

ANSEL ADAMS

(1902 – 1984)

Focus on Planning and Contrast

Posters:

- Sand Dunes*
- Thunderhead Clouds on Unicorn Mountain*
- Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada from Manzanar, California*

Other Visuals:

- Ansel Adams Calendar pages
- Photo of Adams on top of his car

Web sites (A hard copy is included in the Ansel Adams folder):

- www.library.arizona.edu/branches/ccp/education/guides/aaguide/aainguid.htm
Explains the Zone System, the View Camera, and Suggestions for Discussing and Interpreting Photographs
- www.ansel-adams-prints.com/ (good discussion of the life and techniques of Ansel Adams, and many prints you can view)

The following biographical sketch is reprinted from www.edwardcartergallery.com/artists/aadams.html

Ansel Adams was that rare artist who cared deeply for man and Earth, for a reality beyond himself, expressing these feelings in his art and his actions. Throughout his long and prolific career, Ansel Adams created a body of work which has come to exemplify not only the purist approach to the medium, but to many people the definitive pictorial statement on the American western landscape.

He was also strongly associated with a visionary sense of the redemptive beauty of wilderness and the importance of its preservation. The prestige and popularity of his work has been enhanced by the extraordinary technical perfection of his photographs and his insistence on absolute control of the photographic processes.

Ansel Adams was totally passionate about planet Earth. It was as if he was created directly from the California soil. He had been a sickly child, but upon his arrival in Yosemite at the age of 14, he grew healthy. He returned year after year. Taking to the trails of the High Sierra for weeks at a time, he thrived on the brilliant blue skies, pure mountain air and gleam of glacial-polished granite. Later in life he would venture to eastern America only to be slowly diminished in soul and spirit, regaining himself again as he entered the Rockies, for him the true beginning of the America West.

Through a long and rich life, he concentrated his picture making upon a few, most favored landscapes: Yosemite and its surround Sierra, California, the American southwest and Alaska. Ansel Adams is best known as the consummate artist who gave Yosemite full expression. To record their 1916 vacation, his parents gave the fourteen year old his first camera, a simple Kodak Box Brownie. The rapport between Adams, camera and Yosemite was immediate. He returned to Yosemite every summer, soon spending as much of the year there as in his hometown, San Francisco. Photography at Yosemite, always together and never apart, evolved from hobby to job to becoming the point upon which he centered.

Over many years of dedicated work, Adams learned as complete a technical mastery of the medium as possible, combining superb technique with a natural eye for composition and a soul devoted to beauty and the American landscape. At first, photographing big objects – a mountain, a waterfall—his vision of Yosemite soon expanded to include the larger landscape, creating private worlds.

Confined at first to photographing his surround, San Francisco, Yosemite and the Sierra, Ansel began traveling and photographing a larger world in 1926. His first trips were to Carmel, then in 1927 to Southern California, Arizona and New Mexico, places

that he returned to again and again. He could only photograph what he came to fluently know. Rarely would he achieve a successful image on his first visit. Five trips to New Mexico by 1930 resulted in his first book, *Taos Pueblo*.

With the arrival of World War II, Adams went to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a photomuralist for the Department of the Interior. During this time he began to develop a codification of his approach to exposure, processing and printing—the zone system. In effect, this system aimed a previsualization of the final print from a given set of conditions.

Much of our understanding of the beauty and importance of the American wilderness comes from the great images of Ansel Adams, many of his acknowledged icons were made in the 1940's. These grand landscapes, spiritual, yet in touch with the earth, include such masterpieces as *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941, *The Tetons and the Snake River*, 1942, *Winter sunrise*, 1943, and *Mount Williamson from Manzanar, California*, 1945.

In each of his images Adams aimed to modulate the range of tones from rich black to whitest white in order to achieve perfect photographic clarity. He also developed a knowledge of the techniques of photographic reproduction to assure that thoughts of any reproduced work might approach as closely as possible the standard of the original print.

SAMPLE PRESENTATION

Introduction:

How many of you have taken pictures? Did you have to focus the camera or were you just able to point and click? What were you taking pictures of?

Today's artist, Ansel Adams, was a leader of modern photography, one of the most respected fine art photographers in the history of photography. Are all photographs considered art? What makes only some photography an art? We will be finding that there is more to fine art photography than snapping a quick shot of a scene on a perfect day. Painters plan, or "compose" their pictures as they go along.

Photographers also compose their pictures, but they have to work with what is already there. They must carefully choose what goes in the picture, and what is left out. Ansel Adams would begin with an idea, and then waited for weather and lighting conditions that would add to the drama of his subject. He used photographic technology to make his subject look the way he wanted it to, much as a painter uses various techniques to create a certain effect in his art. He simplified scenes, using only black, white and tones of gray, to pull a scene together and make it dramatic.

How do you suppose Ansel Adams got started in photography?

He was given a very simple camera when he was a teenager and he took pictures when he went on vacation to Yosemite National Park in California.

Ansel Adams is best known for his black and white portraits of nature. His photographs have a luminous quality to them because light plays such an important part.

Biography:

So, who was Ansel Adams?

Ansel Adams was born in San Francisco, California, in 1902. His home was built right on the sand dunes by the ocean. When Ansel was your age he was sick a lot and he spent many days in his room, in bed. To pass the time he would look out of just a part of the window to see what might pass before his fixed viewing point. (Have the kids scrunch up their hand and look around the room).

In the summer he would travel with his parents to the wilderness areas to hike and explore. He especially loved the summers because during the school year he had a really difficult time. He loved to ask questions...complicated questions that adults felt really uncomfortable trying to answer. He had a hard time concentrating and listening and by the time he finished 8th grade no school wanted him as a student.

Ansel's father began to teach him at home and along with math and literature he gave his son some pretty unusual ways of learning. In 1915 the Panama-Pacific Exhibition came to San Francisco to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal. Ansel's father gave him a season pass and every day the boy would go to this giant exhibition--part carnival—part science exhibition (with working models of all the latest inventions and machines)—and part art museum. Can you imagine how his inquisitive mind soaked up all these new ideas and sights? What questions do you suppose he asked the exhibitors?

Something else very special happened to Ansel when he was 12. He began to teach himself to play the piano and much to everyone's surprise, he was VERY GOOD. And here is where his luck with teachers and learning began to change. His excited parents arranged for their son to begin piano lessons with a very patient, talented and ORGANIZED lady. Instead of just having the boy sit at the piano and play the notes over and over again, she talked to him about how notes rise and fall, got him to think in terms of building a picture in his mind with the sounds the notes represented.

This disorganized guy was learning how to focus his energy and learned acceptable ways of showing how he felt. He decided he wanted to be a concert pianist. Then, when he was 14, his parents gave him a camera for his birthday and there began a special hobby and another way to express his ideas.

During the winters he would practice the piano. During the summers he explored the rugged wilderness with an adult friend, two pack burros and his camera.

Technique:

As an adult, Adams carried the importance of technique around in his mind and applied it to his photography.

This was not a pocket instamatic. Adam's professional camera used single sheets of film about the size of a piece of notebook paper and the camera was the size of a small suitcase (show the picture on top of the car). He couldn't just stop and take a picture. He had to set up the camera, use a special instrument to find out how bright the light was and then set the camera, compose the shot and THEN take the picture.

He used two important tools—besides a camera and film—to create his masterpieces... **planning and contrast**.

Let's talk for a moment about this special tool called—**contrast**.

Does anyone have an idea what we mean by contrast? (Examples.. hard—soft; black—white; clear—fuzzy; sunny – cloudy)

What does contrast do? (Creates depth, texture, focus) How do you get it? (By putting things that are different near one another)

Remember the second tool I mentioned that Adams used?... **Planning!**

Ansel Adams **visualized**. He first planned in his mind how he wanted the picture to turn out and then set out to capture it. He planned how he wanted the light to look in this picture—what areas he wanted bright and which ones dark—then using his zone system of 11 tones ranging from blackest black to whitest white, he decided how to create contrast. Then he would set the exposures and filters on this camera to capture the effect he wanted.

He also planned the angle from which he would take the photograph, and he carefully planned how to frame his subject (what the edges or boundaries of the photograph would be).

In the lab, he would develop the film into a negative and make his print—lightening and darkening it to create the scene as he had visualized it. He carefully created a range of tones that would result in perfect photographic clarity.

In this way his final print was always a little different from the exact scene. He did this to show the great power, beauty and spirit of nature.

Adams was a hard worker. He often worked twenty hour days, and he took no days off. In addition to creating a large volume of photographs, Adams is remembered as one of the greatest environmental leaders of our country, and as a writer of some of the most influential books ever written about the technical aspects of photography.

AS YOU SHOW THE POSTERS, HAVE THE CHILDREN THINK ABOUT:

- Where is your eye drawn? Does how he framed the photograph help to draw your eyes here?
- Try to imagine the setting where the photograph was taken, and what might be visible outside of the frame. How would a different framing (closer or farther away) affect the viewer's sense of the subject?
- What direction does the light come from?
- What textures do you see, and how is light used to reveal texture?
- What mood is created by the use of light?
- What gradations in tone do you see?
- How is movement created by those tones?
- Is the photograph taken from an angle above or below the subject, or at eye level?
- What effect does the angle have on the way you view the subject?
- How would the photograph have changed if it had been taken from a different angle?

Remind them that the posters are copies of the photographs and that they may differ in size from the original images and they are certainly not as crisp.

Project Suggestions:

1. Creating Gray Tone Compositions

Supplies needed: Glue, scissors, white construction paper as base, ¼ sheets of black, dark gray, medium gray, and white.

Have the posters propped up around the room for inspiration. Ask the children to pick a poster. Looking for the simplest shapes, basic tones, have them create their own compositions using the papers. Remind them of the difference between torn and cut edges—contrast. Ask them to name their compositions.

2. Experiments with Light

Supplies needed: strong flashlights, white poster board as a reflector, darkened room (Caution: check out light levels in the classroom...you may not be able to get the room dark enough for this to really work)

Have the children work in groups to try different lighting angles on a classmate. Light from below (Halloween monster face style) close to the face. Light from below at

about 3 feet. Light from above and sides. If you are able to get the room dark enough, have them try lighting with light reflected off of the posterboard.

Look at how the shadows and points of emphasis change. If you need more “relief” have the subject wear a hat, hold a book, etc.

If you happen to be a photographer yourself, you could introduce the use of a light meter...lots and lots of possibilities.

3. Mountain Still Life (this may be more appropriate for younger grades)

Supplies needed; 2 chairs, 1 broom or mop, large gray cloth, smaller white cloth, spot light, white paper, pencil black crayon, white crayon

First, build your still life mountain. Find a blank wall space for background and then drape one chair and the broom to create a flowing triangular shape. The classroom lights need to be off so you can create shadow with the spotlight. Position the light slightly to the side and front (if using a clamp-on spotlight, put it on a chair back).

Separate the students into two or three groups and have them view the mountain from three different locations (side with light, front, side without light).

Do the shadows change? Does the mountain’s shape look different? Pretend the floor and wall form a horizon – is the mountain close by or far away? (Tie in with the mountains they’ve seen or the beach.)

Have the children draw the basic triangular mountain and horizon line with their pencils. Then, using the crayons, add the major shadow shapes. You may wish to do this as a directed activity—“now, would you draw a triangle shape that looks like our mountain.” “Let’s add a line across the paper that shows us where the sky and ground meet”....