

MAN RAY
LIBERATING PHOTOGRAPHY
29.03 – 04.08.2024

Few names in the history of photography are as illustrious as that of Man Ray, born Emmanuel Radnitzsky (1890-1976) in the United States. Studio portraitist, fashion photographer and experimental artist, he explored the many potentialities of photography at a time when the medium was asserting itself as the very expression of modernity. Mingling with the Paris art scene of the early 20th century, and a close friend of Marcel Duchamp and André Breton, he was one of the few photographers to be mentioned among the Dada artists and Surrealists.

When Man Ray decided to become a professional photographer, it was primarily because he saw it as a way to earn a living. His studio rapidly became a gathering place for the entire Parisian art scene of its day: Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Robert Delaunay, Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst, among others. His work includes portraits of the artists, writers and intellectuals in his circle, including Coco Chanel, Paul Éluard, James Joyce, Elsa Schiaparelli, Igor Stravinsky and Virginia Woolf. Not just content to have celebrities pose in his studio, he tried his hand at staging and photographing his female models – Lee Miller, Kiki de Montparnasse and Meret Oppenheim – in a variety of different settings. Following his encounter with the famous fashion designer Paul Poiret, Man Ray also worked as a fashion photographer for French and American Vogue, as well as for Harper's Bazaar.

Man Ray, whose career spanned more than 60 years, saw the medium as a creative tool that would allow him to go beyond the representation of reality. While always exploring abstraction, he also made relatively traditional portraits of the artists who surrounded him – a circle to which he was introduced by Marcel Duchamp just after he arrived in Paris. He is the creator of 'Violon d'Ingres' [Ingres's Violin] – the iconic photograph taken in 1924 that can be found in every art history book published in the 20th century. Man Ray remains an important name in the worlds of art, fashion and pop culture, with so many artists referring to the photographs of this iconic figure of modern art.

Curated from a private collection, the exhibition explores the artist's extensive social contacts while presenting some of his most iconic works.

1. PROOF AND PRINT, A QUESTION OF VOCABULARY

The question of Man Ray's prints has remained a source of fascination throughout the history of photography. His work went through a series of successive generations of prints over the course of the 20th century, starting with prints made shortly after the photograph was taken: contact prints and more refined prints that highlight his artistic choices. From the 1950s onwards, Man Ray reinterpreted certain photographs to produce new prints, sometimes changing the framing. He also enlisted the services of various photographic laboratories such as Picto, and, in particular, the renowned printer Pierre Gassman, whose lab produced many posthumous prints.

The prolific nature of Man Ray's work is reflected by some 12,000 negatives from his studio archive that were added to the collections of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The experimental and pioneering nature of Man Ray's work raises a number of particular questions, especially in relation to the photograms that he produced and reproduced, contradicting their primary characteristics as unique works. All these elements make it more difficult to determine the artist's intention as well as the aesthetic and historical value of his works, compared to other, more linear authors.

The way we refer to Man Ray's photographs is therefore important, and the notions of proof, print and original are paramount.

Proof

A term from the world of printmaking and sculpture, it was adopted at the birth of photography by François Arago in his 1839 lecture. It designates the object obtained from a matrix, in photography, from a negative.

Original proof

Any copy made under the control of the artist or the holders of his or her moral rights and whose history can be traced. In the absence of this relationship, the object is considered a reproduction and not an original work.

Contact print

A print obtained by placing the negative directly on photosensitive paper. It is generally for the photographer's use only and is used as a reference for an archiving system and as a tool to read newly printed photographs for the first time. A distinction must be made between contact prints, which are the same size as the negative and on which Man Ray generally cropped his photographs, and contact sheets, which allow the viewer to see the entire photographic film.

Vintage print

A print made during the period when the photograph was taken, and whose formal characteristics (format, tonality, contrast, inscriptions) reflect the

artist's intention. Sometimes, authors – as in the case of Man Ray – revisit their archives and produce new prints from an old negative, years after it was produced. This is known as a **late print**, or even a **posthumous print** when made by the artist's beneficiaries after his or her death. All the posthumous prints in this exhibition are by Pierre Gassman.

Countertype

Countertype is obtained by re-photographing a photographic image. Man Ray often countertyped his original photograms for distribution and even sale.

2. STUDIO

'To be totally liberated from painting and its aesthetic implications' was the first avowed aim of Man Ray, who began his career as a painter. Photography was one of the major breakthroughs of modern art and led to a rethinking of representation. In the 1920s and 30s, the photographic medium came to the forefront of the avant-garde movement, and Man Ray soon made a name for himself with his virtuosity. His photographs were not taken fleetingly, but rather meticulously produced in the studio. Unlike some photographers who see the street as a privileged playground, Man Ray composed and staged his photographs. The studio provided him with a space in which to explore his imagination.

3. ELITE

From the moment he arrived in Paris in the summer of 1921, Man Ray was part of the Parisian intelligentsia of the Roaring Twenties. Even before opening his studio in Montparnasse in 1922, he worked from his hotel room. His reputation as a photographer grew rapidly. He photographed Marcel Duchamp, whom he had met in New York in 1915, and who introduced him to the Parisian artistic elite and to many other painters such as Robert Delaunay, Georges Braque, Alberto Giacometti and Pablo Picasso. He met Jean Cocteau, who was himself a fixture of the Parisian art scene, as well as André Breton, Francis Picabia, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Henri Matisse and Max Ernst, plus many intellectual figures of his day, including Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Igor Stravinsky, Ernest Hemingway, Arnold Schönberg and James Joyce.

4. MUSES

Through photography, a medium with multiple possibilities, the Surrealists sought not to reproduce reality, but to sublimate it. Love, as seen primarily by men, was an example of this idea of transformation. An essential notion for Luis Buñuel and Paul Éluard, love was a means of escaping reality and evoking the extraordinary. Femininity, sexuality and the fine line between dream and reality were dominant themes in Man Ray's work when he was exploring the female nude, having those he considered to be his muses pose for his camera. He photographed Lee Miller, a fellow New Yorker who had begun a career as a model but wanted to move to the other side of the camera; Alice Prin, known as Kiki de Montparnasse, the woman with the f-holes of a violin on her back, dancer, singer, actress and painter; and the Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim, who was close to the Surrealist scene before pursuing an independent career as an artist, and with whom he also had a professional and romantic relationship. In the late 1930s, Man Ray had his partner, Adrienne Fidelin, known as Ady, a dancer from Guadeloupe, pose for him.

5. EXPERIMENTATIONS

Man Ray also experimented in the darkroom, transforming the photographic medium into a powerful tool of artistic expression, even going so far as to do away with the camera when, in 1921-1922, he began creating photograms, which he coined 'rayographs' after himself. He described this darkroom work as a way of freeing himself from painting, so convinced was he of the visual power of his experiments. By placing objects directly onto photosensitive paper, he could play with shadows and light, fascinated by the abstractions created by this technique and that produced a unique work of art. He experimented with other techniques in the 1930s: solarization, double exposures and different forms of distortion.

6. CINEMA

For the Surrealists, cinema, an art form that had emerged 20 years earlier, represented a means of transcending reality. Silent, dreamlike and highly suggestive, it resisted interpretation. In the 1920s, Man Ray tried his hand at the moving image, making four films. The rhythm and freedom offered by cinema complemented his photographic production, in which he saw a close relationship between film and poetry. For this reason, he gave his film *Emak Bakia* (1926) the subheading of 'cinépoème'.

TEXTS: Nathalie Herschdorfer, Sarah Bourget and Wendy A. Grossman

ENGLISH TRANSLATION: Gail Wagman

PROOFREADING: Hannah Pröbsting