

The Road to Beauty Stewart Culin's American Indian Exhibitions at The Brooklyn Museum

Ira Jacknis

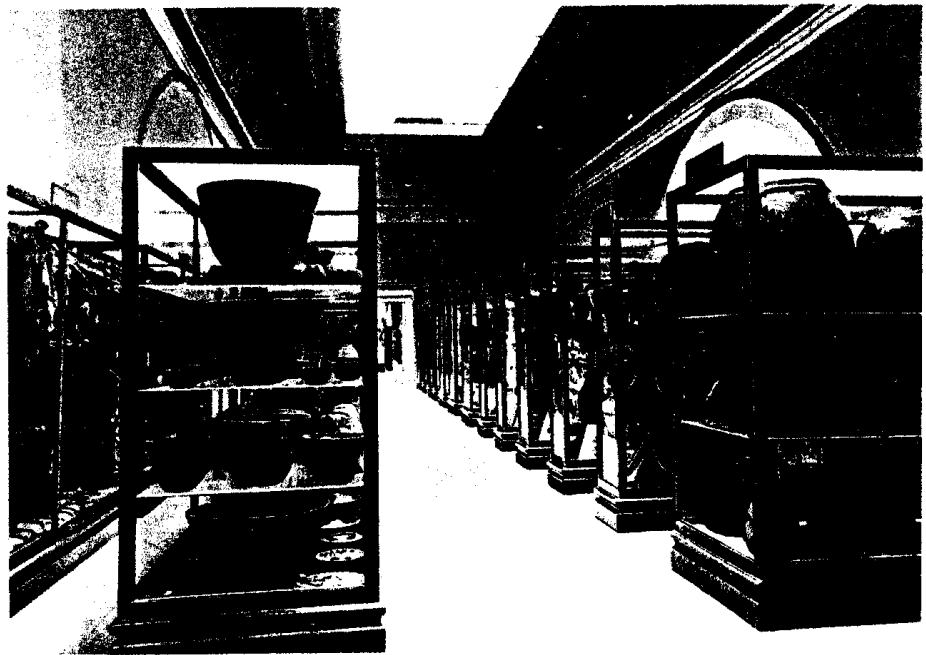
WHILE STEWART CULIN was a passionate collector, it was in the form of the museum display that he most eloquently spoke the language of things. "I have continued on with no other thought than of making things tell me their story," he wrote, "and then of trying to coax and arrange them to tell this story to the world."¹ As an ethnologist, Culin was dedicated to describing cultures through their concrete expressions. His goal of stimulating the public's imagination, moreover, made the medium of the museum display particularly congenial for him. A review of the stories Culin coaxed and arranged his collections to tell, however, will reveal that they were not the simple narratives he suggested: contained in the objects were many stories, which included those Culin initially selected, those he later emphasized in his installations, and those his successors evoked in their exhibits.

By the time he came to Brooklyn, Culin was already experienced in the art of museum display, having won several gold medals for his exhibits at international expositions (see Fig. 4). Though Culin was essentially self-taught as a curator, his early museological mentors were G. Brown Goode, the director of the U.S. National Museum, and Frederic Putnam, the director of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Like many of his colleagues, he made a trip to Europe to study museum methods, and he claimed that this 1898 "journey was decisive in forming my career"; he was a tireless visitor of museums in every city he passed through.² However, as in many other things, Culin's prime role model was his friend George Dorsey of the Field Museum.³ After his 1903 expedition, he spent several days in Chicago, "making a very careful study of the Field Museum cases, methods of installation, catalogues, etc.," and upon his return he modeled his department's cases and catalogue cards after those in the Chicago museum (Fig. 14).⁴

Nevertheless, Culin felt that museum display could not be reduced to set principles: "Largely a matter of feeling and personality, it has no rules that are effective nor can it be taught successfully."⁵ Elsewhere he commented, "The making of a museum, of a great, vital museum, requires knowledge, taste and a genius little short of miraculous."⁶ In the end, he regarded museum installation as an art form: "My ideal museum, above all a museum that is to represent the outcome of human activities, should be a work of art."⁷

*Prizewinning poster for the Rainbow
House by Pratt Institute student
Natalie MacDonald, Brooklyn Daily Eagle,
May 22, 1927.*

Fig. 14. Hall of California Indian Ethnology, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 1907.



Culin's personal aesthetic approach to the science of ethnology was encouraged by the unusual disciplinary orientation at the Brooklyn Institute. The Institute was unique among major nineteenth-century museums in its combination of the arts and sciences. Most ethnology departments of the time were either distinct or combined with natural history. At Brooklyn, Ethnology was one of three major departments—along with Fine Arts and Natural Science. Responding to the director's letter outlining the scope of his department, Culin regarded "the division of the work between the Department of Fine Arts and Ethnology, as necessarily empirical [*sic*]. Personally if I were drawing up a plan, I should make no such division or distinction."⁸

At Philadelphia Culin was only one of many interested in ethnology, while at Brooklyn he had the subject all to himself. This, plus the chronic shortage of staff at the Museum, probably encouraged his development of an individual style of museum exhibition. Culin felt that the art of display, like other aesthetic forms, should be "the result of individual effort," and at the opening of his reinstatement he thanked "the enlightened direction of the Brooklyn Museum that never has attempted to curb or influence my somewhat impetuous spirit."⁹

American Indian Ethnology Halls, 1905–12

The American Indian displays at the Brooklyn Institute were literally the foundation of the Museum's exhibits. The main ethnology galleries, devoted to the American collections, were given the first floor (current third floor) of the West Wing, the oldest part of the Museum, opened in 1897. Thus the American Indian artifacts were directly off the Entrance Hall, in the central section, which contained classical casts and modern sculpture. The East Wing, finished in 1907, held the Egyptian and Classical Antiquities and, on the basement floor below, Polynesian, Chinese, and Japanese Ethnology. Above Ethnology, on the second floor, were the Natural History collections, with the paintings exhibits of the Fine Arts department on the top floor.

Like most anthropological curators of his day, Culin arranged his exhibits by region. The first displays of the Hall of American Ethnology,

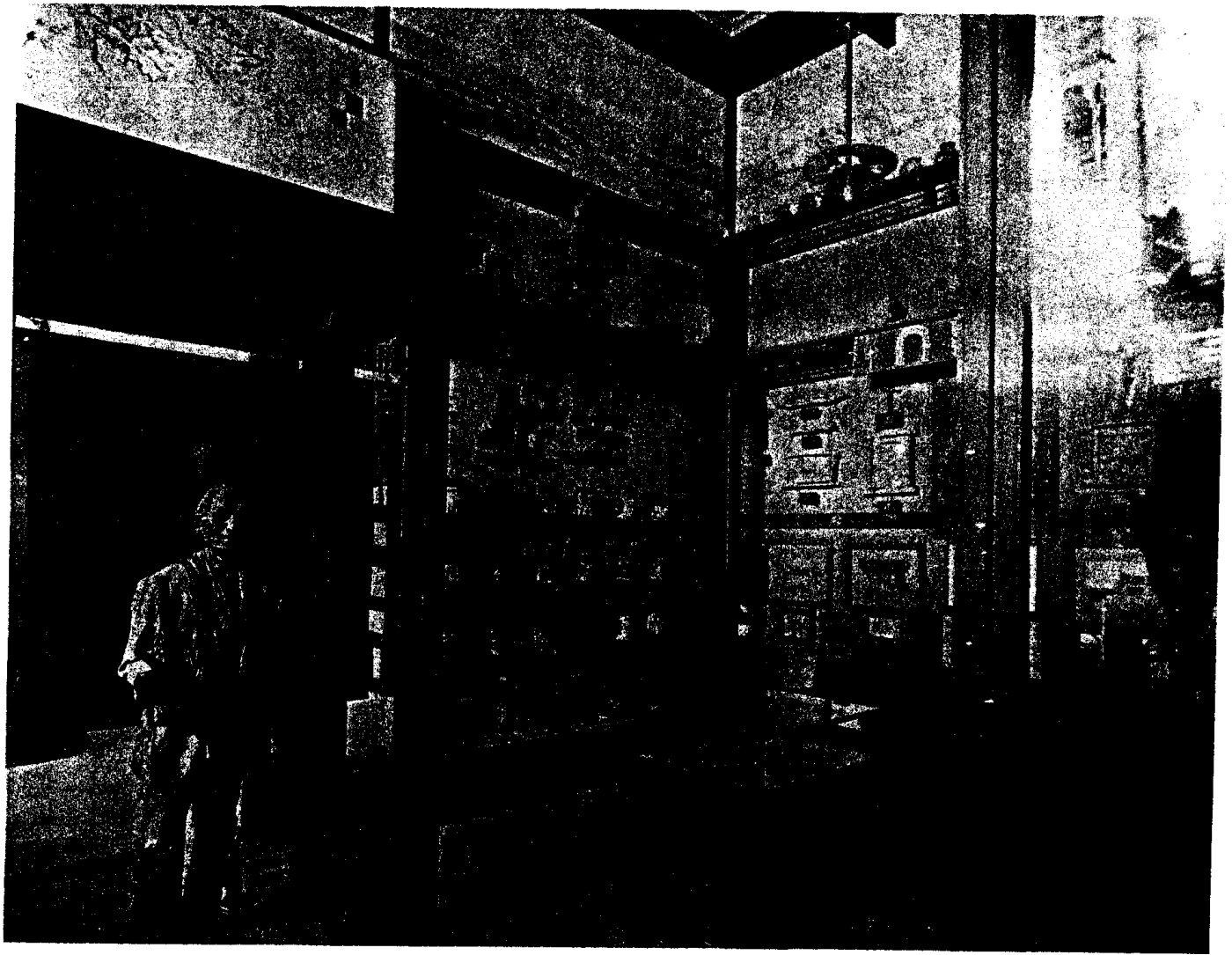


Fig. 15. Southwestern Indian Hall, The Brooklyn Museum, ca. 1910.

devoted to the Southwest, opened to the public on June 1, 1905. The principal Southwest gallery was essentially completed in 1907 (Fig. 15), when Culin published a guide to the Hall, though the section for the Rio Grande Pueblos, in the small hall near the stairwell, was finished the following year. The California Hall was begun in 1909 and partly installed and opened to the public later that year (Fig. 16). It was completed and reopened in spring 1911, following Culin's travels in Japan. Labeling, however, continued into the next year. The third and final component of the American halls—the Northwest Coast—opened in 1912 (Fig. 17).¹⁰

The geographical or "ethnic" approach was carried through to the tribal arrangement of cases within a hall, and within each region, one group was chosen for in-depth presentation: the Zuni in the Southwest, the Pomo in California, and the Haida in the Northwest Coast. For example, in justifying his focus on the Zuni, Culin claimed "that Zuni stands for the entire existing culture of the Southwest, and, adequately represented, would do away with the necessity of exhibiting at least, much material from other less favored localities."¹¹

Within these tribal units, objects were grouped by functional type: costumes, games, religious articles, and so on. A special feature of the Southwest Hall—the largest and most complex—was its inclusion of prehistoric material, which would "illustrate the inter-dependence and relationship of the existing tribes with those of the past."¹² This point was

further developed by material from "the more recent historic [Hispanic, not Anglo] period," such as door frames, saddles, iron tools, and the Zuni church columns (Nos. 130, 131). The other main goal for this hall was to explore the "religion and decorative art" of the region.¹³

Culin's exhibits were distinctive on several counts. First, virtually all the objects exhibited had been collected on museum expeditions, by a single curator.¹⁴ Second, his displays were opened in a rapid and continual succession, paralleling these expeditions. And finally, throughout his museum career Culin followed a practice of near-total display. When it opened in 1907, the Southwest Hall held 4,703 artifacts, and by the following year Culin could report that "practically all" the Southwestern material was on display.¹⁵ As he fairly noted in 1920, "This condition of collections being displayed is without parallel in any other museum in America."¹⁶ For Stewart Culin, exhibitions—not research—were the prime motivation for collecting. He criticized the Peabody Museum at Harvard as "a museum in which the museum idea [by which he seems to have meant exhibition] has been made more or less incidental and subordinate to investigation, instruction, and publication" (1911a:172).

Though he might choose a representative approach for tribes within a region, Culin strove for completeness for his featured ethnic groups: "If Zuni dolls and masks [seem] to predominate in the Southwestern Indian Hall, it is to be remembered that these to-day form the only complete series in existence and their very numbers show at a glance that this tribe is characterized by the number of its religious ceremonies."¹⁷ Culin's displays were meant to serve as a place of record for ethnological facts. However, Culin's "complete series" were something of a fiction, and his exhibits were a partial representation, at best (see p. 24).

As in other ethnological museums of the time, Culin's objects were part of a larger multimedia assemblage: large and small cases, oil and watercolor paintings, framed photographs and engravings, maps and diagrams, architectural models, mannequins, and specimen and topical labels. They were also accompanied by lectures, printed guides, and other publications. While none of these features were unique to Culin's displays, his exhibitions were distinguished by their rich and complex combination of elements.

Labels were extensive and detailed. Each specimen had a label giving the artifact type, people, location, source and date of collection, and museum number. For "the visitor who desires more information than is thus afforded,"¹⁸ he prepared topical labels. In these "the language, arts and customs of the Indians are discussed, and the general significance and relation of the collections explained."¹⁹ Much of Culin's scholarly energy went into the writing of these "minute explanatory labels."²⁰ As a Museum publication put it, in words that were probably Culin's own, "Owing to lack of time only general labels have as yet been placed on the cases [in the Southwest Hall] as the full labelling of this extensive collection demands much time, being practically the writing of a book on the manners and customs of the Pueblo Indians."²¹ The Museum did make available a seven-page *Guide to the Southwestern Indian Hall* and "lists of books for the guidance of the student" on the Zuni, Navajo, and Cliff Dwellers.²²

Like other museum ethnologists of his day, however, Culin omitted from his labels the name of the maker and the place and date of construction (which he often knew because he had commissioned many of the objects).²³ Although he usually noted this information in his expedition reports and often on his catalogue cards, by the time he was annotating his exhibits, Culin was arranging Indian artifacts to stand as anonymous and timeless representations of a vanishing race. With the partial exception of

Fig. 16. California Indian Hall, The Brooklyn Museum, ca. 1911.



the Southwest Hall, his displays created an “ethnographic present” by juxtaposing in one case objects that may have had radically diverse histories—some treasured heirlooms, others commissioned models.

At the time Culin was arranging his American Indian exhibits, the latest style in ethnographic museum display was the “life group.” Although single mannequins had long presented native costumes and appearance, groups of figures acting out a dramatic scene had only been introduced to American ethnological museums at the Chicago World’s Fair.²⁴ With the assistance of Frank Cushing, William Holmes created several dramatic tableaux for the Smithsonian, and the style was soon popularized by George Dorsey at the Field Museum.

In 1903 Culin wrote from the Southwest with enthusiasm about his plans: “The proposed Navajo and Zuni figures would use up most of the material I have bought, to great advantage.”²⁵ For the Navajo display he was thinking of a “medicine man and a woman in old dress, the latter possibly, being healed, and reclining on a sand painting,” and for the Zuni he mentioned, at various times, a dancer, a woman with a water bowl, a male warrior, a shell-bead maker, a silversmith and his assistants, and a woman making pottery.²⁶

Artist and Franciscan friar Michael Dumarest of Gallup, New Mexico, cast the “head and hand of an old Navajo” for the medicine-man figure.²⁷ Culin “was amazed and delighted with the result . . . It is better work than I have ever seen in a Museum, the cast having been made over in clay and animated, so that it is a work of art.”²⁸ Most other museum mannequins were strict “life casts,” direct plaster impressions, but Culin preferred an aesthetic interpretation. Wanting his groups or figures to be “reproductions of actual people, well known to every visitor,”²⁹ he had Dumarest cast the head, limbs, and trunk of his consultant “Zuni Dick.” From these elements Dumarest “expected to be able to model the entire figure” for a dancer mannequin.³⁰ Culin gathered many artifacts for these groups and commissioned Little Singer, a Navajo medicine man, to make a buckskin suit for the medicine-man figure (see Nos. 22–24).

Despite his early enthusiasm, Culin’s exhibits held no life groups—only the single costumed figure of the Navajo medicine man.³¹ The reason for this absence of groups is unclear. We do know that Culin was somewhat critical of groups: “I am prejudicial against most attempts at figures. . . .

Fig. 17. Northwest Coast Indian Hall, The Brooklyn Museum, ca. 1912.



[They have] been made carelessly and are very inaccurate.”³² Such displays were probably precluded at The Brooklyn Museum by the expense and effort they required and by the great amount of space they occupied.

An important part of Culin’s American installations were the murals by staff artist Herbert B. Judy (1874–1946).³³ As Culin wrote, “An attempt has been made by the aid of Mr. Judy’s paintings and sketches to give an idea of the southwestern country and afford an artistic and instructive setting for the collection.”³⁴ Judy accompanied Culin several times to the field (Fig. 18): to the Southwest in 1904 (Zuni and Chinle), 1905 (Hopi), and 1906 (Laguna); and to California in 1906 and 1908 (Clear Lake). He traveled alone to the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia in 1910.

The murals covered the top portion of the walls of each gallery. The one in the Southwest Hall ran along three sides (the painting of the longest wall was composed of five panels, each twenty-two feet long).³⁵ The California mural—and, evidently, the Northwest Coast one—completely encircled the hall. Each series of panels formed a panorama, seen from a definite position: the First Hopi Mesa in the Southwest gallery, the villages of Laguna and Isleta in the Rio Grande Pueblo room, Pomo country around Clear Lake in the California Hall, and the Haida village of Masset for the Northwest Coast Hall. Judy’s murals were an innovation in American ethnology displays. Soon they were followed by those at the American Museum of Natural History in the Eskimo, Northwest Coast, Plains, and Southwest halls. Depicting specific vistas, the murals at Brooklyn were a step toward the backdrops within diorama cases popularized at the Milwaukee Public Museum and in the Southwest Hall at the Museum of Natural History.³⁶

The cases contained smaller oils and watercolors, with Zuni house interiors and the surrounding region, and Canyon de Chelly among their subjects.³⁷ In addition, the ethnology cases were liberally illustrated with photographs and engravings, many taken from BAE publications, as well as maps and diagrams of tribal locations and village plans.³⁸



Fig. 18. Herbert B. Judy painting in Arizona. Simeon Schwemberger photograph, 1904, from 1904 expedition report.

Culin carefully arranged his collections for visual effect. In each hall, certain key objects stood out, symbolizing the whole. In the Southwest Hall it was the mannequin of the Navajo medicine man and the Eakins portrait of Cushing (Fig. 5); in the California gallery, the large Pomo granary (Fig. 50); and in the Northwest Coast room, the Kwakiutl and the Bella Bella house posts (No. 293). Culin desired these impressive artifacts as much for their appearance as for their ethnological value. In a letter to his field agent, he requested "some carved poles to use in the decoration of our Northwest Coast room." He would take as many as he could, "as old and as well carved as I can get, preferably not too high."³⁹ In all three halls, many of the objects were directly exposed to the viewer's gaze, without the barrier of glass. In each room a row of major container forms—pots for the Southwest, baskets for California, and boxes and bowls for the Northwest Coast—ran around the top of the cases.

His visual flair led Culin to adopt native artistic motifs in his galleries: "The symbolic designs employed as decorations in the [Southwest] hall are of Indian origin and appropriate to the purpose for which they are used."⁴⁰ Here he used the characteristic stepped design on wall brackets. For the interior woodwork on the walls of the Northwest Coast Hall, he incorporated "some large, old, roughly-hewn planks" from the roof of a house in Victoria.⁴¹ The Bella Bella house posts were mounted on simulated boxes, painted with a design copied from a box drum in the Museum collection.⁴² At the same time, Culin strove to minimize possible distractions. The four large wall cases in the California Hall were made not of metal, but of oak, "finished a dull olive brown in harmony with the room and objects."⁴³ Furthermore, he felt that "all fixtures and mechanism... should be unobtrusive and as far as possible concealed."⁴⁴

Culin found fault with the displays at Harvard's Peabody Museum, which lacked the appropriate atmosphere he sought in his galleries. Nowhere in it, he felt, "does one get any of the feeling of the land or the people. One is always in the Peabody Museum, looking at museum specimens." In the Plains Hall, he argued, "the collections and methods of display is such that the specimens create no atmosphere of the Indian, and even their beauty is lost or obscured."⁴⁵ His friend George Dorsey understood exactly what Culin was after when he commented that one could "stand in the Japanese Hall [installed by Culin in 1910] of the Brooklyn Museum and forget one is in Brooklyn."⁴⁶

These exhibits were quite favorably received. As Culin himself wrote to a friend: "I have just opened my Southwestern American Hall. It is very beautiful, really beautiful."⁴⁷ The *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that the hall was "destined to take rank with the very best collections of its kind in any museum the world over." The papers also appreciated Culin's style of display. According to the *New York Evening Post*, "The collection gains much of its distinction from the admirable manner in which it is arranged." Another paper thought that Culin's general ethnology hall was "highly interesting, instructive and satisfying," particularly praising "the simple and clearly intelligible manner in which the exhibits have been labeled and described." The article noted Culin's success in speaking to "common, everyday people."⁴⁸

Reviewers were not insensitive to the aesthetic merits of the artifacts. According to one, "the vari-colored dress and decoration [of the Zuni kachina dolls] have elicited the admiration of several artists who have seen the collection. The sense of proportion and color harmony possessed by these Indians puts the impressionism of twentieth century art to shame."⁴⁹ This kind of comparison, encouraged by Culin's displays, was also fostered by the juxtaposition of the art and ethnology halls at The Brooklyn

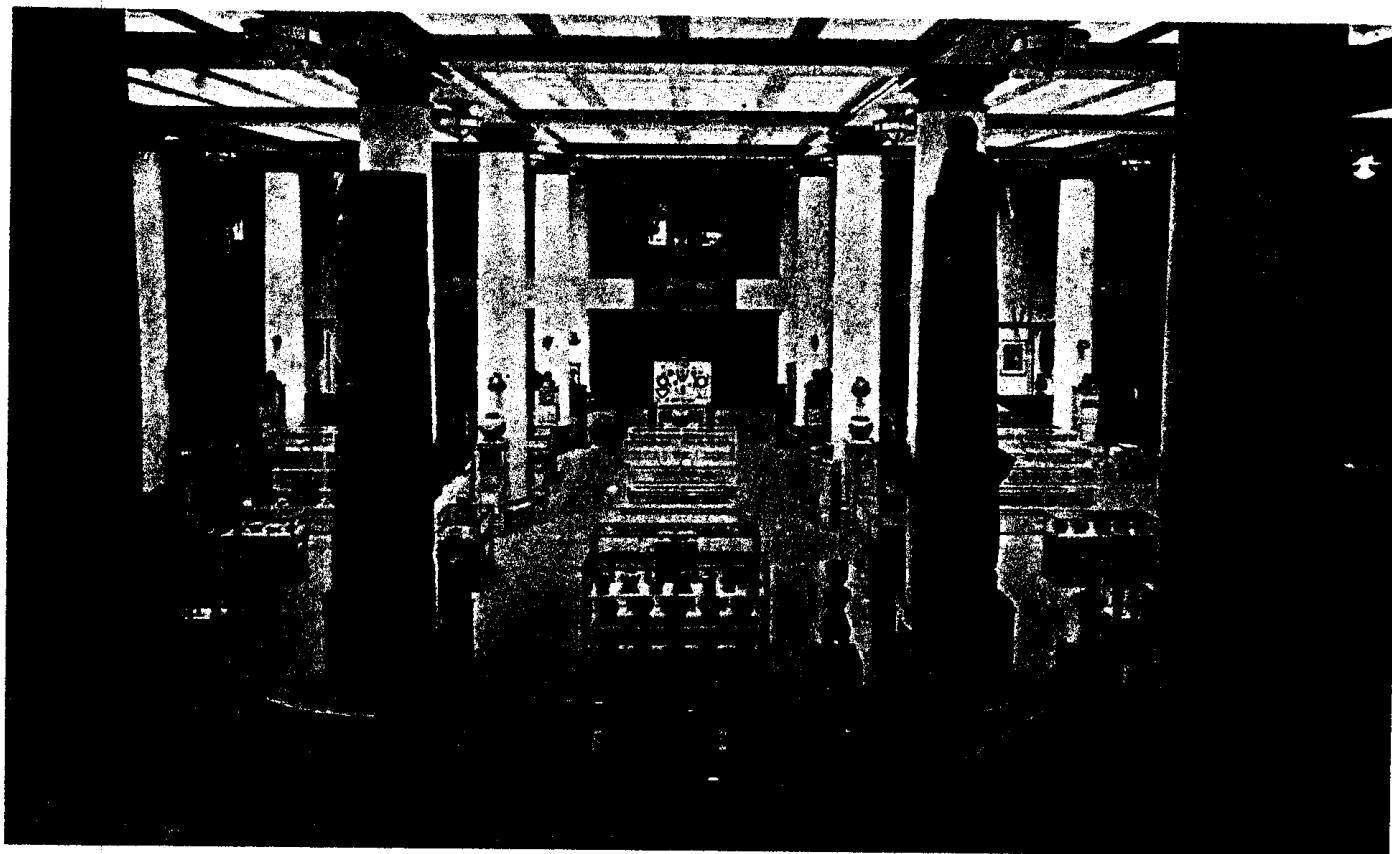


Fig. 19. The Rainbow House, Gallery of Ethnology, The Brooklyn Museum, 1930. By the time this picture was taken, a year after Culin's death, his installation had been slightly rearranged.

Museum; the general ethnology hall opened on the same day in 1905 as the Hall of Sculpture.⁵⁰ Culin's American Indian exhibits were thus among the first to be perceived as art and not just ethnology.

From Ethnology to Art, 1911–25

After his last American Indian collecting trip in 1911, Culin's interests turned to other regions. He cited 1909 as the time when he concluded "that however valuable these Indian collections might be in themselves other fields would prove more immediately helpful through the possibility of the application of the collection to the needs of the American artists in connection with industry."⁵¹ Specifically, he began to focus on textiles and their relation to fashion design.

In 1920 he took stock of his prior collecting in North America (1903–11) and the Orient (1909–14) as he turned to a new field in Europe (1920–28). Each of these units, he felt, was "more or less complete in itself." Culin was not alone in shifting his focus to the Old World. Most anthropology museums felt that they had "done" American Indians. By 1905 Dorsey's Field Museum was sending out expeditions to New Guinea, the Philippines, and East Asia. Galleries were filled, and there was a general perception that there was nothing left to collect among Native Americans.

From 1911 until Culin's death in 1929, The Brooklyn Museum acquired relatively few American Indian objects, and most of these were gifts. Significantly, one reason that Culin used to justify his meager American Indian acquisitions was a lack of space. As he explained in 1926, "Heretofore I have been indifferent about acquiring Indian collections as I had no place to show them."⁵² This was a very telling remark, for most other ethnology curators were happy to acquire research collections that they had no intention of displaying.

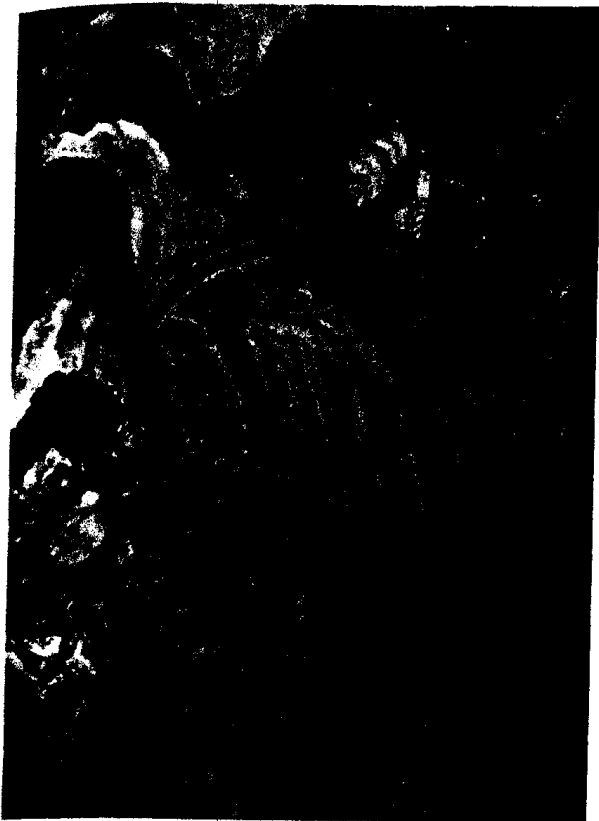


Fig. 20. The Rainbow House of the Zuni Indians. Watercolor by Alice Mumford Culin. Reproduced in Stewart Culin's 1927 essay "The Road to Beauty."

The few plans for American Indian collecting and exhibition that Culin made during these years were abortive. Citing competition from the American Museum of Natural History, he proposed making a summer field trip to Zuni in 1916 for "completing the data and verifying [his] field notes."⁵³ He also wished to purchase specimens to fill gaps in the collection. There is no evidence that Culin ever made the trip. The following year he traveled to Long Island and New England, in contemplation of an innovative gallery combining Euro-American and Indian material. He collected nothing Indian on the trip, however, and the hall was never built.⁵⁴ Though his interests had drifted elsewhere, it was through exhibits that Stewart Culin returned to the art of the American Indian.

The Rainbow House, 1925–29

For over a decade, Culin's North American halls remained unchanged. As early as 1910 the Museum's curator-in-chief was complaining of the congestion in the Ethnology Department, "where any expansion at present is impossible, and even the corridors have been used for exhibition halls."⁵⁵ Though the City of New York began construction of a new wing in 1913, it was not turned over to the Museum until 1925. Given space in the new building, Culin was at first upset at having to move: "It seemed as though Brooklyn was hopeless. I found I had to transfer all my collections to a new wing and it seemed as though the labor of years had been wasted."⁵⁶ As he began to plan the installation in early 1925, however, he evolved his idea of the Rainbow House.⁵⁷ Though the hall was dedicated that December, the American Indian collections were not moved until early in 1926, when the Rainbow House was opened to visitors, and installation work continued until early 1928.⁵⁸

The Rainbow House included most of the Ethnology collections: the Hall of the Primitive Races (American Indian, African, and Oceanic) in the lower court, and the oriental and eastern European galleries on an upper mezzanine. A Chinese Hall of State was arranged on the floor above, at the entrance.⁵⁹ Only one photograph of the Rainbow House is known (Fig. 19), but it reveals that the hall was open and spacious. Many items were exposed, hanging from the columns or resting on top of cases and pedestals. Dominating the space were the two halves of a Haida totem pole, in front of a Kwakiutl canoe and other Northwest Coast objects. The material in wall cases was decoratively arranged in symmetrical patterns (a popular Victorian style). Many elements—architectural models, photographs and maps, labels, and some of Judy's smaller murals and paintings—were recycled from Culin's original installation.

Culin regarded his hall as a kind of *imago mundi*: "I am newly installing my ethnological collections in a square hall symbolic of the world. . . . The races of the four world quarters are distinguished by the colors of the settings."⁶⁰ As far back as the 1880s, Culin had perceived four-quarter symbolism on many gaming implements. Yet the hall was not only a cosmic model; it was also a personal simulacrum, containing all Culin's collections from his many world travels. Having long since left their original habitats, these objects took on a new significance as they were again ordered in novel patterns. Culin was making explicit the metaphoric relationship, usually left unsaid, of the ethnographic display to the world: "This Gallery of Ethnology . . . is not merely a symbol of the people of the world. It is intended as the home of their spirit. [It is meant] as a place for its concrete expression."⁶¹

The Rainbow House took its name from the array of colors used to differentiate each region symbolically. As a newspaper described it, "Each



Fig. 21. Newspaper advertisement for an exhibition of women's blouses drawn from The Brooklyn Museum collections, New York, 1922. Note the American Indian costumes in the middle of each side.

ethnological group [was] represented by a color that to [Culin] typifies the inner meaning of their contributions to art development of the human race."⁶² Culin painted the Zuni cases pink and those of the California Indians red ("a deep strong red I call madrona, from the ruddy tree that everywhere enlivens the color of the coastal landscape"). The Caribbean area was given a blue for its ocean depths, South America a tawny yellow. Green in different shades was used for both the shallow waters of the Pacific islands and the tropical forests of Africa. "The maturer and more highly developed East" was marked with "the pure and intense color" of vermilion.⁶³

Culin drew on many sources for his rainbow scheme. He claimed that he borrowed "the idea as well as the name" of the Rainbow House from the Zuni. Though Culin noted that the Rainbow House was the abode of the personified rainbow spirit, it was also an actual place—a sacred spring east of Zuni, used as a war shrine and an augury in hunting. Culin was also familiar with the rainbow scheme at the Pan-American Exposition, held in Buffalo during 1901, where each pavilion was marked by a different color of paint and light.⁶⁴ Perhaps the most decisive influence was his wife, Alice Mumford Roberts Culin (1875-1950), a painter whom he married in 1917: "Mrs. Culin has been very helpful to me and my unrestrained feeling for color is due to her influence." Culin selected thirty-four of her watercolors for the installation (fourteen illustrating Zuni Indian folktales and eighteen with Congo themes), including one depicting the Rainbow House of Zuni myth (Fig. 20).⁶⁵

The Rainbow House was actually the culmination of many years of Culin's experiments with the colors of museum display. His first oriental halls had been "repainted in bright tones and form an effective setting for the Oriental collections."⁶⁶ In 1923 he employed the polychrome idea in his exhibition of European and Asian decorative arts, where each country's exhibit cases were painted a different color. Underlying this work was a more general poetic theory of color that Culin developed during these years: "Color is the most potent of all agencies that arrest our attention and stimulate our imagination."⁶⁷

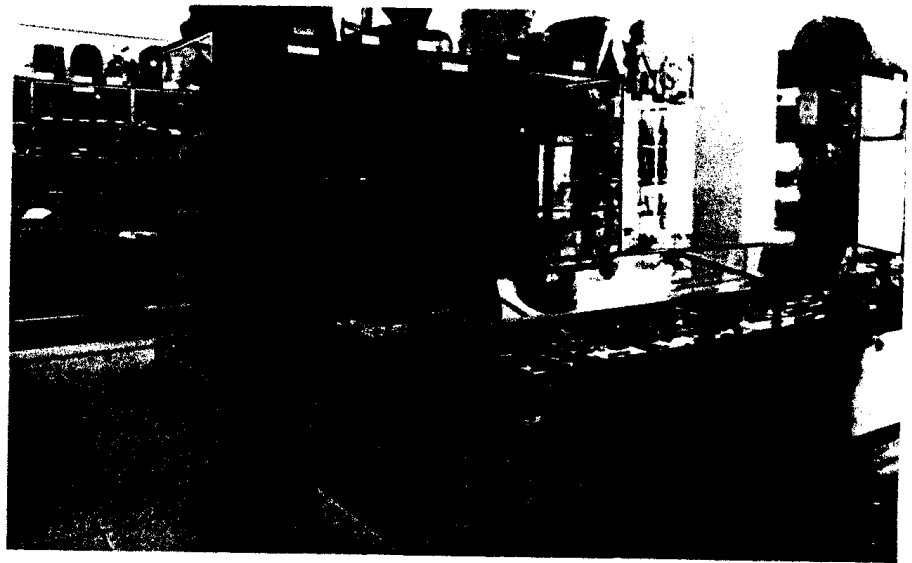
Culin's Rainbow House installation must also be seen as an expression of his interest in department stores and shop window display. Just as he drew on his experience as a merchant for his collecting, so, too, did he apply lessons from the world of commerce to his exhibitions. During his Philadelphia years he had established a friendship with John Wanamaker, who funded his expeditions for the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and was especially known for his impressive displays. Culin maintained a very high opinion of stores, which he felt were becoming "the aesthetic center of our urban communities":

More congruous than many of our residences, our shops display things far better, and more agreeably, than do our public institutions. The Zuni Indians whom Frank Cushing took many years ago to Washington, described our National Museum as a great shop where nothing was sold. If our shops showed their wares as uninvitingly as do many of our museums, they would sell nothing.⁶⁸

For inspiration, Culin looked to these lively shop windows, which he likened to theatrical stages.

By the late twenties, Culin had reacted against the dominant display strategies of his youth, including those of his original installations: "The main idea of the museum has been either to create a neutral setting for its treasures, one that would accommodate itself to varied sorts of things, or a realistic background that would simulate their original environment."⁶⁹ In

Fig. 22. American Indian exhibit, Museum of the American Indian, New York, ca. 1922-40.



contrast, he now preferred the vibrant colors used in contemporary shop displays:

[The Rainbow House] is better than my old halls for it is shown in clear light and the vivid colors of the cases and all the settings add greatly to the visibility of the objects. The old idea was to make cases and walls neutral in tone. It seemed reasonable, but in fact their contents merged with the neutral or black cases and gloom resulted. Things are seen much more vividly in colored cases.⁷⁰

Despite his intense interest in Old World cultures, Culin announced that "my own Ethnographical galleries shall be American first."⁷¹ In fact, reinstallation of the collection was an act of rediscovery: "We are now about to display our collections from the North American Indians. They are much more important than I realized."⁷² As he formulated his ideas, the Zuni returned to the center of his personal philosophy. In 1904 Culin had made little of the Rainbow House site, where he had stopped for lunch on the way to a Zuni shrine.⁷³ Yet in his talk at the hall's dedication, he associated it with the paradisaical "Summer Land in the South" of the Zuni.⁷⁴

Although Culin was vague about the meaning of his Rainbow House, images of youth and creation were central to his conception. Culin liked to think of "the races of antiquity as younger and not older than the people of our own age." Among them he could "refresh" himself, in order to "feel myself younger and more vital." Dawn imagery also suffused his remarks: "I have realized my dreams among savages in whose lives and thoughts I have had glimpses of the dawn of the world"; "The Zuni were an ever-smiling people, looking forward into the dawn [symbolized, perhaps, in the pink cases he gave them]."⁷⁵ Culin was here poetically synthesizing his own youth with that of the Zuni and all humanity.

Culin's radical reinterpretation of the Zuni is evident from the use of paintings in his two installations. Judy's documentary panoramas, based on field sketches, had depicted the view from a specific vantage point. Alice Culin's images, on the other hand, were imaginative re-creations of Zuni myths, based on Culin's stories. In fact, the entire visual style of the display bore out this difference. Where the first had been crowded, objective, and mimetic in its decorative elements, the reinstallation was spacious, expressionistic, and symbolic. Aesthetics, implicit in the original halls, were overt in the Rainbow House.

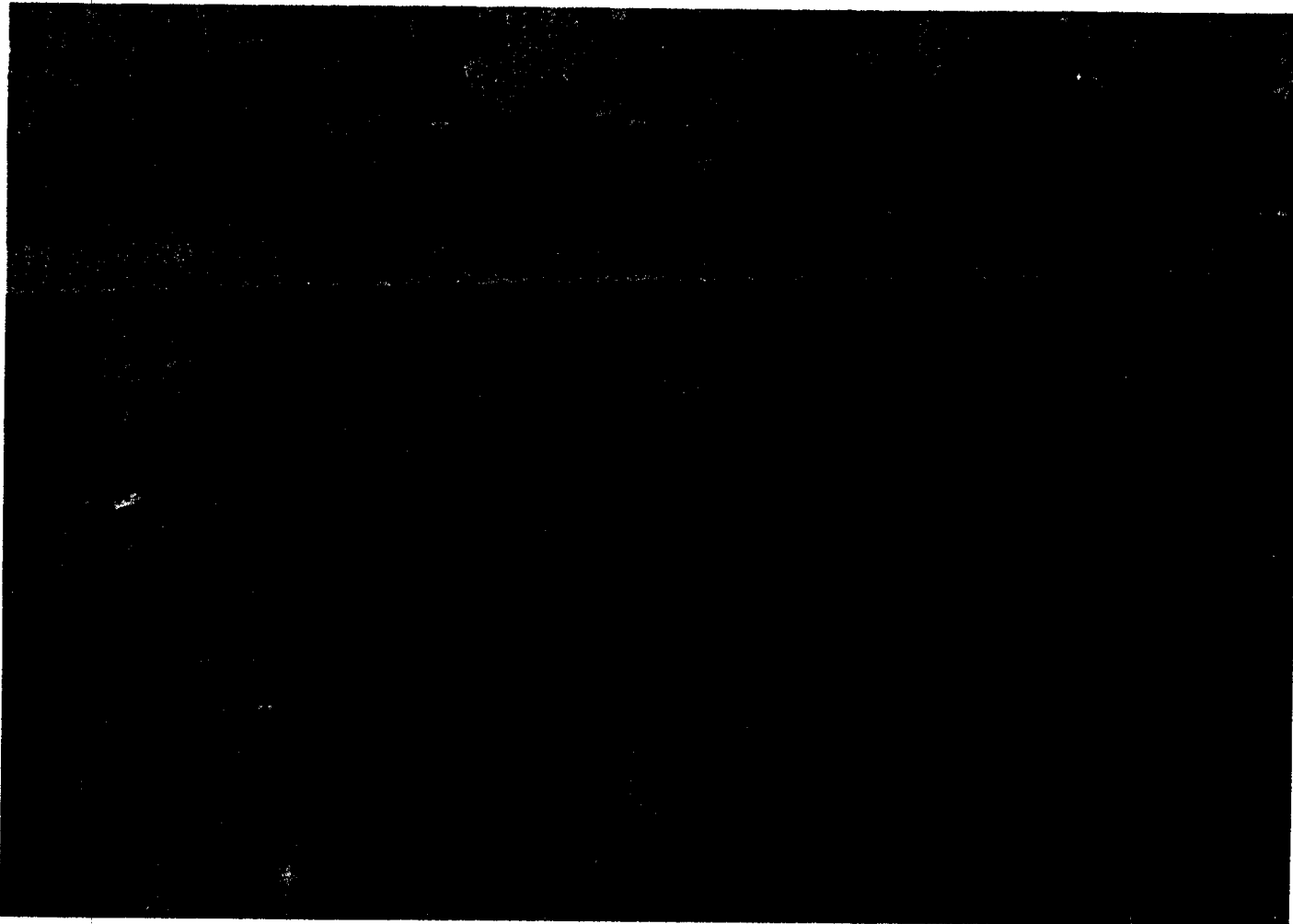


Fig. 23. Exhibition of the Decorative Arts of the American Indian, New York, 1925.

Despite his initial misgivings about having to move his exhibits, Culin soon came to prefer the new arrangement: "The scheme has been so successful, it promises to revolutionize our museums."⁷⁶ Elsewhere, he wrote:

Never before in a museum have carvings and basketry, textiles and pottery, the varied products of aboriginal industry appeared to such advantage. Once dead and inert, they have come to life, and blossomed under the glowing color of their immediate surroundings. To bring them to life, to coordinate them with living things had been always my object, but never before had that object been so nearly achieved.⁷⁷

To judge from press reaction, Culin had accomplished his goal. For Helen Appleton Read, the art critic of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, The Brooklyn Museum was "the first and, to my knowledge, the only museum in this country to show its ethnological collections artistically and as objects which have an interest over and above the purely scientific. In other words, the collections are displayed in such a way that their artistic qualities may be seen at a glance for those who are interested in that aspect."⁷⁸ The aesthetic approach, noted by reviewers of Culin's first installations, had now blossomed.

Helen Read was quite accurate in her assessment of Culin's achievement. With a few exceptions, the twenties were not good years for anthropology museums. The institutional setting of anthropology had changed radically, from the museum to the university.⁷⁹ Two of the largest ethnological collections had moved to new buildings—the U.S. National

Museum in 1910 and the Field Museum in 1922—yet in both cases, the exhibits were transferred virtually intact. The anthropology displays at the American Museum of Natural History had changed little since the mid-teens, suffering under a hostile administration more interested in dinosaurs and big-game dioramas.

At the time the Rainbow House opened, among the more recent anthropological displays were those at the Milwaukee Public Museum and the Museum of the American Indian. In the former, curator and then director Samuel Barrett brought the anthropological exhibits closer to the style of habitat dioramas, and in the latter (founded in 1916 but not opened to the public until November 1922), exhibits were crowded and traditional (Fig. 22). Perhaps the only real exception to Helen Read's claim was at The Denver Art Museum, where a Department of Indian Art had just been established in 1925.⁸⁰

Culin's polychrome scheme also received praise. *The New York Times* reported that Culin's exhibit was "of the gayest and brightest of colors—pink, red, yellow, green, all of the brightest tints. At the same time there is no conflict of colors; all of them blend harmoniously and charm the eye." Culin's friend M. D. C. Crawford wrote: "It makes a new departure in museum arrangement. There is a feeling of lightness and charm and virility of color that makes the sensation of visiting a museum a new and most delightful one."⁸¹ By February 1927 Culin was able to report, "The Rainbow House gains in popularity and is becoming more interesting."⁸²

"A Laboratory for Culture": Extension Programs

Stewart Culin hoped his exhibits would have an active effect on visitors. Proudly reporting the reaction of "a few selected visitors" to the soon-to-be opened hall, he wrote:

I find after seeing it they do not care to look at anything else in my department and disregard the galleries with which they before had expressed satisfaction. Those who are in the industries go away with a light in their eyes. They have been stimulated and plan things they have means to carry out. Others who have no such outlet, express annoyance and regret.⁸³

Accordingly, Culin resorted to several means of broadening the Museum's influence: lectures to school and design classes, an active loan program for manufacturers, and special exhibitions in department stores.⁸⁴

Culin was quite pleased with the use of his exhibits by school groups. Helen Read noted, "There is no similar instance of a museum collection which is so unqualifiedly given over for the purpose of stimulating creative ideas."⁸⁵ In the spring of 1927 the Museum sponsored a poster contest for students, who were to base their designs on objects from the Rainbow House (see p. 28).⁸⁶ As Culin wrote to the director of the Pratt Institute, "These classes... have given me an opportunity to put the machinery I am creating into practice. It works. I can see its effect on the students. Their natural gaiety is stimulated.... The reactions of the Pratt classes to our things are the most direct and useful indications of their value at my command."⁸⁷

During Culin's tenure at The Brooklyn Museum, the borough's population swelled greatly, with the largest increase occurring in the 1920s.⁸⁸ At the same time the population center shifted closer to the Museum, east from Brooklyn Heights to central Brooklyn. The extension of subway service to the Museum in 1920 boosted attendance still further. Culin wanted to reach this audience, to "draw crowds like 'the movies.'"⁸⁹ Again, he looked to the department stores for a model: "Ten thousand people visit a department store to gratify their curiosity, to see new things, [as com-

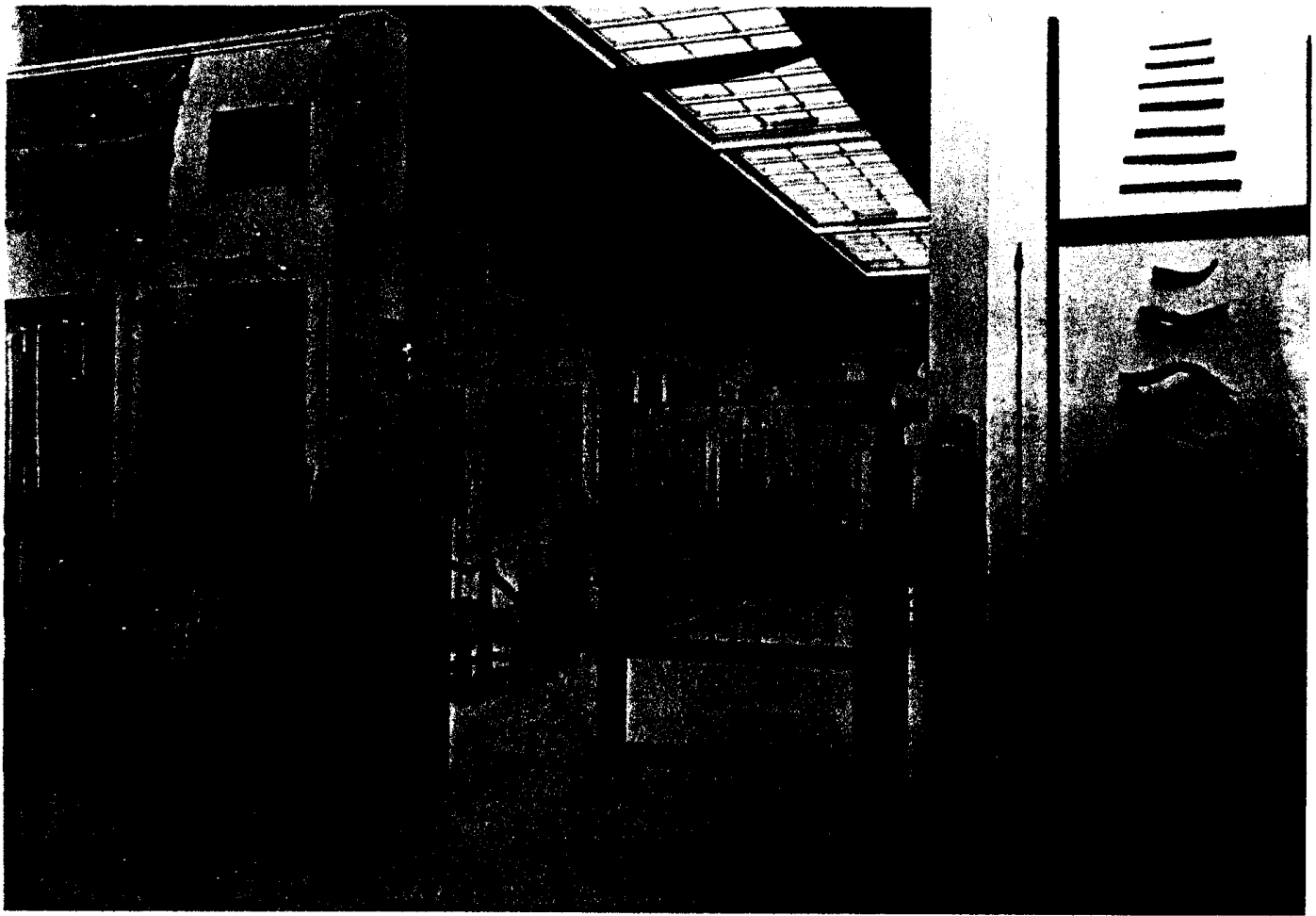


Fig. 24. The exhibition *Primitive Negro Art*, The Brooklyn Museum, 1923.

pared] to one who resorts to a museum or similar education institution.”⁹⁰

Perhaps the audience that most inspired Culin during these years was that of fashion designers. Although he was a pioneer in encouraging active cooperation between museums and industry, Culin was actually part of a larger movement. Many of the great American museums were founded with the intention of establishing a close working relationship with the industrial-design community. As early as 1910, The Metropolitan Museum of Art had a textile study room, and several more opened during the teens. At the same time, John Cotton Dana at The Newark Museum was leading his colleagues in museum display of crafts and industrial design.⁹¹

In 1919 Culin collaborated with ethnologist Herbert Spinden and writer M. D. C. Crawford, both then at the American Museum of Natural History, on an exhibition juxtaposing contemporary fashions and the museum objects that had inspired them.⁹² Editor of the trade journal *Women's Wear Daily* and an amateur scholar of textile history, Morris de Camp Crawford (1882-1949) was Culin's most dedicated protégé. Responding to Culin's suggestion that he write a book on costumes and textiles, Crawford wrote, "I shall always look upon you as the greatest influence in my life—and if I write it will be as much an interpretation of your influences as my own ideas." Until his death in 1929, Culin worked closely with Crawford, becoming contributing editor to the Design Department of the paper in January 1920.⁹³

The Brooklyn Museum loaned objects to several exhibits organized by Crawford and *Women's Wear Daily*. Many of these shows were held in department stores or at meetings of trade associations. The 1925 *Exhibition*

of the *Decorative Arts of the American Indian* (Fig. 23), for example, contained historic material from Museum collections (Navajo blankets, Pomo baskets, Hopi pots, Zuni masks, and the two Zuni shields made for Culin [see No. 114], among others), complemented by contemporary art supplied by the Eastern Association on Indian Affairs.⁹⁴

Bringing the museum to the artist and manufacturer—an ideal dating back to the mid-nineteenth century—was Culin's goal for the Rainbow House. In a talk on museums and advertising, he characterized the museum as a "laboratory for the culture and ferments that are necessary for the stimulation of the creative activities. . . . My idea is a museum in which the things of the past are vitalized. My collections are kept alive and are shooting into new life and development in the present-day world, a world greedy for fertile ideas"⁹⁵

Culin's Legacy

Although Stewart Culin had been one of the founders of the American Anthropological Association, his death in 1929 went unmarked in the pages of the *American Anthropologist*. Several factors account for Culin's meager reputation among later anthropologists. Though Culin's disciplinary focus may have shifted radically over his career, intellectually the change was not as great. All his life he maintained an interest in the evolution of general human types, an approach effectively critiqued by Franz Boas in the 1890s. His thought of the 1920s—quite at variance with museum ethnology from about 1900, let alone with the field at the time—was not, in fact, far from his writings at the beginning of his career. Culin was also limited by his institutional focus: the museum and local professional organizations rather than the university. Like earlier Smithsonian anthropologists, Culin's reputation was hampered by a lack of students, a means to disseminate one's ideas. Furthermore, Culin had the more specific problem of his relative lack of scholarly publications, which virtually ceased after his appointment to Brooklyn.⁹⁶

Probably the most decisive reason that he was not remembered by anthropologists, however, was his shift to a fundamentally aesthetic approach. During his time in Philadelphia, Culin belonged to several art societies and befriended artists such as Thomas Eakins. His expedition reports are filled with aesthetic evaluations of the artifacts he was collecting, and his flair for the visual was quite apparent in his decorative exhibitions. Culin's participation in the aesthetic realm seems to have greatly increased after his marriage to Alice Mumford Roberts in 1917 and his collaboration with Morris Crawford. Among Culin's best-known achievements is his 1923 exhibition of African art (Fig. 24), widely regarded as the first exhibition of African artifacts as art in an American museum.⁹⁷ At his death, Culin was memorialized by publications such as *Art News* and the *Art Digest*, almost all of which mentioned his work with fashion and design, and his popular museum exhibitions.⁹⁸

At heart, Stewart Culin was a "museum man." His research centered on objects; the public expression of this research took the form of exhibits; and his entire professional life was spent in museums. Few of his contemporaries were as focused as Culin on the "language of things." Although he has long been remembered for his compendium on North American Indian games, the extent of his achievement was obscured when his collections were removed to storage and separated from their rich documentation. Now that many of them are being exhibited for the first time in decades, we can reevaluate his accomplishments. These objects remain as Stewart Culin's true legacy.