

● BROOKLYN MUSEUM ●

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PRESS RELEASE

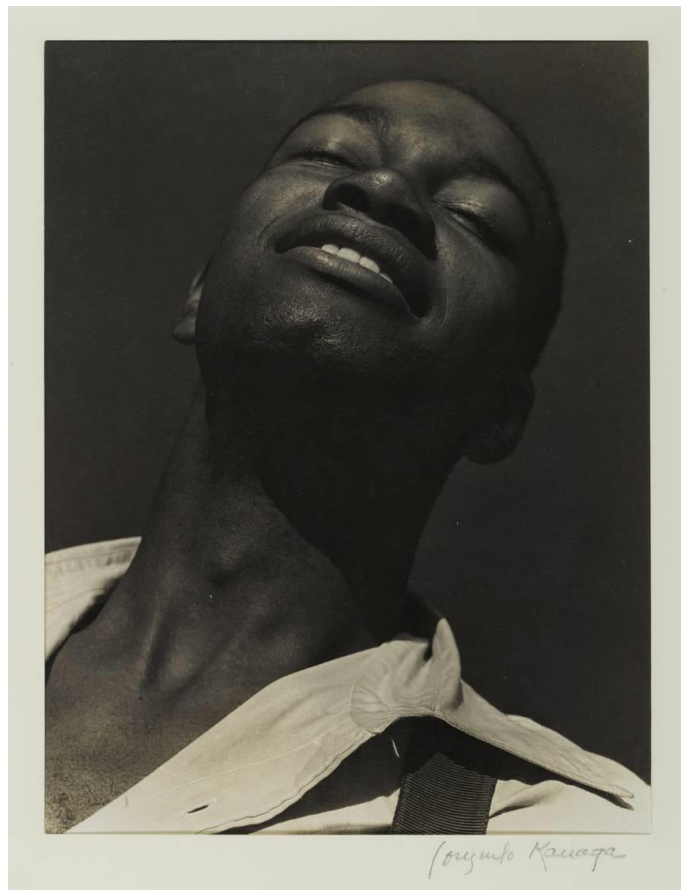
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The Brooklyn Museum Presents *Consuelo Kanaga: Catch the Spirit*

Opening March 14, 2025, the canon-expanding exhibition charts the major yet overlooked artist's radical photographic vision across six decades.



Consuelo Kanaga. *Kenneth Spencer*, 1933. Gelatin silver print. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Wallace B. Putnam from the Estate of Consuelo Kanaga, 82.65.368. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

The retrospective exhibition *Consuelo Kanaga: Catch the Spirit* presents the work of Consuelo Kanaga (1894–1976), a critical yet overlooked figure in the history of modern photography. Co-organized with and first exhibited at the Fundación MAPFRE in Barcelona and Madrid, Spain, followed by a presentation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the groundbreaking survey will return to the Brooklyn Museum, which houses the world’s most extensive Kanaga collection. *Catch the Spirit* explores the artist’s groundbreaking work in photojournalism, modernism, and social documentary, tracing the evolution of her art both chronologically and thematically through nearly 200 photographs, ephemera materials, and film. *Catch the Spirit* is curated by Drew Sawyer and presented at the Brooklyn Museum by Pauline Vermare, Phillip and Edith Leonian Curator of Photography, with Imani Williford, Curatorial Assistant, Photography, Fashion, and Material Culture.

Over the course of six decades, Kanaga captured the urgent social issues of her time, spanning urban poverty and labor rights to racial terror and inequality. *Catch the Spirit* charts the artist’s outstanding photographic vision, from her pioneering photojournalism as one of the only women working in the field in the early twentieth century to her modernist still lifes and celebrated portraits of artists and anonymous sitters alike. Kanaga’s oeuvre includes key figures and moments in early 20th-century North America, with a particularly strong focus on the lives of African Americans. The Museum holds a unique and invaluable collection of works by Kanaga that features nearly 500 vintage prints, 2,500 negatives, and archival material. Two works by Kanaga are currently on view in the Museum’s recently reinstalled American Art galleries, [Toward Joy: New Frameworks for American Art](#).

Consuelo Kanaga began her career as a staff writer and photographer at the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1915 before moving to New York in 1922 to work for the *New York American* newspaper. Soon after, she met Alfred Stieglitz, who encouraged her to pursue photography as an art form. After moving back to California in 1924, Kanaga met the Italian photographer, actress, and activist Tina Modotti and organized an exhibition of her photographs in San Francisco in 1926. During the early 1930s, Kanaga became associated with Group f/64 and was included in its landmark 1932 exhibition at the de Young Museum. In 1935 she returned to New York and began producing photographs for leftist journals such as *Sunday Worker*. She eventually joined the Photo League, where she lectured and became a leader of documentary group projects. During the 1940s and 1950s, she continued her commitment to photographing African Americans, documenting workers in the South during the Jim Crow era. In 1955 she was included in the landmark exhibition *Family of Man* at MoMA.

“Kanaga’s photographs shed light on some of the most critical social issues and actors of her time. Her work and legacy seem all the more important and relevant today,” says Pauline Vermare, Phillip and Edith

Leonian Curator of Photography. “The Kanaga prints and negatives that Barbara Millstein brought into the photography collection are one of the major treasures of the Brooklyn Museum. We are delighted that this exhibition will bring attention to an incredibly modern and generous artist, who worked alongside many well-known photographers, such as Imogen Cunningham and Dorothea Lange. Kanaga was an invaluable mentor to many women photographers of her time. Now is a perfect moment to bring her back into the light. We hope that her life and work will inspire new generations of image makers and critical thinkers.”

The title of the show comes from a quotation by the artist: “When you make a photograph, it is very much a picture of your own self. That is the important thing. Most people try to be striking to catch the eye. I think the thing is not to catch the eye but the spirit.” The quotation encapsulates Kanaga’s use of photography to “catch the spirit” of the people she chose to focus on and of the times they lived in. The exhibition is organized largely chronologically and by bodies of work, broken into the following sections: “Photojournalism and the City,” “Portraiture,” “Americans Abroad,” “Photography and the American Scene,” “Portraits of Artists,” “Travels to the U.S. South,” and “Nature Studies.”

Using modernist visual language to address social and economic inequities, Kanaga’s work is visually arresting and unique when compared to that of her peers. The artist was committed to using photography to address difficult social issues from labor rights to discrimination, focusing on representing individuals who had either been misrepresented or ignored by mainstream media and artists. Considered modern and progressive for its time, her work—and the societal issues they capture—continues to resonate today. *Catch the Spirit* boldly brings history into the present to raise awareness for important contemporary issues.

The retrospective is accompanied by a catalogue highlighting Kanaga’s remarkable oeuvre and presenting new scholarship on this under-recognized artist. The publication includes an essay by Drew Sawyer with additional essays by Shalon Parker, Ellen Macfarlane, and Shana Lopes. Copublished by the Brooklyn Museum, Fundacion MAPFRE, and Thames & Hudson, it is the first major publication on the artist’s work in 30 years.

CREDITS

Consuelo Kanaga: Catch the Spirit is organized by the Brooklyn Museum in collaboration with Fundación MAPFRE and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition is curated by Drew Sawyer, Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography at the Whitney Museum of American Art (formerly Phillip and Edith Leonian Curator of Photography, Brooklyn Museum). The Brooklyn Museum presentation is

organized by Pauline Vermare, Phillip and Edith Leonian Curator of Photography, with Imani Williford, Curatorial Assistant, Photography, Fashion, and Material Culture, Brooklyn Museum.

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ABOUT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

For 200 years, the Brooklyn Museum has been recognized as a trailblazer. Through a vast array of exhibitions, public programs, and community-centered initiatives, it continues to broaden the narratives of art, uplift a multitude of voices, and center creative expression within important dialogues of the day. Housed in a landmark building in the heart of Brooklyn, the Museum is home to an astounding encyclopedic collection of more than 140,000 objects representing cultures worldwide and over 6,000 years of history—from ancient Egyptian masterpieces to significant American works, to groundbreaking installations presented in the only feminist art center of its kind. As one of the oldest and largest art museums in the country, the Brooklyn Museum remains committed to innovation, creating compelling experiences for its communities and celebrating the power of art to inspire awe, conversation, and joy.