



VI. Out of Phantom Africa: Michel Leiris, Man Ray and the Dogon

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The publication in 1936 of Man Ray's photographs of Dogon objects, alongside Michel Leiris' essay "Bois rituels des falaises" in *Cahiers d'art*, presents a fascinating juxtaposition of word and image, each interpreting the objects in a different way.¹ The photographer and author had known each other since the beginnings of Surrealism in the early 1920s, but their involvement with the movement had been different (though in both cases fraught) and their subsequent paths had diverged profoundly. Was this coming together of their work a deliberate collaboration, a merely fortuitous coincidence, or something in between?

This juxtaposition of image and text offers a unique opportunity to examine contrasting surrealist-derived ideologies played out across the pages of a single magazine feature, and an examination of the relationship between Man Ray's pictures and Leiris' words is central to this essay. But alongside that "horizontal" juxtaposition, it is also important to examine the "vertical" history of these Dogon sculptures—how both the physical objects and their meanings have shifted over the last century. Later in the essay, I will consider what happened to them after that appearance in *Cahiers d'art*, and where we might find them now—in sitings that have surprising resonances with how they were pictured in 1936.

But first, it is necessary to move backwards in time, to examine the origin of the sculptures and how they came to Paris. The French had been acquiring objects from their African colonies since the nineteenth century and many of these had found their way to the Musée d'Ethnographie, built in 1878 on the Trocadéro hill. A notoriously cluttered space, this museum had nevertheless been the site where many avant-garde artists had discovered "primitive" art in the early years of the twentieth century.² In 1928, Paul Rivet and Georges-Henri Rivière were appointed director and assistant director with a remit to modernize the museum. Within a decade, this would involve its rebuilding, but initially the most important effort was to connect its function with the development of anthropology as a process of scientific inquiry, which was evolving in France somewhat later than it had elsewhere.

But anthropology in Paris was complicated by its intersection with the artistic avant-garde, and in particular, the movement in the 1920s, which was later to be labelled "negrophilia." James Clifford has described it thus: "'Africa' was by definition primitive, wild, elemental. In the 1920s, however, a series of stereotypes long associated with backwardness and inferiority acquired positive connotations and came to stand for liberation and spontaneity, for a simultaneous recovery of ancient sources and an access to true modernity."³ For some, this was merely a passing and dubious fashion. But for others, the fascination with the "primitive" posed a concerted and genuine challenge to the established values of European culture; among them were a group of writers and artists who had been marked by Surrealism.

In 1981, Clifford famously coined the term "ethnographic surrealism" to describe the conjunction of anthropology and the avant-garde.⁴ It is a term that has been both much used and hotly contested and the complexities of this debate are beyond the present essay.⁵ But one site where ethnography and Surrealism intersected was in the fifteen issues of the journal *Documents*, edited by Georges Bataille between 1929 and 1930.⁶ In its pages, texts by ex-Surrealists like Leiris, Robert Desnos and Raymond Queneau sat alongside essays by leading figures in French anthropology such as Rivet, Rivière and Marcel Griaule. Yet these two elements arguably did not merge until near the end of the journal's run, when Leiris wrote an essay entitled "The Ethnographer's Eye (concerning the Dakar-Djibouti Mission)."⁷

The Mission Dakar-Djibouti was the most important French ethnographic expedition of its time. Its task was to traverse sub-Saharan Africa from west to east, gathering both information and objects on the way. Griaule was appointed the leader of the Mission and he invited Leiris to act as "secretary-archivist." The group left France on May 19, 1931, and landed at Dakar at the end of the month. On September 29, they arrived in the country of the Dogon peoples and stayed there for nearly two months before moving on eastward. For Griaule, it was an encounter that would determine the remainder of his professional life and,

through him, the dominant mode of French ethnography.⁸ For other members of the Mission—Leiris, the musicologist André Schaeffner and the linguist Deborah Lifschitz (the only woman member of the Mission)—it would also be a crucial experience.⁹

The Dogon live in present-day Mali, which in 1936 was French Sudan. They inhabit a string of villages that sit along the 125-mile-long Bandiagara escarpment. Ritual is embedded in Dogon life and carved or constructed objects are an integral part of this, including, most famously, the masks used at funerary or remembrance ceremonies. But these are not *just* objects. In the words of one anthropologist who has recently worked in Dogon society: “The term mask usually suggests a face or head covering that disguises the natural head... For the Dogon, however, the *emma* consists of a person dancing in a costume that includes a head-piece but is not limited to it. Masks are not worn; masks are men who dance, perform, and shout.”¹⁰ And once the physical headpieces have been used in the ritual dance, they have no further purpose. Consequently, they are discarded and left to rot, unless of course they are collected and preserved by foreign visitors.

While in Dogon country, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti collected both information and material objects—in particular an important and representative group of those (usually) abandoned masks. Upon its return in 1933 (carrying with it a collection of 3,500 objects in all), the Mission was celebrated with both an exhibition in the Musée d’Ethnographie and a special issue of the new journal *Minotaure*, which included an essay by Leiris on “Masques Dogon.”¹¹

In 1935, Griaule returned to the Dogon to continue his own intensive study of the Dogon use of masks, including the filming of a number of ceremonies.¹² Among the party were Lifchitz and another young female student of ethnography, Denise Paulme; the two had been jointly awarded a fellowship, which enabled them to stay on after Griaule and the rest of the party had left. Alongside their fieldwork, Paulme and Lifchitz began to collect more objects. As Denise Paulme recalled in 1988, this began with an interest in the elaborately carved door locks that adorned many buildings, particularly granaries.¹³ But they also collected other sculptures and, by the time they returned to Paris in the autumn, they had 184 objects, comprising 96 door locks and shutters, 45 figures, a few masks and several musical instruments.

In retrospect, Paulme was keen to emphasize that these objects were all legitimately acquired. She would have been aware of the shadow thrown over the Mission Dakar-Djibouti by the revelation in Michel Leiris’ 1934 book *L’Afrique fantôme* that many of the objects brought back by the Mission were obtained by coercion and sometimes by straightforward thievery.¹⁴ But Paulme insisted that all the objects collected by her and Lifchitz were paid for and that many had been brought to them for purchase: “These objects we knew were the remains of cults that had disappeared, the user having died and the statues abandoned.”¹⁵

The most remarkable single object that they collected was a hermaphrodite figure, about fifty-two inches high and curved in the shape of the tree from which it was carved (**Conc. 2**). It was discovered buried in the ground. “The head, which was all that was visible, was being used as a post for hitching horses.” The locals would not help to dig it up, saying “these things were already there when our ancestors arrived,” so Paulme and Lifchitz dug it out with their pocketknives.¹⁶

On May 30, 1935, Paulme wrote to Rivière referring to this sculpture: “We have *the* statue—the famous statue that you asked for—and I’ll take everyone to dinner at Carette if Ratton doesn’t turn green with envy.”¹⁷ The letter exudes the excitement of the find and demonstrates that Paulme very well knew the unique quality of this figure, both on an ethnographic and aesthetic level. (Her reference to the well-known dealer Charles Ratton also tells us that she understood the value of the piece in the world of Parisian *art nègre*.) When Paulme and Lifchitz returned to France in September, they sent their collection on ahead, proudly remarking: “With what it already possesses, the Trocadéro will thus have a unique collection of Dogon sculpture.”¹⁸

These new additions to the collection at the Musée d’Ethnographie were those featured in *Cahiers d’art* the following year; but the journal was not a neutral context. It also had a history of engagement with *l’art nègre*. In 1927, the magazine’s editor, Christian Zervos, had himself published an essay of that title, together with a text by Georges Salles calling for the inclusion of African art in the Louvre (a demand that would, as we will see, come to fruition sixty years later).¹⁹ There were several such features in the magazine during this period, where the qualities of non-Western art were set alongside the achievements of the contempo-

rary avant-garde (Zervos was one of Picasso's chief champions).

Yet, as Julia Kelly has shown in her study of the impact of ethnography on the avant-garde in this period, *Cahiers d'art* was a much more conventional journal than *Documents* (or even the more luxurious *Minotaure*).²⁰ *Cahiers d'art*, it might be said, smoothed over contradictions, whereas *Documents* had "openly risked friction and incompatibility."²¹ Nevertheless, one can see in the juxtaposition of Michel Leiris' text and Man Ray's photographs some friction and even incompatibility in the way they regard the Dogon sculptures. We cannot now know how the coming together of Leiris and Man Ray happened. It is tempting to think of it as a collaboration between writer and photographer and there are many examples elsewhere in Surrealist periodicals where image and text rub up against each other to create a "third meaning." But in truth, this idea of collaboration is unlikely. Leiris and Man Ray had never been close and, by 1936 their positions were very far apart. It is more likely that each of their contributions was brokered separately by Zervos or Rivière and that the intention was not friction but variety.²² So before considering the relationship of text and image, it is necessary to consider them separately.

Although Michel Leiris had by his own account been interested in African art since the 1920s, "Bois rituels des falaises" was his first essay on the subject as such, as Denis Hollier recently noted.²³ The texts he had written for *Documents* were almost all on Afro-American culture, and most usually on jazz; "his Africa was out of Africa," comments Hollier. But the journey across Africa in 1931-33 challenged his romantic attitudes and created something of a crisis on both a professional and personal level.

Leiris' activities in the mid 1930s were complex, operating in several areas.²⁴ First, there was his work with ethnology.²⁵ After returning from the Dakar-Djibouti voyage in February 1933, he was in July given a post in the Département d'Afrique noire at the Musée d'Ethnographie. (Two years later, in Autumn 1935, Denise Paulme joined him there.) Leiris was also working toward his formal studies in this area, attending lectures by the "founding father" of French anthropology Marcel Mauss; he would be awarded diplomas in sociology in November 1936 and ethnology in June 1937.²⁶

All this sounds as if, when Leiris wrote his *Cahiers d'art* text, he was settling smoothly into a safe institutional

position. This assumption is however undermined by the publication in April 1934 of *L'Afrique fantôme*, the diary that he had kept in Africa. As we have already seen, this caused consternation because of Leiris' rather too frank admission of how indigenous objects had been acquired. Yet there was much more in the book, building up an account of how ethnographic neutrality is inevitably compromised by the politics of colonialism, the rivalry of co-workers and, above all, the subjective feelings—elation, depression, desire and repulsion—of the researcher himself. It was this awareness of the intermeshing of objectivity and subjectivity that would, half a century later, make *L'Afrique fantôme* the key example of what James Clifford (turning his terms round) called "surrealist ethnography."²⁷

Leiris was interested in stretching and testing the boundaries of ethnographic practices, and he saw that logically he also had to apply his interrogations to himself. During this period, he began work on the autobiographical study that would eventually be published as *L'Age d'homme* in 1939.²⁸ As Clifford remarked, Leiris "wrote about himself from the subject of an oddly detached but passionate participant observer."²⁹ After the Second World War, *L'Age d'homme* would be followed at regular intervals by the four volumes of *La Règle du jeu*, a massive and detailed process of self-inquiry that would be Leiris' central contribution to twentieth-century French literature.³⁰

Some of the strategies Leiris was developing in his writing at this time can be detected in "Bois rituels des falaises." Most notable is his use of extended and intricate syntactical patterns. In his autobiographical books, Leiris would weave a dense texture of long twisting sentences with multiple subclauses, somewhat indebted to Proust of course. According to his translator, his writing style pushed the natural rigour of French into "a further, excessive, exaggerated formality" that is "verbose, awkward, difficult" (quite deliberately so, one must add, in order to register the complexity and indeed the impossibility of bringing together everything he wants to say).³¹

In his *Cahiers d'art* essay, Leiris utilizes these extended winding sentences (some of them a paragraph long) to give a sense of the deep connectness in Dogon society between geography and social structure, everyday life and ritual, while the literariness of his style keeps us ever aware that it is an outsider who is observing and recording. At the same time, Leiris shifts in tone and attitude between the cool accumulation of factual information and a passionate and in-



87 MAN RAY, *Untitled* (Dogon black monkey mask, Mali), 1936

deed sometimes impenetrable poetic evocation. The former is his response as an ethnographer, the latter as a creative writer and lapsed surrealist, both we sense (though Leiris himself is characteristically reticent on this point) deeply informed by his own sojourn with the Dogon five years earlier.

His comments on the sculptures brought back by Paulme and Lifchitz are couched in deliberately ambiguous terms. He emphasizes that there is not in Dogon culture the split that exists in the industrial world between the “objet d’art” and the “objet d’utilité,” between “beings and things.” We cannot understand these works in isolation and Leiris defers to native “connaisseurs” (the passing dig at European connoisseurship is surely deliberate) in understanding the gesture of one figure in raising up its arms as connecting earth and sky or of another hiding his face in his hands “because he is ashamed.”

Though the essay is short, it manages to give us a great deal of information about the Dogon and the sculptures they made, while at the same time unHINGING any hope that understanding might be an easy process. All this is in the essay itself; but this mix of factuality and evocation is heightened—and rendered more fraught—in *Cahiers d’art* by the juxtaposition of Leiris’ text with Man Ray’s photographs.

At first, the intricacy and obscurity of Leiris’ essay seems in stark contrast to the direct and startling drama



88 MAN RAY, *Untitled* (Dogon shutter or door with lock, Mopti region, Mali), 1936



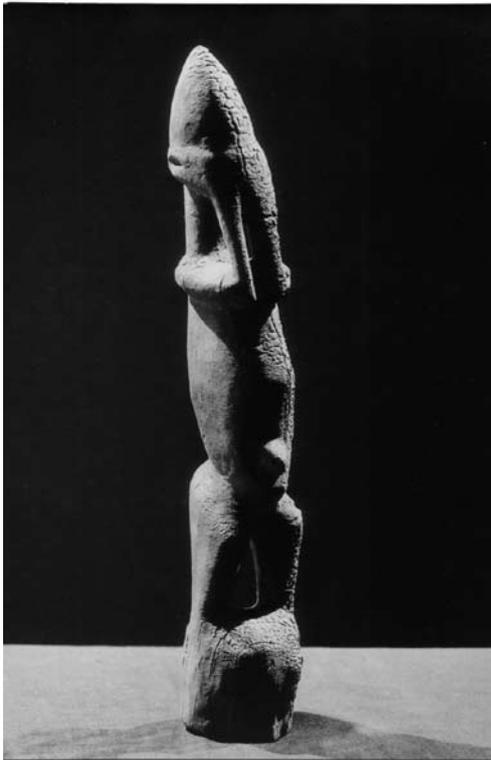
89 MAN RAY, *Untitled* (Dogon lock, Mopti region, Mali), 1936



90 MAN RAY, *Untitled* (Dogon lock, Mopti region, Mali), 1936



91 MAN RAY, *Untitled* (Dogon hermaphrodite rider, Nini village, Mali), 1936



92 MAN RAY, *Untitled* (Dogon figure, Yaya village, Mali), 1936

of Man Ray's eight photographs. One of these faces the beginning of Leiris' text: the large hermaphrodite statue unearthed by Paulme and Lifchitz (**cat. 14**). The others follow the essay. There are two masks: the "monkey mask," which would often be photographed in the years to follow (**cat. 87/Conc. 4**), and a rougher mask with triangular eye holes, which has been little reproduced but is to be seen in the exhibition this catalogue accompanies (**cat. 86/Conc. 5**). There is one door and two locks (**cats. 88-90/Conc. 6-8**), a category somewhat underrepresented given that such objects comprised half of those brought back by Paulme and Lifchitz. They are, however, the least visually dramatic and most obviously functional of the objects. Finally, the Man Ray sequence ends with the two small figures to which Leiris referred: one riding a horse with its arms raised above its head (**cat. 91/Conc. 1**) and one with its hands over its face (**cat. 92/Conc. 3**).

The Dogon objects are dramatically lit, usually from the side, the light raking across their surfaces to create rich and dynamic compositions. This is very different from how such sculptures were usually photographed. There were essentially two existing formats. One was to capture the object in the field at the site of use. This was the preferred ethnographic form of illustration; it was how Marcel Griaule had photographed Dogon masks, his images being used to illustrate both Leiris' 1933 essay "Masques Dogon" in *Minotaure* and Griaule's own 1938 book of the same title. Against this, one can compare the sort of photographs of non-Western indigenous objects prevalent in magazines like *Cahiers d'art*: cool, clear, ostensibly neutral documents filled with an even, unobtrusive light.

Man Ray's photographs violate both codes. In their decontextualization, they work against the desire for scientific exactitude and cultural placement integral to Griaule's approach; in their drama, they cast a heightened emotional effect over a more detached aesthetic appreciation of the sculptures' form and objecthood. Indeed, on both sides of the divide between ethnographer and aesthete, many must have felt that Man Ray had overstepped the line between drama and melodrama. This is most pronounced in his two photographs of the masks. Lit from below so that the shift between light and shade takes place behind and animates the blank eyeholes, the masks, through a trick of *mise en scène*, are given eyes to see.³²

Of course, it is in retrospect very easy to read into Man Ray's pictures all the primitivizing tropes of ne-

grophilia. These objects emerge from the “heart of darkness,” caught in a simulacrum of flickering torch light that turns them into savage gods, sending a thrilling shiver through the sophisticated Western viewer with implications of primal urges and blood rituals. It is interesting to speculate just what Leiris made of the pictures. The precise ethnographer in him would probably have been appalled; in his essay, he had taken great pains to set these objects in the context of their culture and the place of their making. Yet Leiris was more subtle—and more divided—than that, and he well understood that a viewer in Paris could not see these objects as a Dogon would. His own background as both an ardent “negrophilist” and participant in *Documents* would have told him that fearful fascination and yearning excitement were utterly welded into the European sense of the otherness of this art.

Perhaps, then, Leiris and Man Ray had more in common than we might at first think. Certainly, Leiris was more self-conscious than Man Ray in his sense of implication as a European observer, but he was also willing to yield to the fascination of the objects and indulge in their dramatization. He opens his essay by quoting from a ritual Dogon verse: “The eye of the mask is an eye of the sun / The eye of the mask is an eye of fire,” an incantation that, as Wendy Grossman noted previously, can be read directly across to the flickering eye sockets in Man Ray’s photographs of the two masks.³³

Man Ray’s photographs would later be divorced from the context of their first reproduction in *Cahiers d’art* next to Leiris’ essay, which has in turn also been republished on its own.³⁴ But it is much more interesting and complex to return to that point of their first publication, to look at them together, as this exhibition does. There they operate as only a magazine or book spread can, with photograph working off text and vice versa. Their contradictions produce not a perfect resolution and balance but rather an open, dynamic and ongoing set of irresolutions, which give us a map of the relationship between European and African

culture in 1936. It is a map that, as we will see, still has resonances today.

The particular qualities of Man Ray’s photographs are emphasized if one contrasts them with other, later images of these Dogon objects that appeared in various postwar publications. In 1947, Marcel Griaule published his study *Art de l’Afrique Noire*, illustrated with photographs by Emmanuel Sougez (fig. 6.1).³⁵ There, several Dogon sculptures

were reproduced, among them four that Man Ray had photographed.³⁶ But the difference is startling. This is a small book, with the images modestly integrated into the run of text. More importantly, the images, taken (as we are told on the title page) in the Musée de l’Homme, are evenly lit by what we can imagine to be the clear light of day or, more metaphorically, the light of reason. (This concept, as we will see, was fundamental to the ideology of the Museum.)

These pictures might be thought of as mere reworkings of the cool and unobtrusive method of photographing such objects referred to earlier. But, significantly, the title page of *Art de l’Afrique Noire* makes a point of naming Sougez as the author of the photographs, for he was also a photographer with a reputa-

tion. Like Man Ray, his work of the previous two decades had crossed between artistic and commercial work. In the 1930s, he had been one of the leading French exponents of the New Photography, linked to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. The pictures in Griaule’s book show the purity, simplicity and clarity that had been one of the hallmarks of that work.³⁷

If Man Ray and Sougez represent two very different authorial approaches to the photography of these Dogon sculptures, the objects also appeared in publications that downplayed the role of photography in their presentation. In 1967, Leiris wrote an essay for a lavishly illustrated book on African art in the series “The Arts of Mankind,” co-edited by André Malraux.³⁸ The book illustrates three of the pieces that Man Ray had photographed. The photographer here is uncredited but, as in Sougez’s images, the sculptures



Fig. 6.1 Emmanuel Sougez, *Untitled* (Dogon hermaphrodite rider), reproduced in Marcel Griaule, *Art de l’Afrique Noire*, 1947



Fig. 6.2 Anonymous, *Untitled* (Dogon black monkey mask), reproduced in Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange, *African Art*, 1967



Fig. 6.3 Eliot Elisofon, *Untitled* (Dogon black monkey mask), reproduced in Paul Radin and James Johnson Sweeney, *African Folktales and Sculpture*, 1952

are placed against a light background, clearly and evenly lit. Most striking is the photograph of the monkey mask (**fig. 6.2**). Despite the fact that both this and Man Ray's photograph are taken from directly in front of the object, one might at a glance not realize they are the same object.³⁹ The big difference is of course that the later image is in color, and the subtle brown of the mask set against the light grey background suggests harmony rather than black and white drama. The lighting is also radically different, falling much more softly from top left, and the eyes are two irregular rectangular holes through which one sees the flat grey of the background.

The blankness of these eye holes is heightened in other publications of the period that eliminated the photographic background, silhouetting the mask on the bright white of the page. A good example here is the image of the monkey mask made by the *Life* magazine photographer Eliot Elisofon, first reproduced in 1952 as the opening plate in Paul Radin's and James Johnson Sweeney's *African Folktales & Sculpture* (**fig. 6.3**).⁴⁰ It was also subsequently published to powerful effect in Elisofon's large format 1958 book *The Sculpture of Africa*, where the monkey mask occupies a full page, its white eyeholes compellingly void.⁴¹

A few pages earlier, a double spread using the same silhouetting technique was devoted to three more Dogon

sculptures—the rider with raised arms, the figure with his hands up to its face and the large hermaphrodite figure that Paulme and Lifchitz unearthed.⁴² Along with the monkey mask, this latter figure is the most commonly reproduced of all these Dogon sculptures, and interestingly it is always photographed from the same angle—from the left so that it sways toward the right. In a Western context, this makes it more dynamic, since to move from left to right is to move forward. In Elisofon's book, the whole left-hand page is occupied by a large close-up of its face (seen from the same angle), which emphasises its

monumentality.⁴³ It may also remind us though that reproduction has tended to make the various figures more equal in size than they actually are. While the hermaphrodite is fifty-two inches tall, the figure with its hands over its face is only sixteen inches high. On the page, this discrepancy in scale is indistinguishable.

To conclude this account of the photographic representation of these Dogon sculptures, it is worth jumping forward half a century to look at some of their most recent images. For their transfer to the Musée du quai Branly between 2003 and 2006, the objects were photographed again and their images placed in the catalogue on the museum website (**fig. 6.4; cats. 93, 94**).⁴⁴ In the light of what we have seen before, they are startling. The objects themselves are usually lit frontally, which reveals all the detail of their surfaces but tends to flatten them out. But what is most striking is that, whether actually or digitally, many of the objects are now placed against a black background.⁴⁵

The triangular eye holes in the lesser known of the two masks are now dark voids, as striking as the white holes in photographs such as Elisofon's.⁴⁶ There may well be an assumption here that black is just as neutral a background as white had previously seemed to be, but it is hard not to see these objects now as emerging into the light out of darkness. Light and dark, white and black, lighting



Fig. 6.4 Dogon hermaphrodite rider, Nini Village, Mali, Late 19th – early 20th century, photograph by Hughes Dubois, Musée du quai Branly

from the side and from the front—these are physical, formal decisions made by the photographer, but they cannot be ideologically neutral. And it is tempting to see in the shift from light back to dark a parallel with the actual change that took place in the siting of these objects in the early twenty-first century.

It is somewhat ironic that if, in 1936, a reader of the article in *Cahiers d'art* had wished straightaway to go see the Dogon sculptures described and illustrated there, he or she would not have been able to do so. The Musée d'Ethnographie had closed in 1935; the old building was demolished and the new Musée de l'Homme took its place in 1937, a dazzling example of the latest style in architecture fusing modernist functionality with classical harmony. When the new museum reopened, to coincide with the International Exhibition staged below it on the banks of the Seine, visitors would also have found that its displays had been installed very differently from those in the old museum.⁴⁷ In her pioneering analysis of the role of museums in the presentation of art from other cultures, Sally Price referred to Michel Leiris' own description of the thinking behind the Museum's new displays: "the objects were installed in austere metal cases and laden with exhaustive ethnographic contextualization, out of an explicit desire

to stress that anthropology was a legitimate science."⁴⁸

For more than sixty years, between 1937 and 2003, the Dogon sculptures sat in the rectangular glass vitrines of the Musée de l'Homme, in the "Afrique noire" gallery with its large windows facing south toward the river and the Eiffel Tower. When I first visited the museum in 1993, it seemed as if nothing had changed since the vitrines were first installed, and a thin patina of dust had settled over everything.⁴⁹ The museum did have its own potent atmosphere, however,

where "each vitrine represented a lost world."⁵⁰ It was in one of these glass cases that I noticed Griaule's photograph of another Dogon mask—a "masque jeune fille" studded with shells—on which I centred my own study of ethnographic Surrealism and photography.⁵¹

Many of the participants in the pioneering days of French ethnography maintained their professional affiliation



93 DOGON saman mask, Mopti region, Mali, Late 19th – early 20th century, photograph from the Musée du quai Branly



94 DOGON shutter or door, Mopti region, Mali, Late 19th – early 20th century, photograph from the Musée du quai Branly

with the Musée de l'Homme. Leiris worked there (though with typical unease), as did Denise Paulme who, after the war, became director of the African section.⁵² (Deborah Lifchitz died in Auschwitz in 1943.) Also based at the Musée de l'Homme was the film-maker Jean Rouch, the one member of a later generation to acknowledge the influence of “Surrealist ethnography” on his practice.⁵³

In 1996, Guy Seligman made a timely film *Les Dogon: Chronique d'une Passion*, to which several members of the community of now elderly French ethnographers who had devoted their professional lives to the study of the Dogon contributed.⁵⁴ In one sequence, Denise Paulme makes a privileged visit to the (very crowded) storerooms of the Musée de l'Homme and looks through some of the objects she and Lifchitz had brought back from Africa in 1935. She holds up a large, ornately carved door that Man Ray had photographed (fig. 6.5); it not only looks very different but it also reminds one that what is lost behind the flat plane of both vitrine and photograph is the very tangibility of the object. But this, it seems, can only be experienced by someone like Paulme with access to behind the scenes at the museum.

In retrospect, Seligman's film feels like a valedictory tribute, not only to those pioneers of ethnography, but also to the Musée de l'Homme itself. As the twentieth century drew to an end, a fresh battle erupted in Paris concerning the role of the museum. On one side were those who primarily valued the museum's objects as cultural artifacts, each one as important as the next in providing information about the society that produced it. On the other side were those who wished to elevate a certain number of objects to the status of works of art, masterpieces to be sited apart from the rest and judged on their aesthetic qualities rather than their anthropological value. It was the latest round in the continuing debate between the “objet d'utilité” and the “objet d'art.”

Given that the most influential figure in the French Republic, its president Jacques Chirac, was a fervent collector of *les arts premiers* (as they came to be known in preference to the more contentious label “primitive art”) and wanted his own *grand projet* to be the reorganisation of the

museums holding these objects, the winner of this tussle between art and artifact was never really in doubt.⁵⁵ While the struggle lasted, it was a bitter battle of ideologies, but the results, when they came, were decisive. The first stage was the introduction of non-Western art into the Louvre, when Chirac's principal advisor Jacques Kerchache was authorized to choose 117 objects for display in new galleries in the Pavilion des Sessions, opened in April 2000. Far more drastic, though, was the closure of the ethnographic galleries at the Musée de l'Homme in spring 2003, with its collections being transferred to a new museum, the Musée du quai Branly, which opened in 2006.

In the summer of 2008, it was possible to see in Paris four of the Dogon sculptures that Man Ray had photo-



Fig. 6.5 Guy Seligman, *Les Dogon: Chronique d'une Passion*, 1996, Frame still

graphed seventy-two years earlier—one mask and three figures.⁵⁶ Two of these are in the Pavilion des Sessions and two at the Quai Branly and the forms of their display are significantly different, suggesting that even in the “anti-artifact” camp, there are unresolved tensions.

There had been much resistance in the Louvre itself to the introduction of this non-Western art and, being churlish, one might note that the Pavilion des Sessions is about as far as it is possible to go from the central pyramid while still being in the Louvre! Still, the gallery design

echoes that of the main part of the museum, while being minimal and modernist. If one is going to exhibit the sculptures in this way, then this display does it with elegance and dignity.

Two of the Dogon objects exhibited in the room of African art are the large hermaphrodite figure Paulme and Lifchitz found buried and the little rider on horseback with arms raised (**figs. 6.6–6.8**). The large figure is displayed on its own on a square bronzed metal platform and protected by a low, discreet rail. Softly spotlit, it leans forward as it does in all its photographs (and, indeed it does have a “good” side from which it looks better). But the sculpture’s material presence is also very powerful and, though one cannot actually touch it, it evokes a very physical, even tactile experience.

Across from that is a high glass case inside which floats another bronze platform supporting three small figures. The rider is at one end, raised up from the platform by a short rod, and one can walk round, nose pressed to the glass, to also appreciate its three-dimensionality. Though one knew this was small and the hermaphrodite was large, the disjunction in their scale, elided by all the photographs, is made palpable here, in front of the things themselves.

Though an important gesture, the establishment of the Pavilion des Sessions has been less significant than the building of the new museum next to the Eiffel Tower on the Quai Branly. For this signalled a dramatic and controversial shift in the way that one of the most important European collections of non-Western art is displayed. The museum contains many elements but it is the permanent exhibition space that is both central to the visitor’s experience and the most controversial element. In the words of the museum’s architect Jean Nouvel: “It is a haunted place, wherein dwell and converse the ancestral spirits of those who discovered the human condition and invented gods and beliefs. It is a strange, unique place, poetic and disturbing.”⁵⁷

We might expect from this statement that Nouvel’s museum would be very different from the order and clarity of the Musée de l’Homme or indeed the Louvre. Approached by a long, curving ramp, one finds oneself in a large darkened space, peopled by dramatically lit objects. (Once again, few critics have been able to resist the primitivist metaphor of the “Heart of Darkness.”)⁵⁸ Through the middle of the space undulates a walkway between two walls of brown leather (Nouvel calls this “the river”) where

one can look at video screens or read stencilled texts. What windows there are have been covered with images of green foliage, a kitsch evocation of the tropical forest through which one must, rather uncertainly, make one’s way.

However, if one heads for “Africa,” one of the first spaces is very different: high ceilinged and brightly lit with yellow walls. And arranged across one wall is a selection of the Dogon masks from the museum’s collection—large and small, made of wood, shells and leather—each held out toward the visitor on a short pole. They are striking in the variety of their invention and fabrication, and the display is simple enough to give each mask its own presence and complex enough to make their combined effect quite overwhelming. On a side wall are a couple of quotations from Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, while another video screen shows films by Griaule and Jean Rouch that feature the masks being used in Dogon rituals. This at least contextualizes the masks, though, as another recent visitor—the musicologist Tamara Levitz—has remarked, this display continues to value the understanding of Western (specifically French) ethnography over that of the Dogon themselves.⁵⁹

But my own attention is drawn to one mask in particular, the monkey mask. As one enters the room, one sees it for the first time from a three-quarters angle, and I only really recognized it when I walked across to view it from the front. For this is the position from which it has always been photographed, making it both hieratic and very direct—it is looking at *you*. From the side, though, one realizes how three-dimensional it is, rounded and shaped with the central features in a concave bowl.

From this room, one moves back into the darkness, a series of small rooms twisting in a labyrinth, with glass cases theatricality lit from above. The fourth of the Dogon objects photographed by Man Ray—the figure with its hands to its face—is in a tall thin vitrine on its own, and here the lighting is very similar to that in Man Ray’s photograph, from above, throwing long shadows down the figure. One can at least walk round that glass case to see the figure from all sides. But many of the objects in the African galleries can only be viewed from one position, as if one were looking at their photograph rather than the actual object. They, in effect, become images of themselves and it is hard not to remark on the irony of this return to a neo-primitivist display.

And yet the objects survive. Whether framed in the Louvre as world masterpieces or at the Quai Branly as uncanny fetishes, they survive, because they are indeed

marvellous, beautiful, magical. These are, of course, all difficult, problematic words, and they are all terms that come out of a Western discourse about art. We must respect the very different origins of these non-Western objects and acknowledge that we cannot know or understand them as their makers did. But surely that respect and acknowledgment should not debar us in our culture from looking at and thinking about these objects from that other culture.

In this process of looking and thinking, we must consider not only their origin (as far as we can understand it), but also their history since they came to Europe. As Susan Vogel has argued: “An examination of how we view African objects (both literally and metaphorically) is important because unless we realize the extent to which our vision is conditioned by our own culture—unless we realize that the image of African art we have made has been shaped by us as much as by Africans—we may be misled into believing that we see African art for what it is.”⁶⁰ In the particular case of these Dogon sculptures, this examination must include their framing within the photographs of Man Ray and the words of Michel Leiris (among many others who have pictured or written about them), as well as their actual placement in the Musée de l’Homme, the Louvre, and the Musée du quai Branly. It is a complex history and I doubt if it has yet come to an end.

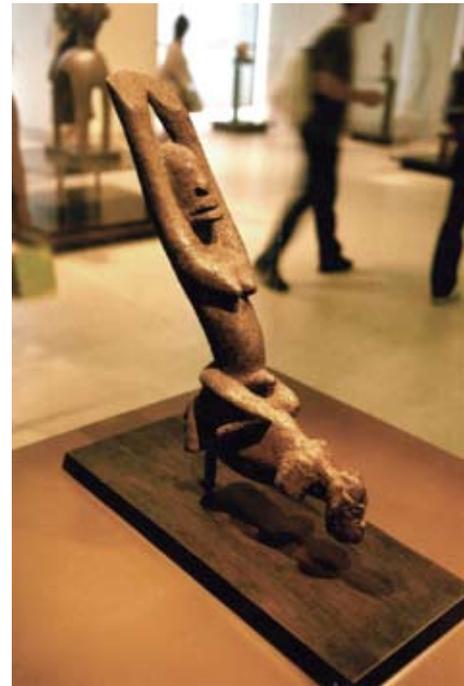


Fig. 6.6 Installation shot of Dogon hermaphrodite rider at the Louvre, photograph by Ian Walker, 2008



Fig. 6.7 Installation shot of Dogon hermaphrodite figure at the Louvre, photograph by Ian Walker, 2008



Fig. 6.8 Installation shot of three Dogon figures at the Louvre, photograph by Ian Walker, 2008

Notes

- 1 Michel Leiris, "Bois rituels des falaises" ("Ritual Wooden Objects of the Cliffs") with photographs by Man Ray, *Cahiers d'art*, 11:6-7 (1936), 192-99. Man Ray's photographs of these objects, largely overlooked in previous scholarship on this artist, were brought to attention and contextualized in Wendy Grossman, "Art modern, entre l'ethnografia, el primitivisme i el surrealisme," in *Man Ray Llums i somnis* (Girona, Spain: Fundació caixa Girona, 2006), 26-31.
- 2 For a detailed study of this period, see Nélia Dias, *Le musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro* (Paris, CNRS, 1991). There is a great deal of literature on the avant-garde response; despite its much-criticized central thesis, there is important primary research in William Rubin ed., "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 volumes (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).
- 3 James Clifford, "Negrophilia," in Denis Hollier, *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 901. See also Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
- 4 Clifford's essay "On Ethnographic Surrealism" was first published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23-24 (October 1981), 539-64; it was reprinted in a revised form in his book *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117-51.
- 5 Clifford's contention that ethnography and Surrealism came together in the early 1930s to create a more contentious, reflexive and culturally grounded form of investigation had an obvious attraction for cultural commentators in the 1980s, who were looking for something similar in Postmodernism. More skeptical readers, usually coming from an ethnographic direction, doubted that any such coming together had actually happened. There is a thorough critical examination of these debates in Michael Richardson, "An Encounter of Wise Men and Cyclops Women," *Critique of Anthropology*, 13:1 (1993): 57-75. More recent studies include Julia Kelly, *Art, ethnography and the life of objects: Paris, c. 1925-35* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), and Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- 6 On *Documents*, see Dawn Ades and Simon Baker eds., *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents* (London: Hayward Gallery / Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006).
- 7 Michel Leiris, "L'oeil de l'ethnographie: A Propos de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti," *Documents*, 2: 7 (1930): 404-14.
- 8 For an informative biography of Griaule and a selection of his photographs, see Isabelle Fiemeyer, *Marcel Griaule: citoyen dogon* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2004).
- 9 In Leiris' writings of the time, including his *Cahiers d'Art* essay, Deborah Lifchitz is called "Lifszyc." Of Ukrainian origin, she seems to have changed the spelling of her name during the 1930s.
- 10 Walter E. A. van Beek (text) and Stephanie Hollyman (photographs), *Dogon: Africa's People of the Cliffs* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 150. This book contains much information about the life of the contemporary Dogon.
- 11 Michel Leiris, "Masques Dogon," *Minotaure*, 2 (1 June 1933): 45-51.
- 12 Griaule would compile the fullest account of the subject in his 1938 thesis, *Masques Dogon* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1938; republished in facsimile, 1994).
- 13 Denise Paulme, "The Paulme-Lifchitz Collection at the Musée de l'Homme," *African Arts*, 21:4 (August 1988): 46-49. The main illustrations for this article are the locks, which otherwise tend to be rather disregarded compared to the more spectacular carved figures. Paulme gives more information about the ethnographical aspects of her and Lifchitz's work in her earlier article, "Sanga 1935," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 17: 65 (1977): 7-12.
- 14 Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934; reprinted 1951 and 1984). Sally Price translates a number of the passages about the acquisition of objects in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 71-73. Leiris' openness here was seen as a betrayal by Griaule, and the friendship between the two men was irrevocably damaged as a result; see Sally Price and Jean Jamin, "A Conversation with Michel Leiris," *Current Anthropology* (October 1987): 171.
- 15 Paulme, "The Paulme-Lifchitz Collection at the Musée de l'Homme," 48.
- 16 The assertion that this figure predates the arrival of the Dogon on the Bandiagara escarpment has led some scholars to attribute it to the Tellem, a rather obscure group that seems to have inhabited the area before the Dogon; dendrochronological analysis now dates it between the late fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries.
- 17 Quoted in Susan Vogel and Francine N'Diaye, *African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme* (New York: Center for African Art / Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 122. The catalogue entry indicates that Jean Jamin had discovered the letter in the museum archives a year before in 1984.
- 18 Letter from Paulme and Lifchitz to Georges-Henri Rivière, 2 July 1935, reprinted in Denise Paulme, *Lettres de Sanga* (Paris: Fourbis, 1992), 85. The bulk of these letters are from Paulme to André Schaeffner, whom she would later marry, but the book also contains letters written jointly by Paulme and Lifchitz to Michel Leiris, previously published in *Gradhiva* 3 (1987).
- 19 Christian Zervos, "L'art nègre," and Georges Salles, "Réflexions sur l'art nègre," *Cahiers d'art*, 2:7-8 (1927): 229-46 and 247-58 respectively.
- 20 Kelly, *Art, ethnography and the life of objects*, Chapter 2: "Classifying: the 'irritating' object and its disciplines," 40-66.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 22 Wendy Grossman discovered that Man Ray had photographed previously at the Trocadéro, as documented by a letter between him and Rivière dated 18 July 1931; see Grossman, "Man Ray's Lost and Found Photographs: Arts of the Americas in Context," *Journal of Surrealism in the Americas*, 2:1 (2008): 126 <http://jsa.asu.edu/index.php/jsa>.
- 23 Denis Hollier, "The Use-Value of Documents," *Papers of Surrealism*, 7 (2007): 12 <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal7/index.htm>.
- 24 This outline is largely based on the chronology in the posthumous anthology of Leiris' writings on Africa, *Miroir de l'Afrique*, edited by Jean Jamin (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 1380-83.
- 25 Like other French anthropologists, Leiris made a distinction between "ethnographie" (field-work) and "ethnologie" (analysis undertaken at a distance).
- 26 Leiris would eventually publish his academic study of the Dogon's "secret language" in 1948; see Michel Leiris, *La Langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1948).
- 27 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 142-43.
- 28 Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939); trans. by Richard Howard as *Manhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 29 Clifford, "Negrophilia," 905.
- 30 The four volumes of *La Règle du jeu* were *I - Biffures* (1948); *II - Fourbis* (1955); *III - Fibrilles* (1966); and *IV - Frêle bruit* (1976). The first two were trans. by Lydia Davis as *Scratches and Scraps* (both Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). For a nuanced examination in English of Leiris' literary work, see Seán Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 31 Lydia Davies, "An Excerpt from *Fourbis*," *Yale French Studies*, 81 (1992): 5.
- 32 Man Ray's fabrication here would seem to be even more extreme. Wendy Grossman (in "Man Ray's Lost and Found Photographs," 129) states that a close examination of the print of the monkey mask reveals that "mask and background were photographed separately and combined to produce this enigmatic image."
- 33 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 34 Leiris' text was collected in the book of his essays *Zébrage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 57-61, assembled by Leiris but published after his death.
- 35 Marcel Griaule, *Art de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris: Les Editions du Chêne, 1947), 34; trans. as *Arts of the African Native* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1950).
- 36 One of Sougez's photographs - of the figure on horseback with its arms raised - would be reproduced five years later in André Malraux's massive volume *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (Paris: Galerie de la Pléiade, 1952), fig. 393. But there the photograph was massively enlarged and moreover "flipped" to better fit the design of the book. Sougez's authorship of the picture was also removed to the book's appendix and replaced by a general claim to copyright by Malraux himself.
- 37 In the late twenties, Sougez acted as mentor for Dora Maar in starting her photographic career; there are some details on his work in Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar with and without Picasso* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 24.
- 38 Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange, *African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), in the series "The Arts of Mankind" edited by André Malraux and André Parrot (originally published as *Afrique noire: la Création plastique* [Paris: Gallimard, 1967]). In Price and Jamin, "A Conversation with Michel Leiris," 172, Leiris agrees this is a "more orthodox" book than his others.

39 Leiris and Delange, *African Art*, 270. Curiously, this photograph has “removed” the iron hook that protrudes from the top of the mask. According to Griaule, *Art de l’Afrique Noire*, 19, this would have been a receptacle for sacrificial blood, though other studies give it a more purely symbolic value.

40 Paul Radin and James Sweeney, *African Folktales and Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), Plate 1, n.p.

41 Eliot Elisofon (photographs) and William Fagg (text), *The Sculpture of Africa* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), 37. The design is credited to Bernard Quint of *Life* magazine.

42 *Ibid.*, 30–31.

43 Several other books also feature a closeup of the face, including Leiris and Delange, *African Art*, 219.

44 The objects can be traced on the Musée du quai Branly website by scanning through the listings of the permanent collection using search words such as “Dogon” and “Paulme.” The initial address is: <http://www.quaibrnly.fr>.

45 There are exceptions such as the standing hermaphrodite figure, which floats in a grey void subtly darkened toward the top. This suggests a more careful control of the process of photographing it, perhaps because it is regarded as having a greater aesthetic value.

46 The image of the monkey mask on the website in early 2009 is more perplexing, having a grey background but black eyeholes! This may be due to a somewhat confused process of digital manipulation: when these images on the Branly website were first accessed by the author in spring 2008, the monkey mask also had a flat black background, so these black eyeholes may possibly be left over from that. (Since images on the site seem to be occasionally replaced, it is possible that this will have changed again by the time of this publication.)

47 For a study of the International Exhibition and the museums opened at that time, see James D. Herbert, *Paris 1937: Worlds on Exhibition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

48 Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 86. Leiris confirms this in Price and Jamin, “A Conversation with Michel Leiris,” 164.

49 To be fair, this lack of change was most apparent in the African displays; other parts of the museum showed signs of more recent reinvigoration.

50 Christian Boltanski, quoted in Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 32; his comments are accompanied by a photograph of the vitrines.

51 The essay “Phantom Africa: Photography between Surrealism and Ethnography” was first published in *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 147 (1997): 635–55. Reprinted as “Phantom Africa: A Surrealist Ethnography,” in Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2002), 188–204.

52 This is how she is described on the title page of her book *African Sculpture* (London: Paul Elek, 1962, trans. from *Les Sculptures de l’Afrique Noire*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), where she gives an account of Dogon sculpture on pages 52–57.

53 On this aspect of Rouch’s work, see Jeanette DeBouzek, “The ‘Ethnographic Surrealism’ of Jean Rouch,” *Visual Anthropology*, 2: 3/4 (1989): 301–17.

54 This film is available on a double DVD, together with a documentary on *Le Musée du quai Branly*, directed by Seligmann, Annie Chevally and Pierre-André Boutang, produced by ARTE France, 2007.

55 The story of the development of these new spaces for the showing of non-Western art in Paris can barely be sketched here; its full complexity is revealed with wit and political acuity by Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac’s Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

56 Perhaps these had been chosen because they most nearly fit the definition of “art” rather than “artifact.” None of the door locks seem to be on display. They are presumably now all stored with the majority of the collection below the museum (and, a little worryingly, below the level of the Seine).

57 Jean Nouvel, statement in the Quai Branly’s press kit, quoted by James Clifford, “Quai Branly in Process,” *October*, 120 (Spring 2007): 4.

58 See for example, the bracingly sharp review by Michael Kimmelman, “A Heart of Darkness in the City of Light,” *New York Times*, 2 July 2006. <http://travel.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/arts/design/02kimm.html>.

59 In 1931, a group of Dogon musicians and dancers travelled to Paris to perform at the Colonial Exposition and their costumes were subsequently acquired for the museum. Tamara Levitz’s essay “The Aestheticization of Ethnicity: Imagining the Dogon at the Musée du quai Branly,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 89:1 (Winter 2006): 600–42, traces the fascinating story of one of the masks bought in 1931—a “rabbit” mask now on display in the Musée du quai Branly.

60 Susan Vogel, “Introduction,” *ART / artifact* (New York: the Center for African Arts / Munich: Prestel, 1988), 11. This catalogue is an important contribution to the “art/artifact” debate; it also contains an essay by Arthur Danto that compares this debate to the status of the “readymade” in modern Western art.