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Chesley Bonestell: Imagining the Future

By: Don Vaughan | July 20, 2018

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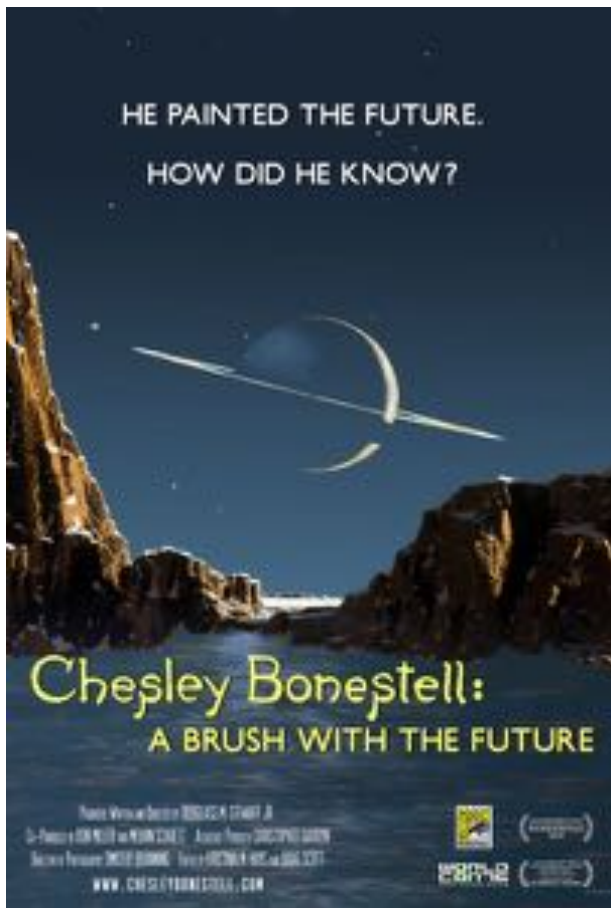
In 1944, *Life* Magazine published a series of paintings depicting Saturn as seen from its various moons. Created by a visionary artist named Chesley Bonestell, the paintings showed war-weary readers what worlds beyond our own might actually look like—a stunning achievement for the time. Years later, Bonestell would work closely with early space pioneers such as Willy Ley and Wernher von Braun in helping the world understand what exists beyond our tiny planet, why it is essential for us to go there, and how it could be done.



Photo by Robert E. David

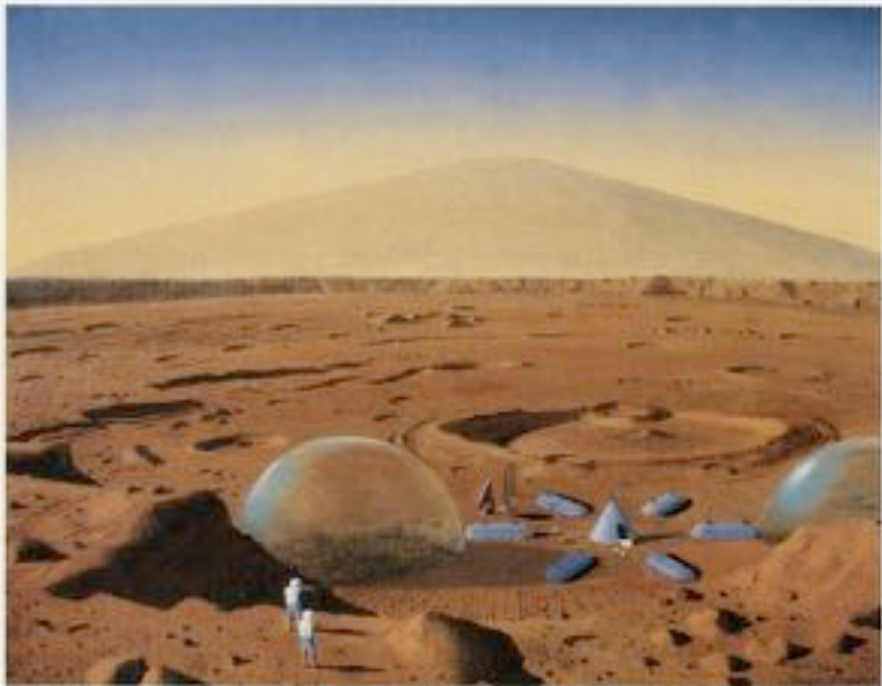
A titan in his time, Chesley Bonestell is little remembered today except by hardcore science fiction fans and those scientists whose dreams of exploring the cosmos were first inspired by Bonestell's astonishingly accurate representations. However, a new documentary titled *Chesley Bonestell: A Brush With The Future* aims to introduce Bonestell to contemporary audiences and remind the world of his remarkable accomplishments, which include helping get the Golden Gate Bridge built, creating matte paintings for numerous Hollywood blockbusters, promoting America's nascent space program, and more.

"Chesley Bonestell was the future, and still is the future," observes Douglass Stewart, who wrote, produced and directed *Chesley Bonestell: A Brush With The Future*. "He had a remarkable way of peering forward in time and putting what he saw down on canvas."



Bonestell was born in San Francisco in 1888, and as a teenager survived the 1906 earthquake that leveled the city. That experience, as several experts in the documentary attest, found a permanent place in Bonestell's psyche and much of his art in the decades that followed.

At the urging of his family, Bonestell attended Columbia University with the intent of becoming an architect, but left the school in his third year. He worked for a variety of architectural firms, and was closely associated with Willis Polk, who helped rebuild San Francisco following the 1906 quake. One of Bonestell's greatest talents was combining his artistic ability with a deep understanding of architectural design to create renderings that helped lay people easily comprehend even the most complex of structures. This ability would come in handy years later when he worked with Ley and von Braun in designing realistic space ships, space stations, and other futuristic hardware.



A Domed Colony on Mars – 1976; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC



An Instrument-Carrying Satellite in its Orbit, Passing 200 Miles Above the Atlantic Coast – 1953; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC

Bonestell's architectural work often comes as a surprise to those who know him exclusively as an astronomical artist, but his fingerprints are on a great number of important buildings, including the Chrysler Building in New York, the U.S. Supreme Court Building, the New York Central Building (now known as the Helmsley Building), and several state capitols. He also was involved in the design of Filoli, the huge California estate featured in the TV series *Dynasty*.

"Everything that Bonestell did can be traced back to his architectural background," says Stewart, who spent three and a half years making *Chesley Bonestell: A Brush With The Future*. "The combination of architectural and artistic skills was a melding of the divine gifts he was blessed with. The results were astounding."

When the Great Depression affected his ability to get work in the architectural field, Bonestell and his second wife, opera singer Ruby Helder, traveled to England, where Bonestell worked for the *Illustrated London News*. Upon his return to the United States in the late 1920s, he joined architect William Van Alen to help design the Chrysler Building. (The gargoyles at the top were a Bonestell touch.) When the Depression hit, Bonestell moved back to California and was hired by Joseph Strauss to illustrate the designs of the Golden

Gate Bridge. Bonestell's beautiful renderings delighted both the city fathers and the public, and helped the bridge get built. From there, Bonestell traveled to Hollywood, a letter of introduction from Van Alen in hand, to pursue a career in motion pictures.



Saturn as Seen from Mimas – 1944; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC



Saturn as Seen From Titan – 1944; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC

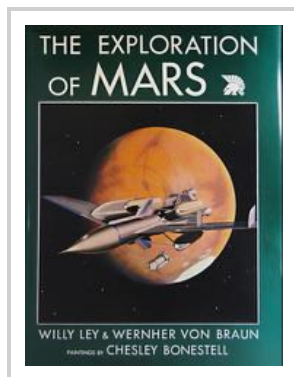
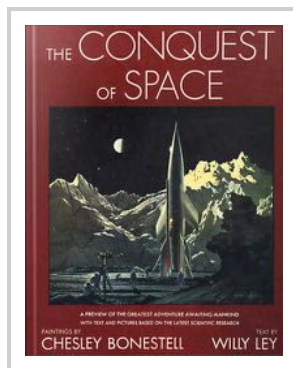
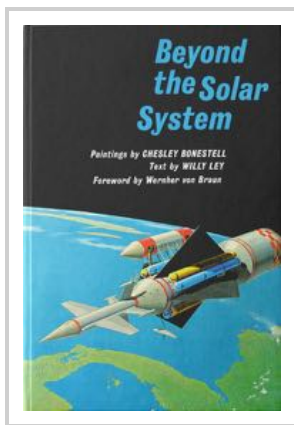
Bonestell quickly established himself as one of the film industry's premiere matte painters, eventually earning an impressive \$1,100 a week. He painted the massive cathedral featured in the 1939 version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and worked closely with Orson Welles on *Citizen Kane*, for which he painted Xanadu, Kane's palatial estate, and on

The Magnificent Ambersons.

It was Bonestell's association with producer George Pal, however, that brought him to the attention of science fiction fans. Pal was aware of Bonestell's talent as an astronomical painter, and hired the artist to create realistic planetscapes and other pieces for such popular Pal-produced '50s fare as *Destination Moon*, *When World's Collide*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *Conquest of Space*. It has been reported by some that Bonestell also worked on *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This is untrue, Stewart says, though according to 2001 special effects supervisor Douglas Trumbull, Bonestell did have a tremendous influence on director Stanley Kubrick.

Bonestell's reputation as an astronomical painter skyrocketed following the publication of his paintings in *Life* magazine, and he quickly found work producing book illustrations and covers for science fiction publications such as *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. It was within these pages that many people first observed Bonestell's genius.

Through it all Bonestell continued to produce astronomical paintings, many of which saw print in the nation's most prestigious magazines, where they were well received by an appreciative, science-hungry public. In 1949, several of these paintings were featured in Willy Ley's best-selling book *The Conquest of Space*, which attempted to explain the actual science of space travel and exploration. Bonestell also worked with von Braun on a number of projects, including a series of articles published in *Collier's* magazine between 1952 and 1954 titled "Man Will Conquer Space Soon!" The series proved a tremendous boost to the American space program.



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"Chesley Bonestell was a testament to the human spirit, both in terms of creativity and inspiration, but also because he went out and did it," says Stewart. "He painted literally to his last day, which is a pretty impressive accomplishment right there."

Bonestell passed away in his home in Carmel, California on June 11, 1986, at age 98. During his lifetime and after his death, he was honored in a variety of ways. The British Interplanetary Society, for example, awarded him a bronze medal for his work in astronautics, and Bonestell was inducted into both the International Space Hall of Fame and the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

However, it's two additional honors that perhaps best ensure Chesley Bonestell's legacy: The artist who took man into space decades before such a dream became reality has a crater on Mars and an asteroid named after him (3129 Bonestell). Almost certainly, Bonestell would have loved to have painted them both.



Ship Ready for Return Trip – 1948; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC



Surface of Mars – 1949; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC



Space Station, Ferry Rocket, and Space Telescope 1,075 Miles above Central America – 1952; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC



The Landing Craft Raised into Take-off Position – 1956; Chesley Bonestell paintings courtesy of Bonestell LLC

About Don Vaughan

Don Vaughan is a freelance writer based in Raleigh, North Carolina. His work appears regularly in *Writer's Digest*, *Military Officer Magazine*, *Boys' Life* and other publications. He also is the founder of Triangle Association of Freelancers.

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