Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mothers”


Dorothya Lange’s “Migrant Mother” is one of the most famous works of art in the twentieth century. While many know of the artwork, few know how it was made, or who Lange’s subject was.

Lange took many photographs during the Great Depression, documenting the economic hardships people faced in everyday life. She assisted the federal Farm Security Agency (FSA) in capturing aspects of the New Deal to help those in need. Little did she know that among the many thousands of images she made, this photograph would become the iconic image of the Great Depression.

Lange’s photograph almost didn’t come to be: at the end of a long, rainy day on the road, she passed the sign for a pea pickers camp, driving 20 miles toward home before circling back to the camp. The photographer spent about ten minutes with her subjects, making six photographs. Lange recalled, “I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that (she and her children) had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food.” (Lange 1960, 42-43, 128) “Migrant Mother” shows a woman solemnly gazing into the distance while holding her baby and being embraced by her other two children. The vulnerability and expressiveness of this work has made it the quintessential image of the era. Promoted heavily by the FSA, the photograph was featured in countless magazines, newspapers, museums exhibitions, and photography periodicals.

Yet, many wondered who the woman was and what became of her. In 1978, a Modesto Bee reporter found the woman, Florence Owens Thompson, in a trailer park near Modesto, California. A woman of Cherokee descent who spent most of her years working the land to support her family. Thompson did not benefit financially from Lange’s photograph. When asked about her feelings on the artwork, she expressed being uncomfortable with such exposure. (Stein 2003, 347)

Thompson described her experience during the Great Depression matter of factly. “We just existed. Anyway, we lived. We survived, let’s put it that way.” When her daughter McIntosh was asked about her experience of that time, she shared that their family never had much. McIntosh said of her mother, “she always made sure we had something. She didn’t eat sometimes, but she made sure we children ate.” (Phelan 2014)

Thompson reveals how many women survived on the land during the Great Depression, exhibiting great resilience. Though “Migrant Mother” is her most famous image, Lange frequently documented mothers and children. These portraits cut across lines of race and ethnicity, as seen in Japanese mother and daughter, agricultural workers near Guadalupe, California (1937); the women were united women in the role of motherhood and the shared struggles of poverty. They were providers. They were pioneers. They experienced hardship, but pushed past the limits placed upon them, whether these limits were financial or in the societal expectations of gender.

Imogen Cunningham: Photographing the Dancer’s Body
Martha Graham was one of the most prominent dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century. Graham is best known for the development of the dance technique called “contraction and release,” which dramatizes the body's natural movements. As Graham explained, “The release is the moment in life when you inhale: the breathing going out, when you exhale, is the contraction. It's the first and last moments in life and it's used as technique, to increase the emotional activity of the body - so that you're teaching the body, not teaching the mind.” (Kisselgoff 1984)

Hoping to capture Graham's interest in the expressiveness of the human body, Imogen Cunningham photographed the dancer's hands and feet. Cunningham highlighted these significant features in an organic way, despite the severe cropping of the images in the series. Although this framing might initially strike viewers as uncomfortable, ultimately the unusual composition allowed Cunningham to draw attention to the body's strength and sensitivity in a striking, intimate manner. For Graham, the hands and feet were essential components of her dance structures: “Think of what a wonderful thing the hand is and what vast potentialities of movement it has as a hand and not as a poor imitation of something else.” (Daly 1999)

In contrast to Cunningham's tightly cropped photograph of Graham, Barbara Morgan presented the dancer fluidly moving through space with her partner, Erick Hawkins. Morgan meticulously prepared to photograph Graham, studying dance rehearsals and performances in advance of their photo shoot, and would frequently re-photograph a sequence. (National Museum of Women in the Arts) Morgan's aim was not simply to capture perfect images, but to express the profound nature of Graham's dance: “I wanted to show that Martha had her own vision, that what she was conveying was deeper than ego, deeper than baloney… I was trying to connect her spirit with the viewer— to show pictures of spiritual energy.” (Acocella 2011)
Judy Dater: What does Judy Dater really think about her most famous work, Wynn Bullock: Youthful Nature


Find out by clicking here (please note: image on the following page contains a nude figure.)
When it comes to landscape photography, finding the right spot to focus can be a challenge. Since there isn’t one particular rule that you should follow, every time – it can be difficult to know where you should focus, and how. The fact is that the ideal focal point will vary – depending on your lens, aperture, and what you have in mind for the end result. Before you can really know where to direct your focus, you must understand how focus works. Depth of field increases with higher f-stops, and if you’re attempting to capture a landscape image that’s entirely clear and in focus from front to back, then it stands to follow that you’ll want to make sure that you use a smaller aperture to keep everything in focus.


