



The author, at work on the actual designing of a movie set. In the background can be seen a model for a set.

Portrait of a Sooner

In
Movie
Production

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BEING graduated from the University of Oklahoma and then starting to work in a motion picture art department was a big jump. It has been an interesting one, however and it keeps on being more interesting each day. I think the reason it keeps on being so engrossing is because of the problems that come up from day to day which seem almost unsolvable but in some way or another are worked out.

Only last week one of the exterior sets on *The Four Marys* accidentally burned. Since part of the scenes had already been "shot" the set had to be rebuilt exactly as the original. I was working at that time as an assistant to the art director on the picture and we had plenty of headaches before we could get the set back "as was."

One of the most interesting things I've found in the studios is the vast amount of research that goes on, not only in the art department but for every phase of the picture. Costumes, furniture, sets, pictures, jewelry, books, in fact, every item that is used in a picture, especially a historical picture, has to be authentic in every detail.

Recently I had an interesting problem. It was a set for *The Girl of the Golden West*, the new Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy picture. The scene takes place in the town of Monterey about 1850. All of the buildings had to be constructed from pictures and drawings made of

Monterey. The time of the scene was about three years after Monterey was started and to reconstruct such a town and to make it absolutely authentic is only one of the problems that come up in an art department.

Perhaps this will help to give you a general idea of how an art department functions. When a script is completed it is turned over to the art director, who sketches every scene called for, then works up the architectural detail. Sometimes these may be fantastic and somewhat modernistic but in all cases certain specific rules, governed by camera angles, are necessary. All settings are built to conform to certain pre-ascertained camera angles, this requiring definite mathematical calculation. After the layout is completed sketches and models are made of the set and after these are O. K.'ed by the art director, director and producer the plans are made architecturally correct and the sets constructed. One of the largest and most beautiful sets which I have seen since I started to work in the studio is the one for *Rosalie*, the new Eleanor Powell and Nelson Eddy picture. The set was placed on a new 60-acre lot purchased by the studio for this particular set, called the Romanza Square. After the picture is completed the set will be "struck" (destroyed) and the Monterey set that I mentioned before will be put up.

The artistic success as far as the sets at M. G. M. are concerned is the result

of the work of Cedric Gibbons, art director. Under him he has his associates or unit art directors who in turn have their assistants or "stooges" as they are called out here. I have just finished working under Gabriel Scognamiglio, the art director on *The Four Marys*, a modern comedy with Myrna Loy, Franchot Tone, Rosalind Russell and Walter Pidgeon. I have also worked on *Dangerous Number*, *The Emperor's Candlesticks*, and *The Bride Wore Red*. The last two required a lot of work and careful designing due to their foreign atmosphere.

Another interesting item to me was the fact that there are men from every branch of the designing field employed in the evolution of proper artistic atmosphere for motion pictures. Order what you will—an airplane, a tenth century castle, a modern steamship, or a complicated roomful of machinery—there is a man in the art department who knows exactly how to put the complete pattern on paper. No minute article is built in the shops for a film set until it has first been drawn in detail by one of the draftsmen and approved by Gibbons and his assistants. The department, of course, puts its product on view for several million critics. Nothing, therefore, can be left to imagination or recollection. This is especially true in period pictures. Every design element must be checked through the architectural library of the art department, through the research department or in private files, before a pencil stroke can be made. In a modern picture, however, this is not the case and here the art director has free rein to design without historical background playing such an important role.

These M. G. M. set designers designed every stick and stone that went into the building of the sprawling Chinese city and the outlying province used in *The Good Earth*. Even the plowed fields had their first furrows drawn with a pencil. The lowliest mud huts had their inception on long sheets of onion skin paper.

The movie set designers, schooled in good architecture, are forced to take a peculiar slant on their finished product. Above everything else, they strive for absolute authenticity. Where a private architect bends his best efforts to obtain a modern, practical, thoroughly inviting home or building, his studio brother has to "follow script" and often (on a tenement set, for instance) turn out something that looks rickety and sadly abused by time.

To me this is a strange and frequently difficult business, this matter of recreating bits of the world for mere shadows in strips of celluloid! Yet the fascination of the industry keeps everyone working with every ounce of energy and loyalty he possesses—despite the fact that one often sees an example of his handiwork—representing months of labor—pass into limbo after a casual moment on the screen.