The Painter's Eye: Paul-Henri Bourguignon's Haitian Photographs

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« Je ne regard pas. Voire me suffit
(I don't look. Seeing is enough for me). »
--Paul-Henri Bourguignon

We of the industrialized world of the twenty-first century are awash in photography. As an anonymous Portside posting of March 9, 2012 reads: “As the camera shrinks in size, becomes ever present and hardly ever noticed, its impact just keeps growing.” Who could argue with that? The Portside writer’s take on this situation is distinctly optimistic: “The video record is our collective memory, our conscience, our shield against deception and amnesia; our political as well as artistic resource of choice.” But is it really? Is it not also pervasive surveillance and invasion of privacy? Can we be sure that the resulting pictures will not be used for the manipulation of the historical record, of our opinions and attitudes, whether political, aesthetic, or economic? Is it not true that at present the manipulation or “editing” of photographs, whether of events or individuals, is within the reach even of teenagers? How then can we distinguish the actual from the fictive?

There was a time, not long ago, when we could be fairly confident that what photographs showed us was trustworthy—and yet that was not always to be taken for granted. We now know, for example, that the propaganda machine of the Soviet Union was notorious for revising history: when members of the political leadership lost their positions they also lost their very existence; they were edited out of history and therefore out of all official photographs. We also discovered in time that some of what seemed to be among the most iconic images of our time

¹ In the interest of full disclosure I want to note that I write these pages as Paul Bourguignon’s widow. We met in Port-au-Prince in 1947, when I was in Haiti as a graduate student in anthropology at Northwestern University. We later married and lived in Columbus, Ohio, where I was a member of the faculty at the Ohio State University. The comments on Haiti included here are based on my own observations at the time, as well as later information.
where staged—which was, to say the least, disenchanted. Now, however, to help us out, there is a new field of expertise: “image forensics.”

Can we imagine, find, or remember societies where the camera and its pictures played little, if any, role? The photographs to be discussed in this essay deal with such a time and place: Haiti in 1947-1948, as seen through the lens of the Belgian artist and writer Paul-Henri Bourguignon. Haiti was then a country with a society that was in many ways different from any other. With a population of some three million people, 90% of whom were illiterate, it was both isolated from and integrated into the world economy and world politics. But I will say more about all this later. Before turning to the photographer and to Haiti as it looked in those years it will be helpful to establish a larger context. This includes a brief look at the significant role photography has played in the creation and the continuing development of modernity. It is no exaggeration to say that photography dramatically changed—and continues to change—how people see and experience the world in which they live and how they see both themselves and each other.

Humans comprise a single biological species with a number of shared characteristics. As Francey Russell (2012) has reminded us, among these are, in the terms of Kant’s philosophy, “certain active cognitive capacities” (p.355). This perspective implies that, given the same capacities, people everywhere will share fundamental spatial and temporal understandings of the world. Russell shows how Freud’s concept of the ego linked these cognitive capacities to the development of the individual. And yet, although they share capacities and psychological processes, ethnographic research has shown that in spite of what they have in common—call it “human nature”—human groups do not necessarily experience the world about them in the same way. They live rather in what the anthropologist A. I. Hallowell (1955) called a “behavioral environment” that is “culturally constituted” (p. 87). He based his initial formulation on his long-term study of a group of Canadian Indians, the Northern Ojibwa, people who lived by hunting, fishing seasonally, and gathering (Hallowell, 1955, 1992). The Ojibwa had developed a sophisticated knowledge and skilled use of their resources, especially
of the animals they hunted, of foods they planted, such as wild rice, and of birch bark that was used for the construction of dwellings (wigwams), canoes, and numerous types of objects. For them the world was populated by animate beings, both human and other-than-human, including the “owners” of animal species. Their conjurers had access to their own guardian spirits, whom they acquired through dreams. These Indians, who lived in small bands, had no formal government, but they expected imminent consequences, in the form of illness, from inappropriate behavior toward animals as well as toward their fellows. Causes of illness were revealed in public “séances” by the conjurer’s guardian spirit. Early European explorers who contacted the Ojibwa and other Eastern Woodlands Indians saw their physical and biological environment quite differently, however: for one, they discovered a great source of wealth in the fur trade.

Hallowell did more than simply observe cross-cultural differences. He asked how these differences could be reconciled with the constancy of cognitive capacities, concluding that human groups’ understanding of their physical and biological environments varies with their culture: in other words, understanding of the external world relates to how human groups meet their physical needs (their technology and economy), how they interact with each other (demography and social structure), and what answers they have developed over time about the nature of the world. Their behavioral environment is not the constant “natural” environment the outsider might imagine but a culturally constituted one. How different the culturally constituted, behavioral environment of the Ojibwa was from the one that Hallowell, his colleagues, and his neighbors in Philadelphia knew! Here there were laws and punishment. Medicine was unrelated to social control. Economic resources were of a very different kind, as were the forces that people believed ruled the world.

This observation has relevance to the present discussion of photography as a visual medium. People’s behavioral environments, as they are constituted by their cultures, affect how they see both themselves and the world about them. Starting more than one hundred years ago
with the work of the British psychiatrist and psychologist W. H. R. Rivers (1901, 1905), and of his associates who conducted research on perception among peoples in Melanesia, Polynesia, and South India, a number of specific studies by psychologists and anthropologists demonstrated this conclusion in some detail (Segall, Campbell, & Herskovits 1966). Foreman and Dervin (2010) arrived at a similar conclusion by a different path: they focused on the importance of audience reception in the context of the teaching of art history and art criticism. Most recently, Eric R. Kandel (2012) takes the point a step further. He argues that a work of art is completed only when seen by a viewer whose brain processes it.

We shall see through Bourguignon’s photographs some of the ways in which the “culturally constituted behavioral environment” of the majority of Haitians of the 1940s varied from that of European and American outsiders. For example, they might agree with outsiders that an illness was “natural,” a maladi bondie—that is, an illness of (or sent by) God—but they also recognized other illnesses, sent by envious people or by the lwa, the spirits of Vodou, Haiti’s Afro-Catholic folk religion. The lwa might want a given individual to undergo an initiation ceremony, which thus became a rite of healing.

In art, at the time that Bourguignon took his photographs, the so-called “primitive” or “popular” painters of the “Haitian Renaissance” (Rodman, 1948) did not proceed in what seem to us as conventional ways. They were largely unaware of perspective, as shown for example in a painting of a Vodou ceremony by Wilson Bigaud (Fig. 1). Here we are shown events as occurring simultaneously although in fact the informed viewer may know that in an actual ritual they must occur in sequence. Further, we are able to see, as if through a wall, what goes on inside a house, and a large imaginary tree and snake are given as much reality as the people and their activities. It is interesting to note that when Silverthorne (1951) used specially drawn pictures for a TAT (story telling test) with a group of rural Haitians they frequently interpreted figures in the foreground as standing or sitting on the feet of people lying in the background; persons in the background appeared to them as being placed higher than those in the
foreground and therefore appeared to be lifted or carried by them. This is consistent with findings by other investigators among people with little experience of two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects. As perception experiments show, cultural as well as individual differences are relevant here.

II

Starting slowly, photography, in the course of the nineteenth century, and ever more rapidly since then, has changed much of what people in the industrialized countries of the West hold to be “reality.” Marco Polo would not have gone to prison for telling lies had he been able to bring back from his trip to China, in the form of a photographic record, proof to support his claims. In our time, the astronauts sent back pictures from the moon, and mechanical rovers show us parts of Mars. The pictures produced by the Hubble telescope continue to transform our vision of the universe and as a result what theoretical physicists tell us about the forces at work.

We may also ask, however, how people see themselves—by what means they produce images and how those images are interpreted and used. This is surely too large a subject to be dealt with here in any detail. In the early 1800s, Western people had mirrors, but these could only give them a reversed image of their faces and bodies. Some people were able to have their portraits painted, but that was restricted to those who could afford it, and then most likely only once in a lifetime. Photography changed all that. We can now see ourselves not only as we are in the present, but as we have been at other times and in other places. Hallowell (1955, pp. 75-110) links conceptions of the self as formulated within a given group to the group’s behavioral environment as it is culturally constituted. He noted that although a concept of the self exists universally, how the self is conceived—whether as unitary or multiple, for example—varies, and this too is a part of the cultural constitution of a given group’s behavioral environment. In Haitian Vodou, for example, individuals are understood to have multiple part-selves, one of which can be displaced temporarily by a possessing spirit.
We may ask then how seeing ourselves in photographs affects our sense of self in way different from what the mirror may show us. For example, images of oneself can be manipulated for the benefit of others, that is, to produce a desired impression. Linda Rugg (1997) has studied attempts of that sort in such different figures as Mark Twain and August Strindberg. A search for the “best” way to let others see us also bespeaks narcissism. As Di Piero (2010, p. 247) has noted regarding more recent times: “Celebrities become celebrities by crafting camera-ready selves.” Now photo-shopping of digital images has taken the potential of such efforts much further than Rugg’s nineteenth-century authors could have imagined.

We may ask too how photography has affected our sense of our physical environment—quite literally, how we “see” the world. In this regard, the photographic lens as a mediator between the environment and the human eye has played and continues to play a major role in the growth and development of the sciences. Photography in this context has served not only to record information but has acted importantly as a tool for its analysis. It served as a major tool for Darwin, especially in his classic study of the Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals (Darwin, 1872; Prodger, 2000). It served Freud in his analysis of Michelangelo’s Moses (Bergstein, 2010). Photography also served Durkheim (1915/2002; Kreinhart, 2012) in his attempt to understand the origin of religion. From Anatomy, Anthropology and Archaeology to Astronomy, from Medicine, Psychology, and Zoology to Art History, photography has served and continues to serve analysis and discovery. Through science, photography continues to change the world we live in.

III

Early on, photography attracted the attention of painters (Chevrier, 1986). Ingres has been quoted as saying that photography liberated painting. Degas (Terrasse, 1983) in the 1870s showed intense interest in studies in black and white, as well in experimenting both with the composition of a subject and with the process of developing pictures. Beginning in 1888 with the invention of the Kodak camera, photography became much easier and painters availed
themselves of the opportunities it offered. Later artists, including Matisse (1986), made remarks similar to those of Ingres, and although he used photography for his own purposes, Matisse himself suggested that it freed painting from the need to produce portraits.

The relationship between painting and photography, and their mutual influence, has been and continues to be a subject of study with regard to specific artists and as well as a topic of exhibitions and discussions regarding specific times and places. Their relationship has changed significantly over time as technology has altered the processes both of taking and of reproducing pictures and as each technological advance in the development of the camera has changed the manner in which artists are able to use it. The small, portable Kodak rapidly opened unforeseen opportunities, especially as, not long after its appearance, developing images became much easier. Easton (2011) illustrates in great detail how several artists used the camera in their work. Noting specifically works by the Belgian Henri Evenepoel and the Frenchman Felix Valloton, her volume includes a number of telling illustrations that juxtapose the black-and-white photograph of a scene to the resulting painting. All involve a complete reworking of the image, not merely a colorizing of it. Postures and expressions of individuals are modified, figures and objects are added, and more. A broad ranging discussion based on a recent exhibit and devoted specifically to American artists can be found in another recent volume (Lynes & Weinberg, 2011) with the provocative title: “Shared Intelligence.”

My emphasis in the following discussion is on Bourguignon’s work as a photographer. I believe, however, that it cannot be separated from his painting or from his writing. By this I do not mean that in making images he intended to tell a story or that a story is required to make sense of his images. Rather paintings, drawings, photographs—each speaks for itself—and each speaks to the senses.

IV

Like his compatriots who were also his contemporaries, Paul-Henri Bourguignon (1906-1988) had experienced as a child the First World War and the German occupation of his native
Belgium. As a young man, the context of his birthplace Brussels and the cultural and social trends of his country remained a significant part of the milieu in which he and his art developed in the 1920s and 1930s. Debora Silverman (2011) has explored the beginnings and early phases of those cultural and artistic movements. Yet, as we see also from the subjects of Bourguignon’s early paintings, travel played a major role in his personal growth and in his development as an artist. Starting in the late 1920s, he journeyed widely. Once he began to roam beyond Belgium, he sought out what were then remote areas with few if any tourists—Corsica, Spain, North Africa, Yugoslavia—as well as more highly frequented places such as southern France and Italy. He traveled with his paint box and folding easel and often took photographs along the way. He loved the sense of estrangement: places where he did not know the language, where, as in Serbia, he could not decipher the writing, and where sights and sounds, foods and drinks were unfamiliar. He was in Spain in the spring of 1931, at the time of the revolt against the monarchy and was briefly stranded in Seville by a railroad strike. Photographs served when he returned to his studio; only a handful of his paintings, all in pastel, remain from this period. The outbreak of war in September 1939 found him Anacapri.

In his student days, the young Bourguignon photographed some sites of Brussels: a rail yard, a Gypsy camp on the outskirts of town, a toy sailboat floating in a park basin. There were also set ups for painting still-lives. Beyond these, there were many images of Bruges, where he spent much time painting landscapes of this historic town—once known as the Venice of the North. The first of his pastels that he saved was a view of a bridge over a canal, at that time called *Le pont de l’âne aveugle*. (In those prewar years, French was the official language even in this predominantly Flemish-speaking town.) In time, Bourguignon amassed a large set of photographs from his travels, but he still did not think of himself as a photographer. Like many travelers, he took snapshots along the way. Some were of places that particularly fascinated him: the old port of Marseille, or urban scenes and people in Bosnia (the women, who wore Turkish trousers, saw this tourist in Western clothing, wearing pants, as a curiosity.) Yet, except
for the presence of mosques with their minarets, buildings in Bosnian villages and towns resembled those of other, non-Moslem parts of Yugoslavia. Bourguignon used some of these sites in his paintings at the time and some turned up again in his later work. He referred to the photographs as “documents,” because they preserved lasting records of places he had visited and complemented his visual memory. Eugène Atget, the great recorder of old Paris, also spoke of his remarkable images as “documents” and sold them as such to both painters and to the City of Paris (Hofstadter, 2012; Lifson, 1980).

The work of Bourguignon’s early years, beginning in about 1924 when he was seventeen, was first heavily influenced by Impressionism and then both by the Fauves and by the Flemish Expressionists, including artists such as Constant Permeke, Jan Brusselmans, and Gutave de Smet (Langui, 1970). These were artists who sought to create an original Belgian art; they are, however, little known in the U. S. Characteristically, exceptionally, and also lastingly, Bourguignon’s work combines the bright colors of the French Fauves and the strong forms of the Flemish Expressionists. It is tempting to see in this a reflection of his joint heritage—both Francophone/Waloon (on his father’s side) and Flemish (on his mother’s). When he lived there, Bourguignon’s Brussels largely succeeded in remaining an island within a country increasingly fractured by linguistic identities. Much of this split had to do with the history of Belgium and its artificial nineteenth-century creation as a buffer state between Germany and France: Belgium took its name from a tribe Julius Caesar called the “ bravest” of Gaul, its history and arts from Flanders, and its official language from France (Goris, 1945).

Among the countries Bourguignon visited in his travels, Spain held special significance for him. His hometown of Brussels, like all of the Low Countries, had been occupied by Spain and then incorporated into the great multinational Habsburg Empire. He visited the Prado Museum in Madrid, where he found a treasure trove of Flemish painters: Bosch, Breughel, Rubens, and others. In Toledo, he visited the house of El Greco, whom, when the time came, he chose as the subject of a thesis in art history. Almost twenty years later, traveling in Peru,
Bourguignon found his memories of Spain revived in the Peruvian desert landscapes and the Colonial architecture and art, as well as in the country’s traditional Catholicism.

In Bourguignon’s posthumous novel The Greener Grass (1993) the narrator—the author’s alter ego—speaks of his need and love of travel:

I secretly believed in the promised land … I was brought up in an atmosphere of respect for remote places. My father, who had never traveled, had a passion for imaginary voyages … He told me stories of people he had known who had spent years in Djibuti and La Paz. According to him, people who travel are different from other people. They are more perceptive, more sophisticated in their tastes … (pp. 19-20)

And while the writer did travel, “the promised land” seems to have eluded him, for he comments somewhat ruefully in his unpublished collection of aphorisms, Arrière Pensées: “From afar, all islands are blue (De loin, toutes les îles sont bleues).” Apparently only from afar.

Bourguignon took photographs on all his travels, and did so, as noted above, in support of his visual memory. He came to think seriously of photography as art, that is, as an art he could practice, only in Haiti, where he arrived in 1947 and where he met the French photographer Pierre Verger (see Verger, 1938; also Krebs, 2012). Working briefly with Verger toward the end of his stay in Haiti, he experimented with developing his own pictures, and he continued to do so when he arrived in Peru later in the summer of 1948. In fact, Verger facilitated this effort by giving him free access to the materiel he had stored in Lima. When Bourguignon went to Ayacucho in the Peruvian highlands, he developed the pictures himself, but once he left Peru for the U.S. in 1950, he never again practiced photography.

Photography represented a special interlude in Bourguignon’s life. Although he did not paint in Haiti or in Peru, I believe that all along painting had priority, in the sense that he came to take photography seriously, as it were, only when he was already an experienced painter. He looked at the world with the eyes of a painter, and the photographs show it. Of course, his work is not unique in this respect. We know of other photographers whose first passion was painting,
especially Henri Cartier-Bresson (1976) who returned to it after a successful career as a photographer. Each medium offers to the artist both limitations and opportunities.

V

Paul-Henri Bourguignon spent fifteen months in Haiti, from May 1947 to July 1948. There he used a Zeiss Ikon camera (Fig. 2) and black-and-white film. Both Agfa and Kodak films were available. Initially he depended on commercial photofinishing. He took pictures only in daylight. Unlike professional photographers, he rarely took multiple shots of a scene and never posed scenes. He did not manipulate his photographs except to crop them or enlarge them when he initially considered publishing a book on Haiti. Since there were few if any tourists in Haiti at the time, Bourguignon was hardly ever asked to pay for permission to take pictures. Some people he got to know asked to be photographed. In the course of his stay, he documented a great range of activities in several parts of the country. He showed, however, no interest in the lives of the “elite,” their houses, or their activities. First in the city of Port-au-Prince and then in the countryside, the overwhelming visual reality that confronted him was that of masses of people in motion. There were festive occasions: celebrations, Carnival with masks, Rara celebrations before Easter, and more. On a daily basis, there were streams of women going to market: women with heavy loads on their heads, women leading or riding donkeys. This was a world of divisions: women and men, the French-speaking, self-proclaimed “elite” and the rest—Creole speaking, illiterate, surviving at various levels of poverty. We may then ask: What is the artist seeing and showing us? And then, how is what the camera captures transformed into what the paintings show?

In the following pages only handful of examples can be presented and these, unavoidably, are somewhat arbitrarily chosen.

We may start with Carnival. In 1948 it was partly a popular and partly a commercial event. On his way to a downtown area of Port-au-Prince, Bourguignon noticed, walking behind him, a teenager wearing a facial mask made of orange and grapefruit peels (Fig. 3). The mask
made it impossible for him to speak. The rest of his body revealed his youth and poverty—his legs clearly show malnutrition. Seen as a whole this is a complex image: the lightheartedness of the head—the mask—seems to contradict the seriousness, indeed the tragedy, of the rest. In a sense, the total image might be viewed as symbolic of the condition of the country: extreme poverty, yet an inventiveness to employ the minimal means available and the will to engage with life. A second print (Fig. 4) is less complete and therefore less complex. It does provide some information about the wearer of the mask. When the image was published many years later in the book *Psychological Anthropology* (see E. Bourguignon, 1979, p. 257), we see only the head. The larger context is not provided. The less we are given to see, the less we learn about what the picture is about. The publicity for the book used only a tight shot of the head and this image could then be paired with that of an American masker. In the end, no contextual differences could be noted so that both might have come from the same occasion or party.

The city of Port-au-Prince is situated in a bowl, surrounded by hills on all sides, except for narrow coastal plans to the north and south. Walking in the hills, Bourguignon captured a sight (Fig. 5) that Joan Dayan, who knows Haiti well, describes in the following terms:

> In Bourguignon’s chilling photograph *The Slum and the Palace*, taken in 1948, the brooding monumentality of the palace, looked down upon from above by a boy standing in insouciant grace between two shacks, unsettles our notions of high and low and questions our assumptions of beauty. (1996, p. 2)

Note that this image was not posed. The boy just happened to be there when Bourguignon came by, saw the scene, and captured it. The view of the palace from above, seen between the housing of the poor and the poorest, could be replicated over and over again. Indeed variations on this theme appear numerous times in Bourguignon’s collection. None, however, have quite the seemingly symbolic impact of this one.

Women as traders were to be seen everywhere. In a photograph, a woman at the large and crowded Iron Market in Port-au-Prince struggles to lift a basket to her head (Fig. 6). Often
the baskets were so heavy that only with help from another woman could the load be raised successfully. The carrying of head loads starts early in the life of girls, affecting their postures and their gait (see Fig. 7). In one of Bourguignon’s paintings, entitled *In the Park* (Fig. 8), a large group of women, traders of all ages, is shown passing through an urban green area, while a group of “elite” men in their white suits are sitting and chatting at leisure, watching the world go by. The painting does not correspond to any photographs but combines memories of the movements of women as they went to various markets throughout the city with recollections of just such assemblies of men. Class and gender are themes here. In the 1940s, “elite” women for the most part were not to be seen in public.

Many of the streets from the hillside to the center of town were nothing but eroded gullies, with houses clinging to them precariously. Closer in, though still steep, there were real streets and houses of somewhat better quality (Fig. 9). It happened that no people are on the street at the moment Bourguignon photographed it. Years later, this particular image appeared in reworked and reinvented form in a gouache painting (Fig. 10). The houses and the street are only slightly changed, but regularized. Color is added giving the image an emotional tone absent from the photograph.

We may for a moment pause to consider the difference between Bourguignon’s procedure and that of the initial users of the Kodak cameras mentioned earlier. Whereas pioneers such as Evenepoel and Valloton set up scenes to photograph as a first step toward preparing a painting, Bourguignon took his pictures in the moment—an opportunity seized. The paintings however were the outcome of a long period of gestation, of technical and emotional development and were produced in another personal and historical context. He revisited his Haitian photographs many years later and in some cases used them as starting points for paintings. While the painting of the *Steep Street* remains quite faithful to the original, other examples of the use of photographs in the development of a painting are much freer. In still
others of Bourguignon’s Haitian paintings and drawings, the artist allowed his imagination to range quite freely.

Moving outside the city, Bourguignon caught a sight most often interpreted by viewers as a cemetery (Fig. 11). Yet, what are taken to be crosses are, in fact, parts of a support system for sisal fibers, hung up to dry. Conversely, another of Bourguignon’s images (Fig. 12) is sometimes taken to represent a city, whereas in reality it shows a hillside cemetery complex situated along a roadside in the southern portion of the country. Such cemeteries are unusual in Haiti, but appear in New Orleans and parts of Latin America. They indicate a degree of prosperity. By contrast, a small number of masonry tombs, possible dating to the colonial period, are located on a steep hillside high above Port-au-Prince (Fig. 13). Next to the tombs, current residents of the area have deposited crosses in memory of the recently dead.

In recent years, dramatic landslides resulting from massive erosion have been part of every hurricane to strike Haiti. Erosion, however, has a long history in Haiti (Fig 14). Deforestation, resulting to a large extent from the use of charcoal as fuel, has been the primary culprit. Charcoal has been and still is widely used for cooking in the absence of other types of fuel. The peasant habitations at the floor of the valley in Bourguignon’s photograph blend into the landscape. An only slightly improved road, based on an old colonial trace, ran along the crest of the hill, from which this picture was taken. Called Furcy, the community extended for a considerable distance along this road, including a Catholic church near to one end and a police station and school further on. Urban dwellers increasingly acquired portions of peasant land to build fairly modest vacation homes. In the process the previous owners became caretakers for the urbanites; some members of their families went to work in the city, at times working for the new owners of the land. The corn grown by peasants without use of fertilizer exhausted the soil, producing poor yields. Storms periodically washed out the topsoil.

Some individuals familiar with Bourguignon asked him to take their pictures. One of these, a teenager at Furcy who had spent some time in the city, was the most eager (Fig. 15).
He wanted to try everything and to show off. Yet while he stood still for the picture, as his eyes indicate, his attention was already drawn to something to the side, outside the frame of the picture. Many years later, this image formed the starting point for a painting titled Luc (Fig. 16). Not merely is the original model colorized but, except for the sideways glance, it is transformed in every respect. Even the glance is moved to the other side of the subject. It seems as if a transformed and transformative memory rather than the actual image had been the instigation for the painting.

We may consider one more image. This is the portrait of Lorgina, a well-known manbo (Vodou priestess) who wished to have her picture taken (Fig. 17). At age seventy, she had long been established as the strong leader of a religious center, with a substantial following. She prided herself on being a native of Port-au-Prince, in contrast to others who were recent arrivals. To have her picture taken she settled herself in her chair and took hold of a baby goat from her yard. It would seem that she wished to present an image of a strong maternal figure. One might view her as having a flair for the theatrical.

What then does the photographer, in Bourguignon’s words, “see” without “looking?” What picture of Haiti does Bourguignon give us in this sample from his collection? Through him we see a picture of “high” and “low,” literally and figuratively: a society and land divided in terms of power and wealth. This division includes profound social and cultural differences: not only lifelong differences in everyday experiences, but also significant contrasts in how events of every type are perceived and understood. For example, as described earlier, a large segment of the population, mostly the great mass of rural people, had little exposure to two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects. Further, the period in which in these photographs were taken was the time of the so-called Haitian Renaissance. Outsiders, primarily Americans, developed and promoted painting by “untutored” individuals, leading to conflicts within the larger art community. To his surprise, and quite incidentally, this conflict involved Bourguignon (see E. Bourguignon, 2004). This deep division between groups was reflected in all aspects of life,
including health. And yet resilience, ingenuity, energy, a will to live, was everywhere to be seen: in the teenager’s mask, in the economic independence of the women who controlled small-scale trade—and in art. The painting titled *In the Park* encapsulates this story of contrasts.

VI

The passage of time and the changes in technology have transformed the way in which the photographs Bourguignon took in Haiti sixty-five years ago have come to be seen. In the first place, living in Columbus, Bourguignon himself looked at them anew, producing, as we have seen, paintings based on selected photographs. Then the publication of a handful of photographs, as well as the production of slides, made it possible for the pictures to be used both in public educational presentations and in the classroom. Much later, in 1997, when I showed the slides at a meeting of the Haitian Studies Association, the effects of time had transformed them yet again into historic documents. Several elderly Haitian men, living in exile in the United States, became visibly moved by nostalgia. Ten years later, in 2007, the photographs acquired yet another new life: digitized, they became publicly available online. In 2010, with the great Haitian earthquake, researchers found in these old photographs a valuable source of images to compare sites of Port-au-Prince before and after the enormous destruction.

VII

In his seminal study of the psychology of art, E. H. Gombrich (1960) cites Pablo Picasso’s famous line “I do not seek, I find,” and interprets it to imply: “he has come to take as a matter of course that creation itself is exploration … [he] has succumbed to the spell of making, unrestrained and unrestrainable by the mere descriptive functions of the image” (p. 356). Perhaps. Picasso was a bit of a trickster. The context of the quotation, as I remember reading it, was the answer to a perhaps unwelcome questioner: “Master, do you too seek?” It may have been no more than a *boutade*, a wisecrack. This, however, does not, I believe, invalidate Gombrich’s interpretation—it quickly summarizes Picasso’s disposition toward his work as well as toward his audience, a disposition quite distinct from the uncertainty shown by his
contemporary, Henri Matisse (Steinberg, 2011), the title of whose 2012 exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York says it all: “Matisse in Search of True Painting.”

What then do I make of Bourguignon’s own statement: “I don’t look. Seeing is enough for me.” He tells us implicitly that his eye is trained to see, that he does not look for the unusual, the provocative. As a result, where photography is concerned, he does little editing when he considers the publication of his photographs. Again, Bourguignon always spoke of his photographs as “documents,” by which he meant primarily that they helped him remember a place, a sight. They were simply snapshots. It was only during the period when he developed his own pictures that he recognized photography as an art form, and then “document” came to mean something more—almost a monument or memorial. It is to this later phase of his photographic work that the above statement applies. He was now ready to take in what he saw. In a new sense, some of the Haitian photographs only then became available to be transformed or, as he would have said, “transposed” into paintings. Gradually, as the years passed, Haiti became a subject to be re-imagined and the paintings became increasingly independent of the photographs.

Bouguignon’s statement also returns us to Kandel’s point: the work of art is complete only when seen by a viewer, when it is processed by the viewer’s brain. Accordingly, as Haiti has changed across the intervening years, Bourguignon’s photographs have taken on different meanings among new audiences. Kandel’s point, however, applies equally to Bourguignon—to the artist—for whom in later years the photographs, and the experiences related to them, acquired different meanings, as shown clearly by the transformation of the Haitian photos into paintings. Finally, it is essential to keep in mind that the most recent generation of viewers has gained different cultural exposure and technological access to images. People habituated to viewing photographs on computer screens and to controlling the various aspects of images “see” differently from those who view images reproduced in books or framed on a wall as part of an exhibition. The transformational process—the struggle for meaning—continues.
References

A large collection of photographs, together with notes, may be viewed at http://library.osu.edu/sites/rarebooks/bourguignon/index-bourguignon/html.


Cambridge anthropological expedition to Torres Straits, Volume 2: Physiology and Psychology (pp. 1-132.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


