

Stewart Culin and the Study of Games

BY ALESSANDRO PEZZATI

Self-trained anthropologist Stewart Culin was eclectic in his interests. A master of exhibition design and a collector of ethnic and folk arts from many parts of the globe, Culin began his career as a young man by following his father around Philadelphia's Chinatown.



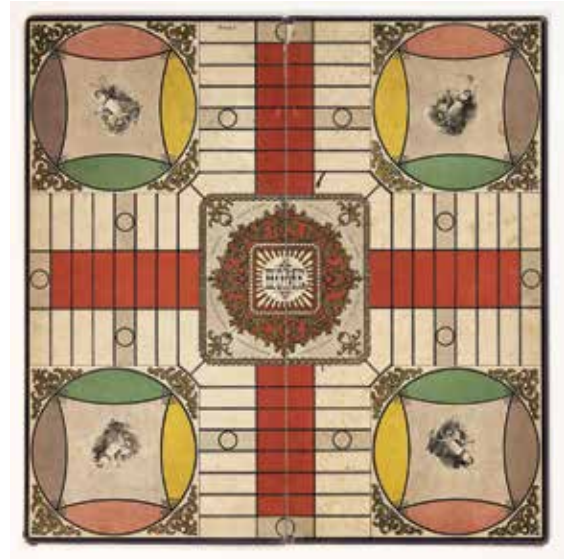
"Filles Turques qui jouent au Mangala." Turkish women playing mancala. Pen and ink drawing by Ieremias Wolff, 1800s. This image was used by Culin to illustrate his article on "Mancala, the National Game of Africa" (*Report of the United States National Museum*, 1894, pp. 597-611.) UPM image #253983.

While Mr. Culin conducted business, Stewart learned Chinese and developed a fascination with different cultural norms and rituals. He published papers on Chinese-American social customs, which brought him to the attention of Dr. Daniel G. Brinton, one of the founders of the Penn Museum and of academic anthropology in general.

As one of the few salaried staff in the early years of the Museum, Culin made himself useful. In 1890, he was appointed Secretary of the Board, as well as Curator of the Asian Section. In 1892, he became Director and then Curator of the General Ethnology and American Sections. He created masterful exhibitions at World's Fairs and at the Museum. He undertook two major research and collecting expeditions to the American West and a shorter



Stewart Culin in the American Southwest during the 1901 Wanamaker Expedition. UPM image #148614.



ABOVE: Parcheesi game board. Gift of the University of Pennsylvania Library, 1897. UPM image #255132A.

LEFT: "722 Paysans jouant au tric-trac." Peasants playing backgammon, Palestine, ca. 1890. Photograph by Bonfils. UPM image #165898.

trip to Cuba. Among his many professional activities, he was a founding member of the Oriental Club of Philadelphia and the American Folklore Society.

In the midst of all these responsibilities, his primary and unique interest was games. Games of skill, chess, cards, board games, puzzles, marionettes, and more, all fell under Culin's curious eye. He published and exhibited widely, including on chess and mancala, as well as two seminal works, which are standard references to this day, *Korean Games* (1895) and *Games of the North American Indian* (1907).

As an encyclopedist of games, Culin collected and classified games and game rules. As an anthropologist, he saw that games provided unique insights into human behavior. Chance and probability, at the

root of many games, are also integral components of divination and attempts to foretell the future (e.g. Tarot cards). Culin saw this connection and tried to trace games to their original purpose in divination (or vice-versa).

I was led to the conclusion that behind both ceremonies and games there existed some widespread myth from which both derived their impulse. — from Games of the North American Indian (1907).

In addition, Culin realized that the rules of games place constraints on the variability of human interaction and, thus, create a type of laboratory setting for observing people.

To me their direct interest is exceeded by the many side-lights which are thrown by their study on primitive life

and thought, by the many practical identifications of things which heretofore have been strange and obscure. — from "American Indian Games." American Anthropologist 5.1 (1903): 58-64.

Because of the ephemeral nature of many games and the beating that they receive during play (think of playing cards), they rarely survive. Rarer still is it to find them in museums. However, due to Stewart Culin's unique vision, the Penn Museum houses a large collection of games and diversions, from lacrosse sticks to the *Game of the Goose*, from Korean flying kites to mancala boards, American Indian playing cards, and all kinds of dice. Games are not just a trivial pastime, but an integral part of human culture. ●

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