

VISIONARIES OF SILENT CINEMA

The First Motion Picture Art Directors

1895 – 1929



The story of Art Direction for the cinema from 1895 to 1929 has never been explored in detail, with all its cast of characters. The odysseys of Ménéssier, Carré, Buckland, Ballin, Grot, Menzies, Gabourie, Hall, Hopkins, and Oliver are all closely interconnected. They laid the foundations for Art Direction and their legacies must be preserved. *“Whatever future the cinema may have will be based solidly on its past. Time is a human conception — very much like a motion picture. It is all there, but we have to live it. And you cannot enjoy the last reel unless you know what happened in the first.”* (Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade’s Gone By*)



Henri Ménéssier



Ben Carré



Wilfred Buckland



Hugo Ballin



Anton Grot



William
Cameron Menzies



Fred Gabourie



Charles D. Hall



Una Nixson Hopkins



Harry Oliver



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THE CRUCIBLE OF ART DIRECTION : PARIS 1895-1912



Paris Opera Palais Garnier



Henri Me'nessier
Robert-Jules Garnier
Ben Carré



Atelier Ambale. Paris



Georges Méliés
Father of Art Direction



Méliés studio, Paris



Pathe' studio, Paris



Gaumont studio, Paris



Parisian's, close friends, and scenic artist apprentices. They were called Artistique-pentres décorateurs before Art Direction had a name.



Henri Ménessier

Henri Amédée Ménessier (1882-1948) career connects European 19th century theatre traditions with the 20th century's cinema, a time of rapid evolution and innovation. A gifted painter he began his career in 1902 as a scenic artist at the Amable Atelier in Paris. In 1905 Alice Guy-Blaché hired him to supervise her first art department at Gaumont studio. Building on Méliés innovations, he expanded the methodology of Art Direction before it had a name. Possessing a sophisticated cinematic style, he came to America in 1910. Working on Broadway and at Guy-Blaché's new Solax studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in 1919 he arrived in Hollywood, where he designed many pictures with leading directors of the silent era before returning to France in 1929.



Ben Carré

Benjamin Jules Carré (1883 -1978). Like Ménessier, Carré began his apprenticeship in 1900 at the Amable Atelier in Paris. Mentored by the masters of scenic painting he joined Gaumont studios in 1906 working as an Artiste-peintre décorateur. Carré was a master of perspective and an innovator in painting in color for black and white photography. Arriving in New York in 1912 he was in the vanguard of film artisans. It was at Fort Lee that he began his remarkable collaboration with French director Maurice Tourneur, making 34 pictures over a 5-year period, many now considered silent classics. Both Ménessier and Carré came to Hollywood in 1919 where they were recognized as the two most experienced Art Directors in the rapidly evolving industry. As a master of silent cinema, it is ironic that the one picture Carré considered forgettable, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), brought an end to the most visual era of cinema he loved so much.



BROADWAY BABIES, COWBOYS & INDIANS : NEW HORIZONS 1895-1923



Belasco Theater



Art Students League



Edison Studios, Bronx



Ft. Lee Ferry



Willat Studio Ft. Lee



Eclair Studio Ft. Lee



Famous Players-Lasky Hollywood



"A filmmaker isn't supposed to say things. He's supposed to show them." (Alfred Hitchcock)



Wilfred Buckland

Wilfred Buckland (186 - 1946) His career was grounded in the American theatre. The son of a rabbi, he was born in New York City and had been a pupil of dramatist Henry C De Mille, Cecil B. DeMille, Cecil's father. He went on to teach stagecraft, costume, and makeup, at the Academy of Dramatic Arts, where Cecil B. DeMille was one of his students. His formative years were spent as a set and lighting designer, stage director, and production manager, for David Belasco in New York. The theater community considered cinema as a low-brow fad, but Buckland was among the first to see its potential for design and visual storytelling. In 1914 Buckland joined DeMille and Jesse Lasky's Feature Play Company. In Hollywood he introduced new production methods and efficiencies for the design, lighting, and producing of motion pictures. He was also the first designer to introduce and receive a new on-screen credit and title: Art Director.



United Artists Studio



Hugo Ballin

Hugo Ballin (1879-1956) was a successful fine artist as well as pioneer Art Director, film director, and producer during the silent era. He studied painting and later taught at the Art Students League in New York City. In 1912 he started designing for the new Edison Studios in the Bronx. It was at Edison that he hired a part-time student and department store window dresser named Cedric Gibbons as his assistant. In 1916 Samuel Goldwyn was creating a Goldwyn quality brand for his new pictures when he invited Ballin to join his company in Fort Lee, and later in Hollywood. Ballin had never been satisfied with Art Direction, so during the early twenties he pursued directing and producing of his own pictures. He remained an independent filmmaker until the rising studio system denied him access to distribution. He then returned to his freelance career as portrait artist, illustrator, and preeminent muralist.



Goldwyn Ft. Lee



Hugo Ballin

MASTERS & MENTORS : EASTERN EXODUS TO HOLLYWOOD 1912-1929



Sigmund Lubin



Lubin Studio Philadelphia



Fairbanks

Grot



Menzies



Fairbanks & Menzies



Grot



The Thief of Bagdad (1922)



"Their scene-by-scene continuity sketches were superb examples of economy in film storytelling." (William K. Everson)



Anton Grot

Anton Grot (1884-1974) was one of the first Art Directors to have been influenced by European modernism and German expressionism. Born in Poland, Grot was a meticulous illustrator and artist whose compositions were carefully executed in terms of their lighting and proportion. Like Carré, Grot was a master of perspective and one of the first art directors to create continuity sketches photographically accurate to the camera's lens. Grot emigrated to the United States in 1909 and was hired to design sets for the Lubin Company in Philadelphia. In 1917 Grot joined Pathé films in Fort Lee. It was for *The Naulahka* (1918) that Grot was permitted to hire an assistant, a recent Art Students League graduate named William Cameron Menzies. In 1921 Wilfred Buckland invited Grot to Hollywood to assist him on Douglas Fairbanks' *Robin Hood* (1922). Grot was a major influence in Art Direction, especially at Warner Brothers, designing everything from gangster pictures to Busby Berkeley musicals, period swashbucklers, and Bette Davis melodramas.



William Cameron Menzies

William Cameron Menzies (1896-1957) was the youngest among this first generation of Art Directors to come to Hollywood during the silent era. His talents as a designer and filmmaker elevated the profession of Art Direction, culminating in the term "Production Design," and his prolific output of motion pictures was astounding. His earliest jobs included making magazine layouts and illustrating children's books. Menzies was influenced by his mentor Anton Grot's methods for designing motion pictures, and became known for the creation of evocative, meticulous continuity sketches and storyboards to plan all the visuals. Director Raoul Walsh first brought Menzies to Hollywood in 1921. Mary Pickford then hired him to design *Rosita* (1923), after which he became the lead Art Director for Walsh on Fairbanks' *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). This picture launched Menzies' career, establishing him as one of the most sought-after Art Directors in Hollywood. Menzies went on to win the first Oscar for Art Direction for *The Dove* (1929), and honorary Oscar for *Gone With the Wind* (1939).



VAUDEVILLIANS, COMEDIANS & MONSTERS : HOLLYWOOD 1912-1929



Broadway



The Three Keatons



Chaplin



Chaplin



Keaton



Keaton Writing Team

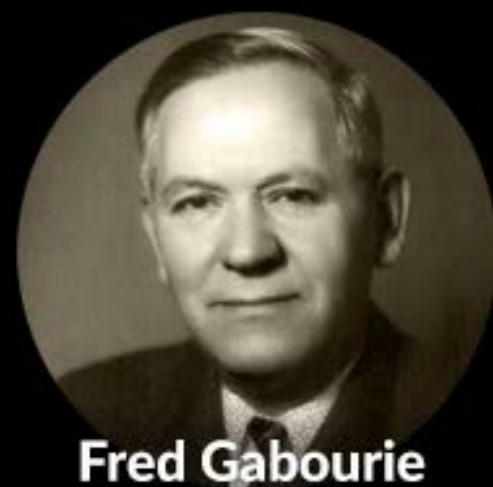


Chaplin Studio



Universal Studio

"Movies were seldom written. They were yelled into existence in brothels and all-night poker games while a band stirred up the emotions." (Ben Hecht)



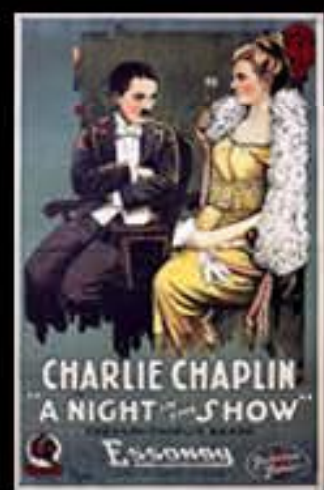
Fred Gabourie

Fred Gabourie (1881-1951) was born in Eastern Ontario, Canada, and was a member of the Iroquois tribe of the Seneca nation. Life in Canada was hard, and his family moved to Detroit, Michigan. His formal schooling ended in the fifth grade. Smart, intuitive, and possessing a talent for mechanics, engineering, and design, he began his career as a stage carpenter and designer touring the vaudeville theater circuit where he first met Buster Keaton. In 1916 he relocated to Hollywood to work for many of the independent film companies. He left Metro pictures in 1921 to work full-time as Keaton's Art Director responsible for all set design, construction, gag-props, and location scouting. However, his most important contributions to Keaton Comedies were his passion for playing baseball on Buster's team and his many talents as an ingenious problem solver and builder. Over the 1920's Gabourie designed and supervised 31 pictures for Buster.



Charles D. Hall

Charles D. Hall (1888 - 1970) was born in Norwich, England. He studied art and had worked in an architect's office. Danny, as he preferred to be called, and his brother Archer had apprenticed as carpenters and scene painters working in theatres and music halls. While working for Fred Karno's Music Hall troupe, he first met Charlie Chaplin. In 1911 the Hall brothers emigrated to Canada and then moved on to California in 1913. In Los Angeles they discovered a robust theater community and a young film colony in Hollywood. Their experience as theatrical tradesmen, Danny a scenic painter-designer and Archer a propmaker, had found a welcoming home. In Danny started as Chaplin's Art Director for 'A Dog's Life' (1918), followed by every Chaplin film thereafter. In 1923 the Hall brothers joined Universal as well, where Danny became the head of its art department and Archer managed all construction. Danny's many years at Universal made him a master designer for silent film comedies and the auteur of the classic horror genre.



RISE OF THE STUDIO SYSTEM : HOLLYWOOD 1917-1929



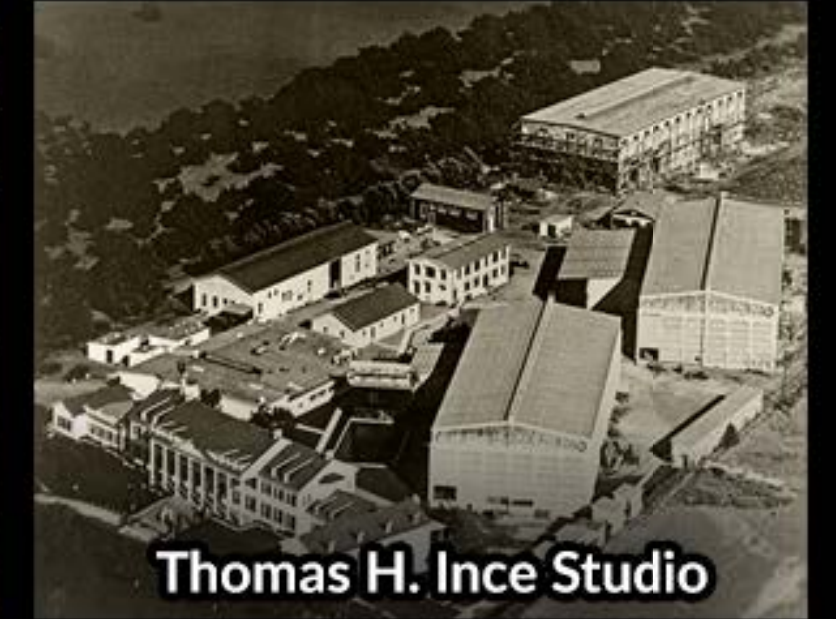
Una Nixson Hopkins



Beaux-Arts de Paris



Oliver Morosco Photoplay



Thomas H. Ince Studio



Harry Oliver



Ince - Goldwyn - MGM Studios



Oliver in Rome



Started in Rome



Completed in Culver City

Artists, dreamers, innovators, all displaced by architects and managers, while sound eclipsed the silent cinema.



Una Nixson Hopkins

Una Nixson Hopkins (1869 - 1956) Born in Denison, Iowa, she was a widowed and working single mother. She had studied art in Paris and was a leading writer and designer described in a 1910 *Herald Tribune* article as "one of the most successful women writers of the West." Over many years Hopkins contributed short stories and articles on interior design and architecture to many magazines, especially *The Ladies Home Journal*, *House Beautiful*, *The Craftsman*, and *Country Life in America*. Hopkins was an anomaly within the community of male-dominated Art Direction. Between 1905 and 1929 a brief period existed when women participated at all levels of silent filmmaking. With the rise of the studio system the art departments were reimagined as formal architectural workrooms staffed by trained "gentlemen" architects. In 1915 Hopkins was hired to be the Supervising Art Director for the Oliver Morosco Photoplay Company, where she made many pictures. In the early 1920's she went on to supervise Reelart's department and later Thomas H. Ince's third and final studio in Culver City.



Harry Oliver

Harry Oliver (1888-1973) was a humorist, writer, painter, set designer, architect, and Art Director. Born to parents who ran a general store and lived in pioneer conditions in Hastings, Minnesota, Oliver claimed to have had a "Tom Sawyer" upbringing. As a Teenager he worked as a burro driver for the U.S. Forest Service. A self-trained artist and architect, Oliver was one of the first Art Directors to work for Goldwyn in Hollywood, and was sent to Rome to make *Ben-Hur* in 1923. His specialty was creating wilderness settings on studio stages and backlots. He went on to art-direct for Carl Oscar Borg, a master painter of American western and Indian scenes. Oliver worked on several big films for Fairbanks and Mary Pickford (*The Black Pirate* and *Sparrows*, both 1926), and then was a leading designer at Fox, creating memorable sets for *7th Heaven* (1927). Oliver left Hollywood behind in 1941 to pursue writing, publishing, and the building of adobe haciendas in the high desert.

