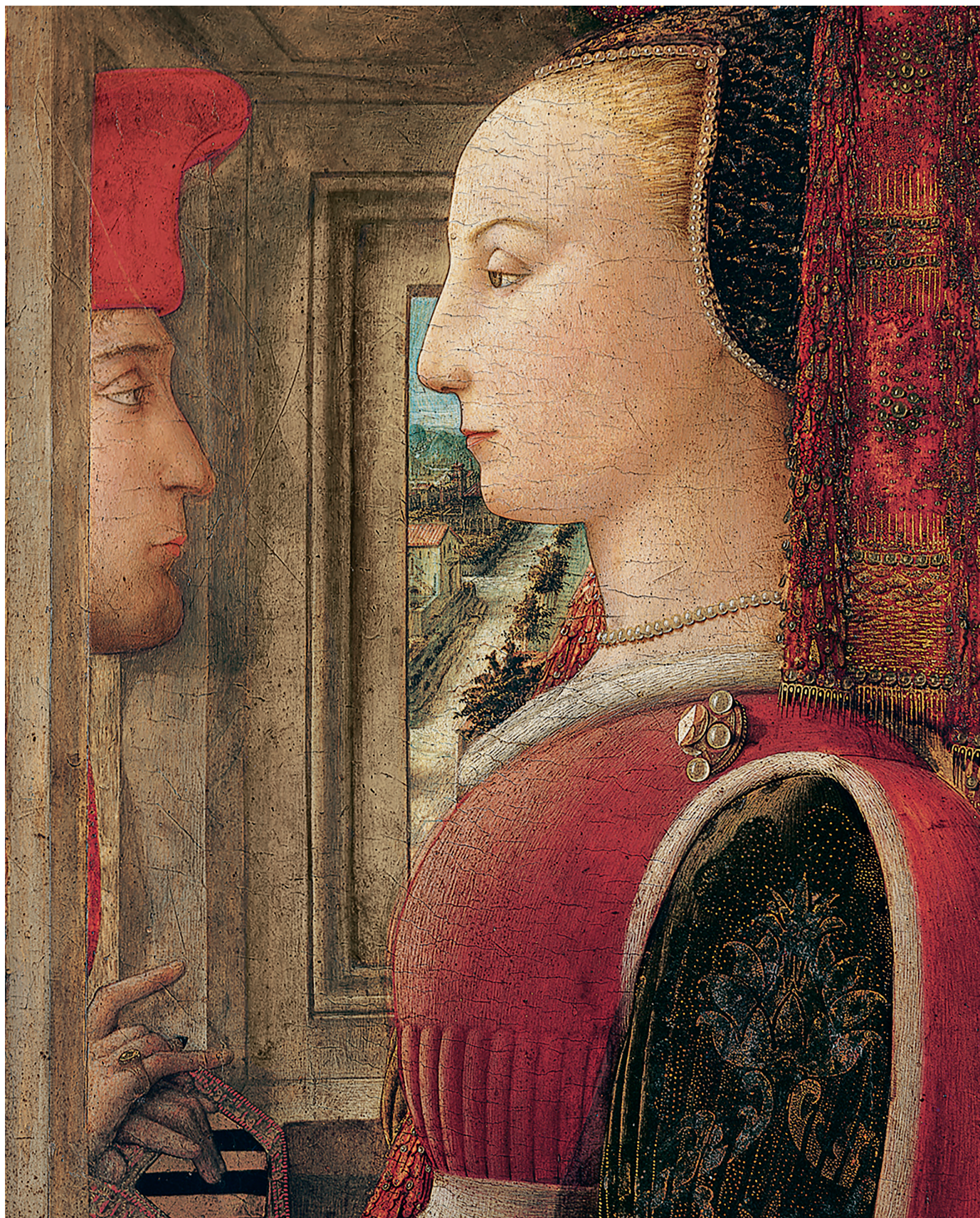


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**JOURNAL** 51



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Illustration on p. 2: Fra Filippo Lippi (Italian, ca. 1406–1469). Detail of *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*, ca. 1440. See fig. 1, p. 64.

Illustration on pp. 8–9: Detail of the Metropolitan Vase. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. See fig. 7b, p. 47.

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## MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

The *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is issued annually by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its purpose is to publish original research on works in the Museum's collection. Articles are contributed by members of the Museum staff and other art historians and specialists. Submissions should be emailed to: journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org.

Manuscripts are reviewed by the *Journal* Editorial Board, composed of members of the curatorial, conservation, and scientific departments.

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Once an article is accepted for publication, the author will have the opportunity to review it after it has been edited and again after it has been laid out in pages. The honorarium for image costs is \$300, and each author receives a copy of the *Journal* volume in which his or her article appears.

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### ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*  
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

*Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.*

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## Photographic Portraiture in West Africa: Notes from “In and Out of the Studio”

In a striking portrait of an elegant Senegalese woman dating from the 1910s, the sitter’s self-assured presence fully engages the viewer (fig. 1). She looks into the camera, decidedly aware of the image that is being created of her likeness. For her portrait, she wore a long *boubou* and an array of jewelry: a silver ring, filigree-work bracelets, two necklaces, earrings, and golden pendants decorating her coiffure set in a style called *Nguuka*.<sup>1</sup> Carefully staged, this image was undoubtedly taken by a professional photographer who did not, however, leave a trace of his identity on the glass negative. An image of great beauty that is now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, it epitomizes a moment in which African photographers and their clientele embraced the medium of photography as a powerful tool with which to shape their own image.<sup>2</sup>

This photograph is one of nearly eighty images from the Metropolitan’s holdings presented in the 2015 exhibition

*fig. 1* Unidentified artist (Senegalese). Portrait of a woman, 1910s. Glass, emulsion, 6½ × 4½ in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.14.1)

“In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits from West Africa.”<sup>3</sup> Co-curated by the present authors and drawing on Giulia Paoletti’s research in Senegal, the exhibition showcased one hundred years of portrait photography in West Africa, from the 1870s through the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Most of the photographs, the majority of which had never been shown before, were drawn from the Visual Resource Archive in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, with the addition of a few important works in the Department of Photographs.<sup>5</sup> The installation sought to expand our understanding of West African portrait photography by rendering visible the broad variety of its practices and aesthetics. It juxtaposed albumen prints, postcards, real-photo postcards (postcards printed with photographic images), and original negatives taken both in and out of the studio by professional and amateur photographers active from Senegal to Cameroon and from Mali to Gabon. These photographic artists explored the possibilities of their medium, developing a rich aesthetic vocabulary through compelling self-portraits, casual snapshots of leisurely activities, and staged images against backdrops or open landscapes.

The exhibition offered its curators an occasion to study the Museum’s collection and to showcase selected works in this first installation devoted solely to African photography at the Metropolitan. Building on the research conducted during that project, this article reflects on issues central to the history of African photography as represented in the Metropolitan’s collection and defines themes that emerged.<sup>6</sup> The article focuses on West Africa—one of the regions where photography arrived first on the continent—and

narrows the sphere of inquiry to portraiture. In surveying the history of photography on the continent, we found that portraiture is the genre that, more than any other, has inspired photographers and patrons alike. This is evident as one traces the founding of the first studios established in the coastal urban centers as early as the 1860s, and it continues to the present day with many artists reworking this trope. Portraiture is a fertile area of inquiry for it reveals changing perceptions and constructions of the self in the fine tension between authenticity and artificiality. In looking closely at specific works, this article will tackle the complexity of authorship and attribution, as in the case of postcards; the emergence of an extensive visual vocabulary of gesture; the place of amateur photographers within the canon of African photography; and the exploration of self-portraiture as a genre. As the literature on African photography is rapidly growing, curators and collectors across the world are encouraged to reinterpret their holdings and reconsider their selection criteria for acquisitions. This article seeks to raise questions and suggest possible avenues in interpreting, collecting, and displaying African photographs under a new light.

#### COLLECTING AND STUDYING AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FIELD

In 1969, when Nelson A. Rockefeller announced the transfer of the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) to the Metropolitan Museum, it encompassed not only more than three thousand works of art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, but also the MPA’s library, its archives, and what was then known as the Photograph Study Collection.<sup>7</sup> This collection was a

*fig. 2* Unidentified artist (Senegalese). Seated man, 1930s–40s. Gelatin silver print, 5¼ × 3¼ in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.027.2)



*fig. 3* Mama Casset (Senegalese, 1908–1992). Two reclining women, 1950s–60s. Gelatin silver print, 5 × 6½ in. (12.7 × 17.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.049)





fig. 4 Malick Sidibé (Malian, 1936–2016). *Karim Keita, le gentleman*, 1967. Gelatin silver print in original frame of reverse-painted glass, overall 15½ × 11½ in. (40 × 29.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph and Ceil Mazer Foundation Inc. Gift, 2005 (2005.85)

form of analogue database, a research tool that included thousands of photographs of artifacts in museums and private collections around the world. Since it entered the Metropolitan, this visual archive has continued to be enriched and its scope extended to images that were thought to provide added context to the sculptural works in the collection: they ranged from field photographs donated by researchers, to postcards, to photographic albums assembled by colonial officers. By the late 1990s, as scholarship on the history of photography in Africa began to grow, the collection expanded to include works on a variety of supports and by a wide range of authors, particularly those working on the continent.<sup>8</sup> In 2012, this heteroclite ensemble of archival and photographic material was renamed the Visual Resource Archive (VRA).

As a whole, the collection and its history provide fascinating insights into the development of a field. By the 1990s, many of the images that originally had been annexed as “study documents” began to be understood as works of art in themselves, integral to a broader history of photography.<sup>9</sup> Until then, images—particularly those produced during the colonial time—were assumed to have been taken almost exclusively by Western photographers to address a foreign audience and in support of the agenda of colonial powers.<sup>10</sup> As early as the 1970s, however, scholars such as Stephen Sprague, Vera Viditz-Ward, and Christraud Geary had already suggested that photography was highly valued among African patrons and that Western photographers did not have a monopoly over the medium.<sup>11</sup> Yet it took almost two decades for international exhibitions and publications to showcase photographers such as the Malian Seydou Keita (figs. 11, 13) and the Senegalese Mama Casset (fig. 3) and to catapult African photography onto the international art market, reaching visitors in Europe, the United States, and Africa. These included Susan Vogel’s 1991 landmark exhibition “Africa Explores”;<sup>12</sup> *Revue Noire*’s editorial and curatorial projects beginning in 1991; the first iteration of the “Mois de la photo” in Dakar in 1992; and Françoise Huguiet’s work on Malian photography, also in the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Before these initiatives, the wider art audience in the West had given little consideration to the notion that photography could have been a popular medium among the general African population, or that African photographers had developed such a distinctive and spectacular photographic vernacular. In contrast to images that promoted colonial enterprise, Malian portraitists Malick Sidibé’s exuberant shots (fig. 4) and Seydou Keita’s sharp portraits (figs. 11, 13) surprised and intrigued the unfamiliar spectator. Now displayed in galleries and museums, these photographs demonstrated to the Western viewer that Africa had a rich and long-standing photographic history—one that could be called “art.”

Since the early 2000s, the field of African photography has grown exponentially, with a substantial number of scholars conducting extensive field and archival research in an attempt to retrieve unwritten histories.<sup>14</sup> Approaching these works from a wide range of perspectives and disciplines, including anthropology, art history, comparative literature, and history, scholars and archivists have raised crucial questions: Who were the first photographers and their patrons? How did photography relate locally to preexisting media and aesthetics? How do we reconcile interpretations and uses of



*fig. 5* George A. G. and Albert George Lutterodt (Ghanaian, active from 1876). Five men, ca. 1880–85. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 6 × 4½ in. (15.2 × 10.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Ross Family Fund Gift, 1999 (1999.184.1)

photography particularly in the colonial context, where it served both as a tool of surveillance and a means of emancipation? How do we promote the study of African photography when faced by the challenges of collecting and preserving it?<sup>15</sup> Although scholars have found many answers to these questions, the study of African photography is, in many respects, still in its infancy. With a collection that has grown to include a wide variety of genres, media, authors, and sitters, the VRA offers the opportunity to study these rich photographic histories, their authors, and patrons.

#### MAKING DISCOVERIES—DRAWING CONNECTIONS

In figure 5, a central figure sits in an armchair flanked by four younger men posing almost symmetrically. Two stand in back and two sit cross-legged on the ground holding similar postures along the vertical axes of the composition. Rather than being a group portrait, the placement of the figures draws attention to the central sitter—the patron of the photograph—who stares directly at the camera. The men's hand gestures, the direction of their gazes, and the employment of props indicate a carefully orchestrated composition that responds to the formality of the portrait-making situation. The painted backdrop recalls nineteenth-century aristocratic interiors and, combined with the complex *mise-en-scène*, speaks to the refinement and eminence of the principal sitter. Dating from the early 1880s, it is one of the earliest photographs in the VRA and one that opens questions of authorship and attribution.

Although the reverse of the print is marked by a rare stamp in purple ink that bears the name of the photographic studio—LUTTERODT & SON / PHOTOGRAPHERS / ACCRA (GOLD COAST) / WEST AFRICA—the identity of the author is not specified. Indeed, the Lutterodt family comprised several generations of photographers who worked in the Gold Coast and trained numerous apprentices in different locations where they established temporary studios. Photograph historian Erin Haney has documented the pivotal role of this family in shaping the history of photography in the region.<sup>16</sup> While the lack of a date on the vintage print made it difficult to identify which member of the Lutterodt family might have authored it, careful study of the stamp and the composition allowed Haney to attribute it to George and Albert Lutterodt.<sup>17</sup> The eldest of three brothers, George Lutterodt (1850/55–ca. 1904) was the first to open a studio, doing so with his son Albert in Accra in 1876. Produced during the first few years of George Lutterodt's career, about 1880–85, this photograph marks the beginning of an important tradition of portrait-making in the region.

While efforts to attribute this extraordinary work were underway, the VRA received the gift of a glass negative by another early West African photographer, Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (fig. 6). Acolatse was one of the trainees who studied with the Lutterodts in the Gold Coast before setting up his own practice about 1900 in neighboring Togo.<sup>18</sup> Like the Lutterodts, he specialized in portraits of the upper class and documented the social and political life of the then-German colony.

In this photograph, a group of male sitters poses outdoors in front of a large backdrop. Shooting in

*fig. 6* Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (Togolese, 1880–1975). Group portrait, 1900–20. Glass negative, 6½ × 8½ in. (16.5 × 21.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anonymous gift, in honor of Agamah Ayao, to the Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (N.A.2015.7)



natural light, Acolatse arranged his sitters in two rows: three men, each resting one hand on a hip, stand at the back, while two figures sit in front of them. He organized his subjects symmetrically, in a manner similar to George Lutterodt's composition, and he employed a painted backdrop showing an aristocratic interior with cut flowers, wood furniture, and lavish curtains. While Acolatse would likely have cropped the final print, his wide angle reveals the building wall and the sand in the street of Lomé. The incongruity between the backdrop and Acolatse's *mise-en-scène* highlights the tension between reality and photographic fiction and possibly hints at his disregard for the medium's (artificial) veracity, that is, a reality constructed through the photographic lens.

The juxtaposition of the two portraits is a visual description of the establishment of a photographic language across national borders and within the West African region. Since most of the earliest photographers relied on itinerant practices, specialist Jürg Schneider argues that they successfully "moved beyond cultural, political and linguistic boundaries."<sup>19</sup> Seen in this light, photographers working in the nineteenth and early twentieth century are revealed as having been more

than highly skilled professionals or respected members of the community: they were cosmopolitan entrepreneurs. By tracing the lineage that connects the artists through their biographies, it is possible to appreciate the complex networks of exchange that popularized photography and portraiture across West Africa.

#### **ATTRIBUTING POSTCARDS: MULTIPLE AUTHORS AND UNEXPECTED PATRONS**

Postcards are images that are designed to travel: they are inexpensive, portable, and made in multiples. From 1900 to 1960, the total production of postcards in West Africa reached almost nine thousand exemplars; in Senegal alone there were more than two dozen producers.<sup>20</sup> The production of postcards involves several steps and different individuals—the photographer who takes the picture, the editor who selects the images, the printer or factory that produces them, and the publisher that distributes them. The multiplicity of "authors" involved in the production of these objects parallels the proliferation of postcards, which were reproduced by the hundreds or thousands, traveled around the world, and were further circulated as *cartes de visites* and through reproductions in books and catalogues.



fig. 7 Unidentified artist, possibly Louis Hostalier (French, active ca. 1890–1912). *A Nioro (Soudan)—Femmes et fils de marchand Ouolofes*, French Sudan (Mali), ca. 1900–1910. Postcard format photomechanical reproduction, 5¼ × 3¼ in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.PC.AF.04)

Two postcards in the VRA offer a fascinating exercise in attribution and raise essential questions pertaining to their medium, which was one of the first to enter Western collections as “study documents.” The image in figure 7 features two seated women posed, with a young boy standing behind them. The sitters fill the picture plane of this closely cropped photograph. Rather than striving to strike theatrical poses, the subjects sit motionless with their hands resting on their knees. Statuesque presences, they are identified on the postcard as “Wives and son of a Wolof merchant,” and the stitch-resist indigo-dyed fabrics in which the women

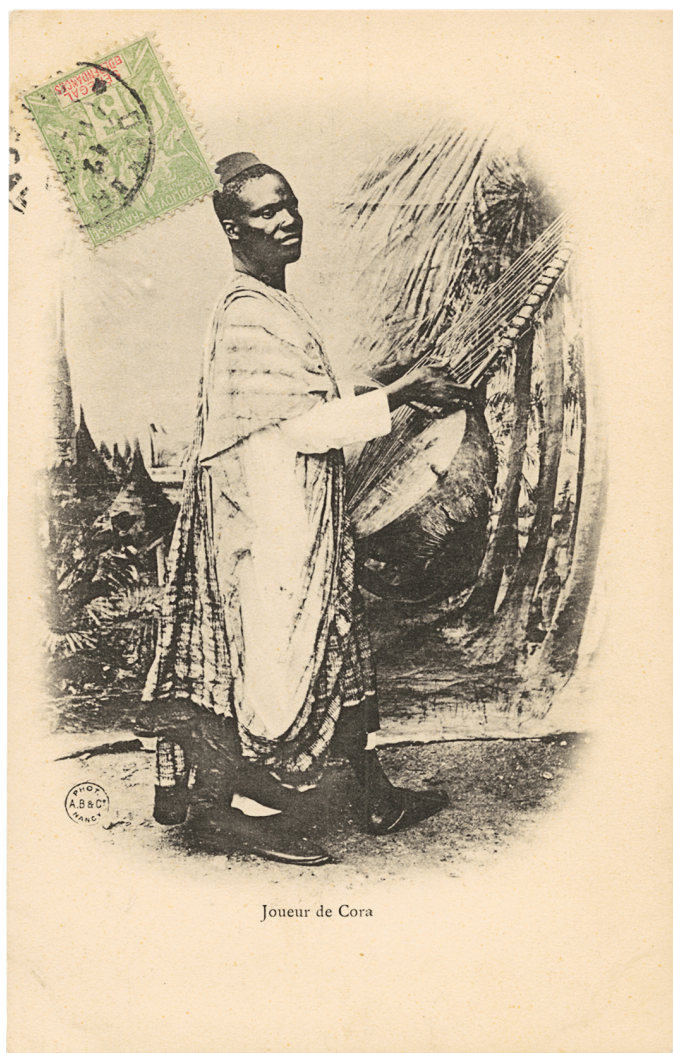
are clothed identifies them as wealthy and refined inhabitants of Saint-Louis, the historic capital of Senegal.<sup>21</sup>

The identities of the photographer and editor of this postcard are more difficult to recover than was the case of the Lutterodts since the postcard’s label does not provide any information about them. Nevertheless, archival research brought to light other postcards showing the same backdrop and studio decor, suggesting that they were taken by the same person. In one of them (fig. 8), a man holds a *kora*, a stringed instrument used in West Africa. His pose and the photographer’s low-angle shot reveal more of the painted scenery: thatched-roof houses in the distance on the left punctuate the vista beyond palm trees on the right and suggest a Senegalese village. This image of a *kora* player must have been particularly popular, as it can be found in various postcard series and formats with different labels and attributions. In one instance, the portrait appeared in a well-illustrated volume published for the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris, in which the photographer was identified as Hostalier.<sup>22</sup>

Active in Senegal between 1890 and 1912, French photographer Louis Hostalier embraced the latest technical innovations including the production of postcards.<sup>23</sup> While the specific circumstances of production are difficult to confirm, there is evidence that local customers commissioned portraits that subsequently circulated (with or without their permission) in the form of postcards, as may have been the case with the formal portrait of the Wolof merchant’s wives.<sup>24</sup> These examples are, then, just one instance of the complex process of image circulation, production, and consumption in Africa.

Contrary to widely held assumptions, scholars have demonstrated that postcards were embraced by African photographers and consumers.<sup>25</sup> Among the former was Alphonso Lisk-Carew (1887–1969), a Creole photographer who opened his studio between 1903 and 1905 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with his brother Arthur.<sup>26</sup> They worked for both the African and the European communities and produced a wide array of images, many of which circulated as postcards. These included formal portraits, records of social events, and images of people and places in the colony.

In one portrait (fig. 9), Lisk-Carew followed the convention of portraiture for an unusual subject. The postcard’s caption indicates that the sitters are “Bundoo girls,” or initiates of a powerful pan-ethnic women’s association responsible for education and moral development, known as Bundu or Sande. Sande is an



Joueur de Cora



Lisk-Carew Brothers, Photo., Freetown, Sierra Leone. Registered.

**BUNDUO GIRLS, SIERRA LEONE.**

**fig. 8** Louis Hostalier. *Joueur de Cora*, Senegal, early 20th century. Postcard format photomechanical reproduction published by A. B. & C., Nancy, France;  $5\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$  in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archives, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.PC.AF.08)

**fig. 9** Alphonso Lisk-Carew (Sierra Leonean, 1887–1969). *Bundoo Girls, Sierra Leone*, ca. 1905–25. Postcard format photomechanical reproduction published by Lisk-Carew Brothers,  $5\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$  in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archives, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.PC.AF.02)

all-female secret society in West Africa, the only society in which women are the wearers of masks during ceremonies that celebrate the end of the young initiates' training period.<sup>27</sup> Sande, as well as the initiation rituals that are fundamental to its role, is shrouded in secrecy. In figure 9, three young women pose formally in front of a painted backdrop that features both vegetation and an aristocratic interior. The central figure sits on a chair while her two associates stand on either side. They wear matching outfits that include a headscarf, bracelets, a necklace, babouches, and a cropped top with a geometric pattern. The central sitter and the woman at her proper left look at the camera; the two standing protagonists seem to give a hint of a smile.

In approaching this and other portraits from the same series, scholars have often focused on their documentary value—their ability to shed light on traditional institutions and ceremonies. More recently, specialists have dwelled on the complexity of these images and raised important questions regarding the relationship

between sitter and photographer, “public display and visual secrecy.”<sup>28</sup> How did Lisk-Carew obtain permission to photograph these individuals whose secret activities were not to be seen by non-initiates? Also, how does the photographic experience change when the author of these photographs is from Sierra Leone rather than Europe? Nanina Guyer argues that these images reveal that the sitters had embraced photography and that the photographer did not hesitate to stage and take creative liberties in composing his images, in a manner that was not, however, disrespectful.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, photography historian Julie Crooks emphasizes the merit of Lisk-Carew’s “disrupt[ing] the unfavorable depictions” of his fellow countrymen.<sup>30</sup>

The intriguing images by Hostalier and Lisk-Carew raise substantive questions about the relationship between photographer and sitter, privacy and visibility, ethnography and portraiture. In defying expectations about the identity of the photographer or the patron,

**fig. 10** Unidentified artist (Senegalese). Five women with two children, indoors, ca. 1915. Glass, emulsion,  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$  in. ( $8.3 \times 12.1$  cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.003)



such portraits account for the ambiguity of images that acquire different meanings according to the context within which they are consumed.

#### NEW GENRES: MORE THAN A MÉTIER

In a photograph taken in Saint-Louis in 1915, three generations of women from the Dumont family pose as a group (fig. 10).<sup>31</sup> As art historian Richard Brilliant argues, group portraits above all serve to document relationships among the sitters.<sup>32</sup> The close angle of the shot combined with the posture of the sitters conveys a sense of these women's proximity and intimacy and contrast strongly with the studio portraits discussed thus far. The room is modestly decorated: hanging on the wall are a calendar for the year 1915, two small, framed photographs of young children, and a mirror reflecting the backs of the posing women.

Although this image belongs to a corpus that was first published by *Revue Noire* in the *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* in 1999, very little is known about the unidentified photographer.<sup>33</sup> Close examination of a group of seventeen glass plates in the VRA that are believed to have been created by this individual offers some clues to his or her identity.<sup>34</sup> It is almost certain that the photographer belonged to

the *métis* community, as almost all the images show members of this tight-knit social group. Alongside dozens of other families from Saint-Louis and Gorée, the sitters reflect a long history of *métissage* between Europeans and Africans that dates to the arrival of the Portuguese in Senegal in the sixteenth century. It also appears that the author was not a professional photographer. While sharing some of the features of a formal portrait, the print betrays photography's incidental nature.<sup>35</sup> The image is far from crisp and focused, with the standing woman slightly blurry—a little too late in striking her best pose.

It is clear from the images that this amateur took pictures during his or her leisure time, working outside the formal space of the studio. The photographer walked with a camera in and out of homes, through the city, using these real locations as backdrops. Starting in the 1880s, photographic cameras, which had been heavy and expensive and required technical knowledge to operate, became portable, relatively cheap, and automated.<sup>36</sup> Thanks to these advancements, photography became increasingly available to the rising middle classes. Photographers and their sitters could break out from the stiffness of the studio portrait: they could stage their joviality and, one second later, their melancholy.

Amateur practices as well as snapshot photography are two genres that have acquired significant currency in the field of photography at large, with some of the most prestigious art institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum, devoting exhibitions to the topic.<sup>37</sup> Yet within the field of African photography, research has focused mostly on amateurs working after the 1970s, when photography had become a “social imperative.”<sup>38</sup> Dating back to the first decades of the twentieth century, this group of seventeen glass plates seems to be one of the earliest taken by an amateur from West Africa. By approaching these works through the new authorial figure of the amateur, the tension between spontaneity and staging, leisure and labor becomes apparent, opening new dynamics in the nature of the photographic experience to be explored by the viewer and the researcher alike.

#### EXPANDING THE CANON: DIVERSIFYING STUDIO PRACTICES

If photographers such as Keïta and Sidibé, both Malians, are often too quickly labeled as the “fathers of African photography,” in the last fifteen years scholars have demonstrated that these portraitists are two among thousands of practitioners who popularized the medium during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era in West Africa. Building on the literature, it is particularly revealing to consider the work of

renowned artists such as Keïta and to contrast their work with that of lesser-known photographers who were working in neighboring Senegal. This may allow researchers to trace continuities in visual language among these communities while concentrating on the articulation of each photographer’s aesthetic. While the human figure remains the subject, photographers have developed distinct formal compositions.

Born in Bamako, capital of Mali, in the early 1920s, Keïta learned darkroom techniques there from photographers such as the Frenchman Pierre Garnier and the Malian Mountaga Traoré. He launched his own studio in Bamako in 1948 and in just over a decade produced about ten thousand negatives of the Bamako elite. In these images, backdrops, clothing, accessories, and postures were meticulously and collaboratively selected to fashion the subject’s chosen identity. Yet it was Keïta’s camera that turned the sitter into a new Bamakois: his photographs contributed to the myth of Bamako as a cosmopolitan and modern city.<sup>39</sup> In one portrait, Keïta depicted a woman seated in front of one of his signature arabesque backdrops. She rests her arms on the back of the chair and stares directly at the viewer (fig. 11). Keïta closely cropped the image, calling attention to the woman’s elaborate jewelry, voluminous outfit, and intricate coiffure, presenting an aesthetic of abundance and opulence that speaks to her social status.

*fig. 11* Seydou Keïta (Malian, ca. 1921–2001). *Untitled*, #313, 1956–57. Modern gelatin silver print (2001), 22 × 15½ in. (55.9 × 39.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph and Ceil Mazer Foundation Inc. Gift, 2002 (2002.217)

*fig. 12* Unidentified artist (Senegalese). *Woman*, 1950s–60s. Gelatin silver print, 9½ × 7¼ in. (24.1 × 18.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.052)



*fig. 13* Seydou Keïta. Reclining woman, 1950s–60s. Film, emulsion, 5½ × 7½ in. (13 × 19 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.2.1)



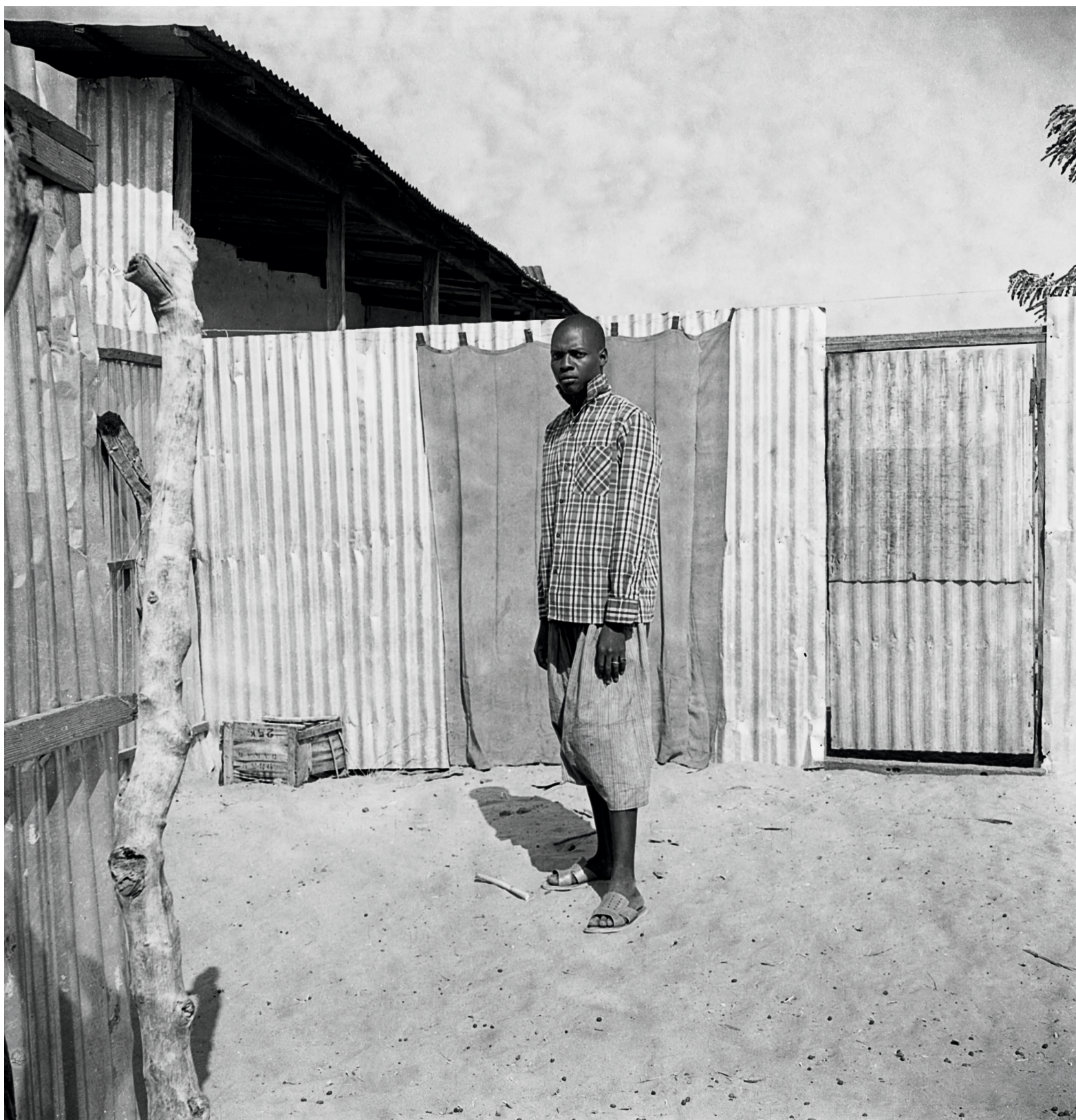
In a portrait produced about the same time by an unidentified Senegalese photographer, a woman also poses seated on a chair, this time, however, with her closed fist resting on her cheek (fig. 12). This photographer played with composition and artificial lighting, employing the latest artistic strategies and technologies. The backdrop here is monochromatic, functioning as a muted device that cedes the focus to the sitter. He manipulated the depth of field, making the sitter's face his focal point while blurring her arm and dress. With artificial lights, he cast strong shadows on to the sitter, creating a dynamic image that enthrones her, like an actress under a spotlight. The difference between these works by Keïta and his Senegalese counterpart is their artistic intent and aesthetic bias. They show the products of two photographers, each of whom developed an idiosyncratically individual visual vocabulary while echoing the established vernacular of postures shared across West Africa.

Another juxtaposition may further explain this point. Comparing prints by Seydou Keïta with those by Senegalese photographer Oumar Ka (born 1930) makes it possible to appreciate the wealth of approaches to portraiture in the region. Keïta's tendency to fill the picture with bold patterns (figs. 11, 13) stands in dramatic opposition to the portraits by Ka, whose subjects are surprisingly enveloped in space revealing either the

edges of a monochromatic backdrop and the contours of the surrounding built environment (fig. 14).

Trained under the Senegalese Cheikh Kane, Ka began his practice as an itinerant photographer in 1959 before opening his own studio in the city of Touba, Senegal, in 1968.<sup>40</sup> Portraying the rural communities living in the interior of Senegal, he traveled from village to village, taking portraits with the only tools he could carry: his medium-format TLR camera and a folded monochromatic backdrop. Rather than cropping the image close to the sitter or modulating sharp tonal contrasts with backdrops the way Keïta did, Ka maintained a distance from his patrons—individuals mostly living in rural rather than urban areas. His wide frames allow a glimpse of local architecture, private interiors, and open landscapes.

In his portrait of a man, a small monochromatic backdrop centers the sitter and defines the image as a formal portrait. The man's shirt, leather sandals, and loose-fitting pants, called *thiaya*, suggest that he was probably a mason who commissioned his portrait during an ordinary workday. Ka included the sandy streets of the Baol region, its overcast sky, and a building complex. He played with the different surfaces—the uneven white sand, the corrugated iron fence, and the cloudy sky—to create patterns that modulate and enrich the composition. In the unequal



*fig. 14* Oumar Ka (Senegalese, born 1930). Man standing in a courtyard, 1959–68. Tagged Image File Format (TIFF). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (N.A.2015.13)

ratio of space attributed to sitter and landscape, Ka's fascination with his environment, or what he called the *décor*, comes to light.<sup>41</sup> While different in their aesthetics and their clientele, both Ka and Keïta successfully visualized and shaped the aspirations of their sitters. The medium of photography allowed artists and patrons alike to express their concept of what modernity looked like—a concept that was constantly reinvented.

#### ON BOTH SIDES OF THE CAMERA

From the early days of portrait photography in West Africa, photographers were professionals who were aware of their role and their image, which they often articulated in carefully constructed self-portraits. The earliest self-portrait in the VRA is a formal representation of Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (fig. 15). Over the course of his long career, Acolatse performed in a series of self-portraits that pictured him wearing a range of outfits. Figure 15, probably dating from the 1910s, shows him dressed in a tuxedo adorned with lapel pins, sporting an elegant mustache, standing in front of an aristocratically decorated backdrop and behind a balustrade. In another image, possibly dating to the 1920s (fig. 16), he wears a suit pinned with medals, a bow tie, and a hat and holds a cane or an umbrella. He has shaved his mustache and is hardly

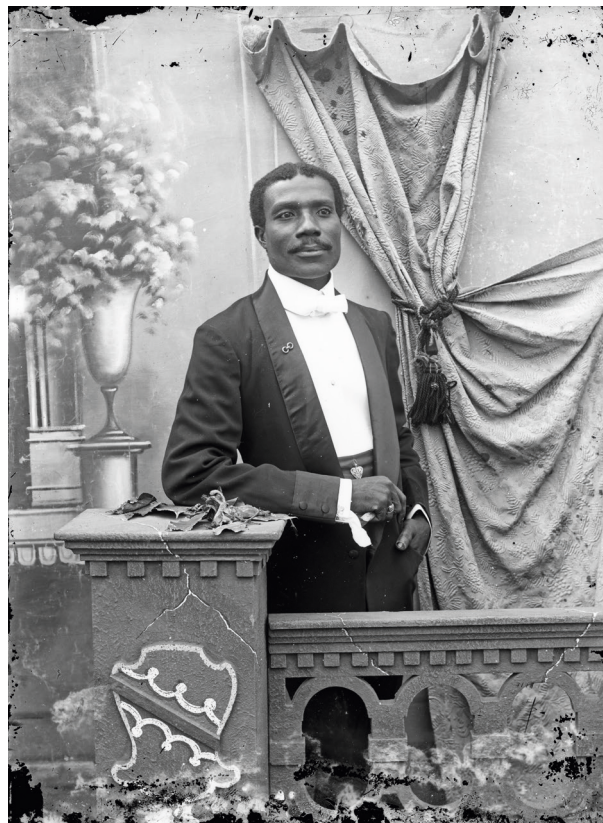
recognizable. Both self-portraits contrast sharply with yet another one reproduced in Philippe David's monographic book on Acolatse's work: there he chose to represent himself dressed with the canonically Akan prestige cloth known as kente.<sup>42</sup> Playfully foregrounding different aspects of his persona, he applied to his self-portraits the same conventions of portraiture he used for his clients.

Taken several decades later, in 1956, a rare self-portrait by Malick Sidibé was recently donated to the Metropolitan's Department of Photographs (fig. 17). In a clear break from Acolatse's formal portraiture, Sidibé is seemingly caught off guard as he looks surprised at the camera. Sitting at his desk, the twenty-year-old photographer turns toward the viewer, his face illuminated on one side by the natural light coming in the entrance to his studio in the heart of Bamako, Mali. The painted frame, added decades after the photograph was made, echoes glass painting traditions particularly popular in neighboring Senegal since the late nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

Oumar Ka, in a self-portrait taken in Touba that dates from the 1960s, chose to picture himself in his role as a photographer (fig. 18). Snapping this image in a mirror, he is seen holding his camera. His glasses hanging from his left ear, and he wears a hat that identifies him as a Sufi follower of the Senegalese

**fig. 15** Alex Agbaglo Acolatse. Self-portrait with balustrade and hanging, ca. 1910s. Glass, emulsion, 9½ × 7½ in. (19.1 × 24.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.32)

**fig. 16** Alex Agbaglo Acolatse. Self-portrait in bow tie and hat, ca. 1920s. Glass, emulsion, 9½ × 7½ in. (19.1 × 24.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.33)





*fig. 17* Malick Sidibé. Self-portrait, 1956. Gelatin silver print in original frame of reverse-painted glass, tape, cardboard, string, 15¼ × 12¼ × ¾ in. (40 × 30.7 × 1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Jack Shainman and Claude Simard, 2014 (2014.638)

*fig. 18* Oumar Ka. Self-portrait at home, 1959–68. Film, emulsion, 2¼ × 2¼ in. (5.7 × 5.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (N.A.2015.10)

Saint Amadou Bamba. As in his portraits, Ka articulates his likeness through his surroundings. We can see the underside of the thatched roof, a bit of the wardrobe door that holds the mirror, and numerous portraits hanging on the wall behind him. Throughout his career Ka produced dozens of carefully composed self-portraits that he printed in multiple copies. These images he gave to his best customers to please and reward them as a deliberate marketing strategy.<sup>44</sup> This portrait presents Ka as a professional photographer, conscious of his art, strategic in business, and aware of his image.

These photographers' self-fashioning is revelatory of their practice and their understanding of their role. In West Africa, this genre was explored further by Samuel Fosso (fig. 19). In one of his self-portraits in the



Metropolitan's collection, Fosso staged himself in his studio wearing high-waist bellbottom trousers and a tightly fitted shirt with cuffs rolled up, platform shoes, a gold watch, large metal-framed sunglasses, and a white cap with "Kodak" printed on it. He looks the epitome of a 1970s fashionable youth. Hanging behind him is a plain backdrop bordered by boldly patterned curtains, platform, and floor. On either side of the composition a vertical row of voluminous photographic lights further accentuates his dashing presence. Here, the studio setting is as integral to the image as Fosso himself. Of Cameroonian origins, Fosso studied photography during the 1970s in the Central African Republic, where he eventually opened a studio. He became known for his extravagant self-portraits, which he took in his studio at the end of the working day. For these images, he experimented with outfits and props in order to cast himself as different characters, investigating the limits of portrait photography, and questioning the distinction between sitter and photographer, reality and fantasy.

Since for decades anonymity of both artist and sitter has been a principal characterization of African art and photography, the existence of this corpus of self-portraits resonates powerfully.<sup>45</sup> These deliberate images bring African photographers sharply into focus as authors. In a field in which the agency and intent of photographers and sitters have often been questioned, welcome clarity comes from images in which the individual represented asserts full control, from the choice of pose, outfit, and backdrop or surroundings to decisions about lighting, framing, and printing.

*fig. 19* Samuel Fosso  
(Cameroonian, b. 1962). *Self-Portrait*, 1976. Gelatin silver print (2003), 20 × 20 in. (50.8 × 50.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Ross Family Fund Gift, 2003 (2003.459)



### CONCLUSION

The photographic holdings of the Visual Resource Archive in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum now go far beyond their original mission as a study collection. This collection constitutes a rare depository of images comprising a wealth of photographic voices while simultaneously telling the story of the development of a history of African photography. As such, it is an ideal collection to mine: the works discussed here, focusing on a specific region—West Africa—and a particular genre—portraiture—offer only a glimpse of its contents. The images bring to light themes central to the growing field of the history of African photography and to photography in general, including topics that have been neglected until recently, such as the figure of the amateur photographer and the genre of self-portraiture.

When considering this history, it becomes evident that studio practice in West Africa as it came to be known in the 1990s did not emerge from a vacuum. Works crafted during the mid-twentieth century reflect

a specific time and place and are the result of a long history that is both locally rooted and globally connected. These artists' paths and their images' journeys go beyond national borders, producing a fertile ground for new creations and interpretations. Images held in the VRA offer powerful testimony that, more than any other medium, photography thrust Africans into a global visual market as consumers, producers, and patrons. When seen and studied within the walls of the Metropolitan Museum, these photographs may finally be perceived by the wider public as integral contributions to the history of art.

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## NOTES

- 1 The hairstyle, the *Nguuka*, which was in vogue in the 1910s and 1920s, identifies the sitter as a mature woman. Siga 1990, p. 38.
- 2 On the early history of photography in West Africa, see Schneider 2010 and Geary 2013.
- 3 The exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum from August 31, 2015, to January 3, 2016. This collaborative project involved the participation of many individuals at the Metropolitan Museum, including members of curatorial departments, the Imaging department, Design, and the Digital Media department, as well as specialists in the field. We cannot name all of them here, but we particularly thank the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, especially Sheena Wagstaff, for lending us an exhibition space and providing the necessary financial support, and Pari Stave, for extensive logistical support; the Department of Photographs, especially Jeff Rosenheim and Beth Saunders, for their enthusiasm for this project and invaluable advice on content and best practices for printing original and digital negatives, and writing labels, and conservators Nora Kennedy, Katherine Sanderson, and Georgia Southworth, for the love and care they gave in preparing the photographs for the exhibition; and in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Jennifer Larson in the Visual Resource Archive, for her masterly logistical oversight.
- 4 For her PhD dissertation (2015), Giulia Paoletti conducted more than two years of archival and field research in Senegal (2010; 2011–13; 2014), with trips also to France and Italy. Her research was supported by awards and fellowships from the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among others.
- 5 Some of the works, such as the early portraits and postcards, entered the collection of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (AAOA) mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2014 the Visual Resource Archive (VRA) acquired an important ensemble of vintage prints and negatives from Senegal dating from the 1910s to the 1960s. In 2015 two donors came forward with gifts, and the VRA also purchased a set of portraits taken by Oumar Ka, a professional photographer working outside the main urban centers of Senegal.
- 6 For a description of the exhibition as it developed, see Biro and Paoletti 2015.
- 7 LaGamma et al. 2014.
- 8 Virginia-Lee Webb, the AAOA research curator responsible for some of these acquisitions, coedited a volume on the history of postcards precisely at that time. See Geary and Webb 1998.
- 9 While exhibitions of African arts at the Metropolitan Museum have regularly included photographs in a variety of formats, “In and Out of the Studio” was the first exhibition to focus solely on African photography, presenting the images as works of art rather than as historical documents.
- 10 By contrast, images of Africa’s cosmopolitan, assertive elites were not disseminated in Europe, for the images sent to and circulated in the West were intended to serve colonial propaganda. Images by African photographers, intended for an African audience, cherished by their owners, sent to friends as souvenirs, kept in albums, or framed and hung in private homes remained mostly in Africa.
- 11 Sprague 1978; Vidity-Ward 1985; Vidity-Ward 1987; and Geary 1988.
- 12 According to Susan Vogel, in an email exchange with Giulia Paoletti, June 2015, “Africa Explores” was seen by well over 100,000 people and the catalogue’s English version alone sold at least 10,000.
- 13 In the 1991 exhibition “Africa Explores,” Vogel included photographic portraits by Seydou Keita that she had collected in Mali in 1975, as well as at least a dozen photographs by other West African photographers; she donated most of these to the Metropolitan Museum in 2015. In 1992, Revue Noire curated the exhibition “Revue Noire et les photographes africains” at the Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles in Paris, showcasing about ninety photographers. In 1991–92 the French photographer Françoise Huguier conducted research on Malian photographers that led to the organization of the First Biennial of African Photography in Bamako in 1994. Also in 1992, the joint effort among the Senegalese photographer Bouna Médoune Seye, Jean Loup Pivin of Revue Noire, and Bertrand Hosti of the Centre Culturel Français in Dakar resulted in the organization of the first edition of the “Mois de la photo.” See Vogel 1991 and Amselle 2005, pp. 74–75, 97, 150–51.
- 14 See, for instance, Haney 2010; Vokes 2012; and Peffer and Cameron 2013.
- 15 The Metropolitan Museum was one of the participants in the Préservation du Patrimoine Photographique Africain (3PA): West African Image Lab, a photograph conservation workshop organized in 2014 in Porto-Novo, Benin. On some of the challenges of collecting and archiving African photography, see Morton and Newbury 2015.
- 16 Haney 2004a; Haney 2004b; Haney 2013, pp. 67–101; Haney 2014.
- 17 See Erin Haney’s contribution to the Metropolitan Museum’s blog in conjunction with “In and Out of the Studio”: [www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/2015/photographing-the-gold-coast](http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/2015/photographing-the-gold-coast). We thank Haney for generously sharing her knowledge and time in the study this work.
- 18 David 1992.
- 19 Schneider 2010, p. 134.
- 20 David 1978, p. 4; David 1986, p. 168.
- 21 On the technique of stitch-resist dyeing, see, for instance, Gillow 2003, p. 68.
- 22 Lasnet et al. 1900, p. 93.
- 23 Hickling 2014.
- 24 For a discussion of this issue, see Geary 1998; Hickling 2014; and Paoletti 2015, chap. 1.
- 25 See, for instance, Geary 1998.
- 26 Vidity-Ward (1985, p. 46) argues that the studio opened in 1905, whereas Julie Crooks (2015, p. 20) maintains that Lisk-Carew began his photography business in 1903.
- 27 Phillips 1995.
- 28 Guyer 2014, p. 411.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Crooks 2015, p. 27. See also Julie Crooks’s blogpost for the Metropolitan Museum website in conjunction with “In and Out of the Studio”: <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/2015/reinforcing-identity>.
- 31 That the sitters are members of the Dumont family from Saint-Louis was communicated by collector Xavier Ricou to Giulia Paoletti, Dakar, Senegal, 2013.
- 32 Brilliant 1991, p. 92.
- 33 Saint Léon, Martin, and Fall 1999, pp. 62–63.
- 34 The catalogue numbers of this group of negatives, which include fig. 10, are VRA.2014.8.001—VRA.2014.8.017. For an extended discussion about them, see Paoletti 2015, chap. 3.

- 35 Fineman 2000.
- 36 The introduction of dry plates, for instance, was one of the elements of portability that had an immediate influence upon the development of amateur photography. Black 1980, p. 149.
- 37 See, for instance, Nickel 1998; Fineman 2000.
- 38 Batchen 2001, p. 5.
- 39 This concept is elaborated by Manthia Diawara (1998).
- 40 For an extended discussion of the work of Oumar Ka, see Paoletti 2015, chap. 4.
- 41 Oumar Ka, personal communication with Giulia Paoletti, Touba, Senegal, December 2012 and January 2013.
- 42 David 1992, cover and p. 48.
- 43 On glass painting traditions, see Sylla 2001 and Renaudeau and Strobel 1984.
- 44 Oumar Ka, personal communication with Giulia Paoletti, Touba, Senegal, December 2012, January 2013, and April 2014.
- 45 See, for instance, Blier 1996 and Bigham 1999.

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## ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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