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Books & Arts

The photographs of August Sander
Twentieth-century man

Aug 27th 2009 | PARIS
From *The Economist* print edition

A photographer who believed he was enabling self-portraits

August Sander Archiv/DACS



Pride in his pastry

Three swaggering young Rhineland farmers, on their way to a country dance, turn round to be photographed complete with their hats and canes, one of them dangling a cigarette between his lips. The photographer's friend, Anton Räderscheidt, a Cologne artist, appears in his dark coat and bowler hat set against a deserted city street like a figure from one of his own paintings. Räderscheidt belonged to a school of formal realism that corresponded to Sander's own artistic beliefs.

Another masterpiece captures a bricklayer pausing in the middle of his work with confident grace, his triangular pile of bricks hoisted above his shoulders. Flawless as a classical painting, this photograph appeared in "Face of Our Time", Sander's volume of 60 portraits published in 1929. This was a preview to his great project, "People of the Twentieth Century", on which he laboured until he died in 1964

"NOTHING is more hateful to me than photography sugar-coated with gimmicks, poses and false effects," wrote August Sander in 1927. "Let me speak the truth in all honesty about our age." Like a lepidopterist, Sander captured and classified his fellow Germans, arranging them by profession, social class and family relationships. In a career spanning 50 years, he observed industrialists, avant-garde artists, communists, circus performers, gypsies and the unemployed with equal detachment, allowing each sitter his dignity.

A new exhibition of Sander's portraits and landscapes opens in Paris on September 9th, along with a book of the same title. The 105-image show, mostly from the 1920s and 1930s, reveals how his unembellished style, free of sentiment or cliché, keeps its powerful fascination.

Sander favoured large-format cameras with lengthy exposure times so he could focus on detail. He described his work as "assisting a self-portrait". A hefty pastry cook, his bulk encased in a white overall, stares at the camera, full of professional pride as he wields his whisk in a giant copper bowl.

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aged 87. "Face of Our Time" was an international success. But Sander's all-encompassing portraits of German society did not appeal to the Nazis. The authorities destroyed the book's printing blocks, then banned sales of existing copies in 1936.

Despite persecution by the Nazis (his son Erich, a committed Socialist, died in prison in 1944), Sander travelled little, remaining rooted throughout his career in Cologne and the nearby countryside of Westerwald, where his family had mined small iron ore deposits for generations. Born in 1876, he left school at 14 to work in the mines, but a glimpse at the grey clouds through a visiting landscape photographer's viewfinder set the teenager on a different course.

He set up his own studio in Cologne in 1911, building up a lucrative clientele. Bicycling around with his rucksack stuffed with photographic equipment, Sander would approach startled strangers if they interested him as suitable "types" for his pet project. As a critic pointed out in 1959, "There are Sander types, Sander characters everywhere. Even here."

"August Sander: Voir, Observer et Penser" is at the Fondation Cartier-Bresson, Paris, from September 9th to December 20th

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