



LESSON THREE

IMAGE AND OBSERVATION

The More You Observe

“When you are traveling around the world and you are in a place where you have never been before, the first thing you have to do is observe. The more you observe the more you understand what’s going on around you.”

Adger Cowans, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*



Essential Questions

- What is close observation?
- How might observing lead to understanding?
- How did Gordon Parks’ close observation reflect in his photography?

In this lesson, students will explore Gordon Parks’ practice of close observation and how it impacted his work. The term “close observation,” within the context of this lesson, refers to the intentional practice of paying close attention over time to context, subjects, communities, or issues to uncover new facets of a narrative and tell previously hidden or overlooked stories. For Parks, close observation became not only a professional practice he instinctively relied on, but a way of engaging and understanding the world around him.



Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Build background knowledge on Gordon Parks’ early years and how he began to develop his skills as a professional photographer
- Closely view and analyze Parks’ photographs of Ella Watson
- Use visual analysis skills to interpret and discuss the Ella Watson images
- Practice close observation and apply it to their own photographs



Materials

- Equipment for viewing film clips and for projecting high resolution photographs
- A shared online space where students can access additional resources
- Camera (phone or digital camera)

All photographs by Gordon Parks courtesy and copyright of The Gordon Parks Foundation.

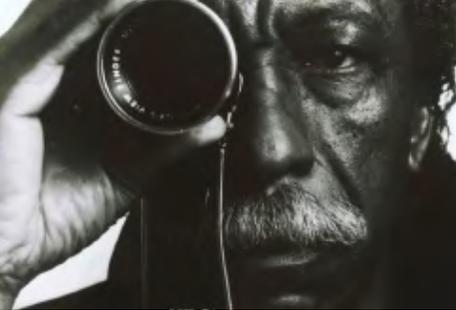


IMAGE AND OBSERVATION

ACTIVITIES

1 OPENING

Organize the class into small groups. Have students discuss, document, and prepare to share responses to these prompts:

- Define the term “observation.”
- Are there differences between looking at something and closely observing something?
- Brainstorm several examples of what a person can learn through close observation.

Share how journalist Nelson George reflects on the work of Gordon Parks:

“Gordon was this guy who could connect with all of these people, and not necessarily be everyone’s best friend, but gain respect enough to move in their spaces....

It’s this ability to move through different environments. A photographer, particularly a really good photographer, isn’t supposed to be imposing—especially if you’re doing photojournalism... His whole thing was to be there, and have a point of view, definitely had a point of view about Black liberation, Black freedom, white oppression, fashion, a lot of stuff, but not to impose that in the environment. To be able to be there and look around...and be present, but not to interfere. To be able to sit back, let it happen, observe closely what’s going on and find out what’s interesting about it. He had that ability and it comes through in all of his photography.”

- What are the most important ideas in this quote about Gordon Parks’ use of observation in his approach to photography?

2 BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Teacher Note: Have students read this background information independently or in their small group.

Early in his career, Gordon Parks worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a government agency created in 1937 by President Roosevelt to aid poor farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and migrant workers. He recalls his time at the FSA as very formative to shaping his practice of close observation as a photographer. [The FSA] developed out of an earlier New Deal agency called the Resettlement Administration (RA). The FSA resettled poor farmers on more productive land, promoted soil conservation, provided emergency relief and loaned money to help farmers buy and improve farms. It built experimental rural communities, suburban “Greenbelt towns” and sanitary camps for migrant farm workers.

One of the New Deal’s most progressive—and controversial—agencies, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) advocated government planning and economic intervention to improve living conditions in rural America. To defend and promote the Resettlement Administration, director Rexford Tugwell created a publicity department to document rural poverty and government efforts to alleviate it. It included a photographic unit with an odd name—the “Historical Section.” In 1937, the RA and its Historical Section were merged into the newly created FSA. Tugwell chose Roy Stryker, a college economics instructor, to run the Historical Section that employed a group of photographers to document, among other social topics, the effects of the Great Depression on rural America. Between 1935 and 1943, FSA photographers produced nearly eighty thousand pictures of life in Depression-era America and remains the largest documentary photography project of a people ever undertaken.¹

Gordon Parks met Ella Watson, a Black woman whose job was to clean the same building in Washington D.C. where he worked. Parks’ portraits of Watson, among his earliest series, taught him the importance of observing and getting to know subjects in order to capture revealing, emotional narratives that have the power to effect change. To underscore this point Parks said, “Roy Stryker taught me that when you are doing a story, it’s not for you to accept the people, but the people to accept you. Because you are going into their presence.”

Watch Film Clip 1: Ella Watson (4:34)

Access in “Film Clips”

- This film clip explains how Gordon Parks came to photograph Ella Watson during his time at the Farm Security Administration and his recognition of the importance of being present, closely observing his subject, and communicating the context in which he is photographing through their eyes.

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/files/atlanta/education/depression-curriculum/section-2.pdf>, p. 2.

3 A CLOSER LOOK: ANALYZING PHOTOGRAPHS

After watching the film clip Ella Watson, have students view several photographs from the series Gordon Parks took of Ella Watson.

Ella Watson United States Government Charwoman



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



Gordon Parks, *Receiving Anointment*, Washington, D.C., 1942



Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Washington, D.C. 1942



Gordon Parks, *Ella Watson with her Grandchildren*, Washington, D.C., 1942

Small-Group Discussion: The Practice of Close Observation with Ella Watson photographs

Organize students into small discussion groups and share the other images from the *Ella Watson United States Charwoman* collection, found [here](#).²

- What do you think Gordon Parks wanted to communicate through the collection of photographs he took of Ella Watson?
- What do these photographs reveal about Gordon Parks' process?
- Gordon Parks recounts that he thought of the [iconic 1930 painting](#) by artist Grant Wood when composing the photograph of Ella Watson titled "Government Charwoman."
 - Compare the Grant Wood painting with Gordon Parks' photograph of Ella Watson. As a group, take some time to discuss your impressions and interpretations.
- Consider the history during the span of time from the 1930 painting to the 1943 photograph (Great Depression, World War II, Jim Crow laws). How does the social, economic, and political context of both pieces of art inform your understanding of them?
- Gordon Parks said of the "Government Charwoman" photograph (sometimes referred to as his *American Gothic*) "I made a very innocent, bold, outrageous statement." What do you think is his innocent, bold, outrageous statement?

² <https://www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/articles-and-essays/documenting-america/ella-watson-united-states-government-charwoman/>

4 CLOSE VIEW OF INTERVIEWS

Teacher Note: The filmmakers conducted numerous interviews to produce ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks***. The full interviews are accessible in the Interview Archive on the [Kunhardt Film Foundation](#) website. A selection of these interviews, edited and curated together here to create interview threads, are available to deepen students' learning and provide access to new scholarship.

Ella Watson (13:39)

Access in "Interviews"

- Watch and listen to Philip Brookman and Khalil Muhammad expand upon Gordon Parks' process in creating the photo essay on Ella Watson.

Closing Discussion

Gordon Parks shared, "Roy Stryker taught me that when you are doing a story, it's not for you to accept the people, but the people to accept you. Because you are going into their presence."

- How does this principle apply to the practice of close observation?
- How do you think the practice of close observation influenced the photography of Gordon Parks?
- What do you learn about yourself and the world around you through close observation?

Extended Learning

Have students learn more about the photographs created by the Farm Security Administration and later, the Office of War Information from 1937 to 1944. These links to the Library of Congress resources are particularly relevant in units on media literacy and historical research as well as American History units on studying the Great Depression, the New Deal policies of President Franklin Roosevelt, and America during World War II.

About the Collection:

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/about-this-collection/>

Video Explanation: (begin after first minute)

<https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-5541> (14:00)



INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

Share with students that close observation is critical in photography. Each of the photographers in ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*** mentions how Parks is a model for the importance of this practice in their own work of visual storytelling.

Here are three examples of photographs, one from each artist featured in the documentary.



Jamel Shabazz, *House of Pain. 4 Upper House*, New York, NY 1984



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Shea and Zion Drink From a Spring*, from the series *Flint is Family*, 2017



Devin Allen, *Coach With Boxers*, Baltimore, MD, 2020

Discuss:

In ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*** and through their full interview in the Interview Archive, each artist references their practice of close observation in the construction of the image. As you look at the photographs, discuss in pairs or small groups using these questions:

- What do you notice in the photograph?
- What is each photographer observing?



PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

CLOSE OBSERVATION

Sample Educator Script

“For this photography exercise, you will be creating a photograph, or series of photographs, through close observation.

First, have a notebook or journal available to record your observations.

Second, spend some time with your person or subject and closely observe what is happening without your camera. If time allows, try and observe at different times of day or in different locations, whatever offers some variety to the situation.

Finally, when you feel you are ready to communicate something, think about how you want to frame your images, and then take one or more photographs of this subject.

When you are finished with this portfolio assignment, write a brief artist statement reflecting on your process of close observation and how it informed the photographs you composed. An artist statement helps the audience understand your artistic process and vision. It is written in the first person and can include key ideas, inspiration, resources, goals, challenges, or other insights you want to share. An artist statement is usually brief and concise, generally a short paragraph.

Here are some suggested questions and ideas to guide this artist statement:

- Share your process of observation. What did you notice just spending time with your subject without your camera?
- What did you feel was successful? What was challenging?
- Reflect on any new insights you gained about yourself as an observer and as a photographer?”

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To request the full film for an educational screening, visit www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org