

# Art's chequered history



By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 26 June 2003



**A** small and enjoyable exhibition, *The Art of Chess*, brings together 19 chess sets designed in the last century by artists ranging from Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray through to Damien Hirst and the Chapman brothers.

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In an engaging and entertaining conceit, the display illustrates Napoleon's apocryphal last game of chess, played on St Helena in 1820, so that each set displays a successive stage of the contest.

The game, which was something of a myth in chess circles, turns out to have been the invention of a 19th century English writer, which is just as well, as its crudity does little to bolster Napoleon's reputation as a genius of strategy.

Successful tactics of a rather different kind, however, are displayed here, for the exhibition is arranged by RS&A, an art company that is selling limited editions of the five sets designed by contemporary artists. They are

all on show in the final room. Alongside the sets by the Chapmans and Hirst are ones by American Paul McCarthy, Spaniard Maurizio Cattelan and Yayoi Kusama of Japan.

The show operates as a context-creating and valueenhancing display for these works, whose starting prices range from £40,000 to £80,000, which even the auction houses could not have matched.

That aside, most of the sets, old and new, are either interesting or attractive.

The best of the lot, notable for its historical connotations and its wonderful, albeit unsubtle, iconography, is the porcelain Capitalists versus Communists set by Natalia and Yelena Danko, made in 1925 in Leningrad.

The king of Capitalism is Death personified and the pawns enslaved proletarians, while the Communists are golden, healthy, sicklewielding citizens. For purity of design, the simple geometric forms of Josef Hartwig's Bauhaus set are matchless, whilst Yoko Ono wins the prize for wide-eyed idealism with her design, in which all the pieces are white, thus subverting the game's competitiveness since you can only play "for as long as you can remember where all your pieces are".

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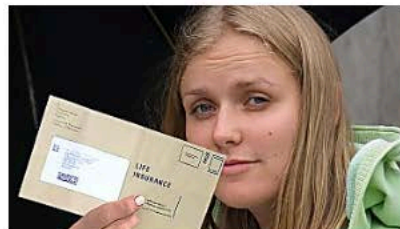
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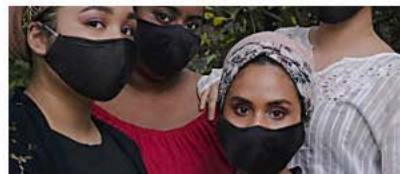
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The five new chess boards find their creators playing up to expectations. Hirst's quite beautiful, but impractical, work is executed in his signature medicinal style, with the pieces as boxes and bottles of pills.

In the Chapmans' entertaining design, all the pieces are sexually deformed mannequins and the blacks really are blacks, resplendent with giant, Seventies Afros.

Even more controversially, Cattelan's set, subtitled Good against Evil, consists of figurines, who on the Bad side include Hitler and Rasputin alongside Donatella Versace.

On the side of the Angels, Mother Theresa and Superman are inexplicably joined by Italian porn-star and ex-wife of Jeff Koons, La Ciccolina.

Until *September*. Information: 020 7420 9400.