

“The Imagery of Chess’ Revisited.” An exhibition organized by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. Jenny Dixon, Director; Bonnie Rychlak, Curator.

Exhibition guest curated by Larry List.

The presentation of “The Imagery of Chess’ Revisited” at The Menil Collection is generously supported by Alice and Risher Randall with additional support from the City of Houston.

A fully illustrated catalogue co-published by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum and George Braziller, Inc. is available at The Menil Collection Bookstore. The catalogue features reproductions of the works shown in the original 1944 exhibition and essays by Larry List, Ingrid Schaffner, F. Lanier Graham, and Paul B. Franklin and Lowell Cross, with personal recollections by Dorothea Tanning, Richard Filipowski, and Jonathan Levy Bayer.

NOTES

1. Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (Boston: MFA Publications, a division of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2003), 188.
2. Julien Levy, “On Designing Chessmen,” “The Imagery of Chess” announcement, New York, December, 1944.
3. Antonin Heythum, Letter to Alexander Calder, November 18, 1944.
4. André Breton, “Profanation,” in *FREE REIN*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d’Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) as quoted in Larry List (ed.), *The Imagery of Chess Revisited* (New York: The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum), 74.
5. Kenneth Harkness, in “Chessmen of Tomorrow” in *Chess Review* (January 1945): 4.
6. Paul Cummings, “Interview with Julien Levy, May 30th, 1975,” transcribed by Deborah M. Gill for *Archives of American Art, Oral History Reviews*, 12, as quoted in *The Imagery of Chess Revisited*, 7.

front:
Isamu Noguchi, *Chess Table*, 1944
Ebonized joined birch tabletop with red and clear acrylic plastic insets, ebonized veneer
lumber-ply legs, and painted or anodized cast-aluminum storage pockets
19 1/8 x 24 7/8 x 26 3/4 inches
Chess Set, 1944 (2003 replica of original design)
Plexiglas
Tallest piece 3 7/8 inches
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum
Courtesy The Noguchi Museum, New York. Photograph: Kevin Noble

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THE IMAGERY OF CHESS
REVISITED



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September 8, 2006–January 7, 2007



The Blindfold Chess Event, Julien Levy
Gallery, New York, January 6, 1945.
Dorothea Tanning, photographic assemblage
of three photographs by Julien Levy
The Dorothea Tanning Studio and Archive,
New York. © 2006 Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris
below, right:
Julien Levy, *Chess Set and Board*, 1944
Chess Set: stained and painted oak; tallest piece, 2 1/2 inches
Board: cast reinforced plaster with incised lines and
seashells; 1 1/4 x 24 x 24 inches
The Estate of Jean F. Levy and The Julien Levy Archive
Courtesy The Noguchi Museum, New York
Photograph: Kevin Noble

ON THE EVENING OF JANUARY 6, 1945, AN internationally recognized assembly of artists, designers, and curators quietly gathered inside Julien Levy’s New York art gallery. Seated with his back to the chess boards, the chess master George Koltanowski waited to contend with his seven opponents: the Surrealist painters Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, the Italian Neoclassical composer Vittorio Rieti, the Swiss-born Bauhaus designer Xanti Schawinsky, the Romanian-born architect Frederick Kiesler, the former director of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Alfred Barr Jr., and Levy himself. The event was staged to complement an ongoing exhibition in Levy’s gallery entitled “The Imagery of Chess,” which opened on December 12, 1944. Reflecting a quest for diversity in design, the show featured chess pieces, tables, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and music by thirty-two artists (a total equal to the number of pieces on a chessboard). In addition to five of the seven chess players mentioned (excepting Barr and Levy), the exhibition included, among others, Surrealists Yves Tanguy and Alexander Calder and emerging American artists Robert Motherwell and Arshile Gorky. Each of the seven players sat alone before a newly-designed chess set and waited anxiously in silence for Marcel Duchamp, the co-curator and referee, to call Koltanowski’s next move for them in turn. Koltanowski, forbidden from looking at

any of the boards, visualized the progression of each game in his mind and listened for Duchamp’s reply before making his response. The master swiftly defeated all but Kiesler, whom he wrested to a draw. Levy and Duchamp would later describe this event as a “pre-happening happening.”¹

During the summer of 1944 when the ideas for “The Imagery of Chess” were first taking shape, war was raging on nearly every continent. The Allies were invading France while the Americans and Japanese struggled over the Pacific.

Exiled from his native Germany, Ernst spent these months playing chess with his friend and dealer Levy in their rented summer home in Great River, Long Island. Initially unable to find a chess set for their impromptu games, the pair decided to construct new chess pieces with improved functional and aesthetic appeal. Sharing Ernst’s garage studio, Levy devised the plaster prototypes for his *Chess Set and Board*, 1944, with rounded bottoms designed for use in the sand. Meanwhile Ernst sculpted the models for his *1944 Wood Chess Set*. The first set to depict a queen taller than a king, Ernst’s set may have reflected his admiration for future-wife Dorothea Tanning, who also inhabited the summer house along with Levy’s wife, the painter Muriel Streeter (both of whom contributed works to “The Imagery of Chess”). With the help of Duchamp, who publicly declared he had abandoned Dada and Surrealist art in the early 1920s in favor of the royal game (a popular term for *chess*),



Levy and Ernst conceived of a chess-themed exhibition. Levy’s gallery, which was known during the 1930s and 1940s as the fashionable venue for Surrealist and Neo-Romantic artworks, provided an ideal location.

The aims of Levy’s exhibition were both ambitious and multifaceted: to revitalize the game of chess through innovative design and to expand artistic thinking to incorporate the hard-earned lessons of chess. In the invitation to the exhibition a text by Levy explained their chief motivations: “*The standard chess sets now in use, the FRENCH Set and the STAUNTON, are both somewhat confusing in the similarity and intricacy of their forms... Cannot a new set be designed, that is... at once more harmonious and more agreeable to the touch and sight, and above all, more adequate to the role the figure has to play in the struggle?*” In the “*complicated modern game*,” the pieces themselves would “*inspire*” the player towards a swift solution.²

Max Ernst, 1944 *Wood Chess Set*
Stained boxwood
Tallest piece: 5¼ inches
The Dorothea Tanning Studio and Archive,
New York. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York/ ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy The Noguchi
Museum, New York. Photograph: Kevin Noble



right:
Dorothea Tanning, *End Game*, 1944
Oil on canvas
17½ x 17½ inches
Collection of Harold and Gertrud Parker,
Tiburon, California
Courtesy The Dorothea Tanning Studio
and Archive. © 2006 Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris



AS A GAME THAT SIMULTANEOUSLY EMPLOYS the language of love, sex, and war, with its “pinned knights” and “mated kings,” chess moved the participants to explore a variety of new ideas and motifs. In Dorothea Tanning’s painting *End Game*, 1944, a white queen’s satin shoe violently crushes a black bishop’s miter, a symbol of clerical authority. A dotted line traces her strategic path through a darkened checked landscape. Because only the death of a king constitutes a true endgame in chess, it remains unclear whose “endgame” is at stake for Tanning. The queen’s fury could point to the church, the state, or perhaps even her lover, Ernst, who, as a three-time divorcé, may have given her pause. On a lighter note, Antonín Heythum, a Czechoslovakian industrial designer, whimsically explored the eroticism and the product of a “mating” in his *Chess Set for Nurslings*, 1943–1944. Comprised of anatomically inspired aluminum pieces, the set and its board rest on a baby blanket. Using a Dadaist conflation of the sexual with the infantile, he described his piece as a mischievous challenge to the other “very serious chess-art contraptions.”³

A close friend of Man Ray and Calder, Heythum’s presence in “The Imagery of Chess,” like that of many of the other artists, demonstrates a web of personal connections fostered in part through chess. The artists involved in the show, however, differed sharply in their opinion of the game. While some of the participants, such as Duchamp and Man Ray, had studied chess for many years and created chess-related works, others, like the American painter Leon Kelly and the designer Isamu Noguchi, were not avid players and would address this theme only once in their careers. Matta questioned the purported rationality of chess, while André Breton declared it to be a narcissistic “profanation.”⁴ A tacit battle was also taking place between nationalities and generations. The center of the art world was shifting away from the European-born Surrealists towards a younger crowd of New York School painters.

The implications of conflict were also fresh in the minds of certain critics. In his 1945 article in *Chess Review*, Kenneth Harkness writes “In the brave new world of tomorrow...the boys who have accustomed themselves to the peculiar and strange shapes of tanks and foxholes will not be too disturbed by untraditional styles of chessmen.... they may prefer the intensely modern design of the Max Ernst chessmen.”⁵ World War II similarly rippled into the artists’ choices of medium. During this period of rationing, recycling,



and substitution, readymades and cheaper, newer materials, such as aluminum and plastic, had a particular appeal. Objects that were small and lightweight were ideal for transporting at a moment’s notice. A long-time exile and nomad, Duchamp exhibited a modestly scaled *Pocket Chess Set*, 1943, in the palm of a rubber glove, pinned to a wall. The work was an altered readymade of a pocket set sold in magazines. He replaced the standard pieces with celluloid ones and pierced them with pins to hold them in place. Although the size of Duchamp’s skewered set demonstrated wartime efficiency, he resolutely maintained that chess was not chiefly about struggle. Recalling Duchamp’s tutelage, Levy wrote, “He said it wasn’t a war game, it’s an aesthetic game, and you feel the shape of the board as it begins to shift its pattern and you make it become beautiful, even if you lose.”⁶ Taking this lesson to heart, Levy endeavored to create an environment where the elegance of chess could transcend the surrounding darkness of bloodshed and uncertainty.

Organized by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, “The Imagery of Chess’ Revisited” presents a rare grouping of paintings, drawings, and chess-related objects chosen to recapture the spirit of Julien Levy’s groundbreaking 1944–1945 exhibition. It features works by artists in the original show in addition to materials related to the context of that exhibition. The Noguchi Museum was inspired to delve deeply into the artistic and historical significance of Levy’s project after their acquisition in 2002 of a chess table Noguchi made for Levy’s show, and their successful reconstruction of Noguchi’s lost chess set from 1944. “The Imagery of Chess’ Revisited” invites visitors to discover new aspects of the artists—such as Ernst, Calder, Tanguy, and Matta—who struggled to translate their ideas into the combative beauty of chess.

*Text by Curatorial Assistant Miranda Lash,
The Menil Collection, adapted from The Imagery
of Chess Revisited exhibition catalogue.*

Antonin Heythum, *Chess Set for Nurslings*, 1943–1944
Anodized aluminum
Tallest piece 1⅞ inch high
The Man Ray Trust
Photographed on the board from *Permanent Attraction*, 1948, by Man Ray
Board: wood with painted squares, 1½ x 12½ x 12½ inches
On baby blanket (not original): wool and satin, 14 x 14 inches
© 2006 The Man Ray Trust. Photograph: Larry List