

Original Work

FROZEN LAKE AND CLIFFS



ORIGINAL ANSEL ADAMS GELATIN SILVER
PHOTOGRAPH
NEGATIVE: 1932
PRINT: 1952
SIGNED: ANSEL ADAMS

REFUGIO BEACH



ORIGINAL ANSEL ADAMS GELATIN SILVER
PHOTOGRAPH
NEGATIVE: 1946
PRINT: 1948
SIGNED: "ANSEL ADAMS"

IN JOSHUA TREE



NEGATIVE: 1942
PRINT: 1950
SIGNED: "ANSEL ADAMS"

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA COAST REDWOODS



ORIGINAL ANSEL ADAMS GELATIN SILVER
PHOTOGRAPH
NEGATIVE: 1960
PRINT: 1963
SIGNED: ANSEL ADAMS IN INK

ANSEL'S TECHNIQUES

DARKROOM

Alan Ross looks at how Ansel Adams used the darkroom.
[LEARN MORE](#)

PRINTING

Outdoor magazine takes a look at how to print like Ansel Adams.
[READ MORE](#)



LESSONS

10 Important Lessons from Ansel Adams
[LEARN MORE](#)

COLOR

What does Ansel Adams think of color?
[READ MORE](#)

THE IMAGE THAT MADE ANSEL FAMOUS

On April 10, 1927, Ansel Adams clambered through Yosemite's LeConte Gully trail with four of his friends in tow. Their destination on that chilly spring morning was Half Dome, the park's iconic granite summit rising some 5,000 feet from the valley's floor. The aspiring photographer had made the trek before, once with an uncle and later with a painter acquaintance, who nearly broke his neck making the treacherous descent back down the narrow gully. But this time, Adams was intent on capturing the perfect shot of Half Dome to add to his portfolio—a shot that would launch his career as one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century. For most of his 25 years, Adams had considered himself a musician first and a photographer second. He was an accomplished pianist, and had spent a winter in San Francisco teaching music lessons and performing as part of the Milani Trio. But it soon became clear to Adams that his level of talent would only garner him local fame, never national. So he decided to chart a new course. In 1926, his mentor Albert Bender, a patron of the arts in San Francisco, tasked him with producing a portfolio of large-format black-and-white photographs of mountains that he would finance and help the young artist sell. As it turned out, Adams already had 11 of the 18 images he needed to complete the set. But he still hadn't captured the sheer cliff face of Half Dome to his satisfaction—and that was what he set out to do that April day. He'd taken photographs of Half Dome before. Several were the results of his very first experiments with a camera, after being gifted a Kodak Brownie at age 14 during a family vacation to Yosemite. One of his favorite images from this time was an accidental upside-down shot, snapped as he tumbled off a tree stump. He'd also photographed the monolith more recently, hiking up to the park's Glacier Point overlook for a panoramic view of its eastern portion. But the resulting photo, with the rock face hooded in shadow, still lacks the drama of Adams's later images. He would need to get closer to Half Dome, he realized. So Adams and his friends set out to reach the Diving Board, a rock slab hanging some 3,500 feet above the valley floor. It wasn't an easy hike in the first place, and Adams was loaded down with a 40-pound pack containing his camera, a handful of filters and lenses, and 12 glass plate negatives. This single-minded dedication would become typical of the photographer's later process, in which he would spend weeks at a time in the mountains, scouting out the perfect location for a single photograph. (In fact, during two such trips, he missed the births of both his children.) En route to the Diving Board, Adams made several exposures, and by the time the group reached Half Dome, he had just two plates left. They sat down for lunch, waiting for the sun to move high enough in the sky to illuminate the entire cliff face. By 2:30 p.m., Adams was ready. For his first shot, he used a yellow filter that he often placed over his lens to subtly darken the blue sky. But almost as soon as he'd released the shutter, he knew something was off. "I began to realize, why, I'm not creating anything of what I feel, because I know the shadow on the cliff is going to be like the sky; it's going to be gray," Adams later explained. "It will be an accurate picture of Half Dome, but it won't have that emotional quality I feel." Instead, for the second exposure, he used a deep red filter that would darken the sky almost to black and emphasize the white snow on Half Dome's cliff face. The filter made all the difference, as Adams quickly realized when he developed the photo later that night. He considered Monolith, the Face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California (1927) his "first really fine photograph," a career-changing image that marked his first successful "visualization"—Adams's term for carefully determining all elements of a photograph before ever releasing the shutter. Over a decade later he would institutionalize this idea with his Zone System, a photographic technique that is still taught in schools today.

