

## Antiques

Wendy Moonan

The Fine Art  
Of Chess Pieces

Versions of chess go back thousands of years, but the game as we know it did not emerge until about A.D. 600 in India. Today, more people across more cultural divides than ever play chess, and it's not even an Olympic sport.

"When you play chess, it doesn't matter what language you speak, what your race or religion is, what nation you belong to or whether you are rich or poor," said Elizabeth Gann, a dealer who is perhaps the only American woman specializing in chess sets. "Everyone is equal. That's the beauty of chess."

Ms. Gann, who has been based in Babylon, N.Y., on Long Island, but is about to move to Boston, usually sells her chess sets by appointment, referral or online ([www.elizabethgann.com](http://www.elizabethgann.com)). Next month, for the first time, she will be an exhibitor at "Antiques & Fine Art at the Armory." The 80-dealer show, from Dec. 8 to 12 at the Seventh Regiment Armory, 67th Street and Park Avenue, was organized by Wendy Management. For Ms. Gann, handcrafted chess sets are objets d'art.

Chess sets come in all kinds of materials: gold, silver, bronze, elephant and (now extinct) woolly mammoth ivory, amber, onyx, lapis, marble, wood, glass and porcelain.

Ms. Gann sells both antique and new sets. She serves as an agent for people like Eva Stakova, a Czech glass artist who designs and etches geometric crystal chessmen that are particularly popular with Muslim players who shun figural pieces for religious reasons.

Ms. Gann also represents Oleg Raikis, a Russian craftsman who creates original wood and mammoth-ivory chess pieces. He will be at her booth during the fair to take custom orders. (Previous commissions include chess pieces carved as likenesses of his patrons.)

Two of Ms. Gann's longtime collectors on Long Island, Floyd and Bernice Sarisohn of Commack, have so many chess sets (more than 1,000, of which a third are antique), that they founded the Long Island Chess Museum in their home. It is open by appointment by calling (631) 543-1330.

"We've been collecting for 52 years, since before we married."



Courtesy of the Honolulu Academy of Arts

A plate carved in red lacquer, from the 14th to 15th century, is among the items included in an exhibition at the China Institute Gallery.

Ms. Gann has customers all over the world. "One client in London has 700 sets," she said. "A man in Mexico City has more than 3,000."

Ms. Gann said Americans buy tens of millions of chess sets each year. At any given moment, there are also hundreds of vintage sets on eBay. But few dealers specialize in antique chess sets. The short list, apart from Ms. Gann, includes Frank A. Camaratta Jr., a Toney, Ala., chess master who collects and sells mostly 19th-century English sets ([www.houseofstaunton.com](http://www.houseofstaunton.com)); Garrick Coleman of Portobello Road in London; and Dermot Rochford of Dublin ([www.geocities.com/dermot\\_rochford](http://www.geocities.com/dermot_rochford)).

Mr. Rochford, who said that "chess is both a hobby and a business for me," sells a wide range of antique sets (including a Bauhaus example based on a Joseph Hartwig design from the early 1920's) and rare chess reference books that are not readily available, like "Chessmen for Collectors" by Victor Keats and "Master Pieces" by Gareth Williams. (Another classic series, "Culture Chess

Ms. Gann learned to play chess at age 11. "I traveled a lot with my family," she said. "At 16, I was studying opera with Maria Callas at Juilliard — and everywhere we went I bought a chess set. When I was 19, I gave up opera but not chess."

She married and had a son, David, to whom she taught chess when he was 4. "It was for mental agility," she said. "I wanted him to learn to focus and think ahead."

She began selling chess sets 12 years ago. "Some 99 percent of my clients are men," she said. "Chess has always been a man's war game." Her prices for antique sets range from \$5,000 to \$18,000.

The market for antique chess sets is quite strong. In June 2003, Sotheby's sold a 1923 Russian porcelain set for \$22,800, on which the Reds (Communists) fought the Whites (Capitalists). At the same sale, a 19th-century Indian set that depicted Bengal fighters and their British colonial overlords sold for \$21,600. Last year, Christie's London sold an early-20th-century amber animal set for \$25,000, a world record for a set of

## Chinese Lacquer

"When people see their friends or they accompany guests to the outskirts of the city, to a river bank with willow trees," said Willow Hai Chang, the director of the China Institute Gallery in Manhattan. "They break off a branch and give it to their friend, to remind him of their friendship along his journey."

Ms. Chang was explaining a narrative scene on one of 31 objects in "Masterpieces of Chinese Lacquer From the Mike Healy Collection," show at the China Institute, 125 E. 65th Street, through next Saturday; includes intricately carved lacquer bowls, dishes, table screens and cups ranging from the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) through the Ming (1368 to 1644).

Referring to its often minutely carved imagery, Ms. Chang said, "Lacquer is known for its intimate and scholarly appeal."

It is also known for its hidden, mysterious meanings. One carved red plate from the late Yuan or early Ming dynasties (14th to 15th century) shows a young boy next to an elderly, bearded man who is holding staff. It is a moonlit night, and they are walking toward a wine store under an enormous pine tree. A shop attendant pokes his head out of a window, watching his dog greet the pair. A crane lands off to one side.

"The figural examples are clear intended to be narratives of life among literati scholars and officials," Julia M. White, curator of Asian Art at the Honolulu Academy of Arts (where the show originates) writes in the catalog. "Landscape serves as a backdrop for interaction and storytelling."

The catalog explains that the old man and the tree may be birthday images. ("The pine tree shows dignity and character," Ms. Chang said. "The crane symbolizes longevity.")

The rim of the plate is festooned with auspicious plum, tree peony, melia and pomegranate blossoms. "The peony was a favorite flower the Yuan and Ming dynasties," Ms. Chang said. "It was a symbol of wealth and nobility."

For the ancient Chinese, lacquer was a luxury item, an example of extraordinary craftsmanship. But one need not know the complex technology of making lacquer, which involves laying down up to 200 thin layers on a wood or fabric base, to