

Migrant Mother

Migrant Mother is the most famous of Dorothea Lange's photographs, as well as one of the most well-known from the time of the Great Depression between the 1920s and 1940s. At the time the photograph was taken, Lange was working for the California Rural Rehabilitation Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Her job was to travel and take pictures to report on the living conditions of migrant workers and their families. In Nipomo, California, in 1936, Dorothea saw the woman in her famous photograph and approached her. The woman, aged thirty-two, was seated with her seven children at a destitute pea pickers camp. The following is an account of the experience in Lange's own words:

"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, and 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." (Lange 1960).

Migrant Mother was taken in February or March of 1936. Lange used a Graflex camera to capture these images. Lange did pose this photograph, and never asked the woman's name, possibly to typify the experience as a whole, not as an individual. There were originally six 4" x 5" negatives taken of this woman and her seven children, although one of them was never received by the Library of Congress.

In the photograph, a Caucasian mother cradles her baby in her lap, while two young children cling to her sides, their faces turned from the camera. The woman, whose face is already extremely wrinkled and dirty, is facing the camera, but her eyes are looking beyond the camera. What was Dorothea Lange trying to say with this image, in which the main subject is looking beyond the camera? Perhaps she is implying that this family is ashamed of their poverty and misfortune, and that they feel they are not good enough to look directly into the camera. The photograph makes the woman appear unhappy and exhausted.

Most of the photograph is very dark, eliminating all details but the portrait of the family. Lange eliminated the background as she moved in closer to photograph the young family. Lange revealed that she did this to accentuate the human element of the Depression, rather than the setting. The children are an important part of this photograph because they help the audience see that the Depression affected children as well as adults.

Compositionally, the children in the photograph form a triangle around their mother, accentuating the mother's face. The woman's face is brightly lit, drawing your attention right to it. The light of the woman's face is in a type of skeletal shape, which may be a subtle reflection of her pervading hunger.

This photograph reveals the woman's hardships and inner strength. It reflects the hardships of life—like hunger, failure, unhappiness, and shame—but it also reveals love, trust, hard work, and dedication. You can see all these things in the way Dorothea Lange has presented the photograph (i.e., through the lighting, the skeletal face shape, the faces turned away, the children holding onto their mother, and the mother holding her baby). This photograph differs from the regular portraits of families, in which the subjects face the camera, because it exemplifies both the physical condition and feelings of the family.

The FSA (Farm Security Act) photography project was active from 1937-1942. Roy Emerson Stryker, the head of this government project, hired many photographers—including Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Ben Shahn—to document the plight of rural Americans during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. As the project developed, photographers also began to record life in urban areas as well. Specific subjects and geographic locations were assigned to the photographers. The main office in Washington, D.C. maintained files of photographs deemed suitable and distributed them to newspapers, magazines, and book publishers. As a result of this project, 77,000 black-and-white and 644 color documentary still photographs were produced that depicted life in the United States during this difficult period in U.S. history. When speaking about the other documentary photographs while working for the FSA, Parks (1979) said, "Their memorable photographs, full of tolerance of the poor, indicted America and could only have been done under a president like Roosevelt." (Mitchell, Martin-Hamon, and Anderson 2002, p. 24).

Lange's *Migrant Mother* was chosen to represent a lesson on migrant workers because it is popular, and because it is a truthful depiction of the living conditions and emotional experiences of migrant workers during the Depression. The tenderness portrayed between family members and the message beneath the surface elicit a variety of responses that support the multiple uses of this photograph in the classroom.

References:

Lange, Dorothea. "The Assignment I'll Never Forget." *Popular Photography* (Feb. 1960).

Mitchell, K., A. Martin-Hamon, and E. Anderson. "A Choice of Weapons: Photographs of Gordon Parks." *Art Education*. Alexandria, VA: NAEA, March 2002, 25-31.