True to the Art

by Leonid & Larisa Alekseychuk

Larisa and Leonid Alekseychuk, a distinguished and innovative team of writer-directors, left the Soviet Union in 1977 following the suppression by the authorities of their most recent film – a feature ballet musical, The Heart of Polichinelle, *based on the life of renowned Leningrad choreographer Leonid Jacobson.*

The Alekseychuks had been widely acclaimed in their homeland as filmmakers who interpreted and celebrated the arts. Among their outstanding and frequently prize-winning achievements were a two-part TV special on the Leningrad ballet (distributed widely in the West) ; a one-hour film about famed Leningrad actress Alicia Freundlich, and a two-hour drama on the life of Vincent Van Gogh.

In Rome, in the late winter of 1977 they encountered the work of William Kurelek, the renowned Canadian painter. Kurelek's portrayal of Canadian life as seen in "Lumberjacks," "A Prairie Boy's Winter," "Oh! Toronto" ; his profound spirituality as expressed in his 160 paintings "Passion of Christ," and his determined sense of the artist's role in Canadian society evident in his autobiography contributed to the Alekseychuks coming to Canada. In November 1980, they became Canadian citizens.

Having completed some film work with CBC-TV and TV-Ontario, the team is now embarking on a one-hour film on the life and work of William Kurelek.

The following essay illuminates their filmic approach to the project.

Certainly the phenomenon of filmmakers taking the trouble to not only describe their approach and reasoning in such great detail, but to also think through and express so eloquently – and with such vivid richness of social and cultural connective – their thoughts and probes about film on art, is an inspiration to those committed to film as art.

Harry Gulkin

The surest way to destroy a painting is to film it. To break up the harmony of the composition through a variety of close-up and medium shots ; to drag the lens across its surface, horizontally on a broad canvas, or up and down on a predominantly vertical composition.

Don't be concerned that your camera examines the canvas like a near-sighted spectator. Step back, bravely advance through retreat. Now zoom in to capture the smallest detail. The unfortunate film-viewer is caught by the collar and brought crashing nose-first into the canvas. Would he permit this to happen to him in an art gallery ?

Let us use all the other methods of torture available for our disposal : "appropriate" music, sound effects, the banalities of a narrator... film ! The filmmaker as a musically illiterate Toscannini enthusiastically conducting his turntable.

Synthetic food for cats is hardly for the lion : only if starving, will he lick it once or twice. In such a manner, without appetite, a camera, craving texture and depth, licks a flat canvas on a flat wall. Usually bold, inquisitive and daring, the camera becomes purblind and anemic upon entering a gallery.

One could make a great film about paintings which escape the confines of their existence and take a stroll through reality.

How wonderful for immortal works to become mortal for a time ! For a painted face to be startled by the freshness of a raindrop on its cheek. To flinch at the touch of a wet, wind-blown leaf sticking to its faded, cracked skin, and, if it didn't tickle too much, to avoid brushing it away with its delicately painted fingers. To breathe in the aroma of its own oils, aroused by the sun's rays. Let us go, worldly masterpieces, into the streets !

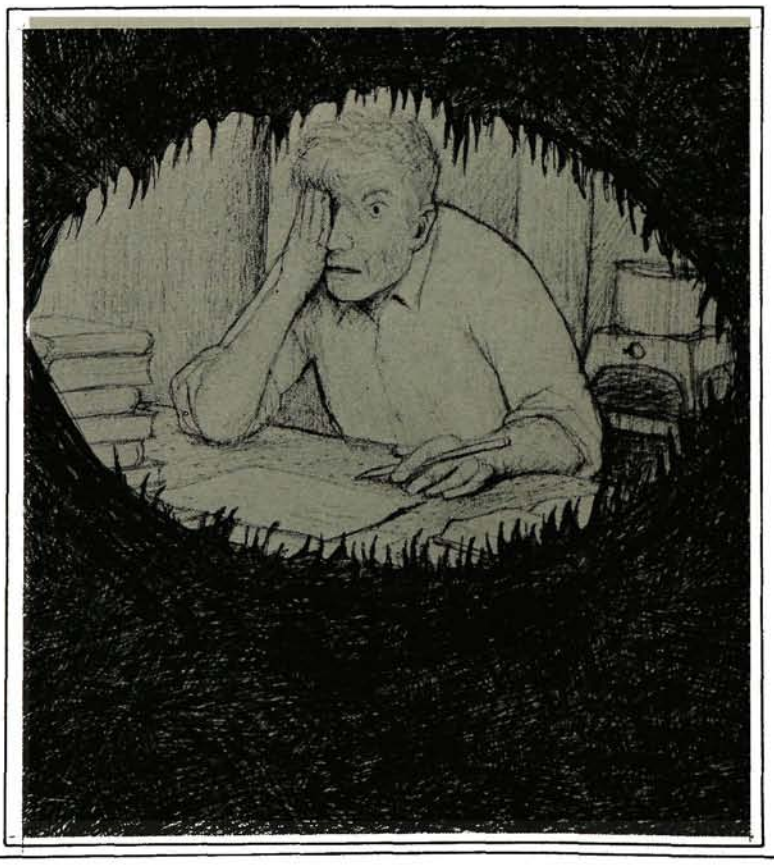
We will hang you on old fences. We will lay you in the grass and shower you with golden leaves. We will enlist a human billboard to walk about with a Van Gogh on his chest and a Renoir on his back. We will place you on easels stationed amid the roar and fumes of downtown intersections. On log booms floating down the river. Or turn you into sails covering Lake Ontario.

We must escape our own confines in understanding art by breaking through the confines of our very being. We must feel the pounding of our own hearts to penetrate the artist's heart.

Rembrandt will be more comfortable in a stable than in an art gallery. First of all, the horses are likely to be more critical of the narrator's babble than an average member of the audience. Secondly, there is ample space for the orchestra. Instead of hiding them off-camera, let them glorify the artist's work before us. But no sound, please ; let the silence prevail for a while, let our camera become a musical instrument and, following the conductor's bâton, perform its solo...

A stable is a possibility. So is a steel plant, an auto scrap yard or even an artist's messy studio. Everywhere is possible but the art gallery. Too lifeless and specialized is the place, especially when filmed : like an apartment building inhabited only by ballerinas.

Just as the painter conveys his message to the canvas, so must the filmmaker fine-tune his imagination and his craft to receive it. Given the fantasy, all things are possible...



Are motion pictures of motionless pictures really important ? Why should we try to improve them ? If for no other reason than that they *can* be improved. Or, for a better reason, that they can offer new avenues to beauty and self-knowledge.

Why do filmmakers sometimes freeze the action on the screen into a still shot? It is the same as a pause in music. The still shot has its own particular mode of expression. How often, as if trying to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, 24 frames per second revolve about their 1/24th part ?

Graphic film has the same relationship to "normal" film as puppet theatre has to live theatre. Both rank lower in prestige. Yet the great Gordon Craig envisaged a model actor-puppet. Radically opposed to the so-called "naturalistic" body expression idealized by most actors, his ideals were best represented by ancient sculptures – the forefathers of modern puppets.

He would have commended the Centaur Theatre production of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* in Toronto. The parts were represented by puppets whose faces bore only the slightest resemblance to the human face. They lacked hair, ears, natural color, and had only holes for eyes. Their parts were not recited by individual actors, but by a narrator. And yet these expressionless masks could laugh and cry. An actor could say so much with so little !

Cinema, in its self-conscious attempts to understand the artistic riddle of stillness, is more in a "pre-Craig" period today than the theatre. But more and more, the revolving film contemplates its stillness.

The problem of filming art effectively is so huge and puzzling that most filmmakers turn a blind eye to it. Although there are some valuable techniques in the presently popular approaches, many of them have become mechanical and predictable. If only to fulfill its physical potential, the camera must be liberated from the limitations of the current modes of expression. Why not look beyond the borders of the canvas ? Why not set the picture in the vast real world so much favoured and savoured by our eyes ? Why not correlate the stillness within the picture with the movement outside it ? After all, the artist's perspective was not limited by the frame. His work, with all its spiritual qualities, was to him a simple household item that could have been touched, sniffed, damaged, transported, put into right or wrong places, hidden, exhibited, sold, loved or hated – so why should all of these vital links be chopped off in film ?

Furthermore, when the individual viewer enters a gallery, he rearranges and restores the masterpiece before him according to his own unique knowledge, associations, quests and

emotions, thus establishing his own 'temperature of perception' – a quality without which any communion with the arts is meaningless, if not impossible. Only in the magnetic field of our vibrating sensations does a work of art *work*. In film, we often neglect this basic necessity, and opt for bombarding the viewer with the so-called "objective information." A usual result is a cold-as-a-dog's-nose lecture, instead of an unforgettable drama.

But now, let us imagine the realization of our theoretical principles in a concrete example : the work of William Kurelek. Let us film in a usual way a Kurelek self-portrait : the painting is that of a boy hunched over from despair, in the face of a dreadful future which his incurable eye disease forebodes. He is seen from inside somebody's eye. No doubt this exquisite composition would lose much of its power without these unblinking eyelids. (See illustration.)

Any ideas about filming ? Zoom in or zoom out, that's it. Or maybe a series of still shots, a staccato whose movement (retreat or approach) would be essentially the same. With these methods, at their best, one can only retell what has already been told.

A slight switch of a railway point sends a train into another direction. Let us do it.

What about moving closer to the boy... without leaving the watching eye ? Perhaps so very close that the desperate boy's eye will fit into the eye-socket of his watcher. Just imagine this slow, mesmerizing movement, at the end of which the desperate eye will be peering into our very depth ; imagine, perhaps, a sad closure of the eyelids (a much more passionate action than a usual fade-out), and you will readily take the trouble to execute such a shot. With this method then, we actually exploit the zoom-in technique – going so far as to maintain that a banal zoom-out should precede it, to let the viewer get a full impression of the drawing before the other cinematic means come into play. We use the mocked technique deliberately because we are hopeful that the difference between an idler playing with a lens' handle and the pursuit of artistic content will be clearly apparent.

William Kurelek envisaged his series of paintings entitled "The Passion of Christ" as one day being produced on film. He therefore used a standard format for the paintings which would match that of a television screen. The compositions themselves are ideal from a cinematographer's point of view. They are bold and economical, and yet rich in detail.

Kurelek has succeeded in making our work easier for us. However, there is a danger here ; for these conveniences for the filmmaker may lead him to be obvious.

There is no place for the timid camera when we approach the mercilessly whipped back of Christ in "The Passion of Christ" series. We are obliged to compose this bloody mosaic on the screen stroke by stroke. Only by doing this can we gain from using the actual sound of whips. The cadence of their whistling as they bite into the mutilated flesh will become the emotional metronome of our shot...

Big lies begin with small ones, on the sensory level. Who is not familiar, for example, with this kind of image-sound association frequently found in films : a frozen image of soldiers marching – the sound of footsteps, armies in combat, the sound of rifles.

Listen instead to your basic sensations, and you will be surprised how much more meaningful a silence can be.

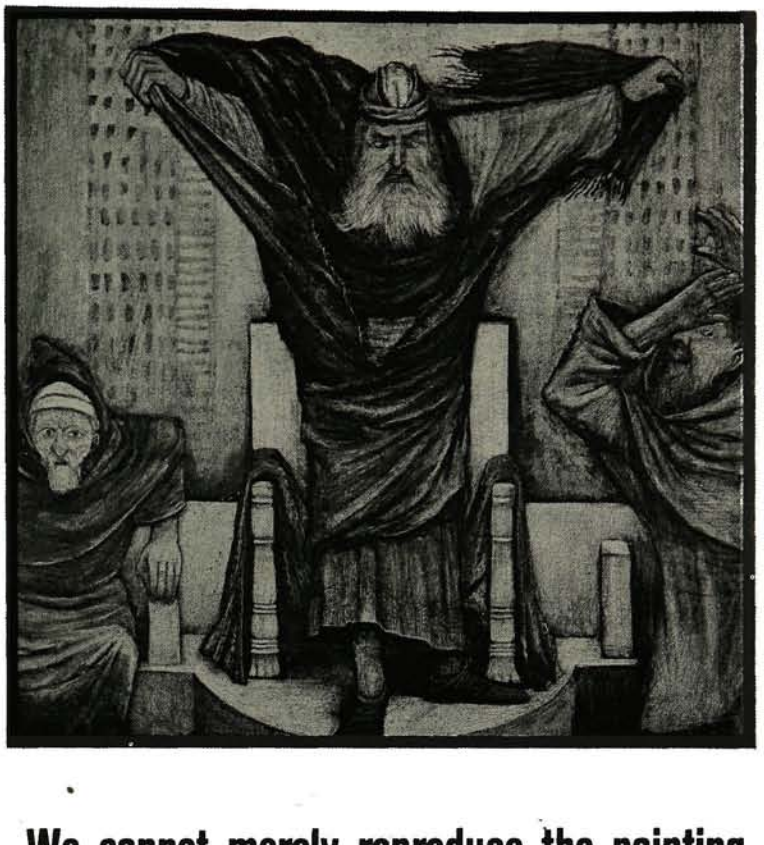
We cannot merely reproduce the painting of the high priest who has torn open his robe and, with outstretched arms, hovers like a hawk ; for this painting is not only one of a series, it is the beginning of a motif. It is the first of three crucifixions : the high priest is being crucified on the cross of his fanaticism ; later we see Pontius Pilate pointing toward Christ on one side and Barabas on the other, his arms extended on the cross of his indifference ; and then, we see Christ on the cross, the cross built upon both intolerance and indifference.

The motif beckons us toward other images, suggests new juxtapositions, leading us to a central theme that pierces the artist's life and works. It will reappear in thematically unsimilar works, in the most paradoxical orchestrations. The small child who has turned his face upward to joyfully greet the snowflakes, so that instead of his eyes, we see his avid nostrils – does this not rhyme with the image of Christ's sorrowfully uplifted face in the Passion series ? And the happy image of childhood, of a boy lying in the grass with outstretched arms can become a visual metaphor for the death of the artist who, despite his fifty years and five children, died a teenager.

But let us return to the painting lying in the grass, concealed beneath the leaves. Let us make a little window in the leaves and discover a pair of enticing eyes. We do not approach too closely with our camera. We allow the circle of leaves to preserve the mystery.

Or, instead of leaves, let us surround the eyes with a soft haze, in which, like in a newly-sown field, we await the first shoots of life. Perhaps the eyes belong to one of several figures. Let's discover who they are, one at a time. Let them appear unexpectedly. Let a figure be revealed only in its outline, perhaps from a preparatory sketch by the artist. Let us fill in the contours with music, its timbre suggesting the colors, as we did many years ago in our black-and-white TV program on Van Gogh – when we discovered that a monochrome rendition of the artist's palette can be more faithful to the original colours than even quality posters or albums. For, the imagination is penetrating and holistic, as opposed to printing techniques which are imitative in essence.

Certainly our approach does not prevent mistakes, extremes or even poor quality – these things depend on the filmmaker's skills – but it opens up



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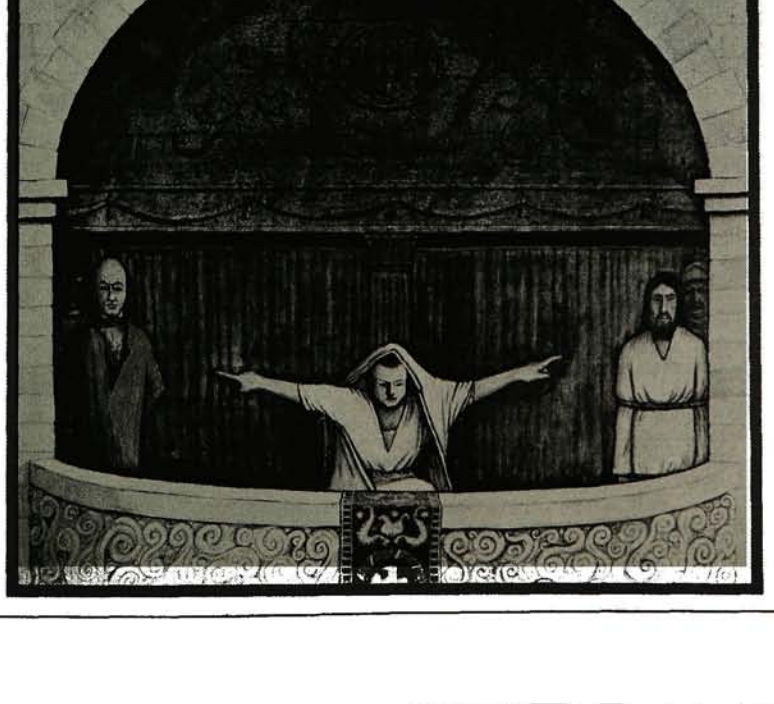


countless ways to a truly creative, personal treatment of the subject.

The authors have often been rewarded in portraying the life of a great artist more through personally experiencing his works than through reliance on any actual film chronicles. What a wondrous wealth of metaphors and paradoxes yield themselves to us when we yield to them!

Some years ago, we began making a feature documentary film about the Russian classical writer of the nineteenth century, Ivan Turgenev. We had a few magazine cartoons, some photographs and portraits, and the author's own writings to work with. The extreme lack of visual materials literally forced us to be innovative.

We brought the cartoons to life through animation. And what delightful stories they were able to tell!

Turgenev is well-known for his sensitive and vivid descriptions of the countryside. They are filled with the movement of wind and rain, mist and sun. We used time-lapse photography to capture this motion on the screen and let it flow with the prose.

But what were we to do with the portraits of Turgenev? There were a dozen or so, showing a portly, somewhat stiff gentleman, plus some equally eye-catching photographs of him. During our research however, we discovered that a great many of Turgenev's contemporaries – including the disappointed painters (most of them of great stature) who had tried to portray him – complained that Turgenev's witty, subtle and powerful personality eluded any attempt to capture it visually. And suddenly this unresolved riddle became a revelation. What the viewer likes above all is to be puzzled – so why not puzzle him? What better way to involve him in the search for the "real Turgenev" than by suggesting that nobody had yet found him?

By lining up the portraits and panning across them, and by letting the contemporaries express their grievances, we immediately made the viewer the authority on Turgenev, knowledgeable enough to dismiss the pictures and increasingly curious to continue his pursuit.

Our image of the writer was created not with the assistance of photographs, but in spite of them. We never referred to a photograph of Turgenev as "Turgenev," but as "a photograph of Turgenev." This seemingly minor play on words, was, in fact, a key issue.

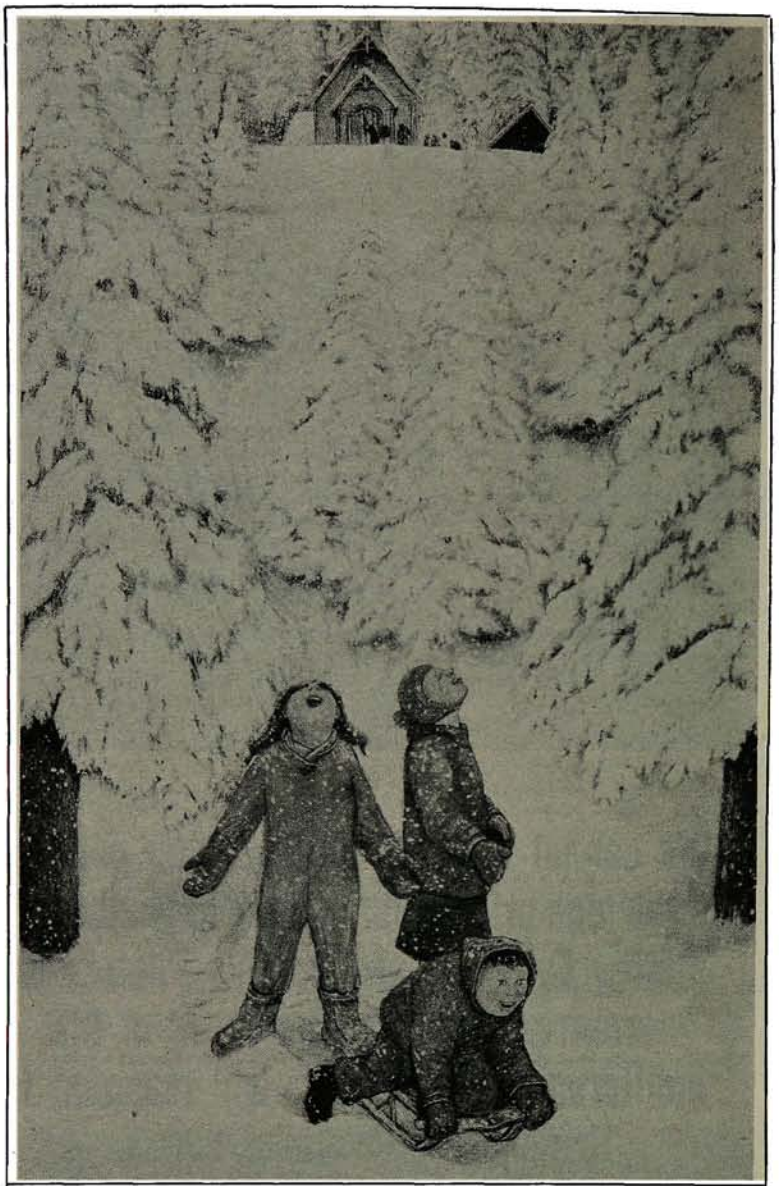
Pauline Viardot, the object of Turgenev's long and unhappy love, was one of Europe's foremost sopranos. She was praised by most of the leading composers, critics and poets of the first half of the nineteenth century.

How could the beauty of her voice be brought to the screen? How could the impression she made on the young writer, and the rapture he felt for her as a member of the audience, best be expressed?

At first, the answers to these questions seemed obvious: as a singer, she would have to sing. Perhaps something from "The Barber of Seville." Who would sing her part? No problem, there were many beautiful sopranos available. How easy it would have been to fall into the banal. There were many beautiful voices to choose from, but not one of them was Viardot's...

Now, let us switch on the film and soundtrack. We see a portrait of the singer. The orchestra begins. Now it is time for the voice to come in. But it remains silent, the lips on the screen do not part. As a spectator, I could not believe in a voice coming from a still image. But now, *not* hearing her voice, I *want* the lips to part, and the voices to be heard. I can almost hear her now. Almost. In my imagination. For the orchestra accompanies an absent vocal part. Finally, instead of the singer's voice, we hear the excited voices of her contemporaries gradually becoming stronger: "What a marvelous voice!" "Genius!" "Bravo!"

The lips do not part. The portrait faces the conductor from a music stand. The music rises toward its dramatic conclusion. On the stand before each musician rests a portrait of Turgenev.



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In this way, we searched for the "real Turgenev." Not by dispelling mystery, but by submitting to it. Not by presenting the spectator with answers, but by involving him in an exciting search for them. In the final moments of the film, we waited in a forest for this man, the author of ***Hunter's Notes***, to appear. His approach was heralded by the sound of distant guns. They grew louder and louder as he was about to appear. But of course, he did not. Because even a resurrected, historical Turgenev, emerging from the great beyond, would have been "not like that at all..."

But, you ask, does all of this not interfere with the individual's personal, and intimate experience of a painting? This question overlooks a simple fact: by the very act of filming a work, we are already interfering with the viewer's direct contact with it. The camera, by its existence, is a middleman. A squeaky floor is more worrysome if it is tiptoed on; just as a furtive camera – if in no other way than by boring the viewer – becomes more obvious. To truly involve the viewer, we must boldly involve the camera, and be noticeable in order to achieve invisibility. To do justice to the painting on the screen, we must not be afraid to be subjective.

In our era of mass culture, such a turn seems all but impossible.

Films about giants are made mostly by dwarfs. It is their stronghold. The business is saturated with stunted concepts that have acquired the status of law. Fortunately, this growth handicap is not some incorrigible whim of Mother Nature. For it is not a growth in size, but a growth in knowledge and responsibility that is needed to cure the disease – provided, of course, we know the symptoms. Here are some:

Lazy or unable to fully explore a single masterpiece, a pygmy filmmaker gulps them down by the hundreds. Shallow superlatives substitute for understanding, and the more inferior is the filmmaker to his subject, the more impudent is his humble adoration. Even Bachs and Mozarts are enslaved to serve his purpose: that of distracting the viewer from the thunderous silence of artistic revelation – which our hero is unable to produce. Confronting great art, such a filmmaker, his mission being to explain what he will never understand, is neither puzzled nor awed: he is too confident to be curious and too informed to be knowledgeable. Small wonder that the notion of objectivity and unobtrusiveness has become the comfortable disguise of incompetence; that artistic values are being devalued for the sake of a predeterminedly feebleminded audience; that creative impotence, in view of quantitative prolificacy, becomes a side issue; that squalor of imagination is passed off as wealth of culture; that art killers wear judge's gowns, often embellished with awards. In the end, the viewer, brainwashed and subdued by such 'unobtrusiveness,' does not even notice how the giants on his screen have become suspiciously dwarfed.

Just as the painter conveys his message to the canvas, so must the filmmaker fine-tune his imagination and his craft to receive it. Given the fantasy, all things are possible. But first...

1) Be equal to your subject. If you aren't, better wait until you are. Unless you have a very strong filmic concept, do not dare touch a great artist. Although dead, he could give you quite a jolt – and sooner or later, you would feel the pain.
2) Beware of the "leave-it-up-to-the-viewer" attitude. Given such a freedom, the viewer might well decide that he does not need you at all – and he will not always be wrong.
3) The surest way to film a painting is... to destroy it? Yes, in a way. At least, to transform and adjust it to the needs of your media.
4) If you want the viewer to watch a painted face with bated breath, let a fly crawl across it...

Are you convinced? Are you almost willing to take the risk? But you are not sure whether the curator will let you take the paintings?

Rob the gallery. ●