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TV: Visiting 'Mad Men' set a trip back to the '60s

Vince Horiuchi
Tribune columnist

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Beverly Hills- The first and most important thing the publicist told us before we stepped onto the set was "Don't take anything!"

Don't steal a single prop, she ordered. I must say, it was tempting.

This week, the nation's television critics at our annual summer press tour visited one of the most elaborate and detailed television soundstages I have ever seen, the place where they shoot AMC's 1960s drama, "Mad Men."

It was like stepping into a time machine and being swept back to the days of Formica countertops, Lucky Strikes and bourbon lunches.

This show's elaborate set design is a perfect example of how essential detail and careful research are to conveying a specific era and mindset.

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While the show takes place in the heart of the advertising world in the early 1960s, New York City's Madison Avenue, the interior sets for the drama are housed in the Los

Angeles Center Studios in downtown L.A. Our first stop was the Sterling Cooper office, a buzzing Manhattan workplace lined with secretary desks and old IBM electric typewriters.

On some of the desks were stacks of typewritten ad copy (all of the stacks, though, had the same wording). Also on the desks were dirty metal ashtrays littered with cigarette butts, even some with lipstick marks on the filters.

We also were taken to the home of the show's lead character, Don

Draper, the advertising firm's creative director, played

by Jon Hamm. The attention to detail was impressive, from the glass china to the ceramic figurines and velvet headboard in the Drapers' bedroom.

"Whatever we put on screen is researched to the Nth degree," the show's set decorator, Amy Wells, told me.

Usually, the show's creator Matthew Weiner, the writers, the production designer Dan Bishop, Wells and a team of other set decorators and designers meet for each episode to figure out what props are

needed. That may include kitchen appliances, office equipment and lots of cigarettes and bottles of liquor (it was, after all, the 1960s).

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Actors Jon Hamm, right, and January Jones, center, and Elisabeth Moss,... (AP Photo/ Matt Sayles)

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A team of people will search anywhere they can. The majority of props on the show are real, although some are reproduced for the series.

And because the series takes place in the world of advertising where Draper and his staff produce campaigns for products of yesteryear, the show's producers have to get clearances to display the names of those items, from Pampers to Playtex.

Sometimes, Wells can use contemporary items if they have the same look as in the 1960s, with one exception - she has to remove the barcodes. "The barcodes are killer," she said.

And just before we left the studio to head back to our hotel, I looked at one last piece of set memorabilia and remembered what the publicist told us at the beginning: "Don't take anything from the set."

But I took one anyway - a faux Sterling Cooper business card for Don Draper.

(Lest you think I'm a tool for disobeying orders, Wells said I could.)



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