GEORGE HURRELL

Gelatin silver prints

Jean Harlow, 1933

Ramon Novarro,
(The New Orpheus),
1929

JOHN SEED

George Hurrell

The Invention of Modern Glamour

Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., 1933

On Sunday, October 20, 1929, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a special photo spread in its rotogravure section: "Novarro with Impressions." The subject of the spread was silent film idol Ramon Novarro. George Hurrell, a young society portraitist who had once trained to be a painter, had taken the portfolio of photos using an aging view camera with a used Verito lens. It was breathtaking.

Heavily retouched and printed on orthochromatic paper that framed their subject in a silvery chiaroscuro glow, the plates were luminous and perfect. One of the most striking images, *The New Orpheus*, endowed Novarro with the poise of a polished marble statue brought to life. Another, which cast Novarro as the operatic character Parsifal—with a horse owned by socialite Florence Barnes serving as his gleaming steed, Lightning—is infused with the enveloping crepuscular light of a Maxfield Parrish painting. "My God, George!" exclaimed Barnes when she saw the finished print. "Even the horse looks glamorous."

That Thursday—October 24, 1929, or "Black Thursday"—the stock market lost 11 percent of its value at the opening bell in heavy trading. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 had begun. As the Great Depression unfolded, Hurrell's photos of MGM's stable of actors and actresses would heighten and sustain their careers at a time when most Americans felt the bottom dropping out of their world. America's crisis was the crucible that shaped George Hurrell's opportunity. The light cast by his overhead spotlights, which caressed the features of the era's most notable stars, presented them as figures of hope and icons of desire that distracted a nation during dark times.

A Bold New Talent

When Hurrell started work at MGM on January 2, 1930, he joined one of America's most influential and productive studios, a powerhouse movie empire built on imagination and profits. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Culver City backlot, a "city within a city," was made up of six fenced lots that covered 185 acres. The company had an incomparable roster of stars, including Buster Keaton, Clark Gable, Norma Shearer, and Greta Garbo; and a connection to the media empire of William Randolph Hearst, whose Cosmopolitan Pictures used MGM as an outlet for its movies.

A sampling of MGM's early films gives an idea of the company's ambition, and also of the rapid evolution of movie technology. Since the 1924 merger between Metro Pictures and Goldwyn Pictures, the studio had released a torrent of silent classics, including *Ben-Hur* (1925), the most expensive silent film ever made; *Torrent* and *The Temptress* (both 1926), featuring Greta Garbo; and its first Technicolor picture, *The Black Pirate* (1926). In response to the hit Warner Brothers' "talkie" *The Jazz Singer* (1927), MGM hastily added sound effects to *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928), including a roaring "Leo the Lion" at the film's opening. *The Broadway Melody* (1929), MGM's first musical, won the year's Academy Award for Best Picture. In 1930, MGM released another spectacular musical, *Rogue Song*, a full-color picture filled with dialogue, singing, and dancing.

On his first day of work, Hurrell entered MGM's stills department offices, where he replaced chief portrait photographer Ruth Harriet Louise—a stylish twenty-seven-year-old who had shot more than 100,000 negatives during her five years with the studio. Louise's refined and elegant style had helped boost the career of femme fatale Greta Garbo; but after Norma Shearer showed her husband, movie producer Irving Thalberg, a suite of photos that George Hurrell had made of her, Louise's contract was not renewed. The boldness and perfectionism—the *glamour*—of Hurrell's photos instantly rendered Louise's work passé.

In the two and a half years he spent at MGM before walking out to open his own studio in July of 1932, and in the subsequent years he spent photographing stars in that studio, Hurrell would make significant contributions to the notion of modern glamour. Although he was working with a modern medium in the early twentieth century, Hurrell's work is informed by and draws its power from his deep understanding of the tradition of idealized portraiture in Western art.

The Origins of Glamour

Sir Walter Scott once wrote in his notes that glamour is "the magic power of imposing on the eyesight of the spectators, so that the appearance of an object shall be totally different from the reality." Although its precise origin is unclear, the word *glamour* has its roots in the occult: it related to potions, enchantments, and spells. The magic of glamour, when it works, has always been to construct a parallel world: a spellbinding zone of near-impossibility inhabited by perfect specters. In European art before the modern era, the qualities that we associate with glamour were found in idealized images, including funeral art, religious images, and portraits of royalty and nobility.

The encaustic (hot wax) portraits found on the wooden mummies of the Roman citizens of Coptic Fayum radiate an otherness that resulted from the efforts of their anonymous creators to help the dead present their ideal visages to the future. One such third-century portrait subject has a liquid gleam in her eyes and sparkling jewelry that denotes her elegance and class. Who knows what she actually looked like? One of the jobs of funeral art is to idealize, and we can assume that her features have been perfected and even fantasized. Idealization—the depiction of people and things as more perfect than they are—is the elder cousin of glamorization, and part of the "magic" of ancient art is its ability to reach outside of reality towards eternity and perfection.

Renaissance painters served aristocratic clients who had an increasing appetite for portraits—especially paintings that emphasized their piety, power, and hereditary connections—and glamorization was sometimes called for or even demanded. The Marchioness of Mantua, Isabella d'Este, who had the vanity of a movie star, was so displeased by Titian's first portrait of her that she asked for a second version that would show how she'd looked forty years earlier. The resulting portrait lacks psychological insight, but does broadcast a certain doll-like hauteur. There is "glamour" in her aristocratic reserve.

Renaissance artists felt most free to invent, fantasize, and eternalize their subjects in religious and mythological contexts. Innumerable ivory-skinned virgins and alluring Venuses resulted, and patrons who paid substantial fees could be depicted peering in from side panels of Annunciations. These wealthy art lovers had the painted equivalent of front row seats that allowed them to peer into a universe of angels and other eternal figures. Proximity to perfection was an exclusive and expensive privilege of the few. But the images they paid for remained cloistered in chapels—where dogged pilgrims might catch a glimpse of them and light a candle—and on the paneled walls of inaccessible palazzos and chateaus. Art museums, and printed postcards of works of art, were still in the future.

Even if glamour as we now understand it didn't exist in the culture of Baroque Europe, it is hard not to think of the Spanish master Diego Velázquez as a "glamorizer" of sorts. Although Velázquez rarely prettified his subjects, he did depict them with all of the trappings of power. One of his jobs was to make the inbred and plain princes and princesses of the Spanish Habsburgs look impressive in portraits. Velázquez never quite managed to paint King Philip IV as a glamorous figure, but he painted the bland, dull-eyed monarch in glistening, richly embroidered fabrics that provided visual distraction. And yes, distraction is one of the great tools of glamorizers.

Catholic devotional and religious paintings from the Baroque era had the liberty of presenting idealized saints with smooth skin and glistening eyes. The firm, clear features of Florentine painter Carlo Dolci's *Madonna in Glory* convey a "glamour" that is enhanced by both subtle directional lighting and a halo of stars: no distracting fabrics are necessary.

Modern glamour began to take shape in the nineteenth century. The expanding European middle class had many reasons to resent the social, economic, and sexual privileges that had been reserved for the aristocracy, and as a result, French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist portraits are often characterized by a certain bourgeois modesty. For example, in Manet's portrait of Jeanne Demarsy—recently acquired by the Getty Museum for more than $65 million—we encounter a beauty whose allure and sensuality are simultaneously shielded and enhanced by her association with nature and delicate fabrics.

Around the time that Manet was posing Jeanne Demarsy with her parasol, the upstart medium of photography was challenging and expanding the possibilities of portraiture. Although slow exposures necessitated stiff poses, photography democratized portraiture: almost everyone could afford a tintype. It is hard to grasp now, but when photographic portraiture began to become commonplace, people must have felt a new sense of social position and possibility when they first glimpsed themselves on the finished plate.

When glass negatives and photographic papers appeared, the multiplication of single realistic photographic images became possible, and this innovation would be crucial to the invention of modern glamour. If a photographer could manage to capture—and possibly manipulate and retouch—a single glamorous image, it could appear on innumerable printed posters and in countless newspapers and magazines. One of the reasons that modern art began to deviate from the long tradition of illusionism (and indeed figuration) in painting is that it needed to distinguish itself from the naturalistic representation that was the camera's natural forte (despite the fact that many early photographs, such as the Civil War images of Mathew Brady, were carefully staged). In the opening decades of the twentieth century, while modern painting abstracted and deformed the image of the human figure for an exclusive "art world" audience, photography offered mass-produced glamour—increasingly tinged with sexual allure—to a mass audience. The tradition of idealization, now tied to glamour, was ready to be reinvented.

Modern Glamour

By accepting the job at MGM, George Hurrell had seemingly strayed from his original goal of becoming a fine artist. But he didn't see it that way. Although he was now a highly paid ($150 per week) commercial photographer, he had an irksomely independent attitude about the studio, the stars, and his new role: "Hell, this is only temporary," he later recalled thinking. "I'm just doing this to make a couple of bucks. Then I'm going back to my easel and paint." Ultimately, the sense of artistic independence that he brought to the highly regulated role of movie studio photographer is what made his work stand out. Hurrell never saw himself as only a studio functionary: he was an artist just like the stars were; and his photos were, in his mind, as much works of art as any painting.

One thing that photography and painting have in common is that they capture a moment. Hurrell's job was to create single images that would lure crowds of Americans into movie theaters and palaces where the big screen would flood with images—thirty-two each second—and after the mid-1920s, there was dialogue, too. Advertising movies with photographic images required Hurrell to be visually succinct, and to devise images endowed with tremendous immediacy. If he could capture moments of al-

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

Jimmy Durante, 1931