Det Danske Filminstitut: The Films by Cinema Pioneer Peter Elfelt

>> View collection The 77 films by Danish cinema pioneer Peter Elfelt (1866-1931) are not only interesting from a cinematic point of view but they are also unique contemporary documents. As royal court photographer, Elfelt had access to the most important people and events at his time, which is reflected by his films, focusing on Denmark's high society.

Detailed description provided by the archive:
December 28, 1895 the Lumière Brothers showed their first films to the public. The ten shorts shown in Grand Café, Paris caused quite a stir. Peter Elfelt was among the first to recognize the potential of the moving images, but in Paris the Lumières, fearing competition, were unwilling to sell him one of their cameras. Instead the crafty Elfelt returned to Denmark with construction plans which Jens Poul Andersen, with his expertise in photographic equipment, used to build Elfelt his own film camera.

With this camera Elfelt made his first film recording in early 1897. The one-minute reel Driving With Greenland Dogs / Kørsel med grønlandske Hunde (CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH) shows Johan Carl Joensen steering his dog sledge towards the camera. The sledge disappears out of the right side of the frame and reappears from the left side with Joensen running to catch up with dogs and sledge.

Fire engines and beach girls
Later in 1897 Elfelt began to edit his one-minute reels as seen in [Fire Engines] / Brandvæsenet rykker ud (CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH) in which he cuts from the fire engines leaving the fire station to the fire being put out in a series of uneven jump cuts.
As early as 1899 the editing is much faster and smoother in a montage [Bathing

Scenes from Skovshoved] / Badescener fra Skovshoved strand (CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH), which under the more suitable title Sommerglæder [Joys of Summer] reveals girls donning swimming costumes behind a semi-transparent veil before running to the sea. The moving image's potential for piquancy was not lost on the filmmaker who was appointed royal court photographer the following year.

Royal skittiness

As Royal court photographer Elfelt documented events such as visits from foreign dignitaries, and as King Christian IX was known as the father-in-law to most of Europe, other monarchs were frequents visitors. In Photographing the Royal Family / Kongelige skal fotograferes (CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH) most of the family is gathered. Czarina Maria Fyodorovna or Russia, King George of Greece and Queen Alexandra of England are visiting with their families. While assembling for the photo shoot the King's grandchildren Prince Aage and Prince Axel in the foreground tease His Majesty while their father makes his own pranks at the top of the stairs.

The Execution - first Danish fiction film

Elfelt not only documented high and low. He also directed the first Danish fiction film in 1903. With a running time of ca. 7 minutes The Execution / Henrettelsen (CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH) shows the fate of a woman who has killed her two children. Although The Execution exhibits a strong sense of telling a story in pictures, Elfelt himself was never convinced of film’s usefulness as a storytelling media. He soon returned to documentary and other forms of representing reality.

Ballet and commercials

Among Elfelt's later work is a series of films with dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet. The Tarantella from "Napoli" / Tarantellen fra Napoli (1903) CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH) is a fine example of these films with choreography by August Bournonville. Elfelt also made a string of commercials for beer, coffee and other products. Among those is Linotol Comp. (1905) (CLICK RIGHT COLUMN TO WATCH).
From 1897 to 1906 Elfelt was the dominating force in Danish cinema. This changed when the visionary Ole Olsen established Nordisk Films Kompagni in 1906 and started to make the fiction films that couldn’t hold Elfelt's interest.
The Elfelt collection at The Danish Film Institute holding more than 70 films is truly exceptional. Via EFG this collection offers a broad view of life when the moving image was in its infancy while giving a thorough introduction to the diverse work of one of the world’s first filmmakers. In time, we hope that other pioneering work in

the same way will become available.