

impounded dorothea lange and the censored images of japanese american internment

Impounded Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment

In the annals of American history, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II stands out as a poignant example of racial prejudice and government overreach. At the forefront of capturing this dark chapter was renowned photographer Dorothea Lange, whose poignant images conveyed the anguish and resilience of those affected. However, many of her photographs were impounded and censored, reflecting the government's desire to control the narrative surrounding the internment. This article delves into Lange's work, the implications of censorship, and the lasting impact of her impounded images.

Historical Context of Japanese American Internment

The forced internment of Japanese Americans began shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The U.S. government, fueled by fear and prejudice, viewed Japanese Americans as potential enemies. As a result, over 120,000 individuals of Japanese descent—most of whom were American citizens—were forcibly relocated to internment camps scattered across the West Coast.

- Executive Order 9066: Signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in February 1942, this order authorized the military to designate certain areas as exclusion zones from which "enemy aliens" could be removed.
- Relocation Centers: These camps, often located in remote areas, were characterized by harsh living conditions and a lack of privacy. Families were uprooted from their homes, businesses, and communities.

Dorothea Lange: The Photographer Behind the Lens

Dorothea Lange, a prominent documentary photographer and photojournalist, is best known for her work during the Great Depression. Her ability to capture the human condition made her an ideal candidate to document the experiences of Japanese Americans during their internment.

Early Life and Career

- Background: Born in 1895 in Hoboken, New Jersey, Lange developed an interest in photography after studying at the New York School of Photography in the early 1910s.
- Documentary Style: Her unique approach combined elements of social realism and portraiture, focusing on the emotional depth of her subjects.

Commissioned Work for the War Relocation Authority

In 1942, Lange was hired by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to document the internment process. Her assignment aimed to capture the conditions and experiences of Japanese Americans in relocation centers.

- Artistic Vision: Lange's photographs were not merely documentation; they conveyed empathy and understanding, highlighting the dignity of her subjects.
- Iconic Images: Some of her most powerful works include portraits of families in the camps, scenes of daily life, and the emotional toll of internment.

Censorship and Impoundment of Lange's Work

Despite the importance of Lange's work, her photographs were subjected to censorship and impoundment, reflecting the government's efforts to control the narrative surrounding Japanese American internment.

Reasons for Censorship

The U.S. government viewed Lange's images as potentially damaging to its public relations efforts. The following factors contributed to the decision to censor her work:

1. Fear of Public Backlash: The government was concerned that Lange's poignant images would provoke sympathy for Japanese Americans and generate public outrage against internment.
2. Control of the Narrative: By controlling the visual representation of internment, the government aimed to maintain a narrative that justified its actions.
3. Security Concerns: Officials argued that images depicting the internment camps could provide intelligence to Japan and hinder U.S. military efforts.

The Impoundment Process

In 1942, Lange's negatives were confiscated by the government, and a significant number of her photographs were impounded. The impoundment process included:

- Seizure of Negatives: The WRA took possession of Lange's negatives, effectively preventing their publication or public display.
- Restricted Access: Lange was prohibited from using her images for any purpose, and many of her works remained hidden for decades.

The Legacy of Lange's Censored Images

Despite the impoundment of her work, Lange's photographs have had a lasting impact on the

understanding of Japanese American internment and the broader implications of government censorship.

Revealing the Human Experience

Lange's images serve as a powerful reminder of the human experience behind historical events. They provide insight into the emotional and psychological toll of internment, illustrating the resilience of individuals and families in the face of adversity.

- Emotional Resonance: The photographs evoke feelings of empathy and understanding, allowing viewers to connect with the subjects on a personal level.
- Historical Documentation: Lange's work has become an essential part of the historical narrative surrounding Japanese American internment, contributing to discussions about civil liberties and human rights.

Rediscovery and Recognition

In the years following the internment, Lange's impounded images gradually became accessible to the public, and her contributions to the documentation of this period were recognized.

- Posthumous Exhibitions: Exhibitions featuring Lange's work have appeared in various museums, bringing attention to the injustices faced by Japanese Americans during World War II.
- Historical Research: Scholars and historians have utilized Lange's photographs in their research, emphasizing the importance of visual documentation in understanding historical events.

Reflections on Censorship and Representation

The story of Dorothea Lange and her impounded images raises critical questions about censorship, representation, and the role of art in social justice.

The Ethics of Censorship

- Freedom of Expression: Lange's experience underscores the tension between national security and the right to free expression. Censorship often silences voices that reveal uncomfortable truths about society.
- Historical Accountability: Acknowledging the role of censorship in shaping public narratives is crucial for understanding the complexities of history.

The Role of Art in Social Change

Lange's work exemplifies the potential of art and photography to drive social change. Her images

inspired activism and advocacy for civil rights, reminding us of the importance of representation in storytelling.

- Visual Advocacy: Art can serve as a powerful tool for advocacy, amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives.
- Cultural Memory: The preservation of Lange's work contributes to a collective cultural memory, ensuring that the lessons learned from history are not forgotten.

Conclusion

The impounded photographs of Dorothea Lange represent a significant chapter in the history of Japanese American internment and the broader struggle for civil rights in the United States. Her work not only documents a painful period in American history but also serves as a testament to the resilience of those who endured it. The censorship of her images serves as a reminder of the need for vigilance in protecting freedom of expression and the importance of diverse voices in shaping our collective understanding of the past. As we reflect on Lange's legacy, we are reminded of the power of photography to illuminate the human experience and inspire social change.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Dorothea Lange and what role did she play during the Japanese American internment?

Dorothea Lange was a renowned American photographer known for her work documenting the Great Depression. During World War II, she was hired by the War Relocation Authority to document the internment of Japanese Americans, capturing poignant images of their struggles and resilience.

What were the circumstances under which Lange's photographs of Japanese American internment were impounded?

Lange's photographs were impounded by the U.S. government due to concerns that they could incite anti-American sentiment and undermine the war effort. As a result, many of her images were censored and not released to the public for decades.

What themes are prevalent in Lange's photographs of Japanese American internment camps?

Lange's photographs often highlight themes of loss, displacement, and resilience. They capture the human experience of internment, showcasing the dignity of individuals and families amidst the harsh realities of their confinement.

How did the U.S. government justify the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II?

The U.S. government justified the internment of Japanese Americans by citing national security concerns following the attack on Pearl Harbor, claiming that individuals of Japanese descent might be loyal to Japan and pose a threat to the country.

What impact did Lange's censored photographs have on public perception of Japanese American internment?

The censorship of Lange's photographs contributed to a lack of awareness and understanding of the injustices faced by Japanese Americans during internment. It wasn't until the images were later released that the public began to grasp the severity and emotional toll of these experiences.

When were the impounded images of Japanese American internment finally made public?

The impounded images of Japanese American internment were largely made public in the late 1970s and early 1980s, following a growing movement for redress and acknowledgment of the injustices faced by Japanese Americans during World War II.

How has Dorothea Lange's work influenced contemporary discussions about civil rights?

Lange's work has become an important reference point in discussions about civil rights and social justice, reminding us of the historical injustices faced by marginalized groups and the importance of preserving individual rights in times of crisis.

What was the public reaction to the release of Lange's photographs after years of censorship?

The release of Lange's photographs led to a significant public outcry and increased awareness of the injustices of Japanese American internment, fueling calls for reparations and recognition of the wrongful treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

What lessons can be learned from the internment of Japanese Americans and the censorship of Lange's photographs?

The internment of Japanese Americans and the censorship of Lange's photographs serve as stark reminders of the dangers of prejudice, wartime hysteria, and the violation of civil liberties. They highlight the necessity of vigilance in protecting human rights, even during times of national crisis.

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