

ANSEL ADAMS
Photographs

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gl Holtegaard

MODERN ART

The Extraordinary Vision of an American Legend

Ansel Adams (1902–1984)

‘One morning shortly after our arrival in Yosemite, my parents presented me with my first camera, a Kodak Box Brownie. After a few minutes of simple instructions, my camera and I went off to explore.’

A leading name in photographic history, Ansel Adams took his first photograph as a 14-year-old in 1916, while holidaying with his parents at Yosemite National Park. A day’s journey east by rail from his home in San Francisco, the location drew him back every year afterwards for the rest of his life. Employed at Yosemite in the early 1920s as a trail guide, Adams met his future wife and eventually saw their two children raised there. His life, and work, became inextricably linked with the location, and his name – through his enduring, articulate vision – synonymous with exceptional photography.

Although Adams initially intended a career as a concert pianist, his deepening involvement with photography in the 1920s, particularly at Yosemite, turned his attention increasingly towards this new direction. Encouragement came in 1927 through the successful publication of his first portfolio of photographic prints. Further impetus followed in 1927 with his introduction to the distinctive desert regions of the American Southwest – another location with which he would make lifelong connections. Here, he was introduced to the flourishing arts communities of Taos and Santa Fe, befriending photographer Paul Strand, painters Georgia O’Keeffe and John Marin, and writer Mary Austin, who provided text for his 1930 portfolio, *Taos Pueblo*.

Adams’ rise in reputation in the 1930s was meteoric. Balancing his creative photography with commercial work, he held two significant solo exhibitions in 1931, followed by exhibitions in 1932 and 1933 with the newly formed Group f/64 – a clique of photographers, including Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham, who named themselves for the camera aperture providing greatest sharpness and definition. Opposing the soft-focus, Pictorialist style of art photography then prevalent, Group f/64 defined ‘pure photography’ as ‘possessing no qualities of technique, composition or idea, derivative of any

other art form'. Adams' reputation was further secured in 1933 after visiting renowned photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz at his New York gallery, An American Place. Upon viewing his work, Stieglitz offered Adams a permanent welcome, and in 1936 gave him an important show.

Adams' increase in prominence occurred alongside a steadily growing passion for conservation and preservation of National Parks and wilderness areas. Armed with photographs in 1936, he lobbied to establish Kings Canyon National Park, which was achieved in 1940. In 1941 he was commissioned to create mural-sized photographs of National Parks for head offices of the US Department of the Interior. Though the project was cancelled due to war, a new sense of grandeur and scale began to appear in his work from this time. Adams' epic landscapes also became increasingly appreciated as wartime contributions, symbolic of freedom and a land worth defending. In December 1944 he wrote to Stieglitz, 'As the war moves to a climax, the only enduring things seem to be the aspect of Nature – and its reciprocal, the creative spirit.'

An active environmentalist throughout his life, Adams retained a sense of wonder at the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Over many decades, favoured locations were revisited with myriad results. Recurring themes included changing seasons, cloudscapes, woodlands and close-up nature; subject-matter did not need to be grandly spectacular to achieve his expressive aims. Describing his ability to be moved by the natural landscape as 'emotional-aesthetic', Adams aimed to convey a sense of 'inner music', a quality often discernible in his work through a distinctive, lyrical feeling for composition, movement and texture.

Adams often compared making a print to a musical performance, likening the tones and shades of a negative to notes in a musical score. The technicalities of negative production were integral to his vision, and Adams' immense ability allowed him intuitively to 'visualise' a finished result in advance. Renowned for the outstanding tonal quality of his work, his means of ensuring a full range of tones in his negatives became known as the Zone System – a method he developed in the early 1940s, and later promoted through writing and workshops.

Widely recognised as an influential voice for photography, Ansel Adams' art continues to be powerfully relevant, and to speak to each new generation in new ways. Leading photographic historian John Szarkowski identified Adams' ability to convey an ecstatic quality of experience through his photographs, describing the quality of landscape in his work as 'something that's not permanent but evanescent – always, always in the process of becoming something else.'

Ken Hall

Assistant Curator, Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand

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All works belong to the collection of Anne Adams Helms

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