

# Alive Mind CINEMA

## **MONK WITH A CAMERA**

The Life and Journey of Nicholas Vreeland

DIRECTED BY  
GUIDO SANTI AND TINA MASCARA



### **PRESS CONTACTS:**

#### **New York and National**

Rodrigo Brandão / Kino Lorber  
333 West 39th St. #503  
NY, NY 10018

212.629.6880 / [rodrigo@kinolorber.com](mailto:rodrigo@kinolorber.com)

#### **Los Angeles**

Sasha Berman / Shotwel Media  
2721 2nd St #205  
Santa Monica, CA 90405

310.450.5571 / [SashaBerman@mac.com](mailto:SashaBerman@mac.com)

# *Alive Mind* CINEMA

DIRECTED AND EDITED BY  
GUIDO SANTI AND TINA MASCARA

PRODUCED BY VISHWANATH ALLURI GUIDO SANTI  
TINA MASCARA

CO-PRODUCER  
LEONARDO COLLA

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS  
VISHWANATH ALLURI  
ANDREW HERWITZ  
LEONARDO COLLA  
KENNETH GRIMES

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
UGO LO PINTO  
RALPH Q. SMITH

MUSIC COMPOSED BY  
PIVIO & ALDO DE SCALZI

ANIMATION  
JOE ROTHENBERG

MOTION GRAPHICS  
SLOANE KORACH

SOUND DESIGN & MIX  
ANDY HAY, CAS

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS  
SIGNE JOHNSON  
NANCY NETCHI  
HUGH DOCHERTY

ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY  
PETER SALAPATAS  
GUIDO SANTI

SECOND UNIT CAMERA  
KENNETH GRIMES  
LAURA SMITH  
ARTURO SINCLAIR  
CORY TOMASCOFF

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## MUSIC

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY  
PIVIO AND ALDO DE SCALZI

RECORDED AND MIXED BY  
TRANSCENDENTAL STUDIO, GENOVA

PUBLISHED BY  
CREUZA, SRL

ALDO DE SCALZIPIANO,  
MARIMBA, VIBRAPHONE, GUITARS, SYNTHESIZER

PIVIO  
PIANO, SANTUR, XILOPHONE, PERCUSSIONS, SYNTHESIZER

WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF  
GNU QUARTET

I° VIOLIN -ROBERTO IZZO  
II° VIOLIN-SYLVA TRABUCCO  
VIOLA -RAFFAELE REBAUDENGO  
CELLO-STEFANO CABRERA

TIBETAN HORNS COURTESY OF  
CRAIG MOLLI

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## LOGLINE

Like the Prince Siddhartha, Nicholas Vreeland walked a way from a worldly life of privilege to pursue the Buddhist ideal. Once a promising photographer, he moved to India and became a Tibetan monk. Years later, he returns to photography to help his community of monks.

## SYNOPSIS

This 90 minute feature documentary chronicles the life and spiritual quest of Nicholas (Nicky) Vreeland, who for the past twenty-eight years has been a Tibetan Buddhist monk. The son of a United States Ambassador, grandson of legendary Vogue editor Diana Vreeland, and a photographer by trade, Nicky left his privileged life behind to follow his true calling. He moved to India, cutting his ties with society, photography, and his pleasure-filled world, to live in a monastery with no running water or electricity. There he would spend the next fourteen years studying to become a monk. Then in one of life's beautiful twists, Nicky went back to photography in order to help his fellow monks rebuild their monastery, one of the most important in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. His journey from photographer to monk, and most recently, to the abbot of the monastery he helped rebuild form the core of the story.



Nicholas Vreeland and his teacher, Khylongla Rinpoche. *Photo, Courtesy of Adam Bartos*

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## THE STORY

Like Prince Siddhartha, Nicholas (“Nicky”) Vreeland walked away from a worldly life of privilege to become a monk.

The son of an American diplomat, Nicky grew up in Switzerland, Germany, France and Morocco before moving to the United States. He went to the prestigious Massachusetts Groton prep school. By the time he finished his studies, he knew he would be a photographer. Thanks to his grandmother, the legendary Vogue fashion editor Diana Vreeland, he got a job apprenticing world-renowned photographers Richard Avedon and Irving Penn. Yet, Nicky felt that something was missing from his privileged and glamorous life. As he searched for meaning, Nicky was introduced to Khyongla Rato Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist Master and one of the spiritual teachers of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. Rinpoche escaped Tibet in 1959 during the Chinese invasion, and eventually moved to New York in the early 1960's to establish the Tibet Center, which is dedicated to the study of Buddhism. Upon meeting Rinpoche at the Tibet Center, Nicky's life changed dramatically. Rinpoche eventually became Nicky's lifelong teacher and guru.

When his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Nicky came to the realization that worldly pursuits were meaningless and felt the desire to become a monk. Ironically, his cameras were stolen, which made his decision easier. Without cameras to distract him, he completely immersed himself into the study of Buddhism. Rinpoche tried to hold Nicky back from becoming a monk, but Nicky's vocational calling was too strong to overcome. In 1984, he moved to India to become a monk at the Rato Monastery -- the same monastery as his guru.

Before Nicky left for India, his brother, Alexander, gave him a camera in hopes that Nicky would not give up photography completely. Nicky accepted the gift, but had no intention of using it. He was serious about his studies, and did not want to be distracted by photography at a time when he was trying to give up worldly attachments. He locked it away inside a trunk. It was only after many years of living there, that Nicky would occasionally take the camera out to indulge his old passion.

Nicky would spend the next 14 years in India, earning a Geshe degree, the equivalent of a PhD in Buddhist philosophy and taking photos. During this time, more and more monks kept coming to India to join the Rato Monastery. Nicky's monastic community grew from 8 to 150 monks, and soon there was not enough space to house them all. The time was urgent to help his fellow monks and Nicky took it upon himself to rebuild the monastery.

Some of his friends pledged to donate, but when the stock market crashed in 2008, everything came to a sudden halt, and the funders were not able to keep their pledges. The difficult situation was made even more complicated because contracts were already signed and the work had to be completed within a certain amount of time. Nicky did not know what to do. Eventually, it was Nicky's brother, Alexander, along with some of his friends, who suggested that Nicky sell his photographs.

Together with Nicky, they were able to host and organize a series of exhibitions around the world to sell his photographs, which became PHOTOS FOR RATO. There were events in Paris, Berlin, Rome, Naples, Genoa, New Delhi, Mumbai, and New York. The sale of his photographs raised over \$40,000, which was used to build a brand new monastery and dorms for the monks. Living conditions drastically improved for the Rato monks, and more importantly the reestablishment of Rato would forever ensure the preservation of Buddhist culture and identity.

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In 2011, His Holiness the Dalai Lama officially inaugurated the Rato Monastery. It was attended by thousands of people who came to celebrate this history-making day. However, even after such a remarkable achievement, Nicky's journey was far from over. Taking the Buddhist community by complete surprise, in April 2012, the Dalai Lama appointed Nicholas Vreeland as the Abbot of the new Rato Monastery, which made him the first Westerner in over 2,800 years of Tibetan Buddhist history, to attain such a highly regarded position.

Nicholas is once again challenged to forge a path where no monk has gone before, to merge East and West, to erase cultural boundaries, and to bring happiness and compassion to the world using his unique experience as a Westerner and his comprehensive understanding of the way of the Buddha.

## THE PRODUCERS

### **VISHWANATH (VISH) ALLURI - PRODUCER/ EXECUTIVE PRODUCER.**

Vish is the Founder/Executive Chairman of IMImobile. Founded in 1999 and with its head quarters in London, IMImobile is a leading mobile data platform and services company serving over 90 mobile operators in 72 countries. Vish is a newcomer to the world of film thanks to his friendship with Nicholas Vreeland. In one of his visits to Rato Monastery, he accidentally met Tina and Guido as they were filming and became interested. Vish is deeply touched by Jiddu Krishnamurti's Teachings and he is closely involved with Krishnamurti Foundations worldwide in their archival work, publications, and schools.

### **TINA MASCARA – PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR.**

Tina was born in West Virginia. She studied journalism and photography at the Art Institute of Pittsburg, and moved to Los Angeles to study cinema. After graduating from the film program at Los Angeles City College. Tina wrote, produced, and directed two feature films: JACKLIGHT (2000) and ASPHALT STARS (2002). Both films have been won awards and have been shown in several national and international film festivals. In 2007, Tina co-founded Asphalt Stars Productions with Guido Santi. Together they made their first feature length documentary: CHRIS AND DON: A LOVE STORY, about the lifelong relationship between British writer Christopher Isherwood and American artist, Don Bachardy. The film was a critical success and was theatrically released by Zeitgeist Films in 2008.

### **GUIDO SANTI- PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR.**

Guido Santi was born in Italy. He started his career writing and directing short films. For four years he collaborated with Ipotesi Cineme, a film laboratory coordinated by award winning director Ermanno Olmi. He wrote and directed CONCERTINO, a story about four teenagers living in the suburbs of Rome, for RAI, Italy's national television network. He moved to Los Angeles to study film at the University of Southern California. After graduating, he began writing, producing, and directing documentaries and TV specials. Among his most recent works are MANDALA: THE JOURNEY OF A DANCER (2002), and CHRIS & DON: A LOVE STORY (2008), which he co-directed, produced and edited with his partner, Tina Mascara.

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## **STYLISTIC AND VISUAL APPROACH**

MONK WITH A CAMERA is told primarily through Nicky's point of view and narration. The documentary also features interviews with family and friends, including: His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Khyongla Rinpoche, Richard Gere, John Avedon, Alexander Vreeland, Frederick Vreeland, Ptolemy Tompkins, Wendy Goodman, and Tonne Goodman.

In addition to Nicky's photographs and archival footage, the documentary also features animation segments done in a deliberately simple 70's TV-cartoon style, which illustrate Nicky's past adventures.

## **OUR IMPACT**

MONK WITH A CAMERA is a film about a man who shapes a very unique path for himself. A man who is not afraid of committing to a spiritual path, and in the process finds a greater reason to pursue his work as an artist. This film is also about the deep bond between a teacher and his disciple, between East and West, and about finding a balance in a world of impermanence.

This is an original story that can appeal, not only to people interested in topical themes like religion and photography, but also to an audience who is passionate about stories of exceptional individuals who defy their times.

Nicky's story can help us to better understand ourselves, the time in which we live, and the way we perceive monasticism, specifically life in a Tibetan monastery. It also gives us a historical perspective on Tibetan Buddhism from the point of view of a monk who is deeply engaged in preserving its message and tradition.

MONK WITH A CAMERA had its World Premiere at the 26th edition of The International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA 2013) and it is currently playing at major festivals in the US. It will be theatrically released in the US and North America in the Fall 2014.