

Art Shipping in the Age of COVID Is More Expensive and Complicated Than Ever—and a Return to ‘Normal’ Remains Very Far Away

Advisors and art dealers are facing new logistical challenges as shippers urge patience.

Eileen Kinsella, July 19, 2021



Employees of the international freight forwarder Hasenkamp pack the painting *The Blinding of Samson* (1636) by the Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn. Photo: Arne Dedert/dpa/picture alliance via Getty Images.

Earlier this year, when Miami-based art advisor Karen Boyer bought a painting for a client, the established London gallery she got it from confidently gave her a rough estimate of what it would cost to get the work across the Atlantic.

So imagine her shock when the shipper sent a figure that was a full 50 percent higher.

Boyer’s experience isn’t unique. Even as the coronavirus pandemic decimated restaurants and hotels, the market for fine art and luxury goods has soared to new highs.

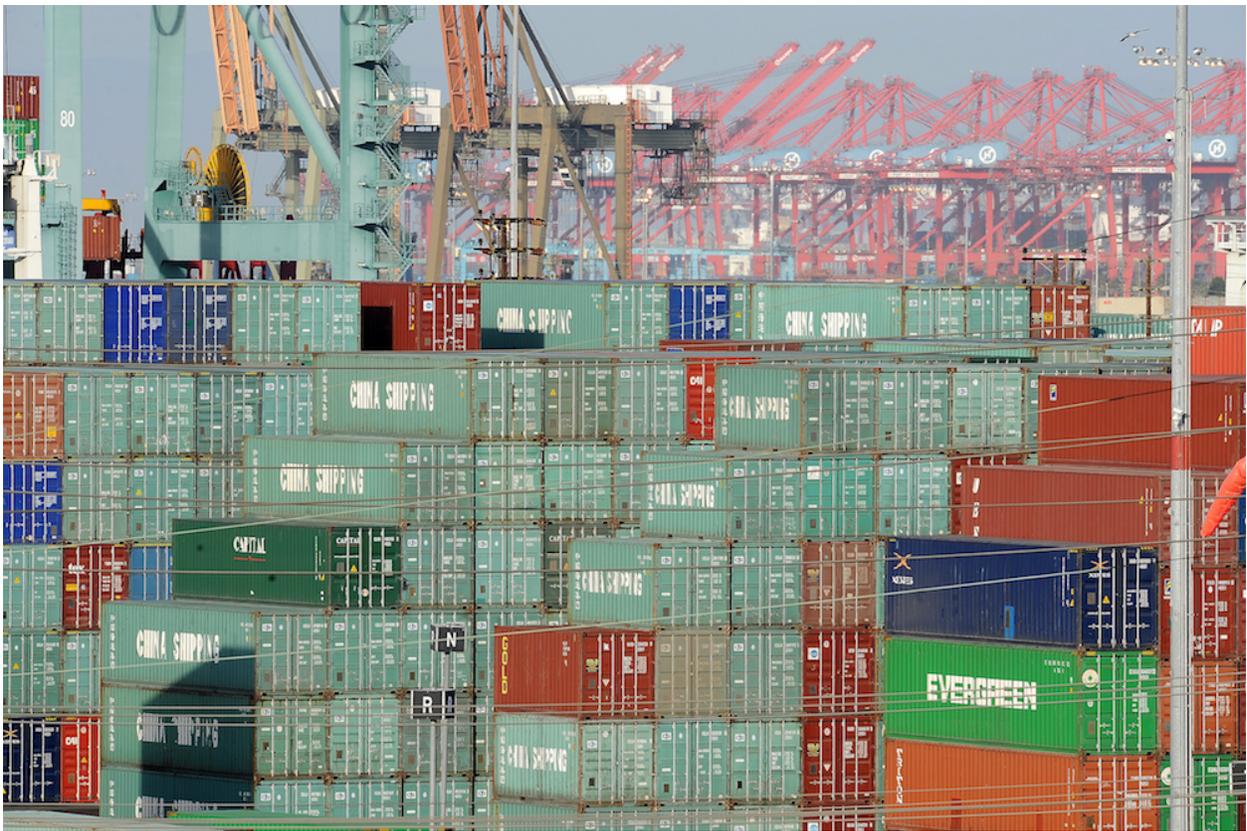
But as cash has poured into the art market, the industry has faced a new set of issues: bottlenecked shipping routes, transportation cost increases, and mounting frustrations about slow deliveries and labor shortages.

“Everything has become much more expensive and also takes longer,” Boyer said.

To prove the point, moments after she hung up the phone, she forwarded me a copy of an email that had just rolled in from a shipper regarding a different acquisition.

“Due to the high volume we are currently experiencing, our first availability for collection and crate fabrication is the week of August 23rd,” the email said. “In the meantime, this request has been added to our waitlist should any appointments become available before then.”

I asked Boyer the average amount of time it used to take for a new artwork to arrive to its new home. Her answer? Just 72 hours.



Containers stacked high at the Port of Los Angeles in San Pedro, California. PHOTO: Robyn Beck/AFP via Getty Images.

A Chain Reaction

The problem stems from a one-two punch: a sharp increase in luxury spending as the shipping industry abruptly ground to a halt in March 2020.

Air travel, which fell by 60 percent amid the pandemic, was one problem. One expert at the fine-art shipper Crozier said the company used to be able to rely on three flights a day to London to San

Francisco. Now, that flight only gets off the ground once a week—and the costs are significantly higher. All in all, air freight rates are currently about four times what they were pre-pandemic.

Sea routes were also blocked early after March 2020, and shipping containers piled up in U.S. ports. Today, sea shipping, while more economical than air travel, is still about double the pre-pandemic rate, said Simon Hornby, senior vice president and general manager for Crozier's European operations.

Some shippers we spoke to said clients need to be patient and accept the new realities of a slower pace. Gone are the days when "overexcited" dealers could "take 80 works to an art fair to probably only hang 30," said Tom Hale, Crozier's senior vice president.

The pandemic, he said, has killed the "sacred cows" of the past, and clients will now need to be much more decisive about what and how they ship artworks. Throwing money at a problem won't by itself solve everything, he said.

Meanwhile, collectors, advisors, and dealers grumbled about suspected price gouging and delays, and wondered just how long it will take for things to stabilize.

At the time of the shutdown, "a number of people had works in transit," said Megan Fox Kelly, president of the Association of Professional Art Advisors (APAA).

"Advisors had bought things at the Armory Show and didn't know where they were. People had paid for things at Frieze Los Angeles four weeks before. People had loaned things to museums, trucks were in transit, and borders were shutting down."

To get a handle on the situation, the APAA organized a series of online meetings to discuss the problems and potential solutions. Members flocked for advice: a total of 90 turned up to the first call.

At the time, Fox Kelly had just purchased a work located in London for a client through a gallery at Frieze Los Angeles. In trying to get it out of England, she said she couldn't believe the time frame and cost.

"It was quite frankly not an expensive work," she said, "but shipping was going to cost more than the piece itself."



The Armory Show in 2017 in New York. Photo by Sean Zanni ©Patrick McMullan.

New Reality

This new world raises a new question, one that buyers should ask dealers in all future transactions: where is the work, exactly?

“It’s the first question I ask,” Boyer said.

A French gallery showing virtually at Art Basel Hong Kong, for instance, might present a work located at an artist’s studio in London, which automatically raises an additional layer of customs considerations for international buyers due to Brexit.

“It’s like a box of administrative snafu chocolates,” New York-based art adviser Liz Parks said. “You never know what you’re going to get.”

Parks said that even before the pandemic, art shipping was a fraught process. But these days, she’s taking into account extra layers administrative work, and planning accordingly.

For a new acquisition coming out of Denmark, a pricey shipping quote prompted Parks and her client to hold off until the gallery comes to Art Basel Miami Beach, so as to take advantage of consolidated-rate shipping.

But Parks has not been able to wait out every problem. Another work, bought last fall, had not made it to her client a month after it was purchased.

“We were hoping that the plane prices were going to go down, and then they didn’t,” she said. “We said, ‘Okay forget it, let’s send it.’”



Art Basel in Miami Beach 2019. Courtesy of Art Basel.

Location, Location, Location

“A lot of it depends on what country you’re dealing with,” art advisor Todd Levin told Artnet News. “It’s really on kind of a country-by-country dynamic.”

In Italy, for example, the governmental office that signs off on exports is now only open two days a week, Levin said. But he has found new solutions, finding unexpected allies in places such as a small regional auction house in Germany.

It agreed to store a small painting for six months—free of charge—after the shipping costs turned out to be 10 percent of the sales price.

“Everybody wants to keep the gravy train moving and wants to be as helpful and as sensible as they can be,” he said. Still, three months later, Levin checked in to learn shipping costs had not decreased.

But some collectors—the uber-wealthy especially—don’t especially mind paying extra for shipping.

“Luckily, people who have to have it *now* are usually willing to pay a premium,” art advisor Wendy Cromwell said. Of one client, she said: “He wants what he wants, when he wants it, but he’ll also pay for it, so it was doable.”

Yet there are some issues that even money cannot solve.

Cromwell, for example, recently needed to coordinate the delivery of a 500-pound marble sculpture to a home in the Hamptons. “I couldn’t get a landscaper there to do the necessary groundwork,” she said. “They were telling me they couldn’t source bluestone, which was going to go under the sculpture.”

And it doesn’t help that seemingly ever member of the one percent fled to the same place.

“I used to be able to get service in the Hamptons very easily,” Cromwell said.



Adam Fields, founder of ARTA. Courtesy ARTA

Shippin’ Ain’t Easy

Shippers, of course, are dealing with their own sets of challenges.

“There is unbelievable demand,” said Thomas Burns, COO of the Fortress Corporation in Boston. “Clients, whether individual collectors or institutions, have been planning during the entire pandemic. Now they have plans that they’re ready to put into place whether selling, acquiring, or mounting exhibitions.”

“Our biggest challenge is keeping up with demand,” Adam Fields, founder of the shipping startup ARTA, added.

Crozier has begun looking into the possibility of retrofitting sea containers, which could help the industry finally develop some best practices for art transport by sea. (To date, ocean shipments for

artworks adhere to general freight guidelines, with no specific standards for the concerns artworks raise.)

But shippers also have to wait on their clients to set the pace.

“We’re waiting for galleries to tell us where they are,” said David Cohen, the cofounder of the U.K.-based Masterpiece shipping company. “They’re still not 100 percent out of the gate yet, as far as I can tell. Everybody is taking calculated steps. Look at the Olympics. You don’t want to go backwards.”

Yet despite the uncertainty, no one doubts that shipping companies are raking in profits.

“If I had to go back into this business, I’d go back as a shipper because I think they’re cleaning up,” Cromwell said. “They literally charge you to say ‘hello’ on the phone.”