

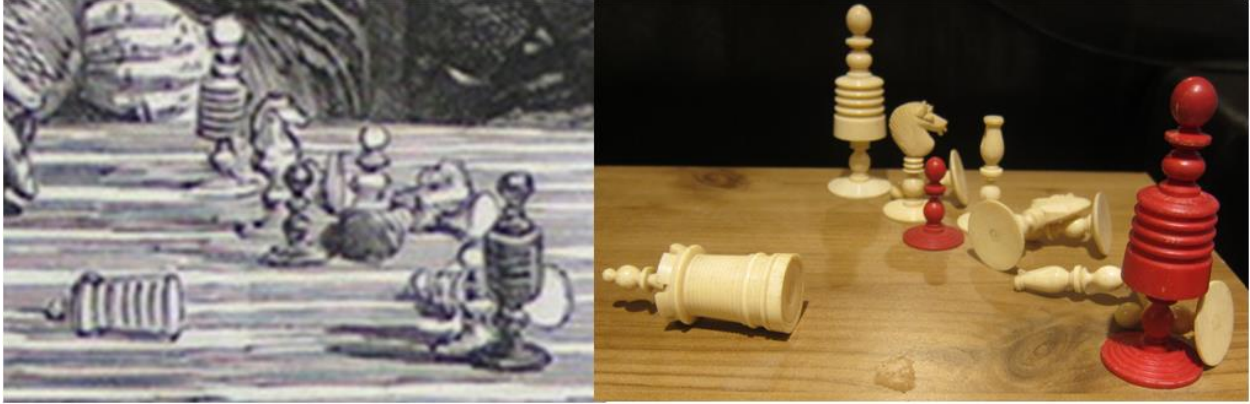
The World of Antique Chess Sets

As chess players, we are enamored with the champions and grandmasters of the game, both past and present: Philidor, Staunton, Morphy, Capablanca, Tal, Fischer, Kasparov, Carlsen, to name a few. But we are often less familiar with the armies and artillery of the game itself: the chess sets and chessboards upon which our moves are played, our games won and lost, our legends immortalized.

The chess pieces themselves also have a remarkable history, and similarly, every chess game we play today is profoundly influenced by that history. In today's world, where every tournament game is played with a Staunton-pattern set, the very idea of playing with a different type of set would be unacceptable. But, BS (before Staunton) there were many different chess set patterns that were each the "standard" for their time and place. Even the Staunton design took a little time to become widely accepted.

The picture below, from the *Illustrated London News* of July 1855, shows many of the leading players of the mid-19th century. Staunton, the third man on the right, is the featured chess player in the illustration, which was made six years after the introduction of the set design that is named for him. There is a bit of unintended irony in this picture, which we can see by zooming in on the pieces used in the illustration. The set is not a Staunton set!





This pattern is called the Barleycorn design, and it was one of the most popular chess set patterns in Britain during the 1800's. The photo on the right is the same arrangement of pieces using a set from my collection. The knight is familiar, of course, but what piece is the tall one? (It's the queen.) It would be utterly strange to play a tournament game with these pieces today.

Interest in the rich variety of chess sets of the distant past isn't just limited to a few chess collectors. Some of the sets have historical importance, notably the Lewis Chessmen, which are considered one of the crown jewels of the collection of the British Museum. Exhibitions of antique chess sets attract people from all over the world – and the interest of top players. The following photo, in which I am explaining some of the details of several antique sets, is from my recent exhibition at the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis. This particular enthusiast's chess strength is, of course, considerably higher than mine and most of the people on the planet!



Starting with this column, which will appear every month, we will take a closer look at this lesser-appreciated aspect of our game – the chess pieces, chessboards, timers, and other chess equipment. We'll see how history, art, and culture have merged together, at different times and in different places, often in boldly imaginative ways, to create two armies, each of sixteen pieces, to wage war on the sixty-four squares. For aspiring chess-collectors, I'll discuss some of the finer points of starting and building a collection.

Some of the themes we'll cover will include:

- The chess set designs that were used throughout history by chess champions
- An examination of some of the most beautiful chess sets ever made.
- The cultural themes that have been captured and addressed in chess sets.
- The main features of chess sets from different countries and time periods.

- The creation of the Staunton pattern and the designs that proceeded it.
- Some of the great designers of antique chess sets.

Like so many other people, my own interest in chess was sparked in 1972 by the historic World Championship match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. In the many years since I took up the game, I have become an experienced tournament player. I earned the National Master title in both correspondence chess (1983) and over-the-board (2001). I continue to study and improve because of the excellent tutoring by my chess teacher and friend, grandmaster Lev Alburt. I've also had the exceptional privilege of playing one-on-one games with Vladimir Kramnik, Magnus Carlsen, and several other top grandmasters, and I teamed up with Garry Kasparov in a London charity event, playing a non-consultation, alternating-move game against the daunting team of Nigel Short and Rajko Vujatovic, a master-strength player. I still enjoy online chess, and I follow the exploits of today's leading players, move-by-move.

My chess hobby (or obsession, as some would call it) took a different turn in 2002. I happened to be perusing through various chess items on eBay, and a set popped up that immediately grabbed my attention. The photo below is of that set.



The set is an antique Staunton pattern set, circa 1870, by Jaques of London. As I looked at it, I thought, "Wow! An antique chess set? I wasn't really aware that such sets existed!" And it was a Jaques, no less -- I had known since I was young that Jaques of London made the top chess sets around. The set on eBay appeared to be in good condition, too -- like I'd be able to play games with this set. Needless to say, I bought it.

This initial acquisition led to another, and another, at which point I also started carefully researching the origins and manufacturers of antique chess sets.

My chess collection now includes over 600 antique chess sets, from 40 countries, spanning hundreds of years – or a thousand years if we include individual chess pieces from the middle ages – or over 5,000 years if we include my collection of ancient gaming pieces, going all the way to back to the Indus Valley in 3000 B.C. Meanwhile, I've studied all aspects of antique chess sets over the past dozen years, doing research and publishing the results for the benefit of the chess-collecting community. With all due modesty, I feel well equipped to write this column, and I hope you enjoy it.

In the next column, we'll start out by taking a closer look at the difference between playing sets, i.e. chess sets intended for the play of actual games, versus ornamental sets, which were created for their artistic beauty. Meanwhile, if you have questions or comments, please send me an email at jon@crumiller.com. Photos of my collection are posted online at chessantique.com and tinyurl.com/ntq9ukw.