

# The Museum of Modern Art

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No. 40  
Monday, March 24, 1969  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## SOVIET FILM ARCHIVES PROVIDE AMERICANA TWO MISSING WORKS OF D.W. GRIFFITH

Two early valued works of David Wark Griffith, father of American films, were discovered in the State Film Archives of the Soviet Union. The missing films, made in 1918 and 1919, have been donated by the Soviets to The Museum of Modern Art, which in turn has given to the Russians some early newsreels referring to events in Russian history.

A world-wide search was made among film archivists and private collectors to locate the two Griffith films, "A Romance of Happy Valley," starring Lillian Gish, and "Scarlet Days" with Richard Barthlemess. Both films will be screened for the public, March 24 and 25, at 2:00 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., in the Museum Auditorium, though the titles are still in Russian. English titles will be made later, Eileen Bowser, Associate Curator in charge of Collections, Department of Film, says from the complete list of original titles from D.W. Griffith films now in the Museum archives.

Referring to "A Romance of Happy Valley," Mrs. Bowser described it as a pastoral romance with an especially fine performance by Lillian Gish, while "Scarlet Days," she said, is of interest because it reminds us that Griffith was among the early creators of the Western genre. He made one-reel Westerns during his Biograph period, but this is the only full-length Western made by the master film-maker.

The Department of Film has renewed hope that "The Greatest Thing in Life," the film that Lillian Gish insists was one of Griffith's best, may yet be found. The search continues for this film among private collectors and film archivists. The latter have formed the International Federation of Film Archives, with 35 member organizations from all parts of the world, which exchange information and films and attempt to preserve motion pictures of the past of their own and other nations.

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While the search for lost film continues unabated, Mrs. Bowser points out that the preservation of early movies is equally important. The Museum maintains two large warehouses in Long Island, and a full time inspector, who examines regularly the cans stored in both vaults, since most films made before 1950 were made on a cellulose nitrate base that is both inflammable and subject to decomposition. Signs of decay are recognized, and the films are transferred to what is called "safety stock," or tri-acetate film that will last 400 years.

The original nitrate print remains in the Museum vault as long as it is not dangerous to store, Mrs. Bowser said, since a copy made from the original will be far better than one made from a print generations removed and which could only be a pale ghost of the original.

So much care goes into the preservation of a film that is on the verge of disintegrating, that before it is transferred to safety stock, an attempt is made to locate all existing prints. A composite is then made using the parts in the best condition. From this composite the safety print is drawn to make the best quality print for future generations.

The archivists are engaged jointly in a race to preserve the films made before 1950. Since then films have been made on an acetate base that is non-explosive and enjoys far greater viability.

In deciding what films to transfer first to more permanent stock, Mrs. Bowser weighs the aesthetic values and historic importance of a film. She also considers whether or not the print is unique, that is the only one extant. She further analyzes the inspector's report on the condition of the print, before determining which films deserve priority.

The Library of Congress is helping the Museum's preservation program, it was revealed by Mrs. Bowser. With financial assistance from the American Film Institute, the Library can provide "protection material" for certain films and store the "safety prints" in its own vaults, while the Museum retains the original nitrate prints, from which other archives can strike a print if desired, and if the owner's permission is obtained. Recently Paramount Pictures came to the Museum to request copies of some of its own films that had disintegrated, among them Josef von Sternberg's "Underworld" and "The Last Command."

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The Museum was able to supply the studio with the necessary material.

The Department of Film of the Museum was founded in 1935 by the Trustees under the leadership of John Hay Whitney. Iris Barry was its first curator. The Library now contains more than 4,000 films, 25 percent of which are circulated to educational institutions. It is one of the earliest film archives in existence, and was a founder of the International Federation of Film Archives, which encourages the formation of film archives.

The source of archive films vary, according to Mrs. Bowser. The films though sometimes found in garages, attics, and ashcans, may be given by private collectors or anonymous donors, purchased from the film companies, other archives, film-makers, and well-known actors and actresses, who used to own their own films. For example, the Museum now has the William S. Hart collection, the collections of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., and D.W. Griffith, and gifts from Lillian Gish, Alfred Hitchcock, Gloria Swanson, Colleen Moore, Richard Barthlemess, Irene Castle, and many others. It also owns the priceless original negatives of the Biograph Studios with the first work of D.W. Griffith and Mack Sennett.

Recent acquisitions include gifts from Joseph E. Levine, Janus Films, and Stanley Kubrick.

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Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Lillian Gerard, Film Coordinator, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.