

Gertie the Dinosaur

By Daniel Eagan

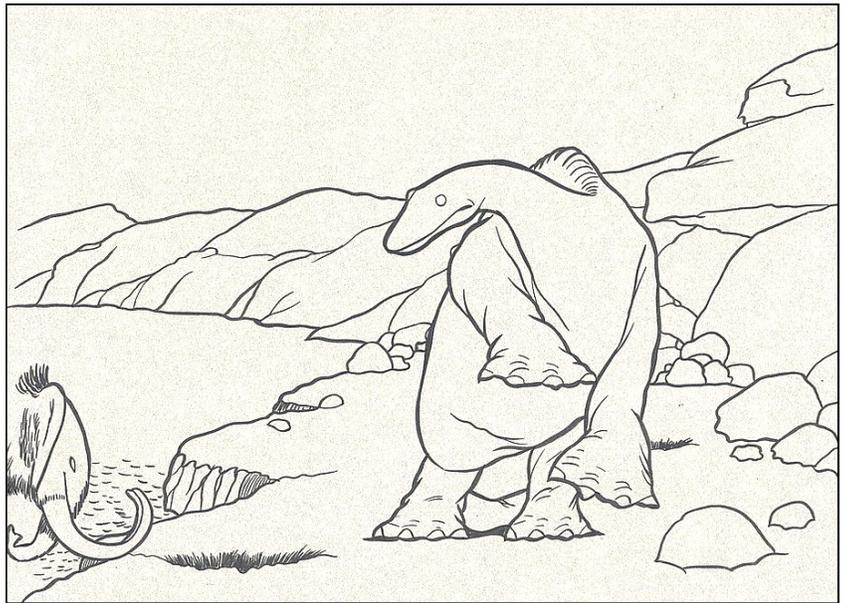
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Winsor McCay would have been a significant figure in film even if he hadn't made "Gertie the Dinosaur." He was born Zenas Winsor McKay in either Michigan or Canada, anywhere from 1867 to 1871 (his birth records no longer exist). His father, a realtor, soon changed the family surname to McCay. Winsor grew up in Michigan, near Spring Lake and then in Stanton. From an early age he was obsessed with art. "I couldn't stop drawing anything and everything," he remembered, later dropping out of business school to create advertising posters in Chicago. Two years later he moved to Cincinnati as a commercial illustrator, primarily for carnivals and dime museum.

For nine years he drew posters. "Missing Link," "Armless Wonder," "Joe-Joe the dog-faced boy," and other oddities and curiosities would return to his imagery throughout his career. Married, and with two children, he took a job in 1898 drawing newspaper cartoons and illustrations for the "Commercial Tribune." He contributed to a humor magazine and then began drawing color pages for the "Cincinnati Enquirer." These got him a job at the "New York Herald" and the "Evening Telegram."

Moving to New York in 1903, McCay began drawing his first comic strips a year later. "Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend" appeared in September 1904; aimed at adults, it presaged surrealism in its depiction of a nightmarish world in which inanimate objects stretched and distorted at will. It was so influential that Edwin S. Porter made a film adaptation in 1906. By then McCay had introduced "Little Nemo in Slumberland," a spectacularly innovative strip that used color, perspective, depth of field, design, and sequential motion to express both narrative and metaphorical meaning. It had an enormous impact on culture at large, from Edison and Biograph films to popular songs; it was even the subject of a 1908 opera by Victor Herbert.

McCay's use of movement suggests that he was fa-



Gertie stands at the edge of a cliff and looks down at a mastodon.
Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

miliar with motion pictures, in particular the stop-motion animation employed by Porter, J. Stuart Blackton, and other directors. Animator John Canemaker believes McCay was also influenced by the French filmmaker Émile Cohl, whose drawings transformed objects and moved characters into unexpected settings. In "Humorous Phases of Funny Faces" (1906), Blackton filmed himself drawing pictures that he then brought to life through animation. It was a landmark in cinema, and a clear influence on McCay's first efforts in the medium.

In fact, Blackton helped McCay with filming "Little Nemo in Slumberland" at his Vitagraph Studios. McCay combined a live-action prologue with four thousand drawings. The film was released to theaters on April 8, 1911; four days later, McCay started using it in a vaudeville act he had prepared. Later, he had the film hand-colored.

The final "Nemo" strip appeared in July 1911. By then McCay had signed with William Randolph Hearst. He also had started on his second film, "How a Mosquito Operates" (sometimes titled "The Story of a Mosquito"), borrowed from a scene in a 1909 "Rarebit Fiend" strip. According to Canemaker, one of the distinctive features of the film is McCay's ability to give the title character a personality.

McCay developed this concept further with his next film, "Gertie the Dinosaur." Gertie, a pleasantly plump and shy dinosaur who inadvertently gets into trouble because she doesn't know her own strength, has been called by some critics the first anthropo-

morphic cartoon character. Even with the passage of time, she is certainly one of the most appealing, in part due to McCay's drawings, but also because of his narrative skills. He not only incorporated the film into his vaudeville act, he wrote the plot so that he could interact with Gertie in front of his audience. McCay would appear on stage holding a whip, using it to draw her out from behind some rocks. McCay's timing with Gertie made her seem alive, especially when he "fed" her an apple.

McCay premiered the film at the Palace in Chicago on February 2, 1914. He received glowing reviews there, and again when he brought the act to New York. However, during a performance a stage assistant mistakenly angered Hearst, who then banned mention of McCay's act from his papers. Hearst later ordered McCay to give up his comic strips and animation. Eventually McCay had to cancel his vaudeville engagements.

The artist drew some 25,000 frames for "The Sinking of the 'Lusitania'" (1918), a grimly political cartoon, but his later efforts in animation were limited and derivative. Still, it is difficult to find a serious animator alive today who doesn't point to McCay as an influence. Among his innovations was his use of "cycling," or repeating a sequence of movement, to save on drawing new material. To show Gertie breathing, for example, he would film the same sequence of drawings up to fifteen times. Canemaker

also credits McCay with inventing "in-betweening," which the artist called the "McCay Split System." He would break motion down into specific poses, draw those, and then later go back and fill in the missing material. McCay's developments would be adopted by the entire animation industry; in fact, John Bray succeeded in stealing many of them and patenting them under his name.

By the time McCay died of a stroke in 1934, his best work had been largely forgotten. But thanks to the efforts of Canemaker and others, his films have been preserved and his reputation restored.

Gertie the Dinosaur has been preserved by the Museum of Modern Art.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Daniel Eagan has worked for Warner Bros., MGM, and other studios as a researcher and story analyst. He edited HBO's Guide to Movies on Videocassette and Cable TV (Harper Collins) and MGM: When the Lion Roars (Turner Publishing), to which he also contributed articles. His work has appeared in Smithsonian, The Nation, The Hollywood Reporter, and other outlets.