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 photographs by his American and European contemporaries—including luminaries such as Alfred Stieglitz, André Kertész, 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—

**MAN RAY, AFRICAN ART, AND THE MODERNIST LENS**

**OCTOBER 10, 2009–JANUARY 10, 2010**

**THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION, WASHINGTON DC**

**AUGUST 7–OCTOBER 10, 2010**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA ART MUSEUM, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA**

**OCTOBER 2010–JANUARY 2011**

**UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY, VANCOUVER, CANADA**

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.
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.
“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.
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 Muesum, Washington, DC. Gift of Alain Locke
PHOTO: COURTESY OF KWAKU OFARI-ANSAPhoto: 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.
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 distinguishes it from the more refined carvings favored in the contemporary taste for African art. 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.

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**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,
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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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 backlighting 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.
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. 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
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 sculptures 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. 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.

**References cited**


