

## The Understated Mastery of Gordon Parks

Abby Schultz | 15 June 2020



At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956  
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

**Editor's note:** The annual *Penta Changemaker's* issue featuring Gordon Parks on the cover was produced in the weeks prior to the racial injustice protests witnessed across the U.S. and around the world. It's clear that the conversations Parks initiated with his poignant photographs documenting the black community's struggle for civil rights in the U.S. are continuing today.

Earlier this year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired 56 photographs from the 1957 Gordon Parks essay for *Life* magazine, "The Atmosphere of Crime," including 55 limited-edition prints purchased from the Gordon Parks Foundation and a single black-and-white gelatin silver print the foundation gave to the museum.

The gift, *Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1957*—a portrait of a man's left hand holding a cigarette through prison bars while the right one grasps the bars below—was apt considering Parks himself had gifted a companion photograph to MoMA in 1993. *Raiding Detectives, Chicago, Illinois, 1957* is a dramatic image

of two white, plainclothes detectives kicking down a door in a dimly lit, scuffed hallway of an apartment building. Cropped, color images of both pictures appeared in the Sept. 9, 1957, *Life* essay, telling a nuanced story of lives intertwined with crime and criminality through blurred nighttime images, silhouettes, and street scenes.

MoMA curator Sarah Meister was drawn to this particular body of Parks' work because of its connection to *Raiding Detectives*, but also because "The Atmosphere of Crime"—although published more than 60 years ago—"speaks to our contemporary moment," and "adds a historical marker against which we can examine and challenge where we are today."

Parks, who died in 2006 at age 93, joined *Life* in 1948, becoming the first African-American photographer in the magazine's history. His understated mastery in evoking the humanity of everyday people navigating their lives, often amid poverty and racism, told powerful stories, revealing truths visible in America seven decades later.

This connection to the present was made by the rapper Kendrick Lamar in 2017, when he drew from several iconic images by Parks, bringing to life photos of three children—two black, one white—with one holding a toy gun, and of a boy balancing a "June bug" tied to a string on his forehead, in the dreamy video for his song "ELEMENT."



Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1957  
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Parks' understated revelations of the black experience also speak to why rapper Kasseem Dean (Swizz Beatz) , and his wife, Alicia Keys, began working with the Gordon Parks Foundation not long after Keys was one of the organization's annual gala honorees in 2012 (a distinction Dean received a year later). "They said, 'We want to build the largest collection of Gordon Parks photographs to be part of our culture,'" says Peter W. Kunhardt Jr., the foundation's executive director.

The couple acquired 85 photographs, creating the largest private collection of Parks' work. These are images that spoke personally to the Deans, but they are also images the couple is committed to sharing through public exhibitions—a wish of the foundation's.

Kunhardt has a special connection to Parks, who, he recalls, would sign notes "Love, Uncle Gordon" to him when he was a boy growing up in Westchester, N.Y. Parks and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., his grand-father, and a former managing editor of *Life*, were "nearly inseparable" until they both died, two weeks apart, in March 2006.

The younger Kunhardt remembers Parks showing up in a Jaguar, smoking his pipe, "always looking so regal," and telling stories of the making of *Shaft*, the groundbreaking 1971 film he directed.

The foundation, established at Parks' death, began by gathering existing material Parks had produced in his lifetime, and, over the course of several years, working with archivists to organize tens of thousands of negatives and prints, many of which hadn't been widely seen in the photographer's lifetime.



Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, Mobile, Alabama, 1956  
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Today, Kunhardt oversees Parks' legacy as a filmmaker as well as a photographer, painter, poet, and writer. In 2012, six years after Parks' death, the German publisher Steidl, along with the foundation, produced a five-volume boxed set edition—*Gordon Parks: Collected Works*—designed to be a road map for scholars to view the photographer's work in depth, Kunhardt says.

Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, was among the first to dig through the volume before deciding to curate an exhibition on the Fontenelle family in Harlem—the focus of a sad and disturbing photo essay. Life magazine's March 8, 1968, cover featured an image of a 5-year-old girl, a tear streaking down her face, beginning a story, with text written by Parks, that unmasked the distress of ghetto life through Norman Fontenelle, a jobless British West Indies immigrant, and his wife, Bessie, who didn't have the money to provide heat or food for their nine children.

Golden's decision to study a single body of work for the museum's exhibition instead of offering up a retrospective proved inspiring, opening the door to "deep, not wide," explorations of the many facets of Parks' work, Kunhardt says. Ever since, the foundation has worked with one museum a year—MoMA being the most recent—to develop an exhibition focused on a different aspect of Parks' career, an approach that has led to new scholarship, he says.

The foundation also wanted to ensure Parks was seen as an artist, not simply a documentary photographer, so it approached noted contemporary art dealers including the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York—which has worked with stellar African-American contemporary artists for decades—and the Alison Jacques Gallery in London, which has represented photographer Robert Mapplethorpe for 20 years. "It gives Gordon this legitimacy that he fits within the canon of important 20th-century art," Kunhardt says.

Alison Jacques knew Parks more for his films and writing, including his semiautobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree*, but was "blown away" by his photographic work. "There's that push and pull between the way he shoots, which was quite incredible, and the really brutal subject matter at times," Jacques says.



Untitled, Alabama, 1956

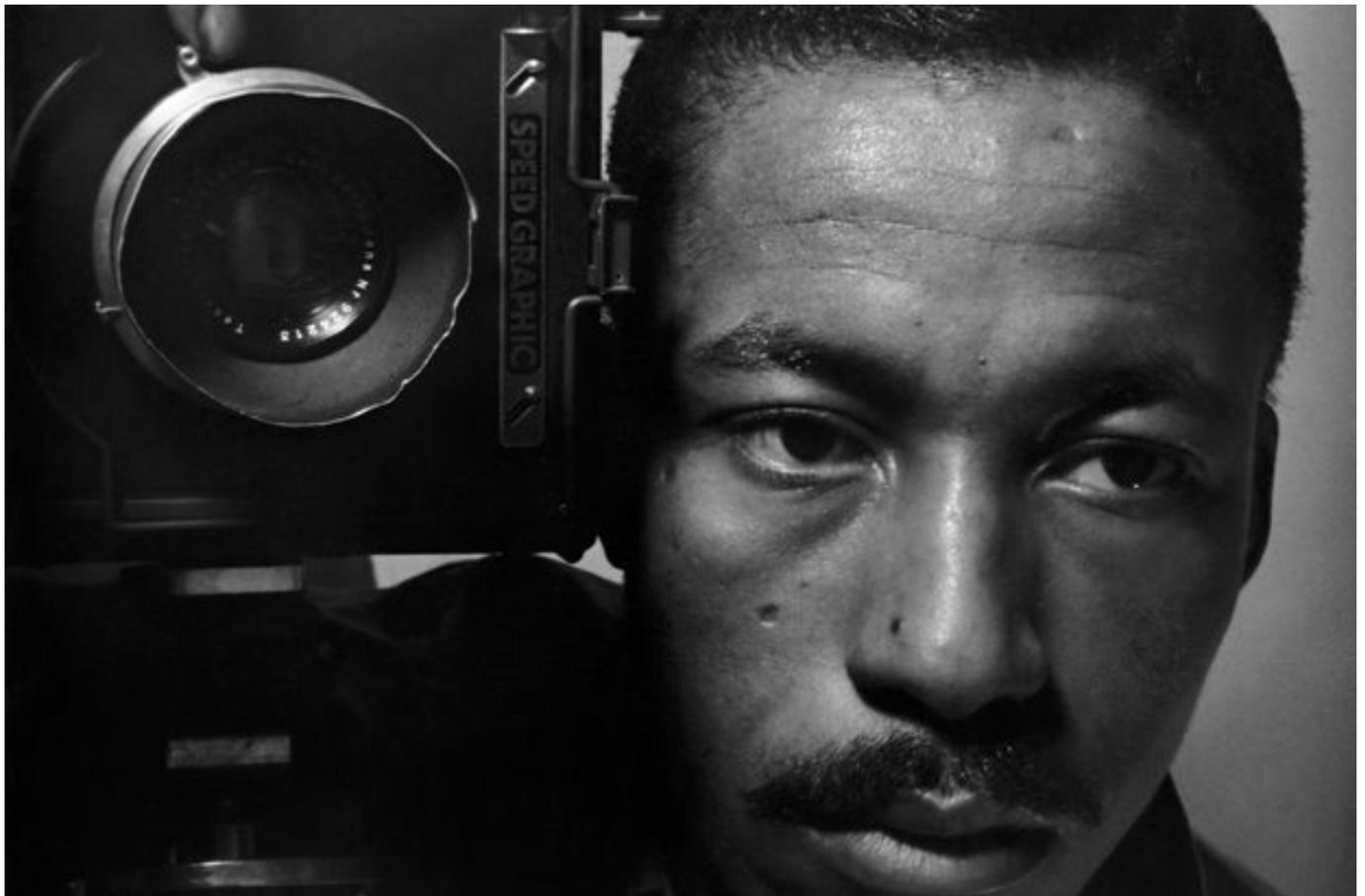
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

The gallery is planning an exhibition later this year featuring three of Parks' stories: "Segregation in the South," 1956, "Black Muslims," 1963, and "Muhammad Ali," 1966 to 1970.

Parks' photographs range in price from \$12,500 to \$70,000, including lifetime prints—made when Parks was alive—and new limited edition prints, which usually are made in editions of 15, 10, or seven, according to the foundation. Sales support the Gordon Parks Arts & Social Justice Fund, which provides annual scholarships, fellowships, and prizes to students and artists across the country.

Bob Rennie, owner of a marketing real estate firm in Vancouver, has worked with Shainman for years on his collection, including in-depth assemblages of works by major African-American artists, such as Kerry James Marshall and Lorna Simpson. Rennie recently began adding Parks, recognizing a symbiosis in his subtle, documentary approach to other artists he collects.

One photograph in Rennie's collection is from Parks' "Segregation" series, an image of a "beautiful family, beautifully dressed," Rennie says. As a girl drinks from a "colored-only" fountain, the sign is obscured, leaving visible the "white-only" sign on the next fountain. "It's a poignant way to get [a] message across without screaming social injustice," Rennie says. "We think we've moved a long way, and sometimes we just haven't. His works bring out that conversation."



Untitled, 1941

Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

## The Life of Gordon Parks

### **Nov. 30, 1912**

Born Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks in Fort Scott, Kan., the youngest of 15 children

### **1933**

Teaches himself to use a camera

### **1940**

Works as photographer for various newspapers and department stores. Moves to Chicago and begins exhibiting work.

### **1942**

Wins the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship with no professional training

### **1942**

Lands a photography position with the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C., and chronicles the nation's social conditions. Takes his famous portrait of Ella Watson, *American Gothic*

### **1943**

Moves to the Office of War Information (OWI) and continues to develop his signature style. Photographs Tuskegee Airmen and documents life in Harlem

### **1944**

Leaves the OWI to work for the Standard Oil Company's photo documentary project

### **1948**

His November photo essay in Life magazine on the life of a Harlem gang leader wins acclaim. Becomes the first African-American staff photographer and writer for Life magazine

### **1952**

Photographs *Invisible Man* series

### **1950s & '60s**

Through various Life magazine assignments, documents in the South, crime in the U.S., and celebrates congregations of faith

### **1960s**

His body of work includes a portrait series of notable figures such as Muhammad Ali, Malcom X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Stokely Carmichael

### **1969**

Becomes the first African-American to write and direct a major feature film, *The Learning Tree*, based on his semiautobiographical novel

### **1971**

Directs *Shaft*, a box-office success

### **1988**

Awarded the National Medal of the Arts

**1989**

Produces, directs, and composes the music for a ballet called *Martin*, for the late Martin Luther King Jr.

**2006**

Dies at his home in New York City at age 93