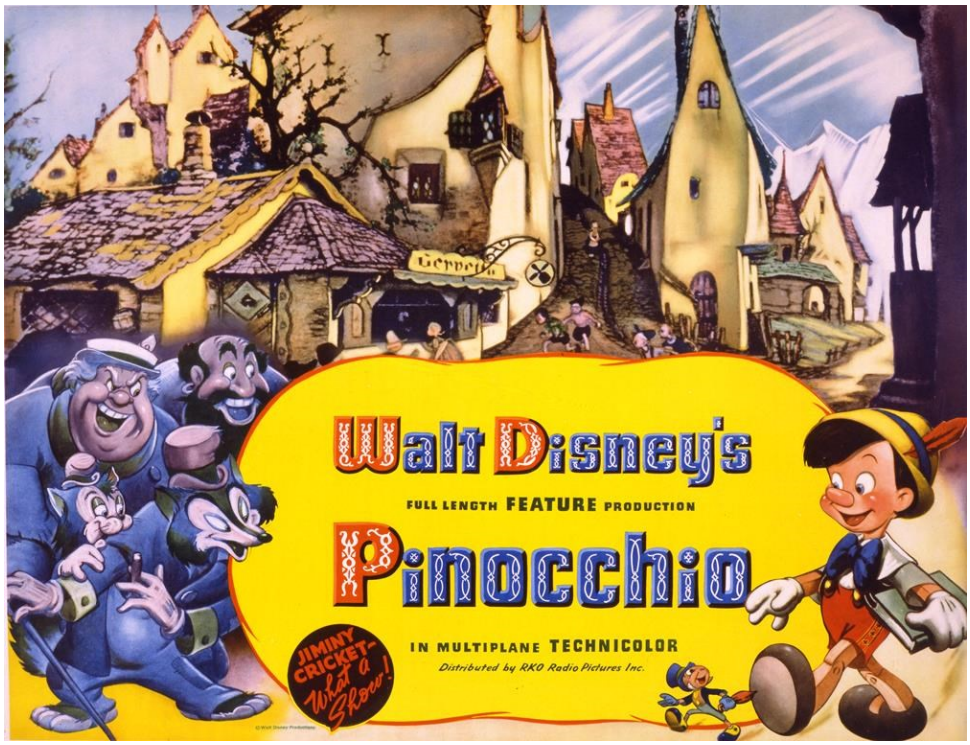
Pinocchio

By J.B. Kaufman



This poster, courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, is one of several images including posters and original pencil sketches found in the Library's Walt Disney Productions Collection http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=disney%

The great Disney artist Joe Grant recalled in later years that Walt Disney approached him in a studio hallway shortly after the release of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." The first feature-length Disney film was just opening around the world and was meeting with a spectacular reception at the box office. With that success reverberating through the studio, Grant told John Canemaker, Walt met him in the hallway and asked cryptically: "What are we going to do for an encore?"

The "encore" emerged early in 1940 as "Pinocchio," a magnificent feature which proved decisively that "Snow White" was no fluke. Having actually started development late in 1937, before "Snow White" was completed, "Pinocchio" fully lived up to the artistic promise of its predecessor and even surpassed it in some technical respects. Based on Carlo Collodi's epic Italian fantasy novel, "Pinocchio" tackled an ambitious range of settings, themes, and visual and dramatic effects. The Disney writers plunged into unprecedented story material for animated cartoons. At one end of the spectrum, the scenes in Geppetto's workshop, filled with his imaginative carved toys and clocks, were atmospheric, charming, and endlessly inventive. Conversely—"Snow White" having been criticized by some reviewers as being too frightening for children— "Pinocchio" responded with a complement of downright terrifying villains and situations. No story idea was off limits, no technical challenge too daunting to pursue. The evidence is unmistakable on the screen: in Pinocchio," Walt Disney presents his vision of the unlimited possibilities of animation.

Part of "Snow White"'s triumph had been the establishment of a new standard of character animation, a standard that remains the industry criterion to this day. "Pinocchio," animated largely by the same artists (along with some talented newcomers), maintained that standard. New refinements were introduced: when Pinocchio is still a lifeless puppet, Geppetto moves him around the workshop, and he dangles and swings like the wooden object he is. When he comes to life a few minutes later, he's still a jointed wooden contrivance, but his movements are those of a sentient being—and when he becomes a real boy at film's end, the transformation is so complete that he *moves* like a real boy. Other members of the cast include Jiminy Cricket, who nimbly leaps from point to point; old Geppetto, who moves with a slower, stiffer gait; the Fox and Cat, slapstick comedians who tear through their scenes with knockabout gusto; and the Blue Fairy, an ethereal presence who glides smoothly into a room. The Disney artists took all these assignments in stride, handling this diverse range of movement with such professional ease that the audience, drawn into the illusion, scarcely notices their achievement.

Along with this wealth of *character* animation, "Pinocchio" added a luxurious helping of *effects* animation. This was the studio's term for water, fire, props in motion, and any other movement on the screen that fell outside the normal boundaries of character animation. The Disney effects-animation department had been formed in the mid-1930s and had attracted specialists of its own, artists who excelled in this highly specific craft. By 1940 every Disney film included a quota of effects animation, but "Pinocchio" displays it in abundance: water ripples and flows, flames flicker and dance, raindrops splash, lightning flashes, ominous shadows loom. The effects are further enhanced on the screen by special graphic refinements, including "the blend," a

painstaking technique that allows subtle gradations of color on faces and clothing.

A related specialty was that of *photographic* effects: special lenses, equipment, and techniques that embellished the artists' work still further. At the time of "Snow White" the studio had unveiled the multiplane camera crane, a complicated device that introduced a new illusion of depth in animated films. For "Pinocchio," the technical crew continued to experiment with this principle. One celebrated scene begins with a bell tower at roof level, then moves down into the streets of the village, passing under an arch and around a corner, all in one unbroken movement, encompassing character movement as well as scenic elements. This "multiplane" scene became so complex that it exceeded the capacity of the multiplane crane, and the crew was obliged to develop yet another procedure to film it.

All these lush visuals are underscored on the soundtrack by a rich, sophisticated musical score by composer Leigh Harline. His music was underappreciated in 1940, and is still perhaps underappreciated today, but it did win two Academy Awards—one of them for the song "When You Wish Upon a Star," which has become a perennial in its own right.

Bursting with this profusion of artistic riches, it was no surprise that "Pinocchio" was ecstatically embraced by critics upon its release in 1940. What *was* surprising was its lackluster performance at the box office. Walt Disney, emboldened by the record-breaking success of "Snow White," had invested a generous outlay of talent and resources in "Pinocchio," confident that it would achieve a corresponding degree of success. Instead, by the end of 1940 "Pinocchio" had yet to recover its negative cost. Whether because of its darker, more sophisticated vision, its lack of "Snow White"'s "first" status, or some other combination of factors, "Pinocchio" utterly failed to duplicate the staggering returns of its predecessor. The situation was not helped when RKO, Disney's distributor, released the film outside the U.S. A healthy percentage of "Snow White"'s profits had come from overseas, but by 1940, with much of Europe engulfed in war, that market was not immediately available to "Pinocchio." For a time, the second Disney feature languished in the wake of the first.

The passage of time has changed all that. Today, after an interim of decades which have seen no fewer than seven theatrical reissues of the film, multiple home-video releases, and the accolades of fresh generations of viewers, "Pinocchio" has taken its place as one of Walt Disney's finest cinematic achievements. Beloved by countless fans of all ages, it is also revered by animation students and professionals, recognized as a formal masterpiece of the animated film.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

J.B. Kaufman is the author of several scholarly books on Disney animation including the seminal works on Disney silent films – Walt in Wonderland: The Silent Films of Walt Disney *(1993) which he co-wrote with Russell Merritt. He has also authored a number of other book, most recently* The Fairest One of All: The Making of Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs *(2012). He is currently working on a new book called* Pinocchio: The Disney Epic *which is scheduled to release next year.*