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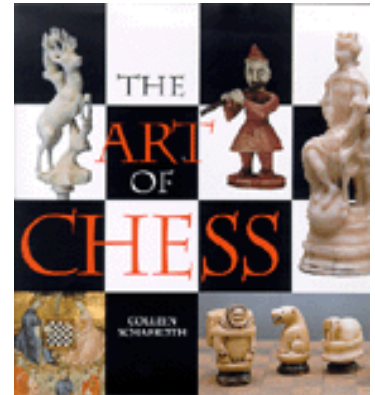
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Chess for Those Who Don't Play

by Taylor Kingston

The Art of Chess, by Colleen Schafroth, 2002
Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Hardcover, 175 pp.,
\$29.95.

In 1957 the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington, USA, under the direction of chess enthusiast Clifford Dolph, held an exhibition of chess sets. With over 1600 pieces gathered from many different countries and periods of history, this exhibit led to the establishment of a permanent chess set collection at the museum. That collection, which now comprises over 300 sets dating back to the 17th century, is the inspiration for this book. Written by Colleen Schafroth, the museum's current director, *The Art of Chess* combines historical narrative with many photographs, from Maryhill and many other museums, such as the Louvre and Bibliotheque Nationale of France, El Escorial in Spain, the Bayrisches Nationalmuseum in Germany, the Topkapi Saray Museum in Turkey, and the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford, England.



The result is a large (9" x 9", or 23 cm. square),



colorful, visually impressive work, of the sort usually called a “coffee table book,” the kind of thing one buys in a museum gift shop as a memento of an exhibit. In the ChessCafe Archives reviews of similar recent books can be found, such as Ned Munger’s large-format *Cultures, Chess & Art*, a sort of globe-trotting travelogue about hand-crafted sets, and the small but pictorially rich *Master Pieces*, an historical survey of chess sets, by British collector Gareth Williams.

In size, *The Art of Chess* is closer to the Munger book, but in theme and content it is much more like Williams’. Beautifully bound, about half its 175 pages are devoted to high-quality photographic reproductions, both of chess pieces and chess-related art works. An example of the former is this,



an intricately hand-carved ivory knight from a 13th-century English set,

while an example of the latter is this,

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a 16th-century Italian painting, “The Three Sisters Playing Chess”, by Sofonisba Anguissola.

A great variety of sets are beautifully depicted, ranging from an 8th-century Indian-style set and the 11th-century “Charlemagne chessmen,” to avant-garde 20th-century sets designed by such artists as Max Ernst and Man Ray. The photos complement the chronological narrative, which begins with the game’s origins in first-millennium Asia, and proceeds to discuss the evolution of chess and chess sets in various regions and eras, primarily the Middle Eastern Islamic world circa 800-1200, Spain and Italy during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, England, France and Germany in the Industrial Revolution, and Western culture in general in the 20th century. Substantial representation is also given to hand-carved sets from China and India, made for export to Europe during the colonial days of the 1800s.

The visual aspect is the book's best feature. The sets depicted are comparable in beauty to those in *Master Pieces*, the photography and printing are equally good, and they are further enhanced by the larger format. They are well-chosen to illustrate various themes in the narrative, for example the gradual shift from abstract geometric forms in Islamic sets to highly detailed human figures in medieval sets for European nobility.

However, while the photography is consistently excellent, the same is not true of the text. As one would expect from an art curator, Ms. Schafroth shows considerable erudition in art history. With H. J. R. Murray's *A History of Chess* prominent among her sources, she also seems to have done her homework on the early history of chess. At its best, the narrative combines those two threads, as in this caption to a 14th-century French illumination:

“Between 1280 and 1320, a Lombard friar by the name of Jacobus de Cessolis, wrote one of the most popular books of the medieval period, *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium*. In the book, Cessolis recorded a sermon originally written to ‘correct the evil manners of the king, avoid idleness and sadness and satisfy the natural desire for novelty by means of the infinite variety of play,’ and used the game of chess as an allegory for medieval life.” (p. 54)

And at a later point she makes a logical link between artistic and practical considerations in describing the origin of the Staunton pattern:

“The variety and styles of the conventional form begun in the fifteenth century had expanded tremendously by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Most pieces were tall, easily tipped, and cumbersome during play. But their largest sin was the uniformity of pieces within a set. A player’s unfamiliarity with an opponent’s set could tragically alter the outcome of a game ... The solution was to become known as the Staunton chess set.” (p. 119)

However, Schafroth’s chess expertise seems to be limited mostly to pre-Renaissance times. The first harbinger of problems is her inexplicable labeling of the 1500s as “The Heroic Age of Chess.” As the narrative moves forward, historical errors become evident:

“Closely identified as it was with courtly accomplishments, chess quickly became important as a status symbol, and consequently chess sets had a place of honor in most upper-class households ... there were also a limited number of players who were serious about the game, even if their standards were never high. It was the more impassioned players who, over time, proposed a number of limited technical changes to the game. These included advancing the pawns two squares ... and empowering the kings and queens to leap squares.” (p. 61) I was at first inclined to dismiss the ‘leaping kings’ as an inadvertent mistake, or perhaps an ill-conceived way to describe castling. But errors continued to surface. Further on in the discussion of 15th-century rule changes we read:

“The bishop, previously allowed to move only one

square at a time, was suddenly given the ability to move diagonally over several squares on each move. This gave the piece as much power as the rook” (p. 76). This is incorrect on both the old bishop’s move (a two-square leap), and of course on the new bishop’s worth compared to the rook.

After a while errors start piling up like cars on a foggy freeway. The final chapter begins “By the beginning of the twentieth century, chess had circumvented the globe,” a most unhappy turn of phrase. Matters get worse in a discussion of post-WW I chess:

“The so-called war to end all wars left a legacy that was to hang like a dark cloud over much of Europe over the next two decades. In the aftermath of the conflict, individual chess organizations found it much more difficult to maintain competitive and international play.” (p. 148) Ms. Schafroth seems unaware of the many important tournaments and matches held in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. She continues:

“In 1924 the Federation Internationale des Échecs (FIDE), the World Chess Federation, was founded ... Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of its mission was the development of a junior level for young players, thus ensuring the continuation of the game into the twenty-first century.” (p. 149) FIDE’s junior programs are indeed commendable, but chess had survived for centuries, and undoubtedly would have made it past 2000, without them. Also, it seems misleading to mention them in conjunction with FIDE’s 1924 founding, since the first FIDE Junior World Championship

did not take place until 1951.

“As the frequency of tournaments increased, for the first time players also found that they could make a substantial living at chess.” (p. 149) One wonders that Schafroth does not see the self-contradiction: first she says a 20-year depression befell European chess, yet soon chessplayers are making “a substantial living”? Who? She names none. Of the prominent players of that period, few fit the description: Lasker and Alekhine prospered for a while but died poor; Nimzovitch, Spielmann, Tartakower, Rubinstein, Grünfeld, Janowski, Yates, and Torre eked out at best modest livings and died poor; most who did ever have any regular income (e.g. Bernstein, Euwe, Vidmar, Kashdan, Fine, Reshevsky) got it from non-chess sources. Other than perhaps Capablanca, with his diplomatic sinecure, or Sir George Thomas, an English baronet, one wonders who these well-off players of the 1920s and '30s were.

The closer the narrative comes to the present day, the more unreal it becomes: “Fischer, Anatoly Karpov, and Garry Kasparov all served to increase and further broaden the popularity of the game. Consequently, chess was transformed from celebrity status into a grassroots movement in small communities around the world. Suddenly, local neighborhoods and schools developed chess clubs ... Now anyone who wanted to could enjoy tournament play.” (p. 153) It is disturbing to learn that local clubs and tournaments were not widely accessible before the Fischer era; this would appear to invalidate many sources I hitherto considered reliable, including my own memory.

It would appear that Ms. Schafroth is competent in art history, but knows little of modern chess. Rather than consult any competent authority outside her province, it seems she has simply filled space with glib misconceptions. A pity, since this badly detracts from her credibility in other parts of this otherwise attractive book. And it could have been remedied so easily, by consulting any one of several good active historians, or at least a few reference books more recent than Murray's 1913 opus. Or maybe drive a few hours up to Seattle to talk to Yasser Seirawan or Mike Franett of *Inside Chess*.

Some similar problems were present in the Gareth Williams book, but not at all to the same extent. I don't expect a book of this sort to serve as an authoritative historical reference, but it can at least avoid being a repository of nonsense. As it stands, the number and nature of this book's gaffes prevent me from recommending it to ChessCafe readers, who tend to insist on historical accuracy. In fact, it's not really clear who this book's proper readership is. Chess history buffs are out, and it has no games, so serious players will not be interested, unless they simply like the pictures. Other than avid set collectors, enthusiasts of chess-related art, and patrons of the Maryhill gift shop, I suspect that *The Art of Chess* will be bought mostly by those who, like the medieval nobility, don't really know much about chess but consider it "important as a status symbol." Strategically placed on a coffee table, it may at least impress their non-playing friends.



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