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● **Frazetta: Painting With Fire**

a documentary directed by **Lance Laspina**  
96 minutes  
available [on VHS](#)

● Reviewed by **Karen Haber**



Frank Frazetta brought the color, dynamism, and eroticism of comic book art to the realm of sword and sorcery illustration and transformed art directors' notions of cover art in the process.

Now tribute has been paid — in VHS videotape format — with a handsomely produced documentary, "Frazetta: Painting With Fire."

Comic book sensibility pervades the film, with details of Frazetta's work zooming across the screen, occasionally animated, accompanied by sound effects. The filmmakers have obviously gotten into the spirit of the thing: they have fun and so does the viewer, at least for the first hour of the 96-minute film.

Frazetta comes across as rugged and matey, the lion in winter. His affectionate relations with his friends and family are a pleasure to observe. And the discussions of his work, its impact on younger artists and filmmakers, are both interesting and informative. If it veers a bit toward idolatry, well, these things happen.

We follow Frazetta from his Brooklyn childhood and the development of his prodigious artistic and athletic skills, to his early years as an illustrator, ghosting the 'Lil Abner' comic strip. After that, Frazetta endured some difficult years as a freelancer before he struck gold with his seminal cover painting for Conan the Barbarian. Defined muscles for warriors and secondary sex characteristics for sirens woke up art directors. Frazetta became a sensation, eventually transferring his skills to the realm of movie posters, movie making, and sculpture.

Talking heads abound: Cathy and Arnie Fenner, Brom, Bo Derek, Ralph Bakshi, John Milius, John Buscema, Simon Bisley, William Stout, Al Williamson, Bernie Wrightson, Forrest J Ackerman, Michael Kaluta, Dave Stevens, Mark Schultz, Kevin Eastman, Joe Jusko, Neal Adams, Glenn Danzig, and assorted members of the Frazetta clan, including Frank's 94-year-old mother! Happily, the high-spirited approach of the documentary keeps the viewer out of the numbing cul-de-sac of repeated commentary peculiar to this genre.

The assembled artists gladly give Frazetta his due, tugging forelocks, citing his enormous influence on their work and field. Brom and Wrightson even show examples of their own work bearing the impact of the master. Greater generosity has no artist.

Family movies and photos, accompanied by affectionate reminiscences by the artist's children, take the viewer into the bosom of the Frazetta family. Ellie, Frank's wife, muse, and business manager, seems to have decided to duck the camera. She is only captured onscreen occasionally, but her presence is felt in much of her husband's art, and most especially in the Frazetta Museum. Ellie Frazetta worked long and hard to make the museum a reality, and the handsome building sits upon their estate like a castle.

The art is well served by the bright light of the TV screen, popping out details and colors. The producers have given the entire film a slick professional texture that is very easy on the eye. They also bring the comic book sensibility up close and personal — perhaps *too* close and personal — in the section entitled "Fighting for Life." Here Frazetta describes his protracted medical problems of the past two decades. The swelling music would have been sufficient accompaniment to the recitation of Frazetta's several brushes with death. The punctuation of his sobering statements by jokey details from his works creates a dissonant segment that should have been left on the cutting room floor.

However, the coda to this section, in which Frazetta demonstrates his

newly-developed left-handed sketching skills — a response to the stroke damage in his right hand — illustrates the meaning of guts and determination. What's more, the man can draw better with his left hand than most people can with their right. Impressive doesn't begin to describe it.

By the last half hour, the commentators seem to be running out of steam. The requisite discussion of Frazetta's place in art history is touched upon, with some disagreements. One historian compares him to Leonardo da Vinci, which made me long to be a ghost in the machines of future art scholars, eavesdropping as they debate that enigmatic expression on Conan's face — *is he smiling or isn't he?*

Despite these quibbles, ***Frazetta: Painting With Fire*** provides a generous, interesting journey through this powerful artist's life. Fans will love it.

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Karen Haber is a novelist and short story writer; an anthologist, most recently of [Exploring the Matrix](#) (St Martin's Press) and [Science Fiction: The Best of 2002](#) (ibooks) with Robert Silverberg; and a reviewer of art books, for *Locus Magazine*. She lives in Oakland, California.

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