

Cricket



ANSEL ADAMS

Painting with Light

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD Ansel Adams sighed and flopped onto his back, staring at the ceiling. From his bed, he could hear the Pacific waves pounding Baker's Beach, and he thought, If only I could be out there, exploring the dunes!

But Ansel had measles, and in 1914, that was serious business. For two dreary weeks, he'd been in bed with the window shades closed.

As he lay there, Ansel noticed a vague image flitting across the ceiling. It was the gardener, tending flower beds below his window. But how did the image of the gardener get onto the ceiling?

Ansel called for his father, who explained the effect as "camera obscura." The darkened bedroom was like the inside of a camera, and the image of the gardener was projected through a gap in the window shade, which acted like a lens. Sunlight illuminated the gardener and cast his image through the "lens," onto the ceiling. Mr. Adams brought in his own Kodak Bullseye camera and opened it up to show Ansel how it worked.



*"Holding My Box Brownie Camera,"
Yosemite National Park, California, c. 1918*

Soon after Ansel recuperated, his father decided to homeschool him. Part of his education was a yearlong pass to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. The Expo had hundreds of art, music, and science exhibits, and Ansel roamed the halls for hours every day. He especially loved studying paintings, fascinated by the artists' use of light and shadow.

When he wasn't at the Expo or being tutored, Ansel was climbing rocky Pacific cliffs or wading in Lobos Creek, looking for insects to add to his collection. He loved spending "long days in a world of sea grass and bright sand" and hearing the "roar and tang of the ocean, and the cry of gulls."

by Melanie G. Snyder

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On 1 June 1916, Ansel was allowed to indulge his passion for nature when he and his parents boarded a train bound for Yosemite National Park. When they arrived, Ansel's parents gave him a gift—a simple Kodak Box Brownie camera. Ansel scanned the instructions, asked his father for a few pointers, then clambered off on the first of many hikes around Yosemite to photograph the breathtaking mountains, waterfalls, and meadows. He took over thirty photographs on that first trip to Yosemite. But when he returned home and had those photos developed, he wasn't happy with the way most of them turned out.

But Ansel didn't let that discourage him. He took more photographs, then went to visit a man named Frank Dittman who owned a film-developing business. Ansel asked Dittman whether he could work in the shop without pay, just to learn more about photography. Dittman agreed and took Ansel and his latest rolls of film into the lab to show him how to develop film into prints.

Ansel soon saw the relationship between

the way a photo was taken and the final print. He decided that in order to become a better photographer, he needed to practice. He made up a set of work sheets on which he could write down every decision he made when taking a photograph—the type of film he'd used and how it was loaded in the camera, which lens and filters he'd used, and all of the camera settings. He also took notes on the amount of light available when he took each photo. Was it cloudy? Sunny? Were there shadows? Was it morning, midday, or evening when the photo was taken?

When he developed his film, he compared the quality of the final prints with the settings he'd used when taking the photographs. This helped him to improve with every photo he took, and he read every book and magazine he could find to learn more.

Ansel soon had plenty of opportunities to practice his photography. Starting when he was eighteen, he spent four summers in Yosemite National Park as custodian for the Sierra Club headquarters. He led hiking expeditions through Yosemite and captured spectacular photographs with each hike.

He created his photos carefully, as though they were paintings like those he'd seen at the Expo. Early in the twentieth century, photography was not considered a creative art, but Ansel hoped to change that. He'd seen how the use of light and shadow in paintings could bring them to life, and he wanted to use his camera to paint with light. He visualized the story he wanted to tell with each photo. "The picture we make is never made for us alone," he said later.



Album page of Ansel Adams's first photographs, Yosemite National Park, 1916

"It is, and should be, a communication—to reach as many people as possible." Photographs, he felt, could create the same strong feelings the paintings at the Expo had aroused in him.


Ansel would decide carefully on the subject of each photograph he took, then choose the angle from which to take it, sometimes hiking for miles to find the best vantage point. He studied the movement of sun and clouds, often waiting hours for the perfect light with which to "paint" his photograph. Then, as he developed the film into prints, he found that he could bring his own paintings to life.

"When I first made snapshots in and around Yosemite," he said, "I was casually making a visual diary—recording where I had been and what I had seen—and becoming intimate with the spirit of wild places. Gradually my photographs began to mean something in themselves; they became records of experiences as well as of places. People responded to them and my interest in the creative potential of photography grew."

Indeed, people did respond to Ansel's photos. His pictures of the wilderness, of people, and of the tiniest details of everyday life captured people's imaginations. Some of his photographs were used to convince the U.S. Congress to establish a new national park at Kings Canyon, California, and during World War II, he photographed a Japanese-American internment camp called Manzanar. He published these pictures in a book called *Born Free and Equal* to draw attention to the unfair treatment of these U.S. citizens. Later, other

Adams photographs were published in President Lyndon Johnson's report "A More Beautiful America." In exhibitions around the world, in magazine articles and books, Ansel's photographs were inspiring people, educating them, making them smile or cry.

Ansel Adams created over forty thousand photos during his lifetime. Many of them were taken in the wilderness places he loved best. But whether he was photographing grand mountains, everyday people, or a tiny leaf curled up on the ground, his approach to photography was based on his belief in the enormous beauty of the world.

"Once completed," he said, "the photograph must speak for itself," and the stunning photos he took speak volumes. 



Leaves, Mount Rainier National Park, Washington, c. 1942