

Frazetta: Painting With Fire (Cinemachine, 2003)



Frank Frazetta is probably the most influential artist of the last half century. -- William Stout, Illustrator

Documentaries are like the little girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead: when they are good, they are very, very good, and when they are bad, they are horrid. You might think that a production company formed initially by fans to create a documentary about their favorite artist would create something that would fall into the latter category. And, when the film is **Frazetta: Painting With Fire**, you'd be really, really wrong.

Frank Frazetta has been the leading artist in the field of fantasy illustration for fifty years. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a fantasy fan who doesn't have a book or album with a Frazetta cover, or a Frazetta comic, in their collection somewhere. His imagery permeates the genre and has been influencing other illustrators since he first began working in the field. He's a living legend. This film explores his art in the context of his life and experiences. As the very impressive press kit that came with the film says:

"To his fans, Frank is quite a mystery. No one has seen him being interviewed prior to this documentary, and therefore there is much about him they do not know. We have been quite thorough in covering his career, revealing some stories never before told in any of his books. His fans will truly appreciate the work we've done by putting the mystery man in front of the camera to tell his story in his own words."

Painting With Fire opens with a shot of one of Frazetta's most famous paintings: Conan. The original Conan, a barbarian with sword thrust into the ground, looming over a pile of skulls with a voluptuous beauty clinging to his muscular leg. If this image has become a cliché in the fantasy world it is only due to the great numbers of Frazetta imitators who have tried over the years to capture a fragment of his success.

In rapid succession we begin to learn about the artist and his life through interviews with family, friends, and contemporaries. Forrest J. Ackerman, Al Williamson, John Buscema, Bill Stout, Neal Adams, John Milius, Ralph Bakshi, Brom: these are just a few of the notables who add their reminiscences and insights to the film. And the man himself speaks, both through film clips of a 1984 live discussion, and current footage of Frazetta today. A bit of a curmudgeon now, Frazetta was a child prodigy, entering art school at the age of 8 and first working professionally at the age of 16. A consummate athlete for most of his life, he turned down a baseball career with the then New York Giants and took the path of the artist instead. Some of the most fascinating material in this film explores how Frazetta's athleticism influenced his painting; those spectacularly muscled men he paints exude such vitality in part because the artist truly understands the working of the human body. His mastery of his own body is evident even in his current state. Partially disabled by several strokes, his right hand occasionally palsied, he has taught himself to draw and paint with his left hand, and is still able to produce quality work.

This is a beautiful, moving piece of filmmaking. Poignant moments abound, as when Frank Frazetta Jr., an artistic talent in his own right, explains that he didn't become an artist because he felt so overshadowed by his father's talent. The elder Frazetta is pictured with his grandchildren -- his entire family dotes on the man.

Technically, **Painting With Fire** is absolutely superb. The film is loaded with spectacular imagery, not only in the dozens of scenes of Frazetta's work but in the way that the filmmakers have unexpectedly incorporated fantasy and live images together in several scenes. The lighting, the sound, the music, the editing are all exquisite. In many ways, this film reminds me of a book I recently reviewed, the artistic biography of author Ray Bradbury entitled **Bradbury: An Illustrated Life**. It's thorough, revealing not only information about the subject himself but also about the time periods in which he did his work. The film feels honest, and most importantly, I felt like I really *knew* something about Frazetta when it was over -- not only that, but in addition to admiration for him as an artist, now I think I know enough about him as a person to say, I like him.

Director Lance Laspina, producer Jeremy J. DiFiore, concept artist Shane White and the rest of the Cinemachine filmmakers have created a superior product here. Whether this documentary ends up on HBO, in art houses, or on the shelves at your local retailer, this is one that any fantasy art, film, or comic fan needs to see, so make sure that you don't miss it. Both endearing, and inspiring, this is a winner.

[[Maria Nutick](#)]

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