

Art and Art Direction in *All About Eve*

There are plenty of films that tell the story of an amateur actress, singer, dancer, and even a showgirl, wanting to take over the career of another more veteran counterpart. *All About Eve* (1950) is one of those films. Furthermore, *All About Eve* is the type of timeless classic that might be easy to read but provides plenty of ways to navigate its drama. One of those ways is through the art direction decisions made by George W. Davis and Lyle R. Wheeler, and particularly the use of artworks to comment on the film's drama.



Artworks such as sculptures, paintings, prints, among others, play an essential role in the diegetic world of *All About Eve*. The film opens with a zoomed in shot of a trophy for the Sarah Siddons Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Theater that will be presented to Miss Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter.) It's important to highlight that Sarah Siddons was a Welsh-born actress and best-known tragedienne of the 18th century. The trophy is positioned on the center of the shot composition, mounted on what it seems to be a Greek column, and surrounded by flowers. At the top of the trophy, there's a gold statuette, which resembles a Greek sculpture of a muse sitting on a throne. Like the Golden Apple of Discord of the Greek mythology, this trophy is a premonition of the film's plot: the dispute between goddesses, and in this case actresses, to win a prize: fame.



As the camera eases back from the trophy, we are able to start seeing the mise-en-scene of this specific scene. As our eyes explore the dining room of the Sarah Siddons Society through an aerial view, it is inevitable that we notice many paintings that inhabit the room. This style of decoration resembles a gallery of a museum and anticipates that artworks play a very important role in the diegetic world of the entire film.



From the set of the Sarah Siddons Society, we are taken to the home of Margo Channing (Bette Davis.) The scene of the belated birthday party for Bill Simpson (Gary Merrill) starts when Margo leaves her bedroom and enters the leaving room where the actual party takes place. On her way from the bedroom through the stairway, to the reception hall, which also connects with another set of stairs that goes to the main entrance, and to the living room, it's easy to observe a number of artworks that adorn Margo's habitat.



The most prominent artwork in Margo's home is a print of Toulouse-Lautrec's poster of *Aristide Bruant dans son cabaret* (Aristide Bruant in his cabaret) that is located in her living room. This monumental print makes an important contribution to the mise-en-scene of the birthday party scene, which also intertwines with what happens in the film's plot. Aristide Bruant (1851-1925) songwriter, singer, and comedian, who also was a contemporary of the painter, printmaker, draughtsman, and illustrator, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901.) Both Aristide and Toulouse-Lautrec strived in their own unique ways during the bohemian cabaresque times of the Belle Époque in Paris. For this reason, this work of art fits perfectly into the decoration of the set of Margos's home. The print makes direct reference to the bohemian and cabaresque atmosphere of the birthday party and also alludes to pre-nostalgia of a Belle Époque that is about to end for her.



In this same room, we notice the presence of a still life painting in the top of the chimney. "Nature Morte" (or Still Life in English) was painted by Georges Braque in 1926, and it's a very interesting choice made from an art direction point of view. First, this painting matches Toulouse-Lautrec's poster in terms of artistic time period. Both art pieces are considered Modern Art. Also, these art pieces are positioned very purposefully; if we look closely, we can notice that Aristide Bruant is directly looking to Braque's still life. Second, there's a specific scene where Karen Richards (Celeste Holm) and Margo are standing in front of Braque's still life painting, and Max Fabian (Gregory Ratoff) and Lloyd Richards (Hugh Marlowe) are standing in front of Toulouse-Lautrec's poster. Generally, a still life is a work of art depicting mostly inanimate subject matter, typically commonplace objects which may be either natural or man-made. From the perspective of art direction, the way the actors are positioned in the scene comments on the fact that women are often viewed as objects and most importantly about how they become an inanimate object as they age. This is reinforced when, as part of the dialogue, Margo says to Max and Lloyd: "I could die right now and nobody'd be confused."



In a latter scene, Addison DeWitt (Gary Merrill) and Miss Casswell (Marilyn Monroe) arrive at the party, and Margo runs into them in the reception hall. Then, Eve appears in the scene. The three women are positioned in the scene with their backs to a few artworks on the

wall of the stairs. If we pay close attention to one of these works, there's the portrait of Mrs. Siddons in the Character of the Tragic Muse painted by Joshua Reynolds' in 1787. This portrait shows Sarah Siddons as a muse sitting on a throne, the same way the muse is sitting in the gold statuette of the Siddons Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Theater. However, the painting is quite different than the statuette. This time the muse, or Sarah Siddons, is not alone. There are two figures in the background on both of her sides: one seems to be an angel and the other a demon. Going back to the scene of Eve, Margo and Miss Casswell, we have here again the mirroring commenting to the drama. Margo (in the center) represents the muse that, in one way or another, is the inspiration of the two young ladies who want to become actresses. On the viewer's right side, we have Miss Casswell dressed in white, as the angel, and on the viewer's left side we have Eve, dressed in black, as a demon. This also reflects the different approaches these two women have taken to achieve fame. While one of them is more innocent, the other one is more cunning.



The closing scene of Bill's birthday party starts when Margo is going to her bedroom. Margo finds everyone in the stairs, including Eve. There are two particular shots that are very interesting. The first one is when Margo is standing next to a portrait of herself. We can notice through this naturalistic painting that there is a mirroring of two very different Margos: one is the

sober glamorous young star, and the other is the drunk aged veteran actress. Meanwhile, in the same scene, but opposite to Margo's shot, we see Eve. On the left side of the shot, we can see what it looks like an impressionist or post-impressionist painting of a young Parisian girl, which seems to be a non-aristocratic person based on the little clothing details that we can appreciate. On the right side of the shot, we see a sculpture of a black female with a basket on her head. These two artworks combine comments about how Margo sees Eve: a non-aristocratic person and a servant.



Another incredible use of artwork in a scene which comments on the drama in All About Eve is when Margo and Addison are having a conversation in the lobby of the theater where an audition for a vacancy in the play "Aged in Wood" is taking place. Margo was late to help in the audition as the reader for Miss Casswell and Eve took her place. During their conversation, Addison tells Margo how extraordinary Eve was. Later Margo starts walking towards a gigantic poster of the play, which simply consists of a caricature of her holding a gun. This time we see how the art designers use the poster to comment on Margo's mood during the conversation. We see in this scene an exaggerated, cartoonish, goofy and sarcastic version Margo. Moreover, we can read based on Margo's body language that while Addison keeps exalting Eve, she wishes to have the gun in real life and kill him, or someone, if she could.



Lastly, we have the “Red Riding Hood” scene. Margo, Karen, Bill and Eve are at the Cub Room having a bottle of wine. The decoration of the room is very subtle, and only portraits of women are hanging on the walls. A waiter approaches Karen with a note from Eve. They notice later that Addison is sitting near them and next to him there’s a cup of tea or coffee indicating Eve's place. In that camera shot, we can notice a very particular portrait; it is a blond woman with a headscarf. Moreover, the way is stylized looks like a riding hood, and, even though the film is black and white, is impossible to put a color to it and not choose red. This particular portrait is making direct reference to Karen, as Red Riding Hood, who is going to see Eve in the bathroom, who is totally a wolf in disguise. There’s another more specific shot when she’s returning to her table after talking to Eve when we can notice more the resemblance between the woman in the portrait and Karen.

As it has been evidenced, George W. Davis and Lyle R. Wheeler did an excellent job as art directors and specifically utilizing artworks to comment on the drama of *All About Eve*. As the topic of this film has inspired many others, it has also inspired other art directors, productions designers and even film directors to utilize artworks in the creating of the diegetic world of their

films to convey commentaries about their dramas. A great example is the worldwide known Spaniard film Director Pedro Almodovar, which his Oscar-winning film *Todo sobre mi madre* (All about my mother) is inspired by *All About Eve* and also uses artworks to comment and elaborate the thesis of the films.

ARTH 159 Spring 2017