

**Paintings with Chess as their subject  
from the fifteenth to the twentieth century**



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To my daughters Ioanna and Sofia

## **EPILOG** (pages 239 - 247)

The history of chess, like that of art, follows its era, influences it, is influenced by it and evolves. The movements, the theory and the time spent thinking during the game, all change according to the social, political, industrial and technological advancement, which is reflected in the chessboard that followed the routes of commerce and conquests. Paintings with chess as their subject not only record this evolution, but at the same time they also record the wide variety of works of art in the areas of philosophy, symbolism, science and allegories. The works, however, do not give us evidence of the strategy of chess since the artists' attention did not focus on the matches being played. This fact had as a result our inability to know the artists' relationship with the game – with the exception of few artists. Undoubtedly, though, the artists who created a small group of works with this as their subject must have known at least the basic rules of the game.

The rapid spread of chess to which the catalytic help of the Persian and Arab Manuscripts contributed, created a legend as to its origin, which caused historical figures to be added to the “Shah Namah” manuscripts of the poet Firdausi (circa 935 – 1025). With the spread of chess in Europe, the portrayal of the two opponents occurs early with a Persian influence as well as in an unknown until then form on different materials. The spread in the West opened two new chapters: that of the parallelism between life and chess by Alfonso X and that of the allegories for the correct relationships between the king and the different ranks of his subjects by Cessolis. The former, in order to reach his public, included figures of all forms and categories – women

and men, nuns and monks, Arabs, Christians and Jews, knights and kings – whose influence is apparent in the Code Manesse.

Essentially, Alphonso and Cesollis helped in the acknowledgement of chess as an intellectual game that was used by kings to frame an image of just and wise authority. At the same time, the game was a form of entertainment which was suitable to accentuate the quality of aristocratic families. These forms of entertainment which befitted the high social position of women and men created an amorous image, an allegory of which is the representation of the Erotic Garden as it corresponds to the transient earthly paradise. Nevertheless, the spectrum of chess allegories expands with the diametrically opposite meanings of violence, war and death.

The romantic adventures of the nobility, which are included in the respective works of literature, appear through the works with chess as an allegory of love in Arabel's love affair with Willehalm, in the Chivalry novels with Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, Gawain, Perceval and in the archetypal figures of medieval romanticism, Tristan and Isolde. The image of love became marital, while the image presented in a confrontation of the opposite sexes could convey love as a simple message.

The creative rendition of imagination in Middle Age prose was the cause for chess to transcend realism and for the contemporary accompanying illustrations to contribute in their way to painting. And this – in parallel with the romantic image – becomes evident in the earliest extant painting, where we see a match between a couple. This tradition of romantic thought continued up to the twentieth century with many variations, new techniques and new interpretations. It is characteristic that the depiction of the dog that appeared

in pictures of couples in the sixteenth century to symbolize bilateral trust did not survive in their counterpart subsequent paintings.

Pictures that depict chess matches between couples usually insinuate the outcome of the battle, too. Victory represents the total conquest of the opposite sex and the mortal threats of the opponent are accompanied by persistent staring looks and congruent titles of threat. Interior and exterior surroundings, where the match takes place, vary and the insinuation of romantic encounter is emphasized when the phallic shapes of the chess pieces are seen.

The fear of the encounter of the end of earthly life as a separation of the body and the soul during the Middle Ages gave birth to the allegory of death in chess. The game is used allegorically to demonstrate the omnipotence of death. No man, not even a king, is able to confront this adversary victoriously, but the frenetic lust for life will introduce later, in the twentieth century, the young player who is unafraid of death and does not abandon the match even in old age. Another use of chess as an allegory of the separation of body and soul as its subject is found in the nineteenth century in the tale of Mephistopheles and Dr. Faust

Since the time of the chess epic by Marcus Hieronymus Vida (1513), chess had been used more often than before as an image and allegory of war and Live Chess was a variation of the version of the war allegory, which inspired artists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

The tranquil picture the opponents project while playing was used as a counterweight next to scenes of violence in the miniatures which accompanied prose in the fifteenth century. The tranquil images of the

illustrations were succeeded by paintings, from 1549 to the eighteenth century, of Duke Johann Friedrich “the Benevolent”, Konstantin der Staufer and Marquis Friedrich of Baden who were characterized by calm reactions, even the moment their death conviction arrives during the match. The painting of historical subjects under the burden of twentieth century modernism did not lend itself anymore to artistic innovations.

Since the fifteenth century, printing helps in the popularization of chess and later, with the early sixteenth century as a starting point, in its evolution to its present form. This is attributed to a plethora of wood engravings. The technique of printing was also used for the translation of the works by Cessolis and Petrarch, that is, by both the positive and negative viewpoints for the game.

The lack of chess paintings in the beginning of the sixteenth century is attributed to the difficulty of establishing chess rules. In the middle of the century Bordone brings in a new element in his paintings, an unusual checkmate scene between two friends. The scene is found only between opponent couples as it suggests the conquest of the opposite sex. The first painting ever of a group portrait of female figures in front of a chessboard, a work by Anguisciola, dates back to the same time period. The setting “portrait and chess” sends the message of a particular ability with which the portrayed faces are characterized. At the end of the century for the first time, Carracci, in his painting *The Players*, captures the players engrossed in a match because of the money wagered which is a result of the competition. This addiction which leads to the inevitable was rendered with conflicts and murders in seventeenth and eighteenth century works.

A similar expression of concentrated attention to that of Carracci is observed in the beginning of the seventeenth century in the portrait of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson by either Karel van Mander I or his son Karel van Mander II. This relationship of Shakespeare with chess was the reason for the game to be introduced in *The Tempest* and the scene between Ferdinand and Miranda became the source of inspiration for a good number of works of different styles.

The cruelest war of the seventeenth century, the Thirty Year War, supplied art with new depictions. Initially it caused the publication of two books, one by Selenus and one by Weickmann, with illustrations which refer to the subjects they are negotiating. In the didactic work of the former we perceive the moral values someone could gain through chess. In the latter's undertaking, with war as its background, a lesson is presented for the state and strategy based on chess and its literary tradition. The war, as well as the eighteenth century, caused the creation of a large reservoir of compositions for the artists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, like Fichel, Lassen, Meissonier and Muchamp.

We discover that in the nineteenth century a number of paintings appear with subjects that arose from the influences among the artists. Gérôme and Meissonier were friends. So were Eakins and Bridgman who were Gérôme's students. Of interest is not only Stoddard's chess subject which she probably got inspired from Eakins whom she studied under, but also the deviations from his style. Also, Bida seems to break free from his teacher, Delacroix, with respect to composition. Bague collaborated with Gérôme, whereas Caballero worked in Meissonier's workshop, whom Fichel

not only knew but had also been inspired by his artistic thought. Moreover, Borione and Lesrel were influenced by Meissonier. During the most part of his studies at the School of Fine Arts, Berndtson was under the supervision of Gérôme and thus was influenced by his technique and generally by his chess compositions. Furthermore, Mussini's chess works are likely to be the result of his friendship with Gérôme.

The economic and commercial interest which Europeans developed towards the Orient, India and later China was followed by artistic pursuits from which chess works and mainly chess sets arose. We can attribute the vast number of orientalist pictures of the nineteenth and twentieth century to the same cultural venture, like those by Alma-Tadema, Gérôme, Delacroix, etc. In the presentation of orientalist works in general which want the Orient to appear primitive to excuse the imperialistic conquest, we observe that the introduction of chess added a rare tint of spirituality to the works. The strategy of the game fueled the creation of works whose intention was to express the political and military activities of the time. Their use commenced in the tenth century and continued up to the twentieth century.

In the seventeenth century the chessboard was included in paintings together with still life objects. In this manner, new, adversative meanings and interpretations of life arose. Later, in the twentieth century, the chessboard is used as a motif in the composition of still life. And still later on in the first half of the twentieth century, it is adopted by Cubism in a wide range of variations.

Besides its use in still life, the chessboard, with the color alteration it offers with its squares, was integrated in Matisse's compositions, while the mystical atmosphere it creates was used by de Chirico.

The change in philosophical exploration brought about by the Enlightenment and the teachings of Philidor and his successors established chess as a purely intellectual game without altering its allegories. This fact has as a consequence in the nineteenth century, much more than before, the winner to feel intellectually superior and the loser inferior. In the chessboard the artists saw a mirror that reflects the players' spiritual world, and their inner dialog led them to create paintings that remind one of a stage set. A respective emphasis on the face of the winner is not observed during female matches as is in matches between men. The winner in matches between male figures is the person who commissioned the picture and in most likelihood he is an individual of higher standing than his opponent.

During the Renaissance, the anti-chess feeling within the clergy lost the battle and the Church itself thereafter assisted in the spread of the game in Western Europe. As a result we have the creation of a series of works with clergymen as players in front of the chessboard in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Their occupation with the black and white squares proves that the intellectual game is part of their everyday life and it represents, as it did earlier with the aristocratic families, a form of entertainment without the risk of being accused that by commissioning the painting they seek prestige. In the paintings with the clergymen, a variety of opponents and spectators are included. In contrast to them, the works of art which portray noted men, like Voltaire, Rousseau, Napoleon, Franklin, Mendeleiev, Mendelssohn, Lessing, Lavater and Golitzyn, which project a wide variety of expressions. A number of works arose from the meeting places, e.g. the coffee shops, tournaments, salons and clubs. These works recorded clearly the aesthetics of these

premises, while the portraits of the powerful chess players make up another considerable part of the history of chess.

Rarely does the game appear in conjunction with other activities; and rarely does the chess set have only a decorative role. More often, the figures of secondary importance work complementary in the composition.

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, we observe a plethora of works with male and female figures – sometimes competing, sometimes solitary – as well as figures of children. Males are more in number and sometimes appear to be sitting in a relaxed manner, with the match being part of their conversation, and sometimes as portraits or engrossed in the match being played. There is also variety in the compositions, which may be triangular, separated into groups, symmetrical, with or without spectators. Both the opponent males and the female figures prove that chess was played by all social classes, and outdoors as well. It is characteristic that in the female competitions there is no emphasis given on the winner as it is with the males. Absent are the older confrontations, however, as the acquaintance with the rules and the agreement of wagers displaced the conflicts.

Paintings with solitary figures next to the chessboard are usually presented full face or in profile. Male figures are portrayed mostly with the look of a player deep in thought and preoccupied with a position in contrast to the females who stand out for their particular charm. Interpretations of chess which involve players of a younger age are austere. Richard Dadd's work is an exception. In the twentieth century, we observe a production of engravings and drawings with opponent players as their motif with variations of the classic type of groups of three or more individuals, while there is also variety

in the surroundings and premises where the matches take place. Furthermore, during the same century we encounter three interesting chess positions in the works of Lavery, Mopp and Escher, as well as an entire match in a painting by Dossi. They are important elements, unknown even in the earlier portrayals of the powerful chess players, which now declare the acquisition of the proportionate strategic knowledge on the part of the artists. It is characteristic that, with the exception of the two chess positions in the pictures of Lavery and Mopp, the few others which portray the two opponents together are of no interest. It is probable that the angles of perspective that can simultaneously convey the chess position together with the silent intensity of the players do not satisfy both emotion and the pictorial composition that the artists want to express. It is remarkable that we encounter neither matches nor positions in the works of Duchamp and those around him, in which only the figures are rendered because the beauty of their movements had a much greater value when it is depicted as a mental process.

The parallel course of the theories of the Soviet School with the philosophic, political and scientific developments, but also the School's fame outside the borders of the country, was the reason why artists in capitalistic countries came to know the new dimensions of the game, which influenced them decisively. The review of the works and their various expressions of chess in different art movements of the twentieth century prove that quite a few elements of the scientific orientations have become accepted.

Without a doubt, the allure that chess exerts on a certain caste of people has the power to unite them: to this we attribute the creation of the "Café de la Régence" circle of chess players and men of the Enlightenment, like

Voltaire, Diderot, Franklin, Robespierre and Rousseau as well as Duchamp's circle. This indiscernible force is probably the reason why some artists grasp more directly the concepts and meanings of the works by other artists and philosophers, with good chances to be influenced, like Fichel by Meissonier, de Chirico by Schopenhauer and Magritte by Poe.

Vieira da Silva expressed herself emotionally using the chessboards. Magritte used the figures of the game, which bring forth sexual associations, as Duchamp did with the pieces of the King and the Queen in his enigmatic works of various forms. His oversized chess pieces resemble an advanced form of evolution of de Chirico's mannequins.

Sargent, Magritte, da Silva, Duchamp and Mastichiadis, who played chess themselves, created more than four chess works. Could this number and the lengthy occupation of earlier artists like Fichel, G r me, Lassen, Meissonier and Muchamp, but even subsequent artists also, like Vasarely, Amen and Baumeister be a criterion so as to suppose that they, also, knew not only the rules of the game but played it as well?

The scientific magnitudes (material, time and space), which Steinitz formulated in the nineteenth century, bonded together indissolubly and were incorporated in various forms in the chess works of art, mainly by Dossi, Vasarely, Escher and Duchamp.

The dynamics of the movements and the intensity the players give forth became a source of inspiration for Baumeister and Dossi's art. The former renders this with mutually intersecting lines and in the field of forces in his paintings the figures, when they are visible, have the shape of spheres or disks. The latter attempted to introduce the sense of countless ramifications in

his paintings through the routes of the movements. Vasarely, with his knowledge of modern physics resorted to the familiar to him road of the theory of Chaos and fractals in order to approach the chaotic regions of the game. In order to show the endless repetition of complexity, Escher used a structure of self-same fractals on a course based on the canvas and formed the Drowning Checkmate.

Some twentieth century artists, like Duchamp, Gris, and Metzinger, who occupied themselves with chess and tried to transfer it in their art, are characterized by their preoccupation with the fourth dimension that holds spirituality as a kindred point with the game. The artists' relationship with science and chess leads to the conclusion that their enquiring spirit was seeking new scientific outlets through the intellectual game.

With Marcel Duchamp and his circle we are transported to a group of artists who were chess payers themselves, and who introduced the game in their art in various ways. The philosophic theory of the game followed Duchamp throughout his artistic course and to that he owes his intellectual freedom. Duchamp exalted the game to an art form and brought the artists close to chess. The postmodern theory of chess, with the strategic principles and dynamic pioneering equilibriums of Nimzovitsch which influenced him, go beyond the boundaries of his works with chess as their subject and introduce an unknown until then perception of art.

The effect on the artists in modern movements proves that the world of chess left indelible marks on art since the moment the way of thinking of the game influenced artistic creation dramatically.



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ΠΙΝΑΚΑΣ ΕΞΩΦΥΛΛΟΥ

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Φώτης Μαστιχιάδης, *Σκακιστές*, 1961, Λινόλεουμ.