

Copernicus and facsimile of his treatise demonstrating the earth moves around both its own axis and the sun.

Commemorating Copernicus

During Easter week later this month, an impressive cross section of the international scientific community will gather in Washington for the secular resurrection of a favorite saint, Nicolaus Copernicus, on the occasion of his 500th birthday. But organizers say the celebration will go beyond mere ceremony, honoring the founder of the heliocentric view of the solar system and the father of modern astronomy, to a reflection on the nature of scientific discovery and its place in the modern world.

"The ultimate reason for the anniversary celebration," says astronomer Owen Gingerich, editor of the event's proceedings, "is a rededication to preserve the fragile freedom of inquiry and

the resources that make inquiry possible."

One of the early planners of the celebration, Harvard's Roger Revelle, says the discussions of scientific discovery will help to combat "the cultural self-hatred, which is spreading like a malignant disease through the Western world."

That's a pretty big order, particularly since the sponsoring organizations—the National Academy of Sciences, the Smithsonian Institution, the Copernicus Society of America and the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO—have kept the program purged of any hint of controversy.

One rarely has to hunt for controversy in Washington. The Wall Street Journal called the celebration, including a commemorative stamp and a Presidential proclamation, a "classic case study of old-fashioned ethnic politics." Several Congressmen with large Polish constituencies have become instant astronomers, expounding on Copernicus' discoveries at some length in the Congressional Record. To their embarrassment, however, they often used identical phrases, created by the same ghost writer in the Library of Congress. The Journal quoted Rep. John Rarick (D-La.) as saying the whole thing was a Communist plot "to exploit for political benefit the great Prussian astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus by designating him a Pole."

Actually, Mikolaj Kopernik came from an old family of Silesia, one of those well-fought-over areas of central Europe that reflects a conspicuous amalgam of ethnic influences. A modest, retiring man who spent most of his life in service of the Church, Kopernik wrote and spoke in Latin, adopted a Latinized version of his name, and demonstrated his loyalty to Poland by helping organize the defenses of his town against German invaders.



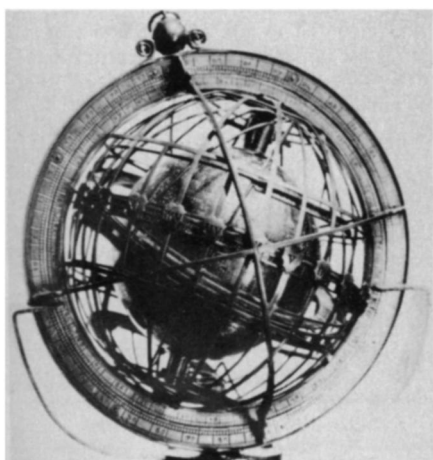
Artist: Leonard Baskin

Portrait commissioned for celebration.

In connection with the celebration, the Polish Government has authorized a loan to the Smithsonian of artifacts dating from the time of Copernicus, including scientific instruments taken from his own university. IBM has commissioned an exhibition by designer Charles Eames. Avant garde music, suggesting breakthroughs in science, has been commissioned, together with preparation of an exhibition of contemporary Polish posters.

The formal program includes original papers, an "education day," and smaller meetings. Speakers include Nobel laureate Werner Heisenberg, the grand old man of German science; John Archibald Wheeler, the famous Princeton astronomer who wrote the first book on black holes; Jacob Bronowski, the Salk Institute biologist who narrated BBC-TV's "The Ascent of Man," and Gerald Holton, Harvard physicist, educator and historian of science.

Though the immediate purpose is largely pomp, one organizer told SCIENCE NEWS, the conference will bring together scientists of many nations whose informal conversations might indeed affect the course of scientific inquiry. □



Photos: Smithsonian Institution
Gold Jagiellonian Globe, dated 1510, is the most precious instrument in the collection from Copernicus' time. Globe is encircled with an armillary (celestial) sphere. Clock mechanism inside ball moves the indicator and sphere. Clock tells hours, days, months, and position of the sun in sky. Globe shows new continent labeled "America," one of the first to use the name.