August Sander (Herdorf, 1876 – Cologne, 1964) occupies an absolutely exemplary position in the history of photography. In addition, his most extensive project, *People of the 20th Century*, reflects the types of occupations in Germany between the Weimar Republic and the 1950s.

23.03 – 23.06.2019
Held in collaboration with the August Sander Archiv belonging to Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne, *Photographs from “People of the 20th Century”* constitutes the most comprehensive exhibition ever staged in Spain on August Sander’s project of the same name.

In addition to the 187 photographs organised following Sander’s own typological concept, a group of motifs of the series “Studies – The Human Being” is included, that has rarely been presented in the international museum’s context until today. These pictures are dedicated to details of some of his models’ gestures, looks and postures and especially to hands.

The exhibition, that shows high quality modern prints on the base of the original gelatin silver negative glass plates, is completed with a documentary section showing handwritten letters from the photographer, the portfolios made at the time for some sections and a variety of bibliographical material.

August Sander (Herdorf, 1876 – Cologne, 1964) occupies an absolutely tutelary position in the history of photography. From Walter Benjamin to Susan Sontag, from Roland Barthes to John Berger, a significant part of the great narrators of images measured their theoretical apparatus before Sander’s unsentimental—and therefore politically incisive—photographs with estimation.

*Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* [People of the 20th Century] is his most legendary project, a huge archive of professional and typological portraits that reflects the productive fabric of German society from the 1910s to the mid 1950s, between the Weimar Republic and the downfall of Nazism after the Second World War.
Although tightly interwoven with a very specific geopolitical era and context, August Sander’s portraits ask to be read from a broader perspective. In some way, and for many people who interpreted or observed them over the past century, they constitute something comparable to a panoptic view on the human condition, a record of the vicissitudes, mentalities and modes of social organisation in farming life and the modern metropolis.

According to Gabriele Conrath-Scholl, one of the leading international specialists on the photographer’s work and also director of Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne, the institution that stores, administers and conducts research into his legacy, Sander introduced a tremendously important paradigm to free documentary photography as a medium of artistic expression: as opposed to the individualised or “unique” image—in the fetishistic meaning of the word—he shifted the focus of attention towards a body of photographic work with complex derivations and many vanishing points.

This change of attitude not only cleared the path for project methodology in the field of photography, it also allowed another type of gaze that positioned the portrait outside the closed circuit between photographer and photographed, adding or “giving voice” to hitherto imperceptible aspects from both the perspective of realism and images aiming for a psychological exegesis.

Therefore, around 1930, when, as Olivier Lugon points out, “documentary photography acquires many labels and begins to qualify, embryonically, a genre that is defined in opposition to New Vision and New Objectivity”, Sander appears as a perfect example against Mannerist exaggeration, while his book Antlitz der Zeit [Face of Our Time], then newly published by Munich-based publishing houses Kurt Wolff/Transmare in 1929, led to passionate critical acclaim as regards the photographer’s ability to document the essence of the era from a commendable “accuracy”.

The “Sander style”, in other words, that combination of incisiveness and impartiality, distancing and capturing detail, certainly acquires its maximum value if it follows a proposal of such encyclopaedic scope as Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts [People of the 20th Century], by opposing the “concept” that Sander developed in order to address all social and professional segments, without excluding any of these—although neither did he opt for any in particular—enumerating the groups, subdivisions and portfolios that would comprise this portrait of portraits, this great atlas of Germany at the time, in long lists that he personally created in the mid-1920s.

It is even more astonishing to observe how he re-evaluated his own commercial work as a portrait photographer of farming families in Westerwald in the 1910s and returned to frontal portraits of the inhabitants of the world of farming, many of which were taken outside. This was a further development of his work, that he had previously already realized in Linz at the beginning of the last century. He avoided the notion of novelty, which had perhaps been overused by the most orthodox avant-garde movements, understanding that the power of People of the 20th Century did not reside in establishing ontological discriminations between utilitarian images and art photographs, but that, beyond these labels, it was the overall project that could produce shifts between one reception or another.

Although earlier, at the beginning of the 1920s, Sander joined the Cologne Progressive Artists Group, comprising much younger Marxist artists who advocated a rejection of emotion and the rhetoric of the self in pursuit of a production that was free from any hint of expressiveness. With them he confirmed his support of their programme of formal neutrality, compositional clarity and expounding the reflection of social structures.

In this way, Sander approaches the conceptual architecture of People of the 20th Century with all this critical baggage, as if he were an archivist or entomologist, and he completes an
initial classification by categories between 1925 and 1927 that will form the basis of his later work.

Shortly afterwards, in 1927, he presents his project to the public for the first time, exhibited at the Kunstverein in Cologne as part of a show organised by the city’s circle of avant-garde artists. Sander displays a hundred or so photographs there that are enthusiastically received, albeit within an essentially local context. But it was two years later, at the end of 1929, with the publication of *Face of Our Time*, including a foreword by the novelist Alfred Döblin, that his work would become truly acclaimed.

Immediately prior to this, in November 1929, he took part in the exhibition *Fotografie der Gegenwart* [Contemporary Photography] in Magdeburg and six months later he was invited to the exhibition *Das Lichtbild* [Photography] in Munich, thereby confirming his distancing from avant-garde experiments and rediscovery of the pioneers of the medium and preponderance of scientific photography. He also took part in the international exhibition of socialist art at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1930, as well as an exhibition of professional photographers in Cologne at the city’s Museum of Applied Arts. From the small catalogue to the latter event we know of one exhibit in detail. It shows freezing hands over a stove. A picture, which can be read as an indication, that beside his portraits he was already dedicated to fragments of bodies as motifs for a separated project, generated from *People of the 20th Century*. Moreover at that time Sander developed his portfolio “Rhine and Siebengebirge”, that reflects his long-term experiences in landscape photography. Thereby refuting the idea so common among later historiography that his interest in landscape developed during the years of the Third Reich as a kind of self-exile or confinement in typically national romantic iconographies.³

The attention given to *People of the 20th Century* by intellectuals and writers increases from this brief period of intense public activity, as the project grows according to the outlined plan. In 1931, Walter Benjamin dedicates words of praise to him in his famous *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*.

³ See Olivier Lugon as regards this list of exhibitions, *op. cit.* p. 404.
Painter [Anton Räderscheidt], 1926

Woodcutter, 1931
[A Short History of Photography]. In the same year, Sander also gave a series of lectures for the German radio station WDR entitled “The Essence and Development of Photography”. Its fifth instalment is significant, for in it he promotes the value of a physiognomy of the acquired as a channel for deploying the medium of photography. It could be said that Sander echoes the renewed attention that this “science” attracted in Germany in the 1920s. However, as opposed to interpretations of a totalitarian, criminological or racial bent, left oriented authors such as Walter Benjamin, Raoul Hausmann or Franz Seiwert—the latter two appearing in various portraits by Sander—had also claimed that facial expressions and attitudes are the result of a biographical, ideological journey, not the product of a previously written, unalterable destiny.

In 1933, the Nazi Party assumes power in Germany. A year later, the photographer’s son, Erich Sander, is imprisoned for his political activism against this regime. He will remain in prison until 1944, when he dies after falling gravely ill through a lack of care and denial of assistance. In 1936, the National Socialists confiscate any existing copies of the book Face of Our Time and also destroy the original printing plates.

Political and personal circumstances do not interrupt Sander’s plan for People of the 20th Century. On the contrary, he reacts by taking many portraits of Nazis in which they appear almost obscenely displaying their authority. He similarly takes various photographs of radio workers, a medium that was the main propaganda channel of the Third Reich at the time.

Around 1942, Sander is forced to leave Cologne because of relentless bombardment, moving with his wife to Kuchhausen, in Westerwald, and taking with him some eleven thousand negatives. However, in 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War, a fire in his provisional storage cellar in Cologne destroys between twenty and thirty thousand negatives, in addition to some original documents and copies.

Now in his seventies, he continues to work on People of the 20th Century using the material he has saved. He conceives the portfolio “The Persecuted”, dedicated to the Jews, and that of “Foreign Workers”, which alongside the later “Political Prisoners”, he includes in the group The City. All the portraits of
inmates are the work of his son, who is forced to conduct documentation tasks in prison given that he was a professional photographer. Erich secretly manages to send these snapshots to his parents, as well as others on the subhuman conditions in the prison or nearby concentration camps.4

He repeatedly returns to his previous work during the long postwar period. In 1962, he publishes Mirror of Germans [Deutschenspiegel], which again includes eighty photographs from People of the 20th Century, although on this occasion the sequence of images is not exactly in line with what the photographer has conceived.

When August Sander dies, he leaves behind a legacy of 1,800 negatives that, according to Conrath-Scholl and Lange, “was intended for People of the 20th Century, in addition to a large number of portfolios bound in cloth, more than twenty of which are still preserved and can be identified with the original concept”.5

The oldest portrait of People of the 20th Century dates back to 1892 and is entitled Hikers on the Hohenseelbachskopf [Wanderer am Hohenseelbachskopf]. It shows a young couple posing quite stiffly for the camera in front of a cavernous mound with steep walls. The woman is smiling as she bends her hand, perhaps a gesture betraying nervousness. The man is leaning on a country hiker’s cane, his left arm akimbo. The most contemporary photograph is a portrait dated 1954 of Robert Görlinger, the mayor of Cologne, as he slightly sarcastically looks towards the camera in half profile while holding a lit cigarette.

More than six decades separate both portraits, two World Wars, the romantic myth of the village as opposed to the reconstruction of industrial metropolises. A young couple seeking the cleanest air and a politician smoking, the latter paradoxically dying a few weeks after Sander photographed him.

Despite the soundness of his concept, People of the 20th Century does not provide a strict image of German society. On the contrary, it is a seismograph of evolutionary movements, regressions and the rifts produced in both the public sphere and individual behaviour.

The canonisation of August Sander’s work came perhaps too late. It occurred from the perspective of other photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, through a critical analysis of historians of photography, through exhibitions and based on a patrimonial study of his legacy. The dissemination of Sander was implemented by writers and narrators of images who, from Kurt Tucholsky to John Berger, from Susan Sontag to Adam Kirsch, read his photographs in a perhaps freer or more literary manner. The influence of Sander’s tenets is evident on certain contemporary photographic conceptions and documentaries.

The career of August Sander is also, or above all, marked by aesthetically, theoretically and morally adapting to a politically terrible period, to biographical circumstances with many dark areas. Confronting, exploring and incorporating all this is perhaps the greatest challenge to which People of the 20th Century bears witness, a guarantee that it will continue to fascinate future viewers no matter the historical situation.

About the choice of photographs
According to the latest revised and reorganised version by Die Photographische Sammlung(SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne in 2002, led by Susanne Lange, Gabriele Conrath-Scholl and Gerd Sander,6 People of the 20th Century comprises 619 photographs arranged in 7 groups and 45 portfolios.7

On the basis of distribution by gender, there are 899 men and 552 women portrayed, in addition to 10 babies, whose young age makes it impossible to determine their sex.

5 Gabriele Conrath-Scholl and Susanne Lange: op. cit. p. 29.

7 The portfolios are numbered from 1 to 45, but number 23 is followed by 23a, while 44 is followed by 44a and 44b. The project also begins with an unnumbered portfolio entitled “The Archetypes”.

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There is a total of 1,461 people portrayed in *People of the 20th Century* and 60% of these are men, 40% are women. This relative parity is perhaps surprising considering that all but three of the photographs (group III/15/10, group IV/22/2, group V/31/11) were taken before the end of the Second World War and there are more men than women in most of the images. This initial impression is offset by group III, dedicated to *The Woman*. It includes 72 photographs portraying 93 women and 72 men accompanying “their women”. It is the only group featuring a majority of women (71%), although it also has the most children: 36 (6 babies, 20 children and 10 adult children). Of the five sections that make up the group, three of these, “Woman and Man”, “Woman and Child” and “The Family”, are portraits of accompanied women, in other words, the group shifts the role of woman towards that of partner, wife and mother. The other two sections, “The Elegant Woman” and “The Woman in Intellectual and Practical Occupation”, make up the largest group of photographs in which women are portrayed alone as independent figures: 34. The largest presence of women in the remaining groups can be found in *The Farmer* (35%), followed by *The City* (30%).

Bearing in mind that the bulk of the photographs were taken in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, a period during which greater industrialisation was destroying the old agricultural order, *People of the 20th Century* reflects this change in traditional crafts and trades, as well as the rise of liberal professions and artists. Therefore, while in group II, dedicated to *The Skilled Tradesman*, there is no explicit distinction between social class and craft—a potter, miller, farm labourer, blacksmith or small workshop owner all belong to the same proletariat—group IV, *Classes and Professions*, defines and delves into the liberal occupations promoted by industrial society—attorney, judge, doctor, pharmacist, etc.—as well as into the social classes not pertaining to this same idea of craft: aristocrats, clergymen, soldiers and officials. In some way, Sander places the representatives of old classes next to new professionals, indicating that something different is emerging and that there is also something of the outdated old world floating in society.

This transformation can also be seen by looking at the women. The presence of the female figure in *The Skilled Tradesman* is 9% of those portrayed, but in the group on *Classes and Professions*, the appearance of women rises to 19%. It is surprising that in the photographs dedicated to artists, who because of their aesthetics and attitude are the most provocative sector in *People of the 20th Century*, women only occupy 11% of the portraits: 14 of 131. Similarly, there are only four photographs in which women appear alone: a luthier and three film actresses, in the remaining ten they are accompanied by men.

Where there is greater parity between men and women is in “The Persecuted” portfolio, belonging to group VI, *The City*. It portrays six men and six women. Similarly in group VII, dedicated to *The Last People*, in which 20 men and 19 women appear.

The exhibition *Photographs from “People of the 20th Century”* at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge brings together 196 portraits whose order and selection precisely follow those conceived by August Sander in his original project. In order to convey a representative image of the 45 portfolios grouped into 7 groups, the length of each has been calculated, which is as follows: *The Farmer* (17%), *The Skilled Tradesman* (10.5%), *The Woman* (12%), *Classes and Professions* (22.6%), *The Artists* (15%), *The City* (22%) and *The Last People* (2.6%). Nonetheless, operating in the same way as Sander, it was considered appropriate to highlight the number of photographs dedicated to women, increasing the number of these from 22 to 40. The aim of this gesture is to accentuate one of the aspects that make *People of the 20th Century* such a benchmark work, while at the same time underlining the role of a political subject, the woman, who has been represented under another type of iconographic context within the history of art and photography.
Curators: Valentín Roma and Gillermo Zuaznabar

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Palau de la Virreina
La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona

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