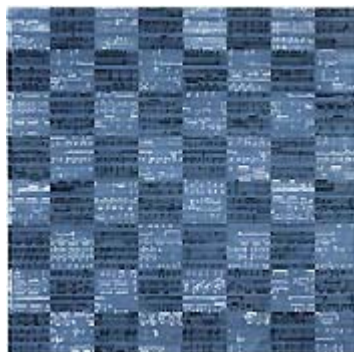




Print Article



Max Ernst
The King Playing with the Queen
 1954
 The Museum of Modern Art



John Cage
Chess Pieces
 Ca. 1944
 Courtesy The John Cage Trust



Man Ray
Silver Chess Set

WE ARE DUCHAMPIANS

by Ben Davis

"The Imagery of Chess Revisited," Oct. 21, 2005-Mar. 5, 2006, at the Noguchi Museum, 32-37 Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, N.Y. 11106

If you had to pick one image to stand as a symbol of the Noguchi Museum's new show, "The Imagery of Chess Revisited," it might be Max Ernst's sculpture of an inscrutable, horned spirit, towering over an array of chess pieces.

But the figure represented by the statue would not be Ernst. It would be Marcel Duchamp, and the chess pieces would be the 30-odd other artists in the exhibition.

In 1944-45, Duchamp, Ernst and Surrealist dealer Julien Levy hatched the idea of inviting artists to reinvent and comment upon the classic chess set. Figures like Yves Tanguy, André Breton, Robert Motherwell, Arshile Gorky and even John Cage took part. For the current show, the Noguchi has brought in guest curator Larry List to recreate the experience.

Duchamp, who served as de facto curator of the original exhibition, had by far the most phlegmatic artistic temperament of all those involved, but was also the most passionate chess player. The Noguchi show illustrates how other artists were drawn into Duchamp's game, a game that he would eventually win, becoming the darling of the anything-goes postmodern art world.

Take the chess designs of three more classically minded modernists: Man Ray, Alexander Calder and Isamu Noguchi.

Man Ray creates a suite of chessmen with clean, abstract geometric shapes, part classic Cubist sculpture, part components for some enigmatic machine.

Calder's large red and blue chess pieces have a fun, almost primitivist feel. Some are roughly carved out of wood, as if hewn from children's blocks, while others use found objects, like the sofa legs he made into rooks.

Finally, Noguchi's set is a study in the artist's gnarly biomorphism, consisting of a set of smooth, insect-like red and green plastic figures and a board that has been streamlined to a pattern of widely spaced dots that represent the black squares.

Three very different artists. But the "Chess" show points at their common interest: the mutation of traditional art forms by technology. You've got Man Ray's combination of reverence and technophilia, Calder's decorative sensibility combined with an eye for technical innovation and Noguchi's organicism intertwined with the polish of industrial design.

Chess -- a mythic game but also one associated with cold scientific rationality -- seems to have provided a field on which to wrestle with

1926
The Museum of Modern Art



Isamu Noguchi
Chess Table/Chess Set
1944/2003
The Noguchi Museum



Dorothea Tanning
End Game
1944
Courtesy Dorothea Tanning Studio and Archive



Marcel Duchamp
Pocket Chess Set
1943
Archives Marcel Duchamp

such tangled feelings about artistic modernization. It's an ambivalence Duchamp famously took to the next level.

The sphinx-like Frenchman's spirit is felt elsewhere. For Duchamp, the machine was a metaphor for sexual perversity, and the machine-like rules of chess are clearly fetishized in several works.

Matta's pencil-and-crayon drawing, *6 Threats to a White Q*, depicts a vortex dotted with floating black squares, in which several faceless figures with writhing erections prod a bound, nude queen figure. Dorothea Tanning's oil-on-canvas *End Game* features a high-heeled slipper grinding a bishop's hat into a checkered ground, liquid spurting from it as it is dominated.

But while other artists simply made chess over in their own style, Duchamp was more interested in the game for its own sake. His chief work in the show, *Pocket Chess Set*, is just what its name would suggest: a small, convenient leather travel version of the game. He also devised an ingenious system of disks that allowed him to assemble a game on a vertical surface.

What Duchamp brought to art was not any specific chess motif, but rather the logic of the game itself, and this approach would make him the most prescient of the artists on hand.

Thinkers from Wittgenstein to Saussure used chess as a key metaphor to illustrate how meaning is produced. Like words, the values of chess pieces are not determined by any positive, intrinsic property, but by a set of arbitrary conventions. Change all the pieces on the board for stones and good players can progress just fine, because the specific pieces are only place-holders for certain functions.

Duchamp became influential for bringing this lesson of the chess board to the art world, showing that art, like chess, is a set of rules that functions independently of the positive properties of the pieces - replacing the art object with a bike tire or a bottle rack, for instance. Asking his friends and contemporaries to trade the traditional chess pieces in for their own inventions at the Julien Levy Gallery was, in a way, the beginning the infiltration of his ironic relation towards visual values into broader artistic discourse.

The first "Imagery of Chess" show offered a perfect symbol for all this: a chess match, advertised on the original invitation, featuring chess master George Koltanowski playing simultaneously against Ernst and Levy, Dorothea Tanning and Xanti Schawinsky, architect Frederick Kiesler, composer Vittorio Rieti and MoMA mastermind Alfred Barr, Jr.

The match was orchestrated by Duchamp. Koltanowski played blindfolded.

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