

The Museum of Modern Art

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The first major retrospective exhibition of the works of the American photographer DOROTHEA LANGE, who died last October at the age of 70, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 25 through March 27.

The exhibition of over 200 photographs dating from 1920 to 1965 includes her famous documentation of the thirties as well as relatively unfamiliar work done mostly in the last 15 years, such as her photographic essays devoted to Asia, Ireland, Egypt, The New California, and on her own home and family.

John Szarkowski, head of the Museum's Department of Photography, who directed the exhibition, collaborated to an unusual degree with the photographer on the basic decisions of content and organization. The show was installed by Kathleen Haven, Co-ordinator of the Museum's Graphics Department.

Miss Lange has long been considered one of the seminal influences in modern documentary photography. Her belief in people, in the significance of the ordinary, and her need to communicate what she observed, expressed first during the thirties in her classic records of the ordeal of rural America, have become fundamental to the philosophy of the modern documentary.

"What distinguished Lange's work was a challenging intelligence and an artist's eye." Mr. Szarkowski says, "Her intelligence allowed her to by-pass the exceptional-- the merely newsworthy -- and discover the typical. Her art gave to her observation an irreducible simplicity, the eloquence of inevitability."

From her beginnings as a professional photographer, around 1920, she worked as a portrait photographer. In the early thirties she came to realize that her deep commitment to people could not be satisfied within the studio, that it was necessary to photograph people in the circumstances in which they were spending their lives.

Unassigned and unsponsored, without knowing what function her photographs might serve, but supported by her need to see life and understand it, she took her
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camera into the center of crisis in strife-ridden San Francisco and photographed sidewalk orators, soup kitchens, strikers picketing, and homeless, aimless, despairing men.

Her view of the dilemma was realized in the photograph called "White Angel Breadline" in 1933. "What has made this picture celebrated is in large part the image of the unshaven, hunched-up, little man ... leaning on a railing with a tin can between his arms, his hands clenched, the line of his mouth bitter, his back turned to those others waiting for a handout." As George P. Elliott, the novelist and critic who was the photographer's friend for many years, notes in the monograph* published by the Museum for the exhibition, "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."

In 1934, Paul Taylor, an economist at the University of California, saw her pictures and recognized the contribution that such photography could make to social research and education. He hired Miss Lange to assist in his study of California migrant workers. The success of this project was an influential factor in the establishment, in 1935, of the photographic unit of the Resettlement Administration (later called the Farm Security Administration). Lange was an original member of this group, which, under the direction of Roy E. Stryker, first suggested the full potentials of documentary photography as a cultural force -- capable of educating the minds and the sensibilities of a nation.

In her nearly four years with FSA, Lange found a context for herself to work in: photographing the disgracefully invisible people of our society, making them visible to those who would see. She continued to work for the FSA and other government agencies: photographing the Japanese-Americans being taken to relocation camps for the War Relocation Authority, working for the Office of War Information. In 1945, after photographing the United Nations Conference in San Francisco for the Department of State, she collapsed, stricken with the first of a series of illnesses which were to fill much of her last twenty years.

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In her periods of relative health, she accepted short assignments and worked on several essays of personal interest. In 1953, she collaborated with Ansel Adams and her son Daniel Dixon on the essay "Three Mormon Villages" which was published in Life in 1954; her Irish essay, another collaboration with her son, which was published in Life in 1955, is represented by a series of 11 photographs in the exhibition. Several pictures from "The Death of a Valley," the documentation of the devastation of the Berryessa Valley, done with Pirkle Jones in 1956-57, are also included in the retrospective. Her photographs of Asia, Egypt and South America were taken while Dr. Taylor was serving as an economic consultant to various government agencies abroad.

A large section of the exhibition is devoted to "The New California." "She did not attempt to repeat her earlier pictures. The central fact was now not depression but prosperity, so she photographed the mushrooming population and its money; its new houses and highways and automobiles and marketplaces and recreations.

"This latter work she considered not a document but the sketch for a document. The record of the '60s that she wanted to make was beyond the reach of one photographer. During the last two years of her life she worked to define the conditions under which a new documentary unit might provide for this generation a service parallel to that performed thirty years ago by the photographers of the FSA," Mr. Szarkowski points out in his introduction to the exhibition.

Continuing he says, "Lange's work was directed not toward esthetic delight, but toward social relevance. Beauty for her was not a goal, but a proof of success -- a demonstration that something of importance had been clearly seen and graphically fixed. A beautiful picture, because of its rightness, demanded contemplation, and that was the success she wished."

During the week of February 7 - 13, the Museum will show a 30-minute film, "Under the Trees," made for National Educational Television by its affiliate station KQED in San Francisco, last year. The film, the first of a two-part study called "USA Photography: Dorothea Lange," deals, to a large extent with Miss Lange's

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preparations for the Museum exhibition. It will be shown daily in the Museum Auditorium at 1 p.m., except on Saturday, February 12, when it will be shown at 2 p.m. Part I of the study will be televised on Channel 13 on Tuesday, January 25 at 8 p.m.; Part II, "The Closer for Me," will be shown on Channel 13 on February 1, at 8 p.m.

Miss Lange's work was first shown at The Museum of Modern Art in 1940-41, in an exhibition of Recent Acquisitions. Miss Lange's work was also shown at the Museum in Diogenes with a Camera II, 1952-53; in The Family of Man, 1955; and The Bitter Years, 1962; and several works have been on view in the Edward Steichen Photography Center since May, 1964.

*DOROTHEA LANGE, with a critical essay by George P. Elliott. 112 pages, 91 illustrations. Hardbound, \$6.95; paperbound, \$3.50. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Doubleday and Co., Inc.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Lynn Traiger, Assistant Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. Circle 5-8900.