

CCI: Boca

By Dr. Tim Redman

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At the Chess Collectors International 13th Biennial Conference, held April 29-May 4, our reporter finds it's not about the collections. It's about the collectors.

When Don Schultz decided to hold the U.S. Senior Open again in Boca Raton, as he did four years ago, I was ready to go. Don and his wife Teresa always put on a first-class event. But as an added enticement he told me that Chess Collectors International (CCI) would be holding their convention concurrently with the U.S. Senior. “You’ll like these folks,” Don said. That was too much to resist. I taught my last class, undergraduate Shakespeare, on Friday, spent Saturday reading to figure out what chess collecting was all about, and on Sunday left for Florida.

“We consider you a collector if you own three sets of interest,” Frank Camaratta explained. Frank is on the Board of CCI, a

long-time collector, and a specialist in Jacques Staunton and ANRI sets. I did a mental inventory. I have a Nixon versus McGovern set from 1972; I have a Coca-Cola set that I won at a raffle at one of Freddy Gruenberg’s National Opens, still in its shrink wrap. “How about a weighted Windsor Castle set from the ‘60s?” I asked Frank. “They’re actually worth something,” he replied. I was a collector!

During that same conversation with Frank and Gwen, I met Floyd and Bernice Sarisohn. Floyd and Bernice organized this convention and guided me throughout. The major attraction of Boca Raton, Floyd explained, came from a kind of triple alignment. The collectors got to participate at an auction of more than one hundred sets; they got to visit the impressive display of sets at the Chess Hall of Fame and Museum in south Miami; and they got to see ten display cases of sets (guarded twenty-four hours a day by an armed security guard) in the playing room of the U.S. Senior.

Floyd explained that the purpose behind this exhibition was to display all levels of chess sets, not just the most expensive, though there were certainly those. George Dean had one entire wall—five display cases—a small part of the most valuable collection in the U.S. or perhaps the world. The display on the other wall had five cases showing sets by Richard Benjamin, Bill and Hope Levene, and Frank Camaratta and the House of Staunton. Every CCI meeting has some such display.

Chess Set Aesthetics

Players see chess as a series of force vectors working themselves out over time; the set is almost completely irrelevant, merely a sign of an agreed-upon position. But collectors look at the material and aesthetic aspect of chess sets; the set itself is the object of attention. The CCI group tends to divide into collectors and player/collectors, with Frank Camaratta, Billy Levene, Rodolfo Pozzi, and Gareth Williams being examples of the latter.

Chess sets can accommodate a variety of artistic styles: representational (what the collectors term figural), abstract, naïve, primitive, folk, kitsch, whimsical, witty, erotic, and conceptual. Sets can also incorporate “found objects,” most vividly illustrated by Hope Levene’s sub-genre of “put-together” sets. Further, the prevailing metaphor of chess, a struggle between two sides, steers set design to a representation of any competitive activity. The most obvious of these is war, as chess is undoubtedly a war game. But other types of struggle, “Hawks versus Doves,” “Capitalism versus Communism,” “Guelphs versus Ghibellines,” also suggest themselves as subjects for chess art. Finally, the material nature of the chess set is also important. Mammoth ivory seems the precious material of choice these days, but its costliness precludes any kind of real artistic innovation. Global warming and the melting of the permafrost in the northern latitudes, particularly in Russia, result in the literal unearthing of mammoth skeletons. The species has been extinct for tens of thousands of years, so the international restriction on the use of elephant tusks does not apply. These sets are exquisitely carved but quite conventional in representation as the material is too costly to risk avant garde design. At the opposite end of the material side, Alessandro Traina’s set, described by Milly Pozzi in her talk and her article for the conference program book, uses iron, magnets, and torn paper to emphasize new materials in the service of a new aesthetic vision. Other common chess set materials include antique ivory, wood, stone, horn, jade, amber, bamboo, ceramic, acrylic, metal, and plastic.

Value is also added to chess set collecting through an accompanying narrative (e.g., a letter with one set attested that it was once owned by Frank Marshall), and through cross-collecting (a Walt Disney collector might have a passionate interest in the Cargo Disney set, but none in chess sets in general). Finally, value is added through craftsmen who are part of a tradition of fine carving, as in China or Japan.

To illustrate what I mean, I will focus on one set from the Dean collection that fascinated me (perhaps because I am about to teach a graduate seminar in the literature and arts of the first world war). The artist was a prisoner of war, and the set depicts both sides, with Raymond Poincaré the king of the French set and Kaiser Wilhelm II the king of the German set shown as highly idealized figures representing the approved values of their time and cultures. The genius of the set lies in the artist’s choice of rendering these pieces in mud grey and mud brown wood, reflecting the actual battle conditions where a front of 400 miles was crossed by 25,000 miles of trenches and the actual loss of life was beyond 8,000,000. The set’s creator subverts the two governments’ official rhetoric about the glory of sacrifice using ironic interplay between the professed values of the leaders, shown in their figures, and the actual suffering in the trenches, shown in the colors of the materials selected.

The Auction

An added feature of this CCI meeting was an auction of about 140 sets at a local gallery and a visit to the chess hall of fame. I had never been to an auction before but I dutifully registered and got my paddle with my number 601 written on it in large letters. At the start of the auction I told Bill Snead, who sat next to me, not to let me raise my paddle though in retrospect there was one 19th-century pocket set on which I regretted not having bid.

There were perhaps 40 people present in person at the auction. There were also bidders on the Internet and by telephone. The auctioneer started by telling us that “chess sets were rated as one of the top ten collectibles for the future.” He displayed not only a mastery of the psychology of his profession but also a quick wit. When the catalog showed a set “Christians versus Jews” but the display on the multiple video monitors in the auction gallery showed a set made up of stone carvings from Easter Island the auctioneer improvised: “They had Jews and Christians on Easter Island too.” “You mean Passover Island,” someone in the crowd quipped.

The high price for the auction was for a 20th-century Japanese ivory set that went for \$13,000. The winning bidder was Antonio Horta-Osorio, a native of Lisbon who now works as a banker in London. He has been collecting for eight years. He bid on only two sets, the one in mammoth ivory and the Japanese set. His bidding strategy was straightforward—for the two sets he wanted, he simply raised his paddle and kept it raised to show his determination. Though he lost out to an Internet bidder on one set (the strategy only intimidates those who can see it), he got the better set at an excellent price (there were no Internet bidders). Antonio explained afterwards that he chose the set because all of the pieces were different and there was great detail in the carving.

The Talks

The conference’s handsome program book, edited by Israel Raphaelli with help from his charming wife Remi and destined to be itself a collectible, was dedicated to the memory of Ralph Kent, a deceased CCI member and avid player. He worked for Walt Disney and was taught by Disney exactly how to draw Mickey Mouse; after Disney’s passing, he became “the keeper of the Mouse.” His son gave a memorable eulogy at the first session of CCI; his father’s “business was smiles,” he said. Kent designed a chess set on a Disney motif—the Walt’s Cargo set, released in an edition of 750 in 1998.

We then participated in a hands-on presentation by Ron Fromkin on ivory, bone, and other materials for chess sets, followed in the afternoon by an equally informative seminar on how to repair sets. Tony Raynes spoke on “English porcelain chess sets.” He didn’t claim great expertise but he is a passionate amateur with an engaging story. Milly Pozzi’s presentation, “Chess in Contemporary Art: Two New Sets,” showed two new chess sets designed by major contemporary Italian artists, A. Traina and Andrea Branzi. The latter set in particular struck me as having a cutting-edge design that will gain in importance after its release in a limited edition of twelve (www.millypozziarte.it). A good complement to her talk was an impressive video presentation by Oscar D’Empaire on chess and art, about an exhibit at the Fine Arts Center in Maracaibo, Venezuela. Rodolfo Pozzi’s talk on “Rooks as Means of Transportation in Mongolian Chess Sets,” based on examination of more than 200 sets, was the most scholarly of the presentations, using the chess sets to present a serious investigation into the cultural anthropology of a society over several centuries.

At the museum we heard Frank Camaratta talk on the origin of the knight move, a flawless example of deductive logic—Sherlock Holmes irrefutable if you grant his premises that the game was invented by an individual who decided that he or she needed six pieces with unique moves. Hope Levene gave a lively talk on her own genre—put-together sets. Yuri Averbakh offered a fascinating psychological profile of the four types of world chess champions: killers, fighters, players, and sportsmen.

CCI members enjoy the social side of their meetings as well as the serious side. Activities included an opening reception, lunch at an Italian restaurant next to the auction gallery, an intracoastal boat ride with lunch, a buffet lunch at the hall of fame, a banquet with drinks and dancing, and a farewell brunch.

Royal Couples in the Court of Caissa

George and Vivian Dean

George and Vivian have homes in Detroit and Boca Raton. They began their collection in 1962. George is a family doctor and a former vice president of the American Family Medicine Association. Typical of the youthful energy of this older group, he still practices and is also a professor of family medicine. George stressed that to collect you need the full participation of your spouse. They also collect late nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and own work by Monet, Renoir, Picasso, Warhol, and Lichtenstein. He said that he would have been an art historian if he hadn't decided on medicine. They look for quality above all in a chess set, and also uniqueness and history. Abrams publishing will print a book on their collection shortly.

Frank and Gwen Camaratta

Years ago, Frank designed a Jaques reproduction set (using engineering drawings) and got permission from Jaques to manufacture them. He owns 700 antique sets, the largest single collection of Jaques in the world. He's working on the definitive book on Staunton sets. On their fourth or fifth date, his wife Gwen got into his world of collecting by accidentally dropping a coffee mug in his kitchen on a pawn from a rare ivory set he was cleaning in the sink, shattering it beyond hope of repair. They married anyway, Frank showing the true chess player's spirit by sacrificing a pawn for a winning combination.

Floyd and Bernice Sarisohn

Bernice was the first chess set collector in the family—she bought Floyd a chess set as an engagement present in 1952. His brother stationed in Japan bought him a set, and Bernice's parents bought them another. That brought them up to the requisite number of three. They now have more than 1,400 sets throughout the house. They delighted the group by showing up in their specially designed king and queen costumes, prompting dozens of photos. The costumes were later sold at the auction. At the Hall of Fame induction ceremony for GMs Joel Benjamin, Larry Christiansen and Nick de Firmian, the volunteer executive director of the chess museum since 2001, Al Lawrence, singled out Floyd and Bernice Sarisohn and Frank and Gwen Camaratta for their significant contributions to the museum collection. Floyd and Bernice are also the curators of the Long Island, New York chess museum.

Billy and Hope Levene

Billy is in his nineties, a dentist still in practice, and, judging from his comments on the games from the U.S. Senior, a very strong player. Hope, a delightful dinner companion and conversationalist at the banquet, specializes in a genre she may have created, the put-together set. They had one of the five display cases on a main wall. Billy's fluent French helped in the question and answer session after Rodolfo Pozzi's talk. In 1959, in a trip to Copenhagen (the couple are world travelers), she saw a number of figures that could be assembled into a chess set. Thus her passion for the put-together set was born.

Rodolfo and Milly Pozzi

Both grew up in Como, Italy and now make their home in Switzerland—not a hardship since Como is a few kilometers from the Swiss border. He is a retired executive who has just published a beautiful book, *Scacchi: Giochi da tutto il mondo* (Chess: The Whole World's Sets) with Gianni Gini, about chess set collecting, an activity which he began in 1963. She has a gallery in Como. He had been a chess master but when he married her 40 years ago, he gave up chess for collecting, prompting an untranslatable pun that circulated among his friends: "Povero Pozzi. Ha lasciato gli scacchi per la dama." ("Poor Pozzi, he gave up chess for checkers/a lady.") Milly was prepared: her university thesis was on the psychology of

chess players.

CCI HISTORY

Chess Collectors International was formed in April of 1984 when Dr. George Dean, founder and first president, invited collectors he knew to Florida. It grew from 30 dues-paying members to 300 now. All officers and directors are volunteers. There is now an Americas group, a German group, and a Franco-Italian group that have meetings on the off-years. Thomas H. Thomsen, a retired mechanical engineer from Germany, has been president since 1992. In 1991 he formed another group with related interest, Chess Historians International (CCI). CCI meets every two years, with one meeting in the Americas followed by two meetings in Europe. Sarisohn ran their business meeting on the bus to the hall of fame. Members from England, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, the United States, and Venezuela chose Cambridge, England as the site for 2010 and re-elected Thomsen as president.

Suggestions for Further Reading in English

Victor Keats, *Chessmen for Collectors*; Ned Munger, *Cultures, Chess and Art; Sub-Saharan Africa, Volume 1; The Americas, Volume 2; Pacific Islands and Asia, Volume 3*; Gareth Williams, *Master Pieces: The Architecture of Chess* (indispensable.)