For flower power or power suits, it took a team to reproduce the ’60s on AMC’s Mad Men.
Jon Hamm as Don Draper, dressed for success.
FROM THE BUSTLING BULLPEN AT STERLING COOPER

TO DON DRAPER’S POLISHED POWER SUITS, IT'S THE INTRICATE ON-SCREEN DETAILS THAT BROUGHT MAD MEN TO LIFE OVER THE PAST SEVEN SEASONS. AS MOURNFUL FANS TOASTED THE MAY 17 FINALE — OVER MAD MEN MARTINIS, NO DOUBT — THE STYLE-OBSESSED WERE LIKELY MUSING: SO HOW DID MEGAN DRAPER SNAG THE PERFECT SHAG RUG FOR HER LAUREL CANYON BUNGALOW? AND HOW DID IDA BLANKENSHIP END UP WITH THOSE ON-THE-NOSE KNICKKNACKS ON HER DESK?
According to the team behind the scenes of the Madison Avenue–based drama, it all comes down to research.

Prior to each season, Mad Men’s extensive crew spent hours scouring vintage stores and combing through catalogs, articles and newspaper clippings for anything pertaining to the 1960s. From there, everything went into a file until it was time to be referenced. And when series creator–executive producer Matthew Weiner handed out copies of his latest script, the real magic began.

“The script is our guide,” said production designer Dan Bishop before the show took its final bow. “We’ll go through that and make notes of the references that Matt makes for each episode. We draw pictures of things to get built and go out looking for locations to accommodate the scene.”

The next step: sketch out a floor plan and confer with the episode’s director to make sure that a scene can be blocked in a particular way. At this point, Bishop (a five–time Emmy nominee for his work on the show and a winner for HBO’s Carnivale) and his team would loop in other parties, such as set decorator Claudette Didul (a three–time Emmy nominee for Mad Men).

“Using the knowledge I have collected over the years and referencing our research files, I’ll team up with Claudette to go through the architectural elements of the set,” Bishop explained. “She will then begin laying out the furniture plans and working in the details of the décor.”
Didul’s role involved scavenging for everything from chimneys to artwork, rugs, couches and plants at antique shops and elsewhere. Her success in decorating the scenes always came down to her treasure-hunting persistence.

“Most of the furniture on set is old,” Didul said. “It’s not stuff that I found at Room & Board. We occasionally will make a few things, but the majority of it is vintage and I take a lot of pride in keeping it that way.”

Tasked with determining whether a roll of ’60s-era Scotch tape should be yellow or white was propmaster Ellen Freund. “I handle the tiny stuff,” she explained. “I’m looking for things like period-correct sandwich Baggies and ballpoint pens.”

To track down accessories such as vintage eyeglasses and briefcases, Freund scoured Etsy and eBay. She also had her team create items that were unobtainable, such as snack foods and cereal boxes. Beyond that, she got creative in her quest for the quintessential props. “We find a lot of goodies through people’s parents,” she explained. “Any friend or production assistant on the show... if their parents or grandparents have lived in a house for more than thirty years, we ask to raid their basements. And it’s remarkably successful.”
Opposite: Betty, in a houndstooth coat and leather gloves, visits an East Village flophouse in search of a young violinist; Don gets behind an 8mm triple-lens movie camera; Mason Vale Cotton as Bobby Draper, with his period-correct breakfast; Christina Hendricks, as Joan Hollo...
While Bishop, Didul and Freund were busy bringing the set to life, costume designer Janie Bryant came in to style the characters. After watching vintage movies and looking through ’60s magazines and newspapers for inspiration, Bryant (a four–time Emmy nominee for Mad Men and a winner for HBO’s Deadwood) would start fabric–swatching and sketching costume concepts for the various actors.

“I’ll work with vintage vendors that sell me items directly,” said Bryant, for whom wardrobe design is all about capturing the tone and mood of each episode. “I’ll browse through vintage stores to try and find the perfect piece or I’ll go to the incredible costume houses in Los Angeles. Don Draper, for instance, has this mysterious and elusive quality about him. I loved the idea that his many gray suits are like his armor. The suit is his uniform. The details are very minimal.”

She dressed Roger Sterling, on the other hand, in more provocative pinstripes with monogram cufflinks.
and showy, expensive ties. Beyond the principals, Bryant was responsible for styling 200 to 300 background actors on any given episode.

The charm behind Mad Men was always its ability to take viewers back in time to a world of chic sheaths and cigarette smoke. It’s due to a crew that worked tirelessly to find the perfect items — but they all agree that it’s a job that isn’t always seamless.

Take, for instance, the IBM 360 computer that appeared in season seven. That wasn’t something sitting around at the corner store. “We had the entire staff looking for parts around the country,” Bishop said. “We did massive amounts of research and had to learn all about the IBM model. Eventually, we located the main board from a guy in Rhode Island, but that was just one of the parts. We had to clean it up, build a custom steel case for it and wire it so that the lights would flash.”

Assembling the office flowers for this year’s Valentine’s Day episode was a large-scale production. First Freund had to track down period green-glass vases. Her team rifled through old newspapers with Valentine’s Day ads to find out not only which flowers were available in New York in February 1969, but how they were arranged. Freund had to then create and re-create the various displays over the next nine days, as they were grabbed and passed around so many times in the episode.
Even the show’s mastermind was astonished by the wizardry of his team in bringing the Mad Men world to life. “Almost every day when I would go to that set and walk in and see a three-dimensional representation — it would so exceed my imagination that I never got used to it,” Weiner said in May, as the season closed in on its final episodes. “It was an emotional experience.” And though he created the blueprints for what ultimately appeared on screen, Weiner credits his renowned production crew for drilling down and nailing every detail.

“I’d say, for example, ‘Roger Sterling is reading the paper in bed,’ and Ellen would say, ‘Well it’s four in the afternoon. I think Roger has already seen the New York Times, and the Herald Tribune just went out of business. If you want him reading the paper, it’s going to be sort of weird. Do you want to just give him a magazine? How about a Playboy?’ I could never really get over the completeness of the environment.”

For a series that has won the Emmy as outstanding drama series four times, it’s not surprising that in the crafts departments of Mad Men, no stone ever went unturned. Said Bishop: “Every little thing is scrutinized.”