







**WITH EACH OF HIS TRIUMPHS, THE WILD PLACES HE SO LOVED EARNED MORE STATURE. PEOPLE WERE NOT SIMPLY LOOKING AT MOUNTAINS AND FORESTS ANYMORE. THEY WERE LOOKING AT AN IDEA: WILDERNESS AS ESSENTIAL TO THE NATION'S SOUL.**

trayed the wilderness as a spiritual idyll from which industrial, urban America had become alienated. Romanticism still held sway when Adams picked up his camera, but the unadorned photograph was considered more documentary than aesthetic. To render it less literal, some used soft focus, painted negatives, or textured paper. Edward Weston took the opposite approach, emphasizing sharp focus and contrast. Adams was a disciple. And, having once entertained a career as a concert pianist, his discipline as a musician found its way into his craft.



**LEFT:** *Early Morning, Merced River, Yosemite National Park.* **ABOVE:** *Sugarpine Boughs and Lichen, Yosemite National Park, California, 1962*

A wealthy art patron, Albert Bender, was so taken he supported Adams financially, providing an entrée into San Francisco's art world and encouraging his first portfolio, *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierra*. A Smithsonian exhibition followed. A *Washington Post* reviewer wrote, "His photographs are like portraits of the giant peaks, which seem to be inhabited by mythical gods." During the 1930s, troubled by the increasing commercial development in Yosemite Valley, Adams produced the limited edition *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, published with the Sierra Club to draw support for the creation of Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park. The club sent Adams to a Washington conference with Interior Secretary Ickes and other officials, his photographs a powerful argument. Ickes sent the images on to President Roosevelt, and both lobbied for the park, designated in 1940.

As Adams' visibility rose, so did the Sierra Club's. With each of his triumphs, the wild places he so loved earned more stature. People were not simply looking at mountains and forests anymore. They were looking at an idea: wilderness as essential to the nation's soul.

In 1936, *An American Place*, his first New York solo exhibit at legendary photographer Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, was a hit with critics and public alike. In 1940, he curated *A Pageant of Photography* to critical acclaim, a show at San Francisco's Golden Gate Exhibition that also featured other photographers. After World War II, he got a Guggenheim fellowship to photograph the national parks. A host of books followed.

**In the 1950s, with unprecedented interest in the parks and an explosion of cars, visitation skyrocketed. Adams called for moderation in meeting the influx. "The imposition of commercial 'resortism' violates the true function of national parks," he wrote. "Things are appreciated for size, unusuality, and scarcity more than for their subtleties and emotional relationship to everyday life," with the parks becoming "gargantuan curio[s] to be seen, not experienced."** In 1955, he and longtime collaborator writer Nancy Newhall produced the exhibit, *This Is the American Earth*, which toured internationally with a companion book published to stellar reviews. It was one of the critical influences in the rise of the environmental movement. By the 1970s, Ansel Adams was a legend. "Dear Mr. Adams," an admirer began her letter. "In writing to you, I almost feel that I am writing to John Muir, or to Yosemite Valley itself." He was a perennial guest of presidents at the White House, where he was not afraid to tell them they should be doing more.

In 1975 he helped found the Center for Creative Photography, a research institution including a museum, photographic archives, and a library. His negatives are now in cold storage, with the photographs conserved so scholars and public can view them in a renovated research space.

In his lens, the landscape became a "symbolic destination," as described in an exhibit at Washington, DC's Corcoran Gallery. Its closing lines captured the essence of his images: "Adams made art that embodied a dream of unbound nature—a sphere where mystery and wonder give way to peace and a sense of one's place in the firmament."

**BELOW:** *Icicles, Yosemite National Park, 1950.* **RIGHT:** *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California.*



