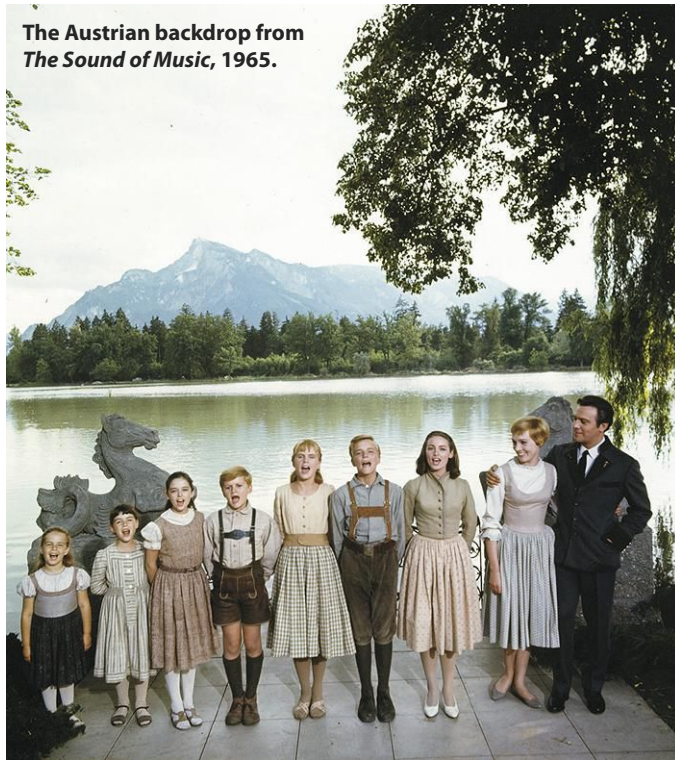




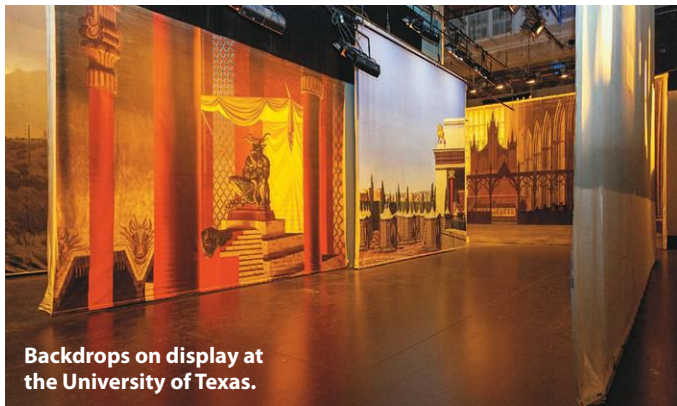
The tapestry backdrop from *Marie Antoinette*, 1938.



The Austrian backdrop from *The Sound of Music*, 1965.



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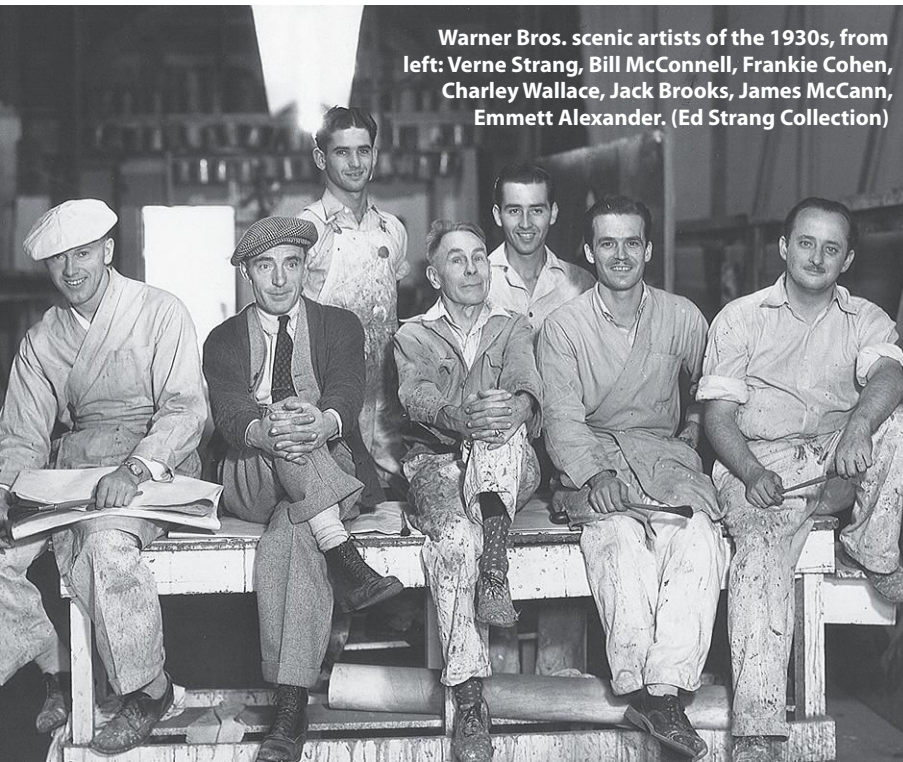
Backdrops on display at the University of Texas.



Pentagon hallway backdrop from *The Beginning of the End*, 1947, later repurposed for *Singin' in the Rain*, 1952.



UT students install the backdrop of Mount Rushmore from *North by Northwest*, 1959.



Warner Bros. scenic artists of the 1930s, from left: Verne Strang, Bill McConnell, Frankie Cohen, Charley Wallace, Jack Brooks, James McCann, Emmett Alexander. (Ed Strang Collection)



Backdrop from *The Student Prince*, 1954.

Grand Illusions

Was it real life or a Hollywood backdrop? Boca Museum of Art to premiere a first-ever exhibition of scenic movie magic.

By Greg Carannante

If you did follow the Yellow Brick Road, of course, you'd have skipped smack into a Hollywood backdrop.

For almost a century of cinematic history, such massive masterpieces of movie magic flourished as an art form that's nearly forgotten in today's era of green screens and CGI. But now, for the first time, they've jumped off the movie screen and right into a ground-breaking museum exhibition, right here in South Florida.

The first museum show dedicated to these giant canvases makes its world premiere on April 20 at Boca Raton Museum of Art. "Art of the Hollywood Backdrop: Cinema's Creative Legacy" honors the unsung artists who, in creating these grand illusions, were the backbone of the film industry.

"This exhibition of movie backdrops is not to be missed," says film critic Leonard Maltin. "These

monumental paintings were essential to moviemaking and were never meant to be seen by the public with the naked eye. Having this rare opportunity to experience these American masterpieces up close is long overdue."

Made between 1938 and 1968, the 22 backdrops feature scenes of Mount Rushmore, *Ben Hur's* Rome, the Von Trapp Family's Austrian Alps, and the Paris streets where Gene Kelly danced. The show is immersive beyond the scope of its backdrops, with interactive video reels created in Hollywood specifically for the exhibition that tell the stories behind the scenes, as well as atmospheric sound effects related to the original films. An Education Gallery also created for the exhibition showcases the artists' historic tools of the trade.

The exhibition was originated by the Boca museum and is co-curated by Thomas A. Walsh and Karen L. Maness, each of whom played pivotal roles in helping to salvage these treasures of the celluloid age. They are on loan from the Texas Performing Arts Hollywood Backdrop Collection at the University of Texas, the most extensive educational collection of such backdrops in the world. In addition, a 1952 backdrop for *Singin' in the Rain* and the tapestry backdrop for 1938's *Marie Antoinette* come from the Motion Picture Academy in Los Angeles.

"It is miraculous that these historic, monumental paintings were not lost forever, as so many Hollywood treasures have disappeared," says Irvin Lippman, the museum's executive director. "The concept for this show had its genesis with a *CBS Sunday Morning* segment that called attention to the campaign to preserve scenic backdrops that had laid rolled up in the basement of MGM's studios."

Painted in an impressionistic style for the camera lens, not the human eye, these works of art appear photo-realistic when viewed from a distance. Close-up, however, they look totally different, and visitors who take selfies with the backdrops in the background will find the resulting images don't exactly resemble what they see in the gallery.

This unique concept of "photo-realism for the camera" was spearheaded by George Gibson, who took scenic art to an entirely new level of artistry and productivity. In its heyday, MGM had three shifts of scenic artists working day and night, non-stop.

"This show is about the joy of reliving something you grew up with, that you always thought was real," said co-curator Walsh. "It is difficult for people to get their minds around the awesome size of these magical spaces, until they see them in person. These are literally some of the largest paintings ever created in the world, similar to cyclorama paintings. Aside from the technicians working in the soundstages, no one else has set eyes upon this collection."

The exhibition runs through Jan. 22, 2023. bocamuseum.org.