



## THE ARTISTIC LIFE FATHERS AND SONS



When Robert De Niro was young, his father would ask to paint him, but he wouldn't pose. "I wish I had," De Niro said recently, "but I didn't have the patience. You gotta sit still." Much later, the actor felt he was too acquiescent when his father neglected the prostate cancer that killed him, in 1993. Book-ended by regrets, De Niro, now seventy, sat in Robert De Niro, Sr.'s studio in SoHo. Save for installing shades beneath the skylights, he'd preserved the loft as it was: red dial phone on a pillar; shirts in dry-cleaning bags; birdcage lacking only the parrot, Demetreus.

De Niro slipped his glasses on to peer at the canvases against the far brick wall—women reclining, dab and confident, fit companions to the images from Ingres, Poussin, Courbet, and Delacroix that his father had tacked up for inspiration. "To me, he's a great artist," he said. He nodded at a melancholy pastel, "Girl with Red Turban": "Such color, simplicity, and the girl *has* something. . . . I wish I had listened more to my father so I

could speak more carefully about his work." De Niro communicates best with his limber lips and torso, marking time in conversation as if waiting for a translator. So is that a mirror one of the women is holding? "Could be." A drumstick? "Possibly," he said, staring it down. "Possibly."

His father, a dead ringer for his son in all but fierceness of profile, was funny and light on his feet, a man who adored masks and Paris and Greta Garbo's face. But De Niro didn't see much of him after his parents separated, when he was two. (The elder De Niro confided to his journals, but not to the world, that he was gay.) His mother, Virginia Admiral, was also a well-known artist, but she put down her brushes to raise her son. "My father would always say, 'Tell your mother to paint more, she's a wonderful artist, blah-blah-blah,'" De Niro said, making a face. "I prefer my father's work." When De Niro, Sr., showed at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, in 1945, the critic Clement Greenberg wrote that he possessed "originality" and "an iron control of the plastic elements such as is rarely seen in our time." Yet as his peers turned to abstraction, and then to deadpan contemplation of popular culture, he became increasingly figurative, bitter, and poor. And it was his son who got famous.

Born on the wrong continent in the wrong century, the painter moved to France in 1960, but found himself out of step there, too. When De Niro visited him in Paris five years later, he recalled, "My father was in a rut. I brought him and his paintings around to galleries on the Left Bank, and, well, the people were nice, but that's not the way you do it, showing up unsolicited. So I made him come back to America, I almost pushed him on a plane. . . . After that, I would help him out, financially, and I put his paintings in the Tribeca Grill, Locanda Verde, Nobu, Nobu in Japan, the Greenwich Hotel"—his business ventures. "My father did the menu for the Tribeca Grill, and the coasters for the Greenwich Hotel, and he hung the paintings himself—he was very particular. And I've never changed it."

De Niro helped make a documentary, "Remembering the Artist, Robert De Niro, Sr.," that will air on HBO next week, coinciding with a catalogue of his father's work and a gallery show in

Chelsea, with prices ranging up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. "The more expensive they are, the better they're going to be protected, because they become an asset," he said. "They get good homes, if you will." However, he added, "I did the documentary, just like I kept the studio, for my children"—he has six. "I wanted them to see what their grand-



Robert De Niro

father did." And? He made a temporizing face. "What are they going to do, jump up and down? But it registers."

Asked if he watched over his father as a father might, tears sprang to his eyes. "Sure," he said. "I had to take care of him. He'd say, 'Artists are often not recognized in their lifetime,' so he would expect me to do this. But it won't affect his reputation, which is about timing, luck, the peculiar taste of the art world. And then you must also have talent." De Niro checked the nearest canvas, a canary-yellow farmhouse lit by the sun, and seemed reassured. "In any case, this is all here, and it's great, and it's not going anywhere."

—Tad Friend