

Gordon Parks: A Photography Response



Ulrich Museum of Art

Objects:

Gordon Parks, *Muhammad Ali in Training, Miami, Florida*, 1966. Gelatin silver print on paper. Gift of Marni Stevens, courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Gordon Parks, *Muhammad Ali*, 1966. Gelatin silver print on paper. Museum purchase, courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Description:

A photography worksheet assignment for students to independently explore Gordon Parks' two photographs of Muhammad Ali, focusing on composition and tonal contrast. Students will produce three photographs in response to the Parks photographs in this lesson.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject: Photography

Length of lesson: Independent work time 1-2 hours

Standards:

VA:Re7.1.Ia Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.

VA:Re11.1.Ia Describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

VA:Pr6.1.IIa Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.

VA: Re7.2.IIa Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.

VA:Cn10.1.IIa Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

VA:Re11.1.IIIa Appraise the impact of an artist or a group of artists on the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a society.

VA:Cr2.1.IIIa Experiment, plan, and make multiple works of art and design that explore a personally meaningful theme, idea, or concept.

Objectives:

Photography students will become more familiar with composition and tonal contrast. They will explore how photography impacts social/political issues and transfer that into their own work selecting a contemporary issue to respond to.

Resources:

<https://de1.zetcom-group.de/MpWeb-mpWichitaUlrich/v?mode=online&objectId=8168>

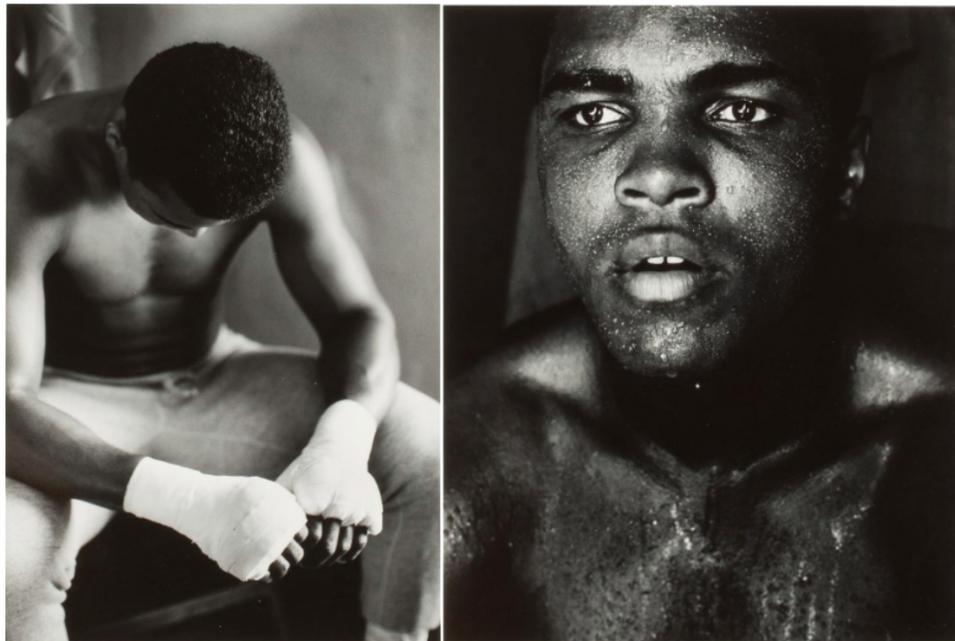
<https://de1.zetcom-group.de/MpWeb-mpWichitaUlrich/v?mode=online&objectId=7564>

<https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/>

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Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. gained notoriety from winning the gold medal in boxing at the 1960 Summer Olympics and taking the world heavyweight title from Sonny Liston in 1964. After befriending prominent Black Muslim leaders Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, he converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. This, his support of the civil rights movement, and Ali's refusal to fight in the Vietnam War (as it was against his religion) caused an uproar in his white fan base. He was declared "anti-white" and a bigot.

It was in the midst of this uproar that Gordon Parks traveled with Muhammad Ali. Parks, who was born in the eastern Kansas town of Fort Scott, was a self-taught photographer and went on to become the first African American photographer hired by *LIFE* magazine. His photographs of Ali showcased the athlete in quiet, introspective moments rather than in the throes of a match. Parks' photographs challenged readers to look beyond Ali's outspoken public persona and instead see him as a person with emotions as complex as anyone else's. His work helped define the rest of Muhammad Ali's career.



Left: Gordon Parks, *Muhammad Ali in Training, Miami, Florida, 1966*. Gelatin silver print on paper. Gift of Marni Stevens, courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Right: Gordon Parks, *Muhammad Ali, 1966*. Gelatin silver print on paper. Museum purchase, courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Take some time to examine Parks' photographs of Muhammad Ali.

How do you think Ali is feeling in these images?
How do you think these images were received during the 1960s?

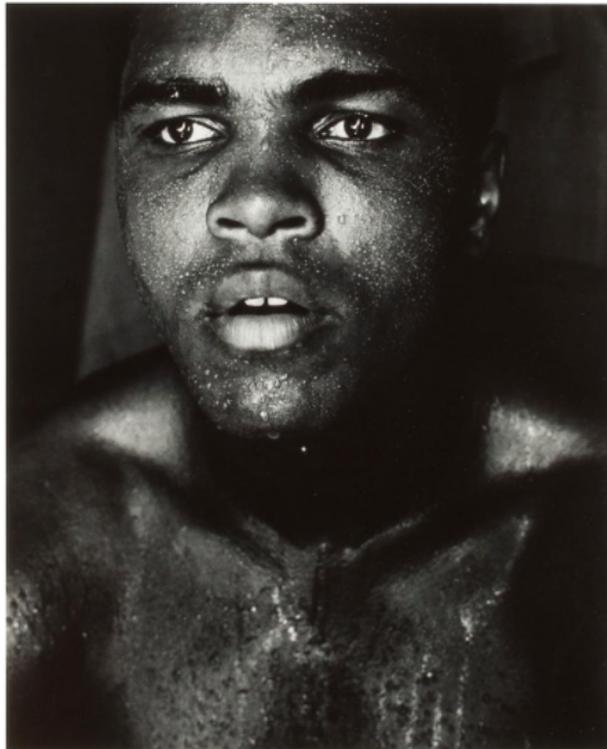
Notice his use of composition and tonal contrast.

Composition: how a subject is arranged in an image.

Notice how he frames his subject within the photograph. What is included and what is excluded from the frame of the photograph?

Tonal Contrast: the differences from the lightest tone (white) to darkest tone (black) with middle being grays.

Examine Parks' use of tonal contrast in this image by circling the lightest and darkest areas:



Photography Response

Now that you have learned more about Gordon Parks and his techniques for capturing Muhammad Ali, take what you have learned and use it in your own photographs.

Photo 1: Take a photograph while paying close attention to the composition. Select something you want to be the focus of your photograph and consider how the framing of the photo can be used to draw the eye where you want it to go. The purpose of this is not to recreate one of Ali's poses, but rather to utilize Parks' use of framing and composition as a baseline for creating a photograph of your own.

Photo 2: Take a photograph while paying close attention to contrast. When you have selected what you want to be the focus of your photograph, consider its lighting. Having a variety of lights and darks can make a photograph more interesting. Play around with tonal contrast in black and white photography.

Photo 3: You have examined how Parks achieved a more emotional, personal portrait. Using what you have learned about composition and contrast, choose a subject and take a portrait that communicates a feeling or emotion. Consider how Parks' photographs of Muhammad Ali changed public perception of this outspoken athlete. Can you change how the viewer responds to the subject of your photograph by altering the composition and/or lighting?