

# *The Jeffrey L. Selznick School of Preservation*

## Changing the Field

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Of the many subsidiary industries that grew out of the birth of motion pictures, the occupation whose invention is most closely associated with a simple appreciation for film itself is that of the film archivist.<sup>1</sup> Formal film archiving is generally understood to have originated in the 1930s with organized attempts to collect films for the purpose of long term preservation. This was at a time when film itself was not ranked as one of the fine arts. Yet a network of dedicated collectors, cinephiles, and archivists recognized and appreciated the value of this new art form, and established the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF)<sup>2</sup> with the intention of standardizing the way films were collected, conserved, preserved, documented, and viewed. The L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation is one reflection of that visionary effort.

The movement that began almost 80 years ago with a small group of individuals dedicated to preserving film has grown exponentially to embrace all audiovisual media. It has evolved into a structured and connected field, linked worldwide through such organizations as the CCAAA,<sup>3</sup> an umbrella organization covering many formalized international groups of film, video, television, and sound archivists.<sup>4</sup> While the first vanguard of film preservationists were self-taught, relying upon existing archival protocols for the other fine arts and the time tested path of trial and error, the field slowly

shifted towards a more official approach as early preservationists retired in the 1970s. Through the years, FIAF archives spearheaded initiatives studying the causes and solutions to film decomposition, and in 1973, FIAF directed the first two-week Summer School for film training, held in East Berlin under the curatorship of Wolfgang Klaue. The 1970s saw a surge in film studies programs offered at the university level, but that trend did not precipitate a similar growth in courses on film preservation. It wasn't until a pioneering graduate program in Film Archiving at the University of East Anglia was launched in 1990,<sup>5</sup> that moving image archiving seemed to finally find its place in academia. Yet respect for audiovisual archiving as a profession, one that is vitally necessary to preserve and promote cultural identity, remains a quiet struggle, with little public awareness of the field and its purpose.

Ray Edmondson's seminal essay "Is Film Archiving a Profession?" (1995) and its follow-up response "Is Film Archiving a Profession Yet? A Reflection – Twenty Years On" in this issue, discuss a profound question: is audiovisual archiving an actual profession meeting the standards held by comparable fields such as library science or fine art curatorship? This brief history of The L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation seeks to address that question from the perspective of an institution specifically created for the purpose of training and

inspiring future professional audiovisual archivists. In 1995, the same year that Edmondson posed his initial question, two men took a crucial step to alter the course of archival film preservation training. L. Jeffrey Selznick, then President of the Louis B. Mayer Foundation, was deeply concerned that the film legacy of his family—grandfathers and film producers Louis B. Mayer and Louis J. Selznick, and his father, famed movie producer David O. Selznick—should be preserved for posterity. Selznick was acutely conscious that their surviving silent films required skilled personnel to oversee their preservation. He chose the George Eastman Museum as the place where he could fulfill his vision of a specialized venue for the education and training in the art and science of preserving cinema as an art form and, more broadly, as a cultural phenomenon. Selznick hoped to emphasize the importance of a dialogue between archives, museums, and academia, in an environment where scholarship and technology were at the service of film heritage.

The George Eastman Museum (then called George Eastman House) was known globally for its expansive film collection (established in 1949 with the personal 35mm and 16mm prints of the museum's first curator of film, James Card) and for its steadfast commitment to the collection, preservation, study, and exhibition of photographic and cinematic objects. The Mayer Foundation, under Selznick's guidance, was already supporting the museum's preservation program, having funded the creation of the Louis B. Mayer Conservation Center for nitrate film, in 1995. In conversations with Paolo Cherchi Usai, Senior Curator of the Moving Image Department at the George Eastman Museum, it became clear that he and Selznick shared the same vision for formal film preservation training. Cherchi Usai, the School's founding and current director, believed that the museum's archive and small but experienced staff, could provide the ideal training ground for the next generation of film preservationists. Knowing that the pioneers of the movement were self-trained, he sought to build upon that heritage using the best practices refined and recommended by his peers in the field. His optimism and initiative to take up the museum's mandate as an educational institution convinced the George Eastman Museum's Board of Trustees to allow him to move forward with plans to create a school that would teach

moving image preservation practices within the archive.<sup>6</sup>

A grant from the Mayer Foundation launched the program, offering a Certificate in Film and Video Preservation, in September 1996. From the beginning, Edmondson's criteria for formal professional standing—university level training and preparation; long term commitment; distinctive skills and expertise; worldview; standards and ethics—were integrated into the fabric of the Selznick School, and were sought in the experiences of the selected students. Cherchi Usai tapped prominent members of the film preservation community to act as an Advisory Board,<sup>7</sup> steering the initial direction of the course curriculum towards these goals. Core teachers for practicum and lectures were members of the Moving Image Department staff, most significantly Assistant Curator Edward E. Stratmann, and Cherchi Usai himself. Guest lectures by industry professionals and archivists whose expertise in curatorial directives and technical film knowledge was widely respected in the field, were introduced and remain a facet of the school structure today. The first-year guest roster included Jean-Louis Bigourdan, Doug Nishimura and James Reilly of the Image Permanence Institute (IPI) at Rochester Institute of Technology, whose essential team-teaching of the chemical characteristics and decomposition of film bases is now in its twenty-second year. Harold Brown (British Film Institute), Grover Crisp (Sony), Susan Dalton (American Film Institute), Ray Edmondson (National Film & Sound Archive, Australia), Edith Kramer (Pacific Film Archive), David Pierce (Copyright Specialist), Juan Prijs (Haghefilm Laboratory), Tulsi Ram (Eastman Kodak Company), and Karan Sheldon (Northeast Historic Film) were just a few of the experts who shared their collective knowledge of film preservation and archival experience with the students. Selznick indicated from the outset that graduates of the Selznick School should acquire the knowledge necessary to successfully apply for jobs in collecting institutions, whether commercial or non-profit, in both curatorial and technical positions. To this end, the first class of six students who arrived in the fall of 1996 were immediately plunged into the archive's daily routine. Film handling, inspection and identification; film and film technology history; programming; cataloguing and documentation; vault management;

copyright; curatorial issues (including acquisition, accessioning and de-accessioning, and determination of preservation priorities); laboratory practices and preservation techniques; grant writing, and film archive management were all presented, discussed, and as much as possible, practiced. After the sudden death of L. Jeffrey Selznick in May 1997,<sup>8</sup> the school which he helped to found was named to honor him and his abiding passion for the preservation of our worldwide film heritage. In the School's second year, new administrator Jeffrey L. Stoiber oversaw the establishment of a training schedule combining classroom lectures on curatorial directives and preservation, with rigorous weekly student rotations among Moving Image Department staff. Students worked side by side with individual staff members to gain practical experience in the various duties, responsibilities and techniques attached to each staff member's position. The greatest asset the students had at their disposal was the George Eastman Museum's film holdings themselves. Comprised of multiple film, electronic, and digital formats, the collection offered the students the best opportunity to understand and engage with the challenges of archiving moving images. Likewise, the department's Stills, Posters and Paper Collection became a Petri dish for experience in archiving paper materials. Practicum and lectures were supplemented by visits to the Eastman Kodak film plant and digital transfer laboratory; the Image Permanence Institute; the Cinema Arts Laboratory and the Museum of Modern Art's Celeste Bartos Conservation Center, both in Pennsylvania, and the Library of Congress' nitrate vaults and film laboratory.<sup>9</sup> Student fellowships began in the first year with funding from the Mary Pickford Foundation. A similar, but more extensive fellowship was developed in year two with the Haghefilm conservation laboratory in Amsterdam. Through the cooperation of the Silent Film Festival in Pordenone, Italy, the third year saw the creation of the Pordenone Fellowship. Subsequently, IPI and many other professional institutions have supported the Selznick School program by offering post-graduate fellowships for on-the-job experience. Selznick students regularly participated in the Syracuse Cinefest during the last ten years of its operations, and continue to visit the Orphans Conference, Capitol Fest, and the Association of Moving Image Archivists annual conference.

The shift in the focus of moving image archiving from film based material to digital media has been profound and swift. Archives, including the George Eastman Museum, are increasingly challenged to identify, conserve and make available digital assets, in an ever expanding response to public, corporate, and institutional demand. While a comprehensive understanding of film material in all of its aspects still forms the foundation of students' studies, the Selznick School has continued to prepare students for the evolving needs of the profession with courses that provide training in the eclectic forum of digital formats and digital preservation software. The first workshops and individual mentoring on digital training projects began in 2003.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the Eastman Kodak Company gifted its entire digital suite of high resolution transfer, restoration, and duplication technologies to the museum. The George Eastman Museum's Film Preservation Services is today both a training ground for Selznick students and a digital laboratory that works in the competitive commercial market, offering students real-world experience in the digital medium. Through dedicated workshops and personal projects, Selznick students have collaborated on several major film restoration projects for the archive, including *Drifting* (Tod Browning, 1923), *The March of the Movies* [*Thirty Years of Motion Pictures*] (Terry Ramsaye, 1927) and William Kentridge's debut film, *Discourse on a Chair* (1975).<sup>11</sup>

In 2005, the Certificate Program was enhanced by the Selznick Graduate Program in Film and Media Preservation, a two-year curriculum held in conjunction with the University of Rochester, offering a Masters of Arts in English. Since 1996, 238 students from 28 countries have graduated from the Selznick School; 30 of those have been MA graduates. The value of formal training in film preservation is no longer merely a hypothesis. The Selznick School—the only full-time course offered within a film archive or museum—is now often consulted by archives and company headhunters seeking recommendations when posting new positions. Through the years, archival exchanges have also been undertaken with our colleagues at the National Film and Sound Archive (Australia), Mo I Rana, The National Library of Norway, the Danish Film Institute, Österreichisches Filmmuseum, Vienna, and the Rockefeller Archive Center, who have sent members of staff

to attend relevant sections of the School for additional training. Collaboration with all of these institutions has been strengthened by the entrance of Selznick graduates into the field, which has promoted mutual cooperation on preservation and restoration projects, exchange of information and training, and a general willingness to assist associates and colleagues.

Increasingly, jobs within the archival field rely heavily upon combining film handling experience, digital techniques, and library science. The School has seen a rise in the number of applicants with degrees in either library science, or cinema history studies, but many have limited knowledge of physical film. The School bridges that gap with its emphasis on combining practice and theory and by integrating both film and digital formats.

The Selznick School's graduates have found employment in museums, archives, film laboratories, libraries, and commercial studios and companies worldwide. Eight graduates are currently on staff at the Eastman Museum. In addition, Céline Rivo (Selznick 2007) is Director of Film Collections at the Cinémathèque française, Paris, and the Head of the Technical Commission at FIAF; Daniela Currò (another Selznick 2007 graduate) was recently appointed Curator at the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome, Italy. Selznick graduates have worked in audiovisual institutions worldwide, including the Library of Congress, the British Film Institute, Gosfilmofond of Russia, the Academy Film Archive, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, the Cinemateca Brasileira, China Film Archive in Beijing, Sony Pictures, and Colorlab.<sup>12</sup> They actively advocate for the preservation of our audiovisual heritage as members of AMIA, SEAPAVAA, and other archival member organizations. The first of its kind in the United States, the Selznick School continues to evolve as its graduates step into leading roles in this singular profession. The School remains committed to the original goal envisioned by L. Jeffrey Selznick and Paolo Cherchi Usai in 1996: to provide the best training possible in the techniques and practices of film preservation, so that the fragile heritage of moving images, born over a century ago, will survive for future generations.

## References

Edmonson, Roy. "'Is Film Archiving a Profession?'" *Film History* 7, no. 3 (1995): 245-255.

## Endnotes

- 1 The term "film archivist" reflects the original material archived. Other terms are used to reflect the range of media archivists are now responsible for.
- 2 International Federation of Film Archives, founded in 1938 by Henri Langlois, Ernst Lindgren, Iris Barry, and Frank Hensel.
- 3 Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations, founded in 1981.
- 4 CCAAA current members: Association of Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC); Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA); International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF); International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT – IFTA); Federation of Commercial Audiovisual Libraries (FOCAL International); International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA); International Council on Archives (ICA); Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA).
- 5 Discontinued by the University in 2012.
- 6 Internal Selznick School documents at the George Eastman Museum, 1996-2017.
- 7 The original members of the Selznick School Advisory Board were Robert Daudelin, Ray Edmondson, Edith Kramer, Gregory Lukow, and Eric Schwartz.
- 8 Obituary by Lawrence Van Gelder, *The New York Times*, Arts, May 14, 1997.
- 9 In 1998 the Library of Congress' nitrate films and laboratory were housed on the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Columbus, Ohio.
- 10 Haghefilm Laboratory in Amsterdam donated a Diamant digital suite to the school.
- 11 Undertaken as a personal project by Brian Fitzgerald in 2016.
- 12 Colorlab is a full service film and digital laboratory in Rockville, Maryland.