



Lunar Wonderland

WHAT CHESLEY BONESTELL DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT LUNAR GEOLOGY MADE HIS MOON MURAL EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL. BY MICHAEL J. NEUFELD | PHOTOS BY JIM PRESTON

WALKING INTO the National Air and Space Museum's Destination Moon gallery, visitors might notice just above them an enormous mural depicting the lunar surface. But it is only when they step back or—even better—see the mural from a nearby mezzanine, that they can appreciate the size and detail of space artist Chesley Bonestell's masterwork.

Forty feet long and 10 feet high, *A Lunar Landscape* was painted for the Charles Hayden Planetarium of the Museum of Science in Boston, where it was unveiled in March 1957, just half a year before Sputnik. Early in the formulation of Destination Moon, my colleagues and I decided that the mural would be displayed in the gallery's entrance area, as it so beautifully represents the dream of flying to the moon—on the cusp of it actually happening.

Bonestell was the dean of American space artists. At the end of World War II, he pioneered a new genre of astronomical painting for the age of spaceflight advocacy. Trained as an architect, he'd already had a long and distinguished career. He designed the Art Deco features on the Chrysler

Building in New York City, made drawings of the Golden Gate Bridge that helped sell its construction, and became one of the top matte painters in Hollywood. He painted scenic backdrops for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and for *Destination Moon*, the 1950 film for which our gallery is named.

For the planetarium in Boston, Bonestell painted an imagined lunar crater near the north pole (so the Earth would be low on the horizon), with the rising sun behind the viewer, illuminating the distant crater rim. Drawing on Earth-based photographs of the moon and the best astronomical knowledge of the time, Bonestell expected that there was no erosion on the airless, waterless moon. Hence, all his mountains and craters were razor sharp.

A Lunar Landscape was a fixture of the planetarium's lobby until 1970. But in the late 1960s, images recorded by the Surveyor landers and Apollo astronauts revealed that the moon didn't look the way Bonestell had imagined it. Billions of years of meteorite impacts had hardened the surface and rounded off crater rims and mountains. The mural

now looked dated and inaccurate. The Boston museum pulled the canvas sections off the wall, rolled them, and put them in storage.

Shortly before the National Air and Space Museum's building on the National Mall opened in July 1976, Fred Durant, the head of the Astronautics Department (now Space History), rescued *A Lunar Landscape*, hoping it might be displayed here. But the mural was in poor shape. The planetarium had cut two holes at the top of the canvas to accommodate air-conditioning ducts, and the paint had started to flake. Lacking the resources to repair the mural, the Museum left it in storage for three decades.

Thanks to Tom Crouch, then a senior curator in the Museum's Aeronautics Department, the mural was not forgotten. When space history curators Margaret Weitekamp and Jennifer Levasseur were planning a new space culture exhibit for the 50th anniversary of Sputnik ("Out of this World"), the mural sections were unrolled in 2005 for an inspection. They concluded that the mural would require an expensive restoration, including fill-ins for the missing sections. But the exhibit was not funded, so the rolled panels were packed away—again. (An online version of "Out of this World" is on the Museum's website.)

Five years later, as I was finishing my term as chair of the Museum's Space History Department, I appointed myself to lead a team to replace the old Apollo to the Moon gallery. The Bonestell mural



was always at the top of our agenda. It was the ultimate expression of the art designed to popularize space travel in the 1950s.

Over the next six years, the exhibit plan and title were revised several times before it became part of the Museum's project to transform the National Mall building. With funding, it finally became possible to restore the mural. In 2019 our conservation department sent the mural to a specialist firm in Pennsylvania, where the old, yellowed varnish was stripped, revealing the cool gray colors of Bonestell's original. The team in Pennsylvania also patched the two missing sections with new panels.

In September 2021, the conservators installed *A Lunar Landscape* in the Destination Moon gallery, and last October, we opened the new west end of the Mall building. Unseen by the public for 52 years, the Bonestell mural is now on display to the thousands of visitors who pass through the gallery each week. I hope you get a chance to see this masterpiece of 1950s space art.

🌟 Bonestell's space paintings, including the mural (top), "encouraged millions of people to believe that space travel was not just a Buck Rogers fantasy," says curator Mike Neufeld (above). "Before the Space Race provided the money to go to the moon, Bonestell made the idea seem real."

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AFTER NEARLY 35 years as a fellow and curator at the National Air and Space Museum, Michael J. Neufeld retired in April. He is the author of several books, notably *Von Braun*.