



Ansel Adams or A perspective to fine art photography

A personal experience report to the Ansel Adams retrospective "Ansel Adams at 100" at the "Kulturforum" (Culture Forum) in Berlin/Germany from October 11th, 2002 till January 5th, 2003.

Seven years after the 1995 exhibition of Ansel Adams I got the chance to see "real" originals of the master himself in Berlin, a very pleasing happening for me. I was conscious about the fact that today's improved printing techniques would not allow to judge the "real" performance of a photographer objectively.

This exhibition gave altogether a good summary about the life and formation of Adams. He made his oldest shown photo at the young age of 16 just after two years after his first photographic experiences. The quality of this photo was definitely all right even it was presumably printed within the later years!

It was also interesting to see how his personal abilities developed further parallel to the technical possibilities – the shown photographs from the twenties to thirties were due to the materials used not especially a hit. On the contrary one could see that he made the really best enlargements within his last 20 years of life. With a fully mature artistic concept at this age he was not afraid, as long as the motive and enlargement size allowed, to let highlights or shades appear "foggy" for the sake of a harmonious picture interpretation.

As a coronation of the whole exhibition, two photos from which two different prints hung beside each other were shown: these were "Aspen, north of New Mexico, 1958" and "Mount McKinley and the Wonder Lake, Denali national park, Alaska, 1947". They had been printed with a time lag of thirty years and showed highly differentiated interpretations of same negatives. A direct comparison made the strong manipulation of these enlargements visible. It reminded me of a famous statement of Adams.

"The negative is the composition, the positive the interpretation."

Adams had never claimed taking realistic photographs!

The exhibition was indeed impressive, it has given me once more the opportunity to see the controversial legend of Adams in a realistic manner. Realistic here means that the numerous reproductions in various media give not a real picture, they are somehow "cleaned up". Even the special exhibition catalog makes no exception in this matter.

Soon after having visited the exhibition, gray tones still fresh in mind, a look inside the catalogue bears many surprises. The range of manipulations reach from re-sharpening up to gradation enhancements which can not be observed on the original prints. Because Adams printed some of his works numerously and individually it is difficult to decide which are archetypical originals since this fact was clearly visible just by comparing the shown prints in the exhibition.

Altogether the quality of the shown was high as expected, but notes for the technically interested were missing. Perhaps the photos had not "Andreas Weidner's (famous German photographer) straight-line manner", but were very natural and eclectic.

The exhibition of 114 exclusive nature expositions was rounded up by concise texts on moving walls which contained small formal fauxpas and despite of the short kept form information about Adams way of thinking and work.

I once more realized that Adams was an excellent photographer indeed. Even twenty years after his death he is able to fill museums with visitors. The cult build around him was created by others though ...

Translated by Serhan Sözmen