

## WALL TEXT

### *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film*

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

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When Thomas Edison's motion pictures were first commercially projected in 1896 in a New York City music hall, enthusiastic audiences embraced them as both a scientific achievement and a new form of entertainment. Projected at life-size or larger within an elaborate gold picture frame painted onto a drop curtain, the earliest films declared themselves the offspring of the fine arts and were quickly dubbed "moving pictures" by the American press. This exhibition explores for the first time the twin histories of early film and American art in the period 1880 to 1910. Paintings, drawings, prints, cartoons, and photographs are side-by-side on the gallery walls with the early motion picture studies of Eadweard Muybridge and others, and the earliest films by Edison, Louis Lumière, and other pioneer filmmakers.

The films of cinema's first decade were divorced from story-telling, focusing instead on a desire to see pictures move—rushing water, galloping horses, dancers with flying draperies, the everyday life of the city. No more than a minute long, the first films were looped so that the action was repeated again and again for the audience. "Moving pictures" were considered a new art form. This exhibition re-creates the artistic context of early films and, for the first time, shows the dynamic relationship in the United States between the moving and still arts at the birth of the new medium of film.

# Early Film and American Artistic Traditions

Unlike films made for the peephole kinoscope, the first movies made to be projected onto a large screen in an auditorium or theater demanded monumental subject matter. The Lumière Brothers in France and Birt Acres in England made films for projection in 1895. The Edison Manufacturing Company caught up a few months later in 1896. Whereas the kinoscope films of performers and athletes were reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's animated motion photographs, the grandeur of nature was a natural subject for the large scale of projected films. In the United States the first filmmakers of this new manner of cinema sought out natural wonders, such as waterfalls and waves crashing on rocky shores that were already part of the American artistic vocabulary, especially Niagara Falls, which provided the grandeur and monumentality that projected films could easily imitate.

The subjects of the first films ever made correspond to well-established traditions in American art—rural genre painting (scenes of daily life), the grandeur of the American landscape, and views of picturesque sights abroad. Early filmmakers were usually practicing artists or photographers; or, if not, they brought to the new medium already established ideas of what subjects were considered artistic. They projected these moving pictures onto a large canvas surrounded by a gold frame, putting the images into the context of monumental art familiar to American audiences.

# The Body in Motion

As photography was perfected, it was increasingly able to capture movement. By 1880 specialists in this type of photography, such as Eadweard Muybridge in the United States and Etienne-Jules Marey in France, received international attention for their experimental photographs of horses and athletes that analyzed cycles of motion. They showed phases of physiological movement never before seen by the human eye. These motion studies inspired artists on both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in Paris and Philadelphia. Thomas Eakins, a teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, was the first American artist to become fascinated by Muybridge's sequential motion studies shortly after they were published in 1878. Zootropes were used to spin the photographs, or drawings made from them, in quick succession in order to animate them. By 1890 inventors such as Thomas Edison had elaborated on this technology to create the film strip and the camera that would produce the "motion picture" as we know it.

This section of the exhibition explores the many ways photographers, filmmakers, and artists studied the movement of the body. Hand in hand with a scientific analysis of human and animal physiology, these images of dancers, athletes, and racehorses reveal the successive movements of their performances. Artists used new photographic methods in their studies of motion and captured the modern interest in new poses and expressions. On a broader cultural level, in an era of progressivism and self-improvement typified by Theodore Roosevelt, such still and moving images promoted well-being through the perfected or "improved" body, which could be seen in vaudeville theaters and sports arenas, and even on the beach.

# The Body in Motion: Portraiture

Not only were the large motions of the body studied by artists and motion photographers in the late nineteenth century, but the subtle movements of the face also received artistic scrutiny. Georges Demeny, a physical education expert who worked in Paris with the French scientist and experimental chronophotographer Etienne-Jules Marey, created a number of studies of speech intended to train the deaf in lip reading. Demeny's studies of "filmed speech" (pronouncing "Je vous aime" or "Vive la France") were widely published in journals such as *La Nature* and widely acclaimed in Europe and America as the "optical equivalent of the phonograph." His work paralleled studies of speaking and singing by American artists such as Thomas Eakins and those influenced by him, including George Luks, Robert Henri, and George Bellows. The American artists were fascinated with subtle movements of the face and how those expressions could be used to animate portraiture. Demeny believed that showing a face in motion would be the ultimate purpose for the new medium of film. Although this type of portraiture did not become practical, many early filmmakers produced equivalent living portraits, particularly those that captured the beauty of a female subject.

# The Body in Motion: Art, Sport, and Fitness

Ordinary people seen at beaches, parks, and even in backyards, casually dressed and relaxed in their movements, were subjects captured in Impressionist paintings in Europe and America. Many early films reflect the fleeting effects of the Impressionist style, as well as its subject matter.

After 1900, artists like John Sloan and William Glackens, who studied in Philadelphia where the influence of Thomas Eakins and Robert Henri was strong, developed a more penetrating realism in their studies of modern life. The beach, for these artists, provided new opportunities to look at bodies and gesture, previously possible only in single-sex settings. As mores changed around the turn of the century more of the body was revealed by shorter and tighter bathing costumes worn by men and women. Physical activity on the beach was usually limited to informal games or dances, but it was novel and endlessly fascinating to painters and filmmakers alike, as well as to their audiences. The work of artists like Sloan and Glackens paralleled strong new images captured by filmmakers like Edwin S. Porter (1869?–1941) in *Seashore Frolics* (1903), on view in this gallery. Porter went on to make many famous early films, including the first blockbuster feature film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), and became one of the most influential filmmakers of his generation.

# Art and Film: Interactions

Early filmmakers were usually practicing artists or photographers; or, if not, they brought to the new medium already established ideas of what subjects were considered artistic. Living pictures were abundant in early film. Popular paintings were not only well-known through chromolithographs but were directly translated into film as modern versions of the *tableau vivant* [painting come to life]. While artists were developing a vocabulary for depicting film in publicity posters and journal illustrations, early filmmakers also looked to the creation of art as a subject in many of their early experiments. An early example is *The Artist's Dilemma* (1900), which was produced by the marine painter and cartoonist J. Stuart Blackton and reflects his enduring interest in the visual arts and the dynamism of the artistic process. Both artists and filmmakers at the beginning of the twentieth century celebrated the power of the visual arts and the creative act.

# The City in Motion

The growth of great industrial cities in Europe and America provided artists with new urban subject matter, best known in the Impressionist paintings of Paris. The city's hallmark was its motion—the bustling of people and vehicles, and the changing views of the observer moving through it. Once the motion picture camera was developed in the early 1890s, the movement of the city became a natural subject, particularly in France in the films by the Lumière Cinématographe Company. The camera was typically set up to accentuate a telescoped recession into space of a grand boulevard or, in the case of Louis Lumière's *Coming of the Train, La Ciotat* (1897) on view in this gallery, the train arriving on the station platform.

In the United States, the Impressionist cityscape was perfected by artists like Childe Hassam and held sway until a new aesthetic emerged around 1900 in the works of Everett Shinn and his fellow artists of the Ashcan School. The monochromatic palette and dynamic movement of their views of New York developed simultaneously with the new films of the city. The artists of this group, who were also employed as news reporters, worked side by side with the filmmakers in this raw urban environment. They rejected the Impressionist aesthetic, which was little suited to the denseness of New York and focused on the less attractive but more powerful images of modern transportation, industry, and the crowded streets of immigrant neighborhoods. The depiction of the modern city revealed by filmmakers and artists at the turn of the century is on view in the next gallery.

The first screen kiss, the *May Irwin Kiss* consists of a notorious scene from a popular Broadway play, *The Widow Jones*, performed by the play's two stage actors May Irwin and John C. Rice. In honor of the musical's 200<sup>th</sup> performance, *New York World* arranged for the Edison Manufacturing Company to film the kiss in the Black Maria studio. The newspaper then published in its Sunday edition line drawings of the kiss based on successive film frames.



"The Anatomy of a Kiss", *New York World* (April 26, 1896), p. 21

The newspaper's frame-by-frame analysis, in the manner of Eadweard Muybridge's analytical motion photographs, dissected and mocked the intense public scrutiny given to this infamous kiss. According to the text accompanying the illustrations:

*Scientists have decided that kisses are dangerous. . . . But now the Sunday World publishes the pictures of a kiss . . . Six hundred different views of the forty-two foot kiss. . .*

The analysis of four frames of the kiss was lighthearted and even comic—"A Perfect Gentleman Smooths His Mustache First," "This Is The Coy Moment—Miss Irwin Hesitates," "The Preliminary Snuggle Seems To Be A Good Thing," and "Climax—Long and Enthusiastic and Too Blissful For Adjectives."

The publication of the *World's* article was just three days after the debut of Edison's Vitascope projection at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in New York. *May Irwin Kiss* was added to the Vitascope program just a few weeks later and became the most popular Edison film of the year. Imagery from the movie spread rapidly through a variety of pictorial media from the Sears & Roebuck, Co. poster (on view at the other end of this gallery wall) to a souvenir flip book on display in a nearby case.

In this period, the subject of boxing was taken up by a range of artists from the cartoonist, Richard Felton Outcault (author of the “Yellow Kid” cartoon), to the influential fine artist, Thomas Eakins. Boxing was in the spotlight because of the moral outrage against its excesses and the many attempts to preserve it as a noble sport through regulation. Not only did images of boxing evoke the power of the male body in combat, but they also raised issues of race and ethnic competition that permeated American culture at the turn of the century.



*George Luks in Mock Prize Fight*, ca. 1891, photograph, studio of Robert Henri, Philadelphia, Courtesy, Sloan Collection, Delaware Art Museum

Artists like George Luks and George Bellows continued Eakins-style realism into the twentieth century and combined the aggressive aspects of popular depictions of boxing with the fine art study of the body in motion. Luks, in particular, cultivated the persona of a boxer, using a number of boxing aliases over the years, such as “Chicago Whitey,” “Lame-em-Luks,” “Socko-Sam,” “Curtain-Conway” and “Monk-the-Morgue.” One of Luks’s favorite performances was a mock encounter staged for the benefit of a photographer at a party at Robert Henri’s studio in Philadelphia. In the photograph of this imitation prizefight (reproduced above), Luks is on the left, stripped to the waist and crouched in a sparring pose. Directly behind him are his friends and fellow artists John Sloan (with glasses) and Everett Shinn.

The street culture of urban youths was caricatured and disseminated nationally through Richard Outcault's popular comic series, *Hogan's Alley*, which featured the antics of Mickey Dugan (a bald, big-eared youth in an oversized nightshirt) and his fellow inhabitants of this fictional Irish immigrant neighborhood. A child of the tenements, Mickey (the Yellow Kid) and his friends often parodied upper-class behavior at imagined sporting events, museums, and even in artists' studios. In the *Amateur Dime Museum*, Mickey leads his girlfriend Liz in a slum version of the waltz known as the "Tough Dance," which was referred to as the Yellow Kid Dance when performed by the Leander Sisters dressed as Mickey and Liz, seen in the film on the left. In the cartoon Liz's feet fly off the ground as she dances enthusiastically. It's not difficult to imagine Mickey singing a popular tune of the day:

*My Pearl is a Bowery Girl  
As waltzing together we twirl.  
She sets them all crazy, a spieler, a daisy,  
My Pearl's a Bowery girl.*

The artist George Luks became the "Yellow Kid" cartoonist at the *New York World* in October, 1896, after Outcault moved to the *New York Journal*. Luks's most famous work, *The Spielers* (1895) is on view in this gallery.



Richard Felton Outcault (1863–1928), *Amateur Dime Museum*, 1896, Illustration in *New York Journal* (October 4, 1896), Courtesy of the www.deniskitchen.com Archives