

Vive La France: The Antique Chess Sets of Dieppe



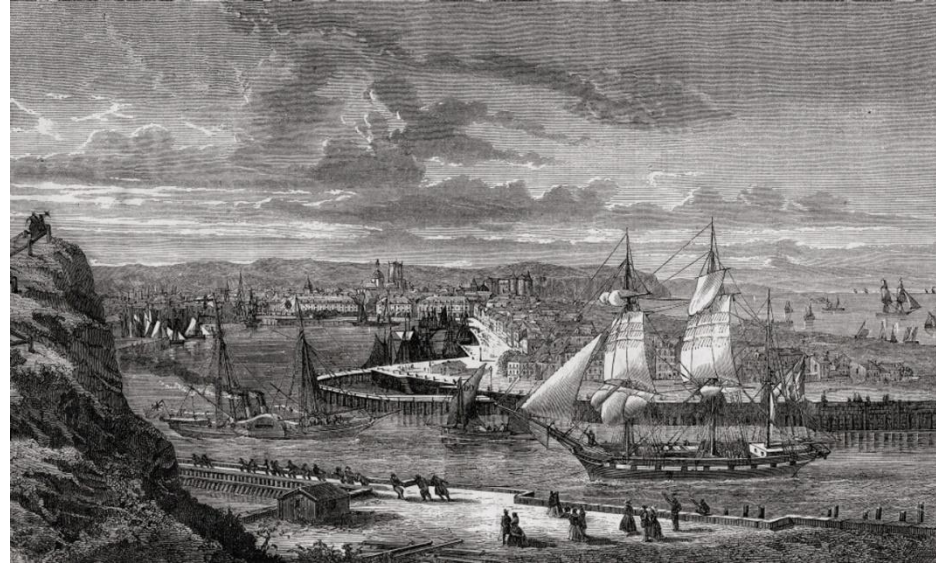
For several hundred years a small seaside city in France produced some of the most beautiful chess sets in the world.

Dieppe's location



Source: Google Maps

Dieppe in the 1700's



- Dieppe first appears by name as a small fishing settlement in the year 1030
- The town is 90 miles northwest of Paris and 140 miles southeast of London
- Dieppe is situated between two mountains at the mouth of the river Arque, which empties into the English Channel
- Dieppe is renowned for its shellfish, especially scallops
- In centuries past, its claim to fame was a vast ivory-carving industry.

Dieppe's ivory-carving industry started in the mid-1300's. A description of its inception is given in *A Sketch of the History of Dieppe*, published in 1832:

During the reign of Charles V, they arrived at the coast of Guinea and having found some [natives] to whom they made some trifling presents received in exchange some elephant's teeth which they brought back with them to Dieppe. [...] This occurred in the year 1354. This town is distinguished for the elegance of its carvings in ivory, which are said to be superior to any in Europe, and on which the inhabitants pride themselves very much and certainly not without reason.



A similar assessment of the quality of Dieppe's ivory carving is given in a 1908 article of *The Connoisseur, An Illustrated Magazine For Collectors*:

...in the old days they were artists of a very high order and consummate skill, as the specimens of their handwork in the little museum of Dieppe abundantly show [...] Dieppe can boast of great names among its artists in ivory, whose surviving works show that they were second to none in their art [...] The work of the Dieppe artists in ivory from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries will probably never be surpassed.

Several patterns of chess sets were produced in 18th and 19th century Dieppe. The highest-quality sets are those of bust figures on pedestals, usually represented as European royalty (natural /white pieces) versus African royalty or Moor rulers (stained pieces).



Here is another European-versus-African Dieppe set from the late 18th or early 19th century, with an extremely rare feature: the stained pieces are blue.



In my database of over 11,000 items from the major chess auctions over the past sixty years, fewer than ten items are blue-stained ivory. The database shows that the most common stain is red (approximately one-third of the sets), then, in decreasing order, black, brown, and green. This set is the only blue-stained Dieppe set I have seen.

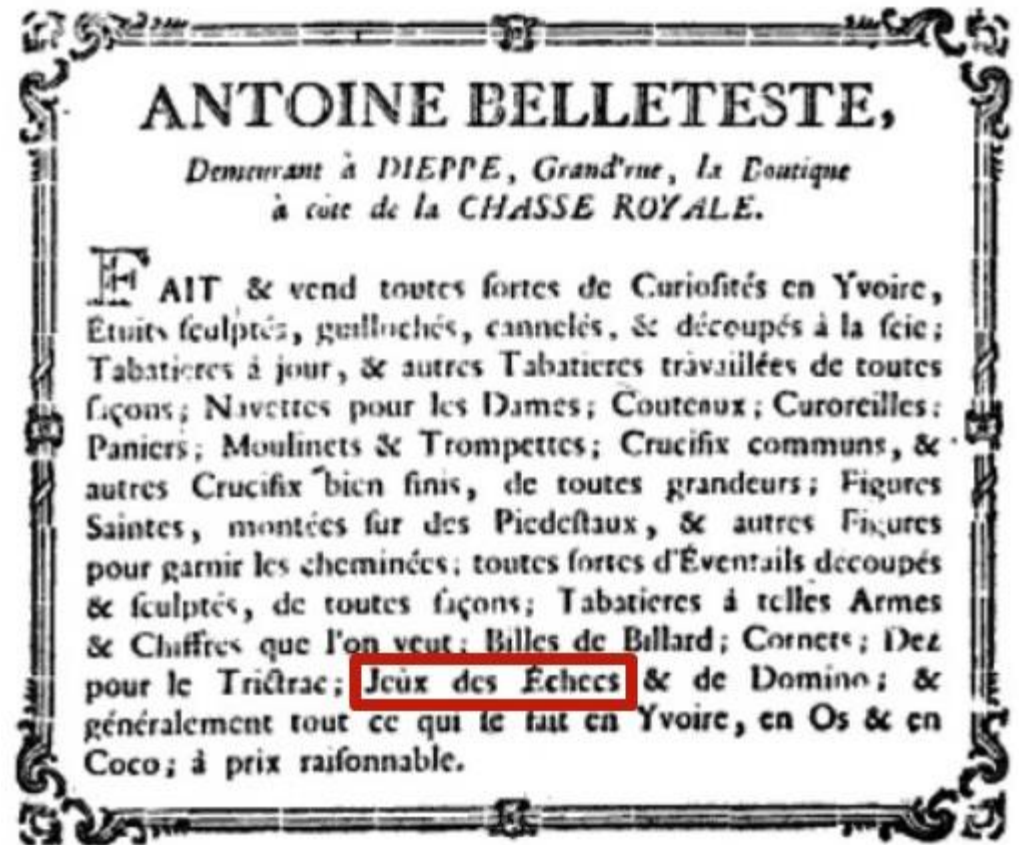
In its heyday, the ivory-carving industry in Dieppe was so large that it supported up to 300 ivory workers.

The diary of John Evelyn, Esq., records his visit to Dieppe in 1644: “It abounds with workmen, who make and sell curiosities of ivory and tortoise-shells; and indeed whatever the East Indies afford of cabinets, porcelain, natural and rarities, are here to be had, with abundant choice.”

Common amongst these curiosities were crucifixes, Madonnas, jewelry, and household items; less common were specialized items such as chess sets.

Ivory sculptures from some of Dieppe’s top craftsmen are exhibited in museums around the world. In many cases, the tools and talents of the elders were passed down to the next generation.

One example from 18th century Dieppe is the Belleteste family. At least four generations of the Belleteste family were well-known for the high quality and intricacy of their work. Antoine Belleteste, active in the 1730s and onwards, kept a prolific shop that sold many types of items. His trade label indicates that chess sets were in his portfolio.



Antoine's son, Jean-Antoine (1731-1811), was world-renowned for his artistic skill in ivory, and is considered to be one of the greatest Dieppe ivory artists.

A street in Dieppe is even named after him. Jean-Antoine's son, Louis-Charles Vincent, was also a world-class ivory sculptor. Louis-Charles had two sons who were also in the craft, one of whom became the foreman in the Blard workshop.

The Blard family of ivory sculptors in Dieppe dated back to at least 1680. A trade advertisement for Jacques Blard can be found in *Itinéraire de Paris à La Mer Par le Chemin de Fer de Dieppe*, published in 1849:

Grande-Rue, N° 52, à Dieppe.

—
BLARD,
Sculpteur en Ivoire,

Fabrique toutes espèces d'ouvrages en Ivoire, Os et Coco, et, en général, toute la Sculpture en relief et ronde-bosse.

PORTRAITS ET STATUETTES.

Christs, Vierges, Jeux d'Echecs, Pelotes, Portefeuilles, Boucles, Tableaux, Navires, Broches, Eventails, Porte-Cartes de visite, Aiguillers, etc.

Ce magasin, un des plus anciens de la ville, doit sa réputation justement méritée au soin qu'on y a pris de conserver les vieilles traditions de la sculpture appliquée à l'ivoire. Les amateurs de beaux ouvrages y trouveront une collection des plus remarquables.

The Blard workshop in Dieppe is noted and illustrated in an 1845 German publication, *Aus den gewerbwissenschaftlichen Ergebnissen einer Reise in Frankreich*. The shop's address is again given as 52 [Grand-Rue]. Although it is not a certainty, there appear to be chess pieces in one of the shop's windows!



Monsieur Thomas, Marchand Ivoirier, Grande Rue, Nr. 30, à Dieppe,
— mit dem Anfangsbuchstaben Th.;

Monsieur Jacques Blard, Sculpteur en Ivoire, Grande Rue, Nr. 52,
à Dieppe, — mit dem Anfangsbuchstaben B.; (hat ein depot: Boulevard
des Italiens, Nr. 18, à côté du café de Paris, à Paris.);

Monsieur A. Dérenty, Fabricant d'Ivoirerie, Grande Rue, Nr. 8, à
Dieppe, — mit dem Anfangsbuchstaben D.;

Monsieur Th. Ouvrier, Sculpteur en Ivoire, Grande Rue, Nr. 156,
à Dieppe, — mit dem Anfangsbuchstaben T. O.;



Most antique chess sets from Dieppe (or on a larger scale, many antique chess sets from France) have one feature that is very noticeable: The bishops appear to be comical characters, with contorted faces and haughty expressions. The reason is that in French bishops are called *fous*, i.e., fools, or court jesters.



Howard Staunton, the great 19th-century English player who gave his name to the modern design for sets, explained why bishops came to be called *fou* in his *Illustrated London News* column of June 15, 1850:

G*—The earliest denomination of the piece we call the *Bishop*, among the Indians, Arabians, Persians, Turks, &c.' was *Phil*, or *Fil*, an elephant. From this the Spaniards, adding the Arabian article *Al*, made *Alfil*. The Italians subsequently formed of it their *Alfine*, and the ancient English, according to Caxton, their *Alphyn*, and, as Lydgate has it, their *Awfyn*. The French, at an early period, termed this piece *Fol*, or *Fou* (an evident corruption of the ancient *Fil*), and gave to it the actual French significance. At what exact period this took place, it is, perhaps, impossible now to discover; but that the figure of a fool constituted one of the Chess pieces on the ancient French Chess-board, there is abundant evidence. Will our Correspondent favour us with an address, so that we might see the cu-

Dr. John Doran, in his 1858 work, *History of Court Fools*, quotes a passage from Mathurin Régnier's Satire XIV, dated 1613, referring to the chess *fou*:

Some French writers deduce the term Fool,—that is their own word *Fol* or *Fou*,—from the Game of Chess. In the French game, the pieces which we call *Bishops*, are called “Fous;” and in anciently carved sets are represented in the fool's dress;—hence the saying of Regnier in his 14th Satire:—

“Les Fous sont aux échecs les plus proches des Rois.”

That translates as, “The fools are in chess the closest to the kings.”

Another Dieppe ivory set shows the court jester in full costume:



An 18th century Dieppe set has *fou* bishops for the White pieces and devilish bishops for the Black pieces.



The theme of *fou* bishops is almost universal throughout the history of Dieppe sets. A collage of *fou* bishops from the Dieppe sets in my collection shows the satirical extremes of the *fous*:



Photos have been scaled so that the pieces are similarly sized relative to each other.



And several other French sets in my collection, not made in Dieppe, also specialized in court-jester *fou* bishops.



Photos have been scaled so that the pieces are similarly sized relative to each other.

The Dieppe knight is another piece with a distinctive style. Knights in some Dieppe sets (usually the higher-quality sets) are represented as horse-heads; whereas in other sets, the horses are mounted with a rider, in almost cartoonish fashion. The latter type of knight is referred to as “hobby-horse” knights.



Some high-quality Dieppe sets (such as the one above) have hobby-horse knights, but as a general observation, lower-quality Dieppe sets are almost always equipped with hobby-horse knights.

The following photo shows horse-heads and hobby-horse knights from French sets.



Photos have been scaled so that the pieces are similarly sized relative to each other.

Thomas Jefferson owned a good-quality Dieppe set, and as we can see from the photo, the knights in his set were of the hobby-horse variety. Jefferson's set is dated to 1770-1790.



Most Dieppe sets were manufactured of ivory, but some sets were made of bone. The bone sets are usually not as intricate as the ivory sets, and sometimes the carving was rather primitive. However, some bone sets approach the quality of the higher-priced ivory sets, such as the following one:



Other materials were used as well. Wood was sometimes used for the black pieces, as ebonized wood reduced the price of a Dieppe set by halving the amount of ivory needed to produce it.



The black wooden pieces are difficult to see because of their dark color, so I've artificially brightened a photo to bring out their features.



Less common materials also make rare appearances. I have a Dieppe bone and coquilla nut set in my collection. Coquilla is the nut of the Brazilian palm tree, and was sometimes used by turners and carvers to make ornamental items. Its natural color is brown.





Dieppe chess sets have also made their appearance in European paintings. The following painting from the latter-1700's[?] was created by an Italian artist, Domenico Maria Fratto (1669-1763)[?]. Zooming in again on the chess set in the painting, shows that the pieces are busts of royal figures and are highly reminiscent of French Dieppe pieces of the same time frame.



By comparison, the following are king and queen pieces from several sets in my collection, all of which were produced by the master carvers of Dieppe, France.



Here are two 19th century examples. The first is French, circa 1800. One can see the red and white bust figures with pedestals that are closely associated with Dieppe sets.



The next painting, by Francis Sidney Muschamp of England, is dated to 4Q 19th century. The red and white Dieppe bust figures, including *fou* bishops, are clearly visible.



Dieppe's ivory carving industry dwindled throughout the 20th century and is now almost defunct. This trend has, of course, been largely driven by the urgent need to preserve the world's elephant population.

Jeanenne Bell describes the vestiges of the Dieppe carving industry in her book, *Collecting Victorian Jewelry: Identification and Price Guide*, published in 2004.

When I visited Dieppe early in 2004, there were only two ivory carvers left in the city. One man, who at 53 years old is a master craftsman, has a shop on the corner of a narrow street. He does beautiful work and also has a good collection of antique ivory carvings. [...] The other carver in the town is located just down the street from the first and is 83 years old. He still carves in the tradition of his grandfather, who started there in 1840. The main problem for these two wonderful craftsmen is finding material to work. They usually resort to recycling old broken pieces. Consequently, their carvings are usually small.

Dieppe's ivory artistry of the past centuries is on permanent display at Le Musée de Dieppe, the town's museum, which is housed in a castle that is almost as old as the town.



Château-Musée de Dieppe

Vive La France: The Antique Chess Sets of Dieppe

