

HYPERALLERGIC

Newly Colorized Portraits of Immigrants Photographed by an Ellis Island Clerk
A book and exhibition celebrate the work of Augustus Frederick Sherman, who documented the faces of over 250 people who passed through his workplace's halls.

By: Claire Voon

December 12, 2016



While waiting on Ellis Island for clearance to begin a new life in America, immigrants at the start of the 20th century may have been approached by a man with a camera. Born in Pennsylvania, Augustus Frederick Sherman worked as chief clerk at the island's immigration station, but he was also an amateur photographer who documented the faces of over 250 people who passed through his workplace's halls.

A select number of Sherman's photographs — which are owned by the Ellis Island Immigration Museum — are now due to be published in *The Paper Time Machine: Coloring the Past*, a book of historical images chosen and introduced by Wolfgang Wild of Retronaut. What's more, they'll appear in color, restored by Jordan Lloyd of color reconstruction company Dynamichrome based on careful historical research. *The Paper Time Machine: Coloring the Past* recently ran a crowdfunding campaign; among its other offerings are images of famous landmarks from the Statue of Liberty to the Taj Mahal and recolored views of such astounding objects as military listening trumpets and King Tut's burial mask.

Sherman's photographs are some of the most fascinating of the trove. Taken between 1900 and the 1920s, they resemble studio portraits, completely dislodged from the busy space of Ellis Island, and showcase the immense diversity of immigrants' backgrounds. Sherman's subjects included a Ruthenian woman wearing a sheepskin vest and traditional linen shirt; a Romanian piper posed with his instrument and wearing a traditional sheepskin cloak; and a boy from India whose long hair is brushed back beneath a cap known as a *topi*.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

With his high-ranking position, Sherman likely had access to the island's detention area, as cultural anthropologist Peter Mesenhöller — who has written about the photos — told the New York Times. Sherman may have persuaded immigrants waiting there to pose for him and ask that they put on their “best holiday finery or national dress,” as the New York Public Library (NYPL) notes. The library owns some group portraits that Sherman may have been taken upon request from Commissioner of Immigration William Williams. The commissioner may have even given away copies of some of the portraits to official Ellis Island visitors as keepsakes.

Sherman provided short captions for some of the photographs that identify the sitters by name, age, occupation, and native country. Sometimes he even added notes like “Vegetarian” or “Belgian Stowaway.” Of one 50-year-old woman in a fedora with a hint of facial hair, he wrote, “came as Frank Woodhull” and “dressed 15 yrs in men's clothes.”

In 1907, National Geographic published a number of Sherman's crisp, black-and-white pictures. In later years, some ended up on the walls of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services' Lower Manhattan headquarters, where they remained on view for decades without attribution, according to the NYPL's records. Finally, in 2005, Aperture organized a traveling exhibition dedicated to Sherman's works, and right now he has his first US exhibition on view at Steven Kasher Gallery, featuring 35 of his portraits.

Sherman's black-and-white photographs stand as unflinching records of the roots of America's rich diversity, which has only increased in the century since. Restored in color in *The Paper Time Machine*, they seem less anchored in the distant past. The bold national outfits worn by their sitters speak particularly loudly at a time when attitudes of intolerance and hatred have emerged.