

Curators squeezed out by high dino bones price tag

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'Big John' was discovered in South Dakota in 2014.

This week the largest triceratops skeleton ever unearthed goes up for auction in Paris—but museum curators like Francis Duranthon can only dream of getting their hands on such a prize.

With an estimated price tag of up to 1.5 million euros (\$1.7 million), Duranthon, who directs the Toulouse Museum of Natural History, told AFP the skeleton would cost 20 to 25 years of his acquisitions budget.

"We can't compete," he said.

The triceratops is among the most distinctive of [dinosaurs](#) due to the three horns on its head—one at the nose and two on the forehead—that give the dinosaur its Latin name.

"Big John" is the largest known surviving example, 66 million years old and with a skeleton some eight metres long.

It was discovered in South Dakota in 2014 and flown to Italy where it was assembled by specialists.

It is only the latest dinosaur to be sold by the Drouot auction house which, according to its website, handled an allosaurus and a diplodocus each worth 1.4 million euros in 2018.

Last year, they sold a second allosaurus for three million.

That these and other skeletons could adorn the private mansions of the ultra-wealthy rather than [museum](#) halls is a common source of frustration.

For Steve Brusatte, a consultant on the forthcoming "Jurassic World" movie, "[dinosaur fossils](#) belong in museums".

The author of "The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs" remembers being a teenager and seeing the fossil that would inspire him to go into palaeontology.



The Drouot auction house has sold several dinosaur skeletons over the past few years.

"The T. rex skeleton Sue was put on display at the Field Museum in Chicago," Brusatte told AFP.

"It awed me and, standing under it, it gave me a new perspective on the ancient world."

Lost to history?

If very rare artefacts go directly into private collections, there could be a

loss for the scientific community, said Annelise Folie, curator of palaeontology collections at Belgium's Royal Institute of Natural Sciences.

"If it's a new species... we may never even be aware that it existed on Earth," she told AFP.

It is also impossible to say without investigation "whether a skeleton contains new information or not," said palaeontologist Nour-Eddine Jalil, of Paris' Museum of Natural History.

Although, the lure of selling fossils could motivate new archaeological expeditions.

In the case of Big John, the sale is "not a big deal because we already have plenty of triceratops," palaeontologist Pascal Godefroit of the Belgian Royal Institute of Natural Sciences told AFP.

Scientists had also been able to analyse the bones before the auction.

He said that while scientists can't force buyers to let them analyse specimens, the two sides are sometimes able to "work together intelligently".

But he said there are problems with many of the specimens put up for sale.



Sue was discovered by fossil hunter Sue Hendrickson in 1990 and purchased by the Field Museum in Chicago at public auction in 1997.

"It happens too often that you have interesting pieces but they're poorly identified," he said.

"Or have been made useless by efforts to make them more complete like filling them in with plastic."

Back in 1997, Sue the T. rex that sparked the imagination of the young Brusatte was also put up for auction.

Chicago's Field Museum was able to raise over \$8 million to purchase it.

"But it could easily have gone the other way," said Brusatte.

"A single wealthy person could have bought it, brought it home and it would never have been put on display for the public, to inspire me and countless other children."

The 67-million-year-old "Sue" was discovered in 1990 on an Indian reservation in South Dakota by American palaeontologist Sue Hendrickson and was named after its finder.

The sale of "Big John" comes amid continued enthusiasm for dinosaur skeletons, with a 67-million-year-old T. rex [skeleton](#) smashing records when it was sold in New York for \$31.8 million just over a year ago.

The triceratops has an export licence, and Alexandre Giquello of the Giquello auction house said in September that there were a dozen possible buyers.

Dinosaur sales can be unpredictable however: in 2020, several specimens offered in Paris did not find takers after minimum prices were not reached.

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