

# Ansel Adams

By Ross Loeser

February 2010

---



Ansel Adams is one of the most fascinating people of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century... a photography pioneer whose art captured the imagination of millions of ordinary people.

Most of the information in this paper is from his autobiography – written in the last five years of his life. I found the book a joy to read.

Adams (1902-1984) was born in San Francisco and lived most of his life in that area. For his last 22 years he lived in Carmel Highlands.

Some key formative events in his early life were:

- In 1916, when he was 14, he influenced his family to go on vacation in Yosemite after reading the book, *In the Heart of the Sierras* by J.M. Hutchens. During that trip, he received his first camera – a Kodak Box Brownie. He returned to Yosemite every year of his life thereafter.<sup>1</sup>
- He was hired as a “darkroom monkey” by a neighbor who operated a photo finishing business in 1917, which enabled him to learn about making photographic prints.
- As he grew up, one major focus was music – the piano. “By 1923 I was a budding professional pianist...”<sup>2</sup>

On a bright spring Yosemite day in 1927, Adams made a photograph that was to “change my understanding of the medium.” The picture was of Half Dome, and titled “Monolith, The Face of Half Dome.” The full story is included later in this paper, but, in a nutshell, he captured how he felt about the scene, not how it actually appeared (e.g. by using a red filter, the sky looks almost black, although it was actually a hazy blue). Adams said this was his first “visualization.”<sup>3</sup>

It was not until 1930 that Ansel Adams made his final choice of profession – between photography and music. “I was wracked by indecision because I could not afford either emotionally or financially to continue splitting my time between them.” He had dinner in Los Gallos, NM, with photographer Paul Strand and artist Georgia O’Keefe. Upon seeing several of Strand’s negatives, he was inspired to focus on photography. “My understanding of photography was crystallized that afternoon as I recognized the great potential of the medium as an expressive art.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> James Alinder, John Szarkowski. *Ansel Adams: Classic Images*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ansel Adams. *Ansel Adams, An Autobiography*. (New York, Boston: Little, Brown, paperback 1996), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, 87-88.

In 1932, Adams joined with several other photographers, including Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham, to form a group called *f/64*. The group's mission was to promote "pure" or "straight" photography. The name, *f/64*, was the camera aperture setting most in this group used to achieve greater sharpness and depth. The group was opposing pictorialism, a mode of photography in vogue at the time that attempted to mimic classical art. This was a major change, and a major movement at that time; they staged an exhibit at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. One of the many complaints at this exhibit was that photography is not art!<sup>5</sup> This seems analogous to the Impressionists in France a few decades earlier.

It's not appropriate in this paper to detail all of Ansel Adam's life. He was a great artist. But he was also a conservation activist, a philosopher, and a fun loving person. He knew many fascinating people, including Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, Diego Rivera, several US presidents. He was instrumental in establishing photography as a form of fine art, and of forming the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. *Time Magazine's* article at his death ended with, "The result of his work was not an instant captured in time but timelessness captured forever in an instant."

The following are insightful quotes from Ansel Adams:

- I never know in advance precisely what I will photograph. I go out into the world and hope I will come across something that imperatively interests me. I am addicted to the found object.<sup>6</sup>
- As with all art, the photographer's objective is not the duplication of visual reality. Photographic images... depart from reality in direct relation to the placement of the camera before the subject, the lens chosen, the film and filters, the exposure indicated, the related development and printing; all, of course, relating to what the photographer visualizes.<sup>7</sup>
- The visualization of a photograph involves the intuitive search for meaning, shape, form, texture, and the projection of the image-format on the subject. The image forms in the mind – is visualized – and another part of the mind calculates the physical processes involved in determining the exposure and development of the image of the negative and anticipates the qualities of the final print. The creative artist is constantly roving the worlds without, and creating new worlds within.<sup>8</sup>
- Those who have not visited the Southwest will not discover its true quality in texts or illustrations. Very few artists have caught its spirit... Color photography usually takes advantage of the obvious. Black and white photography fares better, as its inherent abstraction takes the viewer out of the morass of manifest appearance and encourages

---

<sup>5</sup> Adams, 88-91.

<sup>6</sup> Adams, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Adams, 61.

inspection of the shapes, textures and the qualities of light characteristic of the region.<sup>9</sup>

- ...in 1982 I attempted to define my personal photographic credo.

A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed, and is, thereby, a true manifestation of what one feels about life in its entirety. This visual expression of feeling should be set forth in terms of a simple devotion to the medium. It should be a statement of the greatest clarity and perfection possible under the conditions of its creation and production.

My approach to photography is based on my belief in the vigor and values of the world of nature, in aspects of grandeur and minutiae all about us. I believe in people, in the simpler aspects of human life, in the relation of man to nature. I believe man must be free, both in spirit and society, that he must build strength into himself, affirming the enormous beauty of this world and acquiring the confidence to see and to express his vision. And I believe in photography as one means of expressing this affirmation and of achieving an ultimate happiness and faith.<sup>10</sup>

- For me, a photograph begins as the visualization of the image, which represents the excitement and the perception of that moment and situation. The print represents excitement, perception, and expression (performance). Meaning is found in the final print and only in terms of the print itself. For me, this meaning may vary a little over time and circumstance. For the viewer, the meaning of the print is his meaning. If I try to impose mine by intruding descriptive titles, I insult the viewer, the print, and myself.<sup>11</sup> (Underlines added)
- I am naïve enough to believe that art has a definite relation to what may be called beauty...<sup>12</sup>
- For many years I have distrusted the dominance of words... I believe that all art is a mystique and does not tolerate the dissections of cold critical analysis and aesthetic definitions.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Adams, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Adams, 198.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, 271.

<sup>12</sup> Adams, 286.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, 321.

## Descriptions of Some of the Photographs in the Mint Museum Collection

The Mint Museum's Ansel Adams collection includes 25 prints, made by Adams himself as part of his "Museum Set" project.<sup>14</sup> He was approached in 1979 with the proposal to print sets of his best photographs to be placed in museums. It had become difficult for museums to acquire his prints due to high cost and limited availability. The Mint's holdings are among Ansel Adams most well known.

In his autobiography, Adams described the circumstances in taking several pictures. Ten of the Mint's photos are included. His descriptions are provided, below, as an assist to Docents.



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California*  
negative date: 1927; print date: 1980  
gelatin silver print, 28 ¼ x 22 ¼ in.  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.1

On a bright spring Yosemite day in 1927 I made a photograph that was to change my understanding of the medium. My soon-to-be wife, Virginia, our friends Cedric Wright, Arnold Williams, and Charlie Michael, and I started out quite early that morning on a hike to the Diving Board. A magnificent slab of granite on the west shoulder of Half Dome, the Diving Board overlooks Mirror Lake thousands of feet below... I now had only two plates left for one of the grandest view-experiences of the Sierra, the face of Half Dome itself. At about two-thirty I set up the camera and composed the image... Over the lens I placed a conventional K2 yellow filter, to slightly darken the sky... The shadow effect on Half Dome seemed right and I made the exposure.

As I replaced the slide, I began to think about how the print was to appear, and if it would transmit any of the feeling of the monumental shape before me in terms of its expressive-emotional quality. I began to see in my mind's eye the finished print I desired: the brooding cliff with a dark sky and the sharp rendition of distant, snowy Tenaya Peak. I realized that only a deep red filter would give me anything approaching the effect I felt emotionally.

I had only *one* plate left. I attached my other filter, a Wratten #29(F)... and released the shutter. I felt I had accomplished something, but did not realize its significance until I developed the plate that evening. I had achieved my first visualization! I had been able to realize a desired image: not the way the subject appeared in reality but how it *felt* to me and how it must appear in the finished print... The red filter dramatically darkened the sky and the shadows on the great cliff...

*Monolith* has led a charmed life. It survived my darkroom fire in 1937... It rests in my vault, still printable, and represents a personally historic moment in my photographic career.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The "Museum Set" of photos included 75 total – National Gallery of Art Exhibitions, "Ansel Adams: Classic Images," October 6, 1985-January 26, 1996. (<http://www.nga.gov/past/data/exh541.shtml>)

<sup>15</sup> Adams, 59-61.



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Frozen Lake and Cliffs, The Sierra Nevada Sequoia National Park, California*  
 negative date: 1932; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.3

While on that 1932 [Sierra Club] outing, we hiked over Kaweah Gap, where I was struck by the still, icy beauty of partially frozen Precipice Lake and its background, the black base of Eagle Scout Peak. I saw several images quite clearly in my mind and made five variations. The best of the resultant photographs, *Frozen Lake and Cliffs*, is still very satisfying to me. It has been termed “abstract,” but I do not think any photograph can really be abstract. I prefer the term *extract* for I cannot change the optical realities, but only manage them in relation to themselves and the format.<sup>16</sup>



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Mount McKinley and Wonder Lake, Denali National Park, Alaska*  
 negative date: 1948; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 22 ¼ x 28 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.9

We arrived rather late at McKinley Station for a dull dinner and a night plagued with mosquitoes. The next morning we were driven by regular automobile the ninety varied and beautiful miles of park road to the ranger cabin at Wonder Lake, where we stayed for several days. We were near the land of the midnight sun, where it is no longer darker at midnight than early twilight in San Francisco...

I was stunned by the vision of Mount McKinley, which rises eighteen thousand feet above its immediate base to its summit of twenty thousand six hundred feet. It is a vast, magnificent mountain, presenting complex challenges to the photographer. Upon arrival, I photographed it, wreathed in clouds and with a glorious full moon setting behind its snowy peak. At about one-thirty A.M. the next morning, as the sun rose, the clouds lifted and the mountain glowed an incredible shade of pink. Laid out in front of Mount McKinley, Wonder Lake was pearlescent against the dark embracing arms of the shoreline. I made what I visualized as an inevitable image. The scale of this great mountain is hard to believe – the camera and I were thirty miles from McKinley’s base.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Adams, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Adams, 239-40.



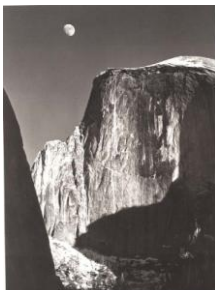
ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Sand Dunes, Sunrise, Death Valley National Monument, California*  
 negative date: 1948; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 28 ¼ x 22 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.11

I remember many sunrises in Death Valley, especially one near Stovepipe Wells in 1948. After sleeping on the camera platform atop my car, I woke before dawn, made some coffee and stoked my stomach with beans reheated from last night's supper. I then perched my camera and tripod across my shoulders and plodded heavily through the shifting sand dunes, attempting to find just the right light upon just the right dune. The sun floated above the margins of the Funeral Range, promising a very hot day. Just then, almost magically, I saw an image become substance: the light of sunrise traced a perfect line down a dune that alternately glowed with the light and receded in shadow. The result is *Sand Dunes, Sunrise, Death Valley National Monument*.<sup>18</sup>



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Aspens, Northern New Mexico*  
 negative date: 1958; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 28 ¼ x 22 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.13

In the hills outside of Santa Fe we happened upon a grove of aspens that immediately captured my imagination. Gerry, Don [both assistants] and I quickly set up our cameras, and all three of us went to work... My creative results... -- two photographs, both titled *Aspens, Northern New Mexico* – one horizontal and one vertical, each different in image and mood...<sup>19</sup>



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Moon and Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California*  
 negative date: 1960; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 28 ¼ x 22 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.16

I was driving a bit aimlessly around the valley one winter afternoon, when I clearly saw an image in my mind's eye of Half Dome as the moon rose over its right shoulder. I parked my car and with my Hasselblad [camera] and tripod firmly positioned across my shoulder, I strode over the snowy field in front of the Ahwahnee [hotel] until I found the place that best revealed the scene. The photograph shows Half Dome, surely the most distinctively shaped mountain in the world, partially darkened by late afternoon shadows with its seemingly small companion, the near-full moon. I used my 250mm telephoto to compress the space relationship, making the moon appear somewhat larger in relation to Half Dome than it was in reality.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Adams, 207-8.

<sup>19</sup> Adams, 145.

<sup>20</sup> Adams, 319.



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*  
 negative date: 1941; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 28 ¼ x 22 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.17

Driving south along the highway, I observed a fantastic scene as we approached the village of Hernandez. In the east, the moon was rising over distant clouds and snow peaks, and in the west, the late afternoon sun glanced over a south-flowing cloud bank and blazed a brilliant white upon the crosses in the church cemetery. I steered the station wagon into the deep shoulder along the road and jumped out, scrambling to get my equipment together, yelling... "Get this, Get that... We don't have much time!" With the camera assembled and the image composed and focused, I could not find my Weston exposure meter! Behind me the sun was about to disappear behind the clouds, and I was desperate... After the first exposure... the sunlight left the crosses and the magical moment was gone forever.

I knew it was special when I released the shutter, but I never anticipated what its reception would be over the decades. *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* is my most well known photograph. I have received more letters about this picture than any other I have made, and I must repeat that *Moonrise* is most certainly not a double exposure.<sup>21</sup>

From Mary Street Alinder's biography of Adams: "For many, *Moonrise...* is the greatest photograph ever made." Alinder details how Adams quickly guessed at camera settings for the photo (without his exposure meter), and how he worked with the negative for many years to get "the best" print. The main issue is the degree of exposure of each segment of the picture. She states that in 1996, original prints were selling for \$20,000.<sup>22</sup>



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Winter Sunrise, The Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California*  
 negative date: 1944; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 22 ¼ x 28 ¼ in  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.22

Another of my best-known photographs was made when I worked at Manzanar [War Relocation Camp for Japanese Americans] – *Winter, Sunrise, The Sierra Nevada, From Lone Pine, California*. I had come to know the Owens Valley well and felt there was a photograph of the Sierra and Mount Whitney to be made near the little town of Lone Pine...

One very cold and very early morning in December of 1943, Virginia and I arose before dawn and drove to Lone Pine. I selected a spot not far from the main highway, parked the car, and set up my camera on the platform. We huddled together in the car, gratefully sipping from a thermos of steaming coffee that Virginia had prepared. Soon, the sun rose above the Inyo Range behind us, glowing pinkly upon the Sierra summits. I scrambled up to my camera, knowing the time was close but feeling it was not quite right. Beams of light began

<sup>21</sup> Adams, 231-2.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Street Alinder. *Ansel Adams, A Biography*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1996). 185 (Alinder was Ansel Adams assistant and corroborated in his autobiography)



highlighting the brushy trees in the foreground of my composition; they also illuminated the rear end of a horse as it calmly grazed in front of the trees. Frustrated, I watched as the light appeared, just as I had hoped. Serendipitously, the horse momentarily turned to profile and I made the exposure. Within seconds, the tonal variety that created the mood of the scene was destroyed by a flood of even sunlight.<sup>23</sup>



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park, California*  
 negative date: circa 1944; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 22 ¼ x 28 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.23

There were to be hundreds of spectacular Yosemite snowstorms for me in the years to come, though time and circumstances made me treat each great weather event as the one-of-a-kind situation it was. I had visualized for many years an image of Yosemite Valley from Inspiration Point and exposed many sheets of film in an effort to achieve that visualization. Finally, in 1944, a sudden heavy rainstorm hit, which at midday changed to wet snow. I drove to my chosen site and quickly set up my 8X10 camera to capture the marvelous vista spread before me. The clouds were moving rapidly and I waited until the valley was revealed under a mixture of snow and clouds with a silver light gilding Bridal Veil Fall, realizing the photograph *Clearing Winter Storm*.<sup>24</sup>



ANSEL ADAMS. American, 1902–1984  
*Mount Williamson, The Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar, California*  
 negative date: 1945; print date: 1980  
 gelatin silver print, 22 ¼ x 28 ¼ in.  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter G. Scotese. 1986.68.24

The grand view from Manzanar visually excited me, and I knew I must make some inner-assigned photographs, though it took an extensive search to find the image that clearly communicated what I saw and felt. Behind and to the west of the camp was a huge field of boulders, extending several miles to the base of Mount Williamson. One day I sensed the conditions to be right: there was a glorious storm playing across the crest of the Sierra and I watched as it approached the peak of Mount Williamson. I drove out to the boulders and set up my 8X10 camera on the car's rooftop platform. This perspective allowed me to compose the photograph with the boulders in the foreground, progressing to Mount Williamson in the midst of a dramatic mix of shafts of sunlight and storm clouds.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Adams, 221.

<sup>24</sup> Adams, 203.

<sup>25</sup> Adams, 220-1.