

Paris Photo

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Booth A24

**August Sander. *People of the 20th Century***

August Sander (1876 - 1964) is considered one of the most important photographers of the 20th century, both nationally and internationally. The high status accorded to him in photographic historiography is primarily based on his conceptual series "People of the 20th Century", which he developed over decades. With this magnum opus, Sander created a unique body of work that not only shaped the art of his time, but also had a lasting influence on subsequent generations of artists and photographers to this day.

Through countless publications and presentations all over the world, Sander's portrait work has received both a broad and scholarly reception. Julian Sander, the photographer's great-grandson, is now exhibiting the complete project "People of the 20th Century" for the first time in Europe at Paris Photo in fall 2024. The total of 619 gelatin silver prints were printed from the original negatives by his father Gerd Sander together with Jean-Luc Differdange in the 1990s. The production was preceded by extensive research work, which took around fifteen years. It was started in 1984 by Gerd Sander and later completed together with the SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne. Using the existing original prints and negatives, documentary materials and interviews with contemporaries of the photographer, the structure of the work, which Sander did not complete during his lifetime, was reconstructed.

From the mid-1920s until his death, August Sander worked on his project with the intention of comprehensively depicting the structure of society at the time by means of hundreds of individual and group portraits. All social classes and professional groups - from the homeless to the Grand Duke - were captured by him in his studio or in their natural surroundings, using a restrained, neutral photographic style. In doing so, he succeeded in capturing the individuality of those portrayed in a way that was as precise as it was sensitive, while at the same time working out the typical features that identified them as representatives of a particular social class. Sander's aim was to use this method to create a "mirror of the times", "to give a true psychology of our time and our people".

He divided his "cultural work in photographs", as he called it, into 49 portfolios, which he then assigned to seven superordinate groups: "The Farmer", "The Skilled Tradesman", "The Woman", "Classes and Professions", "The Artists", "The City" and "The Last People". As a kind of prologue, he also preceded the first group with the so-called "Stammappe" ["Portfolio of Archetypes"], which defined the farmer as the "archetype" of man. The basis for his extensive project was his work as a professional photographer, which gave him access to very diverse social groups. Due to the time span in which the portraits from "People of the 20th Century" were taken - the earliest photograph dates back to 1892, the latest to 1954 - Sander's series not only provides an inventory of the constitution of German society at a certain point in time, but also depicted the social and political changes brought about by the turbulent years between the German Empire, two world wars and post-war Germany.

August Sander first presented his project at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1927, and two years later, in 1929, his photo book "Antlitz der Zeit" ["Face of our Time"] was published, which he wanted to be understood as a kind of preview of his epochal work with sixty selected images. In his foreword to this publication, which was enthusiastically received by contemporary critics as well as the literary and artistic avant-garde, the writer Alfred Döblin noted: "What you have before you is a kind of cultural history, or rather sociology, of the last thirty years. With his vision, his mind, his faculty of observation, his knowledge, and last but not least his immense photographic talent, Sander has succeeded in writing sociology not by writing, but by producing photographs — photographs of faces and not mere costumes. Just as one can only achieve an understanding of nature or of the history of the physical organs by studying comparative anatomy, so this photographer has practised a kind of comparative photography and achieved a scientific viewpoint above and beyond that of the photographer of detail. We are free to interpret his photographs in any way we wish, and taken as a whole, they provide superb material for the cultural, class, and economic history of the last thirty years."

The response to Sander's epochal work was also positive far beyond Germany's borders. Walker Evans, for example, recognized it as a "cultural necessity" and wondered why societies in other countries had not also undergone such a photographic survey.

During the 1940s and 1950s, August Sander revised and expanded his work in line with the changes to which German society was subjected, particularly during the National Socialist era. In the two portfolios of "Persecuted" and "Political Prisoners", for example, he depicted victims of Nazi rule, including his son Erich, who died in political captivity.

"A successful photo is only a preliminary step toward the intelligent use of photography. ...I would very much like to show my work again, but I cannot show it in a single photo, nor in two or three, after all, they could just as well be snapshots. Photography is like a mosaic that becomes a synthesis only when it is presented en masse [...]" noted August Sander in 1951. The presentation of the complete set of 'People of the 20th Century' at Paris Photo now takes account of his desire for 'aggregation' in the most consistent form. The hanging of the more than six hundred prints takes into account the affiliation of the sitters to certain groups, as August Sander had intended or as suggested by art historical reconstruction. The arrangement of the groups in a consistent spiral form, in which the different portfolios are arranged around each other without further curatorial intervention, leads to new, random and unexpected encounters. Representatives from the most diverse social contexts meet here. In this way, the presentation is able to vividly demonstrate the diversity of characters and the simultaneity of different social realities and phenomena, which are also constitutive for every society today. It is Sander's deeply humanitarian attitude and his unwavering interest in the human condition that are visible here and lend his project the relevance and timelessness that he himself recognized in it: "The work, which is more like a depiction than a critique, will shed light on our time and people, and the more time passes, the more valuable it becomes."