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NOTES ON

THE ART *of* MICKEY MOUSE

and his creator

WALT DISNEY

By

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WALT DISNEY and MICKEY MOUSE



Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse

IN a five dollar-a-month room over a garage which he proudly termed his "studio", a boy named Walt Disney used to sit at night and watch the antics of a pair of little mice. After weeks of patient persuasion, he had tamed them beyond the precincts of their hole in the base-board, across the floor and at last onto his drawing-board. There they sat up and nibbled bits of cheese in their paws or even ate from his hand. As he watched them, he sometimes wrote letters to his niece, aged six, daughter

of his older brother who carried mail in Los Angeles. The letters described the activities of the mice and were sometimes illustrated with drawings of them, doing funny, fantastic human things.

Walt Disney (his name is Walter, but no one but his mother ever thinks to call him by it) first saw the light of day in Chicago on December 5, 1901. His mother is German, his father Irish-Canadian. The family was large: four sons already when Walt was born and a sister later. Mr. Disney's business, contracting, caused the family to move frequently, chiefly between Chicago and Kansas City. When Walt was four years old, his parents decided to make a try at country life, and the next six years, until Walt was ten, were spent on a farm near Marceline, Missouri. Here he grew to know and love the animals, cows, horses, ducks, chickens, pigs—the regular roster of farm beasts who now move through Mickey's adventures and the Silly Symphonies to the marvel of all beholders. It was those five years, he believes, that did the most to shape his character. At any rate his unconscious absorption in the way animals looked and moved stamped his mind with impressions that have never failed him since.

When the family returned to Kansas City, Walt earned his first

money with that resource of so many enterprising middle western small boys, a paper route. Every morning he got up at three-thirty, delivered papers until six, returned home for breakfast, went to school at eight and carried papers again at five in the evening. At school he was bright-looking, quiet, apparently studious, but to the surprise of his teacher, seldom able to recite. Investigation revealed that it was the white margins, rather than the contents of the book which held Walt's attention. He had hit upon the trick of drawing people in graduated poses on succeeding pages, and flipping the leaves rapidly, so the figures would move. This fascinating pastime filled all his school books, and the whole of the modest library at home.

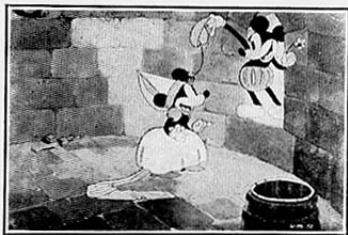
So unusual was his talent for drawing that, about this time, he was forced to defend it in the face of the school art teacher's open suspicion that he had traced a figure drawing from a book. Standing before the whole class, he drew another, and was vindicated.

A short interlude in Chicago for the Disney family gave their son his only opportunity for specialized training and he studied for a few months at the Chicago Art Institute.

In Kansas City again when he was seventeen, Walt drew a funny picture each week, usually of animals in human situations, for the neighborhood barber in return for a haircut. The picture in the window attracted crowds. When he didn't need a haircut, he drew the picture anyway and collected twenty-five cents.

One of the barber shop's patrons, the owner of a movie theatre, offered Walt a job drawing animated cartoon slides as screen advertisements. It was then that he rented his "studio" and made the acquaintance of the two mice.

With a capital dollars, savings job, he made a a motion picture mated cartoons but in Kansas way of learning and was forced step of the pro- It took him op a feasible



"Minnie the Fair, Minnie the Beautiful" from Ye Olden Days

of about forty from this first serious attempt at of his own. Ani- were not new, City, he had no their technique, to work out every cess for himself. months to devel- method, and he

executed literally thousands of drawings for his first picture, each one complete, even to the background. His enthusiastic letters to his brother in Los Angeles at length brought some real cooperation in the loan of a few hundred dollars, with part of which Disney promptly purchased a ticket to California. The rest went to pay for the photography of the picture, which proved, because of its obvious lack of mechanical perfection, an unqualified flop. But the drawings themselves showed enough talent to interest a Hollywood producer, and Disney was eventually ensconced in a studio job, feeling that he had repaid his brother's faith, if not his investment. The character of "Oswald the Rabbit" was his next creation. The success of this series

was not by any means great, but this disappoint- ment would prob- ably not have driven the produ- cer to summary action if it had not been sim- ilar to the produc- tion of sound and sudden introduc- tures, which com- pletely demoral- ized the industry. Out of a job, he again found his brother (now, if anything, more confident in Walt than he was in



"Romeo, ah, Romeo"
from Ye Olden Days

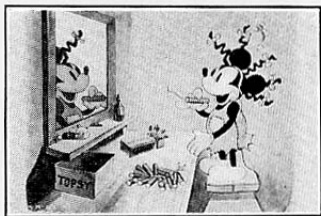
himself) ready to back him on a new venture, one wholly new and completely his own, of synchronizing the actions of animated cartoon characters to music and dialogue. It was then, in the Spring of 1928, that the idea of the mouse as a character recurred in Disney's mind. At first he was to be known as Mortimer Mouse but the name Mickey was soon introduced, and it stuck. The memory of the second little mouse who had nibbled the cheese so friendlily back in Kansas City was realized in Minnie, Mickey's companion and leading lady. Soon Mickey and Minnie were dancing in time to music, tripping off together on extravagant adventures, meeting the animals of the Missouri farm, who also danced and talked in perfect rhythm.

For several discouraging weeks, the brothers peddled the finished film of Mickey Mouse to Hollywood producers and at last found a backer in New York. In September 1928, the film was shown in a

small uptown New York theater. Within a week it was playing to enchanted audiences at the Roxy. Soon exhibitors everywhere were wiring for it and United Artists, as distributors of the films, were besieged with requests from every country in the world.

At five years of age, Mickey and Minnie are the undisputed monarchs of a hundred and fifty thousand dollar Hollywood studio. Every rule is for them, every effort has been expended for their ease and comfort. So definitely do they dominate the atmosphere that suggestions of their actual existence, such as a miniature two-car garage with two very small limousines on which name-plates are engraved "Mickey" and "Minnie", do not seem at all peculiar.

Their "father," at thirty-one, is a happy example of the young man who has made good, not because he has out of an idea, has made a success at work that the most modest come is turned into a perfection, perfecting experimental sorbed is he in his wife terms widow. Although he has surrounded himself with a staff of more than a hundred talented artists, musicians and writers, he is himself responsible for the major portion of the ideas and drawings.



"Woman's Folly"
from Mickey's Mellerdrammer

The Silly Symphonies, the new series which the Disney studio introduced last year, and which is now making use of color photography, have never achieved the fabulous popularity of Mickey Mouse, but their creator feels that in some ways they are superior, and has great hopes for them.

Mickey's meteoric rise to stardom will always remain a legend in the film industry. He has more millions of fans than Garbo, Dietrich, Chevalier and Marie Dressler put together. The use of Mickey's portrait on novelties; souvenir spoons, toys, sofa cushions, jewelry,

sweaters, underwear and candy has become a sort of sales insurance, so that over a hundred manufacturers in England and America are busy turning them out. Sixty European newspapers chronicle Mickey's adventures daily in a comic strip.

The eighteen films which cover the famous mouse's life for each year are shown in ten thousand theatres in America, and more than half that many in Europe.

In Germany, his name is Michael Maus, in France, Michel Souris, in Denmark, Mikkel Mus, in Japan, Miki Kuchi and in Spain, Miguel Ratonocito. If, in any of these countries, Mickey has a detractor, that misanthrope has never been heard from.

In spite of all this no one was more surprised than Mr. Disney when the College Art Association invited him to lend a collection of his original Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphonies drawings to form a circuit exhibition of leading museums and colleges throughout the United States. He has been too busy to realize that his engaging, lovable little adventurer has become the embodiment of a new art, an art in motion and an art in rhythm, the keynote of a new epoch in the history of æsthetics.

CREATING MICKEY MOUSE

The cost of making a Mickey Mouse reel of one thousand feet is perhaps greater, per foot of film, than that of making a full-length feature picture. This is taking into account the salaries of living stars, stage settings, and studio production costs. Between eight and ten thousand drawings, produced entirely by hand, are required for each film, and about eight weeks are spent between the time the idea is first accepted and the finished film reaches the United Artists distributing office. The production system is "staggered" however, so that a new film, either Mickey Mouse or a Silly Symphony, is ready every two weeks.

The first step is, naturally, the selection of a subject. Usually but not always, the idea is Disney's. Around a conference table the studio staff sits and plays with the idea, adding to it, changing, until a rough plot is worked out. It is then the task of the humorists to supply the "gags"—to introduce funny situations that will bring laughs from the audience.

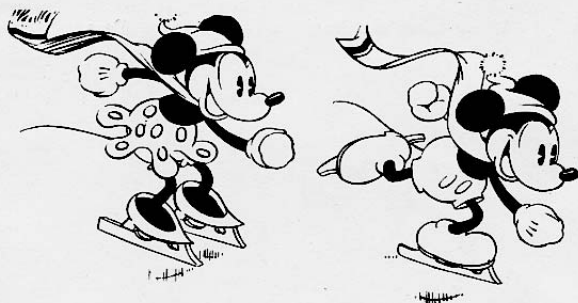
Next, the story is turned over to the artists, and a series of key

drawings, covering the main situations in the plot, are made. Usually these are made by Disney himself—an artist at the Mickey Mouse studio must serve a long term of apprenticeship doing just ears or tails or feet before he is entrusted with more finished drawings.

Simultaneously, the music department of the studio has been busy working out the musical score. This is enormously important, since the number of beats in a phrase of the music determines how many movements Mickey can make in as many feet of film. This calculation, timed to a fraction of a second, is the duty of a chief lay-out man, who corresponds to the director of an ordinary motion picture. When his work is finished, he compiles a detailed list of drawings, usually about nine thousand, which are to be made by the artists, termed animators. Each drawing must be made separately, but for a series where backgrounds are the same, they are transferred to celluloid sheets and photographed after being laid over one drawing of the background.

The recording of the music and sound effects begins as soon as the lay-out man has marked out the score for the artists. In a sound proof room, similar to a radio broadcasting studio, an orchestra plays the music, and five men interpose the dialogue and give perfect imitations of every imaginable sound, from pigs to rain, thunder and tap dancing.

The finished drawings are photographed one at a time on the film and that film is then merged with the sound track film containing the music. The negative is delivered to the United Artist distributing office, and the necessary number of prints are made.





"Uneasy rests the Head" from Ye Olden Days