Bringing Life to Theatre: A Scenic Designer's Role in Creating *The Wild Party*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the research that goes into designing the scenic elements of a musical. I was the scenic designer for Pace School of Performing Arts' production of Michael John LaChiusa and George C. Wolfe's *The Wild Party* in the fall of 2017. Directed by Roger Ellis, our version of the vaudeville-style musical was done in an immersive, in-the-round style. As the scenic designer for this production I was strongly focused on the research aspect of the design process. We consulted several art movements and architectural styles, as well as mythology, film and literature in the research process, all of which were incorporated into the final design of *The Wild Party.*

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The creation, planning and design of a theatrical production often takes months or years to come to fruition. From the initial writing of a script and score to a final product seen on stage, a production goes through a huge number of steps before it is complete. One of the most important parts of any realized production is the scenery. The Scenic Designer is often the first designer hired onto a production and is crucial in creating the world of the play with the director and other designers. Through meetings with a director, sketches and oftentimes weeks of researching, a designer formulates their design into concrete drafting and renderings to be constructed by a shop, and ultimately bringing to life the world of a play. It is up to the Scenic Designer to take a director's vision and the text to bring a show to life by creating the world and language of the piece.

The Wild Party was originally a narrative poem written by Joseph Moncure March published in 1928. Upon its publication, the work was widely banned due to the controversial themes that are presented such as racism, anti-Semitism, homosexuality and the decay of the American Dream. The poem is highly rhythmic and pulses with a musical flare with lines like "Some love is fire: some love is rust: But the fiercest, cleanest love is lust." It is no surprise that in April 2000 *The Wild Party* debuted on Broadway at the Virginia Theater, with a book by George C. Wolfe and music and lyrics by Michael John LaChiusa. The musical pulls directly from the original text, and is mostly sung through, with LaChiusa turning March's lines into full songs, creating the vivacious piece. Just like the original poem, LaChiusa and Wolfe's *The Wild Party* follows the story of Vaudeville performers Queenie and Burrs and their eclectic group of friends during the course of an all-night party that Queenie and Burrs throw at their apartment. The piece starts off highlighting the unique performance styles from the 1920s such as

vaudeville, burlesque and minstrelsy as the audience is introduced to the range of characters that are attending Queenie and Burrs' party. As the show continues, it builds to a boiling point, finally exposing the true sides of the characters within. The audience is shown some of the horrible things the characters have either done themselves or endured, which is shocking as the time period is often romanticized for being so glamorous and care free. It culminates with the explosive death of Burrs, a character who exemplified the dark underbelly of the 1920s, and the subsequent freeing of Queenie from his abusive grip.

The setting and scenery of a play or musical is an important aspect, from the earliest stages of developing the script, until the opening night. When a scenic designer is brought into a production it is their job to read the script, prepare to react to it with their initial thoughts and then discuss their thoughts with a director who will also share their own vision. Roger Ellis directed *The Wild Party* at Pace University in November, and as the scenic designer it was my job to bring his vision of *The Wild Party* to life, while inputting my own creative ideas into the design. Roger was a great director in the sense that he had a strong reaction to the text, and because of that he had a lot of wonderful and interesting ideas that he presented to the design team at our first meetings about six months prior to opening. The way he described the piece was that it was the "moment before impact" and that the show had to be "fatally fascinating". In terms of how to visual elements would fit it he really wanted to stage the production in an immersive style, and have the audience in the round, meaning the action of the play would take place in the center, and also around the audience seating, hence immersing them in the party. He described his vision of the set as "an Art Deco playground in an active volcano", and also described it as "expressionistic", "heightened" "claustrophobic" and "frenzied". Another

important discussion we had was all about the mythology of *The Wild Party*. The "Roaring 20s"

was a time of heightened reality and people in modern times tend to view that era as almost

mythological, as if those people were gods and the tales of the 1920s were myths. This idea of

American mythology helped aid greatly in our future design talks and the finalized layout of the

scenic elements for *The Wild Party*.

The most important part of any scenic design is the research period. Here is where the

designer is able to take what the director has given them, and what they have gathered from the

piece themselves and translate that into visual reactions. Much of what is found in researching

leads to important choices to the final design of a piece. For *The Wild Party*, it became evident

early on that our piece was going to be a more abstract, emotional response to the text than a

realistic replication of Queenie and Burrs' apartment. There were many factors that needed to be

considered in order to make this unique piece a success. Some of those major factors taken into

consideration in regards to the design were the number of audiences seats needed, New York

City fire codes, the height of the theater, the budget and the choreography.

With the piece being immersive, there are certain restrictions due to the facts of safety

codes, which require clear exits and pathways in case of an emergency. Those codes also impend

the number of seats that are able to be in the space for audience. Schaeberle Studio Theater, the

Pace black box theater where *The Wild Party* occurred, has a height of ten feet, which makes

building anything with any height extremely difficult. The layout was also a major factor for the

choreography, as *The Wild Party* is a fully choreographed musical, and we had to work to create

a space that was both dynamic and safe for the actors. The final, and perhaps the most important

factor taken into consideration, was the budget we had to design and build the set. We were

allotted $1,500, which is less than past productions, so this forced the team to get creative with our solutions to still create a fully realized set. All of these restraints affected my choices and although they did hinder aspects of the design, they also gave way to new, creative solutions to birth the final product.

After meeting and discussing the piece with the director, the first step any designer takes is researching. The research process is something that can be unique to each designer, though the overall approach is the same. This phase of a design process is usually regarded at the most important, since the designer and their team are narrowing down the director's ideas and finding new ideas based off the research. This is how a team starts to build an actual world based off the emotional reactions of the director and the scenic designer. There are many outlets used by designers to find research such as books, personal or found photographs, other theatre, film and television, artwork, magazines, posters, billboards and architecture. For *The Wild Party*, starting with the original text was a crucial part of the research process. Returning to Joseph Moncure March's original poem was pivotal for several reasons. As previously stated, March's frenzied, syncopated writing style gave me a strong emotional reaction, which led me to design an abstract space, as I felt that that captured the essence of the original text more than any realistic set could. There were also key themes and specific words that March uses to describe both the characters and atmosphere of the piece that I was able to capture and highlight in the final painting of the set. Finally, the sketches provided by Art Spiegelman in *The Wild Party: The Lost Classic by Joseph Moncure March* inspired my design and led me to thoroughly research specific styles of art that I thought Spiegelman's sketches emulated (Appendix A). Just like March's text, Spiegelman's sketches are edgy and brash, showing the characters of the piece in a

melodramatic, heightened sense that all but captures the emotional feel of the piece. Their expressionistic style greatly aided my imagining of who these characters are and what the world of the show could be. In this case, I referred more to the original poem than I did to the script of the musical, but I also took that into consideration in regards to the actual layout of certain scenic elements described in the script, such as the kitchen and fire escape.

Another element of the piece that strongly influenced my design was the idea of "American mythology" that Roger Ellis and I discussed in length. Works such as *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald have aided in painting a picture in most people's minds of what the "Roaring Twenties" was; an age of loose morality, jazz music, heavy drinking, and most importantly, no consequences. This image of the 1920s in the United States, and specifically New York City, is one based on truth, but also one that has been romanticized so greatly in the last hundred years that it has elevated the 1920s to a mythological level. *The Wild Party* takes that mythology by portraying it vibrantly and then devastatingly shattering it in the course of two hours. Another talking point in this same thread of thought was the novel *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. Gaiman's book portrays an America where each culture has brought over their own gods and myths over the past several hundred years, some slated to prosper in the New World and stay alive in the people's minds, while others were bound to fade and die out as time went on. In *American Gods*, the gods of these religions are real, and depicted as mortal beings, along with the new "Gods" of America; those of industry, power and progress. The reaction we had from discussing *American Gods* led the idea that the characters in *The Wild Party* were god-like themselves. They each were there to stand as an representation of the ideals and important aspects of the Jazz age; Queenie as the flapper-esque vaudeville star, Kate, her best friend, as the

glamourous Silent movie star and Burrs, a fading minstrel who represented the darkness still lurking behind the veil of the Roaring Twenties.

The themes of mythology and gods played another important role in our production and my design. We've established that the space we're creating is meant to be immersive and all encompassing, but we needed to come up with a way to create a dynamic design in such a tight space. The idea of the characters being god-like themselves, along with our previous talks of mythology lead us back to the Greeks and finally, Mount Olympus. I was tasked with creating a central space that mimicked the idea of Mount Olympus; the grandiose home of the gods that was elevated above the rest of the world and its mortal population. In this case, what I came up with combined the ideals of Mount Olympus, a post-modern architectural style and an art movement that was gaining in popularity during the time period of *The Wild Party*.

Deconstructivism is an architectural style that took hold in the 1980s, and has since become a well-known postmodern style. To put it simply, deconstructivism can be described as removing the essence of architecture. Deconstructivist architecture dismantled the idea of what a structure could be, both literally and figuratively. The style challenges the architectural values of harmony, unity and stability, while introducing the idea that flaws are fundamental to that structure. (Wigley, 11) There is something quite striking about the structures that arose out of this new way of thinking. The architects' betrayal of previous standards and what can be described as "traditional" created bold and chaotic work, something that attracted me as a designer. *The Wild Party* truly is wild and cataclysmic, and the characteristics of deconstructivism felt akin to the story we were trying to tell in our production. One of our goals for the design was to create a multi-leveled space to create to support the dangerously heightened

feeling that was so important to the storytelling in *The Wild Party*. Deconstructivist architecture

grabbed my attention as grounding for my design, and upon further research into specific

structures, I was able to finalize my own silhouette of what I wanted the central structure in my

design to be.

Two of the specific structures that I used as inspiration were the Ray and Maria Stata

Center (Appendix B) and the Walt Disney Concert Hall (Appendix C). Renowned architect

Frank Gehry designed both structures in the early 2000s, and they both exemplify the style that I

wanted to bring to my design. The Ray and Maria Stata Center currently serves as an academic

building on MIT's campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Upon its unveiling, Boston Globe

columnist Robert Campbell wrote, "The Stata's appearance is a metaphor for the freedom, daring

and creativity of the research that's supposed to occur inside." Just as the Stata Center represents

the freedom, daring and creativity of its inhabitants' work, the set for *The Wild Party* needed to

reflect the angst and chaotic freedom of the characters in the piece. The Walt Disney Concert

Hall in Los Angeles, California has a similar style to the Stata Center, but reflects the grandeur

of a concert hall. As with the State Center, Walt Disney Hall is comprised of many abstracted

shapes and levels that create the entire structure. These dramatic and striking shapes epitomize

the style of deconstructivism, and along with the Art Deco movement, directly influenced my

design for *The Wild Party*.

Art Deco was an artistic style that was blossoming during the same time period that *The*

Wild Party takes place. Art Deco encompassed a wide variety of fields including fashion, art,

ceramics and typography, though the architecture is what drew me as a designer. In New York

City alone two of the most famous Art Deco buildings in the world, the Chrysler Building and

Empire State Building, were being constructed during the exact timeframe *The Wild Party* was occurring, in late 1929 (Appendix D & E). Although these skyscrapers are some of the most well-known Art Deco style buildings, for my research in regards to *The Wild Party*, I focused on the detailing, ornamentation and especially the shapes of Art Deco. It is generally agreed that most Art Deco buildings are categorized as so because of their ornamental decoration, rather than any distinctive architectural quality. Architects applied the abstract, geometric styling into ironwork, terracotta, stone and more. (Benton, 245-47) These bold symbols and patterns feel as if they define the age of Art Deco so well, that I found myself encapsulated by them (Appendix F). While ultimately, we went in a more abstract route and therefore did not include much detailing in the architectural elements of the set, the general shape of the platforms, along with much of the painting, was pulled directly from the Art Deco movement. In particular, the pattern on the front door of Burrs and Queenie's apartment (Appendix G) was inspired by the sunburst motif, a symbol found in many Art Deco structures, such as the Eastern Columbia Building in Los Angeles (Appendix H). As Art Deco was the defining style of the 1920s and 1930s, it only made sense to draw from it whilst designing *The Wild Party.*

Along with the two styles of architecture I used as a source of research and inspiration for *The Wild Party*, there were two art movements that I drew heavily upon as well. The first of those movements, and the one I would say influenced me the most, was Cubism. Cubism was born in Paris sometime around 1906-1908 and was pioneered by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. (Cooper, 13) Cubism became one of the most influential and well-known artistic styles of the modern era, and grew out of Paris, influencing artists all over the world. The term "Cubism" comes from the French art critic Louis Vauxcelles who coined the term after viewing

landscapes Georges Braque had painted in 1908, emulating the style of Paul Cézanne (Appendix I). Vauxcelles called the the forms in these abstracted landscapes "cubes", hence the birth the term "Cubism" (Sabine). The developing style of Cubism was a direct response to the artists' desire to stray away from copying exactly what is seen in life, a la earlier portraiture, still life and landscape painting. Cubism was all about abstracting and fracturing the subject, sometimes to a point where the subject was no longer discernible. Oftentimes in later Cubism, Picasso and Braques would combine many different subject matters into one piece, such as numbers, instruments, bottles, human figures, faces and more.

Depending on whose work it was and the time period it was created, the level of abstraction and realignment varies. Consider Braque's *Violin: Mozart Kubelik* and Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with a Bottle of Rum* (Appendix J & K, respectively). Both pieces were created within six months of each other, between 1911-1912, and have a similar composition of numbers, words and "still-life" objects. These two pieces could be described as "true" cubism, as per the painters of each are regarded as the founders of the style, and they both exhibit the characteristics of cubism, such as fracturing, multi-planes and the use of multiple subjects. (Cooper 11-23) Both of these pieces served as focal points of both the shape of the design for *The Wild Party*, as well as the style of paint treatment on the floor. The color palette I used for the floor mural for *The Wild Party* uses colors pulled directly from both of these paintings, as well as several others. In contrast, *New York at Night* was painted in 1915 by American artist Max Weber. (Appendix L) Weber's interpretation of New York City through Cubism varies greatly from the earlier style of Braques and Picasso. Weber's use of color is drastically different from that of the earlier styles. Instead of painting with a muted palette with some flashes of

color, Weber chose a dark base (black), with bright pops of blues, reds, greens and yellows. While this palette doesn't reflect my choices for *The Wild Party* set, the rhythm and motion in the piece drew me. Weber accurately captures the heart and soul of New York City during the early twentieth century, and that fractured style, as with Picasso and Braques' work, influenced me greatly.

In our early talks as to what we wanted the emotion of the design to be, Roger Ellis frequently mentioned the term "expressionistic". Expressionistic can mean wide range of things, but I was initially led to the German Expressionism movement of the early twentieth century. Similar to Cubism, the German expressionism movement was based on an emphasis of the artist's emotions rather than replicating their subject matter realistically (Tate). Some of the main themes and ideas represented in much of the German expressionist movement included city life, war, sex and religion. World War I came at the height of the German expressionist movement, and directly influenced many of the artists' work in the post-war world (MoMA). Artwork from the movement tended to portray scenes that oozed with anguish and chaos, and the subjects were rendered brashly, unlike previous artistic styles that focused on realism. The key to expressionism was emotion, and that was what drew me to these artists. While deconstructivism, art deco and cubism provided the basis for my physical designs, the German expressionists provided me with the emotional basis to what I thought *The Wild Party* needed to radiate. The polished, glitzy dream of the Roaring Twenties is not the story of *The Wild Party*. Rather, this piece shows the true grit and chaos of what these people experienced in the late 1920s and what they experienced needed to be dangerous and real. When creating the entire production with the Director and Lighting Designer, we wanted the space to have an edgy and dangerous

atmosphere. That feeling was something that was eventually birthed both through studying the original text by Joseph Moncure March and the artwork of the German expressionists.

As previously mentioned, Art Spiegelman's illustrations for *The Wild Party: The Lost Classic* could easily be described as emotional and expressionistic, and there were several German artists whose work I also felt emulated the emotional style of our version of *The Wild Party.* Three artists whose work was referenced often in my research were Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Egon Schiele and Max Beckmann. Beckmann was one of the founding members of the artists' group "Brücke" who largely molded the German expressionist movement and influenced the history of modern art (Städel Museum). Kirchner largely worked as a painter and printmaker, and his portraits and depictions of city life are harsh and haunting (Appendix M). Egon Schiele was another immense figure in the expressionist movement. Schiele's work as a draftsman and painter is sexually explicit and visceral, causing much controversy during his life. Critics have often discussed his work as being disturbing, grotesque and erotic, and he often worked in watercolor (Appendix N) as well as pencil and crayon (Appendix O) (Kallir). Upon researching the movement, Schiele's work was some of the first to really jump out at me and get me excited. His self-portraits are so uniquely haunting that I fell in love with them instantly, and I starting discovering the characters from *The Wild Party* in his body of work.

All three artists were enlisted to fight in World War I, and all three were affected greatly by their time in the military. Schiele was discharged after suffering from both a physical and mental breakdown, while in the late 1930s Kirchner would commit suicide. Max Beckmann was discharged from the medical corps after a nervous breakdown in 1915, but would later credit his harrowing experiences in war as having a major influence on his artwork. He had been a critic of

the abstracted work of expressionist artists like Franz Marc before the war, but wound up incorporating styles of distortion and frenzied line work into his work after the war (Appendix P). He supported an idea of extroverted emotionalism and that notion of thought comes across strongly in his abrasive use of the pencil, often focusing on themes of urban life and life in poverty (MoMA). As with Schiele, I could see the characters of *The Wild Party* appeared in Beckmann's drawings, and was again drawn to the emotion of the dangerous and frenzied world we wanted to create. The German expressionists provided me with great work both to show the director, as well as for myself to hone into what I thought was important to show our audiences.

All the hours spent on researching the various artistic and architectural movements, historical context of the play and various literature culminated into a dynamic design for *The Wild Party* (Appendix Q). The central element of the set was a seven-leveled platform that emulated some of the shapes and styles discovered from the cubists and whilst looking at the buildings of Frank Gehry. Each level was a different height and, along with the deck level, created a heightened playing space, both literally and figuratively. The seating was in-the-round, with audience members spread out amongst five seating areas, each at a different height as well, and dispersed amongst some of the other set pieces to ground the show in a slightly realistic setting, such as the front door, bed and fire escape. The central platforms were painted with an abstract mural whose color palette (Appendix R) and style of painting was pulled from some of the expressionist and cubist pieces that I found inspiration from. For the mural, we focused on several key symbols such as the spiraling clock that represented the coming end of The Roaring Twenties, as well as eyes and faces, both of which were often mentioned in the script and kept resurfacing in our discussions. The audience was meant to feel as if they were in the actual party,

and we helped achieve that feeling by making all of the audience seats house furniture as well as having them enter through a faux front door and hallway that we constructed. The actors oftentimes intermingled with the audience to create an immersive feel, and together with the vivid color choices by the lighting designer and flashy, period-appropriate costumes, we were able to bring *The Wild Party* to life.

The depth of research into the set design and creation of the world for a piece of theatre is immense. There are influences that come from the art world, architecture, literature, film and the world around you. The period of time spent researching for a show is of the utmost important because it helps the designer, director and creative team narrow down their thoughts and ideas into one cohesive plan. All of the academic, emotional and physical research discovered by a designer that plays even the smallest role in the ultimate design for a piece is important, and no source should ever go unnoticed.

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Appendix A
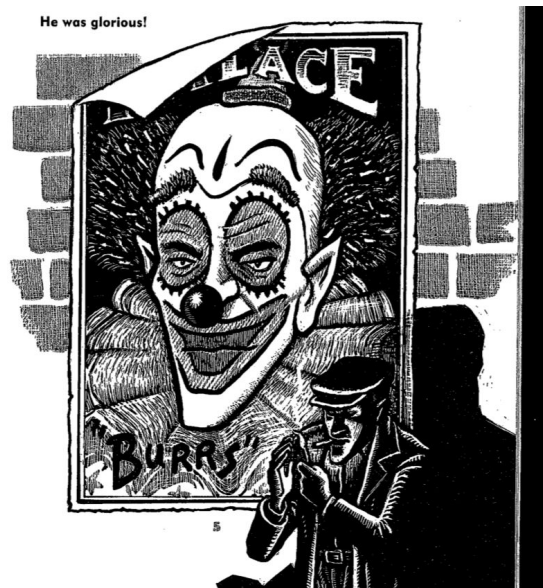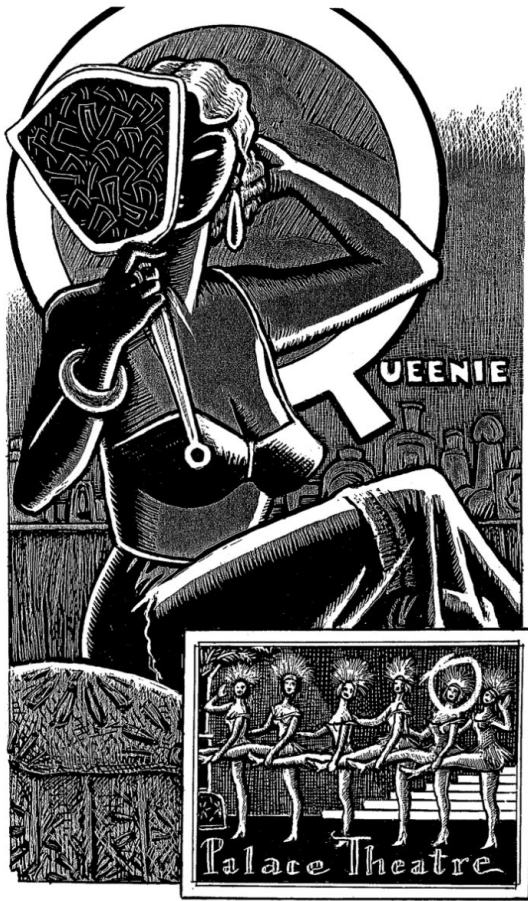
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Appendix B

Gehry, Frank. The Ray and Maria Stata Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge,

Massachusetts. 2004.

Appendix C

Gehry, Frank. Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, California. 2003.

Appendix D

Shreve, Lamb and Harmon. The Empire State Building, New York, New York. 1931.
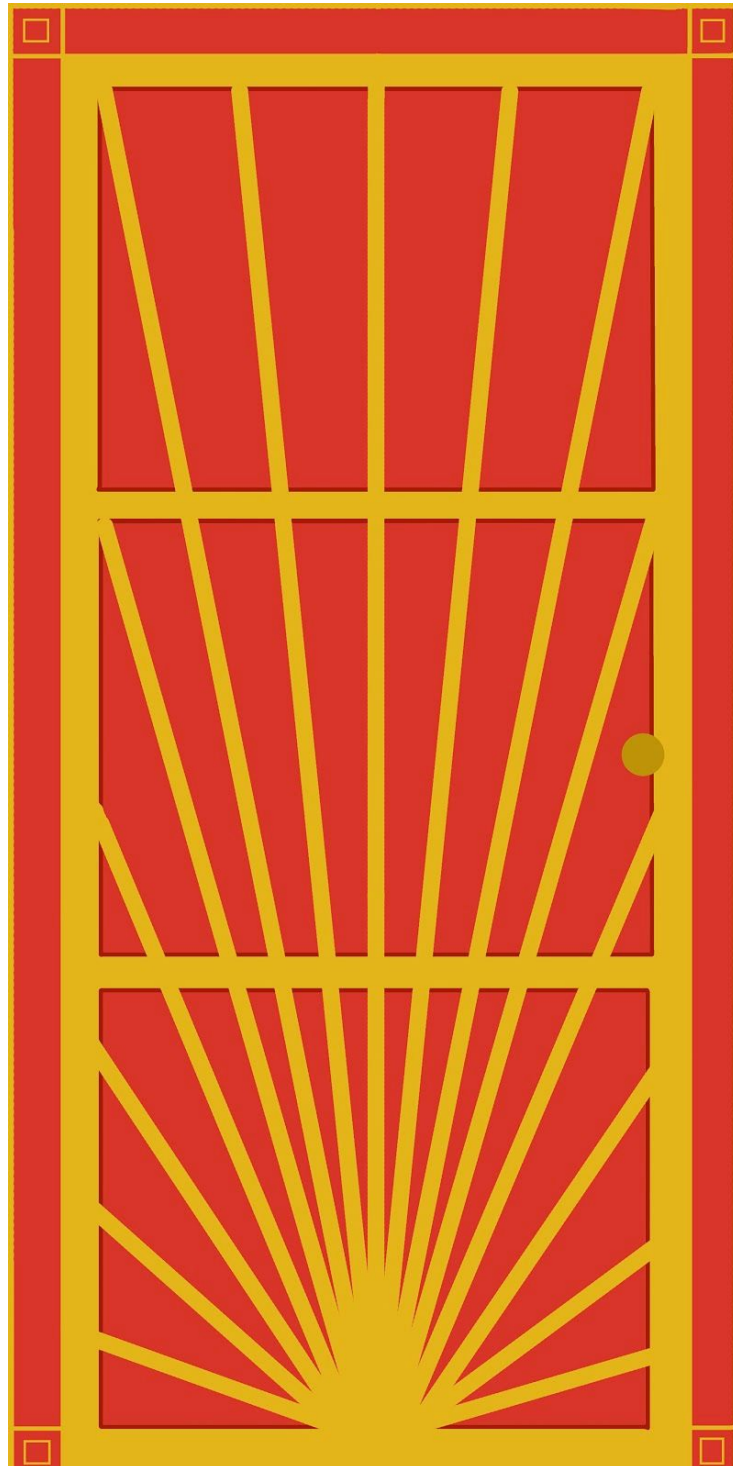
Appendix E

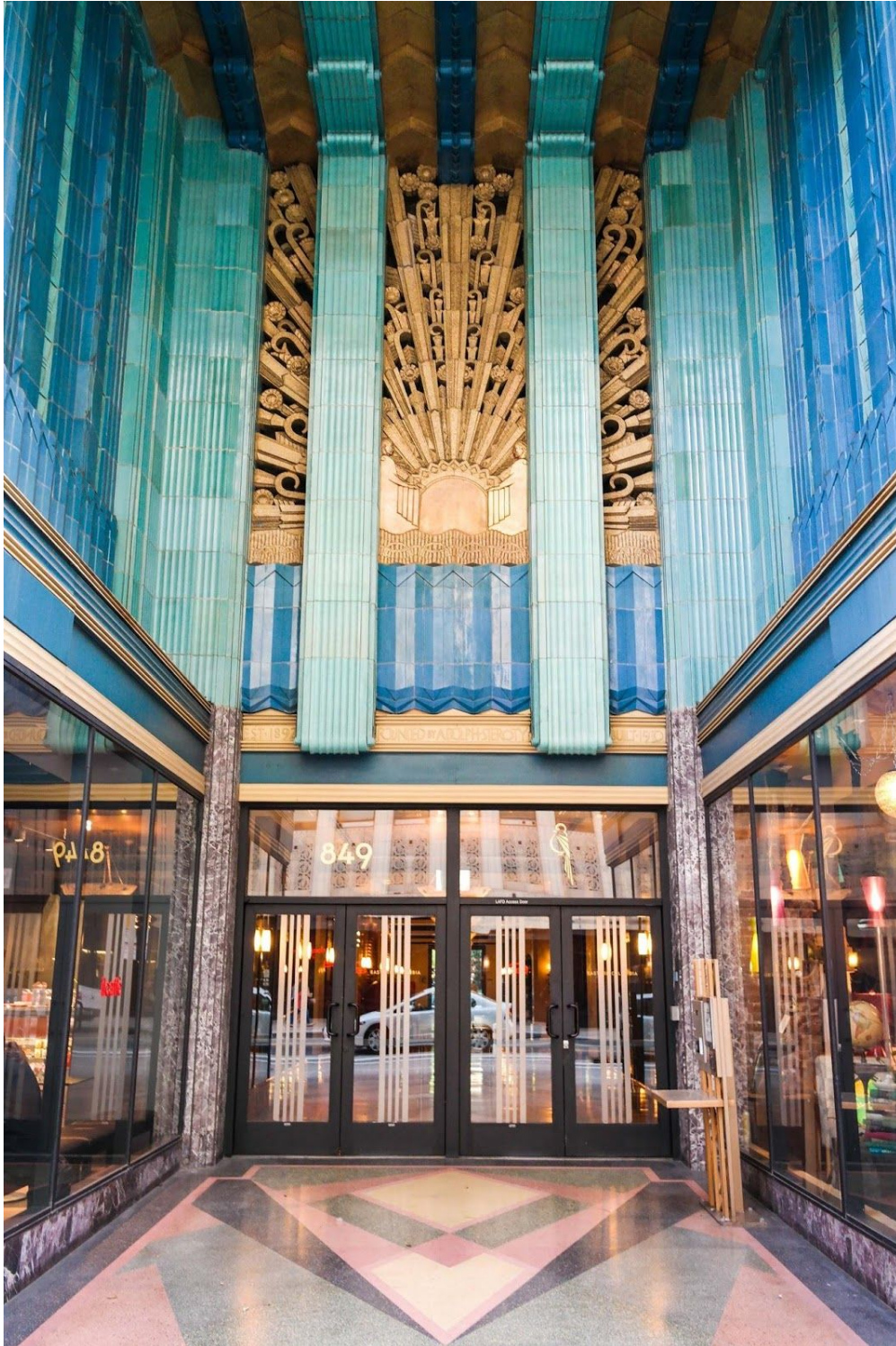Van Alen, William. Chrysler Building, New York, New York. 1930.

Appendix F

Artist Unknown. St. Ignatius and Holy Family Church, Chicago, Illinois. 1920s. Stone relief.
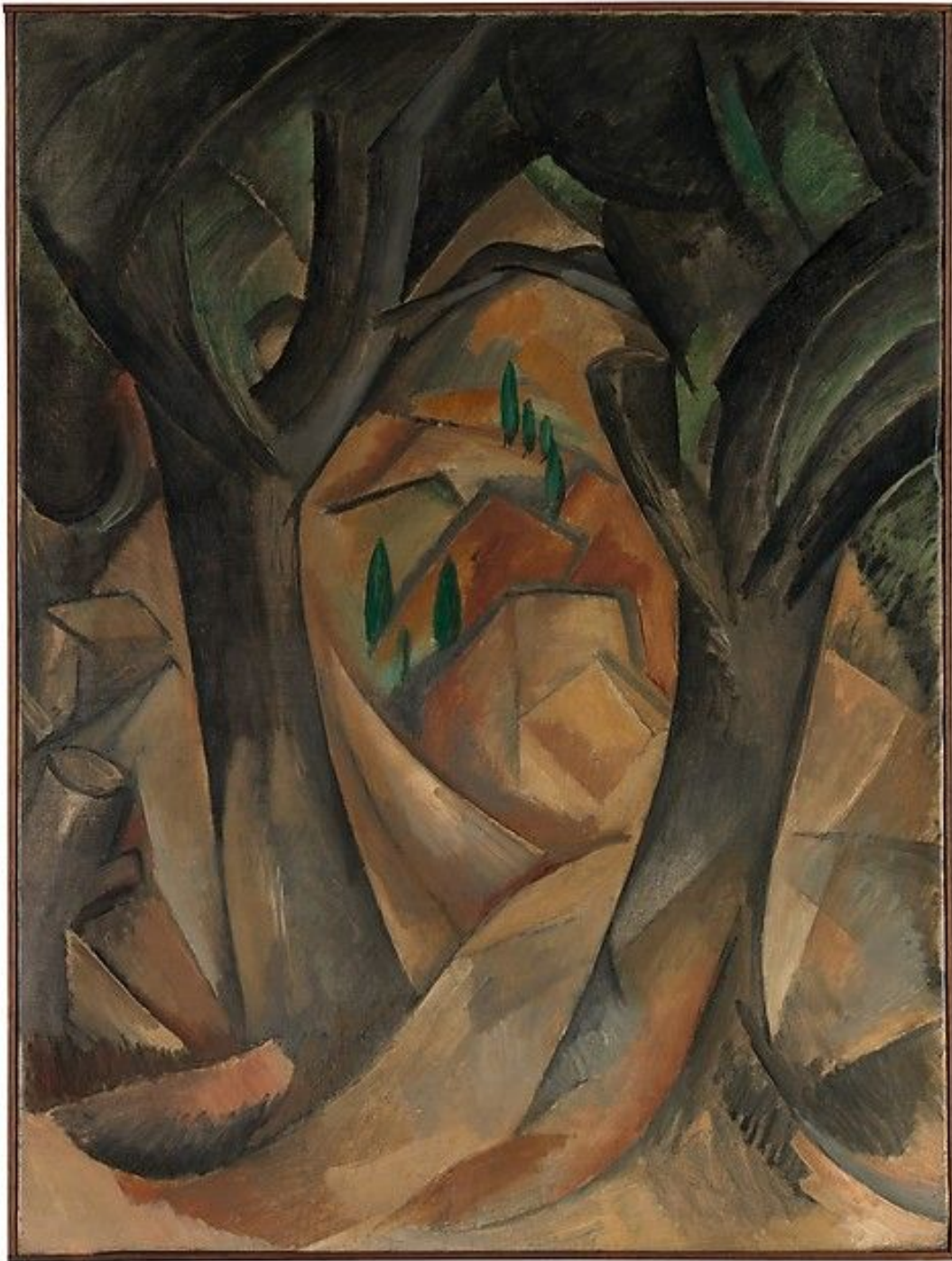
Appendix G

Carlin, Matthew. Door design for *The Wild Party*. Adobe Illustrator. 2017.

Appendix H

Beelman, Claud. Eastern Columbia Building, Los Angeles, California. 1930.
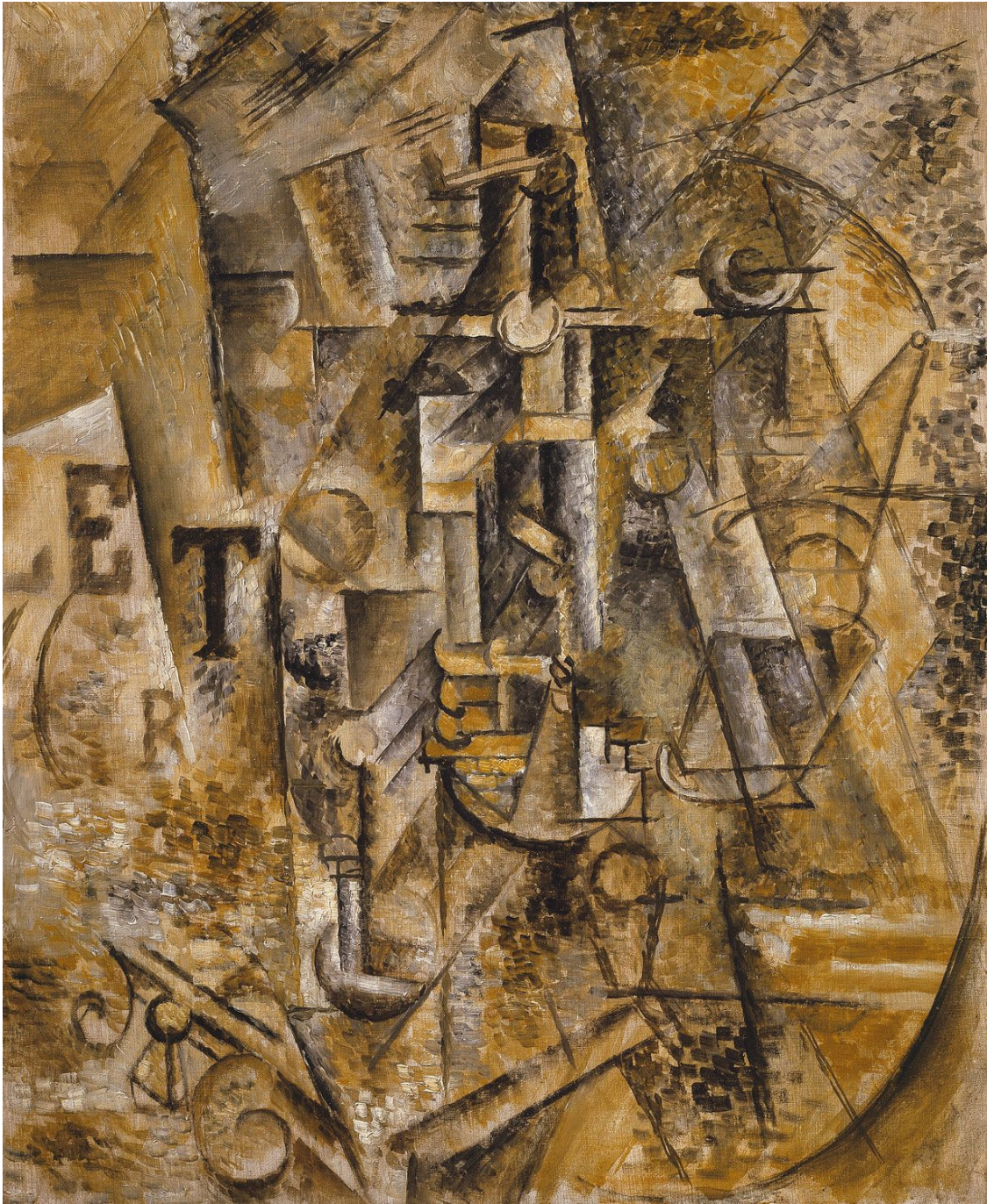
Appendix I

Braques, Georges. *Trees at L'Estaque.* 1908. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
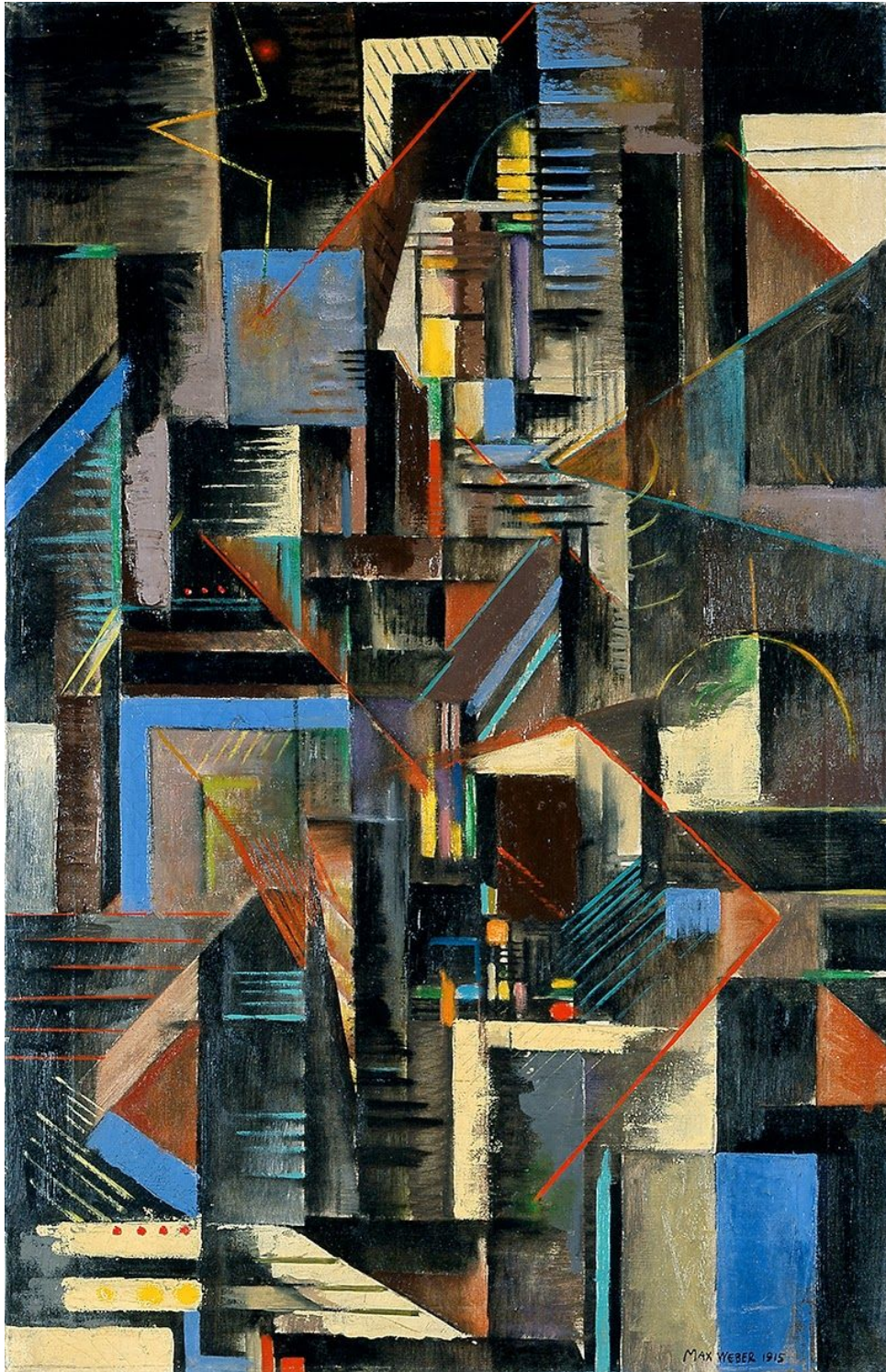
Appendix J

Braques, Georges. *Violin: Mozart Kubelik.* 1912. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Appendix K

Picasso, Pablo. *Still Life with a Bottle of Rum.*1911. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Appendix L

Weber, Max. *New York at Night.* 1915. Oil on canvas. Blanton Museum of Art.

Appendix M

Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig. *Street Scene*. 1922. Woodcut. The Museum of Modern Art.

Appendix N

Schiele, Egon. *Der Cello-Spieler*. 1910. Black chalk and watercolor on paper. The Alberta Museum.

Appendix O

Schiele, Egon. *Reclining Nude with Left Leg Drawn In.* 1914. Pencil on paper. Private collection.

Appendix P

Beckman, Max. *Street II*. 1917. Drypoint print on paper. The Museum of Modern Art.

Appendix Q

The Wild Party. Directed by Roger Ellis, Scenic Design by Matthew Carlin, Lighting Design by Jordan Bliese and Costume Design by Arin Goldsmith.

The Wild Party. Directed by Roger Ellis, Scenic Design by Matthew Carlin, Lighting Design by Jordan Bliese and Costume Design by Arin Goldsmith.

Appendix R

Color palette chosen based off of research, and used for the painting of the floor mural.