The Mathers Museum celebrates half a century this year. It began informally in 1943 and was formally chartered in 1963, its exhibitions confined to a few rooms in Maxwell Hall. Two decades later, with assistance from the Mathers family, the museum moved to a new building attached to an old fraternity house on Indiana Avenue. The collection now includes 68,000 objects and photographic materials in regular use for research and teaching. In the spring 2013 semester and summer, 6,000 IU students were among the 22,000 who viewed the collections and participated in museum activities.

Jason Jackson, museum director and associate professor of folklore, explained that museums grow like people. They are born with a certain genetic code that constrains and focuses their activity, but grow in unpredictable ways. The Mathers genetic code was distinctive, Jackson said. “IU’s museum was global from the get-go.”

Its collections predate the museum by half a century and reflect the research and teaching interests of faculty members. IU history professor Logan Esarey saw the classroom teaching possibilities in the collection of Warder Stevens, a southern Indiana resident who was interested in the tools and household objects used by the early Hoosier settlers. Esarey convinced IU to purchase the collection in
1914. Anthropology professor Georg Neumann obtained 200 life-sized plaster busts from a collection gathering dust at the University of Chicago. Half of the busts were part of an effort to study the skull shape and features of populations in southern Mexico. The other half were created specifically to introduce American audiences to the peoples of the world.

The museum’s large ethnomusicology collection came from a variety of sources; it now has 2,000 items, including musical instruments from all continents. Its African collection includes materials collected since the 1920s and was promoted with the strong support of the IU African Studies Program. For example, Roy Sieber, one of the first professors in that program, often obtained materials from roving traders in Ghana. Nonacademic collectors have contributed as well. Madge and Sherman Minton donated a large collection of items acquired while they resided in Pakistan. John White was a missionary in what is now Congo-Kinshasa and spent as much time learning as preaching. In the 1980s he donated his collection of objects related to the Tetela people.

A century of work by internationalists, both professional researchers and amateur collectors, was recognized some years ago with a new name—the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. That global theme is reflected in many of its recent exhibits: “From the Big Bang to the World Wide Web: The Origins of Everything,” “Footsteps of a Stranger: Shoes from Cultures around the World,” “In the Kitchen around the World,” and “Photos in Black and White: Margaret Bourke-White and the Dawn of Apartheid in South Africa.”

The 50th anniversary was celebrated with a special exhibit, “Treasures of the Mathers Museum.” Jackson

Food storage jar made by the Acoma Pueblo tribe from local New Mexico clay and decorated using the spike of a yucca. Assistant Director Judith Kirk chose this piece for the 50th anniversary exhibition. Last spring about 2,000 schoolchildren visited the museum.
asked staff to select their favorite pieces. At the opening, he noted, “The exhibition does not feature the 100 most valuable Mathers objects. Similarly, it does not feature the 100 oldest objects or the 100 rarest objects. We are an ethnographic museum. We treasure stories, particularly stories of human connection. We treasure historical and social context. We treasure human representativeness even as we treasure and celebrate the unique flash of human genius.” Assistant Director Judith Kirk chose a food storage jar made by the Acoma Pueblo tribe in central New Mexico. “It’s the piece I love above all, not just for the aesthetics, but also for the continuation and adaptation of tradition. I’ve met potters who continue this tradition, and I’ve come to know the process and the importance potters attach to it.”

Jackson explained the expansion of the international mission of the museum. “The museum’s anniversary year is also a time for taking stock of what we have achieved and setting goals for a new era in the university’s international efforts. The museum has adopted an ambitious strategic plan. While many activities will continue to be centered in the museum’s campus home, the museum will increase its presence around the world through the research of its curators, through the exhibitions that it is sending abroad, and through the collaborations that it is pursuing. This summer, we made progress on new projects in South Africa, Indonesia, Mexico, and China.”

Stacie King, faculty research curator, studies artifacts from Santa Ana Tavela in the province of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. She will develop a 3D collection and a...
digital museum exhibit online in conjunction with a local effort to build a community museum. Alex Lichtenstein, IU associate professor of history, has worked with the museum to develop an exhibit of photos that Margaret Bourke-White took in the early days of apartheid in South Africa. The exhibit opened at the Mathers this fall and will move to museums in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2014. The Mathers has been selected by the American Folklore Society as one of three U.S. museums to participate in the “China–US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project” (which is being funded by the Luce Foundation). Over the next three years, IU museum staff will be working with three museums in China on a range of projects and initiatives, including hosting guests and delegations, participating in conferences and publications, and hosting an exhibition of Chinese quilts.

The Afghan jezail was generally handmade and highly decorated by its maker. Like the Kentucky rifle, the long barrel made the rifle accurate and dangerous in battle. This nineteenth-century example comes from Kabul.

Above:
Margaret Bourke-White’s photos of apartheid in South Africa during the 1950s appeared on the cover of Life magazine and in publications around the world. Margaret Bourke-White, Time & Life Pictures, Getty Images.

Left:
In Australian aboriginal culture, the Mimi were spirits that taught the first aborigines how to hunt, cook, and paint. This painting on eucalyptus bark from far north central Australia depicts Mimi Spirit Men dancing at a ceremony of the dead.
Above:
Jason Jackson became the third director of the museum in 2012. He stands here with a Cherokee basket that was part of his research in a project on Southeastern Native American objects.

A fantasy creature (alebrije) made by the Pedro Linares family from Mexico.

Above:
The museum’s earliest collections were acquired as teaching tools by IU professors. That function remains paramount. Here an IU class visits the storage area of the museum to examine beadwork in a discussion led by curator Ellen Sieber.
Below:
A current exhibit, "Thoughts, Things and Theories ... What Is Culture?" offers a view of everyday objects for each stage of life in cultures around the world. The stages here are work and marriage.

Below:
Alex Betts and Betsy Inlow, practicum students, work together to catalog a West African textile from the Mary Warren Collection. Mary Warren grew up in Ghana and married an anthropologist who earned his Ph.D. at IU. She acquired the 150 outfits in the collection to wear herself. They are now being preserved for future study.

Left:
Part of the "Thoughts, Things and Theories" exhibit includes complete rooms of houses from the 1960s as they would have appeared in the United States and in a Hausa compound in Nigeria. "The schoolkids who visit are fascinated with the blue object on the desk. Most have no idea what it is," said Judith Kirk. As novelist L.P. Hartley said, the past is also a foreign country.

Left:
Mask of Yama, a wrathful deity and defender of the faith in Tibetan Buddhism. The mask was worn during a dance, one of the highlights of the annual Great Prayer Festival in Tibet. It was acquired by the late Thubten Norbu, professor of Tibetan Studies at IU and founder of the Tibetan Cultural Center in Bloomington.