

# Bernd Stiegler August Sander – the Collector and Historian

In his capacity as a photographer, August Sander undoubtedly was also a collector. This applies not just to his large-scale portfolio album "People of the 20th Century" but also to his landscapes and the photographs he took in Cologne. They consistently are organized in serial fashion and beg to be viewed comparatively. That they were intended to be studied in this way was implicitly understood from the beginning.

Walter Benjamin, for example, described the "physiognomic gallery" contained in the book *"Antlitz der Zeit"* (Face of Our Time) as a veritable "atlas of exercises," programmatically speaking, while Alfred Döblin called it "a kind of cultural history – or better yet, sociology – of the last thirty years."

But besides systematically collecting images as a diagnostic record, understood as a "cultural project in photographs" that was to capture and give order to the present epoch in all its complexity, August Sander also collected artworks. The "Sander Collection" supplements his photographic oeuvre while providing an explanatory backdrop. Here, we not only repeatedly encounter the creative personalities depicted in the portfolio album's "Artists" group – we are also confronted with some of the same themes, albeit addressed in a different way. That Sander had in mind a dialogue between the visual arts and photography is evidenced by the way he designed the corresponding portfolio folder, which takes up an unusually large amount of space and figures prominently within the overall set. Anna Sander sewed the cover for this folder together from bits of coloured cloth using a pastel painting by Otto Freundlich as a model. While the folder remains in the August Sander Archive of Photographische Sammlung / SK Stiftung-Kultur, the pastel is now part of the collection of the Sander family (Lot 600).

Having received a copy of *"Antlitz der Zeit"* from Sander, Freundlich thanked him in a letter in which he also raised a key topic that was being broadly debated during the era of the Weimar Republic: The classification of individual people into "types."

"For it is precisely this feeling," Freundlich wrote, "that one gets so strongly from these pictures, behind which the author retreats entirely: that they take every type seriously, either in a positive or negative sense or both at the same time. After all, there is no face left these days in which the old and the new do not clash with one another." The

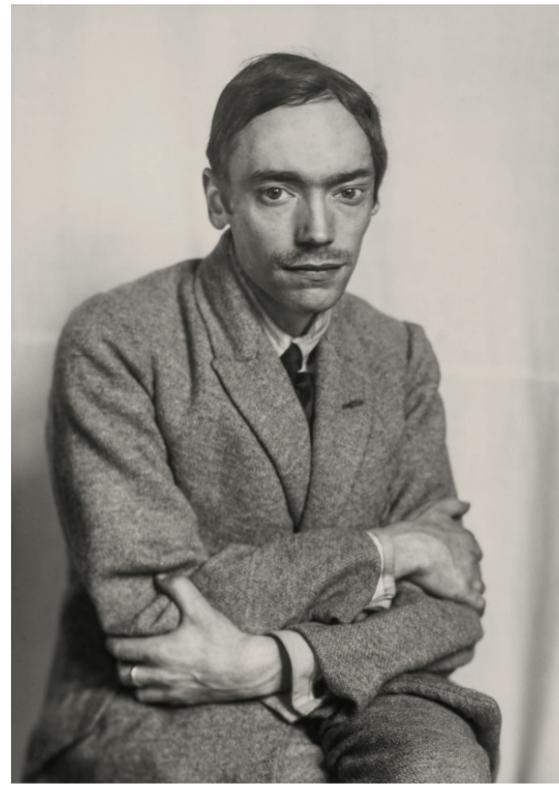
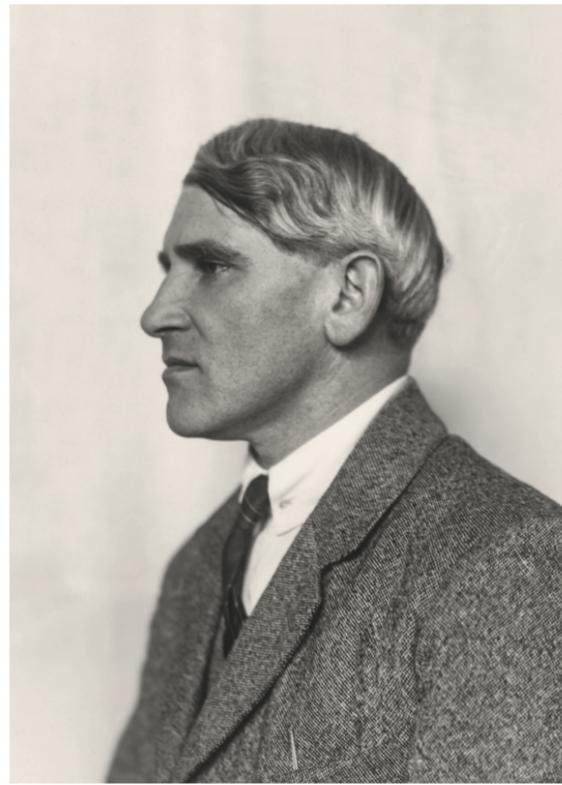


August Sander: Photograph [August Sander], 1925

"type" was one of the theoretical, aesthetic, and ideological battlefields of the period, one that both sides of the political spectrum tried to exploit for their own ends. Old versus new, Left versus Right, historicism versus supratemporal interpretation – these were just some of the dichotomies that collided here. That Sander tended to see the matter with a certain ambivalence – which is still discussed today – is alluded to by Otto Freundlich, who for his part saw in art a cross-cultural language that could promote the idea of a collective community.

Like Franz W. Seiwert, Heinrich Hoerle, Gerd Arntz, Gottfried Brockmann, and others, Otto Freundlich belonged to the group of progressive artists in Cologne known as the *"Kölner Progressive,"* an artistic circle whose members all prominently figured in Sander's portfolio album as well as in his personal art collection. Sander, too, was part of the group – as an artist, he noted proudly. That members of the circle figure so prominently among the artists depicted in the portfolio album certainly has to do with the fact that they were personal friends of Sander's. But it also signals their importance to his ambitious photo project. It bears noting that Sander's encounter with Franz Seiwert in the 1920s marked the end of his pictorialist phase and paved the way for his magnum opus "People of the 20th Century." Instead of the flexographic, fine-art printing process, he would now use normal, store-bought paper for his shots of objects, which he also employed to reproduce some of his older negatives. Having already begun collecting images prior to this, he began scouring his archive for motifs that might be suitable for his new concept.

Influenced by the ideas of the Cologne Progressives, Sander went about reorganizing his photographic world, and with it, the world around him. His re-arrangement of the images also aimed at reordering the world as a whole. After all, the act of "collecting" also implies, at least in the higher sense of the term, the compilation of individual pictures so as to present an idea, a context, a vision. And this is what ultimately makes the "Sander Collection" so noteworthy: It gives us a fresh vantage point for understanding the programmatic mission that Sander defined for his portfolio album, namely the creation of a "visual record of our times" by means of "seeing, observing, and thinking." But whereas Seiwert and his fellow Cologne Progressives expressed the idea of standard human "types" in the form of the new, technologically and collectively oriented man of the present and future, Sander collected hundreds of portrait shots to create what he called a "physiognomic visual record of the German people," divided into "seven groups corresponding to the existing social order." Thus, Sander's compendium of images was specifically linked to the present and reflected his personal concept of the social order as he encountered it. The "Sander Collection," on the other hand, represents visions of other orders, while also elucidating the ideological background against which Sander conceived his great photographic project.



Artists featured in the Sander Collection: Jankel Adler, Otto Freundlich, Franz W. Seiwert, Heinrich Hoerle, Gerd Arntz, Hans Schmitz, Gottfried Brockmann, Marta Hegemann (from left to right)  
Photographs: August Sander Archiv der Photographischen Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Köln.