Editorial:

The Philadelphia Academy Sale

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An earthquake is shaking the Mineral World, and its epicenter is a brick-red building on Logan Circle in Philadelphia. The renowned Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, founded nearly 200 years ago, one-time home to the likes of mineralogist Sam Gordon and the exquisite 123-year-old Vaux collection, has sold its entire mineral collection to Colorado mineral dealer Bryan Lees, California dealer Wayne Leicht and British dealer Ian Bruce. The selling price for the 26,000 specimens (including the Vaux collection, sale of which is pending Orphans-Court approval) has not been divulged, but was surely in the millions of dollars; Argentum Auctioneers had previously appraised the collection at $5 million, and that figure was probably low, given the prices that top specimens can bring these days.

The Philadelphia Academy, which had long ago abandoned the earth sciences, had been strapped for cash for decades. There had not been a functioning mineralogy laboratory or a full-time curator of minerals there since the 1950's (a part-time curator, Robert Middleton, was employed briefly from 1976 to 1981 under a grant). The focus of the Academy and its museum had shifted exclusively to the biological sciences, and there was no intention of ever again hiring a mineral curator or displaying the mineral collection. Consequently, the trustees voted to liquidate the mineral collection and use the money to endow the Academy's library.

Originally an auction was considered, but the size of the collection and the local public opposition (which might have made an auction a messy and protracted public relations debacle) may have been a discouragement. The trustees would have preferred to find another institution willing to buy and preserve the entire collection, but these days no mineral museum can command that kind of money, and few would even have the space available for storage. As part of the deal, the dozen or so "type" specimens having special value to science will be donated to another institution for safe-keeping, and selected suites of specimens of local minerals will be offered for resale to museums in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.

It is sad to hear of the break-up of such a huge and richly historical collection, the product of generations of early American mineral enthusiasts in the birthplace of American mineralogy. The specimens in storage are a miraculous lot, a virtual time capsule from a gilded age long past. Crates of specimens shipped back to the museum by Sam Gordon from his expeditions to Tsumeb and Llallagua in the 1920's and 1930's, with specimens still in pristine condition (including one of the finest known Tsumeb azurites), are just one example. Countless old classics from continental Europe, large numbers of Cornish and other British specimens not seen on the market for a hundred years, drawer after drawer full of the best English fluorites, and even many historical American specimens are coming out of hiding—including rare old New England treasures, crates of spectacular old Arizona specimens marked "Bisby," and a wealth of specimens from classic, now-defunct Pennsylvania localities. This is just a hint

of what I hear from Tom Gressman, who is in Philadelphia helping to pack up the specimens as I write this in late October.

Of course, that's the cream of the collection. Many of the 19,000 non-Vaux specimens are not particularly valuable, aside from their historical significance; the majority of them are probably worth under $50 each. It will be a monumental chore to distribute the various important suites of such specimens to interested museums. And unfortunately, the years of curatorial neglect have taken their toll. Specimens have been pilfered over the years, and some specimens have not survived. Some have crumbled to dust where they sat, with only their embrittled old labels to indicate what they had once been. The smell of decay was thick in many of the old cabinets that had long stood unopened. Such things are bound to happen when a collection is left ignored and uncurated for over half a century.

It must be said that in the altruistic world of non-profit institutions, it is not good for museum administrators to view their collections as monetary resources that can be tapped during difficult financial times. Such decisions can damage a museum's reputation with potential future donors, and cannot later be reversed when a new administration with different priorities takes over. Decisions to sell a no longer wanted collection to benefit other areas of the museum, rather than transfer it at no charge to other institutions, are morally questionable and must be made with the greatest circumspection. It was clearly the donors' wishes that their specimens be preserved for "the public good" in a museum setting *somewhere*, and not be redistributed to other private collectors. But that is a trust which the Philadelphia Academy largely failed at since the beginning, inasmuch as the vast majority of the collection has always been inaccessible to the public. In any case, many museums today no longer accept gifts with "strings attached," requiring them to maintain possession in perpetuity, never selling or trading the specimens to private parties at some time in the distant future. And one certainly cannot accuse the Philadelphia Academy of acting in haste, since their commitment to mineralogy ended so many decades ago.

The grieving process will run its course, bringing a renewed awareness that nothing lasts forever, even great museums. The cold fact is that a museum, or a city, that can't or won't come up with the money to properly care for a great mineral collection should not hang onto it forever. They have an obligation to find their specimens a better home, and that process is now under way for the Philadelphia Academy collection. Acting President Ian Davison and the Academy Board of Trustees finally took the necessary step, a sad one but long overdue. All that remains now is to rename the institution the Philadelphia Academy of Biological Sciences. Congratulations are definitely in order for Bryan Lees, Wayne Leicht and Ian Bruce for successfully negotiating the deal to rescue this great collection from its ignominious dungeon, where further decay would certainly have taken place otherwise.

Local opposition to the sale was strong. Maria Luisa Crawford, a research professor of geology at Bryn Mawr College, was quoted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as saying that it might be reasonable for the Academy to sell the collection, but "the problem," she said, "is that many of the pieces may be bought by individual collectors and disappear from public view." Excuse me, but it was the original acquisition of those specimens *by* the Academy that plunged them into a black hole, *out* of public view, many for over a hundred years. The Philadelphia Academy collection never really did any of us living today much good. It was unavailable for research or study and could not be seen on display (except for a few hundred pieces in a small room in the 1960's and before). To us, the collection might just as well have been re-buried in the ground.

Collectors and museum advocates may mourn the demise of a historically great mineral museum, but must also be experiencing a feeling that this development has its positive side. A tidal wave of extraordinary classic specimens in all price ranges will sweep over the collecting world, leaving our bank accounts drained but our collections enriched. Other museums will acquire treasured suites from long-extinct local occurrences. Photographers will be kept busy for some time recording the best pieces, which in turn will then eventually be illustrated in books and magazines for the education and enjoyment

of all. In fact, the *Mineralogical Record* will be publishing a retrospective on the museum, with plenty of photos of the best specimens.

Wealthy collectors will acquire the very best (and most expensive) specimens, some of which may one day be donated back to other museums for permanent display. Even in private hands, they will be seen and enjoyed far more than they ever were at the Academy. The key requirement in this dispersal process is that the specimens retain their historical provenance by means of careful, detailed labeling and record-keeping—an awesome task. But fortunately each specimen already carries a painted-on catalog number, and the corresponding museum catalogs of the collection have been preserved intact. The collection's noble history will therefore live on.

And so, in a way, it is time for a great celebration. The prodigal specimens have returned to the daylight, and we can all take part in welcoming them back. We will now get to see a treasure trove of minerals on the market, the like of which may never be seen again—certainly a once-in-several-generations event that we can tell our grandchildren about. But let's hope that the administrators of our other great museums don't start seeing dollar signs when they look at their mineral collections. If they do, we might someday have no great mineral museums left.