



Release Date: May 25, 2018

First Exhibition to Chronicle Formative Beginning of Gordon Parks's Career Premieres at the National Gallery of Art on November 4, 2018



Gordon Parks, *Trapped in abandoned building by a rival gang on street, Red Jackson ponders his next move*, 1948, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (The Gordon Parks Collection)

Washington, DC—Within just a decade, Gordon Parks (1912–2006) grew from a self-taught portrait photographer and photojournalist in Saint Paul and Chicago to a visionary professional working in New York for *Ebony* and *Glamour*, before becoming the first African American photographer at *Life* magazine in 1949. For the first time this lesser-known yet incredibly formative period of Parks's long and illustrious career is the subject of an exhibition, ***Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950***. On view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from November 4, 2018, through February 18, 2019, the traveling exhibition provides a detailed look at Parks's early

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evolution through some 150 photographs, as well as rare magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, and books. It also demonstrates how Parks influenced and was inspired by a network of creative and intellectual figures—including Charles White, Roy Stryker, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. A fully illustrated catalog, produced and published by the Gordon Parks Foundation and Steidl in association with the Gallery, features extensive new research and many previously unpublished images.

"While Gordon Parks's varied career and influential oeuvre have been well noted and cataloged, the foundational first decade of his life as a photographer has never before been explored in such detail as it is in this rich exhibition and volume," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful to the Gordon Parks Foundation for its collaboration in sharing a crucial chapter in the life of the pioneering photographer, including his time here in Washington. And it is a pleasure to work once again with Bank of America. They have been a consistent supporter of the Gallery and indeed many arts organizations around the world. This kind of support is important in helping nonprofit museums serve the public."

"***Gordon Parks: The New Tide*** grew from an extensive dialogue between the National Gallery of Art and the Gordon Parks Foundation. Established in 2007 to preserve and promote his work and legacy, the Foundation has systematically made it possible to study his life and art through collaborations with museums," said Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., executive director, the Gordon Parks Foundation. "As this exhibition shows, his photographs from the 1940s are the foundation of his storied career and vision. For Parks, creativity brought with it a fuller, more poignant understanding of humanity that is now our responsibility to share."

### **Exhibition Support**

Bank of America is a proud sponsor of *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*. Generous support is also kindly provided by the Trellis Fund. Additional support comes from The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

### **Exhibition Organization and Curator**

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation.

The exhibition is curated by Philip Brookman, consulting curator, department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

### **Exhibition Tour**

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National Gallery of Art, Washington, November 4, 2018–February 18, 2019

The Cleveland Museum of Art, March 23–June 16, 2019

Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, August 31–December 29, 2019

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, February 1–April 26, 2020

### **Gordon Parks (Pre-1940)**

Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks was born on November 30, 1912, in the segregated town of Fort Scott, Kansas, the youngest of his father's 15 children. In 1928, honoring his mother's dying wish, Parks left Kansas and moved north to Saint Paul, Minnesota, to live with his sister Maggie Lee. The transition was difficult; he attended high school only intermittently, held a series of odd jobs, and rebelled against Maggie Lee's abusive husband. As a consequence, he spent the bitter winter homeless, forced to ride streetcars to stay warm. When his father and sisters Lillian and Cora followed him north the next year, Parks became more settled. He played basketball, composed music, and found love with Sally Alvis, who would become his first wife in 1933. At this time Parks was one of the first to enroll in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). After moving around New York and New Jersey with the CCC, Parks and Sally returned to Minneapolis in 1934 to begin a family.

In 1936 Parks found more stability working as a waiter on the Northern Pacific Railway's North Coast Limited, a luxurious train that ran between Chicago, Saint Paul, and Seattle. In August 1937 a fellow waiter gave him a magazine that would change the course of his life. Parks recalled later that it featured a photo story on the Dust Bowl with pictures by such photographers as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein. Combined with visits to the Art Institute of Chicago and a viewing of the newsreel *Bombing of U.S.S. Panay*, that story convinced Parks that photography might be a tool he could use to help fight the oppression he had experienced for much of his life. Parks soon bought his first camera, a Voigtländer Brilliant, which he later called his "choice of weapons." He began studying photography manuals and magazines, had his first exhibit in the window of a Minneapolis Eastman Kodak store, and had his first published photograph in the *St. Paul Recorder* on March 25, 1938. Purchasing a German Contax, Parks began to make a name for himself by photographing and publishing portraits of glamorous women. After working briefly as staff photographer for the *Recorder*, in September 1939 Parks returned to working for the railroad, this time as a porter traveling between the Twin Cities and Chicago. His next break came when he convinced a local women's wear shop to allow him to take fashion pictures for its displays. In November, he met Marva Louis, wife of boxer Joe Louis, who admired these pictures and offered him help in finding clients in Chicago.

### **Exhibition Highlights**

***Gordon Parks: The New Tide*** is divided into five sections. The first, *A Choice of Weapons (1940–1942)*, opens with some of the elegant society portraits that established Parks's career as a professional photographer in Saint Paul and Minneapolis. After moving with his wife and two children

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to Chicago in early 1941, Parks was given access to studio space and a darkroom in the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC). Recently established with support from the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, the SSCAC was the epicenter of Chicago's African American art scene. In addition to earning a decent living by taking portraits of the city's middle- and upper-class African American community, Parks documented SSCAC activities, including its May 1941 dedication with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in attendance. He developed relationships with other artists—many who taught at the center—such as Eldzier Cortor, Margaret Taylor Burroughs, and Charles White. The latter, a painter, encouraged Parks to take his camera onto the streets to document the surrounding South Side neighborhood. This section also includes Parks's portraits of influential figures, such as SSCAC director Peter Pollack, renowned poet and playwright Langston Hughes, philosophy professor and architect of the New Negro movement Alain Locke, and opera singer Todd Duncan.

In January 1942 Parks applied to the Julius Rosenwald Fund for a fellowship, with the ambitious objective of spending a year "portraying the Negro in his intellectual, professional, educational, social, farm, and urban life." In April, Parks was awarded the first Rosenwald Fellowship given to a photographer and offered the opportunity to work with Roy Emerson Stryker at the legendary Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in Washington, DC. The second section of the exhibition, *Government Work (1942)*, features photographs created during his short time with the FSA. Upon Parks's arrival in May, Stryker sent him into the segregated city without his camera, where he encountered a level of discrimination in theaters, stores, and restaurants that he found shocking. Only after studying the work of other FSA photographers and writing about how to combat this prejudice with his camera was Parks given his first photographic assignment. As one part of a detailed effort by the government to garner needed African American support for the war effort, Parks was tasked with photographing the Frederick Douglass Dwellings—quality public housing recently constructed in DC's Anacostia neighborhood for black defense workers.

While Parks made promotional pictures of federal efforts to improve conditions for African Americans, he also documented the continuing effects of racism in DC. In July he photographed Ella Watson, a cleaning woman who worked for the government, and learned about the bigotry that defined her experiences. His now iconic portrait, *Washington, D.C. Government charwoman*, reveals her dignity and upright character, as she stands with mop and broom in front of an American flag. Watson and her family then became the subject of an extended series that chronicled their lives at home, work, and church, as well as in their neighborhood. Here Parks successfully fused his skills as a portrait photographer with the principles of social documentary practice that he was learning at the FSA. Selections from this series, including a number of original FSA file prints on loan from the Library of Congress, are on view in the exhibition.

The third section, *The Home Front*, presents examples of Parks's projects for the Office of War Information (OWI), where FSA photographers were moved in fall 1942. One on southwest DC's tenements shows children living in substandard housing slated for removal. He also made portraits of

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Wright, the singer Marian Anderson, and the educator Mary McLeod Bethune. In spring 1943 Parks photographed fishermen in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the Fulton Fish Market in New York City, part of a series on food production, a vital national concern in the midst of World War II. Turning his camera on the streets of Harlem later that summer, he made a little-known series on children (some of which are also included in the exhibition). In September, Parks traveled to Michigan to photograph one of the first fighter groups of African American pilots, the 332nd. Denied the opportunity to travel with the 332nd on its overseas deployment in December, Parks ended his work for the government and permanently relocated to New York.

The following section, *Standard Oil (1944–1948)*, features the remarkable, rarely seen, work Parks produced for Stryker in a new role at Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)(SONJ). Blamed for shortages during the war, the company had launched a major public relations campaign that attempted to humanize it. Commissioned to photograph the "face of oil," Parks traversed the Northeast of the United States and parts of Canada. Over four and a half years, he captured the gritty world of oil production, photographing coal workers, roughnecks, refinery operators, pipefitters, railroad workers, grease makers, drilling crews, and miners, as well as the cities, towns, schools, shops, farms, and transportation networks that depended on petroleum. Highlights of this section include his striking portraits of gold miners in Canada's Northwest Territories.

The final section of the exhibition, *Mass Media (1945–1950)*, focuses on Parks's photography for major fashion and lifestyle magazines, including *Ebony*, *Circuit's Smart Woman*, and *Glamour*, in addition to his freelance work and early photo essays for *Life*. Ralph Ellison, the renowned author of *Invisible Man*, collaborated with Parks in 1948 on "Harlem is Nowhere," an article that connects poverty, segregation, and mental health. Though never published as intended, their collaboration brought Parks back onto Harlem's streets and resulted in some of his most insightful pictures from that time. His attention to the prevalence of gang warfare in Harlem led him to portray 17-year-old gang leader Red Jackson, whose struggles with discrimination and unemployment reminded Parks of his own teenage years. *Life* published "Harlem Gang Leader" in November 1948 and its success validated Parks's defining role in picturing and representing black lives during the 1940s. In February 1949 he was hired as the first African American photographer for *Life*. In his first two years there, his assignments ranged from photographing couture fashion in Paris and actress Ingrid Bergman on the set of the film *Stromboli*, to documenting segregation, street life, and poverty from Puerto Rico and Fort Scott to Paris and Portugal.

### **Exhibition Catalog**

A fully illustrated catalog, produced and published by the Gordon Parks Foundation and Steidl in association with the Gallery accompanies the exhibition. The catalog features extensive new research and an illustrated timeline of Parks's origins and early career, as well as reproductions of all the photographs in the exhibition (some previously unpublished) and a selection of ephemera related to

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Parks's early career. It also presents essays by exhibition curator Philip Brookman; Sarah Lewis, assistant professor, department of history of art and architecture and department of African and African American studies, Harvard University; Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett professor of art and art history, Duke University; Deborah Willis, university professor and chair, department of photography and imaging, Tisch School of the Arts, and director, Institute of African American Affairs / Center for Black Visual Culture, at New York University; and Maurice Berger, research professor and chief curator, Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County. The catalog is available in hardcover at [shop.nga.gov](http://shop.nga.gov), or by calling (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; faxing (202) 789-3047; or emailing [mailorder@nga.gov](mailto:mailorder@nga.gov).

## **Related Programs**

### **Lecture**

*Introduction to the Exhibition—Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*

November 18, 2:00 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

Philip Brookman, exhibition curator

A signing of the exhibition catalog follows.

### **Concert**

*Flophouse Crew*

November 4, 3:30 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

Music by Gordon Parks

### **Films**

*Retrospective of Films by Gordon Parks and Related Subjects*

January–February 2019

A renowned photographer, Parks was also the first African American director of a major Hollywood film, *The Learning Tree* (1969). In celebration of *Gordon Parks: The New Tide*, the Gallery is presenting a retrospective of his work in film, as well as a selection of other films related to the exhibition.

### **Press Contact:**

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## **General Information**

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open

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Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt), Twitter at [www.twitter.com/ngadc](http://www.twitter.com/ngadc), and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

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For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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