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All screwed up and nowhere to show

Drawings from Toronto can't make a London opening

BY BRAD WHEELER

Toronto artist John Coburn had taken every precaution to ensure that his parcel of six drawings would arrive safely at its overseas destination. His art was to be exhibited at the annual Watercolours and Drawings Fair held in London's Park Lane Hotel — a chance to have his work displayed alongside that of the best artists in the world, according to his British dealer, Rebecca Hossack.

Packing the half-dozen pieces was done with meticulous care by Canada Custom Picture Framing of Toronto, an outfit Coburn was very comfortable with. Cushioned with cardboard and bubble wrap, the glass was taped so as to ensure it would not shatter if broken. The crate, made of ¾-inch plywood and measuring a sturdy 36 centimetres x 71 cm x 97 cm, was sent by a reputable courier company, United Parcel Service.

The package was delivered to London's Rebecca Hossack Gallery well in advance of the fair's gala opening on Wednesday evening. Just one problem, though: The screws used to fasten the crate were Robertson square drives — a circular screw with a recessed square made to receive a matching hand driver. Quite common in Canada, the make is all but unheard of across the pond.

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The crate was sealed shut, and no amount of effort would open it. Gallery staff tried several hardware stores, but to no avail. Even someone's father was called on — a carpenter for years, he had never heard of such a screw, let alone laid eyes on one.

Paintings and drawings are subject to theft, fraud and various acts of mischief. But in an art world that is often mad, a few loose screws were just what was needed here.

A frantic e-mail explaining the situation reached Coburn a few hours before he was scheduled to leave for London, allowing him just enough time to secure the required Robertson screwdriver.

Though the flight was delayed more than two hours due to Tuesday's snowstorm, the 46-year-old artist was relieved when the plane finally took off, commenting later that he was "very happy to leave Toronto with my screwdriver in hand."

With little time to spare, Coburn arrived in London and immediately sent the screwdriver by motorcycle to the gallery, where it was put to proper use.

With further Ian Fleming flair, the drawings were quickly dispatched by cab to the site of the art fair, where they were, incredibly enough, denied admittance. Protocol required that art pieces be cleared by security officers before being allowed into the hotel.

After all that fuss, Coburn's work would miss the fair's opening gala and would have to wait until the following day before being shown. The artist figures that his pieces — black and white, pen and ink line drawings — could fetch from $1,700 to $2,900 each. All worthless though, without a $20 screwdriver.

According to Louis Hemmerechts, manager of the King Street framing shop in Toronto that bundled the drawings, this kind of thing has happened once or twice before with shipments to the United States, where Robertson screws are not as rare as in England, but not commonplace either.

Asked if he ever considered using Phillips star-head fasteners or single-slot screws when packaging art for international destinations, Hemmerechts bristled at the thought, saying the Robertson was more convenient to use and that he certainly wouldn't go out of his way to use different screws. "That's the standard," he said, referring to the Canadian make.

Coburn's drawings may or may not bring their asking price, but that is not the drama.

In London, land of Shakespeare, the taming of the screw had already played out.