ARTEFACT, Special Issue: Making Fictional Interior

Deadline: Oct 1, 2026

Elisa Chazal

Making Fictional Interiors: Techniques, Public and Modular Materialities (17th-21st Centuries).

We are pleased to announce a call for papers for a special issue of the journal ARTEFACT dedicated to the making of fictional interiors: techniques, public, and modular materialities (17th-21st centuries). Proposals for articles in French or English should be submitted to Elisa Chazal (elisa.chazal@eui.eu) and Barbara Bessac (barbara.bessac@gmail.com) by 1 October 2026. Proposals should take the form of a 400-word abstract accompanied by three to five keywords, a short indicative bibliography and the author's bio-bibliography. If your proposal is accepted, you will be required to submit a 35,000-character article with copyright-free illustrations in May 2027 for double-blind peer review and inclusion in the editorial calendar of the journal ARTEFACT.

ARTEFACT. Techniques, histoire et sciences humaines

Argument
A showroom, a period room, a film or theatre set, or a fictional interior are a life-size, ephemeral space, constructed to replicate an existing, lost or entirely imagined interior. It cannot be lived in, only visited: it is a three-dimensional space designed to be observed from within. As such, it questions the changing nature of our relationship to images because it materialises space and speaks to our desire to inhabit it.
Through the interplay of scale and composition, the representation of an interior is projected into a coherent and legible space. Its construction draws on various technical processes and materials to create the illusion: fake walls, plaster, papier-mâché, patina, trompe-l'œil, furniture arrangement, prop-making and lighting. The audience imagines entering an actual space, but despite the disappearance of the 'fourth wall', they cannot fully occupy the space. The second half of the nineteenth century thus saw the image break free from its two-dimensional surface to become a miniature or enlarged version of itself, taking shape through objects and 3-D materialisations. Theatres, panoramas, shops and exhibitions gradually moved away from the depiction of the physical environment and the illusion of its depth in favour of life-size immersive installations.
In fictional interiors, there is a tension between the visible and the invisible, between what can be seen and what is left to the imagination, starting with the absent silhouettes of the inhabitants. The curtain rises on a richly detailed set, but the actors never take the stage. This phenomenon, known as the 'missing person effect', refers to the ability of a fictional interior to give the impression that the space has just been vacated (Sandberg 2021). The material setting is scrutinised in search for clues to the political, social, cultural and generational identities of its inhabitants. The narrative unfolds as much through the staging of materiality as through the audience's imagination. Details are recognised, assimilated, sometimes rejected – and thus the interior becomes

familiar, or, conversely, confronts the audience with otherness.
By its ephemeral and imaginary nature, a fictional interior is poised between the real and the fake. Its aspirations to faithfulness and realism make its relationship with authenticity more complex than it first appears. In theatre, fictional sets strove to be as realistic as possible. Trompe-l'œil painted backdrops gradually gave way to 'real' objects. These objects, brought to life and skillfully arranged, complement and enhance the performance. On stage at the Théâtre du Gymnase in the 1850s, the clock always kept exact time with the one on the Place de la Bourse. The interior of the stage connects with the outside world: it incorporates furniture from local shops, displays the accessories of socialites, mimics the practices of collecting, or becomes a small museum of things from yesteryear. And just as in the theatre, it is often genuine objects that make up the faux interiors of these ephemeral, immersive spaces.
The artificiality of these interiors lies above all in their heterotopic – and sometimes heterochronic – nature: they recreate a place or a time that ought not to be there. Immersive attractions, like historical reconstructions, physically immerse the audience in a space stripped of its original purpose, removed from its surroundings, blurring the boundaries between the private and the public. This setting is designed to be immediately recognisable and legible, even though it is entirely fabricated. And the public often craves authenticity: although aware that they are immersed in a fiction, they constantly seek to distinguish the real from the fake and the set designers' fantasies, in order to position themselves in relation to the narrative suggested by the fictional setting.
But fictional interiors are, above all, places of wonder and the dramatisation of everyday life, where the emotional and sensory impact of the material world is harnessed so that the audience can project their own narratives onto them. The strategies for intelligibility and immersion employed by artists creating fictional interiors are diverse. Not only are the rooms furnished, but they are also depicted in situations of use. The doors of a wardrobe are open for the laundry to be seen; the table is laid; a letter on the desk appears to have been left unfinished; a jacket rests on a chair; photographs fill the frames. Behind a pane of glass, the light from a fake window mingles with that of the table lamps. Sometimes one can even make out the imprint of a body on the bed, signs of wear and tear on objects, or dust. The attention to detail further blurs the boundaries between the fictional space and the rest of the exhibition space.
For the duration of a visit, the public makes the ephemeral setting their own, becoming its inhabitants. Fictional interiors serve a variety of purposes: to educate, to sell, to entertain. Elements of the décor can become clues to a claim of belonging to a predefined territory, language or culture. National narratives and political ambitions are embedded in material details – from shop windows to exhibition spaces – and are then renegotiated by the public through immersion. Behind their appearance as playful spaces, fictional interiors convey political messages and socio-economic stances.
Indeed, it is precisely their dual role – oscillating between the capacity to both educate the public and encourage them to consume – that lies at the heart of debates surrounding the best-known and most extensively studied fictional interiors: period rooms. These dramatisations of interior history prioritise spectacle, rejecting textual context in favour of illusion. Their museological value has often been questioned, contrasted with a scientific display of objects, considered better suited to showcasing, educating, and conveying a certain historical truth. Yet the fictional interior seems to have regained its place in exhibition spaces, through contemporary installation art and experiments of reinvented period rooms.
Although they are extracted from the image to exist outside of it, these ephemeral spaces are

often captured, sketched, photographed, reproduced and re-consumed, as revealed in sales catalogues and other promotional materials. When flattened onto paper once more, their ambiguity is magnified: it becomes even more difficult to distinguish the real from the fictional, the past from the present, volume from the painted surface, and the outside from the inside. Fictional interiors are often places of passage, fixed in time only through their depiction in two-dimensional formats. Less tangible than they appear, they owe their legacy entirely to documentation, for fictional interiors are not created to last. The objects that make them up are tidied away, sold, reused or forgotten in other interiors, whether fictional or not. These fluid and modular spaces illustrate the circulation of material culture between the private and public spheres, and respond to the capitalist imperative to constantly renew an immersive experience that is ever more up-to-date, spectacular and authentic.
This special issue aims to ground the definition of the fictional interior within the many disciplines that have studied it: material history, art history, design history, the history of technology, theatre studies, film studies, museography and contemporary artistic practice. We encourage submissions that explore the fictional interior over the long durée, examining its processes of creation, its uses and its transformations, and emphasising the intersection of the spaces in which it is exhibited.

Suggestions for proposals

Theme 1: Techniques
The aim is to identify the fabrication techniques common to fictional interiors from the medieval period to the present day – such as those found in temporary attractions in Vauxhall-style gardens, ceremonious processions, or opera sets – in order to highlight continuities and breaks over the long term. How do these immersive installations differ, and how have they been reinvented? We will examine the processes of assembling and reassembling fictional interiors, the evolution of spatial layout, materials, scenographic techniques and construction timelines, as well as methods of creating illusion. Particular attention will be paid to the career paths and motivations of professionals working in the field of fictional interiors, such as theatre set designers, painters and scenographers, museum curators, furniture contractors, and entertainment or exhibition designers. We aim to address issues relating to their training, networks and skills, as well as the conditions of their professions.

Theme 2: Audiences
This theme will examine the multifaceted educational and political roles played by fictional interiors in relation to the public: the staging of the national narrative, the adoption of hygiene standards, and the uptake of consumer practices in the fields of interior design and fashion. We will analyse the advertising and commercial strategies deployed in showrooms, shop windows, shops and exhibitions to promote sales. This theme may also provide an opportunity to discuss the future of period rooms in museum exhibitions, and to imagine ways in which this format might be reinvented in the 21st century, in order to renew narratives and the diversity of voices.

Theme 3: Ephemeral Materialities
We propose to examine the challenges of writing a history of fictional interiors, in terms of the ephemeral nature of sources, their preservation and their destruction. We will determine the methods for studying a three-dimensional space through images: how can we document and represent

a fictional interior; how can we film, write about, photograph or reproduce it?

Submission Guidelines
Proposals should be sent to elisa.chazal@eui.eu and barbara.bessac@gmail.com by 1 October 2026, in the form of a 400-word abstract, with 3 to 5 keywords, a short indicative bibliography and the author's bio-bibliography. If the proposal is accepted, a full article (35,000 characters, with copyright-free illustrations) is expected to be submitted in May 2027 for peer review and to be included in the journal's editorial calendar.

Co-coordinator
Barbara Bessac (NYU London)
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