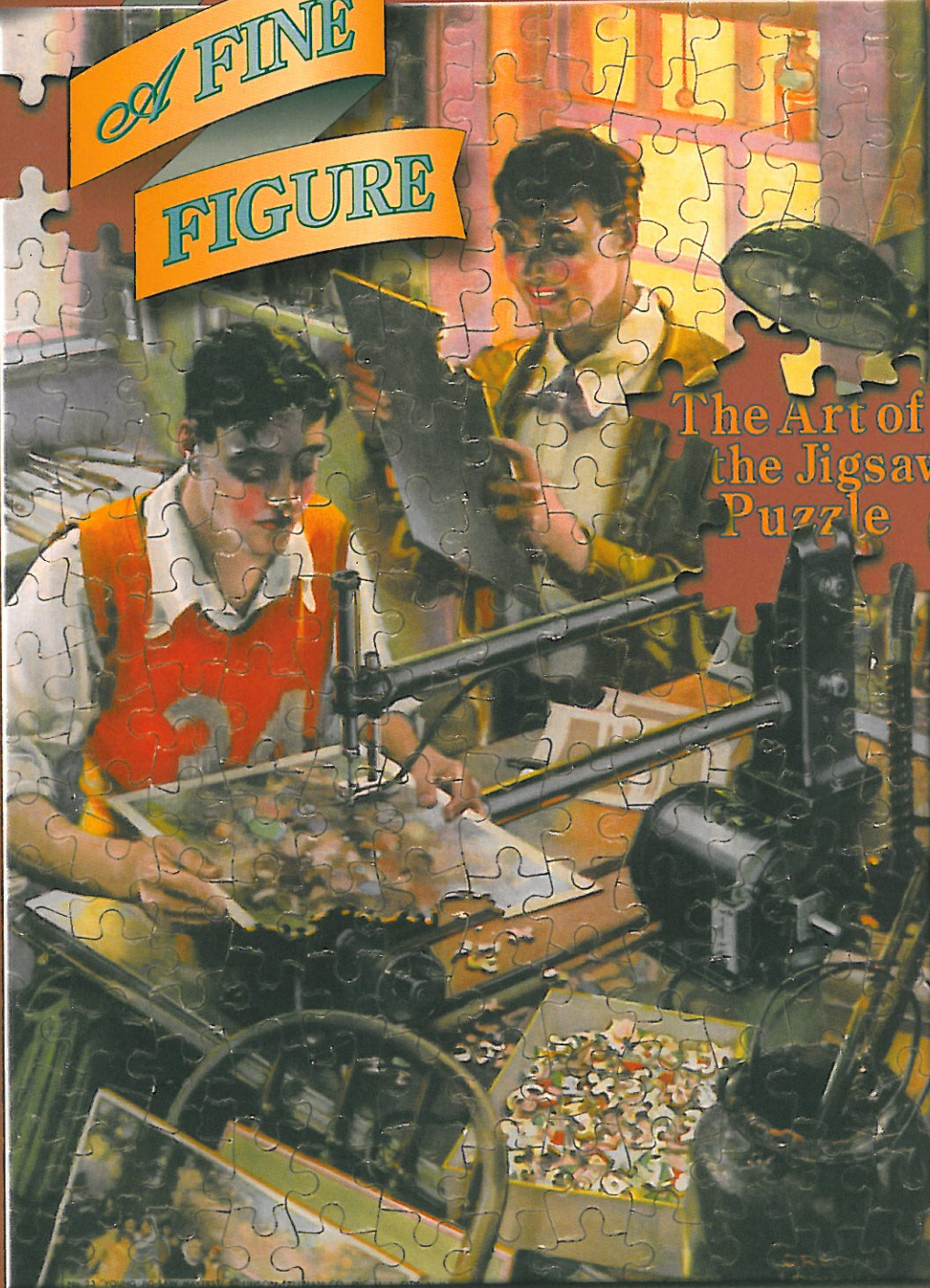


CUTTING

A FINE

FIGURE



The Art of
the Jigsaw
Puzzle

Cutting A Fine Figure:

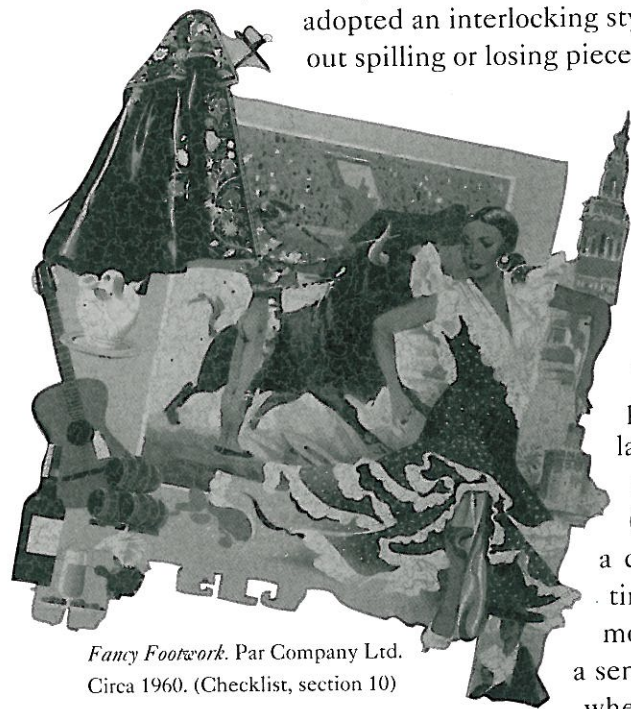
The Art of the Jigsaw Puzzle

by Anne D. Williams
GUEST CURATOR

*More Pieces of the Puzzle Story
- Anne D. Williams*

Museum of Our National Heritage
LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

By 1911 Parker Brothers had introduced a significant innovation, figure pieces in their Pastime brand puzzles. Although figure pieces made puzzles easier to assemble and reduced the challenge, most puzzlers were fascinated by pieces that were shaped like dogs, birds and other recognizable objects. At about the same time Parker and other companies adopted an interlocking style that made it easier to assemble puzzles without spilling or losing pieces.



Fancy Footwork. Par Company Ltd.
Circa 1960. (Checklist, section 10)

After 1910 the craze for jigsaw puzzles tapered off, although puzzles remained steady sellers as a family entertainment for both children and adults for the next two decades.

The Great Depression Puzzle Craze

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, puzzles for adults enjoyed a resurgence of popularity, peaking in early 1933 when sales reached an astonishing 10 million puzzles per week (*Advertising Age*, 1933). Jigsaws seemed to touch a chord, offering an escape from the troubled times, as well as an opportunity to succeed in a modest way. Completing a jigsaw gave the puzzler a sense of accomplishment that was hard to come by when the unemployment rate was climbing above

25 percent. With incomes depleted, home amusements like puzzles replaced outside entertainment like restaurants and nightclubs.

The craze built up slowly in 1930 and 1931 with a revival in the demand for wooden puzzles. Several tool companies introduced electric scroll saws designed for the home workshop in the early 1930s. Popular magazines responded with articles instructing readers on how to cut their own puzzles and go into business. Many of the unemployed architects, carpenters and other skilled craftsmen began to cut jigsaw puzzles in home workshops. Puzzles became more affordable as these small-scale cutters rented their puzzles, either from home or through local drugstores and circulating libraries. Typical rental rates were 25 cents for the first three days, plus 5 cents for each extra day.

Towner K. Webster Jr.'s instructions, published both in *Popular Homecraft* and in a special booklet, were very influential. Rollo Purrington of Florence, Mass., and hundreds of other small-scale producers emulated his cutting methods and figure pieces. The Boston area was full of puzzle entrepreneurs. Harold A. Gleason of Arlington, Clyde W. Richburg of North Andover, Charles Russell of Worcester and Carroll Towne of Auburndale were representative of this new breed. It seemed that every town had at least one and sometimes as many as a dozen individuals cutting puzzles for the local market. In contrast with the 1909 craze when women cut most of the puzzles, during the 1930s men predominated in the puzzle business.

The quality of the home workshop puzzles varied tremendously. Some cutters turned out hasty and crude work, with ragged pieces and sawdust tossed into any handy cigar or candy box. Others took more pride in their work; they sanded the edges of each piece and used specially made boxes and printed labels. A few went far beyond that, reaching and surpassing the skill of the Parker Brothers Pastime puzzles. For example, the Falls Puzzles made by Mary Belle and John Paul Jones of Chagrin Falls, Ohio, were noted for their craftsmanship and creative figure pieces.

Indeed, the Depression led to the birth of Par Puzzles, long dubbed the "Rolls Royce of jigsaw puzzles." Frank Ware and John Henriques, two young men with no job prospects, cut their first puzzle at the dining room table in 1932. Unlike others who sought ways to cut costs, they steadily improved the quality of their puzzles and marketed them to movie stars, industrialists and even royalty. Par specialized in personalized puzzles for the rich and famous, incorporating the owner's name or birth date as figure pieces. They also perfected the irregular edge to frustrate the traditional puzzler who tried to start with the corners and edge pieces. Ware and Henriques further teased their customers with misleading titles and "par times" that were attainable only by the fastest puzzlers.

Advertising Puzzles

The popularity of puzzles took a quantum leap when business rediscovered the puzzle as an advertising medium. Advertising puzzles had been used to some extent since the 1880s. Merchants and manufacturers gave these puzzles away as free premiums to consumers who bought their products. What better way to keep a brand name before the public than to have them working for hours to assemble a picture of the product?

In mid-1932 the Prophylactic Brush Company of Florence, Mass., launched a major advertising campaign designed to combat the falling prices and the resulting losses of the Depression. They supplied a charming puzzle of a child brushing a puppy's teeth free to each toothbrush buyer. The device of the giveaway enabled them to raise toothbrush prices and recover profits. Their runaway success in sales led to wide imitation by other companies. Soon consumers were awash in free puzzles that touted flashlights, motor oil, coffee, coal and hundreds of other products.



[*Determined to Brush*]. Prophylactic Brush Co. 1932.
(Checklist, section 6)