

# A Fine Art

## How to handle expensive art on board

By Sara Ventiera

**Capt. Martyn Walker** was cruising from Monaco to St. Tropez aboard his former Feadship when he walked into the main salon to see one of his stews lying on the floor “cuddling” a set of translucent shells.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Looking after my baby,” she said.

Those ethereal glass shells were handblown by Dale Chihuly, one of if not the most famous glass sculptors in the world. The piece was very rare and very expensive.

It seems counterintuitive to have pricey pieces of delicate artwork displayed aboard a moving vessel. Even when a yacht isn't in transit, it's not necessarily safe from the rocking and rolling of occasional – or sometimes persistent – wakes. But common sense isn't required when you like expensive things and you have more money than you know what to do with. More and more yacht owners are choosing to spend serious money on beautiful objects for their boats regardless of the inherent dangers those precious objects may face.

It falls to the crew, many of whom had never had fine art training before, to protect these invaluable treasures. So how do you keep invaluable three-dimensional objects safe on board?

### Crew Care

When Walker realized he had a problem with his boss's delicate Chihuly, he knew he had to get creative. Remembering the tubular rolls of sand his grandparents kept at the bottom of the doors to keep the draft out in winter, he had a bean bag made to wrap around the fragile piece on coast cruises. It sat on a non-slip mat on a low coffee table ensconced by the protective bag as the boat traveled from port to port.

For ocean passages, which this particular boat did quite often, they got a special velvet-lined box with a drawer for each paper-thin piece that cradled one another, getting smaller and smaller like a trippy marine-inspired Russian doll. Each individual segment was secured before the next one was touched to minimize its handling. “The boss didn't like it being touched because the glass was wafer thin, so it seemed like the safest way to move it,” Walker says.

In an ideal world, this shatterable piece of art would have been brought aboard with a plan in place from the beginning, but owners often thrust high-priced items on the crew without notifying them of their value or special care instructions. Fortunately for Walker, he had a stew who deeply cared about this particular Chihuly.

### Securing Art

Many crew may appreciate an object's beauty, but they don't know what it is or what risks are present. It sounds almost alarmist, but the dangers exist as soon as the sculpture or work begins its transit to the yacht. “Sometimes problems are not on board, it's connected to transport,” says Tilman Kriesel of TKA Art Advisors.

There's a reason art handling is a profession. One of the greatest threats to works of art is moving them from place to place, which is when the pieces are most at-risk of getting dinged, cracked, or damaged in various ways. That's why



M/Y Go's Sea Spray Chandelier by Chihuly and other artwork found elsewhere on board



museums, gallerists, and other art industry insiders recommended using professional art movers who know how to properly protect, transport, and affix objects in their desired place.

While the crew is rarely responsible for designating a place for these pricey works (more on what to look out for in a second), they too often are tasked with figuring out how to keep them in place. It's easy to get it wrong.

Kriesel was recently aboard a vessel in Monaco on which he spotted an antique Chinese porcelain glued to a wood table. "I have a tear in my eye when I see this," he says. "When you try to remove it from the table the sculpture can be destroyed along with the table."

The crew just didn't know better and were not instructed on the ideal way to secure the sculpture. A better way, Kriesel says, would have been to find a surface that could use special magnets or create a storage system like the one Walker devised. Heavier objects, like the kinds of sculptures that would sit on the ground, usually have to be fastened down on a platform with a screw that goes through the floor – otherwise, they could turn into a cannonball in rough seas, endangering not just the sculpture itself but the boat and anyone in the room.

## Location

For items that are particularly invaluable, professionals will often recommend alarm-rigged glass cases that will protect the piece from theft, as well as more persistent pests like sunlight and dust.

Aside from fluctuating temperatures and humidity, which can create issues for natural materials like wood and paper, some of the biggest threats to art aboard are related to their placement. Long-term exposure to sunlight can create discoloration and even cracks on certain materials. "It takes months or years until these damages are seen," says Kriesel. "Then it's impossible to fix it."

But there are other environmental factors to take into consideration, as well. Kriesel has seen multiple pieces installed right next to sprinkler systems, including an old master French impressionist painting. If the fire system were to get triggered, that piece would be lost to history.

Other yacht art professionals have seen works placed right next to the galley, where they absorb grease, making it easier for the dust to stick.

## Cleaning

That brings us to the next point: cleaning. "I've seen pieces not cleaned the proper way by the crew," says Kriesel, including a stainless-steel Jeff Koons sculpture with a polished surface that wasn't quite damaged but had lost its sheen. An acid-based cleaner diminished the mirror-like surface.

Incidents like these are why yacht art insiders like Kriesel recommend creating an art handbook put together by a professional or crewmember who is willing to inquire about the proper care from the gallerist or artist from whom the piece was obtained. "I'd like to see a well-educated crew who has meetings and learnings about the art and how to deal with specific risks," says Kriesel.



Top: M/Y Snowbird master stateroom;  
below: Bye Bye Brazil by Sarah Morris



To be safe, it's good to know the basics of keeping art clean. Over time, dust can be just as deleterious as sunlight, accumulating on surfaces until it's hard to remove, but you don't want to go in with harsh cleaners like the crewmember who dulled the Koons.

Pandora Mather-Lees, director Pandora Art Services, recommends starting slow with any cleaning program, especially if you don't have directions. The first

step is observing the object closely. Are there areas that look particularly delicate or breakable? How is it dirty? Dry cleaning methods (a soft hairbrush or microfiber cloth) are generally preferred over wet for dust and light cleanings. Is it handpainted? If so, that paint could come off if you rub it with a cloth. "That's happened on a superyacht," Mather-Lees says.

Glass and crystal objects are found on many yachts. Although they are obviously delicate, in most cases, the surfaces themselves are inherently chemically stable, not easily scratched or tarnished by cleaning. Mather-Lees recommends cleaning

glass and crystal consistently on a regular basis, once every week or two, with a light dusting. If needed, you could use water on a microfiber cloth or in certain instances add a drop of dish soap to the mix, but you don't want to spray the object directly. It's always better to spray the cloth, then wipe down the piece.

Chandeliers, which can be worth millions, are a bit trickier. Many are hung together with wire. And wire can rust over time. A soft hairbrush is always the preferable way to remove dust; however, cleaning a chandelier can be a huge time-sucking pain. Many are not dusted as much as they should be, so water is often needed to remove the layers of dust that have caked on to the surface and, sometimes, galley grease that attaches to the crystal or glass. Because of the fixtures' delicate nature, you can spray it with water or water and dish soap, then softly dry it with a fresh, clean cloth. "It's important to clean off the water," says Mather-Lees. "It pulls the dirt off, but you get a drip: it looks messy and can cause damage to the surrounding environment." According to Mather-Lees, chandeliers should be cleaned about every six months.

In some cases, chemicals may be needed to clean glass or crystal, but you should always check with the person who provided the sculpture for appropriate products. Never use window cleaner or bleach. If left on the surface, both can cause damage.

Other materials commonly found on yachts can be far more sensitive. Bronze and copper pieces are often strong, but you have to be extremely careful with cleaning. Dry cleaning is always preferable over wet because anything wet can interfere with the surface. Sometimes antique wax or Autosol can be used, but you have to know what you're doing and whether it's safe for the specific piece, as it could damage the patina.

Alabaster, a soft white stone that looks similar to marble, is water-soluble – you can actually rub away the sculpture if you try to wet clean it. Even touching certain materials with bare hands can disturb the piece – there's a reason art folks talk about white glove delivery. Mather-Lees can cite numerous examples of pieces on yachts that have been damaged by human hands, including a million-dollar-plus gold patina Anish Kapoor sculpture that had to be sent back to the workshop after a crewmember's thumbprint imprinted on the surface as they tried to hang it on the bulkhead.



A 19th-century marble sculpture of a woman had been touched on its belly so many times by guests passing by that it became etched (dulled) from the oil on their hands. "It had to be sanded down to have the surface restored," Mather-Lees says.

## Do Your Research

While there are way too many surfaces and techniques to cover all in the span of one article, for crew working alongside fine art, it's important to learn what you're doing. To go about increasing your knowledge, you can track down the gallerists for all of the pieces aboard (even lamps and other pieces of furniture can be considered art and cost far more than one would expect) to find out what each object is made from and how it should be cleaned, moved, and generally maintained. Then, put together an art manual for the boat. Art experts who specialize in yachts, people like Mather-Lees and Kriesel, can help do that work for you.

Mather-Lees offers courses for crewmembers that cover everything from art appreciation and art history to practical care, insurance, and the



Contemporary art on Admiral 54

**More and more yacht owners are choosing to spend serious money on beautiful objects for their boats regardless of the inherent dangers those precious objects may face.**

necessary paperwork for transiting with certain rare works.

It's a lot to digest, but yacht owners have got into trouble for moving works without the proper international certifications. Certain pieces fall under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (which can cover objects ranging

from crocodile-skin covered tables and Hermès Birkin bags to ivory objets d'art) and national treasure statutes. Those rare or endangered items can be confiscated from the vessel if the documentation isn't up to snuff, such as the Picasso that was seized off Corsica from S/Y Adix because the only paperwork the captain could provide said the painting was a national treasure that could under no circumstance be removed from Spain.

It was an unnecessary situation unfair to the captain and crew — and it cost the owner a lot

of money. "It's a huge burden on stews and captains to take care of these multi-million-pound objects on board that can easily cost more than the price of the yacht," says Mather-Lees. "It's the nicest of niches." ①



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