

# CHESLEY BONESTELL: A BRUSH WITH THE FUTURE

Directed and produced by Douglass Stewart

## Ad Astra staff

**O**n this 50th anniversary of the first moonwalk, it's timely to discuss the pioneering artist who helped us get to the lunar surface—not with rocket science, but with a paintbrush. In the new documentary “Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future,” filmmakers shed light on a mysterious man who has been called “The Father of Space Art.” Well before orbiting telescopes, satellites, and human missions into space, Chesley Bonestell took the American public on a journey through the solar system, beginning with a “Life” magazine article published in 1944.

The idea of space travel was not new, but Bonestell's realistic paintings of other worlds caused many to look up and think about venturing into the unknown. This was the first time that many people had seen representations of other-worldly landscapes.

One of his iconic masterpieces—“Saturn as Seen from Titan” (1944), appeared both in the “Life” magazine article and the 1949 book, “The Conquest of Space.” Countless scientists and engineers were inspired to enter the fledgling aerospace industry by this painting.


Bonestell helped to design the Chrysler Building, worked on the Golden Gate bridge, and then became a special effects matte painter for movies like “Citizen Kane” and “The Fountainhead.” Bonestell appears in the film through archival interviews captured and archived by NSS member Richard Dowling, who interviewed the artist in the 1980s. Twenty-four other individuals contribute on-camera commentary, some of whom knew Bonestell personally, and others who were profoundly influenced by him, including Ray Bradbury.

Bonestell's part in science-fiction movies like “Destination Moon” and “The War of the Worlds” is covered as well. When television came along, he created conceptual art for the 1959 series “Men Into Space.” Although his Hollywood career was relatively short, Bonestell's contributions were long-lasting. Filmmaker Douglas Trumbull recounts

an argument he had with director Stanley Kubrick during the making of “2001: A Space Odyssey.” Trumbull was then in charge of visual effects. “At the time we were making ‘2001,’ no one really knew what the lunar surface looked like,” Trumbull explains. “Are these going to be craggy mountains like Chesley Bonestell was painting, or are these going to be low, rolling hills?” Trumbull argued for the latter, but Kubrick insisted that his Moon scenes should be “Bonestellian.” When astronauts landed on the Moon in 1969, Trumbull was proved right.

The lunar debate was not over yet, however. In 1957, Bonestell had

Painted a lunar mural for the Museum of Science in Boston, replete with craggy peaks. The exhibit was a hit with the public for years, but by 1969, was outdated. Bonestell expressed disappointment when the Moon landings revealed the lunar surface was not the way he had painted: “I was very much annoyed when the Museum of Science took my painting down and sent it to the Smithsonian for storage in 1976,” he said.

“Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future” was recently screened at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. The film is the first documentary ever made about Bonestell, and it spans his 98 years in a mere 96 minutes. For Bonestell fans, and space enthusiasts, it's an overdue treat. 



Chesley Bonestell photo by Robert E. David.  
Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC



For more information about the film and where to see it, please visit the website at [www.chesleybonestell.com](http://www.chesleybonestell.com)