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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

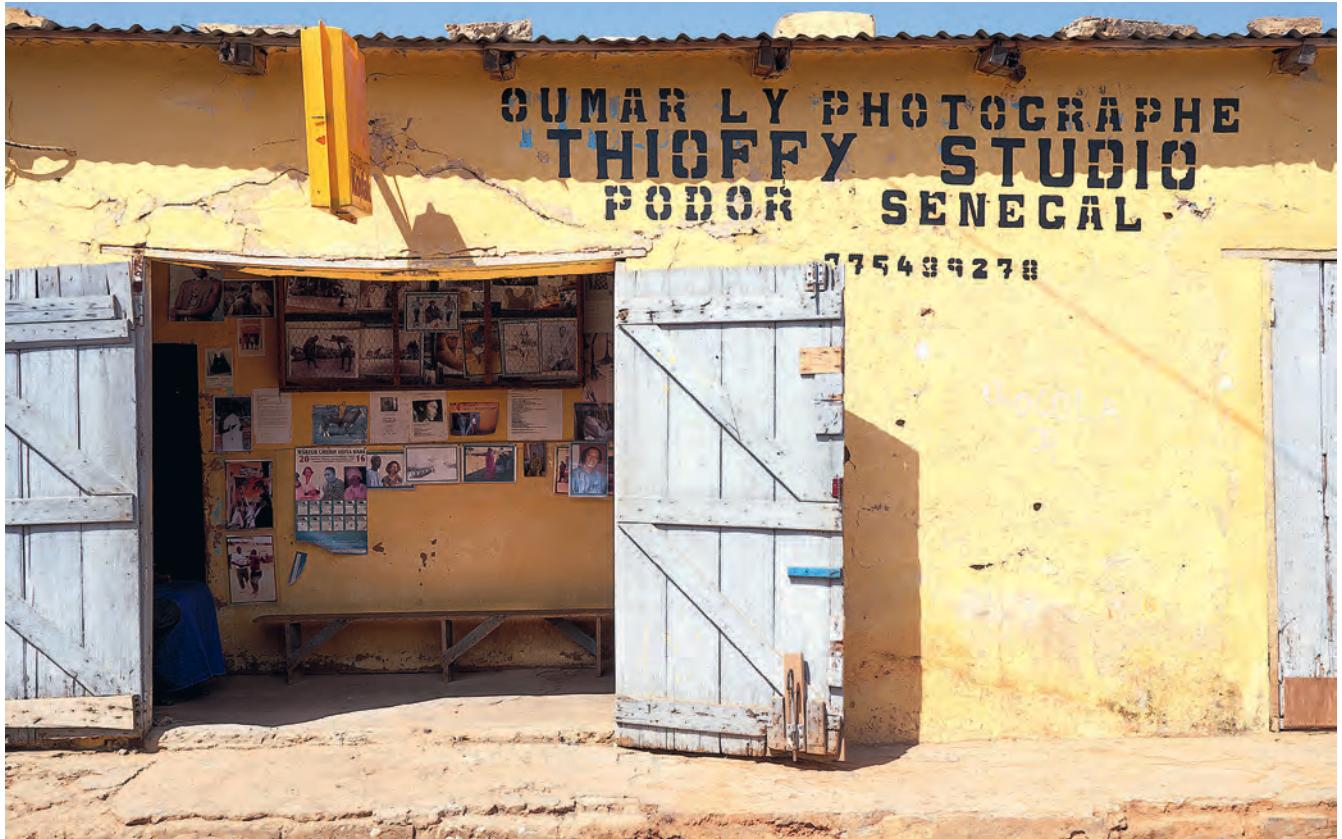
DECORATION SPECIAL

All the Raj in Normandy, a new-build 'Medieval' cottage,
London's cast of concrete kings



Plus, The suburban Surrealist: René Magritte at home





SNAPSHOTS OF SENEGAL

From the moment a passer-by took a picture of him as a teenager, Oumar Ly was fascinated by photography. He went on to produce thousands of images of the local populace for identity cards, amassing an unprecedented pictorial archive of indigenous society. Now, his Thioffy Studio is to be moved in its entirety to the museum in his home town of Podor. Laure Vernière presents a profile. Photography: Anne Garde

Opposite: after being discovered at the Bamako Festival in 2009, Oumar Ly was invited to the Musée des Confluences in Lyon by journalist Frédérique Chapuis. His friends come every day and sit in front of this poster to pay tribute to him. Top: Thioffy (the name of a Podor district) is said to have come from an Egyptian community from the Upper Nile. They settled by the Senegal River and founded the ancient kingdom of Takrur, whose capital is Podor



Top: the weekly arrival of the *Bou el Mogdad* cruise ship in Podor always draws onlookers. On the far side of the Senegal River lies Mauritania. Above: the houses on the quay were built in the early 19th century by Bordeaux merchants. The ground floor was used for business, the upstairs for living space. Opposite: one of Oumar Ly's cameras sits in his office, where he served *attaya* tea to friends and clients. The metal chair is of traditional Senegalese design.





The Thioffy studio's main attractions were two painted walls that offered the clients a choice of backdrop, one Western and the other Oriental. Here we can see Oumar Ly's most famous set, showing a Boeing 747 flying over the Senegal River. This scene was lit by spotlights and reflectors on a tripod, fitted with simple bulbs. He also used plywood panels with designs, such as the one seen on the left in the shape of a heart, through which he placed his subjects



Facing the imaginary Western scene, this painted wall depicting a mosque beneath the moon reminds us that the photographer was also the descendant of a family of Muslim *marabouts* (wise men). On the floor, a pseudo-Persian carpet and a locally made seat welcome the client into this imaginary world. In his career, Oumar Ly was eventually also to embrace instant Polaroid technology, to produce identity photographs for clients

THE MOST POETIC

(if not the fastest) way to get to Podor, a former trading post of Senegal on the border with Mauritania, is to board the *Bou el Mogdad* – an old coaster converted into a cruise ship by the Compagnie du Fleuve – on the quay in Saint-Louis. After six days' voyage on the Senegal River, the wide quay of the town comes into view.

Podor ('pot of gold') is a small town in the Sahel region in the back of beyond, a long way from Dakar and from Saint-Louis – the former capital of French West Africa. This trading post is well known for having been founded by merchants from Bordeaux, who settled here and established trading companies. Among them was Guillaume Foy, who made his fortune in the 19th century with gum arabic extracted from the acacia trees that can be found all over Senegal. Used in the emulsification of beverages, in the 'fining' of wines, in cosmetics, confectionery, varnishes and paints, gum arabic was once the country's most important resource. But Podor returned to its sleepy ways when the gum was replaced by chemical alternatives. Today, the town has regained an unusual fame thanks to its links with African photography and in particular to Oumar Ly, a local practitioner who took the bold step of opening his studio here in 1963.

In neighbouring Mali, portrait photography was pioneered by Seydou Keïta; Mama Casset (*WoI* Feb 1999) fulfilled a similar role in Senegal. Casset's famous studio, African Photo, opened in the medina of Dakar in 1943 and produced a succession of photos of African women, always in a seductive pose, and their equally proud and elegant men. The pinnacle of Casset's career in the 1950s and 1960s foreshadowed the success of Oumar Ly, who was born in Podor in 1943.

His studio is in the noisy, colourful market district of Thioffy. The son of a shop owner who was also a *marabout* (a Muslim wise man), he was sent to Koranic school at a very young age; he left as a 14-year-old, unable to read or write, and became a vegetable seller. A few years later, near Podor's Faidherbe fort, a soldier took a picture of him at work and the youth became fascinated with this new technology. Self-taught, Oumar Ly bought a small second-hand Kodak camera and sent his films for processing to Saint-Louis on the *Bou el Mogdad*, which at that time carried mail and goods. He learned the rudiments of photography there and in Dakar, where he carried out his military service, and where Mama Casset's studio had by then become legendary. In the early years, he used a medium-format Rolleiflex 6×6, but in 1970, inspired by some visiting Ghanaians, he tried out a pinhole photographic chamber that made it possible to take several photos at the same time. He called it the 'Johnny-Johnny'.

From the start, the Thioffy Studio attracted clients, and Oumar Ly continued working there tirelessly until he died. Over a period of 40 years, he took thousands of photos of villagers and tribal people in the bush for the identity cards that were made compul-

sory in 1960, following Senegal's independence. He used a simple sheet – sometimes an ethnic blanket – as a backcloth. He also made more personal and polished portraits of the well-to-do inhabitants of Podor and the surrounding area who flocked to his premises, taking over five thousand pictures. In fact, he took a great many more, but he sometimes gave them away or lost them as he was not interested in fame. 'The client needs to be happy,' he would say. 'I like to put people at ease first before taking the photograph, I shake hands and entertain them, it's a gift I have from God!' By means of these photos, Oumar Ly created a social picture of the Senegal River region of the times. He reflected the socio-economic and cultural changes of his country from the 1960s to our own times, giving his work historic and anthropological value.

From the 1980s, with the arrival of colour processing, the installation of photo booths in Podor and, of course, the growth in digital cameras, times became difficult for Oumar Ly. It was not until 2009 that he attracted wider attention, with his first exhibitions in Dakar and Saint-Louis. His work appeared that year elsewhere in Africa, at the Bamako *Encounters* festival in Mali, and in Paris in 2013, at an exhibition organised by the Comptoir Général museum. Parisians couldn't wait to be photographed in front of the painted palm trees on his backcloths. After his death in 2016, he was finally acknowledged as one of the great African photographers.

On the evening of his death, Oumar Ly was still working in his laboratory, bent over his enlarger, printing portraits that he kept in boxes of photographic paper. His Podor studio has been kept just as it was when he died. In the entrance, his office walls are covered with exhibition posters and photos of figures he admired. His old friends, who often accompanied him into the bush to hold the backcloth in front of which he took his identity photos, still sit here on a bench every morning, talking endlessly about their enduring memories of him and of their youth together.

Painted sets are arranged in the room used for capturing portraits. On one side, a sunny landscape and a Boeing 747 conjure up dreams of travel; on the other is a mosque, to please the many faithful – a shrewd balance between Western dreams and African traditions. Studio photography involved role-play in which the person wielding the camera was the master of ceremonies: he would choose the accessories that corresponded to the status of the sitter – the clothing, the shoes, the sunglasses, a lady's handbag or a rosary were all brought into his ritual. The seat, positioned in front of the backdrop chosen for the sitter dressed in their Sunday best, seems to be waiting forever more for the client. The Thioffy Studio is soon to be transferred exactly as it is to the fort-museum of Podor. This will be the final act of recognition for the chronicler and anthropologist-photographer of the Senegal River Valley ■



Top: this portrait of Oumar Ly finds him posing in traditional dress in front of one of his tropical sets. Opposite: the photographer was in the habit of displaying his prints on the wall, here attached with adhesive tape. These portraits of sporty young men, part dancing part boxing, seem to mimic the posture of their hero, the famous boxer Battling Siki, who came from Saint-Louis and was to become the first African world boxing champion

