"Migrant Mother": the Depression Era Madonna

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Abstract
In the 1930s, American photography was enriched by the works of a group of documentary photographers in which Dorothea Lange seemed to play quite a significant role. "Migrant Mother," Lange's portrait of a woman holding a baby and surrounded by two of her other children, immediately exceeded boundaries of an ordinary photograph and became more than an icon of a forlorn decade. The photograph's unusual composition, reflecting Lange's ability to capture feelings of sorrow and hunger together with hope, confidence, and solidarity, forced many art critics to analyze the photograph and discuss its hidden meanings. One such view of the image compares it to a portrayal of Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. This article is an attempt to explain this biblical interpretation, as well as to describe the genesis of one of the best known photographs of the twentieth century.

Keywords
American documentary photography, Depression era, Dorothea Lange, "Migrant Mother", icon

The Story Behind the Picture

Dorothea Lange's photograph "Migrant Mother" remains a symbol of the Depression era and the Dust Bowl tragedy in the minds of many Americans. Moreover, the fact that the picture was taken by chance, or more accurately, by Lange's "instinct,"[1] as she once recalled in an interview, enhances the picture's value and makes the story of its creation more attractive.

In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the New Deal, which included dozens of recovery organizations and programs for stabilizing the harsh economic and social situation in the United States. Three years after this, Lange was employed as a documentary photographer in the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), one of the relief programs sponsored by the government. The main task of the FSA photographers "was to photograph conditions of rural and urban poverty that would serve to educate the people about the most pressing of the nation's problems."[2] Nevertheless, the FSA was considered to be controversial, and many critics saw these photographs as a piece of propaganda.

Rebecca Maksel describes how in March 1936 Lange, who had been working for the FSA for nearly six weeks, was on her way back home to Berkley. Next to a California motorway, she glimpsed an area that was arrow signposted as a "Pea-Pickers Camp."[3] Duane Damon adds: "[…] What could one more group of exhausted, hungry workers add to the pictures she already had? Besides, there was home only seven hours away.

1 Jacqueline Ellis, *Silent Witnesses : Representations of Working-Class Women in the United States* (Bowling Green : Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998), 41.

2 William H Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of Imagination* (New York : Norton, 1986), 392-393.

3 Rebecca Maksel, "Migrant Madonna," *Smithsonian* (March 2002), 21.

Lange drove on."[4] With a vision of her home, family and final rest, she continued driving on for about twenty miles before she decided to stop her car, return to the camp, and visit it. Damon describes the image Lange saw when she entered the camp:

> Returning to the sign, Lange found the all-too-familiar layout of a migrant camp - rows of crude tents and flimsy shacks in a soggy bed of mud, no electricity, no running water. Among the tired, unkempt residents, a thin woman sat in a lean-to of patched canvas. Scattered around the tent were chairs, a makeshift table, and three unwashed children.[5]

When Lange was later asked what forced her to return to the camp and how she met the migrant woman, she described it this way:

> I was following instinct, not reason, I drove into that soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon. I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence to her, or my camera, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding field and birds that the children had killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. Here she sat in a lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my picture might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.[6]

Immediately after leaving the pea-pickers camp, Lange developed the photographs from Nipomo and sent them to the *San Francisco News* as well as to the Washington office of the FSA. Vicki Goldberg writes about the first publication of the photograph that appeared in the *News* on 10th March 1936. The pictures were added to an article which said: "Ragged, ill, emaciated by hunger, 2,500 men, women and children are rescued after weeks of suffering by the chance visit of a Government photographer."[7] According to Milton Meltzer, the editorial that followed this sentence: "[…] attacked both the counties and the state for being so shortsighted and inhumane as not to offer the migrants help."[8]

Since the published photographs and articles did not mention the portrayed woman's name or her life story, Florence Owens Thompson stayed unknown until the late 1970s when she decided to tell her story to the local *Modesto Bee* newspaper. The web page www.famouspictures.org contains excerpts from Thompson's interview. She

4 Duane Damon, *Headin' for Better Times : The Arts of the Great Depression* (Minneapolis : Twenty-First Century Books, 2002), 65.

5 Damon, *Headin' for Better Times,* 65-66

6 Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 41.

7 Vicki Goldberg, *Photography in Print : Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York : Simon & Schuster, 1981), 355.

8 Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life*. (1st Syracuse University Press edition. New York : Syracuse University Press, 2000), 134.

described her life as a descendant of the Cherokee tribe and told about her early marriage to Cleo Owens, the father of her six children. Florence and Cleo worked in the forestry and farming industries. When her husband died of lung disease, Florence stayed with his family for few years, working in farming fields and in restaurants. Then she travelled with her children and her new partner through California looking for work to feed the family.[9]

According to Lennie Bennett, Thompson said that the only reason they stayed in the Nipomo camp was that their car had broken down and her partner and sons came to town to repair it. Soon after Lange's visit, the family left the camp, so the relief that was later sent by the government to the camp did not get to them. Although Florence was willing to have Lange photograph her, afterwards Thompson did not see any benefit in it.[10] Bennett quotes Thompson in his article: "I wish she hadn't taken my picture. I can't get a penny out of it. She [Lange] didn't ask my name. She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did."[11] Thompson's children were also disappointed about the photographs, feeling ashamed for showing their poverty. What is more, Troy Owens, one of Thompson's sons, told newspapers that Lange gave the media incorrect information about, for example, their car tires. Bennett quotes him:

> There's no way we sold our tires because we didn't have any to sell. The only ones we had were on the Hudson and we drove off in them. I don't believe Dorothea Lange was lying, I just think she had one story mixed up with another. Or she was borrowing to fill in what she didn't have.[12]

As has been mentioned earlier, despite being the subject of one of the most famous images of the Depression era, Florence Thompson had not profited. This was the case until 1983, when she, as an old lady, was destitute and dying from cancer. Her family then took the somewhat controversial step of using the photograph "Migrant Mother" as a tool to solicit contributions toward her medical treatment. In response, about 35,000 dollars was sent to her bank account. Unfortunately, Florence Thompson died a few months later. Her son Troy commented to an interviewer about the donation:

> None of us ever really understood how deeply Mama's photo affected people. I guess we had only looked at it from our perspective. For Mama and us, the photo had always been a curse. After all those letters came in, I think it gave us a sense of pride.[13]

Madonna of the New Age

Although at the time the photograph did not represent anything special to the Thompson's family, it did come to mean a lot to millions of people throughout the world. Its uncommon

9 Dean Lucas, "Depression Mother," *Famous Pictures : The Magazine*, 2009.

10 Lennie Bennett, "Depression's 'Migrant Mother' Remains a Powerful Image," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 11, 2008.

11 Bennett, "Depression's 'Migrant Mother'".

12 Bennett, "Depression's 'Migrant Mother'".

13 Bennett, "Depression's 'Migrant Mother'".

triangular composition, the exclusion of the subjects' surroundings, together with the emotions easily definable on Thompson's face, offered many art specialists an opportunity for discussions and analyses.

Lange's portrait of Florence Thompson was taken as the last shot in a series of six photographs that Lange took the day she visited the Nipomo migrant camp. Most of hese photographs show Thompson and her children "[…] as ragged, broke, uneasy, resigned. Nobody departs from this profile. Nobody smiles," as Michael Stones observes. Unlike the other five photographs in the series, "Migrant Mother" was taken as a close up, not showing the setting. Robert Cole remarks on what effect this has:

> Dorothea Lange has, in a sense, removed that woman from the very world she is meant, as a Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer, to document. The tent is gone, and the land on which it is pitched, and the utensils. In separating the woman from these sociological clues, Lange brings us inside the woman's world; the pity inculcated by the clues dissolved, and our world becomes linked to hers. Because we are no longer kept out of her world, no longer entrenched in our own, we see a stoic dignity, a thoughtfulness whose compelling survival under such circumstances is itself something to ponder, something to find arresting, even miraculous.[14]

The photograph displays the migrant woman worker looking into the far distance as she is holding a sleeping little girl in one arm and is surrounded by two other girls. The girls are not facing the camera, so it is not possible to look into their faces. The children's postures have been described as "[…] demonstrating their condition as social outsider […]."[15] But the children's actual intention was far more prosaic. Katherine McIntosh, the girl standing on the left in "Migrant Mother" told newspapers that "[…] she was afraid of the photographer, which is why she and her sister hid their faces in theirs mother neck while Lange snapped away."[16] Florence's right hand is touching her right lower lip, which "shows a delicacy of manner that contrasts with the dirt under its nails," Stones claims.[17] Her wrinkled face does not correspond with her age. From today's point of view her face reminds one more of a woman in her fifties than a thirty-two-year-old woman.

Another significant feature that has been discussed and criticized many times is the fact that Lange did not include all of Thompson's seven children in her famous photograph. In the words of Jacqueline Ellis, Lange decided to photograph only three of them to reflect the average number of children in the middle-class families to which the photograph was aimed. Ellis explains:

> To photograph all seven children would represent a challenge to middle-class conventions about how large a family might be before compromising the morality of its parents. Three children was the

14 As quoted in John R. Smith, "Making the Cut: Documentary Work in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*. 35, no. 4 (2007): 324.

15 http://www.all-art.org.

16 Carolyn Jones, "Daughter of 'Migrant Mother' Proud of Story : Iconic Image: Kids of 'Migrant Mother' Were Proud of Her," *San Francisco Gate*, August 23, 2009.

17 Michael Stones, "The Other Migrant Mother," *Open Photography Forum*, 2006.

> average in professional, liberal society - usually the audience for FSA images – any more might have suggested selfishness and social dependency.[18]

A similar exclusionary process, according to Ellis, was executed with the teenage daughter, whose presence in the pictures would possibly raise questions concerning her dependence on the family. And besides this, the mother would have probably been criticized for having so many children.[19]

Universally, a question arises as to why some photographs, paintings, or other pieces of art provoke more attention and response in the general public than other works, even those by the same author. A direct answer is hard to find, but one of the reasons for this might be the fact that people have a tendency to liken what they see either to their personal memories or to an image that is widely known.

Susan Goetz Zwirn claims that the photograph "came to epitomize the Depression" and the whole generation of migrant workers facing the difficulties caused by the dust storms and the crash of the New York stock market.[20] Zwirn continues: "[…] a single person stands for the plight of many like her; we are privy to her worry about an uncertain future as she moves from one home to another in search of work to support her family."[21] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites see this in a similar manner. They claim: "'Migrant Mother' communicates the pervasive and paralyzing fear that was widely acknowledged to be a defining characteristic of the depression and experienced by many Americans irrespective of income."[22] In spite of the fact that the picture has been retouched and the subjects have been posed, it "shows how through instruction and manipulation, Lange was able to produce an image that perfectly symbolized the documentary style of the Historical Section" of the FSA.[23]

Some critics, such as Denise Bethel, see the picture's success and its frequent reproduction as a result of "its balanced composition."[24] Contrary to this view, others like Zwirn highlight the intensity of black and white colors, which makes the image remarkable:

> In this quietly powerful photo, we see a dramatic range of blacks and whites, a contrast Lange uses in her strongest photos and one that is unlike the chiaroscuro effect in a Caravaggio painting. Here the black/white contrast is broken slightly by the frayed textures of the clothing, the tousled hair and the furrowed, lined skin.[25]

18 Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 44.

19 Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 44.

20 Susan Goetz Zwirn, "Men and Women at Work: The Portrayal of American Workers by Three Artists of the 1930s and 1940s," *Art Education*, 2 (March 2004): 29, accessed February 6, 2010.

21 Zwirn, "Men and Women at Work," 29.

22 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 55.

23 Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 44.

24 Hans-Michael Koetzle, *Slavné fotografie: historie skrytá za obrazy* (Praha: Slovart, 2003), 30.

25 Zwirn, "Men and Women at Work," 29.

But the most commonly discussed interpretation of "Migrant Mother" is in comparison to a portrayal of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus being surrounded by small angels. As Ellis claims: "The arrangement of the angelic, blonde-haired children around the mother as she holds her baby evokes classic paintings of the Virgin Mary surrounded by attendant angels as she nurses the infant Christ."[26] Because of this interpretation, the image is sometimes called "Migrant Madonna."

In the history of art, the term Madonna is used for figuration of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus, while *Pieta* refers to the Virgin Mary holding the crucified, dying Jesus. Over centuries, from the Byzantine, Medieval and Early Renaissance periods, numerous paintings and sculptures of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus reproduced an icon that was commonly used as a decoration of church altars, book illuminations and mosaics.

According to Hariman and Lucaites, the power of "Migrant Mother" is primarily in the fact that it is an image about social class as well as that it elicits emotions and arouses a sensation to help. What is more, they claim that in American culture portraying class differences is perceived as controversial and in the case of "Migrant Mother" this reality is concealed by an "allusion to religious imagery and its articulation of gender and family relations."[27]

> The primary relationship within the composition is between the mother and the serene baby lying beside her exposed breast, while the other children double as the cherubs or other heavenly figures that typically surround the Madonna. […] Their poses, with eyes averted, give the scene its deep Christian pathos. Their dirty clothes are evocative of the stable in Bethlehem, while their averted eyes make it clear that all is not right in this scene. Instead of heavenly majesty, the transcription from sacred to secular art features vulnerability.[28]

Moreover, the fact that the substitution of a subject that has been through centuries perceived as sacred and heavenly by a subject whose position in the society is inferior and disparaged makes the image simultaneously iconic and human. It is as if the picture is saying that every woman in the same position or situation as Florence Thompson is worthy of admiration and glorification as a modern Madonna. However their destinies, hardships and significance may be different, two women's strength to face life's difficulties with hope make them similar in many ways.

Hariman and Lucaites go even further. They mention that Lange's "Migrant Mother" and a comparison of the image to paintings of the Madonna create an unusual transition from sacred to secular representation of a religious icon.

> The Migrant Mother provides two parallel transcriptions of the Madonna and Child: the image moves from painting to photography, and the Mother of Christ becomes an anonymous woman of the working class. These shifts demonstrate how iconic appeal can be carried over from religious art to increasingly

26 Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 44.

27 Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 56.

28 Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 56-57.

> secular,bourgeois representation and from fine arts institutions to public media.[29]

Another feature that has been the topic of many discussions is the father's absence in the photograph. As mentioned above, the father of Thompson's children was not present at the moment when Lange visited the camp. Similarly, like Florence Thompson has her biblical parallel to the Virgin Mary, the absence of the Thompson's husband can be compared to the importance of the biblical Joseph as a surrogate father.

> [J]ust as Joseph is not the real father in the Christ myth, so the migrant mother's husband is displaced by the higher power of the public (and its agency of the state). And like Joseph, he is kept offstage, mentioned only to fulfill the same role providing social legitimacy for the woman and her children.[30]

To Hariman and Lucaites, the mother is there to protect and take care of her children but she is not able to secure the necessities needed to live. That is the father's work.[31] Nevertheless, the photograph invokes a feeling that most of the responsibility for the family lays on the mother's shoulders. What is more, the vision of a woman who, despite being destitute, is strong enough to take care of her family and her husband might have created a supportive image for others during the Great Depression. As Ellis believes:

> Images of women who remained strongly protective of their children, and who looked like they would ensure the survival of their families despite economic hardship and homelessness, offered hope to middle-class Americans that traditional family life would endure and outlast the ravages of the Depression.[32]

However true this might be, it seemed that the father's absence in the photograph intensified a call for action, providing the audience an inclination to somehow help the woman and her family. Hariman and Lucaites add: "[…] the photograph interpellates the viewer in the position of the absent father. The viewer, though out of the picture, has the capacity for action identified with the parental role."[33] It was like the photograph appealed to the viewers to replace the father's position and supply the family with what they needed. The request for help was primarily directed to the government that was seen to be capable of and responsible for providing aid through relief programs, thus solving the problem of the Dust Bowl migrants. These were largely Midwest farmers who, owing to the terrible droughts and dust storms in the early thirties, lost all their crops and homesteads. They were forced to migrate westwards, largely to California, where they worked for miserable wages on fruit plantations and lived in terrible conditions in migratory camps.

29 Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 57.

30 Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 59.

31 Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 58.

32 Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 47.

33 Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 58.

Surprisingly, a response came quite soon after the publication of "Migrant Mother" in newspapers. According to Maksel, 20,000 pounds of food was sent into the Nipomo camp within few weeks.[34] But this help came too late for the migrant mother in the photo. She and her family left the camp shortly after Dorothea Lange took the iconic image, one that after seventy-four years still arouses emotions and memories.

In this period photography became viewed in a different way. No more was it seen merely as art, but more often as a tool for documentation, for informing the general public and swaying public opinion. Undeniably, Lange had the talent to combine both, art and a message. Owing in part to her iconic pictures of the Dust Bowl migrants, including "Migrant Mother," the farmers' hardship was given public attention and redress in the form of governmental relief. In viewing the images, one thing that cannot be denied is Dorothea Lange's sympathy with and understanding of people in need. She has inspired these feelings in other people through her photographs.

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34 Maksel, "Migrant Madonna," 22.

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