mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “What was the first cartoon?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug. When I was a kid, Saturday mornings were always my favorite. You know why? Because that's when all the best cartoons were on TV. I was a big fan of cartoons like *Ghostbusters* and *ThunderCats*. You probably haven't even heard of those, but before there was the internet, Saturday morning was the time cartoons were on television.

Someone named Azan has a question about cartoons. Let's give Azan a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Azan!
- I have a question for you. What was the first cartoon?
- That's a great question, and I know the perfect person to answer it.

Her name is Britney Thoreson. She makes cartoons at Disney Animation. Let's give her a call.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Britney.
- Hey Doug. I heard you had a question for me.
- I do, and it's a good one. Azan wants to know: What was the very first cartoon?
- Oh, that's an interesting one, I'd be happy to help.

Like a lot of you, I love cartoons, so I became an animator. An animator is somebody who takes the cartoons that you watch every day and brings them to life. At my job, I get to work on a lot of

different animated shows and movies, and a few of them, you might recognize: here, like this one. Oh, and this one's one of my favorites. How about you all, what are some of your favorite cartoons?

Now would be a good time to pause the video and discuss.

But what about the first cartoon? What was that? Well, before video games and TVs and phones, a lot of people didn't know how to animate. And a lot of people didn't know how to make the pictures move, but still they tried. Some of our ancestors drew pictures of animals on the inside of caves and tried to make it look like they were moving. Later on, people started to use shadows to tell stories. These shadow puppet shows were especially popular in places like China, India, and Iran, but cave drawings and shadow puppet shows weren't really cartoons. I mean, the shadow puppet shows weren't something you draw. And the cave pictures didn't really move, you know? Like the way they do in cartoons today. People just didn't know how to animate their drawings. That's because it hadn't been invented yet. But then this happened. See how the horse seems to be running? This was a new invention called the phenakistoscope, and when it first came out, people were blown away. They wondered: how are these pictures moving? Phenakistoscope means to trick the eye. And that's exactly what this toy is doing. It's spinning so fast that it tricks you into thinking you're only looking at one drawing. And since each drawing is a little different than the next, you think that it's one drawing that's moving. Now, the phenakistoscope was cool, but only one person can watch at a time. So inventors started thinking of new machines that can make animation even better. Check out this one, it's called a praxinoscope. Since it was bigger, two or three people could watch at a time. Soon, inventors figured out ways to project animation onto a screen. Now, 10, 20, or even 50 people could watch at one time. These moving drawings of dogs jumping through hoops and clowns playing

with hats were pretty amazing, but they were also kind of random. And sometimes, well, they weren't that interesting. Animators wanted to make their drawings even more exciting. One animator had an idea. While walking through a museum and looking at dinosaur skeletons, he started to think—dinosaurs are extinct. No one has ever seen a living dinosaur. All we have are their fossils, but animation? Whoa! Now that we know how to bring drawings to life, could we make it seem like we brought a dinosaur back to life? And better yet, what if I could tell a story about that dinosaur? His idea became *Gertie the Dinosaur*—the world's first cartoon. And the first time anyone saw a dinosaur come to life. *Gertie the Dinosaur* tells the story of a shy museum dinosaur, and just like today's cartoons, it had a character and a story. *Gertie the Dinosaur* was made in the same way cartoons are made today, by drawing thousands of pictures and then flipping through them quickly. A lot like the pictures on the early animation devices. Now that Gertie had come to life, a lot of other cartoon characters followed. Like Felix the Cat, and this mouse you may recognize. He's been famous ever since he was first created. Pretty soon, cartoons became longer and longer, and they turned into the animated movies you see today. But here's the thing: The longer the cartoon is, the harder it is to make. I mean, it took about one million drawings to animate *The Lion King*. But luckily, we have new technology in place to help us do our work more efficiently, like drawing some of the main pictures on a tablet and having a computer move the rest. In fact, a lot of cartoons you see today are made entirely on a computer, which helps me do my job even better. Animation has come a long way, from the animated toys that trick your eyes, to *Gertie the Dinosaur*, to all the great cartoons that you watch today. It's amazing to see how things have changed. Even so, one thing pretty much stayed the same: we all love watching characters come to life through animation.

And that's all for this week's question. Thank you so much, Azan, for asking it.