

lure and perfect them in his darkroom, the printing presses that cranked out movie magazines like *Photoplay* would multiply them infinitely. Jean Harlow's smoldering glances and Clark Gable's self-assured masculine gaze were transformed by Hurrell's alchemy into a hybrid of art and advertising: their allure was a hot commodity that sold tickets.

Hurrell began his career in an era of black and white, and although his color Kodachrome portraits of the early 1940s are brash and confident, the "Hurrell look" is really about light. Using a boom light as a single spotlight in the early 1930s, he gave his subjects the paradoxical tangibility and mystery that enhanced their glamour. *Motion Picture* magazine once dubbed Hurrell "Rembrandt with a camera." There is a point to the hyperbole: Hurrell's careful and sensitive manipulation of light was indeed painterly. Black-and-white film concentrated the drama of his early photos, and emphasized the subtle effects of light, texture, and shadow that he was able to conjure. Like a painter, Hurrell knew what to emphasize and what to sheathe in shadow.

Hurrell was like a painter in his reliance on careful artistic retouching as well, done both by himself and by associates. When he photographed Joan Crawford without base makeup in 1931 to promote the film *Laughing Sinners*, the commercial lens of his camera captured every freckle. Only after MGM retouch artist James Sharp spent six hours retouching the original negative with graphite did the photo resonate with its full "Hurrell" glamour. In addition to retouching, Hurrell used selective burning (additional exposure) and dodging (reducing exposure) to darken or lighten selective areas of the master prints he made for darkroom technicians to copy and disseminate.

Working with stars on MGM sets and in his private studio, Hurrell improvised, cajoled, and coaxed to bring his subjects' allure to the surface. He once used a pratfall to make Greta Garbo smile, and he played records on his Victrola to loosen things up during most of his sessions. The fantasy that his photos offered to everyday Americans—proximity to icons—was the reality that he lived. The difference was that Hurrell was in charge of the fantasies, which were carefully staged. "If I posed Jean Harlow in a certain attitude that did not look right in my camera," he once recalled, "I would say, for instance, 'Change the position of your left hand,' and she would deftly move her

palm or her fingers a fraction of an inch without altering the whole effect."

The glamorous effects and attitudes of Hurrell's early star portraits were concocted as advertising, but their aesthetic roots can be found in the traditions of European portraiture. Although America was born as a democracy, devoid of hereditary nobility, its citizens still crave aristocratic and saintly figures to look up to; and before World War II, its movie stars gradually came to satisfy that yearning. Movies brought a mass audience into close contact with figures who, when they appeared onscreen, were literally larger than life. Their appeal was carefully refined and distributed in Hurrell's photography. His photographs might not have been seen as art when they were produced, but their immediacy and glamour influenced the works of artists like Andy Warhol. Warhol had grown up reading movie magazines, and he later collected Hurrell photos. (Hurrell and Warhol, who met and were photographed together, were both Catholics who understood the power of icons.)

The photographic mirages that Hurrell created may lose some of their impact when viewed by a younger generation that can't recognize the stars he photographed, and their subjects' poses and attitudes may come across as quaint to a society overstimulated by the overload of sex and violence offered in virtually all of today's media. To appreciate Hurrell's genius—and the culture of his times—you have to imagine an America where charisma sold more tickets than action and where the gleaming light cast by Hurrell's overhead lamps onto Jean Harlow's silken features created enough sexual suggestion to fill a theater. When you look at Hurrell's photos, you have to remember that the movies were still young, and its stars offered America the visions of idealization and allure that it yearned for. Modern glamour began in Hollywood during the Depression, and Hurrell—who understood the art of glamour as well as any artist of the time—was there when it was born and nurtured its growth.

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Joan Crawford, 1932

Self-portrait



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Jimmy Durante, 1931