



american
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conservation

**Preserving Cultural
Heritage**

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AIC Position Statement

On Virtual Courier Oversight

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The American Institute for Conservation (AIC) is the leading membership association for current and aspiring conservators and allied professionals who preserve cultural heritage. We support our members by establishing and upholding professional standards, promoting research and publications, providing educational opportunities, and fostering the exchange of knowledge among conservators, allied professionals, and the public.

Maintaining the safety, longevity, and integrity of objects of artistic, scientific, and historic significance is a professional priority. The lending and borrowing of such objects is a central function for many collecting institutions and private owners, but also one that involves significant risk of damage to the works in question. In-person couriers serve to mitigate that risk. As a temporary response to worldwide travel restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual courier oversight has been widely adopted in lieu of the physical presence of an in-person courier. Virtual couriering is a method of overseeing an object's travel and handling that relies on digital technologies, such as location trackers and video streaming software, to monitor movement, environmental factors, packing/unpacking, condition reporting, and installation/deinstallation. The use of "bookend" couriers, in which couriers are present on each end of the shipment, but not present en route, has also increased, as has the use of local contractors to perform duties typically conducted by in-person couriers. While these measures are a necessary compromise during the pandemic, they do not constitute best practice.

Because in-person couriers are the most effective way to ensure the safety and preservation of collection items, AIC strongly recommends that decisions requiring or waiving the presence of an in-person courier *involve all stakeholders* (conservators, registrars, collection care specialists, and curators, among others) and *be made on a case-by-case basis*.

The adoption of virtual courier oversight as a replacement for in-person couriers will result in increased responsibility and risk. The following considerations should be taken into account when weighing courier options.

Safety and preservation of collection items

An in-person courier familiar with the object on loan serves as an informed monitor and advocate for the object during its transit, packing/unpacking, and installation/deinstallation. A focused and experienced courier is particularly necessary when the object presents difficult installation or travel challenges, is inherently fragile, or has existing condition issues that render it vulnerable. An in-person courier is best positioned to reduce risks of damage along every step of the way.

Costs

While eliminating in-person courier travel may appear to reduce loan costs, budgets need to be examined holistically. Less obvious associated costs may include increased in-house staff labor; possible higher insurance policies (which may mandate security escorts); contracted conservator fees; and technology investment and data storage. Costs will also be incurred should damage occur, which may, by extension, negatively impact an institution's reputation and ability to borrow in future.

Time

The time savings from the elimination of in-person couriers may be offset or eclipsed by the additional staff time required to conduct virtual oversight and the steps taken to minimize increased risks. This includes preparing additional documentation (print or digital); devising and implementing

additional protection such as glazing, encapsulation, or redesigned mounts; ensuring availability for virtual courier appointments in disparate time zones; lengthier installation schedules to accommodate communication on digital platforms; and stabilizing objects that sustain damage during loans.

Partnerships and Privilege

Virtual courier oversight may preclude institutions with limited technological resources from borrowing. In-person couriers may also offer other benefits, such as knowledge sharing with underserved institutions.

Technology

While tele-conferencing technologies allow for synchronous communication, this format presents significant logistical limitations in adequately fulfilling courier duties. Virtual platforms are not conducive to the level of close examination required for condition reporting, and they provide a limited view of the surrounding environment in an exhibition space. The potential for technology failures and data security breaches is also a concern.

Environmental Sustainability

In-person couriers are just one contributor to an overall loan carbon footprint. The environmental impact of loans can be mitigated in ways that do not compromise the preservation of objects, such as reducing the frequency of loans and the number of items being lent; using alternatives to air-travel whenever possible; purchasing carbon off-sets; and exploring more sustainable packing and shipping materials. When approved by all stakeholders, shipments can be bundled with other institutions or couriers can be shared.

—AIC Board of Directors