



How Does a Cinematographer Become an ASC Member? By Richard P. Crudo, ASC

Ask any member of the ASC what it's like to be part of this great organization, and you'll likely hear an expression of humility, a virtue that could easily have been tacked onto our motto of "Loyalty, Progress, Artistry." You might also discover a little presumptuousness among some of us, the type that assumes everyone embraces our intentions and understands our place in the order of things. I can be as guilty of that as anyone, and I'm always astonished when I encounter crewmembers or executives who should know about us but don't. In the interest of filling that gap, here's the straight story.

You may have already read the short explanation that runs above the listing of current ASC officers and board members in each issue of *American Cinematographer* magazine:

"The ASC is not a labor union or guild, but an educational, cultural and professional organization. Membership is by invitation to those who are actively engaged as directors of photography and have demonstrated outstanding ability. ASC membership has become one of the highest honors that can be bestowed upon a professional cinematographer — a mark of prestige and excellence."

Note that we are an invitation-only organization. You can't just call up and join. You can't be a newcomer to the career, either. 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.

In the entire history of motion pictures, fewer than 800 individuals have earned a place on our roster. Currently, we boast more than 350 active members and about half as many associate members. With regard to associates, those highly respected folks who work in support of cinematographers or in related industries, proposal letters are required from two active members, followed by approval by the Membership Committee and the board.

The ASC’s mission can be summed up simply: to protect and promote any and all concerns of the cinematographer. This is accomplished through the work of nearly 20 committees, each made up of members and associates with a keen interest in the issues at hand. Our crown jewel may well be our Motion Imaging Technology Council, chaired by Curtis Clark, ASC. From a standing start, it has evolved to become the guiding voice in the development and implementation of our digital tools and workflows.

Others might hand top billing to our Awards Committee, and I can’t really blame them. Everyone knows the ASC throws the best parties in town!

As you can see, there are a lot of reasons why the ASC has remained an elite organization for more than 99 years. With our 100th anniversary just over the horizon (January 8, 2019), I assure you that our standards will be maintained. If our founders were with us today, I’m certain they would be impressed.

And I’m sure that one day, our descendants will say the same about us.