



Man Ray. *Self-Portrait with Chess Set.* 1921. New York City. The artist with his first realized chess set.

Man Ray and the First Modern Western Chess Set Design

by Larry List

As a collector of chess material one often asks oneself “what qualities make a great chess set?” We may each have *some* different answers, or place these concerns in a different order but, certainly among the qualities of great sets are:

- 1.) primacy, being the first design of its kind
- 2.) first design done by a particular designer
- 3.) reputation of the designer
- 4.) quality and distinctiveness of the design
- 5.) place in history the design occupies
- 6.) rarity – how many examples are extant and potentially available
- 7.) provenance – who owned the set or owns one like it

8.) materials – whether the materials may be precious or special

9.) beauty – its visual and tactile appeal

10.) condition – completeness of set and details of pieces

Each era and culture has had distinctive designs. In the 20th century, a favorite designer of mine is the Philadelphia-born, Brooklyn-raised Dada-Surrealist artist Man Ray. Of the many designs in wood, aluminum, ivory and precious metals that Man Ray created between 1920 and his death in 1976 few are still available for purchase. Those that come to market command prices at auction of tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars because of their rarity and the artist's reputation as one of the 20th century's most innovative artists.

Man Ray was the son of a Russian immigrant tailor. His artwork was far ahead of its time so he lived very modestly most his life. He designed lavish chess sets when commissioned to do so, but, along with his artist friend and chess player, Marcel Duchamp, he sought to design a simple, straightforward, but *modern* affordable chess set. He dreamed that it would supplant the Staunton set as the standard for play and would hence produce design royalties that would support his other art projects. This unrealized mission led him to design many different sets. Those from the 1940s produced in wood or anodized aluminum editions of 10 to 50 sets were priced at only \$ 40.00 a set, or about \$ 400.00 in today's money.

Being an admirer of Man Ray's designs, but lacking the tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars necessary to obtain a vintage set, I was pleased to learn that the Man Ray Trust is issuing a posthumous edition of the artist's rarest design, his 1920 *Early Wood Chess Set*. This set has many of the qualities of a great chess set.



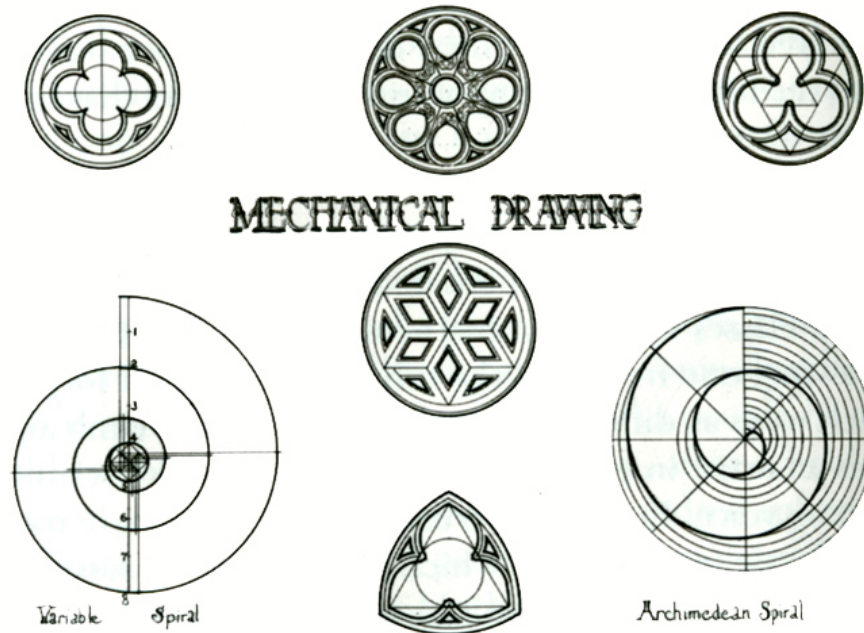
Man Ray Trust. Posthumous Edition of the 1920 *Early Wood Chess Set*.

Photo courtesy of Ameico, Inc. and the Man Ray Trust, 2012.

Though he had made drawings of chess sets as early as 1918, this was the first realized design by this artist created in his New York studio, a year before he moved to Paris to become a member of the Dada, and later Surrealist art movements. It pre-dates the iconic Josef Hartwig *Bauhaus Chess Set* by 3 years to claim the place in history of being the first modern western set to be comprised of all abstract geometric forms. Assembled from geometric shapes he found in his studio, Man Ray made only one set with this design, hence it is rare. In terms of provenance, it was bought by famed American chess benefactor, book and set collector, Gustavus A. Pfeiffer, and donated to the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This set is made of lathe-turned and milled wood forms that have a sense of refined simplicity and elegance. Painstakingly copied from the originals, but made anew by precision craftsmen in Germany and Italy, this new edition will be in fresh, perfect condition.

Though the forms were abstract, Man Ray still made iconic associations for them. The pyramid was the Egyptian symbol of kingship, the cone was a medieval queen's headgear and the flagon represented the bishops' tradition of creating exotic liqueurs and spirits.ⁱ Perhaps the most distinctive detail in this first set, and in many later variations, was that his pawns were as tall as his Rooks and almost as volumetrically robust as many of the other pieces of higher rank. He credited this gesture to the increased importance of pawns in modern chess play.ⁱⁱ However, it may also have been evidence of his sense of American values, which focused on equality and freedom.

Man Ray's use of the spiral violin scroll form to represent the knight expresses another type of geometry, the Fibonacci sequence. As a mechanical drawing student at Boy's High School, in Brooklyn, the young artist studied this geometry through drawing.



MAN RAY. *Mechanical Drawing: Circle & Spiral Studies.* 1904 -1908. Boys' High School, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Man Ray's father played the violin so the young artist-to-be may have associated this spiral form with his father, or a slightly older mentor and friend, Marcel Duchamp, who had carved spirals into the knight pieces of his *1919 Buenos Aires Chess Set*.



MARCEL DUCHAMP. *Knight from Buenos Aires Chess Set.* 1919. **MAN RAY.** *Knight from 1920 Wood Chess Set.*

Word from the Man Ray Trust is that this set will be offered for sale through a network of American and European museums, design shops, and chess sources. As of this date, it will be available at Artware Editions and Chess Forum, both in New York City; Turpan in East Hampton, Long Island; OK Fine Furniture in Los Angeles; Canoe in Portland, Oregon; Kuhl Linscomb in Houston, Texas, by mid-November of this year.

Presented in the same natural and satin black finish as the original set, the tallest pieces stand 3 ¼ inches high and will be presented in a box with an original Man Ray image. A matching board will be offered separately. And, because of the efficiency of the modern production, the new edition of the 1920 *Early Wood Chess Set* will cost around the same as the \$ 40.00 that Man Ray priced his 1940's sets, which, adjusted for inflation is only about \$ 400.00 USD, making it affordable for many more of us avid collectors. The Trust has not made it clear how many sets they will ultimately produce, so it might be wise to acquire a set as soon as they become available.

ⁱ Man Ray, *Chessmen by Man Ray*, 1945, as cited in *MAN RAY AND CHESS, Man Ray: Paintings, Objects, Photographs*, Sotheby's, New York, 1995, p. 142.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*