

VOGT PRODUCTIONS

motion picture and video production

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THE COLLECTOR

Film maker Peter Vogt has an affinity for museum projects

by Nancy Camp

Sometime around 1948, a young boy first pored over two volumes of American art--standard props in his Westfield, New Jersey home. It was a home that indulged many possibilities, with a mother always ready for mineral hunts and a father whose music and photography interests evoked an abundance of creative energy. Fifty years later, these books and impressions are touchstones to Peter Vogt's lifelong passion for art, collections and compelling images.

Vogt is lucky. He's one of those alert individuals who can recognize the handful of moments in his past that crystallized into the person he is today. Such self awareness is invaluable, creating a bottomless well from which to draw up the fragile resource of creativity. But it's self-made luck, born out of diligence, focus and a nearly tedious attention to detail.

For Peter Vogt it has yielded a body of film work that, like any good collection, continues to influence viewers over time. Many of his productions have been on behalf of museums and exhibitions and reflect the particular requirements of this film genre. Even early on he showed a curator's instincts for dealing with things.

At a tender age he started collecting minerals, spurred by a metallurgist grandfather. "It wasn't enough to see the outcroppings of granite, mica, feldspar and quartz on the edge of town. I wanted the stuff in my room," he recalls. After Vogt launched a mineral group in his basement with classmates, his father joined the New Jersey Mineralogical Society so that twelve year old Peter could become its youngest member.

Minerals drew him into museums where he took careful notice of how dramatically lit displays, dioramas and other devices affected viewers. Those early impressions still inform his work.

A visitor to his home need look no further than the front yard for ample evidence of his need to acquire, amplify, illuminate, organize and investigate all manner of things. Some materials have already found a home as part of several monumental outdoor sculptures and adornments, while stone slabs and rusted bridge fabrications await their destiny next to partially honed wood, Maine rocks and rail yard findings. Inside, collections of art and sculpture cover the walls and share space with still more curious and amusing things. What does this have to do with the art and business of film making?

According to Vogt, everything. "Making collections of stuff is very much what this business is about for me. Producing a film or video *is* collecting--looking, getting interested in a subject, gathering it so that you can show people what you have in a way that makes them interested, makes them care enough to learn more, to give money, to vote, to join a cause or understand what they've seen in a museum."

Surprising, perhaps, but he never aspired to specialize in museum film production.



Producer/Director Peter Vogt and Cinematographer Richard Chisolm prepare to film a scene for "Altoona at Work"

In fact, it took him a while to discover he belonged in film making at all. At Colby College, he floundered in geology as a science major before a successful switch to American literature. His real commitment was to singing, recording and performing as part of The Colby Eight, and honing his skills in publicity photography for the group and the college's communication office.

Shortly before graduation, with four years of Air Force ROTC under his belt, the pressure was on to declare his preference of officer postings. Nothing quite fit until he stumbled across a professional film crew shooting on campus. When the camera man, an Air Force veteran, told Vogt that junior officers could work as film makers, the proverbial light bulb lit up. He spent the mid-1960s assigned as a producer-director for Air Force documentaries around the US and overseas, including two periods in Vietnam.

"It was a tremendous experience, with more responsibility and authority than a 22-year-old normally gets," he says. "By the time I got out, I was highly qualified to make decisions, organize logistics, get things done and deal with all sorts of people. It was vastly better for growth than graduate school."

Still, a stint at New York University's film program gave him a chance to test his mettle against some of those graduate students. "I knew how to operate cameras, edit, and get the job done, yet I found I didn't know nearly as much as some of them about conscious creativity and collaboration with peers. It was most stimulating. I began to think 'I'd like to do this as a career,' but I wasn't sure how to go about it."

While on assignment in Viet Nam, he saw a film about rural pacification and was struck with its beauty and compelling imagery. "I noted it was a Guggenheim Productions Film. When I returned to the states I met a graduate from Charles Guggenheim's alma mater who talked about how good the company was. I decided to pursue work there once my 4-year tour with the Air Force ended."

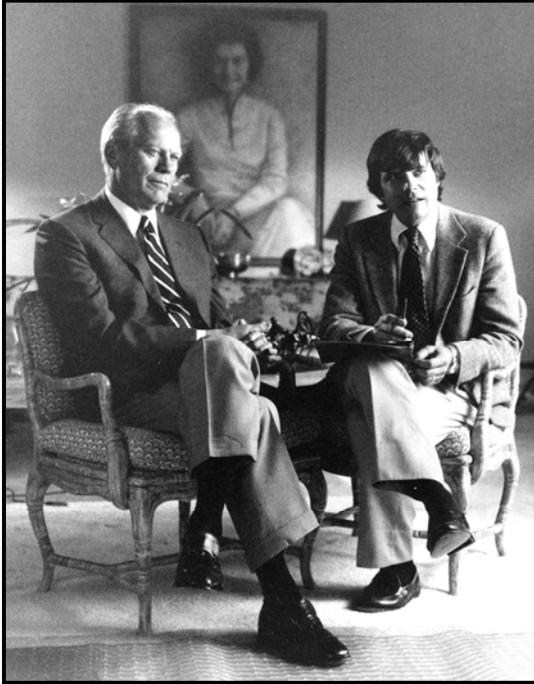
A selling letter, resume, and good demo reel gave him the entre' he needed. Guggenheim Productions had relocated from St. Louis to Washington, DC, and Peter Vogt was on board during the company's explosive growth from 1967-76, first as assistant production manager and eventually as Vice President and Production Manager. "Despite earlier film making experiences, it took a while before I realized I wanted to move from operations to concept production. Eventually, I understood that making things, shaping things, giving them my interpretation was what most important to me."

The lessons he took from his Guggenheim experience--intense concentration, obsession with quality, a requirement to have something in mind, and to be accountable for approaches and outcomes--continue to serve as his model for film production.

Since forming his own company, he has produced a diverse body of work--commercials, television documentaries, sponsored films and political spots--while garnering numerous awards, including three Emmys, more than half a dozen CINE Golden Eagles, six Worldfest Houston Golds and the CASE Exceptional Achievement Award.

His first foray into exhibition work came from a serendipitous event he'd been moving toward his whole life. An artist he'd long admired but never met was in town to paint a mural for a new museum about flight. On a blizzard-struck day with most of downtown Washington deserted, Vogt found easy parking in front of the new building and walked up to the entrance for a peek.

The artist he hoped to meet was not around, but another painter was and Vogt soon became enchanted with how the man worked and what he had to say about his creation. A few days later, Vogt returned with a small film crew to capture the preeminent artist Robert McCall as he was rendering his now famous mural, *A Cosmic View*.



Peter Vogt prepares President Gerald Ford for an interview in the museum film “The Presidency Restored”

Eventually that footage became the focus of an award winning PBS documentary, *A Place Of Dreams*, about the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air & Space Museum and the dream of human flight it celebrates.

More museum work followed, such as the permanent exhibition film at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, the Channel Islands National Park documentary *A Treasure In The Sea*, Saguaro National Park’s permanent theatre introduction and exhibit videos, and several more significant exhibition projects for Smithsonian Institution museums, some of which have shown continuously since 1983.

A recent project was the culmination of a four-year effort on behalf of the Altoona Railroaders Memorial Museum, which opened to rave reviews from critics and curators alike. Vogt was in the unusual position of consulting with the museum from its earliest conceptual stages. A bit different, he notes, from the more typical scenario where a film producer is coming into an already established museum or curatorially conceived exhibition.

Vogt’s contribution includes the surround-sound theatre film, *Altoona At Work*, and a dozen audio-visual exhibit stations that support the “immersion” style of the museum, which transports visitors through all their senses to other times and places. “Each piece is conceived to accomplish different tasks,” he notes. “The theatre film has the most sensational obligation and must offer the larger perspective and a rich sensory experience as the focal point for museum visitors. In contrast, the exhibit stations need to reach out and snag visitors. For example, as you approach a newsstand you hear a young man inside whose charm will, hopefully, keep you listening to what he has to reveal. There are all sorts of techniques and characters employed to contribute to a visitor’s experience.”



Vogt shoots a dramatic angle for "Altoona at Work"

Welcome to late 20th Century "museum land," where exhibits are increasingly crafted with a maximum of technology. With new and established venues competing for visitors, film and video seem destined to remain key components of any curatorial effort. Yet despite his successes, Vogt has no plans to work exclusively in this genre.

"Each film project offers its own challenges and opportunities. I tend to do fewer projects and spend more time on each because I really like every aspect of the process. Even at the smallest step I want to be responsible for making choices that make a difference. Ultimately, satisfaction comes in having done all you can do to give viewers the most you can with the time you have to affect them. "

MAKING MOVIES THAT MOVE MUSEUMS

The Altoona Railroaders Memorial Museum project, one of a string of museum and exhibition film hits, Peter Vogt knows what it takes to provide a satisfying experience for any venue's visitors. His work on the Smithsonian Institution's permanent installation, *Information Age--People, Information & Technology*, represents many of the common exhibition formats for film productions.

+ *Just The Beginning* is a 12 screen video wall theatre presentation that summarizes many of the key concepts of the exhibition. It synthesizes 35mm motion picture film, High Definition Video, video image splitting and digital component video editing displayed through computer controlled video laser disc players.

+ *A Turning Point* is a short recreated newsreel documentary that plays continuously in the exhibit's pre-war neighborhood movie theatre.

+ Nearly 50 video spots are displayed at 16 interactive video stations throughout the exhibit to represent and reinforce exhibition themes.

+ For more than a year, *The Information Revolution* film commissioned for the campaign that raised millions of dollars to fund the exhibition was the only visible representation of the project.

This kind of film making can be a producer's dream. However, cautions Vogt, the opportunities come with powerful challenges as well.

"Museums give you the chance to work with substantial subjects relevant to millions of people. But you don't have the luxury of a long unfolding of plot. An hour of television is attractive to produce because you have the time to begin something, develop it, take excursions, return to it and deliver an audience with total control to the end of the experience."

"Beyond a theatre film, you don't have that control in museum work, you have fleeting engagements. You must get attention immediately, deliver enough so viewers don't walk off and entice them afterwards to explore further."

"It's rare to be involved from the concept stage of an exhibition. Usually you're adding to an exhibition that already exists. Always your work is one aspect of a larger performance that is the whole gallery or museum itself. So you need to pay attention to the messages curators want to deliver and the look and sensory feel of the space the exhibit designers seek."

"The ability to submerge your ego and be truly collaborative is a real necessity. It also helps--in fact to me it's a necessity--to become genuinely enthusiastic for the subject."

"Finally, it's critical to understand you're working for very specific outcomes so you have to answer fundamental questions for each step. What's to be communicated? Who are we trying to reach? Where are they before we reach them and where do we want them to be afterwards?"

"Each individual station, interactive or not, is a microcosm of the same issues. You must figure out how to quickly deliver mood, content, information, insight and a desire to move on. In this sense, it has as much in common with commercial spot production as it does with documentary production."

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