

Express, Amy Cavanaugh—October 8, 2009

WeekendPass

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HIGHLIGHTING THE BEST IN WASHINGTON-AREA ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT | OCT. 8-11, 2009

Africa Moderne

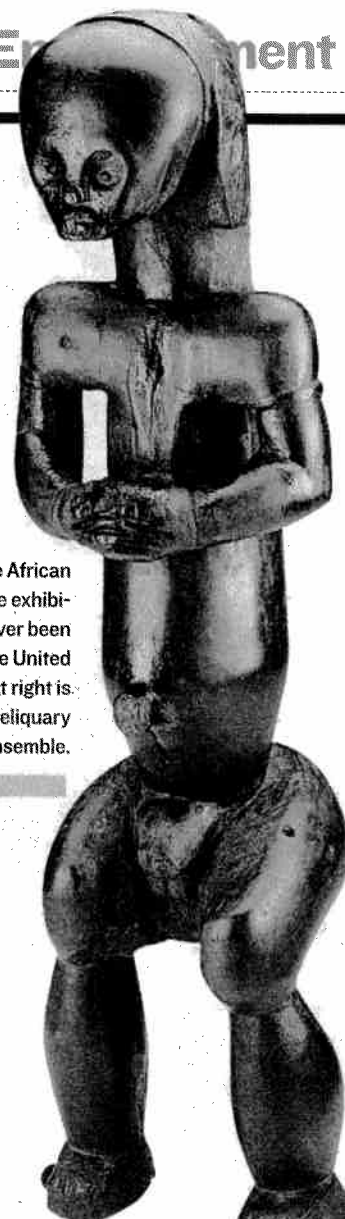
HOW ARTIST **MAN RAY** BROUGHT AFRICAN STYLE TO EUROPE





James Latimer Allen's portrait of James Lesesne Wells holding a figurine.

Some of the African objects in the exhibition have never been displayed in the United States before. At right is a figure from a reliquary ensemble.



THE LANE COLLECTION, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Picturing a Continent

The Phillips Collection shows how modernist artists of the '20s and '30s were inspired by African art

THE 100 PHOTOGRAPHS from the 1920s and 1930s in "Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens," which opens on Saturday at the Phillips Collection, are more than just images — they helped elevate African objects from artifacts to fine art. Led by photographer Man Ray, artists of the period looked at African objects such as masks and figures created in the 19th and 20th centuries and helped expose them to an international audience. The show is broken into sections, including the Harlem Renaissance and surrealism, to help illustrate the different perspectives of modernism.

The International Arts and Artists organized the show and hired independent scholar Wendy A. Grossman to curate it. Elsa Smithgall, associate curator at the Phillips and in-house curator for the exhibition, said that the show offers a "very spe-

cial look at the interconnectedness between objects and photography, and objects and the history of modern art."

"The show demonstrates the important impact that African art had not only on painting, which people are probably more familiar with, but on photography and the way photography is responding to those African art objects in a way that shapes the way we see African art today," Smithgall said.

Smithgall noted that while the Phillips does not have any Ray photographs "yet," a handful of local institutions contributed pieces to the show. Ray took 50 of the photographs in the show, and the other half were taken by 21 other artists, including Walker Evans, Cecil Beaton and Alfred Stieglitz. The 24 African objects on display are those featured in the photographs.



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A Cameroonian statue photographed by Man Ray shows his use of strong shadows.

"What we're trying to show is that the interest in African art reached far and wide," she said. "He wasn't the only photographer out there showing an interest, but he was one of the leaders, and he's widely considered to be a great contributor in photography with radical approaches."

As with many shows that feature a range of media, "Man Ray" offers different points

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of entry for viewers.

"If you love photography, you probably never realize Man Ray took these photos," Smithgall said. "And if you love African art, it's really interesting to see the way the objects figure into the photo and how they appear so distorted and on a different scale. That's why I feel this show has something for everyone, but it's ultimately about showing intersections between photography and the African art objects you're seeing."

Smithgall also noted that many of the objects on display are ones that are rarely seen.

"We have African objects from the National Museum of Denmark which were never shown in the U.S.," she said. "And that's true of so many of these works — they weren't shown even in their host institutions. When I was talking with curators,

there were several cases where these things are being dusted off and coming to light and being shown in rich context alongside the photographic images."

As the show requires some reflection between the African objects and the photographs, Smithgall said that it would cause visitors to slow down.

"We live in an age where we're inundated with images, and this exhibition slows you down," she said. "It makes you look closely at the connections between the photograph and the African art objects being portrayed, and you become even more keenly aware of the way the photograph manipulates reality." AMY CAVANAUGH

→ Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. NW; opens Sat., through Jan. 10, 202-387-2151, phillipscollection.org. (Dupont Circle)