

# Relocation of XXL Collections - you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs

Lessons learned in achieving acceptable risks at reasonable costs when moving thousands of objects

## Keywords

Museum Logistics, Moving collections, art handling, art packing

## Introduction

Once every decade or so, a museum must move major parts of its collections because of extension or refurbishment work. With such projects, thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands or even millions of objects (eg, natural history collections) must be moved. But is this the same process as moving single objects for exhibition loans? The answer is definitely 'no' for a number of factors. Moving XXL Collections is no daily routine work and museums very often lack specific experience in bulk object handling within their own institution. In this case objects are not packed and shipped to another museum far away but very often to a location nearby or within just a few kilometres. Most importantly, objects are handled and moved from one location to another by the museum staff or at least under their close supervision. Except for the transport, the objects are within the museum premises, be it a museum building or a storage facility and in most cases no object will stay outside its home and security perimeter overnight.

## Challenges to move a collection

What are the challenges of moving XXL collections? The sheer mass of objects makes it virtually impossible to use methods and standards familiar to 'single object art handling'. To apply these standards would be too time consuming and far too expensive (eg, using sophisticated crating). XXL relocation projects require other methods for packing and securing objects (eg, standard reusable palettes, palette frames, heavy cardboard, transport pillows, standard containers (PE, PP), bubble wrap, etc). The focus is not simply on the single object travelling alone around the world but must very often include hundreds or even thousands of items.

In a bulk handling process, the strategy is to handle single objects as little as possible. Standard containers, standard palettes etc. containing numerous objects are used as early as possible in the process and are handled with suitable equipment (eg, a forklift).

## Supplementary tasks to be included in a relocation project

As whole collections are moved to new storage facilities, one of the main challenges next to object handling is to place objects in the correct order in the new shelving systems on the new premises and finally to register the object location afterwards in the museum management database. Other tasks may include collection surveys, conservation surveys or, last but not least (in my opinion), thinking about reducing the collections (e.g., by de-accessioning).

## Technical and financial requirements

The large number of objects to be handled makes it relatively difficult to accurately foresee the technical and financial needs for a relocation project. Inexperienced staff often become fixed on the procedures for single object packing and handling. They tend to carry out excessive planning very often based on little or incorrect basic information, inadequate resources as well as a lack of practical experience. This is definitely not their fault as bulk handling is usually not part of professional specialist museum training. Another aspect is the relocation costs (handling, packing, transport). Very often these are very much underestimated or even entirely forgotten. Our experience is that XXL relocation costs may rise to as much as 20% of the total project costs of a storage facility (planning, building works, equipment, logistics, registration).

## What are the risks?

Museum staff are very often horrified when they are asked to manage the relocation of a XXL collection. When they cannot follow highest standards of art handling at exorbitant costs they immediately see only the worst-case scenario: their objects broken, burned, soaking wet, lost or even stolen. This is definitely not the experience we have had in our projects. The real challenges are not the previously mentioned risks but what we call the *six relocation dangers*.

1. lack of experience in *bulk relocation* of objects and little knowledge of suitable procedures
2. handling of 'over packed' and therefore barely visible objects

3. lack of (extra) staff and financial resources
4. insufficient or unrealistic staff training
5. excessive planning
6. poor organisation and supervision of the project
7. last minute organisation and start of the relocation project in relation to the building works

In reality a XXL relocation is much less risky and difficult to deal with when we approach it from the viewpoint of groups of objects to be handled safely *and* effectively instead of an excessive fear of potential damage to single heritage objects that might possibly (and in reality seldom do) occur. Under these circumstances it is more efficient and effective (as well as safer) to pack objects...

- as little as possible yet as much as necessary
- as visible as possible yet as protected as necessary

... using less but suitable material and equipment as well as 'good enough' yet effective methods.

### **Conclusion and General advice for a XXL relocation**

- be realistic
- use the experience of others who have done a similar job before
- realize that relocation is an integral part of a storage facility project
- relocation is as important as the building works itself
- start the relocation project as early as possible
- relocation needs considerable financial resources and extra staff
- use suitable methods and materials for handling and packing
  
- don't overestimate security requirements
- don't be afraid of taking responsibility
  
- accept reasonable risk  
and
- accept some minor damage to achieve the best results for the whole.

*The crux of the matter: "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs".*

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