Dark Skies and Light Pollution: An Art-Historical Approach

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context:
- The spectacle of the stars is becoming ever more obstructed from view by increasing light pollution in the "civilised" world.
- Views of the heavens were familiar in ancient, medieval and modern times — until recently.
- Contemplation of the complexities of the heavens has inspired religions, philosophies and myths — and also scientific analysis and theory.
- But — it is science that is now removing astronomical phenomena from common sight.
- Historical perceptions of the dark sky are an essential backdrop to the aim of protecting the Dark Sky from obliteration.
- Visual images of the night sky provide a context/back story for the fascination with the night sky in relation to the problems of ever-increasing light pollution.

images of the milky way:
- "The Milky Way is no longer visible to one third of humanity (60% Europe, 80% USA)"
- So many stars that the Milky Way was depicted as a solid circle
- Outside everyone’s front door

light pollution/ population (correlation):
- Monaco most dense nation 0.78 sq mile, pop 37,550 (~48,145 per sq mile)
- World population 4m to 7.7bn
- None of the accounts … concerning the Universe would ever have been given if men had not seen the stars or the sun or the heavens … the vision of day and night and of months and circling years has created the art of number and has given us not only the notion of Time but also means of research into the nature of the Universe. Plato, Timaeus, 47 A-B

familiarity with the night sky in the ancient world:
- Egyptian Sky goddess Nut (as ‘Milky Way’)
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population and growth:
- 1417 - London first organised lighting of streets (Mayoral decree)
- 1802 - more efficient coal-fueled lighting (William Murdoch)
- 1807 - London’s first gaslit road
- 1816 - Baltimore gaslit streetlights
- 1820 - Paris (1st electric lights, 1878)
- 1879 - Thomas Edison, incandescent lamps led to bulbs/street lighting

renaisance and baroque:
- Breviary, Spain, late 14th cent (turned/cranked by angels)
- Cicero’s Dream of Scipio, Bologna 1383
- Giotto, Dante and Chaucer
- ‘... cast up thine eye ... See yonder, lo! the galaxie The which men clepe the Milky Way / For it is white ...’ Chaucer, The Milky Way, c 1380
- Padua, late 14th century

modem times, 19th, 20th, 21st centuries:
- Van Gogh, Starry Night, 1888
- Norah Nelson, Milky Way, c 2004 (aboriginal theme)

light pollution in the 21st century:
- Astronomy, science: observations and analysis
- Cities: for security/crime; safety/cars and people; ambiance/monuments
- Effects on human beings: health, well being, routine, sleep patterns
- The natural world, biodiversity: effect on animals, insects (bats to mayflies)

fascination with the night sky:
- Juxtaposition of population/pollution maps with contemporary artworks
- Shoots shows us the world; darkness shows us the stars

references:
- Wikimedia comms (for illustrations)

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