

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



PRESS PREVIEW:
Tuesday, September 4
1:00 - 4:00 PM

ANSEL ADAMS AND THE WEST TO OPEN AT THE MODERN

"I am more than ever convinced that the only possible way to interpret the scenes hereabout is through an impressionistic vision. A cold material representation gives one no conception whatever of the great size and distances of these mountains. Even in portraying the character and spirit of a little cascade one must rely solely upon line and tone. Form, in a material sense, is not only unnecessary but sometimes useless and undesirable."

--Ansel Adams to his father, 1920

Perhaps the most sharply focused exhibition to date of the work of master photographer Ansel Adams will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from September 8 through October 28, 1979. ANSEL ADAMS AND THE WEST, one of the Museum's 50th Anniversary year exhibitions, will present approximately 150 of Adams' landscapes--his most significant contribution to the photographic tradition--from the Museum's own holdings as well as many important public and private collections. "In my view," notes John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, "Adams is one of the most important artists of the natural landscape--in any medium--of his time. It is possible, I think, that he may be both the last of that line of 19th-century romantic landscape artists who glorified the heroic wilderness, and, simultaneously, one of the sources of a new landscape tradition, in which the artist fashions a paraphrase of the aboriginal, in miniature, from whatever materials nature offers."

ANSEL ADAMS AND THE WEST is the third in the Springs Mills series on American Photography, sponsored by Springs Mills, Inc. Additional support is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. In conjunction with the exhibition there will be two lectures in the Museum's Roy and Niuta Titus Auditorium: on Tuesday evening September 11 at 8:30 PM Mr. Adams will discuss his life and work; on Tuesday evening September 25, also at 8:30 PM, John Szarkowski will speak on Adams' work as it relates to that of Alfred Stieglitz and Timothy O'Sullivan. The exhibition coincides with the publication of a major new book, Yosemite and the Range of Light*, dealing with Adams' work throughout his professional life in Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada. Following its New York showing, ANSEL ADAMS AND THE WEST will travel extensively.

Ansel Adams is perhaps the most acclaimed photographer of our time. As an artist, as a teacher, and as a master of photographic technique, his influence has been felt by succeeding generations of American photographers. He has published numerous outstanding books of his photographs, and few photographers have had their work exhibited as widely. Nevertheless, as Mr. Szarkowski observed recently: "It seems to me that no exhibition has yet attempted to define the specific nature of Adams' original achievement, or describe his evolution. Moreover, his habit of continually reinterpreting earlier work--by means of new prints conforming to his present standard--has in large measure hidden the growth and change in his art." As far as possible, ANSEL ADAMS AND THE WEST will consist of prints made at or near the time of the negative.

* Yosemite and the Range of Light. Introduction by Paul Brooks. With 116 photographs. Published by New York Graphic Society. \$75.00. A special paperbound Museum of Modern Art edition, including a 16-page checklist of the exhibition, will be published. \$14.95.

The exhibition surveys Adams' career--spanning over half a century--and features much unfamiliar work. Adams' changing perception and style is made evident from the lyrical, poetic landscapes of the 1920s and '30s to the later dramatic, sublimely epic pictures. In a number of instances, prints made at different times from the same negative will elucidate Adams' often-quoted remark: "The negative is the score; the print is the performance."

Adams' photographs infuse trees, leaves, and driftwood, and the grand Yosemite landscape of mist-shrouded peaks, with an almost tangible sense of poetry and spirituality. There are both "architectural" and "musical" aspects in the way Adams constructs his pictures, composing them with dramatic masses, forms, and textures, and with the tones present in the natural play of light. From the very beginning the basic characteristic of Adams' art has always been his intense sensitivity to light.

"In a good Adams," John Szarkowski states, "one should be able to tell what time of the year it is, and even what time of the day." Szarkowski calls light "almost the basic subject" of Adams' photographs. "They are concerned, it seems to me, not with the description of objects--the rocks, trees, and water that are the nominal parts of his pictures--but with the description of the light that they modulate, the light that justifies their relationship to each other. Adams' pictures seem as dematerialized as the reflections on still water, or the shadows cast on morning mist: disembodied images concerned not with the corpus of things but with their transient aspect."

Adams' legendary technique follows necessarily from his sensitivity to the ephemeral and evanescent in nature and from his ambition to capture the landscape's emotional and visual plasticity in a photograph. Szarkowski has said: "To describe in a small monochrome picture the difference between the twilight of early morning and that of evening, or between the warm sun of May and the hot sun of June, requires that every tone of the gray scale be tuned to a precise relationship of pitch and volume, so that the picture as a whole sounds a chord that is consonant with our memories of what it was like, or our dreams of what it might be like, to stand in such a spot in such a moment."

Another characteristic aspect of Adams' work, one that will be illustrated in the exhibition, has been his return to the same locale over a long period of time. Yet such photographs, while featuring the same motif, are often profoundly different from each other. This difference, as Szarkowski wrote in his 1973 book Looking at Photographs, is due "not to a willful act of artistic interpretation, but rather to the precision of Adams' sensibility: He saw what was there not in vague and general terms, but with a rigorous exactitude. The problem (as Cézanne put it) was to realize his sensation." Adams' subject matter lends itself to such reinvestigation because the landscape is never really stable.

"In this, the Museum's 50th Anniversary year, it is particularly appropriate to be presenting Adams' work," Mr. Szarkowski remarks. "Ansel Adams has had a long relationship with The Museum of Modern Art and its Department of Photography. In 1940 Adams helped Beaumont Newhall and David McAlpin found the Department, the first curatorial department

devoted exclusively to photography in any art museum. Over the past four decades he has been substantially represented in many Museum exhibitions, but ANSEL ADAMS AND THE WEST is the first one-man exhibition of his work here since 1944."

The Museum's overall exhibition program is supported in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.

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For further information please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, (212) 956-2648, or Sharon Zane, Associate Director, 956-7295, the Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019.
