

Spring 2015

Chalkboard

Indiana University School of Education Alumni Association



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ELPS doctoral student co-curates Mathers art exhibit, examines “educational life history” of Nobel winner



Sara Clark

Every home likely tells a story of the people who live there. The home shared by two distinguished professors, including a Nobel Prize recipient, probably holds more tales than most.

Elinor “Lin” Ostrom, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 and Distinguished Professor and Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at IU, passed away in 2012. Within the same month, her husband, Vincent Ostrom, an Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science Emeritus, also died. They willed their entire household to Indiana University, which proved a trove of items split among the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at IU, the IU Art Museum and the university’s campus-wide collection.

Ostrom earned her Nobel Prize through non-traditional economics work. She didn’t simply work with economic theory and statistical models. Her work on how communities of people managed common spaces without other oversight and formal regulation took her into villages and other areas across the world.

Not surprisingly, Lin and Vincent Ostrom collected in an almost anthropological fashion at a place they called home for part of 41 years. Nearly every summer between 1967 and 2008, the couple drove to Manitoulin Island, Canada, located 800 miles northeast of Bloomington on the northern side of Lake Huron, to live and work in a cabin they built. The large island has an aboriginal culture archaeologists say may date back 30,000 years. It is still home to three native tribes. Nearly nine percent of the population speaks Ojibwe.

It is the Ojibwe culture that particularly interested the Ostroms, and they collected original artwork and crafts made by Ojibwe throughout the 41 summers. Paintings, weavings, pottery and boxes made of birch bark are among their collection.

And in 2014, the Mathers Museum put much of it on display, with the help of three co-curators, including Sara Clark, a doctoral student in the IU School of Education’s Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. “There are some really solid collections, really unique collections representing the indigenous peoples from the island,” Clark said of the Ostrom collection. “It’s not often that you’re seeing this sort of contemporary art from the 1960s and ’70s on display here.”

Clark is a specialist in the history of education with a folklore minor. She’s interested in eventually working in a museum and, through a course in curatorship under Mathers Director Jason Jackson, started work on the Ostrom collection in 2013. For her, it was a learning experience about learning itself.

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“I identify as a historian of education, but I also define education very broadly,” she said. “I am interested in teaching and learning what happens both in and outside of schools.” In this case, she viewed the collection as an insight into how a Nobel Prize winner became such an intellectual. The Ostrom collection represents something of the collective work of Lin and Vincent.

“More and more, I realize that their relationship was key to understanding her,” Clark said. “I am especially interested in their intellectual contributions, in particular, how they contributed so much to interdisciplinary studies. But, there’s also this kind of unique appeal to getting to combine their private and their public life.”

The Ostroms left behind rich detail along with the collection that helps place those aspects of their lives together. They kept explicitly detailed travelogues of their journeys, which included the price of gasoline and fruit market purchases. They logged their time at the Canadian cabin in diaries.

With that broad educational view, Clark is examining the couple’s summer home stays to write what she believes will be an “educational life history” of Lin Ostrom. The cabin time is key to understanding how she became an immortal of economic research. “They did not retreat there to summer in this sort of relaxing way,” Clark said. “They were constantly working. They were producing the scholarship that we all knew them for.”

A digital display of the Ostrom exhibit is online at the Mathers Museum web site, <http://www.indiana.edu/~mathers/>.