

#4 March 2013 Cameraderie Dorothea Lange (1895-1965)

Dorothea Lange was active as a documentary photographer in the early to mid-twentieth century. She documented poverty and starvation during the Great Depression and the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII.

Lange was a teaching colleague of Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Minor White at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA). She co-founded the photographic magazine *Aperture* with Ansel Adams, Minor White and others.

Her single most famous image is her 1936 *Migrant Mother*, one of the all-time great iconic images in the history of documentary photography, surely the most famous of the Great Depression, taken in a California migrant camp. The subject, Florence Owens Thompson, is shown in her lean-to tent with two of her children. Here is a link to the image at the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) web site:

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3373&page_number=4&template_id=1&sort_order=1.

Lange worked as a documentary photographer for the US Government's Farm Security Administration (FSA) at the time, and her photographs were made available free to newspapers around the country. When *Migrant Mother* was published, it caused a prompt reaction to send aid to that particular migrant camp, as well as calling national attention to the desperate situation of many migrant workers.

Here are two other links to the same MOMA website of two more of her nearly equally famous photographs of desperate people: *Bread Line*, and *Woman of the High Plains*.

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3373&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3373&page_number=13&template_id=1&sort_order=1

Lange also documented how Japanese-Americans were placed in prison camps during WWII. She illustrated the pathos of this situation with photographs of small children reciting the pledge of allegiance. Here again from the MOMA website is one of her images, *One Nation, Indivisible*:

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3373&page_number=22&template_id=1&sort_order=1

Once you are on the MOMA website, browse through all 32 of Lange's photographs displayed there to get a sense of the full range of her work. Another favorite of mine is *The Road West*:

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3373&page_number=16&template_id=1&sort_order=1

What characterizes Lange's work? Surely simplicity and strong contrasts of light and dark. But far more importantly, there is honesty and mission. One has the sense of her intense, almost electric, engagement with her subject matter. Here is a link to a page of quotes from her, all about this intense engagement with her photography, all very instructive: <http://www.photoquotes.com/showquotes.aspx?id=146>. Here is one from that list: "A documentary photograph is not a factual photograph per se. It is a photograph which carries the full meaning of the episode."

Here another quote from that page that I particularly like, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera." Let's all just think about that for a minute...