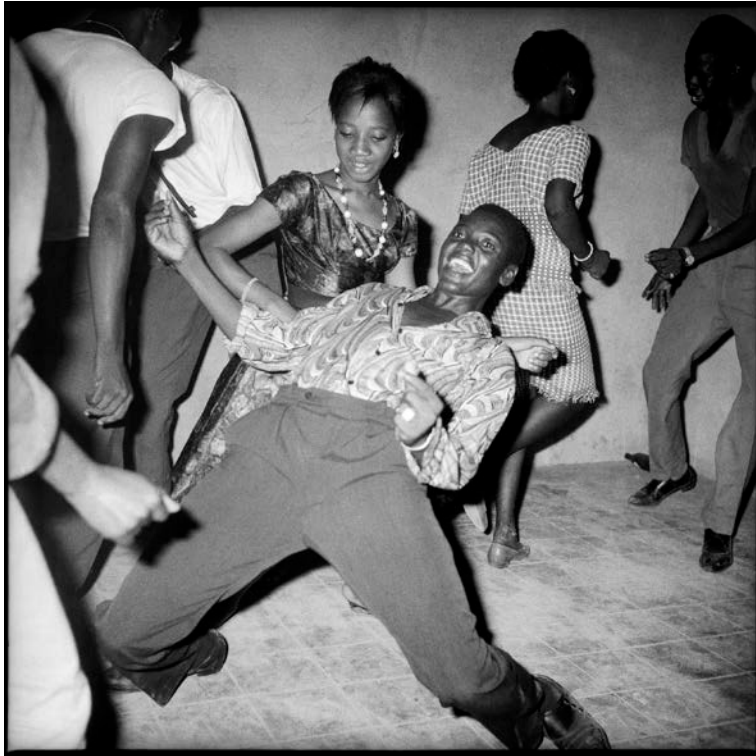


Malick Sidibé's Mali: Scenes of a Rollicking Night Life

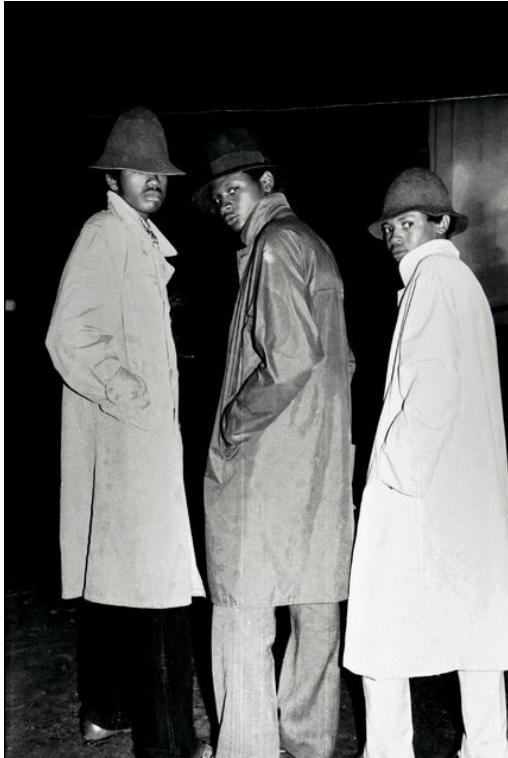
By ANDREW DICKSON, NOV. 10, 2017



Malick Sidibé's "Regardez-moi!," from 1962, captures the joy of the night life in Bamako, Mali, in the first flush of independence from French colonial rule. Credit Malick Sidibé/Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris

PARIS — At the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in the Montparnasse district, the party was swinging. A group of chic Parisians was bobbing absent-mindedly to "San Francisco," by the Gallic rock legend Johnny Hallyday, which was blasting through the foyer. Others were picking through a jumble of costumes and props in an improvised photo studio. One woman had squeezed into a banana-yellow African batik dress; her partner had opted for retro sunglasses and an African feather wand. The couple regarded themselves with approval in a mirror, and struck a pose for a waiting photographer.

Parisian art galleries aren't renowned for their decadent party spirit, at least not on weekday afternoons. But the Cartier Foundation was doing its utmost to get into the groove. A few days earlier, it had opened "Mali Twist," a show dedicated to the renowned Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, and now a highlight of this year's Paris Photo week. Some 250 black-and-white photographs crowd every inch of wall. In one, a pair of teenage boys in wildly patterned bell bottoms pose moodily with a guitar. Nearby, a glacially sophisticated young woman in shades and a tailored suit looks as if she were about to set off down a catwalk.



For many young people in Bamako in the 1960s and '70s, being photographed by Sidibé was a rite of passage. Credit Malick Sidibé/André Magnin

Billed as the largest Sidibé retrospective ever staged, and the first in continental Europe since the photographer's death last year, "Mali Twist" pays tribute to a man who produced electrifyingly modern images of night life in the country's capital, Bamako, in the 1960s and '70s. On view through Feb. 25, it also retells one of the most remarkable stories in contemporary art. After growing up in rural Mali, the son of a stock breeder, Sidibé worked full time as a photographer for just a few decades, before disappearing into obscurity. After being "discovered" by Western curators in the '90s, he ended up being awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2007, the first photographer — and the first artist from Africa — ever to win that honor.

The show's curator, André Magnin, recalled how he first encountered Sidibé, on a trip to Bamako in 1992. He had arrived on a mission to track down a mysterious photographer whose work he'd seen in New York. That man was Seydou Keïta, whose pensive studio portraits of Malians in the 1950s later won worldwide acclaim. Mr. Magnin contacted him, and while in Bamako, he also met a man who spent his time mending cameras and taking passport photos in a run-down joint called Studio Malick.

"In one night, in a few minutes, I met Keïta and Sidibé, two masters," Mr. Magnin said, adding, "It was like a dream."



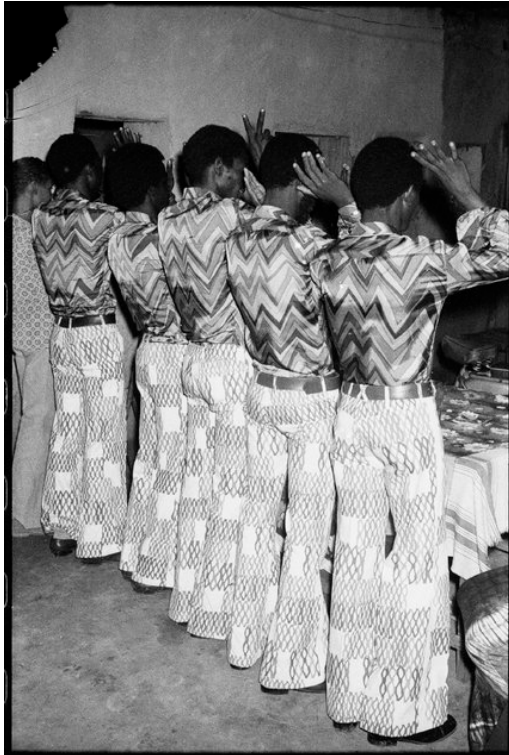
A young man poses in Sidibé's studio in "Un Ye-Ye en Position," from 1963. Credit Malick Sidibé/Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris

The images that Mr. Magnin and his colleague Françoise Huguier turned up astonished the art world, and changed perceptions of African visual culture for good. Accustomed to depictions of remote tribes or shots of famine and conflict, Western viewers could scarcely believe their eyes: The idea that West African baby boomers spent the 1960s doing the twist or grooving to the Rolling Stones, like their contemporaries in Minneapolis and Marseille, was more than many could comprehend.

Wild Nights on Bamako's Dance Floors

Manthia Diawara, a filmmaker who now teaches at New York University, grew up a few streets away from Studio Malick and was part of a teenage group that called itself Les Rockers. In a telephone interview from Senegal, he recalled how sitting for Sidibé became a rite of passage: "You went to your tailor with your James Brown album, and you said to him, 'I want my jacket to look exactly like this,' and you'd do your hair like him, everything else. Then Malick would take your picture and make you immortal."

The renowned Malian musician Boubacar Traoré — whose hypnotic song "Mali Twist" gives the exhibition at the Cartier Foundation its name — also grew up on the scene. He and his friends pooled money to host semi-legal "surprise parties," jiving to James Brown, Otis Redding and the Beatles, as well as salsa and European music. "The nights were magnificent," he said in an interview. "It was a time without worries. Everybody was happy."



Sidibé's night-life photos don't just show the dance floor — they also show the painstaking preparations for a night out. Credit Malick Sidibé/The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva

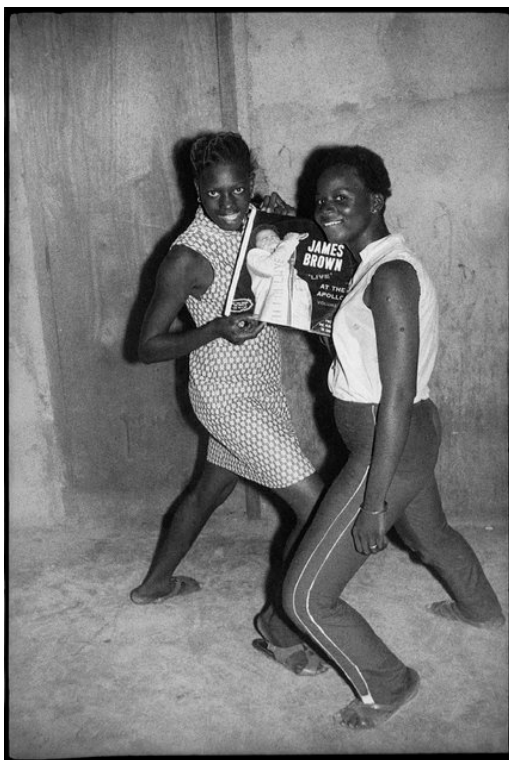
For a roving photographer like Sidibé, keeping up with this hectic night life wasn't easy: After long days at the studio, he spent much of the 1960s and early '70s racing between these parties, sometimes as many as four a night. He would announce his arrival by setting off a flash gun, then take hundreds of snaps of people cavorting, before heading back to the studio to develop negatives, then put prints on display for sale.



“Nuit de Noël (Happy-Club),” taken on Christmas Eve 1963, is probably Sidibé’s most famous photograph. Credit Malick Sidibé/Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris

One of Sidibé’s photographs has become deservedly famous: “Nuit de Noël (Happy-Club)” from 1963. It portrays a brother and sister dancing, he in a tie and flawless safari suit, she barefoot but in a full-skirted dress. The pair are concentrating hard, but have radiant half-smiles. “You can see from their eyes how happy they were,” Mr. Magnin said. “All these pictures are full of tenderness, full of love.”

Yet there is more to Sidibé’s photographs than straightforward joy, Mr. Diawara emphasized: They capture a fragile moment in Malian history, when the country was still in the first flush of independence from French colonial rule. “There was so much confidence in these pictures,” he said. “We honestly believed in the image we were projecting. There was so much power.”



Bamako’s clubs in the 1960s and ’70s featured an eclectic mix of American, French and British pop music, as well as other styles. Credit Malick Sidibé/Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris

After the socialist ruler Modibo Keita was toppled by a military coup in 1969, the atmosphere became more repressive. Mr. Diawara said that he found looking at Sidibé’s images both “sweet and bitter;” the life they portrayed was gone, swept away by worsening economic problems (United Nations data now ranks Mali one of the poorest countries in the world) and the rise of Islamist extremism.

“Many of my friends are — I don’t know a gentler way to put this — orthodox religious men,” Mr. Diawara said. “They no longer tolerate their children to dress the way they used to dress.”

For Sidibé’s work itself, the future is uncertain. This is the second retrospective since the photographer’s death, created from a selection of around 10,000 negatives and prints kept in Paris by Mr. Magnin, on loan from the Sidibé family. Yet a majority of the archive — perhaps more than 300,000 frames in negative, as well as many vintage prints — remains piled in cardboard boxes in Bamako. Most of the images have barely been examined, and there are fears that some have gone missing. Photographs that once sold for a handful of Malian francs now go for thousands of dollars. The fact that Sidibé’s survivors include more than a dozen children and three wives makes administering the estate even more complicated.



It was a rite of passage for young people to pass through Sidibé’s studio. The pictures taken in it were then available for sale. Credit Malick Sidibé/The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva

Mr. Magnin’s hope was that a major photography foundation, perhaps an African one, would step in. “I would be happy for that,” he said. “But I’m not sure what the family wants, it’s too difficult. They are afraid.”

After talking, we headed upstairs so that Mr. Magnin could sneak a cigarette. As we stood by the entrance, a willowy teenager threw a flamboyant, hip-thrusting pose for his friend, playfully impersonating one of the pictures in the gallery.

“I am sorry Malick is not still here,” Mr. Magnin said. “He would have enjoyed it, every minute.”

Mark Rivett-Carnac contributed reporting from Bamako, Mali.

Mali Twist

Through Feb. 25 at the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris; fondationcartier.com.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/design/malick-sidibes-work-reveals-a-hidden-africa-it-loves-to-party.html>