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## Craft and Design in Local Development in Catalonia

### Abstract

This paper explains some successful cases of craft-design collaborations in local and, in some cases, rural development. These are real government-sponsored projects that bring together designers, artists, artisans and schools and involve local authorities, residents and visitors. The first case is 'Oficis Singulares' (Unique Trades), a project by the Generalitat de Catalunya's Artesania Catalunya organisation that recognises the identity of certain trades that have close ties to the area from which they originated. The unique trades are listed by regions, processes and products according to where the raw materials are found, transformed, and the final products made. Different projects are presented and analysed. Experiences have been collected from the workshops, where designers have been involved with rural artisans. The second project is the creation of the 'Empremtes de Catalunya' (Marks of Catalonia) brand, which was created to fill a need in the market: provide visitors to Catalonia with a true image of our country through crafts and design. 'Empremtes de Catalunya' offers a range of quality traditional and contemporary handmade souvenirs that represent Catalan landscape, customs, history, cuisine and art. A third project consists of the biennial conferences on 'Joieria, Art i Natura a Serraduy' (Jewellery, Art and Nature in Serraduy). Serraduy (Isavena valley) is a place of great geological and archaeological interest in the region of Aragon-Ribagorça. The conferences are a 'must' for jewellery teachers and students who want to practise their art in nature, use geological materials and experiment with creative ideas.

### Keywords

Crafts and design, sustainability, identity, local development, branding, tourism, education

### Introduction

This article is a compilation of good practices carried out in Catalonia, a territory in north-eastern Spain that boasts Barcelona as its capital, where we found

a number of very unique trades with historical ties to the territory. These practices have been exercises in the search for new languages, always starting with crafts within local tradition. Some of these projects have been carried out through public initiative, others private. While the shared objective is the development of crafts, they have had a primarily educative purpose, often failing to focus on economic objectives. Exhibiting and cataloguing these crafts is the way to show that with creativity, effort and above all rigour, a creative discipline like traditional crafts that needs to be reinvented may find a new form of expression and a market.

The first part of this paper corresponds to projects launched by Artesania Catalunya (the Generalitat de Catalunya organisation that looks after the interests of Catalan crafts) from 2006 to 2011. The fact that a government, sensitive to the country's values of heritage and identity, placed the management of this organisation in the hands of creative professionals rather than political managers led to the creation of two flagship projects for the craft sector: the 'Empremtes de Catalunya' (Marks of Catalonia) registered trademark for Catalan products, which serves as a guarantee of quality, as well as the 'Oficis Singulares' (Unique Trades) project, which identifies unique trades in Catalonia and increases the range of products the region produces.

The second part of this paper discusses the responsibility of schools that, like the Escola Massana, train future creatives, designers, artists and artisans and strive to preserve the uniqueness of trade workshops while reinventing and adapting them to each course of study.

The Escola Massana, a municipal art and design centre that relies on Barcelona's Education Consortium and is affiliated with the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, ensures comprehensive training of individuals in the relationship between art, design and trades and the T + I (tradition & innovation) formula, in which the tradition of local heritage becomes compatible with modern conceptual and technical innovations.

In terms of training, courses like the conferences on Jewellery, Art and Nature in Serraduy and the Wool Seminar (an Oficis Singulars-related project) are activities that take students out of the classroom and invite them to contribute to local development as a part of cultural, social and environmental responsibility.

## Unique trades: Palm crafts from the Terres de l'Ebre and wool from the Pyrenees

These stories begin with a journey over every inch of Catalonia, recognising the value in the small things that are happening across the territory. This, combined with the responsibility of working for the crafts sector, led to the reactivation of the Areas of Craft Interests thanks to the efforts of the Oficis Singulars project in Catalonia.

The Oficis Singulars project was launched in 2010 to identify and promote a series of trades tied to specific parts of Catalonia. These are trades or products that are considered unique to the town or district from which they originated, either because it is where the raw materials are found, made or transformed, the place where the final products are made or a place with a history in the trade. With the main purpose of recovering specifically Catalanian trades, the need to find new languages and new products through collaborations between artists, designers and craftsmen emerged. Those trades still in practice in the region (trades that were practised in workshops and with existing production) began to be pinpointed on the map, resulting in a list of 15 trades scattered throughout Catalonia:

- Palm crafts from the Terres de l'Ebre
- Alabaster from Sarra
- Pottery from Breda and Miravet
- Black ceramics from Quart and Verdú
- Ceramics from La Bisbal and Esparreguera
- Wood burning from Sant Hilari de Sacalm
- Wood from La Sènia
- Leather from Vic and Igualada
- Wooden spoons from Tortellà
- Bobbin lace from Arenys and l'Arboç
- 'Xisqueta' wool from the Vall d'Assua
- Wood and basketry from Pallars

- Salt from Cardona
- Wood-turning from the Vall de Ges
- Religious imagery from Olot

A documentation, exploration, dialogue and organisation phase followed that concluded in so-called 'missions' inside the region. These 'missions' represent the work of artists and designers (some from Catalonia and others who have moved) with artisans, working side by side to stimulate the trade and generate new product ideas in the workshops. Municipal authorities, schools and museums also participated to make this project a means to regain the credibility of some wasted or neglected economic activities and to bring to light the value of what had been cast aside before.

We will discuss two of these 'missions' – palm crafts from the Terres de l'Ebre and 'Xisqueta' wool from the Vall d'Assua – as examples, because we believe that these are the two projects that will have a major impact on the territory, leading in turn to substantial local development and taking into account the small scale of the trades in question.

The launch of Oficis Singulars took shape in a pilot programme in the Terres de l'Ebre, an area home to the craft of fan palm plaiting (braiding or weaving in bands). Three municipalities from the Ebro Delta participated in the project: Mas de Barberans (the driving force behind the recuperation of this trade), Rasquera, and Reguers. The municipality of Perelló joined the project later.

The fan palm (*Chamaerops humilis*), known in Catalonia as the 'pauma', is the only palm species native to Europe. The plant is found across the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, the Balearic Islands and Italy. The fan palm grows from sea level to an altitude of about 800 metres in Catalonia. Working with the plant was one of the main sources of income in the Terres de l'Ebre in the nineteenth century. The craft began to disappear in the 1950s, however, as rubber began to replace palm as the raw material used to produce large woven baskets.

The palms are harvested in July and August, when the blades are green, and after drying in the sun for twenty to thirty days the individual blades of each leaf are separated and cut from the central stem. Once soaked and dried the blades can be used for weaving. The woven strips are sewn with twine to form the shape and size of the resulting basket.

The basket weavers, almost all elderly women, are experts in the trade because it has always been an ancillary craft linked to the olive harvest. Bringing designers like Gerard Moline to collaborate with artisans in developing new palm products was an experience in coexistence, respect and surprise, reflected in the positive attitude of all the artisans that collaborated. Moline, who held a series of workshops for adults and children, lived with them, and was part of their everyday activities, managed to bring new value to the craft and create, together with the artisans, a collection of contemporary products currently being sold, including at international fairs. This has led to the creation of professional associations and small craft production businesses.

The other significant Oficis Singular project works with Xisqueta wool from the Vall d'Assua. The Vall d'Assua is one of the valleys in the Catalan Pyrenees where livestock farming, mainly sheep farms, has been largely conserved. Over 4,000 heads of sheep are herded to these mountains each summer, sharing the area with cow and horse herds. The '400 auvelles 400 meravelles' (400 sheep 400 wonders) project is being carried out in this valley; the project aims to bring new value to the native Xisqueta wool for uses related to local crafts and sustainable building.

The fleece from the sheep used to be a highly-valued commodity. Each shearer was in charge of shearing 50 sheep and one peseta, normally paid in fleece, was paid for every sheep. Fifty years ago the value of a fleece was 60 pesetas, so a shearer would have to pay 10 pesetas extra in addition to his work if he wanted to take the fleece home.

The current value of these pieces is merely symbolic. A flock of 400 sheep can yield 400 kg of wool for an estimated retail price of 150 euros. In the case of the Vall d'Assua, all of the wool from the flocks is usually sold to one dealer from outside the region who exports the wool to Asian countries.

The '400 auvelles 400 meravelles' project purchases a part of the wool produced during the shearing in June in order to use it in the valley. The wool is worked in two parallel projects. The first ties the wool to crafts: treating it and working with the wool with the valley's own artisans and residents and at the same time holding workshops open to people in the region interested in learning traditional knitting and other wool-related crafts. The second ties wool to sustainable building by using wool scraps as insulation in 'green' buildings, helping at the same time to feed traditional knowledge.

Designers Gerard Moliné and Josep Mañà led the implementation of this Oficis Singular project by organising work sessions with regional artisans, some of them newcomers. The experience resulted in some extraordinary indicators: 116 workshops, 23 designers and 17 town councils were involved and 146 products were created that sold for €25,000 (data from 2010).

The Escola Massana has organised a second seminar on wool for the 2012–13 course in which a group of students studying for the Advanced Technical Degree in Textile Arts will travel to the Vall d'Assua to visit textile workshops, see the sheep and learn more about the properties of this wool to implement it on elements of interior design.

### **'Empremtes de Catalunya': Crafts with identity**

Strolling down Barcelona's La Rambla is a must-do for the thousands of tourists who visit the city each year. La Rambla has ceased to be the domain of the city and its residents to become a place where shops and businesses sell souvenirs to tourists. Mexican sombreros, objects made out of a golden metal called 'Toledo gold', flamenco dolls and bulls are some of the items available that present a blurred regional identity; moreover, the souvenirs are made outside Catalonia's borders.

Only in the best of cases, and almost by accident, might we stumble upon a miniature reproduction of Gaudi's mosaic dragon that dominates the entrance of Park Guell. The journalist and writer Sergi Pamies derides these mass reproductions in an article in *El País*: 'I imagine Gaudi entering the souvenir shops with a bazooka, firing indiscriminately'.

Proposing an alternative souvenir for tourists, one that is not made in China, is certainly an opportunity for the craft sector to find a new way to market its products. 'Empremtes de Catalunya' was launched as a response to that opportunity. Someone once said that the designer has a brand, the artist a signature and the artisan a mark, the mark that the artisan leaves after working with the material. 'Empremtes de Catalunya' is a brand of crafts made in Catalonia that speak to a Catalan identity with a true and guaranteed image of the country that rejects the clichés of kitsch bulls, paella and flamenco dancers.

After a study on Catalan iconography (the document is available in PDF, see bibliography), in conjunction with the Department of Tourism, twenty-five 'families' that make up the identity of past and present

Catalonia were identified: Prehistory, Iberian, Roman Empire, Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Romanticism, Modernism, Gaudi, Twentieth-century Arts, Literature, Cuisine, Popular Traditions and Culture, Sant Jordi, Castellers, Sports, Traditional and Popular Music, Lyrical Music, Nova Cançó, Landscape and Nature, Plants, Wildlife, Barcelona, Traditional Utensils and Unique Trades.

At the same time, the study provided data on the occurrence of the despised 'souvenir' and allowed us to redefine it as a trophy or as tangible evidence of a visit, even as a travel certificate. Its functional characteristics and requirements to be considered memorabilia were defined: representativeness, portability, economy, use, aesthetics, uniqueness and intelligibility. Different types of consumers within this larger target market we call 'tourists' (ethnic, artistic, popular, historic, urban and landscape) were also defined.

Once the 'Empremtes de Catalunya' trademark was registered and its objectives defined a search began for existing products on the market that could be labelled under this umbrella brand. Meanwhile, invitations were extended to the crafts sector to generate new items to expand this collection of Catalan products. Each product (identified by a label that explains the relationship with Catalan iconography, authorship and origin) is documented and truly traditional proof of a visit to Catalonia.

Over 400 products form part of the 'Empremtes de Catalunya' collection, available at a permanent sales point in the centre of Barcelona and with future plans for sale online. Other possible sales channels exist, including the CATS network, museum shops and hotels.

## Jewellery, Art and Nature in Serraduy

The Jewellery, Art and Nature conferences in Serraduy are conferences on traditional casting techniques offered by Barcelona's Escola Massana in Serraduy (Aragon) every two years. The participants are jewellery teachers and students, preferably from the Escola Massana but also from other centres in Spain.

Serraduy, an area in the Pyrenean foothills in the Ribagorça region of Aragon, has a very rich and unique paleontological history. Its economic activity is based on agriculture, rural tourism and cuisine, but because it's located on a small, rocky outcrop the area also has great geological and paleontological significance. Only thirty-six people live in Serraduy, an area covering 22.60 km<sup>2</sup>.

The jewellery department of the Escola Massana has organised these conferences since 2002, targeting students studying for an Advanced Technical Degree in Textile Arts with a carefully-designed programme that includes the development of techniques (such as metal casting, lost-wax casting and mould-making) and approaches to mineralogy (cutting and polishing stones), as well as ceramic firing (along with kiln preparation) in facilities provided by the municipality.

One of the first activities undertaken by the students at the beginning of the seminar is the collection of invertebrate fossils that abound in Serraduy. Fossils are used as models to learn the different techniques that are carried out at the seminar: three metal-casting techniques and one ceramic-firing technique.

The preparation of furnaces for casting in the traditional Ashanti way allow the reproduction of forms borrowed from nature, the fossils, using different techniques: pressed earth, sepia skeleton, etc. The results are spectacular.

Five schools, 300 students and thirty teachers from three different regions (Catalonia, Aragon and Valencia) have participated in these conferences since they first started. The Escola Massana received a grant to promote and publish the results of the conferences in a travelling exhibition in 2013 that has visited six cities in Spain.

## Conclusion

The experiences with the Oficis Singulares project shows that artisans and designers working together on a common project is not something that is necessarily uncomfortable or with little chance of success. Dialogue, respect and common goals can reverse or, better yet, remove the hierarchies between the two, promoting mutual learning through teamwork.

The cases we have mentioned prove that smaller populations, often separated from globalised cities, can boast a deeply-rooted culture of effort among its inhabitants, the guarantee of a fruitful collaboration. In addition, many regional artisans are open to setting new goals, not only because they are searching for a new look at their work but also because of how the arrival of an external collaborator with professional experience that complements their own impacts their daily lives.

Secondly, it is also necessary to discuss the value of the authenticity of local traditions. Authenticity is

a highly-valued asset that is disappearing from our environment every day, engulfed by the uniformity that major retail chains bring. Rediscovering fragments of authenticity and participating in their vindication is one of the most rewarding feelings in all these stories.

These projects have helped to stimulate emotionally and economically-depressed regions and sectors, bringing new value to many of the trades and identities, that had been given up for lost, with exquisite sensitivity on the part of the parties involved, both in terms of respect for nature and environmental sustainability and the liability involved in these initiatives. Thus artisans, designers and the government work towards a common goal: making the region a reason for being.

The second case, *Empremtes de Catalunya*, shows a sales outlet that ties in with the previous case. The issue of distribution has to be addressed once the pieces made in collaboration between designers and artisans are completed. It would seem that marketing and craftsmanship would be like oil and water, but if it is the obstacle must be overcome. The *Empremtes de Catalunya* trademark and the opening of a sales point in the city centre respond to the need to sell crafts in a suitable environment. This branding exercise also serves to set handmade products apart from the low-quality products sold at street fairs, where the staging discredits the product up to 90 per cent of the time.

There is a need to be consistent in matters of image and control as far as possible the values that a brand projects. Thus, the inevitable physical support, like a sales point and bags or boxes for transport, has to match the quality of the product. As much as we work at it, nothing is ever good, beautiful and cheap at the same time, so it is better to convey a single idea loud and clear. There are brands that communicate an empirical value, others emotion, and some even ideologies. *Empremtes de Catalunya* is based on two key concepts: handmade and guaranteed Catalan.

The article concludes with an educational project, the Jewellery, Art and Nature in Serraduy conferences. Here we find the piece that completes the puzzle: the young artisans of the future. Social changes over the past fifty years in Catalonia have affected the very essence of what it is to 'be an artisan'. The number of people who know certain techniques or manual trades because they practise and produce these crafts either part-time, temporarily or seasonally is

decreasing in our country and has been in a gradual decline over the last half century.

A quality craft sector with a future is impossible without adequate training. The schools that train future artisans, as the *Escola Massana* has over the years, have understood that a combination of disciplines is the key to success. Art, craft and design come together in these young professionals' daily practices.

Richard Sennett argued that we can only achieve a more human material life if we better understand how things are produced. Fortunately, people are able to experience a deeper and longer-lasting emotional connection with craft items than industrially-manufactured products. Let's take advantage of it! Objects that everyone believes are valuable are so because we like them irrationally, with all their imperfections.

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