

MALTEST FALCON 1941

Based on book *The Maltese Falcon* from
Dashiell Hammett

Other Detective Noir writers:

Raymond Chandler

James M. Cain

John O'Hara

The Maltese Falcon (1941) is one of the most popular and best classic detective mysteries ever made. , and many

Many film historians consider it the first in the dark *film noir* genre in Hollywood.

The low-budget film reflects the remarkable directorial debut of John Huston (previously a screenwriter)

For Warner Bros. studios.

The precocious director Huston was very faithful to Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *The Maltese Falcon*, that had originally appeared as a five-

part serialized story in a pulp fiction, detective story magazine publication named *Black Mask*.

For early preview audience, the film took a different, short-lived title, *The Gent From Frisco*.

There were two major differences between the book and film: (1) Gutman was killed by Wilmer, and (2) the last quotable line of dialogue, with a Shakespearean reference, was thought up by Bogart on the set.

Hammett's murder mystery novel had previously been filmed twice:

- a low-budget film (directed by Roy Del Ruth) with Ricardo Cortez as the gumshoe opposite Bebe Daniels as *Dangerous Female (1931) (aka The Maltese Falcon)*
- and again remade as *Satan Met a Lady (1936)* (directed by William Dieterle) with Warren William and rising star Bette Davis

Huston was convinced that he could remake the film with a more precise screenplay and better acting than the other two adaptations.

A sequel following the film's success, to be titled *The Further Adventures of the Maltese Falcon*, was scrapped when Huston became unavailable and when Hammett demanded an exorbitant financial guarantee.

As a footnote, it was refilmed 34 years later (a record for an interval of time between a sequel and its original) in the mid-70s as the satirical *Black Bird* (1975) with George Segal as son Sam Spade, Jr., and two appearances by original cast members (Elisha Cook, Jr., and Lee Patrick).

The classic mystery film has also been spoofed in *The Maltese Bippy* (1969) with TV-show stars Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, *Murder By Death* (1976), and *The Cheap Detective* (1978).

The bejeweled, priceless 'Maltese Falcon' [a 50-pound plaster cast, **(7 were made)**, made by the Props Department at Warners] is at the center of the intriguing film as an elusive but valuable object that is greedily desired, for different reasons, by all the principals, in the labyrinthine, noirish plot.

[The black bird serves as the film's **MacGuffin**, a plot device that propels the story forward but is

proven ultimately worthless - although it wasn't termed that at the time. Hitchcock would later popularize the use of a McGuffin in his films.]

It is mostly known for a number of memorable portrayals of corrupt, deceitful, hard-nosed villains ("The Fat Man" by Sydney Greenstreet), low-life quirky crooks (Peter Lorre and 'gunsel' Elisha Cook, Jr.) and tough heroes, interwoven complex interactions between vividly-played characters, double-crossing intrigues and deceptions (e.g., the treacherous, lying Mary Astor character identifies herself with three aliases - as Miss Ruth Wonderly, Miss Leblanc, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy), posturings, betrayals and materialistic greed.

[Lorre and Greenstreet would go on to star in many films together, most notably [Casablanca \(1942\)](#) - also with Bogart.]

B-movie lead character Humphrey Bogart, now introduced as a 'good guy', presented the definitive anti-hero Sam Spade in the mystery thriller classic - as a cynical, cool San Francisco sleuthing private-eye who lives by his own code of ethics.

Bogart had just finished another Warner Bros. film *High Sierra* (1941), in a role that was also turned down by WB's contract player George Raft. Geraldine Fitzgerald was originally chosen to play the role that Mary Astor eventually portrayed.

The film received three nominations, but no Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor (almost 300 lb. Sydney Greenstreet in his talkie film debut), and Best Adapted Screenplay (by the director - John Huston).

Competition from John Ford's [*How Green Was My Valley* \(1941\)](#) took the Best Picture and Best Supporting Actor Oscars (Donald Crisp), and *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) took the screenplay honors.

Mary Astor, in the best performance of her career, was actually the recipient of the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role in *The Great Lie* (1941). Neither Astor nor Bogart were nominated for their immortalized roles.

Bogart would go on to make more films with Huston: the director's Oscar-winning [The Treasure of the Sierra Madre \(1948\)](#), *Key Largo (1948)*, [The African Queen \(1951\)](#) - bringing Bogey his only Oscar, and *Beat the Devil (1954)*.

NOTES

1) The movie defined [Humphrey Bogart's](#) performances for the rest of his life; his hard-boiled Sam Spade rescued him from a decade of middling roles in B gangster movies and positioned him for "Casablanca," "Treasure of the Sierra Madre," "The African Queen" and his other classics.

(2) It was the first film directed by [John Huston](#), who for more than 40 years would be a prolific maker of movies that were muscular, stylish and daring. [John Huston](#) had worked as a writer at Warner Bros. before convincing the studio to let him direct. "The Maltese Falcon" was his first choice, even though it had been filmed twice before by Warners (in 1931 under the same title and in 1936 as "Satan Met a Lady").

(3) It contained the first screen appearance of [Sydney Greenstreet](#), who went on, in "Casablanca" and many other films, to become one of the most striking character actors in movie history.

(4) It was the first pairing of Greenstreet and [Peter Lorre](#), and so well did they work together that they made nine other movies, including "Casablanca" in 1942 and "The Mask of Dimitrios" (1944), in which they were not supporting actors but actually the stars.

(5) And some film histories consider "The Maltese Falcon" the first film noir. It put down the foundations for that native American genre of mean streets, knife-edged heroes, dark shadows and tough dames.

Houston - When he finished his screenplay, he set to work story-boarding it, sketching every shot. That was the famous method of [Alfred Hitchcock](#), whose "Rebecca" won the Oscar as the best picture of 1940

Cinematographer, Arthur Edeson,

Trivia

- George Raft was originally cast as Sam Spade. He turned it down because it was "not an important picture," taking advantage of a clause in his contract that said he did not have to work on remakes.
- Word-for-word and scene-for-scene virtually the same as the original novel.
- The Shakespeare reference that ends the film was suggested by Humphrey Bogart.
- **Cameo:** [**Walter Huston**] Captain Jacobi
- **Director Trademark:** [**John Huston**] [father]
- Sam Spade refers to Wilmer as a "gunsel", a term the censors assumed was a slang reference to a gunman. The Yiddish term "gunsel", literally "little goose", *may* be a vulgarism for homosexual (the word "faigle" (little bird) is usually used in that manner). It is more usually an "underground" term which refers to a person who is either a "fall guy" or a "stool pigeon" in which case Spade is making both a direct and an indirect reference to Wilmer's character.

- Two "Maltese Falcons" were used for the film, because Humphrey Bogart dropped the original during shooting. The original falcon is on display in the movie museum at Warner Bros. studios, its tail feathers visibly dented from Bogey's flub sixty years ago.
- Filming was completed in two months at a cost of less than \$300,000.
- The revolver used to shoot Miles is correctly identified by Sam as a Webley-Fosberry. All Sam says about it is "They don't make 'em anymore." Much more than that, it was an experiment to get a handgun to automatically reload and cock itself between shots. We're familiar with a typical semi-automatic pistol with a moving slide, but this was a revolver that used its backward momentum to cock the hammer and rotate the cylinder, readying it for the next pull of the trigger. They are very sought after by collectors. (see also goofs)
- Sydney Greenstreet's first on-screen appearance.
- Kasper Gutman's (Sydney Greenstreet) repeated phrase of "By gad, sir..." was originally written to be "By God", however

the script underwent changes when it clashed with the censors.

- The "Maltese Falcon" itself is said to have been inspired by the "Kniphausen Hawk", a ceremonial pouring vessel made in 1697 for George William von Kniphausen, Count of the Holy Roman Empire. It is modeled after a hawk perched on a rock, and is encrusted with red garnets, amethysts, emeralds and blue sapphires. The vessel is currently owned by the Duke of Devonshire and is part of the Chatsworth collection.

Goofs

- **Errors in geography:** San Francisco firemen have Los Angeles Fire Department uniforms on.
- **Continuity:** When searching for the body, Sam's handkerchief is ruffled only while he is in the room, not before or after.
- **Crew or equipment visible:** Shadows are visible in scene where Captain Jacoby stumbles into Spade's office and falls on the couch.

- **Boom mike visible:** When Spade and Wilmer are walking down the hall toward Gutman's apartment, the shadow of the microphone boom passes across Wilmer's coat.
- **Factual errors:** The opening crawl begins, "In 1539, the Knight Templars[sic] of Malta, paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, by sending him a Golden Falcon..." This confuses two different religious orders of knights, both founded in Jerusalem. The Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, known as the Order of St. John for short, have existed since 1048; they were in fact based in Malta from 1530 to 1798 and hence were also called the Knights of Malta. On the other hand, the Knights of the Temple of Solomon, also called the Knights Templar or just Templars, were founded in 1119 and became the sworn enemies of the first order; this latter group was disbanded by 1312, after King Philip IV of France had declared them heretics so that he could confiscate their wealth.
- **Incorrectly regarded as goofs:** Spade refers to the gun as an automatic, yet he is

shown a revolver. The gun shown is a Webley-Fosbery automatic. This was a revolver that used the recoil of the shot to turn the cylinder and re-cock the weapon. It was very well made, but susceptible to dirt and fouling and so, as Spade said, "They don't make 'em anymore". However, it was made in two versions, a six-shot .455 and an eight-shot .38, so it can't actually be an eight-shot .45 as Spade says it is.

- **Continuity:** Spade doesn't wear rings or a watch throughout the movie except for one scene. At one point he walks into his office wearing a wedding band on his left hand, another large ring on his right hand and an expensive-looking wristwatch. He sits down to have a quick chat with his secretary where the rings and watch are in plain view. He then walks through a doorway into his inner office and the rings and watch are gone.
- **Revealing mistakes:** At the very end, as O'Shaughnessy and Dundy are leaving in the elevator, the visual effect of the elevator going down is accomplished by lowering a dark screen in front of the backlit actors. Very nice, except that you can clearly see

that both silhouetted actors remain standing motionless at floor level as the screen drops.

- **Continuity:** When Gutman is slicing away energetically at the Maltese Falcon, one shot shows him standing still with his arms not moving.
- **Audio/visual unsynchronized:** When Gutman is slicing away energetically at the Maltese Falcon, his voice ("It's a fake... it's lead!") is clearly dubbed by another actor.
- **Continuity:** Spade gets the drop on Joel Cairo, grabbing Cairo's gun hand. As the gun drops to the floor it falls to Cairo's left side. On the close-up the gun lands near Cairo's right shoe.
- **Continuity:** After Gutman discovers the Maltese Falcon is a fake and shakes off the shock, he puts the statue upright. A close-up of the bird and Gutman's hands shows a knife in his right hand, though in the pervious long shot his hand was empty.
- **Continuity:** In Spade's office, Cairo tells Spade that he is staying at the Hotel Belvedere room 635. Later, Spade meets

Cairo in the lobby of the hotel where Cairo asks the desk clerk for the key to room 603.

**Filming Locations for
Maltese Falcon, The (1941)**

San Francisco, California, USA

Warner Bros. Studios, Burbank Studios,
Burbank, California, USA
(studio)