

# Lucy the fossil dodges controversy, goes on display in US



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HOUSTON, United States (AFP) — Lucy, the world's most famous fossil, took on a new role as international tourist when she went on public display this week for the first time outside Ethiopia since her discovery in 1974.

Lucy is no longer the oldest-known member of the human family tree, but dating back 3.2 million years and with 40 percent of her skeleton recovered, she is the oldest, most complete specimen of an early human species.

As such, some paleontologists and fossil hunters within the scientific community have sharply protested her cross-Atlantic voyage to be exhibited from Friday at the Houston, Texas Museum of Natural Science.

Prominent paleontologists even likened it to prostituting precious artifacts for ticket sales.

Indeed museums such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the American Museum of Natural History in New York refused to participate in Lucy's public tour negotiated over the last six years by the Houston museum.

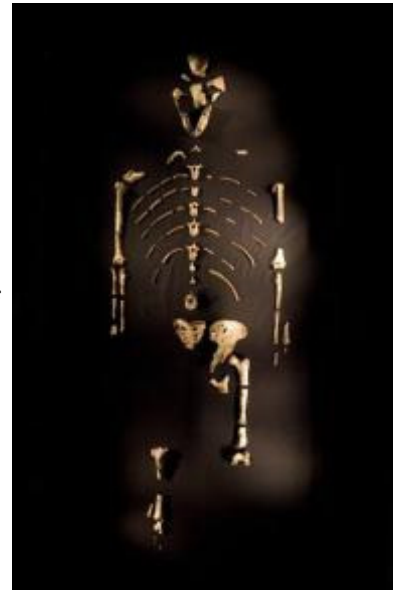
Citing concerns over the fossil's safety and an influential 1998 UNESCO agreement that allowed for the transport of fossils from their countries of origin only for scientific inquiry, leading scientists loudly opposed the plan.

The director of Human Origins at the Smithsonian, Rick Potts, said he was concerned because all his Ethiopian contacts at the National Museum at Addis Ababa that houses Lucy had opposed her trip.

"I don't know of a single Ethiopian colleague who is in favor of Lucy traveling," Potts told AFP.

Officials from the Houston museum negotiated directly with the Ethiopian government, which has long expressed an interest in exhibiting Lucy in a bid to promote the country's fledgling tourism industry.

The Houston museum's director, Joel Bartsch, said his institution was a non-profit organization, and said he does not expect to make money on the exhibit due to the high costs of obtaining and safely transporting Lucy.



The 3.2 million-year-old fossilized remains of "Lucy" on display at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The exhibition is the first time the fossil has gone on public display outside Ethiopia since her discovery in 1974. The exhibition has generated criticism among scientists who believe that the remains are too fragile to be moved from Ethiopia.

He added he was confident Lucy could travel safely following earlier exhibitions of even more fragile artifacts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

"Before we agreed to accept the exhibition, a highly respected team of conservators specializing in hominid fossils was brought in to evaluate Lucy's condition," he said.

"They pronounced her to be 'hearty,' 'robust,' and fully capable of traveling without damage. All necessary precautions have been taken to ensure that Lucy will return to Ethiopia in the same condition in which she arrived."

In the millennia since her death, Lucy's bones have mineralized and become almost stone-like. Transported by Ethiopian Airlines, Lucy did, indeed, arrive safely in Houston in the middle of August.

Unpacked from two specially-designed museum suitcases, where her bones were tucked into custom-made cavities cut into foam, she was readied for an eight-month exhibition titled "Lucy's Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia."

Her safe arrival proves the scientific critics wrong, one Ethiopian official said.

"She is already here," said Samuel Assefa, Ethiopian ambassador to the United States. "The controversy is just idle. It's academic."

American anthropologist Donald Johanson and one of his students, Tom Gray, discovered Lucy in November 1974 near Hadar, Ethiopia.

With many ape-like features Lucy stood about 3 feet, 6 inches tall. But notably she appeared to walk upright, and confirmed to scientists that early humans probably learned bipedalism before developing larger brains.

The bones have been brought to the United States just once before in 1975, when Johanson took them to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History for study. But they were not publicly exhibited.

In August Johanson, now at the Arizona State University Institute of Human Origins, said he had reservations about Lucy's journey, but added the educational opportunity she presented outweighed those concerns.

"While I cannot overemphasize my personal concerns for Lucy's safety, a broader exposure of Lucy to the public does have great educational value," he said.

"Seeing the original Lucy will surely heighten public awareness of human origins studies particularly at a time when the validity of evolution has come under fire in our schools."