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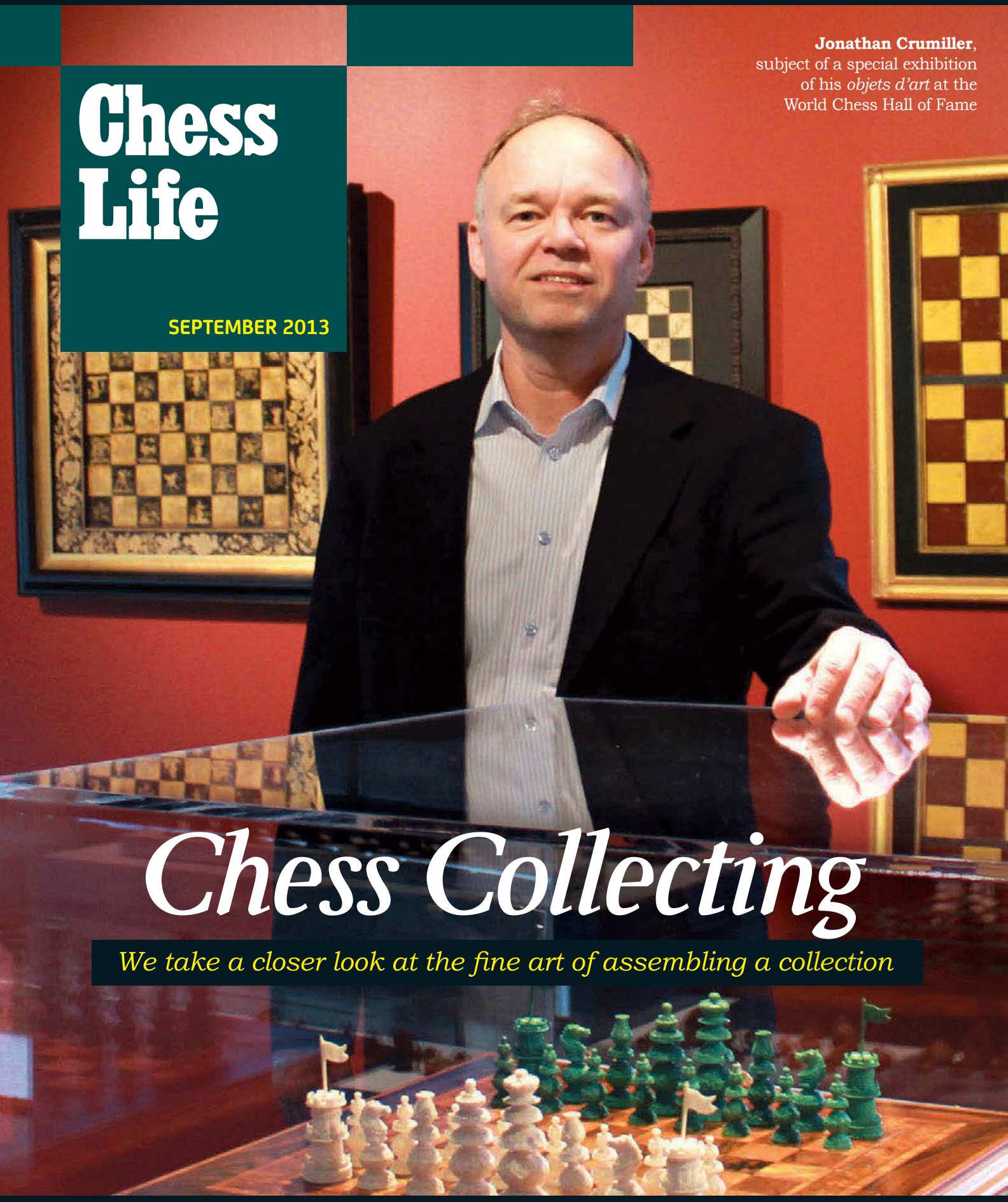
# Chess Life

SEPTEMBER 2013

**Jonathan Crumiller**, subject of a special exhibition of his *objets d'art* at the World Chess Hall of Fame



# *Chess Collecting*

*We take a closer look at the fine art of assembling a collection*

# The Jonathan Cru

## A premier collector's exhibition at the

JON CRUMILLER'S background as a tournament chess player and avid follower of the game inspired his passion for collecting antique playing sets. Over time, he has increased the scope of his chess collection, which now includes over 600 ornamental and playing sets, as well as chessboards, timers, books, and chess miscellanea, mainly from the 18th and 19th centuries. Ever inquisitive about the origins of these antique sets, Jon often conducts research projects about the evolution of chess set styles, usage, and manufacturing. He enthusiastically shares the results of this research with the wide community of collectors. Jon also maintains a website with photos of his exquisite collection at www.chessantique.com.

Jon's tournament experience stretches back to Fischer-boom years in the early 1970s, and includes a state championship title (Delaware) and numerous other tournament victories. Along the way, he has earned the USCF national master title in both over-the-board and correspondence chess. Still active via online chess, Jon credits much of his middle-age chess improvement to the outstanding teaching skills of his friend and chess teacher, Grandmaster Lev Alburt.

Jon and his wife Jenny live in Princeton, New Jersey, and have three adult children and one grandchild. Jon is co-founder and chief operating officer of Princeton Consultants Inc., a mid-size consulting firm that specializes in business optimization and operational efficiency. Jenny is an elected official on the Princeton Council, the governing body of Princeton, New Jersey.

### Philosophy of Collecting

The guiding principles of a chess collector can evolve over time as the collection grows and takes shape. My initial acquisitions were driven by a lifelong love of the game itself. It was a thrill to purchase an antique playing set and touch the well-worn pieces from chess games of the distant past. One acquisition led to another, and eventually I had to admit —to myself and others—that these chess sets, which were now overflowing from one room to the next, formed a collection, which also meant that I had somehow become a collector.

Nowadays things are different. My collection has expanded to include ornamental sets, which were created as objects of beauty rather than intended for use in actual play. I also collect antique chessboards, timers, publications, and chess miscellanea. Every collection must have boundaries, and mine is defined by two words: "chess" and "antique." But even these concepts are not quite specific enough. Does "chess" include variants or similar games? For my collection, generally not, so I don't collect *Xiangqi* (better known as Chinese chess). However, I do have several antique Thai/Cambodian Makruk sets. These sets and boards can be used for normal chess, even though the rules of Makruk are somewhat different.

"Antique" also has a boundary definition. Generally I collect items created prior to the 20th century. Victorian-era (roughly 19th century) sets have special importance to me, due to the extensive archival research

*(Top, left to right):* **Javanese Ivory Chess Set**, 19th century, Java, Indonesia, ivory, king: 5¾ inches. Photo © Bruce M. White, 2013. **German Barleycorn Set**, Mid-19th century, Germany, bone, king: 4¾ inches. Photo by Michael DeFilippo. **French Ivory Bust Set**, 19th century, France, ivory, king: 3¼ inches. Photo © Bruce M. White, 2013. **Berhampore Ivory Set**, circa 1800-1850. **Victorian Wooden Chess Table**, Late 19th century; Pieces: India, ivory, king: 3½ inches; Board: Britain, wood, board size: 19¾ inches x 19¾ inches. Photo by Michael DeFilippo *(Bottom right)*: **Islamic Brass Set and Board-Box**, 19th century, India, silvered-and-black-lacquered box and chess set, king: 2½ inches, Board: 14 x 10 x 4¼ inches. Photo © Bruce M. White, 2013.

# miller Collection

## World Chess Hall of Fame.

*(Above)*: **Prized and Played: Highlights from the Jon Crumiller Collection**, Third Floor Gallery. Photo by Michael DeFilippo. (*Below, top to bottom*): **Dublin Wooden Set**, circa 1850-1900, Ireland, wood, king: 5 inches. Photo by Michael DeFilippo. **Northern European Painted Wooden Set**, Second half of the 18th century, north Europe, painted fruitwood, king: 3½ inches. Photo by Michael DeFilippo.

I've done on the manufacturers and retailers of those sets. Earlier chess sets can be even more desirable because of their age, rarity, and oftentimes superlative craftsmanship.

Two other guidelines I have set for my collecting are "quality over quantity" and "seek the unique." I am constantly searching for high-quality sets with rare and beautiful features. This was not always the case; early on, my collection lacked some of the "must-have" types of antique sets: a Russian Kholmogory set, a Rajasthan canopy set, a pulpit set, and so on. But as my collection has gradually matured, those gaps have been filled. So now I focus on rare, or even one-of-a-kind, antique sets.

What about restoration for a damaged antique set? There are two schools of thought, equally valid, in my opinion. The first school says that damage is simply part of the history of a set, and should be left as-is. I have friends in the collecting world who follow that doctrine, and I respect them for it. But my own opinion is in line with the other viewpoint, that careful restoration can honor the intentions of the creators of the sets. One important corollary is that any restoration should be fully and accurately documented, so that the set's historical provenance is complete.

This last point is very important, and is worth stating in an even larger context: collectors have a solemn responsibility to the collecting community —and even to history itself—to accurately represent all aspects of the artifacts of antiquity. There is no place in the arts, sciences, or any other human discipline for historical items that are not fully authentic, or even worse, misrepresented. It is a "higher calling" of the collector, as it would be for a historian or museum curator, to ensure that the relics of past eras are passed on to future generations with confidence and valid provenance.

With regards to the future, I don't know where my collecting interests will take me next. Like the game of chess itself, my chess collecting experience has always been filled with new excitement and new discoveries. Wherever it chooses to take me, I'll certainly go along for the ride.

## Prized

Intended to be shown as *objets d'art* rather than used in play, ornamental chess sets are testaments to the artistic skill of their creators, as well as the refinement of the wealthy patrons who commissioned them. Freed from the confines of practicality, artists created chess sets of great beauty and originality. Master carvers flaunted their expertise in manipulating luxury materials such as ivory, gold, silver, pearls and precious stones in these ornamental chess sets. Many feature elaborate gilded decoration, delicate carving, and tall forms that made them less than ideal for playing, but perfect as demonstrations of wealth, or as a generous gift for a friend.

Ornamental sets were also symbols of the erudition and sophistication of their owners. Several of the ornamental sets in this show have themes drawn from history, mythology, or religion. The good versus evil set contains bishops holding copies of Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno*, while another set pits Venus and Bacchus, two figures from Roman mythology, against each other. Other artists turned to contemporary military conflicts for inspiration. The army of the British East India Company combats Indian military forces in John Company sets, while other sets celebrated the exploits of Emperor Napoleon. Ornamental sets could also show that a person was well-traveled. A set from Dieppe, France, where master carvers produced lovely ivory products could indicate the owners had traveled to the popular resort town. Swiss Charlemagne sets, produced in Brienz, Switzerland, were also marketed to tourists in catalogues.

These sets were so prized by their owners that, despite their delicate nature and rich materials, they have survived centuries later as examples of the excellent craftsmanship of their makers. They continue to be valued, not only for their aesthetic qualities, but also for the fascinating stories they tell.

## Played

In Prized and Played, superb examples of antique playing sets from across Europe and Asia illuminate the fascinating history of stylistic evolution of chess pieces. Though some of the sets in this half of the exhibition feature elaborate decoration, they were all intended for use in play. Their widely varied appearances testify to the imagination and stylistic preferences of the artisans who created them, as well as the artistic tastes of the players who used them over the centuries. They were made of durable materials like wood, ivory, bone, and metal so that players could regularly use them for play over many years. While the style of the simple, brightly colored, and dome-topped Islamic sets in the show stands in contrast to that of the European sets, diverse styles of playing sets were often manufactured within the same country. Some examples include the Directoire, Régence, and Lyon style sets produced in France, or the Barleycorn and Northern Upright style sets manufactured in England.

The 19th century brought the rise of modern organized chess tournaments and clubs, which highlighted the need for standardized chess pieces. The regional styles that had proliferated in previous centuries led to confusion and contention when the great players of numerous nations gathered to compete. Prominent chess manufacturers of the early-to-mid 19th century England began to stabilize the designs of playing sets into recognizable precursors of the sets we use today. John Calvert set up shop in 1791 at 189 Fleet Street, London, and mass-produced several designs that grew in popularity. These designs, as well as fancier playing sets imported and sold by James Leuchars and other retailers in the initial years of the 19th century, influenced subsequent well-known London chess manufacturers such as George Merrifield, Thomas Lund and his son William, and Charles Hastilow.

Finally the iconic Staunton chess set, designed by architect Nathaniel Cooke and endorsed by the famous English player Howard Staunton, emerged during this period. The sets were first manufactured and sold in 1849 by John Jaques and Son, Ltd., of London, and later became the standard for tournament play.

(*Top right):* **English Carved Hazelwood Set**, Early 20th century, England, hazelwood, king: 5 inches. Photo © Bruce M. White, 2013. (*Top middle):* **Bird Set**, circa 1900; mother of pearl chessboard, circa 1850-1900, Pieces: Probably China, ivory, king: 3¼ inches, Board: Great Britain, wood, mother of pearl, Board size: 20½ x 18 inches. Photo © Bruce M. White, 2013. (*Bottom left*): **East India "John" Company se**t, Early to mid-19th century, Berhampore, India, ivory, king: 5½ inches, dome: 16¾ inches, diameter; 13 inches high. Photo © Bruce M. White, 2013.

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