

## #7 June 2013 Cameraderie Man Ray (1890-1976)

Last time, I mentioned that Man Ray's 1926 photograph, *Noire et Blanche*, was included in the United States Postal Service Commemorative Stamp set, *Modern Art in America 1913-1931*. So let's look at Man Ray.

The Wikipedia article ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man\\_Ray](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man_Ray)) gives the following biographical sketch:

“Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky, August 27, 1890 – November 18, 1976) was an American modernist artist who spent most of his career in Paris, France. He was a significant contributor to the Dada and Surrealist movements, although his ties to each were informal. He produced major works in a variety of media but considered himself a painter above all. He was best known in the art world for his avant-garde photography, and he was a renowned fashion and portrait photographer. Ray is also noted for his work with photograms, which he called "rayographs" in reference to himself.”

Quite a number of photographers were also artists, and I will discuss them as a group in a future article. Since Man Ray worked in multiple media, I will give a little information about his other media, and then concentrate on his photography.

Here is the link to Man Ray works at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York: [http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist\\_id=3716](http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=3716). The first five are paintings, sampling his range. But note as you scroll to the right that fully twelve items are his “rayographs.” A few of his sculptures are also included. And here is a link to some of his films that you can view online, which were highly experimental, to say the least. I have not viewed them, but take a look if you are interested: <http://www.ubu.com/film/ray.html>.

Now to the photography. Man Ray has said, “I do not photograph nature. I photograph my visions.” He is more concerned with the message of the image than with the formal image itself. Therefore, although his images are quite good, it's what they *say* that we should pay attention to.

Here is a website that features on one page all the Man Ray images that I want to discuss: <http://www.atgetphotography.com/The-Photographers/Man-Ray.html>.

First, you can find *Noire et Blanche* there, the fourth image. (French for *Black and White*). The image shows Man Ray's companion of the 1920s, professional model Kiki de Montparnasse, posing with an African mask. Her face is horizontal—the mask is vertical. She is white—the mask is black. There is no background, no other prop. The formal composition comprises the two facial ovals. But, below the table edge, she is presumably naked. A world of suggestion is present about sex, race, and Franco-African colonialism. In my interpretation, reference is also being made to Picasso's use of African mask portrait faces in his breakthrough 1907 painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les\\_Femmes\\_d'Alger\\_\(O.\\_J.\\_R.\\_M.\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Femmes_d'Alger_(O._J._R._M.))). Again we see the interaction of painting and photography. Although *Noire et Blanche* is well-composed, Man Ray is showing us ideas more than an image, as is his stated intention for his photography.

Next, have a look on the same web page at *The Kiss*, a “rayograph.” No camera, no lens, just the shadows of object placed between the light and photo paper. He did a considerable amount of work in this medium, naming it after himself, and the name sticks to this day as a synonym for “photogram.” Again, we encounter the pure suggestion of an idea rather than a precise image. This particular image is built up from multiple exposures, giving the impression that we are looking at the interior of the two lovers kissing, seeing multiple aspects of their faces, hands, and passionate natures. Commentary on this image states that it is Man Ray himself and Kiki de Montparnasse as the lovers kissing.

Finally, look at *Le Violin d’Ingres* (Ingres’ Violin), the first image on the same web page. This is simultaneously a trompe l’oeil image and a word-play, quite a feat for a single image. The word-play is on the title, *Le Violin d’Ingres*, understood to mean a hobby or secondary skill to the primary skill of the person. In Ingres’ case, he was a great painter, but he loved to play violin, variously reported as mediocre to well. His hobby gave its name to the French expression. The trompe l’oeil comes in where Man Ray photographed Kiki de Montparnasse posing in an Ingres-esque style. He then drew violin f-holes on a print and re-photographed the print to make the finished image. Now we have a woman’s curves coinciding with the curves of a violin. There is yet another layer to this. There is the clear suggestion in the image that Kiki de Montparnasse is Man Ray’s *Violin d’Ingres*, that is, *his hobby*, or in admittedly sexist terms, *his plaything*. This last word-play on “play” (here is yet *another* layer: a “play” on “play”) may be a stretch (it also may work in French with *jouer* (verb) or *jouet* (noun) but I am not fluent and cannot be sure).

The more you look at Man Ray’s photographs, the deeper they go. I can’t think of any photographer, except possibly Salvador Dali (future article), who has put this many layers of meaning into all their images. In this sense, they are like written fiction, meriting layer after layer of analysis. They are well worth pondering.