

Arteno Jigsaw Puzzles: What Makes Them So Special

by Bob Armstrong © 2006

While I may have grown up with “only” two dozen wood jigsaw puzzles, five of these puzzles carried the name, distinctive style and/or wood trays of a little known maker/series called “Arteno”. My grandmother and mother had picked them up from lending libraries in Providence, RI and Springfield, MA as they closed in the late 1930s. As a little boy during WW II with a father serving in the US Army in Europe for most of the war, I remember working these puzzles with my mother and much older brothers. Among my first assignments was to assemble the checkerboard in “Checkers” displayed in figure 1. As I grew older I came to appreciate the beauty, complexity and challenge of what I have come to call “the Arteno style”. Naturally, when I took up collecting old puzzles seriously in the early 1990s, I began to look for Arteno puzzles and have built a collection of approximately 20. These puzzles may be viewed on my website at: <http://www.oldpuzzles.com/Examples/collection.php?tag=5>



Figure 1 “Checkers”

As I found more Arteno puzzles and studied other collectors’ Artenos, I realized the name refers to 1) the name of a puzzle maker, 2) the name of several puzzle series made by R.T. Novelties, Arteno Co., Mary Roberts and Marilyn Studios, and/or 3) a style employed in Arteno, Red Top, Artinet, Tourist and Greeting picture puzzles (exceptions noted below). Anne Williams’ article in this issue will focus on her research into the makers and series involved with the name. My focus will be on the distinctive Arteno style: what is it and why does it seem to work, at least for me and several other veteran collectors some of whom have studied my Artenos and decided to collect them as well. In fact, top quality Arteno puzzles have achieved some of the highest per piece prices on Ebay in recent years (well over \$1/piece), leaving me well in the dust!

Based upon my earlier articles focusing on puzzle cutting styles in general and on special cutting techniques [Footnote 1], the Arteno style can be described broadly as 1) scroll (a/k/a curl) cut, 2) semi-interlocking, 3) cut extensively along color lines. More specifically, a close examination of the back of “Checkers” displayed as figure 2, discloses:

The edge pieces barely abut each other and interlock almost entirely from inside the puzzle. It is virtually impossible to assemble the edges without fitting in the abutting inside pieces.

The puzzle is not cut piece by piece but rather by cutting each color section into two or more reciprocal mazes which are then cut through their necks at regular intervals to make individual pieces. The more such secondary cuts, the smaller the pieces, the less interlocking and more difficult the puzzle. I have always associated this approach to cutting a puzzle as the “true scroll style”. It is more difficult to cut than the traditional piece-by-piece approach because of the risk of cutting back onto a previous cut line or getting trapped in an area too small to continue cutting resulting in some piece anomalies.

Several distinctive parts are cut on many individual pieces such as mushroom caps, balls on pedestals, thin arms, lots of curls and sometimes “scrolls”. The results are aesthetically pleasing pieces which are lovely to look at and hold in your hand and which enhance the assembly experience. Figure 2 of the back of “Checkers” shows some particularly good examples of some of these features.

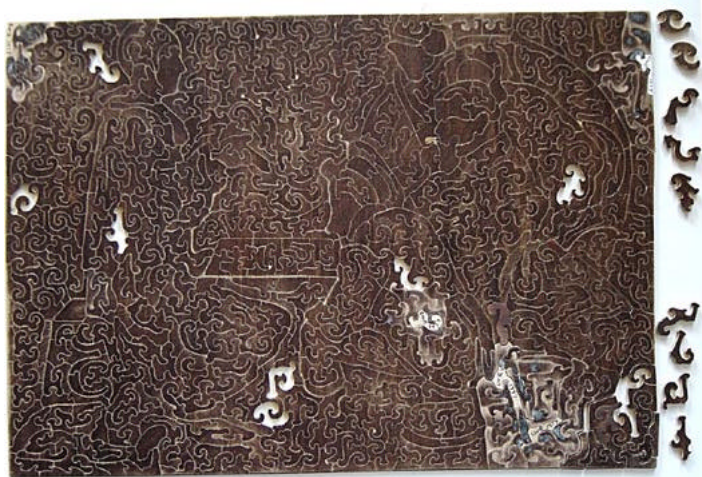


Figure 2 Back of “Checkers”

Footnote 1). **Armstrong**, “Jigsaw Puzzle Cutting Styles: A new Method of Classification,” *Game Researchers’ Notes*, Issue No. 25. American Game Collectors Association (February-May 1997) 5581-5590.

Armstrong, “Earliest Use of Special Techniques for Making Adult Jigsaw Puzzles,” *Game & Puzzle Collectors Quarterly*,” Vol. 3, No. 1,2,3, Association of Game & Puzzle Collectors (March, June, September 2002).

Only rarely do Arteno puzzles contain figure pieces. “The Old Corner Book Store” shown in figure 3 is one of only two I am aware of. The word “Special” is typed on this puzzle’s label suggesting a Special series that might contain figure pieces. Yet, I have another Arteno with “Special” typed on the label and it has no figure pieces. You figure it out! Anne Williams has the second Arteno with figure pieces, issued as a Greeting Picture Puzzle, with the letters necessary to spell out “Happy Birthday” plus other figure pieces.

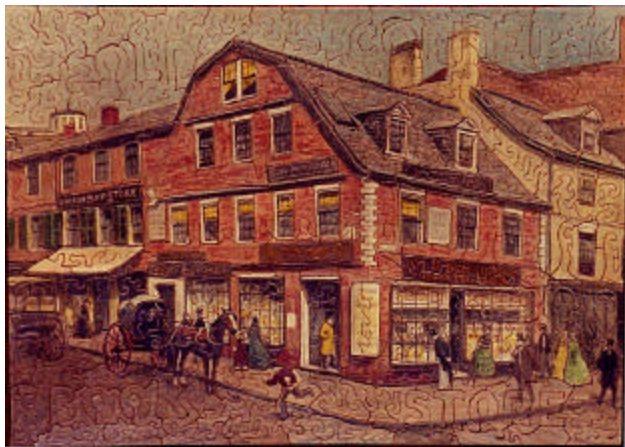


Figure 3 “Old Corner Book Store

Arteno boxes and labels are also quite distinctive. Each puzzle usually came with a wood (some were cardboard) tray to hold the completed puzzle, and a mottled orange or bronze colored box with dimensions sized to hold the tray and puzzle and a tie ribbon to keep the box closed. See figure 3. And some of my Artenos have a cardboard buildup as well, to raise the tray (and puzzle) to the level of the box top. It is highly probable, though not certain, that Arteno puzzles came fully assembled in tray in box. This would have offered the buyer a peak at the picture and removed some of the challenge of assembly. Unfortunately, flat boxes are highly prone to damage, and many Arteno puzzles have lost their original boxes over the years. The wood trays seem to have survived better. The loss of box with label for so many Arteno puzzles is why identification from style is so important. It is entirely possible that some of you have unidentified Artenos in your collections.

Note in figure 4 the distinctiveness of the printed labels for several Artenos, with 3 columns for information. The center column specified the series name and title and stated, “With Wooden Assembling Tray” or “The Puzzle Fits the Inside Tray” (for cardboard trays). The left column stated the maker and town/state and for Arteno Co. listed the No. Pcs. and Size. The right column for Arteno



Figure 4 Labels

Co. listed Pict. No. and Serial No. and stated the street address. R.T. Novelties switched some of this information between left and right columns, omitted Size and added Price. Some R.T. Novelties Arteno series puzzle boxes also had a separate label on another side of the box stating “Made in ‘The Garret’ by R.T. Novelties” and repeating street address.

In addition to its primary Arteno series, Arteno Co. issued at least two more series: Artinet and Greeting Picture Puzzle (see above). My example of the Artinet series is not cut as well, is on thinner plywood, came in a black and gray striped box shaped to hold the puzzle in pieces, and has a differently designed label (see figure 5). I surmise it was cut by an apprentice cutter learning the Arteno style of cutting, and probably was sold for less money. My one example was still a lot of fun to work.



Figure 5 Artinet puzzle

Why is she-crab soup better than other crab soups?

Some Arteno connected puzzles are not cut in the style described above. Mary Roberts, living in Holbrook, MA after 1934, used the name “Arteno Picture Puzzle” on her labels but cut in a scroll style with many more knobs and without color line cutting, probably to make her puzzles truly interlocking. For me, her puzzles are not nearly as much fun to assemble. And Ms. Roberts, while using a similar looking three-column label (see figure 6) packed her puzzles in more conventional black boxes designed to hold the puzzle disassembled. My example of one other series uncovered by Anne Williams’ research as connected to the Arteno group, Red Top Picture Puzzles, was made in the early 1920s by Boston Magazine Exchange and employs the push-fit, non-interlocking style of the 1909 era. However, recent acquisitions show this style rapidly “morphing” into the basic Arteno style by the mid-1920s. Otherwise, all the puzzles connected with Arteno I have studied resemble the style discussed and displayed in this article.

While the history of Arteno puzzles may be convoluted (see Anne Williams’ companion article in this issue, GPCQ V7N2, pp15-16), the style is very distinctive and makes for a most challenging and satisfying puzzle experience, not only in the assembly phase but also in simply handling the aesthetically pleasing pieces. That is about the highest compliment a veteran puzzler can make about a jigsaw puzzle.



Figure 6 Arteno Picture Puzzle—Mary Roberts

About the author: Bob Armstrong has been collecting and restoring old jigsaw puzzles seriously since 1992. He has displayed his fully restored puzzles in several exhibitions and enjoys giving presentations and demonstrations on puzzles to interested groups. He has also authored several articles for publications of the AGPC, mainly focusing on cutting styles in making jigsaw puzzles, and organizes periodic AGPC specialty meetings for jigsaw puzzle cutters, collectors and enthusiasts. He welcomes comments and questions via email (raahna@oldpuzzles.com) and visitors to his website (www.oldpuzzles.com) where several hundred of his collection puzzles are displayed with descriptions.

Where will the 2008 AGPC Convention be held?