

Elisabeth Hevelius Observational Astronomer

Learning Leaflet: Women in Science

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Johann and Elisabeth Hevelius, *Firmamentum Sobiescianum sive Uranographia*
("The Firmament of King Sobiesci, or Map of the Heavens"; Gdansk, 1690)

Exhibit: Galileo's World | Gallery: The Sky at Night | No.: 11

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Can you find the sextants?



Elisabeth Hevelius: Observational Astronomer

Elisabeth Hevelius, wife of Johann Hevelius, was an astronomer in her own right. They worked together in the observatory of their Gdansk home to measure angular widths and distances with a great sextant, which required two observers at a time. The Sextant was among the new constellations they proposed in *Uranographia* (1690), the most detailed and influential celestial atlas of the 17th century. The *Uranographia* contains 54 beautiful double-page engraved plates of 73 constellations, and 2 oversized folding plates of planispheres.

Tragically, in 1679 their observatory burned. Fire destroyed manuscripts, books and instruments, including the sextant. Johann was 67 years old, and passed away six years later. Later, Elisabeth published the star catalog and celestial star atlas.

The frontispiece shows Johann bringing gifts before a tribunal of great figures in the history of astronomy. These gifts are their proposed new constellations: the shield and sextant he carries, and the animals trailing behind him. Of the 12 constellations they created, 7 are still recognized today.

Kerry Magruder

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