

# THE ART DEPARTMENT

As a nerd who grew up watching behind-the-scenes featurettes about the "Star Wars" and "Indiana Jones" franchises, I had always assumed that the typical motion picture director was in absolute control of everything that appeared on-screen. I was convinced that they had every single shot storyboarded out and that nothing went into the camera that the director hadn't painstakingly engineered well ahead of time.

The truth is, most scenes are not storyboarded, and every department on a motion picture project (from art to wardrobe) have an effect on what you see onscreen, down to the moment that the cameras start rolling. Most directors gladly rely on the expertise of their

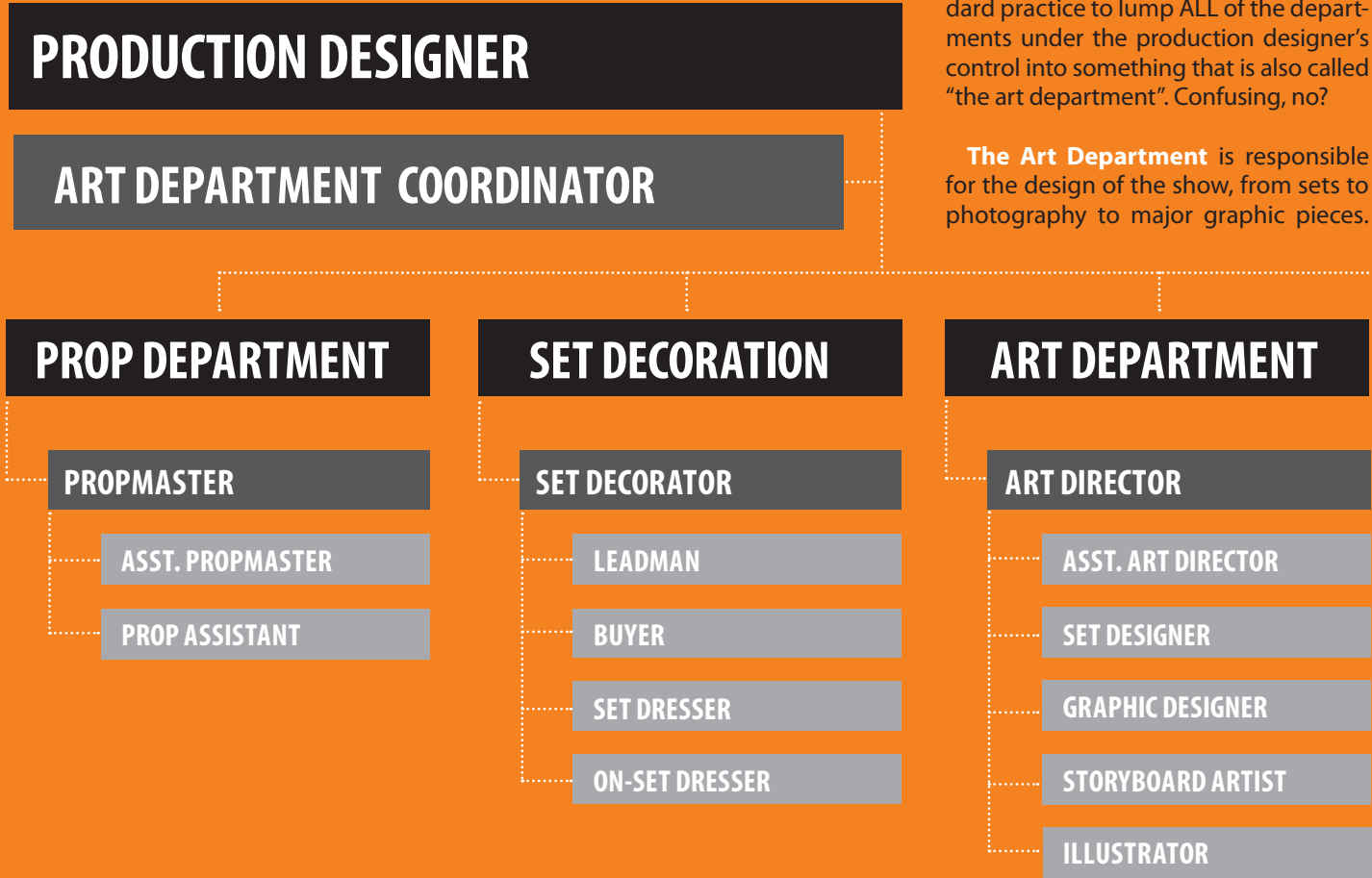
department heads and defer to those people's judgment. But in many ways, the final look of a film still comes down to three positions which have traditionally wielded enormous influence over the look of a project: the director, the director of photography, and the production designer. The director's primary concern is to elicit compelling performances from his actors and to get the shots the editor will need to cut the scenes. The director of photography controls the audience's view into the director's world and has the unique ability to tell a story within the story using lighting and camera techniques. The production designer literally designs the world within which the story takes place.

Directors become famous outside of the industry while production designers generally only become "well-known" inside the business. The simple reason for this difference is celebrity; directors work with famous actors while production designers work with talented nobodies.

Despite being doomed to historical obscurity, the production designer has a remarkably important job, with as many (if not more) people working under them as the film's director. Let's now refer to the organizational chart!

This is perhaps the most typical organization for an art department in the world of motion pictures. And even though one of these departments is named "the Art Department," it is standard practice to lump ALL of the departments under the production designer's control into something that is also called "the art department". Confusing, no?

**The Art Department** is responsible for the design of the show, from sets to photography to major graphic pieces.



The art director tends to act as the production designer's right hand and is responsible for logistics, schedule, and often manage the budget for each set. They may help manage the other creatives within the department, depending on the production designer's working style. Other departments take their cues from the art department.

**The Construction Department** are issued construction drawings by the art department. The construction coordinator works with his foreman (construction) and lead scenic (paint) to have their crews create sets that meet the production designer's vision. Construction craftsmen include carpenters, welders and specialty prop makers who create oversized set elements that should not be confused with the props used by the props department.

While **The Scenic Department** in this diagram is tucked under the construction coordinator, in most people's minds the scenics are their own entity, reporting to the lead scenic (also known as the "paint charge"). Scenics can turn plywood walls into lavish bird's-eye maple paneling using nothing more than paint and secret techniques handed down over the years.

After the sets have been built and the paint is on its way to being dry **The Set Decoration Department** steps in to work its magic. While they do move a lot of furniture, it's entirely wrong to think of the people in "set dec" as mere "movers." They're responsible for making spaces look inhabited, and it's always fun to walk into a freshly decorated set to find all the special touches their crew has left behind. The department head, known simply as "the decorator," usually has an encyclopedic knowledge of furnishings and decor, as do the shoppers/buyers who have relationships with antique stores in their region. The production designer usually pays special care to consult with the decorator because they realize that the final layer of human habitation is what will "sell" their sets to the camera.

The people in **The Greens Department** are often thought of as mere landscapers, but they're actually craftspeople who happen to work with plants. Greens crews may find themselves painting lawns to look winter-dead in the summer, then tying spring leaves to trees in the dead of winter. Greens are especially useful for screening out real world elements that the filmmakers don't want

to see, from other buildings to their own crew's equipment.

Next up is **The Props Department**, which I've referred to as the "redheaded stepchild" of the art department in previous articles, because the props department works embedded with the shooting crew and identifies more with the film's director than the production designer. The people in props are responsible for anything that the actors will touch or use in a scene, from a glass of milk to a spring-driven, helical fed 9mm Calico carbine submachine gun. These props are either purchased, rented from a props warehouse (or elsewhere), or fabricated to order.

Finally, there's **The Art Department Coordinator**, who functions essentially as an office manager for the entire art department. This position is frequently underpaid and underappreciated.

## CONSTRUCTION, SCENICS & GREENS DEPARTMENTS

### CONSTRUCTION COORDINATOR

#### CONSTRUCTION FOREMAN

CARPENTERS

WELDERS

PROPMAKERS

ON-SET CARPENTER

#### LEAD SCENIC

PAINT GANG BOSS

SCENIC

ON-SET PAINTER

### LEAD GREENSMAN

GREENSMEN

ON-SET GREENS