

Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother), Dorothea Lange

Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother)

Dorothea Lange

American, Nipomo, California, 1936

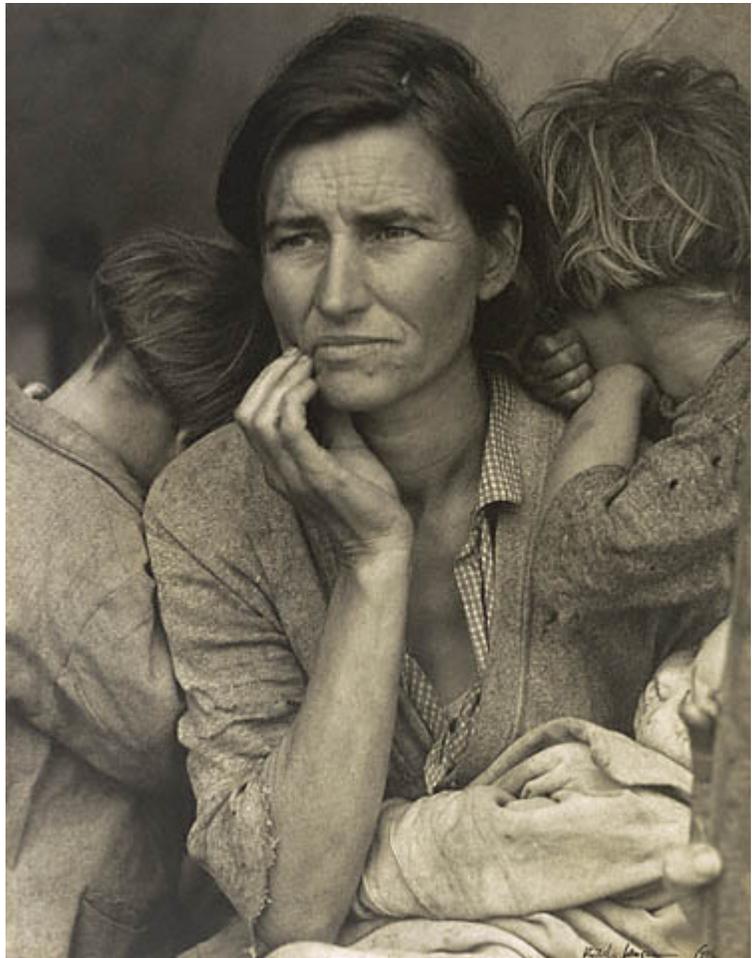
Gelatin silver print

13 7/16 x 10 9/16 in.

98.XM.162

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother . . . She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. . . that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed." —Dorothea Lange

Dorothea Lange's poignant image of a mother and her children on the brink of starvation is as moving today as when it first appeared in 1936. Lange took five pictures of this striking woman, who lived in a makeshift shelter with her husband and seven children in a Nipomo, California, pea-picker's camp. Within twenty-four hours of making the photographs, Lange presented them to an editor at the *San Francisco News*, who alerted the federal government to the migrants' plight. The newspaper then printed two of Lange's images with a report that the government was rushing in 20,000 pounds of food, to rescue the workers.



Lange made this photograph while working for the Resettlement Administration, a government agency dedicated to documenting the devastating effects of the Depression during the 1930s. Her image depicts the hardship endured by migratory farm workers and provides evidence of the compelling power of photographs to move people to action.

About the Artist

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965)

"One should really use the camera as though tomorrow you'd be stricken blind. To live a visual life is an enormous undertaking, practically unattainable. I have only touched it, just touched it."
—Dorothea Lange

Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother), Dorothea Lange

Thus wrote photographer Dorothea Lange of her extraordinary life and career. She worked for Arnold Genthe in his portrait studio in New York and studied photography with Clarence White at Columbia University. In 1918 she began to travel around the world to make her living as a photographer. She found herself stranded in San Francisco, so she opened a photographic studio there. Paul Taylor, who would become her second husband, hired her to document migratory workers in California.

In 1935 she began to work for the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration). During this period, she made her most famous image, *Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother)*. Other less famous subjects included Japanese internment camps and scenes of workers in factories during World War II. Lange became the first woman awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, and she spent nearly ten years making photo essays for *Life* and other magazines. She also traveled extensively, producing photo essays in Vietnam, Ireland, Pakistan, India, and elsewhere.

Questions for Teaching

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image. (In this image a woman appears with three children. The woman is holding a baby, while two older children lean on her shoulders while turning their faces away from the camera. The woman holds the side of her face in her right hand while pulling back the flap of a tent with her left hand. The clothing of the woman and children seems tattered and worn. The woman does not make eye contact with the camera but looks into the distance with knitted eyebrows. Although the age of the woman's children indicates that she may be young, her face appears weather-beaten and exhausted. In the bottom-right corner the image is signed by the photographer.)

This image was taken during the Great Depression when many families lived in total poverty. What reactions do you think Lange wanted to evoke with this image? What do you see that makes you think that? (Above all, this image was intended to promote empathy for the figures Lange represents and eventually to correct social problems. The squalid living conditions and the expression of exhaustion on the mother's face strongly evoke feelings of sympathy for migrant workers. This picture has remained one of the most famous and enduring images ever captured because it effectively communicates the weariness and sense of hopelessness of the Great Depression.)

This image expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here? (The woman's arm becomes a strong vertical *line*, leading the viewer's eye up towards her face. The woman and the two older children are arranged in a pyramidal *shape*, further drawing the viewer's attention towards the woman's face at the apex of the pyramid. *Value* is also interesting in this image. Note the contrast in value between the pale skin of the sleeping baby and the rest of the figures who are darkened by their exposure to the sun while working in the fields. *Space* is also important in this image. The picture is tightly cropped around the figure of the woman, which creates emphasis on the facial expression and body language of the woman, rather than the setting.)

