

Thomas Hutton

NIGHT HERON

Sylvia Kouvali, *Piraeus*
21 December 2025

Uncle Peter pointed up at the night heron; the sun had already risen so the heron was sleeping in the tree. That same afternoon, at the Beinecke library, Audubon's Birds of America was on display in a vitrine, open on a page depicting the night heron (Plate 336).

To limit the books' exposure to the sun, the windowpanes of the Beinecke are made from a semi-translucent marble quarried in Danby, Vermont.

Danby, Vermont takes its name from Danby, North Yorkshire, where there is an International Dark Sky Reserve that preserves the night sky by limiting light pollution.

In 1820 the writer William Danby constructed a replica of Stonehenge as a folly for his estate in North Yorkshire.

The main axis of the original neolithic Stonehenge is precisely aligned with sunrise during summer solstice and sunset during winter solstice.

The word solstice originates from the Latin sol 'sun' and stit- 'stopped, stationary'.

Winter solstice in ancient Rome was celebrated during Saturnalia, the festival dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture.

In *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero explains that Saturn 'maintains the course and revolution of seasons and periods of time' and that, 'Saturn's Greek name is Kronos, which is the same as chronos, a space of time.'

Ancient Greece and Rome divided the night into four segments of three hours each, called phylakes, or vigiliae.

Vigiliae in English became known as 'watches' from the Old English wæcce 'a watching, state of being or remaining awake, wakefulness'.

Within Buddhism the night was divided into three watches for spiritual practise. Each of the three watches are associated with a stage in the Buddha's path towards enlightenment which he achieved during *pacchimayāma*, the 'final watch'.

The word 'Buddha' derives from the Sanskrit root budh, 'to awaken'.

Within the Indo-Tibetan tradition of Dzogchen, tögal (known as ‘the practice of the Clear Light’) involves meditating in complete darkness and looking up at the night’s sky to realize visions of luminous images such as circles of rainbow light. Tögal’s ultimate objective is to achieve the ‘rainbow body’ when the physical body transforms into pure light.

The tantric practise of milam, or dream yoga, is another central part of the Dzogchen teaching that focuses on lucid dreaming. Through his dreams, the 11th Century Tibetan yogi Milarepa was said to be able to travel ‘freely and without obstacles explore the entire universe from one end to the other’.

In 1829 William Danby published a translation of Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* that describes the dream vision of Roman general Scipio Aemilianus. Scipio travels amongst the stars and seeing that the universe is made up of nine celestial spheres, he begins to hear the *musica universalis*, or ‘music of the spheres’.

Pythagoras was the first to extend mathematical and musical harmonies to the universe, suggesting that its movements could produce a kind of inaudible cosmic symphony.

Johannes Kepler’s *Harmonices Mundi* (1619) extended his laws of planetary motion to explore the musical harmonies produced by the elliptical orbits of the six known planets.

In 1957, the composer Paul Hindemith completed an opera in five acts about Kepler’s search for universal harmony.

In 1977 at Yale, musician Willie Ruff (a former student of Hindemith’s) and geologist John Rogers conceived of using tone generators to realise the *musica universalis* based on Kepler’s data.

To make the planets audible to the human ear, one earth year was quickened to five seconds.

At Bell Laboratories Laurie Spiegel developed the program to feed Kepler’s data through the tone generators. Later that year she submitted the recording to be included on NASA’s Golden Record that was launched into space as part of the Voyager mission.

The Golden Record was intended to communicate Earth’s story to any extra-terrestrials it might encounter as it travels through interstellar space. Voyager I is currently 25.3 billion km from the Earth.

On the same day that Voyager II launched (20th August 1977), the Alta’ameem meteorite fell in northern Iraq. The Meteorological Bulletin reported that, ‘after at least one detonation, villagers reported hearing a humming sound that ended when the meteorite struck the ground’.

It was also on that day that astronomer Jerry R. Ehman was reviewing data from the Big Ear radio telescope as part of Ohio State University’s ‘SETI’ (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence) when he noticed an extraordinary signal from five days earlier. The signal was so unusual that he circled the data on the printout and annotated it with ‘Wow!’ The source of the signal still remains unknown. No such signal has ever been recorded since.

The name SETI was inspired by Menmaatre Seti I, the second pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty of Egypt. Seti I was the builder of the hypostyle hall at Karnak which aligns perfectly with sunrise on winter solstice.

Seti I was also the builder of the mortuary temple at Abydos and the mysterious subterranean Osireion that is believed to be a cenotaph for the god Osiris.

Osiris was an ancient Egyptian god and the so-called ‘Lord of Silence’, who presided over the

underworld. He was the god of fertility and agriculture, life and death, and resurrection.

Osiris-REx was a NASA spacecraft designed to collect samples from the near-earth asteroid, 101955 Bennu, to learn more about the formation of the solar system. Bennu was found to contain water, carbon and several of the amino acids necessary for giving life.

Bennu was named after the mythological deity from ancient Egypt who represented the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

The name Bennu comes from the verb wbn meaning 'to rise in brilliance' or 'to shine'.

During the New Kingdom, Bennu was commonly depicted as a night heron.

Bio

Thomas Hutton (b. 1983, London) lives and works in Rome and London.

Hutton has a MFA in Sculpture from Yale School of Art (2012) and a MA (hons) in Architectural History from The University of Edinburgh (2006)

Selected group and solo exhibitions include: *Post Scriptum. A museum forgotten by heart*, MACRO, Rome (2024-5); *Zeit. From Dürer to Bonvicini*, Kunsthaus Zurich (2023-24); *Contributions*, Église Saint-Sulpice, Paris (2023); *Memory Game*, Villa Lontana, Rome (2020); *Supine Effigy*, Citygroup, New York (2019); *Thomas Hutton*, Studioli, Rome (2018); *Seeld Library*, MOCA, Los Angeles (2018); *Through the Gallery*, Sushi Bar Gallery, New York (2016); *Stone Anchor*, Hunter Whitfield, London (2015); *Conversation Piece*, Fondazione Memmo, Rome (2015); *Under the Façade*, Joni Levy, Zurich (2014)