

Ansel Adams

Ansel Easton Adams (1902-1984) was born on February 20, 1902, in San Francisco, California, near the Golden Gate Bridge. His father, a successful businessman, sent his son to private, as well as public, schools; beyond such formal education, however, Adams was largely self-taught. Charles and Olive Adams gave their son, Ansel, the freedom to grow and become whatever his intellect and talents would allow him to be. At twelve, unable to stand the confinement and tedium of the classroom, he utterly disrupted his lessons with wild laughter and undisguised contempt for the inept ramblings of his teachers. His father decided that Ansel's formal education was best ended. From that point forward, the boy was home-schooled in Greek, the English classics, algebra, and the glories of the ocean, inlets, and rocky beaches that surrounded their home very near San Francisco. He also made a serious study of the piano, which he thought was to be his avocation. Another rich source of learning was the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal, and contained exhibits and displays from around the world that fascinated young Ansel for a full year. His earliest aspiration was to become a concert pianist, but he turned to photography in the late teens of the century; a trip to Yosemite National Park in 1916, where he made his first amateurish photos, is said to have determined his direction in life. Subsequently, he worked as photo technician for a commercial firm. He joined the Sierra Club in 1919 and worked as a caretaker in their headquarters in Yosemite.

Ansel Adams was not only a masterful photographic technician but a lifelong conservationist who pleaded for understanding of, and respect for, the natural environment. Although he spent a large part of his career in commercial photography, he is best known for his majestic landscape photographs. A commercial photographer for 30 years, he made visionary photos of western landscapes that were inspired by a boyhood trip to Yosemite. He won three Guggenheim grants to photograph the national parks (1944--58). Founding the f/64 group with Edward Weston in 1932, he developed zone exposure to get maximum tonal range from black-and-white film. He served on the Sierra Club Board (1934--71).

In 1916, during a family vacation in Yosemite National Park, Ansel was given a Kodak Box Brownie as a gift from his parents. It allowed him to record the wondrous images that he already perceived in the natural beauty around him, a process that would continue all his life. Given the position of Custodian of Yosemite's Leconte Memorial (Joseph Leconte was an eminent geologist and conservationist.) in 1920, Adams wrote to his father that ...I want you to see what I am trying to do...the representation of material things in the abstract or purely imaginative way.

After a prolonged and sometimes painful courtship, Ansel Adams and Virginia Best were married in January 1929, and for the first two years of their marriage, he wavered between his two possible career choices, music and photography. After viewing the wonderful work of a new friend, photographer Paul Strand, Adams decided on his course. Happily for all those who would enjoy his work in the future, he would be a professional photographer. A short time later, he joined Willard Van Dyke, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, Henry Swift, Sonya Noskowiak, and Jon Paul Edwards to form f/64, a group dedicated to the concept of photography that looked like photography, not like an imitation of other art forms. Their exhibitions excited much comment, a great deal of which was negative, as their more simplistic, high realistic work was in stark contrast to the overdone photos in vogue at that time. March 1933 was an important time for Adams. It was then that he met the renowned photographer and patron, Alfred Stieglitz, husband of Georgia O'Keefe, owner of An American Place gallery, and a powerful influence on artists of that time. Stieglitz was favorably impressed with the young photographer and his work, and mounted an exhibition for him in November of 1936. Adams wrote in his 1985 autobiography: Stieglitz taught me what became my first commandment: Art is the affirmation of life.

The photography of Ansel Adams is virtually synonymous with the Sierra Nevada, the four hundred mile long, ten to fourteen thousand feet high mountain range that inspired the Sierra Club. John Muir, the Sierra Club's first president and one of the greatest of America's environmentalists, led the group to become a powerful force that influenced the United States government to establish the National Park Service. Yosemite, Sequoia, Mount Rainier, and Glacier National Parks are all found within the Sierra, and their splendid beauty was recorded with enormous dedication and brilliance by Ansel Adams. Both the grandeur of the canyons stalked by gigantic looming thunderclouds (Tenaya Lake, Mount Conness, Yosemite National Park, c. 1946),

massive rock formations shrouded with fragile morning mist (El Capitan, Winter, Sunrise, Yosemite National Park, 1968) and the intricate composition and wonderful design of pine cones and eucalyptus leaves were recorded with painstaking and crystalline clarity for anyone to witness and enjoy. Adams said of his work: My approach to photography is based on my belief in the aspects of grandeur and minutiae all about us .

Adams also worked in the commercial field, taking pictures of everything from raisin bread to glassware to bathrobes for a Christmas catalog. It was not his favorite work, but it paid the rent and allowed him to continue his more artistic pursuits. Even his commercial work produced some powerful images (Worker and Turbine, Pacific Electric and Gas, 1939). Adams established a working partnership with another great photographer of the time, Dorothea Lange, with whom he collaborated on several magazine pictorials for Fortune and Time. The Fortune piece concerned the struggle between small family farms and large conglomerates over water rights in California s San Joaquin valley; Life magazine contracted them for a study of the Utah Mormons. But Adams, though he admired the work done in that field, was not a proponent of documentary photography. He wrote to Lange in 1962 that he ...resent(ed) being manipulated into a politico-social formula of thought and existence....Is there no way photography can be used to suggest a better life-not just to stress the unfortunate aspects of existence...?

In 1943, anxious to contribute in some way to the war effort, Adams sought and received a commission from Ralph Merritt, then director of Manzanar War Relocation Camp, to illustrate and record the lives of the Nisei, American-born citizens of Japanese descent who were interned there. He was tremendously impressed by the spirit of those people as they patiently awaited to return to their lives. Born Free and Equal , a compilation of photos of the camp with text written by Adams himself was released in 1944, but was badly received by those who only wanted to see the Japanese as the enemy. In 1949, Adams received another camera as a gift. Edwin Land, brilliant inventor of the Polaroid Land camera, invited the photographer to become a consultant. Adams was impressed by the camera and by Land s determination to make photography an artistic form accessible to all. Although other professionals considered the Land camera to be little more than a toy, Adams continued to test the camera and promote its use by providing boxes of the film to his associates. Ultimately, he sent over three thousand memos to Polaroid.

Ansel Adams wanted his work to be seen by many, not just the few who could afford to purchase it. He chose three images...Moonrise, Winter Sunrise, and the vertical of Aspens...and arranged for them to be printed as easily affordable posters. This went so well that, in 1984, production begun of Ansel Adams calendars (still a favorite over desks and on kitchen walls everywhere). In 1979, Adams published his very successful book, Yosemite and the Range of Light, which was to sell over two hundred thousand copies. And in 1980, The Ansel Adams Conservation Award was established by the Wilderness Club, and Adams himself named as the first recipient. The citation read ...Ansel Adams-for your deep devotion to preserving America s wild lands and to caring that future generations know a part of the work as it has been... .

The work of Ansel Adams serves as a guide to what we once had, what still remains with us, and what we must not lose in the future. As he reminds us in his autobiography, The only things...that compatibly exist in this grand universe are the creative works of the human spirit.

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