

Dorothea Lange  
Migrant Mother

MoMA

# DOROTHEA LANGE MIGRANT MOTHER

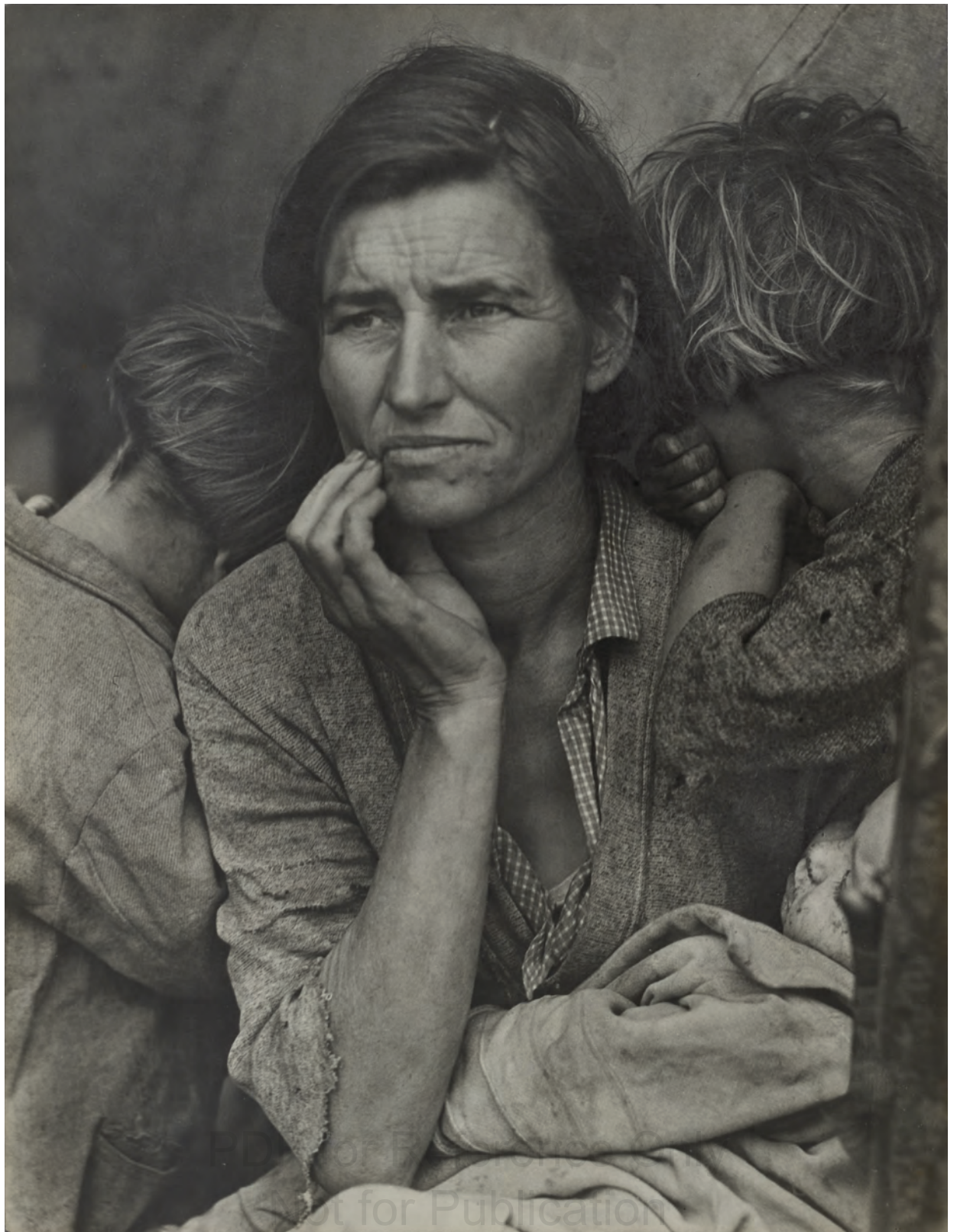
SARAH HERMANSON MEISTER

**IT IS PERFECTLY LOGICAL TO WRITE ABOUT THE SINGULARITY OF A PAINTING,** whereas photography's multiplicity is central to our understanding of the medium. The vast majority of photographs are made from negatives—or today, from digital files—from which it is possible, at least in theory, to make an infinite number of identical prints. The subject of this book, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, exists in more formats, prints, and places than (arguably) any other photograph in the world. In this regard it is, ironically, singular.

*Migrant Mother* is also a singular icon of twentieth-century art. Lange made this photograph—along with six others of the same woman, Florence Owens Thompson, and her daughters—in Nipomo, California, in early March 1936. Since that time, the image has been so widely circulated that it is now a fixture in the public imagination. On March 10 Thompson's likeness appeared in tens of thousands of copies of the *San Francisco News*, and tens of thousands more with a follow-up article the next day. The impact of those photographs was quick and profound, not only on the community of migrant workers near Nipomo. One beleaguered federal employee wrote in July 1936: "We are snowed under with requests for migratory labor pictures. . . . All this material is being grasped at eagerly by all press services, newspapers, and magazines. We are getting the greatest spread that we have ever had."<sup>1</sup> In 1936 Lange was an employee of the United States government, so her images made during that period are in the public domain, which means that anyone could (and in fact still can) reproduce them for any purpose, free of charge. Surely this ease of access has contributed to the ubiquity of *Migrant Mother*. The U.S. Postal Service chose to use it on a thirty-two-cent stamp in 1998, adding millions of (slightly cropped) copies to its circulation history [FIG. 1]. It has appeared on dozens of book and magazine covers, has been transformed into a thousand-piece puzzle and a cross-stitch

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. 1936. Gelatin silver print, 11 1/8 x 8 7/16" (28.3 x 21.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE, 1949 (PROMOTED 1995)







**FIG. 1.** Thirty-two-cent stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service in 1998. PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENTAL COLLECTION, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE, 2018

pattern, and has decorated countless trinkets and T-shirts, posters and postcards. Prints from Lange’s negative have been included in landmark photography exhibitions seen by millions of people around the world, and shown in untold numbers of other displays, both public and private. The image has seeped into our common cultural consciousness. Even a scene from a 1967 Hollywood film carries with it echoes of Lange’s photograph [FIG. 2].<sup>2</sup> Its omnipresence—facilitated by the inherent reproducibility of the medium and encouraged by its powerful emotional impact—may be what most clearly distinguishes *Migrant Mother* from any other photograph.

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Dorothea Nutzhorn was born on May 26, 1895, in Hoboken, New Jersey, the first child of two first-generation German Americans.<sup>3</sup> They lived comfortably, with ample access to music and literature. The family’s only other child, Martin, was born in 1901. During the summer of 1902 Dorothea contracted polio, a potentially life-threatening virus that left her with permanent damage to her right leg and foot. As she later recalled: “I was physically disabled, and no one who hasn’t lived the life of a semi-cripple knows how much that means. . . . [It] formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me. All those things at once.”<sup>4</sup> The other defining trauma of her childhood occurred when she was twelve: her parents separated and (as she saw it) her father abandoned the family.



FIG. 2. Still from *Bonnie and Clyde*. 1967. Film: 35mm, color, sound, 111 minutes. Directed by Arthur Penn

Dorothea and her brother and mother moved in with her maternal grandmother in Hoboken. Her mother took a job at the Chatham Square Branch of the New York Public Library on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Dorothea commuted into the city with her every day and began attending public school near the library. Later, she went to high school on Manhattan's Upper West Side and, upon graduation in 1912, declared her intention to become a photographer. Having never owned a camera, she first took a position in Arnold Genthe's studio (eventually she would apprentice with various other photographers) and augmented her practical training with a class taught by Clarence H. White at Columbia University's Teachers College. Both Genthe and White were adept at navigating the concerns of clients with their artistic ambitions; and their aesthetic approaches, while distinct, shared a pictorialist tendency toward soft-focus that would characterize Lange's early studio work.

In early 1918 Dorothea embarked upon what was intended to be a journey around the world with a high school classmate, Florence (Fronsie) Ahlstrom. By May they had reached San Francisco, where their savings were wiped out by a pickpocket. That misadventure closed the door on their travels, stranding them in the Bay Area, which would remain the photographer's home until her death in 1965. She took a job at Marsh & Company, a general goods store that sold, among other things, photographic supplies, and provided photo-finishing services. Perhaps sensing the significance of this liminal moment, the young job





**FIG. 3.** Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883–1976). *Magnolia Blossom*. c. 1925. Gelatin silver print, 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{2}$ " (17.1 x 21.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ALBERT M. BENDER, 1939

seeker used her mother's maiden name, Lange, on the application, severing a final symbolic tie with her father.

Keen to connect with the photographic community, Lange soon joined the San Francisco Camera Club, and within a year, with money borrowed from friends, she opened her own photographic portrait studio at 540 Sutter Street. That studio became a gathering place for San Francisco's bohemian crowd, and it was there that she met the painter Maynard Dixon, whom she married in March 1920.<sup>5</sup> Photographer Imogen Cunningham was a close friend; her husband, Roi Partridge, had been one of Lange's first customers at Marsh & Company, and their son, Rondal, would later work as Lange's trusted assistant. Despite these close personal ties and their parallel studio-based practices, there were dramatic differences between Cunningham's and Lange's work. Cunningham embraced a rigorous clarity and delicate tonal range characteristic of contact prints from eight-by-ten-inch negatives [FIG. 3], while Lange's first priority (at least through the early 1930s) was to



**FIG. 4.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *Clausen Child and Mother*. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 6 1/8 x 8 1/4" (15.6 x 21 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. THOMAS WALTHER COLLECTION. GIFT OF HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON, BY EXCHANGE, 2017

satisfy clients unlikely to relish such potentially unflattering detail, yet without adopting the fanciful tropes then common in studio practice. In her words:

People like Imogen Cunningham, whom I knew very well by that time, all worked for name and prestige, and sent to exhibits. But I was a tradesman. At least so I regarded myself. And I was a professional photographer who had a product that was more honest, more truthful, and in some ways more charming. At any rate there was no false front in it. I really and seriously tried, with every person I photographed, to reveal them as closely as I could.<sup>6</sup>

Even within the bounds of traditional studio portraiture, Lange's images are notable for their ability to evoke a sense of relaxed intimacy, and for their unconventionally and artfully asymmetrical compositions [FIG. 4].



Lange and Dixon's first son, Daniel, arrived in May 1925, and their second, John, in June 1928; also in the home was Dixon's teenage daughter, Constance (Consie), from his first marriage. Although Lange maintained her studio, the competing demands of being a wife, mother, and professional photographer were compounded with the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929. Even their modest lifestyle was difficult to maintain, as demand for Lange's portraits and Dixon's paintings dwindled. After a short stint living in Taos, New Mexico, they moved back to San Francisco in 1932, and sent the boys to a school in Marin County, where they boarded with local families. Lange and Dixon gave up their shared home and moved into separate studios.

From her second-floor-studio window on Montgomery Street, Lange witnessed scenes of devastation wrought by the faltering economy. In early 1933, with trepidation and conviction in equal measure, she went down to photograph in the street for the first time. As she recalled: "I wasn't accustomed to jostling about in groups of tormented, depressed and angry men, with a camera."<sup>7</sup> One result was *White Angel Breadline*, an image that succinctly humanizes the impact of unemployment: a man grappling with poverty and hunger, alone in a sea of men in similarly dire straits [FIG. 5]. This photograph marked the beginning of a new chapter for Lange, who was becoming increasingly confident in her ability to use photography to confront the urgent circumstances around her. As the writer George P. Elliott would later note: "This image does not derive its power from formal elegance so much as from its being inextricably entangled with the comment it is making. It is art for life's sake."<sup>8</sup> The same may be said for much of Lange's work.

In 1934 Lange photographed the May Day demonstrations in San Francisco; shortly thereafter, the photographer Willard Van Dyke presented these images in his exhibition space in Oakland. Paul Taylor, a professor of agricultural economics at the University of California at Berkeley, describes his visit to the gallery and his first encounter with Lange's work:

What fascinated me especially among her prints was one of a street agitator bellowing into a microphone at the San Francisco Civic Center. It fitted my current need exactly. In collaboration with a colleague at the university, I had just completed and sent to the *Survey Graphic* the draft of an article on San Francisco and the General Strike of 1934. I wanted that photograph to accompany it. The exhibitor, Willard Van Dyke, put me on the phone with Dorothea Lange; and her photograph became the frontispiece of our article. I think we paid her fifteen dollars for the photograph. That was money in those days.<sup>9</sup>

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FIG. 5. Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *White Angel Breadline*. 1933. Gelatin silver print, 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{7}{8}$ " (27.3 x 22.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ALBERT M. BENDER, 1940

In late 1934 Taylor was hired by the California State Emergency Relief Administration to study the contemporary circumstances of agriculture and migrant workers and recommend a program to help them. By early 1935 he had convinced his superiors to hire Lange as a typist—they had yet to be convinced of the need for a photographer—to accompany his team on research trips around California. In their first spiral-bound report, submitted on March 15, 1935, were fifty-seven photographs by Lange, including at least ten made in Nipomo and San Luis Obispo County, where she would create *Migrant Mother* the following year [FIG. 6].<sup>10</sup> This was the first of many journeys Lange and Taylor would embark upon together, bound by a commitment to illuminate—and improve—the extraordinarily difficult circumstances around them. Taylor provided Lange with an intellectual framework for her natural sympathies; together, his scholarship and her keenly observed depictions became hugely influential in effecting public policy.<sup>11</sup> That summer, the state agency for which they both worked was transferred to the newly formed federal Resettlement Administration (RA; in 1937 renamed the Farm Security Administration, or FSA). Their personal mission was unchanged, although the official scope of their responsibilities was enlarged. By November they had divorced their respective spouses, and on December 6, 1935, they interrupted their work only long enough to be married by a justice of the peace in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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In 1934 Van Dyke noted: “Miss Lange’s real interest is in human beings and her urge to photograph is aroused only when human values are concerned.” He went on to clarify: “Unlike the newspaper reporter, she has no news or editorial policies to direct her movements; it is only her deeply personal sympathies for the unfortunates, the downtrodden, the misfits, among her contemporaries that provide the impetus for her expedition.”<sup>12</sup> Time and again, this observation would be confirmed, most memorably in the photograph that would come to be known as *Migrant Mother*. Lange’s evident compassion for a destitute thirty-two-year-old mother of seven children is an essential element inspiring the powerful response to this now-iconic photograph. The fact that Lange was an

**FIG. 6.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Camp of white American pea pickers. Nipomo, Calif. / Mexican pea pickers’ camp. Nipomo. / Jan. 26, 1935,” in Paul S. Taylor, *Establishment of Rural Rehabilitation Camps for Migrants in California*, report of March 15, 1935. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

*Note: The image captions in quotation marks are taken verbatim from the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration files, now with the Library of Congress. They were often drawn from Lange’s notes. Those for the Migrant Mother series were likely derived (by Lange or an RA/FSA staff member) from United Press reports published in the San Francisco News and elsewhere in March 1936. The Library of Congress reference numbers for individual Lange negatives appear on page 47 of this volume.*

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Camp of white American pea pickers.  
Nipomo, Calif.



Mexican pea pickers'  
camp.  
Nipomo -

Jan 26 - 1935

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