

# Vanishing BEAUTY

The name Gebauer is well known to people interested in the arts of Cameroon. Paul Gebauer (1900–1977) spent nearly thirty years in that country as a member of the North American Baptist Mission but also as a photographer, scholar, and collector. In 1935 he married Clara Kratt (1908–2004), an artist and teacher who shared his vocation, life, and enthusiasm for the arts.

Paul's arrival in Cameroon in 1931 began a lifetime of study during which he recorded the diverse aspects of the traditional African art and culture around him. He was mindful of the past in conjunction with his own religious agenda and rather than try to obliterate the powerful artistic traditions that surrounded him, he sought to understand and preserve them. During his residency in Cameroon, initially among Kaka and Mambila communities, he photographed and collected sculptures, encouraged and researched the work of individual artists, documented brass casting, dance, and traditional and contemporary architecture. He pursued formal studies in anthropology at Northwestern University, Illinois, under the supervision of Melville Herskovits and in 1958 was awarded a master's degree. In 1961 Paul and Clara ended their mission careers and a year later Paul took a teaching position at his alma mater, Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. In the 1970s, he published several articles on the arts illustrated with his own photographs.

The Gebauers collected a significant number of sculptures in Cameroon that were later acquired by the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The two museums jointly published his book *Art of Cameroon* in 1979. Clara helped catalogue the collection and was a volunteer at the Portland Art Museum.

Paul was a gifted photographer and his legacy is significant. The images reveal his interests, perceptions, and experiences, and provide a snapshot of the diverse communities he and his family lived in for thirty years. After Paul's death in 1977, most of his photographs of Africa were bequested to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Photograph Study Collection in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. The gift included 400 rolls of black-and-white 35 mm negatives and 2,631 Kodachrome slides. The beautiful and vibrantly colored slides

arrived neatly classified by subject. Some images capture unique moments while others include individual views of sculptures in situ or in neutral exterior spaces. Some entire rolls preserve sequences of ritual or cultural practice.

Most of the photographs presented in this essay are among Paul's earlier images of Cameroon from 1931–1934, the 60 x 110 mm negatives of which have recently come to light (fig. 4). His notations regarding photographs from this period refer to the images as "German prints 2 1/2 x 4" or "small postcard size" (figs. 2–3). We know that later he used a Leica with standard 35 mm film, but he may have used a different camera for these early images. The Leica was perfectly suited to his approach since it was small and allowed him to be discreet and unobtrusive. Held horizontally, the formats were conducive to recording the landscape and daily life. He was especially interested in architecture, both domestic and royal, and the complex and virtuosic designs and carvings integral to the structures were often his subjects. Turned vertically, his camera perfectly frames the human form for numerous portraits of friends and royalty, such as the chief of Bum, the Fon of Bansa, and the Sultan of Bamum. He also represented quotidian activities such as blacksmithing and transporting materials for housebuilding at Ndu. One striking image shows a man standing confidently on a suspension bridge (fig. 5). The vines and ropes that support him appear taut and decisive. Paul's photograph is equally assured and he has turned the frame vertically to capture the tension and elegant symmetry of the bridge. Several additional views of this bridge are in the collection at the Metropolitan Museum.

The diversity of Paul's artistic vision and experience in Cameroon is clearly represented in this group of photographs that is cared for by his family. They reiterate his talent with a camera and his penchant for pictorial lyricism. Importantly, they represent his lifelong interest in









