

Fowler

MUSEUM AT UCLA

Photo Cameroon: Studio Portraiture, 1970s–1990s

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Press contact: Erin Connors, 714-270-6426, erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu



Los Angeles—*Photo Cameroon: Studio Portraiture, 1970s–1990s* is the first exhibition in the U.S. to look extensively at the work of Cameroonian photographers Jacques Toussele, Joseph Chila, and Samuel Finlak. Along with their well-known counterparts from Mali and Senegal, these artists helped define the golden age of studio portraiture in West Africa. Combining technical proficiency with an imaginative and at times playful eye, they fueled their clients’ desire to be represented and seen through this versatile medium.

More than 100 black and white photographs on view—selected from the three artists’ archives—illuminate the aspirations, allegiances, and beliefs of Cameroonians in the post-independence era. Clients collaborated with photographers on the choice of clothing, pose, and props, jointly shaping the image they wished to project, and the artists utilized a range of locations, from formal studios with electric lighting to ad hoc outdoor settings that relied on natural light. Divided into six themes, the exhibition reveals the dynamism of the studio space as a site of civic and individual identity construction.

“The photographs in this exhibition will give viewers a glimpse into the incredible diversity that characterizes the Grassfields region of Cameroon,” said Erica Jones, the Fowler’s Curator of African Arts. “The sitters introduce us to a range of religious and cultural groups in the region, their urban and rural experiences, and various moments of private and public lives.”

Commissioning a portrait from a studio photographer was a common practice in post-colonial Cameroon because personal cameras were rare, and beginning in the mid-1950s, the government mandated that all adults must carry an identity card with a photograph. The steady income provided by taking ID photos enabled photographers to offer lower rates on more complex studio commissions—portraits of families, couples, friends, and social gatherings—making them accessible to a wider clientele.

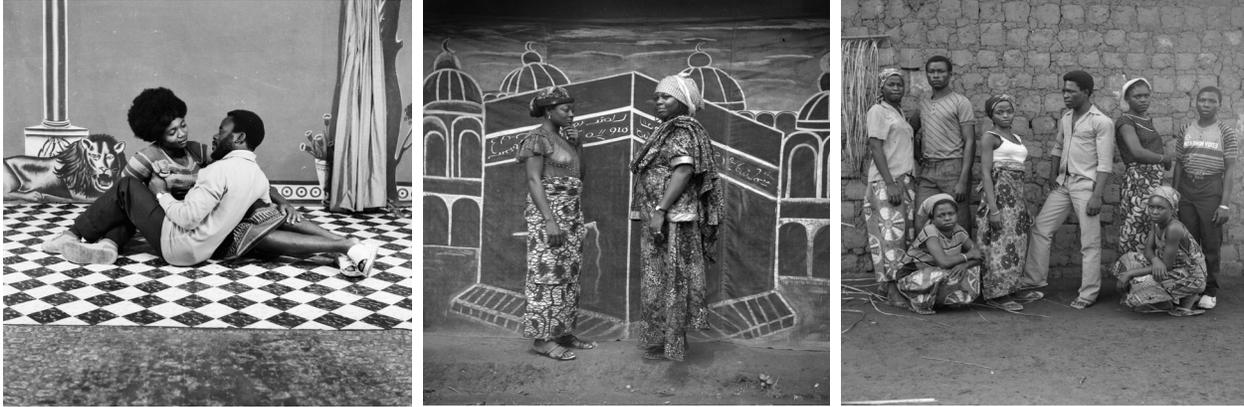
Toussele, Chila, and Finlak were adept at helping sitters convey different aspects of their identities: national or neighborhood affiliations, membership in a cultural group or sports club, religious beliefs or profession, family ties or friendship. Sitters chose hair styles, T-shirts featuring popular figures, boom boxes, and motorcycles to express their prosperity or their aspirations. Elements reflecting local traditions, such as long flowing garments, hand-dyed indigo cloth (*ndop*), and other accessories, served as important indicators of community status in the Grassfields region of Cameroon—home to dozens of kingdoms and the birthplace of all three artists. Taken together, the photographs present a vivid panorama of a nation embracing its traditions and local cultures, as well as globalization.

The Artists' Archives

The exhibition draws on the extant archives of the three photographers. Joseph Chila and Samuel Finlak still retain their collections of several thousand black and white negatives in 2 ¼ square inch format. Exhibition co-curator David Zeitlyn was introduced to the late Jacques Toussele by Joseph Chila in 2001. Realizing the need to act quickly to preserve Toussele's archive of 50,000 photographs and negatives from his nearly 50-year-long career, Zeitlyn secured a grant from the British Library's Endangered Archives Program in 2006 to fully digitize the images—many of them damaged from unstable conditions in the studio. Several prints from these delaminated negatives are on view in the final section of the exhibition. Zeitlyn shared the digitized collection with the Cameroon National Archives, several Cameroonian universities, and the British Library, while the Toussele family retained the ownership and control of the originals.

Artist Biographies

Jacques Toussele (pronounced *Too-seh-lay*) (1939–2017) was born in the village of Bamessingué, but spent most of his life in the nearby town of Mbouda, in the francophone (French-speaking) West Region of Cameroon. Having learned photography from Ignatious Nochai (a native of Yaoundé), the first photographer to work in Mbouda, he set up his own studio, Photo Jacques, in the center of Mbouda. Over the course of his lengthy career, which extended from 1959 to 2006, Toussele took tens of thousands of photographs (his surviving archive of about 50,000 images represents half of his output). He staged most of his photos at the studio, but, together with his apprentices, also attended weekly markets in the outlying villages, traveling there by motorbike and later by car, which his business enabled him to buy, and photographing clients in those more spontaneous settings. Toussele trained many apprentices who later spread throughout the country. One of them ended up working for the Ministry of Information in the capital city, which gave official recognition to Toussele's training. In 2006, Toussele closed Photo Jacques and the site was redeveloped.



Joseph Chila was born near the town of Mbouda in 1948. A nephew of Toussele, he was first introduced to photography as his apprentice in 1969–74. Afterward, Chila briefly set up his own studio in Mbouda, before moving to the small town of Mayo Darlé (administratively in Adamawa Region in the north of Cameroon) in 1975. Initially, he named his studio Young Photo PlayBoy, but soon switched to the more sober Photo Joseph. Mayo Darlé flourished thanks to a local tin mine. Chila established himself as one of the prominent photographers in the area—another being Samuel Finlak—and worked there until his retirement in the 1990s, when he moved to the nearby town of Bankim. Chila took photographs in his studio and around town, but did not travel beyond it: his clients came to him, often while attending Mayo Darlé’s weekly market, one of the biggest in the area.

Samuel Finlak was born in Bongor, Ngwa village, Mbem in 1958. Mbem is located in the anglophone (English-speaking) Northwest Region of Cameroon, just north of the francophone West Region, where Toussele lived. Finlak largely taught himself, along with taking a correspondence course in photography. In spite of his anglophone background, he moved to the village of Atta, in the francophone Adamawa Region, setting up the only photographic studio for many miles. He took photos in Atta as well as in nearby villages and hamlets, and always preferred natural outdoor light to flash in the studio. The wider geographic area Finlak covered overlapped with that of Joseph Chila. Although they knew each other slightly, they had little professional contact until they started working with Zeitlyn on an exhibition in Yaoundé in 2004 and its later version in London. Finlak still lives in Atta, though his work as a photographer has slowed to a trickle.

Credits

The exhibition is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and is curated by Erica P. Jones, Fowler Curator of African Arts, with co-curator David Zeitlyn, Professor of Social Anthropology, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. Support comes from the Fowler Museum Exhibition Fund and the Jay T. Last and Deborah R. Last Endowment.

About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu

New Hours: Thu–Sun 12–5pm

Admission to the Fowler is free

Complete guidelines are listed on fowler.ucla.edu/visit

Parking in UCLA Lot 4: 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd (\$3/hr). Visitor drop-off: 305 Royce Drive. The turnaround area for drivers is directly behind the Fowler. Follow the sidewalk that wraps around the building to reach to the front entrance.

CAPTIONS

PAGE 1 (L–R)

Jacques Toussele (b. Bamessingué, Cameroon, 1939–2017)

Emmanuel Lucky Sparrow, the backdrop painter, and his girlfriend

2021 inkjet print from digital scan of original undated negative

© Jacques Toussele's Estate

Joseph Chila (b. Mbouda, Cameroon, 1948)

Possibly the children of Al Haji Idrissu, a Bamum merchant from Foumban

2021 inkjet print from digital scan of original undated negative

© Joseph Chila

Samuel Finlak (b. Bongor, Cameroon, 1958)

Bebi Kangsua

2021 inkjet print from digital scan of original 1980s negative

© Samuel Finlak

PAGE 3 (L–R)

Jacques Toussele (b. Bamessingué, Cameroon, 1939–2017)

Couple reclining

2021 inkjet print from digital scan of original undated negative

© Jacques Toussele's Estate

Joseph Chila (b. Mbouda, Cameroon, 1948)

Two women, Mayo Darlé

2021 inkjet print from digital scan of original undated negative

© Joseph Chila

Samuel Finlak (b. Bongor, Cameroon, 1958)

Group of Friends, Atta

2021 inkjet print from digital scan of original undated negative

© Samuel Finlak