



In this portrait we see Charles Messier, a famous French astronomer, when he was about 40 years old (circa 1770).

Messier lived between 1730-1817. His interest in astronomy was piqued when he saw the "Great Comet of 1744" and its amazing six tails (which appeared soon after the comet reached its perihelion ** on the 1st of March, 1744).

The comet also was noted in China's astronomical records.

This illustration by Amedee Guillemin—based on the original work of Jean-Philippe de Cheseaux—reportedly depicts how the Great Comet appeared at 4am on the 9th of March, 1744. Messier would have been around 13 years old at the time.



During his adult life, Messier became an astute astronomical observer. He is most-famous for creating a catalog containing 110 "Messier objects."

The objects he included in his catalog were nebulae and star clusters. Messier's main purpose, in creating the catalog, was to help observers, like himself, to distinguish between permanent and transient objects in the sky.

Among his other achievements, Messier discovered 13 comets. They are:

- C/1760 B1 (Messier)
- C/1763 S1 (Messier)
- C/1764 A1 (Messier)
- C/1766 E1 (Messier)
- C/1769 P1 (Messier)
- D/1770 L1 (Lexell)
- C/1771 G1 (Messier)
- C/1773 T1 (Messier)
- C/1780 U2 (Messier)
- C/1788 W1 (Messier)
- C/1793 S2 (Messier)
- C/1798 G1 (Messier)
- C/1785 A1 (Messier-Mechain)

Messier's designations, in his catalog, are still used both by professional and amateur astronomers.

** *Perihelion*—meaning “nearest to the sun”—takes its name from Greek roots: *peri* (meaning “near”) and *helios* (meaning “sun”).

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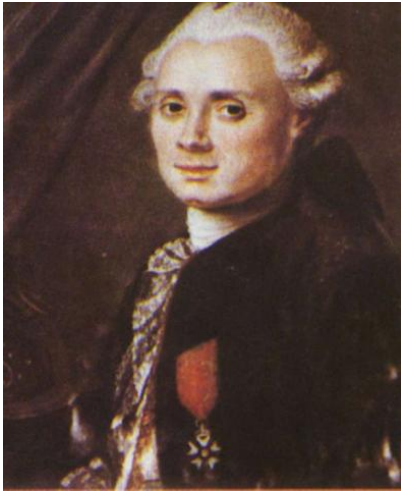
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Six Tails of the Great Comet of 1744

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