CASE STUDY

AIRCRAFT AND ARTIFACTS: WHEN COLLECTIONS COME TO TOWN
Moving museum collections without drama, danger, or damage
By Rob Warren, The Shipping Monster

Moving collections objects for display within a museum is a slow, delicate, and often challenging operation. But within a museum environment, where all stages of the process can be carefully controlled and monitored, and artefacts protected in exactly the right way to ensure its on-going public life without detrimental effects, this can be done. However, add into that already complex equation road transportation, airports, long flights, specialised equipment, packing and handling, pressure, humidity, and temperature shifts, a multitude of new people, several languages, weather, darkness, and in the end a totally new environment, then we have the perfect recipe for disaster.

The way to avoid danger is simple - ensure that when an object is moved the conditions under which it travels are identical to those of its home - lighting, temperature, humidity, air-quality. On paper that’s easy; in reality it’s much, much harder. And it comes with a cost, and not just a financial one.

High levels of investment in planning and preparation, close cooperation and communications with everyone concerned, patience and experience, and protection of the object are required. With all of the above, and more, in place even the most valuable, delicate and unique objects can travel the world.

At the heart of the ambition to protect the object is where the shipper needs to sit. Working closely with project stakeholders from curators, directors, and designers, to producers, conservators, and registrars, to move artefacts safely, quickly, and lawfully across borders, countries, and jurisdictions, the shipper can take on this responsibly on behalf of the museum whilst the objects are being moved.

The Shipping Monster is a project management company that moves your valuable artefacts. It provides everything from logistics expertise and customs clearance, object packing and condition checking, to booking ships, vehicles, and aircraft. This enables us to provide an integrated service that not only protects whatever is being moved, but adapts and reacts to project requirements as they inevitably develop, change, and revise. Packing advice, timeline scheduling, condition reports, budget planning; all are part of the project management process - essential for a safe and smooth moving process.

One project exemplifies this approach to integrated artefact movement, transporting *Pompeii: The Exhibition*. Wall-sized frescos, marble and bronze sculptures, personal jewellery, and full body casts of people caught in the eruption are some of the objects used to tell the story. Artefacts over 2,000 years old, each piece a one-off, priceless item; each needing bespoke packing and movement solutions.

The Shipping Monster was asked to move the artefacts from Phoenix in the US, back to their home, the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy; a six thousand mile, 24-hour journey by road and air. We worked closely with the host museum, the Arizona Science Center, and with
the National Archaeological Museum to put in place the detailed steps, schedules, and the strict conditions under which the artefacts would travel. Arguably the most important part of the process, the importation documentation that allow it to exit the country, was sent ahead to customs for pre-clearance. Without customs approval of the artefact’s ‘passport’, they would be going nowhere.

We supplied three professional handlers, to pack, load, supervise, and document each stage of the journey. Every artefact was packed and crated exactly as specified, and each object was condition checked and photographed. In order to maintain the correct environment, climate controlled fine art vehicles, also fitted with E Track load bars and straps to safely secure the crates from movement, were used for the nine-hour road trip to Los Angeles Airport. And, with temperature and humidity fixed and air-ride suspension engaged to soften the road movement, the crates began their journey home in the safest possible way.

Once inside the airport, customs protocol and airline systems take over, but even with the documentation in place transfer from vehicle to aircraft is intricate and complex. With so many new people and specialist equipment involved, for the artefacts this is probably the most dangerous part of the shipping process. On arrival the vehicles are escorted to a warehouse close to the aircraft under ‘tarmac supervision’. Here the crates are unloaded, customs checked and approved, and loaded into the aircraft. First the crates are wrapped in plastic for waterproofing and attached to bespoke aluminium pallets known in the trade as cookie sheets. These are specifically designed for easy handling of the crates as they are loaded, and to maximise the interior space of the aircraft. The whole pallet is covered in tight netting to minimise any possible movement as they are loaded and transported. With documentation in place nothing needs to be open. And since the entrance to the hold can be more than twenty feet off the ground, the pallets are placed into the aircraft’s hold via a hydraulic lift known as an ETV - Elevating Transfer Vehicle.

The floor of the hold is covered in rollers, enabling the handlers to easily move the pallets around once inside. When in position they are tied off to load bars running the length of the aircraft fuselage, further preventing movement in flight, and particularly during take-off and landing. The art-handlers are on hand throughout and carefully manage each step of the process; they record and photographing every part of the crate movements. In an ideal world they are not called upon, but will stop the process immediately if the correct procedure isn’t followed.
With all the crates prepped and secured on the cookie sheets inside the aircraft, customs documentation complete and approved, the doors are closed, and the couriers board the plane as passengers. Once in the air, this is the safest part of the whole journey; held in smooth, uneventful isolation, with temperature and humidity, monitored throughout.

Approximately fifteen hours later, at the end of a routine flight, the artefacts are on the ground at Milan Airport and the airport process begins again in reverse. Three fine-art handlers from our Milan office met the aircraft and supervised the unloading and removal of the airline pallets. The crates were then loaded into new climate-controlled vehicles for the final part of the journey - road transport to the loading dock at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples.

After a careful nine-hour road trip back, museum art-handlers take over and managed the last piece of the artefact’s movement - delivering the crates back inside the museum. Once safely inside the process of unpacking, condition checking and photography can begin. From the starting point in Phoenix to arrival back into the National Archaeological Museum, Milan, the artefacts were always under the supervision of the art handling teams, venue managers, and art couriers. Each stage of the journey was managed by The Shipping Monster, who took responsibly throughout.

With every detail considered with each stakeholder, all went to plan and the objects returned in the same condition as they left. In order to achieve this the role of The Shipping Monster was not simply there to provide the means of transportation. Rather it was a key stakeholder, integrated into the project and responsible for the safe-keeping of the artefacts at every stage. In many ways the actual transportation should be as boring as it is uneventful; if this is the case everything has gone to plan and without drama. Success is achieved by working closely with everyone involved to put in place a complex infrastructure that ensures every eventuality is accounted for and risk is mitigated during transportation. To achieve this, we ask to be involved in the project as early as possible; to be a part of the development process to offer expertise, quickly respond to the lender’s needs, and be agile as things change. Moving artefacts successfully is not achieved by contracting a service provider, but by creating a partnership.