

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OSCAR®

Shortly after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was incorporated in 1927, a dinner was held in the Crystal Ballroom of the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles to discuss the goals of the new organization. One of those goals was devising a method of honoring outstanding achievements, thus encouraging higher levels of quality in all facets of motion picture production.

Once the decision had been made to institute an award, a major item of business was the creation of a trophy to symbolize film achievement. MGM art director Cedric Gibbons designed the statuette and Los Angeles sculptor George Stanley was selected to bring to three-dimensional form the figure of a knight standing on a reel of film, hands gripping a sword. The Academy's world-renowned statuette was born.

Since the initial awards banquet on May 16, 1929, in the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel's Blossom Room, 2701 statuettes have been presented. Each January, additional new golden statuettes are cast, molded, polished and buffed by R.S. Owens & Company, the Chicago-based awards specialty company retained by the Academy since 1982 to make the award.

Oscar stands 13 1/2 inches tall and weighs a robust 8 1/2 pounds. The design of the statuette has never changed from its original conception, but the size of the base varied until the present standard was adopted in 1945. Officially named the Academy Award® of Merit, the statuette is better known by its nickname, Oscar, the origins of which aren't clear. A popular story has been that Academy librarian and eventual executive director Margaret Herrick thought it resembled her Uncle Oscar and said so, and that the Academy staff began referring to it as Oscar. In any case, by the sixth Awards presentation in 1934, Hollywood columnist Sidney Skolsky used the name in

his column in reference to Katharine Hepburn's first Best Actress win. The Academy itself didn't use the nickname officially until 1939.

The 15 statuettes presented at the initial ceremonies were gold-plated solid bronze. Within a few years the bronze was abandoned in favor of britannia metal, a pewter-like alloy, which made it easier to give the statuettes their smooth finish. Due to the metals shortage during World War II, Oscars® were made of painted plaster for three years. Following the war, all of the awarded plaster figures were exchanged for gold-plated metal ones.

Achievements in up to 24 regular categories will be honored on February 22, 2009, at the 81st Academy Awards® presentation at the Kodak Theatre at Hollywood & Highland Center®. However, the Academy won't know how many statuettes it will actually hand out until the envelopes are opened on Oscar Night®. Although the number of categories and special awards will be known prior to the ceremony, the possibility of ties and of multiple recipients sharing the prize in some categories makes the exact number of Oscar statuettes to be awarded unpredictable. As in previous years, any surplus awards will be housed in the Academy's vault until next year's event.

"Each Oscar statuette is individually hand-crafted," says Scott Siegel, president of R.S. Owens. "This statuette is only a tiny portion of our overall business, but it makes us known all around the world. No other award is as universally recognized as the Oscar, and we treat it with the extra-special tender loving care that it deserves. We are extremely proud that the Academy has entrusted its manufacture to us."

Except in years when the Academy created a publicity event out of the delivery of the Oscars from Chicago to Los Angeles, they normally were sent over land by common carrier. However, in 2000, only a few weeks before the presentation date, that

year's shipment of Oscars was stolen from the overland carrier's loading dock. They were recovered a week later, but not before some nerve-wracking days had passed. Since then, the Academy has kept an additional ceremony's-worth of statuettes on hand.

The Oscar statuette is the most recognized award in the world. Its success as a symbol of achievement in filmmaking would doubtless amaze those who attended that dinner 80 years ago, as well as its designer, Cedric Gibbons.

It stands today, as it has since 1929, without peer, on the mantels of the greatest filmmakers in history.

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