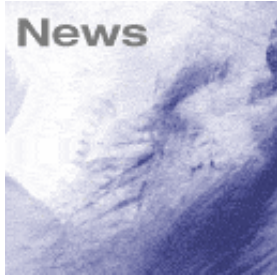


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News

Priceless artworks damaged while on tour

Maev Kennedy, arts and heritage correspondent
Friday November 5, 2004
[The Guardian](#)

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Priceless works of art are in danger of damage or destruction through the merry-go-round of art shuttling around the world for blockbuster exhibitions and international sales.

A conference in London, organised by AXA Art, an art insurance company which is already paying around £3m a year for art damaged in transit, heard the problem is growing. Delegates spoke of art dropped, soaked, impaled on the prongs of forklift trucks - or shattered by zealous customs inspections.

Stories included an Andy Warhol self-portrait caught and ripped by a gust of wind as it was carried from a gallery to a removal van; a Rembrandt etching posted in a glazed frame, protected only by bubble wrap and a padded brown envelope; a Howard Hodgkin broken in half by a collapsing cupboard in a storeroom; and a Picasso ceramic bust broken into fragments inside a specially designed shipping case - which also destroyed its prior claim to pristine condition, exposing evidence of earlier breaks and repairs.

Several delegates spoke of reports of two Byzantine columns, said to have been deliberately smashed by UK customs officers in search of hidden drugs: there were none.

The fiercest attack came from the art historian Christopher Lloyd, who blamed the pursuit of greater access, and marketing-driven hopes of financial gains, for the increasing demand for international exhibitions.

"There is too much of it and I think that paintings should be declared unfit to travel owing to jet lag. There are simply too many exhibitions."

Centre stage for artist's
shocking final works

\$20m art project splits
New Yorkers

"The tendency now is to regard museums and galleries as extensions of the mall, the classroom or an official dating agency. No longer are they run by curators, but by accountants, retailers, restaurateurs and education departments."

Mr Lloyd was speaking in a personal capacity - but his day job is surveyor of the Queen's pictures, responsible for the condition of the Royal Collection, one of the greatest art collections in the world. He stressed that his views were his own, and did not reflect any change in policy at the Royal Collection - which has lent to many of the blockbuster exhibitions which he condemned.

His views were backed by Stephen Duffy, curator at the Wallace Collection, where the conference was held - although the museum is largely immune from the problem, as under its founding principles it does not loan, though it does occasionally borrow. "It is only a matter of time before a major work is lost when a plane crashes or a boat sinks," he said. "We must ask ourselves if it needs such a tragedy before we stop."

The scale of the international movement of art is vast. The big art fairs such as Maastricht and the new Frieze fair in London bring together hundreds of dealers and thousands of works. There were export licence applications for 29,237 objects in 2002-03 - the tip of the iceberg of exports as only older and more valuable works are covered by the licence scheme. Art is also pouring into Britain: the Raphael blockbuster at the National Gallery has 103 paintings from 38 countries.

Just one old master painting, A Winter Scene by Hendrick Avercamp, which sold for £8.6m this year, has been tracked by AXA, and has travelled at least 18,000 miles in the past two centuries.

Bumps, knocks and scratches en route

- Four years ago pages from the Book of Kells, one of the most famous manuscripts in the world, were found to be damaged when they arrived in Australia on loan from Ireland. Vibration during the flight is believed to have damaged the 1,200-year-old pigments
- Christo, famous for wrapping objects as implausible as

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the Eiffel Tower and the Reichstag, has had one piece helpfully unwrapped - and then rewrapped - by customs officers, and another speared by a forklift truck

- A Minton vase with a slight chip was sent to Axa Art in London for insurance assessment - by airmail from South America, arriving in a thousand fragments

- The cargo manifest of a Swissair plane, which crashed in 1998 off the coast of Nova Scotia, revealed that it was carrying almost 50kg of banknotes, jewels, diamonds, watches - and a painting by Picasso

- In 2002 the controversy already raging over a limestone box claimed to have held the bones of James, brother of Jesus - variously regarded as a fake or a relic which could lead to the rewriting of the gospel story - intensified when it travelled from Israel to the Royal Ontario Museum. The ossuary arrived in an armoured truck, but when unpacked by conservation staff many cracks were found, including one running right through the contentious inscription

Source: Axa Art

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