Photographer: Margaret Bourke-White
Born 1904

Reflections

Why are photographs like this so important?

How do you think the photographer felt when she was taking this picture?

How would you feel if you were in the photographer’s position?

What do you think the photographer meant in reality when she talked about using a camera as a barrier between herself and the horror she could see?

Photograph: Buchenwald
Germany
1945

Contextual information

Margaret Bourke White is one of the best known female war photographers of all time, especially known for the pictures she took of Nazi concentration camps when they were liberated in 1945, truly showing the world the depths of depravity that had been plumbed during the previous six years. Talking about her experiences at the Buchenwald camp, she said: “Using a camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me.”

Prior to the concentration camps, the American photographer had accompanied the American Air Force throughout a number of highly dangerous situations, she nearly died a number of times including being stranded on an Arctic island, involved in a helicopter crash and being bombed in Moscow. As a result, she became known to army colleagues as ‘Maggie the Indestructible’!

Bourke-White was much more than a war photographer, however. She began as an architectural and commercial photographer and her revolutionary new style of magnesium flare enabled her to take some of the best steel factory photographs of the era, which garnered her national attention.