

## 'Man Ray' is fruit of curator's 14-year journey

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One of the most intriguing and surprising art exhibits to come to Washington in many a year almost didn't happen.

Wendy Grossman, the indefatigable curator behind "Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens," at the Corcoran Gallery of Art through Jan. 10, struggled for years to realize her vision of an exhibit that would combine the photographs Man Ray made of African art objects in between the two world wars with a number of the objects themselves. Grossman, a freelancer who had no institutional backing for the majority of the time she worked on the show, found both the African art and the photography departments of museums she pitched were skeptical of her proposal for an exhibit they saw as neither fish nor fowl.

That's the problem of originality, whether in art or in art scholarship.

You can see why Phillips Director Dorothy Kosinski was ultimately persuaded to give Grossman a shot. Her show features around 100 photos, half of which are by Ray. Fellow modernists like Alfred Stieglitz and Charles Sheeler account for the rest. The photos are accompanied by about two dozen masks and figures from various West African cultures.

The juxtaposition makes plain Grossman's contention that Ray's experimental photographs of these objects -- which began when a collector named Carl Kejersmeier hired him to document his assembled bounty -- went beyond mere catalogery. Ray used harsh lighting to up the surrealist ante of his pictures, making the masks, especially, seem primeval and frightening.

Grossman said she sees it all as Ray's sense of mischief at work. She singles out an image of an ivory pendant and a black whistle. "These two objects are from completely different cultures," Grossman said. "What Man Ray saw, in his very playful approach to the medium, is the juxtaposition of these objects to evoke chess pieces. Man Ray was totally engaged in chess, as an intellectual challenge and a conceptual game. I see this

as a continuation of his constant play with the idea of black and white and the interplay of forms."

The majority of the photographs in the show have seldom or never been exhibited or reproduced. Even the two on loan from the Museum of Modern Art in New York had been kept in storage since the 1940s. Ray's 1926 "Noire et Blanche" is probably the only image that might be familiar to most visitors.