

# Augustus F. Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits 1905-1920

Peter Mesenholler

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Throughout his tenure as a registry clerk with the Immigration Division of Ellis Island, Augustus F. Sherman systematically photographed more than 200 families, groups, and individuals while they were being held by customs for special investigations. This volume provides an essential revaluation of Sherman's striking portraits, which predate August Sander's cataloging efforts by several years. A historical document of unprecedented worth, Augustus F. Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits includes almost 100 portraits taken from 1905 through 1920. The subjects are frequently dressed in elaborate national costumes or folk dress, emphasizing the variety and richness of the cultural heritage that came together to form the United States. Romanian shepherds, German stowaways, Russian vegetarians, Greek priests and Ghanaian women in elaborately patterned dresses, are treated with equal gravitas. The resulting body of work presents a unique and powerful picture of the stream of immigrants who came through Ellis Island. In its time, the material contributed to the larger project of ethnographic categorization and typology typical of the early twentieth century, much as Edward S. Curtis's portraits romanticized the "last Indians" or John Thomson's "Street Life in London" identified and codified social class in the late 1800s. Though originally taken for his own personal study, Sherman's work appeared in the public eye as illustrations for publications with titles such as "Alien or American," and hung on the walls of the custom offices as cautionary or exemplary models of the new American species.

In this book, Peter Mesenhöller, Research Associate with the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum of Anthropology in Cologne, Germany, provides new critical context and analysis of this rich collection, but also addresses the individual images as powerful, engaging photographs created by a master portraitist.

The publication is accompanied by a traveling exhibition that will open at the Ellis Island Immigration

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