

# Playing Sets and Ornamental Sets

Chess sets can fall into two major categories: playing sets and ornamental sets. As chess players, we are much more familiar with playing sets--the pieces are relatively simple and utilitarian, and are usually made of wood or bone. Antique playing sets are often well-worn due to their usage throughout the decades and centuries, but because many were manufactured to satisfy the ongoing demand, there are still quite a few around, despite the rough-and-tumble nature of chess play.

By contrast, ornamental sets were usually produced in small, or even singular, quantities, so there are fewer in existence. A counterbalancing factor is that ornamental sets, like other works of art, have been carefully maintained by their owners over the decades and centuries. Ornamental sets are often figural, i.e. carved human (or animal) figures, and often follow a theme – political, cultural, moral, or some other reflection of the place and time in which they were manufactured.

This month's column looks at examples in both categories, starting with playing sets.

Playing set designs are almost always associated with a particular country in which they were predominantly used. A good starting point is 18<sup>th</sup>-century France: the era of François-André Danican Philidor. The great French champion reigned supreme in the mid-to-latter 1700's (although there was no "official" world championship designation until Wilhelm Steinitz a century later.) Philidor's famous quote, "The pawns are the soul of chess," is actually not an exact quote from him at all, but he did embrace the concept, and he is considered by many to have been the first "modern" player. Philidor traveled back and forth from France to England, but while in France he would have played with sets in the Directoire pattern.



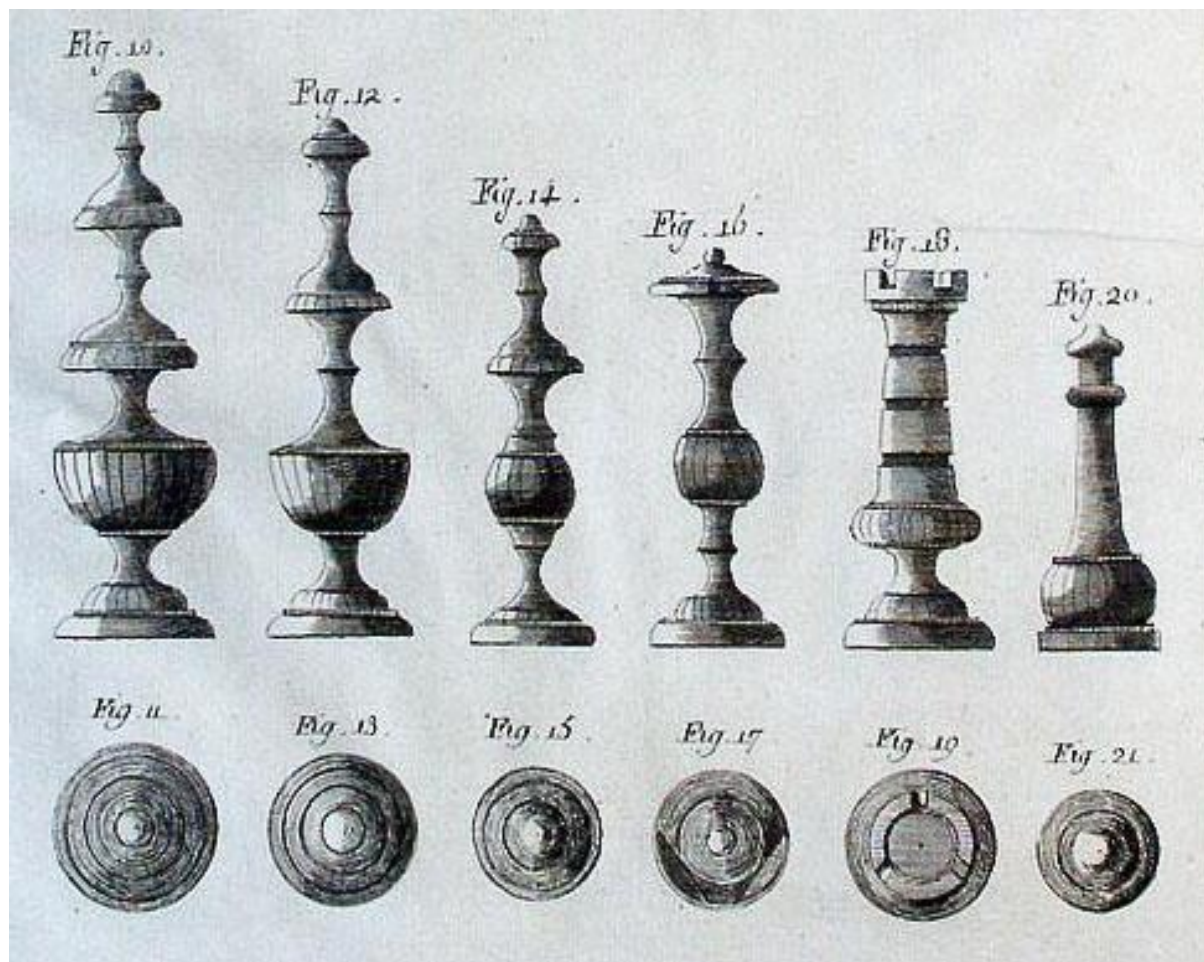
The simple, elegant style of the pieces was well-suited to late-night chess marathon sessions. Modern players might need a few games to get used to the pieces, but it wouldn't take long to intuitively recognize, for example, the queen from the bishop. Knights in this type of set were sometimes made with a sloped cut on the head, and were often taller than the Bishops. The type of set above is a precursor to the highly popular Régence pattern, named after the Café de la Régence in France, which was a locus of chess activity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Also considered to be within the early spectrum of the Directoire pattern is this next French playing set, from the early-to-mid 1700's:



This same type of set was illustrated in Denis Diderot's famous L'Encyclopédie in 1776:





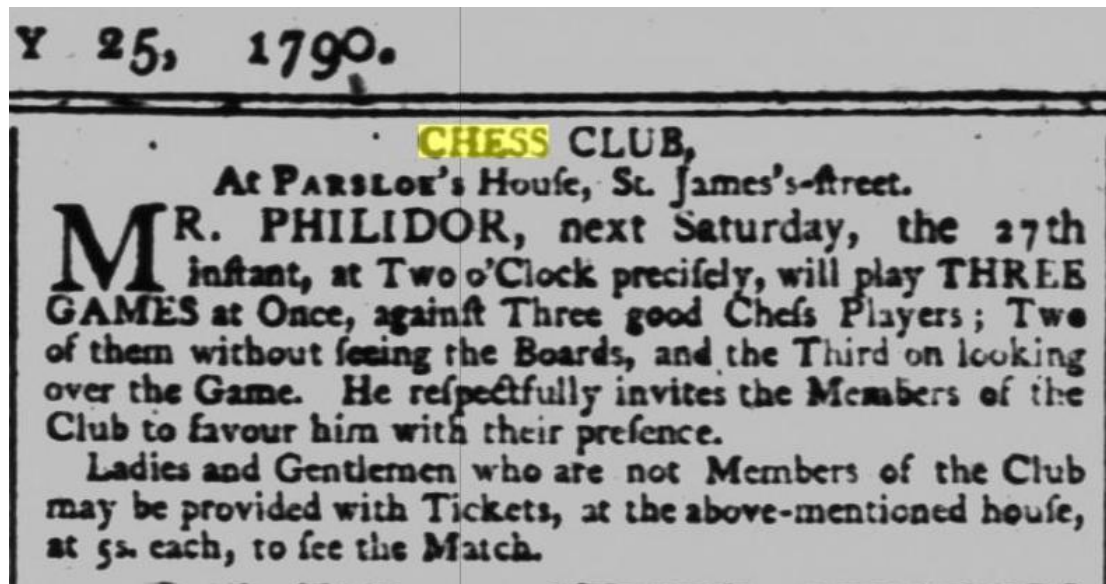
But encyclopedias are not always 100% accurate. Note that in the illustration, as well as in the photograph of my own set (which is lined up to match the Diderot entry), the alleged “knight” piece has a tri-corner collar. (It can be seen in the overhead Diderot view of the piece, labeled *Fig. 17*.) But the tri-corner collar is characteristic of an antique Bishop, not a Knight. Diderot had arranged the pieces in order of height, not in their proper order from the chessboard.

When Philidor ventured across the English Channel to London in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as he did on various occasions, it is likely that his chess games were conducted on an Old English style chess set such as the following:



The top set is ivory; the bottom two sets are wood. There are several similarities between the sets. Knights have a slope-cut on the head, and bishops have a cleft miter, which harkens back to their association with bishops' miters of the church. (That topic will be discussed at greater length in a future column.)

During the latter phase of his life, Philidor gave simultaneous exhibitions of up to three games at a time – blindfolded. On other occasions, especially during his final years, he played two of the three games blindfolded, such as on February 27, 1790, at Parsloe's house on St. James's street, per this advertisement in *The Times*.



The illustration below of an exhibition is from the *Sporting Magazine* of 1794.



The illustration does not provide a clear view of the chess set, but it was probably a set of the Old English style.

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Having seen a few examples of antique playing sets, let's look at the other major category – ornamental chess sets. The first example is from France. It is made of ivory, circa 1875, and is on the theme of "Venus vs. Bacchus." Each piece is a miniature sculpture.



### *Ornamental Chess Set – not for playing a game!*



Imagine trying to play a game with this set! It would be particularly difficult because the polychrome coloring continues to flake off, slowly but surely, after 140 years. Clearly, it's a delicate set, intended for artistic admiration, not for a kingside attack.

Figural ornamental sets often follow a theme, one of which is “moral versus immoral” (usually called “good versus evil” or “virtue versus vice”). This antique French set consists of virtuous figures on one side, with a winged king, Venus as the queen, musical bishops, winged horses for knights, and cherubic pawns. The opposing side advocates a different lifestyle altogether: a wine-sipping king, a bare-breasted queen, satyrs for bishops, Bacchus as the knights, and impish pawns.



It might be psychologically, if not morally telling, if chess players had to pick a side.

Chess is, of course, a war game, so a common theme of ornamental sets is that of two opposing armies ready for combat. This next set shows that theme in a particularly artistic way.



***Ornamental Chess Set – not for playing a game!***



The set was manufactured in ivory by the East India Company (usually but informally called the “John Company”), circa 1800, for export to British high-society. The set, which has extraordinary workmanship and was made by native Indian craftsman using nothing but primitive tools, is very rare and sought-after.

Another example below is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French ivory set, with particularly bold carving. Note that the black pieces are scorched/colored with carbon from an open flame.





The king might look familiar because the set was made on the theme of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, a famous week-long meeting of friendship in 1520 between King Henry VIII of England (pictured) and King François I of France.

To recap: the difference between the two main categories of sets – playing and ornamental – is readily apparent from the following pictures:

***“Playing Sets” are for playing chess***



***“Ornamental Sets” are for artistic enjoyment***



The playing set is a Calvert-pattern set, named after John Calvert, a London-based chess set manufacturer from 1791 until his death in 1822, after which his widow Dorothy took over the shop until her death in 1840. (There are two styles of playing sets that are attributed to John Calvert; a future column will discuss John and Dorothy Calvert's chess sets, and their huge influence on playing set design.) The ornamental set is a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century English ivory set on the theme of two royal courts in opposition.

More photos of the ornamental chess sets shown in this column are at the following links:

<b><u>Pattern</u></b>	<b><u>Dating</u></b>	<b><u>Link</u></b>
French "Venus vs Bacchus" set	circa 1875	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/pxnxzf8">http://tinyurl.com/pxnxzf8</a>
East India "John Company" set	circa 1800	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/qbt8lqw">http://tinyurl.com/qbt8lqw</a>
French "Field of the Cloth of Gold" set	late 19 <sup>th</sup> century	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/pltvo3k">http://tinyurl.com/pltvo3k</a>
English "Royal Court" set	mid 19 <sup>th</sup> century	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/nomyv9b">http://tinyurl.com/nomyv9b</a>

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*Photos of Mr. Crumiller's collection are posted at [chessantique.com](http://chessantique.com) and [tinyurl.com/ntq9ukw](http://tinyurl.com/ntq9ukw)*