

Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens

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MAN RAY, AFRICAN ART, AND THE MODERNIST LENS

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The associated catalogue by Wendy Grossman includes full documentation of the photographs (many never previously published) and the African objects they feature, with a preface by Francis Naumann and essay by Ian Walker. Contributors to the cataloguing of the African objects, edited by Letty Bonnell, include Kevin Dumouchelle, Ekpo Eyo, Kate Ezra, Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, Erin Haney, Alisa LaGamma, Jessica Martinez, Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, Constantine Petridis, Christopher Slogar, Z.S. Strother, Monica Blackman Visonà.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a symposium on “African Art, Modernist Photography, and the Politics of Representation” will be held November 13–14, 2009. The keynote address will be given by Jack Flam, art critic and Distinguished Professor of Art and Art History at the City University of New York, the evening of November 13 at the David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland. A full day of sessions by speakers including Elizabeth Harney (University of Toronto), James Small (University of Maryland Baltimore County), and others will follow at The Phillips Collection.

The exhibition “Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens” explores a little-examined facet in the development of Modernist artistic practice; namely, the instrumental role photographs played in the process by which African objects—formerly considered ethnographic curiosities—came to be perceived as the stuff of Modern art in the first decades of the twentieth century. At the center of this project are both well-known and recently discovered photographs by the American artist Man Ray (1890–1976), whose body of images translating the vogue for African art into a Modernist photographic aesthetic made a significant impact on shaping perceptions of such objects at a critical moment in their reception.

Man Ray was first introduced to the art of Africa in a seminal exhibition of African sculpture at Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery in 1914. While his 1926 photograph *Noire et blanche* (Fig. 1) would later become an icon of Modernist photography, a large body of his lesser-known work provides new insight into how his photographs both captured and promoted the spirit of his age. From that initial discovery of the African aesthetic in New York to the innovative photographs he later made in Paris in the 1920s and ‘30s, Man Ray’s images illustrate the way that African art acquired new meanings in conjunction with photography becoming legitimized as a Modernist art form.

As arguably the period’s most prolific producer of photographs inspired by non-European objects, Man Ray provides a rich body of work that raises critical issues about the role of African art in twentieth-century Modernism and offers new perspectives on that dynamic. For example, his work points to the crucial function photographs served in the collection and reception of African art, while at the same time demonstrating the symbiotic relationship forged between African objects and photographic images within the frame of Modernism. Examining Man Ray’s photographs of African art alongside an array of related photo-based work by his American and European contemporaries—including luminaries such as Alfred Stieglitz, André Kertesz, and Joseph Sudek, as well as lesser-known practitioners like James Latimer Allen and Clara Sipprell—the exhibition places these images within larger transatlantic dialogues concerning colonialism, race, representation, gender, and modernity.

While the concerns of Modernist photographic representation of African art define the terms of this investigation, the display—

whenever possible—of the actual masks and figures alongside the photographs in which they are represented is central to the exhibition's basic premise and serves several important functions. These juxtapositions offer a unique opportunity for viewers to encounter first hand how photographic techniques of framing, lighting, camera angle, and cropping can radically alter perceptions and interpretations of the objects (Figs. 2–3). On a purely visceral level, the remarkably different response evoked by the object and the image is striking, underscoring how meaning is constructed in the translation of a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional photographic image and the inherently subjective, interpretative nature of the medium.

The African masks, figures, and headdresses are presented in the exhibition not merely as auxiliaries to the photographs but as objects worth contemplating in their own right, preserving the integrity of the objects as entities independent from the Modernist photographs in which they appear. Elucidating the original context in which they functioned, the presentation of these objects acknowledges the distance they have traveled and the ceremonial and cultural functions that have been lost when manipulated to meet Western tastes, notions of beauty, and the very concept of art itself. New information on the African pieces provided by leading scholars in the field is an integral component of both the exhibition and the catalogue, drawing upon valuable expertise and utilizing this occasion to create a collaborative resource of wide-ranging value. Organized into four sections, the exhibition frames the objects and images on display through interconnecting themes that reverberate throughout the galleries.



(counterclockwise from above)

1 Man Ray

Noire et blanche (1926)

Gelatin silver print; 20.3cm x 25.3cm (8" x 10")

First reproduced in *Paris Vogue* (May 1, 1926)

Private collection, New York

PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS
 First published on the pages of *Paris Vogue* in May 1926, Man Ray's iconic photograph *Noire et blanche* popularized the vogue for African art, taking ideas of the avant-garde to a mainstream fashion audience. Variations of this image—including photographs with different croppings and printed on different papers, a photograph of the Baule mask alone, and a negative print—demonstrate the complexity of Man Ray's photographic practice and the process through which he came to his final composition. They are supplemented with magazine issues where the photograph appeared in the 1920s and assorted ephemera, revealing the role of the mass media in disseminating his work.

2 Walker Evans

Untitled (*Pende pendant*) (1935)

Gelatin silver print; 50.8cm x 40.6cm (20" x 16")

Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, AZ

PHOTO: © WALKER EVANS ARCHIVE, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART (2004.37.408)

This photograph of a *Pende* ivory pendant is included in the 477-print portfolio the Museum of Modern Art commissioned Walker Evans to produce in conjunction with their landmark 1935 exhibition "African Negro Art." In the photograph, Evans uses compositional devices of a close-up view and tight framing to heighten

the sense of dislocation and distort any sense of scale. The seamless black background and the strong, off-centered lighting intensify the contrast of the image and throw the white, angular pendant into sharp relief. Emerging as a ghostly, disembodied face floating in the center of a black void, this small object—which is actually less than 2½" high—takes on the appearance of a much larger face mask.

3 Pendant

Central *Pende*, Democratic Republic of the Congo; late 19th–early 20th century

Ivory; 6.1cm (2½")

Collection of James J. Ross

PHOTO: JOHN BIGELOW TAYLOR

This small ivory pendant with its delicately carved details echoes the shape of certain *Pende* mask types. While the triangular eyes and coiffure projections complement the chevron form of the face, the worn surface and subtle tonal variations soften its overall angular configuration. The pendant's serene beauty reflects its use as personal adornment intended to enhance the appearance of its wearer.



“WHAT IS AFRICA TO ME?”

“What is Africa to me?”—the ardent refrain from Countée Cullen’s 1925 poem “Heritage”—was relevant well beyond the concerns of the Harlem Renaissance to which it initially was addressed, as evident in this opening section. In fact, the poet’s frequently evoked query speaks to the significance of African art in the construction of modern American identities and aesthetics across racial boundaries in the first decades of the twentieth century, providing an overlay for the investigation of the role of photographs in this development. Although photographs of African masks and figural statuary would not appear in Man Ray’s work until after his move to Paris in 1921, we can only understand the images themselves when positioned within the larger historical contexts in which they were rooted and the larger critical issues of representation they raise. As the wealth of material brought to light in the exhibition reveals, the artist’s photographic engagement with African and other non-European objects takes on new meanings within this framework.

Providing background on the reception of African art among members of the New York avant-garde in this period, the opening gallery presents an overview of the diverse aesthetic visions with which Man Ray’s contemporaries Alfred Stieglitz, Charles Sheeler, and Walker Evans turned their camera lenses on African art. Photographs from the fine-art album Sheeler produced in collaboration with the Mexican artist and dealer Marius de Zayas provide particularly dramatic illustrations of how the convergence of interest in two previously marginalized art forms—African art and photography—offered the potential for creating a dynamic new means of creative expression (Figs. 4–5).

The work of these photographers is considered here along with images by their Harlem Renaissance counterparts, comparing images of African objects taken by photographers across racial divides (Figs. 6–8). Such comparisons reveal not only the way in which issues about race, identity, and difference are frequently embedded in such work but also demonstrate how African art functioned in the quest for a black cultural identity. At the same time, looking at the diverse stylistic approaches taken to the photographing of African art—between images of the famous Bangwa Queen from Cameroon by Man Ray and Walker Evans, for example (see sidebar, p. 76)—encapsulates debates played out on both sides of the Atlantic over the nature a Modernist photographic aesthetic that greatly contributed to shifting attitudes toward the objects themselves.



4 Charles Sheeler

Untitled (Fang Reliquary Figure) (c. 1918)
Gelatin silver print; 22.9cm x 16.3cm (9" x 6½")
Collection of Eric Richter, Washington DC

PHOTO: © THE LANE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The American painter and photographer Charles Sheeler utilized African objects as tools for exploring abstract form in the world around him, translating into a new photographic idiom lessons learned from European Modernism. Detached from its original bark container of relics, the Fang ancestor shrine guardian in his photograph is abstracted into a study of space, time, light, and shadow, transformed into a virtual interrogation of Cubist principles. Through compositional devices and effective use of multiple light sources, the barely two-foot figure is monumentalized and enmeshed in a web of its own overlapping shadows, revealing more about Sheeler’s interest in form and effect than in the sculpture itself. Even the wooden mount, with its stark geometric shape playing off against the undulating contours of the male figure and its ephemeral traces on the wall behind it, becomes an integral element in the composition. The inclusion of the structural base underscores the preciousness of the sculpture as a work of art to be elevated and admired, further distancing it from its functional past.

5 Reliquary guardian figure (*eyema bieri*)

Fang peoples, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea; late 19th-early 20th century
Wood, oil; 58.7cm x 17.8cm x 15.9cm (23" x 7" x 6¼")
Gift of the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, 72-41-3

PHOTO: FRANKO KHOURY, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC

Reliquary guardian figures are carved to sit protectively on top of cylindrical bark boxes containing the potentially powerful bones of deceased notables, such as village founders or those with potent spiritual powers. Members of the Fang Bieri association, dedicated to honoring these revered men and women from the past, call upon the ancestors to assist the living in times of crisis. *Eyema bieri* encompass a wide range of stylistic variation; the firm, bulging musculature and boldly rounded head evident in this figure reinforce the impression of a strong and powerful protector of lineage relics.

(clockwise from top right)

6 Clara Sipprell

Portrait of Max Weber (c. 1916)

Gelatin silver print; 18.7cm x 23.8cm (7¼" x 9½")

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Clara Sipprell's portrait of the artist Max Weber contemplating the Yaka figure he purchased while studying in Paris strives to make associations between the artist and object. Casting the artist's facial profile in shadow and blurring the features of the sculpture into obscurity, the photographer creates an image more about an ephemeral moment and notions of artistic genius than about either Weber or the object per se.



7 James Latimer Allen

Portrait of James Lesesne Wells (n.d.)

Gelatin silver print, sepia toned; 32.7cm x 24.1cm (13" x 9½")

PHOTO: ALAIN LOCKE PAPERS, MOORLAND-SPINGARN RESEARCH CENTER, HOWARD UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, DC

A portrait of the Harlem Renaissance artist James Lesesne Wells by James Latimer Allen introduces the little-known work of this photographer and illustrates the emerging concept of African art as "ancestral legacy" for African Americans. Alain Locke, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, owned the Kuba head-shaped goblet featured in the photograph, which is displayed alongside the print in the exhibition. In both Sipprell's and Allen's compositions, subject and object are situated at opposite ends of the picture frame, set within an austere, shallow space against a neutral background and photographed in profile. Although their shared use of pictorialist devices—diffused lighting, soft focus, intimate setting, and toned print—effect an affinity between the two images, a closer examination reveals significant points of divergence between the images that underscore the manner in which photographic meaning is constructed within specific contexts.

8 Head-shaped goblet

Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood stained with natural dyes; 20.6cm x 25.4cm x 15.2cm (8" x 10" x 6")

Collection Howard University Art Museum, Washington, DC. Gift of Alain Locke

PHOTO: COURTESY OF KWAKU OFARI-ANSA

Offering palm wine to guests is a typical form of Kuba hospitality. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, elaborately carved wooden cups for drinking palm wine established the status and refinement of the owner, serving as display pieces as well as functional objects. These cups were often carved in the shape of a head displaying the wing-like hairstyle characteristic of much Kuba art. The proliferation of geometric patterns incised into the neck and the top of the head contrasts dramatically with the shining smoothness of the face.





Man Ray
Untitled (Commemorative figure of a queen,
 Bangwa Kingdom, Cameroon, 19th century) (c.
 1933)
 Gelatin silver print; 29.5cm x 21cm (11½" x 8¼")
 Private collection, Paris
 PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY
 (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS



Walker Evans
Untitled (Commemorative figure of a queen,
 Bangwa Kingdom, Cameroon, 19th century) (1935)
 Gelatin silver print; 22.8cm x 10.6cm (9" x 4¼")
 African Negro Art portfolio WE 255 (MoMA cat.
 No. 319), Center for Creative Photography
 PHOTO: © WALKERS EVAN ARCHIVE, METROPOLITAN
 MUSEUM OF ART

In the course of their artistic careers on opposite sides of the Atlantic in the mid 1930s, Man Ray and Walker Evans each encountered one of the most acclaimed African sculptures in Western collections at the time, the so-called Bangwa Queen from the Bangwa Kingdom of Cameroon. Photographs of the sculpture subsequently made by them are featured in the exhibition. Their distinctive images dramatically illustrate the role of this medium in constructing ideas about African sculpture and the multifaceted manner in which it promoted these objects at a pivotal juncture in the development of a Modernist photographic aesthetic.

Commonly known as the Bangwa Queen as a result of her attribution as dancing priestess of the earth cult, diviner, and mother of twins, this celebrated "woman of God" was prized for its unusual, dynamic sense of movement and decidedly asymmetrical composition. Its roughly textured surface also distinguished it from the more refined carvings favored in the contemporary taste for African art. Man Ray capitalized on these qualities in a number of photographs he made of the sculpture, including the one illustrated here. Manifest in the dramatic play of light and shadow and oblique camera angle is Man Ray's Surrealist aesthetic. The photograph also embodies the era's "new vision," European avant-garde ideas about revolutionizing visual language through unconventional photographic practices. This approach contrasts with prevailing ideas about the medium among avant-garde art circles in the United States, not only at the time of Man Ray's departure for Europe more than a decade earlier but also with the vision of Modernist photography being promoted in the 1930s, as epitomized in the work of Walker Evans.

Man Ray captured the sculpture using a high camera angle, dramatic lighting and a theatrical use of space. In contrast, Evans chose a more conventional viewpoint, setting the figure in a shallow, austere space and illuminating it with a circular rotation of lights during the exposure. This technique produced a softly lit image with no discernible light source, eliminating harsh shadows in the process. Man Ray's composition draws attention to the sculpture's expressive face, vitality, and dynamic sense of motion. Evans' contrastive approach brings out details and accentuates the sculptural form of the entire figure represented in a more classical repose. While the presence of the stand in Man Ray's photograph grounds the object in the composition, Evans' decision to exclude the base and his extremely tight cropping results in a more spatially ambiguous image. Produced as part of a photographic album commissioned in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art's 1935 exhibition "African Negro Art," Evans' composition demonstrates the photographer's exacting, "straight" documentary style within an artistic vernacular, an approach based on a tradition that characterizes American photography as an "art of the real."

These two photographs evoke radically different interpretations of the Bangwa Queen, perhaps preventing the viewer from recognizing that the object featured in both is one and the same. Man Ray's and Walker Evans' individual approaches to the object and the medium reflect divergent visions of a modernist photographic aesthetic and, viewed together, provide insight into the complex manner in which such images functioned in propelling African objects into the Modernist matrix.

OBJECT & IMAGE / ART & DOCUMENT

This gallery explores the fate of African art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (to paraphrase the title of Walter Benjamin's influential essay), considering books, avant-garde journals, and popular magazines in which reproductions of such objects were circulated. Advancements in printing technologies in the first decades of the twentieth century and the burgeoning mass media played important roles in transmitting the vogue for African art across national borders and in shifting strategies for the representation of such objects. Indeed, the camera lens became a prism through which a large audience first experienced African art, a phenomenon in which Man Ray's photographs played an influential role. Featured on the cover of avant-garde journals (Fig. 9), published in fashion magazines (Fig. 1), or anonymously reproduced in texts promoting stylistic appreciation of African art (Fig. 10), his photographs of African masks and figures conveyed ideas about such objects to a wide audience, contributing to the process through which African art was transformed to meet Western aesthetic standards and to the construction of a canon.

With Man Ray's images as a framework, photographs of African sculpture operating under both artistic and documentary guise in a variety of publications are examined for the embedded messages and significations that inflect the way we read and understand photographs. At the center of this discussion are Man Ray's little-known photographs of African sculpture produced for the Danish collector Carl Kjermeier, reunited here for the first time with the original objects, now in the National Museum of Denmark (Figs. 11–13). Revealed in this examination is the multifaceted manner in which photographs of African art functioned in the interstices between document and art, fact and fiction, the ethnographic and the surreal.

DADA, SURREALISM, AND BEYOND

In the wake of profound societal upheaval triggered by World War I, African and other indigenous arts of the non-Western world functioned within the Dadaist and Surrealist world views in a very different manner than they did for the previous generation of artists. In contrast to the early years of the century,

(right)

9 Francis Picabia

Cover of 391 (July 1924)

Photomechanical reproduction; 37cm x 28cm (14½" x 11")

PHOTO: © COMITÉ PICABIA, PARIS

Man Ray's iconoclastic approach to photographing non-Western objects surfaced in compositions such as this satirical image in which African art is invoked as a literal and figurative challenge to the hegemony and hierarchy of Western classical tradition. Mirroring its irreverent Dada spirit, this confrontation of a Baule spirit figure from the Ivory Coast with a neoclassical Venus-like statuette appeared on the July 1924 cover of Francis Picabia's journal 391 framed by a field of provocative aphorisms. The strategic pairing of image and text poignantly illustrates contemporary political and aesthetic debates in which African sculpture was being positioned as equal—or even superior—to its Western counterparts.



(left)

10 Man Ray

Untitled (Senufo figure from Kjersmeier Collection) (c. 1933)

Gelatin silver print; 22.9cm x 17.8cm (9" x 7")

Collection of Camillo d'Aflitto

PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

Man Ray's photographs of objects belonging to the Danish collector Carl Kjersmeier are featured in the exhibition, reunited for the first time with the actual objects they feature. Man Ray's largely unknown engagement with these objects—and the actual reproduction of several of his photographs in Kjersmeier's pioneering *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre Africaine*—are brought to light, illustrating the manner in which his photographs of objects from this collection have operated alternately as art and document. In photographs of Kjersmeier's collection such as this, the photographer's interest in the play of light and shadow is evident. The photograph of the Senufo figure was reproduced full frame in the first volume of *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre Africaine* with its overlapping pattern of middle-tone and deep shadows creating a dramatic backdrop. In classic Man Ray fashion, there is more to the image than first meets the eye; it is not a literal translation of the object that ultimately interested the photographer but rather the dynamic between the figure and the abstract, mystifying shadows it cast.

11 Standing female figure

Senufo, Northern Côte d'Ivoire/Mali; late 19th-early 20th century

Wood, beads; 21.6cm x 5.9cm (8½" x 2¼")

Carl Kjersmeier Collection G 8095

PHOTO: © 2009 JOHN LEE, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK

Female figures appear during different ceremonies in Senufo society, and without information on the original context it is often difficult today to identify its specific use. This female figure almost certainly had a male counterpart, its small size indicating it may have been part of a Sando diviner's ritual paraphernalia. Male/female pairs are common in Senufo art, reflecting the belief in the importance of the proper harmonious balance between men and women in Senufo society. According to Kjersmeier (vol. 1, p. 29), Senufo statuary is "characterized by an accentuated, protruding jaw, stylized helmet-shaped coiffure, a prominent belly, and long arms with hands resembling mittens placed on the upper thighs." The simplified, curving contours in this figure suggest the Senufo preference for refined, elegant sculptural form as an expression of supernatural power. The prominent breasts make reference to ideal womanhood in the prime of life.





(clockwise from top left)

12 Man Ray

Untitled (Pende pendant and Chokwe whistle from Kjersmeier Collection) (c. 1933)
Gelatin silver print; 22.9cm x 17.8cm (9" x 7")
Man Ray Trust

PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

Man Ray's characteristically idiosyncratic approach to photographing objects in Kjersmeier's collection is evident in this composition juxtaposing a Chokwe whistle and Pende pendant as if they were black and white pawns confronting each other in a game of chess. His images reframe figures from Kjersmeier's collection as objets trouvés exploited for their visual and conceptual potential. Indeed, chess allusions—with their reference to the binary opposition of black and white—are embedded in a number of his photographs of African art, as exemplified here and in the photograph reproduced on the cover of *391* (Fig. 9). Distorted through the camera's lens and floating in the picture plane against a pattern of interwoven shadows, these objects become literal and figurative "pawns" in the artist's visual vocabulary.

13 Whistle

Chokwe, Angola/Democratic Republic of the Congo; late 19th-early 20th century
Wood; 4cm x 2cm (1½" x ¾")
Carl Kjersmeier Collection G 8424

PHOTO: © 2009 JOHN LEE, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK

In the past, whistles were used by the Chokwe for communication in various scenarios: in times of war, during hunts, or as part of the ritual activities of secret societies. Whistle owners were adept at producing combinations of both high and low tones, associated with "female" and "male" voices. The iconography of these whistles ranges from the portrayal of chiefs, to characters personified in masked performances, to forest animals, to purely abstract forms. The distinctive headgear seen in this whistle suggests this may be the head of a chief, possibly used as an insignia of prestige.

14 Man Ray

Untitled (Mask, Dogon, Mali), 1936
Gelatin silver print; 27.9cm x 20.3cm (11" x 8")
Reproduced in *Cahiers d'art* 11, no. 6-7 (1936)
Man Ray Trust

PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

Man Ray imbues the Dogon monkey mask in his composition with life and mystery, monumentalized through techniques of framing and ambiguous use of space and animated through the interplay of light and shadow across its surfaces. Employing compositional techniques that reinforce a reading of the objects through a Surrealist lens, he confers reverential status upon the mask as an art form. The theatrical high-key side lighting throws the mask's features into deep shadow while the back-lighting sets its eyes aglow, heightening the eerie effect of the image. Published in *Cahiers d'art* in 1936, this photograph and several others accompanied an article by the Surrealist turned ethnographer Michel Leiris about a recent excursion to West Africa. The African objects acquired by the Musée de l'Homme as a result of this trip are featured in Man Ray's photographs, which oscillate between notions of the real and the surreal. Photographs and several of the objects from this series are exhibited along with the issue of *Cahiers d'art* in which they appeared, underscoring the channels through which Modernist interpretations of African art were disseminated.





15 Man Ray

La lune brille sur l'île Nias, 1926
Gelatin silver print; 14cm x 8.9cm (5½" x 3½")

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

Framing an ancestor figure from the Indonesian island of Nias against an eerie, moonlit landscape, this photograph was featured on the cover of the catalogue for the March 1926 opening exhibition of the Galerie Surréaliste, "Tableaux de Man Ray et Objets des Iles." The 1926 exhibition catalogue is displayed along with a vintage print of the image.

16 Curtis Moffat

Untitled (Mask, Senufo; War club [U'U], Marquesas Island), 1930s
Gelatin silver print; 25.4cm x 20.3cm (10" x 8")

PHOTO: V&A IMAGES / VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

Curtis Moffat, a London-based American painter, photographer, and interior designer, saw African art as a central component of a Modern aesthetic, a philosophy he realized in his practice as a collector, home decorator, and photographer. Interposing a Senufo mask and Marquesas war club from his own collection with translucent female models and abstract forms, he creates an enigmatic composition reminiscent of his collaborative work with Man Ray in the 1920s.



it was not the formal qualities of African art that provided the principal source of inspiration for the postwar avant-garde, but rather an obsession with concerns of a more conceptual nature. The appeal such objects held for these artists was largely driven by both a universal rejection of the values of the established order and an attraction to notions of ritual they suggested.

Photographs produced within the context of these two international movements in which Man Ray actively participated are the focus of this gallery. Disseminated through avant-garde publications and journals such as *Cahiers d'art* (Fig. 14), his photographs promoted Surrealist ideas about African objects as embodiments of the uncanny. The Surrealists' preoccupation with the unconscious and fascination with dreams, myth, ritual, animism, and the occult, also drew them to objects from the South Seas and the Americas, whose power they sought to channel.¹ Several of Man Ray's photographs of objects from these regions are included to demonstrate how the reception of African art intersected with Surrealist views about other indigenous cultures and how these ideas were reflected, as well as challenged, in his photographic practice (Fig. 15).

The postwar Dada and Surrealist ethos echoed across Europe, as revealed in a range of photo-based works by artists working in Germany, England, and Czechoslovakia included in the exhibition. The Senufo mask and Marquesas war club employed as eroticized props in Curtis Moffat's illusory composition (Fig. 16), for example, reflect the diffusion of Surrealist ideas that projected male fantasies and romanticized notions of otherness embodied in the female form across race and cultures.

FASHIONING A POPULAR RECEPTION

By the mid 1920s, African art had been assimilated into the visual vocabulary of mainstream culture, a process greatly facilitated by photographs reproduced in the popular press and particularly in fashion journals of the day. Promoted through these same channels was the intersection of African and African American culture wherein jazz played a central role (Fig. 17). This connection can be seen in *Henry Music*, the 1930 publication of original sheet music by the African American jazz composer Henry Crowder, featuring Man Ray's photomontage cover of African objects (Fig. 18). Highlighted by this book and the series of photographs that comprise

17 JAZZ, Special Issue (1930)

Photomechanical reproduction

Collection of Gerard Levy

PHOTO: GERARD LEVY

Featuring a Bamana figure with a drum cymbal as its halo, this special issue "Exotique" of the journal JAZZ encapsulates the conflation of African and African American cultures in the popular imagination.

18 Man Ray

Henry Music Cover Design, Hours Press, 1930

Photomechanical reproduction; 33cm x 50.8cm (13" x 20")

Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin

PHOTO: HARRY RANSOM CENTER

Wrapped around front and back covers of Nancy Cunard's special-edition publication *Henry Music*, Man Ray's still-life of her collection features a vast array of Cunard's ivory, wood, and bronze bracelets from across Africa—a collection that grew, by her own account, to number 486 by 1939. Man Ray's photomontage illustrates Cunard's observation that "His vision in taking and placing and, as it were, in 'mating' various objects, was often supreme."

19 Man Ray

Comtesse de St. Exupery Modeling an African Hat, *Mode au Congo* (1937)

Gelatin silver print; 25.2cm x 18.7cm (10" x 7½")

The Baltimore Museum of Art BMA 1976.20

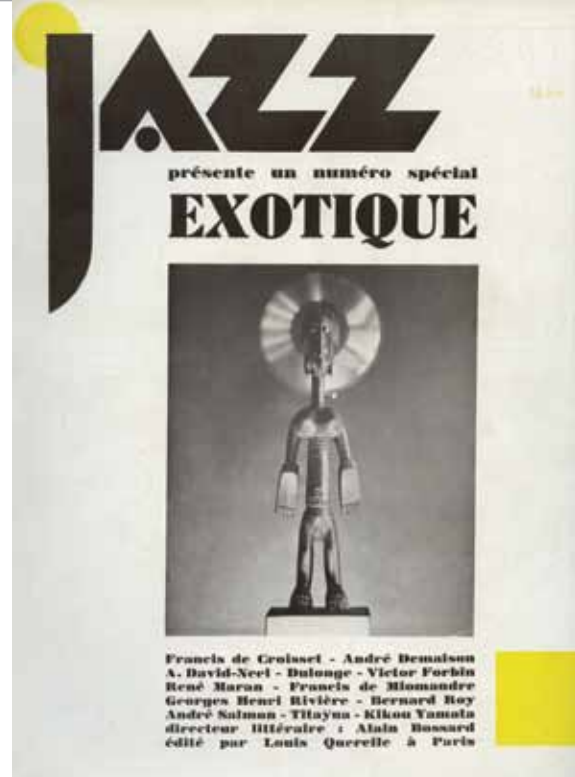
PHOTO: © 2009 MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

This photograph from Man Ray's *Mode au Congo* series—an image of Consuelo de St. Exupéry posed as a twentieth-century Nefertiti with her Congo headdress translated into a royal crown—appeared in print in two distinct contexts. First published as a full-page reproduction in *Cahiers d'art*, it subsequently appeared along with three others from the *Mode au Congo* portfolio in *Harper's Bazaar*, framing an article titled "The Bushongo of Africa sends his hats to Paris." Acquired by the leading Parisian milliner Lily Daché at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, the Congo headdresses featured in this series will be seen together in the exhibition with several of Man Ray's photographs and the issue of *Harper's Bazaar* in which they appear, illustrating the intersection of fashion and the avant-garde that influenced the vogue for African art in this period.

the montage is the conflation of African and African American culture that influenced Western ideas about black culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. These phenomena are explored in this gallery, illustrating the role photographs played in promoting an undifferentiated vogue for the Africanesque, a trend in which all things vaguely African took on symbolic meanings. Photographs by Man Ray, Cecil Beaton, and Carl Van Vechten demonstrate how visions of a fictive Africa, existing only in the imaginations of their creators, contributed to popular imagery about African culture.

Man Ray's *Noire et blanche* is central to this discussion. Published in *Paris Vogue* in 1926, the photograph has defied categorization since its inception, traversing boundaries as it does between art and fashion. Interpreted by critics over the past three-quarters of a century as an extension of the early Modernist impulse to universalize and neutralize difference, as a reflection of contemporary attitudes toward race and gender, or simply as a formal exercise, this photograph embodies issues at the core of this exhibition (see Chadwick 1995, Grossman 2003, Bate 2004, and Grossman and Manford 2006).

Man Ray's *Mode au Congo* series provides another key element to this section. In these photographs, Central African headdresses purchased at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris are sported as haute couture by female models (Fig. 19). Reproduced in 1937 as illustrations for an article in *Harper's Bazaar* by the Surrealist writer Paul Eluard titled "The Bushongo of Africa sends his hats to Paris," these photographs demonstrate how photographs of African objects functioned at the intersection of fashion and the avant-garde. They also represent the ultimate



commodification of African material culture and its wholesale appropriation by Western fashion, reflecting contradictions inherent in the Modernist appropriation of African culture.

In unraveling the various levels on which photographs of African art were created and circulated in the early decades of the twentieth century, the exhibition lays bare the interrelationship between collecting and photographic practices in the promotion and marketing of such objects. In fact, annotations in Man Ray's hand on the back of his prints have added to what was previously known about the provenance of several African—as well as Oceanic and pre-Columbian—objects in Parisian collections. These same photographs, in turn, have provided new evidence concerning the artist's connections with Paul Guillaume and Charles Ratton, two of the preeminent dealers of non-European art in Paris during the two decades Man Ray spent there between the Wars. The fact that several objects he photographed from these dealers subsequently turned up on the other side of the Atlantic in such prominent collections as those belonging to Albert Barnes, Pierre Matisse, and Helena Rubenstein underscores how the qualities of the photographic medium—its reproducibility, ease of distribution, and the perception of photographs as faithful conveyors of visual information—facilitated both the mobility of such objects as commodities and their assimilation into popular culture.

That said, it should be noted that objects which acquired iconic status due partly to their appearance in Modernist photographs are not always the best, most representative or—as is likely the case of the Baule-type mask featured in *Noire et blanche*—even authentic examples of that object type. Rather, their presence reflects the colonial history and related collecting patterns of the time, demonstrating the influential role of photographs in enhancing the reputation of certain objects and contributing to the construction of a canon. In Man Ray's case, the status of certain African objects actually became intertwined with his own legacy to such a degree that imaginative scenarios have been created in which he is credited as the owner of several of the sculp-

tures he photographed. The historical record has been muddied by the perpetuation of such misinformation, resulting in misattributions of objects and false characterizations of the photographer as a collector himself.

These efforts to set the record straight on Man Ray's relationship to the African objects he photographed provide not only new perspectives on one of the preeminent photographers of the period but also greater insight into the reciprocal process through which African art and photography became integrally intertwined in the dynamics of Modernism. Traversing concerns of photographic and African art history, Modernism, and the politics of representation, this exhibition challenges notions of a generic African art that have prevailed in conventional narratives of Modernism and encourages a closer critical look at the complex manner in which photographs convey meanings. In bridging such seemingly disparate fields of inquiry, "Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens" takes its lead from those who have pioneered over the past two decades in exploring conceptual relations between Western representation and the reception of African art through models that have challenged traditional academic boundaries, disciplines, and museological strictures.² Through this investigation, the exhibition aims to add another voice to this dialogue, raising provocative new questions about how photographs have shaped and continue to influence our understanding of African art to this day.

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Notes

1 The growing popularity of African art led a number of Surrealists to the conclusion that such objects had been drained of value for their radical agenda, precipitating a search for new sources of inspiration. They turned instead to the indigenous arts of the South Seas and the Americas, perceiving in these cultures a spiritual, vital essence and magical allure akin to their own artistic aspirations. See Cowling 1978a, 1978b, 1992; Maurer 1984; Thyacott 2003; Grossman 2008.

2 Susan Vogel's exhibition "Art/artifact" (Vogel 1988) set the bar for subsequent efforts to critically and transparently examine the manner in which Western ideas have shaped our notions of African art and the role of exhibitions in perpetuating those ideas. See Karp and Lavine 1991 and particularly Vogel 1991; Roberts 1994; Shelton 2000; Karp, et al. 2006; and Butler 2008.

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