

Making Par: Puzzles for Rich and Famous.

by Anne D. Williams © 2002

Say "Par" to an old-time New York puzzler, and the enthusiastic response is instantaneous. Par is one of the most cherished names in jigsaw puzzles, having reigned as the premier maker of luxury puzzles for five decades. But many of today's puzzlers have never seen a Par puzzle, much less had the opportunity to play with one.

Par Company Ltd. began in the depths of the Great Depression when a jigsaw puzzle craze swept the United States. Thousands of puzzle companies sprang up as box makers, lithographers, and individuals with home workshops jumped in to meet the demand and at the same time replace other lost sources of income. Most closed down when the economy revived, but Par grew and flourished through the 1970s. Indeed, the company built a reputation that is still legendary as the "Rolls-Royce of puzzles."

Par was most famous for creating beautiful one-of-a-kind puzzles for the rich and famous—show business celebrities as well as business tycoons and royalty. The company also catered to less famous (but still well-to-do) puzzlers, many of whom rented dozens of Par puzzles over the years.

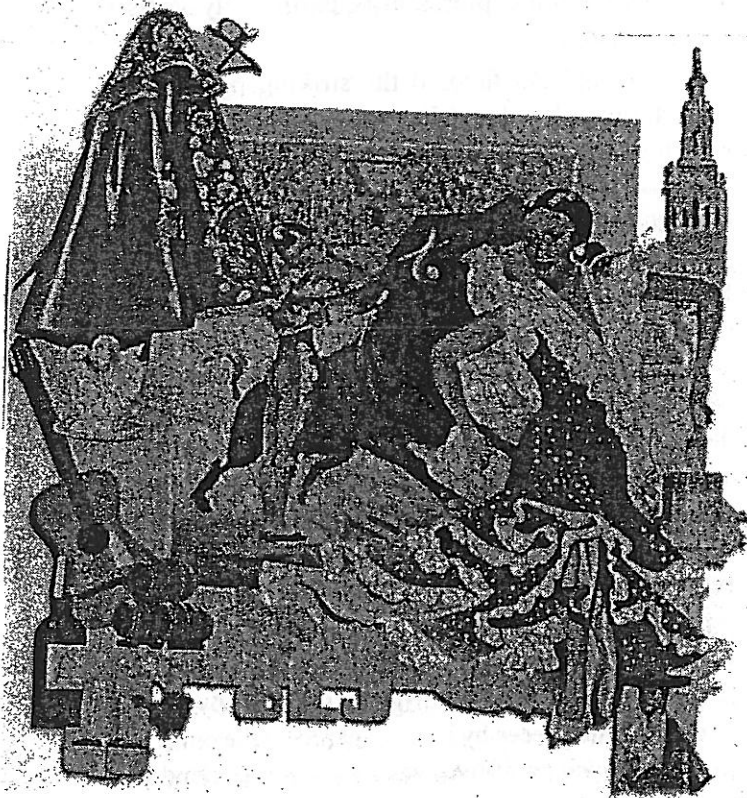


Figure 1. "Fancy Footwork," a colorful poster cut into 900 pieces with irregular edge and owner's CLJ monogram, exemplifies the best of Par puzzles.

Beginnings

Par puzzles were the creation of Frank Ware and John Henriques. Neither initially envisioned that puzzles would become their life work.

Francis Quarles Ware (1903-1984) was the son of Ada Johnson Ware and Edgar Thomas Ware, an executive with American Tobacco, and grew up in Garrison, New York. He attended The Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, where he demonstrated his artistic talents with a sketch published in the yearbook. The death of his mother and family financial reverses forced Frank to drop out after his sophomore year. By 1928, however, he was established as the advertising director for Pennsylvania-Dixie Cement in New York City.

He had also met his life partner, John Nunes Henriques (1903-1972). Little is known about Henriques' background except that he was a New Yorker who played excellent tennis and sold real estate in the late 1920s. The couple lived in New York until the onset of the Great Depression, when both men lost their jobs. With the optimism of youth they concluded that the hard times would be short-lived. They seized on the dismal situation as a golden opportunity for a six month tour of Europe.

On their return in 1931 the economy's downward spiral was accelerating. Still jobless, they cast about for a way to keep busy during their forced leisure. Henriques' family had always had a passion for jigsaw puzzles, and Ware was willing to give it a try. They cut their first puzzle, a Matisse print, with a coping saw at the dining room table.

At first the two made puzzles just to amuse themselves and their friends. The Par brochure glorified these early days. "The aim was simply a better puzzle ... not profit. The makers were both puzzle fans of many years standing. They knew the relative merits of the good puzzles on the market. And they knew, too, that certain definite improvements and refinements in materials, in workmanship were possible. They experimented for months – with pictures printed on different papers – trying many woods and styles of cutting – testing saw blades and glues. They developed rigid specifications. Then they made puzzles which set a new standard."

In 1932, as the unemployment rate approached 25 percent and the contemporary puzzle craze intensified,

Ware and Henriques discovered that their friends and their friends' friends were willing to rent and even buy wooden puzzles. So they converted a hobby into a business. With a \$35 electric scroll saw, a stock of pictures, and some walnut plywood, they set up a workshop in their basement at 419 West 154th Street.

Ware, with his background in marketing, thought their future prospects were good despite Henriques' skepticism. Ware proved to be right. They had to work hard, of course. At first they lugged heavy suitcases all around New York, as they delivered and picked up the rental puzzles. An early window display of their puzzles in midtown Manhattan garnered affluent customers from both industry and the arts. They soon put together the perfect combination of a top quality product and the clientele that could afford it. By 1936 they had moved their workshop to a posh central location, a two story penthouse on 53rd Street, between Madison and Fifth Avenues.



Figure 2. "Double Exposure" (775 pieces) features a completely irregular edge. The mirroring of the owner's monogram matches the image. *reflection*

The "Rolls-Royce of Puzzles"

Par's success was all the more remarkable, because while they were raising quality, most of the puzzle industry was rushing in the opposite direction, to the mass marketing of ever cheaper puzzles. The "Jig of the Week" and "Picture Puzzle Weekly" marked the introduction of the die-cut cardboard puzzle for adults in the fall of 1932. Selling at 25 cents each or less, weekly puzzles fueled the Depression puzzle craze. By the time the "Jigsaw Jag" peaked in March of 1933, ten million new puzzles were flooding the United States market each week.

How could Ware and Henriques compete when they sold a 500-piece Par puzzle for \$7.50 or rented it for 75 cents per week? Quality and customization were the answers. Par built its reputation on unique personalized creations, using unusual prints, tricky cutting, impossible par times, and top of the line materials.

The Prints. Ware and Henriques shared the same taste for modern art and were bored with what they called "the idiot variety of the old tavern scenes." So they tried to wean their customers away from the scenic pictures and sentimental vignettes that then dominated traditional puzzles. Instead they introduced puzzles featuring the art of Picasso, Dali, Dufy, and Leger, among others. They were specially partial to the very colorful impressionists, particularly Matisse and Van Gogh.

The pair also favored the striking posters that advertised railroads, airlines, circuses, and theater. Judging by the many travel posters that appear on Par puzzles, Ware and Henriques must have checked the foreign tourism offices and travel agencies in New York regularly for new stock. Pan American Airways posters, showing destinations all around the world, were staples of their print collection.

Par customers could visit the office and make their own choices from the vast selection of prints. Or, as did many, they could describe their general tastes to Ware and Henriques who would then surprise them with an appropriate picture. The partners also kept "ready cut" puzzles on hand to accommodate urgent needs of puzzlers who were willing to take "pot luck."

Par encouraged orders that used the buyer's submissions: photographs, original art, Christmas cards, and the like. An original painting by Gene Davis, cut into pieces by Par, appeared on the cover of *Art in America* in 1969. Another time a friend of Picasso asked the partners to dissect a print of the

artist's "Still Life with Black Bust." When Picasso received the gift puzzle, he apparently loved it.

Although the partners drew the line at hard-core pornography, they sawed up more than a few *Playboy* centerfolds. Of course, Par cut its share of thatched cottages, Currier and Ives reproductions, and other traditional pictures too. Ware complained to the *New Yorker* in 1946, "We had very little success trying to steer people away from junk, and now we make mostly hunting scenes." Ware particularly disliked seascape puzzles, with their vast and boring expanses of blue sky and blue water.

The Cutting. Ware and Henriques brought exceptional artistry to their puzzles. They adopted the best of the old cutting techniques and perfected new ones to keep their puzzles interesting and challenging. Each contributed complementary talents to their craft. While Ware was the better artist, Henriques did the fastest and most intricate cutting.

Ware designed the hundreds of unique Par figure pieces: dancers and athletes in all sorts of poses and, of course, their signature seahorse piece. Interestingly, Par's first signature piece was a backwards swastika. When Hitler appropriated that symbol, they searched for a replacement trademark with happier associations.

Drama critic and customer Alexander Woollcott suggested the seahorse, which has appeared in every Par puzzle since then. Occasionally buyers who wanted more challenging puzzles asked Par to omit the figure pieces; but they always found a seahorse or two nestled amongst the pieces. Stylized sketches of seahorses served to sign each item of Par's voluminous correspondence. The same sketch appears in gold ink in the margins of many later puzzles

Custom-made puzzles featured the owners' monograms and significant dates. Par was happy to tailor the figure pieces to the owner's interests: an elephant for a staunch Republican, baby carriages for an expectant mother, or a Christmas tree for a holiday gift. Some Par buyers placed standing orders to receive a puzzle each month; so Ware was continually creating imaginative new ways to cut their initials.

The Duke of Windsor, who abdicated the British throne to marry Wallis Simpson, was perhaps their most famous buyer of personalized puzzles. Each of his puzzles had to include the initials "H.R.H." (for "His Royal Highness"), the Windsor crest, and silhouettes of his four cairn terriers. Puzzles for his wife always contained a "W.W." monogram, patterned after her signature.



Figure 3. Some typical Par figure pieces. The top row shows the "PAR" logo that appears in some early puzzles and three jesters holding the owner's initials, GCM. The Par seahorse is in the second row.

Par used a variety of cutting techniques to tease and perplex their customers, especially in the custom-made puzzles. Common tricks included dividing the true corners, cutting fake corners in the middle of the puzzle, or cutting along the color lines. The last made it hard for the puzzler to realize, for example, that the brown piece of a door fit next to the red section of bricks.

Their most creative cutting came with the "drop-out" and the irregular edge. Par appears to have invented the sneaky "drop-out," a gap within a puzzle, often to accentuate the initials of a monogram or to show off the details of a figure piece. Puzzlers go crazy when first encountering this device; only after a lengthy and futile search for the odd-shaped piece comes a realization that the void is deliberate.

The irregular edge was an old trick, but one that Par reinvented and elevated to a new art form. Most puzzlers were used to traditional rectangular puzzles and tackled them by first sorting out the corners and edges to frame the image. When faced with Par's irregular edges, they hardly knew where to begin. Ware and Henriques did keep the rectangular outlines for prints of art masterpieces, not wanting to violate the artist's conception of the picture, but they had no such scruples with other material.



Figure 4. "A Dutch Treat" (635 pieces) is what remains of a 1930s poster for Netherlands Railways after Par cut away the advertising messages.

It was an accident that led them to irregular borders and thus freedom from the tyranny of the straight and narrow. Their wire-haired terrier chewed up a puzzle they had just finished. Loath to discard their work, they made a virtue out of necessity and snipped off the damaged parts.

Irregular edges were particularly useful when they dissected posters. If "Come to Spain" was emblazoned across the top, the partners simply cut away the unwanted words, and often the entire background. They embellished some edges with names, dates, flying birds, or other creatures. They could cut the same poster in different ways, depending on the order. The 500-piece version would be trimmed more and have a totally different edge from the larger 1200-piece one.

Par Time. Each puzzle label gave a "par time," a norm like the par for strokes in golf. It challenged puzzlers to prove they were "up to par" by completing the puzzle within that time limit. Initially Henriques, a *very* fast puzzler, assembled each puzzle after it was cut. "Par" represented his time. In later years, they

just estimated par, being much too busy to assemble each and every puzzle.

Par time was a constant source of frustration to the customers. Few could match it, and occasionally a client would challenge it. Henriques' standard bet was \$25 that he could indeed make par on his own puzzles. He always won. Some puzzlers, feeling too pressured by the time on the box, asked that it be eliminated. Par on their labels consisted of cryptic phrases and their initials: "ask GM" or "RT knows."

Double entendres enlivened some labels. "Sheer Bliss" was one of Par's most popular puzzles; a pastel collage of wedding mementos. They sold dozens of copies as anniversary gifts, each listing the par time as "forever and ever." On their largest puzzle, a 10,000-piece monster, they set par at "days and nights;" they truly had no idea how long it would take to assemble.

Par times were specially infuriating to those who usually assembled puzzles with the aid of the picture on the box. Par puzzles came in plain black boxes with no guide pictures. Furthermore, the partners delighted in teasing puzzlers with corny titles that gave only a hint of the true subject. "Mad Meadows" turned out to show the 1939 New York World's Fair in Flushing Meadows. "Bobby's Beat" represented a London street scene. "High IQ" was the title for a map of Cambridge. A fall foliage scene became "Turn Coat." And a picture of Jenny Lind and P.T. Barnum was known as "The Nightingale's Knight."



Figure 5. Detail from "Sheer Bliss" (800 pieces). Par sold dozens of copies of this puzzle, each personalized with the appropriate wedding anniversary date and the couple's initials. Par is "Forever and ever."

Materials. Ware and Henriques were always secretive about how they actually made the puzzles. They welcomed customers and reporters into the office, but absolutely refused to let anyone view the glueing, designing, cutting, or finishing. The wooden cut out letters on the workshop door said it all: "SCAT." Nevertheless, they were quite happy to boast about their success in finding high quality materials.

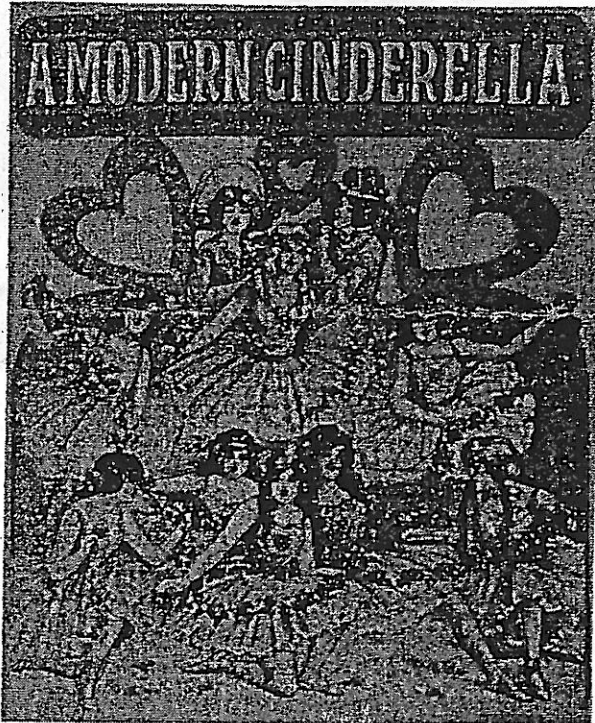


Figure 6. "Hearts and Flowers" (750 pieces) used a theater poster with many drop-outs.

For precision cutting they used extremely fine German blades, only .007" thick. Par had chemists working for five years before they finally developed a glue that met the partners' precise requirements. It took longer to solve the plywood problem. At first Ware and Henriques used three-ply walnut backed wood, but they soon found that walnut splintered too much. They switched to three-ply Honduras mahogany, which they used at least through the 1940s. During the 1950s they began working with five-ply mahogany that was less likely to break.

At one point when their normal supplier was unable to obtain any mahogany, Par even imported whole logs directly from a Belize plantation. A customer in the diplomatic corps helped with the importing arrangements, perhaps to minimize delays in receiving his next puzzle. Customer connections also led them to a manufacturer that made custom plywood sheets to Par's exacting specifications.

The Customers

While the quality product was the key to Par's outstanding success, Ware and Henriques were also unsurpassed at finding buyers who cherished and could afford that quality. Although Par did some advertising in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* in the early years, it wasn't necessary for long. Their flair for publicity and word of mouth recommendations from satisfied buyers served them much better. They soon built up a customer list that read like a *Who's Who* of high society, both in New York and around the world.

They had some luck at the beginning when Norman Bel Geddes, a leading stage and industrial designer, rented one of their puzzles. Not only did he and his children (including actress Barbara Bel Geddes) become excellent customers, but they spread the word to all their friends and associates in the performing arts. Over the years Par cut puzzles for Jimmy Durante, Humphrey Bogart, Bing Crosby, Yul Brynner, Marlene Dietrich, James Garner, Marilyn Monroe, and Gary Cooper, just to name a few.

Ware and Henriques moved in literary, publishing, and broadcasting circles too. Among their customers they numbered CBS executives, the chief editor for *Harper's Magazine*, *Encyclopedia Britannica* editor Franklin Hooper, and mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart. Some of these notables insisted that Par send them puzzles in unmarked boxes, to conceal their addiction to jigsaws from their high brow colleagues.

Time-Life's founder Henry Luce and his wife Clare Boothe Luce, playwright and ambassador, were among their best customers and supporters. Mrs. Luce never set foot in the Par office because the partners repeatedly refused to divulge any of their trade secrets for cutting puzzles. Yet she remained friendly, sending them ties decorated with seahorses. The Luce connection paid off handsomely in terms of publicity; Par received major spreads in *Life* and *Sports Illustrated*. Luce also commissioned the partners to cut a small puzzle for use in a *Time* advertisement.

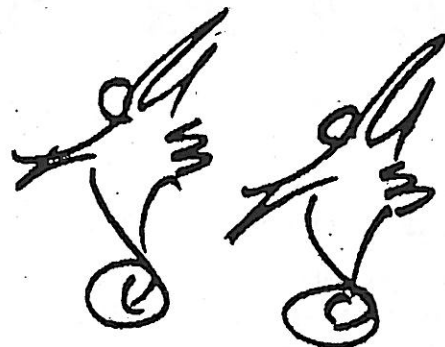


Figure 7. Ware and Henriques decorated some puzzles and signed correspondence with these seahorse sketches.

Par's mailing list boasted business tycoons and politicians as well. Edsel Ford kept puzzles aboard his yacht. Charles M. Schwab, founder of Bethlehem Steel, ordered them for his private railroad car. Par puzzles graced the mansions of Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, du Ponts, Astors, Goulds, and Crowninshields. Wendell Wilkie and Dwight D. Eisenhower owned Par puzzles.

For each famous customer who was willing to be named in Par publicity, there were dozens more who preferred anonymity. Par guarded their privacy closely and opened up the company files only once, during World War II. The FBI and the British Intelligence Service were hunting for Axis spies who were sending secret messages to Trinidad in hollowed out wooden puzzle pieces. They exonerated Par's clientele, however. Most likely the spies could not afford Par's premium prices and had to resort to lesser quality puzzles for their communications.

Rental Puzzles

While the customized puzzles were the most fun and commanded the highest prices, the rental puzzles provided a solid base for Par's operations for more than thirty years. Within Manhattan they used messengers to deliver and collect the puzzles and promised that "a phone call or note received before 6 p.m. brings a puzzle to your door the same day." For more distant customers, who were located throughout the country, they depended on the U.S. mail.

One woman rented 90 puzzles a year for over a decade without ever losing a piece. Like earlier puzzle libraries, Par kept careful records to make sure that she never got the same puzzle twice. Other regular customers included lighthouse keepers and many New Englanders who had a long puzzling tradition. Rentals soared during World War II as gas rationing kept people at home. Escaping into a puzzle brought a respite from worries about the news from the front.

Rental rates were quite reasonable, though still more than the price of a cardboard puzzle. By 1964 Par was charging \$3.75 a week for a standard sized 750-piece puzzle that would fit on a card table.

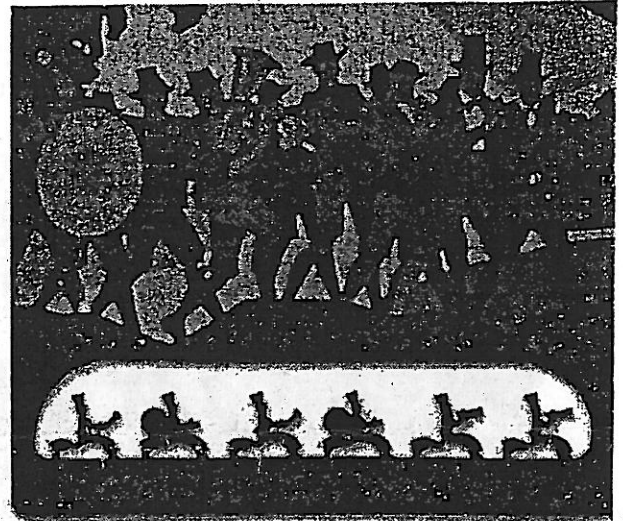


Figure 9. Detail from "Stepping Out" (500 pieces). The band member pieces, accentuated by drop-outs, mirror the image of this poster in one of the more interesting rental puzzles.

Having discovered early on how difficult it was to make replacements when pieces got lost, Ware and Henriques set policies to minimize the problem of damage. They encouraged their Manhattan customers to leave each puzzle assembled until Par's messenger arrived to pack it. Puzzles that went further afield were checked upon their return, sometimes with the help of relatives who loved to assemble puzzles. Renters who damaged puzzles had to purchase them. And the partners had no compunction about cutting off the supply to those who repeatedly lost pieces or allowed dogs to chew them to bits.

Par periodically culled the rental collection, selling off the worn puzzles at discount prices. In 1964 they offered used 750-piece puzzles for \$18, \$25.50 and \$33, much less than the \$125 price tag for a new puzzle. Buyers could specify only the price they would pay; the actual title they received was a matter of chance. A few years later, weary of the hassle, the partners shut down the rental operation entirely.

The rental puzzles are easy to identify because each has a serial number on the label. On the whole they tend to be more traditional puzzles, both in subject matter and cutting. While some had irregular edges, many were rectangular. And obviously none of the rentals had the monograms, dates, and other personalized touches that made Par famous.



Figure 8. The serial number on the end label indicates that "High Spy" was a rental puzzle. This is an early light green label with no street address.

The Par Partners

Ware and Henriques, though financially successful, were not the typical New York businessmen of the time. Many who knew them described them as “eccentric” and “zany.” It was not just that they worked in blue jeans instead of suits. They also had strong, independent, and fun-loving personalities. They enjoyed challenging and fooling their customers. Basically they had a great career entertaining people and answering only to themselves.

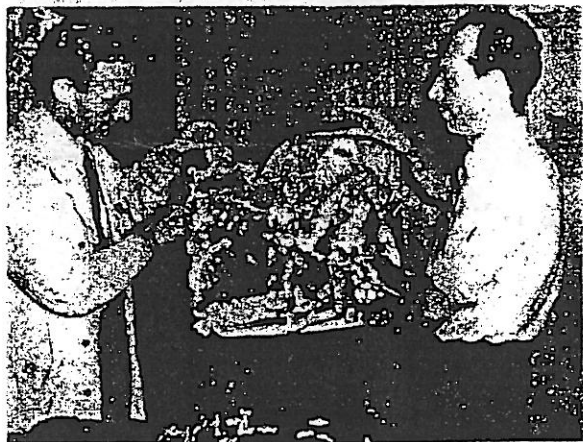


Figure 10. John Henriques (left) and Frank Ware (right) display a Par puzzle in a 1940 photo.

They made one puzzle that gamblers loved. “48 into 49” was a borderless map of the U.S., cut out of plain bakelite (an early plastic) along state lines. The pieces had no writing on them, and nothing about the cutting revealed which side was up. More than one owner used it for bar bets, challenging the unsuspecting to put the map together in less than fifteen minutes. Even those who could sort out all the rectangular states in the middle had trouble with Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, the 49th piece.

The partners liked to tease and joke with people, about everything from puzzles to life in general. They could be witty, irreverent, outrageous, and sometimes quite rude. They spoke their minds and didn’t tolerate fools gladly, even the ones who were spending thousands of dollars on puzzles. They went so far as to refuse puzzle orders on occasion. Henriques told the *New York Times*, “We aren’t unreasonable, but if we don’t like people, we won’t do one.” Once he even threw a particularly obnoxious customer’s money down the stairs after him.

On the whole people liked the pair and found them amusing and interesting. Ware and Henriques were very outgoing and became personal friends with many

puzzlers. Their bookshelves were full of first editions inscribed by authors who were Par customers. *New Yorker* cartoonist Charles Addams presented them with a special drawing in appreciation of the many Par puzzles he had enjoyed. When Norman Bel Geddes designed the General Motors Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World’s Fair, he enlisted Ware to help him build the displays.

Ware and Henriques worked hard, often six days a week. They were proud of their ingenuity, self-reliance, and independence, being self taught in art, cutting puzzles, and repairing machinery. They felt it was inappropriate to ask their underlings to tackle the most difficult tasks. The partners did the heavy lifting, not just figuratively but literally too, as when they carried the heavy workbench up the stairs. (The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor, one flight shy of their workshop.)

Yet they took plenty of time to enjoy their leisure. Great fans of the arts, Ware and Henriques were regulars at New York theaters, concert halls, and movie houses. While hobnobbing with the glitterati, not only did they produce some dazzling personalized puzzles, but they also made some brilliant investments. As backers of Broadway musicals, they astutely picked smash hits like “Cabaret,” “The Music Man,” “Mame,” and “Fiddler on the Roof.” They spent many weekends at their country home in southern Vermont.

Though they did not conceal their homosexuality, neither did they flaunt it. Their public behavior was discrete, as was considered proper for that era. They took care that visitors to their workshop were comfortable, regardless of their sexual orientation. The male elevator operator in the 53rd Street building once began flirting with a Par employee, a teenage boy who worked after school to sweep the floors and clean up. When the partners learned about the incident, they made sure that the elevator operator was replaced.

Successors

Once Ware and Henriques had established their niche, they stayed there. One industrialist was so taken with Par puzzles that he drew up an elaborate plan for expansion into mass production. The partners would have nothing to do with such schemes, preferring to continue on a small scale in their rather cramped quarters on 53rd Street. The two did all their own cutting during the 1930s, although they employed up to five assistants at a time to help with delivery, packing, shipping, and cleaning up.

One of the young helpers, Arthur Gallagher (1922-1989), started as a Par messenger in the late 1930s. He served in the military during World War II, then returned to the company as an apprentice. During a nine-month training period he progressed from the basics to the finest points of puzzle making. Over the years Gallagher took on more of the production cutting, while Henriques concentrated on the custom cutting.

When Henriques died in 1972, Ware felt some of the zest go out of his work and decided it was time to retire. But a feature story that summer in the *Wall Street Journal* brought in so many orders that he kept going a year longer than he had intended. In 1974, he gave Gallagher the entire business - saws, wood, pictures, and the invaluable mailing list. Ware spent his retirement years pursuing his interests in theater and books, but interestingly kept not a single Par puzzle in his Sutton Place apartment. He died in 1984.

Gallagher relocated the business to North Massapequa, close to his home on Long Island, and operated it on a smaller scale. Working by himself, he could cut about 125 puzzles per year, roughly a third of what Par had been producing a few years earlier. One of his sons helped for a while, but had no desire for a career in the puzzle business. Gallagher eventually found his own apprentice, John Madden, who became the third generation trained in the art and secrets of cutting Par puzzles.

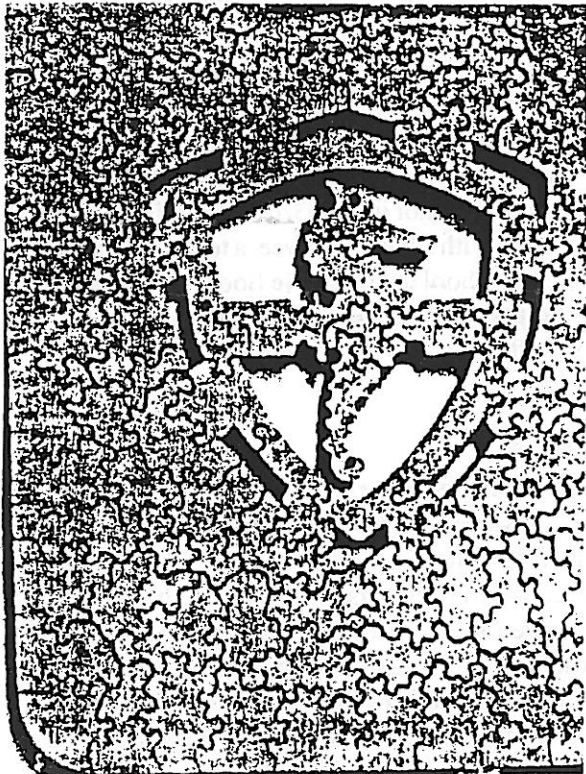


Figure 11. This complex seahorse with drop-outs appears in "Some Sock" (1240 pieces).



Figure 12. Early versions of this Valentine's Day puzzle are called "Be My Love." John Madden cut this one (165 pieces) in the 1990s and called it "Cupid." Naturally several of the figure pieces are cupids.

By the early 1980s poor health forced Gallagher to retire as well. He turned over the business to Madden, who operated it part-time from his nearby home. He still cuts a few dozen puzzles each year.



Values, Then and Now

During the 1930s Par charged 1½ cents per piece, or \$15 for a 1000-piece puzzle. The “puzzle of the month” service offered a dozen such puzzles at the slight discount of \$175 for an annual subscription. Of course, today’s puzzlers would queue for days to buy Pars at such dirt cheap prices. But during the Great Depression, the queues were at the soup kitchens. A worker who managed to find employment at the 25 cent minimum wage earned only \$10 per week.

Par prices went up over the years, reaching 3½ cents per piece in 1944, 17 cents in 1965, and 30 cents in 1980. Today John Madden charges about \$2 per piece, and some of his competitors charge even more. The labor-intensive nature of puzzle crafting means that puzzle prices have increased much more than the general inflation rate.

Activity in the secondary market for Par puzzles has increased in the last five years. Apparently not all the children and grandchildren of the original owners cherish their Pars enough to pass up the prices that they command today. Several Par puzzles now turn up for sale each month on eBay, the online auction.

Complete puzzles in excellent condition sell on eBay in the \$1 to \$2.50 per piece range, or \$750 to \$1875 for a 750-piece puzzle. The colorful posters with interesting irregular edges and abundant figure pieces fetch the highest prices. Personalized puzzles and the impressionists also do well. Rental puzzles go for less, rarely exceeding \$1.15 per piece. Incomplete puzzles usually sell below \$1 per piece, with the actual value depending on the extent of the damage.

The market is still thin, however, with only a dozen serious collectors accounting for the bulk of the purchases on eBay. When two or three of them set their sights on a particular Par, its price soars. Bidding is often very active, with the less affluent collectors establishing their presence just in case the heavy hitters fail to show up and a bargain materializes.

How many Par puzzles might come onto the market in the future? Although no records survive on Par’s production, some estimates are possible. It took almost a full day’s work to make a 500-piece puzzle, and most Par puzzles were larger. Highly personalized puzzles required more time as well. It is thus plausible that each man could have cut up to 200 puzzles per year. Given the number of men cutting over the years, Par could have made a maximum of 20,000 puzzles. The actual number was likely fewer, around 16,000.

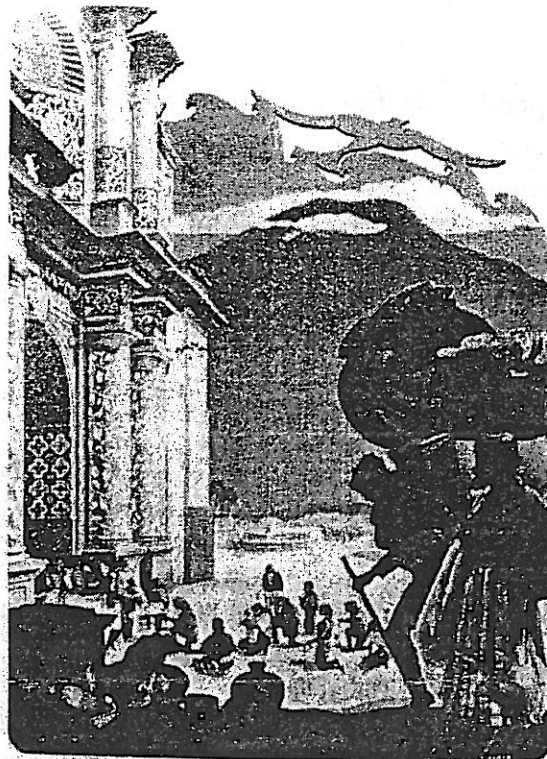


Figure 13. Creative cutting of “Pilgrim’s Progress” (1325 pieces) transforms a large area of blue sky into a tricky edge with a graceful soaring bird.

Par puzzles likely have a better survival rate than other brands because the owners knew their value and how special they were. While this is encouraging news for collectors, the corollary is that most families have treasured their Pars and passed them down through the generations. The trickle onto the secondary market has yet to become a flood.

A Par puzzle is a “must have” for any serious puzzle collector. But buyers should be selective. Avoid the run-of-the-mill rectangular ones and most of the rentals. Focus instead on the spectacular puzzles with personalization and irregular edges. These are the puzzles that embody the creativity and artistry that Ware and Henriques brought to the jigsaw world.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to the late Frank Ware, Elizabeth Carlhian, Jack Donahue, Margaret Gallagher, and John Madden for talking with me and sharing their memories of Par Company Ltd. Dozens of owners of Par puzzles have generously shared their memories, puzzles, and information about their puzzles, with special help coming from Bob Armstrong, Anna Boardman, Pinney Deupree, Pagey Elliott, Robert Fisher, Peggy Mithoefer, Jim Phelan, and Annabelle Thompson.

Editor’s Note. Readers are encouraged to send comments and questions to puzzles@bates.edu. Anne Williams will answer as many as space permits. She can also supply a complete bibliography on Par.

Appendix: Dating Par Puzzles

Par rarely dated their puzzles, but one can usually determine the approximate age of a specific puzzle. Study of over 800 Pars yields the guidelines below. However, the definitive guide to dating Par puzzles awaits the discovery of a collection that spans all the decades and includes the owner's records of when each puzzle arrived.

The color and format of the labels give the best clues to the age of an undated Par. A large label atop each box features a seahorse. A smaller end label gives the title, number of pieces, and the par time. The earliest labels were pale green, with no street address. (Many have now faded to tan, or even white.) After moving to midtown in the mid-1930s, Par put a small label inside each lid reading "Par Company, Ltd., 18 East 53rd St. New York, Telephone: PLaza 3-7181."

Around 1945 Par switched to dark green labels, with the address printed on the end label: "Par Company, Ltd., 18 East 53rd Street, New York 22, N.Y." The crucial diagnostic element is the New York postal zone, introduced in 1943. Par, never wasteful, undoubtedly used up the old zone-less labels over the next few years. (A few puzzles show the transition, with a light green label on the box top and a dark green label on the end.)

When Arthur Gallagher moved the business to Long Island in the mid-seventies, he kept the dark green labels, but trimmed the end labels to eliminate the Manhattan address. In the 1990s John Madden designed totally new white and gold labels, with his Wantagh, New York address on them.

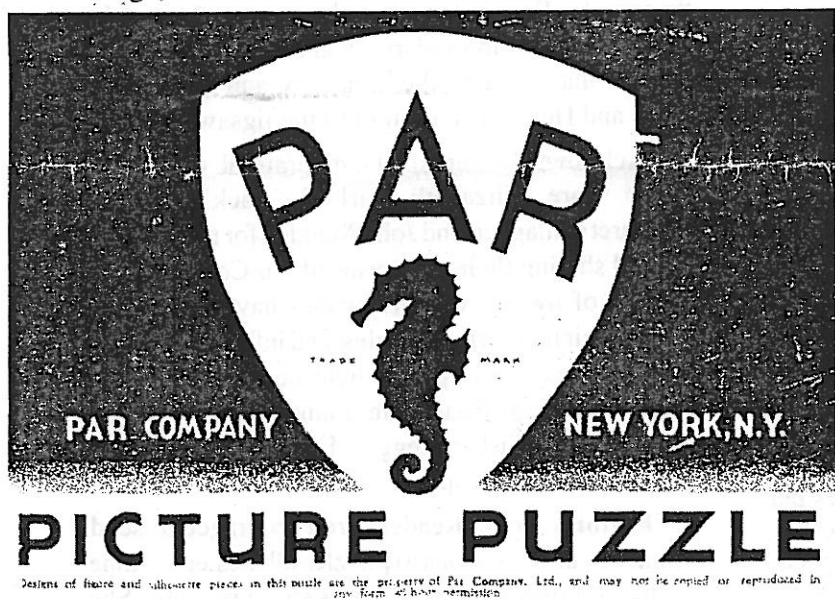


Figure 14. The early labels on Par box tops were light green and warned against copying Par's figure pieces.



Figure 15. John Madden, the third generation of Par puzzle cutters.

The wood offers a second clue for dating Par Puzzles. In the first few years Ware and Henriques used walnut plywood. By the mid-1930s they had changed to three-ply Honduras mahogany, which they used at least until 1950. Still later, they used stronger five-ply mahogany.

The signature piece provides the final clue. For the first year or so, each Par puzzle contained a piece shaped like a backwards swastika. After that each puzzle included at least one seahorse. The vast majority of the seahorses are simple, identical to the one pictured on the label. A few are more elaborate, including one that holds a top hat. Another logo, a piece that spells out the letters "P A R" seems to have been used only in the 1930s.

Note: It is tempting but incorrect to interpret the serial numbers of the rental puzzles as an indicators of production dates. One might think that #5086A might mean the 86th rental puzzle cut in 1950. But many serial numbers were much lower, such as 1126H or 2185A, and it is certain that Par was not cutting puzzles in 1911 or 1921.