

The Margaret Herrick Library
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

By Jill Gurr

For many years, I've driven past the Margaret Herrick Library in the Fairbanks Center for Motion Picture Studies, on the corner of La Cienega and Olympic. Each time I drive by, I am impressed by its beautiful Mission-style façade. Originally developed as the historic Beverly Hills Waterworks, the building was renovated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the summer of 1989 when a 55-year lease was arranged with the City of Beverly Hills.

The Research Library, founded in 1928 and later named the Margaret Herrick Library after a former Academy librarian and long-time executive director, has a world-renowned, non-circulating reference and research collection devoted to the history and development of the motion picture both as an art form and an industry. It's considered to be one of the most complete collections of film-related materials ever assembled – a film buff's dream!

Upon entering the lobby, I loved its spacious design. The interior has an art deco feel to it. Its design was based on a Spanish cathedral. The beautiful wrought iron décor on the windows and doors had a much lighter feel than those of the cathedrals I've visited in Spain.

The library is so easy to use. After signing in with the receptionist, I was told that visitors are only allowed to bring a notepad or laptop computer. But don't worry since

you can put your personal belongings in a locker for a refundable quarter. Remember to bring a valid photo ID.

After climbing a flight of stairs to the second floor, I was welcomed at the Orientation Desk where another friendly staff member explained the layout of the Margaret Herrick Library. I turned over my ID in exchange for a one-day library card. Pens were forbidden, but there were plenty of pencils around.

The beauty of the Cecil B. DeMille Reading Room is entrancing. Lined with birch bookshelves that are topped with soft rounded lighting, it's spacious and comfortable. I sat at one of the four public reference terminals that contained the Library's public database. With Internet Explorer displaying the vast resources available, I explored such categories as Book Holdings, Script Collection, Periodicals, Posters, Graphic Arts, Photographs, Manuscripts, Academy Awards, and Music. I could even tap into additional databases where I learned how to find scripts and more materials from other libraries and private collections in Los Angeles.

The Library stores over 1,000 manuscript and other special collections relating to prominent industry individuals, studios and organizations, plus sheet music, music scores and sound recordings; production and costume sketches; artifacts; and oral histories. I was delirious with all of the information available at my fingertips. Where do I start? I decided to peruse the bookshelves, with more than 27,000 books available on any imaginable filmmaker and subjects related to cinema. The Library collects almost every significant book in English on motion pictures as well as important foreign reference sources and a few selected books in allied fields, such as television and theater.

Bookshelves were devoted to such diverse figures as Clint Eastwood, Federico Fellini, Madonna and Russ Meyers. Volumes about cinema from India, France, China, Brazil, Iran and every other corner of the world were in abundance. Not only were all the latest Hollywood Creative Directories on hand, but also publishing industry handbooks, such as the 2005 Writer's Market and the Guide to Literary Agents.

Another portion of the library was the Reference Section, where I could read 1,800 periodical titles and 60,000 screenplays. What a phenomenal resource!

I quickly realized that to give a fair assessment of the material on hand, I should focus on a couple of projects with which I was familiar. I chose two diverse movies that I'd worked on as a script supervisor: "Old Gringo," starring Jane Fonda, Gregory Peck and Jimmy Smits, and "Menace II Society," directed by the Hughes Brothers.

While there was an article on "Old Gringo" in *Premiere* magazine, and another for "Menace II Society" in *Filmmaker* magazine, I had read them both years before and didn't feel the need to check them again. Screenplays for both movies were also available.

I discovered that the soundtrack for "Old Gringo" was accessible. The computer informed me that, "A cassette listening copy is available for use in the Special Collections Reading Room." There was no soundtrack available for "Menace II Society." The Academy's publicist later informed me that all the soundtracks in their holdings, like virtually everything else, have been donated. The soundtrack to "Menace II Society" was not offered to them as a donation.

The Katherine Hepburn Reading Room was where I could purchase photocopies and photographic reproductions. For 25 cents a page, I could get copies of up to twenty

pages a day of anything in the collected works other than unproduced screenplays. I could even purchase an 8 x 10 black and white photo of whatever was in their collection for just \$ 30. With over 8 million photographs to choose from, the possibilities were endless.

The Library also has 200,000 clipping files, 25,000 posters, lobby cards, press books and other advertising materials. I decided to investigate, again using “Old Gringo” and “Menace II Society” as my barometers. Upon approaching the service desk, I filled out a form where I listed the names of the films and approximate years they were produced. In just a few moments, I was given a pile of manila envelopes and a pair of fresh, white gloves. How cool is that!

I was asked to be sure to replace the still photos front-to-front in the envelopes when I was done. I found a comfortable table and chair, put on my gloves and got to work. I felt like a forensic investigator, getting my hands on valuable film reviews and articles.

For “Old Gringo,” there were three manila envelopes: one dated 1983-1988, another for 1989 (the year of production) and a third file for material dated 1990 and beyond. Each yielded piles of clippings from newspapers and magazines around the world. There were loads of reviews and detailed articles. If even one sentence about the movie had been written, it was smoothly tacked onto an index card with the name of the film and the source highlighted. It was really amazing.

When I had worked on “Old Gringo,” I’d tried to get my hands on as much publicity as possible. After all, I’d spent five months shooting this epic in Mexico and it was a colorful thread woven into my lifetime of experiences. Yet in spite of all the

material that I'd previously read about "Old Gringo," I was surprised to find articles and comments that were totally new to me. I was also provided with three big envelopes filled with still photos and also a publicity kit, which included detailed credits, a synopsis and production notes.

For "Menace II Society," I was given two envelopes packed with clippings, which included a pile of diverse reviews and newspaper articles. In addition, I got two complete press kits: one for the United States and another for the Cannes Film Festival. There were also still photos and a miniature version of the movie poster.

I was blown away with the amount of information that was obtainable on these two movies. If only I had been here sooner, when I was preparing to work on the films. I glanced in on the Microfilm and Microfiche Room where there were six machines available. Then I decided to examine the temporary exhibit in the Katherine Hepburn Reading Room.

"Hollywood and Its Fans: 1908-1963" displayed articles, photos and fan mail about a variety of films and movie stars. One that stood out was a letter from Dr. John Udall of Kaiser Foundation Hospital addressed to Alfred Hitchcock on October 29, 1960. The memo informed the director that in the movie "Psycho," Janet Leigh would have experienced a cessation of blood to the brain during her famous death scene in the shower. This would have created dilated pupils, but in the movie, the actress' pupils were not dilated. The doctor suggested that a drop of tincture of Belladonna in each eye would achieve the desired results... a suggestion that I'm sure Alfred Hitchcock appreciated from one of his fans.

Nearby were some locked antique cases with leather-bound copies of all the original screenplays of films by John Huston, Lewis Milestone and George Cukor. Many more original, leather-bound screenplays exist in their collection. It was like finding buried treasure.

As if all of this weren't enough, they also have more than 1,000 motion picture artifacts. Included is a Lumiere Cinematograph—the machine that recorded and projected the first motion pictures exhibited on a screen to a paying audience. The collection also comprises miniature airplane models used in the Academy's first Best Picture winner “Wings,” the brooch worn by Vivien Leigh in the final scenes of “Gone With the Wind,” life masks of Grace Kelly and Clark Gable and Bert Lahr's lion wig from “The Wizard of Oz.”

My final gift was the chance to experience another one of the Library's artifacts: an 1897 Edison Projecting Kinetoscope. Located in the Reading Room, the large wooden box has a glass opening on top where, for a nickel, one could peer down and see a short movie that lasted less than a minute. I dug out a nickel, although the Library staff will provide one for visitors who are in need. When I dropped it into the box, a film immediately started to roll. It was a woman in a long flowing white dress that performed a beautiful skirt dance. As she twirled and waved the long folds of her gown, the dress suddenly changed to bright red, then back to white again.

When the brief movie ended, I was left with a wonderful feeling. I didn't want to leave! I couldn't believe how long it had taken me to finally get there. What a great opportunity to encounter the early days of cinema and learn a bounty of information about today's films. After my visit to the Margaret Herrick Library, I realized just how

far the art form has grown since its birth. I highly recommend that you take some time to check it out.

Margaret Herrick Library

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Public parking is available in the tennis court parking structure just north of the building. Parking is free for the first two hours. Metered parking can also be found on streets to the north and west of the building.