

Photographer George Hurrell's Moonlight Serenade to Hollywood

Movie icons shot by the legendary VF lensman—on view at Washington, DC's National Portrait Gallery.

BY DAVID FRIEND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE HURR

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Marlene Dietrich BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Photographer George Hurrell shot for *Vanity Fair* during the 1930s, infusing his Hollywood portraits with rich shadow, seductive light, and gobbets of sex appeal. A survey of his work, “**Star Power**,” organized by senior curator Ann Shumard at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, evokes a lost era of peak glamour. Hurrell’s images summon a time, deep in the throes of the Depression, when moviegoers were pining for icons whose onscreen lives might take them out of their own, if only for an afternoon.

Hurrell gave these stars outsize scale and otherworldly shimmer. And on occasion, as evidenced here, some of his subjects could convey such sultry incandescence that certain museumgoers with more frail constitutions may want to bring along a vial of smelling salts.

Between the wars, many of his photographic peers preferred to render cinema’s giants in a sort of gauzy dreamland, but **Hurrell (1904–1992)** was known for his facility with a new invention—the boom light—that gave his pictures a peculiar clarity and coolness, as if illuminated by moonbeams. That nocturnal cast and pinpoint sharpness transformed Hurrell from a mere creator of studio publicity stills into a master of glam.

Before *Vanity Fair* suspended publication in 1936 (its current incarnation was launched in 1983), Hurrell, **George Hoyningen-Huene**, and **Horst P. Horst** were the three H-men of Hollywood, covering celebrities—as well as fashion—for *VF*, *Vogue*, and other outlets through their bold, modernist images. (Hurrell, in fact, enjoyed such longevity that he was among a handful of portraitists commissioned by both the Jazz Age *Vanity Fair* and the contemporary version. He was fortunate enough to photograph, for instance, John Barrymore in 1933, as well as the actor’s then nine-year-old granddaughter, **Drew Barrymore, in 1984**, two years after her appearance as Gertie in Steven Spielberg’s *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*.)

Hurrell enthusiasts—or truly *long-term VF* subscribers, who might have flipped through the magazine in the 1930s *as toddlers* and would now be in their 90s or 100s—will recognize two of the magazine’s most memorable shoots in the exhibition. **Bill “Bojangles” Robinson**, the tap dancer, vocalist, and actor, is caught mid-tap as he executes his famous “stair dance.” And **actor-comedian Jean Harlow** (whom the magazine, at the time, characterized as a “platinum blonde siren”) is shown as if lounging around her living room, perhaps in front of a roaring fire. Harlow, always in on the joke, is accompanied—wink-wink—by a horizontal companion. *Rrrroar*.

The show is on view through January 5, 2025.



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Jimmy Durante



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Joan Crawford and Clark Gable



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Jean Harlow



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Johnny Weissmuller



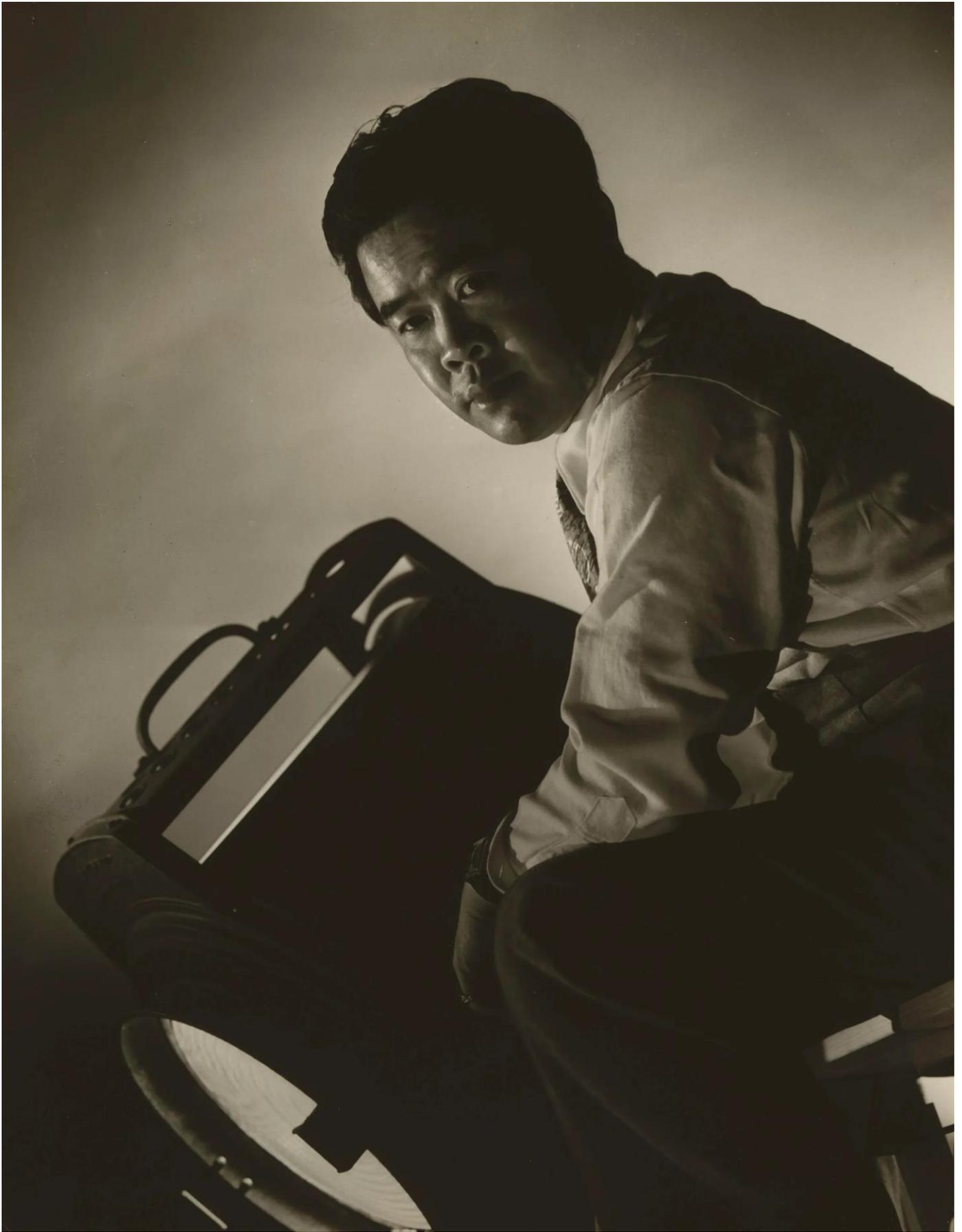
BY GEORGE HURRELL

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Dorothy Lamour



BY GEORGE HURRELL

James Wong Howe



BY GEORGE HURRELL

Gilbert Adrian



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Greta Garbo



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Spencer Tracy



BY GEORGE HURRELL.

Myrna Loy