The Chess Players

By Francesco di Giorgio

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At least as early as the fourteenth century a favorite secular subject for European artists was that of a young gentleman and a young lady seated opposite one another playing chess. In France such scenes were often carved on ivory mirror cases and jewel caskets. An unaccompanied couple at the chessboard is thought by some scholars to represent Tristan and Iseult, whose romance was a popular subject for illustrations at the time. An ivory box in Cologne shows the termination of a game of chess in which the lady evidently has been checkmated, for she raises one hand in a gesture of dismay. The lady makes a similar gesture on an ivory panel of the fourteenth century in the Metropolitan Museum, where the chess game is one of four amorous scenes. On an ivory mirror case in the Louvre one sees a couple at the chessboard, the young man seconded by a companion equipped for hunting with a falcon on his wrist, while his fair opponent is being coached by a friend of her own sex who stands behind her chair (figs. 54 and 55 in R. van Marle, Iconographie de l'art profane). Like certain representations on ivory of pretty ladies in castles who defend their strongholds against besieging youths by hurling down roses, these gallant games of chess were probably meant as allegories of the warfare of love. As late as the mid-eighteenth century Hogarth, in his painting The Lady's Last Stake (recently in the J. Pierpont Morgan collection), depicted such a scene, in which the game has been played with cards and the stake is obviously the lady’s “honor.”

A little painting of a chess game by Francesco di Giorgio (see ill. p. 155 and detail on the cover), which came to the Museum in 1949 as a bequest from Maitland F. Griggs, repeats the motif of such a momentous contest between a man and a woman. In this picture each of the handsome blond contestants is attended by numerous supporters of his or her own sex. The backers refrain from communicating with the players, although it is clear from the aspect of their faces that a great deal hinges on the issue.

Evidently the young man has already won, for his left hand holds one of the black chessmen and none of his adversary’s pieces remain on the board. The youths in the audience appear well pleased with the outcome of the game.

Center: Ivory tablet with four scenes of courtship, including a game of chess. French, xiv century. Gift of Mrs. Mary Ann Blumenthal, 1938
game, whereas the maidens betray distress. The players themselves are moved by emotions of far more complicated sorts—and here Francesco di Giorgio proves himself a master of facial expression. Instead of feeling frankly triumphant as one would have anticipated, our hero has fallen into a state of discomfited indecision. For the lovely defeated heroine the game is already a forgotten episode, and as she gazes into space with sweetly solemn eyes she rests her right hand tenderly upon the arm of her recent opponent. Can it be, one asks oneself, that the poor creature has become infatuated with her vis-à-vis?

That indeed provides the key to the situation if we are to accept an interesting idea put forward by Raymond Koechlin in a treatise on French ivories published in 1924. He refers to a story of such a chess game, found in a mediæval chanson de geste which relates the splendid exploits of Huon of Bordeaux (The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeux, English translation by Lord Berners, 1534). Indeed, Huon's adventure as described in the “boke” seems to fit our picture perfectly, except that the picture should probably include a seated king among the spectators and Huon should perhaps be more humbly clad.

But now for the story itself—or at least a digest of it! Once upon a time, so we are told, the handsome young duke, Huon of Bordeaux, disguised as varlet to a wandering minstrel, came to the castle of Ivoryn, a paynim king. Huon boasting too freely of his skill at chess,
the king cried out angrily, "I have a fair daughter with whom I will thou shalt play on the condition that if she win thou shalt lose thy head, and if thou canst checkmate her I promise that thou shalt have her one night in thy bed. . . ." Summoned to the great hall, the daughter no sooner rested her eyes upon Huon, "whom she saw right fayre," than she wished the game at an end and herself the loser.

The board was set out, and as the playing commenced the king warned the spectators not to speak or in any way interfere with the players on pain of death. The enamored young lady had no difficulty in losing her game. But her father was so angry at suffering dishonor from one whom he believed to be a mere varlet that Huon, his sense of chivalry aroused, relinquished his prize. Thereupon the fair lady (her name is not given) went her way sorrowfully, muttering under her breath, "A false faynted heart, Mohammed confound thee, for if I had known that thou wouldst thus have refused my company I would have mated thee and then thou hadst lost thy head."

The Museum's Chess Players by Francesco di Giorgio is painted on a panel 13 3/4 inches high by 16 1/4 wide. At the right side and at the top and bottom the painting is complete, 1/4 inch of bare wood remaining, as is customary, beyond the limit of the gesso. At the left, however, the panel has been cut abruptly, a green column in the king's hall being split down the middle. The abducted left portion of the panel has been recognized by Allen Stuart Weller (in his monograph on Francesco di Giorgio, 1943) in the collection of Bernhard Berenson at Set-
Panel by Francesco di Giorgio, probably from the same piece of furniture as the Chess Players. Formerly in a private collection in Brussels. This illustration and the one on page 154 are reproduced from Allen Stuart Weller's Francesco di Giorgio with the permission of the publishers, The University of Chicago Press

tignano. The Settignano panel has the same height as our Chess Players and is about 11 inches wide. It supplies the rest of the split green column and shows a continuation of the hall including several additional youths who eagerly watch the game.

A curious painting by Francesco di Giorgio in the same style as his Chess Players is (or was) in a Belgian collection. It has about the same height as the Chess Players and shows a similar brick wall. A young woman standing at a window signals to a youth who sits on some rocks below. This panel may have decorated a piece of furniture, as one assumes that the Chess Players did. Indeed it is likely to have been the same piece of furniture, but this unidentified dramatic scene cannot have illustrated a further episode in the history of the Museum’s romantic chess players, for the faces of the youth on the rocks and the lady at the window are altogether different from those of our young couple who played chess together.