

#12 March 2014 Cameraderie

Ansel Adams (1902-1984)

Ansel Adams: great photographer and pioneering environmentalist. Yes!

Ansel Adams: hyperactive piano-playing party boy? Yes!

Since so many of us know Ansel Adams's photographs and his environmental work so well, I tried to find something to say about him a little beneath the surface. Yes, of course I will get to the photographs.

If you look at the Wikipedia article on Adams (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ansel_Adams), you will find much of what I summarize here.

- Adams was never comfortable in conventional classrooms, and a good deal of his education was home tutoring. This suggests a restless and high-energy personality, which would perhaps be diagnosed today as hyperactive.
- He loved both the outdoors and the piano. His love of the outdoors led him to long rambles and hikes and eventually working for the Sierra Club, and later being a member of its board. His love of piano started at age twelve, and he prepared for a career as a concert pianist, but switched to photography for two reasons. First, his piano skills although excellent, were not quite sufficient for a soloist career. He stressed precision playing, which probably informed his approach to photography later. Second, his emerging skills as a photographer had a higher career arc and corresponded to his love of the outdoors.
- As to my "party boy" remark, Adams was very popular in his artistic circles, being very gregarious and a good entertainer with his piano skills.

Here is another anecdote about Adams from the Wikipedia article, wherein we see the foundations of his moral life:

"His father raised him to follow the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson: to live a modest, moral life guided by a social responsibility to man and to nature. The day after the death of his mother in 1950, Adams broke into a dispute with the undertaker when choosing which casket his mother would be buried in. Adams chose the cheapest in the room, a two-hundred sixty-dollar affair that seemed the least he could purchase without doing the job himself. When the undertaker remarked, 'Have you no respect for the dead?' Adams replied, 'One more crack like that and I will take Mama elsewhere.'"

My final reference to the Wikipedia article now switches to discussing Adams's photography:

"Ansel Adams", wrote John Szarkowski (New York Museum of Modern Art), "attuned himself more precisely than any photographer before him to a visual understanding of the specific quality of the light that fell on a specific place at a specific moment. For Adams the natural landscape is not a fixed and solid sculpture but an insubstantial image, as transient as the light that continually redefines it. This sensibility to the specificity of light was the motive that forced Adams to develop his legendary photographic technique."

The Ansel Adams Gallery (<http://www.anseladams.com/270/>), a commercial website, has the following to say about Adams:

“Adams’s technical mastery was the stuff of legend. More than any creative photographer, before or since, he reveled in the theory and practice of the medium. [Edward] Weston and [Paul] Strand frequently consulted him for technical advice. He served as principal photographic consultant to Polaroid and Hasselblad and, informally, to many other photographic concerns. Adams developed the famous and highly complex “zone system” of controlling and relating exposure and development, enabling photographers to creatively visualize an image and produce a photograph that matched and expressed that visualization. He produced ten volumes of technical manuals on photography, which are the most influential books ever written on the subject.

“In the 1950s and 1960s, Nancy Newhall and Adams created a number of books and exhibitions of historic significance, particularly the Sierra Club’s *This is the American Earth* (1960), which, with Rachel Carson’s classic *Silent Spring*, played a seminal role in launching the first broad-based citizen environmental movement.

“His images became the symbols, the veritable icons, of wild America. When people thought about the national parks of the Sierra Club or nature of the environment itself, they often envisioned them in terms of an Ansel Adams photograph. His black-and-white images were not “realistic” documents of nature. Instead, *they sought an intensification and purification of the psychological experience of natural beauty.* [italics added] He created a sense of the sublime magnificence of nature that infused the viewer with the emotional equivalent of wilderness, often more powerful than the actual thing.

“The great French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson made the well-known comment that ‘the world is falling to pieces and all Adams and [Edward] Weston photograph is rocks and trees’ (quoted by Adams, Oral History, Univ. of Calif., Berkeley, p. 498).

“Reviewers frequently characterize Adams as a photographer of an idealized wilderness that no longer exists. On the contrary, the places that Adams photographed are, with few exceptions, precisely those wilderness and park areas that have been preserved for all time. There is a vast amount of true and truly protected wilderness in America, much of it saved because of the efforts of Adams and his colleagues.”

Here is a list of several of Adams’s most famous photographs, some from the Wikipedia article, many of which you have probably seen. Several are in the public domain and you can download and print them from certain sites (see below). You can Google any of the titles to view them on a multitude of websites, should you want to refresh your memory of Adams’s work:

- *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome*, Yosemite National Park, 1927
- *Rose and Driftwood*, San Francisco, California, 1932
- *Georgia O’Keeffe and Orville Cox*, Canyon de Chelly National Monument, 1937
- *Clearing Winter Storm*, Yosemite National Park, 1940
- *Moon and Half Dome*, Yosemite National Park, California, 1960
- *Moonrise*, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941
- *Winter Sunrise*, Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California, 1944

- *Aspens*, Northern New Mexico, 1958
- *El Capitan*, Winter Sunrise, 1968
- *The Tetons and the Snake River*, 1942

There are many collections of Adams's prints available in book form. An hour or two browsing through them at a large bookstore or a public library can leave one light-headed with delight.

Adams also wrote a number of landmark books on the techniques of photography and printing that are still in print and great treasures today. Among them are the following:

- *The Camera*
- *The Negative*
- *The Print*

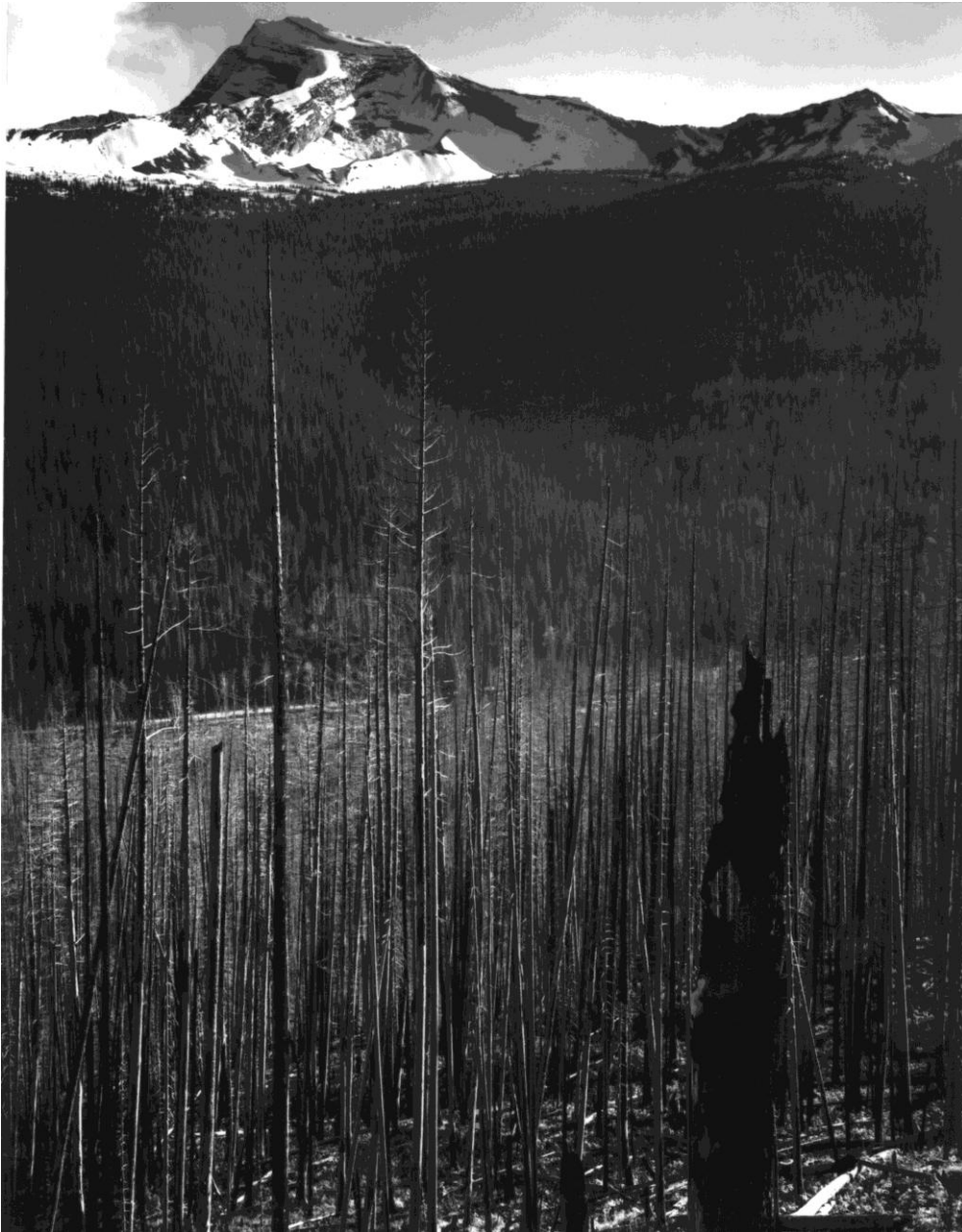
Now here is a surprise, at least for me. Adams worked for the U.S. Department of the Interior for a time, photographing the National Parks and other sites. ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS HE SHOT DURING THIS TIME ARE OWNED BY OUR GOVERNMENT AND ARE THEREFORE IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN. So here you go: at the following link you can view and download over 200 digitized images of Ansel Adams photographs:

<http://www.archives.gov/research/ansel-adams/>. Here, below, are two I particularly like. They show his trademark attention to the full range of tones, from almost pure black to almost pure white, so evident in his most famous images. I am guessing that few of us have seen these images before. I hope you are as excited as I was to explore this archive.

File number 79-AAB-1, Boulder Dam, 1941



File number 79-AAE-3, Burned Area, Glacier National Park



Here is what the National Park Service has to say in part about this collection that they have placed in the National Archives:

“Ansel Adams Photographs of National Parks and Monuments, 1933 - 1942

220 photographs have been digitized from this series. In 1941 the National Park Service commissioned Ansel Adams to create a photo mural for the Department of the Interior

Building in Washington, DC. The theme was to be nature as exemplified and protected in the U.S. National Parks. The project was halted because of World War II and never resumed. Some prints date to the 1930s and were perhaps made before the commission but used by Ansel Adams for the project. These materials are held by the National Archives and Records Administration Still Picture Records (College Park, MD).”

I will leave it there. Adams’s writings and photographs had perhaps more combined impact on photography and our national scene than anyone else in his time. He takes my breath away.