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Chess Sets on the Rise

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Fine Impressionist Sales

Rare chess sets to be sold

Expert Luke Honey introduces the sale of an extremely fine and comprehensive private collection of chess sets and ephemera

"Wonderful things! I can see wonderful things!", the archaeologist Howard Carter is supposed to have said when he first set his eyes on the tomb of Tutankhamun. Similar thoughts come to mind when Dr Ernst Boehlen's collection of rare and fine chess sets is seen for the first time. For anybody even remotely interested in the game of chess, the three floors that contained his astonishing array of chess pieces were a real treasure trove. For a keen player, entering those rooms was not unlike being whisked up into chess heaven.

Among the highlights were walrus ivory sets from Imperial Russia, figural sets carved by 18th-century Dieppe craftsman, exquisite porcelain sets from the Meissen factory near Dresden, inlaid backgammon boards used by 17th-century bucks for their hard gambling sessions, sets depicting the struggle between Christianity and Islam, rare sets with Napoleon as King; with such a collection history comes alive. The collection was displayed with the utmost precision, the majority of sets in near-perfect condition, and wherever possible the provenance clearly recorded.

Ernst Boehlen has been buying chess sets for some 40 years, and his collection is probably one of the finest and most comprehensive in the world. The time has now come for a significant part to be dispersed; Dr Boehlen is delighted that new enthusiasts will be able to obtain the same sort of enjoyment from the sets that he has had over the years. All the pieces have been expertly packed in tough, business-like steel trucks especially constructed for the purpose and shipped to London with the sort of efficiency one would expect

of a major European industrialist.

Chess collections of this quality are rarely offered, and the Phillips Chess Department are anticipating an equally enthusiastic reaction to the one that greeted the sale of the Laurence I Wood collection at Phillips New York in 1996. Certainly, the collection deserves such a response. Not content with collecting just chess sets and ephemera, Ernst Boehlen's discerning eye for the antique, the unusual and the beautiful has also alighted on finely carved walking sticks and fine ivory plaques from the 16th to the 19th centuries, all of which Phillips plan to sell in November at the New Bond Street saleroom.



Phillips' chess expert Luke Honey.



Jaques of London, are highly sought after. An ivory Staunton boxed set of tournament size, made by Jaques, during the 19th century can command a price upwards of £8,000, while a boxwood and ebony set might have an estimate of around £500 or more. Staunton sets stamped by Jaques should not be confused with "Staunton style" or "House of Staunton" replicas which, although perfectly respectable and very popular with collectors, do not reach the higher figures.

The breadth of the chess-set market is vast. Collectors will happily buy a single piece of unusual or attractive design, while the frankly kitsch also find their buyers. The boundary between the flashily collectable and the tastefully antique is a movable one that responds to market forces and still produces surprises. Although Phillips has its own chess expert, chess pieces and associated gaming pieces are still sold in Oriental sales. Desmond Healey, of Phillips' Oriental Department, admits that the crossover between the specialist chess sales and sales of Oriental art is slightly arbitrary and is dictated by which sale might find the vendor the highest price. In a sale of Oriental works of art in June of this year, an unusual 19th-century Canton export ivory chess set reached a hammer price of £1,600.

Probably dating back to around 2,500BC, chess is the most venerable of the family of "warfare" games where opposing sides use strategy to take each others' pieces. In the same category are backgammon, which is at least as old as the Roman game of *alea* (the emperor Claudius had an *alea* board built into his carriage so that he might play during

journeys), and draughts, which was invented in the 12th century and combines a chess board with backgammon counters. Backgammon boards from both East and West come up for sale quite regularly and can often be antiques or works of art in their own right; a Jacobean backgammon board recently sold for £5,000, and boards also appear in sales of Oriental art.

Other, more prosaic, gaming accessories also appear in Oriental sales; at the June sale mentioned above, an 18th-century Chinese hardwood gaming box, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and containing mother-of-pearl gaming counters, was sold higher than the estimate, for £900.

As well as "warfare" games, the other strand of gaming history is "racing" games where opponents race to reach a winning goal or superior position. It was the 18th century that first saw the invention of a number of new games and the 19th that brought an explosion in production, but the lineage of the most basic games goes back, again, to the East. Ludo was brought to Britain by James Asser in 1876, but it is very similar to *Chauptur*, played in China in the 3rd century, and *Pachin* played in India from the middle ages to the present day.

Highly collectable today, good-quality board games in good or "as new" condition can reach thousands of pounds. Most of these games were originally aimed at the children's market and had an educational bias that combined fun with learning about geography, historical characters, or even economics. Other influences include

current affairs: the 19th-century *Trading with the Colonies* involved the negotiation of international trade routes; *Voyage through the Clouds*, circa 1911, was based on airship travel; and *Chasing Charlie* is contemporary with Charlie Chaplin's cinema stardom in the 1920s. The toy department at Phillips holds four or five sales a year, with collectors of board games growing in number.

Games, then, are a serious business that are attracting serious prices at sale. Novelty board games have yet to achieve the status, publicity, or record figures of the doll and teddy market, but they are predicted to have their day. Like playing cards—a field all of its own and important enough to warrant the English Playing Card Society—board games attract collectors who are as drawn by the graphic design of the game as by the rarity of the object. Chess pieces and chess sets, though, will always be a cut above their *arriviste* cousins in the rest of the games market. Regularly combining good design with quality

materials such as ivory, bone, rare woods and fine porcelain—and loaded with cultural symbolism—chessmen have a growing band of international collectors able to support yet higher prices for the truly rare and beautiful.



Above, a 20s Meissen Böttiger Steinzeug stoneware set designed by Professor Max Esser. Left, mid-19th-century Indian ivory playing set.

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