

## Gordon Parks: Crossroads

The North Carolina Central University Art Museum in collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation, is proud to present Gordon Parks: Crossroads, a 45-photograph retrospective celebrating the life work of one of America's most accomplished 20<sup>th</sup> century artists. Photographer, poet, novelist, composer, musician and filmmaker, Gordon Parks (1912-2006) spent a lifetime shattering barriers in his pursuit of truth, beauty, social justice and artistic expression. The exhibition will run February 3 - April 11, 2008.

Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, the youngest of fifteen children of a tenant farmer. His parents were devout Methodists who, despite their extreme poverty, taught their children to value education and equality. He was fifteen when his mother died, whereupon he moved north to Minnesota and supported himself as a brothel piano player and big-band singer (two decades later, while in Paris, he would compose his first piano concerto). In 1938 Parks purchased his first camera at a pawn shop. He pursued his new passion with gusto: within months, despite his lack of formal training, his probing portraits of African-American women were exhibited in the windows of the Eastman Kodak store in Minneapolis.

Parks' initial influences in photography were the celebrated documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee who worked for the Farm Security Administration under the direction of Roy Stryker, documenting the debilitating depths of poverty that pervaded the country during the Great Depression. Parks became the first black photographer to join the FSA, and shortly thereafter made his signature image, "American Gothic," while on assignment in the nation's capital. He was in an angry state of mind when he made that photo, having experienced a day of Jim Crow in the restaurants and shops of Washington. Parks recalled the shoot: "It happened in one of the government's most sacred strongholds. I set up my camera for my first professional photograph and asked Ella [Watson] to stand before the American flag hanging from floor to ceiling, placed the mop in her one hand, a broom in the other, then instructed her to look into the lens."

Yet Parks' vision would not be confined to this one modality. Indeed, even while he pursued numerous hard-hitting documentary assignments for Stryker, he also accepted commissions in fashion and glamour photography, initially for Midwestern department stores, and soon for Vogue and Glamour magazine. "The camera is not meant to just show misery," he explained. "You can show beauty with it; you can do a lot of things. You can show things you like about the universe, things you hate about the universe. It's capable of doing both."

In 1949 Parks became the first black staff photographer at Life magazine, where he would remain on the masthead for a quarter century. With his first two photo-essays for

Life-on the gang wars of Harlem, and on the latest Paris collections-he announced his remarkable range. His intimate photo-essays on the Black Panthers, the nascent Black Muslim movement, and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death remain classics-"my sentiments lay in the heart of black fury sweeping the country," he later wrote-but equally classic were his extended photo-portraits of cultural icons as varied as Barbara Streisand, Langston Hughes, Alexander Calder, Ingrid Bergman, Duke Ellington and Muhammad Ali. "Success among whites never made Parks lose touch with black reality," Malcolm X wrote in his autobiography.

While at Life he continued to challenge stereotypes and break through society's-and his own-barriers. In the process of this exploration, Parks blossomed into one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's true Renaissance men. He authored four volumes of poetry. He helped found Essence magazine and served as its editorial director. In 1968 he became the first African-American to write, produce, direct, and score a major Hollywood film, *The Learning Tree*, based on his semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel. Its success led to plum directorial assignments, most famously *Shaft* and its sequels, one of MGM's top-grossing film franchises of the 1970's. Parks also directed an autobiographical film for PBS, *Moments Without Proper Names*, as well as authoring for autobiographical accounts-*A Choice of Weapons* (1966), *To Smile in Autumn* (1979), *Voices in the Mirror* (1990), and *Half Past Autumn* (1997)-the last of these being the catalog of a major retrospective organized by the Corcoran Gallery which traveled for three years. In 1971 Parks was awarded the NAACP's prestigious Springarn Medal for *Born Black*, his compilation of essays on prominent African-Americans. In 1989 he completed the score and the libretto and collaborated on the choreography for *Martin*, a ballet based on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., for which he later directed and narrated a film version for PBS. Among his other awards are the Jackie Robinson Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, the NAACP Hall of Fame Award, the National Medal of Arts, and-remarkably for a self-educated high-school drop-out-over 40 honorary university degrees.

All are welcome to North Carolina Central University Art Museum programming. The Museum is handicapped accessible and is free to the public. Group visits may be arranged by calling 530-6211, between 9:00 and 5:00 p.m.

Museum Hours: Tuesday through Friday: 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
Sunday: 2:00-5:00