

Deco Bookshelf

By Jim Sweeney

1940s MOVIES

Filmgoers in the 1940s were living with the lingering effects of the Depression, and they also had a war to worry them. Not surprisingly, much of what they wanted at the movies was fantasy and escapism, in extravagant settings.

The variety of styles used in these movies' sets, not limited to Art Deco, are described by Howard Mandelbaum and Eric Myers as "high pastiche" ("Forties Screen Style: A Celebration of High Pastiche in Hollywood," \$29.95, Hennessey and Ingalls, a paperback reprint of a book originally published in 1989).

The authors provide lots of movie stills to illustrate their points. They also look at multiple influences on movie design, not just interior design and architecture fashions.

The authors argue that "High pastiche sucked in stylistic elements like a vacuum cleaner. They break the high-pastiche style into six categories: 1) Early American/colonial, influenced by the restoration of Williamsburg; 2) Victorian, noting that many 1940s films are set in the Victorian era; 3) tropical, with Miami Beach architecture being an influence and setting, but also Latin America and the South Pacific; 4) surrealism, often seen in dream sequences and fantasy musical numbers, especially those of Busby Berkeley; 5) contemporary, often 1930s Moderne or International style; and 6) period revivalism/neo-Baroque.

The last style, also called "historical chic," was championed by interior designer Elsie de Wolfe. She felt that the era of Louis XVI was the high point of house design.

With their audience facing the Depression, films in the 1930s often revolved around the lives of the very wealthy, with lavish Art Deco fantasy sets for homes and workplaces. In the forties, the authors argue, films become more populist, more often focused on the lives

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of middle-class people.

However, futuristic nightclub scenes were still popular. Some famous clubs, such as the Stork Club or the Copacabana, were reproduced in films. Real or fanciful, movie clubs were generally Deco/Moderne or International in style.

After World War II, more realism was found in sets. Another influence on the look of films was technology. "Deep focus photography is characteristic of the forties," Mandelbaum and Howard note. "Thanks to technical advances in camera lenses and film stock, images looked sharper and more dimensional."

Technicolor also influenced the look of films. The authors says the company's consultants tried to control the color of every part of a set.

Colors were often boosted to take advantage of Technicolor's strengths. Billy Wilder had 4,500 white daisies painted blue and planted in the Canadian Rockies for "The Emperor Waltz" (1948).

But films in the 1940s were still largely black and white. Color was usually reserved for musicals, Westerns and costume dramas until the 1950s, the authors note.

Another influence on the look of forties film was the personal idiosyncrasies of directors, executives and actors. The book says that Sam Goldwyn went ballistic over red chairs in one scene for "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," threatening to fire the production designer. MGM art director Cedric Gibbons didn't like wallpaper. And Claudette Colbert "insisted that only the left side of her face be photographed. Sets were naturally conceived with that in mind."

Movie budgets and wartime restrictions also influenced the look of films, the authors point out. While travel restrictions and gasoline rationing helped boost movie-theater attendance except in rural areas, they also made it harder to shoot on location.

Blackout rules made night-time shooting almost impossible. It was also impossible to film at military installations, dams and harbors.

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Materials shortages and budget problems forced studios to recycle sets. Paramount had the sets from "The Palm Beach Story" (1942) painted white for "No Time For Love" (1943). Claudette Colbert starred in both films.

Similarly, "Kismet" sets were reused in Abbott and Costello's "Lost in a Harem" (1943). The French-street set used in 1943's "The Song of Bernadette" became an English-village street in 1945's "Cluny Brown."

The studios had generic sets they used for many movies. The authors say "each major studio had a New York street, Paris boulevard, Southern mansion, opera house and railroad station." They note that Rosalind Russell once joked that she had the same set in nearly every career-woman film she did.

The set recycling went on and on. MGM's Dutch street stood in for postwar Vienna in "The Red Danube" (1949). Andy Hardy's street became the street set for "Meet Me in St. Louis." The "Meet Me in St. Louis" street set was still being used on the 1960s TV show "

