VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM

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Public Lecture Offerings

The Pastel from Mars

In July of 1965, NASA's Mariner 4 spacecraft made a historic flyby of Mars, capturing the first photographs ever sent back to Earth from another planet. The image data was transmitted to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, where it slowly trickled out as a series of numbers on long strips of paper. The engineers at JPL, knowing it would take over 12 hours for the first image to be transmitted, didn't want to wait that long. Breathlessly awaiting the first glimpse of a planet that was still an almost total mystery to science, they stapled the numerical strips to the wall, bought a box of pastels from a local art store, and rendered the image by hand, color-by-number style. It's hard to imagine a more unexpected work of art. The first robotic image of an alien world comes into being in pastel, a medium most closely associated with eighteenth-century French portraiture. But perhaps this eccentric pastel drawing can help us look differently at both the past and future of space imaging, and imagine new ways of understanding what it means to become an interplanetary culture.

The Most Distant Art in the Universe: the Voyager Golden Record and its Images

In 1977, over a hundred images of life on Earth were translated into sound waves, engraved into a gold-plated copper phonograph record, bolted to the sides of two NASA space probes, and launched into space. They are still out there: 15 billion miles away and counting, racing through the interstellar medium beyond the edge of the Solar System. Forever free from whatever fate befalls the Earth, they are predicted to drift through the galaxy for tens of billions of years, longer again than the entire age of the universe so far. The astronomically slim hope is that someday these images might be intercepted by an alien intelligence, and that they might be seen, or sensed, again. Can we stretch our thinking about the arts and humanities to include these impossibly distant images and completely unknowable "viewers"? And what can the Golden Record teach us about what art can do on Earth?

Rethinking Space Imaging: Contemporary Art and Astrophysics

Space imaging today is dominated by jaw-dropping vistas from the Hubble, Webb, and other space telescopes. With their resemblance to photographs, these images may appear to be simply taken from the heavens, but they are in fact made with considerable creative skill. Unfortunately, they have not always received the attention from art historians that they demand and deserve. Moreover, the universe evoked by these images has tended to settle into a narrow set of stylized formats that can sometimes prevent us from perceiving some of the most astonishing implications of astrophysics. Many contemporary artists, however, are busy rebuilding our relationship to the universe by resetting assumptions about how images of space are meant to look. They are making work that is informed by a rigorous use of scientific data while also raising questions that standard science images cannot do.

Classroom Discussion Topics

Ink, Stars, and Glass: The Harvard Computers

1. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the science of astronomy was transformed by the image-gathering capabilities of dry-plate photography. But photographs of the night sky were not immediately useful after they were taken—each glass plate held an unruly sea of thousands of celestial specks that required analysis. At Harvard and other observatories, it was common to hire women (their job title was "computers") to perform that analysis and turn these photographs into usable data. This session will explore the discoveries and accomplishments of the women who worked at the Harvard College Observatory, and discuss the efforts to recognize and preserve their work today.

The Art and Science of the Moon

2. The Moon has profoundly shaped human culture, influencing calendrical, mythological, and political systems. Across cultures, it has functioned much like an art object, both material and mirage, historical and memorial, and a surface for projection and reflection that disrupts earthbound assumptions and power relations. This session explores what it means to expand the arts and humanities to include the Moon and asks how taking it seriously as both a subject and a platform for thought reshapes our understanding of planetary identity and ethical responsibility. At a moment when renewed exploration coincides with the risks of unregulated mining and militarization, the session considers how students can engage in conversations about the Moon's future and how the humanities can help prepare them to do so.