

Studio Degbava, *Untitled (Sunglasses)*, 1970s

This black and white portrait from Studio Degbava, a commercial studio in Lomé, the capital of Togo, comes from the 70s and has been given the title 'Sunglasses'. A man sits facing us, his gaze hidden behind stylish, square-framed, dark glasses. He has a short Afro haircut, goatee beard and moustache, with full lips holding a hint of a smile. He wears spotless white trousers and short-sleeved white shirt, with shiny black leather shoes, and a big watch on one wrist, a heavy gold bracelet on the other. He sits on a low wooden side table, head and body slightly tilted as he rests one ankle on the other knee, his right hand draped over his leg, his left hand holding his other forearm, relaxed and steady. The floor is covered with checked carpet, the pattern evoking a basket weave, while the three steps behind him are covered in shiny lino with a graphic pattern of black and white concentric circles like stylised vinyl records – a black circle surrounding a white label and a black centre. White lines suggesting the light reflected off the discs are echoed by the reflections on his sunglasses. At the very back, the grey studio drapes hang slightly crumpled.

Near this portrait, there are other portraits from the 'golden age' of modern studio photography in West and Central Africa between the late 1960s and 1970s, including photos by the Malian photographer Malick Sidibé. Martyn Ewoma writes that Sidibé documented his fellow citizens 'on their own terms, rather than through the colonial gaze'. For Julie Crooks, these overlooked and 're-discovered' African studio photographers provide evidence that the history of African photography is fluid and still being written. Studio Degbava in Lomé is still in operation today.