



**A History of the
American Society of Cinematographers
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The American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) was founded in 1919 with the purpose of advancing the art and science of motion picture photography by bringing cinematographers together to exchange ideas, discuss techniques and promote the motion picture as an art form — a mission that continues today, 100 years later.

The ASC was the first organization in the American film industry to be devoted exclusively to furthering and honoring professional achievement. As such, it is neither a labor union nor a guild, but an educational, cultural and professional organization. Membership is extended by invitation to those who are actively engaged as directors of photography and have demonstrated outstanding ability and good character.

The need for an organization such as the ASC started along with the birth of motion pictures on the 1890s, as strict control and policing of patents owned by inventor Thomas A. Edison and his Motion Picture Patents Company, which led to strict secrecy by anyone designing, building or using any competing camera technology. Progress was stymied, innovation impeded, and discussion silenced, which frustrated cinematographers always seeking to improve their images.

In 1913, three cinematographers employed at the Edison Studios in the Bronx, New York — Philip E. Rosen, Frank Kugler and Lewis W. Physioic — decided to do something about this dilemma. Earning \$18 a week (about \$450 today), they, like all their peers, were considered mere technicians by management, and none received screen credit for their work. This trio, however, believed that if cinematographers formed some sort of fraternal group, they could establish and maintain professional standards and gain recognition as creative artists. Of course, they could also be potentially blacklisted by the company and out of work completely.

“We had no thought of a union, or using the organization to obtain higher pay,” Physioic explained years later. “Our original purpose was to get cameraman to exchange ideas and thus encourage manufacturers to make better equipment, especially lighting.”

The three began their work in secret by mailing unsigned notices explaining their planned purpose to all the cinematographers they knew to be working under the auspices of the Motion Picture Patents Company, as well as independents working outside it. Those interested in participating were asked to reply by mail to a non-descript address. And after enough replies were received, a meeting was set. The location was Heinebund Hall, at 34th St. and 8th Ave. in midtown Manhattan. Just 13 people attended, and no one seemed to be in charge, but a waiter soon appeared to hand each a slip of paper printed with four words: *This meeting is yours.*

After some discussion, a temporary chairman was selected and the meeting got under way. Officers were elected and Rosen was voted in as president — the Cinema Camera Club was born.

Though they met in secret for its first six months — still fearing a blacklist that never materialized — the Cinema Camera Club grew rapidly, with a small office established on Columbus Circle. By 1915, there were 120 members, demanding a larger headquarters, soon located in the *New York Times* Building at 229 West 43rd Street.

About the same time that the Cinema Camera Club was formed in New York, a small group of cinematographers in Los Angeles formed the Static Club of America — so named because of the static electricity that could build up in a motion picture camera and plagued cinematographers by ruining their work by creating white, lightning-like streaks on the film.

There was less of a need for secrecy on the West Coast, as Los Angeles was 3,000 miles away from the enforcement agents of the Motion Picture Patents Company, so the Static Club was openly founded by cinematographers L.B. Smith, Fred L. Granville, W.E. Alder and H.M. Maguire. And early in 1913, Harry H. Harris, a cinematographer working at Universal City Studios, was elected president of the group.

From the beginning, the two groups established membership reciprocity, and soon reformed under the Cinema Camera Club banner, with each independent entity publishing newsletters by 1916. The Eastern edition was called the *Cinema News*, while the West Coast periodical was entitled *Static Flashes*. Both offered basic information on cinematography, including details on what pictures the members were currently shooting.

In 1918, Rosen was elected to a third term as president of the New York branch, but had to resign in order to shoot a picture in Hollywood — *The Miracle Man* starring Lon Chaney. But even though the center of the film production world was shifting from New York to Los Angeles, he arrived to find the Western organization struggling to stay afloat, and its president, Charles G. Rosher, asked him to head a reorganization committee.

Rosen came to the conclusion that there should be a national organization rather than two independent and loosely affiliated chapters, and that such an organization should be a fraternal society with very exacting membership requirements. He believed that in order for this new organization to have stature, membership ought to be by invitation only to those cinematographers who had clearly demonstrated their professional capability.

Today, there are two primary classifications of ASC members: Active and Associate. The former are directors of photography who have built a body of work and a reputation for excellence. Wrote ASC president Richard Crudo about the process:

Membership is open to directors of photography who have occupied that position for no less than five out of the eight years preceding application. As you might expect, the individual's work must have continually demonstrated superb taste and technical mastery.

In addition — and little known to the industry at large — good character is an important prerequisite. Those who are dishonest, abusive to their crews or who have any sort of dodgy reputation are inevitably found out and barred from our ranks.

Assuming all cylinders are firing, a candidate must then be proposed in writing by three active or retired ASC members. Eventually, this person will be summoned to an interview before our Membership Committee, which executes due diligence by considering the prospective member's qualifications — and believe me, they take their job seriously. This phase also includes a screening of the candidate's work in the form of a sample reel. Afterwards, the person is sent home, and a vote is taken on his or her suitability.

The Membership Committee's recommendation is then presented to the Board of Governors for further consideration and a vote, with two-thirds majority required for approval. Spirited debate often ensues, and occasionally a candidate is stalled at this point. On the other hand, even a unanimously positive vote does not yet clear the way for membership.

That goal is reached only after clearance of a 30-day "posting period." During this interval, the entire ASC membership is informed of someone's pending invitation. Everyone is given the opportunity to review the candidate's sample reel and bona fides, and is free to voice any objections. Sometimes, further investigation is warranted and a candidate's advancement is tabled until matters are sorted out. In most cases, though, they pass this stage with flying colors.

Only active members may add the initials "ASC" after their name in professional use, for instance, in the credits of a feature film, TV episode or other production.

Associate members consist of non-cinematographers who are key representatives of the many equipment manufacturers and other vital production and post support companies who often work very closely with directors of photography.

There are also Honorary members of the ASC, which includes individuals who have made indelible contributions to motion picture photography, such as Thomas Edison, George Eastman and the Apollo astronauts who first filmed the Earth from the moon.

There is a common misperception that ASC membership is only open to U.S. citizens, but this has never been the case, and, today, the Society includes members from dozens of different countries from around the world.

On the evening of Saturday, December 21, 1918, Phil Rosen and the reorganization committee met at the home of William C. Foster. A new constitution was drawn up that stipulated that membership would be by invitation only, and a board of governors was formed from the 10 committee members and five other Cinema Camera Club members who had been invited to attend the meeting.

The 15 cinematographers who signed the application for a charter under the laws of the state of California were Rosen, Foster, Joe August, L.D. Clawson, Arthur Edeson, Eugene Gaudio, Fred LeRoy Granville, Walter L. Griffin, J.D. Jennings, Roy H. Klaffki, Victor Milner, Robert S. Newhard, Charles G. Rosher, Homer A. Scott and L. Guy Wilky.

The constitution of the new organization, which was named the "American Society of Cinematographers," stated its objectives to be:

"To advance the art and science of cinematography, and to encourage, foster and strive for excellence, artistic perfection, and scientific knowledge in all matters pertaining to cinematography... bringing into the closest confederation those leaders in the cinematographic science whose achievements in that field entitle them to membership in the Society... maintaining the high standards set for themselves... promoting the interest of all who shall be called to membership... to the end that membership in this Society may become a mark of honor and distinction based on merit."

The new Society's motto: *Loyalty, Progress and Artistry.*

The next evening, on December 22, in the home of Fred LeRoy Granville, the first ASC officers were elected: Philip E. Rosen, president; Charles G. Rosher, vice-president; Homer A. Scott, second vice-president; William C. Foster, treasurer; and Victor Milner, secretary.

On January 8, 1919, the American Society of Cinematographers was incorporated under California law and received its charter, making the ASC the first professional

organization of any kind in the American motion picture industry. In this pursuit, the ASC has served as the example for numerous motion picture production guilds and organizations formed since. In comparison, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences was established in 1927, SAG AFTRA in 1933, the Directors Guild of America in 1936, the Motion Picture Editors Guild in 1937 and the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences in 1946.

Most directly, the ASC inspired the creation of cinematography societies around the world that would all follow similar tenants, including the British Society of Cinematographers (BSC; founded in 1949), Canadian Society of Cinematographers (CSC; 1957) and French Society of Cinematographers (AFC; 1990), among many others.

After incorporating, the ASC soon established offices within the Markham Building at the corner of Hollywood Blvd. and Cosmo St.

The first documented appearance of the “ASC” credential in a film’s titles was *Sand* (1920), produced by and starring William S. Hart — a superstar of the era — and shot by Joe August. It was a tremendous boost to the fledgling Society when Hart’s latest picture and promotional posters carried the credit line “Photographed by Joe August, ASC.”

More than 50 cinematographers were invited to join the ASC in that first year.

In November of 1920, the ASC began publishing *The American Cinematographer* — a four-page newsletter with a cover price of just 10 cents. It was published twice monthly until March of 1922, when it became a monthly, and *American Cinematographer* magazine has been published every month since then.

AC quickly became much more than an in-house publicity piece and became a sincere effort on the part of the Society to render a service to its members as well as other readers interested in cinematography — which included producers, directors and other film professionals who recognized the vital role of the camera department. It began publishing in-depth technical reports on cameras, lighting optics and new laboratory techniques, as well as exhibition practices.

American Cinematographer is today an award-winning international publication covering the technology and artistry of visual storytelling, offering print and digital editions. It remains one of the ASC’s most effective education tools and has inspired generations of filmmakers.

The *AC* web site was launched in 1997 to digitally deliver a wide variety of educational content, including instructional and informative videos featuring ASC members and historical stories from the vast *American Cinematographer* archive.

To reach new audiences, the ASC began publishing a digital Chinese-language edition of *AC* in 2017, and has plans to launch Spanish and Japanese editions.

After publishing the *Cinematographic Annual* in 1930 and 1931, and nine editions of *The American Cinematographer Hand Book and Reference Guide* from 1935-'56, the ASC began the *American Cinematographer Manual*, a vital technical resource that is commonly known as “the filmmaker’s Bible.” First printed in 1960, the book is currently in its 10th edition, which was published in 2016.

In the depths of the Great Depression, 1933, an unauthorized union strike of all cinematographers, assistants and still photographers was called by the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE). Due to this labor unrest, the ASC moved to protect its members, and changed its bylaws to accept second cameramen, assistants and still photographers as members of a junior division of the ASC. Meanwhile, the Society was approached by the Association of Motion Picture Producers with a proposed long-term contract for all ASC members, with salaries and working conditions to be negotiated. A five-year agreement was signed in January of 1934. Soon, however, ASC meetings largely became labor and grievance forums, and little could be accomplished in an educational and cultural way.

Further negotiations between the producers and IATSE soon resulted in a new deal in late 1935 that compelled all first cinematographers to become members of the camera guild, and the ASC soon returned to its original mission concept as a cultural and education body.

In 1936, the ASC — which had been occupying offices at the Guaranty Building at the corner of Hollywood Blvd. and Ivar St. since 1924 — was offered \$20,000 to vacate the premises to allow the property owner to control the entire building. The Society took the deal and, flush with cash, quickly began looking for a new prospect to call home.

The land that later became world-famous as “Hollywood” was originally part of a vast Mexican land grant known as Rancho La Brea, established in 1828. In 1887, Horace H. Wilcox, a land-poor realtor, made a considerable sum of money by opening subdivisions, but sold little land in the Hollywood area.

Finally, E. C. Hurd, a wealthy miner from Colorado, bought acreage at the corner of what is today Hollywood Blvd. and Wilcox St.

H. J. Whitley bought the old Hurd place in 1900 and laid out what was known as the Ocean View tracts, extending north of Hollywood Blvd. and east beyond Highland Ave. In those days the term “Ocean View” was quite appropriate because one could see the ocean some 10 miles away.

The Los Angeles Pacific Boulevard and Development Company built a house on Lot 7, Block 2 of the Hollywood Ocean View Tract #2 in the architectural style called "Modern Mission." The house plan was like that of a Spanish hacienda in that all the rooms opened off a central patio. This "patio" however was completely enclosed and was actually a great central room with imposing pillars.

A series of people owned this home at 1782 North Orange Dr. from 1903 until 1910 when it was sold to Mr. James Henry Brown of Salt Lake City. He purchased this property for his ailing wife as a retreat from the severe Utah winters. He then persuaded his son, James Creighton Brown, to take his wife Flora and baby daughter Barbara to live there with Mrs. James Henry Brown.

The elder Mrs. Brown died in 1916, but the Creighton Browns remained in the house until 1923. Mrs. Creighton Brown was a beautiful and gracious lady who was very active in the social and cultural affairs of the community. The home became the setting for many receptions for musical and art gatherings. Friends and relatives from Salt Lake would often be guests for weeks at a time. This was gracious living.

Archival photographs reveal that the center section of the home under the glass dome was filled with tropical plants. The front porch, which had originally spanned the front of the house, was enclosed on the South side to form a keeping room or a summer sleeping porch. There were four bedrooms, a parlor and a study up in the cupola. The house had an ample dining room, butler's pantry and large kitchen. Fireplaces provided a cheery warmth on cold days. Comfortable servants quarters were provided in the basement area.

In 1922, the Creighton Browns bought a new residence and the "Modern Mission" was sold to Conway Tearle, a prominent leading man of the Silent Era. He and his wife, Adèle Rowland, used to entertain there with lavish receptions. During those years, he remodeled the house and put a fountain into the "patio" area, and many of the elite film world gathered around it during lavish parties.

Tearle and his estate retained ownership of the property until it was acquired at a foreclosure sale in 1935. (He later died in 1938 at the age of 60.) While the house was in poor repair, the ASC leadership believed that this unique Spanish-style "fixer upper" on a large lot — measuring 150' x 228' — was exactly what they needed.

The Society bought and converted Tearle's former home into their iconic "ASC Clubhouse," which served as a focal point where cinematographers informally gathered at the end of workdays at the studios, in addition to formal meetings. In the January of 1937 issue of *AC* magazine, the Society announced the establishment of these new quarters:

We have moved into our new home. Still in the heart of Hollywood, but tucked in beneath the mountains with spacious grounds and a fine rambling house to accommodate all of the American Society of Cinematographers activities... The new

home, located at 1782 N. Orange Drive, is only a few blocks from Hollywood Boulevard, and directly in back of the famous Grumman's Chinese Theater. It occupies the corner of North Orange Drive and Franklin Boulevard. The structure is a one-story building with a penthouse.

The April issue of *AC* of that same year chronicled the festivities that took place at the Clubhouse on February 28 during the official grand opening:

From 5 o'clock on that Sunday afternoon in the mansion at 1782 North Orange Drive, informality reigned. There were no speeches — that is, not the kind the average man mulls over for a week and of which in his memory as he stands on his feet at the zero second not a trace remains. But there was much speech in the form of conversation, of greetings to old friends and associates, or renewal of friendships and of re-pledging the bond that for nearly twenty years has held under one banner these masters of the camera. The only stipulation the [ASC] board had made was as to the starting hour. The closing hour was represented [on the invitation] by three dots. And, of course, there were to be cocktails...

In December of 1949, the mortgage on the ramshackle-yet-charming ASC Clubhouse was paid off, and the membership celebrated with a “burning of the mortgage” party, during which one guest, comedian Red Skelton quipped, “You should have burned the building and saved the papers!”

In the 1980s, the ASC was offered \$20 million dollars to sell the Clubhouse and its accompanying land to developers. It was declined.

As the decades passed, the ASC grew in membership and stature, but the Clubhouse has remained not only a constant reminder of the Society's past but a part of its future due to the respect that those entrusted with the property have maintained. And on May 7, 2008, The ASC hosted a groundbreaking ceremony before launching a major renovation of the Clubhouse. “This project is a continuation of our historic commitment to fellowship and progress in the art of filmmaking,” announced ASC President Daryn Okada. “It will enable us to accommodate larger meetings and seminars for our members, collaborators and students, who are the future generation of filmmakers, while preserving the legacy of the original building, which is a treasure trove of early film history.” The renovation project added 1,500 square feet to the original Clubhouse.

“Every ASC member has been inspired by our heritage,” said Owen Roizman, chairman of the ASC Building Committee. “We all share an obligation to preserve and enhance that legacy for the next generation.”

“Our plans call for making a number of improvements to the building, but everyone should know that first and foremost, we are steadfastly committed to preserving the character and charm of this place we love so much,” Roizman continued. “There is a lot of history within these walls, and we will be very careful to not disturb the

ghosts. I think our founding fathers would be proud that we are preserving and continuing their original vision.”

“It's exciting that after 70 years of owning this historic house, the ASC is expanding and improving it,” said Los Angeles city council member Eric Garcetti, whose district included Hollywood. “I can only imagine the creativity and innovation that has resulted from conversations here, and I'm proud that the oldest operating motion picture society calls Hollywood its home.” Today, Garcetti is the mayor of Los Angeles.

The Clubhouse renovation was completed in 2010, with a re-opening ceremony held on June 3 of that year. And the facility was soon back in use for activities including the ASC Student Heritage Awards, dinner meetings and presentations, ASC Master Class sessions, discussion sessions between student groups and ASC members providing guidance, and such ambitious events as the bi-annual International Cinematography Summit, which finds representative from dozens of cinematography societies worldwide convening in Hollywood to address creative issues, technological advances and other concerns.

Today, the ASC Clubhouse is a registered building of historic significance and will be forever protected as such. And among all the other cinematography societies in the world, the ASC Clubhouse is truly unique.

Over the years, the ASC has collected cameras, lenses and other artifacts of early motion picture history that have been donated by members and friends of the Society, some of which are on today display at the Clubhouse on a rotating basis. An impressive assemblage donated by Charles, G. Clarke, ASC in the 1950s formed the initial core of the organized collection, which was then built upon by Arthur C. Miller, ASC to include a unique library of books, photos and other historical documentation and memorabilia. Steve Gainer, ASC today curates the collection.

Recently, ASC associate member Jim Jannard donated a rare Mitchell Standard camera — serial number 5 off the assembly line — that had been used by the great George Barnes, ASC in the 1920s.

Caleb Deschanel, ASC gifted his 1960s-vintage Éclair Cameflex CM3 to the collection, which he had used for many years after purchasing it from the great Haskell Wexler, ASC.

Jim Mitchell — whose father George had been an ASC associate member — entrusted Arthur C. Miller's own classic 1912 Pathé Studio camera to the Society.

Finally, one of the ASC's most cherished additions to the collection is a Mitchell BNC camera — serial number 2 — which was purchased new in 1935 by the Samuel Goldwyn Company for use by Gregg Toland, ASC, who photographed numerous outstanding films with it, including *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Best Years of Our*

Lives (1946). Later, the camera was purchased by J. Burgi Contner, ASC — who used No. 2 for many years on motion pictures, TV series and commercials — and it was donated to the ASC collection 2008 by his son, cinematographer/director James A. Contner. As it had been heavily modified over the decades, the camera was then restored as factory-new by the ASC — an expensive process that took 10 years.

To help bring to light the tremendous creative contributions that cinematographers make to all motion pictures, the Society founded the ASC Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Cinematography in 1986 to recognize exceptional work in feature films and television, as well as acknowledge cinematographers and other filmmakers — including directors, producers and actors — for their exemplary careers or contributions to the art and craft of filmmaking. Plans for the 33rd annual ASC Awards are currently being made.

The ASC's many committees — which are made up of members, associate members and other volunteer professionals — cover a wide variety of key interests.

At its heart, the ASC has always been about education and sharing information, and to that end, the Society's Education and Outreach committee regularly welcomes groups of college students from around the world to the ASC Clubhouse for in-depth Q&A sessions with leading ASC members, during which they openly discuss all aspects of working as a professional director of photography. All free of charge.

In 2002, Society members focused on the rapidly evolving filmmaking technology founded the ASC Motion Imaging Technology Council (or MITC — pronounced "My Tech") which includes committees that study and report on developments in such areas as digital motion picture cameras, look management, virtual production techniques, lens developments, motion imaging workflows, projection and display technologies, archiving, advanced imaging and virtual reality.

Some recent notable milestone achievements of the ASC MITC include:

- (2003-'04) The ASC-DCI Standard Evaluation Material (StEM) provided essential motion picture image content used by DCI (Digital Cinema Initiatives) to create the imaging quality requirements for digital cinema that enabled the evaluation of digital cinema projection systems.
- (2005) The two-part article "Color-Space Conundrum," published by *American Cinematographer* in print and online, is a comprehensive exploration of the importance of understanding color space and its impact on the cinematographer's work.
- (2007-'12) Digital camera metadata initiative in conjunction with AMPAS.
- (2007-'17; ongoing) For the past decade, ASC MITC has prepared comprehensive annual Progress Reports on areas of interest, study and research for publication in

the SMPTE Motion Imaging Journal. This series of reports has been of vital interest to SMPTE members and helped foster a dialog between engineers and end users.

- (2008 -'12; ongoing) The DI Committee developed the American Society of Cinematographers Color Decision List (ASC CDL) which has become the de facto industry standard for cross-platform primary RGB color grading and is currently being proposed for official SMPTE standardization by both AMPAS and the Walt Disney Co.

- (2009) The ASC-PGA Camera Assessment Series (CAS) which assessed the photographic performance of seven digital motion picture cameras in comparison with film via the then prevailing Cineon-based 2K digital intermediate (D.I.) postproduction workflow.

(2010 -'12; ongoing) Proactive collaboration with AMPAS on the development of the Academy Color Encoding System (ACES), an innovative open and transparent cross-platform color management system supporting dynamic range and color gamut greater than film.

- (2016) Publishes the “ASC Display Evaluation Plan & Test Protocol.” As higher performance cinema projectors and active screens emerge, it is important to identify where value is created from the filmmakers’ point-of-view, independent of the technology. This represents the first step towards this goal, defining a method for the visual evaluation of parameters that characterize next-generation cinema projection and active screens.

- Continuing work with the Motion Picture Academy on the further development of ACES 2.0 (a.k.a. “ACES Next”).

The Society began the ASC Master Class education program in 2014. Here, ASC members and other professionals teach students from around the world on subjects including lighting, composition, angles, creating mood, postproduction techniques and many other aspects of visual storytelling. Each session begins at the ASC Clubhouse in Hollywood, with portions taught on local stages and other facilities. The faculty of ASC members includes John Bailey, Bill Bennett, Paul Cameron, Russell Carpenter, Dean Cundey, Caleb Deschanel, Larry Fong, Darius Khondji, Karl-Walter Lindenlaub, Emmanuel Lubezki, Guillermo Navarro, Rodrigo Prieto, Cynthia Pusheck, Nancy Schreiber, John Toll, Kees van Oostrum and many more.

This program expanded in 2017 to include the ASC International Master Class, which brings this educational approach to major cities around the world. To date, classes taught by ASC members have been held in locations including Toronto, Canada; Beijing, China and São Paulo, Brazil. The next step in this evolution will be an online version of the Master Class, allowing students everywhere to attend and learn via the Internet.

The ASC Vision Committee was formed in early 2016 with the mission to actively support those who face more hurdles in this industry as they build their careers. Dedicated in to promoting and facilitating change, the “vision” of the committee is to ensure cinematographers and their fellow filmmakers reflect the diverse population of the world at large, irrespective of gender, race, religion, economic status or orientation, as well as encourage advancement for the underrepresented. In that effort, the ASC Vision Committee organizes inspirational events intermixed with networking opportunities, and has established formal mentorship and ASC Master Class scholarship programs.

In 2017, ASC member John Bailey was elected to be the president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He is the first cinematographer to hold that esteemed position.

Today, the American Society of Cinematographers has 373 active members working and living around the world and 206 associate members who represent the many technology and service companies that support them.