



Documentary Co-Producer Melvin Schuetz Talks Chesley Bonestell and "Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future" (UPDATED)

by [Eric Ames](#) in [Announcements](#)



Bonestell's "Saturn As Seen From Titan" via [Atlas Obscura](#)

It might seem strange that an assistant to curators at a 19th century-focused academic library is also a producer on a documentary about the "Father of Modern Space Art." But that's just one of the interesting things you learn when you talk to Melvin Schuetz about his interest in the art of [Chesley Bonestell](#). Schuetz recently served as a co-producer on a new documentary about Bonestell called *Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future* which will premiere at the [Newport Beach Film Festival](#) on May 1.

We interviewed Schuetz via email to get his thoughts on what made Bonestell's work important, how he became interested in Bonestell and the almost improbable (but true!) way in which his first career as an Air Force satellite controller and his second career as an Armstrong Browning Library employee were predicted on the pages of LIFE magazine.

Eric Ames:

What drew you to Bonestell's work in the first place? Were you initially interested in his early work as an architect or as an illustrator of sci-fi landscapes?

Melvin Schuetz:

I discovered the space art of Chesley Bonestell in the summer of 1960, when I was nine years old. As an avid participant in the summer reading program at my elementary school, I was especially fond of science fiction and space travel books. One day, I came across a most wonderful and magical book. Among the many volumes laid out on tables in my school's cafeteria was a book entitled *The Conquest of Space*, published in 1949, and illustrated with 58 magnificent Bonestell paintings. Those paintings immediately captured my imagination and filled me with awe. Leafing through them was the equivalent of boarding a passenger spaceship bound for the Moon, the solar system, and worlds beyond. The images did not just portray outer space to me—they carried me there!

It wasn't until years later that I was to learn of Bonestell's early work as an architect. That separate body of work is extremely impressive, but his space art was from the beginning and always will be the most enthralling to me. Although many of his illustrations appeared on the covers of science fiction magazines, Bonestell's space art was rooted in scientific realism. As Ron Miller has written about them: "They looked exactly like snapshots taken by a space-travelling *National Geographic* photographer."

What do you consider his biggest contributions to the worlds of art, literature, science-fiction, etc.?

Chesley Bonestell's art *literally* influenced a whole generation of young people to become artists, writers, filmmakers, scientists, engineers, and, yes, astronauts. From 1952 to 1954, *Collier's* magazine published a series of articles about the future of manned spaceflight. Bonestell was the head artist for the series, which was to be seen by millions, and which proclaimed "Man Will Conquer Space Soon!" The former director of the Adler Planetarium, Joseph Chamberlain, had this to say about Bonestell: "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 even have happened at all."

His second great contribution was to architecture. Anyone today who drives across the Golden Gate Bridge, or looks up at the Chrysler Building, owes a debt of gratitude to the genius of Bonestell, who was involved in the design of both structures. Bonestell's third great contribution was to Hollywood, where he worked for a number of years as a matte artist to produce backgrounds and special effects, on at least 17 films. The matte paintings of Citizen Kane's "Xanadu" estate and the Gothic cathedral in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* are both prime examples of Bonestell's talents.

Have you seen any ties between your interest in Bonestell and the Baylor Libraries?

People have asked me about my (second) career in the Baylor Libraries, and *especially* in the Armstrong Browning Library, as it is so very different from my Bonestell space interest and my first career as a satellite controller in the Air Force. I reply that it was apparently *destined* to be, and, as proof, I point to the May 29, 1944 issue of *Life* magazine. Beginning on page 78 is an article about the solar system which is illustrated with six of Bonestell's photo-realistic paintings of the planet Saturn and several of its moons. (These were, in fact, the very first of his space illustrations to be published.)

Turning then to page 122 of the same issue is something quite uncanny. That is the first page of an article entitled: "Life Visits a Browning Library in Texas: Baylor University Professor's Consuming Devotion to Great English Poet has Brought Fame to Campus." The article is about Dr. A.J. Armstrong, his large Browning collection, and his dream of building a free-standing Browning library at Baylor. Although I had long known about the Bonestell article in *Life*, it was not until after I began working at the ABL that I discovered the Browning article in the very same issue!



How did you get involved with *Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future*?

In 1999, my Bonestell bibliography was published, entitled *A Chesley Bonestell Space Art Chronology*, and in 2001 I collaborated with Ron Miller and Frederick C. Durant III on a lavishly-illustrated book, called *The Art of Chesley Bonestell*. The first book was nominated for a Locus Award in 2000, and the second book won a Hugo Award in 2002.

California filmmaker Douglass M. Stewart, Jr. obtained copies of our books and telephoned Ron, and then me, in 2015, to tell us of his idea of a documentary devoted entirely to Bonestell. (Sadly, Mr. Durant's health was poor, and he passed away that same year.) Our enthusiastic acceptance of his invitation to participate in the project ultimately grew into our becoming co-producers of the film.

What do you hope people take away from a viewing of *Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future*?

I hope that all those seeing the film will leave the theater feeling inspired and uplifted by Bonestell's visions. Additionally, I hope that it might provide the spark that would encourage some young people today to enter a career in art, or science, or engineering, with the goal of helping to make a better future for all mankind.

What plans do you have for distribution of the film after its debut at the Newport Beach Film Festival?

After its premiere in May, the film will show at the Wonderfest, in Louisville, Kentucky, in June. And the latest exciting news is that it is going to be screened at Worldcon76, the World Science Fiction Convention in San José, California, in August.

Anything else you want to add that's not covered above?

In 1998, I had the opportunity to see Bonestell's most celebrated painting, "Saturn as Seen from Titan," which is owned by the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. A photo of me holding the painting appears on the back cover of my 1999 Bonestell book. Two years after that, the Discovery Channel Canada aired a documentary called "2001 and Beyond," which featured a short segment on Bonestell. Without permission, they used my photo in their film; not only that, but they misidentified me on screen as Chesley Bonestell. One science fiction personality I told that story to replied: "Well, there's your 15 minutes of fame—unfortunately as Chesley, not Melvin!"

I never did get to meet Chesley, but I met his widow, Hulda, in 1989, and corresponded with her until she passed away in 1998. She left one of Chesley's space paintings to me in her will. In 2012, I donated it to the Smithsonian Institution, National Air and Space Museum, where it remains today. As I described at the beginning, I discovered Bonestell's art through his first book, which I saw in the library as a young child. Ten years ago, I was able to acquire Chesley Bonestell's *personal*, first edition copy of that book, *The Conquest of Space*; it is now my greatest Bonestell treasure.

Melvin Schuetz is assistant to the curators at the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University. You can learn more about the Bonestell documentary, Chesley Bonestell: A Brush with the Future, at the [film's website](#).

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For a complete list of upcoming screenings of the film, please visit <http://www.chesleybonestell.com/poster.html>.