

# Packing for Success

by Charlie Cummings

The first time I shipped pots to an exhibition many years ago all five pieces arrived shattered. In retrospect, I did a terrible job packing them, using layers of cardboard with a few pieces of masking tape to hold everything in place. It's no wonder they didn't survive the trip. These days, as a gallery owner and artist, I pack and ship pots almost every day, and only one piece has broken in the past eight years. Today the thriving ceramics exhibition scene and sales opportunities afforded by social media and online shops mean packing and shipping pieces to galleries and customers in far reaches of the country has become very common. When shipping work, we want to pack it so it arrives intact, makes a good impression when the gallery or customer opens the package, and uses minimal resources to maximum effect. There are many approaches to packing pots for shipping, but my current method has been very successful for my gallery and is recommended by major carriers. This system uses two layers of boxes as the first line of defense against damage, packing peanuts as void filler between both the inner and outer boxes and objects inside of the inner box to cushion against blows, and several layers of bubble wrap tightly secured around each piece to keep pots safe from both outside forces and striking against each other.

## Preparing for Shipment

Before packing, pots should be cleaned and labeled with an inventory number, and an inventory form or invoice should be prepared. Packing materials should be gathered ahead of time so you have them on hand—using recycled materials is an eco-

nomical and earth-friendly way to ship. Boxes used for shipping alcohol are sturdy, but references to the original contents of the box must be covered before carriers will accept the shipment. Void filler should be clean and free of foreign objects. Foam packing peanuts can be messy if handled carelessly, but they are very lightweight and the filler recommended by most package delivery services. Packing peanuts made with starch are sensitive to humidity and attract pests, so they should be used quickly.

Small-cell bubble wrap, often  $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch in diameter, is ideal padding for protecting ceramics. Bubble wrap with larger cells is intended for more rugged objects or to be used to fill voids. Shipping tape and stretch wrap or blue painter's tape work best for securing bubble around the pieces for packing.

If storage space is available, buying new material in bulk is economical and eliminates time spent away from the studio scavenging. Rolls of bubble wrap are more compact to store than used bubble wrap and come pre-scored in 12-inch sections. Here at the Charlie Cummings Gallery we use new boxes and bubble wrap with recycled fill when possible. Cube-shaped boxes work well for most things we ship. We use 8-, 12-, and 16-inch cubes most often and keep a variety of other sizes on hand.

## Materials to Avoid

Sealed plastic air pockets are the lightest form of cushioning material, and companies often use them to fill spaces in boxes that contain merchandise that is more robust than ceramics. If punctured, the air pockets will deflate, leading to potentially cat-



1 Packing supplies: bubble wrap, stretch wrap, packing tape, peanuts, fragile stickers, cardboard boxes, and marker.



2 Small squares of bubble wrap folded and secured in place with stretch wrap protecting the handle of Marty Fielding's cup.



3 Bubble wrap folded to add extra layers of padding around the lip of Ronan Kyle Peterson's cup.



4 Stretch wrap holds the bubble wrap in tight compression against the cup. Sharp corners on the form may require additional padding.



5 When shipping a cup in a single box, make sure there's at least 3 inches of packing peanuts around the cup. Point the handle toward a corner for extra protection.



6 Packing peanuts should cover all sides of the pot and fill the entire box. Shipments with multiple items, or pieces that fill the entire box should always be double boxed.



7 A 16-inch cube box provides 2 inches of space for padding on all sides of the inner 12-inch box. Center the inside box with two inches of peanuts below the box.



8 Fill all the voids between the outside and inside box with packing peanuts. Don't forget to put your invoice or inventory form in the top of the box or on the outside.



9 Secure all seams of large boxes or international shipments with packing tape. Always pack your pots with the assumption that your package will be handled roughly.

astrophic effects for pots. Paper is inexpensive, and it's easy to get an ample supply, but it can add significant weight to a shipment, and therefore raise the cost of shipping the box. Shredded paper is very messy and should never be used as a packing material.

Materials that should never be used for packing include: clothing, foam meat/deli trays, plastic grocery bags, empty plastic bottles, non-reusable materials, and packing materials that have been stored in dirty or moldy conditions or are contaminated by exposure to pets, rodents, or insects. These materials are unsound as packing material, can pose a health hazard, and make the shipper look unprofessional.

## Bubble Wrapping the Work

Begin by preparing a clean workspace and gathering packing supplies (*figure 1*). Identify fragile areas such as handles, spouts, lips, or handbuilt additions that require extra padding. Fold two 12-inch sections of bubble wrap and use stretch wrap or blue painter's tape to secure them over or around fragile sections (*figure 2*). I only use this method to protect thin, ribbon-like handles and small spouts. Avoid using packing tape directly on

pots because it can leave an adhesive residue behind, and it mars bubble wrap, making it unsuitable for reuse.

Cover the entire pot with 3–5 layers of bubble wrap. Bubbles should face toward the surface of the pot (*figure 3*). This compresses the air inside the bubbles and provides the best protection. I usually use one 3×1-foot section for a cup, two 4×1-foot pieces for medium sized pots, and many layers for large and expensive pots. Then use stretch wrap to secure the entire piece (*figure 4*).

Examine the wrapped pot. You should be able to apply a couple of pounds pressure to any point and not feel the surface of the pot. Sharp corners on the form may require additional padding.

## Double Boxing with Packing Peanuts

Void fill prevents shifting during transport and provides cushioning if the outside box is crushed. I've had great success shipping small, one-item orders like cups in a single box with 3–4 inches of peanuts on all sides of the pot (*figure 5*). Packing peanuts should cover all sides of the pot and fill the entire box (*figure 6*). Shipments with heavy work, multiple items, expensive pieces, or pieces that fill most of the box should always be

double boxed. When I receive broken work, the most common cause is that multiple pots were packed without double boxing, and they were placed too near to the outside wall of the box.

Packing peanuts settle during transport. To compensate for this, add extra peanuts so the first flaps of the box bulge slightly but can be compressed so the outside flaps lie flat.

Packing a box containing fragile items inside a larger box with a minimum 2–3 inches of foam peanuts on all sides of the inner box is the method recommended by the major package delivery companies (*figure 7*). When valuable pots arrive broken and the artist files an insurance claim, the carrier often picks up the package containing the broken piece to determine if the breakage was their fault or if packing guidelines weren't followed. They often don't pay if the pot was not double boxed.

Don't forget to put your invoice or inventory form in the top of the box or on the outside (*figure 8*). Forms often get lost if they're put in the bottom of the box or wedged between the sides of the inner boxes.

Secure the box with packing tape. Small boxes may require only one strip of tape along the long seam on the top and bottom, but all seams of large boxes and international shipments should be sealed (*figure 9*).

### Shipping Methods

The US Postal Service is often the least expensive way to ship very small packages, but FedEx and UPS are better choices for larger packages. Discounts are available for online shipping, and if you ship often, it's possible to negotiate lower rates. Basic insurance is often included in the price of shipping, but it's always a good investment to insure your work for at least the wholesale value.

Labeling packages as fragile is primarily for you and your customer's peace of mind. Always pack your pots with the assumption that your package will be handled roughly or even intentionally abused. Using clean materials and packing so there's no movement in the package, pots are properly protected from hard impacts on the outside box, and especially fragile areas are appropriately padded insures the fruit of your studio labor arrives intact and makes a great impression.

*Want to see examples of how not to pack your work? Check out the digital edition for images of some bad packing jobs that Charlie Cummings has seen over the years by visiting [www.pottermaking.org](http://www.pottermaking.org).*

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