

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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SPECIAL TO THE OAKLAND TRIBUNE

DOROTHEA LANGE, the American photographer who died in Berkeley last October at the age of 70, has been honored by a major retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Miss Lange, who was a long-time resident of the Bay area, was considered one of the seminal influences of modern documentary photography.

The exhibition of over 200 photographs dating from 1920 to 1965 includes her well-known documentary work of the thirties as well as relatively unfamiliar photographs made in the last 15 years, such as her photographic essays devoted to Asia, Ireland, Egypt, The New California and to her own home and family.

John Szarkowski, head of the Museum's Department of Photography, who directed the exhibition, collaborated to an unusual degree with the photographer on the basic decisions of content and organization.

"What distinguished Lange's work was a challenging intelligence and an artist's eye." Mr. Szarkowski has written in the introduction to the exhibition, "Her intelligence allowed her to by-pass the exceptional -- the merely newsworthy -- and to discover the typical. Her art gave to her observation an irreducible simplicity, the eloquence of inevitability."

The exhibition, which is on view in New York through March 27, will be seen in Worcester, Massachusetts, in Los Angeles and at the Oakland Museum .

(MORE)

From her beginnings as a professional photographer, around 1920, she worked as a portrait photographer. In the early thirties she came to realize that her deep commitment to people could not be satisfied within the studio, that it was necessary to photograph people in the circumstances in which they were spending their lives.

Unassigned and unsponsored, without knowing what function her photographs might serve, but supported by her need to see life and understand it, she took her camera into the center of crisis, into strife-ridden San Francisco, and photographed sidewalk orators, soup kitchens, pickets; the homeless, aimless, despairing men.

Her view of the dilemma was realized in the photograph called "White Angel Breadline, San Francisco" taken in 1933. "What has made this picture celebrated is in large part the image of the unshaven, hunched-up, little man ... leaning on a railing with a tin can between his arms, his hands clenched, the line of his mouth bitter, his back turned to those others waiting for a handout." As George P. Elliott, the novelist and critic who was the photographer's friend for many years, notes in the monograph* published by the Museum for the exhibition, "This image does not derive its power from formal elegance so much as from its being inextricably entangled with the comment it is making. It is art for life's sake."

In 1934, Paul Taylor, an economist at the University of California, saw her pictures and recognized the contribution that such photography could make to social research and education. He hired Miss Lange to assist in his study of California migrant workers. The success of this project was an influential factor in the establishment in 1935, of the photographic unit of the Resettlement Administration (later called the Farm Security Administration). Lange was an original member of this group, which, under the direction of Roy E. Stryker, first suggested the full potentials of documentary photography as a cultural force -- capable of educating the minds and sensibilities of a nation.

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In her nearly four years with FSA, Lange found a context for herself to work in: photographing the disgracefully invisible people of our society, making them visible to those who would see. She continued to work for the FSA and other government agencies until the end of the war. In 1945, after photographing the United Nations Conference in San Francisco for the Department of State, she collapsed, stricken with the first of a series of illnesses which were to fill much of her last twenty years.

In her periods of relative health, she accepted short assignments and worked on several essays of personal interest. In 1956-57, she collaborated with Pirkle Jones in documenting the devastation of the Berryessa Valley which culminated in the essay, "The Death of a Valley" published in Aperture in 1960. Her photographs of Asia, Egypt and South America were taken while her husband, Paul Taylor, was serving as an economic consultant to various government agencies abroad.

A large section of the exhibition is devoted to "The New California!" In these photographs, she did not attempt to repeat her earlier work. The central fact was not depression but prosperity, so she photographed the mushrooming population and its money, its new houses and highways, automobiles and marketplaces and recreations.

"This latter work she considered not a document but a sketch for a document. The record of the '60s that she wanted to make was beyond the reach of one photographer. During the last two years of her life she worked to define the conditions under which a new documentary unit might provide for this generation a service parallel to that performed thirty years ago by the FSA," Mr. Szarkowski points out in his introduction.

Continuing, he says, "Lange's work was directed not toward esthetic delight, but toward social relevance. Beauty was her was not a goal, but a proof of success -- a demonstration that something of importance had been clearly seen and graphically fixed. A beautiful picture, because of its

rightness, demanded contemplation, and that was the success she wished."

*DOROTHEA LANGE, with a critical essay by George P. Elliott. 112 pages, 91 illustrations. Hardbound \$6.95; paperbound \$3.50. Published by the Museum of Modern Art, hardbound edition distributed by Doubleday & Co., Inc.

*Photographs: White Angel Breadline
migrant mother
Opales, Imperial Valley
Preypon, San Joaquin
Shipyard worker
End of Shift
Rebecca Dixon
Oak Berkeley
Guilty Your Honor
The Public Defender
The Defendants
US Highway #40
Bad Trouble
Winter, California*

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Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director,
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