

# Dorothea Lange: Words and Pictures: An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art

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2 May 2020

Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, opened February 9, 2020 and was suspended by MoMA's closure March 30 due to COVID-19. An online version of the exhibition opened April 30 and can be seen here: Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures.

"The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."—Dorothea Lange

With more than 30 million people having filed for unemployment in the US in the six weeks since the outbreak of the coronavirus, images of thousands standing in line wearing masks or lining up in their cars at food banks in cities from New York to Chicago, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and San Antonio, Texas are often compared to the photographs of Dorothea Lange (1895–1965).

Even those unfamiliar with Lange by name may recognize *Migrant Mother* (1936), a photograph of the anxious yet forbearing face of a farm woman with her children, which continues to be the emblematic image of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s.

By coincidence, the first major exhibition of Lange's work at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 50 years opened in February, just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country, eventually forcing the museum to shut down in March, along with the rest of public institutions and businesses in New York City. Although more limited than the actual exhibition, the online presentation allows one to appreciate Lange's extraordinary, yet often overlooked, achievement.

In addition to her main body of work documenting the plight of farm workers in the 1930s, the online exhibition includes examples of her early portraits, street photography, and photographs taken on trips to the Middle East and Indonesia toward the end of her life. It also displays *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), which pairs Lange's photographs with direct quotes of the subjects themselves as she had always intended.

And it includes her extraordinary photographs exposing the brutal incarceration of 117,000 innocent Japanese American men, women and children in internment camps after the US entry into World War II—photos that were censored by the Wartime Civil Control Agency until after the war. Lange herself was denied access to her own negatives until the 1960s, shortly before her death.

Lange took her photos from 1935–39 working as part of a team assembled by economist and agrarian reformer, Paul Taylor (soon-to-be Lange's second husband) for the Farm Security Agency (FSA) under the US Department of Agriculture. This partially explains why she was not better known, at least in her lifetime. Her photos were rarely published outside of reports, and even when they were, they were often not attributed to her by name. Even Lange's negatives remained US government property.

Part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the FSA's purpose was not to employ artists to create art, like the Works Progress Administration's arts program. Rather, it was charged with documenting

conditions of migrant farm workers and advocating for camps to house the million refugees collectively called "Okies" who had flooded into central California not just from Oklahoma, but from across the Great Plains and Southwest states to escape the environmental disaster known as the Dust Bowl.

Coming on the heels of the Depression, set off by the 1929 collapse of the stock market, the Dust Bowl was caused by the worst series of droughts, heat waves and windstorms in US history. Ecologically disastrous farming methods had plowed up the prairie grasslands that had once sustained the bison culture of Native American tribes for generations, rendering the region particularly vulnerable. It is estimated that one quarter of Oklahoma's topsoil alone was blown away in the windstorms, putting from 50 to 90 percent of the population on public relief.

Lange, along with Taylor and other photographers for the FSA, traveled hundreds of miles for months at a time to photograph the camps of destitute farm workers, who had packed up their families and whatever belongings they could strap onto their cars and headed out onto the highways searching for work. Drawn to California by the big growers whose advertisements promised thousands of jobs at good pay, but who only hired a fraction of the new arrivals for a pittance, farm workers were pitted against one another by farm agents, and violence frequently erupted in the camps.

At first glance, the 40-year-old Lange was an unlikely candidate for the assignment. Charismatic and enterprising, she had run an upscale portrait studio in San Francisco in the 1920s by which she largely supported herself, two sons and her husband, the artist Maynard Dixon, well-known for his pastel-hued Western landscapes. Lange's clients included society's elite from Nob Hill, as well as the cultural bohemia of which she was a member, turning her studio into an art salon where artists mingled with patrons. She was close friends with like-minded free-spirited photographers; Imogen Cunningham remained a life-long friend. Photographers Consuelo Kanaga, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and others were part of her wide circle.

Lange's shift from studio work to documentary photography was spurred by the vast social upheaval of the Depression, which threw Dixon and herself, like millions of others, out of much of their commissioned work. Like many of her generation of left-leaning artists and intellectuals, she sought to address economic inequality and social injustice through activism and the lens of her camera. She described how one day she was looking out the window of her studio and saw men waiting in line for food. She grabbed her big, heavy Graflex and captured the remarkable *White Angel Bread Line*, San Francisco (1933).

Much is communicated in a few seemingly random details, the mix of fedoras and caps of the men turned away indicates that the working and middle class alike were going hungry. The mass of the men's backs contrasts with the single man facing toward the viewer, his battered and stained hat pulled down over his eyes while the composition, emphasized

by the diagonal barrier, focuses on his clasped hands and tin cup.

This combination of carefully observed detail and effective composition to convey meaning through what at first seem to be artless shots would become a primary characteristic of Lange's photography. It can be seen in *Migrant Mother*, the woman she encountered in a pea-pickers encampment in Nipomo, California, which at first appears to be a photo just of the woman's weathered, anxious face till one notices the three children tucked around her as though part of her body. This adds a sense of vulnerability, as well as underscoring the need for her fortitude.

In *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona* (1940), the well-worn lines on the man's hand, held facing the viewer across his mouth, "speak" for him louder than any words. And in *Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas* (June 1938), the curve of the regularly plowed furrows, leading up to and around an abandoned shack set low against a desolate horizon, point to the fate of the tenant farmers who once lived there.

Lange's talent for portrait photography, in particular her ability to establish a rapport with her sitters in order to suggest something of an individual's character, sets her work apart from similar photography of the time. The faces of Walker Evans' subjects seem cold and inscrutable by comparison, while those of her close contemporary Margaret Bourke-White, whose photographs of industry, workers and peasants, including those taken in the Soviet Union, were more obvious and propagandistic than Lange's.

However, the strong aesthetic quality of her work did not translate into a reputation for Lange as an artist. Photography was still only emerging from being considered merely a craft or trade, a distinction that Lange to some degree maintained by emphasizing the documentary aspect of her work.

Pioneering photographers, such as Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820–1910), who went by the name Nadar, had photographed a wide range of public figures, from politicians to artists and intellectuals: French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, poet Charles Baudelaire, artist Eugène Delacroix, actress Sarah Bernhardt and others. Photographic portraits offered greater verisimilitude but were not considered art in the same way as a painted portrait. Victorian photographers commonly used soft focus, backdrops and costumes, as well as hand-coloring, to make photograph portraits more "artistic."

Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946)—coincidentally, like Lange, a native of Hoboken, New Jersey and also of German, but in his case also Jewish, descent—played a leading role in establishing photography as an art in its own right, coeval with, not merely imitative of painting. His important gallery, 291 Fifth Avenue, brought the influence of European modern art to America, exhibiting the photographs of Edward Steichen, as well as paintings by Mexican painter Marius de Zayas and other modernists. In 1915, Stieglitz met and exhibited the photographs of Paul Strand, one of the founders of the left-wing Photo League that advocated the use of photography to advance social causes.

Lange saw Strand's work at "291" in the 1920s, and admired his photographs of people in the streets, often captured unawares by using a camera with a false lens so he appeared to be taking a photo in a different direction. In her own work, Lange would further develop photography's potential to communicate social reality in terms that were at once individual and concrete, as well as broadly representative. She described her assignment for the FSA as going out "to see what is really there, what does it look like, what does it feel like? What actually is the human condition?"

Beyond the strength of individual images, the exhibition, aptly titled *Words & Pictures*, emphasizes what Lange herself intended, which was for the pictures to be seen together with the captions, which were drawn from field notes, folk songs and frequently the words of the subjects themselves. This integrated concept is most clearly presented in the book *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, which is part of the

exhibition. Predating Walker Evans' and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by two years, Taylor and Lange's photo book appeared inauspiciously just as World War II broke out in 1939. The book did not gain much attention and has largely remained out of print since.

Compared to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which includes just a handful of photos by Evans, who also worked for the FSA, at the beginning of a long, more subjective narrative by Agee, *American Exodus* stands out for its objectivity and authenticity.

The frontispiece of *American Exodus* reads in part: "Burned out, blown out, eat out, tractored out. ... Yessir we're starved stalled and stranded. ... When you gits down to your last bean your backbone and your navel shake dice to see which gits it ... we live most anywhere in general where there's work ... t'aint hardly fair. They holler that we ain't citizens but their fruit would rot if we didn't come. ... I don't see why we can't be citizens because we move around with the fruit tryin' to make a livin'. A human being has a right to stand like a tree has a right to stand."

Lange was also notable for her attention to class and racial social relationships. *American Exodus* reflects the diversity of migrant workers, not just white "Okies," but African American, Mexican and Filipino as well. Though it was not publicly revealed till 1978, Florence Owens Thompson, whose face in *Migrant Mother* became the face of the "Okies," was in fact of Cherokee descent. Lange also included evidence of Jim Crow segregation in her photographs for which she was censured by her government superiors repeatedly.

On a separate assignment for the FSA, Lange toured the South where, instead of the uprooted "Okies," she documented a social hierarchy still largely influenced by its Antebellum slave days. In *Plantation Overseer and His Field Hands, Mississippi Delta* (June 1936—which appeared in *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the United States* [1941]), written by Richard Wright, with photos by Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn and Walker Evans, as well as seven by Lange, one can see Taylor on the far left almost out of the frame. Working as a team, Taylor spoke to people, while Lange took photographs. In this instance, the resulting image emphasizes the girth of the self-important white overseer, his foot up on his car's fender and his hand on his knee looking across at Taylor, while behind him his four black workers look directly at the viewer, their expressions a combination of wariness, weariness and wry humor.

Lange's photographs of the victimization of Japanese Americans unjustly detained under Roosevelt's executive order following the attack on Pearl Harbor—which served as *casus belli* for the United States' entry into World War Two—are particularly searing and relevant. Nothing she had witnessed during the Depression prepared her for this monstrous attack on democratic rights. "What was horrifying was to do this thing completely on the basis of what blood may be coursing through a person's veins, nothing else. Nothing to do with your affiliations or friendships or associations. Just blood," Lange later said.

Even as the limited social reform policy of the New Deal was discontinued after the war, as the Cold War commenced and many liberal "progressives," including Paul Taylor, moved to the right, Lange continued to use her photography to document social injustice in a moving and evocative way: from a trial in the Alameda County courthouse to her "Death of a Valley" photographs of Berryessa Valley in Napa County, which was intentionally flooded to serve California agribusiness' ruthless drive for water.

During the postwar period, Lange resisted the idea that she document just poverty, "a focus she considered simplistic and shallow ... she thought rather that 'our decade of unprecedented 'prosperity' has many faces, there are many forms of privation within prosperity. The time had come, she said, 'to photograph affluence—whose other face is poverty'" (quoted in *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, Linda Gordon, 2009).

Lange's exceptional eye (and ear) for observing the "words and pictures" that communicated something of the essential truth of the period

in which she lived has left an invaluable record of her times—one that is more than ever relevant to our own.



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