Restoring, Buying and Collecting Chess Sets: a Rumination

Chess restorer Alan Dewey, http://www.chessspy.co.uk, writes for Jaques of London about his chess set restoration business and knowledge of Jaques boxwood & ebony chess sets, as well as a bit on how he prices damaged sets, and his sad addiction to collecting them…along with A Word To The Wise.

If a car or a washing machine is still in daily use after 50 or 60 years, it makes news in the national press, but if some lowly chess enthusiast continues playing chess with his grandfather’s set (or even his great-grandfather’s set) it passes without notice. Nonetheless, some of these sets are nearly 200 years old.

Treasured but used for so long, it isn’t surprising that they often are damaged: chipped on the pawns’and queens’ crenellations, knights’ ears broken, bishops with missing finials, and even dog-chewed pieces where some long forgotten ancestor kept an animal at his feet as he played. Even worse are sets from a chess club, where they have been used and abused in rapid play and simul alike, mixed and matched into different boxes without regard to parentage.

If you are thinking about getting a set that isn’t in perfect condition, what do you look for? Take out all the pieces and put them in groups: four rooks, four bishops, eight black pawns, eight white pawns, etc. Are they all there? Good. Move on. Slide your hand through four at a time and turn them up. If your set is too little, smile at it fondly and handle it any way you can: the point is to see if the felts are the same. Is it obvious that differing felts (mismatched colours, materials) mean the pieces are from different sets?

Anyway, once you have looked on the bottoms, look for chips and splits along the whole bodies of each of the pieces. It might be that the boxwood side is pretty much undamaged. If this is the case, count yourself lucky and take a look at the ebony side. These are usually broken but that’s okay, since they also are more easily colour matched after being repaired. Boxwood is hard to match, and that’s a fact.

There are common types of damage, depending on the piece. The pawns may have chipped collars. The bishops may have lost part of the top and finial. The rooks have damaged crenellations making them look gap-toothed. The knights’ ears are often missing. Crenellation points may have broken off the coronets of the queens. Kings’ crosses may be damaged or entirely missing. All this can be fixed.

Wait! There is more possible damage! As I said before, ebony pieces of all descriptions often have splits in their bases as well. These are because ebony is relatively inflexible and brittle, and tends to shrink around the lead weight in the base. These splits can be filled with wood filler, but an invisible result is hard to achieve.
This reminds me to mention that there is a fine balance with these things, and antiques restoration is an art, not a science. The object of the exercise is to restore an item which is damaged to a condition which most casual observers would see as genuine. I use antique materials and glues as far as is possible and desirable, but considerations of cost and consequently time do come into the equation. Being able to do the repair or replacement and being able to “hide” it are not the same things. I am always looking for what will “do” but not really trying for perfection, much less to fool anyone.

Okay. Done lecturing. Aside from the possible nightmare of colour matching, the most difficult restoration is when there is a knight (or knights) missing. An acceptable replacement is a tough job, mainly because Jaques knights’ heads are carved, not turned. Turning relies upon accurate measurement and is produced in the round: back and front are the same, and the lathe does most of the work. Carving is more of a free-form skill. Also, it seems that we humans are able to spot differences in faces—perhaps even horses’ faces!—readily. So we notice discrepancies between the knights quite easily. It is always tricky.

One of the biggest problems with restoring an old Jaques wood set is inherent to the material. As wood in the round ages it shrinks to oval in section and tends to warp a little, too. This doesn’t matter a single bit unless you are the restorer, by the way: otherwise, ‘ovalling’, as we say, is kind of cool and a sure sign of an old set. But it is a problem for me, and we are talking about restorations here, so onward. When an ovalled piece is mounted on a lathe in most of the usual ways for a repair, the whole piece is hard to center. I usually solve this by using a glue chuck to hold the piece. Since glue will dry in any old...
position, the piece can be glued on crooked (so far as normal turning goes) with the actual little bit I need to work on running true.

Anyway, shop talk aside, this ovalling and warping often are seen in old ivory and bone chess pieces as well as the wooden ones, and are a reliable indication that the set you are offered is antique and not a modern copy. Try it, if you have an old set about: pick up the pieces and look at their bases. Are they truly round? Probably not.

Now that you know what to expect and look for, what are you going to pay for a set? I get asked all the time, “What is this set worth?” Well, it is worth whatever the market will bear. You know that.

However, there are some rough rules of thumb that I use when I am thinking about buying (or selling) Jaques sets. First of all, size matters: a 4.25” set is worth more than a 3.5” (or smaller) one. An older set is worth more. A weighted set is worth more.

In short, big, old, and heavy have value in the chess collecting world if nowhere else!

So, let’s say I have decided to get myself a chess set and have done my due diligence by watching the markets for a while. A good 3.5” weighted Jaques set in decent (this includes restored) condition and still in the original box costs about £800. I have found a 3.5” set that I want, but it isn’t in quite as good a shape. Here’s what I do. Half the usual market price comes off for minor damage and no original box (£400). If there are any major damages or missing/replacement pieces, half comes off again (£200). Anything worse I regard as a collection of ‘spares’ and pay accordingly (£100 or so). Still a bit of money, and all kinds of other things get factored into the equation: my greed, its scarcity, and the like. Such is life as a collector.

This leads me to my last point, which is a word to the reader who is merely contemplating starting a collection of antique chess sets…

DON’T DO IT!
If you are past this stage already, think back. It started innocently enough, didn’t it? How did it happen for you? The usual way is that a friend invites you to see his collection, packed chock-a-block with colours and shapes you never thought had anything to do with chess. Then somehow the hook gets set. Maybe in all that confusing glory you spot (a little relieved to see something familiar) what looks like an ordinary club set, albeit in wood and a little battered. You point it out to your friend.

- *Aha!* he says, with a kindly (?!?) twinkle in his eye, *you are a natural at this!*

- *Where did you get it?* you ask, a little proudly, pleased at his praise.

- *Well, let me tell you,* he begins, stepping a bit closer. *I know a dealer...*

The details vary but it all ends the same way: sad, desperate addiction. I know. First I squandered hours of my life searching through ebay looking for the veritable diamond amongst the dross, all the while knowing that even if I found a treasure it probably would be beyond my means, and I would lose it to another addict with slightly deeper pockets. Once ebay ran dry, I promptly put myself in thrall to the online dealers. I finally ventured abroad, to various auction houses with their shelves and shelves of exotic sets. So desirable… So expensive… I bought.

My ruin effected, I almost at once succumbed to yet another allure: running with a bad crowd. They suddenly were everywhere: online chat groups, auctions, coffee houses. People just like me! Smiling back and forth, all interested in chess sets, usually with an invite to talk over a pint in the local pub. These became my friends, and I joined them: scrabbling about shopping online and in auction houses, tossing through junk shops, prowling the boot sales, chattering away about everything save the next set we most wanted.

**Take my advice: steer clear of this twisted passion…**

*All the more left for us!*