

The Museum of Modern Art

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ACQUIRES 56 PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GORDON PARKS'S GROUNDBREAKING 1957 SERIES "THE ATMOSPHERE OF CRIME"

A Selection from the Acquisition will be Featured in a Gallery Titled *Gordon Parks and "The Atmosphere of Crime"* in the Museum's First Seasonal Collection Rotation in November 2020

NEW YORK, February 11, 2020 [Updated November 14, 2020]—The Museum of Modern Art has acquired 56 prints from American artist **Gordon Parks's** series of color photographs made in 1957 for a *Life* magazine photo essay titled "The Atmosphere of Crime." The Museum and The Gordon Parks Foundation collaborated closely on the selection of 55 modern color prints that MoMA purchased from the Foundation, and the Foundation has also given the Museum a rare vintage gelatin silver print (a companion to a print Parks himself gave the Museum in 1993). A generous selection of these prints will go on view on November 14, 2020, as part of the first seasonal rotation of the Museum's newly expanded and re-envisioned collection galleries. The collection installation *Gordon Parks and "The Atmosphere of Crime"* will be located on the fourth floor, with Parks's work as an anchor for exploring representations of criminality in photography, with a particular focus on work made in the United States.

One of the preeminent photographers of the mid-20th century, Gordon Parks (1912–2006) left behind a body of work that documents American life and culture from the early 1940s to the 2000s. Born in Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks worked as a youth in St. Paul, Minnesota, before discovering photography in 1937. He would come to view it as his "weapon of choice" for attacking issues including race relations, poverty, urban life, and injustice. After working for the US government's Farm Security Administration in the early 1940s, Parks found success as a fashion photographer and a regular contributor to *Ebony*, *Fortune*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue* before he was hired as the first African American staff photographer at *Life* magazine in 1948.

In 1957, *Life* assigned Parks to photograph for the first in a series of articles addressing the perceived rise of crime in the US. With reporter Henry Suydam, Parks traversed the streets of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, producing a range of evocative color images, 12 of which were featured in the debut article, "The Atmosphere of Crime," on September 9, 1957. Parks's empathetic, probing views of crime scenes, police precincts, hospitals, morgues, and prisons do not name or identify "the criminal," but instead give shape to the ground against which poverty, addiction, and race become criminalized. Shot using available light, Parks's atmospheric photographs capture mysterious nocturnal activity unfolding on street corners and silhouetted figures with raised hands in the murky haze of a tenement hallway.

A robust selection from this acquisition will anchor a display within a fourth-floor collection gallery, titled *Gordon Parks and "The Atmosphere of Crime."* Using Parks's work as a point of departure, the installation will draw from a range of other works in the Museum's collection, offering varied representations of crime and criminality. Since the 1940s, the Museum has collected and exhibited photographs of crime as represented in newspapers and tabloids, exemplified by the dramatic, flash-lit work of Weegee, complemented by 19th-century precedents such as mug shots, whose purported objectivity was expected to facilitate the identification of criminals, as well as acquisitions across media that point to subsequent investigations and more contemporary concerns.

While Parks's work was first displayed at MoMA in 1948, and was included in the landmark exhibition *The Family of Man* in 1955, it wasn't until 1993 that five of his photographs were approved for the Museum's collection (including a large-scale gelatin silver print from the 1957 series on crime mentioned above). The Museum has since supported the acquisition of additional vintage prints in 2011 and 2014 (including *Harlem Newsboy*, currently on view on the Museum's fifth floor).

"As an artist of the highest order and a passionate advocate for civil rights, Parks made iconic photographs that continue to speak poignantly to the complexity of cultural politics and racial bias in the United States," said Sarah Meister, curator in MoMA's Department of Photography. "This acquisition substantially improves the Museum's holdings of Gordon Parks's achievement, reflecting our commitment to the artist and fostering the possibility of situating his work within a broad range of contemporary concerns. His enduring impact on the history of photography and representation cannot be overstated."

"MoMA's acquisition reinforces the significance of Gordon Parks as an artist whose practice continues to inspire future generations," said Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., executive director of The Gordon Parks Foundation. "Parks knew that his camera could be a powerful weapon, more potent than violence, and that pictures and words could further social change. The Atmosphere of Crime series remains as timeless and relevant today as when the photographs were made more than 50 years ago."

Sarah Meister has also collaborated on The Gordon Parks Foundation's forthcoming publication *Gordon Parks: The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957*, to be published by Steidl in spring 2020. The book's expansive selection of never-before-published photographs from Parks's original reportage was selected and sequenced by Meister, and her illustrated text situates this critically important photo essay within both Parks's career and historic representations of crime and criminality. Other contributors include Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of *Just Mercy* (Spiegel & Grau, 2014), and Nicole Fleetwood, professor of American studies and art history at Rutgers University and author of *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Harvard University Press, 2020). The book also features a foreword by MoMA's director Glenn D. Lowry and The Gordon Parks Foundation's executive director, Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr.

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