

Male and Female: Anthropology Game

By Michael Story

Members' Night, to be held this year on May 15, 16, 17, and 18, has always been a challenge and inspiration to the Museum staff. The annual event sees thousands of curious members discovering and rediscovering natural history wonders as well as the Museum's behind-the-scenes workings. As part of the staff's job of educating and entertaining its guests during these special nights, each department is expected to produce a demonstration, an explanation for an exhibit of interest to this diverse audience. One of the most successful of these is a simple, thought-provoking exercise called the "Anthropology Game," devised several years ago by Bennet Bronson, associate curator of Asiatic archaeology and ethnology.

have included: *What Is It?*—determining the usage of various artifacts and fragments of artifacts; and *Spot the Fake*—selecting a genuine ancient artifact from among some very accomplished imitations. In August 1976 the game in its newest guise—*Male and Female: Anthropology Game*—became a year-round public exhibit.

The script for *Male and Female: Anthropology Game* states that each of us has stereotyped conceptions of the sexes' respective economic and social roles and the kinds of tasks that men and women should perform.

The player is asked to look at each of 38 artifacts from the Museum's collections as an anthropologist would and decide whether it is—or once was—used by



Cannibal fork, Fiji Islands. Was this utensil used by men, by women, or by both?

The first anthropology game was titled, *Where Does It Come From? The Basic Anthropology Game*. The goal was to involve the members in the thought process of an anthropologist as he attempts to determine an artifact's origin. The game format consisted of a large work table covered with brown paper on which 38 artifacts were arranged. Four possible proveniences were listed below each object. Players were given a handout containing the statement of purpose, rules, and space for answers. The correct choices and the reasons for them were listed on attached pages. In keeping with the just-for-fun spirit of a game, cheating was possible and left to the discretion of the individual player.

So popular was the game format that it is now a Members' Night fixture, eagerly awaited by both the members and the staff, who congregate before the doors open to test their knowledge and game-playing skills. More recent Members' Night variations on the theme

men, by women or by both. For instance: Number 22 is an exquisite example of a 19th century macramé beaded purse from New Guinea. Were purses like this carried by men, women or both? The printed answer states "men" and goes on to say that this area of New Guinea contained societies where our ideas of men's and women's roles were nearly reversed. Men were expected to be flighty, vain, and obsessed with personal appearance. Women, on the other hand, were to be practical, to dress plainly, and perhaps even to take the initiative in courtship.

Male and Female: Anthropology Game contains artifacts from cultures throughout the world including: a Fijian cannibal fork; Egyptian hieroglyphs; a German beer vessel; a Tibetan rosary; and a contemporary American perfume, which the answer states is also called "skin bracer" or "after shave lotion." The script warns the player that answers are not always as obvious as they seem and, indeed, there are quite a few surprises along the way. Upon completion, correct answers are tallied and the player can compare his or her score with a

Michael Story is assistant in Public Relations.

*Is this brass head-
dress, worn by per-
formers acting as
royalty in the wayang
wong (classical Javanese
dance-drama),
worn by a king or
prince, a queen or
princess, or any person
of royal blood? This is
one of 38 artifacts in
Field Museum's unique
quiz game, Male and
Female: Anthropology
Game.*



rating scale: 20—good, 25—very good, 30—superlative, over 35—better than many anthropologists would do, and under 20—"you are either a poor guesser or hardcore chauvinist." In the end, the player will have learned some fascinating information about sex-role definitions in many different societies and possibly taken the time to reconsider his or her own male and female stereotypes.

In its new role as a special public exhibit, the anthropology game needed more than brown paper and a table to make it work—but not much more, which is one of the distinct advantages of this approach. The main substance of the game, the artifacts, or any other materials can be flexible, but the more intimate, and consequently less expensive, scale seems most effective. In order to give the anthropology game a unique visual character and at the same time stay within the game's moderate budget, the Museum's Department of Exhibition converted two existing wall-mounted exhibition cases to horizontal floor cases. The result was two low, side-by-side cases that provide an interesting contrast to hall after hall of tall, glass-walled exhibit cases. The low horizontal design also lends itself to more intimate involvement in the game as the players, particularly the younger ones, can lean their elbows on the wooden frame of the case and comfortably contemplate the glass-covered artifacts. At the top center of each case rests a vertical island that states the name, introduction, and purpose of the anthropology game. Around the perimeter of each case are numbered question-and-answer placards which correspond to the numbered artifacts. Pockets on the side of each case contain answer sheets so a player can record his or her success at playing anthropologist at the Museum.

Located in a busy area near the cafeteria and school lunchrooms, the game is in almost constant use. The

mentally and physically involving aspects of the game, and the word "game," make the exhibit particularly popular with younger museum visitors though the game is designed for and played by all ages. The present anthropology game is no pushover. To the staff's knowledge, there has been no witnessed perfect score. Interestingly enough, the highest known score, 36 out of a possible 38, was tallied by the daughter of a staff member, while the best a professional anthropologist has scored is 33.

The anthropology game is indeed what its name states, but the themes and variables it plays with are intrinsically more valuable than passing "Go" or accumulating plastic hotels. The game is now a valuable part of the Museum's regular public offering—supplementing, not supplanting, the permanent exhibits.

Soon, Members' Night will again be here, and already a new game is in the works. The preliminary title is *Friend or Foe?*, a game which will attempt to demonstrate the misconceptions and ambiguities that exist concerning things harmful and things not. For example: Two specimens—a coral snake and its mimic, the false coral snake— will be mounted side-by-side. Which is lethal and which would make a novel pet? If you knew the specific color pattern of the venomous reptile, you could safely make your choice. The unique feature of this newest game is that it is not just about anthropology, but will include specimens from the Museum's three other major scientific divisions—zoology, botany and geology—demonstrating the nearly limitless adaptability of the game format. □

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