

UNCOVERING AMERICA

National Gallery of Art

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Gordon Parks Photography



Gordon Parks, *Self-Portrait*, 1941, gelatin silver print, 50.8 × 40.64 cm (20 × 16 in.), Private Collection. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

How does Gordon Parks use photography to address inequities in the United States?

How do Gordon Parks's images capture the intersections of art, race, class, and politics across the United States?

What do photographs in general—and Gordon Parks's photographs more specifically—tell us about the American Dream?

"A photographer can be a storyteller. Images of experience captured on film, when put together like words, can weave tales of feeling and emotion as bold as literature.... [Photographers] bring together fact and fiction, experience, imagination, and feelings in a visual dialogue that has enormous impact on how we observe and relate to the external world and our internal selves." —Philip Brookman, "Unlocked Doors: Gordon Parks at the Crossroads," *Gordon Parks: Half Past Autumn*, 1997

What did you picture while reading this quote?

Consider where you encounter photographs and images in your own life. What impact do they have on you?

There is perhaps no individual who embodies the power of photography more than Gordon Parks. Photographer, poet, musician, storyteller, activist—Gordon Parks shaped the times in which he lived as much as he was shaped by them. Though his career as a photographer spanned six decades, it is the period from 1940 to 1950, the focus of the exhibition *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*, that most significantly defined his point of view as an African American artist and documenter of American life at the dawn of the modern civil rights movement.

In 1937, while working as a waiter on the North Coast Limited passenger train, Parks saw magazines featuring Depression-era photographs—images like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant agricultural worker's family, Nipomo, California* that recorded the social and economic conditions of migrant farmers across the country. For Parks, images of dust bowl migrants reminded him of his own struggles and inspired him to purchase his first camera, a life-changing decision. He later recalled, "I was convinced of the power of a good picture."

During the first decade of his career, Parks, a self-taught photographer, captured the beauty, power, and stature of Chicago socialite Marva Louis; the spirituality of churchgoers in Washington, DC; and portraits of prominent African Americans like Richard Wright and Marian Anderson. But he would also use his camera to shine a light on the injustices faced by black Americans, showing the poverty, violence, and oppression that defined the decade from 1940 to 1950. In

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the midst of World War II, with the American military still segregated, photographs like *Washington, D.C., Government charwoman (American Gothic)* make a bold statement about the disparities between the promise and realities of the American Dream. When given the chance, Parks chose to “fight back” against the inequalities he witnessed; his choice of weapons was a camera.

The photographs in this image set speak to the power of Parks's voice as an artist. His images certainly serve as documents of specific moments in time; but individually and as a group they also reveal humanity, implore empathy, pose questions, provoke outrage, and even inspire activism. Though taken decades ago, Parks's photographs capture individuals and represent issues and themes that still resonate deeply with us today.

