T. rex fossil sold for $50.1 million

Philip Guelpa
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The fossilized skeletal remains of a 12-and-a-half-foot-tall *Tyrannosaurus rex* were sold last Tuesday by Sotheby's auction house in New York. The sale, for $50.1 million, makes the dinosaur, dubbed Gus, the most expensive paleontological specimen ever sold on the commercial market. The successful buyer was one of seven bidders and has not been identified. The future disposition of the skeleton is unknown.

The Gus specimen was recovered at a site in South Dakota by commercial collector Thomas Heitkamp and his team at Theropoda Expeditions during an excavation that began in 2021.

Sale prices of such valuable scientific specimens have been on the increase in recent years. Such sales to anonymous private individuals or entities often remove these significant scientific finds from public view and academic study. A 2025 study found that while there were 61 *T. rex* fossils in public trusts at that time, these were outnumbered by the 71 held by private collectors.

The previous top price for a dinosaur fossil was $44.6 million for a stegosaurus two years ago. This followed on the heels of another *T. rex* skeleton—called Stan—priced at $31.8 million, sold at auction in 2020. The buyer was anonymous. That specimen is now located in the Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The museum was opened to the public late last year.

The last time a similar specimen was sold to a public institution was 1997, when another *T. rex* specimen—this one known as Sue—was sold to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago for $8.36 million. The rapidly escalating prices are reaching levels which public institutions cannot afford.

The proper recovery of such specimens entails a long and expensive process of meticulous excavation and conservation which requires the efforts of skilled technicians and scientists, no small undertaking. The Gus fossil was recovered from private land in South Dakota, thus making it the private property of the landowner to be disposed of at their pleasure.

This trend of rising prices for the sale of paleontological specimens to private collectors is driving universities and museums out of the market. The result is a significant loss of valuable information for research and education, all for the personal "enjoyment" of ultra-wealthy individuals.

In advance of the recent sale, the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology issued a statement regarding the private appropriation of such specimens.

> Modern research techniques, including high-resolution CT imaging, geochemical analyses, and molecular investigations are still revealing new information from fossils collected more than a century ago. Because these historic specimens have remained in public collections, researchers have been able to revisit them repeatedly as scientific methods have evolved. The same opportunity should remain available for scientifically important fossils discovered today.

The Society warned of the negative consequences of such sales.

> As the commercial market for exceptional dinosaur fossils continues to grow, museums and universities face increasing challenges acquiring specimens of the greatest scientific importance. When these fossils enter private ownership without provisions for long-term access, opportunities for future research, education, and public engagement may be

permanently diminished.

The extreme prices now being paid for such sought-after fossil specimens are dangerous in other ways. Unscrupulous “treasure hunters” are highly incentivized to loot specimens for private sale. Not only does this remove such fossils from scientific examination but these clandestine excavations are likely to destroy the valuable contextual information derived from the location where the fossil is found, without proper recording.

It must also be noted that study of the past, whether using paleontology or archaeology, requires the comparative examination of a statistically representative sample of the materials being investigated. The larger the sample size, the more accurate and detailed are the conclusions that can be drawn. The concentration of resources on certain objects seen as of special value to the wealthy elite to the detriment of other equally important subjects will tend to distort the representativeness of data recovered and thus available for analysis.

The astronomical prices which these dinosaur specimens elicit are a symptom of the pathological commodification of all aspects of life under capitalism. Everything is valued primarily by the price for which it can be sold. Inevitably then, those individuals with the most money get to decide what is important and how it will be used regardless of the use value these “commodities” may have for the larger society. It also creates the opportunity for the manipulation of knowledge by the oligarchic elite. Large dinosaur fossils are viewed as “trophies” by the ultra-wealthy, so seemingly limitless amounts of money are devoted to their acquisition. At the same time, funding of basic scientific research on the devastating effects of climate change, for example, is being cut.

The Trump administration’s recently shrank the fossil-rich national monuments of Bears Ears and Grand-Staircase Escalante by 90 percent. After the record-setting sale of Gus, opening these areas to private exploitation is definitely cause for concern.

Knowledge cannot be left subject to the interests and whims of the tiny elite. Society’s resources must be allocated rationally for the benefit of all. This can only be achieved under socialism.