

HBO's *Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro Sr. and Ida*

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Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro, Sr.: directed by Perri Peltz and Geeta Gandbhir; Ida, directed by Pawel Pawlikowski; written by Pawlikowski and Rebecca Lenkiewicz

The 40-minute HBO documentary *Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro, Sr.* is a delicate and moving homage to American actor Robert De Niro's father, the accomplished painter. Robert De Niro Sr. enjoyed success in the 1940s and 1950s in New York City, but largely fell out of favor when the art scene shifted fairly dramatically a decade later.

Directed by Perri Peltz and Geeta Gandbhir, the movie includes commentary by Irving Sandler, the art historian and critic, and art advisor Megan Fox Kelly. Their contributions serve to locate the De Niro family footage historically. At the heart of the work are the son's recollections of his father; its soul consists of De Niro Sr.'s remarkable paintings. Robert Jr. reads passages from his father's journal, sometimes emotionally, throughout the film. The excerpts reveal that Robert Sr. was gay and deeply conflicted about that.

Born in Syracuse, New York in 1922, Robert Sr. studied with Hans Hofmann in New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts. It was at Hofmann's prestigious school, whose alumni include many well-known artists (Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Red Grooms, Frank Stella and others) that De Niro met Virginia Admiral, whom he married in 1942. About the pair, Hofmann would assert that they were among his best students.

The New York art scene was a hot bed of political radicalism in the 1930s and early 1940s. Not referred to in the film is the fact that Admiral, who was born in Dalles, Oregon in 1915, had in the late 1930s been a member of the Young People's Socialist League at the University of California, Berkeley, and, according to friends and colleagues, considered herself a Trotskyist. The

documentary does provide some sense of the couple's artistic and political circles. Featured in the film are interviews with De Niro Sr.'s closest artist friends, the painters Albert Kresch and Paul Resika.

After showing a few striking examples of Admiral's work in the 1940s, the documentary explains that she soon stopped painting, presumably to support her son Robert Jr. (born in 1943). Although the latter's parents separated soon after and subsequently divorced, they remained friends. In fact, the elder De Niro was taken in by Admiral when he was dying of prostate cancer in 1993.

"He was the real thing, my father," says Robert De Niro. "He was to me a great artist, I wanted to see him get his due. That's my responsibility."

Art expert Kelly explains that prior to World War II, "the art scene was all about Europe" (surrealism, the Bauhaus). As artists fled Europe "for safety reasons," they came to New York and set up schools. "American artists are for the first time having hands-on experience with the most avant-garde art trends in painting, architecture and design." In the 1940s and 1950s, New York City became a center of the contemporary art world.

De Niro was launched as a painter in 1945, when he was included in a group show at Peggy Guggenheim's renowned "Art of This Century" Gallery in New York, a leading center for the work of the emerging Abstract Expressionist group, which included figures such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell. De Niro had his first solo exhibition at the gallery the following year. In 1946 and regularly in the 1950s, he showed at the Charles Egan Gallery, alongside Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. (Some of his later works are accessible [here](#).)

In the documentary, Kelly explains that De Niro's art was abstract with figures influenced by "analytical Cubism." She claims that the "figurative strain in his work soon took over, influenced by the [French masters]

Ingres, Corot and Courbet.”

In the late 1950s, De Niro moved to Paris. Inspired by the work of Georges Rouault, Pierre Bonnard, André Derain and Henri Matisse, he would be shunned by the American art community for, among other things, being “too French.”

Paul Resika explains that Robert Sr. entered the art world with a generation of Abstract Expressionists who were older than he. “He shows with the greats and is identified with them. But that doesn’t last long and somehow he does not connect with artists of the New York School, although he has many close friends among them, but does not join any of their groups ... They left him behind. They left him out. He did not fit in.”

In a film clip, De Niro Sr., an attractive and sympathetic figure, remarks that “I did not agree with their thinking and their painting. I saw them all get rich. I could have followed that path, I suppose, if I had gone along with [modernist art critic Clement] Greenberg and the rest. I didn’t want it. It did not make any sense to me.”

Resika goes on to describe as a “blood bath” the radical—and retrogressive—change in art style in the late 1950s and early 1960s, best exemplified by Pop artist Andy Warhol. The new group “suppress the painterly quality in their work and this is what really interested De Niro,” adds Resika. “The energy of the paint. The sweep of the paint. The movement of the paint. This was always his emphasis and suddenly this becomes unfashionable.” Or, as director Peltz told an interviewer, De Niro isn’t well known today because “the spotlight turned away from the figurative artists of the Fifties and Sixties ... when it shone on the rising stars of Pop Art.”

Summing up De Niro’s artistic output, *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith wrote in April 2012: “On first sight, De Niro’s paintings and drawings can seem overly indebted to the School of Paris. In particular, you could say that he pledged allegiance to Fauvism and Matisse and never broke his vows. But his paintings, especially, have their own touch, eloquence and integrity, as well as a bluntness of scale and brushwork that easily identifies them as postwar American.”

Actor Robert De Niro’s personal tribute to his father helps bring to light the work of a genuinely talented and marginalized American painter. It also reminds us of the unfortunate fact that serious performers like De Niro—more authentic and convincing in *Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro, Sr.* than he has been for some time in most of his fiction film parts—are rarely given roles of value. This documentary is a labor of love, and

therefore, a pleasing exception.

Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida*

Well-known Polish-born and Paris-based director Pawel Pawlikowski (*My Summer of Love*, 2004) takes up anti-Semitism in Poland in his stark, black-and-white-film, *Ida*, set in 1962. Anna (Agata Trzebuchowska) is about to take vows and join the order of nuns who raised her from infancy. Mother superior urges her to get acquainted with her mother’s sister, her sole surviving relative. Anna learns from her hard-drinking, promiscuous aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza) that she was born Ida Lebenstein, a Jew.

Wanda’s excesses are the product of her mental torment at having lost her sister, Anna’s mother, to an unknown fate, as well as her crimes as a harsh Stalinist prosecutor.

When Wanda and Anna travel to Piaski, a little village where Anna’s grandparents and parents lived, they discover the gruesome end that befell Anna’s parents and brother as Jews during the war. Wanda commits suicide, after which Anna tries to walk in her shoes, engaging in sex, cigarettes and liquor, before she dons her novice’s habit and takes another path. *Ida*’s bleakness seems to express Pawlikowski’s bitterness about both life under the former Stalinist regime and, by implication at least, the past and present-day nightmare of capitalist Poland.



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