They had faces then, in the golden age of Hollywood when a publicity photo could make or break a star. The visual power of George Hurrell's portraits, with their Rembrandtesque lighting and dramatic poses, shaped the careers of stars like Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, and Jane Russell, and did as much or more to establish them as their film performances. Mark Vieira, who adopted Hurrell's techniques and uses them to this day, explains how the master portraitist lit and retouched his photographs—a portrait of Crawford before and after retouching reveals what an artist the one-time painter really was—and analyzes their impact.

My Personal Review:
George Hurrell is universally acknowledged THE Hollywood portrait photographer, the man who recreated during the talkies much of the mystery of the silent stars through his breathtaking photographs. At a time when the finest still photography was becoming more incisive and natural, Hurrell managed to balance this new naturalism and directness in highly manipulated ways, producing in his best work iconic images of the great stars of MGM. After the second World War his work became largely passe, appearing too contrived and built up for an age demanding grit and spontaneity and an off-hand naturalness.

This work seeks to both show and tell the story of Hurrell's highwater era as not only the major photographer of the stars, and MGM in particular, but also his development as artist. Breathtaking photographs fill the volume—Harlow on a polar bear skin rug, her gown glowing a burnished white against the softer fur while all around her Hurrell captures an infinite play of lighting, the entire amazing and unrepeatable, a dream world evoked out of the iridescent sheen of an infinity of microscopic silvery gifts left by the platinum negative; Norma Shearer transformed from attractive but doughty into a timeless vamp, surpassing her silent film predecessors with an electric sexuality never before captured on still film; Joan Crawford,
Hurrell's great muse at the top of his game, seen in powerful forceful images, unrelenting in their hold on an Apollonian authority.

Hurrell's flamboyant personality, his novel and sometimes off-putting behavior during shootings, seems now unfortunately taken as role template by many lesser fashion photographers. In his day and at his height during the late twenties through the beginnings of World War II Hurrell dominates a demanding and highly accomplished professional field. Whether you live in a sumptuous penthouse overlooking Central Park, need a single book for the coffee table in the living room of that restored Neutra you just purchased, or just enjoy reasonably priced fashion books, Hurrell's Hollywood Portraits fits the bill. At a significantly reduced price it's a lovely reminder of one of the nicer advantages of democratic publishing: not every fine art book is a prohibitively expensive limited edition printed by a small press.

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