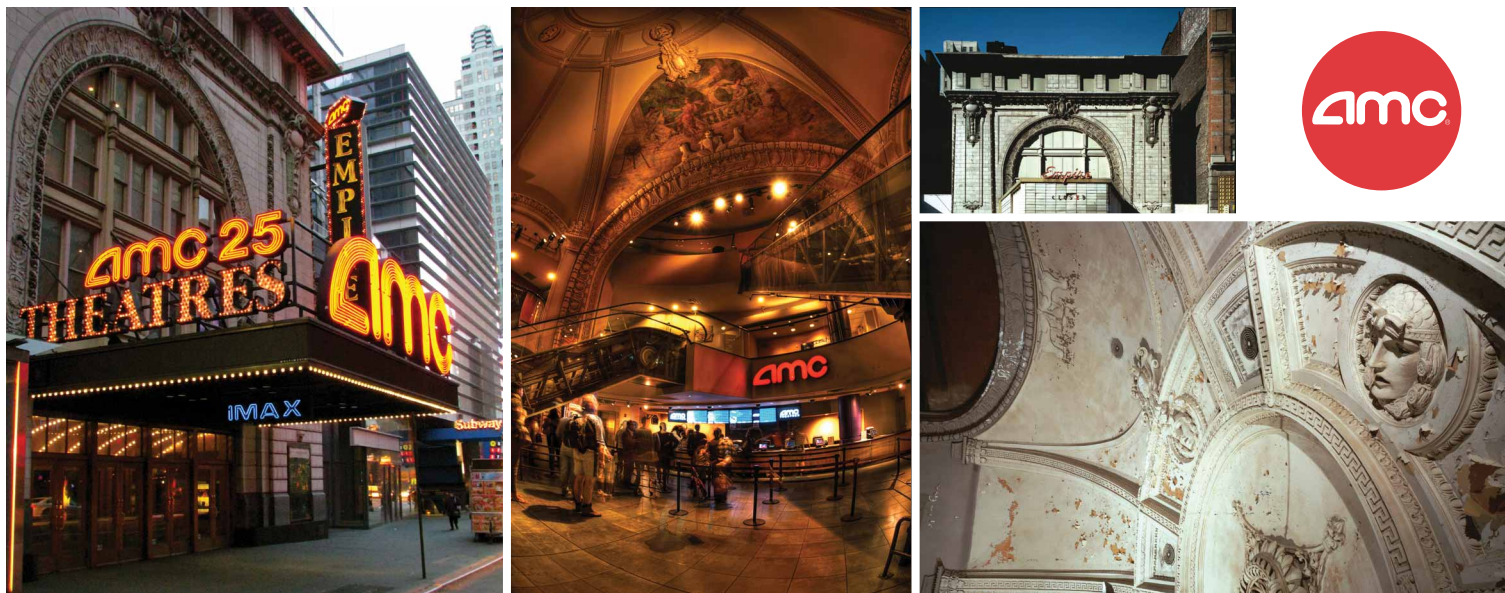


BACKSTORY

RADICAL RECONSTRUCTION

By Jim Lochner

FROM LEGIT TO BURLESQUE TO PORN, THE AMC EMPIRE 25 HAS LED A CHECKERED LIFE.



From left to right: The AMC Empire 25 theater today; the lobby was converted from the proscenium of the old Eltinge Theater; the Empire exterior in days gone by; the theater's dome ceiling pre-restoration.

Winsome maidens cavort to the silent tune of a satyr's pipes. Majestic sphinxes guard their pastoral interlude against intruders. And robed royalty lords over it all, bat-like, from above. This is not your typical multiplex ornamentation.

The AMC Empire 25 opened in 1912 as the Eltinge 42nd Street Theatre, named for the most popular female impersonator of the time, Julian Eltinge. Eltinge was one of the highest paid entertainers in the country, popular enough to have his own magazine (with articles on how to apply makeup) and his own line of cold cream. To show his appreciation for his biggest client, Eltinge's producer and manager Al Woods commissioned respected architect Thomas W. Lamb to design a new theatre.

Renowned for his lavish movie palaces, Lamb's (1871-1942) Beaux Arts design for the Eltinge included an immense triumphal arch window that dominated the 80-foot exterior, featuring carvings in green, blue, orange and red terra cotta. The interior showcased Egyptian friezes and ornamentation, while the color scheme was a mixture of gold, light blue and mauve. In a quirk that may seem strange (but welcoming) to today's theatregoers, the orchestra seats were designed with comfort in mind, available in three sizes—slender, medium and stout.

Though Eltinge never played the theatre that bore his name, it hosted some of the biggest stars of the day, including Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert, and the American debut of Laurence Olivier. But when the Great Depression took a bite out of Broadway, it was converted into a burlesque house in 1931. Jackie Gleason got his start there and in 1935 Bud Abbott and Lou Costello reportedly met doing separate acts as part of *The Eltinge Follies*. But the strippers were the real draw. And in a sweeping move, in 1937 reform-minded Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia used the city's obscenity laws to close the Eltinge and fourteen other burlesque houses—all on the same day. The theatre reopened in 1942 as Laffmovie, a first-run movie house. In 1954, with the neighborhood in decline,

the theatre was renamed The Empire, serving as a second-run grind house screening grainy porn flicks before finally shuttering for good in 1986.

In the late-'90s, all 7.4 million pounds of the Empire were inched 168 feet down 42nd Street to serve as the west entrance to a new entertainment and retail complex, with 30-foot-high balloons of Abbott and Costello "tugging" the building to its new home. Since the AMC Empire 25's opening in April 2001, it has become the busiest movie theater in the country.

A soaring glass-curtain wall soars five levels above the original historic façade, which was left largely intact except for the addition of a new marquee. Escalators rise through the theatre's proscenium arch and heavy rope-like medallions toward the signature dome ceiling. Above the proscenium stands the pastoral mural painted by French artist Arthur Brounet. When the Eltinge converted to burlesque, the mural's Roman and Greek mythology didn't fit in with strippers and bawdy comedians and it was hidden under coats of paint. The mural's 400-square-foot canvas had been glued to the plaster wall and cut in several places to relieve bulges caused by water leaking behind it. Restoration included removing a top layer of latex-based beige paint and an oil-based layer of brown paint underneath that was rubbing up against the oils of the original painting. Though there is no documentation to support the claim, it is widely considered that the faces of all three women in the mural bear a striking resemblance to Julian Eltinge.

As you ride the escalators deeper into the heart of the AMC Empire 25, there are barely concealed, plastered-over reminders of the radical reconstructive surgery done to Lamb's original design. But with the trio of dancing visages in the lobby and a small sign on the fifth floor terrace that bears his name, Eltinge's presence still inhabits the space and enough of Lamb's handiwork remains to provide a stereoscopic glance into the building's historic Beaux Arts past.