

RESIZE WINDOW

# History of Animation

## The Early Years: Before Disney



A forerunner of today's comic strip can be found in an Egyptian wall decoration circa 2000 B.C. In successive panels it depicts the actions of two wrestlers in a variety of holds. In one of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous illustrations, he shows how the limbs would look in various positions. Giotto's angels seem to take flight in their repetitive motions. The Japanese used scrolls to tell continuous stories.

Since the beginnings of time, human beings have tried to capture a sense of motion in their art. From the eight-legged boar in the Altamira caves of Northern Spain to paintings alongside the remains of

long-dead pharaohs, this quest for capturing motion has been a common theme throughout many of mankind's artistic endeavors.



True animation cannot be achieved without first understanding a fundamental principle of the human eye: the persistence of vision. This was first demonstrated in 1828 by Frenchman, **Paul Roget**, who invented the *thaumatrope* (left, click to stop). It was a disc with a string or peg attached to both sides. One side of the disc showed a bird, the other an empty cage. When the disc was twirled, the bird appeared in the cage. This proved that the eye retains images when it is exposed to a series of pictures, one at a time.

Two other inventions helped to further the cause of animation. The *phenakistoscope*, invented by **Joseph Plateau** in 1826, was a circular card with slits around the edge. The viewer held the card up to a mirror and peered through the slits as the card whirled. Through a series of drawings around the circumference of the card, the viewer saw a progression of images resulting in a moving object. The same technique applied to the *zootrope*. In 1860, **Pierre Desvignes**, inserted a strip of paper containing drawings on the inside of a drumlike cylinder. The drum twirled on a spindle, and the viewer gazed through slots at the top of the drum. The figures on the inside magically came to life, endlessly looping in an acrobatic feat.

The development of the motion camera and projector by Thomas A. Edison and others provided the first real practical means of making animation. Even still, the animation was done in the simplest of means.

**Stuart Blackton**, issued a short film in 1906 entitled *Humourous Phases of Funny Faces* where he drew comical faces on a blackboard, photographed them, and the erased it to draw another stage of the facial expression. This "stop-motion" effect astonished audiences by making drawings comes to life.

In the early twenties, the popularity of the animated cartoon was on the decline, and movie exhibitors were looking elsewhere for alternative entertainment media. The public was tired of the old formula of stringing sight gags together without including a story line or any character development. What the art of animation could accomplish was not yet evident in this period, except for in the works of **Winsor McCay** such as *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914. Mccay's major accomplishment was the fact that he had developed a character in his dinosaur, something that had previously only been seen in **Otto Messmer's**, *Felix the Cat*. McCay's piece had a galvanizing effect on audiences. The notion of a dinosaur coming to life on the screen was astonishing. Of all the early animations, *Felix the Cat* developed the strongest screen personality, but failed to develop any further, relying on crude visual tricks to entertain the audience as opposed to developing a stronger screen persona.



**"Plots? We never bothered with plots. They were just a series of gags strung together. And not very funny, I'm afraid." - Dick Huemer, 1957**

At this time, many of the animations were based on primitive gags and violence, which is still true of cartoons today. One character would beat another mercilessly, only to have his victim instantly recover and return the favor. Perhaps the hero would swing his sword and reduce the villain to baloney slices, only to have him reappear as if magically rejoined.

A big change came over the industry in the mid twenties: commercialization. Big studios took over the smaller cottage industries and set standards for animation. Animators were given quotas on the number of drawings they had to produce a day. Cartoons now had to be manufactured in quantity and cheaply.

The same gags were worked and reworked. Audiences became apathetic as the novelty of seeing drawings come to life wore off. This caused a depression in the animation business that coincided with the depression in the economy of the United States.

**Patrick James**  
**pjames@viz.tamu.edu**

