

Rocks for sale - lunar rocks

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The British Museum, the "attic of empire," contains an amazingly diverse assortment of treasure and junk. In the past, some collectors -- from Lord Elgin on down -- often weren't any too scrupulous about how they obtained "their" treasures. A number of nations have tried for years to get items returned, without success.

With the scope and scruples of the institution in mind, a hopeful negotiator recently approached museum officials with a literally out-of-this-world offer. What would the museum pay, the man asked, for a moon rock?

The six Apollo manned expeditions returned to Earth with about 850 pounds of lunar rock and dust. Over the years, much has been loaned out for scientific study, public exhibition, and other official purposes. Because all the material was obtained during missions financed by the U.S. government, it's illegal for anyone else to possess any of it.

And yet an underground market in lunar material has persisted over the years. In the case of the British Museum, the incident involved a gift plaque holding a sliver of Apollo rock presented by the United States to President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. During a military coup in 1972, members of Bhutto's family reportedly escaped from the presidential palace with the plaque. The British Museum official told the lunar salesman that the moon rock had "no commercial value at all" because the museum already had another moon rock loaned gratis by NASA.

A similar lunar gift plaque was stolen in Nicaragua in 1979 when Anastasio Somoza was overthrown. Years later, several U.S. meteorite dealers were approached by self-styled agents for the current, unidentified possessors of the plaque. With federal law in mind, none of the U.S. dealers followed up on the offer.

Many observers have assumed that there are 12 specific men who could well have their own moon rocks as personal souvenirs: the Apollo moon walkers. That widespread assumption has already spread some trouble. People magazine reported a few years ago that the engagement ring worn by Buzz Aldrin's new wife sported a chip of moon rock next to the diamond. Federal agents took the report so seriously that they visited the Aldrins to inspect the ring. The magazine report, it turned out, was bogus. No other solid evidence -- indeed, no other real rumor -- has indicated that any of the men broke the federal statutes.

Apollo samples did disappear, to be sure. One sample shipped to a geologist in the Middle East vanished within a stolen mailbag at a New York airport and probably wound up in a landfill after the thieves removed the bonds they were after.

One other authentic private source of genuine moon dust seems to exist: dirty spacesuits. Upon the Apollo astronauts' return from each mission, NASA shipped the spacesuits to their manufacturer for inspection. According to unpublished accounts, workers sometimes ran loops of scotch tape across them, picking up small amounts of moon dust.

One of those moon-dust tapes, purportedly made off of an Apollo 14 lunar spacesuit, showed up in a for-sale newspaper ad early in 1992. A man named Steve Goodman had found the tape among the papers of his late father, whose company manufactured spacesuits. After consultation with Goodman and his lawyer, NASA decided it wasn't worth the effort--or the bad publicity--to confiscate the contraband moon-dust sample.

The moon-dust-auction attempt never went far enough to establish the market value of real moon rock. But one dealer, Robert Haag of Tucson, Arizona, owns his own moon rock legally, and he estimates the gem value of the stone at \$20,000 per carat. Impacts by space-going objects occasionally blast fragments of rock from the moon, and some pieces fall to Earth as meteorites. The one purchased by Haag fell in Australia.

Only one or two fragments of that size fall to Earth every year, usually into oceans or jungles. Anything on land weathers away to dust in a few centuries, during which it looks like any other ordinary rock. The odds against finding one are cosmic.

Elsewhere in the world, there exists an as-yet-untapped source of lunar material for legal sale. The Russians retrieved a few hundred grams of dust and pebbles on three robotic missions in the early 1970s, and the samples reside at the Vernadskiy Institute in Moscow. Under the current hard economic times, the institute is going bankrupt. The chance to earn dollars for its lunar samples could accurately be called a heaven-sent opportunity.