

# The Art of the Hollywood Backdrop: A Museum Exhibition Like No Other

BY CURATORS, THOMAS A. WALSH, ADG AND KAREN L. MANESS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR UT AUSTIN



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**A.** BOCA RATON MUSEUM OF ART, EAST GALLERY, EXHIBITION DIGITAL MODEL, JAYME GREENE ARTIST.

On April 20, 2022, the ADG’s pioneer scenic artists and community will finally receive the recognition that has eluded it for too long when a formal exhibition of 22-historic MGM and Fox motion picture backdrops created during Hollywood’s golden age will go on public display at the Boca Raton Museum of Art.

**B.** WARNER BROS. SCENIC ARTISTS (1930S). (L TO R) VERNE STRANG, BILL MCCONNELL, FRANKIE COHEN, CHARLEY WALLACE, JACK BROOKS, JAMES MCCANN, EMMETT ALEXANDER. ED STRANG COLLECTION.



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**C.** MGM SCENIC PAINT SHOP, PAINT MIXING AREA. COURTESY OF THE MARGARET HERRICK LIBRARY

Jump to the spring of 2012. Thomas was serving in his 3rd and final term as president of the Art Directors Guild and his efforts to launch the ADG Archives had finally been realized. The archive’s first major endeavor was to partner with the Scenic, Title & Graphic Artists Council



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In 1973 at the age of 17, Thomas began his apprenticeship as a scenic artist in Hollywood. His mentors, role-models, and antagonists were some of our industry’s finest artists. All were men, some thoughtful others taciturn, ribald, creative, proud, talented, damaged, or bitter from working anonymously in a profession that they felt had undermined their aspirations for singular recognition and artistic achievement.



and JC Backings on an effort of redress. The scenic paint profession had been in decline and despair due to the rapid advancements in digital photography and large-format computer printing. The challenge the ADG faced was how to promote positive media recognition about scenic painting while working to secure and preserve the collective memory and legacy of that proud profession and its artists.

The first effort was the curating of a series of five one-night-only exhibitions of painted backdrops at JC Backings’ historic MGM scenic paint building. This successful event was closely followed by the archives and scenic council’s commitment to begin a multi-year oral history project led by its archivist, Rosemarie Knopka, and scenic artist, Karen L. Maness, so that the knowledge and history of the ADG’s artists would be preserved.

In 2016 a glorious blessing arrived upon the release of our 13-pound book, “The Art of the Hollywood Backdrop”. Published by Judith Regan, and written by stage designer, Richard M. Isackes and painter turned scenic historian, Karen L. Maness, it was an award winner and a source of immense pride and recognition for the ADG’s scenic community.

Then in the spring of 2017 an unanticipated challenge occurred, one that would require immediate action by the archives and guild leadership. After 45-years of occupancy, JC Backings decided to move its painting operations to a new facility off the Sony/MGM lot. During JC’s planning for their relocation of over 2000 painted backings, they identified 207-canvases, all too old, fragile, or specific in their genres to be kept as active rental assets within JC’s catalog, and these backings all needed new homes.

To preserve these backings, some historic others unidentified, the ADG Archives launched the Backdrop Recovery Project in partnership



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with JC Backings and with significant support from Sony Studios. The BRP documented and photographed 207- MGM era backings so that they could be preserved and donated to museums, motion picture archives, academic and nonprofit institutions, and to our amazement they all found homes.

**A.** J.C. BACKINGS PAINT SKETCH FOR PAINTED BACKING, *DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES* (2005).

**B.** *DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES* CUSTOM BACKING ON PAINT FRAME,

PHOTOS BY THOMAS A. WALSH

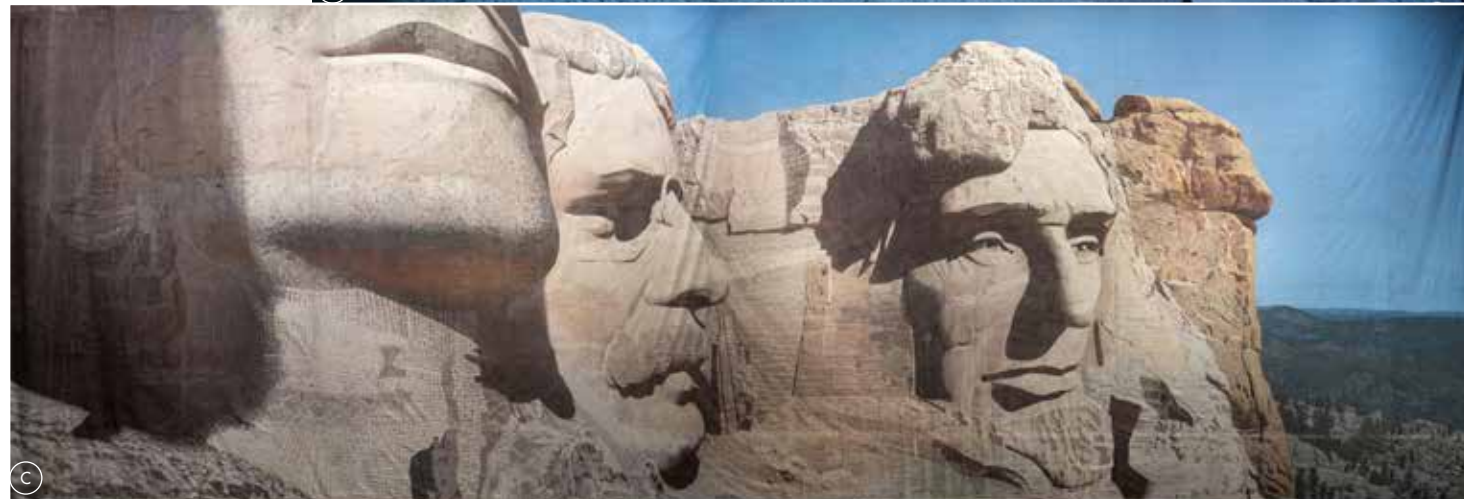


For its efforts the archives received a generous donation from JC Backings of MGM's scenic paint research collection consisting of photos, notebooks, and ephemera; making the ADG Archive's the world's most comprehensive center for the study of Hollywood scenic painting. Finally in 2019 the scenic paint community was doubly blessed with a frontpage article in the LA Times by Pulitzer award winning journalist, Mary McNamara, followed by an Oscars day story on CBS's Sunday Morning program.

**A.** NORTH BY NORTHWEST, MGM (1959). UTAUSTIN STUDENTS RAISE BACKDROP FOR ASSESSMENT, PHOTO: KAREN MANESS

**B.** NORTH BY NORTHWEST, MGM (1959). CARY GRANT & EVA MARIE SAINT, DIGITAL STILL

**C.** NORTH BY NORTHWEST, MGM (1959). BACKDROP: MT. RUSHMORE. KNOWN SCENIC ARTISTS: CLARK PROVINS, ALBERT JOSEPH LONDRAVILLE. 91'X30'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON. TPA HBC.



A fan of scenic painting, Walt Disney once said, "It's kind of fun to do the impossible." We could not agree more, and yes it was fun!

The exhibition at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, Florida, will run through January 2023, at which point we hope to take it on the road, and who knows, maybe the capitols of Europe!



**A.** HAIL CAESAR, UNIVERSAL (2016), BEN-HUR ROME BACKING REPURPOSED. DIGITAL STILL.

**B.** BEN-HUR, MGM (1959). BACKDROP: ANCIENT ROME, 48'X18'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON. TPA HBC.

**C.** THE SOUND OF MUSIC, 20TH CENTURY FOX (1965). VIEW FROM VON TRAPPS' BACK TERRACE, WITH BACKDROP:30'X15'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON. TPA HBC.

# NEWS



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**A.** PENTAGON HALLWAY REPURPOSED FOR *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN*, 18' X 15'. PHOTO: COURTESY J.C. BACKINGS.

**B.** *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN*, MGM (1952). DIGITAL STILL.



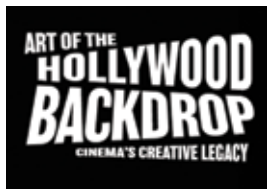
**C. & D.** UNKNOWN FILM. BACKDROP: BROOKLYN BRIDGE, SHOWN LIT FOR DAYTIME AND NIGHT. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON. TPA HBC.

**E.** UNKNOWN FILM. BACKDROP: 26'X15'.

**F.** *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*, MGM (1951). DIGITAL STILL

**G.** *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*, MGM (1951). BACKDROP 20'X15'. PHOTO: COURTESY J.C. BACKINGS TPA HBC

# NEWS



**A.** UNKNOWN FILM. BACKDROP: GRAND STAIRCASE. KNOWN SCENIC ARTISTS: JOHN H. COAKLEY JR., BILL JEKEL. 20'X13'. PHOTO: MELINDA SUE GORDON. TPA HBC.



**B.** *MARIE ANTOINETTE*, MGM (1938). BACKDROP: TAPESTRY, 14'X12'. PHOTO: MELINDA SUE GORDON. ACADEMY MUSEUM OF MOTION PICTURES, GIFT OF THE ART DIRECTORS GUILD ARCHIVES.



**C.** *MARIE'S BEDCHAMBER*, NORMA SHEARER AND HENRY STEPHENSON, SET STILL. COURTESY OF THE MARGARET HERRICK LIBRARY.



**D.** *NATIONAL VELVET*, MGM (1944). WINTER COTTAGE, 13' X 9'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON



**E.** UNKNOWN FILM. CLOISTER 18'X12. KNOWN SCENIC ARTISTS: JOHN H. COAKLEY JR., BILL JEKEL.



**F.** *TWO WEEKS IN ANOTHER TOWN*, MGM (1962). 30'X19'. PHOTO: MELINDA SUE GORDON.



**G.** *YOUNG BESS*, MGM (1953). HAMPTON COURT, 36'X16'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON.



**H.** UNKNOWN FILM. NEW YORK CITY STREET, 19'X15'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON.

**I.** *TIP ON A DEAD JOCKEY*, MADRID ROOFTOPS, 18'X12'. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON.