

local general exhibition

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

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PRESS PREVIEW

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EXHIBITION OF AFRICAN NEGRO SCULPTURE

TO GO ON VIEW AT MUSEUM

Thirty-two enlarged camera studies of examples of African Negro sculpture and seven original sculptures will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from July 2 through September 14, in an exhibition called UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN NEGRO SCULPTURE.

The series of photographic studies are the work of "Life" photographer Eliot Elisofon. Two of the original sculptures in the exhibition are from Mr. Elisofon's own collection and these appear side by side with their owner's photographic analyses of their form. Other camera studies document outstanding examples from European ethnological museums and private collections and from the collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller who has lent to the exhibition five original pieces in wood: individual figures and masks from the Ivory Coast, French Sudan, and Gabun regions. The exhibition was prepared by the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions and will tour other museums and university galleries throughout the country after this New York showing. The design and installation were by Carlus Dyer.

The relation of African art to modern art is noted in an introductory statement which points out that Negro sculpture has played an important role in the development of modern Western art, while modern art, in turn, has opened our eyes to the bold structure and expressive force of African art and brought it out of the ethnologist's cabinet and into the art museum.

In his camera studies, Mr. Elisofon has sometimes selected particular sections of each sculpture to photograph and in some instances has enlarged the details to many times the size of the original. He has varied the lighting so that surface details are either emphasized or on other occasions deliberately obscured so that the broader design of the sculpture receives the emphasis. Front, back and profile views give some idea of the total effect of sculpture in the round and one picture shows five views of a very small Dogon piece, all exposed on

the same negative, following the Cubist device of simultaneously seeing around an object rendered on one plane.

The photographer's purpose in making these studies is outlined in a statement which accompanies the exhibition. In this statement Mr. Elisofon says:

The Westerner of European descent grows up with certain deep rooted beliefs....We find it easier to appreciate a Chartres window than an Ajanta fresco because the content of one is Christian and the other Hindu. There is also the fact that the different cultures have developed different conventions of representation. Thus Western Art usually renders the human figure with head one-to-eight in proportion to the body. The motivations which produced African Negro sculpture are usually unlike those which produced our own....The major block to easy appreciation of Negro African art is the freedom of the native artist from the mere copying of nature. This does not mean, however, that the African artist is a truly free agent. Within the confines of certain traditions and local customs, the artist still produces a highly personal work....Although the various styles are so highly developed that a student can recognize without any difficulty the group from which a sculpture comes....

To help explain the plastic qualities of this sculpture I began in 1951 to photograph it in such a manner that only one narrow aspect of the object came under critical observation....I found it helpful, in some cases, to make an extreme enlargement of a head from its actual two inches to fourteen, in order to facilitate the study of the facial expression. In another case...three studies were made: a close-up of the head...a profile photograph of the head and shoulders to demonstrate...the balance of chin with head and breasts with shoulders...and two studies of the torso...cutting off the head and feet in order to dramatize the abstract construction of the remaining part.

Mr. Elisofon has made three trips through Africa with his camera and has also photographed African art in museums in Paris, London and Brussels. He began his own collection in the late 1930s. Selections from his extensive documentation of African sculpture in photographs were on view at the Art Institute of Chicago last year.