

ELIOT ELISOFON: BRINGING AFRICAN ART TO *LIFE*

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family

John, Linda, Liz and Sam

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Abstract

By

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As a public figure and a famous *LIFE* magazine photographer, Eliot Elisofon participated in the mainstream appreciation and discussion of African art more than many scholars. He publicized African art in magazine articles, exhibitions, books, lectures, films, television documentaries, and much more during his career. Elisofon exposed a wider population to unknown art forms, peoples, and cultures. By putting this content into the mass media, he was ahead of his time. Through stimulating interest in African art, he contributed to its transformation from natural history artifact to fine art. The occasional flaws of his promotion tactics reveal some of the perceptual difficulties encountered during the formation of the field of African art history.

This examination of Elisofon's life's work delineates his unique place in African art history by assessing his contributions to the study and appreciation of African art. It is a field of study that defined a large part of his life, and his affiliated activities give us a window into the history of reception of African art in America from the late 1940s through the early 1970s. Elisofon was fascinated with Africa and African art, and he wanted to convey this interest to the widest audience possible. While he never earned a degree in art history, his photographs of African art and words on this topic influenced generations. Elisofon brought the public along on his journey for knowledge about African art and Africa, initiating public consideration of what most people regarded as a foreign and intimidating topic. His projects embody the varied perceptions of the time.

As Elisofon first discovered African art, he appreciated it because of its influence on modern European art. Later he began to discuss its aesthetic value independent of modern art, and its meaning for Africans. He participated in the debate over how much information should be presented to the public about these objects without getting in the way of appreciation of them as art. Toward the end of his life, he continued to serve as a proponent of African art and culture in the mass media, forming an interest in how his work could encourage black pride.

Eliot Elisofon and African Art: An Introduction

“...the photographer is not simply the person who records the past, but the one who invents it.” – Susan Sontag¹

This dissertation examines Eliot Elisofon's life's work to clearly delineate his unique place in African art history by assessing his contributions to the study and appreciation of African art. It is a field of study that defined a large part of his life, and his affiliated activities give us a window into the history of reception of African art in post-war America from the late 1940s through the early 1970s. Elisofon was fascinated with Africa and African art, and he wanted to convey this interest to the widest audience possible. While he never earned a degree in the art history field, his photographs of African art and words on this topic influenced generations. Elisofon brought the public along on his journey for knowledge about African art and Africa, initiating public consideration of what most people regarded as a foreign and intimidating topic.

As a public figure and a famous *LIFE* magazine photographer, Elisofon participated in the mainstream appreciation and discussion of African art more than many scholars. He was able to put Africa and African art in the public view. He publicized African art in magazine articles, exhibitions, book projects, lectures, films, television documentaries, and much more during his career. The outcome was successful, but not always thoroughly positive. Despite the occasional appearance of stereotypes in his work, Elisofon was able to expose a wider population to unknown art forms, peoples, and cultures. By simply putting this content into the mass media, he was ahead of his time. Through stimulating interest in African art, he helped to contribute to its transformation

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977): 67.

from natural history artifact to fine art. The occasional flaws of his promotion tactics reveal some of the perceptual difficulties encountered during the formation of the field of African art history.

His projects embody the varied perceptions of this time period. For example, as Elisofon first learned about African art he appreciated it because of its influence on modern European art. Then, with time, he began to discuss its aesthetic value independent of modern art, and its meaning for Africans. He participated in the debate over how much information we should be giving the public about these objects without getting in the way of appreciation of them as art. Toward the end of his life, he continued to serve as a proponent of African art and culture in the mass media, forming an interest in how his work could encourage black pride.

‘Driven’ is the word that best describes Eliot Elisofon (**fig. 0.1**). From his formative years as a child of European immigrants on New York City’s Lower East Side, to his career as a professional photojournalist for *LIFE* magazine, Elisofon was always pushing himself to be the best of the best. Coming from extreme poverty, and ashamed of his background, Elisofon was incredibly ambitious and motivated to rise above the world he was born into, to exist in a different circle, one with money, status, and comfort. Photojournalist, painter, author, filmmaker and collector, Elisofon lived his life on a metaphorical bullet train, speeding along from job to job, seeking success and recognition at every stop. According to the 1972 *Current Biography* entry on Elisofon, he traveled

two million miles “across six continents to meet what he regards as ‘the great challenge’ of his craft: ‘to help the world to see.’”²

For the purposes of this dissertation I particularly recognize Elisofon’s need for people to “see” African art as fine art. He wanted his photographs to inspire his audience to learn more about African art, as his duty to society. “Don’t shoot just because it’s a pretty picture,” Elisofon once told an interviewer, “first know what it means...I have no time for pictures that don’t say anything: if something doesn’t say anything, don’t photograph it.”³ Throughout his life Elisofon wrote articles, books, and created films about Africa in an attempt to share with the larger public the beauty, majesty, and power he found in Africa and its art.

The casual student of African art may see Elisofon’s photographs of Africa and African art in a variety of resources: websites, textbooks, exhibition catalogs, magazines, journals, and postcards, as examples. In the field of African art history we typically regard him as “Eliot Elisofon, Photographer of Africa.” However, Elisofon, his friends, family, and the public knew him first and foremost as a *LIFE* magazine photographer. This dissertation is meant to bring the words *LIFE* and Elisofon back together, the way they were in the American cultural psyche during his lifetime. It will elucidate what being a *LIFE* photographer meant, how it affected Elisofon’s personality, work, and day-to-day existence. He was a *LIFE* photographer long before he was a photographer of

² Charles Moritz, ed., “Eliot Elisofon,” in *Current Biography, January 1972*, vol. 33, no. 1 (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1973): 19-21.

³ Robert W. Marks, “Elisofon Takes Both Sides of the Tracks,” *Minicam* (April 1942): 36. (HRC 71.9/66.9, IMG_5994 thru IMG_6010.) The abbreviation HRC stands for the Harry Ransom Center. The number 71.9/66.9 is the box and folder code for the document. 71.9 is the new number, 66.9 is the original number of the box and folder when I started my research. The IMG numbers are the names of the photographs I took of the documents.

Africa, so it should be within that context – historically and biographically framed as an ambitious, commercial magazine photographer – that we should study his work on African art and culture.

In general, Elisofon did not produce his field photographs for a scholarly audience; he made them for specific commercial assignments. All of his photographs of Africa, Africans, and African art were constructed personal visions. He viewed himself as an artist. “Good artists take what they like from reality and discard the rest,” he told *The New Yorker* in 1953.⁴ When we look at Elisofon’s photographs we are looking at an imaginary Africa, a part of the African ‘image world’ constructed by Europeans and Americans. His photographs belong in the same category as “colonial photographic practices that imaged and imagined Africa for European audiences” and they “do not reveal ‘authentic’ Africa, but construct a particular vision of Africa as exotic, timeless and unchanged.”⁵

A Susan Vogel quote reverberates throughout this dissertation: “An examination of how we view African objects (both literally and metaphorically) is important because unless we realize the extent to which our vision is conditioned by our own culture – unless we realize that the image of African art we have made a place for in our world has been shaped by us as much as by Africans— we may be misled into believing that we see

⁴ Lillian Ross and Brendan Gill, “The Talk of the Town: Fictional Color,” *The New Yorker* (March 14, 1953): 24.

⁵ Amy J. Staples, “Visualism and the Authentification of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 181-182.

African art for what it is.”⁶ Elisofon’s photographs are proof of his own cultural agenda. What that agenda was is another question, one with multi-faceted, evasive, and highly debatable answers.

The day-to-day reality of a photographer striving to satisfy both himself and his employer was complex. Elisofon straddled the line between commercial photography, i.e. a photographer on assignment, taking pictures for a client, and a creative artist, following his own impulses. He believed that the two were not mutually exclusive, and that indeed, the line between those two occupations did not exist. According to Elisofon, if a photographer did not imbue his own creative spirit into his work, he was never going to take a good — never mind a great — picture. “Any person can take pictures,” he stated in 1970, “but the secret ingredient of a *good* picture is creativity and imagination.”⁷ “Great pictures come from the eyes, heart and brain of the photographer – not the lens, film and camera. Equipment is the least important. Buying an expensive typewriter won’t make you a Hemingway. You have to care about your subject,” he explained in an interview.⁸

The equipment analogy was one Elisofon often used:

The typewriter is not a writer; the camera is not a photographer. These are only the implements of your craft, they have no soul and they are meaningless utensils without the human element which you must give to the subject which you are treating, whether it be an essay or a photograph.

The camera interferes between you and your subject; it is brutal in its candor, it is a travesty of reality, it can give a completely false image, for it is only a tool, a means to your end....One of the greatest threats of this increasing world of conformity is the loss of passion. Don’t be afraid to be

⁶ Susan Vogel, *ART/artifact* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 1988): 11. Exhibition catalog for Center for African Art.

⁷ Eneid Route, “Hellzapoppin’ Elisofon,” *San Juan Star Magazine* (January 4, 1970): 2-3. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6535.)

⁸ Maureen D’Honau, “Living in Japan; Feminine Focus: Hellsapoppin Elisofon,” *Mainichi Daily News*, February 12, 1973: 6B. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6556.)

passionate, to feel something. Too many people today just don't care. You can't change mankind, but have deep and strong feelings and don't ever be ashamed of them.⁹

Elisofon was never afraid to be passionate about the aesthetic power of African art, and he viewed his artistic sensibilities as a unique and valuable justification for his experimental topics and techniques. For this dissertation, one must fully acknowledge that much of Elisofon's work is inherently flawed as an African art historical/anthropological document, and yet, we cannot 'unsee' what has been shown to the public again and again for half a century. Elisofon's imagery has gained a life of its own in academic and commercial America; it is used both in scholarly sources and the mass media, always taking on a new meaning within each context.

Despite being non-anthropological and non-ethnographic, Elisofon strongly believed his African field photographs were documentary and could be useful to academics and curators. While his African studio work was created for study purposes, it was also designed with the intent to publish. Elisofon suffered from an internal conflict between his artistic impulses and his need to satisfy his client. His daughter, Elin, interviewed Robert Gardner, the Harvard documentary filmmaker, for her biography draft:

Bob believes that Eliot was 'serving two gods.' One being his impulses, which were artistically honest and correct for him, and the other being the client, which in most cases was LIFE. These factors, tugging at each other, created the conflict in which he worked and it was the need to satisfy the client, which meant take pictures which sold magazines, that made Eliot

⁹ Eliot Elisofon, "Dynamism in High School Yearbooks," lecture transcript, October 11-12, 1963, Columbia University, New York, 23rd Annual Conference Columbia Scholastic Press Association and Short Course on Yearbook Production, concluding event at the Waldorf-Astoria, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 53.47, IMG_4006 thru IMG_4012.)

more a ‘journeyman,’ in Bob’s eyes, than the great artist he truly wished to be.

He was famous, he made plenty of money, and he made pictures which sold a lot of magazines, but ‘he knew that this wasn’t how great art is judged.’

Though Bob respected Eliot’s awareness of the struggle between his inner most desires and his professional life, he may not have truly understood the desperate beginnings from where it came and the impossibility of Eliot being able to resolve it.¹⁰

Elisofon used photography to challenge himself. Like any other photographer, he wanted to make meaningful pictures but he also saw himself as an artist. In the end, he was creating commercial products that sometimes pandered to stereotypes and were exploitative. Elisofon was a product of his age, of his time and yet ahead of time as well. We must make a deeper examination of what his photographic practices were, conventions this researcher regards as firmly rooted in the guiding principles of *LIFE* magazine.

Elisofon and *LIFE*

Elisofon contributed to and benefitted from the “iconic presence” and “cultural prestige” *LIFE* magazine quickly gained after its introduction in 1936, something that has persisted even decades after its weekly production ended in 1972.¹¹ How do we measure the impact of *LIFE*? From 1936 to 1973 *LIFE* published 1,864 consecutive issues, many of which carried Elisofon’s photographs. In 1940 2.8 million copies of *LIFE* were sold weekly, and factoring in an estimated pass-along rate, the weekly audience was estimated

¹⁰ Bob Gardner, quoted in Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1518.)

¹¹ Erika Doss, ed., “Introduction,” *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 3.

at 19.9 million people.¹² Despite the growing popularity of television, in 1970 there were over 8 million subscribers to *LIFE*, and with an estimated pass-along rate of four to five people per copy, each issue reached as many as 40 million people.¹³

LIFE was designed as a spectacle within itself, a weekly World's Fair crafted of ink and paper. Laid out flat, an issue measured 13.5 by 21 inches, the largest magazine in the United States. Writing was confined to captions or small text blocks; an article's impact, argument and effect were accomplished through visuals, usually photographs. Overall, the popular picture magazine served as an exchange of lowbrow and highbrow culture. Loudon Wainwright, a long-time *LIFE* employee, explained:

It was clear to everybody that we were assembling each week a very mixed bag of goods. In *LIFE*'s glossy pages, trivial and vulgar fragments about starlets and hairstyles nestled among splendid color portfolios about the glories of antiquity, titillating items about the weird habits of quirky socialites followed high-minded entreaties for American greatness, powerfully moving black-and-white picture essays illuminating the joys of childhood abutted shocking photographs of starvation victims and of people leaping to their deaths from burning buildings.¹⁴

In *Looking at LIFE Magazine*, Terry Smith described how the publication's project was "...to define typical American life by celebrating the strengths of dynamic but ultimately fusible internal, local, and regional differences in contrast to the fascinating but potentially dangerous oddity of external and international differences."¹⁵ Africa and African art landed squarely in the category of "fascinating but potentially dangerous" to most twentieth-century Americans.

¹² Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): 114.

¹³ Erika Doss, ed., "Introduction," *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 1.

¹⁴ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): xv.

¹⁵ Terry Smith, "Life-Style Modernity: Making Modern America," in Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 30.

Elisofon was instrumental in bringing African culture into *LIFE* magazine. For example, the first black woman to appear on the magazine's cover was in an Elisofon photograph, for his 1950 Nile photo essay (**fig. 0.2**). A black woman would not be seen on the cover for another 13 years; not until the widow of Civil Rights activist and martyr Medgar Evers, Myrlie Evers, was shown comforting her son at her husband's funeral (**fig. 0.3**, June, 28, 1963). The text that accompanied the 1950 cover, a smiling portrait of a young Shilluk woman, follows: "The scarified forehead of the broad-shouldered African girl marks her as a member of the Shilluk tribe on the Nile River. Like most smart women of her village of Kwon Fashoda, she wears on her chest decorated aluminum jewelry, fashioned by a local craftsman from the wreckage of a World War II plane."¹⁶

This article also introduced African architecture and ephemeral arts to *LIFE* readers, including coiffures, jewelry, and scarification markings of the Madi, Shilluk, Dinka, and Nuer ethnic groups (**figs. 0.4-0.8**). These types of ephemeral arts and aesthetic forms were not studied as African fine art until the end of the twentieth century, but Elisofon chose to include them in several of his publications and exhibitions.¹⁷

Elisofon also created *LIFE*'s first photo essay on African art, published on September 8, 1952: "Mystic Art of Tribal Africa." And he took the first color images of the Ruwenzori Mountains in Central Africa, featured in *LIFE* on May 4, 1953. In addition, he photographed *LIFE* essays on the Central African Kuba capital and King (March 30, 1947), Nigerian politics and culture (Sept. 26, 1960), and literary-themed

¹⁶ "Table of Contents," *LIFE* (November 20, 1950): 29.

¹⁷ In addition to several other articles and exhibitions on this topic, Elisofon published a book on the Nile in 1964. Out of the 292 pages in the book, 79 are dedicated to sub-Saharan Africa, moving from the headwaters of the Nile in the Ruwenzori mountain range, to the Victoria Nile region, the Sudd, and northward into Sudan where black Africa meets Arab Africa. Elisofon included 18 pictures of black Africans from various ethnic groups, which focus on jewelry, coiffures, dress, architecture, and scarification marks.

African vignettes (Oct. 13, 1961). Elisofon's studio photographs of African art were also featured in *TIME-LIFE* publications, such as *Great Ages of Man: African Kingdoms* (1966). His African work for *LIFE* appeared in other publications, such as the *1954 U.S. Camera Annual* and the French-American international magazine *Réalités*. Elisofon's experiences in Africa as a *LIFE* photographer gave him opportunities later in life to work on African projects for *Smithsonian* magazine and *National Geographic*.

Ultimately, *LIFE*'s purpose was to generate profit, but it appealed to simple and basic human needs. Elisofon saw himself as a theatrical director, staging every scene necessary to tell the story, creating photographs that would elicit empathy and understanding from his audience. This was how most *LIFE* photographs were made. Some were candid, in the moment, with inherent lack of artistic control. But in general, each *LIFE* photo shoot was an elaborate cooperation and compromise between image-maker and imaged.

“Would you please move your army back two steps for a better composition?”—Gordon Parks to the commander of the Danish military forces in Copenhagen

“I know you've a ruptured hernia, but couldn't you put some ice on it or something and get into your riding pants and boots for just one more picture?”—Margaret Bourke-White to Augustus A. “Gussie” Busch in St. Louis

“I know it's expensive to move a whole fleet, but the ships are placed so we can't see the new plane maneuvering among them.”—Ralph Morse to an admiral off Norfolk

“Where is all the traffic?...go to the police and arrange a traffic jam. Go on, do something. We need an obstruction. Go cause an obstruction.”—Rudi Crane to his *LIFE* researcher-writer in London¹⁸

¹⁸ Dora Jane Hamblin, *That was the Life* (New York: Norton, 1977): 48-49.

What was the point of all of these orders? *LIFE* photographers believed they had the right and the obligation to manipulate a situation to get the best pictures for the magazine.

LIFE had an almost-mythic level of potential and influence, and most of these staffers dedicated their lives to its goals. Wainwright offered an explanation of the philosophy of the magazine's staff:

...in its finest efforts (and in many hundreds of less well executed stories, too), *LIFE* did a sturdy, dignified, and occasionally highly distinctive job of reflecting events as no other publication would or could, of presenting stories that now and then offered readers new possibilities for their own lives. Much of the staff's extraordinary loyalty and drive can be traced to the conviction that great things could happen in those pages, or grow out of them.¹⁹

For the majority of his career, Elisofon was a *LIFE* man, steeped in the culture of this exhibitionist, high-flying magazine. He shared the conviction that "great things" could "grow out" of his work, and so he pursued it with passion and energy. The legacy of *LIFE* as "perhaps the single most important general weekly magazine from the late 1930s until its demise in the early 1970s," which "influenced ideas about class, ethnicity, gender and race in America, and throughout the world," is also part of Elisofon's legacy.²⁰

The Legacy of Eliot Elisofon

The word 'legacy' was specifically used in the title of this section to highlight the Elisofon enigma: Why, when he was so active and famous as a *LIFE* magazine photographer and Hollywood color consultant during his lifetime, has no one heard of Elisofon outside of the Africanist field today? What is his legacy? What is his reputation? Where did his fame go? He is not the first man whom history has forgotten. But why has

¹⁹ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): xvi.

²⁰ Erika Doss, ed., "Acknowledgments," *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): xiii.

this happened? Why isn't he placed next to Alfred Eisenstaedt, Gjon Mili, David Douglas Duncan, Margaret Bourke-White, and W. Eugene Smith as fine art photographers in art history textbooks? They were *LIFE* magazine photographers, too.

Through a survey of the literature on Elisofon one discovers that while many articles have been written about him, and several by him, not much comprehensive analysis of his activities has been published. His obscurity in the history of photography is perhaps due to his early death, his willful personality, or simply the inaccessibility of his archives until recent years. In addition, his finest work was done in color film, a medium for which he was a pioneer. For fine art photographic history, color pictures, unless they are impressive contemporary digital accomplishments, are often overlooked.

More than a hundred years after his birth, this project is the first dissertation written on Elisofon's activities. After his death, his work fell into obscurity. Why? His African archives and objects were immediately inherited by the Museum of African Art (MAA) in 1973. In theory, Warren Robbins and his staff became responsible for his legacy. His other papers and photographs sat in his New York City apartment until his daughters donated them to the Harry Ransom Center in 1992. Elin Elisofon, his eldest daughter, worked on his biography in the 1980s, but it was never published. The only non-Africanist who has written about Elisofon from an academic perspective is Roy Flukinger, senior curator of the Harry Ransom Center. The public face of Elisofon's legacy sat squarely in the hands of the MAA, which became the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA). But this situation skewed the public perception of Elisofon into just a photographer of Africa. Even his status as collector and expert fell away.

Elisofon belongs in multiple categories of historical analysis, not just that projected by NMAfA. But what is he? How do we analyze him? Do we treat him as an American photographer? A *LIFE* photographer? A pioneer of color photography and film? An Africanist? Because of this dilemma of muddled identification, Elisofon belongs simultaneously to multiple fields of art history and none. By studying him as an Africanist, his other careers are reduced and forgotten. Africanists have claimed him, particularly as an occasional propaganda tool of the NMAfA, but whom does he really belong to? This is probably one of the main reasons why scholars have not studied Elisofon in depth. He eludes definition, presents a constant challenge of study and analysis.

However, in the end, if his legacy had not immediately fallen into the hands of Africanists, he might not have fallen into such obscurity. He might be known today primarily as the famous *LIFE* photographer he was—his deep fascination for Africa and African art might only be part of a broader legacy. But even scholars' knowledge of his projects on Africa and African art has diminished since his death. Maitland Edey, his colleague at *LIFE*, said in his eulogy:

Eliot was also a past master of the art of the parlay. His photo assignments to Africa for *LIFE* gave him the chance to start collecting African art. Later on he reversed the process, using his collection and his knowledge of the subject as a way of photographing it and publishing books about it. Some of the most beautiful photographs of African sculpture that I have ever seen were made in that way by Eliot. By this time he was recognized as an authority on the subject, and was able to propel himself onto the lecture platform.²¹

²¹ Maitland Edey, quoted in Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 5.

Roy Sieber said of Elisofon:

He extended the range of our knowledge and our consciousness of the rich variety of sculptural form through books, films, field photographs and most especially through the sensitive photographic recording of literally thousands of sculptures in public and private collections. The archives he donated to a number of study centers will long continue to inform the scholarship of African art studies and may well serve as the best monument to a dedicated photographer and an impassioned Africanist.²²

Though he was recognized by his contemporaries for his ambitious achievements, over time Elisofon's career and specific contributions to the field have mostly been forgotten, except for photographic credit lines in African art history publications. This dissertation examines his long-term impact on the field beyond those credit lines.

State of the Literature

Glimpses into Elisofon's career exist from many angles. Elisofon was interviewed dozens of times by newspapers, magazines, and television shows, such as *The New Yorker*, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, *The Milwaukee Journal* and the *Today* show. In addition, there are hundreds of newspaper articles that include references to him. A handful of *The Washington Post* article titles gives an idea of their intriguing content: "The Secrets of Eliot Elisofon" (1972), "Capturing a Visual Philosophy" (1974), "Top Lensman Advises Amateurs How to Click" (1973), "Photographer Would Choose Gorilla Over Glamour Girl" (1953), and "Elisofon's Africa" (1974). There are also many Elisofon obituaries, appearing in newspapers, magazines, and academic journals.

²² Roy Sieber, quoted in Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 7. Study centers that received sets of Elisofon's photographs: the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, the Museum of Primitive Art, the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California Los Angeles, the University of Indiana Department of Art History, and the British Museum (*Tribute to Africa*, 3).

However, scholarly examinations of Elisofon's work are limited, and are often superficial or narrowly focused. Six scholars have written about Elisofon: Warren Robbins, Christraud M. Geary, Amanda B. Carlson, Roy Flukinger, Amy J. Staples, and Raoul J. Granqvist. But Elisofon was not their primary research interest. There have also been three exhibitions about Elisofon, two of which had accompanying publications, but these were short, soft-cover booklets.

1974 - *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon*

After Elisofon died in 1973, from June through December of 1974, museum founder Warren Robbins held an exhibition at the Museum of African Art, in the Frederick Douglass House on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. It was titled *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon*, and had an accompanying booklet publication, which is a trove of images and text (**fig. 0.9**). It also included a truncated bibliography and a chronology of Elisofon's life. Robbins wrote the foreword and the "In the Eye of the Storm" section, while Elisofon's own words were used in excerpts from his diary and letters, and in "On African Sculpture and Modern Art" and "On Photographing African Sculpture." Much like the later Harry Ransom Center exhibition publication from 2000, *Tribute to Africa* presented a flattering account of Elisofon's life, career, and accomplishments.

1974 - Robert and Nancy Nooter

A little more than a year after Elisofon's death, in the August 1974 issue of *African Arts*, Robert and Nancy Nooter's article, "Eliot Elisofon: Photographer of Africa,"

appeared as a tribute to his life and work in Africa.²³ The Nooters were art collectors with particular interest in African and Native American works. They contributed essays to *The Art of Collecting African Art* catalog edited by Susan Vogel, which accompanied The Center for African Art exhibition in 1988. Nancy Nooter also worked on the *African Art in American Collections* book with Warren Robbins. The 1974 *African Arts* article included one page of text followed by five pages of Elisofon's field photographs. It addressed the highlights of his career and major activities in connection with African art. The Nooters knew Elisofon and were not unbiased in their account; they refer to him as "renowned, even legendary."²⁴

1990s-early 2000s - Christraud M. Geary

The primary Elisofon scholar is Christraud M. Geary, although her work on this topic represents only a small fraction of her diverse scholarly output. Geary served as the curator of the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives (EEPA) at the National Museum of African Art from 1990 to 2003. She specializes in the history of photography in Africa and the study of African art.²⁵ Geary was the Teel Senior Curator of African and Oceanic Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, but is now retired.

During her tenure as the EEPA curator, Geary was in an opportune position to study Elisofon's work. Geary's first Elisofon-related publication was featured in *Fotografia e storia dell'Africa: Atti del Convegno Internazionale Napoli-Roma 9-11*

²³ Robert and Nancy Nooter, "Eliot Elisofon: Photographer of Africa," *African Arts*, vol. 8, no. 1 (August 1974): 8-13.

²⁴ Robert and Nancy Nooter, "Eliot Elisofon: Photographer of Africa," *African Arts*, vol. 8, no. 1 (August 1974): 8.

²⁵ Geary received her PhD in cultural anthropology and African studies from the University of Frankfurt in 1973. Her degree fieldwork was conducted in Cameroon.

settembre 1992, edited by Alessandro Triulzi, and published by the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Napoli (1995). Her second publication on Elisofon was a 1993 *African Arts* article, “Two Days in Mushenge: Eliot Elisofon’s Images of the Kuba (1947).”²⁶ Logical speculation would lead one to assume that Geary worked on both of these texts in 1992, after familiarizing herself with the EEPA holdings and Elisofon’s career. Later she also included a brief discussion of Elisofon’s 1947 Kuba photographs in her exhibition publication *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960*, which was printed in 2003.²⁷

Geary’s 1993 *African Arts* article was too brief to provide deep analysis and criticism of Elisofon’s work. She gave an overview of Elisofon’s 1947 encounter with the Kuba and their King, Nyim Mbop Mabiinc maKyen, and included passages from Elisofon’s reports to *LIFE* magazine on the assignment and his letters. This topic also appeared in Geary’s 2003 exhibition catalog *In and Out of Focus*. But her information on this 1947 trip to Central Africa was not comprehensive. In comparison to the propitious and easily accessible 1993 *African Arts* article, Geary’s 1992 conference paper delivered direct criticism of Elisofon’s photographic practices. The article presented the paradoxical observation that cameras simultaneously lie and tell the truth, thus one must use sensitivity and caution when using photographs to form conclusions. Typically pre-arranged and staged, photography is deceptive.

²⁶ Christraud M. Geary, “Two Days in Mushenge: Eliot Elisofon’s Images of the Kuba (1947),” *African Arts*, vol. 26, no. 2 (April 1993): 72-77.

²⁷ Geary also briefly discussed Elisofon’s role organizing the 1958 Museum of Fine Arts Boston ‘primitive’ art exhibition in her chapter, “On Collectors, Exhibitions, and Photographs of African Art: The Teel Collection in Historical Perspective,” in Suzanne Preston Blier, ed., *Art of the Senses: African Masterpieces from the Teel Collection* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2004): 25-41.

In this conference paper Geary explained how Elisofon staged, posed, and re-enacted several Bamana *chi wara* performances for his *Black African Heritage* film project in 1970 and 1971. He purposefully removed signs of Westernization and modernization from his photographs, such as wristwatches and Western-style clothing. Some of these *chi wara* photo shoots were blatant falsifications, which “jeopardize the photographs’ value as sources,” and led to discontent among the Bamana groups Elisofon worked with because they “rightfully felt mis-represented and exploited.”²⁸ The *chi wara* film was used in *Black African Heritage*, the photographs are still used via the EEPA, and little of the context of their problematic production background accompanies the images. Geary concluded that “the contextual image is itself an object, whether in an exhibition or in publications. When used in these new contexts, images should thus be scrutinized no differently from objects, which are painstakingly analyzed as to their formal characteristics, their history, function, and meaning.”²⁹

Geary was mainly concerned with the value of Elisofon’s photographs as contextual evidence for African art, performances, and rituals. How well can an Elisofon picture fit the needs of a publisher or a curator organizing an exhibition? Geary’s texts delivered a muffled cry for more attention to Elisofon’s career. Her work did not dismiss nor discredit Elisofon — that would be counter-productive for the field of African art — but it did issue a caveat to art historians: Be careful how you use his photographs.

²⁸ Christraud M. Geary, “Photographic Practice in Africa and its Implications for the use of historical photographs as contextual evidence,” in Alessandro Triulzi, ed., *Fotografia e storia dell’Africa: Atti del Convegno Internazionale Napoli-Roma 9-11 settembre 1992* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale of Napoli, 1995): 118.

²⁹ Christraud M. Geary, “Photographic Practice in Africa and its Implications for the use of historical photographs as contextual evidence,” in Alessandro Triulzi, ed., *Fotografia e storia dell’Africa: Atti del Convegno Internazionale Napoli-Roma 9-11 settembre 1992* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale of Napoli, 1995): 118.

She encouraged the researcher to analyze the production background for Elisofon photographs before using them, but provided little of that background to her reader. Admittedly, it is a vast topic that even my dissertation cannot fully address. For example, Elisofon documented his 1947 experience with the Kuba very carefully because it was the first time he photographed Africans in the field. He wrote about some of his future photo shoots in Africa with similar attention to detail, but in the end, only a small fraction of them were given this treatment. If the researcher wanted to know everything that was happening before, during and after an Elisofon African photo shoot, he/she is mostly out of luck.

1996 - Amanda B. Carlson, M.A. Thesis

Amanda B. Carlson wrote her Master's degree thesis, "Object Photography: African Art in the Photographic Frame," for Indiana University in 1996. The Smithsonian Institution supported Carlson's thesis research for 10 weeks in 1995 in the form of a Graduate Research Fellowship at the National Museum of African Art. Christraud Geary was the head of her Smithsonian research committee, and assisted Carlson with the conceptualization and support of her project. At Indiana University, Patrick McNaughton and Diane Pelrine supervised the production of Carlson's thesis.³⁰

An art historical analysis of the object photography of African art could be its own dissertation, even its own multi-volume book series; hence, Carlson's thesis project served as an introduction to the topic and not a complete overview. Her 45-page thesis

³⁰ Amanda B. Carlson, "Object Photography: African Art in the Photographic Frame," M.A. Thesis, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1996): iii. Carlson also received her PhD from Indiana University, in Art History and African Studies. She currently serves as an Associate Professor at the University of Hartford and publishes on a variety of topics, such as contemporary art, photography, indigenous writing systems, masquerades, and women's ritual performances.

discussed the nature of object photography, reviewed the literature on this topic, and delved into the history of surrogates, i.e. reproductions as substitutes for the actual work of art, a term introduced in the scholarship of Helene E. Roberts. Carlson then briefly analyzed the stylistic conventions of six photographers of African art: Charles Sheeler, Walker Evans, Eliot Elisofon, David Finn, Erik Hesmerg, and Franko Khoury. Two and a half pages of the thesis were dedicated to Elisofon; not a huge amount of information given the complexity of his career and photographic approach. She included four Elisofon photographs in her figures, three multiple exposure shots and one straight picture of a Dogon mask. The final section of the paper was dedicated to the reception of African art object photography, its layers of meaning and multiple agendas, both positive and negative.

Carlson's thesis treated Elisofon's African images as products of his time period, the 1960s and 1970s. She explained that his corpus of images was produced over two decades; however this is inaccurate – he was taking photographs of African art before the 1960s. She described his black and white images as high-contrast, stating that some objects have no backgrounds causing them to appear very flat. She regarded his color photographs of African art as “dramatic” – the bright jewel-toned backgrounds and lighting sometimes had “a very ‘futuristic’ Star Trek look to them.”³¹ Carlson did pull from some of Elisofon's writings on why he began to photograph African art. The other scholars did not address this information, but it had appeared in Robbins' 1974 *Tribute* booklet. Carlson wrote that Elisofon's “continued documentation of African art was much more than a job. It was a passion.” Elisofon wanted to “visually explain African

³¹ Amanda B. Carlson, “Object Photography: African Art in the Photographic Frame,” M.A. Thesis, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1996): 23.

art.”³² But her brief comments only hint at the deeper narrative of his involvement with African art.

2000 – “*To Help the World to See:*” An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective

From September 14 through December 18, 2000, an Eliot Elisofon retrospective exhibition titled “*To Help the World to See*” was held at the Harry Ransom Center’s Leeds Gallery. A “keepsake booklet” was produced to commemorate the event, with an introductory essay by Roy Flukinger, Senior Curator at the Harry Ransom Center (**figs. 0.10-0.11**). The information and photographs contained in the booklet give an idea of what types of documents are held in the Elisofon papers, and the brief biography and chronology included are useful. In general, however, the text was flowery and laudatory, an expected aspect of something labeled “keepsake” and dedicated to Elin and Jill Elisofon, Eliot’s daughters.

2007-present - Amy J. Staples

The current senior archivist of the EEPA, Amy J. Staples, also wrote an article on Elisofon, “Visualism and the Authentification of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art,” which was published in *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* in 2007.³³ In addition she participated in the creation of Showtime’s Smithsonian Channel 2008 “Spotlight on Elisofon” special, a 27-minute production. With curator Bryna Freyer, Staples co-curated the 40th anniversary Elisofon retrospective at the NMAfA in 2013, *Eliot Elisofon: Africa*

³² Amanda B. Carlson, “Object Photography: African Art in the Photographic Frame,” M.A. Thesis, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1996): 24.

³³ Amy J. Staples, “Visualism and the Authentification of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 181-188.

ReViewed. There was no publication for this exhibition, but Staples did publish a brief article in *Tribal Art* to promote it and the EEPA (Spring 2014, XVIII, no. 71).³⁴

Many of her publications analyze films, such as her 2006 article, “Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa.”³⁵ While this piece discussed safari films as exploitative, Staples did not discuss Elisofon in the same way in her 2007 article. This publication was one of the most informative ever written on Elisofon and his career, discussing specific trips, photographs, and projects; but it skirted around real analysis. Staples argued for a need to study the context of his images in more depth as “a lens to examine historical relationships between Africa and the West,” such as his approach to photographing the Mangbetu in the 1970s.³⁶ This set up an approach for future Elisofon scholarship, but Staples did not address the situation herself in this short four-page article.

2009-present - Raoul J. Granqvist

Raoul J. Granqvist is a Professor Emeritus of English Literature for the Language Studies Department of Umea University in Sweden and a prolific author. He received a fellowship from the Harry Ransom Center in 2009-2010 to study “Colonial Photojournalism and the Western War: Ernest William Smith and Eliot Elisofon in Africa,” which was funded by the David Douglas Duncan Endowment for

³⁴ Staples received her PhD in the history of consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2002, and a Master’s degree in visual anthropology from Temple University in 1989. Her dissertation focused on independent travel and exploration films produced in Africa, New Guinea and South America from 1930-1960.

³⁵ Amy J. Staples, “Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa,” in *Film History: An International Journal*, vol. 18 (2006): 392-411.

³⁶ Amy J. Staples, “Visualism and the Authentification of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 185.

Photojournalism and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Fellowship Endowment.

Granqvist has written seven articles on Elisofon and his work continues on the topic. In 2011 he published, “På gränsen till ett krig: Eliot Elisofon och *Life* i Finland 1939 (On the Threshold of a War: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Finland 1939),” in the Finnish-Swedish cultural magazine *Nya Argus*.³⁷ This was the first in a series of four pieces on Elisofon’s activities during World War II when he was stationed in Scandinavia. It was followed by “Med matkorg och kamera på resa: Eliot Elisofon i krigets Finland 1944 (Traveling with a Sack of Food and a Camera: Eliot Elisofon in Wartime Finland 1944)” and “Eliot Elisofon i Sverige 1944: spion, fotojournalist och livsnjutare (Eliot Elisofon in Sweden 1944: spy, photo journalist and *bon vivant*).”³⁸ Granqvist’s most recent publication in this series is “Elisofon’s möte med Jean Sibelius: nationalism och jazz (Elisofon’s meeting with Jean Sibelius: nationalism and jazz).”³⁹

Granqvist is a literary and cultural researcher who has done work on English literature, African studies, post-colonial theory, reception studies with historical perspectives, popular culture, communication studies and intercultural critique. He has a diverse background, and when dealing with Elisofon he served as a visual media critic,

³⁷ Raoul J. Granqvist, “På gränsen till ett krig: Eliot Elisofon och *Life* i Finland 1939 (On the Threshold of a War: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Finland 1939),” *Nya Argus*, vol. 104, nos. 5-6 (2011): 143-146.

³⁸ Raoul J. Granqvist, “Med matkorg och kamera på resa: Eliot Elisofon i krigets Finland 1944 (Traveling with a Sack of Food and a Camera: Eliot Elisofon in Wartime Finland 1944),” *Nya Argus*, vol. 104, no. 9 (2011): 213-220; and Raoul J. Granqvist, “Eliot Elisofon i Sverige 1944: spion, fotojournalist och livsnjutare (Eliot Elisofon in Sweden 1944: spy, photo journalist and *bon vivant*),” *Nya Argus*, vol. 104, nos. 11-12 (2011): 294-301.

³⁹ Raoul J. Granqvist, “Elisofon’s möte med Jean Sibelius: nationalism och jazz (Elisofon’s meeting with Jean Sibelius: nationalism and jazz),” *Nya Argus*, vol. 105, no. 4 (2012): 89-92.

analyzing Elisofon's projects for their "reflexive duplicity and iconographic clarity."⁴⁰ While the abstracts for the World War II articles were balanced, the full texts were harshly critical of Elisofon, as a photojournalist, as an American, and as a man. The articles framed Elisofon as a cunning, hedonistic spy who mistakenly believed he was a do-gooder American savior. Since the articles were written in Swedish, something may have been lost in translation. However, Granqvist's article on Elisofon and his 1961 *LIFE* photo essay "Storied World of Africa: A Writer's Land of Primitive, Eloquent Beauty" (October 13 issue) was published in English and followed the same agenda.

Granqvist's article, "Photojournalism's White Mythologies: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Africa, 1959-1961," was published in *Research in African Literatures* in 2012.⁴¹ This text falls into several of Granqvist's research themes on Africa: the Western conceptualizing of the continent and its cultural expressions, the colonialist or post-colonialist travelogue, and the visualizing and gendering of the continent.⁴² His work on Elisofon looks to "uncover the predetermined templates that both guided and provoked him to produce ... troubled still-life images of Africa."⁴³ For the "Storied World of Africa" photo essay, Granqvist argued that the pre-determined template for this assignment was one of colonialist domination, racism and sexism, paired with American Cold War politics. He continued to frame Elisofon's work in connection to colonialism and racism in his recent articles: "Eliot Elisofon's Famous Portrait of a Young Chinua Achebe,"

⁴⁰ Raoul J. Granqvist, <http://www.sprak.umu.se/om-institutionen/personal/raoul-granqvist>, accessed June 21, 2013.

⁴¹ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Photojournalism's White Mythologies: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Africa, 1959-1961," *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2012): 84-105.

⁴² Raoul J. Granqvist, <http://www.sprak.umu.se/om-institutionen/personal/raoul-granqvist>, accessed June 21, 2013.

⁴³ Raoul J. Granqvist, <http://www.sprak.umu.se/om-institutionen/personal/raoul-granqvist>, accessed June 21, 2013.

Africa is a Country (blog), Sept. 18, 2013; and “Eliot Elisofon’s Africa: Old, Updated, Worse,” *Africa is a Country* (blog), Feb. 13, 2014.⁴⁴ Granqvist is currently drafting a book on Elisofon and Africa titled: *An American Mission: Eliot Elisofon in Africa 1942-1972*.

While these scholarly publications have illuminated aspects of Elisofon's career and legacy in relation to Africa and African art, they are few in number. Their specificity and — in some cases — underlying agendas deny a holistic view. This has created a narrow, even warped, perception of Elisofon's legacy. No part of Elisofon's work or life existed in a vacuum and separating them from each other, from the environments in which they were created and were lived, blurs the picture. My dissertation takes a broad view of Elisofon's impact on the reception of African art and offers a timeline of events, causes and effects, and influences on his work in order to examine the larger scope of Elisofon's legacy. This dissertation aims to clarify and broaden the scholarship on Elisofon while paving the way for future research.

⁴⁴ See Raoul J. Granqvist, “Eliot Elisofon’s Famous Portrait of Chinua Achebe,” September 18, 2013, <http://africasacountry.com/eliot-elisofons-famous-portrait-of-chinua-achebe/>; and Raoul J. Granqvist, “Eliot Elisofon’s Africa Old, Updated, Worse,” February 13, 2014, <http://africasacountry.com/eliot-elisofons-africa-old-updated-worse/>.

Chapter One: Elisofon Biography and Career Overview

Africa: A Chance to Change Your Life

Elisofon's life-long fascination with Africa was initiated by his father's attempt to set down roots in South Africa from 1904-1907. In a 1970 newspaper article Elisofon stated that his "interest in Africa" was "a mental transference from his father."⁴⁵ Overall, he imagined Africa as a prime location for grand, romantic adventures and starting from childhood, he read every book he could find on the continent. In the 1910s through the 1930s these sources were the popular *Tarzan* books by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Henry Morton Stanley's accounts of his escapades in Africa, including the search for the famous Dr. Livingstone. Elisofon commented in 1962, "always in the back of my mind was Henry Stanley, the great journalist who went to Africa to find a whole new meaning for himself."⁴⁶

Samuel, Elisofon's father, arrived in South Africa, prepared to help his brother Abby, with his business. But Abby died accidentally soon after Samuel arrived, and his widow did not help him find work in the bottling factory. Eliot would later overstate and romanticize his father's experience in Africa, talking about how he had mined for diamonds and gold while there.⁴⁷ Eliot's myth of his father also depicted him as an expert marksman in the Russian army. In reality, Samuel struggled to survive in Capetown for five years, selling fruit on the street.

⁴⁵ Eneid Route, "Hellzapoppin' Elisofon," *San Juan Star Magazine* (January 4, 1970): 2-3. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6535.)

⁴⁶ William F. Woo, "Visual Goals Mark Varied Life," *The Kansas City Times*, January 22, 1962: 2C. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6437.)

⁴⁷ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1102.)

When Elisofon first traveled to sub-Saharan Africa in 1947 to photograph the British royal family's visit to South Africa, he began this assignment in Capetown. In the same town where his father had failed, he arrived as a professional *LIFE* photographer, a success. Elisofon imagined himself as a modern-day Stanley or Livingstone, eager to see everything that he could on the continent, live the exciting life he had read about in books. In his mind Africa was a land of adventure, opportunities, and countless wonders.

Career Beginnings

Elisofon's near-obsession with and appreciation of art, aesthetics, beauty and nature can be attributed to the influence of his mother. He truly wanted to be a painter, but he realized he needed to eat and put a roof over his head.⁴⁸ He embraced freelance photography as a way to earn money while still practicing his watercolor technique. Photography was his second love and an ideal solution, and so it became his primary medium. Being self-taught, Elisofon relied heavily on the advice and critiques of his friends. He sought out other painters, photographers, and artists in his neighborhood to connect with. Eventually Elisofon met Willard Van Dyke, a founding member of f/64, a group of modernist photographers in San Francisco, which included Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, Imogen Cunningham, and Edward Weston.

When Van Dyke needed a studio in which to film in New York, Elisofon offered him August & Co., the commercial studio he had founded with some of his high school friends. This was a major turning point in Elisofon's career. The two men became friends and Van Dyke suggested Elisofon show his experimental photographs of surreal

⁴⁸ Candide, "Only Human," *Daily Mirror*, April 5, 1939. (HRC 71.9/66.9, IMG_6114.)

industrial scenes to Alexy Brodovitch of *Harper's Bazaar*. One of Elisofon's Lower East Side street photography projects included placing fashion models in urban or industrial settings to create bizarre visual juxtapositions (**fig. 1.1**).⁴⁹

Brodovitch liked some of his work, but his editor thought the photographs were too radical for the magazine.⁵⁰ He directed Elisofon to see Julien Levy, of the Julien Levy Gallery; Beaumont Newhall, Curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art; and T.J. Maloney, editor of *U.S. Camera*, the first major magazine for photographers. Levy took twelve of Elisofon's prints on consignment and showed them, and Elisofon's meetings with Newhall and Maloney were the beginnings of life-long connections.⁵¹ Never lacking bravery, Elisofon thought this was the perfect time to show a portfolio at *LIFE* magazine.

Working for *LIFE* Magazine

The first issue of *LIFE* was released on November 23, 1936. From that point, the goal of photographers the world over was to get their pictures in the pages of *LIFE*, the first high-quality American picture magazine ever produced. The enterprise began with a photographic staff of four: Margaret Bourke-White, Alfred Eisenstadt, Thomas D. McAvoy, and Peter Stackpole. In addition, the magazine was contracted with the Associated Press for a steady flow of news photography, and it eventually had similar connections with the Black Star and Magnum photo agencies. But in order to fill its

⁴⁹ Robert W. Marks, "Portrait of Eliot Elisofon: Up from the Tenements He Carries a Camera with a Social Conscience," *Coronet* (August 1940): 32.

⁵⁰ Robert W. Marks, "Portrait of Eliot Elisofon: Up from the Tenements He Carries a Camera with a Social Conscience," *Coronet* (August 1940): 32.

⁵¹ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1123.)

nearly 100 pages of images weekly, *LIFE* solicited images from talented photographers – not just the official staff members and press corps. This meant that anyone with skill and enticing photos could be published in *LIFE*.

Some versions of the story say that Brodovitch told Elisofon to go to *LIFE*, which would have been a conflict of interest for *Harper's Bazaar*, a Hearst publication, so it may not have been smart to advertise this. But Brodovitch was an artistic mentor, helping anyone he thought deserved his aid to get his or her career off the ground.⁵² Elisofon called on Willard Morgan, a *LIFE* contributing editor, who then took Elisofon's prints to Alexander King, assistant picture editor. King gave Elisofon one assignment on speculation, a story on tintype street photographers.⁵³ Elisofon returned with 11 photographs and King bought eight. Elated, Elisofon went home and crafted a mock-up *LIFE* cover with one of his pictures and a cutout logo.⁵⁴

His first photos to appear in *LIFE* were for the September 20, 1937 issue. Elisofon had five pages of images: three pages in the “Speaking of Pictures...” section on the modern tintype street photographers and a two-page feature on the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (**figs. 1.2-1.3**). Throughout the late 1930s he was taking assignments from King and proposing stories. During this time period, Elisofon experimented with social documentary work, trying to use his photographs as tools for

⁵² Elisofon had a small show at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art's Division of the School of Industrial Art, where Brodovitch was teaching a course, in the fall of 1937. So Brodovitch may have helped him get this opportunity.

⁵³ Time-Life Book Editors, “Eliot Elisofon,” in *Photography Year 1974* (New York: Time-Life, 1974): 224. (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG_2767 thru IMG_2772.)

⁵⁴ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1123 thru IMG_1124.)

social change, but *LIFE* rarely published these stories. “It soon became apparent to me,” he stated in 1953, “that my career was at a standstill and I became a photographer of wider scope doing a variety of stories from the stars of Hollywood to the Atlantic Coast of the United States in order to gain recognition....”⁵⁵ Eventually he decided to abandon commercial photography altogether and dedicate himself to photojournalism.

LIFE was a security blanket for Elisofon as he became more creative, more efficient, and more skilled. With every tough and enticing challenge they served him, they provided all of the resources and equipment he needed to complete the assignment.⁵⁶ Elisofon no longer had to be starving in a cold, leaky basement, nor toiling away on non-creative, commercial jobs. *LIFE* brought him sufficient recognition and money to boost both his ego and his bank account. Elin Elisofon wrote on her father: “Eliot admired those photographers whose artistic or humanitarian ideals came first, and many times he wished he could be like them, but he had been hungry too long and wanted to get to the top too much to do as they did.”⁵⁷ Elisofon wanted an audience for his photography, and *LIFE* provided that.

World War II

Elisofon had his first *LIFE* cover photograph in 1940—of actress Carol Bruce (**fig. 1.4**)—but he would not become an official contracted *LIFE* photographer until 1942

⁵⁵ Eliot Elisofon, “The Ethics and Morals of Creative Expression,” lecture for Conference on Moral Standards at the Jewish Theological Seminary 50th Anniversary, September 13-15, 1953, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 53.11, IMG_3844.)

⁵⁶ Roy Flukinger, “*To Help the World to See: An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective* (Austin: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2000): 5.

⁵⁷ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1151.)

when he was drafted to become a war correspondent for *LIFE* and the press pool.⁵⁸ He was initially stationed in North Africa from November of 1942 through May of 1943. Elisofon teamed up with *LIFE* writer Will Lang and they followed the action in their own peep (small Jeep), bouncing along on the muddy ‘roads’ in the wide-open, dangerous landscape of North Africa. This was Elisofon’s field photography training school, teaching him how to deal with dust, dirt, weather, humidity, and their effects on the cameras and film. And it was his first experience of Africa.

Elisofon’s communication to *LIFE*’s picture editor, Wilson Hicks, was steady and gives a glimpse into how demanding Elisofon could be with the *LIFE* staff. His artistic vision was paramount. He explained to his editor how large his photos should be printed, which ones were meant to be double spreads, and which were framed for possible covers. Elisofon had specific thoughts on how his pictures should be printed in the lab and used in the magazine, outlining them all to Hicks. He was unable to develop his own film on the frontlines, and would not be able to see his pictures until he returned to New York. This was a frustrating situation for him, as he had spent years processing his own film. It was also unpleasant for the *LIFE* staff, who mostly followed the orders handed down by the head editors, not from the photographers.⁵⁹

Elisofon was also stationed on the European and Pacific fronts during the war, and was injured during a German stuka dive-bomber attack in Finland, which led to his

⁵⁸ Roy Flukinger, “*To Help the World to See: An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective* (Austin: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2000): 4. In addition, the first true color cover of *LIFE* magazine was Elisofon’s image of General Patton, U.S. Defense Issue, July 7, 1941.

⁵⁹ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1170.)

removal from combat assignments. With the end of the war came a return to business as usual for Elisofon and the magazine, which became the hub of his existence until his death. Now 34 years old, he had lifted himself out of poverty and was a successful professional photographer. He was well on his way to becoming part of the “aristocracy of talent” at *LIFE* with his work being seen by millions of people all over the world.⁶⁰ Despite his occasional desire to resign from the magazine during the war, he stayed on for another 19 years, using it as a public stage to communicate his ideas about the world, including an appreciation for African art.

The Prototypical *LIFER*

Elisofon remained an official *LIFE* staff photographer until 1964. He left to pursue his own projects but still worked for *LIFE* on a contract basis and maintained an office in the Time & Life building in New York until the magazine stopped production in 1972.⁶¹ *LIFE* defined Elisofon’s fame, his career, and his personality. The *TIME-LIFE Books Photography of the Year*, 1974 edition text stated:

LIFE, the magazine he had helped shape almost from its beginning. There was more than a chronological parallel of careers, however, for Elisofon was in many respects the real-life actuality of the *LIFE* photographer of fiction.

Quick-witted, self-assured, friend of celebrities and a celebrity in his own right, he excelled in many fields of photography...His mastery of the evocative powers of photography ranged from clear-eyed objectivity...to feats of studio artifice.⁶²

⁶⁰ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): 110.

⁶¹ Charles Moritz, ed., “Eliot Elisofon,” in *Current Biography, January 1972*, vol. 33, no. 1 (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1973): 19. Lists his business address at the Time & Life Bldg., Rockefeller Center, New York 10020.

⁶² Time-Life Book Editors, “Eliot Elisofon,” in *Photography Year 1974* (New York: Time-Life, 1974): 224. (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG_2767 thru IMG_2772.) Elisofon died 4 months after the production of *LIFE* magazine stopped in 1972.

Roy Flukinger echoed these comments, explaining that the lives of Elisofon and the magazine became enmeshed, and that “he came to embody the prototypical *LIFE* photographer — energetic, creative, brash, unstoppable, globetrotting, always in motion, outspoken, sometimes egotistical, but at all times thoroughly professional.”⁶³

In February of 1973, two months before his death, Elisofon described his feelings about the end of *LIFE*: “The one thing no one said was what a wonderful time we had. *LIFE* was my magic carpet that let me go anywhere in the world to photograph anything I wanted.”⁶⁴ He valued the freedom and opportunities *LIFE* offered him. In a posthumously published interview, Elisofon explained, “Senior *LIFE* photographers had greater privileges than anyone in any other occupation in the world. You could ask to go anywhere. Working for *LIFE* was a romantic period. It can’t ever be equaled by being a TV director — then you have to take a crew, but a photographer goes alone.”⁶⁵

While Elisofon painted a picture of a *LIFE* photographer as being a lone entity, a large team of people produced the magazine. He often created his own assignment ideas, but the researcher-writers in the New York *LIFE* office always created shooting scripts to go with assignments. Elisofon typically attempted to follow the script as best as possible, but sometimes he wondered what the people in New York were thinking, much like any other *LIFE* photographer. For example, in 1948 Elisofon wrote a letter to *LIFE* photo editor Wilson Hicks while he was working on his Pacific Trust Territory story:

⁶³ Roy Flukinger, “*To Help the World to See: An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective* (Austin: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2000): 4-5.

⁶⁴ Maureen D’Honau, “Living in Japan; Feminine Focus: Hellsapoppin Elisofon,” *Mainichi Daily News*, February 12, 1973: 6B. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6556.)

⁶⁵ J.R., “Talent alone is not sufficient,” *South China Morning Post*, July 24, 1973: 5. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6563.)

I am worried about the Tonga Salote story. Everyone here tells me our idea is screwy. The queen is dignified, is very distrustful of American journalists because of the stupid silly stories spread about her (and you can read Dick Johnston's suggested script to see how right she is) and the people are completely under missionary influence and rather dull. I will give it a try but don't bank on it....

I am more than a little tired by imaginative scripts. I reread Johnston on the Nammatol ruins and it is almost frightening to realize how the script could be written, no mountains, no pillars, no nothing.

As for the Wimberly script. I want you to read it. It calls for at least a week's hard work and that was why I declined in the first place. Had I known it was a short act before your cable arrived something could have been done. Wooton's department told me to shoot for at least four pages in color plus plenty of b. and w....

Read the Herzog script with pictures at dawn at sunset and what not. Somebody ought to give her a camera. It is raining like hell here today....⁶⁶

A *LIFE* researcher-writer usually accompanied photographers on assignments to help keep track of needed information and organize photo shoots. Most of the time Elisofon logged his own reports and caption ideas in addition to those created by the researcher-writer.⁶⁷

The undeveloped film was flown to New York on a semi-weekly basis. Dozens of *LIFE* staffers were needed to complete one photo essay. The film was received and cataloged by one group, then handed off to the lab to be developed and printed. A third group of staffers would number and file the images. Film editors combed through thousands of frames each day, selecting photographs to execute the most dramatic telling of the narrative for the magazine. Elisofon, like most *LIFE* photographers, typically shot

⁶⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to Wilson Hicks, December 15, 1948, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 13.7, also Elin's biography draft, IMG_1437 thru IMG_1438.)

⁶⁷ For the 1951 and 1959 African photo shoots, Elisofon's second wife, Joan, served as his researcher.

more than one roll of film per photo shoot. When in the field, the photographers did not have the opportunity or the time to go back and shoot things more than once.

Once the selected photographs were printed by the lab, they were handed off to a researcher-writer in the New York office whose job it was to keep track of the progress of the story, “sort the photos so they made some consecutive sense, study the captions in order to identify all persons therein, and then ‘sound-track’ the entire stack of pictures so they could be shown quickly to the managing editor.”⁶⁸ “Sound-tracking” involved reorganizing the images so they would flow as a story, with the most compelling, and important pictures first, followed by unfolding actions and side characters. Most large photo essays had hundreds of prints tracked into large stacks by the researcher-writer, who then laid them around his office in piles, waiting for the managing editor to come by to look it over. Copy for the photo essay was created by the researcher-writer and then turned over to typists, who made multiple copies and distributed them to division chiefs, copy editors, the managing editor, the head researchers, and the fact-checker.⁶⁹

Then the pages had to be laid out for printing, which involved another group of staffers. Spreads were created page by page and were often revised, tossed out, reinstated, tossed out again. Photographs had to mesh with headlines, captions and textblocks. Then all of the spreads and images were shipped to the printer in Chicago where plates of each page were created for the press and color correction tests were run.⁷⁰ Loudon Wainwright, one of *LIFE*’s lifers and main writers, revealed:

⁶⁸ Dora Jane Hamblin, *That was the Life* (New York: Norton, 1977): 74.

⁶⁹ Dora Jane Hamblin, *That was the Life* (New York: Norton, 1977): 76.

⁷⁰ Dora Jane Hamblin, *That was the Life* (New York: Norton, 1977): 28, 31.

...under the pressure of time narrowing against a deadline, of confining an event or an idea in pictures to a limited space, a strange transformation sometimes took place. For those who shaped it, *LIFE*'s treatment of an event somehow transcended the event itself.

In a long and curious jump of thinking (or of feeling) whatever had happened to make the photographs possible took place now and then, again and even better, in the pages of the magazine. The production in light and shadow seemed bigger than the reality it came from.⁷¹

Elisofon did not create his photo essays on his own. He did not develop the photographs or choose which pictures would appear in print, he did not write the final header and caption copy, he did not arrange the photographs and the pages, and he did not oversee the final product.

Aristocracy of Talent

If Elisofon was the “prototypical *LIFE* photographer” and “a celebrity in his own right,” how can we measure this success from a viewpoint 60 years in the future? First and foremost, Elisofon’s reputation was based upon his status as one of *LIFE*’s *best* photographers. In *The Great American Magazine*, Loudon Wainwright referred to Elisofon as part of “a sort of aristocracy of talent” at *LIFE*, along with W. Eugene Smith, Gjon Mili and Dmitri Kessel. He also commented that these men were as proficient at selling themselves as they were at taking photographs.⁷² For example, Elisofon was a witty self-promoter in newspaper articles and interviews throughout his lifetime. In 1963 he said, “It is hard to be completely modest about my work, because a man with a camera must radiate confidence. He must exude it, even if the camera isn’t working, to gain and

⁷¹ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): xvii.

⁷² Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): 110.

keep the confidence of others.”⁷³ Despite his self-promotion, ‘Elisofon’ is not a name that typically springs to mind when thinking about the great photographers of *LIFE* magazine. And yet, he worked for the magazine for most of his life; he was one of their highest paid, star photographers; and he travelled all over the world on assignments.

Dora Jane Hamblin gave us some insight into why Elisofon’s *LIFE* escapades are not well known. She wrote, “Some *LIFE* photographers — Carl Mydans, David Douglas Duncan, John Phillips, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Larry Burrows, Margaret Bourke-White — have either written books about their adventures or have been the subjects of books by others. Their exploits are well known and will appear in any *LIFE* narrative. But many who do not figure in the best-publicized events were pretty memorable themselves....”⁷⁴ While Elisofon did publish books, he did not publish any comprehensive memoirs before his early death at the age of 61. His sudden death meant that no one was left to fan the flames of his fame. Also, after World War II was over, Elisofon covered very few breaking-news stories for *LIFE*. While the types of assignments he covered were diverse, he was rarely on the front lines of gruesome battles, political campaigns, assassinations, tragedies and catastrophes — the kind of work that seared into the public psyche.

In addition, Elisofon’s personality was not one that lent itself to great appreciation from fellow *LIFE* staffers who, generally, were the ones writing about the history, anecdotes, and meaning of the magazine. Once again, Hamblin shed some light on how people regarded Elisofon. She explained:

It took patience to work on a story with [Fritz] Goro, tolerance to cope with [Francis] Miller. But there were other gods on staff who sometimes

⁷³ Margaret J. Brink, “Photographer Eliot Elisofon: His life has been an adventure story,” *The Globe-Democrat*, March 7, 1963: 14a. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6446.)

⁷⁴ Dora Jane Hamblin, *That was the Life* (New York: Norton, 1977): 55.

had difficulty rounding up attendant harp players [reporters]. There was a noticeable reluctance on the part of reporters and correspondents to work with some of the most glittering stars: Eisenstadt, Bourke-White, Elisofon, among others. They demanded so much mopping-up and ego-nourishment, that the reporter hardly had any time left to write captions....

Eliot Elisofon, though capable of climbing mountains, penetrating swamps, paddling about the South Pacific, required at least 50 ccs of flattery a day and kept on about it until some exhausted reporter agreed, 'Yes Eliot, you are undoubtedly a genius.' He customarily referred to anyone who accompanied him, from editor to reporter, as 'my assistant,' and he was fond of writing articles for photography magazines in which he confessed in effect that 'I cannot tell a lie, I am the greatest photographer....'⁷⁵

What can we conclude from this passage? Elisofon, as Hamblin referred to him, was a "star," which to her meant he was "ego-ridden." Perhaps humility did not come easily to Elisofon, but from Hamblin's perspective, and that of many others, he was in good company on the *LIFE* staff. Wainwright wrote, "...it was all right at *LIFE* in the high-flying years for people to act like children now and then. In fact, a capable man or woman who had passing seizures of mood or drink often made more money and was treated with more respect by the management than an equally talented person with a quiet, even disposition."⁷⁶ Why was it tolerable for Elisofon to act the way he did? How did he get away with it? Why did *LIFE* encourage brashness and arrogance?

The Meaning of *LIFE*

The founder of *LIFE* magazine, Henry Robinson Luce, head of the Time, Inc. mass media empire, was known for his own brashness and arrogance, so it made sense to follow in those footsteps. Luce started *LIFE* in 1936.⁷⁷ He had an idea for a new kind of

⁷⁵ Dora Jane Hamblin, *That was the Life* (New York: Norton, 1977): 60-61.

⁷⁶ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): xiv.

⁷⁷ Erika Doss, ed., "Introduction," *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 1. His publications already consisted of *TIME* (started in 1923, a weekly

American picture magazine, which was actually an earlier idea from the German magazine business. Several American companies had considered copying the Germans and publishing a large-scale picture magazine, but the American printing technology for reproducing high-quality images on magazine paper was yet not advanced enough. Luce pushed his printer to solve this issue, to find a paper that would do justice to high-quality photographs or risk losing Time Inc.'s business.⁷⁸ Luce had self-imposed lofty goals to meet. He wrote, "A hundred years from now the historian should be able to rely largely on our Picture Magazine instead of having to fumble through dozens of newspapers and magazines."⁷⁹ He exhibited an arrogant confidence in *LIFE* that Elisofon shared. In perhaps one of the most famous declarations of purpose for a magazine, Luce outlined what would be seen in *LIFE*:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man's work—his paintings, towers, and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.

Thus to see, and be shown, is now the will and new expectancy of half mankind.

news magazine), the business monthly magazine *Fortune* (started in 1930), and the radio program and newsreel *The March of Time* (begun in 1931).

⁷⁸ Erika Doss, ed., "Introduction," *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 2.

⁷⁹ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine* (New York: Knopf, 1986): 29.

To see, and to show, is the mission now undertaken by a new kind of publication, *The Show-Book of the World*, hereinafter described. (1936)⁸⁰

“*The Show-Book of the World*” was once a proposed title for the picture magazine, the phrase eventually transformed into its subheading, reflecting Luce’s ambitions.

Elisofon’s common refrain that his goal as a photographer was “to help the world to see” was directly related to Luce’s prospectus and he purposefully positioned himself as a key player in accomplishing Luce’s aspirations for the magazine. He became especially adept at helping the *LIFE* audience “see the world...strange things...shadows in the jungle... man’s work—his paintings, towers, and discoveries...things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love....” Given this rundown of poetic fantasies, there is little mystery as to why Elisofon took the pictures he did. Luce wanted attention-grabbing pictures in his magazine; images no one had ever captured. Luce and Elisofon were cut from the same cloth; romanticism was par for the course.

A Life Lived Through a Lens

LIFE editor Maitland Edey explained that Elisofon “was a learner. Having learned something, he became an instant expert on the subject. Brash, ambitious, restless, extremely talkative, he had his nose into almost everything throughout his life....”⁸¹ In a 1963 interview, Elisofon commented, “All my life I have been learning. I hope to die

⁸⁰ Erika Doss, ed., “Introduction,” *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 2. Luce collaborated with the poet Archibald MacLeish to write his 1936 prospectus for *LIFE* magazine.

⁸¹ Maitland Edey and Constance Sullivan, “Fight Trainer, February 12, 1951,” in *Great Photographic Essays from LIFE* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978): 80. (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG _2760.)

learning.”⁸² Thus the *LIFE* prospectus directives “...to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed” also defined Elisofon’s daily motivations. He was both the giver and receiver of these orders. Elisofon was never satisfied with inhibitions, stagnation, or a narrow world-view.

“I’m too diverse a man to be a great photographer,” he explained to an interviewer in 1972, “I have discipline, motivation. I’m a good photographer. But I’m a writer, painter, editor, filmmaker too. I’m a complex human, who needs to satisfy human needs. You can’t be great without giving everything you’ve got to a single art. I haven’t done that.”⁸³ While the public primarily regarded Elisofon as a *LIFE* photographer, his versatility and range of specialties defy categorization. Elisofon also worked for publishing houses; Hollywood motion picture studios; television broadcasting companies; a variety of institutions, such as the Harvard Peabody Museum; and other magazines, for example, *U.S. Camera*, *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian* and *National Geographic*. He lectured, held exhibitions, and collected art around the world; attended conferences and symposiums; wrote dozens of articles and manuscript drafts on a wide range of topics; and participated in and/or created several films and television shows. Elisofon used photography as a stepstool to reach toward everything and anything that fascinated him.

From the level of his activity, one can gauge that he was in demand, and from the range of his interests we know he was a resourceful photographer. Maitland Edey wrote, “He was an unusual and remarkably versatile man. During his career at *LIFE* he was

⁸² Margaret J. Brink, “Photographer Eliot Elisofon: His life has been an adventure story,” *The Globe-Democrat*, March 7, 1963: 14a. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6446.)

⁸³ Charles Benbow, “Eliot Elisofon- Artist of Expanded Interest,” *Tampa Times*, May 1972. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6573). Elisofon’s choice of 5 great photographers is also mentioned in this article – Weston, Cartier-Bresson, Strand, Gordon Parks, Ernest Haas.

given assignments on almost every conceivable subject.”⁸⁴ In this manner, Elisofon helped *LIFE* satisfy the American public’s “will and new expectancy” to “see, and be shown,” just as his assignments satisfied these expectancies within himself. As stated in a 1963 article, Elisofon’s career was “a continuing adventure story, romantic and exciting enough to satisfy the most insatiable wanderlust.”⁸⁵

The Show-Book of the World

After World War II, Elisofon threw himself into his career and his life took on a fevered pace, with constant travel and very little downtime.⁸⁶ His friend and fellow *LIFE* photographer, Gjon Mili, said that Elisofon “was from the old school. He could do everything. Once he accepted a job, you knew he would deliver.”⁸⁷ *LIFE* had no shortage of assignments for him, and he often created his own, which they usually approved. He knew he had to be proactive or risk obsolescence, so instead of staying in New York, waiting for *LIFE* to call him, Elisofon suggested large travel assignments to keep himself busy and on salary. Having traveled widely during WWII, he positioned himself as one of a handful of *LIFE* photographers that were willing to travel to and photograph every corner of the world. Elisofon wanted to prove to the *LIFE* editors that he was not afraid of challenging and dangerous travel assignments. The last 30 years of his life were spent continent-hopping, often visiting dozens of countries per trip. In addition to his work in

⁸⁴ Maitland Edey and Constance Sullivan, “Fight Trainer, February 12, 1951,” in *Great Photographic Essays from LIFE* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978): 80. (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG_2760.)

⁸⁵ Margaret J. Brink, “Photographer Eliot Elisofon: His life has been an adventure story,” *The Globe-Democrat*, March 7, 1963: 14a. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6446.)

⁸⁶ Both of Elisofon’s marriages ended in divorce, partially because of his globetrotting and hectic schedule. He had two children from his second marriage, Elin and Jill.

⁸⁷ N.G. “Eliot Elisofon, 1911-1973,” *f.y.i* magazine (April 16, 1973): 5. (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG_2763 thru IMG_2764.) Mili knew Elisofon since 1938.

the United States and Africa, he photographed many other locations: the South Seas Islands, the West Indies, Europe, Indonesia, Japan, India, Hawaii, Canada, South America, Israel, Mexico, and more.

Chapter Two – 1947: Africa or Bust

In 1947 Elisofon traveled from central Africa to South Africa, to Victoria Falls and then up to the delta of the Nile River, covering most of the continent. He was there from January through June and was paid by *LIFE*. His primary assignment was the visit of the English royal family to South Africa (“England’s King Visits South Africa,” *LIFE*, March 10, 1947, **figs. 2.1-2.2**). Elisofon also crafted an African art photo essay. He took photographs in the Léopoldville (Kinshasa) Musée de la Vie Indigène (**figs. 2.3-2.6**) and field photographs of the Kuba, Luba, Luluwa, and Songye.⁸⁸

Elisofon later wrote that there were three kinds of people on his flight to Africa: businessmen, construction and labor foremen, and missionaries. He had a conversation with one of the missionaries, which revealed the type of research Elisofon had conducted prior to this trip, and also that his thoughts were centered on art. “One of the missionaries, who is also a medical doctor, Rev. Roy G. Hamman of Kyabe, French Equatorial Africa,” Elisofon wrote, “...was very angry when I read him a passage in one of my leaflets on African art in which the ethnologist Dr. Himmelheber states that around 1925 priests and their helpers bound the chiefs of the various tribes, searched for idols and fetishes and then burned these.”⁸⁹ The Reverend told Elisofon this was a lie, but there was truth in this information. Many missionaries had viewed African art as evil and pagan, and did participate in its destruction.

⁸⁸ Elisofon wrote four letters to the TIME-LIFE office in New York describing the Congo portion of his African adventure in 1947. “First Trip Report” 1/12/47 (4 pages), “Letter of Intent” 1/24/47 (9 pages), Jan. 1947 Report #2 (11 Pages), and Report #3 1/31/1947 (6 pages) have allowed the researcher to construct this chapter’s narrative.

⁸⁹ Eliot Elisofon, to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “First Trip Report,” January 12, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 2. (EEPA P-2, 1.)

Elisofon interpreted this information to mean that it might be difficult for him to find traditional African arts, which was why he went to Africa three weeks early. Elisofon also wrote about how he wanted to go to Nigeria, but he did not “even know if there is anything left to the Benin metal craft.”⁹⁰ With only three weeks to make the story, Elisofon ended up focusing on the central Congo. He was interested in finding authentic African sculpture still being made and used by the local population. His prior research, such as the Himmelheber pamphlet, had led him to believe that this was rare, and would be a challenge to find. As he wrote on January 24, 1947, “The best of African art” was “not in Africa but in museums and private collections, the British Museum having the greatest.”⁹¹ Though these two generalized statements were/are not exactly true, he believed them. He had set up a challenging quest for himself, in the style of previous white explorers and adventurers in Africa: hunt down something exotic that was headed toward extinction, find lost traditions and cultures. In 1947 his intention was to photograph what examples he could “find in Africa still in the hands of the natives, and being used by them as part of their everyday life.”⁹² For him — and for many scholars and collectors today — the mark of authenticity was use by Africans.

Elisofon bought into the Western propaganda that African art was dying, which existed to boost the value of art objects, and he believed that most African art existed

⁹⁰ Eliot Elisofon, to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “First Trip Report,” January 12, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 2. (EEPA P-2, 1.)

⁹¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 11.3.)

⁹² Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 11.3.)

outside the continent. It was a notion he repeated even in his 1950s writings on African sculpture. This was a Western misconception, an over-simplification. He wrote in his Report #2: “Up to now I had seen masks only in museums and was beginning to doubt if they had ever been used for anything but collectors.”⁹³ The “best” African art was judged to be so by Western aesthetes and scholars, not by Africans themselves. So the system of categorization of “best” and “great” is inherently distorted and skewed toward a Western perspective. At this point in time, however, Elisofon did not question this system.

Two weeks into the trip in the Congo, Elisofon had already constructed his opinions of the authenticity and quality of current African arts. “It was impossible to find old sculpture anymore,” he wrote, “The new stuff is inferior except in rare occasions.”⁹⁴

Elisofon even knew, or thought he knew, why there was this difference in quality:

A pipe that I had bought from a native...did not have one fifth the quality of the old one. The reason for this is that the native now is after money. If he makes it faster he will sell more and so the quality of the work has gone down. Even stuff made for themselves has deteriorated with this general decline. Stuff made for tourists is even worse as the native has discovered that the white will buy it regardless.⁹⁵

According to his scenario, the local artist has lost his aesthetic soul in pursuit of financial gain. This idea falls into the trope of the ‘native’ being greedy and reinforces the Western view that only older art is good and has real artistic value. The newer objects are made quickly for tourists. So even though the colonials and Westerners created the market,

⁹³ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 11.3.)

⁹⁴ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 8. (HRC 11.3.)

⁹⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 8. (HRC 11.3.)

Elisofon does not fault them for the hastily-made, ‘lesser-quality’ art objects. Like many other authors on Africa in the twentieth century, he regarded the Westernization of the local population as negative and destructive, but never acknowledged that his activities on the trip contributed to the perceived issue. Elisofon purchased objects wherever he went, traded for them, paid for photo opportunities, and overall helped to bolster the existence of a tourist art market in the region. In his writings he never comes to this realization, which speaks to a lack of self-awareness that is prevalent in many of his trip reports.

The 1947 trip was a learning experience for Elisofon. Despite his initial statement that the “best of African art is not in Africa,” he regarded some art that he encountered as fine, great, good, or even “masterpieces.” Elisofon changed his opinion that great African art no longer existed in Africa. He found that Africans were even still using some of it. This aspect of African art—fine art objects being used in everyday life—was the most fascinating for Elisofon. That was his motivation to travel to the Belgian Congo, despite the great expense and potential risks. And despite the fact that *LIFE* did not tell him to go to the Congo. It was his own plan.

Museum in Léopoldville (Kinshasa)

When Elisofon arrived in Léopoldville (Kinshasa), he visited the Museum of Native Art (Musée de la Vie Indigène), directed by Dr. Adrien Van den Bossche.⁹⁶ He

⁹⁶ With the independence of the Belgian Congo, many cities and institutions were renamed. Léopoldville is now Kinshasa, and the Musée de la Vie Indigène was eventually transformed into the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo. Luluabourg is now Kananga, and Elisabethville is Lubumbashi. See Sarah Van Beurden, "Forty Years of IMNC," *African Arts*, vol. 45, no. 4 (November 2012): 90-93, for more information on the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo (IMNC).

described his project to him, in his schoolboy French, but Van den Bossche's response was that it was impossible to do justice to a story on African art in such a short amount of time. Elisofon was used to making *LIFE* stories with short turnaround times, so he insisted on trying. His goal was to spend the next three weeks in the "bush so as to get some original material."⁹⁷

Van den Bossche explained that there was a "relatively untouched" area near Coquithaville, i.e. ethnic groups that would be less Westernized.⁹⁸ One had to reach this area via canoe, but it would give Elisofon the opportunity to photograph art production and use in the field. Van den Bossche had collected objects from the area himself, and showed them to Elisofon, who was also able to examine the museum's collections. He praised the items: "I also looked thru all the other collections from each region. They have a simply incredible museum full of masterpieces the like of which I have never seen and which I will photograph thoroughly."⁹⁹

In true adventurer fashion, Elisofon described the challenges of this encounter in his Luluabourg report dated 1/24/1947: "I spent two days photographing the best the museum had to offer after first blowing out all the lights in the museum because of a difference in voltage between my American lamps and that of the town. Luckily for me the Belgian Information Service in Léopoldville (Kinshasa) has on its staff a film man who had some lighting equipment but we first had to go to the town's light plant and ask

⁹⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, "Letter of Intent," January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 2. (HRC 11.3.)

⁹⁸ Eliot Elisofon, to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, "First Trip Report," January 12, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 4. (EEPA P-2, 1.)

⁹⁹ Eliot Elisofon, to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, "First Trip Report," January 12, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 4. (EEPA P-2, 1.)

for permission to use 1500 watts of light....”¹⁰⁰ Elisofon discussed the museum’s artworks as fine art and his interest in African art was encouraged by the experience. He continued:

I finally got set and shot quite a bit of stuff, taking examples of each section of the Congo. I photographed figures made as pure ornament, drinking cups in the shape of heads and figures, chief’s chairs decorated with figures, iron weapons, some with beautifully carved hilts, baskets of intricate design, earthenware of various shapes and colors, and weavings of grass and raffia. All in all, the set shows that the Congo native is a person of high art standards who very often loves art for art’s sake alone.¹⁰¹

The concept of “art for art’s sake” was still a mark of a civilized people in the 1940s. It is treated in a much more complex manner today, but here Elisofon was recognizing the advanced nature of Kuba art and culture.

While he regarded many of the artworks in the Musée de la Vie Indigène as praiseworthy, he commented on the holdings of the Museum Léopold in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi) as a collection of “junk,” with some “beauties” on January 31st.¹⁰² Elisofon was already being selective with what he wanted to photograph, what he viewed as high quality works, despite only having been in the Congo for three weeks.

¹⁰⁰ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 2. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁰¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 2-3. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁰² Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 1. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

Why the Kuba?

With some analysis it was decided that traveling up to Coquithaville by canoe was not a logical option, given that all of Elisofon's cameras and equipment could easily end up at the bottom of a river during this journey. Elisofon wrote: "By great luck and some research previous to my arrival I discovered that one race or rather tribe in the Congo was outstanding in their reputation as artisans. These were the Bakuba."¹⁰³ He mentioned Torday and Joyce's *Les Bushongo* (Brussels 1910) and Kjersmeier's *Centres de style de la Sculpture Nègre Africaine* (1938) as research sources. He also conferred with the Belgian Bureau of Information and Dr. Van den Bossche about this project, and through their help confirmed that the Kuba had the highest reputation in the region for their artistic output. This was a Western opinion put in place by the activities of amateur ethnographers such as William Sheppard and Emil Torday, who were fascinated with the technical sophistication and royal nature of many Kuba arts.

A visit to the Kuba, to find art being created and used, seemed ideal to Elisofon.

Elisofon was attracted to any type of sculpture or art he saw along this journey:

When we entered the Bakuba district, the walls of the houses were all woven material and I even saw one house in transport with several men carrying a wall a piece.

The first interesting sign of Bakuba country came when we crossed the bridge (just some planks, it looked like) over the Luembe River. This was four columns erected as pure ornament at the corners of the bridge. Each column had a double head at the top and a bas relief of a crocodile around

¹⁰³ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, "Letter of Intent," January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 11.3.)

the middle. The poles were higher than my head. I made some pictures since it had stopped raining.¹⁰⁴

Elisofon took photographs of the bridge, the sculptural poles, as well as a Kuba man next to the poles for scale, wearing a similar hat to one figural form, and smoking a Kuba pipe (figs. 2.7-2.13). This was his first encounter with Kuba art in the “bush.”

Kuba: Mushenge, Day One

The next day Elisofon met the Belgian Government Administrator, Gabriel Hunin, who had been radioed by the Governor General to give Elisofon “all possible assistance,”¹⁰⁵ meaning Hunin was charged with arranging the cooperation of the Kuba King. Elisofon’s project was relayed to the King, through Hunin, to Hunin’s translator, who then retranslated it for the King.¹⁰⁶ Elisofon asked for photographs of the blacksmiths and sculptors, and of women weaving the Kasai velours. In addition, he wanted to photograph dances, and a mask being performed. Elisofon wrote: “I was told about the incredible royal costume and I decided that this might make a LIFE VISIT. So I asked for that as well.”¹⁰⁷ This may seem insignificant, but it was Elisofon who asked for the coronation costume. The King did not suggest it, and it was someone else who had

¹⁰⁴ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1-2. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁰⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁰⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁰⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 11.3.)

told Elisofon about it. In later accounts, Elisofon stated that a colonial told him about the outfit, and more specifically that it was “at the suggestion of the administrator.”¹⁰⁸

The photographic opportunities Elisofon had requested needed to be arranged and it was raining, so the group decided to take interior shots of the blacksmith forge and the King’s bedroom (**figs. 2.14-2.15**). Like the coronation outfit, Elisofon had been told about “interesting carved columns in the outer house of the king’s bedroom” by a colonial.¹⁰⁹ This was not information volunteered by the Kuba people, nor their King. “We went in,” Elisofon wrote, “and there were two columns carved in the rhythmic patterns of the Bakuba. I decided to see the inner chamber and went boldly in without being stopped.”¹¹⁰ Elisofon portrayed himself as adventurous in this text, while also unwittingly laying bare the off-balance power structure between Westerner and African in this situation. He saw it as his right to see the inner chamber, and the King, whether he wanted to or not, did not see it as his place to stop him. The photographs that Elisofon took of the King in his bedroom, occasionally posed with his two sons, become uncomfortable once we learn more of their context. Elisofon was overjoyed at what he found in the inner chamber:

Here were several more columns beautifully carved, a base board for the bed also carved, and on the wall of the inner house a large collection of native knives, with two European hunting knives in sheaths. Near by was a reclining chair beautifully carved in simple patterns and the head of the

¹⁰⁸ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 5. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁰⁹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 11.3.)

¹¹⁰ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 11.3.)

chair was a carved rams head in simple style. I found an illustration of this chair later in Torday and Joyce's 'Les Bushongo' Brussels 1910. There the chair is called 'Siege Bambala.'¹¹¹

The day was spent photographing the King in his home, documenting the Kuba woven mat walls, carved wooden columns, a wooden ram backrest, and a knife collection. These images helped Elisofon fulfill his mission to find African art being used in everyday life. He was particularly enamored of the backrest, and promised the *LIFE* staff that he would take a rubbing from the patterns on it.

Kuba: Mushenge, Day Two

Upon entering the palace grounds on the second day of his visit, Elisofon encountered a large group of the King's wives performing gourd rattle music in a circle with sporadic dancing (**fig. 2.16**). After photographing the King's wives' performance, Elisofon shot a series on the making of the Kasai velours, which were "highly prized and small ones [had] been sold in the US for as much as fifty dollars" (\$515 today, **fig. 2.17**).¹¹² In addition, he photographed four Kuba men weaving a large floor mat, which takes about three months to create, and a woodcarver blocking out an animal-shaped backrest like the one Elisofon photographed in the King's bedroom (**figs. 2.18-2.19**). Elisofon also photographed a dancer wearing a mask, but not genuinely performing with it, which disappointed him.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 11.3.)

¹¹² Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, "Letter of Intent," January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 6. (HRC 11.3.)

¹¹³ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 10. (HRC 11.3.)

Photographing the King

Elisofon described photographing the Kuba King in his coronation outfit with a combination of awe and wisecracks. Throughout the morning Elisofon checked to see if the King was ready to be photographed. “He wasn’t,” he wrote, “We waited two and a half hours for him to get dressed. Cases of all kinds arrived and when I by mistake turned a corner and saw him with a small group of dressers he grunted some thing which was ‘scram’ without any doubt. I did.”¹¹⁴ In this narrative, Elisofon paints himself as apprehensive of the King and builds up the tension to the revealing of the costume.

The King...was dressing in one corner of the grounds. It took him almost three hours to get ready and I understood why when I saw him. There he sat, the King of the Bakuba, a mass of cowrie shells was all I could see at first. He was literally covered with them. Cowrie shells were the first currency in Africa so this costume was actually a fortune on his back. I could also see a large sash of leopard skin.

He wore gloves on which were painted red finger nails and on his feet he had a similar outfit. Above the feet gloves I could see his copper bands and then cowrie shells (white monovalve about one inch length). On his head he wore an open band connected to a chin strap. This again was covered with shells and the crown was topped by what looked like egret feathers to me and a white plume. Between his legs dangled a small brass bell and I discovered another one on the left side below the waist. In his right hand he held a sword and in his left a lance.¹¹⁵

Elisofon was amazed by the costume, its detail, ornament, and complexity. “His hands and toes were covered with some cloth and I think toenails were indicated on the covering,” he wrote in another report, “...On his breast I noticed some medals with

¹¹⁴ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 6. (HRC 11.3.)

¹¹⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 6-7. (HRC 11.3.)

Leopold II on them.”¹¹⁶ When a mirror was brought out next to the camera for the King to see himself, it became a highlight of his narrative.

As I set up my camera I was told wait a bit and two men came in carrying a flat wooden case. This was carefully laid upon the ground and opened. It was a large standing mirror. The glass was adjusted so that the King could see himself and he ordered a change in the set of his crown. Well, only two other people had ever ordered a mirror near the camera before, and they were Gypsy Rose Lee and Ginger Rogers.¹¹⁷

Elisofon seemed to simultaneously regard the King highly and yet not respect him.

Elisofon photographed the King in black and white and in color, taking detail shots, pictures of the King with members of his court, and using multiple cameras (**figs. 2.20-2.22**). “I also made bold enough,” he wrote, “to get a shot of myself standing next to this ensemble. I also shot one on a press plate which I would like to get developed here for postals.”¹¹⁸ He knew this was a special opportunity and wanted to capitalize on it. But the image of himself standing by the King highlights the uncomfortable nature of these pictures (**fig. 2.23**). The King became a tourist’s exotic photo opportunity, and it emphasizes the colonialist voyeurism and consumption of the experience.

The costume was so heavy that the King required two men to help him get up and walk away when the photo session was complete. In a way, this was a stately portrait session. But the fact that the King did not want to pose for photographs, and he resisted

¹¹⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 7. (HRC 11.3.)

¹¹⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 7. (HRC 11.3.)

¹¹⁸ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 7. (HRC 11.3.)

modeling the costume, changes the atmosphere.¹¹⁹ “I told the King the sitting was over,” Elisofon wrote, “and he waddled off. His face was covered with sweat. So was I.”¹²⁰ Clearly Elisofon was directing this encounter. If the King was truly in control of his own image, would he not have decided when the session was done? Would he not have questioned Elisofon’s approach, making sure that the types of photographs he wanted to be made were, in fact, made? It seems unlikely the King would have chosen to spend three hours getting dressed into a 160-pound costume to sit for a portrait session in the middle of the summer, on a sunny day, sweating profusely, if he had not been pressured to do so.

Gift Exchange

After the photo session was over and the King had changed, a gift exchange took place. Elisofon received:

...about a dozen fresh eggs were brought in a small basket. After that two pieces of earthenware, a small urn and a bowl, and then to my great pleasure some old Bakuba wood carvings, an old pipe with a man’s head for the bowl, a head rest of wood carved in the shape of an animal, a cup in the shape of a head, several boxes covered with intricate designs and animals in relief (**figs. 2.24-2.25**).¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Leonard Lyons, “The Lyons Den,” *New York Post*, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1313.) “He was reluctant at first to spend any time posing.”

¹²⁰ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 7. (HRC 11.3.)

¹²¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 7. (HRC 11.3.)

He regarded the “old” carvings as: “A simply wonderful present because it is almost impossible to find old sculpture anymore.”¹²² Elisofon did not acknowledge the eggs as valuable but was very appreciative of the artworks, many of which are now in the NMAfA collection, and some of which were on display in the 2013-14 *Africa ReViewed* exhibition.

Elisofon gave the King 500 francs, in fifty franc notes, which the King counted out and handed to an assistant (\$11.44 in 1947, \$117.77 today). Elisofon could not tell if the King was pleased, so he pulled out more gifts. He wrote:

I had bought some junk jewelry in Woolworths for just such a moment and I took out a gold-looking heavy neck chain that cost me exactly forty nine cents. Unfortunately the King’s neck was so thick it would not pass around it so I took out another and together they made a fine neck piece. I then attached to the chain a clip set with six red stones. The King was very pleased.¹²³

Elisofon took several photographs of the King wearing this jewelry (**figs. 2.26-2.27**). He then felt he could ask the King for a mask, since the King seemed satisfied with the “junk” gold jewelry. A messenger was sent for one, and then the King explained his desire to have an American blonde wife. According to Elisofon’s trip reports, he requested that Elisofon send him/bring him one. He wrote, “I took this without a blink and answered that it would be very difficult to bring one to him. I suggested that he might go to New York. The King said fine. When I told Hunin about it he was disturbed because he was

¹²² Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 7-8. (HRC 11.3.)

¹²³ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 8. (HRC 11.3.)

sure the King would demand a trip to America.”¹²⁴ Elisofon repeated this story in multiple contexts for many years. The Kuba King became the punch line of Elisofon’s joke.

The King then asked for one of Elisofon’s cameras. “I made haste to inform him,” Elisofon wrote, “that it had taken me ten years to learn how to operate these cameras (no lie) and that I would ask my office to send him a simpler one. He was satisfied with this promise and I intend to keep it.”¹²⁵ Elisofon wired a cable to Wilson Hicks at *LIFE* to send the King a Kodak Brownie camera with ground glass. An hour later, Elisofon’s mask was delivered (**fig. 2.28**). He described it in one of his reports:

The mask was just the wooden center portion and it was new but still very fine. It was face in natural size [sic] with a pair of short horns at the top curving downward over the oval shaped face. The features are simple and in relief.

But the coloring of the mask is what is interesting. Black horns, white upper eyelids and black lower ones with open slits for eyes, an earth red nose and mouth with a connection section in relief of similar color between the lips and nostrils. The cheeks are alternating thin stripes (diagonal) of black, ochre, red and white. The forehead and chin are an overall pattern of diamond shapes in black and white. Between the horns there are several stripes of red, white and ochre.¹²⁶

This is an example of Elisofon’s attention to detail and fascination with the formal qualities of the art he encountered and collected. He wrote about the mask as any other art object. He did not use “savage,” “wild,” or “primal,” words that often appear in

¹²⁴ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 8-9. (HRC 11.3.)

¹²⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 9. (HRC 11.3.)

¹²⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 10. (HRC 11.3.)

popular literature on Africa and African art. In addition, his changing view on new artworks was apparent when he wrote that even though the mask was newly carved, it was still “fine.” Elisofon went on, “Afterward I found two more masks by the same man each different but decorated in similar colors and patterns but one mask had protruding cones for eyes and one for the mouth. I bought these two for 80 francs” (**figs. 2.29**).¹²⁷

Earlier in the day he had taken photographs of a Kuba man wearing a mask similar to the one he was given. It had a cloth top and sides, and the man danced in an imitation of boys playing, with awkward gestures and jumping (**figs. 2.30-2.31**). This, however, was not a genuine masquerade performance and Elisofon was not satisfied with the pictures.

When he left the Kuba palace grounds, he was “besieged by salesmen of all kinds.”¹²⁸ Men offered him caps, knives, weaving, etc. He bought a long battle sword that Torday called an “Ilenda” and a short one called “Ikula,” as he described in his report. He specifically referenced Torday, and seemed more inclined to purchase things that were related to his publications on the Kuba. He purchased the swords for less than a dollar each.

Songye

After Elisofon’s visit to the Kuba capital, he based his activities in Luluabourg (Kananga) and traveled every day for a week to nearby Luba, Songye, and Bena Lulua (Luluwa) villages. He tried to photograph as many ethnic groups as possible for wide

¹²⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 10. (HRC 11.3.)

¹²⁸ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 10. (HRC 11.3.)

coverage. Elisofon was always looking for art he could purchase and he was not ashamed to ask if he could buy any item that caught his eye. He visited the hut of the chief of the Songye village of Zappo-Zappo to “see how they lived” but “was sidetracked by several Kasai velours which were tacked to his walls,” that the chief had purchased in Mweka, when he worked there on the railroad.¹²⁹ “I offered to buy the most attractive one but at first he wouldn’t sell,” Elisofon wrote. He continued:

There have been natives who were not all interested in selling to me. One old man who had a beautiful knife told my driver... ‘not at any price.’ Another, a hunter, who was carrying a beautiful ‘*tshisanji*,’ also called a sanza, which is a small board on which are mounted about ten small pieces of thin iron bent over a strut so that they can be picked to produce a tune, refused to even discuss price for his. He told me that he had bought it to play for amusement and so saying played a tune for me and did a little dance as well.¹³⁰

Elisofon bought musical instruments, cloth, utensils, weapons, and anything else that appealed to him. He did not solely buy objects as pure art. For example, he was interested in sanzas because he wanted to start a sanza band when he returned home, with his friends Edward Millman, Julio De Diego, William Baird, and Fletcher Martin.¹³¹

Eventually Elisofon convinced the chief of Zappo-Zappo to sell him one of the velours by offering him “the highest price yet on the trip. One hundred francs.”¹³² Again,

¹²⁹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³⁰ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 4. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³² Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 2. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

Elisofon had paid the Kuba King 500 francs for the opportunity to photograph in the capital, so 100 francs for one object was a high price. “There was a big palaver with the wife, the first time I have ever seen a native woman consulted on anything, and she finally gave in and accepted the money,” Elisofon wrote. “He would not accept the money. I was told that the Basonge do this quite often in great contrast to other tribes.”¹³³

Elisofon’s art collecting interests were not reserved to traditional arts. “To-day I bought two rather strange paintings by a local native, Kingue Po,” he wrote. “Onewas [sic] a portrait of a Bakongo chief, the other a Bayumbe [sic] landscape. They are pure primitive and really charming. I made a portrait of the artist with his work to show this new development in African art.... The adoption of oil painting on canvas. I bought the two for \$12.”¹³⁴ Oil painting was not a new development in Africa; there had been African oil painters in the 1800s. However, in comparison to woodcarving, it appeared to Elisofon to be a newer development. His use of the word “primitive” here draws parallels to the American folk art he also collected.

When Elisofon left the chief’s hut, word had spread that there was a white man paying 2 francs for posing and he was particularly looking to photograph figures and sculptures. He was invited to another hut where he photographed a power figure with an elaborate headdress, said to be a protector for a child, who appears in the picture holding the object (**fig. 2.32**). Then he was approached by several people with smaller power

¹³³ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 2. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³⁴ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

figures, less than six inches high, with rectangular arm placement and holes in their stomachs for medicine (*bishimba*). One older man had carved two figures himself, one to protect against lightning, the other against thieves, and Elisofon photographed him holding up these items (**fig. 2.33**). Elisofon preferred this approach: “A lot more interesting than a cold museum shot.”¹³⁵ Several men showed him Songye swords, which Elisofon referred to as “nasty looking.”¹³⁶ “I photoed and bought several,” he wrote, suggesting that sometimes he paid for the chance to photograph an object by purchasing it.¹³⁷ Also in Zappo-Zappo he encountered a man weaving raffia mats and the shuttle on his loom featured a figural form.

In another Songye village, Zappo Kowiamba, Elisofon photographed a group of large power figures that protected the whole community and had their own platform, which had a small grass-covered section on one end, at the back of a hut (**figs. 2.34-2.35**).

He described his experience:

I learned that this was the home of the spirits of the deceased relations of the native were supposed to live in so as to stay out of his house. The two large fetishes were very crudely carved and are called ‘*Kadifu*.’ The natives told me they were the protectors of the village. I was taken to still another one which was girdled with a monkey skin skirt, called ‘*Tshilolo*.’ Here we were told that the villagers dance around ‘*Tshilolo*’ every full

¹³⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

moon. They also place food before it. I made plenty of pictures of these fetishes in their natural setting.¹³⁸

Again, not only did Elisofon want to see African art, he emphasized seeing it in its normal setting, not just in a museum or in a collector's apartment in New York City. We may never know if these items were authentic or were manufactured or enhanced for him. But Elisofon saw the value of the art in its use and placement, as well as in its aesthetic qualities.

Luluwa

Elisofon found it more difficult to find artwork in the Bena Lulua (Luluwa) communities. He wrote:

The Bena Lulua are not well known for their art and I found very little in the way of material. One of their habits is to decorate their huts. Not in the traditional sense of the Mangbetu who do intricate symmetrical patterns over theirs, but every once in awhile, a native will paint some stuff on his hut. If a figure is depicted he will often raise it in relief. I found one such hut and made some studies of the paintings. They were done in lampblack, a white obtained from the soil, a grey result from a mix of the white and black and a raw red earth color.¹³⁹

Elisofon found this decorated hut in the village of Bashila Kasanga. Luluwa art did and does exist — figures, masks, etc. — but it had not been studied much prior to 1947, so Elisofon would not have encountered much information on it in his readings. While working with the Luluwa, Elisofon was not shown any of the figures or masks we associate with this group today. However, he was invited to attend part of a performance by Luluwa boys in the initiation camp.

¹³⁸ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 5. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹³⁹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 5. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

The son of the chief of Bashila Kasanga invited Elisofon and his guide, Earl S. King, a missionary from the American Presbyterian Congo Mission who spoke Swahili, to view two dances by the trainees and their masked instructor (**fig. 2.36**). Elisofon referred to this as “exciting news,” since he had wanted to see a genuine mask performance.¹⁴⁰ The village’s initiated boys had been circumcised and were in training in the forest, where they stayed for three months. Elisofon explained:

We were guided to the clearing in the forest. There were two small huts at the far edges of the small space and in the center were about fifteen boys of varying sizes. They were lined up and about to begin a dance called ‘Tundandi.’

As they began out of one of the huts a wild masked figure jumped into the air and then into the circle of boys. They all began a rather strenuous movement of the body with the arms and legs all going at once. The best description I can think of is trying to hit your chin with your knees as rapidly as possible and your arms imitating a windmill in a storm. The masked figure was the teacher and he wore a small mask over a woven costume which covered him from head to toe to fingertip of black and tan patches. He wore rattles on his ankles made from seed pods. There were three drummers who beat out a very strong rhythm. They did two dances and we left. I now had pictures of a mask being actually used.¹⁴¹

According to Luluwa art specialist Constantine Petridis, these “are the only photographs that document the use of masks in relation to the *mukanda* ritual” among the Luluwa.¹⁴²

Petridis published two of Elisofon’s Luluwa *mukanda* photographs in his 1999 article on Luluwa masks in *African Arts*. This was the first time an academic published and discussed these photographs. Petridis explained that the dance scene probably “documents the first appearance of the initiated boys during the festivities celebrating the

¹⁴⁰ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 6. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹⁴¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #3, January 31, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 6. (EEPA P-2, 3.)

¹⁴² Constantine Petridis, “Luluwa Masks,” *African Arts*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 43.

end of the initiation period and the reintegration of the boys in the village.”¹⁴³ According to Elisofon’s description, what he photographed took place in the initiation camp, in a clearing in the forest, so it was most likely a rehearsal for the actual celebration of the reintegration of the boys into the village, not the final celebration itself.

The Further History of the Kuba Encounter

Elisofon’s goal for his time in the Belgian Congo was to “track down” a story on “African Negro Art.”¹⁴⁴ Did Elisofon accomplish his goal? Was he able to show African art being used by Africans in their everyday life? And if so, did *LIFE* publish any of these photographs? Yes and no. Elisofon’s Kuba encounter appeared in *LIFE* as a 4-page article; 3 pages were shared with advertisements and only the first page had a whole page to itself (**figs. 2.37-2.39**, March 31, 1947). The first photograph is Nyim Bope Mabinshe in his coronation costume; the second, an image of his wives performing music and dancing; the third, three musicians performing on cowrie-encrusted, waist-high drums; the fourth, the Nyim in his bedroom with two of his sons; and the fifth, a Kuba woman balancing a large water gourd on her head. All of the women in the article appear in their normal topless state, a selling point to *LIFE*’s editorial staff.

The photographs show the Kuba as an exotic, unusual people. They highlight the differences between Americans and the Kuba people – skin color, dress, environment, social practices. If one examines only the photographs in this article and ignores the title and the text, Elisofon’s fascination with the Kuba is apparent. However the tongue-in-

¹⁴³ Constantine Petridis, “Luluwa Masks,” *African Arts*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 43.

¹⁴⁴ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, “Letter of Intent,” January 24, 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 9. (HRC 11.3.)

cheek *LIFE* title “African Big Shot” and text meant purely to entertain undermined this fascination. The article projected an image of Africa as different, wild, and needing tamed. “African Big Shot” is culturalist – it emphasized African ‘problems’ and ‘differences,’ framing the Kuba culture as less-evolved, a reflection of Western perceptions of the time.

African art is not mentioned in “African Big Shot.” The King’s coronation outfit, drums, and architecture are seen, but not discussed as art. The photographs represent what Elisofon experienced, the day-to-day life of the Kuba and their King. He saw dancing, music, art creation, the palace: the best of Kuba culture. But the article was not a lesson in cultural appreciation, even though that was Elisofon’s intention.

The *LIFE* staff is not entirely to blame for this, as Elisofon prepared all the caption material for the piece. The tone of his original text is playful, since *LIFE* was meant to entertain. However, the *LIFE* editors added to the work, because Elisofon was still in Africa when the piece was published. “African Big Shot,” the text began, “A fat, black monarch of the Congo rules his tribe with a heavy hand. Probably the most strangely autocratic ruler in the world is a big, frog-faced man named Bope Mabinshe.”¹⁴⁵ Within the first paragraph, *LIFE* has called the King of the Kuba fat and frog-faced. These words did not appear in Elisofon’s trip report, though he did call the King “quite ugly” and potbellied.¹⁴⁶ Some of the *LIFE* text was taken from John Latouche’s book, *Congo*, written in 1945, with photographs by André Cauvin. The following sections,

¹⁴⁵ “African Big Shot,” *LIFE* (March 31, 1947): 128.

¹⁴⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 11.3.)

which described the Nyim's mode of rule, were not included in Elisofon's reports, but appeared on pages 59-61 of the *Congo* text:

When he sneezes, all people present must burst into spontaneous applause. If the king, who reigns by divine right, happens to spit on the ground, the person nearest him carefully gathers the spittle in a cloth and reverently preserves it. In his court is a minion called the Yumi whose function it is to rub red pepper into the eyes of the monarch's 350 wives if they become disobedient.¹⁴⁷

These were not credited to the *Congo* publication, which demonstrates how *LIFE* used a variety of sources to create its articles, but did not always cite them. The sneezing, applause, spit, and red pepper rubbing 'facts' are highlighted as bizarre practices of this culture. The brief text goes on to explain that the Belgians pay the King a tribute to keep his 'once-cannibal subjects' under control. The final two sentences are: "Bope has one ambition: to visit America. He thinks American blondes are fascinating."¹⁴⁸

Aside from a "plump Buddha" description of Mabinche, the image captions are more respectful and drawn more directly from Elisofon's trip reports.¹⁴⁹ Yet on the whole, the article is a reflection of how Africa featured in American popular culture, as someplace purely exotic, to be ogled, and even laughed at. Ultimately, the image of Mabinche, resplendent in his 160-pound coronation costume, became an iconic *LIFE* image, exhibited and republished repeatedly, including in the Edward Steichen-curated 1951 MoMA show and catalog *Memorable LIFE Photographs*.

In her 1993 *African Arts* article, Christraud Geary explained that Elisofon's 1947 Kuba photographs are some of his most famous of Africans and African art, and that they

¹⁴⁷ John Treville Latouche and Andre Cauvin, *Congo* (New York: Willow, White, and Co., 1945): 59-61.

¹⁴⁸ "African Big Shot," *LIFE* (March 31, 1947): 128.

¹⁴⁹ "African Big Shot," *LIFE* (March 31, 1947): 128.

deserve analysis. Geary gave an overview of Elisofon's 1947 encounter with the Kuba and their King, and included passages from Elisofon's reports to *LIFE* magazine and his letters. Her objective was to concisely address the photographer's motivations and process for this assignment, as well as the Nyim's control of how he and his people were represented in the pictures. This topic was repeated in Geary's 2003 exhibition catalog *In and Out of Focus*. The three pages on Elisofon in this book concluded with these sentences: "In a complex process, the expectations of both the photographer and the photographed met and reinforced each other. Photographers and subjects were authors of the images, which distant consumers imbued with meanings of their own making."¹⁵⁰

Geary explained that she would elucidate "the specific circumstances surrounding their creation" in her article, however specific information about these photographs was not as thorough as it could have been.¹⁵¹ Although Geary's contextual information was derived from the same resources the current research deals with — Elisofon's lengthy letter dated Jan. 24, 1947 and two of his reports — the description of the events seems imprecise. Her argument was that the Kuba King had as much agency in the photographs as Elisofon did. But from Elisofon's writing the King appeared to be more of a pawn than a co-director. Geary did not address Elisofon's statement that the Belgian administrator Hunin asked for the royal coronation costume and insisted that the King be photographed in it. The situation described in Elisofon's reports was one of colonial control. The King

¹⁵⁰ Christraud M. Geary, and Krzysztof Pluskota, *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in association with Philip Wilson, London, 2003): 102.

¹⁵¹ Christraud M. Geary, "Two Days in Mushenge: Eliot Elisofon's Images of the Kuba (1947)," *African Arts*, vol. 26, no. 2 (April 1993): 72. For example, Geary numbered them as 200 black-and-white images, but did not mention that color images also exist from Elisofon's two days in Mushenge, as can be found in the Getty Image archive online. It would have been more accurate to state that there are 200 black-and-white images from 1947 in Mushenge located in the EEPA.

did as Hunin prescribed, despite the heat, the fact that the costume weighed 160 pounds, it took him three hours to get into it, and that it involved great physical strain.

Geary also did not address publication of these photographs in *LIFE* in “African Big Shot.” She explained that “Two Days in Mushenge” was meant to reveal the creation circumstances for these 1947 Elisofon Kuba pictures, a goal largely accomplished in the small text space available. She stated that both the photographer and the King had a stake in the pictures, which is true, and that together they “succeeded in creating a lasting image of the Kuba,” which is also true.¹⁵² However, the initial *LIFE* publication on the King and the Kuba showed the magazine’s and American society’s inability to fully appreciate African culture and to give its inhabitants the respect they deserved.

Overall, Geary’s article did not address the romantic goals that Elisofon had for this project, connected with his self-identification as a *LIFE* photographer. Geary addressed Elisofon as if he were an educated ethnographer, exploring Africa for the sake of knowledge. While Elisofon was interested in knowledge, he also needed his photographs and text to fit a photojournalistic format that *LIFE* would want to publish, which would both inform and titillate the readership. As the *LIFE* prospectus stated: “...to see strange things...to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed....”¹⁵³ Ultimately, Geary’s short article gave a truncated account of the creation of the 1947 Kuba photographs, particularly the most famous image of the King in his coronation costume. Elisofon is a historical example of how many Westerners have

¹⁵² Christraud M. Geary, “Two Days in Mushenge: Eliot Elisofon’s Images of the Kuba (1947),” *African Arts*, vol. 26, no. 2 (April 1993): 72.

¹⁵³ Erika Doss, ed., “Introduction,” *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001): 2.

regarded, written about, and photographed Africans. His experiences in Africa and his naturally Western-oriented perceptions of those experiences add insight to the circumstances surrounding the photographs taken.

Elisofon repeated his tale of adventure with the Kuba over and over — in magazines, newspapers, and television and radio interviews — and played to his audience, just as *LIFE* had in “African Big Shot.” For example, he often sent Leonard Lyons information for inclusion in his *New York Post* daily column, “The Lyons Den.” Elisofon visited Mushenge on January 19th and 20th. On January 31st, Lyons already had a blurb on the story in his column. He wrote:

PHOTO DEPT.: Eliot Elisofon, the Life cameraman, is in the Belgian Congo. He visited the Bakuba tribe near the Kasai River in the heart of the Congo forest, and met the King, Nymi Bope Mabinshe who, among other things, has 350 wives...The royal costume is so heavy that the King cannot rise from a chair without assistance. The costume is covered with sea shells – Congo currency – several bells, a sword, a lance, etc.

When the King had finished dressing Elisofon set up his camera. The King asked him to wait—and then a large, flat case arrived, and from it was removed a large mirror which was set up next to the camera, so that the King could see how he appears to the camera lens... “Only two other people ever pulled this mirror stuff on me,” said Elisofon, pointing to the preening King of subjects who were cannibals only 50 years ago, “and now it’s three –Nymi Bope Mabinshe, Ginger Rogers and Gypsy Rose Lee.”¹⁵⁴

350 wives. Cannibals. The mirror. And those were not the only jokes that appeared in Lyons’ column about the Kuba encounter. “MATRIMONIAL DEPT.: Eliot Elisofon, the cameraman,” Lyons wrote, “covered the arrival of the King and Queen of England, in Capetown. Elisofon told King George about his visit to the tribes and of the time he spent with Nymi Bope Mabinshe. ‘He was reluctant at first to spend any time posing,’ said

¹⁵⁴ Leonard Lyons, “The Lyons Den,” *New York Post*, January 31, 1947. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1306.)

Elisofon. ‘He has 350 wives.’ ‘Well,’ replied King George, ‘it would keep a man busy, wouldn’t it.’”¹⁵⁵

Elisofon maintained a self-congratulatory role as the clever white adventurer. In the TIME Inc. in-house publication *f.y.i.* magazine, this becomes apparent in the coverage of Elisofon’s encounter with the Kuba. *F.y.i.* was similar to a staff newsletter, meant to keep everyone informed about how articles were produced for the TIME Inc. magazines.

The article read:

Eliot Elisofon...is a man of tact. After completing his photographic close-up of King Bope Mabinshe of the Belgian Congo’s Bakuba tribe...Elisofon allowed His corpulent Majesty to peer into the ground glass view finder of his Rolleiflex. They exchanged gifts – two dozen eggs, a decorative mask, odds & ends for Elisofon; some high-class Woolworth’s jewelry for the King – and then the King expressed a liking for Elisofon’s \$400 Rolleiflex.

The photographer had to think fast. ‘This is a very complicated machine,’ he said. ‘It took me ten years to learn how to operate it. But I’ll try to get one in America and send it to you.’ Elisofon sent an SOS to LIFE’s Wilson Hicks, who had a Brownie Reflex, complete with ground glass, dispatched to the monarch.¹⁵⁶

This rendition of the trip painted Elisofon as outwitting a native, thinking “fast” to come up with a way to save his camera, and gift the King a much less expensive device. The implication is that the King would not know the difference between a Rolleiflex and a Kodak Brownie, which cost approximately \$40, one-tenth the price of the Rolleiflex. The Brownie was famous for being an everyman’s, easy-to-use, inexpensive camera. The *f.y.i.* magazine article continued:

¹⁵⁵ Leonard Lyons, “The Lyons Den,” *New York Post*, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1313.)

¹⁵⁶ “With Elisofon in Darkest Africa,” *f.y.i.* magazine (July 21, 1947): 3. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1307.)

King Bope's second request stopped Elisofon cold. He wanted an American blonde, just like those in the copies of LIFE Elisofon had shown him. She would be an interesting addition to his 350-wife harem. Rather than try to explain about U.S. blondes, Elisofon hedged: "Perhaps you can come to America yourself and pick one out." When the Belgian administrateur of the district heard about this, he fumed: "He'll be down here next week for a passport!"¹⁵⁷

"King Bope" is portrayed not only as greedy and Western-technology hungry, but also as a willful lecher. The Belgian Administrator (Hunin) is then added as the beleaguered colonial ruler, unable to satisfy the demands of his 'charge.'

To finish off this text: "Bope, a vain, canny tyrant, had a full-length mirror set up aside the camera while Elisofon was working, so he could be sure his dignity would not suffer in the resulting pictures."¹⁵⁸ And the human sacrifices of the King's widows resurfaced, a story that had appeared in Elisofon's reports: "One of the anthropological details [Elisofon] picked up: 'When a Bushongo king dies, six of his widows are sealed into his underground death chamber after their arms and legs are broken. When Bope's predecessor died, the Belgians sent troops to prevent the celebration of this quaint rite, but I understand it was done anyway as soon as the troops pulled out.'"¹⁵⁹ Multiple cultural stereotypes and Western misconceptions were reinforced.

The 1947 Kuba encounter was mentioned throughout Elisofon's career, as those photographs are some of his most famous. The most noteworthy example of this persistence occurred in 1958 because Elisofon included a photograph of the King in his royal coronation outfit in his book, *The Sculpture of Africa*. It became a trending topic,

¹⁵⁷ "With Elisofon in Darkest Africa," *f.y.i.* magazine (July 21, 1947): 3. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1307.)

¹⁵⁸ "With Elisofon in Darkest Africa," *f.y.i.* magazine (July 21, 1947): 3. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1307.)

¹⁵⁹ "With Elisofon in Darkest Africa," *f.y.i.* magazine (July 21, 1947): 3. (HRC 11.3, IMG_1307.)

promoting the collecting of African art as proof of Elisofon's adventurous life. From the *New York Post's* column, "The Lyons Den:"

Business Dept.: Eliot Elisofon's new book, 'The Sculpture of Africa,' was a seven year project which has just been published simultaneously in N.Y., London, Paris and Cologne. Elisofon is the Life photographer who also is a foremost collector of African sculpture. His book includes a photo of the King of the Bushongo who owned some prized sculpture Elisofon coveted. He knew of the local custom of giving a gift in exchange for a gift.

The photographer marked the pieces he wanted, then gave the King \$50 in Belgian francs. The King signaled and his men brought Elisofon a gift-12 eggs. Elisofon emptied his pockets of \$25 more. The King gave him two worthless jars. Then Elisofon placed around the King's shoulders \$2 worth of rhinestones on a thin chain. The King gave him the priceless African sculpture, which now is on exhibition at the Boston Museum.¹⁶⁰

"Priceless African sculpture" is an exaggeration. Yet that we may never know the truth was reinforced by Elisofon's interview with Robert Taylor of *The Boston Herald*. He interviewed Elisofon on the night he was delivering a lecture for the *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1958. The Kuba story took up most of the article text: "Mr. Elisofon showed us a photograph of the Nyimi in his latest volume 'The Sculpture of Africa.' The Bushongo ruler was a mountainous mass buried under an avalanche of plumage from which he stared out with heavy-lidded, saurian eyes."¹⁶¹ Elisofon explained to Taylor:

I wanted a superb mask in the household of the Nyimi – he's got a full court, by the way, with regal trappings – and I knew that if I offered him something he'd be forced to respond according to native custom. I gave him 50 dollars. The Nyimi's chamberlain, in turn, gave me three eggs. So I raised the price. The chamberlain produced a hen. By this time I was worried. I recalled reading about explorers who had swapped mirrors, gimcracks, that sort of things, and as an afterthought I had purchased some gold chains at the Five and Ten.

¹⁶⁰ Leonard Lyons, "The Lyons Den," *New York Post*, November 21, 1958. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1243.)

¹⁶¹ Robert Taylor, "The Roving Eye: The Many Masks of Eliot Elisofon," *The Boston Herald*, November 7, 1958. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6289.)

It couldn't be, I thought, but apprehensively I took out the chains and placed them around the Nyimi's neck. He used to be an absolute ruler, you know, and the natives aren't entirely unsophisticated. But when he beamed, I heaved a sigh of relief, and a rhinestone fountain pen was the final thing that closed the deal. I felt as if I were back in the era of the explorer, Stanley. I could have gotten myself killed for that mask.¹⁶²

Every time the story was told, it was a little different. Just \$50. Then \$25 more. 3 eggs. 12 eggs. Two-dozen eggs. A hen. No hen. A pen. No pen. The story was in constant flux, adjusted to suit the moment. The journalists did not question the veracity of Elisofon's words, however, the researcher must. In the end, his ideas, opinions, and stories were being projected publicly, true or not.

Among Elisofon's quotes in this article was the following: "One mustn't think of uncivilized artists as child-like. They are extremely intelligent men, but they have their artistic conventions just as we do. I've lived among primitive cultures all over the world, and if you're friendly to them they sense it and generally respond."¹⁶³ The first part of this discussion is valid, and it is commendable that Elisofon was attempting to communicate these points to a broader audience. The last sentence reads as patronizing and paternalistic from our modern point of view. However, he was supporting living amongst the artists and trying to understand them. In one moment, he went from saying 'natives' are not child-like, to saying 'if you are friendly to them they will sense it' as if they are the stray dog on the street that you want to pet. These articles serve as examples of how Elisofon's words and images took on a life of their own in the American media. Despite Geary's argument that the Kuba King had a degree of agency in this encounter, clearly

¹⁶² Robert Taylor, "The Roving Eye: The Many Masks of Eliot Elisofon," *The Boston Herald*, November 7, 1958. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6289.)

¹⁶³ Robert Taylor, "The Roving Eye: The Many Masks of Eliot Elisofon," *The Boston Herald*, November 7, 1958. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6289.)

once the photographs were taken he was no longer controlling anything. This was Elisofon's show.

The Kuba Encounter *ReViewed*

In 2013 the National Museum of African Art held an exhibition, *Africa ReViewed*, in honor of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives. Curators Amy Staples and Bryna Freyer created the exhibition from the archive of 60,000 prints and negatives, as well as the art objects, documents, and film footage that Elisofon gave to the Museum of African Art.

The thesis of the exhibition, that Elisofon presented new ideas about Africa to the American public, is, in part, also the thesis of this dissertation. However, the argument that Elisofon shed “new light on what had been viewed as the Dark Continent,” implied that he showed Africa in a new way, a different way than previous image-makers.¹⁶⁴ The way he approached Africa transitioned throughout his career, and this was not explained by the exhibition nor the museum's publicity. At first, Elisofon was firmly entrenched in the past, occasionally using racist language and constructing the same ‘us vs. them’ dialogue that colonials had used for almost a century. In 1947, the Congolese native was still the primitive, exotic ‘other’ to Elisofon's educated, white adventurer. The concept of being sensitive to racial issues arose in the 1960s, because of the Civil Rights movement and African independence movements, and a subsequent more dignified approach to the continent solidified in Elisofon's work in the 1970s.

¹⁶⁴ Susan Stamberg, “‘Life’ Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens,” NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=272041622>

In connection with the anniversary exhibition, Staples stated in a National Public Radio (NPR) interview: “He redefined Africa in a new and a complex way for American audiences. And he brought Africa into their living rooms in *Life* magazine.”¹⁶⁵ The newest, most innovative thing about Elisofon’s approach was not even his own creation. The bold presentation of images of Africa and African art in a mass-produced, large-format picture magazine was only possible with the invention of *LIFE*. Elisofon did contribute to the popularity of this magazine, but he did not originate the publication himself. And his pictures were not the only images of Africa in *LIFE*; there were multiple participants in the re-defining of Africa for American audiences via this magazine.

So did Elisofon have a new approach? Did he redefine Africa in a new and complex way? Not at first. And arguably, all of his approaches to Africa were derived from other sources. Africa as a land of adventure. African art as aesthetically advanced. African art as proof of advanced African cultures, i.e. a potential source of black pride. None of these were his ideas. They were more like conceptual trends that he adopted, and then let fall away when they went out of fashion. In many ways Elisofon was a pioneer, but it is important to avoid oversimplification. He was a complex man with a long, complex career.

The NPR interview began with a sound bite of the typical Tarzan yell as he swings through the trees. Susan Stamberg, the special NPR correspondent, then explained, “Before World War II, most Americans got their ideas about Africa from movies, filmed

¹⁶⁵ Amy J. Staples, interview with Susan Stamberg, “‘Life’ Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens,” NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

on Hollywood sound stages. ‘Tarzan, the Ape Man,’ in the African jungles.’¹⁶⁶ The interview was set up to present Elisofon as the opposite of this stereotypical Tarzan example, but the character was even in his mind as he traveled through Africa in 1947. In one of his trip reports Elisofon casually commented: “The road passed through forests so dense that you could not see into them and some stretches were covered with heavy vines Tarzan would have simply loved.”¹⁶⁷

“He came in early,” Staples continued in the interview, “He was probably one of the first photographers to travel extensively in Africa after World War II.”¹⁶⁸ This statement should have been qualified. He was one of the first *photojournalists* to travel extensively in Africa after World War II. To think he was doing this work before anyone else had thought of it would be inaccurate. Ethnographers, anthropologists, colonials, and missionaries had been photographing Africa since the invention of photography, and they certainly continued this work after World War II. The difference with Elisofon is that his photographs were immediately published in a mass-produced, popular magazine in the United States. They were not shelved in a museum, moved to an archive, and then cataloged decades later like so many African ethnographic photography collections. Photojournalism was a new field, almost embryonic, spurred onto an international level because of World War II coverage.

¹⁶⁶ Susan Stamberg, “‘Life’ Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens,” NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁶⁸ Amy J. Staples, interview with Susan Stamberg, “‘Life’ Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens,” NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

For a photographer to take an image of a traditional ruler of Africa, like Bope Mabiinshe, and then have it almost immediately published in *LIFE*, viewable by a large audience, millions of people, was something that had never happened before. Even if colonial-era photographs of the Kuba King had been published in journals in the late 1800s, or postcard images sold throughout the world in the 1930s, the scale of readership with *LIFE*, in 1947, was completely new. Further, one must acknowledge that Elisofon created these images with the intent of publishing them in *LIFE*. He had a specific agenda to meet with his photographs. He needed high-quality, aesthetically pleasing, well-composed images that could tell a complete story in *LIFE*. How can I get this published in *LIFE*? How does this work as a *LIFE* story? These were questions constantly going through Elisofon's head, if not directly, suggestively. All of his work needs to be framed by the *LIFE* mission.

Later in the NPR interview was a discussion of the Kuba King photograph and *LIFE* article: "For readers of *Life*, this was a new vision of Africa, Staples explains: 'People hadn't seen that kind of detail and that kind of costume and that kind of beauty and dignity before.'" ¹⁶⁹ Stamberg followed with: "The photo is regal and dignified. But the caption Life put with it was disparaging: 'A fat black monarch.' Elisofon hated that caption." ¹⁷⁰ How could he hate the caption if he helped to write it? How do we know he hated that caption? It is an off-hand remark from the correspondent without any source.

¹⁶⁹ Amy J. Staples, interview with Susan Stamberg, "'Life' Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens," NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

¹⁷⁰ Susan Stamberg, "'Life' Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens," NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

Elisofon was the one who called the King “quite ugly” and potbellied.¹⁷¹ Stamberg continued: “He spent much of his career as a photographer and filmmaker providing evidence of a rich, diverse and modern Africa –evidence for all America, and all the world, to see.”¹⁷²

Another concept that the exhibition sidestepped, but which is emphasized throughout this dissertation, is that the ‘Africa’ Elisofon ‘ReViewed’ was his own view of Africa, his own construction. Staples wrote about this issue briefly in her 2007 “Visualism and the Authentification of the Object” article on Elisofon and his collection at the NMAfA. She explained:

These images encapsulate the underlying assumption that “primitive” or traditional cultures do not change or are isolated from the rest of the world. Elisofon’s photographs do not reveal “authentic” Africa, but construct a particular vision of Africa as exotic, timeless and unchanged....

...Elisofon’s photographs are not simply visual evidence of African cultural or spiritual practices, but must be analyzed for what they reveal about the photographer’s visual practices, his relationships with Africans and local cultural brokers, and the romanticized vision of Africa constructed in his imagery....

While these images contain significant aesthetic and ethnographic detail, it would be a mistake to accept these images as transparent representations of African life, rather than carefully constructed scenes or commissioned events....

...photographs cannot be approached uncritically as visual evidence of reality. His conflation of the exotic and authentic...illustrates the

¹⁷¹ Eliot Elisofon, letter to TIME-LIFE office in New York City, Report #2, Jan. 1947, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 11.3.)

¹⁷² Susan Stamberg, “‘Life’ Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens,” NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

intersecting aesthetic, documentary, ethnographic, and ideological contexts within which archival images are created and interpreted.¹⁷³

Staples' sentences were carefully worded. "I think what he did," she commented in the NPR interview, "is he created a more intimate view of Africa. There was humanity there. He was actually trying to educate audiences in the U.S. about how he perceived the real Africa to be."¹⁷⁴ Overall the NPR coverage projected Elisofon as a hero for Africa – battling stereotypes of the continent as "a remote, exotic, often fearful place."¹⁷⁵

In reaction to this exhibition publicity, Raoul J. Granqvist wrote an article for the blog *Africa is a Country*, titled "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse."¹⁷⁶ Granqvist began: "Eliot Elisofon did not cast 'new light' or 'refine [sic] Africa in a new and complex way for American audiences,' as claimed by Susan Stamberg's 'Life' Photographer Showed Africa through a New Lens' on NPR (February 10, 2014) about an exhibit of Elisofon's work...His subjectivity and artistic talent was of another sort."¹⁷⁷

Much like this dissertation, Granqvist took issue with the oversimplification of Elisofon's approach. He commented on the fact that Elisofon took these photographs for *LIFE*, and they were "the result of an array of interlaced pulls."¹⁷⁸ He explained that

¹⁷³ Amy J. Staples, "Visualism and the Authentification of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 182, 183, 185.

¹⁷⁴ Amy J. Staples, interview with Susan Stamberg, "'Life' Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens," NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

¹⁷⁵ Susan Stamberg, "'Life' Photographer Showed Africa Through A New Lens," NPR radio interview, February 10, 2014.

¹⁷⁶ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014. <http://africasacountry.com/eliot-elisofons-africa-old-updated-worse/>, Accessed June 10, 2014.

¹⁷⁷ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

¹⁷⁸ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

Elisofon's work "was informed by the contextual material that he culled from various impromptu sources, by what the *LIFE* editors supplied him with, and, in particular, by the normative colonial practices that related to the visualization of the 'African' body and the 'African' landscape."¹⁷⁹ Given the amount of research Elisofon put into his projects, one would doubt the label "impromptu" for his sources. But Granqvist's further observation, that Elisofon's "'choice' of what to see (and how) was embedded in a visual colonial archive of long standing," that "it was never a unique choice," has some merit.¹⁸⁰

However, instead of problematizing the discussion, Granqvist maligned Elisofon, *LIFE*, and even the Kuba King. Granqvist continued: "To un-mask the mask or the 'unfamiliar world' (Africa), [Elisofon] re-masked it by bringing it home – at costs for Africa...Elisofon was out for the 'authentic' and the 'untouched,' but he was always ready to compromise these ideals, when his camera caught what he thought might attract an American eye (that was male)."¹⁸¹ Granqvist followed this observation with the account of Elisofon photographing the King's topless "harem" of 350 wives. Granqvist also referred to the Kuba King as a "colonial handyman...a king who knew his price," in this section. Next, the gift exchange story was introduced, which Granqvist explained was a "lopsided mode of bargaining," "a colonial norm that Elisofon practiced whenever he had a chance."¹⁸² Granqvist was quick to assign colonialist qualities to every aspect of

¹⁷⁹ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

¹⁸¹ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

¹⁸² Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

Elisofon's behavior, again oversimplifying a very complex man. Finally, we come back to *LIFE*. How did Granqvist deal with "African Big Shot?" He described how:

The re-invented photographs of the Kuba clan (with the freakish depiction of him as "African Big Shot. A Fat Black Monarch of the Congo," *LIFE*, March 31, 1947), and the denigrating one-liners that accompanied them, were returned 'home,' and being re-published (with them also the support from the condescending captions) and robbed of their content, were/are continuously distancing African cultural and historical conditions, in fact revisiting mythologies....

As a contrast, see the sober, unsentimental photo by Arnold Newman, a colleague of Elisofon, "Bope Mabinshe King of the Bakubas Congo Africa 1958."¹⁸³

"African Big Shot" is a racist article, as previously discussed, however, it is inaccurate to label the photograph of the King as racist. This seems unfounded. The "freakish depiction" is a challenging description of the King's photograph, as it is specifically contrasted with Newman's "sober, unsentimental" picture (**fig. 2.40**). What makes one freakish and the other sober? Newman took his photographs in much the same way as Elisofon – with the guidance of the Belgian government, with the *LIFE* mission in his mind. He even took the same "The King and I" photographs that Elisofon had taken 11 years before, posing twice next to his majesty like a tourist (**figs. 2.41-2.42**).

The most obvious statement from Granqvist—that Elisofon's "photographs are not about Africa, they are about Africa in America!"—is heavy-handed with its exclamatory nature.¹⁸⁴ Clearly this is a similar thought process as Staples—this is the Africa that America saw through Elisofon's eyes—so it is not a new, shocking idea. However, Staples and Granqvist discussed the images solely as views of Africa—whether

¹⁸³ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

¹⁸⁴ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Eliot Elisofon's Africa: Old, Updated, Worse," *Africa is a Country* blog, February 13, 2014.

real, imagined, or racist. The photographs' connection with African art history is being reduced and reframed within new conceptual goals. We must not forget that in 1947 in the Belgian Congo Elisofon was not thinking: 'How can I show Africa to *LIFE* readers?' Instead he was thinking: 'How can I show African art to *LIFE* readers?'

Staples and Granqvist do stand at opposite ends of the Elisofon spectrum. For Staples Elisofon's work had positive repercussions for the image of Africa in the American collective psyche; in Granqvist's opinion the results were ultimately negative. However, while focusing on Elisofon as racist and colonialist, Granqvist missed the most demeaning article on the Kuba King. On December 12, 1960, *LIFE* published the feature "Polygamy Passing: Congo King Loses 750 of His Wives" (figs. 2.43-2.46). The brief essay juxtaposed Elisofon's 1947 photographs of the King in his coronation outfit and of his wives performing music in a circle and dancing against new pictures of the Kuba by Terence Spencer.

The text explained that the King had lost most of his wives, and the majority of his children; his court was dissolving, as well as his power. His palace walls and fences were crumbling because he no longer had the wives to maintain them. The Belgian Congo had gained independence and the new government decreed it undemocratic to have 800 wives: "We have our independence now, and so must these women."¹⁸⁵ The main photograph of the "Morose Monarch," is the visual opposite of the coronation outfit picture. He "sits in a darkened room attended by a favorite son, Bope Mbelepe, in tennis shirt."¹⁸⁶ The "King now has rheumatism so badly two men must hold him up when he

¹⁸⁵ "Polygamy Passing," *LIFE* (December 12, 1960): 79.

¹⁸⁶ "Polygamy Passing," *LIFE* (December 12, 1960): 79.

wears royal robes.”¹⁸⁷ Draped in a blanket in his bedroom, the King carried a look of defeat. *LIFE* named him as Lukengu Bope Mabinshe, now past 60. He told Spencer, “I am a very unhappy man. Circumstances have given us independence before we are ready.”¹⁸⁸

“Polygamy Passing” is a different type of intimacy and humanity than Staples had in mind when she was describing Elisofon’s photographs. It painted an image of the King as pathetic, sickly, and weak. In contrast, Elisofon’s pictures of the King do indeed make him look regal and dignified. Overall, the Kuba encounter of 1947 is both useful and problematic. Elisofon’s two days in Mushenge represent his first experience with African art in the field, being made and used. However, his image of the King in his coronation outfit has become so iconic that it has become representative of his whole career. This narrows our vision of his true impact on the study and appreciation of African art. As important as Elisofon’s 1947 trip is to this dissertation—it was his first experience of sub-Saharan Africa—it was far from his first encounter with African art. Instead, his earliest experiences with African art were as a collector, not as a field photographer of Africa.

¹⁸⁷ “Polygamy Passing,” *LIFE* (December 12, 1960): 79.

¹⁸⁸ “Polygamy Passing,” *LIFE* (December 12, 1960): 79.

Chapter Three: Eliot Elisofon, Meeting African Art

Around the late 1930s, Elisofon brought his photographs of New York's Lower East Side to Marion Willard of the East River Gallery. She was not sure what to do with his work, as she had never exhibited photographs as art. She asked him to photograph some of modernist sculptor David Smith's work to accompany his upcoming exhibition in January 1938. Elisofon photographed Smith at work, his studio, and his artworks for Willard (**fig. 3.1**). Elisofon became friends with Smith and his wife Dorothy Dehner, trading his photographs for Smith's sculptures. Dehner and Smith had been collecting African art since the 1920s, and Elisofon was impressed with what they owned.¹⁸⁹

This was probably his first encounter with a large private collection of African art, though it was not Elisofon's first exposure to African art. Elisofon had gone to the 1935 Museum of Modern art exhibition, *African Negro Art*, organized by James Johnson Sweeney. African art was shown as fine art in this show, against white walls, on white pedestals, and without labels, dioramas or the crowded case displays typical of natural history museums. Later press releases and the acknowledgements section of *The Sculpture of Africa* stated that Elisofon's interest in Africa began at this point and he decided then that he wanted to visit the continent.

In a newspaper interview in 1958, Elisofon stated: "I first got excited about primitive sculpture when I saw a Museum of Modern Art exhibit on African art in 1935.

¹⁸⁹ Elin Elisofon, Dorothy Dehner interview (David Smith's ex-wife), Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1125.)

That started me as a collector.”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, he was so interested in the show and African art that he even squirreled away the *TIME* magazine article on the exhibition, “Works of Fear,” in his papers.¹⁹¹ If this text was one of his earliest readings on African art, it certainly left a lot to be desired. “Ever since the Portuguese, Dutch and British first started raiding the jungles of West Africa for slaves to work their new colonies, the hideous gods and little demons of primitive Africa have been turning up as curios in the homelands of the traders,” the article stated.¹⁹² Racist language and a tongue-in-cheek attitude overshadowed the core, valid explanation that African art was purposeful, not made from spontaneous motivations.

The article epitomizes the type of media representation of African art of this period, running through the gambit of stereotypes, explaining them, and simultaneously reinforcing and breaking them down in an odd paradox. The author seemed to regard all African art as violent, wild and dangerous, and promoted the idea that fear alone was the dominant emotion in generating African art. Also the article argued that African art is the darling of the cultural elite, and not for the masses: “Today an African mask or two is as necessary for the apartment of a young-man-about-Paris as lounging pajamas and a bottle of port.”¹⁹³ While this joke seems heavy-handed, Elisofon did photograph his African-art bedecked apartment (**figs. 3.2-3.5**) and these images certainly speak to this idea of displaying African art as proof of one’s intellect and elite status. The everyman may be able to comprehend the lure of African art to the modern artist, the article continued, but

¹⁹⁰ Robert Taylor, “The Roving Eye: The Many Masks of Eliot Elisofon,” *The Boston Herald*, November 7, 1958. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6289.)

¹⁹¹ “Works of Fear,” *TIME* (April 1, 1935): 49.

¹⁹² “Works of Fear,” *TIME* (April 1, 1935): 49.

¹⁹³ “Works of Fear,” *TIME* (April 1, 1935): 49.

“may not be able to comprehend the technical skill, the shrewd relation of form to material that these savage artists used.”¹⁹⁴

In the end, a lack of respect for the continent and its art is evident. While the author may have been attempting to genuinely describe objects one could see at the MoMA show, he ended up creating absurd comedy: “From Dahomey came one of the largest exhibits, the iron war god in the lobby, nearly life-size and wearing a strange spiked hat and a garment like a pleated nightshirt. His raised left arm looked as if he were signaling over his shoulder with his thumb, like any hitchhiker.”¹⁹⁵ The article endorsed African art as exotic oddities, fit for those who can successfully pretend to understand and appreciate it.

Chaim Gross, Isamu Noguchi, and African Art

Also in the late 1930s, probably through his friendship with David Smith, Elisofon met Chaim Gross and Isamu Noguchi, modernist artists who carved wood sculptures. Gross also collected African art with his wife Renee.¹⁹⁶ They began their collection around 1937, buying objects from fellow artist John Graham.¹⁹⁷ Elisofon started photographing Gross and Noguchi’s sculptural projects. He documented Gross’s

¹⁹⁴ “Works of Fear,” *TIME* (April 1, 1935): 49.

¹⁹⁵ “Works of Fear,” *TIME* (April 1, 1935): 49.

¹⁹⁶ Elisofon’s relationships with Gross and Noguchi would last his lifetime. According to a 2009 essay, Gross was “very sociable” and is regarded “as one of the central figures of New York’s artistic scene in the 1920s into the 1940s.” He was “generous with his time in supporting and educating younger artists and new collectors, he kept his working space as an ‘open studio’ to welcome friends as well as newcomers.” *The Sculptor’s Eye*, Sotheby’s Gross Collection Auction Catalog, (New York: Sotheby’s, 2009): 9.

¹⁹⁷ In 2009 Irwin Hersey, a friend of both Gross and Elisofon, wrote that Chaim had turned many of his friends into African art collectors, including Elisofon. However, Elisofon credited the 1935 MoMA show as the turning point. Irwin Hersey, “A Tribute,” in *The Sculptor’s Eye*, Sotheby’s Gross Collection Auction Catalog, (New York: Sotheby’s, May 2009): 7.

wood sculpting process — an uncommon medium for modern art — from shopping for logs to finishing the wood surface. These were included in Gross's 1957 publication *The Technique of Wood Sculpture*. Several African pieces were included in this text in a photographic section on cross-cultural examples of woodcarving (**fig. 3.6**).

Elisofon crafted several articles on Noguchi for *LIFE*, and an Elisofon photograph of Noguchi lamps was included in the *1956 Color Photography Annual*. The February 6, 1956 issue of *LIFE* included a two-page article with pictures by Elisofon of a stool that Noguchi had designed, which was inspired by a Kuba stool in Elisofon's collection (**figs. 3.7-3.8**). Employing the multiple exposure technique he also used on Marcel Duchamp and African art in the early 1950s, Elisofon photographed a young woman in three poses on one negative, teetering back and forth on the interactive stool Noguchi created (**figs. 3.9-3.10**). The *Technique* book and the Noguchi stool article serve as examples of how Elisofon and his friends influenced each other, and how African art often sat in the middle of these relationships and ideas.

Gypsy Rose Lee and African Art

Elisofon's interest in African art and his pursuit of an African art collection was likely a combination of different experiences within a relatively short time period, rather than a single moment or experience. However, we do know that Gypsy Rose Lee, the famous burlesque dancer and close acquaintance of Elisofon and Chaim Gross, gave Elisofon his first piece of African art: a small Pende ivory sculpture (**fig. 3.11**). Elisofon probably met Lee at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City when he photographed her for *LIFE* magazine. This was likely their first meeting, despite her acquaintance with the

Grosses, and they began dating. So Elisofon received the Pende work after this point, with an obvious romantic connection.¹⁹⁸

Besides Gypsy's gift, Elisofon's experience of African art collecting essentially functioned as a boys' club. In a 2009 Sotheby's auction catalog, Mimi Gross (b. 1940) recalled a typical Friday evening in her parents' home in her teenage years:

A cluster of perhaps five or six men stands in a little circle, close to a cabinet with many African sculptures. All are wearing white shirts, with Chaim standing in the middle in a plaid woolen shirt. I stand around too, also in the middle or off to the side, listening and looking, while they focus their conversations. Chaim is holding an African figure in his hands, perhaps one of the Fang or more recently acquired Dogon, rotating it very slowly for the others to observe.

They are each looking down at the figure with great attention. As he rotates the piece, he is explaining its sculptural qualities. They argue with one another about the special authenticating features, the history, the fetishes, and the facts, sometimes laughing. There's Eliot Elisofon & Harold Rome, & Bill Fagg & Margo Plass, there's Bill Siegmann and Bill Brill, Al Arnold & Arnold Newman, there's Hersey & Segy, & Mert Simpson & Klejman, & Warren Robbins & Lydia Pulcinelli & Ed Spiegel.¹⁹⁹

Despite the presence of women's names in Mimi's list, most of Elisofon's closest collector-friends were male.²⁰⁰ They traded objects amongst themselves and shared their sources.²⁰¹ Elin Elisofon explained, "When one of them acquired a new piece they all rushed to see and inspect it. They delighted in each other's purchases, as if each piece

¹⁹⁸ Though they did not end up as a couple, Elisofon and Lee stayed close friends until she died in 1970. He introduced her to her third husband, Julio De Diego, a Spanish artist, and he dedicated his 1969 book, *The Hollywood Style*, to her.

¹⁹⁹ Mimi Gross, "Common Bonds," in *The Sculptor's Eye*, Sotheby's Gross Collection Auction Catalog, (New York: Sotheby's, May 2009): 6.

²⁰⁰ As examples, Chaim Gross, Harold Rome, Irwin Hersey and Arnold Newman. Their discussions of African art typically occurred on Friday or Saturday nights around a dinner, often cooked by Elisofon. Elisofon was also close friends with Donald Deskey, who also collected African art.

²⁰¹ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1390.)

were an addition to shared holdings. Even so that in no way diminished the sense of contest and fervor with which each piece was sought and shown with explosive pride.”²⁰²

African art was an important part of the camaraderie of Elisofon’s middle-class Jewish New Yorker lifestyle; it helped him make friends, keep them, and gave them something to discuss.

Elisofon also took photographs of his friends’ collections of African art. By the 1950s he had constructed a grand plan to create an archive of African art images for study. Through his images he wanted “to help the world to see” the splendor of African art. In his eulogy for Elisofon, Harold Rome described what it was like to watch him photograph African art: “What a joy it was to be with him when he was photographing pieces from my collection. He would set the sculpture up, dance around it, fiddle with the lights, in a kind of ecstasy at its special qualities, and marvel as he took the picture — pointing out its line and form and snapping away to show the world the beauties he saw.”²⁰³

An African Art Expert?

Just as he had taught himself photography through his friendships, Elisofon used his connections to teach himself about African art. Besides friendly conversations with friends like Gross and Rome, Elisofon researched it independently, plotting to craft *LIFE* articles on African art even though they had never been assigned them to him. He maintained an African art library throughout his life, gathering articles and books,

²⁰² Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1390.)

²⁰³ Harold Rome eulogy, quoted in Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1390.)

reading everything he could. As *LIFE* colleague Maitland Edey put it, “It made no difference that he was ignorant of a subject. Like a fool he rushed in anyway, leaving many of us cautious angels standing on the sidelines. But as it turned out, he was a very wise fool. Wise enough to know he could depend on his taste, boundless energy and intelligence. He trusted them and they steered him straight.”²⁰⁴ For Elisofon it was a point of pride to be regarded as an expert or authority on anything — be it the culinary arts, photography, or African art.

Eventually Elisofon had confidence in his own expertise, knowing which ethnic groups made which artworks, and being able to tell what was good art from bad, authentic from fake. He gained this status by sharing his opinion in an authoritative voice, which he had acquired through years of selling himself in order to get work as a photographer. He had to project confidence in himself for his work, and that transferred into his studies and discussions of African art. Whether or not he could really tell what was fake is not as important as that he thought he could tell, and others believed in him and his opinions. Elisofon did not make up information. Perhaps he was sometimes erroneous, but that was not purposeful. He was sensationalistic at times, but there was a lot of false and /or generalized information around.

Elisofon’s Collecting Habits

Elisofon began to buy art for his apartment and studio in the late 1930s; he “wanted to live with a certain style,” “he bought contemporary furniture, hired a

²⁰⁴ Maitland Edey eulogy, quoted in Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1271.)

decorator and had his clothes custom made.”²⁰⁵ He filled these spaces with modern art, his photographs, artwork from his friends, and pieces of wood that he found on his travels. Once he was on *LIFE*’s payroll, Elisofon took (or suggested) assignments that sent him around the world. His goal was to get paid to travel and collect objects, and he largely succeeded. Robert W. Marks wrote that Elisofon’s apartment was, “loaded down with modern paintings, modern sculpture, pieces of old tree stumps, which have what (Elisofon) calls ‘wonderful design.’ Here and there are accents given by old prows of ships, picked up in odd places; by the hundreds of shelves storing Elisofonana, and by unique bits of photo equipment.”²⁰⁶

Elisofon collected aggressively. When Elin Elisofon interviewed Chaim Gross for her biography of her father, he told the story of how one day Elisofon “stormed” into his studio. He reached for a large figurative wall piece and said, “I have to have this for my studio.” Gross told him he could not have it, that it was one of his most important pieces. Elisofon said, piece in hand, “It’s alright, we’ll straighten it out later.” He took it home and hung it over the fireplace in the living room. Later, Elisofon gave Gross \$150 without asking him what he felt the piece was worth.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1142.)

²⁰⁶ Robert W. Marks, “Elisofon Takes Both Sides of the Tracks,” *Minicam* (April 1942): 36. (HRC 71.9/66.9, IMG_5994 thru IMG_6010.)

²⁰⁷ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1140.)

Elin Elisofon wrote that her father “told his friends he was going to get *LIFE* magazine to send him around the world so he could collect sculpture and they did just that.”²⁰⁸ She recalled her memories of her father’s collecting habits:

He never came back from a trip where he was not preceded or followed by huge crates. Long suffering elevator men strained against hernias trying to squeeze these things next to our back door. Others ended up at museums, the homes of fellow collectors or *LIFE* until Eliot’s faithful friend, secretary and gal Friday, Dottie, could find some other place to stash them. The files are stuffed with copies of cables to Eliot, deep in the bush, from people desperate for instructions.

Eliot bought and picked up everything and size was no object. There were rocks—one had to be rolled end over end for miles on a beach in Java before someone could be found to help carry it; bolts of cloth, jewelry, dishes, Asian, New Guinean, Pacific, Pre-Columbian and Native American, art, weapons, furniture, household tools; enormous exotic shells and huge pieces of coral only the brawniest men can lift, vast amounts of cooking utensils, but more than anything else he collected African artifacts.²⁰⁹

Like the Grosses, and many of his friends, Elisofon collected art from around the world, but the dominant cultural element in his collection was African art. Elisofon used all of his voyages to Africa as collecting trips.

Every time he went to Africa he purchased dozens and dozens of objects, shipping them back to New York by the crate-full. He collected every kind of African art – not just sculpture – but utensils, textiles, paintings, musical instruments, and more. Some of the works he kept for his own collection, others he gave to friends or donated. On some occasions he was specifically sent as a collecting agent for institutions like the Harvard Peabody Museum, the Peabody Museum of Salem (South Seas art), and the Museum of

²⁰⁸ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1344.)

²⁰⁹ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1385.)

African Art. He also donated and sold African art objects to these institutions, as well as New York's Museum of Primitive Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Not all of these sales and donations are connected with Elisofon in the institutions' records, however the object photographs match those Elisofon took of objects he owned or collected in the field. He usually did this job in addition to the photography assignment he was originally sent on. While the *LIFE* editors did not exactly appreciate him using their paying assignments as opportunities to collect, they allowed him to do so for three decades.²¹⁰

Elisofon's collection was built over his whole career, from the mid-1930s until his death in 1973. He was always comprehensive and obsessive in his collecting habits. He bought or traded items that caught his attention. Elisofon did not employ a contemplative method of acquisition; most of his purchases were spontaneous, of found objects. Elisofon began his collection before he even knew what was truly representative of a culture's arts. So if he happened to buy such objects it was because he liked them, not because it was iconic or canonical in some way. He did follow trends, like purchasing Bamana *chi wara*, Kongo *nkisi*, and Dogon granary ladders, but his taste was eclectic and for every trendy item, there were ten more that were acquired simply because they fascinated him. In fact, based on various reports, he seemed to have been more interested in shopping for artworks rather than cataloging or studying them. He would ask to buy jewelry right off the people he photographed, beg a restaurant owner for a sculpture he

²¹⁰ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1385.)

saw in the window, read about a type of object and then hunt it down on his next trip to Mali, and even directly request that the Kuba King give him a dance mask.²¹¹

For example, Elisofon was able to unexpectedly acquire a mask that he photographed as part of a nighttime dance in the town of Ibea in the Republic of the Congo during his 1951 African trip. The performers were identified as Kwele from the town of Madingo in Gabon. A four-faced helmet mask was danced, and Elisofon purchased this object afterward. It is now in the National Museum of African Art, accession #73-7-290 (**fig. 3.12**). The institution's information on this piece follows:

The four faces of this helmet mask are each different but strongly resemble the *ngontang* masks of the Fang peoples. The Fang are believed to have originated this type of mask during the colonial period, blending existing mask styles.

Once used in ritual performances, when borrowed by other neighboring peoples, such as the Kwele, these masks were used primarily for entertainment. This is also true of their use by the Fang today.²¹²

This Elisofon acquisition illustrates the complex history of African objects even before they leave the continent. The helmet mask was performed by one ethnic group, in a different area from where they lived, and most likely the mask was not even made by that ethnic group.

Only one image of this performance has been found at this time, but it reveals the costume of the dancer, and the setting of the event (**fig. 3.13**). Given the presence of chairs and seated guests, the dance seems to have been held for entertainment. This is

²¹¹ Bryna Freyer, personal communication, May 16, 2011; Pascal J. Imperato, *A Wind in Africa: A Story of Modern Medicine in Mali* (St. Louis: W.H. Green, 1975); and Christraud M. Geary, "Two Days in Mushenge: Eliot Elisofon's Images of the Kuba (1947)," *African Arts*, vol. 26, no. 2 (April 1993): 72-77.

²¹² "Helmet Mask," Object Number: 73-7-290, Online Collection Information, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. [http://africa.si.edu/collections/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:4600](http://africa.si.edu/collections/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:4600). (Accessed May 15, 2014.)

probably why Elisofon was able to buy the mask. At another point during this trip, the Elisofons attended a Kuba funeral dance near Luluabourg (Kananga). They watched the dancers, and then asked if they could buy the drum that had just been used. It featured a head and hand carved into it. They received growls, yells, and sneers as their answer.²¹³

Today's Africanists have not studied the works Elisofon collected, and scholars have never addressed the objects' significance and quality. The pieces have been split up between private and public collections, but rarely exhibited after Elisofon's death. The National Museum of African Art holds the majority of the collection, but almost all of the objects reside in storage, both on and off-site. Only a curator would have access and the time needed for assessing the works. Bryna Freyer, curator at the NMAfA, stated that of the 615 objects, only about one-third is ideal for museum display.²¹⁴

Elisofon never wrote any summation of why he collected African art or how he approached this occupation. Because of his early death, he never had a chance to gather these thoughts, or organize a comprehensive exhibition of his collection. Typically an exhibition catalog allows for the collector to voice his or her thoughts on why he began collecting, and what his aesthetic motivations might be. The only publication directed explicitly toward his collection was an October 5, 1958 *New York Times Magazine* article by Cynthia Kellogg that was devoted to the Elisofons' use of their art collection as apartment décor. Kellogg explained, "Current interest in primitive African sculpture is underscored by an exhibition at the Museum of Primitive Art, where many of Mr.

²¹³ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1359 thru IMG_1360.)

²¹⁴ Bryna Freyer, personal communication, May 16, 2011.

Elisofon's pieces are on view through Oct. 19."²¹⁵ Elisofon usually lent objects to exhibitions that had been recently acquired, fit their theme, or had been specifically requested by the organizer. Unless he organized the exhibition himself, he rarely made a conscious choice of what to contribute.

Kellogg discussed a variety of cultures in this article, but it was African sculpture that she specifically pointed out as a trending subject. Kellogg wrote:

During the last decade art collecting by the American public has increased phenomenally, radically changing the appearance of the home. The bare white walls of the years immediately following World War II have yielded gradually to arrangements of oils, water-colors, prints and, more recently, sculptures....

In the New York apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Eliot Elisofon an enormous collection of carvings has set the mood of the decorating schemes throughout. With the sure eye of a professional photographer, Mr. Elisofon has arranged African primitives, South Seas island carvings and ancient sculpture from China and Japan against sparsely furnished backgrounds and muted color schemes....

Throughout the apartment décor is subdued, walls are washed white and floors left almost bare, so that the superb quality of the collection shines through....

Today, good sculpture is available at very reasonable prices. For those who wish to use it in their own homes, these pictures offer many ideas for dramatic display. A number of typical inexpensive pieces are shown on Page 51 (**figs. 3.14-3.15**).²¹⁶

Thus, the article framed the Elisofons as trendsetters, and several photographs of their apartment were included in the spreads (**figs. 3.16-3.17**). African art was given special attention by Kellogg, showing that it had great potential for interior design. While this

²¹⁵ Cynthia Kellogg, "Living with Sculpture," *The New York Times Magazine* (October 5, 1958): 48. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6583 thru IMG_6596.)

²¹⁶ Cynthia Kellogg, "Living with Sculpture," *The New York Times Magazine* (October 5, 1958): 48. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6583 thru IMG_6596.)

may seem to be a superficial, even transitory approach to African art, this type of article also served to boost its public reputation.

Other articles and anecdotes mentioned Elisofon's collection, but they certainly did not approach it from an academic mindset. When Elisofon's 1951 Gabon gorilla hunt article was published in *LIFE*, Elisofon's work was featured in the *TIME, Inc. f.y.i.* in-house magazine. The article, titled "Dr. Elisofon, I Assume," featured an image of Elisofon in his apartment with his art collection (**fig. 3.18**). The *f.y.i.* article presented Elisofon as he wanted to be seen publicly, as an educated man with fine tastes. This was the image he had worked for years creating and fostering. At the core of this persona was an interest in Africa, 'primitive' cultures, and art. He was progressive and unique. The text explained:

LIFE photographer Eliot Elisofon has a passion for Africa... Fact is that Africa and photography came into his life the same year — 1936, when he gave up painting to become a photographer, and saw an exhibition of African sculpture in New York's Museum of Modern Art.²¹⁷

In one sentence, the article tied Elisofon with one of the most famous and influential art museums in the world while also hinting at a fine art background. It continued:

No man to stifle a worthwhile impulse, he literally took Africa right into his home. His apartment looks like a corner of the Smithsonian — without the old aeroplanes. Walls, bookcases, tables and corners are hung, covered and filled with a multitude of statues, tools, busts, masks and vicious looking weapons. Most of them have been collected during trips for LIFE.²¹⁸

This section subtly encouraged the collecting of African art, comparing the Elisofon apartment to the Smithsonian. In addition, the included photograph attested to Elisofon's

²¹⁷ The Editors, "Dr. Elisofon, I Assume," *f.y.i.* magazine (1951): 3. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6236.)

²¹⁸ The Editors, "Dr. Elisofon, I Assume," *f.y.i.* magazine (1951): 3. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6236.)

use of art objects as wallpaper for his eclectic and exciting home. Next, Elisofon's role in the world of 'primitive' art was addressed:

Elisofon's interest in the primitive goes deeper than a yen for mere acquisition. He has become an authority on primitive art, has studied and photographed sculpture from New Guinea, Australia, Peru, and Polynesia (much of it for LIFE) as well as Africa.

A visiting expert, he has lectured at Yale on aesthetics in primitive art — as Trowbridge Lecturer, and as guest in a course splendidly titled "Man, Nature and Society."

During this summer's trip he lectured on African art some more — this time to Katharine Hepburn while he was shooting the story on the movie African Queen (LIFE, Sept. 17). As a result, Miss Hepburn reportedly has started collecting primitive art herself.²¹⁹

Whether or not that last anecdote was true is beside the point. In the end, these passages helped to build the image of African art as an intellectual experience, and the collecting of it as an elite, celebrity interest.

1960s-70s, Warren Robbins

Through his photographing and collecting of African art, Elisofon met almost everyone in the field – dealers, collectors, art critics, and specialists; some he befriended, others he did not. As in any other type of art history narrative, human networking affected the history of African art. Perhaps the most important connection Elisofon made was with Warren Robbins, the founder of the National Museum of African Art. They met in the early 1960s and remained close friends until Elisofon's death.

Robbins picked up *The Sculpture of Africa* in a bookshop in Paris after he had casually started collecting African art while living in Europe in the early 1960s. In his

²¹⁹ The Editors, "Dr. Elisofon, I Assume," *f.y.i.* magazine (1951): 3. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6236.)

book *Speaking of Introductions*, Robbins published his April 10, 1973 eulogy for Elisofon, which discussed *The Sculpture of Africa*: “It took me six days to do justice to it and the reading marked the beginning of my own growth in this field. Later, I read an article by Eliot in *The Atlantic* which made me aware for the first time of the relationship of African art to the work of Picasso and others. My own special interest in this relationship began with Eliot’s article.”²²⁰

In 1963 Robbins established the Center for Cross-Cultural Communication as a “prototype educational institute integrating, popularizing and utilizing the insights and perspectives of the social sciences and the arts to foster not only international and particularly interracial understanding, but equally important, communication between the academic world and a broader public audience.”²²¹ Under the auspices of this Center, Robbins founded the Museum of African Art (MAA) in 1964. The museum had a two-fold purpose: “First, to show the best of the art and culture of Africa, and secondly, to reach the Negro American with an educational program aimed at giving him a sense of his great cultural heritage.”²²² Because of the Civil Rights movement, Robbins was very concerned with race relations when he founded the museum. He explained: “In order for ‘equal regard’ as well as ‘equal rights’ to be achieved, the widespread misconception that the Negro’s only past has been that of savagery and slavery must be challenged on both historical and aesthetic grounds, and supplanted by recognition of a heritage as valid in

²²⁰ Warren M. Robbins, *Speaking of Introductions: Vignettes of a Cultural Pioneer: a Journey Through Four Careers and Three Continents* (Washington, DC: Robbins Center for Cross Cultural Communication, 2005): 73.

²²¹ “Robbins Center for Cross Cultural Communication,” <http://www.robbinscenter.org/>, Accessed April 28, 2014.

²²² Leslie Jud Ahlander, “Negroes’ artistic past,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 1, 1964: 5.

its own cultural context as is Western culture relative to its frame of reference.”²²³

Elisofon would play a key role in supporting Robbins’ goals for his institution.

In the 1974 *Tribute to Africa* booklet Robbins wrote: “In its brief ten-year history, the Museum of African Art had no greater and more energetic friend than Eliot Elisofon. From the very onset he, together with his wife Joan, supported its original concept and its early organizational steps as a teaching Museum, also lending to it two dozen fine works of African sculpture for its first tentative exhibition in June 1964.”²²⁴ The Elisofons lent and gave works, introduced Robbins to other collectors, and encouraged them to help the museum as well. For example, Gaston de Havenon, whom Elisofon introduced to African art, chose the MAA for the first public display of his 250-piece African art collection in 1971.²²⁵ Chaim Gross, Harold Rome, Arnold Newman, and Irwin Hersey, all friends of Elisofon, also helped the fledgling museum by lending objects to exhibitions, and gifting works to the permanent collection.

According to Elisofon’s daughter, Joan Elisofon and Robbins created the idea for the private museum together. Joan wanted the institution to be like the Asia Society’s museum, once known as Asia House, established by the Rockefeller family in 1956: a place that fostered good will and mutual understanding while also being a meeting place for foreign delegates. She also wanted it to be in New York City, like Asia House.

²²³ Leslie Jud Ahlander, “Negroes’ artistic past,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 1, 1964: 5.

²²⁴ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 3. The Museum of African Art was renamed the National Museum of African Art when it was absorbed by the Smithsonian Institution and relocated to the Mall.

²²⁵ Roderick Nordell, “African art: museum on the move,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 4, 1971: 4. Discussion of Museum of African Art, its renovation and reopening, and an exhibition of de Havenon’s collection. Through Elisofon, de Havenon bought his first African artwork, a mask from the Fang, with “simplifications ‘like a Brancusi head.’”

However, in 1963, Robbins bought the Frederick Douglass house in Washington, D.C. as the home of his museum. Elin also explained that Joan helped design and install the first exhibition, which took place in June 1964.²²⁶

Robbins made the museum a showcase for African art, as well as a central focus for efforts to promote American interest in, and knowledge of, African art and culture. Sharon Patton, former director of the NMAfA, stated after his death in 2008: “With little money, through the largess of friends and collectors and an undeterred dream, Robbins established what would become one of the world’s pre-eminent museums for exhibiting, collecting and preserving African art.”²²⁷ The Museum was groundbreaking in many ways, but particularly because it was solely dedicated to African art, and it did not exhibit it as ‘primitive’ art; it was simply art.

After meeting Robbins and becoming a Founding Trustee and Curatorial Associate of the Museum of African Art, Elisofon decided to bequeath his entire African art collection to the museum upon his death. By mid-1972 he had willed his African art collection and his photographic archive of African images to the museum— this included photographs, transparencies, and film footage of Africa and its art, both field and studio work. This kick-started the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives (EEPA), which is now one of the largest repositories of African imagery in the world, collecting not only photographs of the continent and its art, but also old glass negatives, lantern slides, postcards, stereographs, engravings, and antique maps.

²²⁶ Warren Robbins eulogy and communication with Joan Elisofon on June 28, 1985, in Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1389 thru IMG_1390.)

²²⁷ Dennis Hevesi, “Warren M. Robbins, Collector of African Art, Dies at 85,” *The New York Times*, December, 16, 2008: B12.

By the early 1970s Elisofon had amassed a large art collection. His goal was to sell some of the objects for profit. When he died in 1973 he had not yet culled his collection in this manner. Hence, when his bequest arrived at the NMAfA, they received 615 objects of varying quality.²²⁸ While a few of these works have been used in exhibitions, publications, marketing and even film projects, the bulk of the collection remains vaguely categorized and largely under-researched. Most of the items are currently located in storage, but they do travel for exhibitions. Only two sub-Saharan African art objects from Elisofon appear in the museum's handbook, *Selected Works from the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*.²²⁹ For the 2013 Elisofon exhibition at the NMAfA, only sixteen Elisofon collection objects were displayed and his daughter Elin owned one of them. In the permanent installation gallery one Elisofon object was on view in December 2013, a Kota stool from Gabon (accession number 73-7-475).

Robbins often commented on Elisofon's contributions to the field of African art history in the media, and after Elisofon's death, he worked hard to include his objects in exhibitions and catalogs, and fiercely promoted the use of the EEPA. However, once the MAA became the NMAfA, Robbins lost his position as director in 1982, and the attention to Elisofon objects waned. Robbins organized the 1974 *Tribute to Africa* exhibition in honor of Elisofon at the MAA. The institution would not host another exhibition on Elisofon until the 40th anniversary of his death and the founding of the EEPA in 2013. While Elisofon had been actively promoting his collection by exhibiting it

²²⁸ Bryna Freyer, Personal communication, May 16, 2011.

²²⁹ National Museum of African Art, *Selected Works from the Collection of the National Museum of African Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art, 1999). Chiwara, Bamana: 21. Ivory head, Lega: 121.

throughout the country and publishing objects in articles and books, the NMAfA has not continued this level of attention. It would be unfair to expect a museum with over 9,000 objects to fawn over only Elisofon items, however, it could be argued that the Elisofon collection had much more of an impact upon public perceptions of African art when it was in Elisofon's hands than it does today. This speaks to the issues and inquiries surrounding a museum bequest of this nature.

Chapter Four: Elisofon Photographing, Exhibiting, and Writing about African Art

“The act of creating a great painting or symphony or novel or any example of the other arts is perhaps an extension of God’s own creation of the world and the beauty that exists in it. When man makes a new, original work of art he is extending the beauty and meaning of life itself. There is no question but that this ability to produce a work of art is a Divine gift.

The responsibility, therefore, of the artist to his fellowman is great... By the same token, the public itself is in a key position as regards the honesty of creative expression. It is the approval or disapproval of the public which fosters or destroys art.”

- Eliot Elisofon²³⁰

After Elisofon was introduced to African art and started collecting it in the 1930s, he devoted much of his creative energy toward gaining the public’s approval of the field. While World War II interrupted his efforts, he refocused his work in the late 1940s, and by the 1950s he was publishing articles and images of African art, and creating exhibitions. Many of his projects were simple introductions to African art, but provided the valuable resource of photographs with proper identification information. Elisofon understood that people need images of art objects to be able to learn about them and understand them. If African art is not properly labeled and respected, misinformation is produced. Elisofon was working to combat this issue, which was prevalent because many African artworks were orphan pieces, i.e. they were collected in the field without any written documentation.

He witnessed firsthand the mistakes that were made because of the lack of knowledge about ‘primitive’ art. In 1953 he spoke about the recent film *The White Witch*

²³⁰ Eliot Elisofon, “The Ethics and Morals of Creative Expression,” lecture for Conference on Moral Standards at the Jewish Theological Seminary 50th Anniversary, September 13-15, 1953, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 53.11, IMG_3841.)

Doctor, starring Susan Hayward and Robert Mitchum, and based on the 1950 fictional book of the same name.

It is unfortunate to find that the maker of a recent film, ‘White Witch Doctor,’ would be so lax as to use two huge fetishes from the Pacific, one from New Guinea and the other from New Hebrides, as sacred idols of the Bakuba, a Belgian Congo People.

In a documentary by Armand Denis called ‘Savage Splendor’ snatches of dancers in West Africa doing some wonderful dancing were intercut with shots of the King of Bakuba in Central Africa as if it were taking place at his court. This same footage was purchased by the studio which made ‘White Witch Doctor’ and cut into the fictional Bakuba sequences as well.²³¹

The Oceanic items placed in a Central African setting, and the mix-up of film footage is just a small portion of the ethnographic mistakes in the film. Kuba attire and architecture is intermixed with Mangbetu hairstyles and aprons, and West African Benin scarification markings. The black witch doctor’s main costume is an invention and cannot even be labeled. The book’s 1950 cover was a Chokwe mask, not a Kuba one (**fig. 4.1**). But even more odd, the film poster featured an Oceanic sculpture over a Zulu shield (**fig. 4.2**). *The New York Times* review stated, “The Africans, their homeland and the glimpses of their customs are, after all, the virtues of ‘White Witch Doctor,’” as if the film were educational and factual.²³² Most of the footage was shot on a Hollywood backlot. This was the type of mis-informational amalgamation that Elisofon was countering with his work on African art. He wanted his projects to be as honest and didactic as possible.

²³¹ Eliot Elisofon, “The Ethics and Morals of Creative Expression,” lecture for Conference on Moral Standards at the Jewish Theological Seminary 50th Anniversary, September 13-15, 1953, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 53.11, IMG_3843.)

²³² A.W., “Fox Travels to Africa for ‘White Witch Doctor’ at the Roxy – Hayward. Mitchum Star; At the Roxy,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1953.

The Grand Plan

As a professional photographer Elisofon dedicated much time and effort to capturing the beauty of African art with his camera, following in the footsteps of Man Ray, Walker Evans, and many others. In the early 1950s, Elisofon was asked to illustrate the Bollingen Foundation's *African Folktales and Sculpture*, with text by James Johnson Sweeney, Paul Radin, and Elinore Marvel. Elisofon began a diligent effort to photograph his African objects and those of his friends, as well as fellow collectors, galleries, and museums in the United States, Europe, and Africa. He wanted to create clear, lasting images of noteworthy African art objects. This book project dictated that his photographs of African art had to be more detailed and elaborate than those he took during his 1947 trip (**fig. 4.3**). Instead of quickly arranging groups of objects together for documentation snapshots, Elisofon took great care to create images worthy of publication in a reference source (**fig. 4.4**).

When photographing in the studio, Elisofon usually took more than one shot per item. He was interested in showing objects from multiple sides and angles, so one could study a sculpture as though one were walking around it. He typically took pictures of each side of a figure, and detail shots of delicate designs. Elisofon wrote about how and why he photographed African sculpture, and this brief text appeared in Warren Robbins' *Tribute to Africa* catalog in 1974: "To better explain the plastic quality of works of African sculpture, I began in 1951 to photograph them in such a manner that only one aspect of an object would be isolated for critical observation. I did this because few people are capable of seeing only one part of a piece at a time, and of building from part

to part to the whole.”²³³ He wanted his photographs to show people the beauty and power of African art.

Elisofon consistently took these shots in a way that he believed would be useful for specialists, collectors and publishers. However, he did not take them from the perspective of an art historian who might be looking for damaged areas on the work, adze marks, signs of wear and use, sweat marks, surface additions, etc. Elisofon showed details and patterns in many of his photographs, but not the whole story, not necessarily enough information for stylistic analysis. *Tribute to Africa* also included Elisofon’s description of the approach of his detail photographs (**fig. 4.5**):

...in the case of a large Dogon figure pictured here, four studies were made in addition to a conventionally lighted full figure: a close-up of the head and shoulders to reveal the Dogon convention of balancing head and headdress against shoulder and breast – this involved the technique of cross-lighting to bring out texture and show the style and vigor in the carving of facial features; a silhouette to show purity of style and form; and two studies of the torso, frontal and profile, lopping off head and feet in order to dramatize the abstract construction of the torso itself.

I also isolated the cubist construction of the back of a BaSonge figure.... I enlarged a head from its actual size of three inches to twenty inches, in order to focus upon the facial expression characteristic of its particular tribal style.²³⁴

Elisofon’s dramatic style of photographing African art was not entirely unique. Africanist Amanda B. Carlson wrote her Master’s thesis on photographing African art and she discussed Elisofon. She explained, “Elisofon’s style...is similar to much of the black-

²³³ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 16-17.

²³⁴ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 16-17.

and-white object photography of African art in the 1960s and 1970s in that the images are high-contrast (dark shadows and bright highlights), but are perhaps much less ‘mysterious’ than the type of images with dark shadows engulfing the object. Elisofon mostly played with light on the surface of the object.”²³⁵ Elisofon believed his images were simple and true to the objects. “There are no tricks involved in these photographs,” he wrote.²³⁶ He explained:

No object has been distorted by either false camera viewpoint or the use of a wide-angle lens to emphasize perspective. The only devices used were those of selecting the part of the object to be photographed and its position in relation to the lens, and the use of light either to reveal or hide detail as needed. There has not been a single dot or line of retouching.²³⁷

At a conference on “Traditional African Art,” at the Peabody Museum of Harvard in May of 1971, Elisofon spoke on his approach to photographing Africa and African art. Many of his statements echoed his work from throughout his career:

The most basic idea in photographing any subject, including both environment and still life is simplicity. The more direct and the less complicated the subject, the better. Think of what you are trying to record and concentrate on that. Don’t clutter up the picture with extraneous material.... In photographing sculpture it is essential to eliminate distractions such as shadows...avoid confusing shadows on the background.²³⁸

²³⁵ Amanda B. Carlson, “Object Photography: African Art in the Photographic Frame,” M.A. Thesis, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1996): 22.

²³⁶ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 16-17.

²³⁷ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 16-17.

²³⁸ Eliot Elisofon, “How to Photograph Primitive Art,” transcript of lecture given on May 7, 1971, Traditional African Art, Peabody-CAAS Symposium, May 4-7, 1971, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 54.6.)

He dismissed the publications that used African cloth as backgrounds for objects, such as in Leuzinger's *The Art of Africa* (1960), plate 18, with a Baule mask on top of Baule cloth (**fig. 4.6**). Elisofon stated at the conference, "I believe that the function of the photograph of African sculpture made away from its actual environment should be as clear and specific as possible."²³⁹

However, most of Elisofon's work creating study images of African art for Bollingen would not pay off. Pantheon published *African Folktales and Sculpture* in 1952, with 357 pages total – 196 pages of text on African art, and 187 plates.²⁴⁰ Even though Elisofon was contracted to produce images for Sweeney's book, only 15 of the photographs are his.²⁴¹ Instead of relying on Elisofon's work, Sweeney used photographs from Walker Evans' 1935 African art portfolio made to accompany the MoMA exhibition. Undeterred by this outcome, Elisofon decided to pursue his own publication of African art. In the 1950s, he used his studio photographs of African art in *The Sculpture of Africa* (1958), and in articles on African art for *LIFE* and *The Atlantic*.²⁴²

While photographing African art objects for his publications, Elisofon decided to create collections of images for study purposes and to distribute these photographs to several institutions. Study centers that received sets of Elisofon's photographs include the Peabody Museum at Harvard University; the Museum of Primitive Art, New York; the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California Los Angeles; the University

²³⁹ Eliot Elisofon, "How to Photograph Primitive Art," transcript of lecture given on May 7, 1971, Traditional African Art, Peabody-CAAS Symposium, May 4-7, 1971, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 54.6.)

²⁴⁰ It was reprinted in 1964 and in 1970 the African sculpture section was extracted and reprinted.

²⁴¹ Figures 1, 42, 79, 81, 83, 85, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 138, 142, and 143.

²⁴² *The Sculpture of Africa* will be discussed in Chapter Five.

of Indiana Department of Art History; the British Museum; and the National Museum of African Art.²⁴³ By the late 1950s he had created over 2,000 studio images. Elisofon's ambitious grand plan was to photograph every African art object in the world, including those in museums, galleries, and private collections in the United States, Africa and Europe. If he had lived past 61, perhaps a couple more decades, Elisofon might have accomplished this goal.

1951 *Alter Ego*, Cooper Union Exhibition

“Your mask, at the moment, is on my desk facing the entrance to the museum: if the manner in which it stops visitors cold in their tracks is any indication of the effect it will have in the exhibition, it should be the star performer.”

- Everett P. Lesley, Jr. of the Cooper Union Museum Exhibits Section, letter to Elisofon, February 20, 1951²⁴⁴

In March of 1951 Elisofon possessed a growing art collection, and he was asked to lend eight masks to the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art's Museum for the Arts of Decoration in New York. Six of the works were African objects: a 'Babindji' helmet mask, Kuba sorcerer's mask, Poro female mask, Poro horned mask, and two Bushongo female masks. The show was held from March through June of 1951 and the exhibition was entitled *Alter Ego: Masks, Their Art and Use*. It included more

²⁴³ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 3. Elin's Biography Draft (IMG_1390) states the centers were: UCLA Ethnic Collections; the British Museum, London; the Royal African Museum, Tervuren, Belgium; Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard; African Studies Center, Indiana University; Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, and the Museum of Primitive Art, New York.

²⁴⁴ Everett P. Lesley, Jr., letter to Eliot Elisofon, February 20, 1951, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 62.7 and EEPA Z-6, 14.) Elisofon was thanked by the Cooper Union curator for his loan, who also commented that the show was very successful.

than 200 objects and a catalog was published with the ‘Babindji’ mask on the cover.²⁴⁵ A cross-section of the show’s masks was featured as black-and-white photographic figures, including seventeen African works (**figs. 4.7-4.9**).

Thus began Elisofon’s commitment to loaning objects to as many exhibitions as possible, large and small. Art museums, galleries, natural history museums, colleges, and conferences all benefited from the presence of Elisofon’s art and/or photographs. According to the correspondence, if a venue asked for a loan, Elisofon provided something, often one or more objects worth thousands of dollars. These loans often required little effort on his part, as the institution and his second wife or secretary managed most of the exchanges, and the institutions insured the items. That is not to say that lending objects requires no thought. A collector has to weigh the value of showing a piece against the risk of its loss or damage, and for many that risk is too high. Elisofon was in the business of taking risks as a globetrotting photojournalist, so he did not seem to be affected by a collector’s trademark possessiveness.

Wading through the opaque *Alter Ego* catalog text, written by the Cooper Union Exhibits Section curator, Everett P. Lesley, Jr., one can conclude that the show focused on the cross-cultural human tendency to wear masks in order to transform oneself. Masks from around the world and across many time periods were displayed, as well as some paintings, drawings, and lithographs that included or referred to masks. Coming from a decorative art museum standpoint, the catalog text presented the items as both

²⁴⁵ The ‘Babindji’ mask is actually a Bakwa Luntu mask, as identified in Petridis’s 2005 article on the topic. Constantine Petridis, “Bwadi Bwa Chikwanga: A Ram Mask of the Bakwa Luntu,” *African Arts*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 50-59, 93, 95.

“artistic expressions” and “utilitarian objects.”²⁴⁶ Discussion of the artistic materials, uses and functions of the masks was included, but was superficial. Given the breadth of the topic and the number of objects, not much of substance could be said in Lesley’s catalog text. But overall, the essay would have helped the Cooper Union student think about what a mask is, and why and how one is created.

When addressing specific cultures, the prose became flowery. African art was lumped into the ‘primitive’ category. ‘Cult,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘fetish’ were in the introduction sentences. Five styles of masks were categorized: masks worn on top of the head, masks worn over the head as a helmet, masks held in front of the face by a handle, masks bound upon the face, and masks worn as part of a costume. This was Lesley’s most concrete observance, but then his text devolved into an explanation of African art that simultaneously insulted and praised it:

For us, so remote from the African Negro’s habit of thought, what is the extraordinary artistic validity of these objects?

It lies in the effortlessness with which energy has been impressed upon three-dimensional form, the savage stamina that electrifies and humiliates our effete traditions, the perverse gallantry that makes of life a supernatural spectacle even more distressing than reality, and then proceeds to realize it visually, that it may be mastered.

This art is belligerent, but not degraded by sentiment; lurid but outspokenly honest, it assaults form with neither timidity nor affectation. If the new-found enterprise of some modern art is due to these qualities, we are the healthier.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration. *Alter Ego: Masks, Their Art and Use*. (New York: Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, 1951): 4.

²⁴⁷ Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration. *Alter Ego: Masks, Their Art and Use*. (New York: Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, 1951): 12.

With this type of oblique guidance, it is not surprising that Elisofon sought his own route to understanding African art. His next exhibition project, *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*, was designed to showcase his thought process on the matter.

1952 *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*, Exhibition

“If you think you have seen everything photographic, think again...”

*- Association News of Chicago Camera Clubs Association*²⁴⁸

Elisofon was adept at crafting exhibitions of his own photographs: coming up with a theme or narrative, choosing the photographs, organizing the show, convincing a venue to host it, and even writing captions, catalog text, and invitations. While traveling in 1951, he began work on an exhibition combining his studio photographs, field photographs, and African art objects (**figs. 4.10-4.44**).²⁴⁹ The show was built upon years of work he had begun in 1947 for an African art-themed photo essay for *LIFE*, which was eventually published in the September 8, 1952 issue as “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa.”²⁵⁰ Taking its cue from 1930s MoMA exhibitions that included African art, *Understanding African Negro Sculpture* was designed to guide visitors toward a vision of African art as fine art, carved with a cultured, artistic eye.

The exhibition was organized with the Museum of Modern Art as a circulating show, much like James Johnson Sweeney’s 1935 MoMA display. Due to scheduling conflicts, it was shown first at the Art Institute of Chicago, from January 15 through

²⁴⁸ “Art Institute Photograph Gallery: Eliot Elisofon, Top Magazine Photographer, One Man Exhibit,” *Association News of Chicago Camera Clubs Association*, vol. 20, no. 6 (February 1952). (HRC 62.10, IMG_9230 thru IMG_9231.)

²⁴⁹ The technique of combining photographs of art and sculpture was common in MoMA circulating exhibitions, as seen in the *Circulating Exhibitions* booklet from 1931-1954.

²⁵⁰ The publication of the photo essay in *LIFE* coincided with the show’s display at MoMA.

March 1, 1952, and then traveled back to MoMA for its debut there. It was shown in New York from July 2, 1952 through September 14, 1952. Afterward it was booked at sixteen more venues, mostly colleges, and traveled throughout the country until mid-summer of 1955.²⁵¹ On display in Chicago were 26 enlarged camera studies, several field photographs, and 10 pieces of African sculpture. There were seven sculptures at the MoMA and subsequent shows, along with 32 photographs. Two of the sculptures were from Elisofon's own collection and the other five were from Nelson A. Rockefeller's collection.

The artworks included figures and masks from the Ivory Coast, French Sudan and Gabon, and the Belgian Congo. The Elisofon objects were a Fang (Pahouin) male reliquary figure and a Dogon female figure, both valued at \$1,000 each.²⁵² There were also photographs of African art objects from other collections in the circulating version of the show: a Luba horned mask and a Luluwa (Bena Lulua) male figure with sword from the Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo, Tervuren; the Luba Master of Buli Chief's

²⁵¹ Porter A. McCray, Director of the MoMA Department of Circulating Exhibitions, letter to Eliot Elisofon, July 13, 1955, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-5, 9.) Venues: University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida; J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa; Mulvane Art Center, Topeka, Kansas; Oak Ridge Community Art center, Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado; Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota; Sanford Museum, Cherokee, Iowa; Western Michigan College, Kalamazoo, Michigan; Marshall College, Huntington, West Virginia; Iowa State College, Cedar Falls, Iowa; Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio; The Art Institute of Zanesville, Zanesville, Ohio; San Antonio Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas; University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire.

²⁵² Receipt of Loan, signed by Dorothy Dudley of MoMA, May 7, 1952, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-5, 2.)

stool from the British Museum, London; and a Senufo male figure from the collection of Paul Verité, Paris.²⁵³

The show was very successful in Chicago and New York. Most of the reactions and press coverage remarked on Elisofon's contribution to art education. On March 5, Peter Pollack, the Public Relations Counsel for the Art Institute of Chicago, wrote a thank you letter to Elisofon. "It was a great show — popular, respected and highly-praised — and, further, it looked good," he explained, "I'm thankful to you for having made it possible, and may I congratulate you again on the splendid work you are doing."²⁵⁴

Nelson Rockefeller wrote to Elisofon on October 6, 1952 in regard to the show: "I have been very much impressed by your handsome photographs.... The exhibition is convincing proof that a photographer has an important mission in teaching people to see works of art."²⁵⁵

At the heart of the show were Elisofon's close-up, enlarged studio photographs of African sculpture. In Chicago his multiple exposure images were also featured, which he had started taking in 1951, inspired by his friend Gjon Mili's work and his *LIFE* assignment with Marcel Duchamp. Elisofon's high-contrast photographic studies were meant to record the abstract elements of the African carvings, shedding light on the

²⁵³ List of object photographs in the show. *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*. 1952. Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-5, 3.)

²⁵⁴ Peter Pollack, Public Relations Counsel, AIC, letter to Eliot Elisofon, March 5, 1952, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-4, 3.)

²⁵⁵ Nelson A. Rockefeller, letter to Elisofon, October 6, 1952, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-5, 4.)

formal qualities of the works.²⁵⁶ Ralph Pomeroy's text on Elisofon, probably created for the Chicago wall panels, concluded with this sentence: "His photographs catch light at work creating compositions, the intense drama of sculpture in the open air."²⁵⁷

The photographs were typically paired with the sculpture itself (or a related work of art), and sometimes accompanied by a field photograph that would further illuminate the topic. It was a direct, personal approach. Elisofon believed that people were not putting enough effort into viewing African sculpture and that he could see things in it that were not readily apparent to others. His photographs were designed to grab a viewer's attention, to point out overlooked details. "I discovered that a lot of people, in looking at a small piece of African sculpture, were not able to see quite a number of things which were apparent to me," Elisofon commented. "By using light and enlargement it is possible to greatly increase the visual impact, and to point out details not ordinarily seen by the naked eye."²⁵⁸

While working to teach his audience how to understand African art, Elisofon laid bare his own process of understanding it. He dissected African sculpture with his camera, enriching his own experience and appreciation while creating fresh compositions that intensified the dramatic qualities of the art. In the end, he used African sculpture to create new photographic art. However, one could argue that he undermined his own goal.

²⁵⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to Carlotta, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 62.10/57.10, IMG_4222.)

²⁵⁷ Ralph Pomeroy, Chicago Art Institute wall text draft for *Understanding* exhibition, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 62.10/57.10, IMG_4223.)

²⁵⁸ Barbara Powell, "Around Chicago...at the Institute," *WHERE* magazine (January 26, 1952): 5. (HRC 62.10/57.10, IMG_4225 thru IMG_4226; and EEPA M-4, 6.)

Most of the articles and reviews of the show (in the Chicago and New York press) focused on Elisofon, his life, and the studio photographs.²⁵⁹ Very little was said about the sculptures themselves. The field photographs were only mentioned as a part of the show description. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* commented: "It is interesting to view the sculpture and then see what characteristics have been emphasized by the camera."²⁶⁰

Barbara Powell wrote for Chicago's *WHERE* magazine:

Although it would seem that most of the basic possibilities for artistic techniques ought to be about exhausted by now, occasionally somebody turns up with a new one.

LIFE photographer Eliot Elisofon, whose interpretations of African sculpture are currently (through March 1) on display in the Art Institute's Gallery of Photography, has done just that, and with most interesting results, particularly since his photographs were intended primarily to point up details in the sculpture which might otherwise be overlooked by the spectator. They succeed in doing that and, in addition, in creating an artistic effect which in itself is quite satisfactory.²⁶¹

So while the detail and multiple exposure photographs helped the audience to appreciate the art on a formal level, the exhibition did not explore what African art means to Africans, despite Elisofon being interested in this topic himself. However, this was a Museum of Modern Art exhibition, not a Museum of Primitive Art show. As one effort toward an ultimate goal of overall appreciation and comprehension of African art,

²⁵⁹ HRC folders 62.9 and 62.10 address the *Understanding* exhibition. EEPA documents on the show can be found in M-4, M-5, M-6, and M-7. These include copies of press coverage on the show, from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Chicago's *WHERE* magazine, *Chicago Area Camera Clubs Association News*, *This Week in Chicago: the Magazine of Chicago*, *The Art Digest* and *The New York Times*.

²⁶⁰ "Elisofon Show on Display at Art Institute," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1952.

²⁶¹ Barbara Powell, "Around Chicago...at the Institute," *WHERE* magazine (January 26, 1952): 5. (HRC 62.10/57.10, IMG_4225 thru IMG_4226; and EEPA M-4, 6.)

Understanding had value. As the exhibition press release put it, it was one step toward bringing African art “out of the ethnologist’s cabinet and into the art museum.”²⁶²

Elisofon’s Multiple Exposure Images of African Art

As mentioned above, in 1951, lasting inspiration was born out of a *LIFE* assignment to photograph artist Marcel Duchamp. One of Elisofon’s ideas was to photograph him walking down a staircase like his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which had caused a stir at the 1913 Armory Show (**fig. 4.45**). Elisofon exposed the negative multiple times to capture each movement of the artist. This inspired him to use the same technique when photographing African art. He produced at least fifteen black-and-white “multiples” shots using wood figures and masks from throughout sub-Saharan Africa (**figs. 4.46-4.47**). Some items were from his personal collection, but not all of them. Several of these more artistic photographs of African art appeared in Basil Davidson’s *Great Ages of Man: African Kingdoms* book, and Warren Robbins’ *Tribute to Africa* booklet.²⁶³

One of Elisofon’s closest friends, Gjon Mili, introduced him to the stroboscopic photographic technique that he used for his Duchamp image and his African art “multiples.” It was invented and perfected by Mili, a fellow *LIFE* photographer, and MIT professor Harold Eugene Edgerton. Mili had been producing stroboscopic images since the early 1940s — and continued creating them through the late 1950s — using the

²⁶² “Exhibition of African Negro Sculpture to Go on View at Museum,” press preview, July 1, 1952 and press release, July 2, 1952, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-6, 1.)

²⁶³ Elisofon also employed the multiple exposure technique for a color photo essay on jazz musicians for *LIFE* in 1954. He designed his pictures as vibrant visualizations of their music and performance (“New Life for U.S. Jazz,” *LIFE*, January 17, 1955; HRC 21.3-4.)

images to capture the passage of time and the visual patterns of quick movements. His most famous stroboscopic photographs are two series on Gene Kelly and Pablo Picasso (**figs. 4.48-4.49**).

Elisofon's multiple exposure captures were most likely a collaboration between him and Mili, due to their close friendship. In 1942 Mili took the photograph "Nude Descending a Staircase" (**fig. 4.50**), and in the early 1950s Elisofon seems to have used a similar staircase, studio, and set-up for his image of "Duchamp Descending a Staircase" (**fig. 4.51**). Visually, Elisofon's African art "multiples" are most similar to Mili's photographs of Gene Krupa's drum-playing (**fig. 4.52**) and Willie Hoppe's billiard trick shot (**fig. 4.53**), both taken in 1941. Elisofon's pictures were designed to give the viewer the feeling of African art in motion, in use, being performed, and being danced (**figs. 4.54-4.55**). For example, "The two photographs of the throwing knife...attempt to capture the essence of the object in flight, without its having been thrown and seen in flight," Elisofon wrote.²⁶⁴ In reality, a knife would not spin in one spot when being thrown, so the depiction is artificial. However, the "multiples" were a fresh, artistic approach to photographing African art.

Elisofon wanted these photographs to show the relationship between African art and modern art, so he referred to this style as Cubist.²⁶⁵ The viewer could see multiple

²⁶⁴ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, "On Photographing African Sculpture," *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 16-17.

²⁶⁵ List of Elisofon's "Multiples" shots: Kota mask, frontal 5 times – multiple prints of this, some very dark; Dogon figure, female, 5 times; Dogon figure, female (same as above), 29 times (approx.); Dogon figure, female (same as above), 12 times; Various masks layered over each over

views of an object rendered on one plane. Elisofon explained how his experiment developed: “It occurred to me that I could carry the process one step further and include a much larger series of such impressions, mostly overlapping, to arrive at a completely Cubist effect.”²⁶⁶ This technique is evident in his series on a small Dogon figure (**figs. 4.56-4.58**). These photographs are sometimes more powerful than the objects. For instance, the rotated Dogon figure appears monumental in Elisofon’s “multiples” shots, while in reality it is only 6.5 inches tall.

Elisofon wanted to create the broadest impression of an African art object as possible in the projects he worked on, and in the 1950s the projects were exhibitions or publications. “Multiple views are important in describing African sculpture reproduced in two dimensions on a printed page,” Elisofon explained at a conference in 1971.²⁶⁷ He continued:

Photography may also be used as a tool to analyze and demonstrate esthetics in African sculpture. A silhouette picture of Guro heddle pulleys expresses one aspect of the plastic quality of these objects; added light reveals another (**fig. 4.59**).

a) Bamana with figure b) Cameroon c) Baule d) Songye e) Dan/Mano f) Upper Volta with pigments (Mossi?) g) Bamana (?) h) We w/ tusks (Elisofon’s mask)
Fang figure, 3 time (many, many copies of this – some darker than others and one copy has orange marks on it); Zoomed out version of Dogon figure 19 times (non-cropped)

²⁶⁶ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 16-17.

²⁶⁷ Eliot Elisofon, “How to Photograph Primitive Art,” transcript of lecture given on May 7, 1971, Traditional African Art, Peabody-CAAS Symposium, May 4-7, 1971, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 54.6.)

It is possible to photograph a sculpture several times on the same piece of film. Three different views of a Fang figure were made to express different aspects in one image (**fig. 4.60**).²⁶⁸

Overall, Elisofon was interested in using his “multiples” to show the world that African art is fine art. He stated, “I tried in these pictures to explode the object into recognition as a work of art.”²⁶⁹

Elisofon explained his purpose behind making these photographic studies of African art for the press release for the *Understanding African Negro Sculpture* exhibition at MoMA in 1952. A truncated version of his original text was included in the release. His full essay was later published in Robbins’ *Tribute to Africa*:

As a student of art, I was interested in African sculpture as far back as the Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1936 [sic, 1935]. Since then I have seen many thousands of objects, on numerous African trips and in museum and private collections the world over. Having begun a small collection of my own, I found myself trying, when the occasion arose, to explain the aesthetic value of these objects to both sympathetic and skeptical persons.

The task was often frustrating, since the ordinary person’s way of seeing has been determined by conditions of birth, religion, climate and national philosophy. The European or American, or for that matter his Chinese or Indian counterpart, has been steeped in certain deep-rooted beliefs or prejudices. At the very least, his native sensibility has been ‘channeled.’ Thus Westerners find it easier to appreciate a Chartres window than an Ajanta fresco because Christian themes are familiar, Hindu ones strange.

We may not realize how powerfully the unfamiliar content of an art work can block our true appreciation of it. In addition there is the fact that different cultures have developed different conventions used in representation. Thus Western Art usually renders the human figure with

²⁶⁸ Eliot Elisofon, “How to Photograph Primitive Art,” transcript of lecture given on May 7, 1971, Traditional African Art, Peabody-CAAS Symposium, May 4-7, 1971, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 54.6.)

²⁶⁹ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, “On Photographing African Sculpture,” *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 17.

the head in a one-to-eight proportion to the body. To the artist this difference of style or representation is of little matter. He is trained to appreciate an object for its own aesthetic quality.

The same problem confronts the first-time viewer of African sculpture. Africans made traditional sculpture for a variety of reasons — many never properly understood by non-Africans — masks made to ward off alien spirits, mortuary figures to guard baskets of human bones, fetishes to keep away thieves or lightning.

To Westerners, such objects seem very remote, yet could not the African argue that the Western custom of placing a representation of an angel or cross on a tombstone is not so different from the Bakota practice of placing bronze figures on their reliquary baskets? There are other surprising parallels: the bronze portrait heads of ancient Nigeria's Ife rulers rival the portraits of classical Greece and Renaissance Italy; and the finely carved and decorated cups, spoons, knives, and other 'utilitarian' objects used by many African peoples bear comparison with the finest examples from our own tradition.

Our major stumbling block to easy public appreciation of African art is the freedom of the African artist from any compulsion merely to imitate nature. This does not mean that he is a truly 'free agent,' however, for within the confines of local tradition, individual African artists produced highly personal work. At the same time, regional styles are so well-developed and refined that competent students can recognize the origin of a particular work without hesitation. Such highly evolved art can hardly be called crude or primitive.²⁷⁰

Thus, Elisofon hoped his photographs would help "explain the aesthetic value" of these objects to viewers used to seeing European and American art forms. Perhaps the images could re-channel the public's sensibilities toward an appreciation of African art's "bold structure and expressive force."²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ Eliot Elisofon and Warren Robbins, "On Photographing African Sculpture," *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and the Collection of Eliot Elisofon: a Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass House, June Through December 1974* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1974): 15.

²⁷¹ "Exhibition of African Negro Sculpture to Go on View at Museum," press preview, July 1, 1952 and press release, July 2, 1952, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA M-6, 1.)

September 8, 1952, “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa,” *LIFE*

“African Big Shot,” the 1947 article discussed in Chapter Two, was not the culmination of Elisofon’s 1947 African art story for *LIFE*. Instead it functioned as the “*LIFE* Visit” he had envisioned it as, but not exactly as a celebration of African art. The King’s costume, the Kuba drums, and the architecture of the King’s bedchamber were art coverage, but the essence of “Big Shot” was not about art. In early September of 1952 *LIFE* published a 10-page photo essay, without advertisements, on African art (**figs. 4.61-4.65**). All of the images were by Elisofon. His 1951-52 traveling exhibition, *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*, most likely encouraged *LIFE* to publish this article. “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa” was the only photo essay in this issue, placing African art in the limelight. *LIFE* photo essays were designed to be cohesive artistic statements. “Mystic” was bold, laid-out carefully and thematically; it was meant to make a visual proclamation.

What was the main message “Mystic” was structured to convey? The text explained, “The sculptures on these pages are the products of a culture which for some 1,500 years has flourished among the Negro tribes of Africa.”²⁷² The first declaration was that African art has a deep history. “Centuries before the first Europeans penetrated West Africa in the late 1400s,” the article continued, “native craftsmen were creating works of remarkable skill to serve their mystical rites and beliefs.” In other words, Africans were capable of creating sophisticated arts without the aid of Europeans, and their culture was much more advanced and rich than Westerners had typically understood.

²⁷² “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa,” *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 117. The uncredited text was most likely written by a member of the *LIFE* staff, based on a combination of Elisofon’s notes and staff research.

Another one of the article's underlying messages was that cultural uniqueness should be celebrated. Africans and African art may have been portrayed as different, mysterious, and enticing in this article, but they were not depicted in a negative manner. After Elisofon's "Mystic" article was published in *LIFE*, the black magazine *Jet* ran a small article noting positively that African art was finally being discussed in a major magazine.²⁷³ African art was celebrated, hailed for its innovative aesthetics and visual power in "Mystic."

Elisofon's images presented African art as exciting treasures for the reader to be in awe of and worthy of respect. It is beautiful, exciting, audacious, bizarre, misunderstood, complex, advanced, and multivalent. The text acknowledged that African art is confusing to the average Westerner, but understanding could only occur if one pursued more knowledge on the topic. The photo essay delivered a romantic, but not sensationalistic, image of 'authentic Africa,' with real people, real communities, and real art. Wildness and sophistication were combined, coexistent in the Africa of "Mystic." Difference can be compelling; Africans lead very different lives and have different motivations than Westerners. Within the field, Africanists continue to wrestle with whether Westerners can ever truly understand African art. Perhaps not, but that may be part of its allure.

Overall the goal of "Mystic" was to help the reader appreciate African art, so it was more representative of Elisofon's goals for his 1947 trip to Africa than "African Big Shot." The article included photographs from this trip, as well as images he had been working on in the studio. These pictures were taken in connection with the Bollingen

²⁷³ "African Art in *LIFE*," *Jet*, vol. 2, no. 21 (September 18, 1952): 22.

African Folktales and Sculpture project, but did not appear in that book. However, eleven of the “Mystic” objects would be published in *The Sculpture of Africa* in 1958. Also, one of Elisofon’s experimental, multiple exposure photographs, of a small Dogon figure, was featured as a double-page spread in “Mystic.”

Though the text did include some stereotypical language, it was much more sophisticated than “Big Shot.” In comparison to the derogatory “Big Shot” text, “Mystic” was progressive and tried to educate the *LIFE* readers about African art. A push toward cultural conformity was not embedded into the essay, unlike with “Big Shot,” where the reader was led to question and criticize everything about the Kuba King’s lifestyle. These two articles show that Elisofon’s photographs, in *LIFE*’s hands, could be used to create vastly different products. The agenda of the magazine in that moment, for that article, dictated the outcome of a piece.

The table of contents page of the September 8, 1952 *LIFE* issue explained: “On pages 116 through 125 there is a spectacular photographic essay on African tribal art. This not only takes you a long way off but a long way back—some of the carvings shown are 600 years old. Customs now current in Africa grew out of this ancient art, and some of the treasures in your local museum probably derive from it.”²⁷⁴ In a confusing paradox, the reader was presented with opposing ideas. This blurb engendered the myth of Africa as timeless, and by looking at African art you were traveling back in time. It also explained that Africa has ancient arts, and suggested that modern arts are not an exact replication of items from 600 years ago. The subtitle of the article was “Images of Early Negro Culture Influence Native Life of Today.” The sculptures were meant to represent

²⁷⁴ “Table of Contents,” *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 27. Issue with “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa.”

images of the African past, and the field photographs showed modern African life. While delineating between a past and a present, the historic timeline was being blurred. ‘Not much has changed,’ the subtitle and image juxtapositions conveyed to the reader. For Westerners, perhaps continuity in Africa was more comforting than change.

The subtitle also set up an expectation of a detailed description of “native life today” in the text, but even *LIFE* could not supply that kind of information in a 10-page photo essay. Instead, “Mystic” was a modern, stunning, graphic showcase of African art objects, designed by Bernard Quint with Elisofon’s photographs. The article included 20 images, each with a caption. Fifteen artworks were pictured in black and white, many of them as full-page images, with bold interior shadowing and vivid detail. Except for the multiple-exposure Dogon object, all of the African art pieces were isolated on white backgrounds, shadow-less over the white page. There were also six smaller field photographs to illustrate certain points. Quint would repeat his layout design of “Mystic” within *The Sculpture of Africa*.

Quint was the primary layout artist for *LIFE* in the 1950s. His design style was *LIFE*’s style, and therefore this style was present in most of Elisofon’s publications on African art. “Mystic” pages were dedicated to four art objects at most. Many pages featured only one object, which filled the entire page. Often these objects were shown larger than life-size. Other objects were spread across two pages. Quint preferred to have all of the art objects isolated on white backgrounds, so they floated and popped from the white page. The layout design was dynamic and eye-catching, and gave full attention to the aesthetic qualities of the art. While Elisofon shot all of the photographs of the

sculptures, the final result was a combination of his high-quality photography and Quint's eye for design.

"Mystic" featured five spreads, each organized around two themes, one overt and one implicit. Each layout had a titled, thematic paragraph of text that was meant to relate to all of the objects on the page. As previously discussed, the first spread held the main heading: "Images of Early Negro Culture Influence Native Life of Today." The article began with a full-page image of a 12th-century Ife bronze head, a small field photograph of a young, topless Pende woman, and an image of a nude Luba female wood figure.²⁷⁵ Elisofon took the Pende woman's picture because her torso and face featured elaborate scarification marks. The Luba figure is also adorned with scarification marks, and the Ife head is striated, most likely with scarification marks. So the overt theme of the first spread was scarification, or African corporeal cultural markings. The comparison between art objects and field photograph told the reader that body modification traditions have a long history, and are still practiced as "a sign of tribal membership," as stated in the field photograph caption.²⁷⁶ The spread's focus on nudity and physicality suggested a latent theme of the exotic, sexualized African body.

The second spread's title was "Masks and Mysteries" and the theme was animals/animalistic imagery. Objects included were a Bamana *chi wara*, Senoufo firespitter, and Kuba dog divination sculpture. A field photograph of twelve Pende *minganji* initiation guards performing appeared at the top of the left page. The spread was

²⁷⁵ The young woman is simply identified as a "Congo girl" — her ethnic group and name are not included. While Elisofon would have known which ethnic group she was a member of, it is not included here. She appears on page 15 of *The Sculpture of Africa* and is labeled there as Pende.

²⁷⁶ "Mystic Art of Tribal Africa," *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 117.

dominated by the fierce-looking firespitter that cut across the two pages at a slight angle, pushing his plentiful sharp teeth toward the viewer.

In contrast to this wild imagery, the third spread focused on “Household Images.” Six art objects and one field photograph of a sculptor’s hand holding an adze were pictured. Three figurative Luba “household” objects were seen: a headrest with two figures embracing, a double-figure bowl, and a ‘caryatid’ stool. On the far right of the spread were two Baule heddle pulleys and a Kongo cup. Each is carved in the shape of a human head. The visual theme of this spread was the technical sophistication of embedding the human form into everyday objects. Even a seat could be beautiful and transcend the mundane. The prevalence of humanity in these carvings also conveyed the importance of personal connections, community, and togetherness.

“The Unchanging Faces” was the heading on the fourth spread. On the left page a 400-year-old bronze head of a Benin Queen Mother stared nonchalantly across to the right-hand page, meeting the gaze of a Kuba *ndop* figure carved around 1800. In between these two art objects were two field photographs. A profile portrait of a young Congo girl was compared to the Benin head, and the famous image of Kuba King Bope Mabinshe was paired with the *ndop* figure who represented one of his ancestors in the line of Kuba kings. The theme of the spread was timelessness. “The pattern of tribal life in present-day Africa is little changed from that of the early days before European penetration,” the explanatory paragraph stated.²⁷⁷ The text continued with a discussion of the system of divine African kingship, and the rulers’ patronage of the arts, particularly for ancestral rites. Like much of “Mystic,” the informational content was shallow and misleading. On

²⁷⁷ “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa,” *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 122.

the positive side, the imagery here was not sexual, wild, or abstract. Two realistic portraits of people who once lived are paired with contemporary portraits of living Africans. Thus, the theme of this spread was African history and its meaningfulness for contemporary Africa.

The final spread brought together three of Elisofon's most fascinating images, and they served as examples of how much his photography of African art could differ. The multiple-exposure image of the small Dogon figure dominated the layout, occupying most of the two pages. On the far left, a field photograph of the Luluwa boys initiation dance appeared at the top of the page as a visual parallel to this Dogon image. The caption stated: "Dancing boys of Congo form angular pattern like multiple view of Dogon statue...Though such a statue was based on actual observation of life, its geometric forms were arbitrarily arranged to create symmetrical object with a character of its own."²⁷⁸ Despite the confusing wording of this text, the point of the juxtaposition was to show how abstract art could imitate life, as reality is often equally abstract.

"Old Forms Now New," was the heading for this last spread. The explanatory paragraph discussed the "discovery" of African art by European artists, how African art affected Cubism, and how modern art's acceptance of African art led to its "widespread appreciation."²⁷⁹ A horned, human Luba mask was dramatically positioned under this text as an example of the stylized African art that inspired artists such as Picasso at the beginning of the twentieth century. The theme of the spread was the transition of 'old' African imagery into 'new' European art forms. In reality, the timeline is more blurred

²⁷⁸ "Mystic Art of Tribal Africa," *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 124.

²⁷⁹ "Mystic Art of Tribal Africa," *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 124.

and complex, but the idea of African artists being ‘modern’ before Europeans were ‘modern’ was clearly presented. Most of the African art projects Elisofon worked on referred to European modern art, using it as a gateway to entice the reader, educate him, and lead him to accept African art as fine art.

Throughout “Mystic” ethnic group names were used to identify art objects and occasionally people, but the two images of women, and the one image of young boys were simply referred to as “Congo.” Only the Kuba King was named, given an identity. Despite the use of ethnic monikers, the article lumped all African peoples and artists together, indicating that the same tendencies and desires existed throughout the black groups or “Negro tribes” of Africa. For example, the article stated: “While the African Negro made sculpture chiefly for ritualistic purposes, his love of decoration prompted him to ornament the simplest utensil and tool of everyday life.”²⁸⁰

The “Mystic” photographs contained the essence of Elisofon’s fascination with Africa and African art. They were skillfully executed with technical sophistication and carefully composed with regard for the sculpture’s form and detail. Yet scale was lost to the reader, as no measurements were included in the captions, and the images varied greatly in size. Despite the large size of a *LIFE* spread, masks and headdresses were not shown in life size, and heads and small figures were shown oversize. To a reader who had never seen an African artwork in person, it would have been difficult to accurately visualize the works shown.

²⁸⁰ “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa,” *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 120.

In the end, the visuals for “Mystic” were so engrossing that one might not have bothered to read the captions and text, which were a mixture of fact, fiction and exaggeration. For example, on the current state of African art the essay explained: “They have lost much of the inspiration which produced their art but they still ornament their bodies with traditional symbols and surround themselves with ritualistic carvings of their ancestors.”²⁸¹ “Mystic” was not based on complex historic facts, deep academic ideas, or detailed field research. It was structured around semi-educated generalizations, suppositions, and broad themes. It was a simple introduction to the topic with bold photographs, meant to engage and entertain the everyman of *LIFE*’s broad audience of millions.

African Art in the 1954 *U.S. Camera Annual*

Elisofon’s photographs of African art were sometimes used in magazines besides *LIFE*. With permission from *LIFE*, editor Tom Maloney used Elisofon’s 1951 African expedition photographs in the *U.S. Camera Annual 1954*. Founded in 1935, *U.S. Camera* began publication in 1938 as a magazine for professional and amateur photographers. It emphasized the technical process, discussed camera technology, and presented a variety of photographs. The magazine was published several times a year, and the annual was a hardbound book. Together they “reported on the state of photography each year,” and “helped to develop photojournalism as an important news medium.”²⁸²

The 1954 annual included a 25-page photo essay with pictures and words by Elisofon (**figs. 4.66-4.79**). With 26 photographs, many of them full spreads, this was the

²⁸¹ “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa,” *LIFE* (September 8, 1952): 117.

²⁸² “Tom J. Maloney, 83; Published Magazines,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 1988. <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/28/obituaries/tom-j-maloney-83-published-magazines.html>.

principal feature in the American section. There was a combination of black-and-white and color photography. The essay focused on the landscapes and game seen in “Lost Peaks and Big Game,” the May 4, 1953 *LIFE* article also about Elisofon’s trip to Albert National Park in the Belgian Congo. The *Annual* also included several Elisofon ethnographic images, such as the Tutsi performing a lion dance, which was seen in “Black Africa: Primitive Society Holds Out South of the Sahara.” This was another article in the May 4, 1953 *LIFE* issue, which was dedicated to “Africa: A Continent in Ferment.” Two pictures of Nuer men, from Elisofon’s Nile coverage, and a night shot of the gorilla hunt ritual of the Babinga were also in this *U.S. Camera Annual* article.

The introductory page of the *Annual* article was a purposefully blurred close-up of a Kongo power figure shot at an intimidating angle, which was featured in many Elisofon projects. This emotive photograph of a “fetish” indicated the type of sensationalistic prose that followed. Elisofon began, “Africa, the continent of impending tragedy, has been called the ‘Dark Continent,’ ‘Continent in Turmoil,’ ‘Behind God’s Back,’ ‘In Darkest Africa,’ etc. It is all of that and a place of diverse beauty and richness besides. Africa today is a mass of black dynamite, waiting for someone or some great event to set off the explosion.”²⁸³ In the article, Elisofon addressed the issues between black and white, between colonial and native that he encountered throughout Africa. He discussed political issues in a factual manner, but also mentioned “barbaric customs such as cannibalism.”²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa,” in Tom Maloney, ed., *U.S. Camera Annual 1954* (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing, 1953): 163.

²⁸⁴ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa,” in Tom Maloney, ed., *U.S. Camera Annual 1954* (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing, 1953): 165.

Generally, the essay was an account of Elisofon's expedition in Africa — difficulties he and his team faced; what kind of cameras and film he used; the dangerous terrain he encountered; how his wife fared during the Ruwenzori ascent, etc. The first-person narrative brought the reader right along on the journey, making this "Africa" feel less superficial and imaginary than "Lost Peaks and Big Game." Also, unlike "Lost Peaks," this article mentioned African art. This was due to the fact that Elisofon wrote it himself and he controlled the content. He was able to promote his particular interests. He explained:

For the past few years I have been studying and photographing African sculpture in Africa, and in Europe and America as well, since many of the finest examples of this culture were taken away from Africa. The Government of Nigeria is now trying to buy back some of the great bronzes taken away from the Beni when the British destroyed their capital at the end of the last century in retaliation for the killing of nine courageous Englishmen who tried to stop the human sacrifices that took place there.

These will be installed in a museum being finished at Jos which will remind the African of his cultural heritage. This contradiction of some of the finest sculpture extant being used for human sacrificial altars is one of the many that face black and white alike in planning the future Africa.²⁸⁵

Elisofon often brought up the British Punitive Expedition in his articles and essays on African art. It did serve as an explanation for why most Benin art is now in Western collections. However, even though Elisofon acknowledged the beauty of African art, he still capitalized on the stereotypes. For example, he presented the stereotype that Africans were always on the brink of war or revolt, and any white man who ventured to Africa took his life into his hands. Elisofon discussed how in 1947 he saw the Luluabourg (Kananga) church where whites barricaded themselves during these "spontaneous

²⁸⁵ Eliot Elisofon, "Africa," in Tom Maloney, ed., *U.S. Camera Annual 1954* (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing, 1953): 165, 168-169.

outbursts.”²⁸⁶ He also perpetuated the misbelief that colonialism was a necessary evil that would help eradicate the inhuman behaviors of the local cannibals and savages. The Benin Punitive Expedition was launched in order to stop human sacrifices, he explained, which is only half of the story.²⁸⁷ These types of myths were not extinct by the early 1950s. Even a man who had traveled to the continent multiple times and met many Africans still wrote about Africa as if he were writing a nineteenth-century travel journal in order to entertain the masses.

Two more points stand out in this essay, which he repeated in many of his publications on African art, including the 1958 *Masterpieces* exhibition catalog discussed in Chapter Five. First, he stated that even though traditional arts were still being produced on the continent, they were only being made in remote areas. Most of the objects readily available were airport or tourist arts. Modernity had affected many African regions, and led to a change in the fundamental values that influence art production. This may seem a premature obituary for traditional African art, but Elisofon believed what he wrote. He directed the reader to the old collections in Western museums for the best objects. In a way, this was his attempt to develop his audience’s aesthetic tastes. The second point was designed to boost the appreciation of African art by advertising its increasing monetary value on the art market. “The one obvious glory of the African,” he explained, “his masks and statues, is highly prized by experienced art connoisseurs the world over, and some objects command a price of thousands of dollars in other parts of the world.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa,” in Tom Maloney, ed., *U.S. Camera Annual 1954* (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing, 1953): 163.

²⁸⁷ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa,” in Tom Maloney, ed., *U.S. Camera Annual 1954* (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing, 1953): 165.

²⁸⁸ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa,” in Tom Maloney, ed., *U.S. Camera Annual 1954* (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing, 1953): 171-172.

April 1959, “African Sculpture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*

Another Elisofon article that appeared outside of *LIFE* was an examination of African sculpture for *The Atlantic Monthly*. In a similar approach to “Mystic,” the *Atlantic* article presented African art as fine art - complex and sometimes confusing, but worthy of those with sophisticated aesthetic tastes and academic interest. Elisofon’s goal was for the reader to develop an appreciation and admiration of African art. He explained that understanding why African art is made allows us to better comprehend its complicated aesthetics. According to Elisofon, the continent has created a variety of art forms with varied purposes for multifaceted cultural contexts: ancestor figures, fertility figures, funerary figures, power figures, masks, puberty ritual arts, secret societies’ arts, masked costumes, and divination arts.

The Atlantic Monthly (now simply called *The Atlantic*) was founded in 1857 with a focus on literary and cultural matters. From the early years the magazine was geared toward an intellectual audience, and thus, it was never going to have very high circulation numbers. Between 1960 and 1965 the circulation went from 265,243 to 279,000 — that is not exactly the millions of readers that *LIFE* had.²⁸⁹ But as far as being able to get his message about African art out to people who were more concerned about cultural issues, *The Atlantic* was an ideal venue for Elisofon’s article. It was known as a literary magazine, boosting the career of many American poets and authors, and was certainly marketed to the nation’s intellectuals and leaders. In the twentieth century most *Atlantic*

²⁸⁹ “Facts about *The Atlantic*,” www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/about/atlfaqf.htm#circulation, 2007. Accessed April 9, 2013.

issues included editorials on society and politics, as well as short stories, poems, book reviews, and discussions of cultural trends.

Most of the April 1959 issue of *The Atlantic* was dedicated to “Africa: South of the Sahara.” The Benin Queen Mother ivory hip mask was pictured in color on the cover of the issue, courtesy of the Museum of Primitive Art, New York. The issue included articles, stories, and poems by a variety of authors representing a Who’s Who of African Studies in the 1950s (fig. 4.80). It featured articles on African archaeology by Basil Davidson, the African ‘Revolution’ by Tom Mboya, African songs by Léon G. Damas, African music and dance by J.H. Kwabena Nketia, a short story “The Sacrificial Egg” by Chinua Achebe, a poem “We Delighted, My Friend” by Leopold Sédar-Senghor, several articles on current events, racial and political tensions on the continent, and much more. A sampling of article titles in this issue included: “The Emerging Africa,” “The Harmless People,” “Black States or Partnership?,” “The Conflict of Cultures: A Plea for Patience,” and “Last Chance in Africa: An American View.” Despite the usual ethnocentric ‘What does Africa’s current situation mean for America?’ type of discussion, the *Atlantic* issue is noteworthy for its inclusion of African political, social, and artistic leaders as authors and participants.

Elisofon’s piece was the one contribution on the plastic arts of Africa in the issue.

The text’s introduction explained why Elisofon was chosen to author the piece:

An internationally respected photographer for *LIFE* magazine, Eliot Elisofon had made two extensive expeditions in Africa south of the Sahara, in the course of which he uncovered many examples of African art, some of them now part of his own magnificent collection. He is a research fellow of primitive art at Harvard University and the creator of the authoritative, handsome volume, *The Sculpture of Africa*, a collection of

his photographs, published by Praeger, with text by William Fagg and design by Bernard Quint.²⁹⁰

The article worked to promote his book, as well as African art. It served as Elisofon's (sometimes erroneous) account of African art – why we like it, why it was made, why it is not being made anymore, how the West took it all, and the increasing value of it. He relayed his own experiences with African art, in Africa, seeing an initiation dance, collecting from the Bushongo, etc. The article represented the type of personal approach to African art that would have gone into *The Sculpture of Africa* if the publisher had not required essays from well-known scholars (Ralph Linton and William Fagg). It offered Elisofon an opportunity to get his ideas on African art in print.

The 13-page article had 5 pages of Elisofon's text, 8 pages of his photographs, and no advertisements (**figs. 4.81-4.85**). Thirteen art objects were pictured:

- 1) Kota reliquary figure, Edith Gregor Halpert collection, New York, paired with Picasso's *Dancer*, Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. collection (full page)
- 2) Fang reliquary head, Jacob Epstein collection, London
- 3) Fang reliquary figure, Jacob Epstein collection, London (two views)
- 4) Teke ancestor figure, Elisofon collection
- 5) Ife bronze head, Ife Museum collection, Nigeria
- 6) Pende dance mask, Elisofon collection (full page)
- 7) Songye dance mask, Tervuren Museum collection, Belgium (*kifwebe*)
- 8) Chokwe dance mask, Musée de la Vie Indigène collection, Léopoldville, Belgian Congo (*pwo*)
- 9) Luba headrest, Webster Plass collection, British Museum, London (two views)
- 10) Luba divination bowl-bearer figure by the Buli Master, Tervuren Museum collection, Belgium
- 11) Bamana headdress, Elisofon collection (*chi wara*, full page detail shot)
- 12) Two bronze Benin leopards, Jos Museum collection, Nigeria (full page)

The layout was designed by Bernard Quint, and the images were the same ones used in *The Sculpture of Africa*. Some of them also appeared in "Mystic," as well as the later

²⁹⁰ Eliot Elisofon, "African Sculpture," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 48. (HRC 53.21.)

1962 *Think* magazine article. Even though the *Atlantic* essay is more than 5,000 words and was filled with a variety of information and Elisofon's educated opinions on African art, the article was dominated by the images. The eye is drawn to them, and luckily they were accompanied by brief explanatory captions to help deliver specific information about the pieces, including material, use, function, style, and history of the works. Occasionally measurements were mentioned, as well as aesthetic assessments. There were no field photographs included in "African Sculpture," closely aligning it with the overriding approach of *The Sculpture of Africa*. This publication included only a few field photographs, but had over 400 studio pictures of African art.

The Atlantic article began with three solid pages of text, followed by a full-page, bleed-off image of the Kota funerary figure that dominated a much smaller reproduction of Picasso's 1907 *Dancer* painting. Unlike "Mystic," which foregrounded the ancient Ife head and the female nude imagery, the layout of "African Sculpture" relayed a preoccupation with the relationship of African art and modern art. The juxtaposition of the *Dancer* and the Kota work was adapted from Alfred Barr's famous 1936 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which Elisofon probably saw. In her 1988 *Art Journal* article on this exhibition, Susan Noyes Platt included a small installation photograph that showed the *Dancer* next to a Kota figure at the entryway to the show (**fig. 4.86**). Platt referred to the Kota work simply as an "African figure." However, Barr's exhibition catalog included a Kota reliquary figure clustered with three works by Picasso, including the *Dancer* (**fig. 4.87**).²⁹¹ Elisofon used this comparison

²⁹¹ Barr also included several other African artworks both in the exhibition and in the accompanying catalog. Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1966, reprint of 1936 edition).

again in his 1962 *Think* magazine article on African art. In his way, he was perpetuating Barr's discussion of African art's crucial role in the founding of Cubism, although he never credited Barr or MoMA as his source.

As previously discussed, many of Elisofon's publications discussed African art's influence upon European modern art. While Alfred Barr wrote about African art as a part of the development of Cubism and modern art, Elisofon addressed this relationship to engender an appreciation of African art. "The reasons for the ready acceptance of African art by the modern artist," Elisofon wrote for the *Atlantic*, "are perhaps a clue to our own appreciation."²⁹² This dialogue represented one way that he presented African art to the public. He was not the only author to do so—the connection to modern art was often used as justification for the study of African art—however, it is an example of ethnocentrism. It suggested that African art was primarily valuable because it was valuable to modern artists. Yet as a tactic it may have helped people accept the aesthetic value of the African works.

He continued with a passage from James Johnson Sweeney's *African Folktales and Sculpture*:

European painters, sculptors, and critics in the first two decades of this century were constantly on the lookout for examples of primitive art that did not conform to the naturalistic convention which had dominated the art of their continent for most of two thousand years....

And since their time European artists in each generation have been able to find in one or another aspect of Negro art something that seemed to justify their own theories: the expressionists found an emotional use of colour

²⁹² Eliot Elisofon, "African Sculpture," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 48. (HRC 53.21.)

and distortion of shape, the cubists found ‘structure,’ the surrealists found fantasy, mystery –even a pathological inspiration.²⁹³

Sweeney’s text foreshadowed that of William Rubin for his 1984 *Primitivism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Rubin insisted that the trajectory of modern art would have occurred as it did even without the artists’ exposure to non-Western arts. Sweeney argued that the modern artists were already looking for something radical, already had their own theories, and non-Western arts simply were the key that fit the lock. Emotion. Distortion. Structure. Fantasy. Mystery. Inspiration.

Despite the fact that Elisofon attempted to discuss African art as part of its own culture later in this article, he drifted back to Western art historical terms, describing the “serene naturalism” of a Chokwe mask and the “cubistic” *kifwebe* mask of the Songye. These descriptions present a vexing issue—how can we define African art with European terms? How can we call a Songye mask “cubistic” when it might have been carved before Cubism was invented, and the African artist had no knowledge of Cubism? Again, this is a reflection of ethnocentrism, a tendency Elisofon was probably not even aware of.

Elisofon also occasionally used demeaning language in the article. As previously discussed, the positives and negatives of Africa and African culture were often muddled together in his texts. “Without the indoctrination of having seen paintings by these modern artists,” he wrote, “we would probably have considered the objects in the selection of photographs accompanying this article to be hideous native carvings best left in the jungle. Art is the great conditioner, and the artist leads the populace, perhaps

²⁹³ James Johnson Sweeney, *African Folktales and Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952) quoted in Eliot Elisofon, “African Sculpture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 48. (HRC 53.21.)

unwittingly and perhaps unbidden, into new ways of seeing.”²⁹⁴ Like many other contemporaneous authors he had mastered the backhanded compliment for the continent and its peoples. He continued:

Sculpture is only one aspect of a larger body of African culture. Folk tales numbering into the thousands, oral history, traditional music and dancing, well-organized governments, and a powerful religion are some of the Africans’ attainments.

Lack of a written language and thus of recorded history, ignorance of mathematics and other sciences, and a tendency to accept slavery and to practice human sacrifice and cannibalism are some of their uncivilized characteristics.

Many have used the word ‘savage’ not only for the African but also for the South Sea Islander and the American Indian, who shared some of these negative attributes.

The fact that the people of Benin committed human sacrifices does not lessen the artistic quality of their bronzes, nor does the architectural wonder of Chichen Itza become less extraordinary because the Maya threw sacrificial humans into a deep well. We have not changed our opinion of Kant, Beethoven, or Mann because of the horrors of Buchenwald.²⁹⁵

Slavery. Human sacrifice. Cannibalism. Elisofon never seemed to fail to mention these lurid words in his articles on African art. As previously discussed, he used them sensationistically—not as a critical discussion of history or of history’s image of Africa. Elisofon continued mentioning these sensationistic themes, but they did not contribute to his reader’s understanding of African art. He used them to capture people’s attention. Then he dismissed them as unimportant to the appreciation of art. Yet he still viewed it as necessary to include them.

²⁹⁴ Eliot Elisofon, “African Sculpture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 48. (HRC 53.21.)

²⁹⁵ Eliot Elisofon, “African Sculpture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 49. (HRC 53.21.)

Ironically, the article ended with the statement, “It might not be a bad idea to return some African sculpture to the Africans.”²⁹⁶ Elisofon noted that because African art had become so popular to collect in the West, “the African has to buy his art in order to show it to his children.”²⁹⁷ In other words, he acknowledged that Africans have had to buy back their art objects from Westerners to learn about their own heritage. Elisofon was one of the Westerners collecting African art so voraciously, contributing to this dilemma. He openly encouraged the collecting of African art, and publicized it repeatedly in his articles, images, and publications. But he was also promoting the idea that everyone should have access to African art. Thus we are presented with yet another Elisofon African art paradox: the private need to possess and control, and the public need to perform and inform.

October 13, 1961, ‘Literary Africa,’ *LIFE* photo essay

The *LIFE* May 4, 1953 issue and *The Atlantic* April 1959 issue both focused on the changes happening in Africa, the transition from colonial to non-colonial states. Their existence reveals the increasing attention paid to the continent. This consciousness increased in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and is evident in Elisofon’s two final products on Africa and African art during this time period, his ‘Literary Africa’ photo essay for *LIFE*, and his *Think* magazine article, “African Arts: Primitives to Picasso.”

While Elisofon worked on countless photo stories for *LIFE*, his most notable projects were multi-page color photography spectacles, which usually were cover

²⁹⁶ Eliot Elisofon, “African Sculpture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 60. (HRC 53.21.)

²⁹⁷ Eliot Elisofon, “African Sculpture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 203, no. 4 (April 1959): 60. (HRC 53.21.)

stories.²⁹⁸ Beginning in the 1940s, he used large color essays to set himself apart from other *LIFE* photographers, many of whom did not have extensive experience with color film in this early period. At a photojournalism conference in 1961, Elisofon explained that he tried to originate his own stories at *LIFE* as if he were a freelance photographer. He was specifically referring to ‘Literary Africa,’ which he described as “a pageant of Africa through the literary device of using quotations from many writers about the Dark Continent.”²⁹⁹ Elisofon had used this approach before with his “Isles of Romance in the South Seas” project, also known as ‘Literary South Seas.’ These are two examples of his popular *LIFE* color spectacles.

Though ‘Literary Africa’ did not include African sculpture, it did include performance and body arts; and it elucidates how Elisofon photographed and thought about Africa in the late 1950s. This was a major project that Elisofon promoted widely by lecturing about it on multiple occasions, including at the 1961 UNESCO Conference in Boston. Elisofon’s intention for ‘Literary Africa’ was to take photographs that would “make Africa come alive to the public.”³⁰⁰ He believed, as he explained in a letter to *LIFE* Editor Phil Wooton, that if people understood the continent of Africa they would better understand the art produced there. In Elisofon’s mind, Africa and African art were not

²⁹⁸ Elisofon specialized in color photography, starting in the 1940s — during a time period when it was mostly used for advertising. In 1961 Viking Press published Elisofon’s book *Color Photography*. The text served as a guide to color control, the effects of time of day and weather on color photographs, how to create special effects, lighting techniques and set-ups, composition, and equipment specifically for making color images.

²⁹⁹ Eliot Elisofon, ‘Camera as Magic Carpet,’ lecture for the “Learning the Photo Journalism Conference in the West,” Asilomar, CA., September, 26-29, 1961, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 53.35.)

³⁰⁰ Eliot Elisofon, letter to Phil Wooton, November 22, 1957, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 69.2, IMG_1386.) He told Wooton that ‘Literary Africa’ would not depend for its excitement and quality on animal pictures, dancers, and naked girls. On the other hand he made no promise to leave them out and he hoped to photograph these “old subjects” in a new way.

two separate topics. The current concept of separating African studies and African art history did not exist for him. He believed that a photo essay like ‘Literary Africa’ could engender respect for the continent and its art (figs. 4.88-4.99).

‘Literary Africa’ represented aesthetic expressions of the Western perceptions of African culture as portrayed through the quoted passages. So when *LIFE* created this photo essay, it was not surprising to find superficiality. For example, the cover image was a wild-eyed Lega warrior menacing Elisofon’s camera with a spear as his comrade shouts in the background. The warriors were covered in white dot body paint, wore headdresses, and held shields along with their spears. The header, “Africa’s Savage Beauty,” was paired with the photograph. The last two pages of the ‘Literary Africa’ photo essay featured this Lega warrior again, paired with the following poem from Vachel Lindsay’s “The Congo”:

Then along that riverbank
 A thousand miles
 Tattooed cannibals danced in files;
 Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust song
 And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong.
 And “BLOOD” screamed the whistles and the fifes of the warriors,
 “BLOOD” screamed the skull-faced, lean witch doctors,
 “Whirl ye the deadly voo-doo rattle,
 Harry the uplands,
 Steal all the cattle,
 Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle,
 Bing.
 Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM,”
 A roaring, epic, rag-time tune
 From the mouth of the Congo
 To the Mountains of the Moon.³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Vachel Lindsay, “The Congo,” quoted in “Storied World of Africa: A Writer’s Land of Primitive, Eloquent Beauty,” *LIFE* (October 13, 1961): 86-87.

In addition to war painted ‘cannibals,’ naked girls also appeared throughout ‘Literary Africa.’ The first layout featured a girl bathing in the Niger River at sunset. Later in the photo essay was an image of two Liberian girls dancing in celebration. In a traditional manner, they perform without coverings over their chests, and dance with mirrored, fringed woven mats in their hands. Another spread included two photographs of young girls: one shyly looking away from the camera at a market in Monrovia, and the other smiling widely at the camera, her body covered in ritual chalk makeup from the waist up. Africans were stock characters in this photo essay, without names, families, homes, or personalities. They existed only to satisfy the literary passage.

‘Literary Africa’ has received the scholarly attention of Raoul J. Granqvist. His article “Photojournalism’s White Mythologies: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Africa, 1959-1961,” was published in *Research in African Literatures* in 2012.³⁰² He placed the “racist storytelling,” as Granqvist referred to it, of the ‘Literary Africa’ photo essay on Elisofon’s shoulders. This dismisses the context of creation of the photo essay as a sequel to ‘Literary South Seas,’ and also assumes that Elisofon had more control over the final *LIFE* product than he actually did.³⁰³ Very few *LIFE* photographers controlled every aspect of their articles. W. Eugene Smith tried to, and eventually resigned because editorial choices had been made contrary to his clear demands. *LIFE* was undeniably a

³⁰² Raoul J. Granqvist, “Photojournalism’s White Mythologies: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Africa, 1959-1961,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2012): 84-105. Granqvist produced another article that discussed the ‘Literary Africa’ project and the “Hopeful Launching” project about Nigeria published in *LIFE* in 1960. “The story of how the most famous portrait of a young Chinua Achebe was taken,” Raoul J. Granqvist, Sept. 18, 2013, *Africa is a Country* blog, <http://africasacountry.com/eliot-elisofons-famous-portrait-of-chinua-achebe/>, accessed May 4, 2013. In this article he is still critical of ‘Literary Africa,’ referring to it as “myth mongering,” and a construction of “the risky sadness of the bygone.”

³⁰³ Raoul J. Granqvist, “Photojournalism’s White Mythologies: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Africa, 1959-1961,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2012): 84. Granqvist does not mention ‘Literary South Seas’ in his 2012 article.

team effort. Even though Elisofon found the literary passages and took the photographs, he did not make ‘Literary Africa’ on his own. He did not even select which literary passages would be included, and he did not choose the cover image.

Despite being shot in 1959, *LIFE* held onto ‘Literary Africa’ for two years before publishing it. The October 13, 1961 issue was meant to appear right before the October 22-26 UNESCO conference to be held in Boston, which had the theme “Africa and the United States: Images and Realities.” At the UNESCO conference, the largest such meeting ever held in the United States on the topic of Africa, a portion of Elisofon’s African art collection was on display at Boston University, and some of his photographs were displayed as large photo panels at the Boston Museum of Science. In addition, he helped the curators plan these exhibitions, participated in two UNESCO conference panels, and gave lectures on his ‘Literary Africa’ photo essay.³⁰⁴

The goal of the conference was to increase understanding between the U.S. and Africa in order to develop “meaningful guidance” for future American action to help new African nations “strengthen their independence” and “help them in their own efforts toward social and economic progress” as stated by President John F. Kennedy.³⁰⁵ While that sounds friendly and encouraging, today we know more about the events surrounding the Cold War, and that the United States had its own goals. Fearing communism, the United States did morally questionable things in Africa, such as assisting in the

³⁰⁴ Guide to UNESCO Conference, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EIPA D-18, 4.)

³⁰⁵ John F. Kennedy, telegram to conference, delivered October 22, 1961 as opener by Dr. William S. Dix, Chairman of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, quoted in Simon Ottenberg, Phoebe Ottenberg, and U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, “Africa and the United States: Images and Realities, 8th National Conference: Final Report,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. State Dept., 1961): 2.

kidnapping and execution of Patrice Lumumba in February of 1961, which Granqvist cited as murder in his article on 'Literary Africa.'³⁰⁶

But according to the archival data, Elisofon never said nor wrote that 'Literary Africa,' nor his work at the UNESCO conference, were meant to be anti-communist, pro-democratic statements. 'Literary Africa' was meant to be a beautiful color feature on literary images of Africa, a continent that was in the limelight because of this major conference. Granqvist explained that Elisofon and *LIFE* exploited Africa and Africans for their own gain, yet he never talked about money, the underlying motivation behind everything that Elisofon and *LIFE* did.

January 1962, "African Arts: Primitives to Picasso" *Think* magazine, IBM

In a similar approach to the 1959 *Atlantic* article, Elisofon provided a very brief discussion of African art for *Think* magazine in January of 1962. *Think* was both the company magazine and motto of IBM, the International Business Machine Corporation. It debuted in June 1935, with Rodin's *The Thinker* on the cover. The magazine was circulated internally, to IBM customers, and to people IBM viewed as prominent members of society. Circulation numbers in 1935 were around 60,000 and that rose by the 1990s to 360,000; by that time it was distributed in 65 countries. Magazine pieces were contributed by the brightest 'thinkers' of the day, with content from leading

³⁰⁶ Raoul J. Granqvist, "Photojournalism's White Mythologies: Eliot Elisofon and *LIFE* in Africa, 1959-1961," *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2012): 100.

academics, politicians, businessmen, and scientists. Most issues included photographs of art.³⁰⁷

The January 1962 issue of *Think* was dedicated to Africa and explored “the restless continent’s innumerable facets.”³⁰⁸ The table of contents page included an editorial note explaining why the issue focused on Africa. The passage reflects how Americans thought about the continent:

A few years ago, in this country, the popular image of Africa contained approximately equal parts of jungle, witch doctor, wild animals, Dr. Livingstone and Tarzan. In the gentler world of yesteryear, we could afford to indulge in fantasy. Today, such an image is not only distorted; it is dangerous.

When 19 new nations start life on the continent of Africa within a span of two years, when these nations join the U.N. and assume a voice in world affairs, from atom-testing to Berlin, when a tribal chief wins the Nobel Peace Prize, it is time for us to know more about Africa.

The facts alone won’t be enough, of course. A country’s gross national output is a fact we can learn. But whether that country will remain stable in the next 10 years is a judgment we have to make. Still, the facts will lead to a better judgment.

This month we publish a special issue on Africa. It contains articles by native Africans and by other writers who have traveled in Africa and who know their subject. In addition, we are printing an interview with G. Mennen Williams, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs.

There is a saying: ‘It is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.’ We think of this issue as one candle which may shed more light on the once-dark continent. – The Editors³⁰⁹

In contrast to *The Atlantic* Africa issue that Elisofon had contributed to in 1959, every *Think* article in this issue was written by a white man. Only one of them, author and poet Anthony Delius, was from Africa. The rest were journalists, businessmen, politicians, and

³⁰⁷ “A Culture of Think,” http://www-03.ibm.com/ibm/history/ibm100/us/en/icons/think_culture/transform/. Accessed April 9, 2013.

³⁰⁸ “Table of Contents,” *Think*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 1962): 1. (HRC 53.24.)

³⁰⁹ “Table of Contents,” *Think*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 1962): 1. (HRC 53.24.)

religious leaders from America and England: John Gunther, Smith Hempstone, Howard Simons, The Rt. Rev. Trevor Huddleston, and Clarence B. Randall. Hence, *Think* was delivering an incredibly ethnocentric product. This was not an opportunity for Africans to educate others about Africa.

None of the other authors wrote about traditional African cultural issues.

Elisofon's article was the only entry on African art. "African Art: Primitives to Picasso; How tribal sculpture has influenced modern artists," was four pages long. It was a truncated, slightly revised, version of his earlier *Atlantic* article. Most of the short text discussed what African art has meant in the Western world, to artists, collectors, and the market. Elisofon explained:

It has become the darling of a fast-growing audience of aesthetes, collectors and enthusiastic amateurs who have elevated it to a high place in the art pantheon. The good and the bad are being gobbled up, and fakes are being manufactured both in Africa and Europe. Very important pieces of sculpture are almost up to \$50,000. What was once the province of natural history museums and the careful studies of qualified anthropologists has now been hastily incorporated into the art world.³¹⁰

African aesthetics and artistic motivations were barely addressed. Most of the contextual information was reserved to three one-sentence captions.

The cover of the issue was one of Elisofon's multiple-exposure shots of the small Dogon figure (**fig. 4.100**). It wrapped over the front and back of the magazine, with the word "Africa" repeated underneath it seven times in bold white letters. Like the 1959 *Atlantic* article, the first illustrations in Elisofon's *Think* article were a Kota reliquary figure ("primitive Bokota funerary fetish"), and Picasso's *Dancer*. But in a reversal of the *Atlantic* article layout, the Kota illustration took up less than a fourth of the page, while

³¹⁰ Eliot Elisofon, "Artful Primitives," *Think*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 1962): 32. (HRC 53.24.)

the *Dancer* image was much larger and dominated (figs. 4.101-4.102). However, the next page was completely dedicated to the Léopoldville (Kinshasa) Chokwe *pwo* mask. The third page featured a striking example of a Bamana *chi wara*, also seen in *The Sculpture of Africa*, and the final page was filled with a field photograph of Pende *minganji* initiation camp guards. While *The Atlantic* article was much longer and more in-depth in its analysis of African art, it lacked field photographs, which did appear in the 1952 *LIFE* “Mystic” article and this 1962 *Think* piece.

Did this article advocate for African art? Somewhat. Elisofon explained that we can understand why Modernists were inspired by this art — so we should appreciate it as fine art. But it was too short to really serve as an introduction to African art. In May of 1935, Robert J. Goldwater wrote an article on the occasion of the Sweeney exhibition of African art at the Museum of Modern Art for *Parnassus*. His first sentence was: “It is customary to begin any consideration of African art with a statement in its defense.”³¹¹ We saw this practice in “Mystic,” *The Atlantic* article, and again in this *Think* text. Not much had changed in 27 years. Modern art was still being used as the gateway, as it is still often used today.

In this article, Elisofon encouraged the readers’ interest in the artworks that the Modernists saw and collected, increasing the market value of any object with a Modernist provenance. By aligning African art with the accepted and popular modern art of artists such as Picasso, Elisofon contributed to the established dialogue on African art, justifying its study and its placement in elite art museums. But by focusing only on formal qualities,

³¹¹ Robert J. Goldwater, “An Approach to African Sculpture,” *Parnassus*, vol. 7, no. 4 (May 1935): 25.

the art's connections to Africa, its place of origin, are severed, and it loses its meaning. As time passed, Elisofon's work reconnected the art to Africa, celebrating its culture and the environment. He went from telling people about why African art is fine art through the lens of modern art and aesthetics, to celebrating African art and culture, and working to educate people about the continent. In order to gain its acceptance as fine art, African art's ties to the continent were cut; years later the connection was re-established.

Chapter Five: 1958 Was a Very Big Year

As Chapter Four established, Elisofon was involved with African art-related projects throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. These contributions to the field continued throughout his life, and their success led to more opportunities for Elisofon's images of, and ideas about, African art to reach the public. While 1947 marked his first exposure to African art in the sub-Saharan region, 1958 was also a landmark year for Elisofon and African art. Elisofon curated the first exhibition of 'primitive' art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1958. His most famous book, *The Sculpture of Africa*, was published; and *Bell, Book and Candle*, a major Hollywood film famous among Africanists for its inclusion of African art, was released. These three distinctive projects are connected by their demonstration of an increasing public awareness of, and even fascination with, African art, and a growing demand for information about this topic.

Masterpieces of Primitive Art, Exhibition

"The Primitive Exhibition has been a great success. As it was the first exhibition of primitive art to be held in Boston, we were especially proud to be able to show only works of the highest merit.

There is no question that the quality of all the pieces was the factor that won so many new friends for primitive art and gave the display such distinction."

- Perry T. Rathbone, Director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, letter to Elisofon, Dec. 10, 1958³¹²

Elisofon was appointed as a Harvard Research Fellow in Primitive Art in 1958, on the recommendation of John Otis (J.O.) Brew, the director of the Peabody Museum of

³¹² Perry T. Rathbone, Director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, letter to Eliot Elisofon, December 10, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 62.28/57.28.)

Archaeology and Ethnology at the University. His first task was to help assess Harvard's collection of 'primitive' art, and combine its top items with pieces from Salem's Peabody and the Museum of Modern Art to create the first inclusive exhibition of 'primitive' art to be shown at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (MFA). His participation in this project proves that his connoisseurship of 'primitive' art was valued and valuable. Elisofon and Brew ultimately choose 150 objects for the show, 53 of which were African. It was held from October 16 through November 23, 1958.³¹³

According to the MFA's press release, *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* was the inaugural show in a new program to display the best of Harvard's 'primitive' art in a permanent gallery at the Boston MFA. The new gallery space was scheduled to open after the exhibition closed, and the plan was to have two shows annually.³¹⁴ Thus, *Masterpieces* marked the physical and symbolic transformation of ethnographic artifacts into fine art objects. The release explained, "Weird and fascinating masks, dynamic and powerful sculpture, pottery and gold objects used in ceremonies and rituals by primitive peoples of Africa, the Americas and the South Seas will be displayed."³¹⁵ The cultural differences embodied by these non-Western art objects are advertised as the draw. Here, the words "weird" and "primitive" are not meant to be insulting. However, the museum probably would not have used those words to describe a painting by an Old Master.

³¹³ "Return of the Head-Hunter," *f.y.i.* magazine (May 29, 1958): 3. (HRC 62.24, IMG_9501.)

³¹⁴ Division of Education, "Masterpieces of Primitive Art," Boston Museum of Fine Arts press release, October 9, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 57.28, IMG_4318 and IMG_4319.)

³¹⁵ Division of Education, "Masterpieces of Primitive Art," Boston Museum of Fine Arts press release, October 9, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 57.28, IMG_4318 and IMG_4319.)

Even though Elisofon was the curator of the show, it seems he did not title the exhibition himself. In fact, he was not confident that the word ‘masterpieces’ should be used. He wrote to Perry T. Rathbone, the Director of the Boston MFA, on June 25, 1958:

I am a little concerned about the title of the exhibition using the word Masterpieces. I certainly should have spoken up sooner and I am probably over-concerned but this field is so new that it is difficult to call many of the objects ‘Masterpieces.’

There is no doubt that a good part of them have been recognized for their quality by being shown in other museums and by having been reproduced in books on the subject. At any rate, I simply had to speak now or forever hold my peace.³¹⁶

At the heart of Elisofon’s concern was the persistent issue of whether or not we can call any African art object a masterpiece. Such labels implied that we had a complete understanding of the field, thorough enough to create a hierarchy of objects. In addition, what we in the West call a masterpiece, might not be what the original African culture called a masterpiece, and vice versa.³¹⁷

The EEPA holds 69 correspondence documents just for the MFA show, and the HRC holds many more. We can conclude from the archival data that Elisofon was dedicated to the project. He designed the catalog for this exhibition and wrote the introductory essay and the subdivision texts. Rathbone wrote the foreword. The 48-page catalog was issued in a black art-paper cover with cutouts (**fig. 5.1**). African, Oceanic, and American Indian works were included. More than half of the objects featured were from the Peabody Harvard collection. The exhibition also included some of Elisofon’s own objects, those of his friends, and pieces gathered from the Peabody Museum in

³¹⁶ Eliot Elisofon, letter to Perry T. Rathbone, Director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, June 25, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 57.28, IMG_4314.)

³¹⁷ The concerns about labeling art objects as ‘masterpieces’ that Elisofon was pondering in 1958 are still valid for the field today.

Salem, American Museum of Natural History, Brooklyn Museum, and Museum of Primitive Art in New York. In total, loans were organized from 21 public institutions and private collectors.³¹⁸ Elisofon also participated in a television program to promote the show with Brew: the MFA's weekly show, "Invitation to Art," on WGBH Channel 2.

Elisofon and his wife attended a black tie, invitation-only reception and preview of the show as special guests on October 15, 1958. The invitation explicitly presented the event as a 'meet and greet' Eliot Elisofon occasion (**figs. 5.2-5.3**).³¹⁹ While this may not seem remarkable, it does show that 'primitive' art was being given the same exclusive treatment as any other art opening of the MFA and that Elisofon had a celebrity status that the Museum was eager to capitalize on. Over 1000 people attended the opening reception.³²⁰

Exhibitions of multiple non-Western 'primitive' arts grouped together were common in the United States. In some ways, this approach allowed the viewer to think about the 'primitive' categorization as a whole. Rathbone wrote in his catalog foreword:

³¹⁸ Lent by Elisofon to the 1958 MFA Boston exhibition: Dogon mask with bird superstructure; Senufo mask, double firespitter; Teke male figure, 26 inches high; Yaka mask with fiber trim and commercial pigments, collected at Kasongo Lunda by Elisofon in 1951, 21 inches high; Mask, Congo Basin, Bushongo, wearing Bushongo cap covered in chicken feathers, a sorcerer's mask confiscated by a Belgian officer in the 1930s, 19 inches high; Mask, Congo Basin, Baluba, mask of the helmet type, collected by a Belgian colonial in the early 1930s, with raffia fringe, 24 inches high; (Headdress, Guinea Coast, Ibibio, covered with animal skin, collected by Dr. J.S. Harris, wood, 22 in. high, Lent by The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, Gift of Eliot Elisofon); (Mask, Congo Basin, Balumbo; painted white, worn by men in a stilt dance commemorating the spirits of dead women; from along the Ologwe River; wood, paint, 11 3/8 in high; Lent by The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, Gift of Eliot Elisofon)

³¹⁹ Boston Museum of Fine Arts, invitation to *Masterpieces of Primitive Art*, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4311.)

³²⁰ "Primitive Art Fascinates Socialites," *Boston Traveler*, October 16, 1958: 28. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4415.)

The artistic revolution of the twentieth century has been accompanied by a revolution in aesthetic appreciation. Our grandfathers could complacently equate art with ‘beauty’; for us, however, in the words of André Malraux, ‘beauty’ has become only one province of art’s kingdom. The inspired French author further observes that ‘art has become a field in which all works that move us are affiliated.’

We may look for no more striking example of this truth than the widespread appreciation of ‘primitive’ art in our time. That we are genuinely moved by the artistic expressions of cultures that lie outside the great Oriental and European civilizations is undebatable.³²¹

“Works that move us,” is a key phrase in this passage. Later on in his foreword Rathbone credited the discovery of ‘primitive’ art to the modern artists: they “brought them out of the restricted category of anthropological data and into the light of pure enjoyment.”³²²

Enjoyment — the appreciation of ‘primitive’ art had become a respectable intellectual exercise. Rathbone continued:

In the space of fifty years these multifarious works from all over the globe have taken a firm hold upon our imaginations and established themselves in our aesthetic consciousness. There they offer a constant and stimulating challenge to our inherited notions of what art is.

Primitive art occupies today a respected place alongside those classic expressions of man’s plastic genius which have been revered for generations. In the United States especially, the art museum that aspires to reveal every embodiment of the human will-to-form displays with pride the finest obtainable works of the tribal artist.³²³

According to Rathbone, this type of presentation had become obligatory for any major art museum. Questioning the nature of art is part of the modern thought process and welcomed.

³²¹ Perry T. Rathbone, foreword in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 3.

³²² Perry T. Rathbone, foreword in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 3.

³²³ Perry T. Rathbone, foreword in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 3.

Through the combined efforts of the MFA and the Peabody, a collaboration that is perhaps the most significant part of this exhibition, Boston was able to participate in the dialogue surrounding ‘primitive’ art. Rathbone explained:

This is the first exhibition in Boston. Across the river at Harvard primitive art has been shown at the Fogg Museum, but it is Harvard’s Peabody Museum that is almost synonymous with the term. In that venerable fortress of anthropological research there is housed one of the world’s greatest collections of the art of tribal man.

Though much of its vast collections date from the purely ‘specimen conscious’ age, the directors of the Peabody have long been sensitive to the artistic treasure over which they preside. Their concern has been how to share the enjoyment of the Peabody’s riches with a public beyond that which consists only of the student body, an occasional Cantabrigian and the visiting specialist.³²⁴

Rathbone credited J.O. Brew with first recognizing the artistic significance of the holdings of his Museum, and then the greater capacity of the Boston Museum to exhibit, publicize and make them available to a large audience as works of art. The exhibition literally allowed ‘primitive’ art to move from an ethnology museum to an art museum, both a physical and theoretical transformation.

Brew’s role highlights the importance of specific personalities in the history of the appreciation of African art. On this topic, Rathbone acknowledged Elisofon’s key contribution to the show:

Still the character of the exhibition and this publication are in large part owing to the inspired labor and unlimited enthusiasm of Mr. Elisofon alone. Often of necessity working by himself and without benefit of consultation he conceived the plan of the catalogue, gathered quantities of data and wrote the introductory essay and the subdivision texts. It is

³²⁴ Perry T. Rathbone, foreword in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 3.

impossible to thank him adequately for the full measure of his contribution so generously given.³²⁵

This passage suggests that the MFA exhibition and catalog would not have been possible without Elisofon's work.

The two most important catalog essays for our purposes are on "Primitive Art" and "African Art." Elisofon took a practical approach to his language, speaking to the broad public. The first theme he tackled, which also appeared in Ralph Linton's essay in *The Sculpture of Africa*, was the use of the term 'primitive' as a label for these art forms.

Elisofon wrote:

The visitor viewing this exhibition might well ask himself why this art is called primitive. Through lack of a better term the art of three great geographic areas have been lumped together under the term Primitive art.

The peoples of these areas were far from primitive but because their civilization has been considered lower than our own the term primitive has found some acceptance. Other terms sometimes used are indigenous or tribal art. No truly satisfactory term has ever been devised.³²⁶

Language failed Elisofon in this situation. He recognized that the label of 'primitive' was incorrect and useless as a descriptor. These arts were not 'less than' Western art, but had their own cultural framework. This realization marked a shift in his thinking, which matched that of scholars, and then eventually museums, collectors, and the general public. In addition to this commentary, some of the use and function of the objects is explained in this essay, as well as the general stylistic motivations of art being what these peoples feel rather than what they see.

³²⁵ Perry T. Rathbone, foreword in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 4.

³²⁶ Eliot Elisofon, "Primitive Art," in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 5.

In the “African Art” essay, Elisofon described how each art-producing ethnic group in sub-Saharan Africa has a distinct style, presenting an extreme range of representation of the human body. Elisofon also discussed how Westerners will inherently view African art differently from Africans — what is meant to be terrifying to Africans, may be expressionistic to us. “Meaning as well as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,” he explained.³²⁷

Elisofon used art historical terms to situate African art in a recognizable comparison for MFA guests. “Simplicity and strength are perhaps the distinguishing qualities of African sculpture,” he wrote, “In contrast to the highly involved baroque-like carvings of Oceania, African sculpture is a Gothic statement without frills.”³²⁸ Then he formally described African art, as one would visually analyze any art form:

The sculptures are architectonic, evolving from the original material, the cylindrical tree trunk. One rarely finds the African carver adding pieces of wood to this simple shape, a common practice in Oceanic and the Indian art of the Northwest Coast. Instead the figure is compressed out of the cylinder by what appears to be a minimum of carving.

The feet are flat and form the base, the legs are bent in what appears to be a desire to achieve tension in stance, the body trunk is straight up and down, and the head is firmly mounted and rarely tilted or turned. Proportion is often ignored, but the head, if anything, is favored.³²⁹

In comparison to Elisofon’s 1952 exhibition, *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*, this type of catalog allowed him to share more cultural information with his audience.

However, it did not include an object-by-object contextual analysis. In a draft version of his “Primitive Art” essay, Elisofon wrote, “How much the ordinary person must know

³²⁷ Eliot Elisofon, “Primitive Art,” in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 6.

³²⁸ Eliot Elisofon, “African Art,” in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 9.

³²⁹ Eliot Elisofon, “African Art,” in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1958): 9.

about the use of these objects to appreciate them has been a subject of debate between anthropologists and art enthusiasts.”³³⁰ This was a debate Elisofon participated in, and throughout his career he experimented with a variety of techniques to illuminate the topic for the public. But he often returned to an art theory he voiced in this draft: “a true work of art should need no literal explanation.”³³¹

Masterpieces of Primitive Art, Reactions and Press Coverage

Christraud Geary discussed the 1958 MFA Show in her essay in *Art of the Senses* (2004), an exhibition catalog on the Teel Collection of African Art. Having access to the “African Exhibition Files,” of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, Geary was able to examine some pieces of correspondence that are lacking from the HRC and EEPA archives. This included a January 21, 1958 letter from Elisofon to J.O. Brew concerning Elisofon’s ideas for future rotating exhibitions at the MFA that he could help the Peabody organize, for the joint program on ‘primitive’ art between the institutions. “Distortion in Primitive Art,” “The Influences of Primitive Art on Modern Art,” and “Superstition and Magic” were Elisofon’s suggested themes, none of which materialized as shows.³³²

In the end, *Masterpieces* was a short five-week display, and despite many positive reviews in the press, Elisofon was never again a curator for the Peabody nor the MFA.

But his title of Harvard Research Fellow was never retracted. Instead he eventually

³³⁰ Eliot Elisofon, “Primitive Art,” essay draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1-2. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4375 thru IMG_4376, also EEPA Items D-4, 3 and 4.)

³³¹ Eliot Elisofon, “Primitive Art,” essay draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 2. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4375 thru IMG_4376, also EEPA Items D-4, 3 and 4.)

³³² Christraud M. Geary, “On Collectors, Exhibitions, and Photographs of African Art: The Teel Collection in Historical Perspective,” in Suzanne Preston Blier, ed., *Art of the Senses: African Masterpieces from the Teel Collection* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2004): 25-42.

became a Research Associate in Primitive Art, and then later an Honorary Associate in Primitive Art.³³³ But his involvement with the Peabody shifted away from African art and toward South Seas art and work in New Guinea.

The press coverage of *Masterpieces* was generally positive, though the precise reactions of the journalists were varied. Over a dozen newspaper and magazine articles were published on the topic, including announcements, opening reception coverage, special interviews with Elisofon, coverage of the television special, and general exhibition reviews. Most of the articles discussed Elisofon as the main organizer of the show, specifically mentioning his name, and his background as photographer, expert, and collector.

T.H. Parker of *The Hartford Courant* wrote the most analytical article for the exhibition on October 5, 1958. “Art and Artifacts,” as his piece was titled, recognized that ‘primitive’ art was changing its position in the world. He discussed four institutions: the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the brand-new Museum of Primitive Art (MPA), the Harvard Peabody, and the MFA. The 1957 foundation of the MPA and the showing of Peabody objects at the MFA both served “to remove primitive artifacts from ethnology as their frame of reference,” in the words of Nelson Rockefeller.³³⁴ Parker referred to this new type of display as an “emancipation.”³³⁵ “While

³³³ Harvard University, letters of appointment for Eliot Elisofon, February 17, 1958; April 18, 1966; and June 11, 1969, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 73.10/68.10, IMG_4718, IMG_4719, and IMG_4737.)

³³⁴ Nelson Rockefeller, quoted in T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

³³⁵ T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

indeed the world has not been altogether insensitive to the aesthetic content and quality of great, primitive art,” Parker explained, “museums have only infrequently given it equal footing with their collections of the arts of the historic or civilized cultures.”³³⁶

The natural history museum can show one side of ‘primitive’ art, but it does not serve the objects completely. Parker understood the larger implications of showing ‘primitive’ art in a fine art museum. It would effect how an audience appreciated the objects, both visually and mentally. He wrote:

...anyone who wished to make a study of primitive art or delight his eye and imagination with its special provocativeness had to turn to the great natural history repositories. One of the best known in this area obviously has been the fabulous American Museum in New York.

Even here, however, the approach to primitive cultures has been ethnological or anthropologic which, under the circumstance, certainly is mete and right. Here as elsewhere among the natural history museum the exquisite artifact takes its place side by side with the plain. There is no hierarchy of beauty, but only of scientific importance.³³⁷

Pure scientific examination blocked appreciation of the “special provocativeness” of ‘primitive’ art. And it also meant that only scientists were studying ‘primitive’ art. Thus the pool of experts in this field was small. Parker continued:

Thus, only those who had surpassing patience, as well as a keen eye, were able to winnow these great ethnic collections for their sheer art value. And once the enchanting object had been spotted, it could seldom be viewed to any special advantage, surrounded as it was by a host of other exhibits equally loved by the natural historian. The chase after primitive art as art has therefore been a frustrating one.³³⁸

³³⁶ T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

³³⁷ T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

³³⁸ T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

For the MFA exhibition, Elisofon served as the one with “surpassing patience” and “a keen eye,” sorting the Peabody collection to discover objects that could shine in the MFA. He was the middleman between natural history and art.

Parker grasped the primary issue at hand, pondering the question: What is the best way to display ‘primitive’ art? He did not dismiss the natural history presentation, but he also supported this new trend of showing it in art museums. So many objects can qualify as both art and artifact. But to show it as both simultaneously may lead to a “confusion of purposes,” according to Parker.³³⁹ He explained:

...in a natural history museum such a double standard might have been distracting to the ethnic scholar to whom beauty is largely a footnote to anthropological studies.

Moreover, the pure-art addict generally does not think of science museums as repositories of beauty and does not go looking for it there. This may well be his own fault, stemming from ignorance or laziness. However that may be, the art museum seems the native and proper place for beauty of all times and climes.

Whether it again grew out of ignorance, or some sense of professional nicety, the fact that art museums have made so little claim to primitive art is certainly deplorable. Apparently this mistake is about to be rectified on increasing scale. The alliance of the Peabody and Boston museums is both pioneering and wonderful. Who’s next?³⁴⁰

It is interesting that he blamed everyone equally for the current situation, but especially pushed art museums to lay “claim” to ‘primitive’ art. His strong words – ignorance, laziness, deplorable, mistake – forced the issue. Certainly he viewed the MFA exhibition positively and encouraged others to follow suit.

³³⁹ T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

³⁴⁰ T.H. Parker, “Art and Artifacts,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 5, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4413 thru IMG_4414.)

Many other reviewers acknowledged the ‘fresh’ concept of showing an ethnographic collection in an art museum. For example, Edgar J. Driscoll of *The Boston Globe*, explained that the exhibition was “a significant step, since it is just recently that primitive art got into the public domain and out of the rarified atmosphere of ethnologists, anthropologists and psychologists.”³⁴¹ *TIME* magazine commented that the Harvard Peabody was a place “where few people except students of anthropology ever set foot” – i.e. only scholars had access to this material.³⁴² Parker was the only journalist to see the deeper meaning of the exhibition—that not only the display, but also the study of the ‘primitive’ object was changing.

As encouraging as Parker’s analytical thought process was, not everyone was on the same page. “It was ‘bongo, bongo, bongo’ at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts last night as Boston got its first full dress showing of primitive art,” Driscoll wrote on October 16, 1958.³⁴³ “And more than 2000 members and guests responding to the beat, jammed the museum’s upper special exhibition galleries for the big opening Fall show,” he continued.³⁴⁴ This bizarre opening paragraph referred to the song “Civilization,” which was written by Bob Hilliard and Carl Sigman for the Copacabana nightclub in New York.³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., “2000 Attend Primitive Art Show Opening,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1958: 1, 22.

³⁴² “Mana from Harvard,” *TIME* (November 24, 1958): 78.

³⁴³ Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., “2000 Attend Primitive Art Show Opening,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1958: 1, 22.

³⁴⁴ Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., “2000 Attend Primitive Art Show Opening,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1958: 1, 22.

³⁴⁵ Michael Sigman, “‘Civilization’ and its Disc Contents,” *The Huffington Post Blog*, July, 23, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-sigman/civilization-and-its-disc_b_218587.html. The club did not use the song, so it appeared instead in 1947 in their Broadway musical revue,

What exactly was the bongo beat in “Civilization” that Driscoll referred to? He was probably most familiar with the Danny Kaye version of the song, which began:

Each morning, a missionary advertise with neon sign
 He tells the native population that civilization is fine
 And three educated savages holler from a bamboo tree
 (Eeeee! Ah-loh-kee-hah-tah-sah-nah.)
 That civilization is a thing for me to see

So bongo, bongo, bongo I don't want to leave the Congo, oh-no-no-no-no-no
 Bingle, bangle, bungle I'm so happy in the jungle, I refuse to go
 Don't want no bright lights, false teeth, doorbells, landlords, I make it clear
 That no matter how they coax him, I'll stay right here³⁴⁶

The song was a humorous critique of modern society. The Congo ‘natives’ do not want anything to do with Western civilization. But they are referred to as jungle-dwelling savages; who holler in strange tongues; and cannot speak in complete, grammatically correct sentences. These fictional ‘natives’ are simultaneously admired for their simple, ‘laidback’ lifestyle, and mocked for being different, and uncivilized. Driscoll seemed to suggest that the uncivilized savage world of the Congo jungle had manifested itself in the MFA galleries with his “bongo, bongo, bongo” evocation. His text continued: “Masks, ceremonial bowls, rough hewn carvings of dieties [sic], portrait heads of warriors, et al, lured the swarm from one gallery to another, often arousing shivers in the onlookers so strange and powerful are these works.”³⁴⁷ This sentence encouraged the reader to think of the art objects as terrifying.

“Angel in the Wings,” sung by Elaine Stritch. Louis Prima recorded it later and it went on the charts, but the most famous rendition is by Danny Kaye and the Andrews Sisters.

³⁴⁶ Danny Kaye, Carl Sigman, Bob Hilliard, Allan Roberts, Lester Lee, and Vic Schoen. *Civilization (Bongo, Bongo, Bongo)*. (Decca, 1947): MP3.

³⁴⁷ Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., “2000 Attend Primitive Art Show Opening,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1958: 1, 22.

Unfortunately, this article reflected a common fascination with exotic, savage Africa in the press and media. “Civilization” revealed the situation within its lyrics:

I looked through a magazine the missionary's wife conceals
(A magazine? What happens?)
 I see how people who are civilized bang you with automobiles
(You know you can get hurt that way Daniel?)
 At the movies they have got to pay many coconuts to see
(What do they see Danny?)
 Uncivilized pictures that the newsreel takes of me³⁴⁸

As a comic paradox, the ‘uncivilized savage’ regards the images of himself in the newsreel as ‘uncivilized.’ Thus, the larger question becomes – Who is actually uncivilized? The exploited or those that exploit? At the time the song was written, ‘documentary’ films on Africa were popular in the cinema—for example, the famous 1952 film *Latuko: We Saw Primitive Man*, photographed and directed by Edgar M. Queeny, of the Monsanto corporation, in connection with the American Museum of Natural History. The poster images and text for this film were designed to titillate the American audience (**figs. 5.4-5.5**):

See... for the first time on any screen, this completely different picture that takes you back thousands of years...back to Primitive Man!

See...the savage pageantry of ceremonial sacrifice—starkly realistic, completely authentic—entirely unstaged and unrehearsed!

See...native hunters, flaunting death as they track down the most vicious of African game in the wildest jungle!

See...frenzied natives in spontaneous tribal rites never before photographed! Shown in candid color photography for the first time—the Latukos—barbaric, warring heathens, pictured in their remote,

³⁴⁸ Danny Kaye, Carl Sigman, Bob Hilliard, Allan Roberts, Lester Lee, and Vic Schoen. *Civilization (Bongo, Bongo, Bongo)*. (Decca, 1947): MP3.

mountainous redoubt of Africa...barbaric drama as only the camera can record for you!³⁴⁹

Latuko was meant to be educational. From a modern perspective it is clearly sensationalistic and exploitative. However, the poster language is a good example of the way the press discussed Africa in the 1950s, and it is echoed in Driscoll's articles.

Indeed, Driscoll wrote a second article on the MFA exhibition, dated October 19, 1958. If possible, this text is more condescending than the bongo beat: "This Week in the Art World: Halloween Updated By Eerie Museum Show; Halloween came early to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts."³⁵⁰ Driscoll reviewed the exhibition opening for his readers:

Occasion was the opening of the "Masterpieces of Primitive Art" show, which features enough weird masks, strange carvings and fetishes to scare the living daylight out of the most sophisticated child.

In fact, more than one adult will find it eerie going as he makes his rounds of this important showing. Had the museum gone in for darkened galleries, off-beat background music and a little incense burning, they'd do a fast business in tranquilizers.

For this is a strongly emotional show, made up for the most part, of ceremonial and ritualistic objects carved by gifted artist tribesmen in so called "primitive" areas the world over....

There are fantastic cubistic masks worn by members of a powerful secret society in the Belgian Congo; male and female figure carvings to be placed on a barrel containing the skulls of family ancestors; a six-foot snake fetish of a cobra; an ivory tusk from the Guinea coast "the blood from human sacrifices of 10 formed a thick crust on these tucks" notes the catalogue; a war headdress with teeth from Hawaii, worn in battle to

³⁴⁹ Redoubt is a fort system. These posters can be seen in Amy J. Staples, "Popular Ethnography and Public Consumption: Sites of Contestation in Museum-Sponsored Expeditionary Film," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 55.

³⁵⁰ Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., "This Week in the Art World: Halloween Updated By Eerie Museum Show," *Boston Globe*, October 19, 1958: A_30.

frighten the enemy (which it undoubtedly did); figures from the Marquesa [sic] Islands, with inlaid shell eyes that stare menacingly back at you...³⁵¹

Perhaps Driscoll believed that this exaggerated prose would entertain his audience.

Maybe he even thought it would encourage people to go to the exhibition. Either way, Driscoll was not the only journalist to focus on the otherworldliness, strangeness, and even the ‘frightening’ aspects of the show, although he was the only one to mention bongos, Halloween, and tranquilizers.

The *TIME* magazine article on the exhibition described it as a “wild little dream world within the Fine Arts’ staid galleries of European pictures.”³⁵² The visitor could see “Melanesian tom-toms, Benin bronzes, a footstool in the shape of a kneeling woman, a dog-shaped bowl, and African, American Indian and South Sea Island idols by the score.”³⁵³ Robert Taylor also constructed an imagined space at the MFA when he interviewed Elisofon for *The Boston Herald*. He wrote:

We had veered onto this culinary topic [broiled gorilla] by way of talking about primitive art. The scene was a comfortably-appointed room at the Museum of Fine Arts where Eliot Elisofon was scheduled to give a lecture to a large audience. On the walls were paintings by Renoir and Corot. We seemed a long way from the jungle.

The jungle, however, was just around the corner. To be precise it was in the galleries upstairs where many masks and figures from Mr. Elisofon’s private collection figure prominently in the Museum’s current exhibition of primitive masterpieces.³⁵⁴

There seemed to be a need to exoticize the show in the press. To bring the jungle into the museum. To make the show seem wild, violent, and savage. The poster text from the

³⁵¹ Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., “This Week in the Art World: Halloween Updated By Eerie Museum Show,” *Boston Globe*, October 19, 1958: A_30.

³⁵² “Mana from Harvard,” *TIME* (November 24, 1958): 78.

³⁵³ “Mana from Harvard,” *TIME* (November 24, 1958): 78.

³⁵⁴ Robert Taylor, “The Roving Eye: The Many Masks of Eliot Elisofon,” *The Boston Herald*, November 7, 1958. (HRC 71.10/66.10, IMG_6289.)

Latuko film could have easily been plugged into any of these reviews. These journalists believed this was the reality of how African art was used in Africa—as strange, frightening implements of violence—and that the exhibition needed to be described as exotic and dangerous as marks of its authenticity. For example, Robert Taylor explained:

I must confess that the aesthetic appeal primitive works have for me is not altogether divorced from their romantic side. No. 43, “a typical Bushongo cap covered with chicken feathers,” is a wonderfully compelling piece of carving and design; but I also derived great pleasure from knowing that it was an actual sorcerer’s mask confiscated by a Belgian officer in the ’30’s.³⁵⁵

This Bushongo sorcerer’s mask was one of the objects collected by Elisofon in Central Africa and then given to the Harvard Peabody. Perhaps for Taylor it symbolized the conquest of the uncivilized by the civilized, the triumph of logic over superstition. Or maybe it was just the thrill of the illicit, of something scary and powerful that entertained him. He emphasized that it was “an actual sorcerer’s mask.” The mask’s connection to an exciting story, whether it was true or not, allowed the journalist to spin a fairy tale in his head. The romance was alluring. Taylor’s text continued, focusing on the ‘darker’ aspects of African art:

In general, though, the African sculpture on display expresses the ferment of nature’s forces, fertility, war, the surge of supernatural influences constantly affecting man in a thousand ways, but always in changing, prodigal abundance.

The violence in African sculpture is contained within the framework of nature, a part of the natural order; but in the Oceanic works violence is isolated and made to serve as an end in life. The presence of death which one feels as a yeasty flux in African sculpture becomes in the Oceanic a hovering, individual shadow.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ Robert Taylor, “Events in Art: Primitive Masterpieces on View at Museum Through Nov. 23,” *The Boston Sunday Herald*, Oct. 26, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4411 and IMG_4412.)

³⁵⁶ Robert Taylor, “Events in Art: Primitive Masterpieces on View at Museum Through Nov. 23,” *The Boston Sunday Herald*, October 26, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4411 and IMG_4412.)

Taylor felt the “presence of death” in African sculpture. Like Driscoll, his words seem constructed to terrify rather than to educate. Yet, at the end of his article, he called the exhibition “a dazzling experience.”³⁵⁷

Apart from the dramatic language and jungle images, there was some genuine appreciation of the show. William Germain Dooley wrote an article for *The Boston Globe* on October 5, 1958 titled “Primitive Masterpieces Assembled Here.” He explained to his readers: “The arts of primitive peoples were far from primitive. Once regarded as crude and clumsy, the best of their carvings and weavings are now realized to be the work of great craftsmen working with deep conviction. This will be strikingly demonstrated this month when the Boston Museum of Fine Arts opens an exhibit ‘Masterpieces of Primitive Art.’”³⁵⁸ Dorothy Adlow, writing for *The Christian Science Monitor*, praised the show: “The total effect is magnificent.... The immediacy, the contained energy, the raw force.... For those who have not yet encountered the beauty, the mystery, and the oddities of tribal arts, this exhibition can be a revelation.”³⁵⁹ These varied reactions, from positive, to negative, from analytical to childish, demonstrate the multiplicity of approaches that the press, and the public, had toward ‘primitive’ art.

The Sculpture of Africa, Book

“It was so gracious of you to send me the magnificent book on Primitive Art which is illustrated with your photographs. It is truly a masterpiece for which you have every reason to be proud. I am happy that my collection

³⁵⁷ Robert Taylor, “Events in Art: Primitive Masterpieces on View at Museum Through Nov. 23,” *The Boston Sunday Herald*, October 26, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4411 and IMG_4412.)

³⁵⁸ William Germain Dooley, “Primitive Masterpieces Assembled Here,” *Boston Globe*, October 5, 1958: A19.

³⁵⁹ Dorothy Adlow, “Masterpieces of Primitive Art; 207 Objects on Display at Museum of Fine Arts,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October, 20, 1958. (HRC 62.28/57.28, IMG_4409 and IMG_4410.)

was of help to you in compiling your book. I am sure it will be a great success.”

- Helena Gourielli (Rubinstein), noted collector, letter to Elisofon, Dec. 5, 1958³⁶⁰

“Dear Eliot: Many, many thanks for sending me your extraordinary book, ‘The Sculpture of Africa.’ I can assure you that it has been LIFE’s privilege to have so many like you available to train a lens upon so many areas of the world. And the extra dividends, such as this book, that come from the fertile brains – and hearts – of such as you are most gratefully received.

Please give my warm congratulations to Bernie Quint too, for his masterful design. And to you both, hearty good wishes for the Holidays.”

- Henry R. Luce, founder of TIME, Inc. and LIFE magazine, letter to Elisofon, Dec. 8, 1958³⁶¹

In 1958 the Frederick Praeger publishing house of New York released *The Sculpture of Africa*, Elisofon’s most important publication on African art. *The Christian Science Monitor* described the book as “the best and most fully illustrated volume among the numerous publications on African tribal arts...nowhere is there an opportunity to see so much material, such good examples, and such magnificent photography.”³⁶² It was seen as the most complete and authoritative photographic anthology of African art available. African art historian Herbert Cole wrote a review of *The Sculpture of Africa* in

³⁶⁰ Helena Gourielli (Rubinstein), letter to Elisofon, December, 5 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.1, IMG_1137.)

³⁶¹ Henry R. Luce, letter to Elisofon, December, 8, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.1, IMG_1139.)

³⁶² Dorothy Adlow, “Old Masters and New in an Array for the Reader with a Taste for Art: Beauty in Many Forms From Around the World,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 20, 1958: 14.

1979, upon its reprint, for *African Arts*. “Quickly this book became a classic,” he explained, “and in some ways a model for future general books on African art.”³⁶³

What was groundbreaking about *The Sculpture of Africa*? There had been African art publications before. What made it stand out? Essentially it was the scale of the enterprise that made *The Sculpture of Africa* unique. The book included 321 Western and Central African sculptural examples from 46 collections. Art forms from 57 ethnic groups were represented. *The Sculpture of Africa* is a large publication, measuring 14.5 inches long by 10.75 inches wide. In comparison to Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro’s *African Negro Sculpture* (1926), one of the earliest publications on African art, *The Sculpture of Africa* is almost five times larger. *African Negro Sculpture* measures 10 inches long by 7.5 inches wide, and includes only 41 images, all from the Barnes Foundation collection. It has 141 pages; *The Sculpture of Africa* has 405 illustrations on 297 pages. The size of a typical *Sculpture of Africa* image measures 11.5 by 7.5 inches, with multiple images per page. The size of a typical *African Negro Sculpture* image measures 4 by 6.5 inches, with only one image per page. With 350 more images, all of them much larger, *The Sculpture of Africa* packs a visual punch that *African Negro Sculpture* does not have.³⁶⁴

The entire book was laid out by *LIFE*’s main designer, Bernard Quint. The aesthetic he used in the *LIFE* article “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa” was repeated on a grander scale in *The Sculpture of Africa*. Cole commented, “Mr. Elisofon’s style was to

³⁶³ Herbert Cole, “*The Sculpture of Africa* by Eliot Elisofon; W. B. Fagg,” *African Arts* vol. 12, no. 3 (May 1979): 20.

³⁶⁴ The model for the scale of *The Sculpture of Africa* was *LIFE* magazine, which measured 14 inches long by 10.5 inches wide.

light pieces rather dramatically and ‘drop out’ backgrounds, and his results are quite effective.”³⁶⁵ This style was created partially by Elisofon’s pictures, and partially by Quint’s design. Their goal was to show African art in a modern way—stark, bold, abstract (**fig. 5.6**). *The Sculpture of Africa* showed African art as fine art, not as ethnographic items. Field photographs were limited to just nine in the book, apparently to emphasize the fine art over the ethnography.

The contextual information in field photographs was too distracting from pure aesthetic appreciation. Thus, *The Sculpture of Africa* presented African art in a much different format than how it would have appeared in Africa. But Elisofon wanted the book to appeal to the widest audience possible, and he believed that this was the way to attain this goal. The message of *The Sculpture of Africa* is well represented by the quote by the Roman playwright Terence, aka Publius Terentius Afer, that appears on the second page: “Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto.”³⁶⁶ Translated: “I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.” In other words, all of humanity stands on common ground, and in this context, all world arts, including African art, are equally valuable and important.

The Sculpture of Africa was the published culmination of Elisofon’s ‘grand plan’ to photograph all African art objects the world-over. Elisofon had plans for making a book out of his African art photographs since the late 1940s, but he was not able to establish a contract with Praeger until 1954. Elisofon had spent more than a decade working on this project, taking the photographs, gathering the support, communicating

³⁶⁵ Herbert Cole, “*The Sculpture of Africa* by Eliot Elisofon; W. B. Fagg,” *African Arts* vol. 12, no. 3 (May 1979): 23.

³⁶⁶ Eliot Elisofon, *The Sculpture of Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1958): 2.

with collectors, institutions, and authors, and pushing it into existence. It was printed in Germany, under the auspices of British publishing house Thames & Hudson, in order to attain a high-quality print product, which was not available in the United States at that time.

Praeger ordered a total of 15,000 copies of *The Sculpture of Africa* for the 1958 first edition. For many African art books today the typical publication count is much less, between 2,000 and 3,000. The book was distributed internationally: 5,000 copies to the United States, 2,000 to England, 3,000 to France, and 5,000 to Germany.³⁶⁷ “On the whole the book has sold well and steadily,” Frederick Praeger wrote to Elisofon, “We didn’t make any money with it but it has at least added to our reputation. It is such a beautiful book that we would hate to see you out of print.”³⁶⁸ Despite the fact that Praeger assured Elisofon that all of the copies had sold out by October 1961, the company did not deem it a wise business decision to order a reprint. However, *The Sculpture of Africa* still proved that an African art book of this scale could be successful, visually striking, and sell well. A second version of this text was in development when Elisofon died in 1973; one based more on field photographs and cultural context — African art and its environment.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ Distribution of print run documentation, *The Sculpture of Africa*, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.1, IMG_1185.) United States – 5000 copies // Thames and Hudson – 2000 // Fernand Hazan – 3000 // Dumont Schauberg 2000 // Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft – 3000.

³⁶⁸ Frederick A. Praeger Inc., letter to Eliot Elisofon, October 9, 1961, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.1, IMG_1145.)

³⁶⁹ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1428.)

William Fagg, Keeper of Ethnography at the British Museum, wrote the book's four main essays; and the preface was by Ralph Linton, Sterling Professor of Anthropology for Yale University. Fagg embodied the transition of the status of African art. He specialized in ethnography, but as a pioneering scholar produced many art history resources. The Africanist Leon Siroto helped Elisofon with the captions, which Cole referred to as "often quite detailed and informative."³⁷⁰ But the texts were only a small part of the publication; the main focus was on Elisofon's photographs of African art. This makes it particularly ironic that *The Sculpture of Africa* is now usually regarded as Fagg's book. He is the most famous name attached to the project, so in scholars' minds it is his publication. However in 1979, Cole recognized *The Sculpture of Africa* for what it was: "Mainly this is a picture book..."³⁷¹ The contextual depth was lacking. The texts were relatively shallow. Elisofon had gone to sub-Saharan Africa two times when *The Sculpture of Africa* was published in 1958, but the book contained very few field photographs and did not reflect these activities.

A Visual Catalog of African Art

Even though *The Sculpture of Africa* is 297 pages long and includes 405 photographs, Elisofon wanted a much larger publication. He was probably aiming more for an African art visual encyclopedia, rather than the visual dictionary he created. But the publication cost of such a book countered Elisofon's obsessive thought-process. *The Sculpture of Africa* still functioned as a successful visual catalog for the field. It could be used as a guide for collecting purchases. 'Tribal' styles, specific regional tendencies,

³⁷⁰ Herbert Cole, "The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon; W. B. Fagg," *African Arts* vol. 12, no. 3 (May 1979): 23.

³⁷¹ Herbert Cole, "The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon; W. B. Fagg," *African Arts* vol. 12, no. 3 (May 1979): 23.

iconic works, and aesthetic markers were delineated by the captions, and prioritized over use and function data. Figure 122 provides a good example of a typical caption: “Baule, Dance Mask: Schematic nose, tribal marks and slightly asymmetric coiffure are typical of the classical Baule style, of which this is one of the purest examples.”³⁷²

The Sculpture of Africa was an elite resource. It recognized the best of the best collections in the world. It was a mark of pride if your artwork was selected for the book — with Elisofon photographs and texts by a Yale professor and a British Museum curator. The book boosted the status and reputation of collections and objects. It was a tastemaker. In *The Sculpture of Africa* collectors could see their objects, and see those they might want to possess. Institutions could assess their collections in connection with *The Sculpture of Africa* objects. Essentially it looked like an auction catalog — selling the objects aesthetically as fine art. The only thing missing was prices. African art was not placed within the African world — it was presented as fine art for the Western world’s appreciation — to be bought, sold, studied, and photographed as a commodity. On subsequent trips to Africa, Elisofon even encountered counterfeiters who used *The Sculpture of Africa* as a book of blueprints.³⁷³

The publication focused on the sculptural forms that were popular with collectors in the beginning of the twentieth century — figures and masks. The only vessels that appear in the text are a Barotse wooden food dish (No. 203) and a Mangbetu figurative ceramic jar (No. 312). As the publication’s title dictated, the textiles, ceramics, and

³⁷² Eliot Elisofon, *The Sculpture of Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1958): 98.

³⁷³ “Eliot Elisofon at Home: Eclectic Collector,” *Black African Heritage* press release, undated, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 3. (EEPA X-9, 23.)

ephemeral arts of Africa were not included. Even the famous beaded arts of the Cameroon kingdoms and the Yoruba do not appear in *The Sculpture of Africa*. Two Kuba beaded masks are featured (No. 260-261), but no other Kuba beaded art forms are present. The text was built around the sculptural arts of West and Central Africa, again a reflection of the field's concentration at this time. A few objects represent Eastern and Southern African art, but overall those regions appear to be artless.

The Sculpture of Africa became a useful and educational tool for the blossoming world of African art collectors in the United States. Jay T. Last, a famous collector of Central African Lega art, explained:

In 1960 there were few books on African art that were readily available, but I did manage to acquire *The Sculpture of Africa* (1958) by Eliot Elisofon and William Fagg and James Sweeney's catalog of the 1935 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *African Negro Art*. These texts exposed me to the richness and variety of African art....

In pouring over the illustrations in Elisofon and Fagg's *Sculpture of Africa*, I realized that the objects that most intrigued me were the eight Lega busts and figures from the collections of the British Museum, the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren, and the collection of Charles Ratton.

I had not seen any comparable material on my visits to the New York dealers and could only dream of owning objects of this caliber. Years later, I would be fortunate to acquire one of these pieces, Ratton's four-headed ivory figure.³⁷⁴

For Last, *The Sculpture of Africa* was a visual guide to African art. It encouraged him to collect Lega art, and it helped to establish his "dream" canon of objects to own. Lester Wunderman, a famous collector of Western African Dogon art, found himself in a similar situation as Last. He purchased his first African art object at a Los Angeles gallery in 1957, but the dealer did not know what it was. She had traded it with a Parisian gallery,

³⁷⁴ Jay T. Last, "Preface: The Collector's Perspective," in Elisabeth L. Cameron, *Art of the Lega*, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History; Seattle: Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 2001): 12, 14.

but the papers identifying it had not arrived yet. This is where *The Sculpture of Africa* became useful. Wunderman wrote: “When I returned to New York, I tried to identify the piece. It was a book on African art by Eliot Elisofon and William Fagg that finally helped me to recognize it as a sculpture from the Dogon people of Mali.”³⁷⁵ When viewed and purchased from galleries, African art was, and is, perpetually out of its original context. Resources like *The Sculpture of Africa* served a much-needed purpose for a nascent field of collecting and scholarship.

The Sculpture of Africa: Reactions, Reviews, and Press Coverage

“An extraordinary book on all scores....” —*Harper’s*

“By all odds one of the handsomest books published this year.” —
Washington Post & Times Herald

“A treasure.” — *The Nation*

“This is the best and most fully illustrated volume on African tribal arts. Nowhere is there an opportunity to see so much material, such good examples, and such magnificent photography.” —*The Christian Science Monitor*

“The perfect book on African sculpture.” — *Richmond Times Dispatch*

“This book is a revelation.” — *Virginia Kirkus Bulletin*

“A surpassingly beautiful and tautly organized presentation.” — *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“The photographs are large and superb; the text by William Fagg and Ralph Linton is most enlightening.” —*Saturday Review*

“Stunning...it should be essential in every library, grade school, high school and college.” —*Library Journal*

³⁷⁵ Lester Wunderman, “Preface,” in Kate Ezra, *Art of the Dogon* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1988): 7.

“Will perhaps do more than any previous publication in the field to promote appreciation of African art.” – *New York Herald Tribune*³⁷⁶

The Sculpture of Africa served as an approachable, comprehensible introduction to African art for both collectors and casual readers. Press and scholarly reviews of the book were generally positive. For example, Howard Devree of *The New York Times* titled his review, “Study in Primitive Beauty” — the inclusion of the word “beauty” signaled that this was a positive review.³⁷⁷ Devree highly regarded Linton’s essay, describing how it was “a highly discerning and brief but comprehensive introduction on ‘primitive’ art...which should be required reading for anyone interested in art, let alone the special field under consideration.” He paraphrased Linton’s thesis: ‘Primitive’ art has only been labeled as such because it is “the product of people whom we superciliously regard as ‘not civilized’ in our sense.” This “photographic anthology” encouraged the reader to think about how and why African artists created the sculpture within its pages. “Eliot Elisofon’s admirable photographs of the highly plastic African sculpture urge the observer to meet this art on its own esthetic terms,” Devree stated. Beauty. Ingenuity. Quality. Variety. These are the words Devree used to describe African art. “This volume is a challenging addition to any art library,” he explained.³⁷⁸

Despite Devree’s positivity, there were reviews that offered shrouded insults to African art. *The Chicago Tribune* explained that *The Sculpture of Africa* is “a scholarly

³⁷⁶ Quotes adapted from Frederick A. Praeger company brochure, *The Sculpture of Africa* in the Books that Matter series, undated, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA E-2, 1.)

³⁷⁷ Howard Devree, “Study in Primitive Beauty,” *The New York Times Book Review*, December 7, 1958: BR56. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1239.) Six object photographs were included with his short article.

³⁷⁸ Howard Devree, “Study in Primitive Beauty,” *The New York Times Book Review*, December 7, 1958: BR56. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1239.)

study, both important and impressive, of tribal sculpture of Africa, and, while its appeal will be tremendous to some, it isn't a book which can be sent to just anyone on your list."³⁷⁹ *TIME* magazine offered this review:

The Sculpture of Africa, by Eliot Elisofon...contains 405 examples, so brilliantly displayed that the photographs (mostly done on assignment for LIFE) convey a good deal of the subjects' three-dimensional excitement and lasting strangeness. By its influence on Picasso, Modigliani, Brancusi and others, African sculpture changed the course of modern art; yet it is hard to imagine that people will ever get used to it.³⁸⁰

"It isn't a book which can be sent to just anyone on your list." "Hard to imagine that people will ever get used to it." The underlying message was that African art can be discomfiting. It isn't for everyone. Dorothy Adlow, of *The Christian Science Monitor*, took a more understanding approach to *The Sculpture of Africa*. She wrote, "Gradually the strangeness vanishes, the beauty and mystery of these tribal arts become more exciting. Such artifacts are now called works of art, and collectors regard them as treasures equal to works of the grand tradition of classical and medieval times. With photography of this caliber, we come very close indeed to perception of the originals in shape, color, material, texture."³⁸¹

Indeed, the age of the coffee table fine art book had dawned. Better quality publishing. Better quality images. Add in Elisofon's trained photographic eye and you end up with a high-end fine art book. In addition to the off-hand insult above, *TIME*

³⁷⁹ "Two more are 'The Thrones and Earth and Heaven' and 'The Sculpture of Africa,' by Eliot Elisofon, with text by William Fagg..." *Chicago Tribune*, November 30, 1958. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1247.)

³⁸⁰ "Art: Museums Between Covers," *TIME* (December 8, 1958). (HRC 11.2, IMG_1244.)

³⁸¹ Dorothy Adlow, "Old Masters and New in an Array for the Reader With a Taste for Art; Beauty in Many Forms From Around the World," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 20, 1958: 14.

illuminated this interesting aspect of the history of *The Sculpture of Africa*. The article, titled, “Art: Museums Between Covers,” explained:

In André Malraux’s “imaginary museum” of art reproductions, many walls are still blank. But last week U.S. publishers were doing their best to fill in the empty spaces and, incidentally, investing more dollars than ever before in the U.S.’s growing interest in art of all nations and ages.

Result: the biggest crop of art books ever. In anticipation of the Christmas season, more than 100 titles have been published in the fall season alone at prices ranging from 50 cents to \$50.³⁸²

Phil Watson, for *The San Jose Mercury-News* expanded upon this topic:

While one spectacular development in the book business has been the recent dizzy growth of paperbound, pocket-size, 25-cent reprints, another at the opposite end of the money scale has been the annual appearance, usually at this season, of increasing numbers of lavish art volumes that sell for prices closer to \$25.

We had been accustomed for some time to the fine Phaido [sic] and Studio publications, but houses that find this field profitable and that deserve art lovers’ warm regards keep growing more numerous. Their issues are primarily picture books, which are accompanied however by extensive, authoritative texts.³⁸³

Thus, this publication, with its large size, high-quality pictures, and texts by renown scholars, was part of this growing trend, and perhaps could not have been produced before this time period. Watson continued, discussing Praeger and *The Sculpture of Africa* in particular:

One of the busiest newcomers is Frederick A. Praeger, recently named printer to the Whitney Museum of American Art, and publisher this fall of some outstanding and essential works:

The Sculpture of Africa, 405 photos by Eliot Elisofon, text by William Fagg, preface by Ralph Linton (\$15); in effect not just an art book but an

³⁸² “Art: Museums Between Covers,” *TIME* (December 8, 1958). (HRC 11.2, IMG_1244.)

³⁸³ Phil Watson, “The World of Books,” *The San Jose Mercury-News*, December 21, 1958. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1247.)

art exhibition, all the more valuable for being the record of a creative activity threatened with extinction.³⁸⁴

Watson did not insult African art; he did not make any flippant jokes about its strangeness. Instead he recognized the publication as “an art exhibition.”

Reviewers acknowledged that African sculpture was given elite treatment in Elisofon’s book. Martin and Mary Price assessed this fine art book trend for *Harper’s* magazine, also in connection with a review of *The Sculpture of Africa*:

The great range and variety, as well as technical excellence, that art books have achieved in recent years are an index of affluence, like platinum ballpoint pens or stereophonic doorbells. But they indicate too the ways in which the pleasures of collectors—the “proud possessors”—have become diffused and transformed.

The volumes of Henry Moore and Henri Matisse listed below are works the artist has designed himself for large-scale reproduction. The other books, though they give one less of this sense of immediacy, make up for the pleasures of possession with the pleasures of understanding. They enable us to “own” a work through a more intense and informed response, and, if this occasions pride, it also exacts effort and growth.³⁸⁵

Some interesting concepts are at play in this text. The owner of the book was now the collector, now the possessor. Owning the volume was a sign of affluence, as any book with a high price tag automatically has such status. The Moore and Matisse texts were art forms in book format. But even *The Sculpture of Africa* allowed the owner to possess the art within its pages on a theoretical level. It brought the “pleasures of understanding,” encouraging the reader to grow intellectually, which triggered a sense of pride. Thus, in a

³⁸⁴ Phil Watson, “The World of Books,” *The San Jose Mercury-News*, December 21, 1958. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1247.)

³⁸⁵ Martin and Mary Price, “New Art Books,” *Harper’s* magazine, undated, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA E-2, 10.) *The Proud Possessors: The lives, times, and tastes of some adventurous American art collectors*, written by Aline B. Saarinen, was also published in 1958. It discussed high profile art collections, such as those of J. Pierpont Morgan, Thomas Gilcrease, Peggy Guggenheim, and the Rockefellers. (New York: Random House.)

way, the book stood for the art itself in the mind of the possessor, just as Elisofon's photographs stand for the sculptures. The Prices praised *The Sculpture of Africa*: "the special appeal of the book lies in *LIFE*-photographer Elisofon's 400 expert photographs of carefully selected works (in some cases several views of the same object), beautifully mounted in Bernard Quint's book design. These do remarkable justice to texture as well as mass and line; they are all the more handsome in themselves through their respect for the works they represent. They are, in short, closer to art than to *LIFE*."³⁸⁶

Like the passage above, many reviewers hailed the inclusion of multiple views of the same object. For example, Frank Getlein wrote an article about Elisofon for the Dec. 28, 1958 *Milwaukee Journal*, "The World of Art: Photographer of African Sculpture is Also Painter, Scholar, and Explorer." Included in his text was a brief review of *The Sculpture of Africa*:

The photography is direct and clear, dedicated to showing the pieces as faithfully as possible. To heighten that fidelity, Elisofon introduces one device that could well be applied to all sculpture reproduced in photographs. Many of the pieces are shown in two views and a lot are shown in as many as six. Spread across a double page, in a slowly rising and descending arc, these photographs convey exactly the impression of holding pieces in your hand and turning it gradually all the way around.³⁸⁷

Branching out from the concept of mental possession, the notion of tactile possession and manipulation is opened up in Getlein's text. *The Sculpture of Africa* provided an enhanced experience for its readers.

³⁸⁶ Martin and Mary Price, "New Art Books," *Harper's* magazine, undated, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA E-2, 10.)

³⁸⁷ Frank Getlein, "The World of Art: Photographer of African Sculpture is Also Painter, Scholar, and Explorer," *Milwaukee Journal*, December 28, 1958: Part 5, 5. (HRC 66.10, IMG _6300.)

While each of the book reviews promoted *The Sculpture of Africa*, they also served as advocates of African art. Each newspaper article placed African art in the public's vision, moving toward recognition, acceptance, and appreciation. Emily Genauer wrote for the *Herald Tribune Book Review*:

The aim of the new book "The Sculpture of Africa" is...to foster understanding of it on its own terms.... Since we do not yet understand the symbolic meanings of primitive art, our appreciation must be based on its sensuous and aesthetic appeal.

Elisofon's magnificent photographs of objects in wood, ivory, stone and bronze, grouped according to the area of Africa in which they were made, along with lucid explanatory text by William Fagg, of the British Museum, about the anthropology and the art of each region, will perhaps do more than any previous publication in the field to promote appreciation of African art and, as a most important by-product, of the aims of modern artists who also stress idea and essence above a superficial notion of reality.³⁸⁸

The Western construction of beauty is just one option in the world of aesthetics and *The Sculpture of Africa* helped to highlight this fact. Mary Beattie Brady wrote in her review for the *Library Journal*: "The reader-viewer is started on an impelling intellectual exercise of appreciation of this indigenous skilled art that is always logical and understandable in terms of the culture of the artist and in the universal reach for beauty, even though in a different evolution than that of the Western world to which we have been so bound."³⁸⁹

Several reviews, such as Brady's, also looked beyond this aesthetic appreciation for African art, thinking about the publication in a different way. Brady explained:

This book is not simply for the artist, the esthete and the anthropologist. It should interest all who are trying to know and think in world terms.... It

³⁸⁸ Emily Genauer, "Artists of Africa and the Modern West: In Both Cultures, the Stress is on Idea and Essence," *Herald Tribune Book Review*, January 11, 1959: 4. (EEPA E-2, 9.)

³⁸⁹ Mary Beattie Brady, "The Arts," *Library Journal* (February 1, 1959). (EEPA E-2, 11.)

can have a happy effect on our race relations at home and abroad. It can be a useful tool in the development of self respect and pride among our largest minority group in this country. In the United States where almost all come from widely differing cultural backgrounds, we all need a sense of belonging to some cultural inheritance.

After more than three centuries in looking away from Africa, our Americans of African ancestry can take pride in the creative art achievement of Africans as set forth in this thorough, dignified and authoritative presentation. They can enjoy with special cultural satisfaction, along with everyone else, these art objects that convey so skillfully and uniquely, desired emotional effects without lessening esthetic values.³⁹⁰

Associating “the creative achievement” of African art to black pride was not a new concept, but it is meaningful that publications like *The Sculpture of Africa* were being tied to “race relations.” In addition, Brady discussed the broader world: “The book is an impressive combination of American and British knowledge, presentation skills and cultural interest in the sculptural achievement of Africa at a time when those indigenous peoples are joining the modern world with explosive speed and there is vital need for intercultural understanding.”³⁹¹ African art is more than just the sum of its objects; it has a larger role to play and several newspaper articles on *The Sculpture of Africa* acknowledged this. They proposed that the book could effect more than just scholarship—it might affect the public’s worldview. The Jackson, Michigan *Citizen* commented: “Eliot Elisofon’s ‘The Sculpture of Africa,’ is interesting for those concerned with the art world, but also is noted by the politically minded reader who wishes to understand the rapidly changing areas of the world.”³⁹² For the *Chicago Daily Sun-Times* Alma Lach wrote:

³⁹⁰ Mary Beattie Brady, “The Arts,” *Library Journal* (February 1, 1959). (EEPA E-2, 11.)

³⁹¹ Mary Beattie Brady, “The Arts,” *Library Journal* (February 1, 1959). (EEPA E-2, 11.)

³⁹² “Among the many books...,” *Citizen*, Jackson, Michigan, March 11, 1962. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1247.)

Over the last few decades the popular American image of Africa has undergone a swift transformation. At one time the 'Dark Continent' was connected only with backwardness, exploitation and slavery. Today Africa is seen as a composite of emerging nations and peoples. Statesmen, scholars, and artists have learned with each passing day that Africa has its own contribution to make to civilization.

One of those who has helped to reveal the artistic treasures of Africa is Eliot Elisofon, photographer-collector (Life magazine) and research fellow of Harvard University's Peabody Museum.... Not the least of his artistic triumphs is his new book, 'The Sculpture of Africa,' a landmark in the artistic appreciation of primitive peoples.³⁹³

An appreciation of African art and an appreciation of Africa could go hand in hand, the first often feeding the second.

Margaret Trowell, artist and founder of the oldest art school in East Africa, wrote a review of the text in *Man*, the quarterly journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. Trowell stated: "This is a superb book, in both the quality of its photography and the scholarship of its text. It will probably stand as the most important general work on African sculpture for many years to come."³⁹⁴ She also commented on the clarity and scholarly care of the writings. Of course at the time, William Fagg was the editor of *Man*, from 1947 to 1965.³⁹⁵ So this may have biased the review.

Was *The Sculpture of Africa* a lasting publication? Praeger's marketing prose stated: "...The Sculpture of Africa, a huge and most impressive book...is more ambitious than anything yet published in this field and it will be for many years the standard volume for anyone interested in the subject. Eliot has spent seven years altogether compiling the

³⁹³ Alma Lach, "Fine Fare from African Safari," *Chicago Daily Sun-Times*, *Good Food* section, January 8, 1959: 1. (HRC 66.10, IMG_6327.)

³⁹⁴ Margaret Trowell, "The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon; William Fagg," *Man*, vol. 59 (May 1959): 88.

³⁹⁵ Frank Willett, "Obituary: William Fagg," *The Independent*, July 14, 1992. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-william-fagg-1533203.html>

photographs for this book, and the whole thing is really a stunning job.”³⁹⁶ Was it really “the” standard? Yes and no. It served as a great resource for collectors and libraries, but the field quickly outgrew such a superficial approach to the subject. This was not predictable, but Elisofon himself contributed to the push for more information about African art, thus making his own book obsolete as far as contextual content.

Even at the time, anthropologist G.I. Jones took issue with this suggestion of *The Sculpture of Africa* being “the standard,” and most of Praeger’s book jacket prose. He wrote on the publication for *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* in April of 1959. Referring to the Praeger book jacket text, Jones declared: “This is not ‘the most important work on the indigenous sculpture of Africa south of the Sahara ever attempted,’ nor is it ‘a synthesis of anthropology and aesthetics’ from which emerges ‘a unique view of African art, its background and its inspiration.’”³⁹⁷ He criticized some of Elisofon’s photographs as being distorted or blown out by “overpowerful spot lighting.”³⁹⁸ He stated that, “Mr. William Fagg would be the first to disclaim the assertion that his essay ‘constitutes a major work in this field and a profound and detailed analysis of the whole aesthetic philosophy of African sculpture,’” as was proclaimed on the book’s dust jacket.³⁹⁹ Jones disapproved of the division of the book into three regions, and disliked the interchangeable use of the words tribe and style, with no inclusion of precise

³⁹⁶ Praeger Publishing, letter to *TIME* magazine, October 8, 1958, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 11.2, IMG_1223 and IMG_1225.)

³⁹⁷ G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 198.

³⁹⁸ G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 198.

³⁹⁹ G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 198.

definitions of these terms. “It is high time that producers of works on African Negro art made up their minds about the labels which they attach to their specimens,” he wrote.⁴⁰⁰ Jones also undermined some of Elisofon’s style classifications, second-guessing several Nigerian ethnic group attributions. He remarked negatively on the lack of Eastern African arts, and highlighted the inclusion of some recent products that he referred to as “junk...designed for the European market.”⁴⁰¹

Jones finished his in-depth review with the following statement: “But although the classification and attribution of the various styles may be defective and Mr. Fagg’s introduction to them disappointing, there still remains Professor Linton’s essay and Mr. Elisofon’s 405 photographs. What more can we expect or ask for in these days when African Negro art has ceased to interest the majority of anthropologists and has become the accepted domain of the art critic and the connoisseur?”⁴⁰² He seemed to have little respect and patience for the non-anthropologist attempting to deal with African art and publish books on it. He did not expect substance from art critics and connoisseurs. There was no more tried and true anthropology in this book, and few of his colleagues were pursuing the topic anymore. Earlier in the text he explained:

The fact that the producers of this book could find no more suitable essay for their introduction is, however, a sad indication of how little attention anthropologists have devoted to African art.

Mr. Fagg’s contribution which follows underlines this fact still further: instead of a serious comparative study he has produced, presumably in response to pressure from the editors, the kind of introductory essay which

⁴⁰⁰ G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 199.

⁴⁰¹ G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 199.

⁴⁰² G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 199.

has become stereotyped for art books of this kind, in which the writer expresses his own opinions about the subject while debunking those of other less informed or more imaginative writers.⁴⁰³

Jones knew enough about the topic to be critical of the publication, pointing out issues that most other reviewers did not see. In many ways, he wrote a critique from the future, expecting a much more specific text than was possible in 1958. He delivered an authoritative, pointed analysis, but in the end, it is clear that he saw *The Sculpture of Africa* as an attractive picture book for amateurs. The separation of the fields was starting to occur. Fagg was an ethnographer, but he decided to specialize in art history as his career developed. Jones belonged to the pure anthropology camp that disliked this type of shift in scholarship and audience.

But to whom should African art ‘belong’? The art historians? The anthropologists? Or the public at large? Who has the right to study it? Discuss it? Analyze it? Elisofon believed that he had the right to publish this book, despite the fact that he was neither art historian nor anthropologist. He was confident that it could serve as a groundbreaking resource, and in many ways it did, helping to transform the definition of African art as artifact into its new status as fine art.

Bell, Book and Candle, Film

“Who’s to say what magic is?”

- Shepherd Henderson, *Bell, Book and Candle*⁴⁰⁴

During his second trip to Africa in 1951, *LIFE* sent Elisofon on a side-trip to photograph the production of *The African Queen*, directed by John Huston, starring

⁴⁰³ G.I. Jones, “The Sculpture of Africa by Eliot Elisofon,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1959): 199.

⁴⁰⁴ *Bell, Book and Candle*, directed by Richard Quine, screenplay by Daniel Taradash, play by John Van Druten, performers Kim Novak and Jimmy Stewart (Columbia Pictures, 1958): DVD.

Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart.⁴⁰⁵ The article on *The African Queen* was published as “*LIFE* Goes on Location in Africa: Katie and Bogie Hit the Congo,” in the September 17, 1951 issue (figs. 5.7-5.10). While on the set he chatted with Huston about the potential of emotive color in motion pictures. What Elisofon had thought of as a casual conversation turned about to be an important one; Huston asked him to be his Special Color Consultant for the 1952 production of *Moulin Rouge*.⁴⁰⁶

In a *New Yorker* magazine interview in 1953, Elisofon declared that *Moulin Rouge* was the “first picture to be painted with light.”⁴⁰⁷ His work on the film combined many of his passions into one package: photography, color, lighting, and painting. In his five-page spread on the motion picture, “Razzle-Dazzle of Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec,” (*LIFE*, January 19, 1953) he gave the magazine’s readers a glimpse at the settings, scenes, actors, and innovative color scheme. Elisofon’s still photographs of *Moulin Rouge* closely correspond to the look of the film (figs. 5.11-5.13).

Critics applauded the film for starting a revolution in color cinematography and Elisofon won *Modern Photography* magazine’s first award for outstanding photography for his work on *Moulin Rouge*.⁴⁰⁸ *LIFE* continued to lend Elisofon to film studios to work as a color consultant and set still photographer after *Moulin Rouge*’s success. From 1963-

⁴⁰⁵ See Katharine Hepburn, *The Making of “The African Queen”* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

⁴⁰⁶ Jacqueline Bolder, “Eliot Elisofon, 61, Dies: Noted Photographer,” *Star-News* (1973). (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG_2751.) *Moulin Rouge* was a fictionalized account of the life of the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, based on the novel by Pierre La Mure (1950). It was a United Artists film.

⁴⁰⁷ Lillian Ross and Brendan Gill, “The Talk of the Town: Fictional Color,” *The New Yorker* (March 14, 1953): 24.

⁴⁰⁸ See HRC 82.13, *Modern Photography* magazine proofs for article on Elisofon and *Moulin Rouge*; HRC 53.16/48.16, *1956 Color Annual*, HRC 53.19/48.19, “Color Control,” *Popular Photography*, vol. 43, no. 6 (December, 1958), as examples of critical response to the film.

65 he worked on *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, produced and directed by George Stevens, and he also created an accompanying photo essay: "The Greatest Story Ever Told," *LIFE*, March 27, 1964.⁴⁰⁹ Also in the mid-1960s Elisofon worked as a color consultant and still photographer for the films *Cast a Giant Shadow*, *The Warlord*, and *Dr. Dolittle*. These opportunities led to a new phase of his career, and eventually, to his directorship of the *Black African Heritage* television series. His most important Hollywood project in connection with African art was *Bell, Book and Candle*.

In 1957, Hollywood producer Julian Blaustein hired Elisofon as the special color consultant for Columbia Pictures' production of *Bell, Book and Candle*, a successful New York play written by John Van Druten. Daniel Taradash, a friend of Elisofon's, wrote the screenplay and recommended Elisofon to Blaustein. Elisofon also served as a still photographer for the *Bell, Book and Candle* set. His pictures were featured in a *LIFE* magazine cover story on November 24, 1958, which was designed to promote the film **(figs. 5.14-5.16)**.⁴¹⁰

Bell, Book and Candle starred Kim Novak as Gillian Holroyd (Gil), a modern-day witch who falls in love with publisher Shepherd Henderson (Shep), played by James Stewart, and subsequently loses her powers. It is a reverse fairytale in which the 'villain' is also the protagonist. She falls in love with the 'prince' and has to transform into the 'princess' in order to get her man. The movie co-starred Elsa Lancaster, Jack Lemmon, Ernie Kovacs, and Hermione Gingold.

⁴⁰⁹ Elisofon appeared in the documentary on this film on the DVD set, both taking still photographs on set, and making salad in the mess tent for the film's actors.

⁴¹⁰ Ralph Crane took the cover picture of Novak and Elisofon took all of the other photographs on set.

The Role of ‘Primitive’ Art in the Film

Taradash and Elisofon had known each other since the early 1950s, and Taradash was well aware of Elisofon’s art collection, as he had been to his apartment for dinner. He had wanted Elisofon to be the color consultant on his film *Picnic*, but schedule conflicts prevented it.⁴¹¹ In Taradash’s *Bell, Book and Candle* script ‘primitive’ art played an important role and Elisofon collaborated with Julius Carlebach on its appearance in the film. The \$75,000 worth of African and Pacific art was borrowed from Carlebach’s Gallery of New York to stock the shop, and the title sequence of the film lavishes it with attention. Taradash’s script commentary for the opening credits follows:

Behind each Credit Title, a grotesque object of Primitive Art from Africa or Oceania. The impression is that these figures are in a shop or intimate gallery. They are on small individual projections along a wall, at varying height from waist level to near the ceiling, As the Credits change, we pass torsos and skulls, masks and statuettes.

The heads are flattened, the eyes are protruding, the lips are pouting. Distorted bodies, foreshortened legs, pointed bosoms. The pieces represent, to some degree, the characteristic of each Credit: frightening (for the Producer), preposterous (for the Director), endearing (for the Writer) – but always grotesque.⁴¹²

Single art pieces are paired with the actor’s names as a direct correlation between the look of the artwork and the look of the actor. For instance, Kim Novak’s name is paired with a glamorous Kota reliquary figure (**fig. 5.17**).

Bell, Book and Candle opened around Christmas in 1958. Elisofon’s *The Sculpture of Africa* had just been published, and his Boston Museum of Fine Arts

⁴¹¹ Daniel Taradash, letter to Eliot Elisofon, December 19, 1954, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 67.1/66.9, IMG_2236.)

⁴¹² Daniel Taradash, ‘First Estimating Draft’ of *Bell, Book and Candle*, script commentary, October 12, 1956, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 28.8, IMG_2678.)

exhibition on ‘primitive’ art had just opened. The *Daily Boston Globe* featured an article on Carlebach in connection with the film and the MFA show: “Bell, Book and Masks: A Dealer in Magic.”⁴¹³ The text follows:

Bringing a collection of primitive African masks used by natives in ‘magic’ ceremonies, Julius Carlebach arrived in Boston yesterday with several of the antiques and sculptures shown in ‘Bell, Book and Candle.’ This is a picture about Manhattan’s modern witches with Kim Novak as the chief witch ... There are also three treasures from Carlebach’s collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Primitives, he says, are the forerunner of modern art, but they have one value which is not shared by contemporary paintings and sculpture. ‘Primitive art has the appeal of complete honesty,’ he said. ‘The primitive artists didn’t make their masks and sculptures to impress rich patrons but for the purposes of magic. When a native wears a mask, he is no longer himself but the god represented by the mask.’

His one sorrow about the film is that he never did meet beautiful Miss Novak. ‘But I’ll give her a job in my Madison av. shop any time she likes,’ he promised.⁴¹⁴

Just as in this article, the film ties ‘primitive’ art to magic, especially Gil’s magic. The contents of Gil’s art shop and the way it appears are part of her character. Her apartment is at the back of the shop, so there is no separation between the art and her identity. Gil is shown wandering among the sculptures at night, talking to her cat, draped nonchalantly on her shoulder (**figs. 5.18-5.19**).

When Shep meets Gil for the first time, the scene takes place in the shop. He is fascinated and appalled by the ‘grotesque’ art, and comments on several pieces. When Gil loses her magic to love, she changes and so does her shop. Her wardrobe goes from bare feet and beatnik clothing in dark colors and animal prints, to yellow heels and a

⁴¹³ M.L.A., “Bell, Book and Masks: A Dealer in Magic,” *Daily Boston Globe*, November 22, 1958: 24.

⁴¹⁴ M.L.A., “Bell, Book and Masks: A Dealer in Magic,” *Daily Boston Globe*, November 22, 1958: 24.

yellow-and-white gauze shirtwaist dress. The ‘primitive’ art leaves the building (we do not even see it go), and is replaced by ‘Flowers of the Sea’ — floral arrangements of shells (**figs. 5.20-5.22**). The shells are simple, ordinary objects, while the ‘primitive’ art was spooky, magical, and special. To win over Shep, Gil has to give up magic and become human. She must set aside ‘primitive’ art, her college training in anthropology, and embrace blushing, crying, and selling seashells as a ‘proper female.’

Elisofon worked in Hollywood for 10 weeks on *Bell, Book and Candle*. He was contracted “to perform services under the supervision of the producer of the picture in connection with the selection and coordination of the colors contained in the photographic portion of the picture as related to costumes, sets, set dressings, and other elements of the picture and to create a basic color pattern or scheme for the picture as a whole.”⁴¹⁵ Blaustein wanted Elisofon to write a color scenario from the movie script, translating the entire movie, scene by scene, into color terms, using special filters and gelatins.⁴¹⁶ This approach was meant to incorporate color as part of the dramatic action of the movie, to use it to mark character changes, to further the story, and to heighten emotion.

One of Elisofon’s suggestions was to place the shop’s ‘primitive’ sculptures on milk glass shelves lit from below, with light blue gelatins on top of the glass in order to cast an eerie blue glow onto the art. One can see these blue gelatins in some of the stills shot by Elisofon (**figs. 5.23-5.24**). Overall, the original shop had an eccentric, shadowy

⁴¹⁵ “Employment Agreement,” between Phoenix Productions and Eliot Elisofon for *Bell, Book and Candle* color consultant position, December 23, 1957, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 28.6, IMG_2441.)

⁴¹⁶ “N.Y. to L.A.,” *f.y.i.* magazine (undated), Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 28.7, IMG_2629.)

atmosphere that was enhanced by gray walls, unconventional lighting, and ‘primitive’ art. The reformed shop was shown with white walls, the seashell sculptures lit from above, and overall pink lighting for a fresh, healthy, soft atmosphere.

The ‘primitive’ art might appear as just set dressing, but it was specifically written about in Taradash’s script as integral to Gil’s presentation as a witch. While using ‘primitive’ art as a character attribute boosts its status, the overall message of the film is that magic is negative. Spell casting is treated like drug abuse: It is addicting, used selfishly, and causes the user to lose touch with normal society. “That’s what happens to people like us,” Gil says to her brother Nicky, “We forfeit everything and end up in a little world of separateness from everyone else.”⁴¹⁷ In Taradash’s script ‘primitive’ art is treated as baffling, creepy and unsettling. He uses words such as esoteric, ferocious, gruesome and forbidding to describe it.

In a symbolic moment, that is as heavy-handed as the rest of the film, Gil breaks a ‘Pende’ mask when she throws a broom at it during a quarrel. Shep has given her the broom as a cruel joke, as he confronts her about her casting a love spell on him. He is leaving her and the apartment house where they both live. Gil suspects he will go back to his ex-fiancée, he says maybe he will, and she loses her cool. The mask breaks right before she realizes that she has lost her powers and is in love with Shep (**figs. 5.25**). Her cat, Pyewacket, is her familiar and method for casting spells. She searches for him to hex Shep’s ex-fiancee, but he hides from her. In another bit of contrived symbolism, Pyewacket climbs up high to a shelf containing an African sculpture of a cat to escape

⁴¹⁷ *Bell, Book and Candle*, directed by Richard Quine, screenplay by Daniel Taradash, play by John Van Druten, performers Kim Novak and Jimmy Stewart (Columbia Pictures, 1958): DVD.

from Gil and be among the other magical objects, which Gil can no longer channel (**fig. 5.26**).

The average American would come away from the film thinking ‘primitive’ art was dangerous and the domain of weird people who lived abnormal lives. While this may not seem like the best advertisement for African art, for anyone who wanted to live a hip, risky, and exciting life, ‘primitive’ art was the hot trend to embrace. Susan Vogel mentioned *Bell, Book and Candle* in her 2005 *African Arts* article “Whither African Art? Emerging Scholarship at the End of an Age.” A film still of Novak and Stewart in the ‘primitive’ art shop was accompanied by Vogel’s caption:

In the 1950s, African art was primitive, sexy, and exciting — even magical and dangerous. Here, Kim Novak, playing a seductive witch, runs a gallery in bohemian Greenwich Village. The movie *Bell, Book, and Candle* expressed mid-century pop-culture associations of African art with sex, magic, bongo drums, and radical avant-gardes. That is gone today. In the public mind, and in movies, African objects are now usually placed in a high-toned decor or in a museum.⁴¹⁸

Columbia Pictures’ promotional photographs for *Bell, Book and Candle* supported the image of African art as ‘sexy.’ A sensuous homage to Man Ray’s African art photographs (such as *Noire et Blanche*, 1926, **fig. 5.27**), the shots were taken by Columbia Pictures’ studio photographer, famed Hollywood portraitist Robert Coburn. Novak lounges in a revealing gauze gown while clutching an obscured horned African mask in one series of shots (**figs. 5.28-5.30**). In another set she is seen in a slinky black gown posing with the Kota reliquary she is connected to in the opening credits (**figs. 5.31-5.34**). The second series was shot in both black-and-white and color.

⁴¹⁸ Susan Vogel, “Whither African Art? Emerging Scholarship at the End of an Age,” *African Arts*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 16-17.

Reception

Bell, Book and Candle was nominated for two Academy awards and one Golden Globe and garnered a tepid reception in the press. ‘Primitive’ art and the film’s unique sense of color were mentioned in most reviews and announcements. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* wrote: “The magic in *Bell, Book and Candle* ... is not so much black as chromatic. It’s the color that’s bewitching in this film.”⁴¹⁹ For the *Christian Science Monitor*, John Beaufort wrote: “One should mention three contributions which reflect credit on Mr. Quine (the director) and his employers. The first is the amusing use of primitive art to characterize various and sundry in the credit titles. The second is the modish color for which, one assumes, Eliot Elisofon’s consultancy deserves applause. The third is Pyewacket, a credit to all the cats from Siam...”⁴²⁰

While Elisofon did work on more African art-centric productions during his lifetime, out of all of them, *Bell, Book and Candle* has probably had the most impact.⁴²¹ It was distributed in movie theaters around the world from 1958 through 1961, and played in them for weeks, if not months. It has been shown on television for decades, particularly around Halloween and Christmas, two holidays discussed in the film. It was released on video and DVD for home viewing. Today anyone can order a copy of the film, sit down, and watch it at their convenience, even repeatedly. One cannot do that with any of the other of the African art-centric productions that Elisofon was connected to.

⁴¹⁹ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: A Witch in Love; ‘Bell, Book and Candle’ at Fine Arts, Odeon,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 1958. (HRC 28.7, IMG_2623.)

⁴²⁰ John Beaufort, “James Stewart, Kim Novak Starring in Comic Fantasy,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 2, 1959: 9.

⁴²¹ The 1960s American television series *Bewitched* was partially inspired by the *Bell, Book and Candle* film.

Though the way that African art was shown in this film may have had negative repercussions for how people thought about ‘primitive’ art, it still exposed the public to an unfamiliar topic. Elisofon once said, “In the field of commercial films where almost all of them are made to entertain people it is not often that we find enlightenment as well.”⁴²² *Bell, Book and Candle* allowed its audience to view art objects that they may never have seen before, and this could qualify as a type of enlightenment. The same could be said of the MFA exhibition and *The Sculpture of Africa*, and their potential to enlighten was noteworthy. Overall, 1958 produced the most influential African art projects of Elisofon’s career.

⁴²² Eliot Elisofon, “The Ethics and Morals of Creative Expression,” lecture for Conference on Moral Standards at the Jewish Theological Seminary 50th Anniversary, September 13-15, 1953, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 53.11, IMG_3844.)

Chapter Six: Late 1960s and Early 1970s Television Shows

Many of Elisofon's final years were spent honing his skills as a film director, writer, and producer on several African film and television projects. He was the set still photographer and prologue director for *Khartoum*, a United Artists film released in 1965. His experience on *Khartoum* led to a job filming the Ancient Egyptian section of *Man Builds*, a film for the American Institute of Architects. It also opened up opportunities to work on television documentaries on Egypt and Africa, most of which were designed for television broadcast and educational distribution. He was the creative director and chief cameraman for *Africa* (1967), a \$2.5 million, four-part documentary for the American Broadcasting Company. Elisofon also helped create the two-part *Camera III: African Sculpture* special (1970) that was filmed for CBS Television. In addition, four one-hour programs known as *Black African Heritage* were written and directed by Elisofon for Group W (Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1972). Each of these projects helped Elisofon make connections with people in the African art field, and contributed to the changing American perceptions about African art.

1967 ABC *Africa* Special

In 1966, ABC hired Elisofon as the Director of Creative Production for a unique project: a 4-hour documentary on Africa that would take up all of one Sunday evening prime time slot.⁴²³ ABC's intention was to launch a series of long documentaries, each

⁴²³ ABC News Chief Elmer Lower declared in the New York *Daily News*: "With this undertaking we hope to break entirely new ground in TV journalism and deliver a product to make a lasting contribution in conveying knowledge and thereby fostering international understanding" (Matt Messina, "Around the Dials: ABC-TV Sets Africa Study," *Daily News*, May 18, 1966, HRC 48.9).

dedicated to how people live in different parts of the world.⁴²⁴ At the time it was created, *Africa* was the longest, most expensive documentary ever made. ABC's budget for the program was \$2.5 million. The final product was 3 hours and 24 minutes long, 4 hours with commercials.⁴²⁵ With the help of Elisofon, the ABC team formed nine camera crews that were sent to 36 African countries.⁴²⁶

Elisofon traveled to Africa twice for the production, staying approximately six months in total. He directed one of the units himself, filming animal behavior and natural landscape sequences. He also contributed to the early planning for the show's content. While Elisofon wanted to make a magical and poetic documentary about Africa, ABC's goal was to make a hard-hitting news production. *Africa* included segments on current affairs, political leaders, disease, corruption, poverty, civil wars, inter-tribal massacres, refugees, economic problems, and much more. While athletics and folk music in Africa were also addressed, African art was ignored in ABC's *Africa*. Perhaps it was deemed too 'soft news' for their hard-hitting news program.

As planned, *Africa* was shown in a 4-hour block on Sunday, September 10, 1967.⁴²⁷ The press response to *Africa* was generally laudatory. Louise Sweeney,

⁴²⁴ ABC press release, June 14, 1966, Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 48.9, IMG_8728.)

⁴²⁵ The shooting schedule ran 367 days and yielded more than 600,000 feet of film for a total of 278 viewing hours. James Fleming, "Africa on U.S. Television: The Making of a Marathon Show," *Topic* USIA magazine, 1967. (HRC 48.9, IMG_8773 thru IMG_8792.)

⁴²⁶ At the beginning of the project, Elisofon held a seminar in New York City for the crews in order to coordinate the camera techniques so there would be uniform-style footage. The units were trained in lighting techniques, camera manipulation, and lens usage (*Television Age*, June 6, 1966, HRC 48.9, IMG_8743 thru IMG_8744).

⁴²⁷ Then the program was cut into 1-hour segments and shown on subsequent Tuesday mornings for four weeks in order to be shown in schools. In 1967, ABC, Ridge Press and Doubleday published a book to accompany the documentary. It was called *Africa's Animals* and it featured 80 pages on 22 African species, with 45 color photographs by Marvin Newman and Elisofon.

reviewing the show in the September 11th *Christian Science Monitor*, called it “stunning television, entertaining, informative ... *Africa* knew how to use the medium to put the message across.”⁴²⁸ Dean Gysel of the *Chicago Daily News* wrote: “*Africa* was a thoroughly interesting and enthralling evening. It was the definitive piece on this still-dark continent, a document of extraordinary dimension and of lasting educational value.”⁴²⁹ The *Variety* magazine review said *Africa* was “some of the best color footage ever to run on the smallscreen ... Anyone who still doubts that black is beautiful (too) would have been shaken.”⁴³⁰ John Vorhees of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wrote: “ABC turned TV into a magic carpet Sunday night ... certainly no one who saw the entire report will ever be able to think of *Africa* in the same old simplistic fashion again ... As a beginning study of the complexities of *Africa*, it was a brilliant effort by ABC, an outstanding example of what commercial TV can do when it uses its funds wisely by placing them at the disposal of creative talents with a statement to make.”⁴³¹

For the *Dallas News*, Bevo Baker wrote that *Africa* “must go down as a landmark in television ... The photography, masterfully helmed by Eliot Elisofon, was brilliant. His work, alone, made the four hours the best travelogue yet offered on the tube.”⁴³² Elisofon was awarded the Outstanding Achievement in News Documentary Award by the National Academy of Television and Sciences in 1967 for his work on *Africa*. He did not

⁴²⁸ Louise Sweeney, “TV: ‘Africa’ and points west,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 11, 1967: 6.

⁴²⁹ Dean Gysel, “*Africa* a Really Great Show,” *Chicago Daily News*, September 11, 1967. (EEPA V-13, 7.)

⁴³⁰ “Television Reviews: *Africa*,” *Variety*, September 13, 1967. (EEPA V-13, 9.)

⁴³¹ John Vorhees, “Absorbing *Africa*,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 12, 1967. (EEPA V-13, 6.)

⁴³² Bevo Baker, “Broadcast Beat: More Wins than Losses,” *Dallas News*, September 11, 1967. (EEPA V-13, 4.)

feel that he deserved the recognition. In his book *Java Diary* Elisofon described his feelings about the project: "... I was given kudos for the color ... too many kudos since I didn't do much more than select the film we all used, a new high-speed Kodak film that was still unproved, and to help pick some of the camera crews. More credit should have gone to the men who were in the field... Quibbles aside, I am happy the show was a success"⁴³³

After the sensation of ABC's *Africa*, Elisofon was able to make television shows on Africa using his own approach. His next two projects, two CBS *Camera III* specials and the Group W series *Black African Heritage*, were built around his fascination with African art. *Black African Heritage* was released in 1972, a year before Elisofon's death, and following that project he had several new documentary ideas on African art in the works. For example, at the time of his death, Elisofon was working on a large educational filmstrip project for *Encyclopedia Britannica* titled: "Africa: Its People and Their Art." Robert Farris Thompson and Patrick McNaughton contributed to this project, but because Elisofon died, it was never completed.⁴³⁴

1970 *Camera III: African Sculpture Productions*

Camera III or *Camera Three* was a CBS variety show that ran from 1959 to 1979.⁴³⁵ The program was dedicated to the fine arts and often featured presentations of poetry, ballet, and opera. It aired on Saturday afternoons. Each episode ran for 25 minutes

⁴³³ Eliot Elisofon, *Java Diary* (New York: Macmillan, 1969): 285-6.

⁴³⁴ Weldon Johnson, letter to Warren Robbins, February 20, 1975, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA K-1, 6.)

⁴³⁵ In 1966 *Camera III* won a Primetime Emmy, awarded to the producer, Dan Gallagher, for Achievements in Daytime Programming. In 1979 it moved over to PBS for one year before ending.

and was presented by James Macandrew. Elisofon wrote, filmed and organized two shows for CBS's *Camera III* program on African art in 1970.⁴³⁶ Elisofon played the role of host on the two programs, joined by special guests. The first program was titled "African Sculpture: Glorious Past," and the two special guests were Yale University professor Robert Farris Thompson and John J. Akar, the Sierra Leone ambassador to the United States. Akar was instrumental in bringing African culture to the United States: in 1963 he founded the Sierra Leone National Dance Troupe, which performed at the 1964 New York World's Fair. The goal of "Glorious Past" was to explore the meaning of African art for specific ethnic groups in West Africa.⁴³⁷ It aired on April 26, 1970. For the second show, "African Sculpture: Dynamic Expression," Elisofon was joined by James Johnson Sweeney and Warren Robbins. "Dynamic Expression" was a discussion of the aesthetics of African art and how it influenced western art. It aired on May 3, 1970.⁴³⁸

Both programs followed a talk show format in which Elisofon chatted with his guests. They sat in chairs on top of a map of Africa painted on the studio floor. African masks and sculptures sat on pedestals around them. Occasionally Elisofon and one of his guests would stand next to a specific work of art to discuss it. The shows were only 25 minutes long, so comments about the artworks were brief, but they were an effective introduction to African art.

⁴³⁶ On November 30th of the previous year he had appeared on the program to promote his *Java Diary* book and he had a good working relationship with the *Camera III* team.

⁴³⁷ Merrill Brockway, letter to Ned Cramer, CBS employees, April 3, 1970, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 48.11, IMG_8894.)

⁴³⁸ "African Sculpture: Glorious Past" is viewable on DVD at the EEPA. "Dynamic Expression" is probably there, but is currently missing. The HRC holds videotapes of the two *Camera III* programs but they have not been digitized, so the researcher cannot view them at this time.

In addition to the talk show-style studio segments, Elisofon's African field photographs and film footage, and two mask performance films by Thompson were built into the *Camera III* programs. Elisofon also filmed special sequences on the art in two exhibitions, both organized by the International Exhibitions Foundation: the 1970 National Gallery of Art's *African Sculpture* (also shown at the Brooklyn Museum) and the Tishman collection traveling exhibition *Sculpture of Black Africa*. These segments featured African sculptures rotating on a turntable in front of the camera. Elisofon re-used much of this footage in his next television series, *Black African Heritage*.⁴³⁹ Elisofon lent one item to the National Gallery show, a Bete/Dan-Ngere mask, which he had owned since the 1940s (**figs. 6.1-6.4**). He also photographed the exhibition objects for *TIME* magazine, the exhibition catalog, and a traveling picture exhibition. Elisofon was paid to come to the National Gallery and lecture as part of a speaker series to introduce the exhibition. Thus, he was a key participant in the marketing.

The CBS shows were a success and further boosted Elisofon's standing in the African art field. Stephan Chodorov, a *Camera III* staff writer, sent Elisofon a letter on May 12, 1970: "I think the subject matter and your reputation drew a larger audience to these shows than to the average C3 show. I heard later from several friends whose reactions I solicited that they had rather expected a didactic approach and were delighted

⁴³⁹ The two CBS *Camera III: African Sculpture* productions were shown at the Elisofon memorial exhibition opening at the Museum of African art, hosted by Warren Robbins on May 30, 1974. Angela Terrell, "An Elisofon Tribute," *The Washington Post*, May 31, 1974: B3.

to find so much more going on besides talk ... The programs were handsome and very well received.”⁴⁴⁰

CBS *Camera III* African Art Content Guide

African artworks seen in “Glorious Past:”

- Benin queen mother bronze head
- Tsoede chief bronze
- Tada seated bronze statue
- Nok terracotta head
- Igbo-Ukwu bronze shell
- Afro-Portuguese ivory saltcellar
- Benin altar, bronze plaques and Odudua head
- Yoruba bronze female figure, *gelede* masks, *epa* mask
- Ejagham headdresses
- Ashanti gold objects and stool
- Akan head
- Baule sculptures
- Fon sculpture of god of war
- Tishman Cameroonian figure holding severed head
- Dan judgment mask, gorilla mask, and figures
- Mende trumpet and bundu headdresses

African artworks seen in “Dynamic Expression:”

- Bamana and Dogon art
- Special attention to *chi waraw*, masks, mother and child figure
- Fang and Kota works

1972 *Black African Heritage*

“We are all aware of the exciting political, economic, and social growth of today’s African nations. But we can never forget the cultural heritage which Black Africa has given, not only to its own people, but to the world... We will show the traditions, history, culture and beauty of the African people. Some of us, like myself, owe a debt of gratitude to the Africans who are among our forefathers. But all of us, black and white, have been made richer by the African contribution to American culture.”

⁴⁴⁰ Stephan Chodorov, letter to Eliot Elisofon, May 12, 1970, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 48.11, IMG_8906.)

– Julian Bond’s introduction
narration for *Black African
Heritage*⁴⁴¹

Disappointed by the breadth of the ABC *Africa* production but encouraged by its success, Elisofon yearned to do his own large-scale television documentary on Africa. Eventually he got a sponsor to pay for the project: Group W, The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company.⁴⁴² Elisofon convinced the company that he could do four hours on Africa for much less money (\$200,000 instead of \$2.5 million) and with a focus on culture so it would not be a rehash of ABC’s show. For Group W, this was an appropriate follow-up to their 1971 series *Rush Toward Freedom*, a presentation of the modern civil rights struggle in America, narrated by Julian Bond, Georgia legislator and civil rights leader.

Elisofon’s series, *Black African Heritage*, was shown over the course of four weeks, beginning in March 1972.⁴⁴³ It consisted of four one-hour documentaries: “The

⁴⁴¹ Eliot Elisofon, *Black African Heritage* (Group W, The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1972), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: DVDs.

⁴⁴² Elisofon used the two CBS *Camera III* programs on African art to help get backing for *Black African Heritage*. (Eliot Elisofon, letter to John Smith, February 10, 1970, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, HRC 49.5, IMG_9691.) A large part of the studio footage of sculpture seen in *Black African Heritage* was filmed for the CBS *Camera III* specials by Elisofon and then lent to Group W for inclusion in the series. In addition, most of the Nigerian antiquities were filmed from Elisofon’s transparencies that he had made on earlier trips to Africa. (Eliot Elisofon, letter to David E. Henderson, President of Group W Productions Inc., May 31, 1972, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, HRC 49.3, IMG_9453.)

⁴⁴³ The EEPA holds the original 100,000(+) feet of film and audio of *Black African Heritage*, which has been preserved but not digitized. This includes all of the footage shot, but it is not researcher accessible. Luckily the EEPA also holds four DVDs of the programs in their airing format, which are viewable. The HRC also holds five reels of the series, but again, they have not been digitized for the researcher to view.

Congo,” “The Bend of the Niger,” “The Slave Coast,” and “Africa’s Gift.”⁴⁴⁴ The series was shown on television channels in 41 major markets throughout the country and Group W estimated that 40 million people watched at least one of the four programs.⁴⁴⁵ While ABC’s *Africa* was shown all at once, on Sunday, September 10, 1967, the Elisofon series was spread out. This was both detrimental and beneficial to the series. In theory, if a viewer missed one show, he could still see the next one. However, if the viewer only saw one of the films, he was not getting the whole message.

Elisofon created this series over several visits to Africa in 1970 and 1971, with the help of two cameramen, Georges Bracher and John Smith, and one sound technician, Maya Bracher (**fig. 6.5**).⁴⁴⁶ The four films were narrated by Julian Bond (“The Congo”), actor Ossie Davis (“The Bend of the Niger”), author Maya Angelou (“The Slave Coast”), and by fellow *LIFE* photographer and Elisofon’s close friend, Gordon Parks (“Africa’s Gift”). By using famous black Americans to voice the series, Elisofon differed from the ABC approach, which had used Gregory Peck as narrator.

Elisofon produced, wrote, and directed *Black African Heritage*, which was originally titled *Focus on Africa* and alternately *Black Pride*. He had artistic control of

⁴⁴⁴ In addition, two short films were created by Elisofon using some of the *Black African Heritage* footage: *African Carving: A Dogon Kanaga Mask* and *Akan Gold*. The Dogon film was shown with the Lester Wunderman Dogon art traveling exhibition in 1973 (HRC 52.5, 63.27-28). *Akan Gold* was commissioned by Paul Tishman to showcase his Akan gold and brass gold weights collection. It features footage shot in West Africa on a later trip by Elisofon, including the process of making a gold pendant (HRC 52.6). His work on the film became the foundation for his January 1973 *Smithsonian* magazine article, “Africa’s Golden Splendor” (HRC 43.8, 57.11).

⁴⁴⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to Georges Bracher, October 25, 1972, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 49.3, IMG_9506.)

⁴⁴⁶ Georges and Maya Bracher worked as a team and were based out of Dakar. They had done documentary work for the United States Information Service (USIS). Georges Bracher is famous for his work as a cinematographer on avant-garde films, such as *Touki Bouki* (1973).

the programs and Group W had final say on their subject matter and treatment. Elisofon's main goal for the series was to show what Africa has given to the world. However, anyone familiar with Elisofon's life pursuits would recognize it as a visual catalog of his own interests and experiences in Africa. He returned to the same peoples and villages he had been visiting and photographing since 1947.

He wrote several treatments for *Black African Heritage* that described his motivations for creating the series. "This is not an educational TV series," he explained, "but it is informative and will be also exciting entertainment. In 1966 and 1967 I produced and directed two large parts of the four-hour ABC *Africa Show*. Our goal then was too general. We were still unaware of how important the roots of black Americans were, not only to themselves, but to all of us. We will need to learn and to know our black heritage."⁴⁴⁷ Elisofon wanted to present a new, positive view of Africa that would give black Americans pride in their heritage. The series focused on the history and culture of Central and West Africa, the two main areas where black Americans' ancestors had originated from during the slave trade. All of the material filmed was designed to establish the worth of black Africa.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁷ Eliot Elisofon, "In Search of Soul," essay draft for *Black African Heritage*, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: 1. (EEPA X-8, 2.)

⁴⁴⁸ The series was automatically booked to appear on the five Group W TV stations: WBZ-TV, Boston; KYW-TV, Philadelphia; WJZ-TV, Baltimore; KDA-TV, Pittsburgh; and KPIX, San Francisco. Elisofon conducted a press tour for *Black African Heritage* to several of these cities, including Boston and San Francisco. This gave him opportunities to be interviewed by media outlets and get his own words directly into the press coverage, and to defend his approach to the series. After the initial television showings, *Black African Heritage* was handed over to the Westinghouse Learning Corporation, which cut filmstrips from the material, and served as distributor of the films to specific institutions, TV channels, overseas markets, etc. The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company and Learning Corporation were both part of the

A Researcher's Assessment

Black African Heritage had its flaws. It lacked a clear approach to what heritage is and how to show it. Elisofon needed to explicitly define it in the narration — and he never did. Uncomfortable superlatives were occasionally used in the script, such as how the Dogon were “considered to be the greatest sculptors in all of Africa.”⁴⁴⁹ By whom? And the wording implied that all Dogon sculpt, which is inaccurate. On the positive side, the films used specific names of ethnic groups and labeled maps were included to show viewers where each group lived. But sometimes the narration was about one group while another group's objects were being shown, which could mislead the viewer. For instance, two Ejagham headdresses were shown while the narrator talked about the Yoruba in “The Slave Coast,” leading the viewer to think that these works were made by the Yoruba.

The films were bright, colorful and full of action and activities. Westinghouse's editors deemed the camerawork unimaginative and stagnant, so they tried to make the final product more exciting by using a lot of cuts.⁴⁵⁰ Jumping from one thing to another was an attempt to keep the viewer's attention, but resulted in disconnected footage that was often frustrating to watch. It was similar to watching a fast-paced commercial on Africa, not a clear narrative documentary. The viewer was often left asking: “Why are we watching this scene?” For example “The Slave Coast” showed the rocky landscape of the

Westinghouse Electric Corporation, which merged with CBS in 1996 and took on the CBS name and company identity.

⁴⁴⁹ Eliot Elisofon, *Black African Heritage* (Group W, The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1972), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: DVDs.

⁴⁵⁰ Dotty Scher, telegram to Eliot Elisofon, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 49.7, IMG_9828 and IMG_9830.)

Jos Plateau, then cattle, followed by scenes of porridge making, and then a roof construction technique — all of within a matter of seconds. This made it impossible for the narration to keep pace and explain why they are important.

The soundtrack was a mixture of ambient noise and music. Occasionally an African was heard as part of the narration, but in general the voiceover dominated. The composed music was often overly dramatic, not appropriate in tone and distracting. Music or singing was also shown being performed in the films, and then continued on the soundtrack as the narrative moved forward. Long pieces of varied African music were broadcast this way, exposing the audience to this aspect of African culture. However, Africans were rarely allowed to speak for themselves in the films.

Art Coverage

Why was African art featured so prominently in the programs? For Elisofon and many others, it served as visual proof of great civilizations on a continent with limited written, documented history. Art is a record of the rich past of Africa. The films discussed specific ages of the older objects, such as the Nok terracottas and the Igbo-Ukwu vessels, addressing the depth of African history and civilization. However, the timeline was sometimes oversimplified in the narration, leading to a blurred distinction between the Yoruba, Benin, and ancient Ife civilizations, as one example.

Approximately 80% of *Black African Heritage* included images and discussion of African art. Hundreds of objects were shown being created, used, and in studio-style display shots. There were 14 scenes devoted to the artistic process (**figs. 6.6-6.8**):

Kuba cloth weaving and embroidery
Kuba woodcarving (*bope* figure)

Dogon mask carving (*kanaga*)
 Bamana strip cloth weaving
 Bamana headdress carving (*chi wara*)
 Bororo mobile altar creation
 Yoruba artist Lamidi Fakeye and his apprentice carving two objects in his
 workshop
 Bini sculptor demonstrating lost-wax casting process
 Fon appliqué cloth banners being created
 Asante carvers making stools to order
 Asante kente cloth weaving
 Akan pottery creation and firing
 Yoruba artist Twins Seven Seven working in pen and ink
 Senufo carver working on two double firespitter helmet masks

The types of materials used in African art highlighted were: ivory (Kongo staff head), wood (Cameroon executioner), terracotta (Mossi head), and bronze (Cameroon equestrian). Varying artistic styles of African art were also addressed: naturalism, distortion, and simplification.

A major success of the series was the care and attention given to the hundreds of African art museum pieces shown, which tied directly to Elisofon's lifetime interest in giving his audience as much visual information about artworks as possible. The pieces were usually featured spinning on a table. The camera remained in one position and the object turned so all sides could be seen. There were also panning shots when dealing with still images, showing details by moving up and down, side to side over an image. Unfortunately, the background for most of the studio shots was a graduated burnt orange, which is not conducive to examining art. Sometimes the orange hue cast onto the objects themselves, as in the case of the Yoruba door panels. Occasionally the spinning of the objects was sped up the point of ridiculousness, seemingly for a dramatic effect. But in general, the rotating works were shown successfully.

The art objects were well lit and many details were visible. Occasionally there were two shots in one frame, with one side occupied by the complete object spinning, and the other side featuring a detail shot of the piece. Theatrical lighting was used to heighten appreciation of the sculptural form of certain pieces. For example, some Bamana *chi wara* sculptures and a marionette were initially backlit and shown in silhouette before the light source on the front turned on and revealed the entire work.

Court art, masquerades, and older art pieces were given special attention in the series. Usually the most famous art form from an ethnic group was shown first, such as the Bamana *chi wara*, and additional works followed. The function and meaning of the art was occasionally discussed, but not in depth. While not all of the African artists shown in the films were named, many were, including Fakeye, Twins Seven Seven, and Dolo. In the end, the series covered many key points that would be taught today in an African art history course. There were generalizations and some inaccurate statements, but in general they were based on research, facts, and in-the-field experiences. By this time more information was available to Elisofon than ever before. More books, articles, and resources were being published on Africa and African art. In addition, he was more open to advancing his own presentation and understanding of African art.

***Black African Heritage* Reviews and Press Reaction**

The *Black African Heritage* series was well publicized in many markets nationwide, with more than 100 notices for the series appearing in the two Elisofon archives alone. Most of the newspaper articles and blurbs were informational, with some occasionally critical, and others at times very critical. Many, but not all, of the reviews were written about the New York United Nations preview or the first program, “The

Congo.” While a review of the first program would have theoretically encouraged viewers to tune in for the next three parts, it now seems unbalanced and incomplete to judge an entire series from the first quarter of it, particularly when “The Congo” was the weakest and least organized of the programs. But even after having viewed only a quarter of the series, it was clear to many writers that African art was the series’ star.

From an art historian’s perspective, *Black African Heritage* was tremendously successful at exposing the American television audience to African art – in the museum and in the field, object and environment. To show four hours of footage — about 80% of which contained African art — to a total of 40 million viewers in 41 markets was an accomplishment, and one that was not overlooked by reviewers. “Perhaps the most significant aspects of the premiere program are the displays of African arts and crafts, with their beautiful designs; objects of gold, bronze, pottery, ivory, wood, and cloth materials are displayed in excellent color,” wrote Anthony LaCamera for the *Record American*.⁴⁵¹

Several of the reviews remarked on how *Black African Heritage* would encourage an interest in African art, potentially sparking that interest in their readers. For *The Patriot Ledger*, Reed F. Stewart commented:

We are fortunate in the 1970s, to be able to begin to understand the artistic convention of Africa. In spite of the enthusiasm with which the sculptures were shown, one could see why it was that Europeans of past centuries, thinking in the traditions of classical Greece, did not appreciate the stylized and startling conceptions worked into the wood, clay, bronze, beads and gold which the Africans used. ... the point was strongly made that the Black African heritage is lengthy, complex, rich and inspiring. Anyone wishing to pursue the subject further might begin with the

⁴⁵¹ Anthony LaCamera, “‘Black African Heritage’ Makes Bow,” *Record American*, March 17, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 61.)

excellent exhibits of African carving and other arts in the Peabody Museum of Harvard University.⁴⁵²

Harry MacArthur of the *Washington Evening Star* wrote: “It’s a welcome experience when television comes along and broadens your horizons and tells you something about life on the planet today instead of merely lulling you into somnolence... One of the things this series easily could do is give you a strong yen to become a collector of African art. Some of this sculpture is realistically representational and some of it is primitive. Most of it is truly magnificent.”⁴⁵³

But for every positive comment on *Black African Heritage*, there were three negative critiques. The series was also discussed and reviewed in the 1982 book, *Africa on Film and Videotape 1960 – 1981: A Compendium of Reviews*, published by the African Studies Center at Michigan State University. Many of the sharpest critiques in this text were also observed by newspaper reviewers at the time and they bring up some important points. The 1982 review in the film compendium, simply titled “Black African Heritage Series,” began:

This magnificently photographed production is flawed primarily by a distinct lack of analytical and explanatory depth. The films do not fulfill the promise of their beautiful images. This is due to the overriding emphasis on artistic creations of African carvers, dancers, and musicians. While these achievements are unquestionable, little effort is made to explore the more complex and more fascinating relationships between art, religion, social organization, and the rituals which link the various strata of African societies. Beautifully lighted studies of African carvings in museums seem to take too much time in the series.

The footage would have been more profitably spent explaining the dances and ceremonies in the films. The vast scope of the production creates a

⁴⁵² Reed F. Stewart, “Aspects of a Complex Heritage,” *The Patriot Ledger*, March 23, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 60.)

⁴⁵³ Harry MacArthur, “A Fascinating Look at Africa,” *Washington Evening Star*, March 14, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9 and EEPA X-9, 64.)

survey presentation which aggregates many African peoples into an unfortunate and unintended homogeneity. No sense of everyday life is developed because the focus is on admittedly spectacular material culture artifacts. This view, however, is a distorted one, equating material culture with proof of the complexity of the civilization while largely ignoring specifics of the history, social structure, and economy of the people portrayed.⁴⁵⁴

For the art historian, the first point that stands out from this review is the immediate regard for African artistic achievements as “unquestionable.” In fact, Westerners had been questioning them for hundreds of years, calling African art ‘primitive,’ ‘craft,’ ‘child-like,’ and ‘unsophisticated.’ The comment echoed a March 10, 1972 review of *Black African Heritage* by Judy Bachrach for *The Baltimore Sun*. She wrote:

Monday’s show opens with a group of Eleventh Century Nigerian sculptures, and Mr. [Julian] Bond sums up their artistic value by saying: “These bronzes rank with the finest sculptures of any civilization.” Now if there is one unstated assumption a series on Africa should make, it is that since each culture is unique, the products of each disparate culture must also be unique. They do not ‘rank’ with anything from anywhere. And they certainly do not need the insult of a defense.⁴⁵⁵

Bachrach’s opinion was mirrored in that of Lou Cedrone, writing for *The Baltimore Evening Sun*: “‘The Congo’ was also condescending in manner. African art, it said with unhappy redundancy, is comparable to that of other civilizations. No real need to say so. Art speaks for itself, in this case proudly and without protest.”⁴⁵⁶ Elisofon came from a generation that not only had to defend African art, but also modern art and avant-garde photography. Hence, it is not surprising that he repeatedly pointed out African art’s advancement.

⁴⁵⁴ “Black African Heritage Series,” in David Wiley, ed., *Africa on Film and Videotape 1960 – 1981: A Compendium of Reviews* (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1982): 62.

⁴⁵⁵ Judy Bachrach, “The Dark Continent Comes Up Rather Gloomy,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 62.)

⁴⁵⁶ Lou Cedrone, untitled document, *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 15, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4939.)

Bachrach and Cedrone brought up another interesting point: Is it wrong to compare one culture to another? Is that condescending? Another reviewer took a different approach to this issue. “I am sure that the Africa of *Black African Heritage* will be a revelation to most Americans,” wrote Percy Shain of *The Boston Globe*.⁴⁵⁷ “The supposed ‘dark, backward continent’ had exquisite works of art and dazzling gold sculptures a thousand years before we thought of such things...its tribal ceremonies were elaborate and picturesque and the costumes of coronation would do credit to a Tudor court,” he continued.⁴⁵⁸ Why not compare African culture to our own? Is it inappropriate if it engenders appreciation and understanding? To break down stereotypes about Africa, Elisofon employed the universal language of art. In order to do that successfully, he worked to bring the status of African art to the same level as Western art by lavishing it with attention in his films. This was a valid approach. Appreciate the art, understand it, understand the people, appreciate the people.

Returning to the 1982 review, the next noteworthy point was the lack of depth and breadth in *Black African Heritage*, resulting in a homogenous portrayal of the continent and a distortion of what heritage actually is. Again, Bachrach’s review reinforced this criticism:

It has all the markings of a series created with the best intentions and that’s a good part of its problem. For *African Heritage* emerges as a condescending show, and I suspect it was never meant to be, and it emerges as a dull-witted travelogue, and I suspect that was inadvertent. And finally, it emerges as a show entirely bereft of anything but the most cursory manifestations of a heritage.

⁴⁵⁷ Percy Shain, “Night Watch: Special on Africa ‘Fascinating, Exciting,’” *The Boston Globe*, March 17, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 59.)

⁴⁵⁸ Percy Shain, “Night Watch: Special on Africa ‘Fascinating, Exciting,’” *The Boston Globe*, March 17, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 59.)

And I suspect that that, too, was not how things were meant to be.... The show then moves through what might be considered 'spot checks' of varying aspects of life in the Congo.... And the real problem is that the actual heritage of the individual Congolese tribes is never explored.... I think one of the flaws of the series is that most of it is divided into geographical segments, ("The Congo," "The Bend of the Niger," etc.) And not into coherent thematic entities that would substantiate the word 'heritage' in the title.⁴⁵⁹

Cedrone's statements revealed a similar opinion:

Before they presented the first of their four-part 'Black African Heritage,' Westinghouse arranged a one-hour preview of the series, a sampling so disjointed, so completely without form it was impossible to fathom the purpose of the project. Still, a critic is supposed to have an open mind, so we waited, remembering that you can't always tell a series by the sampler. Sadly, in this case, you could....the original materials, footage building on the title and theme of the series, was in short supply.

What we had most were long visits with hippos, water bucks, storks, elephants, buffaloes, hyenas, lions and gazelles, mainstays of the familiar and by now trite documentary on the no longer dark continent....What 'The Congo' needed was a more definitive portrait of the natives, where they learned their crafts and how they made them their own.... 'The Congo' was short on form and substance.⁴⁶⁰

The programs did suffer from a lack of continuity and a scattered approach that produced a fragmented image of Africa. From my perspective, this was due to Elisofon's personality and approach, and was most evident in "The Congo," of which Bachrach and Cedrone were severely critical. Elisofon had too many ideas and images in his head for just four hours of footage. It would have been enough for four books or a lifetime of magazine articles. He had wanted to be more focused than the ABC production, and yet he ended up trying to pursue almost as much breadth in his coverage.

⁴⁵⁹ Judy Bachrach, "The Dark Continent Comes Up Rather Gloomy," *The Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 62.)

⁴⁶⁰ Lou Cedrone, untitled document, *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 15, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4939.)

Elisofon was proud and confident of the fact that he could do four hours on a tight budget of \$200,000.⁴⁶¹ So proud and confident, in fact, that the entire production suffered. Each week filming in the field meant money spent, so the first two takes in the Congo were rushed and resulted in sloppy coverage and technical issues. Large sections of the footage were fogged, much of it was under- or overexposed due to faulty light meter readings, and often what was filmed correctly was simply boring. Sometimes what was exciting and fascinating in the field — such as the environmental changes of the Ruwenzori mountain range at ascending altitudes — was tedious and meaningless when seen 7,000 miles away in a New York City film editing studio.⁴⁶² Elisofon scheduled 14 weeks to film *Black African Heritage* and had to add more and more time. To cover several major African countries in a few months was unrealistic.

Reviewers saw these cracks in the foundation of “The Congo.” Elisofon knew these fractures existed after the footage was reviewed in New York City, and he tried to fix them in subsequent takes in West Africa. He even returned to the Congo to try and salvage the first program. But Elisofon’s desire to show all of his favorite things about Africa persisted, and while the next three programs certainly have more depth per subject, the footage still randomly jumps from one thing to another. Elisofon was not the type of man to sit still in one place and his films were a reflection of that. Once the viewer started to absorb one scene, the film was already moving onto the next thing.

⁴⁶¹ Eliot Elisofon, notes and correspondence for *Black African Heritage* production costs, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 50.7.)

⁴⁶² Dotty Scher, letter to Eliot Elisofon, December 23, 1970, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 49.7, IMG_9906.)

Given the flawed delivery of *Black African Heritage*, how much heritage was shown? Was it none, as Bachrach and Cedrone said? And how does one show heritage? Why is material culture not enough proof of the complexity of a civilization? These were fundamental questions, ones that existed from the start of the project. While one critic commented that it seemed the concept of heritage had been tacked on after the filming was completed, this is not true.⁴⁶³ The idea of portraying the cultural heritage of Africa was in all of the film treatments long before any filming commenced.

The separation happened once filming began. What Elisofon understood as heritage was not what others perceived as heritage. They wanted more. His production manager, Bill Browning, wrote Elisofon a letter on January 14, 1971 with commentary on the first two takes. He explained:

Somehow I have the feeling that we are in danger of winding up with just another National Geographic lecture that relates to this place, that place and the other place without much of the true feeling for the culture, heritage and peoples under discussion. As an example, I was disappointed in not being able to see more of the woodcarver than just a bland and static posed collection of shots showing him seated in front of a dwelling and working on his sculpture. I wanted to see more of how he lived, his family, his pleasures, etc. What I did see appeared to be somewhat hoaky [sic] rather than a comprehensive presentation of a heritage that Black Americans and others will relate to.⁴⁶⁴

How much heritage was actually shown in the final product is debatable, but to regard the African art as taking “up too much time in the series,” as the 1982 review stated, seems to

⁴⁶³ Ben Luparello, “What’s On; TV and Radio; *Black African Heritage* is Scenic but Scattered,” unmarked newspaper clipping, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_5007.)

⁴⁶⁴ Bill Browning, letter to Eliot Elisofon, January 14, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 50.12, IMG_1566 thru _1570.)

miss the point of the programs.⁴⁶⁵ Heritage can refer to valued objects and physical artifacts, not just the intangible qualities and traditions of a society. Elisofon was always visually motivated and fascinated by material culture. Though he saw himself as an Africanist, he was not an academic. He consistently labeled himself as an artist. *Black African Heritage* was *his* production and it was tailored to *his* interests. For Elisofon, the greatest, most profound and most beautiful representation of African culture and heritage was art.

While some reviewers discussed how the series' lack of depth and shallow narration was probably due to the immensity of the subject matter, in general, they seem to have assumed that the progression of knowledge about African cultures was much farther along than it actually was. Cedrone commented on "the no longer dark continent."⁴⁶⁶ The level of knowledge required to create a documentary on the "history, social structure, and economy of the people portrayed" did not yet exist.⁴⁶⁷ These critics wanted a presentation on topics that had yet to be thoroughly researched. In the early 1970s Western academics were still forming an outline of basic African history, and specific African ethnographic studies were not available by the hundreds. To expect an in-depth account on all aspects of each African culture encountered in *Black African Heritage* would have been anachronistic for Elisofon. Such specificity would come with later decades. While such comments must have been frustrating for the filmmaker to

⁴⁶⁵ "Black African Heritage Series," in David Wiley, ed., *Africa on Film and Videotape 1960 – 1981: A Compendium of Reviews* (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1982): 62.

⁴⁶⁶ Lou Cedrone, untitled document, *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 15, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4939.)

⁴⁶⁷ "Black African Heritage Series," in David Wiley, ed., *Africa on Film and Videotape 1960 – 1981: A Compendium of Reviews* (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1982): 62.

read, they reveal the reviewer's (and the public's) desire for more information and greater understanding — an encouraging reaction.

Another critic of the content of *Black African Heritage* was none other than Maya Angelou, the narrator for the third program, "The Slave Coast." In her April 16, 1972 *New York Times* article, Angelou wrote:

A camera in the hands of an intelligent, inquisitive artist is a tremendous peep-hole into life. Elisofon succeeds at what he attempts if what he was aiming at was the recording of tangible Africana. It must be admitted, however that the culture of Africa is not caught only in masks and dances, tribal chiefs and musical instruments.

If we believe that, we are trapped again in the cliché which informs us that all Blacks can sing and dance. And we hear the implication that they can *only* sing and dance. It is unfortunate for Elisofon and for the viewers of this well-done series that the most compelling and little-known facets of African culture do not lend themselves to the camera lens.⁴⁶⁸

Angelou wanted more history, oral traditions, and social background than *Black African Heritage* provided. She highlighted several things she wished were in the series:

discussion of matrilineal inheritance, a Fulani *griot* recounting stories, the Egyptian pyramids, and mention of the ancient Timbuktu university (which was included). She did not seem as fascinated as Elisofon with the visual arts as proof of a rich cultural heritage, a source of black pride, and an educational device.

If Elisofon had concentrated on storytelling, social and political hierarchies, and descriptions of Africa's great cities, people would have pointed out that he ignored the visual culture and artistic masterpieces. A 4-hour special on the daily life of Africans — food preparation, health matters, living arrangements, marriage customs, etc. — would not

⁴⁶⁸ Maya Angelou, "For Years We Hated Ourselves," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4990.)

have been the type of film Elisofon wanted to make. It is difficult to balance all of the meanings of “heritage,” and one TV series can never be all things to all people.

Angelou’s article pinpointed one aspect of the programs that the researcher also viewed critically. *Black African Heritage* did not feature any interviews. No conversations were held. Only one African was heard when speaking to the camera, the Timi of Ede, who introduced and demonstrated the Yoruba talking drum. Of course, language and translations would have been an issue, so one can understand the dependence on separate narration. And yet, this muted the Africans’ ability to describe their heritage. This is the largest and most obvious fault of the series, and one that could have been addressed. We do hear Africans singing and chanting in the films, so recording technology was used in the field. Amazingly, not one of the critical reviews of the series mentioned this lack of African voices talking about African heritage.

Why didn’t Elisofon have Africans talk on camera? How does this lack of African voices impact our understanding of African art? We have to rely wholly upon the narration for our information. Lamidi Fakeye, Twins Seven Seven, and the other African artists could have talked about their work to the camera. This would have remedied the issue of narration not corresponding to or not being informative about what was being shown. There were even moments when the Oni of Ife, Fakeye, Twins Seven Seven, and Dolo, the Dogon sculptor, were talking and addressing the camera. But we could not hear what they were saying. Instead, the recorded commentary and music played on.

Boiling down all of the criticism discussed so far, we arrive at a basic question: Could a commercial television broadcasting company offer the type of heritage that black

Americans needed to see? Elisofon and Group W thought they could. The company ran an advertisement featuring two black children (**fig. 6.9**) that stated:

If there's one thing future generations of black Americans need, it's a past...From the time they first set foot on American soil, black Americans have been cut off from their roots. To bring their lost cultural heritage to light, Group W is presenting a four-part documentary, *Black African Heritage*....

Each of the four one-hour programs focuses on a different region of the African continent. But all of them reveal the remarkable culture of the African people: their music, art, rituals and dance. A culture which much of white America adopted. *Black African Heritage* reveals how much of a past black Americans really have. And helps put them back in touch with it.⁴⁶⁹

Could art be evidence of that much-needed past? Some critics thought so. Three reviewers in particular thought *Black African Heritage* would have a positive effect on black Americans.

John Rhodes of the *Philadelphia Tribune* wrote “upon reviewing the series, I feel that *Black African Heritage* will further inform Black Americans of the life and culture of the African people...the series is chuck-full of detailed information relative to art, music and traditions of Africans.”⁴⁷⁰ Barbara Parkins of the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented in a March 17, 1972 article that the series “has come at a lucky time for American blacks who are seeking evidence of their own African Heritage to give them

⁴⁶⁹ “If there's one thing future generations of black Americans need, it's a past,” Group W *Black African Heritage* advertisement clipping, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_5025.)

⁴⁷⁰ John Rhodes, “Writer Finds African TV Series Informative,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 18, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 56.)

the same sort of solace and pride that other Americans have found in Irish castles or Scottish plaids or Greek dances.”⁴⁷¹

In addition, Henry Mitchell wrote an article titled “‘African Heritage’ – Seven Steps to Pride” for *The Washington Post* on March 14, 1972. His text corresponded directly with Elisofon and Group W’s goals. He wrote that *Black African Heritage* “attempts to get it through our heads that African tribal society is as complex, as serious and as much worth our attention as human society anywhere. The black tribes of Africa did not, as the first hour-long show points out, swing through the trees like Tarzan.”⁴⁷²

Mitchell explained:

Some mischief has been done (as the series hints) by treating black Africa as a kind of joke – as insensitive visitors to a zoo might gawk at the odd giraffes. But the harm of the joke comes if a child should believe, really believe, his forebears were mere savages stomping about in the bush.

Viewers of English background would not be upset at the rudeness of the French, say, who might make cracks about human sacrifice among the Druids, or painting oneself blue with woad. That joke never hurts, because for one thing it’s true, as the African jokes are not. And for another thing, the English have done as well, in terms of power, as any who laugh at them.

The point here is not frivolous. An ethnic joke is one thing if you’re running a continent, but it’s something else again if you’re not.

... We shall see, as the hours unfold, the Benin bronzes. Europe, at that time, had no such plastic art to show. People who give no thought to anything may imagine that great sculpture just sort of springs out of the woodwork. But a saner view is that whenever we see great sculpture, we may assume century after century of trial and error beforehand – centuries of effort.

The Benin bronzes, while not unique among the splendors of black art, are a quick refutation of the slur of ‘savages.’ It is shocking, no doubt, that it should be still be desirable in our late day, to say (as this show implies) to any child, ‘You are the result of an endless line of princes, and now it’s up

⁴⁷¹ Barbara Parkins, “TV Spots,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 17, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 50.)

⁴⁷² Henry Mitchell, “‘African Heritage’ – Seven Steps to Pride,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4997.)

to you.’ But such a statement is necessary indeed, since a cruel society has said to some children, ‘You were born of slobs.’ There ought to be a rage, there ought to be a defiance and there ought to be an answer to that.⁴⁷³

For Mitchell, African art was substantial proof of the advanced cultures of Africa and his article served as a rallying cry for black pride.

The title of Angelou’s *New York Times* article, “‘For Years We Hated Ourselves,’” was a reference to a speech made by Malcolm X at the Henry and Edsel Ford Auditorium in Detroit on February 14, 1965. It is known as the “After the Bombing” speech because it took place the day after Malcolm X’s Queens home was firebombed. This was one of his final speeches, as he was assassinated on February 21, 1965 in New York City. One section of Malcolm X’s speech was dedicated to the topic of Africa and black American self-hate. He described how the West’s image of Africa as uncivilized led black Americans to hate Africa and Africans. “In hating Africa and in hating the Africans,” he explained, “we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree, and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself.”⁴⁷⁴ *The*

⁴⁷³ Henry Mitchell, “‘African Heritage’ – Seven Steps to Pride,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4997.)

⁴⁷⁴ Malcolm X and George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990): 168-169. Malcolm X “After the Bombing” speech excerpt: “Now what effect does [the struggle over Africa] have on us? Why should the black man in America concern himself since he's been away from the continent for three or four hundred years? Why should we concern ourselves? What impact does what happens to them have upon us?”

Number one, you have to realize that up until 1959 Africa was dominated by the colonial powers. Having complete control over Africa, the colonial powers of Europe projected the image of Africa negatively. They always project Africa in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally it was so negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn't want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing

Village Voice interviewed Malcolm X around the time of the “After the Bombing” speech. “The greatest mistake of the movement,” Malcolm X said, “has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, then you’ll get action.” “Wake them up to their exploitation?” the reporter asked. “No, to their humanity, to their own worth, and to their heritage,” he responded.⁴⁷⁵ For Malcolm X, an understanding of the historical achievements of black people, as well as the origins

it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree, and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself.

You show me one of these people over here who has been thoroughly brainwashed and has a negative attitude toward Africa, and I'll show you one who has a negative attitude toward himself. You can't have a positive attitude toward yourself and a negative attitude toward Africa at the same time. To the same degree that your understanding of and attitude toward Africa become positive, you'll find that your understanding of and your attitude toward yourself will also become positive. And this is what the white man knows. So they very skillfully make you and me hate our African identity, our African characteristics.

You know yourself that we have been a people who hated our African characteristics. We hated our hair, we hated the shape of our nose, we wanted one of those long dog-like noses, you know; we hated the color of our skin, hated the blood of Africa that was in our veins. And in hating our features and our skin and our blood, why, we had to end up hating ourselves. And we hated ourselves. Our color became to us a chain - we felt that it was holding us back; our color became to us like a prison which we felt was keeping us confined, not letting us go this way or that way. We felt that all of these restrictions were based solely upon our color, and the psychological reaction to that would have to be that as long as we felt imprisoned or chained or trapped by black skin, black features and black blood, that skin and those features and that blood holding us back automatically became hateful to us. And it became hateful to us.

It made us feel inferior; it made us feel inadequate; made us feel helpless. And when we fell victims to this feeling of inadequacy or inferiority or helplessness, we turned to somebody else to show us the way. We didn't have confidence in another black man to show us the way, or black people to show us the way. In those days we didn't. We didn't think a black man could do anything except play some horns - you know, make some sound and make you happy with some songs, and in that way. But in serious things, where our food, clothing, shelter and education were concerned, we turned to the man. We never thought in terms of bringing these things into existence for ourselves. Because we felt helpless. What made us feel helpless was our hatred for ourselves. And our hatred for ourselves stemmed from our hatred for things African...”

⁴⁷⁵ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* (New York, London, Montreal, Sydney: Pathfinder, 1992, 4th edition): 7.

and evolution of their oppression in recent centuries, was an essential weapon in the hands of those struggling for their liberation.

Angelou's *New York Times* article acknowledged the potential power of black African heritage and it certainly echoed Malcolm X's February 14th speech. She explained:

The act of enslavement does not succeed by force alone. The enslaver and the slave must be persuaded that the latter is sub-human (whether by God's will, the slave physiognomy or just his ill luck doesn't matter very much) and deserves his condition. Both actors in this tragedy must also be convinced that everything about the slave is, was and will be inferior: He is in his present state because he has no past, or certainly none worth mentioning, and can have no future, or certainly none worth anticipating. The African enslavement in the West was carried out along those strict, unwavering lines. And with painfully obvious success. For years Blacks were immersed in cocoons of self-revilement. Africa, to Blacks at the time, was that dreaded dark and pagan land well lost in the past and better forgotten.

Then in the mid-fifties there was the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa and the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. Ghana won its independence and suddenly there were beautifully gowned black men at the United Nations who spoke English (surprise, real English) and Black Americans were jolted into observing themselves again and this time in a historically new way. Then along came Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and the Freedom Rides.... Black students began to insist on courses in African and Black American history. Their demands ranged from requests to riots. They asked, 'If Black is Beautiful, where has it been all this time?' With 'Black African Heritage,' a Group W television series in four parts, Eliot Elisofon attempts to provide some answers to that question.⁴⁷⁶

Did Angelou think the programs provided any answers? Overall, was Angelou satisfied with the series? It is difficult to tell. She continued:

I do not intend to take Eliot Elisofon to task for what he omitted when obviously he has approached his subject with seriousness and respect. It is exactly because the series is as good as it is that I want more. More depth, more explanation and more soul involvement. And yet the photographer is not as committed to the subject as a Black American must be. For Africa

⁴⁷⁶ Maya Angelou, "For Years We Hated Ourselves," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4990.)

to me, to Gordon Parks, to Julian Bond and to Ossie Davis (the narrators of the series) is more than a glamorous fact. It is a historical truth. No man can know where he is going unless he knows exactly where he has been and exactly how he arrived at this present place.⁴⁷⁷

Can a white man successfully create a TV series on black African heritage in the midst of the heated civil rights movement? This was a troublesome topic, and one that irked Elisofon. He felt betrayed by Angelou's article. Of all people, why should one of the narrators of his program critique it publicly?

Her article gave him something to fume about during interviews on *Black African Heritage*. George Tashman, writing for *The Independent*, included this Elisofon quote in his article: "The outspoken photographer disagrees vehemently with that segment of the black population that says, 'Whitey shouldn't write or tell about blacks, because he isn't black.... They're way off base, those blacks who believe that.'"⁴⁷⁸

While Angelou's negative comments were mixed with positive ones, Elisofon was not the type of person to quietly swallow criticism. On the one hand, he liked to argue, and on the other, he took pride in his work and was ready to defend it at every turn. He wrote a response letter to *The New York Times*, "Being White, Do I Love Africa Less?," which was published on May 14, 1972. It stated:

We made four films for as wide an audience as possible. We meant to entertain people and hoped to inspire them to a new appreciation of Africa in general. How many would watch a professional discussion of matrilineal inheritance, which Miss Angelou thinks is most important? It could make a documentary film for a foundation or university, but not a film for a general television audience.

⁴⁷⁷ Maya Angelou, "For Years We Hated Ourselves," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4990.)

⁴⁷⁸ George Tashman, "Tashman on TV," *The Independent*, May 16, 1972: 15. (HRC 46.9, IMG_4978.)

This subject might be ‘much more relevant to today’s need than a perfect photograph of a much-photographed Benin mask,’ writes Miss Angelou. I doubt that one per cent [sic] of the audience has ever seen the greatest Benin art before. Was it not important to show our audience that Africans were producing these works of art in the Middle Ages? We also showed Nok terra-cotta heads made 2,000 years ago, an extraordinary achievement....

Finally, I am very disturbed by Miss Angelou’s statement about me, ‘the photographer is not as committed to the subject as a black American must be.’ This is a bad blow and I am surprised that she sounds just as prejudiced against all whites as are too many of her contemporaries ... Before the black revolution, most black Americans were either ashamed of Africa – and why not, since the Tarzan image was the only one they were familiar with – or they just did not care.⁴⁷⁹

Elisofon regarded himself as a long-time Africanist who had been studying the continent since his first sub-Saharan trip in 1947. Having black or white skin did not matter to him:

Being white does not mean that I love Africa less than a black American, or that I do not have the capacity to understand its vast, complex structure of traditions and culture. Do you have to be Jewish to understand the Old Testament? Or be of Greek ancestry to understand Plato and appreciate the Acropolis? The concept of ‘black for blacks only’ is my biggest quarrel with Maya Angelou, who I believe is one of the most gifted Americans of our time.⁴⁸⁰

While Elisofon loved Africa, to black Americans it meant much more – not just love or hate, but something sensitive and complex. Angelou wrote Elisofon a private letter on May 25, 1972. She told him:

I am distressed that you were distressed with the *New York Times*’ article. I am distressed that you misunderstood the point of the article. In effect, I was saying that, although in my youth I studied Judaism and have visited and taught in Tel Aviv; if I were to do an article on Israel, I could never approach the task with the same emotion as one whose relatives had

⁴⁷⁹ Eliot Elisofon, “Being White, Do I Love Africa Less?,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_5029.)

⁴⁸⁰ Eliot Elisofon, “Being White, Do I Love Africa Less?,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1972. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_5029.)

suffered at Dachau and died in that madness. It is no intention of mine to underestimate your past, present and future contributions to all of us.⁴⁸¹

Elisofon had put himself in a sticky situation, but he was never one to shy away from controversy.

Elisofon was “puzzled by the lack of black student response” to a weeklong series of *Black African Heritage* showings at the Ohio University campus in the fall of 1972 (fig. 6.10).⁴⁸² He voiced his confusion in an article written by Dave Sekal in the campus newspaper, *The Post*, on October 18, 1972: ““So here I am with four films on the roots of the black experience on a campus with a potential black audience of almost 1200, and how many do I draw with my presentation? Six out of an audience of three hundred, six were black. I don’t want to sound like I’m complaining, but I don’t understand why they’re not showing up. I know some of them have classes—but what about the others? Haven’t they had any interest in the culture from whence they came?””⁴⁸³

After essentially ‘calling out’ the black campus population it is not surprising that Elisofon, and in turn, his films, received some backlash. *The Post* published response letters from Allen Knowles and Connie Perdreau. Knowles stated:

There were more than six black students at his first showing, (yes, there were some light-skinned Afros in the room, but they all were not white) not to mention the second showing. But then after seeing two of the four films, six blacks should be considered a huge turnout. “Twas a great flick for 7:30 pm weekdays on channel X. But please don’t expect me to get my intellectual jollies off of it. If this is the involvement that the University

⁴⁸¹ Maya Angelou, letter to Eliot Elisofon, May 25, 1972, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 51.9/46.9, IMG_4996.)

⁴⁸² Dave Sekal, “Filmmaker perplexed by black response,” *The Post*, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, October 18, 1972: 1. (HRC 49.3.)

⁴⁸³ Dave Sekal, “Filmmaker perplexed by black response,” *The Post*, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, October 18, 1972: 1. (HRC 49.3.)

deems relevant to show to the students-at-large (not to mention the black segment of that body) I suggest that the next installment of ‘Africa as seen by...’ might possibly be choice clips from ‘Untamed World’ and ‘Wild Kingdom.’”⁴⁸⁴

Perdreau was even more critical of Elisofon:

... the Africa depicted in his presentation on Tuesday reeked of the undying colonialist spirit: the myth of the happy native, the exoticism of so-called primitive life and customs on the ‘dark continent’ and the exploration of the indigenous population for the financial benefit of the ‘bwana,’ in this case Elisofon and Time-Life. Moreover, the fact that Elisofon admittedly paid these Africans for their services makes one seriously doubt the verisimilitude of the entire production.... It is apparent that you took much from the great continent of Africa, Mr. Elisofon. What in turn, did you give them? More importantly, what have you given us?⁴⁸⁵

Perdreau saw the series as encouraging African stereotypes: “the myth of the happy native, the exoticism of so-called primitive life....” What is a stereotype? An oversimplified idea or image of a particular person or thing. *Black African Heritage* was very specific in its content. Maybe it was too vague with explanations, but it referenced specific peoples, places, and activities. Nothing generic. This was not a Hollywood production, scripted with sets and costumes. Elisofon wrote the narration scripts after all the filming was complete.

Yes, every scene that was shot for *Black African Heritage* was constructed and, hence, can be seen as superficial. And yet, none of the people seen in the films were actors and none of those experiences can ever be reproduced. Perhaps it was as genuine as it could be. For example, the narration acknowledged that firespitter masks are danced at night with lit charcoal pieces in their mouths. But to film such a scene at night and

⁴⁸⁴ Allen Knowles, “Postmarked,” letter to the editor, *Ohio University Post*, vol. 63, no. 19, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 49.3, IMG_9591.)

⁴⁸⁵ Connie Perdreau, “Postmarked,” letter to the editor, *Ohio University Post*, vol. 63, no. 19, undated, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 49.3, IMG_9591.)

have the camera actually get useable footage was a different matter, so two firespitters were shown being performed during the daytime. That way the viewer could see the appearance of the masks and the costumes clearly.

If Elisofon had filmed the entire project without paying any African, critics likely would have then called him out for exploiting them. Perdreau saw Elisofon as the 'bwana,' boss/master, exploiting the natives to make money, yet she complained that the Africans were paid for appearing in the films? This logic seems flawed. Authenticity may always be a source of criticism. But in the end, it only seems fair that those Africans who worked for hours (often in very hot temperatures) in front of a camera crew, whether dancing, weaving, sculpting, or grinding millet, were paid to appear in the films.

Another critic who saw a sea of stereotypes in *Black African Heritage* was Rex Polier of *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*. He wrote an article titled "'Black African Heritage' Takes Museum Approach" on March 20, 1972, a review of "The Congo." He described the show:

Artistic creativeness of the peoples who inhabit the Congo was illustrated by centuries-old bronzes and other sculpture. Bond told of states and governments that existed 1,000 years before Europeans knew anything at all about the 'Dark Continent.'

A number of tribes were filmed doing colorful ritual dances. There were glimpses of artisans, especially of one ancient woodcarver who fashions masks from a log. The scenes were accompanied by throbbing drums and other authentic tribal musical sounds.

But this approach has its limitations, and it was quickly reflected. It produced the same stereotyped views of Africa that we have been seeing since the days of Osa and Martin Johnson and their quaint little African spectacles.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ Rex Polier, "'Black African Heritage' Takes Museum Approach," *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, March 20, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 58.)

Polier also compared the program to *National Geographic*, an observation echoed by Judy Bachrach's article, and the Bill Browning letter cited above — a comparison meant to imply triteness and superficiality. Polier argued that “The Congo” stressed “a simpler, more primitive Africa.” He continued:

Most viewers who have been made aware of modern Africa by the large number of TV films and documentaries in recent years will invariably realize they are looking at museum footage.

It leads to a question. Which better serves the new Africa: the showing of museum objects and token ceremonial tribes, or a contemporary look at this fascinating, exciting and progressing continent? I think the museum approach only perpetuates the older trappings of a civilization that has discarded them except for the theater, museum, and history texts.⁴⁸⁷

There is some misconception and some truth in Polier's statements. Africans have not all “discarded” the “older trappings” of their civilization. Some maintain older traditions even today. And yet, Elisofon was certainly partial to the idea of the timelessness of Africa and attempted to engender it in most of his photographs and in the *Black African Heritage* series. There is a downside to believing that nothing ever changes in Africa, or any other ‘exotic’ environment, be it the South Seas or the Australian outback. When things do change, when acculturation naturally takes place, it is then automatically seen as negative and a tainting of the pure, perfect form of the culture that had once existed.

A portion of the narration for “The Bend of the Niger” confirms this sense of nostalgia: “The Dogon have retained a great deal of their traditions, but they are not far enough away from our ideas to maintain complete independence. There are only a few tribes left who share with the Dogon the stubborn desire to be themselves. Let us hope

⁴⁸⁷ Rex Polier, “‘Black African Heritage’ Takes Museum Approach,” *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, March 20, 1972. (EEPA X-9, 58.)

that this may never change.”⁴⁸⁸ Change does come naturally, but perhaps not as abruptly as Polier thought it had in the “new Africa.”

After Polier’s negative review appeared, Kimpianga J. Mahaniah of the African Studies program of Temple University, and a citizen of Zaire, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*. “An African Agrees with African Series” was published on March 31, 1972. Mahaniah defended the program:

...Mr. Rex Polier argues that the *Black African Heritage* film [“The Congo”]...did a disservice to the New Africa by showing only the pre-European African contribution to world civilization and by eliminating the contemporary look at this fascinating, exciting, and progressive continent. Does Mr. Polier mean that the only fascinating, exciting, and progressive aspect of African civilization is that of contemporary Africa? What does he mean by ‘New Africa’ and ‘contemporary’?

Does he mean that there is no place in his idea of ‘New Africa’ for pre-colonial civilization? Does he believe that African history and civilization began only with the 20th century, or that pre-European African culture ceased operation in the ‘contemporary continent’? The majority of Africans still live in villages and are still part of the culture which the producers of the program showed.⁴⁸⁹

Mahaniah saw the show’s content as myth-breaking, rather than stereotype-enforcing.

The program dealt with more than the dancing, arts and handicrafts of the African people. The message of the program indeed challenged the idea that Africa suffered a cultural vacuum before the coming of Europeans... By showing the weaving methods of the Kuba people, the producer challenged the argument held in Western nations that pre-colonial Africa did not have a technology or that its technology was crude and inferior.... African arts and handicrafts show the contribution of Africa in artistic creativity...art to Africans is never a ‘museum piece,’ as the narrator of the film pointed out. Art in Africa must also be functional in order to be artistic....

⁴⁸⁸ Eliot Elisofon, *Black African Heritage* (Group W, The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1972), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: DVDs.

⁴⁸⁹ Kimpianga J. Mahaniah, “An African Agrees with African Series,” *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, March 31, 1972. (HRC 51.8/46.8, original letter to the Editor of *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, IMG__4893 thru IMG_4894.)

Mr. Polier thinks that the program helped only to perpetuate the negative and humiliating image of Africa created in the Western World...But the *Black African Heritage* film challenges this image....

African history does not begin with colonialism in Africa, nor does pre-colonial civilization cease operation in colonial and independent contemporary Africa. Any genuine understanding of African heritage must begin with the study of the traditional institutions and cultures of African society.⁴⁹⁰

Is it possible to completely break down stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa with a 4-hour made-for-TV series? No, but it was a move in the right direction. Perhaps Elisofon envisioned his project as something more than the final result. But he was not the only one who thought that *Black African Heritage* was a step forward.

While some critics saw the series as condescending in tone, a more apt description would have been paternalistic: benevolent but sometimes intrusive. Elisofon was attempting to influence people's thoughts on and opinions of Africa. "The enslavement of Africans, and the traffic in humans, is one of the most disgusting episodes of man's past," Elisofon wrote in one of the many *Black African Heritage* press releases, "but the story of the African cultures and people is one of his glories."⁴⁹¹ Some people misinterpreted or were wary of the delivery of his message, while others embraced it. Elisofon told Charles Benbow of the *Tampa Times*: "I have been accused of being too slickly commercial with some of my films. I'm not ashamed of entertaining people or working for people, of reaching audiences of 20-25 million people as we have with the African films. I like to

⁴⁹⁰ Kimpianga J. Mahaniah, "An African Agrees with African Series," *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, March 31, 1972. (HRC 51.8/46.8, original letter to the Editor of *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, IMG__4893 thru IMG_4894.)

⁴⁹¹ Eliot Elisofon, quoted in *Black African Heritage* press release, December 21, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 51.8/46.8, IMG_4861.)

think people have come away with more information than they realize, have been inoculated with a whole new appreciation for a culture.”⁴⁹²

⁴⁹² Charles Benbow, “Eliot Elisofon- Artist of Expanded Interest,” *Tampa Times*, May 1972. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG _6573.)

Chapter Seven: The Final Years

The last three years of Elisofon's life were filled with African art-related trips and projects. By 1964 Elisofon was no longer a contracted *LIFE* photographer. Instead he worked as a freelance photographer for a variety of outlets. His last two major African articles appeared in *Smithsonian* magazine and *National Geographic*. He traveled to Africa four times in the early 1970s, working on multiple assignments simultaneously.⁴⁹³ For his final trip to Africa Elisofon stayed on the continent from January through April of 1972. His main objectives were to finalize the article for *National Geographic*, create an article for *Smithsonian* magazine, and shoot a short film on Akan gold art objects for Paul Tishman. He also took pictures of the Dogon in Mali, most likely for the planned exhibition of Lester Wunderman's Dogon art collection.⁴⁹⁴ This was the first exhibition that Elisofon worked on that was dedicated to a single African ethnic group. In addition, for the *Smithsonian* magazine article he focused on one African ethnic group, the Akan, something that he had not done since the 1947 *LIFE* article on the Kuba, "African Big Shot." Also, the article primarily discussed Akan gold arts, a level of specificity that had not yet existed in Elisofon's work on African art.

1973 "Africa's Ancient Splendor," *Smithsonian* magazine

"I am determined that any African art should be related to the environment which produced it; even if very little of it is left today."

⁴⁹³ From March through July of 1970 Elisofon was in Central Africa taking photographs for an article on Zaire for *National Geographic*. (John J. Putnam, "Yesterday's Congo, Today's Zaire," *National Geographic* 143, March 1973: 398-432.) While he was there he took pictures for *Joseph's World* (Crowell-Collier, 1973). This was a children's text on one week in the life of a Zairian boy named Joseph.

⁴⁹⁴ Elisofon's daughters, Elin and Jill, accompanied him during a portion of this trip. Of course, none of them knew this would be his last trip to Africa, and they all expected that this would be the first of many future adventures.

- Elisofon to F. Weston Fenhagen, Public Affairs
Officer, American Embassy, Abidjan, Ivory Coast⁴⁹⁵

One of Elisofon's previous *LIFE* editors and his close friend, Edward K. Thompson, started up *Smithsonian* magazine around 1969 under the direction of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, S. Dillon Ripley. The first issue was released in April 1970 to 160,000 subscribers; 1973 was the first year the magazine turned a profit, with a circulation of 465,000.⁴⁹⁶ Thompson and Elisofon shared a deep sense of loyalty to their *LIFE* colleagues, and so it is not surprising that Thompson hired Elisofon repeatedly for the new magazine. Elisofon's first and last piece on Africa for *Smithsonian* was on Akan gold arts, published in the January 1973 issue.⁴⁹⁷

"Africa's Ancient Splendor Still Gleams in the Akan People's Golden Art" included the cover, ten full pages, and nine full color photographs (**figs. 7.1-7.6**). The *Smithsonian* piece was related to Elisofon's 1972 project *Akan Gold*, the film on the Paul Tishman collection, and he worked on them at the same time. But unlike the film, the article did not include any images of the Tishman objects, though it did mention the collection. Both of these assignments were connected to the Tishman traveling exhibition *Sculpture of Black Africa*, which included over 100 Asante gold objects. Elisofon

⁴⁹⁵ Eliot Elisofon, letter to F. Weston Fenhagen, January 3, 1972, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 42.12, IMG_4870.)

⁴⁹⁶ "Smithsonian Magazine History," www.smithsonianmag.com/about/magazine-history.html. Accessed April 9, 2013.

⁴⁹⁷ He worked on other assignments for this magazine in India and Southeast Asia, and both of these projects were published posthumously: "An Eleventh-Hour Effort to Save Java's Borobudur Temple," June 1973; and "The Last of the Asiatic Lions Hang on in India's Gir Forest Sanctuary," July 1973. (HRC 57.12 and 57.13.) Most likely, if he had lived, Elisofon would have continued doing pieces for *Smithsonian*.

researched and proposed the article to Thompson, and then created all of the text and photographs.

Thompson and Elisofon got along especially well because, at heart, Thompson was a photo editor and of course, Elisofon a photographer. Thompson's *Smithsonian* focused on big, bold photographic spreads and the Akan gold article was no exception. In a way, *Smithsonian* became the offspring of defunct *LIFE*: a mixture of many topics, anything a curious mind would want to learn about, and with a clear focus on great photographic material.⁴⁹⁸

“Ancient Splendor” followed in the footsteps of other Elisofon articles on African art by focusing on the objects and not on intangible theories. However, it was much more specific than any of his previous articles, concentrating solely on the gold arts of the Akan people. It exclusively employed field photographs, unlike “Mystic Art of Tribal Africa” for example, which was a mixture of field and studio pictures. “Ancient Splendor” was designed to show how Akan gold arts were still being used in the 1970s, instead of featuring items in museums and collections in studio photographs. For example, the cover image was Elisofon's picture of an Akan woman holding two gold-handled flywhisks.

The article was Elisofon's first-person account of his experiences in Ghana with several Akan groups. The text starts in Kumasi during the receiving ceremony of a paramount chief Ya Na by the current Asantehene, Otumfuo Nana Opoku Ware II, a London-educated barrister and diplomat, which took place in March of 1971. Elisofon

⁴⁹⁸ Other articles in the January 1973 issue covered the work of modern sculptor Michael Ayrton, the philatelic shop of the Weill brothers in New Orleans, the last sea cows (killed off in the mid-1700s), and the age of Neoclassical art (inspired by a London exhibition on this topic with photographs by another *LIFE* alum, Dmitri Kessel).

described the feeling of the occasion, the clothing, the umbrellas, and all of the objects covered in gold: rifles, knives, pouches, hilts of the swords of state, scabbard décor, linguist staffs, jewelry, pendants (round discs that are known to be the conveyors of souls), and stools. The history and cultural background of the Asante was discussed as well. For example, he mentioned the Golden Stool legend – a symbol of the spiritual unity of the Asante people, for a “remarkable political achievement in West Africa’s past.”⁴⁹⁹ Overall, the article and the photographs were fixed on artworks—what Elisofon saw, how the objects were employed in ceremonies and displays, and how they reflected Ghanaian history and culture.

The Elisofon layouts are rich and colorful, featuring elite Akan men and women draped in a medley of gold art objects and detailed fabrics. In addition to the flywhisks on the cover, the article included:

- 1) The Asantehene surrounded by his court and chiefs, with gold hilt ceremonial swords
- 2) Two Asante chiefs and a linguist wearing gold jewelry
- 3) A man wearing a gold tablet headpiece
- 4) An Asante nobleman holding a gold hilt sword with a gold bull attachment
- 5) A gold elephant atop a staff next to an Ebie chief wearing more gold accoutrements
- 6) A Baule chief with two linguists and musicians, two gold-topped staffs held and gold jewelry being worn
- 7) An Ebie chief’s daughter wearing a large ram pendant on her forehead
- 8) A circle of Ebie chiefs with gold-topped staffs and gold jewelry

Everyone looks very serious, proud, and poised. Despite the fact that modernized, Westernized Africa is not visible in these images, there is nothing condescending. In contrast with the ‘Literary Africa’ layouts of 1961, “African Splendor” is dignified and

⁴⁹⁹ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa’s Ancient Splendor Still Gleams in the Akan People’s Golden Art,” *Smithsonian* (January 1973): 22.

restrained. There is no nudity, no dancing, no spears pointed at the camera. The *Smithsonian* magazine was a government publication, so in those matters it could not take the same path as *LIFE*. It had to be apolitical, non-controversial, and appropriate for a wide audience of all ages. The less sensationalistic style of “African Splendor” was also due to the fact that attitudes had shifted in the decade between the publication of *LIFE* and *Smithsonian* magazine.

This was the last article Elisofon wrote on African art before his death in late spring of 1973. The field had changed a lot since he wrote his first article on this topic in 1959 for *The Atlantic*. In the 1970s there were more scholars and academics writing on African art. In “Ancient Splendor” Elisofon even mentioned “all of the burgeoning interest in African culture and art,” however, he also commented how he found “little scholarly research...focused on Ashanti gold.”⁵⁰⁰ This work for the *Smithsonian* proves that Elisofon was not obsolete. He could gain access to major ceremonies, photograph important persons, and view rare art forms. He had the ability to travel widely around Africa, taking bold, high-quality color photographs that were worthy of magazine publications. Most African art scholars were not traveling the whole continent, nor taking magazine-quality images in the 1970s.

1973 African Art of the Dogon, Exhibition

Eliot Elisofon and Lester Wunderman were close friends, and comrades in the study and appreciation of African art. Wunderman primarily collected Dogon art, and held the largest private collection of this material. The Autumn 1973 issue of *African Arts*

⁵⁰⁰ Eliot Elisofon, “Africa’s Ancient Splendor Still Gleams in the Akan People’s Golden Art,” *Smithsonian* (January 1973): 23.

stated: “This is undoubtedly the finest collection of Dogon art in private hands.”⁵⁰¹ The same year Wunderman commented: “assembling the collection was a process of continuous discovery and learning, in which I was assisted by many friends, scholars, collectors, and dealers,” including “Eliot Elisofon, who helped me learn to see.”⁵⁰² In 1988 Wunderman expounded upon this information:

I...met Eliot Elisofon, the great photographer and Africanist, and we became fast friends. Eliot loved African art, and he had photographed, collected, and written about it. He had also made films for television about African life and art.

Eliot and I installed a photographic studio in my apartment where we worked together trying to understand African art through photography. He taught me to see Dogon art as the sculptors meant it to be seen. We re-created the blazing African sun with harsh, hot photographic lighting in our studio. Meanwhile I went on quietly collecting.⁵⁰³

In the early 1970s Wunderman started a pet project with Elisofon and Michael Kan, then curator of Primitive Art and New World Cultures at the Brooklyn Museum: an exhibition exclusively dedicated to his Dogon collection. This was the last exhibition of African art that Elisofon worked on.

African Art of the Dogon: The Lester Wunderman Collection was first shown at the Brooklyn Museum, from April-May of 1973, and then handed over to the International Exhibitions Foundation as a circulating show.⁵⁰⁴ It consisted of

⁵⁰¹ “African Art of the Dogon: The Lester Wunderman Collection” review, *African Arts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973): 72.

⁵⁰² Jean Laude, *African Art of the Dogon: The Myths of the Cliff Dwellers* (New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with the Viking Press, 1973): 14.

⁵⁰³ Lester Wunderman, “Preface,” in Kate Ezra, *Art of the Dogon* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1988): 7.

⁵⁰⁴ See HRC 63.27-28. Also, another exhibition dedicated to Wunderman’s Dogon collection appeared in 1988, complete with an extensive catalog by Kate Ezra, and shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

approximately 103 pieces and traveled to many cities throughout the United States from 1973 through 1975. Tour locations included:

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
 New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana
 William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
 The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio
 Museum of Fine Art, Houston, Texas
 Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Texas
 Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan
 Dayton Art Institute, Ohio
 Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York
 Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio
 Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois⁵⁰⁵

Despite the number of venues, the show was difficult to ‘sell’ to institutions because it was only one ethnic group and from one collector.⁵⁰⁶ But Elisofon regarded this type of exhibition as the show of the future and pitched it as such. On May 19, 1971, Elisofon wrote to Mrs. John Pope of the International Exhibitions Foundation:

I feel that exhibitions which include a few pieces each from many tribes are often confusing to the public and make almost no statement except as to the general esthetic value of this art. We need now to go further into the subject and concentrate on a cohesive area such as the Western Sudan, or better still, a single tribe such as the Dogon who are justly world-famous for the quality of their art. This will help the public understand the subject to a deeper degree.⁵⁰⁷

Elisofon did not seem concerned whether the art shown was from one collection or from twenty. The main goal of the show was to place the art of the Dogon into its larger

⁵⁰⁵ List of Dogon exhibition tour locations, early 1970s, Eliot Elisofon Papers, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (EEPA Z-4, 17.)

⁵⁰⁶ Mrs. John A. Pope, letter to Eliot Elisofon, October 28, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0418.)

⁵⁰⁷ Eliot Elisofon, letter to Mrs. John A. Pope, May 19, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0361.)

cultural context.⁵⁰⁸ Given the scale of Wunderman's collection, he believed that this was entirely possible to do with just his objects.

Elisofon was not the only one that believed shows like *African Art of the Dogon* would have more impact upon an audience by focusing on one ethnic group instead of many groups. *African Arts* compared the Dogon exhibition to the 1971 UCLA Yoruba show *Black Gods and Kings*:

...the sense of cultural form, the very style of a people, was more apparent than in the mixed bunch of masks and carvings often shown at exhibitions that are divided without a coherent context in their presentation, no matter the caliber of the individual pieces. Such a deliberate single regional focus provides the viewer with at least a minimal opportunity to immerse himself in that culture.⁵⁰⁹

Also, Kan was quoted in the *African Arts* review as saying, "We are moving away from the more superficial 'masterpiece' show, which emphasizes only fine objects removed from their African context."⁵¹⁰

The innovative nature of the Dogon exhibition did not elude the press. John Canaday, of *The New York Times*, reviewed the Brooklyn installation on April 5, 1973. He explained, "Brooklyn's Dogon show gives African art back, not so much to the anthropologists as to the Africans, enriched, for us, by the estheticism of the last 50 years but revived by renewed identification with its sources."⁵¹¹ The show identified Dogon

⁵⁰⁸ "'African Art of the Dogon: The Lester Wunderman Collection,' Opening at Brooklyn Museum on April 4, 1973," press release, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0504.)

⁵⁰⁹ "African Art of the Dogon: The Lester Wunderman Collection" review, *African Arts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973): 72.

⁵¹⁰ Michael Kan, quoted in "African Art of the Dogon: The Lester Wunderman Collection" review, *African Arts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973): 72.

⁵¹¹ John Canaday, "In Brooklyn, the Splendid Art of Africa," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1973: 50.

art with the Dogon people, answering the questions: Where were these sculptures created? Who created them? Why were they made? For Canaday the exhibition represented “a new stage, a kind of rounding out, in our understanding of primitive art,” a “rescue of African masks and fetishes from museums of natural history....”⁵¹² The presentation answered many questions, but was not entirely ethnographic in its approach. The art was not lost within the world created by the exhibition. It was still the focus.

According to a separate exhibition description written to promote the show to the International Exhibitions Foundation, the show was meant to “break new ground in the understanding and appreciation of African art.”⁵¹³ It was originally designed as a non-travelling educational show, with a hundred objects and a multi-media accompaniment, which the planners believed would expand the audience, widen the horizon, and intensify the impact of the exhibition.⁵¹⁴ The Brooklyn Museum, known for its educational work for the black community of Brooklyn, intended for the show to have an impression on the local population. The exhibition description stated, “It is hoped by those organizing this exhibition that it will become a prototype for a new way to present the art of other cultures as a total educational, emotional, and esthetic life experience. This should attract

⁵¹² John Canaday, “In Brooklyn, the Splendid Art of Africa,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 1973: 50.

⁵¹³ Lester Wunderman, description for *African Art of the Dogon*, proposed exhibition, October, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0422.)

⁵¹⁴ Lester Wunderman, description for *African Art of the Dogon*, proposed exhibition, October, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0422.)

a wider audience, hopefully including the black community in an art and learning experience which has hitherto been unavailable.”⁵¹⁵

Elisofon was assigned to be Kan’s research consultant and he helped coordinate the connection with the International Exhibitions Foundation. He had worked with the Foundation before when they organized the 1970 National Gallery and Brooklyn Museum exhibition *African Sculpture*. Elisofon had also collaborated with the Brooklyn Museum for its 1954-55 exhibition *Masterpieces of African Art*. He lent them fourteen objects and contributed photographs to the catalog. For the multi-media portion of the Dogon show, Elisofon’s cooperation was key. “Eliot Elisofon, whose books, photographs, motion pictures, scholarship and long involvement in African Art are world renowned, is creating this part of the exhibition,” the exhibition description stated.⁵¹⁶

The show included Elisofon’s Dogon photographs and film footage taken in 1970 and 1972. If Elisofon had lived, he planned on presenting *Black African Heritage* showings at the Dogon exhibition venues along with lectures. The exhibition catalog thanked him for making his “superb visual material on the Dogon” available for use.⁵¹⁷ Elisofon also took all of the plates of Wunderman’s objects in the catalog, even though they are un-credited. Elisofon’s black and white prints were framed and displayed at the show, as well as blown-up for multiple 4’ x 6’ photo panels. These large murals featured

⁵¹⁵ Lester Wunderman, description for *African Art of the Dogon*, proposed exhibition, October, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 2. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0422.)

⁵¹⁶ Lester Wunderman, description for *African Art of the Dogon*, proposed exhibition, October, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0422.)

⁵¹⁷ Jean Laude, *African Art of the Dogon: The Myths of the Cliff Dwellers* (New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with the Viking Press, 1973): 6.

the Bandiagara Escarpment, and scenes of Dogon daily life and architecture (**figs. 7.7-7.8**).

The show was designed to be immersive and encourage participation. Two displays flanked the entrance to the exhibition for its Brooklyn display: an eight-foot “Mother of Masks” for the sigui festival, and a mannequin wearing the complete regalia of a Dogon *kanaga* performer (**fig. 7.9**). Dogon music was played in the galleries as background atmosphere for the show. Separate from the exhibition, but nearby, was a school project area where students were encouraged to build scale models of the Dogon cliff villages using clay and paper. This project can be seen as an extension of Wunderman’s attempt to share the art of the Dogon with others in order to enrich their lives as his had been affected.

There was also a slideshow of 80 photographs on display, projected onto a false wall in the exhibition. This was a combination of Elisofon’s and Wunderman’s color photographs of Dogon villages, architecture, and daily life, as well as the landscapes of the Bandiagara Escarpment region. In addition, Elisofon’s studio shots of Dogon art were included in this slideshow. The images were of select details, planes, forms and sculptural structures that were meant to assist the viewer in his/her understanding and appreciation of Dogon art. Hence, the show featured some of Elisofon’s photographs with the same purpose as those shown at his 1952 *Understanding African Negro Sculpture* exhibition. “The viewer’s eye will be guided by a master photographer, who is an expert and scholar in the field, to see, appreciate and understand the work as if he himself were an expert,”

declared the exhibition description.⁵¹⁸ According to archival documents, the traveling version of the exhibition maintained much of the original presentation, including the multi-media experience.⁵¹⁹

A nineteen-minute film, *African Carving: A Dogon Kanaga Mask*, was created specifically for the exhibition through a splicing of Elisofon's footage for *Black African Heritage* and a *dama* dance performance film held by the Wunderman Foundation.⁵²⁰ The final film, like the slideshow, was projected at the exhibition on another false wall. *African Arts* commented: "The show had many features in common with other recent displays of African art—the utilization of multimedia forms so that an exhibition is no longer merely a display of the artifacts themselves but a part of a presentation that can stimulate other senses than the eye."⁵²¹

Thomas D. Blakely edited *African Carving: A Dogon Kanaga Mask*, with ethnographic consultation from Hans Guggenheim, and the collaboration of Robert Gardner.⁵²² The exhibition description asserted, "the film will enable the audience to know who the [Dogon] people are, where they live and how, and to observe their life, and

⁵¹⁸ Lester Wunderman, description for *African Art of the Dogon*, proposed exhibition, October, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0422.)

⁵¹⁹ In an invoice dated July 5, 1973, Eliot Elisofon Productions gave rights to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to show 47 black and white photo panels and 80 color slides of Dogon art at their institution from July 15-September 2, 1973 with the Wunderman exhibition. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0489.)

⁵²⁰ See HRC 52.5 for information about film, *African Carving: A Dogon Kanaga Mask*.

⁵²¹ "African Art of the Dogon: The Lester Wunderman Collection" review, *African Arts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973): 72.

⁵²² It was created at the Harvard University Film Study Center and can be purchased today from them on DVD. Music and narration accompany the film, not all original to *Black African Heritage*. Additional sound for the film was acquired from the Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

the environment.”⁵²³ The film was finalized after Elisofon’s death, hence why Blakely was the editor. However, it was still structured around Elisofon’s footage of the creation a Dogon *kanaga* mask by the master blacksmith-woodcarver Dolo and his fourteen-year-old son, Samuel, from the village of Ogol. Also seen in *Black African Heritage*, father and son choose a tree to make the mask from, cut it down, take it to a secluded cave, and carve the mask, away from other villagers. Only one man passes by during the creation process; women are not allowed to see a mask being carved. The conclusion of Elisofon’s footage included the same *kanaga* mask being performed with a large group of masked dancers at the village of Bongo.

This long sequence was a key feature of Elisofon’s *Black African Heritage*: “The Bend of the Niger.” The original television script for the series reveals Elisofon’s high regard for the Dogon and their art, feelings also conveyed by the exhibition. It referred to the Dogon as the most famous ‘tribe’ in the Western Sudan, considered to be the greatest sculptors of all Africa. For Dolo’s process it commented that he does not use sketched lines to prepare his work, he has the whole mask in his mind before he begins carving. It also mentioned that there are several theories about meaning of the *kanaga* mask, but that “research in African art today is difficult since the style and content of the sculptures date back many generations and no one living knows its origins.”⁵²⁴ A mysterious statement, which adds to the allure of the art.

⁵²³ Lester Wunderman, description for *African Art of the Dogon*, proposed exhibition, October, 1971, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 63.27, IMG_0422.)

⁵²⁴ Eliot Elisofon, *Black African Heritage* (Group W, The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1972), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: DVDs.

Black African Heritage also included studio footage of African sculpture, including many Dogon works, most from the Wunderman collection. As previously mentioned in Chapter Six, “The Bend of the Niger” concluded with this statement: “The Dogon have retained a great deal of their traditions, but they are not far enough away from our ideas to maintain complete independence. There are only a few tribes left who share with the Dogon the stubborn desire to be themselves. Let us hope that this may never change.”⁵²⁵ This reveals the romantic, nostalgic Elisofon mindset. He consistently lamented the Westernization of cultures he encountered around the world, from New Guinea to Japan, and even Africa. Change is inevitable however, and Elisofon was either bending reality to his own desires or willfully ignorant of that fact.

Many of the press reviews acknowledged Elisofon’s contribution to the atmosphere of the exhibition. David Shirey, writing for *The New York Times* on April 22, 1973, explained:

The most distinctive feature of this exhibition is, perhaps, the general consideration to the Dogon culture. Supplementing the many art objects in the show are utilitarian pieces as well as film and outstanding dramatic photographs by the late Eliot Elisofon.

Therefore, the art does not seem like something that materialized out of thin air. It is shown as a living part of the culture. The art and the culture, art and life, are inseparable. This educational aspect of the show contributes a great deal to our understanding of the art object. Fortunately, too much is not made of the didactic. Such a disproportionate emphasis could diminish the impact of the art and the show as a whole.

The Dogon people live in villages in Mali. The photographs of the people in their natural habitat, bastion-like structures near the Niger – give us an inside glance into their living habits. Their rituals make us more acutely

⁵²⁵ Eliot Elisofon, *Black African Heritage* (Group W, The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1972), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.: DVDs.

aware of the symbolic significance of the sculpture, mirroring their concepts about the beginnings of man and the world.⁵²⁶

Elisofon's work helped to bring the Dogon world into the mind of the exhibition's audience. Some reviewers regarded this show as the next best thing to booking a ticket to Mali and heading out to the Bandiagara Escarpment. Robert Taylor, after viewing the Boston MFA installation of the Dogon show, wrote: "In the beginning, one enters a defile, as it were, of photo-murals by the late photographer and Africanist, Eliot Elisofon. The land springs to life; immense cliffs pocked by forts, gnarled baobab trees, conical straw huts. We are in Dogon country, a rockscape of myth and mystery near the great bend of the Niger River of Mali."⁵²⁷

One could argue that Elisofon's Dogon photographs and film support the vision of timeless Africa, but that critique also applies to Wunderman's images, and those by Richard de Liberto seen in the exhibition catalog. Overall, Elisofon's work helped people appreciate Dogon art. Taylor explained:

To make sense of the Dogon, we must understand them in their total environment. Context is a word one hears frequently in museum work; and it is context which the MFA exhibition provides.

Edmund Barry Gaither, curator of the show here...has done a job that may be described as no less than brilliant in providing a comprehensive setting.

What Gaither has done is to install the pieces – hemispherical cups, towering ceremonial masks, ritual stools for priest and ruler – so that the mysterious relations of the Dogon to their visual language becomes immediate.

Progressing from the corridor of photo-murals, which is not unlike a mountain pass, into a roomful of smaller metal pieces and then into a gallery where the drums, masks, granary shutters and free-standing figures

⁵²⁶ David Shirey, "African Art Display Shown in Brooklyn; African Art in Brooklyn," *The New York Times*, April 22, 1973: 85.

⁵²⁷ Robert Taylor, "African Art of the Dogon," *Boston Globe*, July 17, 1973: 26.

mounted among coves of rock, is an experience that includes various sides of art and society.

...As Wunderman points out, such a society may be considered simply another and perhaps happier alternative human organization. I guess what impressed me most about the fine installation was a poignant phrase: 'The Dogon conceive heaven as being just like earth.'⁵²⁸

This passage is very evocative of an alternate reality; the Dogon live in another world, an ideal world. And according to Taylor, Elisofon's "corridor of photo-murals" transported the viewer to that world, where one could then learn about the art objects in a more genuine manner. It is a realm where museumgoers, the press, and collectors accept African art as a fine art, and its visual expressiveness is properly appreciated. In this case, despite the superficiality and romance of this otherworldliness, perhaps the good outweighed the bad.

An Adventure Interrupted: The End of Two Lives

"While sitting here I've been thinking of how lucky I am to do what I want to, not just on the weekends, but day in and day out, to go everywhere in the world and savor it. Money alone could not have given me the privileges I've enjoyed; experiencing strange landscapes, primitive peoples, exotic arts. For thirty years my camera has been my magic carpet."

- Eliot Elisofon⁵²⁹

When *LIFE* magazine suspended publication at the end of 1972, it was not a surprise to Elisofon. While the magazine was still incredibly popular, the advertising revenue could not match its high circulation costs, as advertisers increasingly looked to the television market. In a February 1973 newspaper interview Elisofon remarked, "It was obvious that television would kill *LIFE*. When I was offered the opportunity to make

⁵²⁸ Robert Taylor, "African Art of the Dogon," *Boston Globe*, July 17, 1973: 26.

⁵²⁹ Eliot Elisofon, *Java Diary* (New York: Macmillan, 1969): 262-63.

television documentaries, I took it.”⁵³⁰ However being a freelance photographer and documentary filmmaker was an even more demanding lifestyle than being a salaried *LIFE* photographer.

I'm 57 and suppose the machine (will) slow down somewhere along the line, but no sign of it yet. I think that I have made tougher trips in the last two years than ever before. All the animal behavior filming in East Africa, as well as climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro to 18,500 ft. in 1966 and last year, really crazy, ten weeks crossing the Congo basin from Bukavu to Kinshasa by jeep, truck and steamer, a fast moving cookbook assignment going from Hawaii to Tahiti, to Korea, Japan and Thailand, and then three months to Indonesia, ten of them (weeks) in a remote game sanctuary on the Western tip of Java. That doesn't seem like slowing up, but accelerating. To where, I don't know.⁵³¹

On March 18, 1973 at the age of sixty-one and four months after the demise of *LIFE*, Elisofon sustained a cerebral hemorrhage in his New York apartment. He was brought to Bellevue hospital for two weeks and then his family moved him to the New York University Medical Center. He never regained consciousness. On April 7th, at two in the morning, Elisofon died.⁵³² Analyzing Elisofon's posthumous reputation, Roy Flukinger wrote: “His career covered many professions—photographer, writer, adventurer, painter, art collector, curator, explorer, filmmaker—and the results far exceeded any need for

⁵³⁰ Maureen D'Honau, “Living in Japan; Feminine Focus: Hellsapoppin Elisofon,” *Mainichi Daily News*, February 12, 1973: 6B. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6556.)

⁵³¹ Eliot Elisofon, “Far East Diary,” unpublished manuscript, December 3, 1968, Bombay, 8 am, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 132. (HRC 56.3, IMG_7282.)

⁵³² “Lensman Elisofon dies at 61,” *Bangor Daily News*, April 9, 1973. Biographical information summarized from Roy Flukinger, “*To Help the World to See: An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective* (Austin: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2000): 3-8, 23.

self-promotion. Indeed, as his archive and legacy so fittingly demonstrate, there is no need to prove what has been there all along.”⁵³³

Is there truly “no need to prove what has been there all along?” Elisofon’s legacy is far from well known in the way that some of his fellow *LIFE* photographers are immediately recognized and remembered. Without access to the Elisofon archives and online resources it would be very difficult to examine his legacy. The publications, both books and magazines; lectures; exhibitions; interviews; newspaper articles; television shows; Hollywood motion pictures; biographic entries; and obituaries all stand as testaments to a successful, multifaceted career. But these projects are so widespread and held in such a variety of places that only a scholar would invest time in researching them. Elisofon’s legacy has not yet been condensed, curated and commodified for mass public consumption in a way that would stand as proof.

Warren Robbins was quoted in an Elisofon obituary in 1973: “Eliot was one of the pioneers in the studying and teaching of appreciation and collecting of African art in this country...He loved Africa. He made innumerable trips there, drove from South Africa to Cairo and really knew the continent, the people and the terrain.”⁵³⁴ A little more than a year after Elisofon’s death, in the August 1974 issue of *African Arts*, Robert and Nancy Nooter’s article, “Eliot Elisofon: Photographer of Africa,” appeared as a tribute to his life and work in Africa.⁵³⁵ It addressed only the highlights of his career and major

⁵³³ Roy Flukinger, “*To Help the World to See:*” *An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective* (Austin: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2000): 8.

⁵³⁴ Warren Robbins, quoted in Jacqueline Bolder, “Eliot Elisofon, 61, Dies: Noted Photographer,” *Star-News* (1973). (HRC 71.17/66.17, IMG_2751.)

⁵³⁵ Robert and Nancy Nooter, “Eliot Elisofon: Photographer of Africa,” *African Arts*, vol. 8, no. 1 (August 1974): 8-13.

activities that were connected with African art. These types of articles pigeonholed Elisofon.

Even when accounts of Elisofon's accomplishments are readily available in obituaries or articles, they offer little deep analysis of his life, career and fame. As an example, the December 6, 2013 article for *Smithsonian* magazine's website on Elisofon offered these observations:

Meet the Real "Most Interesting Man in the World": On view at African Art, a retrospective of Eliot Elisofon, who drank scotch and was allowed to touch the museum's art

The real "Most Interesting Man in the World" didn't sell Dos Equis; Eliot Elisofon took pictures. And yes, Elisofon was allowed to touch the artwork in the museum, because he gave it to them. He also put the Brando in Marlon. And strippers kept photos of him on their dressing tables.

His Latvian last name (accent the first syllable: EL-isofon) so confounded General George S. Patton that the commander simply called him "Hellzapoppin."

...Beginning in 1947, when Elisofon crossed the continent from "Cairo to Capetown," he became the first Western photographer to portray Africa's peoples and traditions without stereotype or derision.⁵³⁶

In 2013 there was the retrospective for the 40th anniversary of the EEPA at the NMAfA, which this Smithsonian.com article highlighted. Most of the recent publicity about Elisofon is tied to this exhibition and his connections to Africa, however, his career cannot be cut up and placed into neat little boxes. Every project he worked on influenced subsequent assignments. But most of the posthumous coverage of Elisofon's life focused on his work in Africa and his donations to the MAA, forcing him into one role:

"Photographer of Africa."

⁵³⁶ Beth Py-Lieberman, "Meet the 'Real Most Interesting Man in the World,'" smithsonian.com, December 6, 2013. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/meet-the-real-most-interesting-man-in-the-world-180949043/#IEQvKJFPZkE15Jwy.99>

This dissertation seeks to complicate this simplified vision of Elisofon. He was not “the first Western photographer to portray Africa’s peoples and traditions without stereotype or derision,” as stated on Smithsonian.com. Perhaps he is legendary. Maybe he did love Africa. But these are superficial statements. While he did create many groundbreaking projects, he also presented as many stereotypes as the next photographer. Again, Elisofon was both ahead of his time, and a man of his time.

Conclusion: Eliot Elisofon and African Art

Much has been written about the changing status of African objects from curiosities, ethnographic materials, and artifacts to fine art that now appears in the hallowed halls of the greatest art museums of the world. By the time Eliot Elisofon first traveled to sub-Saharan Africa for *LIFE* in 1947, the new status of African art was beginning to be recognized. Elisofon's work related to African art helped boost the reputation and appeal of the field by using the mass media's attention of the general public. Over the course of the twentieth century, he contributed to the developing idea that African art was valuable and sophisticated. He wanted the public to understand Africa's aesthetic achievements. However, he was not an art historian and his contributions to the field highlight the question of who is qualified, or even has the right, to judge art, to label something fine art instead of artifact, or even to separate the masterpieces from the mundane. Despite being a commercial photographer, Elisofon's successful contributions to the study and appreciation of African art suggest that people who are not art historians continually shape art history.

An episode that highlights the fact that Elisofon was not an anthropologist, nor an anthropological photographer, occurred in 1961. He was invited to be a member of an expedition to film native life in New Guinea, organized by Robert Gardner, the Peabody Museum, and Harvard's Film Study Center.⁵³⁷ During this trip, Gardner produced his famed ethnographic documentary *Dead Birds* on the Dani.⁵³⁸ Elisofon arrived later than

⁵³⁷ The interior of New Guinea would eventually be 'suppressed' by the Dutch government, but at this point in time it was one of the last areas on Earth not yet touched by Westernization, though missionaries had already come to the island.

⁵³⁸ The *Current Biography* 1972 entry on Elisofon stated that he did the camerawork for the film *Dead Birds*. This is an error, as Gardner did most of the filming himself, and Elisofon most likely

the rest of the team and found himself in an unfamiliar and frustrating situation. Since this was an ethnographic project, the team was only allowed to observe. Elisofon referred to this as an “anthropological straight-jacket.”⁵³⁹ He could not ask the Dani to hunt nor dance nor prepare for battle. He could only photograph what they were already doing. Elisofon’s patience ran thin and he left New Guinea a month later when *LIFE* messaged him to go on an assignment elsewhere.

Elisofon often had an idea or image in his mind of how a scene should be photographed long before he set foot in the location. This habit was partially due to his personality, always thinking of the next step, but it was also a consequence of years spent working from magazine scripts. To plot out the where, when, and who of every shoot was a necessity for a viable production timeline. With wildlife photography, Elisofon was more accustomed to the sit-and-wait mentality, although it did frustrate him and he got around it every chance he could. For example, for the ‘Literary Africa’ *LIFE* photo essay (1961), he had his assistant, Priya Ramrakha, chase down a herd of zebras with a Volkswagen so that they would be running in Elisofon’s shots. For humans, Elisofon was used to being their director, constructing the idea/image he had created during the planning stages.

never even touched a video camera in New Guinea. Elisofon’s name does not even appear anywhere in the credits in the film. This calls into question the reliability of these biographic collections.

⁵³⁹ Peter Matthiessen, letter to Elin Elisofon, March 26, 1986, quoted in Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1517.)

Despite the continued categorization of Elisofon as an Africanist, he photographed people all over the world, from a variety of cultures, classes, and economic backgrounds. In her biography of her father, Elin Elisofon referred to him as a “pictorial anthropologist.”⁵⁴⁰ He was always looking for the oldest, purest forms of art. There is really no such thing as a pure art form, but he wanted to find it. He believed in their value, and he was motivated by what he thought would look best in photographs – ritual costumes and adornments, dancing, ceremonies, unique activities, native art forms – items, people, activities, shapes that would pop for the camera.

Elisofon put a high value on old traditions, regarding them as genuine and pure. It may be said that he was stuck in the past, but, in general, the world he regarded as ‘reality’ never existed. He was idealistic, and did not want cultures to change, to Westernize, to be diluted. For example, writing in 1955, Elisofon discussed his impressions of post-war Japan:

The serene landscape has been stuck like a pincushion with endless telegraph poles and high voltage towers, billboards no less obtrusive because of their charming calligraphy are liberally scattered between motifs reminiscent of famous old woodcuts....⁵⁴¹

Is Japan perfect? It is perfect in its perfection and ghastly in its imitations. The garden and temple can never be surpassed but the cheap ideas borrowed unwittingly from the West are a seed that will fast throttle a culture sprung out of centuries of evolution.⁵⁴²

⁵⁴⁰ Elin Elisofon, Elisofon Biography Draft, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 79a.1-4/72.2-5, IMG_1535.)

⁵⁴¹ Eliot Elisofon, “A Japanese Kaleidoscope,” manuscript draft, 1955, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 1. (HRC 53.7.)

⁵⁴² Eliot Elisofon, “A Japanese Kaleidoscope,” manuscript draft, 1955, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 3. (HRC 53.7.)

Elisofon had a particular image in his mind about Japan – kimonos, woodcut prints, scrolls, beautiful gardens, majestic temples and shrines – and when he did not find it easily, he was bothered. The billboards, smokestacks, and telephone poles annoyed him.

In a similar manner, Elisofon had an image of Africa in his mind long before he traveled there, but this was not ‘real’ Africa. The ‘Africa’ he projected in his work cannot be quickly labeled as wrong or right, good or bad. It is much more conceptually complex. Elisofon did operate within Western constructions of adventure and exoticism. Instead of breaking down Elisofon’s image of ‘Africa’ to construct an opposing image of the ‘true’ Africa, this dissertation has examined the various contexts of his ‘Africa,’ looking at both the positive and negative aspects of his work.

In her article, “Safari Adventure,” Amy J. Staples wrote a brief analysis of early twentieth-century African safari films. She described how they showed “African cultures with spectacular dances, colorful costumes, and exotic practices,” which “became emblematic of the continent.”⁵⁴³ The belief in a timeless Africa spoke to the white European romanticization of the continent. These safari films depicted “Africa as populated by iconic tribal peoples.” Elisofon contributed to this construction of an iconic Africa. “African people were often portrayed as living in isolated, traditional villages and eager to perform welcome dances, cultural rituals and subsistence activities for the tourist’s camera,” Staples explained. The same description could be used for Elisofon’s

⁵⁴³ Amy J. Staples, “Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa,” in *Film History: An International Journal*, vol. 18 (2006): 394.

African image world. “These cultures were, in fact, produced as *spectacle* through photography and motion picture film,” Staples concluded.⁵⁴⁴

Elisofon’s experience of African art and Africa was constructed through his camera lens, and his photographs were taken to be manipulated by the popular media. The fact that most of Elisofon’s African photographs only included blacks or whites, not both together, is one example of Elisofon’s minimization of Westernization in these pictures, and his construction of an ideal Africa. Westerners were usually hidden away from African life in his images, and, in turn, white people had their own African world when they were photographed. Elisofon probably believed that a Western presence in his images of African art creation and performance ruined his attempt to convey the visual pleasure and spectacle of ‘authentic’ Africa.

However despite his manipulation of reality, Elisofon’s images are still used and valuable to publishers and researchers today. The EEPA tracks the most frequently used images by month and posts this information online.⁵⁴⁵ For May 2014, 29 out of 31 of these top images were taken by Elisofon, even though the Archives also hold thousands of photographs by other people, including Herbert M. Cole, Simon Ottenberg, Constance Stuart Larrabee, Emile E.O. Goria, and Philip L. Ravenhill, as well as hundreds of postcards. The image use has been tracked since January 2009 and Elisofon’s photographs are always in the majority each month. Even 40 years after his death, his pictures still play a large role in influencing public perception about Africa and African

⁵⁴⁴ Amy J. Staples, “Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa,” in *Film History: An International Journal*, vol. 18 (2006): 394.

⁵⁴⁵ “Collection Highlights: Top Images,” Smithsonian Institution Research Information System, <http://sirismm.si.edu/siris/topimages.htm>.

art. Just as they have helped to commodify African art, Elisofon's photographs are commodities today, offered up for easy consumption. They still speak for African art, even though they are decades old and their production context is rarely discussed. However, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the photographs tell us more about the society that produced them, than the culture that produced those objects.

A Life of Influencing the Language of African Art

Dissatisfied with the 1970 National Gallery *African Sculpture* show, Warren Robbins took it as his responsibility to create a better show. He organized *The Language of African Art* to appear at the National Portrait Gallery from July-September 1970. More than 300 of the 425 objects in the exhibition were from the Museum of African Art collection. The rest were loaned from other public and private collections. Elisofon lent thirteen objects to this show.

In a June 8, 1970 letter to Elisofon, Robbins stated, "As you can see, we have put together with your support and that of others, a first rate show which many people feel is much better than the National Gallery one, despite the latter's very special material. Our installation is completely different – warmer, closer to the viewer, much more informative."⁵⁴⁶ Included in the "many people" who felt that Robbins' show was "much better than the National Gallery one," was *New York Times* writer John Canaday. His review for this exhibition began:

Last February, 119,000 people attended the elaborate and rather disappointing exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, and

⁵⁴⁶ Warren Robbins, letter to Eliot Elisofon, June 8, 1970, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0197 thru IMG_0198.)

another 36,000 saw it in a somewhat improved presentation at the Brooklyn Museum before it closed there last month.

I wish that each of these 155,000 people could see another African exhibition that has turned up unexpectedly. It was unexpected even by the organizing institutions. Washington's young Museum of African Art, which had the idea, negotiated the loans, and achieved an exemplary installation in quarters borrowed for the summer from the National Portrait Gallery...all in a matter of 10 weeks.⁵⁴⁷

What made *Language* so different, so much better? Canaday's review was titled "In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change." Of course, it could be argued that the 'language' presented was really Warren Robbins' curatorship, but still Canaday insisted "it is the only exhibition I have ever seen where African sculpture is allowed to speak for itself, although we have been putting words into its mouth for a long time now."⁵⁴⁸ This is a large statement, but has some validity. In many of the exhibitions previously discussed in this dissertation, a louder voice was heard above that of African art.

As Canaday explained in this review, the voice of the Westerner has truly steered the presentation of African art. His description of this situation could easily be applied to Elisofon's journey with African art over the previous four decades: "Usually we subject it to the rhetoric of 20th-century esthetics, identifying it with the School of Paris and German expressionism, or at the other extreme we treat it as illustrative material for ethnological dissertations in museums of natural history."⁵⁴⁹ Elisofon had grown up seeing 'primitive' art in natural history museums. He understood this type of presentation. When he became involved with African art, he did frame it in "the rhetoric of 20th-

⁵⁴⁷ John Canaday, "In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

⁵⁴⁸ John Canaday, "In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

⁵⁴⁹ John Canaday, "In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

century esthetics, identifying it with the School of Paris and German expressionism.” We have seen this in his work on the subject throughout his career.

Elisofon, and many others, believed that in order for African art to be considered as fine art, its ethnological framing had to be minimized. What we see in *The Sculpture of Africa* in 1958, as an example, is a response to the anthropological perspective that treated the objects as artifacts only, not as aesthetic entities. The imagery of the objects dominated, not the information. However, as an opposing voice, Canaday was uncomfortable with this type of simplified presentation. He wrote:

Between the two [aesthetic vs. anthropological], although weaned on the former, I have lately inclined toward the latter approach, and can remember writing an enthusiastic report on the new Hall of Africa at New York’s Museum of Natural History when it was opened last year.

It was good to see African sculpture attached to its own world, even to a remote and synthetic echo of its own world, after having seen it for so long exhibited as material for esthetic consideration alone, extracted from all contexts that accounted for its creation.⁵⁵⁰

The fine art museum versus the natural history museum. Two Western constructs, neither of which provides a satisfactory display for African art. In both, it exists as a foreign entity. Neither one is its true world. And yet, the question has become ‘Where do we show African art?’ and is no longer, ‘Why do we show African art?’

Canaday was not echoing the public response we had seen in the 1950s, such as ‘Will we ever get used to this?’, ‘This isn’t for everyone,’ and “It was ‘bongo, bongo, bongo,’ at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts last night.” Instead he conducted an intelligent examination of how the West could best serve African art. While he was

⁵⁵⁰ John Canaday, “In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

initially enamored of the new installation of the Hall of Africa, his thought process did change. He explained:

However, without shifting allegiance in principle, I must admit that on another visit a few weeks ago the finest sculptures in the Hall of Africa, which formerly I had enjoyed spotting in the crowd, did seem to be suffering under the weight of their neighbors and the complexity of the subject matter.

Their inherent beauty as works of art was indeed a bit dimmed by the didactic purpose they were serving. "You can't have everything" would seem to be the lesson of that. But not so.⁵⁵¹

Canaday deemed the *Language* exhibition as the answer to this perpetual conundrum of how to display African art: "Let's avoid the word 'compromise' and say that the Museum of African Art's Washington show fuses the two opposing attitudes toward African sculpture to the advantage of both."⁵⁵²

African art had transformed from purely anthropological artifact, to fine art under Western terms, and arrived at a new destination where it was recognized as art in its own context. Some ethnographic information was included with the objects, but not too much, as Canaday explained in his article:

The point is made when you begin reading labels. Explanatory labels are anathema to museum curators and are usually a bore to the public, and are naturally passed by, but these labels are read because they are terse and clear on a fascinating subject.

They do no more than explain the original function of each piece, with any immediately pertinent extensions into tribal beliefs and reference to specific details in the example at hand – all of which, surely, sounds elementary enough.

But what happens is that each work takes on individual life in this particularized treatment. Even a representative of one of the most familiar

⁵⁵¹ John Canaday, "In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

⁵⁵² John Canaday, "In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

types – a Senufo ancestor figure, a Fanti fertility doll, a Dogon granary door – becomes not a good or bad example of its kind but an eloquent spokesman of the invisible forces believed in by its people....

“The Language of African Art” has an educational value that any number of exhibitions could have in whatever branch of art you want to mention, but is not often met.⁵⁵³

The labels did not include more information than any other piece of art would have with it at any other show. African art had come into its own, being seen and appreciated, and valued on its own terms. It was no longer beautiful because it looks like a Picasso, or valuable because of its tribal background. It stood on its own as art.

In a way this is the journey Elisofon had been on all along, bringing African art into the public eye. Then as he did this, reacting to the various ways in which it was done. Elisofon’s early fine art studio photography of African art, without cultural context, was an extreme response to the purely anthropological viewpoint. But then the pendulum came back part way to blend the two fields, serving the art better and encouraging greater appreciation. Elisofon was always interested in documenting the creation, use and performance of African arts; for example, the complete costume and dance of a masked character. This approach to African art helped him understand the art, and then convey that information and comprehension to the public. But it was really only during the 1960s and 70s that he was able to push more of his field photographs into popular media. Today, as Amy J. Staples stated, “For many audiences, Elisofon’s photographs of art in situ and

⁵⁵³ John Canaday, “In Its Own Language, For a Welcome Change,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 1970. (HRC 63.22/58.22, IMG_0220 thru IMG_0207.)

African artists (in some cases, named individuals) have contributed to the authenticity and aesthetic value of museum objects.”⁵⁵⁴

She continued, “The meanings created by photographic images are not static but continue to change as they circulate and are re-interpreted in new museum settings and public venues of exhibition and display.”⁵⁵⁵ For Elisofon’s images, we often think of them in museum settings, exhibitions, public displays, but during his lifetime they had a much more complex existence. By the end of his life his photographs had seeped into the collective public psyche. In a book review for *The New York Times* on Dec. 2, 1971, Anatole Broyard explained: “...if you study the sculpture of tribes like the Dogon and Benin, it’s difficult to imagine what Western civilization could offer them...without adulterating their cultures. Or simply look at the landscapes of Africa, particularly those photographed by Eliot Elisofon, and ask yourself whether there is anything in the world worth sacrificing them for.”⁵⁵⁶

It is difficult to depict Elisofon’s work on African art as a single-minded crusade. His projects were purposeful, and his photography was an extension of himself. His work did influence the world around him; each of his projects took on a life of its own, as this dissertation demonstrates. One could say he campaigned for global understanding and the

⁵⁵⁴ Amy J. Staples, “Visualism and the Authentication of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 185.

⁵⁵⁵ Amy J. Staples, “Visualism and the Authentication of the Object: Reflections on the Eliot Elisofon Collection at the National Museum of African Art,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 185.

⁵⁵⁶ Anatole Broyard, “Books of The Times: Africa, Before and After,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 1971. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6544.)

universal dignity of man, perhaps in a naïve way. But he knew that photography was inherently problematic; a photograph is not reality and can be a falsification.

Did Elisofon become more serious about African art and Africa as time went on? Did he gain more respect for African art? Studying his career it is evident that what began as awe moved toward respect and understanding. Elisofon had limited control over the final product of any project he worked on, but particularly at *LIFE* magazine where every photo essay was a team effort. But even with this caveat in mind, his projects became less sensationalistic; and gained an increasing specificity. By the end of his life the Western world was beginning to recognize that Africa was not a playground for entertainment, but a place with valuable history, culture, traditions, and people that should be respected and admired.

The modern separation of African art history and African studies did not exist for Elisofon. They were one and the same thing. His work publicizing Africa supported his work on African art, and vice versa. But increased specialization of academic fields has placed African art squarely into the realm of pure scholarship. In the field of African art history today, there is no room for another Elisofon. There is a line between appreciation and pure study.

At the beginning of *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, Tom Beidelman commented, “One of the nice things about studying African art is that we are all so ill at ease doing it.”⁵⁵⁷ The field is so complex and filled with so many potential controversies that many Africanists approach the subject with caution, constantly questioning their own

⁵⁵⁷ Tom Beidelman, quoted in Enid Schildkrout, *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 1.

perceptions and motives in their scholarship. Elisofon had no such doubts. He knew he had a valuable role to play for African art history even before it had fully germinated as an academic field. Elisofon once commented: “I’m willing to take a chance. You must be willing to commit yourself, to die for it, not for a war, but for a love.”⁵⁵⁸ Though he was talking about his career in general, he could have been discussing the way that he approached African art. He tirelessly pursued the subject from all angles, as photographer, researcher, collector, filmmaker, etc. But overall, he was an advocate for its wider appreciation; he wanted others to admire African art as much as he did.

Like the artists he discussed at a 1953 conference, Elisofon worked to “extend man’s limited vision, to expose mankind to ‘new beauties, new pleasures,’ and ‘new understanding.’”⁵⁵⁹ He once said, “If we do not attempt the new because it is unfamiliar, we will not progress.”⁵⁶⁰ African art had been consistently judged through the Western definition of fine art. The twentieth century was a turning point in this mindset, and Elisofon participated in this transition. Mankind needed to think broader, more universally, about what was art, and what art could be.

This dissertation has provided a scholarly study of the career and accomplishments of Eliot Elisofon in relation to his work on and interest in African art. Such a study has never been produced before. Overall, Elisofon was a famous *LIFE*

⁵⁵⁸ Eneid Route, “Hellzapoppin’ Elisofon,” *San Juan Star Magazine* (January 4, 1970): 2-3. (HRC 71.11/66.11, IMG_6535.)

⁵⁵⁹ Eliot Elisofon, “The Ethics and Morals of Creative Expression,” lecture for Conference on Moral Standards at the Jewish Theological Seminary 50th Anniversary, September 13-15, 1953, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 53.11, IMG_3844.)

⁵⁶⁰ Eliot Elisofon, “The Ethics and Morals of Creative Expression,” lecture for Conference on Moral Standards at the Jewish Theological Seminary 50th Anniversary, September 13-15, 1953, Eliot Elisofon Paper and Photographic Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin: 4. (HRC 53.11, IMG_3844.)

magazine photographer who has not been studied. There are no published books on Elisofon, no prior dissertations. His commercial work has rarely been discussed, let alone more specific aspects of his career. The projects this dissertation has presented are only a small portion of his activities. But they do enlighten us as to how much commercial photography has shaped art history, especially via public opinion and interest.

My work has also examined the history of taste and collecting, commercial aspects of African art history, social and cultural history in connection with African art, the impact of photography on the field, and how African art appeared in the mainstream in the twentieth century. Just as African art had many layers of meaning and significance for African peoples, it was also multivalent for the other societies that collected, stored, and exhibited it. Dealers, critics, artists, experts, and collectors had forged the reputation of African art. But once it became part of mainstream culture, African art took on additional significance, meaning and identities — both good and bad. It became a cultural touchstone and proof of civilization for some; for others it represented the Other and therefore was sexy, dangerous, and even frightening. Yet by the end of Elisofon's life, African art was being written about, photographed, and exhibited as fine art, with an increasing awareness and sensitivity to its purposes, uses and aesthetics in the context of African cultures.

The biggest question of the age was: Now that we have determined that Africans created great art and had a glorious past, what does this mean for their present and future? Fine African art was used as proof of the equality of the races, and an argument that Africans were just as capable as Westerners (if not more so, as some argued). Since Africa had an illustrious history that meant that it could have a bright future. This was a

potent concept for the civil rights movement and for the many African nations that were seeking independence from European powers. The public slowly realized that colonization had not been the savior of Africa, but had been a hindrance to these great, “lost” civilizations. African art sat at the heart of these discussions, a cultural beacon to rally around and celebrate, both in Africa and in the United States.

Elisofon’s career introduces a number of interesting topics to explore. For example, how African art was connected to the aesthetics of popular publications in the mid-twentieth century. We often discuss how African art is displayed in various types of museums. How was African art displayed in magazines and books created for the general public, such as *LIFE*? Public perception and awareness of artworks has such an impact on their value, both to collectors and to institutions. Yet only recent studies from the past fifteen years have examined *LIFE* magazine as a historical topic. *LIFE*, TIME, Inc., or *LIFE* staffers produced the majority of publications on the magazine. The common format for these texts is an oversize photographic compilation with little scholarly input. In general, historians, not art historians, have written on the magazine. The *LIFE* photographer and his/her photographs have been the endpoint for art historical studies. The images became fine art objects, suitable for museum walls and aesthetic appreciation, but removed from their initial context. This dissertation has gone back to the original publications and settings of Elisofon’s projects in an attempt to investigate how the projects were generated and edited, and how the public viewed them during his lifetime.

There have been no extensive examinations of how African art was displayed in *LIFE*. The same can be said of Africa and Africans. This dissertation is one step into this

unexplored territory. By approaching Elisofon's life through the lens of African art studies, I take a rare approach. In addition, few African art dissertations have been written on collecting and the history of taste for African art. It tends to be a subject addressed in articles and book chapters. Projects also usually focus on an earlier time period, at the beginning of the twentieth century. This dissertation examines the meaning of African art for a different generation of collectors, critics and the general population.

From a broader historiographic perspective, this dissertation contributes to the tradition of reflexive, self-analytical research that has been done in the field of African art history. Africanists use Elisofon's photographs on a daily basis, but rarely understand the production context of them. They are still a valuable source of information, but they are more a record of Elisofon's work and objectives than a record of Africa. In this way, I echo previous Elisofon scholars: be careful how you use his photographs in presentations, publications, and classrooms. Do not take them at face value, but instead explore their rich history. Few Africanists know about Elisofon's many African art-related projects, such as his articles, exhibitions and studio photographs, though they recognize his name and most famous images. For the projects they do know about, for instance, *The Sculpture of Africa*, Africanists have little idea of Elisofon's level of involvement. But during his lifetime, Elisofon's images, articles, exhibitions, and more were repeatedly presented to the American public via the mass media. By examining commercial photography, and mass media representations of African art, this dissertation expands the typical techniques for studying how the field itself was shaped.

By approaching the largely overlooked career of Eliot Elisofon through his impact on the appreciation of African art in the United States, this dissertation brings to light the

larger context of his well-publicized images, the vigor and depth of his involvement in African art-related projects, and his passion for sharing African art with the public. Elisofon's interests and interpretations influenced the presentation and very presence of African art in the mainstream. Ultimately, by tracing Elisofon's African art-related activities, this dissertation shows a microcosm of how African art transformed in the American public's eye from ethnographic object to primitive art to fine art, and the impact one individual had on that metamorphosis.

Figures

Introduction and State of the Literature

Fig. 0.1. Eliot Elisofon.

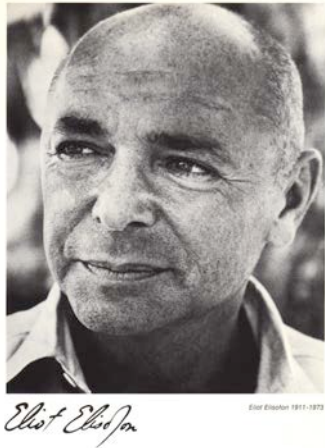


Fig. 0.2. Elisofon's photograph of a Shilluk woman on the cover of *LIFE*, November 20, 1950 –The first time a black woman appeared on the cover of *LIFE*.

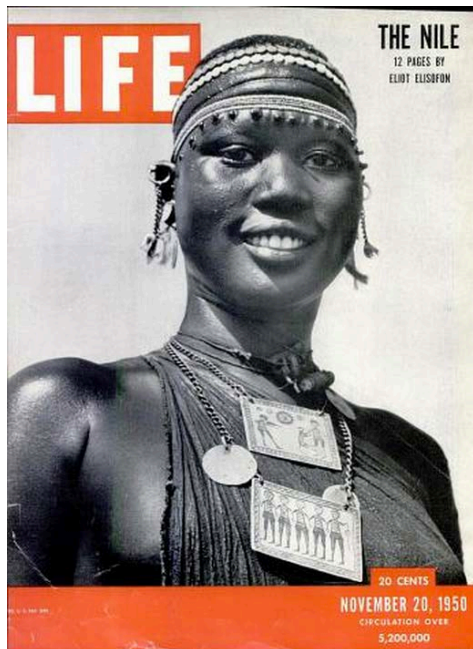
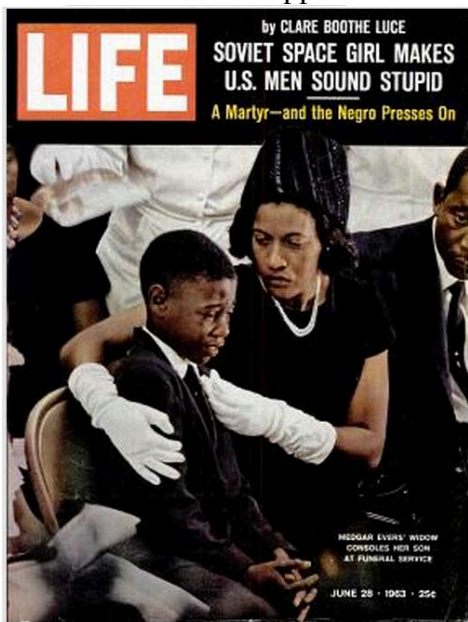
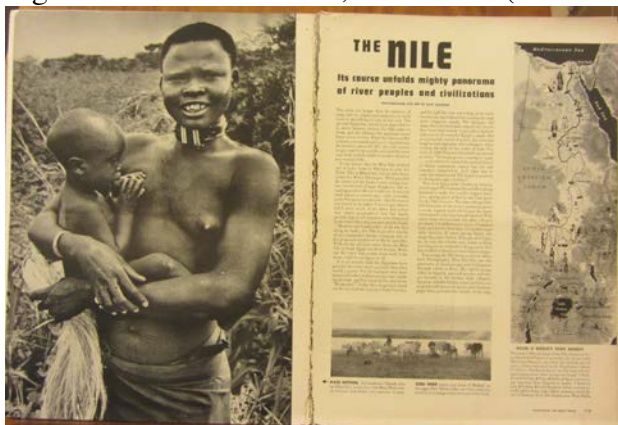



Fig. 0.3. Myrlie Evers and her son on the cover of *LIFE*, June 28, 1963 – The second time a black woman appeared on the cover of *LIFE*.






Figs. 0.4-0.8. *LIFE* article, “The Nile” (November 20, 1950) with images by Elisofon.




**ONLY THE RIVER KEEPS
NOMADS FROM DEATH**



HERE A MIRACLE PASSED



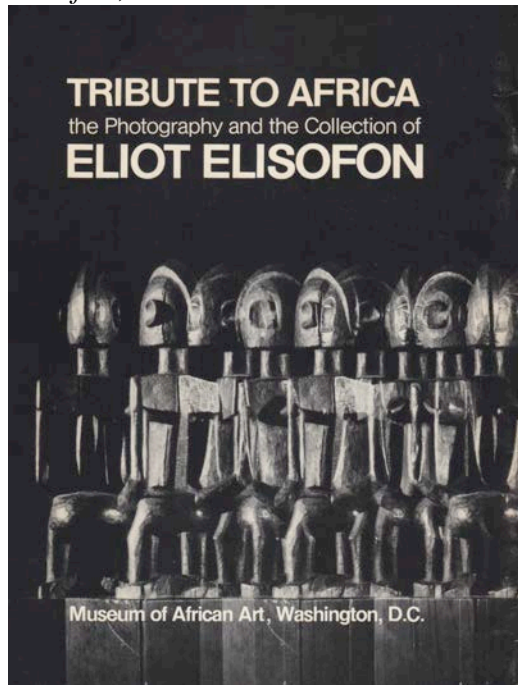
HERE A MIRACLE PASSED



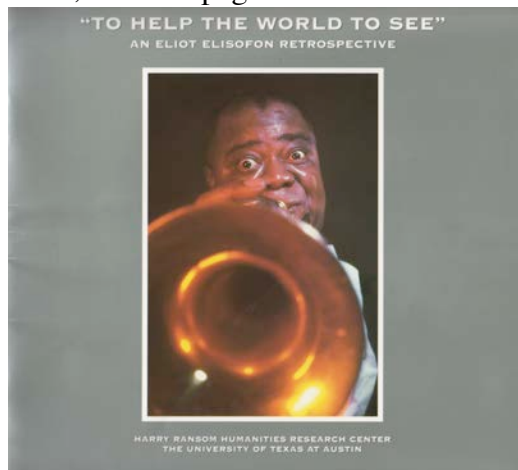
**CAIRO AND THE DELTA
ARE AT END OF JOURNEY**



Fig. 0.9. Cover of the *Tribute to Africa: The Photography and Collection of Eliot Elisofon*, 1974.

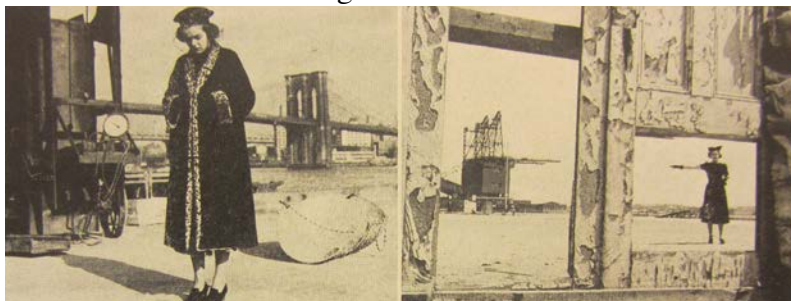


Figs. 0.10-0.11. Cover of "*To Help the World to See:*" *An Eliot Elisofon Retrospective*, 2000; and title page.



Chapter One – Elisofon Biography and Career Overview

Fig. 1.1. Elisofon’s Lower East Side, New York City, street photography of fashion models in industrial settings.



Figs. 1.2-1.3. Elisofon’s *LIFE* articles on tintype photographers and Jewish holidays, September 20, 1937.

SPEAKING OF PICTURES . . .

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THE SHELLY MOSES CANADIAN BEARS WITH A PIECE OF A BOAT

THE COUPLE BROUGHT THEIR FANSIDE TO BROADWAY ON SECOND AVE.

BACK SHOWN OF BARBARA (AND OTHER PEOPLE'S CARDS FOR BAKINGHOUSE)

JEWIS CELEBRATE THEIR HOLIEST DAYS FROM ROSH HASHONAH TO YOM KIPPUR

Page 11

In synagogues throughout the world, from Sept. 3 to Sept. 15, Jews celebrated the chief holy period of the Hebrew year. The holy days, called the Yomim Noraim, began on Rosh Hashonah, the Jewish New Year's Day, which coincided in the year 1937 (differed from the time when Jewish tradition says that God created the world). The holy days ended on Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, when all good Jews fast from sundown to sundown.

The first, second and last days of the holy period found every good Jew in his synagogue, working at special services performed only on these occasions. On these pages appear the first photographs ever made of these holiest of Jewish rituals. *LIFE* was permitted to take the pictures, through the courtesy of Rabbi Bernard Lurie (left, above) at a special service in the synagogue of a Jewish old-father home in Manhattan, the House of the Sons and Daughters of Israel. In this picture appear synagogue the children or men's hats, whose cover reveal guarantees the Rosh Hashonah service, was taken by Yoram Wildman (below of bottom of page), chief minister of the house. Most of the inmates are in their 80's and 90's.

Carlin Loebman Kneels to mark the special prayer of Rosh Hashonah, called the "Telling Names." Congregants have a ritual to read the scriptures from before prayer books.

Jews Sweep Street in prayer except for the special services on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur. In this picture the Cantor has assumed the "mournful position," leading forward.

Jews Go Down to the River on Rosh Hashonah to empty their pockets into the water, about prayer. In this one the waters are those of New York's East River at South Street.

The cantor covers his face as he pronounces a blessing. A cantor is a lay assistant in ritual.

The cantor is blown. Behind the ceremonial dignity is not of the Cantor.

The Cantor is held to his feet by a member of the congregation. This is a gesture of respect but every other movement in the prayer is prescribed by Hebrew ritual.

Fig. 1.4. Elisofon's *LIFE* cover photograph of Carol Bruce, September 9, 1940; his first *LIFE* cover.

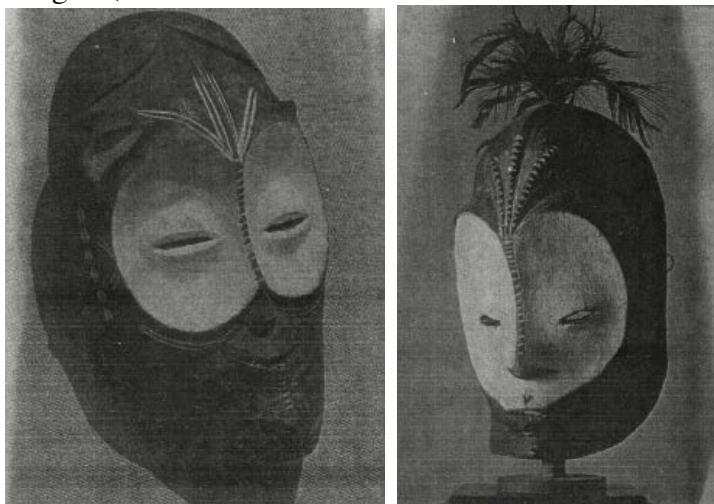


Chapter Two – 1947: Africa or Bust

Figs. 2.1-2.2. *LIFE* article, “England’s King Visits South Africa,” sample pages, March 10, 1947, including Elisofon photographs.



Figs. 2.3-2.6. Examples of Elisofon's photographs of objects in the Musée de la Vie Indigène, 1947.



Figs. 2.7-2.13. Kuba bridge, sculptural poles, Kuba man with hat and pipe, 1947.





Figs. 2.14-2.15. Kuba capital of Mushenge, blacksmith forge, and King's bedroom, 1947.

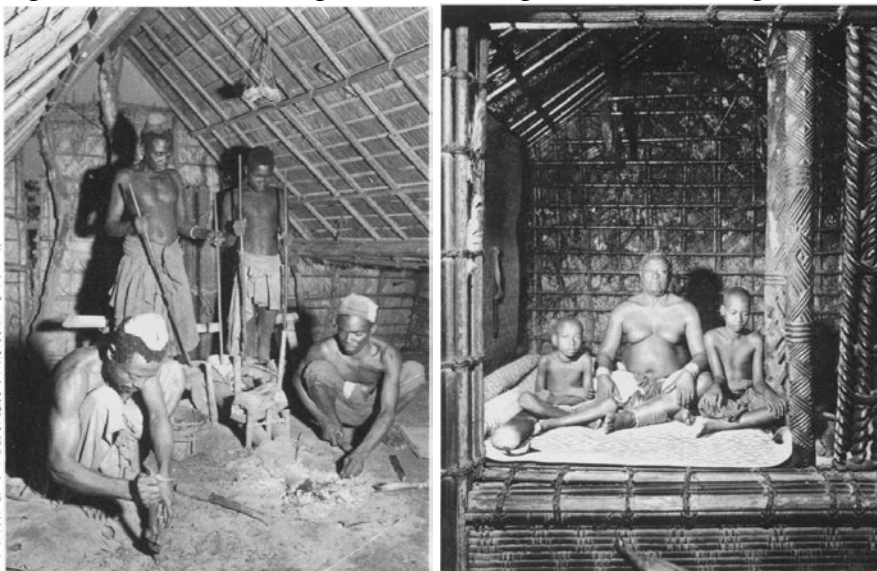


Fig. 2.16. Kuba King's wives dancing and playing music, 1947.

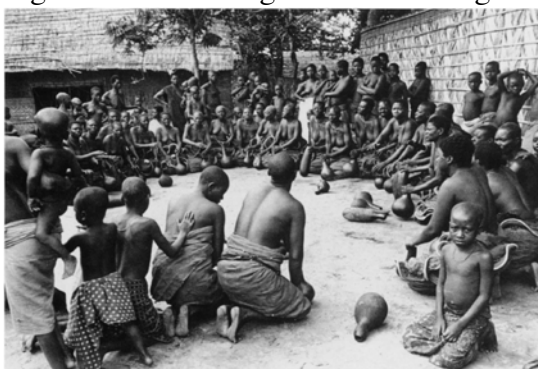
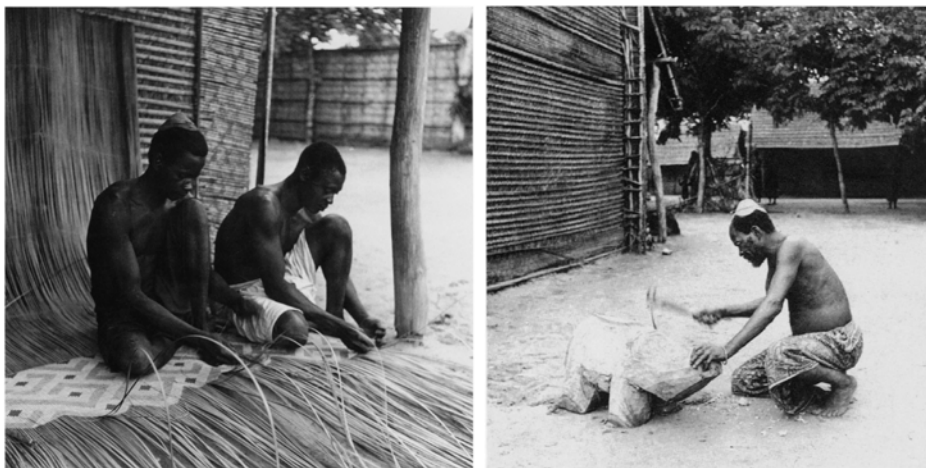


Fig. 2.17. Making of Kuba velours, 1947.



Figs. 2.18-2.19. Kuba men weaving a floor mat and carver with animal-shaped backrest, 1947.



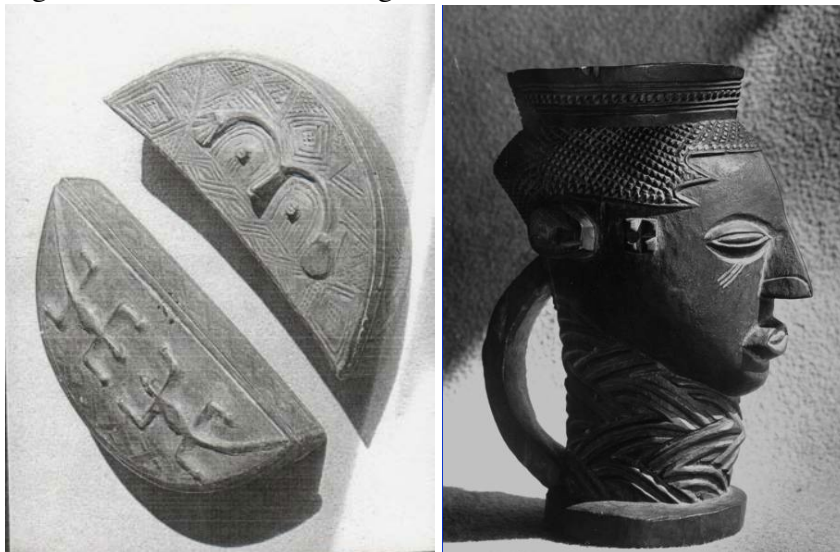
Figs. 2.20-2.22. Kuba King in his coronation costume, 1947.



Fig. 2.23. Elisofon with the King, caption: "Elisofon & Friend: The King adores ground glass," 1947.



Figs. 2.24-2.25. Some of the gifts Elisofon received from the Kuba King, 1947.



Figs. 2.26-2.27. Kuba King wearing the necklace Elisofon gifted him, 1947.

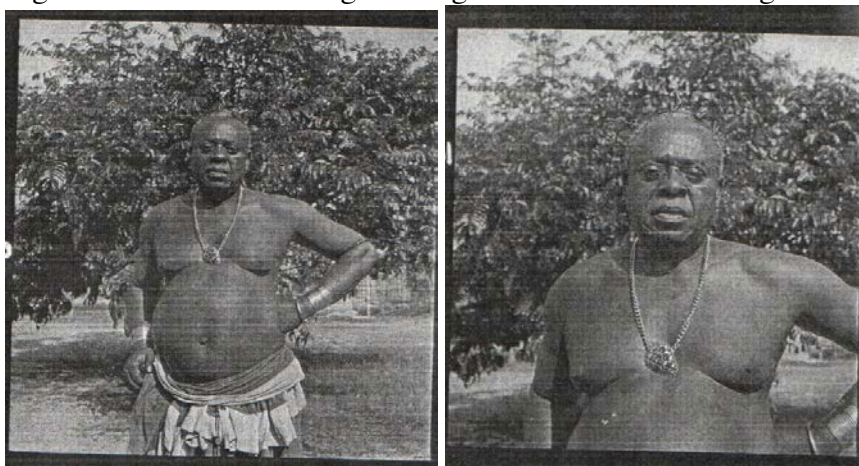
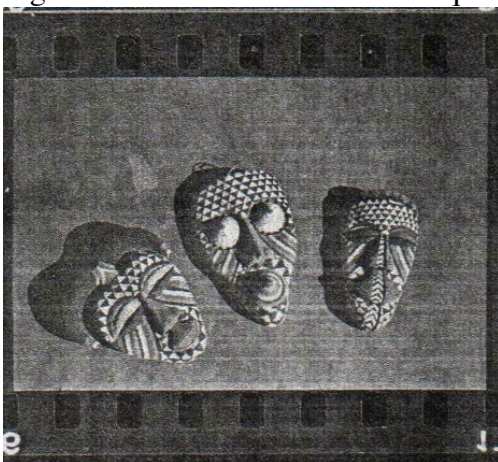


Fig. 2.28. Mask Elisofon received from the King, 1947.



Fig. 2.29. Kuba masks Elisofon acquired on the 1947 trip.



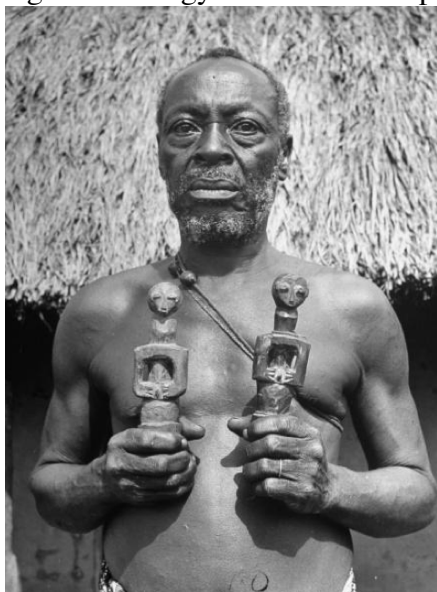
Figs. 2.30-2.31. Kuba man dancing in mask, impromptu performance, 1947.



Fig. 2.32. Songye child with power figure, 1947.



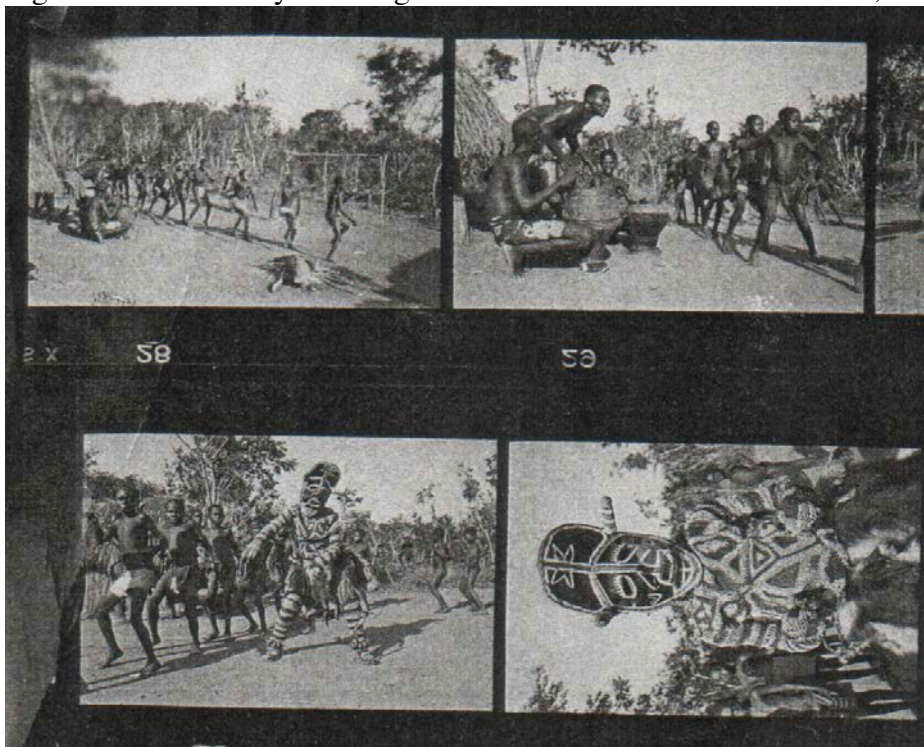
Fig. 2.33. Songye man with two power figures, 1947.



Figs. 2.34-2.35. Songye power figures on their platform, 1947.



Fig. 2.36. Luluwa boys training in the forest with masked instructor, 1947.



Figs. 2.37-2.39. LIFE article, "African Big Shot," pages, March 31, 1947, images by Elisofon.

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Red Cap

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AFRICAN BIG SHOT

A fat, black monarch of the Congo rules his tribe with a heavy hand

Probably the most strongly autocratic ruler in the world is a big, fat-faced man named Roger Mbatia, the former emperor of a large, centrally located kingdom in the heart of the Belgian Congo. Roger's rule of Congo was not new to slaves. When he was born, his people were still in the grip of a cruel and oppressive system. It is the king who brings to his people the light of civilization, the peace and order that have been denied them for centuries.

He speaks in a thick and somewhat guttural tone. In his court a custom called the "kiss of the monarch" is practiced. The monarch's 1,500 wives of many different tribes are the monarch's 1,500 wives of many different tribes. He has a vast collection of slaves, numbering a total of 10,000. He is the monarch of a vast empire, which encompasses the entire Congo basin. He is a monarch of a vast empire, which encompasses the entire Congo basin. He is a monarch of a vast empire, which encompasses the entire Congo basin.

He thinks American slaves are fascinating.

127

SINUS SUFFERERS



Remarkable New Heat Treatment...

NOW... get moist, penetrating heat with the new Casco Sinus Electric Fomentation Pack.

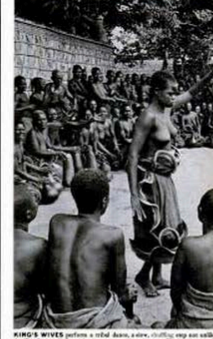
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Write to: Casco of Rhode Island, Inc., 1000 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Price \$4.95.

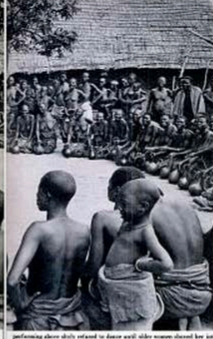


CASCO
SINUS AND MUSCLE ELECTRIC FOMENTATION PACK

African Big Shot



WOMEN perform a ritual dance, some of which are popular in America right now. The background is the London night.



PERFORMERS have only refused to dance and make music for the sake of the ring. When she finished she received a lot of money for the show.



NATIVE DRUMS, which delivered a dull and muffled beat for the dance shown above, are richly decorated with shell and tortoise shell.



LIKE A PUMPKIN BUSHARA from Senegal with two men for her. Photographer shot Bushara. Delivered the King's Imperial himself in a mirror.



All wines aren't Champagne!



All adhesive bandages aren't BAND-AID*

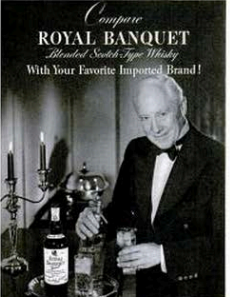
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- In ROYAL BANQUET half of the real whisky used is imported from Scotland and half is produced in America.
- Just as it is in Scotland, the American whiskey in ROYAL BANQUET is produced from barley that is over 100 years old.
- To produce ROYAL BANQUET in the Scotch tradition, we imported and set up a complete Scotch distillery.
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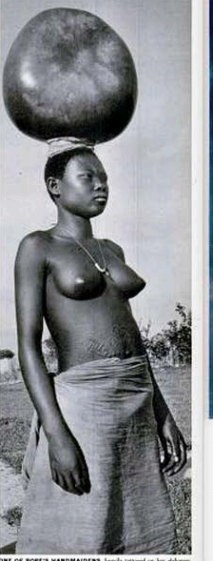
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ROYAL BANQUET
BLENDED SCOTCH-TYPE WHISKY

African Big Shot



ONE OF ROYAL BANQUET'S HANDMAIDENS, barely touched on her skin, could deliver a high-velocity punch to her head. The dramatic lighting is produced by rubbing dirt and vegetable matter into her face.

Fairy Gold for Easter

Now—glam in Textron's dreamy Hostess Coat... mellow yellow gold in Textron's dreamy Hostess Coat. With a shimmering semi pearl from shoulder to hem, a satin belt with a sparkling jewel to glorify your new waist. Also in Hostess Blue or Pink Angel, sizes 12 to 20. Just one of many lovely Textron Hostess Coats, from 9:00 to 17:00, at leading stores throughout the country.

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Fig. 2.40. Arnold Newman photograph of the Kuba King, 1958.




Figs. 2.41-2.42. Arnold Newman with the Kuba King, 1958.



Figs. 2.43-2.46. LIFE article, "Polygamy Passing," pages, December 12, 1960.

SEQUEL



Polygamy Passing
CONGO KING LOSES 750 OF HIS WIVES

In all the troubled Congo we have witnessed in seeing a general reversion of attitudes in King Lokanga from Mbarika of the Belgian side. Lokanga already has over 700 wives, and has lost 750.

Lokanga, who 200,000 subjects in the bush of Kasai province and was as early as 1950 one who when he earned all sorts of living had to depend upon Mbarika, 1951, he was a practicing ruler and the grateful Belgian policeman turned to him, and in 1952 a month in being able to do more.

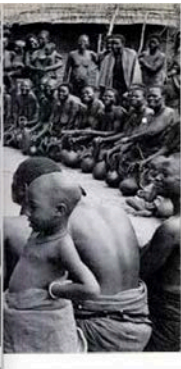
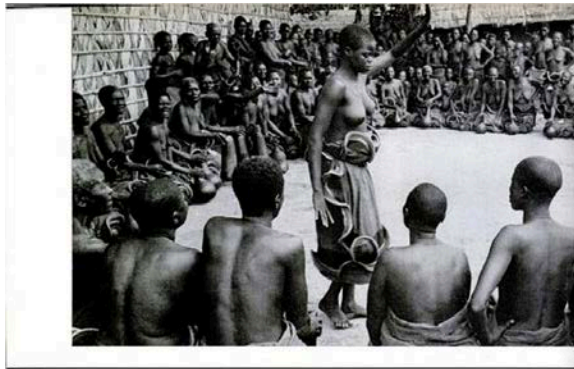
They were independent, and the new government decided to limit them to 100 wives. "We have not to depend upon Mbarika, and we must be self-reliant," Lokanga has ordered Mbarika, telling the other "chieftains." Lokanga promises to spend before the market but instead of spending he was a failure. The government said that spending was the prerogative. An official report on the government's policy towards the ruling class, was published in the paper when the king was in a 1950. Mbarika would be the same as Mbarika. At the moment there was only 75 at the palace, plus a few in the village.

And now, telling Lokanga, was just 75. "I am a new subject now. Government has given me independence but we are not."

Without comment, Lokanga, who is depicted here seated by a female slave. (By Philippe M...)

... King Lokanga has announced a fully new... will have had him up since he was not of value.

CONFRAK 79



POLYGAMY PASSING CONTINUES



LAYERS OLD DAYS of 1947 are such during in... (text partially obscured)

AUTHERITY TODAY shows floor of King's retain... (text partially obscured)

CONFRAK



The happiest scotch n water

POLYGAMY PARSING

Nobody left to mend the king's fences

An King (Ladaga) headed down the end of the day of tomorrow. The... (text continues)

DEFECTING WIFE Mhaweta, 25, has one son by the king. Although she professes no fear for herself, she has hidden the child in a nearby village.

Chapter Three – Meeting African Art, Collecting

Fig. 3.1. Elisofon photograph of David Smith's studio, 1938.



Figs. 3.2-3.5. Elisofon photographs of African art in his New York City apartments, throughout his life.



Fig. 3.6. African art in Chaim Gross's 1957 publication, *The Technique of Wood Sculpture*.



Figs. 3.7-3.8. *LIFE* article on Isamu Noguchi stool, which was based on a Kuba stool in Elisofon's collection.

MODERN LIVING

The New Seat with a Neater Teeter

102

OCTOBER 1957, PAGE 102

TEETER STOOL, continues

African art inspired its design

Sculptor Isamu Noguchi, like the girl on page 102, is a man who figures while he sits. Adopting the African collection of a friend, Eric Photographist Eliot Elisofon, Noguchi was captivated by a dumbbell-shaped stool from the Bakula Group (India), twisted about on it but found the stool ungainly when he tipped it back on its rim. Fascinated but frustrated, he brooded about stools for a year, finally designed a similarly shaped one with a rounded bottom that enables legs to slide to the rock back and forth and even spin around with a fair chance of not tipping over. Noguchi's rocking stools, or teeter seats, are formed from two hand-turned wooden disks connected by sturdy wires. Recently offered by Knoll Associates in New York, they sell for about \$30, may later be made of plastic and sold at a lower price.

AFRICAN STOOL is collected that inspired Noguchi is made of mahogany. Group seems like them at hand, sit on them with sitting staves.

TEETER SEAT is supported by V-shaped wires which give it a dumbbell profile like African stool. Lip on bottom disk serves filter not to lean too far.

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than any other cold remedy!

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New Bromo Quinine—with a Citrus BioFlavonoid—is designed to help relieve more cold symptoms, including those caused by viruses, than any other leading product.

When you've got a real cold - get a real cold tablet

Figs. 3.9-3.10. Elisofon's multiple exposure photograph of a woman teetering on Noguchi's stool and Noguchi's stool next to Elisofon's Kuba stool.



Title: Teeter seat designed by Isamu Noguchi...

Caption: UNITED STATES - JANUARY 01: Teeter seat designed by Isamu Noguchi. (Photo by Elliot Elisofon/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Date created: 01 Jan 1956

Fig. 3.11. Small Pende ivory sculpture given to Elisofon by Gypsy Rose Lee, his first African art object in his collection.



Fig. 3.12. A four-faced helmet mask, Fang, NMAfA #73-7-290, Elisofon collected in the field, town of Ibea in Republic of the Congo, 1951.



Fig. 3.13. Possible Kwele dancer performing this mask.



Figs. 3.14-3.15. Cynthia Kellogg article, "Living with Sculpture," *New York Times Magazine*, October 5, 1958; Inexpensive items to collect.

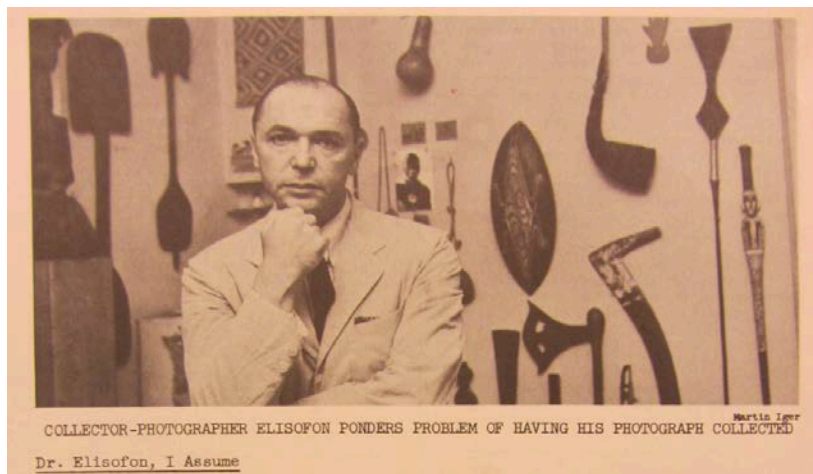


Figs. 3.16-3.17. Kellogg article main pages.





Fig. 3.18. "Dr. Elisofon, I Presume," image with the *f.y.i.* magazine article about Elisofon.



Chapter Four – Photographing, Exhibiting, and Writing about African Art

Fig. 4.1. Cover of *The White Witch Doctor*, published 1950.

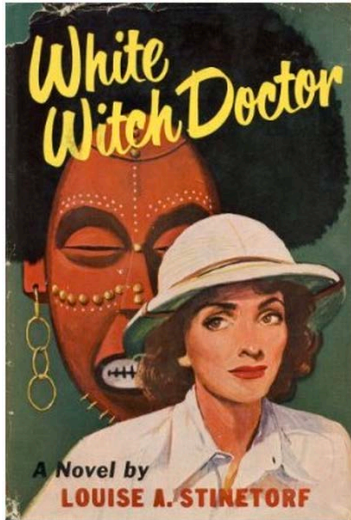


Fig. 4.2. *The White Witch Doctor* 1953 film poster.



Fig. 4.3. Example of 1947 Africa trip photographs, objects clustered on blankets and shot from above. Often distorted by heavy shadows.

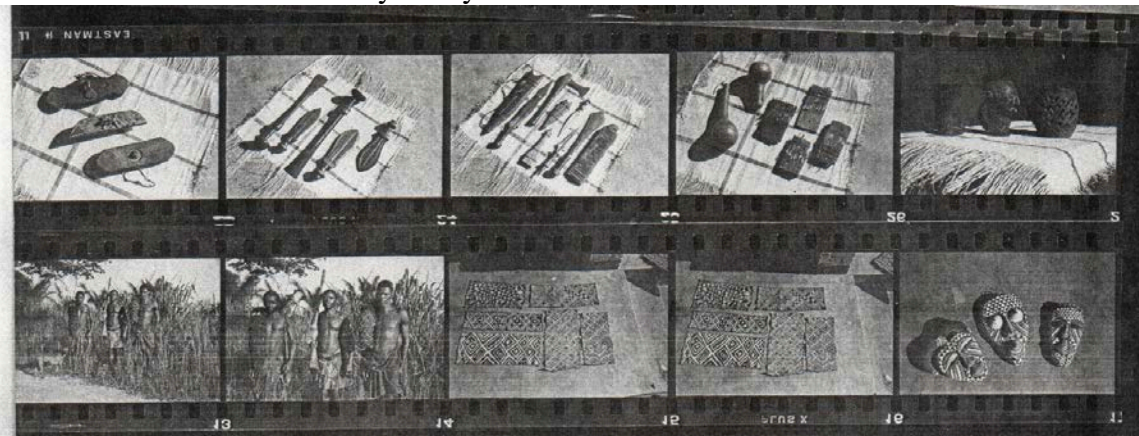


Fig. 4.4. Example of an Elisofon studio photograph of African art made for publication in a reference source, Suku headdress.



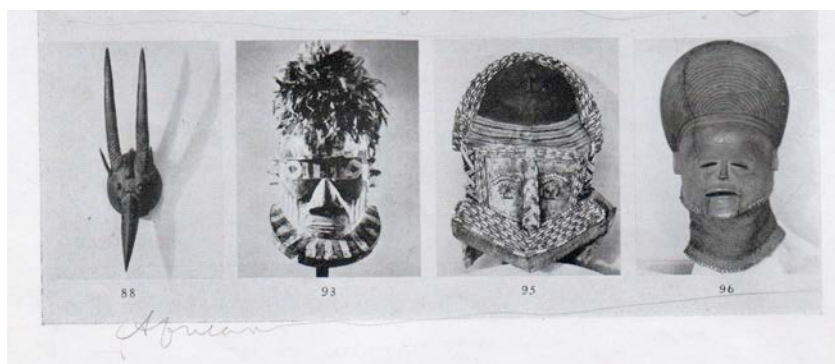
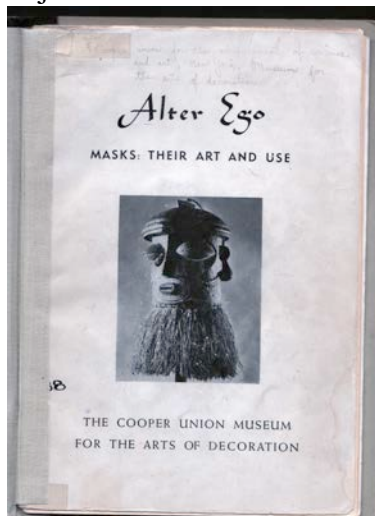
Fig. 4.5. Elisofon's detail photographs of African art, which were published in *Tribute to Africa* (1974), exhibition catalog pages with Dogon and Songye figures.



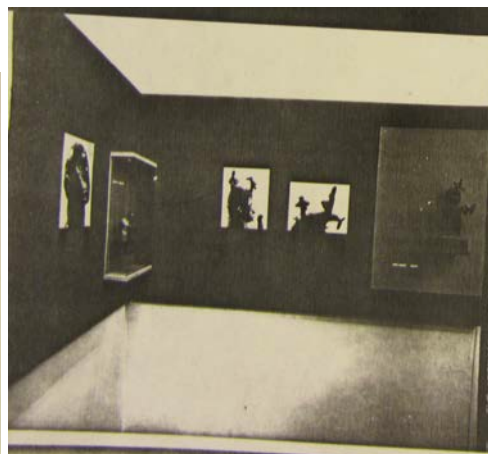
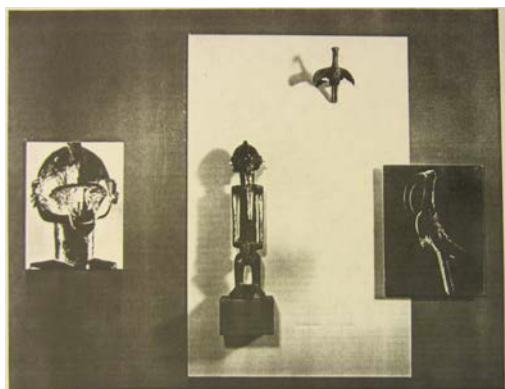
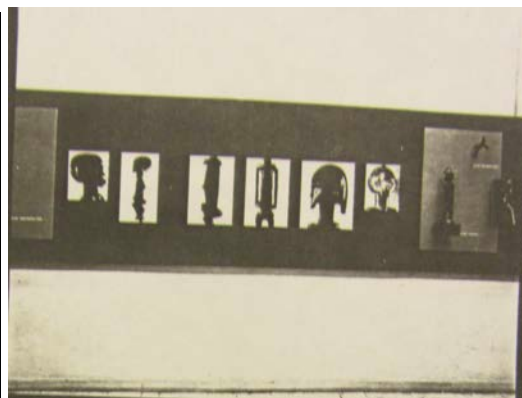
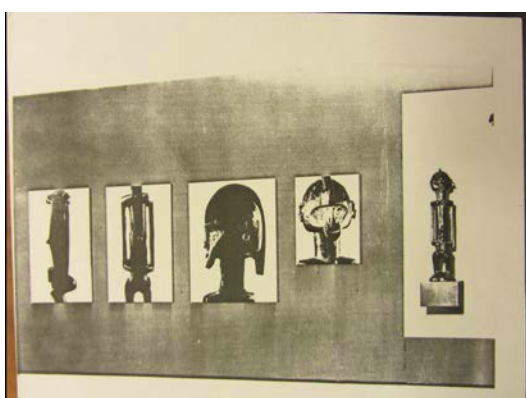
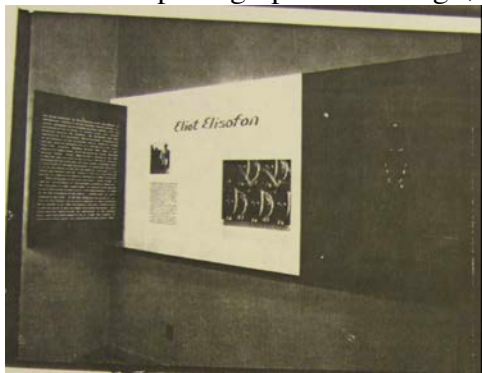
Fig. 4.6. Elsy Leuzinger, *The Art of Africa* (1960), plate 18, Baule mask on top of Baule cloth.

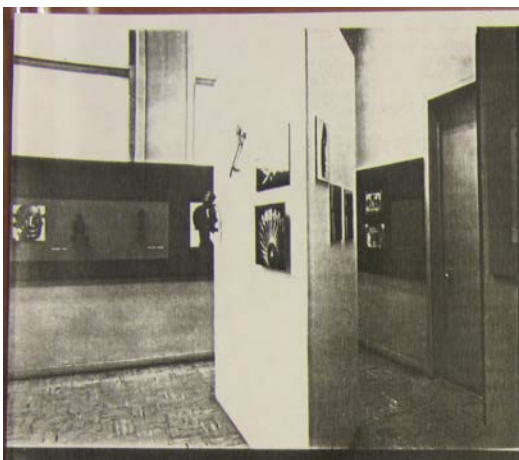
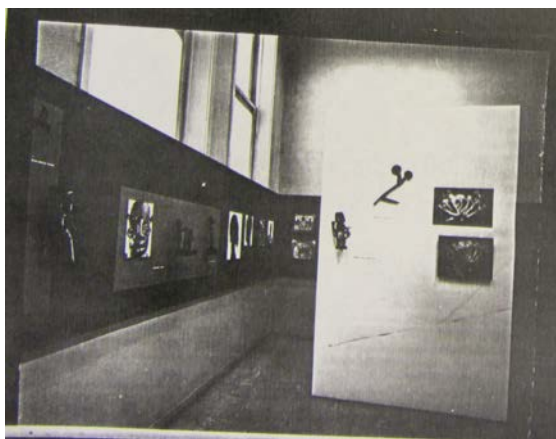
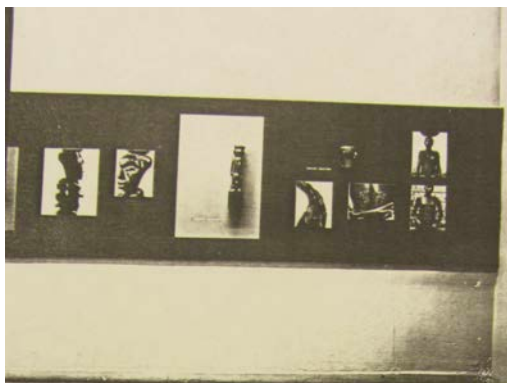


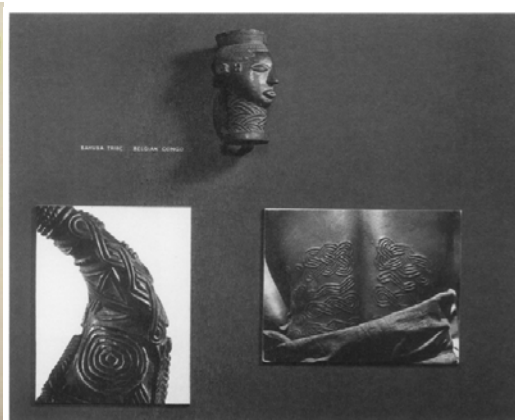
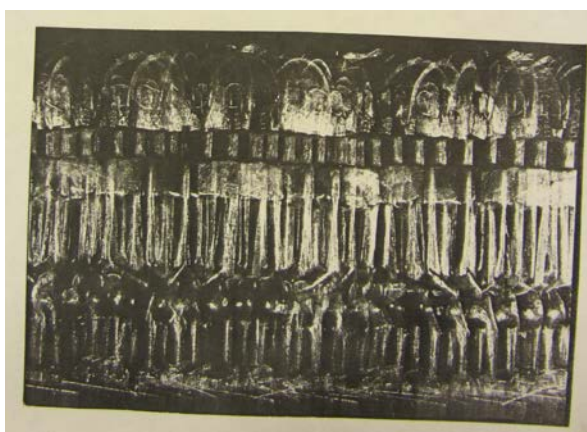
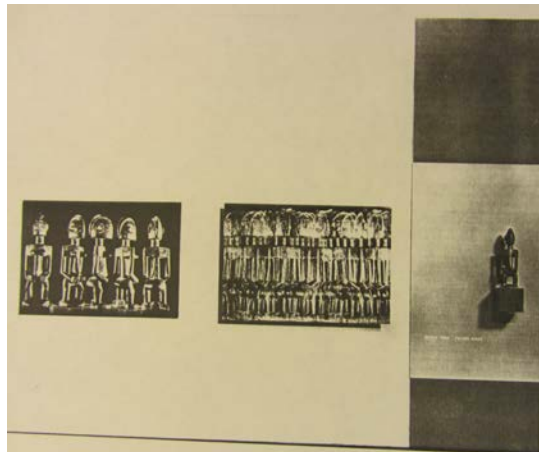
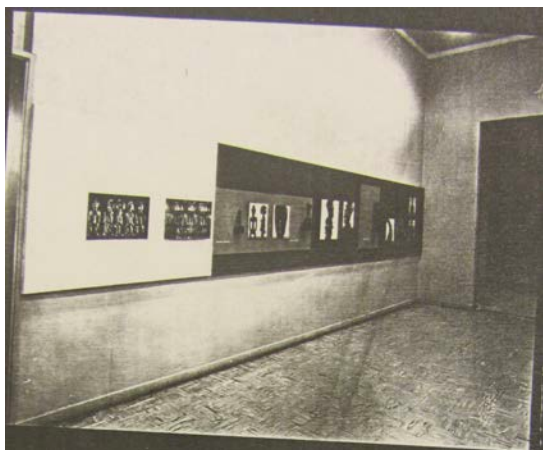
Figs. 4.7-4.9. African art objects shown in the 1951 *Alter Ego* exhibition at the Cooper Union, Nos. 90 (the cover of the exhibition catalog) and 93 are Elisofon collection objects.



Figs. 4.10-4.44. Elisofon's *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*, exhibition, 1952. Installation photographs of Chicago, from photocopies.







Installation photographs of MoMA, photographs by Dick Meek.



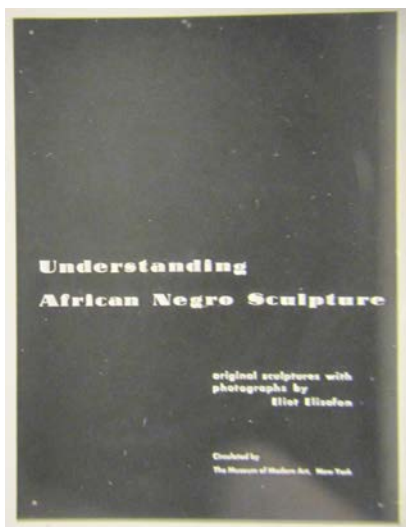


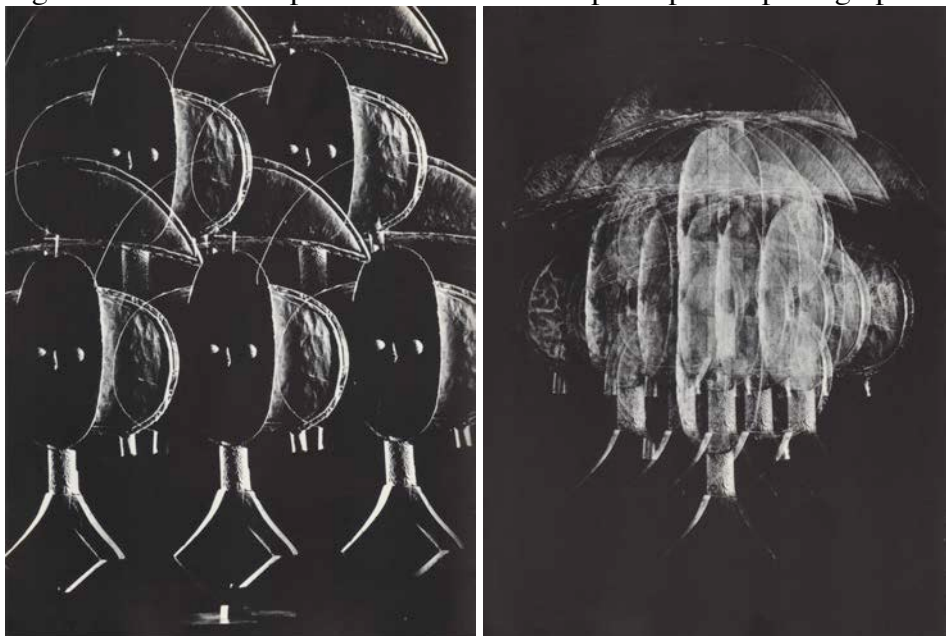




Fig. 4.45. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912.



Figs. 4.46-4.47. Examples of Elisofon's multiple exposure photographs of African art.



Figs. 4.48-4.49. Gjon Mili's stroboscopic, i.e. multiple exposure, photographs of Gene Kelly and Pablo Picasso (late 1940s-late 1950s).

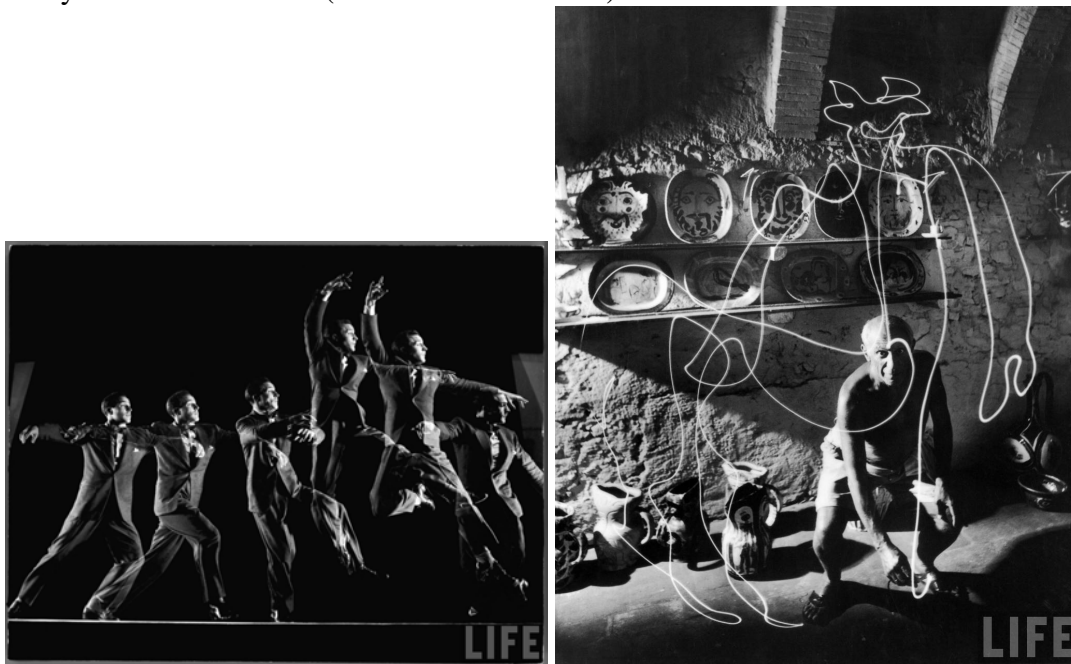


Fig. 4.50. Gjon Mili's photograph of a "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1942).



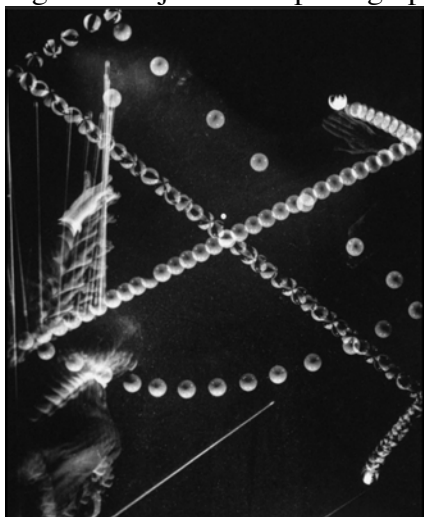
Fig. 4.51. Elisofon's photograph of Duchamp descending a staircase (1951).



Fig. 4.52. Gjon Mili's photograph of Gene Krupa's drum-playing (1941).



Fig. 4.53. Gjon Mili's photograph of Willie Hoppe's billiard trick shot (1941).



Figs. 4.54-4.55. More examples of Elisofon's multiple exposure photographs of African art.



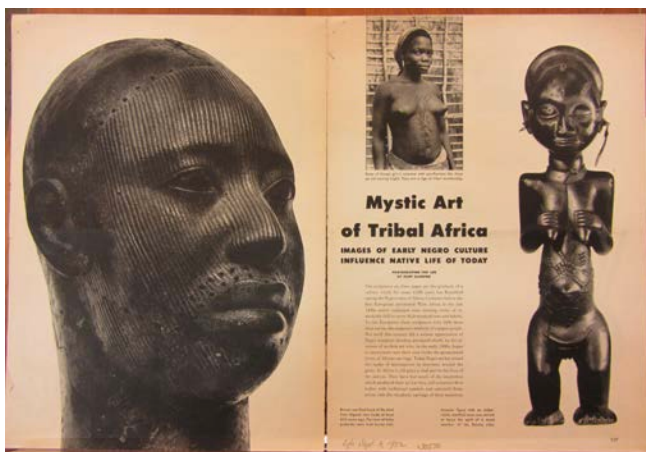
Figs. 4.56-4.58. Elisofon's "multiples" series on a small Dogon figure.



Fig. 4.60. Elisofon's views of a Fang figure.



Figs. 4.61-4.65. Elisofon's "Mystic Art of Tribal Africa," 10 pages, *LIFE*, September 8, 1952.



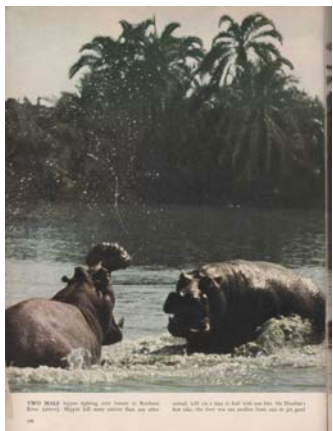




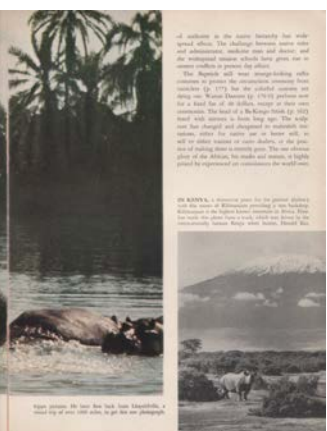
WINDWARD on the lava ridges. The volcanic landscape is a scene of stark beauty. The lava flows are dark and jagged, contrasting sharply with the lighter, rocky terrain. The overall atmosphere is one of raw, untamed nature.



LAVA FROM ABOVE: From this vantage point, the volcanic landscape appears as a series of dark, jagged ridges and valleys. The bright ferns provide a stark contrast to the dark volcanic rock.



TWO WALL hippos splashing over rocks in the Bahr el Jebel. The hippos are partially submerged in the water, with their heads and backs visible above the surface. The surrounding environment is lush and tropical.



IN KENYA, a hippopotamus poses for the camera. The hippo is in the foreground, partially in the water. In the background, a large, snow-capped mountain rises against a clear sky.



ONE OF many spotted herds in the Serengeti. The giraffes are scattered across the open plain, some standing and some grazing. The landscape is vast and open, with scattered acacia trees.



RHINOCEROS (above) has almost lost its primary habitat. The rhino is shown in a natural setting, highlighting its massive size and distinctive features.



FROM WILDERNESS in the Serengeti. The giraffes are silhouetted against the bright sky, creating a dramatic scene. The landscape is a mix of open plain and scattered trees.



TO the rhinoceros, the Serengeti is a place of both beauty and danger. The rhino is shown in a natural setting, emphasizing its role in the ecosystem.

It was made successful to keep it as it is. Nothing but the best of the world was used. The wood used in the building was brought to him from the forest.

The people, however, is a complete collection of all the things of the world. They have the most of all things, and they are the most of all things. They have the most of all things, and they are the most of all things. They have the most of all things, and they are the most of all things.



SHY MEN shows two Masai warriors who live in Kenya and who are considered among the greatest fighting men in the world. Before the English came, the Masai and the Kikuyu fought many battles. The Masai lose their cattle above all else and will spend a year's time to get them back, armed only with the long iron spears they all carry.

RIGHT, MEN of the Bapende tribe in the Belgian Congo wear this special dress made for the purpose of frightening away enemies from their incursions. The dress is made of the young hair of the lion. The Bapende is one of the few African tribes which has faithfully retained its most primitive customs through to the present, in spite of outside pressure.

THE WATERS shows an following two color pages are from Kiburi in Ruanda-Urundi, a Belgian Province where whites stay on but land. This colony is particularly interesting in the Congo. The forest shows in one of the best in Africa and may be just as far south by the purpose of a very reasonable fee of about fifty dollars.

BELOW, interior of a Masai dwelling, which is temporary or the Masai are a nomadic people, moving as their cattle search for food. The people shown are used to make milk and fresh blood from the animals which, mixed together, is the main food of the Masai. The hut is surrounded by heavy branches of acacia plant to keep the strong lions out.

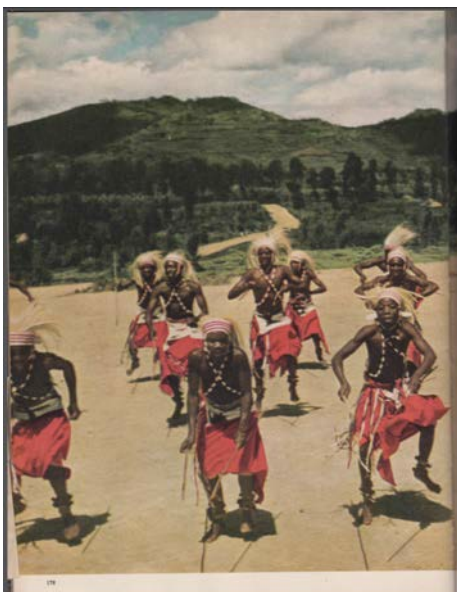


Fig. 4.80. Table of Contents page of *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1959.

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COVER DESIGN BY RUSSELL CARPENTER
Benin mask reproduced by courtesy of the Museum of Primitive Art, New York

Figs. 4.81-4.85. Elisofon's "African Sculpture," pages with images, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1959.



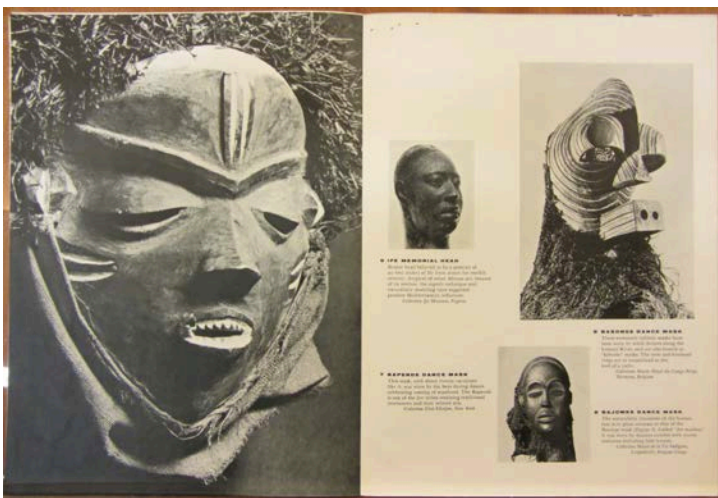
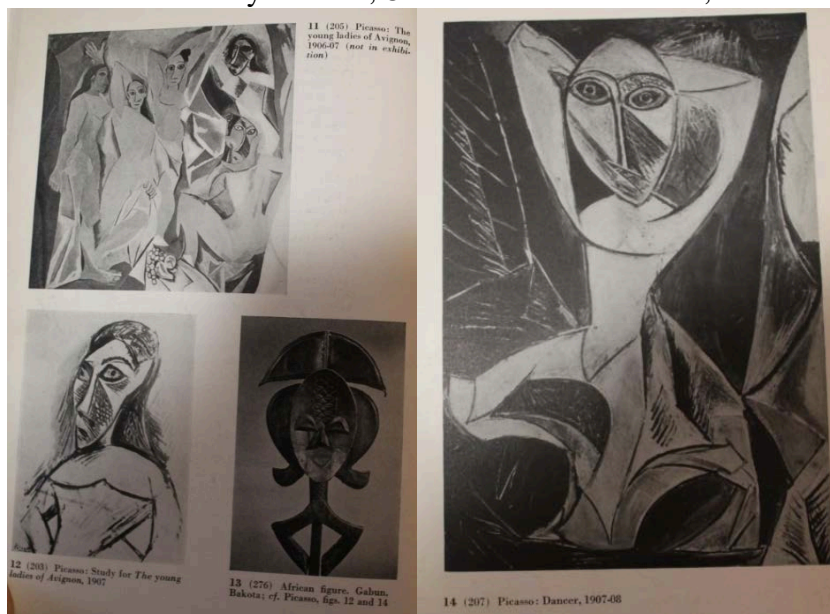


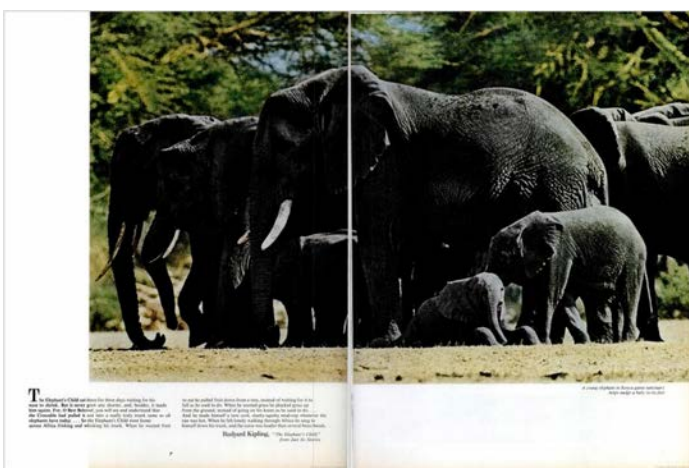
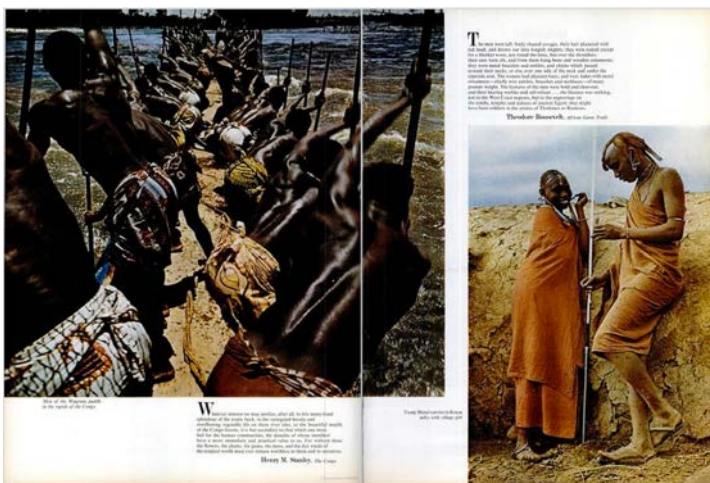
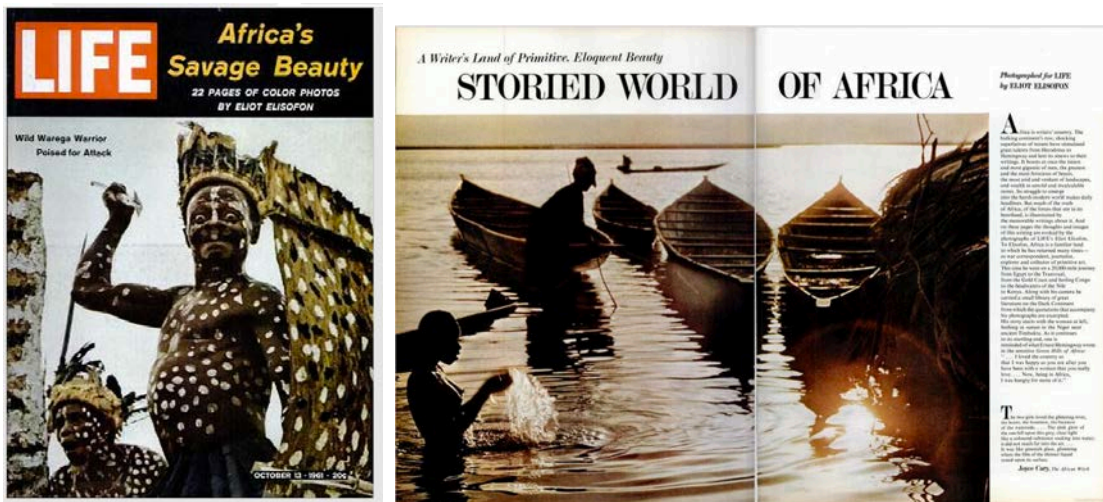
Fig. 4.86. Image of the entrance to the 1936 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Pablo Picasso's *Dancer* (1907) is next to a Kota reliquary figure, by Beaumont Newhall.



Fig. 4.87. Alfred Barr's exhibition catalog pages with a Kota reliquary figure clustered with three works by Picasso, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936.



Figs. 4.88-4.99. Elisofon's 'Literary Africa,' "The Storied World of Africa," 22 pages and cover, *LIFE*, October 13, 1961.





The boy is Mursi, the tribe that has been making headlines for its practice of scarification and lip piercing. The boy is sitting in a lush, green environment, looking towards the camera.

Joseph J. Castellano

Young Mursi women are known for their practice of lip piercing and scarification. The boy is sitting in a lush, green environment, looking towards the camera.

Edward Hamilton



A woman from the Mursi tribe is performing a dance or ritual in a village setting. She is wearing a colorful, patterned dress.

Edward Hamilton



In the savanna, zebras are known for their speed and agility. They are running in a savanna landscape.

Edward Hamilton



Last year, a zebra was spotted running in a savanna landscape. The zebra is running in a savanna landscape.

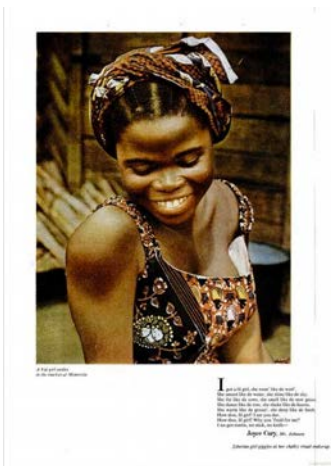
Edward Hamilton



At the edge of the water, the boat is small, but the water is calm, and the sky is clear. The boat is small, but the water is calm, and the sky is clear. The boat is small, but the water is calm, and the sky is clear.

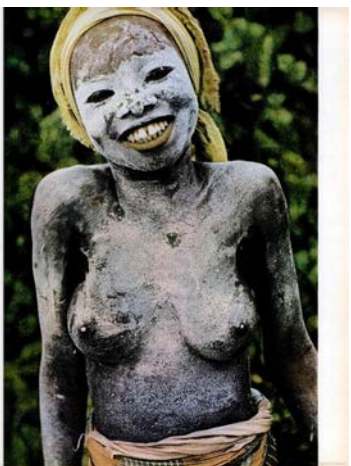
Joseph Verrill, *San Francisco*

Thomas Chubbell, *San Francisco*



I am not just a girl, I am a woman. I am not just a girl, I am a woman. I am not just a girl, I am a woman. I am not just a girl, I am a woman.

Angie Gray, *San Francisco*



The leopard is a big cat, and it is a big cat. The leopard is a big cat, and it is a big cat. The leopard is a big cat, and it is a big cat. The leopard is a big cat, and it is a big cat.

John Kish, *San Francisco*



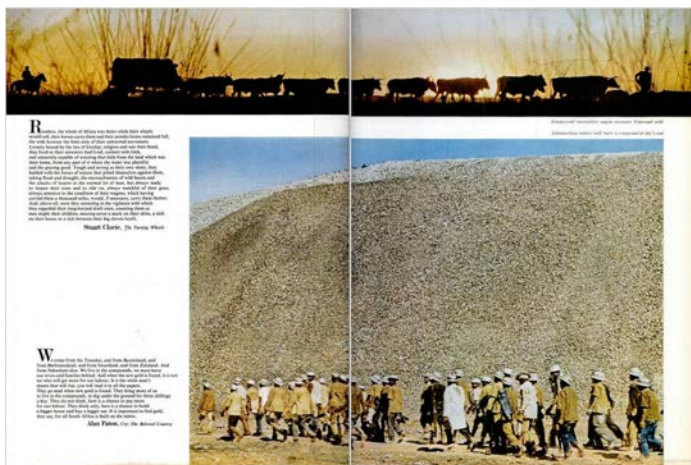
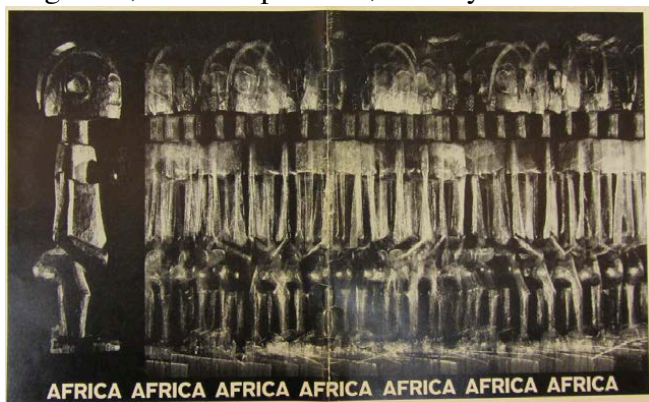
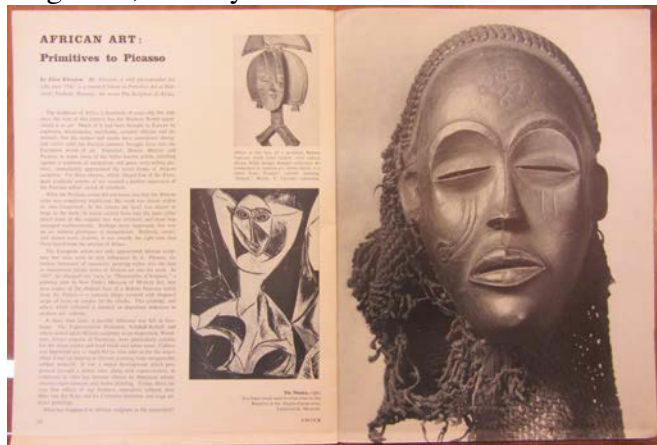


Fig. 4.100. Elisofon multiple exposure image of a Dogon figure as the cover of *Think* magazine, IBM Corporation, January 1962.

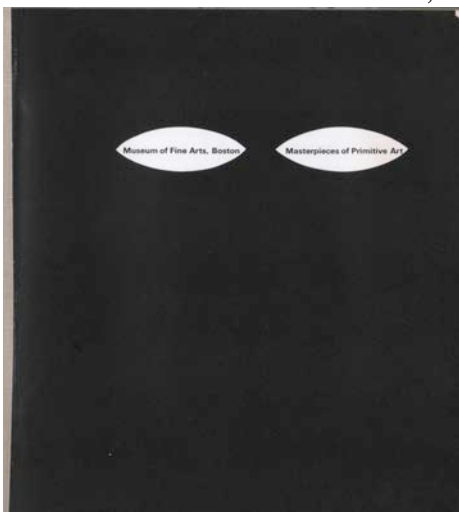


Figs. 4.101-4.102. Elisofon's "African Art: Primitives to Picasso," 4 pages, *Think* magazine, January 1962.

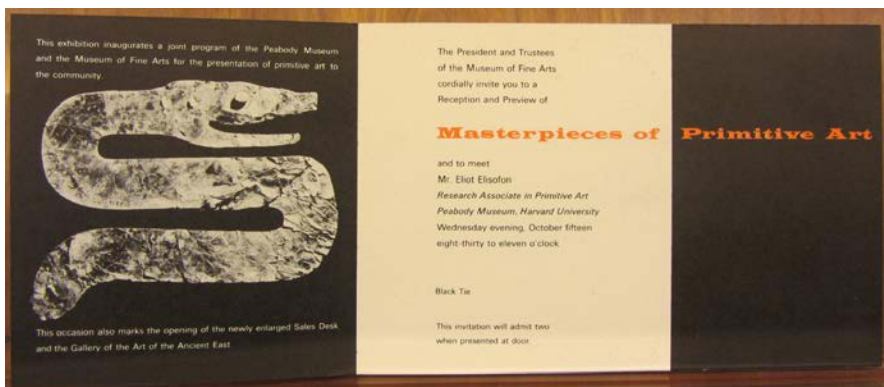
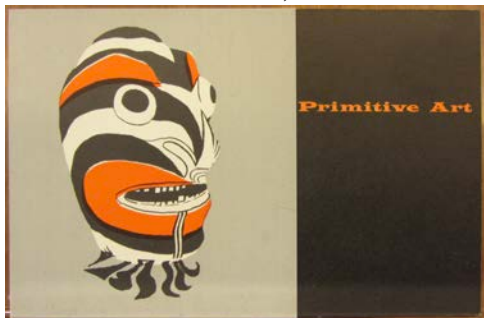


Chapter Five – 1958 Was a Very Big Year

Fig. 5.1. The cover of the exhibition catalog for the *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* show at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1958.



Figs. 5.2-5.3. Invitation to the exhibition opening, *Masterpieces of Primitive Art*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Fall 1958.



Figs. 5.4-5.5. 1952 film *Latuko: We Saw Primitive Man*, photographed and directed by Edgar M. Queeny, poster images.





Figs. 5.14-5.16. LIFE magazine story on *Bell, Book and Candle*, November 24, 1958.



Bewitching Tale

Hocus pocus and a yuletide hex

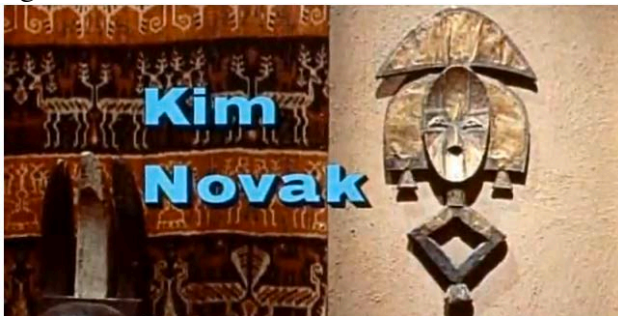
IN REARVIEW MIRROR She looks lovely. She's...
 wearing Nelli's...
 picture for...
PHOTOS BY THE AP/WIDE...
 to...
look for the metal slide magazine

slide projector on your mind?

look for the metal slide magazine

Shiraz

Fig. 5.17. *Bell, Book and Candle*, 1958; Kim Novak's name is paired with Kota reliquary figure in film titles.



Figs. 5.18-5.19. Elisofon's stills of Kim Novak's character Gil, shown wandering among the 'primitive' sculptures in her shop at night, talking to her cat, Pyewackett.



Figs. 5.20-5.22. The shop and character transformation after Gil loses her powers.





Figs. 5.23-5.24. Blue gelatins seen underneath the art objects in Gil's 'primitive' art shop, lit from below through milk glass shelves, as per Elisofon's recommendation.



Fig. 5.25. The 'Pende' mask in her shop, which breaks during Gil's argument with Shep.



Fig. 5.26. Gil's magical familiar, Pyewacket, hiding amongst the sculptures, running away from Gil.



Fig. 5.27. Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche*, 1926



Kiki with African mask

1926

Artist's name MAN RAY

Figs. 5.28-5.30. Robert Coburn photographs of Novak as Gil in a gauze gown with an African mask.



Figs. 5.31-5.34. Coburn photographs of Novak as Gil with a large Kota reliquary.



Chapter Six – Film and Television Projects in the 1960s and 1970s

Figs. 6.1-6.4 Bete/Dan-Ngere mask Elisofon lent to the 1970 National Gallery exhibition of African sculpture, and *TIME* magazine article with Elisofon pictures on this exhibition, Feb. 2, 1970.



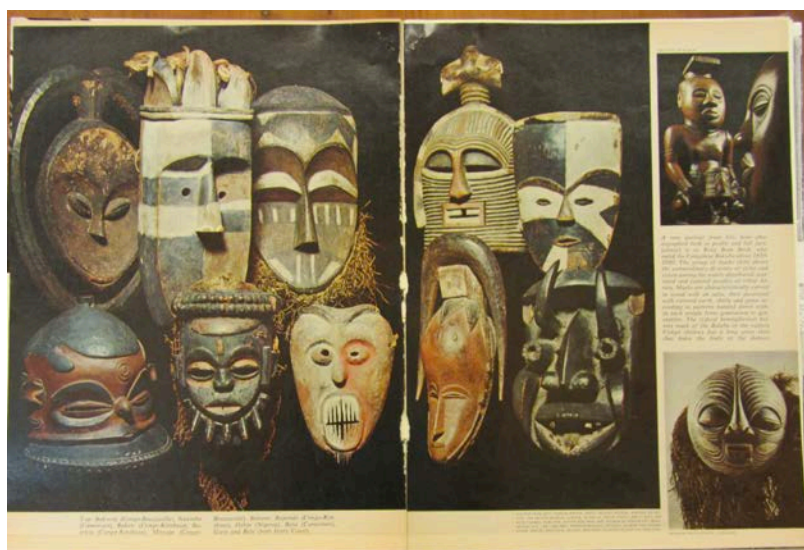


Fig. 6.5. On set the set of *Black African Heritage* with Lamidi Fakeye, Eliot Elisofon, and Georges Bracher.



Figs. 6.6-6.8. Examples of African art being created in *Black African Heritage*, set photography by Elisofon.



Fig. 6.9. Group W advertisement for *Black African Heritage*.

If there's one thing future generations of black Americans need, it's a past.

From the time they first set foot on American soil, black Americans have been cut off from their roots.

To bring their lost cultural heritage to light, Group W is presenting a four-part documentary, "Black African Heritage."

The series, filmed in Africa, was produced for Group W by Elisofon, artist, writer, and filmmaker.

"Black African Heritage" will be shown in prime time on our five stations and in other major markets throughout the country starting this month.

Each of the four one-hour programs focuses on a different region of the African continent.

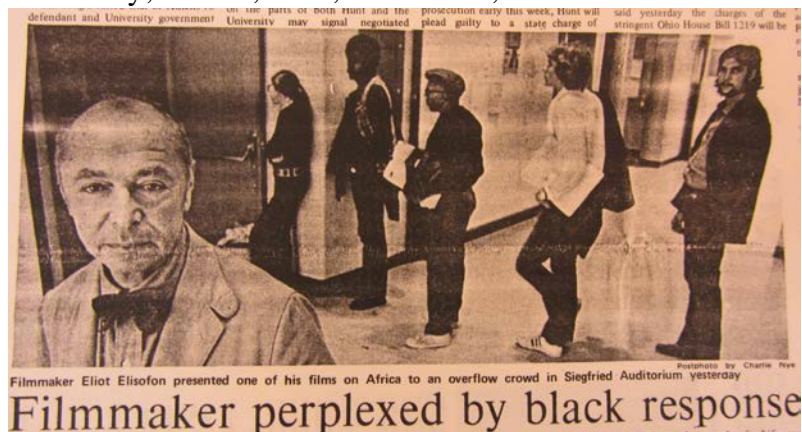
But all of them reveal the remarkable culture of the African people: their music, art, rituals and dance. A culture which much of white America has adopted.

"Black African Heritage" reveals how much of a past black Americans really have.

And helps put them back in touch with it.

GROUP W

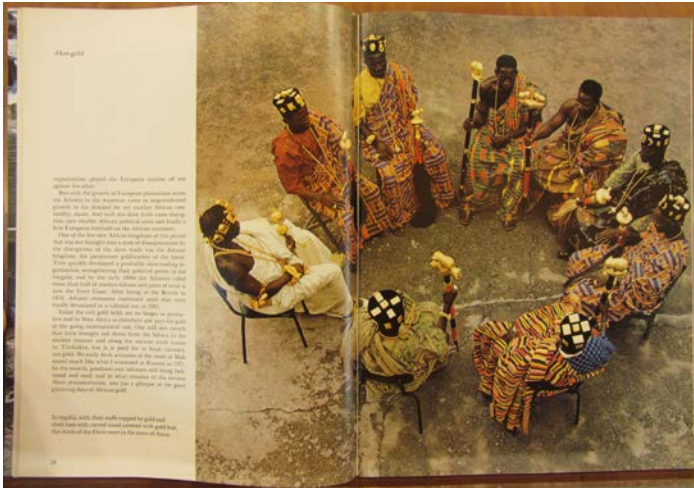
Fig. 6.10. “Filmmaker perplexed by black response,” Ohio U showing of *Black African Heritage*. Dave Sekal, “Filmmaker perplexed by black response,” *The Post*, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, October 18, 1972: 1.



Chapter Seven – The Final Years

Figs. 7.1-7.6. Elisofon’s Akan gold article, “Africa’s Ancient Splendor,” for *Smithsonian* magazine, January 1973, including cover.





Figs. 7.7-7.8. 1973, *African Art of the Dogon*, exhibition installation photographs.



Fig. 7.9. Dogon *kanaga* performer mannequin in regalia in Wunderman exhibition.



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