“A movie star since movies began,” actress Lillian Diana de Guiche was born the same year that Thomas Edison introduced the motion picture to the American public. This coincidence, however random, proved fateful for Gish, a defining artist of early film history. Known as the First Lady of the Silent Screen, Gish made her most significant cinematic contributions during the silent film era, but the prolific actress enjoyed a career that went five decades beyond her last silent film. Over a seventy-five-year career, Gish made more than one hundred films, almost half of which reside in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, including landmark works such as her first film, An Unseen Enemy (1912, no. 1), and her last silent picture, The Wind (1928, no. 2).

Gish spent her entire life acting—on screen, stage, and television. Her persona is one of Victorian womanhood—genteel, vulnerable, and innocent—often reflected in Madonna-like characters (The Mothering Heart, The Battle at Elderbush Gulch, Intolerance, Way Down East, The Scarlet Letter). Her heroines are unadulterated in both innocence and madness, adversity and triumph, as they deflect wanton men hell-bent on defiling their virgin characters (The Birth of a Nation, Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm, The Wind). Cast often in melodramas, Gish played characters who tenaciously fought to gain redemption after the violation of their virtue.

Gish’s doe eyes, button nose, and pixie smile belied a charisma and passion that materialized in front of the camera in her performances. Adept at both comedy and tragedy (often in the same film), Gish possessed an emotional range that could alternate between restrained (Broken Blossoms) and grand (Orphans), with everything from subtle facial nuances to frenzied body movements in full hysteria in her acting repertoire. In all her facets she personified endurance. Her characters—put-upon women facing tribulations from the injustices of the French Revolution (Orphans), the persecution of Puritanical society (The Scarlet Letter), and the ravages of nature in the American West (The Wind)—endured in the face of betrayal, rape, death, and abandonment. Often characterized as a waif, Gish was a dichotomy of fragility and resilience. This was true of her life offscreen as well as onscreen. Fellow female film pioneer Frances Marion knew her to be as “fragile as a steel rod.”

Gish was a woman holding her own in the early days of Hollywood, and she amassed enough clout and influence to call her own shots. As a vocal proponent of film preservation, she made it her lifelong mission to ensure that her work and the work of all film artists would survive. “Art is the most lasting product of a civilization,” Gish said, and “the only lasting aristocracy.” Gish contributed greatly to the aristocracy of her art, and her legacy as an iconic figure in film history will also endure.

After debuting in a production of In Convict’s Stripes in 1902, Gish began acting in touring troupes in New York City. Her tenure in New York and on Broadway led to a friendship with fellow actress Gladys Smith, who years later would change Gish’s life through a chance meeting with film director D. W. Griffith. Attending a nickelodeon showing of Lena and the Geese (1912), Gish immediately recognized the actress in the film as her old friend Gladys. Spurred by the star sighting, Gish, along with her sister, Dorothy, and their mother, Mary, decided to look up her friend by visiting the studio that filmed Lena, American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, located in Union Square. The visit not only reconnected the Gishes with Smith (now Mary Pickford) but also introduced them to Griffith, who was immediately struck by Lillian’s “exquisite ethereal beauty.” He ushered the sisters into a casting session for An Unseen Enemy, a one-reeler about two sisters fending off a larcenous maid and her safe-robbing accomplice. Impressed with their ability to respond to direction, Griffith recast the film with the Gishes, even though he had already begun rehearsals with other actresses, and began shooting Lillian’s first screen appearance the next day.

Gish became one of Biograph’s stock players and appeared in more than thirty Biograph films over the next two years, including significant shorts such as The Mothering Heart (1913) and The Battle at Elderbush Gulch (1913). Griffith left Biograph in 1914, joined several other film companies—Reliance-Majestic, Triangle Film Corporation, Famous Players-Lasky (Paramount), and United Artists—then eventually built his own studio in Mamaroneck, New York. Gish followed him, and under his tutelage she developed her acting talents and honed her screen persona. G. W. Bitzer, the director’s longtime cameraman, recalled that “Griffith conditioned [Gish] to the part she was to play, and once she had the action in mind, she wouldn’t forget or deviate by so much as a flicker of the eye. Her interpretation would be as directed, without waste of precious film.” Gish practiced something akin to Method acting (long before the phrase was coined) and studied dance choreography, but her ability to invent on the spot, born out of in-the-moment emotion, meshed perfectly with Griffith’s directorial style. The chemistry between director and actress resulted in some of Gish’s greatest performances, in silent cinema classics such as The Birth of a Nation (1915), Intolerance (1916), Broken Blossoms (1919), and Way Down East (1920). Gish also matured professionally behind the camera. When Griffith was filming The Love Flower (1920) in Florida, he entrusted the care of his studio to Gish. He also encouraged her to
make her own feature film, stating that Gish knew as much about making pictures as he did, and more about acting.  

_Orphans of the Storm_ (1922, no. 3), the last of Gish's collaborations with Griffith, marked a turning point in her career. She convinced Griffith to make the film, based on Adolphe d’Ennery’s play _The Two Orphans_ (1874)—although he had intended his next project to be Goethe's _Fust_—and to cast her sister as Louise (his first choice was Mae Marsh).  

During rehearsal for the climactic scene at the guillotine, in which Gish’s Henriette seems to be moments from certain death, Gish disagreed with Griffith’s direction and felt that the scene required a “greater depth of emotion.” After rehearsing the scene her way, Gish recalled, “Without a word, he walked up to me, sank to one knee and kissed my hand before the company. ‘Thank you,’ he said.”  

In nine short years, she had evolved from ingenue to Hollywood powerhouse.

Gish pressured MGM to make _The Scarlet Letter_ (1926), based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s book, which had been blacklisted by the censorship office of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America due to outcry from church and women’s groups. Undaunted, she took it upon herself to secure clearance for the film. No roadblock was insurmountable for Gish if she believed in a project. For her swan song to the silent era she chose _The Wind_ , based on a novel by Dorothy Scarbrough. The actress hand-picked her director (Victor Sjöström) and leading man (Lars Hanson) and was asked by MGM’s Irving Thalberg to produce. Gish’s career continued over the next sixty years—her sound work is represented in the Museum’s collection by films such as Charles Laughton’s _The Night of the Hunter_ (1955) and her last film, Lindsay Anderson’s _The Whales of August_ (1987)—but her legacy was long secured by her first sixteen years in film.

On June 25, 1935, The Museum of Modern Art presented to the public its Film Library (now the Department of Film), whose mission was “to preserve [and] exhibit . . . all types of films, so that the film may be studied and enjoyed as any other one of the arts is studied and enjoyed,” with Iris Barry as its inaugural curator. Gish’s relationship with MoMA’s Department of Film, like her relationship with film itself, began at its inception. It was through Barry, in the mid-1930s, that Gish first heard of the nascent concept of film preservation. Inspired by Barry and her own belief in the value of film as an art form, Gish maintained frequent correspondence with the department throughout her life in their joint efforts toward film preservation. As Eileen Bowser, a former curator in the Department of Film, noted, “Convinced of the power of film to change the world,” Gish was a “dedicated fighter for every cause associated with the art of the film.”

The acquisition of the D. W. Griffith Collection—one of the first major film collections to enter the Film Library—might not have occurred had it not been for Gish’s intervention. In the summer of 1935 Barry and her husband, John Abbott (then the Film Library’s director), visited Hollywood in an attempt to convince directors, actors, and studios to deposit films with the Museum. When they approached Griffith, he declined. In 1938, when D. W. Griffith, Inc., was in receivership and the director’s films were on the verge of being lost, Gish interceded and convinced Griffith to entrust his films and legacy to the Museum.
In 1954, when actor Charles Laughton set out to make his directorial debut, he prepared for *The Night of the Hunter* by screening Griffith films at MoMA. An admirer of Gish since Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms*, Laughton sought her out for the pivotal role of Rachel Cooper—an evolution of her silent film heroines—who protects two vulnerable yet resilient orphans from a soulless preacher intent on their destruction. Richard Griffith, then curator of the Film Library, acted as an intermediary between Gish and Laughton during their discussions surrounding the film.\(^{15}\)

From 1963 to 1980 Gish undertook an ambitious endeavor to tour universities, libraries, and museums throughout the world, lecturing on the art of film, concentrating on the period from 1900 to 1928. In preparation for these lectures, the actress engaged in constant dialogue with the Museum regarding film material and preservation methods. In exchange, Gish took her knowledge to the public and provided the Museum’s Film Preservation Program with resounding advocacy.\(^{16}\)

It was fitting that when Gish became the fourteenth life member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on November 25, 1982, the ceremony was held at MoMA. The celebration of her devotion and contribution to the art of the motion picture took place at the institution that continues to collect, preserve, study, and exhibit her work.

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Lillian Gish (on scaffold)

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7. Gish’s only directorial effort was *Remodeling Her Husband* (1920), a film that has been lost. Silver, *Lillian Gish*, p. 10.
10. In 1925, after a fierce bidding war to sign the actress, MGM placed Gish under a studio contract that gave her script approval.
14. Iris Barry, letter to Gish, New York, May 18, 1950. Lillian Gish Letters, Film Study Center Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. In this letter Bowser provides information about films in the Museum’s collection to assist Gish in her lectures and thanks the actor for her support of MoMA’s Film Preservation Program.
16. Bowser, letter to Gish, New York, May 11, 1972. Lillian Gish Letters, Film Study Center Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. In this letter Bowser provides information about films in the Museum’s collection to assist Gish in her lectures and thanks the actor for her support of MoMA’s Film Preservation Program.