Art in Russia: Under A
William Eggleston on N
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Behind Man Ray’s Masks

Few modern artists so brilliantly captured the dynamism of African sculpture as did Man Ray in the early ’30s. In so doing he also influenced the course of avant-garde art. His ca. 1933 photographs of a Bangwa sculpture from Cameroon document the way he could capture the movement and spirit of the dancing figure.

The artist’s achievements not only as a photographer but also as a provocateur are celebrated in “Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens,” up from the 10th of this month through January 10 at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., and traveling to the University of Virginia Art Museum in Charlottesville and the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver. Organized by International Arts & Artists and curated by Wendy Grossman, the exhibition also features images by Cecil Beaton, Walker Evans, Charles Sheeler, and Alfred Stieglitz—all displayed alongside the objects photographed.

Man Ray was introduced to African art in 1914, at an exhibition at Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery in New York in which masks, sculptures, and utilitarian objects, shown against walls decorated with cubic geometric motifs, were treated not as ethnographic subjects but as modern art.

In Paris, where he settled in 1921, Man Ray was impressed by the African art on the market and in the collections of his artist friends, and he soon began photographing it. For the most compelling of these photos, he had the model Kiki de Montparnasse rest her head on a table and hold an African mask next to her face.

Man Ray’s Noire et blanche, 1926 (top), and untitled photograph, ca. 1933, of a 19th-century sculpture from Cameroon.

That image, Noire et blanche (1926), became an icon of the Surrealist movement. Transformed by photography, the mask, a magical fetish, comes to life, while the human head, passive and erotic, looks dead. The picture popularized so-called primitive art and brought avant-garde photography to mainstream audiences. —Stephen May