

THE *FLY ME TO THE MOON* VISIT

Inspired by the skyward gaze of Spencer Finch's *Lunar*, this galactic guide will send you moonwalking through the collection on an astronomical adventure.



GALLERY 10

Paper Moon Portraits (1910/20), artists unknown

What better way to set oneself among the stars than with a whimsical paper moon portrait? Popular during the 1910s and 1920s, paper moon portraits, like the nine collected here, feature everyday Americans seated on or standing with a crescent man-in-the-moon prop. This playful celestial backdrop lends a somewhat humorous aspect to the studio portraits, and the subjects here, while dressed in their finest, look suitably proud, happy, and silly. The pictures were originally produced as postcards at the height of the postcard craze in the United States and could have been sent to friends and family members over great distances. Today, these charming images provide a window into the common impulses of portrait photography, a central feature of the history of photography.



GALLERY 134

Dish with Mythical Bovine (Xiniu) amid Waves Viewing the Moon and Constellations (12th century), China

The cow-moon combo we're most familiar with in the West is likely that of a cow jumping over the moon, but in China from the 12th through the 14th century, the most popular lunar-loving bovine was the *xiniu*, an imaginary creature, often described as a mythical rhinoceros, who communicated with the sky. According to some legends, the animal's peculiar horn is formed while he is gazing at the moon. In other more complicated accounts, the horn elongates to a point after 1,000 years, is then ordained with white stars, and exhales a vapor that penetrates the sky; in this manner, the *xiniu* is said to communicate with the spirit and frighten fowl. Whatever the interpretation, the *xiniu* was certainly a pervasive image in the decoration of ceramics. In this gallery, the motif can be seen on two dishes from the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), including this example, as well as one from the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368).



GALLERY 152

Planispheric Astrolabe (18th century, with later additions), Iran

Not only a beautiful and intricately decorated piece of metalwork, the planispheric astrolabe was also the earliest compass to the skies. Believed to have been developed by the Iraqi astronomer al-Fazari in the 8th century, the astrolabe was used by medieval astronomers in both Europe and the Islamic world to determine the position of the Sun and other prominent stars with respect to the horizon and the meridian. Typically made of a metal—like the brass of this 18th-century Iranian example—astrolabes are composed of several parts. A base plate, called the mater, shows the celestial coordinates; a net-like map of the stars, known as the rete, overlays the mater; a straight rule, the adilade, indicates the altitude of the Sun or a given star; and several interchangeable plates, called climates, are placed between the mater and rete to show coordinate lines for different latitudes.



GALLERY 154A

***Statuette of Moon God* (c. 780–343 B.C.), Egypt**

With both a crescent and full moon comprising this statuette's ornate crown, there is little doubt that the bronze figure represents the Egyptian moon god Thoth, but it is also more than simply a moon god. According to the religion of ancient Egypt, deities could combine with each other to create composite gods. Here, aspects associated with Thoth—the lunar images and ibis head, which protrudes from the center of the crown—are integrated with the usual costume of Osiris, the god of the underworld. This includes a beard, kilt, and an uraeus, the royal asp on the front of the headdress. The dual deity's elaborate crown is further embellished with horns and a sun disk flanked by uraei who also wear sun disks on their heads. Inscribed with the name Pamu, likely the object's purchaser, the statuette would have been placed in a temple as a show of the devotee's piety.



GALLERY 174

***The Fates Gathering in the Stars* (1887) by Elihu Vedder**

This fanciful interpretation of the cosmos is adapted from one of more than 50 illustrations American artist Elihu Vedder did for Edward FitzGerald's English translation of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. An 11th-century Persian poet, mathematician, and astronomer, Khayyám was renowned in his own time for his scientific achievements; his astronomical observations led to the Jalālī calendar, more accurate than our contemporary system. Yet this skilled skywatcher only became known in the West in 1859 when FitzGerald rather freely translated his collection of quatrains, or *rubáiyát*, into a mystical treatise on the impermanence and uncertainty of life. Vedder, in turn, applied his Pre-Raphaelite style to FitzGerald's verse. Here, the three fates, set in silvery swirl of stardust, respectively spin the thread of life, fix its length, and cut it at the appropriate time, symbolizing humanity's lack of control over its own destiny. That's one way to say—it's all in the stars!



GALLERY 397

***Untitled (Hôtel de l'Etoile)* (1954) by Joseph Cornell**

Artist Joseph Cornell was a stargazer in many senses of the word. He was fascinated by the scientific aspects of the universe—becoming a regular visitor to New York's Hayden Planetarium and consequently a bit of an expert on stars—but he also enjoyed more imaginative associations, connecting the stars and his favorite constellations to the film and ballet celebrities whom he so admired. This assemblage beautifully incorporates the artist's expansive appreciation. The title, with the use of the word "etoile," or star, ties into the glamorous world of celebrities and travel, while the splattered white paint on a black background, an abstract constellation, resembles scientific photographs of the night sky. Additionally, the figures at the bottom right—a man carrying a goat and two kids in his arms—portray the myth of Auriga, the basis for the constellation of that name. Auriga was perceived to be an auspicious constellation especially for sailors; its stars were the first to break through storm clouds during the winter months.

Feeling a bit loony?

It's said that the full moon can have that effect. See for yourself by stopping by the Modern Wing's Bluhm Family Terrace to see the full moon of *Spencer Finch: Lunar*, on view through April 8, 2012.