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Chesley Bonestell, the subject of a film documentary co-produced by South Boston artist Ron Miller, worked with rocket scientist Werner Von Braun at the dawn of the American space program. Top, Bonestell's conception of a direct ascent rocket.

By Sharon Kinsey

News & Record

SoVaNow.com / May 21, 2018

Award-winning science illustrator and author Ron Miller is back in South Boston after venturing to Los Angeles this month to screen a feature-length documentary on one of his greatest artistic influences, Chesley Bonestell, whose mid-20th century illustrations of outer space proved to be remarkably prescient imaginings of the real thing.

On May 1, "Chesley Bonestell: A Brush With The Future," premiered at the Newport Beach Film Festival, where it not only sold out its debut screening, it won an Audience Award for Art, Architecture + Design.

The film, co-produced by Miller, is based on the award-winning biography of Bonestell that the South Boston artist and author wrote in 2001, "The Art of Chesley Bonestell." It is the story of the artist who helped launched mankind into space.

Inducted into the Science Fiction Museum Hall of Fame in 2005 (along with Steven Spielberg), Bonestell's influence on the U.S. space program cannot be overestimated. His visions of the future helped inspire the minds that would propel men to the moon in less than 20 years. In the early 1950s, Bonestell collaborated with expatriate German rocket expert Wernher von Braun on a series of magazine articles on the future of space flight that proved instrumental in inspiring Americans to back a then-fledgling space program that had yet to even launch a satellite.

"Chesley Bonestell's pictures are far more than beautiful, ethereal paintings of worlds beyond," praised von Braun. "They present the most accurate portrayal of those faraway heavenly bodies that modern science can offer."

Bonestell was hugely influential in the realms of space exploration and art, yet very few know his name. A classically trained architect, he worked on designs for such iconic structures as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Chrysler Building, and the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. At the age of 50, Bonestell moved to Los Angeles where he became a special effects artist on films like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and *The War of the Worlds* (1953).

His work on the 1950 film classic *Destination Moon* brought the film an Academy Award for special effects. The 1949 film *The Fountainhead*, based on the famed Ayn Rand book, also showcased Bonestell's artistry: in the movie, the buildings designed by the story's primary character, architect Howard Roark, were Bonestell's work.

He turned his full attention to scientifically realistic space paintings in the early

1940s. According to the film's website, Bonestell's iconic "Saturn as Seen From Titan," (1944) became known as "the painting that launched a thousand careers." It was his first published space painting, running in the May 29, 1944 issue of "Life" magazine.

In addition to the artwork he created for books, magazines and movies, Bonestell created a magnificent mural for the Boston Museum of Science. Forty feet wide, it depicted a lunar landscape with breathtaking realism. The mural was removed after the Apollo 11 landing in 1969 because "it was no longer accurate." The mural is now in the collection of the National Air & Space Museum, where plans are being made to restore and display it.

In an article published by Sotheby's, Joseph Chamberlain, director of the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, said, "It might even be suggested that without Bonestell and his early space age artistry, the NASA era might have been delayed for many years, or it might not have happened at all."

One question asked often is, "How did he know?" Comparing a Bonestell painting of Pluto from the 1950s with actual photographs sent back from the New Horizons space probe (2015), shows just how close Bonestell's imagination came to the real thing.

Miller recalls that Chesley Bonestell: A Brush With The Future began with a phone call from Hollywood film director and producer Douglass M. Stewart, another devotee of space travel and Bonestell's paintings. Stewart had been thinking of doing a biographical film about Bonestell for a long time, but felt certain someone had already done it. Internet research failed to turn up any films, but it did lead him to Miller, a preeminent space artist himself and Bonestell biographer.

Stewart told Miller a bit about himself, before asking two questions. Miller said the first was, "Has anyone ever done a film on Chesley?" to which Miller said "no." The second was, "Is anyone doing a film on Chesley?" to which Miller said "no," but added, "It's time for you to do one, and I will help."

Miller discovered Bonestell at a young age due to his passion for all things space travel. He read every book he could find, often deliberately searching for those featuring Bonestell artwork.

After receiving his degree in fine arts, Miller paid the rent as a commercial advertising illustrator. "After a day of doing toaster ads, I would come home and begin working on emulating Bonestell's art," mused Miller. Miller's 2001 book on Bonestell's art won a Hugo award (the equivalent of an Oscar in science fiction) for "Best Related Work" in 2002. Today, Miller is focused on writing and illustrating books specializing in astronomical and science fiction subjects, especially for young adults.

Chesley Bonestell: A Brush With The Future is a perspective on the life and works of one of America's most influential but unfortunately overlooked and forgotten visionaries. Filled with his mesmerizing art, his designs, and the iconic hallmarks of his legacy, this film explores the vast influence Bonestell had on our culture and our destiny.

Filming began in March 2015 with Miller's book providing the narrative foundation of the film. At the Newport Beach Film Festival, tickets sold out quickly for the scheduled showing, necessitating a second showing. Miller and Stewart will be at Tucson's SpaceFest in July for another showing of the film. A DVD with bonus extras is planned for the near future.

July 20, 2019 represents the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. It is a fitting time to highlight the work of a man who not only inspired the United States space program, but generations of astronomers, engineers, astronauts, and space enthusiasts to explore the mysterious galaxy and the potential of manned spaceflight.

Before he died in 1986, Bonestell was honored by having a crater on Mars and an asteroid named after him.