

WHITNEY

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Press Release

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ALICE GUY BLACHÉ RETROSPECTIVE AT THE WHITNEY REDISCOVERS AN EARLY FORCE IN FILM

November 6, 2009 – January 24, 2010



Alice Guy Blaché (1873–1968), *Madame a des envies* (1906, Gaumont). Courtesy of Gaumont Pathé Archives, Paris

NEW YORK, September 29, 2009 – An unprecedented large-scale retrospective of the films of Alice Guy Blaché (1873–1968)—the first woman director in the history of cinema—will be presented by the Whitney Museum of American Art, from November 6, 2009, to January 24, 2010. *Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer* features more than eighty rare films that will be screened in the Whitney’s second-floor Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery.

After a pioneering decade working in Paris at Gaumont (1896–1907) as its first director and head of production, Alice Guy Blaché came to the United States where she was the first woman to establish and run her own film company, Solax (1910–1914), located initially in Flushing, New York, and then in Fort Lee, New Jersey; she continued working in the US as an independent director through 1920. During these formative years of cinema’s evolution, Blaché wrote, directed, or produced more than 1,000 films, ranging from under a minute long to multi-reel features. She made films in a wide range of genres, including comedies, dramas, Westerns, fables, detective stories, a biblical epic, and films based upon literary classics. She wrote scripts, experimented with camera techniques, made films that were color-tinted by hand, and shot more than one hundred synchronized sound films between 1902 and 1906, decades before sound became the standard for the medium.

Until a decade ago, only forty of her films were known to exist; today, some 130 works have been identified in archives internationally. The recovery of Alice Guy Blaché's work—both its identification as hers and its conservation and restoration—has involved an enormous worldwide undertaking by film historians, archivists, and preservationists.

Joan Simon, the Whitney's curator-at-large and organizer of the exhibition, notes: "Alice Guy Blaché—cinema's first woman director, screenwriter, producer, businesswoman, and studio owner—is unique in film history. This exhibition introduces new audiences to a little-known but historically key figure who had decade-long careers in France and the US, and affords film scholars a 'critical mass' of Blaché's body of work by which to place her films within the international context of early cinema. Her films are important examples of film's evolution as popular entertainment: they are bold, her stories fascinating, her point of view singular, her comedies raucous, and her characters (especially her women and child heroes) complex. Her career is worthy of renewed investigation and she deserves recognition as a pioneer of early cinema."

Born in Paris in 1873, and raised in Switzerland, Chile, and France, Alice Guy, as she then was known, studied the new "sciences" of typewriting and stenography, and began working as secretary to Léon Gaumont in 1894 at Le comptoir général de photographie, a manufacturer of still cameras and other optical equipment. This was the corporate predecessor of L. Gaumont & Cie, established in 1895, soon to become one of the world's leading film companies and today the oldest in continuous operation. Guy learned the photography business through correspondence, familiarizing herself with clients, marketing, and the company's stock of cameras, and became acquainted with the new technologies being invented for shooting and exhibiting motion pictures.

Inventors Gaumont and the Lumière Brothers were friends as well as competitors; both were trying to solve the problem of projecting film. Alice Guy and Léon Gaumont were among the audience at a private screening in March 1895, when the Lumières presented their projection of a film of workers leaving a factory.

Until this time at Gaumont, filmmaking had been in the service of science or used as a promotional tool for selling cameras. "In the beginning, everyone was always shooting street scenes, parades, or moving trains, which I did not find terribly interesting," Guy later recalled. "So one day I said to Monsieur Gaumont: 'It seems to me we could do something better.'" Perhaps with the courage of youth, Guy asked Gaumont if she could try making a film that would tell a story. He said yes. Thus, Alice Guy became Gaumont's first director (although the term did not yet exist) and soon became head of production, spending the next decade making films at Gaumont's studios in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, between 1896 and 1907.

Guy's earliest films at Gaumont share certain subjects and visions with some of her colleagues, such as the Lumières. As Joan Simon writes in her catalogue essay, "The magical antics when body parts come undone from a body, as in Guy's *Chirurgie fin de siècle* (*Fin de Siècle Surgery*, 1900), are in the spirit of Méliès's famous and numerous deconstructions. She also, like many of her contemporaries, made travel films and dance films, sometimes the two genres conveyed in one moving picture, such as her dances filmed in Spain, particularly the beautiful hand-tinted films *Le Bolero* (1905), performed by Miss Saharet, and *Tango* (1905)."

Guy's distinct point of view was to be seen in her story films, and she was among the first to make them. She worked from scripts, which she wrote as well as directed. Though she produced such typical period genres as chase films or those derived from fairy tales, these often featured a twist. The folktale of children born in a cabbage patch is the subject of her first film, *La Fée aux choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*). In the story, babies are presented as if they are new cameras for sale. The theme of the complications of parenthood recurs in many of her films, whether *La Fée Printemps* (1906), in which a fairy magically transforms winter to spring and delivers a newborn from a garden to expectant parents, or *Madame a des envies* (*Madame Has Cravings*, 1906), a new kind of chase film, where a pregnant woman races through town, husband and child in tow, stealing foods to satisfy her cravings. Guy also addressed the duplicity and brutality of a stepmother (*La Marâtre*, 1906) and the same year made her epic *La Vie du Christ*, with sets and costumes based on the realist illustrations in a famous James Tissot bible, using some twenty-five sets and hundreds of extras, for a film running ca. thirty-four minutes long, at a time when the norm was a maximum of six or seven minutes.

Guy's decade-long career at Gaumont alone would have earned her a place in cinema history. However, this was followed by a second decade in the United States, from 1910 to 1920, where she was known as Madame Blaché (or Alice Blaché). Here she worked at her own company, Solax, which existed from 1910 to 1914, first in Flushing, New York, and later in Fort Lee, New Jersey (where she built a studio plant at a cost of \$100,000), and subsequently as an independent for companies such as Metro and Pathé. While some of her American films explore genres new for the filmmaker, including detective stories and Westerns, others address in new ways themes she had already considered in France. Several Solax films continue her use of cross-dressing—*Officer Henderson* (1913), for example, in which undercover police dress in drag to pursue purse-snatchers—that was earlier employed to great comic effect in *Les Résultats du féminisme* (1906) to depict a world where male and female roles are reversed (the latter also re-told in her Solax film *In Year 2000*, made in 1912, whereabouts unknown). Others again ponder the nuances, the difficulties, and the human comedy of domesticity, such as *Mixed Pets* (1911), in which neither baby nor dog is wanted in a household, or *A House Divided* (1913), in which a couple estranged by suspicions of infidelity must live together under one roof and communicate exclusively by handwritten notes. She also continued to make films which feature child heroes and heroines, such as *Falling Leaves* (1911), as in the earlier Gaumont film *Une Héroïne de 4 ans* (1907).

Madame Blaché also addressed modern social problems in several of her films. *The Making of an American Citizen* (1912) is a story of immigration and relearning the expected roles of husbands and wives. Other films explore prejudicial views toward the poor (*The Thief*, 1913), and, in the case of *A Fool and His Money* (1912), the follies of social climbers and the well-off. This last film is also significant for being the earliest known film to feature an all black cast.

In her three surviving feature-length films, *The Ocean Waif* (1916), *The Empress* (1917), and *The Great Adventure* (1918), her leading women demonstrate increasing sophistication, finding their way by using their wits and with the help of some surprising comrades. Her characters (and relationships between characters) are psychologically complex, even as they play out the kind of melodramas that were becoming the standard in the industry at that time.

Alice Guy Blaché (the name she chose to use after her divorce and return to France in 1922) produced a singular body of work that spans the evolution of filmmaking on two continents. Her oeuvre in both her French and American periods reveals her to have been a gifted scriptwriter who transformed imagined picture-stories into motion pictures and a new kind of director who asked actors to “be natural.” She established the house style at Gaumont, trained its next generation of directors (including Ferdinand Zecca, Etienne Arnaud, Louis Feuillade), and then did the same at her US company, Solax. Her role as a studio owner is still rare in the film industry; among the few women who followed her were Mary Pickford and Lucille Ball.

Although her moviemaking career ended in 1920, when she was only forty-seven years old, cinema occupied her whole life. She corresponded with historians and others, sharing documents with them, to correct early film histories that had not included her work. Well into her eighties, she gave lectures and was interviewed on radio and television about her roles in the nascent film industries of the US and France. In 1955, she was recognized with the Legion of Honor (France’s highest non-military honor), and in 1957 was honored by the Cinémathèque Française. The posthumous publication of her memoirs, first in French in 1976 and then in English in 1986, with the assistance of film historian Anthony Slide, initiated an important cycle of rediscovery. In his catalogue essay, film historian Alan Williams calls Blaché’s memoirs “one of the very best books of its kind...a basic text in the history of early cinema.”

This exhibition underscores the importance of film preservation in the study of early cinema. From the American portion of Madame Blaché’s career, five films that are in the collection of the Library of Congress have been restored by the Whitney, including the feature *The Ocean Waif*. Two others, also in the collection of the Library, have been restored by gift: *Falling Leaves* (1911), thanks to Dayton Digital Filmworks, and *Mixed Pets* (1911), with a grant from New York Women in Film and Television, Women’s Film Preservation Fund and contributions by the Whitney. The occasion of this exhibition has been the catalyst for other archives to begin to restore films in their collections, including the Academy Film Archive–Center for Motion Picture Study, Los Angeles; BFI, London; and the Filmoteca Española, Madrid.

Detailed daily screening information will be available on whitney.org. To accommodate requirements for limited screenings of archival film material and also allow wider access to these films, for the twelve Sundays and select Friday evenings during the exhibition’s run, special 35mm projections will take place, many of them with live musical accompaniment. The weekly screenings will be shown in other formats, including beta-sp and HD. A selection of Guy’s synchronized sound films will be screened and heard; several suites of silent films will be accompanied by recorded scores by contemporary composers Du Yun, Missy Mazzoli, Tamar Muskal, and Tender Forever—commissioned by Whitney Live and the French Institute Alliance Française—and by Barbara Harbach.

Catalogue

The Whitney’s exhibition of the films of Alice Guy Blaché is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue (fifty-nine black-and-white images; eight-page color section) published by Yale University Press, in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, with contributions by noted film scholars Jane Gaines, Alison McMahan, Charles Musser, Alan

Williams, film historian and preservationist Kim Tomadjoglou, and the show's organizer, Joan Simon.

Alice Guy Blaché Film Score Project: A Whitney Live Commission in Partnership with the French Institute Alliance Française

Whitney Live, the Whitney's performance series, has commissioned scores by four vanguard women composers—Du Yun, Missy Mazzoli, Tamar Muskal, and Tender Forever—for four Alice Guy Blaché film programs. The commissioned-score project is a partnership between the Whitney and the French Institute Alliance Française; the recorded scores will be heard with the films during the run of the Whitney exhibition and will be premiered in live performance, along with the projected films, at Florence Gould Hall, 55 East 59th Street, on September 29th as part of FIAF's 2009 multimedia "Crossing the Line" festival. For more information, go to fiaf.org or call (212) 355-6160. Tickets may be purchased at fiaf.org or by calling Ticketmaster at (212) 307-4100.

Other Special Events

Saturday, November 14, 2009, 9:30 am–5 pm: "Woman with a Movie Camera: Alice Guy Blaché Symposium," co-sponsored by the Whitney's Education Department and the Department of Cinema Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. At the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Film Center, New York University, 36 East 8th Street, New York.

Friday, December 4, 2009, at 7 pm: "Film Evening Honoring the Women's Film Preservation Fund (WFPF) of New York Women in Film and Television." A special screening of four of Guy Blaché's Solax films (*Mixed Pets*, 1911; *A Fool and His Money*, 1912; *A House Divided*, 1913; and *Matrimony's Speed Limit*, 1913), restored by the WFPF, New York Women in Film and Television. Drake Stutesman (editor, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*) will introduce the evening; the screening will be followed by a conversation with Diana Little (preservationist, Cineric) and Mona Jimenez (cinema studies professor and associate director of NYU's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program). At the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Saturday, December 5, 2009, 5:30–6:30 pm: Special Screening of Alice Guy's *La Vie du Christ* (1906) at the Brooklyn Museum. Presented in conjunction with the exhibition *James Tissot: The Life of Christ* (October 23, 2009–January 2010), organized by Judith F. Dolkart and made possible in part with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Alice Guy based the twenty-five sets and costumes for her silent film epic *La Vie du Christ* (*The Life of Christ*) on illustrations from Tissot's watercolors published as the so-called Tissot Bible, a turn-of-the-century bestseller in England, France, and the US. The Brooklyn Museum exhibition includes 124 selected from the complete set of 350, as well as a copy of the Tissot Bible. The original watercolors were a pivotal acquisition of the Brooklyn Museum in 1900, the year Alice Guy herself acquired a copy of the Tissot Bible in Paris. This screening, a partnership between the Whitney and the Brooklyn Museum, affords visitors a chance to compare the mediums of painting (and its translation into printed images) and film as related narrative forms. Following the screening will be a discussion comparing and contrasting the points of view of filmmaker and painter, led by Judith F. Dolkart, Associate Curator, European Art, Brooklyn Museum, and curator of the Tissot exhibition; Catherine Morris, Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum; Joan Simon, Whitney curator-at-large and organizer of the Alice Guy Blaché exhibition. For more information, visit brooklynmuseum.org. Presented as part of Target

First Saturdays at the Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Auditorium, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY. By subway: 2/3 train to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum station.

Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer is sponsored, in part, by American Express



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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today. First housed on West 8th Street, the Whitney relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and in 1966 inaugurated its present home at 945 Madison Avenue, designed by Marcel Breuer. The Whitney is currently moving ahead with plans to build a second facility, designed by Renzo Piano, located in downtown New York at the entrance to the High Line in the Meatpacking District.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:

Dan Graham: Beyond	Through October 11, 2009
Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction	Through January 17, 2010
A Few Frames: Photography and the Contact Sheet	Through January 3, 2010
Steve Wolfe on Paper	September 30–November 29, 2009
Roni Horn aka Roni Horn	November 6, 2009–January 24, 2010
Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer	November 6, 2009–January 24, 2010

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission is \$15 for adults; Members, children (ages 11 and under), and New York City public high school students free. Senior citizens (62 and over) and students with valid ID: \$10. There is a \$6 admission fee for a pass to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 pm. For information, please call 212-570-3600 or visit whitney.org