

GEORGE HURRELL'S HOLLYWOOD

GLAMOUR
PORTRAITS
1925-1992



MARK A. VIEIRA

FOREWORD BY SHARON STONE

IMAGES FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF:
MICHAEL H. EPSTEIN & SCOTT S. SCHWIMMER
AND BEN S. CARBO-METTO

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TO THE MEMORY OF MY PARENTS, ALAN AND ELEANORE VIEIRA.

PAGE 2: Norma Shearer, 1933.

OPPOSITE: Joan Crawford, 1934.

OVERLEAF: Bianca Jagger, 1977.

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FOREWORD BY SHARON STONE

George Hurrell was a master of light, elegance, and glamour. When I met him I had just arrived on the Hollywood scene. The legendary film-star manager Irving “Swifty” Lazar introduced me to the legendary photographer, Mr. George Hurrell, and they agreed that I had a kind of “lost type of glamour of bygone days.” A photo session with George was set up immediately. He would shoot me in a satin gown on Mr. Lazar’s giant satin bed, with a 1940s hairstyle and a smoldering look to match. I was amazed, when after some preparation of hair and makeup and a quick wardrobe change, George took a mere five or six shots.

Yes, he stepped in and lifted my chin just so, opened my pointer finger away from my others, turned my hand “the right way,” asked me to part my lips, and in that rough voice said, “Okay, kid. Now look right here.” And I did somehow—clear that I was with the greatest movie-star photographer of all time. Click, and he changed the giant 8x10 film slide from side to side. He asked me to hold still. He stepped in and adjusted my head. Click, and we were done. There was never any waste. No ego. No pretense. George was simple enough to appear blue collar and yet simple enough to be a king.

After that shoot we worked together a number of times. Each time I learned the mastery of the “clean photo”—the elegance of the body, the hand, the foot, the “look.” He knew it and he taught it to me.

I got to see almost all of his original prints from the beginning of his career onward, almost all of the real work, and I got to spend time with him right up until the end of his life. In fact, I was the last person George photographed before he died. And that shoot was as clean, clear, and simple as all the others. I was wearing leopard and lying on a saber-tooth tiger rug. Yes, a real saber-tooth tiger . . . rug. That was an era, he was a king, and yes, I learned how to be a movie star from the best of the best, Mr. George Hurrell.

Since then I have worked with many masterful cinematographers. I have found that somewhere during the film they always comment about George. There is a throwaway remark here or there, like “Move that key light; it should be more Hurrell,” or “Hey, that really reminds me of a Hurrell photograph.” Or “George Hurrell would have really loved you.” That one brings a tear to my eye, as the feeling was mutual.

—SHARON STONE



Sharon Stone was an exemplary Hurrell subject. She exuded glamour—and she collected Hurrell prints.



George Hurrell's life was marked by dramatic, unexpected shifts of fortune. Here he is in 1980, on the verge of the most extraordinary shift of all.

PREFACE

George Edward Hurrell was the creator of the Hollywood glamour portrait. When he came to Hollywood in 1930, a movie star photograph was soft and undistinguished, like a portrait from a Main Street salon. Hurrell introduced a bold new look: sharp focus, high contrast, and seductive poses. He told a story with each photo, blending the ethereal and the erotic. He created imagery that was unprecedented and unique. How did an unknown artist from the Midwest become the most influential photographer in Hollywood history?

In 1929 Hurrell was twenty-five, a full-time commercial photographer and sometime landscape painter. He was eking out a living in Los Angeles when the film star Ramon Novarro came to his Westlake atelier. A series of sessions produced a remarkable portfolio. Novarro was so pleased that he showed it to Norma Shearer, the highest-grossing star at the most prestigious studio in the world. Shearer commissioned Hurrell to make photographs she could submit for a new type of role. She got the role and Hurrell got a job—head portrait photographer at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

The dreamlike world of silent pictures had created a star system based on personalities who were bigger than life. The naturalism of talking pictures diminished them. If the star system was to survive the studios would have to enlarge them again. Along came Hurrell, who adapted his technique to this purpose. Using new lighting and retouching effects, he created spectacular, enticing images of Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, and Jean Harlow, and sold them to a worldwide audience. In the process, Hurrell perfected a photographic idiom: the Hollywood glamour portrait.

In a town where imitation is the sincerest form of survival, Hurrell was an original. Not only was his lighting unique; his personality was as much a tool as his famous “boom light.” He was loved by his subjects and tolerated by moguls such as Louis B. Mayer, whose patience he tried with occasional bursts of temperament. For thirteen years, Hurrell was the highest paid, best-known photographer in Hollywood. Bette Davis and Joan Crawford gave him their fabulous faces, and he immortalized them. By 1943 he had worked with every studio in town, had a beautiful wife named Katherine, and was affluent. His sitting fee was \$1,000, when the dollar bought thirty times what it does in 2013. The millionaire producer Howard Hughes paid him \$4,000 to photograph an unknown girl in a haystack for *The Outlaw*. Censors suppressed the film, but Hurrell’s photos made Jane Russell a household word—which Hurrell already was. “Hurrell is one of Hollywood’s few genuine geniuses,” said *Motion Picture* magazine. “He is Rembrandt with a camera.” He was working at Columbia Pictures during the week and in his Beverly Hills studio on weekends, shooting foldouts for *Esquire* magazine. At thirty-nine, he had an enviable life and a secure future. The photographer of stars had become a star.

This is the story I told in *Hurrell’s Hollywood Portraits*, which was published in 1997. It was the first book to show Hurrell’s work in accurate chronology, to describe it in the context of the personalities he captured, and to analyze it in accessible photographic terms. I am a working photographer, using vintage camera equipment to make portraits in his style, so I can explain his technique and show why his art had five distinct periods. There were many craftsmen in the studio system, but only Hurrell’s work had the periods that characterize a Picasso.

Hurrell’s Hollywood Portraits was published just as the Internet and digital photography were gaining currency. Before long, images from the book were all over the Web. Faces in magazine ads

had a digital sheen that tried to copy Hurrell's retouching technique. Norma Shearer, known as the First Lady of M-G-M, became "Hurrell's patron." Joan Crawford, the most durable star in Hollywood history, was "Hurrell's muse." An authoritative book had honored the artist. I was no longer a Hurrell expert. I was a Hurrell scholar. I thought I had completed my life's work. It had only begun.

If you've ever written about a famous person, you can expect to answer questions for the rest of your life. "How long did you work with George Hurrell?" And "What happened to his career after Hollywood?" And "What was he like?" I am asked to identify his subjects, his sessions, and their dates; to demonstrate his technique; to give free appraisals; to weed out counterfeit prints; and, happily, to print his vintage negatives. In short, I function as a professor of arcana. This gives me the opportunity to share knowledge and to gain more. In the seventeen years that have passed since I wrote *Hurrell's Hollywood Portraits*, I have learned that a few facts I wrote were incorrect. Hurrell never photographed Marilyn Monroe, even though numerous people claim that he did. This is why I have written a second Hurrell book. The next time you see a Hurrell portrait, I want you to know where he shot it, how he shot it, and what makes it great.

I have also written this book because of the photographs. At one time, in order to see a Hurrell portrait, you had the choice of a museum, a gallery, a book, or a fortunate friend. Technology has changed that. In our democratized millennium, you can see Hurrell's work on the great god Internet for free, any day, any time, anywhere. But what are you seeing? In the '70s I complained about books with poor reproductions of his work. I criticized copy prints that leached the subtle shades of gray from his black-and-white imagery. I have more to complain about now. Few of the Hurrell images on the Web retain the quality of his originals. I wrote this book to ensure that his photographs can be seen as he intended. I have secured prints made by Hurrell himself. I have included prints that I made in a photographic darkroom from his original negatives, sometimes under his tutelage, and sometimes under the supervision of his colleagues. I have scanned the prints myself. And I have entrusted these prints to Running Press, a publisher committed to fine lithography.

I have still another reason for writing this book. Hurrell died twenty-one years ago, yet he lives on. His personality vibrates in every image. People want to know more about him. There is more to tell. Like every Hollywood legend, Hurrell was bigger than life—brilliant, mysterious, mythic. I want to clear the apocrypha from the myth. Truth is more compelling than myth, *Hollywood Babylon* notwithstanding. I want to take the Internet taint off Hurrell and put him in a worthy context. I also want to tell what has not been told.

In 1943, when Hurrell was at the height of his prominence, he suffered a vertiginous fall from grace. In 1975, when I met him, he was seventy-one but could not retire. He had lost his fortune to bad investments and alimony. Instead of shooting glamour portraits, he was working as "unit still man" on *Gable and Lombard*, a feeble tribute to the stars he had immortalized. After years of middle-aged struggle, the one-time Rembrandt of Hollywood was an anonymous studio employee. The artist was in eclipse, his portrait career in ashes.

Six years later, Hurrell was Hollywood's latest comeback story, a celebrated artist. Elderly but robust, he was charging \$5,000 to photograph stars such as Diana Ross and Liza Minnelli. He was selling his 1930s work for twice that, and in galleries that once had sneered at Hollywood photography. He was the subject of articles, books, and shows. He was enjoying a second career.



Hurrell's aptly named "boom light."

This is the story I add in this volume: Hurrell's return from the ashes. I was there, sometimes as a participant, sometimes as an observer. I watched him wend his way through the monolithic soundstages at moribund studios, through the lavender-scented living rooms of invidious collectors, through smoky dens of thieves, and into chic galleries. I saw him flirt with history and scandal, wooing this one and dismissing that one. I was there, like so many others, because I was entranced by the beauty of his work. Before long, I saw it tarnished by bootlegging, theft, and fraud.

The George Hurrell I knew was two people. Depending on what day you saw him, or what time of day, he was as bright as his spotlights or as dark as his famous shadows. When I knew him, I was too starstruck to anticipate his vagaries of mood. As a result, I was hurt and disillusioned. By writing the story of his life I have come to terms with that experience. I thank the individuals who have helped me write an objective account of Hurrell's second career. I have made every effort to convey the truth, both about the artist and about his images.

It is those images that motivate this book. They are luminous, powerful, and timeless. Most have not been published since they were made. As you will read, they have traveled a circuitous route from the studios to this book. With the help of the private collectors and the archives I thank in the Acknowledgments, I have worked to make *George Hurrell's Hollywood* the definitive work on this trailblazing artist, a shimmering montage of fact and anecdote, light and shadow.

—Mark A. Vieira, January 23, 20



George Hurrell was twenty-six when he made this self-portrait with an Eastman Century studio camera in the M-G-M portrait gallery.

INTRODUCTION

The artist who would become famous for turning human beings into latter-day gods was born a Roman Catholic at the beginning of the twentieth century. George Edward Hurrell was born on June 1, 1904, in the Walnut Hills district of Cincinnati, Ohio. At one point his publicity would state that he had been born in Covington, Kentucky, a few miles across the Ohio River. Like so much of his life, the facts of his birth are blurred by myth. What is known is that his paternal grandfather came to America from Essex, England, where his forebears had been shoemakers for hundreds of years. George Hurrell's grandmother came from Dublin. His father, Edward Eugene Hurrell, was born in Cincinnati. His mother, Anna Mary Eble, was born in Baden-Baden, Germany, and came to Cincinnati as a child. Edward and Anna had five boys and one girl. George was the first born. He was followed by Edmond ("Ned") in 1907, Russell in 1910, Elizabeth in 1912, Robert in 1915, and Randolph in 1918. From all indications, the Hurrells were devoutly Catholic. Randolph studied for the priesthood for years but relented a month before his ordination. Likewise, Elizabeth was poised to enter a convent but instead chose the secular life.

In an *Esquire* magazine interview in the late 1930s, George Hurrell made a cryptic statement about his father, the only time he would ever mention his family in print. "I'm a somewhat screwy photographer—an artist gone wrong," he said. "And so wrong, I'm the shoemaker's favorite child." In 1909 Edward Hurrell moved his growing family to Chicago so that he could start a shoe factory. Chicago was the Catholic stronghold of the Midwest, and young George was undoubtedly influenced by twelve years of Catholic education. He served as an altar boy and eventually felt he was being called to the priesthood. In the spring of 1922, as he approached his high school graduation, he decided to acknowledge what was known in Catholic school as a "vocation." He applied for admission to the Archbishop Quigley Memorial Preparatory Seminary in Chicago. Yet he heard another calling. "As long as I can remember," he recalled fifty years later, "I wanted to be an artist. I was drawing all the time, in school and out. Art was my favorite class." George had always been putting his impressions of people on paper. By late high school, he was sufficiently skilled to consider a career in art. Hedging his bets, he applied to the renowned Art Institute of Chicago. He was accepted by both the seminary and the school. He chose the school, mostly because he could attend on a scholarship, and he began to study painting and graphics.

George did not find the Michigan Avenue campus entirely to his liking. The classes may not have been sufficiently stimulating or it may have been that he was easily bored and given to impatience. After a short time at the Institute, he left and enrolled in the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, which was located a block away, at 81 East Monroe Street. (Although this Academy had the same name as an earlier incarnation of the Art Institute, it was an entirely different school, founded in 1902 by the Pictorialist photographer Carl Werntz.) "I went to the Academy of Fine Arts at night for a while," recalled Hurrell in 1980, "and I worked part-time. I would just fit that in. Whenever I had to pay rent I would go to work." His odd jobs did not include photography, although he did have a passing acquaintance with it. Students were encouraged to take snapshots during the warm months to use as the basis for the paintings that they would make in the winter. This was the first time George used a professional-gauge camera and entered a photographic darkroom, but he was more interested in

surrealist painting, especially that of Giorgio de Chirico. After a year and a half, George dropped out of school, yielding to the inquietude that would inform the rest of his life.

In early 1924 George took a job as a hand-colorist in a commercial photography studio, but he soon wandered from the drafting table. "I got curious one day about life in the photography department," he recalled. His curiosity led to a transfer, and he was soon assisting catalog photographers, making photos of iceboxes, hats, and—appropriate to his family history—shoes. "One day," he recalled, "an emergency occurred in the studio. It was understaffed and a photo had to be taken right away—and there was no one else to take it." This was George's baptism by fire, his first professional photograph. It was a thrill, but it did not last. The elder staff members returned and George was back to assisting. After three weeks, he grew bored and quit. After taking a few more photography jobs, he found one that lasted. The portrait photographer Eugene Hutchinson had a splendid studio in the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue, about a block south of the Art Institute. George was hired as a colorist but moved on to negative retouching, airbrushing, and darkroom work. He also learned how to shoot copy negatives of photographs and artwork. Although he continued to paint, it was his photographic work that made a fortuitous connection.

In early 1925 the California artist Edgar Alwin Payne was visiting Chicago with his wife, Elsie, and daughter, Evelyn. Payne was known for painting *en plein air*, particularly the Sierra Nevada mountain range. He had been traveling through Europe for two years and was exhibiting at the Art Institute, which contracted with Hutchinson to shoot negatives of the art. Because George was entrusted with this task, he had an entrée to a lecture that Payne was delivering at the Institute. Never one to stand on ceremony, the young photographer asked the esteemed artist for a critique of his paintings. Payne liked a landscape that George had recently completed. A number of visits followed.

At forty-two, Payne was an acclaimed artist, showing in numerous galleries simultaneously. He had helped found the Laguna Beach Art Association in 1918, and became its first president. He described Laguna's Mediterranean climate, lush landscape, and thriving art colony, and told George that if he was serious about an art career, he might do well in California. George was not averse to a move; besides the lure of Laguna's artistic offerings, the Chicago winter had made it difficult for him to get rid of what he would later call a "stubborn bacterial infection."

In May 1925, George climbed into a Hudson touring car with the Payne family and set off for California. Payne was a true artist. In 1912, when he and Elsie were about to be married, he had suddenly asked her to call their guests and tell them to come several hours later—when the light in the chapel would be right. Anecdotes like this enlivened the drive to California, but it was interrupted by a minor accident in Denver. The party of four escaped injury, possibly because they were insulated by a carload of canvases. George's first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean came on a balmy evening in late May. "No place like California," was Payne's breezy observation. For a young artist from the Midwest, this was an understatement. The image of Emerald Bay seen through a curtain of eucalyptus leaves would stay with Hurrell for the rest of his life.



The *plein air* painter Edgar Alwin Payne was responsible for George Hurrell's coming to California in 1925. Hurrell made this portrait in Laguna Beach in 1926.



George Hurrell's portraits were first published by the Stendahl Galleries in Los Angeles, so it was inevitable that Hurrell should make a portrait of the influential Earl Stendahl.

CHAPTER 1

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IN THE 1920s

On June 1, 1925, George Hurrell celebrated his twenty-first birthday and began to live like an artist. Friends of Edgar Payne helped him find a place to live, a “picturesque cottage” that turned out to be a semifurnished shack called the Paint Box. It had been built in 1904 by J. N. (“Nick”) Isch, who was the proprietor of Laguna Beach’s general store and post office. The Paint Box was a place where an artist could pay for room and board with his or her work, so in a happy demonstration of *quid pro quo* Isch accumulated an impressive art collection from tenants such as Emily White, James McBurney, and Donna Schuster. Hurrell’s arrangement was equally liberal; he would more or less watch the cottage for an absentee tenant, Malcolm St. Clair, a film director whose father, watercolorist Norman St. Clair, was one of Laguna’s first resident artists.

Hurrell soon found a sympathetic physician, but he prescribed pills that were both large and expensive. “I had to make a living,” recalled Hurrell. “I’d brought a camera from Chicago, and these artists needed pictures of their paintings. I’d take them out in the sun and put a Wratten panchromatic K3 filter on the camera [because the film was black and white and the color values of the art had to be approximated], and I’d shoot these paintings. I was getting my bread and butter out of photography.” And his health was improving.

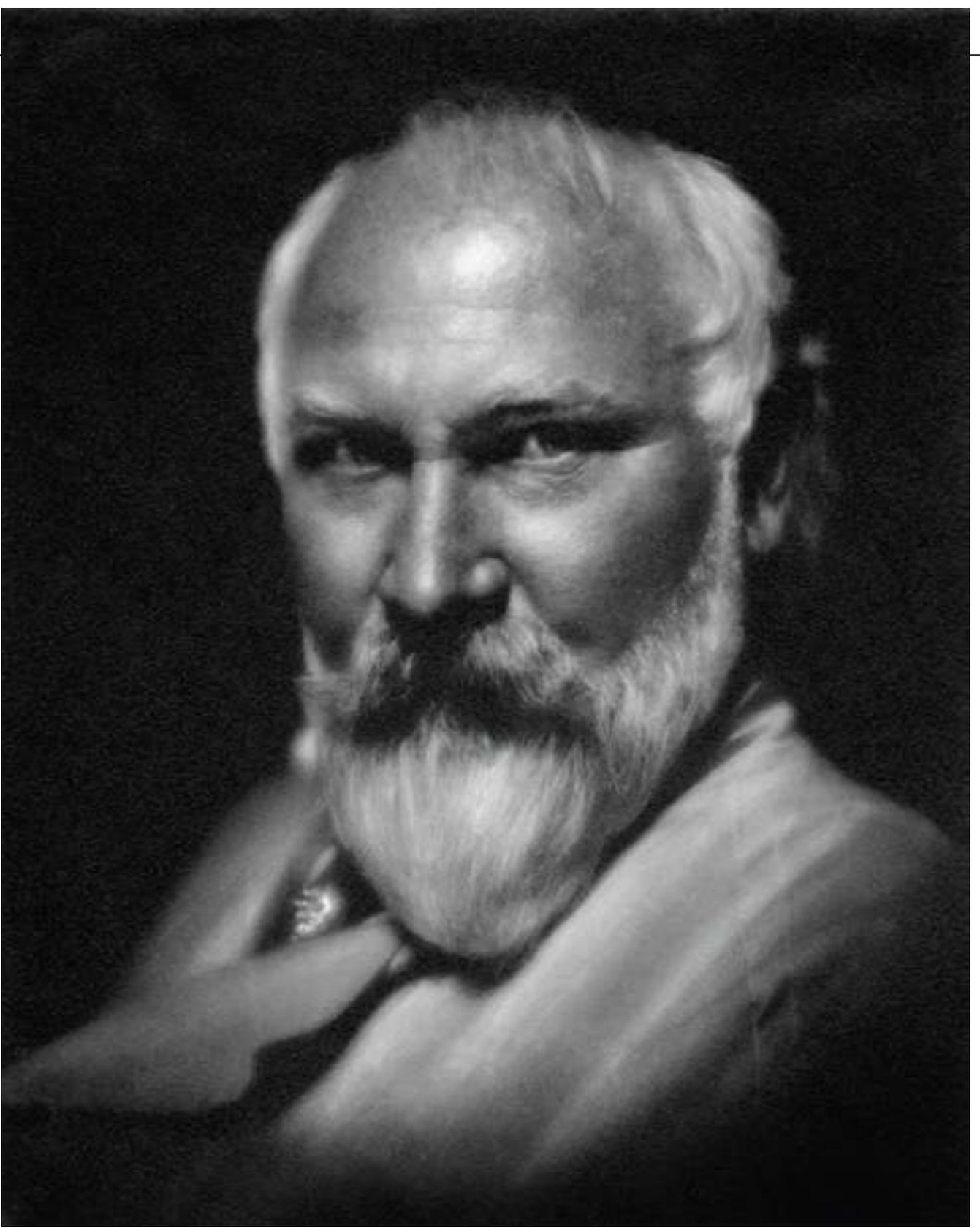
Hurrell’s photographic training did not consist solely of copy technique. He had learned how to make a portrait. Because the 8x10-inch sheet film he used was large and its exposure time lengthy, the rhythm of a portrait session was like that of a sketch session: the artist captured a pose, flipped to the next sheet of paper in the sketch pad, and told the model to assume a new pose.

Hurrell owned a portable 8x10 camera and an eighteen-inch Wollensak Verito portrait lens. This lens was manufactured with a chromatic aberration that created haloes around highlighted areas of the image, an effect called “soft focus.” It gave the photograph a hazy, dreamy quality, not unlike the *sfumato* effect in Renaissance art, but only if the iris was used wide open, which was usually around F/4. Soft focus diffused facial detail, so the negative required less retouching, which saved both time and money. Moreover, the wide-open lens required less exposure time, which made poses more natural.

Before long, Hurrell was photographing Laguna artists. One of his first subjects was Edgar Payne. These dignified personages came to sit for him, even if he was young and his equipment primitive; he was using household bulbs with saucepans for reflectors. Sometimes he used nothing more than the north light coming through his studio’s skylight. Hurrell knew enough about lighting to control both intensity and direction. He had learned technique from Hutchinson, but he also had an innate understanding of what light and shadow could do. “Rembrandt was my ideal,” he said later. “Rembrandt used one source of light, and that’s what I did.”



William Wendt was known as the “Dean of Southern California landscape painters.” He was one of Hurrell’s first portrait subjects in Laguna. The lighting in this study of Wendt is subtle, considering the primitive implements Hurrell was using at the time.



Frank Cuprien was one of the *plein air* painters whom George Hurrell photographed in Laguna Beach in 1925 and '26. Cuprien was known as the "Dean of Laguna Beach artists." Hurrell's use of negative retouching to emphasize highlights is obvious, even in this seminal work. Hurrell was twenty-two when he made this portrait.

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