

Dorothea Lange

Seeing People

American photographer Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) created some of the most groundbreaking portraits of the 20th century. Through pictures of laborers, demonstrators, refugees, migrant farmers, the unjustly incarcerated, and others, Lange captured the spirit of human endurance while recording some of the profound social inequities of the period. Her work expanded the boundaries of portraiture and helped spark the development of modern documentary photography.

Dorothea Lange: Seeing People reframes Lange's art through the lens of portraiture and highlights her capacity to spotlight the humanity and resilience of those she photographed. She began her career as a studio portrait photographer, and even as she ventured far outside her studio people remained key to her mission. Focusing on Lange's abiding concern for those in need, this exhibition reveals her lifelong investigation into how photography — and portraits in particular — could help bring about collective change.

One of the most important documentary photographers of her time, Lange sought to transform how we see and understand one another. Motivated by an ever-growing interest in social justice, she was also an intrepid reporter who traveled extensively in the United States and around the world to create indelible and influential photographs. This exhibition illuminates the centrality of portraiture in Lange's career and its role in exposing the impacts of economic disparity, climate change, migration, and war — issues that remain equally urgent today.

This exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington

Early Portraits

1913–1915

Lange learns photography in New York portrait studios and Clarence H. White's photography course at Columbia University

1914–1918

World War I

1918

Lange arrives in San Francisco and soon opens her own portrait studio

1920

Lange marries painter Maynard Dixon

Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895, Dorothea Lange learned photography in New York City before embarking in 1918 on a round-the-world trip. When forced to cut her journey short and find employment in San Francisco, she secured a position at the photo-finishing counter of a variety store. She soon opened her own portrait studio and worked among a cohort of bohemian artists and intellectuals including Imogen Cunningham, Consuelo Kanaga, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and the painter Maynard Dixon, who would become her first husband.

Bay Area high-society and cultural figures became Lange's clients and the subjects of her studio portraits. These early pictures combine elements of the pictorial style in which she was trained, such as soft focus and diffused light, with an emerging modernist aesthetic that included dramatic cropping and unusual angles. She used light, shadow, and carefully constructed poses to articulate the character, attitude, and individuality of her models: "I really and seriously tried, with every person I photographed, to reveal them as closely as I could."

Poverty and Activism

1929

Stock market crash precipitates the Great Depression, which continues in the US through 1939

1933

Franklin Delano Roosevelt becomes president of the United States and initiates the New Deal to encourage economic recovery

1934

Lange exhibits photographs of May Day protests in Oakland; Paul Taylor sees her work and asks to publish one in an essay about the labor strikes

Although she had a highly successful studio practice, Lange in 1933 was compelled by the nation's worsening economic conditions to rethink her occupation and carry her cameras into the city. "There in my studio I was surrounded by evidence of the Depression," she said. "I remember well standing at that one window and just watching the flow of life. . . . I was driven by the fact that I was under personal turmoil to do something."

Out in the streets during the early years of the Great Depression, Lange saw poverty, breadlines, strikes, and labor demonstrations. Her photographs from this period portray the unemployment and unrest that plagued San Francisco, and also document the activism of workers who organized to change their conditions. In 1934, Lange met the agricultural economist Paul Taylor. The two formed an important professional and personal partnership (they married the following year). Lange soon shifted her attention to the plight of migrant farmers, who were moving to California to seek work.

The Great Depression

April 1935

Resettlement Administration established; later becomes the Farm Security Administration

December 1935

Lange and Paul Taylor marry after divorcing their respective spouses

1940

Lange works for the Bureau of Agricultural Economics

As the Great Depression deepened, Dorothea Lange focused her lens on the families who had fled westward in the face of economic hardship caused by depleted land and failed farm tenancy in the South and Midwest. When she was working for government agencies, she documented the success of rural cooperatives and the unsanitary conditions in California migrant camps while striving to humanize the large numbers of people seeking shelter and employment. For Lange, portraiture offered a way to visualize the impacts of migration, racism, and environmental change, as well as the legacy of slavery, to gain public support for government aid programs.

During this period Lange cemented her style of documenting people. Her empathetic, highly detailed, and sharply focused depictions show laborers within their living and working environments. Some subjects are alone, but many are seen with family and other members of their communities. These photographs provided evidence of economic disaster and bore witness to the resulting human tragedy while underscoring her subjects' strength and resilience. This powerful merging of portraiture and documentary photography expanded the boundaries of both traditions, transforming them in ways that resonate deeply today.

World War II

June 1941

President Franklin D. Roosevelt issues Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in federal government employment and in unions and companies working in the defense industries

December 7, 1941

Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, leading the United States to enter World War II

1942 – 1943

Lange works for the War Relocation Authority and Office of War Information

February 19, 1942

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs Executive Order 9066 leading to the removal of more than 120,000 people of Japanese descent from their homes to detention centers

During World War II, Dorothea Lange focused on the impact of the war on Americans at home as well as the nation's complicated racial dynamics. Nowhere is this seen more acutely than in her portraits of individuals of Japanese ancestry who were forced to abandon their homes in response to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's executive order (see nearby panel).

Lange also recorded the epochal shifts in California's social fabric sparked by the growing defense industries, which helped rebuild the economy. Hired by *Fortune* magazine, she documented the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, California, where well-paid jobs attracted African Americans, Native Americans, and women into what had previously been a white male-dominated workforce. Yet as the population of Richmond quickly swelled, and as these newly empowered groups began to assert themselves, the changes also provoked housing shortages and social unrest.

Postwar America

1952

Begins collaboration with *Life* magazine

Helps found *Aperture* magazine with Ansel Adams, Minor White, and others to “communicate with serious photographers and creative people everywhere”

1954

Assists photographer and curator Edward Steichen with *The Family of Man*, a landmark photography exhibition that opens at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1955

Despite frequent health struggles, in the 1950s Dorothea Lange pursued photographic stories about a variety of American communities in the western United States. These include a project about urban life, for which she roamed the Bay Area; *Three Mormon Towns*, a collaboration made with Ansel Adams and Paul Taylor in Utah for *Life* magazine; and an environmental critique produced with photographer Pirkle Jones about the flooding of a Northern California town to create a reservoir. Wide-ranging in subject matter, Lange’s photographs reveal an extraordinary ability to portray the continued transformation of the American West and shine a light on the environmental and human consequences of the postwar economic boom.

World View

1950–1953

Cold War tensions rise during the Korean War, as the US sends troops to a divided Korea to support the anti-Communist southern military against Chinese-backed northern forces

October 11, 1965

Lange passes away after a years-long battle with cancer

January 1966

Lange's retrospective exhibition opens at New York's Museum of Modern Art

Dorothea Lange began working globally in 1954. Her first trip overseas was to Ireland, where she documented the kinship and community of country villages for *Life* magazine. Her husband, Paul Taylor, began consulting on international economic development for the US State Department and, in 1958, they traveled abroad for eight months, visiting Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, and other countries; in the early 1960s, the couple traveled to Venezuela and Egypt. Continuing to concentrate on portraiture, Lange found a new sort of beauty and serenity in these foreign environments as well as ties to the economic and social disparities she had photographed in the United States. While photographs taken during these trips confirm her ongoing creativity in the face of declining health, profound cultural differences made it more difficult for Lange to connect with people.

Lange devoted the last years of her life to her family and to organizing a retrospective exhibition of her photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She passed away in late 1965, but her legacy continues in the enduring resonance of her photographs and the new generations of photographers who use portraiture and documentary styles to prompt social change.

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