

Anatomy of a Chess Set Collection

TOUCHING HISTORY

Collecting chess sets from different periods is a great way to appreciate the rich history of the game and the people who have played it. Each set tells a story of a different era and can be a reminder of significant events both globally and personally.

By Chuck Grau

In his recent book, *On The Collecting Of Chess Sets*, Holger Langer identifies six organizing principles for a chess set collection. According to Holger, one can organize a collection by:

1. a type or style of set, Staunton pattern sets being the most common;
2. the materials used – wooden sets, ivory sets, or plastic sets, for example;
3. the maker or makers – Jaques, British Chess Company, or Calvert among them;
4. geography – American, British, French, Eastern European, or Soviet sets;
5. time period – seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century sets; and
6. specialized sets or equipment – travel sets, sets for the blind, chess clocks, and so on.

How collectors embrace these principles is highly idiosyncratic. My own collection is a good example. In this column, we will explore the varied dimensions of chess collecting through the prism of my collection, supplemented with specimens from the collections of others.

I was born not long after the end of the Second World War and came to chess as a player during the height of the Cold War. My appreciation for chess pieces is very much rooted in this history. I collect playing sets. I am particularly interested in sets that I played with in the 1960s and early 1970s and have acquired specimens for my collection. The very first set that I owned was a 3.25" plastic Lowe's "Tournament" set that my mother bought for me when I was home sick from school. My first non-school chess club met at the Racine, Wisconsin YMCA, where we played with Gallant Knight sets.



Chuck Grau is a chess collector and retired attorney. His collection emphasizes Soviet chess sets, and he publishes the website sovietchesssets.com. He founded the Facebook group Shakhmatnyye Kollektionery, dedicated to Soviet and Late Tsarist chess collecting, and is an administrator of three other Facebook chess collecting groups. He is a member of Chess Collectors International and has published articles on Soviet chess sets and history in *The Chess Collector Magazine* and *CCI-USA*. He has collaborated with House of Staunton and NOJ Slovenia in the reproduction of various historical sets. He has served as the editor of *New Hampshire Chess Journal*, and as a trustee of the New Hampshire Chess Association.

Photos from Chuck Grau Collection.

American Chess Sets

Not much later I journeyed north to Milwaukee to play in rated tournaments – the Wisconsin Open, the North Central Open, and the Western Open. There we played with the iconic Windsor Castle chessmen. To my knowledge, Windsor Castle chess pieces are the only chess pieces ever to grace the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, where they appeared with Lisa Lane in 1961. The historical record is replete with photos of Lane and of Bobby Fischer with Windsor Castle sets.

Through the United States Chess Federation's *Chess Life* magazine and catalogs, I learned of the Drueke Player's Choice set, and then Pacific Game Company's Cavalier plastic set, and ordered them. Specimens of these famous American sets now reside in my collection.

Windsor Castle chess pieces.



1960s No. 36 Drueke Player's Choice, acquired from Lisa Lane. Drueke No. 64 Grandmaster Board. Solora Clock, Frank Camaratta's former tournament clock.

Pictured above is a No. 36 Drueke Player's Choice set that I obtained from former U.S. Women's Champion Lisa Lane. Introduced in 1965 at the National Open in Las Vegas to replace aging armies of brittle Windsor Castle Chessmen, these well-made pieces quickly became popular. Bobby Fischer's 1971 Candidates Match with Mark Taimanov was played with Player's Choice pieces. Their dominance was short-lived, as they soon faced competition from Pacific Game Company's Cavalier plastic chess pieces and were displaced as the go-to set of American clubs and tournaments by the ubiquitous "Club Set," a Lardy knock-off first introduced by Adult Leisure Products Corporation in 1964.

Early 1940s W.T. Pinney Club chess pieces. Unweighted for wartime.



1960s Steiner chess pieces.



A chess set can be more than just a game – it can be a window into the past and a source of inspiration for the future. The sets that have actually been played with hold an even greater value, as they have been touched and moved by the hands of history. Each mark, scratch, and dent can be a reminder of the battles fought on the board and the players who fought them. Owning one of these sets can feel like owning a piece of history, and each touch can bring back memories of the past.

American Chess Company chess pieces, circa 1900.



My friend, mentor, and perennial Racine City Champion, Wally Teubner owned a beautiful wooden Lardy set that we often played on. At the University of Wisconsin, where I ran the chess program for several years in the early 1970s, we played with the already ubiquitous plastic club set, its many iterations plastic copies of a wooden Lardy design.

My play in American events with American sets fueled my later collecting interest in all these sets, broadening to include other American playing sets of significance – American Chess Company sets circa 1900, the W.T. Pinney sets of the 1940s and 1950s, and the Steiner sets of the 1960s and used in the Piatigorsky tournaments. For these reasons, American tournament sets of the 20th century comprise one major group of my collection. I describe them as "Iconic Sets of the American Chessboard."



Soviet Chess Sets

My blossoming interest in chess coincided with the height of Soviet domination of the sport, and the drama of Bobby Fischer's challenge to it. My junior high school library subscribed to *Chess Review*, which I devoured for stories and games of Fischer, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Petrosian, Tal, and Spassky, as well as other American stars – Sammy Reshevsky, William Lombardy, Robert Byrne, Lisa Lane, and others. My fascination with Soviet chess was in some ways ironic, as not long before we were being taught in school to duck and cover in anticipation of nuclear war, a terrible possibility made very real by

the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. I imagine that my interest in Soviet chess sets and chess history may be my way of working through my childhood anxieties about nuclear war, but such ruminations are perhaps best left to psychoanalysis.

Soviet chess sets have become the primary focus of my collection, an avenue for exploring the history of Soviet chess and its role in establishing the ideological hegemony of the Soviet state. I have begun to explore them systematically in my website sovietchesssets.com and Facebook group, *Shakhmatnyye Kollektionery*, which as of this writing has 3,000 members. Here are a few of the Soviet sets in my collection.

The first Soviet set pictured below has come to be known as the *Botvinnik-Flohr II* set because sets in this design were used in the famous 1935 Second Moscow International Tournament where Botvinnik and Flohr shared first place among an illustrious field. The "II" distinguishes the design from that of the set used in their 1933 match. The design evolved and remained a workhorse of high-level Soviet chess for decades, its last major iteration being used in the 1956 Moscow Olympiad and Bobby Fischer's famous blitz matches at the Moscow Chess Club in 1958. World champions who played with one version or another include Lasker, Capablanca, Euwe, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Fischer, and Karpov. I have yet to see a photo of Kasparov playing with it, but it would not surprise me to find one. From a design perspective, the set incorporated several elements of Modernism and broke with various conventions of traditional Staunton design, thereby reflecting the Soviet conception of art as a tool of politics. The pictured set was made by a Leningrad artel named Prometheus. Artels were collectives of artisans, recognized under Soviet law, that shared costs and revenues and exhibited a great deal of creativity in their designs.

The next Soviet set was born of the need to provide pieces to the hundreds of thousands of new players Nikolay Krylenko's program of *Political Chess* brought to the game. The design is elegant, but quite simplified to facilitate its quick and economical mass production by a semi-skilled work force. The design first

appeared in the late 1930s and was produced in a Gulag by children. It has come to be known by collectors as the *Mordovian* design as the most attractive versions were produced in Mordovian prison camps after World War II. Later versions, like the one used in the climactic Moscow tournament in the fictional television series *Queen's Gambit*, were manufactured in factories by wage laborers.



Late 1930s
Gulag-made
chess pieces.



1952 Mordovian
chess pieces.

Mid-1930s Botvinnik-Flohr II chess pieces.



The pictured pieces, of second quality, were made in Berezovsky Children's Penal Colony in Siberia, close to Krasnoyarsk. It is not surprising that Soviet Authorities turned to Gulags to manufacture the large number of sets needed for the exponentially expanding numbers of players. The old Artel system simply could not come close to supplying the numbers needed. Pieces in this style were produced from the late 1930s to the end of the Soviet Union, and it is safe to say they are the most numerous of any Soviet wooden set design.



I have an odd connection to the sets produced in the Mordovian prison camps. While in law school, I became familiar with the writings of a Bolshevik legal scholar by the name of Pashukanis. Several years after I graduated, I was working at the American Judicature Society in Chicago when a delegation of the Soviet Supreme Court, led by its Chief Justice, Mr. Chairman Lev Smirnov, paid us a visit as part of a tour organized by then U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger. Smirnov was well-decorated, having been awarded the Order of Lenin, the Order of the October Revolution, the Red Banner of Labor, and other honorifics I no longer remember. He made his fame as the Soviets' Deputy Prosecutor at the Nuremberg war crime trials, but ascended to the pinnacle of the Soviet judiciary in no small measure by having presided over the 1966 show trial of two famous Soviet dissidents, Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, who were prosecuted for satire they had authored. Despite my junior status, I begged to be included in the tea my superiors were hosting in the Soviets' honor. I sat next to the friendly KGB officer accompanying the Soviet justices. I surmised he was KGB because he wasn't introduced, said nothing, looked ominous, and wore white socks. We each got to speak with Mr. Chairman Smirnov in order of seniority, so I naturally spoke dead last. The conversation had focused on mundane matters of judicial administration, and Mr. Chairman Smirnov was drifting off as I stepped to the plate. At the mention of Pashukanis's name, Smirnov rose from the dead like Lazarus, and regaled us with tales of the old Bolshevik, who had been one of his law school professors. Pashukanis was an ally of Nikolay Krylenko, who we know as the father of Soviet Chess. But Krylenko's day job was Chief Prosecutor of the Soviet Union, in which capacity he had staged more than a few show trials himself, sending many unfortunates to the Gulag or the executioner. Throughout the early and mid-1930s, Pashukanis and Krylenko battled Andrei Vyshinsky over the nature of Soviet criminal law, a matter of great importance to Stalin. Vyshinsky won the argument and went on to ascend the heights of the Soviet power structure. Pashukanis and Krylenko were shot. Like Vyshinsky, Smirnov was a survivor. He convicted Sinyavsky and David and banished them to a prison camp in Mordovia. Perhaps they made some of these chess sets there or knew those who did.

Olympic Chess Sets

My collection also includes smaller groups of Latin American, Western European, and Eastern European playing sets. My interest in them stems from my family's roots in Germany and Slovakia, the Olympiads and Interzonals held in those regions, and my namesake Roberto Grau, for many years the Argentine champion and an organizer of the fateful 1939 Buenos Aires Olympiad.

This, then, is an overview of my chess set collection and the thinking behind its composition. As you can see, what I collect is very much a function of my personal history and experience. In future columns, I will explore various sets in their historical and cultural contexts and discuss issues that confront every collector: deciding a focus, establishing provenance, restoration, reproduction, display and storage, and beyond.

A fourth example of Soviet design is the "Tal" set, so named because it appears on the cover of the former World Champion's autobiography *The Life And Games Of Mikhail Tal*. The book's cover bears a photo of Tal contemplating his position after Black's 32nd move in his game with Krogius, played in the 30th Soviet Championship in Yerevan in 1962, a Ruy Lopez won by Tal. The design first appeared in a 1940 friendship match between Estonia and Latvia, held in Tallinn before the annexation, but in an evolved form it soon became a staple of major Soviet tournaments held in and around Georgia SSR. Pictured below is the version used in the 1959 Soviet Championship held in Tbilisi, Georgia.



1959 Tal chess pieces.

The Tal set is a good example of what collectors call "Soviet Stauntons." Among the typically Soviet design elements of Soviet Stauntons are the opposite colors of the king, queen, and bishop finials (here much of the black paint has worn off the bishop and queen finials); the modification of the king's cross to one not quite recognized by Christian iconography; and, with one notable exception, a knight not patterned after the Elgin Marbles. Among the features that distinguish the Tal set are the hefty wide and tall bases; the thick rook towers; the crisply carved angled merlons; the squat pawns; and the jaunty knights, which appear to lean backwards with their heads tilted upward. The traditional and idiosyncratically Soviet elements of Soviet Stauntons are illustrated above.

Magistral 1939 Olimpico chess pieces.
They are made from a phenol-formaldehyde plastic.

