

Williams Ten-Cent Coin-Operated Crane Game.



Arcade games have a rich history in America, beginning as attractions in traveling carnivals before facing fierce repression from the FBI and eventually expanding to become fixtures in towns across the country with the invention of video games such as *Pong*. Along the way, classic pieces of game design expanded the audience for games, bringing cheap entertainment to the masses from the Great Depression to the post-war boom. Michaan's Auctions is proud to offer a **Williams Ten-Cent Coin-Operated Crane Game** (\$6/900) for sale in our May Gallery Auction, held on Friday, May 17th.

Originating as an accompanying section of entertainment at traveling fairs in the late 19th century, arcade

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games have been a piece of American culture for over 150 years. Games of skill were initially included alongside spectacles, performances, and food vendors as a way to further increase the potential revenue from the massive seasonal events. It was this increased profitability that eventually led participating vendors to establish permanent locations, creating hubs of gaming we come to call arcades. The industry benefited from numerous advancements in mechanical and electronic technology, beginning with the currency-evaluator, a machine that allowed for coin-operation, that inspired the invention of games which were increasingly sophisticated, automated, and engaging. Encouraged by their popularity during the Great Depression as a cheap entertainment outlet, as well as the invention of the incredibly popular pinball machine, arcade games

became widely available, and by the 1970s were often featured in amusement parks, bars, lounges, restaurants, and other stores. The first successful arcade video game, *Pong*, was introduced in 1972, and led to a boom in arcades until the advancement of home console technology finally brought about their decline in the late 1990s.

The earliest form of the now ubiquitous crane or claw machine game was invented in the late 19th century and was inspired by the machines used to complete the Panama Canal. Decades later, the first patent for a claw machine was submitted in 1926 by the Erie Manufacturing Company, who named their “Erie Digger” after the recently completed Erie Canal. Soon after, carnival operator William Bartlett advanced the machine’s design with his 1932 Miami Digger, a design that employed an electric motor while

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allowing for greater movement. This machine regularly offered monetary prizes, including nickels and silver dollars, and occasionally premium items such as watches and cigarette lighters, which attracted the attention of the FBI. In 1951 the Johnson Act classified these games as gambling devices, alongside pinball machines, and many were destroyed or seized by government officials. A compromise was eventually reached with frustrated carnival owners, limiting the value of prizes and prohibiting vendors from charging fees, an agreement which lasted until the broad loosening of regulations in 1973.

It was in the midst of this complicated legal landscape that the Williams Manufacturing Company introduced the Williams Crane in 1956. The game is classified as an amusement-only device, meaning that players do not win a prize but simply compete to earn



the best score, an essential legal distinction for the operators of carnivals in the 1950s. Costing ten cents per turn, the game resides within a four-legged cabinet painted black and orange. “Be a Sidewalk Engineer – Operate this Crane” is emblazoned across the top of the cabinet. Within the game area, there is a steam shovel, hopper basket, and scale placed against an illustrated background, which depicts a mining

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operation. Using a steam shovel, the player uses four buttons to control the machine's movement, attempting to move as much "gravel" as possible from the ground to an elevated hopper within the allotted time, about two minutes. The device uses a converted Doepke steam shovel toy and lentil beans to operate, and the player's success is measured by the scale, which provides a mechanical measurement of the player's score. The scale is labeled with the text "How many tons can you load in [the] hopper[?]" and instructions on gameplay.

A Williams Ten-Cent Coin-Operated Crane Game (\$6/900) will be offered in Michaan's Auctions May Gallery Auction on Friday, May 17th features excellent furniture, lighting, and decorative pieces from the Furniture & Decorations Department, in

addition to important works from notable artists in the Asian Art Department, and a number of fine pieces from the Jewelry departments. The auction is led by the Furniture & Decorations Department, which will be offering a salon set, chandeliers, and tables in prominent French and Italian styles, while the Asian Art Department offers works of calligraphy and painting by important Chinese artists. Also included in the sale are platinum, diamond, and gold items, including works by Eric De Kolb, presented by the Jewelry Department.

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