Ansel Adams
(1902 - 1984)
Photography

In the vertical art storage rack, you will find the following:
Large Reproductions: *Moon and Half Dome, Thunderheads at Anza-Borrego Desert*
Posters: The *Art Elements & Principles* posters to use in the discussion

On the NSS PTA website, you will find digital images available for download. These can be sent to the teacher to project on their Smartboards:


In the black cabinet, you will find a white binder with a copy of this presentation and several laminated 8.5 x 11 prints of the other works referenced in this presentation.
Personal Information

Name: Ansel Easton Adams  
Born: February 20, 1902 in San Francisco, California  
Died: April 22, 1984  
Lived: Adams and his family lived outside the city of San Francisco in a house west of the city on the dunes overlooking San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean  
Family: Adams married Virginia Best and had two children

Professional Data

Type of Artist: Photographer – AS a commercial photographer for 30 years, he made visionary photos of western landscapes that were inspired by his love of Yosemite National Park. 

His passion for photography and the environment reinforced each other enabling him to create over 40,000 photographs during his career. Many are icons of our national parks, the western wilderness, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Alaska, and the Southwestern United States.

Artistic Credo: Ansel Adams used photography to make a visual statement about how he felt about the natural world and its beauty. The work of Ansel Adams serves as a guide to what we once had, what still remains with us, and what we must not lose in the future.

Famous Work: Ansel Adams wanted his work to be seen by many, not just the few who could afford to purchase it. He chose three images, Moonrise, Winter Sunrise, and the vertical of Aspens, and arranged for them to be printed as easily affordable posters.

Life Lesson: Visit National Parks. Go outside and experience nature. Take care of our world. See its beauty and demand that it be preserved.

Background

Ansel Adams was born on February 20, 1902, in San Francisco, California, near the Golden Gate Bridge. He was the only child of Charles Hitchcock and Olive Bray Adams. His father was a successful business man who owned an insurance agency. In 1906, an aftershock from a famous earthquake threw Ansel to the floor and he suffered a very badly broken nose. Ansel was very shy and self-conscious about his nose, which caused him to have a hard time fitting in at school. His father was very patient and encouraging and sent him to several public and private schools. He received only an eighth-grade diploma and preferred to learn mainly through following his own
Ansel Adams

interests. He spent nearly every day taking long walks and exploring, mainly on the dunes and beaches where he lived.

At the age of twelve, Adams began playing the piano. He taught himself how to read music and taking lessons became a substitute for formal schooling. For the next twelve years, piano playing became his main occupation and it was his intended profession. It gave his life structure and discipline.

But Adams was also interested in photography. In 1916, his family took a trip to Yosemite National Park. His parents gave him a Kodak No. 1 Box Brownie camera and from this first visit to Yosemite, he was amazed. He hiked, climbed, and explored, gaining self-confidence. It was here that he made his first amateur photos and is said to have determined his direction in life.

He returned to Yosemite every year until his death. In 1919, he joined the Sierra Club, an organization devoted to protecting the wilderness of the Sierra Nevada mountains. He became friends with many of the club’s leaders and each summer, they took month-long trips where they would hike to beautiful new camp sites each day. In 1922, he published his first photographs and writings which were printed in the club’s bulletin. It was on one of the trips to Yosemite that he met his wife, Virginia Best. They were married in 1928 and had two children, Michael born in 1933 and Anne, in 1935. Later in life, he was the president of the Sierra Club and remained president until 1970.

Professional Career

Ansel Adams gave up on the piano and decided to become a full-time professional photographer at about the time that some of his work was published in collections in galleries. In 1927, he came under the influence of Albert M. Bender, a San Francisco millionaire who was interested in art and artists. Bender set in motion the publication of Adams’ first portfolio, Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras. Not only did he encourage Adams through his friendship, but he gave him the financial support to publish the portfolio. This first exhibit of his work earned about $3900.

In 1930, Adams met photographer Paul Strand, whose images had a powerful impact on Adams and helped to move him away from the “pictorial” style he had favored. Adams began to pursue “straight photography” in which the subjects are much clearer and the final print is not softened with the lens or during editing. This technique of creating photographs was further explored by a group of photographers known as f/64 (which refers to the lens opening which creates a distinct image). In addition to Adams, the group included other well-known photographers such as Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham. This group helped to develop the field of photography as a fine art.

Adam’s work offered a record of what was still left of wilderness and the shrinking untouched part of the natural environment. However, the main point Adams tried to make with his photography is that without a guiding vision, photography is not necessarily an important activity. The final product must be thought up before it can be executed. This vision must be inspired by life on earth.

Even though Adam’s photography was becoming more well-known, he was not making enough to support his family. He was forced to spend much of his time as a commercial photographer. His clients included the National Park Service, Kodak, IBM, AT&T, a small college, a dried fruit...
Ansel Adams

company, and several magazines including Life, Fortune, and Arizona Highways. This commercial work was not very consistent and he was always worried about paying his bills.

In 1942, he was contracted by a branch of the government, the Department of the Interior, to make photographs of National Parks, Indian reservations, and other locations to use as murals for decoration of the Department’s new building. In addition to producing photographs, he produced ten volumes of technical manual on photography, which are still used by many photographers today. They are the most complete books written on the subject.

Adams described himself as a photographer-lecturer-writer. He traveled around the country to capture the natural beauty he loved in photographs. He played a key role in establishing the first museum department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Most of Adams’s great work as a photographer was completed by 1950. Only a handful of important pictures were made after that time. One of these was Moon and Half Dome. This photograph was produced in December, 1963 at Yosemite. In the photograph you see the sun shining in the late afternoon on Half Dome. On the left is the shaded silhouette of Washington Column and between them is the nearly full moon. This is one of the most famous photographs ever made.

He remained a conservationist and activist in support of our wilderness and environment. Many of his books were concerned not only with photography, but with raising awareness of the natural landscape and the life it supported. In 1980, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Jimmy Carter. This award acknowledged his years of work as both a photographer and an environmentalist.

Featured Photographs

![Moon and Half Dome](image1)

![Thunderheads at Anza-Borrego Desert](image2)
Ansel Adams

*In Glacier National Park*

*Mirror Lake Morning Yosemite National Park*

*North Palisade from Windy Point*

*The Four Seasons in Yosemite National Park*

*The Tetons and the Snake River*
Ansel Adams

General Discussion:

- How does his photography make you feel?
- What do you think Ansel Adams is trying to say to us?
- How would you describe the mood or emotion of his photography?
- How would you describe Ansel Adams' treatment of his subjects?
- What are the major elements in Ansel Adams' photographs? (Use the elements of art for discussion)

Talking about the Elements of Art

Use the Elements of Art posters for discussion

LIGHT:
Ansel Adams was a master of using light to create mood and feeling in his photographs.
What kind of light is he showing in these works?

CONTRAST:
Adams’ photographs are almost never flat but contain all tones from bright whites to deep blacks.
What elements of contrast do you see in the photographs?

TEXTURE:
Texture refers to the appearance of surfaces in art.
What kinds of textures are depicted in his photographs?

LINE:
What mood is created by the use of lines in these photographs?

TONALITY:
Ansel Adams uses tones (various shades of white, gray, and black) in his photographs in the use of highlights and shadows.
Describe the use of tones in his works.

SHAPE:
Shapes can be used to create a feeling in art.
What shapes do you see?

COLOR:
Why do you think Adams used black and whites instead of color in his work??

Online Sources:
www.anseladams.com
www.biography.com/people/anseladams
www.notablebiographies.com/adams-ansel.html