

## Title

*Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*

Lesson Plan created by Kyle Alexander, Nashville

## Overview

As in the progressive era, some of the most important contributions to the cause of reform during the Great Depression were made by writers, artists, and photographers, who portrayed the suffering of the poor in graphic and dramatic ways. Especially powerful was the work of the Photography Unit of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), whose job was to document rural life in America. With photographers such as Dorothea Lange, the FSA Photography Unit produced moving portraits that inspired sympathy and respect for the rural poor. In this lesson, students are asked to analyze selected photographs taken by Dorothea Lange and to identify key themes in her work.

## Objectives

- To discuss and analyze images by Dorothea Lange, identifying key themes in her photography
- To identify the historical contexts for a selection of Lange's images
- To research artists working in other media (painters, printmakers, sculptors, etc.) as well as other photographers who explored some of the same themes and issues covered by Lange

## State Standards

### U.S. History

- Understands the effects of the Great Depression upon American society
- Understands the changes in American life as a result of the Great Depression
  - Examines the impact of the Great Depression on the American family and on racial & ethnic minorities (joblessness, hopelessness, migration, competition for jobs)

### Writing

- Analyzes, evaluates, and synthesizes information from multiple sources

### Visual Arts

- Understands how culture influences the function, meaning, and creation of works of art
- Understands how artists recorded, affected, or influenced change in a historical, cultural, or religious context

## Materials

*Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*

Television and VCR

*Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* Film Quiz

Dorothea Lange Images (1-2)

Photo Analysis Worksheet

Student Analysis Images (A-G)

## Art history books (optional)

### Description of lesson

1. Before starting this lesson, students should have an adequate understanding of the Great Depression (including the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma) and life in California during the 1930s and 1940s (including the "relocation" of Japanese-Americans). There are two excellent chapters (16 & 33) in Joy Hakim's book, *A History of US: War, Peace, and All That Jazz, 1918-1945* (pp. 79-83 & pp. 144-148) covering this material which could be incorporated into an introductory lesson.
2. Show *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* and have students complete the film quiz.
3. After students have seen the film and using "Images One & Two", the teacher should walk the students through critically evaluating a photograph. Teachers may also use the "Photo Analysis Worksheet" here if desired. But using the provided background information and possible questions, the teacher should lead students through the process of evaluating two of Lange's most popular images.
4. Working in cooperative groups, assign each group one of the seven images (A-G) taken by Lange, and using the "Photo Analysis Worksheet", each group should discuss the questions (and thereby the image) and write answers for the questions in the space provided on the sheet. The ultimate goal of these questions is to get the students to identify the key ideas, themes, and/or issues their photo represents.
5. As the students are working in their cooperative groups, the teacher should circulate around the room checking in with each group in order to make sure they are on task. Encourage the students to find relationships between the people and/or objects in the photo. Make sure they understand the event(s) in U.S. history the image relates to. Have them list nouns, verbs, and adjectives for their image—it will help them later determine the meaning and themes from the image.
6. After each group has been given ample time to discuss its image, students will answer the questions on the "Photo Analysis Worksheet." The students should share their findings with the rest of the class. From these presentations, the students (with assistance from the teacher) should decide upon the key themes, issues, and events that many of the photographs have in common. (Suggested items for the list: farming, the Great Depression, poverty, hardship, hunger, workers, migration, the Dust Bowl, the Japanese-American relocation, etc.)
7. As a homework assignment or an extended (research) project, students could find other artists/photographers who deal/dealt with the same issues and themes as Dorothea Lange and write a comparison essay between the two artists or taking it one step further create a pictorial essay of their work selecting various images from each artist which match in issue, theme, or event with the other. Some possible artists/photographers to research would be Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Jacob Lawrence, Raphael and Isaac Soyer, Gustave Courbet, Elizabeth Catlett, Thomas Hart Benton, Jean-François Millet, Ben Shahn, Alexandre Hogue, James Agee (photographer), Walker Evans (photographer), Margaret Bourke-White (photographer), David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Grant Wood. Students' research and work could

be used to create a gallery walk of these various artists' work with written explanations of how each piece relates to or deals with a similar issue as those found in Lange's work.

### Supplemental Activities

Write an essay on whether the purpose of the documentary photography of the FSA seems to have been informational or propagandistic, or both.

### Bibliography

Borhan, Pierre. Dorothea Lange: The Heart and Mind of a Photographer. Boston: Bulfinch Press Book, 2002.

Coles, Robert. Dorothea Lange: Photographs of a Lifetime. Oakland: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1982.

Hakim, Joy. A History of US: War, Peace, and All That Jazz, 1918-1945 (Book 9). New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Heyman, Therese Thau, Sandra S. Phillips, and John Szarkowski. Dorothea Lange: American Photographs. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994.

### Websites

Women Come to the Front: Journalists, Photographers, and Broadcasters during World War II  
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/wcf/wcf0013.html>

Oakland Museum of California: Dorothea Lange Collections  
[http://www.museumca.org/global/art/collections\\_dorothea\\_lange.html](http://www.museumca.org/global/art/collections_dorothea_lange.html)

Hero Artists: Dorothea Lange  
[http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=d\\_lange](http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=d_lange)

The History Place: Dorothea Lange  
<http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/lange/index.html>

The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco: Dorothea Lange and the Relocation of the Japanese  
<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/lange.html>

Dorothea Lange: Photographer of the People  
<http://www.dorothea-lange.org/text.home.htm>

The Getty: Dorothea Lange  
<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=1692>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Pd. \_\_\_\_\_

### *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life Film Quiz*

**Directions:** As you view the film *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*, answer the following questions by writing the correct letter for each question in the space provided. The questions follow the film.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ How much was the daily government per diem Dorothea Lange and her assistant lived off of? A) \$4, B) \$5, C) \$7, D) \$10
2. \_\_\_\_\_ At the beginning of her photography career, Lange started a portrait studio in what city? A) Chicago, Illinois; B) Birmingham, Alabama; C) San Francisco, California; D) New York City, New York
3. \_\_\_\_\_ On May Day, Lange photographed a demonstration and these pictures were printed in which of the following magazine publications. A) Life, B) Survey Graphic, C) Modern Photography, D) B&W Photography
4. \_\_\_\_\_ When Lange joined Professor Paul Taylor's agricultural labor research project, she was officially hired on as what? A) a secretary, B) a photographer, C) a field hand, D) a typist
5. \_\_\_\_\_ What's the name of the man who John Steinbeck based his camp manager character in *The Grapes of Wrath*? A) John Howell, B) Bob Guy, C) Tom Collins, D) Mark Cohen
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Lange's job with the California Emergency Relief Administration led to her appointment to this federal agency. A) the Farm Security Administration, B) the Farm Service Administration, C) the Farm Security Agency, D) the Farm Surplus Association
7. \_\_\_\_\_ While Lange was with the FSA, she had major problems with this man who wanted complete control over everything and everybody. A) Roy Striker, B) John Turner, C) Michael Dixon, D) Thomas Royston
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The consequences of the Dust Bowl changed the character of California and included all of the following except A) new point of view, B) new technology, C) new population
9. \_\_\_\_\_ According to Christina Gardner, Lange's assistant, what made Dorothea "so disapproved of" during the Japanese-American "evacuation"? A) her camera, B) her dress, C) her attitude, D) her position with the War Relocation Authority
10. \_\_\_\_\_ When Lange went to Utah in 1953 on assignment for Life magazine, what famous photographer did the magazine send there with her? A) Jacob Riis, B) James Agee, C) Ansel Adams, D) Walker Evans
11. \_\_\_\_\_ At the end of 1955, Lange photographed the beginning of a story called what? A) "Order in the Court", B) "Surrounding Justice", C) "Pleading the Fifth", D) "The Public Defender"
12. \_\_\_\_\_ According to Lange, the best way to go into an unknown territory is to go in A) well-informed about local culture and tradition, B) ignorant with your mind wide open, C) with a traveling companion familiar with the area, D) with enough money to see everything
13. \_\_\_\_\_ In the photograph of the ravine did not have the subject of family but instead the subject of A) freedom, B) love, C) loss, D) peace
14. \_\_\_\_\_ In August (1964), Lange was diagnosed with this form of cancer. A) stomach, B) liver, C) esophagus, D) brain
15. \_\_\_\_\_ Who directed this film? A) Meg Partridge, B) Sue Stephens, C) Mary Helen Alexander, D) Carlene Taylor

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Pd. \_\_\_\_\_

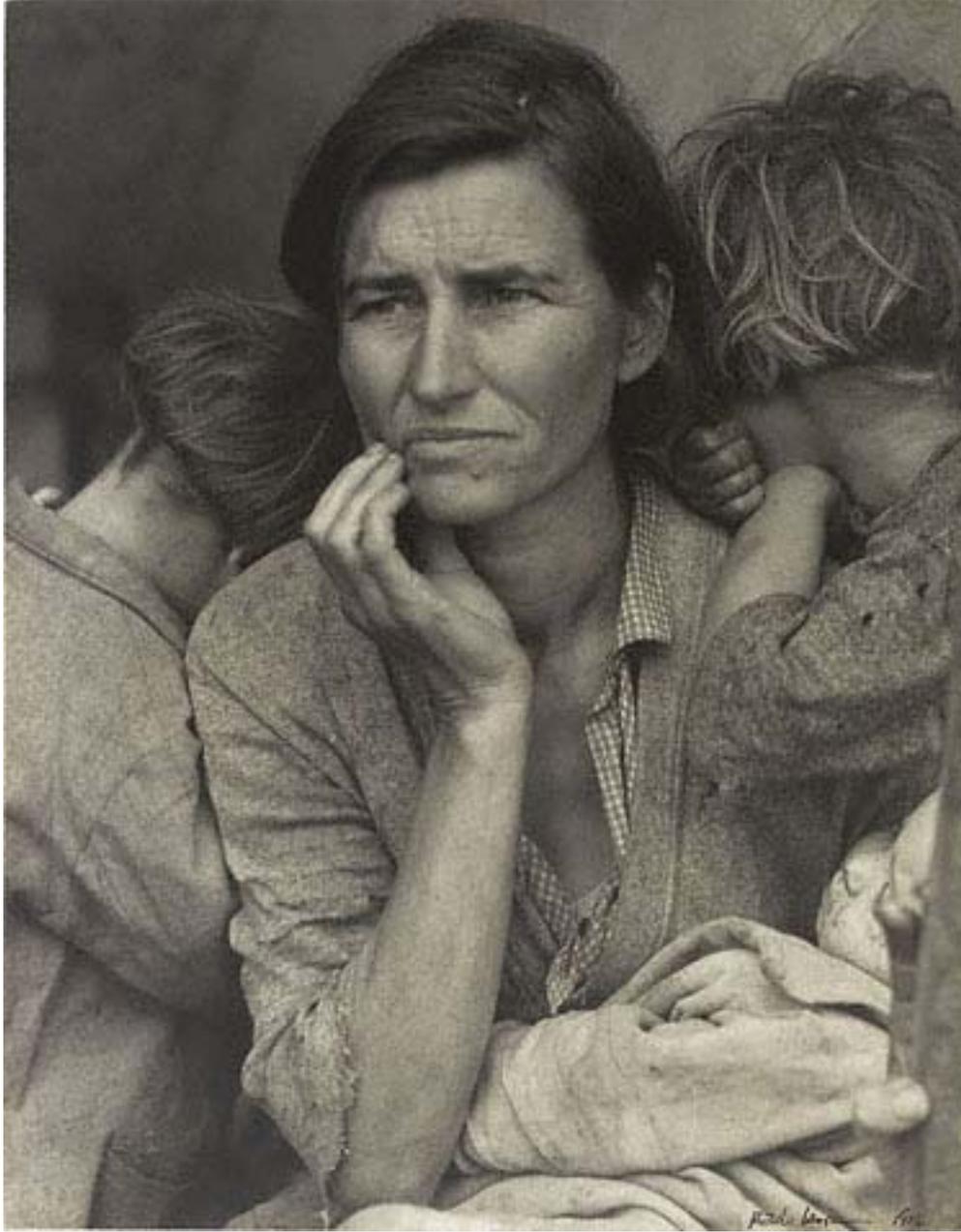
### *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* Film Quiz (Answer Key)

**Directions:** As you view the film *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*, answer the following questions by writing the correct letter for each question in the space provided. The questions follow the film.

1.   A   How much was the daily government per diem Dorothea Lange and her assistant lived off of? A) \$4, B) \$5, C) \$7, D) \$10
2.   C   At the beginning of her photography career, Lange started a portrait studio in what city? A) Chicago, Illinois; B) Birmingham, Alabama; C) San Francisco, California; D) New York City, New York
3.   B   On May Day, Lange photographed a demonstration and these pictures were printed in which of the following magazine publications. A) Life, B) Survey Graphic, C) Modern Photography, D) B&W Photography
4.   D   When Lange joined Professor Paul Taylor's agricultural labor research project, she was officially hired on as what? A) a secretary, B) a photographer, C) a field hand, D) a typist
5.   C   What's the name of the man who John Steinbeck based his camp manager character in *The Grapes of Wrath*?  
A) John Howell, B) Bob Guy, C) Tom Collins, D) Mark Cohen
6.   A   Lange's job with the California Emergency Relief Administration led to her appointment to this federal agency.  
A) the Farm Security Administration, B) the Farm Service Administration, C) the Farm Security Agency, D) the Farm Surplus Association
7.   A   While Lange was with the FSA, she had major problems with this man who wanted complete control over everything and everybody. A) Roy Striker, B) John Turner, C) Michael Dixon, D) Thomas Royston
8.   B   The consequences of the Dust Bowl changed the character of California and included all of the following except  
A) new point of view, B) new technology, C) new population
9.   A   According to Christina Gardner, Lange's assistant, what made Dorothea "so disapproved of" during the Japanese-American "evacuation"? A) her camera, B) her dress, C) her attitude, D) her position with the War Relocation Authority
10.   C   When Lange went to Utah in 1953 on assignment for Life magazine, what famous photographer did the magazine send there with her? A) Jacob Riis, B) James Agee, C) Ansel Adams, D) Walker Evans
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13. A In the photograph of the ravine did not have the subject of family but instead the subject of A) freedom, B) love, C) loss, D) peace
14. C In August (1964), Lange was diagnosed with this form of cancer. A) stomach, B) liver, C) esophagus, D) brain
15. A Who directed this film? A) Meg Partridge, B) Sue Stephens, C) Mary Helen Alexander, D) Carlene Taylor

# Image One



Human Erosion in California/Migrant Mother,  
Nipomo, California, March 1936

# Human Erosion in California/ Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California

## Background Information

This picture of an exhausted mother, consumed with worry over the survival of her children, is one of six photographs Lange took in the span of just a few minutes at a pea-pickers' camp. She had returned to the camp on an impulse after having driven twenty miles past it at the end of a long day of work. The woman in the picture, Florence Owens (1903-1983), was the widowed mother of eight children at the time this photograph was taken. She had been with her family in the Imperial Valley picking beets. They were on their way to Watsonville to work in the lettuce fields when car trouble forced them to stop at the Nipomo pea-pickers' camp. Lange found Owens waiting for her sons to return with the needed parts.

Regardless of the particular circumstances of her being in that place at that time, the mother's pose of stoic anxiety and the encumbrance of her three young children conveyed a universal message. Americans were shocked when they saw photographs of this family published in the San Francisco News, and the federal government immediately sent twenty thousand pounds of food to the starving workers. In the years following its initial publication, Migrant Mother came to represent the Great Depression itself.

Florence Owens eventually had three more children, and her family kept moving, following the California crops. Owens became involved in efforts to organize farm labor and would sometimes serve as the "straw boss," or the one who negotiated wages for migrants as the picking season began. She was still doing field work at the age of fifty, before marrying George Thompson and settling into a stable life in Modesto, California.

## Questions

- Who is in this picture? How do you think they are related? What do you see in the picture that gives you clues?
- How would you describe the woman's expression?
- What does the woman's gesture tell you about how she's feeling?
- Do you think Lange posed the two older children to face away from the camera? If you think she did, why would she have done this?
- How do you think the public responded to this photograph when it was published in a newspaper?
- Years later, Florence Owens Thompson did not want this picture published anymore because she felt it labeled her as "poor" when she no longer was. If it had been up to you, would you have honored her request? If a subject agrees to be photographed, should they be able to control how the photo is later used?

## Image Two



White Angel Bread Line, San Francisco

# White Angel Bread Line, San Francisco

## Background Information

A crowd of men stands waiting, tightly packed together. Most of them have their backs to the camera, but one man in the foreground, with the brim of his hat covering his eyes, is turned toward the viewer. Leaning on a wooden rail, he tensely clasps his hands and balances an empty cup between his arms on top of the fence. All of the men pictured here were standing in a breadline organized during the Depression by a wealthy San Franciscan known as the "White Angel."

Lange's friends urged her to stay away from places like this, where unemployed and desperately poor people gathered. Nonetheless, one day in 1933 she ventured out from her portrait studio and created this image of the misery passively endured by the unemployed who wait for food as well as for a chance to get a job. She later described the experience, which proved to be a turning point in her understanding of what she could accomplish as a photographer: "That's the first day I ever made a photograph actually on the street. I put it on the wall of my studio and customers, people whom I was making portraits of, would come in and glance at them. And the only comment I ever got was, 'What are you going to do with this kind of thing?' I didn't know. But I knew that picture was on my wall, and I knew that it was worth doing." She later said that, soon after photographing White Angel Bread Line, "I'd begun to get much firmer grip on the things I really wanted to do in my work."

## Questions

- What is happening in this picture?
- How would you describe the expression on the face of the man turned toward the camera? What do you think he might be thinking about?
- Would the meaning of this picture change if several of the men were facing the camera, instead of just the one? Explain your answer.
- Compare the dress and expression of the man who faces the camera with the appearance of the other men in the picture. Why did Lange single him out of the crowd?
- Can you find any patterns? How do they contribute to the photograph's meaning?
- Do you think a person needs to have personally experienced unemployment and hunger to understand this photograph?
- Who should see this image? Would/does the publication of a photo like this one help the people pictured in it?

## Student Analysis: Image A



On the Road Toward Los Angeles, California, March 1937

## Student Analysis: Image B



Plantation Owner and His Field Hands, near Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1936

## Student Analysis: Image C



Man Beside Wheelbarrow, San Francisco, California, 1934

## Student Analysis: Image D



Members of the Mochida Family, Haywood, California, May 1942

## Student Analysis: Image E



Working in the Fields, 1937

## Student Analysis: Image F



Migrant Mother and Family, 1936

## Student Analysis: Image G



The General Strike, San Francisco, 1934

# Photo Analysis Worksheet

## Step 1. Observation

- A. Study the photograph for two minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photograph into four sections. Study each section to see what new details become visible.
- B. List people, objects, and activities in the photograph in the chart below.

PEOPLE	OBJECTS	ACTIVITIES

## Step 2. Inference

Based on what you have observed, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

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## Step 3. Conclusion and Questions

- A. List two things the photograph tells you about life in the United States at the time it was taken.

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- B. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

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- C. What major themes and issues are dealt with in this image?

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