

An Examination of Art and Science in Cultural Astronomy

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My concern is with the cultural impact of the sky. The sky constitutes half our natural environment in spatial terms. In any culture which lacks artificial light, the stars and the Moon's monthly cycle are a powerful and unavoidable presence. For agricultural workers the day-time sky is the source of all weather conditions, and the Sun a determinant of time and temperature. Yet, historical and cultural studies almost completely ignores the role of the sky in human culture. In part this may be due to the demonisation of astrology by western intellectuals as a dangerous superstition. I will consider the boundaries between, and shifting definitions of, both art and science.

My presentation and paper document the emergence of the study of cultural astronomy as an attempt to counter academic neglect of the sky. Cultural astronomy encompasses disciplines from the mathematical (the measurement of astronomical alignments to the built and natural environment in archaeoastronomy, or skyscape archaeology) through to the social sciences and humanities. The study of culture includes history, anthropology and sociology, along with such sub-disciplines as the study of religions and the history of art. It is also impossible to draw boundaries between the time periods or geographical regions, and can include the sociological study of modern astronomers or astronomy in cinema or literature, or the ethics of space tourism. This presentation will argue that cultural astronomy is cross-disciplinary, and must respect and include all academic approaches in order to gain a full picture of the significance of the sky for human culture.

I will briefly present two examples. The first, on skyscape archaeology reports on a ground-breaking interdisciplinary study by colleagues at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, examining the alignment of medieval monastic churches in Wales, using a combination of precise measurement and textual support. The second, on art history, looks at the work of the Spanish painter Joan Miro, focusing on his series 'Constellations', and seeking understanding via both Miro's own writings and secondary sources in art history. A connecting methodology between both studies is phenomenology.

Overall, the presentation argues that the academic world could benefit by considering the role of the sky in culture.

