

ARTICLES

How to Protect Your Art Collection from Natural Disasters

By Margaret Bussiere

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The growth of the art market receives a lot of press and with good reason – the statistics are worthy of headlines: the fine art market of objects in excess of \$1 million in value has increased sharply, with the greatest growth being works sold for over \$10 million which has increased by 148% in the past decade^[1]. With the concentration of wealth in the United States by GDP in the metro areas of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Miami there is a significant volume of art in areas that are at high risk for natural disaster, or Catastrophic Risk in insurance speak, which is comprised of hurricanes, earthquakes and wildfires. So how can you best protect works in your collection if you are located in a Catastrophic Risk area?



Be Prepared and plan well ahead.

While Hurricanes may have a season, wildfires and earthquakes do not and when disaster is starting to unfold, it is usually too late. Most available resources will already be too overburdened with other clients to respond in time.

Regardless of what natural disaster you are at risk of there are a few common tips that go a long way to protecting your collection:

Keep an itemized inventory complete with photographs of the items in your collection.

Maintain, if possible, regular value updates through appraisals.

The more documentation you have for your collection, the faster a claim, if one should occur, will be resolved.

Hurricane preparedness

Hurricane preparedness isn't just for residents of Florida and the Gulf Coast. The entire East Coast is vulnerable to significant property damage from hurricanes and collectors living anywhere near coastal areas should have protections in place. Fine art losses alone from Hurricane Sandy, not including general property

damage, resulted in roughly \$500 million in insurance claims. Protecting your art collection from damage from a Hurricane is the easiest and most preventable of all disaster responses: they are typically confined to a season from June to November, with the peak occurring mid-August to late October and modern forecasting provides us with several days' notice in advance of the storm.

Prepare for hurricanes months in advance of hurricane season.

Do not plan to store fine art in basement or attic where works are more susceptible to damage from water or even temperature extremes.

Invest in hurricane shutters or hurricane glass installed by a reputable contractor.

Consider an evacuation plan for your collection. There are many experienced and professional fine art warehouses with experienced art handling staff that can remove your art to a climate controlled facility.

If you have a vacation home, have the works removed when the home is not in use during the "off" season.

If you live in the home full time, have an evacuation plan in place with a fine art shipper that has a clearly defined trigger for an evacuation, such a named storm with hurricane force winds of category 1 or higher.

Make sure the warehouse has a backup generator to maintain temperatures in the event of a prolonged power outage in the area.

If an evacuation plan is not realistic or achievable, install an HVAC climate control system with a backup generator in your home which can protect against rising humidity levels that can damage artwork.

Again, if evacuation your collection is not an option and a storm has been named and flooding is a concern, plan to move valuables to upper floors.

Wildfire Precautions

Wildfires can happen at any time throughout the year, but the potential is always higher during periods with little or no rainfall which make brush, grass and trees dry and burn more easily. High winds can also contribute to spreading the fire. Wildfires present a very difficult environment for the protection of art from the fire itself to severe ambient temperatures, smoke, and reduced access to services that can assist you. In an environment of rapidly changing conditions and the emotional stress that you will be under this is not the time to begin thinking about protections of the art. Plans must be made well in advance and executed before conditions become critical.

The best protection from wildfires is evacuation. All other alternatives, while reducing the risk to your collection, still leave it exposed to an inhospitable environment.

Contact a professional fine art warehouse that has a team of packers and establish an evacuation contract with them. Make sure your evacuation plan has a built in trigger that occurs before a government evacuation order is given for your area.

This detail is important. By the time an evacuation order is issued for a particular area the only priority at that point is preservation of life.

Roads may be closed and your art handlers may not be able to access your home. Their truck could easily be turned away, leaving your collection to burn.

If you have a strong relationship with a museum, you may ask them about storage in the event of a disaster. Many museums accommodate the collections of board members and important local collectors.

A secondary precaution is to have a safe room on site, but it should be known that these safe rooms cannot protect from damage that will result from extremes temperatures if the wildfires should get close to the property.

You and any household staff should be trained by fine art professionals in the moving and storing of art. More damage occurs when collectors try to move the art themselves, especially when under duress, than from the natural disaster they were trying to avoid.

If you are going to contemplate using a fire safe room in your home, you should protect your home as much as possible from encroaching flames and accompanying heat.

Create an area at least 30 feet away from your home that is free of anything that will burn such as woodpiles, dried leaves, newspapers, brush and other landscaping. From 30 – 100 feet reduce or replace as much of the flammable vegetation as possible and prune vegetation. Create “fuel breaks” such as driveways, gravel walkways and lawns.

Regularly clean the roof and gutters.

Connect garden hoses long enough to reach any area of the home and fill garbage cans, tubs or other large containers of water

Earthquake Preparedness

Unfortunately, when an earthquake strikes it occurs without warning and is often catastrophic. Other guidelines mentioned earlier, such as evacuation, are not an option.

The best method for protecting your art and antiques from damage during an earthquake is to have it professionally installed in your home.

Heavy furniture, that can cause damage as well as suffer damage, can be secured to the floor and bookcases can be secured to walls.

Earthquake hooks can be used for art hanging on walls to prevent items from falling.

Sculpture and vases can be secured to their bases to prevent toppling.

A note about evacuation plans

Art collectors cannot assume that they will be home to guide the evacuation team to the works that are to be removed from the home when a catastrophe is looming

When you establish an evacuation plan be sure it includes the following:

Create a list of objects in order of priority. Given the severity of the situation, your art handler may not be able to remove all works at once and their ability to return to your home to remove remaining works is not guaranteed.

Prioritize levels 1-3 in order of necessity.

Provide descriptions of the objects including dimensions so that art handlers can bring suitable packing materials and plan for the amount of space needed on the truck.

Identify where the works are located in the home. Provide a plan of the home so that each room is named and the location of works is marked.

Include photographs of the works for clear identification.

At Risk Strategies we can guide our clients with disaster planning recommendations and can assist in establishing evacuation plans for fine art collections. Contact your account executive for further assistance that are customized to the specific needs of your home and collection.

Margaret Bussiere is a Vice President of DeWitt Stern, a Risk Strategies Company, with 20 years of experience as a fine art insurance specialist for galleries, museums, libraries and private collections. She can be reached at mbussiere@dewittstern.com

[1] McAndrew, Clare *The Art Market 2018, an Art Basel & UBS Report 2018*, Zurich, Art Basel and UBS, 2018. P. 118 Available from Art Basel. Accessed, 3/29/2018.

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