

# Charles Messier (1730–1817)

**Charles Messier** (pronounced Mess-ee-ay) was born in the foothills town of Badonviller, located 200 miles due east of Paris. Messier's father held a mayoral-type position in this town that served as the regional administrative center for the Princes of Salms, the family that held territorial control of the area.

Messier's father died when he was 11 so his oldest brother Hyacinthe took him under his wing, training him as an administrator's assistant until Charles was 21 in 1751. At this time, territorial control of the area was being reorganized and jobs became scarce but Hyacinthe was able to find Charles employment in Paris as an assistant to an astronomer.

In Paris, Messier lived and worked at the Royal College of France for the aristocrat-astronomer Joseph Delisle. For his first two years, he helped draw maps and worked on several projects.

Messier's "probation" was over in 1753 when Delisle noted, firsthand, Messier's enthusiastic and skillful assistance helping astronomers during a transit of Mercury (when Mercury crosses in front of the Sun), a viewing event hosted by Delisle. Thereafter, Delisle encouraged and helped Messier to study astronomy.

It was from 1754 to 1760 that Messier's astronomical knowledge and observing skills were honed. In 1758, he discovered his first comet and noted what would become his first deep sky object (M1). A year later, he discovered the comet predicted to return



*Messier's official portrait painted upon his appointment as Astronomer of the Navy in 1771. The red medal is a tribute as a French Royal Academy of Sciences member.*

# First DSO Cataloguer

by Edmond Halley, and which now bears Halley's name. Then in 1760, Messier discovered two more comets and kept on going.

Messier had a deep passion for searching and finding comets and is credited with discovering 20 during his lifetime. At one point, he was even dubbed "The Comet Ferret" by Louis XV. However, despite this penchant, *he can best be described as the leading observational astronomer of his time*. During his career, he published over 100 articles in major journals on his astronomical observations and only 30% were related to comets.

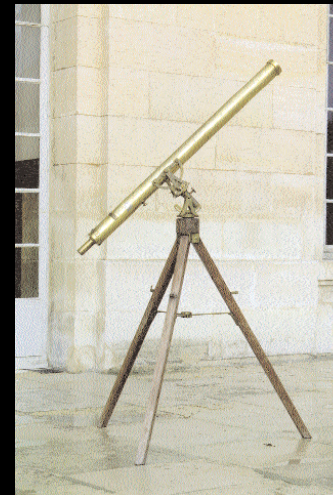
In 1770, Messier married Marie Vermandant after 15 years of courtship. Unfortunately, in 1772, both Marie and their first child died a week after the birth.

Also in 1770, Messier was made a member of the French Royal Academy of Sciences. During his life, Messier was inducted into 17 science academies throughout Europe.

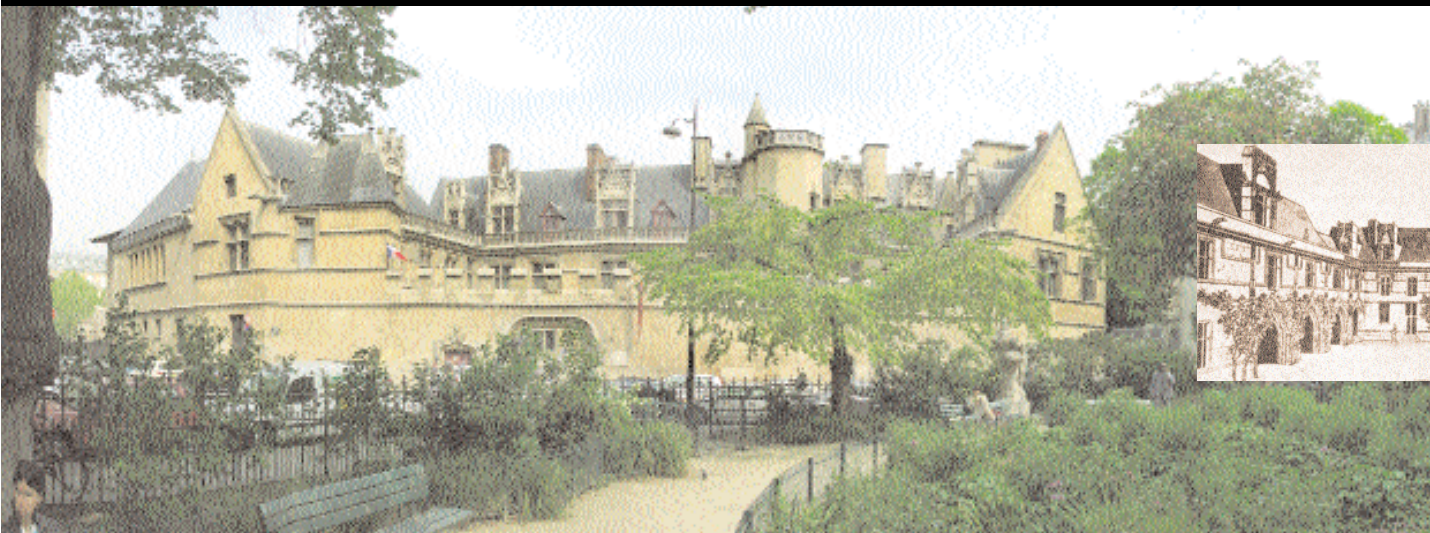
In 1754, Delisle's income from the Royal College of France may have become tenuous because he negotiated with the Navy, the salaried and titled position, "Astronomer of the Navy." In 1771 Messier assumed this title with an increase in salary that allowed him to afford lodging at Hotel Cluny.

Messier published three deep sky object catalogues, each growing in size. The first was in 1771 with the second and third following in 1783 and 1784. The purpose of these catalogues, from the start, was to provide a detailed list of "nebular stars," a reference work that was lacking in the field of astronomy. The final 1784 catalogue had 103 entries.

As a boy who grew up in the country, Messier never would have dreamed that he would become the leading observational astronomer of his time, develop a passion for comets, and create a legacy for compiling a small catalogue of celestial objects. Messier passed away at Hotel Cluny in 1817.



*A 1700s Dollond refractor made in London and of a type used by Messier.*



*Far left. Hotel Cluny, where Messier worked, eventually lived and died, is now the National Museum of the Middle Ages and Thermal Baths of Cluny. The smaller drawing is one of the few depictions of the observatory atop the tower which was built and equipped around 1747 by Messier's boss, Joseph Delisle.*