

Making a Photographer
The Early Work *of* Ansel Adams



EL CAPITAN - YOSEMITE VALLEY

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developed for tourist use. The large Glacier Point Hotel opened atop the valley rim in 1917, providing panoramic views of the High Sierra until its destruction by fire in 1969.²⁴

Yet *The Abode of Snow* gives no evidence that Adams photographed it from a popular overlook. He focused on the distant peak of Mount Florence, showing just a fragment of the Sierra.²⁵ The horizon's placement at the image's top edge and the framing—so that the ridgeline seems to rise at the edges of the picture frame—indicate that the viewer is seeing just a small portion of a continuous whole. (Indeed, Adams would later include a larger section of the Sierra Crest in a postcard view, showing the broader context from which he extracted the peak for *The Abode of Snow*, fig. 2.9). The print's strength relies on velvety areas of deep shadow alternating with creamy passages of snow. Any sense of three-dimensional recession collapses into a flat arrangement of shapes that reads like a series of vertically stacked, alternating light and dark layers. The sky and paper tone are the same, enhancing the picture's two-dimensionality. He encourages the viewer to contemplate the graphic power of the Sierra for its unmistakable aesthetic appeal.

Another distant view is the portfolio's fourth print, *From Glacier Point*, which Adams made especially for inclusion in *Parmelian Prints* (fig. 2.10). With a few friends, he attempted the Four Mile Trail on April 24, 1927, hoping to be the first of the season to ascend it.²⁶ He carried his heavy wooden camera up the strenuous trail, which uses a series of switchbacks to cut the distance of the elevation gain of 3,200 feet to just over four miles. Once on the rim, he confronted eight-foot-high snowdrifts, and when he set up his tripod, its legs sank deep into the snow.²⁷

FIGURE 2.9
Ansel Adams, *High Sierra from Glacier Point*, postcard, undated. Collection of the author.

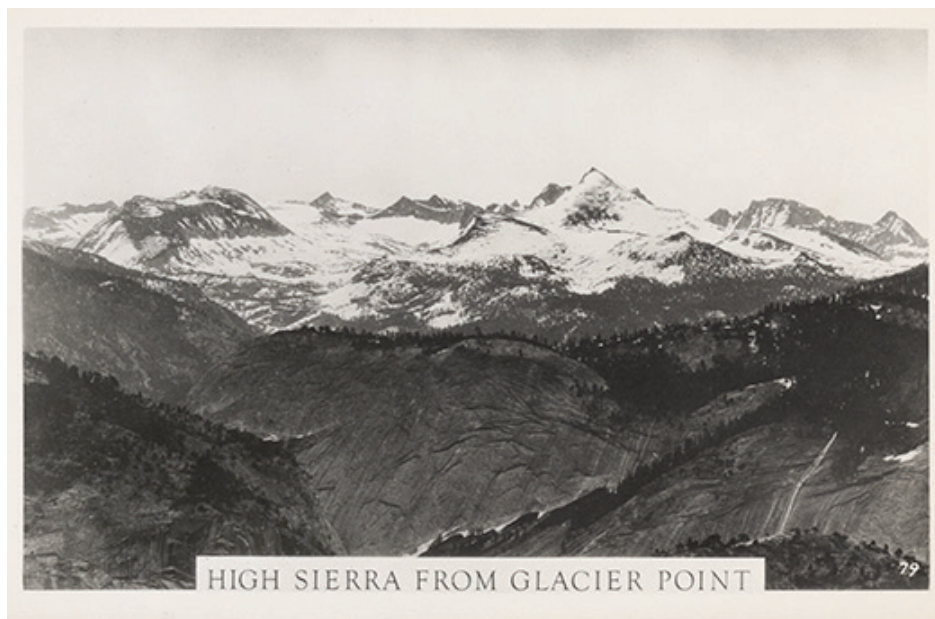


FIGURE 2.10
Ansel Adams, *From Glacier Point*, Yosemite Valley, negative, 1927; print, 1927. Plate 4 from *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*. Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.

The composition of *From Glacier Point* creates a wonderfully abstract photograph. The branches of an evergreen tree frame the picture's top edge, its dark needles extending down to the horizon at the left. The narrow trunk, a deep black, bisects the landscape into unequal segments. While the ledge in the snowy foreground is clear, the picture's highlights run together, connecting the light areas of tone, so that snow in the foreground appears to blend with the granite domes in the background, and the prominent and familiar Half Dome becomes less distinctive against the cloud-streaked sky. The shadow of a cloud on the valley's south wall, the shady north side of the valley, and the dark rocks and foliage in the foreground form an irregular pattern that overlaps the tree's dramatic silhouette. As with *The Abode of Snow*, Adams took the three-dimensional terrain and transformed it into an abstracted two-dimensional picture that, again, emphasizes aesthetics over topography.

This quality, however, is challenged when the print is lifted from its folder and the translucent paper is lit from behind (fig. 2.11). The foreground tree remains dark, as the dense areas of the photograph's emulsion block the backlight. The valley's shadows

photographs, made from roughly the same location relative to the mountain, are close variations of one another. Despite their similarities, however, each casts the mountains in a distinct light. The first, with menacing overtones, shows only a fringe of treetops at the lower edge, with Redoubt as a towering and massive wall of rock and snow. In the second, Adams included trees and a lake in the foreground, creating a tranquil landscape over which the mountain presides. In this more picturesque view, he cropped out a swath of sky from the top of the negative, bringing the mountaintop closer to the picture's edge. This darkroom decision strengthened the impact of the mountain within the picture and preserved its powerful appearance within the lovely valley setting (fig. 3.13). With these two views of the mountain, Adams provided members options for how to remember Redoubt: sublime peak or benevolent lord of a bucolic, alpine landscape.

Although Adams chose a roughly chronological and geographical sequence for the album, he did not simply arrange the pictures in the order in which he took them. Instead, his organization "improved upon" the way an individual hiker might experience the landscape. Rather than introducing the elements of Tonquin Valley as the party came upon them, he began the sequence of images with long and wide views to establish the lay of the land. Indeed, pages 8, 9, 10, and 12 all include surveys of the landscape. Labeled according to the cardinal directions, the images suggest a hiker's attempt, with map in hand, to orient him or herself in the valley. From there, Adams zoomed in, providing

FIGURE 3.13
Ansel Adams, *Redoubt Peak*, proof print showing the original negative. Center for Creative Photography, Tucson. See fig. 3.12, bottom right, for the cropped image as it appeared in the 1928 Sierra Club Album. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



FIGURE 3.14
Ansel Adams, *Blackhorn Mountain*, image 30, from 1928 Sierra Club album. Appeared at left on a page with a telephotograph of Throne Mountain. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



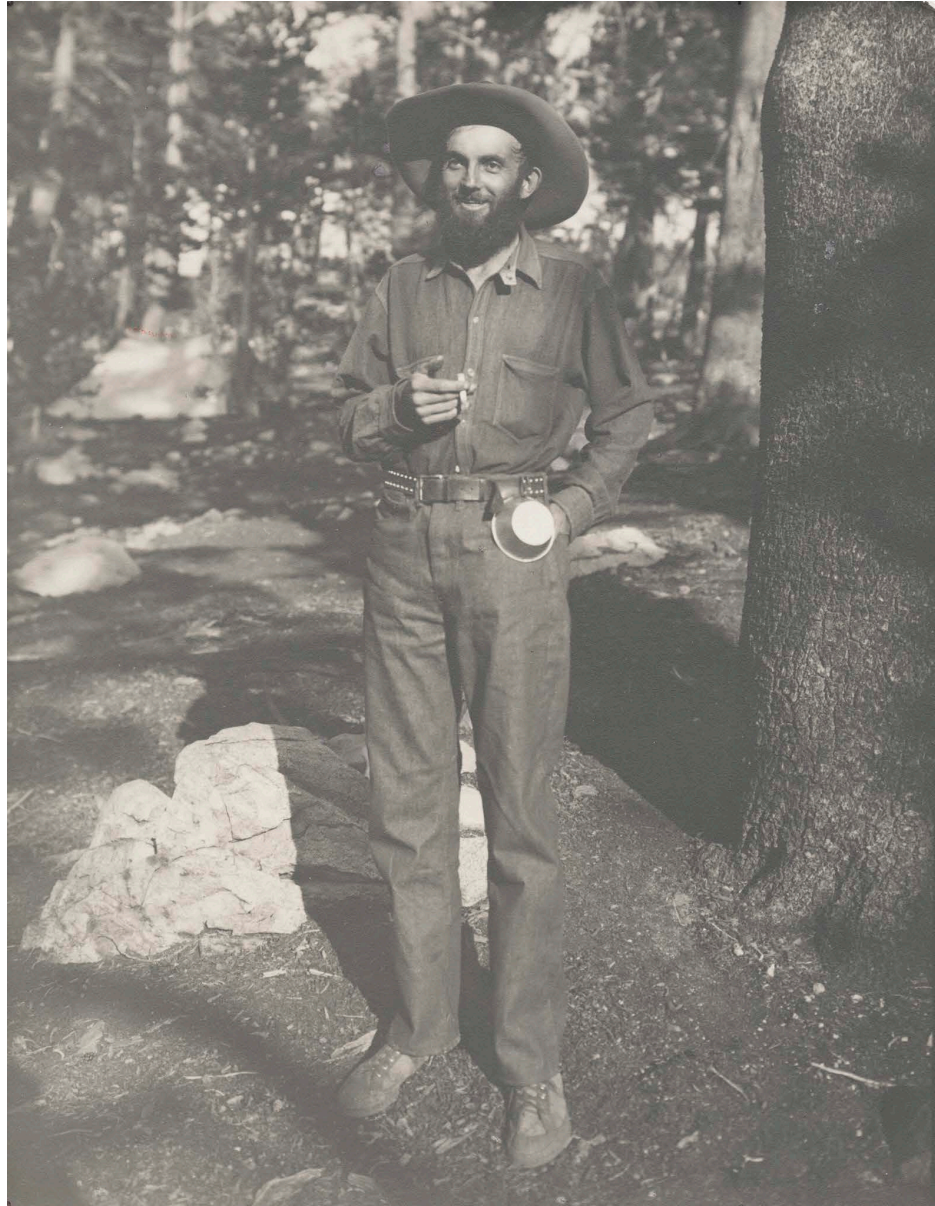
detailed images of specific features (in pages 13 and 14). A view of Amethyst Lake shows a detail of an earlier photograph's subject, as do the telephotographs of Blackhorn and Throne Mountains, which isolate these peaks from their ranges for special attention (fig. 3.14).⁵⁶

Adams made the next subset of Tonquin Valley views from Tonquin Hill, devoting three pages and six photographs to this perspective, the most easily accessible from the party's camp. They are the same peaks and ranges that he photographed from the valley floor, now visible from a higher elevation. His emphasis on these views most likely relates to the large number of outing members who experienced it firsthand. Walter Huber, writing in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* about the Canadian outing, said, "The climb of Tonquin Hill and the stupendous view from its summit were enjoyed by even the least strenuous members of the party."⁵⁷ One of Adams's images made from this viewpoint includes a figure seated in the foreground, admiring the view with a large book open on his lap (fig. 3.15). Whether holding a sketchbook or atlas, the person is a surrogate for the viewer in the landscape. Adams's decision to include six views from this spot underscores both the accessibility of the viewpoint and his belief that, because many members had personally taken it in, they might want to purchase a print of it.

Still focused on the mountains around the Tonquin Valley, page 19 of Adams's album includes three pictures together titled "The Ramparts from the West." The first shows a section of the Ramparts range, including Mounts Bastion, Turret, and Geikie

FIGURE 3.17

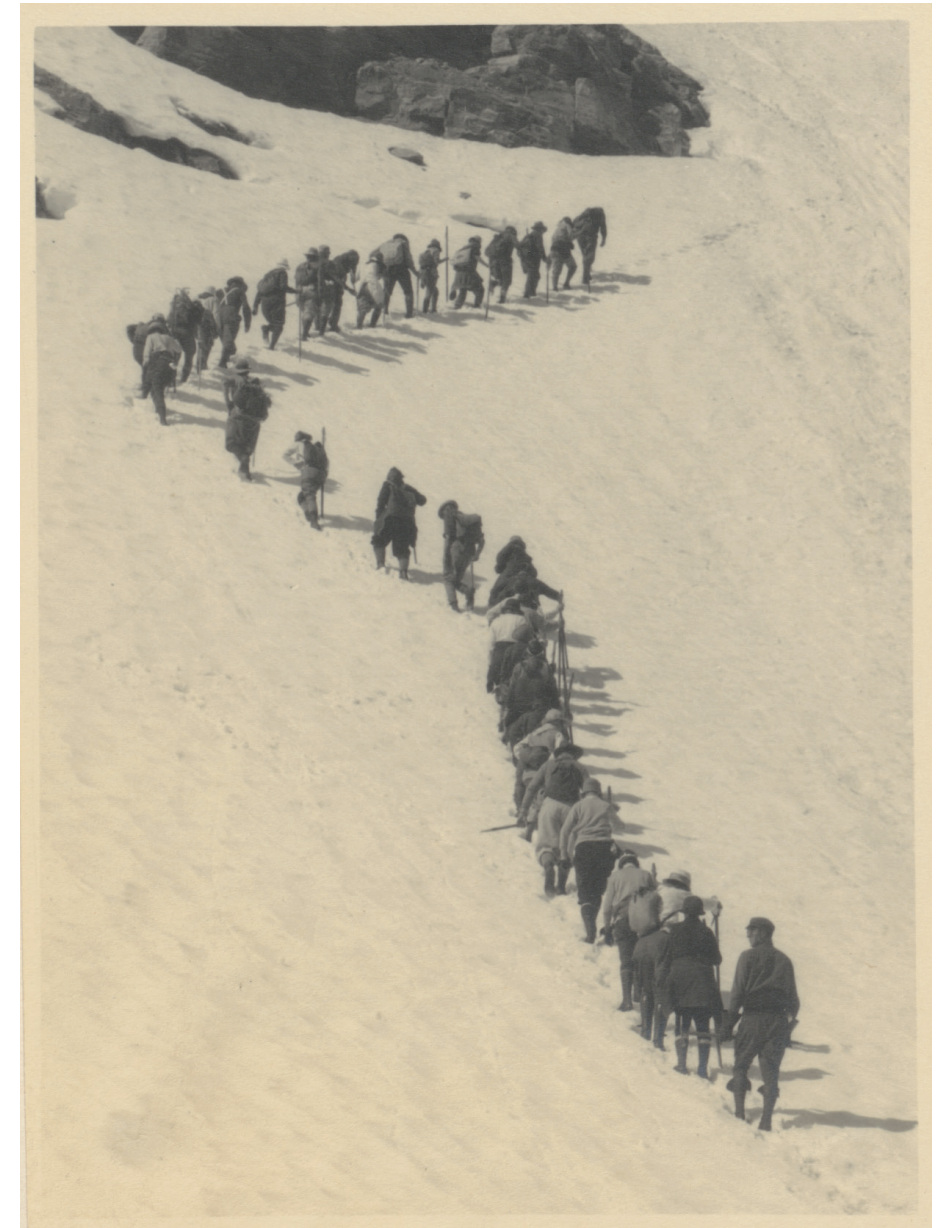
Ansel Adams, *Mount Barbican* (page title), images 44, 45, and 46, from 1928 Sierra Club album. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. This page, with three views of Mount Barbican, is an example of Adams's multi-image mountain profile.



principal mountain-peaks. Within the next few weeks we learned to trust their judgment and skill as mountaineers, and, moreover, found them delightful companions.⁵⁹ Adams's uncluttered portraits of the two men focus on their rugged features and climbing gear. The first page presents a vertical portrait of each man. Hans is set in profile against a white background, wearing a dark wool coat with ropes around his torso and holding a pickax; Heine, in a leather coat and with a rope, pipe, and pickax, poses in almost the same way. The next page shows the brothers together, again in profile. The out-of-focus background hints at a flat meadow and the rising mountain beyond (fig. 3.18).

FIGURE 3.19

Ansel Adams, *Climbing Drawbridge Peak*, image 52, from 1928 Sierra Club album as cropped by Adams. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



Following the guides' portraits, the album shifts from landscape views to depictions of the climb to Drawbridge Peak. A dark string of climbers contrasts with the snowy mountainside in the next five photographs, all depicting the progress of a small party ascending Drawbridge. The first page includes two pictures. In the first, a vertical composition, figures zigzag across the snow starting on the lower right, and a dark rock awkwardly anchors the upper edge of the top-heavy composition (fig. 3.19). The second, horizontal image on the page appears to be a similar view from farther away, showing

FIGURE 4.5
Ansel Adams, plates 1–12
of *Taos Pueblo*, 1930.
Center for Creative
Photography, Tucson.

mountains that they loved, living in dwellings shaped from the earth, and he wanted to depict this powerful interconnectedness. He translated his appreciation of the pueblo's aesthetic into photographic works of art, primarily using light effects on the architecture and compositions that underscore the relationship of the built environment to the surrounding landscape. Finally, he suggested the long history and endurance of the deeply rooted Taos culture by deemphasizing the pueblo as an inhabited and dynamic village of contemporary people, instead presenting it as a quiet and nearly vacant place and describing the Taos people as essentialized types.

At Taos, Adams trained his lens on each of the pueblo's major architectural elements, creating a portrait of the place through its most significant buildings. The photographs beautifully capture the buildings bathed in northern New Mexico light and the way the porous, earth-colored adobe reflects, interrupts, and absorbs the sun. His selection features what one might see on a tour: the two major native domestic buildings, North and South House; the two modern religious buildings, the ruined Old Church and the New Church; and the exterior of one of Taos's religious structures, a kiva. He punctuated this architectural survey with photographic "types": pictures of individuals who were intended to represent the Taos people generally.⁴⁸ Following the images of the pueblo, Adams included his view of the Ranchos de Taos Church.

The images are ordered to create a rhythmic pattern, in four groups of three (fig. 4.5). Each series begins with two landscapes or architectural views; three end with a picture of one of the Taos Indians; and the final series culminates in Adams's view of the Ranchos de Taos Church. This concluding view of the church signals the end of the photographic plates. The sequence of images, with its repetition of subjects, suggests a cyclical continuity, a never-ending and never-changing quality to life at Taos.

Adams was a prolific correspondent, and there are many extant letters that he sent to Austin and Applegate during the period of his frequent visits to New Mexico. He photographed at several pueblos, and knew of Austin's keen interest in the status, living conditions, and political standing of northern New Mexico's American Indian peoples. Adams, however, makes almost no reference to his perceptions of the Taos people, either individually or as a nation, nor of other pueblo peoples. The archival record for this period, despite being quite rich, reveals nothing about how he perceived or understood the American Indian subjects of his photographs, making it necessary to draw conclusions from his approach to photographing Taos and the neighboring pueblos.

Though Adams clearly enjoyed the visual experience of working at Taos, he also appreciated the key difference between American Indian culture and his own: at Taos Pueblo, nestled against the wilderness of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the people lived, often by necessity, in synchrony with the seasons, weather, and land, while for Adams, communing with nature was an ideal state that formed just a small part of his "normal" life. He recognized the Taos people's close connection to nature, and in his photographs he romanticized this relationship based on his own hiking and camping



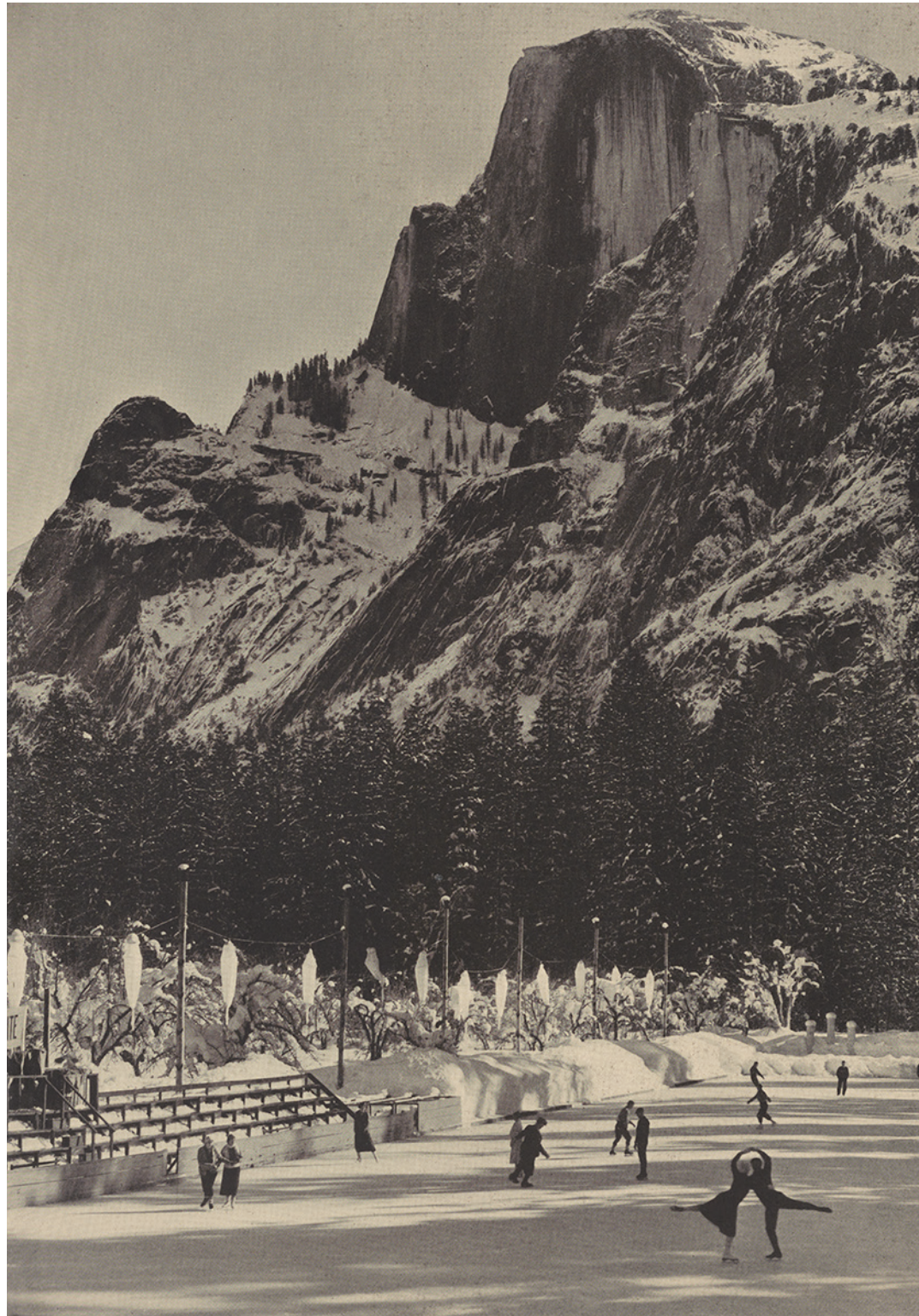


FIGURE 5.1
Ansel Adams, "Skaters and Half
Dome," from *Four Seasons in
Yosemite National Park*.
Collection of the author.

showed just a portion of the partly shaded rink. A number of individual skaters grace the ice, and two pairs appear in the foreground: two women in a patch of bright sunlight skate hand in hand, while the couple at the lower right create an eye-catching silhouette with their outer legs extended and their hands clasped above their heads.¹³ Long white lanterns hang at intervals beyond the rink, evoking a glittering nighttime scene one might find after the sun has set and the great Half Dome is only a shadowy presence.

This photograph of the dramatic Yosemite landscape made more accessible by a civilized winter pastime epitomizes Adams's images for *Four Seasons*, as do the qualities of its presentation within the book. The image of ice-skating beneath Half Dome, the book's penultimate picture, bleeds to the edges, filling the entire page. The grid of dots that makes up the halftone is clearly visible, and the image appears soft, with much of the fine detail of the original negative lost in the reproduction process. This lack of sharpness, a detriment to one's enjoyment of the photographic image as a work of art, actually improves the effectiveness of the picture for promotional purposes. Rather than seeing the skaters with their specific clothes, ethnicities, or expressions, they become generalized, and readers can more easily envision themselves in place of the anonymous skaters. The whites that make up the highlighted areas in the foreground are much brighter than the mountain's white highlights, drawing attention to the skating scene below rather than the landscape. In fact, the contrast of tones across the mountain's face is subdued, making the uneven rock surface appear flat. This effect creates a static backdrop for the skaters, whose poses imply motion and whose different sizes suggest a clear recession of space, clearly defining the ice rink as three-dimensional and receding away from the picture plane.

Despite the fact that the skating scene makes up only the bottom quarter of the image, the contrast of the skaters' dark silhouettes against the light surface of the ice adds to its visual appeal. The picture successfully promotes the qualities of Yosemite tourism the YPCCO wanted to get across: visits to the park can be made year-round, and outdoor activities take place in some of the most dramatic landscapes. This success was achieved both through Adams's compositional decisions when making the negative and Plumb's choice of reproducing the image in the book.

By 1936, when *Four Seasons in Yosemite National Park* was published, nearly ten years had passed since Adams had begun his professional photographic career with the *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras* portfolio. *Four Seasons*, however, was a dramatically different production. Adams himself thought poorly of the book; he never approved proofs before it went to print, and he objected particularly to the way his photographs were arranged and cropped. The book's publication and sale by the YPCCO caused a rift that dramatically changed the terms of his contractual work. Indeed, his relationship with Plumb, the book's editor, was so damaged that the latter threatened not to use any more of Adams's extensive catalogue of Yosemite pictures to promote the company.

Four Seasons in Yosemite National Park provides a unique opportunity to

FIGURE 6.5

Ansel Adams, *Mount McKinley and Wonder Lake, Denali National Park, Alaska*, 1947. Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.



FIGURE 6.6

Ansel Adams, *Maroon Bells, near Aspen, Colorado*, 1951. Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.



FIGURE 6.7

Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942. Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.

Using *The Tetons and the Snake River* (fig. 6.7) as an example, it is possible to describe these stylistic elements that Adams brought together to support his communicative goal. This photograph visually expresses the transformative potential of experiences in nature and the value of wilderness as an intrinsic good. In sum, it presents a heroic vision of the American wilderness as an invaluable asset to its citizens. Adams chose a vantage point that facilitated a panoramic view of the Teton mountain range with the winding Snake River. The picture includes a swath of cloud-filled sky and distant mountains with patches of bright snow; in the midrange, the silvery river curves through tree-covered banks. With little immediate foreground, Adams created a perspective that suggests his omniscient grasp of the scene and, as such, implies that what is presented is made from the ideal position and is the best (or perhaps the only) way this particular vista should be seen. It is a stylistic choice that imparts authority and gravity to the picture, and confers importance on the subject.