

CHRISTIE'S

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## Ansel Adams: 10 things to know

A guide to the pioneering photographer and environmentalist forever identified with the majesty of the American West — illustrated with works offered online from 24 March to 2 April

- 1 | His love of nature was sparked by his native California

Born in 1902, [Ansel Adams](#) grew up in a house amid the dunes of the Golden Gate — the strait between San Francisco and Marin County — before the famous bridge linking the two headlands was built. The area around San Francisco was still wild then, and he would go on long hikes which helped him escape troubling aspects of his childhood, such as his unhappy schooling and his parents' financial worries.

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## 2 | He might have become a concert pianist

Adams taught himself how to read music and play the piano, and it seemed destined to be his career. But while he dedicated himself to mastering the instrument, from 1916 onwards he also began to visit Yosemite National Park every summer.

‘The splendour of Yosemite burst upon us and it was glorious,’ he would later write. ‘There was light everywhere. A new era began for me.’ He began to translate that light into imagery, with a Kodak Box Brownie camera.



Ansel Adams (1902–1984), *Sentinel Rock, Winter Dusk, Yosemite National Park, California, 1944*. Gelatin silver print, mounted on board signed in pencil (mount, recto); signed and inscribed ‘From Portfolio II’ in pencil (mount, verso). Mount: 14 x 17¼ in (35.6 x 45.4 cm). Estimate: \$4,000–6,000. Offered in [Ansel Adams and the American West Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography](#), 24 March–2 April 2020, Online. Artwork: © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

As his attachment to Yosemite grew, Adams became more involved with [the Sierra Club](#), the organisation behind the national park. It was through the Sierra Club that he met his future wife, Virginia.

For years, he struggled to balance his commitment to the piano in San Francisco and his love of Yosemite and Virginia. His wife, and the national park, eventually won.

‘Music is wonderful but the musical world is bunk — so much petty doings, so much pose and insincerity and distorted values,’ he wrote to her in 1927. ‘I find myself looking back on the Golden Days in Yosemite with supreme envy. I think I came closer to really living then than at any other time of my life, because I was closer to elemental things.’



Ansel Adams (1902–1984), *The Minarets and Iceberg Lake from Volcanic Ridge, Sierra Nevada, California, c. 1935*. Gelatin silver print, mounted on board, printed 1978, signed in pencil (mount, recto); titled and dated in ink in photographer's Carmel credit stamp (mount, verso). Mount: 15¼ x 19¼ in (40.5 x 50.5 cm). Estimate: \$4,000-6,000. Offered in [Ansel Adams and the American West Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography](#), 24 March–2 April 2020, Online. Artwork: © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

### 3 | His ‘visualisation’ technique proved to be his breakthrough

Now using a Korona View camera, Adams grew increasingly accomplished but was yet to replicate on film his profound feelings about Yosemite — ‘to pour into the magic little box his wonder and his ecstasy,’ as a friend would write. He finally did so in 1927.

He wanted to capture the ‘majesty’ of the Half Dome rock formation, but only had one plate left. So he did something different: picturing the image he wanted, ‘a brooding form, with deep shadows and a distant sharp white peak against a dark sky’, he realised that a yellow filter would not capture the drama of the image as he saw it. Instead, he used a red filter with a long exposure.

Finally, he said, he had achieved ‘my first conscious visualisation’, which allowed him to capture ‘not the way the subject appeared in reality but how it felt to me’.

#### 4 | He practised pure — or straight — photography

Adams’ ‘visualisation’ strategy marked a shift away from Pictorialism, a much more manipulated photographic style, which had influenced his early work. His desire for sharper focus and deeper tone and contrast (he called it ‘an austere and blazing poetry of the real’) led to him becoming a leading figure in pure — or straight — photography.

Two encounters enhanced his commitment. In 1930, he met the photographer Paul Strand, a pioneer of pure aesthetics. And then in 1933 he met Alfred Stieglitz, the most powerful figure in American modernist photography. After looking through Adams’ portfolio, Stieglitz declared they were ‘some of the finest photographs I have ever seen’.



Ansel Adams (1902–1984), *San Francisco from San Bruno Mountain, California, 1952*. Gelatin silver print, mounted on board, signed in pencil (mount, recto); titled in ink in photographer’s Carmel credit stamp [BMFA 11] (mount, verso). Image/sheet: 14 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18 $\frac{3}{8}$  in (35.9 x 46.7 cm), mount: 21.15/16 x 27 $\frac{1}{4}$  in (55.8 x 70.8 cm). Estimate: \$10,000–15,000. Offered in [Ansel Adams and the American West Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography](#), 24 March–2 April 2020, Online. Artwork: © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

## 5 | He was a technical genius, consulted by Polaroid and Hasselblad

Arguably no other photographer of his era knew more about photography than Adams. He wrote ten technical manuals on the discipline, and even advised major figures like Strand and Edward Weston, his friend and fellow West Coast photographer.

He also consulted for Polaroid and Hasselblad. Without such technical mastery he would not have been able to react with such immediacy to the quickly changing conditions of landscape.

Works such as *Rocks and Clouds, Sierra Nevada Foothills, California, 1938* needed snap judgements of immense sophistication to capture the momentary effect of sunlight streaming through passing clouds, and establish a balanced tone and focus against the imposing rock formation in the foreground



Ansel Adams (1902–1984), *Rocks and Clouds, Sierra Nevada Foothills, California, 1938*. Gelatin silver print, mounted on board, printed 1979, signed in pencil (mount, recto); titled and dated in ink in photographer's Carmel credit stamp (mount, verso). Mount: 15 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$  in (40.3 x 50.5 cm). Estimate: \$8,000–\$12,000. Offered in [Ansel Adams and the American West Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography](#), 24 March–2 April 2020, Online. Artwork: © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

## 6 | He was in an inner circle of luminary American photographers

In his numerous correspondences, Adams often provided candid details of the circle of photographers he encountered out West. In a letter to his wife Virginia in August of 1930, he described a scene from his star-studded Santa Fe social sphere: ‘Everything is going splendidly,’ he wrote. ‘Paul and Becky Strand are in one of Mabel’s houses... Paul Strand is a peach. O’Keeffe was there also, breezing around in a rather cool way — but not as frigid as last year. The entire situation is too funny for words. Will tell you all...’

## 7 | His photographs have been to space

In 1941, Adams was commissioned to create photographic murals of national parks and monuments to decorate the halls of the new Department of Interior headquarters. The most acclaimed work from the commission is *The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942*, which was captured just before the project was discontinued due to financial constraints resulting from America’s entry into World War II.

The image encapsulated the concept of the mysterious, untamed West so well that it was included amongst the pictures electronically placed on the phonograph records that are carried upon the Voyager I and 2 spacecraft. The contents were selected by NASA and Carl Sagan as a means of articulating to extra-terrestrial life the environment of Earth and the human experience.

## 8 | Photographs became vast murals in Adams’ hands

Given the scale of the landscape he was in thrall to, it is no wonder Adams experimented with large-scale images from the 1940s onwards. These ‘murals’ would vary in size, but could stretch to around 1.5 metres wide. Later in life, Adams repeatedly returned to earlier images and enlarged them.



Ansel Adams (1902–1984), *Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada, from the Owens Valley, California, 1944*. Gelatin silver print, mounted on board, signed in ink (mount, recto); titled on affixed artist's label (mount, verso). Image/sheet: 7 x 9% in (17.8 x 23.8 cm), mount: 14 x 17% in (35.6 x 45.4 cm). Estimate: \$12,000–18,000. Offered in [Ansel Adams and the American West Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography](#), 24 March–2 April 2020, Online. Artwork: © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

Between 1969 and 1975, Adams began accepting corporate commissions, and many of his mural prints on the market today were created in this context.

## 9 | He found a ‘greater sense of colour’ through black-and-white images

Adams ventured into the use of colour, often for commercial assignments, but occasionally for artistic experimentation. Between 1946 and 1948, in particular, when a Guggenheim Fellowship again allowed him to explore the National Parks, he photographed prolifically on Kodachrome film.

Perhaps his most visible colour images were the 60 feet-wide Coloramas that later appeared in Grand Central Station. But he was never entirely happy with colour film.

‘I can get — for me — a far greater sense of “colour” through a well-planned and executed black-and-white image than I have ever achieved with colour photography,’ he said.



Ansel Adams (1902–1984), *Rushing Water, Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, c. 1955*. Gelatin silver print, mounted on board signed in ink (mount, recto). Mount: 13<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in (35.4 x 45.4 cm). Estimate: \$4,000-6,000. Offered in Ansel Adams and the American West Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography, 24 March–2 April 2020, Online. Artwork: © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

## 10 | The culmination of a life's work

In 1975, Adams co-founded the Center for Creative Photography (CCP), one of the world's finest academic art museums and research facilities for the history of photography. Located on the University of Arizona Campus in Tucson, the Center for Creative Photography is now home to more than 110,000 works by 2,200 photographers.

Besides Adams himself, some of the biggest names in 20th-century North American photography are represented, including Wynn Bullock, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind and Frederick Sommer.

Adams envisioned this institution not only as somewhere to exhibit but also to study, research and exchange ideas, explains its director Anne Breckenridge Barrett. Its mission is to 'promote the appreciation of the enduring influence of photography on our society'.

The Center for Creative Photography continues to acquire works by modern and contemporary photographers for its permanent collection. The proceeds from the forthcoming sale of 150 Ansel Adams prints on 10 December at Christie's in New York will be used support this initiative.

2 March 2020

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Main image:

Ansel Adams, California,  
USA, 25 March 1983. Photo:  
Barbara Alper/Getty Images

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Highlighted sale



Ansel Adams and the  
American West Photographs  
from the Center for Creative  
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