



Traditional Arts Indiana at Indiana University's Mathers Museum

by Jon Kay

A partnership between Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) and the [Indiana Arts Commission \(IAC\)](#), [Traditional Arts Indiana \(TAI\)](#) is Indiana's statewide, public folklore agency focused specifically on the folk arts and everyday culture in Indiana. A well-established site for the training of folklore graduate students for successful careers in public folklore and related fields, TAI works to identify, document, and present Indiana's traditional arts through collaborations with Indiana artists and cultural organizations.

Founded in 1998 as a research and outreach unit within IUB's [Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology](#), TAI has traveled the state researching the expressive lives of Hoosiers and forging partnerships with state agencies, nonprofits, community leaders, and artists. In 2007, the Indiana General Assembly recognized TAI as the official statewide folk and traditional arts service organization, helping to secure TAI's long-term relationship with the state.¹ This honor encouraged TAI to continue to work with underserved communities in Indiana through strategic documentation of traditional arts, innovative public programming, and exemplary interpretation of the state's folklife and traditional arts resources. Governor Mike Pence recognized the unique contributions made by TAI in 2013 when TAI received a biannual Governor's Arts Award.²

Also in 2013, folklorist Jason Baird Jackson took over as Director of the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures \(MMWC\)](#), helping infuse a folkloristic perspective into this already vibrant museum on the IUB campus.³ Two years later, aiming to strengthen TAI and to ensure its continued support within the university, TAI was moved under the auspices of the MMWC.⁴ Combined, these two successful programs have complemented both organizations' missions and activities. When TAI joined the MMWC, it helped the museum broaden its statewide reach, expand its traveling exhibit program, and increase its access to external funds. In addition, TAI benefited from the museum's strong infrastructure, professional staff, and institutional stability. Since combining forces, the TAI arm of the museum has hosted gatherings of traditional artists, presented public programs at the museum, and become a stronger partner with both the community and the IUB campus.

Key Projects and Intersections with Museum Education

TAI has long toured traveling exhibitions into non-museum settings. Using Indiana's interlibrary loan program, TAI loans exhibition panels to public libraries around the state through its Rotating Exhibit Network.⁵ Since 2005, this unique program has worked to share the stories of Indiana's traditional arts and artists with new audiences. From hoop-net makers and quilters to mariachi ensembles and bluegrass bands, the Rotating Exhibit Network has profiled the cultural traditions of our state and each year more than 300,000 Hoosiers are served by this free community resource.

While the Rotating Exhibit Network exhibitions reached large numbers, their format and venues were inappropriate for larger exhibitions. Becoming a unit within the MMWC created an opportunity for TAI director Jon Kay to curate two large exhibitions at the museum. *Willow Work: Viki Graber, Willow Basketmaker* explored the creative work of a fourth-generation basketmaker working in Indiana today and *Working Wood: Indiana's Oak-Rod Basket Tradition* traced the evolution and end

Small Traveling Banner Exhibits and the Museum Exhibition: A Comparison

Both *Willow Work* and *Working Wood* exhibits had had a small traveling version that toured to libraries through the TAI Rotating Exhibit Network, but presenting these traditional arts at a university-based museum allowed TAI to tell more in-depth stories about these two traditions. These were not better than their traveling counterparts, but rather both iterations worked in two different ways. Exhibitions in the Rotating Exhibit Network had to be small, quickly digestible, and easy to travel. The exhibits at the MMWC allowed us to present objects rather than just images and provide more detailed information and complex storylines. The traveling exhibit helped us reach an audience around the state, but the exhibitions at the MMWC helped us connect our work more directly with the university. Both *Willow Work* and *Working Wood* raised the visibility and perceived value of the traditional arts, by placing baskets in a gallery setting. One added bonus for artists is that museums acquire objects for their collection; in fact, the museum purchased several baskets from Viki Graber for their permanent collection, helping to strengthen the museum's collection of Indiana traditional arts. This also bolsters the relationship between artists and the museum

of a distinctive basketmaking tradition in southern Indiana. These two exhibition projects built on long-term TAI research and connected with global basketry research and exhibition projects also underway at the museum. Also, in the spring of 2016, TAI staff, along with Jon Kay's Laboratory in Public Folklore graduate class, researched and curated a large exhibition based on TAI's years of field research. The exhibition *Indiana Folk Arts: 200 Years of Tradition and Innovation* was endorsed by the Indiana Bicentennial Commission and featured the work of more than 45 traditional artists from throughout Indiana. The introductory panel describes the exhibit's focus this way:

For more than 200 years, Indiana has been home to a wide variety of folk arts. Through telling the stories of specific artists, this bicentennial exhibit highlights the important work of individuals in the continuation of traditional arts in our state. While some create art based on skills they learned from their family or in their community, others have reinvented established forms, taking them in new directions. From beadwork and blacksmithing to rug weaving and limestone carving, the artisans featured here represent a few of the many threads within the creative fabric of Indiana.

The exhibition opened in April 2016 to a large audience, and the festival-like opening, which included narrative stages, musical performances, hands-on demonstrations, and free root beer floats, served by the museum staff. Graduate students planned and presented the opening. The exhibition also had a 76-page, free companion catalogue.⁶ In addition to excerpts from the exhibition, the catalogue included essays about artists, portraits of the artists, as well as images of their artwork.

In February 2016, shortly after relocating TAI offices to the museum, TAI held our first major gathering of traditional artists. For years, we had hosted artist meet-ups, webinars, and workshops, but the 2016 Folk Art Summit was different. Seventeen artists from around the state attended the gathering, for which TAI paid them a stipend. At the gathering, each artist participated in workshops to improve their demonstrations and presentations, professional photographers created portraits for each of the artists, and museum staff assisted with photographing artwork and leading collection tours. Liaisons from the Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana State Parks led workshops on potential grants and upcoming projects.⁷ In addition, students from the Public Folklore Laboratory interviewed artists and created biographies for each. These materials were featured in the exhibition catalogue *Indiana Folk Arts*. Yet, perhaps the most important facet of the day's activities was the networking between artists that took place. This program, exhibition, and publication would not have

been possible if it had not been for TAI's new institutional home. Combining a statewide folk arts program with a campus-based museum proved to be a positive context for engaging with artists, training of graduate folklore students, and producing this bicentennial project.

At the museum, TAI hosts a steady stream of traditional artists on IUB's campus, creating a context where artists engage with both undergraduate and graduate classes, which is helping recruit and train the next generation of public folklorists. In the fall of 2015, Jon Kay taught a special course called *Work as Art: Occupational Folklife in the United States*. The course was offered as part of a campuswide program called *Themester*, which aims to encourage courses around specific interdisciplinary topics. From programs with gravestone carvers to class visits with first-responders the course blended undergraduate education with public folklore programming in a museum setting.⁸ Students also learned basic documentation, research, and presentational methods and gained a greater understanding of the work of a public folklore.



Rethinking the Role of Folklore and Museum Education

The synergy of combining a campus museum with a statewide public folklore agency is proving to be a robust catalyst for the research and presentation of the folk and traditional arts as well as for the support of undergraduate and graduate education. As arts and humanities programs are threatened by the massive restructuring that universities are facing in the U.S, public folklore and related outward facing arts and humanities programs are playing an important role in making our work relevant in the years following the Great Recession. Programs like TAI and the Mathers, as well as the other organizations featured in this essay series, help expose students to the work of folklorists and museum professionals and offer alternative career paths beyond the academy. Public folklore is not a secondary choice for many of today's folklore graduates, and our graduate training needs adapt to support applied and public work in the humanities.

So, what should students expect from a graduate program if they are going into public folklore? First, a grounding in the theories, history, and methods of our field—this should never be compromised. Second, students should receive relevant experience in public and applied work. Just as teaching assistantships help prepare students for a career as a professor, working with arts organizations and museums can prepare them for work in the public sector. Work experience can be gained in a variety of ways. At TAI, we often work with students through practicum courses, where they shepherd a project to completion, help plan and produce a public event, do fieldwork and develop an exhibition panel for the Rotating Exhibit Network, or some other relevant work. We also hire several students each year to work at TAI, assisting with day-to-day operations and public programs. TAI has also hired advanced students to do contract fieldwork. Recently, two students conducted fieldwork for TAI on the circus arts and traditions in Peru, Indiana. This research was the first leg in what we hope will be a component of a future Smithsonian Folklife Festival. In addition to graduate coursework, working helps students grapple with ideas and concepts through real-world situations. It is easy to

joust with straw men sitting in a seminar class but harder when scholars labor alongside individuals on community projects.

Students should also expect to compile, whether through a course or on their own, a portfolio that demonstrates their professional skills and experiences. This dossier should include fieldwork materials (sample fieldnotes, recordings, and photographs); examples of promotional materials for public events or exhibitions; or other resources relevant to the student's career trajectory). Like an academic curriculum vita, a thoughtful resume and portfolio help translate graduate experiences into a legible set of professional skills.



The merger of statewide folklore agencies based in university museums offers a proven training ground for public folklorists and museum professionals. While in some regards this emerged as a new model, folklorists have worked in museums for over a hundred years, and this recent turn may mark a rekindling of interest in public folklore and museum work.⁹ The professional skills and methods needed in both public folklore and museum practice should be foregrounded in our academic training. At IU, we offer hands-on courses through the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology in both public folklore and museums to provide professional skills along with a grounding in the theories and methods of our discipline.

Jon Kay is Director of Traditional Arts Indiana, Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage at Mathers Museum of World Cultures, and Professor of Practice at Indiana University's Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology.

Endnotes

1. "IU's Traditional Arts Indiana program honored with resolution," <http://newsinfo.iu.edu/web/page/normal/5331.html>.
2. "Traditional Arts Indiana Receives 2013 Governor's Arts Award," <http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news-archive/24486.html>.
3. Jackson, Jason Baird. 2015. "Interconnections: Folklore Studies and Anthropology at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures." *Practicing Anthropology*. 37.3: 20-23, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17730/0888-4552-37.3.20>; "IU's Mathers Museum of World Cultures Names Folklore Professor as New Director," <http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news-archive/23745.html>.
4. "Traditional Arts Indiana Thriving in New Home at IU's Mathers Museum," <http://news.indiana.edu/releases/iu/2015/03/traditional-arts-indiana-mathers.shtml>.
5. For more about how the Rotating Exhibit Network works watch this webinar video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qwl-TPFp-VY>, accessed June 28, 2016.
6. *Indiana Folk Arts: 200 Years of Tradition and Innovation* (exhibition catalog), <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/20893>.
7. For more about the Folk Art Summit see this video, <https://youtu.be/uqjiBAs7k4Y>.
8. IU Bloomington's Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President produced a documentary about the Work as Art class, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UFG3Po4mx4>.
9. Dewhurst, C. Kurt. 2014. "Folklife and Museum Practice: An Intertwined History and Emerging Convergences," American Folklore Society 2011 Presidential Address. *Journal of American Folklore*. 127.505 (Summer): 247-263.

URLS

<http://www.in.gov/arts>
<http://www.traditionalartsindiana.org>
<https://folkethno.webhost.iu.edu/scripts/index.cfm>
<http://www.mathers.indiana.edu>