

Minneapolis Institute of Art

# American Gothic

## Gordon Parks and Ella Watson

Teachers Guide

Grades K-12



# Mia

# Teachers Guide

## For Teachers and Students Grades K-12

### American Gothic: Gordon Parks and Ella Watson

January 6–June 23, 2024

This guide is designed to facilitate conversations about “American Gothic: Gordon Parks and Ella Watson,” at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Use it in your classroom before visiting the museum, or in the galleries during a self-guided visit. The exhibition was co-organized by Mia and the Gordon Parks Foundation. This guide highlights selected artworks that illustrate how Gordon Parks presented Ella Watson not only as the cleaning woman he met while working in a federal government building, but also as a devoted family woman, faith leader, and respected community member. The images are accompanied by discussion prompts that begin with close looking and description, and then follow up with more complex questions. We recommend that you review the content and plan your lessons, discussions, or tours in alignment with the interests and needs of your students.

Looking to visit the exhibition with your students? Simply request a free guided tour [here](#) (for groups of 60 or fewer students). Tours are currently filled through mid-April. Or, to register your group of 10 or more students for a self-guided experience, please use [this form](#).

We look forward to seeing you at Mia soon!

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Cover: *American Gothic*, Washington, D.C., 1942, gelatin silver print. Gordon Parks Foundation

# Introduction

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.



*American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*, 1942, gelatin silver print,  
26 × 18<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (66 × 47.9 cm) (image), 30 × 24 in. (76.2 × 61 cm)  
(sheet). Gordon Parks Foundation

# American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942

Gordon Parks, a self-trained photographer, left Minnesota in 1942 to work for the U.S. government as a wartime photographer. His primary goal was to document racial intolerance. As he struggled to find the best way to do this, his supervisor Roy Stryker encouraged him to talk with Ella Watson, the nighttime cleaning woman, saying, “Go have a talk with her before you go home this evening. See what she has to say about life and things.” (Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 1966)

And that he did. On the first night he met Ella Watson, Gordon Parks took this now iconic photograph *American Gothic* (p. 4), originally titled *Washington D.C. Government charwoman*.

The photographic partnership forged between Parks and Watson led to several weeks during which Parks photographed Watson in a wide range of daily activities.

Ella Watson, wearing a polka-dot dress, stands before the American flag, which was hanging in a federal building office. She holds a broom in her right hand. To her left rests a well-used mop. She looks slightly away from the camera with next to no emotion.

*American Gothic*, taken eight months after the United States entered World War II, represents Ella Watson’s position within the racial, professional, and economic hierarchies of Washington, D.C., as well as Gordon Parks’s own coming to terms with the realities of Black life in the racially segregated South. It is a sharp critique of the United States, in Parks’s words, “an indictment of America.”

## Discussion Questions

Look closely at this famous photograph of Ella Watson (*American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*), a government cleaning woman. Without judgment, describe what you see. What things do you notice in the photograph? What words best describe how you think Mrs. Watson is feeling? What do you see that makes you say that?

Photographer Gordon Parks was taking pictures of Mrs. Watson while she was at work in a government building. While photographing her, he decided to pose her in front of the flag, holding her broom. He rested her mop nearby. Why do you think Gordon Parks might have posed Mrs. Watson like this? One of his goals as a government photographer was to show the racial inequities that exist in this country. How does this photograph tell a story of inequity?

Compare *American Gothic* to the photograph below of Ella Watson at work sweeping an office.



*Ella Watson Sweeping, Washington, D.C.*, 1942, gelatin silver print, 22 × 17 in. (55.9 × 43.2 cm) (image), 24 × 20 in. (61 × 50.8 cm) (sheet).  
Gordon Parks Foundation

In what ways are the pictures different from one another? In what ways do they tell the same story? Which photo do you think better honors Ella Watson? What do you see that makes you say so?

The title of the photograph takes its name from a well-known painting made by Grant Wood in 1930, also titled, *American Gothic*. Compare these two artworks. Why do you suppose Gordon Parks named his photograph of Ella Watson after this painting by Grant Wood?



Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, oil on beaver board, 30¾ x 25¾ in. (78 x 65.3 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, 1930.934. © 2023 Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, New York.



*Ella Watson and Her Grandchildren, Washington, D.C., 1942, gelatin silver print, 14 × 18 in. (35.6 × 45.7 cm) (image), 16 × 20 in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm) (sheet). Gordon Parks Foundation*

# *Ella Watson and Her Grandchildren, Washington, D.C., 1942*

Many of Gordon Parks's photographs of Ella Watson focus on her role as a caretaker. At the time, she was living with her adopted daughter, Lauretta, and Lauretta's niece and nephews, Muriel, Raymond, and Robert. In a photograph of a mealtime gathering (*Ella Watson and Her Grandchildren*), Parks clearly experimented with the composition, incorporating a doorway, mirror, and even a photograph to tell a complete story in a creative way.

Mrs. Watson sits in the kitchen with the three children while they are having a meal together. Lauretta's young nephew sits on her lap. The two other young children sit at a small table with their bowls. A mirror in the foreground reflects Lauretta's image. In front of the mirror stands a photograph of a well-dressed older couple, Ella Watson's ancestors. Although their living quarters are modest, Parks celebrates the spiritual abundance of the home.

## **Discussion Questions**

Take a close look at the photograph of Ella Watson taking care of three young children in their home about 80 years ago. What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

Gordon Parks experimented with the composition of this photograph not only to tell the story of mealtime in the household, but also to suggest the continuation of care across generations. In what ways has Gordon Parks composed the picture to tell these stories? Consider how he used architecture and furniture in the picture.

It would be easy to look at this picture and think about what the family lacks in financial resources. That was part of Parks's goal of capturing the realities of a Black woman's life at the time. Yet what Parks also captures is the sense of warmth and abundance in this home. How do you think Parks captures this? What details does he include to support this reading of the photograph?

Why do you think it was important to Watson and Parks to include the ancestor portrait on the dresser? How does this portrait connect to the story of family and pride that Parks sought to tell?



*Receiving Anointment, Washington, D.C., 1942, gelatin silver print, 18 × 13 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (45.7 × 35.2 cm) (image), 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm) (sheet).*  
Gordon Parks Foundation

# Receiving Anointment, Washington, D.C., 1942

In *Receiving Anointment* (p. 9), Gordon Parks showed Ella Watson being anointed by the reverend at her spiritual home in Washington, D.C., Verbrycke Spiritual Church. The Verbrycke Spiritual Church, established in 1928, was a new Protestant denomination whose community emphasized personal agency, lifelong learning, and civic service.

Parks made several photographs during a one-day visit to the storefront church. In this image Parks captured a critical moment in the annual flower bowl ritual. The inventive use of a second photographic negative behind the main scene emphasizes the spiritual nature of the experience over the moment itself. The gestures of ritual, the apparent seriousness of the actions shown, and the suggestion of the church space in this and other images made during this visit convey the spiritual importance and richness of the church as a Black community space.

This particular photograph was originally titled, *Washington, D.C. Contributions are made by all who receive the blessing and anointment of Rev. Clara Smith, during the Flower bowl demonstration, a service held once a year at St. Martin's Spiritual Church*. The title provides a little bit of context for the image but also takes the focus off Ella Watson and her leadership role in the church. Watson's all-white attire is an indicator of her status in her Spiritualist church as a deaconess, a woman who prepares the sanctuary for church services and ritual occasions. Later, in the 1960s, she also served as a church mother within the congregation.

Watson's position in the hierarchy of Verbrycke speaks to her community's recognition of her devotion to caring for and nurturing others. Her church was a place for her community to come together in a shared place of faith and purpose in efforts to better their lives.

## Discussion Questions

Look closely at *Receiving Anointment*. What do you see? What do you wonder about?

Gordon Parks photographed many other aspects of Mrs. Watson's church in pictures that don't include her at all. Why do you suppose he might have done that? Why do you think he decided to take a few photographs that *do* include her? Why might it have been important for him to photograph this ritual act and special ceremony? What does the photograph add to our understanding of Ella Watson?

Compare and contrast *Receiving Anointment* to the photograph below of the dresser in her home. What do they have in common? How does each speak to the importance of faith in Mrs. Watson's life?



*Untitled, Washington, D.C., 1942, gelatin silver print, 10 1/8 × 12 7/8 in. (25.7 × 32.7 cm) (image), 16 × 20 in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm) (sheet). Gordon Parks Foundation*

*Receiving Anointment* was originally titled, *Washington, D.C. Contributions are made by all who receive the blessing and anointment of Rev. Clara Smith, during the Flower bowl demonstration, a service held once a year at St. Martin's Spiritual Church*. What does this title emphasize that the current title, *Receiving Anointment*, does not? Why do you suppose the photographer later changed the title? How does the current title, *Receiving Anointment*, change the ways you might look at or think about the picture?



*Untitled, Washington, D.C., 1942*, gelatin silver print, 10 × 12½ in. (25.4 × 32.7 cm) (image), 11 × 14 in. (27.9 × 35.6 cm) (sheet).  
Gordon Parks Foundation

# *Untitled, Washington, D.C., 1942*

Ella Watson welcomed Gordon Parks into her community. Instead of showing Mrs. Watson interacting with her neighbors, Parks chose to take photographs that show what she would have seen and experienced in her daily life. These include posed and candid photos of people on the street, activities at the dry cleaner, and images taken inside and outside J. Benjamin's Groceries and Meats.

In this photograph, we can imagine Ella Watson stepping into the grocery store, saying hello to the two girls, one who has just purchased an ice cream cone, and moving on to do her shopping for the day. The store interior, filled with stacks of canned goods, fruit, meat, bread, sodas, and so much more, confirms what Parks's other community photos show—that this is a lively and commercially thriving neighborhood.

## Discussion Questions

Take a close look at the untitled photograph (p. 11) of the interior of a store in Ella Watson's neighborhood. What do you see? What's going on in this picture?

Gordon Parks made these photographs in such a way as to invite viewers to step into the shoes of Ella Watson. Imagine you are entering this grocery store. What do you smell? What is the temperature? What are you most likely going to purchase? What else are you experiencing?

How has Gordon Parks created a sense of community wellness in this photograph? How does the way he frames (crops) the photograph contribute to

the feelings you get about the place? How does the lighting help inform the feeling?

Compare and contrast the first photograph with another photo (below), also taken inside the grocery. In what ways are they alike? How do they differ? Think about Gordon Parks's proximity to the man in the second photo. Why do you think he might have taken this picture from the position he did? How does this photograph give you a sense of what it might have been like for Ella Watson when she visited the store? What do you feel when you look at this picture?



*Untitled, Washington, D.C., 1942, gelatin silver print, 10⅞ × 12⅞ in. (25.7 × 32.7 cm) (image), 11 × 14 in. (27.9 × 35.6 cm) (sheet).*  
Gordon Parks Foundation

# Further Discussion

Gordon Parks could have simply photographed Ella Watson cleaning government offices at night, but he chose instead to tell a more balanced and complex human story by showing different aspects of her identity. If someone wanted to photograph *you* over the course of a few weeks, what aspects of your identity would you want represented? Why would you choose those particular things? Where would you bring the photographer in order for them to represent your life, values, and identity?

Gordon Parks learned a lot about Ella Watson and her community by documenting many aspects of her life. How would you go about documenting your community today? What would you do differently if you were going to document someone else's community? Whom might you partner with to learn more about that community?

When Gordon Parks arrived in Washington, D.C., he found it difficult to tell the story of racial inequity through photographs. It was not until he met Ella Watson, learned her story, and experienced her home and community life that he truly understood how he could use his camera to illustrate inequity in the nation's capital city. Challenge yourself to think about how you would tell people about racial inequity in your community. What art form would you choose? What kinds of images would you want to create? Why?