The Great Depression

How do photographs shape our understanding of lives and communities during the Great Depression?

What can we learn from these historic images about the intentions and values of photographers, the United States government, the press, and the consumers of the images?

In 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration, which later became the Farm Security Administration, to aid sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and migrant workers whose lives were challenged by the Great Depression, and included a photographic unit called the Historical Section to document poverty and government efforts to alleviate it. This Portfolio Guide of selected photographs from the Addison’s collection from this time period provides documentation of the Great Depression and entry points for discussion from various points of view.

Educators are encouraged to use this Guide and the expanded Portfolio Image List as a starting point, a place from which to dig deeper, ask questions, and make new connections for class plans and projects.

For online use, click the images in this guide to access digital images in the Addison’s online database.

SELECTED THEMATIC APPROACHES

Creating an Icon - Why and how does a portrait become an icon?
Composing Intention - What goes into composing an image?
Documenting Communities - What can visual clues tell us about life during the Depression and beyond?
Comparing Perspectives - How does a photographer’s point of view influence our reading of an image?
Environmental Impact - What can images tell us about the impact of humans on the environment?
The Ethics of Images - How have ideas about the truth and photojournalism evolved over time?
Creating an Icon

*Why and how does a portrait become an icon?*

Why do you think the U.S. government and photography editors selected the now renowned version of Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother over the others that she took that day?

Working for the Resettlement Administration (RA), the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and as a LIFE magazine photographer, Dorothea Lange created powerful symbols of human suffering. Her Migrant Mother photograph of Florence Thompson and family (selected from among the several frames Lange made that day, B) was printed in a San Francisco News story about hunger in migrant worker camps and elicited immediate government relief for the pea pickers camp where they were residing. Six months later, the same photograph is featured in a Midweek Pictorial article (C) denouncing farm tenancy, as Florence Thompson’s image begins to evolve into a nameless icon of the Great Depression.

This disadvantaged yet strong mother figure, who appealed to the purse strings of the U.S. Congress and the empathy of U.S. media consumers in the 1930s, has also been employed internationally to represent economic and racial oppression (D, E).
Composing Intention

What does a photographer consider when composing an image?

How can focus, light, shadow, line, and color help to tell the photographer’s story?

In the spring of 1936, Arthur Rothstein produced poetic visual accounts of America’s rural poor while photographing for the FSA in the Oklahoma panhandle, one of the worst wind-eroded areas during the Dust Bowl years. This soft-focus image of a father and his sons approaching their half-buried barn illustrates the environmental, family, and psychological impact of the Great Depression.

Dorothea Lange’s photograph of California migrant workers stuck in the mud with all of their worldly possessions tied to their car uses a low angle to relate the gravity of the situation. The diagonal tire tracks and glimmering mud puddles leading to the dark, shadowy cars and their riders create a sense of foreboding in this image, while Russell Lee’s decision to photograph this New Mexico family in color with artificial light highlights the father’s sun-baked skin and their patched-together home interior.
Documenting Communities

What can visual clues tell us about the infrastructure and quality of life in U.S. cities and towns during the Great Depression?

How might these communities look if photographed today?

FSA photographers documented farms, towns, and cities in order to record their visual, economic, and inhabited state. Walker Evans made prominent the mass of power lines and repetitive house designs in a small Alabama community and highlighted the familiar grids of New York City’s protected store fronts. In contrast, Marion Post Wolcott’s slightly tilted color photograph calls attention to the quirky, additive architecture and signage of a local eclectic business in a small town in Louisiana.

Arthur Rothstein offered an ironic twist in Steel Plant Which is Not Running, January 1939, by obscuring the plant with overlapping billboards that began with one advertising “YOU PROSPER WHEN FACTORIES PROSPER.” The otherwise undramatic composition addresses concern for the past and future of the steel industry and the communities that depend on it.
Comparing Perspectives

How do photographers’ unique interests, perspectives, and processes influence the way we understand life during the Depression?

What stories do photographs of people tell as compared to those of the things they build?

While on assignment for the FSA in 1936, Walker Evans traveled and photographed with fellow photographer Peter Sekaer. Although Sekaer did not photograph for the New Deal administration, he and Evans were drawn to the same subjects and photographed together throughout the South.

Sekear’s poignant photographs (top row) express an interest in the people surviving in the difficult conditions of the Great Depression. While Evans also photographed people, he is more known for his iconic images of vernacular architecture of the rural South, which speak indirectly to the industriousness and spirituality of its people.
Environmental Impact

How do nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century images differ in their narratives on land use?

How can photography be used to assess the impact of humans on the environment?

The nineteenth-century painting *He That by the Plough Would Thrive—Himself Must Either Hold or Drive* depicts the quotation made popular in Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack* with settlers laborious taming and transforming the landscape into plowable fields and grazing areas despite nature’s ever-forceful regeneration revealed by the insistent vine creeping up the foreground tree.

During the Great Depression, FSA photographs served to both educate the public and demonstrate the need for assistance for farmers, sharecroppers, and migrant workers. Jack Delano’s image of eroded land in Georgia and Arthur Rothstein’s depiction of the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma (see page 3) illuminate ways in which over-planting and poorly managed crop rotations combined with severe drought conditions to wreak havoc on the land and economy. Contemporary photographs offer poignant commentary on so-called natural disasters, such as Joel Sternfeld’s sink hole after a California flash flood and Katherine Wolkoff’s devastated neighborhood after Hurricane Katrina.
The Ethics of Images

How do we understand the veracity of the images made by New Deal photographers?

How have the ethical codes of conduct of photojournalists and social documentarians evolved over time?

**Walker Evans** was outspoken in his opposition to posed or arranged photos, yet his camera of choice had to be mounted on a tripod, which required subjects, like the two women in the photo above left, to remain motionless while he took a picture. While she did not specifically pose her subjects, **Dorothea Lange** and other FSA photographers would spend long periods of time with a group of people photographing repeatedly until they were able to capture the image that would tell their story.

**Timothy O'Sullivan**'s arranging of bodies to compose *A Harvest of Death, Battlefield of Gettysburg* was perfectly acceptable in his time. A century later **Boston Herald American** photographer **Stanley Forman** won a Pulitzer Prize for his photo of a white teenager threatening an African American man with an American flag at an anti-desegregation rally in Boston. Despite the misleading perspective which suggests another white man holding the African American man in place, it was later revealed that he was pulling the target out of harm's way. These images spark ideas about the relationship between the impact of the artists', editors', and public's intentions on the narrative and implications of media images.
Curriculum Connections and Resources

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

History/Social Studies
- The New Deal
- The Dust Bowl
- photojournalism
- social documentation
- the media
- propaganda

Let us Now Praise Famous Men
- The Worst Hard Time
- Out of the Dust
- Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

Science
- environmental geography
- agriculture
- land use
- drought/soil erosion
- environmental policy
- environmental ethics

English
- The Grapes of Wrath
- Let us Now Praise Famous Men
- The Worst Hard Time
- Out of the Dust
- Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

Art
- portraiture
- artistic expression
- representation

C O N N E C T I O N S  T O  A D D I T I O N A L  T H E M A T I C  P O R T F O L I O S

Manifest Destiny
Representing the Land
Industrialization
American Identity
Family
Identity and Place
Documentation and Art
Representation and Reality
Images and the Media
The Media and Technology

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES


Curtis, James C. “Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression.” Winterthur Portfolio 21.1 (1986): 1–20. This article explores each of the five photographs in the *Migrant Mother* series and gives context of other images from the Great Depression and beyond.


The Library of Congress American Memory Collection

Documenting America. [http://memory.loc.gov/](http://memory.loc.gov/)
Photographs made by Resettlement Administration, Farm Security Administration, and later Office of War Information photographers are available for download through the Library of Congress’s website.

Prints and Photographs Division: *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*.
Digital access to two volumes of photographs by Walker Evans which later appeared in the publication *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*. 

Arranging a Visit to the Museum Learning Center
At least two weeks in advance or preferably more, contact:

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to schedule your visit and discuss possible themes, applicable portfolios of works, and related activities.