

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Grey, Tobias. "Photographer Seydou Keïta at the Grand Palais, Paris." *Financial Times* (April 8, 2016).



Photographer Seydou Keïta at the Grand Palais, Paris

Tobias Grey

The Malian only became known to art circles in the west years after he had retired



©Seydou Keïta/CAAC/The Pigozzi Collection

Untitled photograph from 1949-51

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Seydou Keïta's belated discovery by the western art world as one of the leading portrait photographers of the second half of the 20th century remains a great advertisement for carefully conserving one's work. In 1991, Keïta had been retired for almost 15 years when the French curator André Magnin came knocking on the door of the Malian photographer's studio in downtown Bamako.

Magnin had been sent to Mali's capital by his then employer, the Italian entrepreneur Jean Pigozzi. Owner of the world's largest collection of contemporary African art, Pigozzi had been excited by a couple of anonymous postcard-sized portraits labelled "Bamako, Mali, 1950s, 1955", in a show at the Museum for African Art in New York.

In Bamako, Magnin showed copies of these pictures to another Malian photographer, Malick Sidibé, who immediately identified them as the work of Keïta and told him where to find him. Before long Keïta, who had never before left Mali, was being celebrated in Paris and New York, where his portraiture was the subject of solo exhibitions at the Fondation Cartier in 1994 and Gagosian Gallery in 1997.

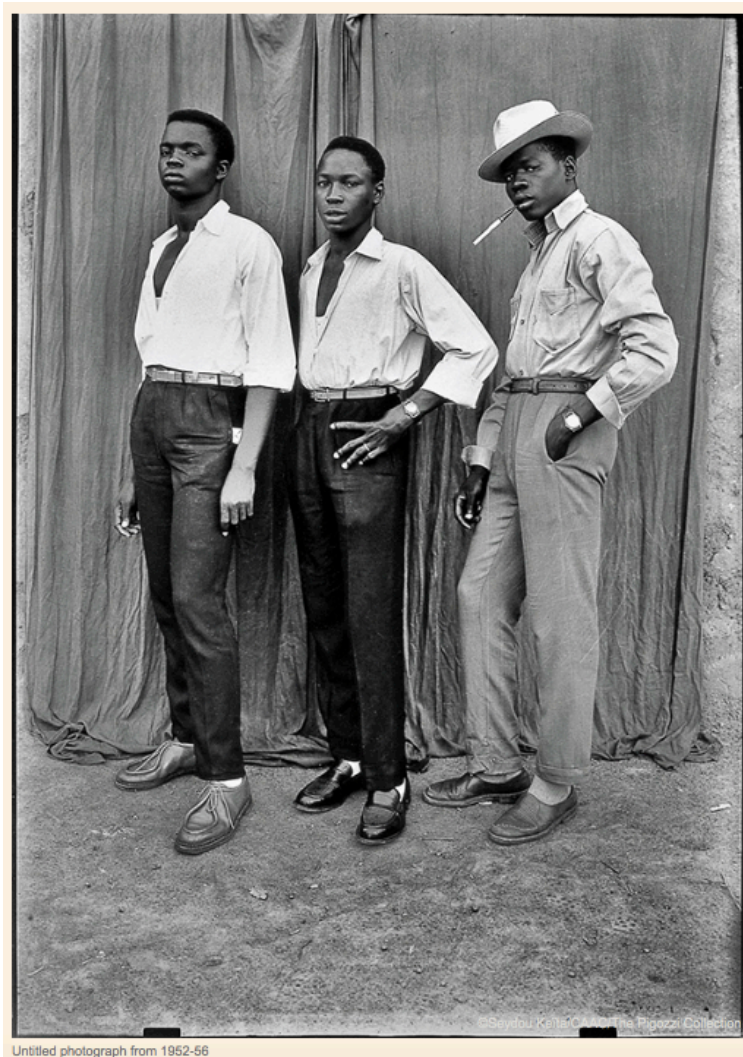
Now Keïta, who died in 2001 aged about 80, has become the first African photographer to be shown in a stunning showcase exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris. Curated by Yves Aupetitallot, the show brings together almost 300 black-and-white portraits, including modern 50x60cm and 120x180cm print formats signed by Keïta, as well as dozens of postcard-sized original vintage prints.

Most of the prints that have never been shown publicly before were recovered from the studio of Keïta's framer, where they had been left behind or forgotten by customers. Many of them bear traces of exposure to wind, heat and humidity.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

The portraits, arranged chronologically, were all taken between 1949 and 1962. (A year later Keïta was appointed the Malian government's official photographer and closed his studio for good.) In the years leading up to Mali's independence in 1960, Keïta's clientele was mostly young and intent on emancipated, optimistic and outward-looking images of themselves.

His studio was not far from the railway station and travellers from all over west Africa beat a path to his door. Many of the portraits are of groups: young bucks wearing shirts opened to the waist pay homage to the gangster chic of Eddie Constantine, the French B-movie star of the day; elegantly dressed Senegalese women outdo each other in their displays of sparkling teeth; uniformed men from the armed forces exude a dangerous grace, their coiled-up martial menace recalling August Sander's portraits of the Wehrmacht and members of the German SS.

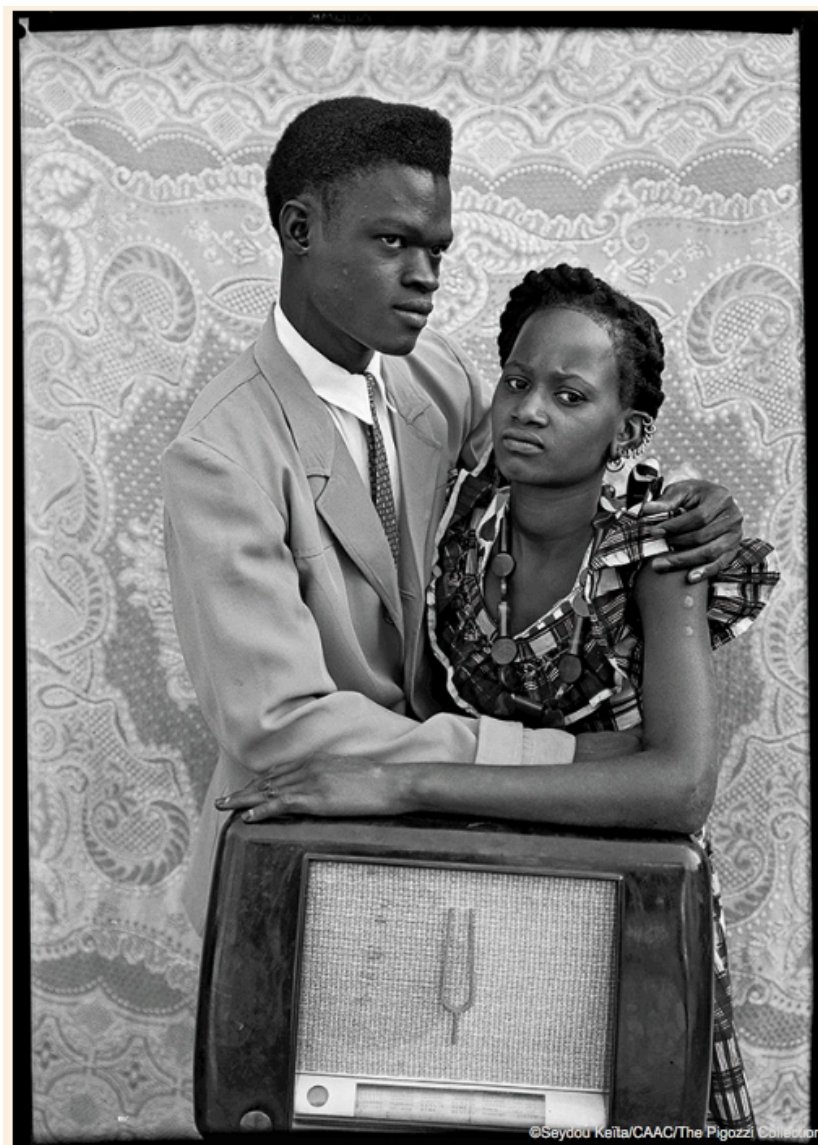


Untitled photograph from 1952-56

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

With six wives and 21 children to support, as well as a love for smart automobiles, Keïta worked quickly, often shooting 40 portraits in a day and then spending much of the night developing them in his darkroom. He favoured natural light and took most of his pictures with a 13x18cm-view camera in the busy courtyard beside his studio.

Keïta's innovations included using patterned fabrics as backdrops. He also kept a large store of accessories (suits, hats, belts, ties, watches, jewellery, pens, flowers, motorcycles), which he put at the disposal of his clients. His avowed aim was to distance his photography from the Eurocentric trend for anthropological studies of native Africans.

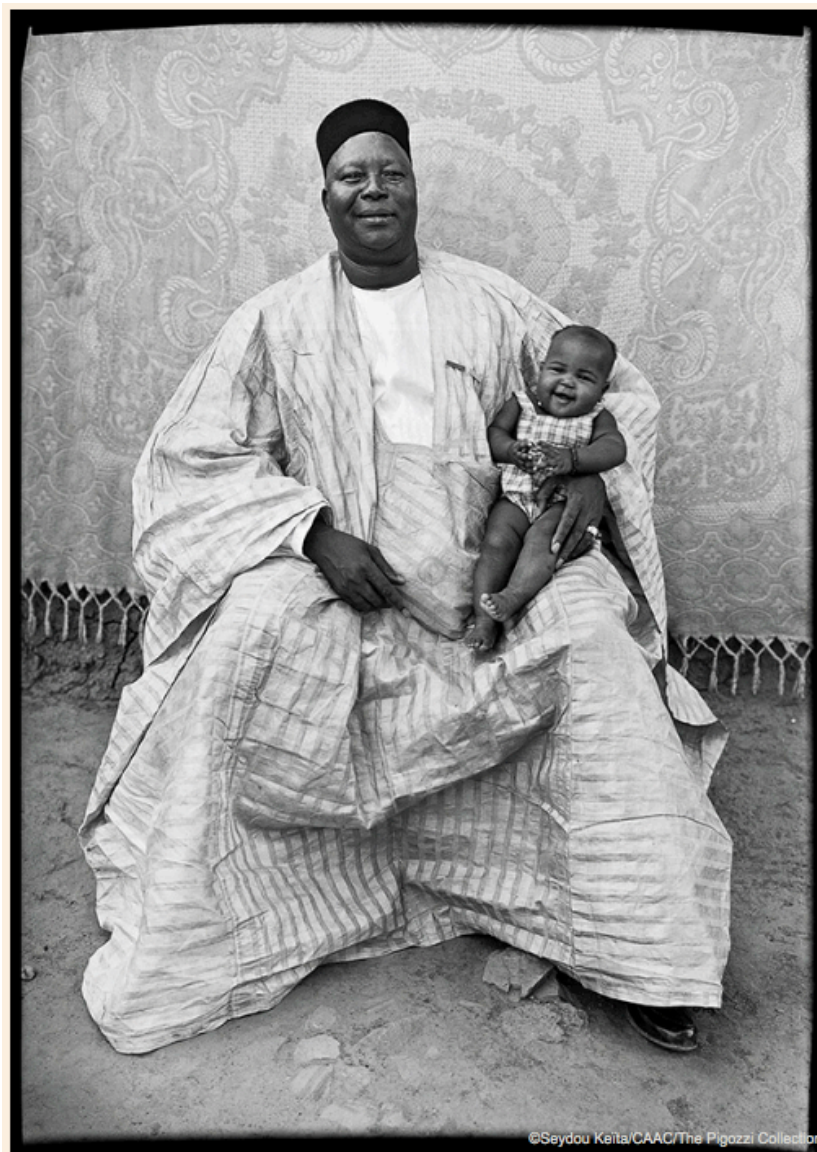


Untitled photograph from 1950

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Keïta's influence can be clearly seen in the work of a new generation of African artists, including the Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop and the Congolese painter JP Mika.

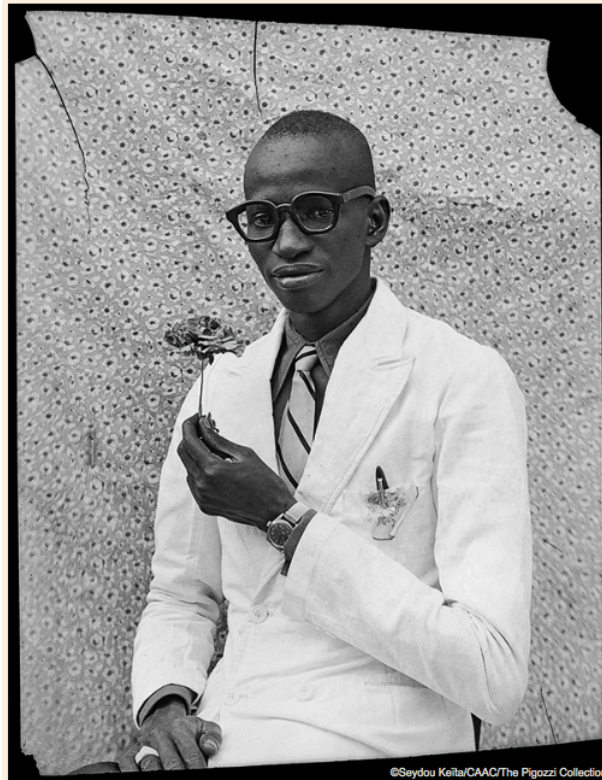
Although Keïta did not get to enjoy his international fame for very long, it did provide him with a wonderful sense of revelation as he managed to see his portraits blown up to almost life-size, as opposed to a postcard format. "You can have no idea what I felt the first time I saw my negatives developed on a large scale, clean and perfect, without a single stain," Keïta said. "At that moment I knew that my work was really very good."



©Seydou Keïta/CAAC/The Pigozzi Collection

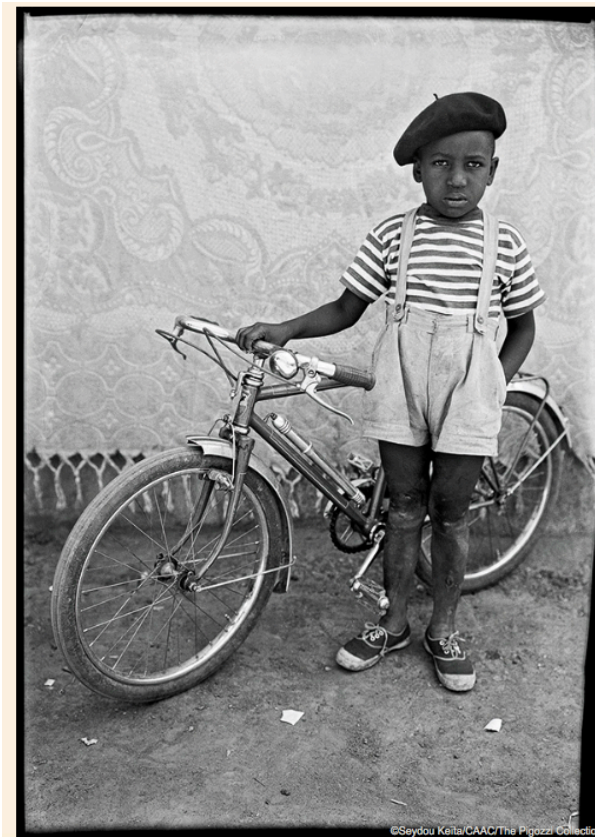
Untitled photograph from 1949-1951

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.



Untitled photograph from 1959

©Seydou Keita/CAAC/The Pigozzi Collection



Untitled photograph from 1949-1951

©Seydou Keita/CAAC/The Pigozzi Collection

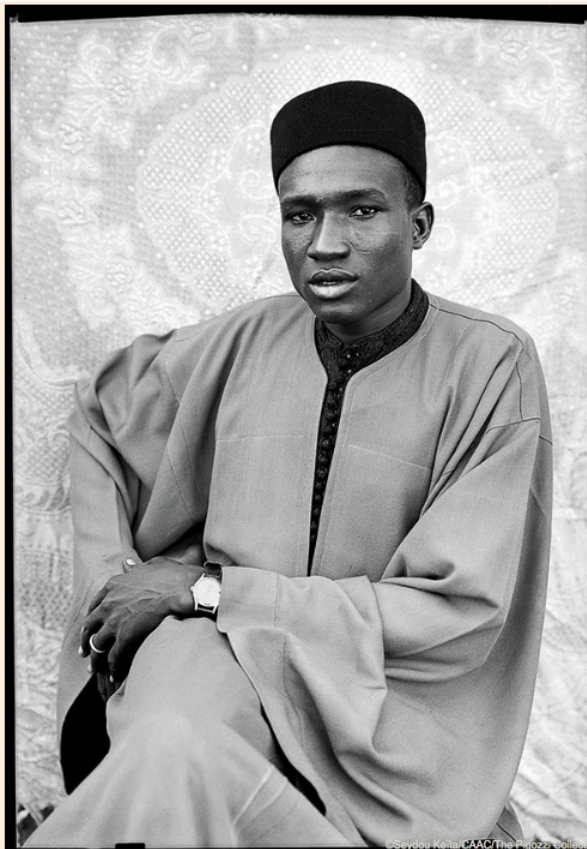
1-87, Alserkal Avenue Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE | 568 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001 USA

www.leilahellergallery.com

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.



Untitled photograph from 1956



Untitled photograph from 1949-51

Photographs: Seydou Keita/CAAC/The Pigozzi Collection

1-87, Alserkal Avenue Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE | 568 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001 USA

www.leilahellergallery.com