

In many liberal arts classes, we ask students to perform visual analysis to demonstrate the connection between culture and history, and imagery and rhetoric. For this demonstration, we would like your group to answer a few questions about Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Mother" photograph.

Lange's image of a mother and her starving children was taken in a pea-picker's camp in Nipomo, California. Lange passed this image along with several others taken at the camp to an editor at the San Francisco News, who alerted the federal government to the migrants' plight. The newspaper then printed two of Lange's images with a report that the government was rushing in 20,000 pounds of food, to rescue the workers. Lange made this photograph while working for the Resettlement Administration, a government agency dedicated to documenting the devastating effects of the Depression during the 1930s. Her image depicts the hardship endured by migratory farm workers and provides evidence of the compelling power of photographs to move people to action.

Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother), Dorothea Lange

Nipomo, California, 1936
Gelatin silver print
13 7/16 x 10 9/16 in.
98.XM.162

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image.

This image was taken during the Great Depression when many families lived in total poverty. What reactions do you think Lange wanted to evoke with this image? What do you see that makes you think that?

This image expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here?

*This activity was adapted from the J. Paul Getty Museum's "Exploring Photographs" curriculum.

