
Gordon Parks photographed Ali for Life magazine when the athlete was in the midst of an intense national controversy after changing his name from Cassius Clay, converting to Islam, and joining the Black Muslim cause. He was chastised for anti-white sentiments and for declaring himself a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War (on grounds that his religion forbade him to fight in this conflict). Amid the uproar, Parks met Ali in Miami in 1966, where the champ was training, then accompanied him to London for his next fight. In his photographs and text, Parks crafted a psychological portrait of Ali that most Americans might never have imagined; he hoped to rehabilitate Ali's image by showing the human side of the smooth-talking fleet-footed boxer who often came off as supremely confident, even arrogant, in his public appearances. The article was tremendously popular and helped redefine Ali's career.

Four years later, in 1970, Parks profiled Ali again—this time as he was attempting to win back his world heavyweight crown from Joe Frazier. While the initial images in the 1970 Life article express the ferocity the twenty-eight-year-old boxer brought to his training, Parks again evinced sympathy for Ali through disarming images, such as the famous picture of him glancing wide-eyed in the locker room.

The twenty-two photographs on display in American Champion provide a glimpse into these two picture stories and the burgeoning friendship between Ali and Parks at a pivotal moment in each man's career. The exhibition remains open through September 24.

About Gordon Parks
Gordon Parks was one of the seminal figures of twentieth century photography. A humanitarian with a deep commitment to social justice, he left behind a body of work that documents many of the most important aspects of American culture from the early 1940s up until his death in 2006, with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life. In addition, Parks was also a celebrated composer, author, and filmmaker who interacted with many of the most prominent people of his era - from politicians and artists to celebrities and athletes.

About The Gordon Parks Foundation exhibition space
The Gordon Parks Foundation's mission is to permanently preserve the work of Gordon Parks, make it available to the public through exhibitions, books, and electronic media, and support artistic and educational activities that advance what Parks described as “the common search for a better life and a better world.” The primary purpose of The Gordon Parks Foundation’s exhibition space is to present focused exhibits of Parks’ photography, as part of the Foundation's commitment to educating the public and preserving his work.

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