

HYPERALLERGIC

The Opulence of Restraint: Robert De Niro, Sr.

by Jennifer Samet on July 5, 2014



Installation view "Robert De Niro, Sr. Paintings and Drawings 1948-1989", DC Moore Collection (all images ©The Estate of Robert De Niro, Sr. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York)

It is hard to imagine a more striking presentation of the life and work of Robert De Niro, Sr. (1922–1993) than the current exhibition of his work at [DC Moore Gallery](#) and the documentary, [Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro, Sr.](#), which premiered on HBO June 9. The work at DC Moore spans the years 1948–1989 and fills the walls of the gallery, including the back room. In perfect condition and impressively framed, this is the moment for those unaware of his work to take notice.

Yet, I wondered what its effect would be. Certainly many outside the art world have now learned, from the very informative documentary, that the actor's father was a painter (and a gay man). A De Niro painting auctioned at Sotheby's on June 12 exceeded the \$5,000–7,000 estimate, selling for \$31,250. But will museum curators decide he is worthy of a retrospective, consider an acquisition, or even place a painting from storage on view?

The documentary, directed by Perry Peltz and Geeta Gandbhir, frames De Niro as an almost martyr-like figure. The story goes like this: a relative success in his early years, with prestigious shows, sales, and reviews, he was pushed aside in the art world by the advent of Pop and Minimalism, exacerbated by his own aversion to diplomatic

participation in “the scene,” poverty, and closet homosexuality. The film is as much about his son’s desire to rescue, preserve, and resurrect his father’s reputation and work, as anything else. But the great — and unanswered — question is about the work.



Robert De Niro, Sr., “Birdcage, Two Vases and Flowers” (1981) oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches, private collection



Robert De Niro, Sr., “Red House with Blue Door” (1970), oil on panel, 30 x 34 inches

Robert De Niro, Jr., who narrates much of the film, is honest when he admits he cannot explain his father’s painting — he loves it because his father made it, but also because of its clarity and beauty. None of the experts interviewed were able (or called upon?) to shed much light on the aesthetics. Robert Storr comes closest when he talks about the uniqueness of De Niro’s paintings: “I can’t name an artist that they look like.” Irving Sandler focuses on what he terms a “bloodbath,” where artists who didn’t address the cultural content implicit in Pop art were eschewed.

Storr maintains that de Niro “painted his pleasure,” while Megan Fox Kelly, art advisor of the De Niro estate, mentions the melancholy present in his paintings. Both are partially true.

The artist’s son points out — with a generous spirit, considering his own success — that recognition is often a matter of luck. This is indeed true, but are there real qualities, inherent in the work, that remain outside of our cultural zeitgeist?

The defining characteristic of De Niro's work is the line: the arabesque that rounds the form of the female figure, the guitar, the vase, and the brusque angles that define table edges, houses, windows. He uses these marks even to cover deeply saturated color areas. These gestural outlines have the energy of Abstract Expressionism, yet, if Willem de Kooning deconstructed forms, De Niro put them back together. Perhaps this is why Storr speaks of "pleasure," why the painter Paul Resika, interviewed for the film, admires his precociousness.



Robert De Niro, Sr., "Moroccan Women" (1984), oil on linen, 70 x 76 inches, private collection



Robert De Niro, Sr., "Crucifixion with Four Spectators" (1982), oil on canvas, 50 1/4 x 48 1/4 inches

And what of De Niro's choices of subject: still lifes, figures, "Moroccan Women" à la Delacroix, Greta Garbo as Anna Christie, and the crucifixion? Indeed, De Niro made many crucifixions. This series was the subject of Eleanor Munro's 1959 *Art News* profile, "De Niro works on a series of pictures," reprinted in the DC Moore exhibition catalogue. However, no crucifixion paintings are present in the exhibition, and neither are they discussed in the documentary. It is a poignant omission, considering the documentary's positioning of De Niro as an artist suffering from partial exile in the art world, steadfastly adhering to his aesthetic beliefs. (De Niro, born into a Catholic family, explored spiritual paths from Edgar Cayce to Krishnamurti to Christian Science.

In the film, De Niro, Jr. reads from some of his father's journal entries, in which he confessed his anxieties and failures, "I have hardly the courage to wash my brushes," and "not enough sales to live like a human being." Sandler suggests that it is the desire to live up to the old masters of art history that propelled his painting. In fact, in a 1975 article, the critic Thomas Hess contrasted De Niro with Andy Warhol, suggesting that De Niro's lack of success was due to the prideful gesture of selecting lofty, "aristocratic" subjects, as opposed to the "modesty" of Warhol's embrace of popular culture.

De Niro painted like the French symbolists he admired: a repetition of forms and motifs symbolizing ideals: beauty, sensuality, music, poetry. He was reductive rather than graphic: expressing a feeling rather than a narrative. It is clear from both the quality of his line and his writings on art that he valued understatement. He suggests distinct gestures, figural poses, and objects with an economy of means, accuracy, and reserve.



Robert De Niro, Sr., "Figure in a Hat with Rubber Plant" (1976), oil on canvas, 50 x 60

Robert De Niro, Sr., "Seated Nude with Green Pants" (1970), oil on linen, 36 x 28 inches



In "Seated Nude with Green Pants" (1970), he focuses on one hand resting behind the figure's head, the other resting on bent legs, all delineated with his thick black strokes. The figure is faceless, without specificity. We are connected to her by these marks: they symbolize a universal feeling of tracing fingers along the contours of a body, rather than a specific personality.

In "Figure in a Hat with Rubber Plant" (1976), it is the sensuous slump of the male figure (also faceless) that tells the story. The pose has continuity and flow — as does the picture at large: windows on the right mirroring the leaves of the rubber plant at the left. With hindsight, it is tempting to suggest that De Niro treated figures with a reserve that reflects ambivalence about his sexuality (in a journal entry he bemoans his inability to find love and true connection with a woman).

Yet, any reserve to be found in De Niro's painting is distinct from the nonchalant detachment that our culture seems to revere in contemporary art. And De Niro fought against the "primitive" while we now valorize "de-skilling." His paintings are full of grace, yet we live in a culture that values information and full disclosure, where the ability to explain is prized more than suggestion.

"The Opulence of Restraint" is a phrase used by the artist in Robert De Niro, "Corot, Verlaine and Greta Garbo or the Melancholy Syndrome," Tracks, A Journal of Artistic Writings 1, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 48-49.

[Robert De Niro, Sr. Paintings and Drawings 1948-1989](#) continues at DC Moore Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 31.

[Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro, Sr.](#) premiered on HBO on June 9.