

On Collecting Staunton Chessmen

*A beginner's guide to assembling
a collection of the finest chess sets.*

By Frank Camaratta

My chess set collecting obsession had its start a few months after I first learned the moves of the game. That was the summer before my 16th birthday. A few friends in my new neighborhood took the pains to explain the moves to me and I was addicted. All I could do was eat, drink and sleep chess.

I was entering my junior year in high school. I turned 16 in the fall of that year and, for my birthday, my mother gave me a nice set of wooden Staunton chessmen. These were nothing spectacular, just a good, solid, German-made weighted set of lacquered chessmen in a wood slide-top box. The pieces were tournament size and I made good use of them in the years that followed.

The lessons I've learned in the intervening 22 years I would like to now share with you. I hope to help you avoid some of the pitfalls and costly mistakes that can befall a new collector. An education in collecting can cost more than tuition to a four-year college. Make no mistake about it, this can be a costly education. First, having been a serious tournament chess player, my interest was in practical playing sets--the Staunton design in particular. What I had discovered very early in my collecting career was that there was woefully little information on the Staunton chessmen and what did exist was mostly incorrect. So, I decided to pull together as much information on the Staunton pattern as I could.

The Staunton chessmen were designed and first manufactured in the United Kingdom by the firm of John Jaques. I obtained a copy of the design registration for the Staunton chessmen from the patent office in London. The Staunton chessmen design was registered as number 58607 on March 1, 1849. The title of the registration was "Ornamental Design for a set of Chess-Men." It was registered by Nathaniel Cook, 198, Strand, London, under the Ornamental Designs Act of 1842. Interestingly, the registration was limited to Class II, articles fabricated mostly from wood.

There have been allusions to a set of similar chessmen having been designed around 1835. That "fact" seems to have been repeated several times in the literature. However, there is no evidence to support that contention.

Well, who was Nathaniel Cook and what was his connection with John Jaques, the original manufacturer? Moreover, how did Howard Staunton get into the mix? What is known is that the first Staunton chessmen were manufactured by the firm of John Jaques, whose business premises were in Hatton Garden, and later on the Strand in London. What is also known is that Cook managed to obtain the endorsement of the then self-proclaimed World Champion, Howard Staunton who, after defeating the leading French Champion Pierre de Saint-Amant in their landmark 1842 match, became the World's "Unof-

ficial" World Champion.

What is not known is the relationship between Jaques and Cook or between Cook and Staunton. We do know that Staunton wrote a daily chess article for the Illustrated London News (ILN). It has been reported, but not verified, that Cook was affiliated with the ILN, possibly as a partner. It has also been reported, again without verification, that Cook was John Jaques' son-in-law.

What to Look For In the Early Sets

Make no mistake about it. If you are looking for a set of antique Staunton chessmen to enhance your collection, there are chessmen produced by Jaques of London and then there are the rest. Jaques Chessmen, Staunton or otherwise, are by far the most collectible and, as a consequence, the most expensive. This is not to say that there are not other Staunton chessmen that are worth collecting. For example, British Chess Company Xylonite chessmen quickly come to mind. However, if you are looking for one set of vintage Staunton chessmen, you must have a Jaques.

What follows is a distillation the important details that will serve as a roadmap for anyone who is seriously contemplating this investment.

The Chessmen

The original Staunton chessmen produced by Jaques were and still are quite

The original Jaques Staunton design from 1849.



unique in appearance. Although generally described as a radically new design for their time, the form was based on the earlier Northern Upright Chessmen which were designed in the 1840s by Lord John Hay.

The Staunton chessmen featured very broad bases, gracefully contoured stems and attractively turned and carved head-pieces. From the graceful Formée cross atop the king to the six crenelled rook, these chessmen make an impression. The knights, however, are their hallmark. They were derived from the visages which adorn the Elgin Marbles, which form a part of the east Pediment of the Greek Acropolis. The "Marbles" were "expropriated" in 1816 by Sir Thomas Bruce and brought to London. They can be viewed today at The British Museum in London. Some important details to look for in the chessmen when contemplating your purchase follow.

1. The original Staunton Chessmen were available in a Standard size (8.9 cm) and a Full Club size (11 cm king) only.
2. The original chessmen were available in boxwood and ebony, ivory and Wedgwood Carrara(!). This latter is largely unknown to both the Wedgwood and the chess collector communities.
3. The large Club-size Ivory set was introduced to the line in very limited quantities in April of 1850.
4. Jaques originated the praxis of weighting their chessmen for enhanced stability.
5. Only the 11 cm boxwood and ebony chessmen were weighted initially. Ivory chessmen were NEVER weighted.
6. The 8.9 cm chessmen could be felted or unfelted. Ivory chessmen were NEVER felted.
7. The black knight heads for the boxwood and ebony chessmen were actually stained boxwood. Apparently, carving the rock-hard ebony was difficult and more time-consuming than boxwood, so, for the first three years or so of production, the knight heads for the ebony side were stained boxwood. If you find a set of Jaques chessmen with stained boxwood black knight heads, the set is pre-1852.
8. In a true Jaques set, the king's crosses are removable. Also, the knights are two pieces--the head and the base--which are screwed together.
9. Jaques was the first chess set manufacturer to affix the symbol of a king's crown to the summits of the kingside rooks and knights. This praxis was largely copied and is not unique to sets produced by Jaques. These chessmen are often offered on eBay as authentic Jaques chessmen. Don't be fooled. Look for the Jaques London mark imprinted on the base.
10. The library-size (7.3 cm king) was added around 1852, while the small club size (10 cm King) debuted around 1856.
11. Library-sized and ivory sets were NEVER weighted. The standard sets were available in both weighted and unweighted configurations. The small club and full club size wooden sets were always weighted.
12. Every Jaques chess set will have "Jaques London" imprinted on the upper part of the rim of the base of the white king if the set is boxwood and ebony and on the underside of the base of the ivory king. Both kings are so marked for sets produced after around 1890.
13. The kings from the earliest Jaques chessmen, which I refer to as the Cook style in my codex of Jaques chessmen, will have the imprint J. Jaques London on their bases. This is true for both the boxwood and ebony as well as ivory chessmen. The "J." can sometimes be difficult to discern. All legitimate Cook style Jaques chessmen will have both the J. Jaques London imprinted on the base of the king as well as a white hand-signed and numbered label. Find one of these and you have found a very valuable collectible set of Jaques chessmen.
14. The "Jaques London" mark on the underside of the ivory chessmen varies in configuration and can be confidently used to date the set. The earliest marks were printed on two parallel arcs. Later ivory sets were

Collecting

marked in two parallel straight lines and, later, in a single straight line.

Registration Certificates

1. Each chessman in a Jaques set, sold during the first three years of production, had a small green paper disk affixed to the underside of their bases.
2. This disk bore a registration mark consisting of a small diamond which identified the day, month and year the design was registered, the class and a parcel number. This protected the design from piracy during those three years.
3. Although the pamphlet from the patent office in the UK lists one registration disk design for 1849, the year the Staunton chessmen were registered, I have discovered that there were actually three designs printed and distributed. The first two had printing errors and omissions. These were used from 1849 to 1852, after which the Patent printed the registration disks correctly.

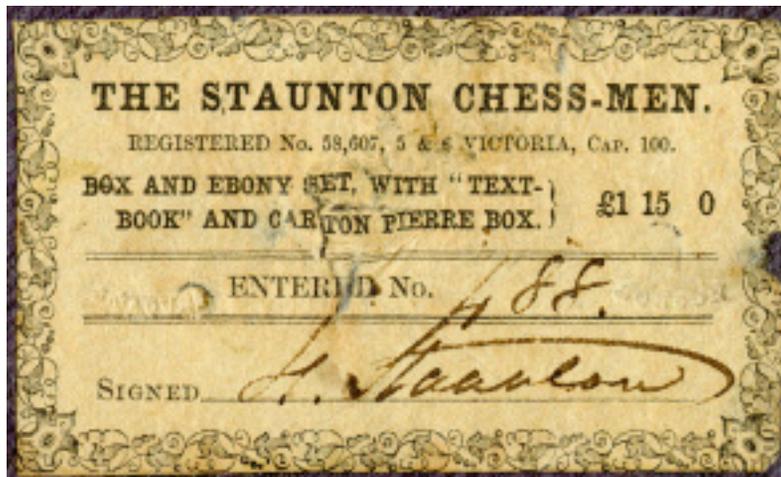
Boxes and Carton-Pierre Caskets

Perhaps the most intriguing aspects of collecting Jaques Staunton are the richly adorned Gothic style Carton-Pierre caskets in which they were housed. These caskets were designed by Joseph L. Williams. Matching Carton-Pierre treatment adorned leather chessboards were designed and sold by William Leuchars and first offered to the public in December, 1849.

1. Chessmen were initially housed in hinge-top mahogany boxes with a semi-mortise lock and key, Carton-Pierre caskets in three configurations for "unweighted" wooden and ivory chessmen, and the large Spanish Mahogany coffer with removable compartmented trays for the club-size ivory chessmen.
2. The mahogany boxes which housed the earliest boxwood and ebony chessmen were distinctive. They had unique hand-made dovetail joints, soft, slightly rounded corners, and they bore their manufacturers label on their undersides. Some of the earliest boxes also bore a small green label on the underside of the lid. Printed on that small label were the words The Staunton Chessmen Jaques, London. This label is quite rare and a good indication that the box is one of the

earliest made to house the Staunton chessmen. Later Mahogany boxes would carry their labels on the underside of the lid. This did help preserve the labels since they were not placed directly on a wear surface.

3. The Mahogany boxes were lined in a green billiard cloth and lacked the center partition found in later boxes.



One of the hand-signed and numbered labels that were affixed to the box of each of the early Staunton sets

4. The Mahogany boxes which housed the club-size chessmen had a large scalloped brass escutcheon inset into the lid and around the keyhole. Mahogany boxes which housed later sets would use circular rather than the scalloped brass on the top of the lid and a thin brass strip set inside the keyhole.
5. Carton-Pierre caskets were made in three configurations. All three configurations utilized the same four side and lid moldings. For the Library-size ivory sets, which were introduced around 1853, the casket had a false, raised bottom. The 8.9 cm and later the 10cm sets were both housed in caskets with the bottom located in its normal position. Carton-Pierre caskets, which housed the club-size ivory sets, utilized a "height extender" which increased the casket height by around 1 inch.
6. The underside of the lid of each Carton-Pierre casket has a decorative gold leaf fleur-de-lis. The specific design of that decoration can be used to date the earliest caskets. The decorative pattern was standardized around 1853.
7. The earliest Carton-Pierre caskets had ivory-colored satin interiors.
8. All Carton-Pierre caskets had a leather-hinged lid and side-mounted ribbons which held the lid in a near vertical position. There was also a small leather or cloth tab on the front of the lid to facilitate opening.

9. The large weighted chessmen were generally not offered in Carton-Pierre caskets. These caskets are very fragile and the heavy pieces would simply break through the sides.

Early Labels (1849-1851)

1. Each box bore a manufacturer's label affixed to the underside of the box or on the bottom inside of the large Spanish Mahogany caskets. This praxis was later changed to affix the label to the underside of the lid of the Mahogany boxes.
2. The earliest labels were white with a decorative black fleur-de-lis. A slightly different Label was designed for sets numbered 600 or so to 999.
3. Along with the box contents and registration number (58,607 5&6 Vict. Cap. 100.), each label bore an original (not a facsimile) signature of Howard Staunton and the production number of the set, also in Staunton's hand. Based on certain observations, I believe Staunton hand-signed and numbered 999 labels (or signed as many as he could until hampered by writer's cramp).
4. These early labels were numbered sequentially, so set #120 could be an 8.9 cm wooden set in a small Mahogany box, while set #121 might be a large ivory set in a large Carton-Pierre casket.
5. Little known is the fact that the earliest labels also have the Jaques London imprint invisibly embossed into the label. The same tool used to mark the bases of their Kings was used to make this imprint. This little-known fact alone should be worth the time you have taken to read this article.
6. These labels were used for sets sold during the first two years of production.

Numbered Labels (1852-1856)

After three years, the design registration expired and was not renewable. On August 11, 1852, Nathaniel Cook entered into an arrangement with Howard

Staunton for the exclusive use of his name and facsimile signature on the labels. This next group of labels was produced under this new arrangement. Labels within each of the three color groups were numbered sequentially without regard for the size of the chessmen.

1. Following the Staunton hand-signed labels, there were a series of labels which showed the box contents, the registration or Entered number (58,607 5&6 Vict. Cap. 100.), a facsimile signature of Howard Staunton and a mechanically printed production number.
2. These early manufacturer's labels were printed in green, yellow and red. The green labels bore Entered numbers from 1000 to 1999. These were used exclusively on the Mahogany boxes which housed the wooden chessmen. Yellow labels bore numbers from 2000 to 2999 and were used exclusively on Carton-Pierre caskets which housed Library-sized and 8.9 cm Boxwood and Ebony chessmen. Finally, red labels were numbered from 3000 to 3999 and were used on BOTH the large fitted Spanish Mahogany caskets and Carton-Pierre caskets which housed ivory sets of all sizes.
3. After the supply of numbered manufacturers' labels were exhausted, new labels were produced which displayed the box contents and registration number (58,607 5&6 Vict. Cap. 100.), but no longer bore a production number. These labels were printed in green, yellow and red. Yellow and green were used exclusively on boxes which housed Boxwood and Ebony sets, while, as before, the red labels were used exclusively for the ivory chessmen. These labels were used from around 1856 through 1862.
4. In 1862, a new label was introduced which commemorated an award Jaques received. The label now bore the words Two Prize Medals Awarded 1862. The box contents and Facsimile Staunton signature still appeared, but the Entered Number was dropped. Eventually, the Box contents were dropped from the face of the label.

The Leuchars Factor

The earliest advertisements for the new Staunton chessmen have the following statement: "The Nobility and Gentry are respectfully informed that these new and elegant CHESS-MEN are now obtainable of W. Leuchars, 28. PICADILLY ..." The earliest Jaques chessmen were sold

through Leuchars and are quite valuable and have the following unique features.

1. The Jaques London mark on the bases of both the wooden and the Ivory sets were over-stamped "Leuchars". In the case of the ivory sets, the Jaques London mark is actually scratched out and over stamped. In addition, a Leuchars green sticker was affixed to the underside of the white King's base.



An early registration disc and the Jaques imprint on the base of an ivory set

2. Leuchars ivory sets were sold only in Carton-Pierre caskets and only in the 8.9 cm King. The label on the bottom of the casket originally bore a green Leuchars sticker.
3. Leuchars Ivory sets also featured a very unique Knight design, not associated with the Elgin Marbles in any way. These are quite rare.
4. Leuchars only offered Boxwood and Ebony sets in the 8.9" King. Also, Boxwood and Ebony sets offered by Leuchars were weighted. Although somewhat difficult to see, the Jaques London mark on the upper bevel of the King's base is over-stamped Leuchars.

The Design Evolves

The Jaques Staunton chessmen have evolved over the 150 or so years since their introduction. Many of the changes were made to improve the robustness of the chessmen. Among the other changes made were the relative proportions of the chessmen. Queens and pawns were made taller. The weight of the chessmen was increased.

Boxes and labels also underwent significant changes. Boxes housing sets produced after 1895 or so were fitted with a partition which separated the white pieces from the black. Labels changed every five years or so. It is beyond the scope of this short treatise to delineate those changes.

How to Choose

When you make your decision to invest in a set of vintage Jaques chessmen, you have a decision to make. Are you looking for a set which is the most collectible, or one which is the most playable? If you intend to use the chess set occasionally for play, then you probably do not want an ivory set. Also, you probably want a set with a 4" or larger King. If you are looking for collectability and investment growth potential, then you want a very early Club size wooden set or an ivory set. Ivory sets prices increase exponentially with size. A good rule-of-thumb to follow when collecting for value rather than utility is larger is better than smaller, older is better than newer, and ivory is king.

Original boxes and labels are important considerations when contemplating your purchase. So is condition. A well restored set of chessmen will always command a considerably higher price than a set in original condition that is damaged, has a poor finish or both.

Conclusion

Beware of counterfeits. With the rising price realized for a good set of Jaques chessmen, coupled with their increasing scarcity, sets made up from pieces assembled from unrelated sets, as well as freshly turned counterfeits, are becoming alarmingly more common. Labels from old Jaques boxes are often affixed to boxes which are not original to the chessmen. Off-brand chess sets are frequently passed-off as authentic Jaques chessmen.

The safest course is to purchase your antique Jaques chess set from a reputable dealer. Ask for a letter certifying the authenticity of the chessmen. Obtain a letter of provenance, if available. In the end, the extra cost will prove to be money well spent.

Finally, antique chess sets are not for everyone. Boxes are worn and often split. Labels are tattered. The chessmen themselves will be dinged and the baize base pads ratty. There will most certainly be hairline cracks in the ebony chessmen.

If, in the end, you decide that you really don't want to own an antique chess set, do yourself a favor. Purchase a fine set of House of Staunton chessmen. There's none finer--at any price! ■

Please see House of Staunton ads on page 2 and the inside back cover.