

Seeing Africa Through African Eyes

By CAROL SQUIERS

THE VIEW OF Africa in the West is one of picturesque extremes, part National Geographic essay, part special bulletin from CNN. On the one hand, it's a dream of exotic locales and colorful native people. On the other, it's a nightmare of famine and war. Images of ordinary modern urban Africans don't fit into either of these formulations.

But such images exist, taken mostly by African photographers rather than by outsiders working for the international media. The way Africans picture themselves is quite different from what viewers in the West are used to seeing.

Just how different is explored in a new exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The show, "In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present," which opened Friday and runs through September, contains 139 images by 30 photographers from 15 countries. The photographers, whose work is being shown together for the first time anywhere, were all born in Africa, and most are unfamiliar to American audiences.

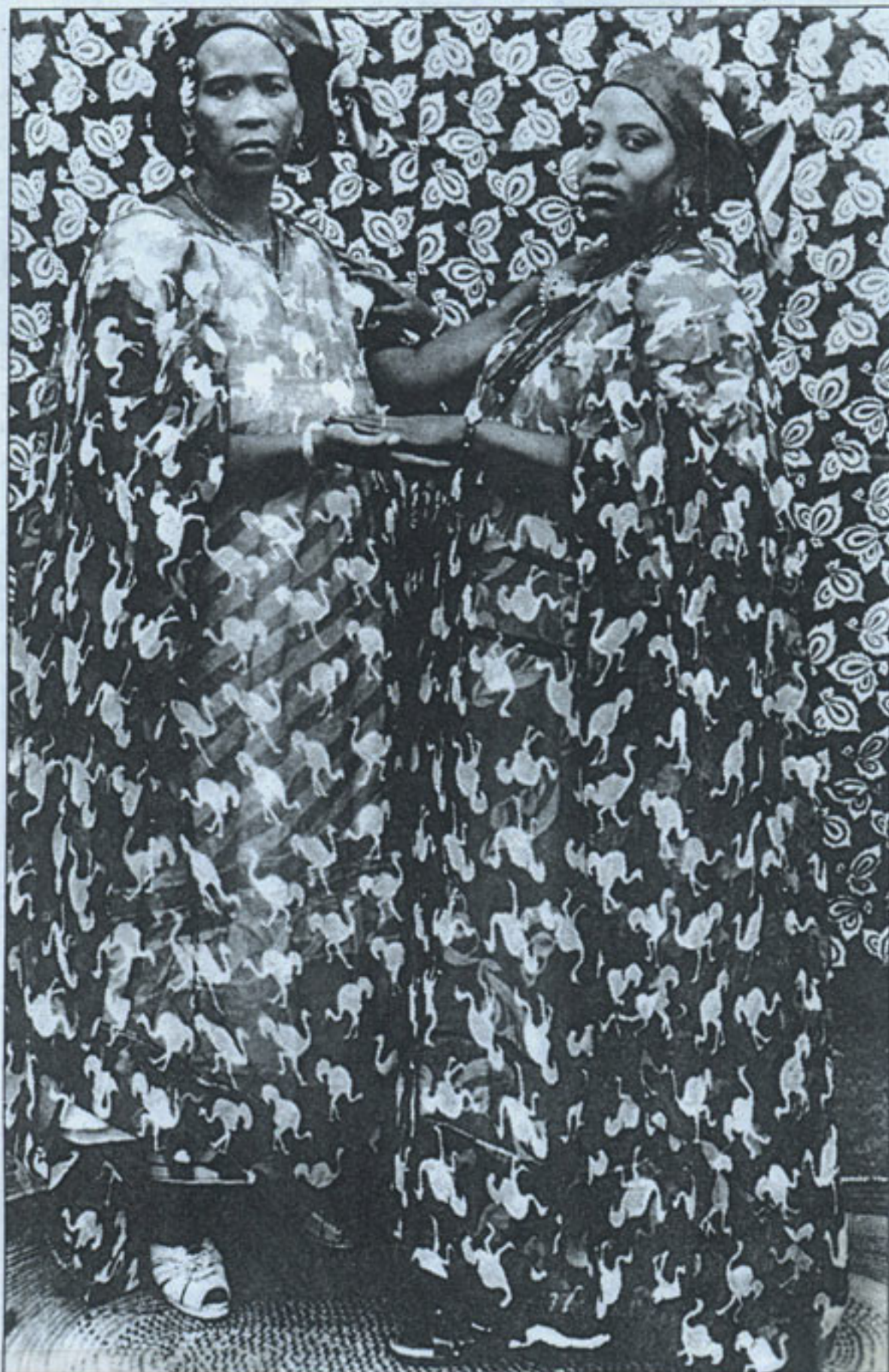
The exhibition presents a heterogeneous array of photographs, including formal portraits from Senegal, candid shots of prostitutes in Mozambique and entertainers in South Africa, conceptual portraits made in London, and images of graffiti in a notorious Guinea jail. An illustrated catalogue with three scholarly essays and artists' biographies helps put the disparate images into context.

The photography show accompanies "Africa: The Art of a Continent," a large historical exhibition of African art organized by the Royal Academy of Arts in association with the Guggenheim and already displayed in London.

Like the larger show, which opens on June 7, the photography exhibition is immensely ambitious, striving to take in an entire continent. Yet it doesn't aim to be a full historical survey. Instead, it is a compilation only of images made in the last 50-odd years and wrestled together in less than one year by Clare Bell, an assistant curator at the Guggenheim, and three freelance curators: Okwui Enwezor, editor in chief of *Nka*, *Journal of Contemporary African Art*; Danielle Tilkin, project coordinator, and Octavio Zaya, co-curator for "Black Looks/White Myths," the Spanish contribution to the first Johannesburg Biennial in 1995. None of them are photography specialists, but the three independent curators know modern African art.

The organizers decided to limit the show to a period when "Africans specifically began to define their own self-image," said Mr. Enwezor, who was born in Nigeria and lives in New York.

The curators set out to look for visual evidence of Africa's emerging post-colonial



"Untitled," above, taken around 1959 by Seydou Keita, and "Untitled," above right, a self-portrait by Samuel Fosso, 1977, on view at the Guggenheim—Emerging African identity.

identity. In the course of their research, they gained access to picture collections in Africa, France, England and Switzerland. They found mostly studio portraiture, documentary photography and photojournalism, along with some post-modern, conceptual and landscape works. The result is a mixed bag of black-and-white and color images that range from 5-inch-by-3-inch black-and-white portraits from the 1940's to 7-foot-by-6-foot color prints made this year.

Cameras were first taken to Africa by missionaries, explorers and ethnographers in the mid-19th century, and the pictures they brought back — strange, titillating and quasi-scientific to Western eyes — became much in demand, creating a boom industry in images of Africans.

Africans themselves began using cameras soon after the machines arrived on the continent. Studio portraiture became popular in countries like Senegal, Mali and Nigeria, so the curators began by looking at portraiture, starting with the work of Seydou Keita, a celebrated figure in Africa and Europe who is having his first American retrospective at the National Museum of

African Art in Washington.

Mr. Keita, who is 73 years old, had a studio in Bamako, French Sudan (now Mali) from 1949 until 1977. His clients included civil servants, merchants, and his own family and friends. Like all the best photographic portraits, his are deceptively simple: people sitting or standing in front of plain cloth backdrops. Mr. Keita's intricate arrangements of line, form and pattern show his keen involvement with esthetics.

HIS SUBJECTS OFTEN POSED carefully in traditional dress, confronting the camera with a sober dignity that is consonant with the African preference for emphasizing the ideal in portraits rather than the individual. Yet some struck the kinds of poses seen in Western magazines, and others also chose Western dress, a clear yet risky statement, especially in the 1950's, about the political changes occurring as Mali made its way toward independence.

"Any woman who is wearing Western dress in this period is seen to be more progressive," Mr. Enwezor said. "Women



The camera, so often turned against them, is a powerful weapon in the fight for cultural autonomy.

didn't make that transition into Western dress because of social pressure." This sense of cultural transformation, of old Africa versus new, is a theme that runs through the exhibition.

Africa's modernization was also being recorded by photojournalists, especially those who worked for a magazine called *Drum*, the continent's version of *Life* magazine, created for a black audience. Founded in 1951 in South Africa by Jim Bailey, a white Englishman, *Drum* trained black reporters and photographers first in South Africa and then for editions in East Africa, Central Africa, Nigeria and Ghana.

"*Drum* was the only mouthpiece for the underdog in this country," said Peter Magubane, one of South Africa's most esteemed photojournalists. "How prisoners were treated, the Morality Act, pass laws, child labor, farm labor — everything that was apartheid."

The curators decided to bypass most of those topics as stereotypical. Instead they represent the magazine with shots showing the texture of daily life — touring politicians, a formal party, a marriage ceremony, the building of a new dam. Mr. Magubane worked for *Drum*, which is still published, in the 1950's and 60's and is famous for his pictures of black children and anti-apartheid rebellion.

"I did everything from guys playing to hard politics," said Mr. Magubane, who has a group of photographs in the show, among them pictures of young Africans jiggerbugging and a women's protest march.

To represent the 1970's, the curators again turned to more personal work, finding evidence of Africa's continuing transfor-

mation in the way the portrait tradition was expanded and redefined by younger African artists. Among the most adventurous is 32-year-old Samuel Fosso, who lives in the Central African Republic. In the late 1970's, when he was in his mid-teens, he began a series of saucy self-portraits: he posed in a variety of costumes and roles, like those of a dandy or a playboy, paralleling Cindy Sherman's photographic masquerades from about the same time.

The work of the younger African photographers in particular resonate with a sense not just of cultural transformation but of cultural and even physical dislocation.

ABOUT ONE QUARTER OF THE works in the exhibition are from the 1980's and 90's and by younger artists, many of whom now live in the West. Much of their work tries to express what it means to be an African in exile. One of them is Ike Ude, a 32-year-old Nigerian who has lived in New York for 15 years. His large installation piece, built for the occasion, seems to sum up some of the issues raised in the show about the power of photographic imagery to depict as well as define its subjects. The piece is a 7-foot-by-6-foot enclosure called "Uses of Evidence." On its interior hang images from family albums and archives; mounted on the exterior is a collage of magazine pictures of exotic "natives" and wild animals.

"The inside is the way I see Nigerian society rather than the way a tourist sees it," Mr. Ude said. The outside, Mr. Enwezor said, "is how we normally encounter Africa in the media."

"A gorilla is much more likely to occupy the cover of *Time* as a subject of Africa than an actual person," he added.

This exhibition makes clear that a half century after Africa began its quest for political independence, its artists are still fighting for cultural autonomy. One of their most powerful weapons is photography, which has so often been turned against them. It has enabled them to reject the West's photographic distortions of Africa while engaging their own cultural traditions to create images of a complex continent still undergoing radical change. □