

Michel Kameni

Portraits of an Independent Africa

August 29, 2025–January 4, 2026

SCMA
SMITH COLLEGE
MUSEUM OF ART

Northampton, MA

© Studio Kameni, Courtesy the Solander Collection



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Michel Kameni: Portraits of an Independent Africa Opens at Smith College Museum of Art

NORTHAMPTON, MASS. (September 2025) – The Smith College Museum of Art (SCMA) presents *Michel Kameni: Portraits of an Independent Africa*, an exhibition featuring 55 black-and-white studio portraits made in the 1960s and 1970s by Cameroonian photographer Michel Kameni (c. 1935–2020). On view August 29, 2025, through January 4, 2026, the exhibition offers a rare glimpse into the daily lives, aspirations, and identities of people living in post-Independence Cameroon.

The exhibition was organized by [Curatorial Exhibitions](#), Pasadena, California, in association with the [Solander Collection](#), and co-curated by SCMA curator Aprile Gallant and Phillip

Prodger, Executive Director of Curatorial Exhibitions and former Head of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, London. SCMA is the opening venue for this exhibition, the first display focused on Michel Kameni's work in North America.

From its founding in 1963, Kameni's Studio KM in Yaoundé attracted a wide cross-section of society. Known for his gift at capturing both dignity and desire, Kameni worked closely with sitters to create evocative *nyanga* (boasting) photographs. These portraits were often commissioned to share with friends and family or to commemorate important milestones, relationships, and professional identities.

Kameni's portraits reveal what his clients most valued: personal and familial bonds, national pride, cultural identity, and style. As intimate records of private lives, the images show how photography became a vital medium for self-expression during a period of tremendous change in Cameroon.

The small prints were designed as personal objects, easily carried or sent through the mail. Many who came to Yaoundé had migrated from remote villages and towns, and photography allowed them to remain connected to friends and family. While the names of sitters were not recorded, the details within the photographs speak eloquently to how these individuals wished to be remembered and how they envisioned their place in a newly independent nation.

"Michel Kameni's portraits invite us into moments of self-fashioning and pride at a pivotal time in Cameroon's history," said Jessica Nicoll, Director and Louise Ines Doyle '34 Chief Curator of SCMA. "They reveal the ways photography became a powerful means of connection and expression, capturing both personal dreams and the collective spirit of a newly independent nation. We are honored to share his work with our community."

"Kameni's ability to portray the people around him with sensitivity and care is truly astounding. Through his pictures, he showed us an Africa swelling with pride, energized with hope and a new sense of purpose," said Prodger. "We are thrilled that this rarely-seen work can make its North American debut at the Smith College Museum of Art."

About the Artist

Michel Kameni was born around 1935 in Bana, a Bamileke community in western Cameroon. Introduced to photography by his uncle, a discharged soldier of the French army, Kameni began his career taking identification photographs for the colonial government. In 1963, after apprenticing with a French studio photographer in Douala, he returned to Yaoundé and established Studio KM in the Briqueterie neighborhood. For decades, Kameni's studio and business thrived, adapting to new trends even as color and digital photography transformed the medium. Though he lost his sight to cataracts in 2007, Kameni remained a presence in the studio, which was operated by his children. He

died in May 2020 in Yaoundé. Today, his children maintain Studio KM as an archive of his life's work.

Exhibition Credits

Presentation of the exhibition at SCMA is made possible by the support of the Edith Stenhouse Bingham, class of 1955, Art Museum Fund; the Louise Walker Blaney, class of 1939, Fund for Exhibitions; and the Ann Weinbaum Solomon, class of 1959, Fund.

Photos

[Link to high-resolution images and credits.](#)

About the Solander Collection

Based in Washington and California, the Solander Collection is dedicated to new and creative ways of thinking about photography and its history. Challenging the idea of a photographic canon, it features works by neglected and marginalized makers, including photographers who may be well known in their own countries, but under-recognized internationally.

Solander holdings range from Australia to Uzbekistan, and from Persia to New Zealand. Encompassing the entire history of photography from the 1820s onwards, the collection has a special focus on women artists, people of color, and indigenous makers.

About the Smith College Museum of Art

As a teaching museum affiliated with Smith College, [SCMA \(Smith College Museum of Art\)](#) is dedicated to connecting people to art, ideas and each other by engaging people with firsthand experiences of art, artists and museum practice; collecting, researching, presenting and preserving an expansive collection of art in the service of learning, teaching and critical dialogue; and by fostering an inclusive and accessible environment that welcomes diverse perspectives and inspires imagination.

SCMA and the Museum Shop are open to the public year-round Tuesday through Sunday, 11am–4pm. In SCMA's galleries and classrooms, visitors experience a world-class collection of art spanning ancient times to the present and encompassing the arts of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. The Cunningham Center for the Study of Prints, Drawings and Photographs houses and hosts the study of a comprehensive collection of works on paper. In November 2023, SCMA was awarded support from the Art Bridges Foundation through its new "Access for All" grant initiative. Joining a generous gift from Smith College alumnae Jan Fullgraf Golann '71 and Jane Timken '64 that enabled the museum to eliminate all admission fees, this funding will be used to provide further access to art through a wide range of initiatives. SCMA will invest in access and audience development with extended hours, innovative programming and student outreach.

An accredited member of the American Alliance of Museums and a founding member of Museums10, a regional cultural collaboration, SCMA is also a member of the College Art Association and the New England Museum Association.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Burns Maxey, Associate Director of Engagement and Communications, bmaxey@smith.edu,
413-585-2759

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