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Wendy Grossman, Martha Ann Bari, Letty Bonnell. *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens.* Washington, D.C.: International Arts & Artists, 2009. xv + 183 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-7017-8.

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African Art and Man Ray: Not So Black and White

Taking Man Ray as artistic cicerone, Wendy Grossman aims in her exhibition catalogue *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* "to focus on the politics of representation from the colonial age to provide a different critical model within which to examine the implications and legacy of Modernist Primitivism as it intersects with Western photographic practices" (p. 2). The catalogue seeks to unveil the varied contexts within and how Modernist photographs of non-Western objects were encoded with ideas about race, identity, and difference while elucidating the central role photography played in African art's transformation from ethnographic curiosities to Modern art objects. Grossman utilizes a methodological model borrowed from Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart's 2004 essay "Photographs as Objects" that incorporates an analysis of the physical attributes of the photograph–lighting, framing, camera angle, and cropping–along with the object depicted.[1]

For Grossman the photographs by Man Ray and the other discussed photographers are far from straightforward black and white images. She presents a compelling argument that both individual aesthetics of the photographer and the context of publication influence interpretation of the depicted African objects. Side-by-side photographs of the same object taken by different photographers make clear how the photographic process is capable of manipulating an object's representation. One example is the juxtaposition of a Man Ray photograph and one by Walker Evans of the "Bangwa Queen," a dancing female figure from the Bangwa region of Cameroon (pp. 20-21). The figure looks completely different in each image. The catalogue relies on a series of such visual comparisons to support the claim that different photographic approaches can and have influenced the interpretation and visualization of African art.

The book is divided into seven well-illustrated chapters–six by Grossman and one by Ian Walker–each with an accompanying sidebar text written by Grossman and an assortment of other scholars that provide in-depth insight into an object, a collection, or a photographer. Roughly chronological, but more thematic in nature, each chapter provides insight on a different context in which the Modernist photographs of African objects were either produced or disseminated. Analyses of the international Surrealist exhibitions, the social milieu of Paris in the 1920s, publications ranging from academic encyclopedias of African art to *Vogue*, and the work of Man Ray's contemporaries combine to support Grossman's point that the photographs of non-Western objects by Modernist photographers are not solely documentary, but rather rife with individual aesthetic ideals and Western ideas about Africa, race, and identity. Moreover, as Man Ray's images of non-Western objects have largely been overlooked by scholars, the catalogue rectifies this ignorance and includes over one hundred rarely seen images by Man Ray and his contemporaries, including several never before reproduced.

After outlining Man Ray's biography and the history of Modernist Primitivism, the text follows Man Ray to Paris where his relationship with collectors like Charles Ratton facilitated Man Ray's access to African art. The second chapter deals exclusively with the reception of African art and Modernist photography in the United States from the Stieglitz circle to the Harlem Renaissance, detailing how photography was used to fulfill ideas about

American and African American identities. The third chapter examines the "fate of African art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (p. 61). Technological advances made it easier for photographs to be reproduced and thus distributed internationally. These technological advancements coincided with a shift in photographic approach as photographers began to treat non-Western objects like Western sculpture–photographing the objects with blank backgrounds, taking close-ups, and publishing multiple views, treating the objects as worthy of individual study. To discuss the evolving approaches, the chapter includes critical visual analyses of the photographs published in two encyclopedic compilations of African art: *Negerplastik* by Carl Einstein (1915) and *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* by Marius de Zayas (1916).

The final four chapters of the catalogue hone in on the Dada and Surrealist movements with which Man Ray is associated and outlines how the photography coming out of these movements reflected each group's opinion of African art. After a discussion of photography's privileged position within the Dada and Surrealist enterprises, and the use of photographs of African art by the likes of Hannah Hoch, Grossman goes on to describe the Surrealist engagement and disengagement with African art in favor of Oceanic art even as the craze for African art swept mainstream Paris in the 1920s. While the Surrealists may have moved on in search of the new avant-garde, Man Ray continued to see value in African art and its use to his innovative photography. Grossman writes that Man Ray's "approach to non-Western objects challenged conventions of object photography, which as noted previously, veil the photographer's subjective engagement under the guise of objective neutrality. His photographs convey not a documentary representation of the figures and masks, but rather an evocation of their spiritual or mystical qualities as imagined ritual objects, promoting new ways of seeing such forms" (p. 96).

Man Ray's ability to impart emotion in his photographs of African art is continued in the sixth essay, Ian Walker's chapter on the differing Surrealist ideologies embedded in the writings of Michel Leiris on the Dogon and Man Ray's photographs when the two were paired in a 1936 issue of *Cahiers d'Art.* Walker characterizes Man Ray's photographic approach as direct whereas Leiris' writing on the Dogon is intricate and obscure. Walker's discussion of the Dogon objects photographed by Man Ray and written about by Leiris stretches from the inner workings of the 1931 Mission Dakar-Djibouti to how the installation of Dogon objects at the new Musee de Quai Branly in Paris affects twenty-first-century viewers' interpretation of the objects. Walker concludes by paraphrasing Susan Vogel's introduction to *ART/artifact* (1988), reminding viewers and readers to remain cognizant of the way in which Western culture rather than Africans shape our vision and interpretation of African art.

While Walker's essay serves as a fitting end point, Grossman elected to conclude the catalogue with a short chapter discussing Man Ray's role in fashion, his relationship with Nancy Cunard and Helena Rubenstein, and how Man Ray was able to integrate his interest in African art with fashion. Given the way in which Walker was successfully able to bring the reader from the early decades of the twentieth century to the twenty-first, Grossman's final chapter seems a bit out of place.

Although focusing on the photographic frame surrounding the African objects discussed, Grossman remains cognizant of the larger contexts framing these objects–namely, colonialism, collecting, and the international market for African art. Two maps of Africa depicting the regions of Africa represented and a map of colonial holdings in Africa circa 1930 appear before the catalogue text. To acknowledge the life histories of the objects prior to their arrival in Western museums and collections, the appendix includes a useful illustrated concordance of the African objects with cultural information written by Africanist scholars and edited by Letty Wilson Bonnell.

Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens is the result of decades of archival research by Grossman, a specialist in European Modernism and the history of photography. It represents an effective challenge to William Rubin's 1984 MoMA show *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* and the tenets of Modernist Primitivism the show advanced. While the two-volume MoMA catalogue included select photographs of the "Primitive" objects that inspired the likes of Pablo Picasso and Constantin Brancusi, Modernist photography as an artistic medium in its own right was omitted. Grossman's exhibit and catalogue reveal the long-standing engagement between Modernist photographers and African art absent from the 1984 MoMA show. Grossman's pioneering endeavor uncovers the myriad of contexts in which the photographs, objects, and photographers under discussion are implicated, and in doing so Grossman lays an essential foundation for what will become an area of sustained engagement for those interested in the reception of African art in the

Modernist period.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, "Photographs as Objects," in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. E. Edwards (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-16.

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