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Influential 12-Minute Silent Film Was Brought Back to Life

By Nicola Smith, Valley News Staff Writer

In 1920 the photographer and painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand took to the streets of lower Manhattan to shoot a film that would show the city in a way that had not been seen before. Since the introduction of newsreels in the late 19th century, there had been ample documentation of New York as a place where things happened, but there was no film documentary that depicted the city in an expressive or poetic way.

That changed with *Manhatta*, the influential, 12-minute silent film that showed the city as a symphony in steel and smoke, and in light and shadow: the inspiration for such artists as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Edward Steichen and Georgia O'Keeffe. But for all its fame, the film was considered lost for many years, and even when it was found again, most of the existing prints were so degraded by dirt and scratches that viewing them couldn't be considered a respectable representation of what the artists had made originally. This is where the indefatigable Bruce Posner comes in.

Between 2006 and 2009, Posner, who lives in Cornish and is one of this country's leading film restorers, oversaw the digital restoration of *Manhatta* for a consortium of some of the world's leading film archives including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the British Film Institute in London and the Library of Congress and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. For his effort, the National Society of Film Critics honored Posner with a 2009 Film Heritage Award.



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Posner will lead a discussion and screening of *Manhatta* on Wednesday, July 28, at the Loew Auditorium in the Hood Museum of Art that is free and open to the public. He will talk about both the process of restoration and the artistic context in which Sheeler and Strand were working.

“If you have the possibility of having a 10-minute epiphany, why not give (*Manhatta*) the time and attention it deserves,” Posner said in a telephone interview, calling it a “pivotal point” in American art and culture of the 20th century.

Ninety years later its images and editing still have the power to amaze with their energy, lyricism and incandescence. It invokes the city as both a force for, and source of, a dynamic modernist aesthetic that drew on such European influences as Cubism but recast them in a thoroughly American vein, using images of Wall Street and the Brooklyn Bridge to show what a brave and kinetic new world this was.

It is also a love letter on film to the idea of New York as a powerful embodiment of American ambition and ability, and how that idea finds form in the buildings and structures that give the city its unique and immediately recognizable profile.

The idea for restoration came when Posner saw a version of the film as part of an exhibition on Sheeler at the National Gallery of Art. “I was floored by how horrible it looked,” he said. “It was scratched, jiggly,” and the very antithesis of Sheeler’s work, which is “very precise, specific and beautiful.”

He had the idea that if he could take the new digital technology and apply it to *Manhatta*, it might be possible to bring the film back to its original glory, or as close as restorers could come to what they thought Sheeler and Strand intended.

There were puzzles to be solved along the way, and still, there are some questions that go unanswered because there is no known correspondence about the film between Sheeler and Strand from that period. Posner called the process of restoration his “affliction,” citing the research and numerous steps that went into unraveling the mysteries surrounding *Manhatta*.

“*Manhatta* had every problem. Literally,” Posner said.

The actual work was done by Lowrey Digital Images in Burbank, Calif., which is noted for its successful restorations of such films as *Citizen Kane*. “Each generation of film has different looks and appearances based on film stock, film processes, cinematographers,” said Posner. “Getting someone to match the technology of today to the old film was the challenge.”

Once the work began, it was like peeling away the layers of an onion or standing in a hall of mirrors, he said. As problems arose and were solved, another problem would confront them. There are computer programs that can correct for dirt and scratches horizontally, but they can’t correct for vertical scratches. And if you remove the dirt and scratches digitally you also remove the fine-grained and nuanced appearance of the film.

Given that both Strand and Sheeler were photographers who were very conscious of the silvery effects of light and dark in printing, this would have to be adjusted. As a result, many frames had to be hand-painted, to put back in what the digital technologies took out.

This wasn't the only obstacle. Many of the old prints were so shaky that the images were hard to see. Did the problem come in the copying of the 16-mm prints, in shoddy film lab work, or something else? Again, while technology could correct for some of the shaking up and down, it couldn't correct for shaking from left to right. No one could pinpoint the origin of the malfunction.

“I don't know when the light came on,” but what he and the team working on *Manhatta* finally realized was that when Sheeler and Strand shot the film, they had used a hand-cranked camera and hadn't mounted it properly on a tripod, resulting in instability that showed up on film as an erratic image.

The entire process “was an experiment on an experimental film. ... The hardest part of the job was that learning curve. You could visualize what might happen, but once it happened, you had to say, do you keep going? You had to be careful each step you took.”

The history of the film, and its disappearance, is another detective story. A print was made in 1920 or 1921. Its last screening in the 1920s was in 1927 in London. It then disappeared, until a copy of it turned up 22 years later in the library of the British Film Institute in London. From that poor copy came all the subsequent prints that made their way into museums worldwide.

But why was the condition of the film so bad when, as Posner points out, it was made by two of the finest American photographers of the 20th century? Therein hangs a long tale, involving a New York film distributor who was probably responsible for the original dispersal of the second-rate prints.

Finally, when and why was it called *Manhatta*? Sheeler and Strand never referred to it that way. They called it their New York film or their abstract film. There are inter-titles that borrow quotes from Walt Whitman. Who added them? Did Sheeler and Strand intend for them to be used? Did the title refer to Whitman's poem, *Manahatta*? If so, why spell it incorrectly -- *Manhatta* rather than *Manahatta*?

No one knows, Posner said.

What is clear, he said, is that at that time in their careers, “Strand and Sheeler needed each other for personal and professional reasons. They were both on the exact same track of American Cubism. They made this film, and it radiates both of their imagery. Some things Strand did and some things Sheeler did but who did what? You don't know.”

In the end, who did what may not matter. In an era in which many silent films still had the primitive look of a nascent art form, *Manhatta* had an assurance and beauty that are still exhilarating.

Manhatta will be shown from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, July 28, at the Loew Auditorium in the Hood Museum of Art in Hanover. The screening and discussion are free and open to the public.

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