

World Chess Hall of Fame: 1972 Fischer/Spassky: The Match, Its Origin, and Influence

By Joshua Anderson

The World Chess Hall of Fame has spent years balancing art and chess. This balance, like beauty itself, is in the eye of the beholder. The beholders, in this case, are the talented and experienced curators—Shannon Bailey, head curator, and Emily Allred, curator. In this exhibit, chess is brought to the fore with Shannon stating, “This exhibition means so much to me! I enjoyed working on it maybe more than any other show I've done at the HOF.”

The museum has one large display space on each floor. To divide up the space and provide more surface area for pictures and ephemera, white walls were placed throughout the floor. The three-dimensional artifacts were usually placed in display boxes positioned around the dividing walls.

The museum's first floor is dedicated to the early years of Fischer, starting with his mother, Regina Wender Fischer (who graduated from Soldan High School in Saint Louis), and his father, Paul Nemenyi. It then moves swiftly through displays depicting his sister teaching him to play in his first chess events, and then to his time with John “Jack” Collins. In his introductory speech, John Donaldson highlighted the table and chairs where John “Jack” Collins and Fischer (along with many others) sat and learned to play (curated by Shannon Bailey and Emily Allred). This is part of the hall's collection and is by far the most striking display on the first floor, but there are several other noteworthy items.

The Sturgis Cup is also on display. This item, too often forgotten about, was “given” to the winner of the U.S. Open, starting in 1945 and continuing through 1966. The winner of the Open, (ties decided by tiebreaker), had his name engraved on the back. Unfortunately, due to placement, it is hard to see the back of the Cup. This speaks to a minor problem of the exhibit, which is that the other chess players of the era are too largely ignored. They should certainly not be the focus, but especially through the 50s and early 60s, Fischer did not exist in a vacuum. In another example, there is a fabulous map of Fischer's New York. It is a large display with about 30 places highlighted, and why they were important to Fischer. It would have been interesting to include other players of the era, along with brief descriptions of how they interacted with Fischer.

The second floor focuses on Fischer's run to the championship, mostly on his candidate and World Championship matches, but also on some of the other events of the mid-1960s. These include the 1966 Olympiad in Havana, Cuba, where an AP video clip plays behind a wooden chess table - one of approximately 100 tables made especially for the tournament by the Cubans. This one was later given to Fred Cramer, but it now belongs to the United States Chess Trust who lent it to the World Chess Hall of Fame.

As most of this floor showcases the run for the World Championship, it is not surprising that there is a replica of the table used for most of the World Championship games along with a selection of memorabilia, both from the chess world and from the popular press. Perhaps the most interesting of the ephemera is a collection put together by New

Zealander Robert Wade, of what were essentially opening books of Petrosian and Taimanov, containing notes and analysis designed to help Fischer prepare for each opponent. Some of Fischer's notes can be seen in the books. At this point, the exhibit includes additional video of some of the more well-known pieces, (Fischer with Dick Cavett, Fischer getting the key to the city of New York, etc.) on screens throughout the exhibit.

The third floor examines the post-match events, focusing on Fischer's influence, rather than on his behavior, over the last few decades of his life. The most interesting connection, according to Donaldson's opening comments, is the letters that Fischer wrote to Berliner, focusing on Berliner's work with computer chess. Fischer was one of the first, if not the first, of the world-class chess players to believe that one day computers would play a prominent role in chess, and be far stronger than any humans.

This section also provides a more thorough account of Spassky's post-1972 career than is usually seen in English. There are photos of Spassky from before and after the World Championship, a poster of the Spassky-Byrne match, and related items, including correspondence between the two former players.

Many of the artifacts belong to the Hall of Fame (some have been used before in exhibits), and many others were generously lent from the Sinquefelds' private collection. There were a few additional pieces that were lent by individuals such as Maria Byrne (widow of Robert Byrne) and Irena Kavalek (widow of Lubomir Kavalek). There is also a collection of Spassky-related photos from an unnamed source, so it is quite possible that you will find some pieces used in previous exhibits.

There are no significant aspects of Fischer's life missing from the exhibit, though some video interviews with Dr. Tony Saidy, Aben Rudy, or others, such as those in Iceland, would have been a nice addition. They also might have incorporated more of the questions concerning how we balance Fischer's greatness as a chess player with his behavior as a human, since that influences how we, and society, have viewed him over the past half century.

Still, these are minor quibbles. This is not only an excellent display about Fischer, but it also provides some depth and understanding into the role of Boris Spassky, and how their match has altered chess ever since.

Author's disclosures:

The author helped Maria Byrne donate an item to the exhibit. He also has worked on a limited basis with the World Chess Hall of Fame on a variety of projects and hopes to do so again in the future.

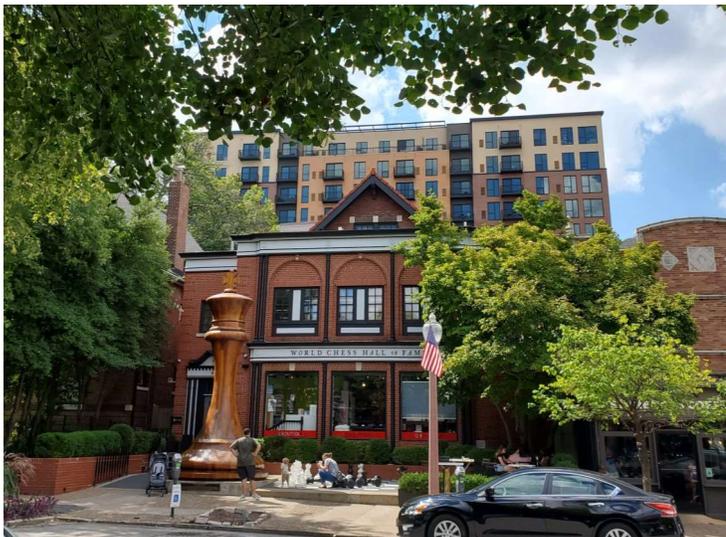
The author also notes that due to his work on the Byrne book for McFarland, he is fortunate to have had experience working with Fischer documents. He hopes visitors to the exhibit appreciate seeing the original game scores and find

them as impressive as he did.

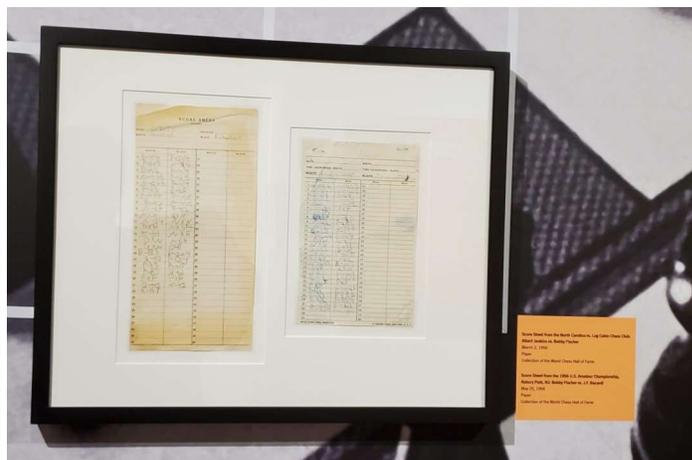
Additional author's note:

The Hall has a few items permanently on display. On the stairs from the second to the third floor, the Hall has a few reprints from 19th century newspapers and similar items highlighting the history of chess in St. Louis. All the materials that are permanently maintained for the World Chess Hall of Fame and the United States Chess Hall of Fame are displayed on the third floor. These include two excellent electronic touch-screen display boards that allow the viewer to see a brief history of the player (in both Halls), a few pictures, and a famous game.

All photos below reproduced with permission.



World Chess Hall of Fame, picture taken from across Maryland Avenue, in front of the Saint Louis Chess Club.



Two 1956 score sheets - Albert Jenkins (W) in a North Carolina vs. Log Cabin Chess Club match and J. D. Bacardi (B) in the 1956 U. S. Amateur Championship



One of the special boards built for the 1966 Havana Olympiad.



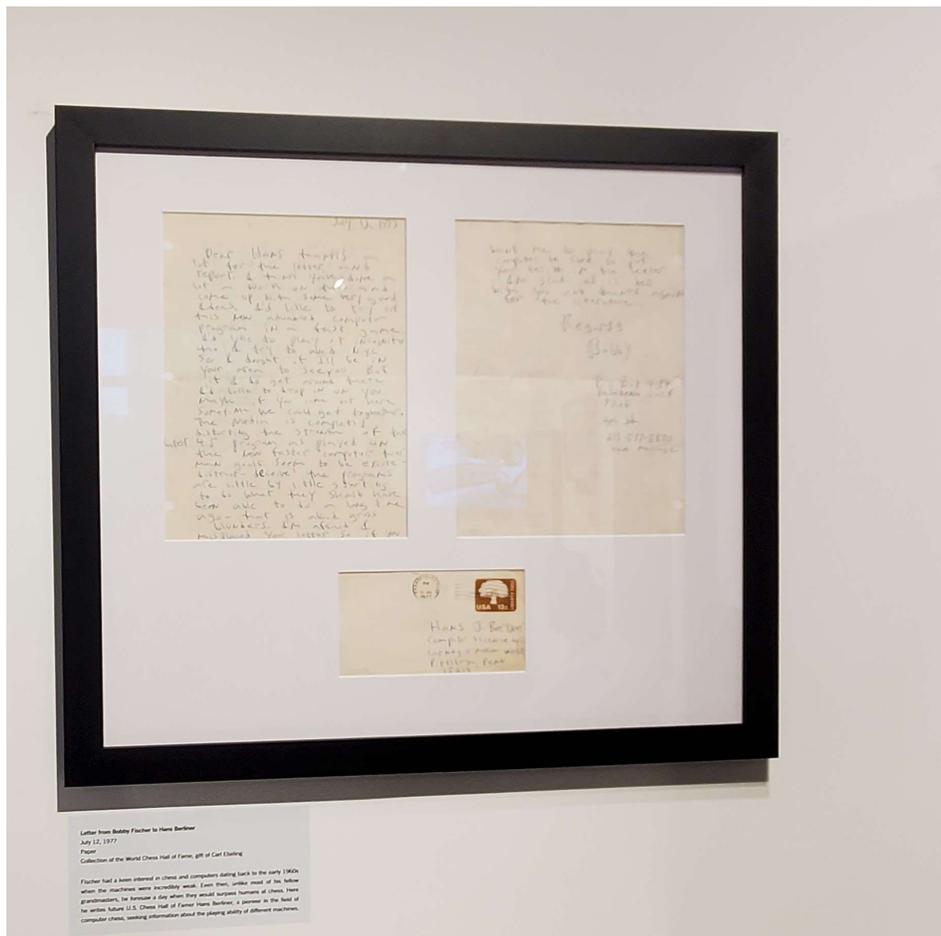
Photograph of Bobby Fischer. Used with permission @ Harry Benson
 Bette Marshall realizing that in the photo she is the one right behind Fischer as he exits the plane.



Above: Many Spassky—related items in front of the electronic boards that allow visitors to see pictures and games of all members of the U.S. and World Chess Hall of Fame.
 Left top: Stencil of a king in the stairwell of the World Chess Hall of Fame.
 Left bottom: One of numerous wall signs helping to contextualize the many artifacts.

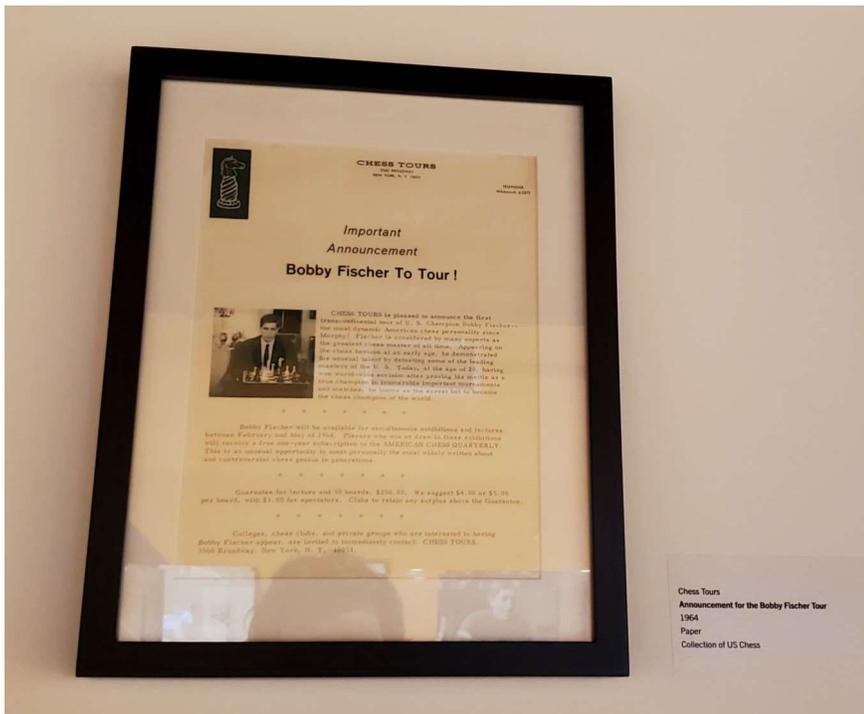


Poster, book, and wire photo of the 1992 Fischer v Spassky rematch. Laurel wreath photo on the right reproduced with permission.



Letter from Bobby Fischer to Hans Berliner
July 22, 1977
Paper
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame, gift of Carl Eklund
Fischer had a keen interest in chess and computers dating back to the early 1960s when the machines were incredibly weak. Even then, unlike most of his fellow grandmasters, he became a fan when they would battle humans at chess. In the winter, future U.S. Chess Hall of Famer Hans Berliner, a pioneer in the field of computer chess, sending information about the playing ability of different machines.

Letter from Bobby Fischer to Dr. Hans Berliner.



Advertisement for Fischer's famous 1964 cross country simul tour.



Bobby on the Dick Cavett Show. Reproduced here with permission.



Text sign highlighting all of Fischer's 1971 achievements. Next to it is a First Day Cover from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Anatoly Karpov is a noted collector of stamps. I wonder if he has this one?



Above: John Donaldson, Emily Allred, and Rex Sinquefeld at the opening ceremony of the Fischer Exhibition, now on-going at the World Chess Hall of Fame. Bottom Left: World's largest chess piece.

