Chess Along the Silk Road
600-1500 CE

SILK ROAD
VIRTUAL MUSEUM

THE EXHIBITION

It is estimated that over half a billion adults play chess regularly, that is equivalent to over ten per cent of World's adult population.

The game emerged from the Indian sub-continent in the sixth century CE. In the following centuries not only had the game spread throughout Eurasia but by 1500 CE it had morphed into the international form that we know today.

Its spread was facilitated by the movement of armies but, more than that, through the cultural exchange that characterised the ancient silk roads.

The Exhibition shows how the game was portrayed in art, usually in miniature paintings in books but occasionally in a detail on a wall mural. It shows how the game changed from a pure battle/strategy game and acquired a 'courtly' undertone with the introduction of kings, queens and bishops. As the new pieces gained in power, new strategies (like castling) were introduced to give the King more protection.

The exhibition also shows the change in the representation of the chess pieces themselves, from the stylistic Islamic chess pieces, following on the prohibition against representing human beings, to the intricately carved pieces from the early middle-ages.

The exhibition, contains thirty sets of artifacts (pictures and chess pieces) from nineteen libraries and museums located in ten different countries.

It is now open in a brand new, modern exhibition space. The eLibrary contains twenty, free online publications including introductions to the rules of chess (Chinese, Indian as well as International style).

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FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION

THE AFRASIAB CHESS PIECES

Uzbekistan State Museum, Tashkent
(late 6th – early 8th century)

The Rukh (meaning Chariot in Perian) is shown here. It is one of the seven Indian/Persian chess pieces discovered in 1977 by archaeologists working on the site of the ancient city of Afrasiab on the outskirts of the present-day city of Samarkand.

The other pieces were a king, a vizier, a horse, an elephant, and two soldiers. They are among the earliest chess pieces ever discovered.

THE ISLAMIC CHESS SET

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. 1971.193a–ff (12th century)

This is one of the earliest (almost) complete Islamic chess sets discovered. The pieces are in abstract Islamic style. Note the two protrusions from the 'elephant'.

It is thought that this shape resembled the Bishop's mitre and inspired the renaming of the piece.

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THE LEWIS CHESSMEN

British Museum, London, UK.
1831,1101.84 (12th century)

Ever since they were discovered in 1891 in the Outer Hebrides, and believed to have originate in Norway, these beautifully expressive pieces carved from walrus and whale bone, have captured the imagination. But how come people so far North are playing chess?

The answer lies in the fact that Vikings had been trading with Baghdad since the 8th century CE, and had been part of the Silk Road earlier than much of the rest of Europe.

SCENE OF CHINESE CHESS

Detail from Temple Mural. The Buz Low Guangsheng Temple, Hongtong County, Shanxi, China (1319)

There are several portrayals of Chinese playing board games like Go (围棋) but it is rare to find them playing Chinese chess. This detail from a temple mural shows the Chinese-chess board quite clearly and it perfectly captures the rapt concentration of players and spectators alike. You can see scenes like this on many streets in China today.

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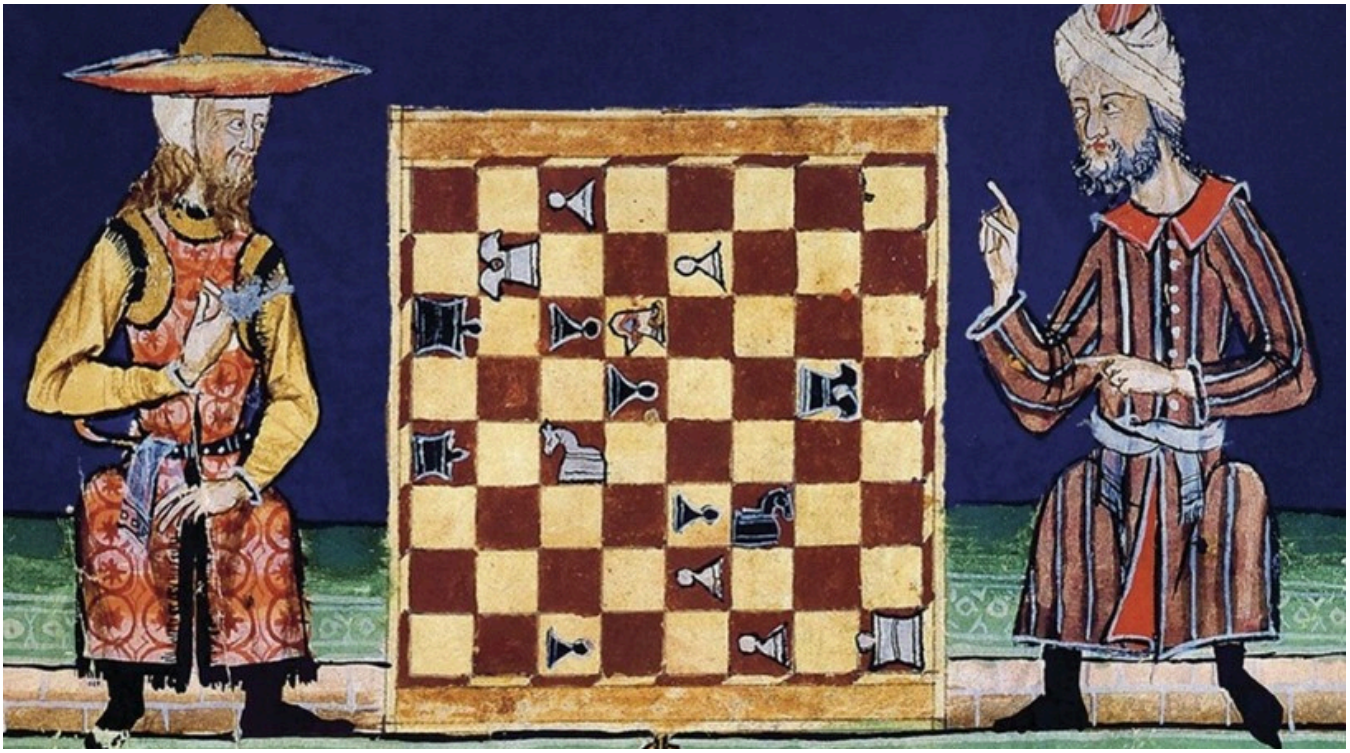

EL LIBRO DE LOS JUEGOS

Escurial Library, Madrid, Spain (1286)

The richly illustrated 'book of games' was devoted to chess problems and variants. It was commissioned by Alphonse X of Castilla (reign 1252-1284) and was completed just before his death.

Castile was one the edge of Islamic ruled areas of Spain and Portugal, where peoples of different faiths could live in peace, and play chess with each other.

Several of the images are shown in the Exhibition but a favourite is of a Jew and a Muslim playing chess. After the end of the 15th century, both groups would either have been expelled or forced to convert to Christianity.

Click here or go to https://silkroadvirtualmuseum.com to enter the Museum