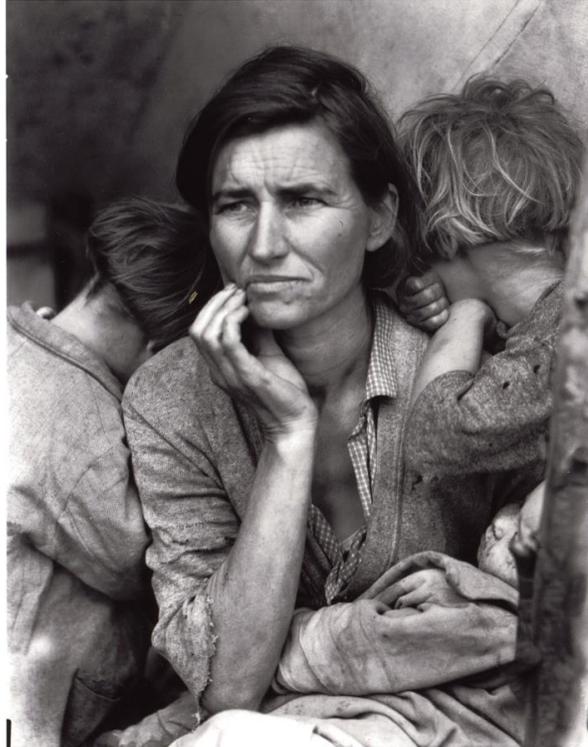


Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, and the Documentary Tradition



Dorothea Lange

Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute. Nipomo, California, 1936

Curriculum Guide

This resource is aimed at integrating the study of photography into fine arts, language arts and social science curriculum for middle school, high school, and college aged students. This guide contains questions for looking and discussion, historical information, and classroom activities and is aligned with Illinois Learning Standards Incorporating the Common Core. A corresponding set of images for classroom use can be found at www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. The MoCP is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The museum is generously supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Committee, individuals, private and corporate foundations, and government agencies including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. The MoCP's education work is additionally supported by After School Matters. Special funding for this guide and the MoCP's work with k-12 educators was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.



Dorothea Lange

Thirteen Million Unemployed Fill the Cities in the Early Thirties, 1934

Dorothea Lange and the Farm Security Administration Photographs

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) believed in photography's ability to reveal social conditions, educate the public, and prompt action. After the stock market collapsed in 1929, Lange felt she had to respond to the deprivation she observed firsthand on the street near her home in San Francisco, where she had a prosperous portrait studio. Her first social documentary photographs depicted striking laborers and bread lines in 1933. The following year Willard Van Dyke organized an exhibition for Lange, through which the agricultural economist Paul Schuster Taylor became aware of her work. Taylor was a professor of economics at the University of California at Berkeley and an advocate for migrant farmworkers. In 1935 Taylor asked Lange to accompany him as a research photographer on a study of migrant laborers in California for the State Emergency Relief Administration. Later that year, both Taylor and Lange obtained divorces and were married, beginning a lifelong professional and romantic relationship.

In 1935 the federal government formed the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration) that oversaw a variety of programs that attempted to alleviate rural poverty. Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange and others including Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Gordon Parks, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, and Jack Delano worked under the direction of Roy Stryker for the historical section of the FSA. Their goal was to create and promote a record of America during the Great Depression, in part to help explain and justify the need for government spending on New Deal programs. They photographed average people at home, work and play. They also documented the ravaged landscape of the dust bowl and the plight of migrant workers and the unemployed. Stryker assigned the photographers basic subjects to photograph such as food, home, leisure, the work

environment, religion, transportation, and commerce. The photographers also collected notes in the field that were used to create captions for the images.



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The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration: Cultural Context

"I am a photographer hired by a democratic government to take pictures of its land and its people. The idea is to show New York to Texans and Texas to New Yorkers."

-Russell Lee

We live in a culture that is inundated with imagery. It is hard to imagine a time in our history when New Yorkers might not know what Texas looked like and vice versa, but in America of the 1930s, before television and the internet and with fewer images in general circulation, this would have been true. At the time they were made, the FSA photographs were published in magazines such as Life, Look, and Survey Graphic. They played a critical role in showing Americans not only the effects of the Great Depression but also what their country looked like and how their fellow citizens lived. This was a **documentary** project of unprecedented scale that resulted in an invaluable historic record--the archive of over 160,000 images created by the FSA photographers is now housed by the Library of Congress and accessible to the public at the Library of Congress website www.loc.gov.

The FSA photographers knew that in telling the stories of their time, they needed to create images that would impact and appeal to the emotions of viewers. This project was in part a public relations campaign. Toward this end, the photographers and editors often selected subjects and images that would garner wide public appeal and sympathy at a time when America was very segregated by race and class. This is likely a factor in why images such as *Migrant Mother*, which depicts a (seemingly) “white” woman, who is identified as a widow and mother, became icons of the era. Ironically, the woman in this image, Florence Owens, was later identified as being Native American. Like most historic accounts, the archive of FSA photographs favors the stories and histories of certain groups over others.

The FSA photographers also sometimes arranged people or details within the scenes that they photographed to create more powerful compositions. This raises questions about the “truthfulness” of documentary photographs. For example, many viewers and scholars have question if Lange might have given some direction to the woman and children depicted in *Migrant Mother* such as might Lange have asked the woman to place her hand on her chin or asked the children to turn their heads away from the camera?

Today many people believe that it is unethical for documentary photographers to intervene at all in the situations they photograph. In the early 1930s when Dorothea Lange began photographing the effects of the Great Depression, the terms “documentary photography” and “photojournalism” were not commonly used and ethical guidelines had not been established. The FSA photographers influenced the development of the fields of documentary photography and photojournalism and initiated discussions on the truthfulness of photography that continue today. We should be cautious of considering any photograph fully “truthful” because even without any intervention on the part of the photographer, simply aiming a camera at a subject is a process of selection where some information is included and other information is left out.

Notes on Migrant Mother

Dorothea Lange shot six frames in March of 1936, the day that she made the image of Florence Owens and her children that has come to be known as *Migrant Mother*.

She says: I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember that she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her her name or her history. She told me her age, 32. She said they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in a lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

Examining the six frames together gives viewers an insight into Lange’s working process and also underscores the importance of editing. Lange and her boss Roy Stryker selected and distributed the tighter frame with the woman’s hand resting on her chin that became the defining image of the Great

Depression and is now one of the most widely known and reproduced images in the history of photography. The title listed here is Lange's original, more descriptive caption. Throughout her career Lange often alternated between using the long captions she wrote at the time she made her images and shorter, sometimes more interpretive titles.

Lange later retouched the negative of *Migrant Mother* to minimize the appearance of a thumb that appears at the lower right corner of the image, which she found to be distracting to the overall composition. Roy Stryker thought that removing the thumb from what was intended to be a "straight" documentary photograph and a historic record was unethical. The original image in the collection of the Library of Congress and Lange's preferred retouched image held in the collection of the Oakland Museum of California are both still in circulation.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

1. Look carefully at the best known frame of *Migrant Mother*:

- Describe what you see.
- Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- What can you tell about how this image was made?
- What do we learn about the people and place in the photograph?
- What is the mood or feeling of the image?
- What details reveal that information?
- What do we know for certain?
- What assumptions might we have made?
- Can you tell how the photographer feels about her subjects?

2. The work of Dorothea Lange and the Farm Security Administration Photographers are considered documentary photographs—they were intended to record history and tell the story of a time, place, or group of people.

- What can photography do well in creating a record or document? What are its limitations?
- In what ways can documentary photographs be "truthful?" How could a documentary photograph be misleading?

3. This photograph came to be known as *Migrant Mother*. The caption that Lange originally wrote to accompany the image that seldom does today is:

Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute. Nipomo, California, 1936.

- How does your perception of this image and of this woman change when you have this additional information?

4. Lange took six frames of the scene that day. Look carefully at each of the frames *Migrant Mother* in the corresponding image set found at </education/resources-for-educators.php>.

- Describe what each separate image shows. How are they alike? How are they different?
- Why do you think that Dorothea Lange and her boss Roy Stryker chose the tightly-framed image of the woman and not one of the other four to reproduce and distribute?
- Why do you think this image became famous or iconic over time?
- Do you feel any personal connections to this work? Describe.
- Can you think of any other art works that remind you of *Migrant Mother*? Describe.

Activities

1. Documenting the Great Issues of our Time

Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s and early 40s used photography to record and respond to great issues of their time such as joblessness, homelessness, and natural and man-made disasters.

- What are some of the major political and humanitarian issues of our time?
- If you were to select one of these issues to document through photography, what would you photograph? Why?
- What places, people, or details would you show to tell the story?
- How would you make those pictures?

Gathering information and writing captions to accompany their images was an important part of the work of the FSA photographers.

- What if any supplemental information would you include any supplemental information with your photographs? Explain.

2. Research and Report: Migrant Labor in America

A. Who were the migrant agricultural workers of America in the 1930s?

- Where did they come from?
 - What issues did they face?

B. Who are the migrant agricultural workers in America today?

- Where do they come from?
- What are some of the issues that they face?

C. What issues have changed for migrants working in these two eras? What have stayed the same?

Vocabulary

caption

A title, short description, or phrase accompanying a photograph or illustration.

compose (composition)

To combine distinct parts or elements to create a whole. To arrange artistically or esthetically.

document

To provide evidence or information.

point of view (vantage point)

Point of view is where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:

K-12 R.R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CC.K-12.L.R.6 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

*CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

*CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3a Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3d Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced. A. Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.

Early High School-26.A.3e Visual Arts: Describe how the choices of tools/technologies and processes are used to create specific effects in the arts.

Late High School-26.A.4e Visual Arts: Analyze and evaluate how tools/technologies and processes combine to convey meaning.

FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present.

A. Analyze how the arts function in history, society and everyday life.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STATE GOAL 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations A. Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation

Elementary-16.A.2b Compare different stories about a historical figure or event and analyze differences in the portrayals and perspectives they present.

Late High School-16.A.5b Explain the tentative nature of historical interpretations.