

Both of these photographs are of the same place, but only one of them is a work of art.

American Landscapes

Find out how famous photographer Ansel Adams turned picture-taking into an art form.

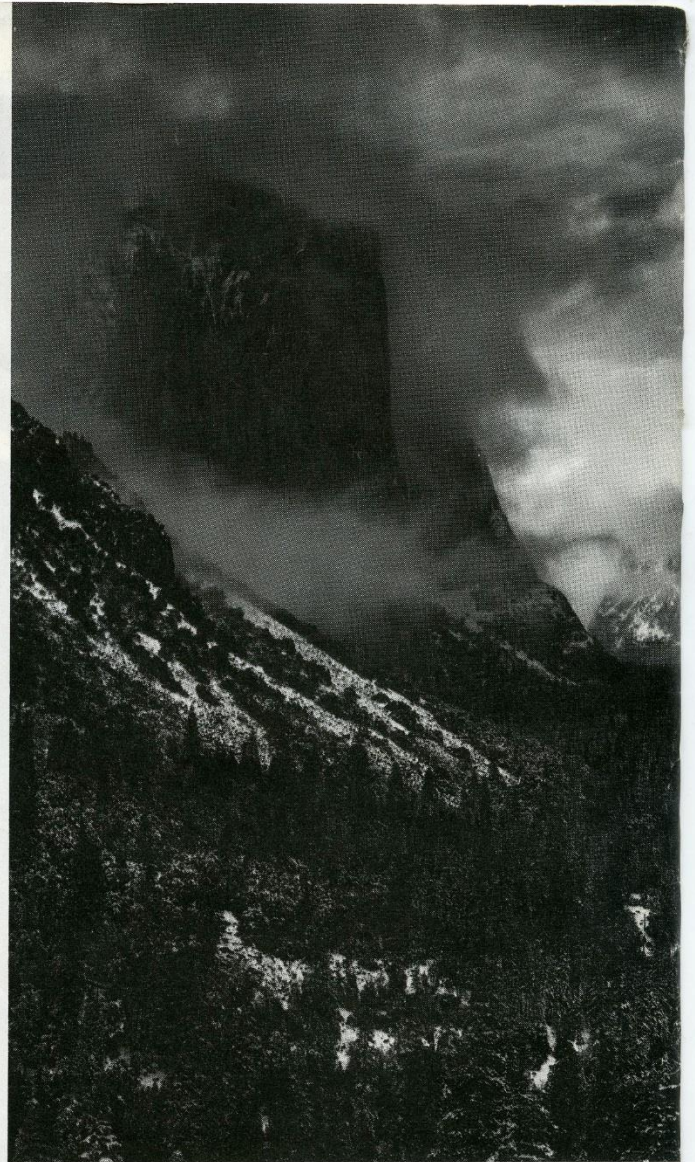
When he was 14 years old, Ansel Adams took his first pictures of Yosemite (the National Park area in California) with a little Brownie camera. Thirty years later, he was still photographing Yosemite, but the results, like *Clearing Winter Storm*, shown above, were among the most dramatic images of nature ever created. Now he would get up before

dawn and travel to the park's farthest corners. Sometimes that meant taking 60 pounds of camera equipment packed on a donkey up a mountain trail, and sleeping on the edge of a canyon. Other times he could stow his big, heavy camera in the back of his old car and get the view he wanted from the side of the road. He could never predict where the pictures would be, but he knew how to get them. Today, at 80, Ansel Adams is one of the most respected fine art photographers in the world.

But what makes only some photography an art? Look at the postcard view of Yosemite Valley, above left, with its perfectly

blue sky, green forests, and gray mountains. Now look at Ansel Adams' view of the same valley. Instead of jumbled shapes and "pretty" colors, Adams simplifies the scene, using only black, white, and tones of gray. These tones unify the picture and give it drama. We move from the pure white of the waterfall, through the grays of the clouds, to the deep black shadows of the rocks. Adams "plays" these tones of light the way a musician plays notes—creating a kind of music in black and white.

The other thing you probably noticed about this picture is the weather. Adams hasn't snapped Yosemite on a typical sunny day.





Ansel Adams (b. 1902).
Clearing Winter Storm,
Yosemite Valley, 1944.

He's studied this valley in all its moods and waited for the one that was most dramatic. Here, in the midst of a winter storm, thick, heavy clouds roll across the valley and wind around the peaks and ridges. But the storm is breaking, and we see a hint of mountains in the distance. For a few moments this place has become charged with magic and mystery.

Finally, what we notice about Adams' photographs are their quality. Adams was interested not only in the art of photography, but also in its science. With a deep knowledge of light, cameras, and the darkroom, he knew how to get the exact tones he

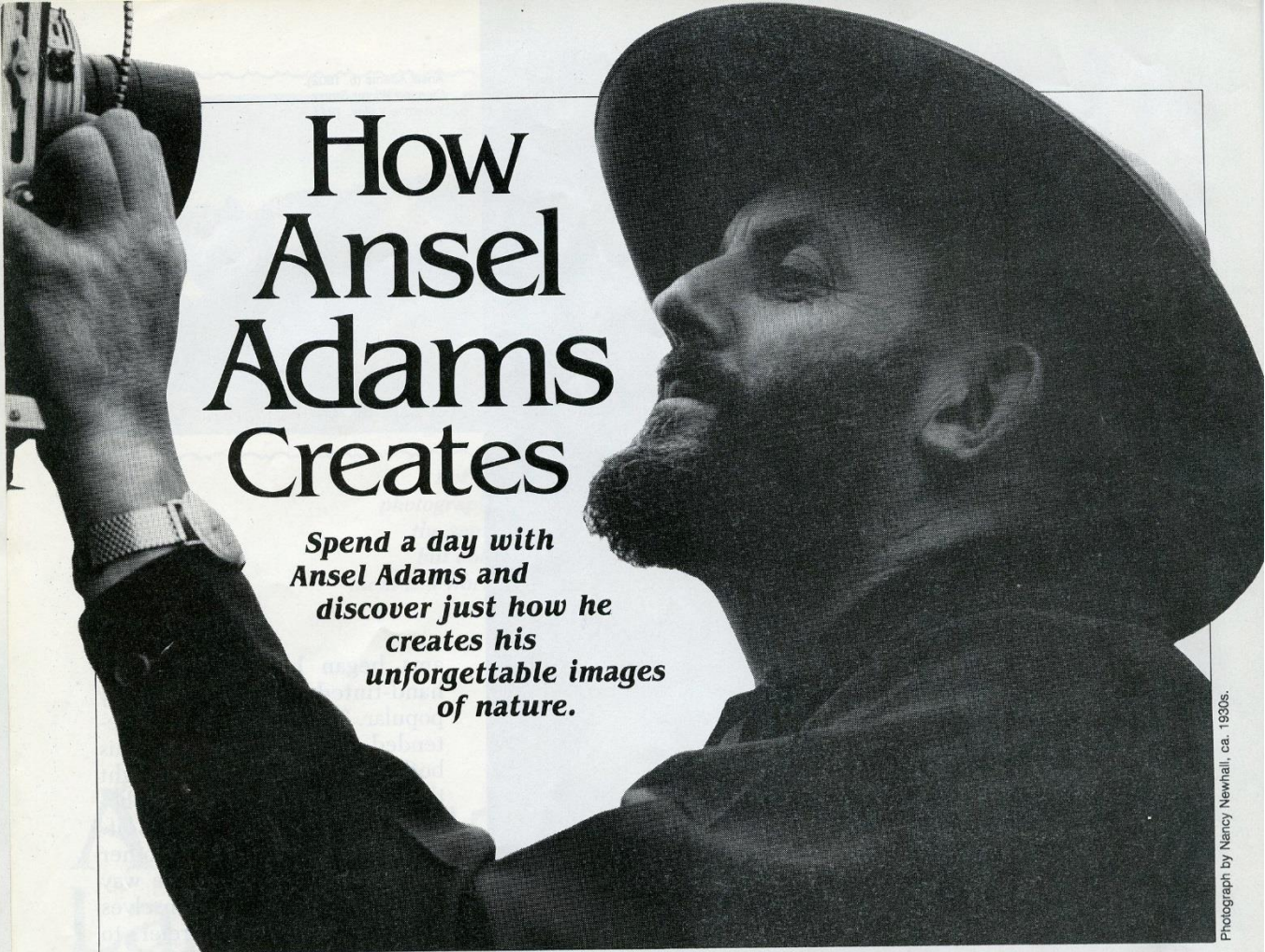
wanted in black and white. He also knew how to capture detail. In *Clearing Winter Storm*, our eyes wander among the finely textured trees in the foreground and then rise up and back to the sharply defined mountain peaks hiding in the clouds. We feel the tremendous space of this valley and at the same time get a sense of each detail.

Photographs weren't always so carefully made or highly regarded. Starting in 1839, when photography first came to America, it was used mainly as a record of people and events. But then in the 1890's, photographers began taking pictures that were more like art. Before 1930, when Ad-

ams began his career, fuzzy, hand-tinted photos were very popular. These photographs pretended to be paintings, and this bothered Adams. He thought the honest black-and-white photograph was an art in itself. Eventually he met a few other photographers who felt the way he did. They called themselves Group f/64 (a term that refers to focus adjustments on a camera). Together they spoke up for *straight* photography.

Straight photography became Adams' approach. He used it to capture his favorite place, the mountains of the western United States. Here, both the light and the weather changed from minute to minute, and each change signaled a different mood. If the mood was right, out came the camera. And then the most powerful part of the scene was framed—first with his hands and then through the lens of the camera.

In the rest of this issue, you'll find out more about the work of Ansel Adams, and the important part light plays in both art and photography. You'll also discover what some contemporary photographers are doing, and meet a young photographer who lives in Alaska.



How Ansel Adams Creates

*Spend a day with
Ansel Adams and
discover just how he
creates his
unforgettable images
of nature.*

Photograph by Nancy Newhall, ca. 1930s.

The sun is rising behind the jagged, snow-covered peaks, clouds of fog drift over the valleys, great waterfalls roar in the distance, and birds sing in the branches above. A little-used trail winding through the mountains is the only sign that human beings have ever been in this majestic western wilderness. As the light gets stronger, a tiny speck can be seen moving slowly in the distance, stopping, then moving on again.

By the time the figure gets close enough to be seen clearly, the sun is high. A tall, bearded man weighted down under a large pack, leads a mule carrying an even heavier load. Suddenly he stops, makes a rectangular "frame" with his hands and stares through it to the valley below. He writes in a small, worn notebook, then moves along. In a minute, he is off the trail, kneeling in front of a

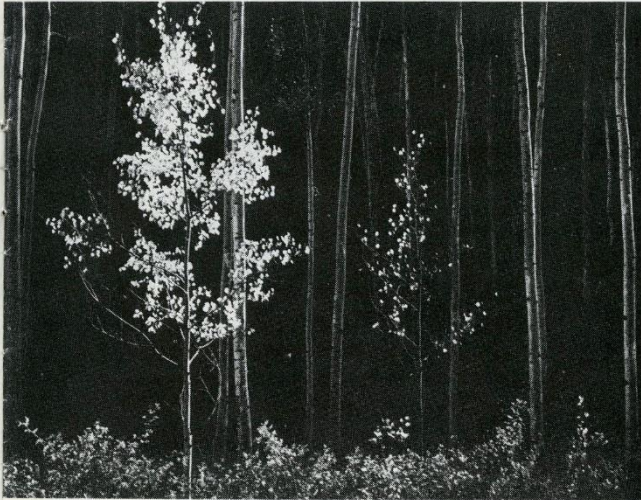
tiny flower growing through a crack in the rock ledge. Who is this man and what is he doing?

As we have seen this year in *Art & Man*, painters plan or "compose" their pictures, inventing everything as they go along. Photographers also compose their pictures, but they have to work with what is already there. So framing, or choosing what to include in the photo, is a very important part of photography. And what is *left out* is just as important as what is put in. As you may have guessed, the mysterious man you just read about is Ansel Adams, and he is composing a photo. How does he decide what to include and what to leave out?

A great photo, like any other work of art, begins with a strong feeling or idea. Look at all of Ansel Adams' photographs in this issue. Are there any city scenes? Any of people? Adams has said, "Ever since that first sight of Yosemite Valley in 1916, my life has been colored by the mountains." Ansel Adams feels strongly about nature and each of his photographs communicates this.

Whether Adams wants to show us the majestic grandeur of Yosemite Valley, or the more intimate beauty of a single tree, there are certain *choices* he

How has light turned this ordinary group of trees into a magic forest?



Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958.

Frozen Lake and Cliffs, Sequoia National Park, California, 1932.



Is this an "abstract" painting or a nature photograph?

must make in order to best express his idea. *Where* will he stand to take the photo? What will be the *center of interest*? *When* should he take the picture—what kind of light does he want? Should everything be clear, or should just one object be in *focus*?

By standing far away from and above Yosemite Valley (see pages 2-3), Adams was able to capture its vastness. The two pictures on this page were both taken from up close and at eye level, showing us a small piece of nature that is just our size. Can you find the center of interest in each photograph? (Where does your eye go first and why?) Cover the white tree in *Aspens*, above left, or the patch of ice in *Frozen Lake and Cliffs*, below left. What happens to each photo?

The key to Ansel Adams' photography is a process he calls "visualization." This means knowing in advance how he wants a photograph to look, rather than just clicking away and hoping for a lucky accident. Adams saw the possibilities in a grove of straight Aspen trees, set his camera up and waited for just the right light to fall on one tree. Walking beside an ice-covered lake, he kept an eye on the roughly textured cliff rising behind it. At last he saw just the shape he needed to bring his vision to life. He framed his composition around a small patch of ice, which looked like an arrow. It seems to point to a tiny path in the wall of solid rock. Later, in this issue, you'll see how visualization made it possible for Ansel Adams to be ready when the time came for him to create one of the most famous images in modern photography.

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