

PAGE-TURNER

# ART DIRECTION: DESIGNS ON FILM

By Kate Bittman February 11, 2011



For me, the best thing about Oscar season isn't the fashion or the broadcast or even the movies: it's the looking back. Every year, I reminisce about favorite films from years past, comparing them to present offerings (the older flicks always win).

"Designs on Film: A Century of Hollywood Art Direction," by Cathy Whitlock and the Art Directors Guild, is a book for those of us who love to wax nostalgic. It's a collection of archival photographs and pre-production sketches of films from the nineteen-forties to today. It offers an amazing glimpse into art direction and other Oscar categories that I know little about, and which I used to groan my way through while watching the show. Now, thanks to Whitlock's book, I'll pay closer attention.

Check out the slide show below of just a few of the hundreds of photos and sketches in "Designs on Film.&#8221

- “A matte painting of the Vandamm house in ‘North by Northwest’ (1959).” Production designer Robert Boyle, who was nominated for four Oscars during his career, couldn’t secure permission to work on location at Mount Rushmore, “as the Department of Interior was not keen to have a movie crew shoot a murder scene on a national treasure,” Whitlock writes, despite Hitchcock’s insistence that the scene “defended democracy, not defaced it.”
- “A sketch of the infamous apartment at the Dakota in ‘Rosemary’s Baby’ (1968).” I’m thrilled that even the sketches from “Rosemary’s Baby” feature Mia Farrow’s haircut. The eerie New York City Dakota apartment, imagined by production designer Richard Sylbert, always finds a way into my head at inopportune times, like when I’m alone in a Manhattan apartment.
- “Art director Henry Bumstead’s illustration for ‘The Sting’ (1973).” For his Oscar-winning work on “The Sting,” Bumstead, also known for “Vertigo” and, more recently, “Million Dollar Baby,” “attributes the film’s successful period feel to his choice of color combinations,” Whitlock writes—the sepia tones, golds, browns, and reds that dominated the movie.
- “The yellow brick road leads to the Chrysler Building in ‘The Wiz’ (1978).” An especially notable anecdote regarding Sidney Lumet’s “The Wiz” is that the World Trade Center was dressed up as Oz. Philip Rosenberg, one of the two production designers for the film (along with Tony Walton), specializes in New York-based locales and was also responsible for a true classic—“Moonstruck.”
- “Production designer and illustrator Joe Alves’s storyboards for ‘Jaws’ (1975).” The infamous Bruce was a curmudgeonly shark—he cost a quarter of a million dollars to build (chump change in today’s world of Avatars and Spidermans), he sank on his first voyage, and, Whitlock writes, he “apparently had an aversion to salt water,” but even Bruce’s misbehavior couldn’t hinder the wild success of the movie that put Spielberg on the map.

- “A beach house was built from scratch for the film ‘Sleeping with the Enemy’ (1991).” Whitlock writes that the entire design concept for “Sleeping with the Enemy,” kudos for which go to production designer Doug Kraner, was centered on the notion that the film would be divided visually into two worlds: Laura’s secluded life at the beach house with her abusive husband, and her “new” life in a small town in Iowa with Ben, the painfully dorky drama professor.
- “A model of Gotham City for ‘Batman Begins’ (2005).” This model is a lesson in evolution—it looks a lot like the actual finished sets of earlier days. “I knew I had to reinvent and be radical enough to make a difference,” production designer Nathan Crowley says. “Gotham is New York on steroids. It’s slightly in the future. Chaos.”

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