THE PROCESS

By examining the records in the archives and understanding some of the theatrical practices of the early 20th century it is possible to reconstruct, in some detail, the process by which the scenic investiture was created. Using names, places and other evidences contemporary to the time frame, the following narrative describes a portion of the process by which the scenery was created.

The first step in building a production took place in the studio of Julian Dove, the Civic Opera Company's chief scenic artist. Dove's workshop, beginning in 1924, was located on the second floor of the company's studio-warehouse on 26th and Dearborn. In the small but sunny studio could be found Dove's sketches, or drawings he had received from Europe, or designs amassed from earlier productions of a given opera. Just across a small hallway from Dove's studio and up a few stairs was the large hall where the actual scene painting was done. Two complete floors of vertical height were necessary to accommodate the painting of the largest scenic elements—the drops measuring 70 feet wide by 40 feet high. The hall was flooded with natural light from multiple sources including a skylight at the top so that painters could have daylight in which to work and more accurately mix their colors.

When the opera company decided to produce a new opera or restage an old, Dove either prepared the preliminary sketches or awaited the arrival of outside sketches for his evaluation. With Dove's European training, preliminary sketches were only created after he had thoroughly familiarized himself with the score and libretto of the work to be produced and had buried himself in the history of the time and place where the scenes of the opera were to take place.

When the preliminary sketches had been completed they were given to Harry W. Beatty, technical director, for cast analysis and approval, and then forwarded to the stage director. If they were approved by both the technical director and stage director, they were returned to Dove, and a ground plan was generated in a scale of 1/4" to the foot. Typically, the ground plan showed the entire stage, with lighting locations, moveable portions of the stage floor, curtains, and pipes on which drops, tabs, cyclorama, etc. were to be hung. Working from this ground plan and the sketches, a model was made to conform exactly with the position of the drops and set pieces on the actual stage.

The finished sketches were traced, and these tracings, together with the model, went to the scene painters. They were blocked off in three-quarter inch squares, which transfers to three feet on the actual scenery. By using these blocks the painters could more consistently follow the proportions as prescribed by the original designs. Constant reference to either the scenic models or the painters' elevation was necessary to ensure the same "coloring" on the finished scenery as was prescribed in the original design. As a production was built each scenic unit, property piece or any other item used in the production was assigned a number and/or identification label.

After an opera was placed in the repertoire, a notebook detailing virtually every technical aspect of the production was assembled by the technical director in order to ensure accurate and efficient remounting of the opera.