

58th IAA HISTORY OF ASTRONAUTICS SYMPOSIUM (E4)
Memoirs & Organisational Histories (1)

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PAINTING APOLLO: ASTRONAUT-ARTIST ALAN BEAN'S FOOTPRINTS IN MOONDUST

Abstract

During the Space Age, eyewitness testimony and, with it, “evidentia” became a crucial category for the media portrayal of US space travel. Such evidence was provided by written reports, photographs, and the exhibition of “contact relics” such as Malcom Scott Carpenter’s Mercury space capsule at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York. As I would like to demonstrate in my contribution, Alan Bean’s biographical and autobiographical memoirs occupy a special position among retrospective accounts of space travel: Following his active career as an astronaut, Bean processed his own experience, his own memories and thoughts, in a large number of paintings to which he devoted himself from the 1980s until his death in 2018.

Time and again, the eyewitness accounts of active astronauts has become significant in terms of visual art. William Anders’ photograph Earthrise, taken on the Apollo 8 mission in 1968, became world-famous precisely because the shot was not included in the mission protocol at all, lending it a somewhat spontaneous authenticity. By contrast, the paintings by Alan Bean, who was the fourth man on the moon to steer the Apollo 12 mission’s shuttle and thus unwittingly installed Meyer’s Moon Museum are practically unknown to art history. After his active astronaut career in the 1980s, he staged himself as well as other astronauts on the moon, working with replicas of his astronaut shoes, moon dust and tools from the moon expedition in the paint material. In this way, Bean aligned the creative process of his paintings with his own journey to the moon, while their reception is determined by this dual authenticity, namely that of the painter-astronaut as well as that of the material itself. The partly extraterrestrial materiality of the works and the imprints of the astronaut’s shoes attest to the credibility of the depictions, which are in no way inferior to the patriotism of early biographies and autobiographies. Against this backdrop, Bean’s Apollo paintings prove to be (auto)biographical memoirs in acrylic, oil, and moon dust.