

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

AFP. "‘Father of African photography’ wows new generation." *The Daily Mail* (April 21, 2016).

MailOnline



They came in their best clothes and queued in their hundreds every day outside the little mud-walled house in Bamako to be immortalised by "the master".

"One shot, that's all I take," Seydou Keita, the great Malian photographer, never tired of repeating. While Mali mourns Malick Sidibe, the west African country's other great photographic genius who was buried at the weekend, Paris is paying homage to Keita -- who opened the way for him -- with the first exhibition ever dedicated to an African artist at the Grand Palais.

In little more than a decade, the self-taught Keita -- who died in 2001 -- created a body of work in the courtyard of his house that many believe puts him on a par with European greats like August Sander. Keita's photos document the last days of colonial French Sudan, as Mali was then called, with his customers as likely to turn up dressed in a natty trilbys and double breasted suits as traditional tarboosh hats and voluminous boubou robes.

At the beginning he used his own bedspread as a backdrop for his portraits.

- Pith hats and boubous -

But as his fame spread to neighbouring Senegal, Guinea and Burkina Faso he bought props, including pith hats and "chic" western style clothing, so that his clients would look their best in the "souvenir photographs" often sent back to their villages.

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In time they would also pose on his Solex moped, Vespa motorbike and his new Peugeot 203 car. But it was the interplay between the patterns of the fabric his customers wore and his backdrops that would make Keita's work so magic and memorable. Two "co-wives" holding each other in a rigid embrace was one of his own favourites, the matching ostrich pattern of their robes playing off the traditional print of the backdrop.

The curator of the Grand Palais show, Yves Aupetitallot, said the effect reaches its apogee in what he calls Keita's "odalisques", where he had his female clients recline on prayer mats.

"There is something really painterly about them," he said with the "subject almost dissolving" into the fabric.

While Sidibe would later be celebrated for his more spontaneous photos of Bamako's swinging post-independence 1960s nightlife, the meticulous Keita was slower and more studied about his composition. He turned his sitters this way and that long before he even looked in the viewfinder, adjusting and readjusting the way the fabric of their colourful boubous flowed.

Keita was aware of his talent, having picked up the basics of his trade from the apprentice of a one-time student of the French Professor H Houppé, author of the bestselling pre-war manual "Secrets of Photography Revealed".

Still, he never dreamt that his black and white prints would grace the walls of museums.

- One-shot rule -

"You cannot imagine how I felt the first time my negatives were printed in a large format," he told one interviewer. "I knew at that moment that my work was really very good. In my photos people are so life-like you almost think there there right in front of you."

One of his most beautiful portraits is of a disabled but faultlessly elegant young man called Sissoko, who he photographed in lensless glasses holding a white flower. Like many of the city's "zazous" or dandies, Sissoko belonged to the "Fleur de Paris" club, his membership denoted by an embroidered flower on the handkerchief in his breast pocket.

Keita rarely recorded the names of his sitters, and closed up his studio in 1962 at the request of Mali's first president when he appointed him his official photographer.

It was only in the 1990s that his work was discovered in the West, by which time Keita had long retired and dedicated himself to his other great passion, mechanics.

In fact "the father of African photography" was rather matter-of-fact about his art.

"I only ever took one picture per customer and I never missed a shot," he said. "You have to work for the film after all," he laughed.

Now and again though he made exceptions. Souleyman Cisse recalled in the show catalogue the day in the late 1950s he plucked up the courage to join the "incredible queue" outside Keita's house. The wait was all the more agonising because of his complex that his "head was too rectangular".

"I bought a black beret to try to disguise it," he said.

Sensing his discomfort as the shutter closed, Keita took another shot and the result so pleased Cisse that "ever since I love to be photographed".

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With even French President Francois Hollande proclaiming himself a fan of his work, Keita and Sidibe have become a major source of cultural pride for Mali.

Coming after the huge success of the "Beaute Congo" exhibiton in Paris last year which explored the thriving Kinshasa scene, the Keita show is another sign of the rising star of African art.

In Bamako, however, Sidibe's death has far more concrete consequences. The photographer, who lived modestly himself, is believed to have supported up to 1,800 through his philanthropy, bankrolling a school and development projects in his home village.