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Art Review

'Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950' Review: Young Talent in Black and White

Early in his career, the photographer was portraying racism, reality—and fashion

by William Meyers
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Gordon Parks, 'Washington, D.C. Government charwoman,' July 1942. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C

Ella Watson dutifully stands her post at the entrance to “Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950,” at the National Gallery of Art. In the poster-size blowup of Parks's best-known image, Watson, an African-American charwoman for the federal government in Washington, holds her broom, straw head up, as if it were her staff of office. Her dress is secured at the waist with two buttons, but buttons are missing above the waist and the top is held by a pin, a sign of her limited means. She faces forward, her eyeglasses giving her an intelligent look. She is not staring directly at the camera, though; her eyes are shifted slightly to the left, perhaps because this unaccustomed attention is a bit unnerving. Behind her, out of focus but unmistakably recognizable, hangs an enormous American flag, symbol of the government that promises her equality, although it is 1942 and the nation's capital is a racially segregated city. Watson has worked as a charwoman for 26 years with no chance of advancement.

Gordon Parks (1912-2006) was born into a large, black, close-knit family in Fort Scott, Kan. At age 6 he taught himself to play piano on the family's upright as he would later teach himself, at 25, how to take photographs with a used camera he bought in a pawnshop. Living alternately in St. Paul, Minn., Minneapolis and Chicago, he developed a clientele in the black community for his portraits, fashion photography and coverage of events. In 1942 he won a prestigious Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship that paid his salary when he went to Washington to work at the Farm Security Administration (FSA) under the direction of Roy Stryker. When Parks first arrived, Stryker insisted he spend a few days roaming around Washington without his camera to accustom himself to life in a segregated city. Then Stryker helped in the development of Parks's talent, the progress of which is the theme of the 151 pictures in this exhibition.

Parks was assigned to cover housing developments and other facilities the government built for blacks to encourage their support for the war raging in Europe and the Pacific. Stryker taught him to verbalize his objective before setting out to photograph a project, so he would know what to look for and could produce a compelling narrative. When he wasn't out shooting, Parks pored through the FSA files, studying

the work of the great photographers who had documented the Depression: Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Lee Russell, Arthur Rothstein. Parks also photographed the constricted lives of the city's blacks, which is what brought him to Ella Watson.

The National Gallery is displaying seven prints from Parks's documentation of Watson's life. Following Stryker's advice, he befriended her so he could shoot her at work in the halls and offices of the buildings she cleaned; at home with her adopted daughter and the daughter's two young nephews and a niece; at the church that was an important part of her story. The Watson pictures show Parks's growing sophistication with artificial light, composition and the use of symbolic details, and also his insistence on presenting African-Americans in ways that defied stereotypes. In his autobiography, Parks describes his determination to master the camera as his "choice of weapons," weapons he would use to fight segregation, bigotry and poverty. Stryker immediately recognized the brilliance of the picture of Watson with her broom, but knew the FSA could not use it. It was not published until 1949, when it ran in *Ebony* magazine.



A 1941 Parks self-portrait. PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION

Parks was an enormously versatile photographer. There are portraits throughout the show, particularly of black luminaries, many of whom were close friends: Alain Locke (1941), Langston Hughes (four pictures, 1941), Todd Duncan (1941), a self-portrait (1941), Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune (1943), several black fighter pilots in training (1943), Ralph Ellison (1948). And workers—black and white—in diverse fields. Parks followed Stryker from government work to Standard Oil and took industrial photographs, many in a modernist style. Throughout his career he took fashion pictures; he had a natural instinct for what made women and their clothes look good. But always he documented the condition of his race.

Life magazine published Parks's debut photo essay, "Harlem Gang Leader," in 1948. Typically, of the hundreds of pictures Parks took for the gang story, none of the positive images ran, only ones that reflected poorly on the subjects. The museum shows pictures the editors did and did not use in the article, and it is instructive. The next year *Life* hired Parks as a staff photojournalist, the first black photographer on staff at the influential magazine, and sent him off to France on the *Queen Mary* to cover the Paris fashion shows.

Chester Higgins, born in 1946, an African-American who became a staff photojournalist for the *New York Times*, told me: "Gordon led the way by example for every black photographer. We all aspired to be like him. His work caused us to believe in ourselves."