

National Gallery of Art

Washington, D.C. 20565
Telephone: (202) 737-4215
Telefax: (202) 789-2681
Cable Address: NATGAL

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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PICTURE, BROADCASTING
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22 January 1993

James H. Billington
Librarian of Congress
Washington D.C. 20540

Dear Dr. Billington:

Thank you for inviting my comments on the current state of motion picture preservation and restoration in the United States.

I am especially pleased to be asked to comment because my point of view will differ from that of the archival institutions which probably constitute the majority of your commentators. My institution, the National Gallery of Art, does maintain a small collection of documentary film on artists, but the museum's primary contribution to film culture has been its exhibition program. In my work as founder and curator of this program, I frequently confront problems relating to motion picture preservation.

The concern that brings these problems into sharp focus is the National Gallery's unswerving commitment to artistic excellence. We do not, indeed cannot, maintain one standard of quality for painting exhibitions and a lesser standard for film. In consequence, on many occasions we have been unable to show the films most appropriate to a particular subject because exhibition prints do not exist, or have been badly damaged, or have not been struck from original negative, or for some other such reason are not acceptable for presentation.

The quest for passable exhibition prints often drives us to borrow from distributors abroad even when the same titles are available in the United States. Generally, our experience has been that European sources take better care of their films than do American sources--a curious situation inasmuch as film is the quintessential American art form. This situation entails not only irony, but also expense. My overseas transactions are typically complicated, frustrating, and costly. With over 120,000 film viewers visiting the Gallery's film auditorium each year, however, we feel that the cost and inconvenience of importing prints from abroad is justified.

With its large film audience, the National Gallery could do much to raise public awareness of film history, film preservation, and related issues. I feel sure that other non-archival exhibition venues share both my concern and

my willingness to help promote the cause of preservation. But there is a special need that we have. And it is a need that should be factored into any federally supported preservation program: It is the necessity for institutions such as mine to have access to films once they have undergone the technical steps required to guarantee their physical existence. The issue is one of common sense. A film preservation program that makes its product available to the largest possible audience will gain widespread and enduring public support. Accordingly, I urge that film exhibitors and museums be enlisted in the planning phase of the preservation program and that accessibility be a fundamental and abiding issue of your deliberations.

Again, thank you for inviting my comments and I look forward to hearing more about the work of the National Film Preservation Board.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Margaret Parsons". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Margaret Parsons
Curator, Film Programs