

September 11th: Art Loss, Damage, and Repercussions

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ART DAMAGED ON 911: THE INSURANCE ADJUSTERS ROLE

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Dietrich von Frank has just explained the financing end of the insurance industry. I'm an insurance adjuster, the person in the trenches. If you've ever had a car accident, the adjuster is the person who examined the damage and wrote you a check. Only, I specialize in the art field. An adjuster goes out, finds out what has happened, then decides what to do and how much it's going to cost. Dietrich von Frank, an underwriter, has the checkbook; I write the check. I tell him how many zeros to put on it. This is unfortunate in the case of the World Trade Center, because two fabulous buildings and many others collapsed.

On September 11, 2001, I was on the train going to the office when I learned about the attack. My first thought, like most other people's, was that the plane was a Cessna; it couldn't be a commercial airline. Two newscasters were with me. Mine was the only phone that worked. I called my office and learned to my amazement that it was actually a passenger airline. As an insurance adjuster, I was confronted with an interesting situation. It wasn't a tragedy just yet, because I didn't understand it yet. When I got to my office, the second plane hit. I went to a restaurant, and while there, I actually saw both buildings collapse. Startling. My first thought was about my family. Once I found out they were okay, my next thought was, "Oh my God, this could be something amazing that the insurance industry has never faced in the United States." As an insurance adjuster who specializes in art, I also wondered, "How much art was in the two World Trade Center towers that have just collapsed?"

A bad day for an underwriter is a tragedy. Unfortunately a bad day for an underwriter is a blessing for someone like myself, because it creates my job, it creates work. In the World Trade Center, there were many losses, but many of these were total losses. So, as an adjuster, my first thought was, "God, there are

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going to be a lot of losses." When I realized that they were all total losses, my usefulness was somewhat diminished. But low and behold, there were many other issues: there were neighboring buildings: 2 World Financial Center, and Liberty Plaza. There are many buildings within an area of approximately three-quarters of a mile south and a mile north, where clouds of debris either broke or seeped through windows. Many items were affected.

In front of 2 World Financial Center, there used to be a very large blue stainless steel sculpture [Modern Head, 1992] by Roy Lichtenstein. Two days after the World Trade Center collapsed, I got a call saying, "Greg, that's my two-million-dollar Roy Lichtenstein, and it has all this debris on it. What are you going to do?" The first thought was, "That's simple, we'll just get it out of there." That's what they pay me to do—to figure these simple things out. Well, it took us three months to get the sculpture out of there, because of all the technicalities of getting in there. We couldn't find a rigger who could get a pass from the FBI and the Office of Emergency Management. During those three months, the FBI used the sculpture as a bulletin board, a Bobcat parked on it, and many other things happened to that beautiful piece. But, thankfully, it was unharmed structurally. Eventually, we were able to get it out of the area. We brought it to the foundry and had it repaired. It's now sitting in the Nassau County Museum, and it looks great.

One of our clients is a very large Japanese bank, Nomura Securities, which had more than 110 works of art that were damaged. Again, the first priority was to get the works out of there. Why couldn't we just repair them there? For one thing, the building was contaminated. Secondly, we were concerned about pilferage. The securities company actually lost a lot of computers and other electronics, but, thankfully, the artwork was intact. We were finally able to get the works out with the assistance of the Office of Emergency Management and brought them to restorers.

There were other claims: one from a book dealer, another from an artist. A window in the artist's studio was open when the buildings collapsed, and the cloud of debris damaged 289 works, every piece of art that that man had ever created. We had to get all of the art out of his studio to a safe haven. It was very difficult, because truckers couldn't get there. Restorers were concerned about the air quality and what they were going to touch (e.g. does this item have asbestos on it?). There were amazing issues that arose that I would never have imagined. We knew we couldn't get the truck in. Thankfully, with the artist's help, we were able to get a restorer with a staff of ten people to go down there, and over a period of approximately nine weeks, all the works were cleaned.

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The tragedy presented the insurance industry with many other issues, some of which I handled, some of which I didn't. The damaged art works were set up either under corporate policies or collection policies. You'd be surprised how many corporate people from nearby buildings such as 2 World Financial Center came to me and said, "Oh, just clean that." Someone with a sponge probably making around \$4.50 an hour was ready to oblige. Thankfully, someone with a cooler head realized that that couldn't happen. We were called in on many cases where we merely facilitated the restorer going down to the site to find out what was wrong and how we could clean it. There were different types of issues, because there were all different types of media, so we needed multiple restorers. The truckers had a difficult time down there. It would take them, literally, four hours to get through checkpoints in order to pick up one painting to bring to a restorer. They didn't want to do the job because of the hassle of getting in and out, Thankfully, we have relationships with the FBI and the New York City police, and we were able to get detectives to sit on the trucks to move them through the checkpoints quickly, so that we could get the art works out in an efficient manner. 9/11 was a startling, startling thing for all Americans. I think the insurance industry initially assumed these items were all destroyed, but there were also thousands of works that were damaged.

I've seen fires. I've seen explosions. I've seen many types of loss. I have never in my life experienced the devastation that I saw three days after the World Trade Center. I went down there to look at that Roy Lichtenstein Head, because my client forced me, I was afraid to go. I didn't know what was going on in the world at the time, and I was definitely hesitant. The devastation took a lot out of me. The people I was speaking to, even restorers and truckers, looked almost punch-drunk, because they were all stunned by the dramatic events. It was hard for me to get people to react. When I asked restorers, "Where do I go with this?" they would just stare at me with almost blank faces. It was scary, because these are the people who, a month prior, had I asked them that question, would have been right on the spot; they had always helped me in these kind of situations.

So, this event taught me as an insurance person that when you examine a situation, you have to look for all the alternatives to move art. You have to have an emergency plan in place for crises like this. You have to have contacts with the Office of Emergency Management, which many people did not even know existed until this occurred. That one office basically ran the entire show. Once you learned about those contacts, they were very helpful in getting things done. 9/11 was a tragedy. Even though we thankfully got some losses from it, which is not a good thing, we were able to help artists and dealers get their items back into saleable condition. We were able to help the artists get their lives back. Anything we could do to help made them so appreciative. The one artist I mentioned earlier, whose 289 pieces were damaged, called me every time a piece was restored and said, "You won't believe how great that came out!" It made me feel good that

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I was helping another person in a time of tremendous distress, while I was also helping my client, the insurance company.

So, in closing, I would like to say that what happened to the art works at the World Trade Center will teach us that we have to be prepared for the truly unexpected and be ready the next time to get everything out, and not just in one building, but in all the surrounding buildings.