

Impact Statement

Zoe Chung, Grade 8

A New Perspective, 2026

Acrylic, watercolor, colored pencil, graphite on canvas. 18 x 24 inches

Jericho Middle School, Jericho, NY

Unsung Hero: Margaret Bourke-White

When thinking about photography, one might imagine pictures of landscapes or a casual snapshot of a fleeting moment. However, in times of turmoil, photos become more than decoration. Instead, they become a communication tool that bridges humans by displaying the true intensity behind major world events. Pioneering photojournalist, Margaret Bourke-White, brought awareness to the difficult or often shameful events in history. She photographed The Great Depression, the Louisville Flood, droughts along the Midwest, Gandhi's fight for Indian independence, German industries, and the concentration camps in Erla and Buchenwald. Her sharing of insightful, thought-provoking photographs captured the public's attention.

Originally brought up in 1904, in New York, Bourke-White's parents fostered her interest in photography at a young age. Her father, Joseph White, saw beauty in industrial machinery and often took her to watch the manufacture of metal structural components. By 17, she graduated from Plainfield High School and attended Columbia University. However, in 1922, her father passed away from a sudden stroke. After returning to school, she turned to photography—signing up for a photography course. “I would like to be a news photographer-reporter and a good one,” she told her professor in 1923. Subsequently, in 1927, she graduated from Cornell University and moved to Cleveland to continue her career as a photographer.

In the early stages of her career, Bourke-White worked as a freelance professor in Cleveland. However, when she was hired by two architects who needed photographs of a school they had built, it sparked the beginning of her success. In 1929, Henry Luce, a Time magazine editor, proposed for her to be the first photographer for his Fortune magazine. At Fortune, she photographed the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl, and became the first western photographer to document Soviet Industry. Her images taken when she was sent to photograph the Midwest drought were highly influential, bringing public attention to the suffering of the farmers. In 1936, Henry Luce hired her for the new Life magazine. Under Life, Bourke-White traveled to Europe amidst WWII, risking her life to photograph the air raids, and witnessed the first German bombs on Russia. When the US entered the war in 1941, she was sent to photograph the concentration camps in Buchenwald, Germany. Her image of the emaciated inmates of the concentration camp left the world speechless. In 1946, after WWII, she photographed India's leader, Mahatma Gandhi, just days before his assassination. Shortly after,

she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at 49 years old, but kept her illness a secret. She retired in 1969 and sadly passed away in 1971.

At first glance, my project has a lot to take in. First, I prioritized drawing the viewer's attention to Margaret Bourke-White first and then allowing the viewers' eyes to wander over other details. I incorporated many elements of symbolism. Since historically, pigeons represent messengers, I drew a pigeon flying off the canvas, representing how Bourke-White delivered a message to the world. It also represents how I want to help others learn about her story. The gears in the background are in reference to how her father sparked her passion for photography by introducing her to machinery early on.

I decided to draw the pictures Bourke-White took on separate pieces of paper to make them pop from the canvas. Wanting the entire layout to look like a collage with a photojournalistic theme, I added a newsprint in the empty spaces and as transitions. On the right side of the canvas, there is an iconic photo taken in 1937, titled 'At the Time of the Louisville Flood'. It consists of African American flood victims lining up for relief behind a billboard titled "World's highest standard of living." It left a profound effect by exposing the difference between American propaganda and the harsh realities of the Great Depression. In the bottom left corner, there is an image Bourke-White took in 1946, depicting Mahatma Gandhi sitting beside his beloved spinning wheel. Gandhi and his followers used the spinning wheel as a symbol of civil disobedience against British rule, representing self-reliance and economic independence. The image in the top left corner is 'The Living Dead of Buchenwald,' showing the prisoners of the Holocaust who survived forced labor and the brutality of the Nazis. The photograph was published by *Life* magazine on May 7, 1945, with the caption, "Dead men will have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them."

Although I had not previously heard of Margaret Bourke-White, I grew familiar with her story through *Unsung Heroes*. Her story captured my attention because she was never directly involved in conflict but was still able to bring awareness towards minority groups. Her actions documented the grim reality behind global affairs for public discussion. She showed how disasters change people's lives and brought awareness, kindness and humanity to the places where they need the most. In the past, I mainly used my art as convenient birthday presents or wall decoration. Through Margaret's story, I gradually started to realize the profound impact art could have on the people around me; not just as a thoughtful gift, but as a voice. My perspective on art changed as I started to see how I could use it to spread a message to the people around me. Most of all, however, I was inspired by her devotion and courage to her causes that shed light on the human side of tragedies in the world. When my artwork is displayed in the school, I hope to capture people's interest and establish further discussion.

I hope that by sharing my artwork, people will continue to talk about her.