

## 1.b. | How a Set is Created

In this document, I'll explain the role of each department in the creation of a set.

There are four departments *primarily* responsible for the creation of a set. These are:

- Art Department
- Set Decoration – often abbreviated to “Set Dec”
- Props
- Construction

Although this course focuses on the Art Department, Set Dec and Props departments, it's important to talk about the Construction department at this stage because they have an essential role to play.

The role of each department can be summarised in this diagram:

	<b>Architecture</b>	<b>Interior Design</b>
<b>Design</b>	Art Department	Set Decoration
<b>Installation</b>	Construction	Props

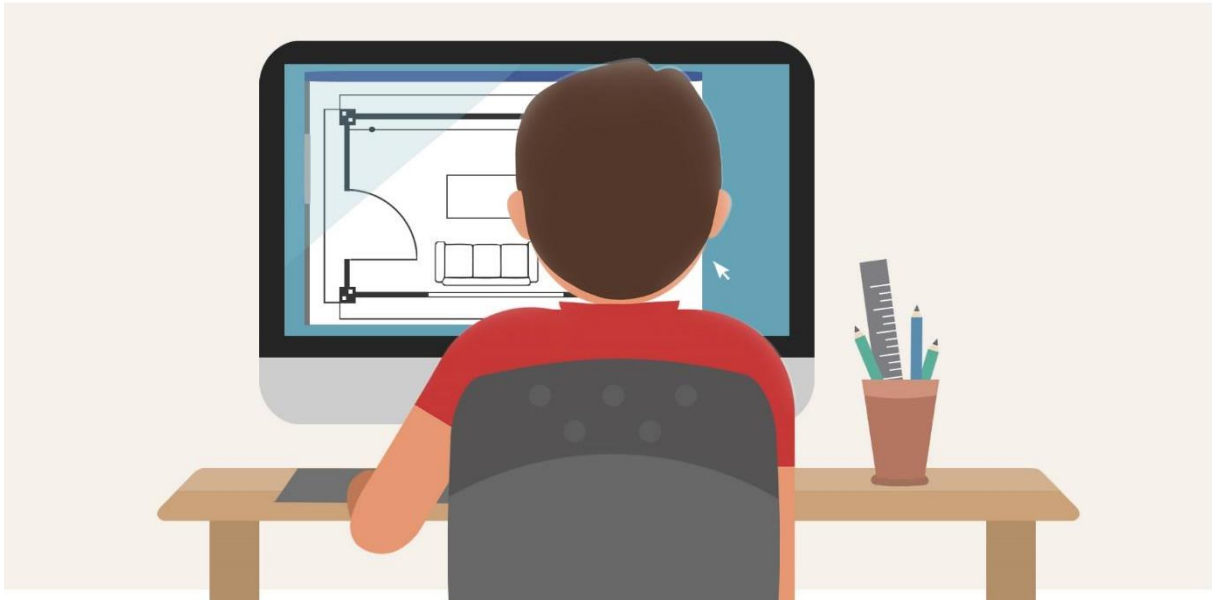
The four departments tend to work in two pairs.

The Art Department works predominantly with Construction – the red pair. Broadly speaking, the Art Department designs the walls and architectural elements of the set, then Construction builds what the Art Department has designed.

Set Decoration works predominantly with Props – the blue pair. Set Decoration designs the interior of the set, and the Props department installs what Set Decoration has designed.

To help distinguish the departments, let's imagine we're designing a set, such as

a simple room in a house and a garden. The Art Department's job is to create technical drawings, similar to architectural plans.



The technical drawings created by the Art Department are given to the Construction department, which consists of carpenters, riggers (scaffolders), painters, plasterers, sculptors, and scenic artists (painters who can achieve specialist effects). Using the drawings created by the Art Department, Construction creates and installs the walls and all the necessary architectural elements.



Plasterers and painters finish the walls to the required standard. For a simple contemporary house like this set, the process is relatively simple. However, they may be required to create the interior of a cave, which is much more complex.

Behind the set, there may be something called a "backing" which is a large piece of stretched canvas mounted onto a metal frame. On the canvas, a Scenic Artist might paint an appropriate scene that would be seen from the window of the set. For example, if the set was supposed to be located in the countryside, the Scenic Artist might paint a countryside landscape.



An alternative to a canvas backing is another type of backing called a "translight". A translight is made of synthetic fabric that is pulled taut and mounted onto a metal frame, in the same way as a canvas backing. However, rather than being painted by a Scenic Artist, a photograph is printed onto the synthetic fabric which gives a photographic quality backdrop. For this reason, translights are often used to depict urban settings.

The set will invariably need decorating with items such as furniture, wallpaper, curtains, carpets etc. These aspects are devised by the Set Decoration department.

The people in the Set Dec department are a combination of interior designers and buyers. Their role is to design the interior of the set in a way that complements the work of the Art Department. They source and acquire props

and furnishings that allow them to realise these designs. The design process will sometimes require a fair amount of research, particularly on productions like period dramas where historical accuracy can be crucial.

When the design and style of the set has been finalised, suitable props are sourced. These are often hired from prop hire companies or purchased from a multitude of suppliers. However, if a prop isn't available from any of these, they are sometimes made by Prop Makers. The buying process requires good organisation and a good level of numeracy since all expenditure has to be documented.

Once the necessary props have been acquired, they are handed over to the Props department. The Props department deals with prop storage, prop transportation, and set dressing. Any props acquired by Set Dec are stored in the prop store, where they are stored according to the set they will be used for.



The Art Department also includes a team of people called "Graphics". As the name suggests, this is a team of graphic designers who create all manner of graphics including shop signs, computer graphics, posters, magazines, book covers, and product labels. Upon completion, these items are typically handed over to the Props department as well. They, too, are stored in the prop store until the set is ready to be dressed.

When a set is ready to be dressed, the relevant props are taken from the prop store to the set. Then, under the guidance of a representative from Set Dec, the Props team dresses the set.



Dressing the set requires good practical skills in a multitude of areas. There are a lot of power tools and hardware involved, and you're often required to think of creative solutions to practical problems. In some ways it's similar to working in Construction, but it deals with interior features rather than architecture.

During the dressing process, electricians from the Lighting department – commonly known as “Sparks” – help set up the lighting that will be used as part of the set.

After the set has been dressed, but before shooting begins, a process known as “pre-lighting” may take place. Pre-lighting is the process of testing the lighting set-up before shooting begins. This process involves the Cinematographer (AKA: Director of Photography, or DoP) and the Lighting department. It allows them to see in advance how the set will look on the day of filming. Therefore, any changes can be made in advance, if necessary. This reduces the number of problems that may occur on the day of filming.

After pre-lighting, the set-up process is finished and shooting begins. When shooting is taking place, a dedicated team of people from the Art, Props, and Construction departments are present. This team is known as the “Standby team”. They work only with the shooting crew and are not directly involved with creating and dismantling sets before and after shooting. The Standby team will be discussed in more detail throughout this course.

After shooting, the process of “striking the set” takes place. During this process,

the set is dismantled, and the stage or location is returned to its original state. In many ways, this is the reverse process of creating a set.

The Props team will move in first. They will remove all props from the set, and otherwise undo all the set dressing they did prior to shooting.



Any hired props that need to be returned to a prop hire company will be organised and re-packaged so that they can be returned as soon as possible. Any props that don't need to be returned, such as purchased props, will be returned to the prop store.

Once all the props have been removed from the set, Construction will move-in and dismantle the set. Again, they will also undo the work they did to create the architectural elements.

This process is used to create a single set. However, a film or TV series typically involves the building, dressing, and striking of multiple sets. We're now going to look at how this is scheduled and coordinated.

## Creating Multiple Sets

As you may already know, most of the time, a production isn't filmed in script order. Instead, scenes are filmed in a particular order which is dictated by various factors. These include:

- Actor availability
- Availability of a location
- Time of year
- Appearance of a location during different seasons
- Time needed to design and create a set
- Problems caused by inclement weather

Factors such as these will affect the order in which the production is filmed. This order is compiled in a document called the Shooting Schedule – which is distributed to everyone working on the production. The sets are then designed, built, used for shooting, and struck according to the Shooting Schedule.

Using multiple sets throughout the course of a production creates a "leap-frog" type system between the teams creating and striking the sets, and the shooting crew who film on it.

For example, let's imagine a production consists of three sets: A, B, and C.

Set A will be used for filming first. Therefore, before the shooting period, the construction and dressing teams will create set A.

While the shooting crew are shooting on set A, the construction and dressing teams will be creating set B.

When the shooting crew have finished shooting on set A, they will move to set B. While they are there, the construction and dressing teams are simultaneously creating set C and striking set A.

Once the shooting crew have moved from set B to set C, the construction and dressing teams will strike set B.

Once the shooting crew have finished filming on set C, set C is struck.

This process is perhaps better illustrated as a diagram, seen on the next page:

SET	TIME							
	PREPARATION "PREP" PERIOD			SHOOTING PERIOD				WRAP – AKA: "CLEAR-UP" / "DE-RIG"
A	ART DEPARTMENT SET IS DESIGNED	CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT SET IS BUILT	PROPS DEPARTMENT SET IS DRESSED	SHOOTING CREW SET IS USED	PROPS DEPARTMENT SET IS STRUCK	CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT SET IS STRUCK		
B		ART DEPARTMENT SET IS DESIGNED	CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT SET IS BUILT	PROPS DEPARTMENT SET IS DRESSED	SHOOTING CREW SET IS USED	PROPS DEPARTMENT SET IS STRUCK	CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT SET IS STRUCK	
C			ART DEPARTMENT SET IS DESIGNED	CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT SET IS BUILT	PROPS DEPARTMENT SET IS DRESSED	SHOOTING CREW SET IS USED	PROPS DEPARTMENT SET IS STRUCK	CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT SET IS STRUCK



This diagram shows the general principle that happens on most productions. As you can see, every department is always busy somewhere.

This diagram shows a slightly idealised scenario. As you can imagine, the reality of creating and striking sets is often considerably more chaotic than this, depending on all sorts of factors.

For example, sometimes the creation of the next set is prioritised over striking a previous set. Other times, the next set cannot be dressed because Construction haven't finished building it. This can mean that there is very little time to dress the set before the shooting crew arrives.

While this is the general approach to creating and striking sets, on some productions it can be different.

For example, I once worked on a production called *The Gallows Pole* which was filmed in script order. We therefore created and dressed the sets in the order in which they appeared in the script. Furthermore, we didn't strike any sets while filming was taking place, since we knew we would need to return to them at some point. We therefore struck all the sets in one go once filming had finished.



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## **Additional Departments**

So far, we've looked at the Art Department, Construction, Set Decoration and Props departments and their role in the creation of a set. I've focussed on these departments because they are generally the main departments involved in the creation of a set.

However, there are some additional departments that sometimes play a role in the creation of a set. Those departments are: Prop Makers, Drapes, and Greens. I'll now give a brief summary of those departments as well.

### **Prop Makers**

As I explained earlier, rather than hiring or purchasing a prop, the Set Dec department may decide to have a prop made by a Prop Maker. There are several reasons why they may decide to do this.

It's particularly common for props to be made on sci-fi and fantasy films because they require props to have a particular aesthetic. By their nature, niche props like these aren't available "off the peg". Alternatively, to shoot a fight scene, a "soft" version of a hard steel weapon may be required. Prop Makers may be asked to make items like these as well.

Prop making encompasses a wide range of skills and techniques. Such skills include moulding and casting, electronics, woodwork, sculpting, painting, plastering, welding, machining, and 3D printing.

### **Drapes**

The Drapes team creates and installs elements such as curtains, blinds, upholstery, interiors, canopies, awnings, leatherwork, sails, flags, and banners. They also make cushions, carpets, and even handkerchiefs and pillowcases. To do this, they work very closely with the Set Decoration department.

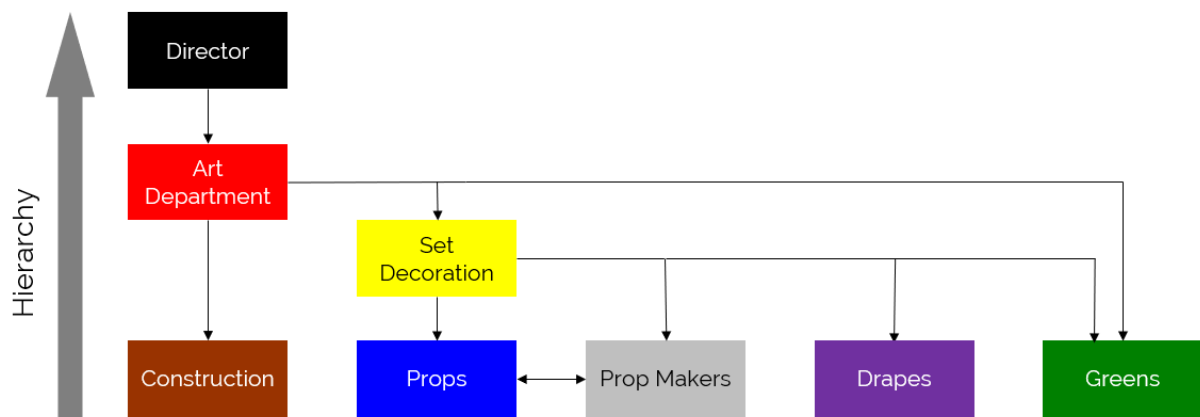
### **Greens**

The Greens department is involved in the acquisition and placement of plant-based set dressing. This includes both real and artificial plants. To do this, the Greens team works closely with both the Art and Set Dec department.

The scale of the department can vary greatly depending on the production. On some films, they may create a simple back garden. On other films such as *Jurassic Park*, the set can consist entirely of plants and trees.

## Hierarchy

When sets and props are being designed and created, there is a hierarchy to the decision-making process. The diagram below shows how this hierarchy is structured, and the main lines of communication between each department.



As you can see, the Director gets the final say. Below the Director, the Production Designer (head of the Art Department) and Set Decorator (head of the Set Decoration department) make most of the design decisions. They then work with the Construction, Props, Prop Makers, Drapes, and Greens departments to implement and install their design ideas.

## Epilogue

I hope that this has given you a good idea of how a set is created, and some of the factors that affect its creation.

In the next four documents, I'll go into more detail about how the Art Department, Set Decoration, Props, and Construction departments are structured. To do that, I'll talk about the various positions within each department.

There is a document dedicated to each department. The next document will talk about the Art Department.