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After 36 years in a closet, JMU planetarium canvas surfaces

Jazmine Otey | The Breeze Sep 21, 2017



What started as an art project for Carter's now a teaching opportunity for Professor Virani, who's also director of the planetarium. He believes the work of art helps to show important figures in astronomy.

Samantha Linczyc | Contributing Photographer

Imagine a world completely and utterly void of science. Technology would be nonexistent and vaccines wouldn't be available. The world would exist as nothing but an enigma to us as the inquiries and questions societies often ask to further an understanding of our world become silenced.

In a three panelled art canvas done by JMU graduate David Carter ('81), he portrays the significance of scientists in our world through an evolutionary timeline of well-known astronomers that've had a large influence on human existence through their discoveries.

The enthralling painting takes you on a scientific journey as it features detailed depictions of many well-known astronomers. Through the utilization of a cool-accented color scheme adjoined with the sun, moon, earth and stars to the back of the pictured scientists, viewers are taken on a trip through our universe.

Now in 2017, the canvas currently hangs in the John C. Wells Planetarium in Shanil Virani's astronomy classroom.

When the painting was completed in 1981, it wasn't given much recognition. Now nearly 36 years later, after being discovered at the far back of a closet coated in dust, Shanil Virani, an astronomy professor and director of the planetarium, took it upon himself, with the help of a few students, to give the canvas the recognition it deserves.

Carter was a JMU fine arts student who always had an interest in science. Although he only took retired professor Bill Ingham's astronomy course because it was required, he did nothing but excel in the class.

"If he wasn't the very top of the class, he was close," Ingham said. "He was an extremely talented student."

Seeing Carter's success and talent, Ingham decided he'd be sufficient as a part-time worker at the planetarium. Ingham then encouraged him to do the three-panel painting, giving him ideas on which figures to include as well as detail on the background.

"As a kid, I went through a phase where I was obsessed with astronomy," Carter said.

When the painting was rediscovered by Verani in 2012, nearly a year later Katie Blackman, a JMU alumna ('15), seized the responsibility to get the painting framed in 2013. Regardless of the time the painting was created, much of what it conveys is still seemingly relevant to today's society.

"I am very happy that it is being acknowledged," Carter said. "I am also a little surprised because when I did it, I know it took quite some time to be recognized. It's nice to think this thing might have a new life after all this time."

The canvas is divided into three panels, with each panel constructed chronologically. The left panel marks the beginning of the painting, but is almost blurred to symbolize the idea that with science there's no beginning, according to Ingham. The artistic timeline dates as far back as 190 B.C. and continues all the way to 1981. However, the original painting was left unfinished, leaving the far-right side of the panel with just barely a sketch on grid paper. This symbolized the idea that science is never-ending.

"I like it because it's a story," Virani said. "It's an art piece that tells a story."

In the left panel, many illustrious scientists, including Greek astronomers Hipparchus and Claudius Ptolemy are featured.

The canvas continues into what's deemed a Renaissance period in the middle panel, with scientists Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Isaac Newton, Edmund Halley, William Herschel, Henrietta Swan Leavitt, Edwin Hubble and Arthur Eddington.

The final panel marks a more modern-day time period as it includes scientists Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, Margaret Peachey Burbidge, Maarten Schmidt, Jocelyn Bell Burnell and Stephen Hawking.

"I gave him some guidance on individual astronomers to include," Ingham, who's now retired, said. "I was trying to identify those individuals who were relatively important in advancing our understanding."

Although the painting was left unfinished, in October 2014 Virani and Blackman asked now-alumna Melissa Huryk ('16) to add three scientists. She added Chinese-American experimental physicist Chien-Shiung Wu, American astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and Carl Sagan, an American astronomer who heavily inspired Tyson. These scientists were added to give the painting a sense of diversity.

"I think the fact all of the scientists depicted are white and male, prior to the 20th century, is wrong," Virani said. "It suggests that no other culture or gender were engaged in this pursuit of knowledge. By completing the third panel I had an opportunity to kind of change that narrative."

Carter now lives in Maryland and has continued his passion for art since he graduated. He's taught art at many institutions, such as American University, College of Southern Maryland and Rockville Arts Place/Corcoran School of Art. Carter currently teaches at the Art League School of Alexandria as well as Montgomery College.

"I think art and science start at the same place, in the sense that both artists and scientists are trying to understand the world, their place and how they view it," Virani said. "The tools are different, but I think at the essence they're both the same. So, for me the art that we're choosing to highlight is to tell a story but to tell a story from a different perspective."

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