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Secrets of Oscar-winning Animation
Cotte
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Mona Lisa
descending a staircase

Through the transformation of famous pieces of art, the film offers a panorama of painting from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. Using incomparable technical and artistic skill, it creates a explosive display of colors, textures and clues, for the amateur to decipher, as to the indentify of the work. The screenplay relies on the pleasure experienced upon seeing the chosen works, and the intelligence of the associations as well as the way they are linked in the film.
Clay painting

Credits

**Title:** Mona Lisa descending a staircase

**Year:** 1991

**Country:** United States

**Director:** Joan C. Gratz

**Production:** Gratzfilm

**Screenplay, animation, artwork, layout, storyboard:** Joan C. Gratz

**Technique used:** Clay painting

**Music:** Jamie Haggerty

**Sound:** Chel White

**Voice and didgeridoo:** Jean G. Poulot

**Sound mix:** Lance Limbocker

**Optical printing:** Fred Pack

**Length:** 7 minutes

The transformation is applied to the film’s symbol (Mona Lisa) to create the title sequence.

Joan C. Gratz received degrees in painting from the University of California at Los Angeles and in architecture at the University of Oregon. She developed her technique of animated painting when she was an architecture student, then shifted to clay while working with Will Vinton Studios from 1976 to 1987. During that time, her work included design and animation for the Academy Award nominated film Return to Oz by Disney. Short film nominees Rip Van winkle and The Creation, which was the first film to feature Joan’s clay painting. She established her own studio Gratzfilm in 1987.

Her independently produced and directed films include: The Dowager’s Feast, which explores the unconscious through abstract imagery. The Dowager’s Idyll, commissioned to be screened at a live concert performance and Pro and Con (with Joanna Priestly), an animated documentary about life in prison. In addition to her personal films, Joan C. Gratz has made many commercials. Her clients include Microsoft, United Airlines, Coca Cola and Knorr.
Screenplay

While experimentation and formal artistic research are not always used in commercial pieces of work, they are often the source of more personal films. The animator’s approach comes closer to that of the artist wanting to give complete freedom to an individual expression that knows neither external nor narrative constraints: the only rule is aesthetic pleasure.

The majority of animation film-makers have been at least partly trained at fine arts colleges and graphic art schools. Thus, they normally draw their sources of inspiration from the traditional visual arts. This influence assumes great importance and promotes the use of many well-known cultural references in their films, including allusions and tributes to classic paintings and sculptures. Joan C. Gratz’s film *Mona Lisa descending a staircase* is an especially eloquent example of this. The title is a combined reference to Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous painting, the *Mona Lisa*, and Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, giving the audience an insight into the type of visual display they are about to watch. It is worth mentioning that Marcel Duchamp was also interested in *Mona Lisa*, and painted a rather personal version in which he added a moustache – *Mona Lisa with a Moustache* (L.H.O.O.Q.).

The seven minutes of Joan C. Gratz’s film present a panorama of contemporary painting, introducing the works of 35 famous artists with images of their most representative work. An outstanding stylistic work of art, it takes the viewer on a journey through modernism at the end of the nineteenth century to the present day; behind this list of works floats the timeless figure of the *Mona Lisa* as the archetype of pictorial work.
A difficult transition between two canvases with very different styles: note that the first one by Fernand Léger is animated slightly (the lines decorating the woman’s hair).

O.C.: How did you get the idea for this film?

J.C.G.: My original idea was to create an animated history of painting in the twentieth century by using morphing images.

O.C.: How much time did you spend on the idea?

J.C.G.: Although the project was conceived in 1981, it wasn’t completed until 1992. I spent nearly eight years researching and planning... and putting everything off until tomorrow. The animation as you see it took two and a half years.

O.C.: That’s quite a lot of time in production. How was it organized? I guess you were unable to work exclusively on the film...

J.C.G.: While I was working on Mona Lisa, I was the set designer and special effects animator on Will Vinton’s feature film The Adventures of Mark Twain, and on the Disney feature film Return to Oz. I also made several commercials. There were a lot of interruptions.

O.C.: And financially?
J. C. G.: Mona Lisa was made with different subsidies, including grants from the Oregon Arts Commission, the Western Regional Media Arts Commission and the American Film Institute. I also used the money I made from advertisements. The fact that the American Film Institute imposed a two year deadline within which to make the film was motivation enough for me to get a move on.

O. C.: What is your relationship with the audience when you are preparing a film?

J. C. G.: I don’t think about the audience when the work I am doing is solely for my own pleasure; it’s quite the opposite to doing commercial work, adverts in particular, in which client satisfaction is paramount. Mona Lisa is an entirely personal film.

O. C.: Do you envisage the film in its entirety before starting?

J. C. G.: No, not at the beginning; it’s exactly this discovery process that interests me. If I were aware of how the whole film would develop before I started working, I don’t think I’d be interested in making it anymore...

O. C.: You had to devise an ‘order’ for presenting the paintings, a chronology that allows fluidity. Was that difficult?

J. C. G.: Yes, determining a chronology to introduce the artists was complicated, as was showing the way in which the images change and providing information about the style and technique used in each painting. That’s the visual side of it. The soundtrack provides indications about the cultural and environmental context for example the sounds of war during the German expressionists and Picasso’s Guernica.

O. C.: Was the soundtrack made before or after the film?

J. C. G.: After, to match the images more closely.
In the middle of the film, surrealism gives way to art brut during the transition from Ernst to Dubuffet. The painting style is completely different in the two paintings; the second painting gradually arrives at its definitive style. In this case, it is the very subject of the first painting that provides the idea for the transition.

Francis Bacon is a painter whose style is most compatible with Joan C. Gratz' own and therefore a pleasure for her to replicate.
Technique

Joan C. Gratz is a specialist in clay animation. Her work at the Will Vinton studio, a pioneer in this field\(^1\), led her to research the techniques and visual effects she has used since then in her commissioned work and in personal films made at her own studio.

When one thinks of animation techniques based on modeling clay, one normally thinks of stop motion puppet films (for example, Wallace and Gromit by Aardman Animations): animated films that are similar to stop-motion cinema and use techniques that involve the use of puppets or other solid figures. The originality of Joan C. Gratz’s work is the fact that the base material is not used threedimensionally, but two-dimensionally to create paintings. She uses modeling clay in the same way that others use oil paints; it is a material that can easily be retouched, and its long drying time makes it easier for it to be modified and reworked frame by frame.

\(^1\) Will Vinton won an Oscar in 1975 with Closed Monday, his first film. With very few exceptions, it was the first time in that era that the possibilities of using modeling clay in animation were shown at the cinema.
Clay painting

The modeling clay is spread out on a solid background, which it sticks to naturally due to its consistency. This background is placed on an easel; the work is carried out vertically, and not horizontally as is often the case in animation (working on the animation stand with the drawing or painting laid flat). This style of work is indicative of the artist’s influences.

On the contrary to what one might expect the clay is viscous enough to hold throughout the several days of animation and filming. However, it must be said that the clay used by Joan C. Gratz is most definitely not the variety that is available commercially. It’s her own special secret mixture. To reproduce the textures and aspect of the different paintings she has some wire tools, but mainly uses her hands to recreate the brush-strokes.

“O. C.: How were the animation sessions organized? How do you work?

J. C. G.: My painting technique is based on oil-based modeling clay, which allows me to reproduce the textures and colors of the paintings. I work at an easel with the camera placed behind me. The animation is live: I work the material, then shoot the frame, I change the painting again, shoot another frame, and so on. Each time, you have to add a little clay, remove a little, and change either everything or some details. I use my hands and also a small wire to make holes in the clay. It obviously takes a long time...”
Mona Lisa descending a staircase

Working with her fingers or a wire tool add or remove modeling clay on Andy Warhol’s pop art painting inspired by Chester Gould’s Dick Tracy cartoon strip.

The final result: a transition between two very different pop art paintings.
Clay painting

O.C.: To be able to distinguish clearly between the different textures and impastos in some of the reproductions, the lighting must have been very important.

J. C. G.: I filmed with two lights at 45° to the painted surface. This is the classic method of lighting under an upright animation stand. In this aspect my work is similar to classic animation.

O.C.: There is something very surprising in the quality of the different textures. The material is always the same, but the result really looks like oil painting, with all the variations that this presupposes about the style from one painting to another... was this difficult to do?

J. C. G.: Oil based clay is a remarkable material. The thickness can be changed and colours blended to replicate the varied consistencies and textures of oil paint. For example, German expressionism uses quite thick brushstrokes, whereas American pop art has little surface texture.

The setup is quite simple. The camera is perpendicular to the easel with two lights at a 45° angle to the painting surface. Each second of film produced in this manner required two days. The exact replication of the key paintings was more time consuming.

A typical example of a painting showing the characteristic thick impasto of the German expressionist school.
O.C.: You work at an easel. Does the clay never run?

J. C. G.: My easel is very stable and even though it’s almost upright, I have never had any problems. The clay being oil-based has good adhesive qualities and wouldn’t run unless exposed to heat.

O.C.: We have both seen that work on this film was spread out over quite a long period of time. There are a few transitions in Mona Lisa but they are quite spaced out. There is some fade to black, which separates the major periods in the history of painting. As your work is filmed directly and you have to remember the stage you were at when you stopped, didn’t you have any problems when you started working on the film again after a long interval?

J. C. G.: I was able to give Mona Lisa a feeling of uninterrupted flow. I planned cut-points which allowed me to down-load and develop sections of the film without losing the fluidity of the imagery. Occasionally I would animate to a solid color and cross-dissolve to hide a cut-point. But in one scene, the sequence showing Picasso’s cubist period, I had to interrupt the work to film an advert. Suddenly, there is a jump... apart from this there was no problem stopping between each animation session.
Animation

In watching *Mona Lisa descending a staircase*, we might assume that the animated part of the film is quite basic, as it is limited to creating the links between one painting and another. It is true to say that we are definitely not considering a film that shows living characters who display behavior patterns or feelings. In this respect, the general work ethic of *Mona Lisa* is far removed from the traditional one, the Disney ethic, which consists of giving a soul to each protagonist. Using the paintings in a realistic or cartoon-like way would have been possible, but this would have overruled the film’s creativity in a direction that Joan C. Gratz would not have liked. The paintings would have been set up in a narrative framework and would have had to abandon, or at least relegate to the background, the idea of a panorama of the history of twentieth century art, which was her main inspiration.

* A simple transformation linking two very different paintings: it is the small elements that make up the first and second paintings that shape the play on their similarities to create a harmony between them.
Nevertheless, the animation in *Mona Lisa* is far from a series of skillfully executed transformations linking the paintings. Firstly, the paintings are not always easy to transform; problems are posed by the theme, background or colors. Consequently, Joan C. Gratz had to create a spatial and dynamic arrangement flexible enough to build up a particular elegance, a natural effect, in the transition from one painting to the next. It must be borne in mind that each pair of paintings is unique and the transitions between them are always different.

Secondly, as these transitions are works of art in themselves (this can be seen when there is a pause at a particular image during viewing, or simply if the viewer pays attention during screening), it quickly occurred to Joan C. Gratz that these new paintings could in turn create a show within a show. Thus, certain new elements, independent of both paintings, were introduced into the background, and others simultaneously, or otherwise, are simply born of preexisting colors and textures. It is also in this way that parts of the metamorphosing paintings achieve an existence for a few frames and play an ephemeral role in the film.
O. C.: Do you think in terms of geometric arrangements to pass from one painting to the next?

J. C. G.: The transitions were the most interesting aspect of the work. A great deal of what they show consists of providing information about the style of the paintings. As there is constant transformation, the images between each painting are a mixture of the two paintings, of the work of the two artists. The relationship between the images depends on the era, the artistic movement and the interconnection between the artists.

O. C.: Technically, did the timing have to be carefully thought out in advance to reach a suitable rhythm for the introduction of each painting?

J. C. G.: No, I didn’t prepare the general timing too accurately. I didn’t know how long each image would stand still on the screen before the next transformation. Once the animation was complete, I changed the rhythm of the film through optical printing in the lab. This allowed me to refine the pacing and flow of the final film.

O. C.: So there were no prior animatics that allowed you to determine the rhythm?

J. C. G.: I never make animatics. I am a great believer in spontaneity. Once again, if I know in advance how the film is going to look, I have no reason to make it.

O. C.: Some scenes must have been particularly difficult to animate.

J. C. G.: A great deal of time went into planning which painters and paintings to include in this film. Certain painting styles are more sympathetic to my own work, but I tried to represent the major art movements. Naturally the painters chosen reflect my own bias. In terms of animation the most difficult paintings are those with no texture or small realistic details.
These two very graphic, almost detached paintings benefit from an explosive transition which provides visual rhythm.
Watching *Mona Lisa descending a staircase* always provokes a kind of euphoria in the audience; laughter can even be heard from the theater when certain transformations take place. Such reactions may be surprising, because if part of the festival-going audience has the same cultural references as the artists, these transitions are not necessarily comic. This film certainly has a playful dimension; following the treasure hunt, recognizing the paintings and references, having fun in trying to guess which painting will be next and how it will make its appearance on screen. Above all, in this film, the audience relives its discovery of painting. In this animated gallery its a part of our souvenirs that stream past.