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*"Rules for Handling Works of Art" will appear as a new article in the third revised edition of Museum Registration Methods (by Dorothy H. Dudley and Irma Bezold Wilkinson), which is slated for publication later this year by the American Association of Museums. It also served as the script for a training film on the handling of art objects, produced by the author and Elizabeth L. Burnham, MOMA's associate registrar, in collaboration with the Downtown Community Television Center.*

*The film was made possible through the generosity of MOMA's International Council and will premiere this month in Sydney, Australia, in conjunction with the opening of the council's exhibition, Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse. It is particularly appropriate that the film's debut is taking place in Australia, for it was there that the rules were first published, in booklet form, by the Art Galleries Association of Australia. Information on rental of the film will be published in an upcoming issue of MUSEUM NEWS.*

# Rules for Handling Works of Art

A set of rules is only one of the necessary ingredients for the safe handling and movement of art objects. Demonstrations of correct techniques, preferably demonstrations in which the staff can participate, are essential supplements to the printed word. Good equipment is a must; all the care in the world will not safeguard objects that are being moved on a handtruck with a sticky wheel.

Another necessity is a supervisor or supervisory staff capable of handling emergencies of every sort and adapting the rules to unusual circumstances. The most important requirement of all is a handling crew that is totally familiar with correct procedures, works well together and operates in a careful, methodical manner. Perhaps this is a tall order but one deserving the best efforts of any responsible institution.

The movement of large or heavy sculptures falls outside the realm of

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floor."**

this document. If cranes or rigging are required, specialists must be called in, because the museum professional is simply not equipped to cope with all the difficulties that might arise. The expense of hiring good riggers is an investment in safety, not only for the works of art but also for the museum staff.

## **Rules for Supervisors**

The rules apply to everyone. Infractions are permitted *only* when the special nature of the material being handled dictates an exception. Only a supervisor can decide if such a situation exists.

Should a supervisor break a rule for some express reason, he should be sure to point out to the others involved why he has done so.

Only those totally familiar with correct handling should supervise an operation or train a new person.

When correcting another for breaking a rule, always point out the reason for the rule. People are more inclined to do something right if it makes sense.

Never force handlers to tackle a job they feel is beyond them, but feel free to suggest alternate methods they may not have thought of.

Never urge haste.

Check condition and note any special features of the material involved before making a move.

If a work suffers from damage that may worsen in transit (such as lifting paint or a serious crack in a vase) ask a conservator to be present during a move.

Always plan a move fully, transmit instructions to the work crew clearly, and once you have made a plan, follow it through. Be sure the crew understands precisely what it is to do.

Do not act nervously no matter how delicate a handling operation may be. Do not make irrelevant comments or conversation during a move.

No person but the supervisor, whether a member of the work crew or an observer, must be allowed to issue instructions to the crew. See to it that all comments are directed to the supervisor.

**"Handle only  
one object at a  
time, no matter  
how small."**

Be sure it is clear to everyone who the supervisor is.

Do not base cautionary instructions on value. All works of art should be treated as if of equal value. The physical requirements of each item and the safety of the handlers must be the *only* considerations.

Refuse to undertake any move if you feel that you have insufficient manpower or that other considerations make the operation unduly hazardous.

Remember that too many hands are as dangerous as too few. It is up to the supervisor to ensure that objects are moved by the appropriate number of handlers.

### **General**

*No smoking* while handling works of art or in the same room with them.

Keep your hands clean, even when using gloves. Use clean gloves only. Handle works of art with gloves at all times except when the object you are moving is too smooth to grip safely through gloves. Dirt or oil from fingers can cause serious damage.

Make no sudden or unnecessary movements in the vicinity of works of art.

Never walk backwards in the vicinity of works of art. Always be aware of what is behind you and how close you are to it.

Only one person directs any operation. Be sure you know who this is. Do not give directions unless you are in charge; accept directions only from that person. Address suggestions or comments only to that person.

Understand exactly what will be done with an object before you move it. Be aware of any idiosyncracies of the material involved. Ask questions freely.

Look for existing damages before moving a work of art, and point them out to the supervisor. This protects you from blame and can save the piece from further harm.

Handle works of art as little and as infrequently as possible.

Carry works of art no farther than necessary. Bring a vehicle to the works rather than the works to the vehicle.

Never drag works of art.

Handle only one object at a time, no matter how small. Use both hands in carrying.

Unless one person can *easily* manage

a work, two people must handle it. This applies to size as well as weight. Two people must handle borderline cases. Never be reluctant to say that an object is too large or heavy for you to manage.

Take your time. Move slowly while carrying objects or pushing vehicles containing them.

Never put dissimilar works (such as sculpture and watercolors or ceramics and paintings) on the same vehicle. Never move objects of the same general type but of vastly different size, weight or materials together.

Safely pad, pack or otherwise secure every object before moving it.

Never overload any vehicle.

Never discard packing materials before searching them thoroughly for fragments that may have dropped off in transit.

Never leave works of art sitting directly on the floor.

Report all damages or possible damages to the conservator *immediately*. Save all fragments.

Remember that damages caused by careless handling frequently don't become visible for a considerable time. If the surface of a painting is bumped, it may be months or years before cracking and lifting of the paint surface appear. A restored work may suffer loss of value or appearance. Our first duty is to protect the works of art in our care.

Make no distinctions as to supposed value or artistic merit. Treat every work of art as if it were the most important item in the collection.

### **Paintings and Framed Material**

Do not touch the front or back of a painting. Never allow *any* object to rest, however lightly, against either surface.

Before picking up a painting, be sure it is secure in its frame. Before hanging a painting, be sure its hanging devices are firm.

Do not carry paintings by one side. Grip with one hand beneath and one hand on the side of the frame, or

with one hand on either side, which ever seems more stable under the circumstances.

Hold paintings at points where the frame is strong, never on fragile gesso decoration.

Do not set paintings down balanced by one corner on the floor and one in your hand. Either hold the painting correctly or set it down completely.

If you need to carry a painting through a closed door, be sure an extra person is along to open *and hold* the door for you.

*Never* insert your fingers between the stretcher bar and the back of the canvas. You can cause serious damage to the paint surface.

Carry unframed paintings by grasping the inner and outer *edges* of the stretcher bar only—not the broader sides parallel to the canvas. The fingers do not touch the front of the painting nor do they wrap around the stretcher bar.

Never apply tape or adhesive either to the front or back of a painting or to the visible parts of its frame.

When moving large paintings, carry them as close to the floor as possible without striking door sills or placing yourself in a clumsy position.

Use extra care in handling wrapped paintings. It is often very hard to obtain a firm grip through wrappings and frequently impossible to see problems inherent in covered works. Move such material on trucks or dollies whenever possible.

Always move and store paintings with their surfaces vertical unless instructed to the contrary by the conservator or the person in charge of the move. Works framed under glass should not be stored flat. Works whose paint is lifting or flaking should be kept flat, paint surface up.

Never hang paintings with their frames overlapping. Even in closely packed storage, allow enough room on all sides of a picture to grip and remove it without touching neighboring works.

In loading trucks, follow the rules for stacking.

When loading or unloading a truck, one handler should stay with it to prevent rolling as works are lifted on or off and to steady the works remaining on it.

Do not overload trucks. The outside painting must not extend beyond the sides of the vehicle.

**“Treat every work of art as if it were the most important item in the collection.”**

## **"Never drag furniture. Always lift it."**

Unframed works, unless protected by sheets of cardboard, must be carried on the outside of painting trucks.

Do not load on a truck any painting so large that its frame or stretcher will not be firmly supported by the truck's framework. There must be no chance of a painting slipping from this framework.

The inside paintings on opposite sides of a truck should not rest against each other above the truck's framework.

Tie loaded trucks before moving them. But do not allow the rope to come into contact with the surface of the paintings.

Do not allow rope from trucks to drag on the floor. Coil it neatly.

Two handlers should accompany each loaded vehicle. At least one of them must be experienced.

Do not stack extremely large or heavy paintings directly against each other. Support each picture (or in some cases, every other picture) with 2" x 4" beams angled out from the wall. Keep such stacks very shallow. It is possible to gain access to any work only by moving everything in front of it, and in shifting the beams it is easy to damage one of the paintings. Furthermore, as the beams all touch the wall, it is impossible to keep the stack lying flat and after a few layers it begins to assume a dangerous angle.

### **Taping Glass on Works of Art**

(Taping glass on works of art in transit affords protection against damage should the glass break during transit. Fragments of broken glass adhere to the tape rather than falling onto the surface of the work.)

Use masking tape or a similar pressure-sensitive paper tape.

Tape should be applied in parallel strips that overlap slightly, or are at most 1/4" apart.

Never tape Plexiglas. It is impossible to remove adhesive marks.

Tape should not cover any part of the frame.

It is easier to remove tape if one end is doubled over against itself. This is particularly advisable if the frame is gilt or has any surface susceptible to damage from adhesive.

To remove tape, pull each strip back slowly along its own length. Do not pull it at right angles to the surface as the strain can break the glass.

To remove traces of adhesive from glass, dampen a cloth and wipe with Windex, turpentine or rubbing alcohol. If it is available, use benzine. These fluids should NOT be used to clean Plexiglas. No cleaner should be poured directly on the glass. The cleaning fluid should not touch the frame, nor should so much be used that it seeps under the rabbet of the frame. Stubborn bits of adhesive may be removed with a razor blade.

### **Oversize Paintings**

When carrying a very tall painting, the handler at each end should hold the sides only (rather than a side and the bottom). Lifting from underneath could raise the center of gravity sufficiently to make the painting topple.

Works too large for painting trucks can often be moved on sculpture dollies. This is hazardous, but if done carefully, it is less dangerous than carrying.

At least three handlers are necessary.

One person supports each end of the painting. If the work is fairly light, they lift its edge onto the dolly, which is steadied by the third person. If it is a heavy piece, one handler raises his corner while the third slips the dolly under the center of the work and holds it flush to the edge of the painting while the work and the dolly are lowered to the floor. If the painting were angled onto a dolly set flat on the floor, it could kick out when the painting is lowered. The third person steadies the dolly until the painting is securely set.

The third person steadies the dolly over door sills and rough spots.

Handles screwed to the stretcher or frame of an extremely large or heavy work give a better grip. Extra handlers can steady the center of the painting by means of handles attached to the crossbars of the stretcher.

The painting must be kept *absolutely verticle* while being moved. Dollies

## **"Stack works with ornate frames only on padded blocks...."**

have no fixed wheels and can kick out to one side if the painting is tilted.

### **Unframed Works on Paper**

#### *Unmounted:*

Lift sheets by the upper corners so that they hang free without buckling. Do not carry them any distance in this manner. Air currents can cause creases.

Keep works flat, face up.

Place unmounted sheets on clean cardboard for carrying.

Works on thin paper should be carried in a portfolio or solander box or between sheets of cardboard so that they will not blow around.

Take great care with charcoal, pencil and other easily smudged media. A pastel, for instance, should be carried alone in a solander box.

Works should be laid only on a clean, absolutely level surface.

If rolling is unavoidable, roll the sheet face out with separation sheets lining the entire surface.

Making piles of unmounted material is a *very* bad practice but is sometimes unavoidable. The following rules represent recognition of the existence of the custom, not an endorsement of it:

Works with easily smudged media must never be piled. There is *no excuse* for piling pastel or chalk drawings. Place a separation sheet between each work.

If the works are small, place each within a separation sheet folded in half. This helps to prevent the sheets and drawings from sliding apart.

A solander box containing a pile may be moved if kept absolutely level. Unless afforded this protection from slipping or blowing apart, do not move piles.

Do not allow piles to exist for longer than necessary.

Keep piles shallow.

Do not disturb piles. Shuffling through can cause creases and introduce dirt. If you must find something in a pile, search by creating a new pile.

## **"Always rest decorative arts objects... on padded surfaces."**



Cover each pile with a large separation sheet to keep out dust.

Do not rest objects on top of piles—including weights to hold them down.

#### *Mounted:*

Handle such material only by the mount. Never touch the work of art itself.

Keep mounts flat, *face up*.

It is perfectly safe to pile properly mounted works subject to the last four rules for piling unmounted works.

Move piles of mounted works on a tray truck or a flat-bed truck.

Pile only works of the same or similar sizes together, largest at the bottom and smallest at the top. If you line up two adjacent edges of a pile, no mat opening should be visible.

### **Sculpture**

#### *General:*

Never handle or lift sculpture by a projecting member such as an arm or head.

Protect sculpture in transit with clean blankets, pads or cushions. If tied to the vehicle on which it is being moved, pad all ropes. Never allow sculpture to touch anything except padding—especially another work of art.

Move and store sculpture in its most stable position. Some pieces are too top-heavy to stand upright without reinforcement. Others can be damaged if laid flat. See rules for stone sculpture below.

#### *Metal Sculpture:*

Touch metal sculpture with gloves or soft cloth *only*. Fingerprints on metal can eat into it.

#### *Marble and Stone Sculpture:*

It is *imperative* to keep hands clean or, preferably, use gloves when handling stone sculpture. Stone is porous and absorbs dirt and oil readily.

In moving stone sculpture, support with pads all protruding members or areas that do not rest on the body

of the vehicle. The weight should be evenly distributed—overpadding is as dangerous as inadequate padding.

Whenever possible, move and store stone sculpture in the position in which it is installed. Often the weight of a piece causes dangerous stresses if it lies at an unaccustomed angle. Stone can break under its own weight.

#### *Small Sculpture:*

Always use two hands in carrying. Support the work with one hand under the base and steady the body of the piece with the other.

Be sure a sculpture is firmly attached to its base before setting it down.

#### *Large or Heavy Sculpture:*

Moving heavy sculpture is a specialized field. Refuse to move any such work unless someone well versed in the subject is present and approves all arrangements. Each move is a unique problem. Do not assume you know everything about moving heavy sculpture—no one does.

Do not carry heavy sculpture. Always transport it on properly padded trucks or dollies.

Do not drag sculpture. Lift it onto the vehicle that will transport it.

When circumstances warrant (for instance, when a heavy piece must be moved a short distance within an exhibition gallery), a work may be tilted onto a rug and the rug dragged slowly to the new location.

Institutions that own hydraulic lift trucks can store and move heavy sculpture on skids or pallets, thus eliminating the need for physical contact with the work of art in transit.

Heavy sculpture must be tied down or otherwise completely secured in position in transit.

Move even more slowly with heavy sculpture than with other material. These works can be dangerous and can seriously injure those handling them.

If a sculpture is to be transported on a dolly and must be tilted to place the dolly underneath, the dolly should be held flat against the underside of the work. Tilt both back to the horizontal at the same time. This method offers maximum leverage and diminishes the danger of a dolly kicking out.

Do not store heavy sculpture on the floor. This is the most difficult surface from which to pick it up—there is no way to get under the piece.

**“Do not touch the front or back of a painting.”**

### **Decorative Arts**

#### *Small Objects:*

Wear gloves or handle with tissue paper metal objects and unglazed ceramics. Slippery items (such as highly glazed ceramics) and objects whose surfaces are likely to catch on the threads of gloves (such as porcelain figurines and some enamels) should be carried with *clean* bare hands.

Lift objects by sliding one hand underneath and steadying the body of the object with the other. Never lift by handles or edges. These are often the weakest parts, even if they were originally designed for carrying.

Always rest decorative arts objects, especially glass and ceramics, on padded surfaces. Take care, however, that the surface is not so deeply cushioned that the object cannot stand firmly.

Stand objects on their most stable surface for moving. Many bowls, for instance, are much wider at the brim than the foot and should be transported in an inverted position.

Do not overcrowd any vehicle. Objects should never be allowed to come into contact with each other.

An object should *never* protrude beyond the edge of a vehicle.

Objects should be packed in such a way that they cannot shift position in transit.

Insofar as possible, move only objects of the same size together. Never move objects of different materials together.

#### *Furniture:*

Before moving furniture, tie down with soft cord, drawers, leaves and other loose or hinged parts.

Remove marble or glass tops and similar material before handling furniture. Such tops should be transported vertically.

Never drag furniture. Always lift it.

Do not lift furniture by arms or other protrusions. Lift from a point of structural strength. Chairs must be lifted by the seat rail.

Furniture should always remain in its intended position, never upside down or on its side. Δ

**“Never handle or lift sculpture by a projecting member such as an arm or head.”**