



# CCI Notes

# 10/13

## Basic Handling of Paintings

### Introduction

One fundamental aspect of a painting's well-being is its safe handling. Proper handling is essential to its preservation and is the result of a professional attitude that promotes the safety of the artifact.

The need to handle a painting may arise at any time: before examination, during treatment, when it is moved between storage and display or during preparation for transportation. As a rule, a painting should be handled as infrequently and as briefly as possible: the more it is moved or touched, the more it risks being damaged.

**Paintings must be handled with the greatest of care, attentiveness, and forethought.** Most damage to paintings during handling or transport is the result of failing to consider their actual fragility or the risks they will encounter and neglecting to take simple precautions.

### Considerations Prior to Handling

Before handling a painting, take the following steps.

#### 1. Examine the painting.

Study previous condition reports to become familiar with the painting's structure and history. Inspect the surface of the painting for loose or

flaking paint. If the paint layer is stable, turn the painting over and examine the reverse. If the painting is framed, make sure the frame is structurally sound and holds the painting securely (see CCI Notes 10/8, *Framing a Painting* and CCI Notes 10/7, *Condition Reporting—Paintings Part II: Examination Techniques and a Checklist*).

Do not handle paintings that are not in stable condition (e.g., have flaking paint) until treatment can be undertaken. Correct improper framing, loose keys and any other problems first.

#### 2. Plan the move.

It is important to plan the intended route. Clear a path and prepare the receiving area before moving the painting.

Obtain the assistance of other people, or equipment such as trolleys, as necessary.

### Observe Safe Handling Practices

Take your time.

Handle only one painting at a time.

Never walk backwards near other museum artifacts.

Do not hand the painting to another person. Place it where the person can lift it in a controlled manner. Never carry a painting by its hanging wire, by the top of its frame or by any one side. Frames are most vulnerable at their corner joints. If a framed painting is held along one side only, the combined weight of frame and painting can often pull the joints apart.

It is preferable to carry a painting with the front surface facing the carrier(s) so that it can be continuously monitored for change. This precaution is especially important in the handling of three-dimensional surfaces (e.g., heavy impasto or thickly applied paint).

If the painting has no protective backing board, avoid curling your fingers around the stretcher and pressing against the back of the canvas. Bear in mind that all paintings *should* have a protective backing board. (see CCI Notes 10/10, *Backing Boards for Paintings on Canvases*).

Most paintings are susceptible to marking and soiling, in particular modern "colour field" or "hardedge" paintings. To avoid transferring natural oils, moisture and dirt from your hands onto the painting, make sure your hands are clean, and where appropriate wear clean, well-fitting, lightweight cotton or latex gloves. (Loosely fitting gloves can be a hazard. They prevent a firm grip and tend to catch on projecting surfaces.) Frames with polished or gilded surfaces will also be better protected if they are handled with gloves.

Any accessories such as watches, jewellery, or cuff buttons may have to be removed because they can snag on or scratch the paint surface.

### Specific Handling Instructions

Painted edges, particularly in modern art, are considered to be an integral part of the work. It is thus important to avoid touching these "viewed edges" (normally the sides). Where handles or straps cannot be



Figure 1  
Carry medium-sized paintings like this.

furnished, handle the edges that are least exposed to the viewer (normally the top and bottom).

Carry a small framed painting by grasping it firmly with one hand on each side.

If the painting is not framed and is small enough for one person to carry, hold it with the flat of your palms against its edges as though it were a panel freshly varnished on both sides.

Medium-sized paintings should be handled by two persons, each with one hand holding the lower edge or bottom corner and the other hand placed along one side towards the top corner to balance the weight of the painting (Figure 1).

Large or heavy paintings should be moved with the assistance of folding handles or nylon webbing straps secured to the reverse of the frame. When appropriate, use a trolley (Figure 2). Tall paintings will be more difficult to handle, as they tend to topple.

### What to Do in Case of an Accident

If a painting is damaged while being handled, the circumstances surrounding the incident should be recorded and any detached pieces carefully collected and identified. Photographic documentation is frequently useful. This information should be forwarded to a qualified conservator for advice on proper procedure and possible treatment.

Note: It should also be kept in mind that many Fine Art insurance policies contain the provision that loss or damage caused by unskilled handling is not covered.

### Conclusion

A safe handling environment for paintings can be encouraged if the museum provides periodic orientation and training programs for its staff. All personnel expected to handle art objects should receive instruction on the basic care and handling of museum objects. Moreover, the staff must exhibit personal initiative

to assess, improve and implement practices that promote the safe handling of paintings.

## Suppliers

Cotton or vinyl gloves:  
local safety supply stores

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Figure 2  
Use a trolley for large paintings.

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Copies are also available in French.

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