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Images as Historical Document - The Photography of Dorothea Lange and the WPA

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Images as Historical Document - The Photography of Dorothea Lange and the WPA
They say a picture paints a 1,000 words

- Can a photograph provide historians with information about the past?
- If yes, how does a photograph provide information?
- What type of information is provided?
  - If no, why not?
- Would you consider photography the closest art form to reality? Why or why not?
Analyzing Photography as Primary Source Material

• Photography, like all art forms can provide a visual glimpse into a certain period of time, a given society, or an individual’s life.

• Art is often reactionary and such, can serve as a social commentary as well.

• It requires the historian to ask questions of the material.

• Often times these questions are guided by the prior knowledge of historian.

• Through analysis and other types of source material, a historian can make some concrete assumptions about the subject they are researching.
But what questions should be asked in regards to art?

What is it made of (medium)?

Who was it made for (audience) – private or public, individual or group?

What was the purpose or function of the piece – utilitarian, ritual, decorative, other?

How was it made?

What are the stylistic qualities of the piece?

Does it show any of the following - (class/race/gender/power):

What does the piece say about this period of history in regards to its people and society?
Who is Dorothea Lange?

• Born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1895
• Studied photography in New York City before the WWI
• In 1919, she moved to San Francisco, where she earned her living as a portrait photographer for more than a decade.
• During the Depression's early years Lange's interest in social issues grew
Who is Dorothea Lange?

• In 1934 she met Paul Taylor, an associate professor of economics at the University of California at Berkeley,

• Taylor and Lange decided to document California migrant workers and their hardship.

• They photographed workers in Nipomo and the Imperial Valley for the California State Emergency Relief Administration – A division of the Works Progress Administration
The Photographer
Sharecroppers
Refugee Camp by Holtville
Drought Refugee
Okies Washing in a Hot Spring in the Desert
Migrant Worker Camps
Waiting for Relief Checks
Japanese Interment Round Ups
Migrant Mother
Migrant Mother
Migrant Mother
Migrant Mother
Migrant Mother
Migrant Mother

Florence Thompson and her daughters Norma Rydlewska (in front), Katherine McIntosh, and Ruby Sprague, at Norma's house, Modesto, CA, June 1979, by Bill Ganzel. To hear Florence's story, click here.

Migrant Mother [Florence Thompson with her daughters], Nipomo, CA, March 1936, by Dorothea Lange.
Lesson Plan

• Start with the two pre-teach questions to gather students’ prior knowledge
• Start the Power Point.
• The slide about how to analyze art will help get your students into the mindset for analysis.
• Continue the Power Point by asking these questions for each slide.
• Before slide 22 stop and have the students read the article about the subject of *Migrant Mother* - Florence Owens Thompson
Lesson Plan

After reading the article ask students the following questions:
1. Ask if their responses to the pre-teach questions align with what they read?
2. Does photography offer true objectivity to the historian? Why or why not?
3. Why should a historian not rely solely on photograph to understand an event?
4. What are some other primary sources that compliment the use of photography in analysis?
Pre-teach exercise - Before the class lecture have students answer the follow questions while examining the image Migrant Mother.

• Answer the following questions in complete sentences PRIOR to reading the article. Make sure to develop your answers and use analysis from the photograph to help support your positions.

• 1. What might the woman be thinking about? Why do you think so?

 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________

• 2. Why do you think Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange was effective in persuading people to support FDR’s relief programs?

 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
 ______________________________________________________
Now have students read the following article about *Migrant Mother*

The photograph popularly known as “Migrant Mother” has become an icon of the Great Depression. The compelling image of a mother and her children is actually one of a series of photographs that Dorothea Lange made in February or March of 1936 in Nipomo, California. Seeing the photograph in the context of related images, understanding the purpose for which it was made, and knowing something of the photographer's and subject's views of the occasion amplify our perspectives on the image, and, at the same time, suggest that no single meaning can be assigned to it.

Lange made the photographs toward the end of a month's trip photographing migratory farm labor for what was then the Resettlement Administration, later to become the Farm Security Administration. Her work was part of the administration's larger effort to document economic and social distress among the nation's agricultural workers and to advertise the agency's relief programs and the measures it was taking to address underlying causes of the dislocation. In 1960, Lange gave this account of the photographic encounter:

“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.”


Whatever the woman, Florence Owens Thompson, thought of Lange's actions at the time, she came to regret that Lange ever made the photographs, which she felt permanently colored her with a “Grapes of Wrath” stereotype. Thompson, a Native American from Oklahoma, had already lived in California for a decade when Lange photographed her. The immediate popularity of the images in the press did nothing to alleviate the financial distress that had spurred the family to seek seasonal agricultural work. Contrary to the despairing immobility the famous image seems to embody, however, Thompson was an active participant in farm labor struggles in the 1930s, occasionally serving as an organizer. Her daughter later commented, “She was a very strong woman. She was a leader. I think that’s one of the reasons she resented the photo—because it didn't show her in that light.”