



Alan Bean at an exhibition of his work at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC in 2009.

## SPACE

# The artist who walked on the Moon: Alan Bean

Richard Taylor pays tribute to the Apollo astronaut who beautifully meshed science and art.

In November 1969, when I was six years old, my father pointed to the Moon and told me that a man was walking on it. I looked up and wondered what he was doing in that remote, crater-riddled land. I later learned that his name was Alan Bean, and that he was the fourth of only 12 humans so far to walk on another world. Even in that select group, he was unique: he was the only one to record what he saw on canvas and in paint. In May, he died at the age of 86.

As my interest in space travel grew, I read about what led Bean to his Apollo 12 Moon landing. Earning an aeronautical-engineering degree from the University of Texas at Austin in 1955, he soon achieved his childhood dream of becoming a Navy test pilot. His instructor was Pete Conrad, later a fellow member of the Apollo 12 mission and Moon-walker, who became his closest friend. Inspired by the “sights, sounds and smells of high performance flying machines”, as Bean put it, they hatched their plan to ride the biggest flying machine of them all.

Standing 110 metres tall, the Saturn V remains the most powerful rocket ever flown. Four months before the Apollo 12 launch, one of these behemoths had carried Neil Armstrong and his crew to the first Moon landing. But whereas Armstrong took off on a sweltering summer's day, Bean, Conrad

and fellow astronaut Richard Gordon sat on their rocket engulfed by a winter thunderstorm. Thirty-six seconds into their launch, the unthinkable happened. The Saturn V was struck by lightning — twice. “I looked up at the display that had all of the caution lights and there were more on than I'd ever seen in my life,” Bean recalled. Seconds away from aborting the mission, he managed to reboot the affected systems. The astronauts' nervous laughter could be heard all the way to orbit.

Previous astronauts behaved with reserve. Bean gave a glimpse of the more human side of being a space explorer. Armstrong commenced his historic landing with a deadpan “See you later”, descending to the Moon's surface in tension-building silence. Bean sounded like an excited tourist. His commentary seemed to touch on whatever popped into his mind: from the view (“Looks good out there, babe, looks good”) to the relief of seeing his landing spot in the Ocean of Storms (“There's that crater right where it's supposed to be”), to complementing Conrad on his flying skills (“You're beautiful”).

Once Bean had ignited my six-year-old imagination, I was on my way to the life scientific. I drew make-believe planets, the real Solar System, spaceships and alien cities — even how aliens might play cricket without gravity. By 1984, close to finishing my physics

degree, I was — like him — grappling with competing desires to pursue science and art.

Meanwhile, the world was celebrating the 15th anniversary of the first Moon landing. Television screens were flooded with Apollo astronauts reminiscing. Seeing the blue Earth hanging like an oasis in the inky darkness filled many of them with a deep spiritual connection to the Universe. Bean, more down-to-Earth, appreciated all that the Moon lacked. “Since that time I have not complained about the weather a single time... I've not complained about traffic,” he said. “When I got back home, I'd go down to shopping centres and... just watch the people go by and think, ‘Boy, we're lucky to be here.’”

Bean's scientific legacy is fascinating. He brought back a Moon rock known as KREEP (potassium, rare-earth elements, phosphorus). Its composition led to a new model of lunar formation: the giant-impact hypothesis. Still being refined by research, this pictures the Moon forming in collisions between Earth and one or more planet-sized objects.

Bean flew once more for NASA, in 1973: he spent a record-breaking 59 days orbiting Earth as commander of the space-station mission Skylab 3. In 1981, he left the agency to work out how best to tell his story. How could he describe what it was like to hurtle home at 40,000 kilometres per hour, or to place his thumb in front of Earth and block from view everything he knew? He found his answer in painting. He mixed Moon dust into his acrylics, and used his Apollo hammer and boots to, in his words, “sculpt a textured surface unique in all of art history”. (Many of Bean's works are reproduced in his 2009 book *Painting Apollo: First Artist on Another World*.)

Bean's art is important in other ways. Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders's stunning photograph *Earthrise*, taken from lunar orbit, is iconic. But Bean's art goes further: it adds emotion to its extraordinary scenes. Self-described as one of the more fearful astronauts, he was aware that death was always near. That comes through in his paintings. Whether we see astronauts deploying equipment, the Service Module flying across the lunar surface, or Earth peeking above the horizon, there's a feeling of being far from home — in both distance and difficulty. The loneliness in the works reminds me of Frank Hurley's photographs of Ernest Shackleton's epic 1914–17 journey to the Antarctic.

Above all, Bean's paintings serve as an antidote to that foolish idea that emerged in the 1980s: that our brains are wired to be either artistic or scientific. Inspired by his example, I went on to be a professor of both art and science. He showed that it was a simple matter. You just follow your dreams. ■

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