

Lowell Observatory to renovate Pluto discovery telescope

January 6 2017



Credit: Lowell Observatory

The instrument at Lowell Observatory used by Clyde Tombaugh to discover Pluto will soon undergo renovation. The year-long project, set to begin on January 12, will include restoration of both the historic telescope and the wooden dome that houses it. While the telescope will be removed from the dome during this work, the dome will be open from time to time for public tours as work allows.

The Pluto Telescope and its [dome](#) date back to the late 1920s, when Lowell Observatory recommenced the search for founder Percival Lowell's theoretical "Planet X". In the nine decades since, some areas of the dome have rotted, a few of the telescope parts have worn out, and the others need to be cleaned or stripped and repainted. The renovation will address these issues, as Lowell's technical staff plans to replace part of the dome wood and then weatherproof the entire facility. They will also repair and clean the telescope control mechanisms, photographic plate holders, and other accessories. Lowell staff will also add new educational exhibits to the dome.

The Pluto Telescope is technically known as an astrograph, a telescope specifically designed for taking photographs of objects in space. In addition to Tombaugh's 1930 discovery of Pluto, the instrument was also used by Lowell astronomers to study comets and asteroids, as well as stars with measurable proper motion (apparent angular movement). But it is the Pluto discovery that continues to generate public interest in the facility, resulting in ever-increasing visitation from guests around the world. In 2016 alone, Lowell welcomed a record 100,000 visitors.



Credit: Lowell Observatory

The renovation comes two years after a similar effort on Lowell's historic 24-inch telescope and will be carried out by the same team of Lowell technicians. Like that instrument, the lens of the Pluto Telescope, measuring 13-inches in diameter, was crafted by the Alvan Clark and Sons telescope making firm of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The dome of the Pluto Telescope was designed and built in 1928-1929 by instrument maker Stanley Sykes, who followed the same basic plan his brother Godfrey had devised for the 24-inch [telescope](#) dome back in 1896.

Lowell Director Jeff Hall said, "Like the Alvan Clark refractor across

campus, the Pluto Discovery Telescope is a national treasure. People come to Lowell from all over the world to see these historic telescopes, and I'm so pleased to see them restored and preserved for decades to come."

The Pluto Telescope and dome renovation will cost \$155,000, all of which Lowell's development team has raised through crowdsourcing, private donations, and a grant from Crystal Trust. Hall said, "We can't undertake major projects like this without external support, and we're grateful to everyone who has donated to make this happen."

Provided by Lowell Observatory

Citation: Lowell Observatory to renovate Pluto discovery telescope (2017, January 6) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-01-lowell-observatory-renovate-pluto-discovery.html>

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