

The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena. INSAP XI: Introductory Comments

Valerie Shrimplin

It is a pleasure to write these introductory comments to the anthology of papers from the eleventh conference on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena (INSAPXI) as Chair of the Executive Organising Committee (The conference was held at the California Institute of Technology Caltech), Pasadena on 20-23 September 2022. The numbers of those who were welcomed to the meeting show the relevance and importance of this highly interdisciplinary conference series. The online recordings and written proceedings are commended to all who are interested in and concerned about this very wide and challenging subject area.

Gratitude is expressed to the many individuals and institutions who made the meeting possible, and also immensely enjoyable. Special thanks are due to Professor George Djorgovski, his colleagues at CalTech and all the those involved in setting up the INSAP XI conference. It proved to be an amazing project that had to deal with a long delay caused by the COVID pandemic. Thanks are also due to all of those involved in the different venues that were visited over the course of the conference, in particular Professor Ed Krupp who arranged for delegates to experience a special visit to the wonderful Griffith Observatory.

Just a few words about INSAP and the series of *Conferences on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena* show that INSAP itself is a phenomenon. Many delegates asked about it and how it originated. 'INSAP' began as the brainchild of three Professors: Ray White, University of Arizona; Fr. George Coyne, S. J. then Director of the Specola Vaticana; and Rolf Sinclair then at the US National Science Foundation (who joined in the INSAP XI conference remotely from Washington).

These three very special people had the idea to set up and organise regular meetings of different groups with an interest in the way that astronomy (or, more broadly, 'astronomical phenomena') has influenced not only science but also the arts and culture in general – from painting,

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architecture and design, to literature and the humanities in general. One of the themes used to generate the idea was based on a quotation from Emerson who pondered,

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore! ... But every night come out these envoys of beauty and light the universe with their admonishing smile.¹

The underlying idea was to bring such different groups together to discuss and share ideas about astronomy and its influence on broader cultural issues, resulting in an audience of an eclectic mix of astronomers, astrophysicists, artists, art historians, philosophers and a range of humanities specialists.

Following this original concept, the first conference was held in 1994 (at the Vatican Observatory at Castel Gandolfo) and followed by other meetings held in Malta, Palermo, Oxford, Chicago, Venice, Bath, New York, London, and Santiago del Compostela. The conferences are thus not based on large annual events, organised by great associations with membership fees and staffing, but rather a simple network of like-minded people, with conferences organised on a voluntary basis. Further details are provided on the INSAP website, which is now managed by Dr John Hatch (Western University Ontario) who deserves a special thank you for dealing with the website and the email distribution list.

Personally, I have been involved with INSAP since the meeting in Malta in 1999. Having completed my research on the influence of Copernican heliocentricity on Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, I was glad to have my ideas accepted for presentation at INSAP II. This caused me to keep my 'art/astronomy' research going whilst having a different daily occupation, so I am much indebted to the founders. This is now the eleventh meeting and the initial idea of INSAP, as formulated by Ray, George and Rolf, has continued now for nearly thirty years – and we are hoping for another, twelfth, meeting in 2024 to mark 30 years of success as well, of course, as looking to the future longer term.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature', in *Nature* (Boston and Cambridge: Thurston, Torrey and Company, 1849), pp 8-9 (p. 8).

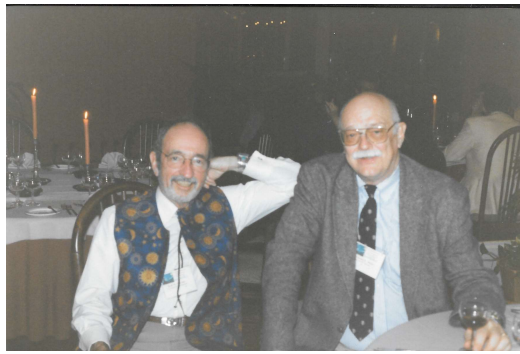
In order to convey an impression of earlier INSAP conferences, I assembled a few photos of events in Malta (1999) and Oxford (2003), which feature key 'INSAP' people such as Ray White and Rolf Sinclair, as well as Chris Impey, Nick Campion, Ron Olowin and Daniel Oberti, Richard Poss, Holly Henry and myself – in younger days! Sadly, Ray, George, Ron and Daniel are no longer with us. The images show the variation between formal academic lectures in historic auditoria, visits to historic astronomical sites – and also informal, convivial discussions in College rooms. As well as intellectual rigour, we have always had fun at the INSAP conferences.

In closing, I would like to flag up a couple of INSAP-related items that both occurred to me following events this past summer. Firstly, I went to see a performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the Globe Theatre in London, and it struck me how much astronomy there is in Shakespeare. I don't think we've ever had a paper on astronomy in Shakespeare at INSAP, but in *King Lear*, written sometime around 1606, there are many references about eclipses ('These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us ... we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars' (*King Lear* I.ii), the influence of the stars in governing our lives, ('It is the stars above that govern us', *King Lear* IV.iii.); and even a reference to spherical earth implying the impossibility of it being flat ('Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world', *King Lear* III.ii). But the one that really struck me was Shakespeare's inclusion of an astronomical riddle. In his very serious works like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, he often included some lighter aspects and there is comic relief in *King Lear* as he presents a riddle: 'The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason', to which the answer is given 'Because they are not eight?' and confirmed as correct: 'Yes, indeed' (*King Lear* I.v). Now that is really significant because it means that Shakespeare knew that the audience would know what the Pleiades were. The audience in London in July 2022 were much less likely to get the joke. A few may have done but the point is that it links with current issues concerning the vanishing Dark Sky. Formerly, the dark skies were outside everybody's door, and constellations were familiar to everyone. Although Shakespeare's audiences included sophisticated educated people, they also included large numbers of very ordinary people. The mass of the audience would have appreciated the allusion, or it would be unlikely to have been included.

As another example of the influence of astronomical phenomena, I also had the fortune last summer to go Normandy to see the Bayeux Tapestry. The significant thing here is the famous inclusion of a comet. There is also

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(as is well-known) the image of a comet in Giotto's *Nativity* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. The former dates to the 1080s (soon after 1066) and the latter is about 1305; both coinciding roughly with appearances of Halley's comet. Comets were often seen as portents of doom and disaster, and in the Bayeux Tapestry (actually an embroidery made in Canterbury, England) the comet was clearly a bad omen for King Harold (even if it was good for William the Conqueror). By contrast, in Giotto's *Nativity* what is clearly a comet stands in for the Star of Bethlehem, as a symbol of wonderful good fortune. The same phenomenon of a comet could be viewed in significantly different ways by different groups. (Halley's comet is next due in June/July 2061, so it might be an idea to make a note in your diary for that!).



Rolf Sinclair (left) and Ray White (photo Valerie Shrimplin)



Father George Coyne