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ANTIQUES

Where in the World Is That Exotic Roof Ornament?

By [WENDY MOONAN](#)

A new Web game developed by a museum group encourages children to single out an exotic artifact — a stone sculpture of a Chinese sea monster, a decorated shield from the Solomon Islands, an African mask or a Hopi kachina doll — and then search for its geographic origin, gaining information about the object along the way.

In this free animated game, called Room of Wonders and meant for ages 6 to 12, intrepid young explorers go by car, boat, plane, balloon or camel as they seek out the antique while the game responds, orally and visually, by releasing amusing bits of information. (If you fail to find the object, you are returned to the start.)

Room of Wonders was developed under the auspices of the French Regional and American Museum Exchange, known as Frame, a coalition of 23 museums that exchange works of art, personnel, technology and resources. The game, stocked with objects from these museums, is at framemuseums.org.

“The idea was to make an imaginative entrance to museums via a game,” said Richard R. Brettell, the American director of Frame. “This allows children to make choices. There are already games like ‘Be Your Own Curator,’ but we thought this would be better because you can play with diverse objects, not simply like things that are arranged together.”

Grown-ups may want to play the game with their children, because it functions at different levels of complexity. Word games, puzzles and musical quizzes also factor in.

For example, in the game’s Room of Wonders is a photo of an old ponarat, a roof ornament from Vanuatu, an island nation in the South Pacific. Resembling an African mask, it is carved from a thick tree fern and looks large and ferocious.

To track it down, you click on the game’s globe and roam the world, continent by continent, following its trail by listening to the increasingly loud noise, reminiscent of a Geiger counter. When it is most intense, you have found both Vanuatu and the ponarat. Then you can either listen to a description of the ornament or read an entry about it taken from an 18th-century encyclopedia.

Back in the Room of Wonders, you can continue browsing the encyclopedia, search for another object or listen to the Frenchman who inspired the game, a Breton noble named Christophe-Paul, Marquis de Robien. (An animated version of the marquis talks and wiggles his ears.) In the 1700s he assembled 8,000 rare natural specimens and curiosities, including shells, insects, minerals, plants, paintings, engravings and examples of rare exotica from Africa, Asia and the New World.

In 18th-century Europe, many learned men collected such marvels in a room dedicated to their display, often known as a cabinet of curiosities. “During the Enlightenment, a collector’s cabinet was the ultimate status symbol for a gentleman scholar,” Mr. Brettell said.

The one belonging to the marquis was confiscated during the French Revolution and ended up in the

Museum of Fine Arts in Rennes. Francis Ribemont is the director of the Rennes museum, which mounted an exhibition about the marquis's cabinet in 2006. He said he then decided he wanted to commission a virtual game about it "to help young people begin to exercise the act of seeing, which is the basis for appreciating art."

The directors of Frame put him in contact with Kahn + Associates (known at K+A), a team of Web designers based in Paris who specialize in "the architecture of digital information."

"The museum in Rennes has a remarkable collection, but our challenge was to get the other Frame museums interested so we would have wider geographical representation," said Paul Kahn, the managing director of K+A.

Staff educators from the member museums held a three-day brainstorming session in France.

"It was like releasing a beast; creative ideas came flying, nonstop, 24 hours a day," Mr. Kahn said. "The Americans ended up knowing and trusting their French colleagues, and we ended up with objects from 18 different museums."

Next came the Web design, which was managed by Laurent Kling of K+A.

"Kahn + Associates' approach was decidedly anti-market research," said Anne Edgar, a spokeswoman for Frame. "Or, rather, it was a focus group of just about one: Marie, Laurent's 7-year-old daughter."

Marie became the touchstone, Mr. Kahn explained, because "we wanted children to learn with the same naïveté collectors had when these artifacts were first discovered."

Another K+A designer, Eva-Lotta Lamm, illustrated each continent with hand-drawn images of plants and animals native to the region.

"It's about kids learning history, geography and anthropology — and having fun," said Elizabeth Rohatyn, who founded Frame in 1998. Mrs. Rohatyn's husband, [Felix G. Rohatyn](#), is a former United States ambassador to France.

"When Felix was ambassador, he was always looking for places outside Paris, like Rouen and Rennes, to place American diplomatic representatives so they could explain what America was doing and explain to Americans what the French were doing," Mrs. Rohatyn said. "Every time I accompanied him, I was taken to see the local museum. So I had an idea: why not have an exchange program between regional French and American museums?"

As cultural diplomacy, the program could extend the reach of smaller museums on both sides of the Atlantic, bringing artworks to those who might not otherwise have access.

"We didn't want government money because governments tell you what to do," she continued. "We charge member museums a small fee." The group also receives foundation and corporate grants, including ones from the Annenberg Foundation and the Florence Gould Foundation.

"Frame offers an active as opposed to a theoretical way to bridge the cultural gap," said Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, a curator who organized the group's 2003 show, "Triumph of French Painting." "The exchanges are not like a one-day symposium. What is produced is different from what any one of us would have done on our own. You meet people whose approaches are different, so you end up doing something completely new. It's immersion in a very dynamic way."

As Frame has become popular among museum professionals, others want in. “Museums in England, Germany and Belgium want to join, but Frame is sticking to France,” Mrs. Rohatyn said. “Let the others replicate it.”

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