

For Immediate Release

Minneapolis Institute of Art Exhibition Explores Iconic Gordon Parks Photographic Series in Deeper Context

Organized with the Gordon Parks Foundation, the exhibition explores Parks' documentary collaboration with Ella Watson.

MINNEAPOLIS—(Nov. 30, 2023)—The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) will present a new exhibition of more than 50 documentary photographs by renowned photographer Gordon Parks exploring his unique photographic collaboration with Ella Watson. Organized by Mia in collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation, "American Gothic: Gordon Parks and Ella Watson" will be on view only at Mia from January 6 to June 23, 2024 in the museum's Harrison Photography Gallery. The photos in the exhibition are organized by four key themes: Care, Faith, Labor, and Community.

The exhibition explores the unique photographic relationship between Parks and Ella Watson, whom he met at the federal building where both worked: Parks as a photography fellow with the Farm Security Administration and Watson as a custodian. Simultaneously a record of one woman's position within the racial, professional, and economic hierarchies that stratified the nation's capital and Parks' visual reckoning with the realities of Black life in racially segregated Washington, DC, the photos examine the ways in which Watson was a pillar of her family and her faith community. They memorialize her character and integrity, providing an unflinching yet tender look at her life.

The Gordon Parks Foundation selected Mia as the sole collaborator for this exhibition. Parks, who lived in St. Paul, Minnesota as a young adult, is known for his documentary photojournalism that explored a range of important issues, including civil rights, the impact of poverty upon individuals and communities, and the lives of Black Americans. Recognized worldwide for his contributions to the medium, Parks' photographs are held in collections of note around the globe as well as in Mia's collection.

Watson is the sitter of the well-known portrait by Parks, now known as *American Gothic, Washington D.C., 1942* and the exhibition at Mia dives more deeply into her life through the lens of Parks' photography. Prints such as *Receiving anointment from Reverend Clara Smith during the "flower bowl demonstration," a service held once a year at the St. Martin's Spiritual Church* illustrate the central importance of Watson's faith in her life and provides insight into the culture of her religious community.

Watson's labor is presented with unwavering realism in the photograph titled *Washington, D.C. Government charwoman who provides for a family of six on her salary of one thousand and eighty dollars per year. She has been a federal employee for twenty-six years.* Watson mops a bathroom floor, her contemplative profile reflected in the mirror behind her. The work's title packs an emotional depth, emphasizing Watson's tenure and how far her meager salary stretches to provide for her family.

"The creative partnership between Parks and Watson is extraordinary," said Casey Riley, Chair of Global Contemporary Art and Curator of Photography and New Media at Mia. "Ella Watson provided unprecedented access to many facets of her daily life and was an active participant in the photographic narrative that resulted from their work together. We are grateful to showcase this body of work that centers Black women's labor and experiences, and are especially thankful to Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr. and the Gordon Parks Foundation for their generous partnership in this exhibition."



Gordon Parks (American, 1912–2006), *American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942*, gelatin silver print. Gift of Frederick B. Scheel, 2007.35.169, © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Riley is a co-editor of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, which features essays from Deborah Willis, Hank Willis Thomas, Salamishah Tillet, Melanee Harvey, and Philip Brookman, and is available for purchase at the Store at Mia. To coincide with the exhibition, celebrated photographer LaToya Ruby Frazer will present a lecture on Wednesday, March 14 that is co-sponsored by Mia's Friends of the Institute.

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About the Minneapolis Institute of Art

Home to more than 100,000 works of art representing 5,000 years of world history, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) inspires wonder, spurs creativity, and nourishes the imagination. With extraordinary exhibitions and one of the finest art collections in the country—from all corners of the globe, and from ancient to contemporary—Mia links the past to the present, enables global conversations, and offers an exceptional setting for inspiration.

General admission to Mia is always free. Some special exhibitions have a nominal admission fee.

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