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WHEN THE WHITE ESTABLISHMENT IGNORED THESE BLACK PHOTOGRAPHERS, THE KAMOINGE COLLECTIVE WAS BORN

By Ashawnta Jackson, March 15, 2018



There's a picture of Miles Davis, black-and-white, date unknown, with the long, lean figure of bassist Ron Carter at his side. Miles aficionados can deduce that it's from the era of his second quintet, sometime between 1964 and 1968. Davis is seated, his body slightly bowed, trumpet pressed close to his figure as he blows. Behind him to his right, Carter stands, relaxed but almost stoic, fingers arched over the strings. The image is dark. Very dark. But just the right amount of light illuminates the men's faces and their instruments. The photo was taken by New York photographer Louis Draper, and

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there is something about the way he's captured the moment, from the shaft of light gently illuminating Davis to Carter's quiet power — something that says Draper saw the men, really saw them, and wanted to us to see them, too.

It's easy to make great artists appear great, wrapped up as they are in our admiration. But what about everyone else? The photographers of Harlem's Kamoinge collective, which Draper co-founded, wanted to spotlight the beauty of black life, from the jazz giants to ordinary neighborhood residents. The members of the Kamoinge collective recognized that they would have to band together, not just in order to push one another artistically, but to earn their place in the larger photography world, which wasn't very interested in letting them in. The collective helped launch the careers of several prominent black photographers and challenged the way stories of black lives were being told, and who got to tell them.

he group was formed in 1963, in Harlem, when two black photography groups — Draper's Group 35, which included Herman Howard and Calvin Mercer, among others, and another local group, which included Herbert Randall and Shawn Walker — combined to create a larger collective. In all, this first iteration had 15 members. They named it Kamoinge, a word from the Kenyan Kikuyu language meaning “a group of people acting and working together.” The collective's aim was to join forces to push one another, raise the quality of their work, and elevate every project they produced. “We saw ourselves as a group who were trying to nurture each other,” Draper said in an interview with photography scholar Erina Duganne. “The magazines wouldn't support our work. So we wanted to encourage each other.”

While each photographer's images reflected something about the person behind the camera, the work the collective made — and made public — was also a means to create nuanced documentation of black lives, politics, and arts. “Most of [us] were not able to break into the ‘downtown white establishment’ but felt its ramifications while seeing the images produced,” founding member and Kamoinge historian Shawn Walker tells Timeline. “We were excited about being able to express ourselves and represent our view of our community visually and aesthetically.”

The first order of business was for each of the collective's members to create a portfolio. One of them, Melvin Mills, worked in a print shop and was able accomplish the task for free. The portfolio images were tangible, visible proof of the members' work, so that “history could not say we did not exist,” as the group writes on its website. They held rotating meetings at members' homes during the first two years, and in 1965 they rented the first floor of a brownstone in Harlem, which they called the Kamoinge Gallery. This space allowed them room to host workshops, critiques, and guest speakers and to add new members. The collective also began to publish their work in Harlem newspapers and other black publications. “We wanted to show a picture that did not emphasize the negativity that the white photographers clung to when shooting in our community,” says Walker. “We could decide what images went into print.”

The group's first director, Roy DeCarava, was instrumental in pushing the group forward. His powerful pre-Kamoinge work, which included *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a book-length collaboration between DeCarava and writer Langston Hughes chronicling life in Harlem, served as a model for what the future of black photography could look like. “He was our mentor, our leader, and our inspiration,” Walker explains. “He helped us articulate our views as photographers and change agents and enabled us to present a different view of our community for our community.”

In a 1972 photograph taken in Senegal by Ming Smith, Kamoinge's first female member, we see a woman walking, her dress billowing behind her. A tree curves ahead of her, simultaneously framing and mimicking her movement. There are only questions in this image. Who is she? Where is she going? But there is also something unquestioningly beautiful and graceful about the subject, something in the way she's climbing a slight hill, facing the wind yet perfectly straight, that gives her a sort of strength. She's not presented as a problem to be solved, or a national burden. She's just a woman, a

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complicated human set against an ordinary backdrop. This was exactly the kind of narrative Kamoinge photographers wanted to create: the beauty of everyday blackness.

The Kamoinge photographers used their exclusion from the mainstream to continue changing the narrative of black life. Smith, for example, noticed the lack of black families shown in fine art photographs and began to address the issue by making pictures. “A lot of the people I’d photograph, they were struggling, but there was life there,” she told the New York Post in 2017. “They were optimistic and full of love.”

In an interview with Bomb magazine, founding member Adger Cowans elaborated on the group’s objectives. “We felt we could do a better job in showing the truth of our people,” he explained. “Rather than someone else coming in and photographing us because that was always in a sort of ‘native’ vein or from somebody else’s point of view.”

It was the right moment in American history for the collective to realize its vision. A growing civil rights movement was under way, New York’s jazz scene was thriving, and the mundane beauty of everyday black life was letting the world know that it was as much a part of that story as anyone else. Kamoinge photographers celebrated all of these moments in their work, and in doing so approached photography in a way that years later would be seen as revolutionary.

DeCarava left the group in 1965, and the gallery was shuttered soon after. (Some attributed the closing to tensions between Kamoinge and its neighbors over controversial images on display.) In a 1970 profile in Popular Photography magazine, he explained that Kamoinge was “an attempt to develop a conscious awareness of being black, in order to say things about ourselves as black people that only we could say.” Throughout the collective’s 50-plus-year history, many of its members have gone on to become renowned artists, teachers, and directors of photography programs. Kamoinge is still active with gallery shows, publications, and mentorship, an enduring collective carrying on its original vision.