

Habiba Salem

Humans and Landscapes in Documentary Photography

This exhibition explores the different uses of documentary photography, focusing on the relationship between humans and landscapes and how they were documented through a series of photographs. It also uncovers the social, cultural, and political conditions behind the photographs and analyzes human influence on photography.

Photography is an engaging instrument to analyze and learn about the continuous transformation history of the world. It is a tool that opens a doorway to exciting, bizarre, and new events one may have never seen or experienced before. Whether it has negative or positive uses, photography helps viewers be aware of the changes or things happening worldwide.

In Miles Orvell's "Photography and Society," the author focuses on documentary photography to present the human and social conditions within the United States (105-140). Documentary photography first started in the United States to explore the effects of the Great Depression on the people (Orvell, 105-140). During the 1930s, a global social, cultural, political, and economic transformation led to photography becoming an essential tool and medium to depict those transformations that shaped the world today (Orvell, 105-140).

However, this exhibition explores the various uses of documentary photography to present diverse social and cultural changes in other parts of the world by analyzing the works of three photographers: August Sander, Sam Tata, and Thaddeus Holownia. Their works are relatively similar yet uniquely distinctive in demonstrating the transformation of documentary photography.

First, August Sander is a famous German photographer who shaped photography in the late 20th century (Burkle, 69). He focuses on capturing the beauty of humans in his culture. Like exploring landscapes, it is mesmerizing to explore people and how each person is uniquely different in appearance and personality. He successfully portrays this beauty in his work. Sander's work consists of portraits of German people, each categorized according to their profession and social status.

Second, Sam Tata is considered an important figure in Canadian photography (Kunard, 30). He was born in Shanghai, China, and became interested in portraiture photography during his twenties. Henri Cartier-Bresson influenced and encouraged him to explore the human depths and the drama of the streets (Metcalf, 63-74). Shanghai was going through major social changes, such as Europeans migrating into the city, wealth inequities between foreigners and the Chinese, and the great diversity of Asian cultures (Kunard, 30). He spent the period documenting these changes using a Quarter plate Thornton Pickard camera to create a careful composition and highly detailed photographs of the prosperous cultural class of Shanghai (Kunard, 30). He aimed to represent his character and to "put the camera out to life" to visual through his subject matter (Kunard, 31).

Third, although there is little information about Thaddeus Holownia's work, he captivates the viewers through unique composition that invokes the mind. Holownia is a Canadian photographer who examines the theme of change through the interaction and integration of humans and nature. He depicts impressive panoramic shots of the landscape and people. Additionally, a major contribution of his work is to inform the viewer about the Canadian identity and to demonstrate the role of landscape in shaping the Canadian identity. (Gilbert, 152).

Lastly, Sander's work consists of portraits of German people, each categorized according to their profession and social status. Similarly, Sam Tata documents human lives in different cities during social changes. Meanwhile, Thaddeus Holownia explores the relationship between humans and nature in landscape photographs. These photographers investigate national identities through documentary photography. For example, Sanders documents the many faces of Germany. While Tata documents the changing conditions in China, especially Shanghai, during the Japanese War and Holownia discovers the Canadian identity through the human imprints on landscapes.

Overall, these photographers explore human impact on the world or landscape, whether socially, culturally, economically, or even architecturally, through documentary photography to aid the viewer in understanding the changes that constructed the world today. They depict beauty and artistic elements that elevate and capture the viewers' emotions and beautifully illustrate events or stories that happened years ago through photographs. It helps the viewers understand the world's development by situating themselves inside the photograph from the photographer's perspective. Moreover, this exhibition includes diverse photographs demonstrating the beauty and artistic elements with a story to tell.

August Sanders



August Sander, *Berlin Coal Porter*, 1929. National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute



August Sander, *Secretary at West German Radio*, Cologne, 1931. National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute

During World War Two, documentary photography transformed into an act against the Nazi regime (Burkle, 70). Sander influenced modern photography through his bold style and shadowy depths of portrait photography. He focused on presenting every kind of German people. He was interested in photographing people of different statuses and occupations and reflect how life in Germany had changed (Zeller, 395). These photographs depict the different social classes in Germany. The image on the left consists of a hardworking manual worker. In contrast, the image on the right is of a secretary dressed fashionably and presented as a glamorous modern woman of the day.

Sam Tata



Sam Tata, *Coolie Woman, Monsoon, Bombay, India*, 1948. National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute



Sam Tata, *Bill Brandt, Photographer, London, England*, 1978. National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute



Sam Tata, *Theatre, Tokyo, Japan*, 1973. National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute



Sam Tata, *Pat Pearce, T.V. Columnist, Montreal, Quebec*, 1962. National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute

The reason for assembling these photographs is to demonstrate the diverse personality in each of Tata's photographs that also portray the cultural and social differences in each city, such

as Bombay, Montreal, Shanghai, and London. Each photograph presents a difference in how the subject dressed and the background or architecture. These photographs represent a social change in each city. For example, in *Coolie Woman, Monsoon*, the woman is dressed as a traditional Indian, barefoot in the rain while carrying an umbrella, while everyone else is dressed in Western clothing. The buildings also display European architecture, perhaps reflecting British colonialism. This photograph is interesting because it exhibits European elements in different environments and cultures, such as the umbrella, an obvious tool the Europeans brought in during Bombay's heavy summer showers. Moreover, it is intriguing to see Bombay in 1948, before the extensive industrial transformation. In the photograph, the streets appear calm and empty, unlike today's busy and loud streets dominated by vehicles and pollution.

Similarly, *Theatre, Tokyo, Japan*, exhibits Western culture's heavy influence on the Japanese. In the photograph, posters of Western films are introduced to Asian cities during the war. Overall, Tata's work is truly fascinating when depicting the differences and the influence of war and colonialism in different parts of the world. It is interesting to see the merging of both cultures, as seen in *Theatre, Tokyo, Japan*, in which it presents Japanese women, one dressed traditionally and the other in western clothing and other American symbols such as Coca-Cola.

Thaddeus Holownia



Thaddeus Holownia, *Rockland Bridge*, 1981-2000.
National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute



Thaddeus Holownia, *Untitled*, 1974-1977. National
Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute

Thaddeus Holownia is interested in analyzing human and landscape relationships. Like the effects of war on human social conditions, he presents the influence of human interaction with nature on the transformation of the landscape. His panoramic work is extremely intriguing. His photographs dominate the scale, almost overpowering the paper and standing out to the viewer, as begging for attention. Destroyed by strong winds, the Rockland Bridge in the photograph was an important link between the two villages. Holownia has always admired the strong support structure of the more than 200 years old bridge (National Gallery of Canada). He had another photograph along with this one to highlight the change in the bridge. Overall, this photograph illustrates the ongoing struggles between the human-made and the natural worlds. In addition, the photographer has an “untitled” series that is equally fascinating of people posing with their cars, each reflecting their unique personality and style, similar to Tata and Sander, who also present the unique personality and style of their portraits.

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