

recent exhibitions

FROM SITE TO SIGHT

Anthropology, Photography,
and the Power of Imagery
Peabody Museum, Harvard University
September 4, 1986–Summer, 1987

The invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century coincided with the emergence of modern anthropology. Since the discipline's formative years, anthropologists have used photography to visually record the peoples, sites, and events encountered in the field, as well as the artifacts brought back to the museum or laboratory. "From Site to Sight," which opened during the celebration of Harvard University's 350th anniversary this past fall, explores the role of photography in anthropology from anthropology's earliest days to the present. Displayed in the exhibit are approximately 130 historic and contemporary photographs selected from a collection of over half a million images in the museum's Photographic Archives and from the work of past and present members of Harvard's Department of Anthropology. The exhibit was curated by Melissa Banta, director of the Photographic Archives at the Peabody Museum, and cultural historian Curtis M. Hinsley, with the assistance of Joan Kathryn O'Donnell, a visual anthropologist.

"From Site to Sight" is an ambitious exhibition that chronicles a broad range of changes and developments in both the history of ideas and the history of technology. It takes us from a harsh image of nineteenth-century racism preserved in a fragile daguerreotype of an African-born American slave, to a sensitive vision of modern cultural relativism captured in a high-quality color portrait of a contemporary Afghan nomad.

The exhibit is comprehensive in its definition of anthropology and provides a wide-angle view of the discipline and its several subfields. The gallery is divided into six sections introduced by a large world map showing historic and contemporary culture areas and locations represented by the photographs. The first section illustrates a number of basic photographic processes, which document the history of photographic technology from the daguerreotype to modern instant photography. Displayed in one of several light boxes in the exhibit is a stunning photograph by Peabody Museum photographer Hillel Burger of an ancient Peruvian textile. The image demonstrates the vivid colors and broad range of tones that can be brought out in a color transparency.

From the history of photography the exhibit moves to the history of exploration with a section on visions of the "exotic" in travel and expeditionary photography. Tracing the roots of modern anthropology to early accounts of travel and exploration, this section presents some of the earliest photographs of non-Western peoples. Because early photographic technology was specialized, most of these im-

ages were taken by professional photographic studios. Many, however, were preserved because they were collected by early anthropologists in the field.

Although at its onset photography was hailed as an objective and factual means of visual communication, the exhibit demonstrates how photographic images were created to satisfy Western stereotypes of non-Western peoples. A striking example of this type of manipulation is evinced by the juxtaposition of two mid-nineteenth-century photographs of Turkish women. Though taken in different studios and in different years, the images present their subjects in front of the same painted backdrop, wearing the same costumes and paraphernalia, and standing in similar poses. Because they are so carefully staged, these images tell us less about the subjects they intend to study than they do about the photographers' preconceptions of non-Western culture.

The third section of the exhibit is devoted to interpretive photography of museum objects. Ceramic, fiber, and wooden artifacts are displayed with photographic interpretations alongside. A closeup image of a colorful Chitimacha basket demonstrates the power of photography to capture texture and detail. The role of museum photography in making images of objects accessible to the public is illustrated by a number of posters and magazines, including the August 1982 cover of *African Arts* depicting a Kongo figure from the Peabody Museum.

The rest of the exhibit deals with the three major sub-fields of anthropology — biological anthropology, archaeology, and social or cultural anthropology. Included in the section on biological anthropology are photographs that were used for "racial" classification of human types, composite photographs of human skulls, and photographic sequences of primate behavior. The exhibit traces the evolution of the use of photography in biological anthropology from posed frontal and side

views of subjects on daguerreotypes to satellite photographs that relate fossil sites to local geological features.

Photography has been used by archaeologists to record field sites, copy hieroglyphics, and interpret artifacts through photoanalysis. Exhibited in this section of the show are photographs of Old and New World excavations, an aerial image of Chichen Itza taken in the 1920s by Charles Lindbergh, and the use of photogrammetry by epigraphists to study inscriptions of a Proto-Elamite tablet.

In social and cultural anthropology the photograph records the ethnographic encounter. This section of the exhibit traces the history of field photography from early images of "frozen" subjects to more recent shots that capture spontaneous action. Field photographs can reveal cultural changes and continuities. Juxtaposed in the exhibition are photographs of Brazilian Indians taken by Harvard anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis in 1958 and recent images from the same region.

Although the exhibit space is relatively small in relation to the number of topics presented, the gallery is cleverly designed with freestanding walls and columns that create an intimate space and channel the viewer around the room. A deep charcoal grey serves as the backdrop for the photographs. The divisions of topics in the gallery (e.g., archaeology, social anthropology) are clearly indicated by bold headings on contrasting bands of color.



STUDIO PHOTOGRAPH OF A TATTOOED MAN
MARQUESAS ISLANDS ALBUMEN PRINT 1898



RENTY CONGO PLANTATION OF B.F. TAYLOR. ESO
DAGUERRETYPE BY J.T. ZEALY, 1852

The exhibit is didactic and rich in textual information. Each section includes a general statement that relates the images to the major themes of the show. Large-type quotations drawn from the writings of explorers and anthropologists are distributed around the gallery. Every photograph is accompanied by a descriptive label that gives dates, identifies the photographic technique, and provides information on the subject. All of the text and photographs in the exhibit are reproduced in a handsome catalogue distributed by Harvard University Press (see review, p. 12).

One of the more interesting trends in recent anthropology has been a movement to reexamine "classic" ethnographies. Rather than read these works for what they tell us about the subjects their authors intended to study, one analyzes the texts in order to un-

cover something of the ethnographers' own assumptions, intentions, and preconceptions. This exhibition does for anthropological photography what such studies have done for ethnography. Once displayed to reveal some putatively disinterested scientific "reality" about non-Western culture, these images are now exhibited to shed light on our own sometimes skewed or ethnocentric vision of the Other. "From Site to Sight" is an important and timely exhibition that brings to the public some elements of the anthropological endeavor's turn toward reflexivity, introspection, and self-criticism.

Beginning in 1988, the exhibition is scheduled to travel for two years with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.

Christopher B. Steiner
Harvard University

IBEJIS

Twin Figures of the Yoruba
Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles
November 1, 1986-May 31, 1987

This exhibition is marked by the exuberant presence of over 125 *ibeji* twin figures from the Yoruba of Nigeria. The Yoruba have the highest twinning rate in the world (45.1 per 1,000 births vs. 11 per 1,000 births in the U.S.). The high rate of infant mortality for twins accounts for the ubiquity of these small wooden carvings in Yorubaland.

It is believed that twins bring good fortune to those who honor them, the reverse to those who neglect them. When a twin dies an *ibeji* is commissioned as a surrogate, a repository for his spirit. The mother treats the carving just as she does the living twin; it is ritually bathed, fed the favorite food of beans and palm oil, and carried on her back. At night it is carefully wrapped and put to bed. The carving may be

anointed with palm oil mixed with camwood powder. This care results in the rich patina seen on many *ibeji*.

The figures are carved in a frontal stance, with hands placed on the sides of the thighs. Most have carefully carved ears and scarification and stand on a round base. Female figures are portrayed with breasts. Apart from these common characteristics, the *ibejis* in the Baum Gallery's display present seemingly endless variation in detail and a wide range of sculptural quality.

The show contains examples of the recognized local styles. Those from the Abeokuta area of southwestern Yorubaland are distinguished by an upswept crescent-shaped hairstyle, heavy protruding eyelids, and prominent lips. Males wear carved trousers or loincloths with a knot at the back. On some the thumb and forefinger form an O. *Ibejis* with an Oyo provenance have wide almond-shaped eyes with carefully carved lashes,

rounded shoulders sloping into heavy upper arms, radial abdominal scarification, and a ridged, round base. *Ibejis* from nearby Ibadan are quite abstract, almost cubist in form.

Examples carved in the Ilorin and Igbomina areas of northern Yorubaland frequently wear the Islamic triangular amulet, *tira*. Ila Orangun, capital of the Igbomina region, is particularly recognized for its high-quality carving. Its long slender figures have tall hairdos and large, lashed eyes. Some have smiling faces.

Figures from the Oshogbo region, pleasantly smooth and, to the Western eye, well proportioned, are also especially sought after. Their eyes are large and elliptical and also have carved lashes. Males wear hoods with ear flaps; females are given a tall coiffure.

Numerous representatives of the various local styles can be seen in the exhibition, but one *ibeji* pair is anomalous. *Ibejis* of royal families have removable elaborately beaded cloaks. This couple wears sewn-on beaded hoods and shirts that cannot be taken off for ritual feedings and washings.

Though they have not always been appreciated for their sculptural richness, *ibejis* today are cherished by collectors. The exhibit at the Jan Baum Gallery provides a unique opportunity for the professional and the layman to experience the power and charm of this facet of African art.

Justine L. Kreher
Beverly Hills, California

SEGUNDA BIENAL DE LA HABANA

Havana, Cuba
November 24-30, 1986

In late November the Cuban government sponsored a second biennial of art. The first, in 1984, drew only Latin American artists. The second, organized by the Centro Wifredo Lam, was more ambitious. The intention was to bring together artists in all fields from numerous countries in the Third World. Given politics, it was inevitable that there would be some selectivity either in invitation or acceptance; equally, given politics, the occasion indicated a dramatic national commitment that non-socialist countries rarely attempt to match. The entire city of Havana seemed to be at the service of the occasion. Among the inevitable tedious displays of Czech and Russian social history, there were numerous galleries and theaters that presented works from a wide spectrum of artists and from regions rarely available to an American audience. The number of exhibitions and performances was astounding. Several were of special interest to readers of *African Arts*.

The major event was the display at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, the result of a competition that had attracted submissions from around the world. The press package proclaimed that 2,451 works from 690 artists living in 58 countries had been received. The results were varied. The inner courtyard of the impressive building provided space for the larger projects — those familiar monuments of modern art, meaningless conglomerations of shabby second-hand material or



IBEJIS AT THE JAN BAUM GALLERY