

# SEYDOU KEÏTA

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JUNE 22 - SEPTEMBER 1 DUBAI



In 1991, I went to a small exhibition in New York on African art, and I stumbled on two photographs that said "Photographer unknown, Mali". I was so impressed by the originality and beauty of these pictures that I asked my curator, André Magnin, to go to Bamako, Mali and find the person who took these wonderful images. After a few days, André found an old man sitting on a big metal case that contained about 10,000 negatives. The old man was Seydou Keïta. We started working with Seydou; we published books, we organized shows in museums around the world, and we restored a lot of his negatives.

My admiration for Seydou Keïta is total. He was completely self-taught, and had the unique habit of taking only one photograph per sitting, which is absolutely amazing when you consider that modern photographers take dozens and dozens of photographs to get a good one.

Keïta was a master at using natural light, he was a brilliant art director, and he was also incredibly good at positioning the hands of his subjects in such elegant ways in all his portraits.

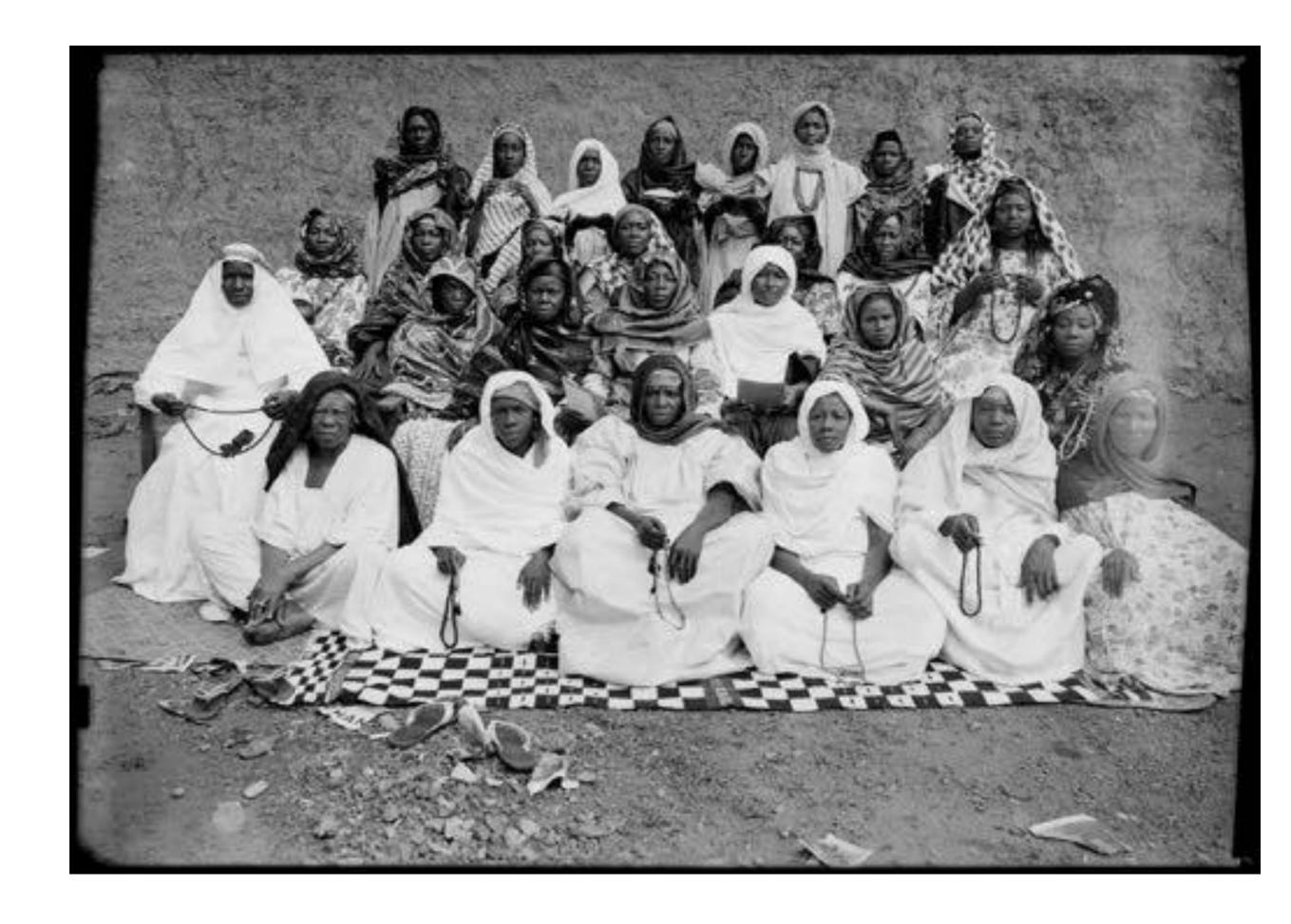
Seydou Keïta was also a clever businessman; he was in the business of renting costumes and jewelry to be worn in his photographs. Also, if you were willing to pay more money, he would even add a radio, or some other modern accessory to the photo, even a car.

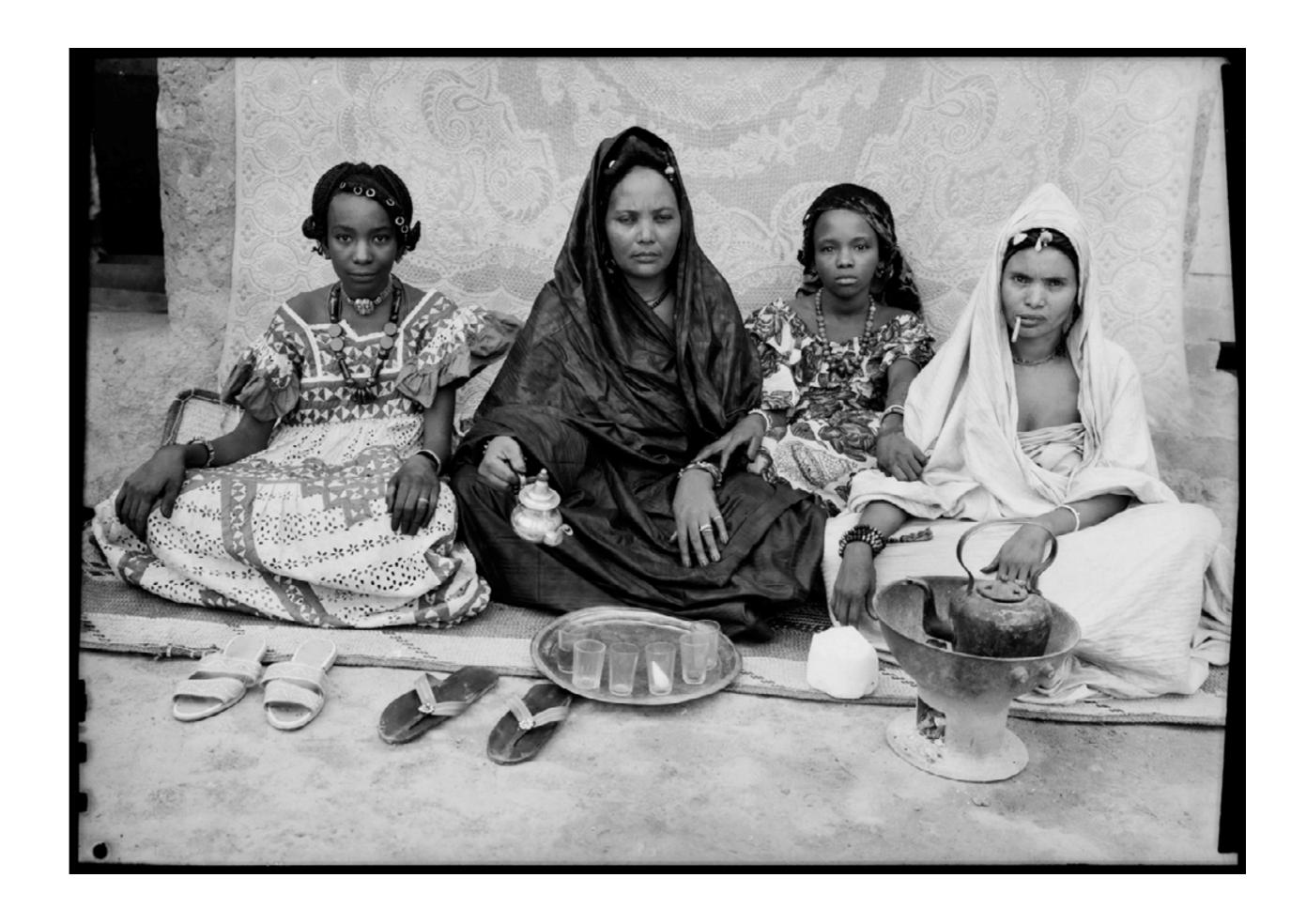
I feel that Seydou Keïta should be considered one of the greatest portrait photographers of the 20th century; on the same level as Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and August Sander.

Jean Pigozzi







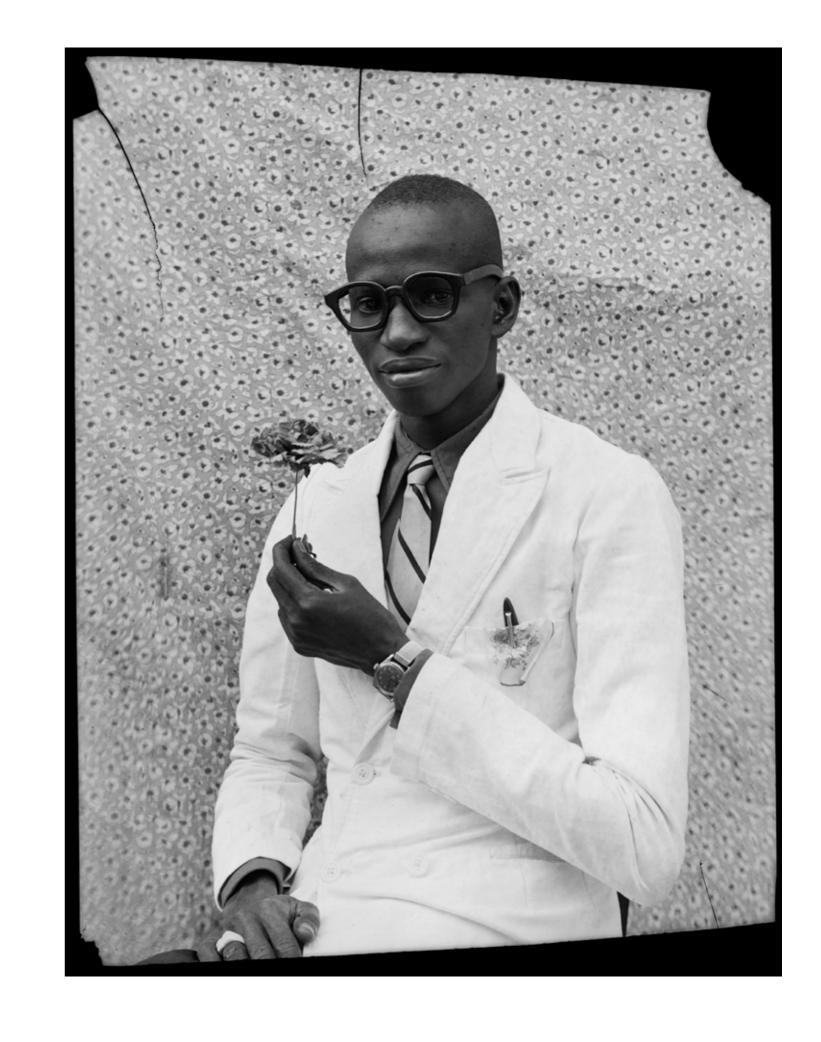


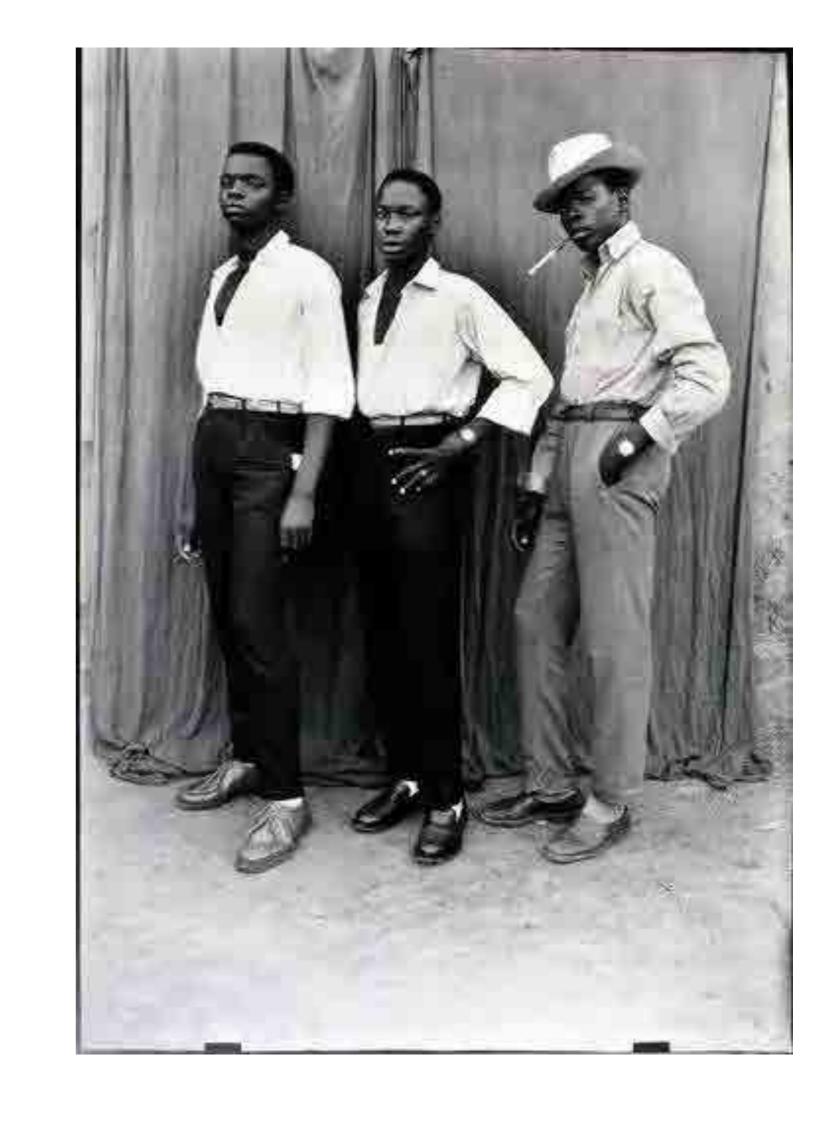


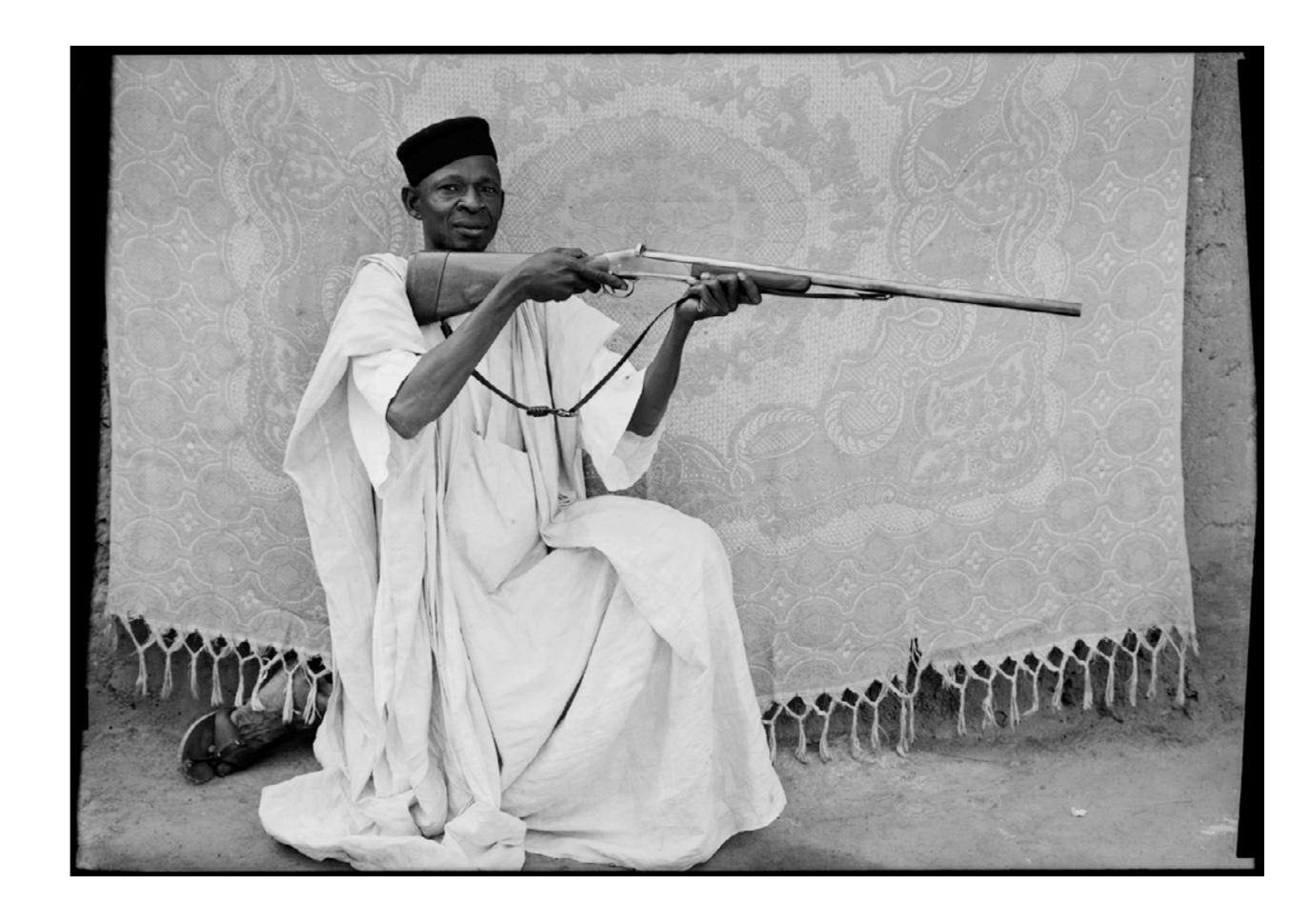
*Untitled,* 1959 Modern gelatin silver print 110 x 170 cm

Following Page, Untitled, 1949-1955 Modern gelatin silver print 170 x 110 cm

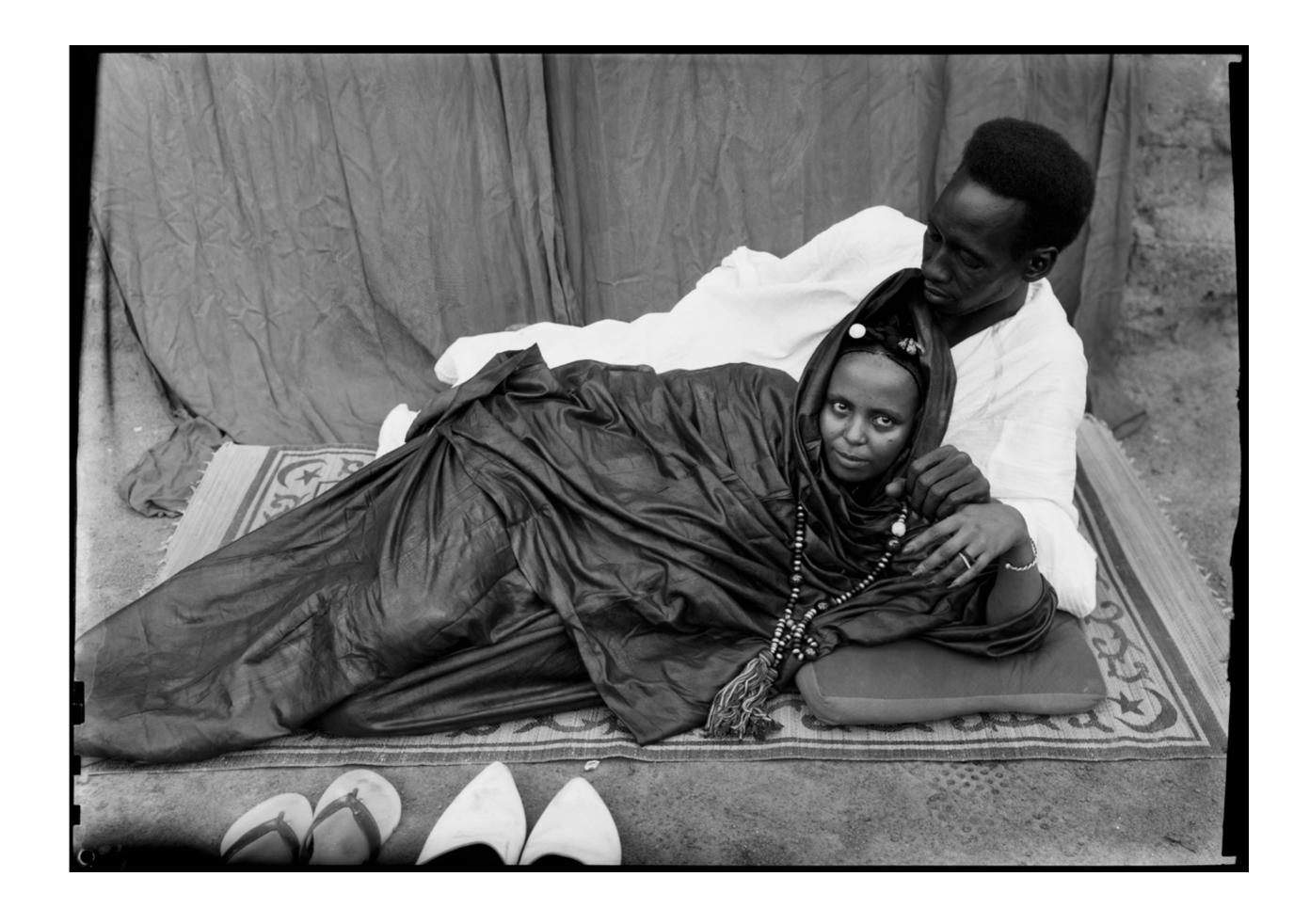


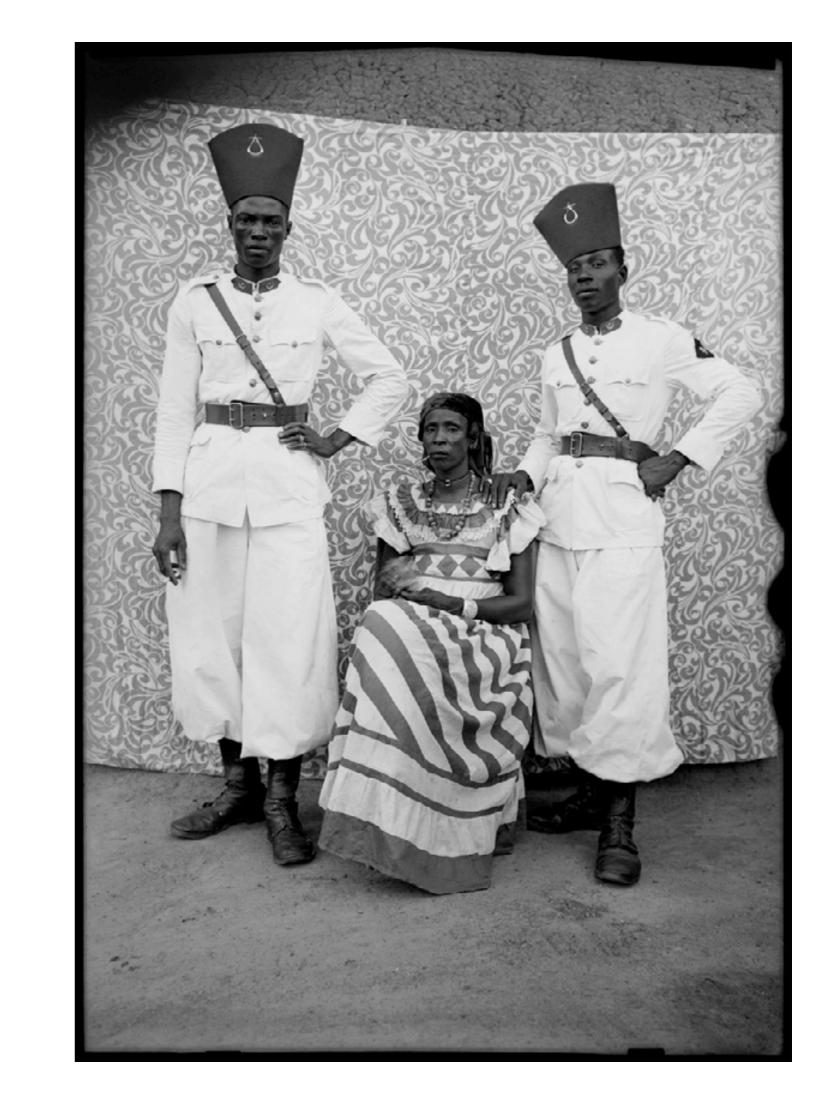








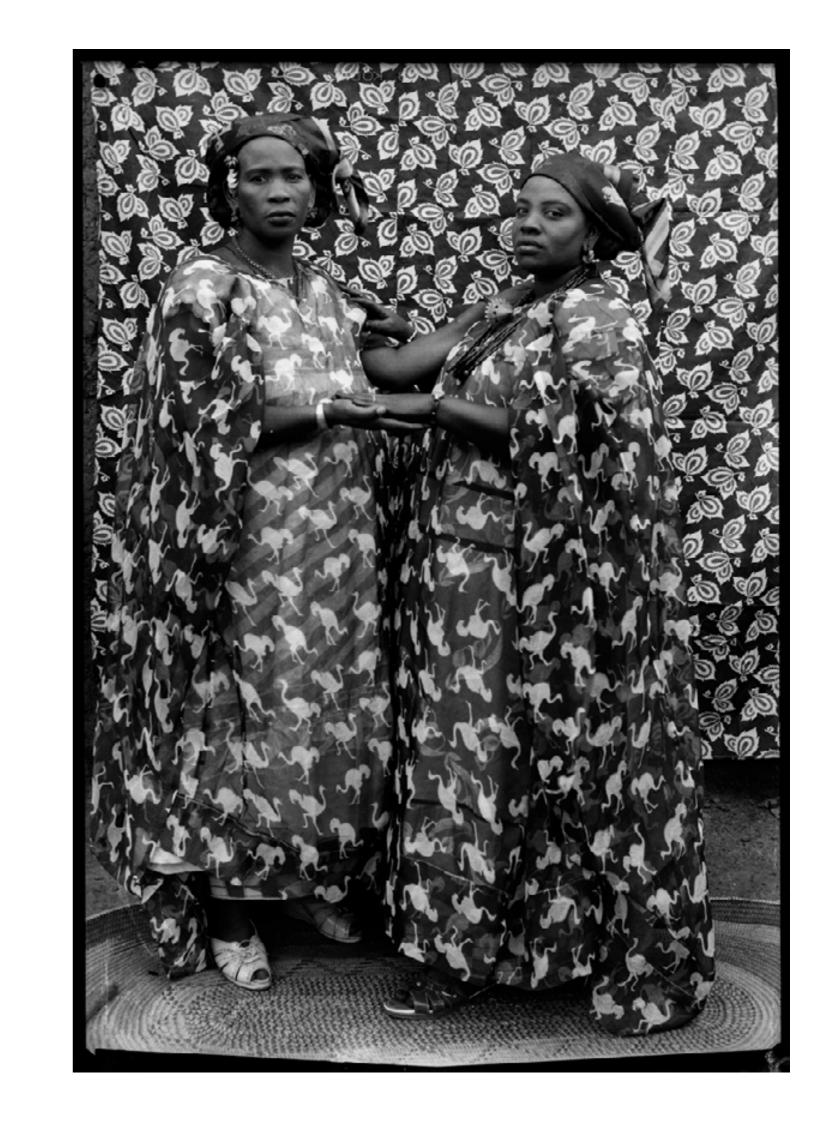


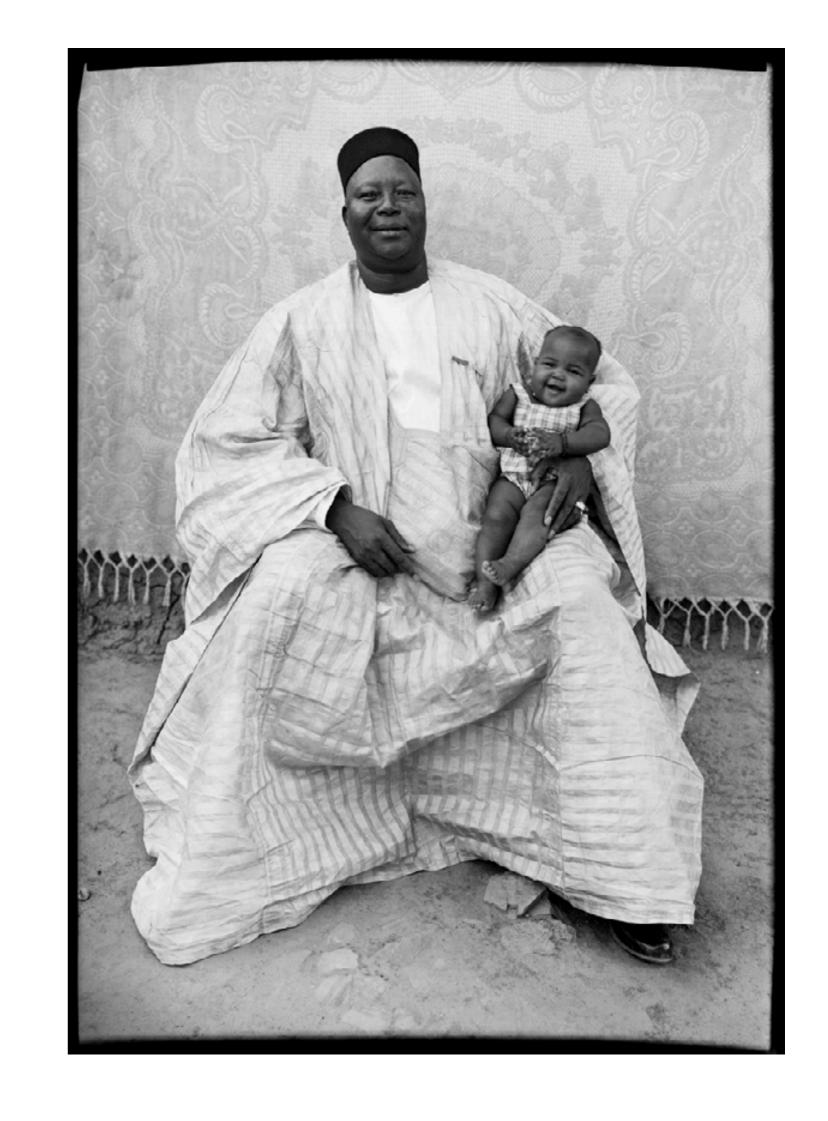


*Untitled,* 1953-1957 Modern gelatin silver print 110 x 170 cm

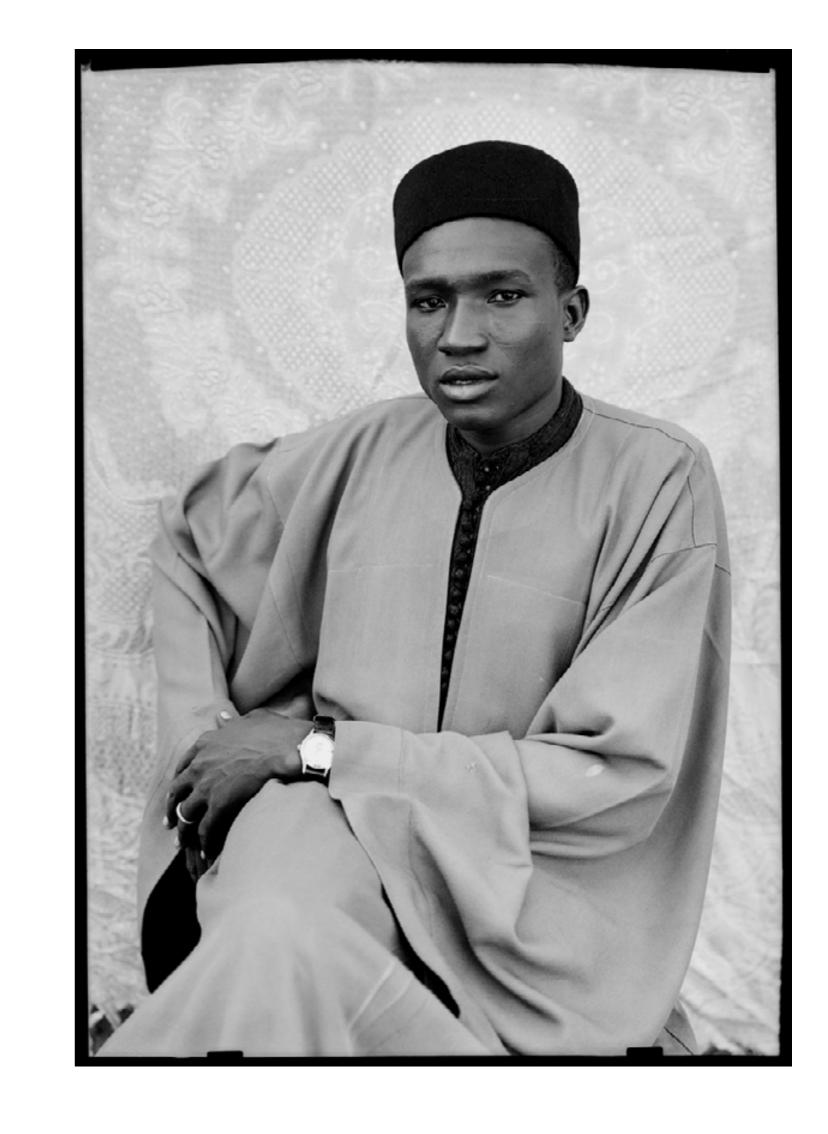
Following Page, Untitled, 1953-1957 Modern gelatin silver print 170 x 110 cm



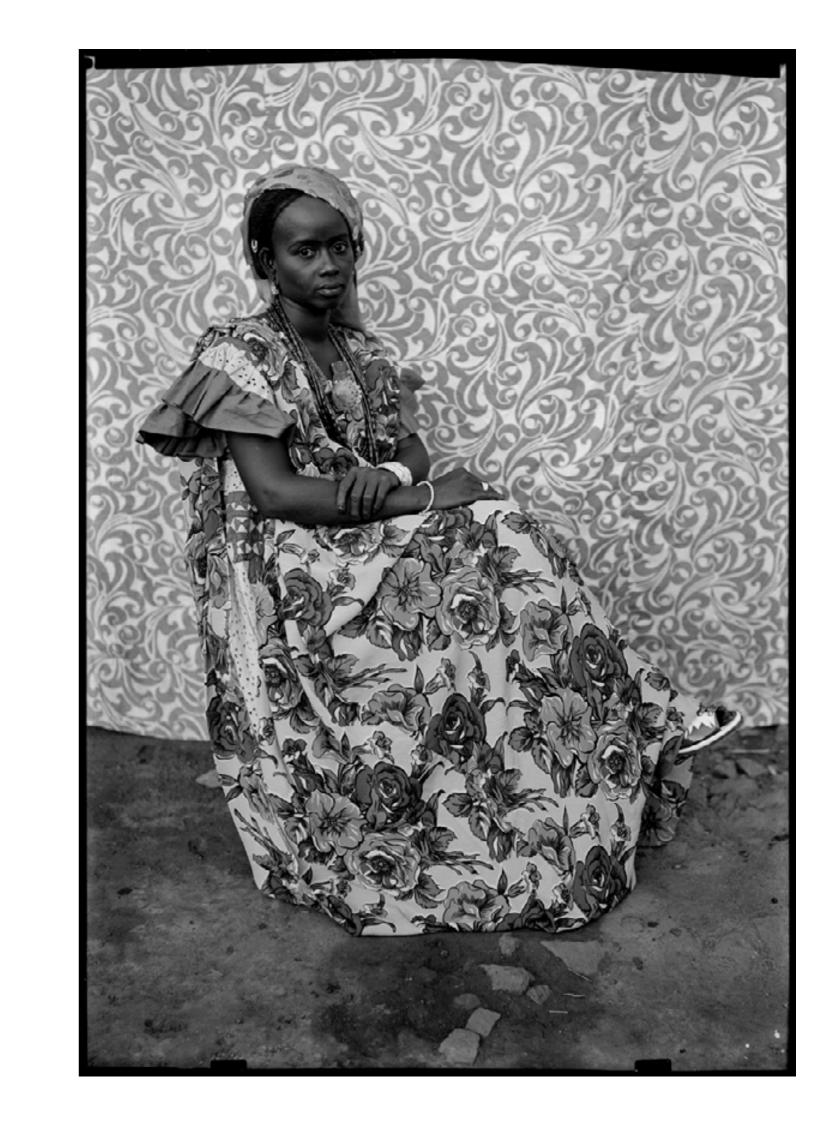






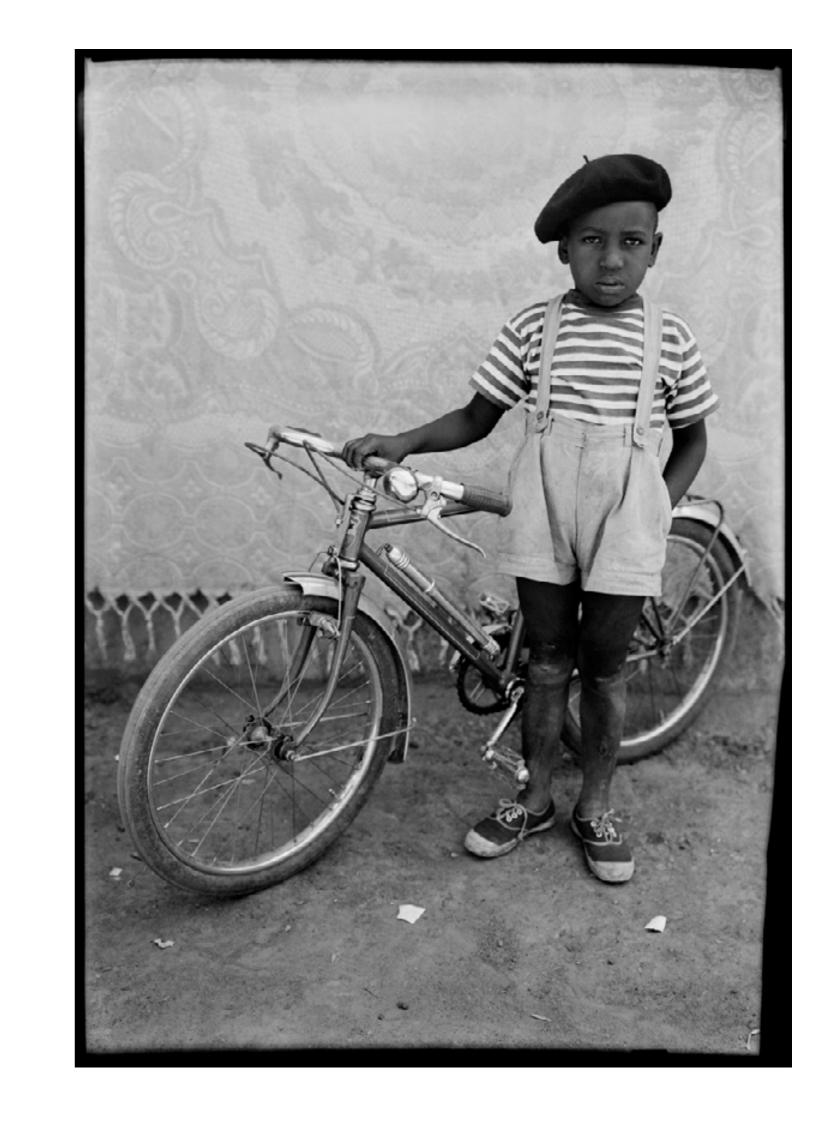


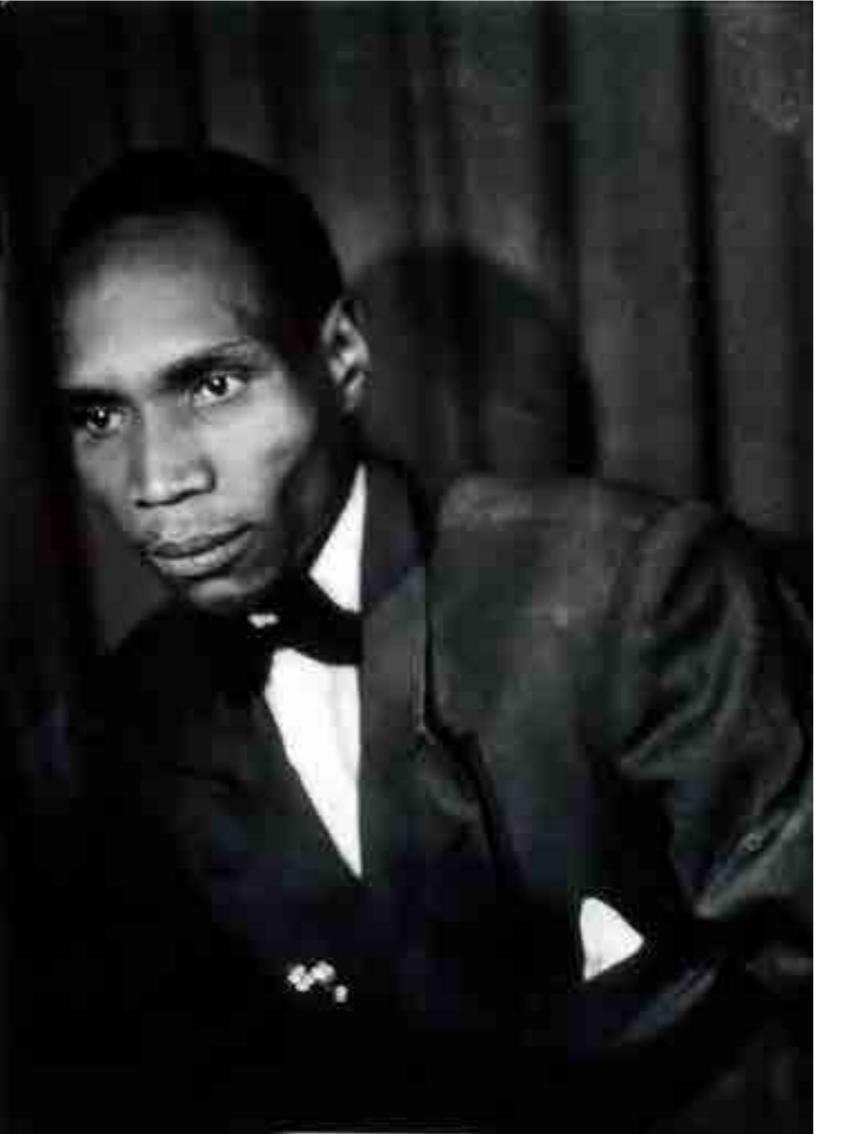
*Untitled,* 1948-1954 Modern gelatin silver print 110 x 170 cm











Seydou Keïta is regarded as the most celebrated African studio photographer of his time. His work, composed essentially of black and white portraits, made in his studio in Bamako from 1948 to 1962, was discovered in the West in the early 1990s, and has since been exhibited in major museums and featured in numerous publications. Inventive and highly modern, his emphasis on the essential components of portrait photography—light, subject, framing—firmly establishes Keïta among the twentieth-century masters of the genre.

Keïta was initially a "studiotiste" who was very famous in Mali and throughout West Africa, thanks to his understanding of the pose, the quality of his prints and the staging of his portraits. Keïta's photographs eloquently portray the changes in urban Malian society during its era of transition from a cosmopolitan French colony to an independent capital.

Born around 1921 in Bamako, at the time the capital of French Sudan, one of the French colonies in West Africa, Keïta was the eldest of five children. His ancestors were from the Soundyata Keïta clan, founder of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century, and the Touré family, one of the three founding families of the city of Bamako. Keïta did not attend school, but became at the age of seven an apprentice carpenter with his father and uncle, who were both educated. In 1935, his uncle Tiémoko, who was very fond of Keïta, came back from a trip to Senegal with a Kodak Brownie, a 6x9 "box" camera with film that took 8 pictures. Keïta was immediately fascinated by the device and convinced his uncle to give it to him. He began photographing his family and the people around him, particularly the apprentices in the carpentry shop.

"I was 14, these were my first pictures and it was the most important moment of my life." His first shots are often clumsy, and even blurred, but Keïta was passionate and he persevered. He had his films developed at the Sudanese Photo Hall, the first camera equipment shop in Bamako, opened by a Frenchman, Pierre Garnier, who gave him a few tips on technique.

Though entirely self-taught, Keïta began working as a professional photographer from 1939, taking photographs on the street or in the homes of clients, while continuing to hold his job as a carpenter. He managed to make a good living

with photography, which enabled him to provide his family with regular income. Though he was never formally instructed, Keïta acknowledged having received advice and training from Mountaga Dembele (aka Kouyaté) when it came to developing. This teacher and photographer, a Bamako personality who joined the colonial infantry and was sent to the front, returned to Bamako to open a studio around 1945, where he would train several indigenous photographers. "(...) when Mountaga saw that I was competent, he left me his lab and every night, I was going to his place in Medina to make his prints in addition to mine. It was obligatory. At that time, I had already taken a lot of photos and I was starting to be known." Keïta then acquired a camera with a folding chamber, which was easier to handle.

Apart from this technical training, Keïta never had a mentor in photography. He had never seen books about photography or even painting, and the only publication he consulted from time to time was the catalog of the French company *Manufrance*, which in those days was illustrated with drawings. Likewise, in the latter part of his life in the late 1990s, when he traveled to numerous exhibitions of his work in Europe and the US, he met leading contemporary photographers who would occasionally give him their books of photographs. André Magnin found these later in Keïta's house, their packaging intact. Keïta had never opened them.

Seeing that Keïta was beginning to assert himself as a photographer, his father offered him part of the family property, located in Bamako-Coura, a new and lively neighborhood in the western part of the capital. This is where Keïta opened his studio in 1948, near the train station and many other places that attracted crowds, such as the zoo, the Rose market, the Sudan Club, Republic Square and the Cathedral. His former apprentice carpenters were the "beaters" around the station, showing travelers Seydou's printed "cards". Also in 1948, Keïta married for the first time. He would go on to have a total of six wives and twenty-one children.

For nearly 15 years, Keïta ran the most famous photo studio in Bamako, thanks to his talent, the quality of his prints and a certain business acumen. He was quickly sought after by eager patrons from all classes and walks of life, who came to have their photo taken—an event considered of

high personal importance at the time. Like many professional photographers, Keïta furnished his studio with numerous props, from backdrops and costumes to Vespas and luxury cars. He sometimes received more than 40 customers a day, more or less well-to-do and sometimes from other West African countries, particularly Senegal. Notables, colonial administration employees, merchants, military officers, teachers, housewives, mothers and youths posed in Western outfits or traditional robes, wearing the various clothes and accessories Keïta made available to them: suits, ties, hats, glasses, watches, radios, etc. Women mainly chose traditional costumes that Keïta carefully adjusted, adding pieces of jewelry. Some ladies would bring several ensembles for the same photo shoot. Keïta also used various fabrics for backgrounds, starting with his own bedspread; since he would change it every two to three years, this later enabled him to give his photos an approximate date. In many of his photographs, often the ones that are the most popular, the play between the patterns of the dresses and the backgrounds creates very graphic compositions. Keïta always preferred natural light, and many of his shoots took place in the courtyard outside his studio. He also used artificial light, often at night, with curtains as a plain background. From 1949 onwards, he took most of his portraits with a 13x18 view camera, which he developed from contacts without an enlarger, and with only one shoot per customer. This format was very successful at the time, because it could easily be sent by mail to relatives and friends. He filed the negatives carefully, in case customers came back for more prints, and cleaned them once a year. Some customers, however, chose to keep their negatives. During his rare moments of leisure, Keïta liked to go fishing and to the cinema. Keïta always said he lived very well from his photography. He bought himself a Peugeot 203 and a Simca Versailles, two luxury cars at the time in Bamako.

Mali gained its independence in 1960 and elected President Modibo Keïta to head a socialist government. The president was related to the Keïta family and had come several times to the photographer's studio to have his portrait taken. In 1963, the director of the security services recruited Keïta as official photographer. Keïta had little choice but to accept. Soon after, Keïta stopped working in his studio entirely and spent the next 14 years as a government photographer.

He covered formal events, visits by heads of state, etc. while working for the security services. The archives of this period are not accessible and may have been destroyed.

In 1977, Seydou Keïta retired. He devoted his time to another passion, mechanics: he repaired moped engines and photographic equipment. We have no further information about Keïta's life until he was discovered by various Westerners in the early 1990s; his archive of over 10,000 negatives was gradually brought to light and Keïta has since achieved international recognition.

The exhibition "Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Arts" opened at the Center for African Arts in New York in May 1991. In this exhibition, which mixed traditional, folk and contemporary African art, the curator, the art historian Susan Vogel, presented some contact prints made from negatives she'd brought back from her travels in West Africa in the 1970s. These images included seven photographs by Seydou Keïta, credited to "Anonymous photographer, Bamako". Jean Pigozzi - collector of contemporary African art, and photographer - visited the exhibition and was struck by the beauty of these photos. He asked André Magnin, the curator of his collection, to track down this photographer. Magnin went to Bamako a few months later and met Keïta, who showed him his negatives, mostly well preserved. This launched a long collaboration. Magnin selected 921 negatives, brought them to France and started making prints in 50x60 format. He then showed them to Keïta in Bamako to get his approval and signature. Keïta was thrilled to discover the quality of his photographs in large formats, which he had not had the means to produce in his studio.

Sometime before that, during one of her many trips to Africa, the photographer Françoise Huguier also met Keïta in Bamako and discovered his work. With photographer Bernard Descamps, she began to develop a project to promote African photography. Their efforts eventually led to the first *Rencontres de la Photographie de Bamako* in 1994, the now famous Bamako photo festival, at which the work of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé was presented, among others. Furthering this burgeoning interest in African photography, the *Revue Noire*, a publication dedicated to contemporary African creation, was founded in 1991 in Paris.

In 1994, André Magnin organized the first solo exhibition of Seydou Keïta's modern 50x60 prints at the Cartier Foundation in Paris, for which the photographer was present. The exhibition was met with major success and travelled around the world, to the United States, Great Britain, Finland, Brazil, etc. This exhibition marked the beginning of the global "discovery" of Keïta's work, and his entry into the history of photography as one of the greatest portraitists of his time. In 1996, André Magnin did some experimental prints in Paris in 120x180 format. Keïta was amazed to "rediscover" his photos: "You can't imagine what it was like for me the first time I saw prints of my negatives in large-scale, no spots, clean and perfect. I knew then that my work was really, really good. The people in my pictures look so alive, almost as if they were standing in front of me."

In 1997, Magnin published the first monograph dedicated to Keïta's work with Scalo editions in Zurich, thanks to the renowned photography publisher Walter Keller. The same year, a number of galleries in Europe were beginning to show and sell the work of Keïta: Agnes B's Galerie du Jour, Paris; 51 Gallery, Antwerp; DV-Galeria, San Sebastian; Hackelbury Fine Art in London; Brancolini Grimaldi in Italy. A major exhibition was organized at the Gagosian Gallery in NY, with many large format prints. Magnin recalled: "Seydou Keïta made the trip to New York. We were in the heart of Manhattan, there was a big crowd, waiting to get their book signed. The Malian community living in New York came to pay homage, but so did the intellectual Manthia Diawara, accompanied by Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize for Literature, the Malian singer Rokia Traoré, the founder of the Real World Music label Peter Gabriel, founder of Atlantic Records Ahmet Ertegun, Walter Keller, of course, the American photographer Roy DeCarava, Nan Goldin, David Hammons, Alfredo Jaar, and naturally Jean Pigozzi. The Maysles brothers, Albert and David, followed Seydou, filming everything, all the way to a big photo store where he was presented with a Hasselblad. The evening of our departure, Keïta told me, very moved, that he could not even have dreamed such unforgettable moments...."

In 1998, the magazine *Harper's Bazaar* organized a photo shoot in Bamako with Keïta. In an open-air studio, with colorful African fabrics draped in the background, the photographer carefully adjusted the poses of his models and their dresses, just as

he had done in his studio 40 years earlier. Keïta died three years later in Paris.

- 1. Magnin, André, Youssouf Tata, *Seydou Keïta*. Zurich. Scalo, 1997
- 2. Lamunière, Michelle, (ed.) You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Art Museums, 2001.

Previous Page: Self Portrait, 1959, Modern gelatin silver print.

#### SEYDOU KEÏTA

Born 1921 in Bamako, Mali Died in 2001 in France

#### **SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

2016	Seydou Keïta, Grand Palais, Paris, France
2013	Seydou Keïta: From Jean Pigozzi's Collection, Moscow House of Photography, Moscow, Russia.
2010	Seydou Keïta, Beautiful Like That, Jack Bell Gallery, London, UK.
2008/2009	Seydou Keïta. Tate Modern, Level 5, London, UK.
2007	Seydou Keïta: Portraits from Mali, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Cleveland, OH, U.S.A.
2006	Seydou Keïta: Portraits, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA, U.S.A. Seydou Keïta: The Image King of Africa, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY, USA. Seydou Keïta, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.
2003	Mali Portraits by Seydou Keïta, The William Bennington Museum of Art, The University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, U.S.A.
2002/ 2003	Seydou Keïta: Portraits, Grany Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hills, CA.
2001	Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy.
2001	Seydou Keïta, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY. Seydou Keïta: Portraits from Mali, Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
1998-1999	Seydou Keïta, Saint Louis Museum of Art. Saint Louis, Missouri, U.S.A.
1998	Seydou Keïta, Institut Français d'Athènes, Athens, Greece. Seydou Keïta, Institut Français de Thessalonique, Thessalonique, Greece.
1997	Seydou Keïta. Gagosian Gallery, New York - U.S October 18-November 1, 1997. Traveled to: Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA, July 10-August 16, 1997. Seydou Keïta, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, U.S.A. Seydou Keïta, Galerie DV, San Sebastian, Spain Galerie DV, Madrid, Spain Seydou Keïta, Pinacoteca o Estado de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil.
1996	Seydou Keïta, Minneapolis Institut of Art Minneapolis - U.S.A. Seydou Keïta, Photographer: Portraits from Bamako, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. U.S.A.
1995	Festival «Jazz et Musiques Métisses», Musée d'Angoulême, Angoulême, France.  Seydou Keïta, Helsingin Taidehalli Helsingfors Konsthall, Helsinki, Finland.  Seydou Keïta, Espace Fernand Léger, Montreuil, France.

Seydou Keïta, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris, France.

1994/1995 «Black Movie», Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland Saint Gervais, Geneva, Switzerland. 1994 Seydou Keïta, Ginza Shiseido Art Space, Tokyo, Japan. Seydou Keïta: portraits de 1949 à 1964, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, France. **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS** 2014/2015 Look at Me! Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. 2014 Luminós/C/ity.Ordinary Joy: From the Pigozzi Contemporary African Art Collection, Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A. 2013 WHITE: Photography, Art, Design, Fashion, Film, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, Netherlands. Malian Portrait Photography, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, New Paltz, NY, U.S.A The Dorsky Alice and Horace Chandler Gallery and North Gallery. Keïta, Ojeikere, Sidibé, 11 Columbia, Monaco. Bamako Photo in Paris, Pavillon Carré de Baudouin, Paris, France. Focus sur la collection, Musée de la Fondation Zinsou, Ouidah, Benin. 2012 Six Yards Guaranteed Dutch Design, Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem, Netherlands. Who, What, Wear. Selections from the Permanent Collection, Studio Museum Harlem, New York, U.S.A. Africa/Africa, Centre d'art contemporain, Meymac, France. 2011 Paris Photo, Artur Walther Collection, Grand Palais, Paris, France. África: Objetos y Sujetos, Teatro Fernán Gómez, Centro de Arte, Madrid, Spain. Art Paris, Just Art! Grand Palais, Paris, France. 2010 Contemporary African Photography from the Walther Collection Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity, Neu-Ulm, Germany. African Stories, Marrakech Art Fair, Marrakech, Morocco. 2007 Why Africa? Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin, Italy. 2006 100% Africa, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain. Vive l'Afrique, Galerie du Jour – Agnès b. Tokyo, Japan. About Africa, part one Fifty One Fine Art Photography, Antwerp, Belgium. 2005 Arts of Africa, Grimaldi Forum, Monaco, France. African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection, Museum of Fine Art Houston, Houston – U.S.A Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., U.S.A. A hundred years of children (travelling exhibition): \* The Bunkamura Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan \* Granship, Shizuoka, Japan \* The Niigata Bandaijima Art Museum, Niigata, Japan. Collection Remixed, Bronx Museum of Arts, Bronx, NY.

Contact: 9th Annual Toronto Photography Festival, Alliance Francaise Toronto,

Toronto, Canada. Corporate Culture, The Fleming Collection, London, UK. Click, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa. Keïta and Malick Sidibé, The Sheldon Art Galleries, St. Louis, MO. 2004/2005 Engaging the Camera: African Women, Portraits, and Photographs of Hector Acebes, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, GA, U.S.A. 2004 Fifty One celebrates four years, Fifty One Fine Art Photography, Antwerp, Belgium. Skin Deep, Cook Fine Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Je m'installe aux abattoirs, La collection d'art contemporain d'agnès b. Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France. Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan. AIM 24: Portraits and Places, Bronx Museum of Art, Bronx, NY, U.S.A.. 2003/2004 Village Global: Années 60, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, Montréal, Canada, October 2, 2003-January 18, 2004. Traveled to: Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, U.S.A. Go Johnny Go! The Electric Guitar – Art and Myth, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria. 2003 Les Ateliers des Désirs, Centre Culturel Français de Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany. Patchworking, Produzentengalerie, Hamburg, Germany. Fables de l'Identité: Oeuvres de la Collection NSM Vie/ABN AMRO, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris, France. Portraits of Pride – Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé and Samuel Fosso, Moderna Museet c/o Enkehuset, Stockholm, Sweden, September 14-October 6, 2002. Traveled to: Norskt Fotomuseum, Oslo, Norway. Alter Ego: Anthropologies Involontaires, Mundaneum Museum, Mons, Belgium, June 20-October 31, 2002. Traveled to: Hotel de Sully, Paris, France, January 17-March 23, 2003. The Short Century Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994. 2001/2002 P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.. Museum of Contemporary Art. Chicago, IL, U.S.A. House of World Cultures in the Martin-Gropius-Bau. Berlin, Germany. Museum Villa Stuck. Munich, Germany. 2002 Face Time, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA., U.S.A. 2001 You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, September 1-December 16, 2001. Traveled to: UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, February 9-May 5, 2002; Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL, September 21, 2002-January 5, 2003; National Portrait Gallery, London, England, March 5-June 8, 2003; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA, June 28-August 31, 2003. Flash Afrique: Fotografie aus Westafrika, Kunsthalle, Wien, Germany. XVI International Video and Multimedia Arts Festival, Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France. I Ka Nyi Tan Seydou Keïta e Malick Sidibé fotografi a Bamako Museo Hendrick Christian Andersen. Rome, Italy. 2000 Africa: Past-Present: Malick Sidibé, Seydou Keïta, P.K. Apagya, Depara, CA. Azaglo and Ojeikere, Fifty One Fine Art Photography, Antwerp, Belgium.

2000 The Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago, U.S.A. 1999 L'Afrique Independente, Partobject Gallery, Carrboro, NC, U.S.A. PhotoEspana 99, Madrid, Spain. Kunst-Welten im Dialog von Gauguin zur Globalen Gegenwart/Glabal Art-Rheinland 2000, Museum Ludwig Koln, Cologne, Germany. 1998 Roteiros, Roteiros, Roteiros, Roteiros, XXIV Bienal de São Paolo, São Paolo, Brazil, 1998. Moscow 2nd Biennal for Photography, Moscow, Russia. 1997 Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa. 1996 In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, U.S.A.. Big City Artists from Africa, Serpentine Gallery, London, U.K. 1995 Seydou Keïta & Malik Sidibé, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, U.K. Counter Cultures: Photography and Image Formation in a Multicultural Society, The Netherlands Photography Institute, Rotterdam, Netherlands. Multiple Exposure – The Group Portrait in Photography, The Bruce Museum Greenwich, Connecticut, U.S.A. Traveled to: Bayly Art Museum Charlottesville, Virginia, U.S.A; Oakville Galleries Oakville, Ontario, Canada. Self Evident, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, U.K. Rimes et regards, Espace Alain Affelou, Paris, France. 1994 Premières Rencontres Photographiques de Bamako, Bamako, Mali. 1993 24th Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles, France. Images of Africa, Copenhagen, Denmark. 1993 Troisièmes Rencontres Photographiques de Normandie, Rouen, France Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art, Espace Iyonnais d'art contemporain, Lvon, France. 1991 Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art, The Center for African Art and the New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York, U.S.A.. SELECTED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

Voilà, Le Monde Dans La Tête, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France.

21C Museum Foundation, Louisville, KY Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH Bronx Museum of Art, Bronx, NY CAAC - The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva, Switzerland Department of State Collection, Washington D.C. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY Department of Arts of Africa/Oceania, New York, NY Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Norton Family Collection, Santa Monica, CA
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ
Saint Louis Museum of Art, Saint Louis, MO
Trinity College, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT
Musée National du Mali, Bamako

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Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, *Mémoires Vives*, 30 an Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 2014, Exhibition catalogue.

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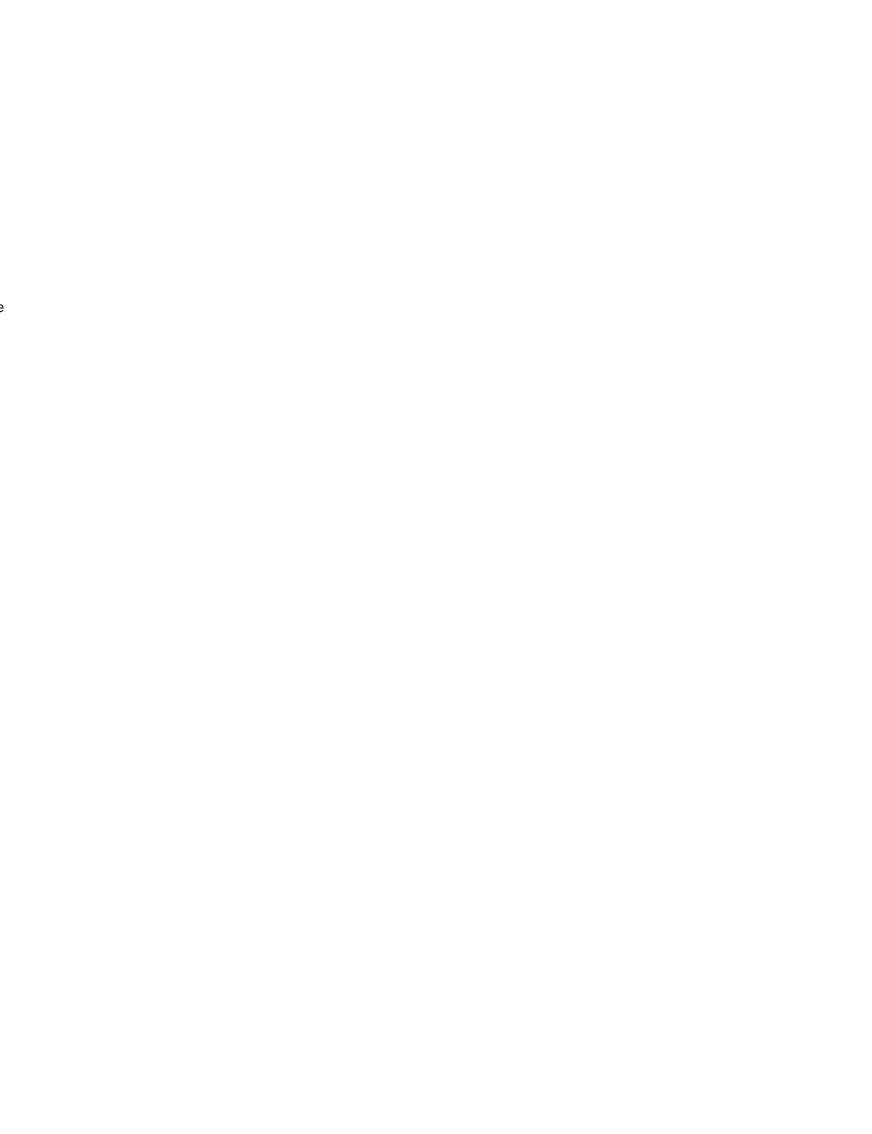
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### SEYDOU KEÏTA

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