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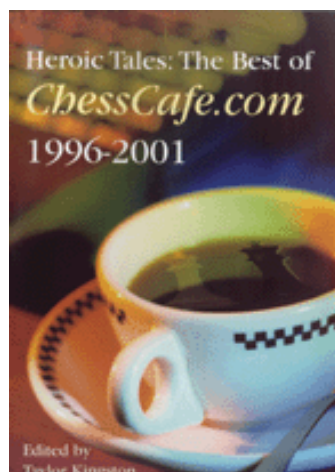
The Art of Chess Biography

John S. Hilbert

“In chess Duchamp did not achieve the highest chess goals, but he was accompanied by chess all his life.” Introduction, p.5

The Chess Biography of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Vol. 1: The Early Career of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1925), by Vlastimil Fiala, Moravian Chess 2002, 323pp., \$34.95

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was a French artist strongly associated with the transformation of the art world during the Twentieth Century. In 1912, at the age of 25, he painted his *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, and the next year stunned the art world with its appearance at the International Exhibition of Modern Art held at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City. A few years later Duchamp championed Dadaism in New York, and in 1917 offered the world his urinal-turned-upside-down, *Fountain*, emblematic of his distaste and distrust of traditional art values, and evocative of what he considered the meaningless absurdity of modern life. Duchamp would greatly influence the Surrealists as well as Pop art and other modern and postmodern movements. He has long been considered, as it were, a grandmaster of the art world.

Little of Duchamp's association with art appears in *The Chess Biography of Marcel Duchamp, Volume 1 (1887-1925)*. Nor should it, necessarily, given the limited field staked out by its author, Vlastimil Fiala, and as reflected in the book's very name. Unfortunately, readers expecting a typical chess biography will also be confronted with difficulties and no doubt some confusion when perusing the pages of this first volume of a promised two.

And that is my chief complaint with this book. What might well have been a finely honed, detailed presentation of Duchamp's chess career, sharply focused on what is known of his play in numerous chess centers, including the United States, Belgium and France, and presented with considered associations to his life and art, in one trim volume, instead is buried within what promises to be, should volume two mirror volume one's scope and presentation, the most widely ranging, indeed sprawling, collection of chess context ever eventually placed between four covers. This work is a beautifully detailed sourcebook, not a fully realized chess biography.





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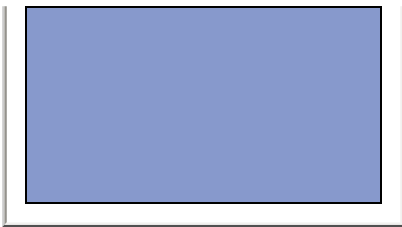
Do not misunderstand me. I am a firm believer in historical and chess context in the writing of chess biography, as anyone who has read some of my works already knows. But there are limits. Or rather, there should be limits, to what material surrounding a player's chess life is useful for a work and what is enjoyable for a reader. What Fiala has really produced here is less a chess biography and more a chess sourcebook. The volume is an exceedingly detailed collection of events and games that may or may not have been significant for Duchamp. What it is not is a tightly focused chess biography.

Examples speak louder than general words. Duchamp's first American chess period, from 1921 through mid 1922, occupies roughly 100 pages in the book, from p.19 through p.118. The games in the volume are numbered, and pages 19 through 118 include games numbered 3 through 99. Of these 97 chess games played in the United States during 1921 and 1922, exactly 2 (games 26 and 71) were played by Duchamp. The remaining 95 games from this period were not played by Duchamp. Some were played in events he participated in, such as in the Metropolitan Chess League, where Duchamp appeared a few times for the Marshall Chess Club team. Others were played in New York events it is logical to assume Duchamp might have attended. But the net result is the same: the reader interested in what is now known about Duchamp's early chess play in the United States risks becoming irretrievably lost in a deep marsh of context. Readers will find, on the whole, 261 chess games in this volume. Of those, only 35 are games played by Duchamp.

This simple fact, that only 35 of the 261 games in this first volume on Duchamp were played by Duchamp, starkly illustrates both the strength and weakness of this book. Although I do not profess to be an expert on Duchamp and his chess, it is quite likely that the 35 games by Duchamp played during the period 1921 through 1925 represents the largest collection yet assembled of Duchamp games for those years. For this contribution Fiala should be worthily applauded. That the reader must resort to the Player's Index to discover just where those 35 games appear in the text, embedded as they are within the accumulation of another 226 games, suggests something of the difficulty readers seeking to cull specific Duchamp material from this volume will face.

Fiala attempts to alert his readers to what is in store for them: "The aim of the chess biography of M. Duchamp was not merely to describe in detail and assemble as many of his games as possible, but to bring closer to the reader the national activities in the countries where he lived or which he visited as an active player or which he followed" (Introduction, p.10). And Fiala holds true, largely, to his "chess field study" method that he outlined in an earlier work, and one that he cites in his Introduction: "Basic Principles of Chess Research," *Quarterly for Chess History*, Vol. 1 1999 (pp.136-140).

In that article Fiala details his method for chess research, from selection of a topic to assembling and reexamining all relevant chess publications,



ranging from well-known chess magazines and journals to the much less explored but crucial local chess columns. Private and club archives, as well as memoirs and reminiscences of contemporaries, when available, form equally important elements of the chess research heuristics Fiala champions. These materials, marshaled together by the chess biographer, are, as Fiala notes in his article, “absolutely essential for the making of the last step—writing a historical chess publication. Each work on chess, which deals with known, less known, or even unknown data, and which will publish already forgotten games or publish known games with unknown chess commentaries, enlarges the scope of our knowledge of the chess past and is a major contribution to the golden fund of chess history.”

All well and good. All true, as well. And yet the assembling of such extensive materials does not, necessarily, result in excellent chess biography. For chess biography is also an art, one involving the telling use of such materials to form a whole greater than its parts. The chess biographer, extensive materials at hand, must also strive to comprehend his subject, to give the reader a form in which the chessplayer considered comes to life in a way that the mere stringing of citations, events and games cannot possibly convey.

What Fiala has created here is what I refer to as a sourcebook rather than a biography. It is the stuff from which biography can be written. But it is not biography. What the reader of volume one of *The Chess Biography of Marcel Duchamp* will find is not a finely finished picture of Duchamp and his life in chess, but rather the hard-won fruits of Fiala’s widely ranging and diligent research into the periods and places where Duchamp played chess. Those wishing to understand precisely what this volume covers, before finding themselves entangled in scores of games and a myriad of events played by Duchamp’s chess contemporaries, would do well to first read the page and a quarter Conclusion appearing on pages 316 and 317 of the work. There, in simple prose, one will learn the outline of Duchamp’s chess play during his early chess years.

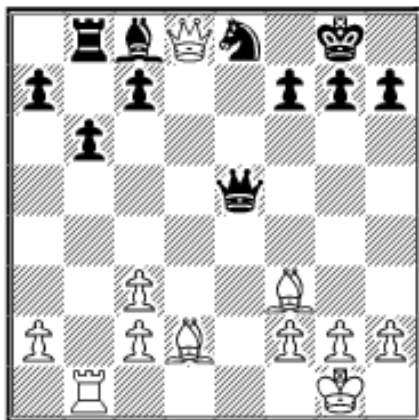
That the reader has to resort to the end of the book to make better sense of the whole strongly suggests that Duchamp, and the reader, would have been better served had Fiala considered his materials longer and taken the time to work them into a sharply focused biography, with the vast bulk of the chessic context Fiala provides relegated either to appendices and footnotes or, in some cases, to the editor’s cutting room floor.

There are, indeed, wonderful items that Fiala’s painstaking research has unearthed. Here, for example, is the earliest Duchamp game yet to appear, as the author tells us, and one previously forgotten, as it has been included in no other book or article on Duchamp:

***Bruno Forsberg - Duchamp* [C49]
New York Match, 1921**

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bb5 Bb4 5.0–0 0–0 6.d3 Bxc3 7.bxc3 d5
8.Bg5 dxe4 9.Bxc6 exf3 10.Bxf3 Rb8 11.Re1 Re8 12.Rb1 b6 13.d4 Qd6**

14.dxe5 Rxe5 15.Rxe5 Qxe5 16.Qd8+ Ne8 17.Bd2



17...c5?? 18.Bf4 1-0 (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 30, 1921, *Duchamp*, p.49)

While not great chess, the game is clearly of importance to all interested in the genesis of Duchamp's chess play. Fiala's careful working through of several years' worth of Hermann Helms's *Brooklyn Eagle* column to find this score is to be commended.

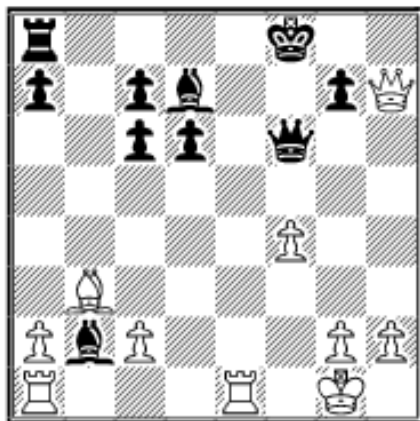
Some readers, especially other chess historians, will find useful information in the extensive contextual material Fiala provides, regardless of that material's frequent obscuring of the volume's main subject. A review, for instance, of the twelve Marshall games appearing in the book's Index shows that no fewer than seven of them have citations only to the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Anyone seeking to put together as comprehensive as possible a collection of Marshall games, and who has not examined the *Eagle's* chess column, may well find most of these seven games to be new to him, and will certainly learn that he needs to carefully go through the pages of that chess column as well as other New York columns if he hopes to adequately cover his subject. I suspect, as well, that readers interested in the likes of Albert Hodges (six games), George Koltanowski (twelve games) or Edgar Colle (twenty-three games) will find some new material in this book. Here is one example of the kind of additional games readers will discover here, and probably nowhere else, short of Fiala's original sources:

***Marshall - Jaffe* [C40]**

New York Greco Counter Gambit Tournament

October 1921

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5 3.Bc4 d6 4.d4 exd4 5.Nxd4 Nf6 6.Nc3 Nc6 7.Bg5 Ne5
8.Bb3 fxe4 9.Nxe4 Be7 10.Bxf6 Bxf6 11.0-0 Bg4 12.f3 Bd7 13.f4 Nc6
14.Nxc6 bxc6 15.Re1 Kf8 16.Ng5 Bxb2 17.Qh5 Qf6 18.Nxh7+ Rxh7
19.Qxh7



19...d5 20.Rad1 Re8 21.Qh8+ Kf7
 22.Rxe8 Bxe8 23.c4 Qxf4 24.cxd5
 Qe3+ 25.Kh1 Ke7 26.dxc6 Bf6
 27.Qg8 Qe4 28.h3 a5 29.a4 Bc3
 30.Bd5 Qxa4 31.Qe6+ Kf8 32.Rf1+
 1–0 (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 20,
 1921, *Duchamp*, p.52)

Very few of the games in this volume are annotated. None of the 35 Duchamp games have annotations, aside from one or two having

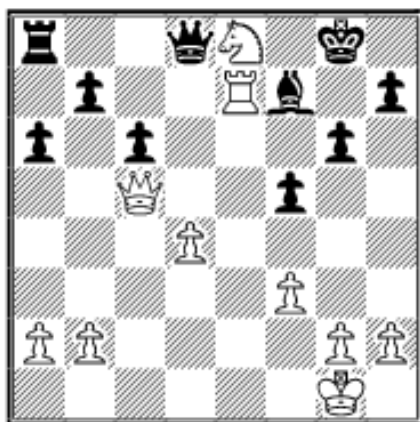
exclamation or question marks attached to a few moves. The few games in general that are annotated include five from the *American Chess Bulletin* played at New York 1922, the young Reshevsky's first tournament appearance, a small affair won by Edward Lasker over Jaffe, Bernstein, Bigelow, Janowski and the child prodigy. I have not seen a complete collection of all fifteen games played in this event. Fiala includes twelve of the fifteen, having gone through numerous contemporary sources including the *New York Evening Post* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*. This may well be all the games that can be recovered from this tournament. Again, finding so many of these games is commendable in itself. That they deserve to appear in a biography about Duchamp, and are given over nine pages of text (see pp.74-84), apparently on the basis of Fiala's assertion that "In is my firm belief that among the everyday visitors [*to this event*] was Marcel Duchamp, following the exciting tournament contests with great interest" (p.74), is more debatable.

Fiala covers Duchamp's appearance in a variety of Belgian and French chess events during 1923 through 1925, and indeed 33 of the 35 recovered Duchamp games in the book appear in these chapters. This reader found most entertaining the treatment of Duchamp playing in the Third Championship of France held at Nice in September 1925. Not only did Duchamp finish the event at fifty percent (3-3, with 2 draws), and thus earn the title of chess master from the Fédération Française des Échecs, but we learn that he designed the four color poster for the event (unfortunately reproduced only in black and white in the book), and something of the connection between Duchamp's production of the poster and its value not only for chess purposes but for general Duchamp collectors as well. We learn, too, that Duchamp not only authorized the production of the poster for chess clubs and billboards, but that he also had printed a limited run of deluxe copies, numbered and signed by the artist-turned-chessplayer. As Fiala tells us, "Their price was fixed at 100 francs and Marcel Duchamp donated the profit from the sale of these originals to the tournament treasury" (p.286). It is hoped Fiala's second volume will include more such connections between Duchamp's art on and off the board.

The volume also includes the final round game Duchamp played at Nice, thereby achieving the fifty percent required for the official title of French master:

**Duchamp – H. Bertrand [D53]
Third Championship of France (Nice), Rd. 9
September 11, 1925**

**1.d4 e6 2.c4 d5 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 Be7 5.Bg5 Nbd7 6.e3 c6 7.Rc1 Ne4
8.Bxe7 Qxe7 9.cxd5 Nxc3 10.Rxc3 exd5 11.Bd3 0–0 12.Qc2 g6 13.0–0
f5 14.Re1 Nf6 15.Ne5 Ne4 16.Ra3 Be6 17.f3 Nd6 18.Qc5 a6 19.e4 Qc7
20.exd5 Bxd5 21.Bc4 Nxc4 22.Nxc4 Rfe8 23.Rae3 Rxe3 24.Rxe3 Kf7
25.Nd6+ Kg8 26.Ne8 Qd8 27.Re7 Bf7**



28.Nf6+ Kg7 29.Qe5 Kf8 30.Rd7 1–0
(*La Strategie*, 1925, p.195, Duchamp, p.309)

There are unfortunately also a number of problems with the volume's production. The Introduction inexplicably repeats whole lines of text. For example, the last four lines on page 7 appear immediately as the first four lines at the top of page 8. Similarly, the last four lines of text on page 10 repeat as the top four lines of page 11. There are logical inconsistencies as well, and right from the start. The first paragraph of the book proper, on page 12, tells us that Duchamp, who was born in 1887, was "the fourth of seven children." We then learn Duchamp's two older brothers became artists. Thus, one would assume that the third of the three siblings older than Duchamp was a sister. But in the same paragraph we read that "the oldest sister, Suzanne" was born in 1889, two years after Duchamp. Thus, the reader is left to puzzle out whether Suzanne's year of birth is incorrect, or if she was not really the oldest sister, or if Duchamp instead had three, not two, older brothers, or several other possible questions related to his family's size and composition. Such confusion does not inspire trust in the accuracy of what is to come. There are inconsistencies in crosstables as well (the one on p. 54, for example, fails to give Hodges his half point against Jaffe, instead suggesting he lost both games; the one on p. 74 suggests Santasiere lost a game to Hago, but Hago is given credit for no points in the event at all). The Index of Players on p.322 oddly inserts Gaudin, Gaty, Haasted, Hodges (for one of his games) and Horowitz between the listings for Dunkelblum and Chajes (yes, Chajes follows Dunkelblum in the Index; I leave it to the reader to puzzle out the multiple confusions).

All in all, *The Chess Biography of Marcel Duchamp, Volume 1 (1887-1925)* appears rushed, both in terms of editing and, as suggested earlier, conception and execution. As a sourcebook for materials on Duchamp and his chess play between 1919 and 1925, one suspects that Fiala has done a more creditable job, although a definitive and thoroughly digested treatment of the artist Duchamp as chessplayer remains to be written.



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