

Awards to Future Chessmen

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Abstract

Staunton chessmen are briefly discussed as tools which may have their profile improved by modern techniques of design. The introduction of periodic awards assigned by the collectors' association to the best new models is suggested.

Riassunto

Premi a scacchi futuri. Dopo aver brevemente discusso gli scacchi Staunton nell'ambito del moderno design, che potrebbe introdurre significative modifiche nel loro profilo, si suggerisce l'attribuzione periodica di un premio da parte dell'associazione dei collezionisti ai nuovi modelli considerati più validi.

The presence of an international association such as CCI may have great influence on establishing reliable values for chessmen. Exchange of knowledge on a world scale should lead to a situation where everybody knows which are the chessmen to look for, which are those commonly offered in different countries, which are the criteria to follow in choosing and collecting the best items. Of course, the specific goals of individual collectors will remain different: one looking for precious materials, another for antiquity, another for craft skill, another for decorations, and so on.

I continue to maintain that more attention should be paid by collectors to chessmen for play; namely, those which historians have always been mostly interested in. My argument, essentially limited until now to items of the past, may be further developed towards present and, par-

ticularly, future sets. In my opinion, collectors of chessmen should develop a refined taste for “suitable” models, and use it to evaluate not only old items but also new proposals.

As chessmen for play, Staunton pieces are everywhere leading the way. Different items, such as those largely employed in Far-East Asia, are only used for regional or national variants. This may explain why during this century little attention has been paid to improving the profile of ordinary chessmen (*L'Italia Scacchistica*, 83 N. 7 (1993) 170-175).

However, Staunton pieces come from the mid-19th century and most things of this age are now outdated. Meantime, much progress had been made by professional design applied to the mass production of most tools – often the agreement between shape and function has thus greatly improved. It should now be possible to design and use a set of chessmen more suitable to the tastes and fashions of nowadays. There are two different problems: how to suggest an improved chess set; how to impose it on the chess world. The second problem is also a hard one, but we can neglect it now – the problem of designing a really modern set is already complex enough, and collectors ought to contribute to its solution.

Let us begin with individual chessmen: for each of them we can consider its Staunton portrait, its meaning, its moves. It may be supposed that just introducing small variations on the Staunton profile will not be welcome – as already happened with the “Italia” set, which did not succeed in becoming popular with Italian players during fascism.

How can we suggest the significant modifications required? The best answer appears to be, by using the methods of professional design. But just any designer cannot be an expert in the history of chess and he must learn what is the meaning of chessmen – for instance, that the piece known as a bishop in English-speaking countries must be recognised as a madman in France, a runner in Germany, an elephant in Russia, an ensign in Italy, and so on. At this point, it is probable that he will already have given up any further search for allowing the piece to be “suitably” figured.

For many new chessmen, any figurative type of profile has been practically abandoned: in several cases, designers have instead tried to add marks to the specific piece indicating its way of moving on the chessboard.

A great influence on some recent proposals has derived from the chessboard squares, which may be the basic reason for so many new

square-section chessmen. A set located on the chessboard appears more coherent if built on a cubic basis and Bauhaus chessmen may be considered a fine prototype. However, chessmen are not usually produced for being looked at while standing still on a chessboard, even if collectors may think so, considering that many sets have been produced just for collectors' use. Let us instead require that our new model be suitable for actual play, or even that any new proposal be tested in a chess tournament.

There have been remarkable changes in tournament play during recent years and rapid chess is more and more popular. The need is felt everywhere that chessmen be tough, easy to grasp, easy to be located on the chessboard. In addition to these general requirements for new chess sets, others can be suggested by experts. The problem then is how to stimulate the production of such "suitable" models, how to provide acknowledgements that a given model has fulfilled these requirements, and – in the very end – how to suggest to federations of players that they should adopt one or another new model.

I am not certain that it is high time for finding substitutes to Staunton pieces in current play. However, I feel certain that an international association such as CCI, in addition to supporting research on the history of chessmen, should contribute to the production of better chessmen too. That cannot be achieved in any coercive way – it is obviously impossible to prohibit the private production of any set. However, the contrary approach can be followed, that of encouraging designers of the finest new sets which are acknowledged to follow the "rule" that they are play-oriented chessmen.

A possible way would be to establish a specific award, for instance to be assigned among original proposals submitted to CCI conventions. In the course of time, a whole series of fine sets would thus receive the Collectors' Award and represent an acknowledged basis for future improvements. Collectors could thus influence not only the market for ancient pieces but also the design of chessmen for the future; no doubt, at the same time they will have further developed their refined taste.