

“You put your camera around your neck along with putting on your shoes, and there it is, an appendage of the body that shares your life with you. The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.”

- Dorothea Lange



The insightful and compassionate photographs of Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) have exerted a profound influence on the development of modern documentary photography. Lange’s concern for people, her appreciation of the ordinary, and the striking empathy she showed for her subjects make her unique among photographers of her day. The Art Department of the Oakland Museum of California holds the largest and most comprehensive collection of the work of Dorothea Lange, representing every facet of a long and varied career. Beginning as a commercial portrait photographer in 1920s San Francisco, Lange’s early documentary work included images of Native Americans, made on travels to the Southwest with her first husband, painter Maynard Dixon. By the early 1930s, studio work seemed limited and static to Lange; almost intuitively, she took her camera to the streets, to the breadlines, waterfront strikes, and down-and-out people of Depression-era San Francisco. In 1935 Lange began her landmark work for the California and Federal Resettlement Administrations (later the Farm Security Administration).

Collaborating with her second husband, labor economist Paul Schuster Taylor, she documented the troubled exodus of farm families escaping the dust bowl as they migrated West in search of work. Lange’s documentary style achieved its fullest expression in these years, with photographs such as “Migrant Mother” becoming instantly recognized symbols of the migrant experience. Coupled with Taylor’s essays and captions, her photographs were hailed as persuasive evidence of the urgent need for government programs to assist disadvantaged Americans.

Although the coming of World War II brought an end to Lange’s FSA work, the war opened a new chapter in her life as a photographer. During the War, Lange documented the forced relocation of Japanese American citizens to internment camps; recorded the efforts of women and minority workers in wartime industries at California shipyards; and covered the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco. Only illness prevented her from completing a 1940 Simon Guggenheim Foundation grant to travel the country photographing the American people.

This dedication and compassion drove Lange even during the final years of her life. In the 1950s and 60s, she produced vivid photographic essays on Ireland, Asia, Egypt, Midwestern utopian communities, and the post-war industrial scene of the Bay Area.



### *Migrant Mother, 1936*



The image of a worn, weather-beaten woman, a look of desperation on her face, two children leaning on her shoulders, an infant in her lap; has become a photographic icon of the Great Depression in America. The photo was taken in March 1936 at a camp for seasonal agricultural workers 175 miles north of Los Angeles by Dorothea Lange. Lange was working for the Farm Security Administration as part of a team of photographers documenting the impact of federal programs in improving rural conditions.

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In 1960, Lange described her experience in an interview with the magazine *Popular Photography*.

"It was raining, the camera bags were packed, and I had on the seat beside me in the car the results of my long trip, the box containing all those rolls and packs of exposed film ready to mail back to Washington. It was a time of relief. Sixty-five miles an hour for seven hours would get me home to my family that night, and my eyes were glued to the wet and gleaming highway that stretched out ahead. I felt freed, for I could lift my mind off my job and think of home.

I was on my way and barely saw a crude sign with pointing arrow which flashed by at the side of the road, saying PEA-PICKERS CAMP. But out of the corner of my eye I did see it I didn't want to stop, and didn't. I didn't want to remember that I had seen it, so I drove on and ignored the summons. Then, accompanied by the rhythmic hum of the windshield wipers, arose an inner argument:

Dorothea, how about that camp back there? What is the situation back there?

Are you going back?

Nobody could ask this of you, now could they?

To turn back certainly is not necessary. Haven't you plenty if negatives already on this subject? Isn't this just one more if the same? Besides, if you take a camera out in this rain, you're just asking for trouble. Now be reasonable, etc. etc., etc.

Having well convinced myself for 20 miles that I could continue on, I did the opposite. Almost without realizing what I was doing I made a U-turn on the empty highway. I went back those 20 miles and turned off the highway at that sign, PEA-PICKERS CAMP.

I was following instinct, not reason; I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon.

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 32. 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.

The pea crop at Nipomo had frozen and there was no work for anybody. But I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers. It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment."

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After returning home, Lange alerted the editor of a San Francisco newspaper to the plight of the workers at the camp, presenting him with two of her photos. The editor informed federal authorities and published an article that included Lange's images. As a result, the government rushed a shipment of 20,000 lbs. of food to the camp. The photos' wider impact included influencing John Steinbeck in the writing of his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

