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Exhibitions: Augustus Sherman's Images of Aliens and Americans

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Opening on November 3 — five days before the presidential election — the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York presents an up-to-the-minute exhibition about immigration and its impact on the nation.

It features images that are a hundred years old.

The exhibition, “Augustus Sherman: Aliens or Americans?” showcases 35 vintage black-and white-portraits of immigrants on Ellis Island made by Augustus Sherman, chief clerk at the Ellis Island Immigration Station between 1905 and 1920 and

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self-taught photographer. The gallery says the work “gives historical context to Donald Trump’s populist disparagement of immigrants as undesirable aliens.”

The photographs underscore America’s role as a refuge for people fleeing poverty and conflict elsewhere, as well as the country’s long-running antipathy for immigrants.

Sherman made the portraits to promote the services of his organization. “However,” notes the Kasher Gallery, “they were also used, without attribution, in various anti-immigrant publications that asserted that America would fall apart under the pressure of these so called ‘aliens.’ For instance, in 1906 Sherman’s images were used in the book *Aliens or Americans?* by Baptist minister Howard B. Grose as visual evidence of the supposed menace of the ‘new immigrants.’”

Sherman’s portraits, though written about previously, were given wide attention in the 2005 Aperture book *Augustus F. Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits 1905 – 1920*. Sherman photographed more than 200 families, groups, and individuals while they were being held by customs for special investigations, encouraging his subjects to dress in elaborate national costumes or folk dress — from Romanian shepherds and Greek priests for Ghanaian women in patterned dresses — as a way of emphasizing the variety and richness of the cultural heritage that came together to form the United States.

“They are not the ‘huddled masses yearning to be free’ as described by Emma Goldman. They are not portrayals of anonymous travelers weary from journey as photographed by Lewis Hine. Sherman is producing a catalog of diversity,” notes Kasher.

More historical context: In 2015, nearly one million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe, fleeing the civil war in Syria and inhospitable conditions across the Middle East and Africa. The *Time LightBox* blog explained in February that that number roughly matches the number of immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island in 1907, the year the immigration center’s intake peaked.

The Kasher Gallery notes that more than 100 million living Americans, a third of the nation’s population, are descendants from the 12 million people who entered the U.S. through Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954, aliens who became Americans.

The exhibition “Augustus Sherman: Aliens of Americans?” runs through December 23.