

The Kjersmeier-Man Ray Vision of African Art

Professor Christer Lindberg and curator Jesper Kurt-Nielsen

The National Museum of Denmark contains a world class African art collection. The collection is not only unique because of the objects, but also because of the man behind it.

Carl Ludvig Vilhelm Rømer Nutzhorn Kjersmeier was born in 1889 in the Danish provincial town of Vejle. Already as a young man, he was a misunderstood and belittled poet, and unfortunately, he was not able to sustain a stable income through poetry. Instead, he became a so-called king's bailiff at the city court of Copenhagen. He never gave up on poetry, however, and in his spare time, he translated poetry from all corners of the world. The criticism of his work was harsh, however, as he did not translate from the original languages but from French versions. Kjersmeier was undoubtedly a lifelong Francophile.

Sometime in the early 1920s, he had, according to himself, an epiphany. One of the bridge operators in central Copenhagen, connecting the two islands Amager and Zealand, displayed a sculpture on his desk that he said came from the Belgian Congo. Jobs as bridge operators were often given to retired sea captains, and as many Danish mariners were employed on the Congo River, it is very likely that the bridge operator himself had worked as steamer captain on the Congo River. Kjersmeier's encounter with the sculpture led to a life-long fascination with African art, and the creation the unique collection that now lies in the National Museum. Kjersmeier's collecting and curating inspired the symbolist Man Ray and later the COBRA artist group. They all visited

Kjersmeier's small apartment in the working class neighbourhood of Vesterbro, just a stone's throw away from Copenhagen's illuminated Tivoli Gardens. But Kjersmeier's awakening to African art also meant a life long struggle to make African art known, not only in Denmark, but in all of Scandinavia. He wrote that Africa was first when it came to the creation of fire, poetry and sculpture. He was instrumental in highlighting the fact that Africa is not a single country with a unified culture, but a continent with a myriad of rich and varied material cultures. While this fact is self-evident today, Kjersmeier was one of the first to understand and promote this notion. It made him known far beyond the borders of the ancient Kingdom of Denmark, a small and remote archipelago located between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea.



Kjersmeier at home. Photo; Unknown.

It is well known that African objects had inspired Matisse, Picasso, Nolde and many other artists. They were fascinated by the African carvers' ability to artistically interpret their subject matter; they saw in African art the positive aspect of the primitive, without superficiality and not in need of fake decoration. As stated by Man Ray: "I am tired of being surrounded by objects I can smile at, be indulgent with, – objects which amuse me and arouse in me a sense of tolerance and of superiority. I want objects that disturb, mystify, and intimidate me – whose function I cannot divine, objects which I hope will never function for my comfort or my understanding."¹ Man Ray thus produced a large body of photographs featuring African artefacts to be displayed in avant-garde public actions (such as *291* and *Minotaure*) and major fashion magazines such as *Vogue*.

In the wake of the French colonial mission in Africa, objects of a kind that Man Ray had previously encountered in museum or gallery settings in New York were widely accessible to him in Paris, appearing in flea markets, curio shops, as well as in private collections. The purpose of such gallery exhibits was never to present the objects as they served in their original contexts, but as timeless universal art pieces in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, surrealism, and the worlds of high fashion and popular culture. His "Noire et blanche" (1926), showing a white model with a black mask, is an icon of modern photography.

In the 1920-30, African art was hailed as the pinnacle of human artistic creation, and while Man Ray was instrumental in encouraging the popularity and understanding of l'art nègre for a western audience, Kjersmeier became the promotor, if not high priest, of African art. His dedication to this "mission" was relentless: he wrote, lectured, contacted collectors and scholars of African art all over the world, and he collected himself with restless energy.

He slowly refined his collection, as described in his own translation of his favourite poem by Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827); "O snail climb Mount Fuji but slowly, slowly!"

¹ Mundy, *Man Ray Writings on Art*, p. 183.

The job as a king's bailiff paid him only enough to sustain life in his small apartment, because most money was spent obsessively on procuring African objects. Fortunately for himself, but not least for his collection, he had married the wealthy Amalie in 1917.

In 1931-32, Kjersmeier and Amalie travelled to French West Africa on a "fetisch hunt". Carl Kjersmeier deeply admired Africans and African culture, "why regard them as lesser people? They have invented the fire and have an ancient culture thousands of years old and which is still the most modern of all." In his view "the Africans' joy of life, music, and their artistic sense made it a pleasure to be in their presence."³ In contrast, Kjersmeier looked down upon the African who had been polluted by modernity, Christianity or Islam. He would have preferred that everything had remained "pristine"; not fully understanding that cultural expression in Africa was just as dynamic as in Europe, and therefore not static. In this respect, he was a reactionary although in his younger days he noted that he had been a "salon communist". Later in life, he embraced a more bourgeois lifestyle and became a fervent conservative. Kjersmeier never acted strictly conservative however, and it is probably more correct to conclude that he was a more libertarian national conservative. He loved to provoke, using language that would stir the reaction of guests. Amalie often had to calm him down when he became too loud and vulgar, but he would never judge a person because of skin colour, and it is also fair to say that he could be very critical of "whiteness" in general and be extremely impertinent towards his own countrymen.

After his return from the West African expedition, Kjersmeier wrote a popular book *På Fetishjagt i Afrika* ("Fetish Hunting in Africa"). This was followed by his monumental, four volume *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine* (1935-38). Today this work must be considered one of the most important contributions to the understanding and the categorisation of African art. The four volumes have also resulted in Kjersmeier and his collection being better known outside of Denmark not least in France and United States.

³ Kjersmeier, Carl. Negeroprøret i Dugukulubugu. Et rejsemind fra Fransk Vestafrika. Radio manuscript 1935, det Kgl. Bibliotek.

It was also important that his collection was not only seen by Danes alone. It attracted visitors from all over the world. One of the more prominent visitors was the surrealist artist Man Ray, who even photographed some of his artefacts.



Photo; Man Ray.

Man Ray worked in many mediums, but he is best known as an avant-garde photographer. Born Emmanuel Radnitsky in Philadelphia in 1890, Man Ray had been involved in freethinking anarchist circles in his youth and had been drawn to the Dadaists and surrealists in part for their commitment to revolution, political as well as artistic. He lived in the bohemian circles in Paris, from 1921 until the German occupation of the city in 1940, and produced most of his well over 13,500 photographs – experimental images as well as fashion photographs, and celebrity portraits.⁴ It has been speculated by the curator for the Africa Collection in the National Museum, the late Poul Mørk (the last curator for the African collection in the National Museum of Denmark), that Man Ray's photographs were supposed to be used as illustrations for Kjersmeier's 4-volume *Centres*. There are no sources to support Mørk's theory, but it is fair to say that Mørk was a frequent visitor in the Kjersmeier home after Kjersmeier's death in his capacity as representative for the National Museum, and he obtained much information about the collection that was unfortunately never publicised. Moreover, this was not “bread-and-butter photography” for Man Ray. So why did he travel to Copenhagen to see yet another private collection of African Art?

Kjersmeier also tried to define authenticity in connection with African objects, and anyone visiting his collection today will enjoy his refined taste. Behind his thick glasses, the expert and connoisseur worked relentlessly. He bought back only those objects that lived up to his strict standards of authenticity, the object should have been “danced” that is, had to have been used for its original purpose and not just been carved for the colonialists as a souvenir. The head curator of the Ethnographic Collections, Kaj Birket-Smith, writing in 1945, declared that Kjersmeier had without doubt more knowledge on African art than any other scholar or collector in Scandinavia. This is why Birket-Smith worked hard so that Kjersmeier would donate the collection to the Danish state. He saw early on that Kjersmeier had an eye for the sublime and at a time when the sublime still could be found in Copenhagen; alas, those days are gone. One of the objects that define

⁴ Mundy, *Man Ray Writings on Art*, p. ix.

Kjersmeier's collection is the Luba Headrest. Only a handful of Luba neckrests from the Luba tribe (Congo) exist in museums in Europe and the United States and these pieces are today proof that African carvers were not at all anonymous craftsmen. These headrests are all carved by the same person and have diffused over the Upem bassin (the present day Katanga Province), because of their high quality. Today we recognise the artist as: *Maître de la coiffure en cascade*. Kjersmeier procured one of the master's headrests in Brussels, and it stand today as a magnificent centrepiece at the exhibit in the National Museum.



Fetish hunting in Africa. Photo; Amalie Kjersmeier.

Kjersmeier's international network grew steadily, and in 1934, he wrote the chapter *Banmbara Sculpture* in Nancy Cunard's book *Negro Anthologies* with prominent co-writers such as the playwright Samuel Beckett and the immortal jazz legend Louis Armstrong. The book has been accused of being proto-communist and naïve. It certainly documented not only culture and identity among Afro-Americans but also repression and rage in an age when not all citizens were treated neither as countrymen or equals.

During the Second World War, both Kjersmeier's wife and his collection were exiled. Amalie, born Edelstein, had married outside the relatively small Jewish community in Denmark, and as so many other Danish Jews, she had to be smuggled by boat to safety in neutral Sweden. Kjersmeier's collection was hastily transported to the National Museum, where it was kept secure, out of sight of the German authorities in case they planned to confiscate it as Jewish property. The museum's storage rooms contained other secrets during the war as well. Kaj Birket-Smith's son was a member of the resistance, and illegal arms were also kept in the cellars of the museum. When Europe was liberated in the spring of 1945, and in Denmark's case with the arrival of a small band from the Royal Dragoons, the collection, which had been clandestinely cared for, was immediately and discretely transported by the museum staff back to Kjersmeier's small apartment. With the return of the collection to its rightful owner, both duty and honour had been upheld, and we suspect not a word was said about it afterwards, because any other way of dealing with the matter would simply not have been considered.

After the war, Kjersmeier's influence on anthropology dwindled. New theories flourished, and Europe entered its postcolonial era. Kjersmeier also obtained an early retirement due to a nervous breakdown. A Danish Nazi collaborator had threatened and waved a gun in front of Kjersmeier's face during the war, and with his beloved wife and collection in exile, it was all too much. Kjersmeier tried to concentrate on his collection and visitors, but the cognac is said to have always been within reach. His guestbook

documents that members from the symbolist art movement COBRA made several visits and took inspiration from the crowded rooms full of African art and civilisation.

Africa became Kjersmeier's destiny, it filled his life, or as Mørk once told us: near the front door of their apartment, Carl and Amalie kept an evacuation list in case of fire, but they themselves were not on it. For them, their collection was larger than life itself. Carl Kjersmeier died in 1961 and when Amalie passed away seven years later, the entire collection, counting 1400 objects, was donated to the National Museum of Denmark.

THE COPENHAGEN PORTFOLIO

Visual anthropologist Christer Lindberg from Lund University in Sweden photographed large parts of the collection in situ in Copenhagen on July 20-22, 2016. A total of 285 images were shot during the three days, the goal being to take photos in the spirit of Man Ray, who stated that photography is directed by the mind through the eye with desire and love. "In every period artists have broken rules, and been called modern. Art has always been modern and looked upon with suspicion by those who had a sure thing. The last thing a genuine artist is concerned with is the production of a work of art. Then what is his object? Freedom and the pursuit of his desires and pleasures, resulting from his make up which he cannot help and must accept as is."⁵

⁵ Mundy, *Man Ray Writings on Art*, p. 216.









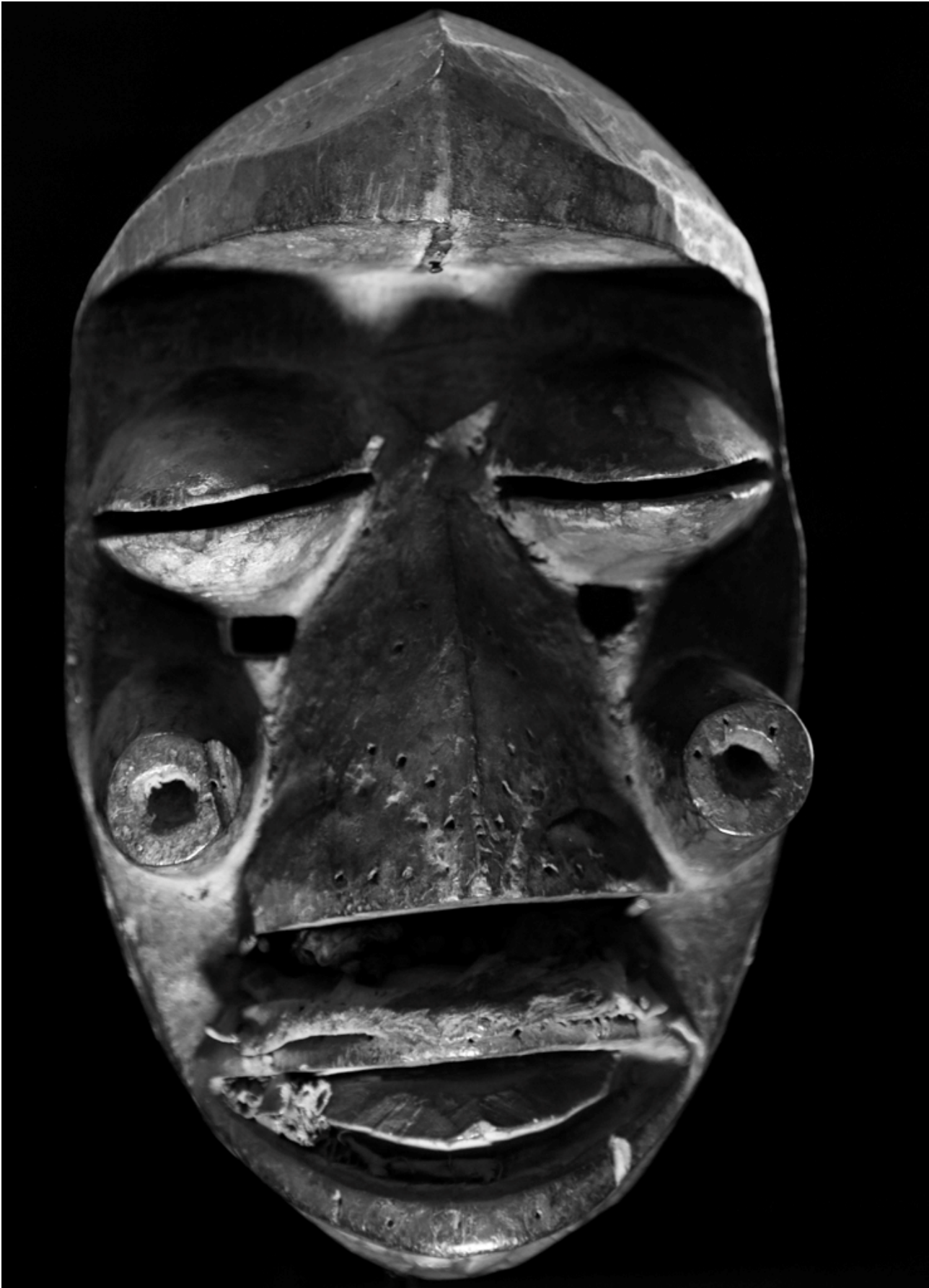












































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About the Authors

Jesper Kurt-Nielsen is curator at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Christer Lindberg is professor of social and visual anthropology at Lund University in Lund, Sweden.

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