

THE *Disney* ladies

They were the women who brought the first Mickey and Minnie Mouse characters to life – but they never got any credit. Now, says Melonie Clarke, their story has finally been told

When most people think about the groundbreaking animators at the Walt Disney Studios, the majority will think of Disney's Nine Old Men: Les Clark, Marc Davis, Ollie Johnston, Milt Kahl, Ward Kimball, Eric Larson, John Lounsbery, Frank Thomas and Wolfgang Reitherman.

However, as Mindy Johnson's spectacular new work, *Ink & Paint: The Women of Walt Disney's Animation*, reveals, there were a great many women who helped the Disney studio become what it is today, but it is a legacy that had been largely forgotten. When you consider, as one woman working in animation put it, that 'without the artists of Ink & Paint, you'd be looking at nothing more than pencil sketches on the screen', it's shocking that these women have faded into the background. The Ink & Paint department was where the images that had been drawn by the illustrators would be inked and painted onto celluloid, ready for film.

'One of the chief archivists [at Disney] had a folder in his hand and handed it to me very sheepishly and said: "This is all we have on Inking & Painting." It had five pieces of paper in it... proof positive that history is recorded, preserved, archived, written about and documented from a male perspective,' Mindy tells me.

'There are wonderful books out there [on Disney], but usually the role of women is condensed into one sentence. I was led to believe that there were maybe one or two women who worked at the studio. There was nothing written or documented about them. You hear about Walt's wife, Lillian [whom he met when she was working for him at the studio], as just his wife, but there was nothing about the fact that the wives were there helping to make the first Mickey Mouses, the first Minnie Mouses, the first Oswalds. Sometimes they didn't even cash their pay cheques in order to keep the little company going, but the sacrifices they made, and the hard work they put in, were never properly acknowledged.'

With barely any record of the women who had such a hand in Disney's success, Mindy had to research her subject for five years before the women of Walt's world began to appear, which, by her own admission, still 'merely scratches the surface'.

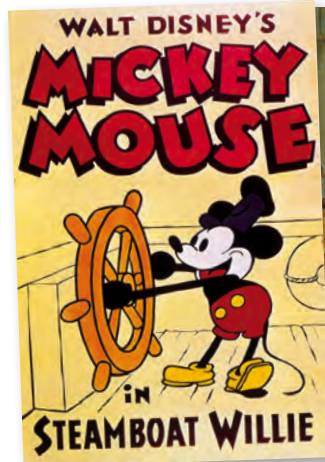
'I went through the ledgers and we looked into the names we found. Then we found the name for the place they got the celluloid from and there was a stack of correspondence with Hazel Sewell. She was one of the first women in animation to run a major department [Ink & Paint]. She was also, I think, probably one of the most unsung people in animation.'

Hazel is certainly one of the most important names that crop up at the studios again and again during the early years. 'In the 11 years or so she was there, she created an all-female team of blackeners and raised the level from the original basic, crude blackening to the fine artistry evident in *Snow White* in 1937. The colours, line work, detail and expression – that's all created by the hands of women.'

'These women truly were artists in their own right. If you see their own art, their fine artistry, it's just brilliant – at least on the same level as, and often superior to, a lot of the men's work.'

Women got the chance to break so many boundaries at the studio. 'There are a lot of feminine firsts; for example, Louisa Fields. She was Hollywood's first female music editor and she worked on *Fantasia*... Walt didn't see hair colour or shoe size or anything, just your capability.'

Women had always played a big part in Walt's life. 'The influence his grandmother had on him as a



Ginni Mack, one of the inkers, with Walt Disney in 1955



Below, left to right:
Mary Weiser, 1934;
Hazel Sewell, 1934;
Gyo Fujikawa
working on *Fantasia*
in 1940; animator
Rae Medby, 1941



storyteller was very apparent. She read Grimm's Fairy Tales and introduced him to story and imagination. His mother, too, was a vibrant, colourful force in his life. She had a wonderful sense of humour... You could see that women had a strong influence on him.

'His wife [Lillian] and his daughters were also very influential. He listened to them and valued their opinions. Reading *Mary Poppins* to his daughters and hearing them laugh and giggle - that's a pretty major influence. And look at the success he made of that film.'

It was this respect of women that encouraged Walt to seek them out to work for him. 'Walt was very progressive... he purposely sought out women artists and advanced them in editing and every other area.'

In the 1930s, Walt decided that he wanted to create longer animations,

and this was another reason for him to encourage women into the studio.

'As he's moving towards this idea of a feature-length animated film... he recognises that the pratfalls and physical comedy, that up to now had characterised the shorts, wouldn't be

tolerated by the audiences for 90 minutes at a time. He needed to bring in the sensibilities and sensitivities that women contribute.

'It was really fascinating to track where the women were at the time, and how the numbers of women grew within the span of the five or six years he was working towards feature-film animation.'

His approach to women and their career progression was unique at the time in the world of animation. 'He was the first to establish a training programme specifically for women... and he is on record in 1941 as saying that if a woman does the job, she gets

'These women truly were artists in their own right. If you see their own art, their fine artistry, it's brilliant'

the pay. This was revolutionary at the time, it was jaw-dropping.

'We also found a 1930s memo, addressed to the men in the in-between department as women were moving into those areas, which said, "Please watch your language. Walt wants this to be a comfortable place for the ladies." Who does that even today?'

I wonder whether, without Walt, >



The Rainbow Room Paint Lab, 1974

the story of women in animation would have taken longer to get going. 'I really think so. If you look beyond the book into other studios, there were women working, but not in the numbers that there were at Disney.'

I ask if it's also fair to say that Walt owes a lot to women, and Mindy agrees. 'Very much so,' she says. 'He valued women where other studios may not have. What's interesting is that there are a lot of images [of female workers] which are fairly decent studio photographs... they were making an effort to celebrate and feature women, but, as a society, we've overlooked it.'

'A woman, Janet Martin, ran his publicity department, which was a big deal... Walt was very progressive.'

Walt's forward-thinking approach was met with mixed reactions by the men who worked at the studio. 'There were men who railed against it, but there were also men who supported it. A great example of that is Mary Blair. Walt clearly adored her work, but a lot of the men were very jealous of the attention she was getting. But they were jealous of each other, too. Many of the male artists couldn't move up into lead animation positions as they were already filled, so it wasn't just women not being promoted. There was a lot of sour grapes, as some

Meet the girls

A mere handful of the many women who helped to make Disney...

HAZEL SEWELL

The older sister of Lillian, Walt's wife, Hazel was a big support to Disney. She ran the Ink & Paint department – the first woman in the animation industry to hold such a position. Disney's Ink & Paint department was also the first all-women department.

KATHLEEN DOLLARD

The Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio (as it was known then), officially opened on 16 October 1923. Their first employee was Kathleen Dollard, in the Ink & Paint department. She was hired as a blackener, tracing and darkening the pencil lines of animations onto celluloid.

MARGARET WINKLER

Although she never worked for Disney, she certainly worked with them. A major cartoon producer in New York,

famous for her work on Warner Brothers' Felix the Cat cartoons, Walt corresponded with her about his own works. He also signed his first contract with her in 1923, promoting and distributing his Alice Comedies. Despite working from a tiny office, this made the Disney Brothers the first animation studio in Hollywood.

MARY WEISER

A supervisor in the Color Model Department, Mary decided to study paint chemistry, following problems achieving the desired colours and getting paints to take to celluloid properly. She spent her evenings researching and came up with formulas to mix paints that were designed to work for celluloid. Her work meant Disney became the first, and only, studio to create their own paints. She sourced

pigments from around the world and developed training classes for staff.

DOROTHY ANN BLANK

Dorothy worked on the story development for Snow White and was given an official role to develop stories for animation in 1936. A former journalist, she was brought in to provide the 'women's angle' for productions and wrote key dialogue for films such as Snow White. She would research the viability of a story, and her work provided the basis for what became the Story Research Department.

RETTA SCOTT

The first female animator at the studios, she faced some resentment, but her obvious talent won the men round. She worked on the Bambi film, drawing most of the dogs that featured, and estimated she had drawn 56,000 dogs in a year.

'When, realistically, the only other options were teaching, factory work or cleaning houses, these roles were valued. It was the Depression, so if

'The studio actively sought artists; they weren't simply pulling random women off the street and training them. They looked for artists to begin with and then trained them in the relevant skills. They needed women who knew what they were doing.'

'Generations today have so many options, they have major shoulders to stand on and, if we don't know the history, we end up reinventing it. There were a number of ladies who thought they were the first, but there were women in the 1930s doing those jobs – only no one knew that because we didn't keep this history recorded.'

'It will change what we thought we knew about the development of animation. It's the other half of the experience, and we've been missing this half for all this time.' ■

♦ *Ink & Paint: The Women of Walt Disney's Animation* by Mindy Johnson is published by Disney Editions, priced £32

'He is on record in 1941 as saying that if a woman does the job, she gets the pay. This was revolutionary at the time'

of the men thought they should be in more prominent positions. But Walt really didn't have time for egos; his philosophy was get the work done and it will be recognised.'

The Ink & Paint department was the springboard for a lot of women at Disney. But, as many of the women were artists in their own right, I wondered if this was in any way a step down professionally for them.

'I'd asked that question, too, and a lot of the women said that, firstly you have to realise it was the 1930s and for them it was, "Wow!"

you got into an animation studio in Ink & Paint, but especially at Disney, it was like winning the lottery.



Snow White, 1937