

# Cosmic Blink,

an intriguing mural that graces the lobby of the William M. Staerke Planetarium, is the work of the late Billy Morrow Jackson (1926-2006), renowned artist-in-residence and professor emeritus at the University of Illinois. The result of an idea that came to Dr. Staerke during the spring of 1985, the artistic display was then commissioned with the help of donations to the Parkland College Foundation.

*Cosmic Blink* depicts the timelessness of mankind's quest to understand the Universe. In the painting, Jackson pays homage to important figures of science (and, in particular, of astronomy) throughout history, intellectual giants whose investigation peeled away layers of the unknown. Yet the artist also reveals the continuing, local nature of the quest through inclusion of Dr. Staerke and Parkland faculty and students in his piece.

The largest figures in the painting—pillars of astronomy—include Nicholas Copernicus at left, pondering the heliocentric (sun-centered) solar system he proposed as the accurate model in 1543. Next to him, Galileo Galilei stands on his *Dialogue of the Great World Systems*, the work that caused him to live out his final years under house arrest as it disagreed with the Church's current view of the subject when it was printed in 1630. Despite his movements being constrained by officers of the Inquisition, Galileo's mind is unfettered, and he is able to use his pulse to time the motion of a clock's pendulum. The third figure is Johannes Kepler, whose mathematical trial and error determined the true shape of planetary orbits to be elliptical rather than circular. He is followed at the upper right by Sir Isaac Newton, seen with a prism and spectrum. A true genius, Newton literally "stands on his principles" here: *The Principia*, his masterpiece of scientific thought published in 1687. Suspended before Newton are the Earth, the Moon, and an apple—three objects he used to determine his Law of Gravitation. The artist and his wife Siti Mariah Jackson stand in awe beside Newton.

Albert Einstein is also shown in the mural, whimsically blowing bubbles from his pipe. His famous equation of 1905,  $E=mc^2$ , appears in these bubbles along with a mushroom cloud—a fearsome result of harnessing energy's power. Dr. Staerke appears at the lower left, watching as his dream of a planetarium for Parkland College is finally realized. Other Parkland personnel are represented as well, including Dick Karch, assistant dean of student activities in 1988, shown listening to students in the halls of the college, and David Linton, Parkland's first astronomy instructor and former director of the Staerke Planetarium, in the lower right.

In *Cosmic Blink*, astronomy folklore intermingles with the realities of space exploration and discovery. Constellations depicted include the hero Perseus as well as the zodiac constellations Leo the lion, Taurus the bull, Sagittarius the archer, and Pisces the fishes. The Seven Sisters star cluster appears in front of Kepler and above the unidentified man gazing through the telescope. Spacecraft represented include the Solar Maximum Satellite in the upper left; the Space Shuttle; an Apollo Command Module; a Gemini Space Capsule; and the Hubble Space Telescope in the upper right, which had not yet flown at the time the painting was completed. An Apollo astronaut is shown placing the flag on the lunar surface, while Stonehenge appears in the distance; a group of students representing the ages appears in the lower left. Interspersed through the mural are galaxies, nebulae, supernova remnants, and star formation regions. Halley's Comet, the most famous of known comets, made its most recent appearance during the construction of the Staerke Planetarium. The event was commemorated by the burial of a time capsule outside the planetarium entrance, to be opened when the comet reappears in 2061.

Visual puns are typical of Jackson's work and are represented here by Newton "standing on his principles;" Sagittarius in the "centaur" of the painting; and the "calculating woman" in the lower left corner. When *Cosmic Blink* was completed, it was first displayed on the wall in the Parkland College Center near the Library stairs; it was moved to the Planetarium lobby in the early 1990s.