

Art World

What Art Defined the Civil Rights Era? We Asked 7 Museum Curators to Pick One Work That Crystallized the Moment

Curators from across the country share the works that capture the ethos of the era.

Katie White (<https://news.artnet.com/about/katie-white-1066>), January 20, 2020



Gordon Parks, *Department Store* (1956). Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

In honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we tasked curators across the country with the difficult task of choosing a single work of art that they feel defines the ethos of the Civil Rights Era. Their choices present a kaleidoscopic and occasionally surprising group of works that span continents and centuries—from iconic photographs to ritual sculptural objects.

See the works and read the curators' insights below.

Joe Minter's *Children In Jail* (2013)



Joe Minter, *Children In Jail* (2013). Courtesy of Souls Grown Deep.

This contemporary work by Joe Minter reflects back on Birmingham, Alabama’s Children’s Crusade: On May 2, 1963, more than 1,000 students skipped school and took to the streets from the doors of the 16th Street Baptist Church, and for days faced police violence and dog attacks, brutal sprays of fire hoses, and mass arrests. Ultimately, more than 3,000 children took part in the direct actions. More than 500 children were jailed by Alabama Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor, including 75 kids crammed into a cell meant for eight adults, and still others locked into animal pens at the fairgrounds for days on end. Thanks to their sacrifices and the widespread media images of brutalized black children, President Kennedy took notice, the city negotiated with Martin Luther King Jr., jailed demonstrators were freed, and Connor lost his job.

In Minter’s multi-part sculpture, a seemingly domestic image of praying children is placed behind bright red bars. The violence of Birmingham’s police and fire departments is indicated by the strewn hats and smiling dog statue, laced with rusted chains alongside tools that Minter uses to refer to 400 years of labor and oppression inflicted on Blacks by whites. A makeshift cage traps three baby dolls, representing kids in cages who fought “JUST TO B FREE.”

I’m still struck by my memory of this work, five years after seeing it at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama. And, as a side note, I’ll add that every person living in the US should visit Montgomery’s Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the Equal Justice Initiative’s racial injustice museum and elegiac monument to more than 4,400 lynching victims—African American men, women, and children.

—Carmen Hermo, associate curator, Brooklyn Museum

Will Count’s *Elizabeth Eckford of The Little Rock Nine* (1954)



Will Count, *Elizabeth Eckford of The Little Rock Nine* (1954). Courtesy of Getty Images.

It can be argued that there is no more important medium to the Civil Rights movement than that of photography. The documentation of violences enacted upon black people in the south—in private lunch counters, in public parks and bridges, in educational spaces, and so forth—and the subsequent mass dissemination of this imagery, heightened public awareness of such abuses and galvanized a public's increasing demand for judicial and legislative action that would enforce the equality of African Americans. Indeed it said that the mass reproduction of Charles Moore's infamous photograph of Civil Rights protesters being high-pressure water hosed at a spring 1963 action directly impacted the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Yet as scholars and curators like Leigh Raiford, Maurice Berger, and Connie Choi have written, the usage, status, and function of photography during the movement was much more complicated than mere documentary realism. For instance, there was not uniformity around how these images were read and understood by all publics, even intra-racially; nor did all images themselves evince the larger context in which these actions took place or offer up the full scope of the movement's participants. Indeed, as Raiford argues, black people increasingly turned to photography as a tool for shaping and presenting their own images to themselves, not just an imagined white public.

Of course, photography in this moment also calls forth questions of spectacle, and that of the ethics surrounding the circulation of images that feature violence being enacted upon, or violated, black persons. When has an image served its "purpose"? How do the reproduction of these images serve to shape public consciousness over time in ways more complex than mere "awareness"?

In this image, a group of young white women and men are angry. This is gleaned from the facts of the faces: of the menacing glares, of the mouth agape in rage. A slight step ahead of them is the target of this terror: a young black woman, looking forward through her sunglasses, clutching her binder in hand.

There are the things that a photograph can and cannot say. For instance, it had always been the plan for the group of students chosen to integrate Little Rock Central High School in the fall of 1957 to arrive together. One of the “Little Rock Nine,” 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford had ultimately arrived at the wrong meeting place, not having received word of a shifted meeting plan. In this photograph, she makes her way through a mob of hundreds, with her gaze directed forward through her sunglasses, as she clutches her binder in hand, alone. This mob—which includes Hazel Bryan, who shouts aspersions at her back, and the National Guard deployed to terrorize the integrating students—prevents her from entering school on this day. It would take the deployment of troops at the command of the president to allow safe (physical) entrance for Eckford and the other eight, some weeks later. The traumatic events of this day will go on to effect Eckford into her adulthood.

When I see this photograph, I think of the ordinary and the extraordinary, of youth and of bravery. How a young, ordinary girl, was forced to occupy a posture of extraordinary bravery in the face of a violence that was extraordinarily hostile and in part extraordinary in its ordinariness. I sit with what that means.

— Ashley James, *associate curator of contemporary art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*

Elizabeth Catlett’s *Homage To My Young Black Sisters* (1968)



Elizabeth Catlett, *Homage To My Young Black Sisters* (1968)

Homage to My Young Black Sisters represents the influence of hundreds of everyday young women who participated in grassroots organizing and revolutionary activity during the Civil Rights era. Catlett often identified with these women because she, too, was consistently beleaguered by the US government for her revolutionary political ties and

eventually forced to relinquish her American citizenship, in 1962. The gesture of the sculpture is clear. Its clenched fist and dominant stance shouts Black Power in the wake of Jim Crow segregation. Catlett speaks openly to her audience with this work, revealing that the pulse of the Civil Rights era began with black women.

—Kelli Morgan, associate curator of American art, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields

Gordon Parks's *Ethel Sharrieff, Chicago, Illinois (1963)*



Gordon Parks, *Ethel Sharrieff, Chicago, Illinois (1963)*.

No other visual medium defined the Civil Rights movement than documentary photography, particularly the black-and-white images of male leaders, cordons of marchers under turbulent skies, or black children in their Sunday best blasted with G-forces by the Birmingham fire department. Gordon Parks, one of the great chroniclers of the era, made the important decision to equally document black people in their communities, often in moments of peace and self-sufficiency. His “Black Muslims” series for *Life* magazine was a wake-up call for many non-black Americans who were fascinated and alarmed by the group. Park’s portrait *Ethel Sharrieff* for the magazine feature stands as an iconic image of the series and the Civil Rights era. A single woman set against an army of sisters encapsulates all the resolve, communitarianism, and new consciousness the moment was brewing, without falling back on any proscribed clichés.

—Naomi Beckwith, senior curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Frank Bowling's *Night Journey (1969–70)*



Frank Bowling, *Night Journey* (1969–70). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It's a tall—even impossible—task to summarize the Civil Rights Era with a single work of art. The best I can do is to highlight a few of my favorites (across media) and admit to a particular favorite in the Met collection. I love so many of Gordon Parks's photographs from the period, especially *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama* (1956), an image that never loses its power. Elizabeth Catlett's *Black Unity* (1968) is a great sculptural icon of the period. David Hammons's body prints, such as *The Door (Admissions Office)* (1969), are difficult to surpass in their inventiveness and visceral impact. A favorite of mine at the Met is Frank Bowling's *Night Journey* (1969-70), a beautiful painting in the artist's "Map" series. Bowling masterfully employs his staining and pouring techniques to ruminate on the forced sea journeys endured by enslaved people taken from West Africa to the Americas and West Indies.

—Randall Griffey, curator, the Metropolitan Museum of Art

David Hammons's *The Door (Admissions Office)* (1969)



David Hammons, *The Door (Admissions Office)* (1969). Courtesy of Collection of Friends, the Foundation of the California African American Museum, Los Angeles.

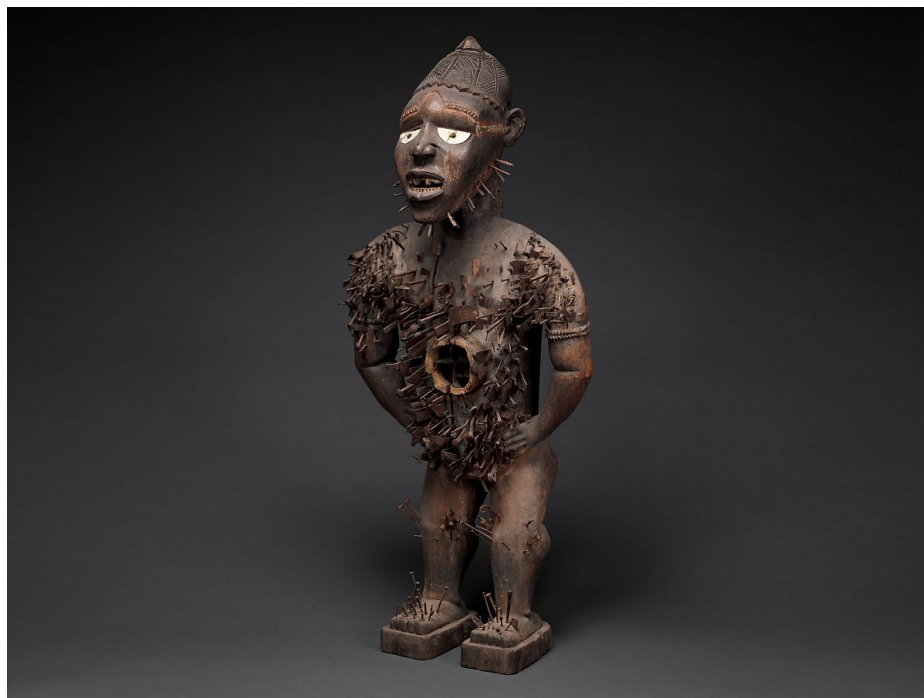
With the ridges of fingerprints and curls of hair still visible in the dried black oil, a human Rorschach test is printed upon a transparent windowed admissions door. Hand-prints halo above the image of a double face; the gesture is one, often futile, made in pleas for safety, one which remains important in protests of communal recognition. David Hammons's *The Door (Admissions Office)* (1969) not only critically comments on the blockades of academia, civil rights, and nationhood, but speaks directly to the political commitments and legacy activism of youth in the country.

This work continues to reaffirm the presence of barricades and borders that remain closed but could be easily opened, if only for the single turn of a wrist. This work, often generously loaned by the California African American Museum, continues to be emblematic of artistic interventions of the Civil Rights era and has been a part of significant exhibitions

such as “Crosscurrents: Africa and Black Diasporas in Dialogue, 1960-1980” at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco; “Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties” at the Brooklyn Museum, and is now on view as a part of the international tour of “Soul of a Nation.”

—Emily A. Kuhlmann, director of exhibitions and curatorial affairs, Museum of the African Diaspora

Congolese’s Nkisi Nkondi (Power Figure)



Nkisi Nkondi, 19th century, Republic of Congo, Angola, Chiloango River region. Wood, plant fiber, iron, resin, ceramics, textile, pigment. Yombe artist. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Often referred to as a power figure, *nkisi* was a container that held the *bilongo* (medicine) that purified the self and community in “Kongo” culture. This figure mediated the sacred and profane spheres, addressing social concerns and warding off evil spirits. It’s jarring presence endured many driven nails that bind promises and seal deals. No other symbol could have encapsulated the Civil Rights movement in this country. Despite all the tribulations, progress was made in archiving some of the aspirations that defined the cause at that time.

—Ndubuisi C. Ezeoluomba, Françoise Billion Richardson curator of African art, New Orleans Museum of Art

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