

GEORGE HURRELL

Gelatin silver prints



Ramon Novarro,
(*The New Orpheus*),
1929



Jean Harlow, 1933

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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.