The current exhibition in the second-floor photography gallery is *Louisiana Portraits* by Debbie Caffery, Lee Crum and A.J. Meek. The photographs, on view through November 4, are selected from portrait series made by these photographers in the regions where they reside. Debbie Caffery photographs the workers of the cane fields around Franklin, Lee Crum the personalities of New Orleans, and A.J. Meek the residents of small towns around Baton Rouge. The photographers share the pursuit of documenting an area through the portraiture of its people, a fitting undertaking in Louisiana, a state which derives much of its distinctive character from its diverse citizenry. Each of the series, however, is defined by the choice of sitters for the document, the style of portraiture employed, and determining all else, the purpose for its creation.

Lee Crum, a free-lance photojournalist, is compiling a collection of portraits which he calls a "physical document of New Orleans." As a photographer for the *Times-Picayune/States Item* from 1978 to 1982, he came to know New Orleans as a city of personalities, ranging from dignitaries to street people. In 1983, he began assembling portraits of them with the belief that they, perhaps more than history or architecture, give the city its special glamour and piquancy. The task is reminiscent of that of the French photographer Nadar who set out in the 1850s to produce an extensive catalogue of prominent Parisians called the "Panthéon-Nadar." Members of Crum's pantheon are of no particular type or station, although many are easily recognizable such as Tuts Washington and Police Chief Henry Morris, and include art patrons, religious leaders, flambeaux carriers and "Lucky Dog" vendors. What unites them all is the possession of a distinct persona.

The task of their chronicler is first to recognize this attribute, and second, to distill its essence into an accessible form. It requires a style of portraiture, that is, of overall simplification with exaggeration of the most salient details. Crum photographs his sitters in a mobile studio environment of canvas sheeting and portable strobe lights. The background is bland, the lights producing slight tonal variations upon the canvas. The props are only those considered essential for the understanding of a particular sitter; the photographer Clarence John Laughlin, for example, is posed with his camera. Crum's camera is concentrated upon the sitter at close range, allowing little else into the frame. The prints from the two and one-quarter inch negatives are crisp with detail and value; skin tones are tactile, and expressions are finely defined.

This spare portrait photography style was made famous in the 1960s by Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, although it extends back to early daguerreotype portraiture, and nineteenth-century painted portraits influenced by the naturalizing tendency of the period. Crum acknowledges Avedon and Penn as influences, and quite obviously derives his method from them. There is, however, a notable difference. In the preface to his book, *Worlds in a Small Room*, Penn described his experiences traveling to remote regions to photograph isolated peoples in a portable canvas studio. What he found most interesting was the transformation of his sitters during the process of being photographed. "As they crossed the threshold of the studio," he wrote, "they took on a seriousness of self-presentation that would not have been expected of simple people." "I am struck," he continued, "that . . . they rose to the experience . . . with dignity and a seriousness of concentration that they would never have had . . . in their own surroundings." One wonders, "Why wouldn't they?" In Crum's portraits, however, there is not Penn's patronizing attitude towards people of a different culture, but one of equality with the sitters. Many of them are, in fact, his friends, and in this, he is closer in spirit to Nadar whose moving portraits of sitters such as Camille...
Corot and Sarah Bernhardt came only after long association.

While Crum is assembling what might be called his "New Orleans Pantheon," A.J. Meek is photographing the people of the small towns around Baton Rouge as part of his documentation of the rural environment of the area. His portraits grow out of his studies of the surrounding landscape which he began photographing in 1977 when he took a teaching position at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. It was a natural progression for him. He found the people and the land integral here, the character of either dependent upon the other. Because of this, a sense of place is heightened in Meek's portraits. He is careful to note the names of towns such as Plaquemine Bayou, Port Allen, or Rosedale in the titles, and to include details such as a yard planted with garlic, a pickup truck, or a local roadside tavern. The portraits are made out of doors, usually from a middle distance. The sitters are at rest and composed, and assume an unposed naturalness. The overall mood of tranquility is respected by Meek's cool and restrained style. The eight- by ten-inch negatives are usually printed full-frame, maintaining the inherent stability of their horizontal format. The compositions are anchored by a central placement of the sitter, and a classical ordering of the simple adjacent pictorial masses.

Meek's portrait style has clear correspondence with that of August Sander, one of the leading photographers of Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. Sander had the grand ambition to compile a complete portrait of the German people. He called the series the "Man of the Twentieth Century," and grouped the individual portraits by sociologic, economic, and professional classifications. His sitters were photographed against a plain background or in what he felt were their natural circumstances, and often included an accessory suggestive of their rank, such as a postman with his bag, or a workman with a load of bricks. His style was straightforward, his attitude towards his sitters unflinchingly direct. Their individual personalities were rarely disclosed, as their importance was as a member of an aggregate. "The individual," Sander said, "does not make the history of his time, he both impresses himself on it and expresses its meaning."

Sander's analytic style is echoed in Meek's portraits which often possess the detachment of a catalogue. The distance of the camera to the sitters gives the portraits the air of anthropological investigations and encourages the use of the term "subject" instead of "sitter." This is suitable for a document of an environment. Meek's sitters are not only significant as individuals, but equally as representatives of groups that might be classified "farmers," "rural ministers," or "owners of small-town businesses."

This does not diminish Meek's respect for the small-town people he photographs. His physical distance from them is as much his observance of "respectful distance," and he seems careful not to intrude upon them. Instead, he allows what he calls a "mutual attraction" to bring them together and includes their full names in titles—"Mr. J. Businella," or "Mrs. Joel Alcado." In short, his sitters are not "caught" by the camera, but allowed to present themselves to it with great self-awareness and dignity.

Meek's correspondence of subject and environment is weighted towards the latter. Caffery has sympathy for the sugar cane workers she photographs, but it is tangential to her fascination with the totality of sugar production—the sights and smells of the harvest, the nature of light in the fields, the warmth and vitality of the workers—and her pursuit of a documentation of a way of life that is dying in Southern Louisiana as cane farming increasingly mechanizes and sugar mills close down.

The workers in the photographs are obviously poor; one assumes that their life is one of difficulty and struggle. However, Caffery's photographs are not the statement of their plight that one associates with the American tradition of documenting the rural poor culminating with the Photography Project of the Farm Security
The Art of Cameroon

BY EVA S. LAMOTHE
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Bryce P. Holcombe, Jr., African art historian and Director of Pace Primitive and Ancient Art, died recently in New York City at the age of 43. Born in New Orleans, Bryce had a deep affection for the city and made donations of African Art to the Museum’s permanent collection. As a tribute to this respected scholar, collector, and dealer, who was a lender of objects to The Art of Cameroon, the New Orleans presentation of this exhibition is dedicated to his memory.

The New Orleans Museum of Art will host an international exhibition of royal art from the African nation of Cameroon from October 6 through November 25, 1984. This exhibition of 120 stunning and impressive objects from private and public collections in Cameroon, Europe and the United States includes two types of art objects: ceremonial ancestral images and prestige objects.

Ceremonial ancestral images are believed to be inhabited by the spirits of important dead ancestors, who communicate with both gods and the living. The images are therefore highly esteemed and are additionally looked on as being the only channel for the living to consult with or communicate with the gods who control the everyday conditions and final fate of the living.

Royal prestige objects include caps, bracelets, royal thrones and stools, to name a few, and publicly announce the social position of the wearer, be it a living person or a carved image of a dead ancestor. One’s social position is solely related to one’s degree of connection with the King, who is not only the political and religious leader, but divine in his own right.

Cameroon art represents a microcosm of traditional African art. In its own context, the success of an art object is judged according to how effectively it functions. Form and function are closely related, and Cameroon sculpture is not only an expression of beauty, but a form of communication and a release of deep emotion. Its function is to communicate with and pacify ancestral spirits in order to perpetrate the physical and political well-being of the kingdom, control social transgressions and express social prestige within a highly stratified hierarchy. When not in use, the art is carefully kept from public view in a secluded place, cared for by keepers who make sure that its power to communicate with the spirits is retained through sacrifices and purifying rituals. As an art object ages, its effectiveness is deemed to diminish. This diminished effectiveness is resolved by carving a new image which the spirit is coaxed into entering through special rituals and sacrifices. Without a spirit an object is considered dead and simply discarded. Contrary to the Western concept that antiquity adds value to an object, the Africans prefer the new to the old, and their sculpture is seldom more than 50 years old. Therefore, to the African artist, there is no conflict in creating powerful religious and spiritual images in such ransitory media as wood and natural fiber.

Cameroon is located in West Africa, lodged between Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Congo, Cabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. It is divided into a complex multitude of ethnic groups falling into three major cultural groups: the Fulani in the north, the Grassfields in the center and the Rainforest in the south-southwest, including the coast. The Fulani converted to Islam, which forbids graven images, during the early 19th century, and their art consists mainly of pottery, weaving and personal adornment. The Rainforest has had contact with Europe since the 17th century, and their traditional art forms have slowly disintegrated, mainly through the impact of 19th- and 20th-century contact with German, then with French and British colonial administrations. It is therefore mainly in the Grassfields one finds the rich heritage of royal ceremonial and prestige art on view in the New Orleans Museum of Art’s current exhibition.

The Grassfields consist of a multitude of...