



## ***Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing***

**February 14 - May 10, 2020**

**Exhibit Lesson Plan: Grades 6 – 12**

**Exploring the Influence of Artist's Statements, Captions and Titles**



Dorothea Lange in Texas on the Plains. 1935. Courtesy of the Collection of the Oakland Museum of California. © The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

***“The camera is a great teacher, and the more people use it the more aware they become of the possibilities of the visual world.” —Dorothea Lange***

During her long career, Dorothea Lange’s belief in the transformative and motivating power of seeing guided her work. She was certain that seeing the effects of injustice could provoke reform and—just maybe—change the world. Her photographs are more than simply beautiful. They are charged with a quiet outrage. They speak of a deep empathy for people, encouraging us to imagine ourselves in such circumstances.

Beauty was secondary to Lange. “The good photograph is not the object,” she said. “The consequences of the photograph are the object.” Lange wanted her audience to see and be affected by the truth of a photograph rather than its artistry.

The Oakland Museum of California received Lange’s personal collection as a gift in 1966, a year after her death. The archive contains more than 25,000 negatives and 6,000 prints. Though the events she recorded are now history, her photographs continue to inspire new generations of artist-activists.

Most of Lange’s photos were published anonymously, and when she died in 1965, few people truly recognized her talent and contributions. As a result, most people today recognize *Migrant Mother*, but not Lange’s name. Lange often said a single image was an idea, two grouped together were a phrase and five or more became a sentence. People might recognize *Migrant Mother* but by Lange’s determination, it is just one word. This exhibition will provide sentences.

Drawing upon vintage prints, unedited proof sheets, personal memorabilia and historic objects, this exhibition takes a unique approach and will be the first to examine the extraordinary emotional power of Lange’s work through the lens of social and political activism. Visitors will read Lange’s words and hear her voice. They will learn about her process and approach; the difference between looking at something and truly seeing it; and leave the exhibition with a better appreciation of her artistry and advocacy, as well as an increased awareness of the ways photography can be used to sway minds and prompt change. In an age of cell phone cameras and social media, a critical and informed awareness of the power of photographs has become an obligation of citizenship.

**Note to the teacher:** This lesson utilizes the Migrant Mother photograph and is aligned to Oklahoma History standards, however, the scope and span of Lange’s work allow this lesson to be used in broader US History, World History and Economics units. Consider utilizing a different photograph from the exhibit that might connect with your subject area.

**Essential Question:** How do captions/titles influence the way we read a photo?

## Oklahoma History

**OASSS: OKH.5** The student will examine Oklahoma's political, social, cultural, and economic transformation during the early decades following statehood.

**OKH.5.7:** Describe the impact of environmental conditions and human mismanagement of resources resulting in the Dust Bowl and the migration of “Okies”, the national perceptions of Oklahomans, and the New Deal policies regarding conservation of natural resources.

## Art

**STANDARD 2:** Visual Art History and Culture: “Responding” The student will recognize the development of visual art from a historical and cultural perspective.

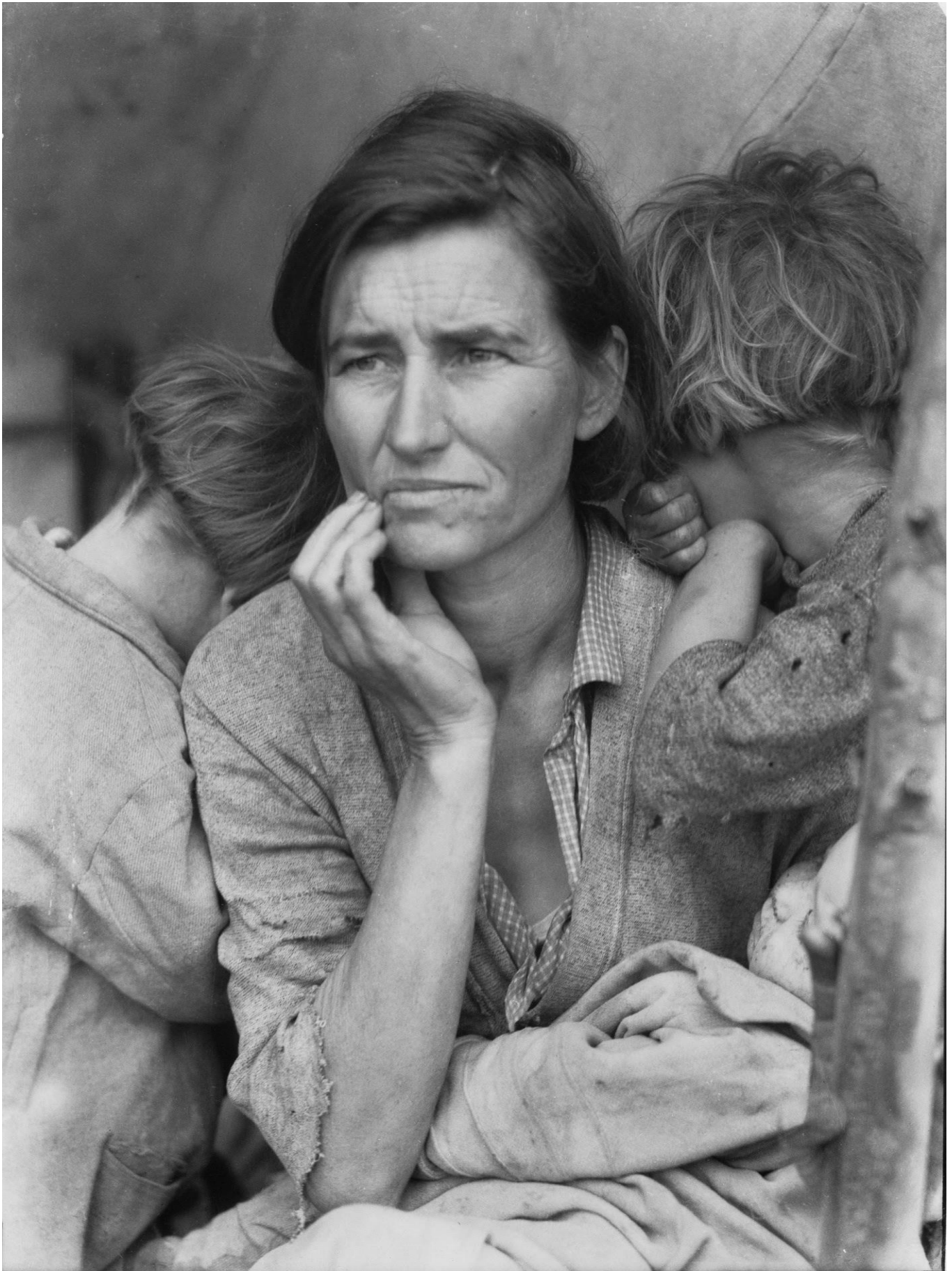
## Pre-Visit Activity

- Select a few samples of classroom appropriate photographs from a popular social media photo site (e.g. Instagram) and ask students to discuss the role that captions play when sharing photos on social media. Do all photos need captions? Do captions or titles influence the way we “read” a social media photograph? If a picture is worth a thousand words, why do we even need titles?
- Facilitate a classroom discussion and then encourage students to transfer these ideas to historical or journalistic photography. Encourage students to critically think about photographs as a primary source in the study of history and the role that a title or caption can make in how people view a photograph. Ask them to discuss this quote: “While fine artists are known to be *creating art*, many consider photographers to be *capturing reality*.” Source: Johnson, P. *Art: A New History*.
- Show students the *Migrant Mother*, (included) but do not reveal the title. Ask them to utilize the National Archives photograph analysis worksheets ([A](#) and [B](#)) to “read” this photograph, but still do not reveal the title. Allow time for students to process the questions and discuss them in small or large groups.
- Share with students the most commonly known title for this photograph: “*Migrant Mother*” and ask them to think about how this title influences what they see in the image. After discussion, reveal to learners that Lange’s full title for this photograph is “*Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California*” or sometimes “*Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother)*.” Ask students to discuss how the full title might change how we interpret the photo and/or the context in which the photo was taken. Ask learners to discuss what “human erosion” might refer to.

- Ask students to discuss: In what ways are the titles similar or different? Do different titles instruct a viewer to look at the photograph differently? Is it better or worse to read the title before you “read” the image? Why do you think the first half of the title has been eliminated from the public conversation over the years?
- Prepare students for their trip to the Lange exhibition by providing a brief summary of Lange’s work in various areas of U.S. history. A resource on the entire body of her work can be found [here](#).
- Let students know they will be viewing a large range of Lange photographs and that they will be encouraged to think critically about the titles/captions and select photos to re-title.

### **During Museum Visit**

- Remind students about your classroom discussions regarding the role that titles/captions play in interpreting a photograph.
- Ask students to explore the exhibit and pay close attention to the titles and to consider how they influence their understanding of the historical events highlighted in the collection.
- Ask students to select two or three photographs that they are drawn to and take a picture of them with a mobile device. Remind students to write down the actual titles as given by Lange and to write new titles on the handout provided. Alternatively, you could select photos from the [Lange collection](#) at the National Archives for students to look at when you have returned to the classroom. The [Online Archive of California](#) also holds a large number of Lange photos that are viewable online.
- Alternatively, bring copies of the National Archives photo analysis worksheets and ask learners to select a photograph they feel is most powerful and complete the analysis worksheet during their trip to the museum. Upon returning to the classroom, ask learners to share their selections in small groups.



Migrant Mother. Nipomo, California. 1936. Courtesy of the Collection of the Oakland Museum of California. © The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

## Post-Visit Activities

- Conduct a classroom conversation by sharing the photographs that students re-titled or sharing their analysis of selected photos. If possible, view selected photographs together on a classroom screen and discuss Lange's titles as compared to new student titles. Ask students to consider again how titles influence the viewer.
- Use a textbook or other classroom source to examine photographs and the messages they convey in the text. Ask students to select textbook photographs and re-title them in a way that shines a new light on the content. Consider sharing these in small groups or with the whole class. How do captions/titles in textbooks shape the way we learn history? Facilitate a discussion about textbook "objectivity" - who decides what the textbook captions state?
- Facilitate a discussion or assign a writing prompt utilizing this quote from Lange: In 1952, Lange critiqued contemporary photography as being, *"in a state of flight,"* seduced by the *"spectacular,"* *"frenzied,"* and *"unique"* at the expense of the *"familiar"* and *"intimate."*

It had become, she wrote,

*"more concerned with illusion than reality. It does not reflect but contrives. It lives in a world of its own."*

Against this trend, she urged photographers to reconnect with the world...

*"That the familiar world is often unsatisfactory cannot be denied, but it is not, for all that, one that we need abandon,"* she argued. *"...Bad as it is, the world is potentially full of good photographs. But to be good, photographs have to be full of the world."*

Source: <https://www.moma.org/artists/3373>

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## Museum Activity Handout

Select three photographs from the exhibit that you feel are the most powerful or that tell the most powerful story. For each photograph, describe it in the space provided below (and take a picture with your mobile device if that is permitted by your teacher) and record the title given by Dorothea Lange. Then, write your own alternative caption that you feel captures what the photograph is about.

### **Photograph 1**

Describe the picture:

Dorothea Lange's Title:

Your Title:

### **Photograph 2**

Describe the picture:

Dorothea Lange's Title:

Your Title:

### **Photograph 3**

Describe the picture:

Dorothea Lange's Title:

Your Title: