

IMS Paulista opens first retrospective of photographer Gordon Parks in Brazil, with pieces recording the history of Black Americans in the 21st century, from social movements to everyday life

The largest ever Parks exhibit held in Latin America opens on October 4. The selection rounds up about 200 photographs, most taken between the 1940s and the 1970s, in addition to movies, magazines, and books. Included are portraits of central figures in the American Black movement, such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Muhammad Ali, as well as photography series on topics such as childhood and everyday life.

"I, too, am America. America is me."
Gordon Parks, 1968



A central name in world photography history, **Gordon Parks** (1912-2006) is the author of a vast body of work, documenting the everyday lives of Black citizens in segregated states in the USA, the Black movement's organized fight for civil rights, and the cultural and religious life of African American populations, among other topics. His work, trajectory, and legacy are honored in the retrospective **Gordon Parks: America Is Me**, opening on **October 4** (Saturday) at IMS Paulista (Av. Paulista, 2424).

Curated by Janaina Damaceno, with Iliriana Fontoura Rodrigues as assistant curator and Maria Luiza Meneses as curatorial assistant, the exhibit is the **first Parks retrospective in Brazil and the largest in Latin America**. On opening day (**October 4**), at 11am, the curatorial team will talk to the public at the IMS cine-theater. The Instituto Moreira Salles is producing the exhibition in partnership with **The Gordon Parks Foundation**, who are

holders of the photographer's collection and were the main source of material for the conception of the project.

Taking up two of the cultural center's stories, the exhibition rounds up about **200 photographs**, taken mainly between the 1940s and the 1970s, in addition to films, magazines, witness accounts, and other publications, highlighting Parks's multifaceted character as a musician, filmmaker, and poet as well. Among the works on display are portraits of central names in the Black movement in America, such as **Malcolm X**, **Martin Luther King** and **Muhammad Ali**, and renowned photo series such as ***Back to Fort Scott*** (1950), and ***Segregation in the South*** (1956). (Find out more about the works below).

Gordon Parks was born in 1912 in the city of Fort Scott, in Kansas, during the segregation era. In 1928, his mother passed away, and he moved from his hometown, going from place to place while facing the challenges of poverty and racism. During this time, he worked several different jobs to get by, including club and hotel gigs as a pianist. In 1937, he purchased his first camera, and in 1938, he published his images for the first time on the *St. Paul Recorder*, an important Black press newspaper in the State of Minnesota. Later, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked for the Farm Security Administration, as did other photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, John Vachon, and Carl Mydans at different points. **In 1948, he started working at *Life*, one of the top magazines in the world, becoming their first Black photographer.**

After joining *Life*, his career as a photographer got more and more consolidated, with the publication of books and participation in exhibitions, focused on turning his lens toward the life of the American Black population, as well as denouncing racism and inequality, in the amalgam of art and activism that characterized his whole trajectory. He also worked as a filmmaker, and, among other films, put out *Shaft* (1971), considered one of the top *blaxploitation* movies. He has received awards and homages for his work both in photography and film. To this day, Parks is an influence on artists in different fields such as rapper **Kendrick Lamar**, photographers **Zanele Muholi** and **Devin Allen**, and filmmaker **Ava DuVernay**.

America Is Me



The title of the exhibition – *America Is Me* – was taken from a piece written by Parks for *Life* magazine in 1968 about a crucial issue for the Black movement in the USA: the fact that the American democracy was consolidated under a racial segregation regime, excluding the Black population. The piece was published in tandem with a photography series portraying the precarious living conditions of the *Fontenelle Family*, a Black family in Harlem.

In his own words, but also resonating with those of the Fontenelle Family, the photographer states: ***“There is something about both of us that goes deeper than blood or black and white. It is our common search for a better life, a better world. I march now over the same ground you once***

marched. I fight for the same things you still fight for. My children’s needs are the same as your children’s. I too am America. America is me. It gave me the only life I know — so I must share in its survival. Look at me. Listen to me. Try to understand

my struggle against your racism. There is yet a chance for us to live in peace beneath these restless skies."

Series shot in Harlem and in the segregated South



The IMS retrospective includes Parks's central photography series, highlighting how a sequential image output is an important aspect in his work, aimed at showing the complexity of subjects, documenting them integrally, as opposed to keeping one sole stereotyped image.

One of the first series on display, shown right at the entrance to the exhibit, is dedicated to **Ella Watson** (1942). When Park shot the images, he had been interning at the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an agency of the American government, with a grant for Black artists. When he arrived in Washington, D.C., Parks walked around town and, even though he was not in Southern lands, he was kicked out and barred from restaurants, movie theaters, and retail

stores. To try to portray this experience, the photographer decided to do a photo shoot with Ella Watson, an FSA cleaning staff employee, showing some of her everyday life.

Parks documented different facets of Watson's life, such as the relationship with her grandchildren and her high standing in the church she attended. In one of the most striking images of the series, known as *American Gothic*, Watson holds a broom in one hand, and a mop in the other. The American flag can be seen in the background, stressing the exclusion experienced by the Black community in the US. About his conception of the image, Parks relays: ***"So I put her before the American flag with a broom in one hand and a mop in another. And I said, 'American Gothic' — that's how I felt at the moment. I didn't care about what anybody else felt. That's what I felt about America and Ella Watson's position inside America."***

The following series in the retrospective shows the photographs Parks took in the Harlem neighborhood in New York, destination of thousands of people fleeing the racial segregation of the South. This section shows the series ***Harlem Gang Leader*** (1948), marking Parks's debut at *Life* magazine, and ***Invisible Man*** (1952), a partnership between him and writer Ralph Ellison, in addition to the movie ***Shaft*** (1971), considered one of the central films in the *blaxploitation* movement, which reclaims Black protagonism in American cinema.

In the series ***Back to Fort Scott*** (1950), also present in the exhibition, the photographer goes back to his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas, under the segregation regime, and talks to his former classmates, making visual records of what happened to them. Most had also, much like Parks, migrated North in search of better living conditions, but never getting rid of the violence and precarity imposed by racist structures completely.

Another highlight in the exhibition, ***Segregation in the South*** (1956) was commissioned by *Life*, and documented the segregated South. To get his shots, the photographer himself experienced different episodes of violence, including being chased by white nationalists. In color, Parks shows the everyday lives of Black persons in those states, undercut by much symbolic violence and segregation, such as the signs marking white-only spaces. The photographs denounced that reality and its systems of domination, and, on the other hand,

also showed people's complexity and power, as they were portrayed in all their beauty and plenitude.

On the next floor, the retrospective shows passages of *The Learning Tree* (1969), the first movie directed by a Black filmmaker in Hollywood. With an autobiographical bent, the feature film is inspired in Parks's childhood in Kansas. Children are, in fact, as well as human religious experience, frequent topics in the artist's output, as pointed out by the curation team: "***With some of his images, Gordon Parks gives back to Black children a place where they can just be children playing with a favorite beetle, jumping on puddles in rural neighborhoods or in the outskirts of cities or reading with their parents.***"

The Black movement under Parks's lens



The exhibition highlights historical images shot by Parks focusing on the organized Black movement, portraying its multiplicity of organizations and ideas. In 1963, for instance, the photographer documented the March for Jobs and Freedom, better known as ***March on Washington***, one of the most important political actions in American history opposing racial segregation. With the presence of more than 250,000 people, that was where **Martin Luther King Jr.** gave his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream".

Black Muslims, a series from 1963, was the result of a report that Parks wrote and photographed for *Life* magazine about Nation of Islam, a Muslim Black organization that arose in 1930. Parks presents a wide-ranging account of the organization and the trajectory of one of its main leaders, **Malcolm X**, with whom the photographer became close. The exhibition also includes portraits shot by Parks of **Black Panthers** leaders such as **Stokely Carmichael**, in 1966-67, and **Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver**, in 1970.

Another central Black leader in the 20th Century portrayed by Parks was boxer and activist **Muhammad Ali**, and the series dedicated to him is a highlight in one of the final exhibition rooms. As he does with most of the other portrait subjects, Parks documents Ali in a sequence of shots, with images where he is shown smiling or playing with children, as a counterpoint to stereotypes associated with male strength.

The exhibition also highlights the iconic photograph ***A Great Day in Hip-Hop***, shot in 1998, in Harlem, New York, for the cover of *XXL Magazine*, one of the most important hip-hop magazines in the world. The image is a homage to the photograph *A Great Day in Harlem* (1958), by Art Kane, gathering 57 jazz stars in front of number 17 on 126th Street, on the West Side. Parks's photograph includes 117 figures, including foundational names for

hip-hop such as Grandmaster Flash, Slick Rick, The Roots, and Da Brat. The picture is a temporal link between jazz and hip-hop, two of the top expressions of Black culture in the United States.

Parks and his relationship with Brazil



Another important aspect highlighted in the retrospective is the presence of Parks in Brazil. In 1961, the photographer came to the country under a *Life* magazine commission to document life in the Rio de Janeiro *favelas*. For a few weeks, he followed the everyday life of the Da Silva family, who migrated from the Northeast region of Brazil to Rio de Janeiro, especially their son Flávio, who suffered from chronic lung infection. The report resulted in the family receiving donations from magazine readers and buying a house in the suburbs, and Flávio was flown to the United States to get treatment. The case had a major repercussion in the Brazilian press, and *O Cruzeiro* magazine sent photographer Henri Ballot to do a report on poverty in Harlem.

In addition to the magazine piece, Parks also directed his first movie, *Flavio* (1964). Narrated in the first person, in the voice of a child, the short film is part of the history of Black diaspora cinema and is one of the first movies directed by a Black man in Brazilian territory. **The exhibition features photographs by Parks that were never shown before in Brazil: children playing soccer on the shores of the Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon in Rio de Janeiro, and an evangelical ceremony.**

Open until March 1, 2026, the exhibition comes with a wide-ranging program of activities, in addition to a catalog of its images and texts. When visiting the retrospective, the public will be able to delve into Parks's work and trajectory, marked by political commitment and a sense of kinship with the subjects, as pointed out by the curation team: ***"The exhibition is a reunion with American Black history, but also with one of the most important photographers in the 20th century, the one who best documented how dignity, self care, and beauty became forms of resistance against a system that desired the annihilation of Black persons. In his work, he deals with subalternity, with the American racist structures, while also building up narratives of kinship, self esteem, community, intimacy, and trust among Black persons. He shows us our singularities and the multiplicity of our experiences as Black individuals in the world."***

Captions of the images in order of appearance: *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, 1963; *Woman and Dog in Window*, Harlem, New York, 1943; *Untitled*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956; *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, 1963; *Untitled*, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, 1961

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PRESS INFORMATION

Gordon Parks: America Is Me

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Free Admittance

Floors 7 and 8

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