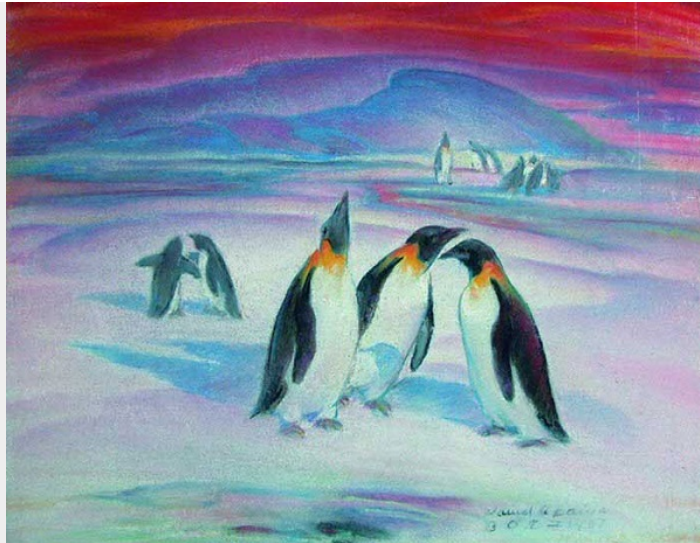


ARMENIAN PAINTER IN...ANTARCTICA

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By Artsvi Bakhchinyan, Yerevan, 28 June 2023

It's a well-known fact that Armenians are found everywhere... even the *ice-covered* and deserted *Antarctica had Armenian visitors from time to time.*

The first Armenian to appear in Antarctica was artist and graphic designer David Abbey Paige (1901-1979) of the United States. I read his name for the first time in an article titled "An Armenian in South Pole," published in the Armenian "Aras" newspaper of Bucharest (February 2, 1934). My later searches resulted in further information, although so far I have not succeeded in finding Paige's photographs. Only in one of his exhibition's poster (see photo) we see his portrait.

Sources mention that Paige was born on May 15, 1901 to Armenian parents in the Anatolian region of Ottoman Empire, that is, in Western Armenia. In 1911 he arrived in the United States to live with his uncle in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. In 1919 David taught classes at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and from 1923-1930 worked as commercial artist and interior designer in New York City. He was deeply interested in the nature depiction, having received several commissions to paint nature-based murals.

In 1930 Paige was commissioned by the Luna Amusement Company to paint the world's largest cyclorama for Luna Park in New York's Coney Island. The subject was the Antarctica expedition base camp of explorer Admiral Richard Byrd (1888-1957) who led five expeditions to the continent from 1928 to 1956. The explorer's accomplishments attracted extensive media attention, capturing the public's imagination. To complete his "Panorama of the Antarctic," Paige contacted crew members, studied expedition accounts, and conducted scientific research. According to Ohio State University's official site, *"The Byrd expedition members were not impressed by Paige's preliminary sketches and made it clear that they would not officially sanction the cyclorama, nor would they have any official connection to it. Paige would not be dissuaded, and continued his interest in depicting the "color in Antarctica." After successful completion of the Coney Island cyclorama, he continued to complete paintings of Antarctica, using the information he gained from discussions with various expedition members, as well as data gathered from his study of various meteorological and scientific works. He completed 13 such canvases, and invited members of the expedition to come and view his work. As they did so, he made a charcoal sketch of each man. His work impressed the members of the expedition. In a letter to Paige, Larry Gould stated that, "I would not have believed that anyone who had not been in the Polar regions could have so effectively caught those opalescent blues and kindred colors as you have... your work has that rare charm of being thoroughly authentic as well as genuinely artistic." Gould was so impressed, in fact, that he included two of the paintings in his book, Cold (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1931), stating in the preface, "Because words are such an inadequate medium for conveying expressions of color, and because David Paige has so aptly caught certain phases of Antarctic colors on his canvases, I am grateful for his friendly interest"* (<https://library.osu.edu/site/antarcticcolours/exhibit-overview/>).

The Magic of Antarctic Colours



David Abbey Paige
Artist of the
Byrd Antarctic Expedition 1933-1935

In 1931-1932 Paige traveled and painted in 28 countries in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In 1933, he applied for the position of expedition artist for Byrd's Second Antarctic Expedition. Byrd first replied that there would be no room for an artist, although he would have liked to have taken one.

Paige continued to pursue his dream of becoming the expedition artist by lobbying several members of the crew and garnering letters of recommendation from the several important personalities of the time. Finally, in October 1933, he became the "Official Artist on the Scientific Staff for Color Research" on Second Byrd Expedition to Antarctica (1933-1935). In Antarctica Paige completed pastels of various sizes and about 300 pencil drawings and eight portraits in charcoal of expedition members.

Upon his return to the US, he edited Byrd's expedition films at Republic Studios in Hollywood and lectured widely on the expedition. In 1937-1938 Paige exhibited his Antarctic sketches, paintings, and pastels in several California galleries. His collection was destined for the Smithsonian.

In 1942 Paige joined the US Army Signal Corps and trained cameramen in Louisiana. In 1943 he worked as a scenic artist for Hollywood studios. From 1947 to 1970 he was a cinematographer for major motion picture studios in Hollywood, although the Internet Movie Database does not provide his name in any film credits.

In 1953 Paige married Lucille Johnson. They had a son (David A. Paige Jr., born in 1957) and daughter Pamela, born in 1958. Paige died on August 9, 1979 in Beverly Hills.

In 1985, the Ohio State University acquired the Papers of Admiral Richard E. Byrd among which there are sixty of Paige's 100 pastel drawings. In 2004, the German Maritime Museum and the Alfred Wegener Institute in Bremerhaven, exhibited Paige's pastels for the first time since the 1930s under the title "The Magic of Antarctic Colors: David Abbey Paige." A book was written on the occasion by Reinhard A. Krause and Lars U. Scholl. In April-June of 2012 an exhibition with the same title was organized at Fitchburg Art Museum in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, the city Paige settled after immigrating from Armenia.

I would be happy if Paige's heirs contact me (artsvi@yahoo.com) for further studies of this unusual artist.

Photo in teaser: *David Abbey Paige - "Group of Penguins", 1934 - 33.2 x 37.8 cm, courtesy the Ohio State University Libraries, at the Fitchburg Art Museum in "The Magic of Antarctica Colors".*

There are no comments yet.