

The Museum of Modern Art

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NO. 35

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

EXTENSIVE MEMORABILIA EXHIBITION AT MUSEUM SELECTED FROM RARE COLLECTION SHOWN FOR THE FIRST TIME TO THE PUBLIC

A rare and significant exhibition of memorabilia, both the private and professional papers of D. W. Griffith, illuminating the film director's spectacular career, will go on view at The Museum of Modern Art. The documents will be shown from May 15 through June 29 as a complement to the second and major portion of the D. W. Griffith retrospective devoted to the director's feature films.

Both the exhibition and the retrospective commemorate the centennial year of America's foremost filmmaker, who gave the movies its syntax and artistic purpose. Both are supported by the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The exhibition provides a stunning and unique display that traces D. W. Griffith's ascent from anonymity to world fame and contains intimate glimpses into his early years, as well as his later ones, with his subsequent decline in recognition.

The display attempts to demonstrate the diversity and richness of the Museum's Griffith collection, which contains in all 10,000 documents, from which the present artifacts were selected. It was conceived and planned by Eileen Bowser, Associate Curator in the Department of Film. Mrs. Bowser, who is in charge of all the Museum's film archives, catalogued and indexed its extensive, valuable Griffith collection. Because of the fragility of these documents, only a limited number of serious scholars have been permitted to examine them until now. This will be the first time they will be made available to the general public.

The presentation, installed by Kathleen Haven, includes the personal correspondence of Griffith in which he expresses his opinions about his own

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films and indicates his particular working methods. There are also letters from famous people: W. C. Fields, Tyrone Power, Sr., Erich von Stroheim and Carl Sandburg. Besides the letters, portraits of Griffith as a youth, an early bank book, his only produced play "A Fool and a Girl" and a contract with Lillian Gish, the memorabilia also consists of early posters and programs, musical scores and scenarios, rare stills and production records.

Perhaps the most impressive object in the exhibition is the Biograph printer. A small machine, the size of a modern day Xerox, it reproduced with exceptional clarity the early Griffith films made for the Biograph Studios in the years 1908 to 1913. Many of these one- and two-reelers have already been shown at the Museum as an historical introduction to the complete retrospective.

Most of the Griffith collection came from the director himself in 1938. He gave the Museum his complete personal records and business files, together with his films, which had been stored in a New York warehouse. The storage rental was too high for him to continue paying.

Additional material was donated by Linda Arvidson, the actress, who was the first Mrs. Griffith, by various members of the Griffith family, and by relatives of Griffith's long-time associate, the gifted cameraman, Billy Bitzer.

In a written commentary Mrs. Bowser explains that the Museum's first exhibition dedicated to the work of D. W. Griffith was organized by the late Iris Barry in 1940 at a time when the director was still living but forgotten or neglected by his colleagues and the public. "It was Miss Barry who showed us the high place in the history of the cinema that ought to be accorded to this American film master."

In 1965 the Museum had a second Griffith exhibition, and Mrs. Boswer

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adds, "it revised and extended our knowledge of the director's contribution to the film medium." Similarly the present exhibition, containing films and related material not previously shown, is designed to continue that process of evaluation. In fact, prior to showing "The Birth of a Nation," a lecture will be given by Russell Merritt, Associate Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His subject will be D. W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation": Muckraking a Southern Legend.*

There has never been a picture more controversial than the 1915 Griffith epic, "The Birth of a Nation." At the time it was released it drew angry protests although the director never considered it a bigoted or inaccurate portrayal of the Reconstruction period, according to Ron Mottram, Guest Programmer of the D. W. Griffith Centennial retrospective. "Griffith admittedly had a southern point of view, but he saw his critics in the wrong for attacking him so strongly and for attempting to censor his film."

Griffith's response took several forms, points out Mottram, who is an Assistant Professor of Film at State University of New York at Purchase. Griffith wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America," made innumerable speeches around the country decrying censorship, and then conceived of "Intolerance" which "was intended as a comment upon what he saw as the viciousness of his critics. It was meant to show the results of intolerance and tyrannical suppression throughout the ages."

"Intolerance" was an immense picture, intercutting four stories from four periods in history. Its gigantic Babylonian sets were built without any architectural plan, and, inconceivable as it seems, the director apparently worked without a written script. At least no written script of "Intolerance" exists.

*The lecture will take place May 15 at 8:00 p.m. The picture will be shown on the following day, May 16 at 2:00 p.m., and May 19 at 5:30 p.m.

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Despite the passion and extravagance he poured into it, reactions to "Intolerance" were mixed. It was not heralded in the same way as the later "Broken Blossoms," "Way Down East" and "Orphans of the Storm." They became, along with "Intolerance" and "Birth," the masterworks on which the fame of Griffith rests. Yet scholars are now scrutinizing the entire Griffith oeuvre with new vision.

"It is hoped," Ron Mottram writes, "that the Museum's retrospective will draw attention to the lesser known, and often misunderstood, parts of Griffith's career. Most obviously this would include his other major films, which, though far from unrecognized, are not often seen by the general public: 'A Romance of Happy Valley,' 'True Heart Susie,' 'The White Rose,' 'Isn't Life Wonderful,' 'The Avenging Conscience,' 'Hearts of the World,' 'The Girl Who Stayed at Home,' and 'The Greatest Question.'"

"It is also hoped that attention can be brought to the later features and those that have been too hastily dismissed as examples of Griffith's decline, such as 'One Exciting Night,' 'The Sorrows of Satan,' 'Lady of the Pavement' and especially his last film 'The Struggle.'"

"The Struggle" is cited by Mottram as a mature work reflecting Griffith's Biograph style in its less dynamic form. "If Griffith's career had to end in 1931," writes Mottram, "it at least ended in a fitting manner by recalling and refining in his last film some of the most important contributions that he made to the narrative cinema. Far from being the dismal failure that it has been made out to be, 'The Struggle' should be included among Griffith's most important works, indicating that he had lost none of his innate genius for the medium."

May 15, 1975

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