

# WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art

## PRESS RELEASE

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June 2001

From July 14 to September 9, the Whitney Museum of American Art will present *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893-1941*, a treasure trove of rare material from the first decades of cinema. The films bear witness to a world gone by and provide a missing link in the history of experimental filmmaking in the United States.

*Unseen Cinema* presents more than 160 films in newly restored or preserved 35mm and 16mm film prints. Many have not been available since their creation, some have never been screened in public, and most have been unavailable in fresh prints until now. The exhibition is co-presented at Anthology Film Archives and the American Museum of the Moving Image. It was organized by Anthology Film Archives, New York, and Deutsches Filmmuseum, Frankfurt, as a collaborative film preservation project, and made possible by Cineric, Inc. and Eastman Kodak Company.

Taking an innovative and even controversial perspective, the series views experimental cinema as having been created by a combination of avant-garde artists, Hollywood directors, and amateur filmmakers working collectively and individually at all levels of film production during the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. It covers a broad spectrum, from the work of popular filmmakers like Busby Berkeley, Ernst Lubitsch and Dorothy Arzner to the films of artists like Rudy Burckhardt, Mary Ellen Bute, Oskar Fischinger and Joseph Cornell.

*Unseen Cinema* reclaims early American avant-garde film in light of the filmmakers' genuine and uncompromising approach to film as an art form. Whether one considers early American avant-garde films collectively, as part of an ongoing historical process, or as a series of individual experiments in style and technique, the material available here reveals a grand experiment in cinema that continues to reverberate to this day through all genres of American filmmaking. The early American films made from 1893 to approximately 1913 were experimental in their method of production and content. Finding new techniques and styles, they directly influenced later American filmmaking, both experimental and mainstream. Alternative practices in film at this time included, for example, an emphasis on states of mind over narrative and an exploration of social and political injustice. At the same time, many of the films experimented with an ever-evolving technology. Newly available lenses, film stocks, methods of lighting or sound recording, the availability of post-production facilities, and advancements in camera design permitted startling cinematic discoveries. With these various influences, early American avant-garde cinema pushed forward what would become a vast cinema frontier.

The period from 1925 to 1929 was not only a Golden Age for Hollywood silent feature film, but was equally vibrant for avant-garde filmmaking as well. The momentum peaked during the early 1930s when industry professionals, amateurs, and other cinema enthusiasts produced an astonishing array of experimental shorts and feature films. From the 1940s onward, many experimental filmmakers began working in isolation. Their work continued to expand the boundaries of the genre and led to an experimental film renaissance in New York and San Francisco in the postwar era.

The series brings together many seemingly disparate early films, including American Mutoscope and Biograph pieces such as Frederick Armitage's *Star Theater* (1902) and *Down the Hudson* (1903), Edison/Edwin Porter's *Ghost Train* (1903), and kinoscope loops from 1893 and 1894, including *Cockfight no. 4*. The exhibition also includes later films such as *Autumn Fire: A Film Poem* (Herman G. Weinberg, 1930), *Jerome Hill's La Cartomancienne [Fortune Teller]* (1932), Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1925) and Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924).

The films open a window onto the past with works like the four-minute *Interior N.Y. Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street* (1905), shot by the legendary G.W. "Billy" Bitzer, and film pioneer Edwin S. Porter's *Coney Island at Night*, made the same year. These will be shown as part of "Picturing a Metropolis: NYC Unveiled," the first program in the series, which also includes Robert Flaherty's *Twenty-Four Dollar Island: A Camera Impression of New York* (ca. 1925-27) and *Seeing the World Part One: A Visit to New York* (1937) by Rudy Burckhardt. The program also features *Ghost Town: The Story of Fort Lee* (1935) by Theodore Huff and Jay Leyda's *A Bronx Morning* (1931). Other programs in the series include films by Robert Florey, William Cameron Menzies, Sergei Eisenstein, Joseph Cornell, Slavko Vorkapich, Frank Capra, D.W. Griffith, Man Ray, Busby Berkeley and Orson Welles.

A special presentation with live piano accompaniment by Donald Sosin will take place on September 7 at 7 pm: *Salome* (1922), produced by and starring Alla Nazimova and designed by Natacha Rambova. It will be preceded by the world premiere of George Antheil's original 1924 score to the film *Ballet mécanique* by Fernand Léger.

Bruce Posner, curator of the exhibition, edited and annotated the exhibition catalogue (128 pages with 24 pages of illustrations, soft-bound), which is published by Anthology Film Archives. Film preservation, exhibition, and catalogue were all made possible through the generous support of Cineric, Inc., New York, a full service post-production, restoration, and preservation film lab.

The series is divided into programs organized by theme; these will be shown on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the summer. On weekdays, video transfers of approximately a dozen titles will be screened continuously beginning at 11:15 am on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and at 1:15 pm on Fridays.