

**Inventory of the James Orson Belden - Lillian Gish letters and ephemera, 1936-1991**

\*T-Mss 1998-043

Billy Rose Theatre Division



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## Descriptive Summary

Title: James Orson Belden - Lillian Gish letters and ephemera, 1936-1991.

Collection ID: \*T-Mss 1998-043

Creator: James Orson Belden .

Extent: .42 linear feet (1 box)

Repository: The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.  
Billy Rose Theatre Division.

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## Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open to the public. Photocopying prohibited. Advance notice required

Preferred Citation: James Orson Belden-Lillian Gish letters and ephemera, \*T-Mss 1998-043, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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## Biographical Note

James Orson Belden, born in Rochester, New York on August 4, 1914, was a long time fan and friend of Lillian Gish. The friendship started when he wrote to her enclosing a copy of *The Duchess of Malfi*. This began a long-time friendly correspondence discussing the theater, film and literature.

Belden's interests included silent film, literature, art, music and theater. He was mostly self-taught having attended Aquinas High School in Rochester, New York. During World War II, he worked as a clerk in the Ordinance section of the War Department and was stationed in England during that time. After the war, Belden applied for work in the Foreign Service. He was sent to Belgium in 1947 where he held the position of visa specialist. Throughout most of his career he was stationed in Western Europe having assignments in England (1953-1963) and in France (1963-1967).

James Orson Belden retired to the United States and lived in Wilmington, Delaware where he died on August 12, 1998.

Lillian Gish, best known as one of the earliest stars of the nascent film industry, began as a child trouper on the stage with her sister Dorothy and their mother. At the age of five, she made her first appearance in a melodrama *In Convict Stripes*. A chance meeting in

1912 with another child actress Gladys Smith, who became world renowned as Mary Pickford, brought her and Dorothy to the attention of D. W. Griffith, a pioneering director in silent film days. She soon became his leading star and achieved stardom in his productions of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), and most notably in *Orphans of the Storm* (1922), playing opposite her sister Dorothy. She was the perfect Griffith heroine, revealing a strong will and intelligence under a fragile, almost ethereal exterior.

She parted company with Griffith over a salary dispute, later joining MGM in 1925. One of the few stars to have control over story and director, Gish made only two successful movies at MGM, *La Boheme* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Overshadowed by the rising prominence of Greta Garbo, she left MGM and made a few films as an independent. She then decided to return to the Broadway stage and found the right vehicle in director Jed Harris's production of *Uncle Vanya* in 1930. Her success in the play led to other starring roles, among them Ophelia opposite John Gielgud in the 1936 production of *Hamlet*. Thereafter, she never lacked for roles on Broadway and worked steadily as a stage actress until 1973.

In 1968, she suffered a personal blow when her sister Dorothy, with whom she was extremely close throughout her life, died. From time to time, she returned to the movies and also appeared on television from the 1950s to the 1970s, making her final appearance on screen in the movie *The Whales of August* in 1987. In 1970, she was awarded a special Oscar for her lifetime contributions to motion pictures. Lillian Gish died in 1993 in her hundredth year. She recorded the account of her life in *Life and Lillian Gish* (1932), *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* (1969) and *Dorothy and Lillian Gish* (1973).

### **Scope and Content Note**

The collection documents both the long-time correspondence between James Belden and Lillian Gish and his admiration for her which is illustrated in his documentation of her career. The correspondence spans the years 1936 to 1991 and contains many of Gish's opinions and insights into the world of the theater and her tastes in literature. The clippings and articles document primarily her earlier career, becoming sketchy during Ms. Gish's middle age.

### **Organization**

- Series I: Correspondence
- Series II: Ephemera

## Series Description / Container Listing

### Series I: Correspondence, 1936-1991

7 folders

#### Chronological

This series contains letters written by Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden. The letters which begin using formal address become friendly through the years. In them, Ms. Gish discusses the theater, literature, film and travel. There is a gap for the years 1945 through 1953 and 1970 through 1974.

- b. 1 f. 1      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1936**  
1 folder (7 letters)  
Correspondence [1936-1939] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.
- b. 1 f. 2      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1940**  
1 folder (6 letters)  
Correspondence [1940-1944] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.
- b. 1 f. 3      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1953**  
1 folder (7 letters)  
Correspondence [1953-1959] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.
- b. 1 f. 4      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1960**  
1 folder (11 letters)  
Correspondence [1960-1963] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.
- b. 1 f. 5      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1964**  
1 folder (8 letters)  
Correspondence [1964-1966] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.
- b. 1 f. 6      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1967**  
1 folder (7 letters)  
Correspondence [1967-1969] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.
- b. 1 f. 7      **Correspondence / Lillian Gish, 1975**  
1 folder (18 items)  
Correspondence [1975-1991] from Lillian Gish to James Orson Belden.

## Series II: Ephemera

This series contains articles, clippings, photographs and photocopies of photographs of Lillian Gish. Ms. Gish's early career is documented more fully than her later work. Of special note is a photocopy of a photograph of Lillian Gish and Paul Cadmus as *Egeria and Numa Pompilius*.

- b. 1 f. 8      *Lillian Gish: a legendary actress remembers...*, 1982  
1 folder  
Article about Lillian Gish in Guideposts magazine.
- b. 1 f. 9      **Biographical materials / Lillian Gish**  
1 folder  
Biographical writing about Lillian Gish. Front page as drawing of Lillian Gish by Peter Arno.
- b. 1 f. 10     **Photocopy of photograph of Paul Cadmus and Lillian Gish**  
1 folder  
Photocopy of a George Platt Lynes photograph entitled Paul Cadmus and Lillian Gish as *Egeria and Numa Pompilius*.
- b. 1 f. 11     **Photocopies of *Camille* photographs**  
1 folder  
Photocopies of photographs by Laura Gilpin for the production of *Camille* with Lillian Gish. Photocopies from 1986, original photographs from 1932.
- b. 1 f. 12-16   **Scrapbook / Lillian Gish**  
5 folders  
Scrapbook documenting the life and career of Lillian Gish. Scrapbook was disassembled and divided into 5 folders.