CHESS MASTERPIECES

Highlights from the Dr. George & Vivian Dean Collection

WORLD CHESS HALL OF FAME

SEPTEMBER 9, 2011 - FEBRUARY 12, 2012
CHESS MASTERPIECES

An Indian legation from the court of Rajah Dewarsah introdced chess to the Persian court of Shah Khusraw 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. The game was played and operated. The Persian minister, Buzurjmirj, 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 parts of the world. It was described as figurative in style and usually featured black and yellow, 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 wood were among the additional materials used by Islamic craftsmen to make durable, beautiful sets for their nomadic players.

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 modern 16-inch game boards or checkerboards in the palaces’ rooms, as 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 as far as Sicily to 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 game from Northwest India, through Kashmir into China by about the 700 CE, and on to Korea, Japan, and the rest of Southeast Asia.

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 work on moral philosophy discussing each person’s social status and responsibilities. Originally published as Liber de morbus hominum et officiis nobilium (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 Cavendish, 4th Duke of Devonshire, illustrated with simple woodcuts and simply re-titled The Game and Playe of the Chess, 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. He debated 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.

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 Staunton, the English chess champion for whom the Staunton, the English chess champion for whom the Staunton chess set was named), Africans vs. Europeans, Asians vs. Europeans, 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, that or Howard Staunton, the English chess champion for whom the world’s most ubiquitous chess set is named, was also a leading Shakespeare scholar.

MATERIALS & 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” his 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 of its 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.

Walruses, mammoths (though long extinct), hippopotami, and narwhals also have been valuable sources of carving ivory. A pleasing creature while 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 with 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.

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 translation was made to checkerboards, which multiplied designers’ opportunities for decorative effects while also aiding players; calculation of moves on checkerboards were adapted as tools to aid accounting calculations as well, giving rise to the job title “Exchequer.”

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 manual-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.
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”

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 motifs. 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. 1.25”

3.6. Asp or Faras (Horsemman), 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 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 Ashṭāpada 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”

5.2. Pil (Elephant) or Turm (Rook), Germany, 1500s. Ivory. 2.75”

6.1. Springer (Knight) or Turn (Rook), Germany, 1500s. Ivory. 2.75”

6.2. Cavalier (Knight), France, 1500s. Ivory. 2.75”

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. König (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”


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”

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 Wedgewood vase. Pieces: 5” to base. Wedgewood vase: 12 x 10”
11.2. Insects Set and Board, Italy, c. 1790. Ivory and ebony pieces and board. King: 3.75" Board: 12.5"


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"

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"

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"

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.
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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.

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