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Ansel Adams prints found at UC Berkeley

ART Professor finds prints from book commissioned in '64

By **Sam Whiting** Updated 4:19 pm, Monday, October 1, 2012



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Dance Professor Catherine Cole discovered 605 signed prints by Ansel Adams in a box in the Bancroft Library.

In 1964, University of California President Clark Kerr hired Ansel Adams to photograph the UC system. What the visionary Kerr had in mind was an elegant and oversize table book to celebrate the centennial of the university, in '68. What Kerr did not have in mind was that Gov. Ronald Reagan would fire him before the celebration could begin.

The picture book came and went quietly and would have ended up in obscurity if a theater and dance professor named Catherine Cole had not been nosing through documents that have nothing to do with the classes she teaches in performance art.

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"I kept seeing the name Ansel Adams and thought 'what the heck is he doing all over the UC archives,' " says Cole, who followed this lead to the Bancroft Library, where 605 signed fine prints by Adams sat in a box, among the university's rare collections.

Cole got those pictures out of the box and onto a wall and now 50 of the prints are on display at the Bancroft Library Gallery. The new exhibition hall, one door west of Sather Tower (the Campanile), is free and open to the public during regular school hours, and this Saturday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., as part of the Homecoming hoopla.

Other than a touring show organized by UC Irvine in 1991, most of these vintage Adams prints have not been exhibited before. It is worth a stop just to see the brilliant black-and-whites of the Cal Band going through Sather Gate, horns glistening, en route to a football game, and Memorial Stadium emptying out after one. It is also worth it if you went to any other UC campus, because Adams covered all nine, including UC Santa Cruz when it was just a pile of old boards from a barn.

"This is an extraordinary resource that has been buried like a time capsule," says Cole, 49, who discovered the prints while doing independent research on the California Master Plan for Higher Education. "I really felt frustrated that at the current moment there aren't horizons, at the university. There isn't long-range vision."

If you are looking for horizon and vision, Ansel Adams is a good place to start. The monograph, titled "Fiat Lux," after the UC motto "Let there be Light," could also describe Adams' style. The book opens with a shot titled "West From the Big C," taken from the hillside behind Bowles Hall, the system's oldest dormitory, looking west to the horizon through the Golden Gate.

Among the ephemera on display is a picture Adams took on campus in 1954, for a book called "The Pageant of History and the Panorama of Today in Northern California." This book and maybe this picture is what gave Kerr the idea for a similar book on the UC system. The letter of understanding for the project, dated Oct. 21, 1964, enlists Adams and writer Nancy Newhall to deliver the manuscript, for a fee of \$75,000, that included their expenses.

Kerr got his money's worth. Adams, who died in 1984 at age 82, spent three years hauling his gear to outstations up and down the state, from the Radio Astronomy Observatory at Hat Creek, near Mount Lassen, to the Desert Research Center in the Coachella Valley, Riverside County.

An intriguing juxtaposition is his re-creation of the 1954 image of Wheeler Hall, taken from the same angle, in October 1966. In between, the Lawrence laboratory complex has popped up in the background, the Free Speech Movement in the foreground. Three months later Kerr was exiled back to academia where he quietly finished his career, as a labor economist.

But he's getting his due, in two books released over the summer. One is "Subversives: The FBI's War on Student Radicals, and Reagan's Rise to Power," by Seth Rosenfeld. The other is a new edition of "Fiat Lux: the University of California," which Cole persuaded the administration to issue to every faculty member and incoming student at UC Berkeley. That means 11,000 new copies are out there, more than the original print run of 10,000.

Funded by private donation, "Fiat Lux" is a gift, compliments of the Board of Regents, in exchange for a tuition check in the amount of \$5,610 for the fall semester. Unless the University of California Press adds a commercial run, the only way to see it is to come to the Bancroft, find a freshman, or search the used bookstores next to campus.

"There is probably a resale market," Cole says.

Fiat Lux Redux: Ansel Adams and Clark Kerr: Through Feb. 28 at the Bancroft Library Gallery on the UC Berkeley campus. Free. (510) 642-3782. bancroft.berkeley.edu

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