

# Mathers Museum Showcases Worldwide Music Connections

Among the major events held in April to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indiana University's William Hammond Mathers Museum of World Cultures was the opening of the exhibit, "World Music: Themes and Variations." Drawn from the museum's extensive ethnomusicological collections, the exhibit is cosponsored by IU Bloomington's Department of Anthropology, the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and the Folklore Institute.

According to **Geoffrey Conrad**, the museum's director, the Mathers Museum houses one of the best collections of traditional musical instruments from around the world, encompassing the collections of pioneering fieldworkers such as George Herzog, Erich von Hornbostel, and Laura Boulton. Curator of Collections **Thomas Kavanaugh** says the 190 instruments in the exhibit comprise about ten percent of the museum's total instrument collection.

The "theme and variations" of the exhibit deal with the commonly shared technological and physical aspects associated with the craft of making musical instruments worldwide. Many may have their origins in one area but are adapted and undergo innovation in another.

For example, the Western accordion actually has its roots in Chinese instruments. According to Kavanaugh, the free reeds commonly used in China, Japan, Laos, and Burma were discovered in the 1770s by Western Europeans who traveled to Asia, and who then introduced the concept to Europe, resulting in concertinas, harmonicas, and accordions.

Another example is the American hammer dulcimer. The dulcimer originated in Persia, went to China to become the *yang-ch'in*, to Hungary as the *cimbalom*, to Spain as the *timpano*, and to Germany as the *hackbrett*.

Yet to understand these instruments and how they are used is to examine the relationship between sound, music, and culture. A simple example is a bag full of bottlecaps exhibited alongside a rattle from Colombia made of bottlecaps (*see cover*); the former is not a

musical instrument, the latter is. This is because "music is sound culturally organized," and the sound of rattling bottlecaps may please one cultural ear but not another.

The exhibit is careful to show how these instruments, through color-coded explanations, represent the functional intersection of the politics, economics, social structure, and religion of the "culture" in question.

For example, a Tibetan flute made from the femur bone of a criminal and used to dispel demons illustrates religious/social dimen-



sions because criminals are considered to have contact with demons; the material of the instrument itself embodies Tibetan notions of crime and criminality.

Similarly, the Croatian *tamburitzza* ensemble of five long-necked plucked lutes speaks of a political dimension. The development of these ensembles was closely associated with nationalistic political movements, and in immigrant Croatian communities today such as in South Bend, Indiana, the playing of *tamburitzza* still serves as a focus of ethnic identity.

A number of hands-on reproductions of authentic instruments are also on display, such as the reproduction of a large nine-key xylophone from West Africa. The exhibit will run for two years. For further information, contact the Mathers Museum at 812/855-6873 or visit their Web site <http://indiana.edu/~mathers>.

—RMN

## ON EXHIBIT

"World Music:  
Themes and  
Variations"  
Mathers Museum

A gamelan ensemble, traditional to Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, on exhibit at the Mathers Museum.