

# Grossman, Wendy A. Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens

Mary Drach McInnes *School of Art and Design, Alfred University*

Copyright © 2012 Mary Drach McInnes

## Recommended Citation

McInnes, Mary D. "Grossman, Wendy A. Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens." *Dada/Surrealism* 19 (2013): n. pag. Web.

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Dada/Surrealism* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

GROSSMAN, WENDY A. *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens*. With an essay by Ian Walker and additional contributions by Yaëlle Biro ... et al. Washington: International Arts and Artists; Minneapolis: Distributed by University of Minnesota Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8166-7017-8. xv + 183 pages.

What kind of communicating vessel is Man Ray's 1926 photograph, *Noire et Blanche*? Is it a surrealist object, an anthropological specimen, or a fashion document? In her 2009 travelling exhibition and catalog, *Man Ray and the Modernist Lens*, Wendy Grossman answers this question; in doing so, she demonstrates how the artist's production slips between these categories. Grossman simultaneously reframes iconic images and introduces us to a largely unknown body of work by Man Ray. The artist, who was a celebrated participant in Dada and surrealist circles, photographed non-Western art over several decades. This work was displayed in avant-garde publications such as *391* and *Minotaure*, in mass-circulated magazines such as *Vogue*, and anonymously in ethnographic books. His translation of non-western art from ethnographic curio to modern object is richly examined in this project.

Grossman's central interest is exploring photography's role in the early twentieth century as a relatively new and profoundly promiscuous agency of culture. In the exhibition design, Grossman frequently employs a strategy of triangulation to demonstrate her arguments. Three different objects—such as Man Ray's original sculptural subject, his contact print, and his final photograph—illuminate the artist's depiction of the "Other" to his contemporary audience. A comparison between a Senufo sculpture, Man Ray's print, and its published image in Carl Kjerfve's *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine* of 1935, for example, demonstrates the artist's ability to monumentalize the African figure. We see both subtle modifications and dramatic changes of the original objects made by the artist's use of spacing, cropping, and lighting. In some instances Man Ray created new surfaces, such as his metallic toning of a wooden Akua'ba Asante figure in a 1933 print. The shaping of meaning by artistic decisions and market distribution is graphically presented for us. While Grossman's chief interest lies in examining photography's role in translating the exotic fetish into an icon of modernity, her concern in highlighting the original non-Western sources is evident. She includes this material alongside its photographic documentation and adds a concordance to the objects in the exhibition and catalog (a section ably edited by Letty Wilson Bonnell).

The book and exhibition venture beyond the work of Man Ray himself and include a wide circle of American and European photographers. As in the case of the European avant-garde, American artists in the first decades of the twentieth century sought a specific modern voice in seemingly contradictory sources, including "primitive" art and industrial design. Grossman discusses a range of artists—including Charles Sheeler, Max Weber,

Alfred Stieglitz—focusing on their depiction and display of African art. The exhibition opens with a series of images reprising Stieglitz’s Gallery 291 exhibition on African sculpture in 1914. This event marked Man Ray’s introduction to African art and also offered an occasion for collectors such as John Quinn to acquire non-Western objects from a modern art gallery. Further, it provided an early opportunity for African-Americans to incorporate African objects in their quest for a black cultural identity. Over the next several decades, members of the Harlem Renaissance used these non-Western objects to declare their own distinctive character within the Jim Crow culture of America.

Grossman investigates individual style and national identity through the use of traditional art historical comparison. The contrast between Man Ray and fellow American Walker Evans is particularly instructive. In photographing the celebrated sculpture known as the “Bangwa Queen,” for example, Man Ray capitalizes on the figure’s dynamism by photographing it at an oblique angle, using an overhead perspective, and dramatically lighting the figure to emphasize its rough texture. This animated version, which, as Grossman notes, uses contemporary avant-garde ideas embodied in the term “new vision,” contrasts with Walker Evans’ version of the same object. Evans, who had documented approximately 400 African objects for the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition in 1935, demonstrates his direct approach and effort to eliminate any sense of artifice. His image utilizes a more conventional viewpoint and sets the “Bangwa Queen” in a shallow space. He brings out the full figure and its sculptural detail by illuminating the surface with a circular rotation of lights during the exposure, a technique that produces a softly lit image with no discernable light source. Walker Evans’ sustained interest in creating an objective document—whose careful construction is apparent to contemporary scholars—opens up a discussion of what constituted an “authentic” American style in the interwar years.

In addition to broadening her own study beyond a monographic focus on Man Ray, Grossman has gathered an international group of scholars to complement her texts and contribute important data to this project. Yaëlle Biro’s short essay and catalog of Charles Sheeler’s album of the Quinn collection provides information that illuminates the early twentieth-century market in African art. Rainer Stamm, the Director of the Paula Modersohn Museum in Bremen, provides an essay on Albert Renger-Patzch’s photographs of African art in the “quasi-encyclopedic” German volumes entitled *Kulturen der Erde* (*Cultures of the World*) published in the 1920s and 30s. Stamm’s case study offers a fascinating counterpoint to Grossman’s own investigation of Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* (1915). Two essays expand on Man Ray’s relation to Surrealist studies; the first is by *Umêni (Art)* journal editor Tomás Winter, who writes on Czech surrealist photographers (including the extraordinarily rich tonal images of Josef Sudek). The second is by Ian Walker of the University of Wales, who writes on the partnership of image and text in “Out of Phantom Africa: Michel Leiris, Man Ray, and the

Dogon.” These contributions add a rich layering of information, analysis, and speculation to the entire project.

Grossman’s central exploration remains modern photography’s mixed and multi-faceted role as an agency of culture. Photographs of non-Western objects were seen in a range of venues from Dada journals to women’s magazines and played an important role in introducing a broad public to African art. Man Ray’s photographs, as well as those of his contemporaries, translated the exotic “Other” for Western audiences and helped promulgate the idea of African masks and figures as essentially “modern.” Grossman highlights the porous nature of the boundary between avant-garde circles and outlets of mass culture: “[T]he production and dissemination of Man Ray’s photographs of African objects—especially through the channels of Surrealism and the world of fashion—reveal the multifaceted manner in which such images operated in the interstices between document and art, fact and fiction, and the ethnographic and the uncanny.” (5) Man Ray’s images of African art—and those of other avant-garde photographers—reframed the objects as collectible artifacts and fashionable commodities.

*Man Ray and the Modernist Lens* resides in the spaces between anthropology, art history, and material culture. Appropriately, Grossman and her colleagues incorporate a number of diverse methodologies for their analyses. The exhibition, which originated at the Phillips Collection in Washington in 2010 and ended in 2011 at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, is a major effort to bring contemporary scholarship on Man Ray and African art out from the shadow of the narrow curatorial interests that have dominated the field. Modernist primitivism became a focus of vigorous debate in the mid-80s with the major exhibition “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The curators’ focus on formalist concerns came under fierce attack by a host of artists, critics, and scholars. This controversy was a pivotal moment in exploring the West’s historical relationship with Third-World cultures and spurred a re-examination of assumptions in a number of academic fields as well as museum display and collecting practices. In the years since the MoMA exhibition, important research has deepened our understanding of the forms of cultural exchange and appropriation. Scholars have examined the alignment of modernist production with colonial exploitation, exploring the political dimensions of artists’ appropriation of so-called primitive materials, and investigating their contribution to the Western public’s understanding of non-Western culture. Grossman’s study, which charts the transformation of exotic objects from savage curios to modern icons over the course of a few decades, is a significant contribution to this literature.

Mary Drach McInnes  
School of Art and Design  
Alfred University