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Auction features rare images of Hollywood's Golden Age

By Bob Strauss, Staff Writer

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PHOTOGRAPHIC AUCTION

Ever wanted to own a classic George Hurrell photograph of Joan Crawford or Jean Harlow? Even better, an original camera negative?

Or maybe you'd like a pouty portrait of 15-year-old Angelina Jolie by Harry Langdon. Or one of George Clooney from back when his Aunt Rosemarie was helping him get a foothold in show business.

You'll have your crack at these and around one million other items at The Michael H. Epstein & Scott E. Schwimer Glamour Photography Auction on Friday and Saturday.

"It's even hard for me to believe the quality and the quantity that's in this catalog," noted Joseph Maddalena, whose Calabasas Hills-based Profiles in History is staging the auction. "There are over 1,300 lots, so no matter who you like, we'll have something of them. There's everyone from the '30s, '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s . . ."

And earlier. There's a nude shot of D.W. Griffith's icon of Victorian Era innocence, Lillian

Gish, reclining beside a pond — taken a good decade before the advent of sound cinema.

Acres of brilliantly lit star portraits fill the auction catalog, which is viewable and downloadable at www.profilesinhistory.com. You can also make an appointment to view items at the auction house through Thursday by calling 310-859-7701.

The collection took Epstein, a former telecom owner, most of his 55 years to build up. Two uncles were television producers during his childhood, and he'd always hit them up for autographed actor stills.

Epstein became a savvy collector of modern art, and ultimately applied that trained adult eye to his childhood obsession.

"I embraced the glamour photography world for two reasons," Epstein said in the art-filled, Studio City canyon home he shares with entertainment attorney Schwimer and their dog Triple. "One, because I loved it. And I realized, with the amount of funds I had access to, that I could have the finest glamour photography collection in the world."

While the auction includes pieces from all of the great Hollywood portrait shooters — as well as fine art photography by Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton and others — there's an emphasis on MGM's top pros of the studio's 1930s/40s Golden Age: Hurrell and Clarence Sinclair Bull.

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"What stands out to me about Hurrell is the retouching, the lighting and the subjects that he shot," Epstein explained. "Just the depth of Crawford, Harlow and Norma Shearer in the auction is amazing."

Epstein estimates that he's spent several million dollars building the collection over the years, and says he was once offered \$10 million for it.

So why's he selling now? Epstein comes from a family of philanthropists, and plans to fund favorite charities that have been hard hit by the recession with most of the auction's proceeds.

But there was also the fact that, aside from the many photos that adorn the walls of his and Schwimer's homes, they hadn't enjoyed many of the pieces for decades.

"I had three warehouses, and I walked into one of them one day and realized that I couldn't really navigate myself around it," Epstein recalled. "When my archivist came in there and started pointing things out, there was stuff I hadn't seen in 20, 25 years. I thought it was only fair that other people had the ability to see some of these one-of-a-kind things."

It wasn't always easy to prepare for the collection's transfer, emotionally as well as practically.

"This is Michael's love of his life," Maddalena, who's known Epstein for 25 years, observed.

"While doing the catalog, there were days when I'd be exhausted and he's pining away, going 'It's killing me to sell this!'"

Maddalena and his staff, who specialize in auctioning historical documents and pop culture memorabilia, spent close to a year sifting through the photos and negatives to assess the relative value of each item and lot.

"I couldn't even give an opinion until I saw everything," Maddalena recalled. "I might think something was great, but they might have had stuff that was way better. That took about three or four months. There's never been anything like this auctioned before, so there's nothing to compare it to."

Maddalena said that the suggested bidding ranges he's come up with are extremely reasonable, and that he expects a lot of average film fans, as well as dealers and serious collectors, to come away from the auction with bargains.

"People are starting to say, 'Wow, these are beautiful, I want something like this hanging on the wall of my house,'" Maddalena reckoned. "Especially if you live in Southern California, and you want a great '30 s or '40 s photograph that goes with the theme of your house, for a fraction of what a print or a lithograph costs, you're buying a real piece of Hollywood history."

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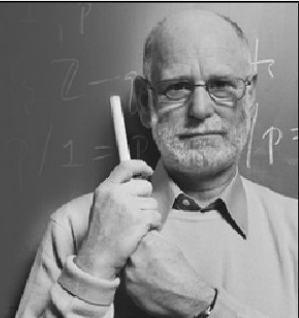


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