

EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

INVESTIGATING KEY ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY

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AUGUST SANDER

MALER (ANTON RÄDERSCHIEDT)

FIELD WITH MARGUERITES

UNIVERSITÄTSGEBÄUDE
(UNIVERSITY BUILDING)

AUGUST SANDER
GERMANY 1876–1964

MALER (ANTON RÄDERSCHIEDT) 1926, printed 1978
gelatin silver photograph, 27 x 19.7 cm
Alistair McAlpine Photography Fund 2007 22.2007
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AUGUST SANDER
GERMANY 1876–1964

FIELD WITH MARGUERITES 1930s
gelatin silver photograph, 17.1 x 22.9cm
Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Collection Benefactors Program 2006 58.2006
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AUGUST SANDER
GERMANY 1876–1964

UNIVERSITÄTSGEBÄUDE (UNIVERSITY BUILDING) 1935–37

gelatin silver photograph, 17.2 x 23.1cm

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AUGUST SANDER

GERMANY 1876–1964

Nothing seemed more appropriate to me than to render through photography a picture of our times which is absolutely true to nature ... In order to see truth we must be able to tolerate it ... whether it is in our favour or not ... So allow me to be honest and tell the truth about our age and its people.

August Sander 1927¹

August Sander was one of the 20th century's greatest photographers. His remarkable 'atlas' of the people of the 20th century, compiled over a period of five decades but never finished, was a series of portraits that aimed to exhaustively document contemporary German society. His work went on to influence Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the more recent work of Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Rineke Dijkstra.

August Sander began his working life as a commercial portrait photographer in Austria. The stock-in-trade of that job was usually to flatter the sitter or client; to produce portraits that presented an acceptable mask rather than capture an essential truth or essence of the subject. But by around 1910 Sander's approach shifted to a more detached observational style that sought to see things as they are and not as they could or should be. His camera objectively noted the every detail: fur collars, monocles, walking sticks, the Dobermans, the military armbands and the anxiety in his subjects' wary eyes.

To 'see things as they are' in Weimar Germany (c1920–33) was to penetrate the terrible uncertainties and bewilderment that underpinned the rise of the National Socialists and Adolf Hitler. Sander's cool and unemotional images, sharply focused and flatly lit, grew to a total of about 700 photographs, classified into seven archetypal categories: The Farmer, The Skilled Tradesman, The Woman, Classes and Professions, The Artists, The City and The Last People. These categories appear tightly taxonomic, moving from the noble rustics of the soil to the capitalists and bohemians, and back to the outcasts of society. Sander rarely identifies his subjects by name; classified by profession or social class, the images remain representations of types rather than portraits of individuals. The sequence of Sander's categories foretells another narrative: the sense that these stratified roles of a nearly feudal community in their Sunday best are about to be slammed into a war-fuelled modernity. It also shows how Sander's thinking about genealogy, typology and physiognomy fed into the then influential social philosophy of eugenics² and the darker currents of racism and Nazism.

August Sander manages to do what photography does best: to suspend time for a moment. And yet in spite of the solitude and

stillness of his composed portraits, we sense the lethal movements of history about to sweep everything away. How did these people end up? Where did they go?

As the shattering inflation of 1920s Germany hit home, respected families would be thrown from their houses, precious jewellery and fine carpets would be traded for milk and eggs (we wonder about Sander's bank official of 1932 – was he interested in saving the currency or collapsing it?). Soon ministers would be murdered and schoolchildren would cheer; one of the ageing revolutionaries that Sander photographed would have his teeth knocked out with rifle butts; young soldiers that looked innocent in their helmets posing in a farmyard a long way from the war would soon be carrying out frightening acts of violence and destruction.

Maler (or Painter) 1926, one of three works by Sander held in the Gallery's collection, was in fact artist Anton Räderscheidt (1892–1970). He looks conformist in dress and stern in aspect, but behind the severity of the suit and expression is an element of mischief. History tells us that Räderscheidt worked as a freelance artist in Cologne and had known Hans Arp and Raoul Hausmann. Exhibitions were held in his studio and there was a dadaist mood in many of the gatherings. But the world would become more complicated. By 1934 he had left Germany for Paris and then Toulon in France. By 1940 he was placed in an internment camp near Toulon. A close friend poisoned himself there. When Räderscheidt was about to be handed over to the Germans, he escaped across the Swiss border (hidden by a butcher from Barjols among his wares and taken across illegally). He painted until he died from stroke in 1970 back in Cologne.³

Given the political climate and rampant nationalism of Nazi Germany, it is not surprising that Sander's watchful and worried citizens in his smaller 1929 project *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of the time) were not what the Third Reich wanted. The bricklayers and teachers were rather too ordinary at a time of such loud patriotism: heroic leaders and glorious soldiers were the order of the day. The book was confiscated and the printing plates destroyed. In 1934 Sander's son Erich, a student and active Communist, was denounced and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. He was to die there. Sander ended his portfolio on the picture of the death mask of his son. Then, at the end of the war, Sander's Cologne studio was destroyed by fire and 30 000 negatives were lost.

With historical hindsight, Sander's detailed portraits, country landscapes, fields of marguerites, or the solid university buildings convey a certain sense of menace and pathos; these seeming solidities of everyday life have a poignant impermanence. From our position in the 21st century we know of the tragic consequences and aftermath of Hitler's Germany.

What makes Sander's *People of the 20th century* project so compelling for viewers today is the way we are both engaged and

estranged before these images: spare and yet full of information, unsentimental and yet affecting. The people look reserved, their Prussian bearing conveys the fear of dropping from the safety of their status. They don't want to give too much away and yet every detail of face and hand speaks volumes. And so we oscillate between the protective mask that weighs so heavily and the real facts of character in a face, between the general and the specific.

Sander's images also mark a bridge between a person's past and their uncertain future. It is this perhaps that is so suggestive for us here and now: how discord can readily replace peace; how catastrophe seems far away until it is very near; and how quickly we can lose what we hold on to for dear life.

1. August Sander Archive. August Sander: 'In photography there are no unexplained shadows!', National Portrait Gallery, London 1996, p 21
2. The Eugenics program was established as early as July 1933 by the Nazi party which justified the sterilisation of the racially weak in Germany, in order to strengthen the 'Aryan' bloodstream originating in Scandinavia (or old Germany)
3. www.raederscheidt.com/english/default.htm

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

August Sander Archive. August Sander: 'In photography there are no unexplained shadows!', National Portrait Gallery, London 1996

Döblin, A. 'Faces, images and their truth' in *August Sander: face of the time*, Michael Robertson (trans), Shirmer's Visual Library, Munich 1994

J Paul Getty Museum. *August Sander: photographs from the J Paul Getty Museum*, The J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 1999

Lange, S. 'A testimony to photography: reflections on the life and work of August Sander' in *August Sander 1876–1964*, M Heiting (ed), Taschen, New York 1999

Sander, G (ed). *August Sander: citizens of the twentieth century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Ma 1986

For further resources, information and programs related to August Sander and his work see also:

- Art Gallery of New South Wales
Information on the exhibition *Extraordinary images of ordinary people: the photographs of August Sander from the J Paul Getty Museum* 17 November 2007 – 3 February 2008

Information on August Sander photographs in the collection

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

- J Paul Getty Museum
J Paul Getty Museum Education
www.getty.edu

A biography of the artist August Sander from the J Paul Getty Museum's collection
www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=1786

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- Sander's approach to photography in the 1910s was about 'seeing things as they are and not as they could or should be'. Consider this statement and discuss the role of photography as a tool for portraying the truth. Discuss the relationship between the artist, subject, image and the time it was created. How do these relationships shape the way we see this truth?
- Research the historical events that were taking place in Germany in the early 20th century. Suggest how Sander responded to these events and discuss the impact they had on his art. Specifically consider Sander's technical and compositional decisions. Debate whether his approach is unique to the time.
- Were Sander's images well received by the audience of the time? Research how different social classes responded to his portrayal of the human form. In what way can the audience of today bring meaning to Sander's images? How do specific histories, memories and experiences of different audiences affect the interpretation of an artwork?
- Discuss the modernist qualities portrayed in Sander's photographs. In what way has Sander's work influenced the development of modernist photography? Consider the technical and compositional qualities as well as his approach to portraying human identity.
- Sander had a fascination for physiognomy or the study of appearance to determine the character of a person. Choose a portrait by Sander from his body of work and discuss the significance of facial expression. How does the face encompass time and experience? Sander was also interested in classifications and typologies. Discuss how this approach enhanced the narratives he was trying to portray.
- Sander was trained as a pictorialist in the late 19th century. What does this mean? Research pictorialism and identify the characteristics found in Sander's images. Discuss how this has influenced his approach to photography in the 20th century. Evaluate the way Sander observed the world around him and his attention to technical and compositional detail.
- August Sander influenced many 20th-century and contemporary European and Australian artists such as Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Andreas Gursky and Anne Zahalka. Develop a case study on one of these artists and discuss the significance of Sander's approach to seeing the world around him on their own artmaking.

Acknowledgments

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