
Filming in Museums

Even those of us who live in Los Angeles, where we should be accustomed to it, get a bit of a buzz when we encounter a filming location. The trucks, masses of equipment, cables crisscrossing, people standing about, people focused on arcane tasks, is this one of my favorite shows? maybe a movie? any stars? at least, some really good actors?

Now, imagine what fun it would be to have it all happen in your own museum, with you in the role of supervisor, safeguarding the floors, the walls, the fittings, and, oh yes, the collection.

The following set of articles was assembled as a reference for these situations. It includes: two articles by conservators who have supervised shoots, Chris Stavroudis here in LA and Laurie Gibbs of Hampton Court near London; a glossary of film jargon so you can possibly understand what crewmembers are saying to each other; a compilation of the guidelines given to production companies from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Boston Museum of Fine Art, the National Gallery in Washington, DC, and Hampton Court; and finally an sample of a request for filming from a location company.

Never Yell “Cut”

(A brief guide to filming in museums)

by Chris Stavroudis

There are a number of occasions in which a film crew can be found working in a museum, gallery, historic house, or around artwork. They can range from a couple of people with a single camera to an entire movie or television production, a process that is an amazing thing to witness, dozens, if not hundreds, of people working intently together for a single goal – entertaining or educating an audience out there somewhere. Unfortunately, however, in many cases these focused intent professionals are somewhat less concerned about the well-being of their immediate environment.

The role of supervising a production will often fall to the conservator, as our familiarity with the materials and what can harm them, makes us the most obvious choice. The purpose of this article (and the others as well) is to provide a primer for conservators on the production process as it relates to our environments, and how to insure that filming does not compromise the artifacts, artwork, or historic structure.

To be entirely fair, an experienced crew has done its job hundreds if not thousands of times. Our conservation concerns often border on insulting the professionalism of the crew. They throw rolls of gaffer’s tape around the set all the time, and they never miss the intended recipient. However in a cultural institution, throwing anything, by anyone, is simply not acceptable. This difference in perspective must always be remembered and accommodated.

During the course of filming, the conservator is often called upon to make judgment calls as to safe practices. If appropriate, there may be acceptable “bending” of the rules, but when push does come to shove, the conservator needs to be prepared to be assertive and lay down the law. While it may never be used, the conservator or someone else from the museum on the set must have the authority to shut down a production that doesn’t follow the guidelines for filming or continues to pose a risk to the collection or structure after the potential danger has been pointed out to the production.

The Script and Cast

A museum, gallery, or historic house is something special to us as preservation professionals. However, to the production, it is a set. The degree to which the production interacts with the set will establish parameters for the supervising conservator. And no matter what the size or complexity, there should be security staff appropriate for the site.

Perhaps the least invasive filming is something on the scale of news coverage of an event. This might involve a cameraperson, a hand-held camera, perhaps a light, perhaps a talking head, and a microphone. In these cases, monitoring the “set” is pretty straightforward. Watch for people backing up or walking while not looking (the camera operator or the talking head). Watch for food and drink brought in surreptitiously. Watch light levels on sensitive objects. The light is apt to be tungsten or quartz halogen so UV will likely not be a huge worry unless it is a very fragile object. This sort of filming is usually quite fast, and the crew is in and out. The light is normally only on for the actual shot so the exposure is also brief.

The next level of interaction between production and set is something like a documentary about the collection or house or a show or movie featuring aspects of the collection or site. These productions are somewhat more intensive, require a larger crew, and will have greater demands on control of the captured image.

In this situation, control of lighting, shadows, color temperature, and how characters or a narrator looks will usually call for a surprising amount of setup. Additional lighting will be needed which in turn often necessitates additional electric power. There will be a number of stands, cables, and other accoutrements needed to make the magic happen. There will most likely also be a more complicated system to hold the camera: a tripod, a dolly, or any of a number of other systems.

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All of the extra equipment requires a number of additional people: gaffers, grips, wardrobe, makeup, camera operators, and one or more people who are in charge - the director and possibly an assistant. (A movie lingo glossary is on page 14.)

Further up the list of invasive productions would be filming scenes for a movie, a television production, a commercial, or a music video. Similarly, a still photo shoot for advertising or publicity would also be considered in this category. These productions can run from one day (or night) to perhaps a week. Often, to avoid conflict with the museum's public, filming will be performed after hours. It is not uncommon for a production to begin at 5:00 pm and work through the night, wrapping at 6:00 the next morning.

In these larger productions, there will be more lights, perhaps a second camera, and more elaborate ways to hold and move the camera(s) (a dolly or two, dolly tracks, a crane, a steady-cam operator), and more people than mentioned above. There is apt to be a producer or two, maybe an art director, the property department (props), lots of assistants, talent (actors and extras), stand ins, and, if children are involved, their parents, and often an on-set tutor. If you are lucky, you may have special effects and stunt people.

Suddenly, the museum staff is faced with supervising a very large number of people doing many things at once. Security must control access into and out of the museum, watching that food and drink don't come in, and that collection items don't go out. The conservator's responsibility is to the safety of the objects in the collection and historic structure.

Most of what the people from the production are doing in your museum is innocuous (after all, this is probably happening in the same space that visitors and student groups occupy on a daily basis). However there are a number of film-specific actions that require the conservator's close attention and possible intervention. There is also the psychological problem that the crew is working, and it is easy for them to think of the location as just another work site. As a consequence, they may not use their museum manners.

A further escalation of a production's intrusion is something like an ongoing filming – a series or a movie that is largely set in the institution. (See *It's a Wrap*, page 16.)

Pre-production

First, before any filming can be even agreed upon, the people planning the production must be given a list of guidelines for filming. Ideally, the director or producer should sign off on having received and distributed the guidelines to all departments. The guidelines specify the rules under which the actors and crew are expected to operate. Before shooting begins, all members of the crew must be given copies of the filming guidelines. (See samples and suggestions for filming guidelines, page 20.)

The filming guidelines lay the framework and establish the authority of the conservator to intercede in situations where the collection or structure may be jeopardized. The

institution may also have representatives on hand to make sure that the content of the filming is compatible with the mission of the museum (e.g., no pornography) and also someone who is familiar with which items can and cannot be filmed due to copyright issues and lender/owner wishes. These tasks can also be delegated to the conservator.

Depending on the site's popularity for filming, there may be a site rep from a location company – a person or company that acts as the agent representing the museum to potential productions. They also act as liaison to the production company and will have a person or two on-site during filming. These guys are on our side, as they have responsibility for the fabric of the building, floors, walls, etc. They watch over productions every day (actually, usually every night). Befriend them. They are extra eyes on the scene and tell great stories. In Los Angeles, the good site companies are licensed real estate brokerage firms.

A larger production will have on their staff a location manager, the person who has coordinated using your museum, gallery, or site for the production. The location manager will have made sure that parking issues have been arranged, necessary permits were obtained, and may well be present for the filming or at least the beginning of filming. There also may have been a location scout, the person from a production that looks at various places to film and makes recommendations to the director.

On Set

Before any work begins on the set, the conservator should be introduced (or introduce themselves) to the producer(s), director, assistant director(s), location manager, and site rep. It is very nice if one of these people makes an announcement reminding the crew about where they are and how they are expected to behave.

To repeat myself, a good production is an amazing beast.

Because there are so many people working together (sometimes for a long period and other times for just a few days) decorum on set is quite informally formal. Everyone is (or should be) extremely polite on set. Often as someone becomes more annoyed, they will behave more and more politely. (Although this general rule does not necessarily apply to directors or producers at all times.) You will hear lots of “yes sir's” and “excuse me's.” It is a means of everyone getting along and also an acknowledgement that everyone has to work together to make the magic happen. At times it feels a bit stilted and forced, but it is expected.

If the conservator can maintain a polite, respectful, informal demeanor, the production will go much more smoothly. (I have forgotten this rule on occasion and gotten really snippy replies to an insufficiently-polite tone. Unless the crewmember's offence was egregious, a sincere apology from the conservator is called for after things have settled.) So you keep your voice down; say please and thank you, even if inside you want to scream. However, it is also entirely fair not to give a

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second warning. If a cast or crewmember repeats unacceptable behavior, show no mercy. You may even ask that they be removed from the set. They are expected to be professionals, and professionals shouldn't have to be asked twice.

Remember that many jobs on set are union. You can ask a grip to move a light, but he/she will call an “electrician brother” to actually move the equipment.

There is a distinct chain of command. The director is in charge. Producers are the money-people and get lots of respect and deference and often work closely with the director. There will be a cameraman (DP, director of photography) and camera crew. The cameraman will often work very closely with the director – by just watching it can be difficult to tell who is who. Depending on the size, scale, and budget of the production, there is apt to be an AD (assistant director) or two (first AD and second AD). There will be the sound people (at least two), and a script person. There will invariably be at least one PA (production assistant) and perhaps many. (PAs tend to be young, overworked, underpaid, and hoping to make it in the business.)

If there are actors, there will be makeup, wardrobe, hair stylists (I've even seen a beard stylist), stand-ins, and sometimes actor's assistants. There may be extras – the people that mill around in the shot for background. (Extras are generally treated as a lower form of life on set. It's a really tough gig. They are treated like cows, idiots, children, or all three. They often they live up to their stereotype – particularly when in a large group. They also are expected to remember their movements and recreate them over and over. As a testament to their importance they generally eat last at meal breaks.) If you are offered a walkthrough on a production, think seriously about the implications. First, you won't be able to watch everything that is going on. And, you will also have become, if only for a moment, an extra.

There will often be a bevy of people hanging around the producer and director. Sometimes these are friends, family, investors, or part of their entourage. These folks come along for part of the shoot because your museum is an exotic location. They are generally harmless and usually hang out in the video village in “directors chairs.” They can get bored and may wander off into other areas of the museum that may be off limits. So, do keep an occasional eye on them.

Your Role

As conservator on set, you want to be omnipresent. When supervising a shoot, I rarely sit down. I try to keep my eye on areas that have more activity, but filming guidelines can be broken anywhere. I roam. I let people know I'm watching. If someone bends a rule slightly, even if I don't say anything, I want them to know I saw it.

It is really good to get to know the head lighting person: the gaffer or key electrician. They are very knowledgeable about light, light levels, and color temperature -- it's their job. They usually have really cool light meters and are of-

ten happy to talk about lighting. If you have a light meter with you, particularly a UV meter, you can have an I'll-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours moment. In my experience, after a short conversation (not lecture), they understand our concerns about light levels in the museum.

The gaffer works with the director and director of photography (DP) when a scene is being set-up (blocked). It is the gaffer who decides where to put lights and what type of light is necessary to light the scene. You really want the gaffer to be on your side. However recognize that both the director and DP overrules them.

Anyone on set, including you, has a few other obligations. Stay out of the way as much as possible; particularly stay out of the camera's line. When filming starts, be absolutely quiet. If possible, don't move. Make sure your cell phone is off or on vibrate. (The best line I've heard for this is the admonition, “Set your iPhones to stun.”)

Lights

The conservator's gravest concerns will be the lights. There are questions of visible light levels, UV levels, and heat build up.

Lights are also apt to be placed high in the air on stands and are often quite heavy. There are lots of rules in the various guidelines about setting up lights in the museum, but to me, the fundamental rule is that the light must be out of striking distance from any and all collection objects and fragile surfaces. So, should there be an earthquake, or someone yanks a cable somewhere, the light simply cannot fall on an object. This gives flexibility to the crew – if the light is low, it can be closer to an object, but if it is high, it must be further away. This prevents an argument about why it is not OK to put a light on a 12-foot stand 6 feet away from a collection object – “but the filming guidelines say they only have to be 6 feet away.” It also makes sense to the crew, sometimes begrudgingly, but sense nonetheless.

There are so many different lights available, and those big trucks seem to carry every imaginable type.

The gentlest light is a Kino, a bank of fluorescent tubes that can be switched and dimmed independently. The tubes are covered with plastic sleeves, presumably to protect the bulbs, but the sleeves also absorb UV. They run cool, the light is diffuse and not intense, and there is no UV. They are also comparatively lightweight. They take a few minutes for the light to stabilize, so they are not good for short term turning on and off.

The opposite end of the spectrum, if you will, is the HMI®. These are unbelievably large, heavy, bright, and hot. The larger units swallow up 18,000 Watts (and are much more efficient than tungsten to boot, so it's an amazing amount of light). HMI® stands for Hydrargyrum Medium-arc Iodide and have color temperatures of 5600K. In night shoots, these are often used to make areas look like they were lit by

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sunlight. This can be disorientating because after a while, your body begins to think that it is real sun and that it's daytime. The visible light level sends my meter off scale, and if the UV levels are to be trusted, they put out lots and lots of UV. This is in spite of a UV filter in the lamp. (Without the internal UV filter, you could get serious burns and sunburn your eyes.) The UV level can be reduced by shining the light through a plastic diffuser. The lighting crew can also be requested to bring transparent, UV absorbing gels. Obviously, the HMI® is not for many lighting situations in museums.

The tungsten incandescent light (often called an “inky”) remains a popular option, as well. These can be as large as 20,000 Watts in the stereotypical, fresnel-lensed, movie light, to arrays of bulbs that look rather like old-fashioned auto headlamps. These are usually referred to by a number of names and their wattage.

Lights are positioned on stands and are moved around to get the lighting effects necessary for a shot. Often, the light needs to be modified – bounced, diffused, color corrected, or blocked off from some parts of the scene. All of the tricks to modify lighting are usually accomplished with the aid of a C-stand, a three-legged stand that can be folded flat (the two of the three legs swing around and nestle with the third leg). The C-stand can be fitted with arms and connectors to hold just about anything. Of most interest to the conservator, the C-stand can be used to position flags, large black cloths on a wire frame that can be used to block light.

Camera

The camera is the most valuable piece of equipment on set, although some of the camera mounts (dollies, and some cranes) can also be unbelievably expensive. The people who work with the camera are every bit as fastidious as conservators. Once when filming a group of children, one of the kids bumped his head on the camera (it was on a crane). Everyone rushed over with looks of grave concern playing across their faces. They all went to check the camera.

Action

From the conservator's perspective, when “action” is shouted, you can generally relax. All other work on the set should stop. Everything should be set and safe. It is fine to watch the action (make sure you are out of the way – listen for the admonition “clear the lens”). Also, be aware that some actors don't work well when they see people watching them work (you are in their eye line). So as a general rule, try to find a vantage point that is out of their sight lines. If you hear “clear the eye line,” it usually means you should move out of the way. If you want to watch what is happening, you can wander to the video village and watch the scene on a monitor. Most of the production will be there too, often sitting in their directors chairs. The producer will usually be there and sometimes the director. Don't get in the way and be very polite – there is no way you can claim your watching is anything other than curiosity.

The conservator can't relax during action if there is something happening in the scene that does require your supervision. I've sometimes found it necessary to place myself behind the camera crew to make sure they don't back up into a case. Or I stand beside the person working a camera crane to make sure they don't swing wide and go near something they shouldn't. Always remember that these people are pros. I usually explain my presence as being there for my peace of mind, not because I don't trust them.

Back to the eye line of the actors. If you find you have to be in their eye line, don't look at the actors. Make it clear by your actions that you are watching the camera, a crewmember, or whatever you are doing. (You might just exaggerate your watching the whatever to make it clear you are not looking at them.)

The times when the conservator is most occupied is watching when stuff gets moved around. Oftentimes there may be setup in two or even more areas at the same time.

Load in, when the lights, C-stands, cables, lunch boxes, carts, etc., are brought into the museum is a busy time, but usually they are initially staged somewhere out of the way.

After all of the necessary equipment is unloaded and in the staging area, the electricians will string cables for powering the lights. The cables are run where it is hoped that they won't show in the filming. You need to make sure that the cables aren't put in places they shouldn't be, and watch that no one bumps into anything while placing the cables.

Then the fun begins. The electricians will begin bringing in the lights and grips will be setting up C-stands and bigger stuff to control the lighting. Lots of carts will be rolling in. The video village (monitors, directors chairs) will be setup somewhere near by, the sound cart will be rolled in, and camera, lenses, film, dolly will all be brought closer to position. Set dressers and props may be bringing in fake objects, fake displays, furniture, trays of prop food, and just about anything else you can think of. This all may be happening in different areas within the museum. While we can't be attentive to everything, we need to know what is going on in different areas and keep more of an eye on the areas that seem more risky. If there is more than one person supervising, it makes these busy times much easier.

Once everything is set, there might be a rehearsal and then the scene will be filmed. Keep an ear out for “last looks,” this means everything should be ready to film. (Often makeup, hair and wardrobe will run in and make last minute tweaks to the actors.)

Eventually, you will hear “rolling” or “rolling, rolling” to let everyone know that the camera is running, sound will chime in with “speed,” and the director or AD will say “action.” Filming is underway in earnest now, and usually you can relax, maybe very quietly sneak off to craft services. The scene may take a number of takes. There may also be a number of scenes shot in the same location with some mov-

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ing of lights and cameras. These moves can happen rather suddenly, perhaps a shadow is falling in the wrong spot, or they like the shadow falling in the wrong spot and want more. Because every one is waiting, these changes are made very quickly, and you need to make sure that no corners are cut.

When filming is done with a set and a successful take is in the can, you will hear “check the gate” which means to make sure there were no equipment problems. (Checking the gate to make sure that there is no hair or crud in the camera where the film is exposed. Sometimes anachronistic in this video age, but you will be surprised how often film is used.)

Eventually you will hear the magic words “moving on.” This means that the shooting is done with this setup and that equipment will be moved to the next location. Again, things go from no action to intense moving of lights, stands, props, cameras, and sometimes even the video village.

While supervising, keep an ear out for any of the following: “Watch your back” or “points” will mean that something unwieldy (or sharp) is being moved around. If you don’t see what’s going on, find it.

If you hear “patching” or “repatching,” it means that something electrical needs to be moved around and that a light will be turned off briefly, i.e., it might get suddenly dark. And, just so you know, a stinger is an extension cord.

And, after a long shoot, hearing “martini” is a wonderful thing. The martini is not a call to an open bar (actually you should never see anyone drinking on set), but the announcement of the last shot of the day.

This also means that everything that has taken hours and hours to setup will be taken down and removed in a few minutes. It happens staggeringly quickly and can really catch you by surprise. Perhaps you made a mental note to watch something leave, but if you are not quick, it will be gone before you wander over to supervise.

While the crew are consummate professionals (and by this time, you should know who the less professional professionals are and watch them more carefully), it’s been a long day. The only thing between your museum and a warm bed is getting all the stuff out. This is an important time to be extra watchful. Tired and in something of a hurry, people might cut corners and rules might not be followed. Using the most polite tone and wording is important at this point.

And...

No matter what happens, never, ever yell, “Cut.” If something horrible happens and you need to intervene, you can yell anything else, even something that would give the film an “R” rating, but never “cut.” This is an unforgivable intrusion into the director’s domain.

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