SESSION 11 · UNIT 2 — LIGHT & PERSON · Dec 01, 2026

Yousuf Karsh & George Hurrell

Karsh 1908–2002 · Canadian (born in Armenia) — Hurrell 1904–1992 · American

The manufactured portrait — psychological revelation and invented persona



Winston Churchill · Yousuf Karsh, 1941

"Within every man and woman a secret is hidden, and as a photographer it is my task to reveal it if I can."

— Yousuf Karsh

KEY WORKS

- Winston Churchill, 1941 (Karsh) — the most reproduced photograph in history
- Norma Shearer, 1929 (Hurrell) — the reinvention that got him hired at MGM
- Ernest Hemingway, 1957 (Karsh)
- Joan Crawford (Hurrell) — his most-photographed star

CONTEXT

Karsh was the portraitist of the 20th century's great figures — over 15,000 subjects across six decades — working with a single key light, fill, and separation refined to an extreme. His Churchill portrait was made in ten minutes after a state dinner; Churchill refused to put out his cigar, so Karsh plucked it from his lips, and the resulting expression of surprised fury became the defining image of wartime resolve. Hurrell, trained as a painter, built personas rather than revealing them — Norma Shearer hired him in 1929 to reinvent her image before a racier role, impressing her husband, studio chief Irving Thalberg, enough to make Hurrell head of MGM's portrait gallery. He invented the boom light, modeled on a boom microphone, to sculpt shadow and highlight mid-sitting.

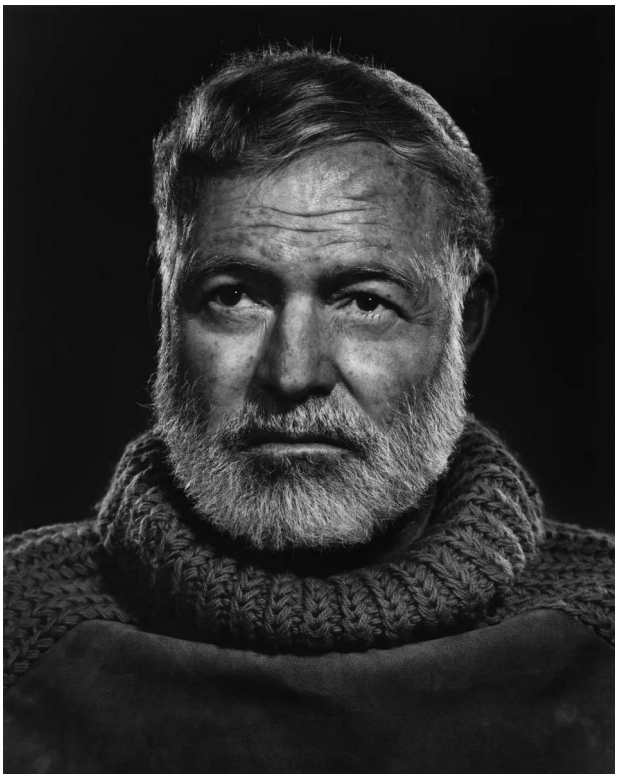
WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Karsh reveals what's already there through psychology and a mastery of single-key-light technique; Hurrell builds what isn't there yet through stagecraft and the boom light. Together, two opposite uses of the same simple lighting toolkit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Karsh plucked Churchill's cigar to get his expression; Hurrell built the persona the studio wanted, not the person in front of him. Where is the line between revealing a subject and fabricating one?
2. Both worked from essentially one key light, refined to an extreme. What does mastering one light teach you that adding more doesn't?

MORE IMAGES



Ernest Hemingway · Yousuf Karsh, 1957



Joan Crawford · George Hurrell



Clark Gable & Joan Crawford · George Hurrell, 1936