

TEACHER RESOURCES



The museum of us.

**Frist Art
Museum**

DOROTHEA LANGE:

POLITICS OF SEEING



Toward Los Angeles, California, March 1937, Gelatin silver print, Gift of Paul S. Taylor

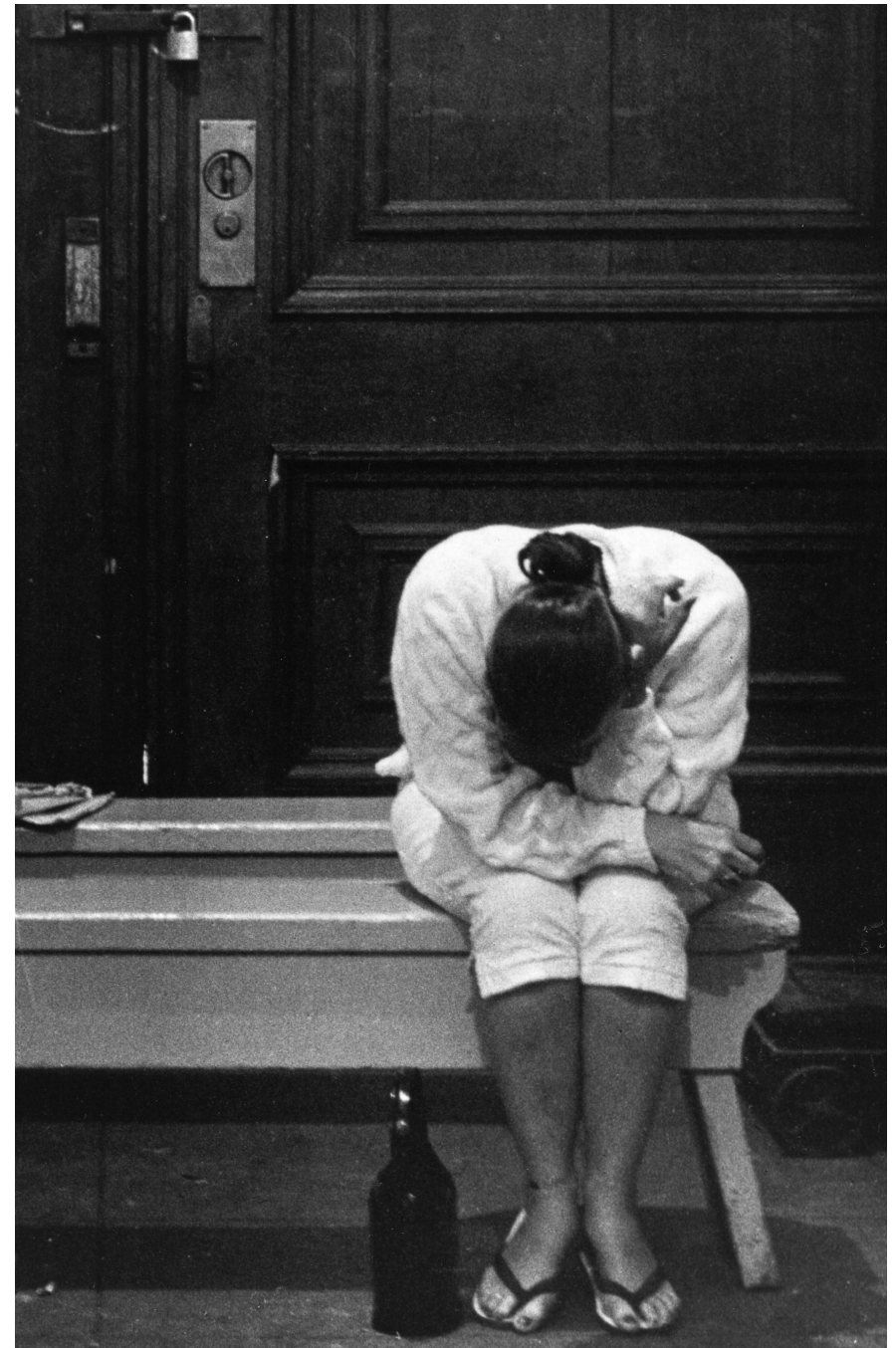
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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Dorothea Lange is recognized as one of the most important photographers of the 20th century. Together with the novels of John Steinbeck and the songs of Woody Guthrie, her photographs stand as the central artistic statement of the Dust Bowl years. *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing* is the first exhibition to examine Lange's work through the lens of social and political activism, demonstrating how the focus and impact of her photography extends far beyond the Depression.

On Lange's death in 1965, her archive of more than 25,000 negatives, 6,000 prints, papers, field notes, and correspondence was gifted to the Oakland Museum of California. *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing* includes approximately eighty-five framed vintage photographs, more than fifty digital prints scanned from Lange's original negatives, along with a selection of ephemera drawn from this vast archive. Through in-gallery media, interactive experiences, and the photography of contemporary artists highlighting connected social issues, this exhibition provides viewers the opportunity to analyze the enduring legacy of her work.

Designed to provoke social and political change, Lange's photographs urged Americans to see and respond to suffering and injustice, stimulating their empathy and rendering faceless crowds into recognizable individuals. Not merely historical, they are timely and provocative, serving in the contemporary context as inspiration for new generations of documentary photographers.



Untitled (Defendant's Wife), 1957, Gelatin silver print

NOTES TO TEACHERS

Notes on the Curriculum

These teacher resources were developed in honor of the Oakland Museum of California's exhibition, *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing*; however, their use does **not** require viewing the exhibition. The suggested activities are interdisciplinary in nature and can supplement learning in a history, photography, or visual arts class or engage students in critical thinking around social justice issues. The activities are designed at a high school level but can be adapted for use with younger students.

Picture This Website

Several of Dorothea Lange's photographs can be examined more closely on the Oakland Museum of California's *Picture This: California Perspectives on History* website—underlined title in blue text are direct links to specific images. The *Picture This* website provides historical context for important eras in California history, and Dorothea Lange's photographs are featured in multiple sections, including the "Depression Era: 1930s" and "World War II Homefront Era: 1940s."

<http://picturethis.museumca.org/>

Dorothea Lange Archive

Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing and these teacher resources draw heavily from the Oakland Museum of California's Dorothea Lange Collection, a rich assemblage of primary sources. This personal archive was a gift from the artist. It includes approximately 25,000 negatives, 6,000 vintage prints, field notes, and personal memorabilia. Pieces from this archive are also featured in both our permanent Art and History Galleries. To view more images from the archive, visit the Dorothea Lange tab on our *OMCA Collections* website.

<http://collections.museumca.org/?q=category/2011-schema/art/dorothea-lange>.

Most of Lange's negatives from the Oakland Museum of California can also be accessed on the *Calisphere* website, administered by the University of California (Search for "Dorothea Lange").

<https://calisphere.org>

THE POWER OF SEEING: DOROTHEA LANGE'S VIEWS AND INFLUENCES

Inquiry Questions

Why was Dorothea Lange drawn to photography?
How might an artist reveal herself through her art?
What motivates or inspires you?

Background

Dorothea Lange was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895. In her early life, two childhood calamities shaped Lange's path as a photographer. At seven, she was stricken with polio, which left her with a withered foot and a permanent limp. Five years later, her father abandoned the family, causing them to move to a poorer neighborhood in New York City and prompting Dorothea to adopt her mother's maiden name. During this time, Lange began to learn to overcome hardships through perseverance.

These experiences gave her empathy for "the walking wounded," her shorthand for people in distress. Left on her own while her mother worked, Lange wandered the streets of New York, fascinated by the variety of people. It was then she learned to observe without intruding—good practice for a documentary photographer.

During her long career, Dorothea Lange's belief in the transformative and motivating power of seeing guided her work. Beauty was secondary to her. "The good photograph is not the object," she said. "The consequences of the photograph are the object." Lange wanted her audience to see and be affected by the truth of a photograph rather than its artistry—a view that led her to struggle with her image as an artist and her association with the art world.

Suggested Activities

Quote Me

Make copies of the Dorothea Lange quotes on the following page and Images 1–6 available to students. In small groups, have the students choose one of the quotes to discuss, or assign each group a different quote. Ask students to consider the following questions in their group:

What do you think the quote means?

How does the quote change your understanding of Dorothea Lange's work?
In what ways, if any, do the images support your understanding of the quote?

Bring the class back together and generate a [Know, Want to Know, Learned \(KWL\) chart](#). Have students break back into small groups and use this chart to develop [inquiry questions](#) about Lange and her work that they would like to explore further. Have students conduct [independent research](#) on Dorothea Lange's life as well as major historical events connected to her work (e.g., the Depression) based on these inquiry questions.

One View of You

Share Image 7 and the "Facts about *Migrant Mother*" on page 13 with your students. In small groups, ask students to discuss the impact of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, considering the following questions:

Why do you think Lange was surprised by the reaction to this image?

Why do you think Florence Thompson came to feel the way she did about the photo?

Based on what you've learned, do you think the photograph was an accurate representation of Thompson and her family?

At home, have students take a [portrait](#) of a friend or family member, and afterward, record one thing their subject would want others to know about who they are (a hobby or interest, a personality trait, etc.). Back in class, break the students into pairs and have the students swap photographs. Ask the students to write down one adjective they would use to describe the subject's personality and what in the photograph makes them say that. Next, have students share their impressions with one another and compare these interpretations with what the photographer and subject wanted to communicate. Ask students to conclude by discussing the opportunities and challenges of capturing "truth" through photography.

DOROTHEA LANGE QUOTES

"I said, 'I want to be a photographer' and my mother said, 'You have to have something to fall back on.' I didn't want anything to fall back on; I knew it was dangerous to have something to fall back on."

"The camera is a great teacher, and the more people use it the more aware they become of the possibilities of the visual world."

"I had begun to talk to the people I photographed. The people in the city were silent people, and we never spoke to each other. But in the migrant camps, there were always talkers. It gave us a chance to meet on common ground—something a photographer like myself must find if he's going to do good work."

"A photographer's files are in a sense his autobiography. More resides there than he is aware of. Documentation does not necessarily depend upon conscious themes. It can grow almost of itself, depending upon the photographer's instinct and interests."

"Documentary photographers are not social workers. Social reform is not the object of documentary photography. It may be a consequence because it can reveal situations and can be concerned with change. Its power lies in the evidence it presents not in the photographer's conclusion, for he is a witness to the situation not a propagandist or advertiser. A documentary photographer has a responsibility of keeping the record and to keep it superbly well."

"The photograph is not the object. The consequences of the photograph are the object."

"I had in my early years a variety of experiences that a child shouldn't really meet alone. Now I know how much that has given me."

"If you see mainly massed misery in my photographs and decry the selection of so much suffering, I have failed to show the multiform pattern of which it is a reflection. For the havoc before your eyes is the result of both natural and social forces. These are my times, and they, too, are my theme."



IMAGE 1

Untitled (Dorothea Lange's foot)

Circa 1957

Digital print

Original negative gift of Paul S. Taylor

new season

» 1934 «

dorothea lange

photographs
of people

new place

» 2515 «

gough street

sAN FRANCISCO

gRAystone 2807

» the contemplation of things

as they are,

without substitution or imposture,

without error or confusion,

is in itself a nobler thing

than a whole harvest of invention. «

frANCIS BACON

IMAGE 2

Pamphlet, Dorothea Lange, Photographs of People,
from her San Francisco portrait studio

1934

Gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 3

"Now, I wanted to take a picture of a man as he stood in his world—in this case, a man with his head down, with his back against the wall, with his livelihood, like the wheelbarrow, overturned."

—Dorothea Lange

[Man Beside Wheelbarrow, San Francisco](#)

1934

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Paul S. Taylor



WORKERS, UNITE!

Photograph by DOROTHEA LANGE, San Francisco

SURVEY GRAPHIC

SEPTEMBER
1934



Volume XXIII
No. 9

SAN FRANCISCO AND THE GENERAL STRIKE

BY PAUL S. TAYLOR AND NORMAN LEON GOLD

SIXTY-FIVE thousand trade unionists during four July days staged on the shores of San Francisco Bay the second and most widespread general strike in United States history. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth they carried out an extended maneuver which surprised, bewildered, gratified, or terrified and maddened the average citizen. To most Americans there is something foreign about a general strike, and a bit ominous—like the “dole,” storm-troopers, socialists, communists, fascists, and a lot of other things that used to seem farther away than they do now. But to many on the Pacific Coast, experience has made the general strike at least real, however differently they may interpret it—as a splendid demonstration of the strength and “solidarity of labor,” a victory for the “real leaders of labor,” a “sell-out” by labor “fakers,” a “striker’s dictatorship,” or an “insurrection.”

The San Francisco general strike of 1934 was in no sense a “sport.” It is but the latest of a long line of conflicts between employers and employed in that area, many of them, like the general strike, centering about the waterfront, and focusing on the degree of control over employment to be exercised by employers or by union. For power flows from job control. Beginning in the late eighties, the shipowners’ association established a hiring-hall as a device for breaking union power. The sailors struck, proposed joint control, were refused, and then beaten. In 1934 the longshoremen demanded substitution of union-control for employer-control of hiring halls. The employers proposed joint control, were refused, and the issue finally went to arbitration. The general strike was but a climax to the 1934 phase of this perennial struggle for power.

Waterfronts the world over provide dramatic examples of the local accumulation—characteristic of many industries—of over-supplies of under-employed workers. We lack neither knowledge nor example of how to “decasualize” this waterfront labor. Indeed, Seattle employers have taken the lead among American ports in achieving regularization, and the other ports of the Pacific Coast, except San Francisco, have more or less followed suit. But in San Francisco the “good employer,” while

maintaining his individual labor relations on a fairly advanced plane, allowed general employment practices in his industry to lag behind those long recognized by experts in industrial relations as intelligent and beneficial. The philosophy of the agent who for years has managed waterfront labor there is suggested by his characterization of marine workers as “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” and by his statement some years ago that “Really, what we are trying to do is to put the spirit of Jesus Christ in these men,” a profession promptly balanced with: “Of course, you’ve got to put the fear of God in them, too.” Under this régime, the well-known abuses of an overcrowded labor market flourished: under-employment, low earnings for many, long and fruitless waits at the docks, petty graft as the price of jobs. These were the conditions, against a background of protracted unemployment and insecurity, of anxious hope stimulated by the rights of collective bargaining under the National Industrial Recovery Act, of a left-ward surge toward more aggressive labor activity both within and without the trade unions, from which the waterfront strike, and ultimately the general strike, developed.

THE first rumble of impending conflict on the waterfront was heard in October 1933 when 400 longshoremen struck against the Matson Navigation Company, claiming discriminatory discharge of members of the newly formed International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA.) The company refused to recognize the ILA, but after mediation, reinstated the men. This act sounded the death-knell of a curious organization, the “Blue Book” union, or Longshoremen’s Association of San Francisco. Fourteen years earlier the Blue Book union had arisen during a strike from a schism within the ILA; organized by the gang bosses as a right-wing dual union, the employers promptly accorded it recognition and a “union shop” agreement which consigned the original ILA to a lingering death. Strangely, the Blue Book union later was welcomed into the San Francisco Labor Council in 1929 as a “transformed” company union, but ejection followed in 1931 when it was ascertained that the “transformation”

What really happened in San Francisco’s general strike? What were the issues? What do they mean to labor, employers, the community? What of the vigilantes and their violent anti-Red campaign? Two Californians here give the story down to date

405

IMAGE 4

“They printed one, full-page, with their own caption . . . ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’ It wasn’t my caption and it gave the picture a turn which a good documentary photographer is very punctilious about.”

—Dorothea Lange

Copy of *Survey Graphic* magazine with photographs of the San Francisco General Strike by Dorothea Lange 1934

Gift of Paul S. Taylor

*"I am trying here to say something
About the despised, the defeated,
The alienated.
About death and disaster.
About the wounded, the crippled,
The helpless, the rootless,
The dislocated.
About duress and trouble.
About finality.
About the last ditch."*

—Dorothea Lange



IMAGE 5

Walking Wounded, Oakland

1954

Digital print

Original negative gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 6

Rondal Partridge

The Walls (Dorothea Lange in her studio)

1965

Digital print

Original negative gift of Paul S. Taylor

Facts About *Migrant Mother*

- Dorothea Lange almost didn't take this photograph. After an exhausting day, Lange passed the pea picker's camp where this image was taken. At first, she kept on driving, but many miles down the road decided to turn around and return for a few shots. She spoke little with her subject (very unusual for Lange), only recording a few details such as her subject's age (32).
- *Migrant Mother* gained instant notoriety. It was published in newspapers across the country, and thousands in aid was raised for the farmworkers. The image became a symbol for motherhood and the tragedy of the migrant farmworker experience; yet, Lange never completely understood why this particular image, of all the thousands she took, had such enduring popularity and power.

"It [Migrant Mother] has, in a sense, lived a life of its own through these years: it goes on and on."

- Though she became a symbol of White motherhood, Florence Thompson (the subject of *Migrant Mother*) was actually of Native American heritage. She had worked as a farmhand throughout her life and experienced times of hardship, describing experiences living under bridges and in tents with her children. She was in the pea picker's camp that day because her car had broken down. Having had the car fixed, Thompson reported that she and her family were just about to leave when Lange arrived on the scene. This later account contradicts Lange's version that Thompson had just sold the car's tires to pay for food.
- The photograph's popularity caused distress for Thompson and her family. She was quoted as saying: *"I didn't get anything out of it. I wish she hadn't of taken my picture."* She was convinced, wrongly, that Lange had made a fortune on the image. When interviewed as adults, Thompson's children indicated that their mother willingly participated in the photograph to help others in need—there were reports of people starving in the camp—but struggled to shake the stigma of poverty herself. Despite the initial resentment, Thompson's children eventually came to appreciate the photograph's power to move so many people.

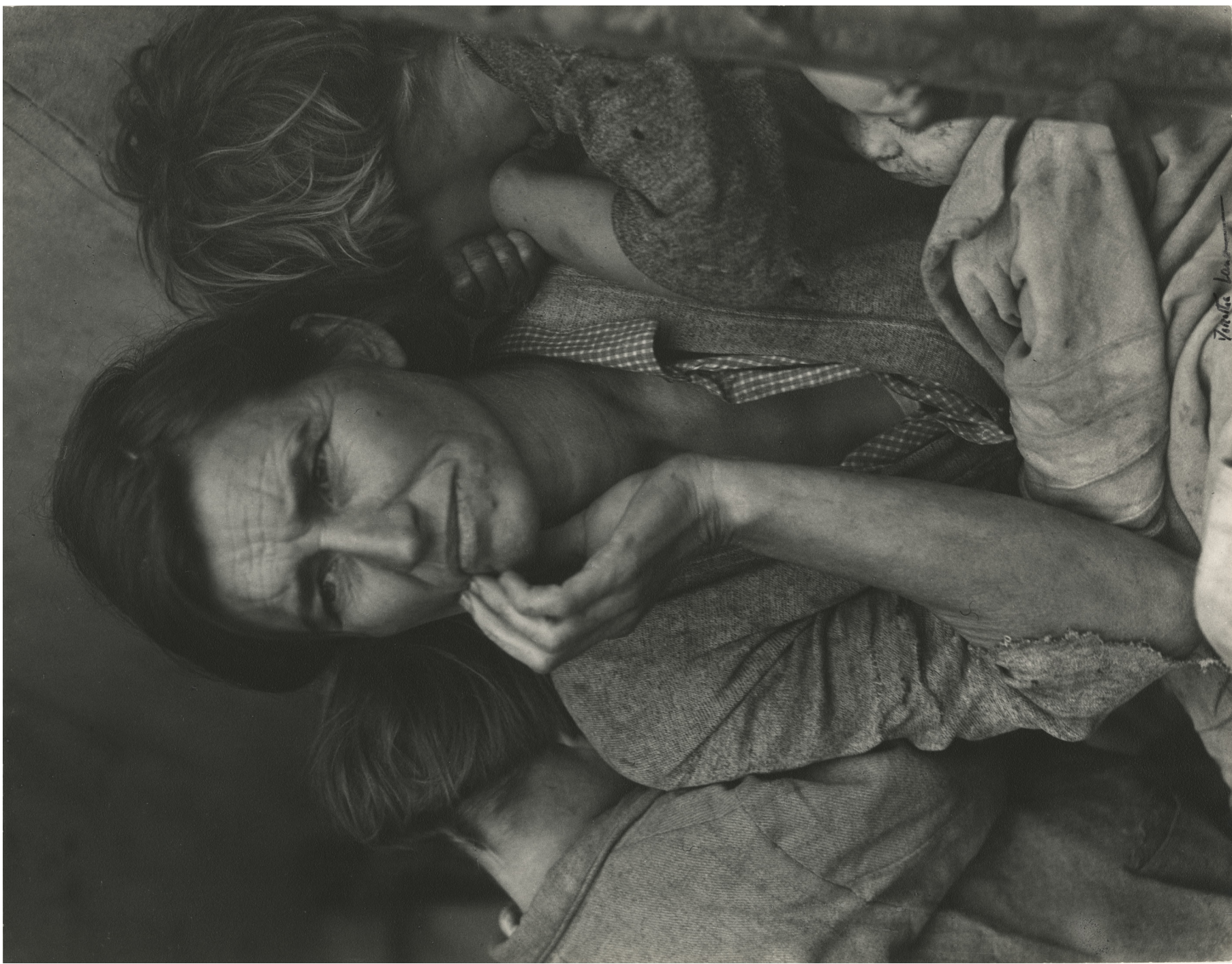


IMAGE 7

Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California

1936

Gelatin silver print

Gift of the Art Guild of the Oakland Museum of California

RESPECT AND DIGNITY FOR ALL: DOROTHEA LANGE'S PROCESS

Inquiry Questions

Why did Dorothea Lange value collaboration with her subjects?
What should an artist consider when she portrays another person?
How do you communicate respect for others?

Background

Traveling west in her early twenties, Lange settled in San Francisco and opened a successful portrait studio. There she met and mingled with local artists like Western painter Maynard Dixon—whom she married and had two children with before divorcing in 1935. The experience she gained as a portrait photographer proved critical in her transition to documentary work, helping to polish her technique and teaching her to establish a rapport with the people she was photographing.

In the early 1930s, America was hit by a devastating economic depression. In response, Dorothea Lange left the safety of her studio and created powerful photographs on behalf of those on the bottom. During this time, Lange met Paul Taylor, a sociologist from the University of California. He taught Lange to carefully and accurately record the circumstances (and in many cases the words) of those she photographed in detailed field notes. The two soon became a couple and embarked on a series of road trips working for state and federal governments.

Even amid the large scale of the events she recorded, it is the personal and human moments that make Lange's photographs so moving. She worked hard under difficult conditions to connect with the people she photographed; the resulting images are collaborations between artist and subject. When her works were displayed, she preferred groupings with extended captions to highlight the words and experiences of those she captured. Instead of creating images that emphasized beauty divorced from context, Lange sought to tell a full and nuanced story about the real people she met.

Suggested Activities

Caption This

Display a series of Dorothea Lange photographs for students (Images 8–13). Use [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) to explore each image as a class. Have students create a short caption for each based on their interpretation of the photograph. After students have completed their responses, share the corresponding captions from Lange's conversations with her subjects and field notes. Ask students to respond to the image based on the new information.

How does Lange's caption differ from their own?

How does Lange's caption affect their interpretation of the work?

In what ways does Lange's photograph visually represent the ideas recorded in her caption?

Next, ask students to place themselves along an imaginary line based on how strongly they agree or disagree with the adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Once students have chosen a spot, ask for volunteers to explain why they chose to place themselves where they did. As they listen to their peers' arguments, let students know they are welcome to change their mind and move their position in line.

Stronger Together

Have students explore Dorothea Lange's collection of photographs featured on the [OMCA Collections](#) and [Picture This](#) websites. Additional examples of her work may be found on the Library of Congress, National Archives, and [Calisphere](#) websites. Ask students to individually choose 3–5 images of her work to represent a theme they would like to explore (e.g., human endurance). Have students put together a short presentation on the images, providing an argument of how each connects to the theme and how they all relate to one another. Encourage students to incorporate both visual evidence and [historical research](#) to support their claims.



IMAGE 8



IMAGE 9



IMAGE 10



IMAGE 11



IMAGE 12



IMAGE 13

PERSUASIVE PROOF: DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Inquiry Questions

Why might someone describe Dorothea Lange as an activist?
What is the role and responsibility of a documentary photographer?
How do you inspire social change?

Background

Through her photography, Dorothea Lange documented the world. She also took a stand. Lange's work sheds light on issues that affected the lives of people around her. She was certain that seeing the effects of injustice could provoke reform and—just maybe—change the world.

From the desperate streets of Depression-era San Francisco to the dusty towns of the Jim Crow South, from the haunting landscapes of Japanese internment camps to the tension-filled courthouse of Alameda County, Lange's span of work reveals her lifelong commitment to social activism. She did not participate in organized politics, preferring to let her photographs speak for themselves. In many instances, this sense of responsibility to the truth put her at odds with those that hired her. The United States Army seized and impounded her photographs documenting the detention of Japanese Americans during WWII. Nevertheless, she persisted.

Today, Dorothea Lange's legacy endures. Contemporary artists draw inspiration from her work, and she is an iconic figure in the history and development of documentary photography. Her photographs continue to move viewers; in their vivid honesty, people see connections to their own struggles and triumphs as well as those of their fellow man—at once proof of our humanity and a call to action.

Suggested Activities

Focusing In

Share Images 14 and 15 (cropped and uncropped versions of the same Dorothea Lange photograph) with the class. Lead a class discussion analyzing the set.

How does the impact of the cropped image differ from the uncropped version? Why might Lange have chosen to crop the image in this way?

Next, break the class into pairs and provide each pair an uncropped version of a Lange photograph (Images 16–21). Ask the pairs to explore the image closely and think about how they would crop the image to strengthen its impact on viewers. Have students reach a decision and use pencils or markers to crop the image. It may help help students to use two L-shaped pieces as a [cropping tool](#). Ask the pairs to record their decision-making process and come up with a title for their cropped image based on the message they hope to convey to viewers.

Making An Impact

Have students work in small groups and brainstorm on some of the social issues that Lange explored in her work. Encourage students to use the collections available on [OMCA Collections](#), [Picture This](#), and other websites. Ask the groups to look for connections with current issues important to themselves and their communities. Have each student choose one of these issues and generate an original piece of [documentary photography](#) (complete with field notes and [quotes](#)) to raise awareness and inspire action on this issue. Remind students that editing is an important part of an artist's work; they should take at least 30 photos, from which they must choose just one image and caption that best represents their issue. Use a [group critique method](#) to have students share and analyze their final products with their peers.



IMAGE 14

*Ditched, Stalled and Stranded,
San Joaquin Valley, California*
1936, Cropped version
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 15

*Ditched, Stalled and Stranded,
San Joaquin Valley, California*
1936, Uncropped version
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 16

Drought Refugees (Back)

Circa 1935

Original negative

Gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 17

Oakland, 10th Street Market

Spring 1942

Original negative

Gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 18

Crossroads General Store, Gordonton, North Carolina

July 1939

Original negative

Gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 19

*The Howard family, Oklahomans without food and shelter,
encamped beside US 99*

Circa 1936

Digital print

Original negative gift of Paul S. Taylor

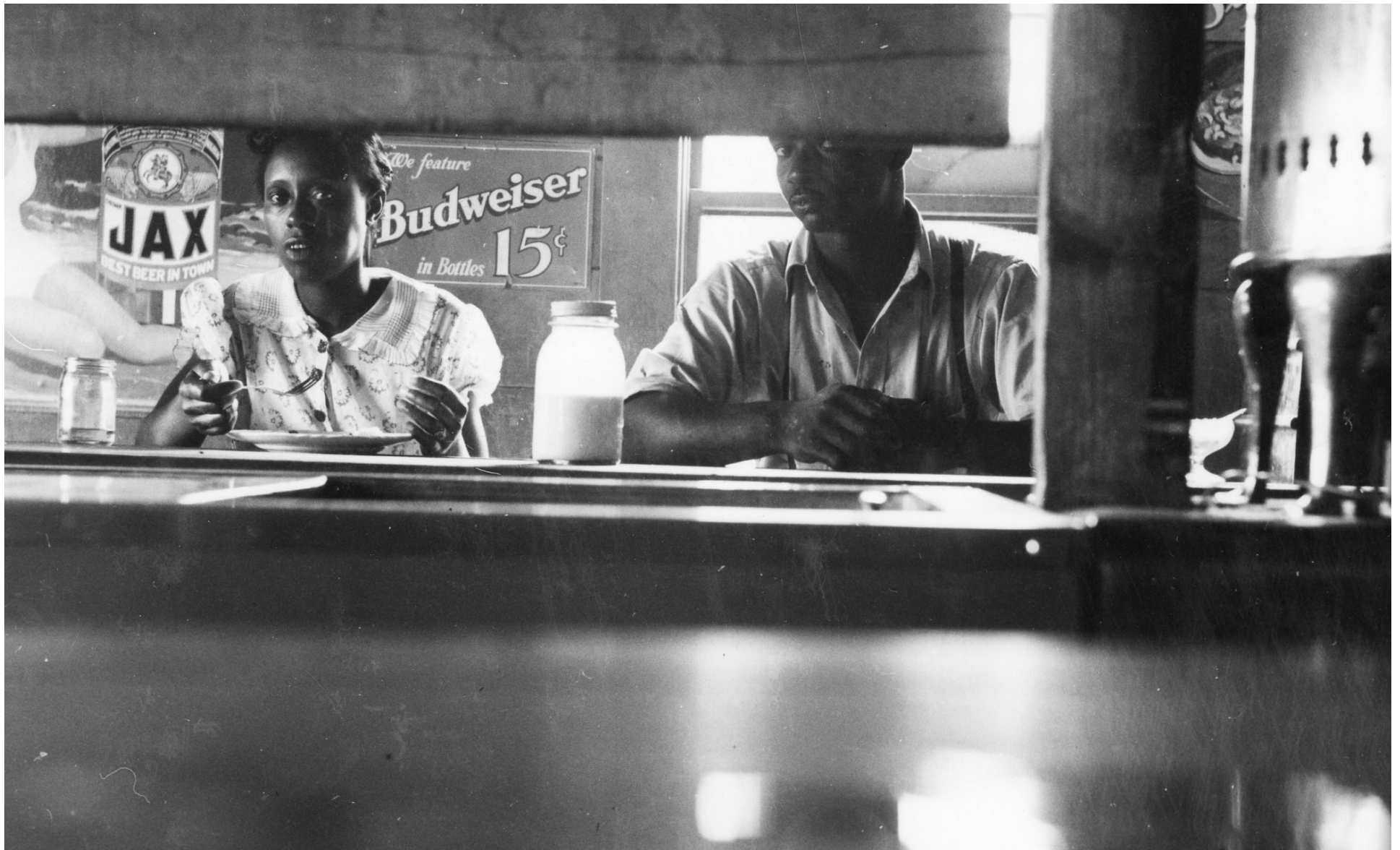


IMAGE 20

Restaurant Segregation, Mississippi

1938

Digital print

Original negative gift of Paul S. Taylor



IMAGE 21

One Nation Indivisible, San Francisco

April 20, 1942

Digital print of full negative

Original negative gift of Paul S. Taylor

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites

<https://www.loc.gov/>

The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world, housing millions of books, historical documents, photographs, and other multimedia. Educators and students can use this online database to search for thousands of Dorothea Lange photographs and other related documents.

<https://www.archives.gov/>

The National Archives provides public access to the documents and materials created in the course of business conducted by the United States federal government. Because Lange worked for the federal government on several projects over the course of her career, many of her photographs and records are accessible through this online database.

Calisphere.org

A project of the University of California libraries, *Calisphere* stores hundreds of thousands of digitized historical documents collected from libraries, museums, and universities throughout the state of California. This collection includes the Oakland Museum of California's Dorothea Lange Archive, providing digital access to over 20,000 records.

<https://www.icp.org/school/teacher-family-resources>

The International Center of Photography's "Focus on Photography: A Curriculum Guide" provides educators a comprehensive tool for helping students of all ages better understand and practice photography.

Books

Linda Gordon. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*.
New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro. *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*.
New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.

Elizabeth Partridge. *Dorothea Lange: Grab A Hunk of Lightning*.
San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013.

Films

Child of Giants: My Journey with Maynard Dixon and Dorothea Lange.
Directed by Thomas Ropelewski.
New York City: The Cinema Guild, 2010. DVD.

PBS American Masters, Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning.
Directed by Dyanna Taylor.
Arlington, VA: PBS, 2014. DVD

Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing

Frist Art Museum March 15–May 27, 2019



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