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PEOPLE, PLACES, AND EVENTS

WIL TIRION, 1943–2024

BY: [GOVERT SCHILLING](#) | JULY 9, 2024 | 10

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Dutch astrocartographer Wil Tirion will be remembered as the creator of the most beautiful star maps and atlases of our time.



Wil Tirion
Alex P. Kok / Wikimedia Commons

World-famous Dutch astrocartographer Wil Tirion passed away on July 5, 2024. He was 81 years old. He will be remembered as the creator of the most beautiful star maps and atlases of our time.

As a 12-year-old budding amateur astronomer, Tirion had already become fascinated by star maps, and even started to draw his own. However, it wasn't until 1979 that his work was first published, in the form of five maps in Colin Ronan's *Encyclopedia of Astronomy*. British astronomy author Storm Dunlop was so impressed by the quality of the maps that he convinced the British Astronomical Association to publish them separately as the *B.A.A. Star Charts 1950.0*.

Tirion's first big star atlas was *Sky Atlas 2000.0*, the first edition of which was published in 1981 by Sky Publishing Corporation, the company that

also published *Sky & Telescope* at the time. The 26 maps of this eye-catching atlas, showing 86,000 stars down to 8th magnitude, were all drawn by hand. At the time, Tirion had a full-time job as a graphic designer and illustrator at a printing office in Rotterdam; his work on the atlas took place in the early morning hours, evenings, and weekends.



Wil Tirion at work on the *Sky Atlas 2000.0*.
Sky & Telescope, 1981 June

The success of *Sky Atlas 2000.0* led to many new commissions from book publishers and magazine editors. In 1984 Tirion quit his job to become a full-time *uranographer*, or mapper of the stars, working from his home in Capelle aan den IJssel, a suburb of Rotterdam. Around that time, he was approached by Perry Remaklus of Willmann-Bell, Inc. with the request to produce a modern and more visually appealing replacement of *Webbs Atlas of the Stars* (2nd edition, 1945). This new atlas would be Tirion's biggest project.

The two volumes of *Uranometria 2000.0* (named after the famous 1603 star atlas *Uranometria*, by German astronomer Johann Bayer) were published in 1987 and 1988. Together, these first editions showed 280,000 stars (down to magnitude 9.75) as well as many thousands of deep-sky objects. Although the maps were based on computer plots, most of the work was still done by hand. The same was true for his *Bright Star Atlas 2000.0* (1990, with Brian Skiff) and *The Cambridge Star Atlas* (1991).

In the mid-1990s, Tirion replaced his drawing board with a computer. Before long, his star maps were created using Project Pluto's *Guide* software, Adobe Illustrator, and an unrelenting artistic feel for the most elegant use of colors, symbols, and fonts.

Ever since, Tirion's star maps have been published in numerous magazines, books (including *Atlas of the Night Sky* (2005) and the yearly *Guide to the Night Sky*, both with his long-time friend Storm Dunlop), and on astronomy websites. Tens of thousands of copies of his star atlases have found their way to public observatories and amateur astronomers all over the world. Most *Sky & Telescope* readers are probably familiar with his work.

After a brief but fatal illness, Wil Tirion – an endearing and very friendly person – died just weeks after he worked on his latest maps of the night sky that he knew and loved so much. Asteroid 4648 Tirion was named after him in 1993. He is survived by his wife Cokkie and his children Martin and Naära. He will be sorely missed.

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OwlEye

July 9, 2024 at 11:55 am

I used the northern hemisphere Uranometria until the covers fell off. I still refer to it sometimes . . . sans covers. DZ

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**Andrew James**

July 10, 2024 at 4:50 am

Sad day. He led the revolution when we changed from Epoch 1950 to 2000. I have several copies of Sky Atlas 2000. Home version that I use for writing, and a dogeared version that has had many nights under the open sky. I learnt about the heavens from his atlases, and use the step method of stars to find many deep sky objects. There are a few in my generation who don't know his name of this uranographer. We are blessed by his contribution. May our goddess Urania smile in his honour!

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**Anthony Barreiro**

July 10, 2024 at 9:19 pm

The Monthly Sky Guide with text by Ian Ridpath and charts by Wil Tirion was an essential reference for me when I was just starting to learn my way around. First edition 1987, tenth edition 2019.

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Marty-Ahrens

July 11, 2024 at 8:07 am

Wil Tirion was one of the special ones who made the night sky so much more accessible for the rest of us. There are so many things I never would have found without his charts.

His charts will be out under night skies for many, many, years to come. What a living memorial...

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Jose

July 11, 2024 at 12:24 pm

I and other colleagues published a book on binocular astronomy with two maps by Wil Tirion. It was an honor for us to have the collaboration of Wil Tirion, whose maps gave our book a very good look. I still remember and keep the invoice he sent us, beautifully decorated with a swarm of stars.

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Tim

July 12, 2024 at 4:57 pm

Sky & Telescope should devote an entire issue to Mr. Tirion's life and work.

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Anthony Barreiro

July 12, 2024 at 7:14 pm

Maybe not an entire issue, but certainly a lavishly illustrated feature article.

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GavinEadie

July 12, 2024 at 8:09 pm

A great loss and equally great legacy ..

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geoffmc@grapevine.com.au

July 12, 2024 at 11:46 pm

I've been using his charts for decades and now use them to teach young people how to navigate the sky without a computer. Vale, Wil Tirion, and thank you!

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John

August 1, 2024 at 4:52 am

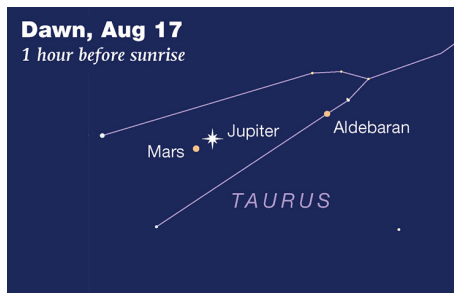
Amazing that when I purchased Sky Atlas 2000.0 and Uranometria 2000.0 in the 1980's, they really did last a lifetime! Given that the official switch from 1950.0 coordinates to 2000.0 coordinates occurred around 1985, we won't need to be switching to 2050.0 coordinates until 2035. I'll likely be dead by then. Thus, Wil Tirion's monumental epoch 2000.0 sky atlases will see me through! Rest in peace, Mr. Tirion! And thank you! But still, one wonders: Who is going to make the 2050.0 counterparts to Sky Atlas and Uranometria? And will there still be a market for a printed sky atlas when the time comes to switch to 2050.0 coordinates?

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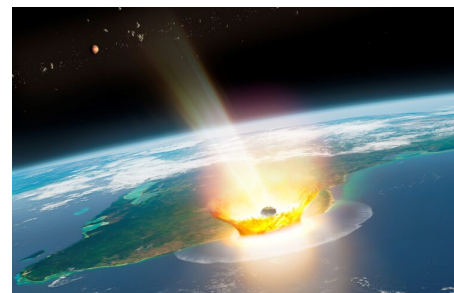
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