

Chess in contemporary art

THERE IS A LITTLE BIT OF ITALY IN THE "BRONZE GAME" OF WASHINGTON

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In *The Chess Collector* (2/2006, p. 12) appeared the picture of an outdoor bronze statue situated in Richmond, Virginia, representing two chess players, and the editor asked: "Can anyone provide further information?". The statue is not located in Virginia but in Washington DC, John Marshall Park along the Pennsylvania Avenue and next to a court, U. S. Federal Court House, as made clear to me by my friend, the lawyer Douglas Rosenthal (*fig. 1*).



(1) - The sculpture of Washington with the game of chess.

The chess players in the sculpture are sitting on a small wall. The board is not oriented properly and, because all the chess pieces are of the same colour, the interpretation of the chessmen positioning in the game at first is anomalous, if not impossible (*fig. 2*), but the scene looks natural.



(2) - The board, with pieces that have the same colour.

Trying to interpret the game, I made this sculpture known to collectors and chess players with an article in *The Chess Collector* (3/2007) and *L'Italia Scacchistica* (1197/2007), which honoured a picture of the board on its cover.

Ivo Fasiori, read my article on the Italian magazine, wrote to the Director Adolivio Capece that, in 1999, surfing the Internet, had stumbled into the site of the Masonic Postal Chess Club, a circle of Freemasons correspondence players (*Internet, e*), which included a photo of the sculpture and the detail of the

board. Building on its extensive chess database, he had managed to locate the game and had sent it to the Webmaster.

The colour of the pieces was not as it could be assumed (the two queens were reversed), and the position was referring to the climax of a match played in 1855 (in Springhill or New Orleans, Louisiana) by none other than Paul Morphy, who was then eighteen years old, against his seventeen years old French-born friend Charles Amédée de Maurian. The latter had mated him in 12 moves!

Continuing the research, I found another site (*Internet, d*), where you can see that Morphy, with White, had allowed the opponent (as he often did) have the advantage of Ra1, a figure which has not been forgotten, and that a Black N had already left the scene.

The site follows the whole game, and after the eleventh move of White (Qe2xBa6) shows the position played in the sculpture: the Black bishop is still in the hands of the character who has captured and who certainly does not see the imminent danger of mate (*fig. 3*).



(3) - The right player, who holds the bishop just captured.

Here, the very short Morphy-Maurian game.

1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Bc4 Qh4+ 4. Kf1 b5 5. Bd5 Nc6 6. Nf3 Qh5 7. d4 Nf6 8. Bb3 Ba6 9. Qe2 Nxd4 10. Nxd4 b4 11. Qxa6 Qd1+ 12. Kf2 Nxe4 mate.

Diagram: position after 11. Qe2xBa6.

I sent new reports to the magazines (*L'It. Sc. 1198/2008 and TCC 1/2008*), arousing the interest of some readers, including Giuseppe Napolitano of Palermo, who cited the variation 12 ...

Ng4 mate, reported in several other paper and computer texts. According to him, "the move seems to be true, probably 12 ... Ng4 mate" (*L'It. Sc. 1199/2008*).

At this point, however, the artist had not yet been identified. Even the writing in relief "© LILLIE 83" followed by "TX" (Texas) hidden at the base of the seated players, had helped me (*fig. 4*).

(4) - The signature of the sculptor.

Finally, in 2010, in Bookshop of the National Gallery of Art in the American capital (which, coincidentally, is located two hundred meters from the "game of bronze"), my eye fell on the book "Washington Sculpture" (*Internet, b*). The title "The Chess Players" in the index sent me to the desired page, and I was able to ascertain that the artist is **Lloyd Lillie**, an American born in 1932, sculptor and professor emeritus of art at Boston University, as well as jazz musician. He studied at various American schools and the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence (*Internet, c*): so, *in this beautiful contemporary work of art there is also a bit of Italy!*

The book and the internet says that Lloyd Lillie has portrayed her son in the younger chess player and his father in the older one (*fig. 1*), the loser who holds the Black bishop (*fig. 5*).

(5) - The bishop at the hands of the right player.

On a site (*Internet, a*), we see the diagram, of course with the wrong colours of the two Queens, and read comments like "What a shame the position is improbable, and for more than one reason..." (*12 June 2009*), "I disagree. White's knight has just chased Black's queen from the c6 to the a6 square, where it now check's White's king. The only choice White has to block

on e2 with the queen. The artist probably chose this position because it's from one of his games, and it is clear which side has the turn, and why" (*14 October 2009*), and so on.

In John Marshall Park, a short distance, there is a statue of the same John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States from 1801 to 1835. Another interesting detail is that his favourite pastime was formed from chess, and the sculpture is placed (*fig. 6 and 7*) in such a way that he can "see" the game on the wall (*Internet, f*).

(6) - - The statue of John Marshall: the American politician from the pedestal "see" the game..

(7) - The game, that John Marshall, represented in the statue, can "follow" through the trees.

As a curiosity, I will say that the monochromatism of the pieces me think of a type of heterodox chess variants in which, with a referee, is played with chessmen of the same colour, and everyone has to remember which are his.

The complex, seen from afar, seems animated, and sometimes we see the fans who are photographed with the "players". If some reader had occasion to visit Washington DC, I suggest going to the John Marshall Park, Pennsylvania Avenue, near the Mall and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, Metro Red Line, Judiciary Square stop, exit to 4th street.

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 - (b): for the book (2010): <http://www.flipkart.com/washington-sculpture-james-goode-clift-book-0801888107>
 - (c): for the Author: <http://alchemipedia.blogspot.com/2009/08/lloyd-lillie-sculptor-nan.html>
 - (d): for the Morphy game (2010): <http://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessgame?gid=1238147>
 - (e): for Masonic Postal Chess Club (2007): <http://mpcc.freesevers.com/>
 - (f): per altre foto: http://dcmemorials.com/index_indiv0000352.htm
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