AUGUST SANDER

is important and this is why...

Self-portrait, 1928.

He was an undoubted influence on Arbus, Penn and Avedon, the inspiration for many Düsseldorf School portraitists today and a scourge of the Nazis. Here, Robin Gillanders takes a backward look at the iconic German photographer whose influence is still strong nearly a century after he created his most important works.

{ICON}

Bricklayer, 1928.

{ICON}

"I hate nothing more than sugary photographs with tricks, poses and effects." August Sander

A few weeks ago I attended the opening of an exhibition of photographs by the German photographer August Sander at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. Besides the usual artists, academics, gallerists and glitterati who attend these events, I met two friends, both highly respected professional photographers, there to pay enthusiastic homage to this remarkable man whose most important work began a century ago; but who is August Sander, why should we be interested in him and what relevance does he have to us today?

Political Prisoner, 1943.

Soldier, c 1940.

Sander's origins were humble. He was born in 1876 and his father was a carpenter working in the mining industry. There was no private wealth in the Sander family. Leaving school at 14, August worked at a local mining waste tip, where he became enthralled by a photographer working at the mine. Sander's future direction and career were established and he spent his two years of military service, from 1897 to 1899, working as a photographer's assistant and doing various other photographic jobs. He was then employed to run a general commercial studio in Austria and then, in 1909, a studio in Cologne, Germany, specialising in portraiture. So far then, nothing unusual and perhaps even today, many reading this will identify with Sander's rather unremarkable early career progression.

He was, however, an extraordinary man. Although having relatively little formal education, Sander immersed himself in literature and art, and quickly made friends and contacts within the cultural scene of Cologne, occasionally exhibiting his work in international salons (small group exhibitions) and winning numerous prizes. But it was while engaged in the day-to-day activities of his studio that, in around 1911, he began to plan a major project that was to become his life's work.

Many professional photographers like to set themselves personal projects. For some, photography is in the blood – it's a lifestyle and not just a career – and to produce work only to the requirements of clients, editors or art directors has the potential to be enervating. However, no photographer had conceived a project of the scale and scope of Sander's. His plan was to document, catalogue and photograph the entire German population by type and trade. This he would do by dividing his immense project into seven distinct sections: The Farmer, The Skilled Tradesman, The Woman, Classes and Professions, The Artists, The City, and The Last People (which was to represent those on the fringes of society: the blind, disadvantaged, homeless and destitute). Sander photographed professionals, middle-class families, farmers, students, war veterans, circus artists, beggars... and Nazis. This astonishing project was entitled *People of the Twentieth Century* and would result in more than 600 photographs. It was never completely finished, nor were all the pictures published in his lifetime.

In each photograph Sander had his subjects simply look into the lens of his plate camera. He allowed his subjects to 'speak' for themselves, with quiet dignity. He didn't impose an opinion, and in this respect, his work may be termed 'objective'; everybody, whether aristocrat or beggar, was accorded the same respect. He neither elevated his subjects, as Yousuf Karsh did in the 1950s, nor did he denigrate them as Martin Parr sometimes appeared to do in the 1980s and 1990s. When his photographs were first displayed at the Cologne Art Union in 1927, he said this: "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."

Sander's work had no sponsors; he had to endure the privations of recession during the 1920s and extreme hostility from the Nazis. They destroyed the printing plates of his book *Face of Our Time*, published in 1929, and which comprised 60 photographs from what was to be the final project, because they felt his 'objective' approach did not represent the German people as the master race that the Nazis were trying to promote.

Today, much is made of Sander's 'objective' approach. His magnum opus was a typology according to the original meaning of the word – in that it is a process of cataloguing 'types'. Sometimes we are told the name of his subject and other times merely their societal position: secretary, coal heaver etc, so they are depersonalised. However, it could not be termed a 'photographic typology' in the sense that we have come to understand the term from the more recent Düsseldorf School. This began with Bernd and Hilla Becher cataloguing gasometers, winding engines and so on, and

Pastrycook, 1928.

"By means of seeing, observing and thinking... we can capture world history... by means of the expressive potential of photography." August Sander

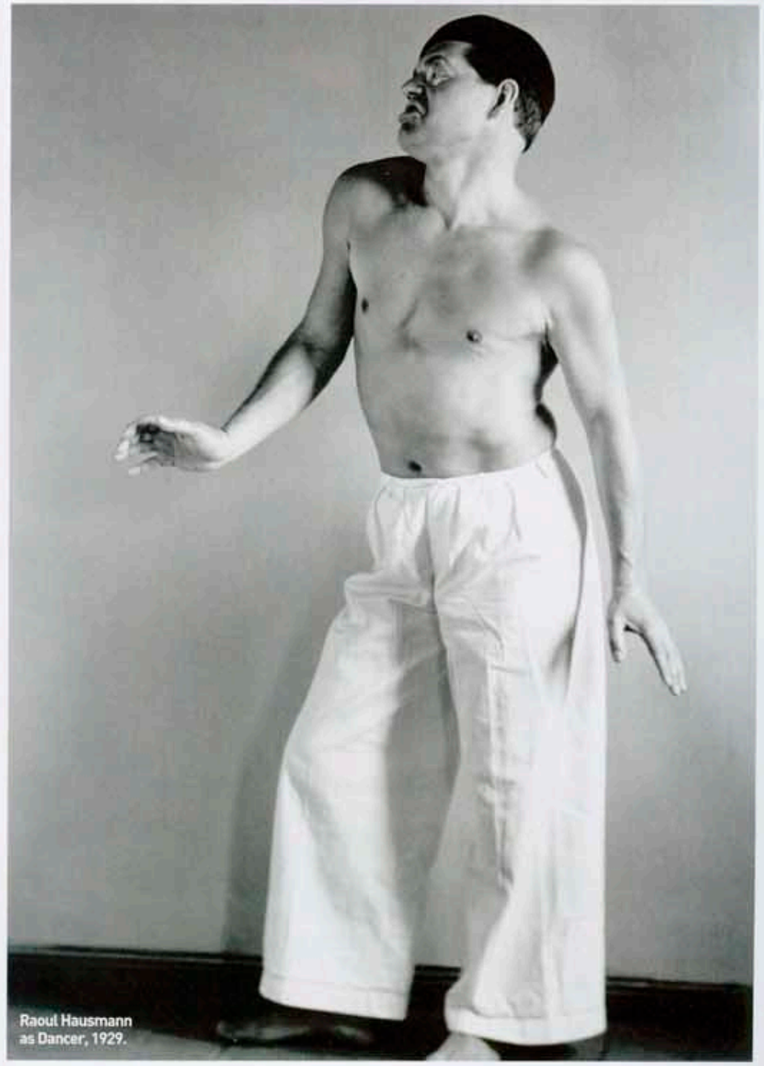
Farm Children, c 1913.

was extended to portraiture by artists including Thomas Ruff and Rineke Dijkstra, whose postmodern, deadpan, anaesthetic head studies have had a remarkably enduring influence on artist photographers today.

In many cases, Sander's subjects are placed serially against similar plain backgrounds and these images seem coldly dispassionate; however, a considerable proportion of his work demonstrates a subtlety and sophistication of picture-making, and a finely tuned humanist sensitivity.

In public conversation with Keith Hartley, chief curator at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Sander's grandson Gerd commented: "It's not about photography, it's about the idea... and Sander's work is not about making beautiful photographs, it's about documenting an idea. And stylistically if anyone influenced him it was Rembrandt for the lighting." In other words, and as Keith Hartley pointed out, the implication is that Sander's was one of the first conceptual photographic works. And yet the visual evidence of the work itself does not suggest this. Aren't all projects initially the result of an idea – a concept? Having said that, Sander rejected pictorialist 'fuzzygraphs' and championed 'straight' photography, much as Paul Strand did in the USA in the 1920s. As Sander said himself: "I hate nothing more than sugary photographs with tricks, poses and effects."

Sander worked with 5x4 and 5x7 cameras and most of his images were made on location rather than in the studio. Generally he made only one or two exposures of each subject – perhaps understandable given the weight of the glass plates that he used. So why is it that despite huge advances in technology over the past century, the standard of picture making has not necessarily improved? It is so much easier to produce technically proficient images – anybody can do it now to a certain standard – and yet we still look in awe at the intensity, intelligence, vision and beauty of some of these early photographers. It's logistically much easier to take pictures, but... Here's Sander again in a radio lecture in 1931: "One can snap a shot or take a photograph; to 'snap a shot' means reckoning with chance, and to 'take a photograph' means working with contemplation – that is to comprehend something, or to bring an idea from a complex to a consummate composition... By means of seeing, observing and thinking... we can capture world history... by means of the expressive potential of photography." What would Sander think now, 47 years after his death, of the huge impact of digital, where it is possible to take hundreds of images of one subject with the possibility that without serious prior 'contemplation' none of them will be any good? Surely it is better to take one image



Raoul Hausmann as Dancer, 1929.

Girl in a Fairground Caravan, 1926–1932.

"It's not about photography, it's about the idea... and Sander's work is not about making beautiful photographs, it's about documenting an idea." Gerd Sander

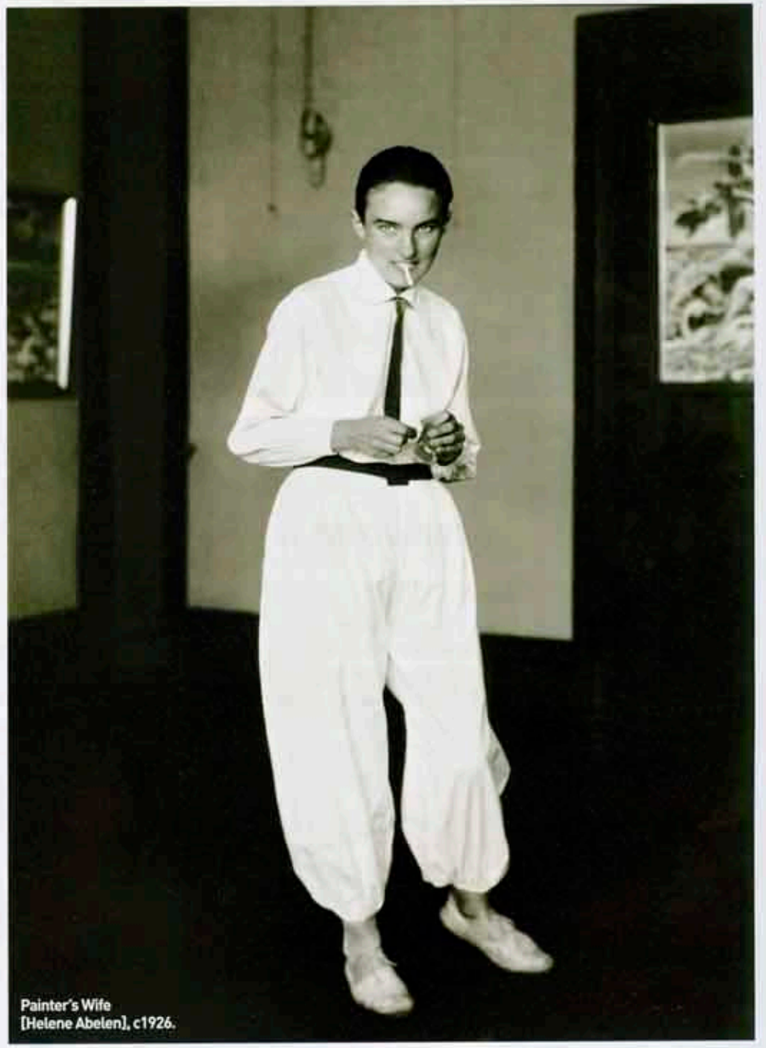
as a result of "seeing, observing and thinking" than a hundred without.

Sander had an immense influence on most of the major portrait photographers of the last century, especially photographers such as Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus. Each of them worked commercially while following Sander's example and engaged in 'personal projects' – for example, Penn's *Small Trades*, Avedon's *In the American West* and Arbus's portraits of people on the margins of society. None of these projects, however, had the scale and ambition of Sander's.

Avedon for example, must have been aware of – and been influenced by – Sander's portrait of *Bricklayer*, especially since it was one of several of his pictures selected by Edward Steichen for the New York City Museum of Modern Art's seminal, blockbuster show *The Family of Man* in 1955. A portrait of dignity and strength, not least because one can only imagine the weight of those bricks as the bricklayer waited, apparently effortlessly with hand casually on hip (so essential for the composition), while Sander composed, focused and exposed.

And what about the portrait of *Girl in a Fairground Caravan*? If it wasn't for the precision of the crop and composition, it could be an Arbus. Most of Sander's subjects appear to have an air of melancholy – and tension – as if they are presaging or reflecting on the tragedy of the German people in that period. The conscious positioning of the girl's hand on the key in the lock looks at first glance as if she is bleeding on to the door...

If Avedon and Arbus, among many, were influenced by Sander, in turn each of these influenced countless later generations of photographers. Some, like my two friends at the Sander exhibition opening, drew their inspiration directly from the instigator of it all.



Painter's Wife [Helene Abelen], c1926.

***August Sander: People of the Twentieth Century* is at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, until 10 July 2011; admission free. www.nationalgalleries.org**

To read our feature on the Düsseldorf School from the October issue go to the magazine section on www.professionalphotographer.co.uk

FOR THE LATEST PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITIONS VISIT WWW.PROFESSIONALPHOTOGRAPHER.CO.UK