



Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing

February 14 - May 10, 2020

Exhibit Lesson Plan: Grades 6 – 12

Historical Photographs and 6-Word Stories



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 can historical photographs inspire creative writing?

Oklahoma History

OASSS: OKH.6 The student will investigate how post-war social, political, and economic events continued to transform the state of Oklahoma from the 1950s through the present.

OKH.6.8: Describe the changing perceptions, both internal and external, of the state and its citizens, as reflected in the *Grapes of Wrath*, and the musical *Oklahoma!*, Route 66, and the professional basketball team the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Art

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

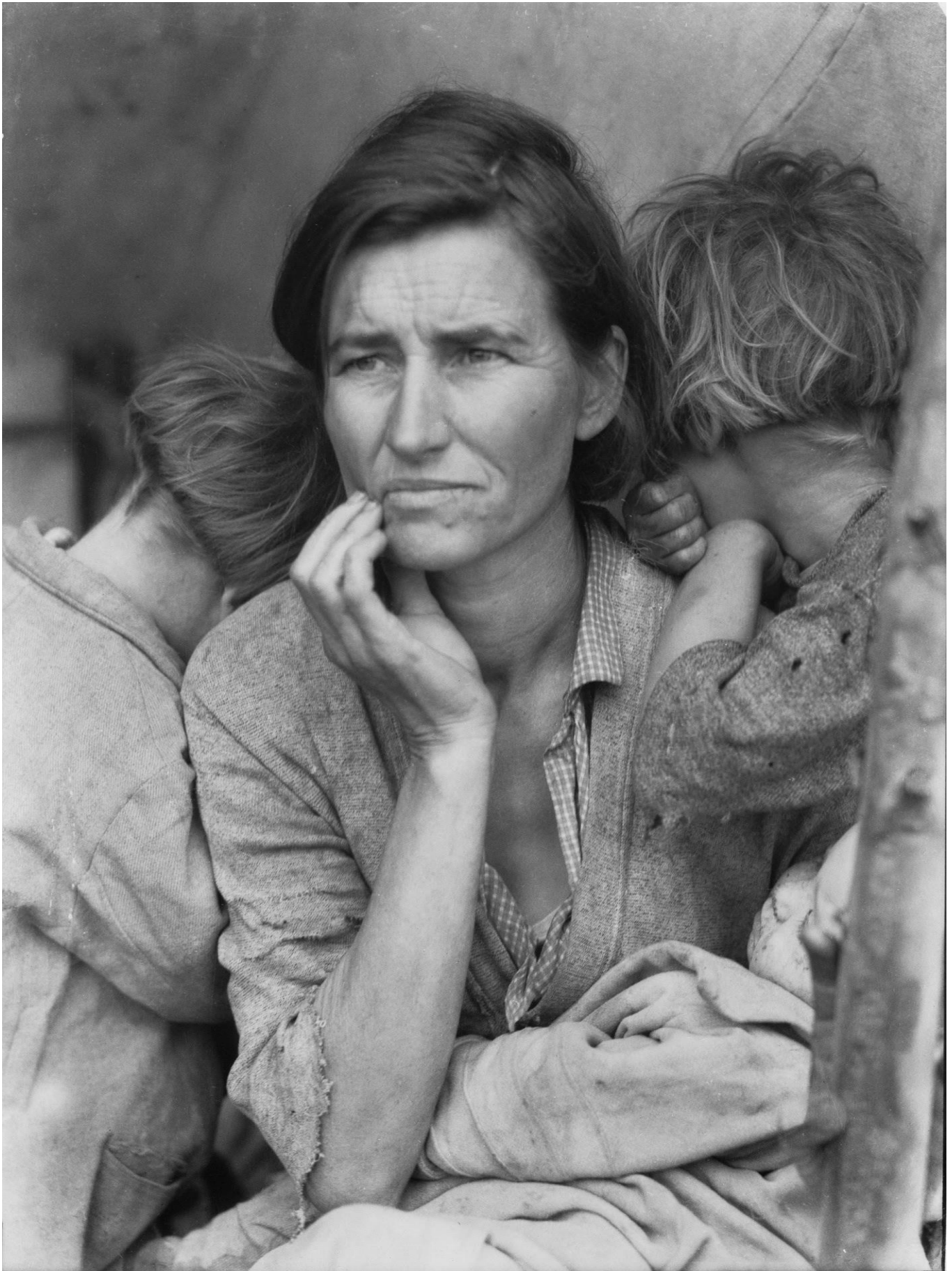
Pre-Visit Activity

Encourage students to critically think about photographs as a primary source in the study of history.

- Share this quote with your students and ask them to discuss what it means to them:

"While fine artists are known to be creating art, many consider photographers to be capturing reality." (Paul Johnson, Art: A New History, 2004)

- After discussion, ask students if they believe that historical photographs are more or less accurate than other types of historical documents (e.g.: documents, political cartoons, etc.). Ask students to discuss what *choices* a photographer might make that influences the final image they capture.
- Ask students if they believe it is possible to capture an impartial photograph. You might ask students to think about how the photographs they take with their mobile devices are similar to or different from historical photographs.
- Show students Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, and conduct a class discussion about what they see. If time allows, show students the [entire series](#) of photographs that Lange took of the family. Ask students why they think the *Migrant Mother* photograph was the photograph that became most famous from the series.
- To conclude this discussion, ask students to write and share a 6-Word Story about the *Migrant Mother*. A 6-Word Story should provide a movement of conflict, action, and resolution that gives the sense of *a complete story transpiring in a moment's reading*, ex. "I came, I saw, I conquered." Let students know that they will be visiting the exhibit that shows a wide range of Lange's photographs over many different topics and that they will be asked to select a different photograph from the exhibit to write a 6-Word Story about.



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.

During Museum Visit

- Gather students at the *Migrant Mother* photograph in the exhibit and remind students about their discussion about photographs prior to the visit. Ask students to recite their stories or bring along some that can be read aloud in the museum.
- As students begin their exploration of the exhibit, instruct them to select a different Lange photograph that they are drawn to and think about the life of the person in the photograph.
- After they have selected a photograph, ask students to use the photograph and any accompanying exhibit information to draft a new 6-Word Story about the life of this person. Students may photograph their selected image with a mobile device for reference for the post-visit activity.
- Be sure to let students know that they will be revising and sharing their 6-Word Stories in class when you return to campus.

Post-Visit Activities

- Ask students to share the photograph they selected from the exhibit and read their 6-Word Stories in small groups or with the class. Provide paper copies or share photo files and allow students to create digital presentations of their stories.
- Consider creating a bulletin board that pairs their selected photo with a final draft of their stories in the classroom.
- If time allows, place students in small groups and ask them to craft a full story that combines each individual 6-Word Story.