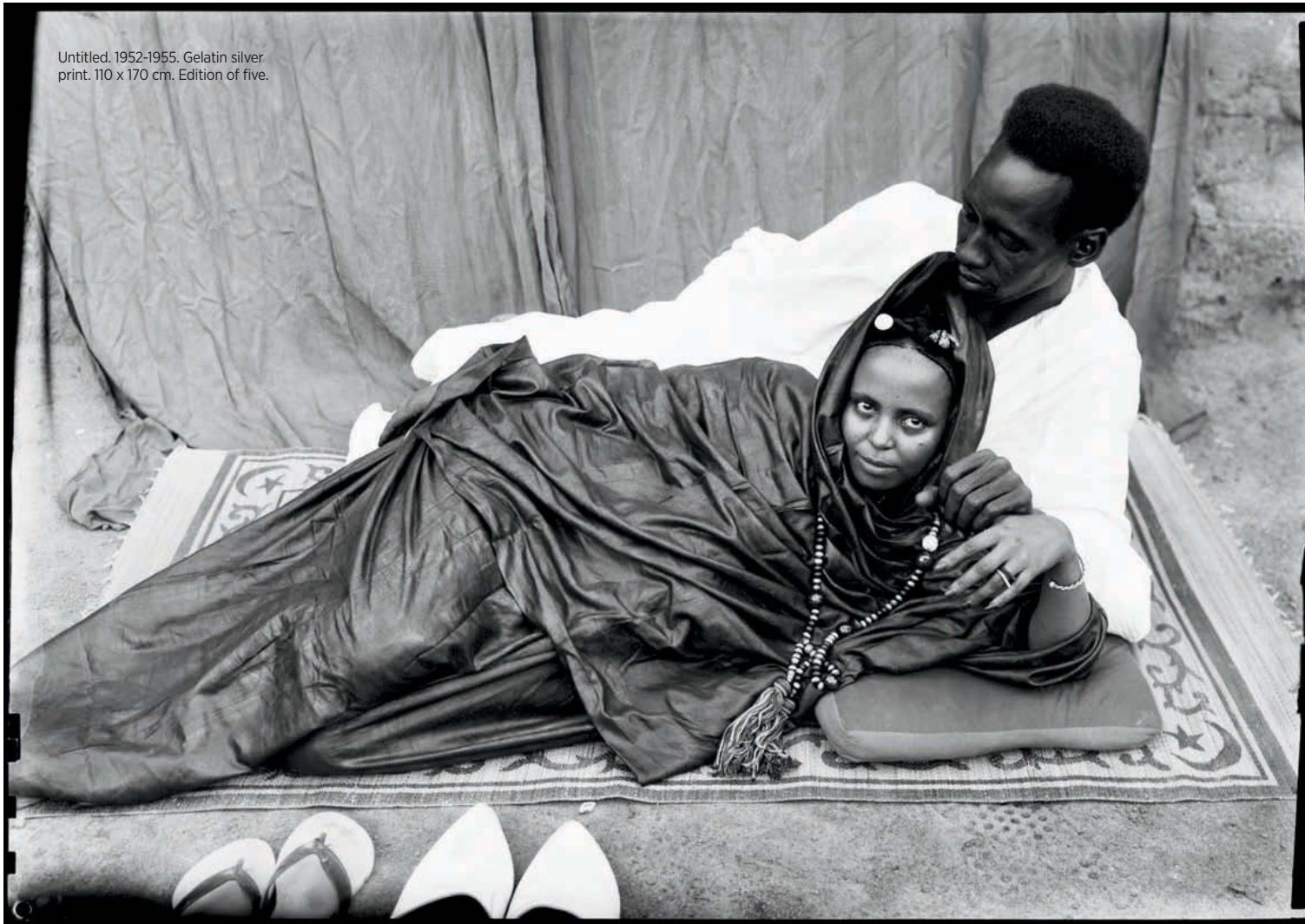


Untitled, 1952-1955. Gelatin silver print. 110 x 170 cm. Edition of five.



## Portraits from MALI

*The poignant works of Malian photographer **Seydou Keita** captivated viewers at Leila Heller Gallery's Dubai space over the summer. Rania Habib reviews the one-of-a-kind exhibition*

A large, jovial man holds a plump, cherubic child on his lap. The little one is nestled comfortably between the man's large hand and the sleeve of his regal striped grand *bubu*. The portrait was made by commercial photographer Seydou Keita in Bamako, sometime between 1948 and 1954, and presumably depicts a proud father and his young child. At the time it was taken, the photograph was probably no larger than 12 x 17cm, a time when Keita did not have the means to print his portraits at the nearly life-size scale they are produced at today. Blown up and exhibited at Leila Heller's expansive Alsterskal Avenue space in Dubai, this image by Keita draws you in intimately, and cannot help but make you smile.

Such is the power of the late Malian photographer's images; they will stir up all kinds of ►



Untitled, 1948-1954. Gelatin silver print. 170 x 110 cm. Edition of five.



VISIONS OF MALI

From above: Untitled, 1948-1954. Gelatin silver print. 110 x 170 cm. Edition of five; Untitled, 1953-1957. Gelatin silver print. 110 x 170 cm. Edition of five; Untitled, 1954-1960. Gelatin silver print. 110 x 170 cm. Edition of five; Untitled, 1953-1957. Gelatin silver print. 110 x 170 cm. Edition of five.

emotions in their viewers. They are also spectacularly contemporary—every photo on show looks like it could have been taken this decade, albeit with a retro twist. But Keïta was active from 1948 to 1960, a time when he used a Kodak ‘brownie’ camera gifted to him by his uncle in the 1930s—taking only a single shot to make portraits of Bamako residents. It was also a time when his work was unknowingly pioneering.

The show at Leila Heller Gallery, which ran from 22 June-1 September, marked the first time Keïta’s works were exhibited in the Middle East. In fact, it was not so long ago that his portraits were shown publicly at all; his archive of over 10,000 negatives was uncovered only in the early 1990s, when famed collector, photographer, and philanthropist Jean Pigozzi discovered Keïta. “Over 25 years ago, I saw two little photographs in the corner of an exhibition at a gallery in New York, and their captions read ‘Anonymous. Mali.’,” says Pigozzi, who attended the opening of the Dubai show. “I sent my curator, André Magnin, to Bamako with those two images and he found Seydou after driving around for a few days. He was sitting on an old metal trunk that housed hundreds and hundreds of negatives.” And so, as they say, the rest is history. In 1994, Keïta’s works were exhibited at the Fondation Cartier in Paris to great success, and continue to be shown the world over. Prior to the show at Leila Heller Gallery, Keïta’s photographs went up at the Grand Palais in Paris, in a solo exhibition that drew over 100,000 visitors.

**BAMAKO TO PARIS**

Before his “discovery”, Keïta was a poor, uneducated man who had set up a commercial photography studio in downtown Bamako. He used his own props to set his scenes, including his own bedsheet as a backdrop to create rich textures for his black and white portraits. In fact, though individual photographs remain precisely undated, a group of six images on show at Leila Heller Gallery are dated 1948-1954, the bracket of time that Keïta recalled using this particular prop. These photos include the one of the father and his child, one of a moody young boy standing by his bicycle, dressed in overalls, a striped T-shirt and a beret, one depicting four women—including two Touaregs, one defiantly holding a rolled cigarette between her lips—

drinking tea, and one portraying a man wearing the traditional grand *bubu* and pointing a rifle towards the outside of the image frame. In this latter photograph, the bedsheet is visibly torn at the bottom right, signalling the wear and tear of this much-loved prop.

The backdrops are an important element of Keïta’s works, playing a crucial role in setting the scene. In an untitled photo, dated from 1956-1959, two women wearing grand bubus featuring a playful ostrich print stand side by side, hand-in-hand, against a leaf motif textile. In theory, the clash of prints should not work—but Keïta, with his creative and continuously evolving eye, makes it work. This particular backdrop reappears in a 1959 portrait of a young woman in traditional African dress, staring pensively into the camera.

**SETTING THE SCENE**

A different flower motif appears in Keïta’s photographs from 1958-1959, perhaps most strikingly in his portrait of a bespectacled young man dressed in full Western garb—including a light suit, tie, handkerchief and pen in his jacket pocket—holding a flower. Keïta played with various combinations of African dress/Western poses, or Western dress/African props and stances to mesmerising effect. Posing for portraits with Keïta was an elaborate process within a controlled environment, which saw the photographer continuously adding props to his repertoire. One of those items includes a Peugeot 203, which Keïta owned; it appears in a stunning untitled photograph dated 1949-1955, in which three women of different ages pose against the side of the car. At the far right end of the photograph, a man leans on the hood of the car, his body carefully cropped to reveal only his right arm. And for the piece de resistance in that portrait: In a playful nod to the art of Keïta’s photography, his own reflection is seen in the body of the car, near the front right wheel.

Keïta’s photographic compositions are so well researched and wonderfully complex, it is easy to see why, and how, he was so ahead of his time. Pigozzi, who recalls Keïta as “an elegant, wonderful, and discreet man,” has hailed the photographer, who died in 2001, as one of the “five most important [photographers] of the 21st century, in the same category as Irving Penn.” ■

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