

# THE MOVING PICTURE SHOW



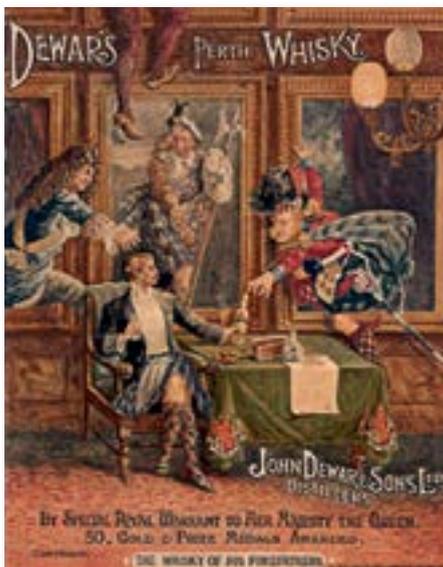
Research has brought to light a forgotten early film genre – the recreation on film of scenes from classic paintings

## By Bryony Dixon

When we think of how art (the painterly kind) intersects with film we might immediately think of biopics of famous artists – usually a clunky way of representing one visual medium in another. But very early film had a more direct, imitative relationship with art, based on a simple delight in making famous pictures move. We see a similar impulse presented as a spectacular attribute of magic in the Harry Potter films. Do you remember how cool it was when the characters in newspaper articles and paintings in the corridors of Hogwarts came to life? How soon we get used to such novelties. Perhaps only Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel can cast their minds back 120 years ago, when moving pictures were born in to the muggle world; but if you were living in those times the term ‘living pictures’ might have meant two things to you; one was an entertainment recreating with living bodies, costumes and lighting a work of fine art – a *tableau vivant*; the other was the latest novelty of the age – film.

In both forms the primary inspiration was the narrative art work, usually old master paintings. Like the *tableaux vivants* of upper-class soirées and popular theatres, the early films recreated famous scenes, a format suited to their short running time. Some of these source paintings were of iconic events – the death of Nelson or the murder of Marat in his bath; many were Bible stories or popular book illustrations, such as those by Gustave Doré or James Tissot. As with the *tableaux*, classical art was occasionally used to justify ‘tasteful’ nudity, and the films wandered into the realms of the erotic.

Enthusiasts for very early films have long been aware of fine art as a source; but a new piece of research, presented by Valentine Robert of the University of Lausanne in the form of a film show, brings together for the first time a significant number of the paintings and the surviving films. Her programme, premiered at the Pordenone silent film festival this year, is



Distilled wisdom: Dewar's 1894 whisky advert...

elegantly put together and works well on the big screen – starting with the original art works and proceeding with the films, sometimes in different versions by different filmmakers. The examples pose many questions. One question Robert asks in her catalogue note is, “Who is copying who, and where is the original?” Her answer is that the question is irrelevant: “Early cinema’s remakes of *tableaux vivants* represent the culmination of an aesthetic of reproduction that reigned in visual culture around 1900. Every medium reproduced and renewed the same images, which were treated as models to be repeated.”

She gives the example of Alphonse de Neuville's painting *Les Dernières Cartouches* (1873), recreating an incident of desperate heroism from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, which was re-used in engravings, sculptures, photography, theatre and film.

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...and the 1900 film version

The continuous process of reappropriation is nicely illustrated by my favourite *meta* example, a parody of this process – a faux old master painting called ‘The Whisky of his Forefathers’ by Matthew B. Hewerdine, commissioned in 1894 with commendable perspicacity by the distiller Dewar's to lend its advertising a veneer of antiquity. In the picture, a kilted laird is seated among the portraits of his ancestors, who are climbing out of their frames to drink a toast with Dewar's Scotch. The painting was adapted by the Edison Company that same year for the Kinetoscope, becoming the first-ever advertising film; in 1897 a projectable version was made, and shown on the side of a large building in New York. A more elaborate version, *The Spirit of His Forefathers* (1900), was made by the British Mutoscope & Biograph Co on large format 68mm film. Robert's film/slide show ends with that 1900 film, re-presented within a 1977 TV advert. In 2015 Dewar's had its finger on the pulse with a virtual reality 360-degree film for its latest campaign: on it goes. 📺

**i** For more about Valentine Robert's programme, see [giornatedelcinemamuto.it/tableaux-vivants](http://giornatedelcinemamuto.it/tableaux-vivants)



Take two: Jean-Louis Gêrome's *The Duel After the Masquerade* (1859)...



...and the 1902 Pathé Frères film version