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More Than Just the Father of a Famous Actor

Portrait of Robert De Niro Sr. by His Son

By NEIL GENZLINGER JUNE 8, 2014



Robert De Niro Sr. HBO

Robert De Niro, one of the most respected and successful actors of his generation, ended up in a very different field from his father, the painter Robert De Niro Sr. But he knows that one thing is true for all artists no matter what the discipline: Talent isn't enough. What separates someone at the top from countless skilled contemporaries who spend their careers in semi-obscurity has as much to do with serendipity as it does with ability.

It's an insight he contributes to [“Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro Sr.”](#), a short documentary, shown Monday night on HBO, in which the son remembers the father, who died in 1993.

“Part of recognition is luck,” Mr. De Niro says early in the film, no doubt thinking of moments from early in his own career when he benefited from a casting director's whim or some similar happenstance. “You have no control over those things.”

Mr. De Niro's honesty is what makes the film appealing, even if you know nothing about art. He is 70, an age at which many people begin thinking about their legacy and come to appreciate more fully their parents' lives. The film is directed by Perri Peltz and Geeta Gandbhir, but it is clearly Mr. De Niro's labor of love, and he unabashedly plays flame keeper. It is both sweet and bittersweet to see this world-famous actor become posthumous advocate for his father, a decent painter who never made it to the pantheon

inhabited by Pollock, Rothko and others who thrived in the middle of the last century.

The senior De Niro also had success in that period but, as the film details, did not achieve the fame of the others for reasons that were a mix of painting style and personality. His son reads from journal entries that show a man struggling with what might have been depression, and fellow artists and art experts talk about De Niro Sr.'s inability to fit in. Adding to the complexity was his homosexuality, which led him to leave the family when his son was quite young.



Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro Sr. An artwork by this painter in a documentary shown Monday night on HBO. HBO

Through it all, we see glimpses of his paintings, some of which are on display at the [DC Moore Gallery](#) in Chelsea through July 11. And we see a life that from the perspective of the son, now famous, must seem like a wistful mix: considerable achievement but a lot of what might have been.

Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro Sr.

HBO, Monday night at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time.

Directed by Perri Peltz and Geeta Gandbhir; Jane Rosenthal and Sheila Nevins, executive producers; Sara Bernstein, supervising producer; Ms. Peltz, producer; Ms. Gandbhir, editor; Rudy Valdez, director of photography; Philip Glass, composer.

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