

The Art of the Game

IT'S EASY TO FORGET the significance of board games now that the cool clatter of Monopoly dice has been hushed by the computer mouse in a session of desktop solitaire or by the controller in an Xbox 360 match. But chess has survived for centuries on its reputation as an intellectual pastime laden with the metaphors of politics, power and class struggle. And today, antique sets are coveted collectibles that command top dollar at auction, quickly surpassing bids for vintage models of other recreational standbys like Parcheesi and backgammon.

In the Christie's London sale of the Dr. Jean Claude-Cholet Collection last May, ivory chessmen from Germany, circa 1870, hand sculpted in the shapes of owls and mice, earned £150,000 (\$299,100), a world record for a 19th-century set. Pippa Green,



Power players—king and commoner alike—have long been lured to chess by the appeal of bloodless battle. But it's the antique game pieces, often finely carved, that have today's collectors smitten. By Rebecca Knapp Adams

a specialist in Christie's objects department, describes the items as "beautifully carved, typical of eccentric high Victorian taste." They were presented in a box of Coromandel ebony stamped with the retailer's mark of Thornhill, which added historical import. More typically, 19th-century European ivory sets in good condition sell for between \$5,000 and \$10,000, although prices vary according to rarity and the quality of the carving.

Antique figural versions are appealing for many reasons, not least of which is the drama of pitting time-honored opponents—owls and mice, communists and capitalists, Indian soldiers and British colonists—against each other. Dublin-based collector and dealer Dermot Rochford says that 17th- and 18th-century ivory figural pieces from Germany, France and Italy, which are often finely carved and turned, are of particular interest to collectors.

Complete chess sets from the 17th century, however, are extremely rare; detailed ones were made in small numbers



Among Dublin dealer Dermot Rochford's personal collection, from top: Italian 18th-century wood chess pieces depicting the courts of an Ottoman and an African sultan, and ivory pieces from a French 18th-century set pitting the royal court against the Moors.

for the aristocracy, among the few at the time who possessed both the leisure and the money for such pursuits. When an example does surface, it can easily draw upwards of \$100,000 at auction, says dealer Frank Camaratta Jr., a former tournament player who owns the House of Staunton Antiques in Toney, Alabama. Record prices for antique sets are terribly hard to establish, however, because there are so many variations in design, material and country of origin. That said, Sotheby's is thought to have made the high price for a 17th-century model with a 1616 carved amber set, which sold in London in 1990 for £330,000 (\$574,200).

At press time, antiques dealer S. J. Phillips of London had a 1735 German carved-boxwood set with silver and silver-gilt mountings, in a fitted ebonized case, priced at approximately £300,000 (\$611,000). According to Phillips's Guy Judd, pieces of this caliber from the 18th century turn up once or twice a decade. (A similar assemblage by the same maker, Christian Baur, is in the Bavarian National Museum, in Munich.)

As the popularity of chess spread throughout England and Europe in the late 18th and 19th centuries—thanks in part to the attention showered on a few brilliant masters, as well as the advent of coffeehouses and clubs devoted to the game—makers seized the opportunity to expand their market and began creating wooden sets that were more



Russian porcelain playing pieces, 1922–23, made to portray the “Reds versus the Whites.” The set sold for \$22,800 at Sotheby's New York in June 2004.

affordable while still exhibiting elaborate carving. Conventional models from this period in wood or ivory (bone sets were less expensive) include the Regency, from France, and the St. George, from England, named after the coffeehouse and chess club, respectively, that popularized them. The pieces are incredibly sculptural and highly detailed. The sets were made to be played with, however, and if the board was inadvertently jostled, many chessmen of this period tended to topple over, sometimes cracking or breaking.

Such misfortunes were eliminated with the 1849 introduction by gaming manufacturer Jaques of London of the English Staunton set, named for the leading chess master of the day, Howard Staunton. Its pieces had weighted bases and abstract forms: simple columns with crowns on top for the king and queen, a horse-head figure for the knight and a ball atop a base for the pawn. Players loved the design's stability, durability and easily identifiable figures. Once its popularity was firmly established later in the 19th century, untold makers the world over churned out their own Stauntons. But the most sought-after models were—and still are—those produced by Jaques (pronounced “Jakes”), universally regarded as the finest such sets available. Some bear the manufacturer's name, but makers' marks are unreliable—a fine antique Staunton set made by Jaques for luxury retailer Asprey, for example, would have only the Asprey label. Other quality manufacturers of Staunton chessmen before World War II were the British Chess Company and B & Co., but they lack Jaques's cachet.

Starting in the 1840s, Staunton sets—as well as models introduced by other English firms, like Lund and Calvert—were typically made of ebony and rosewood or ivory (until the ivory trade was banned, around World War II). Prices for antique examples depend on quality, but \$10,000 for a “decent” Jaques set from the period 1849 through 1935 is fairly common, says Camaratta. Of course, Jaques made patterns other than Staunton, but the two names are now almost always linked. Even the company's contemporary Staunton patterns, which are still turned and carved by hand, are collectible and can be found at »

Chess Club

Having already conquered the art world, these visionaries set their sights on an unlikely, if fruitful, muse: the game of chess.

In 1919, **Marcel Duchamp** wrote in a letter to the Stettheimer sisters, who frequently hosted the artist in their New York salon: “My attention is so completely absorbed by chess... I like painting less and less.” The game captured the imaginations of Duchamp and several of his contemporaries, including **Max Ernst** and **Man Ray**, who executed their own much-coveted sets for a 1944 exhibition organized by Duchamp and Ernst at the **Julian Levy Gallery** in New York. (An earlier 1920–26 silver model, pictured below, by Man Ray is in the collection of the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York.) In 1924, **Josef Hartwig** introduced a wooden version with clean lines and pared-down pieces in the style of the Bauhaus School, where he was a master craftsman from 1921 to 1925. Hartwig's sets, which sold quite well when they debuted, very rarely surface today; the **Virginia Museum of Fine Arts** acquired one in 1999. The tradition of the chess set as muse has continued into the 21st century with designs by contemporary figures such as Italian artist **Maurizio Cattelan**. In 2003, Cattelan created an edition of seven sets titled *Good versus Evil*, each of which sold for around \$220,000 through London's **RS&A Gallery**. The hand-painted porcelain models depicted the ultimate showdown: Adolf Hitler against Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with Mother Teresa, Rasputin and Sitting Bull among the pawns. RKA



chess shops for anywhere from \$900 to \$5,000. (Jaques does not have a retail shop of its own but sells directly to the public online at www.jaques.com.)

According to Camaratta, buyers of antique sets are largely male and not necessarily players. The ones who do enjoy the game rarely deploy their antique pieces, not wishing to risk damage. But just as chess requires strategy, so too does collecting its appurtenances, as guidelines are broad and subject to the aesthetic whims of collectors and parts tend to be unsigned. A good place for aspiring collectors to start is with a 19th-century wooden St. George set by Jaques, which might cost \$4,000 (an unsigned one would probably cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000). Those unfamiliar with the field often ask if antique chess sets include boards—apart from traveling ones, they do not. And since chessmen are easily chipped, cracked and misplaced or destroyed over the years—certainly more than one sore loser tossed his king into the fireplace and stormed out of the parlor—Rochford notes that “finding a set [the original 32 pieces] with a board and the box it came in is a bonus.” He advises interested parties to carefully inspect the men, which should be in as close to pristine condition as possible, with few, if any, repairs, to discern the quality of the carving.

The market for antique chess sets is clearly on the upswing. Camaratta thinks the growing appetite for luxury goods may in part be responsible, along with the lure of a package deal that nets the buyer 32 pieces of sculpture. Luke Honey, who heads the

Chess & Games department at Bloomsbury Auctions’ London office, which holds two sales of vintage games annually in the fall and spring, says that chess sets have been undervalued for years. Honey adds that in the past half decade, Internet exposure has made chess collecting much more accessible and created more aficionados: “Our clients for these sets used to be largely Germans and Americans, but now it’s a truly international group—and some savvy big-money guys are catching on.”

Attractive examples, however, are still available at reasonable prices. Boards, which can be highly decorative, are often wallet-friendly. Garrick Coleman, a London dealer in antique games, recently sold a late 19th-century Anglo-Indian ivory-inlayed sandalwood folding board for chess, checkers or backgammon for £1,250 (\$2,400). Coleman also parted with an early 18th-century French ebonized example with ivory inlay and two unusual silver sconces on the edges—to hold candles during nighttime play—for £3,850 (\$7,392).

The variety of antique chess sets and parts is vast indeed. In addition to the European sets mentioned, there are many popular patterns from makers in India and the Far East. After all, the idea that a lowly pawn might one day conquer an entire kingdom is universally seductive. ☒

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Near left: Jaques of London’s Staunton pawn from an 1855 model. Below: A 19th-century French set, carved from marble and basalt, also from Rochford’s private trove.



Above: 18th-century Russian ivory chessmen belonging to Rochford. Right: Pieces from Wedgwood’s set for Jaques of London, circa 1849, owned by dealer Frank Camaratta Jr. Far right: The German ivory model, circa 1870, that fetched a record-breaking £150,000 (\$299,100) at Christie’s London in May 2007.

