



LE MYSTERE PICASSO (THE MYSTERY OF PICASSO) is the September, 2013 Ligonier Valley Cinema Association dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library.

LE MYSTERE PICASSO (THE PICASSO MYSTERY) France 1956 black-and-white and color live action feature documentary in French with English subtitles 75 minutes Filmsonor

Producer: Henri Georges-Clouzot Milestone Film & Video dvd

13 of a possible 20 points

*** ½ of a possible *****

*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points

Director: Henri Georges-Clouzot

1 Editors: Henri Georges-Clouzot (Pictures)* and Henri Colpi (Sound)

1 Cinematography: Claude Renoir

1 Lighting

0 Screenplay: Henri Georges-Clouzot

2 Music: Georges Auric*

2 Sound: Joseph de Bretagne*

1 Cast: Pablo Picasso, Henri Georges-Clouzot, Claude Renoir

1 Ambience

2 Creativity

2 Insightfulness

13 total points

This 1956 film about how a master artist operates manages to cause as much controversy today as when it first appeared. Clouzot's evaluation of Pablo Picasso as the greatest artist of the twentieth century is a red flag waved in front of viewers at the opening of the film. If anyone disagrees with that assessment and believes Munk, Kandinsky, Matisse, and Chagall to be superior, as this reviewer does, then that individual is initially forced into an adversarial posture relative to the director. That, in turn, colors how the film itself is perceived. It's blatantly evident Clouzot is more interested in exhibiting his friend Picasso at work than in answering the question his portentous introductory narration poses: How does an artist produce something creative from a blank? In this case, the primordial canvas is stretched

paper devoid of any character whatsoever. There are no props, models, or preliminary sketches present in the studio to assist the creator.

Whatever is executed for the film must derive from three primary sources. First, the mediums themselves: paper, canvas, inks, paints. Second, the memory of the artist. Third, the imagination of the person employing intermediary tools to accomplish a representation of internal reality.

Unique to this motion picture is its faithful recording of the process by which recalled details fuse with experimental doodles to form a communicative bond between the thought of Pablo Picasso and the interpretation of a viewer who sees material imagery it generates. No, the motion picture does not reveal precisely what Picasso's thinking as he works. But it certainly succeeds in capturing the trial-and-error procedure key to formation of genuine art.

In early sections of the film Pablo is concerned with showing how an arbitrary dots and lines, of contrasting color with the white paper background, can then become a network of increasingly more complex associations linked initially only by personal whimsy. A given squiggle may become the contour of a human leg. Or the border of a matador's cape. There is nothing in the line itself to determine its ultimate decoding. That will be done first by the sketcher's mental vision and then, if the physical manifestation is actually effective, by a parallel perception within brains of onlookers. Which is clearly an example of creative leadership, with stimulation of viewer sensations being triggered by what appears before their eyes.

An artistic master must be someone who can translate an individual idea into a communal one. Perhaps that's why Adolf Hitler floated from art into political demagoguery. Fortunately, most creators of masterpieces have not been inclined to compel patrons, students and admirers into subordination to their ideas. A person can accept a concept without making it a precept or ethical mandate. Not everyone who prizes Picasso's *LOVERS* feels equally inclined to adopt his political or social views. So it isn't necessary for individuals watching this film to harmonize with its director's reverential approach to the Spaniard or his work. Just observing the manner in which a curved line transforms into the chest of a rooster or a circle morphs into an eye is sufficient to fascinate and inform.

Through time-lapse photography, dynamically suspenseful music, and extraordinarily acute editing, *LE MYSTERE PICASSO* illustrates how art is created. It does not answer the question of why.

Every successive stroke of the brush changes both what appears and subjective guesses about final outcomes. Only rarely did Clouzot permit his subject to discourse on direction and goal. Here, actions speak volumes. Words themselves only hint at the series of debates and decisions which lead to what is ultimately fashioned onscreen.

Many critics of this film are repelled by Picasso's insistence about savagely recreating and reenvisioning his art. Continuous overturning of the existing in favor of an alternative is unacceptable to them. But absolutely basic to creativity. Unwillingness to destroy can only lead to inorganic art, possibly pleasing to eye, yet completely incapable of satisfying soul or imagination. Picasso and Clouzot understood this. Their denigrators do not.

Each painter brings an individual experiential environment along with his brushes to the easel. In the case of Pablo Picasso, what emerged are matadors, bulls, roosters, fish, human models, erotic longings, a fascination with vivid reds, marinescapes, the delicious sensuousness of ripe fruit. These are elements of the world he knew and lived in. It should surprise no one they are uppermost in his thought when turning a tabula rasa into something suitable for display and wonder.

Pablo exhibited astonishing energy for a man of seventy-five springs. Perhaps at times that activity overwhelms the sedentary watcher, who finds it almost impossible to keep pace with the rapidity of thought propelling an invisible hand behind the screen. This is certainly truest as the final two projects are constructed and deconstructed, with shifts of lighting, reversals of open and closed territories (white and black, respectively), mind-boggling pivots, sudden jagged penetrations into previously calm scenery, constantly redefined borders, and a fluidity of composition which must have seemed heretical to photographer Claude Renoir. His uncle Jean was renowned for stability and proportional balances within frames. Grandfather Pierre-Auguste strove continually to soften outlines, not intensify them. What was Claude thinking as Pablo violated Renoir traditions continuously before his very eyes?

Is LE MYSTERE PICASSO a masterwork of the cinema? No. Its music score is sometimes too violent, too secure, too formally persuasive, at odds with what Picasso was doing. There are no false starts, overrides, or inexplicable transformations in it. That's natural, for Georges Auric composed music cues only after weeks of prolonged careful study of what was already present on film reels. Sometimes this pays off with a succession of suspense-building passages that dovetail with Picasso's manual activity. At other moments, the two clash irritatingly, with music moving towards stability and art heading the exact opposite direction.

Clouzot's screenwriting skills here are put to bad use. What viewers see does not require external commentary. Inserted time constraint dialogue was patently designed to impress ardent devotees of lightning sketch art and adrenaline-driven movie thrillers. It bears the same relationship to artistic creation that lightning chess does to a disciplined tournament game. Winning strategy for one is likely to lead to abysmal defeat in the other.

Photography by Claude Renoir is effectively functional, neither experimental nor miscalculated. It reinforces the primacy of its subject, calling attention to achievements of Picasso's hand operating behind the screen, not the camera itself. High-contrast lighting is employed to reinforce an ongoing battle between white and black. When color is eventually introduced, it services Picasso's expressed desire to employ paints for deeper explorations into mood shifts.

Georges Auric's music is mostly beneficial to the film. It can stand effectively independent of visual images. The reverse is true, also, with Picasso's characters and scenes not necessitating rhythmic or melodic accompaniment. In fact, there is no basis in what Pablo crafted to justify sustained melody.

Though Clouzot fancied casual banter would suggest welcome informality, the recording of dialogue does not stand the test of time well. Subtitles are very helpful in clarifying patently staged conversational scenes.

Anyone thrilled to see a master engaged in the throes of creation will discover a riveting, unforgettable depiction of battle between producer and production, aptly titled Picasso's Mystery. But not a solution.

LE MYSTERE PICASSO challenges, provokes, inspires and educates. Don't pass it up. Suitable for ages eighteen and older, the film does contain quite graphic painted nudity.

This Milestone release includes two audio commentaries: one by Peggy Parsons from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and one by Archie Rand, a muralist and Senior Professor of Visual Arts at Columbia University. The former is pedantic and rather superficial, but does include fascinating information that, contrary to Clouzot's assertion, some of the works created for LE MYSTERE PICASSO still exist in museums and private collections. More partisan, but with greater insight into Picasso's

method of artistic creation, is the latter. Rand is a practicing artist attuned to ideas that define a creator's approach to his work. He is also better informed about what Picasso was attempting to achieve in this film. Simply showing off was not his goal, but rather depicting the combat between shaper and shape, an ongoing, non-linear development that ends only with intolerable weariness. Lines are more important than words in expressing ideas of graphic artists. And black is more significant than white, controlling illumination by restricting it, placing boundaries on inexpressive nothingness. Here screeners discover the triumph of order over chaos, portrayed with amazing clarity. This truly is a remarkable gift from filmmakers to viewers.

Also part of special features Milestone included on THE MYSTERY OF PICASSO dvd is a short film about the bombing of Guernica, Spain on April 26, 1937. Two thousand civilians were killed during a three and one-half hour aerial assault. This massacre was supposed to permit scientific study of the effects of such warfare on human victims. Picasso, enraged by such an unprovoked egregious attack on humanity, responded with his angriest masterwork, simply titling it Guernica.

Co-Directors Robert Hessens and Alain Resnais in 1950 cobbled together a mixture of surrealist poetry by Paul Elard and Picasso's symbolic representation of the unmitigated anguish of Guernica's victims with documentary footage of carnage and ruins left by Fascist bombers. Jacques Pruvost opens their film with a newsreel-style introduction. The camera moves from archival footage to Picasso Blue Period paintings, their subjects now recontextualized as residents of Guernica. As this series of portraits is revealed onscreen, actress Maria Casares replaces Pruvost as narrator, presenting a funereal reading of Paul Eluard's poem, the text of which seems to be inspired by poverty more than war. Yet astonishing special visual effects of Henry Ferrand, slowly moving isolated figures of Picasso's GUERNICA painting from remote, blurry background to center foreground, prove very effective in eliciting emotional empathy from onlookers. Alain Resnais wisely matches timings of each cameo with an eclectic score supplied by Guy Bernard, a conflation of sirens, musique concrete a la Edgard Varese, and melancholic atonalism similar to post-Romantic chamber music of Arnold Schoenberg. The result is a lacerating indictment of war's folly, difficult to expunge from memory.

Below is Kino Ken's rating of the short film GUERNICA.

GUERNICA France 1950 black-and-white short experimental documentary 13 minutes

Pantheon Productions / Les Filmes de la Pleiade Producer: Pierre Braunberger

Initial commercial release: 1971, Finland in French with English subtitles

17 of a possible 20 points

****1/2 of a possible *****

*indicates outstanding technical or performance achievement

Points

- Co-Directors: Robert Hessens and Alain Resnais
- 2 Film Editor: Alain Resnais*
- 1 Cinematographer: Henry Ferrand
- 1 Lighting
- 2 Special Visual Effects: Henry Ferrand*
- 2 Narration (includes poem by Paul Eluard)*
- 2 Music: Guy Bernard*
- 2 Sound: Pierre-Louis Calvet*
- 2 Narrators: Jacques Pruvost* and Maria Casares*

2 Creativity

1 Insightfulness

17 total points