Ansel Adams
A Legacy

Exhibition text

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at the University of Virginia
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*Ansel Adams: A Legacy*

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Once completed, the photograph must speak for itself.
— Ansel Adams, 1978

The photographs you are about to encounter are original works of legendary American photographer Ansel Adams (1902–1984). They were created between the late 1920s and the early 1980s, a span of nearly sixty years, and document a most prolific career. They include early efforts as Adams first explored his medium, and masterworks from his most productive period dating from the late 1930s through the 1950s. Each photograph was printed by Adams in his darkroom at Carmel Highlands, California. The works forming the Meredith Collection were originally selected by Adams and given to The Friends of Photography to represent his legacy.

The photographs include many of his most famous images in the format he intended them to be viewed. Adams participated in several photomural projects and produced a series of large-scale backlit Colorama images used for advertising by the Eastman Kodak Company. Many of his signature works were also carefully but extensively reproduced by the New York Graphic Society beginning in 1981 in the form of large-format posters. The public came to expect Adams’ photographs to be presented at a dramatic scale equal to their majestic subject matter. In reality, Adams worked in a variety of sizes, but more often in a more intimate scale. He personally objected to overly enlarging his images as it distorted his original vision. The low aperture settings and extended exposure times he utilized captured his images in a clear, crisp, super-detailed format. He was a master of composition. He did not retouch images, but rather adjusted development times to impact contrast, tone, and value.

Adams’ love of the American landscape comes through clearly in his photographs. He was an ardent conservationist and environmentalist, often serving as a lobbyist, advocate, and sponsor for environmental issues. The humanist beliefs and values instilled in him by a devoted father combined with his extroverted nature to create a dynamic personality. Adams was interested in the people and the world around him. His belief in “giving back” produced thousands of photographs, over forty books, numerous journal articles, educational workshops, erudite correspondences, and impassioned advocacy.

It has taken me a lifetime to recognize when I should not feel obligated to make a photograph. — Ansel Adams, 1984
He was a tough old bird, until you got under the feathers.
— Ansel Adams on Alfred Stieglitz, 1977

Brusque, moody, and opinionated, master photographer and art impresario Alfred Stieglitz holds a pivotal place in the course of American art history. He was an influential writer and advocate who both created and set the standards for fine art photography and who almost single-handedly introduced America to the concept of modern art. Stieglitz’s own photography began in a romantic, atmospheric “pictorialist” style, then abruptly changed following his meeting Paul Strand to a sharp, pure, un-manipulated realism — “straight photography.”

Born into a comfortable life supported by a successful family textile business, Alfred Stieglitz was never concerned with making a living. His marriage in 1893 to Emmeline Obermeyer secured him an even larger income and afforded him the luxury of pursuing his interests in photography and writing. He edited American Amateur Photographer magazine and Camera Notes for The Camera Club of New York, and later published his own private journal, Camera Works.

Between 1905 and 1946 Stieglitz managed a series of Manhattan art galleries. He was the first gallery owner to introduce modern European artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, and Auguste Rodin to American audiences. In 1925, Stieglitz opened his third gallery, An American Place, where he showed American modernist works he felt best represented the twentieth-century spirit. Among the artists he promoted were Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin, Paul Strand, Arthur Dove, Eliot Porter, Marsden Hartley, and, eventually, Ansel Adams.

Stieglitz left Emmeline in 1918 after becoming involved with painter Georgia O’Keeffe. He and O’Keeffe eventually married in 1924. For a period of twenty years, Stieglitz utilized O’Keeffe as his principle model for a collective series of over three hundred photographic portraits. The couple occupied a suite of rooms at Manhattan’s Shelton Hotel six months a year. Stieglitz then summered at his family’s home at Lake George, New York, while O’Keeffe lived and painted in New Mexico.

Ansel Adams traveled to New York City in 1932 specifically to meet Alfred Stieglitz. Their first meeting was cut short when Stieglitz abruptly dismissed Adams, telling him to return later in the day. The second meeting went much better. Stieglitz silently perused Adams’ portfolio twice, closed it, and then told Adams, “These are some of the finest photographs I have ever seen.” It was the beginning of a long and beneficial partnership that culminated in a one-man show at An American Place in the fall of 1936.
Due to the strain of an ongoing heart condition, Stieglitz ceased photographing in 1938. In 1946, he suffered a heart attack while alone at An American Place. He was later discovered by Nancy Newhall and rushed to the hospital. Georgia O’Keeffe was summoned from New Mexico, and traveled to Stieglitz’s bedside wearing the same housedress and work shoes she was wearing when she received Newhall’s telegram. Stieglitz died shortly after her arrival. Following Stieglitz’s death, O’Keeffe set about organizing his extensive collection of archives and photographs. The Stieglitz Archive, covering the years 1881 through 1946, was later gifted to the Yale University Library’s Collection of American Literature by Georgia O’Keeffe.
Ansel Adams: The Man

The love that Americans poured out for the work and person of Ansel Adams during his old age, and that they have continued to express with undiminished enthusiasm since his death, is an extraordinary phenomenon, perhaps even unparalleled in our country’s response to a visual artist.
— John Swarkowski, Ansel Adams: Classic Images, 1985

Shy and self-conscious as a child, Ansel Adams evolved into one of America’s great twentieth-century creative geniuses. He was the only child in a household of elderly adults haunted by the loss of the family fortune. His mother was clinically depressed, his father devoted and caring. Young Adams struggled with his education; his personal hyperactive tendencies forced him through a succession of schools. His formal education barely reached the eighth grade level, yet he went on to become an acclaimed photographer, an eloquent educator and environmental spokesperson, the author of more than forty books, and the voice behind thousands of letters to the editor in support of various causes.

Physically, the adult Ansel Adams was a bit of an Ichabod Crane figure. Tall and gangly with long, animated arms, he was prematurely bald with large ears that stuck out and a prominent, crooked, beak-like nose flanked with deep-set brown eyes and a full beard covering a prominent chin. While a Californian by birth, he had a clipped New England accent, the product of his father’s ancestry and influence. Adams had a long, energetic stride and an enthusiasm for discovery. His longtime collaborator, Nancy Newhall, remarked, “What an extraordinary, mercurial, multiple being! A lion, when you looked into that ardent countenance…. The whole man was radiant; he was like the sun. Yet you waited for the shadow, I don’t know why.”

A self-described loner, Adams nevertheless possessed a charismatic personality. He always made an impression. A colleague at the Museum of Modern Art, Beaumont Newhall, recalled, “Ansel was a great party man and loved to entertain. He had a very dominating personality, and would always be the center of attention.” Yet Adams suffered periods of deep depression and self-doubt. He would sometimes simply withdraw into isolation.

Adams was a workaholic, a consummate artist, and a master technician, but he chose a less-than-lucrative profession. He sometimes commented on his difficulties “to climb over the financial fence.” His wife’s small yet steady income, derived from the Best Studio in Yosemite Village, often kept the family afloat. The two Guggenheim Foundation Fellowships that Adams received in the late 1940s also helped free his creative efforts. Adams’ energy and capacity for work were monumental. He worked tirelessly — often putting in eighteen- to twenty-hour days — to support his family. It wasn’t until he was in his seventies that he achieved a degree of financial independence.
On Art and Photography

During a 1976 interview with BBC Four, Ansel Adams observed the following concerning the language of art and photography:

As I progressed in my work it became clear to me that photography was a language, and it covers a great variety of communication and statement. To lump it all together would be as foolish as saying that all literature is the same. It [photography] is a visual language!

All art is the expression of both the external and the internal…. Photography is concerned with external events, the existence of the world in a space and time, and the internal events which is what happens in the photographer’s mind and spirit when he is making a photographic statement. To fully grasp this concept one must think perhaps that the outer world is a world of shape and that the final photographic statement is a formal one…. In photography we have a peculiar situation in that the subject itself can be highly emotional, and a record can be made…and very often presented as an emotional experience. It is the personal observation of an emotional situation. It is a recording of an emotional situation, but it does not necessarily imply that it is a creative act, and there is where the internal concept comes.

We approach photography first in the mind, what we call “visualization” — the image is there, it is clearly seen, it is clearly felt — then with adequate technique the photographer uses his equipment, and his materials, and his procedures to first get the negative, which is equivalent to the composer’s score, it contains all the information he wants, which leads on to the performance of the score, which is the making of the print. This “visualization” of course is a very highly personalized thing…. We can have craft without art, but we cannot have art without craft.
June 1916 brought two major events into young Ansel Adams’ life. He and his parents made a summer trip to Yosemite National Park, California, and Adams received his first camera, a Kodak Box Brownie. The family stayed at Curry Village, a rustic enclave of canvas tent cabins at the base of Half Dome and Glacier Point. Adams learned the basics of camping and took enthusiastically to capturing his first photographs of the Yosemite Valley.

The family returned again in 1917 and 1918. Ansel traveled alone to Curry Village in 1919 to rest and to recuperate following a bout with Spanish influenza. It was during his convalescence that he began to take daily hikes into the back country and developed a sense of the rhythms of nature.

Adams joined the Sierra Club, an organization of Bay Area nature enthusiasts, in 1919. Throughout the 1920s, he made repeated excursions into the back country, often utilizing pack mules to carry his gear and photographic equipment. He published his first portfolio of Yosemite images in 1926. *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras* was issued in a limited edition printing of a hundred books (plus ten artist’s copies) containing eighteen prints. They sold for fifty dollars each.

It was also in Yosemite that Adams met his future wife, Virginia Best. Her family operated Best’s Studio, a modest art gallery, bookstore, and curio shop in Yosemite Village. The Bests also owned a piano, and in the early 1920s, when Adams was still a professional musician requiring a place to practice, the Bests welcomed him into their home. Best and Adams discovered a mutual interest in music, nature, Yosemite, and one another. They were married in 1928, following two separate engagements. The bride wore black. The groom wore tennis shoes.

... I have met someone, whom I have grown very fond of indeed. A very lovely character—one whose affection is a privilege to possess...
Dorothea Lange (1895–1965)

You happen to be one of the very few who has brought enough deeply human emotion into your work to make it bearable for me.
— Ansel Adams to Dorothea Lange, 1962

The great documentary photographer Dorothea Lange and her first husband, western painter Maynard Dixon, were among Ansel Adams’ circle of Bay Area friends. Having begun her career in New York City as a society portrait photographer, Lange relocated to San Francisco in 1918. She married Dixon in 1920. The couple had two sons. During the social upheaval of the Great Depression, both Dixon and Lange turned their attentions, and their mediums, to the struggles and plight of America’s unemployed and displaced workers. While working for the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, Lange created many of her most memorable images of migrant farm workers and sharecroppers. Lange and Dixon divorced in 1935.

Though characteristically opposites, Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange frequently collaborated on commercial photographic assignments, including their series of images in 1944 documenting twenty-four hours in the life of California’s Kaiser Shipyards for *Fortune* magazine. During the late 1940s, Adams was the recipient of two prestigious Guggenheim Fellowships for excellence in photography. Lange preceded him in receiving the award in 1941, but later declined the honor while recording the grim realities facing Japanese-American citizens at the Manzanar relocation camp in Northern California. Her gritty photographs were immediately impounded and suppressed by the government. Adams also documented Manzanar for his 1944 book *Born Free and Equal*. Both photographers suffered accusations of disloyalty.

Having been stricken with polio as a child, Dorothea Lange was left with one withered leg and a pronounced limp. Fiercely independent, she felt this distinct characteristic helped her connect with her subjects and put them at ease, for she felt she did not appear “whole and secure” in the face of their poverty and adversity. Lange died from polio-related complications and esophageal cancer in 1965.

*One should really use the camera as though tomorrow you’d be stricken blind.*

*To live a visual life is an enormous undertaking, practically unattainable.*
*I’ve only touched it, just touched it.*
— Dorothea Lange
Early Life

Ansel Easton Adams was born in 1902 into an affluent, upper-middle class family in San Francisco. He was the only child of Charles and Olive Adams. Adams took pride in his New England ancestry and in his distinct, crooked nose — the result of a childhood accident sustained during an aftershock of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Charles Adams built his family a comfortable chalet-style home on Baker Beach, about one mile from San Francisco’s city limits. Young Adams’ childhood was played out along the wild and foggy shoreline of the Pacific Ocean and Lobos Creek in a world populated by his parents, his mother’s father, a maiden aunt, and a number of servants.

The family’s comfortable lifestyle experienced an abrupt setback when their lumber business suffered a series of financial disasters, including the loss of several of their Washington State lumber mills and the majority of their shipping fleet. Charles Adams did his best to insulate his family from their financial realities. Following several failed business ventures he became the secretary and building manager of the Merchant Exchange Association, the center of the city’s shipping commerce.

Charles Adams was devoted to his young son. Adams was enrolled in a succession of schools due to his frequently bored, disruptive, and unruly behavior. In response, Charles Adams decided to home school his son, a rather unorthodox practice at the time. In addition to studying the classics, Adams was given a season pass to the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The Exposition was organized in celebration of the monumental completion of the Panama Canal. Ansel visited the Exposition daily, often with his father joining him in the afternoons to discuss the exhibitions, technology, and displays.

The San Francisco art world and thirteen-year-old Ansel Adams were first introduced to the modern paintings of Bonnard, Cézanne, Gauguin, Monet, Pissarro, and Van Gogh during the Exposition at the Palace of Fine Arts. He later remembered, “They had little effect on me at the time, though I remember viewing them repeatedly. I now wonder what subconscious effect they had in the years to follow.”
Edward Weston (1886–1958)

A native of Illinois, photographer Edward Weston moved permanently to California in 1908. He established himself in the Los Angeles area, eventually opening a portrait studio in Tropico (now Glendale), California. Weston had four sons by his first wife, Flora Chandler. Shortly following the birth of his fourth son, Cole, Weston met Mexican photographer Tina Modotti. The two began a lengthy and well-publicized partnership and love affair. Following the death of Modotti’s political-activist husband, Weston divorced Chandler and moved to Mexico with Modotti. In Mexico City, Weston’s photographs drew acclaim from many of the leading modernist painters and printmakers of the period: Diego Rivera, José Orozco, and David Siqueiros. Returning to the United States in 1928, he published his first collection of writings and photographs entitled *From My Day Books*. He also traveled to New York City that same year meeting, Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Paul Strand, among others. Following that influential trip, his photographic work moved toward a more abstract style.

Ansel Adams met Edward Weston in 1928, shortly after Weston’s return from Mexico. Weston was among the circle of artists promoted by Adams’ patron, Albert Bender. Weston was the first professional photographer of Adams’ acquaintance. They remained close friends for almost thirty years. In 1932 they joined five other photographers with similar artistic philosophies to form Group f:64. When Group f:64 staged a show that same Christmas season, Adams recalled, “Edward charged fifteen dollars per print and the rest of us charged ten.”

In 1937, when Weston received the first Guggenheim Fellowship ever awarded to a photographer, he and his future second wife, Charis Wilson, visited Adams in Yosemite while they collaborated on *California and the West*. Adams acted as chauffeur and guide for the couple, sharing many insights and his favorite vistas around the valley. Weston returned the favor when he, in turn, introduced Adams to the desert landscape of Death Valley. Adams produced his groundbreaking 1940 *Surf Sequence* series of photographs following a visit to Edward and Charis Weston at their Carmel, California, home and studio.

In 1946, the same year the Museum of Modern Art staged a major retrospective of his work, Edward Weston began exhibiting the progressive symptoms of Parkinson’s disease. He took his last photograph in 1948. However, under his supervision, two of his sons, Brett and Cole Weston, continued producing prints of their father’s previous works for the next ten years. A *Fiftieth Anniversary Portfolio* was printed in 1952. It was followed by two additional portfolios between 1952 and 1955. Edward Weston died at his home on January 1, 1958.
Environmental Legacy

I believe the approach of the artist and the approach of the environmentalist are fairly close in that both are, to a rather impressive degree, concerned with the “affirmation of life.”
— Ansel Adams

During the thirty-seven years Ansel Adams served on its board of directors, the Sierra Club evolved into an organized and powerful voice lobbying for the creation of new national parks and protecting the natural environment from destructive and unchecked development. One early defeat — losing the Yosemite Valley’s companion canyon, Hetch Hetchy, to a reservoir project for San Francisco — mobilized the organization into a formidable advocate for sustainable environmental welfare at both the regional and national level. Adams was a regular contributor of both photographs and writing to the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. The organization’s lobbying efforts to secure California’s Kings Canyon as a national park led to the publication of Adams’ 1936 limited-edition pictorial portfolio *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*. The publication was instrumental in securing the 1940 congressional vote necessary to create the new park. The book also caught the attention of Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Adams sent Ickes a second copy after the president claimed Ickes’ first copy for the White House library.

Adams’ relationship with the Sierra Club was not always genial. In 1958, feeling that the organization had compromised rather than protesting when the Park Service proposed blasting a new highway through a remote section of Yosemite National Park, he resigned his position on the board of directors. The political fallout was monumental and the project was briefly stopped for review. Adams’ resignation was refused.

Adams also became a vocal proponent for the Trustees for Conservation and the Sierra Natural Resources Council. He campaigned to protect the Big Sur region of California and worked with The Wilderness Society to establish federal protection for the California coast. He also worked to protect the Alaskan wilderness through Americans for Alaska and The Wilderness Society.

In 1968, Adams was awarded the Conservation Service Award, the Interior Department’s highest civilian honor, “in recognition of your many years of distinguished work as a photographer, artist, interpreter and conservationist, a role in which your efforts have been of profound importance in the conservation of our great natural resources.” Then, in 1980, Adams received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for “his efforts to preserve this country’s wild and scenic areas, both on film and on earth. Drawn to the beauty of nature’s monuments, he is regarded by environmentalists as a national institution.”
Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986)

To see O’Keeffe in Yosemite is a revelation.
— Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, 1938

Ansel Adams and Georgia O’Keeffe met in Taos, New Mexico, in 1929, the summer O’Keeffe first ventured past West Texas into the American Southwest. O’Keeffe traveled with her good friend Rebecca Strand, the wife of photographer Paul Strand. Adams was traveling with his wife, Virginia, and was photographing the ancient Taos Pueblo. They all met at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s sprawling home, “Los Gallos.” It was a memorable summer for all parties.

Georgia O’Keeffe began her remarkable life in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Her family later moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, where she attended Chatham Hall. O’Keeffe knew from an early age that she would be an artist. Following high school she traveled north to attend the Art Institute of Chicago and New York City’s Art Students League, studying there under William Merritt Chase. She next ventured back to Chicago and then on to Canyon, Texas, near Amarillo, to teach art at West Texas Normal College. O’Keeffe also intermittently lived in Charlottesville with her mother and sisters beginning in 1912. She took a summer drawing class at the University of Virginia taught by Alon Bement, and taught art classes at the University each summer between 1913 and 1916. However, it was during her time in Canyon that she made the first charcoal landscape sketches that would establish her as a legendary American artist.

O’Keeffe sent this collection of sketches to Anita Pollitzer, a good friend from her time at the Art Students League. Pollitzer, in turn, shared the sketches with art dealer Alfred Stieglitz, who enthusiastically exclaimed, “Finally, a woman on paper!” Pollitzer later wrote that Stieglitz could speak of nothing else the remainder of the day. He decided to show the works, and without her knowledge, Georgia O’Keeffe had her first show at Stieglitz’s gallery, 291, in 1916. A second show of West Texas watercolors followed in 1917. One year later, at Stieglitz’s urging, O’Keeffe moved to New York City. Six years later the couple was married; she was thirty-seven, he was fifty-four.

As her fame and notoriety grew throughout the 1920s, O’Keeffe created a series of large, vibrant, dynamic canvases exploring both Manhattan’s urban landscape and dramatic floral still life compositions. Then came the inspirational trip in 1929. O’Keeffe had previously known the arid, high desert, prairie landscape of West Texas but now she experienced the vast spaces of the American Southwest. It was there she found the distinctive themes that would dominate the remainder of her career, and from 1929 forward she would spend part of each year in New Mexico.

Back with Stieglitz in New York, O’Keeffe suffered a nervous breakdown in 1932 following a stressful failed commission at Radio City Music Hall. During her recovery she again returned to New Mexico, this time discovering the area around Ghost Ranch in the Rio Chama valley north of Española. After leasing Ghost Ranch for several years, O’Keeffe eventually purchased the property in 1940, and then an adobe hacienda in Abiquiú, New Mexico, in 1945.
Georgia O’Keeffe and Ansel Adams remained good friends throughout the years, frequently visiting one another either in New Mexico or California. In 1937, Adams undertook an extensive trip led by O’Keeffe through New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. It was on this trip that Adams was introduced to Arizona’s mythical Canyon de Chelly.

O’Keeffe suffered retinal degeneration beginning in 1970, and by 1972 was practically blind. She focused her attentions on several retrospective exhibitions, ceramics, and directing painting projects executed by gallery assistants. She died at the age of ninety-eight in 1986. Her ashes were scattered near her beloved Ghost Ranch on Pedernal Mountain, the black mesa which figured so prominently in many of her New Mexico paintings.
Legacy

You can’t have anything named after you until you are thoroughly dead.
— Ansel Adams, 1977

Ansel and Virginia Best Adams moved to Carmel Highlands in 1962, occupying a newly built house that incorporated living quarters, darkroom, and a studio overlooking the Pacific Ocean. They became anchors in the local artistic community, renewing old friendships and establishing many new ones. Edward Weston’s youngest son, Cole, serving as director of the Sunset Center in Carmel, approached Adams regarding his long-standing desire to establish a group dedicated to celebrating creative fine art photography. The result was The Friends of Photography. Adams became the first president of the board. The Friends served as a leading proponent of photographic exhibitions, publications, and educational programs.

The 1970s brought Adams the one thing that had eluded him throughout his prolific career—financial freedom. William Turnage, a former forestry graduate student that Adams met while lecturing at Yale, took over management of the Best Studio in Yosemite and the management of Adams’ personal affairs. He recognized the untapped resources in Adams’ voluminous portfolio. For seven years, Turnage led the movement to market both Adams’ work and Adams the personality to the public. Adams became an American cultural icon.

In 1973, Adams, working in partnership with John P. Schafer, established a depository for his collected works at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Following Adams’ wish that the archive also include works by other photographers, The Center for Creative Photography was born, and to this day oversees the rights and reproductions of Adams’ work. Adams also established The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust to control publishing and reproduction ventures utilizing his works. He also donated a portion of his papers relating to the Sierra Club to the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

Following declining health throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ansel Adams died of congestive heart failure aggravated by cancer on April 22, 1984. He was surrounded in the end by a small circle of close friends and his beloved family.

Six months following his death, the Minarets Wilderness in the Inyo National Forest, California, was renamed the Ansel Adams Wilderness. The area is bordered by the John Muir and Yosemite Wilderness areas. In 1985, an 11,760-foot peak in the Sierra Nevada was named Mount Ansel Adams in tribute to this great American photographer, educator, and conservationist. Adams’ ashes were scattered in the Ansel Adams Wilderness. Virginia Best Adams, having outlived her husband by sixteen years, passed away on January 29, 2000.
The Meredith Collection

Shortly following his move to Carmel Highlands, California, in 1962, Ansel Adams co-founded The Friends of Photography with Cole Weston and several other supporters. Cole was the youngest son of Adams’ good friend, photographer Edward Weston. He also managed a gallery and creative arts center in Carmel. Adams met Cole as a child in 1928 while attending a dinner party at the home of his patron, Albert Bender.

The Friends of Photography was formally chartered in 1966 as a not-for-profit visual arts organization with Adams serving as president of the board. The Friends organized numerous photographic exhibitions and workshops, in addition to publishing a series of highly regarded books. Throughout the years, the organization was the recipient of several significant donations of works by Adams. These works were printed by Adams in his Carmel Highlands studio darkroom during the 1960s and 1970s. Following Adams’ death in 1984, The Friends relocated to San Francisco and established the Ansel Adams Center for Photography. This group was disbanded following bankruptcy in October 2001 and its holdings were marked for dispersal.

In 2002, collector Tom Meredith of Austin, Texas, discovered the availability of the Ansel Adams Collection through The Friends of Photography. Meredith originally intended to purchase four prints as an anniversary gift to his wife, Lynn. In the end, the couple purchased all 138 works by Adams in The Friend of Photography’s holdings, and that group of photographs forms Ansel Adams: A Legacy.

Since becoming the Meredith Collection, the works have been shown at The Ransom Center Galleries at the University of Texas at Austin, at St. Francis University, and at the Cleveland Institute of Art’s Reinberger Gallery.
Music and Order

Around 1914, Adams began experimenting with playing the family’s unused upright piano. He found he had a natural gift. His father, sensing an aptitude, encouraged his son and arranged for piano lessons. Adams soon mastered a classical repertoire that included Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and Schubert. During this process he discovered the framework of music provided him a structure by which he was able to rein in his often erratic and hyperactive behavior.

Adams credited his music teachers with bringing order to his life. They also introduced him to the larger cultural world of San Francisco. Adams began attending concerts and moving within the artistic sphere of the city. He counted among his friends many of the city’s leading musicians. By 1923 he was considered a professional pianist. He was also giving lessons.

One of Ansel Adams’ prized possessions was a Mason and Hamlin grand piano. It was purchased with a twenty-two hundred dollar down payment (proceeds from the sale of an inherited lot of land) and installment payments over five years. The piano held a significant place in both of Adams’ homes, and frequently functioned as a fixture near his darkroom, where he could sit playing a Bach Prelude while waiting for a photograph to develop.

Adams’ career path eventually took him away from the concert hall, but music remained an important element in his life. In later years when he, his wife, and children were in residence in Yosemite, Adams could sometimes be found playing the piano in the lobby at the grand Ahwahnee Hotel, and he was always game for an impromptu concert at parties.

Of course, music is not simply putting one note after another; a tremendous variety of physical, aesthetic, and emotional situations are brought under control over the years by arduous practice. All falls together in a grand, yet apparently simple creative pattern that reveals high levels of memory, comprehension, and sensitivity.
– Ansel Adams, Ansel Adams: An Autobiography, 1985
Paul Strand (1890–1976)

*I believe you have made the one perfect and complete definition of photography.*
— Ansel Adams to Paul Strand, 1933

Ansel Adams considered documentary cinematographer and photographer Paul Strand the catalyst for his choosing photography over music as a profession. During the summer of 1930, while completing his photographic survey of the Taos Pueblo, Adams shared a guest bungalow at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s home with Strand and his wife, Rebecca. Adams and Strand shared many long philosophical discussions on the subject of photography, and one memorable day Strand shared the cache of unprinted photo negatives he had created over the summer. In those negatives Adams found his future path.

Paul Strand began photographing in New York in 1910. He became the protégé of master photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and his work was promoted in Stieglitz’s gallery and publications. In 1917, Strand produced a series of stark, spare, gritty photographs documenting New York City’s tenements and immigrant population. Those photographs began his career as a documentary photographer. In 1921, he collaborated with artist Charles Sheeler on the film *Manhatta*, a study of New York City’s high-rise environment.

In the early 1930s, Paul Strand turned his attention to documenting Old Mexico. In 1934, he served as co-writer, producer and cinematographer for *Redes (The Wave)*, a documentary film about Vera Cruz’s native fishermen created for Mexico’s Marxist government. He returned to Manhattan in 1937 to form Frontier Films, a filmmaking cooperative that included many of the most progressive writers and activist filmmakers of the period. Strand retired from documentary cinematography in 1948, returning exclusively to fine art photography. He traveled New England, Europe, and Africa throughout the 1950s and 1960s in search of subject matter.

Following his memorable first meeting with Alfred Stieglitz in 1932, Ansel Adams returned to San Francisco and established his own gallery with the purpose of promoting the modernist aesthetic of both An American Place and Group f.64. In 1933, he wrote Paul Strand proposing a one man show. Strand declined the offer explaining, “I don’t like to let these prints go out of my hands.” Undeterred, their friendship continued and their paths crossed many times throughout the years. However, the opportunities lessened considerably once Strand’s socialist beliefs forced him to move to Europe in 1949. Just prior to Strand’s death in 1976, Ansel Adams dedicated his book *Photographs of the Southwest* to Strand, stating, “It was a small tribute to a man who was a very important influence on my creative life.”

*Paul Strand is a peach.* — Ansel Adams to Virginia Best Adams, 1930
I could not afford two mistresses at the same time, and photography took over.
- Ansel Adams, 1976

Ansel Adams resolved a conflict of indecision in the early 1930s. Throughout the 1920s, he had supported himself by means of a variety of occupations: summer guide for the Sierra Club, concert pianist and piano teacher, and occasionally as a photographer. He published his first portfolio of photographic studies, *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*, in 1926 under the guidance of his patron, San Francisco philanthropist and art patron Albert Bender. He married in 1928 and, by 1932, he and Virginia were expecting their first child. He needed to settle on a permanent means for supporting his growing family.

During the summer of 1930 he set out for Taos, New Mexico, intent on completing his portfolio documenting the ancient pueblo community. Tony Lujan, a governor of the Taos people and husband to Taos art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan, had obtained permission granting Adams unlimited access to the compound. Adams joined artists Georgia O’Keeffe and John Marin, controversial writer D.H. Lawrence, and photographer Paul Strand as guests at Luhan’s sprawling pueblo-style home, “Los Gallos.” He shared a guest bungalow with Paul and Rebecca Strand.

That summer, Strand shared his vision of photographic expression with Adams, and Adams considered those discussions instrumental in his decision to pursue photography as a career. A 1932 trip east to meet the leading authority on fine art photography, Alfred Stieglitz, further confirmed his choice.

For the next forty years, Ansel Adams worked primarily as a commercial photographer doing what he called “nuts and bolts photography.” His images filled company brochures, magazines, national advertising campaigns, and government promotional guides. The New York City public came to know his work through the large-scale backlit Colorama images displayed at Grand Central Station. He tested and promoted new products for the Eastman Kodak Company and the Polaroid Corporation, as well as published a series of technical guides to help his fellow photographers maximize their medium.
San Francisco

The San Francisco area played a pivotal role in Ansel Adams’ life. From his birth in 1902 until he moved to the Carmel Highlands in 1962 it was his primary residence. His paternal grandparents settled in Atherton, south of San Francisco, in 1868. And until it burned in 1908, the family’s palatial estate, “Unadilla,” held a distinct place in Adams’ childhood memories.

Another pivotal childhood memory was the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. In 1902, Adams’ father, Charles Adams, built a chalet-style cottage for his family on the windswept sand dunes of Baker Beach facing the Pacific Ocean, about one mile from San Francisco’s city limits. Charles was away on business when the powerful earthquake struck at 5:15 the morning of April 17, 1906. As Adams’ nanny covered him in his bed, the cottage’s chimneys fell away and windows shattered, while in the living room a New England family treasure, a tall case clock, lurched violently across the floor, scattering its wooden workings.

Years later Adams wrote that following the earthquake he remembered seeing a “vast curtain of smoke by day and walls of flames by night….Refugees poured into our district, setting up their pitiful camps in the dunes….We had several friends who had been burnt out of their dwellings sleeping on our floors.” During one of the many aftershocks, four-year-old Ansel was thrown against a low brick garden wall, completely shattering the septum in his nose. From that day forward, Adams’ distinct beak-like nose sported an obvious s-curve in forward profile. In later years he referred to the condition as his “earthquake nose.”

In 1930, Adams built a small home and studio in the garden plot beside his parents’ home on Baker Beach, which by that time had become an established neighborhood bereft of sand dunes. He began work as a commercial photographer. Adams and his new bride, Virginia, divided their time between the residence in San Francisco and the Best Studio in Yosemite.
Ansel Adams and the Sierra Club

The Sierra Club was incorporated on May 28, 1892, as a gentlemen’s alpine club, its expressed purposes being to provide recreational, educational, and conservation guidance “to explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast; to publish authentic information concerning them,” and “to enlist the support and cooperation of the people and government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada.” The club was an amalgamation of two parallel special interest groups, one led by conservation proponent John Muir, and the other including Joseph LeConte, a professor of geology at the University of California.

Initially, due to the difficulty in accessing the Sierra from the San Francisco area, the club’s preliminary efforts took the form of scholarly publications and public lecture programs. Then in 1898 they established their first staffed information center and library in the Yosemite Valley. This was followed in 1904 by the LeConte Memorial Lodge at Curry Village, which became their summer base of operations. In 1901, the club utilized the Yosemite area for their first organized summer outing to Tuolumne Meadows, a large group event which was repeated over the next fifty years as the annual back country High Trip.

Ansel Adams joined the Sierra Club in 1919 following his summer convalescence from Spanish influenza. Through 1927 his primary involvement was as the summer caretaker at the LeConte Memorial Lodge. In 1928 he became the official — but unpaid — photographer for the Sierra Club’s outing to the Canadian Rockies, and by 1930 he was an organizational leader of their annual summer excursions.

Both Ansel Adams and Virginia Best Adams served on the board of directors of the Sierra Club. Virginia was among the early women directors, serving from 1932 through 1934, when the impending birth of their second child, Anne, required her attention. Ansel Adams served as a director consecutively for thirty-seven years, beginning in 1934.

Adams first traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1936 as a lobbyist on behalf of the Sierra Club during its efforts to establish Kings Canyon National Park. He returned again on many occasions, becoming a recognized force in the environmental preservation movement. Adams voluntarily retired from the Sierra Club’s board of directors in 1971 following the controversy surrounding California’s Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. He felt it was time for a new generation to take the lead.
I am deeply attached to the high desert regions of the American Southwest.
– Ansel Adams, Ansel Adams: An Autobiography, 1985

From his first visit in 1927, the Southwest held a special place in Ansel Adams’ heart. He returned to its stark sculptural forms again and again throughout his career and many of his most recognizable images document southwestern locales. He wrote, “Those who have not visited the Southwest will not discover its true qualities in texts or illustrations. Very few artists have caught its spirit.” When photographing this environment, he felt, “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 inspection of the shapes, textures, and the qualities of light characteristic of the region.”

Adams chauffeured his patron, Albert Bender, on his first trip through the region, piloting Bender’s open touring car over twelve hundred miles of washboard roads. Bender’s influence opened doors throughout the region and Adams met many of the local intelligentsia, including Taos art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan.

On a subsequent trip through the region with his wife Virginia, Adams met Santa Fe writer Mary Austin. Together they formed a collaborative partnership resulting in the narrative portfolio Taos Pueblo. The portfolio was published in 1930 under the guidance of Albert Bender. The limited-edition printing sold out in two years.

In 1937, Adams joined an intensive excursion led by painter Georgia O’Keeffe through New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. It was on this trip that Adams first encountered the dramatic, sculptural, and tragically sacred site of Canyon de Chelly National Monument in northeast Arizona. He described the encounter as “an extraordinary experience, made the more intense by the presence of its Navajo residents, who demonstrate that man can live with nature and sometimes enhance it.”

Adams again traveled to the Southwest and to the Texas Big Bend regions during World War II. He captured many of his most memorable National Park images as a “Photo Muralist” for an unrealized project by the Department of the Interior.
Visualization

The steps in making a photograph may be simply outlined as follows:

1. **Need, or desire, to photograph.** This attitude is obviously essential. Sometimes just going out with a camera can excite perceptive interest and the desire to work. An assignment—a **purpose**—can be the greatest stimulus for functional or creative work.

2. **Discovery** of the subject, or recognition of its essential aspects, will evoke the concept of the image. This leads to the **exploration** of the subject and the optimum point of view.

3. **Visualization** of the final picture is essential in whatever medium is used. The term “**seeing**” can be used for **visualization**, but the latter term is more precise in that it relates to the final picture—its scale, composition, tonal and textural values, etc. Just as a musician “hears” notes and chords in his mind’s eye, so can the trained photographer “see” certain values, textures, and arrangements in his mind’s eye.

— Ansel Adams, 1970
Photography, in the final analysis, can be reduced to a few simple principles. But, unlike most arts, it seems complex at the initial approach.

— Ansel Adams

Ansel Adams was a prolific educator. He published his first technical book, *Making a Photograph*, in 1935. He would eventually release forty additional books and folios, and numerous shorter publications. In 1940, he joined the Art Center School in Los Angeles as an instructor where, during World War II, he trained military Signal Corps photographers.

While at the Art Center School, Adams felt the need to codify his intuitive visualization process into a structured—and teachable—formula of image management and value production. In partnership with portrait photographer Fred Archer, he developed what would come to be known as the Zone System.

The Zone System is based on advance visualization of how subject matter will be rendered in the final print, and how that impacts the brightness range (luminosity) and relationships of the light and dark tones in the composition. The system was initially developed for use with black and white photography utilizing gray tones, but it is also applicable to color photography. Within the Zone System, the value range from pure white to pure black is divided into eleven steps, or zones. These steps, in turn, correspond to the controllable shutter speed and aperture opening of the camera, utilized for creating the exposure, and to the development times necessary for rendering the final print.

What I describe as the Zone System is a practical interpretation of sensitometry; it makes use of the basic parameters of exposure and development of the negative to achieve optimum negative quality in reference to the desired results in print or transparency.

— Ansel Adams, quoted in *Basic Techniques of Photography, Book 2*

Photography is more than a medium for factual communication of ideas. It is a creative art. Therefore emphasis on technique is justified only so far as it will simplify and clarify the statement of the photographer’s concept...Our objective is to present a working technique for creative photography.

— Ansel Adams