

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Desmet Collection

(Netherlands)

Ref N° 2010-74

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

I SUMMARY

The Desmet Collection consists mainly of an exceptional group of films, company documents, posters and film stills from the 1910's. The collection is exceptional for two reasons: firstly because it is of unparalleled film historical importance, secondly because its importance exceeds the boundaries of film history and has great value for the socio-historical description and appreciation of one of the most important decades in modern history.

The 1910's was not only the decade of World War I, but also of new technology, scientific developments, artistic experiments, new fashions and the Russian Revolution. The cinema was at the centre of these developments. Through his entrepreneurship in cinema Jean Desmet (1875-1956) not only witnessed, but also contributed to some of these major changes in Western Europe.

Desmet experienced the major changes in cinema; from the travelling shows in the early years, to permanent film theatres in cities, and to the sudden flourishing of film distribution business in the late 1910's. He witnessed changes of economic infrastructure, but also changes of the formal aspects of cinema, the development from short films to longer films, and from a 'cinema of attractions' to a narrative cinema. By the time he decided end his distribution company, the cinema industry had grown from infancy to maturity.

The Desmet Collection represents in many ways all these developments. The cinematographic changes are certainly reflected in the films, while the collection in the greater sense is a cross-section of cultural and social developments of that time. The collection not only exists of objects of artistic or film historical value, but also of non-artistic documents. The uniqueness of the collection is largely situated in the cohesion between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic parts. The detailed administration with correspondence, invoices, programmes, lists of acquisitions, sales and rentals is of enormous cultural and socio-historical value. The Desmet Collection conceals many stories about the 1910s that still need to be unveiled and that will give future generations a fascinating insight of a decade that proved to be fundamental for the development of modern culture and society .

The importance of Desmet Collection for film history is undisputed. It is known that the collection contains a large number of unique film prints that are often lost in their country of origin. Among the circa 900 films, many masterpieces have been discovered that were formerly presumed lost. Screenings of such discoveries challenged and changed fundamentally the perspective on Italian diva films, German melodramas and French comedies. However, the strength of this collection is not so much that it contains several masterpieces, but on the contrary, that it gives a representation of daily programming, of supply and demand in both cultural and economic terms. The strength of the collection is therefore situated in the details; films and documents that are often marginalised gain enormous value within the relative context of a coherent collection.

The Desmet Collection is unparalleled in the world, in terms of both size and content. The only comparable collection could be the film distributor George Kleine's collection at the Library of Congress (U.S.A.). However, the original film prints of the Kleine Collection have all been destroyed and the films only survive today in the reduced 16mm format.

Restoration and preservation are key issues when old films are concerned. The highly inflammable nitrate prints need to be duplicated for access and presentation. However, the preservation of the original artefacts remains crucial since duplication techniques are still not perfect and only with the recent emergence of digital technology better results can be gained. Digital technology is also essential for the accessibility to documents, posters and photographs, but also here the preservation of the original artefacts is as important as in the case of the film prints, since a digital copy can never replace all the aspects of the original historical document, and cannot be examined or appreciated in the same manner.

Preservation and restoration of the Desmet Collection and giving access to it, are among the main goals of EYE Film Instituut Nederland. However, while restoration and preservation may be good strategies to safeguard the individual objects and their content and meaning, the importance of the Desmet Collection as a whole exceeds the significance of the individual artefacts. Full valorisation of the collection, in both its uniqueness and richness, can only be realised through the acknowledgement that this collection belongs to the core of world heritage, which will enable further study and exploration and innovative ways of access and presentation.

Mark-Paul Meyer

Senior Curator, EYE Film Instituut Nederland

2 *DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR*

2.1 Name (person or organisation): **EYE Film Instituut Nederland**



2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated:

The collection has been donated to the EYE Film Instituut Nederland by the Desmet family in 1957, where it is acknowledged as part of the core collections, bearing the highest preservation status.

2.3 Contact person (s):

Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, Silent Film Specialist, Film Collections.

Mark-Paul Meyer, Senior Curator Film Collections.

2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

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3 *IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE*

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated:

The Jean Desmet International Film Rental and Sales Company Collection (often referred to as the Desmet Collection). This collection includes over 900 films (on 35mm cellulose nitrate), as well as related original posters and publicity publications (information sheets, studio stills, etc), company administrative records, international correspondence with film producing companies worldwide, and film exhibitors in the Netherlands, from 1907 to 1916.

3.2 Description

The Desmet Collection consists of:

- Company papers: 22 shelf meters of card boxes and binders, containing around 100.000 items (all of which are currently being digitized)
 - 930 motion picture films on 35mm nitrate stock.
 - 1050 film posters in different languages
 - 2500 pieces of publicity materials pertaining to the films
 - Hundreds of stills pertaining to the films
 - EYE also holds the complete interior decorations of the Parisien Cinema (Amsterdam), as they were salvaged from demolition in the 1980's. The ceiling ornaments and wall decorations are installed and in use in one of the screening rooms of EYE (this screening room will be identically reconstructed in the new premises of EYE in Amsterdam Noord).
- (The figures in this list are rounded off)

All the films, posters, stills and publicity material are registered to the main EYE database (FMDB = Filmmuseum Database), that can be consulted in the EYE Bibliotheek (library) by general public. Many films and posters can be reached and viewed directly via this database (low resolution). Not all the publicity material and stills are scanned yet. All the company papers are being scanned at the moment. Researchers can make a request to see the originals.

Films and other materials are interrelated in the Filmmuseum database (i.e., searching by a specific film title will yield different results, combining films, posters, and derivative material such as videotapes, etc.)

Although the provenance of individual films and related material may not be immediately clear to the researchers (since the researchers are usually more interested in the films for their individual historic or artistic merits), it is possible to search and find the Desmet Collection materials, through the link "Dutch distributor". (please see database search examples in the attachments).

4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Is authenticity established?

The Desmet Collection consists of several types of material. There can be no doubt about the authenticity of the company papers, correspondence, etc., as these are unique documents. The materials pertaining to the films are 'naturally' copies of the original; since the common practice of film distribution always implies reproducing the films (and their posters, etc) and partly refashioning these materials according to the needs of the local markets (for example by changing the language, poster, or even the main titles of the films). From this point of view, such material within the Desmet collection is certainly not "original", but "vintage" elements. That is to say, that all these prints were touched by Desmet's hands. Moreover, in many cases these prints turn out to be unique materials, in the sense that these are the only surviving elements of that particular film. This aspect is continuously confirmed by the fact that in many cases, third parties worldwide request to access our material.

4.2 Is world significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability established?

As stated above, the uniqueness and cultural value of many components of the Desmet collection is continuously confirmed by the fact that in many cases, academic researchers, film restorers and affiliated archives worldwide request to access our material. Following the publication of the book *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* by Ivo Blom in 2003, the book reviews underscored once more the international significance of this collection

4.3 Is one *or more* of the criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style (f) social, spiritual and community significance satisfied?

TIME: Due to its very early origins in 1907 as a film distribution company, Desmet provides an almost unique (and rather complete) look into the practice of European film distribution before the WWI. A very big proportion of the films and related materials of this era are gone missing, not to

mention the great lack of company archives, consisting of contracts, correspondence, financial administration, etc. Back then, the distributors were required to buy the film prints (instead of getting temporary representation licenses), thus building their own collection through time. This type of film distribution has now disappeared completely.

PLACE: Jean Desmet was a businessman related to many film trading companies around the world, but also directly related to the local Dutch market of film exhibitors. This mediatory position makes the Desmet collection an interesting source for numerous studies focusing on the early international film distribution and exhibition history. Scholarly research into the socio-economic aspects of the film business and culture is still relatively young, and many phenomena within this field still await further exploration. Given the fact that conclusive documentation about this earliest period of film distribution is very rare and hardly accessible at one institute, the Desmet Collection becomes an important source for further research.

PEOPLE: Recently, film scholars have been stressing the importance of the relationship between the film producers, distributors, exhibitors and the audiences. These four groups of people are interrelated to each other and their specific needs and demands (financially or culturally) define the contours of film culture (and history) as we know it (including the spin-off material in the media, marketing, etc). The interrelation between these groups is essential to study film history. Despite the existence of separate sources for such study (for example fan-magazines or scrap-books in the libraries) Desmet Collection provides a richer context by bringing together several elements provided by different sources.

SUBJECT AND THEME: The films and the related materials found in Desmet Collections are often proven to be the only existing copies of these works world-wide. The availability of this material to scholars, and film audiences is crucial for the understanding of the pre-WorldWarI cinema. Although the biggest part of the films are fiction, the collection also includes almost 150 non-fiction films, either registrations of remarkable historical events, or travelogues, showing historic city centres, touristic attractions, architectural monuments, etc. Such documentation is of great historic value.

FORM AND STYLE: The documents within the Desmet Collection may not necessarily be the originals, however, they are vintage prints, i.e. they belong to the earliest generation of their species (and not later re-issues). Also, various elements in several versions pertaining to one specific film are available within this collection. For example; the unique nitrate print of the American film, **CHAMBER OF FORGETFULNESS** (1912), bearing Dutch intertitles is within the collection. Related to this film, there is also a French language promotion material of that time (indicating also the probability that Desmet received this film through an agency in France or Belgium). [In order to watch this film and read about its history, including its distribution through Desmet, please visit: http://www.europafilmtreasures.eu/PL/344/a-brief-history-chamber_of_forgetfulness

In other cases, different language versions of the posters for the same film are present, facilitating a comparative historic study about the promotion of films.

Moreover, in some cases, even when the original negatives may exist in the country of origin, the Desmet copies still represent additional value. First of all, since all prints in the Desmet Collection are projection prints, they all have intertitles which are missing in the negatives.

Also, according to the techniques of that time, the films were shot and developed on black & white stock, however, often coloured afterwards for exhibition. These colours were applied either by hand at the country of origin and then exported, or applied locally by the distributors to the projection prints. In many cases, the Desmet nitrate prints are richly coloured. EYE policy to study, preserve, restore and show these colours, has led to a worldwide recognition and reappraisal of colour in early cinema.

SOCIAL, SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANCE: The Desmet Collection as a whole proves that despite its small domestic market (also considering its language limitations and relatively small population), a country like the Netherlands was not at all a marginal player within the international film distribution business. The ability to reconstruct how Jean Desmet ran his film

business, provides an insight to Dutch trade models and its ramifications within the rest of the world (Desmet's distribution territory also included Indonesia, the former Dutch colony).

The possibility to see the films that were shown in the cinemas hundred years ago, provides us with an insight to what past generations have seen, and cared for. Although impossible to express concretely, this experience is very enriching and significant for the present audiences, that otherwise have very little concrete references to the past. The significance and demand for these early films is made clear by the ever growing interest from festivals and other exhibitors (universities, musea, etc).

4.4 Are there issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management that relate to this nomination?

Despite the fact that Jean Desmet kept every single piece under his custody until his death, and that the collection was almost immediately handed over to EYE Film Instituut Nederland, some parts of the Desmet Collections appear to have been lost before their arrival in EYE (perhaps due to material decay).

After their arrival in EYE, a very small percentage of the elements had to be destroyed, due to material deterioration. EYE is continuously controlling the damage through monitoring the material and copying it when necessary (if the original items show damage beyond repair).

According to the policies of the moment (prescribed by FIAF, Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film), initially some of the films were repatriated from EYE to the countries of origin, to be further preserved by the FIAF partner archives. In the last decades, this policy has been changed, and items belonging to Desmet distribution lists (whether they are donated by Desmet family or others) are kept at EYE. When possible, film prints that were sent to the respective countries of origin have on request been sent back to EYE.

EYE Film Instituut Nederland aims to complete the missing elements within the Desmet Collection. Over the past years, individual films belonging to the original Desmet distribution lists have been acquired through other donations.

5 *LEGAL INFORMATION*

5.1. Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details): The Desmet Company Collection is officially donated by the Desmet family to the EYE Film Instituut Nederland.

5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

5.3 Legal status:

(a) Category of ownership: the materials that are part of this collection belong to EYE Film Instituut Nederland

(b) Accessibility: EYE aims to make (copies of) this material accessible to professionals and the general audiences

(c) Copyright status:

Rights may pertain to individual items that are part of this collection (especially films, through their individual production companies). As the custodian of the material, EYE uses the restored versions of the films for its archival practices, always acknowledging the intellectual rights of third parties, if retrievable. (Some of the films are public domain). Parts of the collection are constantly loaned to other institutions for their presentations.

(d) Responsible administration

(e) Other factors

EYE core collections are recognized as national cultural heritage by the Dutch state.

6 *MANAGEMENT PLAN*

6.1 Is there a management plan in existence for this documentary heritage? YES
Desmet Collection is considered to be among the most important holdings of EYE. As such, it is included in every management plan. All the conditions applying to the optimum storage and custody of archival holdings are valid for the Desmet Collection. All the films and paper material are kept under the necessary storage conditions, in climate controlled vaults. As the collections can be prone to chemical dangers such as acidity (or vinegar syndrome for film stock), fungi, etc. the material is regularly tested. EYE is full member of FIAF (Fédération Internationales des Archives du Film) since 1947 and its archival conditions meet all the FIAF requirements.

In accordance with its archival policy, EYE Film Instituut Nederland aims to make the Desmet holdings maximally accessible to the general public. Many steps have been taken in this direction over the years, starting with preservation, restoration and copying of all the elements. Today almost all the parts of this collection are being digitally scanned for easier access, including the more than 100.000 paper documents from the company archive. There are future plans to make the films and the papers accessible to everybody through internet.

(Two separate documents [in Dutch] are also submitted with this nomination; “Filmmuseum Beleidsplan 2009-2012”, and its attachment about Collection policy “Bijlage 4: Collectiebeleid”. Together, these documents provide an insight into the preservation and access policies of EYE, with regard to its core collections)

7 *CONSULTATION*

7.1 Provide details of consultation about this nomination with (a) the owner of the heritage (b) the custodian (c) your national or regional *Memory of the World* committee

In the process of nomination, EYE Film Instituut Nederland has sought contact with Jan Bos, Secretary of the Dutch national Memory of the World Committee, for his assistance.

PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8 *ASSESSMENT OF RISK*

8.1 Detail the nature and scope of threats to this documentary heritage (see 5.5)

9 *ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION*

9.1 Detail the preservation context of the documentary heritage (see 3.3)