

## 217 Films: Bringing American Art to Life

By Barbara Malinsky/Photos Courtesy 217 Films

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“I am an old-fashioned film maker. I like to tour with my films when they are released, as often as I can. I like dark and quiet rooms where people have to focus on the screen. I instruct the techs in the booth to make sure the lights are off when the credits roll at the end, as they are an integral part of any film I make and always contain some of the film’s best music. I will never get tired of touring, of greeting people at the door, of hanging around afterwards for the Q&A. I relish the intelligent and thoughtful comments I get at the end of a screening.” Michael Maglaras

Ashford residents Michael Maglaras and his wife Terri Templeton are producers of films about American Art. Both come from a performance background. He is a professional opera singer having performed in the United States and in Europe. She has been performing professionally since the age of 16, as a musician, singer, songwriter, and actress.

Though trained as a professional singer, Maglaras has always had a fascination with visual art. “There isn’t enough film footage around about our great American visual culture legacy and I am very passionate about learning more about it. America has been good to me and I feel that I must give back and I do that by telling stories of American Art; citizenship means giving back.” He has produced six films in ten years and they are all self-funded.

To create a movie he employs a format. “I look for a crucial combination: great art and a great story behind it. There is no way to put the viewer in the middle of the art itself, without a narrative generated by the artist’s own life and writings. This all helps to illuminate the art. In my research, I always ask, ‘why should I care?’ when the paintings have value – that is, artistic merit – the story behind them helps to accentuate our appreciation of them.”

He and his wife have chosen to focus on a small group of artists whose work is representative of changing times in the history of American art. These have included early modernist artists such as John Marin, Marsden Hartley and Lynd Ward. In addition, Maglaras has used his resonant voice to recite Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (2007), whom he proclaims is America's first super hero. "I read the poem in its entirety one summer afternoon, coming to the realization that this had to be our next project. I hope this recording, which took three months to produce, will revitalize interest in a poet and a seminal work that has, in a sense, fallen out of political fashion. It is an idealized treatment of the Native-American issue, from a white author's perspective. And yet, I see in the person of Hiawatha – who actually lived, by the way – a true hero."

*Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet* and *Cleophas and His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy* (2005) are two films that explore the artistic life of Marsden Hartley. "Hartley was a member of progressive group, photographer Alfred Stieglitz's 291 studio in New York. He had a strong start to his career in the 'teens. But he was drawn to the natural world, which manifested itself in landscape painting. He was a remarkably skilled diarist, in addition to his artistic output."

"What appealed to me in Hartley's writing, his paintings, and emotional life, for that matter, was the spiritual healing achieved through his work. He was deeply conflicted about intimacy, moving toward it and away from it his entire life – with relationships constantly coming and going, either due to his own restlessness or others' untimely death. He turned emotional conflict into a positive aesthetic value, claiming that real art arises from emotional distance. Desire and distance – mutually contradictory emotions – marked much of Hartley's life and his paintings."

John Marin (1870-1953), *Let the Paint be Paint!* (2009), was another artist of interest for 217 Films. Marin was part of the early Modernist movement in New York in the years just prior to World War I. He was also a member of Stieglitz's 291 studio. His work redefined the urban landscape deconstructing great architectural icons such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Woolworth Building, as well as daring, expressionistic versions of the Maine seacoast. Maglaras explains, "He was the first artist in the new century to experiment with water color, treating it much like oils. They took on a life of their own on paper. The artist himself said, 'Let the paint be the paint.' His work is sensuous and self-revelatory in the style of the poet, Walt Whitman."

Lynd Ward (1905-1985) was an American artist who published several novels as an unfolding narrative in the form of hundreds of woodcut images of characters between the years of the two world wars. In his film *O Brother Man; The Art and Life of Lynd Ward* (2012), Maglaras explores this artist's work. He calls Ward "the father of the American graphic novel and one of the most prolific book illustrators and printmakers in the history of American art." For the film, he

completed extensive research and interviews with Ward's daughter, Robin Ward Savage. The film demonstrates how Lynd's work chronicles American life in the 20th century, as well as his commitment to social justice and the difficulty of the worker during the Great Depression.

The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show (2013) explores the International Exhibition of Modern Art known as the Armory Show because of its 69th Regiment Armory venue. This was the first large exhibition of modern art in America. Thousands of Americans attended the show igniting debates among the public and in the press about impact of "Modern Art" exemplified by Cézanne, Renoir, Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, and the daring Marcel Duchamp, as well as Americans such as Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Charles Sheeler who gained tremendous exposure. Americans were challenged in their understanding of art. "Our goal as filmmakers was to bring the drama of that time back to life." Enough to Live On: The Art of the WPA (2015) is the most recent documentary that recently had its world premier at the New Britain Museum of American Art.

Enough to Live On derives its name from a comment by artist Willem de Kooning, who said that the Works Project Administration (WPA) work gave him enough to live on during those dark years. As a young man Michael Maglaras always admired the portrait of a man that hung above his father's workbench. When he asked about the man's identity his father said that he was the second greatest man who ever lived. That man was Franklin D. Roosevelt. "It was instilled in me very early that Roosevelt brought us back from the brink." Eighty years ago this president created the Works Progress Administration (WPA) bringing art from the elite to the American people as both an inspiration and a means of change and recovery in the 1930s. It was the largest relief effort in the history of the United States.

Featuring more than 70 works of art from this period as well as rare footage of WPA artists, the story reveals the various programs that put artists to work in theater, visual arts, writing, photography, music, dance, oral history, music history, and other fields. Maglaras settled on 78 pieces of art to showcase his film, including works by Rockwell Kent, Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, Jacob Lawrence, Paul Cadmus, and others both familiar and unfamiliar.

The film also probes the contentious murals of Diego Rivera that inspired Depression-era muralists with their glorification of workingmen. He included one mural in Connecticut; the painting on the wall of the post office in Southington, created in 1942 by Ann Hunt Spencer. In addition, Connecticut can boast a total of 30 murals throughout the state. Residents should check their local post offices. Maglaras explains the urgency of documenting this period in American history. "The story of this project needs to be told. How soon we forget." Maglaras describes his philosophy, "That's the bargain that, as a filmmaker, I am pledged to respect. You leave wherever you are comfortable, and you come to a place where you are forced to sit in the dark and watch something onscreen. In

return for your sacrifice, I have to make it my business to enlighten you, entertain you, move you, and perhaps get you to see something you've not seen before. I have to succeed at this because it is the right thing to do in return for your having made the journey."

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