

CHESS SETS BY GERMAN TURNERS

The craft of turning - the term "art" of turning is also used - was at all times very closely connected with the production of chessmen.

For some years I have been researching this relationship in Germany. It has been a time consuming project. But occasionally there have been successes.

Thus I found a book printed in 1708 in Leipzig with the title "Der vornehmsten Künstler und Handwerker Ceremonial-Politica", written by Friedrich Friese. The subtitle to the chapter about turners reads (translated) "The ceremonial of wood turners as observed since long ago and in various places according to their rules".

This book points out it was a must for a turner when applying for the mastership to produce a set of chessmen with a board en suite. Also a spinning wheel and a spice box with seven compartments.

The importance chessmen had for turners in Germany is also shown by the seal of the Hanover turners' guild, which has incorporated a chess knight since 1743 (Figure A).

Figure B shows delicately turned Selenus type chessmen reproduced in the book "Drechslerkunst" (Art of Turning) by Hugo Knoppe, published in Leipzig in 1926. Knoppe reports that this set was made only in 1896, of boxwood and ebony, as a "Meisterstück" - a piece of work required of turners seeking to qualify as master turners - following an old design. He also says that a set such as this is not recommended to play with in view of its fragility. It should be treated as a valuable showpiece.



Figure A

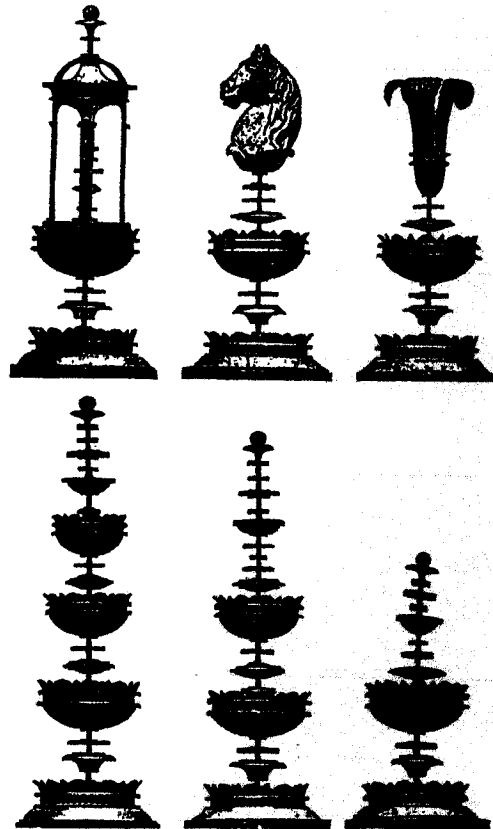


Abbildung 1.
Schachspiel. Meisterstück von H. Laakso. Cedreht in der Deutschen Fachschule für Drechsler und Bildschmitzer zu Leipzig. 1896

Figure B

That such elaborate work was produced less than 100 years ago shows how careful one must be in dating such sets.

A special pattern book for turners, published in Weimar, the first part in 1889 and the second part in 1895, shows chessmen, inlaid squares for chessboards and draughts. The authors are A. and M. Graef. No comments are given on the pieces in plate XXXII of 1889 (Figure C). With regard to the pieces in plate 8 of 1895 (Figure D) it says that they were suggested mainly as decorative objects.

Let me also draw your attention to the lovely carved horses' heads.

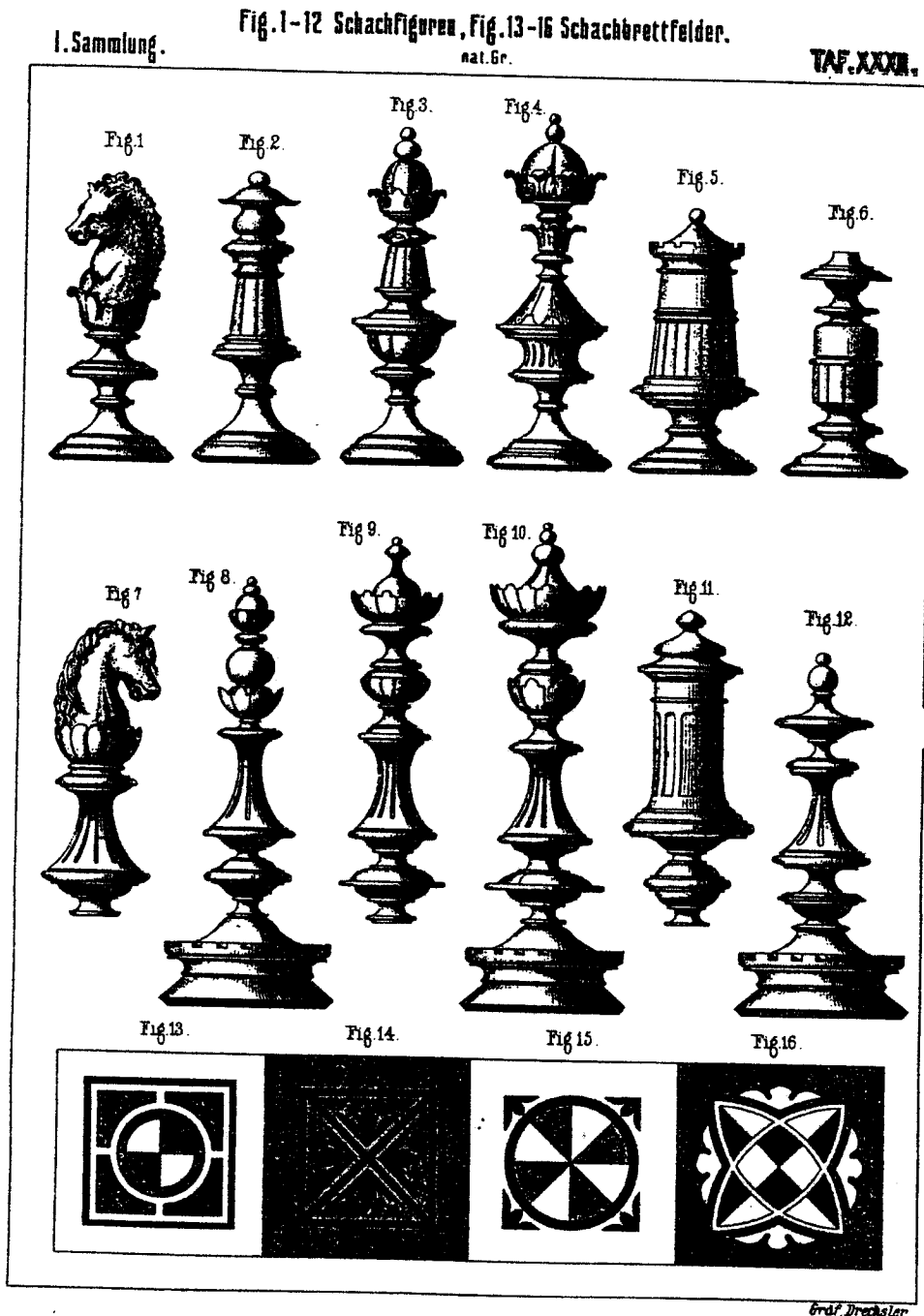


Figure C

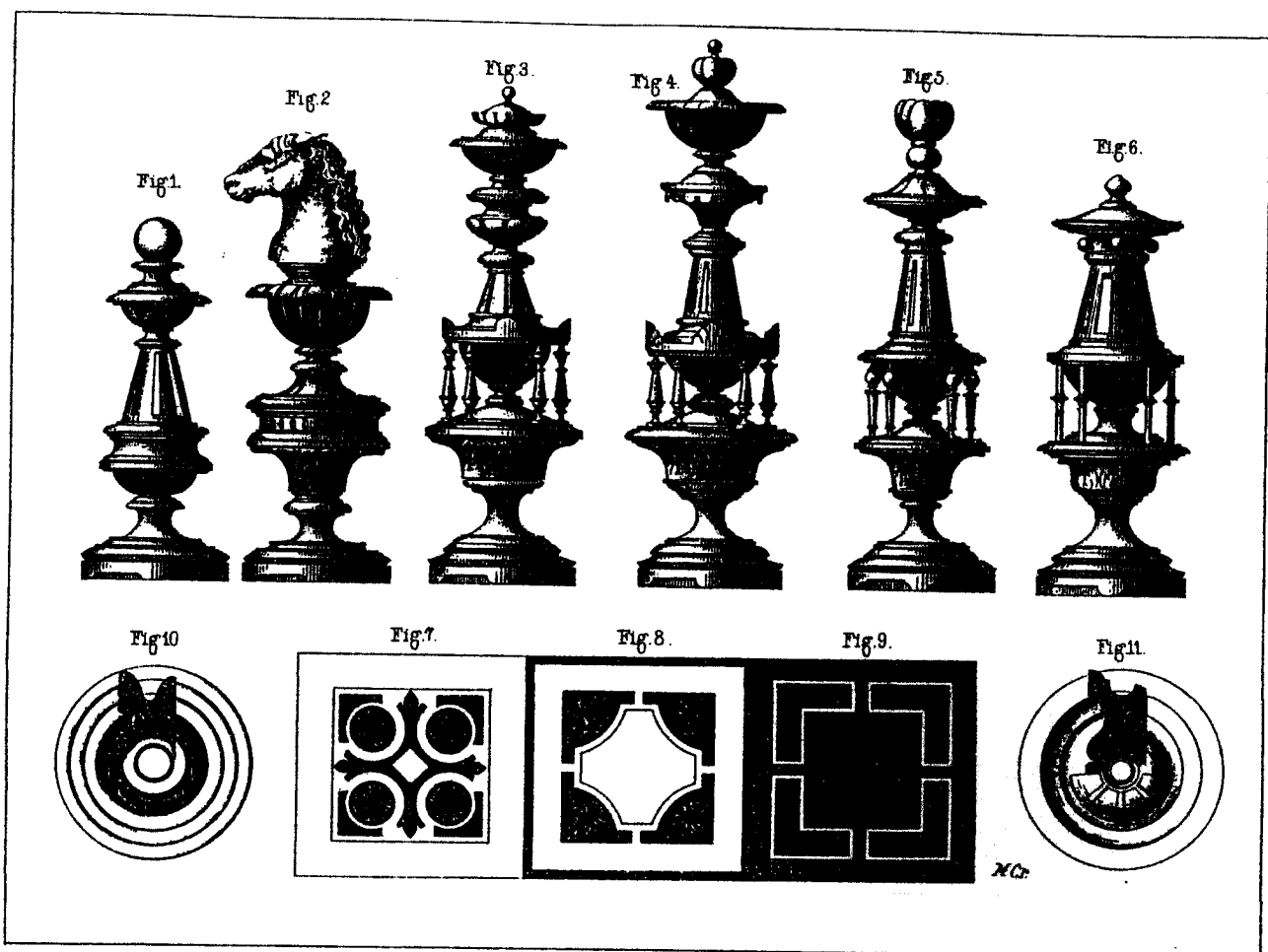


Figure D

Sadly, I have never seen a set like either of the Graef sets either in a museum or in a private collection.

A still more remarkable result of investigations is figure E. Here chessmen are shown designed by the famous Munich turner Michael Edel during the first third of the 19th century. In 1839 he published a book with the title "Zweiundzwanzig neue Musterblätter für Bau Decorateure, besonders für Drechsler und Liebhaber der Drehkunst" (22 new patterns for building decorators, especially for turners and the amateurs in the art of turning).

All who own the catalogue "Schönes Schach" of the joint exhibition in Munich in 1988 of the Bayerisches and Germanisches Nationalmuseum will easily be able to identify the first set illustrated by Edel as that at page 58 of the catalogue (no.45), where it is incorrectly attributed to Anton Edel, the son of Michael Edel. It was made not by Anton Edel but by his father, Michael.

When I proudly informed Dr. G. Himmelheber, the former curator of the Bayerische Nationalmuseum, who has recently retired, about my findings, he told me that he had also found this valuable source of information when carrying out his own researches. We can expect to receive from him further material about Michael and Anton Edel's works on chessmen in the near future.

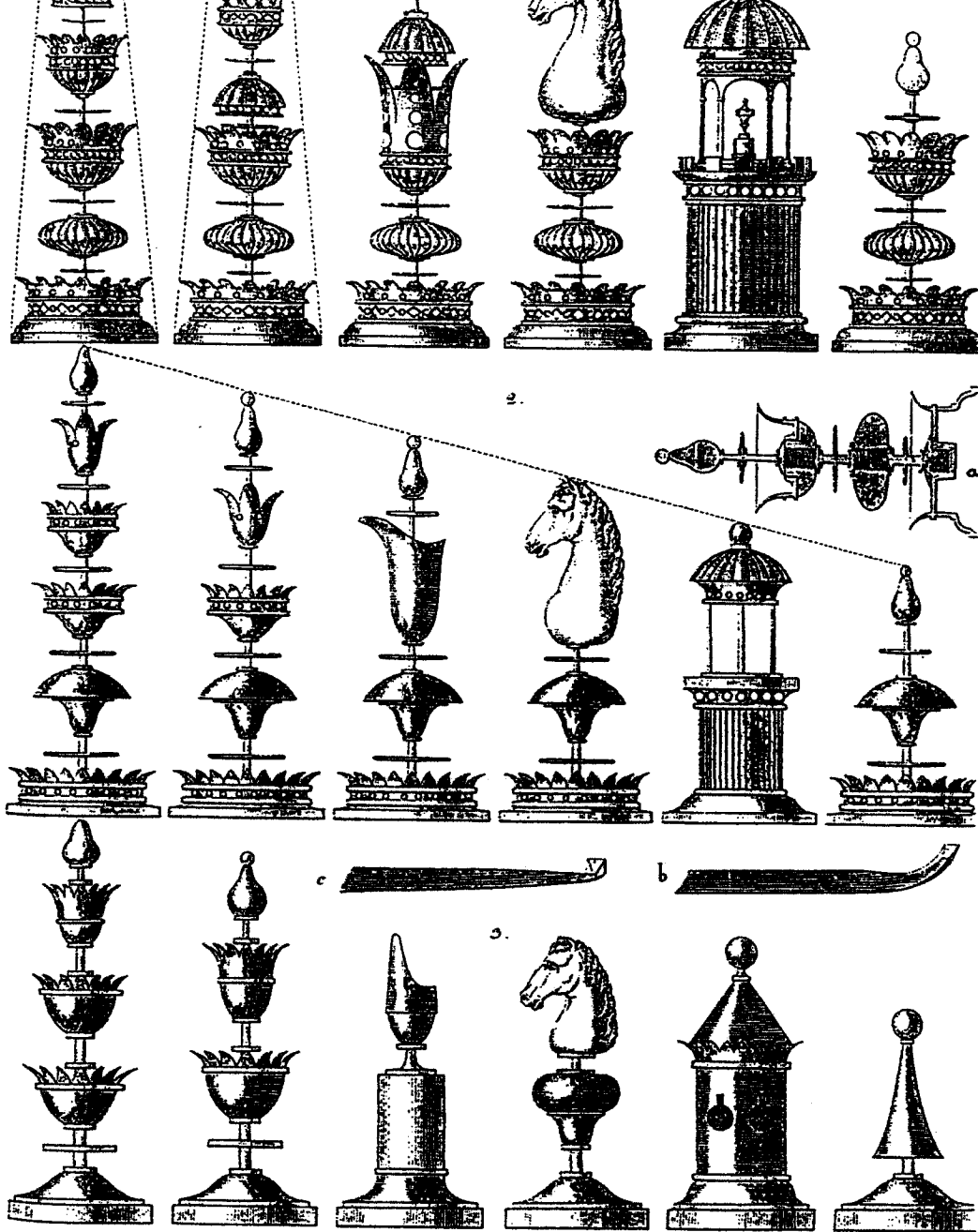
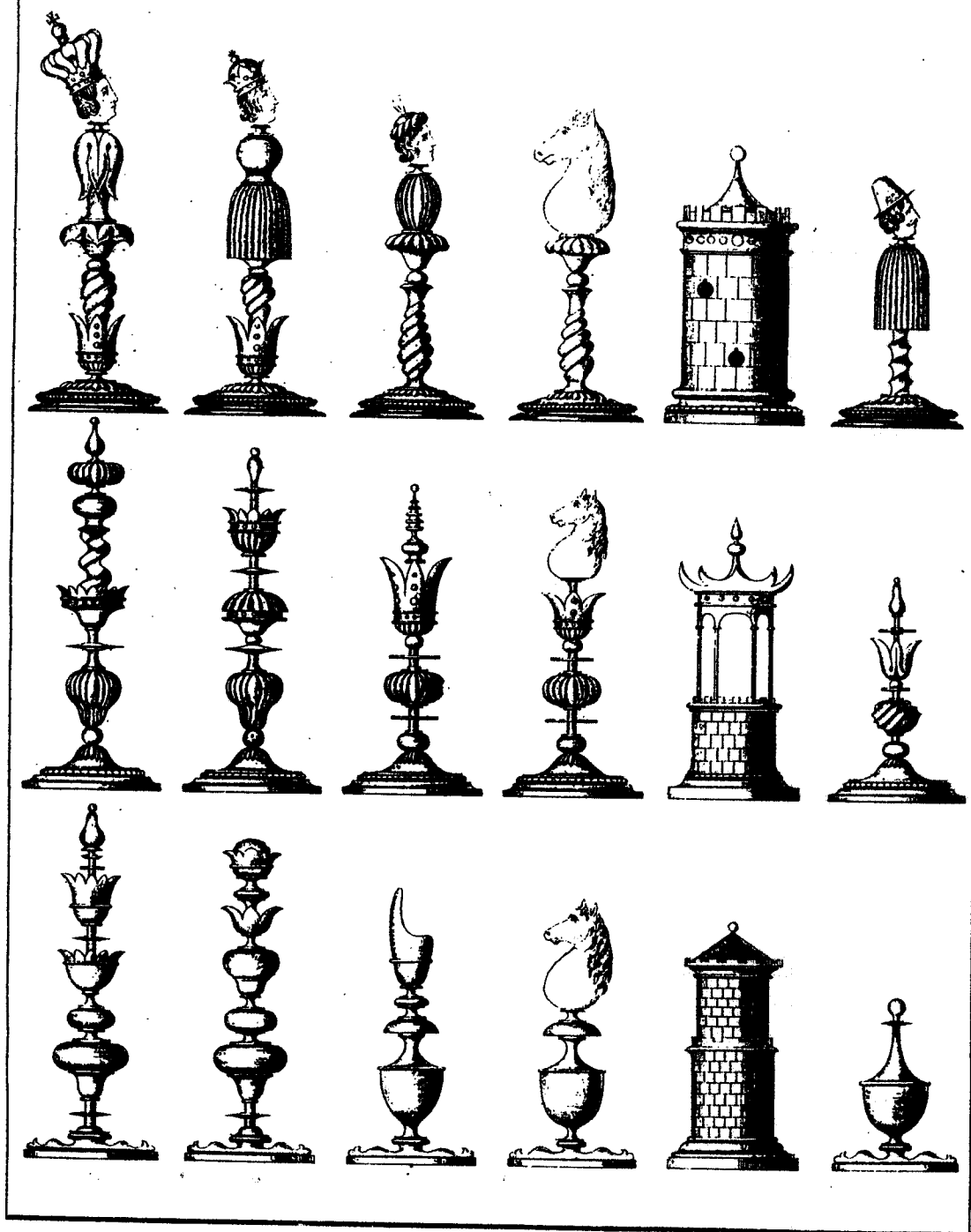


Figure E

For all of us it is exciting to know what Michael Edel wrote in relation to these three sets :

"Fig.1: A chess set of ivory. The construction of the entire set consists of 266 pieces, the threads having equal calibre. Following the elder rule, the height of the chess pieces should then, if aligned in one row according to their ranking, decrease in such manner that if one drew a diagonal from the top of the king to the pawn (see fig.2) the tops of all the other pieces must be touched by this line.



Druck und Verlag von Emil Koller in München.

Figure F

By the way, practical chess players find it appropriate that the king should be of the highest height, however bishop, knight and rook be equally tall, and that the queen should be in height between that of the king and the remaining main pieces. Only the pawns must be unmistakeably smaller than any other pieces.

The ivory set shown in figure 1 was made according to this relationship, and his Royal majesty Maximilian Joseph had it set up in the famous royal cabinet of ivory carved works in Munich.

The four rooks of this set must also be mentioned. Within them is a second tiny chess set made elaborately of mother of pearl and black tortoiseshell.

Fig.2: Shows a different chess set, one side consisting of boxwood and the other of ebony, each chessman being turned from one piece of material. Sub. b and c show two small steel instruments which were used to create crowns and pedestals.

Fig.3: This again shows an ordinary wooden chess set. The king, queen and knight all received similar pedestals, so that with only a little effort better symmetry was attained.

Finally, even if superfluous for some readers it should nevertheless be mentioned that a chess set consists of 2 kings, 2 queens, 4 bishops, 4 knights (chevaliers), 4 rooks and 16 pawns (pions), one side being differentiated from the other in colour."

A few years later in 1848 Conrad Selinger published in Munich another book about turning following the instructions of J.H. Koch, a master turner there. One page is dedicated to chessmen (Figure F). In my opinion his designs were influenced by Michael Edel, who had the higher reputation of the two at this period.

Very little text is given with these illustrations. It only says that the first two sets are recommended to be made of bone, the last set of wood. It may be that "bone" here means ivory - in German Bein, Elfenbein) as the carving of human heads in bone is a terrible job even for extremely skilled craftsmen.

I also want to draw your attention to the fact that both these turners show designs with bishops heads cut aslope, a design which has been popular in Germany for centuries.

FRANZ JOSEF LANG

