Ansel Adams: A Life’s Work

“For it is in the mind’s eye that one creates a picture, and the sources of pictures therefore are as boundless as one’s own creative imagination.” –Ansel Adams

With a legacy that permeates the world and saturates the decades, Ansel Adams revolutionized the realm of photography with his reverence and appreciation of nature. Although most renowned for his sublime images of picturesque landscapes, Adams’ career was comprehensive, including not only these iconic photographs of nature, but also images of Japanese-American internment distress as well as little known commercial and color work.

Born in 1902 in San Francisco, California, Ansel Adams spent his childhood on the dunes beyond the Golden Gate Bridge, peering at the ships in the sea from his home, and gazing at the stars in the night sky with his father. At the age of 12, Adams taught himself how to play the piano, anticipating a lifelong career in music. His interest in music was forever transformed when at age 14 he traveled to the Yosemite Valley with his parents, armed with a seemingly insignificant No. 1 Box Brownie camera. As Adams took snapshots of his mountain outings, with the intent to merely record his memories, he became engrossed with the photographic process. It was this trip that sparked and ignited his enduring adoration for the boundless Sierra Nevada, the resolute power of nature, and photography itself.

Soon after, Adams took a job as an assistant at a photo-finishing business located in his neighbor’s basement. He would leave early in the mornings to deliver prints and collect work to be processed, and return late at night to develop the new rolls and make new prints, earning a wage of two dollars a day. Through this experience, Adams was introduced to the intricacies and temporalities of the photographic process, which he would later apply to his own darkroom prints.

In 1918 Adams traveled again to Yosemite, this time with Francis Holman, a retired mining engineer who was a member of the Sierra Club. As a club that took mountain trips with naturalists and conservationists, the Sierra Club became a gateway for Adams to fuel his appreciation for nature. A year later, when he was 17, Adams became the “keeper” of the Sierra Club’s LeConte Memorial, sweeping floors and overseeing the collections. During his free time, Adams would venture off into the natural surroundings with his camera, instilling his dedication and commitment to the preservation of nature through photography.

On one of his trips with the Sierra Club, Adams met Albert Bender, a successful man who was interested in helping artists. Bender helped Adams publish his first portfolio in 1927, encouraging Adams to end his continuous affair with music in favor of photography. Over the years, Adams became linked to several notable artists within the photography world, such as Edward Weston, Nancy Newhall, Paul Strand, and Alfred Stieglitz, all of whom contributed to Adams’ vision and purpose.

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Like many other photographers, Adams accepted commercial assignments in order to support his career. Nevertheless, he often balanced his time at these commercial sessions and exercised his creativity with his camera during his free time. Although the bulk of his work is comprised of black and white prints, Adams captured images in color as well. He believed that the photographer did not have as much control of the color values in color photography as compared with black and white. However, he did appreciate the distinct color variation and radiance in color photography. While natural colors with low saturation appeared with similar one-dimensional effects in black and white prints, Adams valued their luminous transformation when made into a color print.

Adams is distinguished for his transcendent photographs and precise visual techniques. Adams was a preliminary advocate of the concept of “pre-visualization,” believing that the first and foremost purpose of a photographer was to “first conceptualize, then accurately capture, and finally reproduce as nearly as possible the emotional and objective realities” of the scene. In the 1930s, Adams developed the legendary Zone System, a systematic method that allows photographers to predetermine the correct exposure in order to produce an accurate representation of their vision. In turn, Adams held the process in the darkroom equally as significant as the act of photographing, each step equally as technical and creative. His images emit an intensity satiated with emotion and conviction. He often emphasized the simplicities of nature, conceiving a complex vision of purity and clarity. It is this simplification of the visible around us that Adams captures in his images, creating an aura of timelessness. With a lifetime of devotion to photography not only as an art but also a mission, Adams’ work surfaces as more than just a mesmerizing conception, but also one that exposes the entire artistry and invention of Adams himself.

“My last word is that it all depends on what you visualize. If you don’t visualize a picture before you make it you might as well use a purely automatic camera. They are marvelous devices for their purposes, but they cannot create for you, and that’s not photography to me.” - Ansel Adams

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Ansel Adams, *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine, California*, 1944, gelatin silver print, courtesy of the Museum of Photographic Arts.

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Ansel Adams and the American West
Suggested Lesson Plan (grades 3-5)
The below lesson plans meets the following content standards for California schools:

Visual and Performing Arts Content Standards

Grade Three
1.5 Identify and describe elements of art in works of art, emphasizing line, color, shape/form, texture, space, and value.
2.3 Paint or draw a landscape, seascape, or cityscape that shows the illusion of space.
2.4 Create a work of art based on the observation of objects and scenes in daily life, emphasizing value changes.
4.1 Compare and contrast selected works of art and describe them, using appropriate vocabulary of art.
4.3 Select an artist's work and, using appropriate vocabulary of art, explain its successful compositional and communicative qualities.

Grade Four
1.1 Perceive and describe contrast and emphasis in works of art and in the environment.
3.1 Describe how art plays a role in reflecting life (e.g., in photography, quilts, architecture).
4.1 Describe how using the language of the visual arts helps to clarify personal responses to works of art.
4.5 Describe how the individual experiences of an artist may influence the development of specific works of art.

Grade Five
1.1 Identify and describe the principles of design in visual compositions, emphasizing unity and harmony.
2.6 Use perspective in an original work of art to create a real or imaginary scene.
2.7 Communicate values, opinions, or personal insights through an original work of art.
3.3 Identify and compare works of art from various regions of the United States.
4.1 Identify how selected principles of design are used in a work of art and how they affect personal responses to and evaluation of the work of art.

English-Language Arts Content Standards

Grade Three
2.1 Write narratives.
2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.
2.1 Make brief narrative presentations.
2.5 Make descriptive presentations that use concrete sensory details to set forth and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.

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Grade Four
2.1 Write narratives.
2.4 Write summaries that contain the main ideas of the reading selection and the most significant details.
2.1 Make narrative presentations.

Grade Five
2.1 Write narratives.
2.3 Write research reports about important ideas, issues, or events.
2.4 Write persuasive letters or compositions.
2.1 Deliver narrative presentations.
2.2 Deliver informative presentations about an important idea, issue, or event.

Description: In this multi-session lesson, students will be introduced to the photography of Ansel Adams. Students will discuss and analyze the subjects, the time period, and the relationships between nature, the environment, and works of art. Students will record their ideas and reflections by creating an original landscape and accompanying written reflection based on the observations of the works created by Ansel Adams.

Time Required: One visit to the Museum of Photographic Arts, two 60-minute class sessions.

Grade Level: 3-5

Materials:
Lined Paper
Drawing Paper
Colored pencils, markers, chalk pastels, and/or crayons

Preparation:
• Familiarize yourself with the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) available on www.vue.org.
• Familiarize yourself with the information included in this curriculum and print the attached images to distribute to your class.
• Familiarize yourself with the Elements of Design:
  o Line, Shape, Pattern, Color, Texture
• Preview the exhibition Ansel Adams: A Life’s Work.

Procedures:

Museum Visit:
View the exhibition with your class. If you are comfortable, use the VTS technique with the students in the galleries or schedule a docent-led tour for your visit. Explain to the students that Ansel Adams was really interested in capturing and preserving the American West through his photographs of nature and how this connects to California History. Explain that he would think carefully about the composition of his images and
often incorporate the elements of design (line, shape, color, pattern, and texture) to make his images aesthetically pleasing. Consider and discuss the following questions:

- When and where do you think this photograph was taken?
- Why do you think that Adams was interested in photographing the beauty of nature?
- Are the photographs in your history books similar to Adams’? How are they different?
- How can Adams’ photographs be used to learn about that time in history?

Have the students choose their favorite landscape image and write a descriptive paragraph describing the landscape, using all five senses.

60-Minute Class Session:
Discuss the Ansel Adams exhibition with your class. Talk about why Adams thought it was important to photograph the natural world during his lifetime and the artistic techniques (elements of design, composition) that he used within his photography. Explain to your students that they will be creating an original work of art based on their observations of the images and gallery discussion(s).

Any preferred or available artistic medium can be used for this project. Have your students create one of the following art activities:

- Create two landscapes: one showing the land as Adams observed and one showing the landscape you observe in your neighborhood
- Create two landscapes: one showing the land as Adams observed and one showing what you think that land looks like now

60-Minute Class Session:
Have your students complete one of the following writing assignments to compliment their images:

- Choose one of Adams’ images. Using the Internet, books, or magazines, find present day photographs of this area. How has it changed? How has it remained the same?
- What can we learn by using photographs from the past? What do they teach us about life, history, and culture? Where do you see images that capture what is going on in our world today? What do you think people 50 years from now will think about what was going on in 2009?
- How did Ansel Adams capture mood and feeling in his photographs? Choose one photograph and describe the mood. How does his use of the Elements of Design and Composition affect this mood?
- Write a poem about one of Adams’ photographs.

Optional (but highly recommended):

- If space is available in your classroom, libraries, or school hallways, create a small exhibition to display the students’ images. Each student should write a small label

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to be placed alongside their work with their full name, grade, and title of their image.

- Creating an exhibition for others in the school to see is a positive, creative, and encouraging outlet for students and teachers alike. An exhibition will not only engage in new and challenging means of education and teaching, but also will improve the students’ self-esteem and open them up to the many possibilities available through art.
Ansel Adams: American Artist and Activist

Suggested Lesson Plan (grades 9-12)

The below lesson plans meets the following content standards for California schools:

Visual and Performing Arts Content Standards

Grades Nine-Twelve

1.1 Identify and use the principles of design to discuss, analyze, and write about visual aspects in the environment and in works of art, including the environment.
1.2 Describe the principles of design as used in works of art, focusing on dominance and subordination.
2.6 Create a two or three-dimensional work of art that addresses a social issue.
4.1 Articulate how personal beliefs, cultural traditions, and current social, economic, and political contexts influence the interpretation of the meaning or message in a work of art.
4.2 Compare the ways in which the meaning of a specific work of art has been affected over time because of changes in interpretation and context.
4.3 Formulate and support a position regarding the aesthetic value of a specific work of art and change or defend that position after considering the views of others.
4.5 Employ the conventions of art criticism in writing and speaking about works of art.

Description: In this multi-session lesson, students will be introduced to the photography of Ansel Adams. Additionally, students will learn about the role that art can play in the context of a social and environmental consciousness. Students will examine social problems and record their ideas and reflections and incorporate them into their own original photographs as commentary on a social condition.

Time Required: One visit to the Museum of Photographic Arts, two 30-minute class sessions, and outside class time to photograph.

Grade Level: 9-12

Materials:

Cameras and ability to print photographs
Writing Paper
Pens

Preparation:

- Familiarize yourself with the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) available on www.vue.org.
- Familiarize yourself with the information included in this curriculum and print the attached images to distribute to your class.
- Preview the exhibition Ansel Adams: A Life’s Work.
Procedures:

Museum Visit:
View the exhibition with your class. If you are comfortable, use the VTS technique with the students in the galleries or schedule a docent-led tour for your visit. Discuss the role of Ansel Adams as an environmentalist with your students. Talk about how his images are a record of what the landscape was like before human intervention, travel, and industry. Explain how Adams, through his photography, and passion for conservation brought environmental issues to the surface of the American public. Consider and discuss the following questions:

- What do you think it means to have a social and environmental consciousness?
- Do you think photography can influence one’s social or environmental consciousness? How?
- Where have you seen this occur?
- How have you been influenced by photographs?
- Can you tell that Adams’ was an environmental activist through his images? How?

30-Minute Class Session:
Discuss the Ansel Adams exhibition with your class. Engage the students in a conversation about what it means to have a social and environmental consciousness. Allow the students to vocalize their own thoughts about the images in the galleries, describing the ways in which Adams portrayed the subject matter in his images and how these ideas evoke messages concerning social issues. Encourage your students discuss the Adams’ intentions and implications. Relate the discussion of the photographs to the environment, the evolution of technology, and development in contemporary society.

Inform the students that they will be creating their own photographs in response to the lesson. Encourage the students to be as original and inventive as possible in their photography while reinforcing the idea of creating a work of art that addresses a social issue or concern. This concern can be environmental, social, cultural, political, or personal. Let the students know that there will be a final critique and discussion of all work. The students will lead a discussion about their own work, as well as the work of their peers.

Provide ample time for your students to photograph, perhaps over a weekend. Print all student images.

30-Minute Class Session:
Allow each student to choose two images to display for the critique. Allow each student to vocalize his/her thoughts upon completion of his/her artwork as well as any problems, outcomes, successes, or failures along the way. Have the students talk about their steps, beginning with the creative process and medium of choice up to the end
results. Constructively critique all of the works, and allow for adequate time for each student to present his or her work. During the critique, clearly display each work or all works so that they can be visible during discussion.

Optional (but highly recommended):

• If space is available in your classroom, libraries, or school hallways, create a small exhibition to display the students’ images. Each student should write a small label to be placed alongside their work with their full name, grade, and title of their image.

• Creating an exhibition for others in the school to see is a positive, creative, and encouraging outlet for students and teachers alike. An exhibition will not only engage in new and challenging means of education and teaching, but also will improve the students’ self-esteem and open them up to the many possibilities available through photography.
Ansel Adams—Remember a Special Place

This exhibition features the work of Ansel Adams, an American landscape photographer. A landscape photographer is an artist who likes to take pictures of nature and the outdoors. Adams’ spent his life taking pictures of mountains, forests, and lakes because he wanted to create permanent images of places that might soon disappear or be destroyed.

Look at the images around the gallery. Would you want to visit any of these places? What would you do there? Do any of the pictures remind you of a place you have visited before?

Think of a special place in nature that you would like to protect, maybe the beach or a park. Why is it important to keep this place clean and to remember this place? How would you feel if this place disappeared? What can you do to protect this place?

Now draw a picture of this place so that you can remember it forever.

Image Information: Ansel Adams, Mount McKinley, Alaska, 1948, gelatin silver print, courtesy of the Museum of Photographic Arts. Copyright © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust
Ansel Adams—Elements of Design

Ansel Adams traveled all over the country taking pictures of nature and the wilderness. He often used the elements of design in the compositions of his images. Composition means how the photographer arranges their photograph. By using interesting compositions, Adams' was creating images that seem difficult to capture.

Do you think Adams' enjoyed taking these pictures? Do you think he faced any challenges? Do you think you could take this picture, too? Would it be easy or hard for you?

Find an image that you think uses each of the Elements of Design listed below and answer the questions for each image.

**Pattern**
What is the title of the photograph? _____________________________________________________
Where do you see patterns in the photograph? _____________________________________________
Do you think it was difficult for Adams' to take this photograph? Why? _________________

**Shape**
What is the title of the photograph? _____________________________________________________
How many different shapes can you find in the photograph? _________________________________
How do you think Adams’ felt at the moment he took this photograph? Why? _______________

**Line**
What is the title of the photograph? _____________________________________________________
What kinds of lines can you find in this photograph? ______________________________________
What would you like to ask Adams’ about this photograph? ________________________________


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Resources

Books

