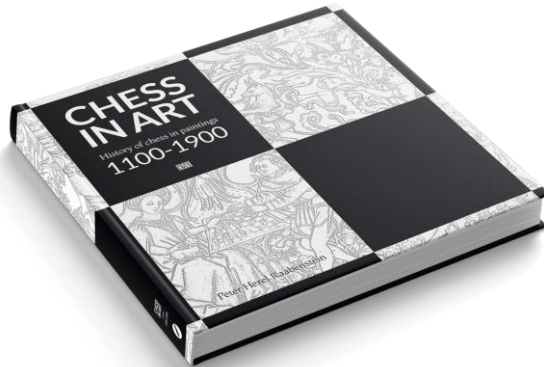


Book Review

By Carl Portman

Chess in Art: History of chess in paintings 1100 – 1900



Chess is art, science and sport, or so they say. There have been debates around this assertion across the centuries. Marcel Duchamp famously said that “While all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists”.

There is a dearth of books about chess in art. Enter stage right the new book from Peter Herel Raabenstein, published by HereLove, with some 317 pages. The author is a conceptual artist born in Czech Republic.

I write this review as a chess player for chess players. The advertising strapline says ‘This unique book, a collection of paintings where chess is the main theme, is a brilliant example of connection between the Game of Kings, art and history. He was inspired by the symbolism of chess and evolution of art itself’.

This is a book that contains mostly pictures with little text. Each page carries one or more images of art with the name of the artist. There are several pages at the end of the book giving a basic profile of each artist.

The book is divided into five eras across 800 centuries, thus:

1100-1500
1500-1600
1600-1700
1700-1800
1800-1900

This is followed by the Index.

It’s tricky to review a book like this. It is art, and therefore subjective to the reader. If you like art and chess, then I am sure the reader will relish this. It is the biggest collection of chess in art that I have ever seen in one place, and I can put it all on my coffee table. There is a lot of material to study and it was fun to see if the boards were set up correctly – something which often goes wrong, and infuriates real chess players, as it leaves a question as to whether the artist actually knew and played the game or not.

Unsurprisingly, as the centuries progress the artistic presentation changes and this will be a question of taste. I find some of the paintings to be magnificent such as Peder H.K. Zahrtmann's work (only one person seems truly interested in the chess and they are not at the board!) but other works are not to not to my taste. As I said, it is subjective.

The book demonstrates that the game of chess has been and still is played across the social spectrum, from Royalty to Ragamuffin, in castles and ale houses around the world. Chess is depicted as an intellectual pursuit, a thinking person's game. These paintings declare openly that chess brings families together in drawing rooms and clubs (*online chess, take note*) and that women and children are every bit as interested in the game. Indeed, there are plenty of paintings of women playing both men and one another.

In most of the paintings, the chessboard is the centre of attention but in others I had to look further to work out the chess connection. The answers are all there. There are Baroque and Classical works here, and it is fun to study the costumes and the settings. Then we can scrutinize the actual positions on the chessboard. How were such positions arrived at? Did they declare a wbroader message, perhaps even secret ones? There is a wonderful painting by Dominik Skutecky from 1898 which reminds me of Stephen Fry as General Melchett. I wonder if he has seen it – he likes chess after all.

I do have a couple of critical observations. I am not an art student, so I benefit from an expert explaining aspects of a painting to me. It helps me to increase my appreciation of a work. You won't get that here. I craved further information, but I appreciate that this is difficult to achieve. I wondered who the characters are, why did the artist add this or that aspect, what materials were used for the painting etc?

The author declares that it was not possible to obtain all images in the highest printing quality. He is reaching back hundreds of years after all. What is the objective of the book? Clearly to offer images of chess in art. In that sense, it has achieved the objective but there is more to this. It was a cultural journey. It reminded me of the old adage, *'It's not enough to look, you have to see'*.

Chess players might balk at the hefty price tag, but I do believe that it is one of a kind. Do I recommend it? Yes. I see it as an investment in any chess player's collection that can be enjoyed time and again. Visit the website to learn more at www.chessinart.com

RRP €111

320 pages

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