

Arthur Pinajian: No Turning Back

Peter Hastings Falk

“Let’s throw away the oars and see what we can do on our own.”

*“If realism has lasted all these centuries, so will abstraction for the next centuries,
and I am now able to work in both directions at the same time.”*

— Arthur Pinajian

Starting in the 1890s and lasting to the late 1920s, more than 100,000 Armenian Christians fled to America as the result of persecution by Turkish Muslims. The worst horror began in 1915, with a methodically launched genocide that claimed more than one million lives. Arthur Pinajian was the child of two of these survivors. His parents had arrived in Union City (then called West Hoboken), New Jersey, around 1910, and settled in its growing Armenian community. With little money but great hopes for making a new life in America, they found sanctuary in a strong community centered around the state’s only Armenian church, Union City’s Armenian Apostolic Church of the Holy Cross. It was here that his father (Hagop) first met his mother (Vartanoosh), and where they were soon married. Arthur was born on March 28, 1914. His family called him by his Armenian name, Ashod, but his American nickname was Archie. His sister, Armen, was born in 1920.

Pinajian’s father worked for a drycleaner and his mother was skilled at embroidery, but the family remained quite poor. Fortunately, they benefited from the backing of a tightly-knit fabric of relatives who helped support them. Pinajian was a precocious boy who skipped two grades and entered high school at twelve. He possessed the insatiable urge to draw ambidextrously and was particularly inspired by Hal Foster’s [1892–1982] illustrations of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes*. Burroughs’s romantic adventure novel was published as a book in 1914. As soon as it was released in 1929 as a syndicated newspaper strip series, it became wildly popular.

By the time Pinajian graduated from high school in 1930 at age sixteen, the Great Depression was under way, grinding a relentless path through America. He was fortunate to secure a job as a clerk in a carpet company in Lower Manhattan. Every day, he took the ferry (the Lincoln Tunnel would not be completed until 1945), occupying himself by sketching the commuters. In 1932 the misery in the household of the Great Depression was exacerbated by his mother’s death. In addition, both his father and his previously supportive uncle were out of work, so he moved with his father and sister to a smaller apartment warmed only by a pot-belly stove, just a few blocks away from the Armenian church. For much of the decade, breadlines were fixtures on New York’s sidewalks while the arid Great Plains became known as the Dust Bowl. Farmers and other agricultural workers fled the plains seeking employment elsewhere but were often disappointed. This led to large camps of migrant workers. Photographers working for the Farm Security Administration captured some of the most poignant and now-iconic images, such as Arthur Rothstein’s *Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* and Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*. Despite this bleak environment, the public sought diversion at the movies, particularly in madcap comedies and gangster flicks. In 1932, at eighteen, after seeing Paul Muni in *Scarface*, Pinajian was so impressed that he started his first comic strip, “Gangsters’ Guns.” Americans found some small measure of relief in these “funnies,” which had been popular in newspapers since the turn of the century.

In that same year, while keeping his job at the carpet firm, Pinajian was hired as a freelance cartoonist by a reporter-illustrator at the *New York Daily News*, Lud Shabazian. The elder Armenian American was well known in Union City because he had worked for its local paper, *The Hudson Dispatch*. As a boy, Pinajian was certainly well aware of Shabazian's drawings of the Dempsey-Carpentier fight in Jersey City in 1921, which had been internationally billed as "the battle of the century."

At only twenty, Pinajian was promoting himself as a commercial illustrator, stamping his works, "A. Pinajian, Cartoonist-Artist, 234 19th St, West New York, N.J." One of his early series was a single-panel gag titled, "That Old Gang O'Mine," produced in 1934 for a pulp magazine in Chicago called *Sport Eye*.

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