

Courier & Technology Considerations During a Pandemic (August 2020)

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to address the temporary modifications made in lieu of sending a physical courier due to travel restrictions. It is a shared concern within the international community of museum registrars and collection specialists, insurers, and underwriters, that these emergency measures may be viewed as a replacement for established industry standards. Recognizing the immediate short-term and potential long-term effects on couriered shipments facing the Museum community due to the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, this paper will:

1. Identify temporary measures taken to address immediate obstacles;
2. Recognize the full and potential impact of such measures;
3. Agree that short-term, urgent solutions neither equal nor replace industry standards; and
4. Acknowledge that a return to best practices is the ultimate goal.

With travel prohibited or discouraged, the Museum community has quickly adapted to providing the best oversight and care possible through advanced technology and enhanced communication in lieu of physical courier accompaniment.

- Registrars collaborating with assigned couriers are overseeing outgoing and incoming installations, packing & handling, shipments, and condition reporting on a virtual platform (hence the term “virtual courier”).
- Where physical courier travel is not permitted, museums are providing staff on the front and back ends of shipments (hence the term “bookend courier”).
- Additionally, digital tracking devices (“trackers”) are being used to illustrate the shipments’ movement, location and other external factors (vibrations, temperature, humidity, etc.).

For each platform that offers a real solution, other concerns are raised, such as security, quality of care, and immediacy of action.

Technology

Various types of video streaming software are being used to provide oversight, such as FaceTime, Zoom, Teams, Google, and WhatsApp. While these technologies enable significant involvement in real time, some challenges remain:

- Difficulty with sight lines.
- Difficulty with clarity and viewing detail.
- Reliance on a person correctly positioning the camera.
- Reliance on a good cellular/Wi-Fi connection.
- Scheduling the appointment in varying time zones.
- Agreed use of the type of streaming software.
- Agreement to the security measures of the streaming software.

Various types of Global Positioning Systems (GPS), commonly referred to as trackers, have been used in other markets for transport of high value goods and are now gaining increased use in the museum industry. While trackers may prove beneficial in aiding the courier by capturing temperature, humidity and vibration, there are some issues and unanswered questions that remain:

- Inconsistent approval by airports, airlines or fine art trucking companies.
- Regulation by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) due to lithium ion battery components.
- Location tracking is inoperable in flight and during ground transport without cellular connection.
- Security concerns regarding inadequate encryption and lack of password protection.
- Inconsistent cost structure and related budgetary considerations.

Insurance considerations

Fine art insurance, either commercial or indemnity schemes, carry the expectation of best practices for the preparation and oversight of shipments. Mitigation of risk in transit is a shared concern among the Museum and Insurance communities. Courier oversight remains not only an industry standard, but also an essential tool for reducing risk.

Upon consultation, fine art insurance brokers, underwriters and the Administrator for the US Government Indemnity program responded as follows to the temporary short term measures defined above.

United States Government Indemnity (USGI):

In response to an appeal letter from the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), USGI official policy remains intact: *A physical courier is required on each conveyance.* However, considerations will be made on a case-by-case basis for shipments through December 2020.

Commercial Fine Art Insurance:

Museums have benefited from a 75% reduction in insurance premiums over the past 30 years due to the expansion of the registrar's role and implementation of best practices. The Insurance community relies upon registrars to apply industry standards for shipments by risk category and expects that changes to current courier policies are only enacted temporarily out of necessity. Concerns are as follows:

- Lack of a courier accompaniment could negatively impact conveyance value limits.
- Underwriters have expressed concern about cyber-security. While most U.S. policies include coverage due to a cyber-attack, it does vary by country and policy. Any loss resulting from a cyber-attack could invalidate coverage and affect premiums industry wide.
- There is plausible risk for an unvetted fourth party (supplier of GPS tracker) with access to this sensitive information.
- Reliance upon technology to replace the physical courier.

Assignment of a physical courier is internationally considered an essential element of overall risk management. Permanent changes to courier policies must be considered very carefully as changes may affect premiums and policy terms. The Insurance industry is reactive to loss and, in the current climate, one large loss could have a domino effect on premium rates world-wide.

Courier Requirements

Based on the specific needs of the artworks, the following criteria should be examined when assigning a courier:

- Fragility
- Multiple transit and handlings
- High value
- Installation concerns
- New borrower/facility
- Insurance requirements
- Exhibition condition check and installation oversight

These basic considerations are universal and existed before the pandemic; they should remain in place through the pandemic and into the future. Refer to Appendix A for some examples of risks averted when a physical courier was present.

Conclusion

The impact of this rapid shift in industry operations should not be assessed in isolation, but rather as a whole and with a view to the future. The technologies are helpful in augmenting the physical courier model, while maintaining our best practices without risk to our collections. Pre-pandemic, the Museum community experienced historic low insurance rates with deference to the registrar's judgement and best practices as our objectives aligned. Registrars, conservators and insurance brokers agree that the highest risk of loss or damage to an object is during transit and the second highest vulnerability occurs when the object is in the care, custody and control of those unfamiliar with it. The modifications necessitated to the physical courier due to the pandemic are not the ideal; they are instead temporary measures meant to augment existing physical oversight and should be re-assessed as the situation evolves.

The authors of this paper have a combined 153 years of registration, art and artifact collections management, and exhibitions experience at internationally recognized federal, state, private and university museums in the US. They have held leadership roles in Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists (ARCS), Collections Stewardship – American Alliance of Museums (CS-AAM), Western Museum of Association (WMA), New England Museum Association (NEMA), the Registrars Committee – Western Region (RCWR), have presented at numerous conferences and taught graduate level courses in museum studies and law.

Appendix A

All events cited below were collected from a variety of North American registrars.

Installation issues:

- *“Borrower requested to install a very fragile sculpture in a vitrine on a free-standing pedestal without weights or floor attachments/anchoring.”* The courier reduced the possibility of damage by addressing the **unprepared borrower**.

Multiple transits and handlings:

- *“Arrived at an international cargo terminal, to find crates already depalletized and loaded on the truck. I asked that they open the truck so I could see the loaded crates before departing the airport, only to find that none of the crates were strapped down.”* The courier discovered **failure on the part of the drivers**, who had not completed the basic task of strapping freight to ensure safe transport.
- *“Upon arrival at an international destination (with a subsequent 10-hour truck trip), the truck assigned to transport the loans had a full-size image of a painting on the side of the truck. That painting was among those going in the truck.”* The courier directed the drivers to cover the image with tape thereby eliminating the **security risk caused by the fine arts shipping company**.
- *“During a cross country transport of an artist’s retrospective, the truck’s wheels locked causing the rubber of the tires to drag while at a high speed creating a large volume of smoke. The truck pulled over immediately to find the tires were on fire. The driver was about to unhitch the trailer from the tractor thinking the value of the tractor was greater than that of the contents of the trailer. I intervened and instructed the driver to get the fire extinguisher and put out the fire.”* The courier averted the loss of multiple high value objects of great cultural heritage and **compensated for the driver’s poor judgement**.

Fragility:

- *“In a domestic cargo terminal, a forklift driver wasn’t careful and instead of placing the forks beneath a crate, he hit the crate and knocked it over. It contained an extremely high value painting glazed with glass. Our delivery truck had already departed, so we had to find another truck to come back, pick up the crated piece and bring it back to the museum so it could be checked. The flight had to be rebooked for another day, as did the supervision/pickup arrangements in the country of origin.”* The courier witnessed the **forklift driver’s negligence** ensuring that there was no question about liability resting with the airline company; a primary matter for the ensuing claim.
- *“Overseeing crates being palletized in an outdoor cargo shed in a Latin American city, I informed the airport supervisor assigned to my shipment that one of the crates had wax objects and should not sit in the sun. While we waited for palletization, it took the inexperienced agent over an hour to have the crate moved by cargo personnel. He was not assertive, and since my site line was limited at times, I could not see what he was doing. Only after I became insistent did he have the crate moved out of the sun.”* The courier witnessed a high probability of damage to art owing to the **failure of the airport supervisor** to advocate for the shipment.
- *“In the cargo area at the airport, a small ride flat crate stacked on top of another (unknown) crate that was 7-8 feet tall. There was no courier for the cargo.”* The **airport supervisor failed to represent the client** by allowing an art crate to be stacked, thereby exposing it to unnecessary risk.
- *“Waiting to board a plane, I could clearly see my container sitting on the tarmac. The gate agent called “final boarding” but I refused to board without an explanation of when my freight would load. The gate agent called cargo and found that the freight-loading mechanism on the plane had broken. I gave my seat away and called the airport supervisor, who had already left the airport. Had we not sent a courier a painting significant to our collection would have been abandoned planeside.”* The courier prevented possible damage or loss by compensating for the **failure of the airport supervisor** to do his job.