

CAN CHESS COLLECTING SAVE THE WORLD?

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“As collectors, they are naturally tempted to exaggerate the value of their possessions, and even when not collectors, they may attach undue importance to their observations and discoveries.” (Anonymous)

The idea for this talk came to me in a dream a while back. When I woke up, my first thought was, what a ridiculous idea. Patently absurd. Surely a question like this can be little more than a joke, right? A sick joke, or a fever dream, perhaps ... Could it be anything more? I’ve thought about this a lot, and my conclusion is, I honestly don’t know.

Actually, to take a different viewpoint just for a moment, just for the sake of argument, I would point out there are a lot of creative or artistic endeavors that have the potential to save the world, or at least improve it. Today we are going to look at collecting as one of them. Today we’ll be looking at some fairly expansive ideas surrounding chess and collecting. We’ll mention some other areas of collecting besides chess, to be sure, but mostly we’ll examine chess in the context of collecting, and collecting in the context of chess. This could go in a lot of different directions, obviously. So, please forgive me in advance for these flights of fancy I’m about to subject you to.

After all, collectors are, fundamentally, people who want to save the world. When you find a desirable chess set or book floating around out there, in an auction, or in a dealer’s stock, or anywhere else, what’s your first impulse? To buy it, or trade for it, to somehow acquire it. To save it, in other words. Collectors are people who reach out into the infinite stream of time and space to pluck out certain items which allow us to reconstitute, or reassemble, a world that once existed. A world we’d prefer to live in, rather than the world as we found it. A world worth saving.

To save the world, in the sense of, to retain, to keep, preserve, even to hoard. But to save can also mean to rescue, to protect. To rescue an object from obscurity, if nothing else. Hopefully good objects do not sit unwanted and unloved in dusty attics and dark storage units. Hopefully they wind up at collectors’ houses where they’re loved and appreciated. What I mean by “saving the world” can be as simple as this. Not unlike saving a difficult position over the board.

But for the most part, *collecting* chess and *playing* chess require very different skill sets, obviously. I mean, with collecting, it’s all about ... you know, *strategy*, and *tactics*, long-range planning and such. In collecting, you have to constantly be *calculating*, the potential value of

particular exchanges or trades you may be considering. Well, in collecting you don't have to worry so much about controlling the center. There. That's one difference, anyway.

So let's jump right in and look at a few of these areas:

Can Chess Collecting Save Cultural Treasures?

If the Mona Lisa (or, say, the rock crystal set of Saint Louis, you could say the same thing about any cultural treasure, really) were somehow destroyed tomorrow, say by a Russian missile, insurance could replace it, right? (Is the Mona Lisa insured? It must be, right?) The Louvre could make a claim on its insurance and get the thing replaced, right? It must be insured for a lot. For that kind of money, you could get a really nice replacement Mona Lisa. It would look just like the original, right? No one would know the difference, right?

What's wrong with this argument? My point is, it's not insurance executives, and others who count things in terms of money who know what is wrong with this argument. It is collectors who know what's wrong with this argument. And I'm sure each of us – collectors especially – gets the same awful, sinking feeling in the pit of our stomach at the thought of a Russian missile taking out our house. (How many of those destroyed buildings in Ukraine were once home to collectors? A vast number.) The things in our homes are irreplaceable. Whether or not they are insured. No matter how rare or common they are. The Mona Lisa is common in the sense that there are LOTS of paintings in the world. But it is mind-bogglingly rare in the sense that there is only one Mona Lisa. No matter how many copies are made, there is only one. As collectors, some of us are fortunate enough to have things in our homes that are a little bit like the Mona Lisa in this sense. And we are desperately trying to save, to preserve, to protect these precious parts of the world to pass on to future generations. Every true collector in this room knows what I'm talking about.

For example, here's a fine example – not the only one in existence, mind you, but a fine example – of arguably the most important chess set of the entire 18th century, the *Encyclopédie* set; I say most important because it represents nothing less than the French Enlightenment itself, as no other chess set possibly can. Yet most museums would have no idea what I'm talking about, or why this chess set is so important. The happy exception, of course, is the World Chess Hall of Fame, the museum we're in right now, which has exhibited this set on more than one occasion.

Can Chess Collecting Save Lives?

In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we wrote about how to checkmate the virus. I am not a doctor, yet I know that epidemiology is just one example of a field of medicine that has long been informed by the strategy and tactics of chess, if not chess collecting. Many of the great epidemiologists have been chess players, most famously the smallpox vaccine pioneer Edward Jenner, a hero of the Enlightenment. (Edward Jenner is the reason we don't all die of smallpox these days. It's estimated that his work has saved more lives than the work of anyone

else in history. And yes, he was also a chess player.) This has been true in many other fields of medicine as well; doctors often fight disease as if it were an opponent sitting on the other side of a chess board. Suffice it to say we could go much more deeply into this. Entire books have been written on the relationship between chess and medicine, and if you just Google some combination of those two words, the number of online articles seems nearly infinite.

Although for some reason, most medical-themed chess sets I've ever seen have not been "Doctors vs. Diseases" but rather, "Doctors vs. Patients". I thought the first rule was, "Do no harm".

Can Chess Collecting Save the Environment?

This is the strange tale of Glass Beach, in a little town called Fort Bragg, Northern California. Not so much a case of one man's trash is another man's treasure, but one DECADE'S trash is another decade's treasure. Glass Beach started out as the city dump, in the early part of the 20th century, with residents dumping old cars, machinery, household garbage and all sorts of other refuse. They always kept a fire going on the beach, to sort of reduce the trash pile, and keep things under control. By the 1960's, with the environmental movement, the city put a stop to the dumping, and they hauled away all the old cars and appliances to better dump sites, and tried real hard to clean up the beach. They couldn't do much of anything about all the glass bottles they'd dumped. But the ocean could. Turns out the ocean just acted like a gigantic rock-tumbling machine, and began to turn all that jagged glass into tiny little lumps of pure beauty. It's called "sea glass" or "beach glass" and suddenly the town found that large numbers of tourists were stopping in town looking for this magical "Glass Beach" they'd heard so much about, by word of mouth. Suddenly, Fort Bragg found itself a tourist town, and the local businesses all began to thrive.

People just love beach glass, it turns out. They love to collect it, like sea shells, and string it up in various ways, making things like sun catchers to hang on your porch or patio, and of course, jewelry. Lots and lots of jewelry. And chess sets? Yes of course, people have even made a few chess sets out of beach glass and sea shells, things like that. Here's one I found online.

Beach glass is not intrinsically valuable, except of course, that people find it beautiful. Most people will take just a few pieces here and there, on an afternoon stroll. But some people, the more enterprising types (some call them greedy), would fill bags and boxes and entire vehicles with the stuff, and go into business selling the jewelry and other crafty things they made. You can find all sorts of these little businesses online, if you look.

Some people took so much beach glass, that – God forbid – the beach began to get cleaned up. I mean, really cleaned up. Tourists would stop in the town and complain, "Where's all the pretty beach glass we've heard so much about?" And this was actually a problem. Tourist revenues began to fall off drastically. The town had a crisis on its hands. "What? Our garbage is disappearing, right out from under our noses?"

So the town did the only thing it could think of doing: It banned collecting. They put up signs to say, "Hands off our beautiful beach glass. Leave it here for others to enjoy."

To this day, the town goes back and forth on whether collecting is really banned or not. There have even been serious proposals that the thing to do is to dump MORE garbage into the sea, so there will eventually be more beach glass. Or at the very least, let's dump a lot of old bottles into the sea, bottles that would otherwise be *wasted* by being *recycled*, if you want to stop and think about that one for a minute.

Can Chess Collecting Save History?

The point is, humans are often incredibly fickle when it comes to what they value. And when I say humans, I also include institutions and so-called "experts". I remember back in the 1970's, at many libraries and institutions, it was considered "best practice" to microfilm old records, and then discard the records themselves. The rationale was that microfilm was supposed to be a "permanent" medium (what a laugh!), and once we had everything on microfilm, we could safely get rid of all that bulky old paper.

Well, now all that old microfilm and microfiche is breaking down and degrading chemically, they're scrambling to convert it to digital media (which is also far from permanent) and a couple of generations of researchers have started to complain that the grainy, monotoned images captured in the first place hardly did justice to the originals. In some cases, microfilm actually loses information that the originals could have provided at a glance.

If those archivists of the 1970's were here with us today, they'd say, "Well? Where were we supposed to store all those bulky paper objects? They wouldn't give us the funding for storage. We were doing everybody a favor by getting rid of those old things."

I remember one late, great Denver city councilman who built up a fantastic collection of rare books, manuscripts, maps, archives, city directories, and other irreplaceable records and documents of early Denver and Colorado history. Things the museums of today would absolutely kill for. And he did it all just by going dumpster diving behind the Denver Public Library for a few years.

He was desperate to save these things. He disagreed hotly in city council meetings with the decision to throw these things out. But nobody was listening to him. And of course he could only save a small fraction of everything that was thrown away.

This is why the world needs collectors in it. To save it, quite literally. Collectors are not as fickle as most people. As most institutions, or so-called "experts". Collectors are a bit more steadfast in how they value the past.

In chess collecting, thankfully, we have organizations like the Hall of Fame, and the Chess History and Literature Society (a group of chess book collectors) to save the books, records,

scoresheets, documents and archives of our game's past. To prevent debacles like the one I just described.

Then of course, there are things that are in no danger of being thrown in a dumpster. Arguably the most famous chess pieces of all time (all 79 pieces) are the Lewis Chessmen. I don't think I have to explain to anybody in this room what these are. But I think you will all agree that the many theories as to their origin – that is, their past – can probably never be reconciled. Where and when were they made? Did a cow really discover them? Or was it a credulous farmer who ran away, thinking they were tiny demons? And on and on.

Supposedly they were found in a dune on the Isle of Lewis in 1830 by a man named Malcolm "Sprot" MacLeod (in Scottish Gaelic, *Calum an Sprot*). On or near the beach in a place called Uig Bay, township of Pennydonald. But these details are all very murky.

As murky as their past is, it must be noted that their future is also a bit murky. There's still an ongoing debate, that flares up from time to time, about where the Lewis chessmen really belong. Some have said they should all go to England. Some have said they should mostly go back to Scotland. Some have even said they should go back to the Isle of Lewis. Back to the beach where they were found! As if they were bits of beach glass!

(Never mind the people who say it is Norway that should be asking for them back. Or the latest theory, that they were made in Iceland, and so it's Iceland that should be asking for them back.)

There's even one lone warder wandering around out there, discovered a few years ago in Edinburgh, which sold for 735,000 pounds back in 2019 to an undisclosed buyer, who later turned out to be the billionaire Ronald Lauder, heir to the Estée Lauder fortune. It was exhibited as part of his collection at the Neue Galerie in New York earlier this year. He owns it, and he's not giving it back to anybody. Ah, the power of private collecting.

Do we really have to put everything – everything of archaeological importance – back where we found it? Many people argue yes. But I would say that's a rather Utopian notion. By Utopian I mean highly impractical. Sure, I guess we could put the Lewis Chessmen back on the beach at Uig. As long as we're prepared to build a concrete bunker around them. Because the one thing we know about human nature, the one thing that's been true ever since caveman days, right up to today, with tourists walking on Glass Beach, is that humans, when they find something interesting on a beach, will pick it up and carry it away with them, if it's not nailed down.

And what about the Elgin Marbles, that were one of the main design inspirations for the Staunton Chessmen? Taken from Greece to England around 1801-1812. Now, you can argue whether the Ottoman Turks really were the legitimate ruling government of Greece at the time, or just an invading occupier. And you can argue whether the Firman or decree given by the Sultan was really a legal permission to remove massive quantities of stone sculptures, or just a license to putter around whose authority Lord Elgin vastly exceeded in taking what he did. And you can argue whether the stones were really in the process of being destroyed at the time

anyway, or soon would have been destroyed in a war, perhaps the coming War of Greek Independence (1821-1829). I mean, did Lord Elgin, collector extraordinaire, really *rescue* the marbles? Or steal them? We're never going to get to the bottom of that here. The point is, the Greeks, now an independent nation, feel strongly that they were stolen, and they want them back.

Where to put them? How about a brand new Acropolis Museum? Here is the concrete bunker, so to speak, that the Greeks built. The Acropolis is way up here, and the museum is down here, at the foot of the mountain. Luann and I have been here, and it's very impressive. You look up, and there are blank friezes inside the museum, waiting to receive the marbles, if England ever returns them. But indoors, rather than out in the elements.

But WILL the English ever return them? First, we would have to decide whether the original taking was justified, or legal in any sense. But there is literally no way to ever resolve that dispute. Every aspect of the case is endlessly complicated, and it depends entirely on who you ask. For now, it seems, possession is nine tenths of the law.

Can Chess Collecting Save Our Soul, or Our Sanity?

For centuries, there have been tales, stories and legends, some fictional and some actual historical accounts, that involve chess as a defense against extreme mental or physical duress. Collectors in other fields like to tell the tale of the art dealer who was lifted out of a suicidal depression by the discovery of a portfolio of Rembrandt etchings. Chess has often served the same purpose for people like us. We all know of tales and stories, and we've even had talks on, chess in prisons or POW camps, chess during wartime, etc.

Just to take one example, the movie we just showed, *Chess Story*, for those of you who saw it with us last night, is a fictional example, but it's very much in this general theme. In Vienna in 1938, our protagonist, Dr. Bartok, sneaks a book off a pile between interrogation sessions at Gestapo headquarters. One less book for the Nazi book burners to destroy. When he gets it back to his room, he's disappointed to find it's a book of famous chess games! Yet this single act is the linchpin that holds the entire plot together. (Here he is on the bathroom floor, with the chess set he made out of bread and floor tiles.) Through this one *random act of chess collecting*, accidental though it was, Bartok eventually gathers the strength of will necessary to resist the Gestapo. But did chess save Bartok's sanity, or destroy it? Even after seeing the movie twice, I'm still not sure. I'm going to go out on a limb, though, and say it was probably the Gestapo torture and interrogation that destroyed his sanity.

Here is a non-fictional example, just to help make the point. Chess during wartime. And there are a lot of chess collectors who would love to find a copy of this stereo card.

Can Chess Collecting Save Our Democracy?

In the pages of CCI-USA, a couple of issues ago, I wrote an article called, “On the Importance of Playing by the Rules.” It got very little reaction or feedback, but it was basically a comparison of the rules in chess with the rules of life. The rules of politics. The rules of free and fair elections, etc. The basic idea was, what if the rules of chess were subject to mob rule? What if the winner at a chess tournament was determined by who had the loudest screaming mob on their side? What if the rules in chess were subject to change on a whim by persons who claimed, without evidence, that they knew the rules better than you did? And the rules were, whatever it took for *these* people to win, not you. So that every chess game would eventually turn into a fist fight, as if we were all unruly children, lacking any adult supervision. I used this notion as a metaphor to describe what happened to our country on January 6th, 2021.

I’ll be honest: It cost us a member. A retired Secret Service agent, no less. He wrote to me and said he was dropping out of the group because I got way too political for his taste, and in the wrong forum. He didn’t bother trying to refute any of my arguments, which would have been difficult; he merely said I was wrong to talk about politics or current affairs in a chess collecting magazine, and he was so outraged about it, he insisted on quitting CCI.

He and I had a productive conversation before he left, in which he shared that he also happened to be a playwright who had written a play about Bobby Fischer, of all people. When I pointed out that THAT topic can also get rather controversial and political, he didn’t get my point. My point of course, was that there was LOTS of political commentary in all kinds of chess magazines back during Bobby Fischer’s later years, with all the hateful rhetoric Bobby was spewing in those days. There’s no ban on talking politics in a chess collecting magazine. We have war-themed sets, political sets, we’ve recently had articles on Soviet sets, all sorts of things that invite, indeed require, some sort of political and/or historical commentary.

I firmly believe if people were to actually read this article, and compare politics to chess, suddenly the evil of undermining faith in our system of free and fair elections would become crystal clear: Just as if chess tournaments were run by mob rule.

Personally, I don’t believe there is a ban on discussing politics as it relates to chess in our magazines, or at our meetings. One of the main reasons I’m interested in chess is because I think it has a lot to teach us about life. And I don’t think that thought is original to me.

Can Chess Collecting Save the Elephants?

On the ivory ban: Let me explain the situation with ivory in about five minutes: Poaching is certainly a problem, but it’s not the main threat to the elephants. A much bigger threat is human overpopulation, land development and habitat fragmentation. It’s not the sight of a slaughtered elephant that should shock and disgust you, at least not as much as the sight of elephants walking through a hotel lobby, struggling to maintain their ancient migratory routes. Everyone thought this was cute, when this video first appeared on YouTube, but of course it

spells doom for the elephants in the long run. This is the equivalent of a polar bear standing on a shrinking patch of ice.

This is Mfuwe Lodge, in South Luangwa National Park, Zambia. Ever since this hotel was built right over their traditional migration path, this herd of elephants has been wandering through the lobby at certain times of year, to get to their favorite mango tree, which the Lodge's central courtyard was built around. They now market this to the tourists. Hotel guests are allowed to stand behind the registration desk and take pictures, as long as they don't get too close, and have a back office to retreat to if the elephants get angry or excited. And this kind of thing keeps happening more and more, as the towns and cities in Africa keep expanding, more hotels, airports and superhighways are built, and more land is fenced in for farming.

As human territories keep expanding, and elephant habitat keeps shrinking, the pressure on elephant herds grows worse and worse. HEC stands for Human-Elephant Conflict, which is usually where elephants raid farmers crops or even break into homes in their relentless search for food. Humans try to resolve these conflicts peacefully using things like bees, electric fences, or chili powder, but it often doesn't work. Sometimes the humans kill the elephants, sometimes the elephants kill the humans, and sometimes both. Both the humans and the elephants are just trying to eat. Just trying to make a living. Never mind Elephant-Hotel Conflict, we're even starting to hear terms like Elephant-Highway Conflict, and Elephant-Railway Conflict. In Sri Lanka, for example, it's now fairly common for elephants to be hit by trains. The elephants usually lose that one. Further, there are many indications that the illegal bushmeat trade is also a bigger problem than ivory poaching. People killing elephants for meat. Every day, elephant meat goes into cookpots across Africa, *as it has since the beginning of time.*

Conservationists often warn us that, unless we save the elephants, in the future they won't exist outside of zoos. My question is this: If the elephants at Mfuwe Lodge are not in a zoo, aren't they halfway there? Aren't they about halfway to being in a cage?

The ivory banners want you to believe two things, both of which collectors know are false: One, that everything ever made out of ivory is a mere "trinket". And two, that everything made out of ivory comes from a recently poached elephant. I think we can all agree that a club-sized Jaques set from 1873 is not a mere trinket, and was not made from recently poached ivory.

In order to save the elephants, at some point there's going to have to be an about-face on the ivory question. If the ivory is not allowed to have any economic value, in the long run, the elephants will be cleared off the land. There will always be more productive economic uses for elephant habitat than having elephants on it. And humans, like elephants, need to eat. If you really want to save the elephants, the thing that would help the most is to legalize the ivory trade. This is what's happening to most elephant habitat. This is what the elephants are really trying to compete with. Poachers are the least of their problems.

Conservationists will tell you that I'm making a self-serving argument, because I merely want to collect certain antiques made out of ivory, such as chess sets. Because it's self-serving, my

argument can safely be dismissed. Groups of antiques dealers sometimes get together and file lawsuits to challenge ivory bans, only to be laughed out of court.

“You shouldn’t want that,” is the entire legal theory behind the ban. Legislation based on this idea, the idea of “you shouldn’t want that,” usually fails in the long run. “You can’t legislate morality” as my father used to say. Prohibition in the 1920’s is only one example. Since Prohibition was repealed in 1933, we still have all the societal evils associated with alcohol that caused it to be banned in the first place. We’ve just found better ways of dealing with them. Just like we can with ivory.

What if there were an inexhaustible supply of ivory that didn’t require killing any elephants? There is. There are vast warehouses chock-full of it in Africa, ivory that African governments are unable to sell. These government stockpiles, if legal to sell, could keep prices down and discourage poachers for many decades to come. And after that, there is also natural death ivory, where the tusks are collected after the animals die naturally. Where the tusks grow as big and valuable as possible. And this is about as controversial, and causes about as much suffering, as walking around in the woods gathering up naturally-shed deer antlers, as many people do.

As for poaching, there are much better, more effective ways to fight poaching today, that didn’t exist just a few short years ago. Today’s herds are tracked by hordes of conservationists and wildlife experts with drones and satellite footage. Field DNA test kits have now gotten so cheap that the DNA of both dead animals and living, tranquilized animals is routinely entered into government and scientific databases. Poaching incidents especially, are now recorded, since the DNA from these animals may well be evidence in a criminal case. And the DNA from poached elephants is always readily available, since poachers never go to the trouble of hiding the entire corpse, nor could they if they tried.

Need I say it? A legalized ivory trade could help to fund these anti-poaching activities. The never-ending supply of ivory that doesn’t require any living elephants to be poached or killed could *protect living elephants*.

The sustainable use model is an arrangement that national governments in Africa would agree to eagerly. But it may take *chess collectors* to explain this to people. Conservationists will never explain this to people, much less adopt this obvious solution. Why not? Well, it turns out conservationists have been making a few self-serving arguments of their own.

It turns out that the current fundraising model, where donors contribute to these wildlife organizations in support of the ban, is simply too profitable. The problem with legal sales of ivory is that that money would bypass the wildlife organizations and go directly to the national governments of Africa, to benefit them and their citizens. Making sure local people benefit from their own natural resources is the key to saving species in the wild. But conservationists don’t want that.

Let the natural value of the elephants' ivory contribute to the survival of the species. That is a more sustainable model. As long as you have elephants, you will have ivory. Pretending it doesn't exist, or pretending that it only has value when it's attached to an elephant, is short-sighted. In the long run, the ivory ban will only accelerate the clearance of elephant herds off of high-value real estate that humans will always have more profitable uses for.

Because we're not willing to even discuss controlling or reducing *human* populations, sustainable use models are increasingly going to become the primary, if not the only strategy available to preserve biodiversity and save species in the wild.

Never mind poaching. Elephants are in competition with humans for simple living space. If you declare that their ivory cannot have any economic value, you deprive elephants of the one resource that might have helped them survive in a world completely overrun by humans.

Well, in conclusion, I know this talk has been all over the map, but I just wanted to get us thinking about the many, sometimes unexpected ways in which chess and chess collecting can be a force for good in the world. Thank you. Any questions or comments?