

With My Own Eyes

Visual observing is still worthwhile even if it doesn't contribute to science.

I'M SOMETIMES ASKED why I spend time observing things that professional astronomers have studied for so many years. The first instance occurred not long after the Apollo 11 landing. My father came outside to see what I was up to, puzzled that I would still be so interested in looking at the Moon with my 60-mm refractor. After all, hadn't I seen all the pictures sent back to Earth? I have no recollection of how I responded; I can only hope I had the answer for him then that I give now.

Why bother? After all, these celestial objects have long been cataloged, many not long after the telescope was still a new and paradigm-shattering invention. Years of patient study have since revealed the truth behind much of what the first

telescope users saw. Why go to the trouble in this day and age to peer into the night with a relatively small telescope at these thoroughly characterized (if not quite fully understood) celestial objects? Surely the days in which amateurs equipped with such instruments could make a contribution to science must be long gone.

Of course, this is not true, and pro-am astronomy projects are alive and well. Dedicated and well-equipped amateurs continually make contributions to science (for example, see the March issue articles about Epsilon Aurigae). Some writers refer to this as making "meaningful" observations. But most of us will explore the night sky and never add a single data point to any scientific endeavor.

My observations don't lack meaning simply because they don't advance the cause of science; such was never my intent. I bought a telescope because I've discovered that seeing these things for myself is deeply satisfying. It's like taking a trip to the Grand Canyon. Would anyone seriously support the notion that such a wonder isn't worth a visit simply because it's so well known?

The same thing holds true for viewing the Orion Nebula (M42) in the eyepiece. Countless people have observed, studied, and recorded it using every technique and in every wavelength available. But I still study it myself each winter. It doesn't matter that others have seen it before. The best picture postcard of the Grand Canyon will never replace standing on the rim and gazing into it with your own eyes. Nor does it matter that the nature of the Orion Nebula has already been determined, any more than the Grand Canyon can be said to have lost its wonder because we know what those layers of rock tell us about the depths of time.

I need to see these things for myself. That was true when I studied the Moon in my youth, and that need has grown stronger as I've grown older. All the photos, sketches, and images cannot replace the feeling of seeing for myself shadows cast by lunar mountains, or the diamond-dust glitter of a globular cluster. The depth and beauty of the universe gain a new level of meaning when you take the time to see things for yourself. For me, that's reason enough to spend time at the eyepiece. ♦

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