

Collaborative, Consultative, and Research-Based Public Folklore Programming in Museum Contexts: A Professional Development Project to Strengthen the Work of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Traditional Arts Indiana, and the Michigan State University Museum

A report on a professional development effort undertaken pursued with support from the Consultancy and Professional Development Program of the American Folklore Society.

Jason Baird Jackson¹

With a grant generously provided by the Consultancy and Professional Development Program of the American Folklore Society, the staff of the Michigan State University Museum (MSUM) hosted the staff of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures (MMWC) and Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI), both based at Indiana University.² This professional development exchange/workshop took place March 24-26, 2014 at the MSUM on the Michigan State University campus in East Lansing. All participants greatly benefitted from this exchange. As will be noted in conclusion below, the lessons of the visit played an essential role, in the days and months that followed, in the overcoming of a challenge to the traditional arts/public folklore work of Indiana University. What could have been a blow to public folklore work at Indiana became a positive development. The professional development project described here contributed significantly to securing this positive outcome.

This staff exchange visit focused on a mixture of general and focused goals. On the general level, the staff of all three units learned about the work of their individual peers and about the three organizations as a whole. Discussions and show-and-tell sessions of broad scope included mutual exchange relating to collaborative research, staffing, facilities, collections development, collections management, traveling exhibitions, special exhibitions, digital asset management, public programs, social media, and podcasting. In all of these areas, the participants learned much from the work being done by their peers. All participants contributed significantly to the discussions, which took place over an afternoon and evening (March 24) and a full day (March 25).

The visit also included a focused set of discussions relating to the articulation of state-assisted, university-based public folklore programs and university museums. At issue in these discussions were the lessons to be learned from the work of the Michigan Traditional Arts Program (MTAP) as a distinct public folklore program embedded in, and administered from within, the MSUM as a statewide arts partnership with the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs. Under the direction of MSUM Curator of Folk Arts Marsha MacDowell,

¹ Jason Baird Jackson, Director, Mathers Museum of World Cultures, 416 N. Indiana Ave., Bloomington, IN 47408, USA. jbj@indiana.edu. For assistance in the preparation of this report, appreciation is extended to the other partners in the effort reported on here.

² For MSUM, MMWC, and TAI, see: <http://museum.msu.edu/>, <http://www.mathers.indiana.edu/>, and <http://www.traditionalartsindiana.org/>, accessed July 5, 2015.

MTAP pursues a wide range of programs, including the Great Lakes Folk Festival, the Michigan Stained Glass Census, and the Michigan Heritage Awards.³ Directed by Jon Kay, TAI is a peer traditional arts program to MTAP just as MMWC is a peer university museum to the MSUM. The key difference at the time of this exchange was that TAI was based in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University. TAI collaborated with, but was distinct from, the MMWC. As public folklore/public humanities units that are supported by state government but based at, and administered on, public university campuses, TAI and MTAP share a great many goals and circumstances. A key interest in our discussions at MSU focused on the work of MTAP and TAI and the ways that this work does (MTAP+MSUM) or could (TAI+MMWC) articulate with that of the respective campus museums.

In addition to consultations between the staff of these units, the group also visited with a number of other key actors and organizations. A meeting was held with John Bracey, Executive Director of the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs—in it we learned about the state of arts funding in Michigan, about the history of support provided to MTAP, and about trends in states arts support in general.⁴ We also visited MATRIX, MSU's Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences. MATRIX is a key partner for MSUM (including MTAP) projects, such as the Quilt Index and the Michigan Stained Glass Census. The work of MATRIX and its partnerships with MSUM were of special interest to the MMWC because the museum is building up its digital infrastructure and its digital humanities programs. The visit was equally relevant to TAI given its extensive digital humanities activities. Finally, the participants visited the Broad Art Museum, receiving a behind the scenes tour of this still-new facility and learning about its campus and community outreach work.⁵

In the months immediately following our consultations together at MSUM, developments emerged at Indiana University that placed our conversations into an important new context, especially vis-à-vis MMWC and TAI. These developments are also of relevance to MSUM, because MSUM and MMWC have become key mutual partners in a number of initiatives, including the China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project.⁶ At the time of our professional development exchange, TAI was housed in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, a unit of the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University. Contrastively, the MMWC is unit within the Office of the Vice Provost for Research. It is beyond the scope of this report to describe the full nature of the issues faced during the summer and fall of 2014, but questions about the future status and organizational home of TAI were raised and productively resolved during this period, with the result being that TAI moved from the College of Arts and Sciences into the MMWC, becoming a vital and important constituent program of the museum. Appropriate to stress here is that questions about the future of both the MMWC and TAI were resolved in a

³ For more information on the Michigan Traditional Arts Program, see: <http://museum.msu.edu/s-program/mtap/>, accessed July 5, 2015.

⁴ <http://www.michiganbusiness.org/community/council-arts-cultural-affairs/#MCACA>, accessed July 5, 2015.

⁵ <http://broadmuseum.msu.edu/>, accessed July 5, 2015.

⁶ <http://www.afsnet.org/?page=FICH>, accessed July 5, 2015.

positive way on the basis of insights and lessons gained from our colleagues at MSUM. The long-term of success of MTAP as a constituent program of the MSUM provided a clear and very useful model, one that was compelling to key administrators at Indiana University. While the Indiana University participants went to East Lansing with the goal of learning how TAI and MMWC might more fruitfully collaborate, the trip proved useful in negotiating a much more dramatic transformation. MMWC and TAI are now organized in close parallel to the ways that MSUM and MTAP are organized.⁷

For the fields of museum-based folklore studies and public folklore in the United States, we note that the convergence of public folklore agencies and university-based museums of ethnography is a broader pattern, as evidenced by new ties linking the Kentucky Folklife Program and the Kentucky Museum (both at Western Kentucky University) and linking the South Carolina Folklife and Traditional Arts Program with the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina.⁸ This pattern was already in place in a number of other settings, such as with the Missouri Folk Arts Program based in the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. Based on our discussions in East Lansing and on other discussions ongoing in the field, we see these shifts as a positive development. The partners to this project aspire to be part of a larger field-wide conversation of such shifts and their ramifications. Discussions organized under the auspices of the AFS Public Folklore and Folklore and Museum Sections represent one logical next step in such conversations.

On a more micro level, the staff exchanges have facilitated a deeper understanding about folklore in general and the place of folklore at museums among peers at each institution whose work is only tangentially affiliated with folklore. Importantly, the exchanges also facilitated professional relationships that will not only advance folklore-related activities but also other future collaborative activities between the Mathers Museum and the Michigan State University Museum.

⁷ See <http://news.indiana.edu/releases/iu/2015/03/traditional-arts-indiana-mathers.shtml>, accessed July 5, 2015 for an Indiana University media release describing the move of TAI to the MMWC.

⁸ For the linkage of the Kentucky Museum and Kentucky Folklife Program, see: <https://wkunews.wordpress.com/2015/01/12/bjorkman-museum/>, accessed July 5, 2015. For the move of the South Carolina Folklife and Traditional Arts Program to the McKissick Museum, see <http://www.southcarolinaarts.com/press/011514.shtml>, accessed July 5, 2015.