

Feature Article

HOW ANSEL ADAMS' PRINTS WENT FROM \$150 EACH TO OVER \$600,000!

Contributed by Ken Timm

In 1970, 11x14 prints by Ansel Adams (1902-1984) were retailing at \$150. If one purchased a 16x20 print of *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* (aka "Moonrise") at an Art Gallery it would cost \$200, and because most galleries get a 40% discount, the maker would receive \$120. *Moonrise* generally cost more because it was the most popular and difficult to print (the foreground was underexposed and clouds were overexposed).

At that time the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite was still called "Best's Studio" (acquired in 1935 when his wife, Virginia Best, inherited it from her artist father) and Ansel needed help managing it. He hired William Turnage from Yale who later also became his business manager and suggested he raise his print prices to \$250. Ansel feared he might lose sales but agreed to the increase.

In 1971, Lee Witkin's Gallery in Washington, D.C. was marketing Ansel's work and suggested another dealer, Harry Lunn might do the same. Lunn's Gallery exhibited ten of Ansel's prints in January, 1971 and sold \$10,000 worth of prints that month. Turnage suggested hiring Alan Ross, a top darkroom assistant, to help with printmaking and an editor to help with his books.

By 1973 single prints were selling for \$350. Prices were raised to \$500 September, 1974 but Ansel, then 72, was becoming weary of so much time in the darkroom repeatedly printing the same negatives and wished to work on other projects. In late 1974 he met with Turnage and Ted Orland (his current darkroom assistant) and together they decide he should simply stop. To give individuals and dealers a

last opportunity to make purchases they announced that beginning September, 1975 prices would go from \$500 to \$800 (and \$1200 for *Moonrise*) but they would stop taking orders December 31, 1975. The 1974 price of \$500 (less 40% = \$300 for dealers) looked great to Harry Lunn so he ordered at least 1000. Ansel expected less than 1000 orders total by the end of 1975 but he received over 3000. It took three years to fill all those orders.

Although Adams had made statements earlier that he didn't like the idea of "limited editions" because it created false rarities, he found himself in that position and the dealers quickly realized they were in charge of the prices and could control the flow of prints as well. By April, 1977 dealers' print prices were \$1500 each, then \$1800 in August, 1977, \$2500 in 1978, and \$8000 in 1979. Ansel only made his agreed-upon \$300 per print to the dealers, but the volume of sales still made him a very rich man.

In 2006 a single Ansel Adams print sold for \$609,600 at Sotheby's New York auction.

Sources of Information:

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