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Painting the Past

An exploration of the role of scenic art within historic locations and the impact of studio versus location.

By Imogen Bissett

When you are watching a television programme or a film, do you ever wonder where it was filmed? The delicately executed historic interiors that become the backdrop for so many of our on-screen favourites, are they a real location or is it all taking place in a studio? I often find myself researching where something was filmed, especially if I recognise aspects in the scene, but does this have an impact on the location? Studies by Creative England, and experience from industry professionals and locations have found that many venues have experienced positive effects from filming. In historic locations, and for companies such as the National Trust, Cadw and the English Heritage, an increase in publicity often leads to more visitors wanting to visit the worlds of their favourite films, and subsequently helps to fund the conservation of their locations. I am interested in whether the use of studio versus location affects the viewers' enjoyment, if they can even tell when each is used. I will explore how scenic artists work respectfully on location and convincingly recreate locations in studio. I have done my own recreation to practice these scenic recreation skills. While there are many different types of location, I am going to be focussing on historic and protected venues as they often have stricter rules around adaptations and physical changes to their buildings, which creates a more interesting challenge for production companies. From the art department's point of view, I will compare how their creativity and freedom is either blocked or allowed to flow freely in adapting these locations, and at what stage the decision is made to work in studio.

Filming either takes place in a studio or on location. Purpose-built studios allow the set to be built from scratch to create the production's world. They are like a large blank canvas, set up with lighting rigs, blackout curtains and quiet environments (Duffy, 2025). They offer greater control and freedom for the production. Location filming takes place in real world settings, such as parks, streets or private homes. Often this means large-scale set builds aren't required, however some locations may allow elements to be built or adapted in their venue. This can include bringing in flats, props or covering up location fittings. There are pros and cons of both studio and location filming and is a difficult balance to get right. Many argue that filming on location adds more authenticity, while others say that creating in studio allows more creativity for the design. Personally, the look and feel of a set is incredibly important because although it may be a background influence, it has a strong part to play in grounding the scene. It creates the base for the actors to play off and can tell stories of its own. The production company has an important job in deciding where to film and what is right for their production. This doesn't have to be the same throughout the film; some scenes can be filmed in a studio while others can use real locations. Many productions will use a combination, even within one scene, as studio and location have different benefits.

While it largely depends on each location and studio, there are some consistent advantages and disadvantages of each. The positives of working on location generally come down to the environment and lower costs. They offer more realism and authenticity, as real settings provide natural textures, sounds, lighting and overall atmosphere that can help immerse the story and can be difficult to replicate in a studio (LA411, 2024). Often the location already has the desired look, maybe with only a few compromises on the design, or can be slightly altered to have the desired look. This means that there may not be so much set dressing and construction required, which saves on time and budget. Diverse environments can be achieved, as most settings can be found, from rural to urban, exterior and interior (LA411, 2024). With exterior locations, such as streets or parks, there's also less limitation with the space of the shot, meaning backgrounds don't need to be created. However, hiring out larger areas and blocking off more of a street becomes expensive. Locations also benefit from natural lighting, which can not only be more accurate but also reduces the lighting equipment and setup. However, this can also be a problem if the weather or lighting during the time of the shoot is wrong for the scene, meaning artificial lighting or post-production may have to work harder to correct it. While they may have a built-in atmosphere, this can cause difficulties as it can be unpredictable. The environment can't be

easily controlled, so factors like the weather, light levels, noise from the public or environment, local events and public interference if the site can't be closed can disrupt the filming schedule. This can cause delays, re-shoots and subsequently increased costs (LA411, 2024). Generally, the cost of hiring a location is cheaper and more cost efficient than filming in studio. This does depend on the location and length of the hire, and any adaptations to the location, but is normally cheaper overall. Working on location could seem more environmentally beneficial, as the production of large-scale sets isn't required, which uses a lot of materials and carbon to produce them (Stringer, 2026). However, there is also an argument to say locations are worse for the environment, particularly for the location itself, as it creates more light and sound pollution in the area (Ashton, 2026), as well as more transportation of cast, crew and equipment and the use of large diesel generators (Duffy, 2025). The logistics can also be more complicated. Transport, parking, accommodation and equipment for both cast and crew can be difficult and expensive to organise. Additionally, permits and location fees must be approved, which can also include permissions and paperwork from the local council, businesses and private owners. Sometimes insurance may be needed, and specific location rules must be followed (Duffy, 2025). There's then also the problem of amenities, such as power and whether generators need to be supplied (which needs the size and noise taken into consideration), water availability, toilets and catering.

The pros and cons of studio filming are largely the reverse of those of location filming. The positives include having a more controlled environment as the lighting, sound and weather can be managed to get consistent and correct conditions throughout the shoot which means the process can be more efficient and predictable. This is also customisable, so reliance on the real situation doesn't impact the design. The set can be tailored to the specific needs of the productions, which allows the design team more creative possibilities so that every detail can be perfect (LA411, 2024) without the need for permits and permissions to protect the venue. Often, studio filming is more adaptable for a variety of camera sizes and angles. Where real locations are fixed settings to be worked within, studios can be dismantled, walls removed and camera traps made and hidden. Studios can be more convenient to work in as they come equipped with the essential amenities like dressing rooms, green rooms, lighting rigs, blackout curtains, green screens, storage, high-speed internet, toilets and kitchens (Duffy, 2025). This improves the comfort and therefore efficiency of the cast and crew (LA411, 2024). A fixed location is easy for cast, crew, props and equipment to get to, set up, and stay settled throughout the shoot, as well as loading and building being suitably accommodated. Studios normally have sufficient parking and are easily accessed which reduces the logistical challenges of size, space and transportation costs, as well as being easier for scheduling. Although it means the creation of new sets, which uses a lot of materials, lots of companies and studios are now aiming to recycle and reuse parts of sets to be more environmentally conscious, and because they are designed for this purpose they are energy efficient and controlled, as well as not having any possibility of damaging historic locations. A 2022 report by Sony Pictures investigated two productions, analysing the CO₂ emissions of each. One was filmed on location while the other was filmed in a virtual production (VP) studio. They found a 52 – 76% reduction in emissions from using VP studio work (Oseman, 2024). The electricity and utilities of studios contribute most to their carbon footprint (Producing for the Planet, 2021). Because of the bills and expenses for their upkeep, studios are very expensive, even more so for long shoots. On top of this, there's the hire cost, equipment and materials, construction, scenic art, props, dressing, sound, lighting and installation costs (LA411, 2024). Studios often either charge by the day or the hour. As of 2025, Silverstone Studios' rates ranged from £1,350+VAT for a 10-hour day of a 3600sqf dry hire, to over £3,250+VAT for a VP/LED stage. In under a year the price for a VP/LED stage has risen to over £3,550+VAT, a 9% increase, showing the high and rising cost of filming in studio. Small studios can have limited space which may restrict the vision of the set, but larger studios are more expensive and may not be affordable for the production. This can limit the width of the shot, along with how many actors, props and cameras can be brought in, and how the camera can move around the space (Duffy, 2025). A main issue people have is that studios can look more artificial, as they lack the natural and authentic feel of locations. Even the best quality sets or green screens have difficulty achieving a convincing level of realism as this can require a lot of expensive resources.

Creative England in partnership with Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2021) conducted research into local authorities' filming fees across England, to provide guidance to support them with setting fees and strategies to work in a film-friendly way. Fee bands can be decided by the value of the location (the area's appeal to the film industry) which can be impacted by its proximity to cities where filming is taking place, desirable assets such as

large empty buildings and unique backdrops, the range of other sites nearby, its flexibility and relationship with locations managers, its rurality, and having minimal disruptions. This is levelled alongside the filming ambitions of the local authority, which considers the want to attract more productions to the area and the benefits the area is hoping to gain from hosting the filming. The fee bands are as follows: fee band 1 is for locations with a high value but low ambition; fee band 2 is for locations with medium to high value and ambition; fee band 3 is for locations with low value but high ambition. For medium to large crews, the suggested application and permit fee for fee band 1 is £200 - £500, for fee band 2 this goes down to £100 - £300 and is £25 - £100 for fee band 3. This is charged as a one-off cost. There are additional charges for outdoor location hire (day rate), indoor location hire (day rate), income loss (day rate), traffic notices (one-off) and extra licences (one-off). For all three bands, extra licences fees range from £50 - £200. Outdoor location hire and indoor location hire is recommended at £500 - £1000 and £500 - £2000 respectively for fee band 1, £300 - £900 and £400 - £1400 for fee band 2, and £0 - £800 and £0 - £900 for fee band 3. Creative England recorded the economic impacts that filming had on 80 local authorities and the proportion of them that experienced each. The results were:

“PR opportunities – 74%

Immediate local spend – 58%

Direct income to the council – 49%

More domestic tourism – 43%

Community donations – 29%

More international tourism – 19%

Business created/attracted – 17%”

(Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2021)

41% of local authorities strongly agreed that filming had created wider economic benefits for their area. Some places, such as Kent and Maldon, view the benefit of publicity as so important to them that they may waive the fees in return for this publicity. This can increase tourism and popularity in the area, as well as creating jobs. For example, in Maldon a tea shop was saved from closure due to the increase in visitors.

However, filming doesn't always have a positive impact. A well-known example is Dobby's grave from Harry Potter, filmed at Freshwater West Beach in Pembrokeshire. For years, fans have been 'honouring' the character, but the environmental impacts have been overlooked. It has now become such an issue with so many socks, painted rocks, and trinkets being left at the site, that the National Trust have had to ban people from leaving things at the site, as the memorabilia is getting washed into the sea, and entering the marine ecosystem (Sharf, 2022). Although many people would never consider littering, when it is disguised as a 'memorial' or film site, they seem to be blind to their usual morals, either following group behaviour or perhaps because they don't connect the film location as being a real-world space. Freshwater West Beach is an area of special interest and conservation, but for now the grave has been allowed to stay, as long as visitors only view and photograph their visit, leaving no trace (Sharf, 2022).

Location filming can also cause issues like political controversy. For example, the filming location of the 2020 live action remake of Disney's *Mulan* caused a boycott of the film. The film used a location in Xinjiang, a region in China with widespread human rights abuses against Uighurs and other Muslim minorities where the government attempted to suppress birthrates by forcing Uighur women to take birth control, which experts have cited as a "demographic genocide" (Kuo, 2020). Filming in this location took place in 2018, during the escalation of China's "Strike Hard" campaign, with the rise of 're-education' and extrajudicial internment camps where an estimated one million Muslim citizens were detained. Turpan, one of the filming locations in the region, is the alleged first documented case of "re-education" and political indoctrination against Uighurs (Adrian Zenz, 2020). The Turpan police manage at least fourteen internment camps in the area, but the film still credits and thanks them. Eight government entities in the region, including the Chinese Communist party's propaganda department for Xinjiang, are thanked in the film's credits (Kuo, 2020). Disney claims that this decision was made by local contractors, and that they were not responsible (Wintour, 2021). The president of

Walt Disney studios motion pictures, Sean Bailey (2021), said “Chinese regulations prohibit foreign producers from operating independently and require them to partner with a Chinese production company”. Filming mostly took place in New Zealand but for authenticity reasons twenty locations in China were used. These decisions were made by the film’s producers and weren’t dictated or influenced by the state or local Chinese officials (Wintour, 2021). This begs the question of whether authenticity is worth causing ethical controversy and inadvertently supporting human rights abuse. These sections could have been filmed in studio, or a different location could have been found. The film’s release also came while protests about the mandatory introduction of Mandarin and the erasure of the region’s own language and culture were taking place in Inner Mongolia (the autonomous region of China). The film frames the people who at the time were having their culture actively erased as the ‘bad guys’ and enforces Han dominance and Chinese nationalism (Kuo, 2020). This controversy has made the film unpopular and has damaged Disney’s image, demonstrating the negative effects on publicity due to filming on location. This is due to the decision to use the ‘wrong’ location in the name of film authenticity, supporting human rights abuses and culture erasure in the process. If they had chosen human rights over authenticity by filming either elsewhere or in a studio the film likely wouldn’t have got such damning press, Disney and the production designer wouldn’t have come under scrutiny and the film possibly could have been more successful. However, would they have been able to create the world they wanted? This is a balance that productions have to consider carefully.

There are many different people involved in the curation of historic sets and the use of historic buildings. From filming conservators and location representatives to location managers, the art department crew and scenic artists, I have communicated with a variety of professionals across these departments. Having researched companies that offer filming at their locations, such as the National Trust, English Heritage, Royal Historic Palaces and Cadw, I found they all had accessible website pages on filming at their locations, brochures on their available buildings, and application forms. I contacted each of these to ask a series of questions, such as their regulations and expectations of film crews, especially when it comes to painting or adapting their locations; if they allow their rooms to be repainted to suit the production, and if so, do certain types of materials and paints have to be used; or if this is only allowed if the original decoration is cladded over to preserve the historic work. I was also interested in the impact of filming on their income and popularity, if productions help to bring in more tourism and therefore fund conservation and the protection of the locations, or if it can instead have a negative effect.

The main expectation and way that the following of location regulations during shoots is ensured is by the submission of risk assessment method statements (RAMS) (Berry, 2025) and agreed proposals for any work that is to take place (Maddison, 2025). This includes any adaptations being made, flats and set being brought in, equipment on site, how long each will take or will be on site for, and when. This is advised by and goes through the property staff and filming conservators or supervisors. Consent forms are created to ensure that only the approved activities happen. These mostly need to be submitted in advance, which can sometimes cause issues for production companies as it limits live changes.

Filming companies can want to change scenes or things are dropped or added, the film conservators have to keep up with the crew and the information changes to make sure everything is documented and legal, and checked for safety. Cadw colleagues chase up [the production] to make sure everything is consented. Busy dynamic sets can get annoyed if they have to keep checking things.

(Berry, 2025)

Generally, these locations do not permit productions to paint or adapt any of their historic fabrication. Each film is considered on a case-by-case basis, and in special cases may be allowed to make the changes they desire (Marsland, 2025). The common theme I found in conversation with these companies is that anything that is done to the building must be able to be undone after filming is completed. Any damage that is caused during the shoot has to be paid for by the film company. This cost can also include hiring a conservator onto site as well as the labour cost. Therefore, great care is taken to minimise this risk, as is also agreed in the consent forms. This includes the majority of set being built and painted off site and transported to the location. Touch-ups or assembly required on site must be completed in a suitable area outside or with adequate protection and will need to be agreed by the property staff, often being undertaken under their or a filming conservator’s

supervision. Even when bringing in external set, there are strict regulations to be followed. It must all be stable and, in most cases, free standing. Any set that touches the surfaces of the building must have the appropriate padding and protection. This can include mats and castor cups, and 2mm foam, often Plastazote, between the build and the surface (Marsland, 2025). Any fixings to the buildings must be reversible. As this is in reference to historic buildings, the materials of the building are often delicate and must be protected. Any materials that are being brought in or used around the masonry and fabrics are approved by the filming conservators based on their chemistry and safety around the fabrics of the building (Berry, 2025).

In exceptional circumstances, some locations may allow areas of their buildings to be adapted. This usually is only accepted if the condition of the existing wall warrants plaster repairs. “We have taken the opportunity to get this work done as a chargeable prerequisite to redecorating in the Production’s preferred colour.” (Marsland, 2025). In places where modern work has been undertaken - sometimes if the building is privately owned, or if conservation work was required to protect the building - the art department may be allowed to repaint. In most cases this would need to be returned to its original state after filming or, if it is in line with repairs, may be kept. Usually when painting is permitted it needs to be using specified materials and methods, such as soft distemper paints (Maddison, 2025). The English Heritage and The National Trust specify in their contracts that they reserve the right to hire in their preferred and trusted contractors, the cost of which is charged to the production.

The reported effects of filming for these historic locations have been overwhelmingly positive. A main impact being an increase in tourism which is often seen in locations of popular films, as the public enjoy visiting the sites of their favourite films. Large fan bases even allow some locations to hold film specific events. For those companies that are charities, such as The National Trust and The English Heritage, the majority of their income comes from ticket sales and events. 50% of Cadw’s income is paid by the Welsh taxpayer, but 50% is funded by their own operations, including ticket sales, events, and filming requests (Berry, 2025). As well as increased visitor numbers, the production itself helps to fund the building’s conservation and upkeep. The income from filming and increased tourism, both directly and indirectly, are essential to the preservation of the buildings and their collections. For The National Trust, the use of their locations helps them to reach the aims of the organization.

Using the historic locations and breathtaking backdrops in our care [inspires] people through the stories they see on screen...the upside is clear: the featured properties can use the income raised to help care for their landscapes, buildings and collections, and more people are inspired to visit the places they’ve come to love through watching the films.

(McGrady, 2025)

The use of their buildings helps to encourage a new audience to their locations (Liv, 2025), creating more variety and diversity in their visitors through different generations, which ensures the continued success of important charities to continue to preserve and educate our history.

Largely, the positive impacts outweigh any small negatives. The only real negative that emerged was the disruption on visitors during filming. Sometimes sites get completely closed for the duration of the shoot, however depending on the case, certain areas or rooms may be able to be kept open. Depending on the scale of the site closure, this can reduce ticket sales during this time, or a reduced price is given to the visitors. The commercial impact is considered in application discussions (Liv, 2025), with some locations adding any lost income from reduced tourism to the hire cost. Many aspects are considered to best benefit the location and its visitors. This includes the time of year; they will often try to use the off seasons for tourism so as not to disrupt this income and disappoint their visitors, normally meaning that the summer holidays are off limits for filming as so many visitors would have to be turned away. The length of the filming period is also considered, as prolonged closure can affect ticket sales as well as necessary conservation (Berry, 2025). The only other negative effect seen, as mentioned by Jonathan Berry (2025) of Cadw, is the possible disappointment from tourists, when either certain spaces are locked to the public, meaning that they may not be able to see all the filming locations they’d hoped for, or if it doesn’t look exactly like the film due to set changes and added effects.

However, this is a small and rarely noticed effect, with the disruption to visitors normally being manageable and the positives being more impactful.

Locations managers act as the go-between for the production and the location. They are responsible for finding and hiring the location and ensuring the safety and following of protocols for the duration of the hire. They negotiate and agree any permissions required from the location and manage the location during filming. They control the teams to minimise any damages and clean and return the location to its original state on departure (ScreenSkills, 2024). I contacted Daisy Maddison (2025), who is a locations manager for Clerkenwell Films, to learn more about her experiences of using historic locations. She gave me both specific historic information and general hire information. The regulations and expectations of film crews, especially when painting locations, from a production's point of view largely come down to the budget and the designer's and director's decisions. If the location is Grade II listed, material changes aren't allowed to be made to the building. She has found through working with National Trust buildings that they have very strict rules around what is allowed to be done. Daisy reiterated what I'd heard from the likes of The National Trust, that it is very unlikely that they would allow an interior wall to be repainted. However, if they were to allow it, they would specify which types of paints needed to be used to retouch any walls or would require qualified historic experts to do the work. In locations with woodwork or original features, cladding is usually used to mask these, or these features are fitted into the design because they are often more delicate and difficult to reinstate. In some special cases, if the building is privately owned or is going into disrepair there is a chance they would allow the production team to fix and paint walls if it is making an improvement, but this is the decision of the owner. When the location is modern or not listed, it is entirely up to the owner to agree to the changes the production want to make. Normally, all requests go through the submission of a proposal document which details the art department's intentions. In Daisy's experience, most locations have allowed them to make changes. Sometimes the location will keep them if they like them, or they require the production to return things to how they were. In these cases, there is often a specific paint or type of wallpaper they want it returned to, which is all documented beforehand. Part of the location team's job is to make sure these regulations are being followed, which is achieved through a clear proposal agreement and a member of the team always being onsite. If any new intentions were to come up, this goes straight to the owner to request. Sometimes the team will have a conservator present, who knows the rules of the location and can ensure they are being properly followed. All details are discussed before the work starts so that everyone in all areas is clear on what can and can't be done. The decision on the use of a location is a difficult and important choice, as the setting for a film or show can have a huge impact on the atmosphere of the story. As well as this, locations managers consider the locations' specifications and regulations, and the cost. I asked Daisy whether the strict regulations influence where they decide to film, and what else may influence whether to film on location or recreate in a studio.

It really depends on the type of show you [are] making, if you are filming a period drama and need to be historically accurate then you have to find locations that fit the show and there are lots of limitations and the designer may have to make do with what is available.

(Maddison, 2025)

The budget of the production also has an impact, as with a larger budget it may be possible to be more creative in the studio, where the designer will have more control. She told me it is much more expensive to build in the studio than to film on location, so it is different for each production, depending on its requirements and budget. The cost and efficiency can also depend on the filming schedule. According to Hannah Good (2025), locations manager for Clerkenwell Films, this can affect the decision. If other scenes are shooting at the same location or nearby it might be more beneficial to film at and around the same location than going back and forth between the location and studio.

While lots of locations are trying to encourage the use of their buildings for filming, and locations managers may favour on-location filming, scenic artists tell a different story. This is because of the difficulties and limitations of working on site. From a scenic artist's perspective, working on location poses many more inconveniences than the comfort of being in the studio. Firstly, they have to be very careful with what they can and can't do and ensure they don't damage or spill anything. This often involves having a chaperone from the

venue or location department with them as they work, and as Hannah Dimelow (2025) told me, this “can be high pressure and a bit stressful as it really does mean painting with someone looking over your shoulder”. With the travel and site limitations, scenic artists often consider working on location not to be worth it, especially if the location needs a lot of adaptation, as it would be easier to do in the studio. They have to be prepared for anything and know the kit they need to take with them depending on what they are going into. Venues may not have access to a water supply or anywhere to wash brushes and mix paints, so either everything has to be pre-mixed or prepared in their own vans and carried into the area. They then need to be sure to correctly mask everything and keep everything tidy. There may not be facilities for lunch or toilets, or it could be run down with asbestos, dust and mould. Sometimes the team may be required to bring their own working lights and a battery kit as not everywhere has electric or plugs, especially in historic locations. Fortunately for the scenic artists this is specified in the contract by the locations managers before they arrive on site so they are presented with a clear idea of what the job will entail. A studio would have all the amenities required, as well as heating and electric so is much easier. Generally, working in the studio allows for longer to work on sets and make changes until the last minute, whereas locations often only give a short time frame, presumably because they don’t want to close to the public for too long. In speaking to Kirsty Glover (2025), she agrees that working in a studio is generally preferred for scenic artists, however she also reiterated that historic venues seem to be actively encouraging filming at their sites. It helps to pay for their maintenance and allows them to advertise themselves as an attraction and future filming option.

I think shooting on location (in Scotland certainly) isn’t going anywhere - more and more productions are favouring shooting on location in its entirety as it’s so expensive to hire studio facilities and build sets. There’s a real lack of studio space up here [Scotland] too.

(Glover, 2025)

Maybe as more locations hire out their venues more frequently for filming, they will provide better working conditions as they can afford to provide more access. If they are in frequent business for filming the pay off of closing to the public or creating scenic safe spaces with facilities might be of greater benefit. However, unless it is a privately owned venue, generally the purpose of these buildings is for the public’s use and enjoyment, so there is a delicate balance in the income benefits and the duty of the locations. If better facilities were provided scenic artists might not favour studio work as it wouldn’t be as difficult or uncomfortable. As the history of these places is always the focus, nothing much can be done about the difficulties of filming, as the spaces can’t be changed or put at risk of damage. I don’t necessarily think filming in studio is always a bad thing either, as it allows the team more creativity and the chance to create impressive sets and use their skills to their full extent.

Painting in historic locations may have its limitations, but both Hannah and Kirsty have had experiences where they have been allowed to paint some locations. These are likely to be in privately owned buildings as opposed to listed buildings. Where this has been allowed, they have to be careful with the types of materials they use, which could be more complicated or expensive than bringing in flats, but it creates authenticity. When repainting walls, nothing that stains or smells can be used (Dimelow, 2025), and where the adaptations often have to be returned to the original it is useful for the paint to be able to be peeled off. This is achieved by using latex first. Sometimes things are clad first and then painted, sometimes it can be painted straight onto the wall, and other times sets are made and painted in the workshop and tied in on site, all depending on the venue specifications. When working on site, minimally invasive products are used, such as things that don’t need screws or fixtures like balsa wood and thin white card (Glover, 2025). Elements that don’t fit into the design, such as modern fittings, plug sockets, wires and signs, can be covered up with low-tack water soluble products. Examples of these are lining paper and Mask It which is described as “a very low tack saturated paper. Perfect for location work.” (Flints, 2023). It can be applied over the original wall coverings, and doesn’t damage the existing wallpaper or paint, so long as the wall behind isn’t peeling or cracking as this would likely be pulled off when removing the Mask It. It is like a large roll of masking tape in tackiness, and it is applied by taking off the backing paper and sticking it to the wall (Greer, 2026). It can then be painted using regular scenic paints. It dries flat, although it may wrinkle when wet, so it convincingly replicates the desired look of the wall. Both Mask It and lining papers are applied using a low-tack adhesive, so can be peeled off after filming to reveal

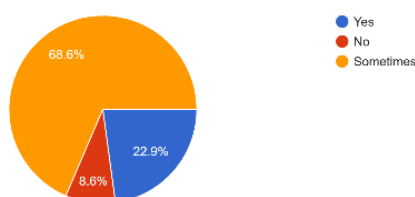
the original wall without damage. Lining papers are often preferred to using latex, as it is easier to remove from delicate surfaces. Latex is used where lining paper isn't feasible, such as on columns, as on BBC's *Ghosts in Stone* Hall of West Horsley Place (James, 2025). Products like toffee tape, Velcro and little wedges are good ways to attach set dressings and constructed elements that don't leave a mark (Glover, 2025). In most cases, the props department will remove anything belonging to the location and bring in their own dressing. Therefore, the dressing and set elements belong to the film and can usually be painted by the scenic artists as directed. I contacted Michelle Greer (2026) from Flints Theatre Chandlers about information on Mask It and any other materials that are good for scenic artists working on location, through which she informed me of Peelable Masking Paint which can be used over non-porous smooth surfaces to cover any unwanted details and can be painted over. It has a finish like latex and can be peeled off carefully to restore the items to their original state.

There are occasions where a studio is required, either due to site availability and cost, or because of the nature of the scene and camera angles. It may also be the case that a double is made in studio, so both studio and location are used for the same scenes depending on the shots. Therefore scenic artists need to be able to accurately recreate either the historic building or their adaptation, whilst maintaining continuity. This is achieved by taking lots of photos and documenting each colour, paint, and finish used (Glover, 2025). Site visits are important for this, as the team can visit the venue and colour match everything to be able to seamlessly recreate it. Additionally, exterior shots may not be filmed at the same location as the interiors, it may be a combination of multiple different locations, including real and studio (Dimelow, 2025).

The audience connection and enjoyment of a film or TV show is always a key consideration. As the paying customer, and the basis for success of the film, how they react to it is important to all departments. Can viewers tell when a show is shot in a real location versus in a studio, and does this affect their enjoyment of the production? I set up a survey which I sent to industry and non-industry contacts to aid this research (Imogen Bissett's survey, 2026). Of the 35 respondents, 68.6% work in the creative industries, while the other 31.4% don't. The industry participants work in disciplines ranging from students to professional prop makers, set designers, costume makers, location assistants, producers, art directors, camera operators, script supervisors and actors. The results were as follows:

1. Do you think you can tell when a set has been made and painted in a studio rather than filmed on location?

Do you think you can tell when a set has been made and painted in a studio rather than filmed on location?
35 responses



A lot of the time this does depend on the quality of the studio set, which has overwhelmingly led to a majority 'sometimes' response. Of these, 67% of industry professionals and 73% of non-industry answered sometimes. 25% of industry and 18% of non-industry answered yes, and 8% of industry and 9% of non-industry answered no.

2. Do you look up where a show was filmed?

The majority, 57.1%, answered sometimes. The other 42.9% said yes, but no one answered no. 46% of industry answered yes, and 54% answered sometimes. 27% of non-industry answered yes and 73% answered sometimes. This suggests that maybe the creation and location of filming is of more interest to industry people, maybe because they believe they can tell more when it is or isn't real.

3. Are you more likely to be interested in where it was filmed if you recognise the location, either from visiting it or seeing it used in other shows?

33 of the 35 participants answered yes, 100% of non-industry and 92% of industry said yes.

4. If you were to watch a film or series that was filmed at a historical location, would you feel more inclined to visit the location or find out more about its history?

It was good to see the impact of filming on location for tourism, with 85.7% of respondents answering yes. Of these, 83% of industry and 91% of non-industry said they would. Although they are close, it could be that non-industry are more inclined to feel more connected to the film world as they don't experience it elsewhere.

5. Have you visited a filming location because of the film or show? If so, where and what was filmed there?
50% of my industry participants and 44% of the non-industry participants have visited a filming location. This doesn't reflect the previous answer, so although people are more interested in a location if they see it used in a film, maybe they don't act on it. A lot of the locations that had been visited were places used in Harry Potter, including Freshwater West Beach, Warwick Castle, Alnwick Castle, Oxford Colleges and Lacock. Other examples include Dr Who locations in Cardiff, West Horsley Place (Button House) from Ghosts, and Bridgerton houses filmed in Bath.
6. Are you disappointed if you find out that a show was filmed in studio rather than on location? Why?
27% of industry and 33% of non-industry were. The rest weren't disappointed, but some were sceptical or would only be disappointed if the set wasn't convincing. Some said they do believe a real location creates a more authentic feel, especially from an actor's point of view, but others said they'd sometimes prefer films not to use real locations so that they aren't at risk of damage. Reasons for disappointment included lack of authenticity and character, not having a location they can visit, a higher budget, and the quality of the studio set. However, most people either enjoy watching behind the scenes studio builds or are impressed by the work that goes into creating the set. Others brought up environmental reasons, budget and genre, as well as health and safety of the cast and crew such as illnesses from weather conditions like colds, sunburn or heatstroke as reasons to film in a studio. Location restrictions were also brought up.
7. Would it change your decision on whether to watch the show?
34 of the 35 participants concluded that a show being shot in a studio wouldn't affect their decision to watch it. This could be good for the industry, as their work is being appreciated in all forms, however for the locations this could be negative if more companies move to filming in studio, meaning locations may lose some income. I don't necessarily think this would happen completely, but it could be a possibility if companies know they won't lose viewership and it suits the production better.
8. Do you think there are more positive or negative impacts on the location as a result of filming?
76.5% of people believed there would be more positive impacts, 23.5% went for negative. Of these, 78% of industry and 73% of non-industry see more positive effects. 22% of industry and 27% of non-industry thought there would be more negative effects. From the companies and locations I have spoken to more positive effects are reported.
9. Have you ever been impacted yourself by something filming near you, either directly or indirectly? If yes, what was it and how did it impact you?
48.6% of my participants have been impacted by filming happening near them. The negative impacts include diversions and closures to roads and footpaths, high traffic, construction sites/business closure, job losses or disruptions, and parking difficulties for residents. However, there were reported positive impacts too, including getting to watch filming, introducing younger generations to the industry, creating more local industry jobs, increased tourism and custom which can be important for the local economy, and location tours. Shows filmed in these locations include Clarkson's Farm (Chipping Norton), Poldark (Cornwall), Beyond Paradise (Plymouth), Father Brown (locations across the Cotswolds), Gavin and Stacey (South Wales), Dr Who (Cardiff), Deadly 60 (at the Eden Project), and common filming locations such as Bristol and Charlestown Harbour in Cornwall.

To complete my investigation, I made a recreation of a window alcove from Lord Bute's Bedroom in Cardiff Castle to reflect a studio recreation of a historic location. This has been used in a collaborative short film with Rob Axtell doing the construction, Ashling Ryan doing props and sculptural construction, Callum Casey doing

the castle miniature for exterior shots, and Sam Measor doing puppets. I have done the scenic art for the castle. Janis Peraworasakul's movement piece has been filmed in the set. I contacted Erfyl Parry, the Cardiff Castle Curator, about my recreation to set up a site visit to get the measurements, photographs and colours I need for my set. From information I was told by scenic artists and locations I spoke to, I was expecting to have a chaperone in the room with me, especially as it was a private tour room that wasn't open to the public, so I went prepared with a list of the measurements I would need so I could be as professional and concise as possible. However, I was allowed to have the room to myself which gave me a bit more freedom to get extra measurements, but it was useful to know what I needed. I was careful and respectful of the room, as it is a historic location, and I made sure to leave no trace of me being there. Cardiff Castle is in an almost pristine condition, however there are some damp marks and leaks, and the walls have faded, so to justify my recreation I have adapted it to be as if it were new. I also haven't included the shutters. As sometimes the need for a recreation can be due to changes to the location that can't be done, these are some examples of why I would choose a studio for this set. Another reason is the performance style, as it is physical theatre with a lot of space interaction, so a studio may be preferred to be able to use the space to its full ability without damage to the location.

I started with the stained-glass window by drawing up the window shape from my measurements and then drawing the design onto tracing paper. The paragraph at the bottom of the window I traced from the photograph to make sure it all fitted. I used a sheet of aged Perspex for the window, which I put over the design. From here I used glass paints to fill in the design. I only drew up the outlines and spacing, as the detail wouldn't be clear enough to see through the Perspex, so I instead painted this freehand onto the Perspex. Once I'd finished the painting, I glazed both sides as this helped to clear the Perspex a bit and gave it the stained-glass shine, as the glass paint dried matt. I used adhesive window lead tape from Flints which gave a convincing look for the lead strips. I am happy with how this turned out, however due to the detail it did take about a week to do. Time could be a reason to work on location, especially if working to a tight schedule.



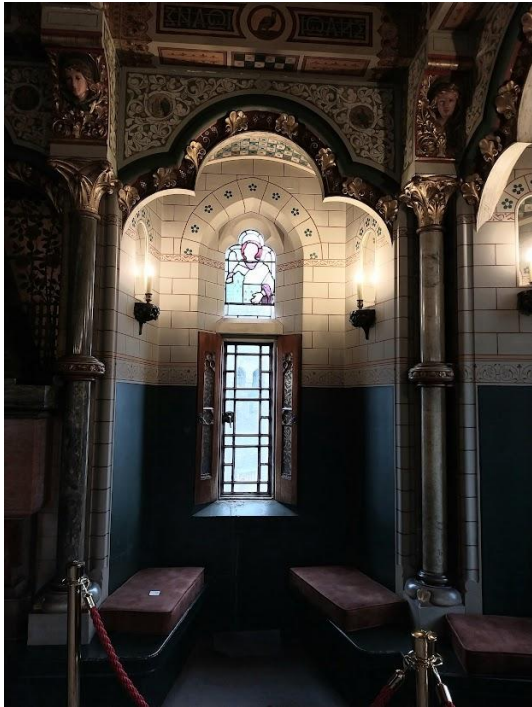
Cardiff Castle Reference



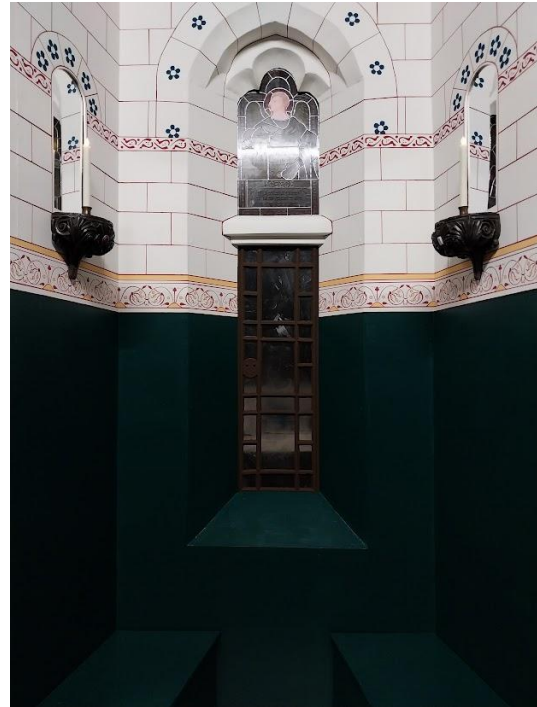
My Recreation

After priming and base coating with the cream colour, I measured out the wall sections, starting with the green section at the bottom which I painted and outlined. I then measured out the bricks and pattern strips and taped the lines to make painting quicker and neater. I quickly realised I needed to prime the taped sections with the cream so that the red lines didn't bleed, which made the lines crisp and quick, with only minor touch ups. Initially I tried using a circle sponge stamp to make the flowers as it was the correct diameter, but it was better to make a stencil as this ensured they were all equal and easier to centre. This did cause some leaks but was quick to touch up. I decided this would also be the best method for the top pattern as the design was thick

enough to stencil, so I drew and cut out a section of the pattern that could then be repeated around the wall. This wasn't the case for the bottom pattern, as the design was thin and delicate. Instead, I drew the pattern and traced it around the wall. I then painted it freehand which I thought would add a lot more time, but it only took a couple of hours. Because the set was being used in an interactive and physical way, I wanted to protect the reachable sections, so I used matt glaze to protect the green section of the walls and floor from scuffing. I glazed the benches with gloss glaze as is in the actual castle. I put in the mirrors and windows to complete my parts of the set. In total this took me about 11 – 12 days, which was longer than I expected for a small set, however it is very detailed and completed to a high standard. Again, this could be a reason to film on location as building and painting a set does take a long time, especially to achieve the accuracy to the location.



Cardiff Castle Reference



My Recreation

In total I spent about £210 on materials for this project which, when added to the studio hire (about £1,350 by Silverstone Studios rates), would be very expensive for a small shoot. This price is also based on a 10-hour day which would be too long for the required shoot time of this scene, so could be a waste. If the studio was being used for other scenes or larger sets as well this may make a recreation worth it, however for my scale it could be better to find ways to film on location. This also depends on the individual hire price of the location. Hiring a room at Cardiff Castle (2025a) (not filming specific) costs £180 - £250 +VAT per hour, with a minimum hire of 4 hours. For our film, this would most likely be long enough, but still comes to £720 - £1000 +VAT, and this could be different for filming. As well as this, if the room needs to be closed, Cardiff Castle do reduce ticket prices for the public when filming is taking place as it disrupts their visit (Cardiff Castle, 2024), which may be charged to the production company. Based on Creative England's guidance, film hire of Cardiff Castle could come to between £500 - £1700, however due to the size of the shoot I would estimate this at being on the lower end. This does make filming on location considerably cheaper than studio, especially for the scale. Overall, I would say for the set it would be more beneficial to film on location but take into consideration the set changes and the use of the set, studio does have its benefits.

As previously mentioned, I was recommended Mask It and liquid latex as common scenic methods on location, so I tried these myself. On my completed set, I did test patches of both. I was also interested to see if they behaved differently on glazed walls compared to unglazed. On first impression, Mask It was easier as it sticks easily to the wall and creates a smooth surface that can be painted straight away, whereas the latex has to dry, which took longer over the glazed area, and it painted slightly streaky and clumpy as the drying latex got caught. Having painted a layer on all four sections, the Mask It began to wrinkle on the unglazed patch, on the glazed area the wrinkling was minimal. One coat would nearly be enough over the Mask It, but the latex needs at least two or three coats of paint, and it stays slightly streaky. There were also areas where it seemed to soften

when the paint was applied, causing it to pull. With two coats of paint the glazed section of Mask It was the best, it was smoothest and had the best coverage, the unglazed Mask It section was quite wrinkly. This did smooth out a bit as it dried, and from a distance wouldn't be too noticeable, but it wouldn't be suitable for any close-up shots. Generally, the latex on both areas had a good finish, it was a bit streaky, but I think with smoother application this would be unnoticeable. I also painted a pattern onto each section, which I thought might be affected by the wrinkling of the Mask It, however it didn't make a difference. The Mask It was extremely easy to remove and left no surface damage on both glazed and unglazed walls. It could also be re-stuck at least once, and I think it would be possible to paint the design before applying to the wall, which might help with the wrinkling. The latex was trickier to remove but came off well over the glaze. The problem with this is it created a lot of mess, as the paint splinters as the latex is pulled off, and it doesn't come off in one sheet. There was no damage caused to the glazed wall, however it was much harder to remove from the unglazed section. It had to be scrubbed off as it wouldn't pull. This did cause some damage as with the scrubbing the pigment was also smudged onto the wall despite it being dry. Overall, I think both products are useful but generally are better over a glazed wall, which isn't typical in locations. Therefore, I would favour Mask It as it was easy to apply and remove without damage.



Mask It

Latex

In conclusion, studio filming can have its benefits and for some viewers may be preferable. Through doing my own recreation, I experienced some challenges scenic artists may face in studio replications. Although I carefully measured everything in the location, when painting my set there were some inconsistencies that reduced some of the accuracy. If the set is being used as the only filming location this may not be such a problem, but if it is used in collaboration with the real location, differences can cause issues with the continuity so this would need to be solved. This is something going forward that I would like to work on so that I can be more accurate in my work, through more experience with site visits. I would also like to keep practicing the skills I used doing a recreation which will be useful for my career, like colour matching to a location, pattern matching and working from location photos instead of a model. Behind the scenes footage of studio builds usually has more scenic art examples which is a good way of encouraging a new generation into the industry. However, filming on location is an important part of the industry. The benefits to historic locations, especially public buildings, is evident through increased tourism and income. Viewers enjoy watching shows that are filmed on location, whether this is due to authenticity or because it gives them ideas for places to visit. I now know the materials and considerations I will need to be prepared with when working as a scenic artist on location and will continue to experiment with these. There isn't an overall better option, as it really depends on the production and both have their advantages and disadvantages. The size, budget and time constraints of the production may decide where filming can take place and how much can be adapted, as well as considering how a location can be used as to whether it is worth being restricted by location rules or if it's better to have studio freedom. It is common to use a combination of location and studio, which I think may be the best answer in most cases. This makes sure the location is protected during more complex scenes and creates more scenic artist jobs but keeps the authenticity for the audience in simpler scenes.

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