



## Notes from the Archive

### Seaver Center for Western History Research

#### Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

#### February 2020

Welcome to Notes from the Archive, a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department. If you are informed by what you read here, please share it with a friend or colleague.

### SPECIAL MOTION PICTURES ISSUE

Los Angeles and Hollywood readies for another close-up as the aura of glitz and glamour streams to the world when the Academy Awards are presented on Sunday, February 9th. The nascent "moving picture" and "photoplay" industry on the East coast settled out West around 1905, and soon others followed to reap the year-round sunshine for ideal filmmaking conditions. The Seaver Center collections reflecting the history of motion pictures are strongest from the pre-cinema era through the 1930s.

The Museum acquired a significant portion of these materials through the vision of Earl Theisen, who was a member of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers. Theisen had close contact with the Hollywood motion picture community. In 1930 he acquired for the Museum every kind of movie artifact, three-dimensional as well as brochures, catalogs, film frames, play bills, and posters. His stewardship has since aided scholars, students and others to understand movie-making, both behind and in front of the camera. Theisen influenced the practice of collecting to explain the technological evolution of speed, sound and synchronization, lighting, and make-up, along with gathering a rich array of photographic documentation through actor and set stills.

Betty Uyeda, Collections Manager

### THE COLLECTION HIGHLIGHT: RKO PRODUCTIONS, INC.

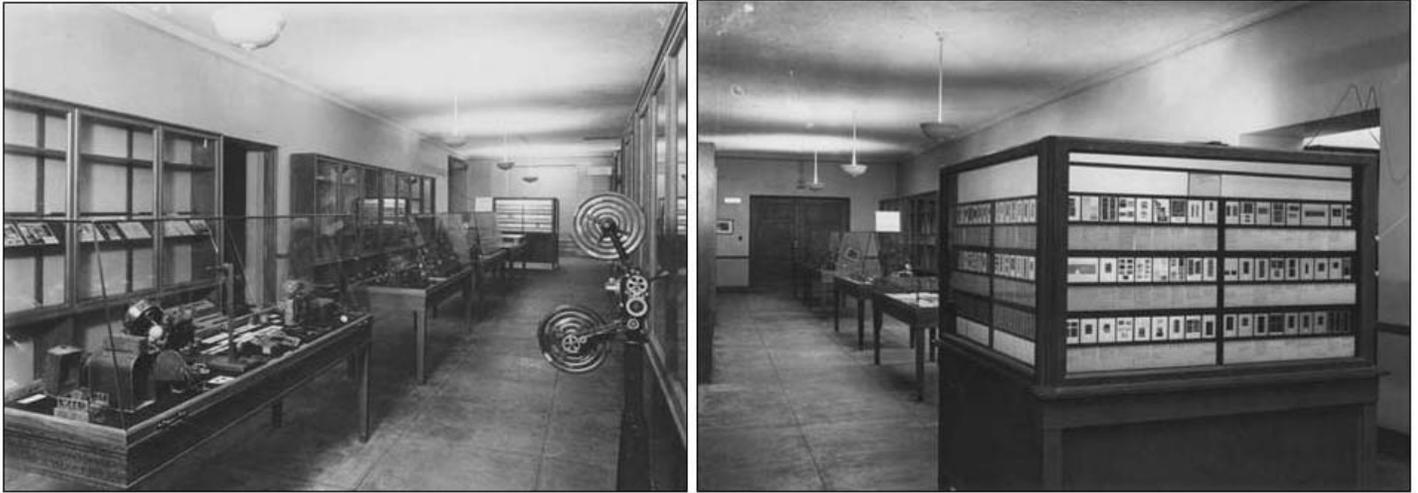
An example of a donation prompted by Theisen's influence is an often-researched film collection - the **RKO Collection** from Radio-Keith-Orpheum Productions, Inc. Contents include *Top Hat* (1935) – one of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' most popular musicals. A set design sketch shows the celebrated Venice, Italy set complete with canals; a photograph of the finished set is included as well. *Top Hat* was nominated for four Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Black & White Art Direction. Also part of the RKO Collection are Bernard Newman's costume sketches for the feather dress worn by Ginger Rogers in the Cheek to Cheek dance number.

John Cahoon, Collections Manager



## THE RESEARCHER

Mark Lynn Anderson became aware of the film historical collections at the Seaver Center some fifteen or more years ago while conducting research on the early Hollywood star system. Yet for the past four years he has been interested in the provenance of those collections and the person most responsible for bringing the majority of these documents, prints, and artifacts to the Museum, Earl Theisen. Better known today as a mid-century celebrity photojournalist and one of the founding photographers of Look magazine, Theisen served as a honorary curator of motion pictures at the Los Angeles Museum during the 1930s, where he not only built the Museum's collections in this area but was also responsible for an evolving permanent exhibit on film history that occupied one of the central halls on the ground floor until its removal in early 1942.



GPF.0460 a-b

While scant documentation exists about this exhibit or the people who encountered it, Anderson seeks to critically account for Theisen's curatorial practice as a pioneering effort in making film history both visible to a museum-going public and scientifically respectable. This research is part of a larger, ongoing book project on the practices of film historians before 1940, although this summer Anderson will submit an extended essay on Theisen's work at the museum to *The Moving Image*, the official journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA).

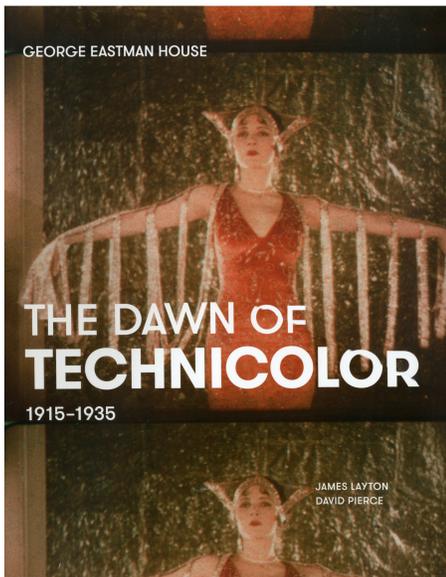
Anderson is an Associate Professor in the Film and Media Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of *Twilight of the Idols: Hollywood and the Human Sciences in 1920s America* (University of California Press 2010) as well as several book chapters and journal articles on film censorship and regulation, the star system, film historiography, and the history of film and media education.



Anderson taking a research break at the museum cafe

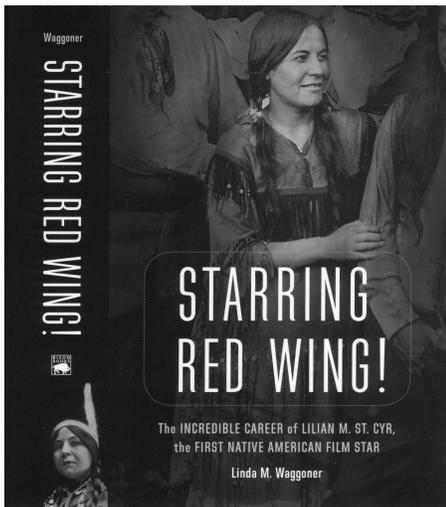
## THE PUBLICATIONS

Three recent book publications that relied on research materials from the Seaver Center are shown below.



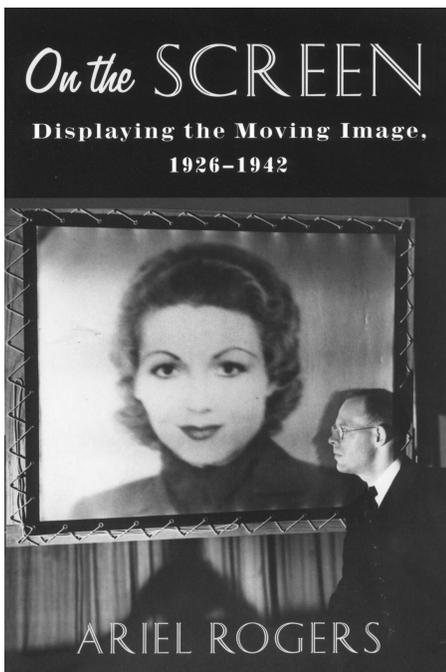
(George Eastman House, 2015)

James Layton, co-author of *The Dawn of Technicolor, 1915-1935*, utilized the Seaver Center's film frame collection in his research. Layton is an archivist with George Eastman House, specializing in motion picture technology.



(University of Nebraska Press, 2019)

Linda M. Waggoner is an independent scholar specializing in Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) history. Her latest book *Starring Red Wing! The Incredible Career of Lilian M. St. Cyr, the First Native American Film Star* features the Ho-Chunk actress who is remembered for her work in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Squaw Man* (1914).



(Columbia University Press, 2019)

*On the Screen: Displaying the Moving Image, 1926-1942* explores technological innovations of the cinema screen, in the most literal sense: production screens such as rear projection and special effects; theatrical screens; and early television screens. The author, Ariel Rogers, is Assistant Professor at Northwestern University in the Department of Radio/Television/Film, Screen Cultures Program.



**Plan your research visit**

Call 213.763.3359 or  
Email [seavercenter@nhm.org](mailto:seavercenter@nhm.org)  
Open by appointment  
Monday and Thursday  
10-noon and 1-4 p.m.

---

**The Collections**

[Search the Online Archive of California](#)

Over 370 general collections  
Over 290 photographic collections

**Digitized Collections**

[Search over 34,000 images](#)

---

The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.  
The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

---



---

*Copyright © 2020 Seaver Center for Western History Research, All rights reserved.*

Want to change how you receive these emails?  
You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).

