Gordon Parks & Roy DeCarava

Parks 1912–2006 · American — DeCarava 1919–2009 · American

Two ways of photographing Black American life in the same era



American Gothic, Washington, D.C. · Gordon Parks, 1942

"I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs."

— Gordon Parks

KEY WORKS

- American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942 — his direct response to Grant Wood, made for the Farm Security Administration (Parks)
- Emerging Man, Harlem, 1952 — LIFE magazine photo-essay work (Parks)
- The Sweet Flypaper of Life, 1955 — with poet Langston Hughes, 140 photographs woven into a fictional narrative of everyday Harlem life (DeCarava)
- Graduation, 1949 — a young woman in a white dress framed against a rubble-strewn Harlem street (DeCarava)

CONTEXT

Parks and DeCarava were foundational Black American photographers of the same generation, working the same city and often the same subjects from opposite angles. Parks worked outward, for a mass audience — LIFE magazine photo-essays built to move readers who had never set foot in Harlem, images made to argue, to indict, to be seen by everyone. DeCarava worked inward, for the community itself — quiet, deliberately underexposed, low-contrast images that photograph Harlem the way Harlem actually looked at night, refusing to lighten his prints for an outside audience's comfort. Both photographed jazz; both photographed dignity under hardship; one aimed his camera at the country, the other at his neighbors.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

This session sits inside the Irving Penn arc and Tony's second bookmaking session, where students are literally building a photobook by hand. DeCarava's Sweet Flypaper of Life — a real, published photobook that tells a story through sequence — is the clearest possible model for what a Photobook Template can do. Parks, alongside him, shows the other route: the single photo-essay image built to carry an argument on its own.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Sweet Flypaper of Life tells its story through the sequence of images, not any single photograph. As you lay out your own Photobook Template today, what order tells your story best — and why?

2. Parks made American Gothic as a direct, deliberate response to a painting. Is a photograph that answers another artwork more or less powerful than one that stands alone?

MORE IMAGES



Emerging Man, Harlem · Parks, 1952



Graduation · DeCarava, 1949



Coltrane and Elvin · DeCarava



The Sweet Flypaper of Life (cover) · DeCarava & Hughes, 1955



Self-portrait (as sourced) · DeCarava