



## You Do WHAT?

Cinema's behind-the-scenes stars finally get their close-up.

**ONCE UPON A TIME** in Hollywood, before the advent of hyperreal digital photography and brain-bending CGI, whole worlds were created from powdered pigments and giant bolts of fabric. Meticulously crafted backdrops brought 18th-century French courts, sweeping Western plains, and craggy alien planets to life. But the studio painters who made them were unsung masters: “There are no signatures on these pieces,” says Thomas Walsh, a production designer and former president of the Art Directors Guild. “They weren’t created to stand out.”

Countless backdrops were produced between the 1910s and 1960s, Tinseltown’s golden age. Some—imagine the misty trees behind the gazebo in *The Sound of Music*—are lodged in cultural memory. Others, from more obscure flicks (ever heard of *Skirts Ahoy!* or *Quick, Before It Melts?*), not so much. Either way, the artistry is undeniable. So in 2017, when Walsh learned that J.C. Backings, a prominent backdrop rental

company that owns thousands of vintage assets from MGM, among other studios, was going to shed more than 200 decades-old canvases, he swooped in. “An image of the New York skyline or a generic village can still be rented out,” says Walsh. “The ones with no commercial value were just sleeping at the bottom of piles.”

That first crop of long-folded treasures has since become the Art Directors Guild Backdrop Recovery Project, an effort to archive the heirlooms. Each is cataloged as Walsh pursues his ultimate goal: finding appreciative homes for the canvases—whether in museums, universities, or a film buff’s private collection. Not all would-be owners can safely exhibit the titans (“Someone in Illinois wants one for a silo, but that won’t work”), and not all pieces are easily placed (“Who wants a 90-foot piece of Middle Eastern desert?”). But Walsh believes every cinematic artwork deserves a bow: “It’d be criminal to go into the future forgetting our past.” The end. —**ZOE DONALDSON**

From top: A still from *The Sound of Music* (1965) with Julie Andrews as Fräulein Maria; the scene’s backdrop in 2019; Eva Marie Saint and Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*; another staggering Mount Rushmore backdrop from Hitchcock’s 1959 thriller.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC: 20TH CENTURY FOX/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK. NORTH BY NORTHWEST: COURTESY OF THE BACKDROP RECOVERY PROJECT. LOS ANGELES TIMES/POLARIS (2). SOUZA: JEFF ELKINS.

## My Best PET

Former White House photographer and Instagram sensation Pete Souza has a shell of a time with his Russian tortoise, Charlotte.

### ON HOW THEY MET

About 20 years ago, our daughter brought Charlotte home after her friend—Charlotte’s original owner—decided she didn’t want a tortoise anymore. Of course, kids grow up, move out of the house, and leave their pets behind....

### ON HAPPY MEALS

Charlotte mostly eats grains, but on occasion we give her a piece of fruit or vegetable as a treat. Without fail, she ends up with a bit of strawberry or banana on her beak, which she’s totally oblivious to. It’s always a funny sight.

### ON ACTS OF FAITH

I say Charlotte puts up with people, because I honestly think she’d rather we not be here. Obviously, she needs my wife and me for food and shelter, but beyond that we’re probably just a bother. That said, she is incredibly trusting of us. Sometimes she’ll sleep with her head outside her shell, which is unusual; most turtles retreat inside for protective purposes. She even lets us pet her on the head.

### ON YARD WORK

We have a cabin in Michigan where we spend some of the summer. If

it’s warm and sunny, I’ll take Charlotte outside. You have to watch her, though. Originally, she came with a mate, Peppers, but he escaped several summers ago and never returned. So now we keep a much closer eye on Charlotte, especially because she really loves to explore. At least, I think that’s what she’s doing. Who knows what’s in her mind!

—**AS TOLD TO M.G.**  
Follow Charlotte’s adventures on Instagram @charlottethetortoise.

