Chess set

Ceramics and Glass Collection

Accession Nr.:	3911
Artist/Maker:	Kändler, Johann Joachim (1706 - 1775)
Manufacturer:	Meissen porcelain factory
Place of production:	Meissen
Materials:	porcelain
Techniques:	cast; gilded; painted in polychrome overglaze; pressed
Dimensions:	width: 32,5x32,9 cm height: 1,7 cm

The predecessor of modern chess was probably chaturanga, a game which developed in India around 500 AD. Pieces lined up on the eight-by-eight squares in imitation of the structure of the Indian army, in four military formations: infantry, battle elephants, cavalry and battle chariots. The army was led by the raja, the king and the general. The game came to Europe via the Arabs, and by the 18th century this strategic intellectual game had become one of the most popular leisure pastimes at court. At the same time, an anecdote spread in European circles which proved the inventiveness and mathematical ability of the inventor of the game. The unnamed scholar of mythical “ancient times” modestly requested from the raja a reward of grains of wheat: one on the first square of the board, two on the second, four on the third, and so on, twice as many on each successive square. The payment seemed very small, but the amount that would have been required on the 64th square was so enormous as to be unattainable. The squares of the Meissen chess board are painted purple and green with tiny square grids, and its edge is lavishly gilded. The squares of the initial positions are white octagons, and in all of these, on thirty-two fields are miniature pictures of Turkish infantry and cavalry, each shown in exquisite detail. The squares of the king and queen have half-figure representations of the Turkish emperor and empress, those of the knights galloping cavalrymen, and those of the rook, battle elephants. The pawn’s positions have representations of Turkish infantrymen. The figures, however, distinctive small sculptures by Johann Joachim Kandler (1706–1775), on little triangular bases, wear the clothes of European courts at that time. This chess set is the Meissen Porcelain Factory’s commemoration of the military success of the age, the victory of Europe over the Turkish Empire. The pawns hold their hats on their heads with both hands, the rook is a battle elephant, the knight a rearing horse, the queen an elegant, crowned lady, and the king wears armour. The complete Meissen chess set in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich has similar squares in the same colour scheme, but its chess pieces are ornate rocaille towers.

Literature

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