Gordon Parks

“I chose my camera as a weapon against all the things I dislike about America: poverty, racism, discrimination”

Gordon Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas in 1912 to Sarah and Andrew Jackson Parks. He was the youngest child of 15 kids. Gordon attended an integrated high school, Mechanical Arts High School. Despite being integrated, Gordon still experienced racism at school such as not being allowed to participate in school sports or attend social events hosted by the school. At the age of 11, he experienced a near death experience due to racism when a group of young white boys threw him into the Marmaton River. A few years later when he was 14, his mother tragically passed away. As a result, Gordon was sent to live with his sister and her husband in St. Paul, Minnesota a year later. The arrangement didn’t even last a year before Gordon’s brother-in-law kicked him out of the house. At the age of 15, he was forced to start living on his own and provide for himself. For this reason, he would drop out of school and start working to take care of himself. Over the next few years, he held jobs as a busboy, pianist, worked with a big band jazz troupe, semi-professional basketball and football player, and the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps.

One of the last jobs Gordon Parks held prior to becoming a photographer, was a porter for Northern Pacific Railroad. While working on the railroad, he became fascinated with the photos he would find in magazines on the train. The work of the photographers from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) inspired him the most. In particular, a photo set of migrant workers taken by FSA photographers motivated him to buy his first camera from a pawn shop. He started honing his skills and decided that he would use his camera to capture things that displayed the issues he saw within America. While getting his first role of film developed his pictures impressed the clerk, who would encourage Gordon to work for a fashion magazine. Soon after, he would be given an opportunity by Marilyn Murphy to take fashion focused photos for her department store in St. Paul. It didn’t take long for Parks’ work to become recognized within the area. One day Marva Lewis, wife of Boxer Joe Lewis, observed Gordon’s photo and was thoroughly impressed. She would go on to convince Gordon and his wife to move to Chicago where Parks would have the opportunity to make money photographing wealthy women in the area. The opportunity provided the finances needed to survive and allowed Gordon’s photography skills to garner more attention. In addition to snapping photos for the wealthy, Gordon started working out of the Southside Community Arts Center (SSCAC). He was able to meet the likes of painter Charles White, sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, and writer Langston Hughes. These new connections with fellow artist inspired him to start capturing photos of the southside of Chicago. Gordon once stated “I chose my camera as a weapon against all the things I dislike about America: poverty, racism, discrimination”. These three things were abundant throughout the southside of Chicago and the photos that Gordon captured during this time would be used for his portfolio in a competition for the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, a fellowship program for young African Americans. The portfolio was strong enough for Gordon to win one of the coveted fellowships in 1942. After winning the Rosenwald fellowship, Gordon wrote to Roy Stryker of the FSA’s Historical Division and asked to join the division’s team as a photographer. The letter proved to be beneficial, and he was offered a role with the FSA just months after winning the fellowship.

Gordon moved his family to Washington, DC in 1942 to start his new role with the FSA. Unfortunately, a year later the FSA closed and the Historical Division was transferred to the Office of War Information (O.W.I). While with the OWI, Gordon worked photographing the 332d Fighter Group (Tuskegee Airman). The group would be called overseas to Italy in 1944 to help fight in WWII. Gordon decided to relocate to Harlem and look for freelance photography work. During this period, he would reunite with Roy Stryker, who was now working for the Standard Oil Company in New Jersey. Stryker was over the Standard Oil Company photo project and Gordon started doing freelance work for the project. Outside of the Standard Oil Company photo project, he would hold similar freelance positions for *Vogue, Glamour* and *Ebony* magazines. These opportunities helped Gordon display his versatility. On one hand, he had the ability to capture the poverty, racism, and discrimination that America would rather not be seen. On the other, he was able to capture some the most fashionable and elegant photographs for the elite. In 1948, he became the first African American staff photographer for *Life* magazine after his photo essay of a gang leader from Harlem helped earn him the opportunity with the magazine. The relationship between the two would last over two decades, 1948 to 1972. During his time with *Life*, Gordon was able to further show his versatility by capturing some of the most iconic photos for the magazine of the civil rights movement and its leaders such as Muhammad Ali, Malcom X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr, and Stokely Carmichael. While capturing iconic photos that were true to his initial purpose of capturing social wrongs, he was also able to capture photos the elite such as Gloria Vanderbilt, Glenn Gould, Duke Ellington, and Alberto Giacometti. While working at *Life* had its advantages, Parks was never a fan of not being able to control the entire narrative around his photos and was persistent about writing the captions for his photographs. That persistence would lead to Gordon’s next phase of his professional career.

While working at *Life,* Gordon became more fixed on telling his story in his words as time passed. Eventually, he decided to start working on a story based on upbringing in Kansas. The book would be published in 1963 and named *The Learning Tree.* The book received great critical claim and opened new doors within the writing world for Gordon. He would go on to write his first memoir, *A Choice of Weapons* in 1966. Then in 1968, he published *A Poet and His Camera* which was a book that combined his photographs with his poems. The success of *The Learning Tree* still loomed larger than each of those projects, and eventually Gordon was approached to bring the story to film. In 1969, *The Learning Tree* was released making Gordon the first African American to write and direct a major Hollywood studio feature film. Just like the book version, the film was a success and opened doors for him within the film industry. In 1970, Gordon helped found Essence magazine. The following year, his second film *Shaft* was released. The film was a major hit and ushered in a new genre of movies coined as blaxploitation. These films included African Americans playing lead roles in urban crime dramas similar to John Shaft in the film. The success of the film lead to its sequel, *Shaft’s Big Score,* the following year in 1972. Gordon looked to show his versatility with his 1974 release *The Super Cops*. Then in 1976 he released *Leadbelly* which would go on to be his least successful movie. The film would turn out to be Gordon’s last film, although he would produce films for television. He would spend the decade to continue writing books and music. In 1989, he wrote the music for the ballet *Martin*.

Gordon Parks would go on to pass away in 2006 but not before leaving behind a legacy of work that would inspire some the greatest artist of the 20th century. His photo essays for *Life,* critical acclaimed books, and the classic film *Shaft* illustrate just how wide Gordon’s talents knew no boundaries. Archives of his work can be found at universities, museums, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution. Spike Lee and John Singleton have both credited Gordon Parks for paving the pathway for their success. During a time in which social media was non-existent, the artistic documentation Gordon Parks provided proved to be critical for the civil right movements and African American history.

* I had a great sense of curiosity and a great sense of just wanting to achieve," he said. "I just forgot I was black and walked in and asked for a job and tried to be prepared for what I was asking for."
* <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/08/arts/design/gordon-parks-a-master-of-the-camera-dies-at-93.html>
* <https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/gordon-parks/biography\>
* <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0662953/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm>
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