

Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens Premieres at the Phillips Collection



Figurative Goldweight (abrammuo). Late 19th–early 20th century. Ghana, Akan. Brass; h: 1 1/16 in). The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen, Carl Kjersmeier Collection. Photo: John Lee.

WASHINGTON, DC.- Best known for revolutionizing the art of photography, American artist Man Ray (1890-1976) produced a prolific collection of striking black-and-white compositions inspired by the African objects they depict. [The Phillips Collection](#) showcases these works in a new exhibition that explores the pivotal role photographs played in changing the perception of African objects from artifacts to fine art. *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens* is on view at the Phillips from Oct. 10, 2009 to Jan. 10, 2010.

Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens features more than 50 photographs by Man Ray from the 1920s and 1930s as well as approximately 50 photographs by his international avant-garde contemporaries, including Cecil Beaton, Walker Evans, Charles Sheeler, Alfred Stieglitz, and James L. Allen. For the first time, a selection of these photographs is presented alongside the original African objects they feature.

While the influence of African objects on modern painting and sculpture has been explored extensively, this exhibition examines the diverse parallel activities of early-20th-century photography. At the center of this investigation are both well-known and recently discovered photographs by Man Ray, whose images were instrumental in promoting non-Western objects as modern art to an

international audience.

“These photographs speak powerfully to our collective past and invite us to look anew at a critical moment in the history of modern art,” says Dorothy Kosinski, director. “It is a timely, if not long overdue, moment to bring to light this neglected chapter of modern art with an exhibition that considers how photography has shaped our understanding of African art while contributing to diverse narratives of modernism.”

Wendy Grossman, photohistorian and exhibition curator, spent nearly two decades examining the relationship between photography and African art. Through this process she uncovered a number of unknown photographs by Man Ray and others which provide new perspectives on this preeminent artist as well as greater insight into the symbiotic process through which African art and photography engaged the dynamics of modernism.

In juxtaposing the photographs with the actual African masks, figures, and headdresses they depict, the exhibition offers a rare opportunity to encounter firsthand how techniques of framing, lighting, camera angle, and cropping evoke radically different interpretations of these objects. The exhibition also fully documents the histories of the individual objects, exploring the original ceremonial and cultural functions that were lost when manipulated to meet Western ideas of beauty and art.

Man Ray was first introduced to African art in 1914 through a seminal exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery. While his 1926 photograph *Noire et blanche*, which features the model Kiki of Montparnasse posing with an African mask, became an icon of Modernist photography, a large body of his lesser-known work and that of his contemporaries reveals a far more complex engagement with African art.

The exhibition is organized into four sections that place the photographs within the context of diverse modernist perspectives, including the Harlem Renaissance, surrealism, and the worlds of high fashion and popular culture.

African Art American Style

The opening gallery presents an overview of the embrace of African art in the United States in the first decades of the 20th century. Images of African objects by American photographers, ranging from New York avant-garde artists Alfred Stieglitz, Charles Sheeler, and Walker Evans to their Harlem Renaissance counterparts Carl Van Vechten, James Allen, and Marjorie Griffiths, reveal different understandings of African art and culture. The photographs shed light on issues of race, identity, gender, and colonialism influenced by the country’s history of slavery, segregation, and disenfranchisement.

African Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

This section examines the books, avant-garde journals, and popular magazines in which these photographs were reproduced. Advances in printing technologies in the first decades of the 20th century and the burgeoning mass media played a critical role in spreading the vogue for African art, allowing the camera lens to become a prism through which a large audience first experienced African art.

A selection of the little-known photographs of African objects that Man Ray produced for the Danish

collector Carl Kjersmeirer are featured for the first time in the United States with nine of the original sculptures. The objects and photographs are accompanied by a copy of Kjersmeirer's groundbreaking publication, *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre Africaine* (1935), which illustrates the way photographs of African art challenged the traditional boundaries of photography by blurring the lines between document and art, fact and fiction.

Surrealism and Beyond

The exhibition also explores how the reception of African art intersected with the surrealist movement in which Man Ray actively participated. Photographs and photomontages by artists working in Germany (Marta Hoepffner and Albert Renger-Patzsch) and England (Cecil Beaton and Curtis Moffat) are highlighted as well as images of African masks by Czech photographers Josef Sudek and Vaclav Zykumund. Several of Man Ray's photographs of objects from the South Seas and the Americas are also included.

Fashioning a Popular Reception

First published on the pages of *Paris Vogue*, Man Ray's now iconic photograph *Noire et blanche* popularized African art and introduced the ideas of avant-garde photography to a mainstream audience. Multiple vintage prints and published versions of *Noire et blanche* are displayed together for the first time, illustrating the complexity of the artist's photographic practice and underscoring the individuality of each print. Man Ray's series of fashion photographs featuring models in Congo headdresses—*Mode au Congo* (1937)—is also featured and displayed with several of the actual headdresses and original magazines in which they appeared.

The exhibition culminates with *Henry Music*—the 1930 book of original sheet music by the African American jazz composer Henry Crowder that features Man Ray's photomontage of African ivory, wood, and bronze bracelets on the cover—along with vintage prints of the photographs from which the montage was constructed.

Man Ray

Born Emmanuel Radnitsky in 1890 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Man Ray spent most of his young life in Brooklyn, New York. He initially rose to prominence as a painter and sculptor in the social groups of the New York Dada school during the second decade of the 20th century.

Photography was an essential tool for the artistic avant-garde in the United States at this time, and Man Ray took up the medium under the influence of his close friend, Marcel Duchamp. In 1921, Man Ray followed Duchamp to Paris, settling in the Montparnasse quarter favored by many artists. It was there, for the next 20 years, that Man Ray revolutionized the art of photography.

After its presentation at the Phillips, the exhibition will be on view at the University of New Mexico Art Museum (Albuquerque, N.M.) from January 30 to May 23, 2010; the University of Virginia Museum of Art (Charlottesville, Va.) from Aug. 7 to Oct. 10, 2010; and the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia (Vancouver, British Columbia) from Oct. 29, 2010 to Jan. 23, 2011.