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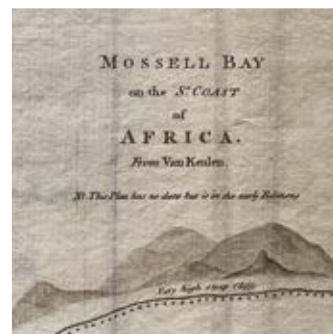
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Front cover Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, detail from 'Mapa della parte de la Nueva Mexico'. Fray Angélico Chavez History Library/ New Mexico History Museum Santa Fe, NM.78.9.1760.



AN 'ATLAS' IN 90 BLOCKS

A nineteenth-century French educational toy

Thomas O'Loughlin

The 'educational toy' is an ambiguous, almost paradoxical, notion; and certainly, any such toy belongs to a liminal space in our lives. The very mention of a 'toy' links us to feelings of 'the not serious' and fun; while 'education' is the opposite: it is about what is not-fun and about the serious business of work. Toys belong to the child and a child's freedom from responsibility, but schooling is, or was, part of getting ready to leave childhood behind. The problems arise because the toys are what a child – or anyone being playful – wants for themselves, the educational dimension comes from outside: the adult who wants them for the child's 'good'. 'Education may not be fun, but,' cries the educator, 'it is for your own good!' So, if the toy belongs to the world of leisure, freedom and fun, education smacks of the world of work, drabness and grind: polar opposites.

There have been any number of attempts to get over this divide between play and learning, 'to sweeten the pill', and make education fun or, at least, to encourage children to self-engage in activities that are seen to bring them benefits over and above what they derive from 'pure' play. It was the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) who first suggested that having wooden blocks with letters and numbers on them would combine the attraction of playing with blocks with learning letters and basic numeracy. His insight is now stock wisdom among educators: 'the chief art is to make all that ... [children being schooled] have to do, sport and play too'! His blocks have now become an ubiquitous element of childhood.

It was around a century later that Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont (1711–1778) in France – where

the educational vision of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) in *Emile* also added to Locke's notion of school as play – took the idea a stage further, linking play and learning geography with maps. It is claimed that she used some sort of wooden map to teach geography to little girls, but, alas, no physical evidence of this has survived.² In England, John Spilsbury (1739–1769) is credited not only with inventing the jigsaw puzzle but the jigsaw map.³ His 'Dissected Map' of Europe from 1766 – and several others – is the direct antecedent of any number of jigsaw maps that are on sale today, and of the elegant *Etudes Géographiques* that is the focus of this paper.

At first sight, the *Etudes Géographiques* is impressive: in an impressive wooden box (305 x 256 x 183 mm) with metal handles, whose weight (almost exactly 5 kg) and title suggests that it contains some scientific instrument rather than an educational toy (Fig. 1). On opening the box one finds three wooden trays each containing thirty solid wooden cubes (44 x 44 x 44 mm) (Fig. 2). On each face of the cube are pasted sections of a map, so that each tray of blocks can make up six maps (Fig. 3). The whole box (90 blocks) can thus be used to make up eighteen maps. While each tray

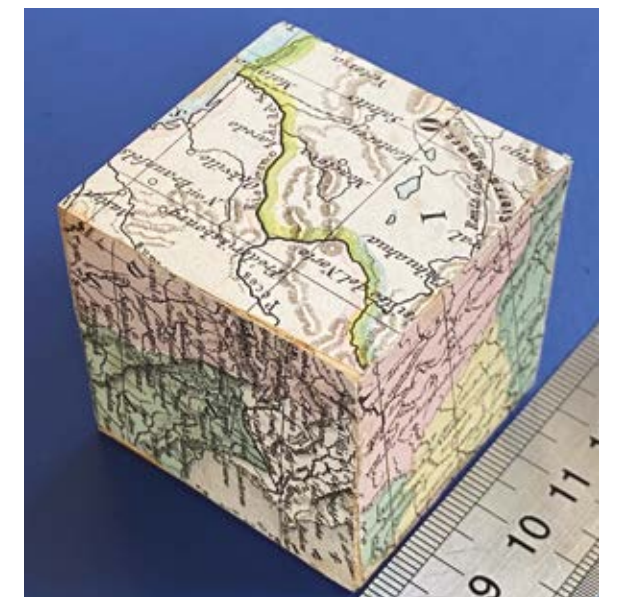
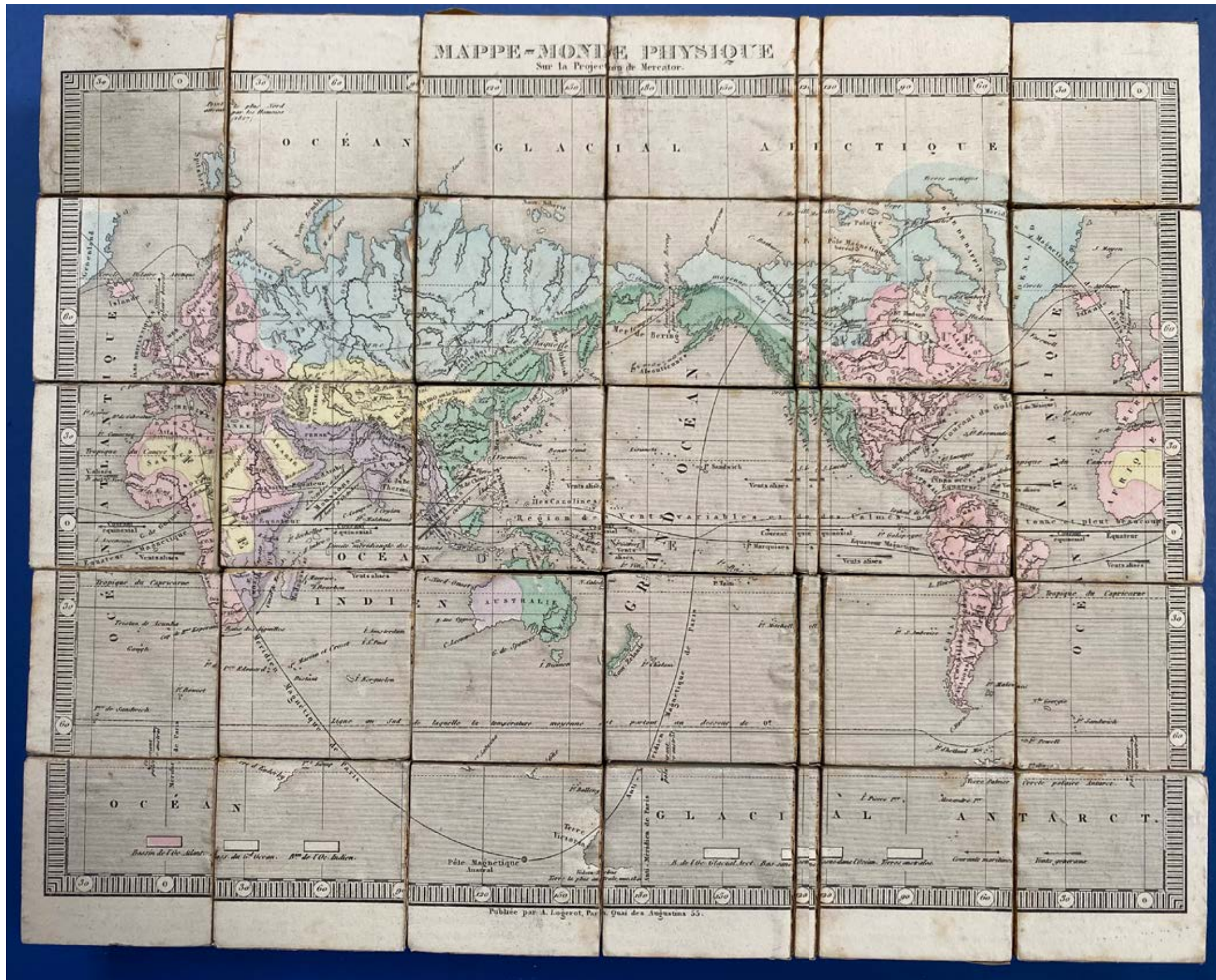


Fig. 1 (left) *Etudes Géographiques* weighs 5 kilograms, its weight and solidity indicate that this is a serious endeavour promising real geographical learning.

Fig. 2 (left) One of the three trays in the box. Each contains 30 blocks which can make up six different maps. This is the only map of Europe in the box.

Fig. 3 (right) One of the 90 cubes in the box. If its entire contents were emptied on to a table, it would be a puzzle of 540 pieces (= 90 cubes x 6 faces per cube) of which 30 were needed for any one map. If played with in this way, it is quite a challenge!



makes up six maps (i.e. only one tray needs to be taken out of the box at a time), there is no single relationship between the various sides of the cubes (i.e. one has to puzzle out each new map rather than simply alter which face of a cube is facing upwards having successfully arranged one of the maps). If a complete map is turned up-side-down, then another complete map is revealed. Thus, each tray is a set of six puzzles. This arrangement was probably arrived at for commercial reasons of being able to sell boxes with one, two, or all three trays.⁴ The fact that each set of blocks when turned up-side-down produces another complete map was also probably due to commercial reasons: in this case, the convenience in the process of manufacture of working on one side, then flipping it over to work on the other.

In addition to the three trays of blocks, the box also contains eighteen loose maps (most on sturdy paper) which are the guides (equivalent to our jigsaw box covers) to the various maps that can be assembled from the blocks. These guidance maps were not trimmed to a single size, and the pages measure between 287 and 295 mm x 225 and 233 mm .

Origins

The only guidance as to date and origin comes from the box and the maps themselves. The whole production was the work of Mazrand from Cirey-sur-Vezouze in the département of Meurthe-et-Moselle.⁵ This printing establishment began work in 1872 and, by the beginning of the First World War, had expanded to having bases in Paris and Blamont (département of Doubs). The firm specialised in commercial colour printing using lithography.⁶

The actual maps (both the guidance maps and those dissected and pasted onto the cubes) were not produced by Mazrand but come from a variety of sources. Fourteen come from the Paris firm of Auguste Logerot, a map publisher in the latter half of the nineteenth century who has left a large body of maps and atlases. Each of these bears his name (*Publiée par Logerot* or *Publiée par A. Logerot*) and this occurs, with one exception, in a cartouche. In every case, the maps have his Paris address at the bottom of the page: *Quai des Augustins, 55*. On two the engraver's name is given:

Fig. 4 A world map assembled. There is provision at the bottom of the base map for a colour coding of the oceans, but this was unused in the coloured map. The magnetic equator and meridian of Paris and William Parry's 'furthest north' (1827) are included on this, unusually, Pacific centred map.