

UNTITLED (THREE GIRLS AND A BABY)

1986

Gelatin silver print,
mounted with cardboard,
tape, and glass

5 1/8 x 3 1/2 in. (13 x 8.9 cm)

Malick Sidibé

Mali

Born 1935

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Lynne and Harold Honickman Fund for Photography, 2003-74-1



LOOKING QUESTIONS

How many people are in this photograph? What are their ages? What do you think their relationship is to one another?

Describe the composition of the photograph. How are the people arranged? What is the strongest design element?

Is this a formal portrait or a candid snapshot? How can you tell?

Malick Sidibé (mah-LEEK see-DEE-bay), a photographer in Bamako, the capital of Mali, made this small, postcard-size, black-and-white portrait in 1986. The photograph is arranged **symmetrically** with two girls standing on either side of a seated girl holding a baby in her lap. The bold **horizontal** stripes of the skirts and blouses **contrast** strongly with the backdrop of **vertical** stripes. Sidibé used striped backdrops to create striking combinations of **patterns** in many of his photographs.

When he was seventeen years old, Sidibé moved to Bamako and attended art school, studying jewelry making. After graduation, he learned photography by watching French photographers as they worked. Sidibé then began making formal portraits like this one, as well as **candid snapshots** of young people at parties, clubs, and Sunday outings by the Niger River. The candid shots have become especially well known in Europe and America, yet Sidibé prefers making portraits. He finds portrait-making more artistic and likes having control over the final image: "For me, setting up a photo shoot isn't so different from drawing a scene: I decide what goes where, I decide how to **pose** the person. . . ."^{*}

After Sidibé opened Studio Malick in 1960, his popularity grew quickly. On Saturdays and around Muslim holidays, people wearing new hairstyles and clothes would be seen waiting in line in front of his studio. Sidibé's black-and-white portrait business declined with the arrival of color photography

in Mali in the 1980s. Today, however, he enjoys an international reputation and teaches young people in his neighborhood how to make inexpensive pinhole cameras and create beautiful black-and-white photographs.

I KA NYÈ TAN (YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL LIKE THAT)

—Bambara expression

Sidibé's photographs are primarily keepsakes for his clients, but they are also **symbols** of wealth, social importance, and modernity. Signs of his clients' affluence, like stylish shoes, jewelry, or clothing, are often visible in their portraits. Can you spot different pieces of jewelry worn by the girls in *Untitled (Three Girls and a Baby)*? Sometimes these objects are noticeably European or American to emphasize the sitter's wealth and familiarity with foreign goods and contemporary taste.

While Sidibé enjoyed having control over his portraits, his clients also like to assert their individuality in their images. One man had himself photographed with his sheep, another with a sombrero. Even the ways people choose to stand or place their arms express their personalities. How do you think the girls in *Three Girls and a Baby* show what they like and who they are?

Sidibé's role as a Malian photographer was groundbreaking because in French colonies like Mali, the French government prohibited Africans from working as photographers. After Mali gained its independence from France in 1960, Sidibé became one of the first West African photographers to create images of African people for an African audience. Although he felt his work was beautiful and artistic, Sidibé did not consider himself an artist at the time he was making a large number of portraits. As a **commercial photographer**, his job was to please his customers by showing them at their best. Paradoxically, Sidibé's photographs are now collected by museums and admired the world over as art.

*Malick Sidibé, interview by Michelle Lamunière. *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums; New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 2001), 51.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART

Work in pairs to draw, paint, or photograph portraits with patterned backdrops. One person will be the artist or photographer and the other will be the client. Discuss which aspects the artist and the client will decide (backdrop, pose, lighting, clothing, jewelry, etc.) When one portrait is completed, switch roles.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

Write a story or dialogue about the people in *Three Girls and a Baby* based on what you see. How are they related? What happened just before the photograph was taken? What will happen next?

MATH

Malick Sidibé made small photographs so that his clients could put them in envelopes and mail them to family and friends. Collect different sizes of envelopes and figure out the dimensions photographs would need to be to fit inside, in inches and centimeters.

SCIENCE

Make pinhole cameras, and then create black-and-white photographs. For simple directions on how to make pinhole cameras, see:

How to Make and Use a Pinhole Camera,
<http://www.kodak.com/global/en/consumer/education/lessonPlans/pinholeCamera/>
Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N.Y.