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Film Offers Intimate Portrait of the Life and Work of Robert De Niro, Sr.

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05/06/14 1:36 PM EDT



Robert De Niro and Robert De Niro, Sr.

Robert De Niro, the film actor, plays a sizable role in the documentary “[Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro, Sr.](#),” co-directed by Perri Peltz with Geeta Gandhir, who also produced and edited it. Both an homage to the painter, who was the actor’s father, and an apologia to him, the film is rich in photographs, home film footage, and interviews. It looks closely both at De Niro Sr.’s painting career and his life and, movingly, at his son’s relation to both. The two themes are braided together exquisitely.

The co-directors and producers have worked together on other successful documentaries, providing a measured and careful analysis of their subjects, for which they have been justly honored with Academy Award nominations and Peabody awards, among other recognition. They resolve, without sentimentality, to stay on the delicate edge between the personal and the political, allowing them to infuse their films with responsible empathy.

Needless to say, the subject of this film became “Senior” belatedly because his son eclipsed the father’s name as an artist. Still, the film does a very good job of locating De Niro Sr.’s oeuvre within a larger art historical context of pre- and post-World War II America. Figures such as Robert Storr, dean of the Yale University School of Art, Irving Sandler, the preeminent American art historian of that period, and Megan Fox Kelly, an art adviser, speak eloquently of De Niro Sr.’s education and introduction to both European influences and the later American split from those influences after World War II. They all do this to underscore De Niro Sr.’s particular directions, which were in large part European, and that perspective does much to advance the case for his artistic work without exaggeration or displaced zeal. De Niro Sr. continued to adhere to a more European style, whether affected by Rouault, Matisse, or even Hans Hofmann and thus slowly fell away from the new trail being blazed by the Ab-Ex artists.

All too often we see reclaimed artists, a group in which De Niro Sr. resides only partially, being subjected to embellished claims of status accompanied by a sense of historical victimization. This biography is careful to position De Niro’s work and his aesthetic accomplishments within a set of social parameters and personal proclivities. He continued to exhibit for most of his career and there was always approval, although more muted as historical and institutional forces (such as MoMA, for instance) assumed a more radical trajectory. Or, it may be said that the critical discourse shifted to a particular kind of American art and De Niro Sr. was not a part of it and was wary of it, at best.



A painting by Robert De Niro Sr.

De Niro Jr.’s contribution is twofold and does not undermine the more objective tone established by the experts. First, he places his father in a biographical arc that is an accurate accounting of the older man’s deep commitment to his artistic career and his familial entanglements. Within this story, Bobby, as he is often called by family and friends, has the courage to engage his parents’ divorce and his mother’s move away from the profession of artist. This provides a backstory, as it were, as Virginia Admiral had early achievements that were originally greater than her husband’s. We hear, for instance, not only of her gallery show at New York’s Art of This Century, but that the renowned artist and teacher Hofmann considered her and her husband to be his finest students ever.

The other aspect that De Niro Jr. brings to the film is, of course, emotion. In interview format, we see him struggling to deal with his conscience and his sense of responsibility to honor his father posthumously. He does not try to make extraordinary claims for his father’s work, understanding as an artist himself that a career is based not on either good or bad values, but on a complex set of conditions that include luck and timing. The

emotions are real, however, and form a tender backdrop to all of the film.

One of the finest parts of the film is the intimate interviews with two of De Niro Sr.'s closest artist friends, Albert Kresch and Paul Resika. Both are generous in their praise of the work and the life of their colleague. One of the most moving moments is offered by Kresch when he talks about Senior's near obsession with Greta Garbo as the title character in the first scene of the movie "Anna Christie." Drawing and painting images of her in a state of melancholy that hovered over both her real life and that famous scene, he has represented her continually. Yet when De Niro Sr. encounters Garbo in an elevator on 57th Street — on his way to his own exhibition, which features many images of her — he is rendered mute. His silence matches her legendary silence. That pain, which today would be drowned out in a celebrity culture with endless narcissistic selfies, stays in the memory as an example of a kind of stoicism he was known for, along with his dedication to his art. Despite the fact that he learned French on his own and danced well, he was conflicted by a Catholic guilt and an almost overwhelming sense of lacking love, remaining a loner, dedicated to an art that, for a while, was less fashionable and less ambitious than that of some of his peers.

In the end, Robert De Niro Sr. comes off as a committed artist of talent and unique foresight who may have been lesser-known than others of his time, but whose clear personal vision and strong aesthetic progress is captivating. This is a powerfully modest, but important, inspiration that carries throughout this truthful film.

"Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro, Sr." airs on HBO on June 9.

A version of this article appears in the July/August 2014 issue of Modern Painters magazine.