



THE FIRST PAINTING OF A CHESS GAME IS IN SICILY

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The earliest known painting depicting a chess game is kept at the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily.

The Cappella is part of the Palace of the Norman Kings, which is in the higher western part of Palermo, called 'Cassaro' (castle) from the Arab 'Qasr'. The Palace originally consisted of two towers (Torre Greca and Torre Pisana) between which Roger II, the Norman king of Sicily, later added his residence, called the "Gioaria" (jewelled) from the Arab 'al-gawhariyah'.

In 1132, Roger II built a church with a nave and two aisles within the area of his Palace. This was the Cappella Palatina. On the 28th April 1140, a Palm Sunday, the Cappella was officially dedicated. In all probability, the decorations of the basilica were only completed around 1150. But the ceiling of the nave of the Cappella had been splendidly completed by 1140, as the sermon delivered on the 29th June of that year by the Greek Archbishop of Rossano, Theophanes Ceramus, bears witness.

The ceiling of the Cappella is decorated with tempera paintings on wood treated with plaster. The ceiling of the nave is articulated with many coffers of different sizes. These coffers gave an excellent opportunity to the Islamic painters to celebrate the secular aspects of the life of a 'Prince' who is strong and powerful because God has given him His consent and authority. The Monarch, Roger, gave welfare to the people and therefore had to be exalted.

In the Cappella, a Christian place of worship, the Muslim artists expressed themselves in their best traditional way without Christian censorship or limit on the themes. Certainly Roger was aware of such secular celebration addressed to him by his Islamic artists. For the religious aspect of the church decoration, he used the best Byzantine mosaicists to celebrate the glory of the God, Jesus Christ with all the Apostles and Saints on the walls and on the cupola. In this respect the Cappella is a brilliant showcase of tolerance and the capacity of Roger to amalgamate the three different cultures (Latin, Byzantine and Islamic) which were in conflict elsewhere but not in Sicily in the XII century.

The Islamic pictures of the Cappella Palatina may be classed as;

- (1) Scenes from 'the life of a Prince', with images reflecting the joy of power. We see drinking kings, singers, musicians, dancers, and so on. This is a traditional theme in Islamic art.
- (2) Scenes of great variety of animals, real and legendary. Again, a traditional theme.
- (3) Scenes from everyday life - a new theme.
- (4) Western motif - a new theme.

One painting of the 'everyday cycle' shows a chess game. It is the first time, in the long history of the game, that such a scene is known to have been depicted. Two Arabs, well dressed and with turban, seated on the ground under a tent have a chessboard between them, and play the game.

This painting may have given inspiration a century later to the Franco-Spanish miniaturists who illustrated the 'Libro de Acedrex, Dados e Tablas' which was commissioned by the Spanish King Alfonso X, el Sabio, and completed in 1283.

Another consideration comes spontaneously from the observation of the Islamic paintings of the Cappella. For centuries the painters of the vast world of Islam, from Persia to Syria, from Egypt to Spain, had the technique to paint realistically animals (like an elephant or a horse), humans (like soldiers, cavaliers, viziers, kings) and carriages (like a chariot of war). We know that these images were iconographic topics in Islamic art and many testimonies are left on many fabrics, plates, sculptures. These images were found in palaces of Sultans, Viziers, Caliphs and Kings in spite of the Qu'ran's prohibition of realistic depictions of animals and humans.

It is interesting to note then that the only animals and humans carved in abstract form for centuries in Islam and even in Christian Europe were chess pieces. I think that such abstract design was adopted only for practical reasons. The so-called 'Islamic pieces' were in fact pieces well balanced, easy to play with, to make and replace, to move around.

I agree with the opinion that 'a chesspiece is a tool. To understand it visually, as a design, it must be considered as a tool with a particular nature As a design a chesspiece is primarily an articulated image of invested power'. (Chess Sets, F.L. Graham, 1968, Introduction.)

The so-called 'Islamic' pieces were for the players of those centuries internationally used for so long a time because they were able to convey the message of their invested power. They were the Staunton pieces of their time.

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