

POWERMASK - THE POWER OF MASKS



Jan 2017 To you F

THE POWER MASKS

CURATOR
WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK

*Under this mask, another mask.
I will never finish removing all these faces.*

CLAUDE CAHUN

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PREFACE

*The mask means to me: freshness of colour,
sumptuous decoration, wild unexpected gestures,
very shrill expressions, exquisite turbulence.*

JAMES ENSOR

Jan Willem Sieburgh

In a world that has changed so much and a city that keeps on evolving, the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam is searching for a new role for its collection and also for new ways of communicating about that collection.’

This is how curator of exhibitions and art historian Alexandra van Dongen voiced the ambition of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam in a conversation with guest curator Walter Van Beirendonck. At first sight, a self-evident statement. Indeed, the world around us is changing. Museums, by contrast, have the tendency, and in part also the responsibility, to remain stable beacons in this fluctuating world. And the urgency to change is also felt less.

It is precisely for ethnographic museums in metropolises like Rotterdam that Alexandra’s exhortation is more relevant than ever. These museums were once Eurocentric and colonial windows onto distant and exotic worlds that most of us would never have the opportunity to visit. Today, however, those far-off countries are toured extensively and sometimes even inundated by mass tourism. At the same time, those world cultures have infiltrated our daily life through food, music, dance, film, video, television, the Internet, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook (two billion users!) and more. And it is not only through a range of physical and virtual media that these ‘other’

cultures have got so close: indeed, the superdiverse city of Rotterdam is now home to individuals from more than 170 countries.

Today some museums still often depict non-Western cultures as extinct civilizations, as it were, while these civilizations are, on the contrary, alive and kicking. It is still too often the case that we show the ‘clogs, tulips and windmills’, so to speak, of Africa, Asia, Oceania or the Americas while both historical and contemporary realities are so different. Surely it is not surprising that museum visitors and newcomers from non-European countries find it difficult to recognize themselves in the way in which we present the cultures of their lands of origin. This raises a pressing question, and not only for ethnographic museums. The category must redefine its role at the current juncture.

In short, it is time for a new perspective. Time to bring conventions up for discussion and to break through them. That is one of the reasons why I immediately reacted with enthusiasm to the plans that Alexandra and Walter developed jointly for the exhibition *POWERMASK – The Power of Masks* and this accompanying publication by Lannoo Publishers. This enthusiasm was only reinforced when Walter presented his first sketchbooks full of ideas and surprising perspectives for the show.

*The African masks opened a new horizon to me.
They made it possible for me to make contact with
instinctive things, with uninhibited feeling that went against
the false tradition [late Western illusionism] which I hated.*

GEORGES BRAQUE

In this exhibition, Alexandra and Walter, assisted by anthropologist Sonja Wijs and project manager Amy Blonk, present an idiosyncratic and plural perspective on the phenomenon of masks. Stemming from all continents, the masks on display do not only refer to the traditional use of masks in various cultures, including European masks. The show also devotes much attention to the way in which, both in the past and present, the mask has been and still is a source of inspiration for international visual artists, photographers and fashion designers, such as Pablo Picasso, Louise Bourgeois, James Ensor, Keith Haring, Jean Paul Gaultier, Viktor & Rolf Coco Fronsac, Charles Fréger, and Phyllis Galemba. A selection of works by these artists is on display, providing insight into the mask's history of cultural embedding and artistic reception which continues in Walter Van Beirendonck's personal fascination for the mask as a fashion designer.

Walter began working with masks in his fashion collections as early as the 1990s. 'At the time', he says, 'I was fascinated by the fact that a mask can change your identity in a simple way, that it has such an impact, that it evokes a particular atmosphere. You can't change your identity by pulling on a glove.' Since then, the mask has been a constant in his work, recurring regularly in his collections. The title *POWER-*

MASK – The Power of Masks refers to the fact that the mask is usually intended to lend power, divine spiritual power.

Alexandra's important contribution lies not only in her art-historical knowledge and in her familiarity with the collections of the Wereldmuseum and of the city's other museums such as Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and Museum Rotterdam. She has also mobilized her great interest in and knowledge of the field of 'Global Things', artefacts with a plural genesis. From time immemorial, the countless dynamic bridges between cultures in our world have constantly ensured innovation and creativity. As she herself says, she has made it her 'mission in life' to continue to shed light on this transcultural phenomenon. The exhibition *POWER-MASK – The Power of Masks* is the perfect synthesis of Alexandra's mission and Walter's fascination.

Walter Van Beirendonck is not only a guest curator, but also the show's scenographer. The character of the exhibition rooms' particular design reflects the range of perspectives chosen for the subject, such as 'Persona: Masks from the World and Beyond', where 'persona' is the Latin word for mask, or 'Supernatural', where a connection is made with the role of the mask in Oceania. The layout itself is an artistic interpretation where the rooms, in fact, become a *Gesamtkunstwerk*



Amulet mask, Ramu-Delta (culture), East Sepik (province), Papua New Guinea, before 1909, Collection Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, coll. nr. 31861, Lemaire, 1951, collected by Dr. Lau, Borbor, 1909



PREFACE

or total work of art. Through the use of remakes of historical museum showcases based on examples found in historical photographs from the Wereldmuseum around 1900, twentieth-century design furniture on which various masked costumes and fashion silhouettes are placed, and wall installations made in collaboration with a number of visual artists such as Brian Kenny, Coco Fronsac and Charles Fréger, the makers of the exhibition offer an idiosyncratic perspective on the mask, which in all its universal diversity deserves such an innovative approach.

For a long time there was a taboo on a word that luckily has recently come back into use in the context of ethnographic museums. It is the word 'enchantment', which has many meanings, but expresses well the ideas of charm, appeal, appreciation and fascination. In April 2017 the Research Centre for Material Culture of the National Museum of World Cultures organized a seminar entitled *Objects and Affects: Artists and the Ethnographic Archive*, in which the following question was raised: 'In our modern life it seems to be hard to experience enchantment. Thinking with Jane Bennett, who challenges this view, we question: how can objects be a source of enchantment?'¹ How can they inspire, captivate and disturb? What might be the relation between the creative imagination and the archive? And what are

NOTE

1 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010.

the ethical implications when artists activate and intervene in ethnographic archives?'

The exhibition *POWERMASK – The Power of Masks* demonstrates, in a sound, enchanting and fascinating manner, the wealth and enormous diversity of mask cultures, thanks to the many generous lenders and visual artists, fashion designers, designers and photographers who contributed with such enthusiasm to this special exhibition. I also wish to thank the authors of this publication who, through their essays, have provided insight into the power of the mask from a range of perspectives.

Jan Willem Sieburgh

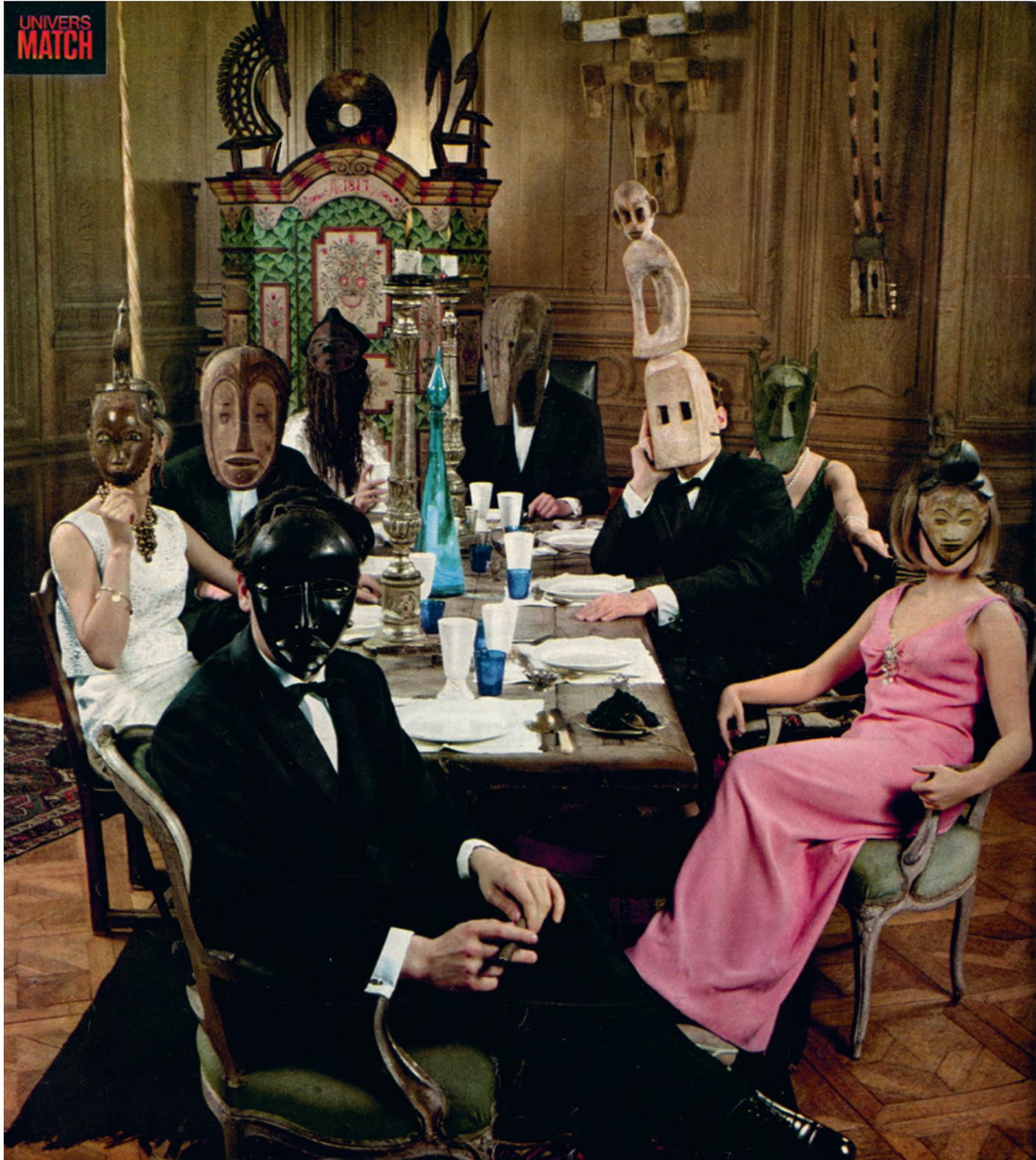
Interim director, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam

Helena Rubinstein with African mask, c. 1935





Lomane or Ioman face mask, Yaure, Ivory Coast, Musée Barbier-Mueller, coll. nr. 1007-60, former collection Josef Mueller



THE IMPACT OF AFRICAN MASKS ON ARTISTIC CREATION

Valentine Plisnier

On 21 May 1966, issue 893 of the French magazine *Paris Match* was released, featuring a report on the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, inaugurated by the Senegalese president and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor and André Malraux, who was the French Minister of Culture from 1958 till 1969. The report was by Michel Gall, and the accompanying photographs by Tony Saulnier. The magazine concluded the subject with a quite remarkable photograph by Saulnier. Eight guests (four men and four women) in formal dress are gathered around a dish of caviar for a seated dinner. Each guest wears an African mask and poses nonchalantly for the photographer. It is a striking arrangement, set in a Parisian apartment, where the paroxysm of Western society life confronts ancestral African works. The picture is entitled 'In Paris, rue Jacob, Le Dîner des collectionneurs de têtes'¹ and captioned: 'Hardly back from Dakar, Tony Saulnier, himself a passionate collector of Negro art, held a dinner of head collectors. On our photo, in front of a dish of caviar, the most beautiful masks in his collection. The person to the left of the young woman in white wears one of the rarest in the world. Three months ago, a museum paid eight million French francs for a similar mask. It comes from the Congo. The masks around the table, from l. to r.: Dan (black), Guro, Pongwe, Kono (elephant mask), Bambara, Dogon (monkey mask), Pongwe. On the wall, Dogons.'

Also in 1966, in Budapest, the artist and theoretician of the Hungarian and European avant-garde Lajos Kassák made the photomontage *Montage-Self-portrait, 1923-1964*. In this retrospective montage of a creative life, one finds among others two cut-outs of sculptures from Côte d'Ivoire: a Yaure bird mask with brass triangles²[former collection of Paul Guillaume, today collection of the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, and a Senufo bird, the representation of a calao.³ These cut-outs were taken from the same issue of *Paris Match*, the latter being a photograph taken by Tony Saulnier.⁴

Thus, quite by chance, one and the same publication, *Paris Match*, brought together at a distance two artists and two works that combine Western and African art. For one, it was a source of dissemination; for the other, a source of creation. Although it may simply be a coincidence, the latter is sufficiently remarkable for us to take a closer look at these two artists on whose imagination African masks and sculptures left such an impact.

TONY SAULNIER, A REPORTER NURTURED ON AFRICAN ART

Tony Saulnier (Paris, 1926 – Guadeloupe, 1968) was

*Picasso aimait particulièrement un petit masque
de femme à qui la peinture blanche du visage,
ressortant sur la couleur bois de la coiffure,
donnait une expression étrangement douce.*

FERNANDE OLIVIER

exposed to African and Oceanian art early on. 'His mother [was] an expert in African and Asian objets d'art', reporter-photographer Benoît Gysembergh wrote in his tribute to Saulnier in *Paris Match*. *60 photographes. 60 ans.*⁵

Marie-Ange Saulnier-Ciolkowska was indeed a great collector and art dealer of African and Oceanian art. In order to better grasp the circumstances leading Tony Saulnier to make the photograph 'Le Dîner de têtes' and its unexpected publication in the report devoted to an art festival in Senegal, I contacted the expert in African art, Christine Valluet.⁶ She knew Marie-Ange Ciolkowska in the 1970s, after Tony's death. When I invited her to immerse herself in her souvenirs, she evoked the family context and the apartment, the locus of the famous dinner, where she used to visit him: 'It was in the late 1920s that the journalist and art critic Henri Saulnier-Ciolkowski and his wife, Marie-Ange, settled at 26 rue Jacob, in a huge apartment with old-fashioned charm (the building dated from 1710), property of the city of Paris. I think they had taken over this place from Marie-Ange's parents, who were the previous tenants. It was modestly comfortable, and the rent was low. Being widowed in 1933 and living alone with their young son Tony, Marie-Ange first worked in an antique shop, where she made friends with artists. During the war, while she was engaged in the Resist-

ance, she decided to start dealing in primitive arts, which she had discovered with her husband. The apartment filled up with objects from Africa and Oceania, and it was in this atmosphere that Tony grew up. This magical place (which I remember with certain emotion) became a place where intellectuals and artists gathered around Marie-Ange. Tony then lived with his wife and his son in a section of the apartment (where the photo was taken), while his mother conserved the use of the rear section giving onto the garden. In the late 1950s, Marie-Ange Ciolkowska set off on a series of collecting journeys to Dogon country, which she would visit regularly into advanced old age. She loved this country, where she would sleep under the stars. She probably collected the objects that feature in the photo in Mali. She died in 1992.'

Is it this special contact with far-off cultures that drove the young man to travel the world with a camera? This is, in any event, what Gysembergh believes: 'Saulnier was naturally fascinated by the secrets and mysteries of the primitive peoples. A printer in the photolab of *Paris Match* on rue Pierre-Charron, he made a year-long initiatory journey to Africa in 1952. [...]' For *Paris Match* and *Jours de France*, the young man reported on, and through his photographs bore witness to, events that made the headlines at the time. In 1953, some 25 of his photographs illustrated Pierre-

Dominique Gaisseau's book *Forêt sacrée. Magie et rites secrets des Toma*⁷, an account of his three-month mission to Guinea. 'Tony Saulnier is one of the major photographers that will have made the most "special reports", those famous Match Univers, at a time when photography was lifting the veil on the world, long before television. [...] In 1962 (*sic*), Tony joined Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau's expedition to New Guinea to study the Papuans. That is where he earned his nickname, "the Papuan".⁸ In 1956, his photos would accompany another book by Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau, *Visa pour la préhistoire. Shangrila, la vallée perdue de Nouvelle Guinée*.⁹ Drawing on his experience with the documentarian in 1952, he himself would ten years later release a lavishly illustrated book, *Les Papous coupeurs de tête – Cent soixante-sept jours dans la préhistoire*, published in 1961,¹⁰ in which he questioned the pertinence of a controversial mission that would prove perilous and would lead to the death of three porters. But Saulnier, who sometimes signed his reports 'Saulnier-Ciolkowski', using his father's full name, continued to photograph the world for a press in search of exoticism. Gysembergh enumerates his reports in remote and sometimes unknown destinations: 'He then made *Univers Paris Match* reports on Bali, the blue men of the Nile, the troglodytes of Australia, voodoo in Benin, Pompeii, the fakirs of the Ganges. In 1968, *Paris Match* sent him, in the company of Hubert

Herzog, to make a report on Easter Island in order to try and elucidate the mystery of this lost civilization of the giant statues, the Moai. [...]'.¹¹ But it was not during a dangerous mission or on one of his journeys into little-known regions that the photographer died prematurely, at the age of 42: 'On March 5, the team was on board the Air France flight connecting Caracas to Pointe-à-Pitre. At 20:29, the Boeing [...] crashed as it approached the Grande Découverte volcano in Guadeloupe. There were no survivors.' A posthumous exhibition, *Pays Dogon. Hommage à Tony Saulnier*, was organized with the support of the photographic department of *Paris Match*; the catalogue, undated, endures.¹¹

Let's now return to the photograph of the dinner. While the guests have been deliberately left anonymous in this reception's photo caption, we know more about the objects photographed: they were part of the collection of Tony Saulnier's mother. More precisely, from left to right, they are: a *Dan* mask (Côte d'Ivoire), then *Baoulé* (Côte d'Ivoire), *Fang* (Gabon), *Pende* (DRC), *Kono* (?) (Mali), *Bambara* (Mali), *Dogon* (Mali) and *Punu* (Gabon). On the fireplace are two *Ciwara* crests (Mali) and, hanging from the woodwork, two *Dogon* masks. Some may have been brought back by Tony himself.¹² An allusion by Tony Saulnier to the connoisseurs of African customs: the fibre skirts originally worn by the masked dancers (and rarely brought back



To this day, the women who saw these fetishes are punished by death', photograph by Tony Saulnier published in 'L'art nègre', *Univers Match*, 21 May 1966



*For me the masks were not just sculptures...
They were magical objects... intercessors...
against everything – against unknown, threatening spirits...
They were weapons – to keep people from being ruled by spirits,
to help free themselves.*

PABLO PICASSO

with the masks) have ironically been replaced by the pomp of the guests' dresses and dinner jackets, the photographer playing on this contrast and its absurd character. But, with the connotation of strangeness caused by the clash between these two cultures, isn't the photograph itself another allusion to surrealist works?

'Le Dîner des collectionneurs de têtes' is manifestly a work that was not commissioned professionally. It shows an artistic and personal approach by the photographer, published in a magazine with which he regularly collaborated. While we are familiar with Tony Saulnier photographic reports, his artistic photographs and his photographs of artists remain largely unexplored territory. Raised in a creative environment from early childhood, he had an open and unbiased way of looking at art. His interest in ancestral African and Oceanian art forms combines with an interest in contemporary artists, whom he photographs in their studios, like Joan Miró in Majorca, or places in arrangements evocative of a 'sur-reality', as with Salvador Dalí (*With the Queen of Venus*, 1964) in a creek in Cadaques. Thus it is not surprising that this same photograph was used as the cover illustration for the catalogue of the *Surréalisme et Arts primitifs. Un air de famille* exhibition, which was held at the Fondation Pierre Arnaud in Switzerland.¹³

Lajos Kassák's photomontage echoes Tony Saulnier's photograph in two respects. On the one hand, he borrows elements from the latter to make up his own work; on the other, he fits in a tradition shared by certain surrealist artists. They both have Africa in common.

LAJOS KASSÁK, AFRICAN ART AS AESTHETIC LEGACY?

Lajos Kassák (1887, Érsekújvár¹⁴ [Czechoslovakia] – 1967, Budapest) is the artist who opened up early twentieth-century Hungary to the main trends of European artistic modernity. A self-taught painter, journalist, essayist, poet and novelist, he was a visionary intellectual.¹⁵ The city of Budapest, where he settled in 1904, today pays tribute to him with a museum that bears his name.¹⁶ An ardent defender of the working class and of its revolutionary social *and* cultural claims, he founded, among others, the reviews *Tett* (Action) in 1915 and *Ma* (Today) in 1916, as well as taking part in writing *Munka* (Work) from 1926 onward.¹⁷ Through these publications, this advocate of the avant-gardes gradually became their depository, spokesman, and even more so, theoretician in Hungary.¹⁸ He travelled extensively in Europe—in 1907 he went for the first time to Paris without any money, on foot from Budapest—and this

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enabled him to discover the main artistic movements of the day.

Although Kassák cannot be associated with any particular avant-garde movement—whether Expressionism, Futurism or the Dadaism that he promoted, with the exception of the constructivist school—, his *Self-portrait*, in the form of a photomontage, expresses his surrealist aspirations. Placed above a typographic composition—which evokes those he practised regularly in his avant-garde works at the time and in his literary and poetic work—is the image of the mask of the Yaure bird published in *Paris Match*¹⁹ and that of a Senufo sculpture, also from Côte d’Ivoire, an effigy of the same type of bird,²⁰ the cut-out of which, as we have seen, comes from a photograph taken by Tony Saulnier in Dakar. Rather than the snapshot of a self-portrait, this photomontage made by Lajos Kassák at the age of 77 is, given the time span evoked in the title (1923-1964, i.e., 41 years), the portrait of a life. The presence of these extra-European works reflects a desire to reveal the aesthetic choices that fed the imagination throughout a life of artistic creation.

Lajos Kassák portrays himself as both a writer (the typewriter in the foreground) and an artist, invoking both writing and the visual arts through a tribute paid to the innovative forms of the collage and



'L'art nègre', *Univers Match*, 21 May 1966

of the photographic composition of the 1920s and 1930s. The African sculptures, placed above him, appear as his source of inspiration and are combined with the figure of the bird, which symbolises flight, fervour and escape, like the vectors of his artistic and spiritual elevation. They seem to be dictating the words to the writer, to be influencing his mind and his thought, and they symbolize the revolutionary, avant-garde and universal aspect of his literary and artistic activity. A poetic reverie where the mythic calao bird of Côte d’Ivoire fits in a literary and visual vocabulary with surrealist echoes, representing that passage from the outer world to the inner, inspired and creative world.

While art historians have established the many links connecting modern and contemporary art to non-Western sources of inspiration, rare are the accounts of artists expressing this influence directly. These two works by Tony Saulnier and Lajos Kassák, made—sadly—shortly before their deaths and gathered in one single publication, exemplify an African source of artistic inspiration that lasted a lifetime.

Valentine Plisnier
Art historian