

Around the Mall

SCENES AND SIGHTINGS FROM THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS AND BEYOND

- 32 Let the Collecting Begin
- 34 From the Secretary
- 36 The Object at Hand
- 37 Q&A: Brad Bird
- 38 What's Up

PICTURES OF YOUTH

A boy in an oversize Dallas Cowboys T-shirt smiles, one arm slung over a donkey's neck. Amid a crowd of children, a girl grasps a long wooden pestle and grinds shea nuts into shea butter. In the shade of a tree, a man naps outside on a woven mat, his radio beside him.

These uncommonly intimate scenes of daily life appear in a collection of black- and-white photographs by 22 children, ages 12 to 17, in two rural villages in Mali. More than 40 of the photographs are at the National Museum of Natural History through April 2007.

Chantal, a 12-year-old Malian, says of her photograph: "Sébastien and Gnasian are dressed to go out."

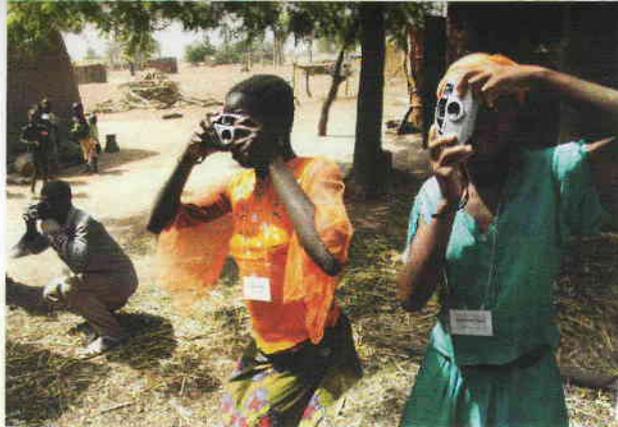
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The exhibit, the first at the museum to feature images by amateur African photographers, was set in motion by Nestor Hernández, of Washington, D.C., who visited Mali in 2003 for a photography show in the capital, Bamako. He also went to Damy and Kouara, farming villages near the Burkina Faso border, where he photographed the cotton harvest. Back in the nation's capital, Hernández met Shawn Davis, who had worked in Mali as a Peace Corps volunteer. By January 2005, the pair were back in Mali conducting a photography workshop, co-taught by the famed Malian photographer Alioune Bâ, for children in Damy and Kouara. (Hernández died of cancer this past May)

None of the children had ever held a camera. Each received a point-and-shoot from the Academy for Educational Development, a D.C.-based nonprofit that employs Davis and funded the project. There was no electricity in the villages, and Davis—who'd toted more than 100 AA batteries to the sites—reminded the kids to turn their cameras off at night. "Just before you close your eyes," he said, "you have to close the eye of the camera."

The childrens' photographs are notable for the obvious ease between them and their subjects, giving the collection the feel of a vast family photo album. It's this warmth that sets the pictures apart from what Americans often see of life in Africa—foreigners viewed through the detached gaze of Western photojournalism.

Some of the photographs are so well composed it's hard to imagine the kids had never taken pictures before. People in



Workshop students (above) photographed family members (a grandmother, below left) and village life (making shea butter).



Damy and Kouara were familiar with photography, mostly from itinerant market photographers, who charge \$1 for portraits.

But it was a new concept for the students to compose a picture in a rectangular frame, says Davis. He had them practice by looking through boxes cut out of paper.

The workshop was guided by a Malian oral tradition in which a "griot"—a person of honor in the community—records family events, politics and history through recitation and song. Thus the young photographers came to be known as "visual griots"—the title of the exhibition.

Last fall, the newly built U.S. Embassy in Bamako acquired some of the photographs. One shows an old woman sitting on a woven mat, an arm resting on her knee (left). The photographer notes in a caption, "This image is all that I have left of my grandmother." { BY KATY JUNE-FRIESEN }



Let the Collecting Begin

The National Museum of African American History and Culture isn't scheduled to open, on the Mall, until 2015. But the new museum has just acquired its first piece—a 115-year-old pew from Quinn Chapel, site of Chicago's oldest African-American congregation. Organized in 1847, the African Methodist Episcopal church was a stop on the underground railroad and helped Southern blacks adjust to urban life. The current Gothic Revival structure, built in 1890, stands on the Near South Side, a block from Michigan Avenue. Among those who have addressed the congregation are Frederick Douglass, President William McKinley and Patti Labelle. Museum director Lonnie Bunch says the pew is an appropriate first acquisition because such churches are "one of the most important elements in understanding black America." { BY KATY JUNE-FRIESEN }