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# Lang and Lee: Two Views of the Great Depression

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# LANGE AND LEE

By Steven M. Gelber

## TWO VIEWS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION



**D**URING THE 1930s, AMERICA WAS the subject of American art. The European expressionism that had influenced so many artists through the 1920s was unceremoniously abandoned in favor of domestic realism. Creative people in all the arts adopted the theme. Virgil Thomson's music and Martha Graham's dance joined the novels of John Dos Passos and the plays of Thornton Wilder in an across-the-board celebration of America, past and present.

Domestic realism, as an artistic style, could take two distinct forms. On the one hand there was the "documentary style" that sought to illustrate the country's troubles as a first step toward solving them. On the other hand there was the "American Scene,"



Top: Dorothea Lange's 1938 photo of a Tulare County family in the rural rehabilitation program.  
Bottom: Russell Lee's 1942 photo of the Ray Halstead family in Malheur County, Ore.  
Halstead was an FSA rehabilitation borrower.

In unflinching pictures, Lange documented the need for reform.



Top: Lange's portrait of a grandmother from Oklahoma and her pieced quilt. The photo was taken in 1936 in Kern County.  
 Bottom: Lee captured the radiance of a carpenter's daughter living in a tent home in 1940. The girl's family moved from Louisiana to Mission Valley near San Diego. She had to drop out of high school.

a somewhat amorphous concept that stressed the strength and traditions of the country in a consciously nationalistic way.

Perhaps the most searing images of the Great Depression were commissioned by the Farm Security Administration. The FSA's payroll from that era included such artists as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Carl Mydans and Ben Shahn; their photographs of Dust Bowl migrations and sharecropper poverty have become virtual icons of that terrible time.

Lange's pictures along with those of her fellow FSA photographer Russell Lee are the subject of a show currently at the De Saisset Museum at the University of Santa Clara. The exhibit, *Views of the Family: FSA Photographs by Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee*, will continue through March.

As the photographs on these pages show, Lange's harshly realistic "documentary style" stands in contrast to Lee's more benign American Scene vision. Taken together, the two photographers provide us with views of the best and the worst of the Depression decade.

Dorothea Lange had spent the first 20 years of her career as a portrait photographer, originally in the East and later in the San Francisco Bay area. Her interest in documentary photography was sparked by the impact of the Depression on San Francisco workers. She began taking her camera out of the studio and into the street. As a result of an early photograph of a breadline, she came to the attention of University of California economist Paul S. Taylor. Taylor hired her to illustrate some articles he was writing and then to be the official photographer for a state commission investigating the plight of migrant workers. Although she was almost 40 at the time, her career underwent a radical transformation. She divorced her husband, artist Maynard Dixon, married Taylor and moved from obscurity to national prominence.

In 1935 Lange became part of the federal Resettlement Administration and spent the next five years photographing the effects of the Depression in California. President Franklin Roosevelt created this agency to deal with the problems of the poorest one-third of the rural population, a group who had been ignored by the early New Deal legislation. The Resettlement

*continued*

Using a gentler style, Lee showed how conditions improved as the New Deal progressed.



Administration ended its independent status in 1937, when the Department of Agriculture absorbed it and changed its name to the Farm Security Administration.

The FSA's primary work, providing low interest loans, restoring exhausted land, improving migrant worker camps and developing some new communities, went largely unnoticed by the general public, but the pictures taken by its small "historic section" were reproduced widely throughout the '30s and brought this otherwise minor agency widespread recognition.

When Lange was laid off from the FSA in 1940, the West Coast lost its resident photographer. She was not replaced, but Russell Lee did make two trips to California, one in 1940 and one in 1942, and his pictures show a world different from Lange's. Lee had joined the Resettlement Administration in 1936 and spent most of his early years with the agency concentrating on the rural Midwest. The son of a prosperous Illinois farmer, Lee had grown up in the corn-fed world of the American Scene, and his photographs reflected a much gentler view of life. His



Top left: Lange's 1937 photo of migrants washing in an Imperial Valley spring. Top right: Lee's 1941 photo of housing project basins. Bottom left: Lange photographed these tenant purchase applicants in Stockton in 1938. Bottom right: Lee met this Placer County couple in 1940. Heavily in debt to the Federal Land Bank, they had not picked their pear crop, knowing there was no market for it.

Dust Bowl migrants and farm debtors drew the attention of America's finest photographers.



"family album" approach to picture-taking plus the improved economic climate of the early '40s resulted in photos that stressed contentment rather than pain.

As different as their pictures are, the photographers reflect two sides of the same coin. Both were American realists, and both were propagandists for the Roosevelt administration. Lange's documentary realism revealed the terrible conditions of the early '30s. By illustrating the poverty and suffering of poor farmers and migrant workers, Lange was demonstrating the need for the New Deal.

Lee's American Scene realism derived in part from his own affirmative outlook, but it also reflected the changed conditions of the early '40s. The war in Europe had stimulated American industry, and times were better even for the poorest of rural society. There was, in truth, less poverty to photograph. Moreover, Roosevelt had been in office for two terms and pictures of pain and suffering would only remind people that the New Deal had not solved all of the country's problems—hardly the sort of photographs that a government-funded agency would likely encourage.

If Lange's bitter image of an eagle crucified on a barbed wire fence clashes with the proud birds perched on the federal buildings built during the Depression, it is because the early New Deal was trying to both reform and preserve at the same time. By the end of the decade that duality had disappeared. Reform was a thing of the past and preservation in the face of the Nazi challenge dominated the national conscience.

Writing in 1940, Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA Historical Section, explained that photographers could no longer be concerned about artistic integrity. "Do you think I give a damn about a photographer's soul with Hitler at our doorstep?" he asked. "You are nothing but camera fodder to me." But, of course, they had always been "camera fodder." They had always been used by the government for its own purpose, but they had always been willing tools because they shared the vision of the Roosevelt administration in peace and in war. W

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**Top:** In 1936, Lange photographed the very symbol of America—an eagle—crucified on a barbed-wire fence in Fresno County.

**Bottom:** In 1940, Lee took this picture of a Shasta County pool hall. A straightforward slice of American life, it shares the style of realism made famous by fellow FSA photographer Walker Evans.

Amid the crises, they saw images that celebrated Americans' enduring strengths.