

DIY Wrapping and Packing Art for Storage or Transit

by Phillip Schubert

A question often asked, and which is not an infrequent subject of web searches is, "What is the best way to package art for storage or transport?" Of course, there really is no short answer, for the methods are almost as varied as the types of art objects made. The many different techniques for wrapping art for storage or transit depend on factors such as the properties of the artwork, the length of time in storage and the method of transport. Ideally, you would hire a reputable company that deals exclusively with packing fine art. It might seem like an expensive solution, but it will be money well spent in terms of the amount of work it will save you. If you want to do it yourself, there really is no one-size-fits-all solution, but there are some general principles that can serve as a guide. Minimally, you'll want to protect against adverse handling, moisture and acidic materials.

Materials

The best materials to use, regardless of type (paper, cardboard, foam, tape), are pH neutral. This means they are neither acidic nor alkaline. This is especially important for wrapped works that will be stored for an extended period of time. At the very least, the first layer of protection, in closest proximity to the artwork, should be acid-free and inert (stable or not subject to changes in chemical composition over time). This provides a buffer against other packing elements that may not be pH neutral. With this in mind, the following packing methods will acceptably protect artworks over the short- to medium-term.

Paintings

The best way to protect paintings is to make sure that none of the wrapping material touches the surface of the painting. This is especially important for works with still-tacky paint and/or a delicate or textured surface or heavy impasto. You can make a collar with wide strips of double-thick cardboard that fits around the work and extends the perimeter edges out beyond the face. Then wrap it with a high-grade polyethylene. Wrap it completely around, like a Christmas present, covering the face and the back, and do all of the taping on the back side. Use packing tape, but don't overdo it. Don't seal the overlapping edges of the plastic; the idea is to provide a barrier against moisture, but to allow air to pass through. A work that is completely sealed in can develop condensation as it passes through different environmental conditions.

If completely dry, paintings with a virtually flat face can just be wrapped in polyethylene as described above. If you are at all concerned that the plastic might stick to the paint, you can use a thin polypropylene foam as a barrier between the work and the plastic. Better still (though not archival, and maybe harder to find) is silicone paper. Never use glassine or any other paper for this, as they can stick to the surface. Also, if you're using bubble wrap instead of polyethylene, definitely use a barrier, and then wrap with the bubbles outward--otherwise it can leave an impression embedded in the surface. Blanket or fabric wrapping is not recommended, as their fibres and textures can also embed the paint.

Works under glazing

Determine if the glazing is glass or acrylic. Glass is cooler to the touch, and makes a sharper clicking sound when very lightly tapped with a metal object. If acrylic, you can just wrap in polyethylene or bubble wrap. If glass, you should first tape the glass with glass tape or a low-tack tape, like blue painter's tape. This way, if the glass breaks, the shards

will be more likely to stick to the tape and not fall onto the work. Be aware that some high-end glass (Denglas, TruVue) has a coating on it that makes it non-reflective; the tape may remove this coating. It's often a safer bet to protect the art by taping this glass anyway, especially for large works, as the glass is more easily replaced than the art.

Framed or mounted works

If the work is framed or mounted so that you can see the edges of the paper or other substrate, don't rotate it or lay it face down--this can tear the hinges (mounts) that keep the work in place. Lay it face up to wrap it, and only stand it vertically in its intended orientation.

Unframed works on paper

These can be stacked in piles of like sizes, with sheets of acid-free paper or glassine in between each work. Each pile should then be wrapped in polyethylene, and sandwiched between two sheets of double-thick cardboard, cut larger than the works inside. Compress and tape the outside edges together. For large works, cardboard won't be sturdy enough--it will bend and crease when handled. Use plywood instead.

Packing

The best way to package artworks for shipping is in crates. That's a job for the professionals. Otherwise (and less optimally), small- to medium-sized works wrapped as above can be consolidated into appropriately-sized boxes. Put a thick layer of styrene or other sheet foam or multiple layers of bubble wrap or crumpled paper on the bottom, at least 4cm (2 inches). Stand the works inside, placing them face-to-face and back-to-back, making sure that each work either vertically or horizontally spans the ones against it; you don't want a smaller work pressing into a larger one. You can put cardboard that spans in between works that don't. Pack the box snugly, and stuff crumpled paper or other void-fill into the negative spaces. The idea is to prevent the works from moving in any direction inside the box. Close the box and tape it securely.

Wrapped works too large for boxes should at least be completely encased in double-thick cardboard and taped securely.

Mark each package FRAGILE, and GLASS where applicable. Indicate UP with arrows for packages that should stay in a certain orientation.

It's worth saying again that paying for professionals is nearly always the wisest course of action, especially if you have more than a few artworks. Here is a link to the International Convention of Exhibition and Fine Art Transporters: www.icefat.org. It may be worth your while to contact the member nearest you for more information.