

Galileo's groundbreaking treatise describing the surface of Earth's moon, the satellites of Jupiter, and the Pleiades constellation.

Galilei, Galileo. *Sidereus nuncius*. Venetiis, : Apud Thomam Baglionum., MDCX. [1610].

8 1/2 inches (220 mm), 16, [2], 17–28 leaves.

The *Sidereus nuncius* of Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) offers the first description in print of the astronomical use of the telescope. (The title is usually translated as *Starry Messenger*, with the sidereal “stars” to be taken as heavenly bodies in general, and *nuncius* as in “papal nuncio.”) In a mere 56 pages, it is perhaps the greatest show-and-tell presentation in scientific history. The volume established its author as a celebrity: he was promptly head-hunted by the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Galileo had learned of the invention of the telescope in the Netherlands, and like a clever backwoods mechanic, soon figured out how to construct one for himself. It was capable of magnifying celestial objects by thirty times. He soon made nine major discoveries, including the existence of craters, mountains and valleys on the moon, thereby demoting the satellite from its former position as an ideal polished sphere—see the striking chiaroscuro illustrations on **Spreads 9, 11, and 12**. Galileo also described a multitude of stars and constellations, including the Pleiades (**Spread 19**) and many more invisible to the naked eye. He also discovered four unknown moons revolving around the planet Jupiter. These he named after Cosimo II de' Medici (to whom the book is dedicated—see **Spreads 3–5**), calling them *Medicea Sidera*, or “Medicean Stars.” The allusion (or the flattery) was not wasted. Galileo resigned his professorship of mathematics at Padua (which he had held for the previous 18 years) and moved to Florence to become Philosopher and Chief Mathematician to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

The more theatrical (or cinematic) aspects of Galileo's career—the heavy objects said to have been dropped from the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the fateful encounters with the Inquisition, the brilliant epigrammatic retraction of the retraction—have at times obscured, at least from foreigners, what every educated Italian knows: that Galileo is one

of the great masters of Italian prose style. He was the quintessential scientific *essayist*. As an author, Galileo was poised between the medieval age of ponderous, often derivative folios, lifelong summations of everything for everyone, and our modern minute incremental contributions to science and scholarship, by experiment or research, presented to a highly restricted academic audience in the form of a few pages in a specialist journal, or on the computer screen.

Indeed, the title alone of Galileo's book has a journalistic immediacy: whenever and wherever hot but distant news was hard to come by—in Renaissance Europe, as in frontier America—the *Post-boy*, the *Messenger* or *Mercury* was often used as a title to personify its transmission to the reader. The title-page, too, of *Sidereus Nuncius* (**Spread 2**), lists in varying sizes of display type, like an old-fashioned newspaper hoarding, almost every one of Galileo's star attractions. (This aspect of the publication can only be appreciated in facsimiles such as this). All that is missing is a banner headline reading (with the usual exaggeration) "COPERNICUS TROUNCES ARISTOTLE 9-0."