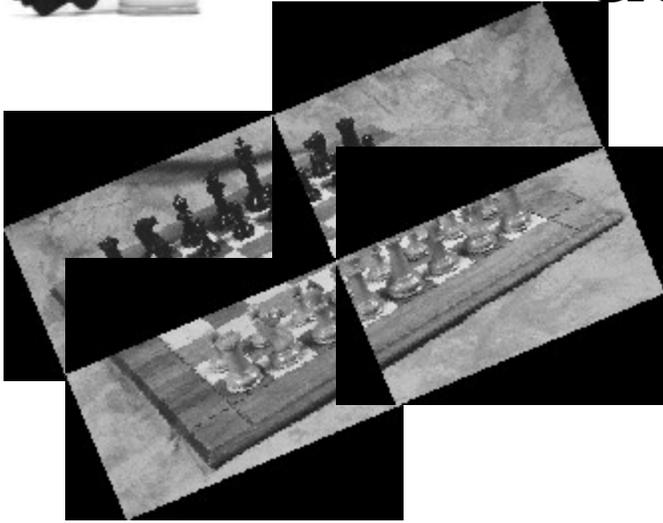


# 'Restoration of the Game'



300 of these very Staunton sets. This article discusses this restoration project.

Chess sets are collectable, and sets gain value in time, as do most antiques and collectables. No doubt, the members of Chess Collectors International are familiar with the need for conservation and ongoing care of antique sets in their prized collections.

We should note that this project is the first chess set Artisans restored, and it will make a unique addition to our portfolio. Jaques has been producing fine chess sets since 1795, with the "Rolls Royce" of their product line being the Staunton sets. Our research into materials and finishes quickly lead us back to the company, still producing chess sets that define the tournament standard today, for advice. Their position that a carefully planned and implemented restoration shall serve to enhance the value of a damaged set ensured us that our role was appropriate in this effort. Jaques, as an interesting fact, has the longest documented lineage for a business passed without interruption through the generations.

Our client's desire was to restore the set as accurately as possible, and ensure preservation the historic value through the process. All thirty-two hand made pieces were present, but sixteen sustained damage including missing pips, crosses, and chunks. All common damage, sustained from years of being shuffled around against each other in a single compartment box; we also pondered the possibility of a child breaking off the delicate tips. These very thoughts inspire our documentation of the process, as with all antique restorations we carefully photograph and list the damage to each piece prior to instantiating our restoration plan.

Overall, the set was in stable condition, and the restoration project was definitely feasible. All efforts would have to be done by hand, filing or carving the new material to meet the contours of the piece. Originally turned, the pieces were perfectly rounded and gained a high polish friction finish while spinning on a precision lathe.

A woodworking fact: Turnings never age in the round. What started round always ages towards oblong. It is impossible to repeat the turning process without not only eliminating the oblong aging, and destroying the existing finishes, but risking shattering the aged and dry wood. Matching the missing sections of the rims and bases requires hand detailing. Fortunately, these sets are originally hand made, making slight discrepancies and distinctions between pieces acceptable, and when the repairs are blended with the existing characteristics of the individual piece they very difficult to detect without close inspection.

We located heartwood Gaboon Ebony and English Boxwood for the project from a local instrument shop, the materials originally destined for violins. Wood selected for musical instruments tends to be high quality stable kiln dried

## **Restoration of the Game; The conservation of an 1849 Jaques Howard Staunton tournament set.**

**by Eric M. Saperstein**

All things are subject to the impact of time, including chess sets. From their creation, pieces experience use and abuse all the while weathering environmental changes and natural deterioration of materials and finishes. The popularity of the ancient game of chess is known to have thrived for at least fifteen hundred years, inspiring the design and production of countless sets in as many forms as the imagination has to offer. Chess set designs have varied with the personalities of players and designers throughout the game's history, including the set featured in this article. Sets included turned pieces, sculptured fantasy, medieval, architectural bases, and carvings in wood, ivory, porcelain, and various metals cast, bent, or otherwise fabricated.

The random correlation of these uniquely designed pieces with their rank on the board created frustration though players of all levels, with particular ferocity amongst tournament champions. The creativity and master skills of the artists, designers, and craftsmen became counterproductive to carrying out the original intention of the set. Mistakes raised controversy when the misidentification of a piece inadvertently altered the direction of the game, confusing even the most competent of players.

In 1849, Jaques of London introduced the first tournament standard set, designed by Nathaniel Cooke. Cooke's revolutionary simplistic design quickly gained attention in the circles of masters, impressing famous English School of Chess exponent Howard Staunton enough to authenticate every set with his signature. Artisans of the Valley recently had the privilege of completing the restoration of the ninth and second earliest known existing, of the first

heartwood. Each missing chunk was hand cut and fit to the profile of the break, removing as little original material as possible, only enough to ensure a tight joint.

The fitted ruff pieces were then hand sculptured. Using diamond files to shape, round, and blend the pieces into the original profile for the ebony pieces. The characteristics of ebony is to resist carving tools and chip easily; filing is the fastest method to obtain a smooth surface. Boxwood, on the other end, is an excellent carving wood and can be sculpted using a carving knife with precise detail.

The pips and crosses were completed as components, the mounted appropriately using a splicing technique that carefully mitigates any collateral disturbance to intact material. The most difficult of the pieces to repair are the bishops, configured with pips of a carefully angled perspective.

Turning offers perhaps the best scenario for polishing, the key factors of motion, friction, heat, and even contact become autonomous as coats are applied to the rotating piece. Turned chess pieces are finished on the lathe, a risky proposition to repeat with brittle antiques. Our task: spot patching a French polish.

Spot patching is an arduous task, but the advent of premixed solutions of shellac based crystal-clear polish allowed Artisans to match the aged shine with a five or six carefully applied and rubbed coats. A final wax, using an ebony or golden oak Briwax over the whole piece blends the repairs into the existing finish, resulting in a barely noticeable alteration and imparts much needed oils into the shellac finishes of the pieces.

Our conservation mission is to ensure we enhance the value of a piece; this chess set is no exception. We believe that the restoration will restore this first edition set to a value of at least 80% of a pristine set. Our client provided an example from the same series, and documented a history of value between the sets. Having a model set in excellent condition was a rare luxury and it ensured the accuracy of our restoration.

Taking approximately thirty-five hours, our restoration returned glory to the bruised royalty of the set, and restored a tattered clan of battered pawns to their original splendor. It should also be mentioned that the original mahogany box is intact with the set, including the hand signature of Howard Staunton. The box was simply waxed, adding much needed oils to the wood.

Our initial game restoration experience continues with a second Jaques set, extending restoration into recreation, and our first entirely new piece was born. The birth secured us the joy of challenging one of our clients to play a slightly untraditional game of shells, using three knights. In the Knight's photo, one original, one that was missing his snout, and the last just plain missing down to the base, all stand awaiting distinction.

Our client's keen attention to detail won him the Knight's game of shells, but from a player's vantage point, the repairs are almost undetectable. Only upon close and conscious inspection of individual pieces do the joints or hints of the restoration become apparent; thus achieving the objective of conservation.



(Photo by Frank Jacobs)

#### **About the Authors:**

Artisans of the Valley is a New Jersey based father and son furniture shop specializing in period furniture reproductions and restorations. Father, and Master Craftsman, Stanley Saperstein has over thirty years experience in 18th Century techniques, and boasts one of the last traditional apprenticeships completed with C. N. Grinnell of a craftsmen lineage tracing back almost four hundred years.

Stanley is now transitioning this a rare combination of woodcarving & sculpture, furniture making, design, and finishing knowledge to his oldest son Eric. Their knowledge and experience in the furniture arena provides the basis for high quality restoration of gaming pieces, boards, and furniture.

We are now accepting restorations on chess sets, gaming pieces, and furniture. Small items can be shipped insured express anywhere in the US or International. Please contact us to discuss your restoration requirements.

*Please check the following page for color photographs of some of the pieces featured in this article!*



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