

Points of View

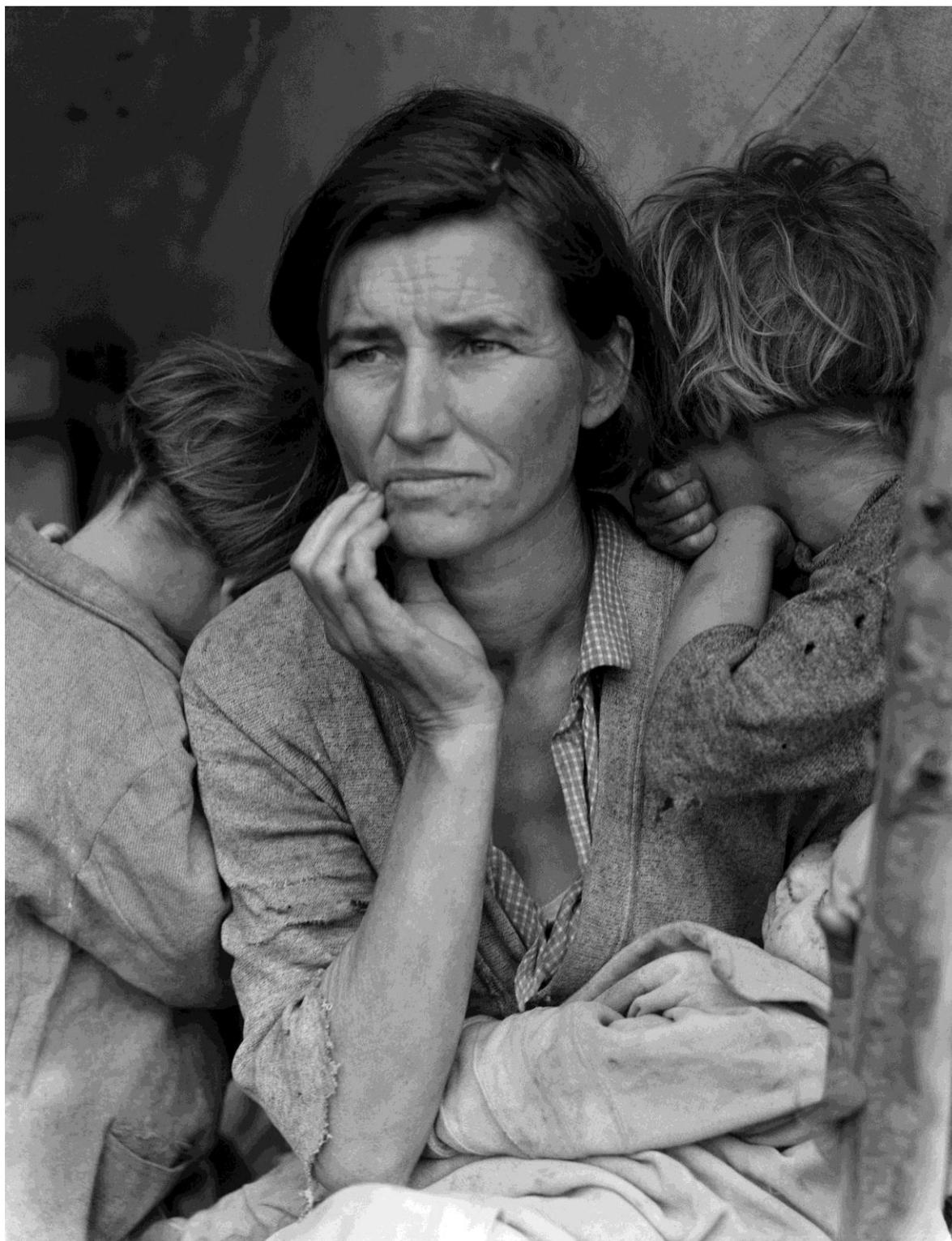
Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange

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Migrant Mother, 1936, by Dorothea Lange (Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress)

In March 1936, Dorothea Lange, a government photographer, took a series of photos in a pea-pickers camp around Nipomo, California.¹ Her most famous photograph came to be known as *Migrant Mother*. Anyone who looks at the photograph can see the pain and suffering on Florence Thompson's² face, but there is much more behind the photograph than that. Experts have many differing interpretations of the full meaning behind it. This photograph is undeniably one of the greatest and most powerful symbols of the Great Depression. It seems to be a simple photograph of a woman and her children, yet it tells the story and the struggle of a generation.

Linda Gordon, in *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, focuses on the beauty of the photograph *Migrant Mother*. Gordon says, "It is fitting that Lange's most famous photograph, one of America's most famous photographs, showed a drawn, hungry farmworker mother of extraordinary beauty. This was Lange's signature: beauty in unexpected places." She discusses how even though the woman in the photograph, Florence Thompson, is clearly exhausted and hungry, she is still beautiful. Gordon sees this to be Lange's strong point: finding beauty where no one else sees it. Sometimes Lange took portraits where the subject was making a direct connection with the camera, but this was one of her portraits where the subject became so used to the camera being there that they no longer paid attention to it. She started off not too close to Thompson and her children, and made her way closer throughout the series of six photographs. She directed the mother and children, and began to slightly change the scene. For

¹ Curtis, James C, "Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, and the Culture of the Great Depression." *Chicago Journal* Vol. 21 No. 1 (1986): 1.

² Gordon, Linda. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. London, England: W.W. Norton & Co, 2009. 235.

the most famous of the series, *Migrant Mother*, Lange asked the two small children who were leaning on their mother to turn their heads around. This was a bold move, but it leads the viewer to concentrate on the mother's "beauty and anxiety."³

Gordon also talks about what an icon *Migrant Mother* was and still is today. A few things it was used for include postage stamps, magazine covers, advertisements, fund-raising for charity, and political campaigns. Often times, people who don't know the name Dorothea Lange may actually be very familiar with her photograph *Migrant Mother*.⁴

Besides being a symbol of the Depression, it also portrays the selflessness of being a mother. Thompson is doing all she can do provide for her children. They have all become one, and their mother is their source of strength and hope. It's not her fault at all that she's in the poor conditions her and her family are engrossed in. Although she is photographed in a state of weakness, "paralyzed with anxiety," it is known what strength she has had just to survive.⁵

In "Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression," James C. Curtis expresses his analysis of *Migrant Mother*. Curtis says, "After its publication in 1936, *Migrant Mother* became a timeless and universal symbol of suffering in the face of adversity."⁶ He sees the photograph as something that was important at the time and will forever be an accurate and powerful way of explaining that period of time. It was a time of urbanization and modernization, and there was profound anxiety in many families. Instead of discussing motherhood and the view of women portrayed in the photograph, Curtis focuses on the cultural

³ Gordon, 237.

⁴ Gordon, 237.

⁵ Gordon, 238.

⁶ Curtis, 1.

aspects during increased centralization and bureaucratization.⁷ He says Lange tried to communicate symbolism through these photographs, which is especially apparent when the images are all shown together. They show the middle-class people's perspective on family.

This series of six photographs were almost taken like a typical portrait session, in the eyes of Curtis. At first the family was a bit uncomfortable, and more spread apart through their area of residence. As Lange took a few more photos, they arranged themselves to be closer together, and slightly more comfortable with having their portrait taken.⁸ However, the way the family appears in *Migrant Mother* is not exactly how they were in reality. The image only shows three of the seven children that the mother had. Even in the photos earlier in the series of six, only four of the children are shown, according to Curtis. This could possibly be due to the fact that a family that size was considered too large at the time. Curtis says, "...Lange was undoubtedly influenced by prevailing cultural biases. A family of seven children exceeded contemporary social norms."⁹ Lange may have thought that it was better to portray the family to have only four children to avoid bias. Also, the father is completely left out in every photograph taken by Lange. No one will ever really know where the other three children or the father were at the time of the photographs.

Carole Henry, in the article "*Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange," focuses her point of view on how a photograph which once was used to remedy social injustice is still around today, and we now view it as a piece of art. "The human and aesthetic elements merge, and a photograph initially used to remedy social injustice in the 1930s survives today as a work of

⁷ Curtis, 2.

⁸ Curtis, 4-5.

⁹ Curtis, 5-6.

art,”¹⁰ Henry says. This means that what once held so much meaning in human suffering and injustice, can now be seen as beautiful. The photo doesn’t just have one purpose or meaning to Henry, and she believes that people need to understand that photos that may seem to just be a work of art actually have an enormous amount of cultural significance. *Migrant Mother* was used by the Farm Security Administration during the Depression to lobby and gain funding to aid homelessness, unemployment, and other major issues during the period of the Depression.¹¹ Today, even though it is studied and sometimes just seen as a piece of art, Henry sees it as very important to remember what a powerful message it holds behind the aesthetics.

I agree with all the points of view of Gordon, Curtis, and Henry. I don’t think any of them are wrong. The three authors each bring about certain aspects of the photograph and its meaning that are all completely credible. A photo as complex as *Migrant Mother* with such cultural significance behind it has more than just one meaning and interpretation. However, I feel that Gordon brought up a few very important points that usually go unnoticed. For example, how Gordon discusses the beauty seen in Thompson, despite the hardships she is enduring. She may be starving, exhausted, and anxious – but she is still beautiful through all of it. She also brought up what an icon the photograph was, was even during its time. It’s important to know how widely the photograph was used back then, and how prevalent and recognizable it still is today. Gordon also brought up what Thompson represents for motherhood: being the source of strength in the family, and the one that everyone counts on. These are a few things that were overlooked by the other two authors.

¹⁰ Henry, Carole, “*Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange.” *National Art Education Association*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (1995): 39.

¹¹ Henry, 26

Curtis brought up important cultural aspects of the photograph. He sees it as showing suffering through the Depression, and mentioned all that was going on during the in the government. Gordon focused on two things: how important the photo as at the time to lobby for government funding from Congress, and how the photograph is still a beautiful piece of artwork today. These are also important aspects showing how powerful *Migrant Mother* was back in that era, and still is today.

What may appear to some to be just a photograph actually has such vast meaning behind it. It can be interpreted in many ways – that it's a symbol of beauty, motherhood, the culture of the Depression, a symbol of suffering, or simply a piece of artwork. No matter what someone may see as the most important aspect of *Migrant Mother*, it is undeniable that it is truly an incredible icon from the era of the Depression, and still is an icon to this day.

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