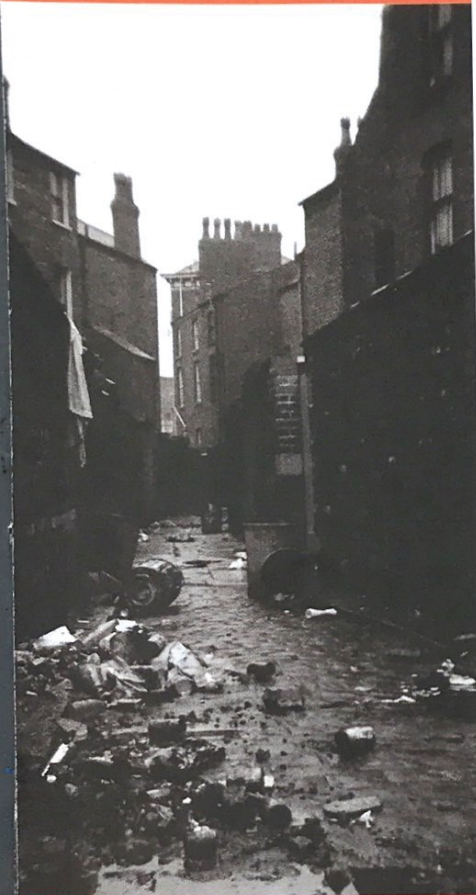
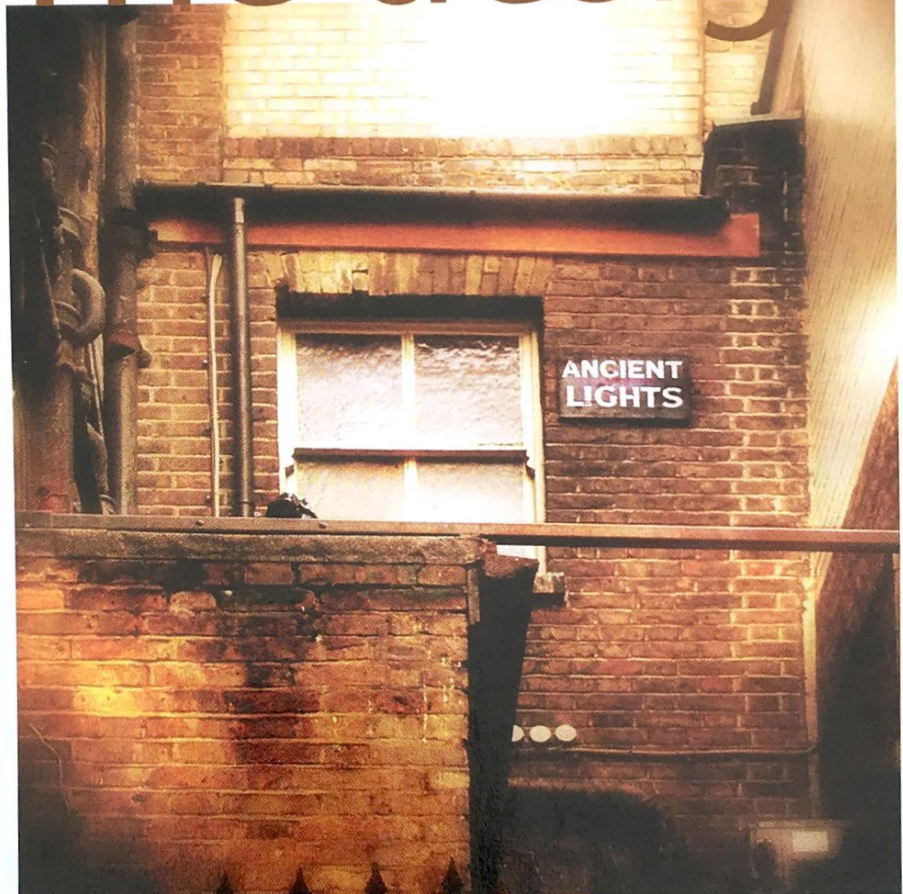


The designer



FRAY BENTOS

Above: "Moss Side, Manchester," from Fray Bentos's "Last Days of the Old North" collection on Flickr. To the right, three great studies of old brick buildings by Stephen May, also from Flickr.



STEPHEN MAY

IN DESIGN, "research" has a meaning different from the way the word is used in other fields of study. When I give my students their first assignment to do research for a set or costume design, many of them come back with Wikipedia entries or photocopied pages from an encyclopedia that address the historical context of the play. Understanding historical context is important, but that's not really what we mean when we talk about research for a design. Designers need *visual* research related to the play's time and place: pictures of architectural details, fashions, furniture, housewares, and the stuff of everyday life. The more relevant images you find, the larger visual vocabulary you have to work with. Architects, illustra-

tors, and interior designers call these images "reference material."

Visual references can be photographs, drawings, paintings, or motion pictures. They can be found in books, magazines, newspapers, catalogs, advertisements, postcards and other printed materials, museums and galleries, film, video, DVDs, and of course online.

Until recently design research almost always started with a trip to the library. Now there's an enormous amount of reference imagery online, and Google and other more specialized Internet search tools are an essential part of the process. Many research treasures can only be found in libraries, however, and a visual reference search that's conducted exclu-

From hemlines to brick textures, visual references supply design details

Ys homework

BY SEAN O'SKEA



sively online won't find them.

The key to success in design research is knowing how to organize your search. Let us say you need to know what you would find in the lady chapel of a gothic cathedral. If you use "lady chapel" as your first search term, you might get lucky and find a terrific book or website right off, but generally it's better to begin with a broader search that will turn up names and terms to use for further, more narrowly focused searches.

You might start with "gothic architecture," either online or in the library. You'll likely find the names of large and well-known cathedrals. Feed those names back into your search. In that second iteration you may find a great image of one partic-

ular chapel. If the image is captioned, feed that place name back into your search to see what you find, making notes as you go. This way you can get to know the names of architects (or fashion designers, if you're doing costume research) and significant surviving examples of a period style. At the same time you will be learning how to narrow your search.

Terms like "colonial" and "Victorian" are too broad and vague to be useful on their own. Do you mean American colonial, as in Georgian architecture? Or do you mean Federal Style, which was popular around the time of the American Revolution as a way for the colonies to distinguish their architecture from that of Britain? Or do you mean French Colonial ar-

chitecture, which developed into the styles of New Orleans and the early American South? Or nineteenth-century colonial architecture like what the European powers (especially Britain) were building throughout Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean?

And that term Victorian! Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901 through one of the greatest periods of creativity in the history of the world. A dozen major styles came to prominence during the era. To further complicate matters, a lot of what Americans think of as Victorian, the *Mary Poppins* aesthetic, is actually Edwardian. So all of your mental images of *Anne of Green Gables*, *My Fair Lady*, and a lot of Sherlock Holmes are actually Edwardian, as are a great

many of the Queen Anne-style buildings in America that we point to and say, "that's a Victorian."

Clearly, research for useful reference material that's accurate to period and place will take more than a few quick clicks on Google unless you already know exactly what you're looking for. But you can *start* with a search engine.

For example, say your play is set outside a tenement house in an English slum about 1890. You could start by typing the very broad term "Victorian slum" into Google Images. You'll get quite a lot of hits, some pretty useful. If you follow some of the image links to their websites you will find a few sites on the subject of Victorian slums that reference a number of authors and books. Chances are your library might have one or two of those books. Even if you can't find a specific book in your library, try typing the title into an online bookseller site like Amazon. If that book comes up, there will be other related books suggested, and some of *those* books may be in your library. The books and sites are going to give you the names of other notorious slums of the time. You'll soon learn the name "Bermondsey," the setting for *Oliver Twist*, a new name to fold back into the search.

Of course the big search engines have their drawbacks. Google Images is great, but you often have to wade through enormous amounts of irrelevant stuff. Type in "Bermondsey" and you might have to look at a dozen photos of somebody's dog named Bermondsey or a couple hundred tiny pictures of industrial machinery from the Bermondsey Inc. catalog website.

One good alternative is a photo collection site like Flickr.com. If you don't know Flickr, you need to. But just as when you are searching the wider web, you have to be creative and precise with your search terms. Type in "Victorian" and you'll get a million hits. Try "Victorian slum" and you get better results. You'll find a photo of a "Manchester slum." So type that in. Still better results. There's

a great photo titled "Moss Side, Manchester." A new name! But even better, this image is in a collection called "Last Days of the Old North," a set of dozens of photos the photographer took in the 1960s and '70s of the old working-class neighborhoods of Manchester, all of which were built during the Victorian era. A lot of those photos are in an image pool called "Older Pictures of Manchester." Click on that and now you have dozens of other photographers' collections to go through. One of those might have sets of images of other working-class neighborhoods in other cities, and on and on.

Persistence is one of the most valuable qualities in design research. Don't stop after your first try even if you do get some results. Try "Victorian slum," "English slum," "London slum," "Victorian ghetto," "Victorian tenement," "Dickensian London," "Dickens London," "Dickens slum," etc. One of the more interesting results returned by "Dickens' slum" leads to a stream called "Brizzle Born and Bred," a gold mine of historic photos of the city of Bristol. The photographer has dozens of sets where he has organized thousands of historic photos of Bristol into all kinds of historic periods, activities, neighborhoods, and subjects.

Remember Bermondsey? Put that into Flickr and you can find an image from photographer Stephen May and his photo stream "Hauntedmansion." Suddenly you're presented with hundreds of his fantastic detail photos of old London neighborhoods full of textures and color—street signs, a broken factory window, a bricked-in doorway—some of them almost a set design in themselves. You can get lost for hours trolling through the "Ghosts of London Past" group or "Urban Fragments" or wandering into "Alleyways." Soon your problem won't be too few images but how to choose the best from dozens of fantastic references.

Cracking the stacks

The library is the traditional source

for reference, and still indispensable for a thorough image search. But just like on the web, it's all about how you look. Bring those search terms you learned while online with you.

A lot of library catalogs let you search with multiple terms. Try "Jewish shtetl AND Russia AND photography" to get right to what you're after. Learn who the leading artists, designers, and photographers were from the period of your play. You might not get much by searching for "New York West Side street life pictures," but once you find that your library has a big coffee-table book of Helen Levitt's photography, you've hit the jackpot.

Don't forget periodicals in the library. Many libraries have old issues of magazines like *Vogue*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Good Housekeeping*, and others that would now be called lifestyle titles. A lot of these magazines go back into the 1870s or earlier and are fantastic sources for fashion reference. Don't forget the Sears Roebuck catalogs for period props and clothing. Old newspapers, usually available on microfilm, are filled with terrific ads and photos. One of the great things about using newspapers for image research is that you will know exactly where and when the pictures come from.

Of course the granddaddy of all research magazines is *National Geographic*, and it can now be accessed through an online search engine (publicationsindex.nationalgeographic.com) that covers the entire span of the publication, from 1888 to last month. Read the directions; it's a little tricky to use at first. Type your search term followed by "NG" to limit the search to the magazine. Enter "Victorian NG" and discover the April 1974 issue has an article titled "The England of Charles Dickens." *Voilà!*

National Geographic is a fantastic source for archeological images. There are literally hundreds of articles over the years on Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, and other civilizations' history and architecture. Not just photos of ruins but beautiful, de-

tailed artist's recreations of the times and places. It's a great place to go for rural and exotic. Need to know what a Bulgarian village looks like? Cambodian folk dress? A scarlet macaw? Try *National Geographic*.

If you're stuck on a research problem, ask a reference librarian for help. Usually they love to assist on interesting quests like research for a design. But be ready with specific questions. Don't expect them to do the work for you.

Saturate yourself

Focused research of the kind we've been discussing here is generally for a specific show. The truth is that good designers become constant students of period style, noting details large and small that they encounter in books, movies, and elsewhere and mentally filing them away for future reference.

TV and movies can be a great source, provided you are confident the people who did the visual research for the production were as fastidious about accuracy as you intend to be. BBC mysteries and mini-series are fabulous for period style. Watch films from Agatha Christie's Miss Marple series for English village life. The Hercule Poirot series is a fantastic Art Deco wonderland. Sherlock Holmes is great for Victoriana, and *Jeeves and Wooster* is a veritable parade of swanky English country houses. Even shows with a modern setting like *Wallander*, *Ballykissangel*, *Hamish Macbeth*, and *Monarch of the Glen* can give you a very detailed sense of place. We all know what an American sitcom living room looks like. So put some new shows on your Netflix queue and get to know some new places.

Rent *Gosford Park*, *Becoming Jane*, *The Aviator*, *The Last Emperor*, *Gangs of New York*, *House of Mirth*, *Cold Mountain*, *Elizabeth*, *Room With a View*, *Chocolate*. There are even Listmania lists on Amazon devoted to people's suggestions of the best period films. Watch with your finger on the pause button.

Finally don't forget the great wealth of imagery to be found in fine art. Sites like the amazing Art Encyclopedia (artcyclopedia.com) let you search by artist, artwork title, movement, nationality, and more. They link to thousands of high-resolution reproductions. Greatbuildings (greatbuildings.com) is similar with links for architecture. American Art Archives (americanartarchives.com) has hundreds of images from the classic age of illustration. It's especially good for 1940s and '50s advertising, pulp fiction, and propaganda poster art.

The object of all this research is to assemble a collection of reference images that will guide your design choices. Unless you are already an expert in a particular time and place, you need to have something to look at to help you make informed choices. And don't assume you don't need research for modern settings. Unless the play is set in a place you are personally familiar with—and probably even if it is—you still need images. If you haven't actually lived in a New York apartment, don't assume you can design one without reference.

The good news is, once you've done the work to collect a fabulous set of reference images, your design is

half done. Now all you need to do is make these images fit into the needs of the production's action, theme, and concept. By studying the script and working with your director and design colleagues, you'll learn what to select from your research. You'll have a sense of what kind of house the characters live in, what kind of furniture, what kind of art they'd have on the walls. Or you'll find period- and status-appropriate clothes for your characters. When you really know the characters, it's amazing how often you'll turn a page in a period fashion magazine or catalog, and there looking up at you is your character, waiting for you to find her.

Reference and research makes the difference between a design that's just made-up and meaningless, and one that evokes the truth of the time, place, and character of your play. ▼



DRAMATICS
WEB EXTRA

For your convenience, the online research site links included in this article can be found in a directory in the Dramatics pages on Schooltheatre.org.