2018 marks the tenth anniversary of the Saint Louis Chess Club (STLCC), which now hosts some of the United States’ and the world’s most prestigious chess tournaments, making it the perfect time to examine the history of the Staunton chessmen. Their familiar pieces are used in these competitions as well as elite tournaments around the world. The Staunton chessmen, first introduced to the public in 1849, are now so well-known that their form is taken for granted. However, they only rose to prominence through the efforts of their namesake, 2016 World Chess Hall of Fame inductee Howard Staunton (1810-1874). Staunton, a top player of the 1840s as well as a writer and promoter of chess, was an early proponent of the set during a time when multiple styles of sets proliferated throughout Europe and around the world. Its advantages were clear, as stated by Staunton himself in a June 2, 1850, issue of the *Illustrated London News*. “In the simplicity and elegance of their form, combining apparent lightness with real solidity, in the nicety of their proportions one with another, so that in the most intricate positions every piece stands out distinctively, neither hidden nor overshadowed by its fellows, the ‘Staunton Chess-men’ are incomparably superior to any others we have ever seen.”

First produced by Jaques of London, competing firms quickly imitated the pattern. Jaques produced ads warning, “Caution—As spurious imitations are sometimes offered, purchasers are requested to observe Mr. Staunton’s signature on the box, without which none are genuine.” By 1863, publications from locations as far-flung as Australia’s Sydney Morning Herald declared a local auction house would be selling “Solid ivory Staunton chessmen, as used in the Paris and London clubs.” The New York Times published an 1851 ad for Bangs, Brother & Co. advertising “Several elegant sets of the STAUNTON CHESSMEN with the Carton Pierre Box,” and in 1873, the Helena Weekly Herald declared that players in Bozeman and Deer Lodge, Montana, would compete in a telegraph match with Staunton chessmen of English manufacture as the prize. Additionally, U.S. and World Chess Hall of Fame inductee Paul Morphy (1837-1884) challenged Staunton to a match in 1858 to be played, “with Staunton chessmen of the usual club-size, and on a board of corresponding dimensions.” During his 1858 visit to Europe, Morphy also challenged “Alter,” a strong well-known amateur player to a match with a set of ivory club-size Staunton chessmen as a prize for the winner of the first five games.

Though Jaques warned of imitators, the pattern’s popularity could not be denied, and by the late 19th century, the set was mass-produced by multiple companies.

The 20th century saw a number of innovations for the set, from its aforementioned mass-production in a number of materials from wood to Bakelite, catalin, lead, and plastic, to the 1998 introduction of Digital Game Technology (DGT) boards and pieces. DGT boards, which record the moves of the pieces, allowed chess fans to follow games as they happen rather than waiting until they were published in chess periodicals. The Staunton Standard: Evolution of the Modern Chess Set contains examples of Staunton and Staunton-style chess sets from the 1840s through the present-day, showing how the set has both become a tradition as well as how creators have customized it to make it their own.

The show includes spectacular sets from the collection of Jon Crumiller, who owns some of the earliest Staunton Chessmen created. Crumiller has worked with the World Chess Hall of Fame on two previous exhibitions: *Prized and Played: Highlights from the Jon Crumiller Collection* (May 3 – September 15, 2013) and *Encore! Ivory Chess Treasures from the Jon Crumiller Collection* (May 14 – October 18, 2015), lending both sets from his collection and his knowledge of antique sets and their makers. His collection contains over 600 sets from more than 40 countries, with the earliest set dating from the 11th century.

Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame
Emily Allred, Associate Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame
“The Staunton Chess-men.” — We have lately been favoured with a sight of the newly-designed Chess-men you speak of, and shall be greatly mistaken if, in a very short time, these beautiful pieces do entirely supersede the ungainly, inexpressive ones we have been hitherto contented with. In the simplicity and elegance of their form, combining apparent lightness with real solidity, in the nicety of their proportions one with another, so that in the most intricate positions every piece stands out distinctively, neither hidden nor overshadowed by its fellows, the “Staunton Chess-men” are incomparably superior to any others we have ever seen.

Howard Staunton never claimed to be the designer/creator of the chess piece pattern that bears his name. The Staunton chess pattern was patented in March 1849 by Nathaniel Cooke (misspelled as “Cook” on the patent document). Cooke was the business partner and brother-in-law of Herbert Ingram, the primary founder of the ILN. Although the Staunton design is officially attributed to Cooke, speculation abounds as to other possible contributors—perhaps John Jaques, the manufacturer of the first Staunton chess sets; or perhaps Staunton himself influenced the design in some way.

Regardless of the set’s actual designer, the direct connection of Staunton’s name with the new design was a savvy and effective marketing tactic. Celebrity branding is common these days—Air Jordan sneakers and the George Foreman grill come to mind—but all of today’s named products share a marketing ancestor: Howard Staunton was one of the earliest celebrities in modern history to lend his name to a product. And Staunton’s name carried considerable weight within the chess audience of his far-reaching weekly ILN column. And indeed, he advertised the Staunton pattern relentlessly in his column. The first mention comes in the September 8, 1849, ILN issue:

“Staunton repeated these accolades, and others, in column after column. All 16 subsequent columns in 1849 touted the benefits of the Staunton pattern, as did the vast majority of columns in 1850, and onward, spanning over a 20-year period. And Staunton’s efforts were gradually rewarded, not due solely to his diligence, but also due to one important fact: he was right! For the actual playing of chess games, the Staunton pattern is indeed “superior to any other” with “simplicity and elegance of their form, combining apparent lightness with real solidity.” Especially when compared to the prevalent chess patterns of the era, e.g. the Old English pieces, with short pawns often hidden behind other pieces; or the Barleycorn and Edinburgh patterns, easily tipped over; or the ornamental patterns, fragile and breakable; or, in France, the Directoire and Régence patterns that could be knocked askance with the slightest errant touch.
It took quite a while for the new design to become popular. Initial sales were slow, in spite of Staunton’s frequent assertions to the contrary in his weekly column. A portrait of Howard Staunton posing with other leading chess players in the July 14, 1855, issue of the Illustrated London News includes a Barleycorn set, not a Staunton set, on the table! But slowly, surely, the advantages of the Staunton standard won out over all others, and by the end of the 19th century it had become the prevalent chess set pattern. Other patterns were still marketed in chess manufacturers’ catalogs, even well into the 20th century, but the dominance of Staunton’s standard continued to increase until it became the only chess set design allowed in major chess tournaments, starting in the 1920s.

Howard Staunton’s preeminent place in history would have been assured solely on his exploits as the world’s top player in the 1840s. Or solely on the chess literature he produced: 1,440 weekly ILN chess columns, a dozen chess books, several magazines, and hundreds of articles. Or on his relentless efforts to popularize the game. Or even on his other endeavors, as a Shakespearean scholar (he wrote a 3-volume, 2,400-page book series on Shakespeare’s plays) or as an authority on education (he authored The Great Schools of England, a treatise on educational reform). But first and foremost, Staunton’s legacy is inevitably linked to the chess set pattern, “superior to any other,” that bears his name: the Staunton standard.

A longtime chess fan and competitor, Jon Crumiller purchased his first antique chess set online in 2002. This acquisition quickly sparked a passion, and Jon’s collection of antique sets now numbers over 600. It includes pieces originating from over 40 countries, dating back to the 11th century (and gaming pieces dating to 3000 BCE), unique sets owned by 18th- and 19th-century royalty, and made from materials such as jade, silver and gold, bone, wood, and precious stones among others.

The scope of his collecting has also grown to include chess boards, timers, and chess miscellanea, mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries. Now recognized as one of the greatest chess set collections in the world, the artifacts he has gathered serve as a visual history of the diverse ways that cultures across time and around the world have interpreted the game of kings. Portions of Crumiller’s collections have been highlighted in two previous WCHOF exhibitions. Not only interested in acquiring artifacts but also learning about their origins and histories, Jon conducts research on the evolution of chess set styles, usage, and manufacturing. He shares this information with the global community of collectors, including his fellow enthusiasts in Chess Collectors International. Jon provides curious chess devotees around the world with beautiful photos of his stunning collection as well as some of the fruits of his meticulous research through his website www.chessantique.com.

Top: England
Jaques #9
1849
King size: 4 ½ in.
Wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller

England
Jaques Stamped Board
1900
1 x 22 x 22 in.
Wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller

England
Jaques Congress Timer
1895
9 ½ x 2 ½ x 7 in.
Wood and metal
Collection of Jon Crumiller

Bottom Left: Howard Staunton
Chess Praxis: A Supplement to the Chess Player’s Handbook Owned and Signed by Bobby Fischer
1962
1 ¾ x 7 x 1 in.
Book
Collection of Jon Crumiller

Bottom Right: England
Jaques “Tees Side Trophy” Set
1880
King size: 4 7/16 in., Board: 1 ⅜ x 23 ¾ x 23 ¾ in., Box: 5 ¾ x 8 11/16 x 13 in., Ledger: ½ x 8 ⅜ x 6 ⅜ in.
Ivory, felt, wood, velvet, metal, and paper
Collection of Jon Crumiller
Opposite, Clockwise from Top Left:
France
French Regence Set
1850
King size: 3 7/16 in.
Wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller

Unknown
Mother of Pearl Staunton-Variant Set and Board
1900
King size: Black: 3 1/2 in. White: 3 2/5 in.
Board: 1 3/4 x 15/16 x 15/16 in.
Mother of pearl, bone, wood, and felt
Collection of Jon Crumiller

Steiner Master Chess Set
1947
King size: 5 in.
Board: 4 3/4 x 6 3/16 x 10 1/2 in.
Wood, felt, and metal hardware
Collection of Joram Piatigorsky

Right:
England
Calvert Stamped Ivory Set
1820
King size: 2 3/4 in.
Ivory
Collection of Jon Crumiller

England
Victorian Gothic Penwork Chess Table
Late 1890
26 x 17 x 17 in.
Wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller
ON COLLECTING STAUNTON CHESSMEN

FRANK CAMARATTA

My chess set collecting obsession had its start a few months after I first learned the moves of the game. That was the summer before my 16th birthday. A few friends in my new neighborhood took the pains to explain the moves to me and I was addicted. All I could do was eat, drink, and sleep chess. I was entering my junior year in high school. I turned 16 in the fall of that year and, for my birthday, my mother gave me a nice set of wooden Staunton chessmen. These were nothing spectacular, just a good, solid, German-made weighted set of lacquered chessmen in a wood slide-top box. The pieces were tournament size, and I made good use of them in the years that followed.

First, having been a serious tournament chess player, my interest was in practical playing sets—the Staunton design in particular. What I had discovered very early in my collecting career was that there was woefully little information on the Staunton chessmen and what did exist was mostly incorrect. So, I decided to pull together as much information on the Staunton pattern as I could.

The Staunton chessmen were designed and first manufactured in the United Kingdom by the firm of John Jaques. I obtained a copy of the design registration for the Staunton chessmen from the patent office in London. The Staunton chessmen design was registered as number 58607 on March 1, 1849. The title of the registration was “Ornamental Design for a set of Chess-Men.” It was registered by Nathaniel Cooke, 198, Strand, London, under the Ornamental Designs Act of 1842. Interestingly, the registration was limited to Class II, articles fabricated mostly from wood.

Jaques originated the praxis of weighting their chessmen for enhanced stability. In a true Jaques set, the king’s crosses are removable. Also, the knights are two pieces—the head and the base—which are screwed together. Jaques was the first chess set manufacturer to affix the symbol of a king’s crown to the summits of the kingside rooks and knights. This praxis was largely copied and is not unique to sets produced by Jaques. Every Jaques chess set will have “Jaques London” imprinted on the upper part of the rim of the base of the white king if the set is boxwood and ebony and on the underside of the base of the ivory king. Both kings are so marked for sets produced after around 1890.

REGISTRATION CERTIFICATES—Each chessman in a Jaques set, sold during the first three years of production, had a small green paper disk affixed to the underside of their bases. This disk bore a registration mark consisting of a small diamond which identified the day, month and year the design was registered, the class and a parcel number. This protected the design from piracy during those three years. Although the pamphlet from the patent office in the UK lists one registration disk design
for 1849, the year the Staunton chessmen were registered, I have discovered that there were actually three designs printed and distributed. The first two had printing errors and omissions. These were used from 1849 to 1852.

**BOXES AND CARTON-PIERRE CASKETS**—Perhaps the most intriguing aspects of collecting Jaques Staunton are the richly adorned Gothic style Carton-Pierre caskets in which they were housed. These caskets were designed by Joseph L. Williams. Matching Carton-Pierre treatment adorned leather chess boards were designed and sold by William Leuchars and first offered to the public in December, 1849. Chessmen were initially housed in hinge-top mahogany boxes with a semi-mortise lock and key, Carton-Pierre caskets in three configurations for “unweighted” wooden and ivory chessmen, and the large Spanish mahogany coffer with removable compartmented trays for the club-size ivory chessmen.

The mahogany boxes which housed the earliest boxwood and ebony chessmen were distinctive. They had unique handmade dovetail joints, soft, slightly rounded corners, and they bore their manufacturers label on their undersides. Some of the earliest boxes also bore a small green label on the underside of the lid. Printed on that small label were the words “The Staunton Chessmen Jaques, London.” This label is quite rare and a good indication that the box is one of the earliest made to house the Staunton chessmen. Later mahogany boxes would carry their labels on the underside of the lid. This did help preserve the labels since they were not placed directly on a wear surface.
EARLY LABELS (1849–1851)—Each box bore a manufacturer’s label affixed to the underside of the box or on the bottom inside of the large Spanish mahogany caskets. This praxis was later changed to affix the label to the underside of the lid of the mahogany boxes. The earliest labels were white with a decorative black fleur-de-lis. A slightly different label was designed for sets numbered 600 or so to 999.

Along with the box contents and registration number (58,607 & 6 Vict. Cap. 100.), each label bore an original (not a facsimile) signature of Howard Staunton and the production number of the set, also in Staunton’s hand. Based on certain observations, I believe Staunton hand-signed and numbered 999 labels (or signed as many as he could until hampered by writer’s cramp).

These early labels were numbered sequentially, so set #120 could be an 8.9 cm wooden set in a small mahogany box, while set #121 might be a large ivory set in a large Carton Pierre casket. Little known is the fact that the earliest labels also have the Jaques London imprint invisibly embossed into the label. The same tool used to mark the bases of their kings was used to make this imprint. This little-known fact alone should be worth the time you have taken to read this article. These labels were used for sets sold during the first two years of production.

NUMBERED LABELS (1852–1856)—After three years, the design registration expired and was not renewable. On August 11, 1852, Nathaniel Cooke entered into an arrangement with Howard Staunton for the exclusive use of his name and facsimile signature on the labels. This next group of labels was produced under this new arrangement. Labels within each of the three color groups were numbered sequentially without regard for the size of the chessmen.

THE LEUCHARS FACTOR—The earliest advertisements for the new Staunton chessmen have the following statement: “The Nobility and Gentry are respectfully informed that these new and elegant CHESS-MEN are now obtainable of W. Leuchars, 28. PICADILLY.” The earliest Jaques chessmen were sold through Leuchars and are quite valuable and have unique features. The Jaques London mark on the bases of both the wooden and the ivory sets were over-stamped “Leuchars.” In the case of the ivory sets, the Jaques London mark is actually scratched out and over stamped. In addition, a Leuchars green sticker was affixed to the underside of the white king’s base. Leuchars ivory sets were sold only in Carton-Pierre caskets and only in the 8.9 cm king. The label on the bottom of the casket originally bore a green Leuchars sticker. Leuchars ivory sets also featured a very unique knight design which was clearly distinguishable from the more normal Jaques knight. Leuchars only offered boxwood and ebony sets in the 8.9” king. Unlike Jaques, Leuchars also offered lead weighting in the smaller boxwood and ebony sets sold between 1849 and 1852. Although somewhat difficult to see, the Jaques London mark on the upper bevel of the king’s base is over-stamped Leuchars.
THE DESIGN EVOLVES—The Jaques Staunton chessmen have evolved over the 150 or so years since their introduction. Many of the changes were made to improve the robustness of the chessmen. Among the other changes made were the relative proportions of the chessmen. Queens and pawns were made taller. The weight of the chessmen was increased. Boxes and labels also underwent significant changes. Boxes housing sets produced after 1895 or so were fitted with a partition which separated the white pieces from the black. Labels changed every five years or so.

The full version of this article first appeared in the November 2008 issue of Chess Life. Frank Camaratta is the internationally-recognized expert in antique Staunton and other playing sets. Between 1986 and 2010, he owned one of the world’s largest collections of Jaques and Staunton-style sets, which numbered well over 1,000 sets. He has been a serious collector and researcher into antique playing chess sets, their design and history since 1986. His serious research, which started in 1989, was centered on Jaques and other Staunton chessmen and quickly expanded into Pre-Staunton playing sets. Camaratta is a serious chess tournament player, national title holder, International Correspondence Chess Master, collector, and historian with a broad educational and professional background. He purchases and sells chess collections, large and small, and has provided numerous appraisal and research services.

In addition, Camaratta has brokered the sale of several large collections in the States and overseas. In 1990, Camaratta founded The House of Staunton, Inc. and later, The House of Staunton Antiques, LLC. His website is chessantiques.com.
Top: England
Gray’s of Cambridge - Sillette Catalin Staunton-Variant Set 1927
King size: 2 13/16 in.
Catalin
Collection of Jon Crumiller
Bottoms: England
British Chess Company
“SS” Small Set 1890
King size: 3 in.
Wood and phenolic
Collection of Jon Crumiller
Opposite Left: United States
Drueke Players’ Choice with Wooden Box 1964
King size: 2 1/4 in.
Box: 3 3/4 in x 8 x 1 7/8 in.
Plastic and wood
Collection of Duncan Pohl
Opposite Right: Japan
“The Craftsman” Staunton Pattern Chessmen 1940
King size: 3 1/4 in.
Box: 3 1/4 in x 8 1/2 in.
Wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller
Opposite Bottoms: England
The Rose Chess Staunton-Variant Set 1940
King size: 2 7/8 in.
Box: 1 5/8 in x 7 1/32 in.
Lead
Collection of Jon Crumiller
American Chess Company
Staunton Style Chess Set
c. 1900
King size: 4 in.
Boxwood and ebonized wood
Collection of Alan Buschmann

Austria
Austrian Coffeehouse
Staunton-Variant Set
1900
King size: 3 ⅞ in.
Wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller

OKUMA America Corporation
Machined Commemorative Set
2007
King size: 2 ⅞ in.
Board: 1 ⅝ x 15 x 15 in.
Aluminium and brass
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame, gift of Hartwig Inc.

England
Edwards & Jones Ivory Set
1875
King size: 3 ⅞ in.
Tray: 5 x 6 x 9 ½ in.
Ivory
Collection of Jon Crumiller
Top left: United States
Bird’s Staunton Chessmen 1890
King size: 4 5/16 in.
Wood and metal
Collection of Jon Crumiller

Bottom left: Chess Pieces from Game 3 of the 1972 World Chess Championship 1972
King size: 3 ⅜ in.
Collection of Dr. Jeanne and Rex Sinquefield

Chess Board Signed by Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky 1972
1 ¼ x 19 x 18 ½ in.
Wood
Collection of Dr. Jeanne and Rex Sinquefield

Right: England
English Ivory Playing Set 1840
King size: 4 ¾ in.
Ivory
Collection of Jon Crumiller

England
Victorian Tilt-top Chess Table 1850
28 x 22 x 22 in.
Papier mâché and wood
Collection of Jon Crumiller
THE STAUNTON STANDARD:  THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN CHESS SET  
APRIL 12 - SEPTEMBER 16, 2018

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