

Deck the Hall: Behind the Scenes of Manor House Decorating

By Chloe Wingard, Curatorial Projects Specialist

When I work in the Manor House during Stan Hywet’s holiday event, Deck the Hall, the #1 question people ask me is, “*How long does it take to decorate this place?*”

The short answer is “three days,” but there’s a lot more to the project than assembling trees and putting ornaments on them.

I also have to preface this by saying this blog only details the work that goes into decorating the Manor House. All year, there are other teams collaborating on plans for decorating the Carriage House Courtyard and Playgarden, or programming and picking out new songs for the Dazzle light show. Or evaluating and planning how to light the pathways and trees throughout the estate. Deck the Hall really is an ALL HANDS ON DECK (pun intended!) event at Stan Hywet; staff and volunteers really pull out all the stops to make it bigger and better every year.

The process for decorating the Manor House starts months, sometimes even more than a year in advance of the actual event. The very first thing the team has to tackle is the overall theme and the look of the Manor House for that season. In 2019, our theme is **A Classic Comic Hero Christmas**.

In the last few months of 2018 — more than a year in advance — we began working out the concept for each room, based on the overall theme: Superman, Batman, LEGO bricks, etc. Throughout winter and spring of 2019, we contacted a small handful of local makers, designers, florists and artists to partner with us. We also asked groups of staff and volunteers at Stan Hywet to “adopt” a room to decorate. I’m very excited with the amount of talent that we bring to Deck the Hall this year!

By the end of April, we have all of our room ideas nailed down, and start to pick out decorations for each room’s design. We usually invite a room’s decorating team over to the Manor House to look through our giant binders that catalog the thousands of decorations in our collection. Between ornaments, tree toppers, picks, garlands, lights, figurines, trains, ribbons, wreaths, and decorations crafted on-site (whew!), we fill the entire Trunk Room and its three storage bays on the third floor of the Manor House. Everything is housed in hundreds of stacked bins, and is kept meticulously organized by a dedicated group of staff and volunteers.



Over the summer, just as it's getting really hot and humid, we get down to business, making the special decorations for a particular season's theme. We create photo inspiration boards for each room, and communicate regularly with our design teams.

Since giving away every last secret about our upcoming season of **A Comic Hero Christmas** might spoil the excitement, I'll describe the process of creating last year's Deck the Hall, *Winter Wonderland*.

For the Music Room I made a snowman out of newspaper, tape, and glue. He took a few weeks to get just right and really creeped me out until he got his eyes!



I also made a costume for one of our mannequins to look like an ice queen, decorating a tree with her ice powers. The sequins were hand-painted Mylar tiles, hot glued to a corset. I used scrap cape fabric and Velcro to make a removable cover for the center front closures — so the front was seamless sequins.



The cape was 12 feet of fabric, sewn together based on a pattern I made. My office was covered in glitter for weeks after cutting and sewing this piece!



Lastly, I made an igloo out of 559 plastic jugs! The hardest part was collecting all of the jugs. The igloo went together quite easily on a cardboard base, using hot glue as “mortar.” It was a blast to build!



Three to five weeks before the official decorating days in mid-November, we organize the selected decorations, taking them out of the storage bins in the trunk room and dispersing them to their designated rooms. Since we’re still open for tours and events, all the decorations are tucked away in closets and hiding spaces throughout the Manor House — ready to go when decorating begins.



Two weeks before decorating, the collections team rents a truck and hauls about 60 tree bags up to the Manor House. Our giant 20 foot tree takes up five jumbo bags! We really get a workout on Tree Moving Day. Sometimes we need the help of a PVC candy cane to make the bags fit into the truck...



We also start to move furniture out of rooms, and clear out spaces for decorations. It's exciting for visitors to take a tour at this time because everything is in transition. It's a little bit of "behind the scenes" as guests get to see the Manor House full of hustle and bustle, and maybe get to go somewhere or see something not normally on view on any other day.

One week out, we assemble Christmas trees for *five whole days*. It's all hands-on-deck to fluff the branches and string the lights of around 40 trees. It takes a team of about 5 staff/volunteers almost an entire day to fluff, assemble, and tie-off the 20-foot tree with 33 rows of branches. Stan Hywet owns about 75 Christmas trees, but were always looking to replace the ones with un-hinged branches or sparse looking builds.



Then come the days we have prepared for all year.

Decorating days are the Monday and Tuesday of the week before Thanksgiving. The estate is closed to the public because work is being done all over the estate. In the Manor House, these days are dedicated to teams who are to putting their creative touch on our historic rooms. In 2019, Kern’s Home and Garden, the Stan Hywet Flower Arrangers, Jill Pangas and Renee Campbell (a local decorating duo), Edward J. Sajovic Design LLC, Akron Makerspace, NEO LEGO User Group, and several groups of staff and volunteers from the estate spends these days helping us decorate.

These two days are a very controlled chaos filled with glitter, pine needles, and pipe cleaners galore. Because of the historic walls and surfaces in the rooms, we can’t use any adhesives on decorations, so pipe cleaners are our best friend during Deck the Hall. Depending on how big the room/design is, teams of 2-6 people usually take 6-12 hours to decorate a space from start to finish.

On Wednesday, after two days of festive frenzy, the collections team adds music players, spotlights, and stanchions to the finished rooms. We vacuum up all of the at-large glitter and pine needles (always VERY necessary). After the final details are added, we open the doors to the media and Stan Hywet members at the end of the week for preview night.

In November and December 2018, we opened the Front Gates to more than 43,000 people to marvel at the outstanding work everyone did across the property.

After the new year, it’s time to put away Christmas-everything for another year – or at least 10 months. Putting decorations away is just as organized and detailed as when they’re removed from bins to decorate. The storage areas are covered with Excel spreadsheets to keep it all straight. Everything gets tucked away into the Trunk Room. The trees get lined up in their numbered bags in the Great Hall to get taken back to storage. Once cleaned and stored away, we start the process again: planning and creating another season of Deck the Hall in the Manor House.



Take a “Nooks & Crannies tour to check out our Christmas storage area in the Manor House!

Be sure to attend 2019 Deck the Hall, **A Classic Comic Hero Christmas**, opening on November 29, 2019.