

Establishing Provenance of Antique Chess Sets

Dermot Rochford

In Gareth Williams' excellent article on Alex Hammond in the last edition of the Chess Collector (Vol. XV No. 3, 2006), the first image shown (titled 'an expert on chess sets') is that of Alex Hammond examining a chess piece in front of a cabinet of chess sets (see Image 1).

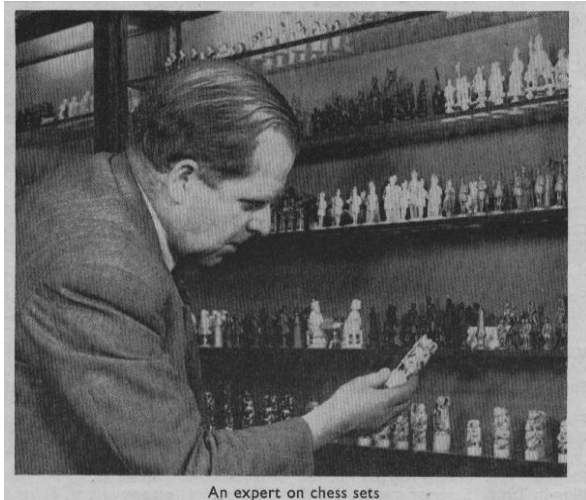


Image 1

This image had originally appeared in the December 1950 edition of the British Chess Magazine. The chess piece he is holding appears to be the king piece from an ivory Japanese set which is on the shelf in the background.

This triggered me to look again at a set I had bought some time ago and which I thought was similar to that which Hammond was holding (more on this below) and this in turn raised in my mind, the whole area of the importance of establishing 'provenance' of antique chess sets we happen to 'temporarily' own. As chess collectors I believe we have a role and indeed a responsibility to try to leave information (even if its only partial or incomplete) on our sets so that when we are long gone, others can use this information for further research either on antique sets in general or in undertaking more research to establish the provenance of a particular set. Over time, many fine sets pass from collection to collection, some acquired in circumstances, which allow a clear provenance to

be established e.g. when a set is directly acquired from the owner or where an auction house is selling the contents of a publicly named collection. But the reality is that most good chess sets come to the market in circumstances where it is almost impossible to establish who the previous owner or owners were - for instance trying to trace previous owners of chess sets through the auction houses which sold them, is impossible because of the auction houses' privacy rules.

This was highlighted for me last year when two high quality antique sets (see image 2 and 3 over the page) appeared on the market in different locations - both were housed in almost identical fine period tooled leather cases which had felted slots designed to the shape of individual chess pieces - the cases looked like they have been specifically built for each set by the same maker.

It suggested that the chess sets may have been together at one time in the same collection and got split up due to inheritance or some other factor, but because one of the auction outlets would not divulge the name of the vendor, it was impossible to establish if they were originally from the one collection. Maybe auction houses might consider amending their rules to allow genuine research queries to at least be passed back to the vendor who might be agreeable to provide the information being sought. All this is to suggest that all of us who collect antique chess items should, as a matter of standard procedure, label our sets with information as to when and where they were acquired and if possible also provide any other data as to previous owners of the sets.

Apart from anything else, such information would greatly enhance the interest in a chess set if and when it came to be sold and would also allow potential new owners to be more confident that it was a genuine antique and not some recent reproduction masquerading as being old.

Now back to my attempt at 'provenancing' my own chess set mentioned at the top of this article - I was interested to find out if there was a link between the chess set in the Hammond picture. (Image 1) and the set I purchased a few

Establishing Provenance of Antique Chess Sets

Continued



Image 2

years ago (image 4 Right). When I purchased a Japanese ivory chess set (which is signed) in December 2001, from the London chess dealer Garrick Coleman, he had just acquired it from a retired military officer. The officer had informed Garrick that his father (whose name was Pitcon) was a senior British military intelligence officer based in Egypt in the 1940s and had been given the set as a gift from King Farouk of Egypt when he was returning back to England. Now, King Farouk, who reigned in Egypt from 1936 to 1952, was famous (or infamous) for his lavish spending on antiques which he purchased from dealers all over the world. Apparently the set acquired by Garrick had originally been presented to King Farouk by the French Ambassador to Egypt. Interestingly, Hammond would have had his Japanese set available for sale in the 1940s in his London shop, and if some arm of the French Government was seeking a quality antique chess set to present as a gift, Hammond's shop would have been a logical place to purchase one. In this way Hammond's set could have ended up in Farouk's collection and he in turn



Image 3

could have passed it on as a gift to the British Officer at the end of his tour of duty in Egypt. Further research has shown that what appears to be an identical Japanese ivory set to the one shown in Gareth's article is illustrated in Hammond's own book 'Book of Chessmen' on page 106 with the following attribution; "Half a Japanese set made about 1840, doubtless copying the Chinese theme. The pieces though small, are very detailed; it should be noted that the pawns have something of a Central European character in that they represent different trades or professions.



Image 4

The opposing side is gilt and decorated. Note the details in the Kings and Knights; such a set must have taken six or seven years to produce". Again while the picture in Hammond's book is small, the set seems to be identical to the one shown in images 1 and 4. Now I know none of the above actually proves that the set pictured in Hammond's hands was the one pictured in his book or the one I purchased but as I have not seen another similar set in any chess literature or for sale in auction catalogues in over 20 years, it is obviously a very rare type of set and therefore there must be a reasonable chance that it is the same set in all the images.

It would be nice to think this linkage outlined above is correct and if only the French authorities would respond to my emails enquiring if any records exist on the purchase of a chess set from Hammond in the 1940s, then it might be possible to say more definitively that they are one and the same set. Another way of approaching the issue would be to see if it is possible to access Hammond's own sales records of that period—so, if anyone has any ideas in this regard I would be very happy to hear from them.

E-mail dermot_rochford@yahoo.co.uk