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SFMOMA PRESENTS MOST COMPREHENSIVE U.S. SHOWING
EVER OF AUGUST SANDER'S MONUMENTAL
PHOTOGRAPHIC SURVEY, *PEOPLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY*

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present *August Sander: People of the 20th Century* from November 29, 2002 through February 23, 2003. The exhibition comprises more than 200 vintage prints drawn from the photographer's monumental portrait of German society, made for the most part between the two world wars. SFMOMA's presentation is the most comprehensive showing in the United States of this seminal project, which has never been publicly displayed in its entirety in this country. The works on view are culled from the archives of the Photographische Sammlung of SK/Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, and supplemented by selected photographs on loan from international institutions and private collectors. The exhibition curator is Susanne Lange, director of the Photographische Sammlung of SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne. Overseeing the San Francisco presentation is Douglas R. Nickel, SFMOMA curator of photography. Accompanying the exhibition is a newly revised seven-volume trilingual (German, English and French) monograph containing all 619 works in the portfolio, as well as Sander's own annotations on the photographs and negatives, many categorized and evaluated for the first time.

August Sander (1876–1964) is widely hailed as an avatar of modern photography. His influence can be seen in the work of subsequent generations of international photographers, including that of Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. Sander's exhaustive *People of the 20th Century* project set conceptual and aesthetic standards that were unprecedented in the history of photography; the achievement is still considered unparalleled today. Through this project, Sander created a compelling record of the world and time in which he lived by making direct, descriptive posed portraits of ordinary people from a broad cross section of German society—the farmer, businessman, bricklayer, painter,



August Sander, *Hod carrier*, 1928, gelatin silver print; courtesy of the August Sander Archive, Cologne; ARS, New York, 2002

secretary, philosopher, dockworker, blacksmith and coal carrier, for instance—where individuals stood for and were grouped according to categorical occupational, social or familial types. He then collected the photographs into some 45 portfolios, which were finally assigned to seven archetypal categories: “The Farmer,” “The Skilled Tradesman,” “The Woman,” “Classes and Professions,” “The Artists,” and “The City.” The final category, “The Last People,” included the elderly as well as those with birth defects, disabilities, and mental disorders. Taken together, these images capture a detailed view of pre–World War II Germany and reflect Sander’s optimistic view of the prevailing social order.

Sander was born in 1876 in Herdorf, Germany, near Cologne, the son of a mining carpenter. Soon after receiving a camera from an uncle in 1892, he built a darkroom and began photographing. After his military service, he worked as a commercial photographer, specializing in architectural and industrial photography. Sander was most active creatively during the period between the two World Wars, when many German artists were stimulated by newfound political freedom. Inspired by the Cologne Progressives, a group of radical painters he met in the early 1920s, he conceived of his ambitious project in sympathy with the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or “New Objectivity,” in art current in this circle.

Sander worked on *People of the 20th Century* until his death in 1964, despite the tumultuous world events generated by the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich: Nazi authorities disapproved of Sander’s undifferentiated, unheroic depiction of the German people and for a time forced him to stop work on the project; thousands of his glass negatives were confiscated and destroyed. Eventually Sander relocated to the village of Kuchhausen—bringing with him and thus saving 10,000 negatives—and sat out the war years by devoting himself to a series of landscapes and nature studies. One of Sander’s sons, Erich, who joined the anti-Nazi Socialist Worker’s Party in 1933, was jailed for treason in 1934 and died in prison 10 years later. Erich’s brother, Gunther Sander, began working toward the publication of *People of the 20th Century* in 1980.

The first section of the exhibition, “The Farmer,” demonstrates Sander’s familiarity with the rural environment of his youth, as well as his view of the farmer as the basic archetype of society. The first section also includes a portfolio of 12 pictures that Sander created as a prologue to the total project. These images depict a broad cross section of social types as they relate to inner character: the man of the soil, the revolutionary, the philosopher and the sage. A second section, “The Skilled Tradesman,” includes images of members of the trades as they were understood in Sander’s age—the bricklayer, the locksmith, the shoemaker, the tailor, the potter and the pastry cook—as well as images of industrialists, technicians and inventors. In the third section, “The Woman,” women appear largely defined in relationship to other people in pictures with titles such as *Wholesale Merchant and Wife*, *The Innkeeper and His Wife* and *Middle-Class Couple*. In some of the later images, however, women do appear in autonomous social roles in occupations that were open to them, such as nun, dressmaker and secretary.

In the fourth section, “Classes and Professions,” Sander creates a complex image of society: the subsection “The Clergyman” includes both Roman Catholics and Protestants; “The Teacher and Educator” shows teachers from cities and villages; “The Businessman” ranges from match seller to publisher to art

dealer. Sander's comprehensive view of society is most apparent in his inclusion of people whose professional activity might be considered marginal, such as the hypnotist in the portfolio "The Doctor and the Pharmacist." Also on view are portraits of politicians of multiple political persuasions. However, all Sander's portraits are made in the same spirit of scientific objectivity and neutrality, including a series of national socialists, Jews, and soldiers of both world wars.

The cultural spectrum of "The Artists" ranges from world-class conductor to café musician, from film actor to touring player. The images in "The City" depict the life of urban dwellers on festive and solemn occasions; people living on the fringes of urban society, such as circus artists, gypsies, transients and city youth. The section also includes images of persecuted Jewish citizens, foreign workers and political prisoners. Sander devotes the final section, "The Last People," to people on society's outermost perimeters: the sick, the old and frail, and people born with physical or mental disabilities. On view in this section is an image of the death mask of his son Erich, who died as a political prisoner.

The seven-volume catalogue that accompanies the exhibition is available for purchase in the SFMOMA MuseumStore. Published by Harry N. Abrams, the fully illustrated set is priced at \$195, \$175.50 for SFMOMA members.

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Hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 9 p.m.; summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day) open at 10 a.m.; closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day.

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