

The social mosaic attempted: the photographs of August Sander

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“People of the Twentieth Century”: August Sander’s Photographic Portrait of Germany, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 25—September 19, 2004

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A selection of 150 photographs from August Sander’s *People of the Twentieth Century* [*Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*] was recently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in a traveling exhibition organized by Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne. The show is accompanied by a new seven-volume publication of Sander’s photographs, arranged in a manner that the photographer might have chosen had he been able to complete his massive project.

Together the exhibition and the publication capture the breadth of Sander’s ambition to create a photographic portrait of Germany society in the period between the two World Wars. While several of his most striking images—*Bricklayer* or *Young Farmers*, for instance—have achieved iconic status individually, it is within the context of this comprehensive catalogue of social existence that they attain their full meaning.

Sander said, “A successful photo is only a preliminary step toward the intelligent use of photography... I cannot show [my work] in a single photo, nor in two or three; after all, they could as well be snapshots. Photography is like a mosaic that becomes synthesis only when it is presented en masse.” [1]

Therefore, the arrangement of the photographs, no less than the photographs themselves, was at the heart of what became Sander’s lifelong undertaking. Beginning in the late 1890s as a journeyman photographer taking pictures of the stolid farmers in his native Westerwald near Cologne, then as the proprietor of a commercial portrait studio in Linz from 1905 till 1909, and finally, working independently after his return to Cologne till he was forced into semi-exile by the bombings and other ravages of World War II, Sander took thousands of photographs in the course of his career. (An amazing 1,800 of them have survived.)

Sander developed the remarkable ability to use photography’s strength as an objective record of reality to access, and then highlight, those images that most clearly express essential social relationships. His individuals confront the viewer with a direct gaze, often holding a defining tool of their trade; the formative influence of an individual’s social position is inseparable from who he or she is, making itself felt in his or her intimate nature no less than in public persona. Social class stands before us in all its detail and specificity.

In communicating this Sander was remarkable, not least of all because his preconceptions about class relations were somewhat at odds with what

he observed and recorded. But he succeeded in doing as an artist what A.K. Voronsky in *The Art of Seeing the World* describes as essential:

“...to burrow into a thing or person and creatively re-embody himself within them. Then he walks away from daily concerns, from petty joys and sorrows, from clichéd opinions and views; he becomes infused with a special sympathetic feeling, with a sense for the different and unfamiliar life, self-sufficient and independent of him; the beautiful is discovered in things, in events or people, independently of how the artist wants to interpret them.” [2]

As a result, we have the subtle and complex depiction of many social types who had not been given serious consideration in art before, as well as of more traditional ones in a new and sharpened light. Organized by a classification system akin to that of genus and species, the completed *People of the Twentieth Century* was to consist of forty-five portfolios each containing twelve photographs, arranged in seven volumes that, according to Sander, corresponded to the structure of society. Taken together, they succeed in being a mosaic-like portrait of Weimar Germany.

The social types that Sander photographed reflected his multi-textured and variable social position, a phenomenon not uncommon in the economic upheaval of Weimar Germany. He was born into a family of modest means in Herdorf, outside Cologne, in 1876. Given the mixed mining and farming economy of the region, Sander’s father was typical in working as a part-time carpenter in the mines while running his own farm, and even possessing capital from the sale of a small coalmine.

While maintaining its strong agrarian identity, the Sander household evidently valued the technological advances of industrialization, and considered intellectual and artistic pursuits to be a part of its solid, respectable existence; Sander’s early interest in the new medium of photography was supported.

As a medium, photography in the late nineteenth century was in transition from being a mechanical innovation and curiosity to becoming a means of artistic expression. There was debate between those who thought photography’s future as an art lay in its approximating the look of paintings versus those who saw photography’s strength in its objectivity, its ability to record what the human hand could not render, and the human eye quite possibly could not even consciously register.

In *A Short History of Photography* (1931), Walter Benjamin describes photography as playing a revolutionary role akin to psychoanalysis by making what he calls an “optical unconscious” accessible to consciousness, thus further extending our knowledge of the world. [3]

The development of the new medium was also impacted by its commercial uses. Photographic portraits, as opposed to the traditional painted ones, had gained a vogue amongst the rising middle classes of the 1880s and 1890s. Even the most humble households boasted a velvet bound album of relatives in their Sunday best posed in front of the inevitable backdrop of velvet drapes and potted palms.

By the time Sander set up his portrait studio in 1901, the more

sophisticated among the bourgeoisie wanted portraits that better expressed their status and individuality. Art Photography met this taste; artificial backgrounds and standard props were rejected in favor of personalized settings. With technical advances in camera exposures and lighting techniques, naturalistic outdoor scenes also became possible.

In 1907, Sander advertised his services by claiming, "...to retain all the characteristic features which circumstance, life and times have stamped upon the face. Thus I can offer to produce expressive, characteristic likenesses that completely represent the nature of the subject." [4]

The careful attention paid to the features stamped by "circumstances, life and times" which was his credo as an Art Photographer would continue to characterize Sander's work, even as his individual subjects became the means of viewing the social group to which they belonged, more than their individuality per se.

Although Sander did well as a portrait photographer in Linz, in 1910 he moved his family to Cologne, where initial business difficulties led him to augment his commissions by traveling to the outlying farming districts of Westerwald, familiar from his youth.

This was to have profound consequences for his work, which began to take on the nature of a sociological study as much of as a photographic endeavor. Furthermore, the destabilization in Sander's own career took place under conditions of impending political and social instability. As Germany's aggressive imperialist ventures were about to erupt in World War I, an accelerated process was underway which would sharpen social relations between the classes as Sander knew them.

His initial understanding of these relations was that of the conservative agrarian petty-bourgeois milieu in which he moved. Society was thought to develop cyclically, beginning with the farmers, who in their closeness to nature were endowed with special wisdom, upwards through the craftsmen whose pride in tools and handiwork kept them in touch with honest values, on from the village economy to the metropolis, which in spite of, or perhaps because of its greater wealth and complexity inexorably led to degeneration expressed by the lost and rootless souls of the Last People. After this fall, a return to the soil and redemption was anticipated.

His early portraits of farmers emphasize the characteristics that Sander felt made them a universal archetype for mankind; they are weather-beaten, but resilient looking, neither blissfully bucolic, nor absolutely ravaged by the elements.

However, a sense of social indeterminacy is captured as the pressure of new conditions on traditional modes of life increased. In the much commented upon *Young Farmers*, for instance, the air of confidence of this younger generation of farmers, with their jaunty canes, is undermined by the suits being ill-fitting, and the oversized shoes and slim canes totally inadequate to cope with a muddy, rut-filled road in what appears to be the middle of nowhere.

The aftermath of the First World War left Germany in a state of acute economic and political crisis. With an economy and a state apparatus in shambles, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) came to power. But having betrayed the working class in 1914 by voting to give the imperialists the war credits to launch the war, the SPD deepened its treachery in the postwar period, subordinating the interests of the working class to the exigencies of restoring capitalism.

The SPD leadership concentrated its efforts on suppressing the working class and its revolutionary leadership in 1918-19. In the following decade, committed to the defense of the bourgeois Weimar regime, the SPD leaders opposed all political collaboration with the Communist Party. The Stalinists, for their part, refused to take up a serious struggle against Social Democratic influence in the working class, resorting instead to demagoguery and ultimatism. With the working class divided and politically paralyzed, the Nazis were able to come to power in January 1933.

The economic fluctuations of the 1920s were not good for Sander's

livelihood as a portrait photographer. "In December 1923 prices were 1.2 trillion times higher than in 1913... and nine tenths of a family's money went for food." [5] Food riots broke out, and as unemployment reached 40 percent, famished angry people wandered the streets. No one in Sander's photographs would have been unaffected, but it was the petty bourgeois Mittelstand, the core of Sander's clientele, that was the most devastated.

Displaying his Westerwald resiliency, Sander systematized his project, seeking out subjects more broadly, and probably not all on commission, from the various strata of small crafts and tradesmen, petty officials, servants, office and factory workers, employed and unemployed in Cologne, producing such striking photographs as the *Notary*, the *Wallpaper Hanger*, the *Locksmith*, and the *Pastrycook*.

It was also at this time that he involved himself with an artistic circle in Cologne called the Rhineland Progressives, a group that included painters Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, and Anton Raderscheidt, composer Paul Hindemith and the flamboyant "Dadaist" Raoul Haussman.

These contacts were to prove fertile for Sander. Not only did he photograph them, and give the category of "Artist" a special place within his scheme, he was able to strengthen the theoretical framework for his photographs. While there were stylistic variations within it, the "Neue Sachlichkeit" (literally translated as "new thing-in-itselfness" or objectivity) movement was animated by principles of scientific objectivity and social criticism in art. Painters such as Otto Dix, and Georg Grosz painted and drew cartoons of German society's key members that were far from flattering, in the name of being unvarnished and truthful.

And while Sander does not seem to have abandoned his earlier structure of seven categories, organized in a cyclical relationship, he increasingly perceived the individuals he was representing as products of specific class relations.

By the late 1920s, his photographs gained some recognition; they were exhibited at the Cologne Art Union, and a contract was signed to publish them in a "photo book," a newly popular book form.

It is unclear how directly Sander collaborated with novelist Alfred Döblin on the preface to his *Face of Our Time* (*Antlitz der Zeit*), which was published in 1929, but in it Döblin brilliantly articulates the essential power of Sander's photographs. Comparing the leveling of faces by society to that other universal leveler, death, Döblin writes:

"People are shaped by what they eat, by the air and light in which they move, by the work they do or do not do, and also by the peculiar ideology of their class. One can learn more about these ideologies—perhaps more than could be learnt from long-winded reports or accusing comments—merely by glancing at the pictures of the wealthy middle class and their children. The tensions of our time become clear when we compare the photograph of the working students with that of the professor and his so peaceful family, nestling contentedly and still unsuspecting." [6]

The social tensions Sander captured were soon to explode. Just four years after *Face of Our Time* was published, the Nazis came to power. Sander's son Erich (on the far left in "Working Students") was imprisoned and then killed as a member of the Communist Party, the photographic plates for *Face of Our Time* were destroyed and the book banned. There is speculation that this was in retribution for Sander having helped his son distribute subversive literature, but it is unclear to what extent Sander's association or awareness of left-wing movements ever turned into actual support.

Another explanation is that Sander's realism depicted categories of German society—the vagrants and beggars, the deformed and unemployed, the circus performers and street musicians—that the Nazis found intolerable in their Third Reich. While too simplistic, this explanation gets at something of the truth.

Many of these images are among Sander's most enduring. Because he always used the traditional camera with glass plates and tripod, Sander's subjects were conscious participants in their portraits, and the photos bespeak a degree of human connection, that "burrowing" into the other that Voronsky spoke of, to the highest degree.

But it was not just this humanization of the supposed dregs of society that threatened the Nazi regime. After all, what power could a few pictures of beggars have? Rather, it was the depiction of the class content of Weimar society, the inclusion of not just the "Last People" but the revolutionaries, and the workers councils alongside the middle class mother and child, the aristocrat, and the tycoon—just to view society through such a lens—which truly gave Sander's work its subversive implications.

Sander continued to take photographs through the 1930s under increasingly tenuous conditions. The groups added reflect the times—"People who came to my Door" includes beggars and the bill collector, the photos of "Persecuted Jews" (1938) were possibly taken for passports, and "Foreign Workers" (1941-45) shows Ukrainian farmhands in the German countryside.

But after his studio in Cologne was hit in the Allied bombing of the city in 1944, Sander salvaged the negatives and prints he could, and moved them to a country farmhouse in Kuchhausen, where he remained till his death in 1964. Although Sander did not die in complete obscurity, *People of the Twentieth Century* was left unpublished; it has only been on the basis of his outline for the project dating from 1924 that subsequent editors have arranged his outstanding photographs, always with a fair amount of guesswork as to what Sander himself would have intended.

Critics have pointed out undeniable shortcomings in Sander's work. His social portrait is uneven, with a disproportionate number of middle-class and professional types relative to the population (no doubt reflecting the fact that these were byproducts of his studio work). His reach did not extend upwards to the highest levels of society, nor did he explore the seamiest side of Weimar life—the "working girls" and their decadent clientele, the profiteers and con men and shady politicians that show up so vividly in Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, or Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

There is also a degree of repetitiveness among the photographs because of the decision to stay within narrowly defined conventions of portraiture—subjects posed facing the viewer or occasionally in profile. Modeling himself on a scientist who restricts the number of variables in an experiment, Sander may have limited his exploration of more adventurous artistic forms.

More importantly, the resort by editors to Sander's outline from 1924 make it impossible to know whether Sander ever revised his ideas about the inter-relationships between his subjects under the impact of events. The hierarchy of types suggests stability, instead of adequately communicating the fierce conflict between them, evidenced by the events of the time, which is their decisive feature.

These shortcomings are relatively trivial, however, when compared to Sander's overall accomplishment. His photographs remain indelible in our consciousness, advancing our understanding of Weimar German society, and of humankind itself as molded by the pressure of class relations in his time, as in our own. His exemplary approach of attentive objectivity toward his subjects, which finds reflected in individuals the crystallization of a whole totality of social relations, has much to teach to artists and viewers alike.

In a letter to Paul Fröhlich (leader of the centrist Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei/SAP) dated 1946, Sander wrote, "The work, which is more depiction than criticism, will provide some insight into our age and its people, and the more the time passes, the more valuable it will become."

[7]

He was not mistaken.

August Sander's photographs are currently in print in collections of varying sizes:

August Sander, Face of our Time, with introduction by Alfred Döblin, Schirmer Art Books, Schirmer/Mosel Munchen and Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Köln 1994/2003 (ISBN: 3-88814-292-X)

August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century, Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952, Gunther Sander, ed., Ullrich Keller, intro., Linda Keller, trans., The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, Fourth Printing, 1997 (ISBN: 0-262-19248-9)

August Sander, Aperture Masters of Photography, Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1977 (ISBN: 0-89381-748-1)

August Sander: People of the 20th Century, (7 vols. set) Susanne Lange and Gabriele Contrath-Scholl, ed. and intro., Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2002

References:

1. Ulrich Keller, introduction to *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century, Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, Gunther Sander, ed., Linda Keller, trans., The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, Fourth Printing, 1997, p. 36
2. A.K. Voronsky, "The Art of Seeing the World," from *Art as the Cognition of Life, Selected Writings 1911-1936*, Fredrick S. Choate, trans. and ed., Mehring Books, Inc, Oak Park, MI, 1998, p. 370
3. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Classic Essays on Photography*, Alan Trachtenberg, ed., Leete's Island Books, New Haven, CA, 1980, p. 203
4. August Sander, as quoted by Ulrich Keller in *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century, Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, *ibid*, p. 13
5. Leo Rubinfien, "The Mask Behind the Face," *Art in America*, June/July 2004, p.101
6. Alfred Döblin, introduction to *August Sander, Face of our Time*, Schirmer Art Books, Schirmer/Mosel Munchen and Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Köln 1994/2003, p. 10
7. August Sander, letter to Paul Fröhlich and Rosi Wolfstein, dated 31 December 1946, Document in REWE Library of Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archive, Cologne



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