

CorpsStudent, Köln, 1925
August Sander



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Titles, such as, portraitist, artist, and documentarian with a camera can be used to describe the German photographer August Sander. However, care must be taken not to isolate one description from another because, singly, no classification completely and precisely defines him, except for the general category of photographer.

Sander was born in the farm community of Westerwald, Germany in 1876. He became a miner at the age of 19 and continued with this profession until his enlistment into the military. Beginning in 1899, he employed himself as a self-supporting professional photographer in such locations as Hagan, Chemnitz, Dresden, Linz on the Danube and above all, after a short residence in Weimar and Berlin, in Cologne from 1910 - 1944. In 1944, as a result of the bombing in Cologne, Sander lost his studio and home. Returning to Westerwald, he worked there and remained until his death in 1964 at the age of 88.

Quite early in his career he gained the attention of experts and connoisseur's and it was duly rewarded. He received a gold medal in Paris in 1904 in a Silver medal in Linz in 1909. His first exhibition in 1927 was an affiliation with Colognes Art Club. The next two, both in 1930 were located in Hagan and Magdeburg. *Antlitz der Zeit* (Countenance of the Time), his first book of photographs was published in 1929. And in 1934 remaining copies were confiscated by the German Secret State Police, (a friendly Nazi organization, operating against political and treasonable offenses). Between 1936 and 1939, his volume of portraits,



Photographer August Sander

Deutsches Land, Deutsches Volk (German Land-realm German People-nation) appeared, in spite of the title's impartial theme. After the second World War, Sander must have realized that his photographs would become the retrospective witness of the entire era. Sander once again received his share of honors in the cultural awards for photography given in 1961. The Swiss magazine "Du" (You) devoted a special issue to his achievements in 1959, in an effort to renew the once suppressed interest in his work.

Why did the Third Reich "appropriate" *Antlitz der Zeit*? Probably above all because in certain types of people (who had obviously lost favor with the government) were portrayed there in. In addition, the authorities didn't find the type of German depicted who would insure the future of Germany. Instead, they found youngsters, happily pregnant women, and joyfully gathered party leaders. In comparison, many of the photographs read as caricatures, and it turns out that the German people (especially oversensitive leaders) didn't appreciate being made fun of. The war and times has a lot to do with it. The party was organized around the idea of a firmly united country of super-people avidly supporting their military power. Sanders portraits didn't exactly represent the breed being forged by German propagandists.

His work seems to revolve around the portrayal of the individual and society. Heinrich Lützeler goes one step further to delineate five variations showing the way society has altered the manner in which the sitter reacts to the camera.

First: individuality and invention in peaceful coexistence. He cites a doctor, a bank clerk, and a commercial manager, as all having the same pre-dispositions. The convention: their apparel and gesture of their hands. The individuality: their gazes. These photographs simply follow the codes of formal portraiture.

Hindemuth, A representative of the "degenerate music", a democratic deputy, and socialist leader, revolutionaries, and clergymen all clumped together in the same book.

Second: People revealing their own myth. Lützeler exemplifies this group with a Democrat, Marxist, and a group of revolutionaries who (because of the times) were compelled to convey a stricter personality not wholly their own. However, Sander has captured their playful, hopeful, or wishful dreams on film without totally losing this more serious fabricated self.

Third: Those people who borrow a pose or attitude for themselves. Here Sander became a caricaturist. The butcher's companion, the pianist, the painters, and art



historian, all become extravagantly, sentimental.

Fourth: People in search of themselves. Here the allusion is to those people who assume the personality of someone else, or a glorified version of their own selves. i.e. the woman disc jockey, the woman dentist, and the secretary.

Fifth: Pure individuality. The best example is the stockbroker from Cologne. Society has made no obvious impression on this fine lady. She continues to be herself, oblivious (contentedly?) to the competitive demands, of a “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses society.”

The handle of portrait photographer was more or less a front to perpetrate Sanders artwork. His keen sense of seeing along with a unique (sometimes out of focus) folksy craft enable him to record the aforementioned types. His camera documented classes, ranks in society, and professions, but not necessarily people. Yet he allowed the sitter to inform the viewer, in his own way, how society changed or altered him, thus conveying the result and not the beginning. The sitters preoccupation with this duty gave Sander the opportunity to show, with uncompromising reality, the fabricated person plus Sander’s own added insight. This addition to the sitter’s portrait makes these photographs distinctive and enduring.

Either Sander was influenced by or influenced “Die Neue Sachlichkeit” (The new objectivity), introduced into the art world during the 1930’s in Germany. Such painters as George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Max Beckman were the front runners of this movement. For the most part, it was a new realism: “a mode of representation that takes an aura of the incredible because, commonplace objects are presented with unexpectedly exaggerated and detailed forthrightness.” According to H. H. Arnason. Comparatively, Sander’s photographs also incorporate the frontality of figures to create an overpowering confrontation. Although nothing freakish or exotic is included within the format, the sense of the unreal is intimated. As documentary, his photographs are certainly straight-forward, untouched, aggressive, close-up, views. It’s because Sander was under the auspices of portrait photography that he was able to accomplish this. It’s as though Sander has extracted 2 or 3 different beings from each of his subjects, and asked the viewer to relate to each one of them, obviously to offer a much wider experience from what otherwise might become a stale and static mugshot. Perhaps it is way of viewing of exercising our emotions.

Such a multi-level experience can be gained through this portrait of the **“CorpsStudent Köln, 1925”** [Corps student Cologne]. At first glance, the

photograph seems to utilize the rules of studio portraiture. Fixed, preplanned, gaze and posture, ornamented appearance, and unadorned backdrop to enhance the arrangement and concentration of the figure. This is the type of photograph made for the express purpose of hanging over a family mantelpiece. He seems to be the clean-cut, every-mother's-son, type boy become a man, or has he? True he wears the costume-uniform of his set station; full dress, uniform, sash, medal, hat, white gloves, and menacing scepter. But what about the real person underneath these clothes? This is where Sander starts to divide his subject.

**First, the caricature,
second, the real person, and third, their tragic existence.**

Sander didn't prearrange his subject dress, but rather let them prepare themselves as they wanted to appear. The Corps student wanted a record of this period in his life, so he dressed for that purpose. However, the handsome military attire of his day appears somewhat comical to the observer today. Sander may or may not have been aware of this possibility, but his objective realistic method and medium recorded the facts. They'll always be on film, so the people can interpret them, according to the dictates of their era, and those preceding. A retrospective view of any artwork has to deal with the artist's insight into the real situations of his study.

Sander has focus directly on the boy's head and allow the uniform, gloved hand, and scepter to slip into a softer focus. Possibly this represents the dreamlike being this individual is trying to portray. His face tells a truer story. Curiously, the face is also the only unmasked living piece in the entire picture. The rest of his body (and life) is bound by the uniform, and what it stands for. The uniform gives the impression of a dashing, brave, and courageous soul, while the face, even with the efforts to appear as a tightlipped, determine warrior, shows the not-so-gallant scars of a dueling incident. The horizontal slices mar the otherwise genteel child-like visage.



His direct gaze is softened by the innocence of the eyes in the naïveté of what's to come. Again the lapse in time forward to the view were these insights. Most certainly 1925 saw so many identical young men being thrown into the horrors of an adult world engaged in war. The facts were all much the same, and the scars, the visible or not we're always there. Possibly scars were more a badge of honor than tragedy or disgrace. Once again Sander transcends this time differential to offer a document that can be continually appreciated.

The tragic existence reveals itself within the above 2 instances. The caricaturization of uniform and poets betray the military's efforts to conceal their ulterior motives. Supposedly flashy uniforms and strength in numbers instantly creates a comradeship. However, the repulsive duty of killing performed in these uniforms is so pitiful that



not even white gloves, can cover it up. The young boy, complete with scars, is just that, a boy. An individual expected to accept a way of life created by older people. Sander correctly chronicled his appearance in 1925 for our observation today. The world has kept busy during this time, what with 5.5 million soldiers dying as a result of a single war. (not to mention the 2.4 million military casualties) That fact and a retrospective look at the 1925 student brings to realization the tragic statement of our times.

In this case, as in most of the others, Sander was firstly, a portrait photographer. He doesn't employ social surroundings, or the pretension of acting to put his point across, rather the resignation, at the moment of exposure is the strongest selling point. The sitter has laid

himself bare before the camera, and he's more of a victim than master of its eye. Sander's work as mediator-documentarian is accomplished before the exposure, and

in no way camouflages the sitter's, real self, and/or that which he wished to convey. To say that Sander is just a photographer would be unfair. He is an artist, portraitist, and most important, a documentarian of his own people. A man able to see beyond superficial fronts, and the time so he can objectively record of people in transition. His repetitive method of collecting professions, social ranks and classes binds his German people together so that the differences disappear and the universals remain.

Books used as reference material.

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[**German Mirror, People of the 20th Century**]

History of Modern Art, H. H. Arnason

The New Cassell's German Dictionary