



Herbert Molderings A Masterpiece for a friend – Franz Wilhelm Seiwert's "Wandbild für einen Fotografen"

Franz Wilhelm Seiwert was the "soul and spiritual epicentre" of the "Progressive Artists' Group" founded in Cologne in the early 1920s. Comprising painters and sculptors like Heinrich Hoerle, Gerd Arntz, August Tschinkel, Otto Freundlich and a dozen other, less well-known creative personalities were part of the group, whose aim was to revolutionize not just art but society itself in the wake of the social and political catastrophe of World War I. August Sander became this artistic circle's photographer in 1923/24 and went on to create portraits of all its members. Many of these portraits were later incorporated into Sander's seminal photographic collection "People of the 20th Century," which was conceived in a close exchange of ideas with Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, the group's leading intellectual.

Collectors of modern art were few and far between in the Rhineland region in those days, and still completely under the spell of Expressionism. They did not know what to make of the representational-constructivist painting style championed by the 'Progressives,' who in turn found it virtually impossible to find buyers for their works. In consequence, their paintings circulated almost exclusively from friend to friend on a barter basis. This presumably was also the case with "Wandbild für einen Fotografen" (Mural for a Photographer), which Seiwert painted for August Sander in 1925. The peculiar title alone raises questions, since the panel painting is certainly not a mural. It may well refer to the cherished hope of Seiwert and his friends that painting, in tandem with modern architecture, eventually would acquire entirely new functions, one of which would be mural painting. But since orders for the execution of actual murals were not forthcoming, using this term to describe their large-format paintings was the best they could do.

The 110 × 154.5 cm "Wandbild für einen Fotografen" from 1925 was the largest painting that Seiwert had created up to that time and it would remain one of the largest in his oeuvre. It was not August Sander himself whom Seiwert chose as the subject for this tribute to their friendship, but rather Sander's profession: photography. Inspired by the surface painting of synthetic Cubism, Seiwert had developed an original style that combined the Cubist technique of deconstructing forms with the clear and simplified formal language of the diagram. He had intuitively recognized what art critic John Berger would propose decades later as a sensational thesis: that the metaphorical model of Cubism is the diagram. Cubism made it possible for painting to depict processes instead of only static structures.

As if on a diagram, Seiwert distributes the essential devices and operations of the photographer across the surface of "Wandbild für einen Fotografen" as stylized symbols: The large-format studio camera standing on a massive mono-

pod with foldable leather bellows and chromed-brass lens; the model posing in front of the camera; a photo being taken; and the intermediate negative changing into a positive image on paper. A key benefit of a diagram is that it allows hidden structures and processes that cannot be shown directly to be made visible in symbolic form. In the case of photography, these are the optical radiation processes that give rise to a photo image. Seiwert takes certain liberties in depicting these processes. Thus, the light rays that create the image of an entire figure emanate exclusively from the model's head, and they do not cross at lens level, as the rules of photographic optics would dictate, and instead at the navel of the smaller of the two figures who seem to watch the photographer's work from the side. Consequently, the projected image is created not on the camera's internal image plane but instead on the circular opening of the camera's lens, which has been turned forward into the painting's surface. And in it, the figure we see is not upside down – as the principles of photography would lead us to expect – but upright.

Seiwert's symbolic representation of photographic ray optics is not strictly accurate, then; instead, it serves as a sort of hieroglyphic illustration of the essence of the photographic process while at the same time aligning itself with the image's own structural logic. It is within the confines of the camera housing that the upside-down image of the posing model projected is projected onto the negative plate on the camera's back wall and thus, it remains invisible to the viewer. The end result of the photographic process appears as a horizontal black rectangle at the bottom of the painting: An enlarged positive print, with its characteristic inversion of tonal values, of the negative shown at the top right.

The pictogram-like figures look extremely statuesque and, since they have no eyes, they lack the very physiognomic features that give faces temperament and spiritual depth. Yet the painting still manages to exude a highly life-like quality. This is thanks in part to the artist's sensitive use of a bright colour palette with strikingly contrasting pairings: orange/blue, green/red and yellow/violet. But the effect is also achieved because this painted "diagram" is actually about the act of seeing per se. And this concerns more than what is being depicted. The viewers seeking to decipher the objective functional relationships in the image enjoy a unique experience that only a masterpiece will enable: They are observing the act of seeing itself.

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1894 – Cologne – 1933

“Wandbild für einen Fotografen”. 1925

Oil on canvas. 109.5 × 154.5 cm (43 1/8 × 60 7/8 in.).
Monogrammed and dated upper right: FWS 25.
Catalogue raisonné: Bohnen 70.

Provenance

August Sander, Cologne (thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 400,000–600,000

USD 476,000–714,000

Exhibition

Hoerle und sein Kreis. Frechen, Kunstverein, 1970/71, cat. no. 235, ill. / Vom Dadamax bis zum Grüngürtel. Köln in den zwanziger Jahren. Cologne, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1975, ill. p. 93 / Gottfried Brockmann. Bild und Überzeitlichkeit. Kiel, Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof and Berlin, Haus am Waldsee, 1995, cat. no. 174, ill. / Contemporaries. August Sander and the art scene of the 1920s in the Rhineland. Cologne, Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle, and Kiel, Kunsthalle, 2000, cat. no. 510, ill. p. 133 / köln progressiv 1920–33. seiwert.hoerle-arnzt. Cologne, Museum Ludwig, 2008, without no., ill. p. 28 / Los progresistas de Colonia. August Sander y su círculo de amigos. 1920–1933. Valladolid, Museo de Pasión, Sala Municipal de Exposiciones, 2012/13, ill. p. 66

Literature and illustration

Carl Oskar Jatho: Franz Wilhelm Seiwert. Recklinghausen, Verlag Aurel Bongers, 1964, ill. p. 50 (photography, circa 1930) / H.U. Bohnen: Das Gesetz der Welt ist die Änderung der Welt. Die rheinische Gruppe progressiver Künstler (1918–1933). Karin Kramer Verlag, Berlin 1976, ill. p. 148 / f.w. seiwert gemälde grafik schriften. published by gerd arntz and augustin tschinkel. The Hague, edition bo, 1976 [=reprint of the original edition, Prague 1934], ill. p. 17 / Uli Bohnen, Dirk Backes: Der Schritt, der einmal getan wurde, wird nicht zurückgenommen. Franz W. Seiwert – Schriften. Berlin, Karin Kramer Verlag, 1978, ill. p. 18

A loan request has been placed for the exhibition “August Sander et la Nouvelle Objectivité” at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (11.5.22 – 5.9.22) and at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek (13.10.22 – 19.2.23).

