



Omar W. Nasim. *The Astronomer's Chair: A Visual and Cultural History.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021. Illustrations. 279 pp. \$60.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-262-04553-7.

Reviewed by Sarah Pickman (Yale University)

Published on H-Material-Culture (May, 2022)

Commissioned by Colin Fanning (Bard Graduate Center)

I would guess that most scholars have had the experience of volunteering to review a book because they have seen that a new publication meshes so well with their research interests that they know they will end up reading it anyway. I confess that this was my motivation for agreeing to review *The Astronomer's Chair: A Visual and Cultural History* by Omar W. Nasim. As a historian of science, with prior training in the study of design history and material culture, I have found that it is rare to see a book-length work that explicitly tries to bridge those fields. Thus, I was excited to learn about Nasim's book and equally excited to find it as satisfying and illuminating as I had hoped it would be.

In his previous book, *Observing by Hand: Sketching the Nebulae in the Nineteenth Century* (2013), Nasim, a professor of history and philosophy of science at the University of Regensburg, explored drawing as a tool for nebular observation in the nineteenth century. In *The Astronomer's Chair*, he again combines close attention to the interplay between visual depiction, material things, and the practices of long nineteenth-century science. Nasim uses the titular chair as the center of a "thick cultural account" that shows the interconnections between "gender, historicism,

labor, and race" in the work of astronomy (p. ix). He probes what we can learn from these specific chairs that are widespread in the drawings and photographs astronomers chose to depict themselves and their observatories in this time period, yet also so common as to escape previous scholarly scrutiny. Rather than follow a strict chronology, Nasim's chapters each explore a different theme connected to these chairs.

Chapter 1, "The Astronomer's Chair and Its Fields," begins with a brief discussion of visual representations of astronomers seated on some kind of furniture dating back to the medieval period. It moves into a discussion of chairs more broadly, especially as objects in western European culture that have had a long association with prestige (for example, there was a well-known hierarchy of furniture in Louis XIV's court at Versailles, which mapped on to where certain courtiers were allowed to sit). Nasim ends the chapter by introducing the initial boom in astronomers' chairs as they were adopted, and expounded on, by prominent astronomers in the first few decades of the nineteenth century.

In the second chapter, "Home, Hierarchy, History," Nasim pays careful attention to shifting notions of comfort in the nineteenth century, draw-

ing on insights from historians and decorative arts scholars like John Crowley and Katherine Grier. He examines how bourgeois notions of comfort, informed as much by ideas about correct posture, social etiquette, gendered norms of behavior, and “civilized” self-control as by physical sensation, created the cultural background against which astronomers’ chairs must be understood. Nineteenth-century chairs, Nasim writes, “circulated in a distinctive moral economy” and were “loaded with cultural meanings and social significance that went far beyond just the domestic space” (p. 70).

The book’s third chapter, “Mechanical Comforts,” charts the overlap between the proliferation of scientific specializations in the nineteenth century and the proliferation of task-specific chairs for those disciplines. The increase in the quantity of chairs with mechanized, movable parts was driven not so much by new techniques in furniture manufacture as by the number of places and activities that seemed to demand a specific kind of chair, from chairs for photography studios and dentists’ offices to chairs for invalids and women seated at sewing machines. Many of these other chairs shared the essential features of astronomers’ observing chairs: they disciplined the body into the correct posture for the activity, could be adjusted to recline at certain angles, and allowed the sitter to remain seated for extended periods of time without taxing the body. The growth of workshops that could produce mechanical chairs for other specialties helped some astronomers carefully design chairs for their own needs, in concert with these workshop craftsmen. One humorous example illustrates the connections between mechanized chairs of this time. In 1880, a group of physicians and pharmacologists toured the U.S. Naval Observatory but were completely unmoved by the sights visible through the observatory’s famous telescope. They were, however, quite taken with the observing chair, which one of the visitors proclaimed would make an excellent chair for gynecological examinations. As-

tronomers’ chairs were a product of nineteenth-century technologies and cultural norms, but visual and textual depictions of these chairs in popular and scientific magazines “signified expertise, wonder, and technological romance” (p. 101).

Nasim illuminates the connections between Anglophone astronomy, colonialism, and racialized white Victorian depictions of cultural Others in the book’s fourth chapter, “Cross-Legged Astronomy.” Here, the author examines the visual and textual trope of cross-legged Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Indian astronomers or scholars, seated on floor cushions or divans rather than chairs, a trope that frequently appeared in Anglophone art and literature. These images, combined with racist European travel accounts and anthropological writings, served to downplay non-European or non-settler traditions of astronomy and knowledge-making more broadly. In the minds of white viewers, these cross-legged postures were indicators of physical laziness and cultural stagnation.

By contrast, the book’s final chapter, “Restless Energies,” shows how white astronomers and those writing about them fashioned an image of men fired by “restless vigor and abundant energies” (p. 167). The astronomer’s chair was not a place of leisurely study but a vehicle for channeling the supposedly inherent energy that characterized white men of science. Whereas non-white astronomers dabbled only in archaic ideas and were uninterested in new insights (so the thinking went), white astronomers harnessed Western energy and drive to propel their nations forward. This energy and drive were epitomized by their very chairs and how they used them. Far from being benign or mundane pieces of furniture, astronomers’ chairs were important signifiers in an ecosystem of racialized and gendered ideas that went beyond science, signifiers that nineteenth-century viewers would have understood. The book’s coda connects the themes of the work to another iconic piece of scholarly furniture, Sigmund Freud’s “analytic divan,” which Nasim suggests

was a way for psychoanalysts to relieve their patients' maladies by allowing them to slip into the uninhibited states of mind that white scholars associated with non-white peoples.

The Astronomer's Chair brings together disparate bodies of literature—from histories of fatigue science and hygiene to scholarship on decorative arts and postcolonial readings of Victorian travelogs—in a fluid and readable way. The book is beautifully illustrated, and Nasim has done an impressive job tracing the history of specific astronomers' chairs back to their design and workshop production, the kind of object-based research that

is often hampered by incomplete archives. It is an excellent example of the kinds of insights that can result from an interdisciplinary cultural history and illustrates how looking at mundane objects can reveal illuminating entanglements between science and society more broadly. I can also imagine this book being a useful teaching tool on a variety of subjects, particularly for teaching students to combine close reading and visual analysis, showing them that scientists are “products of their culture” and not isolated from the social worlds of which they are a part (p. 101).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-material-culture>

Citation: Sarah Pickman. Review of Nasim, Omar W. *The Astronomer's Chair: A Visual and Cultural History*. H-Material-Culture, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57254>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.