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Tips for Sculptures in Legacies and Collections

By Jennifer Cohen

Whether you are a sculptor concerned with preserving your works and their value for posterity or are responsible for a sculpture collection or legacy, have a look at these tips for your planning. While we at POBA (a new not-for-profit initiative of the James Kirk Bernard Foundation) offer general tips on cataloguing, archiving, and more that all persons responsible for art collections and legacies may find useful, here are some specific tips on preserving, displaying and caring for sculptures that you will likely pass on to heirs or have sold posthumously.

- Consider the enduring after-life of sculptures.** With few exceptions, sculptures are made to last. Both the original sculptor and anyone responsible for a sculptor's legacy will want to get ready for the posthumous life of these artworks, especially about handling the creation and sale of reproductions. For artist-rendered pre-cast sculptures intended for casting and their heirs or executors authorize the casting, the posthumous casts may be considered originals. In part this depends on whether the artist gave specific instructions to do so: authorized posthumous casts are attributed to the original artist. Conversely, posthumous casts made without the authorization of the artist or the artist's heirs (assuming that they hold the copyright) may constitute infringement. There is agreement among experts that the artist's standards must be realized, and advise that heirs and executors to restrict posthumous reproduction to only one limited, numbered edition (e.g. usually not exceeding twelve casts) to pre-

serve the work's value. Specific situations may vary but the general message to artists and their heirs is this: leave or create instructions about use and reproduction of original sculptures, even if not yet cast. This will eliminate hassles, increase value and protect both the works and the loved ones who care for these legacies.

- **Know what the artist intended.** Before making any decisions about care, storage or shipping, it is useful to know, if possible, how the artist created the work in order to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. What is the material used – metal, wood, resins or polymer, mixed media, etc - and learn about the qualities of that medium. Understand the treatments the artist applied – creating a patina, turning with or against the grain, or mounting permanently or for change, for example. This knowledge helps the steward of a sculpture collection make good decisions, which in turn affect both the pleasure of seeing each sculpture and the value of owning it.
- **Keep them clean.** This may sound obvious, but the method of cleaning sculptures has a big effect on beauty and longevity. Regardless of medium, dust with soft cloths and use moving air – blow brushes, vacuum nozzles, and computer compressed air “dusters” for example, - as your best friend to remove dust and loose debris. Avoid chemicals in cleaning unless absolutely necessary. Even mild soap and water should be tested on a non-visible surface first. A mistake can entirely change the actual work and its value.
- **Display each sculpture properly.** Make sure that each sculpture is located in a setting appropriate for the medium: the first big dividing line is whether a sculpture was created for outside or inside display. Weather – light, temperature, humidity – can either add to a sculpture's beauty and value or shorten its life considerably. Regardless of medium, most sculptures benefit from ventilation and moderate humidity. Extremes take their toll over time. So, know the medium of each piece and place it where age makes it more beautiful and sustains its life, rather than shortens it.
- **Handle each sculpture appropriately.** Some sculptures need regular care such as simple clean up from dust and causal debris, noted above. But others benefit from regular treatments, especially those where patina is of interest. For example, bronze sculptures, which are meant to last centuries – age differently depending on whether the patina is treated or not. Sometimes, the artist has created the work with a patina produced for a specific effect through heat or additives such as wax or lacquer. Others do not treat the surface and anticipate that nature will win, and intend that specific effect on the work. These patinas need to be treated differently. Wax coatings wear thin, and you may prefer to let the aging process take advantage of that thinning. But if you prefer to preserve the patina created by wax, use an inert wax, without chemicals or abrasives, such as Johnson's Traffic Wax or Renaissance wax. Lacquers and polymers (like polyurethanes) crack, fade and discolor over time, so like other surface treatments, it is important to know the composition of the original, as modern overlays can cause significant changes in color and wear.
- **Do no harm.** If you do not know what a given sculpture is made of, where it was intended to be displayed, or other basic questions, the adage should be: do nothing, but get informed quickly about how to display and preserve that work! If you find variations in coating, multiple patinas, or changes in coloration to the surface that are not part of the original work, consult an expert. Likewise, if you see weakening or damage to the mounting. In other words, when in doubt contact a reputable gallery, conservator or resource such as POBA to get expert advice regarding a valuable or personally important sculpture.
- **Store your sculptures smartly.** Avoid storing in attics and basements for extended periods, that is, spaces with limited ventilation and where ob-

jects are often ignored for long periods. When packing up bronzes, wear white cotton gloves as skin oils leave a residue that eventually erode patinas. For storing ceramics or glass sculptures, latex gloves give both added traction and surface protection. For metals of all types, first wrap in clear plastic. If storing in a tight place where the sculptures may "hit" each other, add a wrapping of bubble wrap but ALWAYS face the bubbles outward, away from the surface. The bubbles themselves can leave marks on metal and other surfaces.

- **Ship and pack with safety and value in mind.** Sculpture of all sizes pose special challenges for shipping and packing because of their irregular shapes and sizes and because they can be both fragile and heavy at the same time. Knowing the value of your piece(s) will help determine the type of packing materials you need. For smaller sculptures, packing boxes should be adequate provided the box is larger than your art piece by at least 2-3 inches on all sides. Most sculptures over 40 pounds will need a double-walled moving box. Heavier, larger or significantly valuable items will need a wooden shipping crate. Sculptures with delicate or sensitive features may need to be braced, preferably using foam or wood. Always ship your sculptures with a reputable and insured carrier, and make sure to get delivery insurance equal to its known (or best guestimate) value. Your art is precious, so if you are in doubt about shipping sculptures, contact a professional shipper that works specifically with fine art and don't hesitate to ask questions about how your art will be packed, transported, and insured.
- **Protect your rights.** The Copyright Act of 1976 fully protects original sculptures from unauthorized reproduction or the creation of derivative works. The sculptor retains all copyright rights in the work unless a bill of sale specifies that the artist has transferred copyright rights (e.g., to create reproductions) to the purchaser. However, under the Sections 203 and 204 of the Copyright Act of 1976, the sculptor or her heirs also have a right to terminate or renegotiate such rights if they file within 5 years of certain deadlines. If your sculpture collection entitles you or may entitle you to exercise these rights, seek expert assistance to determine eligibility and procedures.

POBA is a new not-for-profit initiative of the James Kirk Bernard Foundation that provides support and an online platform for displaying, preserving, and promoting the art of talented deceased artists, both known and unknown. You can learn more about POBA artists and services, including [POBA Concierge Services](#) and [POBA Tips](#) at [POBA | Where the Arts Live](#).

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