

Establishing and disseminating new sustainable standards for packing and transporting artworks by working collaboratively

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Image



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By Marina Herriges, Associate Editor for Reframing Conservation Through Sustainability

During the last IIC Fellows meeting, I was introduced to the UK Museums and Heritage Sustainable Packing Group. The Group was presented by Lynne Harrison, paintings conservator at the National Gallery in London, and Alexandra Gent, paintings conservator at the National Portrait Gallery in London. While I was listening to their presentation, I thought this group was an

inspiration regarding collaborative effort and wanted to share it with a wider audience. I spoke with Lynne and Alex, and I left our conversation with a positive feeling that together we can do more. I hope those who read this article will also come away with a similar feeling.

The Group started back in 2021, when four conservators were asked to reflect on sustainable practices for packing cases to better support their loans programme. These professionals quickly realised the huge scope of this topic and that there was so much they did not know. They decided to invite colleagues from other institutions, and every time the Group met, it grew a little bigger and became more formal. Today it includes professionals from The National Gallery, English Heritage, National Museums Liverpool, Royal Collection Trust, Guildhall Art Gallery, National Trust, National Portrait Gallery, Glasgow Life, National Galleries Scotland, Victoria & Albert Museum and Tate.

The Group divided according to their professional interests and the priorities of each organization to consider two aspects of packing paintings—one side specialising in museum standard packing cases and the other in soft wrapping. The soft wrapping group is led by Alice Tate-Harte (senior conservator at English Heritage) and Rebecca Hellen (senior conservator at the National Trust) and primarily contains professionals who work in heritage organisations with lower budgets that use fewer travel cases. The packing case group is led by Lynne Harrison and Helen Brett (senior conservator at Tate) who are based in bigger institutions.

One of the main aims of both sub-groups is to make sure that they are not replicating research. The Group is a network in which the members can talk freely about their research and findings. The focus is to share resources and experiences and work in collaboration. Therefore, a range of specialists (conservators, art handlers, registrars, scientists) come together bringing different perspectives and knowledge.

As Lynne mentioned to me, “one idea is to increase awareness of the impact of museums loans programmes and the use of vast amounts of packing materials that generally get thrown away.” Lynne also mentioned some challenges faced; “one of the UKs main packing case suppliers stopped operating during the pandemic. This challenged the loans and exhibitions programmes for many institutions, so this was one of the key motivations to start the Group.” This led institutions to rethink their current practices, concentrating on what they need to do differently in their daily work, taking on board new ideas, new terminology, new techniques, new ways of describing what is done as well as looking at practices that need to be remodelled, including recycling, for example. “It was a bit of learning about new terminology and what things actually mean, about being sustainable and a realization of how much greenwashing goes on”, said Alex.

Alex also revealed something interesting about the soft wrapping group and the idea behind the materials and sustainability: “To begin with it felt like, ‘we will find some new materials that will help us be more sustainable, and that will be the solution’. Whereas the more research that happened within the group and as our knowledge of the current state of play increased, we became more aware of all the different factors involved in making something more sustainable [rather] than actually using new materials. Using similar materials but with a higher recycled content and making sure that they're being used in reusable ways has become more of a focus than maybe what, in our initial naivety, we thought was going to be a solution based on new products.

Conservation as a profession was mentioned as key in the discussion; “as conservators, we have very specific needs. We have an understanding of the objects that we work with and what parameters we want. For instance, in the soft wrapping group, we gathered some materials to test, ran some workshops, got feedback from the people that were using the materials, then went and worked with academics to do assessments of sustainability on selected materials. Then, after that, going back again to assess whether these were appropriate materials for our needs as conservators”, explained Alex. Continuing this thread, Lynne added, “We have got registrars, art handlers and conservation scientists involved. And I think, as a group, we work really well together. We need those professionals that maintain the systems that we are trying to address. So, it works really well.”

These two sub-groups were developed due to the participants’ familiarity with the topics; but interestingly, Lynne said that “early on I shied away from the idea of looking at packing cases from a sustainability perspective, because it seems like such a massive task. I can't honestly say that I chose to do this. I was asked to investigate it, and I'm very happy to say that after the first couple of meetings [I] realized I was surrounded by colleagues with the same challenges—the same concerns—so that we could help each other. I don't think the task is any less big, but it feels a bit more manageable.”

The Group has been able to keep momentum and places these topics at the top of their to-do lists within their institutions. In their view: “The outputs, recommendations or new ways of working need to be disseminated. And then, hopefully, the impact is greater because it's a bigger group of people, and it takes the weight off individuals.” Lynne also said that working together gives the Group the confidence that they can achieve things. “When you do have some time, you can work on it. When you do not, you can step back and know that there is still something trickling along, and it might feel like we are not really getting very far, but actually, we have, in the time that we have been collaborating.”

Both Alex and Lynne recognise that the two groups are a bit London-centric. However, they have great ambitions to extend abroad. They also acknowledge that an important part of the Group is to disseminate the information they’ve gathered that will encourage other conservators to work alongside their efforts. For Alex and Lynne, the learning journey is endless. “Maybe the focus will shift over time, or we could have more people involved to look at different types of objects, because at the moment it is very painting and frames focused,” said Alex. Lynne and Alex would like to see more professionals from different disciplines involved and expand the Group. The more variety in group members, the more development can occur by looking at issues from different perspectives. The ambition is to establish new sustainable standards for packing and transporting artworks. If you would like to collaborate, I would encourage you to start by messaging Alex at: agent@npg.org.uk.

I would like to finish with the mission of the Group which is inspiring: “work collaboratively, create a pool of resources and expertise, re-examine materials, search for alternatives and reduce waste”.

Author Bio

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