

Richard's Tales of Ocean Park, Santa Monica and other magic places.

NEWSLETTER

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The Legendary MGM Auction, 1970.

was there.







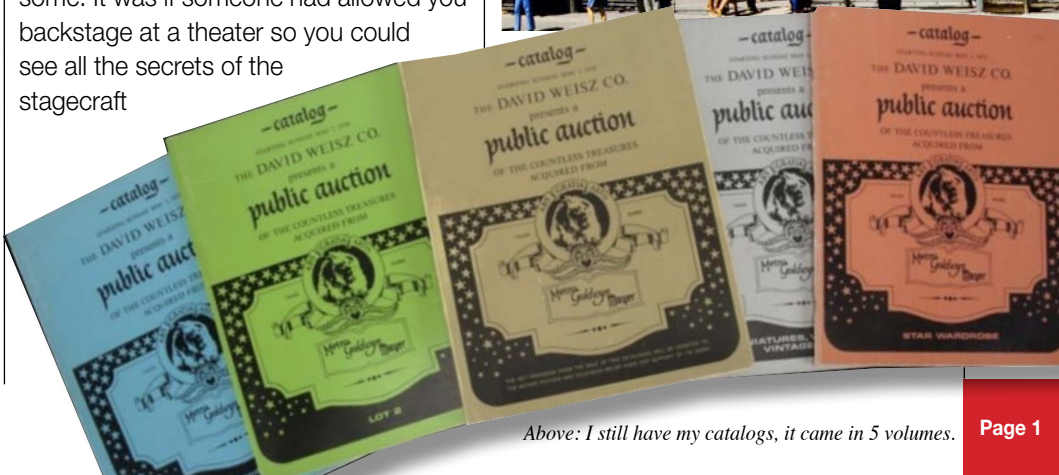
Above, There were sound stages full of furniture, junk side by side with priceless antiques purchased in France in the 1930s for the film "Marie Antoinette". Right, the streets between the sound stages were lined with conveyances of every sort, including Andy Hardy's jalopy, Roman chariots, Conestoga wagons, etc. Below, The entrance.

I grew up in the 1950s and 60s when all the old movies from the Golden Age of Hollywood were hitting TV screens for the first time and I devoured them. Even as a teenager I could appreciate that each studio had their own style and my favorite of all was MGM.

By 1970 I was a student in Film School at UCLA. So in January 1970 when it was announced that MGM was going to auction off all their old props and costumes I knew I would have to go have a look. I was a poor college student and never even considered buying anything but for $10 I could buy the catalog which admitted me to all the previews to at least see everything. The bonus part of these previews is that it happened all over the studio, including sound stages and the vast acreage of the standing sets on back lots all over Culver City. I could see the actual sets used in 100s of MGM movies I'd seen on TV.

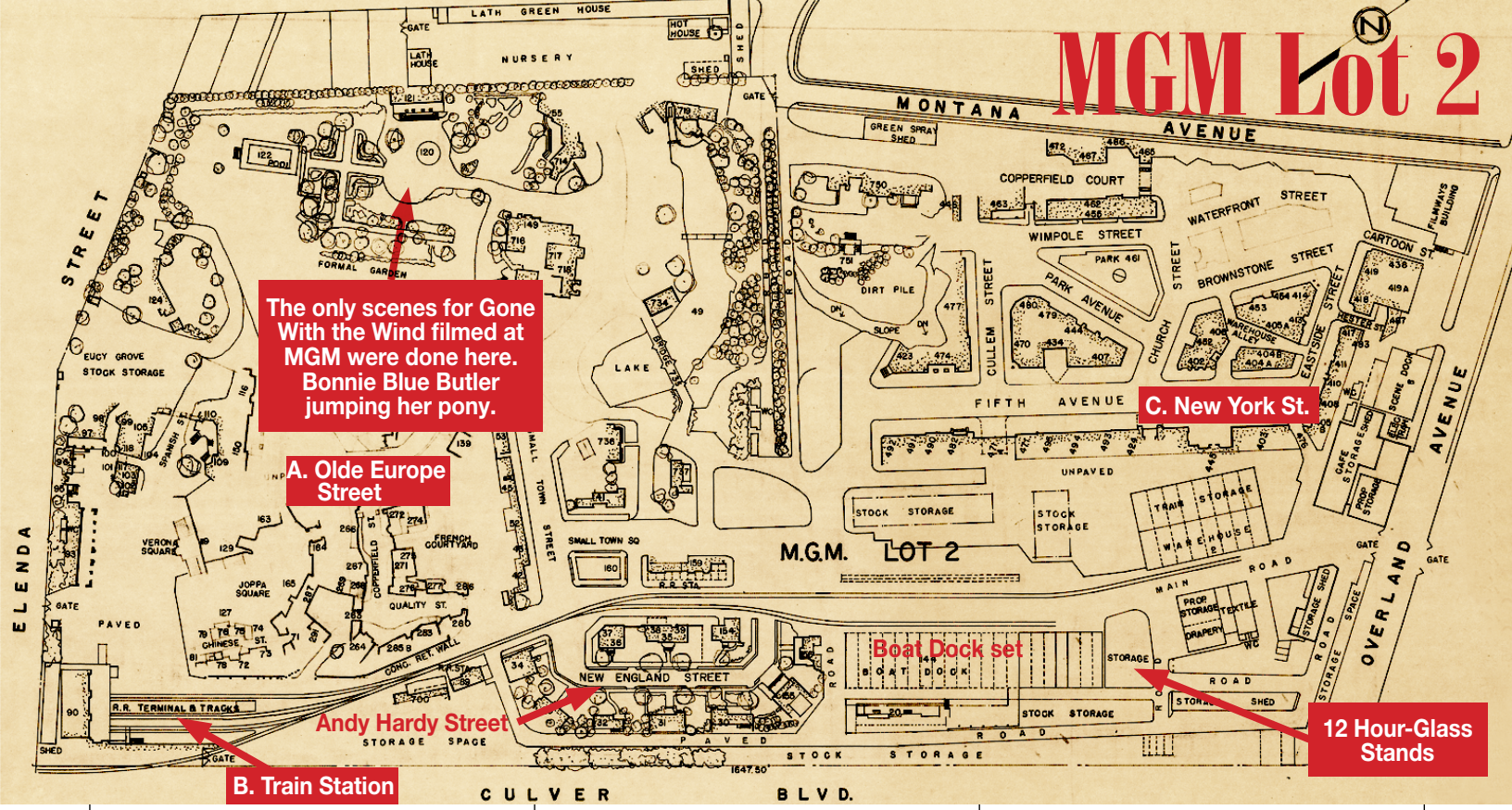
My roommate was Paul, my best friend since 6th grade, we grew up on the same street in Michigan. We were film nerds, in the AV Club and we made 8mm "student films" all through high school. Paul was a film student at USC and he shared my enthusiasm for all things MGM so we each bought a catalog which included admission to the previews.

The first preview day was Saturday April 25, 1970 and we were there early. There was a good crowd, everyone clutching their catalog and the sights were awesome. It was if someone had allowed you backstage at a theater so you could see all the secrets of the stagecraft



Above: I still have my catalogs, it came in 5 volumes.

MGM Lot 2



which delivered top notch entertainment.

We started with Lot 2, one of the busiest lots and closest to the dressing rooms, makeup department and wardrobe. The first "set" we came to was the "Boat Dock" off in a corner with storage slots for huge set pieces. One wall was painted black with rivets, port holes and openings to look like an ocean liner at the dock. Add a few props and lots of extras and it was totally believable.

The famous hour-glass

There was a wooden shed nearby with interesting treasures... about a dozen Plaster of Paris hour-glass stands. These were back-up props for the famous hour glass that is destroyed by the witch in "The Wizard of Oz" when she throws it at Dorothy's rescuers. There were three supports for each, carved to look like a dragon. A mold was made from the one carving and plaster copies were made and assembled into an hour glass. The ones used on the set had been painted to look like wood, these didn't even get that close but had been saved for over 30 years in this shed. I wonder what they sold for? I wish I had bought one. The one I show to the right went for almost $500,000 at a recent auction.

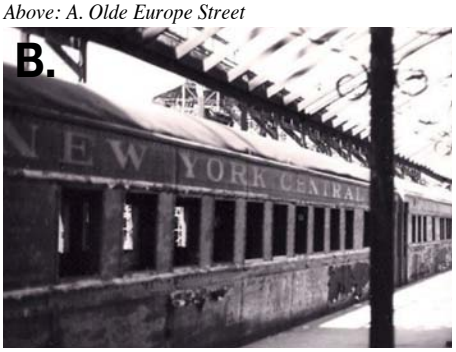
How the auction came about?

The demise of the old studio-system was the reason for the auction. By the late 1960s movie equipment became lighter, more compact, and easier to take on location. Film speeds were faster, so the controlled sound stage environment was no longer needed, and the "back lot" was becoming obsolete. And maybe someone in accounting questioned the need to store a dozen Plaster of Paris hour-glass stands for 30 years.





Above: A. Olde Europe Street



Above: B. Train Station



Above: B. New York Street
Left: Witch's hour-glass from "The Wizard of Oz", Plaster of Paris painted to look like wood.

Carving up MGM

By the late 1960s having gone through several owners and at an all-time low, the assets of MGM were viewed as just properties to be sold off, or if valueless, to be discarded. Thus Ted Turner bought MGM and kept the pre-1970 film library, Kirk Kirkorian bought the name rights of MGM to be used for Las Vegas hotels, and several of the back lots were sold off for future housing developments. The MGM management at the time didn't think the costumes were worth enough even to sell, but maybe there was some value in the props. David Weisz of the eponymous auction company, knew that Kirkorian was interested in selling off assets, and made MGM an offer of $1.5 million for all the props and costumes, which was accepted, and Weisz held the auction on the MGM lot. It was the biggest bazaar in L.A.'s history. The David Weisz company bought all of MGM's costumes for something like $1 apiece, and originally thought of a bazaar sale direct to the public for prices just above that.

Paul and I continue our Tour

After we toured Lot 2 we headed to the Main Lot with soundstages full of props and costumes. Our first stop were the three huge stages full of furniture, they clearly never threw anything away. In the 1930s in anticipation of the film "Marie Antoinette", MGM scoured Europe for Louis XVI antiques paying rock bottom prices because they had money to spend when everyone else was hurting. And the treasures were in there mixed with junk. I was in my early 20s and had no interest in or understanding of antiques so what

Below: The brass bed used in "Molly Brown" was the same brass bed used a few years earlier by Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman in "Cat On a Hot Tin Roof".





Above: In 1944 the newly built St. Louis Street on MGM Lot 3 was used for the film "Meet Me in St. Louis". This is one of the opening shots of the movie showing director Vincent Minnelli standing on the camera boom. Here we see Toody riding on a beer wagon discussing life with Chill Wills. The beer wagon was an item up for sale at the 1970 MGM Auction. Below: The LA Times opening day of the auction.

MGM props going, going, gone!

By MICHAEL KERNON
Washington Post Service

LOS ANGELES — Clark Gable's trenchcoat with the collar still up. A warehouse full of nothing but stoves. A lion's head. Enough costumes to clothe every living soul in Norfolk, Va. Two rare signed Tiffany lamps. Kim Novak's black lace bra and panties (with lavender ribbon) from "Lylah Clare." Several hundred chandeliers including four from a Hapsburg palace in Austria. A Sherman tank. Aubusson rugs, Chippendale, Beauvais, Louis XIV and XV furniture.

Fifteen pieces by Belter of Philadelphia, probably one of the world's largest collections of this Victoriana. Ben-Hur's chariot. George Murphy's dancing shoes. Tarzan's loincloth. A thousand firearms from Derringers to an elephant gun and 3,000 swords, daggers, stilettos, krises, spears, hauberks, pikes, sabers, machetes, snickersnees and other weapons, all real and mostly sharp . . .

IT TAKES A 400-page catalog to list all the items being sold in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's auction starting today and continuing until everything is gone. The David Weisz Co., auctioneers for the purchaser, a holding company, is selling the catalog for $10 as an open admission ticket.

Sale price was reported at $2 million, but the actual value could not even be guessed at by the antique experts and museum officials who have been roaming the three great sound stages (total area: 150,000 square feet) where the items are being collected.

During the 1930s especially, when the big movie studios had money and hardly anyone else did, no expense was spared to make the sets and costumes as authentic as possible. That was when Hugh Hunt, who designed sets for some 600 films, traveled the world for MGM, picking up an incredible variety of things.

ONCE IN 1936 he scoured India for a production of "Kim" and came back with 5,000 separate items, for which he paid $85,000. To get them out of the country during monsoon season, he didn't dare expose them to the leaky, drafty Indian freight trains so he bought up all the seats of a passenger train, removed them and stowed his booty in it.

Hunt, 68, recalled spotting an elaborate Oriental wedding processional cart when he passed a wedding party in Pakistan. He bought the cart on the spot, gave the group his station wagon and walked the cart back to town.

TWO THOUSAND people a day are expected at the auction. In one building alone there are 3,000 lots, one to six items in a lot. John B. Scura, in charge of the men's wardrobe for 35 years, said the biggest demand in costumes is going to be for things worn by Clark Gable and Judy Garland. Judy's "Wizard of Oz" dress is there, a blue-checked cotton pinafore as crisp and fresh as new, along with her red sequined "Ruby" shoes (size 5C) and some of Gable's well-remembered pinstripe suits.

Most of the items are expected to go to individual buyers, but many won't fit into the sound stages where 50 workmen have been organizing the properties since January. Some of these problem pieces are the riverboat used for "Showboat," an old railroad train, airplanes and parts of planes mounted on motion machines.

MGM IS GETTING rid of everything. It will lease props as needed. Even the 300 miniatures of bridges, barrels, buildings and people, used in explosions, floods or other catastrophes, are being sold. The list goes on and on.

Uniforms for every major league baseball team. Mickey Rooney's jalopy from the Andy Hardy days. The Cecil Beaton dress Leslie Caron wore in "Gigi." A 115-foot square-rigged schooner. A large painting of Greer Garson. A signed "Stradivarius" violin made in Columbus, Ohio. A perfect small replica o the Mayflower. A Louis XVI treaty table measurin 29 by 15 feet. The Pope's throne, full size.

Four stage coaches and two coronation coaches Scores of zithers, guitars, bagpipes, panpipes an exotic African instruments. A stack of witch hats. suburban front hall and living room complete to th row of Reader's Digest books on the bookshelf. space ship. Nearly 300 wagons comprising an i stant history of the wheel. And Rosalind Russell fantastic black ostrich-feather hat from a come nobody can quite remember.



Above: Huge miniatures of all kinds of ships were photographed in the studio tanks on Lot 3. Some were moved to the Main Lot for the sale.

impressed me was not any specific items but the sheer quantity of items for sale. It took 11 days to auction all the furniture.

There were a couple of impressive items among the furniture. One Time Machine was for sale from the movie of the same name and in good condition. And there were enormous chandeliers, some the size of rooms hanging from wooden contraptions on wheels. They must have been extremely heavy but if you needed one, just wheel it into position and hoist it up to the steel rafters of the sound stage on a heavy chain.



Above: Lana Turner, in "Ziegfeld Girl" sharing the screen with one of the huge chandeliers that made MGM so special. **CLICK HERE FOR GLAMOUR**

Wardrobe Sale

Next we went to the sound stages where they displayed the costumes to be auctioned. Yes the highlights of the collection such as Gable's trench coat and the ruby slippers were featured in special displays but nothing impressed me as much as



Above: The original time machine was sold at the MGM studio auction in 1970. The winner of the auction was the owner of a traveling show. Five years later the prop was found in a thrift store in Orange, CA and sadly, not in good shape. But it was bought and fully restored by film historian Bob Burns. The miniature of the machine seen in the film was owned by the film's director George Pal and it was lost when his home burned down in the Bel-Air fire of 1961.

the dress Mary Astor wore to the fair in "Meet Me in St. Louis". It was an Edwardian summer gown of ecru lace embroidered top to bottom with ecru grapes. There was a matching wide brim hat and a parasol to go with it. The dress must have weighed 70 pounds and been very hot under harsh Technicolor lights. But if you look at the movie you can see that it photographs beautifully. This costume was used again in another Minnelli film, "Gigi", 1958 on a dress extra in the background.

Paul and I never made it to the other back lots or to any of the auctions themselves, as college students we didn't have money to spend at auctions. Today I regret not having bought at least something but attending the preview was an experience I'll never forget.

We both took 8mm movies of our visit to MGM that day in 1970 and I wish I could find them.



What color is that dress?

Right: Mary Astor and the elaborate dress she wore to the fair in "Meet Me in St. Louis". Notice the difference in the color "temperature" between the large picture and the insert "screen grab" from the Technicolor movie. I'm thinking in Technicolor if you wanted a costume to photgraph as white, it had to be made in ecru.



Many thanks to Marc Wanamaker and The Bison Archives for selected images.