Walt Disney Animation Studios

Coordinates: 34°09′20″N 118°19′23″W

Walt Disney Animation Studios (**WDAS**),[6] sometimes shortened to **Disney Animation**, is an American animation studio that creates animated features and short films for The Walt Disney Company. The studio's current production logo features a scene from its first synchronized sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* (1928). Founded on October 16, 1923, by brothers Walt and Roy O. Disney,[1] it is the oldest-running animation studio in the world. It is currently organized as a division of Walt Disney Studios and is headquartered at the Roy E. Disney Animation Building at the Walt Disney Studios lot in Burbank, California.[7] Since its foundation, the studio has produced 62 feature films, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Wish* (2023),[8] and hundreds of short films.

Founded as **Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio** in 1923, renamed **Walt Disney Studio** in 1926 and incorporated as **Walt Disney Productions** in 1929, the studio was dedicated to producing short films until it entered feature production in 1934, resulting in 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, one of the first full-length animated feature films and the first U.S.-based one. In 1986, during a large corporate restructuring, Walt Disney Productions, which had grown from a single animation studio into an international media conglomerate, was renamed The Walt Disney Company and the animation studio became **Walt Disney Feature Animation** in order to differentiate it from the company's other divisions. Its current name was adopted in 2007 after Pixar was acquired by Disney in the previous year.

For most people, Disney Animation is synonymous with animation, for "in no other medium has a single company's practices been able to dominate aesthetic norms" to such an overwhelming extent.[9] The studio was recognized as the premier American animation studio for much of its existence[10] and was "for many decades the undisputed world leader in animated features";[11] it developed many of the techniques, concepts and principles that became standard practices of traditional animation.[12] The studio also pioneered the art of storyboarding, which is now a standard technique used in both animated and live-action filmmaking.[13] The studio's catalog of animated features is among Disney's most notable assets, with the stars of its animated shorts – Mickey

Walt Disney Animation Studios

Logo used since 2007

The studio's headquarters at the Roy E. Disney Animation Building in Burbank in 2007

Formerly	Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio (1923–26) Walt Disney Studio (1926–29) Walt Disney Productions (1929–86) Walt Disney Feature Animation (1986–2007)
Type	Division
Industry	Motion pictures Animation
Predecessor	Laugh-O-Gram Studio

Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Daisy Duck, Goofy, and Pluto – becoming recognizable figures in popular culture and mascots for the Walt Disney Company as a whole.

Three of studio's films – *Frozen* (2013), *Zootopia* (2016), and *Frozen II* (2019) – are all among the 50 highest-grossing films of all time, with the latter becoming the second highest-grossing animated feature film of all time. It also had the highest-grossing worldwide opening of all time for an animated feature film up until the release of Nintendo and Illumination's *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* (2023).

By 2013, the studio was no longer developing hand-drawn animated features and had laid off most of their hand-drawn animation division.[14][15] However, the studio stated in 2021 and 2023 that they would be open to proposals from filmmakers for future hand-drawn feature projects.[16][17]

Founded	October 16, 1923 (as Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio)
Founders	Walt Disney Roy O. Disney
Headquarters	2100 West Riverside Drive, Burbank, California, U.S.
Key people	Clark Spencer (President) Jennifer Lee (CCO)
Products	Animated films Animated series
Owner	The Walt Disney Company
Parent	Walt Disney Studios
Website	disneyanimation.com (https://disneyanimation.com/)
Footnotes / references [1][2][3][4][5]	

History

1923–29: Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio

Kansas City, Missouri, natives Walt Disney and Roy O. Disney founded **Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio** in Los Angeles in 1923 and got their start producing a series of silent *Alice Comedies* short films featuring a live-action child actress in an animated world.[19] The *Alice Comedies* were distributed by Margaret J. Winkler's Winkler Pictures, which later also distributed a second Disney short subject series, the all-animated *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, through Universal Pictures starting in 1927.[19][20] Upon relocating to California, the Disney brothers initially started working in their uncle Robert Disney's garage at 4406 Kingswell Avenue in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, then, in October 1923, formally launched their studio in a small office on the rear side of a real estate agency's office at 4651 Kingswell Avenue. In February 1924, the studio moved next door to office space of its own at 4649 Kingswell Avenue. In 1925, Disney put down a deposit on a new location at 2719 Hyperion Avenue in the nearby Silver Lake neighborhood, which came to be known as the Hyperion Studio to distinguish it from the studio's other locations, and, in January 1926, the studio moved there and took on the name **Walt Disney Studio**.[21]

The building on Kingswell Avenue in Los Feliz which was home to the studio from 1923 to 1926[18]

Meanwhile, after the first year's worth of *Oswalds*, Walt Disney attempted to renew his contract with Winkler Pictures, but Charles Mintz, who had taken over Margaret Winkler's business after marrying her, wanted to force Disney to accept a lower advance payment for each *Oswald* short. Disney refused and, as Universal owned the rights to *Oswald* rather than Disney, Mintz set up his own animation studio to produce *Oswald* cartoons. Most of Disney's staff was hired away by Mintz to move over once Disney's *Oswald* contract expired in mid-1928.[22]

Working in secret while the rest of the staff finished the remaining *Oswalds* on contract, Disney and his head animator Ub Iwerks led a small handful of loyal staffers in producing cartoons starring a new character named Mickey Mouse.[23] The first two *Mickey Mouse* cartoons, *Plane Crazy* and *The Galloping Gaucho*, were previewed in limited engagements during the summer of 1928. For the third *Mickey* cartoon, however, Disney produced a soundtrack, collaborating with musician Carl Stalling and businessman Pat Powers, who provided Disney with his bootlegged "Cinephone" sound-on-film process. Subsequently, the third *Mickey Mouse* cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*, became Disney's first cartoon with synchronized sound and was a major success upon its November 1928 debut at the West 57th Theatre in New York City.[24] The *Mickey Mouse* series of sound cartoons, distributed by Powers through Celebrity Productions, quickly became the most popular cartoon series in the United States.[25][26] A second Disney series of sound cartoons, *Silly Symphonies*, debuted in 1929 with *The Skeleton Dance*.[27]

1929–40: Reincorporation, *Silly Symphonies*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

In 1929, disputes over finances between Disney and Powers led to Disney's animation production company , reincorporated on December 16, 1929, as **Walt Disney Productions**, signing a new distribution contract with Columbia Pictures.[28][29][30] Powers, in return, signed away Ub Iwerks, who began producing cartoons at his own studio, although he would return to Disney in 1940.[31]

Columbia distributed Disney's shorts for two years before the Disney studio entered a new distribution deal with United Artists in 1932. The same year, Disney signed a two-year exclusive deal with Technicolor to utilize its new 3-strip color film process,[32] which allowed for fuller-color reproduction where previous color film processors could not.[33] The result was the *Silly Symphony* cartoon *Flowers and Trees*, the first film commercially released in full Technicolor.[33][34] *Flowers and Trees* was a major success[33][35] and all *Silly Symphonies* were subsequently produced in Technicolor.[36][37]

By the early 1930s, Walt Disney had realized that the success of animated films depended upon telling emotionally gripping stories that would grab the audience and not let go,[38][39] and this realization led him to create a separate "story department" with storyboard artists dedicated to story development.[40] With well-developed characters and an interesting story, the 1933 Technicolor *Silly Symphony* cartoon *Three Little Pigs* became a major box office and pop culture success,[33][41] with its theme song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" becoming a popular chart hit.[42]

In 1934, Walt Disney gathered several key staff members and announced his plans to make his first animated feature film. Despite derision from most of the film industry, who dubbed the production "Disney's Folly," Disney proceeded undaunted into the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*,[43] which would become the first animated feature in English and Technicolor. Considerable training and development went into the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and the studio greatly expanded, with established animators, artists from other fields and recent college graduates joining the studio to work on the film. The training classes, supervised by head animators such as Les Clark, Norm Ferguson and Art Babbit and taught by Donald W. Graham, an art teacher from the nearby Chouinard Art Institute,[12][43] had begun at the studio in 1932 and were greatly expanded into orientation training and continuing education classes.[12][43] In the course of teaching the classes, Graham and the animators created or formalized many of the techniques and processes that became the key tenets and principles of traditional animation.[12] *Silly Symphonies* such as *The Goddess of Spring* (1934) and *The Old Mill* (1937) served as experimentation grounds for new techniques such as the animation of realistic human figures, special effects animation and the use of the multiplane camera,[44] an invention that split animation artwork layers into several planes, allowing the camera to appear to move dimensionally through an animated scene.[45]

Walt Disney introduces each of the Seven Dwarfs in a scene from the original 1937 *Snow White* theatrical trailer.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs cost Disney a then-expensive sum of $1.4 million to complete (including $100,000 on story development alone) and was an unprecedented success when released in February 1938 by RKO Radio Pictures, which had assumed distribution of Disney product from United Artists in 1937. It was briefly the highest-grossing film of all time before the unprecedented success of *Gone with the Wind* two years later,[46][47] grossing over $8 million on its initial release, the equivalent of $166,316,780 in 1999 dollars.[47]

During the production of *Snow White*, work had continued on the *Mickey Mouse* and *Silly Symphonies* series of shorts. *Mickey Mouse* switched to Technicolor in 1935, by which time the series had added several major supporting characters, among them Mickey's dog, Pluto, and their friends Donald Duck and Goofy. Donald, Goofy, and Pluto would all be appearing in series of their own by 1940, and the *Donald Duck* cartoons eclipsed the *Mickey Mouse* series in popularity.[48] *Silly Symphonies*, which garnered seven Academy Awards, ceased in 1939, until the shorts returned to theatres with some re-issues and re-releases.[49]

1940–48: New features, strike, and World War II

The success of *Snow White* allowed Disney to build a new, larger studio on Buena Vista Street in Burbank, where The Walt Disney Company remains headquartered to this day. Walt Disney Productions had its initial public offering on April 2, 1940, with Walt Disney as president and chairman and Roy Disney as CEO.[50]

The studio launched into the production of new animated features, the first of which was *Pinocchio*, released in February 1940. *Pinocchio* was not initially a box office success.[51] The box office returns from the film's initial release were below both *Snow White*'s unprecedented success and the studio's expectations.[51][52] Of the film's $2.289 million cost – twice of *Snow White* – Disney only recouped $1 million by late 1940, with studio reports of the film's final original box office take varying between $1.4 million and $1.9 million.[53] However, *Pinocchio* was a critical success, winning the Academy Award for Best Original Song and Best Original Score, making it the first film of the studio to win not only either Oscar, but both at the same time.[54]

Fantasia, an experimental film produced to an accompanying orchestral arrangement conducted by Leopold Stokowski, was released in November 1940 by Disney itself in a series of limited-seating roadshow engagements. The film cost $2 million to produce and, although the film earned $1.4 million in its roadshow engagements,[55] the high cost ($85,000 per theater)[55] of installing Fantasound placed *Fantasia* at an even greater loss than *Pinocchio*.[56] RKO assumed distribution of *Fantasia* in 1941,[57] later reissuing it in severely edited versions over the years.[58][59] Despite its financial failure, *Fantasia* was the subject of two Academy Honorary Awards on February 26, 1942 – one for the development of the innovative Fantasound system used to create the film's stereoscopic soundtrack, and the other for Stokowski and his contributions to the film.[60]

Much of the character animation on these productions and all subsequent features until the late 1970s was supervised by a brain-trust of animators Walt Disney dubbed the "Nine Old Men," many of whom also served as directors and later producers on the Disney features: Frank Thomas, Ollie Johnston, Woolie Reitherman, Les Clark, Ward Kimball, Eric Larson, John Lounsbery, Milt Kahl, and Marc Davis.[61] Other head animators at Disney during this period included Norm Ferguson, Bill Tytla and Fred Moore. The

development of the feature animation department created a caste system at the Disney studio: lesser animators (and feature animators in-between assignments) were assigned to work on the short subjects, while animators higher in status such as the Nine Old Men worked on the features. Concern over Walt Disney accepting credit for the artists' work as well as debates over compensation led to many of the newer and lower-ranked animators seeking to unionize the Disney studio.[62]

A bitter union strike began in May 1941, which was resolved without the angered Walt Disney's involvement in July and August of that year.[62] As Walt Disney Productions was being set up as a union shop,[62] Walt Disney and several studio employees were sent by the U.S. government on a Good Neighbor policy trip to Central and South America.[63] The Disney strike and its aftermath led to an exodus of several animation professionals from the studio, from top-level animators such as Art Babbitt and Bill Tytla to artists better known for their work outside the Disney studio such as Frank Tashlin, Maurice Noble, Walt Kelly, Bill Melendez, and John Hubley.[62] Hubley, along with several other Disney strikers, went on to found the United Productions of America studio, Disney's key animation rival in the 1950s.[62]

The Disney animators' strike started in May, 1941.

Dumbo, in production during the midst of the animators' strike, premiered in October 1941 and proved to be a financial success. The simple film only cost $950,000 to produce, half the cost of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, less than a third of the cost of *Pinocchio*, and two-fifths of the cost of *Fantasia*. *Dumbo* eventually grossed $1.6 million during its original release.[64] In August 1942, *Bambi* was released and, as with *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*, did not perform well at the box office. Out of its $1.7 million budget, it grossed $1.64 million.[65]

Production of full-length animated features was temporarily suspended after the release of *Bambi*. Given the financial failures of some of the recent features and World War II cutting off much of the overseas cinema market, the studio's financiers at the Bank of America would only loan the studio working capital if it temporarily restricted itself to shorts production.[66] Features then in production such as *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Lady and the Tramp* were therefore put on hold until after the war.[66] Following the United States' entry into World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the studio housed over 500 U.S. Army soldiers who were responsible for protecting nearby aircraft factories from enemy bombers. In addition, several Disney animators were drafted to fight in the war and the studio was contracted on producing wartime content for every branch of the U.S. military, particularly military training, and civilian propaganda films. From 1942 to 1943, 95 percent of the studio's animation output was for the military.[67] During the war, Disney produced the live-action/animated military propaganda feature *Victory Through Air Power* (1943),[68] and a series of Latin culture-themed shorts resulting from the 1941 Good Neighbor trip were compiled into two features, *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1944).[68]

Saludos and *Caballeros* set the template for several other 1940s Disney releases of "package films": low-budgeted films composed of animated short subjects with animated or live-action bridging material.[69][70] These films were *Make Mine Music* (1946), *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947), *Melody Time* (1948) and *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949). The studio also produced two features, *Song of the South* (1946) and *So Dear to My Heart* (1948), which used more expansive live-action stories which still included animated sequences and sequences combining live-action and animated characters. Shorts production continued during this period as well, with *Donald Duck*, *Goofy*, and *Pluto* cartoons being the main output accompanied by cartoons starring Mickey Mouse, Figaro and, in the 1950s, Chip 'n' Dale and Humphrey the Bear.[71]

In addition, Disney began reissuing the previous features, beginning with re-releases of *Snow White* in 1944,[72] *Pinocchio* in 1945, and *Fantasia* in 1946.[73] This led to a tradition of reissuing the Disney films every seven years, which lasted into the 1990s before being translated into the studio's handling of home video releases.[72]

1948–66: Return of features, Buena Vista, end of shorts, layoffs, and Walt's final years

The original Animation Building at the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California, the headquarters of the animation department from 1940 to 1985.

In 1948, Disney returned to the production of full-length features with *Cinderella*, a feature film based on the fairy tale by Charles Perrault. At a cost of nearly $3 million, the future of the studio depended upon the success of this film.[74] Upon its release in 1950, *Cinderella* proved to be a box-office success, with the profits from the film's release allowing Disney to carry on producing animated features throughout the 1950s.[75] Following its success, production on the in-limbo features *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *Lady and the Tramp* was resumed. In addition, an ambitious new project, an adaptation of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" set to Tchaikovsky's classic score, was begun but took much of the rest of the decade to complete.[76]

Alice in Wonderland, released in 1951, met with a lukewarm response at the box office and was a sharp critical disappointment in its initial release.[77] *Peter Pan*, released in 1953, on the other hand, was a commercial success and the sixth highest-grossing film of the year. In 1955, *Lady and the Tramp* was released to higher box office success than any other Disney animated feature since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*,[78] earning an estimated $6.5 million in rentals at the North American box office in 1955.[79] *Lady and the Tramp* is significant as Disney's first widescreen animated feature, produced in the CinemaScope process,[78] and was the first Disney animated feature to be released by Disney's own distribution company, Buena Vista Distribution.[80]

By the mid-1950s, with Walt Disney's attention primarily set on new endeavours such as live-action films, television and the Disneyland theme park,[61] production of the animated films was left primarily in the hands of the "Nine Old Men" trust of head animators and directors. This led to several delays in approvals during the production of *Sleeping Beauty*,[61] which was finally released in 1959. At $6 million,[81] it was Disney's most expensive film to date, produced in a heavily-stylised art style devised by artist Eyvind Earle[81] and presented in large-format Super Technirama 70 with six-track stereophonic sound.[81] However, despite being the studio's highest-grossing animated feature since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the film's large production costs and the box office underperformance of Disney's other 1959 output resulted in the studio posting its first annual loss in a decade for fiscal year 1960,[82] leading to massive layoffs throughout the studio.[83]

By the end of the decade, the Disney short subjects were no longer being produced on a regular basis, with many of the shorts divisions' personnel either leaving the company or being reassigned to work on Disney television programs such as *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *Disneyland*. While the *Silly Symphonies* shorts had dominated the Academy Award for Best Short Subject (Cartoons) during the 1930s, its reign over the most awards had been ended by MGM's *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, Warner Bros' *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies*, and the works of United Productions of America (UPA), whose flat art style and stylized

animation techniques were lauded as more modern alternatives to the older Disney style.[84] During the 1950s, only one Disney short, the stylized *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom*, won the Best Short Subject (Cartoons) Oscar.[85]

The *Mickey Mouse*, *Pluto* and *Goofy* shorts had all ceased regular production by 1953, with *Donald Duck* and *Humphrey* continuing and converting to widescreen CinemaScope before the shorts division was shut down in 1956. After that, all future shorts were produced by the feature films division until 1969. The last Disney short of the golden age of animation was *It's Tough to Be a Bird*. Disney shorts would only be produced on a sporadic basis from this point on,[71] with notable later shorts including[86] *Runaway Brain* (1995, starring Mickey Mouse)[87] and *Paperman* (2012).[88]

Despite the 1959 layoffs and competition for Walt Disney's attention from the company's expanded live-action film, TV and theme park departments, production continued on feature animation productions at a reduced level.[76]

In 1961, the studio released *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, an animated feature that popularized the use of xerography during the process of inking and painting traditional animation cels.[89] Using xerography, animation drawings could be photochemically transferred rather than traced from paper drawings to the clear acetate sheets ("cels") used in final animation production.[89] The resulting art style – a scratchier line which revealed the construction lines in the animators' drawings – typified Disney films into the 1980s.[89] The film was a success, being the tenth highest-grossing film of 1961 with rentals of $6.4 million.[90]

The Disney animation training program started at the studio in 1932 before the development of *Snow White* eventually led to Walt Disney helping found the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).[91] This university formed via the merger of Chouinard Art Institute and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music. It included a Disney-developed animation program of study among its degree offerings. CalArts became the alma mater of many of the animators who would work at Disney and other animation studios from the 1970s to the present.[91]

The Sword in the Stone was released in 1963 and was the sixth highest-grossing film of the year in North America with estimated rentals of $4.75 million.[92] A featurette adaptation of one of A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories, *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*, was released in 1966,[93] to be followed by several other *Pooh* featurettes over the years and a full-length compilation feature, *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, which was released in 1977.[93]

Walt Disney died in December 1966, ten months before the studio's next film *The Jungle Book*, was completed and released.[94] The film was a success,[95] finishing 1967 as the fourth highest-grossing film of the year.[96]

1966–84: Decline in popularity; Don Bluth's entrance and departure; "rock bottom"

Following Walt Disney's death, Wolfgang Reitherman continued as both producer and director of the features.[97][98] The studio began the 1970s with the release of *The Aristocats*, the last film project to be approved by Walt Disney.[98] In 1971, Roy O. Disney, the studio co-founder, died and Walt Disney Productions was left in the hands of Donn Tatum and Card Walker, who alternated as chairman and CEO in overlapping terms until 1978.[99] The next feature, *Robin Hood* (1973), was produced with a significantly reduced budget and animation repurposed from previous features.[97] Both *The Aristocats* and *Robin Hood* were minor box office and critical successes.[97][98]

The Rescuers, released in 1977, was a success exceeding the achievements of the previous two Disney features.[98] Receiving positive reviews, high commercial returns, and an Academy Award nomination, it ended up being the third highest-grossing film of the year and the most successful and best reviewed Disney animated film since *The Jungle Book*.[97][98] The film was reissued in 1983, accompanied by a new Disney featurette, *Mickey's Christmas Carol*.[100]

The production of *The Rescuers* signaled the beginning of a changing of the guard process in the personnel at the Disney animation studio,[98] as veterans such as Milt Kahl and Les Clark retired; they were gradually replaced by new talents such as Don Bluth, Ron Clements, John Musker and Glen Keane.[98][101] The new animators, culled from the animation program at CalArts and trained by Eric Larson, Frank Thomas, Ollie Johnston and Woolie Reitherman,[98][101] got their first chance to prove themselves as a group with the animated sequences in Disney's live-action/animated hybrid feature *Pete's Dragon* (1977),[102] the animation for which was directed by Bluth.[97] In September 1979, dissatisfied with what they felt was a stagnation in the development of the art of animation at Disney,[103] Bluth and several of the other new guard animators quit to start their own studio, Don Bluth Productions,[103] which became Disney's chief competitor in the animation field during the 1980s.[101]

Delayed half a year by the defection of the Bluth group,[101] *The Fox and the Hound* was released in 1981 after four years in production. The film was considered a financial success by the studio, and development continued on *The Black Cauldron*, a long-gestating adaptation of the *Chronicles of Prydain* series of novels by Lloyd Alexander[101] produced in Super Technirama 70.

The Black Cauldron was intended to expand the appeal of Disney animated films to older audiences and to showcase the talents of the new generation of Disney animators from CalArts. Besides Keane, Musker and Clements, this new group of artists included other promising animators such as Andreas Deja, Mike Gabriel, John Lasseter, Brad Bird and Tim Burton. Lasseter was fired from Disney in 1983 for pushing the studio to explore computer animation production,[104][105] but went on to become the creative head of Pixar, a pioneering computer animation studio that would begin a close association with Disney in the late 1980s.[104][106][107] Similarly, Burton was fired in 1984 after producing a live-action short shelved by the studio, *Frankenweenie*, then went on to become a high-profile producer and director of live-action and stop-motion features for Disney and other studios. Some of Burton's high-profile projects for Disney would include the stop-motion *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), a live-action adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), and a stop-motion feature remake of *Frankenweenie* (2012).[108][109] Bird was also fired after a few years working at the company for criticizing Disney's upper management as he felt that they were playing it safe and not taking risks on animation. He subsequently became an animation director at other studios, including Warner Bros. Animation and Pixar.[110]

Ron Miller, Walt Disney's son-in-law, became president of Walt Disney Productions in 1980 and CEO in 1983.[111] That year, he expanded the company's film and television production divisions, creating the Walt Disney Pictures banner under which future films from the feature animation department would be released.[111]

1984–89: Michael Eisner takeover, restructuring, and return to prominence

After a series of corporate takeover attempts in 1984, Roy E. Disney, son of Roy O. and nephew of Walt, resigned from the company's board of directors and launched a campaign called "SaveDisney," successfully convincing the board to fire Miller. Roy E. Disney brought in Michael Eisner as Disney's new CEO and Frank Wells as president.[99][112] Eisner in turn named Jeffrey Katzenberg chairman of the film division, The Walt Disney Studios.[101] Near completion when the Eisner regime took over Disney, *The*

Black Cauldron (1985) came to represent what would later be referred to as the "rock bottom" point for Disney animation.[101] The studio's most expensive feature to that point at $44 million, *The Black Cauldron* was a critical and commercial failure.[101] The film's $21 million box office gross led to a loss for the studio, putting the future of the animation division in jeopardy.[101]

Roy E. Disney (Chairman, 1985–2003), nephew of Walt Disney, was a key figure in restructuring the animation department following the reorganization of the Disney company in 1984.

Between the 1950s and 1980s, the significance of animation to Disney's bottom line was significantly reduced as the company expanded into further live-action production, television and theme parks.[101] As new CEO, Michael Eisner strongly considered shuttering the feature animation studio and outsourcing future animation. Roy E. Disney intervened, offering to head the feature animation division and turn its fortunes around,[101] while Eisner established the Walt Disney Pictures Television Animation Group to produce lower-cost animation for television.[99] Named Chairman of feature animation by Eisner, Roy E. Disney appointed Peter Schneider president of animation to run the day-to-day operations in 1985.[113]

On February 6, 1986, Disney executives moved the animation division from the Disney studio lot in Burbank to a variety of warehouses, hangars and trailers located about two miles east (3.2 kilometers) at 1420 Flower Street in nearby Glendale, California. About a year later, the growing computer graphics (CG) group would move there too.[101][114] The animation division's first feature animation at its new location was *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), begun by John Musker and Ron Clements as *Basil of Baker Street* after both left production of *The Black Cauldron*.[115] The film was enough of a critical and commercial success to instill executive confidence in the animation studio.[101] Later the same year, however, Universal Pictures and Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment released Don Bluth's *An American Tail*, which outgrossed *The Great Mouse Detective* at the box office and became the highest-grossing first-issue animated film to that point.[116]

Katzenberg, Schneider, and Roy Disney set about changing the culture of the studio, increasing staffing and production so that a new animated feature would be released every year instead of every two to four.[101] The first of the releases on the accelerated production schedule was *Oliver & Company* (1988), which featured an all-star cast including Billy Joel and Bette Midler and an emphasis on a modern pop soundtrack.[101] *Oliver & Company* opened in the theaters on the same day as another Bluth/Amblin/Universal animated film, *The Land Before Time*; however, *Oliver & Company* outgrossed *The Land Before Time* in the U.S. and went on to become the most successful animated feature in the U.S. to that date, though the latter's worldwide box office gross was higher than the former.[101]

At the same time in 1988, Disney started entering into Australia's long-standing animation industry by purchasing Hanna-Barbera's Australian studio to start Disney Animation Australia.[117]

While *Oliver & Company* and the next feature *The Little Mermaid* were in production, Disney collaborated with Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment and master animator Richard Williams to produce *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, a groundbreaking live-action/animation hybrid directed by Robert Zemeckis, which featured licensed animated characters from other studios (such as Warner Bros., MGM, and Universal).[118][119] Disney set up a new animation studio under Williams' supervision in London to create the cartoon characters for *Roger Rabbit*, with many of the artists from the California studio traveling to England to work on the film.[101][120] A significant critical and commercial success,[120] *Roger Rabbit*

won three Academy Awards for technical achievements.[121] and was key in renewing mainstream interest in American animation.[101] Other than the film itself, the studio also produced three *Roger Rabbit* shorts during the late 1980s and early 1990s.[122][123]

1400 Flower Street in Glendale, California, one of several buildings used by Walt Disney Feature Animation between 1985 and 1995.

1989–94: Beginning of the Disney Renaissance, successful releases, and impact on the animation industry

A second satellite studio, Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida, opened in 1989 with 40 employees. Its offices were located within the Disney-MGM Studios theme park at Walt Disney World in Bay Lake, Florida, and visitors were allowed to tour the studio and observe animators at work.[124] That same year, the studio released *The Little Mermaid*, which became a keystone achievement in Disney's history as its largest critical and commercial success in decades. Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, who'd been co-directors on *The Great Mouse Detective*, *The Little Mermaid* earned $84 million at the North American box office, a record for the studio. The film was built around a score from Broadway songwriters Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, who was also a co-producer and story consultant on the film.[101] *The Little Mermaid* won two Academy Awards, for Best Original Song and Best Original Score.[125]

1400 Air Way, another Glendale building used by Walt Disney Feature Animation between 1985 and 1995.

The Little Mermaid vigorously relaunched a profound new interest in the animation and musical film genres.[101][126] The film was also the first to feature the use of Disney's Computer Animation Production System (CAPS). Developed for Disney by Pixar,[101] which had grown into a commercial computer animation and technology development company, CAPS/ink-and-paint would become significant in allowing future Disney films to more seamlessly integrate computer-generated imagery and achieve higher production values with digital ink and paint and compositing techniques.[101] *The Little Mermaid* was the first of a series of blockbusters that would be released over the next decade by Walt Disney Feature Animation, a period later designated by the term Disney Renaissance.[127]

Accompanied in theaters by the Mickey Mouse featurette *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990) was Disney's first animated feature sequel and the studio's first film to be fully colored and composited via computer using the CAPS/ink-and-paint system.[101] However, the film did not duplicate the success of *The Little Mermaid*.[101] The next Disney animated feature, *Beauty and the Beast*, had begun production in London but was moved back to Burbank after Disney decided to shutter the London satellite office and retool the film into a musical-comedy format similar to *The Little Mermaid*.[101] Alan Menken and Howard Ashman were retained to write the songs and score, though Ashman died before production was completed.[101]

Debuting first in a work-in-progress version at the 1991 New York Film Festival before its November 1991 wide release, *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Kirk Wise and Gary Trousdale, was an unprecedented critical and commercial success and would later be regarded as one of the studio's best films.[128] The film

earned six Academy Award nominations, including one for Best Picture, a first for an animated work, winning for Best Song and Best Original Score.[129] Its $145 million box office gross set new records, and merchandising for the film, including toys, cross-promotions, and soundtrack sales, was also lucrative.[130]

The successes of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* established the template for future Disney releases during the 1990s: a musical-comedy format with Broadway-styled songs and tentpole action sequences, buoyed by cross-promotional marketing and merchandising, all carefully designed to pull audiences of all ages and types into theatres.[130] In addition to John Musker, Ron Clements, Kirk Wise and Gary Trousdale, the new guard of Disney artists creating these films included story artists/directors Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff, Chris Sanders and Brenda Chapman, and lead animators Glen Keane, Andreas Deja, Eric Goldberg, Nik Ranieri, Will Finn and many others.[130]

Aladdin, released in November 1992, continued the upward trend in Disney's animation success, earning $504 million worldwide at the box office,[131] and two more Oscars for Best Song and Best Score.[132] Featuring songs by Menken, Ashman and Tim Rice (who replaced Ashman after his death)[133] and starring the voice of Robin Williams,[134] *Aladdin* also established the trend of hiring celebrity actors and actresses to provide the voices of Disney characters,[134] which had been explored to some degree with *The Jungle Book* and *Oliver & Company*, but now became standard practice.[134]

In June 1994, Disney released *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff. An all-animal story set in Africa, *The Lion King* featured an all-star voice cast which included James Earl Jones, Matthew Broderick and Jeremy Irons, with songs written by Tim Rice and pop star Elton John. *The Lion King* earned $768 million at the worldwide box office,[135] to this date a record for a traditionally-animated film,[136] earning millions more in merchandising, promotions and record sales for its soundtrack.[130]

622/610 Circle 7 Drive (the Hart-Dannon Building), another Glendale building used by Walt Disney Feature Animation during the early 1990s.

Aladdin and *The Lion King* had been the highest-grossing films worldwide in each of their respective release years.[137][138] Between these in-house productions, Disney diversified in animation methods and produced *The Nightmare Before Christmas* with former Disney animator Tim Burton; Walt Disney Feature Animation contributed by providing the film's second-layering traditional animation.[139] With animation becoming again an increasingly important and lucrative part of Disney's business, the company began to expand its operations. The flagship California studio was split into two units and expanded,[130] and ground was broken on a new Disney Feature Animation building adjacent to the main Disney lot in Burbank, which was dedicated in 1995.[101][130] also one of Disney's television animation studios in the Paris, France suburb of Montreuil[140] – the former Brizzi Brothers studio[140] – became Walt Disney Feature Animation Paris, where *A Goofy Movie* (1995) and significant parts of later Disney films were produced.[101] Disney also began producing lower cost direct-to-video sequels for its successful animated films using the services of its television animation studios under the name Disney MovieToons. *The Return of Jafar* (1994), a sequel to *Aladdin* and a pilot for the *Aladdin* television show spin-off, was the first of these productions.[141] Walt Disney Feature Animation was also heavily involved in the adaptations of both *Beauty and the Beast* in 1994 and *The Lion King* in 1997 into Broadway musicals.[130]

Jeffrey Katzenberg and the Disney story team were heavily involved in the development and production of *Toy Story*,[142] the first fully computer-animated feature ever produced.[142] *Toy Story* was produced for Disney by Pixar and directed by former Disney animator John Lasseter,[142] whom Peter Schneider had unsuccessfully tried to hire back after his success with Pixar shorts such as *Tin Toy* (1988).[101] Released in

1995, *Toy Story* opened to critical acclaim[142][143][144] and commercial success,[142][145] leading to Pixar signing a five-film deal with Disney, which bore critically and financially successful computer animated films such as *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Toy Story 2* (1999), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001),[146] *Finding Nemo* (2003), and *The Incredibles* (2004).

In addition, the successes of *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* spurred a significant increase in the number of American-produced animated features throughout the rest of the decade, with the major film studios establishing new animation divisions such as Fox Animation Studios, Sullivan Bluth Studios, Amblimation, Rich Animation Studios, Turner Feature Animation, and Warner Bros. Animation being formed to produce films in a Disney-esque musical-comedy format such as *We're Back! A Dinosaur's Story* (1993), *Thumbelina* (1994), *The Swan Princess* (1994), *A Troll in Central Park* (1994), *The Pebble and the Penguin* (1995), *Cats Don't Dance* (1997), *Anastasia* (1997), *Quest for Camelot* (1998), and *The King and I* (1999). Out of these non-Disney animated features, only *Anastasia* was a box office success.[147]

1994–99: End of the Disney Renaissance and declining returns

Concerns arose internally at the Disney studio, particularly from Roy E. Disney, about studio chief Jeffrey Katzenberg taking too much credit for the success of Disney's early 1990s releases.[101] Disney Company president Frank Wells was killed in a helicopter accident in 1994, and Katzenberg lobbied CEO Michael Eisner for the vacant president position. Instead, tensions between Katzenberg, Eisner and Disney resulted in Katzenberg being forced to resign from the company on August 24 of that year,[148] with Joe Roth taking his place.[148] On October 12, 1994, Katzenberg went on to become one of the founders of DreamWorks SKG, whose animation division became Disney's key rival in feature animation,[130][149] with both computer animated films such as *Antz* (1998) and traditionally-animated films such as *The Prince of Egypt* (1998).[147] In December 1994, the Animation Building in Burbank was completed for the animation division.[150]

Walt Disney Feature Animation logo, used from 1997 to 2007.

In contrast to the early 1990s productions, not all the films in the second half of the renaissance were successful. *Pocahontas*, released in summer of 1995, was the first film of the renaissance to receive mixed reviews from critics, but was still popular with audiences and commercially successful, earning $346 million worldwide,[151] and won two Academy Awards for its music by Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz.[152] The next film, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) was partially produced at the Paris studio[140] and, although it is considered Disney's darkest film, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* performed better critically than *Pocahontas* and grossed $325 million worldwide.[153] The following summer, *Hercules* (1997) did well at the box office, grossing $252 million worldwide, but underperformed in comparison to Disney's previous films.[154] It received positive reviews for its acting but the animation and music were mixed.[155] *Hercules* was responsible for beginning the decline of traditionally-animated films. The declining box office success became doubly concerning inside the studio as wage competition from DreamWorks had significantly increased the studio's overhead,[112][130] with production costs increasing from $79 million in total costs (production, marketing, and overhead) for *The Lion King* in 1994 to $179 million for *Hercules* three years later.[149] Moreover, Disney depended upon the popularity of its new features in order to develop merchandising, theme park attractions, direct-to-video sequels and television programming in its other divisions.[130] The production schedule was scaled back[149] and a larger number of creative executives were hired to more closely supervise production, a move that was not popular among the animation staff.[130][156][157]

Mulan (1998), the first film produced primarily at the Florida studio,[158] opened to positive reviews from audiences and critics and earned a successful $305 million at the worldwide box office, restoring both the critical and commercial success of the studio. The next film, *Tarzan* (1999), directed by Kevin Lima and Chris Buck, had a high production cost of $130 million,[149] again received positive reviews and earned $448 million at the box office.[159] The *Tarzan* soundtrack by pop star Phil Collins resulted in significant record sales and an Academy Award for Best Song.[160]

1999–2005: Slump, downsizing, and conversion to computer animation; corporate issues

Fantasia 2000, a sequel to the 1940 film that had been a pet project of Roy E. Disney's since 1990,[161][162] premiered on December 17, 1999, at Carnegie Hall in New York City as part of a concert tour that also visited London, Paris, Tokyo and Pasadena, California. The film was then released in 75 IMAX theaters worldwide from January 1 to April 30, 2000, making it the first animated feature-length film to be released in the format; a standard theatrical release followed on June 15, 2000. Produced in pieces when artists were available between productions,[161] *Fantasia 2000* was the first animated feature produced for and released in IMAX format.[163] The film's $90 million worldwide box office total against its $90 million production cost[162] resulted in it losing $100 million for the studio.[162][164] Peter Schneider left his post as president of Walt Disney Feature Animation in 1999 to become president of The Walt Disney Studios under Joe Roth.[165] Thomas Schumacher, who had been Schneider's vice president of animation for several years, became the new president of Walt Disney Feature Animation.[165] By this time, competition from other studios had driven animators' incomes to all-time highs,[130] making traditionally-animated features even more costly to produce.[149] Schumacher was tasked with cutting costs, and massive layoffs began to cut salaries and bring the studio's staff – which peaked at 2,200 people in 1999 – down to approximately 1,200 employees.[166][167]

In October 1999, Dream Quest Images, a special effects studio previously purchased by The Walt Disney Company in April 1996 to replace Buena Vista Visual Effects,[168] was merged with the computer-graphics operation of Walt Disney Feature Animation to form a division called **The Secret Lab**.[169] The Secret Lab produced one feature film, *Dinosaur*, which was released in May 2000[170] and featured CGI prehistoric creatures against filmed live-action backgrounds.[171] The $128 million production earned $349 million worldwide, below studio expectations,[171] and The Secret Lab was closed in 2001.[172]

In December 2000, *The Emperor's New Groove* was released. It had been a musical epic called *Kingdom of the Sun* before being revised mid-production into a smaller comedy.[173][174] The film earned $169 million worldwide on release,[175] though it was well-reviewed and performed better on video;[176][177] *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), an attempt to break the Disney formula by moving into action-adventure, received mixed reviews and earned $186 million worldwide against production costs of $120 million.[166][178][179]

By 2001 and early 2002, the notable successes of Pixar's computer-animated films (thanks to its distribution deal with Disney), along with DreamWorks' *Shrek* and Blue Sky Studios' *Ice Age*, respectively, against Disney's lesser returns for *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* led to the speculation that hand-drawn animation was becoming obsolete.[130][180][181] Disney laid off most of the employees at the Feature Animation studio in Burbank, downsizing it to one unit and beginning plans to move into fully computer animated films.[130][182] A handful of employees were offered positions doing computer animation. Morale plunged to a low not seen since the start of the studio's ten-year exile to Glendale in 1985.[130][183] The Paris studio was also closed in 2003.[184]

The Burbank studio's remaining hand-drawn productions, *Treasure Planet* and *Home on the Range*, continued production. *Treasure Planet*, an outer space retelling of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, was a pet project of writer-directors Ron Clements and John Musker. It received an IMAX release and generally positive reviews but was financially unsuccessful upon its November 2002 release, resulting in a $74 million write-down for The Walt Disney Company in fiscal year 2003.[183][185] The Burbank studio's 2D departments closed at the end of 2002 following completion of *Home on the Range*,[130][186] a long-in-production feature that had previously been known as *Sweating Bullets*.[187]

Meanwhile, hand-drawn feature animation production continued at the Feature Animation Florida studio, where the films could be produced at lower costs.[182] *Lilo & Stitch*, an offbeat comedy-drama written and directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois,[181] became the studio's first bonafide hit since *Tarzan* upon its summer 2002 release,[188] earning $273 million worldwide against an $80 million production budget.[189]

By this time, most of the Disney features from the 1990s had been spun off into direct-to-video sequels, television series, or both, produced by the Disney Television Animation unit. Beginning with the February 2002 release of *Return to Never Land*, a sequel to *Peter Pan* (1953), Disney began releasing lower-budgeted sequels to earlier films, which had been intended for video premieres, in theaters,[141] a process derided by some of the Disney animation staff and fans of the Disney films.[130][190]

In 2003, Tom Schumacher was appointed president of Buena Vista Theatrical Group, Disney's stageplay and musical theater arm, and David Stainton, then president of Walt Disney Television Animation, was appointed as his replacement. Stainton continued to oversee Disney's direct-to-video division, Disneytoon Studios, which had been part of the television animation department,[5] though transferred at this time to Walt Disney Feature Animation management.[191]

Under Stainton, the Florida studio completed *Brother Bear*, which did not perform as well as *Lilo & Stitch* critically or financially.[188] Disney closed the Florida studio on January 12, 2004,[130][188] with the then in-progress feature *My Peoples* left unfinished when the studio closed two months later.[156][181][186][192] *Home on the Range*, released in April 2004, did not do as critically or commercially successful as *Lilo & Stitch* as well.[193] In spite of this, Disney officially announced its conversion of Walt Disney Feature Animation into a fully CGI studio – a process begun two years prior[180][194] – now with a staff of 600 people[180] and began selling off all of its traditional animation equipment.[130]

Just after *Brother Bear*'s November 2003 release, Feature Animation chairman Roy E. Disney had resigned from The Walt Disney Company, launching with business partner Stanley Gold a second external "SaveDisney" campaign similar to the one that had forced Ron Miller out in 1984, this time to force out Michael Eisner.[190] Two of their arguing points against Eisner included his handling of Feature Animation and the souring of the studio's relationship with Pixar.[180] The same year, the studio collaborated with Walt Disney Imagineering on the 4D theme park film *Mickey's PhilharMagic*. One of the studio's first attempts at CG animation, the studio brought back several animators from the Renaissance period to work on the film; each animator worked on a sequence that they had previously worked on, such as Glen Keane animating Ariel for the "Part of Your World" sequence.[195]

Talks between Eisner and Pixar CEO Steve Jobs over renewal terms for the highly lucrative Pixar-Disney distribution deal broke down in January 2004.[180][196][197] Jobs, in particular, disagreed with Eisner's insistence that sequels such as the then in-development *Toy Story 3* (2010) would not count against the number of films required in the studio's new deal.[196] To that end, Disney announced the launching of Circle 7 Animation, a division of Feature Animation which would have produced sequels to the Pixar films, while Pixar began shopping for a new distribution deal.[196]

In 2005, Disney released its first fully computer-animated feature, *Chicken Little*. The film was a success at the box office, earning $315 million worldwide,[198] but was met with critically mixed-to-negative reviews.[199] Later that year, after two years of Roy E. Disney's "SaveDisney" campaign, Eisner announced that he would resign and named Bob Iger, then president of the Walt Disney Company, his successor as chairman and CEO.[190]

2005–10: Rebound, Disney's acquisition of Pixar, and renaming

Iger later said, "I didn't yet have a complete sense of just how broken Disney Animation was." He described its history since the early 1990s as "dotted by a slew of expensive failures" like *Hercules* and *Chicken Little*; the "modest successes" like *Mulan* and *Lilo & Stitch* were still critically and commercially unsuccessful compared to the earlier films of the Disney Renaissance.[197] After Iger became CEO, Jobs resumed negotiations for Pixar with Disney.[200] On January 24, 2006, Disney announced that it would acquire Pixar for $7.4 billion in an all-stock deal,[201] with the deal closing that May,[200][202][203] and the Circle 7 studio launched to produce *Toy Story 3* was shut down,[204][205] with most of its employees returning to Feature Animation and *Toy Story 3* returning to Pixar's control.[206] Iger later said that it was "a deal I wanted badly, and [Disney] needed badly". He believed that Disney Animation needed new leadership[197] and, as part of the acquisition, Edwin Catmull and John Lasseter were named president and Chief Creative Officer, respectively, of Feature Animation as well as Pixar.[202]

John Lasseter (Chief Creative Officer, 2006–18, left) and Edwin Catmull (President, 2006–18, right) came to Disney following its acquisition of Pixar and dedicated themselves to revitalizing Walt Disney Animation Studios after the studio's unsuccessful early 2000s period.

While Disney executives had discussed closing Feature Animation as redundant, Catmull and Lasseter refused and instead resolved to try to turn things around at the studio.[207] Lasseter said, "We weren't going to let that [closure] happen on our watch. We were determined to save the legacy of Walt Disney's amazing studio and bring it back up to the creative level it had to be. Saving this heritage was squarely on our shoulders."[208] Lasseter and Catmull set about rebuilding the morale of the Feature Animation staff,[209][210] and rehired a number of its 1980s "new guard" generation of star animators who had left the studio, including Ron Clements, John Musker, Eric Goldberg,[105] Mark Henn, Andreas Deja, Bruce W. Smith and Chris Buck.[211] To maintain the separation of Walt Disney Feature Animation and Pixar despite their now common ownership and management, Catmull and Lasseter "drew a hard line" that each studio was solely responsible for its own projects and would not be allowed to borrow personnel from or lend tasks out to the other. Catmull said that he and Lasseter would "make sure the studios are quite distinct from each other. We don't want them to merge; that would definitely be the wrong approach. Each should have its own personality."[212][213]

Catmull and Lasseter also brought to Disney Feature Animation the Pixar model of a "filmmaker-driven studio" as opposed to an "executive-driven studio"; they abolished Disney's prior system of requiring directors to respond to "mandatory" notes from development executives ranking above the producers in favor of a system roughly analogous to peer review, in which non-mandatory notes come primarily from fellow producers, directors and writers.[208][214][215] Most of the layers of "gatekeepers" (midlevel executives) were stripped away, and Lasseter established a routine of personally meeting weekly with filmmakers on all projects in the last year of production and delivering feedback on the spot.[216] The

studio's team of top creatives who work together closely on the development of its films is known as the Disney Story Trust; it is somewhat similar to the Pixar Braintrust,[214][217] but its meetings are reportedly "more polite" than those of its Pixar counterpart.[218]

In 2007, Lasseter changed the name of Walt Disney Feature Animation to **Walt Disney Animation Studios**,[219] and re-positioned the studio as an animation house that produced both traditional and computer-animated projects. In order to keep costs down on hand-drawn productions, animation, design and layout were done in-house at Disney while clean-up animation and digital ink-and-paint were farmed out to vendors and freelancers.[220]

The studio released *Meet the Robinsons* in 2007, its second all-CGI film, earning $169.3 million worldwide.[221] That same year, Disneytoon Studios was also restructured and began to operate as a separate unit under Lasseter and Catmull's control.[222] Lasseter's direct intervention with the studio's next film, *American Dog*, resulted in the departure of director Chris Sanders,[223] who went on to become a director at DreamWorks Animation.[224] The film was retooled by new directors Byron Howard and Chris Williams as *Bolt*, which was released in 2008 and had the best critical reception of any Disney animated feature since *Lilo & Stitch*[225] and became a moderate financial success, receiving an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Film.[226]

The Princess and the Frog, loosely based on the fairy tale *the Frog Prince* and the 2002 novel *The Frog Princess*, and directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, was the studio's first hand-drawn animated film in five years. A return to the musical-comedy format of the 1990s with songs by Randy Newman,[227] the film was released in 2009 to a positive critical reception and was also nominated for three Academy Awards, including two for Best Song.[228] The box office performance of *The Princess and the Frog* – a total of $267 million earned worldwide against a $105 million production budget – was seen as an underperformance due to competition with *Avatar*.[226] The underperformance was also attributed to the word "Princess" in the title, resulting in future Disney films then in production about princesses being given gender-neutral, symbolic titles: *Rapunzel* became *Tangled* and *The Snow Queen* became *Frozen*.[209][229][230][231] In 2014, Disney animator Tom Sito compared the film's box office performance to that of *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), which was a step-up from the theatrical run of the 1985 film *The Black Cauldron*.[232] In 2009, the studio also produced the computer-animated *Prep & Landing* holiday special for the ABC television network.[233]

2010–19: Continued resurgence; John Lasseter and Ed Catmull's departure

After *The Princess and the Frog*, the studio released *Tangled*, a musical CGI adaptation of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale "Rapunzel" with songs by Alan Menken and Glenn Slater. In active development since 2002 under Glen Keane,[194] *Tangled*, directed by Byron Howard and Nathan Greno, was released in 2010 and became a significant critical and commercial success[234][235] and was nominated for several accolades. The film earned $592 million in worldwide box office revenue, becoming the studio's third most successful release to date.[236]

The hand-drawn feature *Winnie the Pooh*, a new feature film based on the eponymous stories by A.A. Milne, followed in 2011 to positive reviews; it remains the studio's most recent hand-drawn feature.[237] The film was released in theaters alongside the hand-drawn short *The Ballad of Nessie*.[238] *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, was released in 2012 to critical acclaim and commercial success. A comedy-adventure about a video-game villain who redeems himself as a hero, it won numerous awards, including the Annie, Critics' Choice and Kids' Choice Awards for Best Animated Feature Film, and received Golden Globe and Academy Award nominations.[239] The film earned $471 million in worldwide

box office revenue.[240][241][242] In addition, the studio won its first Academy Award for a short film in forty-four years with *Paperman*, which was released in theaters with *Wreck-It Ralph*.[243][244] Directed by John Kahrs, *Paperman* utilized new software developed in-house at the studio called Meander, which merges hand-drawn and computer animation techniques within the same character to create a unique "hybrid". According to Producer Kristina Reed, the studio is continuing to develop the technique for future projects,[244] including an animated feature.[237]

In 2013, the studio laid off nine of its hand-drawn animators, including Nik Ranieri and Ruben A. Aquino,[245] leading to speculation on animation blogs that the studio was abandoning traditional animation, an idea that the studio dismissed.[246] That same year, *Frozen*, a CGI musical film inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Snow Queen," was released to widespread acclaim and became a blockbuster hit. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee with songs by the Broadway team of Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez,[247] it was the first Disney animated film to earn over $1 billion in worldwide box office revenue.[239][247][248] *Frozen* also became the first film from Walt Disney Animation Studios to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature (a category started in 2001), as well as the first feature-length motion picture from the studio to win an Academy Award since *Tarzan* and the first to win multiple Academy Awards since *Pocahontas*.[249] It was released in theaters with *Get a Horse!*, a new *Mickey Mouse* cartoon combining black-and-white hand-drawn animation and full-color CGI animation.[250]

The studio's next feature, *Big Hero 6*, a CGI comedy-adventure film inspired by the Marvel Comics series of the same name, was released in November 2014.[251] For the film, the studio developed new light rendering software called Hyperion, which the studio continued to use on all subsequent films.[252] *Big Hero 6* received critical acclaim and was the highest-grossing animated film of 2014, also winning the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.[253][254][255][256] The film was accompanied in theaters by the animated short *Feast*, which won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film.[257][258] In the same month that *Big Hero 6* was released, it was announced that General Manager, Andrew Millstein had been promoted as President of Walt Disney Animation Studios.[203][259][260][261]

In March 2016, the studio released *Zootopia*, a CGI buddy-comedy film set in a modern world inhabited by anthropomorphic animals.[262] The film was a critical and commercial success, grossing over $1 billion worldwide, and won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.[263][264][265][266]

Moana, a CGI fantasy-adventure film, was released in November 2016.[267] The film was shown in theaters with the animated short, *Inner Workings*.[268] *Moana* was another commercial and critical success for the studio, grossing over $600 million worldwide and receiving two Academy Award nominations.[269][270]

In November 2017, John Lasseter announced that he was taking a six-month leave of absence after acknowledging what he called "missteps" in his behavior with employees in a memo to staff. According to various news outlets, Lasseter had a history of alleged sexual misconduct towards employees.[271][272][273] On June 8, 2018, it was announced that Lasseter would leave Disney and Pixar at the end of the year after the company decided not to renew his contract, but he would take on a consulting role until it expired.[274][275] Jennifer Lee was announced as Lasseter's replacement as chief creative officer of Disney Animation on June 19, 2018.[275][276]

On June 28, 2018, the studio's division Disneytoon Studios was shut down, resulting in the layoffs of 75 animators and staff.[277] On October 23, 2018, it was announced that Ed Catmull would be retiring at the end of the year, and would stay in an adviser role until July 2019.[278]

In November 2018, the studio released a sequel to *Wreck-It Ralph*, titled *Ralph Breaks the Internet*.[279] The film grossed over $500 million worldwide and received nominations for a Golden Globe and an Academy Award, both for Best Animated Feature.[280][281][282][283]

2019–present: Continued success and expansion to television

In August 2019, it was announced that Andrew Millstein would be stepping down from his role as president, before moving on to become co-president of Blue Sky Studios alongside Robert Baird, while Clark Spencer was named president of Disney Animation, reporting to Walt Disney Studios chairman Alan Bergman and working alongside chief creative officer Jennifer Lee.[3][4]

The studio's next feature film was the sequel *Frozen II*, released in November 2019.[284] The film grossed over $1 billion worldwide and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Song.[285][286]

Starting in 2020, Disney Animation created a series of experimental shorts called *Short Circuit* for Disney+. The first pack of shorts was released in 2020,[287][288][289] and a second pack was released in August 2021.[290][291] During that period, Disney Animation returned to work on hand-drawn animation, having released the hand-drawn "At Home with Olaf" web short "Ice,"[292] as well as three hand-drawn animated Goofy shorts for Disney+,[293] and a hand-drawn animated "Short Circuit" titled "Dinosaur Barbarian".[294] In April 2022, Eric Goldberg confirmed plans within the studio to develop hand-drawn animated films and series.[295] That year saw the release of the hand-drawn shorts *Mickey in a Minute*, released as part of the Disney+ documentary *Mickey: The Story of a Mouse*, and *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, which marked the title character's first animated short produced by Disney Animation since Disney acquired the rights for the character in 2006.[296][297]

In December 2020, the studio announced that it was expanding into producing television series - a business usually handled by the Disney Television Animation division. Most of the projects in development are for the Disney+ streaming service.[298] The CG series produced include *Baymax!* (a spin-off of *Big Hero 6*), and a TV anthology called *Zootopia+* (set in the *Zootopia* universe). Upcoming series include a TV adaptation of *Moana* and *Tiana*, featuring the lead character from *The Princess and the Frog*. They also announced they would be teaming up with British-based Pan-African entertainment company Kugali Media on a science fiction anthology named *Iwájú*.[299] In addition, employees from Disney Animation are involved on the Disney Television Animation series *Monsters at Work*, based on Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.*[300]

Raya and the Last Dragon, a CGI fantasy-adventure film, was released in March 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was released simultaneously in theaters and on Disney+ with Premier Access.[301] The film was accompanied in theaters with the animated short *Us Again*.[302] *Raya and the Last Dragon* grossed over $130 million at the box office[303] and became a hit on the streaming charts after its Premier Access charge expired on Disney+ and became the third most streamed film title of 2021.[304][305][306] The film also received a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.[307]

In August 2021, it was reported that Disney Animation was opening a new animation studio in Vancouver.[308] Operations at the Vancouver studio started in 2022, with former Disney Animation finance lead Amir Nasrabadi serving as head for the studio.[308] The Vancouver studio will work on the animation for the Disney+-exclusive long-form series and future Disney+ specials, while the short-form series will be animated at the Burbank studio.[308] Preproduction and storyboarding for the long-form series and specials will also take place at the Burbank studio.[308]

In November 2021, the studio released *Encanto*, a CGI musical-fantasy film.[309] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the film was given an exclusive 30-day theatrical run in theaters and was released to Disney+ on December 24, 2021.[310] It was released in theaters with the 2D/CG hybrid short *Far from the Tree*.[311] Although *Encanto* was not able to break-even at the box-office by grossing $256 million against its $120–150 million budget,[312][313][314][315][316] it went viral over the 2021 holiday season and achieved wider commercial success after its digital release to Disney+.[317][318][319] The film went on to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, and received Academy Award nominations for Best Original Score and Best Original Song.[320]

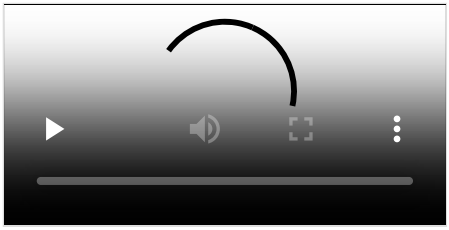
In November 2022, the studio released the CGI action-adventure film *Strange World*.[321] It received positive reviews but failed at the box office, grossing $73.6 million worldwide on a budget of $135–180 million, with an estimated loss of $100–147 million.[322][323]

By 2023, the studio had opened a new apprentice program for hand-drawn animators.[324] That same year, the live-action/animated short film *Once Upon a Studio* was released to celebrate Disney's 100th anniversary, which occurred in October 2023.[325]

The 2D/CG musical-fantasy film *Wish* was released in November 2023. The film's theme is inspired by Disney's 100th anniversary.[326][327]

Production logo

Until 2007, Walt Disney Animation Studios did not use a traditional production logo, using the standard Walt Disney Pictures logo instead. Starting in 2007, an on-screen production logo based on *Steamboat Willie* was added after the 2006 Disney logo. It depicts Mickey Mouse, in his classic form, being drawn in against a beige paper background. As pages flip in the manner of a flip book, the drawing is animated into a scene from the aforementioned short in which Mickey is whistling. The camera zooms out onto a yellow-gold spotlight background and the wordmark of Walt Disney Animation Studios is displayed below the scene.



The production logo of Walt Disney Animation Studios.

The studio's production logo has appeared on every film since *Meet the Robinsons* (2007). "Milestone" variants were used for *Tangled* (2010) and *Encanto* (2021), with text saying "Walt Disney Animation Studios: "50th Animated Motion Picture" and "60th Animated Motion Picture" respectively, with Mickey in the "0"; the *Encanto* version used a shortened version. An 8-bit version of the logo was used for *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012). For *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), *Frozen II* (2019), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) and *Encanto*, Mickey's whistling was muted to allow their respective opening themes to play over the logo. In *Strange World* (2022) and *Wish* (2023), the logo is shortened due to the length of the 2022 Disney logo (in celebration of the company's 100th anniversary in 2023), as akin to the start of the studio's short films, as well as the end of the studio's feature length films (albeit without Mickey's whistling, besides *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), albeit without the music). The logo is expected to remain in use after *Steamboat Willie* enters the public domain on January 1, 2024, due to the cartoon being a work published in 1928.[328]

Studio

Management

Walt Disney Animation Studios is currently managed by Jennifer Lee (Chief Creative Officer, 2018–present) and Clark Spencer (President, 2019–present). Corporation's CEO is WDAS' CEO, John Nallen is COO, Viet Dinh is CLO, Steve Tomsic is CFO (previously 20th Century Fox, now part of Disney), Stacey Snider is CEO, John Gelke is VP Global Operations, J Young is SVP Growth, Gerard Devan is Group Executive APAC, Stephanie Gruber is Group Executive Television and Christopher Greavu is Vice President of Sales.

Former presidents of the studio include Andrew Millstein (November 2014–July 2019),[3][276] Edwin Catmull (June 2007–July 2019), David Stainton (January 2003–January 2006), Thomas Schumacher (January 1999–December 2002) and Peter Schneider (1985–January 1999).[329]

Other Disney executives who also exercised much influence within the studio were John Lasseter (2006–18, Chief Creative Officer, Walt Disney Animation Studios), Roy E. Disney (1972–2009, CEO and Chairman, Walt Disney Animation Studios), Jeffrey Katzenberg (1984–94, Chairman, The Walt Disney Studios), Michael Eisner (1984–2005, CEO, The Walt Disney Company), and Frank Wells (1984–94, President and COO, The Walt Disney Company). Following Roy Disney's death in 2009, the WDAS headquarters in Burbank was re-dedicated as **The Roy E. Disney Animation Building** in May 2010.[330]

Locations

The south side of the Roy E. Disney Animation Building, as seen from the public park that separates it from the Ventura Freeway.

Since 1995, Walt Disney Animation Studios has been headquartered in the Roy E. Disney Animation Building in Burbank, California, across Riverside Drive from the Walt Disney Studios, where the original Animation building (now housing corporate offices) is located. The Disney Animation Building's lobby is capped by a large version of the famous hat from the Sorcerer's Apprentice segment of *Fantasia* (1940), and the building is informally called the "hat building" for that reason.[331] Disney Animation shares its site with ABC Studios, whose building is located immediately to the west.

Until the mid-1990s, Disney Animation previously operated out of the Air Way complex, a cluster of old hangars, office buildings, and trailers[101] in the Grand Central Business Centre, an industrial park on the site of the former Grand Central Airport[332] about two miles (3.2 km) east in the city of Glendale. The Disneytoon Studios unit was based in Glendale. Disney Animation's archive, formerly known as "the morgue" (based on an analogy to a morgue file) and today known as the Animation Research Library,[333] is also located in Glendale.[334] Unlike the Burbank buildings, the ARL is located in a nondescript office building near Disney's Grand Central Creative Campus. The 12,000-square-foot ARL is home to over 64 million items of animation artwork dating back to 1924; because of its importance to the company, visitors are required to agree not to disclose its exact location within Glendale.[334]

Previously, feature animation satellite studios were located around the world in Montreuil, Seine-Saint-Denis, France (a suburb of Paris),[140] and in Bay Lake, Florida (near Orlando, at Disney's Hollywood Studios theme park).[181] The Paris studio was shut down in 2002,[192] while the Florida studio was shut down in 2004.[192] The Florida animation building survives as an office building, while the former Magic of Disney Animation section of the building is home to *Star Wars* Launch Bay.

In November 2014, Disney Animation commenced a 16-month upgrade of the Roy E. Disney Animation Building,[335][336] in order to fix what then-studio president Edwin Catmull had called its "dungeon-like" interior.[337] For example, the interior was so cramped that it could not easily accommodate "town hall"

meetings with all employees in attendance.[336] Due to the renovation, the studio's employees were temporarily moved from Burbank into the closest available Disney-controlled studio space – the Disneytoon Studios building in the industrial park in Glendale and the old Imagineering warehouse in North Hollywood under the western approach to Bob Hope Airport (the Tujunga Building).[217][338] The renovation was completed in October 2016.[338]

Productions

Feature films

Walt Disney Animation Studios has produced animated features in a series of animation techniques, including traditional animation, computer animation, combination of both and animation combined with live-action scenes. The studio's first film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was released on December 21, 1937,[339] and their most recent film, *Wish*, was released on November 22, 2023.

From the Disney Renaissance to the post-Renaissance era, their films have cost between $40–140 million. Starting with *Chicken Little* (2005), most of their films have cost $150–175 million. *Tangled* (2010) is the studio's most expensive film, with a budget of $260 million.

Short films

Since *Alice Comedies* in the 1920s, Walt Disney Animation Studios has produced a series of prominent short films, including the *Mickey Mouse* cartoons and the *Silly Symphonies* series, until the cartoon studio division was closed in 1956. Many of these shorts provided a medium for the studio to experiment with new technologies that they would use in their filmmaking process, such as the synchronization of sound in *Steamboat Willie* (1928),[24] the integration of the three-strip Technicolor process in *Flowers and Trees* (1932),[33] the multiplane camera in *The Old Mill* (1937),[45] the xerography process in *Goliath II* (1960),[340] and the hand-drawn/CGI hybrid animation in *Off His Rockers* (1992),[341] *Paperman* (2012),[244] and *Get a Horse!* (2013).[250]

From 2001 to 2008, Disney released the Walt Disney Treasures, a limited collector DVD series, celebrating what would have been Walt Disney's 100th birthday.

On August 18, 2015, Disney released twelve short animation films entitled: *Walt Disney Animation Studios Short Films Collection*, which includes among others *Tick Tock Tale* (2010), directed by Dean Wellins and *Prep & Landing – Operation: Secret Santa* (2010), written and directed by Kevin Deters and Stevie Wermers-Skelton.

Television programming

Walt Disney Animation Studios announced its expansion into television programming in 2020, and is currently producing five original shows for Disney+. The shows include *Baymax!* and *Zootopia+* (both 2022), *Iwájú* (2023), *Tiana* (2024), and *Moana: The Series* (TBA).[342][343]

Title	Network	Original run	Notes
Short Circuit	Disney+	2020–present	Shorts
Zenimation		2020–21	
How to Stay at Home		2021	
Olaf Presents			
Baymax!		2022	TV series
Zootopia+			

Franchises

This list only includes film series and/or franchises featuring theatrical films, short films, and television series *solely* produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios through the years (and not any subsequent films or series produced by Disney's direct-to-video/television units such as Disney Television Animation or Disneytoon Studios).

Titles	Release dates
Mickey Mouse & Friends	1928–present
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	1937–present
Fantasia	1940–present
Dumbo	1941–2019
Bambi	1942–present
Saludos Amigos	1943–2018
Make Mine Music	1946–54
Cinderella	1950–2015
Alice in Wonderland	1951–present
Peter Pan	1953–present
Lady and the Tramp	1955–2019
Sleeping Beauty	1959–present
101 Dalmatians	1961–present
Winnie the Pooh	1966–present
The Jungle Book	1967–present
The Rescuers	1977–90
The Fox and the Hound	1981–2006
The Little Mermaid	1989–present
Beauty and the Beast	1991–present
Aladdin	1992–present
The Lion King	1994–present
Pocahontas	1995–98

The Hunchback of Notre Dame	1996–present
Mulan	1998–present
The Emperor's New Groove	2000–08
Atlantis	2001–03
Brother Bear	2003–06
The Princess and the Frog	2009–present
Tangled	2010–20
Wreck-It Ralph	2012–present
Frozen	2013–present
Big Hero 6	2014–present
Zootopia	2016–present
Moana	
Encanto	2021–present

See also


Disney portal


Film portal


Animation portal


United States portal

- The Walt Disney Company
- Disney's Nine Old Men
- 12 basic principles of animation
- *Walt Disney Treasures*
- *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life*
- Modern animation in the United States: Disney
- Animation studios owned by The Walt Disney Company
- Disneytoon Studios
- Circle Seven Animation
- Pixar
- Blue Sky Studios
- 20th Century Animation
- List of Disney theatrical animated feature films
- Disney Television Animation
- List of animation studios

Documentary films about Disney animation

- *A Trip Through the Walt Disney Studios* (1937, short)
- *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941, a staged "mockumentary")

- *Frank and Ollie* (1995)
- *Dream On Silly Dreamer* (2005)
- *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (2009)

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External links

- Official website (https://disneyanimation.com)
- Walt Disney Animation Studios's channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_976xMxPgzIa290Hqtk-9g) on YouTube

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