

# PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES OUR DESIRE FOR CELEBRITY AND GLAMOUR

Story By  
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**Amy Henderson, Smithsonian cultural historian, writes about how photographic images are central to the creation of Hollywood celebrity, advertising, and desire.**

It's interesting to consider that after still photography helped catalyze motion pictures, Hollywood in turn had to rely heavily on still pictures to create and sustain the careers of its movie stars. By the late 1920s, each of the five major studios that dominated Hollywood had its own portrait gallery, where publicity photographs were shot for mass distribution. And even though those photographs were made in very controlled environments, images of the stars (who had already been transformed and groomed by the studios—given new names, faces and life stories) were even transformed further, sculpting mere mortals into celluloid icons.

In the golden age of Hollywood, which coincided with the Depression, people looked at these iconic pictures of stars and wished and hoped that they could be like them. People wanted to touch, to share, to own a piece of that glamour, and early on, advertisers tapped into star celebrity as a way to create national markets and profit from what one observer described as a "staggering machine of desire." A strong and symbiotic relationship evolved between the advertising industry and Hollywood studios. Stars—who signed seven-year contracts, got paid a lot of money, and lived lives that were unimaginable—became commodities owned by the studios who, in turn, were called upon to sell not only themselves, but other products, too.

So here's a beautiful image of Veronica Lake—born Constance Ockleman, in Brooklyn—who had an extraordinary burst of fame during the Second World War with her peek-a-boo hairstyle. Her gorgeous face was used to endorse makeup; Woodbury made powder, rouge, and lipstick for the stars. The connection was simple: if you bought and used Woodbury products, you'd transform yourself, and be the star in your own life.

Makeup played a central role in the creation of Hollywood glamour. Joan Crawford was quoted in fan magazines as saying, "I never go outside my door, outside my bedroom door, looking like anything but the star that I am." Because movie stars had become such powerful role models, what they looked like and said, ads raised people's level of expectation about what they themselves were supposed to look like and do. Photography was very consciously used in an ad like this to raise people's expectations about their own potential. Lake looks sultry, yet demure: soft, shiny, young, and beautiful. The color in this photograph is fleshy, luxurious, luscious. You'd look at a picture like this, and wonder "Why not me?" and were encouraged to believe that if you bought the makeup, you *could* look like Veronica Lake.

This poster, which is about 40 inches tall, was used for advertising purposes in department stores. At the Woodbury cosmetics counter, you'd stand next to, or in front of a mirror. And behind or next to the mirror, there's Veronica Lake. Her face in the photograph is same size as yours, and she's looking right at you. In the movies she's fifteen or twenty feet tall, but now in the store, it's one-on-one. And a sales person is available behind the counter, ready to use Woodbury products to make you up to look, as much as possible, like the movie star.

In 1945, when this ad circulated, Lake was at her peak. The critics and GIs loved her. In 1941, she starred in "Sullivan's Travels" a classic movie where you see her at her best. After the war, she starred in "The Blue Dahlia," with Alan Ladd, married a director, and had children. In the 1950s she worked in television. But what was ultimately beyond Lake's or the studio's control was the schizophrenia that lurked beneath her glamorous surface. By the 1960s, she had also succumbed to alcohol, and wound up working as a barmaid. She died at 53, destitute. But the image of Veronica Lake will always remain—the lovely face peeking out on screen, and in the Woodbury ad.