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Portrait of an artist: Robert De Niro Sr

By Liz Jobey

Robert De Niro does not star in his latest film but he did make and narrate it – a documentary about his artist father, whose work remains little known despite great early success



Robert De Niro and his father, New York, c 1983

There are two entries for Robert De Niro in the online collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. One is for *Taxi Driver*, the film directed by Martin Scorsese, for which De Niro was nominated for an Oscar as best actor in 1976; the other is for *Raging Bull*, also directed by Scorsese and for which De Niro won the award for best actor in 1980.

At the Metropolitan Museum, however, the name Robert De Niro tells a different story. Four entries are listed – two drawings in crayon from 1976, a charcoal drawing from 1941 and a self-portrait in oil dated 1951. These are works by Robert De Niro Sr, the actor's father, a relatively unknown American painter, who died in 1993. He had early success in the 1940s and 1950s, part of a group that included Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, the core of American Abstract Expressionism, and his portrait came to the museum in 2006, part of the bequest of Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman, a leading collector. The image is not on view but is accompanied by the following caption:

The critic Clement Greenberg pronounced De Niro "an important young abstract painter" upon seeing his 1946 show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century. A student of Hans Hofmann ... very few paintings in this style remain; most were lost or destroyed by the artist. When De Niro saw this picture exhibited at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1981, he asked to exchange it with a recent one, hoping he might keep it from view. Fortunately, Mrs. Newman declined ...



There is no explanation of what it was that De Niro objected to but the art adviser Megan Fox Kelly, who looks after De Niro Sr's estate today, says she is very pleased that the painting is still there, "because there was a fire at some point, late 1940s, early 1950s, and a lot of work was destroyed. The self-portrait in the Met is a relatively early picture and we're happy to have it stored away somewhere safe, because we don't have a lot of pictures from that period."

There is another charcoal drawing in the Met's collection, also from 1941, this one by a young female artist called Virginia Admiral. She, too, studied under Hans Hofmann at his school in Provincetown, Massachusetts and there, in 1940, she met the young Robert De Niro. They were married a year later, and in 1943 they had a son, Robert, who became one of the most famous screen actors of all time.

The actor Robert De Niro turned 70 last year. He has six children and four grandchildren but only the two oldest, his son Raphael, born in 1976, and his daughter Drena, born in 1971 (whom De Niro adopted when he married their mother, Diahnne Abbott), knew their paternal grandfather while he was alive. The four younger children – three boys and a girl – were born after his death.



©Brigitte Lacombe
De Niro Sr's studio in SoHo, New York, photographed in 2012 by Brigitte Lacombe

When his father died, De Niro kept on the studio in SoHo, where De Niro Sr had lived and worked for the last decade or so of his life. Twenty years later, it remains much the way it was – the walls covered with his paintings and drawings; pictures and posters by artists his father admired; shelves of books and audio tapes; and posters of his father’s own exhibitions from decades ago.

“When he passed away I thought, well, I should keep it,” De Niro says, speaking on the phone from New York, “because it’s a very special place, and also for my grandchildren and for my young kids, who never knew him. I wanted them to see what their grandfather did, what their great-grandfather did. And this is the best way.”

Two years ago he invited the photographer Brigitte Lacombe to visit the studio. She went there alone. “I was just looking and documenting with my camera,” she says. “Nothing was planned. It’s at the top of the building but it’s very modest in a way. When you think of artists’ studios now, all designed and organised, it’s not like that. I loved all the things that he has pinned to the wall, the paintings ripped out of books, the posters. I felt really moved by the space and the intention behind it.”



De Niro Sr at work, 1957

(Photograph: The estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Ars, courtesy of DC Moore Gallery.
First published by ARTnews in the May 1958 article, 'Robert De Niro Works on a Series of Pictures')

The studio is also the backdrop for the documentary film De Niro has just released about his father, *Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro Sr*, intended, like the studio, to give his children – and now the wider public – a better sense of his father’s life and work.

“I’ve always wanted to do it,” he says of the film, “just for the family – not for broadcast or anything, for family and close friends, whoever, who just wanted to see it. And I was talking to Jane Rosenthal [an executive producer of the film and co-founder, with De Niro, of Tribeca Productions] and telling her about it, and finally she said ‘Let’s do it,’ because I was worried about his contemporaries. There are two of his friends in the film and I wanted to make sure I could have them in it.”



©Courtesy of HBO
De Niro and his father, c 1945 (Photograph: Courtesy of HBO)

The two contemporaries are the painters Albert Kresch, born in 1922, the same year as De Niro Sr, and Paul Riseka, born in 1928, both of whom studied in Provincetown. It is their fond descriptions of their friend – by turns an attractive, melancholy, irascible, touchy, stoical, determined and sometimes very funny man – which bring De Niro Sr alive – along with the sections of precious home-movie footage and archive film, photographs and his paintings.

Another catalyst in the making of the film was the offer, soon after De Niro's death, to buy a cache of Super 8 film of the artist, which had been shot in the 1970s by a film-maker who was a fan of his work.

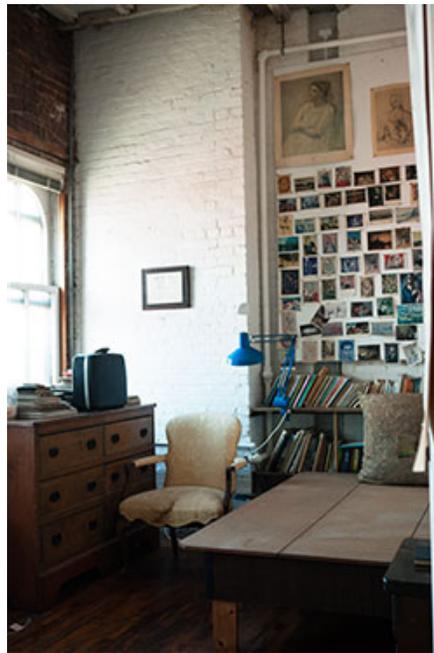


©Courtesy of HBO
De Niro's father and his mother, the painter Virginia Admiral, c 1940 (Photograph: Courtesy of HBO)

"It must have been right after he passed away," De Niro says. "This guy had followed him around with a Super 8 camera, taking it all around the 1970s, and I bought the footage from him. I was prepared to pay for it, so he sold it to me, and I gave it to [Thelma Schoonmaker](#), who is Martin Scorsese's editor, and I said 'Thelma, here, I have this Super 8 footage, print it out or keep it ... just keep it ...' So we used some of it – not as much as there was – in the documentary. So that was helpful."

As a result we hear De Niro Sr's speaking voice – lighter, pitched slightly higher than his son's, but fluent and articulate, with some of the same staccato delivery familiar from the actor's early roles. De Niro Jr doesn't have his father's attractive, crooked-toothed mouth but he has the same hooked nose, dark eyes and neat, slender build and, as is clear from photographs, the physical resemblance between father and son is remarkable.

Along with stories from his friends and family – Drena De Niro recalls being cajoled by her grandfather as a child into sitting for a portrait, wearing a large pink hat – the art historian Irving Sandler and Robert Storr, former MoMA curator and now dean of the Yale School of Art, place De Niro's work within a critical framework; his style – gestural, free-flowing, figurative, full of colour and light – more related to Matisse and Rouault than to Abstract Expressionism. But it is Robert De Niro's commentary that provides the emotional centre of the film, a testimony filled with regret and a certain amount of guilt, particularly when he describes his inadequacy in his father's last years to force him to find treatment for the prostate cancer that killed him, and for which De Niro himself underwent surgery in 2003.



©Brigitte Lacombe
Postcards in Robert De Niro Sr's studio, 2012 (Photograph: Brigitte Lacombe)

Although his parents separated when he was only two and divorced about a decade later, they always remained friends. The SoHo studio was originally his mother's, De Niro told me, but she gave it to his father about a dozen years before he died. Virginia Admiral had been considered a very talented painter – in fact, her work was shown at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery as early as 1942, three years before her husband. But once she and De Niro separated, she had to take on regular work to bring up her son. According to Christopher Turner, who interviewed De Niro in 2009, she started a typing and editing service called Academy. "Her claim, when I was young, was that she had to support me," De Niro says. "But after that she didn't really do it the way my father did. That's all he knew."

The strong emotional link between father and son is obvious, not only from what De Niro says about his father but from the extracts he reads from the letters and journals he kept for periods throughout his life. It is some of the journal entries, read by De Niro in the film, that caused headlines in the US press, as they concern De Niro Sr's struggle with his sexuality, his guilt about his homosexuality, his longing for a lover and his prayers to God for help.

I wondered if De Niro had known about this while he was growing up? "No, I didn't. There was a time

when my mother would infer it but nobody ... ” He broke off. “He was very quiet about his own ... He wasn’t like ... Not like today.”



'Woman in Red', 1961

(Photograph: The Estate of Robert De Niro Sr/Artist Rights Society; Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery)

It seems as if he is still in the process – and the film is part of this – of assembling his father’s life into a comprehensible emotional narrative. He hasn’t yet read through all the journals. “I’ve read the excerpts. I’ve not read them because I just didn’t feel there was time for me to read them. I’ll read them when the time is right.”

As well as preserving his father’s studio, he has made sure his father’s paintings and drawings are still exhibited, nurturing his reputation within an art world that has changed beyond recognition from the one De Niro Sr entered more than 50 years ago.

There is no escaping the fact that, after a successful start in the mid-1940s, De Niro’s painting style developed in a way that was absolutely counter to the prevailing shift. As his work became more figurative, influenced by the European painters he loved – Ingres, Courbet, Corot; Rouault, Derain and Matisse – his peers were headed in the opposite direction. Pollock, de Kooning and Rothko had all made figurative paintings in their early years, but by the mid-1940s they were moving towards a new American abstraction. As New York took over from Paris as the capital of the post-war art world, they were in the ascendant. De Niro, never by all accounts one to join a club – “He wasn’t a person who did the kind of conventional ... who hung out in certain places that artists would hang out,” De Niro says – became isolated and disillusioned.

In 1960 he sailed for Paris, hoping to find a more congenial atmosphere for his work. De Niro Jr was 17 when he left. But by his late teens and early twenties, he was travelling in Europe and visited his father more than once. At first De Niro Sr had enjoyed himself, going to the museums, sketching in front of

favourite works. But by 1965 it was clear the move had not been a success. De Niro was sick, broke and living in a seedy hotel room in Paris when his son arrived to rescue him and send him home.



'Side View of Houses and Street', 1967-69, by Robert De Niro
(Photograph: The Estate of Robert De Niro Sr/Artist Rights Society; Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery)

"I had to," De Niro says, "because he was in a kind of rut. In the beginning it was nice for him [but], when I came back, say three-and-a-half years later, he was in another place. He was in Paris, in a hotel on the Left Bank, which is not a bad thing to be in a hotel on the Left Bank, even if it's a small one, there is something romantic even about that – but he had to come back." He describes how he trailed his father's work around galleries in Paris trying to get dealers interested. But, as he says now, that was never going to work. "So I literally made him get on a plane and go home. I stayed. But I sent him back."

Soon after that, De Niro's career as an actor took off. His father carried on painting, and from the late 1960s there is a lift in the colours and a lightness returns to the touch. The French works seem leaden by comparison, the palette dulled and dark. He took on some teaching and continued to show and to sell his work. In today's art market, where success is measured by international fame and prices at auction, his career might be judged a failure. But his is the story of many mid-20th-century artists, who enjoyed a period of recognition before falling from public view. "He did have recognition," De Niro says. "Even today. Of course, I've had shows [of his work] over the years since he passed away in different cities around the world."

But De Niro is modest about his own value judgments when it comes to the art. "For me, he was the real thing, my father," he says in the film. But it is for others to make up their minds. He knows that luck and fashion also play their part.

In 2008 he hired Megan Fox Kelly to help look after his father's papers and surviving paintings, and in consultation with her has placed his work with the D C Moore Gallery in New York, where an exhibition of his paintings and drawings is currently on view.

De Niro said he never liked going to his father's openings as a child. "I didn't like it because I felt shy ... a normal kid's reaction. And my kids are like that too. But I just wish that I had. Later on, I went all the time to his openings, and he came to openings of [my] movies."

How had his father felt about his success as an actor? "Well, he was proud of my ... of what I had blah, blah, blah ... Yeah, he was proud of that. As I was proud of him. I was always proud that my father was a painter."

But did he somehow feel it was necessary to compensate for his father's lack of recognition?

"That's a valid question, but no. I felt my responsibility to his legacy. It was my responsibility as the curator-patriarch of the family, to carry it on, or to propel it, if you will, and to make sure what I did was done."

Have any of his children inherited the drawing bug? "Well, one or two of my kids have great ... you know, are good. That's one reason I've got to have them see what their grandfather did, as a kind of example. It might reinforce what they might have an inclination to want to do, to see what their grandfather did."

Some of his father's paintings hang in the restaurants and hotel De Niro owns in New York. "He hung those paintings in the restaurant. I asked my father if he wanted to do that, and I thought he would turn it down because he was very particular about what he did with his works, because he said, you know, 'People they take it and they put it in the closet,' and so on, and he was sensitive to that. But he agreed to do it, and not only that. I asked him if he would do the menu, and he said 'Yeah,' and of course the menu has been the menu and that will never change.

"Some people say ... in the art world it's very particular, and so certain things you do and certain things you don't. So some might say, 'Why do you hang his works in the restaurant?' But to me, they're supposed to be seen."

'Robert De Niro, Sr, Paintings and Drawings 1948-1989' runs at the D C Moore Gallery in New York until July 31; dcmooregallery.com. The HBO film 'Remembering the Artist Robert De Niro, Sr' is directed by Perri Peltz and Geeta Gandbhir.

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