

# DESIGNING *CHESSMEN*

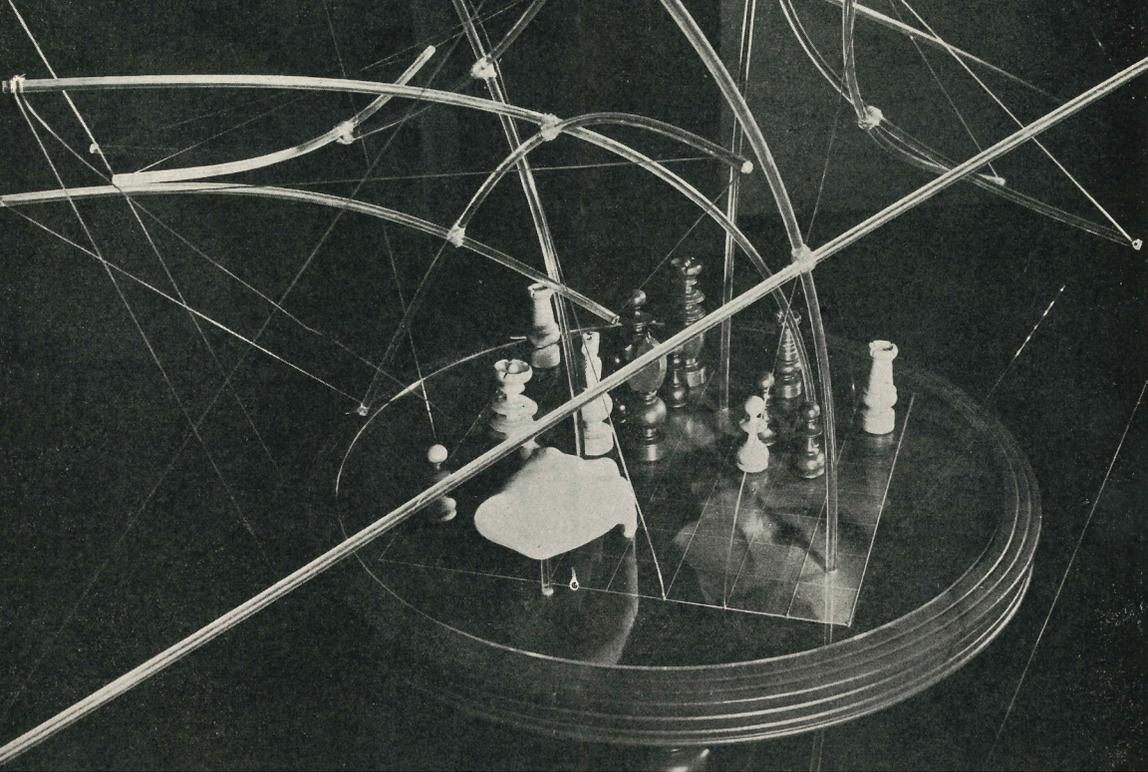
*A Taste of*  
*THE IMAGERY of CHESS*

*SEPTEMBER 29, 2016*

*through*

*MARCH 12, 2017*

WORLD CHESS HALL *of* FAME  
*SAINT LOUIS ~ MISSOURI*



## DESIGNING CHESSMEN A TASTE of THE IMAGERY of CHESS

On December 12, 1944, *The Imagery of Chess* opened at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City on the 4th floor of a townhouse at 42 East 57th Street. Conceived by the Dadaist and chess master Marcel Duchamp, gallery owner Julien Levy, and Dadaist/Surrealist Max Ernst, the exhibition brought together a group of artists who were challenged with designing chessmen that differed from the traditional and formal Staunton and “French” sets used in everyday chess and tournament play. Tasked with creating new “figures, at once more harmonious and more agreeable to the touch and to the sight,” over 30 artists, many of whom had previously exhibited with Levy, participated in the project, creating a variety of boards and sets as well as sculpture, music, paintings, and drawings. Though a few of the participating artists—Alexander Calder, Man Ray, André Breton, and the organizers were well known at the time, others such as Matta, Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, and John Cage would emerge as significant figures in the second half of the 20th century.

Coinciding with the height of World War II, this playful and whimsical exhibition was celebrated at the time and received great press coverage in both mainstream media (*Newsweek*, *Town & Country*), and art and chess journals (*Art Digest* and *Chess Review*) among

Al Puhn, **Photograph of Xanti Schawinsky's Chess Table Assemblage, c 1944, at the Julien Levy Gallery.**  
From article “Chessmen of Tomorrow” by Kenneth Harkness *Chess Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 1945  
Courtesy of U.S. Chess  
Courtesy of Lorenzo Bianda, Locarno, Switzerland

other publications. Strangely, the details of the show were not documented thoroughly and the exhibition had been widely ignored among art historians. No checklist was recorded, or has been found, so there is much speculation as to what each artist contributed to the show. Thanks to the work of independent curator, artist, and scholar, Larry List, working as the first guest curator at The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York, in 2005 the exhibition *The Imagery of Chess Revisited* was organized and an accompanying catalog published. Upon reviewing archival images, Levy’s gallery ledger, and press images, List and a network of cooperative institutions, artists, estates, and private individuals reconstructed much of the original exhibition. Bringing together many of the actual works of art and reconstructing many of the “lost” pieces, the exhibition gave new life to a forgotten unique collaboration and conflation of art and chess.

With a mission to interpret the game of chess and its cultural and artistic significance, the World Chess Hall of Fame (WCHOF) is honored to celebrate the history of *The Imagery of Chess* and its impact on future artists and our own institution. September 2016 marks the fifth anniversary of the WCHOF’s existence in Saint Louis, Missouri. Since our opening, we have

staged 10 exhibitions that merge art and chess—two of which were group shows where artists reinterpreted the game of chess and incorporated their artistic ideas into either chess sets or chess-related imagery. The inspiration to do this comes directly from the 1944 exhibition, and more specifically, the chess-related art created by Marcel Duchamp.

The WCHOF will continue to explore the myriad of creative notions of chess to enrich our viewers’ experiences with this ancient game. In 2017, the WCHOF will continue to pay homage to the original *The Imagery of Chess* when we ask local artists to create chess-related artwork. We look forward to this project as we continue to celebrate Saint Louis as the U.S. Capital of Chess.

—Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, WCHOF



International News Photos  
**Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning and Muriel and Julien Levy Playing Chess, The Julien Levy Gallery, New York, 1945**  
Philadelphia Museum of Art: 125th Anniversary Acquisition.  
The Lynne and Harold Honickman  
Gift of the Julien Levy Collection, 2001  
Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art



## O R I G I N S

In the summer of 1944, New York gallerist Julien Levy and his friend the German painter and sculptor Max Ernst rented a house near Great River, Long Island, along with their respective partners American painters Muriel Streeter and Dorothea Tanning. These avid chess players were shocked that their house was not furnished with a chess set. However, seeing their problem as a creative opportunity, Ernst and Levy immediately set to work inventing their own plaster chess pieces in Ernst's makeshift sculpture studio in the garage.

Surprised and pleased with their plaster chess creations, Levy and Ernst decided to invite everyone in their creative circle to design chess sets and chess-themed art for a winter holiday exhibition of affordable works, great and small. Levy wrote a brief manifesto "On Designing Chessmen," advocating the replacement of the stodgy 19th-century chess set designs with new forms "...more agreeable to the touch and to the sight" ones "... more adequate to the role the figure has to play in the struggle..." whose visual "...aspect would represent...a clear incisive image of its inner conflicts..." and would "...inspire the player instead of confusing him." Invited to help his friends organize the event, artist and chess master Marcel Duchamp rallied the chess community and designed a 4-quadrant folding announcement/brochure with Levy's manifesto and iconic red silhouettes of the new, abstract chess pieces by Ernst. They entitled the exhibition simply *The Imagery of Chess*, and broadly described it as a "group exhibition of painting, sculpture, newly designed chessmen, music, and miscellany."

Julien Levy (1906-1981)  
*Chess Piece Prototypes (45) with Their Exhibition Copy Egg Carton*, 1944  
 Plaster and cardboard  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Bloomfield Moore Fund, 2007  
 Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

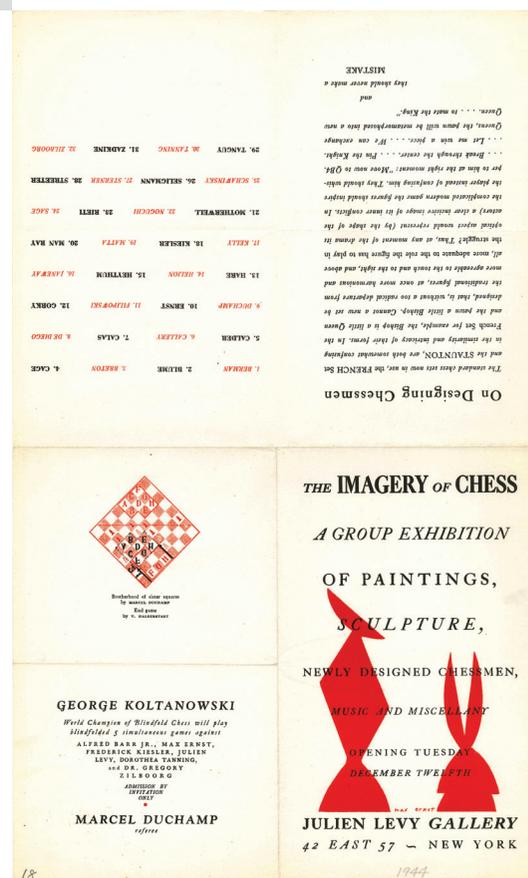
## H E A L T H Y H E T E R O G E N E I T Y

Unlike other art historians or gallerists of his era, Levy had taken studio courses in painting, sculpture, photography, and filmmaking while studying at Harvard in the mid-1920s. He even took a class about Renaissance egg tempera and plaster casting techniques nicknamed the "eggs and plaster course." Inspired by his friend Constantin Brancusi's abstract sculptures and using Surrealist word play to suggest a starting point, Levy literally made his *Chess Piece Prototypes* from plaster casts of egg shells saved from his breakfasts. He preserved them in their cardboard cartons and then had a local craftsman produce his chess set prototypes larger in wood.

To Levy, Ernst, and Duchamp, creativity was not bound by medium, style, or vocation. They invited expatriate European Modernist and Surrealist painters and sculptors but also Neo-Romantics and young, scruffy, aspirant New York School artists too. Architects; scenic, graphic,

and industrial designers; photographers; a ceramist; a research librarian; two music composers; two art theorists; and a famous Freudian psychiatrist rounded out their roster. Unlike the provincial American art world "boys' club," this show of 32 participants had eight women, seven couples, and 14 nationalities.

To avoid the boredom of like-mindedness in the show, the organizers invited people with differing attitudes toward chess. Man Ray, Alexander Calder, Xanti Schawinsky, Vittorio Rieti, Dorothea Tanning, and Muriel Streeter, among others, loved chess. Artists such as Isamu Noguchi, Kurt Seligmann, Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, Jean Hélion, and Julio de Diego understood the game but did not really care about it. Still others, like André Breton, Nicolas Calas, and Roberto Matta were among those who openly hated the game. Surprisingly, everyone, even the disinterested and adversarial parties, contributed engaging and provocative works.



Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)  
*The Imagery of Chess invitation/brochure*, 1944  
 Red and black ink on paper  
 Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame  
 © Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2016  
 Chessmen Design by Max Ernst. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



M A X E R N S T

Max Ernst's earliest known chess set was a series of loosely sculpted plaster forms pictured in a photo of *Plaster Chess Set*, 1929. Between 1929 and 1930 these king, queen, and bishop figures were mounted together on a base and editioned as *Roi, Reine et Fou*, a trio which may have been included in *The Imagery of Chess* show. Ernst, a serious player, also prepared a framed watercolor referred to as his *Strategic Value Chess Board 1* and a second version of it which served as the board of Xenia Cage's *Chess Table*. He additionally offered the 16 piece plaster set of his transitional design, *1944 Plaster Chess Set Prototype*, along with three complete sets of his now classic *1944 Wood Chess Set*. The forms, suggestive of Easter Island and African sculptures, were initially composed from fragments of plaster casts of funnels and other kitchen utensils which Ernst then had reproduced in different combinations of hardwoods by the local craftsman Levy had found. Ernst also exhibited the plaster version of what became his most famous sculpture, *The King Playing with the Queen*, a large, horned Minotaur King seated at a chessboard, his right hand forward protecting his Queen while his left hand hides the beheaded torso of another Queen figure behind him.

Max Ernst (1891-1976)  
*Plaster Chess Set*, 1929  
 Photograph

Courtesy of Stiftung Max Ernst, Bruhl, Germany  
 © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

M A R C E L D U C H A M P

Though he played a large part in organizing the show, Duchamp exhibited the smallest known work, an altered readymade object. It was a wallet-style pocket chess set held by a rubber glove pinned to the wall, with pins as center points of the chessboard grid supposedly to hold the celluloid chess piece tabs Duchamp had custom-made. The French chess master was making a visual pun referring to the chess tactic of "pinning" an opponent's piece in a position that rendered it useless. Often referring to art as "useless," Duchamp ironically offered the convenience of a portable chess set but rendered it useless (hence now art) by inviting the player to try to move the miniature "pinned" pieces while wearing a large clumsy rubber glove. Duchamp attempted to sell copies of his "pin-grip pocket chess board" with the help of his friend Grandmaster George Koltanowski, with whom he staged a blindfold chess event on January 6, 1945. With Duchamp as interlocutor, Koltanowski simultaneously defeated Levy, Museum of Modern Art Director Alfred Barr, Jr., artist/designer Xanti Schawinsky, composer Vittorio Rieti, painter Dorothea Tanning, and Max Ernst. Architect Frederick Kiesler forced a draw.



Julien Levy (1906-1981)  
*The Blindfold Chess Event, Julien Levy Gallery, January 6, 1945*  
 Black and white photograph  
 Collection of the Jean and Julien Levy Foundation for the Arts  
 Courtesy of the Jean and Julien Levy Foundation for the Arts



M I L I E U

Having suffered the senseless, chance privations of warfare before arriving safely in America the European artists, especially, drew closer to the game of chess. Chess was the game of war, but it was a cathartic one. It was an orderly game of skill with rules, not blind chance, determining one's destiny. For these disenfranchised immigrant artists the opportunity to design a chess set, to create a harmonious ensemble of new forms, allowed them to imagine a new, more ideal model of society and network of relationships. Then, as now, chess offered players and artists alike a sense of community.

M A N R A Y

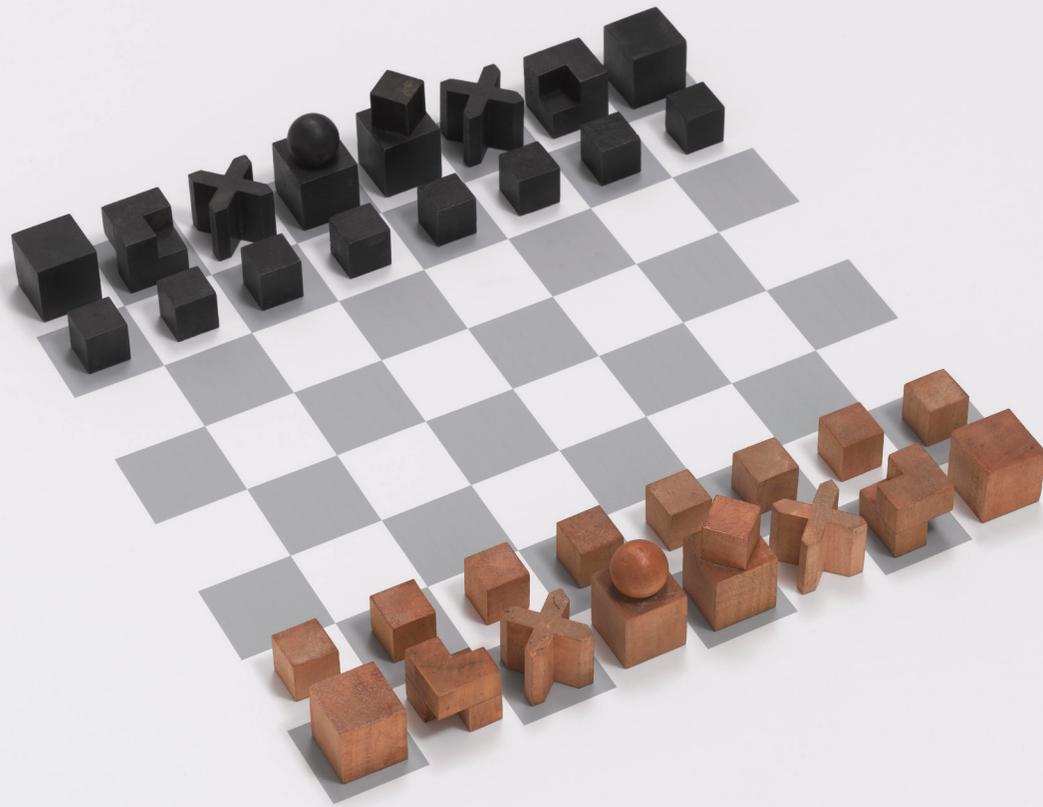
Living in self-imposed exile in Hollywood, California, from 1940 until 1951, Man Ray was an eager, though long-distance participant in the exhibition. Though this American Dadaist and Surrealist began designing chess sets as soon as he had mastered mechanical drawing in high school, as demonstrated in *Recto: Perspective Study for Chess Pieces*, he assembled his first actual chess set in 1920 from wooden found objects in his studio. He sent his deluxe 1926 *Silver Chess Set*, an enlarged version of this first 1920 wood set to *The Imagery of Chess* show. This 1926 set and its table design was the inspiration for his later 1962 *Chess Set and Table* edition. Man Ray may also have submitted an earlier 1944 version of *Design for Chess Pieces* drawing from which one set was ordered and produced in 1945. Unable to participate in person at the *Blindfold Chess Match* Duchamp planned, Man Ray may also have sent the photograph *Self Portrait with Chess Set*, and his chessboard painting *The Knight's Tour* to represent him as a player in absentia.

One of Duchamp's chess friends, Freudian psychiatrist Dr. Gregory Zilboorg loaned the show an early 1923 prototype of what was to become the iconic 1924 Josef Hartwig *Bauhaus Chess Set*. Perhaps the first chess set whose sole subject was the nature of the game of chess itself, this set visually portrayed the "... role the figure has to play in the struggle." Derived from identical wooden blocks, the abstract shape of each piece portrayed its identity solely by indicating its direction of movement.



Top left:  
Man Ray (1890-1976)  
**Chess Set**, Designed 1944;  
made 1945  
Natural and ebonized birch  
Philadelphia Museum of Art:  
Gift of John Harbeson, 1964  
Courtesy of the Philadelphia  
Museum of Art  
© Man Ray Trust / Artists  
Rights Society (ARS), NY /  
ADAGP, Paris 2016

Bottom right:  
International News Photos  
**Julien Levy with Josef  
Hartwig's 1923 Bauhaus  
Prototype Chess Set**, c 1945  
Black and white photograph  
Collection of the Jean  
and Julien Levy Foundation  
for the Arts



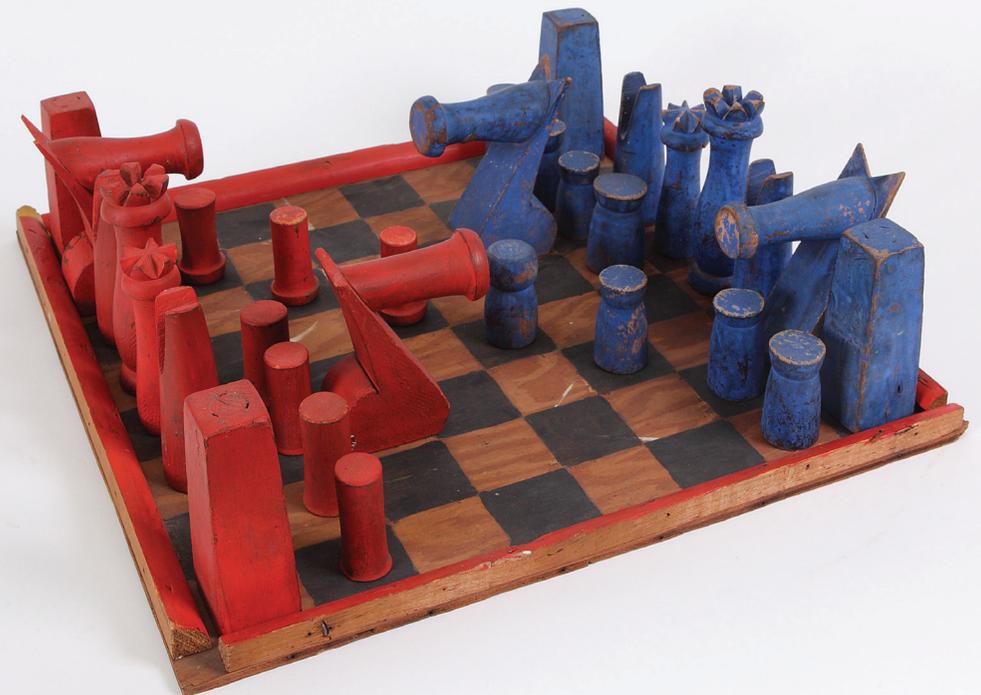
## N E W M A T E R I A L S

Though wartime made the familiar materials scarce it also introduced artists to new experimental materials. Laszló Moholy-Nagy sent his protégé Richard Filipowski's *Clear Chess Set* entirely from transparent surplus Plexiglas. Xanti Schawinsky used curving lengths of the plastic rod to describe artillery trajectories over a chessboard battlefield, and Isamu Noguchi used Plexiglas to fashion colored abstract silhouette-figure *Chess Set* pieces and the inlays on the *Chess Table* he made from two other new aviation grade materials, lumber core plywood and cast aluminum. Man Ray's friend, the Czech architect and stage designer Antonín Heythum, a government advisor on civilian substitutions for strategic materials, sent a small chess set of lathe-turned and anodized aluminum, which influenced Man Ray's post-war designs.

Alexander Calder (1898-1976)  
**Chess Set**, c 1944  
 Wood and paint  
 Calder Foundation, New York / Art Resource, NY  
 © 2016 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
 Photo: Bonnie Morrison

## S C A R C E M A T E R I A L S

The wartime scarcity of good materials generated a strong psychic urge to piece together a new world from whatever could be found. Chess set prototypes and the sculptures that Ernst and David Hare exhibited were plaster originals, not bronze casts. The lack of fresh art supplies drove artists to work with found objects and salvaged materials instead. In 1942, Alexander Calder used slices of a broom handle to create his first *Traveling Chess Set*, then went on to use odds and ends of wooden bric-a-brac, including the sawn-off legs of his studio sofa as the rooks, to complete his *Assemblage Chess Set and Board* of 1944. Scarcity promoted reducing forms to their minimal limits as Yves Tanguy did with his *Chess Set and Tabletop Board*, first made in Paris, 1938, then again in New York in 1944. The sets he fashioned, also from broom handles, rival the Hartwig *Bauhaus Chess Set* for simplicity, functionality, and clarity of identity and purpose. Surrealism's theorist André Breton and art critic Nicolas Calas took the use of scavenged found objects even further by assembling a temporary *Wine Glass Set and Board* from borrowed wine glasses and mirrors.



Josef Hartwig (1880-1955)  
**Bauhaus Chess Set on Board**, 1924  
 Stained birch

The Museum of Modern Art  
 Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY  
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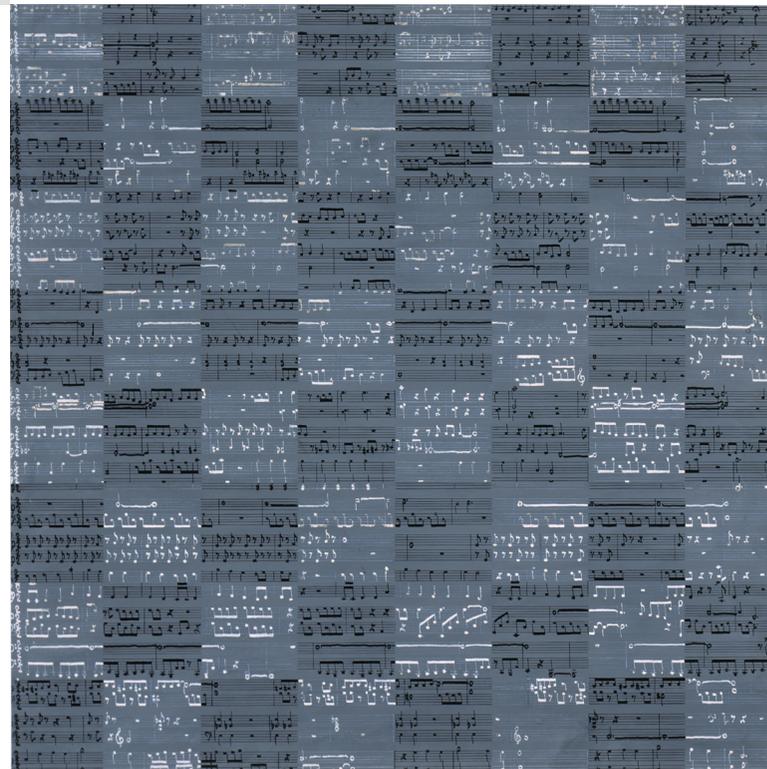
## FIGURATION & ABSTRACTION

By the time of *The Imagery of Chess* show in 1944, the experiments of Surrealism, which began in the 1920s to build bridges between reality and dreams, had reached the boundaries between figuration and abstraction. Around this time, Chilean architect-turned-Surrealist painter Roberto Matta tutored ambitious young New York painters Robert Motherwell, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock in Surrealist collage and calligraphic automatic writing techniques. Matta promoted a new “Abstract Surrealism” to them. The picturing of chess sets and boards offered the perfect nexus of figuration and abstraction.

Chess pieces, designed as harmonious families of forms almost always read as figures, even when abstracted. However, the chess boards they were moved about on were increasingly viewed as purely geometric, gridded, totally flat, abstract spaces. They were canvases across which linear, multi-directional, non-perspectival painting gestures, like chess moves, could be made in a new type of conceptual space. The dialogues that Gorky and Motherwell had with Matta and the exposure that the New York art community had to “chess space” described in the chess board grid paintings of Man Ray, Dorothea Tanning, Max Ernst, John Cage, and Julio de Diego in *The Imagery of Chess* show may have contributed to the development of the flat picture plane abstraction of the New York School and by extension to later forms of Minimal grid-based art.

## TRADITION & INNOVATION

While new materials and scarcity of familiar ones sparked innovation, so too did these artists’ awareness of chess history and tradition. Levy, Duchamp, Ernst, and Man Ray all had their own chess libraries, and through copies of H.J.R. Murray’s 1913 masterwork *A History of Chess*, many of the other artists drew inspiration from the 14 centuries of chess history. Noguchi’s intense study of Indian culture and art led him to make his chess pieces sparkling red and green and his table black with inlaid white center-points instead of squares, to pay homage to traditional ruby and emerald chess pieces on black lacquered Indian boards with their round mother of pearl center-points. Levy’s cast plaster chess board expressed his love of both Eastern and Western stylistic traditions. A fan of Early Italian Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca’s perspective geometry, Levy inscribed a forced perspective grid into the plaster board surface but, with a nod toward the Indian board mother of pearl center-points he embedded a lustrous mother of pearl seashell in the center of each square.



Left:  
Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988)  
**Chess Set and Table**, 2005  
replica of last original, c 1944  
Table: Ebonized wood and  
aluminum  
Pieces: Red and green plexiglass  
Collection of Dr. Jeanne and  
Rex Sinquefeld  
© 2016 The Isamu Noguchi  
Foundation and Garden  
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Photo: Michael DeFilippo

Right:  
John Cage (1912-1992)  
**Chess Pieces**, c 1944  
Black and white ink and  
gouache on Masonite  
Private Collection,  
Chicago, Illinois.  
©John Cage Trust  
Photo: Brian Franczk

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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André Breton (1896-1966) and Nicolas Calas (1907-1988).  
**Wine Glass Set and Board** (Exhibition Replica), 2016, of lost original c 1944.  
Mirror glass, wood, glass, and red and white wine  
Reproduction by the World Chess Hall of Fame  
Photo: Michael DeFilippo

L O O K I N G B A C K — L O O K I N G F O R W A R D

*The Imagery of Chess* exhibition of 1944 was an idea simply sparked by the absence of a chess set. Yet, it led a diverse range of creative talents to produce an incredibly rich variety of work based on the 14 centuries of chess history and culture. It gave 20th-century modernists alternative ways to think about space, form, and movement; offered a new set of abstract Modernist norms; and has encouraged the aesthetic explorations of subsequent generations of artists, designers, and architects.

—Larry List  
New York, August 2016



Man Ray (1890-1976)  
**1962 Silver Chess Set and Table**, 1962  
Enameled metal chessboard with 32 Sterling Silver Players  
Edition 1 of 5  
Collection of Dr. Jeanne and Rex Sinquefield  
© Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris 2016  
Photo: Michael DeFilippo



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Curated by Shannon Bailey, Chief Curator, World Chess Hall of Fame.

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FRONT COVER: Chessmen design by Max Ernst. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

BACK COVER: Designed by Max Ernst (1891-1976). *Chess Set*, Designed 1944. Stained boxwood. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of John F. Harbeson, 1964. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

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