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OBJECTS
OF
MYTH
AND
MEMORY

American Indian Art at The Brooklyn Museum

DIANA FANE

IRA JACKNIS

LISE M. BREEN

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The Language of Things

Stewart Culin as Collector

Diana Fane

ON FEBRUARY 18, 1903, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* announced that the museum of The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (now The Brooklyn Museum) was about to embark on a new era “building up great ethnological collections, sending out expeditions for acquiring of antiquities, first over all America, then over the entire world.” The man selected to head up this ambitious program of global collecting was R. Stewart Culin, formerly of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

According to the article, Culin’s credentials were somewhat unconventional: “True tales, well authenticated by scientific men, are related of Mr. Culin—who is not to be spoken of [as] Dr. Culin, coming from no university, possessing no degree—and the wonderful way he manages to pick up valuable objects.” His talents included the ability to attract wealthy patrons, to buy rare and curious things for very little money, and to ingratiate himself with natives so that “liking him they give him object after object where another man would get nothing.”¹

Although he was self-taught, Culin was not without impressive professional experience and connections. In fact, as a review of his background shows, he had played a leading role in the development of museum ethnology during the last decade of the nineteenth century. In addition, he was a “born” collector with a seemingly insatiable curiosity about cultural artifacts of all kinds. Given the Brooklyn Institute’s stated goals, he was unquestionably the right man for the job.

The Philadelphia Years, 1858–1903

In a brief appreciation written in 1913, George A. Dorsey, curator of anthropology at the Field Columbian Museum of natural history in Chicago, confessed that he could not think of Culin as “having been born, or having had the measles, or childhood.” Instead of associating his longtime friend with any such mundane events, Dorsey imagined him as “always Culin, always a sage, always a philosopher, and always a perpetual youth.”² Culin would have had no trouble recognizing himself in Dorsey’s description; it is very much the way he presented himself in interviews with the press. His reticence about his family life and early education is all the more striking in view of the fact that he maintained scrapbooks and diaries—forms of record keeping usually associated with personal memo-

Drawing by Herbert B. Judy of the pilasters from the church in Zuni. Frontispiece of 1904 expedition report.



Fig. 1. R. Stewart Culin (1858–1929)

ries and revelations. Significantly, Culin's scrapbooks and diaries exclusively concern his professional interests and field trips. As a result it is difficult to consider the man apart from his work.

Our knowledge of Culin's childhood is limited to a few names and dates. A twin, he was born on July 13, 1858, in Philadelphia, where his father, John Culin, was a merchant. Culin appears to have been a good student in high school, but there is no indication that he ever was interested in a university education; upon graduation he entered his father's mercantile business. Practically nothing is known of the next period of his life until the late 1880s, when he suddenly emerged as an expert on the Chinese in America with the publication of a series of articles on their games, religious ceremonies, medical practices, and secret societies.³

How did he get from the merchant business to ethnology? By Culin's own account, written many years later, he

fell under the spell of a problem which involved a knowledge of the Chinese language. It was...the elucidation of the origin of the Chinese game which recently has become widely known and popular under the name of mah-jongg. I might have gone to school and taken lessons from a professor. Instead I went to live in one of our Chinese settlements, where in time I came not only to speak the language but, eager and curious, saturated myself with the spirit of these interesting and capable people. It was the direct road to what I wanted to accomplish and I acquired a knowledge of the Chinese that has lasted with me to this day.⁴

We should be cautious about accepting Culin's rather self-congratulatory recollection as the whole truth,⁵ but a review of his articles shows that he certainly did rely on firsthand experience and direct observation rather than library research. In order to learn more about Chinese materia medica, he consulted a local Chinese doctor about his cold and used the prescription he received as the basis for his first article, "The Practice of Medicine by the Chinese in America" (1887a). In another study of Chinese medicine, he took the point of view of the clerk behind the counter in a drugstore and traced every step in filling a prescription from the processing (slicing, grinding, mixing) of the raw materials through the weighing, packaging, and sale of the medicine to the customer. The clerks' knowledge, Culin observed, "is derived almost entirely from experience, no books on the subject being used or studied by them."⁶ Embarking on his own innovative research into various aspects of the Chinese community, Culin must have felt a degree of sympathy with these clerks.

Culin soon added collecting to experience as a method of inquiry. "There is no way one can become so well acquainted with things as in the process of buying them," he observed,⁷ thereby giving his acquisitive spirit free reign in the name of scientific investigation. All the objects used to illustrate his paper "The Gambling Games of the Chinese in America" (1891) belonged to him. Presumably his career as a merchant fostered this passion for shopping and provided him with the necessary negotiating skills and ready access to a wide range of goods from various parts of the world.

In addition to Culin's published articles and personal collection, two remarkable scrapbooks containing clippings dating from 1882 to 1888 document his interest in Philadelphia's Chinese community.⁸ They include newspaper articles about legal cases; vicious political cartoons; New Year's cards (some made expressly for Culin); business cards; advertisements (Fig. 2); and announcements of public events. With each item carefully labeled, these scrapbooks provide a fascinating record of an immigrant community in the late nineteenth century and testify to Culin's meticulous record keeping.

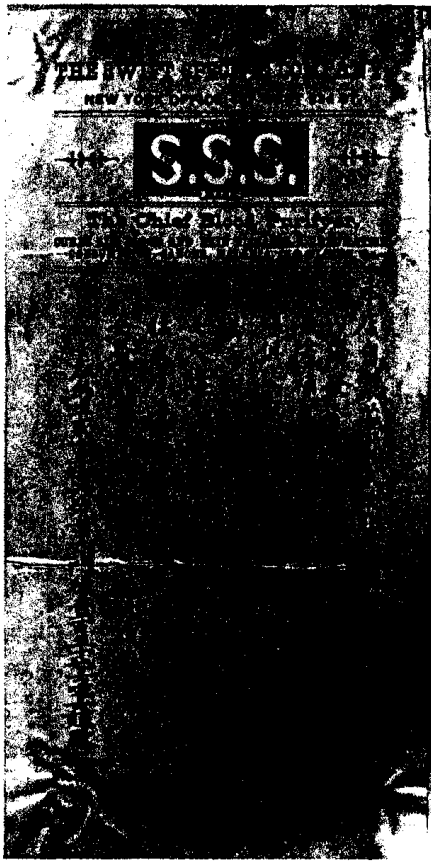


Fig. 2. Advertisement from Culin's scrapbook taken from a telegraph pole on Mott Street on September 26, 1885. Culin noted in the scrapbook that the public notices of the Chinese were usually fastened on this pole.

The premise underlying Culin's Chinese research was that folk customs survived, even in the inhospitable conditions of the modern city. "I feel assured," he wrote, "there is more folk-lore to be gleaned from any one of the... Chinamen we see shambling about our streets than could be collected among our entire native population."⁹ The key word here is "gleaned," indicating a search of scattered and unlikely sources. This was precisely the ability Culin prided himself on. He found his clues in the objects academic scholars had overlooked or taken for granted—games, medicines, and toys—and delighted in playing "that illusive [sic] and engrossing game of hunting the origin of familiar things."¹⁰ If he managed to overturn the conventional ideas on the subject, so much the better. All the hallmarks of Culin's mature style of ethnographic research are present in his early work: having selected the "direct road" at the start of his career, he never abandoned it. There are also hints of the future museum curator in his constant attention to, and acquisition of, objects.

Philadelphia at this time was in many ways an ideal place for a young man with Culin's interests to educate himself.¹¹ The intellectual life of the city was rich and varied, with numerous amateur and professional societies open to serious students. In 1883 Culin became the recording secretary for the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia, and in 1888 he founded the Oriental Club. He was a founding member of the American Folk-Lore Society (and its president in 1897) and, in 1902, of the American Anthropological Association. Other important affiliations were with the American Philosophical Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Culin did not limit his memberships to scientific organizations or to the city of Philadelphia. He joined the Contemporary Club of Philadelphia and the Salmagundi Club of New York City. He was on friendly terms with several Philadelphia artists, including Thomas Eakins. In the Pennsylvania Academy's Annual Exhibition in 1901, Eakins exhibited a life-size portrait of Culin entitled *The Archaeologist*.¹²

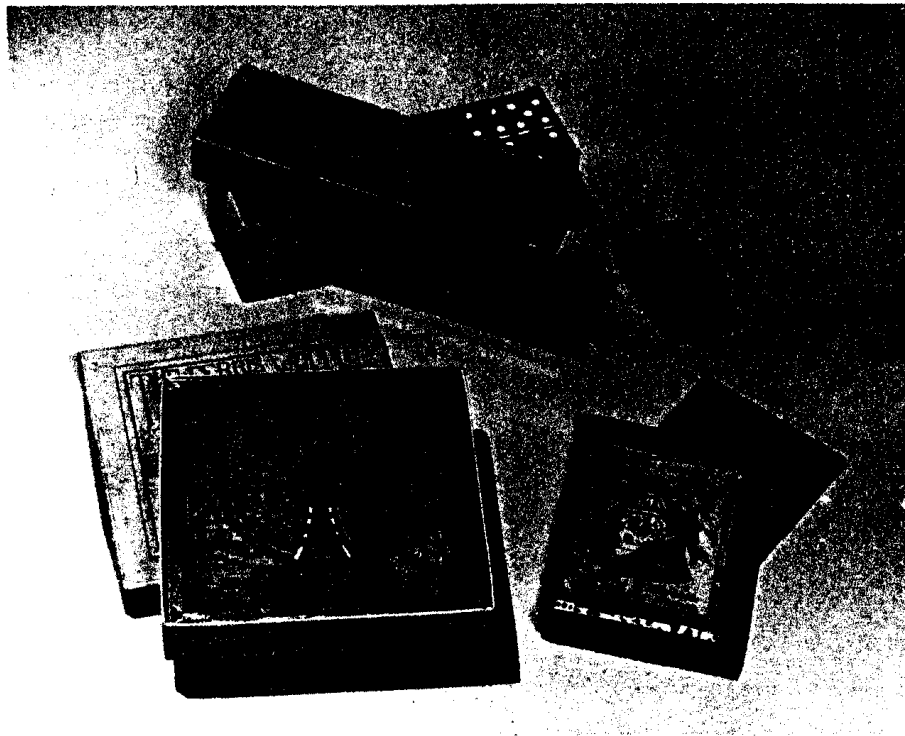
Local scientific societies were central to the practice of anthropology in Philadelphia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.¹³ Through his participation in them, Culin met the renowned Americanist Daniel Brinton (1837–1899), who became his mentor and guide to the study of Native American language and mythology. As the first university professor of anthropology in the United States, Brinton bridged the transition "from the scholarly society to the specifically anthropological institution in which full-time professional employment was possible."¹⁴ His support of Culin assured the young businessman a role in the growing professionalism of American anthropology.

In 1890 both Culin and Brinton were elected members of the Board of Managers of the newly created Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Through this honorary position, Culin was encouraged to extend his research beyond the Chinese community and was introduced to the complex and challenging world of the museum.

The year 1892 was decisive for Culin in terms of his status as a professional and his national and international reputation. In quick succession, he organized a major loan exhibition of objects used in religious ceremonies, became the director of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania,¹⁵ and took charge of the museum's contribution to the Columbian Historical Exposition in Madrid. He also agreed to head a section on "Folk Lore and Primitive Religions" for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Abandoning his "mercantile interests,"¹⁶ Culin devoted himself full-time to his new responsibilities.

The exhibition Culin organized for the Chicago World's Fair consolidated his fame as an ethnologist and linked his name to the subject with

Fig. 3. Games from Stewart Culin's personal collection. The ferris wheel (pictured on the puzzle) was first introduced at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. The Brooklyn Museum Collection.



which he is still most closely associated today: games (see Fig. 3). Instead of trying to cover all aspects of folklore and religion, Culin chose to focus on games "as they have developed and trace them around the entire world."¹⁷ In his display (Fig. 4) he arranged the games in an orderly sequence to illustrate the progression from the sacred to the secular. "One of the neatest stories in his showcase," a popular guide noted, "is the evolution of playing-cards from dice, and of dice from the knuckle-bones of sheep."¹⁸

The Chicago fair brought many of the leading ethnologists together and provided a forum for the exchange of information and artifacts. Culin participated at every level—as collector, exhibitor, practicing ethnologist (duly noting the death rites of the Javanese when "several of their little company" died unexpectedly),¹⁹ and critic. Among the exhibitions he singled out for praise was a group of life-size effigies of the participants in a Zuni ceremonial, arranged under the direction of William H. Holmes and Frank Hamilton Cushing. "The details of this group," wrote Culin, "were represented with a fidelity which has never been equalled."²⁰

Fidelity, or authenticity, was a quality that Cushing (1857–1900), the pioneer ethnologist who had lived among the Zuni from 1879 to 1884, invariably conveyed in his public appearances. He often dressed in Indian costume (Fig. 5), sang Indian songs, and recited Indian stories and myths. According to John Wesley Powell, the director of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), "there was nothing that a Zuni could make that [Cushing] could not reproduce with greater skill."²¹ Culin had first met Cushing in Washington, where he was employed by the BAE, the national center for American Indian studies. The two men, only a year apart in age, had much in common, including a lack of formal education. They soon discovered a mutual interest in games and planned an ambitious comparative study of the games of the Old and New worlds.

This project formed the basis of an intense intellectual friendship between Cushing and Culin that lasted until Cushing's premature death in 1900. From Washington, Cushing provided inspiration, encouragement, and, most important, examples of games and arrows, many made with his

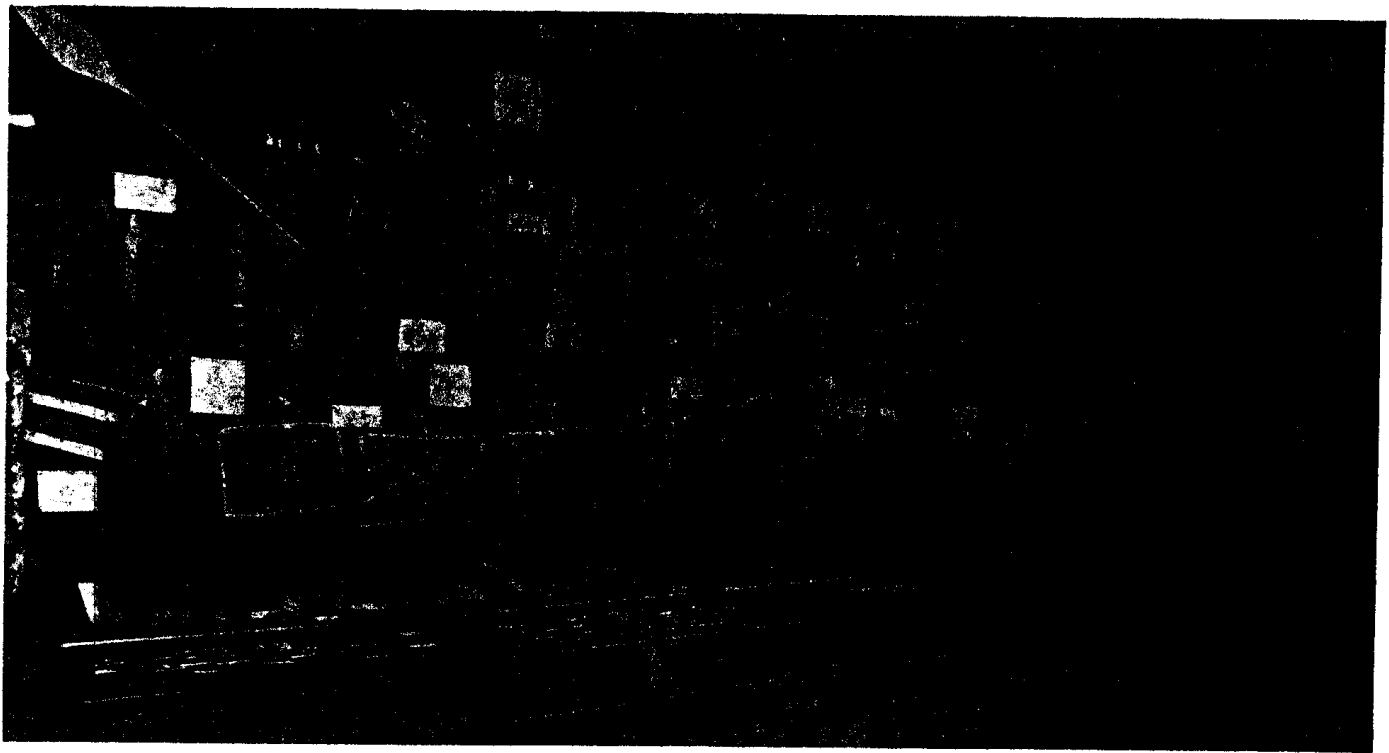


Fig. 4. University of Pennsylvania's exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair, 1893. Culin's folklore exhibit was installed in the horizontal cases.

own hands (Fig. 6). In addition, he sent drawings that graphically demonstrated the sacred and divinatory origins of certain gaming pieces (Fig. 7). In Philadelphia, Culin began to assemble a representative collection of Indian games and expert accounts of the rules for playing them, relying primarily on the contacts he had made at the Chicago fair such as George A. Dorsey, the Harvard-trained anthropologist who became the curator of anthropology at the Field Museum in 1897.

By 1895 it was clear that Cushing's chronic health problems and other commitments made it impossible for him to co-author a book. Culin went ahead and published his half of the project, a comprehensive study of Korean games, in a lavishly illustrated limited edition. Two years later he selected "American Indian Games" as the topic for his presidential address to the American Folk-Lore Society in Baltimore. Gradually, with Cushing's encouragement, Culin took the subject as his own and in 1907, seven years after Cushing's death, his massive *Games of the North American Indians* was published in the BAE's Twenty-fourth Annual Report. It proved to be his most substantial scholarly work and is still a standard reference on the subject.²²

Games of the North American Indians shows Culin's extraordinary diligence in gathering evidence to support the ideas he and Cushing had spent years discussing. Not comfortable with writing a theoretical text, Culin assembled masses of examples that could speak for themselves. He drew on the collections of all the leading ethnological museums and obtained field photographs and drawings wherever artifactual evidence was lacking. Like his early Chinese scrapbooks, Culin's book on American Indian games allows us to observe him mastering a subject, and it is clear that collecting—of data, descriptions, and photographs, as well as objects—was both his primary research method and his main goal.

In 1900, with his first field trip for the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, Culin embarked on a new phase in his career. For once, he did not strike out on his own, but went in the company of George Dorsey, who "had had much experience in field collecting" (1901a:1). The trip was a

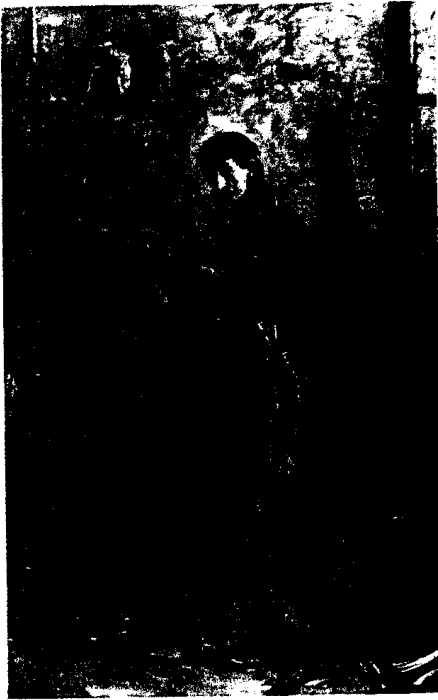


Fig. 5. Frank Hamilton Cushing, by Thomas Eakins, 1895. Oil on canvas, 90 x 60 inches. The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

whirlwind tour of Indian reservations, an itinerary that Dorsey, a man of prodigious energy and ambition, favored because it allowed him to buy faster than anyone else. Culin's travel expenses and purchases of more than two thousand objects were supported by John Wanamaker, Philadelphia's department-store magnate and a patron of the museum's American collections.

Wanamaker also funded Culin's second museum expedition, to Cuba in 1901. By now a seasoned field worker, Culin went alone, rushing off in response to the news that a tribe of wild Indians had been discovered living in the mountains of the eastern part of the island. The rumor proved to be false, but Culin nevertheless managed to assemble a small collection that included water jars imported from Spain as well as snail shells "used as playthings by children" (1902a:225).

On two final field trips Culin made for the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania in 1901 (see Fig. 8) and 1902, he concentrated on the Southwest, acquiring collections he ranked "at least fourth among the Museums of the entire world."²³ These trips gave Culin new material to install at the museum and exciting topics for lectures and articles.²⁴ An accomplished self-publicist from the start of his ethnological career (the press followed his Chinese research with interest and admiration), he soon attracted headlines that stressed the sensational over the scientific; "Strange Rites Transmitted to the Young by means of Curiously wrought Dolls," for example, introduced an article on the kachina cult of the Southwest.²⁵ Culin was proud of his flair for publicity and used it as a means of soliciting private funds to support his curatorial program.

Within the museum, where Culin had a long history of problems with the administration, his fieldwork provided ammunition for his enemies. According to one newspaper reporter (whose statement was later cautiously retracted), Culin was "accused of incompetency, and it was said that his expensive trips in this country and abroad had been productive of little good: that his specimens had to be deciphered and classified by others and that everything he wrote had to be revised and edited by his secretary."²⁶ Culin was simply moving too fast for the conservative members of the Board of Trustees. They were not ready to see the museum expand at the rate required by his acquisitions, nor did they approve of his excited rhetoric, especially when it was echoed by the press. In January 1903, the incumbent trustees defeated the alternative ticket Culin proposed and demanded his resignation.

The timing could not have been better for the museum of The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, whose director, Franklin W. Hooper, envisioned an institution where "it should be possible to read the history of the world."²⁷ A section of the grand new building designed by McKim, Mead & White had opened in 1897 (Fig. 9), and construction on another wing was well under way. There was room for a man with Culin's proven collecting skills and broad interests. On February 13, 1903, at a meeting of the Board of Trustees, the Institute voted unanimously to establish the Department of Ethnology and selected Culin as its first curator.

The implications of the appointment were not lost on the anthropological establishment. In an interview with the press a few months later, Franz Boas of the American Museum of Natural History in New York reviewed the history of ethnological collecting in America and named "the seven or eight great collections" in the country. "The Brooklyn Institute to be" was among the institutions on his list.²⁸

In Pursuit of the Vanishing Indian

Culin was in an enviable position at Brooklyn. The department was new, the museum was expanding, and expedition funds were guaranteed.

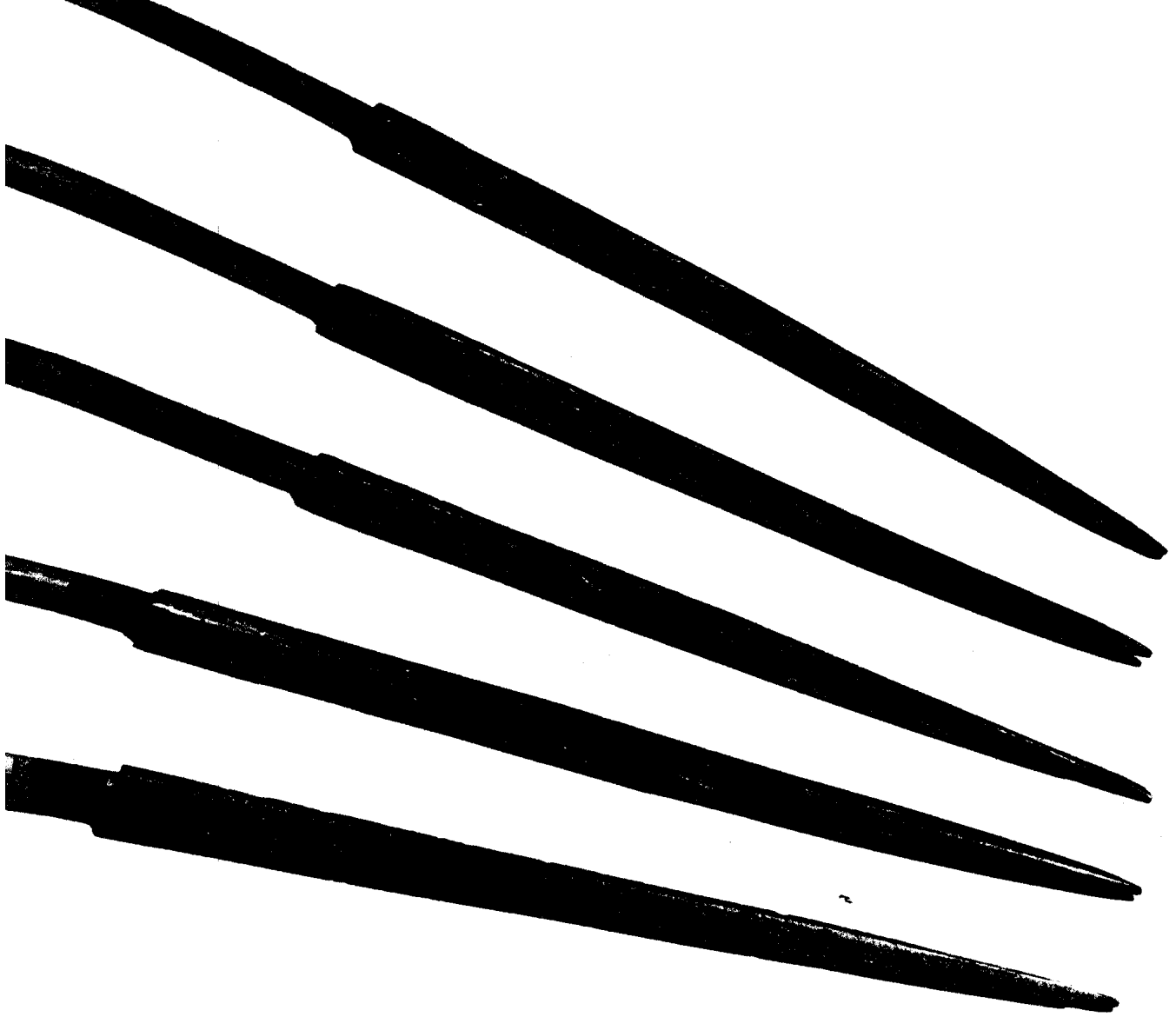
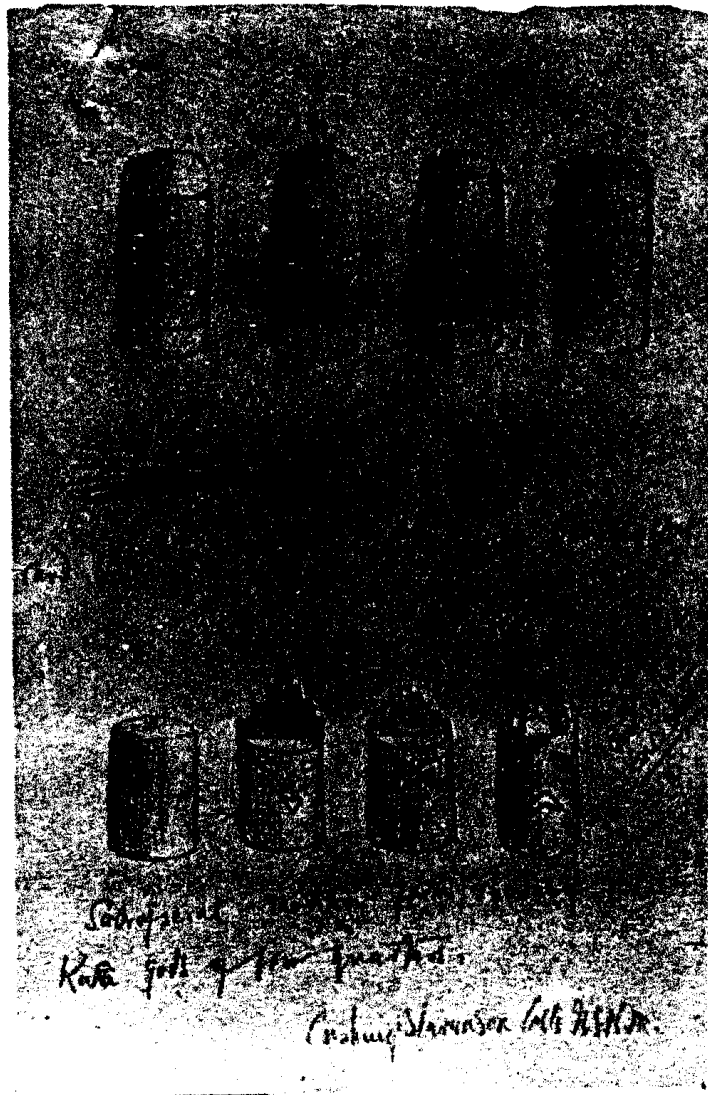


Fig. 6. Kiowa arrows made by F. H. Cushing. Wood, feathers, fiber, pigment, L. 26½ inches. The Brooklyn Museum, 30.780.1-6, Estate of Stewart Culin, Museum Purchase.

Anything seemed possible. For several reasons he made an American Indian collection his top priority. First, he considered the field "of the greatest scientific importance as well as general interest."²⁹ Second, he was already familiar with it. Through his research on games and collecting trips for the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, he had met ethnologists, missionaries, and traders throughout the country. These were valuable contacts, as he explained to the director in a letter reviewing his plans for his initial expedition for Brooklyn: "The success of the trip I have proposed to you depends very largely upon the personal relations of your representative with the people of the region. As a rule they are extremely generous and objects which money would not purchase can often be obtained as gifts."³⁰ Finally, and most important, he was convinced that the supply of valuable Indian objects was dwindling and would soon be gone. Returning from his first continental collecting trip for the Philadelphia museum in 1900, he had announced to the press: "If our museums are ever to have good collections of Indian things they must waste no time in setting out after them, for none will be left ten years from now." "There are," he added ominously, "no real Indians among the young."³¹

In evoking the specter of the "vanishing Indian," Culin was very much a man of his discipline and his times. Nineteenth-century ethnology was "built on the assumption of Indian decay,"³² and the theme of a dying race pervaded the art and literature of the period as well. Because the conviction

Fig. 7. Sketch by F. H. Cushing showing the archaic form and the sacrificial modern form of the pieces for the Zuni game of hidden ball.



that the Indian had no future played such a determinative role in Culin's collecting, it is worth considering its origins and implications in greater detail.

By the second half of the nineteenth century native cultures all over the world appeared to be in decline. The situation in America was particularly acute. Not only had warfare and disease decimated Indian populations, but the government was determined to "civilize" the tribes that remained. The "Indian-as-savage," as Culin observed to a museum trustee in Philadelphia, was "soon to disappear."³³

Mixing grim statistics about the future with nostalgia for the past, the rhetoric of the vanishing Indian was well established by the mid-1800s. The common concern of artists, writers, and men of science was not the Indian, but his "unwritten" history; the variables were the timetable (every speaker situated himself just before the end) and the solution proposed. In 1832, for example, the artist George Catlin (1796–1872) chose "literal and graphic delineation" as the most effective means of "lending a hand to a dying nation, who have no historians or biographers of their own to pourtray [sic] with fidelity their native looks and history; thus snatching from a hasty oblivion what could be saved for the benefit of posterity."³⁴

Beginning with the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, ethnologists turned to collecting as a means of salvaging an Indian



Fig. 8. A Hopi at the door of the cabin where Culin stayed on Second Mesa, Arizona, in 1901. Photograph from 1901 expedition report. The Hopi from neighboring villages rode up on burros to trade with Culin.

heritage. O. T. Mason, who later became the first curator of ethnology in the Smithsonian Institution's U.S. National Museum, justified the Philadelphia project as follows: "The fact that the monuments of the past and the savage tribes of men are rapidly disappearing from our continent, and that, ere another century will renew an incentive so great and universal as this Exposition, they will have disappeared forever, should be all the stimulus required to give to the enterprise the conscientious labor which it demands."³⁵

What was new with the Philadelphia Exposition was not the interest in Indian things, but the approach to collecting that the prospect of a vanishing race inspired. Previously traders, missionaries, and military men had acquired Indian artifacts for a variety of reasons ranging from outright aggression to idle curiosity. Nathan Sturgis Jarvis, a surgeon stationed in the 1830s at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, for example, "amused" himself "making a collection of the dresses, arms, and domestic implements of the various tribes of Indians inhabiting those distant regions."³⁶ Primarily considered personal "souvenirs" of exotic encounters, such collections were haphazardly stored and rarely exhibited. The Jarvis collection, deposited in the New-York Historical Society in 1848, remained, for the most part, in storage until 1937, when it was transferred as a loan to The Brooklyn Museum, where it is now part of the permanent collection.

In brief, the collecting of American Indian artifacts before the last quarter of the nineteenth century had been frankly subjective, necessarily fragmentary, and mildly diverting—an incidental result of warfare, colonization, and adventure on the American frontier. Beginning with the Philadelphia Exposition, museum-sponsored collecting expeditions reversed this pattern. Systematic collections were "gathered for a specific purpose and according to a definitive plan, which would make them representative of the material culture of a native society."³⁷ It was no longer sufficient for Indian things to surprise or entertain: they had to work in unison to create an authoritative account of Indian cultures before contact. Subsequently, exhibitions became the main medium for presenting the story of America's aboriginal race to the general public. With characteristic eloquence, Cushing summed up the challenge the first generation of museum ethnologists faced in the late nineteenth century: "Ours is a New World where things speak as in time *primaeval*, and our museums become books and histories or should become so, for the History of Man in America is, thank heaven, a natural history and an unwritten one!"³⁸

Culin worked within this tradition of systematic ethnological collecting. His twin goals for Brooklyn's American Indian collection were that it be representative and complete. Committed to telling the whole story, he was convinced that he could discover it in the remnants and recollections of a vanishing race:

America presents to the ethnologist a most fertile field. He finds here not only the graves of the remote dead with their relics of bone and stone, but numerous tribes of their direct descendants, who, whatever may be their present condition and mode of life, are able, at least, to recall traditions of the past, and who retain a more or less perfect knowledge of their ancient arts and industries (1904b:2).

Culin in the Field, 1903–11

As the historian Douglas Cole has pointed out in his review of anthropological collecting, "The race against time was also a race against museum rivals."³⁹ In setting out for the field, Culin knew that he was off to a late start and that the competition was stiff. That same year, the American Museum

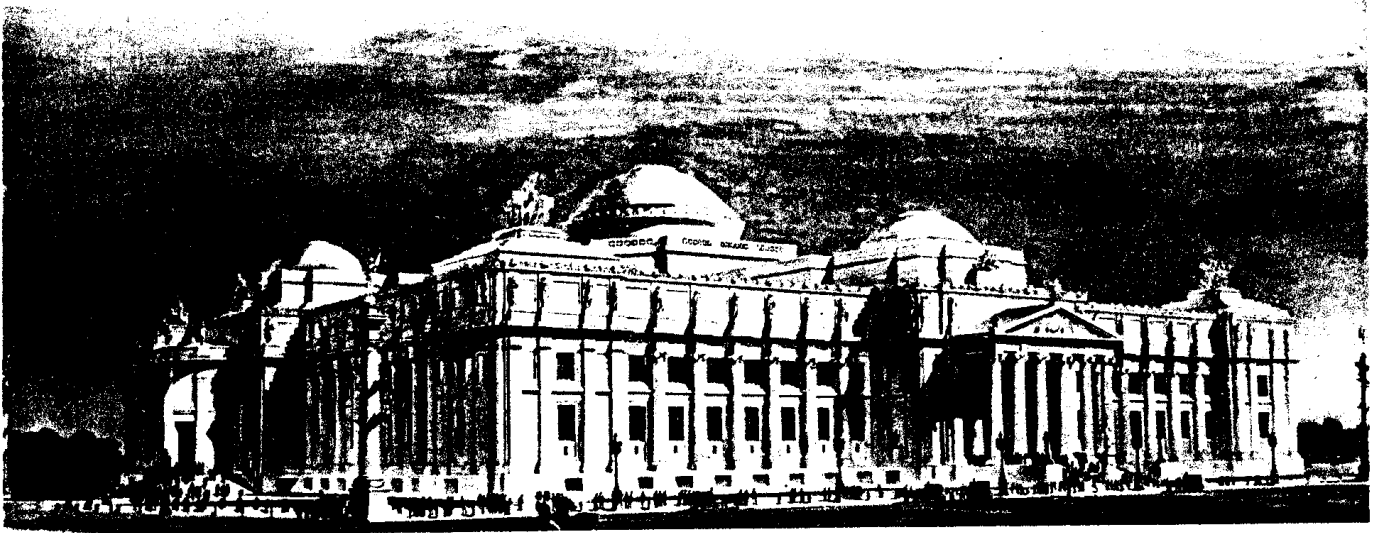


Fig. 9. Architect's Rendering of the Central Museum of The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. 1893. Watercolor and pen and ink, 26 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 67 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. The Brooklyn Museum, X737.

of Natural History was planning no fewer than nine expeditions to the West and Southwest. The Field Museum in Chicago already had a collection of Hopi material that, in Culin's estimation, surpassed "in extent and completeness any collections from a single tribe in any museum in the world" (1904b:10).

In addition to competition from other museums, Culin faced a number of other challenges in the field. Acculturation had rendered certain native artifacts obsolete. Most of the games that Culin had spent years studying, for example, were no longer in use. The California Indians were playing baseball (see Fig. 10) and, in New Mexico, a basketball game was on the program for the Fourth of July along with the traditional Navajo foot race (1903:107). Because intermarriage between Indians and whites (see Fig. 11) was increasingly common, domestic items and everyday dress often reflected Anglo-American influence. What Culin described as the "unifying processes of civilization" were everywhere apparent.⁴⁰

Tourism, a booming industry in certain regions, had also brought about changes in the material culture. In his 1907 report, Culin commented on "tourists in livery teams on their way from the Snake Dance or the Grand Canyon, 'doing Zuni'" (1907a:176). The influx of vacationers encouraged trade in antiquities (see Fig. 12), raised the prices on attractive "collectibles" such as California baskets and Navajo textiles, and fostered the production of cheap souvenirs.

Culin also had to contend with legal restraints imposed by both the U.S. Government (for archaeological material on federal lands) and the Indian tribes (for sacred objects). Before he left for the field, he had asked Brooklyn's director to get the necessary permissions for collecting on the Indian reservations. In spite of Hooper's assurances to the authorities in Washington that the Museum was working with "no commercial or speculative purposes, but... directly in the interest of the Science of Ethnology," the request was denied on the grounds that "the government has no right under the treaties with the Indians, to grant such permission."⁴¹ In most Indian communities sacred and ceremonial objects were difficult to see and impossible to purchase. "The things which the scientific collector most desires," Culin had reported in 1901, "such as masks, and the paraphernalia of the dances and ceremonies, are usually the property of a society and cannot be legitimately disposed of" (1901b:18).

Authenticity was another problematic issue for Culin. The first systematic collecting expedition to the Southwest, sponsored by the BAE, had

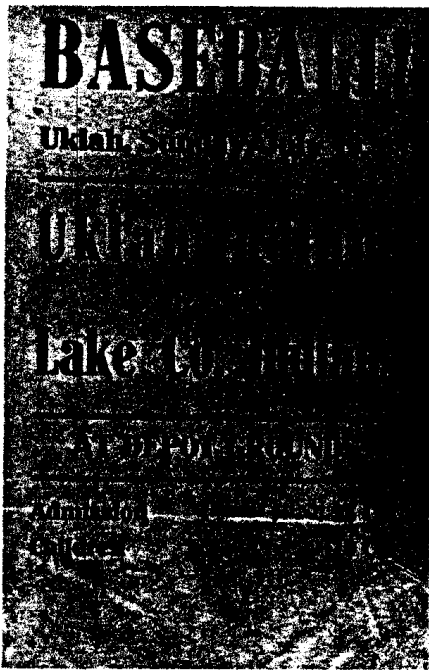


Fig. 10. Announcement of a baseball game in Ukiah, California. Flyer from 1908 expedition report.

inadvertently stimulated new industries. "At present," a rival collector reported in 1902, "the less orthodox men will manufacture almost anything the collector may desire. Spurious ancient fetishes are made by the sackful and passed off as genuine. So it is also with the masks and altars. Any number of fraudulent objects may be obtained at the prices set by the clever Indians."⁴² The "vanishing" Indian was making a comeback as a purveyor of traditional goods. Collecting was not simply a matter of hastily gathering up what was there: a critical eye and a competitive strategy were necessary to assure the Brooklyn Institute a share of the spoils.

Culin proceeded with his expeditions "systematically," keeping the Hall of American Ethnology that he planned for Brooklyn foremost in his mind. In 1903 and 1904 he collected in the Southwest, emphasizing the Zuni and the Navajo so that he could contrast Pueblo and non-Pueblo cultures. By 1905 he had installed the first part of his Southwest collection. That same year he added California and the Northwest Coast to his annual itinerary in order to gather material for the hall "devoted to the ethnology of the Indians of the Pacific Coast"⁴³ (see "The Road to Beauty," p. 31). He continued to concentrate on these regions until 1911 when, with a final stop in Oklahoma for an Osage collection, he in essence declared the field exhausted and his collection complete. Between 1903 and 1911 Culin had selected, transported, and installed more than 9,000 American Indian artifacts. As a curator, he took great personal pride in the collection and considered it "for the tribes represented about the best in the world."⁴⁴

After each season in the field, Culin submitted an "exhaustive illustrated typewritten report"⁴⁵ to the trustees, following a pattern he had established with his first field trip for the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Written in the style of a personal travel diary with daily entries, these reports went far beyond the record keeping required by the Museum or the discipline of ethnology. By nature and training incapable of keeping himself out of the picture, Culin documented the process of collecting as well as the collection itself. We can, therefore, consider Culin's actual strategies in the field in relation to his professed goals and methods.

The Language of Things: Culin on Collecting

Stewart Culin defined the "ideal" museum as one in which all the collections had been "secured in the field by the trained representatives of the museum itself." This acquisition policy ensured the vitality of things ("the fewer hands they pass through, the better") and their cultural authenticity. "Ordinary collections," he noted, "even in museums, usually reveal more of the psychology of their collector than they do of the people who originated them."⁴⁶

Fieldwork for Culin, however, did not entail participating in Indian society or taking the Indian's point of view. This is dramatically demonstrated by an episode he recorded in his expedition report of 1903. While staying in Gallup, New Mexico, he received a Navajo suit that he had commissioned for a plaster model of a medicine man in his display (see "The Road to Beauty," p. 33). "Anxious to see how the figure would look when properly dressed," Culin put on the costume (see No. 23 for hat). Not for a moment did he identify with the Navajo: instead, his friends christened him "Robinson Crusoe," and he encouraged this masquerade (Fig. 13) by writing a new version of the classic story. Significantly, Culin's hero is not only an adventurer, but also a collector: "Ro-bin-son for a long time past has harried the country in our neighborhood. He is reported to have come from the East where he had amassed [*sic*] a great store of the Wampums and other objects which our Indians value most" (1903:137).

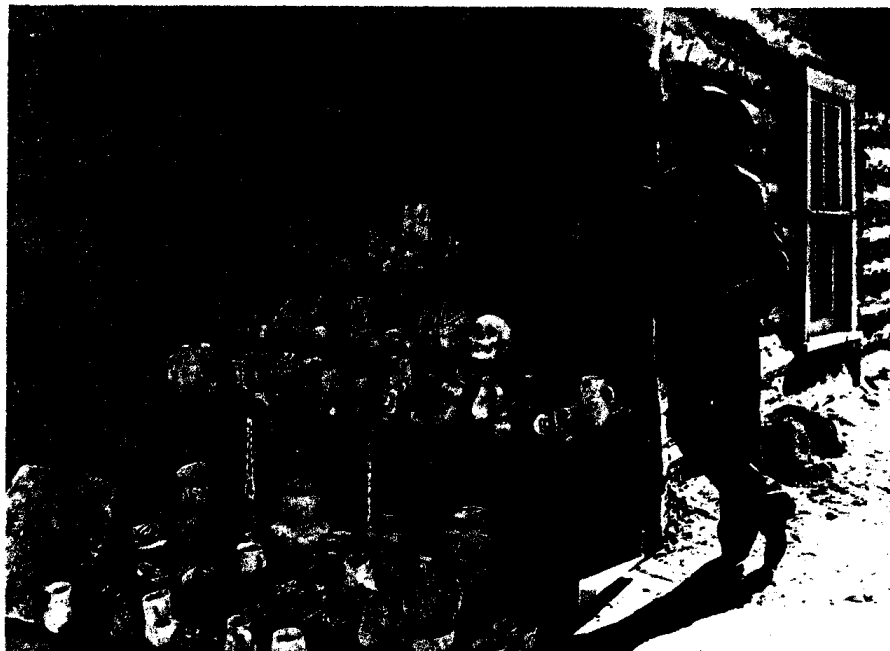
Fig. 11. The marriage of Ed Thacker and a Navajo woman. Simeon Schwemberger photograph from 1905 expedition report. Because a white person could not legally marry an Indian in the territory of Arizona, the ceremony for this couple took place in New Mexico at a well-known landmark called the Cow's Head.



Culin considered objects, not Indians, his primary informants. An ethnologist, he insisted, "must learn the language of things, unprejudiced by their apparent age or the place where he may happen to find them."⁴⁷ The metaphor of language was central to Culin's philosophy of collecting. His professed goal as a curator was to make things tell him their story and then to coax and arrange them to tell this story to the world.⁴⁸

By making the objects the speaking subjects, Culin dismissed the Indians as a source of historical knowledge. Instead, he found the solution to an incomplete and acculturated material record in the ethnologist's ability to read in the surviving objects "the message of their faraway creator."⁴⁹ Like Brinton and Cushing, the scholars who had introduced him to the American Indian field, Culin believed in the homogeneity of Indian cultures through time and space; thus he justified the use of "survivals" in the present to interpret the "lost arts" of the past. Collecting was a question of careful selection, omission ("My chief saving I am tempted to say," Culin confessed to a friend, "is knowing what not to buy"⁵⁰), and commissions, to which Culin alluded in a letter. "The old things have gone," he lamented. "They cannot be ordered from the Indians, but can only be secured by an

Fig. 12. Joe Foley with his collection from Red Rock. Photograph from 1904 expedition report.



intelligent collector who knows what he wants. The Indians themselves do not know.”⁵¹

It was the ethnological collector, not the Indian or the commercial dealer, who knew the “relative value of the new and old wares” (1901a:110). Such a collector could also distinguish the fake from the real, conjure up lost arts, and make fragments whole again. “A medicine bag,” Culin stated in an interview with the press, “is a mere curiosity to the relic hunter. To the ethnologist it is an open book of Indian life and history.”⁵² The conceit of the language of things allowed Culin to assume authorship as well as ownership of the Indian past and to restore the bits and pieces to their fullness of meaning in the exhibition case (see “The Road to Beauty”).

Objects of Myth and Memory: Culin’s Collection Reconsidered

Self-consciously a salvage operation, undertaken “just in time,” Stewart Culin’s American Indian collection in many ways exemplifies the attitudes and assumptions underlying the pursuit of the vanishing Indian during the heyday of ethnological collecting. The collection is unique, however, in the extent and detail of its documentation. As a result, we are able to examine critically Culin’s collecting rhetoric, particularly the terms “representative” and “comprehensive,” in relation to the reality of collecting in communities where the material culture was anything but stable and where objects were only one manifestation (albeit the most visible and portable one) of complex ongoing social, religious, and economic systems.

Culin actually did acquire a large portion of the collection by means of direct observation and interrogation, the methods he had advocated throughout his career, but his expedition reports show that this process was neither as scientific nor as objective as he claimed. In each community he looked for things that appeared old and used, or rare and unusual, and purchased them regardless of whether he found them in an Indian’s house, a missionary’s basement, or a curio shop. Often very little was known about these objects, and Culin had to rely on his own judgment in making his selections. In order to avoid overlooking anything that might subsequently prove to be of value, he bought “with a lavish hand” (1904b:46), sometimes taking an entire collection for the sake of one piece. Culin’s personal taste



Fig. 13. Stewart Culin, dressed as a Navajo, and Father Michael Dumarest. Father Juillard photograph from 1903 expedition report.

and interests certainly came into play in his door-to-door collecting. Most of the objects appeared in response to his questions, which usually progressed from the general category of "old things" to queries about particular games, dolls, and, finally, when he had established a good trading relationship, ceremonial things.

Culin did not depend solely on his own observations and knowledge, however. Faced with a bewildering mix of the old and the new, he looked to the published literature and existing museum collections for help in defining his goals. Naturally, he was most influenced by the men he had personally met and admired, such as Brinton and Cushing. As both had died shortly before he began to collect for Brooklyn, he welcomed the opportunity to confirm and complete their research.

In his reliance on his predecessors in the field, Culin reversed his model of the language of things: the story came first, and he collected the objects to illustrate it. He was, in fact, extraordinarily successful in closing the gap between the written record and museum collections. Changed economic and social circumstances often allowed him to acquire objects that had been described before but previously had not been for sale, while economic need or religious conversion brought family heirlooms and ceremonial artifacts into circulation. Culin valued these objects as much for their place in the history of collecting as for their cultural significance. He was a master of provenance and an expert on museum collections: when presented with a throwing stick from the cliff dwellings in the Southwest, he knew immediately that it was the "sixth recorded" and could name the location of the other five discovered (1902b:20).

As a competitive collector, Culin not only rejoiced in acquiring what others had failed to get but was determined to go beyond the existing literature and collections and break new ground. In seeking out the overlooked, unrecorded, and unobtainable, he had no choice but to consult with contemporary Indians. In spite of his faith in the ethnologist as a privileged interpreter of things, Culin recognized the limitations of an outsider's knowledge. Therefore, in almost every community where he collected extensively, he established a close working relationship with at least one Indian resident who shared his interest in the past. Each of these individuals provided access to different kinds of materials. In Jemez, for example, José Toya directed Culin's attention to his own family's possessions, whereas in Zuni, Nick Graham, the adopted son of the trader Douglas Graham, had particularly good contacts with the Anglo-American community.

The most concrete evidence of Culin's collaboration with natives is the number and variety of commissioned pieces in the collection. Whenever he discovered that an object was not for sale, no longer made, or was missing from a set, he asked a native artisan to make a replica. Although some of his colleagues looked askance at this practice,⁵³ Culin considered commissions an essential step in recovering and revitalizing the past, and a curatorial obligation. The museum's object, he stated in a letter to Cushing, "is manifestly conservation and instruction. The conservation should extend not only to the material object, but to its traditions, and where these have been lost, it should be the duty of the curator to endeavor of [*sic*] revive them, thereby converting what may be regarded as dead specimens into live ones."⁵⁴ Indeed, Culin did play an active role in these "revivals," providing his native interpreters and guides with lists of what he needed, the "correct" materials, and even mailing labels when he was not able to stay until the piece was finished (1908:7).

Conversely, the Indians were quick to think of ideas for objects that they had once used or seen. As news of Culin's interests spread, enterpris-

ing artisans anticipated his order and were already at work making the old games, hunting equipment, or implements of war when he arrived in the village. Under pressure to assimilate, many Indians had become more vigilant and self-conscious about safeguarding their heritage and willingly participated in Culin's program of redemption.

These replicas are certainly the most problematic objects in Culin's collection in terms of their cultural authenticity and historical significance. Summoned into existence by the collecting process itself, they "speak" of a past in which they played no part. Although Culin commissioned the replicas to complete the record, they in fact call attention to the fiction of the totality he constructed. At the same time, they contradict the underlying premise of his collecting—the myth of the "vanishing Indian"—and provide us with an invaluable corpus for the study of individual creativity and knowledge within Indian communities in the first part of this century.

The discards, heirlooms, and replicas that Culin acquired in the field embody the myths and memories of a variety of people, both Indian and non-Indian. Because of Culin's fascination with collecting and his detailed expedition reports, we have a rare opportunity to observe these objects at the moment when they changed hands. Seen from this perspective, his acquisitions transcend cultural boundaries and reveal surprisingly rich and varied histories.



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