

# THE ASTRONOMER'S CHAIR: A HISTORY OF SITTING AND ITS IMAGE

**Public lecture by Dr. Omar W. Nasim  
as part of the NDXIV Biennial History of  
Astronomy Workshop**

At one time or another, we all have seen an astronomer pictured next to his or her instrument, perhaps posing next to a famous telescope or peering through its eyepiece, as if at work. But what you might not have noticed in these pictures is the chair; often there but easily overlooked in its commonplace simplicity. However, once you see these chairs, often used to seat the observer at the telescope, you cannot miss them—they tend to be everywhere in the history of astronomy. In this illustrated public talk, Omar W. Nasim, award-winning author and professor at the University of Regensburg, will unearth the cultural significance of displaying chairs in engravings and photographs for nineteenth-century audiences.

Specialized and task-specific observing chairs began to be designed and built by astronomers in greater numbers than ever before in the nineteenth-century. These mechanized chairs were often pictured not just for other astronomers, but also for broader audiences. Why? By exploring what the chairs and the bodily postures they afforded visually communicated to middle-class audiences, we will also come to understand their function in observing. But even more surprisingly, we will gain access to a gendered and racialized perspective on the presumed labor of astronomical observation and the historical place of astronomy in Western and non-Western civilizations. Once decoded, we find that astronomers' observing chairs embody—in their design, function, and image—a world of assumptions and values consonant with an Age of Empires.

**7:00 pm**

**Wednesday, June 19, 2019**

**Eck Visitor Center, University of Notre Dame  
Followed by a public reception**

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