The Art Department Staff: Definition of Positions, Duties and Rates

By Dawn Snyder

The head of the art department is usually, but not always, the production designer. In the case of some non-union projects, small budget features, and television projects the head of the art department can be the art director. In either case, this position functions as the one who is responsible for the visual look of the project. The production designer is hired very early on, and collaborates with the director on the visual direction the film will take. The areas discussed are what location will best convey the look of the setting described in the script. (Country, state, city, or area of city) and which sets will be construction on a sound stage. Any special items involving ‘the look’ that are unique to the film such as visual effects, computer animation, and special lighting and coloring, or the design of specific props and set dressing are the responsibility of the production designer. (See ‘The Production Designer’)

The production designer assembles the art department staff, which is often made up of people he/she has collaborated with in the past. (See Organizational Tree) There is usually one art director (or in the case of big budget features a supervising art director and several art directors overseeing specific areas of the film, one assistant art director, and several set designers. A large show can employ many illustrators as well as pre-visualization artists. Regardless of the size of a project, there is almost always the need to use a graphic artist, although many designers prefer to do their own graphics. Every art department should have an art department coordinator, just as the production office has the production coordinator.

The art director is often the first person hired after the production designer and can be instrumental in putting together the remainder of the staff. The art director is second in command to the production designer and largely responsible for managing the department. The art director can spend a large part of the day supervising the set designers and collaborating with and managing the construction department. The art director should be experienced in many areas including, set design, script breakdown, budgeting, scheduling and fully understanding the job functions of the production office staff, the shooting crew, and ancillary departments. (See ‘The Art Director’)

The assistant art director works with the art director and is frequently an art director in training. The assistant art director may take on a variety of tasks, given the size and scope of the film. Typically, the assistant art director will be responsible for selecting, ordering and delivering to the construction department all hardware and special construction materials required for the sets. Other common duties are interfacing with ancillary departments and vendors such as sign shops, staff shops and scene docks. (See 'The Assistant Art Director')
The set designer is responsible for drafting all set drawings. Depending on the individual, the set designer will work directly with the art director or the production designer. Typically, the art director supervises the set designer. The set designer is given original sketches or floor plans, research photos, field measurements or magazines and books from which to draw the blueprints of the sets. The art director then checks these drawings, including plans, elevations and construction details before being turned over to the construction department.

The production designer may choose to hire an illustrator to draw perspective views of the sets. These descriptive illustrations, based on the production designer’s concepts, are then shown to the director, producers and other applicable personnel. Occasionally, the production designer works with the storyboard artist (who’s work is primarily as an aid for the director in the planning of his shots) to assure that the depictions of the sets and locations match the sets being built and/or chosen.

The advent of the computer has provided an invaluable aid as a concept and presentation tool. Art departments quite often hire graphic artists to not only design logos and signage, but to also scan in location photos and then alter them as per the production designer’s direction. These are then used as presentations to the director. A talented graphic artist can so alter a location photo so that it will be a realistic view of the finished product. These ‘photos’ are also valuable in the cost estimate stage and as a way for the construction department to see the scope of the work. Graphic artists can also be employed to create original posters and artwork because the use of existing art is becoming increasingly difficult and costly.

Another use of the computer is in computer modeling and pre-visualization. Set floor plans can be inputted into a 3-D program and create an accurate walkthrough as a tool to show the director. Specific action, camera angles and lighting requirements can be pre-planned through pre-visualization. In addition, the production designer can see the space and shape the set will occupy so that colors, graphics, greens, and set dressing can be considered long before the construction coordinator has committed the designs to construction. Today, with the advancements in computer technology, many worlds and sets are created in the computer by the visual effects team. The production designer will oversee the actual design of these sets, so that they can be coordinated with any actual sets and locations, and reflect the style and visual statement the production designer is attempting to convey.

Quite often the first staff member hired on by the production designer is the art department coordinator. The coordinator fields all calls, creates and distributes all memos, often tracks budgets, orders wallpaper and carpet samples. The coordinator keeps the art department supplies stocked, copies and distributes blueprints, and generally makes sure everyone is “kept in the loop”. Additionally, the coordinator is responsible for setting up the art department office, including
the ordering of furniture, drafting tables and the blueprint machine, and placing of phone lines. The duties may vary depending on the needs of the particular art department, but the importance of the job remains constant. Larger art departments will also employ a production assistant (P.A.) to handle running the errands; shopping for art supplies, the art department’s craft service, distributing the memos and running the blueprints.