

Dorothea Lange used photography to make an ugly world beautiful

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.15.20

Word Count **625**

Level **580L**

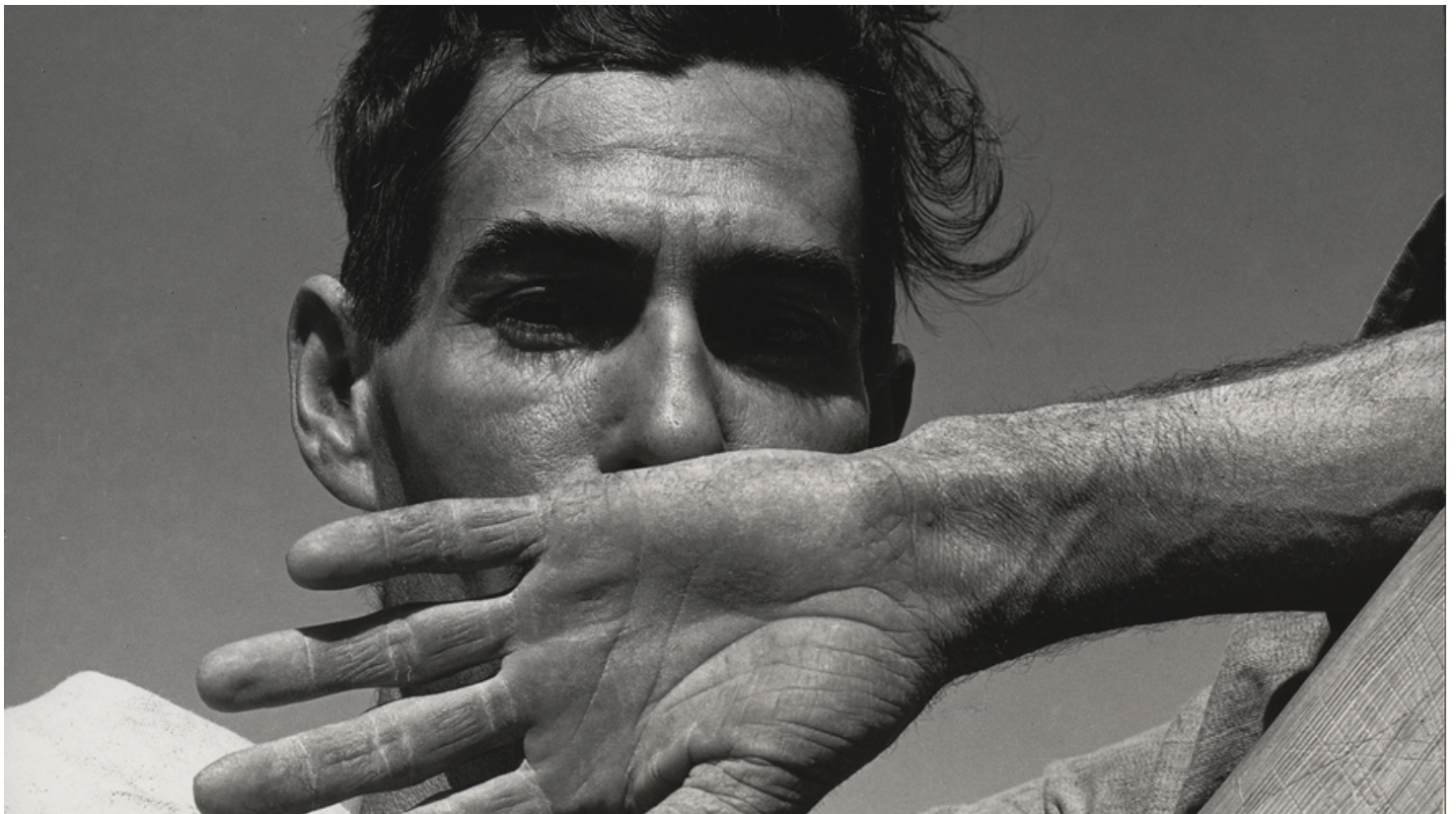


Image 1. "Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona" (November 1940) by Dorothea Lange. Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Dorothea Lange was an American photographer. She is most known for her work during the Great Depression.

In 1929, the American market collapsed. Banks and businesses closed. About one-fourth of Americans did not have jobs. This period of time was called the Great Depression. It lasted until the early 1940s.

Things got worse. In the 1930s, the central part of the United States experienced a drought. A lot of farmers lived and grew crops there. They had to leave to find a new job. The Farm Security Administration was a government agency at the time. In 1935, it paid Lange to take pictures of this area and the people there.

An exhibition of Lange's photos opened on February 9 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The museum is called the MoMA, for short. The exhibit is titled, "Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures."

Most Famous Photograph

Lange's most famous photograph is "Migrant Mother." It shows a woman who, while tired, is also beautiful. Her beauty is not often talked about. Rather, Lange's photographs are surrounded by words. They are often tied to a larger conversation about poverty and despair in America during the Depression.

"Migrant Mother" was made in 1936. The picture was not known by that title until 1952. The woman in the image is Florence Owens Thompson. She was not named until 1978. She is a symbol of American suffering and strength. She is also Cherokee, a Native American tribe, which was not stated for tens of years.

Words are tied to photographs all the time. However, that has not always been the case. Some believe good photographs should not need explaining. Photography is art. Art is independent. Therefore, photographs should be able to stand alone.

Strong Images

Lange made some of the strongest images over the past 100 years. Even though her images were so strong, Lange believed words can always strengthen a photograph.

"All photographs — not only those that are so called 'documentary' ... can be fortified by words," Lange said. Lange's images brought attention to social problems. They often needed to be strengthened against a lack of interest or disbelief.

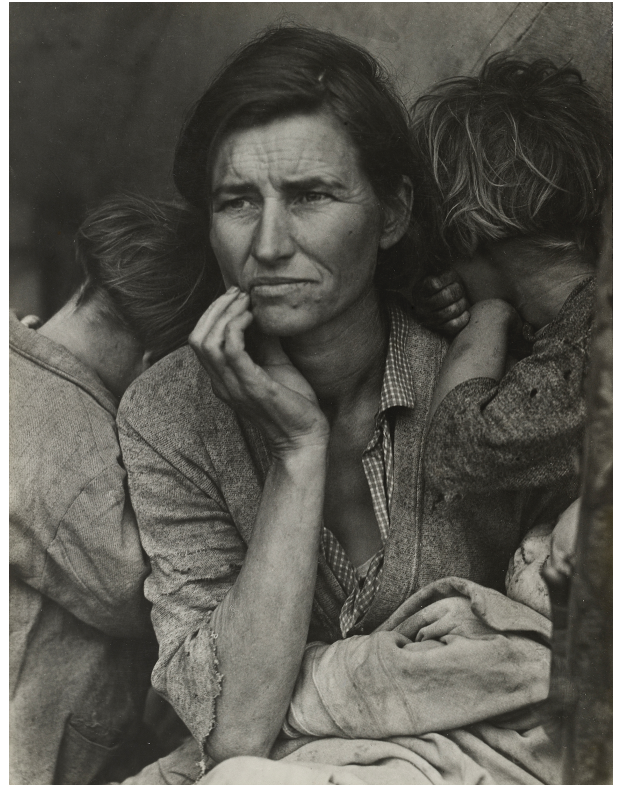
Many of Lange's images appeared in magazines or books called phototexts. She also took field notes while photographing. In the 1930s, she worked with her husband, Paul Schuster Taylor. He was an economist. They reported information to the government about people's lives during the Great Depression.

Images can also be altered to change their truth. In 1940, MoMA printed "Migrant Mother" in a news report. The picture appeared much lighter than other versions. The woman looks white. The printing feels like it is erasing Thompson's racial identity as a Native American.

Knew What Makes A Photograph Interesting

Lange knew what makes a face interesting. The beauty in her photographs creates a desire to know more about them. Beauty, for Lange, was foundational to photography. She always found strong visual images.

One haunting photo is "Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas." In it, an empty house sits alone in a field. The picture shows the suffering of farmers during the Dust Bowl. It is also a beautiful image.



Lange once said, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera." She could make perfect images. The picture, though, always had a greater meaning. The camera could help one see both beauty and ugliness in the world.

Many photographers feared that words might distract you from the photograph. Lange understood that was exactly the point.



Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Knew What Makes A Photograph Interesting."
Select the sentence from the section that explains HOW Dorothea Lange felt about photography.
- (A) Lange knew what makes a face interesting.
 - (B) One haunting photo is "Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas."
 - (C) Lange once said, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."
 - (D) Many photographers feared that words might distract you from the photograph.
- 2 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].
Which sentence explains a reason WHY Dorothea Lange took many photographs of the Great Depression?
- (A) She is most known for her work during the Great Depression.
 - (B) About one-fourth of Americans did not have jobs.
 - (C) In the 1930s, the central part of the United States experienced a drought.
 - (D) In 1935, it paid Lange to take pictures of this area and the people there.
- 3 According to the section "Strong Images," WHY did Dorothea Lange include words with her photographs?
- (A) Words help her photographs tell a bigger story.
 - (B) Photographs would not make sense without words to explain them.
 - (C) She wanted others to know the names of the people in her images.
 - (D) She added words because she forgot what her images showed.
- 4 How did Dorothea Lange want her photographs to affect people?
- (A) She wanted people to think about the problems that many others face.
 - (B) She wanted people to feel confused about the stories her photographs told.
 - (C) She wanted people to feel upset at how ugly her photographs were.
 - (D) She wanted people to give money to help those shown in her images.

Answer Key

- 1 Read the section "Knew What Makes A Photograph Interesting."
Select the sentence from the section that explains HOW Dorothea Lange felt about photography.
- (A) Lange knew what makes a face interesting.
 - (B) One haunting photo is "Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas."
 - (C) Lange once said, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."**
 - (D) Many photographers feared that words might distract you from the photograph.
- 2 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].
Which sentence explains a reason WHY Dorothea Lange took many photographs of the Great Depression?
- (A) She is most known for her work during the Great Depression.
 - (B) About one-fourth of Americans did not have jobs.
 - (C) In the 1930s, the central part of the United States experienced a drought.
 - (D) In 1935, it paid Lange to take pictures of this area and the people there.**
- 3 According to the section "Strong Images," WHY did Dorothea Lange include words with her photographs?
- (A) Words help her photographs tell a bigger story.**
 - (B) Photographs would not make sense without words to explain them.
 - (C) She wanted others to know the names of the people in her images.
 - (D) She added words because she forgot what her images showed.
- 4 How did Dorothea Lange want her photographs to affect people?
- (A) She wanted people to think about the problems that many others face.**
 - (B) She wanted people to feel confused about the stories her photographs told.
 - (C) She wanted people to feel upset at how ugly her photographs were.
 - (D) She wanted people to give money to help those shown in her images.