

Saroyan in Black and White

By Felicia Cousart Matlosz / The Fresno Bee / January 20, 2008

For all his fame as a writer, William Saroyan also cut a compelling figure on film. In photographs, to be exact.

The dashing handsome face of his youthful days aged into the countenance that many Fresnoans remember from the writer's later years in his native city. The longish hair. The drooping, walruslike mustache. The long, wide sideburns. The deep, piercing eyes. The serious look of an artist.

It's that familiarity that makes a photo exhibit of Saroyan in Armenia an interesting insightful slice of the writer's life. The 40-plus black-and-white photos, displayed on the first and second floors at City Hall, were taken by Boghos Boghossian.

They are from 1976 and 1978, when Saroyan visited his ancestors' homeland. Boghossian, an award-winning photographer who was born and lives in Armenia, went with him everywhere. Saroyan once wrote to Boghossian:

"For my friend, one of the great poets of the camera in the world."

But more than just photographs, this exhibit -- called "Saroyan As Captured Through the Lens of Boghos Boghossian" -- melds the two Saroyan treks with the writer's own words.

The curator of this display is Varoujan Der Simonian, who enjoys photography as a hobby. He is president of the Armenian Museum of Fresno and is executive director of the Armenian Technology Group, a Fresno-based nonprofit group that provides support for Armenian farmers.

Both organizations are presenting this exhibit, one of many events marking the centennial year of Saroyan's birth in Fresno. (Art exhibits on City Hall's first and second floors are coordinated by the Fresno Arts Council.)

What does Der Simonian hope that visitors take away from this show?

"The human personality of Saroyan, his character," Der Simonian says. "While he is in a crowd or away from Fresno, he is able to recall moments of his life that have touched him and that he has written stories of.

It's the sensitivity of the man, which probably has not been so clear."

On the first floor, for example, is a page of short excerpts from the story "Return to the Pomegranate Trees." Saroyan writes about the pomegranate trees that a relative planted near Fresno, and that he helped tend as young teenager in 1919 and 1920.

Twenty-five years later, he takes his 5-year-old son Aram for a drive and searches for the trees. They are gone: "The whole place was taken over again by the little burrowing animals, the horned toads, and the jack rabbits."

The two drive to Sanger, where Saroyan shows Aram a pomegranate tree and hands him a fruit that's not quite ripe. They return to San Francisco, and Aram keeps the small fruit. More than a month later, they visit Fresno, and Aram wants to drive out to the land where his father tended pomegranate trees. Once there, the boy glances around and wordlessly and carefully places the fruit on the ground.

Now look at the photo, one of Der Simonian's favorites in this show, taken in 1976. Saroyan, dressed in a light-colored jacket and a dark shirt, is looking upward, his left hand holding a small pomegranate. "Look at his eyes. His mind is not there," Der Simonian says. "It's sad. It's beautiful. ... You can see the feelings in his eyes. People, hopefully, can relate to it."

Another photo shows a completely different side of Saroyan. Der Simonian titled it "Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All." The 1978 shot shows a smiling Saroyan between two other authors, his arms around their shoulders, his feet gleefully lifted off the ground.

Der Simonian says the exhibit will travel to other parts of the state after Fresno.

The exhibit came about when Der Simonian and Boghossian met last summer. Der Simonian knew of Boghossian and his work and had been introduced to him through mutual friends. When Der Simonian saw the extent of Boghossian's photos of the Fresno writer, Der Simonian asked whether he could put together a show. The photographer agreed and also approved the approach of how each shot would be titled.

The pictures not only present contemplative photos of the writer but also document how he was followed like a rock star by crowds of college students and other admirers.

Larry Balakian, chairman of the William Saroyan Centennial Committee, says it's interesting how Saroyan is seen interacting with not just writers but other artists in these photos, taken only a few years before his death in 1981. He also says the comments he's heard about the exhibit have been "absolutely tremendous."

"It certainly takes you back to that period," Balakian says. "It makes you feel like you're there."

The reporter can be reached at fmatsz@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6428

MORE INFORMATION

If you go

What: "Saroyan As Captured Through the Lens of Boghos Boghossian"

Where: Fresno City Hall, Tulare and P streets

When: Through Jan. 31, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost: Free

Details: (559) 243-5880

Visit: www.SaroyanCentennial.org