

The Traveling Conservator: Tales from Turin

In 2005, the Kelsey was approached to loan archaeological objects from its extensive holdings of material from Seleucia (modern-day Iraq) to the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica di Torino (the Civic Museum of Turin)

Spotlight

for a major exhibition entitled "Sulla via di Alessandro: Da Seleucia al Ghandāra" (Alexander's Heirs in Asia: From Seleucia to Ghandāra). The exhibition, which is currently on display at the recently restored Palazzo Madama, Turin, is also the inaugural show for the beautiful Sala del Senato (Senate Hall) of the Palazzo. The exhibition highlights the work of the Italian mission in Seleucia, particularly the work of Professor Antonio Invernizzi, Scientific Director of the Turin Center for Archaeological Research in the Middle East and Asia, under whose auspices the Italian Archaeological Expedition in Iraq began excavations at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in 1964.

Among their many other duties, Kelsey conservators are responsible for objects that go out on loan, from a single item to a complete touring exhibition. It is standard practice for a representative of the Museum to act as courier, traveling with the loaned objects between locations. The courier is responsible for the safety of the objects during all stages of transport between venues, supervising the packing, unpacking, and installation (or deinstallation) and checking the objects against condition reports provided by Kelsey conservators. In addition to

undertaking conservation work on the 38 objects selected for the exhibition, I was also the courier who accompanied the crated objects to Turin.

When objects are loaned to another institution, and especially if they travel internationally, a complex set of issues needs to be taken into consideration. The conservation department, in conjunction with a representative from the Turin Center for Archaeological Research in the Middle East and Asia, assessed the initial list of 51 objects requested for loan to determine whether the objects were stable and robust enough for travel. The borrower then pared this list back to 38 objects, and I was able to begin treating the material in preparation for travel. The objects requested for loan consisted of seventeen small and one large terracotta figurines, one larger stone figurine, one stucco architectural fragment, three cuneiform tablets, fourteen ceramic vessels, and a small bronze mirror. A couple of the objects had undergone prior conservation treatment, but most had not been assessed by a conservator since they were received at the Kelsey in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the objects chosen for travel had never been displayed before.

Conservation of the objects included digital photographic as well as detailed written documentation of their condition. Treatment of the material consisted of removing layers of dust and dirt, particularly well accumulated on some of the ceramics; reversing old, inaccurate, yellowed restorations and rejoining with a synthetic, reversible adhesive with

good ageing properties; consolidating fragile surface areas; removing insoluble salts where visually distracting; removing distracting, waxy red pencil from some of the terracotta figurines (most likely acquired in the field during initial excavation and recording); removing old, abrasive mounts and replacing them with less damaging ones appropriate for the material type.

Once conservation treatment was complete, specific handling and packing requirements were discussed with Paul Smith, an art packer who has worked with the Museum to crate numerous loans for travel both within the United States and internationally. The 38 objects were packed into a large, custom-built wooden crate for transport, with individual recessed areas cut into thick foam planks to house the ceramics and large figurines and a rigid box support with individually padded compartments for the smaller objects.

The crates were transported between the Kelsey Museum and Turin by both road and air. The most direct flight to the destination is favored for transporting fragile cultural material, as loading and unloading crates for several flights is too risky. For this loan, the most direct flight to Italy was from Chicago to Milan. The crate was transported to Chicago on a truck equipped with air suspension and then hand-loaded onto a pallet at the Alitalia cargo center prior to being loaded into the cargo hold of the plane. Space is often tight in the cargo hold of a plane, and it can be impossible to avoid stacking crates when palletizing. As I had an intimate knowledge of the crate construction and packing methods



Photo: C. Chemello

The crate of Kelsey Museum objects waiting to be loaded onto the plane.



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The Palazzo Madama, Turin, Italy.