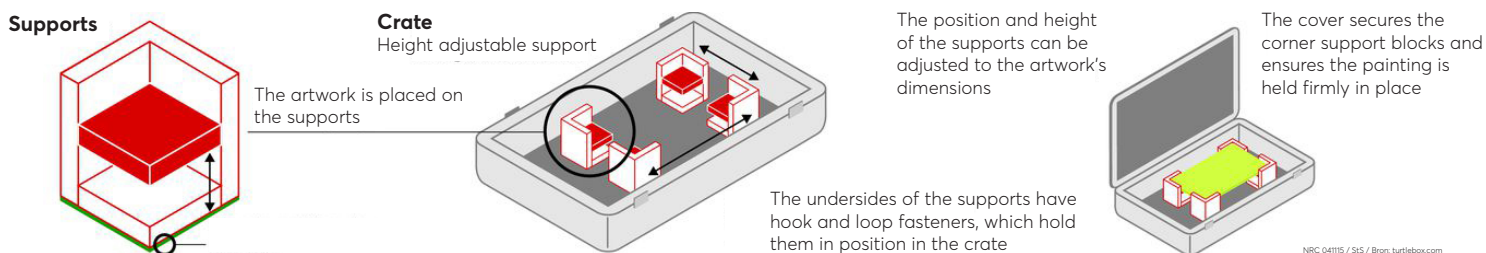




The Gemeentemuseum in The Hague transports Mondrians in a new art transport crate: the Turtle uNLtd (unlimited)



Art transport in a Turtle

Art Transport Previously it was standard practice to use a crowbar to open a wooden crate containing a vulnerable painting. These days the new Turtle is the standard for art transport.

By our editor
Claudia Kammer

Benno Tempel, director of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, clearly recalls how, when he was still a curator in other museums during the early nineteen-nineties, he was horrified by the way paintings were transported. 'They were in wooden crates, the tops of which were screwed down. Sometimes it was not possible to loosen a screw because it was stripped, so it was standard practice to use a crowbar to pry the crate open. I always shuddered when this was done because I was worried that the painting inside the crate would be damaged.' Those wooden crates did not last long either. 'A crate was custom made for every painting, and after being used a couple of times it was of no further use and was thrown away.'

By the time he became director of the Gemeentemuseum in 2009 that problem had already been solved. In cooperation with the art transport company Hizkia Van Kralingen, the museum had developed a new type of crate for transporting paintings. This reusable yellow plastic crate, the Turtle (Van Kralingen: 'Like a turtle, tough on the outside and soft on the inside'), could be used to transport works of different sizes. The works of art including frames are held in place in the crate by corner support blocks, which are attached to the bottom of the crate by hook and loop fasteners. The positions and height of the corner support blocks can be set for each painting. More than one picture can be fitted into one crate if they are small.



*Like a turtle,
the crate is tough on the outside
and soft on the inside.*

Transport

The Turtle and the two Rembrandts

In recent news reports about the purchase of two Rembrandts by the Netherlands and France, the Turtle was also referred to a couple of times. Both Jan Six Jr, whose father owns a Rembrandt that he only allows to be transported in a Turtle, and Friso Lammertse, curator at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, suggested that the two portraits could be shipped in Turtles. They would have to be custom made however. The maximum dimensions of a painting that fits in the biggest Turtle are 1.60 x 1.34 metres, but the portraits are both two metres high. Van Kralingen prefers not to say too much about this, except that, 'Nothing is impossible.'

Brazil Tour

The invention of the Turtle has meant that Tempel could achieve his ambition of making a better job of showing the Gemeentemuseum's collection outside the museum. 'Our museum holds the biggest Mondrian collection in the world,' he says. 'We have 300 of his works.' For ages the museum did little with them. 'Previously, if you wanted to see works by De Stijl artists, MoMA in New York was the place to go because they were exhibited better there,' he explains. 'I wanted to change that.' In 2011 the best works were given a place in the new, permanent 'Mondrian and De Stijl' exhibition. The museum also selected paintings that, packed in Turtles, could travel. 'They can be loaned together as a complete exhibition,' continues Tempel. 'There are furthermore works that museums can request as individual loans.'

Starting in January seventy works by Mondrian and De Stijl will be touring in Brazil. That exhibition is being organized by the cultural agency Art Unlimited of São Paulo and is being sponsored by Banco do Brasil. Hundreds of thousands of visitors are expected to visit this exhibition. In 2011 the same players organized an exhibition of works by M.C. Escher, which were also loaned by the Gemeentemuseum. In just over two months 573,691 people visited this exhibition, to which admission was free. That made it the most visited exhibition in the world that year. According to Tempel the Gemeentemuseum is earning half a million euros by loaning the Mondrians to Brazil.

A new crate, the Turtle uNLtd (unlimited), was developed at exactly the right time for this tour, which is of importance to the Gemeentemuseum. This version, in green, is made from a stronger lighter type of plastic, which is a better insulator and is more environmentally friendly. 'We

worked together with Airborne Composites, a company specializing in plastics for aerospace applications,' recounts Van Kralingen.

Tough as Nails

Meanwhile other major museums are also using the crates. Van Goghs from the Van Gogh Museum, for instance, were recently shipped in Turtles to Oslo for Munch: Van Gogh, and they returned in these crates to Amsterdam, where the exhibition is now being staged. 'If we make a loan to another museum, we make it a requirement that it's transported in a Turtle,' says managing director Adriaan Dönszelmann. 'It's safe to say that by now these crates are considered to be the museum quality standard for transporting paintings.'

According to Dönszelmann the major advantages are that paintings of different formats fit inside them and works are better protected from impacts and temperature fluctuations than in wooden crates. 'They're still used, but only for big paintings.'

The Turtles are not cheap: one crate costs 6,000 euros. 'But a wooden crate costs 2,000 euros and has a much shorter useful lifetime,' explains Van Kralingen. 'A Turtle pays for itself in five years.' Museums can also rent them. The Gemeentemuseum owns 50 Turtles, the Van Gogh Museum rents them, while the Kröller-Müller Museum has ten of its own and is renting a further 40 for the exhibition Divisionism, which has already travelled through Japan and will soon be going to the north of Italy. 'We don't have hundreds of them because of the storage costs,' explains business director Rinus Vonhoff, 'The crates are as tough as nails. We've been using them for some eight or nine years and I think they'll last for 25 years.'

