

Half Past Autumn: The Art of Gordon Parks

First and Third Floor Galleries, September 28, 2002 – January 5, 2003

Gordon Parks' photography, poetry, books, music, and films teach important lessons about hatred, hope and the American dream. The Tacoma Art Museum will present this nationally touring retrospective exhibition of the work of this American Renaissance man and his uplifting message of hope in the face of adversity.

The exhibition is a return of sorts for Parks, who (at the age of 25, while working as a waiter on the Chicago-to-Seattle train line) accidentally fell into the Puget Sound while trying to take some of his early photographs. He colorfully remembers purchasing his first camera from a Seattle pawnshop in his 1990 autobiography *Voices in the Mirror*.

Though best known as a ground-breaking photojournalist for *Life* magazine, this exhibition brings together for the first time Parks' work as a photographer, filmmaker, novelist, poet and musician. The exhibition features Parks' photographs for Franklin D. Roosevelt's federal Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the early 1940s, as well as his hard-hitting photojournalism, which lays bare the persistent poverty, racism, and bigotry in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. The exhibition also includes a compelling group of celebrity portraits and a rich and varied selection of glamorous high-fashion photography he made for *Vogue* magazine.

The core of *Half Past Autumn: The Art of Gordon Parks* is his photographs of the Civil Rights movement. Through his personal connections and ability to gain the trust of his subjects, Parks captured the horrors of gang warfare and poverty in Harlem, the leadership of the Black Muslim movement, and the effects of racial segregation in Alabama.

The youngest of 15 children, Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912. After his mother died, his father sent the then-15-year-old to live with an older sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. Soon thereafter, however, he was homeless and alone and worked a succession of jobs: piano player in a brothel, busboy, basketball player, and Civilian Conservation Corpsman.

Eventually, Parks landed a job as a dining car waiter on the North Coast Limited railroad that ran between Chicago and Seattle. It was 1937, and the Great Depression had been taking a toll on Americans for eight years. But when Parks saw the work of photographers employed by the Farm Security Administration in a magazine – haunting images of Americans starving, struggling and being taken for granted – he was inspired. If anyone could tell the story of the oppressed, Parks



believed, it was he, an African-American man subjected to bigotry and raised in poverty.

Parks purchased a Voightlander Brilliant camera for \$7.50 in a Seattle pawnshop. And his remarkable

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ability to master the camera quickly earned him a position as a professional photographer. Just four years later, he joined the ranks of the FSA photographers based in Washington, D.C. and documented the root causes of poverty in inner-city Washington. In the early 1940s, he supported America's World War II efforts and photographed military activities. After the war, Parks joined *Vogue* magazine as a fashion photographer and began writing books about flash photography and portraiture.

In 1948, Parks became *Life* magazine's first African-American photographer. At *Life* – the preeminent illustrated cultural magazine of its era – Parks translated his job into a position of great social and aesthetic influence. For more than twenty years, Parks captured America as it struggled through social changes.

By the 1960s, Parks had become one of this country's most influential photojournalists. He continued making photographs, started publishing his poetry, and began exploring the expressive potential of experimental color photography.

Parks ventured into the creation of films in the 1970s. His award-winning film, *The Learning Tree* (1969) was one of the first Hollywood motion pictures to be directed by an African-American filmmaker. Parks also directed *Shaft* (1971) and *Shaft's Big Score!* (1972).

By the 1990s, Parks began to focus on the creation of large-scale abstract images created with computers and ink-jet printers. These prints, which focus on color and composition, are often poetic meditations of the natural world and illustrate Parks' ability to master new techniques and imagery while maintaining his artistic vision.

Parks has had an amazing and expansive career in photography, poetry, books, film, and music. This retrospective exhibition captures nearly sixty years of his creative power as an American Renaissance man

who stood steadfast with his message of empowerment, perseverance, and hope.

Half Past Autumn: The Art of Gordon Parks is organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The exhibition and related programs are made possible by AOL Time Warner and Ford Motor Company. Additional support is provided by the Glen Eagles Foundation, Cone-Laumont Editions, Ltd., Laumont Labs, and Time Life Photo Laboratories. The exhibition is co-curated by Philip Brookman, senior curator of photography and media arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and Deborah Willis, former collections coordinator at the Center for African-American Culture and History, Smithsonian Institution. Local sponsorship is provided by Laird Norton Financial Group and KUOW 94.9 Public Radio.

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