

IS THERE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE TO MAN RAY'S AFRICAN OBSESSION?

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Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens

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The Phillips Collection

1600 21st Street, NW, Washington, D.C.

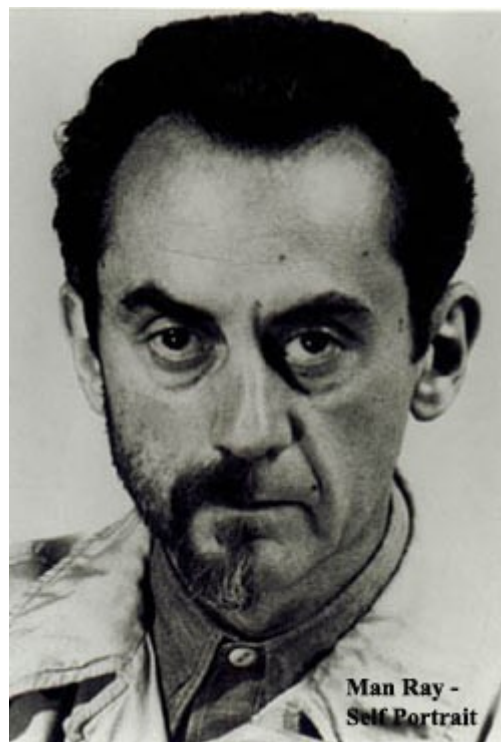
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Jews, and particularly Jewish kings of the biblical period, are not supposed to be too keen on horses. An unhealthy love for things equestrian, according to the admonition in *Deuteronomy* 17:16, will tempt the king to return the Jewish people to Egypt. That being said, it must be admitted upfront that it is quite a stretch to ask whether a biblical prohibition against amassing royal stables of Egyptian horses applies to Jewish artists today. There are countless representations of the Genesis and Exodus narratives in Haggadahs and other Jewish books - some of which might even have been made by Jewish artists - so there was surely no ban on representing Egypt in art. Yet, if the bible espouses what we can only describe as an anti-Egyptian perspective, which anyone who attends a Passover Seder cannot help but confront, this could trickle down to artists.

So when *Isaiah* 31:1 curses "Woe (*hoy*) unto those who go to Egypt for help, who depend on horses" and fail to realize "Egyptians are men not G-d, and their horses are flesh not spirit" and *Ezekiel* 17:15 promises the Jews who send representatives to Egypt seeking horses and servants will not prosper, what, if anything, do they have to say about the Jewish artist Man Ray?

"Egypt appears most notably in Man Ray's chess sets, in which he designed the king as an Egyptian pyramid. But I never considered the biblical connection to Egypt when thinking about those pieces," said Wendy A. Grossman, curator of the exhibit *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens* at The Phillips Collection, in an email. In addition to the show at the Phillips, Man Ray, born Emmanuel Radnitzky (1890 - 1976), is also the subject of an exhibit at The Jewish Museum called "Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention" (through March 14).

According to Grossman, who specializes in Man Ray, the history of photography, early 20th century European and American Modernism, and the relationship between African and modern art, it would be "highly uncharacteristic" of Man Ray to have associated the Egypt of his chess board with the Egypt of Exodus. Indeed, on the website of the Museum of Modern Art, which owns a silver-plated and oxidized silver-plated brass version of Man Ray's "Chess Set" (1920 - 26), the bible is not mentioned.





Man Ray, Comtesse de St. Exupery Modeling an African Hat, Mode au Congo, 1937, © 2009 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADGAP, Paris, Baltimore Museum of Art.

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"Moreover, while Egypt is indeed part of the African continent, the avant-gardes' embrace of African objects was focused on Sub-Saharan Africa," Grossman said, "which was rarely considered in relationship to Egypt at that time." Thus when Man Ray photographed African sculptures and masks, he embraced the objects for "the challenge they presented to Western culture as a whole and classical artistic hierarchies in particular," according to Grossman, and "the taboo nature of such objects specifically for his Jewish peers was far from his conscious concerns."

But even if Man Ray did not have biblical slavery in mind, there is actually quite an interesting Jewish narrative surrounding one particular photograph (Man Ray's most famous, of the artist, singer and model Kiki of Montparnasse with an African mask) that appears in both the Phillips and the Jewish Museum shows, according to Grossman. In the black-and-white image, Kiki's white face with black hair sharply contrasts with the black mask, although there are similarities between the softly modeled features of the mask and the model. Though the two faces have many differences (cultural, ethnic, racial), they share a similar olive-shape and striking beauty.



Man Ray, Black and White (Noire et Blanche), 1926, © 2009 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADGAP, Paris, Baltimore Museum of Art.

Writing in "Unmasking Man Ray's *Noire et blanche*" (American Art, summer 2006) with co-author Steven Manford, Grossman notes that varied interpretations of Man Ray's "enigmatic" photograph of the mask reflect the image's "ambiguous and provocative character." Instead of turning out to belong to "a phantom French collector of African art," the mask, Grossman and Manford discover, belonged to the American George Sakier (1897 - 1988), a Paris-based art director for Vogue, which published the photograph.

"Although the relationship between these two individuals has been largely overlooked, they knew each other growing up in Brooklyn, where Sakier's Russian Jewish family (then Sacken) had immigrated around the same time as Man Ray's," Grossman said. She says it is "anyone's guess" whether Jewish artists at the time like Man Ray may have been more likely to have been sympathetic to art of other marginalized groups (like Africans) since they were considered outsiders themselves.

"But it is worth noting that a Jewish artist, Max Weber, was instrumental in bringing African art to the American avant-garde after his studies in Paris," she said, "just as an artist of Jewish origin (viz., Man Ray) was instrumental in introducing African art to a large audience through his photographs."



Man Ray, Untitled (Akan goldweight), c. 1933, © 2009 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADGAP, Paris, Private Collection.

Man Ray certainly tried to distance himself from his Jewish identity, which the Jewish Museum website calls "conflicted," though it "was central to an artist who yearned to escape the limitations of his Russian Jewish immigrant past." But he may have intentionally embraced props that were familiar to him since his father worked in a garment factory and ran a tailoring shop, and his mother was a seamstress: tailor's dummies, flat irons, sewing machines, needles, pins, threads and fabric.

References to Egypt, biblical prohibitions against creating taboo idols and interest in marginalized art might amount to nothing more than a series of coincidences, but what is clear is that viewers seeking Jewish relevance to Man Ray's work can find it not only at The Jewish Museum, but also at the Phillips Collection fantastic examination of the artist's approach to African iconography.

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