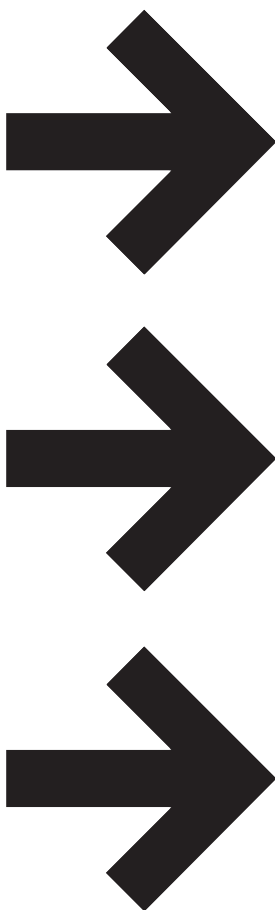


Chest Out!

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At the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Triennial Conference in Barcelona in July 2001, I spoke about the work of the long-established Loans Service in Reading to the Committee for Education & Cultural Action (CECA). I took the opportunity to meet with fellow professionals from Barcelona museums to compare experiences of loans to schools. I was quickly directed to Mireia Mayolas, Head of Education at Barcelona Maritime Museum, with the advice that, in Spain, her department is considered to be a leader in this field.

Barcelona Maritime Museum was founded in 1941, to illustrate the maritime history of a wide region, but with particular reference to the Catalan navy, and is located in the magnificently restored medieval boatyard building in the port of the city. The collections include historic ships and boats, paintings of maritime scenes and fishing and navigational equipment. The museum is governed by a consortium of officials from the city council and the port authority.

There is no long standing tradition of loans services in Spain, and the one or two services that have developed in recent years are at their earliest stages of development. The best known scheme in the country is organised by La Caixa savings bank, and concentrates on the loan of replica artworks. In 1996, Spain agreed a new national educational curriculum which placed a greater emphasis on the use of museum resources. In anticipation of national developments, in 1994, the Barcelona Maritime Museum had formed an Education Department for the first time. As one of its first initiatives, in 1999, this small team put into operation a service of lending «teaching chests» to assist schools in working on different aspects of maritime culture. The service began with 4 different titles of 3 units each. Both the range of titles of chests and the number of units of each of them have increased every year, now reaching a total of 46 units of 10 different titles.

The 10 different chest titles cover a wide range of themes relating to the history and culture of a major Mediterranean port, and to important social themes such as emigration and immigration: *Children's Sea Story*, *Pirates*, *Fishing*, *Sea Poetry & Melodies*, *Emigration*, *Home-comers (Returning Emigrants)*, *The Port of Barcelona*,

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Mediterranean-Cross-Roads of Civilisations, Bread, Oil and Wine and Sea of Babel-Mediterranean Languages.

The Barcelona team has been inventive in their response to practical problems. To start the scheme they converted simple trunks of unpainted metal

bought relatively cheaply at IKEA, adding branding on the lid with a vinyl panel with the name of the chest, the Museum logo and a decorative drawing connected with the subject concerned. These first chests are large, 71cm in length, to allow inclusion of display size maps and photographs, and weigh, when full, around 18kg. The latest chests were bought from a specialist suitcase shop in an attractive blue painted metal and are slightly smaller (49x41x20cm) and lighter. The items are securely protected for travel by being mounted in purpose made cut-outs in interior foam lining 10cm thick. A simple fold-up luggage trolley is loaned together with each chest so that it can be easily transported to and from vehicles and from one classroom to another in the school.

The loans schemes at Reading and Barcelona are on different scales -Reading lends out more than 1,700 boxes. But, from our discussions, it emerged that the two services are facing similar challenges. In both cases there is a strong demand for the loans at schools far beyond the urban boundaries -the Reading scheme covers Berkshire and beyond, Barcelona Maritime Museum lends to schools throughout Catalonia. The distances and costs involved in a museum visit make an outreach scheme particularly attractive to schools in both rural areas and for urban schools facing constant budget and time-table pressures. The loans also enable the museums to cover themes not covered in the displays and activities available on site. Both museums find that running a loans service requires a considerable commitment of staff time to answer enquiries, do the paperwork and check outgoing and incoming objects. The Bar-

celona scheme is free to Catalan schools, although they have to collect and return the chests themselves, and demand far outstrips what the small education team can supply. However, regional Teaching Resource Centres provide some assistance in distributing the chests in Catalonia. Reading delivers and collects boxes twice a term for users that sign up for a full year in the scheme, but schools are charged either directly or through their local education authority to fund the required staffing resource. Reading has relied on developing an innovative Corporate Membership scheme in order to subsidise the costs in recent years, including the loan of

«Flying Objects» to local companies.

The two services have taken very different approaches to the amount of supporting material provided for teachers. In Barcelona, a great deal of research and preparation has gone in to each chest. The chests have been designed to be used in the classroom, but not in any fixed or rigid way. Some of them have been conceived in the form of a game. Each chest also contains a teacher's guide in

which, in addition to further information on the subject, there is a series of teaching ideas to be applied with the objects in the chest for a range of subjects and pupil ages. At Reading, many of the older boxes contain little more than a caption for each object, and teachers have provided their own background material and lesson plans. However, recent focus groups with teachers has led to the development of prototype boxes with notes about the objects for use by both teachers and pupils. All notes will be rationalised on this model in coming years. Reading has, this year, launched a web site to allow schools to search for items by general themes and national curriculum hea-



dings, to view a general purpose idea for a lesson plan and, in a world first for the sector, to reserve boxes on-line.

The Barcelona education team report that they receive a good level of support from other departments in their Museum for developing and maintaining the loans service. Conservators often assist in making and mending models and mounts. But, they admit that it can sometimes be difficult to convince colleagues that such work is high priority. This may reflect the fact that the Education Department is a relatively recent creation and is still developing recognition of its status. This pattern seems to be repeated throughout Spain. But, Reading Museum Service faced similar issues in 1995, that led to the then head of service, Karen Knight, to carry out a staff restructure to integrate education into a central position within the service (Museums Journal, March 1999).

The most striking difference between the two services is shown by the objects that are loaned. For the Barcelona teaching chests, much of the contents - books, videos, models of vessels, navigation instruments, costumes, fishing tackle, music CDs - are purchased from local suppliers. Some have been created in the museum itself: reproductions of documents, question and answer games, stories, puppets, maps, large format plastic-coated photographs, information dossiers, suggested itineraries, teaching ideas of all kinds, etc. In no case are objects from the Museum collection used. Museum education officers in Spain explain that allowing an item from the collection to be used by the public unsupervised would be considered by their institution to be «a sin», and completely unprofessional. Occasional damage to the contents of the loan chests adds to the feeling that using real artefacts would involve unacceptable risks, although such damage has been found to be minimal, with deleted video-tapes being the most common problem.



The majority of the contents of the Reading loans are real objects, taken from the collection or acquired specifically for education use. The principal purpose of the Reading loans service is to provide direct access to the collection. Fragile objects are fixed in protective mounts, known as «perspex sandwiches», made by a skilled in-house team, and damage occurs very infrequently. A perspex sandwich from a Reading loans box was demonstrated to Barcelona educationalists, who remained incredulous that the Roman brooches that it contained were real. (Some colleagues in English museums have the same reaction!). The recent DfES-funded project to evaluate Reading Loans Service, «Loans for a New Millennium», has demonstrated that teachers and pupils acknowledge the educational value of real objects.

Both museums see their loans schemes as being central to their educational aims and have gathered evidence that has demonstrated that schools greatly value the service. Barcelona has employed extensive teacher questionnaires. Reading, as part of the aforementioned «Loans for a New Millennium» project,

has used a series of focus groups, student questionnaires, in-depth teacher and student interviews and classroom observations. In summary, Mireia Mayolas says: «We are determined to see the teaching chest lending service continue to grow in quality and quantity in future years.»

