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**"Obscure Objects: Avant-Garde Treasure Trove"**  
by ALAN LICHT

A collaboration between several film museums and archives, the mammoth box set *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941* (Image, \$99.99) provides a revealing and exhaustive look at the earliest examples of experimentation in filmmaking. While it presents ample evidence of self-produced experimental narratives and abstract animation that prefigure later avant gardists like Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, and Harry Smith, many of its selections depict how weird commercial cinema could be. Dream or fantasy sequences, revolutionary camera and editing techniques, even Busby Berkeley dance routines are classified as proto-avant-garde in this collection, which includes works by such celebrated directors as D.W. Griffith, Ernst Lubitsch, Edwin S. Porter, Robert Flaherty, Sergei Eisenstein, and Victor Fleming. These innovative technical hijinks highlight filmmaking's origins as an extension of magic shows, and the seminal interactions between film and the other arts are notably explored; certain films are termed "visual poems", "film-ballets," or "city symphonies." Particularly fascinating are *The Devil's Plaything: American Surrealism*, which features standard archetypal avant-garde works like *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1926-28) and *The Life & Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (1927); *Light Rhythms: Music & Abstraction*, which shows cinema's links to modern classical music, dadaism, and cubism with films by artists Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Ferdinand Leger; and *Picturing A Metropolis* (also available as a single disc), which features priceless images of turn-of-the-century-and-beyond New York City, including the legendary *Manhatta* (1921) by photographers Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler. The discs are packed with material; many of the films are recently restored and look as good here as they will anywhere. There are also informative notes preceding each film. •