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Curating the Ostrom collection: IU students practice hands-on curatorship at Mathers

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by Bethany Nolan

Full of packing paper and boxes, the basement of the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#) resembled a holiday morning after a frenzy of gift unwrapping.



Students in Jason Jackson's curatorship class are gaining hands-on experience curating the Ostrom collection of Native American art. Jackson is director of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures.

But the students in museum director Jason Jackson's curatorship class were much more careful than the average gift recipient -- the group is among the first to handle some items from a vast Native American art collection donated to Indiana University by the late Elinor and Vincent Ostrom.

In one corner, classmates unwrapped Native American baskets, the discovery of an informative postcard tucked inside one drawing excited "oooohs." Others pored over tiny birch bark boxes intricately decorated with dyed porcupine quills, quietly discussing the depiction of a particular animal. Nearby, another group studied a collection of paintings from the Ojibwe peoples in the Great Lakes, while others gently unrolled a large rug, marveling at its unique woven pattern.

Known to many simply as "Lin," Ostrom was Distinguished Professor and the Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at IU. The only woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, she died June 12, 2012. Her husband, Vincent, the Arthur F. Bentley Professor Emeritus of Political Science, died just two weeks later.

Ellen Sieber, the museum's curator of collections, was one of a handful of IU staffers who walked through the Ostroms' Bloomington home after their deaths, when the university learned the couple had donated their entire household to the university. Those items, many from Canada's Manitoulin Island where the Ostroms had a vacation home, were split between the Mathers, the IU Art Museum and the university's campus-wide collection.



Students inspect an art piece that the Ostroms used in their home -- as a wastebasket. "They truly lived with these items," said Ellen Sieber, the Mathers Museum's curator of collections.

“The Ostroms had a very comfortable home, and it was so clear they inhabited it fully, that it wasn’t a showpiece despite their extensive art collection,” Sieber said, pointing out a nearby woven basket. “For example, this was used as a wastebasket in Vincent’s study. They truly lived with these items.”

Jackson, who became the museum’s director in January, saw the Ostroms’ gift as a perfect opportunity to create a teachable moment for his students -- something he believes would have appealed to the couple who spent their lives on research that changed the way people think about the relationship between individuals and institutions.

“The Ostroms’ collection extends and complements what has been here at the Mathers for many years, and I can’t help but think the Ostroms would approve of IU students gaining experience by working with these items,” Jackson said. “Museums like ours would be hard pressed to collect the way they did, so we’re very fortunate to receive these items.”

And Jackson’s students have clearly responded to the opportunity to use the Ostrom collection for hands-on study. Their work will be incorporated into an exhibit and other activities, partially funded through one of the first grants given by the Ostrom Grants Program of the College of Arts and Sciences.

“It’s really fascinating to see the behind-the-scenes processes,” said Dorothy Berry, a dual masters student in ethnomusicology and library science. “Anyone can go look at an exhibit, but to be in here, in the basement, and to really see the organization that goes into cataloguing and organizing items, it’s pretty interesting.”

Alex Betts is the lone undergraduate in Jackson’s course, a senior majoring in anthropology and history who plans to attend graduate school for museum studies.



“The Ostroms’ collection extends and complements what has been here at the Mathers for many years, and I can’t help but think the Ostroms would approve of IU students gaining experience by working with these items,” said Jason Jackson, seen here with students from his curatorship class.

“As an anthropology student, I’m interested in the context and culture behind these items,” he said. “The Ostroms’ collection includes a mixture of tourist items -- which have an importance of their own -- and more ethnographic objects, which definitely shows their varied interests and how well-traveled they were.”

For graduate student Sara Clark, who’s studying in the School of Education’s Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, it’s a chance to do hands-on work.

“I really like to learn by doing,” she said, gesturing to the Navajo rug rolled out on the table before her.

“And this is a chance to really work with items and not just look at images on a screen or discuss things. You really gain a sense of the pieces, and get to spend time with them.”

Fellow graduate student Miriam Woods, who is studying folklore and Central Eurasian studies, agreed, saying, “These are real life skills we’re developing.”

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