

American Gothic: Gordon Parks and Ella Watson

In the summer of 1942, during a yearlong fellowship in Washington, D.C., Gordon Parks photographed government worker Ella Watson across the varied landscape of her daily life. The resulting picture story presents Watson—a custodian, the head of a household, a deaconess at her church—as a vital figure within the civic sphere. At the same time, this intimate series reveals Parks’s experiences in coming to terms with the segregated city he once embraced as “the seat of democracy.”

This exhibition brings together nearly 60 photographs from their partnership and draws its title from one of the most celebrated photographs of the 20th century—an iconic portrait of Watson that Parks later titled “American Gothic.” Most importantly, it proposes new grounds for understanding Parks as an artist and activist and highlights a unique professional collaboration between two Black federal employees at a crucial juncture in United States history.

LABOR

When Gordon Parks met Ella Watson, she was cleaning the corridor outside his supervisor's office at the Farm Securities Administration (FSA). He introduced himself and learned that she was a widow and sole breadwinner for several children. Drawn to the magnitude of her situation, Parks asked Watson if he could photograph her for the FSA, and she agreed. Their collaboration continued for a period of weeks, with most of his photographs showing Watson polishing floors and emptying trash cans after business hours. Throughout this portion of the series, in photographs shot in dark, deserted offices and hallways, Parks underscored the dignity of Watson's labor as well as the inequities of the political system that employed her.

CARE

Ella Watson granted Gordon Parks access to her home, where she regularly cared for her adopted daughter, Laretta, and Laretta's niece and nephews Muriel, Raymond, and Robert. Her yearly salary of \$1,080 was barely sufficient for the needs of the household, a fact made apparent in the modest furnishing of her apartment. Parks chose not to linger on the meagerness of their living arrangements. Instead, he focused on the warmth and generosity of Watson's family life. In his images of Watson reading, playing, eating, and daydreaming with the children, Parks celebrated the spiritual abundance of her home, where she presided as a proud and loving matriarch.

FAITH

Ella Watson was a woman of faith and served as a deaconess in the Verbrycke Spiritual Church, a community that emphasized personal agency, lifelong learning, and civic service. Gordon Parks devoted great attention to Watson's spiritual home, focusing on individual members of the congregation as well as their minister, the Reverend Vondell Gassaway. Parks trained his lens on distinctive elements of the sanctuary, including altars, religious statuary, and a pulpit positioned underneath the words "GOD IS LOVE." When Watson appears before the camera in her white deaconess's gown, she is transformed: here, in the presence of her community, her leadership is fully recognized.

COMMUNITY

Gordon Parks's photographs of Ella Watson's neighborhood show a commercially lively and racially diverse community crisscrossed with streetcar tracks and bustling with city dwellers. Watson herself does not appear in these pictures. Instead, Parks used the camera to approximate Watson's daily life in the neighborhood. Through his photographs, viewers can imagine Watson standing in line for the register at J. Benjamin's grocery store, waiting for a streetcar, or peering in the window at Franks Cleaning and Pressing. By dissolving the boundary between his collaborator and the viewer, Parks created an emotional connection and identification with Watson—a humanistic approach that he would use in future documentary projects.