

(Artist) Life School: How to pack and store your artworks with Lydia Baxendel

Wednesday 7 June, 5.30pm - 7.00pm

So you've finished making some art... Now what? Maybe you're going to keep it, or you might be sending it to a gallery or buyer. Regardless of where your work is headed next, it's important to take care of it through that process. Sometimes we can be so involved in the making that we disregard the importance of what follows. Storing work, or packing it for the post can make or (literally) break an artwork.

In this session of (Artist) Life School our guest speaker Lydia Baxendell will be sharing expert advice, practical tips and examples of how to safely package and store your art. Drawing from her many experiences as kaitiaki of an art collection—like the time she received a courier delivery of broken artworks wrapped in used socks and undies—Lydia will be passing on her knowledge and skills regarding practical care for different materials and works.

Notes

Lydia currently works at UC Macmillan Brown Library and looks after approximately 5,000 artworks from the UC collection. These range from engravings from the 17th Century to works made in 2023.

She works with a team of heritage specialists, rare book experts, conservators and experts on Māori and Pasifika art and culture.

It's not a big team, so she finds herself wearing many hats: registrar, curator, packer, installer. They aim for best practice, working with what they have - and how she's planning to frame this workshop.

She used to work at dealer galleries, which had a much faster and higher turn around on artworks.

Major causes of damage in storage

Light

UV light such as direct sunlight as well as radiation/infra red light can:

- cause chemical changes (and degradation) to happen faster
- Fade pigment and dyes
- Weaken materials and lead to stresses and breaks

Organic materials in particular are high risk: watercolour, drawings on paper, textiles, prints

The general rule is, the less exposure to direct light, the better. Keeping in mind that all works are different and some just have a lifespan.

Temperature

Temperature fluctuations are bad - you want to avoid extremes of either hot or cold. Ideally you want to keep a stable temp between 18-22 Degrees Celsius. A 10 degree jump will double the rate of degradation.

High temperatures can cause:

- Increase in insects, mould growth
- Speed up chemical processes
- Expansion and contraction of materials leading to cracking, bending and breaking

Humidity can cause:

- gelatine, emulsions and other materials to become sticky
- Metals to corrode
- Dyes to fade
- Swelling and changing shape of some materials
- Some glues and gum to come unstuck
- Insects, mould

Low temperatures can cause:

- Warping of the surface if it's too dry, causing issues with stretched canvases

Sometimes moving artworks from one climate to another affects them, For example, when receiving artworks from Auckland in Dunedin, work had to be done due to the canvases changing due to temp and humidity.

Keep in mind that everything degrades at different rates and levels.

Pests

A common pest in NZ is silverfish. Moths, mice and rats too.

Pests eat organic materials such as paper and textiles, leaving them damaged and weak.

Identify the pest so that you can find a solution. This usually involves making the environment more hostile for it.

You can do this by:

- Sealing cracks and crevices
- Putting screens on doors and windows
- Using draught stops
- Good housekeeping (no food mess)
- Improve ventilation

If you receive an artwork which might have pests with it, consider quarantining it away from other works until the pests are dealt with.

Remember that pests have a life cycle, so if you eradicate them at one stage, you'll need to make sure you get them at the others too.

You can actually freeze silverfish and their eggs to kill them - put works on paper in a couple of ziplock bags and place them in a freezer for 48hrs.

Lydia advises the careful use of pesticides only when really needed. You can also use blunder or pheromone traps for silverfish, which are available at Mitre 10.

Pollutants

Dust, grease, hair, skin, dirt. These absorb moisture and also attract pests.

People

We are the biggest risk factor!

Dirty hands, food and drink.

Poor handling, carelessness, rushed unpacking and incorrect carrying are common ways artworks get damaged.

When moving or transporting an artwork, plan ahead - think about how much it weighs, if you need doors held open, your route and what the best way to hold it is.

Have something ready where you can place the artwork - a table or base

- Think about where you install or store your artwork, is it a main thoroughfare? Easily knocked?
- Some artworks do have a lifespan, and that's ok

If you want to use gloves when handling artworks, to be honest, powder free latex gloves are better than cotton ones. White cloth gloves are not in fact best practice as they absorb dirt and sweat and are hard to clean. You also can't feel as much while wearing them, which makes slipping, dropping or tearing things more likely.

Prevention of Damage

- Better building design
- Glazing/framing
- Dust jackets for books
- Keeping windows closed when windy
- Good housekeeping
- Doormats
- avoid aerosol sprays near artworks
- If using furniture polish, beware as some are sticky
- Display cases, layers of storage
- Solander boxes for works on paper
- Package or store things when they're not on display
- For larger objects, cover them - an unbleached cotton drop cloth is more affordable than \$800 per roll tyvek.
- place things underneath artworks, not straight on the floor, allowing airflow (for temporary placement as well as storage). Plastic pallets or foam blocks are good options.

- think about how certain things let off gases (MDF, photocopiers) and chemicals which can affect artwork stored closely to them

Lydia stores a lot of her art collection in a wardrobe in her spare room. Keeps it safe, dry and out of the way.

Disasters and Art

Get a conservator to fix an artwork, not an artist. The conservator will aim to return it to the previous condition whereas sometimes an artist will take license with it and alter the whole work.

Consider art insurance.

Document your artworks and keep a digital file of them.

Think about an emergency plan for your artwork. For example: if you have to send a team of people in to collect your important pieces with only 10mins, how do you identify and find them?

Key works in Lydia's collection have a yellow sticker on them

Don't store everything in one place.

Make sure your smoke alarms are working properly

Packaging artwork tips

When packaging, make sure you have clean, dry hands and remove any rings that you are wearing.

Consider photographing the work before sending it, so that you have a condition report onhand.

Don't scrimp on packaging, it's important to keep your work safe when sending it. Incorporate packaging into the sale price of works or charge it separately.

Couriers are not to be trusted. Pack your work so that if you dropped it from chest height to the ground, it'd be ok. Label it clearly with fragile stickers, this way up etc.

Don't label it as artwork in case someone wants to steal it.

You are not wrapping a gift - ugly tape to the front! An ideally wrapped artwork is one that doesn't need to be turned over to unwrap it.

Make it easier to remove tape by folding over the end to create a small pull table and labelling it.

When it comes to tape, less is more.

Painters tape is your friend - it comes off a lot easier than masking tape.

When sending artwork, think about the person on the other end. Make it as simple as possible for them - label where to open, which way is up, make it as easy as possible. (Eg: fragile, face, this side up, keep flat, do not store anything on top of, open here)

Some materials to have on hand for packaging

Acid free tissue paper - place between artworks

Bubble wrap - pack with the flat side facing the artwork to avoid leaving 'tentacle sucker marks', best for short term storage and waterproofing, but not great for long term as it's non breathable

Card bubble - robust card with bubble wrap inside it, great for short distance

Heavy card - like TV and fridge boxes is good for long distance

Painters tape - great for making pull tabs

Packaging tape - only for the outside layer. Less is more.

Cardboard - to layer between framed artworks (this also helps w airflow to prevent artworks sweating)

Packaging and Storing Examples

Cardboard tube

For sending rolled up work. Keep in mind that it will need to be flattened out over a period of time at the other end. Not best for long term storage.

Label the end to open from, this way up etc.

Create a little pull top of excess tissue at one end, so that the can pull the package out easily without jamming your hands in the middle of the tube.

When rolling the work up, roll it face in, with the largest work on the outside, interleaved with tissue between any other smaller works on paper.

Make a paper ring to keep the rolled works rolled up - that way when they're out of the tube they won't spring open and surprise anyone.

Archival Box

These are made of acid free cardboard.

For storage, Lydia recommends having a clear plastic sleeve with an image and description of the work/s contained inside taped to the outside of the box (top) and a label on the side to save you from needlessly unpacking things.

Sometimes, if storing objects inside these boxes, [ether foam](#) and tyvek is used to create cradles for the objects. The basic form is cut into the foam, then it's lined with tyvek. You can place non-acidic ribbon underneath the objects in order to easily pull it out from underneath as well.

Solander Box

These are especially for works on paper.

[Solander boxes](#) were originally designed by Swedish naturalist Daniel Solander (1733-1782) while he was working at the British Museum between 1763 and 1782. It was during this time he accompanied naturalist Joseph Banks on Captain James Cook's south seas expedition on the Endeavour. This design, with its distinctive collapsible spine, allows for easy access to the contents, reducing the potential for damage as can occur with a standard four-sided box. It has since been adapted throughout the world to provide for the safe storage of works on paper, documents, photographs, plans and rare books.

Solander Boxes are also fire retardant.

Storing Tips

Don't keep artworks on the ground, give them a bit of distance and airflow to prevent dampness from getting to them.

Save up those 'do not eat' packets from clothes and other bought items - they absorb water and help keep things dry.

If you have a humid space, make use of a dehumidifier or a damp trap.

Reuse packaging from other things - sometimes tech comes with some great foam forms.

Add corners to edges of card when you sandwich a work on paper between them. It prevents movement. You can use mylar or just paper.

Polystyrene is fine for short term packaging and postage, but not long term as it gives off gases (and is terrible for the environment).

Use a damp microfibre cloth to wipe down frames. If you must use glass cleaner, spray it on the cloth, not on the frame (in case it finds a gap and gets to the artwork inside!)

Quake wax is your friend for keeping sculptures on display.