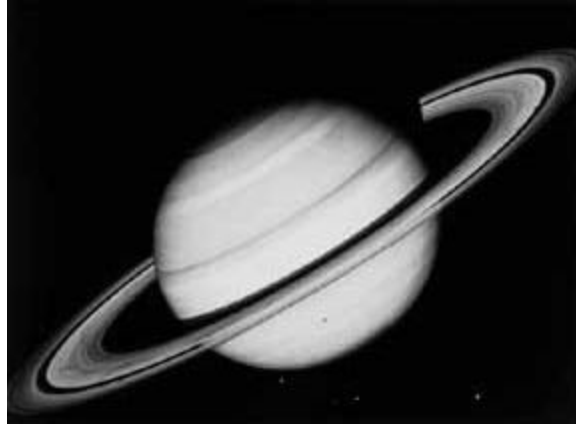


Saturn



SATURN, the sixth planet from the Sun, is one of the five planets visible from Earth without a telescope. Since the 17th century, when Saturn's dazzling, complex ring system was first observed by the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei, the planet has stood as a symbol of the majesty, mystery, and order of the physical universe. Over the past 20 years, we have discovered that Jupiter, Uranus, and Neptune also have rings; however, Saturn's ring system is the most extensive and brilliant. Although the origin of the rings is unknown, scientists hope to uncover clues by studying the planet's history.

Although Galileo was the first to see Saturn's rings (in 1610), it wasn't until 1659 that the Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens, using an improved telescope, observed that they are actually separate from the planet. In 1676, the French-Italian astronomer Jean Dominique Cassini first observed what appeared to be a division between the rings now known as the Cassini division. Improvements in telescopic technology over the next three centuries revealed much about the mysterious planet: the banded atmosphere, the storm "spots," and a very apparent "flattening" at the poles, three features Saturn was observed to share with Jupiter. (Courtesy of NASA)