

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Academy Museum

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, September 23rd, 2021

I had already attended a virtual press preview of the [Academy Museum of Motion Pictures](#) in March, but it was a thrill to actually step in person inside this amazing building conceived as a tribute the history of cinema.



Magic Lanterns (c) Elisa Leonelli

The architect [Renzo Piano](#), with an Italian sense of humor, begged us not to call the giant sphere he designed to house the David Geffen Theater with the nickname [Death Star](#), a *Star Wars* reference, he preferred to call it a dirigible, a Zeppelin, a spaceship, a flying vessel or even a soap bubble. Tom Hanks used the name [Magic Lantern](#), and I would see many of these 17th century projection machines in *The Path to Cinema* exhibit.



Lumiere Bros, Venice 1896

In that same room I was delighted to watch again some of the 1896 silent one-minute shorts photographed all over the world by cameramen equipped with the [Lumière brothers](#) early cameras. I had seen hundreds of these incredible films in 2016 at the [Lumière Invention of Cinema](#) exhibition during the Festival of Preservation (Il Cinema Ritrovato) organized by the Bologna Cinematheque. You may [read here](#) my article about that event.

The pillars and bridge on the fifth floor of the Academy Museum are named in honor of extraordinary women who achieved significant “firsts” in the history of cinema and the Academy Awards.

These artists broke important ground and are an inspiration to filmmakers and fans around the world. Learn more about each of their stories in the biographies to your right.

Many thanks to the generous donors who have helped to make this recognition possible: Asian Hall of Fame/ Robert Chinn Foundation, Julia and Ken Gouw, Lyn and Norman Lear, Oneida Indian Nation of New York, Regina K. Scully, Kimberly Steward and K Period Media, Barbra Streisand, Lynda Weinman, and Jamie Wolf.



ALICE GUY-BLACHÉ

Alice Guy-Blaché (1873–1968) is considered the first woman film director. Born in France, she started as a secretary for Léon Gaumont and began directing movies at his studio. In 1907 she moved to the United States, where she and her husband, Herbert Blaché, founded the studio Solar Company. Guy-Blaché wrote, directed, produced, and supervised hundreds of films. After her business and marriage faltered, she returned to France but could no longer find work as a director. Guy-Blaché was relatively absent from historical accounts until many of her films, long presumed lost, were rediscovered in the 1990s. She is now recognized as one of the most significant early filmmakers.

Alice Guy-Blaché, 1908

Alice Guy-Blaché

The fifth floor bridge between the remodeled May Company building and the sphere is dedicated to groundbreaking women like Alice Guy-Blaché. You may [read here](#) my article about Cinema Pioneer Alice Guy.



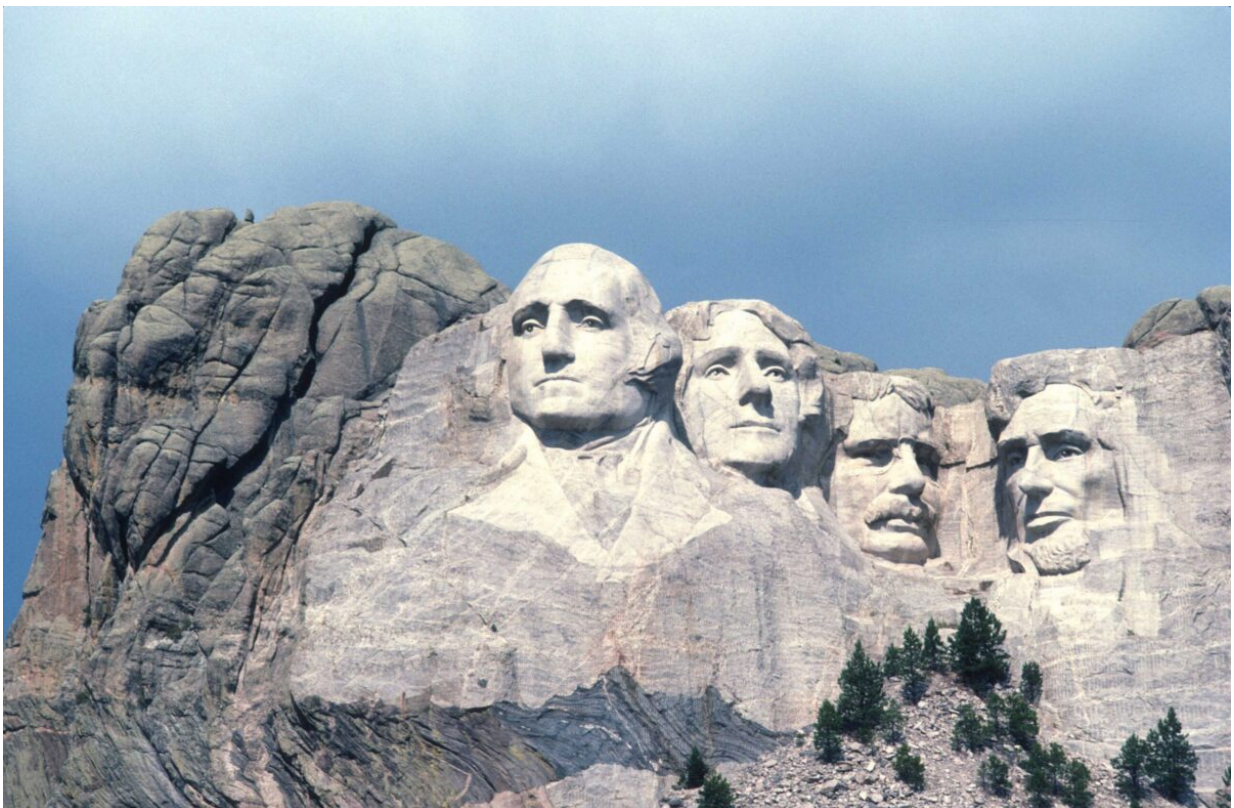
Flatbed Moviola (c) Elisa Leonelli

In the *Stories of Cinema* multi-room exhibit I noticed a large [flatbed moviola](#), which was used to edit movies when they were still shot on celluloid. I had worked at one of these machines to examine every frame of movies presented at the Pesaro Film Festival in 1970, where I had landed my first professional job as a film critic. You may [read here](#) my article about the 2019 Pesaro Festival of New Cinema.



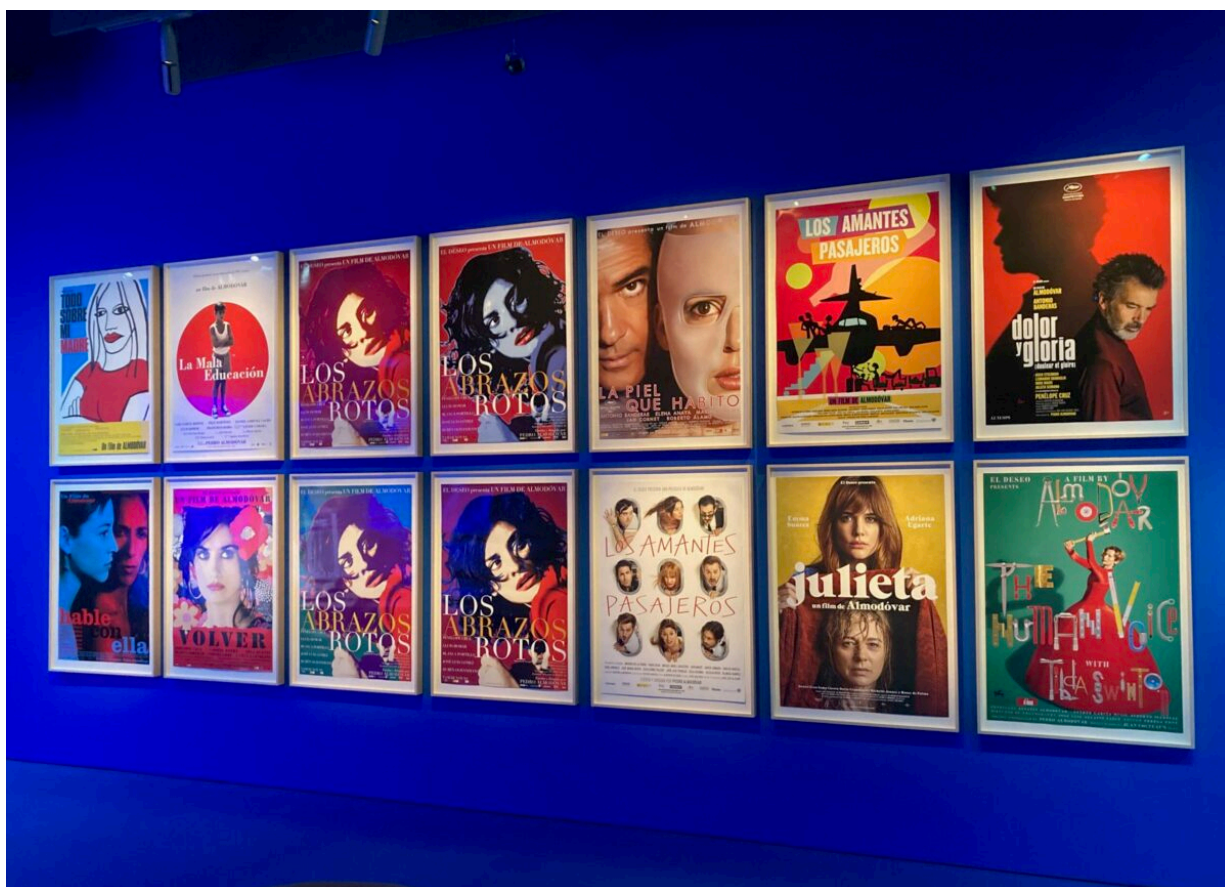
Mount Rushmore backdrop (c) Elisa Leonelli

As a photographer who often utilizes painted backdrops in my work, it was great to see a two-story room housing the Mount Rushmore backdrop painted for Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959).



Mount Rushmore © Elisa Leonelli 1985

See a photograph of the real thing that I shot in the Black Hills of South Dakota as part of a photo essay on American Indians. [Click here](#) for link to this series in the Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist Collection at the Claremont Colleges Digital Library.



Pedro Almodovar movie posters (c) Elisa Leonelli

In the exhibit devoted to Spanish filmmaker **Pedro Almodóvar**, I photographed the two rows of posters of his movies, all of them I have seen, except the latest, *Parallel Mothers* (Madres paralelas), which premiered at the 2021 Venice Film festival. I interviewed him several times through the years, in my long career as an entertainment journalist.



Hayao Miyazaki (c) Elisa Leonelli

I have also seen most of the fabulous animated movies by the Japanese filmmaker [Hayao Miyazaki](#), my favorite being *Porco Rosso* (1992), which is set in World War I Italy, when it screened at the Venice Film festival in 2005. An entire floor is devoted to this artist, and you're not allowed to take pictures inside, but it was interesting to see his small drawing desk.



Spike Lee room (c) Elisa Leonelli

A room curated by [Spike Lee](#), featuring his inspirations, including a poster of the Italian movie by Vittorio De Sica *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di biciclette*), reminded me of the anti-racist message of his recent movie *BlacKkKlansman* (2018). I had featured its star, John David Washington, in my 2018 article [Young Faces in Movies](#).



Cher © Elisa Leonelli 1986

In a room devoted to movie costumes, it was fun to see the dress that [Cher](#) wore at the 1986 Oscars where she was a presenter. I used to photograph backstage at those ceremonies in the 1980s. Cher would wear this other dress also designed by Bob Mackie in 1988 when she won as Best Actress

for *Moonstruck* directed by Norman Jewison.



Cher © Elisa Leonelli 1988

The Academy Museum opens to the public September 30, with a full program of screenings to November 30. Price of admission is \$25.

Featured image by Iwan Baan.

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