

Legacy: The Continuing Influence of Ansel Adams and Minor White

By Eric Biggerstaff

Perhaps no two photographers have had as much influence over the last fifty years on the technique, philosophy, and understanding of photography as a fine art as Ansel Adams and Minor White. For each, the art of photography was a passion that bordered on religion, demanding a serious commitment from one's self to master. This passion for the art of photography was handed down by these artists to a wide group of talented and influential photographers, who have taken the lessons and continue to shape fine art photography today.

The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with an appreciation of the influence both artists continue to have on fine art photography, and how their legacy has shaped the careers of several of today's most talented and respected artists who, in turn, are shaping the talents of the next generation.

Ansel Adams is by now an icon of American culture whose influence continues to shape photography and environmentalism. Born in San Francisco in 1902, his early difficulties in school led to an intense interest in music, where he found he could excel, giving rise to hopes of being a professional pianist. Family trips to Yosemite and a Kodak Box Brownie camera sparked an interest in photography and environmentalism that was to forever shape what is now known as fine art photography. His accomplishments are too numerous to be detailed in a short article; however, a few are the formulation of the Zone System, development of the photography department at the California School of Fine Arts, assisting in the foundation of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa), publication of twenty-eight books, founding member of Group f/64, a founding member of Aperture, and three Guggenheim fellowships. His work and techniques continue to be the basis of the "West Coast tradition" of straight photography, which demands excellence not only in vision, but also in printing technique. The technical and visual beauty of Ansel Adams' work continues to set the standard by which all others are judged.

While not as well known as Adams today, Minor White's contribution to photography is no less important. In fact, John Szarkowski has written: "Of those photographers who reached their creative maturity after the Second World War, none has been more influential than Minor White." Minor was known for his deep belief in the sacred and spiritual quality of photography. What was seen in the image was important, but the meaning behind the image was even more so. Minor White's life was a spiritual journey that used photography as a means to communicate his inner self to the outer world, and was heavily influenced by Christianity, Zen meditation, and Gurdjieff's teaching. He was devoted to the idea of "Equivalence" (first articulated by Alfred Stieglitz), a theory of photography based on the idea that any image, regardless of technical merit, should function as an experience, as opposed to a "thing." The photograph should act as a springboard for the viewer to explore feelings and emotions within himself or herself, the photograph acting as a metaphor for a feeling. Up until his death from a heart attack in 1976, his work brought him international acclaim, but it was his devotion to teaching and bringing the work of many talented photographers to the public eye that is perhaps his greatest legacy. Among his accomplishments were co-founding with Adams the photography department at the California School of Fine Arts, and serving as a founding member of Aperture (for which he was editor), a founding member of Society of Photographic Education, a Fellow of the MIT Council of Arts, and a tenured professor of photography at MIT. If there were an "East Coast" tradition of photography, then Minor White would have to be its leading influence.

Ansel Adams and Minor White have left a philosophical and technical legacy that will perhaps be unmatched by other artists in future generations. However, the greatest legacy is the fact that several of today's most influential artists were students or assistants to each, and these photographers continue to teach future generations the lessons learned. Some of the more recognizable names are Paul Caponigro, John Sexton, George DeWolfe, Marion Patterson, Alan Ross, Ron Rosenstock, Ted Orland, Don Worth, Chris Rainer, Jerry Uelsmann, Jack Welpott, Al Weber, and David Ulrich.

What follows is a series of thoughts on the experience of working with these masters from some of their students and assistants. This list is not exhaustive, of course, but will hopefully provide more insight on the

important legacy left by both Ansel and Minor, and will encourage you to explore Ansel, Minor, and these artists in greater depth.

My first meeting with Minor White was at a farewell party in his honor. He had accepted a teaching position at the Rochester Institute of Technology as well as a position as curator of exhibitions at the George Eastman House, and was being given a grand send off by friends and faculty of the California School of Fine Arts.

I was inducted into the U.S. Army during the Korean conflict and was stationed in San Francisco. While there, I met Benjamin Chin, who looked at my photographs and commented that they had much in common with the style of the so-called "West Coast Photographers." Ben thought the work was good, but needed help with the technical aspects, so he took me under his wing, loaned me his view camera, and demystified Ansel Adams' Zone System. Ben also introduced me to many of the well-known West Coast photographers such as Ansel Adams, Brett Weston, Imogen Cunningham, and Dorothea Lange; I was 19 years old, and my head was spinning with the mother lode of ideas and people into which I had inadvertently fallen.

Already conversant with photographing the landscape, I knew I wanted something more to happen in my pictures. I wanted something deeper. At Minor's party, Ben introduced me and stated that he had taught me enough technique, and that I now needed exposure to Minor's psychological approach to the medium. Since Minor was leaving for Rochester, he invited me to catch up with him when I returned to the East.

Minor's approach to photography confirmed my own feelings of what my photographs could express, and I contacted him shortly after the Army discharged me. Minor lived in an apartment at #72 North Union Street, just blocks away from the George Eastman House and in close proximity to R.I.T., where he taught. At #72, there was a steady flow of students, other teachers, photographers, and dignitaries from the Eastman House. I was given a bed in exchange for keeping the place clean and assisting Minor in whatever he needed.

Minor often said that to know or discover substance in an image, one needed to "be still" before it. He also stated that one could photograph a thing not only for "what it is," but for "what else it is." Minor believed and worked assiduously to find any underlying meaning contained in the photographic image.

Ansel was not particularly inclined to look for any underlying meaning or psychological reading of photographs, as was Minor's way. I recall a time when I was with Ansel and Minor; they were drinking and chatting, when Minor chidingly asked Ansel if he was still practicing the "Zone System." Ansel replied that he certainly was, and that he understood Minor was now practicing the "Zen System."

I learned a great deal from both men about Zen and Zones, and how it all applied to making photographs. I also discovered how the individual imparts something of him or herself to the work. It still amazes me how such a mechanical process as photography allows subject and silver to be affected by emotion and intention. But then, I have said in the past that no matter what you touch, you invariably leave your thumbprint on it.

Minor was generous, giving often and freely to his students and associates. The inspiration and confirmation he gave to his students was imparted by the fact that he lived for photography with constancy and integrity. One might agree or disagree with his unique teaching methods, but there is no denying his photographs have that extra "something" -- a touch of mystery and magic many of us seek.

In this age of image making, I would encourage the student of photography to put emphasis on making art, and not being seduced by the glamour of notoriety. Also, try not to be pulled along to do more and more in less time, in the ways technology offers today. The act of creating is an unfolding within a natural rhythm specific to the medium and the task.

- Paul Caponigro

While working for Ansel Adams, I found this charismatic character to be a dedicated, ethical, honest, and hard working person. He strove for perfection in his photography, and tolerated excellence. He combined his passion for the preservation of the environment with his passion for photography almost seamlessly. He used his photographic skills to convey his personal excitement for the natural environment, as well as the irreplaceable value of the wilderness experience. Ansel's photographs came from the heart, and his mastery of the craft of photography came from a keen mind. The two together created a compelling legacy of unforgettable images.

It's safe to say Ansel was a hero for me. I would have been shattered had my hero not been authentic when the

darkroom door was closed. Rather, I found him to be a person of great integrity and generosity. He was a gracious and giving teacher. His workshops went from dawn until the wee hours of the morning. His teaching style provided more information than most students could ever begin to digest. His greatest gift as a teacher was the ability to provide inspiration.

I clearly remember a day when Ansel was printing a negative he had made in the early 1930's in the Southwest. This was a negative he had printed previously on a number of occasions. He was trying to get a print that was "just right." He had experimented with a few different papers, and even a couple of different developers. At that point in his printing, Ansel would test dry his prints in the microwave oven. He asked me, as his assistant, to give an objective commentary on prints as he was working on them. He made numerous trips to the microwave and brought out work prints, and finally he asked me what I thought of his latest rendition of this image. I had watched as Ansel went in and out of the darkroom, and as the large work table slowly became covered with 11"x14" test prints that had been "speed-dried" in the microwave. This new print was superior to all the rest. I told Ansel I thought it looked great. At this point, Ansel was beaming, and he said something I will never forget: "I think I finally got the print I wanted when I made the negative." That negative had been made nearly fifty years before, but the excitement, the magic, the frustration of photography was clearly alive for Ansel. I realized the creative process in photography was genuine and could last a lifetime if one dedicated oneself to it.

- John Sexton

Olivier Messiaen, the great French composer, said that technique allows the heart to expand.

It is simplistic to label Ansel a technician and Minor an intuitive poet. Ansel's passion and spirituality are in his photographs, more beautiful because of his glowing technical virtuosity. We forget that Minor wrote "The Zone System Manual," which was the bible for serious photographers from the 1950's on -- that accessible little yellow book which simplified the Zone System and gave us the entry to mastering the fine negative and print.

Ansel would answer my technical questions and give me unlimited assistance and encouragement, while Minor would ask me about my astrological chart (to Ansel's dismay)! Minor gave me confidence in expressing my inner vision. I needed both approaches. And it was Ansel who told me, in the old-boy fifties, that fine art photography NEEDS a woman's vision. Minor, too, affirmed that need and included a number of my images in APERTURE and in his exhibits such as "Light7." The old boys are still dominant, but we women now have found our way into the sacred ranks.

- Marion Patterson

My time with Minor was crucial in my evolution as an image maker.

I initially went to RIT to become a commercial / portrait photographer. Minor introduced concepts that greatly expanded my vision of what photography could be. It seems naïve now, but at the time I went to RIT (mid 1950's), it never occurred to me that photography could be used for self-expression!

There is a Zen saying: "When the student is ready, the Master appears."

-Jerry Uelsmann

I think the most valuable "lessons learned" from the years working with Ansel were lessons in simplicity, practicality, and humility.

There was nothing about Ansel's equipment - camera or darkroom- that was either extravagant or exotic. His camera gear was old and beat up; his darkroom cabinetry was mostly painted plywood. He didn't own an enlarging timer. He had no interest in whether he had 'the best' of anything; if it served his needs, that sufficed. He drove an old Ford and loved it.

He had no illusions that every one of his exposures would be a masterpiece; it was enough that he had responded to something seen and tried to make it work. He never regarded himself as anything more than a hard-working human with a purpose. He was dedicated to his convictions regarding photography, the environment, and politics, and that dedication kept him always in motion. He always kept himself listed in the phone book.

He could never understand why anyone needed or wanted to find "meaning" in art. After having worked for Ansel, Minor White came back to San Francisco for a visit. Ansel had a number of photographs propped up on a ledge, one of

which was a picture of a stump. Minor asked, "Ansel, this photograph is beautiful, what does it MEAN?" Ansel replied, "It only means what it IS. It's a picture of a stump!"

-Alan Ross

By the mid 60's I knew I would have a life in photography. Minor White came to MIT in 1967. At the time I was working in a camera shop in Harvard Square, and one day I noticed a small stack of brochures on the camera store counter, advertising a private workshop with Minor, titled "Six Weekends with Minor White." I had no idea that workshop would change my life as much as it did. After the workshop, I continued working with Minor on manuscripts he wrote, titled "Consciousness in Photography."

Working with Minor set off a chain of events in my life that still has repercussions thirty-five years later.

Because of the group I was in with Minor, I learned of a job opening for a photography teacher in Worcester, Massachusetts. I applied for the job and got it. I taught at the Worcester Crafts Center from 1969 to 1980. The job afforded me the luxury of continuing with my photography. I brought a portfolio of my recent work to show Minor in 1972. As a result, he gave me my first one-person show at MIT, in the Center for Creative Photography.

I vividly remember helping Minor hang his first one-man show at the Carl Siembab Gallery in Boston. Two hours before the opening, a panel hanging from the ceiling crashed with eight framed photographs. Glass shattered all over the gallery. After a few seconds of silence (that felt like an eternity), Minor calmly said, "It must be time for lunch." After lunch we swept up the glass and noticed the prints were not scratched. We re-hung the panel without glass in the frames, just in time for the opening. John Szarkowski from the Museum of Modern Art bought the entire panel, titled "The Sound Of One Hand Clapping."

Looking back on those years with Minor, I have to say he was extremely supportive. Often, Minor would invite me and a few others to dinner at his house in Arlington, MA. His lessons never ended. His lessons were about living fully, not about getting the perfect print, or the perfect exposure.

Minor was a man ahead of his time. Today, meditating or taking part in a spiritual group is commonplace. Back in the 60's, it was far from commonplace. His interest in teaching was deeply tied in with his spiritual beliefs, perhaps even stronger than his need to photograph.

-Ron Rosenstock

I think what I gained most from Ansel over the years was a sense for what it means to have a truly clear vision of the world. Ansel saw the world revealed in the large-scale features and intimate details of the natural wilderness. Without that belief system to inform and direct his art making, using a large format camera at f/64 and inventing an elaborate system for exposure and development would have been a pointless academic exercise.

Most of us, however, aren't fortunate enough to develop such a clear vision so early in life. At least, I certainly didn't! As a beginning photographer, I was unsure what was important, uncertain what I lived for - and so I was unsure what I should photograph. (Sadly, there's abundant evidence of this in every medium - the world is filled with inconclusive art.)

And so when I showed up for that first Yosemite Workshop (which also made Ansel my first photography instructor), it's not surprising that I swallowed the Zone System hook, line & sinker. B&W large-format landscape photography became my definition of art photography -- it took years for me to recognize that I just don't lead a fine-grained life, certainly not one that stands still long enough for me to set up a tripod. But while Ansel was single-minded as an artist, he was broad-minded and encouraging as a teacher, especially toward young photographers like myself, who were just beginning that long process of finding our own pathway in the art.

He was also amazingly accessible. During the years I worked at Ansel's studio in Carmel, every afternoon all work came to a complete stop at the stroke of five. Ansel would pour himself a glass of scotch, plunk himself down in the big easy chair at the window overlooking the Pacific -- and, at that point, virtually anyone who had phoned ahead was welcomed into his home and treated like an honored guest. Some days, it would be a student with a portfolio; some days it would be Brett Weston. You just never knew, and Ansel didn't care -- he was famously gregarious, and enjoyed trading views on most any subject.

I picked up gobs of technique from Ansel, but most of the particulars needed to be un-learned later on as photographic technology changed. What remained, however, was an underlying love of craft and a belief that quality counts. Over the long run, what I've come to value most are the intangibles I picked up, simply by standing near someone who had found something important he wanted to say through his art, had molded his technique to match that vision, and -- most of all -- demonstrated the strength of will it takes to stay focused on reaching that goal. It isn't the equipment or tonal range or recent auction price or even the subject matter that I relate to and remember when I look at Ansel's art -- it's the sincerity and passion and care and trust he embedded into the making of that art.

-Ted Orland

When I went to The Rochester Institute of Technology in 1969 to get an MFA in Photography, I expected Minor White to be there, but learned he had moved to Arlington, MA, to start the School of Creative Photography at MIT. I first met Minor at the opening of the "Being Without Clothes" exhibition at MIT in 1970, and he taught our whole MFA class from RIT for two sessions and looked at our portfolios during that weekend. Later, in 1974-1976, when I was teaching at the New England School of Photography in Boston, I would go and bug Minor weekly about photographic issues, and act as a sounding board for him on his new book on the Zone System that he, Dick Zakia, and Peter Lorenz were working on.

The main things I learned from him had to do with the deeper aspects of photography. From Minor I really learned how to look at other people's photographs, the subtleties of black and white printing, and his practice of Zen, which made a lasting influence on both my photographs and the process of photography in general. The Zen ideas, along with Dick Zakia's perception research, formed the basis of my Contemplative Photography course. The little book Minor made us read, "Zen in the Art of Archery," continues to challenge me even today, as I probe the mysteries of the world with my camera."

-George DeWolfe

Artist Biographies

Paul Caponigro (1932 -): Generally regarded as one of the America's master photographers, Paul Caponigro has been using his camera to explore the world around him for more than fifty years. His approach to photography relies on intuition to lead to a greater understanding of the world, as opposed to mere recording of surface details and forms. Paul Caponigro has taught throughout the world, and his work is represented in most major museums. In addition, he has received two Guggenheim fellowships and is included in most history of photography books. Like many photographers, music has been a major force in Paul's life, and he remains a dedicated pianist.

Marion Patterson (1933 -): A native of San Francisco, Marion Patterson has been involved in photography since 1956, when she began studies at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) with such luminaries as Dorothea Lange and Minor White. From 1958 to 1961, she worked for Virginia and Ansel Adams in Yosemite, and has remained closely associated with the Adams family since then. From 1961-1964, she was assistant to the Photography Editor of Sunset Magazine. While at Sunset, she prepared her first major exhibit, which was shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1965. Living for a year in Oaxaca, Mexico, resulted in another one-woman exhibit at the Oakland Museum in 1966. In 1968, she began teaching at Foothill and De Anza Colleges, later becoming chair of the Foothill photography program. Her photographs have been widely published, and exhibited nationally and in Mexico, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. Her monograph of 57 photographs, "Grains of Sand," was published by Stanford Press in 2002.

Jerry Uelsmann (1934 -): Jerry Uelsmann was born in Detroit in 1934, and was trained at the Rochester Institute of Technology and Indiana University. In 1967, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 1972, was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. His work is widely collected and is represented in most major museums internationally. In addition, he has published many books and is one of the most sought-after workshop instructors working today. He recently retired from teaching at the University of Gainesville, where he had taught since 1960, and was a research professor since 1974. He now concentrates his time on creating new images, lecturing about his work, and recently completed work on his new book, due out in September of 2005, titled "New Realities." Jerry lives in Gainesville, Florida, with his wife, artist Maggie Taylor.

John Sexton (1953 -): John Sexton was born in 1953, in Maywood, California, and is one of the most collected photographers working today. For John, the "decisive moment" in his career happened in 1969, when he first watched a print develop in a friend's darkroom. A week later, he had his own enlarger, and has pursued his passion for photography ever since. Sexton served as photographic assistant and technical consultant to Ansel Adams from 1979

until 1984. Since 1974, Sexton has taught hundreds of workshops throughout the United States and abroad. His finely crafted large format photographs have appeared in many publications, and have been featured in exhibitions throughout the world. John has published three award-winning books; *Quiet Light, Listen to the Trees*, and, most recently, *Places of Power*. He is currently working on a retrospective monograph, featuring images from his thirty-five year career in photography, which will be published in the fall of 2006.

Alan Ross (1948-): Perhaps no other photographer is more closely associated with the work and techniques of Ansel Adams than Alan Ross. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1971, Alan began his career as an apprentice in the M. Halberstadt studio in San Francisco. In 1974, Alan became the principle photographic assistant to Ansel Adams, where he worked closely with the master photographer until 1979. Since 1975, Alan has printed the Ansel Adams Special Edition Photographs, a program Ansel started in the 1950's. Alan has printed in excess of 80,000 images from Ansel's original negatives. Alan continues to teach workshops across the country, and has taught for the Ansel Adams Gallery, University of California Extension, RIT, The Friends of Photography, and Ilford Photographic. His personal work is widely exhibited and collected internationally.

Ron Rosenstock (1943 -): Born in Monticello, New York in 1943, Ron Rosenstock earned his AA from Boston University (1968) and his MA in Photography from Goddard College (1977). From 1967 to 1973, Ron studied with Minor White, and had private studies with Paul Caponigro. Ron is recently retired from the faculty of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and now devotes his time to leading photography workshops worldwide and contributing articles to View Camera Magazine. He has exhibited his work in over seventy-five one-man shows, and is represented in many museum and private collections internationally. In addition, Ron has three books of his work in publication.

Ted Orland (1941 -): Ted Orland attended the Ansel Adams Summer Yosemite Workshop as a student in 1966, and then returned as an Instructor at those same workshops for the next fifteen years. During the 1970's, he worked as Ansel's assistant and printer of his Yosemite Special Edition Photographs. In 2001, Ted was commissioned by the Adams family and the Yosemite National Park Museum to curate the major Centennial Exhibition of Ansel Adams' life and work. Today, Ted leads a typical artist's life of economic levitation, pursuing parallel careers in teaching, writing, and photography. He is co-author (with David Bayles) of the best-selling book, "Art & Fear," and is finishing a new book -- "The View From The Studio Door" -- for publication (hopefully!) in 2006. Ted also teaches digital photography at a local community college, and photographs prolifically with his favorite camera, a plastic Holga. The Ansel Adams Gallery represents Ted's artwork.

George DeWolfe (): George DeWolfe has been a photographer since 1964. He studied with Ansel Adams and Minor White in the 1970's, and holds an MFA in Photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology. George has published widely, most notably "At Home In The Wild, on New Hampshire's White Mountains," edited by David Brower. He has had numerous one-man and group exhibitions, is in several permanent collections, and is currently Senior Editor for View Camera and Camera Arts, and consultant to Epson, Adobe, and Polaroid. He teaches The Digital Fine Print Workshop and Contemplative Photography throughout the United States.

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Contributors Websites:

www.alanrossphotography.com

www.johnsexton.com

www.tedorland.com

www.georgedewolfe.com

www.uelsmann.net

www.ronrosenstock.com

www.marionpattersonphotographer.com

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