

The Still Sells the Movies

THE POWER OF PUBLICITY PHOTOS

By Lauren Uhl, Curator



MAURICE COSTELLO
OF THE
VITAGRAPH PLAYERS

R. & H. 17 W. LAKE ST. CHICAGO

Maurice Costello Publicity Postcard, c. 1910.

Born in Pittsburgh's Strip District, Maurice Costello lost his father in an accident at the Carnegie Union Mills when he was only six months old. Rugged and handsome, by age 23 Costello was an actor in the city's Grand Opera House stock company. He joined the Vitagraph studio around 1910 and quickly became the movies' first matinee idol. This image appeared in the premier issue of the first movie fan publication *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*. The following year the magazine ran a "Popular Player Contest." Costello won by a landslide with 430,816 votes. (By comparison Mary Pickford garnered 24,726.) This photo could be purchased from Vitagraph's publicity department, and Costello told an interviewer in 1913 that he had signed an estimated 3,000 of them since joining the company.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Lauren Uhl.

In 1928, at a convention of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, portrait photographer Fred R. Archer noted, "There has long been a saying that 'the still sells the movies.'"

In the early 20th century, film was a brand new medium, if not quite yet an art form. The industry was slowly finding its way forward from novelty to Nickelodeon to movie palace. A film studio's success depended on exhibitors buying and screening their films, and audiences showing up to see them. So how did filmmakers entice exhibitors to choose their films and audiences to consider brand loyalty?



A Star Is Born, 1937.

Janet Gaynor, Frederic March, Adolphe Menjou, Lionel Stander, and Vince Barnett

By the late 1910s, the lure of the movies prompted thousands of young women to travel to California with the desire for a glamorous life as a famous actress. Here, art imitates life when small town girl Esther Victoria Blodgett (Janet Gaynor) follows her dream to become an actress in Hollywood. Pittsburgher Adolphe Menjou, as producer Oliver Niles, changes her name to Vickie Lester and runs her through the Hollywood beauty and publicity treatments. In this scene fellow Pittsburgher Vince Barnett snaps a poolside photo of newlyweds Vickie and Norman Maines as part of the Studio's campaign to keep the new star in the public eye.

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"PUBLICITY DEPARTMENTS NOW USED STILLS AND PORTRAITS TO SHAPE PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT FILMS"



Olive Thomas portrait in *Photoplay*, 1918.

Born in Charleroi and raised in McKees Rocks, Olive Thomas portrayed the first Flapper on screen in a film of the same name, *The Flapper*, in 1920. Her picture in the fan magazine *Photoplay* uses the pictorial style popular in contemporary theater portraits featuring an evocative soft focus and painterly quality. Both demure and sexy, Olive stares at you with her Mona Lisa smile in her barely there diaphanous wrap.

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The earliest advertisements came in the form of catalogs for exhibitors that featured the films available from a studio. Thomas Edison was a forerunner in producing and distributing catalogs to sell his films. Each catalog entry gave the film's title, a brief synopsis of the action, the length of the film, and the purchase price. Exhibitors purchased a variety of films and designed their own programs.

Around 1910 a number of changes occurred to create a seismic shift in the developing film industry and the way movies were sold to consumers. Initially, each studio developed a stock company of actors much like a local theater. Acting in movies was considered less than reputable by those in the legitimate theater, and movie actors remained anonymous. But as audiences saw the same players in films week after week, they began to ask who these people were and wonder about their private lives. Studios quickly recognized that certain actors were particularly popular and that promoting them would also promote their brand. So, actors began to receive credit for their performances on film. At the same time, newspapers noted this increased interest in movies and began to incorporate brief film reviews as regular columns.

In 1911, J. Stewart Blackton, co-founder of the Vitagraph Studio, began publishing what is acknowledged as the first fan magazine, *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*. This new monthly featured a synopsis of a dozen or so films "lavishly illustrated with photographs



“WONDER BAR”—A First National & Vitaphone Picture

Dick Powell in *Wonder Bar*, 1934.

In 1932 Warner Brothers tapped Dick Powell, a popular Pittsburgh crooner and stage show emcee, to bring his boyish charm and vocal talents to Hollywood. His bubbly personality and engaging singing voice made him a perfect fit for their series of musicals. This photo reinforces the image of Powell-as-crooner showing him in mid-song.

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Joan Blondell and Dick Powell, *Gold Diggers of 1937*.

In a spin on the scenario for *A Star Is Born*, newcomer Dick Powell learned movie acting when placed in a series of musicals with tap dancer Ruby Keeler and established star Joan Blondell. Powell and Blondell soon fell in love and married on a break between films in September 1936. This photo of the popular duo publicized the film released in December 1936 and capitalized on their recent real-life marriage.

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GOLD DIGGERS OF 1937—DICK POWELL—JOAN BLONDELL—A First National Picture



Behind-the- Scenes Still from *A Free Soul*, 1931.

Fans have long been intrigued by how movies are made. In this posed shot, director Clarence Brown points to a model of the film set to explain the action to stars Leslie Howard, Clark Gable, and Norma Shearer. Born in nearby Cadiz, Ohio, Clark Gable had family in the Conneaut Lake and Meadville area and often visited them.

HMC Delre L&A, Klingensmith Collection, MSS 939 B47.102.

from life of those actors,” what we now call a film still. The stories were interspersed with portraits of favorite “photoplayers” as actors were then known.

CHANGES IN PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLE AND THE RISE OF PUBLICITY PHOTOS

The first movie stills were shot by the cinematographer or assistant camera operator. After filming a sequence, the actors regrouped in a pose representing the action of the film and a still photo was recorded. As this was an additional task for the camera operator, and

time was of the essence, the images tended to be perfunctory, less artful than simply documentary. An alternative to shooting a still was to select a single frame from the film strip and have it enlarged. This technique, however, often resulted in an image that was somewhat blurred. These stills served to illustrate the film and augment written descriptions of the action or story line.

Early publicity portraits of film actors and actresses were modeled on those of stage stars and tended to be in the pictorial style, incorporating soft focus with muted

backgrounds, often printed in sepia tone. As interest in films increased, so did the number of still photographs and portraits taken by studios and the amount of information produced on actors.

The mid-1920s witnessed the rise of the studio system in which film companies began to employ vertical integration much like other industries. Studios exercised tighter control over the personal and work lives of their talent, played a greater hand in film distribution, purchased and built theaters, and controlled publicity. Studios no longer



Tarzan Escapes, 1936.

Unrelated to the film's plot, this still is one of a series of publicity photos showing a playful Tarzan and Jane—Johnny Weismuller and Maureen O'Sullivan in their iconic roles. MGM signed Weismuller, an Olympic gold medal swimmer in the 1920s, to a seven-year contract from 1932 to 1939 during which he only played the role of Tarzan. Shooting up at the pair fully captures his athletic physique. Weismuller's family immigrated to America when he was an infant and settled initially in Windber, Pennsylvania.

HHC Detre L&A, Museum purchase.

"STUDIOS
TURNED INTO TRUE
FACTORIES, RELEASING
ONE OR MORE FEATURE
FILMS A WEEK FOR A
COMBINED TOTAL OF
ABOUT 700 FEATURES
PER YEAR"

Jean Harlow and William Powell on the set of *Reckless*, 1935.

Pittsburgher William Powell started in silent films in which he often played a heavy or villain. In talkies, however, he was able to transform himself into a leading man playing comedic as well as dramatic roles. He is probably best remembered as dapper Nick Charles in the *Thin Man* series. In 1935, he starred with Jean Harlow in the film *Reckless*. Originally planned as a vehicle for Joan Crawford, it's possible the last-minute casting switch was made to take advantage of the well-publicized romance between Powell and Harlow.

HHC Detre L&A, Klingensmith Collection, MSS 939 B47.103.



The Easiest Way, 1931.

Robert Montgomery, Constance Bennett, and Adolphe Menjou

Pittsburgh-born Adolphe Menjou broke into films in 1915 at a time when actors often provided their own costumes. With his trademark mustache, continental manner, and impeccable wardrobe Menjou quickly established a film persona as a debonair cad. Proud that he often topped Hollywood's "Best Dressed" list, he expounded on his wardrobe and screen roles in his witty memoir, *It Took Nine Tailors*.

Still photographers tried to capture the essence of a scene or film story in one shot. Though static and posed, this still accurately captures the relationship triangle in the film. Working class girl Constance Bennett becomes the kept woman of wealthy advertising magnate Adolphe Menjou, but falls in love with aspiring reporter Robert Montgomery.

HHC Detre L&A, Klingensmith Collection, MSS 939 B38.F01.02.



simply advertised films and made available photos and information on actors. Publicity departments now used stills and portraits to shape public perceptions about films and the personal lives and personalities of stars. Newspapers, magazines, and fan publications created an unquenchable demand for news from Hollywood.

In 1927 the Warner Bros released *The Jazz Singer*, credited as the first "talkie." Though not the first film to include either dialogue or sound effects, the electrifying experience of hearing the great stage entertainer Al Jolson sing on screen caused a revolution in the industry. Within two years nearly all films included sound.

Studios turned into true factories, releasing one or more feature films a week for a combined total of about 700 features per year. Staff photographers shot hundreds of negatives each day, both stills and portraits, for use in advertisements and other marketing, to place stories about the films and actors, and to use in theater lobby displays. A huge number of portraits also went out to fans. It is estimated that in the late 1920s the most popular stars mailed around 10,000 photographs per month in response to requests from their admirers.

During the Golden Age of Hollywood, Robert Franklin "Buzzy" Klingensmith worked as an editor on several film publications in Pittsburgh's Film Row on the Boulevard of

the Allies. Over a period of nearly 40 years he amassed an enormous collection of publicity material from the late silent era through the 1960s. Included in the Klingensmith Collection at the History Center are nearly 20 boxes of 8 x 10 publicity photos taken in the 1930s at the height of the "studio system." Here is a small sample of the stills and portraits of some of Pittsburgh's movie stars and the films in which they appeared.

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