
 DUNN DUBSON
MATCH OF THE MATRIARCHS
 AND OTHER AMAZONMACHIES



*This exhibition is dedicated to my mentor
and colleague Joseph Wheelwright for
teaching me how to carve wood*

*To Marilyn Yalom, whose book,
Birth of the Chess Queen inspired
The Match of the Matriarchs*

*To Craig Dodson, my big brother and my
first chess opponent*



*This exhibition is also dedicated to my
parents, Don and Bonnie (Van Buskirk)
Dodson, for their tireless love, guidance,
and support of my artistic pursuits*

*And to Andy Moerlein, my best friend, my
true love, and my partner in art and life*

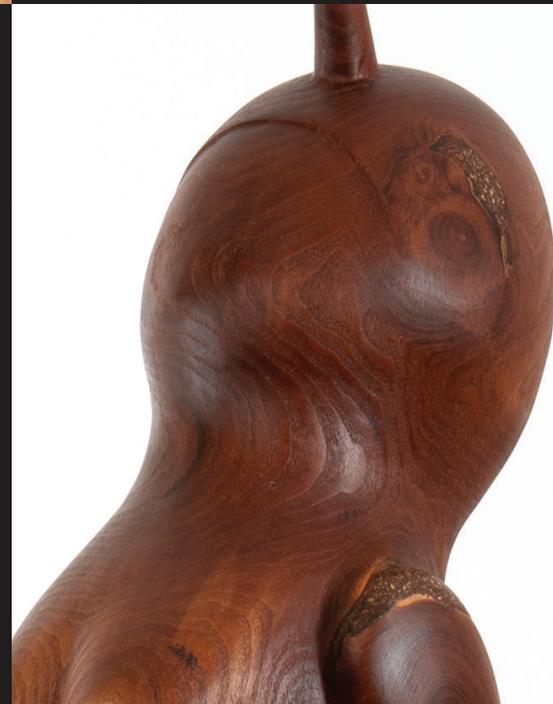


*And most of all to the powerful
matriarchs in my family:
Mary Kay (Dodson) Cannon
Dorothy Eloise Seymour Cannon Dalbey
Irma Dodson
Marjorie (Ingalsbe) Dodson
Judith Elaine (Van Buskirk) Gugudan
Ruth Dodson Hopkins
Martha Alice Pichon
Olive Elaine (Pichon) Van Buskirk
Dorothy L. Pichon Wessels
Elaine (Dodson) Williams Tarter*



*Thank you to Cate McQuaid, Jennifer
Shahade, and Dr. Kurt Steinberg for their
essay contributions to this catalog and
especially to Shannon Bailey and the
World Chess Hall of Fame for making this
exhibition possible*

*It is truly a dream come true
-Donna Dodson*



Cover and Opposite:
Donna Dodson
Match of the Matriarchs
2018
Wood and enamel
Courtesy of the artist

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DONNA DODSON has been carving images out of wood for nearly 30 years. Her sculptures explore feminine beauty and evoke humor, playfulness, grace, power, and emotional strength. Her unique vision responds to the relationship of animals to the human spirit that has existed since ancient times. Her figures are almost always female and range in size from the intimate to the monumental.

Dodson's pre-med studies and her passion for Egyptian art led her to study wood sculpture with Joseph Wheelwright. Amazons, Goddesses, and Wonder Women influence her work. She uses logs of osage orange wood from her grandfather's farm in Illinois and local hardwood logs salvaged from friends in New England.

Dodson has worked in a variety of series from using an elephant headed goddess to explore female figureheads in positions of power, to resurrecting ancient bird goddess imagery and reinterpreting fairy tales to interpreting all 12 figures of the Sun signs of the Western Zodiac and all 12 figures of the Moon signs of the Eastern Zodiac as powerful feminine icons. Recently, Dodson created *Madam President*—a monument to the first female president of the United States of America and to the dream that every girl can become the president. Her most famous sculpture *Seagull Cinderella* (2012) has attracted international media attention. Dodson is known for creating statement pieces such as a cardinal goddess for the women of the Catholic Church who aspire to be ordained and the *Match of the Matriarchs* (2018), the world's first and only life size, all female wooden chess set made by a woman.

As a sculptor of icons, goddesses, and wondrous women, I have been called a scavenger for the heroines of humanity. My artwork celebrates the mystical relationship between human beings and the animal kingdom. Because there were no icons of women in the church that I grew up in, my vision is to create them. Through hybrid female-animal forms that I sculpt in wood, I flesh out sensuality, sexuality, and soul with a well-proportioned figurative vocabulary. The natural grain of the wood interacts with the form and shape of my sculptures in a descriptive way, suggesting nostrils and nipples or garments and fabric textures. I often stylize each piece to enhance the girl, woman, princess, queen, or goddess within. The mouths, or in some cases beaks, are closed symbolizing the mysteries they embody. These figures are sculpted in sizes ranging from the intimate to the monumental. I use color in both subtle and bold ways to activate each piece. My inspiration comes from ancient iconography and mythological imagery.

ARTIST STATEMENT





Shannon Bailey is Chief Curator at the World Chess Hall of Fame and has worked there since it opened in 2011. Prior to working at the WCHOF, Shannon served as the Director of Institutional Giving at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and the Director of Art Galleries at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. In addition to her museum work, Shannon has taught art history classes at several colleges and universities, including Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland State University, Stephen F. Austin State University, and Saint Louis University. Shannon holds a Master of Arts in Art History and Museum Studies from the Case Western Reserve University/Cleveland Museum of Art joint program and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Museum Studies from Juniata College.

Michelangelo said that “Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.” What an inspirational quote, considering he carved several of the most beautiful and intricate sculptures ever created. I see this process in the work of Donna Dodson; however, not only does she release a statue from a block of wood, but she also releases her heroines’ remarkable and moving tales of strength and resistance.

Donna Dodson: Match of the Matriarchs and other Amazonomachies showcases 40 total sculptures, including 32 pieces of a chess set influenced by the relationship she had with her late mentor, artist Joseph Wheelwright. Wheelwright taught her how to carve and played chess with her, though he would try to make the game more fair by removing key pieces. His death was sudden to her, and this piece helped bring her some closure through her grieving process. Dodson researched the marine life surrounding her in Massachusetts and the history of ship prow carvings in the creation of her chess set. Seeing female sculptures on ship prows, Dodson wanted to reimagine what these female effigies might represent and the power they could hold. Inspired by the strong women and matriarchs in her family, she envisioned an all-female chess set to counter the history of the male-dominated game pieces. Historically chess sets had only male military figures: king, general, infantry, foot soldiers, cavalry, etc. In the 10th century, the queen appeared on the chess board, and by the 16th century, she became the most powerful piece. Dodson states, “As women, we are often told that ‘men’ is a gender neutral pronoun that includes men and women, and that everyone in a position of

power being male is normal, so I want my audience to consider a world where all the powerful figures are female. An all-female chess set seems like an apt metaphor for this worldview.”

Representing deep sea archenemies, giant squids and whales, the life-sized chess set shows the battle between cephalopods (octopus, cuttlefish, and squid) and cetaceans (orca, elephant seal, and narwhal). Each piece has its own personality and unique features. According to Dodson, “all of the figures are females in this chess set as opposed to the lone queen in modern chess sets.” This life size chess set is fully functional and meant to be played. Because of the large scale, the viewer or player becomes completely immersed in the game, and must maneuver through the monumental pieces. The opponents experience the positions and the relationships among the various figures and become immersed in the drama of the violent battles for survival that sea creatures have in the deep ocean.

Many of the other sculptures in the exhibition are from Dodson’s “Amazon” series which shows a modern and very personal take on several legendary and fictional female heroines including Mulan, Tomyris, a reinterpreted Black Panther, and Catherine Sforza. Dodson strives to place some of these potentially unfamiliar or overlooked figures back into their rightful place in history to inspire so many to understand and emulate their courage, power, and strength—many descriptions often associated with men only. Dodson celebrates a wide definition of gender roles to expand the traditional binaries of feminine/masculine and break down the historical restrictions that they once had. In a world where many of us grew up

SHANNON BAILEY



Donna Dodson
**The Madwoman
 of Chess or
 Autonomous
 was a Woman**
 2023
 Honey locust and
 enamel
 Courtesy of the artist

with Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella, whose success in life depended on the love and care of a man, Dodson is in step with a newer trend where children see an era of “Disney” characters such as Elsa, Mulan, or Moana, where the independent girl or woman strives to make real change from within and without.

In addition to Dodson’s work, the exhibition also includes a cameo by the distinguished group, Chess Collectors International (CCI), who is celebrating their 40th anniversary this year. In honor of their generous and inspiring relationship with the World Chess Hall of Fame through their donations, loans, and historical contributions, I chose to include some of the gems from several collectors in the organization. Jon Crumiller, Dr. George and Vivian Dean; Tom Gallegos and Luann Woneis; and Israel and Remi Raphaelli, all generously loaned chess sets, boards, and ephemera to the exhibition. CCI is a 501(c)(3) organization of collectors, players, dealers, historians, curators, academics, artists, and others dedicated to the acquisition, preservation, study and appreciation of chess sets, boards, books, clocks and all other artifacts related to the game of chess. Educating both

ourselves and the general public about the material culture of the royal game is central to this mission. Founded in 1984, CCI initiatives include sponsoring research projects and publishing articles on the history of chess sets, boards and other chess artifacts, exploring the relationships between chess and history, culture, the arts, literature and the sciences, organizing conferences and exhibitions on an international scale in conjunction with recognized museums. The members of the organization have lent their expertise and collection to the WCHOF numerous times since we opened in Saint Louis in 2011. We are honored to celebrate them and their important anniversary.

A special thanks to Kurt Steinberg, Cate McQuaid, and Jennifer Shahade for their contributions to this exhibition. Their insightful reviews of Donna and her work are included in this brochure.

We hope this exhibition will inspire all to see another side of the game of chess. Donna Dodson’s show is the first female solo exhibition at the WCHOF, and her creation *Match of the Matriarchs* is believed to be the only life-size all-female chess set in existence. We are so honored to present this unique experience to you.

Donna Dodson’s *The Madwoman of Chess or Autonomous was a Woman* was commissioned by the World Chess Hall of Fame for this exhibition and is now in the permanent collection.

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Paul Weiner in
Collaboration with
Donna Dodson
Queen's Gambit
2023
Photograph printed on
aluminum
Courtesy of the artist



Donna Dodson
**Beatrice Cenci for
Harriet Hosmer**
2023
Black walnut
Courtesy of the artist



Donna Dodson
Tomboy
2023
Honey locust and
enamel
Courtesy of the artist

CATE MCQUAID



Cate McQuaid, an art critic has been covering the local Boston art scene for more than 25 years for the Boston Globe. She also writes *Ocean in a Drop on Substack*, a newsletter about the intersection of art and life.

Sculptor Donna Dodson does what many activists and scholars have failed to do: She approaches feminism playfully.

When she first exhibited *Match of the Matriarchs* at Boston Sculptors Gallery in 2018, she had a far-reaching conversation with a young woman who spent an hour contemplating the large-scale, all-female chess game pitting cetaceans against cephalopods.

“Disliking ourselves as women is such familiar territory and liking ourselves as women is so alien,” Donna wrote afterward.

The sculptor’s mythic heroines break new territory. When I saw *Sheroes*, her most recent exhibition, at Boston Sculptors Gallery in the fall of 2023, I found myself wishing I’d had the figures there as role models when I was a girl. Half animal, half human, Donna’s works are bold and accessible, fierce, and cheeky. They are unapologetic exemplars of wit, clarity, and feminine power. Often crafted in wood coursing with grains and knobs that echo their voluptuous curves, they are loaded with content, context, and history.

Chess is a tactical game, and Donna points to her own matrilineage as canny and supportive.

“My mother and grandmother always taught me, ‘what’s your strategy?’” the artist told me when I visited her and her husband, sculptor Andy Moerlein, at their home in Maynard, Massachusetts. Together, as *The Myth Makers*, they create monumental public artworks that share the humor, strength, and robust formality of Donna’s sculptures.

Her own role models include two great aunts who were single, and successful career women. She had no other artists in her family, but another aunt, thinking strategically, coached her to find a mentor. That’s

when Donna introduced herself to Joseph Wheelwright, a sculptor of magical, hybrid beings from wood and stones.

Joe was an accomplished chess player. “He’d give me handicaps, but he’d always beat me,” Donna said. He died in 2016, the year she started making the 32 undersea creatures—whales and octopi, narwhals and cuttlefish—that comprise *Match of the Matriarchs*. The series is the first and only life-size female chess set in the world.

And size matters. In 2016 and again in 2023, Donna’s public art piece *Seagull Cinderella* drew ire from certain residents of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where it was temporarily installed. They thought it was “too sexy.”

“I think it’s the size,” Donna said. “Men have trouble because it’s bigger than them.”

In chess, meeting a bishop or a knight eye to eye ramps up the emotional stakes. The player isn’t so big, so godly. That narwhal’s tusk may look more dangerous than dainty.

Furthermore, when a game about rulership and strategy is completely taken over by females—not to mention a host of bright and imposing undersea creatures—it scrambles old power dynamics. Can the game be played differently? Who is in charge? What is power, anyway?

All of Donna’s sculptures are deeply researched; she makes monuments to women who have fallen through the cracks, like the fanged and ferocious Caterina Sforza, Tigress of Forli, on view here as the *Madwoman of Chess*. Donna is finding old stories and turning them into new archetypes of female power. She’s lighting the path.



Donna Dodson
Fight and Flight
2021
Chinese elm, enamel,
colored pencil, and ink
Courtesy of the artist



Close your eyes and think of the word “chessplayer.” What do you see?

If you pictured a female chessplayer, congrats. You’ve advanced to the next paragraph. If not, let’s try again, and this time imagine a woman. Some will now see a redhead in a sea of men. Perhaps the fictional Beth Harmon from *The Queen’s Gambit*, or the real life GOAT, Judit Polgar. A singular genius, a powerhouse that commands not only attention and adoration, but also respect. Much like the chess queen herself, who became the strongest piece on the board in 1500 CE.

But what if the women in chess we value went beyond the coronated geniuses, and became the default player?

Those are the types of questions I think of when I look at Donna Dodson’s epic chess set, featuring battling sets of female sea creatures. As Dodson herself says, “I want my audience to consider a chess world where everyone being female is normal.”

When Dodson’s *Match of the Matriarchs* premiered in 2018 at the Boston Sculptors Gallery, I got a chance to play on it. Both sides of her oversized set drew me in. The black cetaceans are the mammals of the sea with orcas and narwhals representing the major pieces. The red cephalopods are squids and cuttlefish with names like Octopus Grandmother. It’s hard for chess players to resist the octopus. The eight tentacled beast is an icon on the chess board: a centralized knight is known as an Octopus, jump-scaring an opponent on eight different squares. Octopuses are famous for escaping from tanks that seem closed.

An ultra-powerful piece that merges the octopus with the queen is known as an Amazon. Imagine how easily you could mate with such a piece. But even

without tentacles, the chess queen we’ve known and loved for six centuries is plenty potent. And yet, historically it’s mostly men who play on the board she rules.

While still grossly outnumbered, more women are claiming their seats at the chess board. In the *Barbie* movie, two perfectly coiffed and bespectacled Barbies wave hello as Lizzo sings, “All dolled up playing chess by the pool.” One Barbie has pastel pink pieces, while the other plays fuchsia. The board is set up backwards, with chameleons, prawns, and swans for pieces. The set brought back memories for me. Twenty years ago, soon after I won my first U.S. Women’s Chess Championship, I hosted a pink party with the same color scheme: hot vs. light pink. From shades of pink to expressing femininity, there are as many choices as in a chess game.

And Dodson’s vision, like director Greta Gerwig’s, is oversized. *The Match of the Matriarchs* may not fit in Barbie’s dream world, but it too is made of dreams. What if the chess world was set up around women and their desires and needs? What if some openings were named for women? The Alekhine Defense is now known to me as the Octopus Grandmother. Remember: You can’t spell Grandmaster without Grandma. But you can spell Chess without the Patriarchy.

Part of making the world better for women and gender minorities is asking more questions. Standard queries like, “Why do we even have women’s events?”, or “which female player is most likely to become world champ” will and ought to persist, but we can dig more broadly than that. As Donna Dodson’s work implores, dream as big as the whales in her chess set.



A two-time U.S. Women’s Chess Champion, Jennifer Shahade is an award-winning writer, and speaker known for making chess more fun and inclusive. She is the author of *Chess Queens* (2022), *Play Like A Girl* (2011), *Play Like A Champion* (2023), and the forthcoming *Thinking Sideways*. Jennifer is also a board member of the *World Chess Hall of Fame*. She lives in Philadelphia with her family.

Donna Dodson
Alpha Female
2020

Spalted pear, oak, enamel,
and colored pencil
Courtesy of the artist

JENNIFER
SHAHADE



Dr. Steinberg is currently the Chief Operating Officer of the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, MA. He has been an authority in operations and arts administration for over 20 years.

Prior to coming to the PEM, he completed his tenure as the 8th President of Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, MA, on Boston's North Shore. This followed 12 years as Executive Vice President and Acting President at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

Donna Dodson has gained recognition for her distinctive fusion of nature and mythology within the realm of contemporary sculpture. Dodson has developed an affinity for the intricate beauty of nature, a theme that permeates her work.

Central to Dodson's artistic practice is a commitment to sustainable methods. Drawing on reclaimed and recycled materials, she notably utilizes salvaged wood, infusing each piece with environmental consciousness. This dedication aligns with contemporary concerns about ecological sustainability, positioning Dodson as an artist cognizant of the impact of her work on the environment.

Dodson's sculptures transcend mere physical representation, delving into the realm of mythology. Her creations often depict hybrid beings and mythical creatures, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Drawing inspiration from diverse mythologies and folklore, Dodson imbues her sculptures with symbolic narratives, inviting viewers to explore universal themes embedded in the human experience.

A recurring motif in Dodson's sculptures is the portrayal of powerful female figures. These representations challenge conventional gender roles, emphasizing strength and resilience. This thematic choice aligns with feminist principles, encouraging viewers to reconsider preconceived notions of femininity. By integrating these strong female characters with natural elements, Dodson prompts a dialogue on the intersection of feminism and the organic world.

The chess set, a centuries-old game with deep historical and cultural roots, provides Dodson with a compelling canvas to meld artistic expression with functionality. In her interpretation, each chess piece becomes a

sculptural manifestation, intricately carved and infused with symbolic meaning. Dodson not only challenges the conventional boundaries of sculpture but also transforms a utilitarian object into an artistic statement.

Dodson's chess set becomes a microcosm of her broader thematic exploration, incorporating elements of mythology and symbolism. Each piece represents a character, often mythical or hybrid in nature, inviting players and viewers to engage with a narrative embedded in the game. This integration of storytelling emphasizes the importance of narrative in artistic expression.

Dodson's installations extend beyond traditional gallery spaces, contributing to the democratization of art. Whether placed in public parks or city streets, her large-scale sculptures encourage interaction and contemplation. This approach brings art into everyday life, fostering a connection between the public and artistic expression in unexpected urban settings.

Dodson is an advocate for the importance of community in the arts. She often collaborates with other artists, fostering a sense of camaraderie and shared creativity.

Dodson encourages aspiring artists to explore their own connections to nature and mythology, fostering a new generation of sculptors with a shared passion for story telling through art.

Donna Dodson has created a body of work that serves as an embodiment of strength, resilience, and empowerment, challenging traditional gender roles and inviting viewers to reconsider their perceptions of femininity. The juxtaposition of these strong female characters with natural elements creates a powerful dialogue that transcends cultural and societal boundaries. Her sculptures serve as a testament to the interconnectedness of nature, mythology, and the human experience, inviting viewers to embark on a visual and intellectual journey through the captivating realms she brings to life.

DR. KURT STEINBERG

Donna Dodson
Cybele
2020
Black walnut and colored pencil
Courtesy of the artist



Donna Dodson
Black Panther
2020
Black walnut and colored pencil
Courtesy of the artist



DONNA DODSON: MATCH OF THE MATRIARCHS AND OTHER AMAZONOMACHIES

February 15, 2024-September 15, 2024

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

The World Chess Hall of Fame (WCHOF) acknowledges Dr. Jeanne Cairns Sinquefield and Rex Sinquefield, whose generous support have made all of our exhibitions possible.

The WCHOF would like to thank Donna Dodson for her inspirational work and collaboration with the Saint Louis Chess Campus. In addition, the WCHOF would like to thank all of the talented and generous people who contributed to this exhibition, including:

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Contributors: Cate McQuaid, Jennifer Shahade, and Dr. Kurt Steinberg

All photos of Dodson's art courtesy of Brian Wilson unless otherwise indicated.

The WCHOF sincerely apologizes if anyone was omitted from the acknowledgements. We will update any further printings.



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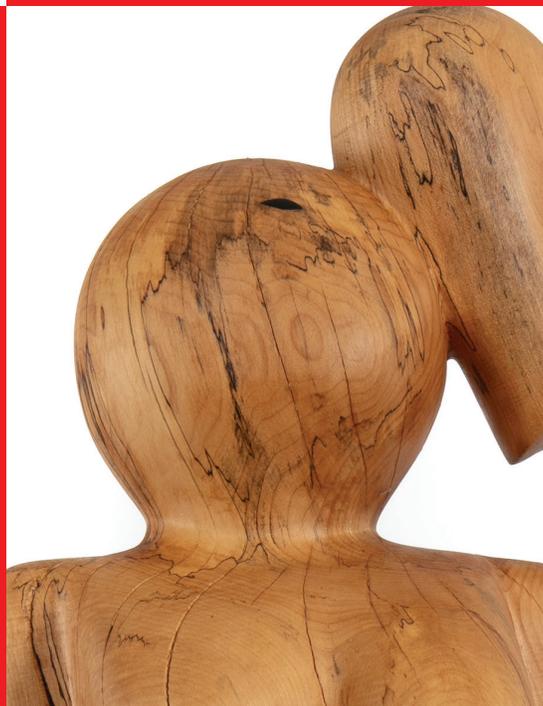
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Donna Dodson
Match of the Matriarchs
2018
Wood and enamel
Courtesy of the artist

Back Cover:
Donna Dodson
Pythoness
2023
Cherry wood and enamel
Courtesy of the artist





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Saint Louis, MO