

TRANSPORTATION AT THE CROSSROAD^{*}

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Over the past few decades, mobility has attracted sustained and growing attention within the scholarly community. By focusing on the processes through which people, objects, and ideas move across space and time, mobility studies raise a crucial set of questions and offer methodological approaches that are relevant across the humanities. They illuminate both the spatial complexity of cultural phenomena and their inherently dynamic character. The emergence of mobility studies has been closely tied to a renewed scholarly attention to space, which, as Edward Soja has noted, has long been marginalized in humanistic research in favour of predominantly social perspectives.¹ Mobility studies are significant in that they provide tools for rethinking notions of presence and immediacy. They also prompt reflection on the medial and material condition of movement, drawing attention to technological developments such as logistics and the operational infrastructure that enable mobility. Finally, mobility studies offer a key framework for understanding cultural phenomena on a global scale, helping to elucidate how distance structures and mediates human interactions across the world.²

^{*} KELLEY HELMSTUTLER DI DIO, *Shipping Sculptures from Early Modern Italy. The Mechanics, Costs, Risks, and Rewards*, Harvey Miller, London 2025.

¹ EDWARD W. SOJA, *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Verso, London – New York 1989, esp. p. 10–42, where the author critiques the lack of « critical sensibility to the spatiality of social life » (p. 11) in twentieth-century epistemologies. See also HENRI LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, London 1991, esp. p. 86, where the author explains that movement activates space, and that space « attains ‘real’ existence by virtue of networks and pathways ».

² Since the early 2000s, the social sciences have seen much theorization of mobility, the critical emergence of which was first described by MIMI SELLER and JOHN URRY, « The New Mobilities Paradigm », *Environment and Planning*, 38 (2006), p. 207–226. In setting forth their manifesto, the authors emphasize mobility as opposed to sedentarism, which « treats as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change, and placeness » (p. 208). Among the most representative works building on this agenda are TIM CRESSWELL, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, Routledge, London 2006; JOHN URRY, *Mobilities*, Polity, Cambridge –

Within the humanities, art history has emerged as one of the fields most actively engaged with this critical focus on mobility. Since the early 2000s, scholars have begun to reinterpret a broad array of subjects through this conceptual framework, examining not only the transnational circulation of artists but also the movement, relocation, and recontextualization of objects at various scale, from portable icons to entire buildings. The prominence of mobility as an analytical category is shown by a substantial corpus of monographs, articles, collaborative research initiatives organized around this theme, many of which prominently feature *mobility/movement* as keywords in their titles or abstracts. Among the scholars who have been particularly influential in advancing this field from different perspectives, one may cite, in strict alphabetic order, Stephen Greenblatt – who first christened the field in his *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* –, ³ Christopher Heuer, Alina Payne, Jennifer Roberts, to mention but a few. (It is perhaps not a coincidence that this list includes only scholars based in the United States, reflecting the extent to which the engagement with questions of mobility in art history and cultural studies has, to a significant degree, emerged within an anglophone scholarly context). As of December 2025, *kubikat.org* – one of the leading bibliographical databases for art historical publications – indexes more than five thousands entries under «mobility», reflecting a pronounced and ongoing rise that began in the early 2010s. Significantly, this historiographical turn is both international in scope, engaging scholars across diverse academic traditions, and diachronic in ambition, extending from the medieval period to contemporary art. Taken together, these features position mobility – perhaps alongside materiality – as one of the most influential and productive paradigms currently shaping the discipline of art history on a global scale.

In an object-based discipline such as the history of art, it is hardly surprising that – more than the travelling artist – ⁴ is the physical object in motion that has emerged as one of the principals, if not the paradigmatic, topics of investigation. It is nonetheless important to observe that, in addressing objects in motion, art history has more often than not approached questions of mobility mostly through dematerialized narratives of cultural exchange. Such accounts tend to privilege interpretative frameworks that trace the reception of objects as they circulate across geographical and cultural boundaries, for instance as diplomatic gifts, collectibles, or commodities. In schematic terms, these studies may be understood as spatial extensions of more traditional methodologies informed by reception theories: a foreign object enters a new context and is assumed to elicit a

Malden 2007; TIM INGOLD, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description*, Routledge, London 2011; and THOMAS NAIL, *Being and Motion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

³ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009.

⁴ DAVID Y. KIM, *The Traveling Artist in the Italian Renaissance. Geography, Mobility, Style*, Yale University Press, New Haven– London 2014.

discernible response, manifested in practices of replication, adaptation, veneration, or reuse. Within this frame, mobility is inevitably reduced to a mere vector that enables cultural transfer, while the material, logistical, and infrastructural conditions of movement itself – the technologies of transit – remain analytically underexamined. This approach, however, frequently neutralizes the intrinsically mobile moments of the material phenomena under scrutiny, privileging instead the points of origin and destination – that is, the relatively static moments of creation and reception, which continue to function as the primary benchmarks in an object's life. What unfolds between these two poles, by contrast, remains largely uncharted. Objects disappear from view only to re-emerge elsewhere, a process that effectively effaces the spatial and temporal continuum in which they exist. Despite their displacement, they are frequently treated as inhabiting a condition of perpetual instantaneity, as though permanently fixed in a single time and place. The mobility invoked by this approach is therefore more metaphorical than material, resembling less a factual condition of movement than a process of cultural exchange.

In order to address – or, more precisely, to redress – the limitations of this approach, which might more aptly be described as a theory of long-distance reception, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the concrete modalities through which mobility actually occurs. This turn has prompted closer attention to the issue of transportation, a topic that is attracting growing recognition across the discipline.⁵ As one of its most incisive proponents, the Americanist Jennifer Roberts, argued in her influential book of 2014, *Transporting Visions*, this reorientation entails examining mobility « in its clunky and literal sense », rather than treating it primarily as a metaphor, foregrounding the logistical, mechanical, and operational phases through which the works of art move across space.⁶ Such an approach requires moving beyond abstract, reception-driven narratives to interrogate the practical conditions of the displacement of the artistic object. It demands close attention not only to the

⁵ Among the titles that have recently appeared and that consistently foreground transportation and its multifaceted dimensions, one should mention at least TIM ANSTEY, *Things That Move. A Hinterland in Architectural History*, The MIT Press, Boston, 2024; DAVID LANDAU, *Art on the Move in Renaissance Italy*, Ad Ilissum, London, 2025; and the several entries related to mobility/transportation in UWE FLECKNER, MARI LENDING (eds.), *Provenance in Architecture. A Dictionary*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin 2025, *ad vocem*.

⁶ JENNIFER L. ROBERT, *Transporting Visions. The Movement of Images in Early America*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2014, p. 2. More recently, « Transportation » has been also the topic of a special issue of the French journal *Perspective* published in 2022: see in particular VICTOR CLAASS, « Histoires de l'art en route », *Perspective*, 1 (2022) [DOI: 10.4000/perspective.26454, last accessed 10.05.2026]. Bringing together contributions by museum specialists and historians of the visual culture, the volume arguably represents, to date, the most explicit intervention from a European scholarly perspective in the debate on the impact of transportation on the works of art.

material and technological frameworks that enable movement, but also to the geographical, geopolitical, and human factors that actively shape, constrain, and inflect it. As Roberts eloquently puts it, this requires submitting « the picture to the captivation of extrinsic transport systems managed [...] by custom agents, packers, drivers, couriers, postmen, and slaves », thereby revealing the work of art as the product of an extended network of circulation, profoundly shaped by the processes and conditions of its transportation.⁷

This long preamble helps to situate the volume under review here within its broader scholarly context and to clarify its position in relation to the research conducted over the past few years. As a matter of fact, Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio's recent monograph, *Shipping Sculptures from Early Modern Italy*, exemplifies the application of this approach to the early modern period and signals a phase of consolidation of research into the transportation of artistic objects. The author, Rush C. Hawkings Professor of Art History at the University of Vermont, is not new to this line of investigation, that she previously addressed in the anthology *Making and Moving Sculptures in Early Modern Italy* (2015), which she edited and which laid important groundwork for the present study.⁸ Lavishly produced by Harvey Miller and illustrated with numerous high-quality colour reproductions, *Shipping Sculptures* examines – as its subtitle explains – *the Mechanics, Costs, Risks and Rewards* inherent the relocation of sculptures, covering the period roughly between c. 1520 and 1750. Through a close examination of the logistical complexities involved in moving objects by land and sea from Italy to Spain at the end of the Renaissance, the book moves beyond a conventional historical survey or a study of the reception of, and taste for, Italian sculptures in the Iberian Peninsula (although, for obvious reasons, this dimension frequently informs the author's analysis). Instead, it offers an account of mobility as a structuring condition of sculptural production and circulation, foregrounding transport not as an ancillary concern, but as a central category within the history of early modern European sculpture.

The volume is structured into four chapters, each devoted to the examination of a distinct aspect of early modern transportation of sculptures. The opening chapter offers a detailed analytical reconstruction of the transit of sculptures to their final destinations, addressing individually and in depth each stage and component of the transport process, while the three that follow examine specific case studies of sculptures-in-motion chosen in relation to their sites of display – respectively, ecclesiastical settings, private residences, and public spaces. Whereas the first chapter will be of particular interest to historians working broadly in transportation and mobility studies, regardless of their geographic and

⁷ JENNIFER L. ROBERT, *Transporting Visions. The Movement of Images in Early America*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2014, p. 1.

⁸ KELLEY HELMSTUTLER DI DIO (ed.), *Making and Moving Sculptures in Early Modern Italy*, Ashgate, Farnham 2015.

chronological focus, the remaining three are likely to prove especially engaging for specialists in Renaissance sculpture in general and for those concerned with artistic exchanges between Italy and Spain more in particular. The book concludes with a substantial documentary appendix (p. 177–219), which presents transcriptions of a large corpus of documents – most of them previously unpublished – that form the empirical foundation of the study. These documents are drawn primarily from Italian archives (Genoa, Milan, Florence), with additional material from Spanish repositories (Simancas), and testify to the breadth and rigor of the author's archival research. Indeed, Helmstutler Di Dio's investigation is clearly driven by the recovery of this rich body of documentation – which she began assembling in the early 2000s (p. 7) – and by the opportunity to analyse it systematically, thereby bringing coherence to a category of sources that has not always been fully exploited in previous art historical scholarship.

For the readers more interested in the practical aspects of transportation, the first chapter (« From Origin to Destination », p. 17–62) will be of particular interest, as it offers a thorough examination of « the how, why and when » (p. 7) of moving sculptures in the early modern period. Here the author provides a detailed account of the distinct phases of the process of transportation, identifying 10 steps that articulate its complexity – from the preliminary identification, at a distance, of an object to be purchased or commissioned, through the preparation of crates and the selection of routes by lands or sea, to the final installation of the work at its destination. The chapter introduces art historians to a set of issues that have rarely received systematic attention within a discipline still reluctant to engage with the material lives of the artworks, especially in those liminal spaces represented by transportation. These include the preparation of sculptures for shipment – practices that appear to have been relatively consistent also across non-sculptural media and that typically involved wrapping objects in padding of cloth or straw before their encasement (p. 31; the same procedure is also vividly illustrated in Jean-Antoine Watteau's *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* of 1720); the selection of routes, generally informed by complex cost-benefit considerations (p. 36); and the payment of custom duties or tolls (p. 57–58), underscoring the fact that artistic objects, like any other exported good, were subject to taxation upon arrival, with exemption only rarely granted (such as, for example, when the sculptures were considered a royal possession, as in the case for the bronzes for the Escorial, which were marked with symbols on the case to ensure their direct delivery to Philip II [p. 98]).

The three subsequent chapters examine specific case studies of sculptures sent from Italy, grouped according to their sites of display. They address a range of objects different in scale and subject, with focused discussions devoted respectively to Benvenuto Cellini's *Crucifix* and Pompeo Leoni's bronze sculpted retable for San Lorenzo at the Escorial in the context of works for churches; to

Pietro Tacca's *Equestrian Statuette of Louis XIII*, along with Giambologna *Samson and the Philistine* and Cristoforo Stati's *Samson and the Lions*, in relation to works destined to private settings; and to the equestrian monuments of Philip III and Philip IV as examples of sculptures intended for public spaces. Where the documentation allows, these chapters also incorporate discussions of additional sculptures of Italian provenance. In the case of sculptures destined for ecclesiastical contexts, for example, the analysis is further expanded to include works executed in different materials – namely Carrara marble and bronze – and, in some instances, objects dating to periods earlier than the chronological framework privileged for the book (such as the case of Lorenzo Suárez de Figueroa's tomb slab attributed to Alessandro Leopardi, dated c. 1503). The uneven survival of documentary evidence inevitably results in case studies of varying depth, and in some instances the analyses developed in this section overlap with the more general observations advanced in the opening chapter. Nevertheless, the wealth of documents examined – much of it, as said, previously unpublished – makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of some of the most significant Italian sculptures in Spain.

The numerous documents collected in the three final appendices also merit attention. These materials are not conceived merely as ancillary support for the historical reconstructions developed in the book's central chapters; rather, they form their empiric backbone. The documents provide not only a substantial body of historical data that allows the processes under examination to be reconstructed with precision, but also detailed information concerning materials, labour, and logistics. The largest portion of the appendices – nearly half of their total extent – is devoted to documents relating to the Escorial project. These records meticulously register every aspect of expenditure, from the materials used to construct the crates to the daily wages paid to cart drivers. They preserve remarkably granular information, such as the exact number of oxen assigned to pull each cart transporting a crate along the route from Sale to Pozzolo, in Piedmont, in January 1589 – specifically, two pairs per cart (doc. 2.5.63). The documents are equally valuable for their linguistic evidence, recording specialized terminology that points to a largely lost artisanal vocabulary: they specify, for example, the types of wood prescribed for the crates («travetto di rogore»; «pobbia»). Taken together, these sources provide a vivid sense of the material complexities of sculptural transport and underscore its highly customized character. They also indicate, albeit indirectly, the extent to which such operations were coordinated – and in some cases actively directed – by the artist responsible for the sculptures, in this instance Pompeo Leoni.

The rich documentary component, which brings into focus otherwise complex and difficult-to-trace phenomena, constitutes one of the undeniable strengths of this book. At the same time, the prominence of primary sources also foregrounds

a broader methodological challenge, both for this book and for the field more in general. In my view, the central question here concerns how historical evidence concerning transportation can be more fruitfully integrated with the analysis of the works of art themselves. Put it differently, how can historical reconstruction be made to engage more directly with the material reality of the objects to which it refers? How might documentation relating to transport be brought into closer dialogue with the artworks whose histories it records? The risk is that histories of art transportation may incline toward the mere documentary record, even as they seek to remain attentive to the material and visual dimensions of the objects under consideration. This is a risk that Helmstutler Di Dio's volume at times runs. A sense of the priority accorded to the documentary evidence may be gleaned, for instance, from the treatment of crucial factors for understanding and organizing mobility – such as the weight or height of the sculptures – which are only rarely specified and, when they are (as in the list of bronzes discussed on p. 97–99), derive almost exclusively from archival sources. The absence of such information can limit the reader's ability to fully grasp the scale of the logistical challenges involved.⁹ Mobility risks remaining an administrative or logistical abstraction, rather than a condition that concretely informed artistic design and material configuration. In the case of Alessandro Leopardi's tomb slab mentioned above, for example, the failure to clarify that the work is a bronze slab weighing approximately 1,800 kilograms – a figure which is not reported in the text, and which roughly corresponds to the weight of a modern utility vehicle – renders less intelligible the magnitude of the effort required to transport it to Spain.

In other words, to be effective, an inquiry of this kind cannot be confined to a mere chronicle of transport – « the how, why and when » – but must be expanded to include sustained reflections on the impact of transport on artistic creation *tout court*. This applies both to substantial objects for which the effects of mobility can be readily apparent (such as sculptures), and to works whose effects might seem less consequential at first glance (such as paintings or works on paper).¹⁰ Such an approach would require close attention to the transformative effects of displacement, which may include material damages and formal alterations – the effects of what the French mediologist Régis Debray eloquently called « the

⁹ For one of the few sustained art-historical engagements with the question of weight – an issue closely tied to the problems of mobility and transport, yet otherwise marginal within the discipline – see DAVID Y. KIM (ed.), *Matters of Weight. Force, Gravity, and Aesthetics in the Early Modern Period*, Edition Imorde, Emsdetten 2013.

¹⁰ For a preliminary analysis of the impact of transportation on paintings, with particular reference to the questions of chromatic persistence over distance, see MATTIA BIFFIS, « Itinerant Matters: Rubens and the Itineraries of Painting », *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift – Journal of Art History*, 90 (2021), p. 211–230. For a similar approach in a multimedia perspective, see also the abstracts collected in MATTIA BIFFIS, VICTOR CLAASS, ELEONORA PISTIS, « Matter in Motion », in *Proceedings 36e congrès du Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art*, forthcoming.

tragedy of transmission »¹¹ – but also to its anticipatory role in shaping the finished object. This is what Jennifer Robert has described as the *preprocessing* of the transport event on the object: artists were often keenly aware of the spatial demands their works would have to meet and were therefore compelled to conceive them with transportation already in mind. This awareness (a practical form of anticipatory thinking, or figural decision-making) could inform the choice of materials, the manipulation of formats, the division of objects into smaller components, or the decision to complete the works at their destination--the range of possible responses is broad and must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Even specific formal choices (for example, in the case of sculptures, the inclusion or avoidance of projecting or delicate elements) could be shaped by the prospect of physical displacement. In this sense, artists worked with a form of intentionality – to borrow a critical term introduced in art historical scholarship by Michael Baxandall in his *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* of 1985¹² – conditioned by the practical demands of transport. It is precisely this intentionality that a history of transport should seek to foreground and systematically explore.

Because of the logistical demands required to move them, sculptures constitute an especially revealing field to probe the relationships between mobility and artistic decision-making. They do so, quite literally, on a grand scale. *Shipping Sculptures* offers a few valuable insights into these dynamics, although they might have been developed more fully along the hermeneutical lines suggested here. For example, the recurrent choice of materials well suited to, and resilient under, transport – above all marble and bronze – points to a conscious avoidance of fragile media, such as terracotta, which were particularly susceptible to damage in transit. This raises broader questions about how such material constraints shaped the presence and character of Italian sculptures in Spain. It is equally striking that many of the sculptures examined in the volume are not characterized by pronounced virtuosity; rather, they appear as works of restrained ambition and compact form. One might ask whether such formal restraints may be understood as a deliberate strategy to safeguard the physical integrity of the object during displacement, and thus as evidence of a practical, anticipatory mode of thinking that shaped the artistic production in view of its displacement. Faced with the

¹¹ Debray's words deserve particular attention here: « Transport *by* is transformation *of*. That which is transported is remodeled, refigured, and metabolized by its transit [...] To transmit should not be considered merely to transfer (a thing from one point to another), any more than cultural inheriting should be deemed a mere instance of receiving (it is rather a process of selecting, reactivating, and recasting) »: RÉGIS DEBRAY, *Transmitting Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, p. 27.

¹² MICHAEL BAXANDALL, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, Yale University Press, New Haven – London, 1985.

prospect of transport, sculptors such as Benvenuto Cellini and Pompeo Leoni learned how to temper their virtuosity in favour of durability. From this perspective, it is difficult to imagine that a major artistic revolution – such as the emergence of the Baroque style – could have been driven primarily through the long-distance transport of sculptures.

Apart from considerations of labour, time, and expenses, moving a block of marble is not necessarily a titanic undertaking: even cultures with relatively limited technological means were able to conceive and execute the long-distance transport of massive megalithic structures, for example. Transporting a sculpture, by contrast, poses a fundamentally different challenge. In the absence of adequate protective technologies, sculptural forms risked damage that could compromise their aesthetic integrity and, with it, their cultural value. Even today, within the global economy of museum exchange and art transportation, sculptures remain a particularly vulnerable category, requiring specialized care and attention. In a sense, the issue at stake here is not mass – as it was still the case, for example, in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's pioneering study of the Carrara quarries¹³ – but form.

Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio's volume represents one of the most comprehensive treatments of this subject to date and is of considerable importance not only for its historical and documentary contributions – shedding light on complex practices that are otherwise sparsely recorded – but also more broadly for the study of Italian sculptures in Spain. The opportunity it offers to engage with the linguistic dimension of transport is a further strength of the book, particularly in its substantial appendices. Furthermore, its publication also attests to the growing importance that studies of transportation have come to assume within the history of art, as evidenced, for example, by their increasing significance for provenance research. At times, however, the study tends to underplay the impact of movement on the objects themselves – a frontier that future scholarship will need to address more directly. In other words, a history of transport should aim not only to reconstruct routes and procedures, but also to elucidate the ways in which mobility informed artistic choices and shaped the material configurations of the works of art. It is along these lines that future research on the subject might most productively advance.

¹³ CHRISTIANE KLAPISCH-ZUBER, *Les maîtres du marbre. Carrare 1300–1600*, S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1969.