



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

By Peter Mesenhöller

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

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 A historical document of unprecedented worth, "Augustus F. Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits" includes almost 100 portraits taken from 1905 through 1920.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 Museum in the summer of 2005.

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### Editorial Review

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\*Starred Review\* The 97 full-page, sepia-tone portraits in this handsome volume are heartbreakingly beautiful. They were taken by amateur photographer Sherman, a clerk on Ellis Island during the period of mass immigration to America in the early twentieth century. Most of his subjects were immigrants detained at Ellis Island for further interrogation; the flat, impersonal captions that describe them tell a story of their own: "English-Jews," "Moroccan men and boy," "Greek woman," and "Tattooed German stowaway deported May 11." First you look at the pictures; then Peter Mesenhöller's brilliant historical essay makes you go back to look at them again with a fresh perspective: this was a period of fierce American nativism, when the huddled masses of Latins, Slavs, Jews, etc., were regarded as dregs that threatened Anglo-Saxons with "racial suicide." Does the focus on elaborate national dress in the photos reinforce stereotype and the same exoticism as in Curtis' famous images of Native Americans? In fact, some of the photos are of distinct types, but their body language and expression also make you see close-up the wrenching personal anguish, loss, courage, and hope. Patrons researching family roots will want to examine these images, but the book will be of equal interest as a primary-source piece of American history and as a way to make connections to contemporary immigration issues. An exhibition of images from this book will open in June at the Ellis Island Museum and will then travel around the world. *Hazel Rochman*

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### About the Author

Augustus F. Sherman worked as a clerk in Ellis Island from 1892-1925. He was an untrained, yet highly gifted photographer who created hundreds of images documenting the new arrivals to America. At the time, his photographs were not taken in an official capacity but used by immigration officials to promote the work of Ellis Island. In 2008, the Minnesota History Center opened a new exhibit celebrating the human story of the more than twelve million immigrants who entered the United States. Today, Sherman's collections are housed in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum and the New York Public Library.

Peter Mesenhöller has been a research associate and part-time museum educator with the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum of Anthropology, Cologne (Germany) since 1990/2001. He is author of *Mismeasurements: Other Bodies in 18th and 19th Century Ethnology and Anthropology* (2002) and *Mundus Novus: The Image of America as Mirrored in European Print Media from the 16th to the 20th century* (1992). He has been a freelance curator since 1984. His shows include *Picturing Paradise: Colonial Photography of Samoa 1875-1925*, co-curated by Alison Devine Nordström (1995-1996) and *Augustus Frederick Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits 1905-1920* (2005-2008), co-curated with Diana Edkins.

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