



Chess Sets: A Brief History

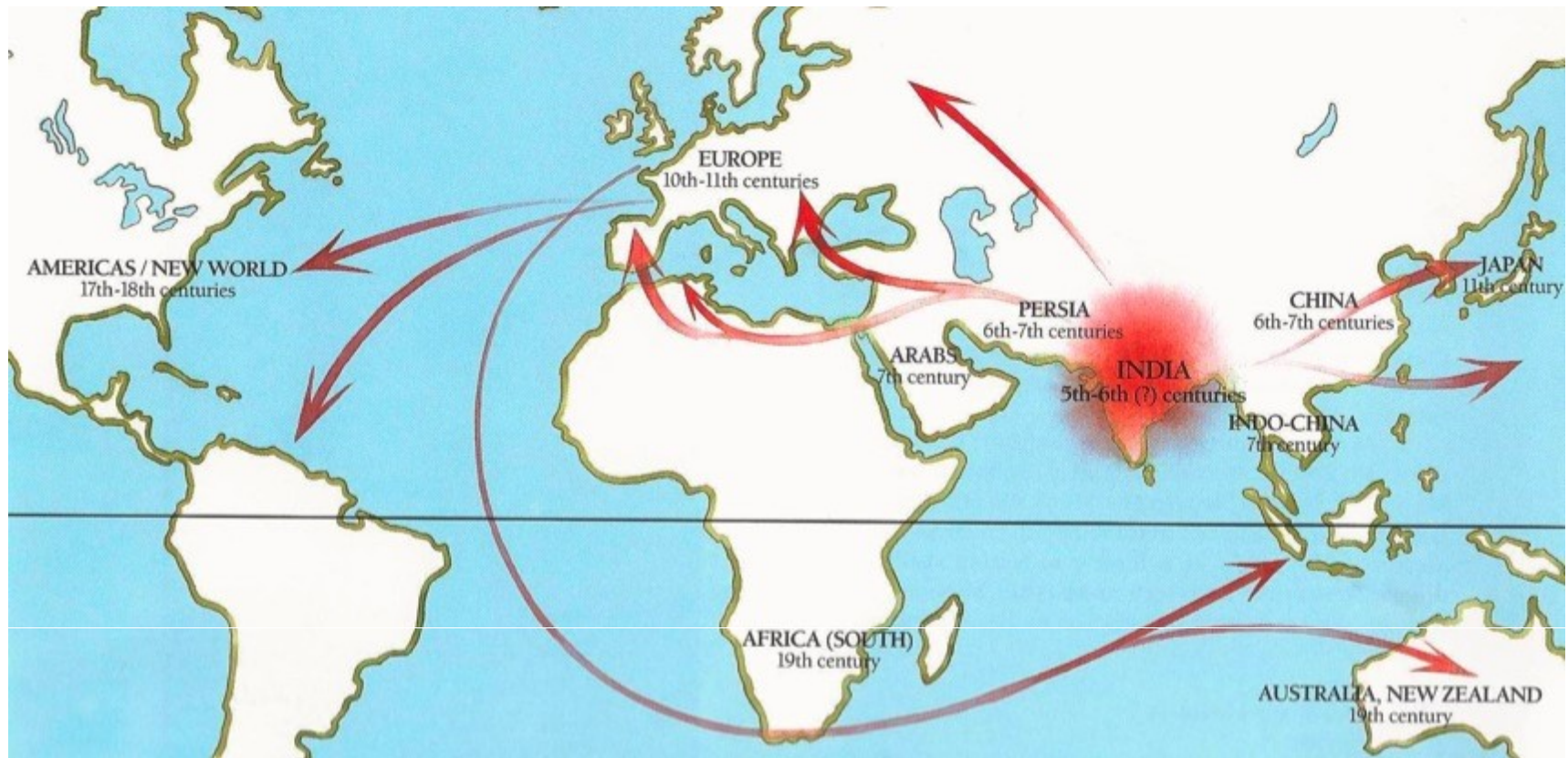
Sculptures in Miniature



Chess was invented in India over a thousand years ago as a game of strategy. It probably evolved from the Indian game of chaturanga, played with two or four players and sometimes with dice.



The first playing pieces may have looked similar to these later Indian chess sets. It is thought they represented the military: people, animals, forts and ramparts, navies, chariots, horse guards, generals and soldiers.

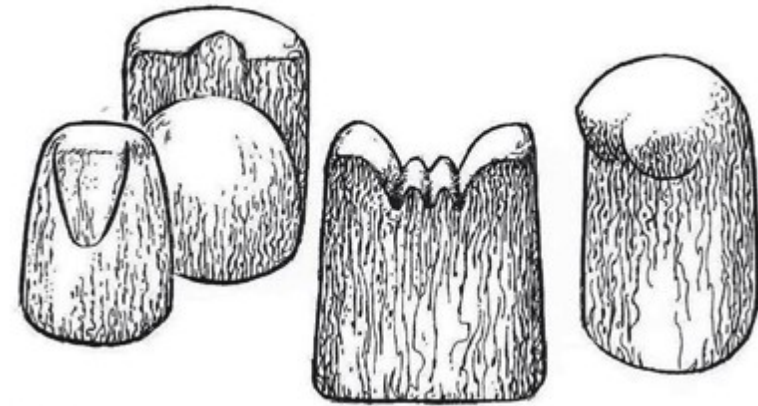


Over centuries, chess traveled East and West around the world from India. And as it moved, each group of people that played the game shaped it. The board, the rules, the playing pieces and their names, and even the name of the game changed time and time again.





In the East chess took different forms and had different rules. Here are sets from Cambodia (top), China (left) and Thailand (right).



In the West, chess was played first by the Persians, and then later adopted by the people of Arabia who spread it throughout the Islamic world, including parts of Spain and southern Italy. Their artists reduced the earlier realistic pieces into elegant symbolic playing pieces (above) and wrote some of the first books about playing chess. Latter styles were developed, such as these 20th century ones, left.



The Arabs introduced chess to Europe about 1,000 years ago probably through Spain and Sicily. At first Europeans used Islamic playing pieces but soon they were making playing pieces that reflected their own world view: kings, queens, bishops, knights, castles and foot soldiers.



Europeans made both graceful but practical playing pieces and more showy display pieces—all inspired by the world around them. A world filled with kings, queens, knights, bishops and castles but also animals, plants, stories and more.



Chess became so popular that the people of Europe took it with them as they traveled and move to America, Africa, Australia, Asia—wherever they went.

The game was admired in North America, and Americans such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington enjoyed the game.

Franklin loved it so much he wrote an essay about the game, *The Morals of Chess*.



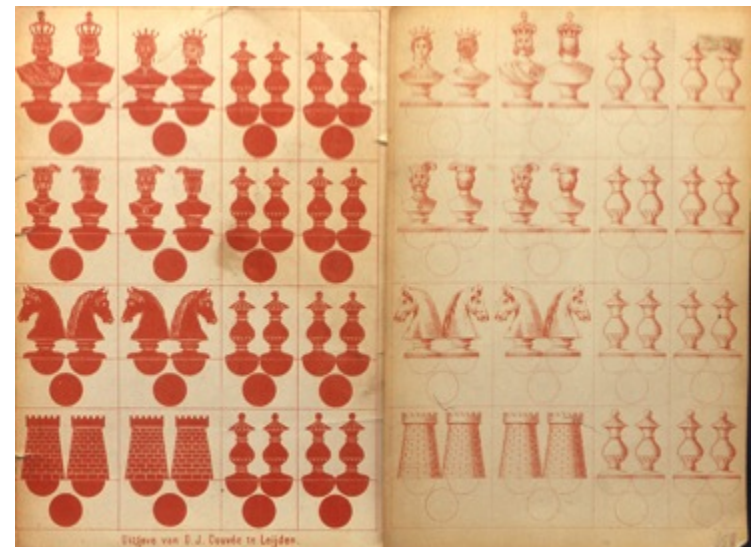
As more people began to travel, artists made sets to sell to these travelers based on the western game of chess—and almost always what they thought their customers would buy.



But chess players wanted really great playing pieces that were easy to use showing clear differences between the pieces. So artists were always trying create the best playing pieces. Perhaps the greatest was called Staunton (far right), made in England in 1849—almost 200 years ago. It was easy to tell the pieces apart and they were well balanced and sturdy for play. The basic pattern is still used today.



Today chess sets can be found made of glass, clay, wood, paper, metal and...





Ceramic, nuts and bolts or bottles—just about anything can be used to make a set.



Chess sets tell stories about the people who made them.

They speak to us about history, such as the Romans and the Egyptians (top, left) or the Chinese and the British (middle, left).



And tell us some of our favorite stories such as *Alice in Wonderland* (bottom, left) or those of the *Ramayana* (below).





Chess sets
really tell us
so much
about each
other.



35 Maryhill Museum Drive
Goldendale, WA 98620

www.maryhillmuseum.org