

Ben Carré: Parisian in Hollywood

MOTION PICTURE'S PREMIER ART DIRECTOR

BY THOMAS A. WALSH, PRODUCTION AND SCENIC DESIGNER



A. BEN CARRÉ, AGE 36, HOLLYWOOD 1919.

B. BENJAMIN JULES CARRÉ, AGE 3, PARIS 1886.

C. GEORGES MÉLIÈS (FAR LEFT) WORKING IN HIS PAINT SHOP WITH SCENIC ARTISTS, STUDIO MONTREUIL, PARIS, CIRCA 1897.

The Paris Years

How does one tell the tale about an artist who lived to the age of 95? This is the story of Ben Carré. He was born before film even existed. But based on his life story, it seems like destiny that he came to define it. This is a remembrance of one of the very first, and very best, Art Directors.

Paris 1883

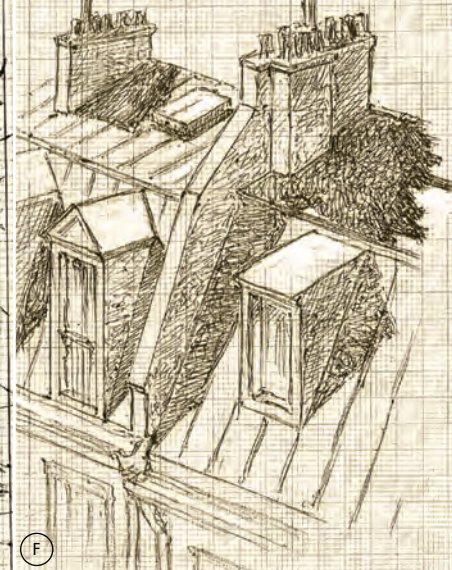
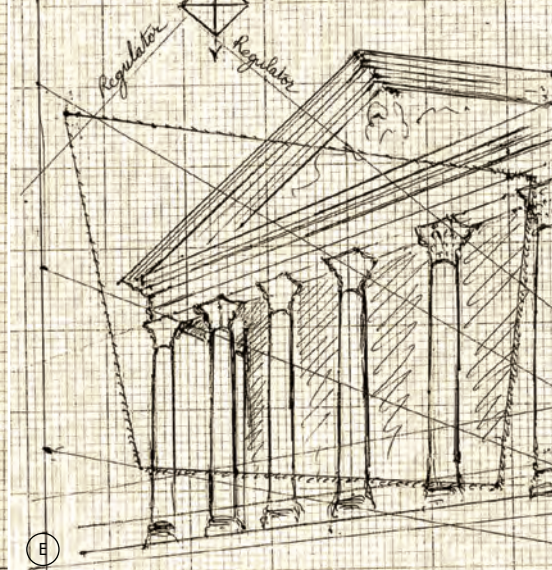
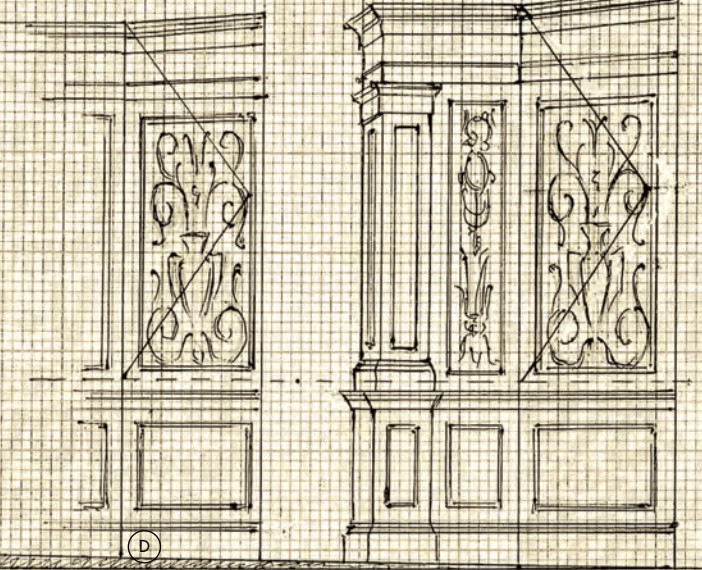
Benjamin Jules Carré was born into a working-class family living in the Belleville District of Paris. His father, Germain, was a master decorator and fine art painter who had participated in the restoration of the interiors of Sainte Chapelle in Paris. Sadly, Germain, was poisoned by the lead in his paints and died when Ben was 6. Germain's widow, Louise, owned a modest fruit and vegetable shop which now had to provide for Ben, his sister Jeannie and their extended family. Fortunately, they had many friends in their neighborhood who worked in the trades and in the performing arts. Their many gifts of kindness made it possible for the Carré family to remain together and permitted them the luxury to attend occasional entertainment at the theatre, opera and ballet. These outings raised their

spirits all the while enriching Ben's fertile imagination.

Birth of Cinema, Paris 1895

Engineer and inventor Léon Gaumont first used early motion pictures to demonstrate the potential of the cameras that he was manufacturing at his new factory located near Buttes Chaumont in Paris. As the length of the film stock increased, so did the opportunity for making longer motion pictures. In the beginning, short pictures were being made by the Lumière brothers, Méliès, Pathé and Gaumont that documented moments taken from life, such as trains in motion or workers leaving a factory. Broad comedies were created from improvisation and simple stories that were





artist, writer, producer, thespian and magician. His techniques, mechanics and story concepts influenced the work of all his competitors in Paris. The first Art Directors for motion pictures were Scenic Artists and designers of décor hired from the theatre. They were expected to design, engineer, paint, decorate, prop and create the special effects for all their studio's pictures whether filmed on location or within the simple sets built on their new stages. Because controlled electrical lighting had not yet been perfected, motion pictures depended on natural daylight. Out of necessity, the stages were glass buildings like greenhouses. They were outfitted with wooden platforms, mechanical equipment and rigging that was common in the theatrical stages.

occasionally documented in brief outlines, as screenwriting had not yet been invented.

Birth of Cinema Art Direction
1896

In 1896, Art Direction for narrative motion pictures was rapidly evolving in Georges Méliès' new Montreuil Studio. Méliès was a true auteur,

Truant Youth
1896

At the age of 13, Ben became tired of his rigorous Catholic schooling. Dropping out of middle school without telling his mother, Ben chose to pursue an elective education. Swims in the river Seine, walking through the Tuileries, attending performances of the circus and making unauthorized explorations of the Louvre Museum were now his curriculum. Fortunately, Ben possessed natural talents in art, literature and mathematics. When the nuns informed his mother of her son's

D. BEN CARRÉ, WALL ELEVATION FIELD SKETCH STUDY. (PEN ON GRAPH PAPER.)

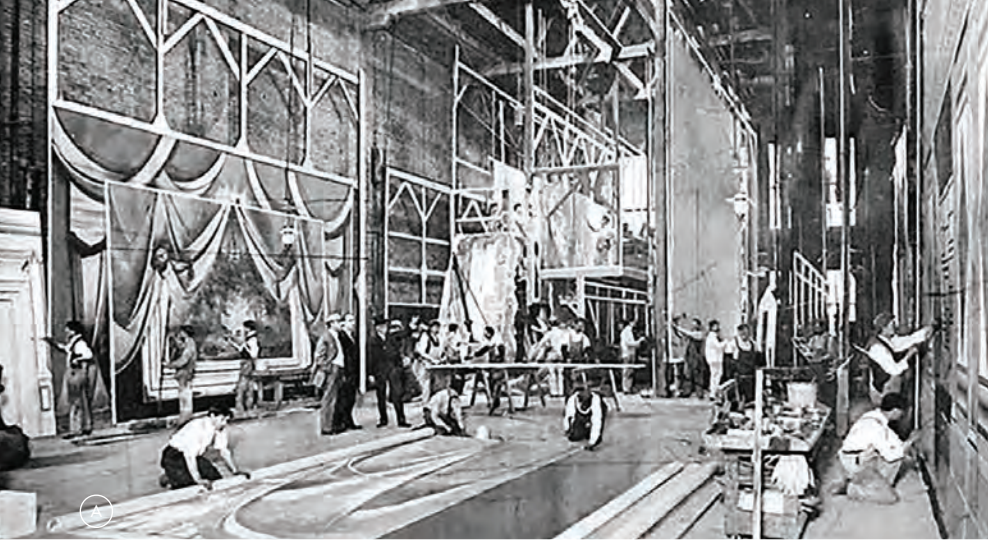
E. BEN CARRÉ, PERSPECTIVE STUDY OF COLONNADE AND PEDIMENT. (PEN ON GRAPH PAPER.)

F. BEN CARRÉ, PARISIAN ROOF DORMER PERSPECTIVE STUDY. (PEN ON GRAPH PAPER.)

G. PARISIAN ROOFTOPS, BEN CARRÉ. (WATERCOLOR ON PAPER.)

H. SET BUILDERS WORKING AT GEORGES MÉLIÈS STUDIO, MONTREUIL, PARIS, CIRCA 1897.





truancy, she found Ben an unpaid apprenticeship with a gentleman who did estimations for house restorations. This experience allowed Ben to develop his math and spatial drawing skills while gaining access to the interiors of many beautiful houses in Paris. Unfortunately, Ben's new patron had a weakness for drink, gambling and horse racing that would bring a close to their working relationship.

**Atelier Amable
1900–1905**

A family friend referred Ben to Monsieur Amable, the owner and master painter at Atelier Amable, one of the leading scenic paint studios in Paris. Clients included: the Opéra de Paris, the Comédie Française, Covent Garden, London's Earl's Court, many music halls and the recent Paris Exposition. Ben was now 17 and the year was 1900, the pinnacle of the Belle Epoque in Paris. He was accepted as an unpaid scenic apprentice requiring a three-year commitment on his part. At the Amable Studio, Ben discovered his life's true calling, creating art on a grand scale. Ben told his mother, "At last, I got my wish, I am with artists who paint all day long and love their work." Ben was mentored and challenged by the leading Scenic Artists of the day. All were unique individuals. They whistled in the morning, took proper French lunches and sang in the afternoons. All artists were masters of classical drawing and painting for the opera, theatre and ballet. They saw something special in Ben and encouraged him to spend many hours after



A. TYPICAL SCENIC PAINT STUDIO, CIRCA 1900.

B. TRADITIONAL PARISIAN SCENIC PAINT STUDIO WHERE ALL BACKDROPS AND SCENERY PIECES WERE PAINTED ON THE FLOOR RATHER THAN VERTICAL FRAME. CIRCA 1900

C. BEN CARRÉ, AGE 17, APPRENTICE SCENIC PAINTER PERIOD, PARIS 1900.

D. LEON GAUMONT, FOUNDER OF CITÉ GAUMONT; ALICE GUY, SECRETARY AND FUTURE FIRST DIRECTOR OF FILM PRODUCTION, PARIS 1896.

E. ALICE GUY ON LOCATION DIRECTING GAUMONT'S FIRST FEATURE FILM, *THE BIRTH, THE LIFE, AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST*, CITÉ GAUMONT, PARIS 1906.



work studying art, architecture and literature in the library. He took the studio's art-box outdoors or to art classes in the evenings and on the weekends with great enthusiasm. This became a passion that he continued to do throughout his long life. Working at the Amable Studio was also where Ben formed his lifelong friendships with fellow scenic apprentices, and future pioneer French Art Directors, Henri Ménessier and Robert Garnier.

Montmartre Years

Over the next six years, Ben encountered many challenges both at work and in life. As a young freelance painter, he was faced with periodic unemployment. Ben entered a brief wilderness period searching for his identity and direction. Moving to the Montmartre District he made many bohemian friends, writers, journalists, political cartoonists, poets, performers, artists, and a gifted painter who became his lifelong teacher and mentor, Jules Adler. It was toward the end of this time that Ben's life was to be irrevocably transformed by a woman who was a true force of nature, Alice Guy. At 18, Alice had been hired by Léon Gaumont to be his secretary. After a few

years, she was made the director of Gaumont's first cinema production department located at its new factory. Alice Guy was to quickly become the first woman to ever direct, write, and produce motion pictures in France and very soon after in America as well.

F. CITÉ GAUMONT STUDIO, CAMERA FACTORY AND FILM LABORATORIES. PARIS, CIRCA 1906.

G. CITÉ GAUMONT'S MAIN SHOOTING STAGE, PARIS, CIRCA 1906 (WATERCOLOR) BY ART DIRECTOR ROBERT GARNIER.

H. JERUSALEM TOWN SET ON STAGE, *THE BIRTH, THE LIFE AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST*, ALICE GUY, DIRECTOR, HENRI MÉNESSIER, ART DIRECTOR, CITÉ GAUMONT, PARIS 1906.

I. BETHLEHEM TOWN SET ON STAGE, *THE BIRTH, THE LIFE AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST*, ALICE GUY, DIRECTOR, CITÉ GAUMONT, PARIS 1906.

J. PAINT STUDIO (BEN CARRÉ FAR RIGHT) CITÉ GAUMONT, PARIS, CIRCA 1907.

**Cité Gaumont
1905–1912**

In 1905, Ben's close friend, Henri Ménessier, became Gaumont's first Art Director and lead Scenic Artist. Amable Studio and Cité Gaumont were in the same district of Paris, so Ben and Henri would often share a proper lunch together. On one such occasion, Ben expressed his frustrations with his patron, Monsieur Amable, and the small salary he was finally being paid. Henri's

A. CONSTRUCTION SHOP, CITÉ GAUMONT, PARIS, CIRCA 1907.

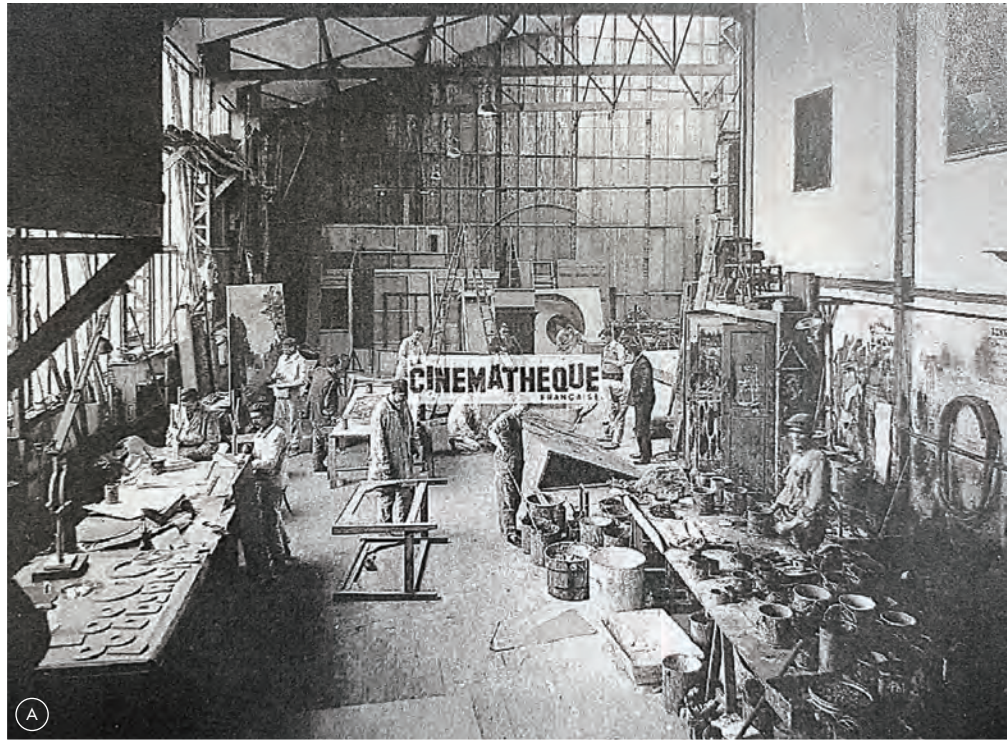
B. PARISIAN APARTMENT SET ON STAGE, *THE CLEANING MAN*, ALICE GUY, DIRECTOR, HENRI MÉNESSIER, ART DIRECTOR, CITÉ GAUMONT, PARIS 1907.

C. ROOFTOP SET ON STAGE, *CI-CONTRE*, EN BAS, ECLAIR STUDIO, PARIS 1920.

answer was to introduce Ben to Alice Guy at Gaumont Studios where Ben was hired at twice his current earnings on the spot. Ben's mother disapproved of Ben's decision and motion pictures, believing them to be a fad that would soon pass.

At first, Ben found the new motion picture work strange and chaotic, "You never knew what they would ask you to do!" He had no scripts

to work from as they were making things up on the fly. Ben would say, "At Gaumont, we'd be given an assignment to build a set. The set would be built, and the director would come in to direct without knowing anything beforehand about the set." Ben designed and painted all of his sets. He also was responsible for any special effects that were required. He had to master the intricacies of theatre mechanics such as counterbalances, trapdoors, revolves and all the necessary





A

epic, *La vie du Christ* (*The Birth, The Life and The Death of Christ*). Adapted from a popular illustrated bible, it was directed by Alice Guy and designed by his friend Henri Ménessier. One of Ben's earliest design assignments was in 1908, *La course aux potirons* (*The Pumpkin Race*), which he attributes to director and pioneer animator Émile Cohl. For Ben, this was a real exercise in the problem-solving skills required for the making of motion pictures.

A. ALICE GUY FILMS
A PHONOSCENE
(SYNCHRONIZED SOUND
WITH FILM) CITÉ
GAUMONT, PARIS 1907.

B. HARRIS COLOUR WHEEL
(CIRCA 1766).

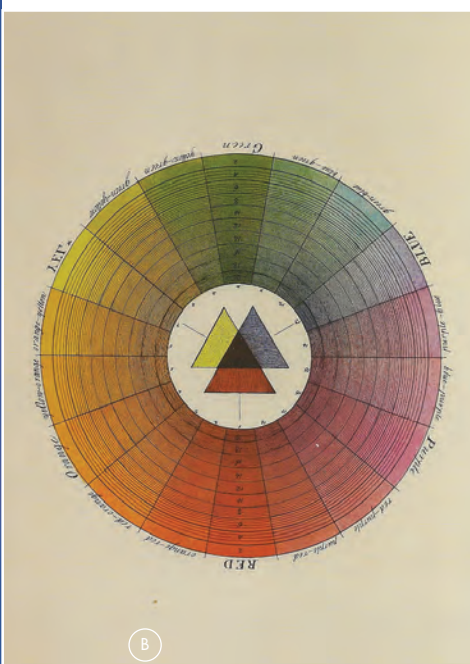
C. COLOUR SWATCH
CHART OF COMPATIBLE
COLOURS FOR BLACK-AND-
WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY
(CIRCA 1900S).

D. HOUSE BACKDROP FOR
LITTLE WOMEN (1949),
PAINTED BY BEN CARRÉ IN
COLOUR FOR BLACK-AND-
WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY.

mechanical or technical solutions that the story might require.

Over his next six-years at Gaumont, Ben designed and collaborated on hundreds of pictures. Many of Gaumont's early films were comedies or musical shorts promoting their patented Chronophone synchronized sound system. In his unpublished memoirs, Ben describes Gaumont's 1906 biblical

The first film sets were very theatrical. They consisted of three wall spaces assembled from conventional theatre flats with canvas backdrops, all painted in ten shades of grey as colours were not compatible with the black-and-white film stocks of that time. It was around 1910 that Ben began to experiment with sets painted in colours that were equivalent in their hue to the standard greyscale. After many camera tests, a modified colour palette



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A

A. IN 1911, THE FRENCH FILM COMPANY ÉCLAIR BECAME FORT LEE'S SECOND FILM STUDIO. THE TRI-STATE WAS TO BECOME THE PRIMARY POINT OF ENTRY FOR MANY OF THE MOST EXPERIENCED FRENCH FILM ARTISTS AND TECHNICIANS INTO THE EARLY AMERICAN FILM INDUSTRY.

B. BEN CARRÉ (ON RIGHT) WORKING ON THE SMALL PAINT FRAME WITH TWO SCENIC ARTISTS AT PARAGON-WORLD STUDIOS, FORT LEE, 1915.

C. AT FIRST, A CONVENIENT BACKLOT FOR NEW YORK CITY'S FILM PRODUCTIONS, THE SLEEPY VILLAGE OF FORT LEE, NEW JERSEY, IN 1910 RAPIDLY BECAME A BOOMTOWN AND THE EPICENTER FOR FILM PRODUCTION IN AMERICA.



B

was conceived that was compatible with the evolving black-and-white film stocks of that time.

Paris and Fort Lee

1910–1912

Paris was the center for motion picture production in 1910, but its dominance was soon to be challenged in a place called Fort Lee, New Jersey. A sleepy village and vacation community, it was now being used as a backlot by Manhattan's start-up picture companies. To centralize their productions, enterprising investors, such as Jules Brulatour, began building motion picture studios in Fort Lee in rapid succession. Among the very first was Solax Studio, owned by Alice Guy-Blaché and Éclair Films from France. With the arrival of Éclair came a sizable number of French emigre workers bringing with them significant creative and technical expertise. These French pioneers introduced an emerging style of visual storytelling referred to by director Louis Feuillade as *Le Film Esthétique* ("The Aesthetic Film") and *La Vie Telle Qu'elle Est* (*For Life as It Is*). Their creative and technical infusion unleashed a period of rapid growth, invention and a transformation within the American motion picture movement.

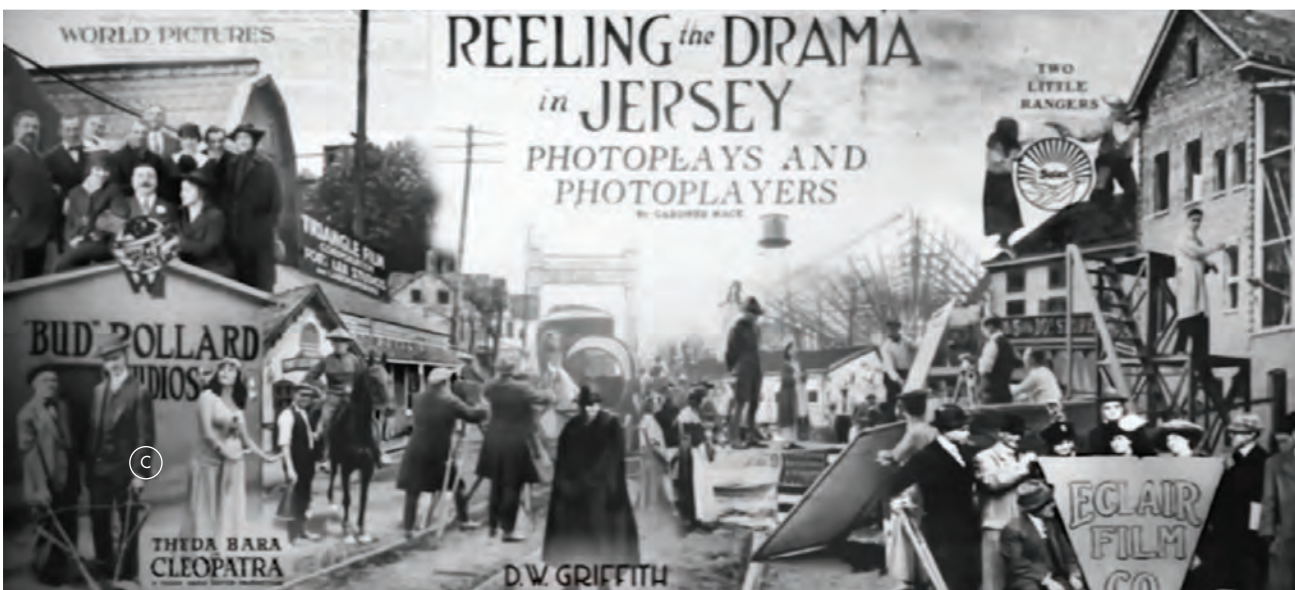
America

1912

Ben was 29 in 1912 when Étienne Arnaud, the new head of Éclair Films American unit, invited him to come work at Fort Lee. Ben thought that this new adventure would only last a few years, so the learning of English properly was not a priority for him. Instead, Ben merged both the French and English languages into his own unique mongrel dialect that filmmaker Kevin Brownlow referred to as "Franglais." Ben departed France in early October on the steamship *La Lorraine*, arriving in New York City seven days later. He was warmly greeted dockside by his close friends from Paris, camera pioneers, Lucien Andriot and Georges Benoit. They, along with Art Director Henri Ménessier and cameraman John van den Broek, were to become inseparable companions in the rapidly growing French community at Fort Lee.

Drawn from Ben Carré's 400-page unpublished memoir, "Parisian in Hollywood" is the first of three serialized chapters about Ben's journey and contributions to the creation and evolution of Art Direction for motion pictures in America. Chapter

two will focus on the crucible of invention that Fort Lee became, Ben's thirty-two films with French director Maurice Tourneur and their eventual relocation in 1919 to a distant agrarian village called Hollywood. **ADG**



C

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Part Two: Fort Lee to Hollywood 1912–1919

Ben Carré has been called “the first true artist of American film.” When Ben started in motion pictures, the industry was a struggling medium of low esteem. By the time he retired, it was the dominant art form of Western civilization.

When Ben arrived in America in 1912, New Jersey was about to become the crucible of invention for the new and very young motion picture industry.

There was a film colony starting up in Hollywood, but New York City and Fort Lee were the first epicenter for American film production.

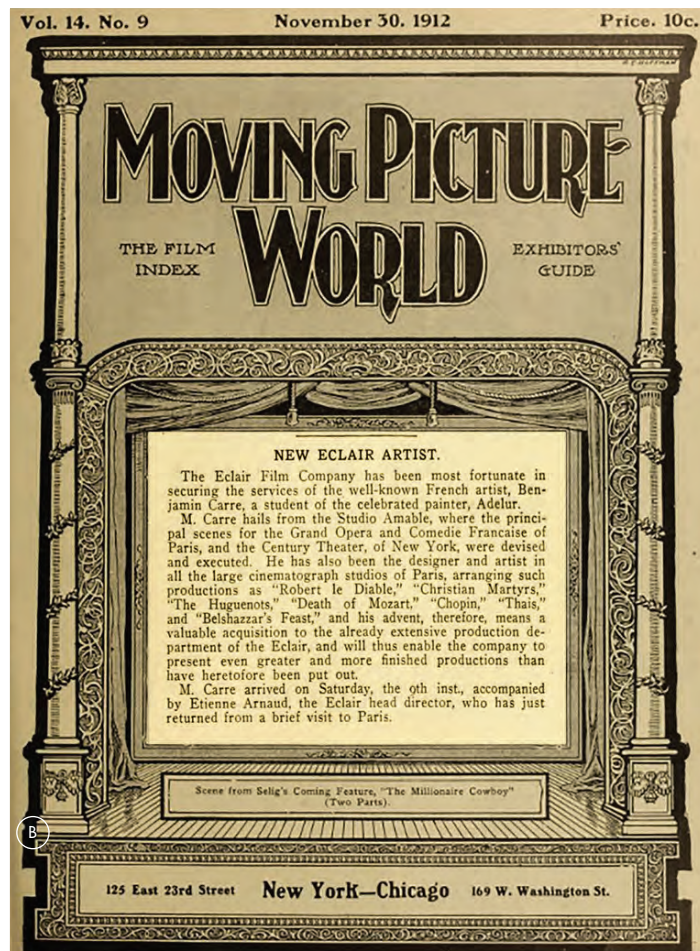
To promote Ben’s arrival in America, the Éclair Film Company issued a press release seen in *Moving Picture World* for the New York trades.

Though many have been lost, Ben Carré made hundreds of motion pictures over the next seven years in Fort Lee. It was here that Ben’s training and experiences in Paris gave him a significant advantage. He often had to work with multiple directors, simultaneously designing, painting, decorating and supervising a full slate of pictures each month. To manage such a workload, Ben evolved an effective and personal approach to Art Direction for motion pictures. Ben was never an accomplished draughtsman, but he was a gifted painter and Illustrator and a master of mathematics and perspective. His illustrations were very precise and easily translatable by his

construction departments into the necessary working drawings. Understanding the importance of composition and lighting, Ben respected and always collaborated closely with his cameramen. It was during this early period that Ben introduced his techniques for painting sets in color to American filmmakers. He also somehow found the time to fall in love with a recent French émigré artist and Illustrator, Jeanne Cottrel, who was a talented Illustrator and painter. There is reason to believe that they met when she was working in Ben’s Art Department at Paragon-World Studio. Her decorative painting is prominently featured in

A. BEN CARRÉ (AGE 29) ACCEPTS AN INVITATION FROM ETIENNE ARNAUD, HEAD OF ÉCLAIR FILMS, TO COME TO AMERICA, EARNING \$50 A WEEK.

B. MOTION PICTURE WORLD’S ANNOUNCEMENT HERALDING BEN CARRÉ’S ARRIVAL TO AMERICA (NOVEMBER, 1912).





C

Mary Pickford's bedroom set for *A Poor Little Rich Girl*. The pair married in 1914 and their daughter, Evelyn, was born in 1918.

Maurice Tourneur and *Trilby*, 1915

It was at Éclair and soon thereafter at Paragon-World Studio that Ben Carré began his long collaboration with French director Maurice Tourneur. Carré designed thirty-two feature-length films for Tourneur and influenced the visual style for which Tourneur became noted. This new style was first explored in their 1915 production of *Trilby*.



D

Set in the Latin Quarter of Paris, it is a story about young artists, a world that Ben had lived in as a young painter in Paris. His sets were reminiscent of the studios of his friend and mentor, Jules Adler. The art students who participated as extras in the

classroom scenes were all recruited from New York's Art Students League. One student in particular had the look of a matinee idol. A native of Brooklyn, and a department store window dresser by day, his name was Cedric Gibbons.

The Tourneur—Carré Style

Ben Carré and Maurice Tourneur had a mutual understanding. Tourneur would focus on the story and actors, the cameramen would manage the photography and lighting, and Ben would manage the sets and all the physical details. Their 1917 production of *A Poor Little Rich Girl* marked the beginning of Tourneur's and Carré's trademark styles. The 1918 production of *The Blue Bird* was recognized after its release for establishing a new creative standard for motion pictures. The film introduced new visual and story solutions never imagined or attempted before and remained one of Ben's all-time personal favorite pictures.



E

C. MANSION FOYER UNDER CONSTRUCTION, PARAGON-WORLD PICTURES (1915–1919).

D. LABORATORY SET, ÉCLAIR STUDIOS (1912–1914). BEN CARRÉ, RIGHT, DIRECTOR ETIENNE ARNAUD, LEFT.

E. BEN CARRÉ PAINTING, *OUTSIDE OF THE PARAGON*, FORT LEE, 1916 (OIL ON WOODEN PANEL).

F. BEN CARRÉ AND FIRST WIFE, PAINTER AND ILLUSTRATOR, JEANNE COTTREL (1914).



F



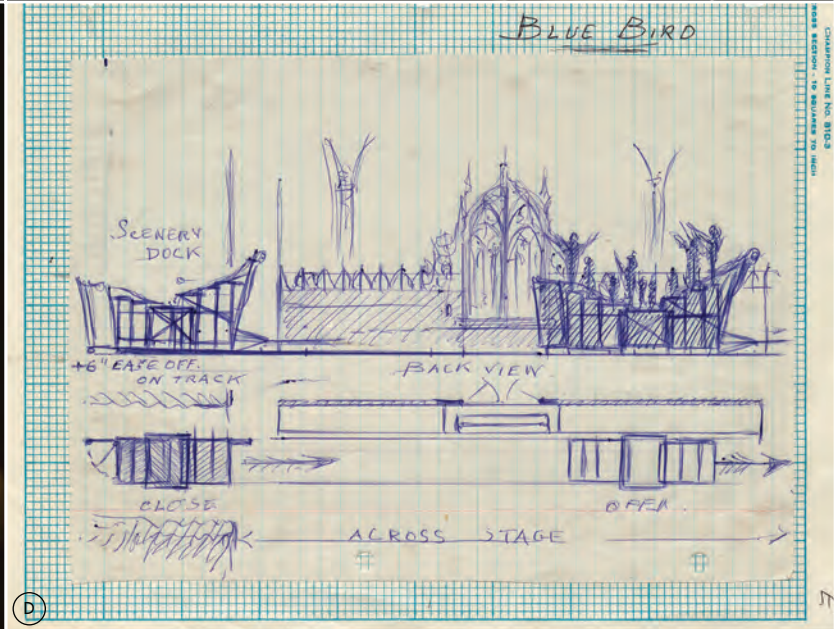
A



B



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D

A. A POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL (1917). BEN CARRÉ, ART DIRECTOR. MARY PICKFORD'S BEDROOM SET. PARAGON-WORLD STUDIO, FORT LEE. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. A POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL. MARY PICKFORD'S BED AREA. PRODUCTION STILL.

C. THE BLUE BIRD (1918). BEN CARRÉ, ART DIRECTOR. ARRIVAL OF MAGICAL SHIP AT PALACE DOCK. PARAGON-WORLD STUDIO, FORT LEE. PRODUCTION STILL.

D. THE BLUE BIRD (1918). CARRÉ'S SKETCH FOR SHIP AND DOCK ELEMENTS. (PEN ON GRAPH PAPER.)

Culver City 1919

The First World War devastated the French and European motion picture industries. Capital, materials and manufacturing were diverted to the war effort. Ultimately, the small farming village called Hollywood in Southern California developed into the next and future global center for motion picture production. It was in 1919, while working for Famous Players Lasky, that Maurice Tourneur agreed to relocate his company to Samuel Goldwyn's new studio in California. Ben, now 36, undertook a five-day train journey to Los Angeles. Dropping his bags and family at the hotel, Ben took several streetcars for a long ride out to a small dusty village called Culver City. A land developer's gamble, the new studio had been built in an

empty field surrounded by farms and oil wells that extended out to the horizon.

The Studio System

Ben Carré had again arrived at the epicenter of filmmaking's next significant chapter in a new land where these young and brash film migrants were disdainfully referred to by the locals as "The Movies." Ironically, Hollywood's town charter prohibited factories and industry within its city limits, but this did not forbid motion pictures, which were about to rapidly transition from small independent director-producer film companies into a centralized studio system with large campuses. Over the next seven years, pictures would become a commodity, and their manufacture an industry, dominated by large



E

banks and corporate investors from the East Coast. A growing audience now had an insatiable appetite for motion pictures. The era of the large studio system was about to begin.

Goldwyn Studios 1919

Besides the need to hire a crew, Ben's other preoccupation was one shared by most European expats now arriving in Los Angeles. They yearned for a clean and proper restaurant for their important daily meals. The Goldwyn Studios' canteen was crowded and offered a menu that was unappealing to Ben's French palate. Always the problem solver, he convinced the owner of a small boarding house across from the studio to hire a proper chef and open a small bistro. He promised that the studio's European expatriates would become their loyal patrons. This effort proved to be Ben Carré's first real success in Hollywood.

Ben's first picture in Culver City was also to be his last collaboration with Maurice Tourneur. The making of *The Life Line* (1919) became the final breaking point and termination of their long collaboration. Maurice Tourneur had not been warmly received in Hollywood by his director colleagues on the West Coast, making him defensive and insecure. Mary Pickford observed that Tourneur did not understand American film or comedy. She doubted that he had any sense of humor, either French or American. "His thoughts were always for the artistic and the beautiful."



F

Hollywood 1919

Carré's story of why he resigned from Tourneur's company is simple but not complete. Ben said that he had dressed a pet shop set for the *The Life Line* and then had gone home. Returning the next morning, he was angered to find that his set had been redressed with Tourneur's approval by Tourneur's new assistant director. Carré and Tourneur's working relationship had been on the decline since the accidental death of cameraman John van den Broek. To Carré, Tourneur's action was a betrayal and a personal insult. Ben resigned on the spot and walked off the stage, but not before Maurice secured Ben's promise that he would finish the picture. At this time, Hollywood was still a very

E. TITLE ART DEPARTMENT, GOLDWYN STUDIOS, CULVER CITY (1919).

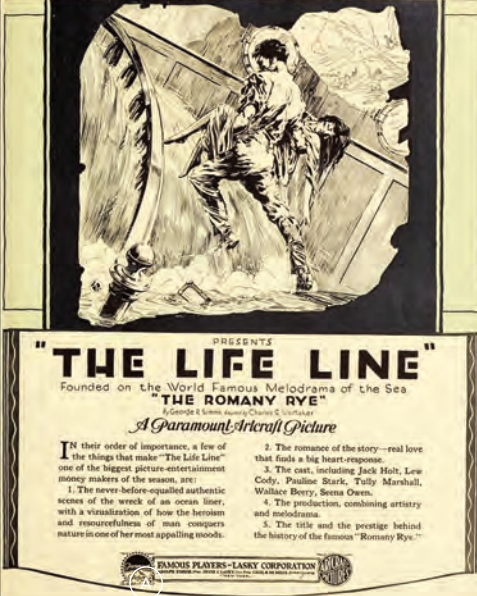
F. FRANK'S "FRANÇOIS" CAFÉ SOON TO BECOME "MUSSO & FRANK," HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA (1919).

G. AERIAL VIEW OF GOLDWYN STUDIOS (1919), THE FUTURE HOME OF METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER STUDIOS. CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA.



G

MAURICE TOURNEUR



small company town. Its social events evolved around evenings at Hollywood's restaurants and weekly boxing matches at the old American Legion Hall. Ben said, "You could find anyone you were looking for there." Raiding a competitor's crew was a common

practice and there were spies on the lookout everywhere. News traveled fast, no sooner had Ben entered the company's production office when he received a phone call from director Marshall "Micky" Neilan, another Fort Lee acquaintance, offering Ben a new job. The typist in Tourneur's office was the wife of Neilan's manager, so when she heard the news of Ben's resignation, she instantly called her husband. As Ben would say, "Tourneur was being watched!"

Transitions 1920s

Ironically, Ben's resignation happened on the same day that another of his friends from Fort

Lee, Goldwyn's Supervising Art Director Hugo Ballin, reached out to Ben about another new job possibility. Hugo Ballin had a successful New York career as a muralist and designer for Broadway. He had been a pioneer Art Director working at Thomas Edison's Studio in Bedford, New York, and later the Goldwyn Studios in Fort Lee. Hugo told Ben that he was leaving his position with Goldwyn to pursue directing. He suggested that his current job could be Ben's. Ever the independent freelancer, Ben was not interested in managing a studio Art Department. Instead, the new job went to Hugo's assistant from Fort Lee, Cedric Gibbons. No longer a department store window dresser, Cedric assumed his new position at Goldwyn Studios which would soon be reorganized and become Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). As they say, the rest is history!

Next, part three. Ben becomes a leader among his equals within the first bona fide generation of Hollywood Art Directors. Ultimately becoming frustrated and disenchanted with Art Direction in the studio system, Ben returns to his first love, the art of scenic painting backdrops. **ADG**



B

A. TRADE MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENT, *THE LIFE LINE* (1919). FAMOUS PLAYERS LASKY PRODUCTION, MAURICE TOURNEUR, DIRECTOR; BEN CARRÉ, ART DIRECTOR. CARRÉ'S FINAL FILM WITH TOURNEUR.

B. CEDRIC GIBBONS (CIRCA 1919-1922). FUTURE SUPERVISING ART DIRECTOR FOR MGM.

C. METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER STUDIOS (1925).



C



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A. SKETCH FOR *PHANTOM OF THE OPERA*. 1925
PENCIL, CRAYON,
CHARCOAL ON CARD
(17"X 11").

B. BEN CARRÉ
(1970'S) MARK MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPHER.

Part Three: The Hollywood Years

It was during the twenties that the Hollywood studios became fully self-contained campuses and placed their creative workforce under exclusive contracts. These practices further diminished the work opportunities for freelance Art Directors such as

Ben Carré. Many of the pictures that

Ben made between 1919 and 1930 have been lost, but a few of the best and most challenging productions have been preserved and restored.

***Phantom of the Opera* 1925**

Phantom of the Opera was a Universal picture for which Ben was asked to consult. Director Rupert Julian was struggling with his adaptation of Gaston Leroux's novel. Ben had worked at the Paris Opéra

Garnier and knew the novel very well. Though the real theater had no subterranean caverns and waterways, Ben was only too happy to create them from his imagination. Ben painted twenty-four concept sketches for the subterranean sequences which were faithfully realized. In addition, he provided a detailed backstory to assist Julian in his staging for the Phantom's world.

Don Juan 1926

Don Juan was directed by Alan Crosland, a veteran of Fort Lee, and a frequent collaborator. A romantic adventure set in the 1600s in Rome, John Barrymore starred as the legendary Spanish libertine. Having only six weeks to prep, Ben said, "I should not of attempted this picture if I had not had experience in this period already." His deep knowledge of classical architecture, ornamentation and the necessary lavish decors



required served him well, as did his expertise with using backdrops and glass mattes for the many set extensions.

design sets that could be acoustically compatible for recording live sound. His other challenge was finding compelling ways to photograph the scenes now that the camera's movements were once again restricted and immobile as they had been during his early days in Paris. *The Jazz Singer* ushered in the new era of talking pictures while bringing an abrupt end to the beauty and elegance that epitomized silent films. For Ben and his contemporaries, there was only sadness as they witnessed this demise of the pictorial art and its universal accessibility to all audiences.

A. DON JUAN CAST PHOTO, THE VITAPHONE CORP. CARRÉ IS BACK ROW SIXTH FROM RIGHT.

B. GOLGOTHA (CALVARY HILL) SCENE FROM *KING OF KINGS*. PATHE EXCHANGE, 1927.

C. *THE JAZZ SINGER*, WARNER BROS. (1927) CREW ON EARLY CONVERTED STAGE FOR SOUND RECORDING.

D. WARNERS' THEATRE, BROADWAY, NYC FROM *THE JAZZ SINGER*. WARNER BROS., 1927.

King of Kings 1927

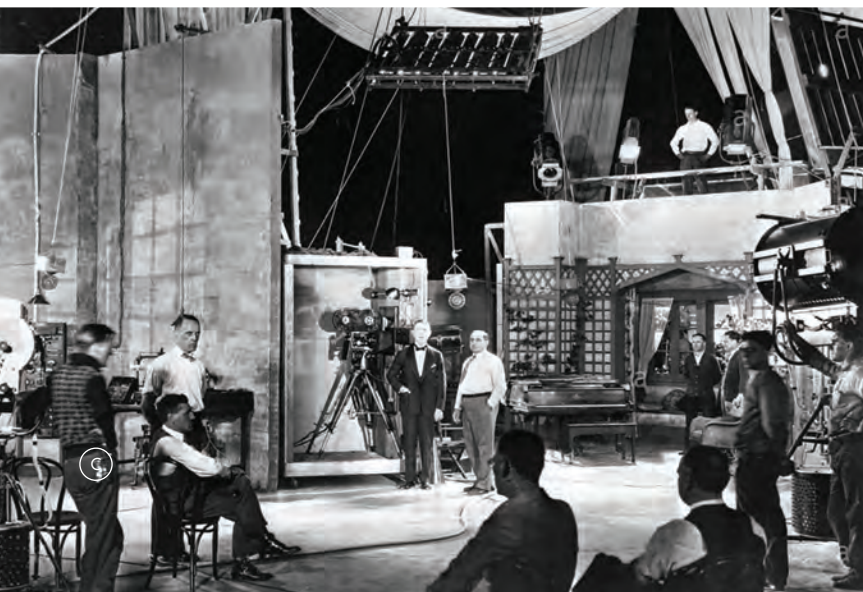
The King of Kings was a Cecile B. DeMille silent epic. It was common at this time for producers like DeMille and Fairbanks to hire multiple Art Directors to design different sequences for their films. Ben came onboard to Art Direct the Golgotha (crucifixion hill) sequence. Ben called upon his childhood ramblings through the Louvre and designed an epic set while supervising the picture's wrath of God special effects sequence.

The Jazz Singer 1927

Ben considered this picture ordinary and doomed for failure. Being Warner Bros.' first feature-length sound picture, his biggest challenge was the trial-and-error process of learning how to

The Iron Mask 1929

Douglas Fairbanks played D'Artagnan and was directed by Fort Lee veteran Allan Dawn. Nine Art Directors collaborated working under the supervision of French Illustrator, costume designer and historian Maurice Leloir who was brought in from France to assure that an



“authentic period look” for the production was realized. Ben Carré designed all the palace and tavern interiors and the convent sets. Being both Parisians and mutual lovers of fine food, Carré and Leloir became very close, and they relished their many proper French lunches together over a glass of excellent wine.

Difficult Times 1930-1934

With the stock market crash in 1929, Ben found himself entering a midlife crisis that must have been the darkest period of his life. Choosing to remain outside of the studio system, work between the years 1930 and 1934 was very hard and included the 1931 divorce from his first wife of sixteen years, Jeanne Cottrell. Eventually, his luck was improved by the freelancer’s friend, that unexpected phone call. This time it was from Frank Sersen, head of Fox Studio’s scenic arts department inviting Ben to join the studio’s matte painting unit.

Dante’s Inferno 1935

In 1935, Ben was put in charge of Fox’s visual effects unit for *Dante’s Inferno*. Based on the illustrations of Gustave Doré, Ben had to design and supervise many complicated sets, miniatures,

and in-camera glass matte paintings for the picture’s haunting nightmare sequence. This picture also featured Ben’s future wife Anne Pogash, who had an immodest but very visible role as one of the artistically naked tortured souls in hell.

A Night at the Opera 1935

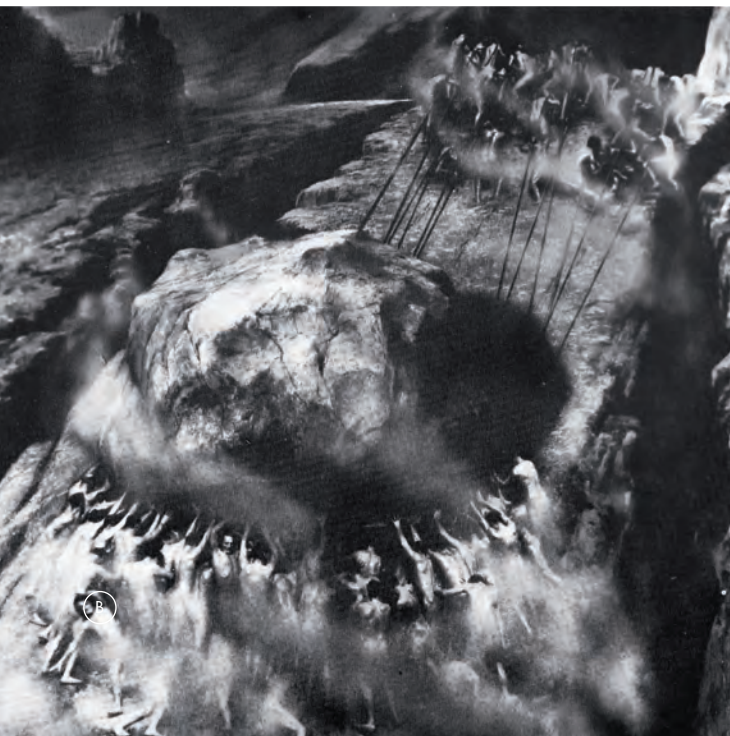
After *Inferno*, Ben received yet another phone call from Cedric Gibbons inviting Ben to come back to MGM to Art Direct their first Marx Bros. film. Gibbons promised Ben a “carte blanche” budget. Ben would have the freedom to do whatever he wanted, and he would have his choice of stages



A. FOYER, PALACE THRONE ROOM FROM *THE IRON MASK*. UNITED ARTISTS, 1929.

B. *DANTE’S INFERNO*. 20TH CENTURY FOX, 1935. THE TEMPEST OF HELL SEQUENCE, IN-CAMERA SET WITH GLASS MATTE PAINTING.

C. *DANTE’S INFERNO*. 20TH CENTURY FOX, 1935. THE PUNISHMENT OF SIMONISTS SEQUENCE, IN-CAMERA SET WITH GLASS MATTE PAINTING.





A



B

and crew. Ben was amazed to see how MGM's Art Department had evolved. There were draftsmen, set dressers, prop men—all doing the things that he was accustomed to doing by himself. Many of the crew heads at MGM were old-timers from Fort Lee and knew Ben well so he felt very supported and appreciated. Designing for the picture's stunts and gags was challenging because many of the props and choreographed gag sequences needed to be engineered. The picture's screenwriter, George S. Kaufman, was a very intimidating presence on the lot, but he respected Ben's talent for problem solving, a trait that had served him well throughout his career. A big problem was that no one could figure out how to end the picture and ultimately it was Ben's staging suggestions that successfully solved the final stunt and madcap chase sequences in the picture's opera house.

Ben broke down the working script and made his preliminary set sketches. He started going through the studios' scene dock and backlot looking for set pieces and locations that could help save the studio time and money. This was the standard way that all unit art directors at the studios functioned. Ben created his budget estimates for the sets and then went to see the studio manager, Joe Cohn, another veteran from Fort Lee. Ben estimated that the sets would cost \$60,000. Chewing on his cigar, Cohn said, "NO! All you can spend is \$30,000!" Cohn was playing the poker hand typical of all money managers at the studios. Fortunately, the script's many revisions and the picture's shooting delays ran the final budget up much higher than Ben's original projections. Still every time that

Ben submitted a new budget for Cohn's approval, he would get the same lecture, "Carré, you know that you are way over budget already!"

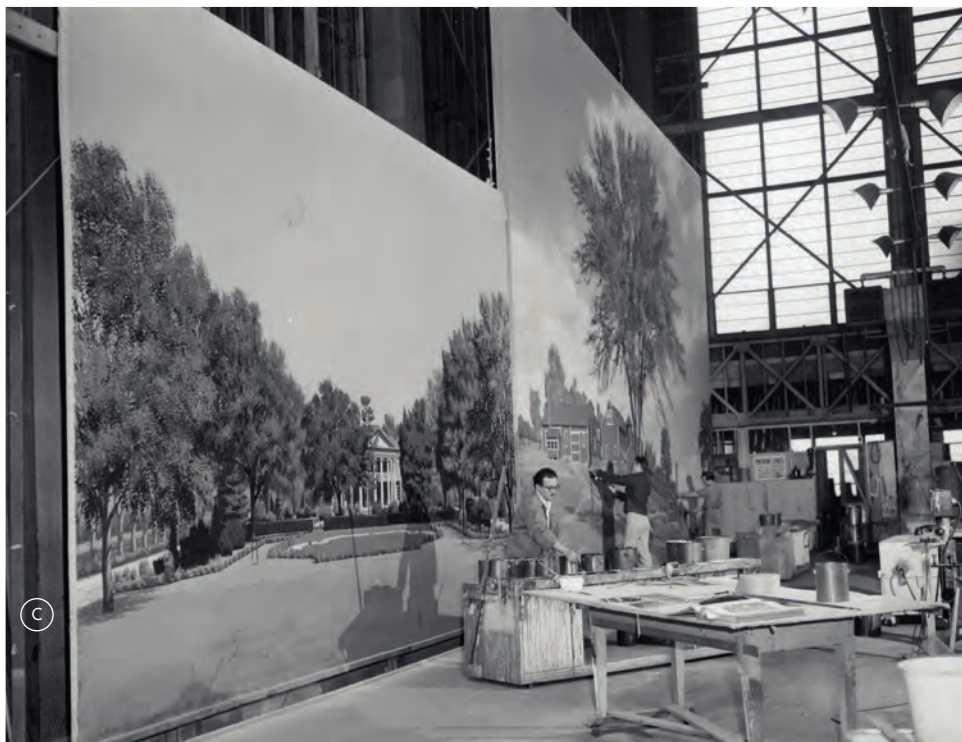
MGM Builds a New Scenic Paint Department 1937

In 1937, Ben received yet another phone call from Cedric Gibbons, but this time informing him that MGM was reimagining its scenic paint department. Now releasing a feature film every week, the studio needed to create backdrops on an industrial scale and schedule. They were building a new state-of-the-art scenic paint building and they had hired Scenic Artist George Gibson to manage the department. Cedric asked if Ben would consider working as MGM's new lead Scenic Designer and Artist. Ben now 54, was at a point in his life where he was searching for stability and continuity after thirty-one years of working as a migrant freelance Art Director.

A. CENTRAL PARK STAGE SET FROM *A NIGHT AT THE OPERA*. MGM, 1935.

B. LA TROUVERE SET IN OPERA HOUSE ON STAGE 6 FROM *A NIGHT AT THE OPERA*. MGM, 1935.

C. PAINT DECK, SCENIC PAINT DEPARTMENT, MGM (CIRCA 1940'S).



C

A. *THE FOUR HORSEMAN OF THE APOCALYPSE*, MGM, 1962. BEN CARRÉ AT PAINT FRAME, CHARCOAL LAYOUT OF NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL BACKING.



B. CARRÉ INSPECTING NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL BACKING IN PROCESS.



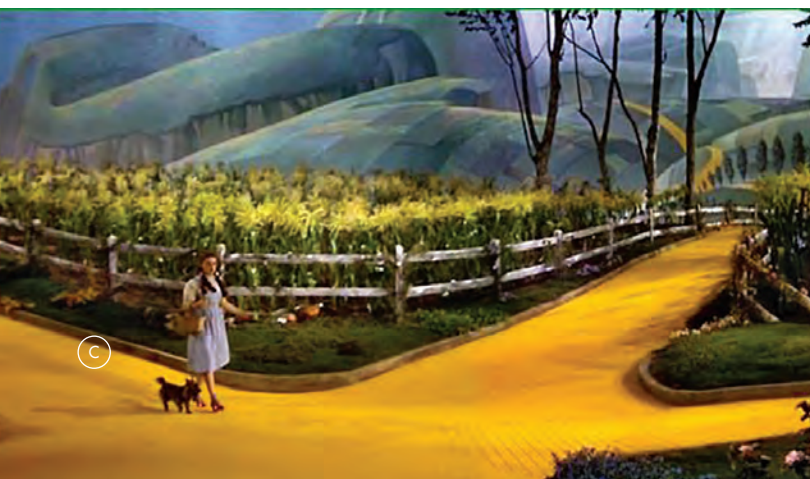
C. SET NO. 10, YELLOW BRICK ROAD, CORNFIELD, AND BACKING (400' X 35') BEN CARRÉ LEAD ARTIST (CHANNELING GRANT WOODS) FROM *THE WIZARD OF OZ*. MGM, 1939.

In Ben's words, "I had not decided to quit as an Art Director yet. I took a test; the good old times came back to me; I enjoyed seeing my work growing every day instead of waiting for months to see it on the screen. The remembrance of my first years at Amable Studio as a Scenic Artist made me feel anxious to tackle the interest of drawing and problems of perspective. It was as master in that line that I took and remained in the scenic shop."

D. MOUNT RUSHMORE SET, BEN CARRÉ, BACKING DESIGNER AND LEAD ARTIST REGARDED AS THE PERFECT BACKDROP FROM *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*. MGM, 1959.

Working in MGM's scenic department enriched the next thirty-one years of Ben's life. He had many challenges working at the paint frame, alongside his unique brotherhood of painters and

young apprentices. Ben's talent for drawing and perspective, and his reputation for visual precision were such that it is not hard to look at an MGM backing today and see the influence of his drawing and his brush strokes. Certainly, Ben's influence on the younger artists that he mentored was not dissimilar to his own experiences training under William Nolgrove, Émile Verlie and Jules Adler, who had mentored Ben during his youth in Paris. During these years, Ben had a large variety of backdrop assignments for hundreds of films. Of fondness to Ben were *Marie Antoinette*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, *National Velvet*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *The Clock*, *Ziegfeld Follies* and





Little Women. The two seminal pictures which best celebrate Ben's talents and legacy are the dream ballet backings for *An American in Paris* (1951) and one of the most successful backings ever painted, the 90-foot-wide Mount Rushmore for *North by Northwest* (1959).

Ben Carré retired from MGM on October 15, 1964, at the age of 82. He began his career as a scenic artist in Paris in 1900. He had worked for sixty-five years as a first-generation Art Director and Scenic Artist for motion pictures. A founding member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, it was in the sixties that a brief period of

recognition and appreciation of Ben Carré began. Film historians, students and chroniclers of silent motion pictures all sought him out. At the 1977 Telluride Film Festival a tribute screening of *The Blue Bird* was run followed by a long and exuberant standing ovation for the artist who had created it in 1918. As Ben said in his most emotional *Franglais*, "I don't know if I deserve all that marvelous praise, but believe me, it is much nicer to be honored and praised than to be overlooked and forgotten." Ben Jules Carré 1883-1978

For more information or to view Ben's tribute film go to bencarre.com **ADG**

A. *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*, MGM (1951) CHAMPS-ÉLYÉES ILLUSTRATION, BEN CARRÉ, DESIGNER WATERCOLOR ON CARD.

B. *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*, MGM (1951) OPENING SEQUENCE, BEN CARRÉ, DESIGNER AND LEAD ARTIST.

C. *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*. PLACE DE LA CONCORDE BALLET SET, BEN CARRÉ, BACKING DESIGNER AND LEAD ARTIST.

D. BEN CARRÉ EN PLEIN AIR PAINTER (1940S).



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