

ROLE OF THE COURIER

■ OVERVIEW

The following are general guidelines for couriers escorting works of art. There is a variety of shipments that require couriers such as:

- Local transits to another museum, a historic house, private residence, or the airport.
- Long-distance shipments that require aircraft, long over-the-road shipments, or train journeys.
- Combinations of the above, which may require several days and deliveries to differing institutions or homes.
- Fragile works of art or complex installation problems may require a courier.
- Objects of high value or politically sensitive may require a courier.

While perceived as a wonderful adventure, some of these shipments may try the courier's patience, endurance, and creative problem solving.

Many museums have developed their own courier guidelines as has the Registrar's Sub-Committee for Professional Practices of The American Association of Museums. These museums have also developed courier training programs to inform couriers of their responsibilities and role during the transit. A novice courier should develop experience with local courier trips. Only after developing local experience should an individual be used for an international shipment. **In most museums the courier pool is made up of curators and their assistants, conservation staff, registrars, art handlers, packers.** Most museums exclude non-art technical assistants and clerical staff from the courier pool. The courier must be diplomatic yet assertive, flexible to meet the developing situation, and able to cope with unusual, stressful demands.

▣ **COURIER TRAINING**

Each individual assuming the responsibility of courier for a work of art should be trained for their role. A typical training session might cover the following agenda:

Paperwork

- Travel tickets
- Condition report with photograph
- Letter of introduction to airline/trucking firm
- Air waybill
- Trucker's bill of lading
- Pro-forma invoice
- Customs documents for international shipment
- List of names, telephone numbers, and addresses
- Incoming/outgoing receipt
- Terms of the loan (loan agreement form)

Hand-carried shipments

- Security checks
- Placement on the plane

Cargo shipments

- Conservation considerations
- Environmental concerns
- Examination reports
- Packing and handling

Frame conservation issues

Packing and unpacking procedures

Installation procedures and concerns

▣ **TRAVEL ACCOMMODATIONS**

Generally the **borrowing institution makes arrangements** for lodging for the courier and provides them with a per diem allowance to cover their meals, tips, and other expenses. Some museums prefer to **invoice the borrower for the per diem expense at the end of the loan**. Hotel and per diem rates should be agreed upon in advance so the courier knows the limits allowed.

Airlines require that couriers hold a regular ticket whether they are on a passenger flight or cargo shipment. The ticketing arrangements for the courier are usually made by the museum registrar or shipping agent.

▣ **PAPERWORK**

The following is a list of the usual paperwork associated with a shipment:

- Receipt from lending museum
- Receipt from borrowing museum
- Condition report and photograph
- Letter of introduction to airline or shipping firm
- Airline waybill
- Bill of lading for truck shipment
- Pro-forma invoice
- Custom documents (varies with country)
- List of contacts
- Terms of loan (loan form, borrowers agreement)

▣ **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COURIER**

The **courier has the authority to act on behalf of the owner** in the protection of the work of art until the object is officially released to the borrowing museum. The courier **must have an understanding of the construction and condition of the work of art and its special requirements**. If necessary, the courier should be prepared to **oversee the installation** of the work of art, assuring that necessary environmental and security requirements are met.

- The courier should **know exactly where the work of art is going**, the contact at the borrowing institution, by what carrier, by what agent, and the route.
- The courier is **responsible for protecting the work of art** while expediting its movement.
- The courier should be **aware of special handling** or instructions for the work of art, including all security requirements.
- **The formal condition report may have been prepared by a conservator or registrar and the courier must understand the report**. The condition report may be sent with the courier or it may be packed with the work of art in the shipping case. After examination of the work of art, the courier must oversee the packing. Upon arrival at the borrowing museum, the courier must supervise the unpacking and reexamine the work of art for any change in

condition. Upon conclusion of the condition examination, both the courier and registrar (or other agent as appropriate) must sign the report. A copy of the condition report should be delivered to the registrar of the lending institution upon the return of the courier.

- **The courier has the responsibility for the security, safety, proper handling, and the general environment of the work of art in its case.** The courier must physically stay with the shipment or be in contact with agents in control of the shipment. With air cargo shipments, legal restrictions may prohibit the presence of the courier in the warehouse or at planeside and control of the shipment must be delegated to an appropriate authority. The courier may be prevented from following the shipment planeside onto the tarmac to see the case loaded aboard the aircraft. Or the courier may be required to board the aircraft as the shipping case is being loaded. This may be overseen by the shipping agent.
- **It is the responsibility of the courier to secure and carry the necessary paperwork, documents, letters, condition reports, and receipts** for the work of art. Upon delivery of the case to the borrowing museum, the courier should receive a signed receipt. Should the courier not be returning to the lending museum directly, the receipt must be airtailed or faxed to the registrar of the lending museum within twenty-four hours.
- **In the event of damage, problems, or questions, the courier should immediately notify the lending institution** by telephone or fax to obtain further instructions. Complete detailed notes should be taken in the event of damage and the condition report updated and signed by both the courier and the borrower's representative. The damaged work of art should be photographed immediately.
- **Couriers must have no conflicting professional or personal obligations** that would hinder fulfilling their courier obligations.
- **Unless there is an accompanying museum staff member, the courier must travel alone.** If the courier plans to meet family or friends for a vacation following their courier responsibilities, they must travel independently. It is unprofessional for the courier to expect the borrower to make travel/hotel arrangements for accompanying family or friends.

- **Information regarding the trip and shipment should not be volunteered to anyone.** For security reasons, information should be given on a need-to-know justification only.

▪ **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SPECIFIC TO CARGO SHIPMENTS**

Over-the-road truck shipments are the most common modes of transportation. The information contained here applies to local and long-distance shipments by truck.

- **The courier must observe the loading into the truck,** assuring that the case is properly secured in the vehicle with straps.
- Assure that **someone stays with the truck** at all rest stops.
- Periodically **call in** to verify progress or alert receiving institution.
- **Assure that unloading can be safely done** away from traffic or pedestrians, at a loading dock, or with proper personnel and equipment.

Air cargo shipments are the next common modes of transportation. The information contained here applies to shipments by airplane. Shipments by boat are rare but would have similar applications.

- **Accompany the shipment to the airport** and observe the unloading at the airport. Stay with the shipment and observe the loading of the case onto the pallet or airline container. Be sure that there are no hazardous materials or liquids included on the pallet or in the container and that the shipping case is securely strapped into the container/pallet. If a pallet is used, assure that the work of art case is covered with plastic sheeting. Make note of the pallet/container number containing the shipping case. If allowed, observe the loading of the shipment aboard the aircraft, noting the pallet/container's position within the aircraft. If the courier cannot personally observe the loading onto the aircraft, have the shipping agent verify that the shipment was loaded. The courier must travel on the same flight as the shipment.

- The courier **must be prepared for any changes in routing or schedule**. The airline may reroute the flight through a third city or may change aircraft requiring the unloading of the shipment. If known in advance, arrangements will have been made for other agents to oversee the transfer. Otherwise, the courier must follow through on the transfer with the cargo manager and airline crew.
- At the departure airport, **obtain a copy of the air waybill and the pro-forma invoice** from the shipping agent or customs broker.
- **Be alert to shipment events** such as dropped cases, forklift hazards, major temperature and humidity changes, container or pallet problems. Do not allow containers or pallets to be left outdoors in the weather for extended periods. The container should be checked for damages and potential leaks. Carry a camera with you.

If there is a delay in the shipment schedule, **stay with the shipment** or arrange to have it safeguarded in your absence.

Upon arrival at your destination, you should be met by an agent of the borrowing museum. **The borrower's agent must be at planeside to supervise the offloading**. The courier should be present as well but this is often prevented by restrictions.

The **courier should supervise the unloading** of the pallet or container, assuring that if a forklift is necessary that it is used carefully.

The **borrower's agent should expedite the incoming customs** clearance so the case is not delayed or opened for inspection. If it can be avoided, the courier should not allow the shipping case to be opened for inspection until safely within the destination museum.

The borrowing museum must provide suitable vehicles to transport the courier and work of art case from the airport to the museum.

The **courier must supervise the unloading** of the van and the placement of the case into secure storage at the borrowing museum. Often the shipment may require a layover that necessitates storage of the case in an agent's secured warehouse overnight. **Do not leave the shipping case and work of art until you are satisfied with the security of the storage**.

- **Arrangements should be made between the courier and borrowing museum to unpack and inspect the work of**

art. The packing case should be allowed to stand for twelve to twenty-four hours before opening. Packing cases often become cold during winter transport or in the cargo hold of aircraft and this waiting period allows the contents to warm up to room temperature. If the contents are cold when the case is opened, condensation may form on the work of art.

It must be made clear to the borrowing museum's staff that **the courier must be present at the unpacking.**

After unpacking, the courier must complete the condition report with a representative of the borrowing museum, co-signing the report. A copy of the report should be retained by the borrower and a copy returned to the lending institution.

The **courier should inspect the exhibition site** where the work of art will be installed. This inspection may include confirmation of the temperature and relative humidity ranges. The lending institution may have the courier oversee the installation or actually install the work of art, and with some lenders, this is one of the main duties of the courier.

The **courier has complete authority over the work of art** until satisfied with its disposition and a signed receipt has been received from the borrower. A copy of the receipt must be sent to the lending museum within twenty-four hours.

▣ **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SPECIFIC TO HAND-CARRIED SHIPMENTS**

- **If traveling by a private automobile with a hand-carried shipment, the courier must be accompanied by a second individual** at all times so the case is never left unattended.
- **When traveling by train or plane, the courier must be escorted to and from the plane or train** by museum personnel or a designated agent. It is helpful if the courier has the name of the individual in advance.
- The courier **must be familiar with the appropriate areas on the aircraft** or place for the hand-carried case. The recommended locations are under the seat in front of you or strapped into the seat next to you. Do not place the case in an overhead storage bin as it may shift during the flight or fall out when the bin opens.

- **The courier must never surrender the case to a baggage handler** or allow the case to be included as checked baggage.
- **Keep the hand-carried case with you and within sight at all times.**
- **Keep personal baggage to a minimum** or check luggage so as not to interfere with the hand-carry case.

The registrar should always check the under-the-seat size for the hand-carried case since they differ with each aircraft type. Purchasing a seat for the case is an option and usually a larger case can easily be accommodated, especially in the larger seats of first or business class.

▣ **PEOPLE AND THEIR ROLES**

The roles of museum staff and shipping agents differ throughout the world. Many of the functions described below may be interchanged between museum staff and the shipping agent.

The lender's art handlers and packers or agent

Will move and pack the work of art

Loads the shipping case into van/truck

The lender's registrar or agent

Will accompany the courier to the airport

Assists the cargo personnel with loading the container or pallet

May escort the shipping case to planeside if the courier is required for boarding or prohibited from being on the tarmac

Ensures the safe departure of courier and the shipment

The airline personnel at the cargo terminal

Will receive the shipment

Draw up the shipment waybill

Load the shipment into the container or onto the pallet, securing it from movements and rain

Move the container/pallet to the plane and load into the aircraft cargo hold

May accompany the courier (or other representative) to planeside

May ensure the courier's boarding of the aircraft from planeside

The airline personnel at the passenger terminal

Will assist in the safe storage of hand-carried cases in the aircraft cabin

May arrange for early boarding of a courier with a hand carried case

May notify airline personnel at the arrival terminal to ensure smooth operations at the courier's deplaning

May assist the courier through customs

The customs broker, shipper, or forwarding agent

Will be present at the airline warehouse for international shipments

Will book cargo shipments

Will prepare the necessary customs documents and arrange customs clearances

Will provide for supervision of the shipping case and container/pallet

Will accompany the courier while at the airport, arranging for passenger boarding

Will arrange for the storage of a hand-carried case on board the aircraft

Will ensure the safe loading and departure of the shipment

May arrange transport to and from the destination museum

The borrowing museum's representative

May be any member of the museum's staff or their agent (ask for identification)

Will meet the courier at the plane (or after immigration inspection)

Will assist with custom clearance for the work of art

Will arrange to expedite the removal of the shipping case from the container/pallet

The truck driver and assistant (almost always two people)

Are responsible for the vehicle and its maintenance

Will load the shipping case onto the van/truck

Are responsible for the safe transport to the destination museum

Will safely unload the shipping case at the destination

The security personnel

May be present on long-distance overland trips

May use a follow car in which the courier can travel

Are responsible for the constant security of the shipment

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, SEE:

A Code of Practice for Couriering Museum Objects
The Registrar's Sub-Committee for Professional Practices (1986)
The American Association of Museums
Washington, DC

NGA Courier Information
Office of the Registrar
National Gallery of Art
Washington, DC

Loans from the Tate Gallery
Second Edition, April 1984
The Tate Gallery
London, UK

Conditions for Loans to Exhibitions
British Museum
London, UK

Responsibilities of Couriers
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, NY

"International Exhibitions"
Mary Kay Zuravleff
Museum News, February 1987
American Association of Museums
Washington, DC

"The Courier's Art"
John Buchanan
Museum News, February 1985
American Association of Museums

Responsibilities of a Museum Courier
Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1979
Philadelphia, PA

Conservation Policy
National Museum of Science and Technology
Ottawa, Canada

Conservation Policy
National Archives of Canada
Ottawa, Canada

*Environmental Guidelines for the Loan of Objects from the
National Gallery of Canada
Ottawa, Canada*

*"A Draft Code of Practice for Escorts and Couriers"
Peter Cannon-Brookes
The International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship,
1982*