Family Life During the Great Depression

"I am trying here to say something about the despised, the defeated, the alienated. About death and disaster, about the wounded, the crippled, the helpless, the rootless, the dislocated. About finality. About the last ditch."—Dorothea Lange

Basic Information

Grade Level: 6–8
Subject Area: Visual Arts, Social Studies, U.S. History
Time Required: 3 or 4 sessions
Student Skills Developed: Making inferences and drawing conclusions, comparison and contrast, narrative writing, evidence-based learning

Artworks

Newark Museum Collection
Minetta Good
At the Country Auction, 1935
oil on canvas, 78¼ x 39¼ in.

National Endowment for the Humanities, *Picturing America Collection,* Dorothea Lange
Migrant Mother (Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age 32) Nipomo, California, 1936.
Black-and-white photograph.

Introduction

Family life during the 1930s Great Depression could be hard, as fathers lost their jobs and mothers scrimped to make ends meet. Artists Minetta Good and Dorothea Lange bear witness to how families on both sides of the United States met these challenges.

In this lesson, students compare Minetta Good's painting of a family selling household items and handmade goods in *At the Country Auction* with Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph *Migrant Mother*. After viewing 1930s household items, students create a collage or drawing of such objects. They write an imagined news story about the country auction in Good's painting.

Guiding Questions

+ How did economic difficulties during the Great Depression affect individuals and families?

+ What do paintings and photographs tell us about life during the Great Depression?

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

+ Describe economic problems that ordinary American families encountered during the Great Depression and understand how they dealt with these difficulties.

+ Identify ways Minetta Good and Dorothea Lange composed their art to deliver a message.

+ Create an artwork that demonstrates their understanding of everyday life during the 1930s.

+ Write an imaginary news story about the Depression-era auction and subjects in Minetta Good's painting *At the Country Auction* that indicates an understanding of individual financial difficulties and solutions.

Background Information for the Teacher

Great Depression

The optimistic Roaring Twenties screeched to a halt with the 1929 stock market crash and the subsequent ruin of millions of investors. Western industrialized countries plunged into the Great Depression's prolonged, deep economic slump. Consumer spending dwindled, production slowed, and companies laid off employees. By 1933, at the height of the Depression, almost half the banks in the United States had failed, and thirteen to fifteen million workers were unemployed. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's government instituted an alphabet soup of relief measures to strengthen the economy and provide Americans jobs. The economy did not completely recover until after 1939, as American industry ramped up production for World War II.

Works Progress Administration

The Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of Roosevelt's New Deal programs, provided jobs for more than 8.5 million people. WPA workers built roads, parks, bridges, public buildings, and airports. The WPA supported thousands of artists, who created 2,566 murals and 17,744 sculptures for public buildings throughout the nation.

Minetta Good

During the Great Depression, muralist and printmaker Minetta Good was employed by the WPA. Born in New York City in 1895, she lived there and in nearby New

Jersey her whole life. She studied art with portraitist Cecilia Beaux and, at the Art Students League, with F. Luis Mora. She exhibited her work with the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors and at the Philadelphia Art Alliance. She was fifty-one years old when she died.

At the Country Auction
In *At the Country Auction,* Good depicts a family near Middle Valley, New Jersey, who are selling their possessions for income. Stylistically, her art resembles that of such Regionalist painters as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. Like them, she painted humble people in everyday life activities.

Dorothea Lange
See 18b in Picturing America Educators Resource Book http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide/English/English_PA_TeachersGuide.pdf for further information and discussion ideas for Dorothea Lange and her photograph *Migrant Mother.*

Preparing to Teach This Lesson

+ Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout.
+ Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites.
+ Download and print out documents you will use and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.
+ Students can access the primary source materials and some of the activity materials via the EDSITEment LaunchPad.

Lesson Plan Activities

1. Look and Think Worksheet—Minetta Good's painting *At the Country Auction.*

2. Compare and Contrast Worksheet—Good's painting to Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother.*

3.Write newspaper coverage of a country auction.

Lesson Activity 1

Look and Think Activity
Minetta Good's painting *At the Country Auction*

Before discussing Minetta Good's *At the Country Auction,* have students study it individually.

After giving a few minutes to view, have students complete **Worksheet 1, Look and Think** (included below). This worksheet is a guide to help students look closely at the painting. Use the worksheet questions and students' answers as a framework for class discussion. Encourage them to notice details Good added to help us understand this story and the people in the painting.

Look and Think Worksheet Answer Key

1) What seems to be happening in this painting?
A family is selling household items and food at an auction.

2) How do these people feel about what is happening?
They appear rather stoic or unemotional. The little girl, woman, and boy have slight smiles. The man with his drooping mustache seems tired or resigned. They do not look at the woman on the right or at each other. Only the small girl stares out at the viewer.

3) Who could these people be? Who are the sellers?
The four people facing us are probably a family selling their belongings.

Who is the buyer? Why do you think this?
The woman turned away from our view may be a customer. She is the only one looking at the other people in this painting. Her hand seems most animated. Are her clothes more stylish?

4) List three objects that are for sale. Which ones could they have made themselves?
Perhaps the woman in red preserved the food in the jars. Someone in the family may have made the basket or doll. The clay pot, clay pitcher, and various dishes and jewelry seem to be for sale. We do not know if the handmade quilt and chairs in the background will be auctioned off.

5) Where are these people? What is the setting for this painting?
From the title and Cook's documentation, we know it is a country auction in rural New Jersey. Notice how green the background is. The Dust Bowl that occurred during the 1930s was in the western and central part of the United States, not on the East Coast.

6) Why are these people selling these things?
They probably need money from the sale of these household items and preserved foods in order to purchase food, clothing, and shelter, and perhaps to enjoy an occasional luxury like a movie. (In 1935, the average movie admission was 24 cents.)

7) Analyze the composition of this painting to understand how Minetta Good organized it so that we would notice certain parts of it. Squint your eyes and look at the painting. Which part seems most important? How did she make this important?
The faces and the white paper in the basket form a compact grouping near the center of the picture. Their light faces, light clothing near their faces, and the white paper contrast with the dark values in the background.

8) What lines lead to the central family group?
The path and the tree lead to this group. Notice in which direction each figure gazes. The hand on the right, eating utensils, and little girl's top arm point into the painting.

9) Pick a color in this painting:_____. Where is it repeated?
The repetition of colors and shapes directs our gaze throughout the painting.

DEPRESSION ERA FAMILIES
LOOK AND THINK

Name: _____ Date: _____

Spend a few minutes looking at Minetta Good's *At the Country Auction* painting. Afterward, answer the questions below.

1. What seems to be happening in this painting?

2. How do these people feel about what is happening?

3. Who could these people be? Who are the sellers? Who is the buyer? Why do you think this?

4. List three objects that are for sale. Which ones could they have made themselves?

5. Where are these people? What is the setting for this painting?

6. Why are these people selling these things?

7. Analyze the composition of this painting to understand how Minetta Good organized it. Squint you eyes and look at the painting. Which part seems most important? How did she make this important?

8. Which lines lead to the central family group?

9. Pick a color in this painting:_____. Where is it repeated?

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Lesson Activity 2

Compare and Contrast Good's painting to Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother*

- Have students analyze Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother*.
- Ask them what they think is going on in this photograph. They should support their answers with clues in the picture.
- Working in small groups, students may use the Venn diagram on Worksheet 2 to compare Lange's 1936 photograph to Good's 1935 painting *At the Country Auction*.

Venn Diagram Teacher Answer Key

The students' Venn diagram responses should be similar to this:

Minetta Good	Both	Dorothea Lange
Color, oil painting on canvas	Mother with children	Black/white photograph
A man and a second woman are also present	Generations present	Has baby
Children face forward	Solace in faces	Children turn from camera
Background suggests distance		Plain flat background
Many objects in painting		Only mother and children
Mother has little expression, slight smile		Mother looks worried
Some are wearing hats		All have bare heads

After completing the diagram, ask students:

Which family seems to be having the hardest time?
Why do you think this?

Point out that:

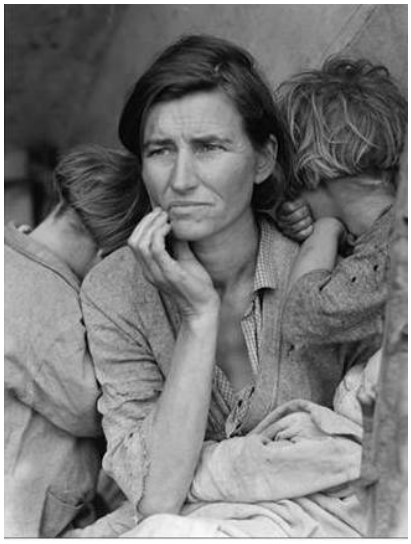
- both artworks were created within a year of each other
- the families shown were on opposite sides of the country
- both artists were employed by government agencies.

Students may look at more of Lange's photographs of this family and read about their troubles on *America's Story*, http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/lange/aa_lange_power_1.html.
More background information on Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, and questions for careful study of the photograph are in *Picturing America Educators Research Book*, 18b, http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide/English/English_PA_TeachersGuide.pdf.

Depression Era Families
Compare and Contrast

Name: _____ Date: _____

Write words and phrases describing each artwork in the circle for that painting.
Write similarities for both paintings in the center of the overlapping area.



At the Country Auction,
by Minetta Good

Migrant Mother,
by Dorothea Lange

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Lesson Activity 3

Create a Newspaper Article Covering a Country Auction in the 1930s

+ Show and analyze the three-dimensional images of Newark Museum teaching collection objects including pottery and a toaster.
+ Have students imagine they are writing a newspaper article about the country auction in Minetta Good's painting.
+ Use the guided questions as details that should be included in their article.
+ Be sure they mention the three-dimensional objects and the family's objects that were sold at this auction, including how much they sold for and their purpose during this era.

To be included in the article:

+ What will be the title of your news article?
+ What type of article are you writing? (news, feature, style?)
+ Create the setting for your article: Where did the auction take place? When did the auction take place?
+ Create a purpose for the auction. Why were these people at the auction? Where did the items they were selling come from? How did they feel about selling these things? What was the most popular item sold? Who attended?
+ Name two of the people in the painting. Create a quote for each of them, based on what you think they would have said about the auction before attending it or what they said as they were leaving. Consider their gestures and facial expressions as you write their reactions.

Extending the Lesson

+ Have students research buildings and art created by the WPA in your community. The WPA built public buildings, such as schools, parks, airports, and libraries. WPA artists created murals and sculpture for public spaces.

+ Show students art by Regionalist painters Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. Have them compare their style to Minetta Good's painting. See *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,* by Grant Wood, and *The Sources of Country Music* in Picturing America, http://picturingamerica.neh.gov.

+ Students may paint a still life of a collection of historical objects.

+ Assign students to photograph or sketch a rummage sale in your community. Compare it to the sale in Minetta Good's painting. How are they alike and different?

Resources

Selected NEH EDSITEment Websites

American Enterprise, *From "Rag" Doll to Community Riches*
http://americanenterprise.si.edu/2011/05/from-rag-doll-to-community-riches/

American Experience: The Works Progress Administration (WPA) from Surviving the Dust Bowl
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-wpa/

America's Story
http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/lange/aa_lange_power_1.html

Ken Burns: The Dust Bowl
http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl
PBS documentary

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
Women and the Great Depression
http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/great-depression/essays/women-and-great-depression

New Deal Network
http://newdeal.feri.org

http://newdeal.feri.org/library/browse_projects.cfm?SubCatID=1031&CatID=7
Art created under government programs in photo library

Picturing America
http://picturingamerica.neh.gov

> *Picturing America Educators Research Book*http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide/English/English_PA_TeachersGuide.pdf

Smithsonian Art Museum—Picturing the 1930s Exhibit
Interactive introduction to 1930s art
http://americanart.si.edu/education/picturing_the_1930s/

John Steinbeck: A Voice for a Region, A Voice for America
http://www.neh.gov/divisions/education/other-opportunities/john-steinbeck-the-voice-region-voice-america

Selected EDSITEment Lesson Plans

An Introduction to the Relationship Between Composition and Content in the Visual Arts http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=647

What's in a Picture? An Introduction to *Subject* in the Visual Art
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=621

Everything in Its Right Place: An Introduction to Composition in Painting
Lesson 1: Shaping the View: Composition Basics
Lesson 2: Repeat After Me: Repetition in the Visual Arts
Lesson 3: Follow the Leader: Line in the Visual Arts

Depression-era Photographs: Worth a Thousand Words

Dust Bowl Days

Family and Friendship in Quilts

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath:* The Inner Chapters

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath:* Verbal Pictures

FDR: Fireside Chats, the New Deal, and Eleanor

Other Useful Websites

Dust Bowl Descent
Ganzel Group Communication
http://www.ganzelgroup.com/books.html
Dust Bowl Descent was written, in 1984, by Bill Ganzel, and published by University of Nebraska Press. This site includes photographs and an oral-history interview with Florence Thompson, the mother in Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother.*

Migrant Mother—Florence Thompson
http://www.ganzelgroup.com/movies/thompson.html Audio of Florence Thompson telling her story

National Building Museum
http://www.nbm.org/media/slideshows/slideshow-house-home.html?page=7

Newark Museum
http://www.newarkmuseum.org

Standards Alignment

NAES – VisArts – 5–8, 1 Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
NAES – VisArts – 5–8, 4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
NAES – VisArts – 5–8, 6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6–8.7 Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts

Minetta Good (1895–1942)

At the Country Auction

1935
oil on canvas
Gift of Miss Dorothea Mierisch 1949
Newark Museum Collection, 49. 153

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Dorothea Lange (1895–1965)

Migrant Mother and Children

(Destitute pea pickers in California, a 32-year-old mother of seven children.) February 1936.
black-and-white photograph.
Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

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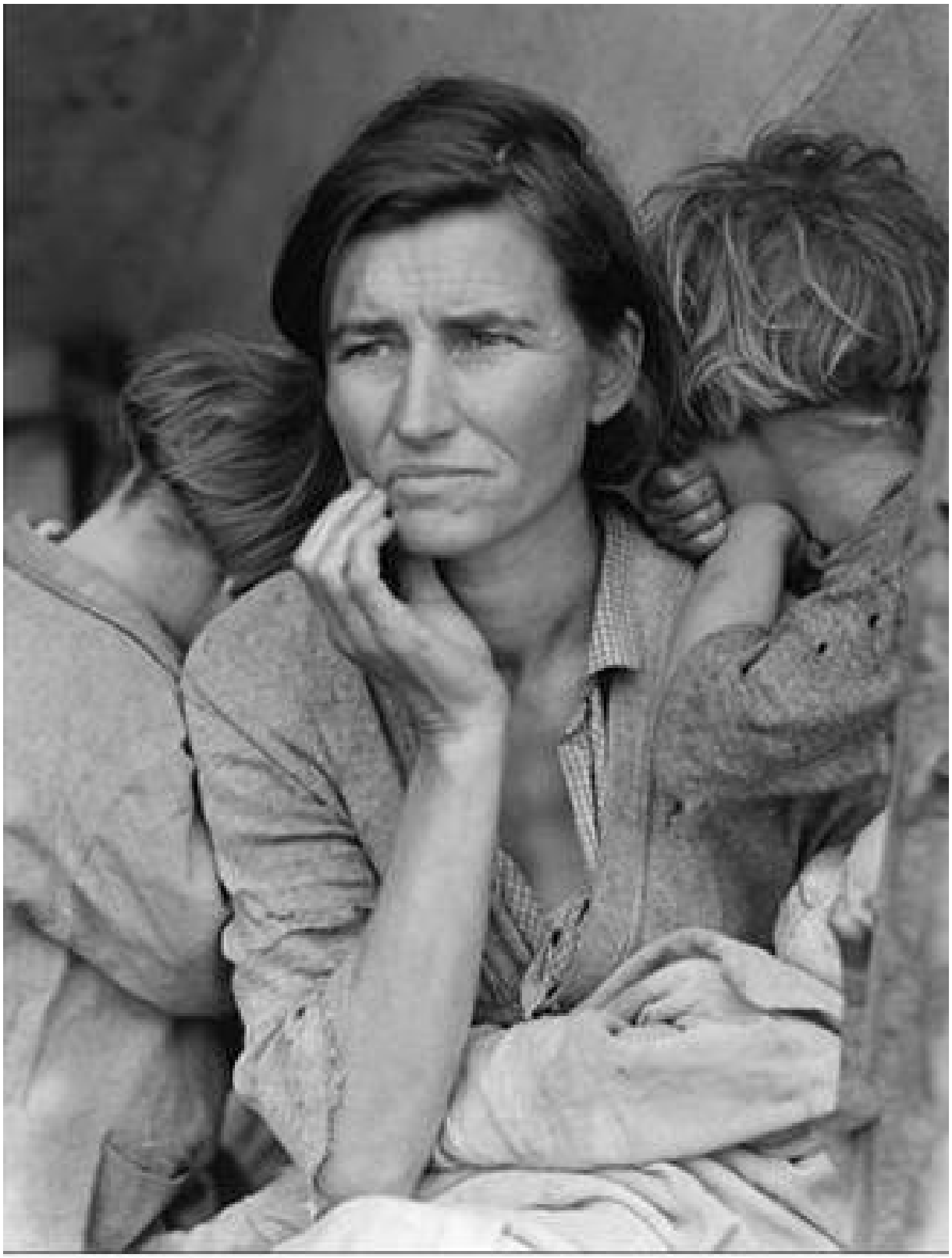
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