

It came from outer space, lighting in Owings Mills

Meteorite stops en route to auction



Sun photo by Kenneth K. Lam, October 21, 2007

Jon Wood (left) of Direct Dimensions in Owings Mills performs a 3-D laser scan on the 1,400-pound meteorite for collector Steve Arnold (standing), who is taking his find to a New York auction.

By Liz F. Kay and Tyeesha Dixon | Sun reporters

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Looking for an out-of-this-world conversation starter for your den? A hefty chunk of space debris made a brief stop in Owings Mills yesterday on its way to New York to be auctioned to the highest bidder.

Professional meteorite hunter Steve Arnold brought his 1,400-pound find to Direct Dimensions, an Owings Mills-based 3-D imaging company, to gather precise measurements of its mottled exterior.

The meteorite - a chunk of interplanetary debris that falls to the earth's surface - is an "oriented pallasite," composed of iron and olivine, a semiprecious gemstone known as peridot. It is called "oriented" because of its curved surface, indicating it moved straight through the atmosphere rather than tumbling or breaking apart.

Arnold, of Kingston, Ark., says this is the largest oriented pallasite found on the planet. After spending 15 years as a meteorite broker and dealer, he began searching for meteorites full time about two years ago, just weeks before he found this specimen about 7 feet under in a Kansas wheat field.

He and his family drove the meteorite to Maryland in a U-Haul trailer towed by his yellow Hummer H2. They departed last night for a New York City auction house where the stone will be sold next week. Meteorites are often sold between individuals, sometimes through Web sites such as eBay.

Tim McCoy, a geologist and curator of meteorites for the Smithsonian Institution, described it as "a nice collector piece or museum piece."

The rock probably landed on Earth about 2,000 years ago, Arnold said, and McCoy added it was likely 4.5 billion years old - half a billion years older than scientists say is the age of any rock on Earth.

"To study the birth of our solar system, you have to look at meteorites," he said.

For those thinking of bidding, McCoy cautioned that the metal in the meteorite would likely corrode from exposure to the oxygen in the earth's atmosphere.

Arnold agreed that rusting is a challenge, but said collectors can preserve the meteorite by using desiccants to keep it dry.

Arnold couldn't be certain how much the meteorite would bring at auction, but the auction house estimated its value at between \$630,000 and \$700,000.

McCoy said there's a pretty healthy market for meteorites, which "is a mixed blessing." There's an economic incentive for people to find meteorites, but it's driven up prices, putting some specimens out of reach for museums. Still, he said, collectors and scientists have "struck a pretty healthy balance."

Most dealers are good about contributing samples; even the system of naming meteorites requires placing a deposit in a well-curated museum.

The meteorite was brought to Owings Mills because it might be sold to a private owner, Arnold said, and he wanted to measure the contours of the meteorite so digital models or replicas could be constructed at a later date.

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