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Artist's biography re-released and full of color

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See Frank Mechau's work

The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center is exhibiting Frank Mechau's work through May 15 as part of its Legacy Series.

The series features the work of artists who worked or taught at the FAC. Mechau taught at the art school there in 1937 and 1938.

Go to csfineartscenter.org for information.

[By Laurena Mayne Davis](#)

Saturday, March 12, 2016

Painter Frank Mechau led an amazingly full life. In only 20 years as an artist he was awarded three Guggenheim Fellowships, studied and lived in New York and France, and taught at the Broadmoor Art Academy and Columbia University.

Raised in Glenwood Springs, Mechau painted from 1926 to 1946, incorporating a wide range of influences into Western scenes with the clarity of Japanese prints and figures that twist and flow in self-contained energy.

Mechau hopped trains, studied connections between art and architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright, and wrote clever, thoughtful letters.

He and his wife, Paula, herself a talented writer and singer, settled with their four children into a remote Redstone home, where they enjoyed a creative, active life.

His 1981 biography, long out of print, has just been re-released, with even more full-color images of his work. "Frank Mechau: Artist of Colorado" is a beautifully designed book, showcasing the talents of one of Colorado's great artists, whose work still feels fresh and vibrant these decades later.

Michael Mechau, of Palisade, talked about his father's expanded biography.

Laurena Mayne Davis: How did this new edition come about?

Michael Mechau: Cile Bach, a writer on art and history was for years associated with the Denver Art Museum

where she became interested in Frank Mechau's life and work. With the assistance of my mother, she did the necessary research to write "Frank Mechau: Artist of Colorado," which first appeared in 1981 in conjunction with an exhibition of Mechau's work at The Aspen Center for the Visual Arts.

Bach does an excellent job telling the story of Frank Mechau's life, often quoting from the artist's lively letters. For a long time, the book has been out of print and it became clear that there was a need for a new edition, which would include more images of paintings and drawings.

***Davis:** What was the extent of the family's involvement?*

Mechau: For years, this has been high on the family agenda. Without the family's involvement, a new edition of the book would not have happened — at least not for a long time. Fortunately, my brother's wife, Carolyn Servid, combines an ardent admiration of Frank Mechau's art with a discerning sense of graphic design. So when she retired from the Island Institute in Sitka, Alaska, a year or so ago, with the full support of the rest of the family she gladly took on the task of redesigning the text so as to integrate it with the additional images.

The next step was to find a publisher, and we were pleased that the University Press of Colorado enthusiastically approved the book and has taken on the task of promotion and marketing.

***Davis:** What family members live here locally?*

Mechau: Two of the four of my generation live in the Palisade area. My sister and her husband, Duna and Jack Stephens, settled in Palisade, where he's from. They with their five children — all of whom now live in the Grand Valley — were the prime movers that drew the rest of us here. Three of my brother's four children also live here. The rural character, the irrigated farms and orchards, also play an important part in attracting and keeping the family here.

***Davis:** Many of the paintings in the book are sourced from "Paula Mechau Estate, Palisade, Colorado." Are they displayed or stored somewhere locally, or are they in family members' homes?*

Mechau: Many of the paintings and drawings are hanging in family homes and many remain in the beautiful old Redstone home where our father last lived and painted and where our mother Paula continued to live well into her 90s. Sometimes groups of art students and teachers, such as those led by Connie Robbins-Brady, the Arts Coordinator for School District 51, visit there to see the artwork in its historic setting.

***Davis:** Did the family lend works for the exhibition?*

Mechau: All of the family's major paintings and many of its drawings have been lent for this exhibition. In addition, major paintings in private and institutional collections that have not been shown for many years will be on view. Although this exhibition is a major exhibition, there are fine paintings that will not be included — in some cases because of the exorbitant cost of shipping and insurance when the paintings are at a distant location.

***Davis:** Who in the family has inherited your parents' artistic talents?*

Mechau: I am 78 years old, and I have yet to amaze the world with the artistic genius I undoubtedly have! In seriousness, my three siblings all have a fine sense of design manifested in different ways. But our sister, Vanni, is the one for whom making charming and beautiful things is a key part of her existence. Over the years she has done innumerable drawings and prints and mastered fine crafts such as eggshell decoration and making delicate figures of angels and animals out of bread dough mixed with glue.

I will add that my brother, Dorik, has designed and built beautiful additions to family homes, and my sister Duna has always kept a neatly decorated home and routinely makes scrumptious meals and superb pies and has made ornaments with moving parts of bread and glue of astonishing cleverness and charm.

Davis: *Your father is among the artists who benefitted from Works Progress Administration mural commissions during the Great Depression. What do you think of the role of the government in supporting the arts?*

Mechau: As long as there are public buildings and highways and bridges and city and land use planning, government will play a huge role in public art. To make the useful beautiful should be the motto of architects and engineers. That was part of the inspiration of government-sponsored mural commissions of the depression era. The program was well-conceived and, for the most part, succeeded in producing works of quality that depicted the country's heroes, struggles and achievements.

Of course, controversies have arisen about whether the scenes depicted in some of the murals unjustly glorify or denigrate individuals or peoples. Such a controversy arose and still persists about a Mechau mural in Washington, D.C., depicting an Indian massacre of a party of whites traversing Indian territory in a stagecoach.

A government-sponsored public art program must, on the one hand, avoid demanding specific content in the art that it commissions and, on the other hand, it must avoid pandering to artists who demand unlimited license to impose their creations on the public that sometimes are outrageous. So, because of the fierce culture wars that presently abound, it is probably best to keep government-funded visual art programs at a modest level of activity.

Davis: *What would you like people to know about your father, as both a human being and as an artist?*

Mechau: He was an exciting man to be with who loved sports and the physical side of life and partook to a considerable extent in the bohemian life that Paris and New York and the art world offer.

But he was the antithesis of the conception of the artist as a free-wheeling or troubled soul whose creative work can only arise from a disordered life. He took great joy in his wife, his children, as well as in his love of art.

Davis: *Where is the book available locally?*

Mechau: At present, Grand Valley Books, the fine bookstore on Main Street in Grand Junction, is the only one carrying the Frank Mechau book. I would encourage anyone interested in buying the book to buy it there.

Davis: *Will there be any local events to celebrate the new edition?*

Mechau: For now, we are focusing on the exhibition, but perhaps something will be done in the Crystal River and Roaring Fork valleys in the year ahead.

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Have news about local authors, bookstores, book clubs or writing groups? Email Laurena Mayne Davis at laurenaatwork@gmail.com. Look for the Write or Wrong column every other Sunday on The Daily Sentinel's Books page.

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