

“This wind of change blowing through Africa . . . is no ordinary wind,” wrote Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1963. “It is a raging hurricane against which the old order cannot stand.” In the 1960s, independence movements swept across the African continent, resulting in the disintegration of colonial territories. These transformative struggles coincided with an exhilarating campaign for civil rights in the United States, forging a transatlantic call-and-response that established “Africa” as a political idea.

Ideas of Africa: Portraiture and Political Imagination examines the role of portrait photography within this emerging sense of Pan-Africanism. It unites portraits by mid-century photographers from across West and Central Africa and works by contemporary artists of African descent, illuminating different modes of image-making and forms of transnational solidarity. As the art historian Kobena Mercer has argued, “‘Africa’ has never been a static entity, confined to the boundaries of geography, but has always had a diasporic dimension.” Embedded within the exhibition is a reading room featuring a selection of photobooks, alongside archival ephemera from the Paris-based collective Air Afrique. Following in the wake of the eponymous international airline, the group has continued the circulation of Pan-African culture and ideas into the present day.

Conceptually influenced by the late philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe’s book *The Idea of Africa* (1994), in which he exposes Western views of Africa as politicized constructions, this exhibition demonstrates how African photographers grappled with Africa as a political idea in their own ways. Presenting subjects for whom the personal was undeniably political, their images assert photography’s unique potential to creatively reflect our surroundings and beckon new worlds. At a time when profound shifts are once again transforming the global geopolitical order, *Ideas of Africa* attests to the enduring relevance of these themes.

Organized by Oluremi C. Onabanjo, The Peter Schub Curator, with the assistance of Chiara M. Mannarino, Curatorial Assistant, The Robert B. Menschel Department of Photography.

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We invite you to explore the accompanying publication, *Ideas of Africa: Portraiture and Political Imagination*, available in the Museum Store.

What goes into the making of a photographic portrait? Hear from artists and writers on the creative and political potential of an image.



For related content, programs, and audio, visit moma.org/ideas-of-africa.

Keïta opened his first photography studio in Bamako, French Sudan (present-day Mali), in 1948. He first used a Kodak Brownie Flash but later switched to a large-format camera, often steadying it on a tripod. With this approach, he was able to attain an exceptional degree of resolution, which allowed him to make impeccably detailed prints without an enlarger. In one such composition, a group photograph in front of a Peugeot, his camera is as sensitive to the creases in the subjects' garments as it is to the sunlight playing across their faces. The photographer himself is just visible in the reflection on the car's fender, testifying to the dialogue involved in the making of a portrait.

In 1954 Depara established his studio in Leopoldville (present-day Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo), a city that boasted a thriving music scene of some three hundred clubs. Depara quickly became a devoted chronicler of Congolese nightlife. His entrancing images present young, self-possessed women, contemplative musicians, and dynamic, aspiring intellectuals. The writer Yasmina Price has noted that Depara's portraits "synthesized how political currents registered on the lived scale of people off the clock—not just from their daytime obligations but also from official timelines."

For Sidibé, the roving “eye of Bamako,” the city was his studio. Active during the 1960s and ’70s, Sidibé shot on 35mm film and often printed proofs of the exposures he took at weekend parties. He arranged them sequentially on pastel cardstock and displayed them at his studio so that clients might purchase souvenirs of their exploits. Sidibé’s images of youth culture emphatically pushed back against Mali’s normative state attitudes and expectations of decorum. Reveling in effusive gestures and strong poses, he deftly photographed a community full of elegance, style, and sensational flair that staked its claim on a connection to a global African Diaspora.

In her practice, Akunyili Crosby meditates on familial life within a transcultural context. Her large-scale compositions of everyday domestic scenes synthesize drawing, painting, printmaking, and photography. *And We Begin to Let Go* depicts the artist and her husband, who leans over her shoulder. To make it, Akunyili Crosby drew from Nigerian print media publications and her family’s photographic archive. She united these images’ varied photographic textures through the same formal treatment: acetone transfer, a printmaking technique through which a printed image is transferred onto another surface using an acetone solvent. Images of smiling faces, elaborate coifs, and patterned clothing suffuse the picture plane, accruing on the surfaces this marital encounter.

Brathwaite, for whom photography functioned at the nexus of Black artistic, political, and cultural expression, rhythmically documented jazz scenes in Harlem and the Bronx. In 1956 he cofounded the African Jazz-Art Society and Studios (AJASS) in the South Bronx, where he made structured portraits of the Grandassa Models, a group of women who were part of the Black Is Beautiful movement of the 1960s and '70s. “Black Is Beautiful was my directive . . . It was a time when people were protesting injustices related to race, class, and human rights around the globe,” Brathwaite said. “I focused on perfecting my craft so that I could use my gift to inspire thought, relay ideas, and tell stories of our struggle, our work, our liberation. . . . Oppression still exists today, and we must keep fighting, keep on pushing until we are free.”

“Everyone chooses what they want in photography,” Sory once said. First opening his studio, Volta Photo, in Bobo-Dioulasso, Upper Volta (present-day Burkina Faso), in 1960, Sory organized *bals poussières* (or “dust balls,” named after the dirt clouds that dancers kicked up) in the fields of the nearby Kou Valley. The sound of his Multiblitz flash accompanied the percussion at parties, setting an effusive tone for his *reportage de nuit* (nighttime journalism). At Volta Photo, Sory’s portraits made possible a particular process of being and becoming for his sitters. He reflected the ideas that they wanted to communicate—whether to friends, lovers, strangers, or themselves.

In 1968 Ojeikere embarked on a monumental project to document the myriad hairstyles worn by women across a newly independent Nigeria. Over the next seven years, he amassed more than one thousand photographs. Together, these rigorously composed images form a portrait of a nation undergoing social and physical transformation—with feminine beauty standards providing the ultimate symbol. In *Brush Eko Bridge*, clean lines appear across a woman's carefully parted scalp, her hair threaded to sculptural effect. In profile her hairdo evokes the highways and architectural developments that were then populating the Lagos skyline.

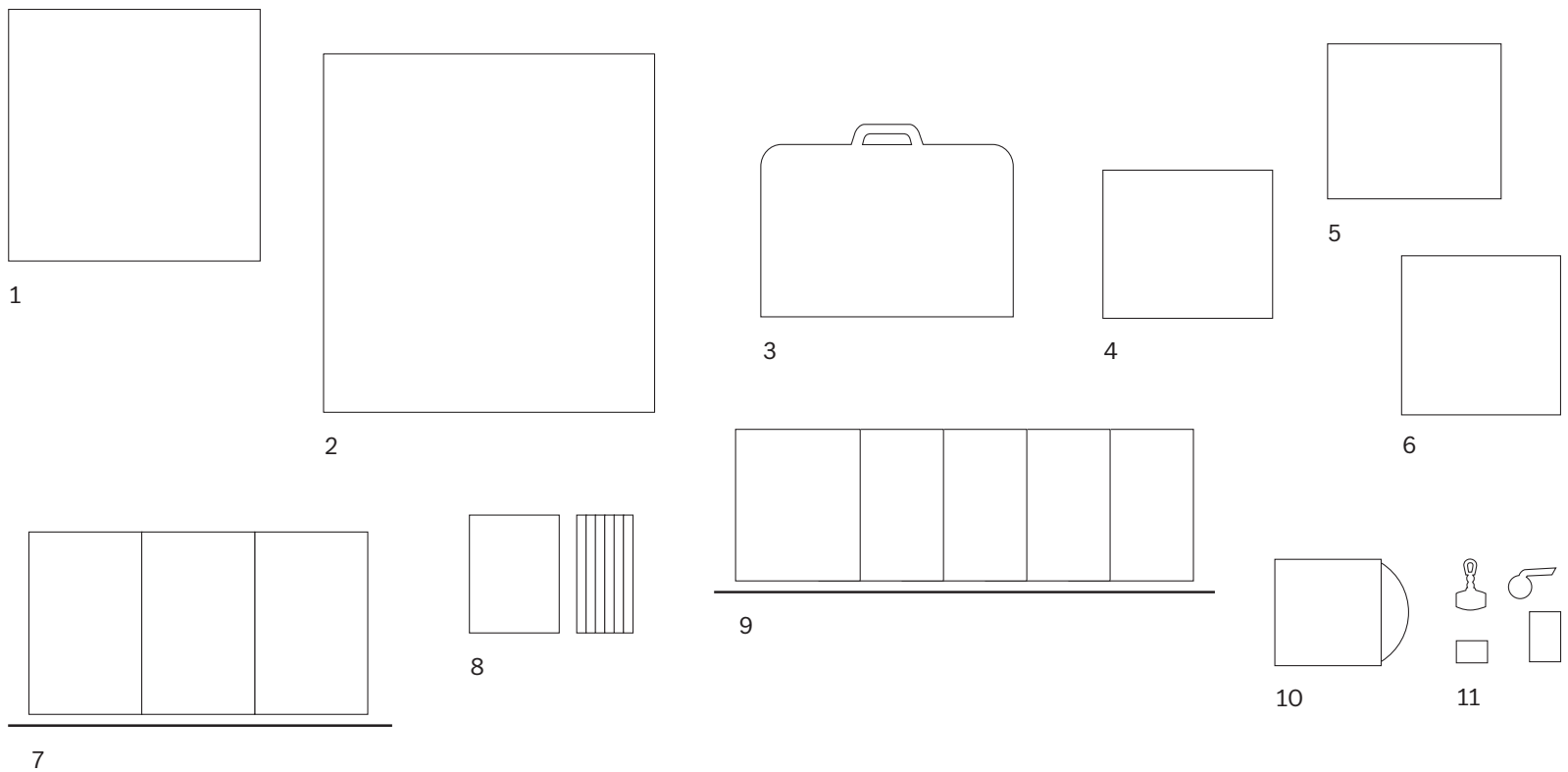
From 1961 to 2002, Air Afrique served as the official transnational carrier for francophone West and Central Africa, providing regular jet service throughout the continent and internationally. The airline was also deeply committed to the production of Pan-African arts and culture. It funded vinyl records, published books on African history, and produced the in-flight magazine *Balafon*, which reported on events across Africa and beyond. Twenty years after the airline shuttered, a Paris-based artist collective formed to revitalize the spirit of Air Afrique through design collaborations, film programs, and a magazine. Their collection of archival ephemera, on view here, comprises gifts and purchases from former Air Afrique staff.

Inspired by the international activities of Air Afrique, both past and present, this reading table presents issues of the airline’s in-flight magazine, *Balafon*, one of which features a portrait of the Malian photographer Malick Sidibé on its cover. This table also includes a selection of photobooks, catalogues, and scholarly publications, celebrating the circulation of images and ideas in Africa during the decolonial era. These books are additionally available to browse within the gallery, offering further directions for reading, thinking, dreaming, and imagining.

Decades after nightlife and youth culture first attracted the attention of African photographers at mid-century, their photographs served as source material for Janet Jackson’s 1997 song “Got ’Til It’s Gone.” The lively mid-tempo track samples folk singer Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi” (1970) and features syncopated refrains from the rapper Q-Tip. A Pan-African photographic feast for the eyes, the music video is filled with scenes directly referencing pictures by Seydou Keïta, Samuel Fosso, and Malick Sidibé as it follows elegant partygoers moving seamlessly between the street, barbershop, studio, and dancefloor. However, its celebratory nostalgia is tempered by the setting—apartheid-era South Africa—highlighting the political stakes of African self-determination.

Rosi has said, “I’m not just performing, but reflecting on history.” Through photographic self-portraits, the artist examines personal, familial, and national narratives of migration, memory, and belonging. Deeply informed by the history of West African studio portraiture, Rosi’s images elegantly synthesize the formal strategies of mid-century African photographers, including many of those represented in this exhibition. Rosi often reenacts moments from her family’s past. *Disintegrated Waiting*, for instance, recalls when her mother first arrived in Italy from Togo. “She once said, ‘I used to be integrated, now I’m disintegrated,’” the artist shared. “To me this phrase is . . . an expression of the experience of diaspora.”

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- 1 **Malick Sidibé**
Msselle Kadiatou Touré avec mes verres fumés
 (Miss Kadiatou Touré with My Dark Glasses) 1963
 Gelatin silver print

The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection

- 2 **Malick Sidibé**
Boxeur (Boxer) 1966
 Gelatin silver print

The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection

- 3 **Air Afrique**
 Air Afrique suitcase 1970s

- 4 **Jean Depara**
 Untitled c. 1960
 Gelatin silver print

The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection

- 5 **Jean Depara**
 Untitled c. 1960
 Gelatin silver print

The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection

- 6 **Sanlé Sory**
 Untitled 1970–85
 Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
 Committee on Photography Fund

- 7 **Air Afrique**
La mémoire de l'Afrique (Memory of Africa) 1970
 Box set of four books

- 8 **Air Afrique**
Histoire générale de l'Afrique (General History
 of Africa) 1970
 Double box set of twelve books

- 9 Selected issues of **Balafon**, nos. 4–138
 1965–98
 Publisher: Air Afrique

- 10 **Air Afrique**
 Untitled 1969
 45 RPM record released on Air Afrique's Djima
 Records label

- 11 **Air Afrique**

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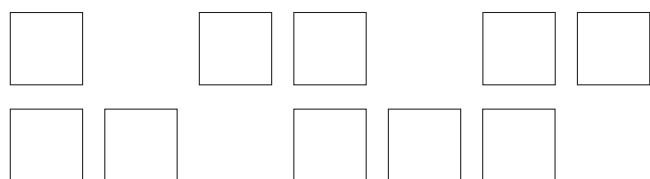
Key ring 1966

Pilot's pin 1965

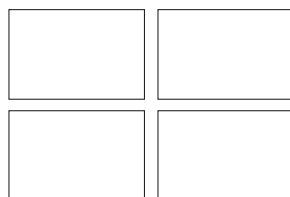
Playing cards 1980

Matchbox 1970s

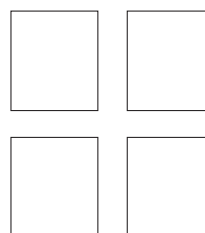
All Air Afrique materials Air Afrique Collective,
 courtesy Lamine Diaoune, Ahmadou-Bamba
 Thiam, Djiby Kébé, and Jeremy Konko



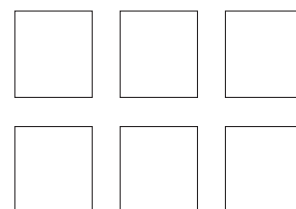
1



2



3



4

- 1 **Sanlé Sory**
Ten untitled works 1970–85
Gelatin silver prints

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Photography Fund

- 2 **Malick Sidibé**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Nuit du 10 octobre 1970 (Night of October 10, 1970) October 10, 1970
Les caïds (Big Shots) July 19, 1970
Untitled July 28, 1973
Tiep mariage (Wedding Tiep) November 5, 1967

Gelatin silver prints mounted on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Judith and Wm. Brian Little Fund

- 3 **Seydou Keïta**
Four untitled works 1952–56
Gelatin silver prints

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection. Gift of Jean Pigozzi

- 4 **Felix Akinniran Olunloyo**
Six untitled works c. 1950–70
Gelatin silver prints

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection. Gift of Jean Pigozzi