

The Conventional Chess Sets from 1700 to the introduction of the Staunton Design (1849)

Chesmayne Chess History Time Lines:
[1500's](#) . . . [1600's](#) . . . [1700's](#) . . . [1800's](#) . . . [1900's](#)

Today, the Staunton design, named after a Chess Master in England, but actually developed by and produced by John Jaques of London in 1849, is now the standard design for chess pieces. Prior to that, a number of Conventional styles of turned chess sets preceded the [introduction of the Staunton Design](#) in 1849. These pieces were designed for play using simplified or abstract shapes and made of more inexpensive materials than more ornate displays sets. Some of these various styles were named after either the Coffee House/ Chess Clubs in London and Paris, and other European cities where they were used; or the skilled turners who created them. Along with these Conventional Playing Sets, there were also a variety of Representational Sets - the latter tended to be more for display than play.



The [original chess sets](#) from the East were [highly abstracted pieces](#). Early Western sets were [carved figures](#) such as the [Lewis Chess men](#) or [those of Charlemagne's time](#). In the Middle Ages, Chess was a game mainly for the Nobility and Clergy. They could afford expensive ornate sets. During the [Renaissance](#), it was still mainly a game for the households of kings such as Philip II of Spain or Henry the 8th; and the Queens, such as Catherine De Medici, or Elizabeth I. A revolution in Chess play in the West was the development of the powerful Chess Queen. No longer a Visier, with single square moves like the king, the much more powerful Chess Queen that emerged in the West increased the playability of the game tremendously. In 1510, [Bishop Vida of Alba wrote a poem on Chess](#) - and that perhaps influenced the development of modern chess pieces.

Representational sets were ornate works of art and very expensive status symbols. But less expensive playing sets began in this period to be produced on the lathe - non-figurative pieces, experimenting with a variety of shapes and forms. They discovered that they could create chess pieces of remarkable beauty by varying the incisions creating channels and terraces. These too became more sophisticated and elegant. During this time -- the chess pieces also gradually took their modern symbolic forms - The King represented by his Crown, the Queen by a her Coronet, the Rook evolved from an chariot (*ruhk*)/ elephant, or a mythical bird (Sinbad's Roc?) to a Castle Tower, the Bishop developed his split Mitre, and the Knight went through a variety of forms (such as a triangular finial representing a tricorne hat) to become a carved horse's head.



Chess becomes a popular pastime

During the 18th and 19th Centuries there was an increasing popularity of Chess developing among the Aristocratic and the Middle Classes in Europe. Interest in Chess increased to a larger degree for four reasons:

Chess Masters

Second were a number of Chess masters such as Francois-Andre Philidor and Paul Morphy, whose spectacular play (sometimes playing a multitude of games simultaneously and blindfolded) drew a lot of attention. The stage had been set by 16th century masters like Lopez and Greco. Later Howard Staunton, an English chess player and writer would give his name to the Standard Playing Piece design used today.

- o **Ruy Lopez** (1530-1580) was a Spanish priest who studied and lived in Salamanca. He was considered by many to be the first unofficial world chess champion and was probably the father of international competition when in 1571, he went to Rome and defeated Leonardo and Boi, the two best Italian players. Giovanni Leonardo da Cutri (Italian, 1542-1587) and Paolo Boi (Italian, 1525-1598) took [their revenge against Ruy Lopez in 1575](#) in presence of

King Felipe II. His name lives on in both a popular chess opening, as well in the Chess book he wrote in 1561. His opening, generally known as the Spanish Opening, but many English players call it the Ruy López is one of the most famous of all openings. It goes 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5.

- [Gioachino Greco](#) (Italy, 1600-1634) An Italian player of note who wrote a book *The Royal Game of Chess Play* on Chess Traps and Gambits. Whether he actually played these 77 [games](#) or made them up is debated, but [they are brilliant](#). Nicknamed "il Calabrese", he was considered the best player of the 17th Century.
- [François André Danican Philidor](#) (France, 1726-1795) For almost 50 years, [Philidor](#) was the unofficial chess champion of the world. Philidor spent much of his time in the Chess clubs of Paris and London. He first came to the chess world's attention when he beat Philip Stamma in a 10 games series at Slaughter's Coffee House at the age of 21. He maintained his reputation by winning match after match in Parisian cafes, beating famous philosophers of the time such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Francois Voltaire. The best player of the 18th century, he often drew crowds to the chess clubs in Paris and London with demonstrations of playing blindfolded while playing multiple games. He was also a composer, and wrote 20 operas, including one on Tom Jones, based on Fielding's novel. In December 1792, at age 65, he left France for England, never to return. His music was banned from France after the French Revolution (1789-1799) for political reasons. He had to leave his wife and children behind. later outstanding french players included [Alexandre Deschappelles](#), 1815-20, [Louis de la Bourdonnais](#), 1820-40 and [Pierre Charles Fournier de Saint Amant](#) (1800-1872).



François-André Philidor



Howard Staunton

- [Howard Staunton](#) (England, 1810-1874) who created a storm of interest in chess in London. He was also writer with a particular interest in Shakespearean literature. For thirty years [Staunton](#) was the best player in England, though he is probably remembered more today for refusing to play Paul Morphy, than for [His games](#). He promoted the idea of [Chess by Telegraph](#) - a form of correspondance chess. In February 1845, Staunton became the chess columnist for the *Illustrated London News*. He was a columnist for 29 years, until he died in 1874. *The Chess-Player's Handbook* first appeared in 1847, and in 1848 he published the *Chess-Player's Companion*. His endorsement of the Chess piece design of John Jaques that still today bears his name helped make it successful - and for a fee, permitted a facsimile of his signature to be included with every "authentic" set.

- [Paul Morphy](#) (American 1837-1884) was an American protegy from Louisiana. [Morphy's](#) first notable triumph came in 1857 as he won the First American Chess Congress with a dominating performance. This success was followed by a European trip where Morphy met and defeated most of the prominent masters of the period including Lowenthal, Harrwitz, and Anderssen within a space of six months, however he never was able to play a match against Howard Staunton, the current world champion, who considered him a "professional chess player," but was probably afraid he would be routed. Returning to the States, he quit playing chess in 1859 after in his twenties, supposedly because a young woman rebuffed his advances "because he was only a chess player"!! . Many of his [Games](#) are recorded. he was also a master of [blindfolded chess, once taking on eight opponents simultaneously in Paris](#). Bobby Fischer considered him the greatest player of all time.



Paul Morphy

Chess Books

The books written by these masters did much to increase popular interest in the game.

- The Chess book by **Ruy Lopez**, a well know Spanish cleric and master chess player contributed much to the interest in chess. A priest and master player, Ruy Lopez wrote his *Book of the Liberal Invention and Art of Playing Chess* in Spain in 1561. His name lives on in a popular chess opening.
- **Gustavus Selenus'** book *Chess or the King Game* was written in 1616 and is most significant for illustrating his book (essentially that of Ruy Lopez) with illustrations of Central European and German chessmen - what would be called the "Selenus Style." (Actually Selenus was Augustus, Duke of Brunswick-Luneburg (1579-1666.)
- **Phillip Stamma** (1705-?) was considered as the leading chess player in England. He was a Syrian chess player from Aleppo and an interpreter of Oriental languages. His *Noble Game of Chess (Essai sur le jeu des Echecs* was written in French in 1737 and translated into English 1745, as well as German and Dutch.) A book of chess problems, it had 74 openings and 100 end games. Stamma is considered the pioneer of modern Chess technique. Stamma

divided his time between London and Paris. Not much is known about him. He was defeated by [Philidor](#) in a ten game tournament (8-1, 1 draw) in 1747 at Slaughter's Coffee-House in London.

- **Francois-Andre Philidor** *Analyse du jeu des echecs* (1749). His book, emphasizing the play of pawns was for people who knew the basic game and wanted more. This was the first chess book that organized the chess openings. It was a favorite of Thomas Jefferson.
- **Ben Franklin** wrote an Article on [the Morals of Chess](#)

[Coffee Houses](#) and Chess Clubs

A third source of growing popularity of Chess began in the Coffee Houses in major European cities, such as the [Cafe de la Regence](#) "Place du Palais-Royal" in Paris, just beside the Louvre; and **Slaughter's Coffee House** and **Parsloe's** in London, where chess attracted many players. The [Cafe de la Regence](#) attracted players like Voltaire, Rousseau, Stamma and Philidor, Ben Franklin, Robespierre, Napoleon, Harrwitz, and Morphy. Other coffee houses noted for chess play included the Roode Leeuw in Amsterdam; the Bauer, Belvedere, and Konig in Berlin; the Cafe de la Couronne in Geneva; the Cafe du Levant in Madrid; the International in New York; the Palazzo de' Cinque in Rome; the Rabel and Central in Vienna. These establishments contributed greatly to the increasing popularity of chess, especially among the gentile classes. Visitors would usually obtain an opponent by applying at the counter for an introduction. Playing for money stakes was discouraged, but happened anyway - and there were a number of "professional" chess players hanging around. They were on the lookout for rich opponents, and like professional gamblers would often cede games to their opponents deliberately and praise their natural talents to keep them interested while dipping into their pockets.

The coffee-house epoch in the history of chess in England ended in the year 1810 with the establishment of the **London Chess club**, where members met for play in a private room in Cornhill. Other [London Chess Clubs](#) followed. The clubs were a place for gentlemen to meet and play, maintaining decorum while keeping out the charlatans. They also helped codify the playing rules and sponsored championship tournaments. It was not until the year 1832, that a rival association appeared upon the scene, the famous **Westminster Chess Club** where Howard Staunton, for many years the champion chess-player of England, made his first appearance. The club was temporarily dissolved in 1835, again in 1840, but once more revived by Staunton, and the meetings were held in Charles-street, off the Haymarket, but it closed in 1843. In 1843, a new chess club at the West-end was formed, at Beatties Hotel, George-street, Cavendish-square, and was called after the name of the street in which its first meetings were held, the **St. George's Chess Club**. Beattie's Hotel was closed in the following year, and the St. George's removed to new quarters at the Polytechnic. Here was played the first International Chess Tournament in 1851. In the year 1857, after several moves, the St. George's removed to its present quarters, Palace-chambers, King-street, St. James's. In 1852, a club was formed in the city, under the title of the **City of London Chess Club**, by a few amateurs of little note at the time. This association is now, in point of numbers, and the chess force and public repute of its members, the strongest chess club in the world. Daniel Harrwitz was a great favourite at the London and St. George's Clubs, where for some years he had lucrative engagements.

Chess Sets for Play

- The final reason for the increased popularity of chess was **the availability of quality and relatively mass produced Conventional Chess sets**, some of which were made by a number of master carvers and turners. Many of the pieces were turned on lathes and assembled. Using now available materials - bone, hardwoods like boxwood, mahogany or ebony, or soft woods like fruitwood. and the increased availability of Ivory - attractive and generally affordable sets discovered a substantial market. Ivory or bone white pieces were left as they were, the dark pieces were stained red, or possibly black. Wood black pieces were stained a darker brown. In Germany skilled designs were published by Selenus and Edel, but more significant in the development of these beautiful conventional chess pieces were the skilled English wood and ivory turners, such as John Calvert, the Lunds, George Merrifield, and John Jaques.



The Conventional Designs

Certainly a key component to successful chess pieces design is recognition. Players needed to be able to readily tell the pieces apart. With quite a variety of sets in use, a lack of familiarity with a chess set would put a player at a disadvantage as well. There were certain "conventions" to the making of Chess pieces. Generally Kings and Queens were the tallest, often having a symbolic reference to a crown. Bishops, Knights and Rooks were simliar in height to each other and distinguished by various symbols. Pawns were smaller and simpler. Sometimes there was difficulty with some Conventional sets telling the pieces apart as you can see from the illustrations on the page. It would be this factor that would ultimately lead to the development of the Staunton Style by Nathaniel Cook. The Conventional sets were also tall and had a tendency to tip over, a definate incovenience during moments of exciting play especially.

English Chess Set
(Tricorner Hat for Knight)



Politics also played its' part in the development of chess pieces. The Jacobean Style in the 1700's had three crowns on the King reflecting perhaps their allegiance to the Pope. In France as well as America, [revolutionary feelings](#) downplayed the "royalty" of the Kings and Queens. And there was a lengthy period of conflicts especially between the English and French, but also in Eastern and Northern Europe as well.

The most popular conventional designs in Western Europe and America were the **French Regency**; and the **English Barleycorn**, and **St. George patterns**. But a wide variety of interesting shapes and styles were in use during this time period.

France and America

The Regency design was named after [Café de la Regence](#) in Paris. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were known to play there, as well as Robespierre and Napoleon.

Regency
Chess Set



The **Regency** pieces were produced in the late 1700's till 1890's. Earlier or more inexpensive sets had Knights without the traditional horse head, but rather turned pieces with notched collars to distinguish them from the Bishops. Latter sets had the more traditional horse head for the knight.

Other pieces in use in France:

- The **Lyon Chess sets** added stylized ivory decorations to the simpler **Regency set**.
- Also found in use in French chess circles were the Representational **Dieppe Chess sets** which featured head and shoulders' busts mounted on pedestals. Dieppe is a town in France where an ivory carving industry thrived during the 18th century. Chess sets of intricately carved ivory were a product of Dieppe, usually depicting French characters. The bishop was often depicted by a fool rather than a cleric. Following the French Revolution, ["kingless" designs were developed in France](#) and certainly this "revolutionary spirit" had an influence in the America's as well. Later [Napoleon](#), who had a nasty temper when he lost a game, would inspire a number of representational sets, as would the battles he fought. The "head and shoulders style" persists in a variety of modern sets based on historical characters, and in the sculpted plastic or ceramic Peter Ganine charicatured pieces popular in the 1960's.

In the America's, [Chess was popular among the Founding Fathers](#), perhaps in part from their alliances with the French and the time that Franklin and Jefferson spent in France as ambassadors. Conventional Sets belonging to Washington, Franklin and Jefferson are still around.

Ben Franklin had a chess set of the French "Regency" design, as well as a miniature ivory set. Washington had an ivory chess set, and Jefferson had at least a half dozen chess sets, and [has made quite a few refereneces to chess](#) in his writings. One beautiful set of [carved ivory Dieppe busts](#) was presented to him by the French government, but it was missing the kings, as legend has it, because the French didn't want to offend a man who had worked so hard to rid America of kings. Jefferson, an intellectual who could read the Greek Classics in Greek, had every chess book available in his time in the Monticello Library. He also had a conventional English "Barleycorn" bone chess set, and the

Washington's
Chess Set



design was growing in popularity, almost becoming a standard before the Staunton style emerged. Benjamin Franklin was an enthusiastic player, and would write the first chess article published in the US, on "[The Morals of Chess](#)".

A game of chess even contributed to the success of the American Revolution - Washington's victory in crossing the Delaware at Trenton succeeded in part because a note warning of the attack from an English Sympathizer was pocketed unread while the officer, Colonel Johann Rall, finished his game of chess. The note was found in his pocket, still unopened, when he died in battle.

German and Eastern European sets

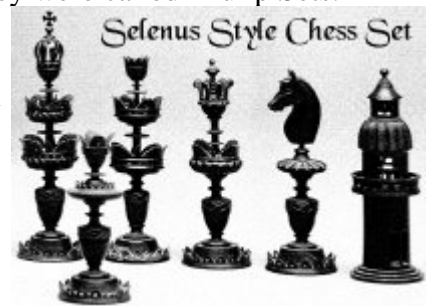
In Germany, chess sets were produced for the Aristocracy and had a number of distinguishing characteristics. Following Eastern European custom, frequently the finials of the royal pieces would be in the colors of the opposing pieces, and sometimes other portions of the pieces would be as well. Modern wooden sets from Poland and Russian often continue this tradition and they often have multi-colored, woodburned, or carved decoration as well. Lovely carved and painted representational sets are often sold to tourists or exported today based on historical characters and conflicts as well. Many of these sets are available on Ebay - try a search for "[Chess set Polish wooden](#)" or "[Chess set Russian wooden](#)".



- **The "Selenus Style" or Garden Style** is the most elegant classical chess style. These sets, had elegant lathe turned bases and shafts and tiers with circlets resembling crowns. Pieces were distinguished by heights, the number of tiers and sometimes by symbols. Sometimes called "Garden Sets" - their theme was of "formal flower gardens" - Kings and Queens were Fountains; Bishops and Pawns were flowers; Knights were gentle horses; and Rooks became civic towers in stead of battlements. In England they were called "Tulip Sets."

- **Michael Edel** of Munich published a set of patterns in the early 1800's. Notable in his designs, was the convention that a slanted straight edge would rest on each the decreasing heights of the tops of the pieces from the King down to the pawn. He also replaced the Castle with a Bell Tower with a cupola.

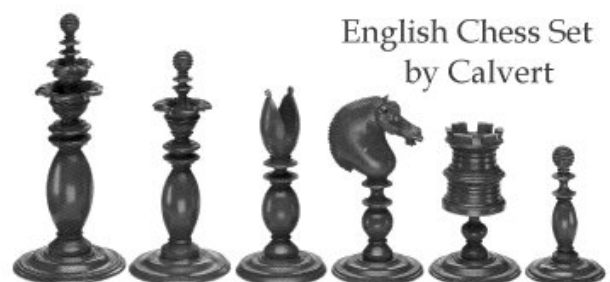
- In Hanover, the distinctive **German Twin Knight** appeared in 1743. German figural sets often reflected the conflict between the Habsburgs and the Turks (Ottomans). Carvers in the Tyrols and Augsburg produced fine representational sets, frequently using fruitwood. Northern Europe also had a distinctive conventional set - whose origin from either the Dutch, Danes or Germans is unclear.



Early English Sets

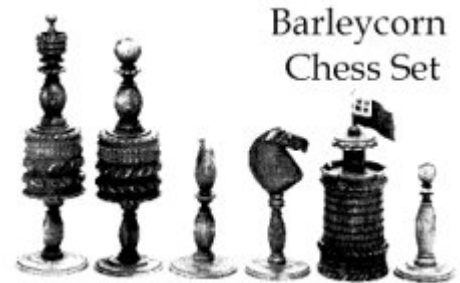
The [English Playing sets](#) came in a variety of shapes, but all are finely turned and extremely well carved. The Queens frequently have a ball for a crown and the Rooks often have flags or poles. Bone and Ivory was popular, but they also used hardwoods as well. Red and White were the most popular colors in England.

- One of the first chess piece designs came from **John Calvert** in 1790. The king and queen had openwork crowns, the bishop had a deep clefted mitre, and the rook was a tower on a pedestal. He produced his chess sets at his shop at 189, Fleet Street from 1790 to 1840. Today they are collector's items. John Calvert also was originator of the St. George Design.



- **The St. George design** was named after a Chess Club in London. This was a standard design in Britain until the 1850's when it was almost universally replaced by the Staunton sets. They were popular because they were cheap and easy to make as, all but the horses heads, could be turned on a lathe, giving the pieces their distinctive "stack of rounded disks" shape. They were mainly produced in France, but were not used a great deal there. The main fault with this design was the difficulty of identifying the pieces as they were all so similar. Only the Knights heads were really distinctive.

- The second most popular English style were the **English Barleycorn sets** especially in America. Made circa 1820 to 1845, the [Barleycorn sets](#) usually came in red-stained and natural bone. The Rooks usually have a full tower with flag, and the Kings and Queens usually have elaborate decorative carvings on the barrels. The name "Barleycorn" comes from the style of decoration carved on the barrels of the King and Queen. The knights are well-carved and the bishops have the vertical split miter.
- **Edinburgh (Northern Upright) pattern sets**, circa 1840 to 1860, were available in red-stained and natural ivory or boxwood and ebony. The Sets are characterized by the tall posts on each of the pieces. The pieces are exquisitely turned with attractively carved Knights, identical in style to those found in the better St. George style sets. The Northern Upright pattern is believed to contributed inspiration for the Staunton design and is quite rare.
- **Lund pattern sets**, Made by William and Thomas Lund, early 1800's, are made mostly of red-stained and natural ivory. The Kings were often very ornate, topped with an open-work crown and detailed Maltese cross. The Queens were also quite detailed. The Knight and Bishops are very attractive. They also manufactured the Fisher Chess Sets.



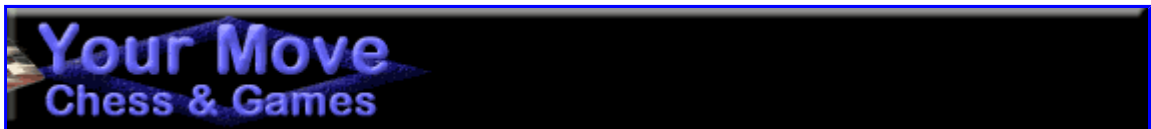
- **George Merrifield** a cabinetmaker of Lincoln's Inn Fields specialized in games tables, but also turned some beautiful chess pieces. An effort was made to market a simpler designed "Philidor Chess Set," perhaps to compete with Jaques' Staunton. The designs were registered in 1850 in the UK and manufactured by George Merrifield. The advertisement for them ran for around six months in a London publication. But Staunton ridiculed the design, and that did not help the popularity of the chessmen. They never took hold and had a production run of only about a year.
- Other Conventional styles included the **Spanish Pulpit sets**. These pieces which may not have originated in Spain are characterized by the King and Queen's stems have two round sections, one stacked above the other. The top section of the King's stem is thick; the Queen's is thin and graceful. The stems of all other pieces have just one thick section. Though symbols were used in early sets, later pieces were topped with human heads except for the horse's head on the Knight and the typical, finial-decorated turret on the Castle. Churches and their furnishings - including pulpits - were an important focus of Spanish artists' endeavors. The influence of Spanish Chess-set art from the eighteenth century, with carvings resembling pulpits is apparent in Mexican sets.
- [The Staunton Design](#)

Prior to the introduction of the Staunton design, the pieces most commonly used were called the St. George design chessmen, followed by the Calvert, Edinburgh, Lund and Merrifield designs. Most of these sets of the period were quite intricate and relatively expensive to produce.



It is suggested that Jaques actually designed the Staunton pieces, and a relative, Nathaniel Cook registered the wooden chess pattern under the Ornamental Designs Act of 1842. They used the symbols in their plainest form, and a heavy wide base made them less likely to tip. In September 1849 the manufacturing rights were bought by John Jaques of London, workers of ivory and fine woods. Jaques was the brother-in-law of Nathaniel Cook. Jaques removed much of the decorative features that topped earlier chess patterns, and was able to manufacture the new design at less cost. On September 8, 1849 the first wooden chess sets from Jaques became available. The first sets had red crowns on top of the King's Rook and King's Knight that distinguished them from the Queen's Rook and the Queen's Knight. They were often marked with "J. Jaques London" on the base of the King as well.

On the same day that the Jaques chess sets were available, Howard Staunton recommended and endorsed the sets in the *Illustrated London News*. Nathaniel Cook was Staunton's editor at the *Illustrated London News* (small world, huh?) The ad that appeared in the newspaper called it Mr. Staunton's pattern. Later, Staunton began endorsing the set and had his signature on the box of Staunton chess pieces. One of Staunton's chess books was given free with every Staunton chess set. Celebrity endorsement and marketing helped, but the simplicity of the Staunton design probably contributed the most to its success.



To see examples of these various Chess Piece styles

You can browse the images in [The House of Staunton Antique Chess Shoppe](#) or in [Jon Crumiller's personal collection of 200 chess sets](#)

Dermot Rochford's Articles: [Antique English Playing Sets](#), [Collecting 101](#) and [Condition and Restoration](#)

- [Japanese Repository](#) Ron Fromkin in Florida does wood and ivory restoration - including repairing chess pieces.

To Shop for Antique Chess Sets:

You might check with [Dermot Rochford](#) or [Garrick Coleman](#) or check out my [In Search of Unusual Chess Sets](#).

All sorts of sets are always being [auctioned on Ebay](#) as well.

Sources:

- [The Art of Chess](#) by **Colleen Schafroth**
Maryhill Museum of Art director Colleen Schafroth's beautifully illustrated homage to one of the world's oldest and most popular pastimes. Schafroth traces the evolution of the game from its origins in India, to its first golden age under the Arab caliphate, to the birth of the (much faster) modern version in 15th-century Europe.
- [Master Pieces: The Architecture of Chess](#) by **Gareth Williams**
The first full-color illustrated book devoted to the art and design of the individual pieces in a chess set, the book presents examples of the most magnificent pieces from around the world, both ancient and modern. Master Pieces sheds new light on the history, evolution, and symbolism of chess pieces and displays the artistry and craft of creating these miniature works of art. Featuring some of the most beautiful and famous chess sets from all over the world, Master Pieces is the ideal gift for chess players everywhere.
- [Birth of the Chess Queen : A History](#) by **Marilyn Yalom**
How did a game that originated in India in the sixth century evolve to feature a game piece that now has iconic stature in modern Western culture? Both chess fans and those unfamiliar with the game will enjoy this absorbing look at the evolution of chess and the rise in power and stature of the chess queen in the last 500 years.



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