

BOOK REVIEW

THE SMALE COLLECTION: BEAUTY IN NATURAL CRYSTALS by Steve Smale (editors: G. Staebler and G. Neumeier), Lithographie, LLC, East Hampton, Connecticut (2006) 203 pages, hardcover, \$50.00

This large format book is described by the author as a coffee table art book; however, it is much more like a labor of love for Steve Smale. Smale not only describes the early difficulties of trying to publish such a mineral “art” volume, but also his efforts to develop the talent of photographing his own specimens, some of which are published here. You can understand his passion for mineral specimens and the development of this eye-candy book from the fact that he decided to enlist the talents of Jeff Scovil (a renowned mineral photographer) to provide the remainder of the color plate images. In total, there are 101 exquisite mineral color photographs.

Beside the magnificent photos, Smale also provides a very valuable discourse on his (and his wife Clara’s) personal collecting criteria. Among the many characteristics he discusses, three elements are paramount: beauty, balance, and economy. Beauty is self evident to him; the specimen should be attractive from all angles and all components (matrix and main crystal) should enhance the composition. Balance takes on many aspects in his judgment, with the “horizon” being the most crucial. This is where the upper edge of the specimen meets the sky and therefore the main crystal termination must be unblemished. Other aspects of balance include a single crystal on matrix, or two different minerals of equal importance on matrix, or perhaps a special floater. Finally, in the consideration of balance, the specimen must be three dimensional and stunning in every direction.

The next item covered by the author in evaluating a mineral specimen is “economy.” His interpretation of economy, “that every part of a specimen plays a role in its presentation; thus if any part were removed the piece would be degraded” is very fitting. Smale also mentions the role of repairs in display specimens, and that if properly disclosed and labeled repairs do not significantly reduce the integrity of the piece. Furthermore, he puts great emphasis on the documentation associated with a specimen. Such documentation includes precise location description (down to the pocket from whence it came), pedigree of previous owners, and published representations either as photographs or descriptions. I personally believe that the specimen presentation criteria presented by Smale are the unseen gem of this book. I will read this section over and over before I attend the next mineral show.

For all the great aspects of this book about world-class mineral specimens in a private collection, there are also some obvious flaws. They can be grouped as (1) mineral names, (2) specimen

economy, (3) crystal form, and (4) provenance. The mineral names used by the author seem to be random. Smale believes that there is no unique word to describe a mineral; rather the choice depends on the context. He believes it is often inappropriate to use the technical or species name. The first problem I have found in the book is that the author fluctuates from using species (aquamarine or schorl) to family (beryl or tourmaline) names frequently. Perhaps if he used the actual species names all through the captions, such confusion could be avoided. The second issue hinges on Smale’s criteria of specimen economy. Since he stresses that viewing the whole specimen is part of the complete beauty, I don’t understand why he presented cropped photographs on pages 12 (azurite – Tsumeb), 14 (pyrargyrite – Saxony), and 60 (emerald – Cosquez). The third comment concerns the ability to see the crystal form of a mineral. The Chinese scheelite presented on page 80 is so incredibly transparent that the form is difficult to discern. Similarly, the lush red Bolivian proustite displayed on page 175 does not resemble crystal forms I would associate with this mineral.

The first three “flaws” I would consider trivial. However, the last issue—that of provenance—is more troubling. The pedigree of a specimen is important, as is giving credit to the person or firm that brought the mineral to the marketplace. Steve Smale gave credit to Sandor Fuss for either trading or selling over thirty of the specimens portrayed in the book. However, in most cases Fuss was either a sales representative for The Collectors Edge (owners: Bryan and Kathy Lees) or provided secondary transactions (trades, etc.) through The Collectors Edge. I believe Smale should have given much more credit to Bryan and Kathy Lees (and their full staff), who for twenty years (through direct mining of specimens and purchasing of minerals around the world) have brought many of the most exquisite mineral specimens available to the marketplace.

The issue of proper credit to the appropriate source aside, this is otherwise a wonderful art book of mineral specimens. The Smales have assembled a world-class private collection and have shared a portion of it through the publication of this book. Mineral collectors in general can benefit from using the Smales eye for beauty and perfection as a standard for building a collection. Such standards can obviously be used at any size scale from thumbnails to miniatures and on up to cabinet specimens. This large format portfolio of mineral portraits would be a welcome addition to any mineral lover’s library.

FLORIE CAPORUSCIO
2708 Plazuela Serena
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505, U.S.A.