CINEMA'S CREATIVE LEGACY

Foreword

North by Northwest (1959) is a tale of mistaken identity, with an innocent man (Roger Thornhill, played by Cary Grant) pursued across the United States by agents of a mysterious organization. Finally, Thornhill and Eve Kendall (played by Eva Marie Saint) escape over Mount Rushmore's monumental presidents' heads. It is a scene that lasts just over two minutes. Still, the climax defines one of Alfred Hitchcock's most revered movies—a classic for which credit went to everyone except the scenic artists who made the dangerous flight possible by creating the backdrop. Because of the magic of Hollywood, this lifeand-death action took place on a sound stage in front of a 90-foot-wide painting that makes us believe we see the historic location. This exhibition of scenic backdrops. made between 1938 and 1968, celebrates an essential art form nearly forgotten. It is a moment in the spotlight for the dozens of unidentified studio artists. Their uncredited craftsmanship made scenes of Mount Rushmore, Ben-Hur's Rome, the von Trapp family's Austrian Alps, and Gene Kelly's Paris street dance possible.

The concept for Art of the Hollywood Backdrop had its genesis with Jane Pauley on a CBS Sunday Morning broadcast on February 9, 2020. That program called our attention to the effort to preserve scenic backdrops that had lain rolled up in the basement of MGM's studios. The television program introduced Lynne Coakley, Karen L. Maness, and Thomas A. Walsh. All three have played significant roles in preserving this inventory from Hollywood's Golden Age. In addition, their partnership with the Boca Raton Museum of Art was paramount in making this exhibition possible.

With a multitude of thanks, we acknowledge the contribution of these three principal players in realizing Art of the Hollywood Backdrop: Lynne Coakley heads J. C. Backings Corporation, which acquired over two thousand backdrops from MGM storage in the 1970s. In 2012, the Art Directors Guild Archives, then under the Guild's president, Thomas A. Walsh, launched the Backdrop Recovery Project, a partnership with J. C. Backings. Their goal was to preserve the backings and make them available for study. One of the recipients of this cache of gigantic paintings was the University of Texas at Austin,

under the care of Karen L. Maness, Assistant Professor of Practice and Associate Director of Texas Performing Arts's Fabrication Studios. She saw the opportunity to use the artifacts as part of a learning laboratory where students could use them for visualization and inspiration to succeed in high-realism scenic painting.

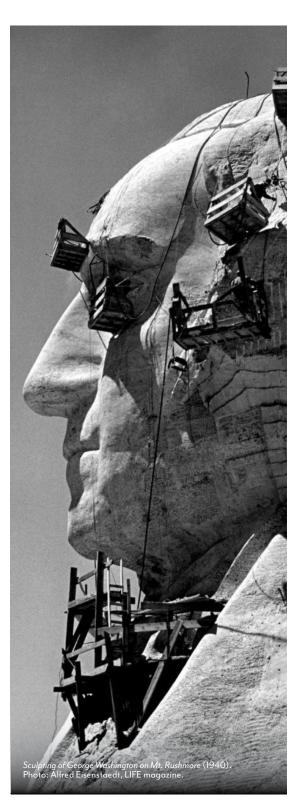
With Thomas A. Walsh and Karen L. Maness agreeing to co-curate this first major exhibition of *Art of the Hollywood Backdrop*, the project began. The Texas Performing Arts Hollywood Backdrop Collection at The University of Texas at Austin is lending twenty backdrops, including the famous Mount Rushmore. In addition, a backdrop from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and the tapestry backdrop from *Marie Antoinette* (1938) are on loan from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. Donald O'Connor danced his brilliant comic performance of "Make 'Em Laugh" in front of the backdrop from *Singin' in the Rain*. And the tapestry backdrop was reused in the *North by Northwest* auction house scene—backdrop reuse being a common practice in the film and television industry of the time.

With great admiration and gratitude, we thank Thomas A. Walsh and Karen L. Maness for giving shape to this exhibition and their contributions to this publication. These Hollywood backdrops now have new life because of their expertise and incredible passion.

Together, it is our pleasure to introduce you to Hollywood's masters of illusion and perspective, who heretofore have received little recognition for their talent or applause for their essential role in making film magic. We dedicate this publication and exhibition to their industry and thank them for what they brought to popular culture and cinematic history.

Irvin Lippman

Executive Director, Boca Raton Museum of Art



Acknowledgments

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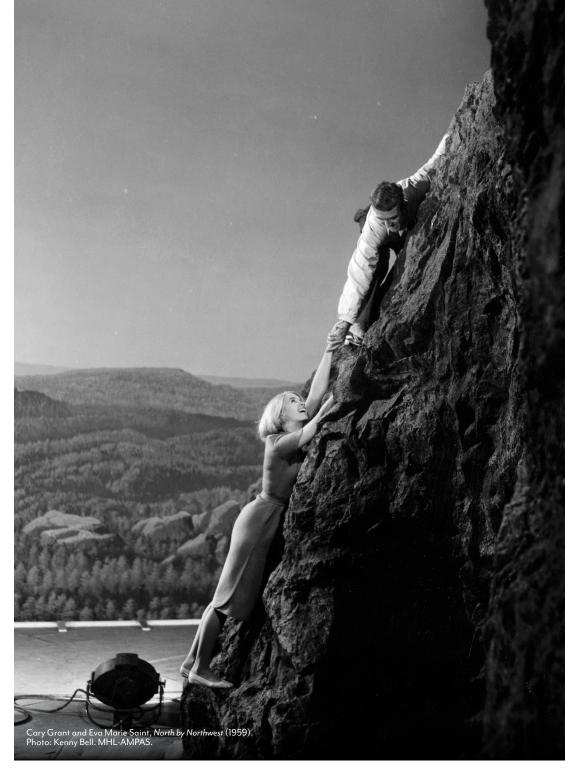
Enthusiastic support for this project also came from two noted film historians: Leonard Maltin and Kevin Brownlow.

Placing the backdrops in context with their movies was critical to the exhibition's completeness. For this, we turned to Cindy Peters Murphy, film editor, and Benjamin Kidwell Lein, media technologist.

Thanks go to Kathy Goncharov, Boca Raton Museum of Art's Senior Curator, who worked closely with our guest curators and our talented in-house team, led by Martin Hanahan, Deputy Director for Collections and Exhibitions; Jim May, Deputy Director for Communications and Strategic Planning; Austin Modine, Associate Director for Marketing and Publications; and Roberta Kjelgaard, Director of Development.

Special thanks to the Coakley family and the J. C. Backings Corporation for their generous donation of painted backings to UT Austin for display in this exhibition.

Our appreciation also to Texas Performing Arts Executive and Artistic Director Bob Bursey and the expert technical support of the Texas Performing Arts Fabrication Team, including Karen L. Maness, Jeff Grapko, W. Scott Bussey, David Tolin, J. E. Johnson, Ashton Bennett Murphy, Carolyn Hardin, Hank Schwemmer, David Hernandez, Roxolana Krywonos, Madu Akoma, Mikaela Kelarek, Julio Muñoz, and Jason Huerta. We thank them for their attention to detail. Finally, our profound gratitude goes to the organizers of this publication: Kathryn Rogers for her editing and Monica Griffin for her stunning design.



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Special Thanks

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