

When Movies Shot in L.A.

Before tax credits and sprawl sent filmmakers packing, the City of Angels could accommodate just about anything

By Cathy Whitlock

Who can forget the detailed drawing rooms of *The Age of Innocence*? The Moorish architecture and grandeur of *The Thief of Bagdad*? The Fallingwater-style house inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright in *North by Northwest*? The high-gloss sets synonymous with the musicals of Fred and Ginger?

Through these images, movies have the ability to transport us from our day-to-day reality to a new, self-contained world.

The iconic elements and indelible images of countless films have been crafted by perhaps the business' biggest unsung heroes: production designers, art directors and set decorators. And during Hollywood's Golden Age, many of them did their best work right here — on sets across the Los Angeles area.

In *Designs on Film: A Century of Hollywood Art Direction*, I catalog the work done by these artisans: from the silent-film era to modern-day movies. The book includes choice vintage photographs of sets from cinema's grand era, when all of Southern California was a veritable backlot. Here's a peek at some of those shots and a look at the locations today.

Even the most infrequent moviegoers can recall the name of a director or actor, but few know who the production designer is or what he or she does.

I'm hoping to change that.



Mildred Pierce

LATIGO SHORE DRIVE

MALIBU

The 1945 film noir classic included memorable set design by Anton Grot. It also featured a personal touch from director Michael Curtiz: his beach-front home. Curtiz's house was used in the film's opening and other scenes, including the murder on which the film is centered. Grot filled the film with shadows and darkness, creating a sense of danger. In a twist fit for film noir, the house collapsed into the ocean during a 1983 storm. A large home has since been built at its site. It's a choice Malibu location: Latigo Beach is known for its surfing and shore fishing.

NOW



THEN

All Quiet on the Western Front

IRVINE RANCH
IRVINE, CA

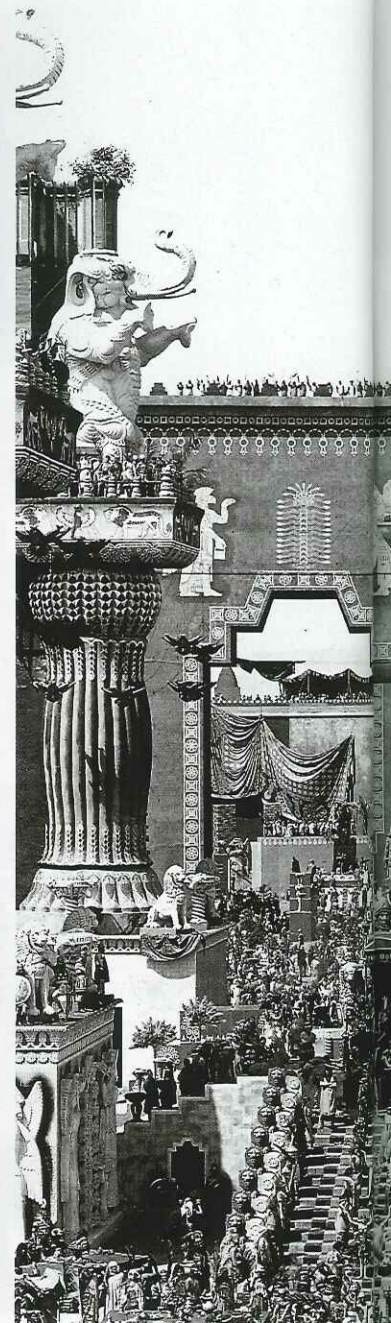
The 1930 World War I epic used nearly 100 acres of Irvine Ranch to re-create battle sequences. Set designer Charles D. Hall designed battlefields with an eye for detail, and some of the extras in the film were WWI veterans. Today, the 44,000-acre ranch is owned by Irvine Co. Large chunks of it have been developed into residential communities, and it's likely that a current swath of suburbia, replete with rows of tract homes, was once the setting of gory trench warfare.



Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages

SUNSET AND HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARDS
HOLLYWOOD

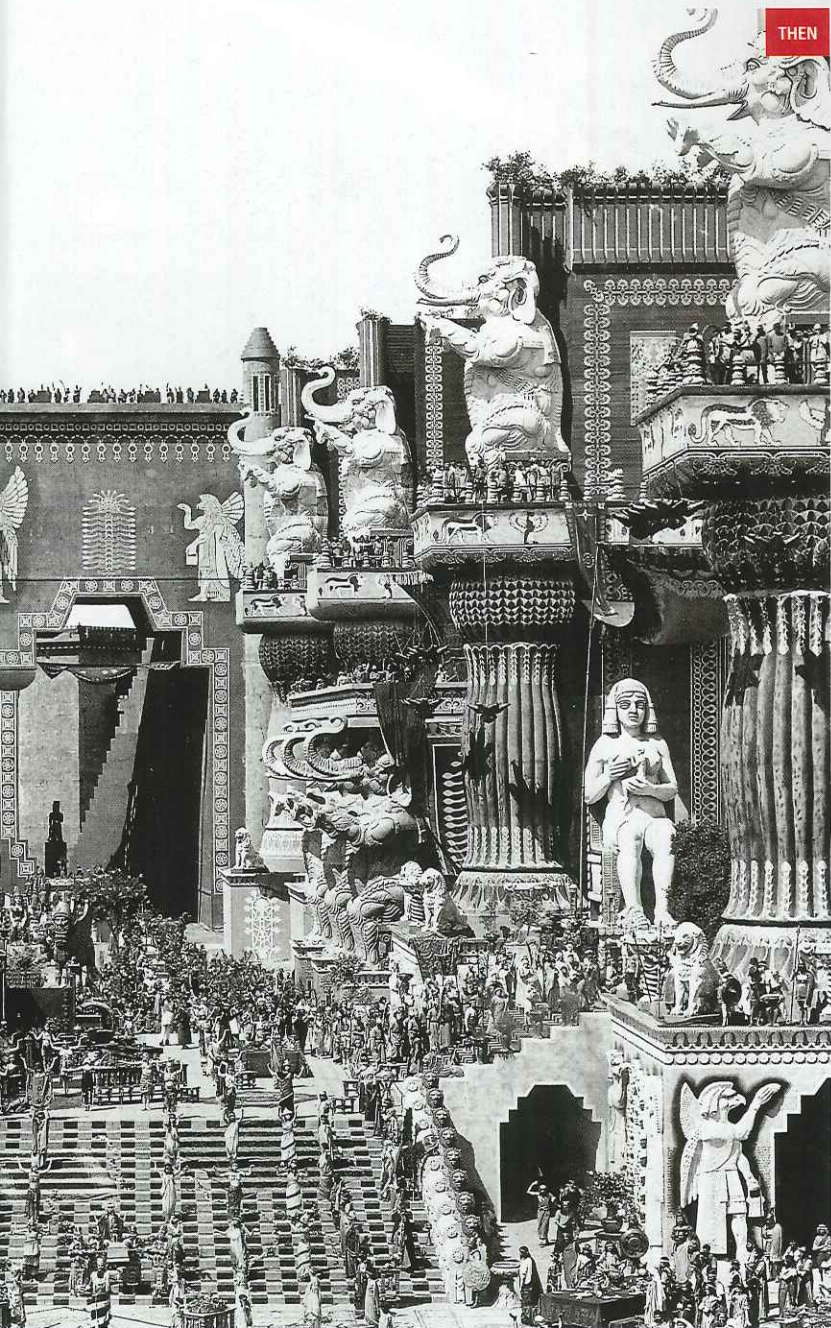
A sequel of sorts to D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, this silent film was one of the era's epic productions. Its gargantuan sets of Babylon, designed by Walter L. Hall, were built at the corner of Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. The film's famed Towers of Babylon were situated at the present-day site of the Vista Theatre. The structure stood 90 feet tall and was 150 feet long and could be seen swaying in the wind during production. The Vista, which opened in 1923, is itself considered a landmark. Shoppers at Hollywood & Highland might not realize that the mall's expansive courtyard, which includes an ornate tower, pays homage to the set.



The Thief of Bagdad

N. FORMOSA AVENUE
WEST HOLLYWOOD

The 1924 Douglas Fairbanks film is considered the pinnacle of silent-era epic filmmaking. A majority of the film's \$2 million budget was spent on its design, and nothing was more impressive than the six-acre re-creation of Baghdad by designer William Cameron Menzies, who married Moorish architecture with Art Deco and Art Nouveau touches for a fantastical depiction of Baghdad. The sets were built at Pickford-Fairbanks Studios in West Hollywood. The property on Formosa now is the site of the Lot, a studio. About a decade after filming wrapped, the Formosa Cafe opened on the avenue nearby.



THEN

Sunset Boulevard
 WILSHIRE AND S. IRVING
 BOULEVARDS
 HANCOCK PARK

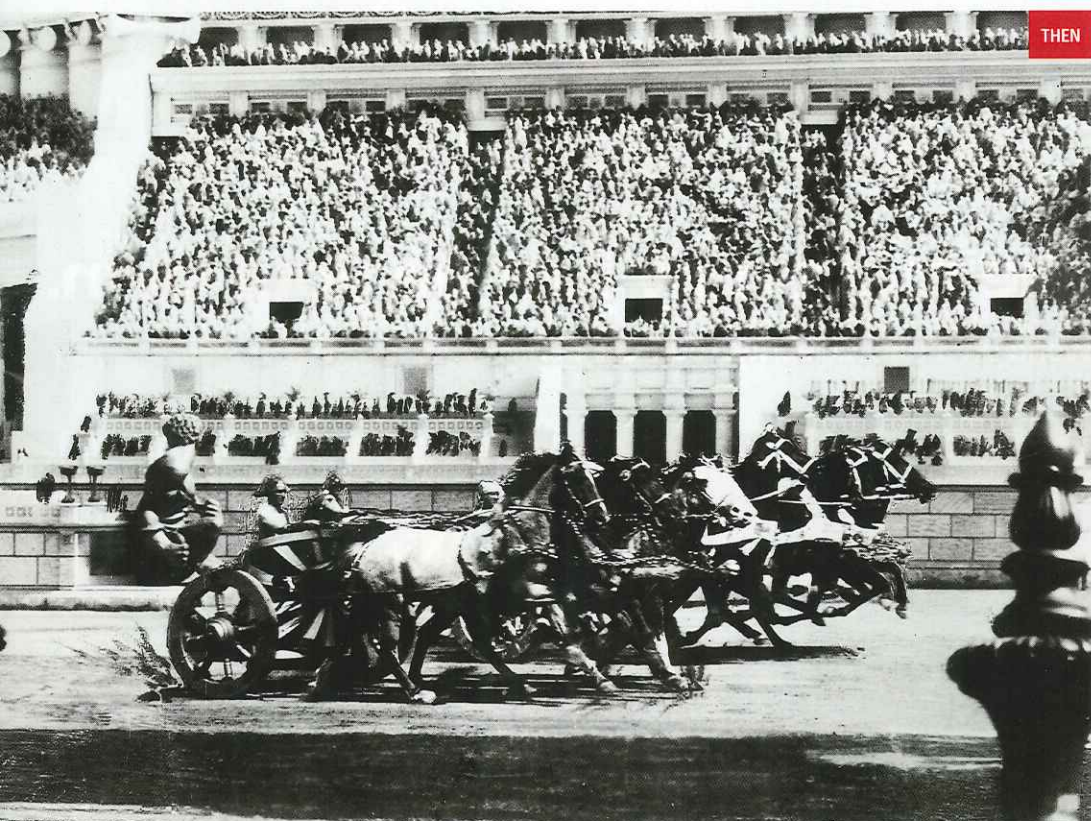
The film's namesake mansion wasn't actually located on the famed boulevard. Instead, a Hancock Park manse was used to depict the rundown abode of forgotten silent-film star Norma Desmond. J. Paul Getty at one time owned the home, since demolished and replaced by an office development. Hans Dreier designed the sets, and the film's production team won an Oscar.



NOW



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Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ
 VENICE AND LA CIENEGA BOULEVARDS
 CULVER CITY

Not to be confused with the 1959 Charlton Heston film, this 1925 take on the classic tale also was a visual stunner, and many of art director Cedric Gibbons' flourishes still influence designers today. Much of the \$4 million budget went toward the famed chariot-race scene. A replica of Circus Maximus was built for the races in the heart of Culver City, and Hollywood luminaries of the day sat in the stands to watch the races. These days, the Culver City intersection is home to a check-cashing facility, mini-mart and Laundromat.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: DOUGLAS FARRBANKS/PICTURES UNLIMITED; ARTIST'S CONCEPTIONS COURTESY OF MARC WANAMAKER/BISSON ARCHIVES; PARAMOUNT PICTURES/PHOTOFEST; VISIONS OF AMERICA/JOE SOHN/GETTY IMAGES; FRANK ZELER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES; TRIANGLE FILM/PHOTOFEST; CHRIS GODDIE/THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER; PARAMOUNT PICTURES/PHOTOFEST; CHRIS GODDIE/THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER; COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION; CHRIS GODDIE/THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER