

## OREGON CARTOON INSTITUTE a short history

Dennis Nyback and I started Oregon Cartoon Institute in 2007 by inviting Oregon artists to educate audiences about the “who, what, where, when” of Oregon film, animation, and print cartooning history. As we did this, the artists kept volunteering answers to questions we didn’t ask. They kept telling us about the people who first identified their talent, encouraged their ambition, and supported their quest for technical mastery and artistic independence. I began to map this network of support chronologically, and what I learned transformed my understanding of the city in which I live.

I learned there are very concrete reasons behind our regional strength.

Oregon was quick out of the gate creating innovative, nationally recognized arts education programs: PAM’s Museum Art School opened in 1909, UO’s AAA in 1914. We were likewise ahead of the curve supporting independent film: American Lifeograph, a full fledged film studio, opened on SE Yamhill in 1910. Right from the beginning, at the very dawn of cinema, we made independent features, shorts, documentaries, and animation. Before most cities had either an art museum or a film industry, we had both. In the extraordinary group of filmmakers which includes **Will Vinton**, **Jim Blashfield**, **Bill Plympton**, **Joan Gratz**, **Gus Van Sant**, and **Matt Groening**, these two threads of early influence come together. Vinton wins an Oscar in 1975, Plympton is Oscar nominated in 1987, Blashfield wins a Cannes Golden Lion in 1989, Groening wins his first Emmy in 1990, Gratz wins an Oscar in 1993, and Van Sant is Oscar nominated in 1998. All are entrepreneurs. Vinton, Blashfield, and Gratz founded studios; Plympton, Groening, and Van Sant founded production companies. Portland’s early investment in arts education and support for independent film paid off. We prepared these artists for success.

Our regional strength, the writer-director-producer, is so distinctive it shows up before this group existed, in two artists educated at UO: **James Ivory** and **James Blue**. Both were Oscar nominated.

Thanks to the artists who collaborated with OCI, I now understand the way UO’s AAA, James Ivory’s alma mater, contributed directly to the strengths of the art & art history departments at PSU, Bill Plympton’s alma mater. I understand the way the interrelationship between these two universities fits into Oregon’s overall history of innovative arts education. Slowly but surely, OCI has pieced together a map of Oregon film history that makes sense. The artists themselves are responsible for this deepened understanding. They redirected my attention away from their individual achievements and toward the network of support from which they emerged. With their help, a pattern emerged, and Oregon’s previously inexplicable track record of film, animation and print cartooning excellence began to fit into a specifically regional, and completely logical, context.

I heard the stories from artists, not institutions. I believe stories are easily lost in institutions. When NWFC’s Thomas Phillipson brought together a group of Oregon film history stakeholders to discuss the problem of archiving Oregon film, he asked visiting expert Steve Seid, head of Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, for his opinion. Seid said “It doesn’t matter if you keep the films if you don’t keep the stories”.

OCI keeps the stories. Besides the stories which illuminate arts education and independent film, the warp and the weft, so to speak, of our regional film history, there are stories of individual

“Essential wisdom accumulates in the community just as fertility builds in the soil.” Wendell Berry

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lightning strikes of inspiration. For James Ivory, it was meeting a local architect who had worked in Hollywood designing sets. For Bill Plympton, it was seeing **Homer Groening's** short art films. For Matt Groening, it was watching guest speaker **Mel Blanc** unite a high school auditorium in laughter. How can we responsibly structure opportunities for the next generation to experience these same lightning strikes? How can we continue to build on existing strengths?

When I first heard Steve Seid recommend keeping stories, I did not know the archive he directed in Berkeley was founded by a Portlander. That story had been lost. I only learned later that **Sheldon Renan** wrote the 1970 NEA initiative responsible for the creation of a network of regional film centers. NWFC is one of them.

When Matt Groening came to speak at UNDERGROUND USA, OCI's 2016 symposium, he asked to be introduced to Sheldon Renan.

Through largely donated gifts of time, talent, and intelligence, Oregon's most distinguished artists have laid the groundwork for a deeper, more scholarly understanding of the national importance of our regional film, animation, and print cartooning history. Thanks to their work, and the support of Kinsman Foundation, Miller Foundation, and the institutions which partnered with us, Oregon Cartoon Institute can now begin moving beyond the "who, what, where, when" questions, and open up the question "why".