

GORDON PARKS MUHAMMAD ALI X 1966 | 1970 THE IMAGE OF A CHAMPION

This exhibition features photographs Gordon Parks took of Muhammad Ali during an important period in the boxer's early career. Parks first profiled Ali in a 1966 essay for *Life* magazine. At the time, Parks was already a celebrated cultural figure, renowned for his photography and his work in other artforms. Ali, on the other hand, was mired in controversy stemming from his political stances and his bombastic public persona. Parks's nuanced 1966 essay presented a humanized yet complex vision of Ali just as the athlete's professional career teetered on the brink of collapse.

Parks photographed Ali for *Life* a second time in 1970. Changing political tides meant that aspects of popular opinion had shifted in Ali's favor. Still young and strong, Ali was poised for a return to the ring. Parks photographed Ali as he prepared for a comeback fight, ultimately publishing the cover photo under the headline "Look Out—He's Back."

Featuring photographs from these two *Life* projects, this exhibition explores the relationship between Parks and Ali, their significance to the cultural and historical moment in which they lived, and the role of photography in shaping public image.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

- You will see 54 photographs, all but one taken by Gordon Parks. Of those, 43 are from the series Parks made for his 1966 *Life* essay and 10 were taken for the 1970 *Life* cover story on Ali.
- Almost all of the photographs are in black and white; two are in color.
- Also included in the exhibition are copies of the 1966 and 1970 *Life* issues and two contact sheets from the 1966 project. Contact sheets contain thumbprints of all the negatives in a roll of film; they allow the photographer to scan all the images at once and select the best ones to print.

GOOD TO KNOW

- This exhibition is on view in the museum's photography galleries (Galleries L10 and L11).
- Most of the photographs in this exhibition measure at least 11 x 14 inches, making it possible for 5-6 people to examine a single image at the same time. A few of the prints are much larger and could be viewed by an entire class at once.
- While most of the exhibition photographs are on loan from the Gordon Parks Foundation, 10 are in the permanent collection of the Nelson-Atkins. These and other Parks photographs can be viewed online at: <https://art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6170/photographs-by-gordon-parks/objects>.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Gordon Parks (1912 – 2006) was one of the most respected photographers of the 20th century as well as a talented writer, musician, and filmmaker. Born in Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks experienced poverty and racial segregation in his youth. He took up photography as a young man, establishing himself first in fashion photography and later as a documentary photographer. In 1948, Parks became the first African American photographer to join the staff of *Life*; he worked for the magazine for more than 20 years, producing photo essays that documented prominent people and social issues of the day, including racism, poverty, and urban life. Parks also wrote and directed feature films (including 1971's *Shaft*), composed music and poetry, and wrote several memoirs.

ABOUT THE SUBJECT

Muhammad Ali (1942 – 2016), born Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., was a renowned boxer and social activist. He grew up in segregated Louisville, Kentucky and began training as an amateur boxer at the age of 12. After winning a gold medal at the 1960 Olympics, the confident young athlete launched a professional boxing career that would see him reach heights of both fame and controversy. After joining the Nation of Islam, a religious and political organization of black separatists, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali. This affiliation, along with his criticism of the Vietnam War and refusal of the draft, made Ali a polarizing figure in the eyes of the American public even as he won boxing's most elite titles. In his later years, Ali's public image evolved in the wake of cultural shifts and his own focus on humanitarian endeavors.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

- Get to know Gordon Parks and Muhammad Ali through PBS video resources:
 - *Through a Lens Darkly* (excerpt on Gordon Parks): pbs.org/independentlens/videos/gordon-parks/
 - *In Their Own Words: Muhammad Ali*: tinyurl.com/uz3822f
- Preview the 1966 and 1970 *Life* articles on Muhammad Ali, viewable online through Google Books at tinyurl.com/wddfdk4 and tinyurl.com/vd3e4uf.
- Learn more about American popular culture and the media in the 1960s using tools from the Newseum. Visit newseumed.org to access primary sources related to the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the role of the media in shaping public opinion.

For each of the following featured works, discussion questions are categorized as:

- INQUIRING EYE – focused on the formal qualities of photographic images;
 - BOTH SIDES OF THE LENS – exploring how photographs are influenced by the relationship between artist and subject;
 - ART & PUBLIC IMAGE – considering photography in the context of celebrity and mass media.
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FEATURED WORKS

Muhammad Ali, Miami Beach, Florida, 1966

INQUIRING EYE

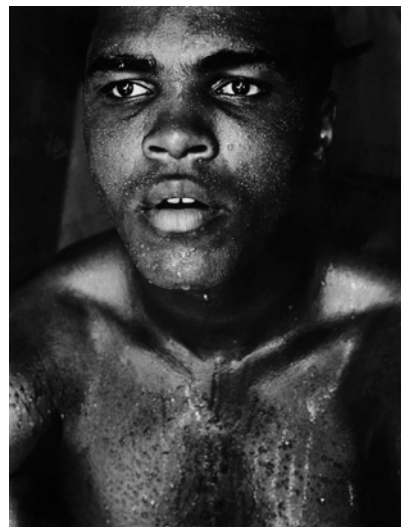
Consider the framing, contrast, and focus of this photograph. How does Parks use them to create a sense of presence and power?

BOTH SIDES OF THE LENS

Though they represented different generations and differing approaches to activism, Parks and Ali became friends over the course of the *Life* projects. What aspects of this image suggest Ali was comfortable in Parks's presence?

ART & PUBLIC IMAGE

Parks used this as the first photograph in his 1966 article, which he titled "The Redemption of the Champion." What message does this image send about Ali? Why do you think he chose it?



Untitled, Miami, Florida, 1966

INQUIRING EYE

How would you describe the use of light in this image? How would the photograph be different if Parks had changed the lighting or contrast?

BOTH SIDES OF THE LENS

Parks's 1966 article suggests that, while he did not agree with the militant rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, he was interested in Ali's relationship to the movement and to his faith. What mood does Parks convey in this photograph of Ali praying?

ART & PUBLIC IMAGE

Parks did not publish any of the photos he took depicting Ali's ties to the Nation of Islam, because he knew they could provoke a harsh reaction among *Life's* readership. If you were him, would you have made the same decision? Why or why not?



Untitled, London, England, 1966

INQUIRING EYE

Where is Parks's camera in relation to the scene he is photographing here? How does point of view affect the meaning or impact of this image?

BOTH SIDES OF THE LENS

What does Parks's location within this scene tell us about his relationship to Ali?

ART & PUBLIC IMAGE

Consider what this image says about Ali's relationship with the public. Recounting the fervor of reporters and fans in London, where the boxer had traveled for a fight, Parks noted: "The adoration finally took its toll." Do you see any echoes of that sentiment in this image?



Untitled (Lord's Cricket Ground, St. John's Wood), London, England, 1966

INQUIRING EYE

Where do you see repeated lines or shapes in this image? How do they help create an interesting composition?

BOTH SIDES OF THE LENS

Even when Ali was at his most controversial, Parks recognized the boxer was capable of establishing a great legacy. What elements within this photograph suggest a sense of greatness or promise?

ART & PUBLIC IMAGE

Imagine you needed to write a headline to accompany this photograph. What would it say? What would the tone of the article be?



Untitled (Champburger), Miami, Florida, 1970

INQUIRING EYE

Muhammad Ali is not at the center of this photograph, yet his face is the focal point of the image. What has Parks done to direct your eye to Ali?

BOTH SIDES OF THE LENS

Consider the expression on Ali's face here. Surrounded by young fans awaiting his autograph, he makes direct eye contact with Parks's camera. If you were Parks, what might you imagine Ali is thinking?

ART & PUBLIC IMAGE

What do you think this photograph says about the celebrity status of athletes? Could a photograph like this be taken of a contemporary superstar? How might it be similar to and different from this image of Ali?

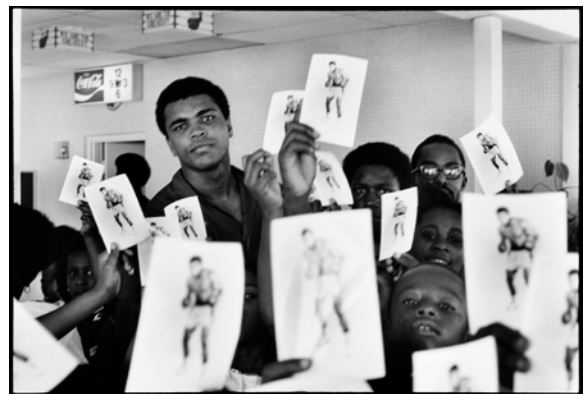


IMAGE CREDITS

All images by Gordon Parks, American (1912 – 2006).

Muhammad Ali, Miami Beach, Florida, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 50 x 40 inches. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 2019.55. Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Untitled, Miami, Florida, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Untitled, London, England, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 2019.14.3. Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Untitled (Lord's Cricket Ground, St. John's Wood), London, England, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Untitled (Champburger), Miami, Florida, 1970. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 2019.14.12. Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

AFTER YOUR VISIT:

- Consider how photographs influence the way we think about prominent people or social issues of our own time. Have students find photographs from the news media that depict a person or issue that is important to them, and discuss:
 - What choices did the photographer make in capturing this photograph?
 - Where was it published, and for what audience?
 - What message does this photograph send?
 - Challenge students to make a photo series that presents a person, issue, or activity in a way that goes against popular opinion. How might they use photography to counter assumptions and present a different side of a story?
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