

The man who captured *happiness*



Malick Sidibé was born in around 1935 in Soloba, Mali, at a time when precise birth registrations were hardly a priority. He was to die in April this year after a lifetime of photographic achievements – including being the only African to be awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale, in 2007.

He was to tell the *Why Africa?* 2008 exhibition's curators, for the eponymous book *Why Africa: Le Collezione Pigozzi* that accompanied the Turin show: "I don't know if I'm an artist, but I am a good photographer. I know how to capture precise instants and gestures, and to find nice poses. Photography is the art of observation. It is also an act of humanism among human beings."

Sidibé was to add some biographical detail: "I started out by studying drawing and entered the [French] Sudan School of Arts and Crafts. In 1955 I was hired to do odd jobs in a studio. The following year I bought myself a camera and started making portraits and doing some photo journalism.

"In 1957, I opened my own studio, 'Studio Malick', where I am still working now.

"I believe in the power of images, which is why I invested myself totally, to add dimension to the subject matter. Photography is a form of writing. I've recorded the history of my country since it became independent like many African countries. I was appreciated because I looked for ways of recording moments of happiness. I displayed photographs of local nightlife in front of my studio. Everyone could see them, which is how I developed a clientele.

"I captured social change and the new life of young people in Mali. My work helped my country, even on an economic level. Young people wanted to have very beautiful clothes, which obliged them to change their image. In my photos, there is a truth about Africa that proves that the stereotyped views are lies. The happy moments and the hope you see in them are the opposite of poverty and war.

"As to my studio portraits, I took



Left: Joyful revellers show their moves on the dancefloor. Middle: Dancers, Christmas Eve 1963. Bottom: A family portrait in Studio Malick. Photographs © Malick Sidibé, courtesy Gallery Magnin-A, Paris

pictures that were different. You had to be nice to someone before you took their picture. I related to people, got them to make special poses. I created lighting techniques. I invented my own style.

"My recognition and success delighted me morally, made me wealthier, but did not change my life. I was able to share this with others and give to the needy. My recognition has been a source of pleasure to my country, Mali, which feels I have honoured it. I didn't take these photos to please the West, but the West discovered them.

"I was already in the 'setting sun' when they took over. At the start of the 1990s, collectors and foreign museums started to become interested in me. Not the African museums. My passion has been amply rewarded, and the exhibitions have added stature to my work. I could never have achieved that myself. Now that my pictures are exhibited almost everywhere in the world, I have become proud of my works."

Jean Pigozzi, whose collection was shown in Turin and who did so much to ensure Sidibé's work found the recognition it deserved, told *New African*: "The great portrait photographer Seydou Keita* introduced me to his younger friend, Malick Sidibé. I immediately fell in love with Sidibé's fantastic nightlife and party photographs that he took from 1956 onwards in Bamako, Mali.

"These photographs exude such life, fun and happiness. They also were so contemporary and show us the fabulous clothing that the young people were wearing in those years. It is with great sadness that I learned about the passing of this master."

* Coincidentally, Seydou Keita has a large photographic exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris: www.grandpalais.fr/en/event/seydou-keita