

## ANSEL ADAMS: EARLY WORKS

Ansel Adams (1902-1984), photographer, musician, naturalist, explorer, critic and teacher, was a giant in the field of landscape photography. His work can be viewed as the end of an arc of American art concerned with capturing the “sublime” in the unspoilt Western landscape. This tradition includes the 19<sup>th</sup> century painters Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole and Thomas Moran, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century photographers Carleton Watkins, Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson.

For much of his early adulthood, Adams was torn between a career as a concert pianist versus one in photography; later, he famously likened the photographic negative to a musical score, and the print to the performance. Yet most museum-goers are only familiar with the heroic, high-contrast prints on high-gloss paper stock that Adams manufactured to order in the 1970s-80s, coinciding with the emergence of the first retail galleries devoted to photography; as performances, these later prints are akin to “brass bands.” Much less familiar are the intimate prints, rich in the middle tones – the “chamber music” – that Adams crafted earlier in his career.

This exhibition focuses on the masterful small-scale prints made by Adams from the 1920s into the 1950s. Already in this time period there is quite an evolution of printing style, from the soft-focus, warm-toned, painterly “Parmelian prints” of the 1920s; through the *f/64* school of sharp-focused photography that he co-founded with Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham in the 1930s; and, after the War, towards a cooler, higher-contrast printmaking style. Throughout, Adams is revealed as a poet of light, both in the field and in the darkroom.

*Ansel Adams: Early Works* is organized by art2art Circulating Exhibitions, LLC. All photographs are from the private collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg. Local support has been provided by [...]



1. A Grove of Tamarack Pine,  
Lyell Fork of the Merced, ca. 1923  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches

In 1927 Adams published *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*, a portfolio of eighteen photographs of Yosemite National Park printed on textured translucent paper and priced at fifty dollars, at the time a high price for photography. This was to be the first of eight portfolios that Adams would produce over a fifty-year span, in editions ranging up to 260 – a prodigious output, given that Adams made all the prints himself. The invented word ‘Parmelian’ derived from the mountain lichen *parmelia*, and was thought to sound more marketable to art collectors than a ‘mere’ photograph; the purist Adams would later regret this youthful pomposity.

*Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras* featured several of Adams’s earliest successes. These include “A Grove of Tamarack Pine,” done in the soft-focus, painterly style known as Pictorialism which was dominant among artistic photographers of the period, and which Adams would later play a key role in discrediting; indeed, this was the only Pictorialist photograph that he would still reprint into the 1970s. Other Parmelian prints, such as “From Glacier Point” and “Mount Galen Clark,” with their lace-like silhouetted pines in the foreground and telescoped multi-layered backgrounds, reveal the stylistic influence of early Japanese woodblock prints, which were highly prized on the West Coast. Only a handful of the Parmelian prints, such as “Banner Peak – Thousand Island Lake,” clearly foreshadow what would become Adams’s signature majestic style.



2. From Glacier Point, 1927  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



3. On the Heights, 1927  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



4. Mount Galen Clark, 1927  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
8 x 6 inches  
Frame size: 18 x 14 inches



5. Roaring River Falls, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
8 x 6 inches  
Frame size: 18 x 14 inches



6. Sierra Junipers, ca. 1923  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



7. Kearsarge Pinnacles, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches

“When I first made snapshots in and around Yosemite, 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 apace. My piano suffered a serious rival. Family and friends would take me aside and say, ‘Do not give up your music; the camera cannot express the human soul’. I found that while the camera does not express the soul, perhaps a photograph can!”



8. Mount Brewer, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



9. East Vidette, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



10. Mount Clarence King, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
8 x 6 inches  
Frame size: 18 x 14 inches



11. The Abode of Snow, ca. 1923  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



12. Lower Paradise Valley, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



13. The Sentinel, ca. 1923  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



14. El Capitan, ca. 1923  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
8 x 6 inches  
Frame size: 18 x 14 inches



15. Marion Lake, 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



16. Cloud and Mountain, ca. 1925  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches

“It was one of those mornings when the sunlight is burnished with a keen wind and long feathers of cloud move in a lofty sky. The silver light turned every blade of grass and every particle of sand into a luminous metallic splendor: there was nothing, however small, that did not clash in the bright wind, that did not send arrows of light through the glassy air. I was suddenly arrested in the long crunching path up the ridge by an exceedingly pointed awareness of the light. The moment I paused, the full impact of the mood was upon me. I saw more clearly than I have ever seen before or since the minute detail of the grasses, the clusters of sand shifting in the wind, the small flotsam of the forest, the motion of the high clouds streaming above the peaks. There are no words to convey the moods of those moments.”



17. Banner Peak – Thousand Island Lake, 1923  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 x 8 inches  
Frame size: 14 x 18 inches



18. Mount Robson, 1928  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
15 x 10 7/8 inches  
Frame size: 30 x 24 inches

This rare monumental print is one of Adams's first enlargements. It is printed on Dasonville Charcoal Black photographic paper, a gelatin silver paper which boasted of having the matte surface and subtle tonal scale of the more expensive platinum process, while permitting the use of an enlarger (unlike platinum prints which must be contact-printed). Adams's inscription to the paper manufacturer reads:

"To my friend W.E. Dasonville – I want you to have this print as an expression of my appreciation – As you see, I have been able to achieve results with a most difficult subject, in a manner that I know could not be gotten with any other photographic paper."



19. Sierra Peak on Glacier Ridge, ca. 1926  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
5 ½ x 7 5/8 inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches

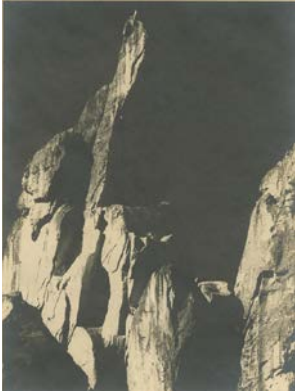


20. Glacial Cirque, Milestone Ridge, Sequoia National Park, ca. 1926

Vintage gelatin silver print

5 ½ x 7 5/8 inches

Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



21. Yosemite Crag, ca. 1926

Vintage gelatin silver print

7 5/8 x 5 ½ inches

Frame size: 20 x 16 inches

In April 1927, along with his fiancée Virginia Best, Adams hiked up to Diving Board, a precarious outcropping that faced Yosemite's magnificent Half Dome. For the first time in his early career, he experienced what photographers call *previsualization*:

"I began to think about how the print was to appear, and if it would transmit any of the feeling of the monumental shape before me in terms of its expressive-emotional quality. I began to see in my mind's eye the finished print I desired: the brooding cliff with a dark sky and the sharp rendition of distant, snowy Tenaya Peak."

To achieve the desired effect, Adams shot through a red filter, which preternaturally darkened the afternoon sky so that the black of the sky was separated from the black of the shadowed cliffside by a sinewy strip of brilliant white snow. The resulting photograph, "Monolith, the Face of Half-Dome," would become one of Adams's enduring favorites. Moreover, it was his first successful harnessing of a clever technique (the use of a filter) to achieve a specific aesthetic aim.

In the early 1940s, partly to distinguish himself from other landscape photographers, such as his friendly rival Edward Weston, Adams began to experiment with scale. Shown here is a rare early 16x20 inch matte-surface enlargement of "Monolith," juxtaposed with the original Parmelian print from 1927. Starting in the 1950s, "Monolith" would be printed on glossy paper, and the sky and most of the cliff side would be printed jet black, with much of the subtleties lost.





22. Monolith, the Face of Half-Dome, 1927  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
8 x 6 inches  
Frame size: 18 x 14 inches



23. Monolith, the Face of Half-Dome, 1927  
Gelatin silver print, printed ca. 1940  
20 x 16 inches  
Frame size: 30 x 24 inches

In 1932 Adams co-founded Group *f/64* with fellow West Coast photographers Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Willard Van Dyke, and others. The name refers to the small lens aperture characterized by sharpness and depth. Inspired by the teachings of the charismatic New York photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz and by Stieglitz's protégé Paul Strand, Group *f/64* rejected the soft-focus Pictorialist approach in favor of a more rigorous aesthetic known as "straight photography." The following year, Ansel and Virginia traveled cross-country to visit Stieglitz at An American Place, his groundbreaking gallery devoted to modern art and photography. Stieglitz praised the younger photographer's consistent vision and the quality of his prints, and there began a lifelong correspondence and collaboration, including a show in New York of Adams's work in 1936. Adams wrote:

"Stieglitz's doctrine of the equivalent as an explanation of creative photography opened the world for me. In showing a photograph he implied, 'Here is the equivalent of what I saw and felt.' That is all I can ever say in words about my photographs; they must stand or fall, as objects of beauty and communication, on the silent evidence of their equivalence."



24. Alfred Stieglitz at An American Place, New York, 1938  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
8 ¾ x 6 inches  
Frame size: 20x16 inches

This picture captures a solitary Stieglitz at the end of his distinguished career.

Adams's frequent pilgrimages to Yosemite from his home in San Francisco had begun in 1916, when he was a thirteen-year-old armed with a Kodak Box Brownie camera. In 1937, Ansel and his wife Virginia moved to Yosemite and took over her father's photographic studio. They would live in the park for a decade. Like Monet with his serial paintings of haystacks, or Edward Weston with his variegated photographs of the sand dunes in Oceano, Adams would return again and again to favorite spots from which he would capture the spectacular changes of the seasons and the endless variations in light and in clouds, as exemplified by these three images taken from similar vantage points.

"Storm, Yosemite Valley" is considered Adams's finest California photograph; it is an icon in the American Western landscape tradition stretching back to luminist painters such as Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. "Although the scene was of low general contrast, my visualization of the final print was quite vigorous," Adams remembered. "The subject had a very dramatic potential." This recently-discovered print, which bears a 1938 date on Adams's original typewritten label, is the earliest recorded print of this image, which previously had been dated "circa 1944." It is surprising to learn that the otherwise meticulous Adams was quite careless in dating his negatives, and that such a well-known photograph might thus be redated by a full six years.



25. Yosemite from Inspiration Point, Summer, ca. 1936  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
6 7/8 x 8 ¾ inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



26. Storm, Yosemite Valley, California, 1938  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 x 9 ¼ inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



27. Yosemite Valley, High Clouds, from Tunnel Esplanade,  
Yosemite National Park, California, ca. 1940  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 x 9 inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches

The 1930s and 1940s represent the heart of Adams's career. It is during this period that his work became synonymous in the public eye with the unspoiled grandeur of the American West, from Arizona to Alaska. The radical "Frozen Lake and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada" is his most successful abstraction, displaying Weston's influence, while other masterworks such as "From Wawona Tunnel" and "White House Ruin, Canyon de Chelly" are more representative of Adams's grand, and accessible, vision.



28. Frozen Lake and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada, California, 1932  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 1/8 x 9 3/8 inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



29. From Wawona Tunnel, Winter, Yosemite, 1935  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 1/16 x 9 1/16 inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches



30. From Wawona Tunnel, Winter, Yosemite, 1935

Vintage gelatin silver print

6  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Frame size: 20 x 16 inches



31. Grand Tetons from Jackson Lake, 1940

Vintage gelatin silver print

11  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Frame size: 20 x 16 inches

It was a crisp fall afternoon in 1941 that Adams together with his young son Michael and close friend Cedric Wright were driving through the Chama Valley of New Mexico and passed a rural church and cemetery off the highway. "Get this! Get that, for God's sake! We don't have much time," Adams yelled. They struggled to set up the tripod in the fading light. Adams recalled:

I could not find my Weston exposure meter! The situation was desperate: the low sun was trailing the edge of clouds in the west, and shadow would soon dim the white crosses. I suddenly realized that I knew the luminance of the moon—250 cd/ft<sup>2</sup>. Using the Exposure Formula, I placed this value on Zone VII. Realizing as I released the shutter that I had an unusual photograph which deserved a duplicate negative, I quickly reversed the film holder, but as I pulled the darkslide, the sunlight passed from the white crosses; I was a few seconds too late! The lone negative suddenly became precious.

The resulting picture is Adams's most famous, and an icon of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography. He would make over 1300 prints of "Moonrise" over his career, but surprisingly only a dozen from the 1940s survive, of which this is one of the very earliest. From the 1950s onward, Adams changed how he made the print so that it looks like a night scene: the foreground is rendered much darker, the sky is jet black, more structure is visible in the clouds above the horizon, while the wispy clouds at or above moon level are absent.



32. Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
9 5/8 x 12 7/8 inches  
Frame size: 18 x 22 inches

While other notable photographers felt compelled to document the Great Depression, and later World War II, Adams recognized his strengths and remained true to his purist vision. “I still believe there is a real social significance in a rock – a more important significance therein than in a line of unemployed,” he asserted in a letter to Weston. Others were unconvinced. “Now in this moment, in this crisis, with the world maybe going to pieces – to photograph a *landscape!*” sniped Henri Cartier-Bresson. Perhaps in response, in 1944 Adams set out to document life in the Manzanar War Relocation Center, a notorious internment camp for Japanese-Americans that was set up in the Owens Valley in the aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The resulting book, while a collector’s item today, is visually undistinguished: Adams was not nearly so gifted a social documentary photographer as Cartier-Bresson, or as his close friend Dorothea Lange. Ironically, it was during this shoot that Adams swiveled his camera away from the camp and made the classic landscape “Mount Williamson, from Manzanar.”



33. Mount Williamson, from Manzanar, 1944  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 ¼ x 9 ¼ inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



34. White House Ruin, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, 1949  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
9 3/8 x 7 ¼ inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches

Adams was not a gifted portraitist. "Adams said more than once that it was his aim in making a portrait to photograph the head as though it were a piece of sculpture," the curator John Szarkowski has written. "Regrettably, he too often succeeded in this bizarre ambition." In contrast, his photographs of sculpture are inventive and full of life, such as this behind-the-scenes picture taken in San Francisco's de Young Museum, which Stieglitz included in his 1936 show of Adams's work at An American Place.



35. Museum Storeroom, de Young Museum,  
San Francisco, California ca. 1935  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 x 9 ¼ inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



36. Old Doors, Columbia Farm, Los Angeles, 1940  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
9 ¼ x 6 ¾ inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches



37. Coastal road, 1952-53  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
9 3/8 x 6 7/8 inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches

In Adams's poetic lens, trees are not simply trees: they are lacework, they are stencils, they are calligraphy. "Trees and Snow, 1933" is his riff on the German photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch's "Mountain Forest in Winter" reproduced in his influential book *Die Welt ist*

*Schön* (*The World is Beautiful*) in 1929. A quarter-century later, the moody, mysterious photographs "Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958," taken in the Sangre de Cristo mountains above Santa Fe, and shown here in both their horizontal and vertical versions, are acknowledged as his final masterpieces.



38. Poplars, 1928-29  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 5/8 x 5 1/2 inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches



39. Forest, Garfield Merner Home, Hillsborough, California,  
ca. 1930  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



40. Trees and Snow, 1933  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
9 1/4 x 5 1/4 inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches



41. Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
7 1/8 x 9 7/16 inches  
Frame size: 16 x 20 inches



42. Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958  
Vintage gelatin silver print  
13 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches  
Frame size: 20 x 16 inches