

Chess sets worth making a move for

The intricacy and craftsmanship of antique chess sets makes them rare pieces of art in their own right, writes Donald Macgillivray

COLLECTORS and players demand different things from their chess sets. For a player, the board and pieces should be functional — collectors favour intricate designs that would distract even the most single-minded chess champion.

Take, for example, a 30-year-old set carved by Inuit craftsmen from walrus tusks. The pawns are seals, rooks are loons, knights are narwhals and bishops walruses.

When it is auctioned at Phillips's sale of chess collectibles tomorrow, the set is expected to fetch about £2,500.

Luke Honey, organiser of the sale, says: "Artists find chess is a wonderful vehicle for their art."

Another offering in this auction is a mid-19th century set from Dieppe, France. The king is represented by Napoleon and the queen by Josephine, with an imperial guard as pawns. Each carver often made fun of the church by portraying bishops as fools — the bishops in this set are court jesters. Napoleon and his ivory army are

estimated to fetch between £10,000 and £15,000.

A set of porcelain frogs, made by Meissen of Germany, is expected to fetch £11,000. And Russian-made figures of elephants as bishops and ships as rooks, carved 200 years ago from the bone of a mammoth

preserved in the Siberian ice, are valued at £13,000.

In the 1830s serious chess players demanded a standard design for tournaments. Nathaniel Cook modelled his knights on horses from the Elgin Marbles and his pawns are based on the Freemasons' symbols. This

standardised universal set was named after the English master Howard Staunton and was made — and still is — by Jaques of London. Prices for collectors' wooden sets from the 19th century run as high as £2,000; Staunton ivories regularly fetch as much as £10,000.

These prices assume the sets are complete, but it is difficult to keep 32 pieces together for scores let alone hundreds of years, and a chess set is not a proper set if just one of the pieces is missing. An absent pawn will lower the value of a set by about 30%. If the king is

gone, the price dives by as much as 70%.

Collectors try to remedy this huge devaluation by filling in the missing pieces. Generally the pawns were originally made by apprentices and are relatively easy for modern craftsmen to reproduce. But few are

able to replicate the 18th-century ivory kings and queens carved in India.

The red pieces in these eastern sets are also hard to copy because the ancient dye was made from a secret formula using crushed beetles, which cannot be reproduced.

Pondering her move: Phillips's Julie-Anne Cosgrove admires Meissen frogs and Napoleon and Macbeth chess pieces

Jeremy Young

COLLECTORS' TIPS

► It is generally best to avoid modern, limited-edition chess sets made specifically for the collectors' market. Their value is artificial.

► Take care if buying an ivory set. It is illegal in many countries to import newly carved ivory; antiques usually are allowed only if you have a permit.

► Sets by Jaques of London and named after English master Howard Staunton are nearly always a good bet. Five years ago early 20th century sets sold for £200. They are now about £500 and continue to rise.

