The Art of Gambling

Through the Ages

ARTHUR FLOWERS and ANTHONY CURTIS

Foreword by LeRoy Neiman

The Art of Gambling

of

Through the Ages

ARTHUR FLOWERS AND ANTHONY CURTIS

Foreword by LeRoy Neiman

Dedicated to
June, for her constant support and encouragement.
And to Sam and Lauren, for the future.

Acknowledgments

The authors are indebted to the score of talented and enthusiastic people who assisted in this complex project. Some made direct contributions, and we acknowledge them here.

Beginning with day one, we thank Deke Castleman, senior editor at Huntington Press, who endorsed the concept from the first time he saw the proposal, then lent his masterful editor's pen to the text. Jackie Joniec and Erik Joseph were also early supporters and helped in parts of the image-search process. In that capacity, the contributions of all the tireless reference librarians, especially Jim Lane, Maggie Slomka, and Verdell, whose cancer did not allow her to see the completion of the project, were integral—without the continuous whole-hearted assistance of these professionals, we would still be searching the library stacks.

Thanks are due Vanessa Giordano and Phillipe Juarez for helping us overcome a few language barriers, and especially Jessica Roe, for assistance in both translation and research.

Our unending gratitude extends to LeRoy Neiman for his unselfish support of the project and his many contributions contained herein, including the book's insightful Foreword. To LeRoy's Lynn, who continues to demonstrate her unbridled excitement for the book every time we see her; to Dave Hickey and Fred Sigman for their skillful teaching of Art History, which provided us with an enlightened understanding of the evolution of the art world; to the gamblers who contributed their expertise, Stanford Wong, Blair Rodman, Fred David, and Barry Meadow, among them, and to Bart Rakay for his good eye; thanks to all.

We would like to register particular gratitude to Suz Brna, for introducing us to other living artists whose fine works adorn these pages. And to Zara Kriegstein who was always there to help.

To HP staffers Katie Rose Joniec, Jim Karl, Toya Norwood, and Jody

Introduction

Ever since we initiated this project approximately three years ago, most people with whom we raised the topic of "gambling art" responded with some variation of, "Do you mean the dogs playing poker?" Granted, we knew that there was more out there than the dogs, but our searches quickly revealed a mother lode of gambling images, the likes of which shocked even us—fabulous works rendered by history's masters. Most people have heard of LeRoy Neiman, and wouldn't be surprised to learn that he's committed casino to canvas on a few occasions, but Cézanne, Picasso, Daumier, Goya, Van Gogh, and Caravaggio?

It's true that each of these great artists focused their talents, at some time, on the subject of gambling. But they represent only a small part of the artistic tour de force collected herein. To create *The Art of Gambling Through the Ages*, we identified more than 300 gambling-related paintings, drawings, etchings, and sculpture produced over a period of two and a half millennia. From these, the best 141 images, representing the work of 103 artists, were selected.

Since this volume's primary goal is to provide a source of visual-cognitive enjoyment, the images are displayed in full-page presentations whenever possible, with some half-pages scattered throughout. Accompanying each is a facing page of text, which supplies a thumbnail sketch of the artist, then zeros in on the gambling itself. The intent is to whet the appetite sufficiently to send the reader back for a closer look, further enhancing the appreciation of these classic works.

In *The Art of Gambling Through the Ages*, we have not attempted to present art history in the traditional sense. Thus we have ordered the images in a random, as opposed to a chronological, fashion. For those who wish to know more about the artists, their styles, or the various schools of art represented, we have supplied as much biographical data as was available, which should provide a good starting point for extended study.

Formulating the gambling analysis presented a unique challenge that we did not anticipate. The initial plan seemed simple. Since there were no Polaroids when Romans played dice with knucklebones or the English gathered to gamble around cockfighting rings, we presumed we could rely on the artists to preserve the scene on canvas just as they'd witnessed it. But it quickly became evident that the artists (except for the Photorealists) often weren't worried about getting all the details right. Of course, personal interpretation is what most art is really about, and as a result, at times we had to work with less than perfect information. We found this particularly ironic, given that making decisions without perfect information is what most gambling is really about. We had to speculate in a few spots, however, on balance, the artists' renditions and the historians' accounts matched up remarkably well.

The reader will find the descriptions infused with a healthy dose of gambling jargon. In most instances, words, phrases, and concepts that are specific to gambling are placed within quotation marks. The names of the games are not capitalized, though they are italicized when they're a product of a language other than English. In anticipation of questions about whether all of the art depicts true gambling scenes, we'll concede that they all do not. However, we'll stand squarely behind the premise that if something *can* be gambled on, then at some time in the past it has been, and at some time in the future it will be again.

Finally, we'd like to acknowledge that a great deal of gambling art is not included in *The Art of Gambling Though the Ages*. Some pieces we were unable to locate. For a few, permissions could not be obtained. And surely there are many images that we still don't know about. All in all, though, we're confident that this volume contains the most exhaustive and prestigious body of artwork devoted to gambling ever assembled. How confident? We're laying 7-to-5.

Foreword *by LeRoy Neiman*

In 1957, the top man at the Fabulous Flamingo, Al Parvin, came to my Chicago studio and bought some horse race and bar paintings. It wasn't long after that I was flying to Las Vegas at his expense for a comped visit at his casino. There, he proceeded to woo me into painting a series of gambling scenes. That was the beginning—my virgin visit to Las Vegas and my introduction to the inner world of big-time gambling.

The subject wasn't completely new to me. I'd already done a number of gambling paintings of the tony world-class casinos of Deauville and Monte Carlo. But to tackle a frontier like Las Vegas, with its energy and openness, was going to be a whole new challenge. I'd have to dig deep.

The ambience was raw—remember, Caesars Palace had yet to be built. Themed fantasy hotels and casinos were years in the future. Las Vegas in the '50s was quite a contrast to the sophisticated, sedate, stiff Old World casinos where I had served my apprenticeship. Casinos on the Continent were so quiet that, all the way across the carpeted and chandeliered room, you could hear the ball bouncing on a spinning roulette wheel, along with the eerie chanting of the French croupier. Casinos in Las Vegas were so raucous that standing right at the roulette table, you could barely hear the dealer's call.

Though not a gambler myself, I got hooked on the gambling motif. I was not one of those kibitzers who circle a table in casinos and gawk like the galleries at a golf classic. Yet I had to get close for studying and observation, to check out the go-for-broke bettors of both sexes—their postures, passions, anxieties, and tensions.

Eventually I found myself downtown, observing the colorful high-stakes card players at Binion's Horseshoe's World Series of Poker. Once on the inside I could check the deceptive eye movements and body English of poker pros with sobriquets like Puggy, Tex, and Amarillo Slim.

Then it was on to examining the appetites and indulgences of the in-

vited, pampered, premium high rollers sipping Chateau Petrus '82, Lafite Rothschild '61, or Roederer Cristal while at play in the baccarat salon at the fabled Sands, Sinatra's house.

But mostly I gravitated to the center of the action—blackjack tables full of cowboys in 10-gallon Stetsons and stiletto-heeled kicky chicks tossing dice, the buzz of the crap tables serenaded by the shouts from the slots. Vegas was on a roll, and I got into it. This was my kind of town. The noisy casinos made for the noisy color in my paintings. That's how it all got rolling as a subject for me. From black-tied gamblers and croupiers swathed in European tradition to wild wide-open Las Vegas, an exciting step into a different world.

Gambling and games of chance have always merited the attention of the artist: painter, sculptor, or printmaker. The studiously and faithfully compiled gambling images appearing in *The Art of Gambling Through the Ages* have been selected from all quarters of the world and date as far back as the fifth century B.C. The collection encompasses gamblers of every age, race, and sex, playing nearly every game of chance: roulette, blackjack, baccarat, slots, and other casino offerings, as well as non-casino games of wager such as pool, chess, bridge, and backgammon, plus horse racing, boxing, and even stock speculating. Card-playing is the subject most prevalent, with a raft of top-notch art works depicting this most popular form of gambling.

Artists have always been aware of and fascinated by the people caught up in the gambling obsession—men and women gamblers, croupiers, card sharps, wheeler-dealers, cheats, and children. My personal favorite is the formally attired player in grand and gilded gambling casinos. This book has two excellent examples: Contemporaries Raoul Dufy and Max Beckman both painted "Baccarat" subjects; they are the ultimate in the tuxedoed, bare-backed, bejeweled power elite. Today's high roller, casual as an around-the-clock player, does not subscribe to such dictates of decorum and attire.

Many such subjects from the world of risk and reward are addressed in these pages.

Thomas Hart Benton takes a sultry slant on Tennessee Williams' play, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* in "Poker Night."

George Grosz' line drawing of a circle of Nazi officials playing cards is a scathing observation of a distasteful period in recent history.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is represented by a vintage litho, "The Game of Bezique," from 1895.

Two English social critics and satirists, Thomas Gillray and William Hogarth, weigh in with "Two-Penny Whist" and "The Cockfight."

There's a fine selection of surreal works by Redon, Goya, and Balthus; Otto Dix with "Scat Players"; and Daumier's "A Game of Draughts" on wood.

Léger's 1917 World War I industrial piece and the World War II "Soldiers Playing Dice" on a *New Yorker* cover by Will Cotton evoke wartime memories.

Gambling for dead game is depicted by William Sidney Mount's 1837 oil, "Raffling for the Goose," which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and John Mix Stanley's 1867 painting, "Gambling for the Buck," which shows Indians at a table playing cards with a dead deer at their feet.

Women gambling pops up frequently in this collection. Georges de La Tour's painting of a woman being cheated is contrasted to the painting of proper ladies seated at cards by Sir John Everett Millais. "Game of Cards" by Abraham Rattner is a strong worthy composition of women, and a young female contemporary artist, Suz Brna, shows us a woman at the table in "Luck of the Draw."

Even children gamblers figure strongly in works like Murillo's 17th century "Small Beggers Playing Game of Dice"; "Children Playing Cards," a 1631 picture by Dirk Hals; "The Truant Gamblers," by Mount, 1835; "Loto," an 1865 oil by Charles Chaplin; and Frank Schoonover's sympathetically painted "Boys Playing Craps," from 1903.

The collection is also populated with eight or so Native American tribesmen in gambling situations. Perhaps the artistic interest in Indians of the early West foreshadowed today's burst of Native American casinos.

Let us not forget the working man. Phillip Evergood's Great Depression depiction of gandy dancers playing cards in "The Siding" and George Caleb Bingham's "Raftsmen Playing Cards" are standouts.

Abstract concepts have absorbed gambling themes in paintings and collages, as in Picasso's still lifes and the works of Arp, Gris, and Braque. Gambling features in the titles of Audrey Flack's 1976 "Gambler's Cabinet," Joan Mitchell's "Casino," and Robert Motherwell's "Throw of Dice No. 17."

Religious themes are not overlooked in this collection. Mantegna's "The Crucifixion" in the Louvre shows soldiers shooting dice at the foot of the cross; "Denial of St. Peter" by Georges de La Tour also includes dice throwing.

Other pieces that appear in *The Art of Gambling Through the Ages* are portrait studies, including a full-length abstract of "Card Players" by Picasso in 1915, and Marcel Duchamp's "Portrait of Chess Players" from the Philadelphia Museum. And it would be overly modest of me not to include two Neiman portrait paintings: a "Change Girl" at the slots and a monumental dealer, "Baccarat Girl."

Several pieces I particularly favor include the inventive "Poker Game" serigraph by Israel Rubenstein, and "A Friendly Game" by Fletcher Martin, 1958, "Gambling at the Ridotto" by the Venetian Marchiore, "The Gamble," a 1968 archetypal Romare Bearden, and David Teniers' amusing and far-fetched painting in the Pushkin Museum, "Monkeys Playing Cards." Other eye-stoppers: Norman Rockwell's "The Bridge Game," a bird's-eye view from a *Saturday Evening Post* magazine cover; Jacob Lawrence's excellent "The Pool Game"; and Van Gogh's pool table in "The Night Cafe."

Finally, my 1970 painting of another heavy gambling citadel, "New York

Stock Exchange," appears on the last page. The floor of a stock exchange is different from that of a casino, but at both locales, the worlds of work and play converge.

The artist has never overlooked the vast world of gambling, because the artist, too, is a gambler. The artist and the gambler both know the odds. For the payoff, both must go for the pot. You can't hit a big jackpot without a big bet. Where there's a risk factor, there is opportunity, and they usually occur together. You may retard pursuit in view of likely failure, but neither risks nor opportunities present themselves when there is no commitment of chance-taking. It's summed up in an old gambler's expression: "If you don't have action, *nothing* can happen."

With all due respect to the high-rolling gambler, the artist plays a similar high-stakes game, taking chances continually during the very process of painting in order to survive in his God-given profession.

<div align="right">

—LeRoy Neiman, September 1999

</div>

The Art of Gambling
Through the Ages

POKER NIGHT

1948

Thomas Hart Benton

Born: 1889, Neosho, Missouri, USA   Died: 1975

tempera and oil on panel, 36" x 48"

Thomas Hart Benton's early paintings embraced the modern Parisian styles, but he ultimately developed a technique that reflected a predominantly American culture. His paintings celebrate purely American experiences, especially those of the heartland where he was born and raised. Benton's gambling-related paintings are no exception. In his "Poker Night," "Crapshooters" (see page 45), and "Arts of the West" (see page 125), gambling is shown as it was enjoyed in the everyday lives of common people.

Perhaps the greatest of all games—gambling or otherwise—poker combines skill, probability, and psychology like no other contest. Its roots stem from Europe—possible ancestors include England's brag, France's *poque,* and Italy's *primero*—as well as from an old game of Persian origin called *as nas,* but poker is distinctly American. Though "Poker Night"—inspired by a scene from the Tennessee Williams play *A Streetcar Named Desire*—includes women, the traditional home poker gathering depicted here is almost always stag.

POKER NIGHT, Thomas Hart Benton

THE CHEAT WITH THE ACE OF CLUBS

c. 1625

Georges de La Tour

Born: 1593, Lorraine, France   Died: 1652

oil on canvas, 38 ¹/₂" x 61 ¹/₂"

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Most of the paintings of Georges de La Tour were of the Baroque style, characterized by 17th-century court and religious scenes. Strongly influenced by Caravaggio, de La Tour painted numerous night scenes illuminated by candlelight, which added an eerie effect to the settings ("The Cheat" is one of his brighter efforts). During his most productive years, de La Tour was intrigued by gambling and some of the deceptive practices associated with it. During this time, he completed "The Cheat With the Ace of Diamonds," as well as a virtual clone, "The Cheat With the Ace of Clubs." In addition, de La Tour painted at least three other vivid gambling works, including "Card Players," "Denial of St. Peter" (see page 181), and "The Dice Players" (see page 189).

This scene is instructive in two ways. One is the strong depiction of women gambling with complete acceptance. Many 17th-century artistic portrayals confirm that European women were not excluded from gambling, either among themselves or with men. Central, though, is the obvious cheating theme. The ace about to be reintroduced into the game was "palmed" earlier and "held out" for use at an opportune time. The technique is known as "mucking." The date of this work renders it one of the earliest artistic portrayals of cheating at cards.

THE CHEAT WITH THE ACE OF CLUBS, Georges de La Tour

John Mix Stanley exhibited an early interest in Native American culture as he grew up in the heartland of the Iroquois nation. His father was an innkeeper, and it's believed that local Indians frequented the Stanley tavern. His early exposure to Indian culture is manifest in his specialty—the painting of Indian portraits—and he is considered one of the most prominent artistic chroniclers of the American Indian. Stanley also had a fascination with gambling, especially as it was practiced among American tribal people, and the fertile ground of Indian gaming inspired some of his finest work. "Gambling for the Buck" is regarded as Stanley's best and most popular painting (see also "Game of Chance," page 173). In it, he characterizes the participants as dignified, stately, and handsome subjects, resplendent in their finest buckskin attire.

American Indians were ardent gamblers and game players. While the history of Native American gambling, in general, is well-documented, little has been written about the specific origins of their card-playing, the activity depicted here. Most historians believe that Columbus brought cards with him on his voyage to America, and it's likely that games were learned from subsequent settlers in the New World.

GAMBLING FOR THE BUCK, John Mix Stanley

Paul Cézanne is often referred to as the "Father of Modern Painting." Though his family did not encourage his early efforts as an artist, his father, a banker, provided him with an excellent classical education and financial freedom. While attending the Atelier Suisse in Paris, Cézanne befriended many budding Impressionist painters, but his initial experiences with the Impressionist style were not successful. In fact, his close friend Emile Zola criticized Cézanne's early work in his novel *L'Oeuvre,* in which he characterized him as an unsuccessful artist. Cézanne's dissatisfaction with the Impressionists led him to explore a new painting technique, in which he reduced natural objects to geometrical patterns, and his style is generally believed to have influenced the development of the Cubist movement. Cézanne painted three versions of "The Card Players"; this version was the last and is considered the best of the three.

While there are many theories concerning the origin of playing cards, most historians believe they were invented in China. Their introduction into Europe is thought to have occurred around the late 13th or early 14th century, probably in Spain by way of travelers from Egypt or Arabia. The card "suits" that developed in Cézanne's France—spades, clubs, hearts, and diamonds—first appeared near the end of the 15th century and have survived to become the standard.

See also Cézanne's "The Card Players and Girl" (page 207).

THE CARD PLAYERS, Paul Cézanne

Pablo Ruiz Picasso learned art from his father, a teacher at the Fine Arts Academy in Barcelona. Around 1906, he and his close friend and associate Georges Braque began experimenting with a new artistic method that combined geometric forms with collage. This procedure gave impetus to the rise of Cubism, a technique pioneered by Paul Cézanne. Picasso's famous "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907) was one of the first recognized Cubist paintings. In the early 1920s, Picasso developed his own style of Abstraction and Surrealism. During this period, he produced his masterpiece, "Guernica," in which he protested the horrors of war.

While Picasso exhibited no known affinity for gambling, he, like many Cubists of the period, found playing cards particularly suitable to the technique. His "Card Players" was one of several such images painted by Cubists of the period (see Fernand Léger, page 17; Theo Van Doesburg, page 129; Georges Braque, page 175; and Juan Gris, page 197).

See also Picasso's "Ace of Clubs" (page 151).