

## The Arts in Antarctica

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For almost two hundred years nearly all Antarctic activities have had a scientific focus, including economic and political activities. However during this time artists of many disciplines have made a steady and significant contribution to our understanding of life on the ice with their unique insights and willingness to raise public awareness of scientific issues. Many of these artists have been amateurs, heading south in other capacities, but in later years many have been professional artists. What follows highlights some of their thoughts on their experience and how it affected their work.

The history of Antarctic arts starts with a mysterious, mythical continent that excited the imagination of writers and painters, through photographs and paintings charting the 'heroic' quests for sovereignty and scientific knowledge, and finally to the work of professional artists.

### Antarctica begins in the mind

Antarctic artists are of two types - those who have been there and those that have not. It could be expected that an observer of Antarctic art would be readily able to tell to which group the artist belonged, but this is not the case. In part this is because the well documented experiences, exploits, and expeditions of even the earliest Antarctic explorers meant dramatic impressions of the frozen continent quickly became well known. In this respect both amateur artists and professional scientists were important in portraying Antarctica - as Apsley Cherry-Garrard (Terra Nova Expedition) stated:

*'... everyone who has been through such an extraordinary experience has much to say, and ought to say it if he has any faculty that way...'*

### Music in Antarctica

To accompany the striking, cold images of Antarctica, in stills and movies, equally dramatic music was composed, for example

Ralph Vaughan Williams' Symphony No.7 Sinfonia Antarctica for Scott of the Antarctic (1948) which used an eerie, wailing female chorus, like sirens luring sailors to their doom.

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies Antarctic Symphony No.8 which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the film Scott of the Antarctic.

### Drawing in Antarctica

Many early Antarctic images are drawings made by explorers and scientists. Important amongst these are those of Dr Edward Wilson who was Scott's chief scientist. However Wilson was an excellent artist with a keen eye for detail and overcame the problem of painting with water colours in Antarctica by sketching the outlines then creating a 'painting-by-numbers' schema so he could complete them later, either back in the hut or in England.

Wilson also edited The Polar Times, which featured cartoon drawings, poems, songs and articles, both serious and humorous, allowing the 'amateur artists' of the expedition to express themselves.



*Gustave Dore's bleak Antarctic illustration for The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1878)*

Other examples include

- Apsley Cherry-Garrard (Terra Nova Expedition)
- Herbert Swire (Challenger Expedition)
- George Marston (Shackleton's expedition)
- Charles Royds (Scott's first expedition)
- John Hamilton (HMS Endurance)

### Photography in Antarctica

Antarctica is most widely portrayed using photography and especially through the work of Herbert Ponting (Scott's Terra Nova Expedition) and Frank Hurley (Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition). It is their images that truly capture the spirit of the Heroic Age, with their stark use of black and white that adds pathos, depth and human drama through an impassive and almost fatalistic lens. Poet Chris Orsman explains this perfectly in his lines:

*'This early footage is played hard/ with a graceful optimism./ Men smile, stamp, breathe/into their permanent images,/ As well as heightening the 'moment-in-time' aspect, the black and white images provide a clarity and crispness that in an instant brings back to anybody that has lived in a cold climate – but particularly Antarctica – that brutal sense of cold.'*

### The 'Artists in Antarctica' programme

Today several countries support artistic visits to Antarctica and consequently a significant body of Antarctic-related art exists. Such programmes are 'an admirable example of how arts, science and the environment can come together.'

New Zealand in particular has supported sending artists to Antarctica since 1957 with Peter McIntyre and continuing in 1970 with Maurice Conly, an official artist with the RNZAF. Others followed but it was not until 1997 that an official programme was put in place, based on a:

*'promotion of understanding and appreciation of the values of Antarctica, in particular its scientific, aesthetic and wilderness values, through... the contribution of writers, artists and musicians'*

## Recent Antarctic artists

In 1997 Antarctica NZ, with the support of Creative NZ created a programme that encouraged New Zealand artists in all disciplines to

*'explore Antarctica through their work, thus increasing New Zealanders' understanding of Antarctica's value and global importance'*

From this initiative each year two to three artists head south, ranging from visual artists (painters, ceramicists, photographers, sculptors, choreographers, jewelers, designers) through to writers and composers, with each artist awarded the title of Antarctic Arts Fellow. The programme ran for 10 years and is currently replaced by an 'invited artist' scheme whereby each year one or two artists and writers travel to Antarctica for specific projects as honorary Antarctic Arts Fellows. For many, the experience has been life-changing, with some finding it almost spiritual, while for others it meant a connection – or reconnection, with their own beliefs and work.

The value to the artists is inestimable, but the logistics are difficult so programmes are often under scrutiny, especially regards the financial costs. In such a debate perhaps the strongest words come from the artists themselves, such as writer Owen Marshall who summed up the feelings of many Antarctic artists, saying:

*'How fortunate I am to have been given the opportunity to make the trip. In time, the things of significance will become clear as the present swirl of impressions settles'*

## An Artist's Perspective

### Kathryn Madill, painter:

*"Antarctica is what you make it, that you take your ideas and expectations down with you, and make of it what you will. I found that gigantic indifference thrilling – it was as if everything in my head was swept clean – scoured like the stones in the Dry Valleys"*

### Nigel Brown, painter:

*"In Antarctica I felt the curve of the earth, our fragile reliance on the sun, on temperature, on supplies, as never before".*

### Margaret Mahy, author

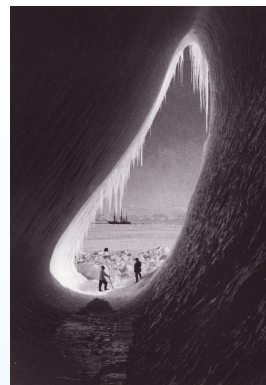
*"Visiting the Antarctic is the closest I will ever get to being on another planet. It is not a natural place for humans to be".*

### Bernadette Hall, poet

*"I felt like a survivor ... I had walked right outside my usual self, back to something like the heroine all girls are at about age nine".*

### Bronwyn Judge, dancer

*"... no wind, no bird song, no water dripping, no smells, no life ... absolute stillness".*



*Herbert Ponting's famous image of the Terra Nova, seen through an ice cave entrance.*

### Phil Dadson, composer

*"...what an absolute miniscule remote and insignificant dot we are on our planet"*

### Craig Potton, photographer

*"[Antarctica is] at times anxious and at times peacefully resolute"*

## Practical activity: The Arts in Antarctica.

### Introduction

Even before its discovery the Arts expressed a fascination for the possibility of a great southern land.

This fascination continues today, with artistic expression relating to the continent being actively encouraged through government funding.

### What to do

Using a media (sound, light, language, music, movement etc) and medium (materials) of your choice, express what you know or feel is important about Antarctic. The inspiration for choice may come from these pages or from other sources.

### Relevance

- No longer is Antarctic a continent for solely scientific research or sleeping politics.
- Many Antarcticans, both past and present, are artistically skilled.



*Clare Plug. Ice Crack 2 2008.  
Textile artwork*

Adapted from material by Dr Patrick Shepherd, University of Canterbury.

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