

# Modernist Merger

## Man Ray Shines with Stylish Juxtapositions of African Art



PHOTO: MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

by Gary Tischler

As a title and as an idea, "Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens" is a mouthful, or should we say mindful — thick with connections, provocations and a keen awareness for the power and parallels of photography, modernism and native art.

The exhibition at the Phillips Collection is also in some ways about trends, infatuation and fads, not so much for the photographer Man Ray himself, but for the explosive interest in African art early in the last century — an interest that was taken up not only by artists and collectors but also by fashionistas, which is where this show comes full circle.

More than 50 photographs taken by Man Ray in the 1920s and 1930s — along with roughly another 50 by his international avant-garde contemporaries — form a striking black-and-white backdrop to the African objects they frame. The images — which played an important role in altering the perception of African objects from non-Western artifacts to fine art — are for the first time presented alongside some of the original African artworks they depict.

The core of this show is the presence of these real-life, so to speak, African sculptures, artifacts, masks and other items, which recreate the buzz and shock that must have occurred when they were first exhibited in Europe and New York. Here was the work of civilizations and cultures that were oftentimes ancient yet at the same time completely new to Western audiences. The encounter was like stirring the hornet's nest of modernism in the art world.

Photographing the objects stirred the modernist strain even more, and there was no one better at shaking things up than Man Ray, the surrealist master best known for his avant-garde photography. Here, in the company of such vivid objects and his peers — including Cecil Beaton, Walker Evans, Charles Sheeler and Alfred Steglitz — he shines anew at the Phillips Collection.

The different exhibition sections — "African Art American Style," "African Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "Surrealism and Beyond" and "Fashioning a Popular Reception" — are carefully and intelligently thought out by curator Wendy Grossman. They trace the growing interest in African art and its special meaning to the existing African American cultural and intellectual community, before examining the art's merger with photography, as exemplified by Man Ray and others.

### Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens

through Jan. 10

Phillips Collection

1600 21st St., NW

For more information, please call (202) 387-2151 or visit [www.phillipscollection.org](http://www.phillipscollection.org).

African art at first intersected with the surrealist movement but later — as if the art had become too conventional for the surrealist artists who took up Polynesian and other "primitive art" — both the photographers of African art and the art itself ended up in the stylish embrace of the fashion world in Europe and the United States, a destination probably not imagined when the journey began.

And here Man Ray was right at home, having worked for Harper's Bazaar as a photographer for years. First published on the pages of Paris Vogue, his beautiful, haunting and now iconic photograph "Noire et blanche" popularized African art and



PHOTO: METRO NOIR / MAN RAY TRUST / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NY / AGAP, PARIS, FAR LEFT: HARRY HANSSON CENTER



PHOTO: PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART / CARL VAN VECHTEN TRUST

Photographer Man Ray, top, popularized African art with iconic images such as "Noire et blanche," above. A show at the Phillips Collection features Man Ray's "modernist lens" on African art — including his photomontage on a 1930 book of original sheet music by jazz composer Henry Crowder, far left — along with work by his contemporaries, such as Carl Van Vechten's print of "Billie Holiday," left.

introduced the ideas of avant-garde photography to a mainstream audience.

But the exhibition's beauty is also immensely highlighted by the actual works themselves, many of them from Danish collector Carl Kjerfve. And throughout, Man Ray never wavers in his own fascination or passion for photographing African art — and not just dressing it up with stylish models for the purposes of fashion magazines.

It's clear that Man Ray understood exactly what to do with these objects when it came to capturing them in a way that some of his peers didn't. Walker Evans, for instance, ever the documentarian, can't seem to do much with these objects except to record them in a straight-up photographic document.

Man Ray honors the art with his own inimitable style, often exaggerating what is already exaggerated. He gives the work emotional punch, a certain dark, shadowy frightfulness and a burst of imagination. You don't have to read the wall text to know which photographs are his — they're the ones that elicit a raised eyebrow, a blow to the gut, a gritty acknowledgement.

The African art alone is worth a visit here, as are the numerous magazines and books that gave rise to this form of photographed art. But this is Ray's show through and through — a history of his passion filtered through his lens.

The last item in the exhibition is a particularly fitting tribute to him. "Henry Music" — a 1930 book of original sheet music by the African American jazz composer Henry Crowder — 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. It's a layered journey much like the one Man Ray pioneered, forever intertwining African art and photography in the annals of Western modernism.

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