

Alaskans / Pioneers

By Jennifer Houdek and Leslie Oh

Fred Machetanz

1908-2002

<http://www.painterskeys.com/clickbacks/fred-machetanz.asp>



Fred's studio was a corner of his Palmer home, "High Ridge," which he and Sara built in 1951. Photo courtesy The Painters Keys.

<http://www.painterskeys.com/clickbacks/fred-machetanz.asp>



Fred and Sara absorb the news of statehood in the *Anchorage Daily Times*. The couple traveled the territory extensively and captured many images of Native life on film, which they showed on trips across the United States. Photo courtesy The Painters Keys.

<http://www.millpond.com/site/viewprint.cfm?ID=1449&offset=27>



"Whaling Lookout," 32" x16 1/16", artist proof by Mill Pond Press.

© Fred Machetanz

<http://www.millpond.com/site/viewprint.cfm?ID=1432&offset=27>



"Tense Moment," 19x28, 950 limited edition print by Mill Pond Press.

© Fred Machetanz

<http://www.stephanfinearts.com/detail.aspx?ID=413>



"Kyrok, Eskimo Seamstress" measures 24.6" x 31". On the artist's proof, Machetanz wrote, "Kyrok was a good friend since the time I first went to Eskimo country. She was a great-grandmother and could remember when Alaska was sold by Russia to the United States. Here she is working on a ground squirrel parka to give to one of her granddaughters. Fred Machetanz." Stephan Fine Arts Gallery.



© UA Museum of the North

Machetanz's stone lithographs are prized among collectors of northern art. This image of a woman cutting fish with an ulu measures 8" x 11.25". University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Title: [Cutting Fish](#)
Creator: [Machetanz, Fred](#)
Contributors: [Fred Machetanz Estate \(donor\)](#)
Collection Name: [Fine Arts](#)
Identifier: [UA2003-001-091](#)
Description: [Machetanz, Fred](#) (artist). Size: 8 x 11.25 in.
[Woman cuts](#) a [fish](#) with an [ulu](#).



Machetanz executed "Freeze-up" as oil on masonite, using the rough side of the board. University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Title: [Freeze-up](#)
Creator: [Machetanz, Fred](#)
Collection Name: [Fine Arts](#)
Identifier: [UA1985-22-2](#)
Description: [Machetanz, Fred](#) (artist). Size: 12 x 16 in. Medium: [Oil](#) on [Masonite](#) ([rough side](#)) [Signed](#), [lower right](#).

More about Fred Machetanz:

*"If anyone viewing my work has felt the beauty, the thrills and the fascination
I have known in Alaska, then I have succeeded in what I set out to do."*

— Fred Machetanz

Alaskan artist Fred Machetanz possessed the ability to capture a romantic view of Alaska as a place of heroic adventure, beauty, and mystery, and all within a narrow spectrum of color. Machetanz, a master of light and shadow, expertly captured the delicate shades and tones of snow and ice. To look at a Machetanz winter scene, it may appear that the artist used only one color. One of his most famous paintings, "Still of the Night," looks as if it were painted in only two colors. Yet according to the notes Machetanz recorded on the back of the painting, he had selected a variety of blues and greens, as well as violet and red.

"Many people believe that snow is white and its shadows are blue," Machetanz explained. "There is quite a difference in my blues in a snowy landscape. Some shadows are grayed. There is a difference in them as they move back going from green to cobalt blue. I use six or eight different blues in my palette. . . . Snow-covered landscapes, often bathed in violet, warm gold and rich pink by the low level sun, Arctic night silver in moonlight or brilliant with aurora."

Machetanz was born in Kenton, Ohio, on February 20, 1908. After receiving a bachelor's and a master's degree from Ohio State University, he studied at the American Academy of Art in Chicago. In 1935 the young artist made his first trip to Alaska, to visit his uncle, Charles Traeger, who was running a trading post in Unalakleet. Although he intended to stay in the Iñupiat community for only six weeks, Machetanz's visit stretched to two years as he fell in love with Alaska. Afterward, he journeyed to New York with his paintings and sketches, hoping to persuade a publishing house that he could illustrate any upcoming books on Alaska. Although more than one publisher noted his talent, there were no Alaska books in their plans. Following their suggestion, Machetanz wrote and illustrated two books on his own: *Panuck: Eskimo Sled Dog* and *On Arctic Ice*.

During World War II, Machetanz returned to Alaska, this time as a Navy serviceman in the Aleutian Islands. And on a return trip, he met his future wife, Sara Dunn, a Tennessee-born public relations writer who was traveling the world during a one-year leave of absence from her job. They were married in Unalakleet in 1947 and settled in Palmer a few years later.

Because Machetanz lived and hunted with Alaskan Natives and traveled extensively through remote parts of Alaska, the land and its first people were common subjects for his paintings. Like other artists, he sketched from life and also referred to black-and-white photographs that he took in the field. His imagination provided the color palette.

Even with some successes in New York, Machetanz was far from famous in those days.

In 1951, Fred and Sara found a choice piece of land with a view and together built a cabin measuring sixteen feet by twenty-two feet. The Palmer cabin, which the couple named “High Ridge,” had no running water or electricity. In the early years, one corner of the cabin served as Fred’s studio. In 1959, when their son Traeger was born, the couple paid for the delivery with a painting; other debts were paid with the same bartering system. Over the years, the cabin grew as Fred and Sara added rooms. Between 1948 and 1960, they spent their winter months traveling across the United States, sharing stories about Alaska. The husband-and-wife team also published eight books and collaborated on films for companies such as Walt Disney. But it wasn’t until 1962 that Fred Machetanz found recognition for his greatness as a painter. That year he opened his first one-man show of forty-four paintings at the Westward Hotel in Anchorage.

The time-consuming painting technique that Machetanz preferred was developed during the Renaissance. Typically, he painted on untempered masonite, a hard panel that’s smooth on one side and textured on the other. After priming the surface, Machetanz began with underpainting, using a thin mixture of ultramarine blue and a large bristle brush. Rather than outline an exact picture, he used the brush to rough out the patterns of dark and light.

”It hurts me to see people outlining,” he once said. “It takes away the illusion of nature. There is no outlining in nature.”

The underpainting was the first of up to five coats of color, as the artist added thin layers of transparent glazes made from oil paint and linseed oil. He used colors such as ultramarine, cobalt, thalo green, thalo blue, viridian, rose madder, sienna, and umber. Each layer of glazed color took two or three days to dry. When he was satisfied with his work, Machetanz finished his painting with a glossy topcoat. As in the paintings from the Renaissance period, the effect of multiple layers of glazed color and gloss create a glowing effect and the appearance of depth.

During the winter months, with only a few hours of sun each day, the panels took longer than usual to dry on the windowsills. As his painting space in the cabin expanded, Machetanz added an infrared drying room to speed the process. Even so, the panels still took six to twelve months to complete. He allowed time to “live” with the painting, too, making adjustments here and there before sending it out. Normally, the artist was working on three or four pieces at a time and averaged about fifteen paintings a year. He painted almost every day into his eighties, until his health would not allow it.

Another favorite medium for Machetanz was stone lithography. In this method, Machetanz used a special crayon to draw directly onto a piece of Bavarian limestone. Next the stone was

shipped to the printer in New York, and after several preparatory steps, the printer could make lithographic copies of the art onto paper.

As for those paintings and lithographs and paintings that Machetanz traded to pay his bills so long ago, they are extremely valuable today. Those pieces, as well as the many paintings, reproduction prints, and lithographs that were released in the following years can be found in public and private art collections all over the country. An original oil painting of an Alaska landscape, measuring 28"x 32", was offered in a 2006 online auction for more than \$28,000. Lithographs and artist proofs of reproduction prints cost many thousands of dollars. And, depending on the subject matter, prints may start at \$300 and go upward into the thousands. The Anchorage Museum of History and Art collection includes at least fifty stone lithographs and select paintings. Other paintings are on display at the Z. J. Loussac Library in Anchorage, the Museum of the North in Fairbanks, and in the county library of his birthplace in Hardin County, Ohio, as well as in many other private and public collections.

Fred Machetanz's life of adventure and hard work earned him many honors over the years, among them the designation of Alaskan of the Year in 1977, and in 1981, "American Artist of the Year" by *American Artist* magazine, as well as three honorary doctoral degrees.

Machetanz died of pneumonia in his Palmer log cabin on October 6, 2002, at ninety-four. Sara had passed away just one year earlier. His death marked the end of an era in Alaska art. Machetanz, along with other famous Alaskan painters who had gone before him—Sydney Laurence, Eustace Ziegler, Ted Lambert and Jules Dahlager—continue to inspire many budding Alaskan artists today.

LINKS:

"Northern Painter" from The Painter's Keys:

www.painterskeys.com/clickbacks/fred-machetanz.asp

"A Northern Adventure: The Art of Fred Machetanz (1908-2002)" from *Resource Library Magazine*:

www.tfaoi.com/aa/4aa/4aa479.htm

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about Fred Machetanz, the gold rushes he followed, and the early years of Anchorage. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.

2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **FRED MACHETANZ** or **ALASKA ART**.

A selection of Machetanz taped oral histories and speeches were donated to the University of Alaska Anchorage Archives by Matanuska-Susitna College in 1995. Access the collection folder at www.lib.uaa.alaska.edu/archives/CollectionsList/CollectionDescriptions/KtoN/MACHETNZ.wpd.html.

Also, selected film clips by Fred and Sara Machetanz are part of the Alaska Film Archives at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The images may be accessed through the Alaska Digital Archives at <http://vilda.alaska.edu/>. Click on the “Advanced Search” button and type in “Machetanz” in the search field.

More Reading:

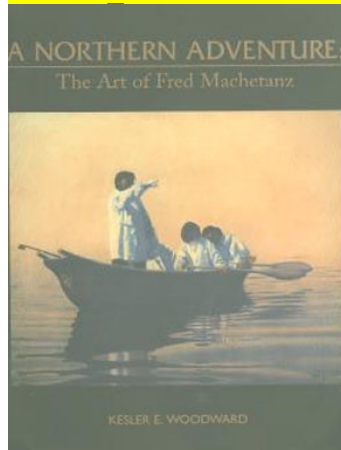
ART BOOKS:

Machetanz, Fred. *The Alaskan Paintings of Fred Machetanz*. New York: Peacock Press / Bantam Book, 1997.

Machetanz, Fred and Sara Machetanz. *The Oil Paintings of Fred Machetanz*. Leigh-on-Sea [Essex]: F. Lewis, 1980.

Machetanz, Fred and Sara Machetanz. *The 50 Stone Lithographs of Fred Machetanz*. Venice, FL: Mill Pond Press, 1981.

http://www.anchoragemuseum.org/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=AMS&Product_Code=16427&Category_Code=EXB



Woodward, Kesler E. and Fred Machetanz. *A Northern Adventure: The Art of Fred Machetanz*. Augusta, GA: Morris Communications Co., 2004.

ALASKA BOOKS:

Machetanz, Fred. *On Arctic Ice*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1940.

Machetanz, Sara and Fred Machetanz. *Where Else but Alaska?* New York: Scribner, 1954.

Machetanz, Sara and Fred Machetanz. *The Howl of the Malemute: The Story of an Alaskan Winter*. New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1961.

Nef, Evelyn Stefansson and Fred Machetanz. *Here is Alaska*. New York: Scribner, 1943.

FOR JUVENILE READERS:

Machetanz, Fred. *Panuck: Eskimo Sled Dog*. New York, Scribner, 1939.

Machetanz, Sara and Fred Machetanz. *Barney Hits the Trail*. New York, Scribner, 1950.

Machetanz, Sara and Fred Machetanz. *A Puppy Named Gih*. New York, Scribner, 1957.

Machetanz, Sara and Fred Machetanz. *Robbie and the Sled Dog Race*. New York, Scribner, 1964.

Renick, James and Marion Renick, Fred Machetanz. *Tommy Carries the Ball*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1940.



Renick, James and Marion Renick, Fred Machetanz. *Steady: A Baseball Story*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1942.

FILM and VIDEO:

Masterpieces in motion

the early Alaskan films of artist Fred Machetanz /

Laura Bliss **Spaan**; Russ **Weston**; Jerry **Brigham**; Fred **Machetanz**; Sara **Machetanz**
1999



English  Visual Material : Videorecording :  VHS tape 1 videocassette (ca. 60 min.) : sd., col. ; 1/2 in. [Alaska] : The Association,

Experience what Alaska was like nearly half a century ago, from everyday life in an Eskimo village to the spontaneous celebrations that broke out in the cities when the Territory became the 49th state. Join Fred and Sara Machetanz as they recall their adventures while capturing the last frontier with a film camera.

Jay Hammond's Alaska.

Volume 9

Jay S **Hammond**; Larry **Holmstrom**; Joan **Ray**; Richard **Taylor**
1994

English  Visual Material : Videorecording :  VHS tape 1 videocassette (VHS) [40 min.] : sd., col. ; 1/2 in.



Fairbanks, AK : RTR Television,

Former Alaskan governor Jay Hammond interviews Alaskans from differing backgrounds. Includes Fred and Sara Machetanz, the Reeve Family, Steve Pradell and a look at Unalakleet, Unalaska, and Dutch Harbor.

The heritage of Alaska

Elmer E **Rasmuson**; Roger G **Laube**

1971

English  Visual Material : Videorecording :  DVD video 1 videodisc (23 min., 37 sec.) : sd., col. ; 4 3/4 in.

Elmer Rasmuson and Roger Laube host this weekly series presented by the National Bank of Alaska. Segments show the muskox farm at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, artist Fred Machetanz, the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus, Attu baskets woven by Aleut women, maps of the discovery and exploration of Alaska, and Alaskan writer Elsa Pedersen.

Machetanz

an artist's journey /

Kristine **Samuelson**

1982

English  Visual Material : Motion picture :  Film 1 film reel (27 min.) : sd., col. ; 16 mm.

[Fairbanks] : University of Alaska Foundation,
Examines the life and works of Alaskan artist, Fred Machetanz.