

THE REAL SMILING ROCK

Go to www.ebay.com.

Navigate to a category called "Everything Else."

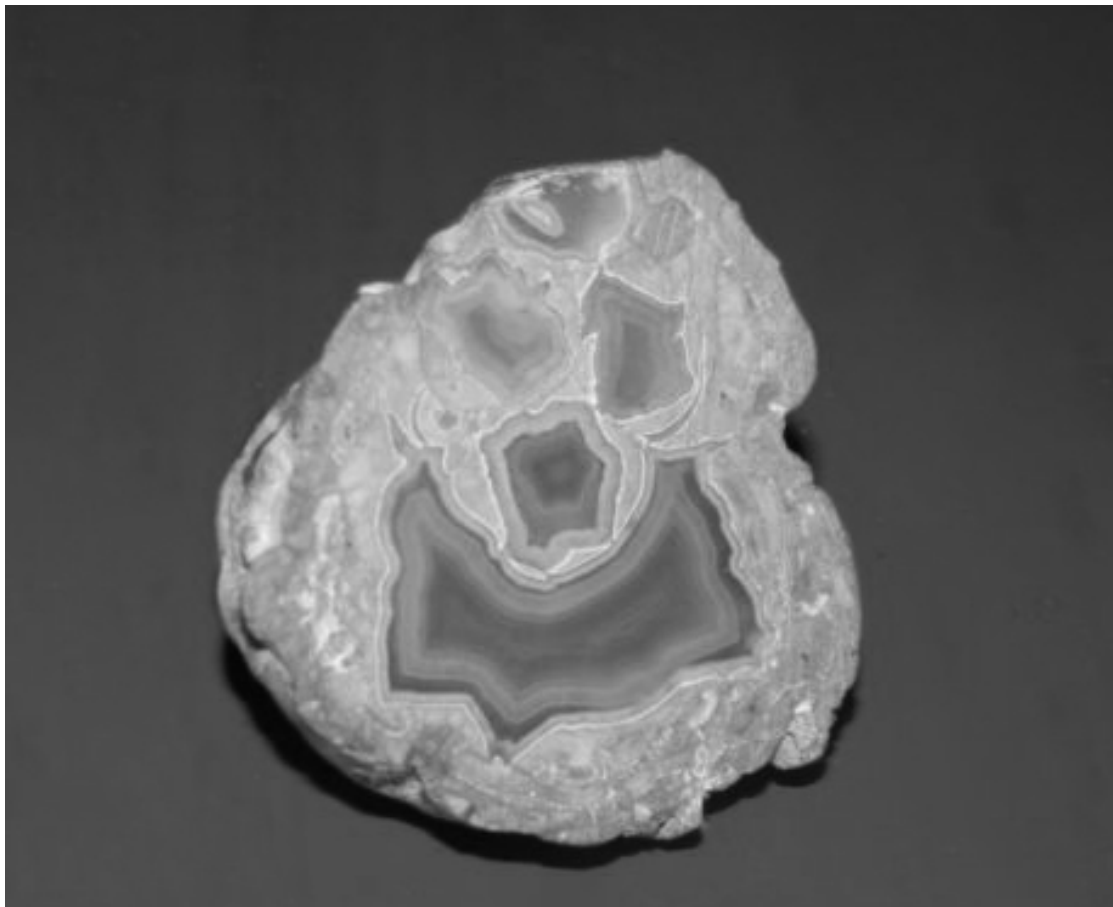
Within it are categories like "Weird Stuff," "Totally Bizarre," and simply "Other."

This is the outer limits of eBay, a place for items that defy categorization.

Set your minimum bid relatively high at \$1,000, for example.

Now you are scrolling through the crème of the dregs of online auctions.

This is where the smiling rock resides.



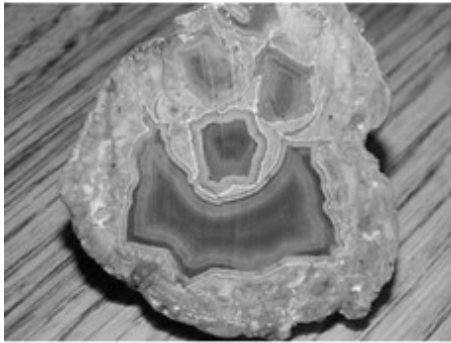
The smiling rock is a small agate geode for sale on eBay.com. Buyers can use the Buy It Now function to purchase the smiling rock for \$1,000,000 or they can suggest a lower price, which the seller can accept or reject.

The smiling rock has been listed on eBay for more than five years. It has been viewed more than 28,000 times and 97 people currently have the listing saved in their Watch Lists. Nearly 200 offers have been made to purchase the smiling rock for amounts less than \$1,000,000 and none of them have been accepted.

I have kept the smiling rock in my eBay Watch List for three years. The eBay listing has evolved over time as the images, title, and item description have changed.

This screen capture was taken in November of 2012:

Saved in your Watch list | Remove



very rare real smiling rock oak This is a real rock

Item condition: --


Price: **US \$1,000,000.00**

or

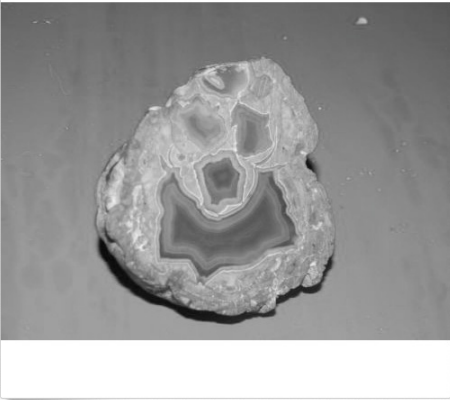
Best Offer:

Bucks Join eBay Bucks and earn 2% back on this item. See conditions

Shipping: Read item description or contact seller for details. |
Delivery: Varies
Returns: 3 day money back, buyer pays return shipping | Re

 **eBay Buyer Protection**
Covers your purchase price plus original shipping.
Learn more

Exactly two years later, this screen capture was taken in November 2014:



One sexy smiling rock, its a gold apple diamond oak Box shape Very Rare
Come feast your eyes upon a rock smiles
1 Aufruf pro Stunde

Artikelzustand: **Neu**
Übersicht: 201 Preisvorschläge

US \$1.000.000,00
Ca. EUR 803.632,42

77 Beobachter

Neu	7 Fragen an den Verkäufer	Verkäufer akzeptiert Preisvorschlag
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Last updated February 11, 2015, the description currently reads:

*** Update *** it is still smiling ***

This is a rock that smiles I hand cut this rock open and I seen it was looking back at me. I have been cutting rocks for yrs and never seen any thing like this before "it scared the shat outa me" This would make any person happy since it always smiles back i came to realize over the years never once have i seen that a frown on ether rock

This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real Natural Rock . THIS ROCK HAS BEEN FEATURED ON FRONT PAGE OF BIDMONKEE in 2011. :) I Enjoy all the people that looks at it cause where its at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people. It would always smile for someone if they had it, right now if i went where I have it stored at it would give it a big smile like always " If Who ever was to buy it It would never frown once it would keep smiling. (sic)

The item's condition is listed as being new and international shipping is not guaranteed.

The eBay seller is called guitarpickman.com. He has primarily sold guitar picks that he shaped and polished from stones and coins. He currently has a positive Feedback Percentage of 100% and a Feedback Score of 188. Outside of www.ebay.com, he also sold his guitar picks from his Etsy store and his website www.guitarpickman.com. Most of the picks were sold at a set price of around \$20, which buyers could pay using PayPal. Sometime between 2013-2014 his website went offline, but the URL is still registered.

In 2012 I made my first offer on the smiling rock for \$100 and it was immediately rejected. I made several more offers that year, the last and highest being \$1000, which was also rejected. In late 2012 I saw that the smiling rock had been sold for \$10,000. Somehow I couldn't believe it so I contacted guitarpickman.com to ask if it really was sold. He replied to my eBay message saying that the rock was not sold and that it was being relisted. I never found out exactly what happened, but I presume that someone made an offer in error, in haste, or in jest.

I thought about the smiling rock from time to time and would check in on it, revisiting the eBay listing to see what was new. One update included a modification to the title claiming that it was "sexy" along with the usual descriptors like "rare" and "ooak" (one of a kind). Another update was a new picture of a child holding the smiling rock next to her face. Presumably it was to demonstrate scale and compare smiles, but it also changed the tone of the eBay listing. While still being rare and sexy, this smiling rock was also a wholesome family type.

Then a breakthrough came during the summer of 2013.

I was telling the tale of the smiling rock to a friend when she asked a question so obvious and so crucial, I could not believe I had never asked it myself.

What about the other half?

This changed everything for me. The eBay listing had thus far only pictured one half of the rock, but obviously there had to be a second half. Its inner smiling face was only discovered when someone happened to cut it in two.

I had a lot of questions.

Where was the other half? Was it destroyed? Was it a perfect mirror copy? Was it included in the auction? Did both halves cost \$2,000,000? Could I buy one half for \$500,000?

Coincidentally, the listing was updated soon after and a photo of both halves was uploaded.

The second half was different. It leaned to the right rather than the left. The top of its face was less pointy, making it seem shorter. Its left eye was cloudy. It was missing the indentation marking the left temple. And it had a mineral deposit curving down its right cheek that looked like a big, grey scar.

To me, it seemed inferior. The physical quality of the specimen was comparable, but something felt off, almost counterfeit. I imagined that when the rock was cut open, the original smiling rock (that is, the first half) was the first to look out onto the world and witness the shock on guitarpickman.com's face. The second half was like an afterthought, the younger twin tardy to the miracle of its own birth.

At this point, I began to realize that I had become involved.

I felt offended by the second half as if its existence made the first half less rare, although I knew this wasn't exactly logical since the two halves were once a single stone. The first half seemed to have distinct personality and the item description was its voice, even if it was written by guitarpickman.com.

The smiling rock (the first half) was "always smiling" and has a "smile that will last forever." It was a charmer, an optimist, a people person, but the second half was never described. Was it moody? Was it arrogant? Was it insincere? Why did guitarpickman.com reveal the existence of the second half so late?

In June 2013 I decided to find out more about guitarpickman.com. From his website I found that his name was David Melton and he was likely living in Arkansas. A Google search didn't reveal much so I paid \$2.00 for an online background check. I now had his current and several previous addresses, phone number, and next of kin. I looked up satellite images of his house on Google Earth and wondered in which room he kept the smiling rock. Was it prominently

displayed in his living room? Was it on his bedside table to greet him every morning? Was it stored away in a box? Were both halves together?

Guitarpickman.com wrote, "Where [the smiling rock is] at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people." Its calling was to make people smile, but few people saw it in this small town in Arkansas. The eBay listing provided a stage for this tragic clown to shine and it functioned as a platform for the development of the smiling rock's online identity. The listing allowed many people to own the smiling rock in the sense that the eBay Watch List is a kind of virtual collection of objects. My Watch list is full of things I will never buy, but simply want to bookmark for the possibility of a collection.

My feeling of ownership over the smiling rock eventually made me aware of how precarious that was. eBay auctions that have ended will only remain in a Watch List for 60 days, so if the smiling rock ever sold the listing would disappear shortly after. Perhaps as a way to assert my own agency in this narrative, I decided to write a short story about the smiling rock and an eBay user much like myself.

The narrator describes the smiling rock, much like I have written here. The layered categories of "Other" set the scene of a murky eBay landscape and the smiling rock was a treasure in this littered marketplace, but one that is quickly deemed to be infinitely out of reach. The story profiles guitarpickman.com as a sadistic eBay seller who has no intentions of selling the smiling rock, but merely wants to taunt prospective buyers. He teases by updating the listing, calling the smiling rock sexy, uploading photos of the smiling rock cradled in his hand. He writes that he enjoys all the people looking at the listing. He wants them to know that he enjoys it. As the story continues the smiling rock is sold for \$10,000 and the distraught narrator suspects foul play asking, "Was the smiling rock ever even real?" The story ends with a dubious assertion and the last line quotes guitarpickman.com's item description: "This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real." (sic)

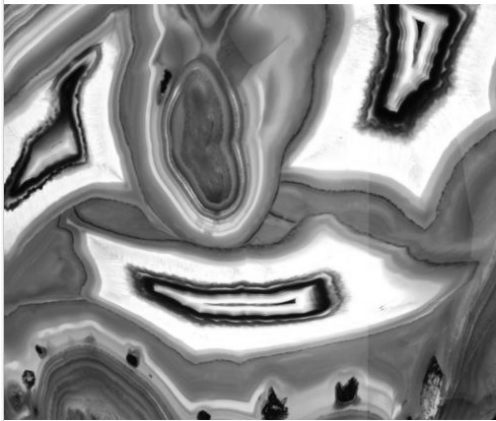
So the story was over, but then what?

The next logical step was that story should become a short film so I started to write a script that focused on the character of the narrator. Her initial intrigue evolved into an obsession with the smiling rock. The fact that her offers were denied only fueled her bidding fever. But then there was a twist...

The eBay buyer joined an online dating site and there she met someone who looked like the smiling rock. Specifically, their profile picture was the primary image of smiling rock from the eBay listing. She contacted this "smiling rock" on the dating site and they began a correspondence.

During the Autumn 2013 I began working on an exhibition that would feature digital prints and sculptures spawned from this developing script. The prints were 3D models of virtual smiling rocks that I designed, one of which was used as the

image for online invites and the press release, which was an eBay listing selling a virtual model of a smiling rock for \$10,000.



Sad Hetero World

Item condition: --
"brand new OoAK Rock"

History: 4 offers

Price: **US \$10,000.00**
[Add to list](#)

Shipping: **FREE** Standard Shipping | [See details](#)
International items may be subject to customs processing and additional charges. ⓘ
Item location: **Berlin, Germany**
Ships to: **United States**

Delivery: ⓘ **Estimated within 8-10 business days** ⓘ
Includes 5 business days handling time after receipt of cleared payment.
Please allow additional time if international delivery is subject to customs processing.

Payments: **PayPal** | [See details](#)

Returns: **Seller does not offer returns.** You are covered by the eBay Money Back Guarantee if you received an item that is not as described in the listing.

Guarantee: **ebay MONEY BACK GUARANTEE** | [See details](#)
Get the item you ordered or get your money back.
Covers your purchase price and original shipping.

The press release posted on ebay.com.

The text in the item description was almost identical to that of the "real" smiling rock (as of December 2013) with the addition of the date and time of the opening. It reads:

very rare real smiling rock OoAK This is a real rock

This is a rock that smiles It's a goold apple diamond box shape 4 gift
its sexy x cool

This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real Natural Rock .

THIS ROCK HAS BEEN FEATURED ON FRONT PAGE OF BIDMONKEE
in 2011. :)

It was hand cut open and seen it was looking back . I Enjoy all the
people that looks at it cause where its at right now it sees nobody and
would love to be seen by people. Give This SEXY oak ROCK SMILING
ROCK a loving home. Found it in teh ground and thought it was
nothing special. Prob Laid there for yrs b4 it got found. ITS sexy smile
will be looking out at you for yrs and yrs.

If Who ever was to buy it It would never frown once it would always
smile back

Friday, December 6

18:00 – 21:00

(sic)

The exhibition was titled "Sad Hetero World" and opened December 6, 2013 at
Gillmeier Rech in Berlin, Germany.

One of the exhibition reviews appeared on rhizome.org on January 17, 2014. It contained a link to the press release eBay listing for my virtual smiling rock as well as a link to the listing for the "real" smiling rock.

On July 22, 2014 David Guitarpickman (his Facebook username) shared a link to my press release eBay listing with the comment "#lawyer." He wanted to find legal representation to sue the person who he said had switched the picture, but was using his "song and dance" on another eBay listing. The same day he contacted the rhizome.org reviewer via Facebook to say it wasn't right to use his words to sell another "crappy rock they want to say is a smiling rock."

I deliberated what to do. It seemed likely that Guitarpickman would understand my intentions if I simply wrote to him, but my unease in breaking the communication seal made me hesitate. It was becoming so real.

On July 30, 2014 I contacted David Guitarpickman on Facebook to introduce myself, explain the press release, and ask if he would like to be involved in the project.

He responded quickly and was still unsure if my press release eBay listing was a fake listing, but he was happy if his "real" listing was used. Before I could respond he wrote again seven hours later. He admitted he first thought I was "messing with him," but then saw things differently. Now he was "speechless and in kinda shock and aww [sic]" that his rock had inspired me. He wanted to participate in the project, saying it "would bring great joy in [his] crazy hillbilly life."

Two months later he wrote, "Help me sell my rock lol."

Now as his Facebook friend, I had much more access to David Melton's life. The child holding the smiling rock in an early eBay picture was Melton's daughter who had grown up quite a bit since the photo. There were many photos of his guitar picks and he also shared photos of stained glass he had made himself. Melton had his own metal roofing business and regularly went out to collect rocks. He often found arrowheads and once found a ring near a creek, but couldn't tell if the gemstone was real. He is fond of doughnuts and live action role-playing. He got a puppy in the spring of 2014 that grew into a large German Shepherd. He went to Red Lobster on May 3, 2014 and got a bad sunburn on August 4, 2014.

In the summer of 2014 I finished my script, which had expanded into a feature-length film and immediately went into production. Guitarpickman.com had become a character in the film and the soundtrack would feature guitar prominently, so I thought that it would be perfect if David Melton could contribute to the soundtrack somehow. I asked if he played guitar. He wrote that he did not.

On October 12, 2014, I received an invitation to exhibit my work during Reed Arts Week 2015 at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

I finished shooting principle photography in Berlin on November 17, 2014 and flew to New York for an extended trip on November 18, 2104.

I planned to produce a new work during my travels in the U.S. and I eventually proposed that I show the "real" smiling rock during Reed Arts Week. I wrote to David Melton on Facebook (he had since switched his last name from Guitarpickman to Melton) asking if he would be interested in loaning me the smiling rock to show in an art exhibition. He responded the same day, "Hello yes I'm interested ☺"

The terms of the loan were drafted and a rental contract was made. David Melton would be paid an honorarium and the costs of shipping and insurance would be paid by Reed College.

The actual value of the smiling rock is not yet determined because it is a unique item that has never been sold. David Melton was asked to declare the value of the smiling rock so that Reed College could acquire the appropriate insurance in case of damage, loss, theft, etc. He initially gave the sum of \$1,000,000, then \$50,000, and finally a lower sum that both parties agreed upon.

Because Melton was having trouble sending emails from his account, his correspondence with one of the Reed curators had to resume on Facebook. David Melton and I now have one mutual Facebook friend.

On February 4, 2015 I flew back to Berlin and will be unable to attend the exhibition during Reed Arts Week on March 3-7, 2015.

I will not see the real smiling rock.

Lindsay Lawson
February 14, 2015