

Zeitschrift: Orion : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Astronomischen Gesellschaft
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Astronomische Gesellschaft
Band: 58 (2000)
Heft: 297

Artikel: The art of Ludek Pesek
Autor: Cramer, Noël
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-898567>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 15.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

■ Au vu du caractère international de l'œuvre de l'artiste LUDEK PESEK, nous avons choisi de rédiger l'article suivant en langue anglaise qui assure une accessibilité plus large au lectorat d'ORION, et fait l'économie d'au moins une traduction. Nous pensons que les reproductions de ses œuvres présentées ici parlent suffisamment d'elles-mêmes, et nous nous en excusons auprès des lecteurs peu familiarisés avec la langue anglaise. (réd.)

■ In Anbetracht des internationalen Charakters des Werkes des Künstlers LUDEK PESEK haben wir uns entschlossen, den folgenden Artikel in englischer Sprache abzufassen. Damit kann eine grössere ORION-Leserschaft angesprochen und eine Übersetzung überflüssig gemacht werden. Wir glauben, dass die hier wiedergegebenen Abbildungen seiner Werke genügend für sich alleine sprechen und möchten uns bei jener Leserschaft entschuldigen, die mit der englischen Sprache weniger vertraut sind. (Die Redaktion).

The art of Ludek Pesek

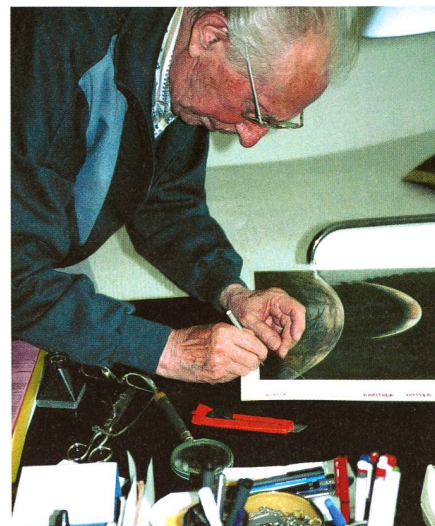
NOËL CRAMER

LUDEK PESEK died on the 4th of December 1999 at the age of 80 at his home in the village of Stäfa, on the lake of Zürich, where he had been living with his wife BEATRICE for many years after having acquired Swiss nationality. For his friends and those who have had the privilege of meeting him, his death was most untimely. In spite of his respectable age, LUDEK PESEK still possessed the mind of a young man and was at the peak of his artistic skills and creativity. For the international astronomical community, he occupies a prominent position as illustrator of the alien landscapes encountered, or still to be visited, within our solar system. But his work was not restricted to that field alone. Educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, his technical skills were moulded according to the concepts of the classical naturalistic tradition which requires great patience and attention to detail of the practitioner. Thus endowed with the ability to render «reality» with a quasi photographic accuracy, the only remaining limitation is set by the extent of his imagination. That he put the latter

to good effect is shown by the small sample of his works we have the pleasure to reproduce here (see also ORION 257, August 1993).

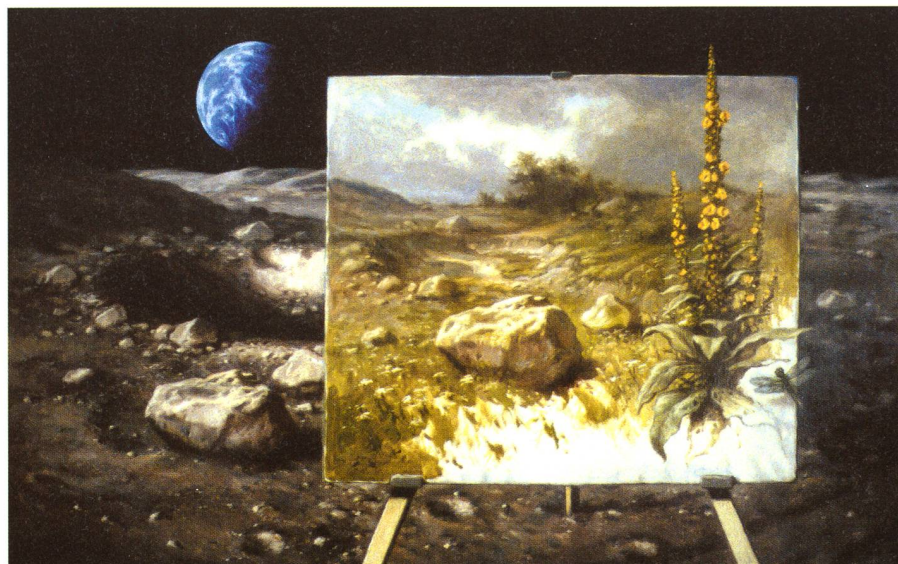
LUDEK PESEK was a strong-headed realist (as are also many poets....) with an interest in astronomy and geology reaching back to his childhood in Czechoslovakia. As he himself admitted, his fascination for extra-terrestrial landscapes was awakened by the work of LUCIEN RUDAUX (1874-1947), a French astronomer who illustrated his popular works in a scientifically correct manner with great skill. Most of RUDAUX's drawings still fare well in the light of our present knowledge of the solar system, and it is a great pity that they have been out of print for at least 50 years. Thus, apart from his activity as photographer and writer of Science Fiction novels and educational texts for young people, LUDEK PESEK's main source of livelihood was his work as illustrator of scientifically oriented exhibits and publications.

Now, since photography was invented, and particularly in the present times, the illustrator has most often been



1. The artist signing his work (August 1999, see figure 7).

2. A symbolic view of the artist's work...



scorned in artistic circles. Even though life-like «illustrations» of animals done some 30 000 years ago in caves are rightly regarded by the same circles as representing masterpieces of the human artistic heritage. Today, the faithful rendering of what the eye sees is hopelessly frustrated by the ability of the simplest photographic camera to instantaneously capture the finest visible details. The camera, however, does not record what is perceived by the «vision» of the artist. In that sense, the talented illustrator must be fully considered as a creative artist, in spite of whatever some aesthetes may contend. His craft is in fact difficult, and requires great proficiency. It is our feeling that among the most virulent critics of «illustration considered as art» are to be found those who are least endowed with the capability of doing so....

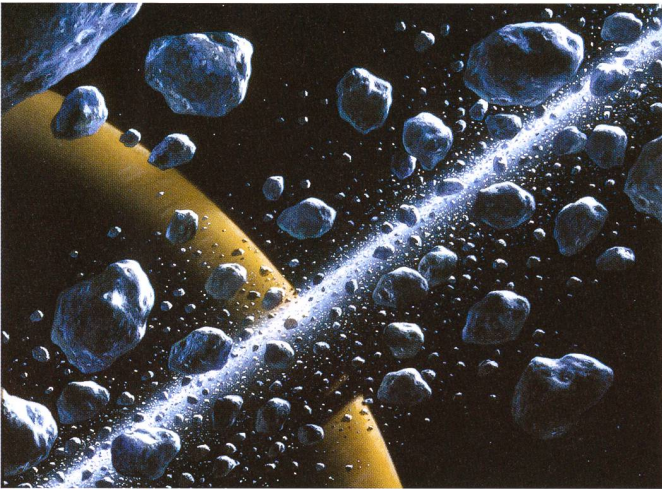
The crowning of LUDEK PESEK's career was his appointment as illustrator of the discoveries made by NASA's spacecraft in the late sixties and the seventies in the pages of the National Geographic Magazine (see the August 1970, or February 1973 issues), and for the Smithsonian Institution. At that time, prior to the arrival of the various spacecraft at their destinations, little was known concerning the local conditions



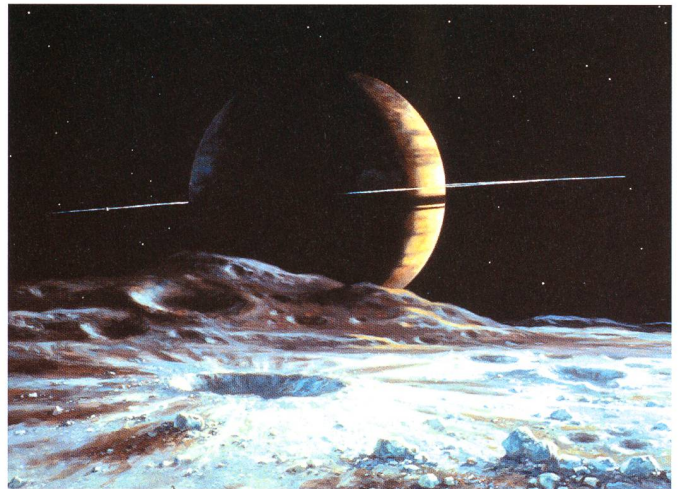
3. In the rings of Uranus.



6. An early concept of the surface of Saturn's moon Titan.



4. In the rings of Saturn.



5. Saturn as seen from its moon Rhea (1993).

7. From left to right: Europa, Amalthea, Jupiter (with ring), Io, the Sun.



prevailing on the Martian surface or in Jupiter's or Saturn's vicinities. The illustrator, however, had to anticipate those conditions since some of the publications were meant to appear before the

much awaited event of the encounter. This sometimes led to confrontations with the scientists in the mission teams. In the case of Mars, for instance, Earth-based polarimetric observations were

interpreted by them as indicating a very smooth Martian surface, with very few rocks apparent. PESEK's intuition, on the other hand, could not conceive of such vast wind-swept expanses being free of



8. Mars seen from its moon Deimos.



10. Mars. Evening in Coprates Chasma.

rocks. That he was correct was amply demonstrated by the pictures transmitted later by the landers. Indeed, the real landscapes are even rockier than those he originally painted! Another subject of contention was the structure of Saturn's rings. The apparently extreme thinness of the rings led the astronomer GERARD KUIPER to suggest that the particles composing them would be consistently of a few decimetres in size and elongated in shape, little dispersed and aligned perpendicularly to their orbital plane. The artist could not accept that «unnatural»

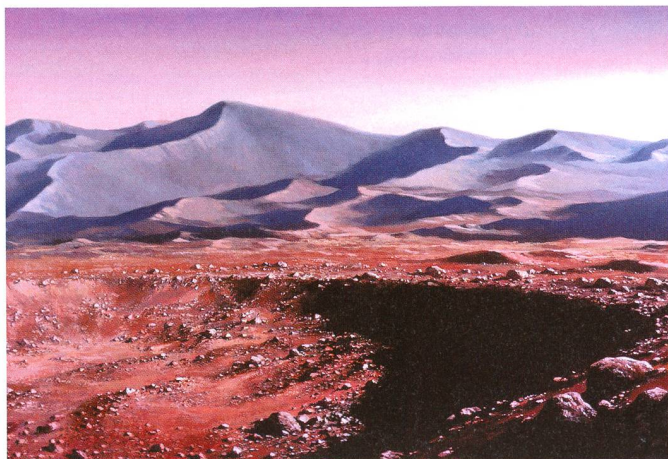
vision and favoured the other view of more loosely and randomly distributed chunks of ice having a wide range of sizes. The difference of opinion was solved by illustrating both alternatives (p. 182 of National Geographic Magazine, August 1970), whereby LUDEK PESEK clearly vindicates his view, subsequently proved right, by rendering the second painting in a far more powerful and dramatic manner...

Certainly the most famous astronomical paintings by LUDEK PESEK are his views of Saturn seen from within

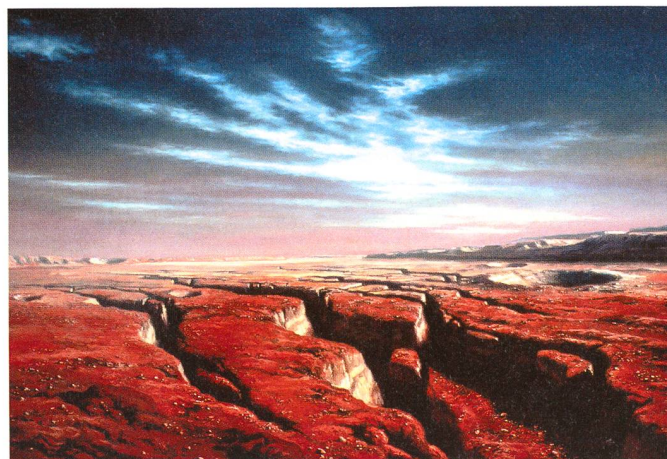
the rings, and his paintings of Mars done after the results of the Mariner 9 orbiter became available. The detailed images of the Martian topography transmitted by that spacecraft allowed him to anticipate, in a realistic manner, the landscape as it would appear at various locations on the surface. As he used to say, he «spent several months living on Mars» painting more than 30 views of interesting locations. Some of those works were presented in ORION 257 (August, 1993). Five more are shown here. Rocky, stark and dramati-

9. Approaching dust storm seen from a Martian canyon.





11. Martian dust dunes.



12. Mars. Cracks within an ancient impact structure. *LUDEK PESEK* painted this view in spite of the opinion to the contrary expressed by the NASA mission scientists in the early seventies, who said that such features would have long ago been filled up by dust. In 1998, the high resolution images of Mars Global Surveyor showed that such formations do indeed exist.



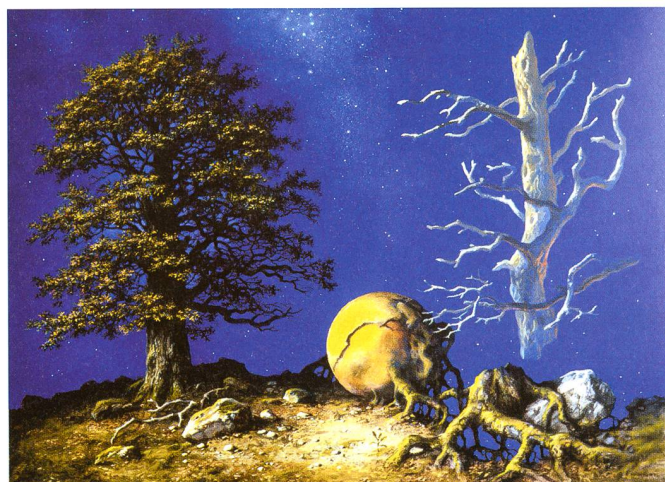
13. Mars. In the ancient caldera of Olympus Mons.



14. The frame - is not a frame.... (1992).



15. Ruins, with butterflies and yardstick.... (1989).



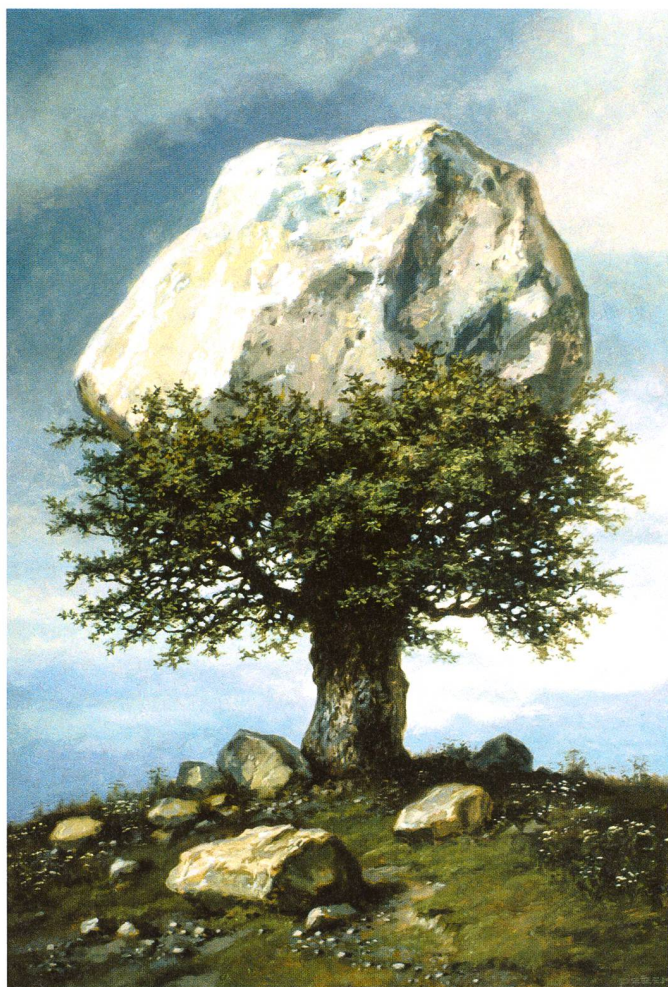
16. The cosmic character of life.... (1991).

cally beautiful visions that the future landers would prove to be so accurate. One detail was not fully anticipated, however, in the earliest paintings: the universally pink-hued sky above the horizon due to the dust suspended in the lower atmosphere. His Martian

works are to be found mainly at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, in some private collections and as a donation of 21 works proposed by him shortly before his death to the Smithsonian Institution. These are, in our opin-

ion, the very best works of art devoted to Mars achieved up to the present date.

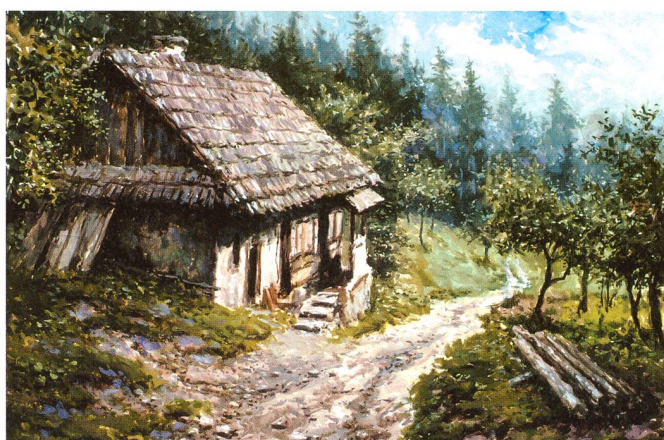
Following his stay in the U.S.A. he painted a series of some 50 deep-forest scenes such as he experienced them in the woods of the American West Coast.



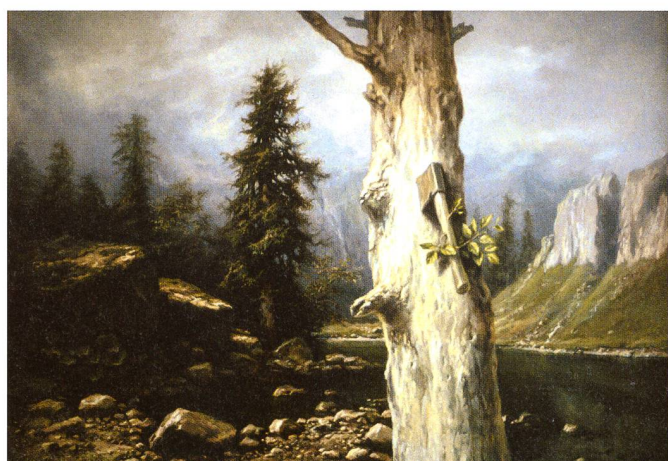
17. *The force of life...*



19. *Winter scene (1999).*



20. *A house similar to that of the artist's childhood (1999).*



18. *Sprouting axe in classical landscape...*



21. *A long way to go.... (1999).*

Those were executed in the true naturalistic style of his early education. During the rest of his life in Switzerland, he spent most of his time painting, and continued to apply his precise technique to surrealistic or symbolic compositions often incorporating astronomical subjects. He liked to present some of his later works in the form of triptycha which enhanced the impression of width of the scene. His last works, of which three are

shown here, are very much of the classical vein and tend to reproduce scenes experienced during his youth in his homeland.

LUDEK PESEK was as meticulous in his manner of work as are his paintings. The visit of his workshop was always a disconcerting experience to the newcomer. An elegant sitting room without any trace of paint that may have found its way to the floor. At the best lighted win-

dow stood his almost spotless easel. He used to explain that his master in Prague taught his students that an artist who «made a mess» also made a mess of his painting... And that was certainly not the case for LUDEK!

(All the paintings presented here are reproduced with the permission of BEATRICE PESEK)

D^r NOËL CRAMER
Observatoire de Genève, CH-1290 Sauverny