

Spectacular News

Comet over Nuremberg, 1580



Comet over Nuremberg, October 1580

Hans Mack

German, active Nuremberg, c. 1536-1585

Woodcut with transparent washes and body colors, applied through stencils and freehand, highlighted with gold and silver
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg

LOOKING at Comet over Nuremberg

In October 1580, the people of Nuremberg, Germany witnessed a spectacular event. People gathered in the field outside the walled city to look at the sky in wonder.

Use the **Zoom** feature on the web site to study the print up close (click the link below).

http://artbma.org/paintedprints/html/pp03_flash.html

The Print

- What makes this print look like a newspaper?
- Which part of the script seems to be the headline?
- Zoom in on the upper right corner. Can you recognize any words in the headline?

The People of Nuremberg

- Zoom in on the people who have gathered out in the field.
- Which people are farmers? What farm implements are they holding?
- Which people are middleclass merchants? How does their clothing differ from the farmers' clothes?
- Which people are well-to-do aristocrats? How does their size in the picture correspond to their place in society?
- What are the people pointing to? Are they just looking? Or are they talking with each other about what they see?

The Sky over Nuremberg

- What makes this sky look different from an ordinary starry sky?
- In which direction is the big star moving?
- How do the clouds activate the entire sky?
- Zoom in to find stars painted with gold paint.

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The City of Nuremberg

- Zoom in to explore the city.
- Find the wall that encircles the city. The wall was built in the 14th and 15th centuries. The wall is about 3-1/2 miles around, 22 feet high, and 3 feet thick. A red tiled roof creates a covered walkway over the wall.
- Find the towers placed at intervals along the wall. The towers allowed guards to observe approaching enemies and throw things down upon them.
- Find the castle, high above the rest of the city and the round tower that guards the main gate.
- Find several church steeples.
- Find the red tile roofs of the houses. The houses are packed tightly together inside the wall along crooked streets and narrow alleys.

For a detailed view of Nuremberg in 1493, see:

http://historic-cities.huji.ac.il/germany/nuremberg/maps/schedel_1493_C_b.jpg

Click on high resolution.

For a map of Nuremberg showing the wall that encircles the city, see:

http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/nuremberg_1858.jpg

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A BROADSHEET SPREADS A DIRE MESSAGE ALONG WITH THE NEWS

Four hundred twenty-two years ago in 1580, there was no radio, no television, and certainly no Internet to spread the daily news. But there were advanced printing presses that were capable of printing pictures and text together on the same page. The presses could mass-produce hundreds or even thousands of flyers called *broadsheets* that spread news and pictures of important events.

The **headline** on this *broadsheet* tells of a **comet** that appeared over the city of Nuremberg, Germany in 1580. The headline (loosely translated) says that the broadsheet serves as

a memento and a warning about the shining Comet that first appeared in this month of October in the current 80th year.

A MEMENTO

It is easy to understand why the citizens of Nuremberg would purchase the broadsheet as a *memento* of a marvelous gold comet moving across their sky. Even today, the appearance of a comet can be a special and spectacular event.

A WARNING

The broadsheet also serves as a *warning* that the blazing comet is an omen of impending disaster sent by an angry God. The text tells readers that *the comet will cause violent storms with severe wind, drought, and poisonous air. Crops will be deformed...*

The text insists that citizens must repent their sins before calamity strikes. Since the picture shows aristocrats, merchants, and farmers together out in the field it seems that the warning pertains to people of all walks of life. This was probably not the first time that the citizens of Nuremberg had received such warnings. Other broadsheets of the time relayed frightening images and dire warnings about hail, lightning flashes, storms, floods, fire, earthquake, northern lights, mirages, and strange cloud formations. Unable to explain these natural events, most 16th-century sky watchers interpreted them all as signs from an angry God.

DISCUSSION

Does *Comet Over Nuremberg* depend on the text for its meaning? What aspects of the image can you understand even if you can't read the words? What aspects of the image are lost to you without a verbal explanation?

If television had been invented in the 16th century, how might this same information have been designed for TV news? Would there be interviews with spectators, astronomers, and church leaders? Telescopic views of the comet? Panel discussions about what it all means?
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COMETS

What did **16th century astronomers** know about comets?

The text of the *Comet over Nuremberg* broadsheet offers readers no scientific explanation of the comet. But in 1580, there *was* a small group of serious astronomers who observed comets and tried to figure out whether a comet or the moon was closer to the earth. This was a difficult question because at the time that the comet appeared over Nuremberg, the telescope had not yet been invented.

One of the astronomers was a Danish scientist named Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) who made many attempts to calculate the size and position of comets with his naked eye. Records show that on October 10, 1580, Tycho Brahe observed the comet that appears on the *Comet over Nuremberg* broadsheet. He followed it until November 25, and then saw it again in December. Even without the use of a telescope, Brahe was able to conclude that the comet was farther away than the Moon.

What do **modern astronomers** know about comets?

The word *comet* is derived from a Greek word that means “long-haired.” Modern scientists know that this “long-haired star” is really a body of particles of dust, rock, ice, and gas that orbits the sun as a permanent member of the solar system.

This “dirty snowball,” as one scientist called it, travels in an elliptical (rather than circular) orbit so that its distance from the sun varies. When the comet is far from the sun, it has no tail. But as it approaches the warm sun, its ice particles begin to vaporize. The dust particles that had been contained by the ice are released and sent flying. The result is a long gleaming tail that streams out behind the comet’s bright cloudy head. The tail may extend to a length of over 100,000,000 miles. Comets may be visible on earth for a time period varying from a few days to several months.

ACTIVITY

Compare the comet in *Comet over Nuremberg* with photographs of actual comets. You can locate many photographs of comets on the Internet. Try www.jpl.nasa.gov/comet/index.html for a start.