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Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression

James C. Curtis

Claim of fact: this is how it happened.

A COLD, RAINY AFTERNOON in March 1936 a government photographer named Dorothea Lange made a brief visit to a camp of migrant pea pickers near Nipomo, California. She took a series of pictures of a thirty-two-year-old woman seated under a makeshift tent with her children. One of these images soon became known as *Migrant Mother* and has been called the most famous documentary photograph of the 1930s. "When Dorothea took that picture, that was the ultimate," recalled Roy Stryker, head of the government project that employed Lange. "To me, it was the picture of Farm Security. The others were marvelous but that was special."¹

After its publication in 1936, *Migrant Mother* became a timeless and universal symbol of suffering in the face of adversity. The image was reproduced repeatedly, even retitled and refashioned to serve other causes in other cultures. In his introduction to the Museum of Modern Art's 1966 retrospective of Lange's work, critic George P. Elliott maintained that *Migrant Mother* had developed "a life of its own" with "its own message rather than its maker's." "There is a sense," he continued, "in

2nd paragraph: context for how the photograph has previously been interpreted. Involves restating or summarizing others' claims. Deploying Elliott to show how the photograph was understood.

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which a photographer's apothecary is as anonymous as his camera. . . . "Dorothea Lange," he concludes, "is a great, perfect, anonymous image about which she can do little beyond making herself available for that gift of grace."²

problem statement begins--what's missing from these previous interpretations

Lost in the appreciation of *Migrant Mother* as a timeless work of art is its personal and cultural genesis. Like many documentary photographers, Lange thought of herself as a clinical observer committed to a direct, unmanipulated recording of contemporary events. On the door of her darkroom, she displayed the following quotation from Francis Bacon:

The contemplation of things
Without substitution or im
Without error or confusion
Is in itself a nobler thing
Than a whole harvest of ir

acknowledgement that yes, she was a documentary photographer. Qualification

² George P. Elliott, *Dorothea Lange* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 7. The best studies of Lange's life are Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978); and Karin B. Ohrn, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980). In addition to Elliott, *Lange*, the best collections of Lange's photographs are Therese Thau Heyman, *Celebrating a Collection: The Work of Dorothea Lange* (Oakland, Calif.: Oakland Museum, 1978); Robert Coles, *Dorothea Lange: Photographs of a Lifetime* (New York: Aperture, 1982); and Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939).

³ The source for this translation is a memorial tribute to Lange by Wayne Miller, reproduced in Dorothea Lange, *The Making of a Documentary Photographer*, interview by Suzanne Riess, 1960 (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, 1968), p. 245. If this was the exact quotation that Lange pinned to her darkroom door it was a loose translation of section 129 in Bacon's *Novum Organum*. Most translators agree that the wording of the second line should be "Without superstition or imposture" (emphasis added).

biography and culture will explain the image better than the subject.

Problem statement-- something that the scholar is going to add to the discussion of her work.

Lange believed that to stray from this creative record only one's preconceptions; to her "false" and limiting. Yet the power of Lange came directly from her own personal values from her heartfelt need to communicate with her contemporaries in terms that they would understand. While not inventions, the exposures Lange took on that chilly and damp March afternoon reveal more about the photographer and her audience than about the life of *Migrant Mother*.

This is not to argue that Lange broke faith with the documentary tradition, but only that our understanding of that tradition is somewhat limited. Recent definitions of documentary photography have concentrated on the act of taking pictures and the bearing a photographer's motives had on that decisive moment: honesty, directness, a lack of manipulation—these qualities distinguish the work of documentarians who are often regarded as sociologists with cameras. However insightful and persuasive this line of argument is, it obscures the artistic ambitions of influential figures like Lange and Walker Evans.⁴ They knew from experience that nobility of purpose and commitment to human betterment were not guarantees of success. They had to produce images of technical distinction and aesthetic merit in order to communicate effectively with their audience.

As a professional artist who took pride in her work, Lange was constantly concerned with the critical second stage of the documentary process: public recognition and acceptance. So long as she remained inside her San Francisco portrait studio, Lange had only to satisfy the needs of her patrons. The onset of the Great Depression disrupted her commercial enterprise, not by depriving her of customers, but by intruding a compelling question. How could she focus exclusively on well-to-do sitters when the unemployed gathered in relief lines near her studio? When she decided to take her camera into the streets, Lange assumed a new set of obligations. To succeed as an advocate of the downtrodden, she had to communicate with a jury of newspaper editors, book and magazine pub-

trons of the arts, and government buyers. By winning their support she might reach a larger audience, thereby gaining recognition for herself and for the cause of her subjects.

Time and circumstance were in her favor.

Although experiencing the early stages of a communications revolution, depression America was not yet saturated with images. Motion pictures exerted an enormous influence on popular culture, creating at once an interest in visual arts and an acceptance of contemporary events as appropriate subject matter for education and entertainment. Illustrated news magazines would build upon that appeal, but not until the late 1930s. At that time many of Lange's colleagues found work with publications like *Life*, where new canons of photography emerged and sensationalism often outweighed aesthetics. As a result, the photographic essay came to replace the single image as an accepted means of documentary reportage. Although the pictures from the *Migrant Mother* series were first published in a San Francisco newspaper, the enterprise belongs in the realm of art rather than photojournalism. As the several exposures she took of the scene show, Lange sought to create a transcendent image that would communicate her sense of the migrants' condition. She created a portrait that incorporated elements she knew her contemporaries would understand and find worthy of support.

In addition to being a timeless work of art, *Migrant Mother* is a vital reflection of the times. Examined in its original context, the series reveals powerful cultural forces of the 1930s: the impact of the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of American life; the anxiety about the status and solidarity of the family in an era of urbanization and modernization; a need to atone for the guilt induced by the destruction of cherished ideals, and a craving for reassurance that democratic traditions would stand the test of modern times.

When she took the *Migrant Mother* series, Lange was not a lonely artist wandering California in search of subject matter. She was a salaried employee of the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (RA). Created in 1935, RA was the brainchild of Rexford Tugwell, Franklin Roosevelt's brilliant but controversial adviser whose investigations of rural America generated heated debate in the mid 1930s. Tugwell believed that worn-out land was a major source of agrarian poverty; he hoped to identify submarginal terrain and then resettle its inhabitants on more productive soil and in progressive agricultural units. He

The use of *substitution* implies that Lange might have adhered to an even stricter definition of observation than Bacon advocated, but one that is more relevant to the debate on the nature of the documentary method.

⁴ For a basic definition of the theory and practice of documentary photography, see William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). For a reappraisal that concentrates on Walker Evans, see James C. Curtis and Sheila Grannen, "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 1–23.

charged the Historical Section with the task of compiling visual evidence to accompany the massive educational campaign that RA would mount to achieve its goals. Tugwell chose his former teaching assistant at Columbia University, Roy Stryker, to head the photographic project. Having previously selected the illustrations for Tugwell's *American Economic Life*, Stryker believed that photographs could be persuasive documents.⁵

No photographer himself, Stryker had the good sense to hire artists with solid credentials. Walker Evans joined the project in autumn 1935, having previously done some commercial photography for the Museum of Modern Art. Known for the purity of his technique and the directness of his documentary styling, Evans had little prior exposure to rural poverty. Arthur Rothstein, a former chemistry student at Columbia, had mastered the technical aspects of photography but like Evans had limited fieldwork training. When Lange joined RA, also in the fall of 1935, she brought a wealth of experience as a portrait photographer, strong connections with artists in California, and, most important, new and dramatic photographs of the suffering among California's poor.

Like its parent organization, the Historical Section sought to operate on a national scale. Initially Stryker envisioned a task force of thirty or forty photographers, fanning out from Washington and traveling across the country to compile an accurate record of the American land. They would report directly to his office which would have a central darkroom to develop negatives and make prints. Publicists working for the RA would then draw freely on this central file to supply pictures to congressional committees, investigative agencies, newspapers, and commercial publishing houses. Budgetary constraints handicapped Stryker from the beginning. He could barely equip three photographers, let alone thirty. Unsympathetic supervisors questioned the expenditure of funds on film and camera equipment, per diem expenses, and the subsidy of automobile travel. One zealous ac-

countant wondered why Evans needed a car to go to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; a round-trip train ticket would save \$1.25. Stryker patiently explained that Evans's equipment was too bulky to cart about on trains and in taxicabs.⁶

Although forced to scale down his budget, Stryker never relinquished his dream of a centralized photographic project that would produce a comprehensive record of American life. He was embarked on an educational mission, not a program to make work for his photographers. He gave them great encouragement but little leeway. Both Evans and Lange asked to keep their own negatives; Stryker refused. Their images became part of his file, and "the file" soon became the major justification for continuing the project. "I am really quite disturbed over the inability to convince our superiors of the necessity of keeping up a definite momentum in this photographic work," he wrote to Lange in 1938 shortly after the RA had been absorbed into the Department of Agriculture's Farm Security Administration (FSA). "They seem to think that because there are over 20,000 negatives in the file that our job may be pretty well done."⁷ Four years later the FSA file had quadrupled, and still Stryker was not satisfied. He passed along these frustrations to his photographers in the form of constant demands for more pictures.

Output was as important to Lange as it was to Stryker. In the field, she often recoiled from the desperate poverty arrayed before her camera. How could she justify an art that literally fed on the starvation of the poor? Frenetic effort assuaged some of her guilt. "I worked at a pace and saw conditions over which I am still speechless," she wrote to Stryker after one grueling assignment. She "encountered dust, blowing sand, and misery to an extent that" her home seemed "like a heaven."⁸ A quantity of exposed film was proof of a job thoroughly done, allowing Lange to leave the hellish environment of the migrant camps with good conscience. No matter that some of the images might be flawed; they would be useful in the file.

Lange's meeting with *Migrant Mother* came at the end of another long, arduous journey. The photographer was headed home when she passed

⁵ On Tugwell and the RA, see Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964). On Stryker and the Resettlement/Farm Security administrations photographic project, see F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972). Of the several collections of Farm Security Administration photographs, the most comprehensive is Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and Its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976). For a recent account that traces the subsequent lives of dust-bowl refugees including *Migrant Mother*, see Bill Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descendant* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

⁶ Memoranda, December 1935, Roy Stryker Collection, Photographic Archive, University of Louisville (hereafter cited as RSC).

⁷ Stryker to Lange, May 17, 1938, RSC.

⁸ Lange to Stryker, February 28, 1939, RSC.

the sign Pea-Pickers Camp. "It was raining, the camera bags were packed, and I had on the seat beside me in the car all those rolls and packs of exposed film ready to mail back to Washington." She recalled driving twenty miles toward home, trying to blot out that sign from her memory. "Haven't you plenty of negatives already on this subject?" she asked herself. "Besides if you take your cameras out in the rain you are just asking for trouble." "Almost without realizing" what she was doing, Lange turned around and drove back to the camp. She took the trouble to unload her camera and to take six pictures of the woman and her children. She remembered spending only ten minutes in front of the lean-to shelter, working closer to her subjects with each shot. She did not ask the woman's "name or her history." Nor did she "approach the tents and shelters of other pea-pickers. It was not necessary." She knew that she "had recorded the essence of [her] assignment."⁹

This brief encounter was typical of Stryker's project; his photographers were constantly on the move. They were required to cover as much territory as possible and rarely remained in one location for more than a day at a time. Lange and her colleagues became transients themselves, working out of the backs of their vehicles, traveling to unfamiliar locations, and enduring the vicissitudes of weather. When Will Rogers quipped that the United States was "the only nation in the history of the world to go to the poorhouse in an automobile," he might have added "and the only nation to hire a car and a photographer to document the exodus."¹⁰

Had Lange been at the beginning of an assignment instead of at the end that day in March, she might have stayed hours at the pea-pickers camp instead of minutes, but only to take more pictures, not to achieve greater intimacy. *Migrant Mother* remained nameless by design, not oversight. Stryker had his photographers follow contemporary social-science techniques in captioning their images. Subjects photographed, like citizens interviewed, remained anonymous.¹¹ Stripped of their identities, they became the common men and

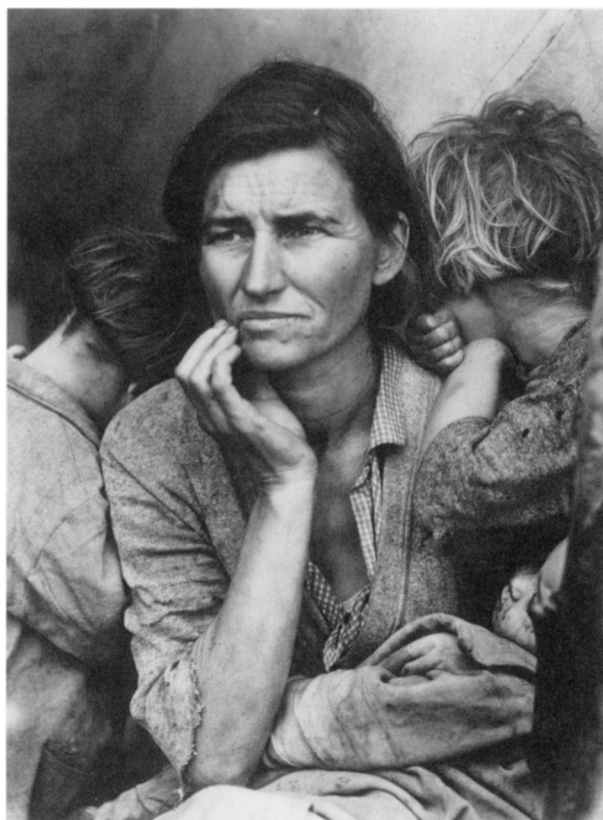


Fig. 1. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

women whose plight the Roosevelt administration was working to improve.

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet," the photographer would later say of her most famous assignment. "I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera" but moved "closer and closer from the same direction." In her approach to the tent, Lange took a series of pictures, the last of which is a closeup of *Migrant Mother* and three of her children (fig. 1). Lange did not arrive at this final composition by accident, but by patient experimentation with various poses. The images in the series comment on each other and represent a logical progression and development of subject matter. Internal evidence in each provides important information on Lange's choice of symbolism and the values she sought to communicate.¹² As a

⁹ Dorothea Lange, "The Assignment I'll Never Forget: *Migrant Mother*," *Popular Photography* 46, no. 2 (February 1960): 42-43, 128.

¹⁰ Bryan B. Sterling, comp., *The Best of Will Rogers* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1979), p. 45.

¹¹ See, particularly, Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1929). On Stryker's friendship with and admiration for Lynd, see Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade*, pp. 96-98.

¹² Lange, "Assignment," pp. 42-43. While we cannot be sure of the exact order in which she took these photographs, Lange says that she worked closer with each picture. This would make the long shots the first two in the series and *Migrant Mother* the last. In analyzing the intervening three images, I will follow the order suggested in Ohrn, *Lange*, pp. 85-87.

group, the images provide a revealing commentary on middle-class attitudes toward the family.

Lange, her biographers, and scholars of documentary photography have described the *Migrant Mother* series as consisting of the five photographs that she submitted to Stryker and that are now located in the FSA collection in the Library of Congress.¹³ Lange took an additional picture that she withheld from the government most probably for aesthetic reasons. This long shot appears to be the first in the series (fig. 2), probably taken as soon as Lange had unloaded her camera equipment from her car. By comparison with the five known exposures, it is a rather chaotic image, lacking control and a central focus. The teenage girl, seated in a rocking chair inside the tent, is turned away from the camera. One of her younger siblings stands nearby, looking at Lange but crying and making a motion with her hand that blurs the image. *Migrant Mother* is close to being crowded out of the frame; she, too, is looking away from the camera, and her posture all but obscures the fourth child. It would appear that Lange took this as a trial picture, to introduce her subjects to the photographic process and to ease them into the posing and arrangement that a portrait session required.

The trial succeeded, for in the next image the family has rearranged itself and now fits more comfortably into Lange's viewfinder (fig. 3). *Migrant Mother* looks toward the camera, as do her younger daughters, who stand, somewhat stiffly, to her right. The teenage girl poses in a stylized fashion in the rocking chair, which has been moved from inside the tent and now occupies the foreground of the picture. While better composed and more neatly arranged than her first picture, this second photograph contains confusing elements. In her caption for this photograph, Lange says that this was a "Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children and their mother aged 32. The father is a native Californian."¹⁴ Although Lange conversed enough with her subject to learn

that *Migrant Mother's* husband was a "native Californian" and thus even more deserving of relief funds than a newly arrived "Okie," she probed no further into the reasons for his absence or that of the other three children. Perhaps it was a press for time, perhaps a reluctance to learn more than she cared to know. What if the father had abandoned the family?

The father's conspicuous absence served several useful purposes. Viewers could easily presume that he was working or at least looking for work. Either interpretation highlighted the consequential cost to the remainder of the family unit. Lange's colleague Russell Lee had a similar idea in mind when he created *Christmas Dinner in Iowa* the following December (fig. 4). This photograph shows an empty place at the head of the table; the children are left to provide for themselves, their meager repast a bleak commentary on the once-proud ideal of rural self-sufficiency. Lee took another picture inside that cabin, showing the father at his traditional place; significantly, that image has rarely been published (fig. 5).¹⁵ By way of extension, Lange's famous portrait of a drought refugee family in which the focus is solely on the defiant wife nursing her child (fig. 6) is usually preferred to the variation in which the recumbent husband dominates the foreground.

In the *Migrant Mother* series, the father is missing from all the pictures; indeed, Lange's shots do not even include all the children. Three of the seven are missing. Where they were that cold March day is impossible to say. Even if they were nearby, it is quite possible that Lange chose not to include them in her photographs. Five figures posed enough of an obstacle to intimacy; one of the youngsters in the tent was smiling, thereby negating the aura of desperation the family's plight evoked.

However much logistics may have governed her decisions, Lange was undoubtedly influenced by prevailing cultural biases. A family of seven children exceeded contemporary social norms. Family size had declined in twentieth-century America. In 1900, the average family had 4.7 children; by 1920 this figure had dropped to 4.3. Among business and professional elites, groups

¹³ Lange, "Assignment," pp. 42–43, says that she "made five exposures," not six. O'Neal, *Vision Shared*, p. 76, locates the sixth photograph in the Oakland Museum but does not publish it. Heyman, *Celebrating a Collection*, n.p., refers to the series as consisting of six photographs but reproduces only four. Coles, *Lange* (put out in part by the Oakland Museum), p. 20, refers to the series as having only five photographs. That book publishes only the five now in the Library of Congress, as does Ohrn, *Lange*, pp. 79–88. The sixth picture appears without comment, along with the other five from the series, in an article by Lange's husband Paul Taylor, "Migrant Mother: 1936," *American West* 7, no. 3 (May 1970): 41–47.

¹⁴ This quotation is visible on the FSA print (neg. 9098C) in the Library of Congress.

¹⁵ Most authors, including F. Jack Hurley in *Russell Lee: Photographer* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Morgan and Morgan, 1978), p. 48, identify the location as Smithfield in contradiction of the caption on FSA neg. 10125D; Smithland is the proper name. It is located near the Little Sioux River about 25 miles southwest of Sioux City, Iowa. A companion photograph (FSA neg. 1133-M1) shows the mother of the family with two of the children.



Fig. 2. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. From Paul S. Taylor, "Migrant Mother: 1936," *American West* 7, no. 3 (May 1970): 44.



Fig. 3. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)



Fig. 4. Russell Lee, *Christmas Dinner in Iowa*, Smithland, Iowa, vicinity, December 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)



Fig. 5. Russell Lee, *Christmas dinner*, Smithland, Iowa, vicinity, December 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)



Fig. 6. Dorothea Lange, drought refugees from Oklahoma, Blythe, Calif., August 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

that weighed most heavily on public policy decisions, the ideal family contained no more than three children. While there was a rise in the rate of early marriages in the 1920s (presumably the decade when Migrant Mother married), there was an offsetting delay in the arrival of the firstborn. This came as a result of an increased acceptance of the ideals of family planning.¹⁶

Statistically, Lange's own family history conformed to these modern trends. Born Dorothea Margareta Nutzhorn in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895, Lange adopted her mother's maiden name after her father abandoned the family in 1907. Lange's mother was one of six children from a German immigrant family of professional status. Married at age twenty-one, Joan Nutzhorn was twenty-two when she bore Dorothea and twenty-eight when her second, and last, child was born. After her husband left, she went to work at the New York Public Library and later became an in-

vestigator for the juvenile court system. This early form of social work served as an important role model for Dorothea's later career development.

As a teenager, Dorothea had scant respect for her mother's industry. A childhood bout with polio had left the young girl partially crippled in one leg; while never pronounced, her limp was a constant reminder that she was different. A sense of shame and humiliation fed her restlessness yet kept her from moving away from home. Against her mother's wishes, she set out to become a photographer and poured her youthful energies into a series of apprenticeships in commercial studios in New York City. For a time, she studied with Clarence White, a noted proponent of artistic photography, whose classes at Columbia represented one of the few academic programs in the field of photography. Lange never went to college and was twenty-three before she set out on her own, intending to travel around the world with a childhood friend. "Not that I was bitterly unhappy at home . . . it was really a matter of testing [my]self out."¹⁷

The trial lasted less than six months and took

¹⁶ Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 53–118. The average family size appears even smaller in U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1976), pt. 1, p. 41. The difference is a result of the government's use of a definition of *household* that included families without children and families in which children were grown and no longer living with their parents.

¹⁷ Lange, *Making of a Photographer*, p. 80.

Lange no farther than San Francisco. She went to work for a photograph-supply house and then, at the suggestion of influential photographers in the Bay Area, established her own studio. Friends soon introduced her to a prominent local artist, Maynard Dixon. In 1920 they were married. Dorothea was twenty-five; her husband was twenty years her senior, recently divorced, and father of a teenage girl. The couple waited nearly five years before having their first child. A second son was born in 1928 when Dorothea was thirty-three years old. Although Lange apparently tried to create the stable home life that she had lacked as a child, she was unsuccessful. Lange was never accepted by her stepdaughter with whom she had several violent fights. She curtailed her studio work and arranged child care for her sons in order to accompany Maynard on his periodic artistic retreats to the desert Southwest. Despite such sacrifices, or perhaps because of them, the marriage fell on hard times. Both had affairs, and Dorothea had two abortions before she divorced Dixon in 1935.

Lange terminated her marriage not to escape from the bonds of a family, but to wed Paul Taylor, a University of California economist whom she had met the previous year, and to resume her career. A pioneer in the investigation of California's migrant labor conditions, Taylor had convinced Lange to join his research team as a field photographer. They traveled together in the spring of 1935 and late that year obtained the divorces that left them free to marry. Taylor had temporary custody of his three children; Lange had permanent custody of her two sons. The couple's combined annual income of nearly six thousand dollars provided a financial base that Lange had sorely missed in the waning years of her first marriage. This money enabled Lange and Taylor to pay for child care when their jobs took them on the road. Thus, for Dorothea Lange, the spring of 1936 was a season of new beginnings in both her personal and her professional lives. Believing that her new marriage would create family stability and nourish her own work, she embarked on her government assignments with renewed energy and optimism.

The *Migrant Mother* series reflects Lange's new mood. Despite her end-of-day fatigue, Lange moved confidently in arranging her compositions. She knew the image that she wanted, what to feature and what to leave out. Although focusing on the family and shaping it to manageable size, the two long shots contained unwanted elements. Technically the teenage daughter was almost old enough to be self-sufficient. Her presence in the

photographs presented awkward questions as to when *Migrant Mother* began bearing children. Was she a teenager herself when she gave birth to her first child? Having already produced more children than she and her husband could support, would she enlarge her family yet again? While middle-class viewers were sympathetically disposed to the needs of impoverished children, teenagers posed thorny questions of personal responsibility. Lange herself was fresh from several searing battles with her ex-husband's resentful daughter.

Lange's third photograph eliminated the teenager. For this, Lange moved closer to the tent, focusing on the powerful bond between the mother and her infant. Apparently she asked the two small children to step aside so that she could feature the act of breast-feeding (fig. 7). Since neither of the first two photographs shows *Migrant Mother* nursing her child, it is possible that the photographer arranged this candid scene. With the decision to make an explicit record of this intimate nurturance, Lange related her composition to a cherished icon of Western art: the Virgin Mary in humble surroundings. Indeed, *Migrant Mother* is often called *Migrant Madonna*.

Despite their attraction to works grounded in contemporary events, presented in a style of social realism, Americans of the 1930s retained a reverence for tradition and religion. Throughout the decade, they found faith a powerful antidote to hard times. When the stock market crashed in 1929, Lloyd Douglass's *Magnificent Obsession* was atop the best-seller list. At the beginning of World War II, his powerful novel *The Robe* (1942) enjoyed even greater success. Both John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) believed that they could best communicate the depths of rural deprivation by using overt religious symbolism. Significantly each author began his research at the same time that Lange was exploring the sufferings of California's migrants. Lange's colleague Walker Evans provided the photographs for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and styled his compositions to underscore Agee's religious allusions. Prominent painters of the era restated the nation's fundamental religiosity. John Stuart Curry's *Baptism in Kansas* (1928), Thomas Hart Benton's *Susannah and the Elders* (1938), and John McGrady's *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* (1937) explicitly invoked spiritual themes, while Doris Lee's *Thanksgiving Dinner* (1934) and Joe Corbino's *Flood Refugees* (1938) dealt indirectly with the primacy of faith in contemporary American culture. Exemplifying this reverential aspect of



Fig. 7. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

American art, Lange's composition employed fundamental and historic religious symbolism.¹⁸

Long a popular image in Western religious art, the nursing Madonna was often depicted as sorrowful; her tears, whether suggested or real, belonged to "a universal language of cleansing and rebirth." Regeneration and renewal were popular

¹⁸ Curtis and Grannen, "Let Us Now Appraise Photographs," pp. 17–19. On the importance of religion in popular literature and culture during the depression, see Warren Susman, *Culture and Commitment, 1929–1945* (New York: George Braziller, 1973). The most insightful analysis of the American scene movement is Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920–1940* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1978); while the most recent and provocative discussion of symbols and iconography of the 1930s is Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). See also Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting in the 1930s* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974); Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, *The Regionalists* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1976); Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); and Joseph S. Czeszochowski, *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press and Cedar Rapids Art Assn., 1981).

themes in American culture during the Great Depression, offering citizens convenient remedies for the sense of guilt and shame they felt as a result of the economic collapse. The Virgin's milk represented her "intercession on behalf of mankind" to promote "healing and mercy," again qualities that had special meaning during the 1930s. Steinbeck would end *The Grapes of Wrath* with Rosasharon nursing a starving old man, a scene derived from Charles Dickens and based on thirteenth-century religious lore. Like Lange, Steinbeck presented the Madonna in lower-class garb. Although such portrayal had been common during the Renaissance, by the sixteenth century society had considered it "indecorous for the Virgin to bare her breast."¹⁹ Similarly the 1930s had drawn the veil of propriety over the frank sexuality of the Roaring Twenties. Although grounded solidly in religious tradition,

¹⁹ Maria Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), pp. 223, 203. This is the most sensitive of the many works concerning the image of the Madonna in art and literature.



Fig. 8. Walker Evans, Floyd Burroughs, Hale County, Ala., Summer 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

Steinbeck's closing allegory would strike hostile critics as one more example of licentiousness in a novel made notorious by its explicit language.

Experience, not modesty, pushed Lange to search for more subtle variations of the Madonna theme. Even as her shutter released, she sensed a flaw in her composition. She had captured an intimate moment in *Migrant Mother's* life, one rich with symbolic potential, yet the woman's facial expression, the key ingredient in a revealing portrait, was all wrong. *Migrant Mother* looked downward, as if wishing to shield herself from the scrutiny of the camera. Lange knew this defense mechanism, having used it herself as a teenager in the streets of New York: "If I don't want anybody to see me," she later claimed, "I can make the kind of face so eyes go off me."²⁰

That "kind of face" spoiled Lange's image. She and her documentary colleagues fought constantly to overcome the discomforts of their subjects, to present them as dignified human beings whose plight would elicit sympathy, not ridicule. To this end they tended to avoid recording certain com-



Fig. 9. Walker Evans, Floyd Burroughs, Hale County, Ala., Summer 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

monplace emotions. Poverty was a distressing matter, they believed, not an embarrassing one. Such an outlook caused them to discourage the conventional smile as well. Evans's portrait of Floyd Burroughs compels attention because of the apparent anxiety of his tenant hero (fig. 8); Evans never published his alternate view of Burroughs (fig. 9). The hint of a smile or cynicism would have undercut the message Evans sought to convey. Anger was nearly as subversive as contentment. When Lange and Taylor published their story of the migrants, *American Exodus* (1939), they included only one photograph of an angry farmer; even then their caption explained that the man was not violent and certainly was no radical.²¹

Had Lange been able to elicit a more expressive facial gesture, one indicative of sorrow or anxiety,

²⁰ Lange, *Making of a Photographer*, p. 16.

²¹ Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*, pp. 82–83.

her portrait of the nursing mother would have succeeded. Instead, Lange had triggered what she would call that “self-protective thing.” Because she sensed that she was invading her subject’s privacy and was causing discomfort, Lange used her fourth shot to regain cooperation and recruited the children to help to overcome their mother’s reserve.

She incorporated children into the close-up with some misgivings. Although preteenagers had long been used by documentarians to symbolize the sufferings of the dispossessed, Lange had limited experience making children’s portraits. If she spent time taking pictures of her two sons, she chose not to exhibit these images in her own lifetime, and only a few have appeared in the several biographies published since her death in 1965. Her previous photographs of California’s migrants concentrated on adults and their problems.

Despite her lack of experience with children as models, Lange managed in the next few minutes to elicit the complete cooperation of her young sub-

jects. Moving slightly closer, she asked one of the young daughters to return to the tent and to stand resting her chin on her mother’s shoulder (fig. 10). While awkward, this posture immobilized the girl’s head, thereby reducing the chance that any sudden motion might spoil the picture. The young girl removed her hat so as not to obscure her facial features. The fading afternoon light fell on her tousled hair. Where she had been smiling at the photographer in the second picture, she now looked down and away from the camera.

The facial expressions of both mother and daughter were now acceptable, but Lange decided she could do better. She repeated the composition with critical modifications. Lange moved slightly to her left and switched from a horizontal to a vertical format. This allowed her to center her subjects in the frame, give them ample headroom, and present them against the backdrop of the tent canvas (fig. 11). The tent post no longer obscured part of the infant’s head. This new perspective also enabled Lange to eliminate the piles of dirty clothes



Fig. 10. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

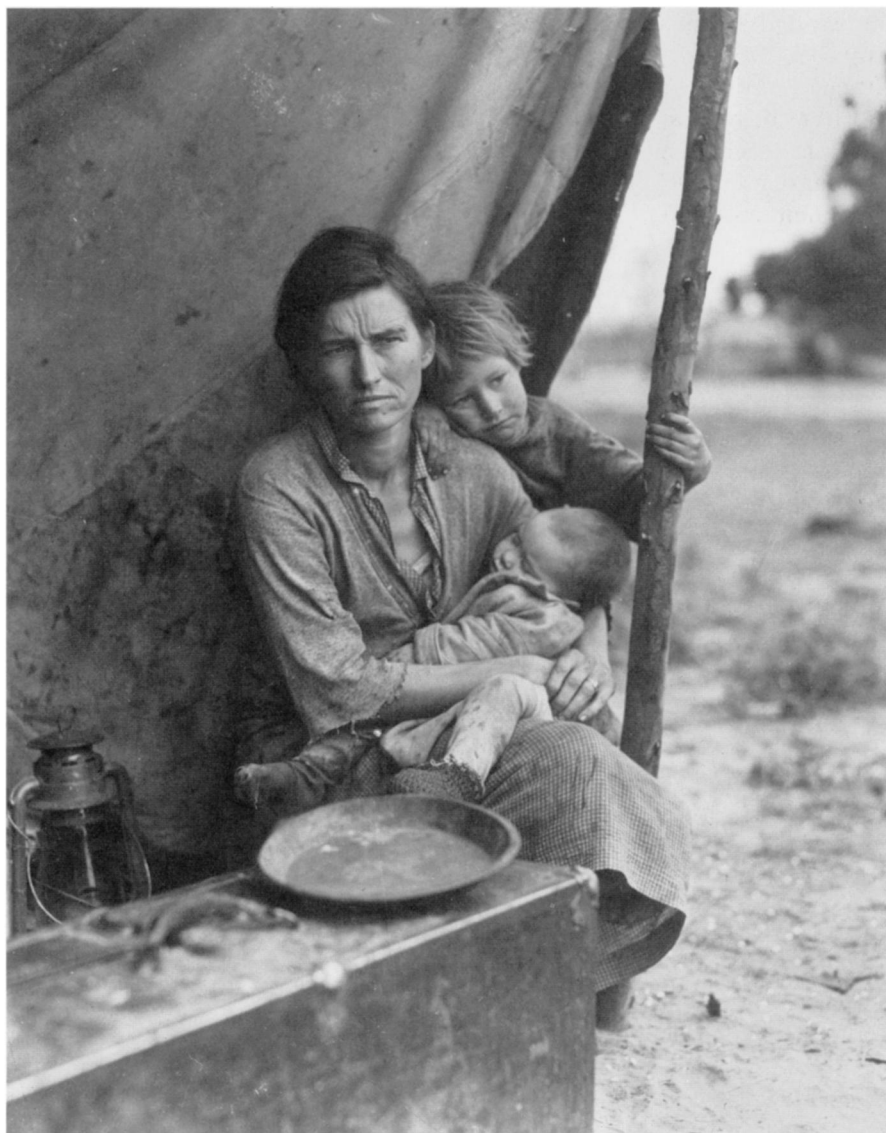


Fig. 11. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

so visible in her third composition. Given the option, she preferred to excise such details and the suggestions they intruded. The public might be less sympathetic to migrants who could not even pick up their personal belongings. But if set against a spare backdrop, a migrant family could become a stirring symbol of deprivation and discipline and lay great claim to public support. Lange certainly did not go so far as her colleague Evans to avoid including dirt and disorder, yet she shared with him a determination to present her subjects as dignified human beings, struggling to surmount the consequences of society's neglect.

The vertical format also permitted Lange to feature the trunk and the empty pie tin, each a powerful symbol of the migrant condition. The well-worn trunk which runs at an angle into the

frame provided clear evidence that this was a family on the move, forced by circumstances to leave home and to take to the road.

Having followed migrants for nearly a year, Lange had become increasingly more sensitive to the telltale signs of their tenuous existence. In her previous RA assignments, she had recorded itinerancy in rather obvious ways, focusing on hitchhikers, makeshift shelters, stranded automobiles, and entire migrant camps. In the next few years as she spent more time in the field, she developed new and more ingenious ways to dramatize the tragedy that she would later call an *American Exodus*. In March 1937, she completed one of her most famous highway pictures, a photograph of two hitchhikers walking along the road toward a billboard that advised "next time try the train [and]

relax" (fig. 12). Less ironic but no less powerful is her 1938 photograph of a family moving from Idabel to Krebs, Oklahoma. Like *Migrant Mother*, this picture distills the shock of displacement in a single expression: the anxiety of a young child whose prized possession has fallen off the wagon that serves as her family's means of transport. In that image, too, Lange used her wealth of portrait experience to create the mood. As with her first long shot in the *Migrant Mother* series, she took a trial photograph of the family walking away from the camera. Finding them cooperative and willing to rearrange themselves at her suggestion, she took the second picture from the front. The oldest son dropped back to the rear, leaving the father in the foreground pulling the wagon with its young passenger. Still the image would not work so long as the child turned away from the camera. Lange had to find a way to catch her attention without prompting a smile like the one worn by one of her siblings in the background. Close examination of the photograph suggests that Lange threw a small black object in front of the wagon, and as the girl turned to look at the object, Lange snapped the shutter (fig. 13). This strategic diversion worked to perfection, resulting in a classic portrait of America's proud rural folk, humbled by economic hardship and forced to leave their homes and take to the road.²²

More alarming than such signs of uprooting were those of starvation in a country renowned for the self-sufficiency of its agrarian populace and the plenty of its land. The bare pie tin on the corner of the trunk called attention to *Migrant Mother's* plight more forcefully than did the phrase "Seven hungry children without food" that Lange later used in the caption for the fifth image in the series (fig. 11). Lange's artistry made verbal descriptions superfluous. In this composition, she turned the portrait tradition on its head. Where affluent sit-

ters posed amid artifacts attesting to their status and economic achievements, *Migrant Mother* was surrounded by objects mutely testifying to her poverty. The stained tent canvas, the kerosene lamp, the battered trunk, the empty plate—each suggested yet another dimension of poverty.

Lange's positioning of her subjects was no less accomplished than her focus on surrounding detail. She sensed the enormous power that lay in the contrast between the dignity of this family and the deprivation of its circumstances. To achieve this, she crafted a formal pose, a striking departure from the candid effect associated with most documentary photographs. She directed the daughter to shift position slightly; to rest her head on her mother's shoulder, not to peer awkwardly over it; to reach out and grasp the tent post so that her delicate hand came into full view of the camera; and then to look wistfully into the distance.

The arrangement succeeded brilliantly, combining and enriching the religious and familial themes that Lange had pursued from the outset of the series. Her composition could easily fit into a long-standing tradition in Western art where the Madonna and Christ child were surrounded by young angelic figures whose innocence and devotion to Mary bespoke divine grace. Occasionally artists had even identified youthful attendants as Christ's siblings and showed them bound together by the purity and sacrifices of the holy family.²³

Lange's photograph also reflected contemporary American attitudes on family bonding. During the early twentieth century, Americans had feared that the twin pressures of industrialization and urban growth had altered traditional family structure. They mourned the disappearance of the family farm, where home and work were one, where the father remained the head of the household and raised his children to respect parental authority. The financial and moral excesses of the 1920s prompted some critics to argue that the American family could not survive the rude transplantation from an agrarian to an urban setting.

If the city had its critics, it also had defenders. The field of sociology sprang primarily from urban universities like Columbia and Chicago. Sociologists regarded the city as a laboratory. Their research provided a bedrock for emerging social welfare agencies that tried to improve the quality of family life. Lange's mother had been involved in such work after World War I. Dorothea followed in her mother's footsteps, first by establishing her-

²² Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime*, pp. 62–64; Lange photographs, especially lot 344, FSA collection, Library of Congress. These conclusions are the result of extended analysis of this image revealing the following: the shadow details clearly show that the object is forward of the wagon; the child could not have thrown the object off the wagon and still returned her hands to her lap; the object could hardly have fallen forward unless there was a strong wind that would have disturbed the clothing of subjects; the shadow detail indicates that the object is in motion and about to hit the ground; the object is about the size of a film holder; while Lange is taking the picture head on, she still might have used a cable release, allowing her to step aside and toss the object into the picture; or an assistant (Lange frequently had help from Taylor or friends) could have introduced the object while Lange stood ready to time her shutter release. The alternate view of this scene is not in the Library of Congress but is in Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*, p. 64.

²³ Warner, *Alone of Her Sex*, pp. 23, 33.



Fig. 12. Dorothea Lange, *Toward Los Angeles*, Calif., March 1937. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)



Fig. 13. Dorothea Lange, family bound for Krebs from Idabel, Okla., 1939. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)

self as an urban professional, then by documenting San Francisco's problems, and finally by carrying her urban perspective into the California countryside.

The defense of the urban family reached full expression in a report by the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection. Published the same year that Lange's photograph of Migrant Mother first appeared, this document was the result of a series of annual meetings begun under presidential auspices earlier in the decade. The conference concluded that the urban middle-class family was far more open than its rural counterpart. Children raised in the city experienced more freedom, were more likely to confide in their parents, and were subjected to a less exhausting regimen of chores than rural youth. Granted greater independence, urban young people "were decidedly less hostile to parents." Affection rather than authoritarianism bound city families together; as a consequence, urban children were likely to give "open demonstrations" of their positive feelings for their parents. The conference viewed the rural family as overextended and rigid, operating "with harsh or stern methods of control." Rural youth enjoyed little independence and therefore developed resentments for which there were few acceptable outlets.²⁴

In her fifth composition, Lange employs a pose that suggests the affectionate bonding that sociologists considered characteristic of the modern urban family. The daughter displays a familiarity and a fondness by resting both her head and her hand on her mother's shoulder. These loving gestures, at once dependent and supportive, contrast markedly with the presentation of the rural family in literature and art of the Great Depression. Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) shocked readers with its lurid account of the Lesters who were a family in name only. The oppressions of southern tenantry had destroyed familial feeling as surely as they had ravaged the soil. While bound together by its determination to overcome adversities, the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* is still reserved. In the film version of Steinbeck's masterpiece, Ma Joad bids farewell to her son Tom with the words, "You know we aren't the kissing kind," and then embraces him stiffly. Hollywood scriptwriters concocted this tender scene; in the novel, the parting is remarkable for its lack of affection.²⁵ Such stiff for-

mality is also the hallmark of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1932), easily the most famous painting to emerge from the regionalist reaffirmation of rural traditions.

Whether affection or authoritarianism governed Lange's upbringing and early family relationships remains a mystery. She refused to discuss her father's departure and indicated some ambivalence toward her mother. Yet in her private and professional photography she was often drawn to an intimate style of family portraiture, where bonding is physically explicit. Her 1930 photograph of son Daniel and husband Maynard concentrates exclusively on their intertwined hands. One of the nine photographs Lange submitted for Edward Steichen's famous *Family of Man* (1955) shows her newborn grandchild in the arms of her son John. Lange repeated such expressive and affectionate gestures in her studio work as well. Her 1934 photograph of two members of the Katten family shows a grandfather and grandson seated in separate chairs (fig. 14). The youth's clasped hands rest on the patriarch's shoulder. The elder Katten is the epitome of strength and dignity, his head erect, his gaze fixed intently on some distant object. Without breaking his formal pose, he returns his



Fig. 14. Dorothea Lange, *Katten Portrait*, San Francisco, Calif., 1934. (Oakland Museum.)

²⁴ Fass, *Damned and the Beautiful*, pp. 88–89.

²⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), pp. 463–64.

grandson's affection by resting one hand on the boy's knee to pull him closer. The resulting image suggests a family in which intimacy and individualism coexist in natural and productive harmony.

Rich in symbolism and brilliantly composed, Lange's fifth image did not quite measure up to her most expressive studio work. *Migrant Mother's* reserve continued to be the main obstacle to intimacy. Throughout the brief photographic session, she had held the same posture, her body rigid, her face impassive as if recoiling from the camera's lens. In all these pictures her hands are clasped to support and keep her infant near the soothing sounds of her heartbeat. Lange was reluctant to alter this arrangement for fear that the child might awaken and spoil her composition. Yet she knew that the mother's facial expression was the key to a powerful photograph. Lange moved closer, hoping that her subject would cooperate in one final picture. A beautiful metamorphosis occurred in the next few moments. *Migrant Mother* surrendered herself to Lange's expert direction, striking a pose that would burn itself into the memory of American culture (fig. 15).

Lange worked swiftly with a confidence bolstered by her successful incorporation of the young child in the two previous frames. She balanced her composition by summoning the other small child to stand to *Migrant Mother's* right. Lange had the youngsters place their heads on their mother's shoulders but turn their backs to the camera. In this way Lange avoided any problem of competing countenances and any exchanged glances that might produce unwanted effects. She was free to concentrate exclusively on her main subject. Again *Migrant Mother* looks away from the camera, but this time she is directed by Lange to bring her right hand to her face. This simple gesture unlocked all the potential that Lange had sensed when she first approached the tent.

In the studio and in the field, Lange had developed a keen sensitivity to the expressive potential of body language, especially the importance of hand placement. Two previous and highly acclaimed documentary images feature details similar to the gesture that Lange was incorporating in the final frame of the series. *White Angel Breadline* (1933) shows an unemployed male, in the midst of a relief crowd, leaning on a wooden railing, his arms encircling an empty tin cup (fig. 16). The man's hands are clasped so that he resembles a communicant at the altar rail. Lange's message was obvious, as it was the following year in her portrait of a San Francisco policeman standing in front of a

crowd of strikers (fig. 17). The power of the constabulary is evident from the repose of the folded hands against the man's uniform with its gleaming buttons and badge. What makes this presumption of authority so powerful is the position of the policeman: his back is turned to the protestors. In both these pictures Lange had taken swift advantage of chance encounters with her subjects. "You know there are moments such as these when time stands still," she was moved to remark in looking back at *White Angel Breadline* thirty years later, "and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you."²⁶

The exposure of the final frame in the *Migrant Mother* series (fig. 15) was not such a moment. Instead Lange had seized control of the situation in an effort to create the type of portrait her sensibility perceived. The hand framing the face, calling attention to *Migrant Mother's* feelings, breaking down her reserve, was the critical element lacking in the previous exposures. Lange drew this gesture from her studio experience and employed it regularly in documentary fieldwork. When photographed by friends, Lange often preferred such a pose herself, as in a picture by Rondal Partridge (fig. 18), taken the same year as *Migrant Mother*. Lange may well have had personal reasons for presenting herself in this fashion to the camera. Even as an adult, she was still sensitive about the results of her childhood polio. "I've never gotten over it," she said shortly before she died, adding that she was constantly "aware of the force and power of" an injury that she felt had left her a "semi-cripple."²⁷ By wearing pants and by bringing her hand to her face, she could divert attention from her damaged leg. But Lange also believed that her handicap gave her a special sensitivity to the downtrodden and helped her to communicate their condition. She knew instinctively from her own fears of public scrutiny exactly the kind of gesture that might break down *Migrant Mother's* fearful reserve.

Ironically, Lange's control over her subject is confirmed by another gesture—an unwanted element that escaped the photographer's attention in the field but that later in the darkroom would emerge as a "glaring defect." In bringing her right hand to her face, *Migrant Mother* apparently feared that she would lose support for her sleeping infant, and so she reached out with her left hand to

²⁶ Ohrn, *Lange*, p. 24.

²⁷ Lange, *Making of a Photographer*, pp. 17–18.

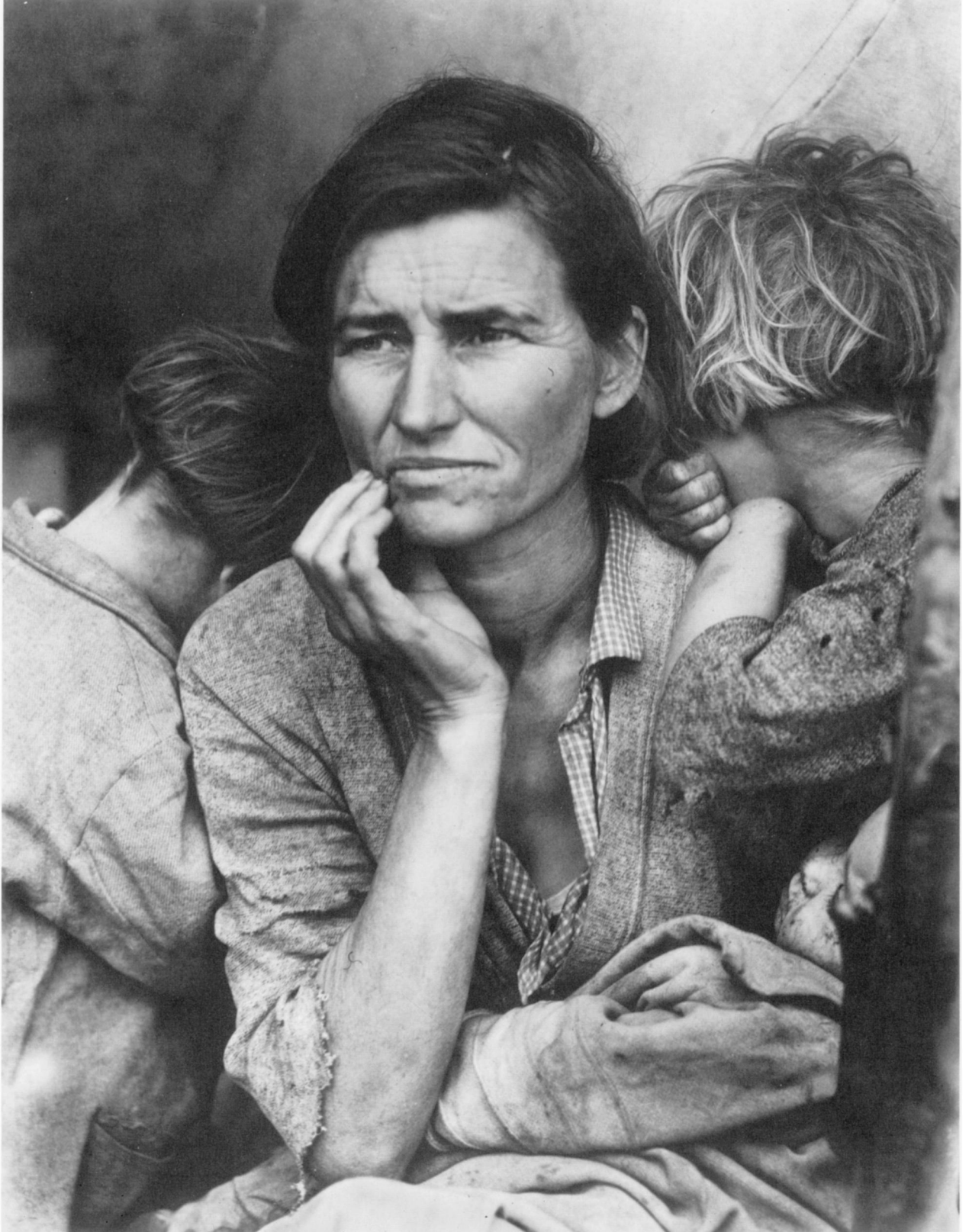


Fig. 15. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, Calif., March 1936. (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.)



Fig. 16. Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Breadline*, San Francisco, Calif., 1933. (Oakland Museum.)



Fig. 17. Dorothea Lange, *The General Strike*, San Francisco, Calif., 1934. (Oakland Museum.)

grasp the tent post. Her thumb intruded into the foreground of the image.

Caught up in the excitement of what she knew was an extraordinary photographic session, Lange failed to notice this intrusion. Within days of her return to San Francisco, she rushed several prints from the series to the *News* where they illustrated a wire-service story of hunger in the frost-destroyed pea fields. An accompanying editorial claimed that only “the chance visit of a government photographer” had led to the immediate dispatch of relief rations to Nipomo. Although not mentioned by name, Lange was soon recognized as the artist who created *Migrant Mother*. In September 1936, *Survey Graphic* published the final picture in the series, prompting *U. S. Camera* to request that Lange submit the image for exhibit as one of the outstanding pictures of the year. By 1941 the picture had become a recognized documentary masterpiece and was enshrined in the Museum of Modern Art. While preparing her print for permanent exhibit, Lange was haunted by the disembodied thumb in the foreground of the negative. Over objections from Roy Stryker, Lange directed a darkroom as-

sistant to retouch the negative and eliminate this aesthetic flaw.²⁸ Having worked so hard to overcome her subject’s defensiveness, having converted her to a willing and expressive model, Lange did not want a small detail to mar the accomplishment.

This alteration removed *Migrant Mother* further from the realm of reality toward that of universal symbolism. This transformation had begun with the required suppression of the subject’s individuality so that she could become an archetypal representative of the values shared by Lange’s middle-class audience. Lange never recorded *Migrant Mother*’s name, eliminated her older daughter from all but the first posed photograph in the

²⁸ Meltzer, *Lange*, pp. 133–34. For an early reproduction of *Migrant Mother* showing the thumb, see James L. McCamy, *Government Publicity: Its Practice in Federal Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), facing p. 238. McCamy’s book presented the government’s use of photographs in a most favorable light. McCamy takes particular care to thank Stryker for assistance in helping him to understand the nature of documentary photography (pp. ix, x). Lange to Stryker, May 16, 1939, RSC. For a discussion of the retouching incident, see Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade*, pp. 142–43; and Ohn, *Lange*, pp. 102, 251 n. 18.



Fig. 18. Rondal Partridge, Dorothea Lange, 1936. (Rondal Partridge, Berkeley, Calif.)

series, moved the young children in and out of the scene, and directed her subject's every gesture. Then in the darkroom she removed the last traces of the one instinctual motion that Migrant Mother made. Aesthetic liability though it proved to be, this gesture gave clear evidence that Migrant Mother's highest priority remained the support of her family and that posing for a government photographer was a secondary concern.

For nearly half a century *Migrant Mother* remained a powerful but anonymous symbol of the sufferings and fortitude engendered by the Great Depression. In the summer of 1983, the photograph appeared again in the national press, this time to benefit Migrant Mother herself, Florence

Thompson, who lay gravely ill in California not more than fifty miles from the pea fields where she sat in front of a lean-to and where chance had prompted Dorothea Lange to return for photographs. Like Lange, who died in 1965, Thompson had cancer; she had just been rendered speechless by a stroke. Thompson's children pleaded for funds to defray their mother's medical expenses, as she had no insurance. Within weeks contributions totaled nearly thirty thousand dollars. In mid September, Florence Thompson died.²⁹

²⁹ *New York Times* (August 24, September 17, 1983); *Los Angeles Times* (September 17, 1983).