

Consuelo Kanaga

CATCH THE SPIRIT

When you make a photograph, it is very much a picture of your own self. That is the important thing. Most people try to be striking to catch the eye. I think the thing is not to catch the eye but the spirit.

Consuelo Kanaga

Consuelo Kanaga (born 1894, Astoria, Oregon; died 1978, Yorktown Heights, New York) was “way ahead of her time,” as her friend the photographer Dorothea Lange recalled. “Generally if you use the word unconventional you mean someone who breaks the rules—she had no rules.” This assessment was no doubt because Kanaga was one of the first women to become a staff photojournalist at a major newspaper in the 1910s. During the 1930s, she became associated with several avant-garde groups of photographers in the United States, including Group f.64 in San Francisco and the Photo League in New York. However, gender inequality, social norms, and class constrained Kanaga’s ability to fully dedicate her time to her photographic art practice. She worked full-time jobs, pursued her art on weekends, and often put her career on hold for her male partners—these are some of the reasons why her work is not better known today.

Drawing upon the Brooklyn Museum’s collection of nearly 500 vintage prints and 2,500 negatives by Kanaga, as well as archival materials, *Consuelo Kanaga: Catch the Spirit* presents the work of this critical yet overlooked figure in the history of modern photography. Over the course of six decades, Kanaga documented urgent social issues, from urban poverty and labor rights to racial terror and inequality, and her work remains as relevant today as it was during her own lifetime. She also championed the formal and poetic possibilities of photography as an art form. Like other modernist photographers, Kanaga drew on the realization that truth is relative and photographs are as much an

expression of the photographer's feelings for the subject as they are a reflection of the subject depicted. This exhibition charts the artist's vision, which spans pathbreaking photojournalism, modernist still lifes, and celebrated portraits of Black Americans, both famous and anonymous.

Drew Sawyer
Exhibition Curator

PHOTOJOURNALISM AND THE CITY

Kanaga was among the first women to work in the field of photojournalism. In 1915, at the age of 21, she began writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where she learned to photograph while on assignments, before officially becoming a staff photographer in 1918. Kanaga went on to work for newspapers in Denver and New York as well as numerous national magazines from the 1920s through the 1950s. As a photojournalist, she often shot scenes of city life as well as images of economic and racial inequality.

It was through photojournalism that Kanaga realized the potential of photography as an art form. Around 1918, she joined the California Camera Club of San Francisco, where she had access to not only a darkroom and equipment but also books and journals about the medium. She was particularly influenced by *Camera Work*, published by Alfred Stieglitz, and New York and San Francisco photographers who captured street scenes and architecture in their images, for instance Arnold Genthe.

PORTRAITURE

Beginning in the early 1920s, Kanaga supplemented her work for newspapers by setting up a portrait studio. Throughout the rest of her life, she would support herself and her partners by photographing wealthy clients as well as avant-garde friends in San Francisco and New York. As a result, portraiture became the primary focus of her creative output.

A principios de la década de 1920, Kanaga complementó su trabajo para los periódicos abriendo un estudio dedicado al retrato. Durante el resto de su vida, se mantendría económicamente a sí misma y a sus parejas fotografiando a clientes adinerados y a amigos del entorno de las vanguardias de San Francisco y Nueva York. En consecuencia, el retrato se convirtió en el principal foco de su producción creativa.

In her portrait work, Kanaga experimented with posing, cropping, lighting, and printing to enhance the expressive potential of her photographs. Like other modernist photographers, such as her mentor Alfred Stieglitz, she often composed pictures to show the hands touching or near the face, for dramatic effect. In addition to flash she used darkroom techniques such as burning and dodging, which manipulate exposure times in select areas of a photographic print to increase the contrast between shadows and highlights. She toned her prints with metals including gold and would add pencil or graphite to bring out features.

AMERICANS ABROAD

Between 1927 and 1928, Kanaga spent nearly a year traveling and making photographs in France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Tunisia. This was made possible by the support of Albert M. Bender, a leading patron of the arts in San Francisco. During her sojourn abroad, Kanaga visited museums, monuments, and churches, and also sought out opportunities to learn about modernist photographic practices. While staying with a community of expat artists in Kairouan, Tunisia, she photographed the city and its people, producing three albums.

It was during these travels that she began to express her views on racism in the United States, which she would further explore through photography during the 1930s. “I am sick of seeing colored men and women abused by stupid white people,” she wrote in a letter to Bender. About her deepening belief in portraiture as an artistic genre, she noted, “Strange but the more I see in portrait work the nearer I feel toward expressing myself. Now I can see how hours passed absorbing the quality of painting and sculpture abroad has given me a longing for

more clear and penetrating work.”

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE AMERICAN SCENE

While Kanaga is best known for her portraits, she worked in a range of genres and styles throughout her career. Like other U.S. artists during the interwar period, she was particularly drawn to what became known as the American Scene, or naturalistic and descriptive representations of national and regional heritage and everyday life. Artists and critics desired to construct a national brand of art that differed from styles associated with European modernisms. While these efforts were largely associated with painting, photography proved particularly well suited to the task.

Kanaga mostly focused on marginalized subjects in everyday life and politics, from workers and Black Americans to overlooked objects and buildings. She often emphasized the camera’s ability to record precise details as well as new perspectives.

THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT AND REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACKNESS

Kanaga’s work intersected with the discourses and visual arts of the New Negro Movement, also known as the Harlem Renaissance. Like the broader American Scene, which was attempting to celebrate vernacular subjects and everyday people to create a distinctly national art, the New Negro Movement sought to redefine and celebrate Black American identity through cultural self-expression, economic independence, and progressive politics.

During the 1930s, Kanaga produced portraits of well-known Black Americans including the poet Langston Hughes, the artist Sargent Johnson, and the singer Kenneth Spencer. Her desire to seek beauty was driven by not only the flowering and celebration of Black creativity but also her attempt to challenge prevailing notions and representations of Blackness in the United States. While these efforts aligned with those of Black artists and intellectuals, Kanaga’s focus on Blackness was complicated by her position as a white woman.

THE WORKER-PHOTOGRAPHY MOVEMENT

As part of the international Worker-Photography Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, Kanaga became involved in numerous photography- and film-based collectives that sought to support workers' organizing efforts as well as showcase the lives, issues, and experiences of working-class people during the Great Depression. These "media activists" rebelled against mass media institutions that reflected the values of their well-financed owners and sought to give workers the tools to represent their own struggles.

In the early 1930s in San Francisco, Kanaga joined the Workers Film and Photo League and the Photo Commentors, a short-lived group of socially concerned photographers that included Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams. After relocating to New York for the third time in 1935, she made photographs for leftist publications such as *Labor Defender*, *New Masses*, and *Sunday Worker* and became involved in the Photo League. In a period marked by the attempt to create solidarity among workers across race and gender lines, Kanaga focused on the experiences of Black Americans and laborers in particular.

PORTRAITS OF ARTISTS

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Kanaga produced portraits of artists, writers, performers, and musicians. She met many of them through her association with various photo clubs and groups as well as during her travels throughout the United States and Europe. Her images show photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz and W. Eugene Smith, painters such as Milton Avery and Mark Rothko, and designers such as Wharton Esherick.

Kanaga's career is especially intertwined with a strong and far-reaching circle of women photographers that she cultivated over her many-decades-long practice. She served as a resource and confidant for Berenice Abbott, Imogen Cunningham, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Dorothea Lange, Alma Lavenson, Tina Modotti, and Eiko Yamazawa, among others. These photographers often made portraits of each other.

TRAVELS TO THE U.S. SOUTH

Between the late 1940s and early 1960s, Kanaga took several trips to the U.S. South. As with her work from the 1930s, she focused primarily on Black laborers and children. Kanaga found inspiration in the farm workers she encountered in the reclaimed swamplands (“mucklands”) outside of Maitland, Florida, as well as farming families in Tennessee. In 1950, during her second trip to Tennessee, she sought out and photographed the Black self-taught artist William Edmondson along with his carved-stone sculptures.

One of Kanaga’s final travel assignments was for the writer Barbara Deming, whose activist work included protesting segregation in Alabama and Georgia. Kanaga joined Deming’s group of activists in early 1964 after their imprisonment for walking on a “whites only” sidewalk. Deming’s 1966 book *Prison Notes* includes Kanaga’s photographs.

NATURE STUDIES

In 1940, Kanaga and her husband the painter Wallace Putnam purchased a property with a pond and an old icehouse in Yorktown Heights, New York, near Croton-on-Hudson in Westchester County. Kanaga turned to photographing the area’s natural environment in the following years as well as making portraits for local clients. One of her photographs of the pond was included in the 1948 exhibition *In and Out of Focus* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The couple moved to Yorktown Heights full-time in 1950 after Putnam’s employer, the New York newspaper *The Sun*, folded. Kanaga began to freelance for several women’s magazines, including *Women’s Day*, which financially supported both her and Putnam. Perhaps this is one reason why, after her photographs were included in important shows in the 1940s, Kanaga’s activities dropped off for the next two decades.