

GORDON PARKS (1926-2006)

Gordon Parks was one of the seminal figures of twentieth century photography. A humanitarian with a deep commitment to social justice, he left behind a body of work that documents many of the most important aspects of American culture from the early 1940s up until his death in 2006, with a focus on race relations, poverty, Civil Rights, and urban life. In addition, Parks was also a celebrated composer, author, and filmmaker who interacted with many of the most prominent people of his era—from politicians and artists to celebrities and athletes.

Born into poverty and segregation in Kansas in 1912, Parks was drawn to photography as a young man when he saw images of migrant workers published in a magazine. After buying a camera at a pawnshop, he taught himself how to use it and despite his lack of professional training, he found employment with the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.), which was then chronicling the nation's social conditions. Parks quickly developed a style that would make him one of the most celebrated photographers of his age, allowing him to break the color line in professional photography while creating remarkably expressive images that consistently explored the social and economic impact of racism.

When the F.S.A. closed in 1943, Parks became a freelance photographer, balancing work for fashion magazines with his passion for documenting humanitarian issues. His 1948 photo essay on the life of a Harlem gang leader won him widespread acclaim and a position as the first African American staff photographer and writer for Life Magazine, then by far the most prominent photojournalist publication in the world. Parks would remain at Life Magazine for two decades, chronicling subjects related to racism and poverty, as well as taking memorable pictures of celebrities and politicians (including Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael). His most famous images, such as *Emerging Man*, 1952, and *American Gothic*, 1942, capture the essence of activism and humanitarianism in mid-twentieth century America and have become iconic images, defining their era for later generations. They also rallied support for the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, for which Parks himself was a tireless advocate as well as a documentarian.

Parks spent much of the last three decades of his life expanding his style, conducting experiments with color photography. He continued working up until his death in 2006, winning numerous awards, including the National Medal of Arts in 1988, and over fifty honorary doctorates. He was also a noted composer and author, and in 1969, became the first African American to write and direct a Hollywood feature film based on his bestselling novel *The Learning Tree*. This was followed in 1971 by the hugely successful motion picture *Shaft*. The core of his accomplishment,

JACKSON FINE ART

ATLANTA

however, remains his photography the scope, quality, and enduring national significance of which is reflected throughout the Collection. According to Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Research Center at Harvard University, "Gordon Parks is the most important black photographer in the history of photojournalism. Long after the events that he photographed have been forgotten, his images will remain with us, testaments to the genius of his art, transcending time, place and subject matter."

Films

- *Flavio*, 1964. Director and screenplay
- *Diary of a Harlem Family*, 1968.. Narrator, still photography.
- *The World of Piri Thomas*, 1968. 16mm. Director
- *The Learning Tree*, 1969. 35mm. Director, producer, screenplay, music.
- *Shaft*, 1971. 35mm. Director
- *Shaft's Big Score!* 1972. 35mm. Director
- *The Super Cops*, 1974. 35mm. Director
- *Leadbelly*, 1976 35mm. Director
- *Solomon Northrup's Odyssey*, 1984. 16mm, made for TV. Director, screenplay.
- *Moments Without Proper Names*, 1987. 16mm. Director, screenplay, music.

Books

- *Flash Photography*, NY: Grosset and Dunlap. 1947
- *Camera Portraits: Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture*, NY: F. Watts. 1948
- *The Learning Tree*, NY: Harper and Row. 1963
- *A Choice of Weapons*, NY: Harper and Row. 1966
- *Gordon Parks: A Poet and His Camera*, NY: Viking Press. 1968
- *Born Black*, Philadelphia: Lippincott. 1971
- *Gordon Parks: In Love*, Philadelphia: Lippincott. 1971
- *Gordon Parks: Whispers of Intimate Things*, NY: Viking Press. 1971
- *Moments Without Proper Names*, NY: Viking Press. 1975
- *Flavio*, NY: W.W. Norton. 1978
- *To Smile in Autumn*, NY: W.W. Norton. 1979
- *Shannon*, Boston: Little, Brown. 1981
- *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography*, NY: Doubleday. 1990
- *Arias of Silence*, Boston: Bulfinch Press. 1994
- *Glimpses Toward Infinity*, Boston: Little, Brown. 1996
- *Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective*, Boston: Bulfinch Press. 1997
- *A Star for Noon: An Homage to Women in Images, Poetry, and Music*, Bulfinch. 2000
- *The Sun Stalker*, Ruder-Finn Press. 2003
- *Eyes With Winged Thoughts*, Atria. 2005
- *A Hungry Heart*, Washington Square Press. 2005