



“An initial difficulty faced by most photographers is viewing a full-color subject and ‘seeing’ it as a print in values of gray.”
–Ansel Adams – *The Camera*, 1980

With this quote, Adams summarizes one of the challenges a photographer faces when looking at a subject through the camera and learning to visualize a final black-and-white print. Although this ultimately involves understanding the controls and characteristics of film, exposure, development, and printing, the process begins when the photographer imagines their interpretation of the scene, making decisions about how the image should feel, and how different tones relate to one another. In this image of the Ranchos de Taos church, Adams created his own interpretation of the church’s warm adobe walls, shadows, and sky to match how the location felt to him.

Put on your photographer’s hat and see if you can visualize an image in tones of gray! A photographer like Ansel Adams would use film and gelatin silver printing paper, but you can give this a try using drawing pencils.

Below is an image of the New Mexico Museum of Art in color. There are also two line drawings based on this image. With the first line drawing, try to recreate the color image as faithfully as you can using shades of gray. Before you begin, take a moment to really look at the color image:

- What is the brightest part of the image?
- What is the darkest? What are the relationships between adjacent tones?
- How much darker is part of a wall in shadow compared to the parts that are in the sun?
- How much darker is the blue of the sky compared to the walls of the museum?



Top image: Ansel Adams, *Church at Ranchos de Taos*, circa 1929-30, gelatin silver print. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Museum acquisition, 1981 (1981.27). © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust



Terms:

- **Pictorialism** (from Britannica) is “an approach to photography that emphasizes beauty of subject matter, tonality, and composition rather than the documentation of reality.”
- **Modern Photography** refers generally to twentieth-century photography’s move away from the techniques and look of painting.
- Formed in 1932, **Group f/64** adopted its name from smallest lens aperture, or opening, found on camera lenses of the time. This setting produced the sharpest images and marked a break from the softer focus photographs of pictorialism. Creating previsualized images using film exposure and development were favored over manipulation of the image through cropping or darkroom printing techniques.

Questions for further reflection:

1. What do Adams’s early portraits have in common?
2. Adams claimed that “the most effective photographic portrait is one that reveals the basic character of a subject in a state of repose (i.e., rest, sleep, or tranquility).” What do you think this means? Do you agree with him? What do these portraits reveal to you?
3. How does the difference in size between the two *Moonrise* prints affect your experience of the works?

Suggested At-Home Activity

Choose a photo from your phone or other device (or take a new photo) and use your phone’s editing program to create two different versions of your photo. We suggest trying to emphasize different elements in each version. How do these images feel different from the original? Has their meaning to you changed? What changes did you make to the image that made the image feel or mean something different?

Images from top to bottom: Ansel Adams, *Pine Cone and Eucalyptus Leaves*, San Francisco, California, 1932, gelatin silver print. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Margaret McKittrick, 1968 (2228.23PH). © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

Ansel Adams, *Leaves, Stump, Frost*, Yosemite National Park, California, circa 1931, gelatin silver print. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Margaret McKittrick, 1968 (2229.23PH). © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

Ansel Adams, *Factory Building*, San Francisco, 1932, gelatin silver print. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Margaret McKittrick, 1968 (2226.23PH). © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

Ansel Adams, *Annette Rosenshine*, 1932, gelatin silver print. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Margaret McKittrick, 1968 (2225.23PH). © The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

