



SPECIAL DELIVERY: PACKING RARE BOOKS FOR SHIPPING

Steven E. Smith & Beth M. Russell

Illustrations by Stephanie Cline

In the museum world, where paintings and other objects are frequently lent and borrowed for exhibitions, standards and practices have been developed to guide curators and other professionals in the packing of artwork for shipping. The emphasis is on packaging that protects the object within from external forces and does not cause damage itself. These packages must also be durable, for at a minimum, a good shipping container is designed to be used twice—first on the trip to the borrower and again on the trip back to the home institution. If an object is part of a traveling exhibit, however, its container must be able to withstand repeated disassembly and reassembly as it travels from venue to venue.

Exhibits with materials from various institutions have traditionally been much less a part of the world of rare books and archives, but a new era of cooperative ventures seems to be increasing the frequency with which librarians and archivists face the challenge of shipping valuable materials. Of course, librarians frequently receive books through the mail, typically from booksellers. These packages vary greatly in quality, and they are meant for one-way, one-time use. In fact, even these packages are often unsafe and unsatisfactory for shipping books.¹ Nevertheless, when faced with a request

Steven E. Smith is Special Collections Librarian and Beth M. Russell is Cataloging Librarian at Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University.

to borrow an item for exhibit, we usually use these packages as our models. We often even use these packages themselves, or what we can find that is left of them—stray bits of foam “popcorn,” used bubble-wrap, or even worse, crumpled newspaper.

Yet the need to ship rare or irreplaceable materials should be approached with more forethought. At the Cushing Memorial Library, the special collections and archives repository for Texas A&M University, we have developed a packaging system that is designed to be reusable and adjustable to books of many different sizes. It provides more than enough protection for overnight delivery within the United States for most of the books in our collection. For overseas shipment or for books of extreme value (say a Shakespeare folio or a Gutenberg Bible), this package would not be appropriate, though it could be scaled up to meet those demands. Our purpose was not to design a budget-busting, “high-end” shipping crate that would be used only once, but rather to create a package that would serve our most frequent or routine requests for shipment using materials that, for the most part, we already have on hand for other uses in our preservation program.

Literature review

Traditionally books and other materials within a rare book library or archives do not circulate outside the library or archives. In fact, if not for lending materials for exhibit, books, manuscripts, and other objects, once received in a special collections repository, would usually stay there indefinitely.² The primary professional organization for special collections library professionals, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the American Library Association, has developed guidelines for lending special collections materials for exhibit and research use, aiming both to encourage such types of loans and to provide helpful guidelines to make them safer and more successful. RBMS's *Guidelines for Borrowing Special Collections Materials for Exhibit* state: “Although individual museums and a few large libraries have long had procedures for dealing with such loans, no such standards for special collections libraries in general have been formulated.”³

Both this set of guidelines and the *Guidelines for the Loan of Rare and Unique Materials*⁴ attempt to simplify the exchange of materials through clearly worded documentation and clear delineation of responsibility for materials. The guidelines are particularly helpful because they suggest procedures through the duration of the lending process, while alerting institutions to possible sources of conflict and damage that many professionals may not anticipate.

Both sets of guidelines specify that the borrowing institution must comply with the lending institution's wishes concerning the packing of materials. These guidelines also state that if requested, the identity and qualifications of the person who will unpack and repack materials should be provided with a description of the physical environment in which packing, storage, and display will occur. The cost of packing, insurance, shipping, and conservation, and administrative costs should also be borne by the borrower. Implicit in these guidelines is the importance of the packing and unpacking processes, both as a means to protect the objects in transit and as a potential source of injury in itself to the objects.

In recent years, the physical construction of packing materials for rare books has also been addressed in library literature. Paul Banks, an authority on the preservation and conservation of books, devoted a short section to the problem in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*.⁵ He asserts that "packaging is by far the most important element in safe shipping," and he describes an "ideal" package that should combat the two major problems in packing books: lack of sturdiness and lack of protection for corners. Banks provides an excellent package design. However, his design calls for the use of double-sided, pressure sensitive tape at various points within the package, and we felt this complicated the repacking procedure, thus making the design more difficult in two-way shipment. We also use tape, but more commonly available packing tape and only at the last step of the packing process. Because the packing tape is applied only to the exterior of a rigid polyethylene shipping crate, there is no risk of the tape's damaging the package, thereby necessitating the replacement of all or part of the package.

Another helpful treatment of the topic is Frank Mowery's narrative of his experiences with a traveling exhibit from the collections at the Folger Shakespeare Library.⁶ This included the construction of special crates to reduce the need to handle the books. Although Mowery admits that "[i]n most cases it isn't necessary to go to these extremes when shipping books," his article did suggest two practices that we incorporated into our design: the use of a reusable shipping case and Etha foam as a packing material because of its unique characteristics. However, as Mowery states, his crate is designed for "extremes." Our package differs from his in that it is designed to meet more routine lending requests.

Physical details

Our package protects the book by layering different types of material to provide shielding in case the package is punctured, cushioning in case it is

dropped or run over, and buffering from inevitable changes in temperature and humidity (see cross section illustration, Appendix 1). The package is essentially water resistant. All of the material used in the package is acid free and archivally safe. Except for the outer shipping case, none of the material used is purchased exclusively for use in shipping books. In other words, this package is made up of material we already have on hand for other uses in our preservation program.

The book is first placed in a standard phase box constructed from .020" thickness TrueCore® archival boxboard. This is typically the box in which the book is stored on our shelves, but if the book has never had a phase box, then one is constructed at this time (see Appendix 2). The phase-boxed book is then placed in its first zipper-locking polyethylene bag and covered with several layers of 1/8" thick Volara®, a polyolefin foam, which acts as the primary cushioning material. The phase box in the polyethylene bag covered in Volara® is then sandwiched between two pieces (.060" thickness) of Davey Red Label Binder's Board, and the sandwich is held together by two, 1"-wide straps fashioned from acid-free book cloth and Velcro® Velcoins. The package is then placed in another phase box, this one constructed from 1/8" single-wall, corrugated cardboard. The corrugated board has the advantage of acting as a shock absorber and thus provides additional cushioning.

The package is next enclosed inside two zipper-locking polyethylene bags and placed in the middle of the shipping crate, and any excess area in the crate is filled with Etha foam. The outside shipping crate can be custom made, but we prefer using TransPort® shipping cases, which have reinforced corners, heavy web strapping, and a riveted handle for easy carrying. They also come in a variety of sizes, though the 32" x 40" x 4" size is large enough to handle almost any book in our collection.

As an additional measure, three strands of packing tape are applied to insure that the case does not come open during shipment. Because the case is made of rigid polyethylene, tape can be repeatedly applied and removed without tearing or peeling its surface.

Included in the package is a detailed list of packing instructions (Appendix 2). We also include a roll of packing tape in the event the borrower does not have any on hand when repacking. Before the package is shipped, we alert the borrower by letter of the date the package will arrive. We also inform the borrower that packing instructions are included in the crate and that none of the packing material should be discarded.

A complete list of the materials and suppliers is provided in Appendix 3.

Summary

The development of our reuseable packing container was prompted by the importance of safe shipping in an increasingly cooperative special collections environment. We attempted to demonstrate the dangers of shipping and to point out the availability of materials, while refining our design and instructions to make them easy to use. We encourage other librarians and archivists to learn from our experience, while adapting our procedures to the needs of their own institutions.

Notes

1. Jeryl Metz. "Packing Books for Shipment—And Survival," *AB/Bookman's Weekly*, August 14–21, 1989: 513–16.

2. The irreplaceable nature of special collections materials demands more concern for their physical well being than is afforded by most general interlibrary loan shipping. For this reason, although interlibrary loan shipping and special collections lending share some concerns, the literature from the former area has not proved very helpful.

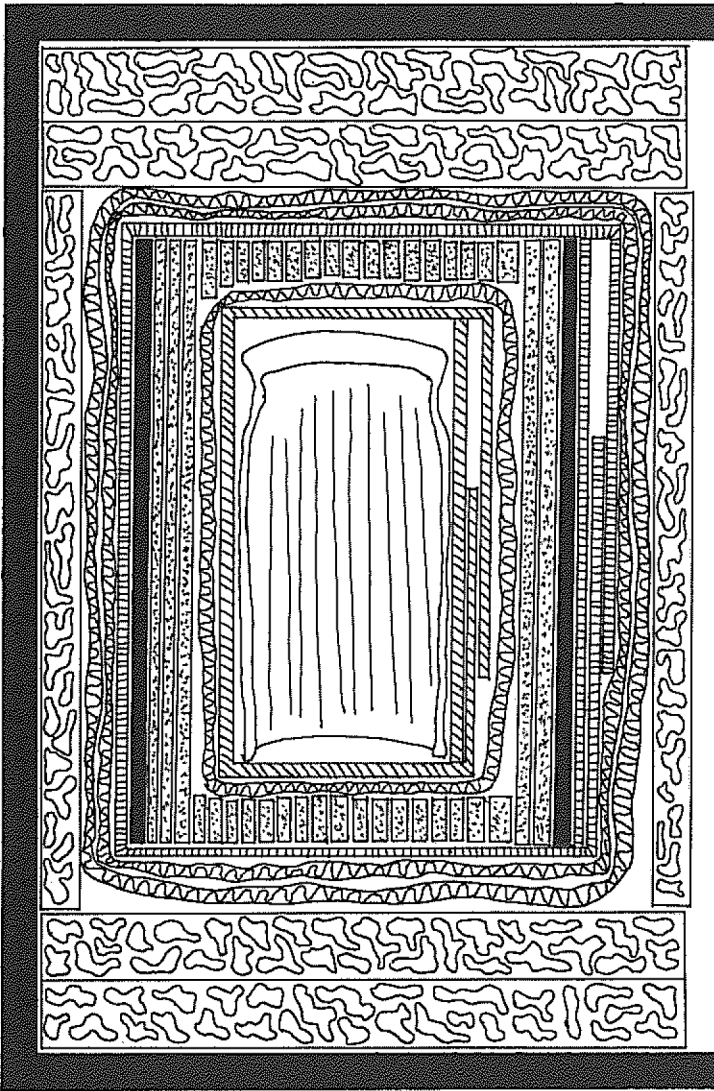
3. *Guidelines for Borrowing Special Collections Materials for Exhibition*, prepared by ACRL Rare Book and Manuscripts Section's ad hoc Committee for Developing Guidelines for Borrowing Special Collections Materials for Exhibition (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 1990), 1.

4. *Guidelines for the Loan of Rare and Unique Materials* by the ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section's ad hoc Committee on the Loan of Rare and Unique Materials. Available on the ACRL Web site at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/loanrare.html>.

5. "Preservation," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: Dekker, 1968), v. 23: 197–99.

6. John Franklin Mowery. "Packing Books for Travel," *Guild of Bookworkers Newsletter* 23: 58–68.

APPENDIX 1



↑ Outside Crate
(Not Davey Board)



Etha Foam



Corrugated
Cardboard Box



Davey Board



Volara

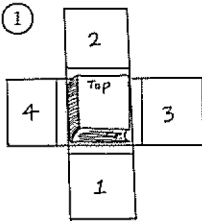


Plastic
Bags

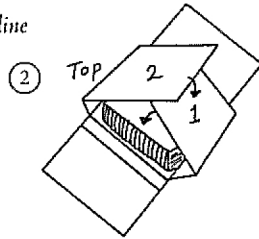


Acid-Free
Cardboard Box

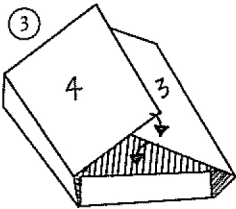
APPENDIX 2
Illustrations by Stephanie Cline



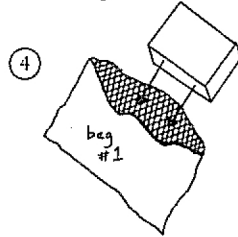
1. Put the book in the center of the flaps with the spine facing the flap-marked spine.



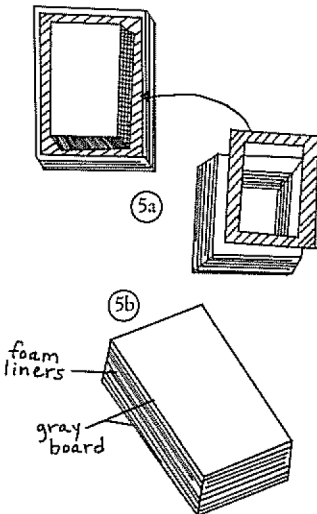
2. Then fold the top and bottom flaps in the order they are numbered with flap 1 being the one that lies touching the book.



3. Fold the two side flaps as you did the first two.

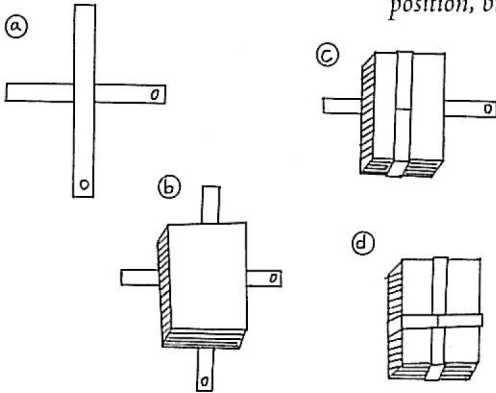


4. Then place the box in the plastic bag marked #1, folding the extra plastic over to make a tight fit. This ensures waterproofing.

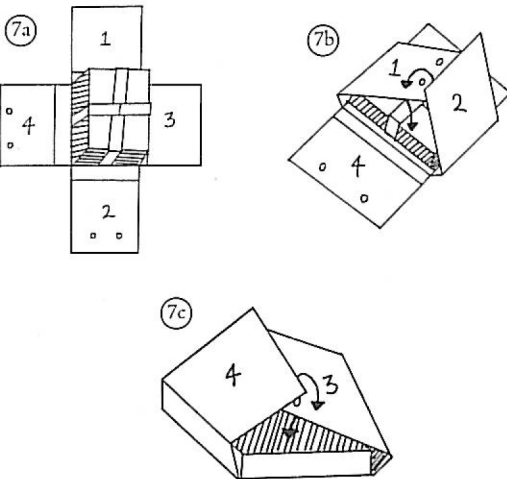


5. Place the packaged book on top of a piece of gray cardboard and three whole pieces of foamboard. Put each foam frame where the book fits through the opening (a). Push the liner down around the book. Continue the process until the liners are stacked to the top of the book. Then put the three remaining sheets of foam on top of the book; the gray board then goes on top of the whole stack (b).

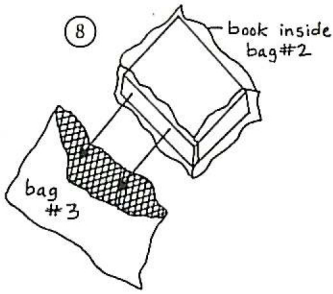
6



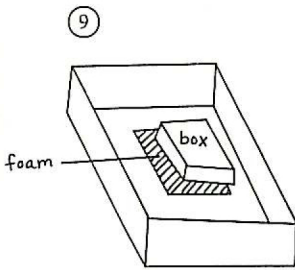
6. Place the two strips of material in a cross position, brown side down (a). Lay the foam-packed book on the crossed part of the material (b). Fold the top and bottom tightly around the package and secure using Velcro (c). Repeat for the side strips so that it is tightly bound and nothing slips or moves (d).



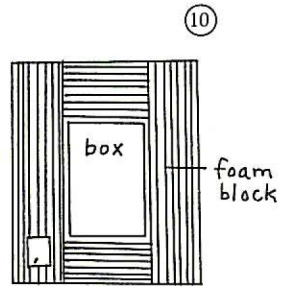
7. Place the box onto the center flap (a). Fold flap 1 onto the box and then flap 2, securing them with Velcro (b). Do the same for flaps 3 and 4 (c).



8. Put the box into the plastic bag marked #2; fold the edges down around the box. Then put it into the plastic bag marked #3 with folded edges from the opening of bag #2 going to the inside edge of bag #3.



9. Put the wrapped box on the cut piece of foam in the center of the black box (a). Put foam blocks around the plastic-wrapped box (10) creating a tight fit to eliminate movement. Then put the last piece of foamboard on top of the book package. Put on the black lid and secure it. Be sure to leave the tape out of the box for later use.



After the black lid is on, wrap tape around the box as shown in the drawing—twice around the width and once around the length.

APPENDIX 3 Materials and Sources

Below is a list of materials and sources. They are listed in the order they are used when packing. The sources are not the only ones for many of these materials but those we tend to use most often.

- .020" TrueCore® archival boxboard:
Light Impressions: 439 Monroe Avenue, Box 940, Rochester, New York 14603-0940; (800) 828-6216
 - Polyethylene zipper-lock bags:
Associated Bag Company: 400 West Boden Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53207-7120; (800) 926-6100
- Note: Our package calls for three of these bags. They will vary in size depending on the size of the book. The aforementioned source stocks them in sizes from 1 1/2" x 1 1/2" to 13" x 18". We recommend having a few dozen from the 4" x 6" size to the larger sizes on hand at all times.*
- Volara®:
Voltek: Division of Sekisui America Corp., Ft. Worth, Texas 76140; (817) 551-1100
- Note: We purchase Volara® in rolls of 1/8" thick sheets, 60" wide and 600' long, and we cut down pieces from that to fit the particular job.*
- .080" Davey Red Label Binder's Board:
TALAS: 568 Broadway, New York, New York 10012-9889; (212) 219-0770
 - Buckram Book Cloth:
Gaylord: Box 4901, Syracuse, New York 13221-4901; (800) 448-6160
 - Velcro® Velcoins:
Gaylord (see above)
 - Single-Wall, 1/8" Archival Corrugated Board:
Light Impressions (see above)
 - Etha foam:
Preservation Products: 178 West Boden Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53207; (800) 448-6070
 - TransPort® Shipping Cases:
Light Impressions (see above)
 - 2" Tartan® Brand Tape "3690" 3M:
Any office supply store