



SHARE Museums East
a network of know how

‘Something Borrowed’

In partnership with the British Museum

Things to consider when preparing for a loan from another
museum

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Introduction

'*Something Borrowed*' was a pilot project that explored partnership working between the British Museum and three smaller museums in the East of England facilitated through the Renaissance East of England hub office. The partner museums, Ely Museum in Cambridgeshire, Mill Green Museum in Hertfordshire and Dunwich Museum in Suffolk, were chosen to be part of the pilot project because they represent three distinct types of organisation: Mill Green Museum is part of a small local authority service, Ely Museum is independent with a small number of paid staff as well as a volunteer staff, and Dunwich Museum is a largely volunteer run independent organisation.

Each museum borrowed an item or number of items from the British Museum and created a new exhibition. Mill Green borrowed the original paintings of the 'Tales of the Flopsy Bunnies' by Beatrix Potter. Ely Museum borrowed an Egyptian mummified cat and Dunwich Museum borrowed a series of seal matrices from around the world. Both Mill Green and Dunwich borrowed material from other large institutions as part of the project (the Victoria and Albert museum lent further images by Beatrix Potter to Mill Green and Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service made the Dunwich seal available). The first two exhibitions opened in July 2010 and ran for three months. The Dunwich exhibition opened in March 2011 and ran for six months.

Project Aims

The project was first conceived of in September 2009 after discussions between the British Museum and East of England Hub team at the regions annual Partnership Day conference. The aims of the project were multifarious from the outset. At one level, the aims were directed at supporting the museum partners reach new audiences and develop their capacity and experience with a view to them potentially taking further loans in the future. It was also important to increase access to national collections by getting them into the region. In addition to these aims, the project was focused on facilitating the lending process through exploring skills-sharing practices. In particular, it was recognised that smaller museums do not always have the range of staff or experience to form a pro-active relationship with a national

organisation such as the British Museum. Therefore, facilitating loans through drawing on the support of staff from the East of England's hub museums through the regions SHARE¹ scheme was a central aim of the project. The final aim was to evaluate the lending and borrowing processes involved in each individual project.

A full evaluation of all aspects of the project has been completed and a report written, which is available at www.sharemuseumseast.org.uk in the resources section. The aim of this paper is to draw together some recommendations based on observations made by those participating in the '*Something Borrowed*' project with a view to informing future projects.

Recommendations

The recommendations that arise from the '*Something Borrowed*' project reflect the nature of the pilot scheme. In particular the project was pulled together in a short timeframe and the budget was modest. However, despite the specifics of the project, it was felt that some of the issues that arose were universal. Therefore the recommendations in this document are not a '*how to*' guide, but rather a '*things to consider*' guide, which it is hoped will be useful to other organisations of all sizes embarking on develop a loan project.

1. Project Planning – initial things to consider

- What is a realistic timeframe for a loan to come to fruition - it can take a year or more to organise loan
- Explore potential security implications and establish whether the borrowing organisation requires a security review by the national museums security advisor (this may depend on the material being borrowed)

¹ SHARE (Support, Help and Advice from Renaissance East) is a scheme that has brought expertise from the regions hub museums out to non-hub museums. The SHARE scheme has also run a workforce development programme for the region. During 2011/12 SHARE is developing to incorporate all museums as 'givers' and 'receivers' of help in wake of the dismantling of the hub.

- Explore whether there are insurance considerations (this will depend in part on the material being borrowed)
- Establish what loan agreement papers need to be completed
- Establish who is responsible for what – it might be useful to put a contract together

2. Communication

- In the both the borrowing, lending and facilitating organisation (if there is one), it is helpful if a single person acts as the point of liaison or project lead. Appointing a project lead is often easier in an organisation where there are paid staff – however, it is an essential role and should be put in place by a volunteer run museum if it is looking at borrowing material.
- It is useful if both parties can meet early in the discussions. It is particularly useful if the meeting takes place in the museum borrowing material in order to for the lending institution to gain an understanding of the space of the prospective exhibition.
- It is useful to think about what ‘communication hotspots’ there might be – for example, there might some considerable information exchange required when agreeing what the loan will comprise. The point of installation will also need a good deal of discussion to ensure all details are covered.
- It is useful to know when there might be communication ‘cold spots’. These might come early on in the process, particularly following an initial request for a loan. Such a cold-spot might be to do with the lending organisation establishing whether it has the material requested, whether the object is currently on

display, or whether it needs conservation work before it can be lent.

3. Mapping out additional support that may be required

One of the aims of the '*Something Borrowed*' project was to facilitate the development of each exhibition through providing additional support from East of England Hub staff through the regions SHARE scheme. The level of support required differed between the organisations, with the largest of the three requiring the least support and the museum that was volunteer run requiring the most. So that support is targeted, it is useful to consider what is needed at an early stage in the planning process. It may that support can be supplied through a skills-sharing scheme, if this is the case, it is important that the type of help needed is planned into the project and support organised and made available at the right moment. If support needs to be bought in through freelancers, it is still essential that a programme of the right kind of help is devised and that support is delivered at the right points in the project. Things that an organisation borrowing an item might need support with are:

- designing a display – a 'walk-through' with other museum professionals may be a useful starting point for developing a new exhibition
- writing labels and text
- accessing specialist information on the material being borrowed to inform the exhibition panels
- information on specialist equipment, such as writing a specification for a bespoke case, backing panels or specific lighting, etc
- developing events or school sessions to be run around a new exhibition

As part of defining support needs, it is also helpful if each organisation could reach agreement early on as to who is responsible for what. For example, it is useful to be clear on who is writing and producing exhibition panels, or who is responsible for delivering objects to the venue taking the loan.

4. Marketing

At an early meeting of all the project partners involved in '*Something Borrowed*' held at the British Museum, the team were fortunate to meet with the Brentwood Museum team who had worked on the Gayer-Anderson Cat exhibition. What became clear from their experience of taking on a significant loan was that marketing was central to the success of the exhibition. In order to get the most out of a temporary exhibition, it is important to consider how to market it effectively and whether that can be achieved in house. In the case of the '*Something Borrowed*' project, marketing was undertaken by a freelancer, rather than being delivered through a skills sharing programme – this ensured that a particular style was maintained throughout the project and that the marketing worked with both the lenders and the borrowers style requirements. In this case, the freelancer was also involved with developing text panels and events.

5. Managing time and money

Taking a loan from another organisation is time consuming, particularly if that loan is part of a new exhibition. It is important to consider in terms of capacity how the borrowing museum will cope with the extra requirements that a loan process will need. In addition, whether it is for new cases, security requirements, new panels, marketing needs or developing outreach and education packs, a loan project will require some funding. Therefore it is essential to be clear on what the project aims to deliver and to be sure that the funding available will enable to project to succeed.

Conclusions

Each loan project will have its own idiosyncrasies and own 'crunch' points. However, the aim of this project was to try and shine some light on the

processes of borrowing material and developing a temporary exhibition. If a loan is going to take place smoothly, each organisation needs to understand the other and there needs to be clear understanding of each partner's responsibilities.

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May 2011