



GORDON PARKS, *Car Loaded with Furniture on Highway, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1946*
Gelatin silver print
12 1/2 x 9 3/4 inches, image
21 3/4 x 19 3/8 inches, framed

GORDON PARKS

The Early Years: 1942 - 1963

June 30 - August 5, 2023

Rhona Hoffman Gallery is pleased to present Gordon Parks's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, *The Early Years: 1942 - 1963*. One of the preeminent photographers of the twentieth century and committed to social justice throughout his life, Parks is best known for his documentation of African-American life, both in urban and rural environments, and his focus on civil rights. Many of the photographs in this exhibition were captured during Parks' time as a staff photographer at *Life* magazine, where he was the first African-American to be hired in that position, in 1948.

In this exhibition, the viewer is able to see Parks's remarkably formal agility as he synthesizes multiple visual languages, drawing from his rural Kansas roots to the streets of Paris. These photos take in the myriad experiences and wide ranging histories of this tumultuous period while finding specific and poignant human moments in each setting. Parks uses his unique lens to draw out the universal truths of the era while carving out a place for himself and a vision uniquely his own. Parks's visual style was honed and shaped during this time by new experiences while keeping a clear, instinctual, formal continuity.

As the title denotes, the exhibition is comprised of photographs produced earlier in the artist's career, in locations spanning Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, New York, Kansas, Maine, Alabama, Chicago, Paris, Canada, and Brazil. The content of *The Early Years: 1942 - 1963* depicts intimate familial moments from the home, as is the case with *Ella Watson with Her Grandchildren, Washington, D.C., 1942* and *Untitled, Anacostia, D.C., 1942*; migratory imagery, apparent in *Car Loaded with Furniture on Highway, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1946*; documentation of American workers during the period following the Great Depression (*Grease Plant Workers, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1946*); as well as images of abandoned homes and roads that feel distinctly Americana, crowds of French photographers clambering to capture

President Dwight D. Eisenhower and of nuns congregating in Chicago, IL. A recurrent theme in some of the photographs is also children, a subject Parks returned to throughout his career. Photographing children allowed Parks to expose contemporary issues of racial, social, and economic inequality, while also often presenting the possibility of a hopeful future.

The photographs in *The Early Years: 1942 - 1963* provide foresight into what a young Parks would develop into as a photographer and artist. The individuals and settings Parks chose to document during this special window of time remained subjects and atmospheres that he would continue to privilege throughout his artistic tenure. The images from the exhibition depict an America that is in a state of transition and flux, by a self-taught photographer who would transform into one of the most celebrated documentarians and artists of our time.

Gordon Parks, one of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century, was a humanitarian with a deep commitment to social justice. He left behind an exceptional body of work that documents American life and culture from the early 1940s into the 2000s, with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life. Parks was also a distinguished composer, author, and filmmaker who interacted with many of the leading people of his era—from politicians and artists to athletes and other celebrities.

Born into poverty and segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912, Parks was drawn to photography as a young man when he saw images of migrant workers in a magazine. After buying a camera at a pawnshop, he taught himself how to use it. Despite his lack of professional training, he won the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1942; this led to a position with the photography section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in Washington, D.C., and, later, the Office of War Information (OWI). Working for these agencies, which were then chronicling the nation's social conditions, Parks quickly developed a personal style that would make him among the most celebrated photographers of his era. His extraordinary pictures allowed him to break the color line in professional photography while he created remarkably expressive images that consistently explored the social and economic impact of poverty, racism, and other forms of discrimination.

In 1944, Parks left the OWI to work for the Standard Oil Company's photo documentary project. Around this time, he was also a freelance photographer for *Glamour* and *Ebony*, which expanded his photographic practice and further developed his distinct style. His 1948 photo essay on the life of a Harlem gang leader won him widespread acclaim and a position as the first African American staff photographer and writer for *Life*. Parks would remain at the magazine for two decades, covering subjects related to racism and poverty but also fashion and entertainment, and taking memorable pictures of such figures as Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael. His most well-known images, for instance *American Gothic* (1942) and *Emerging Man* (1952), capture the essence of his activism and

humanitarianism. They also helped rally support for the burgeoning civil rights movement, for which Parks himself was a tireless advocate as well as a documentarian.

Parks was a modern-day Renaissance man, whose creative practice extended beyond photography to encompass fiction and nonfiction writing, musical composition, filmmaking, and painting. In 1969 he became the first African American to write and direct a major Hollywood studio feature film, *The Learning Tree*, based on his bestselling semi autobiographical novel. His next film, *Shaft* (1971), was a critical and box-office success, inspiring a number of sequels. Parks published many books, including memoirs, novels, poetry, and volumes on photographic technique. In 1989 he produced, directed, and composed the music for a ballet, *Martin*, dedicated to the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

Parks spent much of the last three decades of his life evolving his style, and he continued working until his death in 2006. He was recognized with more than fifty honorary doctorates, and among his numerous awards was the National Medal of Arts, which he received in 1988. Today, archives of his work reside at a number of institutions, including The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York; the Gordon Parks Museum in Fort Scott, Kansas, and Wichita State University in Wichita; and the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the Smithsonian Institution, all in Washington, D.C.