Title
The Fine Art of the Art Crate: The Protection of Aura

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Waiting after hours on an airport loading dock was one of the last things I wanted to be doing on a Friday night. The wind near the airport was cold and the evening fog was beginning to billow over the coastal mountains onto the bayside flatlands. But my friend Elliot, the warehouse manager, was cashing in a favor, and so I was there to help with the arrival of a crated piece of art for overnight storage. The artwork we were waiting for was arriving by truck and, for insurance reasons, would be followed by armed off-duty police officers in SUVs. I hugged myself to stay warm while the semi backed up: beep, beep, beep. The trailer gate slammed open with a crash and a bang. Sitting there, in the middle of the truck’s vast interior, was a single crate that was no taller than my knee and no wider than my foot. The crate was flying out to New York the next morning with a courier following its every move. Elliot and I looked at each other and agreed that this artwork must be very important.

The greatest artworks of the world have passed through my hands, however they have all looked like every other crate I have moved on a daily basis. Most of a great artwork’s life is spent in a crate waiting to be viewed and enjoyed in the name of preservation. While works of art wait to be reunited with the clean museum walls of established institutions, classes of laborers known as art handlers become their
caretakers; moving, shipping, and storing boxes of art until the pieces are ready to be viewed. In fine art logistics, also known as art handling, we are never told if a work is good. Such details are unnecessary. Instead we are only told when a work is important, and where it is going.

Putting artwork into a box seems like an unfair act, hiding the beauty and potential of the artwork from the greater world. However, the importance and power of the art box is its ability to protect the aura of the work that lies within it. The box may not look like much, but on closer inspection reveals a careful attentiveness to the hidden qualities of any work of art, focused around the preservation of its seen and unseen aspects.

Fine art crates look ordinary for a reason. The physical appearance of the crate allows the logistical class of the art world to give respect to all works deemed important without the judgment of appearance. While ordinary to the naked eye, there is a hidden beauty to the fine art crate. They are constructed as an archetype for shipping and storage, like something you might find in the background of an Indiana Jones movie.

Function follows form when it comes to crates. Today, works of art are wrapped in medical grade polypropylene plastic, secured with a wooden armature (usually called a travel frame) and then slipped into a crate lined with foam and Tyvek. The crate is commonly made with layers of protective plywood and other lumber. The wood is then sealed with urethane, which becomes a utilitarian posting board for the time and spaces that artwork travels to or is stored in: museum logos, catalog numbers, air freight flights, fragile stickers, arrow indicators, in tags, out tags, fork lift scuffs, tarmac diesel dust. These marks become the record of a given piece of art in storage and an account of a piece’s acclaim and status. Previously, inventory or succession numbers alone tracked crates, but today there are barcode and chip technologies to better keep track of them through transit.
On that chilly Friday night, when Elliot and I stood on the loading dock, the crate was being delivered for overnight storage before being returned to the tarmac in the morning. After signing a pound of paperwork, we carried the crate from the truck back to the storage area with the steel-blue eyes of the courier following our every move.

Sometimes, in awkward situations, it is best to lighten the air with conversation. I politely asked what we were moving and the courier explained that it was the last painting Edward Hopper made months before he died. The artwork had never been seen publicly. Frank Sinatra had owned it in the 1970s. Later, a CEO in the surrounding hills of the Bay Area purchased it, and he was now sending the painting to New York for a retrospective on Hopper’s work.

It was well after five o’clock and starting to get dark. We signed another pound of paperwork and said farewell to the courier. After he left, the insider knowledge of what was in the crate and its aura was too strong. We had to look. The aura is the undefined, felt presence of the artwork that draws people to look, collect, and feel a piece of art. When exposed, the aura of an artwork can make atmosphere and define space. The artist Robert Smithson said, “Size determines an object, but scale determines art.” It is the intangible aura that carries the power of art beyond the words of historians and critics. It is an experience that is between you and the artwork. For Elliot and me, the aura was the undefined mystical fuel that drove artists like us to make art. And we needed to experience the aura of the work inside the box we were moving into storage for the night.

There are six sides to an art box. Indicated by a marker on the front, only one side of the crate comes off to ensure the proper loading of the precious cargo. It is secured by hex bolts in every corner and midway along the edges of the crate. As we unbolted the front panel, we felt the rubber seal release its protective pressure. We freed the panel and
removed it from the rest of the crate to reveal a thick layer of grey foam, placed and fitted with an artisan’s precision. Inside were Tyvek-covered bumpers holding the painting in place, backed by alligator board.

The materiality of an artwork has a sensory presence like old oil paint, antique stretcher bars, rusted screws, fasteners, and mildewed canvas. All these components act like a time capsule for the piece, indexing when and how it was made. They are also part of what defines the aura of artwork. The painting had been wrapped in polypropylene and stretched tight around a foam core collar. The collar makes sure that the “poly” does not touch the surface of the painting. The “poly” liner creates a blurring, clouding effect when you look through it. It was hard to see the painting through the “poly,” but we were hungry to take in that aura, the knowledge and pure experience of art seen and felt up close.

As we got closer, we could smell Edward Hopper’s paint. Without disturbing the painting any further, we leaned in towards the tightened drum of the plastic. With our noses pressed against it, we could see just beyond the “poly.” We peered in, staring and soaking in the image that only a few had seen. We caught the aura of the stark, lonely painting. With admiration and a big breath, we looked at each other and proclaimed with shrugged shoulders, “Ehh.”

With the same precision as before, we carefully put the piece back in the Tyvek cradle, layered the grey foam, and closed the crate with the hex bolts. We secured the artwork to a metal rack full of other crates with twill tape, a measure that reassures insurance companies that the crate will not fall over in an earthquake. With the painting and its aura safely back in the box, the warehouse’s climate controlled air lay still. After properly securing the crate, we turned off the lights, activated the alarm and went home.