

Techniques and Practical Skills in Scenery, Set Dressing and Decorating for Live-Action Film and Television



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Executive Summary

In film and television production, the art department operates, under the leadership of the production designer or art director, to create and manipulate the overall 'look, feel and mood' of the production. The appearance of sets and locations transports audiences into the world of the story, and is an essential element in making a production convincing and evocative.

Although the set usually creates the dominant visual motif, the set dressings and properties (commonly known as 'props') are coequal design elements. In most cases they are the chief design tools utilised to provide visual clues about the personal characteristics and socioeconomic status of the inhabitants of the set, while the set itself establishes the location of the scene. These settings are rarely left to chance; a great deal of work and imagination goes into constructing appropriate backdrops to any story.

The Australian screen industry, as a part of a global movement, is currently in a transitional phase in which a new 'digital framework' is being set. Computer imaging is no longer simply an asset for the visual effects or post-production departments; instead it has become an indispensable part of the production designer's creative repertoire. Unlike the well-established arts of miniatures or stage sets, digital set generation remains new territory for which a workflow has not yet been established. In this transitional phase, new strategies must evolve that will lead to a standard process for the production of a digital set, or for sets created from a combination of 'live' and digital components. The same can be said for the production of props and set dressings, with computer controlled free-form fabrication being utilised at a phenomenally increasing rate.

There has been a current trend within the screen industry and government training bodies, both in Australia and overseas, to promote the move into digital technical areas of design; with areas such as animation and multimedia design being high on the list. Unfortunately, this foray into digital imaging is narrow in scope and vision, and has not been integrated with the new 'digital framework' of the production industry as a consideration.

This report provides an analysis and evaluation of the current global trends and practices in adapting to the new 'digital framework', primarily concentrating in the areas of properties and set decoration.

The aims of the Fellowship Programme are:

- To establish a fundamental understanding of state-of-the-art materials and the techniques used in scenery, dressings and prop preparation for live-action film and television, as well as other screen productions.
- To develop a fundamental understanding of newly established art department skill sets, and their relationship to the emerging 'digital framework'.
- To learn and develop new skills and knowledge in the area of art department organisation and processes—especially in relation to the contemporary design process in film, television and other screen productions.
- To establish an understanding of the various roles of art department personnel at an international level, as well as the training background and career paths of practitioners in relation to the emergence of the 'digital framework'.
- To identify underpinning skills and knowledge required of art department personnel at an international level.

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- Evaluate and apply international training methodologies for development of art department crafts and skills.
- Gather resources and materials to develop teaching aids for ongoing training in the area of screen design and art direction, with particular reference to the emerging 'digital framework'.

In identifying the skills deficiencies, a strategy for research was developed incorporating three key elements:

- Identify new methods and technologies in set construction, set decoration and props manufacturing in film and television production.
- Identify the new skills sets associated with new processes and methods relating to the introduction of new technologies into the art department.
- Collect, record, and analyse information relating to the education and training of art department personnel, particularly those practitioners of traditional methods and techniques needing to adapt to new technologies adopted within the art department.

As a component of the Fellowship Programme, research was undertaken overseas in the USA and UK at major production studios and highly regarded film and television schools. Over a period of two weeks interviews were recorded with a wide range of stakeholders including production designers, art directors, set decorators, props managers, production design lecturers, design students, and film school managers. In addition to interviews, inspections of the associated training and production facilities were carried out.

The overseas component of the Fellowship provided the Fellow with an insight into the current situation concerning the role of the art department in production for film and television, and the need to address the issues associated with working within the emerging 'digital' framework and its associated implications. It can be said that on a global level the film and television industry is in a constant state of flux, especially since the introduction of digital technologies.

In regard to the art department outside the design area, technological changes appear to be slow in comparison with the more technology-based areas of production (cinematography and editing, for example) but nevertheless technology has had an impact, albeit somewhat indirectly. The means of addressing these challenges of change are still in progress, but the industry requires a response that is both flexible and of a visionary nature while protecting the more traditional skills.

The training needs of the future generation of art department practitioners should not be based on new technologies alone but incorporate them with time-proven traditional methods and techniques. The key to success of the visited film schools and their graduates is in part their realisation that the art department and the associated skills play an integral role in developing the visual storytelling within a production.

Recommendations are made in the report to government, industry and educational bodies. The recommendations address three key areas of new technology, versatile training products and art department training.

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The recommendations discussed in the report include:

- Target specific training in traditional areas, such as set decoration, set dressing, standby props, and staging, amongst others.
- Review film making course structures to include a more comprehensive training ground for art department personnel.
- Recruit highly skilled professionals from the professional art department area as tutors and teachers in film making courses.
- Review and update art department industry units of competency.
- The development and implementation of short courses to develop existing art department industry craft skills to a broader and higher level of expertise.
- Develop and support programmes that promote the 'pursuit of excellence' of the art department craft skills of the screen industry.

Screen production is moving towards a homogenised workflow within a 'digital framework' and we must adapt to the change. The creative and artistic potential of the new tools is far-reaching and we have just scratched the surface of what is to come.