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Noire et Blanche

When I initially saw this image, it struck me as extremely powerful. I could not tell at first, what it was that was so striking about it. Was it the woman's face, the angularity of her pose, the African mask, or the intensity created by the black and white effect? I tried to find meaning in this seemingly simple but very perplexing image. I supposed it was meant to show a woman taking off her mask, revealing her true identity. To me, maybe based on personal experience, the woman seemed tired. Like she has to wear the facade, all day, everyday, and it is utterly exhausting. And now she finally gets to take off the mask and rest. But, perhaps my take on the photograph is not exactly what the artist conceptualized and intended.

This photo is actually one part of a larger series, called "Noire et Blanche" (which quite literally translates to "black and white"). In 1926, the photographer Man Ray created this series, consisting of about 20 images featuring the woman and the mask (Weston). This photo outlined how frequently artists used both African masks and a woman or a woman's figure in their photographs. However, the "Noire et Blanche" photo was different, as Man Ray placed the mask and the woman adjacently, creating a larger significance.

The placement of these two symbols together, the woman and the mask, gives the photo its surrealism. It was unusual. It caused people to question why Man Ray had chosen to put these two images side by side. Of course, everyone would see something different, based on their own perspectives and life experiences. But, it seems significant to note that, though these photographs

were created in 1926, they did not gain widespread attention until the '80s, when people started to pay attention and try to tackle more social issues. Man Ray captured the juxtaposition of these changing times in his photograph. As previously mentioned, African masks were frequently used in art. This was due to prejudice and bigotry, leading many artists to portray black people as savages. Slavery was only abolished in 1865, and even after the abolition, of course, equality still did not exist. Between Jim Crow laws and unpunished violent racial targeting, racism towards the African American community was pervasive, including in art. During the times leading up to the surrealism period, modernist art reigned. And it was many modernist artists who depicted the black people as savages. Man Ray challenged this notion by showing the stark contrast between the mask and the woman.

An important observation to make is how similar the mask and the face actually look. Though the mask is supposed to show primitiveness, and the woman's face is supposed to show a more refined woman, except for the color, they both look almost the same. The woman's face is raw, plain, just skin and features. Her slicked back hair, mixed with the small lips and the shape of the eyebrows and eyes, match the mask very well. With the use of contrasting lighting, we can see that the two identities have been switched (Weston). The woman appears almost primitive, looking empty and without the touches of a well kept woman at the time. The mask seems to connote more life, more depth. This is one way to see the photographs. The next perspective the artist tried to convey holds a few more complexities.

Going back to my initial thoughts on the photograph. I viewed it as an unmasking, an identity reveal. On closer study, I was not entirely wrong in what I thought. However, Man Ray was not trying to show a facade being removed. He was trying to show the different evolutions

of womanhood. There are some similarities between the savagery depicted by the mask, and how women were treated during that time. Women were also seen as primitive, to some extent. The patriarchy made them inferior to men, especially women of color, who still face the brunt of injustice. This photograph shows how similar the life struggles of black people and women are (in some ways).

Continuing in this vein, if we look closer at the woman's face, we can see that the way her hair has been styled, combined with the minimalistic makeup, makes her look almost egg like (Weston). An egg is the beginning of life. Women are the creators of life. In a way, it is like she is stripping away one part of her life, and revealing the next phase.

Finally, if we study the lighting closely, we can see how deliberately Man Ray created the contrasts. The woman's face is extremely pale, a stark contrast to the black mask. The shadow near her head is also very dark. In the background, there is a gradient of lighting, going from dark to light (Weston). This contrast between the woman's face and the mask continues to show the different phases of her being. It seems to show two different parts of her, not unlike the concept of "yin and yang." We can see these two sides: the calmness, stillness, of her face, versus the more dynamic sense we feel from the mask.

This photograph is very interesting- and full of nuances. Every part of this photograph has been thought about, done with specific deliberation, which is why I think I was drawn to it. It thoughtfully captures the complexities and burdens of being a woman of color, how they have to fit into different masks in society to maneuver various prejudices. Women of color, especially black women, are often seen as "angry" and "emotional," which could possibly be portrayed by the "savage" mask. But we are also supposed to be demure and quiet, which can be seen in the

woman's expression. And of course, besides all that, every woman has much more substance in her, some that can be expressed, and some that is constantly being shut down by society. I think this photograph captures that very well, as well as showing the (unfortunate) irony in how horribly black people were represented in art.

Roger Fry said that the "graphic arts were the 'expression of imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life' and should therefore be taken as 'an expression of emotions regarded as ends in themselves'" as an answer to the debate: "if art is not a copy of nature, then what is it?" (Howells). I believe that Man Ray illustrated Roger Fry's sentiments the best. Man Ray did show actual life- but he went beyond that. It is not a still life, a simple capturing of an image. He goes beneath the surface and we can actually see the emotions and struggles that might have been faced. The photograph gives us, as viewers, a platform from which to enter another period of time. This is what art should do. Everyone will always disagree on what a piece of art means. We are all influenced by our own educations, experiences, and thoughts. But Man Ray depicts the emotions he wants to share so well, that there is a point of universal convergence, a point that we can all reach and understand together. Furthermore, it is not simply the image that we are viewing; Roger Fry is correct. The expressions are the means to the end, the pathway to understanding the concept.

Works Cited

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