

How Ansel Adams Came to be the Photographer We Know

Spring 2021: January 26 - April 06, 2021

Tuesdays, 1 pm - 3 pm (AZ TIME)

The Center for Creative Photography's Chief Curator, Dr. Rebecca Senf, recently published a highly anticipated new look at photographer Ansel Adams. One of the most influential photographers of his generation, Ansel Adams (1902–1984) is famous for his dramatic photographs of the American West. He has a large presence in the Tucson community for his role in co-founding the Center for Creative Photography with then-University of Arizona President John Schaefer in 1975.

The course focuses on Adams's early career. While many of Adams's images are now iconic, his early work has remained largely unknown. The Humanities Seminar "How Ansel Adams Came to be the Photographer We Know" will demonstrate how these early photographs are crucial to understanding his artistic development and offer new insights into many aspects of the artist's mature body of work.

Drawing on copious archival research, much of it conducted at the Center for Creative Photography, Senf will illuminate the first three decades of Adams's photographic practice—beginning with an amateur album made during his childhood and culminating with his Guggenheim-supported National Parks photography of the 1940s. Highlighting the artist's persistence in forging a career path and his remarkable ability to learn from experience as he sharpened his image-making skills, she also looks at the significance of the artist's environmentalism, including his involvement with the Sierra Club.

All these newly revealed aspects of Adams's career are now available through a ten-week course of two-hour sessions. All sessions are taught by Senf unless otherwise noted.

Seminar Calendar:

Tuesday, January 26, Introduction:

We will begin with an overview of Ansel Adams, the Center for Creative Photography, the Ansel Adams Archive, and the premise of Senf's research and her thesis.

Readings:

- Selection from Amy Rule and Nancy Solomon, *Original Sources: Art and Archives at the Center for Creative Photography* (2002), pgs. 34-41.
- CCP Ansel Adams finding aid
- Selection from John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams at 100* (2001), pgs. 7-41.

Tuesday, February 02, From Tourist to Mountaineer:

We will be introduced to Ansel Adams as a 14-year-old tourist who, with his parents, made his first trek to Yosemite Valley in 1916. We will follow his progression from an amateur photographer and novice outdoorsman to an accomplished image maker and equally expert mountaineer.

Readings:

- Selection from Mary Street Alinder and Andrea Gray Stillman, *Ansel Adams Letters and Images, 1916-1984* (1990), pgs. 1 to 38.
- Anne Hammond (1999) Ansel Adams and the high mountain experience, *History of Photography*, 23:1, pgs. 88-100.

Tuesday, February 09, Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras:

Ansel Adams's first portfolio was produced in 1927 with the backing of patron Albert Bender. Though not commercial successful, this endeavor allows us to see Adams beginning to think of himself as a professional artist. Despite the relative poor sales of the portfolio, it is a delight to deconstruct his process and learn about his very first cohesive body of work.

Readings:

- Excerpts from Joseph Nisbet LeConte's 1925 and 1926 journals (provided from Senf's notes).
- Ansel Adams, *An Autobiography* (1990), pgs. 80-95.

Tuesday, February 16, The Sierra Club Outing's Official Photographer:

In 1928, Ansel Adams was appointed the official photographer of the Sierra Club's summer outing to the Canadian Rockies. His master album produced from the trip was an effort to sell the pictures to the club's members. His pivotal relationship to the Sierra Club and his approach to making pictures on the trip will show how he is becoming increasingly savvy about marketing his work.

Readings:

- Walter Huber, "The Sierra Club in the Land of the Athabaska," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 14:1 (February 1929): pgs. 1-12.

Tuesday, February 23, Taos Pueblo:

Ansel Adams always loved the Southwest. Starting in the late 1920s, he made a series of trips from his native San Francisco to northern New Mexico. From these trips he produced a high-end, photographically illustrated book with activist and novelist Mary Austin. The book, when released in 1930, was a success, selling out every copy. Adams's increasing sophistication about his audiences can be clearly seen with this endeavor.

Readings:

- Anne Hammond (1999) Ansel Adams and Mary Austin: Taos Pueblo (1930), *History of Photography*, 23:4, pgs. 383-390.
- Selections from Karen Haas and Rebecca Senf, *Ansel Adams in the Lane Collection* (2013), pgs. 52-75.

Tuesday, March 02, Four Seasons in Yosemite National Park:

Adams acknowledged in his autobiography that commercial work was important to his career but didn't discuss many details. However, his nearly ten-year engagement as a photographer for the Yosemite

Park and Curry Company (the national park concession) was transformative for his artistic work. You will see Ansel Adams photographs made for promoting the park unlike any Ansel Adams pictures you've ever seen and will learn why this job was so impactful on Adams's artistic expression.

Readings:

- Selections from Ansel Adams, *An Autobiography* (1990), pgs. 158-191.
- Selections from Stanley Plumb, *Four Seasons in Yosemite National Park* (1940), unpaginated, pgs.5-13 and 42-54.

****Spring Break, Tuesday, March 09, No Class****

Tuesday, March 16, The National Parks Project:

The National Parks are where it all comes together – in 1941 Adams is hired to photograph the national parks for the Department of the Interior. It is with this job that Adams brings together all his learning and experience from the previous decades and creates work that is characteristic of what we now think of as his signature style – panoramic views of a dramatic and awe-inspiring landscape. This session will explain the significance of the parks project (and Adams's follow on Guggenheim Fellowship) to his career.

Readings:

- Selections from Ansel Adams, *An Autobiography* (1990), pgs. 270-291.
- Selections from Peter Wright and John Armor, *The Mural Project: Photography by Ansel Adams* (1989), pgs. i-viii.
- Department of Interior website about Ansel Adams prints in Interior Building:
<https://www.doi.gov/photos/news/photos/Ansel-Adams-Mural-Project-Opens-at-Interior-Department>

Tuesday, March 23, Ansel Adams in Context:

Led by Dr. Meg Jackson Fox, CCP Associate Curator of Academic and Public Programs, this week we will learn about Adams and his peers, mentors and assistants, as well as the larger cultural and political context that helped shape photography during Adams's career. Discussion will include the important collective of American photographers, Group f/64, and its position within American Modernist Photography.

Readings:

- Selection from Mary Alinder, *Group f.64: Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and the Community of Artists Who Revolutionized American Photography* (2014), pgs. 82-110
- Selection from Deb Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840-Present* (2000), pgs. 35-48

Tuesday, March 30, Ansel Adams's Photographic Legacy:

Led by guest speaker, Karen Haas, the Lane Curator of Photographs, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, this week will discuss Adams's legacy with contemporary photographers. Based on her phenomenally successful exhibition "Ansel Adams in Our Time," she will talk about the diverse range of photographers she related to Ansel Adams including Abe Morell, Catherine Opie, Arizonan artists Mark Klett and David Emitt Adams, Victoria Sambunaris, and Trevor Paglen.

Readings:

- Video recordings from "Ansel Adams in our Time" (to be provided by Karen Haas)
- Interview with Karen Haas about her curatorial practice:
<https://whatwillyouremember.com/curators-viewpoint-karen-haas-museum-of-fine-arts-boston/>
- Exhibition page with reviews: <https://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/ansel-adams-in-our-time>

Tuesday, April 6, Ansel Adams's Institutional Legacy:

Dr. Senf will be joined by a guest to discuss how the Center for Creative Photography came into being. Following a long history of institution building, Adams created with the CCP the most complete fulfillment of his aim to create a hallowed ground for photography.

Readings:

- Selections from Karen Haas and Rebecca Senf, *Ansel Adams in the Lane Collection* (2013), pgs. 10-31.

Speaker Bios:

Rebecca Senf is Chief Curator at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, in Tucson. Her B.A. in Art History is from the University of Arizona; her M.A. and Ph.D. were awarded by Boston University. In 2012, her book *Reconstructing the View: The Grand Canyon Photographs of Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe* was released by University of California Press; in 2017, her book *To Be Thirteen*, showcasing the work of Betsy Schneider, was published by Radius Press and Phoenix Art Museum. Senf is an Ansel Adams scholar, with a book forthcoming on Ansel Adams's early years, called *Making a Photographer*, copublished by the CCP and Yale University Press, due in early 2020.

Meg Jackson Fox is the Associate Curator of Academic and Public Programs at the Center for Creative Photography. She has an M.A. in Modern History from the University of Tennessee; an M.A. in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University, jointly convened with Sotheby's Institute of Art-London; and a Ph.D in Art History-Contemporary Art & Theory from the University of Arizona. Jackson Fox draws from a research base that uniquely sweeps from western Europe through eastern Europe to North America. A twelve-year background teaching in universities and cultural institutions, Jackson Fox maintains a rigorous program of speaking and publishing locally, nationally, and internationally, and is currently working on her first book manuscript, *Movement(s): Essays on Art, Politics, and Running*.

Karen Haas has been the Lane Curator of Photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston since 2001, where she is responsible for a large collection of photographs by American modernists, including Charles Sheeler, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Imogen Cunningham. The Lane Collection, which has recently been given to the Museum, numbers more than 6,000 prints and ranges across the entire history of western photography from William Henry Fox Talbot to the Starn twins. Before coming to the MFA, she received her MA from Boston University and held various curatorial positions in museums and private collections, including the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the BU Art Gallery, and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover. Her recent activities include exhibitions, *Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott*; *Edward Weston: Leaves of Grass*; and *Bruce Davidson: East 100th Street*; and publications, *An Enduring Vision: Photographs from the Lane Collection*; *MFA Highlights: Photography; Ansel Adams*; and *The Photography of Charles Sheeler: American Modernist*.