

Gordon Parks:

Camera Portraits from the Corcoran Collection

In 1948 Gordon Parks (1912 – 2006) proposed a new way of creating photographic portraits. Writing in his book *Camera Portraits: The Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture*, Parks urged portrait photographers to abandon the controlled environment of a studio and embrace instead a documentary approach, situating their subjects within the places where they live and work. He also encouraged them to conduct “ample research” into their subjects’ lives and personalities and to remain “alert to every gesture or emotion that contributes to the sitter’s individuality.” In this way, he believed photographers could fulfill their “moral obligation” to accurately record the truth as they see it, creating more powerful portraits than “mere words” can convey.

This exhibition explores how Parks applied this approach to his portraits of celebrated individuals and everyday people from the 1940s to the 1970s. It also underscores the vital role of portraiture in Parks’s art. His deeply humanistic photographs address race, poverty, civil rights, and other important issues of his time and ours. Through his work during World War II and after, Parks revealed the richness of African American culture and its centrality to the American story. His innovative and influential work laid the foundation for subsequent photographers, especially those of color, to create insightful pictures of the people within their communities.

This exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is made possible through the leadership support of the Trellis Fund.

Unless otherwise noted, the photographs are gelatin silver prints from the National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection (The Gordon Parks Collection, 1998 – 1999).

Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks developed a powerful style that drew on his sophisticated melding of documentary, portrait, and fashion photography. His commanding portraits of people in their natural environments humanize them, inspire empathy, and enable us to see beyond racial and cultural stereotypes.

Born in 1912 in Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks grew up amid poverty, segregation, and racism. After his mother's death when he was just 16, he left home and survived by working several different jobs. In 1937 he bought his first camera. It soon became his "weapon of choice" to fight for social change.

Parks began his career as a portrait and fashion photographer in St. Paul and Chicago. In 1942 he moved to Washington, DC, where he worked as a photographer for various federal agencies, including the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Office of War Information (OWI). He then worked for Standard Oil Company as well as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Ebony*, and other magazines. In 1949, *Life* magazine hired Parks as the first African American photographer on the staff. He held his position there until 1972.

Trapped in abandoned building by a rival gang on street, Red Jackson ponders his next move, 1948

In this portrait, Leonard “Red” Jackson, 17, peers warily out a shattered window. For his first article for *Life* magazine, Parks proposed a story about gang wars in Harlem. He narrowed his focus after befriending Jackson and then spent four weeks shadowing him and learning the complexities of his experience. Parks made pictures of many aspects of Jackson’s life, from his gang-related hardships to the joys of his home life and friendships. These photographs underscored the racism, poverty, and lack of opportunity that young men in Jackson’s position faced while simultaneously showing his resilience and humanity. However, *Life*’s editors instead focused the article on the violence in Jackson’s life, reinforcing existing stereotypes.

Self-Portrait, 1941

National Gallery of Art, Purchased as the Gift of Alan and Marsha Paller, Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen and Marc Andreessen via the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Raj and Indra Nooyi, Mitchell P. Rales, David M. Rubenstein, and Darren Walker in honor of Sharon Percy Rockefeller

Parks made this self-portrait in Chicago soon after leaving his job as a railroad porter to work as a photographer. Alert to objects that helped describe a person's character, profession, and values, Parks positioned himself next to his Graflex Speed Graphic camera, proudly proclaiming his new calling. Using a pose that he directed many of his subjects to take, he gazes off to the side, allowing us to study his face and assess his character more freely. At the time of this photograph, he supported himself and his young family by taking pictures of African American intellectuals, artists, and socialites who congregated at Chicago's vibrant South Side Community Art Center, dubbed the incubator of the Chicago Black Renaissance.

Washington (southwest section), D.C.
Black woman in her bedroom, November
1942, printed later

Reflected in a mirror, a woman sits on a bed facing away from a picture of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Parks's 1942 picture may have been influenced by 1930s FSA photographers. They frequently recorded the decor of the modest homes they documented, including pictures that residents clipped from newspapers or magazines that visualized their values or aspirations.

Similarly, in this photograph of a woman who lived in a Washington, DC, home with no running water, Parks's inclusion of Roosevelt's image suggests her support of the president's policies — though it may also acknowledge Roosevelt's limited ability to expand civil rights for Black Americans.

Father and Son Looking out the Window, Puerto Rico, 1954

Parks made several trips to Puerto Rico for *Life* magazine in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He often photographed in the San Juan neighborhood El Fanguito (The Mudhole), known at the time as one of the poorest areas in the Western Hemisphere. Here, Parks captured a father and son looking out a window. The light illuminates their pensive faces, and the pose suggests their close bond. Despite the sympathetic nature of the portrait, Parks, contrary to his usual practice, did not record their names.

Washington, D.C. Government Charwoman (**American Gothic**), July 1942

Parks's portrait of Ella Watson is an iconic photograph of the 20th century. Framed against the backdrop of the American flag, Watson is flanked by her broom and mop, recalling the title's inspiration, Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. Just as Grant Wood intended his 1930 painting of an American farmer and his daughter to convey a positive image of the resilience of rural white Americans, so too did Parks hope to recognize the critical work of often overlooked Black Americans. The photograph also suggests the racial, economic, and professional disparities that characterized the nation's capital and the realities of life for a Black woman under segregation. Parks met Watson while he was working as an FSA photographer and she was cleaning the program's offices. Their meeting led to a monthlong collaboration, during which Parks photographed Watson in her home and community.



Grant Wood, ***American Gothic***, 1930, oil on Beaver Board, The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, 1930.934

Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY

Mrs. Mullens, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1950

Framed by posts and an exterior wall, Maggie Mullens, a longtime neighbor of the Parks family in Fort Scott, Kansas, is shown at the far end of a porch dotted with potted plants. Parks and others fondly remembered Mullens for her skills in soothing the ailing and bereaved. Although Parks depicted her dozing, with her head covered by a shawl and resting on her hand, her strong presence still dominates the scene.

Drug store “cowboys.” Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada, September 1945

In September 1945, Parks traveled to Alberta, Canada, to photograph exploration and drilling by the Royalite Oil Company, a subsidiary of his employer, Standard Oil. While there he also pictured the community of Black Diamond, including roughnecks, ranchers, and the pseudo-cowboys shown here relaxing after work. Parks depicted these men dressed in traditional denim and work boots but also sporting fashionable slicked-back hair. They are standing in front of a drugstore, its signs for Coca-Cola and “Wampole’s Extract of Cod Liver” just visible.

Uncle James Parks, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1950, printed later

Parks depicted his blind 85-year-old uncle James leaning on his cane in thoughtful contemplation, a tree arcing over him as if affording protection. When Parks returned to his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1950, he reconnected after many years with family and friends. He eagerly sought out his uncle, whom he said was his “real mentor! Taught me about life.”

**Husband and Wife, Sunday Morning,
Detroit, Michigan (Bert Collins and
Pauline Terry), 1950, printed later**

As part of a project for *Life* to document the lives of his former junior high school classmates, Parks traveled to Detroit to photograph Pauline Terry in her adopted city. Pauline told Parks that she and her husband, Bert Collins, a machinist for General Motors, stayed “pretty close to church and God.” Parks depicted this solid, upright couple in their Sunday best walking arm-in-arm to church with Bert clutching a well-worn Bible. Parks made several pictures of them at this time, but for *Life* he selected this one that shows two other men in the background, emphasizing the couple’s larger community.

Mrs. Jefferson, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1950

While on assignment for *Life* in his hometown, Parks visited people he knew from his youth, including Mrs. Jefferson, whom Parks depicted sitting erect in a throne-like chair with her head held high. Parks later said she “was carrying off her 98 years very well.” Parks found his birthplace little altered. Still beautiful, it also embodied “fear, hatred and violence.” Many of his friends had, like Parks, joined the Great Migration, fleeing the small town for Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, and elsewhere in search of greater freedom and more opportunities. Others like Mrs. Jefferson stayed put, perhaps too elderly to uproot.

Flavio da Silva, Rio de Janeiro, 1961

In 1961, when *Life* published Parks's photo essay on poverty in Latin America, its editors featured this picture of 12-year-old Flavio da Silva, malnourished, covered in grime, and balancing precariously on one leg. Parks met Flavio in Rio de Janeiro and followed the boy for a month around the favela (shantytown) where he lived amid desperate circumstances. Despite severe bronchial asthma, Flavio had to scavenge for food and care for his seven younger siblings. Readers moved by the story donated sufficient funds to enable Parks to return to Brazil, relocate Flavio's family, and escort him to Denver for medical treatment. Parks and Flavio formed a close bond that endured for decades but was complicated by their differing paths and prospects — when he returned home, Flavio again faced poverty as well as limited economic and educational opportunities.

Muhammad Ali, London, 1966

Parks made this and a nearby photograph of boxer Muhammad Ali for a story in *Life* in 1966. Although Ali was celebrated for his athletic prowess, many in the press at the time criticized him for declaring himself a conscientious objector and announcing his refusal to fight in the war in Vietnam. Parks, who came to respect the boxer's intelligence and commitment to social reform, sought to rehabilitate Ali's reputation. In Parks's essay "The Redemption of a Champion," which accompanied his photographs, Ali said he understood he had "to be a gentleman forever" to earn the respect he desired. With that in mind, Parks posed him in an elegant suit striking a thoughtful pose in front of a painting of an English gentleman playing cricket. In the end, *Life's* editors did not include this picture in the article.

Alexander Calder's Hand and Mobile, 1952

On assignment for *Life* in 1952, Parks made photographs of the celebrated American sculptor Alexander Calder and his mobiles — kinetic sculptures that incorporate elements of chance. At Calder's studio in Roxbury, Connecticut, the two artists collaborated to translate the dynamic and wondrous nature of Calder's sculptures for the printed page. This photograph shows Calder's hand emerging to choreograph the floating forms of one of his mobiles, conjuring the artist's sense of play.

Leonard Bernstein, New York, 1954, printed later

Parks first photographed the internationally renowned musician and conductor Leonard Bernstein for a *Life* story on celebrated American composers. Bernstein is shown at Carnegie Hall, encircled by the auditorium lights, with a musical score tucked under one arm and a cigarette in the opposite hand. He looks down at the camera with a confidence befitting the 36-year-old maestro, whose career was skyrocketing. The 1950s were among Bernstein's most prolific years. He composed several original symphonic works and film scores as well as four Broadway musicals, including *West Side Story* in 1957. That same year he was appointed the first American-born music director of the New York Philharmonic.

Samuel Barber, New York, 1955, printed later

Samuel Barber reached global fame at the age of 26 for his string orchestra arrangement “Adagio for Strings.” For Barber, who resided on a property surrounded by forest in the Westchester suburbs outside of New York City, much of his creativity came from nature: “One of the physical nurturing components that makes my music sound as it does, is that I live mostly in the country.... I have always believed that I need a circumference of silence.” For the *Life* essay “U.S. Composers in a Bright Era,” Parks playfully emphasized Barber’s inspiration from nature and the bright spark he brought to American music, including a cascading potted vine and a painted backdrop with a bolt of lightning.

Langston Hughes, Chicago, December 1941,
printed later

Langston Hughes was already a distinguished poet, novelist, playwright, and social activist when he met Parks at Chicago's South Side Community Art Center in 1941. A close friendship grew from the shared belief that their art should address social justice for African Americans. Soon after meeting, they discussed collaborating on Parks's next exhibition. They hoped to caption Parks's photographs with lines from Hughes's latest book of poetry, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, about the blues and African American struggles. By depicting Hughes in this pose, Parks seems to suggest that they would fill the empty picture frame together with photographs and words that told Black stories. In the end, the exhibition did not take place.

Muhammad Ali, 1966, printed later

This monumental close-up portrait of a fiercely determined, focused, and undaunted Muhammad Ali shows him dripping with sweat after a training session. Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion of the world, had become one of the most celebrated athletes of the 20th century. Yet his reputation was tarnished after announcing in 1966 that he would refuse to serve in the US military. Ali, who had converted to Islam in 1964, filed for conscientious objector status, indicating his opposition to the war in Vietnam on religious and ethical grounds. Although he had once been nicknamed “the Greatest” and was beloved by many, critics in the American press now condemned him as a “shameless traitor.” Parks presents him as invincible.

Pastor Ledbetter, Chicago, 1953, printed later

In 1953 *Life* magazine assigned Parks and a white reporter a story on the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago. When entering the church, the reporter failed to remove his hat. The deacons felt this was, as Parks wrote, “another case of the white man’s disrespect” and asked Parks to continue alone on the story. As he learned about the church, which he described as a “temple of hope,” Parks realized that the Sunday services provided solace and restoration for the congregation “in a world of unending trouble.” Positioned directly in front of but slightly below Pastor Ledbetter, Parks shows the pastor in a halo of light and bestows on him the same grace that the pastor, with his eyes closed and arms raised, bestowed on his parishioners. In the end, *Life* did not publish the story.

Malcolm X Addressing Black Muslim Rally in Chicago, 1963, printed later

Malcolm X stands out against a black background as he addresses a rally. His outstretched hand, slightly blurry and grasping a folded handkerchief, draws attention to his sharply focused face. Parks photographed the Nation of Islam for *Life* in 1963 amid the growing civil rights movement. A trusted friend of Malcolm X, Parks earned unprecedented access to the group's daily life. This powerful and humanizing photograph reveals Parks's reverence for Malcolm X's intensity and dynamism. It also suggests his empathy for the Nation of Islam's message of Black empowerment and aim of challenging racial oppression in America. In his accompanying essay, Parks wrote that although his own beliefs did not align with the group's, "the common circumstance of struggle has willed us brothers."

Leon Kirchner, New York, 1955, printed later

The American composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher Leon Kirchner was 36 when Parks photographed him for a feature in *Life* on young American composers. The virtuoso, who began studying music at age four and trained with composer Arnold Schoenberg, gained acclaim for his dissonant and atonal chamber music. Known occasionally to stage his photographs with props, Parks commented that Kirchner's music was "so hot, I want to have smoke in the picture."

New York, New York. Richard Wright, poet, 1943

In August 1943 Parks traveled to New York to photograph Richard Wright, the renowned author of *Native Son* (1940) and *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). Both are searing accounts of the effects of racism, segregation, and poverty on African Americans. The day before he arrived at Wright's apartment, Parks was swept up in the Harlem Race Riot of 1943 — precisely the sort of violence Wright had predicted in his recent books. “Anger had taken over Harlem,” Parks wrote. In response, he created a bold portrait of Wright that emphasizes the monumentality of this courageous man who decried the silencing of millions of Black voices.

Duke Ellington Listening to Playback, Los Angeles, 1960, printed later

In 1960, Parks had the opportunity to photograph jazz great Duke Ellington on tour with his band. In this formally innovative yet tender portrait, Ellington, head atilt and doubled in a reflection in a grand piano lid, listens attentively to a playback session. Ellington made the recording during a brief stop in Los Angeles, where he worked with arranger Billy Strayhorn on the album *Swinging Suites*, a jazz variation on Edvard Grieg's classical *Peer Gynt* suites. A lifelong admirer of the composer and big band leader, Parks — himself a pianist and composer who had traveled with a jazz band in his twenties — called the tour with Ellington's band “a trip through paradise.”

Eldridge Cleaver, 1970

Life assigned Parks to report on the Black Panther Party, a militant Black Power organization dedicated to social reform. Parks traveled to Algiers to photograph Eldridge Cleaver, then minister of information for the Panthers. Two years earlier, Cleaver had fled the United States. He had been involved in a police confrontation after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and was charged with attempted murder — charges that were eventually dropped. Parks portrays the party leader poised and reclining with an open copy of the posthumously published *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in his lap. Parks discussed with Cleaver the persecution and recent murders of Black Panther members. In his *Life* essay, Parks wrote, “Somewhere in our history of hatred and death for one another, there must be an even greater place for courage and love.”

Alberto Giacometti, Paris, 1951

While assigned to the Paris bureau of *Life*, Parks photographed a number of artists in their studios. This composition intermingles the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, head bowed to light a cigarette, amid two of his skeletal sculptures. At center, a thin figure inclines precariously toward the artist; at left, an eerie disembodied hand reaches out in his direction. Following the horrors of World War II, Giacometti began making the elongated cast bronze sculptures of the human figure for which he is best known. With their haunting, emaciated forms and anguished expressions, they are seen as metaphors for the human condition in the aftermath of the war.

Washington, D.C. Marian Anderson broadcasting a Negro spiritual at the dedication of a mural installed in the United States Department of the Interior building, commemorating the outdoor concert which she gave at the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow her to sing in Constitution Hall, January 1943, printed later

Made soon after Parks arrived in Washington, DC, this photograph shows the celebrated opera singer Marian Anderson performing at the Department of the Interior. The performance marked the dedication of a mural commemorating her historic concert four years earlier at the Lincoln Memorial. Parks's photograph looks up at Anderson with her hands clasped as she sings a Black spiritual — a vantage point that alludes to her monumental accomplishment and fortitude in breaking barriers for performers of color. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, who arranged for Anderson to perform at this dedication and at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, can be seen in the background.