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GRAND RAPIDS ART MUSEUM ANNOUNCES OPENING OF *AMERICA BLACK AND WHITE: GORDON PARKS PHOTOGRAPHY* WITH SPECIAL GUEST LECTURER DAVID PARKS

Gordon Parks' Son Will Speak at 7:00pm on Friday, June 27, 2008 during the Opening Night Reception

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., June 26, 2008 – The Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM), a new leading cultural destination, presents the work of Gordon Parks (1912-2006). Parks' son, David, will speak on opening night, providing an incomparable view of the artist's life and notable achievements. Gordon Parks was the first African-American photographer to gain an international reputation in the twentieth century and he opened the field for others with his accomplishments in documentary and fashion photography. In 1948, Parks was hired by *Life* magazine, the publication—more than any other—that elevated the art of photography in the minds of the American public.

The exhibition opens at 5pm June 27 and closes October 12, 2008.

Organized by the Grand Rapids Art Museum in cooperation with the Gordon Parks Foundation, the exhibition *America Black and White: Gordon Parks Photography* consists of thirty-five photographs, including rare vintage prints recently acquired by the museum.

Parks' work and life as an artist during the five decades since joining *Life* magazine continued to expand. His photographs of the 1960s and 70s are compelling images of America in an era of social change. He wrote books, composed music, and became one of the first African-American filmmakers to win major awards. Gordon Parks died in 2006 leaving a body of photographic works of prodigious significance.

"*Gordon Parks Photography* is not only an exhibition, but also an acquisition. We are pleased to be able to acquire thirteen key works of Gordon Parks for the art museum's collection," said Celeste Adams, museum director. "We are particularly honored to welcome Parks' son David to Grand Rapids for the opening of the exhibition."

America Black and White will include a variety of educational activities including lectures, film series and weekend family workshops. The Museum Store will offer a selection of merchandise related to the exhibition.

In addition to the opening night lecture with David Parks, educational programs include:

- August 22, 2008: *A Tribute to Gordon Parks*, a Friday Nights at GRAM special featuring the music, poetry and prose of Gordon Parks as well as work from Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes and Martin Luther King, Jr. (subjects of Parks' photographs).
- September 5, 2008: Dr. Randal Jelks, the 2008 Langston Hughes Visiting Professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas, will lecture on "The Learning Tree of Gordon Parks: From Life magazine to John Shaft and Beyond."

- Weekend film series will feature related work including *Half Past Autumn: The Life and Works of Gordon Parks*.
- Saturday mornings during the exhibition, ArtVentures for Families will create art projects inspired by the works of Gordon Parks.

Visit the website at www.gramonline.org for an extensive list of related programming.

About Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks (1912–2006) was the first African-American photographer to gain an international reputation in the twentieth century. Prior to his recognition after World War II, African-American photographers were restricted to studio portraiture in black communities. The most famous example was James Van der Zee, who was active in New York during the 1920s and 1930s and a notable figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Parks' distinguished work for *Life* magazine was a pivotal influence on a new generation of black photographers who recorded the events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Parks was born the youngest of fifteen children in the small prairie town of Fort Scott, Kansas. When his mother died in 1927, he was sent to live with his sister in St. Paul, Minnesota, where his brother-in-law turned him out when he was still a teenager. Homeless on the winter streets of Minnesota, he survived through jobs as a dishwasher, busboy, and piano player barely managing to earn a living. He eventually got a steady job with the railroad as a dining car waiter.

During one of his runs on the transcontinental train from Chicago to Seattle he picked up a magazine left by a passenger. It featured images from the Farm Security Administration of the desperate rural poverty of the Great Depression by photographers Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and John Collier. Seeking to find his own voice, Parks purchased a camera for \$7.50 in 1938.

The first photographs he shot revealed a significant talent. He quickly sought opportunities to work as photographer and ways to make a living in the profession. In 1940, laid off his job, hungry and desperate, he walked into a stylish dress shop in St. Paul and told the owners he wanted to do fashion photography. They gave him a chance and displayed the photographs he took in the store window. They caught eye of Marva Louis, wife of the champion boxer, Joe Louis. She invited Parks to work in Chicago and there he won a Julian Rosenwald Fellowship and a job with the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C.

In 1944 Parks rented a room at Harlem's YMCA and began looking for work in New York. He took his fashion photographs to *Harper's Bazaar*. They were impressed but explained that as a Hearst organization, they were restricted from hiring "Negroes." Parks went to his friend Roy Stryker from FSA who sent him to Edward Steichen. "That son-of-a-bitch Brodovitch!" Steichen said and scribbled down a name and gave it to Parks. "Go see this man at *Vogue*!" That afternoon *Vogue* magazine hired Gordon Parks. During the next four years, he traveled to the world's fashion capitals on assignment for the magazine while continuing to work independently on other subjects that also interested him.

In 1948 he was hired by *Life* magazine and produced a significant body of photographic work. In addition to photography, Parks also wrote books, composed music, and pursued filmmaking. Gordon Parks died in 2006.

About the Grand Rapids Art Museum

The mission of the Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM) is to provide a gathering place where people of all ages and backgrounds can enrich their lives through interaction with works of art in a

thought-provoking and creative way. Established in the heart of downtown Grand Rapids, the new art museum is internationally known for its distinguished design and gold LEED certified status. Established in 1910 as the Grand Rapids Art Association, GRAM has grown to include more than 5,000 works of art, including American and European 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture and over 3,000 works on paper. Embracing the city's legacy as a leading center of design and manufacturing, GRAM has a growing collection in the area of design and modern craft.

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