



Collections Storage and Management:  
Effective Practices

## Introduction

Artist-endowed foundations play crucial roles individually as stewards of an artist's creative legacy and together as a collective repository of our shared cultural heritage. As custodians of artworks committed to public benefit, foundations have fiduciary responsibilities that hold them to a high standard of care<sup>1</sup>. This is distinct from private owners of a collection, such as the artist who created it or the artist's family members, who themselves determine the standard of care they will undertake. The goal of this publication is to assist artist-endowed foundations in navigating the challenges of securing appropriate collections storage and management services enabling them to fulfill this important responsibility. This publication was prepared for The Aspen Institute Artist-Endowed Foundations Initiative/AEFI.

## The Nature of Artist-Endowed Foundation Collections

A foundation's collection may comprise a wide range of objects, including finished and unfinished artworks, studies, maquettes and plans, records and other paperwork, studio materials and equipment, and libraries. Consistent with the foundation's mission, these materials will be researched, studied, and viewed by scholars, curators, educators, and artists, loaned for public exhibition, donated or sold to institutions, or placed in private collections. Developing a mission-based framework to guide the foundation's use and care of its collection is essential to successful collection stewardship.

## The Lifecycle of a Foundation's Collection

There are several key stages and associated tasks during the typical lifecycle of a foundation's collection:

- 1 Estate Settlement:** Taking physical control of the collection and securing it during settlement of the artist's estate and transition of assets to the foundation.
- 2 Initial Processing:** Conducting an inventory, condition assessment, photo documentation, and appraisal.
- 3 Collection Definition:** Utilizing a mission-based framework to determine whether objects will be retained in the collection or disbursed as non-mission related.
- 4 Use-Based Categorization:** For objects retained in the collection, either for the short or long-term, further categorization based on particular needs for access, handling, and storage.
- 5 Collection Database:** Design, development, and maintenance of a database for collection management purposes.
- 6 Object Conservation:** Assessment and treatment of objects in the collection to ensure the preservation of original physical properties.
- 7 Charitable Use:** Ongoing facilitation of the collection's use for scholarly research, education, and exhibition, and in some cases, placement in public collections or private holdings, as determined by the foundation's mission.

## Recognizing Risk in Collections Storage and Management

A foundation must minimize and manage risks to its collection, be this a danger presented by a natural cause, accident, or human intention.

The physical composition of collection's objects makes them susceptible to natural elements, such as fire (the most likely cause of art collection loss or damage<sup>ii</sup>) and water. Third-party services required for packing, shipping, or handling the collection, can increase the risk of objects being damaged or lost.

In addition, the high value of objects can make them a tempting target for those with unsupervised access to the collection, be they former members of the artist's staff with continued access during the estate settlement process, or foundation employees, scholars, or service providers with open access during ongoing foundation operation.

Finally, the potential for loss can increase when a collection en masse is assigned to the physical control of a third party, such as an art dealer with responsibility for storage, thus placing the collection beyond the foundation's direct control.

Minimizing risk plays an essential role in fulfilling fiduciary responsibilities.

## Recommendations

There are many factors to consider when planning for a collection's storage and management. As a first step, establishing a board-approved policy and procedures for collections management is essential. Once a policy has been established and is being implemented on an ongoing basis, it should be given periodic stress tests as a component of the foundation's annual audit, thereby guaranteeing the integrity of the foundation's internal controls.

We've compiled a list of suggestions for artist-endowed foundations to consider when choosing collection storage providers as well as service providers. These are based on three elements that will be key to a board-approved collections management policy:

- Require that collections are kept in museum-standard storage  
*Will minimize risk of natural damage (e.g. fire or water), theft, and loss*
- Require that collections are maintained using museum-standard services  
*Will minimize risk of third-party error and damage*
- Require appropriate insurance coverage  
*Ensure adequate policy to cover any damage or loss that may occur*

# Collection Storage

There are a variety of options for storing a foundation's collection as the objects will have different needs with regards to environmental conditions, ease of access, and security. While some foundations maintain their documentary archive in secured, purpose-built facilities located within the foundation's administrative offices, artworks most likely will require an off-site storage facility. Although some foundations have the resources to construct and operate a secure, purpose-built storage facility, most foundations will find that a specialized third-party provider with the infrastructure to monitor and maintain the storage facility, as well as provide operations support, will be the most effective and cost-efficient choice.

Should the foundation desire to continue using a storage space utilized by the artist during their lifetime or by family owners of the collection prior to the foundation's establishment, that space must be properly secured and vetted by the insurance provider if the foundation desires to continue its use. As noted above, private owners, including artists themselves as well as their family members, are not held to the fiduciary standards of care that foundations must meet.

## An off-site storage location should meet the following requirements:

- The provider specializes in art and collections storage
- The provider and the facility have been vetted by insurance companies
  - + The facility does not have a basement
  - + There is no deferred maintenance
- The facility is single-use and purpose-designed for art and collections storage
  - + The provider owns the facility or has a long-term lease of 49 years or more
- The facility has museum-standard environmental controls
  - + Climate-control or temperature control depending on the needs of the collection
  - + Pest control program
- The facility has a security system that reports directly to a central station and does not rely solely on security guards
- The facility has minimized risk of natural disasters
  - + Is not located within a flood zone
  - + Is constructed of non-flammable materials
  - + Is not located in a densely populated urban area
- The facility is prepared for natural disasters, should they occur
  - + Has a back-up generator
  - + Has an evacuation plan in place
- Art handlers employed by the provider are given thorough background checks and are trained to museum-standards
- The facility's loading dock(s) are covered or enclosed
- The provider's trucks are climate-controlled and equipped with GPS tracking
- The provider uses a digital inventory management and control system that can be integrated with the client's own database
  - + System should be secure and backed-up on off-site servers

# Collection Services

Collection services providers, such as packers, shippers, framers, and installers, require similarly vigorous vetting. Rather than take a piecemeal approach to this responsibility, it is worth considering partnering with a storage provider that has the capacity to provide facilitated access to a suite of collection services. This can help minimize complications and the risk of dealing with third parties, while also increasing efficiency.

## Art storage providers that furnish collection services should:

- Assign a dedicated account manager to facilitate collection services
- Provide installation and handling services
- Provide or coordinate packing and crating with a vetted partner
- Provide condition reporting and photo documentation services
- Either provide or coordinate registrarial services with a vetted partner
- Coordinate appraisals and conservation services with a vetted partner
- Have the capacity to implement project management across small and large endeavors as required
- Offer private viewing rooms of varied scales appropriate for individual pieces as well as groups of artworks

# Conclusion

Whatever the mission of an artist-endowed foundation, the fiduciary duty of care defines its collection stewardship practices. The standards for collection storage and management during a foundation's lifetime in many ways are comparable to those of a museum. Attaining this high level of care is possible with proper preparation, strong internal controls, and partnerships with trustworthy providers of collection storage and management services.

## Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup>"Considerations in Foundation Practice: Art Collections" in *The Artist as Philanthropist*, Vol. 2 (Washington D.C., The Aspen Institute: 2010), 165.  
<sup>2</sup>Spiess, Katherine and Spiess, Philip. "Museum Collections" in *The Museum: A Guide* (New York, Greenwood Press: 1990), 157.

