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Landscape
photographers
today owe much
to the influence
of Ansel Adams

By Michael Frye

The 100th anniversary of Ansel Adams' birth will arrive on February 20, 2002. Although he died in 1984, Adams may still be the most famous photographer in America.

Ansel Adams wasn't the first photographer to convey the monumental scale of western scenery, but he was the first to wait for light and weather to transform those places into magical landscapes. Whenever a contemporary photographer captures such a moment, that photographer, whether aware of it or not, owes a debt to Adams.

In 1936, you could buy an Ansel Adams print for \$25. Recently, a 16x20 print of "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico," sold for more than \$50,000, and larger prints have commanded prices of more than \$100,000. While few photographers will ever earn those fees, we can thank Adams and others of his generation for promoting photography as a fine art. He helped to establish the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, and the immense popularity of his own work helped to create a collector's market for photography.

Adams had a commitment to teaching and passing on his knowledge. Along with Fred Archer, he developed the Zone System in 1940. This is still the most comprehensive method of understanding and mastering exposure. Adams also started the first photography workshop program in the country. Many of today's finest photographers attended his Yosemite workshops and were mentored, to some degree, by Adams.

"Ansel inspired legions of people carrying tripods," says John Sexton. "I can't imagine the number of people who have been excited to pursue photography more seriously because of his imagery."

To examine the effect of Ansel Adams on nature photographers, we talked with several prominent photographers who had some connection to Adams, both personally and professionally, to describe how this photographer influenced their work.



Ansel Adams, Upper Yosemite Fall, Yosemite Valley

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Ansel Adams, Mt. McKinley and Wonder Lake



Adams On Exhibit

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (February 2-April 27, 2003); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (July 9-November 4, 2003).

In addition, a beautifully printed, oversized book is now available. Also titled *Ansel Adams At 100* (Little, Brown and Company, 2001), it includes some of the truest reproductions of Adams' work in any publication, according to Bill Turnage, trustee, Ansel Adams Trust. The book even includes a special tritone frameable reproduction print.

The photos in the book and the exhibit were chosen by longtime director (1962-1991) of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, John Szarkowski. Szarkowski picked these 114 images himself and wrote what Turnage calls the best analysis of Adams' work as an introduction to the book and in the wall panels at the exhibit itself.

If you like Ansel Adams, you'll definitely want to check out one of the largest exhibits of Adams' work ever. Now at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until January 13, 2002, **Ansel Adams At 100** next travels to The Art Institute of Chicago from February 20-June 2, 2002.

The exhibit will then travel the world on this schedule: The Hayward Gallery, London (July 4-September 22, 2002); Kunstbibliothek, Berlin (October 10-January 5, 2003);



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Ansel Adams, Tenaya Lake, Mount Conness, Yosemite National Park



William Neill, Death Valley National Park, California

{ William Neill }

William Neill has lived in or near Yosemite since 1977. After he began working at The Ansel Adams Gallery in 1980, he had the opportunity to attend and assist several of Adams' workshops, and to visit the photographer's house in Carmel. Here's Neill's view of how his association with Adams helped him to develop his thoughtful, spiritual style of photography.



William Neill, Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park, California

William Neill: There are many things that I learned from Ansel Adams. I was inspired by his workshops, in particular, which included such a diverse range of photographers. I was guilty of being fairly narrow-minded at the time until I started to take some of the lectures from instructors Ansel brought to the workshops. You were exposed to people doing portraits, like Arnold Newman, or photographing in color, like Ernst Haas.

Arthur Ollman was one of them. I looked at his work and initially had no real response to it. But in listening to him, I could see through his eyes and understand why he was doing what he was doing, and I appreciated his work far more.

You didn't come out of a workshop with Ansel feeling like you should copy him; in fact, it was the opposite. All these photographers he brought in had found a different way to express themselves.

John Sexton, Aspen Forest, Dusk, Near Aspen, Colorado



The greatest lesson that I learned from Ansel is the importance of personal vision.

— William Neill

So I had to decide what I wanted to do and in what direction I should go in photography. Did I want to photograph man in the landscape more, did I want to photograph environmental degradation? What should I photograph? What meant the most to me, what did I respond to the most?

During my time at The Ansel Adams Gallery, I saw how Ansel presented his work, and I was inspired to make high-quality prints. Even though I never fell in love with working in the darkroom, I was very interested in making the best prints possible. I also saw Ansel's open-minded view of technology, and that helped me see the potential of digital imaging, although I use it in a quite restrained manner.

The greatest lesson that I learned from Ansel is the importance of personal vision. The essence of artistry in photography is expressing your own perspective as deeply as possible, not being derivative, and not mimicking, but pushing yourself to make creative images.

{ John Sexton }

John Sexton attended Ansel Adams' Yosemite workshop in 1973, and this began a long association between the two men. Soon Sexton was assisting at these workshops, and in 1979, he became Ansel's photographic assistant. This involved everything from working in the darkroom (not making fine prints, though, which Ansel did himself) to assisting Ansel when he photographed President Jimmy Carter, to taking out the trash on Thursdays. By this time, Sexton was developing the quiet, luminous style of landscape photography for which he has become famous, but Ansel's effect on his life and work had already taken hold.



Ansel Adams At

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{ As I watched Ansel work, I saw how much time and effort he dedicated to achieve a goal.

— John Sexton



John Sexton, Corn Lily, Eastern Sierra Nevada, California

{ John Sexton }

John Sexton: A person would have to be blind not to see that somewhere along the line I had been influenced by Ansel Adams' photography. I'm not embarrassed by that. I don't want to try and run away from it. In fact, if someone wants to find some influence in my work, I'd be pleased to have it be Ansel Adams because Ansel was a hero of mine even when I only knew him through his photographs.

What's more, he retained that level of respect through all the experiences that I had with him. He was genuine.

It was inspiring to see that Ansel faced the same frustrations as anyone who pursues photography faces. He was disappointed when things didn't go according to plan, when the print didn't turn out correctly, or when the image on the film wasn't what he wanted, and he was just as excited as we all are during those moments when things did work.

As I watched Ansel work, I saw how much time and effort he dedicated to achieve a goal. He didn't just try something for a short while and then abandon it. If he truly believed in something, he pursued it. I've also faced situations where people told me that something wasn't possible. If I truly believed in a project or an image, I worked hard to make it a reality.

It seems that every couple of years, a new group of people, young people, becomes aware of Ansel's photography, and his work seems to have a timeless ability to inspire people.



Galen Rowell, Yosemite National Park, California

{ Galen Rowell }

Although he never knew him well as an adult, Galen Rowell was aware of Ansel Adams and his work from an early age. His mother and aunt both knew Adams personally, and young Rowell delivered papers to Sierra Club president David Brower during the time when Brower and Adams were publishing *This Is the American Earth* and other seminal works of American conservation. This early influence helped Rowell choose photography as his career.



Galen Rowell, Yosemite National Park, California

Galen Rowell: During the early 1970s, I had to decide whether to continue doing something that I didn't like just to make money or plunge headfirst into a career of outdoor photography and writing. I took that plunge in 1972, partly because Ansel showed me that it was possible to have a meaningful existence not only as a photographer, but as an environmen-

talist, teacher and mountaineer.

I was deeply influenced when I first read some of the stories behind Ansel's photographs because they made me realize that images that I had just snapped along the way wouldn't do it. Even though Ansel tended to shy away from saying, "This is what this photograph should mean to you," I felt that, having climbed

in the Sierra and spent a lot of time in Yosemite with a camera, I knew just what Ansel was trying to say when I'd look at his images.

If I would get back mediocre slides I'd say, "How can I do this better? What was in Ansel's mind when he went out there? What was he seeing that brought about this simplicity and this clarity, and

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how can I translate that to color film?"

I think that the gallery I have today in Bishop wouldn't exist if it wasn't for Ansel Adams. One morning there were three photographers here from the Netherlands. They had read my column in *Outdoor Photographer* and were quite devoted to outdoor photography. They said you'd

never find a gallery like mine in Holland because people there don't have an appreciation for nature photography as art to the same degree in Europe. Ansel was the one who broke through that. Ansel made America aware that photographs of nature could be art, and he had the first exhibits of work that were pure,

straight nature photography.

It's really gratifying to see how broad the influence of Ansel's craft and art has been as we come around to his 100th anniversary, and to see all the connections that Ansel had with the wild places of America.

{ Chris Rainier }

Chris Rainier was an assistant to Ansel Adams from 1980 to 1985. One of his main duties was proofing more than 50,000 of Adams' negatives, most of which had never been printed or even proofed before. Since that time, Rainier has incorporated what he learned from Adams about landscape photography into his imaginative images of the world's indigenous people.

Chris Rainier: People describe my work now as landscape images with people in them. The land with all of its spiritual darkness and lightness says a lot about who that person is. That approach comes from living with Ansel's negatives for five years, and constantly proofing and helping Ansel print them.

From 1985 on, I was working in United Nations relief camps and non-government agencies around the world, taking that artistic influence that Ansel had given me and combining it with photojournalism. My work didn't move away from landscapes, but rather incorporated people into the landscapes.

My father was South African, and I grew up in Africa, Australia and Europe, and traveled a lot with my family. The seeds of my interest in photography as a social tool were planted by visiting tribes in the outback of Australia and in the depths of Africa. When I took my first workshop from Ansel, I saw someone who had successfully found a way to use photography as a social tool. His artistry com-



Chris Rainier, Varanasi, India

...Ansel showed me that it was possible to have a meaningful existence not only as a photographer, but as an environmentalist, teacher and mountaineer.

— Galen Rowell



Chris Rainier, Timbuktu, Mali

pelled people to make a difference, not with horrific images, but with beauty. That was a profound turning point in my career.

Ansel stepped above the daily pettiness and saw the big picture. He was talking with the garbage man one day, and Mary Alinder, his administrative assis-

tant, came out and said, "President Carter is on the line."

Ansel said, "Just tell him to hold on a second."

He continued to talk to the garbage man, gave him a smile and a chuckle, and then came in and talked to President Carter.

He made everybody feel comfortable, informed and a part of a larger process.

Perhaps the most important thing that Ansel instilled in me was a sense of integrity. He was selfless, he had no secrets, he passed on what he knew, and he became a larger-than-life person because of it.



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{ His artistry compelled people to make a difference, not with horrific images, but with beauty. That was a profound turning point in my career.

— Chris Rainier

{ Michael Frye }

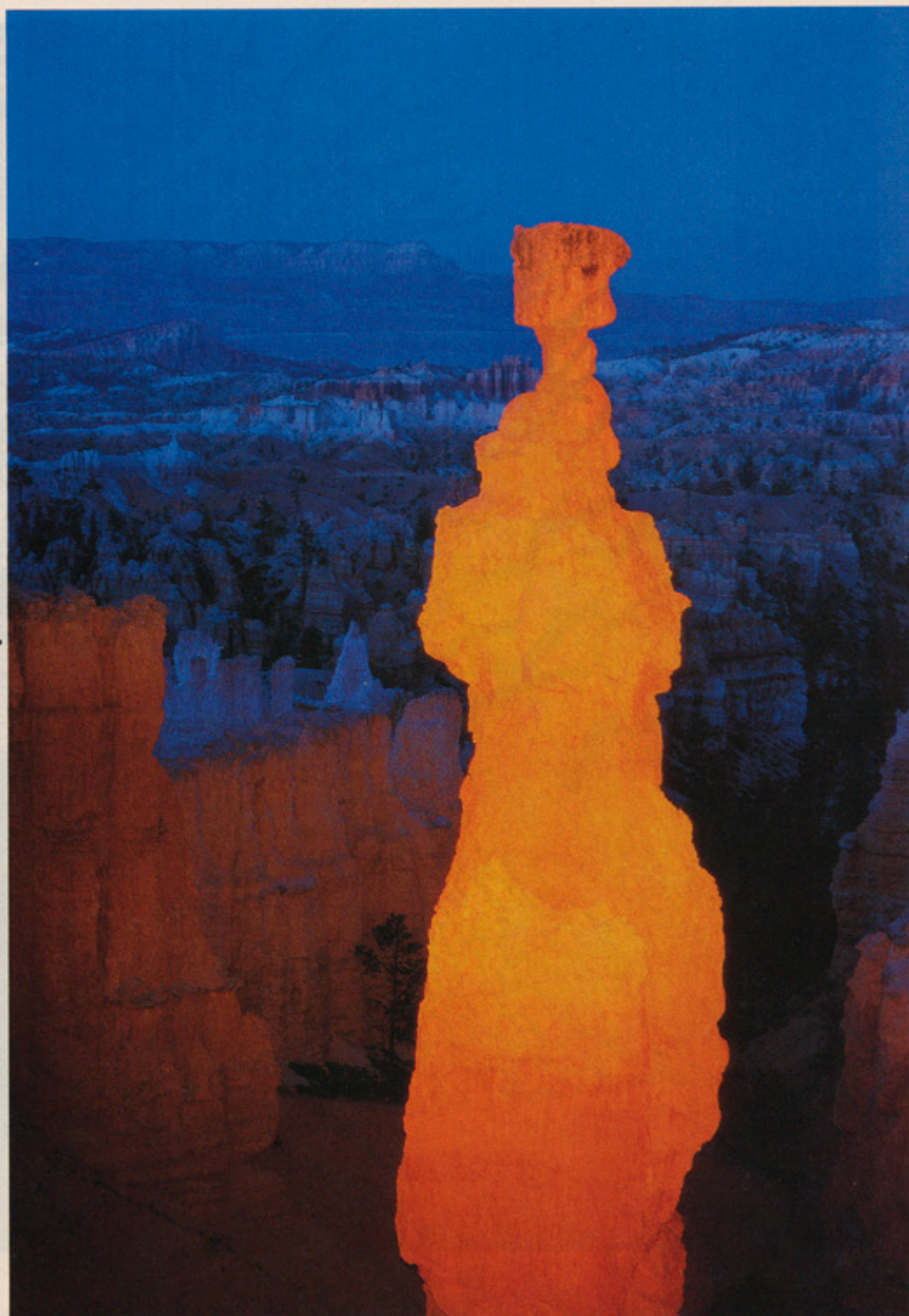
Michael Frye: I never had the privilege of meeting Ansel Adams, but I've lived in Yosemite Valley for 18 years, including six years spent working at The Ansel Adams Gallery. Because my wife, Claudia, still manages the gallery, we live in Ansel and Virginia Adams' old house.

Anywhere I go in Yosemite Valley, I'm reminded of one of Ansel's images. In time, I overcame my reluctance to photograph Half Dome, El Capitan and the other Yosemite formations that Ansel made famous. I've photographed some spectacular scenes, but these aren't really my images. They just pay homage to a man who captured the spirit of the American West in a way that no one else will ever quite match.

While working at The Ansel Adams Gallery, I attended workshop sessions during my time off. I also met many photographers who had been students or assistants of Ansel's. It was striking to see the diverse range of styles they had all developed. Seeing their work reinforced the message of the workshops: that it was important for photographers to develop and nurture their own unique way of seeing the world.

Because of this influence, I've experimented throughout my photographic career, including using gel-covered flashes and flashlights to light landscapes at night. When this technique worked, I found that the photographs held a powerful, mysterious mood that I had never been able to capture before.

And so I found myself traveling to many of Ansel's old haunts, the national parks that he turned into American icons. Using my colored-light techniques, I created a series of nighttime images of these parks. Although they look very different



Michael Frye, Thor's Hammer at night, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah

from anything Ansel Adams ever did, these photographs continue his tradition of finding creative, artistic ways to interpret the landscape. In a sense, they also pay homage to him. OP

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See: "Let The Image Sing" (Sept. '98)

{ Photographer Websites }

Michael Frye www.michaelfrye.com
William Neill www.williamneill.com
Chris Rainier www.chrisrainier.com
Galen Rowell www.mountainlight.com
John Sexton www.johnsexton.com



Ansel Adams, Lower Yosemite Fall, Yosemite Valley, California