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*American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942; Photograph by Gordon Parks
Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.*

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Zoom in on the USA

The Life of Gordon Parks

Even from birth, Gordon Parks defied the odds. He was stillborn, with no heartbeat, and he had been declared dead by the family doctor when another doctor in the room had an idea. The other doctor immersed the newborn in cold water, which shocked his heart and caused it to start beating again. The baby was named Gordon, after the doctor who had saved his life.

Gordon Parks is a world-renowned photographer, writer, composer, and filmmaker who played a key role in documenting the segregation of the American South in the 1940s, as well as capturing the spirit of activism and humanitarianism that prevailed during the mid-twentieth century in the United States. He was born into poverty in Fort Scott, Kansas on November 30, 1912 as the fifteenth and youngest child of Sarah and Jackson Parks. While growing up, he often experienced discrimination and segrega-

tion in his school and community. Gordon Parks and the rest of the African American students at his high school were not allowed to participate in sports and activities because of their race, and they were discouraged from pursuing higher education. He left home at age 14 after his mother died, living with relatives for a short time before setting off on his own. He worked odd jobs to support himself before deciding to become a photographer after seeing pictures of migrant workers in a magazine. He stated in an



Nursemaid's Kerchief by Lilly Daché, New York, New York, 1952; Photograph by Gordon Parks
Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

interview in 1999, "I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs. I knew at that point I had to have a camera."

Gordon Parks bought his first camera in a pawnshop at age 25 and taught himself how to use it. Much of his early work was focused on fashion photography. His work soon caught the eye of Marva Louis, wife of boxing champion Joe Louis, who encouraged Parks to move to Chicago to further his career. He began a portrait business that catered to society women and started to also photograph the inner city and ghetto of Chicago. These photographs of African Americans and their experiences throughout the city helped him win the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to work for the Farm Security Administration in 1941. It was during this fellowship that he took many of his most famous photos, like "American Gothic." When the Farm Security Administration closed in 1943, Parks became a freelance photographer, mixing his work with fashion magazines with his passion for documenting life in the inner city. His photo essay of a Harlem gang leader won him widespread fame and a position as the first African American staff writer and photographer for *Life* magazine, which was the most prestigious photojournalism magazine in the world at that time. He stayed in his position at *Life* magazine for 20 years, documenting celebrities, sports figures, and fashion models, as well as African American leaders like Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Muhammad Ali.

Gordon Parks was married and divorced three times. He was also romantically linked to railroad heiress and designer Gloria Vanderbilt, and they later became lifelong friends. Parks had four children: Gordon, Jr., David, Leslie, and Toni (Parks-Parsons). His oldest son, Gordon Parks, Jr., who was also a filmmaker, died tragically in a plane crash in 1979 in Kenya while traveling to make a film.

Parks wrote many books, but perhaps the most famous was his autobiography *The Learning Tree*. In 1969, he became the first African American to write and direct a Hollywood feature film when he adapted *The Learning Tree* for the screen. He also directed the immensely successful detective film *Shaft* and its sequel. In addition to film and photography, Parks was also a musician and composer. His song "No Love" was performed during a national radio broadcast by Larry Funk and his orchestra during the 1930s. He was also a co-founder of *Essence* magazine and held a position as its editorial director during its first three years of publication.

Gordon Parks continued working until his death from cancer at age 93 on March 7, 2006. He is buried in his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas. The legacy of Gordon Parks lives on today through his iconic photographs, books, and films, which showcase his vital work as an advocate and documentarian for the Civil Rights Movement.



Harlem Rooftops, Harlem, New York, 1948: Photograph by Gordon Parks
Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Ella Watson

Parks came to Washington on a fellowship program from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a foundation dedicated to research about the South. This foundation had a spe-

cial program dedicated to facilitating opportunities for African Americans in the field of visual arts. He joined the Farm Security Administration and started working under

Roy Stryker. For Parks, settling in Washington proved an ordeal. He came across injustice and segregation worse than that which he had known before, and his first impulse was to photograph “scenes of injustice and portraits of bigots.”

However, on the advice of Stryker he started looking into documentaries of other renowned photographers and soon abandoned the idea. He decided to show victims instead of perpetrators. While on a search for a topic for his first big project, he was prompted by Stryker to talk to a charwoman who worked in the building. “Go have a talk with her,” he said, “See what she has to say about life and things.”

This is how Parks met Ella Watson, who played a vital role in the success of his career in photography. She told him the sad story of her life. She was left alone after her mother died and her father was killed by a lynch mob. She married, but her husband was accidentally shot to death two days before their daughter was born. Her daughter gave birth to two children, but died at the age of 18. At the time that Parks met Watson, she lived with her grandchildren, and her adopted daughter. In order to go to work at the FSA, she had to leave the children under her neighbors’ care.



Ella Watson with Her Grandchildren, Washington, D.C., 1942; Photograph by Gordon Parks Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Flavio

Gordon Parks traveled to Brazil in 1961, intending to document extreme poverty in the slums of Rio de Janeiro for Life magazine. In the Catacumba favela, which was a slum on the outer edge of the city, Parks met twelve-year-old Flavio da Silva. He was the oldest of eight children, which meant he had the responsibility of taking care of his siblings while his parents struggled to

support the family by selling kerosene and bleach. Flavio also suffered from severe asthma, which made it difficult for him to attempt even simple tasks. When Parks described his first impression of Flavio, he said, “Death was all over him, in his sunken eyes, cheeks, and jaundiced coloring.” In a stunning photo essay entitled “Freedom’s

Fearful Foe: Poverty,” Parks captured the plight of the da Silva family with acute honesty. He painted a brutal picture of seven family members sleeping in one bed, inconsolable crying children, and, perhaps most hauntingly, the skeletal body of Flavio reclining after an asthma attack.

The readers of Life magazine were shocked by the photographs and soon began a campaign to raise money for the family. They succeeded in raising about \$30,000, and with the financial assistance of Life readers, the da Silva family was able to move out of their dilapidated dwelling and into a proper house. The money even benefited the rest of the favela by providing for the installation of a drainage system, a medical clinic, and more. Flavio was able to travel with Parks to the Children’s Asthma Research Institute in Denver to get treatment for his asthma. Gordon Parks documented Flavio’s journey and recovery in a second photo essay, which was published on July 21, 1961.

Flavio lived with a Portuguese family in Denver for two years during his treatment, learning English and at-

tending school in the US. He then returned to Brazil, where he struggled to readjust and longed to return to the United States. Flavio eventually got married, had two children, and worked as a security guard. Gordon Parks kept in touch with Flavio throughout his life, even visiting Brazil again to chronicle Flavio’s adult life in 1977. Though Flavio’s life largely returned to the poverty from which Gordon Parks tried to help him escape, Parks had no regrets about what he did. When asked about it, he said, “If I saw him tomorrow under the same conditions, I would do the whole thing over again.”

Parks often connected with the subjects of his photographs, and the experience of meeting Flavio took on a special meaning for him. Gordon Parks once told Flavio, “You provided me with a message to give to the rest of the world, one that I felt was perhaps the most important message I’ve ever delivered, about caring, about love, and about how one who is close to death has the courage to hold on and encourage other people to live.”



Untitled, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1961; Photograph by Gordon Parks, Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Photography Techniques

Gordon Parks did not graduate from a photography school before he started taking pictures. He bought his first camera at the age of 25, and taught himself how to use it, but he knew exactly why he wanted and needed to photograph. He hated racism, bigotry, and injustice towards the black population at the time and understood he had a role in fighting for equality. His camera became a weapon – a non-violent weapon for changing the social stage of America – a weapon which he, nevertheless used with caution and consideration. At the time when some black people resorted to violence to claim equal rights, others, like photographer Gordon Parks, made their appeal by exposing the evil, showing individual stories that depicted poverty and hardships of African Americans. The photographer hoped that showing these problems would finally bring a change. His awareness of the importance of visual journalism was very progressive, and certainly preceded the general outlook on journalism at this time. Back in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s Gordon Parks applied the motto of every photographer today: “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

An important influence and the person who shaped Parks as a photographer, was Roy Stryker, the head of documentary photography in the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Stryker realized that Parks was able to dig deeper into the problems of the black community than white photographers. Not only was he able to come much closer to the heart of the matter based on trust generated by his skin color, but his sensitivity and consideration guaranteed objectivism and unbiased approach. It was Stryker who gave Parks an idea of how to make his first photo essay about a charwoman at the FSA building, Ella Watson. The resulting series of photos, which included Parks’s photo of Watson entitled “American Gothic” (named after the famous painting by Grant Wood that it resembles), launched his career as a photographer.

In Gordon Parks’s photographs of people, both famous celebrities like Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, or Ingrid Bergman and common people like the above mentioned Ella Watson, a poor Rio de Janeiro twelve-year-old named Flavio, and many others, the viewer perceives the good relations that the photographer was able to establish with his models. They trusted him and felt at ease with him and his camera, which is a distinct feature of his portraits.

Gordon Parks is a master of creating moods. The black and white photography of his early photographs enhances the thoughtfulness, despair, and poverty that he so masterfully depicts on his models’ faces.

Room arrangement and lighting were important for Parks in preparing the set for his indoor photographs. He also liked including mirrors that would reflect models as well as make the surroundings mysterious, sometimes ambiguous and symbolic. In group photos he liked to arrange the space in such a way that his characters would fill the entire room, which suggested not only their different roles inside the house but also mutual relationships. He liked to place all generations within this space and, if some were absent, he would make sure their portraits were displayed on a table or a dresser.

In appreciation of his contributions in the field of photography, as well as film, books, and music, Gordon Parks received hundreds of awards, including the National Medal of Arts (1988), the Jackie Robinson Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, and numerous honorary doctorates from American universities. He was inducted into the International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum in 2002. In 2006, the Gordon Parks Foundation was founded to conduct research about his life and work.



Mary Machado, Mother of Isabell Lopez, and Family, Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1943; Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

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Gordon Parks's Famous Quotes

"The guy who takes a chance, who walks the line between the known and unknown, who is unafraid of failure, will succeed."

"If you don't have anything to say, your photographs aren't going to say much."

"Nothing came easy. I was just born with a need to explore every part of my mind. And with long searching and hard work, I became devoted to my restlessness."

"I feel it is the heart, not the eye, that should determine the content of the photograph. What the eye sees is its own. What the heart can perceive is a very different matter."

"I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty."

"I suffered evils, but without allowing them to rob me of the freedom to expand."

"There's another horizon out there, one more horizon that you have to make for yourself and let other people discover it, and someone else will take it further on, you know."

"Enthusiasm is the electricity of life. How do you get it? You act enthusiastic until you make it a habit."

"The subject matter is so much more important than the photographer."

"I've been asked if I think there will ever come a time when all people come together. I would like to think there will. All we can do is hope and dream and work toward that end. And that's what I've tried to do all my life."

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With his "American Gothic" looking over his shoulder, photographer Gordon Parks gestures while speaking at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington Tuesday Sept. 9, 1997 during the opening of an exhibit of his works entitled "Half Past Autumn." Photo: AP Images