
“Bring out the best, conceal the worst, and leave something to the imagination.”

George Hurrell

During the 1930s and early 1940s, George Hurrell (1904–1992) reigned supreme as Hollywood’s preeminent portrait photographer. His timeless images helped define the public personas of some of the “Golden Age’s” most glamorous figures. With a keen eye for artful posing, innovative lighting effects, and skillful retouching, Hurrell developed an idealized style of portraiture. Its influence extending far beyond Hollywood, Hurrell’s style shaped popular—and for many unattainable—standards of beauty for years to come.

Today, established actors and aspiring stars alike enjoy considerable agency in crafting and refining their public image. Thanks to a wide array of social media platforms, they can access vast audiences directly, without the mediation of an all-powerful Hollywood studio. This was not the case during the formative years of the American film industry, when studio bosses exerted extraordinary control over both the physical appearance and public personas of their stable of stars. Actors’ names were

routinely changed by the studios to make them sound more alluring—or to mask their ethnicity. Additionally, makeovers could radically alter features such as hairlines, hair color, and even eyebrows, as in Hurrell’s photograph of Jean Harlow (cover). Studio wardrobe departments boasted outstanding costume designers whose creations enhanced the glamour of the stars. By employing sophisticated lighting techniques, cinematographers ensured that actors always appeared to their best advantage on screen.



Fig. 1. *Greta Garbo* by George Hurrell, gelatin silver print, 1930. Acquired in part through the generosity of an anonymous donor.

To market its stars and generate box office revenue, each studio’s publicity department worked overtime, churning out countless flattering stories that shaped an eager public’s perception of its favorite performers. Hollywood’s publicity machine owed much of its success to the endless stream of portraits produced by the studios’ in-house photographers. Among the principal purveyors of screen glamour and star power was photographer George Hurrell, whose mesmerizing images burnished the luster of established stars and Hollywood hopefuls alike.

Hurrell was only twenty-five when he was hired as a “stills” photographer in the Publicity Department at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Founded in 1924, the Hollywood studio claimed to have “more stars than there are in heaven.” At a time when MGM was churning out as many as fifty-two films a year, Hurrell’s job was to fuel the public’s interest in each new release by capturing memorable images of film royalty such as Greta Garbo (fig. 1). “There was drama and romance every day,” he recalled. “The stars had faces, electric personalities. They were truly glamorous people and that was the image I wanted to portray.”

Ultimately growing tired of MGM’s punishing production schedule and



Fig. 2. *Johnny Weissmuller* by George Hurrell, gelatin silver print, 1932. Acquired in part through the generosity of an anonymous donor.

the demands of the studio’s bosses, Hurrell opened his own portrait studio on Sunset Boulevard in 1933. There, working on a freelance basis, he created some of his most iconic portraits of MGM stars, including Jean Harlow, Johnny Weissmuller (fig. 2), and Marlene Dietrich (fig. 3). He was also free to photograph actors from the other major studios, such as Twentieth Century Fox’s Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (fig. 4).

Hurrell closed his Sunset studio in 1938 and served briefly as the head of photography for Warner Bros. before



Fig. 3. *Marlene Dietrich* by George Hurrell, gelatin silver print, 1937. Acquired in part through the generosity of an anonymous donor.

establishing a new studio on Rodeo Drive. Shortly after accepting a contract with Columbia Pictures in 1942, he was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Forces. His wartime service included working with a military film production unit and later making portraits of generals at the Pentagon.

Following World War II, change was afoot in Hollywood: anti-trust rulings lessened the major studios' once iron-fisted control over nearly every aspect of the film industry. Television's small



Fig. 4. *Bill "Bojangles" Robinson* by George Hurrell, gelatin silver print, 1935.

screens emerged to challenge big screen dominance. Simultaneously, candid photographs, produced by portable, small-format cameras, rose to replace the meticulously crafted, large-format studio portraits that epitomized Hurrell's style. For George Hurrell, Hollywood's "Golden Age" had come to an end. "When we stopped using those 8 x 10 cameras," he declared, "the glamour was gone."

—Ann M. Shumard
Senior Curator of Photographs

STAR POWER

*Photographs from Hollywood's
Golden Age by George Hurrell*

For further reading:

Whitney Stine, *The Hurrell Style: Fifty Years of Photographing Hollywood*. New York: John Day, 1976.

Mark A. Viera, *Hurrell's Hollywood Portraits: The Chapman Collection*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997.

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Cover: *Jean Harlow* by George Hurrell, gelatin silver print, 1934. Acquired in part through the generosity of an anonymous donor.

*All works are in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

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