PUZZLES TO DELIGHT, CHALLENGE, AND CONFOUND
AT MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA

Chinese Puzzles: Games for the Hands and Mind
Showcases a Thousand Years of Antique Puzzles
November 6, 2010-May 2, 2011
November 5 (Press Preview)

Visitors Invited to Explore History and Art with Their Hands

April 19, 2010, New York, NY – This November, the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) invites visitors to explore the intellectual, historical, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of puzzles with an exhibition of antique games from China. Some of the world’s most famous and widely enjoyed puzzles—such as tangram and interlocking burrs—have their roots in China, with close links to Chinese scientific and artistic traditions across more than two thousand years. Chinese Puzzles: Games for the Hands and Mind will showcase 100 objects from the Song dynasty through the mid-20th century. With contemporary reproductions available for hands-on visitor participation, Chinese Puzzles will be engaging for everyone from small children to experienced puzzle masters, and from designers to historians to mathematicians. The exhibition will premiere on November 5 and will remain on view in MOCA’s Bloomberg Special Exhibitions Gallery through May 2, 2011.

“Puzzles have been one of China’s chief cultural exports to the United States since at least the 19th century,” said Alice Mong, director of the Museum of Chinese in America. “Part of MOCA’s mission is to explore how Chinese culture is lived, experienced, and passed along through generations here in the United States—and with Chinese Puzzles, that exploration can be literally played out with the hands.”

Curated by puzzle collectors Wei Zhang and Peter Rasmussen, and drawn from their collection of more than 1300 puzzles, books, and graphic materials, the exhibition explores multiple types of puzzles, including the tangram, the game that sparked the world’s first international puzzle craze; the nine linked rings, an object of interest for mathematicians and computer scientists; and the sliding block puzzle, a challenge in military strategy. Afforded the same attention as works of fine art and master artisanry, these puzzles are made from
materials such as porcelain, carved ivory, and mother-of-pearl. Modern replicas suitable for handling allow exhibition visitors to discover how these mechanical puzzles work.

“Puzzles like these are called ‘intelligence games’ in Chinese, and they are valued as tools for training the mind in creative, logical, and spatial thinking,” explained Wei Zhang. Peter Rasmussen added, “They are also obviously a source of great entertainment. Children enjoy these games just as easily engineers, logicians, and expert puzzlers. Chinese Puzzles is at once a serious exhibition of antique decorative art and a game room.”

Varieties of Chinese Puzzles

Tangram (七巧板) – China’s most famous puzzle, the tangram consists of seven flat geometric pieces—traditionally made from wood, ivory, or metal—that can be arranged to create any number of challenging shapes. Many Chinese scholars believe that tangram’s origin dates back to the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), when Huang Bosi 黃伯思 (1079-1118) invented a set of rectangular banquet tables and a collection of diagrams that showed many different ways in which they could be arranged for various social functions. The modern form of the puzzle made its way to the United States in the early 19th century, when merchants who arrived on clipper ships from Europe and America took the puzzle home with them after doing business in Canton. Very quickly tangram became the first international puzzle craze. Examples from the exhibition include intricately carved ivory sets and porcelain condiment dishes manufactured in the shape of tangram pieces.

Fifteen-Piece Puzzle (益智板) – Known in Chinese as the “enhancing intelligence” puzzle, this game was invented in 1862 by Tong Xiegeng 童叶庚 (1828-1899) as a complex elaboration on the popular tangram. The puzzle is comprised of 15 pieces, including several with curved edges and interior angles, which can be used to create much more intricate shapes than the tangram. Examples include using the puzzle pieces to construct illustrations for classical Chinese poetry and hundreds of Chinese characters.

Sliding Block Puzzle (華容道) – The Chinese sliding block puzzle consists of a board and 10 rectangular and square pieces, which must be shifted in one of several complex sequences in order to remove the key block. Closely related to other sliding block puzzles, the Chinese version references ancient Chinese military history. According to tradition, the game board and its pieces represent a battlefield from 208 A.D., when a military leader sought to evade his enemies and escape through a narrow passage called Huarong Pass.

Puzzle Vessels (益智容器) – As long as one thousand years ago, Chinese artisans have designed ceramic vessels that function in surprising and confounding ways—a wine pot that must be filled upside down, or a cup that leaks from the bottom if filled too close to the brim. The earliest Chinese puzzle vessels date back to the Tang dynasty (618-907), and the examples in Chinese Puzzles represent some of the finest known.
Nine Linked Rings (九連環) – Perhaps China’s greatest mechanical puzzle—and a subject of perpetual interest for children, mathematicians, and computer scientists alike—this game consists of a looped handle that is interlocked with nine rings. The object is to remove all nine rings from the loop. Legend holds that the rings were invented as far back as the second century, and the puzzle has appeared repeatedly in Chinese legends, literature, songs, and painting.

Ingenious Rings (巧環) – A creative variation on the nine linked rings, these puzzles have complex shapes—resembling everything from pagodas to teapots to Chinese characters—and varying numbers of rings. The Ingenious Rings were invented and perfected in the 1930s by Ruan Liuqi, a craftsman who single-handedly generated a renewed craze for linked ring puzzles.

Burr Puzzles (魯班鎖) – These puzzles consist of interlocking pieces that are assembled to form three-dimensional structures. Called “Lu Ban locks” in Chinese, these puzzles are named in honor of the original master of wood joinery, Lu Ban (魯班, 770-476 BCE), who is also credited with inventing the saw, the carpenter’s plane, and the chalk line. The puzzles operate on the same principles as traditional Chinese furniture, which used intricately interlocking wood pieces to create joints without nails or glue. Burr puzzles can consist of any number of pieces, the most common being three sets of 2 rods, with each pair of rods arranged at right angles to the others. Easy to take apart but difficult to assemble, these puzzles have endured as objects of entertainment and study for hundreds of years.

Catalogue and Programming
The exhibition is accompanied by an 80-page, full-color catalogue. A full range of public programs designed for audiences of all ages will be scheduled throughout the duration of the exhibition: guided gallery tours, Family Puzzle Days for budding puzzlers aged 5-12 years, Puzzler Day for veterans of the puzzle world, and curator talks with Wei Zhang and Peter Rasmussen.

MOCA’s Core Exhibition: With a Single Step
Also on view, With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America presents the diverse layers of the Chinese American experience while examining America’s journey as a nation of immigrants—an overview of Chinese in the United States from the 19th century to the present, individual stories that reveal what it has meant to be Chinese in America over time, and the physical traces and images of past generations left for us to consider, reflect on, and reclaim.
The exhibition is tied together by three main threads: the relationship between China and the United States and its impact on Chinese Americans; how Chinese Americans have perceived themselves in American society (and have been perceived) over time; and, the impact of Chinese Americans on politics, culture, and life in the United States.

About MOCA
The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) is the leading national museum dedicated to preserving and presenting the history and culture of people of Chinese descent in the United States. From its Maya Lin-designed home on the border of Chinatown and SoHo in New York City, MOCA collects and displays historical and cultural artifacts, and organizes traveling exhibitions, classes, discussions, and events that explore all aspects of the Chinese American experience in the United States. MOCA began as a community-based organization founded in 1980 by Chinese American artists, historians and students who felt that the memories of first-generation “old-timers” in Chinatown would be lost without oral history, photo documentation, research, and collecting efforts. Now a resource for historians and community members alike, the Museum has evolved into a national keeper of cultural information and an influential voice in the ongoing history of Chinese and Chinese American culture across our country. The Museum’s original location (which will continue to be used for archives and collections) is in the heart of Chinatown on the second floor of the historic, century-old school building that was once Public School 23. For more information, visit www.mocany.org

Museum hours:
Monday: 11am-5pm
Tuesday: Closed
Wednesday: Closed
Thursday: 11am-9pm
Friday: 11am-5pm
Saturday: 10am-5pm
Sunday: 10am-5pm

The Museum is closed to the public on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, except for prescheduled group tours and special programs.

Admission:
General Admission: $7
Seniors (w/ID) and Students (w/school ID): $4
Children under 12 in groups less than 8: free
MOCA Members: free
Target Free Thursdays: Free gallery admission every Thursday through the generosity of Target

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