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EDITORIAL

Another Leeuwenhoek Comes to Light

Antony van Leeuwenhoek's handmade microscopes — those simple, single-lens instruments small enough to rest in the palm of your hand — continue to intrigue and fetch large sums at auction. The Dutch microbiologist is known to have left 247 microscopes when he died in 1723.

And now, one more has surfaced.

This newest find is a silver scope (there also examples made of brass) that was auctioned at Christie's of London for $218,000 to a California buyer on Dec. 13, 2023. It was unearthed during a house clearance in East Anglia, England. Prior to the sale, Prof. Brian J. Ford, a Leeuwenhoek scholar, authenticated it under the scanning electron microscope at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge University. Ford says that are many forgeries and replicas, and his SEM protocol is effective in examining the methods of handcrafted manufacture not visible by other instruments, providing objective authentication rather than a "gut feeling." (See "Leeuwenhoek Microscopes: Mystery and Mischief," *The Microscope*, 63:3, pp 131–142, 2015.)

This recently discovered Leeuwenhoek silver microscope sold for $218,000 in December 2023.

"Remarkable as it seems," says Ford, "this is the third new example to cross my desk in [recent] years."

In 2015, a silver dealer in London submitted a silver microscope to Christie's, who asked Ford to determine if it was a true Leeuwenhoek. It had been found in a box of dollhouse toys. Using a hand lens, Ford could detect the telltale signs of manufacture seen on genuine Leeuwenhoek microscopes and was certain of its authenticity. Ford didn't stop there. "I was keen to study it by scanning electron microscopy to develop a protocol by which Leeuwenhoek's work could be objectively authenticated." The microscope never went to auction but was privately bought by a Dutch antique dealer for a fraction of its value.

Within 3 months, another microscope emerged, this one was made of brass and dug out of mud from the canals of Delft, Netherlands. Strangely, it was offered for sale on eBay as a "weird kind of drawing instrument," yet the microscopy community took notice. Ford wrote in 2015 that "it seemed to have the thrice-perforated handle characteristic of many Leeuwenhoek microscopes." (See "Two New Leeuwenhoek Microscopes?" *The Microscope*, 63:1, pp 35–36, 2015). This one also dodged the auction house and was purchased privately by a Spanish collector, who asked Ford to authenticate with SEM.

"As a schoolboy," recalls Ford, "I was once encouraged to go find Leeuwenhoek microscopes, though nobody thought any more could have survived 300 years. Having three emerge recently is beyond anybody's expectations."

Prior to these three, a silver Leeuwenhoek microscope, found in a box of laboratory supplies in 1979 at Leiden University, Netherlands, was sold at Christie's in 2009 for $459,225 — reportedly the highest price ever paid for one of these world's rarest, original microscopes. Ford says it then disappeared without a trace after being bought, apparently by a European biotech company.

Have we now seen the last of these modest little microscopes? One thing is certain: they and the groundbreaking research that Leeuwenhoek conducted with them will continue to impress and edify us for years to come.

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