

## 5 Decor Secrets From the Set of 'Empire'



"Empire" photo courtesy Chuck Hodes/Fox Broadcasting Co.

If you manage to tear your eyes off Cookie and Lucious' intense relationship, then you've probably drooled over the insanely cool set design on "[Empire](#)." The homes featured on the so-bad-it's-great Fox drama are as opulent and interesting as the hip-hop mogul hero/villain and his family members who inhabit them. Whether it's Lucious Lyon's (**Terrence Howard**) lavish mansion or Jamal's (**Jussie Smollett**) sleek townhouse, these interiors were artfully put together by veteran set decorator **Caroline Perzan**.

We talked to Perzan about the design secrets hiding within these gorgeous often-gated homes—and how you can apply them to your own, presumably less glamorous, life.

### Secret No. 1: Combine old with new, sometimes in the same piece

"In Los Angeles, it's easy to decorate a show, because there are so many prop houses. But outside Los Angeles [the show is set in NYC but shot in Chicago], it becomes more of a challenge. I think it's more fun



in a way, because you get to be far more creative. I was buying a mid-vintage couch in an antiques shop and decided to update it to a more high-end Mid-Century Modern look. By the time I am done with it, I will make it look like it's worth \$20,000. And it will be a unique piece. That's much more interesting than going to a prop house for a couch. And in real life it's a more interesting approach, too."

The "Empire" set doesn't use many props—it's all real furniture, shopped for and often upgraded by the set designer.

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## Secret No. 2: Decorate a room around a special item

"The grand piano in Lucious' office is designed by [Warren Shadd](#), the only African-American piano manufacturer in the U.S. He is a lovely man who wrote me a letter introducing himself to me. Now, I get a lot of letters, but I thought this was really cool; the range of his pianos—baby, grand, upright—were really amazing. He came on his own dime to us, because he was passionate about the show and felt so strongly that the pianos should be a part of what we were doing. I would never have been able to afford them! Terrence has them tuned up to his specifications."

The grand piano in Lucious Lyon's office is the most expensive item on set.

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### Secret No. 3: Determine what art you love, and use it as a decorating motif

“From the very beginning of the series, artwork has been a really big deal to **Lee Daniels**, ‘Empire’s’ co-creator. He loves contemporary African-American artwork, which is why the main character’s mansion is

filled with it. He's one of the few directors I've worked with who often starts a shot focusing first on the piece of art before bringing on the actor. I present some pieces to Lee, and then I figure out what room they should be in. I have more art on this show than I have had with any previous project I have ever worked! Not everyone has to spend what we spend on artwork, but figuring out what you love and decorating around it can add a lot to any room.

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"We have artwork in the mansion from well-known artists such as **Kehinde Wiley**, **Walter Lobyn Hamilton**, and **Mickalene Thomas**, but Lee wanted to showcase up-and-coming artists, too. For the second season, to freshen things up a bit, Lee asked me to start checking out several art schools, and I have spent a tremendous amount of time getting to know several of the artists we have used on the show.

"One example is a guy we found right out of art school, **Jon Moody**. One of his big mural pieces is in Jamal's penthouse and has been featured quite a bit. Lee got so excited about Moody's work and looks forward to making him famous! There's no way an artist like Moody would ever have received this type of exposure if it weren't for Lee."

The set features contemporary African-American artwork by famous artists and recent art school grads.

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## Secret No. 4: Be realistic about what you can and can't have

"The actors on the show try to take stuff home all the time. There is so much cool stuff on the set. Take those gold and platinum 'Empire' record albums in Lucious' office. I have to say, 'No! You can't take them!'"

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## Secret No. 5: Display *your* creations

"Not only is Terrence a great actor and musician, he is also an incredible sculptor, too. He creates these incredible acrylic, [three-dimensional sculptures](#). We would love to see them on the set, but of course, he hasn't time to really work on them!"

Might we see Terrence Howard's own sculptures in Lucious Lyon's office one day?

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