

Dorothea Lange

Politics *of* Seeing

March 15–May 27, 2019

Dorothea Lange is widely recognized as one of the most important documentary photographers of the twentieth century, and her 1936 photograph of a mother and three children in a pea pickers’ camp in Nipomo, California, has become a global cultural icon (cover). The image is so widespread that Lange once stated, “It doesn’t belong to me anymore. It belongs to the world.” *Migrant Mother* is specifically an emblem of the hardship endured by many during the American Great Depression, but it also reflects the artist’s larger commitment to using her camera to provoke social and political change.

Born in 1895 in Hoboken, New Jersey, Dorothea Lange knew from a young age that she wanted to be a photographer. She ended up in San Francisco at age twenty-three and began working in a photography shop. Lange quickly became enmeshed within the city’s artistic community and, in 1919, opened what would become a successful portrait studio. Her attention shifted from San Francisco’s elite to the impoverished unemployed figures she saw on the streets through her studio window in the early 1930s as the devastating effects of the Depression deepened (right).

For the next thirty years, Lange would apply her skills as a portraitist to connect with her subjects. She attributed her empathy for the “walking wounded” to her own experience of living with a physical disability that resulted from a childhood case of polio. In addition to recording scenes of urban poverty, Lange documented the plight of migrant farm workers, many of whom were refugees from

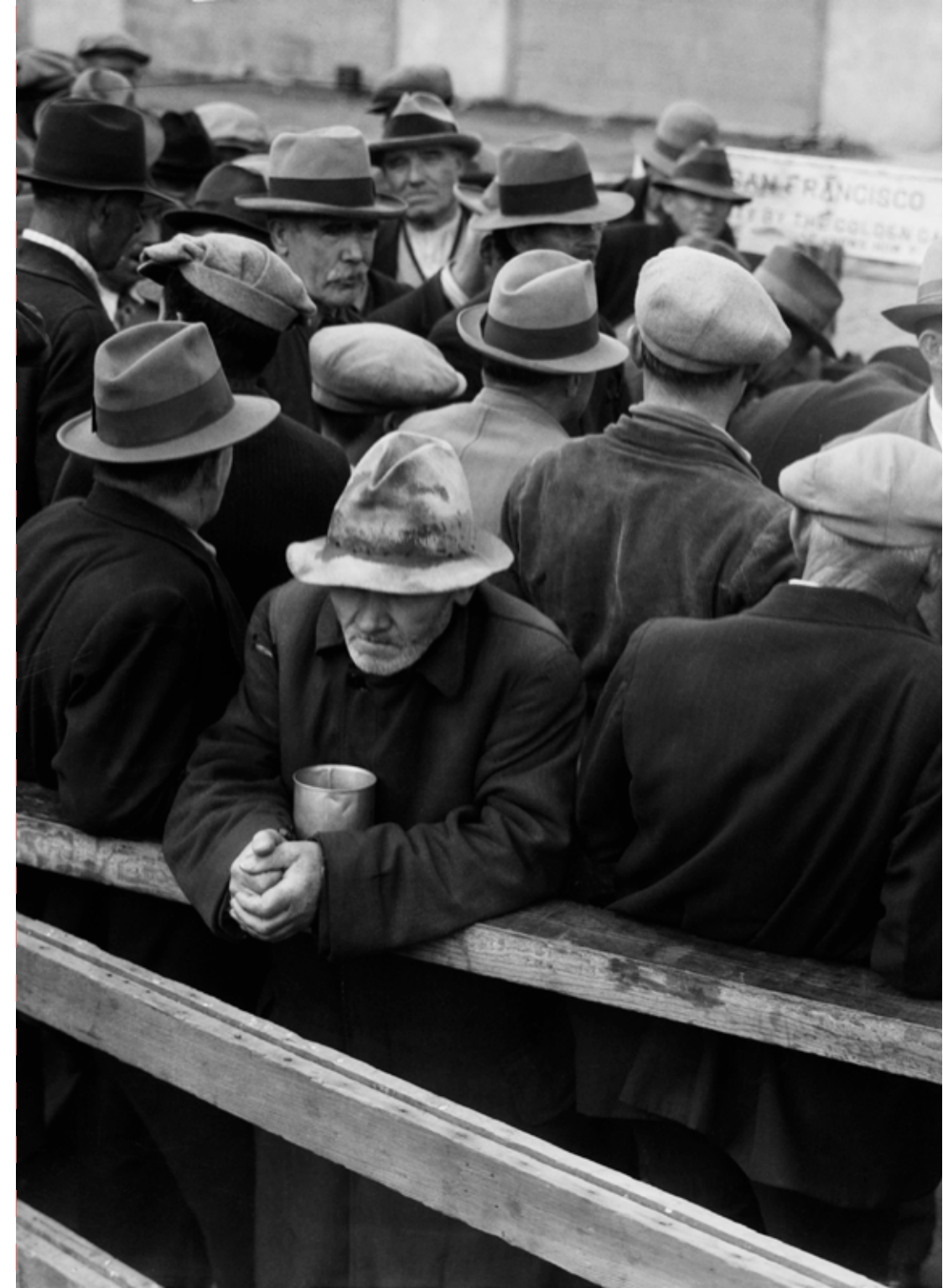
the drought and dust storms ravaging the southern Great Plains. She also traveled to the Deep South to expose the exploitation of farmers tethered to the sharecropping system of agriculture. Most of these farmers were African Americans. During much of this time, Lange worked for the government’s newly established Resettlement Administration (later called the Farm Security Administration), and her photographs were meant to be powerful arguments for government assistance.

America’s entry into World War II ended the Great Depression. Jobs became abundant as the nation prepared for the conflict. *Fortune* magazine hired Lange to document bustling naval shipyards in Northern California where patriotic men and women of different races and classes worked together in support of the cause. At the same time, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order calling for the forced removal and imprisonment of Japanese American citizens on the West Coast in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing. The government again hired Lange to photograph the process, but this time she was not in agreement with its motivations, which she saw as racist and unfair. Lange’s disgust at the policy and her sympathy for her subjects is evident in her photographs. Most were censored and remained unseen for decades (back).

After the war ended, Lange became interested in examining how not everyone was benefiting from the booming economy and unrestrained development in California. Concerned also about the lack of equity in the criminal justice system, she created compassionate portraits of prisoners and their families as they experienced arrest, booking, and court appearances. Although Lange’s photographs were taken more than half a century ago, many of the issues they address remain relevant today, including poverty, environmental degradation, treatment of immigrants, and racism, as well as the role of images in shaping public opinion and political positions.

Katie Delmez
Curator

COVER: *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936. Gelatin silver print. The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California, gift of Paul S. Taylor. RIGHT: *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco*, 1933. Gelatin silver print. © The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California, gift of Paul S. Taylor. BACK: *One Nation Indivisible, San Francisco*, 1942. Gelatin silver print. © The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California, gift of Paul S. Taylor





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