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SET PIECES

# The satin and silk world of 'Miss Pettigrew'



Kerry Brown

In the living room set for "Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day," bas-relief panels of Diana and deer flank the Deco fireplace.

## Auction houses and junk shops deliver luxe, seductive scenery for the new movie about an American starlet in prewar London.

By Christy Hobart, Special to The Times  
February 28, 2008

IN the new movie "Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day," Amy Adams plays an entirely delectable American starlet looking for love and fame in pre-World War II London. Her performance lives up to her character's name, Delysia (say it out loud: dee-LEE-see-ah), and indeed, the apartment she inhabits is as scrumptious as a box of fine, liqueur-infused French chocolates.

"We used every beautiful texture you can get," production designer Sarah Greenwood, an Oscar nominee for "Atonement," says of the London set for "Miss Pettigrew." When the film opens next week, audiences will see how the satins, silks, velvets and a creamy polar-bear rug give the penthouse a come-hither-and-roll-around-for-a-while appeal.



PHOTO GALLERY  
Art deco scenery

Nick, a nightclub impresario (played by Mark Strong), owns the apartment and uses it to put up rotating love interests. Greenwood imagined that he had revamped the space for his current American amour, merging the English Art Deco décor with a dash of Hollywood glamour. In the two-story entry, a whimsical collection of bas-relief clouds floats high on a wall.

"Something had to go up there, and that was the solution," she says. "It tells us the character is ditzzy and has her head in the clouds."

Mirrors, the plague of every director of photography, are everywhere.

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"They were typical of the times," Greenwood explains, "and, of course, they show Delysia's vanity." Fittingly, the character brings framed photographs -- of herself -- to place on the living room's shiny, black grand piano.

A delicate iron handrail swirls up the foyer's sweeping staircase.

"You wouldn't really find that staircase in an English penthouse," Greenwood says, "but the story's a fairy tale, really, so we took some liberties."

The upstairs bedroom suite was heavily influenced by Jean Harlow's house. Sheers above the vanity "were copied directly from Doris Day's," Greenwood says.

Both real-life homes, conceived by legendary Hollywood decorator William Haines, guided the set designs, as did interiors by Haines' contemporary, Dorothy Draper.

It was a bas-relief copy of Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" placed above the bathtub, on the other hand, that dictated the boudoir's color palette of aquas, silvers and duck-egg blue.

The bed, which Greenwood saw as the center of life in the apartment, had to be spectacular. It's roomy, plush and silky and gets pride of place up on a platform. But it didn't start out that way.

"We found it at auction in London," the designer says. "It was terrible, from the 1980s, with those adjustable, electric mattresses. But it was cheap, about \$500, and the size was right. All it needed was the satin and tassels."

Given just nine or 10 weeks to find all the furnishings for the set, Greenwood and her team scoured London's auction houses and junk shops. Working within a strict budget, they often chose inexpensive pieces to repaint and reupholster.

The fanciful, Chinese-themed hand-painted silk that covers the walls of the bedroom comes from de Gournay, the English company that specializes in fine wallpaper and fabrics. It looks expensive but, like the bed, ended up being a bargain.

In today's prices, Nick would have had to spend about \$60,000 for the luxurious touch. But Greenwood, who worked with the company on the 2005 movie "Pride & Prejudice," got it for about a tenth of the price because of that relationship. "Chinoiserie," she adds, "was appropriate for the time."

Although it might seem the downstairs living area was designed around the glossy black piano -- white when Greenwood found it in a junk shop -- the starting point was actually the bas-relief panels of Diana and three deer on either side of the fireplace.

"I quite liked the idea of Diana the Huntress and asked myself if there was an analogy with the mistresses that [Nick] put up there," Greenwood says.

She found the artwork while studying a book on the interiors of the Queen Mary ocean liner, then copied it.

"The décor of the ship is quintessentially English, but it's not the heavy Art Deco one would have found elsewhere in England at the time," she says. "Heavy," of course, doesn't suit Delysia. However, bouquets of beautiful flowers definitely do.

The action in the film takes place in one day, but the shooting took three weeks, Greenwood says. For reasons of continuity, real flowers were simply not a possibility. So Greenwood and set decorator Katie Spencer crafted a dozen arrangements out of silk. Luckily, the team had had practice: They had whipped up all the flowers for "Atonement," whose action within the house, she says, also takes place in a day.

"We always do our own -- real or fake," Greenwood says of the flowers. "It's like the icing on the cake."

There's not one flower in the kitchen of "Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day," however. There's no polished marble flooring or gilded sconces, either. In fact, there isn't a spit of glamour. It's a dingy, rundown room where Delysia -- and even Miss Pettigrew (Frances McDormand), who's hired as Delysia's social secretary -- rarely venture.

"The kitchen wasn't a room for public consumption," Greenwood says, "and therefore Nick didn't renovate it."

It doesn't get more Hollywood than that.

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