Mathers museum celebrates 50th anniversary

By Liz Leslie Special to the H-T

Situated on the edge of campus and the edge of the world, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures provides museum goers young and old the chance to see up-close international treasures.

Jason Baird Jackson was named the third director of the Mathers Museum on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University in January, kicking off the museums 50th anniversary year.

As for his vision for the museum over the next five years, Jackson uses a metaphor by looking at the museum building itself.

If you look at our building, Jackson said, it has two front doors.

Standing in the lobby and facing the doors, one can see one door facing into the city of Bloomington and the state of Indiana beyond. The other door looks into the university.

When I think about the Mathers, I think about it in that fact it’s at the edge of the university, Jackson said, connecting people between the community, state and world.

As a museum, Mathers is positioned to be available to all the university, the wider community and anyone who wants to learn and experience its collection.

Herman Wells is noted for having stressed the fact that not every Hoosier was going to travel the world and see the seven wonders, but one thing the university could do is bring the world to Indiana so that people could come to Bloomington and connect with the diversity of the world’s peoples, Jackson said.

Bloomington, in many ways, is an international city.

Mathers has collaborated with the city and university with global events throughout its 50 years, including the first Lotus festival 20 years ago.

The university has begun to shine a brighter light on global involvement, including the new school of Global and International Studies and IU President Michael McRobbie marking the first trip to Africa for a sitting president in two decades.

The Mathers Museum is situated to be a pivotal point for study and research, because it’s where we’ve always been, Jackson said.

Current featured exhibit, Photos in Black and White: Margaret Bourke-White and the Dawn of Apartheid in South Africa, provides students and the community a chance to peer into the world of Apartheid South Africa through the eyes of the photojournalist.

Local 7th grade students have been visiting the exhibit to learn about apartheid as part of a partnership with local schools.

Both teachers and students have expressed enthusiasm about the photographs and the exhibit, curator of education Sarah Hatcher said. The topic of apartheid is a difficult one, but I think these photographs offer a different way to discuss and/or introduce it.

The exhibit will run through Dec. 20 of this year, and then will travel to the Bensusan Museum of Photography, Museum Africa, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The Indiana University Bloomington Mission Statement, given by Provost Lauren Robel in her 2013 State of the Campus Address, focuses both on the research and educational aspects of the Bloomington campus as well as how to fulfill those needs both in and outside the classroom.

The Mathers Museum meets that mission by keeping a diverse collection representative of the world’s people, but also by providing opportunities for all to learn.

We’re not just interested in objects, but interested in the stories that the objects tell, what we can learn from the people of the world, Jackson said.

Because we are a museum, we also have stewardship responsibility. We have to take care of a collection that has been entrusted to us for the last 50 years, and it’s constantly growing.

Nobel Prize winner and Indiana University professor Elinor Ostrom and her husband, fellow IU professor and political scientist Vincent Ostrom, both passed away in June 2012, leaving their collection of art to the Mathers Museum.

Students in Jackson’s classes have begun getting hands-on experience as they dive into the Ostroms collection in preparation for its exhibition.

Many of the items come from native peoples of Manitoulin Island in Ontario, Canada, a place where the Ostroms spent time.

As for the future of the museum, Jackson said he wanted the museum to continue to serve the larger goals of the university, particularly in ways it connects with the world and the people of Indiana.

The Mathers Museum also has plans to put together digital projects, including a digital component with the Ostrom exhibition.

Jackson has pursued issues in intellectual property, cultural property and heritage property, and believes, unless unethical, in open access to scholarly publishing and museum collections.

The digital initiative doesn’t mean digital only collections, Jackson said, but will be connected with other projects and make them accessible online.

Jackson studied at the University of Florida as an undergraduate, earning his degree in sociology with a minor in anthropology. He then came to Indiana University for his masters, where he earned a masters in anthropology, a masters in folklore, and a Ph.D. in anthropology.

While a graduate student, Jackson began his study in Oklahoma on the Yuchi/Euchee people. Once he graduated, he continued his partnership with the Yuchi/Euchee people that continues to today.
Jackson had museum experience coming from his studies, including the Mathers Museum. He took a position as a research assistant and assistant curator with the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, later becoming the curator of anthropology there while continuing his work with the Yuchi/Euchee.

Jackson then took a position with the University of Oklahoma in Norman where he worked as a curator at the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History as well as a professor.

Jackson returned to IU in 2004 when he first became an assistant, then associate, professor of anthropology and folklore.

Many students at IU have social science interests, like anthropology, ethnomusicology and others, Jackson said. How will I leave the university and put those interests to work? The museum is one answer many students come to Mathers like I did, as a place to connect to intellectual interests and do work that they want to do.