

MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago

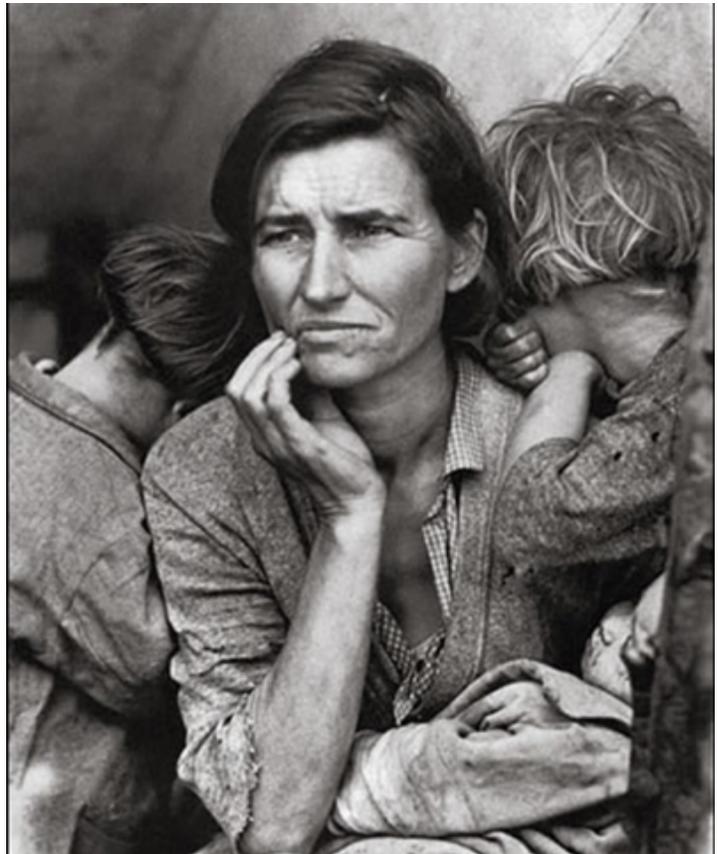
FRAMING IDEAS

Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother and the Documentary Tradition

CURRICULUM GUIDE

The curriculum materials here are excerpted from resources created by the Museum of Contemporary Photography Columbia College Chicago through the [Terra Foundation for American Art's American Art at the Core of Learning initiative](#). Terra Foundation staff contributed to this guide. Excerpts of this curriculum have been posted by [PBS](#) in conjunction with the American Masters documentary *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*.

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Dorothea Lange, *Mother*, Nipomo California, 1936

Dorothea Lange at the MoCP

The Museum of Contemporary Photography's permanent collection holds nearly 500 works by Dorothea Lange (1895-1965). The majority of these photographs were acquired through a generous gift from Katharine Taylor Loesch (1922-2012), daughter of the economist Paul Schuster Taylor (1895-1984), Lange's collaborator and second husband. Though she is best known for her depression-era photographs that came to shape our view of one of the most tumultuous eras of American history, the career of Dorothea Lange was long and varied. Her keen interest in the lives of ordinary people led her to travel and photograph diverse subjects across the U.S. and around the world. A full biography on Lange and a description of the bodies of work held in the MoCP collection can be found [here](#).

Lesson Summary

Dorothea Lange's 1936 image *Migrant Mother* is one of the most widely known images in the history of photography. This lesson stresses developing students' fluency at reading across a range of types of text, with a focus on visual images, as students deepen their understanding of this iconic image. Students will conduct a slow and careful "reading" of the image, noting details that support their observations and interpretations. Students will then consider this work in the light of a caption that Lange wrote for another photograph of the same family. They will read informational texts about Dorothea Lange and her work with the Farm Security Administration as well as the Dust Bowl to expand their knowledge of the photo's cultural and historical context. Next, students will compare *Migrant Mother* with the six additional frames Lange made of the scene that day. Finally, students will consider how the work fits within the tradition of documentary photography.

Lesson Overview

Grade Levels: 5-12 (May be adapted for use by other grades)

Essential Questions

- How do photographers express ideas, tell stories, and capture history through the tools and techniques of their medium?
- How can the close reading of a range of texts deepen your understanding of historic events?
- How can thoughtfully creating photographs expand our awareness of how photographers communicate using the tools and techniques of their medium?

Enduring Understandings

- Understanding a text's structures and themes helps the reader to make meaning of the text.
- Key details reveal the content and tone of an image or a text.
- Reading informational texts about the cultural and historic context of a work of art deepens our understanding of the work.
- The point of view of the photographer/author shapes the content of a text.



Dorothea Lange, *Mother, Nipomo California, 1936*

About the Image

In this photograph, a woman wearing torn clothes sits under a tent. She holds a sleeping baby in her arms. There are two children leaning on her shoulders, with their heads turned away from the camera. The relationship between these figures suggests that this is a mother and her family. The mother stares into the distance, and not directly at the camera. Her wrinkled forehead, pressed lips, and hand resting on her chin suggest that she's thinking deeply. But what might she be thinking about? Who is she, and why would a photographer make this portrait of her and her family?

Photographer Dorothea Lange created this portrait in March of 1936. Lange made many notes about the scene. She wrote that the family lived in a pea picker camp in Nipomo, California. The pea crop did not grow, which left many migrant workers (people who traveled to find work) and their families poor and struggling to survive. She noted that that this family was forced to sell their few belongings in order to buy food. Lange took seven photographs of this mother and her children, but did not write down anyone's name. This frame (in photography, a frame is a single image on a roll of film) became the most famous. In time, it became known simply as *Migrant Mother*. Nearly forty years later, the mother in the photograph was identified as Florence Owens Thompson.

Lange created thousands of photographs to document the poor conditions of Americans during the Great Depression (1929–1939), the period after the stock market crashed, leading to little business activity in the United States and around the world. Lange photographed workers on strike, people living on the street, and hungry families waiting in line for food. *Migrant Mother* was just one of many images of the hundreds of thousands of desperate farming families who were forced to leave their homes in search of work. Some farmers couldn't make enough money to keep their lands because of the struggling economy. Other farms were abandoned because of the horrible dust storms and a lack of rain. The dust and drought made the land impossible to use in sections of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas, a region that came to be known as the Dust Bowl.

In 1935 the United States government created the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an organization to help those most affected by the Great Depression. The FSA hired photographers including Lange to record the difficult conditions in rural America during the time in images. These photographs, like *Migrant Mother*, were used to help convince Americans that people, especially those migrants camping near rural farms, were suffering and needed help. Shortly after *Migrant Mother* was taken, the photograph was printed in a newspaper with the title "Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squaller." [squaller is another spelling of squalor] As a result of the image, the government rushed 20,000 pounds of food to the camp where the family was staying. It is now one of the most famous images of the Great Depression, and one of the best-known American photographs ever made.

Lesson Steps

1. Guide a close reading of Migrant Mother: Display the image. (<http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29516/>). Use the following questions to guide students in a close reading of the image:

- Describe what you see and notice.
- Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- What can you tell about how the photographer made the picture?
- What do we learn about the people in the photograph? How?
- Can you tell where and when this image might have been made? If so, how?
- What is the mood or feeling of the image? How is that communicated?
- What do we know for certain?
- What assumptions might we have made?
- Can you tell how the photographer feels about her subjects? If so—how?
- Do you feel any personal connections to this work? Explain.

2. Discuss a caption: Explain that photographer Dorothea Lange created this image and several others when she met this family in March, 1936. Share and discuss the caption that Lange wrote for another photograph of the same mother and children:

“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.” (http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html)

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



3. Share an informational text: Have students read text on Migrant Mother and text on the Dust Bowl (see resource list).

4. Consider Lange's additional frames: Tell students that Dorothea Lange took seven frames of the scene that day. Have them look carefully at each of the frames here <http://www.mocp.org/education/resources/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother-and-the-documentary-tradition.php> and respond to these questions:

- 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 five images to reproduce and distribute?
- For what reasons do you think this image became so famous or iconic over time?



Dorothea Lange,
Ditched, Stalled and Stranded, San Joaquin Valley California, 1935



Dorothea Lange,
Yazoo Delta, Mississippi, 1938

5. Connect *Migrant Mother* to the larger context of the FSA and documentary photography: Explain that the images made by Dorothea Lange and other Farm Security Administration photographers are considered to be documentary photographs—they were intended to record history and tell the story of a time, place, or a group of people. While many of the FSA photographers pursued their individual interests in what they photographed, they were ultimately working on assignment for the US government. Their images were used in part to promote government programs and were eventually archived in the Library of Congress. The FSA photographers did not have control over how the images they created were reproduced, distributed, or archived. Have students discuss the following questions:

- 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?
- What are some of the rights and responsibilities of those who tell the stories of others through photographs or words?
- Why would the FSA hire photographers to document the people and the places affected by the Dust Bowl?
- Now that you have learned much more about this work, how have your perceptions of *Migrant Mother* (the image, as well as the woman depicted) changed?

Extension Activities

- **Plan a Documentary Project**

Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s and early 1940s used photography to record and respond to great issues of their time such as joblessness, homelessness, and natural and man-made disasters. Divide students into groups and have each group discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the major political and humanitarian issues of our time?
- What are some issues of concern at your school or in your neighborhood?
- 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?

Have members of each group share their ideas with the rest of the class.



Dorothea Lange,
Toward Los Angeles, California, 1936



Dorothea Lange,
Texas Farmers in California, Marysville Migrant Camp (R.A.), August 1935

Migrations: What would you take?

Many of the families impacted by the Dustbowl left their homes quickly, taking with them only the few belongings they could fit in their car and then embarked on long journeys often not knowing where they might end up and what they might do for work, food, and shelter. They felt pushed away from their homes by poor living conditions and pulled toward lands where they heard there might be more opportunity. Work and resources were scarce everywhere during this time and the “migrants” were not often wanted or welcome in the places they moved to.

Imagine you must leave your home, possibly forever, and you can only bring what you can fit in your backpack.

- What would you pack? Why?
- What would you want to take? What would you need to take?
- What might you have to leave behind that would be difficult?
- What might you think about and how would you feel as you made these decisions?
- Write and draw about what you would take or draw the contents of your bag.

Migrations: Push and Pull Factors

Ask students to do additional reading from the below resource list or have a class discussion on the causes and effects of the Dust Bowl, then discuss the following questions.

- What are some of the factors that pushed Dust Bowl migrants to flee their homes and pulled them to migrate elsewhere?
- What issues and situations did they encounter on this journey and once they reached their destinations?
- Can you think of examples from recent history or that you have studied in school where a group migrated to a new location?
- What push and pull factors contributed to their migration?
- What do you know and can you learn about what they experienced in that new place.
- Did they find opportunities?
- Were they accepted or did they experience tensions in the communities they joined as the “Okies” often experienced during their migration?

Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother and Dust Bowl Recommended Resources

Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936

Plus the six additional frames Dorothea Lange made that day. Note: rights to these images are held by the Library of Congress and the public has free and open access to using these images. See: http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html

Fictional:

Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.

Janke, Katelan. *Dear America Survival in the Storm: The Dust Bowl Diary of Grace Edwards*. New York: Scholastic, 2002. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Viking Press, 1939.

Non-Fiction/Informational Text:

Dorothea Lange's caption for the image that came to be known as Migrant Mother:

"Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. 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." http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html

Dorothea Lange's Field Notes:

"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 she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that 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 that 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." (From: Popular Photography, Feb. 1960).

Additional Non-Fiction Texts:

Library of Congress- AMERICAN MEMORY DUST BOWL HOME PAGE:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/dust-bowl-migration/>

Partridge, Elizabeth. *Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange*.

New York: Puffin, Penguin Group USA, 2001

Nardo, Don. *Migrant Mother: How a Photograph defined the Great Depression*. North Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, 2011.

Sandler, Martin W. *The Dust Bowl Through the Lens: How Photography Revealed and Helped Remedy a National Disaster*. New York: Walker & Co, 2009

Guiberson, Brenda Z. *Disasters: Natural and Man-Made Catastrophes through the Centuries*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2010.

Stanley, Jerry. *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*, New York: Crown, 1992.

PBS and Ken Burns: The Dust Bowl video clips

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/watch-videos/#2284398428>

Library of Congress Primary Sources:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/dust-bowl-migration/>

Maps:

This map outlines the states considered to be Dust Bowl states and the states damaged by the storms. <http://capita.wustl.edu/namaerosol/Dust%20Bowl%20map.htm>

A map-based interface that sorts the Farm Security Administration images by region and photographer: <http://photogrammar.yale.edu/map/>

Dust Bowl Timeline: <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm>

Audio Files:

- Recording and biographical information of Florence Thompson, the subject of "Migrant Mother." http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/movies/thompson_water_06.html
- The musical recordings and song lyrics of Woody Guthrie <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/>
- There are more than 200 interviews of Dust Bowl refugees in audio file form, available from the Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tshome.html>