Archie Rand Chosen To Narrate Reissue of Classic Documentary, The Mystery of Picasso

BY COLIN MORRIS

When Archie Rand speaks, one can visualize the flow of his ideas as if they are being splashed on to a canvas. For this reason, among many others, the accomplished painter and visual arts professor was chosen to narrate a rare cinematic glimpse into the master craft of one of the 20th century’s most influential painters: Pablo Picasso.

The film, The Mystery of Picasso has an interesting past. Henri-Georges Clouzot filmed the painter in 1955 using a new approach to capture Picasso in action. The director filmed a thin canvas from behind, enabling the viewer to see the actual stroke method and style of the painter in real time.

The result is an unprecedented account of Picasso’s mind and technique as the artist brings various works to life. After being out of print for over ten years, Milestone Films, a boutique distribution company in New Jersey, restored and digitized the film, which has been dubbed a national treasure by France, for international release on DVD.

Rand describes Picasso’s technique and approach with much fervor and authority. The professor explains that, in regards to earlier reviews and criticism of the film, “I didn’t think that the core tangents I considered as being most important in the film were really being covered—that you’re watching one of the greatest masters in the history of Western art actually think. It’s an unbelievable experience. What I try to explain through commenting on it is that it can really be a helpful experience.”

In the film Picasso employs a wide range of brush styles, paints and subjects. Some of the earlier works in the film appear similar to gesture-drawing exercises—often featured in introductory drawing classes—with Picasso actually illustrating painters working on subjects. As the film progresses, Picasso starts working on a larger scale using full amounts of oil paints and filling the canvases with reoccurring themes of more personal importance.

Rand believes that a key theme in being able to understand Picasso’s technique through the benefit of real time is the painter’s narrative emphasis. Indeed, through the engaging process of watching the master paint, such torrential changes are made to pieces as they are created that a narrative rarely seen before comes to life through Picasso’s thought process. Yet the final product wields no fewer narrative qualities as a freestanding work. “It is always about the story,” Rand explains, “and that’s an amazing lesson. And he never veers from that.”

Rand finds Picasso is ultimately being selfless and giving by allowing an audience such intimate access to his way of thinking and creation. “What I found in this film is that Picasso is doing something that none of his biographers ever give him credit for—in fact it’s just the opposite: an absolute flood of affection and generosity.”

Rand believes Picasso, above, was “affectionate and generous” for allowing viewers into his world.

PHOTO COURTESY MILESTONE FILMS

Archie Rand

PHOTO COURTESY MILESTONE FILMS

As Picasso paints, the camera films the opposite side of the thin canvas whereby the brush strokes and technique of the painter can be witnessed in real time.

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