

Regionalism, Photography and the Great Depression

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is about regionalism, photography, and the Great Depression. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the context of the Great Depression and its influence on the arts, and identify examples of regionalism and photography from this era. The Great Depression influenced the arts in the prevalence of social realism. This lesson covers:

The art that we're looking at today dates from between 1920 and 1942.

1. The Great Depression

Regionalism, in a nutshell, is an anti-Modernism movement that reached its height during the Great Depression. It explores American identity through scenes celebrating rural life. The Great Depression was a worldwide economic downturn in the 1930s and 1940s that saw significant declines in production, spending, and trading, and rises in unemployment, reaching around 25% unemployment in the United States alone.

The events leading up to and causing the Great Depression are still debated today. In chronological terms, most agree that the stock market crash of 1929 marks the beginning and with the depression abating, in the United States at least, around the beginning of its entry into World War II in 1941.

The Depression and concurrent Dust Bowl of the Midwest and Great Plains decimated the local economies. Crops literally turned to dust, and thousands of farming families were displaced as a result. One of the largest migrations in hopes of finding a better living was the famous migration from Oklahoma to California, which served as the backdrop for the literary classic *The Grapes of Wrath*.



Buried machinery in a barn lot during Dust Bowl

1936

Dallas, South Dakota

The plight of western migrant workers and sharecroppers from the South served as the subject matter for the photography that you're looking at in this lesson.



TERM TO KNOW

Regionalism

An American art movement during the 1930s characterized by depictions of realistic rural scenes.

2. Paintings

The first pieces of art to look at today are two paintings. The first is by the Midwestern artist Thomas Hart Benton.



People of Chilmark by Thomas Hart Benton

1920

Oil on canvas

Though he was born in Missouri, Benton wasn't confined there. He studied in Chicago and Paris and spent considerable time in New York and the Northeast. "People of Chilmark" is set in the town of Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard, which is an island south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. In terms of subject matter, it's a group of people at the beach, but definitely recalls romantic works of art, such as Géricault's "Raft of the *Medusa*", in how the bodies are intertwined and dramatically postured.



Raft of the Medusa by Théodore Géricault

1818-1819

Oil on canvas

His style is quite unique. He rejects traditional depictions of perspective and uses vivid colors, bold contrasts, and pliable-looking figures to fill this composition. Benton's subject matter is characteristic of a number of artists who rejected modernism, in favor of depictions of rural life. This choice came to be known as regionalism, which is an anti-modernist movement that reached its height during the 1930s and during the Great Depression.

Grant Wood's "American Gothic" has become one of the most iconic paintings of all time, sharing a tiny place among paintings such as the "Mona Lisa" and Edvard Munch's "Scream."



American Gothic by Grant Wood

1930

Oil on beaverboard

The name of the painting derives from the house in the background, which is a real building in Iowa designed in a regional style that used elements of Gothic revival architecture, such as the pointed-arch window.

Though the figures are based on actual people that Wood knew, they may serve as more symbolic figures representing the pioneering spirit of Midwesterners. Artists such as Benton and Wood explored American identity through scenes that celebrated rural life.

3. Photography

The Great Depression was very influential in the arts and the presence of **social realism**. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal plan, which was created to help overturn the effects of the Depression, included new programs and agencies, such as the Social Security Administration; the FDIC, which protects bank deposits; the Works Progress Administration, which was a new agency that targeted employment; and social improvement programs, such as the **Farm Security Administration (FSA)**, which sought to improve the lives of rural farmers.

Part of the public relations strategy to create and maintain support for the New Deal was to hire photographic journalists to portray the reality of rural poverty.

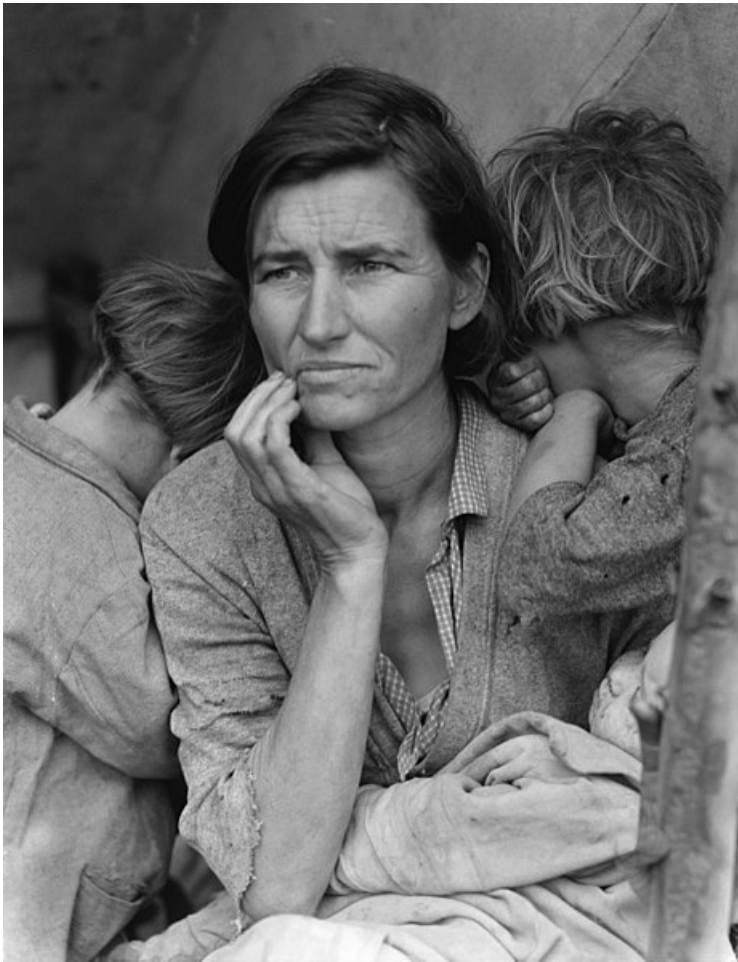
Take, for example, Walker Evans' photos of Allie Mae and Floyd Burroughs, two Alabama sharecroppers, and Dorothea Lange's photo entitled "Migrant Mother":



Floyd and Allie Mae Burroughs by Walker Evans

1935-1936

Photographs



Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange

1936

Photograph

These photographs are examples from two parts of the country documenting the suffering that was taking place during the Great Depression, but doing so in an artful manner.

Lange's photo in particular has become one of the most recognized images from the Great Depression, depicting a 32-year-old mother of seven (eventually, she was a mother of 10) looking to the side as if contemplating her family's future while her children grasp onto her. It's a heart-wrenching portrayal of the reality facing rural farmers and workers of the 1930s.

The photographer Gordon Parks was the only African American hired by the FSA, and he provided a look at the reality facing African Americans during this time as well.

His parody of Wood's "American Gothic" painting features a cleaning woman named Ella Watson, who worked at the FSA building in Washington.



American Gothic, Washington D.C. by Gordon Parks

1942

Photograph

She's holding a broom and mop. It was a rather controversial photograph, but it raised awareness among many of the additional struggles that African Americans faced with the prevalence of racism even in the nation's capital.



DID YOU KNOW

Parks's work led him to become a writer and photographer for *Life* magazine, a position he held for some 20 years before moving onto other creative endeavors, such as directing the '70s action movie *Shaft*.



BIG IDEA

The Great Depression influenced the arts in the prevalence of social realism.



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Realism

Part of FSA, an art movement whose artists focused on “everyday conditions of the working class”.

Farm Security Administration (FSA)

First developed to assist resettlement of rural populations, the program was responsible for

supporting a highly prolific photography and writing program that documented life during the Depression.



SUMMARY

Now that you've gone through the lesson, are you able to identify and define today's key terms? Can you describe the context of **the Great Depression** and its influence on the arts? Can you identify examples of regionalism and photography from this era? The Great Depression influenced the arts in the prevalence of social realism. You saw this influence by looking at **paintings** and **photography** from this time.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell



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