

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.



Photo: C. Chemello

The Palazzo Madama, Turin, Italy.

for the Kelsey objects, I felt confident in deciding which way our crate could be loaded and oriented. In this case, our objects were accompanied by several crates of paintings from the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Toledo Museum of Art, and the Flint Institute of Arts that were on their way to an exhibition in Florence.

Once on the ground in Milan, I was met by our local contact, an agent from Gondrand International, an Italian art-handling and transport company. A four-hour wait for customs clearance for our crate from Rome meant that I was able to see close up the workings of the huge Alitalia freight center at Malpensa International Airport and taste the wonderful food in the airport staff cafeteria! Once cleared by Italian customs, the crate was again loaded and secured onto a truck for the road journey to Turin, which took about two hours. This drive took us past some lovely views of the Alps, but unfortunately I could only get glimpses of the snow-capped mountains through the low clouds and smog that are so familiar to the Po river valley region of northern Italy.

Our crate was taken directly to the Palazzo Madama, which is located in the city center, where it was to remain for twenty-four hours to acclimate to local environmental conditions before being opened. Once the crate was opened, I unpacked and checked each object individually against its pre-travel condition report and photograph. With the assistance of the exhibit preparators and designers for this exhibition, a combination of staff from the Civic Museum of Turin and contracted museum specialists, each object was then installed safely

into its showcase. Individual mounting systems for some of the objects were designed and constructed on the spot; these consisted of silicon-covered pins and rods to which plastic wire was tied to secure the objects without damaging their surface or being obtrusive, as well as barrier layers between the object and the painted surface of the showcase.

This exhibition borrows material from numerous cultural institutions worldwide, and the installation team was kept on their toes with different couriers arriving each day with diverse installation requirements varying in complexity. Thankfully, the Sala del Senato (Senate Hall), which houses temporary exhibits in the Palazzo Madama, is on the same floor as the very stylish café, where good, strong Italian coffee and panini could be had at any time during the day! The café also has a wonderful view of the Piazza Castello, where the Palazzo is located, through floor-to-ceiling windows.

Turin is a city renowned for its many museums, encompassing subjects ranging from archaeological materials to history and natural history, ethnography, science and technology, and modern art. There are also many specialist museums devoted to topics such as cinema, automobiles, and even a marionette museum. I was able to visit the Museo Egizio, the Egyptian Museum, which is said to have the largest and most important collection of Egyptian artifacts outside of Cairo. Evidently Jean-François Champollion, the renowned decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphs, famously wrote, "The road to Memphis and Thebes passes through Turin." This museum, founded in 1824 and

housed in a beautiful seventeenth-century palace, is justifiably popular, with 6,500 objects on display. One of the most imposing galleries of the museum is the Statuario, a dramatic gallery dedicated to monumental stone sculpture representing a veritable royal *Who's Who* of the kings and gods of ancient Egypt. The gallery lighting was an amazing backdrop to the sculptures; it was designed by Dante Ferretti, the Oscar-winning art director of *The Aviator*, and was installed during the first half of 2006.

I encourage all those who find themselves in Italy before May 27 (the closing date for the exhibition) to take a look at this incredible exhibition. The Palazzo Madama is an unforgettable venue in which to display the objects from our own Kelsey collection to the world. Since 1934 the Palazzo has housed the collections of the Civic Museum of Turin, a wide-ranging assemblage of 30,000 objects, including paintings, archaeological material, sculpture, textiles, and decorative arts. The Palazzo itself was initially one of the entrance gates to the Roman city Augusta Taurinorum on the *decumanus maximum* (east-west axis—today the Via Garibaldi). Among its other manifestations, the Palazzo has experienced life as a fortress in the medieval period, a castle in the 1400s, and a baroque royal palace for the royal madames, Christine of France and Maria Giovanna Battista of Savoy Nemours, during which time it took the name Palazzo Madama. The restoration of the Palazzo, itself a long-awaited multiyear effort, has enabled the incredible history of the building to be appreciated in all its guises.

Claudia Chemello



Photo: C. Chemello

Some of the Kelsey's ceramics newly installed in their showcase for the exhibition.



Photo: C. Chemello

Some of the Kelsey's small terracotta figurines being installed for the exhibition.