The Gordon Parks Gallery

at

Metropolitan State University

“In my youth, violence became my enemy. Photography, writing, music and film are the weapons I use against it.”

– Gordon Parks

Grand Reopening May 2010

Gallery’s new name to be celebrated with an exhibition of work by Gordon Parks.
The late Gordon Parks would have treasured Metropolitan State University.

Like many of the university’s students, Gordon Parks confronted steep challenges. Parks combated systemic racism as an African American and overcame poverty and no formal education to emerge as one of America’s foremost photojournalists and an acclaimed writer, filmmaker and composer. The youngest of 15 children who forged much of his artistic sensibility while living as a young man in Saint Paul, Parks would identify with the pluck and perseverance of many Metropolitan State students and alumni. And he would have admired the university’s embrace of diversity; it is the most ethnically diverse four-year higher-education institution in Minnesota.

Parks especially would have cherished Metropolitan State’s art gallery.

As was Parks, the gallery—located on the third floor of the university’s new library—is committed to presenting artistic expression in varied forms and in serving underrepresented communities. Perhaps Parks’ most famous photograph was “American Gothic,” an iconic image of a black cleaning woman that symbolized racial bigotry and inequality. While he was at ease shooting high fashion, Manhattan socialites and celebrities like Barbra Streisand, Ingrid Bergman and Muhammad Ali, Parks’ most evocative photos illuminated poverty and powerlessness. Parks produced riveting photo essays on the 1960s Black Power movement, a Harlem youth gang, and a desperately ill boy in a Rio de Janeiro slum that produced enormous public response after it was published in *Life* magazine, where he worked for 24 years and was that publication’s first black photographer. He authored *The Learning Tree*, a popular
coming-of-age semiautobiographical novel about a young black man experiencing racism, love and loss. He later became the first African American artist to direct a major Hollywood film with the same title as well as compose music for its soundtrack. The most celebrated of five films he directed was *Shaft*, a 1971 commercial blockbuster that featured America’s first black hero. The largely self-taught Parks also penned other novels, memoirs, four volumes of poetry, a ballet and several orchestral scores.

Matching Parks’ convictions, Metropolitan State’s art gallery showcases a groundbreaking, multicultural mix of virtually all forms of the creative visual arts. Because of these shared values, it is fitting for Metropolitan State to commemorate Parks by renaming the university art gallery in his honor.

To help preserve Parks’ legacy, the university has just launched a campaign to raise $250,000 which will be used for endowment and ongoing programs for years to come. Some of that funding will support community outreach, including establishing ties with the Gordon Parks High School in Saint Paul and enhancing connections with the city’s East Side, one of the most diverse communities in Minnesota and home to Metropolitan State’s Saint Paul Campus.

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