Man Ray’s *Noire et blanche*: Surrealism, Fashion, and Other(s)

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Bio:

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Abstract:

Man Ray's photographic series, *Noire et blanche*, 1926, consists of more than twenty photographs of a pale-faced, female model holding a darkly stained African mask. Most of the photographs draw our attention to similarities in the shape of the model's face and that of the mask, as well as contrasts between the model's paleness and the mask's darkness. Although the first photograph from the series was published in *Vogue* and *Variétés* during the 1920s, the series did not gain attention in the art world until the 1980s when scholarly and critical interest in primitive art redeveloped within the contexts of postmodernism and post-colonialism. My paper advances beyond the too often superficially noted formal similarities and contrasts between the representations of the woman and the mask to identify cultural connections between them involving sexual and racial "Otherness." Establishing the connections involves a consideration of why modern artists often used African art or the female figure in their work. Importantly, by analyzing how the photographs foster formal similarities rendering the model and mask alike, I am able to show how Man Ray commodified both the image of the modern woman and the image of African or "savage" to appeal to the fashion and fine art worlds.
Introduction

Man Ray's photographic series, *Noire et blanche*, 1926, consists of more than twenty photographs of a pale-faced, female model holding a darkly stained African mask. Most of the photographs draw our attention to similarity in the shape of the model's face and the shape of the mask, and contrast between the model's paleness and the mask's darkness. The first photograph from the series was published in *Vogue* magazine and *Variétés* magazine during the 1920s. However, the series did not gain attention in the art world until the 1980s, when scholarly and critical interest in primitive art redeveloped within the contexts of postmodernism and post-colonialism, for example, in the scholarship of Marianna Torgovnick.

My paper brings a focus on the connections between the two subjects represented in Man Ray’s series in relation to surrealism, their formal qualities, and their social and cultural statuses. It examines how the too often superficially noted formal similarities and contrasts between the representations of the woman and the mask reference cultural connections between them involving sexual and racial Otherness in the context of 1920s Paris. I also consider why early twentieth-century modern artists often used African art or the female figure in their work. Importantly, by analyzing how the photographs elicit formal similarities rendering the model and mask alike, I am able to suggest how Man Ray commodified both the image of the modern woman and the image of African or "savage" to appeal to the fashion and fine art worlds.

*Noire et blanche* Series

Man Ray’s series of photographs entitled *Noire et blanche* (1926) features two of the leading subjects of the early twentieth century: the image of the modern woman and the image of the “primitive,” represented here by a ceremonial mask originating from the Baule people of Africa. The woman in the photographs is Alice Prin, Man Ray’s mistress at the time who was
better known as Kiki of Montparnasse. The African mask relates to the “savage” or “primitive” man and art that many visual artists associated with modernism were depicting in their work, while Prin reminds us of the fabricated beauty of the modern woman whose looks were being used to sell a wide variety of consumer goods and also were featured in new forms of mass popular culture, such as film. Later in my paper, I suggest that visual correspondence between the images of Prin and the Baule mask conflate what each signified in discourses of modernism, resulting in the woman connoting primitiveness and the mask, style and eroticism.

In each print, the angle and position of Prin and the Baule mask varies. Some prints feature only Prin’s pale head and the Baule mask she holds upright with her left hand, while others show her from the waist up with her breasts exposed. In all of the photographs, Prin holds the mask close to her face and she and the mask directly face the viewer. Throughout the series, light is used to highlight the shape of Prin’s head or face and the mask’s contours while it also casts shadows in the foreground or background that add depth and intrigue to the composition. The quality of the prints also varies; some appear to have been produced from dirty or damaged negatives, while others look clear and unscratched.

Of the twenty-four prints, the one published in the May 1926 issue of Vogue has become the most recognizable of the series. It shows Prin resting her head on top of a table as she holds the African mask upright next to her face with her left hand. Originally entitled Visage de nacre et masque d’ébène (Mother of pearl face and ebony mask), in Vogue the photograph was reproduced with text describing the evolution of mankind through women. The text offers an interesting perspective on the “primitive savage” flourishing at the time:

Face of a woman, calm transparent egg straining to shake off the thick head of hair through which she remains bound to primitive nature. It is through women that the
evolution of species to a place of full mystery will be accomplished. Sometimes plaintive, she returns with a feeling of curiosity and dread to one of the stages through which she has passed, perhaps before becoming today the evolved white creature.\(^3\)

The text identifies key visual features: “face of a woman,” and references to which they give rise formally, “calm transparent egg,” that play upon longstanding associations of femininity with giving forth life. It thus implies that Prin is not Prin or Kiki but a symbol of woman, the source of humanity, who is fearful of relapsing into her “savage” past, invoked by the mask she holds next to her. That she holds the mask underscores her connection to it, even as the statement clarifies that the connection is one of evolution, including “stages through which she has passed” that ostensibly render her “the evolved white creature.” An inference is that along with development from “primitive nature” to “evolved…creature” is a transition from a “thick head of hair” and perhaps also from darkness to “white.”

In other words, the text accompanying the reproduction of Man Ray’s photograph in *Vogue* treats the Baule mask as a sign of mankind’s past in regard to which “woman” is a conduit through which all pass as she herself advances through stages involving a transformation to whiteness to become “the evolved white creature.” At the same time, one can understand the significance of the mask as personifying Andre Breton’s concept of the savagery of images – something raw and untainted by reason; similar attributes were then being attributed to the concept of the African “savage.”\(^4\) Although the conscious, the part of the mind governed by reason and here represented by Prin, and the unconscious, the part of the mind that is not governed by reason but emotion and desire, represented by the mask, are presented here by two separate figures, similarities in their appearance, connections between them based on Prin holding the mask near her, and narrative connections introduced by the text promote their
interaction. The theme of interaction between civilized or evolved white humans and the dark African mask, reason and desire, and consciousness and unconsciousness prevailed in Andre Breton’s vision of surrealism, a key vanguard modernist movement in which Man Ray participated.

Two years after its publication in Vogue the photograph was published in the two other Parisian art magazines: Art et Décoration, and Variétés, thus solidifying its existence in both the art and fashion worlds. It was in these magazines that the title the series received in Vogue was replaced by Noire et blanche. This new title, one could say, corresponds directly with the two most obvious formal qualities of the photographs: the color of Prin’s face and the color of the mask. Nevertheless, it is the formal qualities of Prin and the mask, such as the shape of Prin’s face and that of the mask, along with Man Ray’s modification of the photographs by drawing in or erasing some of Prin’s facial features that contribute to the sense of the Baule mask as Prin’s internalized self. The oval shape of Prin’s head is nearly identical to the shape of the Baule mask; the similarity in shape resulted from the artist’s meticulous modifications of her face in his photograph. Specifically, the aesthetic details of Prin’s face, such as the thickness of her eyebrows, her lips, her hair, and the shape of her face, have been retouched by Man Ray, with sections either drawn in or removed.5

As Wendy Grossman and Steven Manford have explained, Man Ray modified Prin’s make-up and slicked back hair “to create a more harmonious visual mate for the mask (the completion of a more distinct and seamless oval shape and elimination of visual distractions….)”.6  The most obvious dichotomies between the face of Prin and the mask are Prin’s paleness and the mask’s darkness, and Prin being animate versus the mask being inanimate. One can argue that Man Ray positioned the mask as a representation of a half of Prin,
and vice versa. In another photograph where Prin holds the mask upside down with its chin against her own, her torso visible, the sense of the mask being a shadow or reflection of hers is heightened. This, in turn, heightens the similitude between the two subjects and further cultivates extra-formal correspondences of similarity, a narrative of cause and effect, and a narrative of chronology with the mask signifying an earlier state of the woman and, conversely, the mask as an always apparent sign of her origins and perhaps a potential for devolving into a prior state.

Because of Man Ray’s association with surrealism which, as Jane Livingston explains, was an artistic movement interested in eliminating “dualistic perceptual redemptiveness, our conventional faith in separable conscious and unconscious minds,” one can appreciate Man Ray endeavoring to evoke as much similarity between Prin’s face and the mask as possible in order to visually conjure psychoanalytical rapport between the two. One represents the conscious and the other the unconscious, and, moreover, the identification oscillates between one as consciousness and the other as unconsciousness. Prin’s head rests against the table, her eyes closed as the Baule mask faces the viewer. Although its eyes are slits and indistinct due to the lighting, the viewer is left with a sense of the mask’s consciousness and awareness that contrasts that of Prin, who appears suspended in a state of reverie. The awareness of the mask suggests that this “primitive” part of Prin has, and always will be, an equal part of her existence, alert and active in her, despite its appearance in the photograph as a material artifact.

The series also contains negative prints, or tonal inversions of the black and white photographs, and one of these is of the aforementioned Vogue photograph. In this print, the mask and the head of Prin are rendered ghost-like because the unnatural illumination of the mask and Prin’s lips and hair create an eerie image of the mask and Prin’s face with their qualities reciprocated. In other words, Prin’s face appears black and her eyebrows and hair, white, while
the dark surface of the mask is visually flattened by a radiating white luminescence; it seems pushed further into the realm of the inanimate. The ephemeral nature of the photograph is increased by shadows that have become bright, halo-like objects, further forcing Prin’s face and the mask into an ethereal, unreal or dreamlike state. The ability to easily switch the formal qualities that make each of the subjects in the photograph so unique and beguiling, while still retaining their attractiveness to the viewer, suggests that the mask and Prin are more the same than different. This observation is important because it tells us that, instead of heightening formal differences between the mask and Prin, Man Ray has emphasized their many correspondences – formal, visual, and psychic.

The Theme of the “Other”

Another level of connection involves Prin and the mask each representing a type of figure having significance for the Parisian avant-garde. Specifically, these are the female nude and l’art nègre – or African art – or, more likely, the sexual and racial Other, which artists believed could heighten the meaning of their work. L’art nègre, as mentioned above, is an important component of Man Ray’s series. In the Occident, the rise of l’art nègre, or African art, began with the arrival of art and other artifacts from French colonies to France and other parts of Europe during the second half of the 19th century. Upon their arrival, an interest in the “dark continent” developed among Europeans, which resulted in the rise of ethnographic museums to relay colonial experiences and accomplishments to those outside of the colonies. As time progressed, artists who were members of the Parisian avant-garde, as well as those in other avant-garde circles around Europe, began incorporating art from the colonies into their work. Initially, they became interested in blacks and their culture “because [white avant-garde artists] identified [their] outsider status with their own feelings of alienation.” Aware of the social status
of blacks and the representation of them as savages by whites, as well as by themselves in order
to gain acceptance in society, the avant-garde was able to use these erroneous, stereotypical
images in their work to subvert the Parisian bourgeois in regard to their beliefs regarding how
society and art should be, and invoke in them the same uneasiness and anxiety which they felt.
*L’art nègre* became a symbol of the very thing that the avant-garde wanted to create: something
powerful “enough to transform and effect profound change.”

Moreover, the qualities the artists perceived *l’art nègre* to possess became techniques to
use in enhancing the meaning and significance of their work. For artists in Man Ray’s circle, the
“African masks were fetish objects and represented the material embodiment of forces, values,
and meanings which were discernible through the object’s formal elements.”

European modernists’ appropriation of formal elements gave them access to the intrinsic meanings they
believed the masks possessed, meaning about vitality having a potent, creative, and sexual
nature. A quote from Pablo Picasso explaining his reaction to the African masks he saw at
Trocadéro in Paris is an example of the avant-garde’s sentiments towards *l’art nègre*:

*Les masques, ils n’étaient pas des sculptures comme les autres. Pas du tout. Ils étaient
des choses magiques.... Les Nègres, ils étaient des intercesseurs, je sais le mot en
français depuis ce temps-là. Contre tout; contre des esprits inconnus, menaçants.... J’ai
compris: moi aussi, je suis contre tout.*

[Translation: The masks, they were not like other sculptures. Not at all. They were magic.
The Blacks, they were intercessors, I knew the word in French from that moment.
Against everything, against unknown, threatening spirits... I understood: Me too, I am
against everything.]
The idea of *l’art nègre* possessing something supernatural was widespread within the Parisian avant-garde and this belief resulted in references to it in avant-garde work. The appropriation of this art resulted in the fetishization and eroticization of the objects in order to subvert society.

Like the fetishized African mask, female sexuality was used by early twentieth century avant-garde artists to express their feelings of alienation, frustration, and desire. As Chadwick suggests, “Man Ray’s photograph, *Noire et blanche*, addresses modernism’s uneasy relationship between the “primitive” and the “civilized” under the sign of woman’s sexuality and the desire of modern men to possess the objects of their desire – whether sexually or culturally Other.”

Prin, with her eyes shut, unaware of the artist taking her photograph, becomes an object of his desire for visual consumption and subsequently she is the object of the desire of her onlookers. The Baule mask, already a commodity in the era of *l’art nègre*, heightens the sense of Prin’s transformation into commodity. The perfect oval shape of her face imitates that of her companion, the mask, and her lack of animation further suggests she is inanimate and more similar to a mannequin or idea than a real person. Furthermore, in many of the photographs, she does not look at the camera, her photographer, or viewers directly, which allows her to be further consumed by those who look at her.

The social context of Prin and the mask, or the modern woman and the “primitive,” also contributes to their sameness. The image of the female body, particularly the image of Prin’s body as it appears in much of Man Ray’s work, is a symbol or leitmotif of “Otherness” and freedom from society for modern avant-garde artists. Crucially, the Other – in this case the female and the nonwhite – both lack a place in occidental society; forever, they are torn between a homeland and the Occident, or she must live in a male-dominated world. In representing these situations, the figures in Man Ray’s photographs represent individuals who are subdued and
dominated. Prin’s gaze is always away from the viewer; she does not assert her own looking or animate her own representation, and, therefore, she seems to facilitate those who view her image objectifying not only the image but Prin herself as an image and thing. Likewise, the Baule mask is taken from its original intention as “a portrait mask intended for use in masquerade ceremonies by the Baule people and transformed into a functionless fashion object.¹⁴

Both Prin and the Baule mask have been appropriated and modified by Man Ray to meet his artistic desires and to meet his and society’s views of transgression as well as beauty. Like the Baule mask, Prin is a commodity to sell an image, or a sign of the idea of a modern woman – a woman who signifies freedom, as well as femininity and the fashionable. Modifications Man Ray made to Prin’s face in the photograph remove her flaws and underscore her perfection as an image and a material thing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Noire et blanche possesses many elements relating to early twentieth century modern art. By incorporating surrealist ideology into aesthetically beautiful compositions, Man Ray was able to create a series of photographs that resonated with the themes, dualities, and binaries that entranced the European avant-garde while also reaching a broad range of audiences as a work of fashion, photography, and l’art nègre. Fashion and photography were two developing areas in which Man Ray was becoming a prominent figure. Whether Noire et blanche was to be a negative or positive critique of l’art nègre and its creators, as well as the modern woman, is something that has yet to be discovered. The reciprocity of the formal qualities Prin and the mask forces the viewer to re-evaluate his or her understanding and associations with the animate versus the inanimate, as well as the differences between race and sexuality. The unmodified mask represents in this series a type of perfection that Prin can only
reach by the artist’s modifications of her, a fact that opposes long standing beliefs in African and African Americans, as well as their art, as being inferior. By contrast, Prin is the inferior subject that must be “fixed” in order to more effectively sell an image, while the Baule mask is perfect as is. Is this series aggrandizing l’art nègre under the guise of just another example of a 1920s work of fashion art or avant-garde photography that uses African motifs? Although it is not definite, what is apparent is that Man Ray’s choice in these two subjects was deliberate as well as his position of the two equals instead of opposites.
Notes

1. Wendy A. Grossman and Steven Manford, “Unmasking Man Ray’s Noire et blanche,” *American Art* 20 (Summer 2006): 142. For images of photographs mentioned, see links below:
   - [http://www.all-art.org/art_20th_century/cubism/New%20Folder_man_ray/103.jpg](http://www.all-art.org/art_20th_century/cubism/New%20Folder_man_ray/103.jpg)
2. Grossman and Manford.
3. Grossman and Manford 139.
5. Grossman and Manford 144.
10. Archer-Straw.
11. Archer-Straw.