

Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens, Wendy A. Grossman, with an essay by Ian Walker, and other contributors. Washington, D.C.: International Arts & Artists, 2009. 184 pp. ISBN 978-0-8166-7017-8. \$39.95.

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This book accompanies the major touring exhibition of the same name which began at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D. C. in October 2009 and was curated by Wendy A. Grossman and organised by International Arts & Artists, . By all accounts this exhibition has been well received, and eventually will have shown at four venues in the United States and Canada. This book is a worthy accompaniment, but also stands in its own right, full of detailed research, critical reflection, excellent illustrations, and a concordance of artifacts mentioned in the book, authored by leading scholars. As a museum curator of photography within an ethnographic museum, this book has done enough to convince me to take an interest in the accumulated photographs of artifacts that the museum has generated over 120 years. Well, almost (and more on that below).

As Grossman states in the Preface to this book, Man Ray (1890-1976) played a pioneering, and well-recognized, role in the development of modern art in the twentieth century. And although most of us would immediately recognize his photograph *Noire et blanche* (1926), in which a white woman leans her head on a table-top whilst holding an African mask upright beside her, Grossman probably rightly argues that Man Ray's extensive body of photographic work depicting African art has had little serious attention. But the book does not examine Man Ray in a cultural vacuum, discussing in detail the work of contemporaries such as Erwin Blumenfeld, Charles Sheeler, Walker Evans, Alfred Stieglitz, André Kertész, and others. In doing so, Grossman convincingly demonstrates that both the aesthetic approach of the photographer, and the context in which the image is viewed, are highly influential in the process of interpretation. By illustrating photographs of the same artifacts by different photographers, the point is well made that not only does the same object look very different, it radically changes its interpretation and even affectivity. The best examples of this, and probably the highlight of the book, are the fascinating juxtapositions of photographs by Man Ray and Walker Evans of the carving from Cameroon known as the "Bangwa Queen" (20-22), as well as Walker Evans's photograph of a Pende pendant (7), dramatically lit and with a high camera angle, illustrated alongside a "neutral" recent photograph provided by the object's owner. As Grossman argues, "In Walker Evans's photograph of this pendant ... compositional devices of a close-up view and tight framing heighten the sense of dislocation ... Emerging as a ghostly, disembodied face floating in the center of a black void ... [and] takes on the appearance of a much larger face mask" (6). In the case of the "Bangwa Queen," features that made the figure celebrated by contemporary connoisseurs, such as its dynamic sense of movement and asymmetry, are accentuated by Man Ray, using an unusual overhead camera angle and dramatic lighting. There is no attempt to accurately describe form here, but rather the intent is to enhance a pre-existing Western artistic interpretation of the figure. Placed in a shallow focal plane, and much more evenly lit, Walker Evans's photographs of the "Bangwa Queen" couldn't be more contrasting. Informed by the documentary tradition in American photography, Evans's

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images are pure visual description, a record in which each mark made by the carver can be read as they ripple across the surface of the figure. As Grossman argues, Evans's vision "was informed by the contemporary search for authentic and uniquely American forms of expression ... and the straight photographic style that eliminated the artifice of manipulation was embraced as faithful to that vision" (20).

Divided into seven informative chapters (one authored by Ian Walker) with sidebar texts by other contributors, each chapter deals thematically with different aspects of the production, reception, and dissemination of African art within the Modernist movement. After a brief history of Modernist Primitivism, especially in America, Grossman also discusses Man Ray's important connection to Parisian collectors of African art such as Charles Ratton. In chapter two (African Art "American Style") Grossman turns her focus to the "examination of the reception of African art and its confluence with Modernist photographic practices in the United States" (29), providing a useful discussion of how contemporary racial attitudes inflected images of, and including, African art. Chapter three examines "the fate of African art in the age of mechanical reproduction and beyond" (61), arguing that the reproduction and dissemination of Man Ray's images had consequences in the way African art was understood more widely, "contributing to the process through which African art was translated to Western taste" (61). The following chapter turns attention to Dada and Surrealist photographic images of African art, including ones by Man Ray. After WWII, argues Grossman, photography became a powerful medium of artistic expression and a vehicle for new representational forms. "In its ability to challenge received notions of the world," Grossman argues, "photography held a particular appeal within both the Dada and Surrealist ethos" (81).

In "The Poetics and Politics of Surrealism" (chapter five), Grossman discusses how "many of Man Ray's 1920s-30s images of non-Western art occupy an ambiguous space between the ethnographic and the surreal" (93). But this ambiguity is shown to be a product of the contexts in which his work appears rather than anything intrinsic. Man Ray's surrealist-informed approach to photographing African art, it is argued, "challenged conventions of object photography, which ... veil the photographer's subjective engagement under the guise of objective neutrality" (96). Rather than offering a documentary representation, in the manner of Walker Evans, his photographs offer "an evocation of their spiritual, mystical qualities as imagined ritual objects, promoting new ways of seeing such forms" (96). But more than this, iconic works such as *Noire et blanche*, in which an inverted, negative, version of the photograph is placed alongside the positive, deal with contemporary attitudes to race and beauty in a highly sophisticated manner, "to raise provocative questions about difference and similitude, correspondence and reciprocity" (97). In Ian Walker's chapter that follows, discussion of the 1936 publication of Man Ray's images of Dogon objects alongside text by Michel Leiris in the pages of *Cahiers d'art* leads the author to "examine contrasting surrealist-derived ideologies played out across the pages of a single magazine feature" (113). Tracing the biographies of the objects themselves, Walker sketches a fascinating journey in which objects and intellectual movements intersect. Tracing this journey past 1936, he describes the subsequent life of the objects in the Musée de l'Homme and their appearance in a 1996 documentary on Dogon art. It would have been interesting here to have compared and extended the analysis of the Man Ray/ Leiris publication with later genres of publishing on African art, such as tribal art and popular travel magazines, to examine

whether surrealist-inspired representational norms continued to influence the way in which Dogon culture was presented.

In the final chapter Grossman turns her attention to the chimerical nature of Man Ray's work and the mixture of genres with which his work engaged. The chapter explores Man Ray's practice of including African objects within the genre of fashion photography and its dissemination in popular culture. Here we again return to *Noire et blanche* as a key work that illustrates many of the book's themes, this time in the pages of Paris *Vogue* magazine, which associated the photograph with both an Art Deco aesthetic and the world of fashion (129). The fascinating history and pre-history of the photograph that is presented here suggests that, as a touchstone for so many of the themes explored in the exhibition, a fuller and more nuanced discussion of it would have been beneficial in a separate chapter. Possibly the author felt that this had been achieved elsewhere in her referenced *American Art* article.¹ The chapter then moves on to discuss the racialized female body in representational norms of the period, and interestingly situates Man Ray's African object photography in the context of gender and racial debates of the time, as well as his relationships to certain key women, such as Nancy Cunard and Helena Rubinstein. These women "used African chic as an empowering tool, adroitly exploiting the association between fashion, modernity, and African art to create compelling public images" (136).

The final section of the book, a multi-authored concordance of objects in the exhibition (edited by Letty Wilson Bonnell), opens in slightly dismaying fashion with the statement that "what we see enclosed in the glass display case in a museum is but a faint echo of the artwork's original vitality, its life force dissipated" which "the authors ... have breathed new life back into" (148). I understand the point, of course, but the disservice done to ethnographic museums here is palpable. Many of the lending institutions, such as Nationalmuseum (Copenhagen), Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian Institution), and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), might take issue with the insinuation that their collections are imprisoned and virtually lifeless forms, barely able to communicate to visitors anything about cultural vitality. Of course, research and publishing on such objects is essential to their interpretation and, even, appreciation by curators and the wider public, but ethnographic displays have always been challenging spaces for cultural debate and never the dead space that is sometimes imputed to them. The book concludes with an interesting illustrated timeline of key events and exhibition checklists.

I mentioned above that this book and exhibition had inspired me to take greater interest in the archive of object photography accumulated over 120 years by my own institution. No doubt, there is much of research interest within such an archive, including the tracing of historical shifts in the way objects have been understood and interpreted as artifacts before and after their arrival in the museum. But, reader, I have to report that there was no Man Ray at work here on the collections in Oxford, and neither was Surrealism, evidently, a formative influence on our staff photographer. Nonetheless, this book's blend of patient research, historiographical confidence and thought-provoking

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¹ See Wendy Grossman and Steven Manford, 'Unmasking Man Ray's *Noire et blanche*', *American Art* (Summer 2006): 134–47.

analysis, as well as visual richness and ability to engage with popular culture, should be enough to inspire future exhibitions.