

# The August Sander Project: Beginning a Five-Year Exploration of Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century*

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Fig. 1

It always takes a while for art historians to describe German photographer August Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century*, which includes 619 pictures, is divided into 49 portfolios (for example, The Skilled Tradesman) that fit into seven groupings (The Skilled Tradesman is subdivided into five portfolios: The Master Craftsman; The Industrialist; The Worker—His Life and Work; Working Types—Physical and Intellectual; and The Technician and Inventor), and which took 62 years, from 1892 and 1954, to not-quite complete. That all makes Columbia University professor Noam Elcott's distillation of one stunning aspect of Sander's project into clarity all the more striking.

"No two individuals ever look alike," Elcott said, using long pauses between each word to emphasize the point. "Herein lies the most profound contradiction in Sander's work.... Each photograph is at once a portrait of an individual and an image of a type."

Elcott's observation, and the implied question it generates—How did Sander do that?!—kicked off the five-year August Sander Project, a collaboration between The Museum of Modern Art and Columbia University. The initiative is an engagement with MoMA's 2015 acquisition of a complete set of *People of the Twentieth Century*. Sander's

**Fig. 1** August Sander. *Young Farmers*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 x 7 3/8" (25.8 x 18.7 cm). Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2016 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY

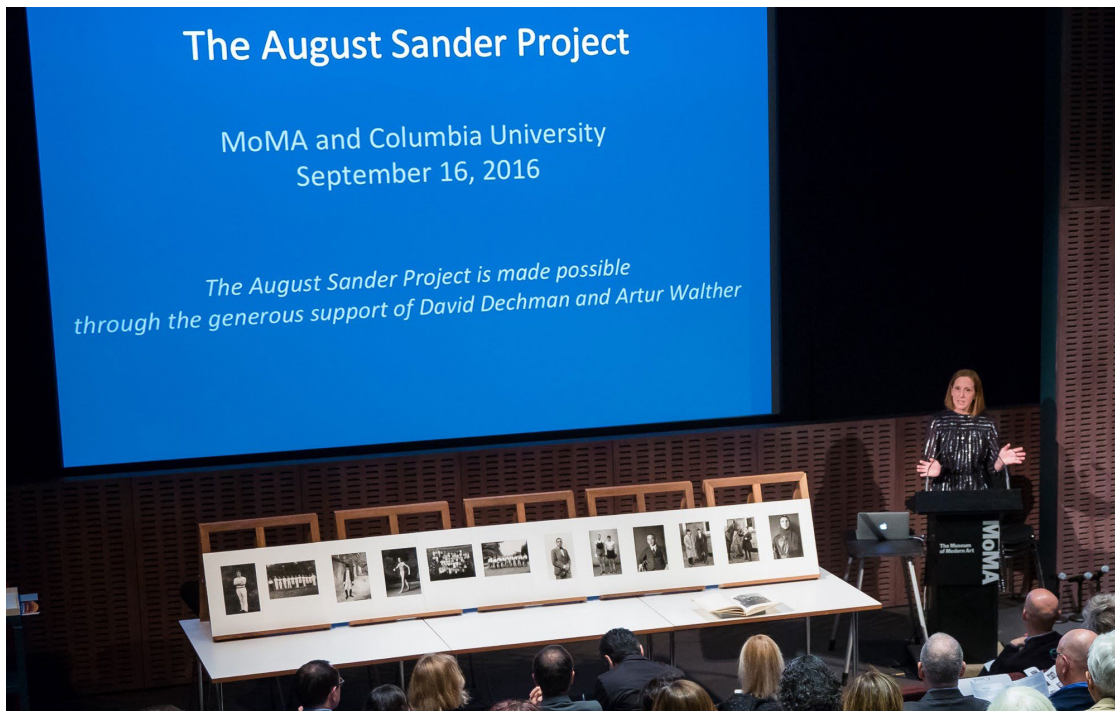


Fig. 2

project was intended to be a comprehensive presentation of German society. It is both one of the most ambitious projects in art history, and one of the most influential.

Over the course of five years, the August Sander Project will ultimately invite each of 49 scholars, critics, curators, historians, and artists to pick a single portfolio and make a presentation about it to a group of their peers. These presentations will take place in five annual, one-day symposiums. This prolonged examination may allow for a thorough consideration of the breadth and depth of Sander's project in a manner that will resist any certain geopolitical or art historical moment, an approach that nods toward Sander's own careful, 62-year exploration of his subjects. The first of the five events took place last month at MoMA.

While the nine symposium presenters did not know what Elcott would say in advance and were not trying to align their presentations with a central or unifying theme, each of them, whether artist or historian, whether British-American or French-Swiss, whether discussing circus folk or political prisoners, touched on Elcott's unifying contradiction: On one hand, each of Sander's sitters looks different from every other Sander sitter, but even so, each person in

Sander's project still reliably represents or stands in for a recognizable German societal type. The Banker in *Classes and Professions* looks respectable, solid, conservative, and confident. The Master Potter in *The Skilled Tradesman* looks like he's been sitting at his wheel for years, and so on. The question of how Sander achieved this seemingly paradoxical duality underlay a day's worth of discussion.

For example, artist Tina Barney selected Sander's *The Young Farmer* portfolio, a set of 21 pictures made between 1892 and roughly 1930. She spoke of Sander's selection of specific farmers as "casting," suggesting that no film director wants his leading man to look like his sidekick or his rival for the leading lady, and that film directors aren't shy about presenting actors as recognizable, often clichéd, types. As part of the same thought, Barney wondered, "How much direction did [Sander] give?"

Many symposium speakers found film-rooted metaphors irresistible, and mused on how strangely close to cinema Sander's procession of still images seems. MoMA curator Roxana Marcoci extended Barney's casting idea from looking for individuals for individual pictures, encouraging us to imagine Sander casting the entire, enormous series: "We tend to focus on these iconic pictures, the baker, the

Fig. 2 Sarah Hermanson Meister, curator in MoMA's Department of Photography, at the inaugural August Sander Project symposium, September 16, 2016. Photo: Scott Rudd

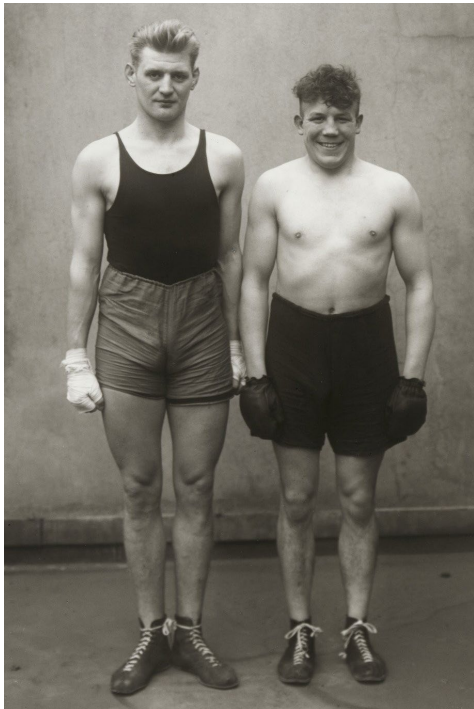


Fig. 3

bricklayer, the judge,” Marcoci said. “For me the interest in this project, and I think where we locate [the] intentionality of the project, is within the selection of this bigger compendium.”

Quentin Bajac, MoMA’s new chief curator of photography, offered up one of Sander’s funniest pictures, *Boxers* (1929). It shows a serious, blond, muscular young man posing next to a presumed sparring partner who is shorter, less fit—and grinning maniacally. Both are straight out of central casting: the über-fit boxer, the pudgy tomato can. “If we assume this is from a film, it is a comic one,” Bajac said, offering up Charlie Chaplin as a reference. (A few minutes later, an audience member pointed out the likeliest reason why the lesser pugilist is on the verge of having the last laugh: the blond boxer’s shoelaces are tied together. As soon as Sander is done making the picture and allows his two models to wander off, the greater athlete is going to fall flat on his face.)

Speakers also emphasized the extent to which Sander used traditional German culture—especially popular culture but also photography and painting—to point to familiar types with a few well-understood signifiers. By leaning on familiar signifiers for profession, activity, trade, or even

**Fig. 3** August Sander. *Boxers*. 1929. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 x 7 3/8" (25.8 x 18.7 cm). Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2016 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY

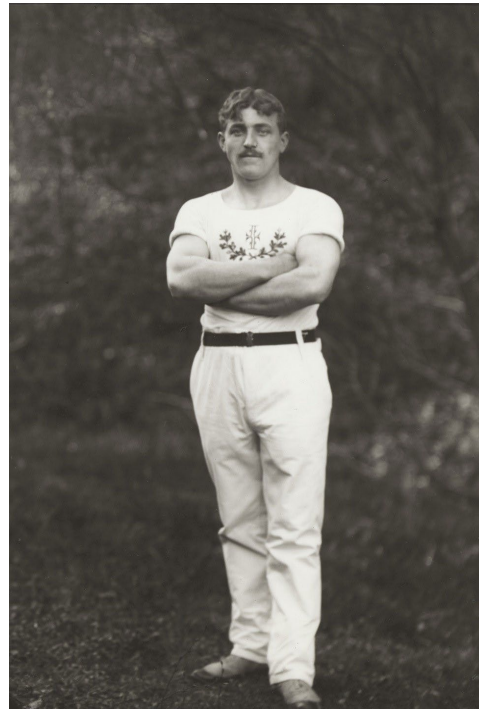


Fig. 4

class, Sander could be sure his audience would understand the role of the portrait-sitter, thus freeing him to focus on seeking out range and difference for the person who would stand in for a particular type. Take Sander’s portfolio of sportsmen, titled *Sport*. Bajac started his presentation with the first picture in *Sport*, a 1912 portrait of a gymnast clad in white pants and a white shirt, clothes that effectively formed the background against which the man’s hulking forearms flex toward the viewer. Bajac noted that Sander’s German audience would have immediately recognized that the man was dressed as a prototypical German gymnast of the previous century; his curly-mop-parted-down-the-center hairstyle and mustache were practically a facial uniform for members of 19th-century gymnastic clubs. When discussing Sander’s pictures of German sporting clubs, Bajac noted that they were close in style and approach to the voluminous archives of amateur pictures of community clubs. This freed Sander to cast a distinctive-looking chap as his gymnast.

While photography scholars often look for precedents and pictorial relationships only within their medium, speaker after speaker emphasized relationships between Sander’s pictures and painting. Many presenters argued that Sander’s tendency to refer to painting further contributed

**Fig. 4** August Sander. *Member of a Rural Gymnastics Club*. 1912. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 x 7 3/8" (25.8 x 18.7 cm). Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2016 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY





Fig. 5

to his audience's ability to understand types, again freeing Sander to focus on differentiation in individual sitters. When discussing the portfolio *The Worker—His Life and Work*, Elcott said that it would have been near impossible for Sander to have made a picture of blacksmiths, as he did in 1926, without thinking about centuries of paintings of Vulcan, including those by Vasari and Velasquez. Indeed, the pose of the figure on the left of Sander's *Blacksmiths* isn't far off from the left-most blacksmith in Velasquez's 1630 *Vulcan's Forge*, now at the Prado. (Elcott returned to photography to note that photographs had also trod near the furnace: Both Eadweard Muybridge and the duo of Etienne-Jules Marey and Charles Fremont made pictures of blacksmiths.) Marcoci found that Sander's 1924 portrait of Otto Dix, from the portfolio *The Painter* in the group *The Artist*, was a near-quotation from Dix's 1922 watercolor self-portrait (which happens to be in MoMA's collection). (Dix was fond enough of this profile view that he used it in a 1922 drypoint print, which is also at MoMA.) And Yale professor Carol Armstrong noted the similarity between the beggars in Sander's post-World War I pictures from *Types* and *Figures of the City* and similar figures in dozens of George Grosz paintings.

Difference having become apparent, near the end of the day's symposium several speakers zeroed in on the question of why establishing difference between sitters seemed to be so important to Sander—at least for most of the project's six-decade duration. University of Lausanne professor Olivier Lugon suggested there was a moment

during which Sander tried to walk back his emphasis on differentiation, at least in the *People who Came to My Door* portfolio, a notably atypical grouping of pictures. This set is exactly what it sounds like: portraits of people who knocked on Sander's door and who were then invited to pose for him. They include a bailiff, peddlers, beggars, and several disabled or unemployed workers. It is likely that all of them asked Sander for money. Lugon noticed that Sander didn't have the idea for this portfolio in 1925–27, when he put together the first draft of *People of the Twentieth Century*. The portfolio seems to have come into being around 1932, after the Nazis' rise to power was well underway.

"[It] could be seen as an attempt to soften the rigid categorization at the heart of the project and to develop more flexible forms of depiction of society in a time of extreme social instability," Lugon said. He noted that this portfolio, perhaps uniquely within the project, came about as the result of an unexpected encounter. "The series brought into Sander's project an element which for sure we don't spontaneously associate with him or any typological work: chance," Lugon said. "In fact the very idea of type and typology seems to repress any possibility of chance."

Maybe Sander's quest to find difference within typologies was important to him because it highlighted points of unity across the project's extraordinary duration—*People of the Twentieth Century* includes pictures in the age of the horse and buggy, as well as in the era of supersonic flight—while still honoring individuality.

**Fig. 5** From left: August Sander. *Blacksmiths*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 x 7 3/8" (25.8 x 18.7 cm). Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2016 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY; Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez. *La fragua de Vulcano (Vulcan's Forge)*. 1630. Oil on canvas, 223 x 290 cm. Museo del Prado

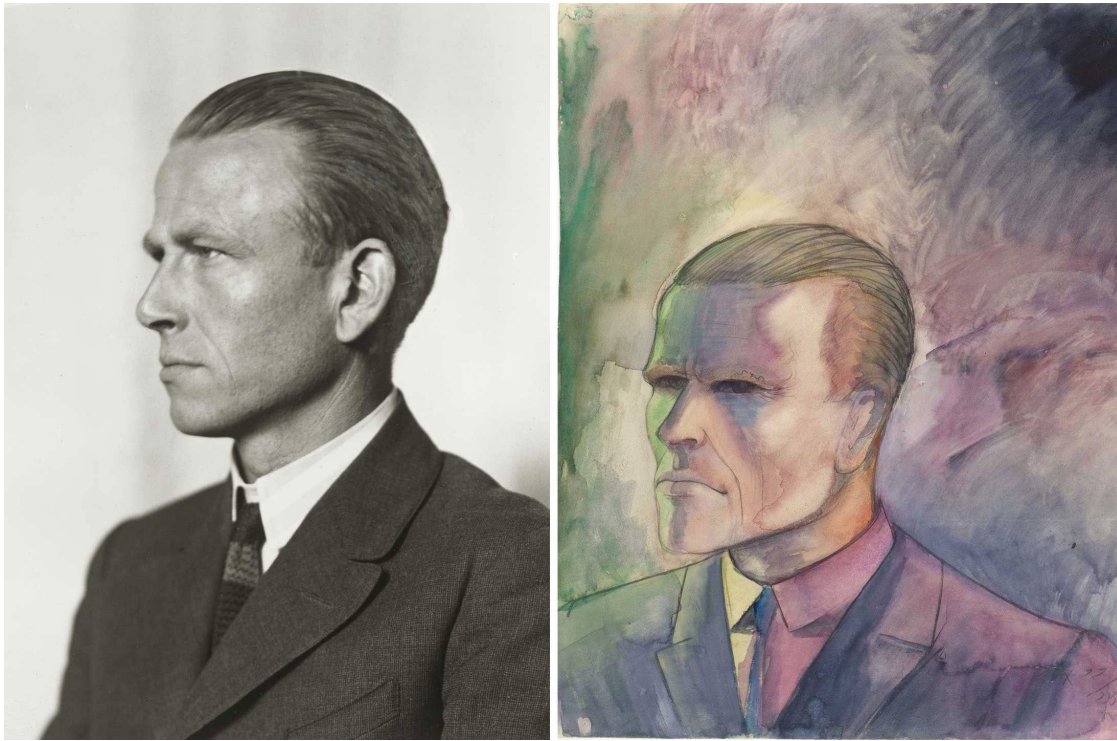


Fig. 6

“August knew Germany, he knew that structure. He used that toolkit.... The fashion, the colloquialisms, the details, all of these tiny little things, the mannerisms and their meaning inside the image were very rooted in German culture,” said August Sander’s great-grandson, gallery owner Julian Sander. “If you take the examples as words or sentences, he spoke German. In photography he spoke German.”

*Tyler Green is the author of a forthcoming book about 19th-century artist Carleton Watkins and his leading role in making the West a part of the United States. The book will be published by University of California Press. Green is also the producer and host of The Modern Art Notes Podcast, America’s most popular audio program on art.*

**Fig. 6** From left: August Sander. *Painter [Otto Dix]*. 1924. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 x 7 3/8" (25.8 x 18.7 cm). Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2016 Die Photographische Sammlung/ SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY; Otto Dix. *Self-Portrait (Selbstporträt)*. 1922. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 19 3/8 x 15 1/2" (49.2 x 39.3 cm). Gift of Richard L. Feigen. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn