

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## **DIRECTORS' CENTENNIAL: FORD/RENOIR/STERNBERG**

Through January 3, 1995

An exhibition of film still enlargements and posters celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of three outstanding directors -- John Ford (1894-1973), Jean Renoir (1894-1979), and Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969) -- is on view at The Museum of Modern Art through January 3, 1995. **DIRECTORS' CENTENNIAL: FORD/RENOIR/STERNBERG** features images from several of the directors' films, including *The Searchers* (1956), *La grande illusion* (1937), and *Morocco* (1930), respectively. Born in one of the first years of the cinema, these three men helped raise an infant industry to a vitally mature art.

Still and posters included in the exhibition share aspects of the directors' distinctive styles. Mary Corliss, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Video, who organized the exhibition, states, "Ford and Renoir were both inspired landscape artists -- Ford of the vast American West, and Renoir of French Provençal farms, rivers, and villages. Ford, along with Sternberg, escorted Hollywood films from the silent to the sound era. Sternberg and Renoir were among film's most ardent portraitists of women; the former iconized female guile in the sculpted, soft-focus face of Marlene Dietrich, and the latter presented women as an intoxicating mixture of the divine and the all-too-human."

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Ford's life spanned a tumultuous era of American conflict from the Spanish-American War to Vietnam, and many of his films can be seen as chapters in a dramatic picture book of American history. From the Revolutionary War (*Drums Along the Mohawk*, 1939) to World War II (*They Were Expendable*, 1945), in times of expansion (*The Iron Horse*, 1924) and during the Depression (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1940), Ford was the nation's most romantic chronicler and, occasionally, its severest.

Renoir is considered to be one of cinema's supreme artists. His oeuvre presents many problems for critics and scholars. Although some believe that Renoir's work can be divided into periods, others argue that no matter where Renoir worked -- France (*Une partie de campagne*, 1936/1946), the United States (*The Southerner*, 1945), or India (*The River*, 1951)-- his films should be viewed as an indivisible whole. There is, however, no disagreement about the integrity of Renoir's films; his works are unfailingly humane, psychologically acute, and bursting with visual and aural moments that propel the narratives. Renoir's genius lies, in part, in his seemingly effortless ability to represent life in its rich inconstancy.

The exhibition reveals how Sternberg's films were distinguished not only by satiny decor and soft-focus lighting effects, but by a rare cinematic intelligence. The sinuous tracking shots, the nets and smoke, spoke of the mystery of the human spirit; Sternberg saw that spirit as something glamorous, remote, ultimately unknowable. After completing *Der Blaue Engel* (1930) in Germany with Dietrich, he brought her to Hollywood, at which time she was virtually unknown to American audiences. Together, they made six Hollywood melodramas, from *Morocco* (1930) to *The Devil is a Woman* (1935), each more elaborate and delirious than the last.

The films of John Ford were the focus of the exhibition, **JOHN FORD, 1894-1973: AN AMERICAN MASTER**, this past spring. A complete retrospective of the extant work of Jean Renoir will be presented October 22 - November 27, 1994, in the exhibition, **JEAN RENOIR**. The films of Josef von Sternberg will be featured December 16 - January 5, 1995, in **JOSEF VON STERNBERG: CAMERA POET**.

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