

# Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing - Group B B1 B2



Dorothea Lange at work in Texas, photographed by her husband Paul S. Taylor.

Dorothea Lange au Texas sur les Plaines, vers 1935 © The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland. Gift of Paul S. Taylor

**Dorothea Lange was one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century. Her documentary photos, particularly of 1930s America during the Great Depression, brought the plight of ordinary Americans into public view. A major exhibition of her work in Paris encompasses her philosophy in its title: Politics of Seeing.**

Dorothea Lange was born in 1895 in New Jersey, U.S.A. She started her career as a fashionable portrait photographer in San Francisco, California. But the early 1930s were a terribly difficult period in the U.S.A. A financial crisis was caused by the 1929 Stock Market crash. This was coupled with a natural disaster: horrific droughts in the central states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico meant that more than two million small farmers could no longer produce food for their families. Many had to abandon their farms and they and their families became migrant workers. They travelled wherever there might be work on big farms. Many went to California, a rich and fertile state with lots of agriculture.

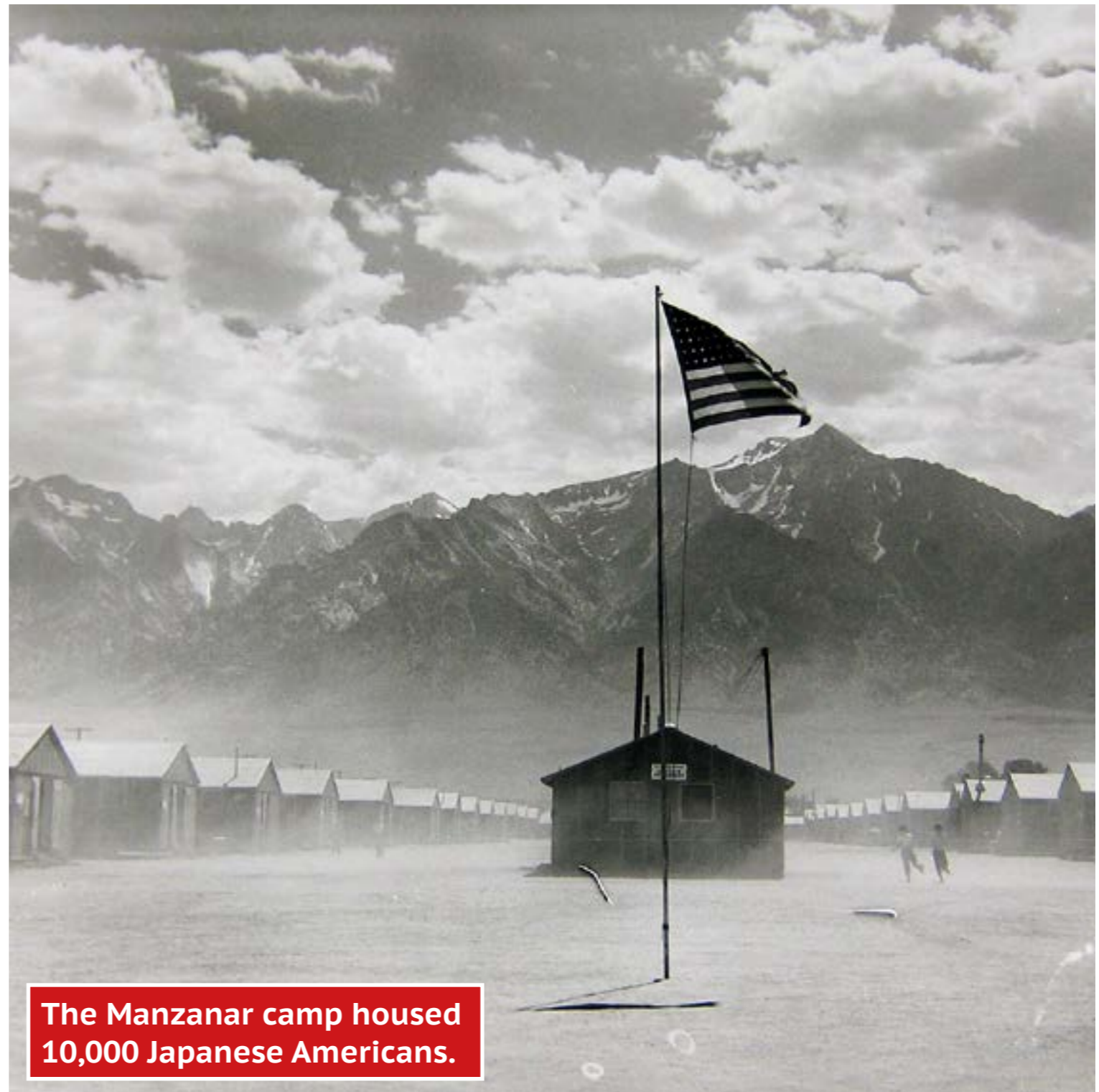


## Making the Dispossessed Visible

In response to the Great Depression, the newly elected president Franklin D. Roosevelt launched The New Deal: a programme of government works that employed and helped people who were suffering financial hardship. Lange, along with many other photographers, was employed by the government to document the New Deal.

## Documenting Social Change

During World War Two, Lange continued to work for the government, taking photos of the Japanese American community, who were sent to internment camps for the duration of the war. Many of her photos were unpublished during the war, as they showed a reality many Americans weren't happy to witness: American citizens, some of whom had been in the U.S.A. for generations, parked in camps.



The Manzanar camp housed 10,000 Japanese Americans.

Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, California, 1942 © The Dorothea Lange Collection, the Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland. Gift of Paul S. Taylor

Lange also documented workers at a California shipyard building ships for the war effort. The workforce was mixed in a way that would have been unthinkable before the war: men and women, Blacks, Whites and other ethnicities all working together. Her images of women workers in particular helped build a story in the national psyche of proud, competent women wielding industrial tools to help the nation.

## Getting Close to the Subject

After the war, Lange worked less intensively as she was plagued with ill health. She had contracted polio as a child. It deformed her right leg and left her with a limp. She said that she believed this disability helped her approach her subjects.

*"I walk into situations where I am very much an outsider. To be a crippled person, or a disabled person, gives an immense advantage. People are kinder to you. It puts you on a different level than if you go into a situation whole and secure."*



**Shipyard Worker, Richmond California, around 1943.**