Among the men who made the original horror films at Universal Pictures in the late-1920s through the mid-1940s, few were as important and none was more important than legendary makeup artist and monster maker Jack Pierce. Creating all of the original characters at the studio during that time, Pierce’s highest achievements certainly included the three Frankenstein Monsters with Boris Karloff, the original Mummy, Im-Ho-Tep, with Karloff in 1932; Elsa Lanchester’s glamorous ghoul Bride of Frankenstein; and Bela Lugosi’s Dracula. In addition to Jack Pierce, the craftsmanship of The Wolf Man was also entrusted to the help of several other talents, including wizard John P. Fulton, and editor Ted J. Kent. A.C.E. For the Wages (also spelled Wages) Wolf Man film, sketched as a B picture by the Universal brass, Pierce and Fulton put him on the cinematic map. Chaney—he knew they had an opportunity to create a unique project that would harken back to the old Laemmle years at the studio. In Chaney, they had the ballparking physical actor who could be used to realize their ideas. Working closely with Pierce, Fulton was the mastermind of the “transformation” sequences in the film, in which stages of makeup were photographed identically and laid over the footage, creating the illusion of an on-screen transformation. The technique had been done before on film—notably in 1952’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Paramount)—and in Fulton’s own Werewolf of London in 1935, but Fulton’s use of matching his dissolve from one stage of Pierce’s makeup to the next had been perfected by 1941. It is likely that Fulton learned to master what was then called “tricks” photography at an optical house, where he worked as a technician in the 1920s. Despite the early evidence of his talents, Fulton’s first truly groundbreaking work on 1933’s The Invisible Man would earn him the industry nickname, “The Don.” He would work alongside Jack Pierce at Universal until 1947.

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when the Laemmles were planning a werewolf film. Thus, The Wolf Man was a true horror classic, and Pierce’s version of the character has been the model for the numerous werewolves that have since come to the screen and the benchmark against which all such characters have been judged since.

To the lay observer, the idea of Jack Pierce re-creating a wolf character from scratch every day of principal photography may seem daunting, but—as with the Frankenstein Monster and the Mummy before—Pierce prided himself on working from the bottom up with each new makeup application. “I don’t use masks or any appliances whatsoever,” proclaimed Jack Pierce about the development of his famous monster characters. The one exception to Pierce’s rule occurred with his striking initial realization of the Wolf Man in 1941. “The only appliances I used was the nose that looks like a wolf’s nose,” Pierce said, indicating the head, chest piece, and hands. “I put all of the hair on a little row at a time. After the hair is on, you curl it, then singe it, burn it, to look like an animal that’s been out in the woods. It had to be done every morning.”

With regard to his chosen techniques, Pierce might have lifted these from at least one Loup Garou story, which described a werewolf-attacked man this way: “There stood Page with his shoulders scratched, his hair be singed, his nose poisoned with sulphur breath of the wolf, his knife reeking with the blood of the cursed Loup Garou.”

Pierce’s other key characters in The Wolf Man included 1940’s “scream queen” Evelyn Ankers as Gwen Conliffe, Claude Rains as Sir John Talbot, Bela Lugosi as Bela the gypsy, and Maria Ouspenskaya as Maleva, the gypsy woman. As a result of Pierce’s methods, audiences were treated to perfectionism in The Wolf Man.

As legend has it, wearing the Wolf Man makeup was an unpleasant experience for Lon Chaney, Jr. According to Denis Gifford’s A Pictorial History of Horror Movies, (Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, New York, 1974, page 136), Chaney Jr. explained it in detail: “The day we did the transformations I came in at two a.m. When I felt that position they would take little nails and drive them through the skin of my fingers, on both hands, so that I wouldn’t move them anymore. While I was in this position they would build a plaster cast of the look of my head. Then they would take drapes and wring it down with one ton, so that it wouldn’t quiver when people walked. They had targets for my eyes up there. Then, while I’m still in this position, they would shoot five or ten frames of film in the camera. They’d take that film out and send it to the lab. While it was there the makeup man [Jack P. Pierce] would come and take the whole thing off my face, and put on a new one, only less. I’m still immobile. When the film came back from the lab they’d check me. They’d say, “Your eyes have moved a little bit, move them to the right . . . now your shoulder is up . . . .” Then they’d roll it again and shoot another ten frames. Well, we did twenty-one changes of makeup and it took twenty-two hours. I won’t discuss about the bathroom!”

Alas, with the films that followed, what might have been was never realized in exactly the same way as with the stunning originality and critical and commercial success of The Wolf Man. As the United States entered World War II, a slew of sequels and remakes of the original horror films were cranked out at Universal with few standouts as momentous as their antecedents. Pierce went on to create the Wolf Man character in succeeding sequels, including Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (1943) and both House of Frankenstein (1944) and House of Dracula (1944).
The latter, originally titled The Wolf Man's Curse, featured an end to the cycle of appearances by the Wolf Man in Universal films, but the character would inexplicably reappear in Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein three years later. By that point, Jack Pierce had been dismissed from Universal, and Bud Westmore was supervising younger makeup artists Jack Kevan (who created the 1948 Frankenstein Monster) and Emile LaVigne (who created that film’s version of the Wolf Man) in their execution of Jack Pierce’s original designs. Notably, LaVigne streamlined Pierce’s work with a larger foam rubber nose, additional appliances, and a more comfortable, quickly applied approach for Chaney Jr. With that final 1940s Universal Monster film, the classic monster movie era, in effect, was over.

In retrospect, Pierce’s makeup slightly evolved over his four Wolf Man films. Compared with the overall wilder approach of the 1941 film, Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man was a slightly more polished approach—one might say that the character had a haircut with more closely cropped (meaning applied) rows of hair and a new nose appliance for Chaney Jr. In point, these foam rubber appliances from the 1941 film onward were molded and produced by Ellis Burman, Sr., whose son Tom and grandson Robert and Barney continue to work as Hollywood makeup artists specializing in prosthetics.

Note the subtle change from the 1941 character’s nose to that in 1943. With the 1944 and 1945 House films, Pierce, with a full list of characters to prepare for shooting on each film, surely simplified his Wolf Man application process further than he had for the 1943 film. While in Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man, Pierce had double the characters to get ready for screen daily than in the original The Wolf Man, in each House film he had Count Dracula, hunchbacks, and mad scientists to boot. Without question, the Wolf Man, with its meticulous hair work, was the most complicated of these House characters, necessitating that the process (regardless of Pierce’s careful attention to detail) become more efficient with a quicker application time.

Among those to assist Pierce during these years were three craftspeople who rarely receive due note in popular literature about the period. Carmen Dirigo, who was the 1940s head of Universal’s hairstyling department (as her mother had been in the 1930s), assisted Pierce in preparing the characters in Universal’s makeup department, which was reportedly situated on the site of the current Jurassic Park ride at Universal Studios, Hollywood, amusement park. With Dirigo’s knowledge of hair products and wig preparation, she surely provided at least advice, if not outright hand-to-hand assistance, to Pierce on these films. Another key collaborator was Bill Ely, a noted makeup technician who worked with Pierce in the department in the 1940s (until Pierce was let go in 1947).

Finally, a major 1930s to 1940s Pierce ally was makeup artist Abe Haberman, a craftsperson who often worked on the many Abbott and Costello pictures of the period. Before his death in winter 1998, Haberman stated, “I used to hold the dryer when [Pierce] was doing the Wolf Man. He would lay that whole beard in, then singe it to give it the animal look. They light the fire in a fireplace, he would light that and then very carefully singe it, and it would curl up and change color and everything.”

Working at Max Factor’s makeup enterprise in the early 1930s, Haberman freelanced at many studios in town, often landing at Universal. When Joan Bennett brought Haberman with her to Universal in 1938, Haberman encountered Jack Pierce. In 1996, Haberman said of
his time with Bennett at Universal, “When she didn’t work I didn’t have to come in but I did anyway and Jack liked that. We became very close friends, he and Blanch [Craven, Pierce’s wife]. At Universal, I worked with Pierce. We would go in at 5:00 or 5:30, 14 or 15 hours a day; we usually were on six days a week. They would ask me to come in and hold the drayer while they were doing the work. On The Wolf Man, when he used to blend the head with cotton and spirit gum—which is a forgotten art today, since I am the only one left who knows it—while he was applying the cotton, I would dry it for him. He would apply it between the head and the forehead. He had the head and then the cotton and spirit gum would blend the edges.”

Haberman continued of his time with Pierce in the late 1930s and early 1940s, “Jack Pierce was a perfectionist and he did a lot of research. He did his own molding of the characters because I used to see some of the molds in his garage. His garage was in the [San Fernando] Valley on Havenhurst, at his home. He fought for his men. We were like a big family, the whole makeup department. He had his private room and the most loyal people I ever met. He fought for his men. He was making money for them. He was very creative. Universal gave him carte blanche, do whatever you want. He picked his own things. He was a dynamo and very loyal. I have seen him come on the set and just raise the roof with the cameramen because they were complaining about something. He would back his people to the limit because we were all, like I said, like a family. He all helped each other, which is unusual today. He wasn’t afraid of anybody because he knew his business.”

Of all the incarnations of the Wolf Man character, it would be difficult to think any version was better than that in the original 1941 film. However, according to legendary “Monster Kid,” historian, and collector Bob Burns, by 1943, the character was tweaked to the point that it was “perfect” in Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man. Moreover, Burns, who met Pierce and is perhaps the greatest living authority on monster films, has publicly stated that the Wolf Man is more than likely his favorite of all screen monsters.

Even today’s artists revere Jack Pierce and his majestic triumphs with his various Wolf Man characters. Contemporary makeup effects master Todd Tucker of Illusion Industries created a newly envisioned re-creation of Pierce’s last original classic horror character, 1941’s Wolf Man, using model and actor Douglas Meyers. Sculpting in clay with help from his assistant, Chris Gallaher, Tucker created an overhead mask appliance, hands, and feet, rounded off with lenses by Dr. Stacey Sumner. “It was natural for me to do, since I’ve created many of my own wolf characters over the years,” said Tucker.

Upon the occasion of Jack Pierce’s death in 1968, one of the all-time greatest monster makers was gone, but his work continues to live on as new audiences begin to discover his treasured films. Perhaps with the fresh perspective now available to audiences through Universal’s recent re-releases of many of the classic horror films on DVD and Blu-ray, including a Legacy Collection of The Wolf Man (1941) on DVD from Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, which housed his numerous classic makeups from 1938-1947, including those for five films with The Mummy, and seven different Frankenstein Monsters, the Bride of Frankenstein (once), Ygor (twice), and hordes of other icons in American cinema. (Courtesy of Ronald V. Borst/Hollywood Movie Posters)