

Practical or ornamental ?

Franco Pratesi

The history of chessmen is an essential part of the history of chess. However, chessmen as studied by historians may be different from chessmen considered as collectors' items. Thus, historians are often interested in ancient pieces that are seldom found in private collections. Moreover, even with late pieces, historians are less interested in "collectors items" than in chessmen for common play. Thus there may arise a question of compatibility between studying and collecting chessmen.

Common sense helps us to decide what is worth collecting: something more unusual and more valuable than a common object, whether the reason for its greater value derives from antiquity, material or hand-craft.

It turns out, however, that something deemed worth collecting by some people is entirely unnoticed by others, and vice versa. It may even occur that we are faced by a paradox: the more notable a given object is, the less will it be a representative one for any historical reconstruction. A few examples taken from other collectors' objects will be useful for clarifying my argument, before approaching chessmen: coins, stamps, playing-cards and paintings.

Coins. The most common coin should be the unit of count. In my country the corresponding coin went slowly out of use without anybody noticing its disappearance, so small had become its value. We should now choose among the pieces of nickel 100, brass 200, or white and yellow 500 lire. None of them, nor of the other Italian coins in circulation, looks like a collector's item (even if careful collectors exist who keep one fine specimen for each year of issue). It is no surprise that a choice of gold and silver coins from other countries and even medals issued for particular occasions are offered to collectors. A different situation is valid for coins coming from the past; it suffices to think to the relevance of ancient coins for dating archaeological findings. As known, they usually bore Emperors' and Kings' heads and nobody thinks they are not worth collecting or studying.

Stamps. In the case of stamps, we have several issues per year of “commemorative” editions which represent a real pleasure for many fans. Specific catalogues are issued yearly with printed information and small pockets where precisely to locate each specimen so that all can be collected. Even laymen may become involved at a less sophisticated level. When I receive a letter, I often keep the stamp. There is, however, a stamp that I throw away with the envelope, without hesitating: the commonest stamp for a letter. It is here worth 750 lire – for the moment! – and is part of the series of “castles” stamps, as it was in recent years. It may be interesting to check how its value has increased in recent times, starting from the 500 castle, with subsequent jumps of 50 lire each two or three years. By looking at these castles, we may already make a fanciful journey. Each specimen was produced by the millions, and its collecting value is practically zero. In other countries such stamps bear kings’ portraits, as ancient coins did. That adds a further point of interest for the future collector (the present one may not appreciate such portraits, unless he is from a country so far away that the personage can look extraordinary).

Playing-cards. With playing-cards we enter a slightly different field – the issues are now unrestricted. In the past, however, they were often controlled by the government, for gathering taxes. Each pack often had a tax stamp printed on a given card; in specific cases, even the patterns of the card images were fixed by the law. However, alongside with cards for common card-playing, more artistic cards have often been produced for particular occasions or personages. Which can be considered as items worth collecting? Certainly the “artistic” issues, which take various forms, from scarce editions by real painters to advertising issues. Another typical case aimed at collectors is the production of cards of unusual shapes or dimensions. Thus, at first, cards for common use, or play, appear to be interesting, as for other items, only if coming from such countries as India or Japan. It was a great merit of an English collector, Sylvia Mann, to establish that the interest of “common” cards could be no less than that of “artistic” ones. If one has to follow the historic development of the cards (and possibly of the games played with them), it is precisely the study of the evolution of common cards around the world that can bring the most detailed information!

Art objects. When considering art objects, for instance paintings, we have finally reached a field which very seldom has been brought under government control! In principle, each item can here reflect the free intention of the artist. Certainly, collecting works of the most renowned artists would require knowledge and engagement out of reach for a layman. However, even in the field of paintings the introduction of photography and other advanced techniques has markedly changed the situation during the last century. Thus, a most useful collection of pictures, to be studied by a researcher of the future, would probably consist of the front covers of the weekly magazines with the largest circulation!

Chessmen. Chessmen worth collecting may be considered more akin to the art objects than to other items examined. In fact, they have never been fabricated under government control, nor have taxes been paid for any national model. That implies that no external guide is available to help us in assigning which pattern to which country or time. Nevertheless, it is an ascertained fact that groups of chess players have always preferred their own models. These have been different according to times and sites but a general tendency to uniformity might be observed at a regional or national scale. For the history of chess, precisely these common pieces, used by ordinary players of the various countries, contain the most information as to the evolution of chessmen, their changes of fashion, and sometimes also the changes of the game's rules.

When some playing-cards collectors decided to found a Society, there was the influence of Sylvia Mann, and probably others, to remind the group of the interest of common cards and the study of their evolution in the various countries. They began to publish quarterly a *Newsletter* with information on conventions, new issues and catalogues, together with a *Journal* with papers at a more scholarly level. In its first twenty years, the *Journal* has already gathered a lot of fundamental articles which have remarkably increased our knowledge of playing-card history. A different situation seems to have prevailed among the chess collectors who founded, some years later, their own Society. I remember I was deeply affected by a note published in the very first issue of the bulletin. It was written by the owner of one of the largest private chess collections, as an advice suggesting which chessmen are most suitable for collecting. The great collector reported that initially he was rather confused by the many possible choices until he found a rule of

thumb for selecting his pieces: the pawns ought to be carved each differently from any other of the set!

Certainly, low-priced sets will seldom fulfil this requirement. By strictly following it, one can trust to have in his own collection only pieces that are “worthwhile”, but there remains a fundamental drawback. Practically no chess player will have used such chess sets! As a consequence, if a researcher will examine in the future such a collection he will derive less information than if he could compare just the “contrary” specimens from same dates and places: simple chessmen used for common play, where carving is reduced to an absolute minimum. Really speaking, it is not a question of black or white: several tones of grey may be found in-between. First of all, the same collection can obviously contain items of both kinds. Moreover, there can be patterns which are certainly “artistic” but which might have been employed for playing too; as an extreme case, I am thinking to Italian marine-life chessmen.

It is to be expected that precious chessmen once belonging to a Royal House will for ever appeal much better than chessmen of same date used by common players. Even if one comes to present-day chessmen, there is no great problem for understanding the collecting value of artistic chessmen that are continuously produced in many materials and shapes. I will only comment shortly on a single set, the brass chessmen by Wunderlich of 1984. A full book of 103 pages has been devoted to it (H.Hollander *Minotauros im kinetischen Labyrith* Huber, Offenbach 1989) with many scholarly comments also on other artistic chessmen used for reference. (I am wondering how many chess collectors are familiar with it; without Mr Mittelbach’s help I would likely never have found the book.) The set is apparently an item worth collecting. On the other hand, I have no precise idea as to its value from the point of view of chess history. While I can agree upon the conclusion that Bauhaus-Schach could reflect the state of advanced design as of 1923, in this case I am not able to see clear elements for assigning this set to 1984.

When chess historians deal with chessmen, those used in play are the most studied. That is what occurred, for instance, with Murray himself who in his historical master-work only devotes a few lines to Oriental chessmen for collectors; the same approach was followed by Dr. Chicco, who studied common sets and their evolution.

Let us then consider the resources of a collection based on chessmen-for-play. Here we have a single model prevailing in the whole world,

Cook-Staunton pieces. As known, they were introduced in London in mid 19th century and in the course of time they have acquired such a general spread that it is now practically impossible to play an official game with other chessmen. This does not mean that a collection of chessmen-for-play would only consist in a single set. Here too are various choices of material, dimensions, artistic skill – particularly evident in the knight's head. There are also regional differences; for instance, in Croatia, and in other neighbouring Balcanic countries, bishops are commonly used with a small cap of the opposed colour. (By the way, let us hope that these peoples, so passionately fond of chess, will soon again fight only over the board.) Bigger differences can also be found up to Chinese disk-chessmen and Japanese tablet-chessmen.

Further possible kinds of typical chessmen for play can be found if we consider earlier times. A model that was associated with the international fashion of French culture and goods throughout the world is represented by the so-called Régence chessmen. Their displacement by Staunton chessmen was not sudden; it was not yesterday, but neither centuries ago, that I could see Régence-like pieces in common sale, and use, in Florence. Certainly, only a few exceptions as Staunton, Régence, and Arab chessmen appear to have ever enjoyed an almost universal spread. But common features have been acquired in the course of time also by some other models, mostly characterised by a national spread, as the Russian typical examples. In other countries, there have been historical and geographical reasons hampering the establishment of a national pattern as in Italy and Germany (their late unification) or in Central-East-Europe (changes of borders and kingdoms).

The need for giving due attention to ancient chessmen is not neglected either by historians or collectors. Many studies have recently been devoted to archaeological findings and no chess collector would refuse to admit interest in a piece dating from 500 or 1000 years ago – however common would have been its production and use. The task is to show the connection between these ancient sets and later sets, in the many countries where chess has flourished. The task is not easy and there is often an apparent contrast between recent chessmen available to collectors and old chessmen for play.

In my opinion, the main criterion to follow is first of all to limit ourselves to common chessmen used in play in the various countries; then to reconstruct the evolution of their shape, for instance deepening and

updating Wichmanns' approach. From the historical point of view, all the rest should be treated as an appendix, however valuable the corresponding "extraordinary" chessmen might be. After all, the main question is only better to trace out a demarcation line, which is already more or less explicitly present in specific works, from Murray to Mark, the latter having included it in the layout – and in the title itself – of his 1986 catalogue, *Chessmen Practical and Ornamental*. Further improvements I am now expecting from Sanvito's new book on chessmen.