

The Accent of Truth: The Hollywood Research Bible and the Republic of Images

DESPITE DECADES OF BEING CONSIDERED quite conventional, the French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme has recently enjoyed a renewal of interest. The 2010 exhibition *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme* at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, in its catalog and in an accompanying collection of essays, argued that Gérôme was in fact a pioneer of modern painting. The exhibition and its publications make the case that Gérôme's work is in fact protocinematic—in its engagement with subjects of large-scale spectacle, its circulation in secondary formats such as prints and photographs, and its use of strategies of duration and anticipation.¹ While several authors discussed a few of his Roman paintings, such as *Hail, Caesar! We Who Are About to Die Salute You* (1859), *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer* (1862–83), and *Pollice Verso* (1872), missing from their discussions was the fact that Hollywood studios actually used copies of these paintings in their background research for productions of films set in ancient Rome. An examination of the materials used as visual guidance for the 1951 production by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) of the Roman melodrama *Quo Vadis*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, makes it clear that Gérôme's paintings of the Circus Maximus, along with many other images of the ancient city by academic artists including Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Thomas Couture, and hundreds of popular illustrations and photographs of ancient sites, were used by Hollywood studios to understand and recreate the look and material culture of antiquity in a way the audience would recognize and enjoy.

ABSTRACT Hollywood studio film production through the 1960s involved visual research into depictions of the past in order to help show the audience representations they could recognize and believe. This was part of a much larger and more complex republic of images through which pictures of the world, its people, and its material culture circulated within a system of modern media, including illustrated books, the pictorial press, and other image-based materials of which movies were a part. Hollywood cinema should be reconsidered an essential part of how twentieth-century audiences have perceived history, regardless of the accuracy of these depictions. REPRESENTATIONS 145. Winter 2019 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 152–73. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/REP.2019.145.1.152>.

By the mid-1920s, nearly every Hollywood studio had already established a research library where extensive collections of visual materials, including illustrated books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as photographs, post-cards, *cartes de visite*, stereo-view slides, maps, building blueprints, technical manuals, prints of paintings, and drawings were housed and managed. Their staff compiled these images into what they called “research bibles,” scrapbooks of thematically organized images. To obtain images that might help suggest a design for a prop or set, researchers scoured their own libraries; those of other studios; outside picture collections in the public libraries of Los Angeles, New York, London, and Paris; the Huntington Library; the libraries of the major universities of Los Angeles; the picture and photo collections of many state historical libraries; and the collections of other film services, such as Western Costume Company, the film industry’s largest costume maker. Research bibles helped film workers in managerial and craft departments—including producers, directors, writers, art directors, costume designers, hair and makeup designers, set decorators, and prop builders—visualize all sorts of mundane details, whether they were bowls, tables, and lamps or more exotic items like chariots, military uniforms, and fountains, to create believable cinematic environments. These multivolume collections could be reproduced, allowing every department to use the same visual sources simultaneously. The art department would see images of costumes, and the props department would see images of hair and makeup; all of a film’s creative crew had access to the same visual field. As a typical example, the *Quo Vadis* research bible contained five volumes, each focusing on a different element of the production: locations, costumes, sets, props, and sculpture from the ancient world.²

Hollywood studio films made through the 1960s were part of a much larger “republic of images.” The depictions of the world, its people, and its material culture found in films circulated within a larger system of modern visual media that included illustrated books, the pictorial press, and other image-based materials. Much like the Republic of Letters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, within which ideas and essays circulated among a class of learned people throughout Europe and North America, this twentieth-century visual network allowed for the wide dissemination of knowledge about the ancient and modern world throughout a broad, decentralized area. When producing movies, filmmakers were inspired by images gathered from a diverse set of illustrated sources that were recognizable to viewers precisely because such pictures were already circulating throughout many popular forms of media.

Scholarship regarding the research undertaken for Hollywood films has for the most part focused on issues of historical accuracy.³ In so doing, historians have often assumed that the films in question were simply

renarrating written historical discourse, emphasizing the attention filmmakers showed to how these narratives were previously presented in literature, rather than considering how Hollywood cinema has recirculated a body of visual knowledge of the world of the past. Such scholarship has largely overlooked the fact that film research was largely picture-centered, using methods related to earlier visual practices from the centuries before the advent of cinema, and that Hollywood research departments were less concerned with accuracy than with gathering a large quantity of visual media about a time and place. It did not matter, for example, that statuary in antiquity was frequently polychromatic, richly decorated in bright colors; by the twentieth century, the film audience familiar with printed and projected depictions of ancient Rome would have assumed that the white marble sculpture most often depicted was historically accurate.

Stephen Bann has explained how inauthentic historical narratives and objects were popular with scholars and audiences alike from 1750 through the late nineteenth century. “The critical preoccupation with authenticity and the transgressive wish to simulate authenticity are, in a certain sense, two sides of the same coin,” he explained.⁴ But in Hollywood, all materials relating to a film’s subject, time period, characters, and material culture were considered when creating a film; authenticity was merely a marketing flourish. Standard practice in the industry involved visual research that considered a tremendous range of illustrated media from popular and scholarly sources, which together contributed to what Bann has called “historical poetics.” Such a practice combined historical details with entertainment and spectacle, often with a tinge of irony, to interest, amuse, and educate the audience.⁵ This heterogeneous mix of source materials also structured history museums, dioramas, panoramas, historical literature, and historical painting in the nineteenth century, and it is the most common way modern people have experienced history for the past three centuries. In this way, the question of whether or not a film presents an authentic historical narrative misses the point; Hollywood filmmakers were much more interested in presenting familiar images that the audience would recognize from many earlier and well-circulated depictions of the past, regardless of their historical validity.

In the case of *Quo Vadis*, the film narrative contains true historical events, such as Nero’s setting fire to Rome in 64 CE or the spectacle of the crucifixions of early Christians. But the film also refers to thousands of images and elements from visual depictions of the city created, for the most part, not from the first century but from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Anne Friedberg, referring to the late twentieth-century point of view, explains that history is “inexorably bound with images of a constructed past: a confusing blur of ‘simulated’ and ‘real.’”⁶ Through eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century depictions of ancient Rome that were widely circulated in prints and illustrated journals, the modern understanding of the city changed to fit those images, and in turn, twentieth-century films were designed to echo those earlier images, using them as inspiration for their recreations of the ancient capital.

Likewise, nineteenth-century academic painters looked to earlier depictions of the past, including earlier narrative paintings and antiquarian images, to find visual inspiration for invented details. Gérôme, for example, gathered a tremendous volume of visual materials and pioneered the use of photographs to help him to recreate the material culture of the distant lands that were frequently his subject. He claimed that his Roman painting *Pollice Verso* was a depiction of gladiators in the Circus Maximus superior to his earlier *Hail, Caesar! We Who Are About to Die Salute You* because he had done more research on the armor and appearance of gladiators for the later picture. He explained that the accumulation of so many details helped to create an “accent of truth” that the audience would understand.⁷

It is worth dwelling on Gérôme’s “accent” for a moment, as it suggests a somewhat ephemeral or insignificant gesture, very different from the studious and judicious work of academic historians. The artist likely knew that most viewers of his paintings would be less concerned with carefully sourced depictions of the world than with spectacular scenes from antiquity. He was no doubt aware that viewers would neither notice nor care about the difference between a painting that showed how the past *seemed* to him rather than how it actually *was*. After all, it is unlikely that many viewers of *Hail, Caesar* would have known what he himself came to learn about how Roman gladiators actually looked. There were enough visual details in the painting to convince most in the audience that what they were seeing was historically accurate.

Considering that many nineteenth-century academic artists circulated their works through reproductions in books and the illustrated press or as commercial prints and photographs, it follows that some of the images they created came to be widely known. Gérôme was one of the most popular artists of his day, due in no small part to the promotion and circulation of prints and photogravures of his paintings made by his father-in-law Adolphe Goupil, a well-known art dealer. These reproductions circulated widely, and it is no surprise to find an image of *Pollice Verso* from an illustrated journal in the research bible for *Quo Vadis*.⁸

The republic of images accelerated with the rise of inexpensive illustrated magazines, books, and other media in the nineteenth century, and it changed how the modern world understood information in visual terms. Each Hollywood library had extensive collections of major illustrated

newspapers and magazines, including the *Illustrated London News*, *L'Illustration*, *Harper's*, *Collier's*, and eventually *Life*. Mason Jackson, an early editor of the *Illustrated London News*, explained that "when the history of our own age comes to be written, the pictorial newspapers will form an inexhaustible storehouse for the historian."⁹ While their inquiries were not scholarly, Hollywood researchers looked to nineteenth-century illustrated sources as storehouses of visual knowledge.¹⁰ Not only did the pervasiveness of the illustrated press give Hollywood researchers ample sources for representations of historical and contemporary events and the details within those scenes, but also, thanks to the popularity of such newspapers and magazines, many of the images that made their way into research bibles and later influenced films were already familiar to audiences when they were echoed onscreen. By the middle of the twentieth century, researchers in every studio library would have had bound editions of the same journals the early audience had read, in which paintings by nineteenth-century artists would have been reproduced. Film researchers would have scoured these journals for details on the world the way an antiquarian from two centuries earlier would have examined a Roman monument.

Beyond the confines of Hollywood, the pervasive distribution of the pictorial press led modern readers to gain a basic visual and intellectual understanding of certain newsworthy aspects of the world. The history on offer seemed true because familiar. In 1910, a review of a short film series, *The Life of Moses*, marveled that "the research which must have been required to secure the information necessary to reproduce the ancient scenes and have them approximate the best modern knowledge of Egypt and Israel, is well worthy the consideration of scholars and others interested in accurate work of this type."¹¹ In fact, for their research on "the appropriate scenic backgrounds," the film's producers looked to nineteenth-century art sources including Gérôme, Alma-Tadema, James Tissot, Gustave Doré, Edwin Austin Abbey, Briton Revière, Jozef Israëls, and Benjamin Constant.¹² Even in this early era of American cinema, companies were already using fine art sources to make their films appear familiar to audiences. Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that the film critic and the typical filmgoer already had a general understanding of ancient Egypt and Israel from nineteenth-century paintings they would have seen in museums, illustrated books, and the illustrated press.

Frances Richardson, a pioneer in studio research departments and the long-time head of the Twentieth Century Fox library, reflecting on the visual knowledge system she helped to develop and the popular media she employed for the work, remarked: "For information on [nineteenth-century England] we are thankful beyond measure to George Cruikshank for his contributions to *Punch* and his illustrations of Dickens. . . . While

his sketches were done somewhat in cartoon fashion, they pictured everything in the life of that time in England from wooden legs, brooms, and garden tools to doctors' bags and chandeliers; from police uniforms and cooks' attire to court counselors' wigs and dog collars."¹³ Richardson and her fellow researchers understood the world as an intersection of many specific visual and material details, such as brooms, uniforms, wigs, and dog collars, an understanding that proved invaluable to the filmmakers they assisted.

Richardson's comment about finding inspiration in prints also echoes a sentiment from nearly a century earlier by the French painter Eugène Delacroix, who explained the value of daguerreotypes to his own research for his paintings. The new medium, Delacroix believed, could reveal "details almost always neglected in the drawings from nature and thus introduce the artist into the complete knowledge of the construction; the shadows and the lights are found there with their true character."¹⁴ While the two writers differed in their specific concerns—material culture for Richardson, naturalistic light and shadow for Delacroix—both turned to pre-existing images to guide their respective practices. Delacroix called photography "an advisor, [or] a sort of dictionary."¹⁵ By the same token, the film director who needed to "define" the look of a wooden leg might consult the research bible's encyclopedic compendium of the world's visual and material culture. The similarities between the practices of academic painters in the nineteenth century and Hollywood research libraries in the twentieth show a clear methodological continuity.

The Hollywood researchers' selection of images of ancient Rome from sources showing the appearance of mundane objects (lamps, benches, military armor, and the like), relates to an older, antiquarian impulse in the visual appreciation of the past. Historian Peter Miller has argued that an antiquarian examination of the physical elements of the past is as significant a mode of understanding history as is academic scholarship. Antiquarians of the seventeenth century, Miller writes, concluded that "things—objects, matter—constituted the building blocks of history."¹⁶ The same could be said of the methods used by Hollywood researchers and filmmakers who recreated the look and feel of the past by accumulating material details through a close analysis of images of the period, whether those details derive from antiquarians such as Bernard de Montfaucon or from academic painters like Gérôme. Researchers were agnostic about the veracity of the images they gathered and were mainly concerned with offering directors thorough collections of images relating to the movie's location and era. It is not difficult to imagine, then, how images that experts or historians might consider misleading or inaccurate found their way into research bibles.



FIGURE 1. The Circus Maximus, *Illustrated London News*, April 14, 1923, in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. I, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

Unlike seventeenth-century antiquarians who might have visited Roman-era ruins in person or acquired printed images during travel to faraway locations, Hollywood researchers gathered materials through rather typical library work, including writing and examining bibliographies on recurring topics, subscribing to and indexing newspapers and magazines, gathering older issues of significant journals, and seeking specific images from public library rare book and picture collections. They would note each image in every journal issue and add them to card catalogs organized by visual item rather than by call number. When they needed to find images of Roman wax tablets or armor, they could easily retrieve the book or issue that contained such pictures. In this way, when MGM researchers were building the *Quo Vadis* research bible they looked for depictions of the Circus Maximus and easily found one in the April 14, 1923, issue of the *Illustrated London News*, which they rephotographed and pasted into the book (fig. 1). This image was a modern depiction of the ancient arena, and, while likely based on earlier images and possibly photographic evidence of the structure as it stood when the artist executed the picture, it was not actually a representation of the stadium made thousands of years earlier. Such a fact did not matter to researchers, who understood that it still showed a certain vision of the structure in a somewhat nonspecific past moment. The “accent of truth” was what cinema researchers were practically concerned to present to filmmakers.

Examining the *Quo Vadis* research bible further, we find many images that seem to have been directly copied into the finished film. In the opening sequence, Roman soldiers march along the Appian Way and pause at an overlook above the city. Two officers, Marcus Vinicius and his lieutenant, sit atop horses in armor decorated with medals won during their recent battles as a legion of soldiers stands behind them with shields and weapons. The research bible has extensive antiquarian images of Roman soldiers, armor, and medals, as well as views of the Appian Way (figs. 2, 3, and 4). These images seem to be stripped of much of their narrative function and represent a visual catalog of people and their material culture based on culture, class, and rank. Later, as the story moves into the city, there is a scene where

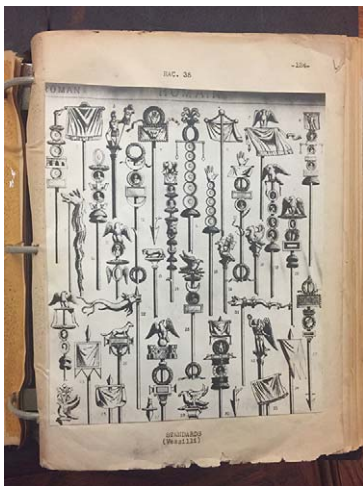


FIGURE 2. “Standards,” in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. IV, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

FIGURE 3. “Decoration for Valor,” in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. II, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.



FIGURE 4. Nerva and Vinicius arrive in Rome with breastplates decorated with medals for valor, *Quo Vadis*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy (1951; Burbank, CA, 2008), DVD.

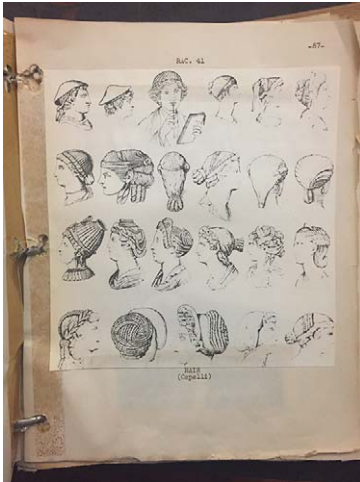


FIGURE 5. “Hair,” in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. II, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

the female lead character, Lygia, meets some of the ladies in waiting at Nero’s palace. The bible provides many images of hairstyles, gowns, and ancient statues of women, again all elements of a syntax of the past’s material culture (figs. 5, 6, and 7).

Still later in the film, a scene in which the strongman slave Ursus fights a gladiator in the street seems specifically choreographed after an illustration by Polish artist Jan Styka, whose images based on the *Quo Vadis* novel were published in the French magazine *Le Figaro Illustré* in 1902. Both the fight scene in the film and the published illustration show the characters wrestling in a paved passageway with a fountain, suggesting that the

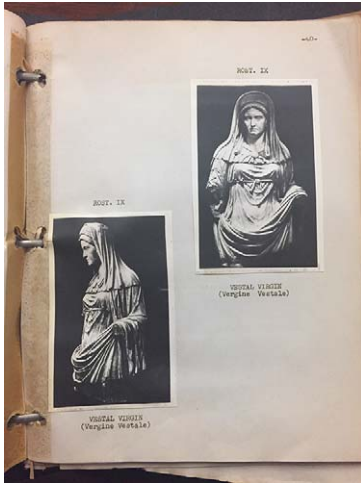


FIGURE 6. “Vestal Virgin,” in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. II, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

FIGURE 7. Lygia meets Acte and a hairdresser in Nero’s house of women, *Quo Vadis*.



choreography of the scene could have been directly inspired by Styka’s lesser-known images (figs. 8 and 9). Finally, much of the design of the sequence depicting the slaughter of the Christians in the Circus Maximus seems to have been based on paintings of the stadium by Gérôme. Like Gérôme, *Quo Vadis* director Mervyn LeRoy shot the scene largely from the dirt track looking up at the stands, rather than solely from the stands looking down (figs. 10 and 11). All of these images, whether they were more imaginative and narrative-based, such as illustrations in journals, or more academic and antiquarian, such as books of military uniform and weaponry typologies, functioned by showing details filmmakers could copy, frequently

FIGURE 8. [Ursus wrestles Croton], in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. 1, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

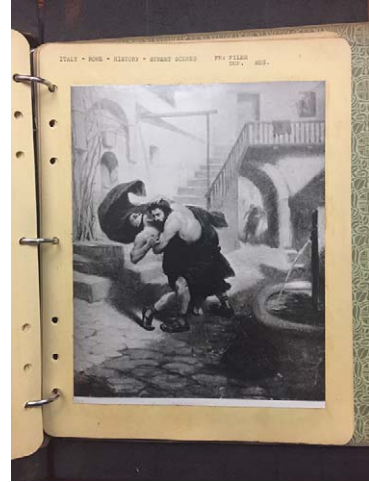


FIGURE 9. Ursus wrestles Croton, *Quo Vadis*.

from pictures the audience might already know as they circulated in the republic of images.

Rather than simply responding to questions from craft workers about the details relating to specific scenes in a given film, research bibles were organized on the principle of visual surplus. The excess of materials gave additional information about the period, regardless of how it related to the narrative. For this reason, research bibles always included material that never appeared in a film. This was a sign not of inefficiency, but of hyper-efficiency; a surplus of images allowed craft workers and filmmakers to find background material on nearly any unanticipated but crucial detail, no



FIGURE 10. “Arena” [*Pollice Verso* by Jean-Léon Gérôme], in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. II, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.



FIGURE 11. Slaughter of Christians in the Circus Maximus, *Quo Vadis*.

matter how obscure. Because of the large store of visual evidence in the bibles, directors were able to incorporate story and script revisions quickly and efficiently. Excess material could also help designers invent new details that looked appropriate for the time and place, regardless of the veracity of

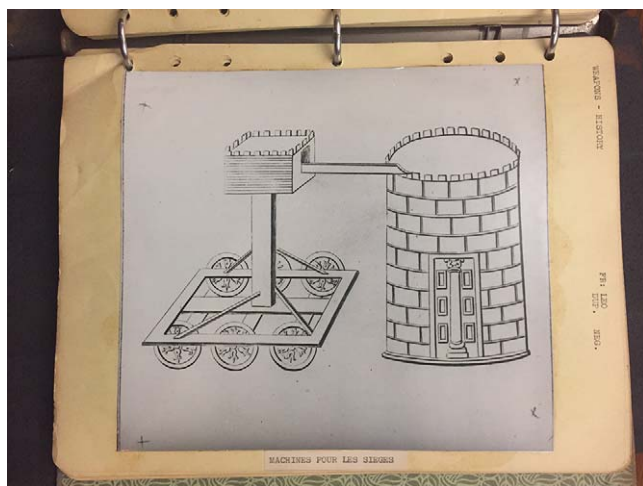


FIGURE 12. “Machines Pour les Sièges,” in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. I, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

their origins. For example, the *Quo Vadis* research bible includes many images of chariot races and gladiators with armor and several of war machines taken from Montfaucon’s opus *L’Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, despite the fact no gladiators, chariot races, or battle scenes appear in the film (fig. 12).¹⁷ The inclusion of such images testifies to the practice of collecting a broad range of material relevant to a given film, in this case items that reflect the nature of Roman military and popular culture. For researchers, any images of Rome could be categorized and included in the bible, as they added more visual background for the film’s production. Many of these details would not be used in the films for which they were gathered, but when the bibles were later loaned out for subsequent productions, these elements would find new value for other filmmakers.

As a visual encyclopedia of Roman material culture that offers a wide scope of entries, the *Quo Vadis* research bible also introduces a nonspecificity to the place and period in which the film is set. Quite unlike a traditional antiquarian practice, which would have relied heavily on the historical accuracy of particular objects of different types from specific periods, the scrapbook contains images from different eras of Roman culture and from several locations in the Empire. In one image from the bible’s third volume, which relates to sets, a print of the interior of a house bears the caption, “Living Room-Petronius or Plautius/The House of Faunus-Restoration,” suggesting that the picture could be useful for



FIGURE 13. “A Roman Orgie” [*Romans of the Decadence* by Thomas Couture], in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. I, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

designing sets for the homes of two wealthy characters in the film.¹⁸ The House of the Faun was one of the grandest homes in Pompeii, built no later than the first century BCE and buried in ash along with the rest of the region following the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. While there might have been some differences between a building in Pompeii and one in Rome constructed a hundred years apart, they were irrelevant to researchers who saw the spaces simply as collections of details that could produce the sense of space from antiquity. For cinema researchers, the precise location and period of a building was irrelevant as long as it seemed right and evoked the traditional understanding of these spaces.

The research bible also included the imaginative renditions of historical images found in paintings by Gérôme, Couture, and Alma-Tadema. In addition to Gérôme’s *Pollice Verso*, the bible included representations of Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence* (1847) and Alma-Tadema’s *Spring* (1894) (figs. 13 and 14), all of which provided creative renditions of the past through which Hollywood filmmakers could interpret specific details. These pictures include certain elements of history, but their spectacular aspects were equally important, providing scenes that would grip viewers.

Film theorist Philip Rosen has explained that in recreations of the past, from historical museums to cinema, there is a “slippage” from accuracy to the appearance of accuracy.¹⁹ This feeling of the past is important for the creation of a historical poetics for which details about architecture, costumes,

FIGURE 14. “A Procession of Flora” [*Spring* by Lawrence Alma-Tadema], in *Quo Vadis* Research Bible, vol. I, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.



and props are foundational. Gérôme’s painting shows how the Circus Maximus might have appeared from the ground level during a contest of gladiators; Couture’s painting shows the general clothing of wealthy Roman citizens, as well as the scale of architecture relative to those people. In the hands of Hollywood craftspeople, such visual details helped to build believable screen images, which contributed to the film’s popularity.

By the end of the 1940s—and presumably years before—images from earlier films had also become valuable as source material. Two memos from the production of *Quo Vadis* reveal the importance of including earlier movies, now part of the republic of images, into the visual materials gathered for filmmakers on later productions. Researchers knew that, aside from the convenience of their ready availability in studio storage vaults, these earlier productions had already provided indelible impressions of ancient Rome to the contemporary filmgoer. As classics scholar Maria Wyke has noted, the so-called peplum films have been “crucial to the formation and wide dissemination of an historical consciousness of ancient Rome.”²⁰

In the summer of 1948, two years before production on *Quo Vadis* began in earnest, studio executives sent “set and costume stills” from the 1918 film *Fabiola* to the art department for research on architecture.²¹ This earlier film, directed by Enrico Guazzoni, who had made a name for himself with a feature adaptation of *Quo Vadis* in 1913, contained many visual details in costumes and interiors that would have been valuable to the later Hollywood production. While the stills were evidence only of a film made thirty years earlier rather than an accurate record of the past, they offered insight into what viewers would expect ancient Rome to look like. The following year, as preproduction work on the film continued, the production team in Rome

watched the chariot race sequence from the studio's 1925 *Ben-Hur* production, presumably for further guidance on costumes, props, and sets.²² Filmgoers who had seen *Fabiola* or *Ben-Hur* decades earlier might have recognized those images in *Quo Vadis*; the production team found a clear and believable portrayal of the visual and material culture of that era of ancient Rome that midcentury audiences could recognize. The cinematic past supplanted true history; familiarity trumped accuracy.

When *Quo Vadis* was released in theaters beginning in the fall of 1951, it made \$21 million at the box office worldwide, or nearly five times the average successful film of the period.²³ Produced for the astounding sum of \$7.6 million, nearly three times the cost of a major film at the time, it was one of the most profitable movies the studio had ever produced.²⁴ After the film's release, its research materials were consulted by craftspeople making peplum films for the next several decades. These later films would follow the vision of Rome presented in the research bible and would each become part of the greater tradition of peplum films and the generally accepted sense of Rome built over the previous centuries. After decades of representing the ancient city using many of the same visual sources—including earlier films set in the ancient city—these later productions had to follow suit by maintaining a similar appearance, on or off the screen, so that audiences would recognize the *mise-en-scène* as properly Roman.

Following standard library protocol, each of the bible's volumes was given a check-out card to track to whom the book was lent and for which film. Several significant productions used these materials, including Twentieth Century Fox's 1953 film *The Robe*, which was the first film produced in the widescreen CinemaScope format. Like *Quo Vadis*, it was set in the years following Christ's crucifixion and also showed the growth of the early church. Several largely forgotten films also referred to these materials for guidance on sets and costumes, including Douglas Sirk's 1954 widescreen Technicolor film *Sign of the Pagan*, made by Universal-International, which took place in the Roman Empire of the fifth century as it battled the encroaching armies of Attila the Hun, and the MGM Esther Williams romantic comedy *Jupiter's Darling* in 1955, which involved the star swimming through ancient Rome. Each of these films showed similar Roman military uniforms and standards, as well as architecture, hairstyles, and decorative details. Because Universal-International likely copied the images in the bible while making Sirk's film, it is probable that the production team for Stanley Kubrick's 1960 *Spartacus*, also a Universal-International production, referred to the same material for guidance on the recreation of Roman villas and gladiator costumes.

Edward Carfagno, who served as the art director for *Quo Vadis*, later worked on several other MGM peplum films, including Joseph Mankiewicz's

1953 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, starring the young Marlon Brando as Marc Antony. While the visual style of this later film appears more modernist in its black and white rectilinear starkness, many details of the costumes and props are similar to those used in *Quo Vadis*.²⁵ This film serves as an important example of how research bibles merely presented information about material culture in an essentially atonal way; creative teams were tasked with organizing those materials and developing a style for the screen. Research bibles offered what was essentially data and creative workers organized the details.

Carfagno's most important project was MGM's massive 1959 epic *Ben-Hur*, one of the biggest films the studio ever produced, and indeed one of the most acclaimed peplum films in Hollywood history. It cost a staggering \$15 million to produce and earned an equally impressive \$67 million, shattering the studio records set by *Quo Vadis* eight years earlier.²⁶ The similarity of the Circus Maximus in *Ben-Hur* with that of *Quo Vadis* strongly suggests that the craftspeople on the later film consulted the prints of Gérôme's paintings in the bible and might also have looked to the earlier film itself for visual guidance.

At the same time that film studios were concerned to present audiences with films that looked familiar, a film made only thirty years earlier became as valuable a source of what ancient Rome looked like as an antiquarian image from two centuries before, or a photograph of ruins and objects that were constructed during the classical era itself. For researchers, visual information from antiquarian sources, from nineteenth-century highbrow and popular sources, or from twentieth-century films all had the same informational merit, and all emerged from a similar body of images in circulation by the middle of the twentieth century. Much like historical spectacles of the nineteenth century, Hollywood films were created on a foundation of antiquarian and archaeological veracity upon which layers of imaginative spectacle were constructed.

When Bann argued that in *Ben-Hur* "the amphitheater is constructed in clear analogy to Gérôme," he was not only pointing out a simple visual allusion but also suggesting a relationship between the painting, the screen image, and a construction of a specific sense of the past.²⁷ While it is now clear that there was a direct relationship between the depiction of the Circus Maximus in the film epic and in the painting by Gérôme, is it also important to acknowledge how influential that film was to the cinematic depictions of Rome that followed, and how much of the cinematic view of Rome that originated in nineteenth-century paintings has come to influence a modern view of the ancient city.

In an oft-cited anecdote, Ridley Scott remarked that the paintings of Gérôme inspired him to make his 2000 film *Gladiator*.²⁸ He could easily have

said that he looked to earlier peplum productions such as *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis* for visual guidance. But the precise origin of the information that Scott—or anyone in the recent era—might have had about ancient Rome cannot be precise or complete. The peplum film images have become “icons and clichés” of ancient Rome, as Ivo Blom has explained.²⁹ For this reason, Scott did not have to see an image of a Gérôme painting to understand the time period; it was already part of his cultural memory.

When *Quo Vadis* director Mervyn LeRoy described the function of research departments, he said that their job was “to catalogue everything that might be needed for the picture.”³⁰ This explanation points to the key antiquarian element of visual research in Hollywood in which taxonomic sources were mixed with imaginative and narrative representations of the world. For *Quo Vadis*, all visual materials were treated with an equivalent understanding, regardless of whether they derived from actual objects, as in the case of the many images from Montfaucon, or from narrative depictions of Rome created in later periods, such as the paintings by Gérôme and Alma-Tadema. For a craft worker designing or building the visual space of a film, the veracity of the original sources did not matter. Hollywood studios were more concerned with finding creative ways to produce the most believable film, one that would tell a story that would appeal to the audience.

Film researchers’ use of earlier visual representations of the past has had the effect not simply of a certain degree of historical accuracy in movies, but of the creation of a wider cultural understanding of ancient Rome. *Quo Vadis* may look like the Rome that actually existed, but, more importantly, the film presents a cultural construction of Rome that had been developing over the course of the past nine centuries. American philosopher Nelson Goodman, in examining aesthetic realism, concluded that the claim that “a picture looks like nature often means only that it looks the way nature is usually painted.”³¹ Unlike the simple function of a hall of mirrors, which can disorient and hide elements, the research bibles used in Hollywood actually worked as guides to a wider and older understanding of how the past looked and had been represented by earlier artists.

Peter Miller has considered the “antiquaries, connoisseurs, collectors, curators, reenactors, writers of historical fiction, documentary filmmakers, and public historians,” who would not count as true “historians” today, as agents nonetheless of valuable inquiry.³² To this list we should add Hollywood studio filmmakers who have used research libraries to access thousands of images to help them recreate the past. The audience would understand ancient Rome through the gowns, lamps, armor, and statuary in any given frame as much as through the political motives of Nero or the popular Christian uprising growing in the streets. Like antiquarians, commercial Hollywood films aimed to present the past through its material

and visual culture, linking the past to the present through both its materials and its stories.

The similarity in the look of that material culture, in which each new peplum film looks like all others of the past, has been called by Charles Tashiro a “hall of mirrors.”³³ Indeed, this is a common appraisal of such films by art historians who have noticed quotations of famous paintings in peplum productions. Through the examination of research bibles, we can easily see that such quotations were not the result of luck or traditional visual reference. Rather, research bibles show how the ahistorical and temporally disordered visual understanding of the world embodied in them allowed filmmakers to create moving pictures an audience would recognize from a wide field of visual media, both popular and arcane. So much of the sense of the past consumed and enjoyed in cinema balconies was due to the films’ many historical and material truths, but the films also excited and connected with viewers through their depictions of familiar scenes and objects.

Films projected worlds of material culture found in the visual archives of illustrated books, magazines, newspapers, and other media—or what Christopher Wood has called the “evidence” of the past or the “unintended” ephemera of a culture—to create a view that most filmgoers would have understood from the vantage of the historical poetics of their time.³⁴ The objects that appear in films project the accent of truth, even if the scholar of history might find insufficient value in such details. Reconsidering both antiquarianism and Hollywood movies as essential parts of how twentieth-century film viewers have perceived the past not only brings renewed attention to both areas but also brings a greater depth of understanding to the study and presentation of the visual past beyond the domain of academic history.

Notes

1. Dominique de Font-Reaulx, “Gérôme and Photography: Accurate Depictions of an Imagined World,” in Laurence Des Cars, Dominique de Font-Reaulx, and Edouard Papet, eds., *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Leon Gérôme* (Los Angeles, 2010), 213–58; Dominique Paini, “Painting and the Moment Just Afterward, or, Gérôme as Film-Maker,” in Des Cars, Font-Reaulx, and Papet, *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Leon Gérôme*, 333–40; Emily Beeny, “Blood Spectacle,” in Scott Christopher Allan and Mary Morton, eds., *Reconsidering Gérôme* (Los Angeles, 2012), 40–53; Marc Gotlieb, “Gérôme’s Cinematic Imagination,” in Allan and Morton, *Reconsidering Gérôme*, 54–64; furthermore, Wolfgang Kemp examined this concept years earlier in his essay “Death at Work: A Case Study on Constitutive Blanks in Nineteenth-Century Painting,” trans. Raymond Meyer, *Representations* 10 (Spring 1985): 103–23.

2. *Quo Vadis* Research Bibles I, [Locations]; II, Costumes; III, Sets; IV, Props; and a book marked “Received from London Studio, December 1950, v. II,” including shots of the Appian Way and sculpture and objects from museums, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) Research Department files, Collection number 323, University of California, Library Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles. Volumes II and III are both included in the same three-ring binder. The volume marked “Received from London Studio” was created at MGM’s Borehamwood, London, studio, which managed the production of the film in Rome’s Cinecittà studio. Considering that the book is marked “v. II,” there was likely a first volume that has been lost.
3. Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead’: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1988): 269–83; Vivian Sobchack, “‘Surge and Splendor’: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic,” *Representations* 29 (Winter 1990): 24–29; George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992), 111–18; Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Film and History,” in *The Sage Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald and Michael Renov (Los Angeles, 2008), 199–215; Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2012); J. E. Smyth, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane* (Lexington, KY, 2006).
4. Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge, 1984), 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 3. Bann borrowed the notion of historical poetics from Hayden White, who wrote in his influential book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), about the literary foundation of history writing. Bann has brought this concept out of the theoretical and historiographic and into the practical world of nineteenth-century culture. See the introduction to *Metahistory*, “The Poetics of History,” 1–42.
6. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, 1993), 7.
7. Fanny Field Hering, *The Life and Works of Jean Léon Gérôme* (New York, 1892), 88. In one example, Ken Jacobson pointed to Gérôme’s 1879–80 painting *The Snake Charmer*, in which the blue Arabic script and elaborate floral motifs were directly inspired by a photograph of the Topkapi Palace in Constantinople taken by the commercial firm Abdullah Frères, which the painter had acquired on his travels through the Middle East. See Ken Jacobson, *Odalisques and Arabesques: Orientalist Photography, 1839–1925* (London, 2007), 69–70.
8. *Quo Vadis* research bible, II–III, 112. See Stephen Bann, *Distinguished Images: Prints in the Visual Economy of Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven, 2013). For more on the relationship between Gérôme and Adolphe Goupil and the circulation of the artist’s images, see Hélène Lafont-Couturier, “Mr. Gérôme Works for Goupil,” in *Gérôme and Goupil: Art and Enterprise*, ed. Hélène Lafont-Couturier (Pittsburgh, 2000), 13–43. More proof of the cultural importance of these reproductions of Gérôme’s Roman paintings lies in the fact that several nineteenth-century prints of these works are still in the picture collection of the Western Costume Company, one of the last fully functional research libraries in Hollywood. It is likely that each studio would have had similar prints in their libraries during the classical studio era, roughly from 1927 through the 1960s.
9. Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press: Its Origin and Progress* (1885; reprint, Detroit, 1968), 361.
10. Jennifer Tucker, in examining Jackson’s book, has explained how the illustrated press was fundamental in creating the power of visual media in the

- modern world: “By the 1890s illustrated newspapers were established in many countries: at least five in Paris, one in St. Petersburg, six in New York, three in Australia, two in Warsaw, one in Mexico, one in Rio de Janeiro, and two in Montreal”; Jennifer Tucker, “‘Famished for News Pictures’: Mason Jackson, the *Illustrated London News*, and the Pictorial Spirit,” in *Getting the Picture: The Visual Culture of the News*, ed. Jason Hill and Vanessa R. Schwartz (New York, 2015), 213.
11. Review of *The Life of Moses, IV*, directed by J. Stuart Blackton, *Moving Picture World* 6, January–June 1910, 299.
 12. *Vitragraph Bulletin* 204 (January 15–31, 1910).
 13. Frances Richardson, “The Twentieth Century-Fox Research Library,” *California Librarian* 28, no. 2 (April 1967): 96.
 14. Eugène Delacroix, “De l’enseignement du dessin,” in *Oeuvres littéraires*, vol. 1, *Études esthétiques* (Paris, 1923), 17, translation by author. The idea of a photograph as a dictionary is somewhat similar to William Henry Fox Talbot’s notion, in his book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844; reprint, New York, 1969), 3, that photographic images “will surely find their own sphere of utility, both for completeness of detail and correctness of perspective.” Both Delacroix and Talbot point to the value in photography relating to the medium’s ability to reproduce minute elements of nature and how useful this would be for viewers.
 15. Delacroix, “De l’enseignement du dessin.” Furthermore, a trade in stock photographic prints, called *études d’après nature*, emerged in the mid-nineteenth century to aid and inspire artists representing the natural and human-built world. For more on the use of photographs as *aides mémoires* for artists, see Ulrich Pohlmann, “Another Nature; or, Arsenal of Memory: Photography as Study Aid, 1850–1900,” in *The Artist and the Camera: Degas to Picasso*, ed. Dorothy Kosinski (Dallas, 1999), 43–57; and Ken Jacobson, *Étude d’Après Nature: Nineteenth Century Photographs in Relation to Art* (Petches Bridge, UK, 1996), 7–18.
 16. Peter N. Miller and François Louis, eds., *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500–1800* (Ann Arbor, 2011), 37.
 17. Bernard de Montfaucon, *L’Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, book 5, chapter 7, “Où il est parlé de la castrametation, des sièges & des machines de guerre,” 2nd ed. (Paris, 1722), 140–43. Plates in this volume show military “siege machines,” weapons, and military encampment arrangements.
 18. The image is from *A History of the Ancient World* by Michael Rostovtzeff, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1927), which traces the political history of the Mediterranean region and is extensively illustrated with images of art and architecture from different regions over time.
 19. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, 2001), 65.
 20. Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (New York, 1997), 3.
 21. Miss D. Wright to Mr. [Alfred] Junge, 11 August 1948, MGM British Production Collections, f. 163, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles. At this early point, more than two years before production began, John Huston was slated to direct and Alfred Junge was scheduled as the art director; both men would leave the production before it began.
 22. Henry Henigson to Leon Algrant, 7 April 1949, John Huston papers, f. 756, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

23. Adjusted for inflation, this is roughly equal to just under \$201 million in 2018 according to <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.
24. "Loew's Incorporated Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Operating Results by Pictures, 1951–1952," Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles. Adjusted for inflation, this is roughly equal to just under \$73 million according to <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.
25. Roland Barthes wrote of the actors' bangs in Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar*, that "the frontal lock overwhelms one with evidence, no one can doubt that he is in Ancient Rome"; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), 24. While Barthes used this hairstyle as an example of a readable sign, it is important to note that these bangs were not arbitrary; the craftspeople for the film consulted the *Quo Vadis* research bible, where they saw sources for the haircuts, most of which came from photographs of Roman statuary in museum collections.
26. "Loew's Incorporated Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Operating Results by Pictures, 1959–1960." Adjusted for inflation this is roughly equal to a cost just under \$144 million and box office earnings just under \$642 million according to <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.
27. Stephen Bann, *Ways Around Modernism* (New York, 2007), 191.
28. Alex Lewin, "Rome Wasn't Filmed in a Day," *Premiere*, May 2000, 44. Also see Marc Gotlieb, "Gérôme's Cinematic Imagination," in Allan and Morton, *Reconsidering Gérôme*, 57, and Ivo Blom, "Quo vadis? From Painting to Cinema and Everything in Between," in Leonardo Quaresima and Laura Vichi, eds., *The Tenth Muse: Cinema and Other Arts* (Udine, Italy, 2001), 281.
29. Blom, "Quo Vadis? From Painting to Cinema and Everything in Between," 288.
30. Mervyn LeRoy with Alyce Canfield, *It Takes More than Talent* (New York, 1953), 201.
31. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, 1976), 39. W. J. T. Mitchell later investigated this claim and refined it, explaining that "'realism' cannot simply be equated with the familiar standard of depiction but must be understood as a special project within a tradition of representation, a project that has ideological ties with certain modes of literary, historical, and scientific representation"; *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986), 73.
32. Peter Miller, "Antiquarianism and Its Images," USC Mellon Sawyer Seminar, "Visual History: The Past in Pictures," Workshop Two, "The 16th and 17th Centuries," February 6, 2017.
33. Charles Tashiro, "When History Films (Try to) Become Paintings," *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 19–33.
34. Christopher Wood, "The Referential Image," USC Mellon Sawyer Seminar, "Visual History: The Past in Pictures," Workshop Two, "The 16th and 17th Centuries," February 6, 2017.