

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS LARGE EXHIBITION OF WORK OF D. W. GRIFFITH, FILM MASTER

It is difficult to blueprint genius, but in its exhibition documenting the life and work of David Wark Griffith the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will attempt to show the progressive steps through which this American film pioneer between 1909 and 1919 brought to the motion picture the greatest contribution made by any single individual. In that important decade he taught the movies to become an original and powerful instrument of expression in their own right.

The Griffith exhibition will open to the public Wednesday, November 13, simultaneously with an exhibition of the work of another American, the two combined under the title Two Great Americans: Frank Lloyd Wright, American Architect and D. W. Griffith, American Film Master. Although at first glance there may seem to be no connection between them, actually a curious parallel exists. America's greatest film director and America's greatest architect, the one in the second decade of this century, the other roughly from 1905 to 1914, had an immense influence on European motion pictures and architecture. After the first World War this influence was felt in the country of its origin in the guise of new European trends, even though European architects and motion picture directors openly acknowledged their debt to Wright and Griffith. The Griffith exhibition was assembled by Iris Barry, Curator of the Museum's Film Library, and installed by her and Allen Porter, Circulation Director.

By means of enlarged photographs, posters, stills, scripts, original documents and other items, Griffith's career will be traced from his early years of struggle as an actor--first on the stage, then on the screen--as author of one produced play and several movie plots, through his notable years as director at the old Biograph Company in New York and the brilliant period of his maturity. Blow-ups of individual frames from a sequence in

The Birth of a Nation will provide a pictorial analysis by means of which Griffith's actual technique can be studied closely. This will be supplemented by the continuous projection of the same sequence on the opposite wall of the gallery.

But only part of the Griffith exhibition is being shown in the Museum's galleries. The other part is in the form of a cycle of Griffith films from 1907 to 1924 arranged in a series of ten programs (twenty-two films) to be shown in rotation daily at 4 P.M. and Sundays at 2 and 4 P.M. in the Museum's auditorium throughout the period of the exhibition, which will extend through Sunday, January 5, 1941.

Movie audiences of today may be surprised to see Griffith appear as leading actor of the first two films in the series shown at the Museum. The other twenty films in the series were all directed by Griffith and include such early pictures as A Drunkard's Reformation (1909) with Linda Arvidson and Arthur Johnson; Resurrection (1909) with Arthur Johnson and Florence Lawrence, the famous "Biograph girl"; The Lonely Villa (1909) with Mary Pickford and James Kirkwood; The Lonedale Operator (1911) with Blanche Sweet; The Musketeers of Pig Alley (1912) with Lillian Gish, Lionel Barrymore, Harry Carey and Robert Harron; The New York Hat (1912) with Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore; Judith of Bethulia (1913) with Blanche Sweet, Henry B. Walthall, Robert Harron, Mae Marsh, Lillian Gish.

Then came The Birth of a Nation, the masterpiece that finally established the movies as a new and important art. From the beginning it shattered all precedent. It opened March 3, 1915, in a Broadway theatre with top admission price of \$2.00. Before The Birth of a Nation the movies had usually been considered a cheap form of amusement. But with The Birth of a Nation the films were accepted as serious entertainment and within a few years "palaces" and "cathedrals" were built to house them. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel, The Clansman, Griffith at no time used a scenario. The film was nine weeks in production, a remarkably short time in consideration of the magnitude of the battle scenes and the conditions under which they were shot. It remains today one of the most popular and profitable films ever made, and in a balloting by moviegoers a year

ago was again voted the favorite. As a writer of the time so aptly said "It is like writing history with lightning and my one regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Intolerance, also shown in the Museum's Griffith series, was the great director's next production. On it he spent with lavish prodigality much of the profits from The Birth of a Nation. Intolerance was not so great a popular success but it showed Griffith's directorial genius at its greatest.

The Museum's series continues with Broken Blossoms, Griffith's beautiful picture of the "Chink and the Child" based on a story from Thomas Burke's Limehouse Nights. Lillian Gish and Richard Barthelmess played the unforgettable leads. This picture is followed in the series by Way Down East, one of the most successful pictures he ever made. The series ends with a picture produced partly in Germany in 1924--a study of post-war chaos in Central Europe made somewhat in the manner and mood of the best of Griffith's early Biograph films, with the same simplicity and naturalism and the same power to express feeling through small details and restrained performances.

The book, D. W. Griffith: American Film Master, which the Museum will publish simultaneously with the opening of the exhibition, contains a biographical and critical essay by Iris Barry, Curator of the Film Library, and A Note on the Photography of Griffith Films by Beaumont Newhall. Miss Barry weaves her critical comment through her biographical data and account of Griffith's career. She writes in part:

"The period between Intolerance and Way Down East marks the apex of Griffith's success. A figure of international importance, he had played a signal part in founding a huge industry--he had already created a new art form--in which the United States became and remained supreme. Except for Frank Lloyd Wright, no such eminent American as he had arisen in the arts since Whitman. He was to continue active for another decade, though the most fruitful years were past. Already men trained under him were stepping into the limelight, at the same time that newcomers drawn from many walks of life, and from Europe as well as from this country, were likewise contributing new ideas, new techniques....

"The film Intolerance is of extreme importance in the history of the cinema. It is the end and justification of that whole school of American cinematography based on the terse cutting and disjunctive assembly of lengths of film, which began with The Great Train Robbery and culminated in The Birth of a Nation and in this. All the old and many new technical devices are employed in

it--brief, enormous close-ups not only of faces but of hands and of objects; the 'eye-opener' focus to introduce vast panoramas; the use of only part of the screen's area for certain shots; camera angles and tracking shots such as are commonly supposed to have been introduced by German producers years later; and rapid cross-cutting the like of which was not seen again until Potemkin....

"...the men who make films today know who it was that taught them the basis of their craft. The American public, which for 45 years has so keenly enjoyed and supported the motion picture, has been somewhat reluctant to allow it the status of an art. Now, gradually, they too are recognizing that in Griffith they have one of the greatest and most original artists of our time."

The exhibition of Two Great Americans, which opens to the public Wednesday, November 13, will remain on view through Sunday, January 5, with the exception of Christmas Day when the Museum will be closed all day. The Museum hours are 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. daily including Saturday; from Noon until 6 P.M. on Sunday; Wednesday night the Museum stays open, to accommodate business people, until 10 P.M. The Griffith film programs will be shown at 4 P.M. daily and at 2 P.M. and 4 P.M. on Sunday. On the Sundays when The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance and Orphans of the Storm are shown the first showing will begin at 1:30 P.M. instead of 2 o'clock because of the length of these films.