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Frosty Drew Observatory in Charlestown marks the birthday of Galileo with an open house

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By Thomas J. Morgan

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The Frosty Drew Observatory, in Charlestown, was selected by NASA to receive mural-sized images of the spiral galaxy Messier 101. They will be unveiled Sunday at an open house.

The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

February seems to be a month of anniversaries, what with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin occurring yesterday. Now comes the case of Galileo Galilei, the scientist who lived in the 16th and 17th centuries and whose birthday is Sunday.

And it's not just his birthday that's being recognized. This is the International Year of Astronomy, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first telescope observations.

That's why the Frosty Drew Observatory in Charlestown will hold an open house Sunday from 4:30 to 7 p.m. to unveil a pair of mural-sized images of the well-known spiral galaxy Messier 101. The observatory can be found in Ninigret Park, off of Route 1. Its Web site is <http://www.frostydrew.org/observatory/>

Why two images of the same object?

“One of them is a set of three images in different wavelengths,” said Francine Jackson, co-director of the observatory. “One picture was taken in visible, infrared and ultraviolet light. The other one combines all three.”

The images were acquired by a trio of high-tech orbiting instruments: respectively, NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope, the Spitzer Space Telescope and the Chandra X-ray Observatory.

Jackson said NASA only selected a few public education facilities around the country to receive the murals. “We are very pleased, very fortunate,” she said.

The images show not only the spiral structure of the galaxy, nicknamed the Pinwheel Galaxy, but also the gigantic clouds of gas and dust where stars flame to life and the visible traces of black holes and exploded stars.

Jackson said the observatory’s main telescope, a 16-inch reflector, will be pressed into service to let people have a peek at the Planet Venus, currently a jewel-like object easily visible high in the southwestern sky even before sunset.

Jackson said the observatory also will try to use a reproduction of Galileo’s original telescope.

Venus, which these days is often mistaken for an airliner with its landing lights on, is well-placed for viewing because it is growing closer to Earth.

“Talk about extremes,” Jackson said. “Venus’ magnitude right now is minus 4.5, which means it’s a hundred times brighter than the star Betelgeuse.

Betelgeuse is the red giant star that forms the right shoulder of the constellation Orion.

Jackson said that Venus is nearly three times the magnitude of Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky.

And those who spy Venus through a telescope may be surprised to note that it has phases, as the moon has phases. Right now, Jackson said, less than half of Venus is visible.

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