

# Project Report

## Traditional Arts Indiana's Bicentennial Exhibition\*

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*Abstract: This project report describes the planning, creation, and touring of a 26-panel traveling exhibition about Indiana folk arts, timed for the Bicentennial of Indiana's statehood in 2016. The exhibition, its catalogue, and related public programs were produced by Traditional Arts Indiana, Indiana's official traditional arts service organization based at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.*

[Keywords: *folk art*, Indiana, *exhibitions*, *exhibition catalogs*, *public folklore*, *collaboration*. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

### Introduction

While 2016 marked Indiana's Bicentennial, it also witnessed a re-imagining of the state's public folk arts program, Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI), a program that I have directed since 2004.<sup>1</sup> TAI joined Indiana University's Mathers Museum of World Cultures in 2015, just in time to embark on a robust series of Bicentennial related events. Leveraging our field research and existing partnerships, TAI produced *Indiana Folk Arts: 200 Years of Tradition and Innovation*, a traveling exhibition that toured to state parks, libraries, and community festivals, as well as to the Indiana State Fair. At each of these sites, TAI augmented this static display of photographs and text by collaborating with artists and community groups to present craft demonstrations, workshops, and stage presentations. These programs brought the exhibition to life, not only for the attendees, but also for the artists who, over the course of the year, became a community of their own. In this essay, I report on TAI's Bicentennial activities and situate them within the collaborative practice of a statewide folk arts program at a university-based museum of ethnography, ethnology, and cultural history.

Fifteen years ago, when I became director of Traditional Arts Indiana, I hoped my research would result in a folk arts exhibition for Indiana's 2016 Bicentennial—I saw this as both a major milestone for the state and a strategic event that TAI could use to increase our visibility and to further our work of supporting Indiana's traditional arts and vernacular culture. I had worked on statewide exhibitions before for both the Historical Museum of South Florida (1998) and the Kentucky Folklife Festival (1997-2000); the latter was a kind

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of living exhibition. Both of these displays taught me about the interactive nature of folklife exhibitions. Once in Indiana, I spent the next decade documenting the everyday expressive lives of Hoosiers and forging partnerships with artists and community organizations—all the while keeping in mind that future goal of a large exhibition of Indiana’s traditional arts.<sup>2</sup> Although I had originally envisioned the exhibition in a museum (like the one in Florida), experience taught me that TAI excels at presenting traditional arts at community festivals, fairs, libraries, and parks (making it much more like the Kentucky festival). In fact, our exhibition became a hybrid of my Florida and Kentucky experiences: a showcase of living, working artists able to communicate with visitors, framed by text and image panels about their art forms and experiences.

Once the time came to create the exhibition, we produced an outdoor exhibition that could serve as the backdrop for this traveling festival. Employing weighted banner stands, we traveled the exhibition to over twenty venues around the state, including the Mathers Museum’s galleries on the Indiana University campus (Figures 1 and 2). The majority of the time, we set up the cumbersome display in rural communities, which historically have had limited access to public arts dollars and programs. As noted above, we worked with the artists featured in the exhibition at each of these gatherings to host demonstrations, stage narrative sessions, and serve as community ambassadors (Figure 3). An unexpected result of the time spent in close proximity with shared goals, these artists from different regional and cultural backgrounds throughout the state formed a community of their own (Figure 4). But I am getting a head of myself. Let me first provide an overview of the year, and how this traveling museum roadshow worked.

## **Folk Art Summit**

Folklore and Ethnomusicology graduate students in my “Laboratory in Public Folklore” course helped plan, develop, and produce the exhibition, as well as an accompanying catalogue and a large public program celebrating its launch (Figure 5) (Kay 2016). Our year of collaboration began in February 2016, when we hosted an orientation for the artists we hoped to feature in the exhibition and related events (Figures 6 and 7). We called the gathering a “Folk Arts Summit.” The selection was hard; I knew of dozens of artists and tradition bearers whom I wanted to feature, but the usual limitations of exhibition space and the pragmatics of planning so many events would not allow for it. We invited around 25 artists, but only seventeen were able to attend. Most were joined by their spouses, partners, and/or apprentices, whom we specifically encouraged the artists to bring. Though we would be contracting with individual artist to demonstrate, teach, and participate in other aspects of our program, we knew that many of the demonstrators rarely came to an event by themselves, and often relied heavily on these significant others to assist with their work.



Figure 1. The Bicentennial Exhibition on display at the Taste of Tippecanoe festival in Lafayette, Indiana. June 18, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 2. The Bicentennial exhibition set up at McCormicks Creek State Park. June 11, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.





Figure 3. At a gathering of the National Association of State Park Directors, Larry Haycraft discusses his family's net making tradition at Spring Mill State Park. September 7, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.





Figure 4. On the plaza near the Indiana statehouse, Larry Haycraft teaches quilter Maxine Stovall how to tie a net. Both artisans were attending the Hoosier Homecoming. October 15, 2018. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 5. Jon Kay with graduate students from his Laboratory in Public Folklore course after they installed the Bicentennial exhibition at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. (Top, left to right: Kate Mullen, Jennie Williams, Mathilde Lind, Jon Kay, Carolisa Watson, Barb McGuiness, Maria Zeringue. Bottom, left to right: Caroline H. Miller, Jessie Riddle, Lailah Rajani). April 24, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 6. Cathy Nagy Mowry shows one of her cornhusk dolls and tells participants in the Folk Arts Summit about her Miami heritage. February 4, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.

The summit included discussions about the venues where we would be working, how we could make the events more meaningful for the participants, and other logistics (such as travel expenses and honoraria). We began with a brief welcome and introductions. Each of the invited artists introduced themselves and their guests, and then shared the story of how



they came to their craft. From glass workers and limestone carvers to bead artists and basket makers, each spoke of their work and their community, conjuring the constellation of their tradition. As each introduced themselves, a common thread began to emerge. Each of the stories seemed to include a detail about how, when they were twelve or thirteen, a grandparent, neighbor, or family friend began mentoring them in their work. While not everyone had this creative coming of age experience, more than half did. A glass worker apprenticed with his grandfather and uncles, a quilter helped her mother piece quilts. A net maker, a basket maker, and a pysanki artist all learned from their parents (Figure 8). As each told their stories, the foundation of a shared vision for the exhibition emerged: the story of individual artists framed within that constellation of tradition and community.

An additional focus of the summit was to provide artists with technical assistance and training for writing state arts grants. To this end, the graduate students recorded life histories with the artists, and professional photographers created portraits and work sample photographs for the participants. The recorded interviews and photographs would serve as the backbone of the exhibition and also as resources for the artists when marketing their work. This newly collected data was augmented by existing fieldwork, but some of our older material was outdated. The summit allowed us to update our information and listen one-on-one to the collaborating artists—starting the back and forth conversations as we worked to co-create an interpretive panel about each artist. Based on these conversations, we crafted our exhibition text, selected photographs, and compiled stand-alone interpretive panels. The artists then reviewed these panels to ensure factually accurate and culturally sensitive representation.



Figure 7. At the Folk Arts Summit, representatives from the Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana State Parks help artists learn about program and grant opportunities. February 4, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 8. At the Folk Arts Summit, Joe Rice tells other artists about learning to work glass from his grandfather and uncles when he was twelve. February 4, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 9. Indiana University Students read an exhibition panel at the university's First Thursday Festival. September 1, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



For example, Katrina Mitten, a Miami bead artist from Fort Wayne, Indiana, was not happy with the text initially written by a graduate student in my class. We went back to the drawing board, studying our interview transcripts and incorporating her comments into a second draft. She still felt it missed the mark. On the third (or maybe it was the fourth) try, I took over the writing; I called Katrina to talk about what she felt was missing and what she thought was most important to convey. Finally, when I emailed her the text I had written after our phone call, she sent me a Facebook message that read, “You get me!” I am sure that the new text was more to her liking, but more importantly our relationship was stronger. She felt that she had been heard, and I sensed that we had created more than just exhibition text, we had laid the foundation for a mutually productive working relationship that would continue to grow over the next few months.<sup>3</sup>

From the data gathered at the summit as well as from the TAI archive, we produced 26 panels focused on an artist, community group, or tradition. From Mennonite quilters and Nigerian drum builders to woodcarvers and weavers, the panels made clear the diversity of a state that is popularly perceived as monocultural. Each panel included two or three images and fewer than 150 words, purposefully keeping the text short, engaging, and approachable with the hope that demonstrating artists would fill in the gaps (Figures 9-14). The exhibition was not intended to be the final word about the artists and traditions featured, but rather a dialogic beginning; a backdrop to contextualize artist demonstrations and create a space where event attendees and artists could talk and learn.



Figure 10. Fr. Jerome Sanderson works on an icon at McCormicks Creek State Park. June 11, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 11. Tom Wintczak decorates a redware plate using a sgraffito method, while demonstrating at Harmonie State Park. October 1, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.

As a companion to the exhibition, we published a full-color catalog that was offered free of charge to participants and event attendees (Kay 2016). This publication was not only the culmination of our work at the Folk Art Summit, but also of a decade of conducting fieldwork, teaching folklore classes, and presenting traditional arts at parks, festivals, libraries and events throughout the state. We recognized that, like the exhibition, the catalogue would not provide a complete picture of Indiana's traditional artists. For each artist included, we wanted to tell the story of dozens more, but space did not allow us to do so in our 76-page catalogue. Thus, we accepted that it would have to be a snapshot—all that we could squeeze into our interpretive frame given our time, space, and funding constraints. We printed 3000 of them, which we gave away at the events. We gave stacks to artists to take to their home communities and also made it available as a free digital [download](#) via Indiana University's library-based open access digital repository. The catalogues gave a sense of the artists' work—drawing attention to their craft, tradition, and community.

As with the catalogue, I was surprised at the pride the artists took in the panels we created with and about them. At each event, many wanted their picture taken with their panels as a way to document the day (Figure 15). I view this mutual ownership as one of the signs of a successful program. After four or five of the installations, I noticed the artists were beginning to introduce themselves as "TAI artists." Though we never intended to start a group organization (and still do not), I felt reassured by the way these artists viewed themselves as part of Traditional Arts Indiana (Figure 16). It is important to note that there is a downside to this sense of connection and ownership. We now have a deep relationship with (and tacit obligation to) these artists, but we cannot continue to produce programs on the scale and



with the frequency that we did for the Bicentennial (for discussion of such dynamics in museum-based projects, see Swan and Jordan 2015). There will be other projects, as well as other communities and artists who we, as a statewide folk arts program, are expected to serve. As the summer came to an end, I had to sit down with each of the artists and explain that while the relationships we built are valuable to TAI and will be maintained, they should not expect to participate in projects of this nature on a regular basis. We will continue to work together, but not in the same way and on the same scale. Having said that, this Bicentennial exhibition/roadshow allowed us to deepen relationships with tradition bearers and has resulted in wonderful spin-off projects. I will briefly discuss three such instances. First, we are creating a documentary and instructional video about a traditional bowl hewer; a project that emerged when Keith Ruble asked if I could help him write a book about bowl hewing. After sharing his talents with so many people, and with me, I felt I could not refuse him. I did not have time to write a book, but I could spend a few days shooting and editing a video for him and TAI.



Figure 12. Fourth and fifth generation weavers, Dee Neirman (left) and Margaret Lucky (right) show two wool rugs at O'Bannon Woods State Park. May 28, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.

A second example of the continuity of these relationships can be found in programming at the Mathers Museum. When the assistant director of the Mathers Museum asked if we had any Indiana University related material for an IU Day social media blitz that IU was planning for spring 2017, I suggested that we have Carol Powers, a Ukrainian pysanki artist, make an IU egg for the museum's collections. Carol is an IU alumna, and I hoped this would allow us to acquire one of her eggs for our collection (Figure 17). The red, white, and black egg, with its IU-related symbolism and the [video](#) we made about it, was a hit in the university's social media feed (Traditional Arts Indiana 2017). Additionally, this relationship has led to other workshops, classes, and demonstrations with the artist.



Figure 13. Marcos Bautista demonstrates Zapotec weaving at Clifty Falls State Park in Madison, Indiana. July 9, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 14. James Yang demonstrates Chinese calligraphy at McCormicks Creek State Park, while his wife, Jenny Yang, helps. June 11, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.





Figure 15. Viki Graber holding a willow basket by her exhibition panel on display at the Taste of Tippecanoe festival in Lafayette, Indiana. June 18, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 16. Left to right: Janie Wyatt, Kathy Muhammad, and Patrice Smith at the Taste of Tippecanoe festival in Lafayette, Indiana. June 18, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.

One final example that grew out of our collaboration is a revival of TAI's Apprenticeship Program. The program was suspended in 2007 because we did not have adequate research and relationships to maintain it. Apprenticeships require master artists to identify an apprentice, come up with a strategy to teach them, and schedule a public program to showcase the progress of the apprentice. After our Bicentennial year, we received eleven applications, many of which were from artists who had participated in the Bicentennial programming. We awarded six apprenticeship pairs in a variety of traditions, and four of them were to artists with whom we had worked during the Bicentennial. Larry Haycraft, a fourth generation hoopnet maker, worked with his teenage son, Samuel, to make an oval hoopnet; a very complex pattern that is unique to their family (Figure 18). Larry estimates that no one had made this traditional net form in over thirty years. Similarly, Daniel Cain was supported through the apprenticeship program to teach netmaking to fellow fisherman David Guffey. Daniel himself had been a netmaking apprentice nearly twenty years ago in TAI's original Apprenticeship Program. Drummaker Tony Artis continues to teach a variety of traditional drums to his son, Andre Rosa Artis. Both Daniel and Tony had learned their crafts through apprenticeships with master artists. Finally, Katrina Mitten is teaching Miami and Great Lakes beadwork embroidery to her granddaughter, Saiyah Miller.<sup>4</sup> Each of these pairings are the direct result of TAI's relationship with these artists.





Figure 17. Image of a Ukrainian pysanki egg made by Carol Powers for Indiana University. Mathers Museum of World Cultures. MM351.1.

TAI collaborated with several organizations to present the exhibition and related programs. Probably the most impactful was our work with Indiana State Parks. We had been presenting artists in parks for five years, but the Bicentennial year, which was also the State Parks' centennial, proved an especially effective time for hosting public programs (Figure 19). Our collaboration with parks has laid the groundwork for several projects that are just now coming to fruition. As mentioned, at the Folk Art Summit, artists met with representatives from the Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana State Parks. They learned about the new Arts in the Parks and Historic Sites initiative that TAI had helped pilot. Armed with information from that meeting, four of the artists applied for—and received—grants to do projects in Indiana State Parks. One of the artists, Viki Graber, a fourth-generation willow basket maker, will build living willow structures in three parks using native willow stands from each property. Other grants received by these artists have funded limestone carving demonstrations, sweetgrass basket workshops, and programs with a Miami doll maker.



Figure 18. Larry Haycraft watches as his son, Samuel, ties the knots for his oval hoopnet, a distinctive form that today is only made in the Haycraft family. March 25, 2018. Photograph by Greg Whitaker. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 19. At McCormicks Creek State Park, folklore and ethnomusicology graduate student Jenny Williams tries splitting a rail for a fence, while experienced rail-splitter Alan Richards and his grandson Porter watch. June 11, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



While our collaborations with artists on the Bicentennial exhibition and programs were generally good (often exceeding our expectations), our partnerships with state agencies did not always measure up. We encountered parks where interpretive staff unexpectedly took the day off, leaving us to set up and host a program by ourselves, and a historic site that booked a Jimmy Buffet cover band to perform at the same time we were hosting the exhibition and demonstrations. Finally, a big Bicentennial capstone event at the statehouse promised 4000 attendees, but approximately 400 showed up. Nevertheless, at each of these events, the artists were excited to be a part of our work, and we used these moments to deepen our relationship with them.

I should note that in addition to being Indiana's Bicentennial, 2016 was also the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of both the Indiana Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts. Without these two agencies, Traditional Arts Indiana could not do our statewide work. The modest investments made by these two funding agencies allowed us not only to reach more than 300,000 people during the Bicentennial year, but also made it possible to collaborate meaningfully with traditional artists working in our state and to bring relevant and engaging arts and humanities programs to more than twenty communities across Indiana (Figure 20-23).



Figure 20. Violinmaker Bruce Taggart lets young musicians try his fiddles at the Lotus World Music and Arts Festival in Bloomington, Indiana. September 17, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 21. Viki Graber holds her “Bicentennial Basket” during the Hoosier Homecoming at the Indiana Statehouse. She worked on this basket at each of the Traditional Arts Indiana Events that she attended. October 15, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.





Figure 22. A hewn bowl in the shape of Indiana that Keith Ruble made with his adz at the Hoosier Homecoming at the Indiana Statehouse. October 15, 2016. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.



Figure 23. Traditional Arts Indiana participants at the Hoosier Homecoming at the Indiana Statehouse; October 15, 2016. Left to right: Jon Kay, John Bundy, Kathy Muhammad, Emily Burke, Linda Jones, Jan Boettcher, Keith Ruble, Katrina Mitten, Greg Adams, Viki Graber, Maxine Stovall, and Carol Powers. Courtesy of Traditional Arts Indiana at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.

## Notes

1. In the United States, most states have a program based in state government charged with supporting the folk and traditional arts that are based in community life. These programs are often located in a state arts council/commission. In recent years, states faced with limited positions have turned to universities and nonprofit agencies to house these programs. TAI is a partnership between the Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana University. State folk arts programs often conduct field research, produce exhibitions, host public programs, and administer support programs for traditional artists, such as apprenticeships, fellowships, and project grants. These programs aim to support traditional arts practices and community life. Typically, these state agencies employ academically trained folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and anthropologists to administer such programs.

2. Indiana residents, and those born in the state, are known colloquially as Hoosiers. Such state nicknames are common in the United States and they often also attach to the state's flagship university, as with the Indiana University Hoosiers or the Sooners of both the state of Oklahoma and of its major public university.



3. Much of the discussion between Katrina Mitten and TAI workers was about how to render a longer family story in a limited space. Katrina made a beaded handbag that illustrates an encounter Killsoohkwa, the granddaughter of famed Miami Chief Little Turtle (c.1747-1812), had with the little people, and how through that experience she helped a family and their newborn. Killsoohkwa shared the story with Katrina's grandmother Josephine, who told it to Katrina. Ultimately, we ended up not including the story in the panel, but instead focused on Katrina's beaded purse, which visually illustrated a story that has been told in Katrina's family for generations. The artist designed the purse with her granddaughter Josephine in mind.

4. While a few of the apprenticeship pairings were between family members, this is neither a requirement nor the norm within the field.

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