

# CHESS MASTERPIECES

Highlights from the  
Dr. George & Vivian Dean Collection



WORLD  CHESS  
HALL OF FAME

SEPTEMBER 9, 2011 - FEBRUARY 12, 2012

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## DESIGNERS OF THE ROYAL GAME

The chess sets most of us first encountered were likely to have been small, humble figures of plastic or wood arrayed across simple printed vinyl boards. However, chess has been called “The Royal Game” not only because it originated in royal courts, but also because, across all eras and cultures, chess sets have been created from the most opulent and diverse materials by the world’s finest craftsmen. The world-renowned Fabergé, Meissen, and Sèvres workshops and many others were eager to join ranks with generations of elite anonymous craftsmen who worked for their ruler, church, or wealthy civil patrons to craft chess sets recognized as consummate works of art. The singular works in this exhibition were chosen from the more than 1,000 chess sets in the collection of Dr. George and Vivian Dean. Their collection is the result of 50 years of devoted travel, study, and erudition. These outstanding examples help trace the development of the game of chess and the design of fine chess sets from 900 CE to the early twentieth century.

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## PREDECESSORS & ORIGINS

There are more than 20 myths concerning the origin of chess. It is first factually mentioned in documents of the early seventh century CE, hence it was already played widely enough to be a subject worthy of record. Though some accounts vary, it is generally acknowledged that the game of chess originated in northwestern India.

Two other early games shared characteristics of chess: Ashtāpada and Chataranga. Like chess, Ashtāpada, which was thought to be an ancient spiral race game, originally had an un-checked 8 x 8 square board. Chataranga was a game of war with the four divisions of an Indian army. An Elephant (Hasti), later became the Bishop; a Horse (Ashwa), represented Cavalry and eventually the Knight; a Chariot (Rat-ha), later became the Rook; and a Rajah, or Shah, finally became the King. These were fronted by four foot soldiers (padati), who have since become pawns. Chataranga, which literally means “four-membered,” was played by four people at once, each with eight pieces launching into battle from a different corner of the board. However, Ashtāpada and Chataranga were games of chance, with dice determining the players’ moves.

Chess eliminated the chance element of dice and became a game of skill played by only two people. Each player had sixteen Chataranga pieces. A Minister (Mantri), or advisor, took the place of a second King on each side. The goal of the game was to render the King powerless—unable to move. Few examples of the earliest Indian chess sets exist, though in later writings they were described as figurative in style and usually featured the colors of Chataranga pieces—black and yellow, or more often, red and green. Wood, ivory, precious metals, and gemstones were favored materials for early Indian chess sets.

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## A RIDDLE SPREADS THE GAME

An Indian legation from the court of Rajah Dewarsah introduced chess to the Persian court of Shah Khusrav I Anushivan (r. 531-579 CE) in the form of a riddle.

They presented an ornate chess set and board decorated with rubies and emeralds to the Persians, who were challenged to identify the game and how it was organized and operated. The Persian minister, Buzurjmihir, solved the riddle of chess and, with his Shah, sent back another game as a riddle to the Indian Rajah—the game of Nards (backgammon). Chess grew quickly in Persia as the Arabs who conquered the area around 638 CE spread “the Persian game” to other nomadic Muslim peoples, though still using Indian organization and rules. Chess assumed such importance that rulers maintained resident master players in their courts, and games and patterns of chess openings began to be recorded. The central chess term “Checkmate” originated in the Persian expression “Shah mat”—the King is helpless.

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## FIGURATION & ABSTRACTION

The Koran discouraged the representation of human or animal forms, so talented Islamic designers refined and abstracted the Indian pieces into easy-to-handle, still-recognizable, but not realistic, forms often embellished with complex geometric decorations. These works were among the earliest minimal abstract forms and set up the stylistic tension that continues to this day between chess set designs that are highly figurative and those that are highly abstract. Stone, glass, cloth, and wire were among the additional materials used by Islamic craftsmen to make durable, beautiful sets for their nomadic players.

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## ELASTICITY & MOBILITY

Indeed, as long as the pieces were recognizable, chess sets could be made any size, ranging from under one inch to ten times that or more. Chess was like today’s computer games—it could be played on large scale boards in the royals’ palaces, just as computer games can be played on large monitors, or it could be played with small portable sets carried in a bag—just like the modern day Game Boy or smartphone carried in a pocket or knapsack. The complexity of the game made it popular to play, and its elasticity of scale made for a proliferation of designs that were readily portable. Chess traveled the world with Arab warriors and traders. The game invaded North Africa and reached as far as Spain by 713 CE. A century later, in 827 CE, it had traveled with the Saracens across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Southern Italy. Chess spread across Europe from east to west and south to north. It reached Russia, the British Isles, and Iceland between 875 and 1100 CE, carried by Scandinavian traders. Other trade routes carried the Royal Game from Northwest India, through Kashmir into China by about the 700 CE, and on to Korea, Japan, and the rest of Southeast Asia.

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## A DURABLE TEMPLATE

In addition to the game’s complexity and its elasticity of scale, a third factor has contributed to the longevity of chess and its worldwide appeal: the game presents a durable yet mutable template for society. Early chessboards were similar to the Ashtāpada board, which was derived from the Vastu Purush Mandala, believed to be the universal template for organizing dwellings, temples, cities, societies, and ultimately, the universe.

In 1275, Jacobus de Cessolis, a Dominican monk in Lombardy, used the game of chess as a basis for a major sermon on morality discussing each person’s social status and responsibilities. Originally published as *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobelium (Book of the Manners of Men and the Offices of the Nobility)*, it became so popular that it was translated, re-copied, and illustrated in every European language. William Caxton’s 1475 version, illustrated with simple woodcuts and simply re-titled *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, was the second book published in the English language.

In 1284, King Alfonso X the Wise of Castile and Leon enlisted numerous scholars and artists to produce the *Libros del Axedrez, Dados et Tablas*, or *Book of Games and Tables*, which he organized and edited. He contrasted dice, a game of chance, with chess, a game of skill, in order to debate the larger topic of whether life itself was driven by fate or instead, was a matter of free will, which he equated with games of skill, chess the first among them.

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## MUTABILITY & REPERTORY ACTORS

The longevity of the standard chess pieces over centuries is in part due to their mutability as characters. Throughout history, inspired artisans have used the chess pieces as repertory actors, recasting them in the topical roles of the day to be played out upon the 64 squares of their chessboard stage. Chess sets in this exhibition have immortalized the courts of Catherine the Great, Napoleon, and Czar Nicolas II. They commemorate cultural conflicts such as Indians vs. British (*the John Style Set*), Assyrians vs. Egyptians, Europeans vs. Africans and Communists vs. Capitalists (*Soviet Propaganda Set*). They have distilled the dramas of basic human nature such as the *Battle of the Sexes* and *Good vs. Evil*. Shakespeare’s plays, like chess games, were rife with seductions, bluffs, betrayals, and murder. Hence, it may come as no surprise that there are chess sets portraying the characters of *Macbeth*, or that Howard Staunton, the English chess champion for whom the world’s most ubiquitous chess set is named, was also a leading Shakespeare scholar.

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## MATERIAL & TECHNIQUES

Chess sets of every country had basically the same elements, and since they were readily portable, they were readily comparable country to country, culture to culture. This challenged the courtiers and inspired the craftsmen of each region to seek out the finest materials and devise the most advanced and ingenious techniques of fabrication. Augustus the Strong of Saxony went so far as to imprison his leading alchemist for seven years to “incentivize” him to either turn lead into gold or figure out how the Chinese made porcelain. Though perhaps a bit extreme, it did result in the founding of Meissen, the first porcelain works in Europe. Despite efforts to keep the process secret, twenty-five other porcelain workshops sprang up by the end of the century creating a revolution in design using this versatile new medium.

A wide variety of materials, from precious metals and gemstones to tortoise shell and paper mâché were

employed to create the works in this exhibition. However, there is one material that appears in almost half of the works in this exhibition because it was both precious and practical: ivory. Until the introduction of plastics in the twentieth century, ivory from Asian and African elephants had been the carving medium of choice throughout the world. It had been a prized material since prehistoric times.

Walrus, mammoths (though long extinct), hippopotami, and narwhals also have been valuable sources of carving ivory. A pleasing creamy-white in its natural state, ivory could be painted or stained a rainbow of colors and had a tight, even grain, finer than any wood. Hence, it would hold exceptionally fine detail, could be buffed to a lustrous finish, and was durable enough to last generations. Demand for finely carved ivory goods has never abated, though declining herds led the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to put the Asian elephant on its endangered list in 1975 and the African elephant in 1990. This makes international trade in ivory illegal and helps to discourage interest in any newly made ivory goods.

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## BOARDS AS ART

Many craftsmen did not stop when they completed the 32 chess pieces. They regarded the chessboards as equally important expressions of their artistry: each board became a detailed stage, a private little universe in which their characters would play out their combative dramas. In Europe between 1100 and 1200, the transition was made to checkered boards, which multiplied designers’ opportunities for decorative effects while also aiding players’ calculation of moves. In fact, checkered boards were adapted as tools to aid accounting calculations as well, giving rise to the job title “Exchequer.”

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## STRANGE BEAUTIES

Beneath the strange beauties that abound in these works runs a deep, intense current of human ingenuity, technical innovation, consummate craftsmanship, and brilliant artistry. While viewing these creations, one should consider that all but one or two of the works in this exhibition were made before the availability of electric lights or power tools. There were no digital calipers to perfectly measure and lay out designs, no super-sharp carbide drills or chisels or carving knives. The vast majority of these craftsmen worked either under sunlight or were aided only by the frustrating flicker of candle or lamp lights and used basic man-made tools for carving and sculpting. This makes these works all the more amazing.

It is said that there are currently more than 500,000,000 chess players in the world and that there are more potential chess moves than there are atoms in the universe. These highlights from the Dean Collection would suggest that there is also infinite variety and possibilities in the design of chess sets for us to study, learn from, and enjoy.

*Larry List,*  
Consulting Curator

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Listed with the height of tallest piece.



**1.1. Neresheimer French vs. Germans Set and Castle Board**, Hanau, Germany, 1905-10. Silver and gilded silver, ivory, diamonds, sapphires, pearls, amethysts, rubies, and marble. King: 5" Board: 30.5"



**2.1. Abstract Bead and Dart Style Set with Board**, India, 1700s. Natural and green-stained ivory, black lacquerwork folding board with silver and mother-of-pearl. King: 2.375" Board: 1 x 12 x 12"



**2.2. Rajasthan Style Figurative Set**, India, 1700s. Carved polychromed ivory. King: 6"



**2.3. Mogul Style Set with Presentation Case**, India, 1800s. Beryl with inset diamonds, rubies, and gold, wooden presentation case clad in maroon velvet and silk-lined. Bishop: 1" Presentation case: 8.5 x 13 x 8.5"

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**3.1. Pil (Elephant) with 2 Horns**, Persia, 700-900. Ivory with circular pierced decorations. 2.25"

**3.2. Pil (Elephant)**, Persia, 700-900. Stone with incised arch motif. 1.5"

**3.3. Pil (Elephant)**, Persia, 700-900. Stone with horizontal decorative bands. 1"

**3.4. Payadah (Pawn)**, Persia, 700-900. Glass with traces of small, painted or incised decorations. .75"

**3.5. Pil (Elephant)**, Persia, 700-900. Alabaster. 1"

**3.6. Asp or Faras (Horseman)**, Persia, 700-900. Alabaster. 1.25"



**3.7. Mushroom Style Abstract Set and Engraved Silver Board**, Syria, 1600s. Chased, stamped, and engraved silver alternately gilt. King: 2.5" Board: 15.5"



**3.8. Jade and Marble Set and Board**, Persia, 1800s. Jade and marble pieces with a board of jade and marble inlaid into a gilt silver with niello 4-legged base. King: 3" Board: 14.5"



**3.9. Braided and Embroidered Moroccan Travel Set and Board**, Morocco, 1800s. Silver and gold lace braid, glass, wood, silver, velvet, and brocade. King: 5" Board: 18"



**3.10. Abstract Tulip Style Set with Ashtāpada Board**, Natural and stained ivory pieces, velvet and gold embroidery board. King: 6" Board: 17.5"



**5.1. Burgundy Rock Crystal Set and Board**, France, Early 1500s. Carved rock crystal and smoky topaz, silver, gilt, and metal foils. King: 2.75" Board: 12"



**6.1. Springer (Knight) or Turm (Rook)**, Germany, 1500s. Ivory. 2.75"

**6.2. Cavalier (Knight)**, France, 1500s. Ivory. 2.5"

**6.3. Fou (Fool)**, France, 1500s. Ivory. 3.25"

**6.4. Fou (Fool)**, France, 1500s. Ivory. 1.5"

**6.5. Fou (Fool)**, France, 1700s. Ivory. 3.75"

**6.6. Königin (Queen)**, Germany, 1500s. Ivory. 3.125"

**6.7. Königin (Queen)**, Germany, 1600s. Ivory. 2.75"

**6.8. Reine (Queen)**, France, 1500s. Ivory. 3"

**6.9. Tour (Rook)**, France, 1500s. Ivory. 2.75"



**6.10. Eger Wood Chessboard with Low Relief Carving**, Eger, Germany, 1600s. Carved and inlaid wood. 17.75 x 1"



**6.11. & 6.12. Staunton Chess Set with Jacques Carton-Pierre Paper Mâché Box**, England, 1850s. Turned and carved natural and stained ivory pieces and cast, laminated, and painted paper mâché box. Nathaniel Cooke, designer. King: 4" Box: 4 x 7 x 6"



**6.13. Macbeth Set**, England, Early 1800s. Jasperware by Wedgwood. John Flaxman, designer. King: 3"

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**7.1. Battle of the Sexes**, Austria, Pieces, 1783; Board, 1815. Silver and gilt pieces and gilt silver, lapis, and malachite board. King: 2" Board: 12"



**8.1. Europeans vs. Africans Set and Board**, Italy, 1800. Coral, ebony, and marble pieces with coral, ebony, marble, lemonwood, and silver board. King: 3" Board: 14 x 21"



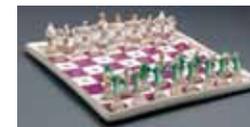
**8.2. Good vs. Evil Set and Board**, Italy, 1700s. Natural and stained ivory pieces with carved ivory and ebony board. King: 4" Board: 20.5"



**9.1. Catherine the Great Amber Set and Board**, Russia, Late 1700s. Carved amber and ebony. King: 3" Board: 15.125"



**9.2. Napoleon and Josephine vs. George III and Queen Charlotte Set**, France, Early 1800s. Polychromed ivory with **Erbach Ivory Board**, Erbach, Germany, 1800s. Natural and stained ivory. King: 4.75" Board: 15"



**10.1. Early Meissen Set and Tray Board**, Germany, 1740. Multi-colored glazed porcelain. King: 2.625" Board: 13"



**10.2. Murano Blown Glass Set with Stained and Inlaid Chestnut Board**, Italy, 1700s. King: 3.25" Board: 13.5"



**11.1. Pique Sable Set**, France, Late 1700s. Natural and stained ivory pieces displayed with sand in a Wedgwood vase. Pieces: 5" to base. Wedgwood vase: 12 x 10"

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**11.2. Insects Set and Board**, Italy, c. 1790. Ivory and ebony pieces and board. King: 3.75" Board: 12.5"



**14.1. 1905 Fabergé Kuropatkin Set and Board with Presentation Case**, Russia, 1905. House of Fabergé. Venturine quartz, kalgon jasper, and silver pieces and Siberian jade, apricot serpentine, aventurine quartz, and cast and engraved silver board. Karl Gustav Hjalmar Armfeldt, designer. King: 3" Board: 17.5" Presentation case: 3.125 x 25.75 x 19.25"



**15.1. Ball-in-Ball Style Set**, China, 1800s. Natural and stained ivory with Landscape Decorated Lacquerwork Folding Board, China, 20th century. Urushi lacquer. King: 8.5" Board: 22.5 x 25"



**16.1. John Style Set**, India, Late 1700s. Polychromed ivory. Rook: 5.625"



**17.1. Angkor Wat Set Wood and Board**, Cambodia, 1700s. Stained ivory pieces with wood and ivory inlaid board. King: 5" Board: 19.25"



**17.2. Kashmir Bell Style Set**, India, 1700s. Natural and stained ivory with Philippine Carved Wood Board with ivory inlay. King: 6.5" Board: 18"



**12.1. Habsburg Dynasty Set and Board**, Austria, Early 1900s. Patinated silver, gilt, enamel, garnet, turquoise, pearls, emeralds, and diverse other gemstones and mother-of-pearl and tortoise board with silver and gilt inlay and enamel decorated base with gemstones. King: 3" Board: 20"



**14.2. 1915 Fabergé Egyptians vs. Assyrians Set with Presentation Case**, Russia, 1915. House of Fabergé. Cast silver and gilt. Karl Gustav Hjalmar Armfeldt, designer. King: 3" Presentation case: 2.5 x 15.625 x 14.75"



**15.2. The Incomparable**, China, 1700s. Carved natural and stained ivory. King: 9.5"



**15.3. Carved Coral Figurative Set**, Japan, 1800s. Orange and white coral with Illustrated Lacquerwork Folding Board, China, 20th century. Multicolor Urushi lacquer. King: 3.25" Board: 23 x 25"



**13.1. Soviet Propaganda Set**, Russia, 1923. Polychrome porcelain. GFZ - Gossudarstvennyi Farforovyi Zavod (State Porcelain Factory), Leningrad. Natalia and Yelena Danko, designers. **Karelian Birch Burl Veneer Board**. Veneer. King: 4.125" Board: 18"



**DR. GEORGE and VIVIAN DEAN**

This exhibition commemorates the 50th year that Dr. George and Vivian Dean have been collecting chess sets together. They purchased their first chess set in the Middle East and thereafter acquired a set in each country they visited. As they studied chess history, they expanded their collection more systematically. Now they travel to new countries for the sole purpose of acquiring new sets to make their collection more complete. Their collection includes over 1,000 chess sets and related objects from over 100 countries.

The Deans have shared their collection with the public for study, research, and education. Pieces from the collection have been shown at The Royal Academy of Art and The Somerset House, London; the Musée d'Orsay and Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; The Maryhill Museum of Art; The Philadelphia Museum of Art; The 1990 Kasparov vs. Karpov World Chess Championship at Hotel Macklowe, New York City; and The Detroit Institute of Art. *Chess Masterpieces: One Thousand Years of Extraordinary Chess Sets*, (Abrams) by George Dean with Maxine Brady has received The 2011 Cramer Award for Excellence in Chess Journalism.

*Chess Masterpieces: Highlights from the Dr. George and Vivian Dean Collection*

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*Chess Masterpieces: Highlights from the Dr. George and Vivian Dean Collection* is curated by Larry List. Related programming information and a downloadable pdf of this brochure can be found at [www.worldchesshof.org](http://www.worldchesshof.org).

Front Cover: 1905 Fabergé Kuropatkin Set and Board



Above: 1500's Burgundy Rock Crystal Set and Board

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