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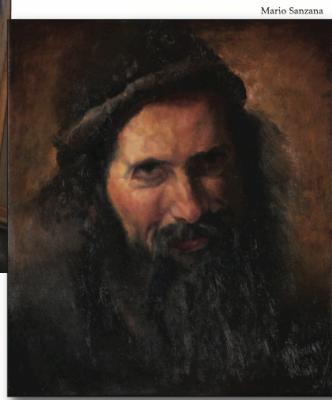
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Sebastián Letelier: Salmon Flies and Serendipity

by Katie Polhemus



Above: *Sebastián Letelier in his Santiago studio.*



Right: *Self-portrait of the artist, oil (16 x 13.75 inches).*

PAINTER, FLY TIER, GUIDE, AVID STORYTELLER—these descriptors don't do justice to all that Sebastián Letelier has to offer the sporting world, but they're a start.

Both art and angling have been intrinsic to Letelier's life since his birth in Chile in 1979. His father was an artist with a painting studio, and it was there that Letelier learned drawing and other media during his childhood. At age eight, he took up fishing, with frequent visits to southern Chile's Lake District. By age twelve, he was fly fishing with flies he tied himself.

A series of serendipitous events led twelve-year-old Sebastián to knock on the door of Adrian Duffloq, owner of Cumilahue Lodge, the first fly-fishing operation in Chile. Established in 1963, the lodge hosted many great anglers, including the late Ernest Schwiebert.

Meeting Duffloq proved to be a defining moment for the budding artisan. Duffloq became Letelier's mentor, teaching him traditional techniques of fly fishing, such as using split-cane rods and well-dressed flies. Letelier became proficient at tying fine trout and classic salmon flies—a true extension of his artistic talents.

Letelier recalls the most decisive and testing moment of his teenage years: receiving a phone call in 1996 from one of Duffloq's sons, offering him a job as a fly-fishing guide in Patagonia. He was sixteen at the time, making him the lodge's youngest guide ever. He emphasizes that although it was not an easy start, it led him to a unique lifestyle filled with great experiences.

In high school, Letelier focused on drawing, then studied fine art at Universidad Finis Terrae. He recalls his father cheering him on, saying that despite the challenges that a career in fine art may present, it's worth the try. In 2001, at the beginning of his second year at university, Letelier visited the Academia de Bellas Artes Martín Soria in Santiago, a small fine art academy run by a Spanish painter. He didn't return to university. At the academy, he found what he was looking for: many hours of practice in drawing and painting. He learned different techniques and how to work with raw materials, such as stretching his own linen, grinding his own pigments, and mixing his own paint. It was the old way of learning a painter's vocation, much like how Rembrandt or Vermeer learned how to paint.

Letelier's determination to continue learning artistic traditions combined with a passion for classic salmon flies led him to Scandinavia. He researched Atlantic salmon fishing in the region for a few years and wrote to some Scandinavian anglers to learn more. He also wrote to the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum, simply to inquire about a visit, and received an unexpected response. Nerdrum's wife wrote back, introduced the possibility to study under Nerdrum, and asked for photos of Letelier's work.

In 2007, Letelier set off for Norway. He fished the rivers, met amazing people, toured museums, and, at the end of the journey, visited the Nerdrum farm and school outside Oslo.

Then, in 2008, Letelier won first place in Helsinki's international classic salmon fly-tying contest and found himself back in

Scandinavia to fish. The stars aligned, and on that same trip he returned to the Nerdrum farm to live and paint as an apprentice. Letelier recalls Nerdrum as being quite open to sharing his knowledge and experience—something uncommon in painters of his caliber.

What is most striking about Letelier's paintings is exactly what is most striking about his way with words: the incredible storybook-like poetry of the scene he creates is enough to transport us to a completely different time and place. Letelier says his angling art is all about the catch, a moment, or the sensation of space, light, and color. He finds inspiration from places he's visited and once told me that the placement of the angler in the scene "gives an idea of a relationship between man and nature—of how small we are on this beautiful planet, and how humbling that is." While his landscapes of choice are often vast and expansive settings in rather extreme regions of the world, his soft and muted earth tones and gentle lines give his paintings a certain down-to-earth humanity.

Letelier's first piece of wisdom on finding one's space and peace in this world is that it's a constant quest that never ceases. He notes how, like many of the Romanticists of the nineteenth century, his paintings seek his own place in the world. The riverscape is where he feels the most comfortable and free. The perceptive nature that he's developed from engaging so deeply in both art and angling has led him to conclude that although life often provides uncertain, unexpected events, we simply learn to make the best of it—it is life's nature to be unexpected. "I have a feeling of constant serendipity," he told me.

Today, Letelier spends the fishing season in Patagonia and the off season in his painting studio in Paine, a small town about an hour south of Santiago. He often travels abroad with his guiding clients, many of whom commission portraits with their catches on the river. But he always finds time to paint his own compositions, many of which go beyond fly-fishing subjects.

Letelier firmly believes in the importance of contributing to organizations that work to protect game fish and their environments, and has supported numerous conservation organizations with his art: Atlantic Salmon Federation, Wild Trout Trust, North Atlantic Salmon Fund, Goran Ullsparr Foundation, and North Umpqua Foundation, to name a few. His work can be found in many private collections worldwide, including the American Museum of Fly Fishing.



New Fly for the Next Go, Lærdal River, Bjørkum Pool, oil (32 x 39.5 inches).



William Blacker's Shannon No. 12, tied in hand by Sebastián Letelier in a hook size 8/0. Photo courtesy of Sebastián Letelier.