
Guidance notes: The Virtual Courier (UK and Europe)

UK Registrars Group



What is a Virtual Shipment Courier?

- a. A courier may perform some elements of traditional courier duties in person, as long as museum/transport/cargo terminal personnel allow their presence alongside the crew or airport supervisor. They may be a member of the lending museum's staff, or could be a contracted freelance registrar, but it is likely they would need to travel independently to the warehouse or museum. They would be present at the offloading or loading of the crates from the truck and they would oversee palletisation or depalletisation of the crates. Should a qualified contract registrar be appointed, then recording or live streaming may not be needed. The agent and the courier would be in constant communication until the plane had taken off or the truck is loaded and *en route*.
- b. Should it be impossible for a human courier to be present at the museum or warehouse, then an alternative would be to work through the transport company airport supervisor or the local crew to provide a "live stream", before a crate is in its final palletization stage at the airport, for example. By viewing this way, questions and approval for how crates are secured and palletised can be communicated before the final netting and shrink-wrap are applied. Each port will have different security policies in place, filming may be prohibited, so it is important that the registrar works closely with their agent in this scenario, by pre-briefing and telephone calls (with still images if at all possible). This scenario will change constantly.

Risks: [Transshipment/crate handling/unloading/new venue](#)

Mitigations: [Trackers, instructions to agent, video or image logging of operations \(where permitted\) either pre-recorded or live, local contractor.](#)

What is a Virtual Installation Courier?

- a. As with the shipping courier, if a museum cannot send their staff, and a courier is allowed to be in the gallery space with borrowing museum staff, then hiring a contract registrar or conservator acting on behalf of the lender would be an option. The contract courier's duties could include overseeing the unpacking/packing, the condition check and installation or deinstallation of the objects. A digital condition report is essential in this scenario, as it can be emailed to the lender immediately upon completion, even before the courier leaves the museum setting, allowing the lender to ask any questions as needed at that time.
- b. If a human courier cannot be present in the gallery space, then the lender should work with the borrower on conducting a "live stream" of the unpacking/packing, the condition check and the installation/deinstallation of the objects as needed. Note that these tasks might take place at different times of the day, so any time zone issues should be discussed prior to confirming the appointment times. In this scenario, the digital condition report can be edited and electronically signed by both the lender and borrower upon completion

of the tasks. However, this will only be possible if the report (usually a PDF) is accessible to both registrars, potentially using a shared file application such Box.com, Dropbox, or Google docs, for example.

Risks: Unpacking/object handling/specialist knowledge/sensitive materials/mounts or book strapping
Mitigations: Prior instruction and resources, pre-made mounts sent with loan, video calling, appointed local contract specialist – direct courier as last resort, preferred travelling for installation only and local quarantine permitting.

In assessing the requirement for a virtual courier, the lending institution should base the decision on a risk assessment for the object and for the staff involved, to arrive at a clear position of the specific activities that require supervision. Concerns around routing and handling in transit may not be best served by video supervision, particularly where restrictions might apply in areas such as airport operations, and where other measures like agreed contact with the transport crew, designated agent supervision, or tracking devices might be more effective. Arrival, unpacking/repacking activities are more easily supervised by video. *In any case, where you have trusted a borrowing institution with a loan without sending a courier before, then consider maintaining that position as long as the risks have not changed substantially, in the lender's judgement.*

It should be borne in mind that arriving at a general position on transport is difficult because of varying guidance both with the UK and across the European community, and will be subject to short-notice change for months to come. Communication with the agent, awareness of your local situation, and support networks such as UKRG, For the Love of Art, and ARCS, are the keys to managing safe transport.

As for guidance on art handling and transport, it is expected the art transport agent crews and the installation team will be working in accordance with UK or relevant national government guidance, in particular with regard to:

- social distancing;
- reducing periods of time where it is necessary to work in closer proximity, e.g. a single object lift;
- teams are assembled and retained along the principles of 'cohorting', whereby their working life is confined as far as possible to proximity with a limited number of people in fixed teams;
- Installation and conservation teams will be pared down to the minimum number of people required, and tasks that used to be run concurrently will now have to run sequentially, to reduce the mixing of cohorts and maintain space. This means extended de/installation schedules, but can also mean a very efficient team;
- Other measures such as temperature screening may be in place, which could reduce the team further at short notice.

Additional PPE such as masks and goggles will quite possibly be worn by the installation team, as they will be undertaking extended working indoors in proximity with others. This is relevant to how well they are able to communicate on-screen and for your recognition of individual members of the team.

Preparation:

- All-digital condition reports. It is critical to have detailed images available to both parties in order to carry out the inspection and agree the condition of objects at unpacking or repacking. What is required is not only the high-quality record image, but individual documentary shots showing front and reverse, sides, specific features. *sent to the 'courier' and to the borrowing team in advance.*
- Written condition report information needs to be in a simplified form, retaining basic identification details and *specific unpacking, handling and installation instructions*, and the capability for an electronic signoff, and including the date the objects were packed.
- The gallery space must have network access/wifi adequate to support a lengthy video call. The digital platform proposed (e.g. Skype, FaceTime, Teams, Meets, Zoom) should be agreed and tested beforehand: not all institutions will support all platforms. In large galleries the

infrastructure should be able to support more than one video call at a time, if there is space for separate teams to work concurrently.

- The observing courier must also have adequate internet capability, particularly relevant as they may still be working remotely from their workplace.
- It might be considered to have an additional camera with a broader field of view (tablet on stand or tripod) on a separate dial-in to take in the activities of all of the team, and allow some respite for the observer on a longer call.

On site:

- Time needs to be allowed for a crate quarantine period extending beyond the usual object acclimatisation allowance, and this will need to be built into the transport schedule.
- As with normal courier trips, it is good practice to begin with an introduction to the installation team, a general briefing on the handling requirements and particular points to note, and a general walk-through of the access routes, gallery space and display locations. This could be done in advance and recorded (and used for all lenders), during the arrival procedure of the crates, for example, but it should be agreed how the files are to be handled securely by all parties, as there will be security-sensitive material in it.
- One member of the installation team should be designated as the observer, i.e. they have control of the camera and direct contact with the courier. They should not be called upon to participate in practical tasks while in this role, they are the relay for communication between courier and team. It means practical steps will be slowed and the observer will need to position themselves carefully to view and comment. Should the courier need to intervene the observer can relay this for them. Where the camera is handed over to someone else it should be made clear why and to whom.
- For practical reasons a small device such as a phone is easier to handle and can be moved around the object or activity more readily – and during inspection it means the camera is moved more than the object. The drawbacks are the video platforms available, battery life for long calls, and camera quality. These can be mitigated by having portable power bars charged and ready, and relatively low cost USB/laptop inspection endoscope cameras can be obtained through conservation suppliers for the condition check phase.
- All-digital condition reports and images, and effective two-way communication, are therefore the key to the condition checking, even with improved cameras available. Particular features can be captured with a high-quality digital stills camera and sent on to the lender/added to the condition report, as usual.
- Streaming sports or security body-cameras could be used for some activities, but care must be taken that they are firmly held in place and that staff do not inadvertently knock or detach the camera onto objects. In addition, filming an activity ‘hands-free’ may tempt the individual to assist practically in crate moves etc., rather than remaining the observer and providing a clear view for the courier.
- Should the observer wish to record any element of the filming, all members of the team must consent.
- Where the physical presence of a specialist is required for the object, consideration could be given either to the contracting of a locally-based conservator or technical specialist, reporting to the lender, or cooperation between institutions in the same area to ‘lend’ assistance between them to enhance the team already on site.

Summary of key elements:

- Digital condition report resources.
- Firm and specific risk identification for each object and trip.
- Effective communication in advance and during installation.
- Adequate infrastructure – wifi and equipment.
- The role of the observer.

Further developments:

It is quite possible that the current crisis will drive more permanent changes in practice, and bring into place more quickly measures that were already under discussion:

- Courier training frameworks will need to incorporate 'Virtual Courier' scenarios.
- The reduction overall of physical courier travel, most specifically a review of the requirement for couriers to travel on trucks: and overall, the establishment of a suite or portfolio of measures that may replace some aspects of physical courier culture.
- Returning focus to management of specific risks or stages of the process and how a courier's presence mitigates these risks.
- A shift to digital resources in condition reports and the facilities and equipment to support it, such as upgrades to wifi and network provision, and the development of dedicated apps to support remote activity.
- Thoughts about the security of locations being filmed, and examination of secure digital file handling and retention of recordings and facilities reports.
- Reassessment of the insurance requirements around courier presence, and the legal demands such as secure digital signature as per contracts and date stamping.
- Enhanced tracking devices and software.
- Incorporating improved remote working and supervision practices into improving the environmental impact of loans, and into the current emergency response plans for institutions.

Main reference points:

UK Govt *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Safer transport – guidance for operators* [12 May 2020]

University of Cambridge Safety Office - biological section

Canadian Conservation Institute *Caring for Heritage Collections during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, CCI Technical Note [17 April 2020]

Home Secretary announcement 22 May 2020 concerning 14-day quarantine for arriving/returning travellers to the UK

Bizot Group guidelines

Suite of online discussions held by ARCS, Chairs of European Registrars Group, and UKRG.