

The Museum of Modern Art

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143
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AUGUST SANDER (1876-1964)

A selection of 27 photographs from the German photographer August Sander's life-long project "Men of the 20th Century" ("Menschen des XX. Jahrhunderts") is on view at The Museum of Modern Art through June. Directed and installed in the Steichen Photography Center Gallery by Gary Metz, Curatorial Intern, the exhibition was chosen from the Museum's collection of some 50 works in the series.

"Men of the 20th Century" was intended to be a visual chart of German society; at the same time it was to depict those aspects of culturally structured systems that enable men in all societies to relate to each other.

Sanders recorded hundreds of faces of his fellow countrymen in a traditional and straightforward manner revealing the complexities of the individuals as well as their struggles and accomplishments in responding to the needs of society. The photographs are at once individual portraits as well as studies of personalities, professions, and social positions.

In the exhibition wall label, Mr. Metz comments, "[Sander's] intention was to compile, in portraits of his fellow Germans, what might be called a pictorial genealogy of society. A picture composed of many pictures, this 'genealogy' was to present a particular epoch of German history. In the widest sense, 'Menschen des XX. Jahrhunderts' also was intended to picture those relationships that might hold true for all societies. Thus, although occupation, dress, social station, and so forth may vary with time and place, men relate to each other universally in these terms.

"It was Sander's understanding that when an individual consents to being photographed, he shows himself as he wishes to be seen. In effect, he puts on a mask. Whereas the choice of the mask is a personal one, the nature of the mask itself is public. In a certain place and time, a society will have a specific inventory of the

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personas, roles, and attitudes that individuals may assume. Sander used the term 'human type' to describe those masks that the people he photographed chose to wear. His self-imposed task was to photograph the faces of his time and re-present them, as in a mirror, back to society for its reflection.

"Sander's great 'cultural work in photography' was to consist of 500-2,500 portraits of human types. Perhaps the proposal has an air of the Linnean taxonomist about it; nevertheless, the concept and its execution are seen through the eyes of a compassionate and perceptive human being. The categories are not so important for Sander as the people he photographed, nor do they contain the vision and concern of the man who conceived them. It was Sander's genius to be able to establish such rapport with his subjects that they do not become mere stereotypes. Each of his people reveals himself as he simultaneously gives himself away and holds to his own identity. Thus, in the portrait of the Police Officer, a synthesis occurs, in which the twinkle of an eye and the surprised sweep of a moustache parry the cut of the coat and the insignia of its buttons, and we finally confront both a Man and a Uniform. As the complexities of individual and type combine into Subject, so do Sander and Subject combine into the single photograph.

"Clearly, photography is an ideal medium for such an undertaking as Sander's. For photography can render the unique in all its special and varied appearances, as it can also formalize with incisive directness. Perhaps because these portraits are photographs, we give them a reality we would not otherwise. Even as we are referred to these 'real' people, we can also recognize the reality and beauty of the pictures themselves."

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, and Linda Gordon, Coordinator, Public Services, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.