

Man of the Hour

Jewish Surrealist Artist Man Ray Rediscovered

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Once underestimated in favor of his more acclaimed artist friends, like Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky in Philadelphia in 1890) is now finally the man of the hour, honored with two major exhibits: *Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention*, which runs from November 15 to March 14, 2010, at New York's Jewish Museum, and *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens*, from October 10 to January 10, 2010, at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. These exhibits, displaying a rich variety of Ray's photos, sculptures, paintings, and drawings, provide an occasion for reassessing the inspirations of Man Ray from early canvases, which, like works by his predecessors Picasso and Braque, were strongly influenced by the powerful abstraction of African sculpture, as well as by the less obvious, but equally essential, influence of his own self-camouflaged Jewish origins. Together, these two exhibits help place Ray in context both as a visually obsessed and inspired creator of his times and as a 20th-century American Jewish expatriate in France.

The camouflaging began in 1912, when, after moving to Brooklyn, the Philadelphia Radnitzkys changed their last name to Ray to ward off antisemitism. Although many critics noted that during his lifetime, Man Ray discussed neither his family's original name, nor his religious origins, as a surrealist he was innately opposed to a recitation of biographical facts. Ray's oft-quoted comment, "Personally, I have always preferred inspiration to information," applies here, especially as now, decades after his death, critics so often get simple facts about him wrong. On October 18, *The Washington Post* erroneously claimed that Ray was born in Brooklyn, while a Web site of the Public Broadcasting Service bizarrely claims that his original family name was "Rabinovitch."

A fact-dodger or not, Ray was definitely influenced by concrete details of his family background as the son of a hardworking Jewish tailor, as Hebrew University art historian Milly Heyd points out in *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art* (Rutgers University Press, 2001). One such example is Ray's sculpture "*Cadeau*" ("Gift") from 1921, of which a later reproduction is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, made from an ordinary flat iron with tacks glued on to it in an inescapable reference to his father's having spent his life bent over an ironing board. Despite Ray's vehement need to distance himself from his parents' working-class lives, his art would often likewise include tailor's dummies, sewing machines, needles, pins and threads, often thereby achieving a surreal apotheosis of the **schmatte*.

As Ray is a trickster in art (he proclaimed in a 1970s interview that the "most successful art... involves humor"), his direct allusions to ethnicity sometimes cannot be taken at face value. His photograph "*Ciné-Sketch: Adam and Eve*" (1924), in the Philadelphia Museum, for example, spoofs Old Testament iconography by posing Bronia Perlmutter, a nude 18-year-old Dutch Jewish model, as Eve with his friend Duchamp as a preening, fig-leafed Adam. This ironic photo is overshadowed by the somber power of Ray's iconic 1927 photo of Arnold Schoenberg, now in the Art Institute of Chicago, by his elongated,

gracefully aristocratic 1924 image of Peggy Guggenheim, in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and by monumental images of Gertrude Stein, now at the Getty Museum in LA.

In these and other photographs, Ray created a majestic iconography of 20th-century Jews in the arts. Reminding us of this solid connection with fellow Jews, the beautifully presented, if unevenly written, catalog for "Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention" (Yale University Press) reproduces Ray's 1903 bar mitzvah photo, with little Manny posing in a proudly defiant stance, wrapped in a tallit. In 1914, barely out of art school, Ray received one of his first significant reviews from a friend and colleague, the Belgian-Jewish Dadaist poet, sculptor and anarchist Adolf Wolff, who called Ray a "youthful alchemist forever in quest of the painter's philosopher's stone." Readers of Gershom Scholem's "Alchemy and Kabbalah," or even more pertinently, "Kabbalah and Alchemy: An Essay on Common Archetypes" by Ray's friend, Italian-Jewish art historian Arturo Schwarz, know that being an alchemist in art may be fully compatible with a Jewish identity.

Nor was being a Dadaist and Jew inherently contradictory for Ray's generation. The abstraction and irrationality that the Dada movement typified attracted German-born Hans Richter; Romanian-Jewish painter Marcel Janco (born Iancu), who later founded the Israeli artists' village Ein Hod, and Arthur Segal. Tristan Tzara (born Samuel Rosenstock), a fixture at the Cabaret Voltaire and, later, one of the "presidents of Dada," was a close friend and frequent Ray photographic subject. Small wonder that in 1921, Henry Tyrrell, reactionary art critic of the newspaper the New York World, complained suspiciously that to be Dadaist meant to be "anti-everything — except anti-Semitic."

Like these artistic colleagues, Ray aspired to the illogical or irrational rather than the practical. In 1915, when John Weichsel, an anarchistic New York art critic of Polish-Jewish origin whose People's Art Guild took art classes out into Jewish communities, asked Ray to participate, he refused on the grounds that his works would be displayed inadequately. Whether in unfettered erotic art exploring varied facets of human sexuality or in airbrush painting, which he called a "purely cerebral act," Ray was an ultra-liberated artist. In 1922, a year after he moved permanently to Paris, Ray devised his "rayographs," photos that use negative imaging and varied exposure time, and duly announced in a letter to a patron: "I have finally freed myself from the sticky medium of paint, and am working directly with light itself."

Yet, Jewish tradition was but one of a panoply of influences in this highly imaginative artist's mind, as is emphasized by "Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens." The exhibit catalog, from the University of Minnesota Press, focuses on the intriguing intersection between surrealist sensibilities and African sacred art. Inspired by these artifacts of African spirituality, as well as by his own Jewish origins, Ray was a creator of kaleidoscopic insights, belying condescending reviews such as a 1989 New York Times article claiming that it would be "wrong to consider" Ray "more than a master on a minor scale." On the contrary, thanks to these new exhibits, Ray has finally manned up to the top rank of 20th-century Jewish artists.

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