

Walt Disney Studios, Animation Celluloid from the 1988 film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

Walt Disney Studios' 1988 film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* employed a 'groundbreaking' combination of live-action visuals and hand-drawn animation. It received widespread acclaim for its artistry, humor, and writing and was one of the highest grossing films of 1988, second only to Barry Levinson's *Rain Man*. The film won a host of awards, including the Special Achievement Academy Award for Richard Williams' visionary animation direction. At the time, it was the most expensive animated film ever produced, with a budget ranging \$30-50 million, which paid off, as it took



home over seven times that amount in the box office.

While it is true that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* employed a combination of live-action filming and hand-drawn celluloid animation, this technique is far from groundbreaking. It is better described simply as one of the first modern instances of this technique *that found mainstream fame and*

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popularity. Some of the earliest instances of this technique came off the heels of the vaudeville craze of the 1910s. Winsor McCay was a pioneer of animation, and is often referred to as the ‘father of American animation.’ His 1914 animated short film *Gertie the Dinosaur* revolutionized the American film industry with its seemingly magical combination of hand-drawn moving pictures and live-action acting. Max Fleischer’s 1918 animated short film series, *Out of the Inkwell*, is another pillar of what we now know to be animation. Both of these series featured live-action backgrounds and

characters working with hand-drawn cartoons overlaid. This technique was revolutionary, and the composition and success of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* is proof of the influence these early animators had on creating and shaping both the animation and film industries.

Prior to the widespread adoption of celluloid animation in the 1920s, animation frames were drawn on single sheets of paper before being photographed. This meant that in order to create a scene, or make a character move, animators had to redraw every single element in the scene on every new frame. Stationary elements such as backgrounds had to be redrawn to appear exactly as they just had in the frame before, while minor adjustments were made to the moving subject. As most films move at about 24 frames per second (fps), early animation was an incredibly time-



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consuming (and wasteful) process. The introduction of celluloid sheets, which were made of clear, flexible plastic, allowed animators to paint just one element per sheet and layer elements over one another.

Stationary sheets could then be reused over and over again, while only the moving element had to be redrawn. This greatly reduced the time and cost it took to produce animated films. It also allowed greater freedom of expression, as the clear celluloid sheets could be layered over conventional, live-action film to give the impression that cartoons and live-action people were interacting and living in the same space and universe, as seen in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

Because it takes thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of individual celluloid frames to create a feature-length film, most hand-drawn cel frames were

destroyed shortly after use. Individual animation cels had no value at the time of creation, as they were simply a means to the end of creating a moving picture. Some film scholars argue that an animation cel's value is in the film itself, that the parts are no more important than the whole. That the magic is in the relay of a film, when a still



drawing comes to life through the rapid playback of hundreds of still frames. Especially at the time of creation, the end product was more important than the individual frames it took to get there. Not to mention, there was no room to store the

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hundreds of thousands of cels required to make one scene, let alone an entire movie. Because of this, it is rare that animation cels like the one Michaan's is proud to offer have survived. Therefore, it is a historic honor that Michaan's is auctioning an animation cel from such a well-received, critically acclaimed, and beloved film.

Michaan's is thrilled that we were entrusted with the sale of not only this animation cel from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Est: \$700 - \$1,000) but that we

have four others on offer in our September Gallery Auction as well. We are offering stills from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1988), and *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986). All coming from the same consignor, we are grateful that whoever saved these still frames did so, preserving these small pieces of film history that are so often lost.

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