Meet Bill Gold: The Man Behind the Most Iconic Movie Posters Ever

Description

Have a favorite vintage movie poster? Chances are, it was probably designed by Bill Gold, one of the most prolific designers ever to work in movies. Gaining early prestige working on CASABLANCA for Warner Bros., his legacy of posters spans from Hollywoodâ??s Golden Age through New Hollywood, including a close and enduring collaboration with director Clint Eastwood.

AFI spoke with Gold, now retired, about an illustrious career that has proven as influential as the films for which heâ??s designed posters.

AFI: Tell us how you got started in the business, and where you are today now that youâ??ve retired.

Bill Gold: In my wildest dreams, I could not have foreseen the career I would have. As a young child, while other kids were out playing ball and riding their bikes, I was at home drawing. After graduating from Pratt Institute, I got a job in the poster department at Warner Bros. V that the first film I would work on would be the iconic CASABLANCA? That lau career.

By the early 1960s, I had started my own company, Bill Gold Advertising.

As a kid in Brooklyn, I started drawing from the age of eight and never stopped. In elementary school I was winning art honors. I was drawn to the movies. I graduated from Pratt Institute and went looking for

a job, and introduced myself to the art director of the poster department of Warner Bros. in their New York offices. He sent me away on trial to design posters for four earlier films: ESCAPE ME NEVER and ROBIN HOOD with Errol Flynn, THE MAN I LOVE with Ida Lupino and Bette Davisâ??s WINTER MEETING. Afterwards he told me, â??Youâ??re hired.â?• My first assignment was for a film not yet finished: CASABLANCA.

Iâ??ve been retired since 2004 with the exception of coming back to work with Clint on J. EDGAR and Warner Home Video on a special project. Iâ??m currently enjoying life with my wife, Susan, and our dog Willoughby in Connecticut.

AFI: What is â??the Bill Gold lookâ?•? What is it that makes your work yours?

Gold: I know what movie posters should look like, instinctively. My style is and has always been â??[illegible]â??t like a cluttered look. Clean, simple and to the point. I guess you could white are usually my trademark colors.

Years ago, I looked at everything that MGM and Paramount and all the companies did, and I never liked anything that I saw. I always found fault with the fact that they showed three heads of the actors, and thatâ??s about all the concept they would use. And when I started to work, I thought: â??I donâ??t want to just do a concept with three heads in it. I want a story.â?•

Iâ??ve worked on poster campaigns for films by Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick and Federico Fellini, but my most significant relationship is with Clint Eastwood. We began working together in 1971 when I created the poster for DIRTY HARRY and continued until I retired in 2004.

AFI: What do you think are the ingredients of a successful/memorable movie poster?

Gold: Youâ??d get an assignment and theyâ??d tell you something of how the movie should be

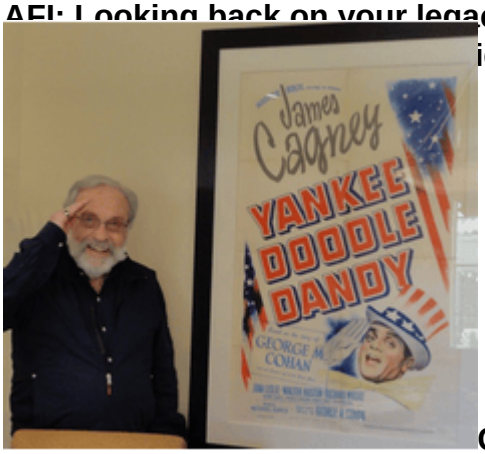
marketed. Iâ??d go see the film (I always got a kick out of seeing peopleâ??s reactions to movies), or if it wasnâ??t complete, Iâ??d look at the stills. You then decide how you want the public to see it, then you think of the best way to communicate that. I had usually at least three art directors working for me in a given year, production people and assistants.

AFI: How has the poster making process changed today?

Gold: Posters illustrations are gone. They only use digital photos now. Anybody who can use a computer thinks they can do this. Having computer knowledge is very different from being an artist or an art director or a marketer. A 10-year-old can do a good job on the computer. With photos today the stars canâ??t say, â??It doesnâ??t look like me.â?• We used to have to do it over.

My objective is to â??sellâ?• the film, to entice an audience to see it through a revealing and striking image and typography. To provoke an interest in the â??storyâ?• of the film is what I am able to do best.

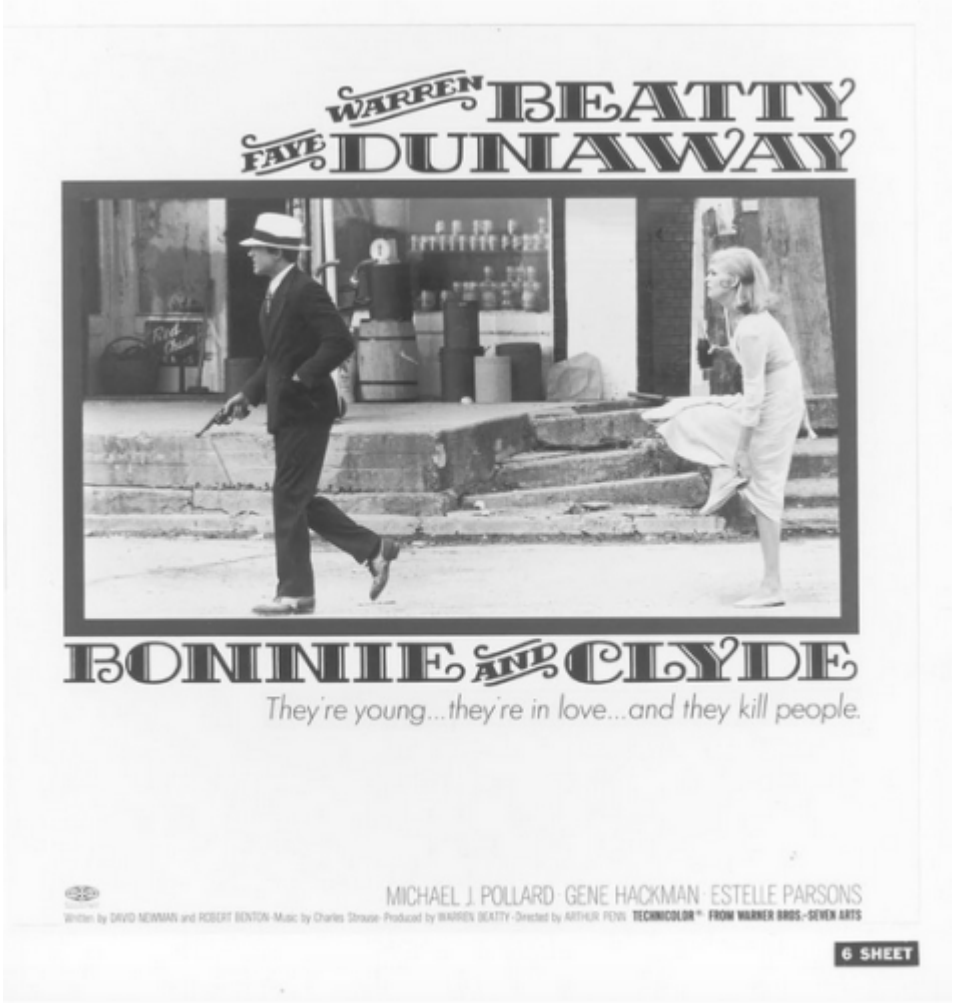
AFI: Looking back on your legacy and decades of work, how do you feel you have contributed ies?



Gold: Itâ??s remarkable the range of styles Iâ??ve used in creating numerous iconic works. It seems a bit unlikely that the designer responsible for the conventional rendering of James Cagney in patriotic garb in YANKEE DOODLE DANDY could have conceived the frilly pink collage of MY FAIR LADY, the blobbed, multi-colored hippie images for WOODSTOCK and the upside-down nocturnal reflections of Clint Eastwoodâ??s MYSTIC RIVER.

Moving with the times as American graphics began to change in the 1950s, I went from relying on traditional illustration to embracing Modernism, Symbolism, Pop Art and psychedelia. I didnâ??t forget the early American influences, such as J.C. Leyendecker, or the folksy wit of Norman Rockwell.

BONNIE AND CLYDE (1967)



We got together with Warren Beatty and I believe we had Faye Dunaway at the meeting as well, and Warren was in charge: it was his movie. He wasnâ??t sure what he wanted, or how to market BONNIE AND CLYDE. It was a sensational, dramatic action-thriller but he also wanted it to look authentic and real and *exact â??* so, looking at the poster, you couldnâ??t make the mistake of thinking it was just a story. It was about the Depression years, 1930s America. Hence the sepia and the period lettering and those kinds of aesthetic choices. We worked from a specially shot photograph. Beatty was delighted with the final campaign.

CASABLANCA (1942)

HOLLYWOODGLEE, LLC
1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com

My first assignment in 1942 after being hired by the Warner Bros. art department in New York was CASABLANCA. My initial thoughts were to put together a montage showing all the characters depicted in the film. I wanted to have Humphrey Bogart in the foreground and Ingrid Bergman behind him looking on. I didnâ??t want to give away their romance. The client loved it but said there was no excitement, so I put a gun in Bogartâ??s hand. The gun was taken from the film HIGH SIERRA.

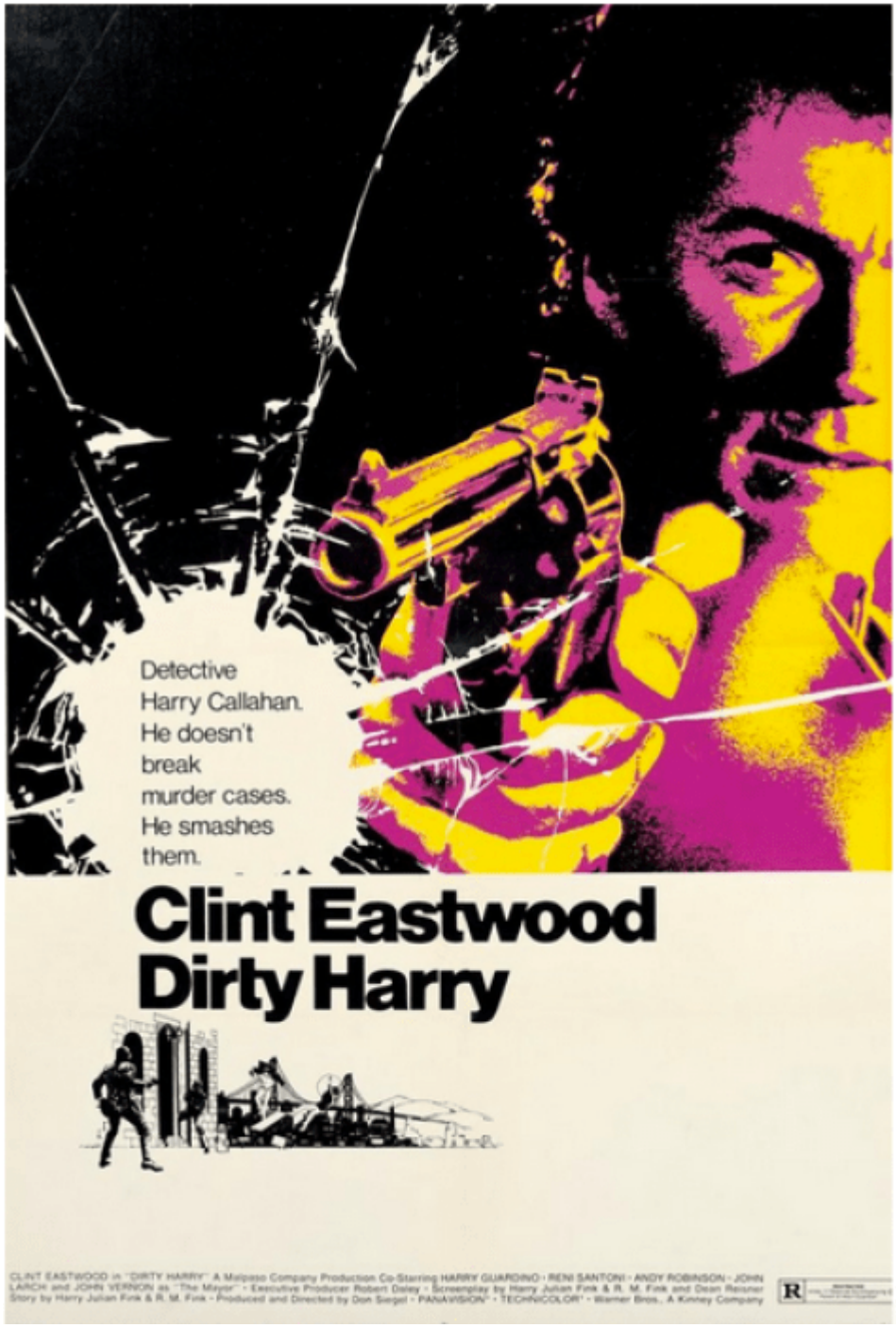
A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971)

Kubrick always wanted to be in control. He wanted to be aware of every step I was taking. He needed to know he had input and was part of the thinking process.

DELIVERANCE (1972)

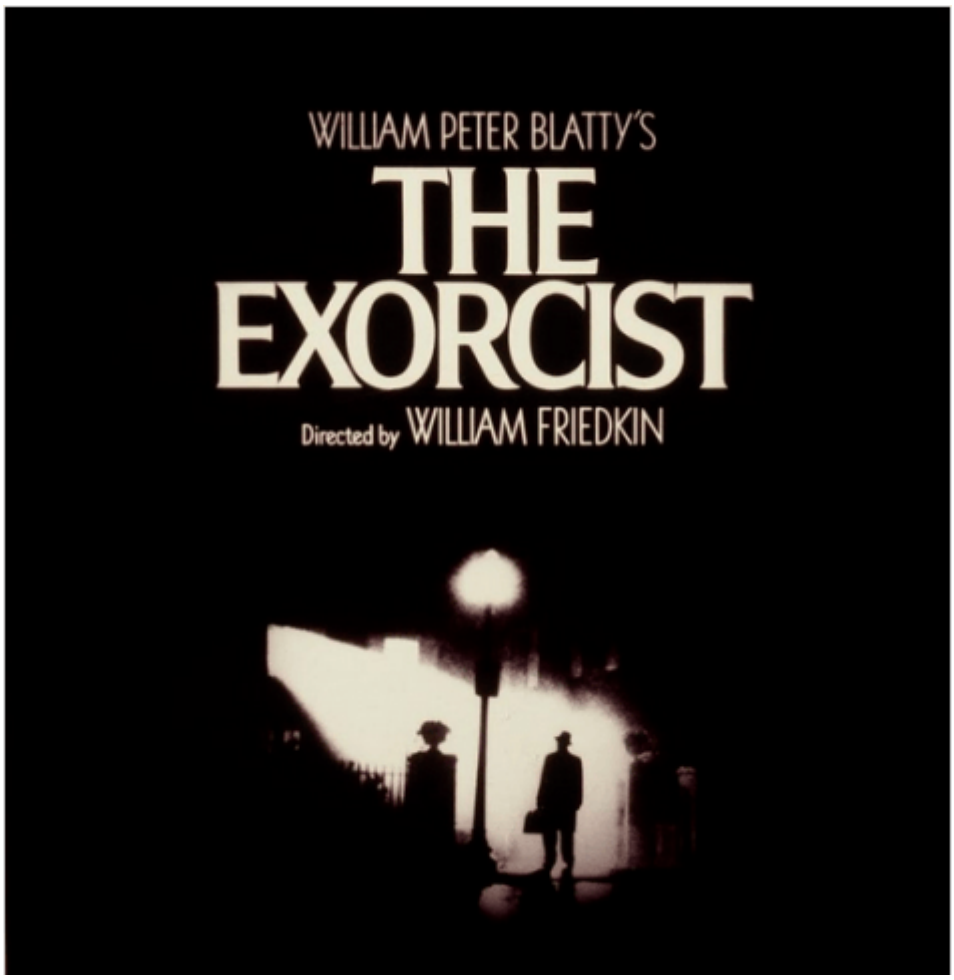
The poster used in the domestic campaign for DELIVERANCE showed hands coming out of the river holding a rifle. But executives in charge of the international campaign wanted something a little more dynamic to represent a movie about a weekend canoe trip from hell. So I thought, wouldnâ??t it be great if it had a three-dimensional quality, and it looked like it was coming out of the eye of one of the Southern characters? The tag line â??What did happen on the Cahulawassee River?â?• added a final mysterious touch.

DIRTY HARRY (1971)



Clint and I have become very good friends over the years. Professionally, he is as good as it gets. He appreciates everything I have done for him, and has wonderful taste and a remarkable eye for art. Of course, there have been a couple of times when he has asked me to â??go back to the drawing boardâ?• and investigate another direction. But this is part of the working process, and most of the time we are both on the same page. Clint Eastwood wrote in the foreword to â??Bill Gold: Posterworks,â?• â??With Bill I knew he would bring great ideas, and the poster he created would be one less thing we had to think about. He respected the film, he respected the story, and he always respected what we were trying to accomplish.â?•

THE EXORCIST (1973)



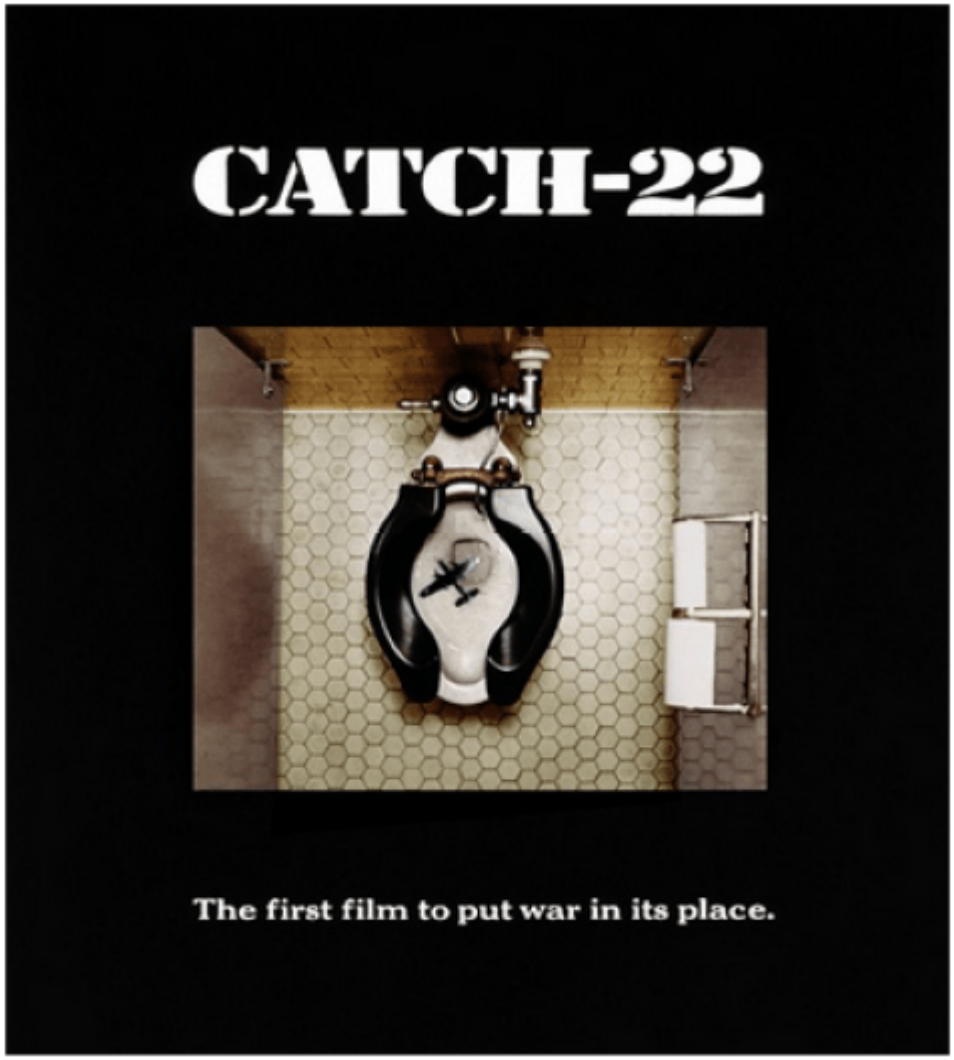
I picked the still of the priest, Father Merrin (Max von Sydow), arriving at the house in Georgetown for the exorcism with a briefcase in his hand because it struck a chord with me. When you looked at this still, you knew somehow that whatever is about to happen inside that house is not going to be good! I adapted it by taking a lot of the detail out of the photo and turning it into a design, and after that no one wanted to see anything else. Iâ??d been specifically told by William Friedkin and Warner Bros. that we must not use an image of the girl possessed, or show anything that had any hint of religious connotation. They were very concerned about that. Friedkin was very involved, and he and Warners rejected all our other comps. They knew what they wanted and certainly picked the right image, which was used all over the world. And the movie, at the time, became the biggest hit in Warnersâ?? history.

MY FAIR LADY (1964)

HOLLYWOODGLEE, LLC
1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com

I had seen the stage musical on Broadway a couple of times, with Rex Harrison as Prof. Higgins and Julie Andrews as Eliza Doolittle, and I knew it by heart. This campaign is a favorite of mine. With George Cukor directing, the movie had Audrey Hepburn instead of Julie Andrews, and Cecil Beatonâ??s costumes and sets which were important. Warner Bros. had invested about $17 million in it. Here we began with work-in-progress charcoal drawings, and squiggles to get our juices flowing. Eventually, I was happy with the way both principals looked, and now we had to add some extra elements to embellish it, such as the umbrella. The final poster is a collage of charcoal drawings, with color added on top. I designed the lettering, which has become so symbolic of the movie, inseparable from it almost.

CATCH-22 (1970)



This was directed by Mike Nichols, for Paramount. We used military-style lettering and tried to capture the irreverence of the novel: putting war in its place. I like the clarity of these posters. But none were used in the end. They thought they were too clever. This one presents its message clearly with the overhead shot of a toilet with a toy bomber in the bowl. The tagline underneath the image simply says â??The first film to put war in its place.â?• While that message does work with the film, perhaps it was a bit too risky a venture to go with at the time; or distributors felt that having a one-liner like this (despite the truth in it) wasnâ??t the best way to sell the movie.

(Source: http://www.blog.afi.com)

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