

L'Oeil de Bamako

Photographs by Malick Sidibé, Courtesy of Tristan Hoare Gallery
Interview with Tristan Hoare



1814: Malick Sidibé began life in the small village Solaba, Mali . It was thought that he would become a goat herder... how did Malick Sidibé transform himself into one of the most famous photographers in Africa?

TH: I'd say that's partly luck due to Malick's talent and infectious personality.

Mali was a French colony when Malick was young and his talent was spotted by the administration. He was encouraged to enlist at the Institut National des Arts de Bamako and it was here that he met the French photographer Gérard Guillaat-Guignard from who he learnt his craft. Soon afterwards Gérard moved back to France and Malick was able to buy some equipment and set up his own studio in 1958.

Two years later Mali became independent and quickly began to be exposed to a new wave of influences from abroad, including music, record covers, and magazines from America and Europe. There was great energy in the country and the young Malians emerged confident and full of vitality and began throwing parties all over the city. Malick went to as many as he could, photographing everyone having a good time. He would then return to his studio in the early hours and start developing the film he had taken. Later that day everyone would come by to see the results, gossip about the night before and buy the pictures. Studio Malick became THE place to hang out in the 1960's in Bamako.



Jeune homme avec pattes d'éléphant, sacoche et monte, 1977, Malick Sidibé

1814: Malick Sidibé's studio portraits feature the young people of Mali's capital Bamako in their finest western clothes as if they just stepped out of a night club. Can you tell us about these portraits? Were they in fact taken after hours? Was this a case of people dressing up for their most important portrait?

TH: A bit of both! There are two sides to Malick's work. The first are the party scenes and the other side of the coin are the studio portraits. Many of the parties were given or attended by different 'groups'. Like the bands they were listening to, young Malians formed groups with different names, codes, and identities... and they liked to be photographed in costume. However, it's not practical to wear your finery all night... particularly in the heat of Bamako, so the portraits you are referring to are studio portraits, and these were carefully staged. Every item of clothing has been meticulously thought out, and in some you can see the clear influence of American movies and record covers. My favorite details are the accessories. If you look carefully it seems that many of the poses are chosen just to show off a watch, a ring, or a bracelet!



1814: Throughout his career Malick Sidibé continued to focus on black and white rather than color photography... analog rather than digital... What can you tell us of this commitment to his medium?

TH: I think as a starting point it was purely practical... his customers wanted black and white photographs and so he stuck to that and he mastered it. He really knew his craft. In the early days he developed the pictures himself and he also taught himself to repair cameras. When you walk into Malick's studio the first thing you see is a shelf with a huge collection of cameras, which he accumulated and restored over the years.

I never asked him about color photography, but instinctively feel that he didn't have the same love for it as black and white. In fact, the arrival of color photography in the 1980's almost put Malick out of business. Tastes had changed, and his clients wanted something else: a new aesthetic. In order to make a living he began charging to repair cameras and other electronic equipment.



Mile Kant Sira, 1965, Malick Sidibé

1814: Malick Sidibé is widely regarded as the most important photographer in Africa. Can you tell us about how Sidibé and his work were regarded in Mali?

TH: When you sat with Malick for a few hours outside his studio, it quickly became obvious that he was a well-loved local celebrity. People would drop in and out all the time, and bicyclists and bikers would scream his name as they rode past. In the early days many of the people he photographed were young people coming from all over the country to find work in Bamako, so he definitely has a following throughout Mali.

1814: Was Sibibé able to photograph up until his death?

TH: The pace was slowed until the early 1990's when curator Andre Magnin arrived in Bamako with an anonymous photograph and began asking around to see who had taken it. Eventually he was led to Malick's door and to the great Malian Master, Seidou Keita. Within a few years their reputations were global, culminating in Malick winning a Golden Lion Award in Venice in 2007. From that point onwards there were always people coming to his studio asking him to take their photograph with his signature style. He remained open, inquisitive and loved taking photographs right up until his health began to decline last year.



1814: Malick Sidibé's most famous photographs were taken in the 1960's and 1970's at a time when social and political influences were converging to shape a new society... Mali had won its' independence from France and Western music and cultures were replacing traditional values. Can you tell us about Sidibé's cultural influence on Mali and this period's influence on Sidibé?

TH: All I can say is that the luck was that Malick learnt the skills he did, and had the talent to act as a mirror to what was going on in Mali during the 1960's and 1970's. He was not a political person, he just loved people. Because of this, his photographs give us a clear picture of the dynamic and young post-colonial Mali. Ultimately, he really just liked to take pictures of parties and people having a good time!

That time and place definitely had a strong impact on Malick. He had come from the countryside and had grown up in a tradition and way of life that had existed for thousands of years. Suddenly he was exposed to influences from all around the world and was in touch with a large number of people and all sorts of new ideas.



1814: As a gallerist, can you tell us about how you became aware of the work of Malick Sidibé and about your first meeting?

TH: I saw a book of his work when I first became interested in photography, which I kept in my flat in London. I noticed that all of my friends who looked through the book were immediately enchanted by the images, and asked me about Malick. The thing that really interested me was how much you could tell about the people in the photographs if you look a little closer; the worn out shoes, the same props used by different people, the prominence of watches... a luxurious accessory... and the seriousness of the faces in the amazing costumes.

My first meeting with Malick was in 2007 at the Venice Biennial when he won the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement. Like everyone else, I managed to briefly shake his hand and tell him how much I loved his work. However, our first conversation was in 2008, when I went to Mali for the first time. Prior to arriving I spoke to him on the phone and he had told me to come and see him at his studio in the morning. I asked the hotel concierge what 'morning' meant. His answer was to be that it could be anywhere between 9:00 or 11:00 AM, so I turned up at 8:00 AM outside his studio in the morning and sat by the road in the boiling heat. Malick arrived at midday with a collection of sons, and we sat for a few hours talking outside his studio and drinking tea. That was the beginning of our friendship.



1814: Can you tell us about your first show of Sidibé's work in London and the response you received?

TH: The first exhibition I did of Malick was in London in March 2010, and the response was phenomenal. I was very much hoping that he would be at the opening, it was a great party and I know he would've loved it. However, his youngest son, whom he wanted to travel with, told me over the phone a week before that he didn't have a passport, so our plans were scuppered!

The exhibition received lots of good press and as a result people came from all over the UK, many of whom were touched by the images they'd seen. Others who had traveled in Africa came with their own stories. It was a fascinating 2 months and I felt that through the exhibition I was able to do justice to the talent of a fascinating man who is undoubtedly one of Africa's greatest photographers.

