

# *The Chess Game at the Mansion*

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This antique oleograph, by French artist Louis Auguste Georges Loustaunau (1846-1898) and printer Alfred Legras (dates unknown), is a bit of a mystery piece within the David Davis (1815-1886) Mansion. While not the first oleograph that the mansion holds in its possession, this print of a genre painting (a style of art that depicts everyday life) stands apart due to having little to no record of how it was obtained. What is known, however, is a patchwork of information that any historian, art lover, or mystery enthusiast would find intriguing.

To start, the artwork is known by two titles: "Partita Di Scacchi" (which is French for "Chess Game") and "Domestic Comforts" (a less suitable, yet more commonly found moniker within art auction sites and collections). There is scarce information regarding the art piece's origins and creators,

however, there are a few things we know for certain: The work was first painted by A. Loustaunau circa 1880 and later printed by the publisher A. Legras circa 1885. History notes little about the printer A. Legras (other than his shop located at 66, Rue de Bondy Paris<sup>1-2</sup>), but his name can be seen on many prints housed by the British Museum<sup>3</sup>. Most of his work consisted of chromolithographs and oleographs, which were created using metal sheets or stones to print images. Oleographs<sup>4</sup>, in particular, were made by hand-pressing multiple layers of ink atop each other using individual stones or metal sheets. Each layer in the process allowed for more color and detail to be added, which resulted in a beautiful print resembling the unique textures of an oil painting.

In the 19th century, oleographs were popular because of these intricate details, but more importantly, the method (a reflection of the Industrialization of the time) greatly contributed to its affordability. The frame in which the Davis family's "Partita Di Scacchi" resides, on the other hand, reflects the wealthy Gilded Age aesthetic, with its intricate flower pattern and gilt (gold-leaf) finish. These points showcase the owner's good taste and love of nature, which was expected from Upper Middle-Class decor. Since the work was printed in 1885, Sarah Davis (1814-1879) could not have been the person to purchase the piece, rather it was likely either David or George P. Davis (1842-1917) who obtained the artwork.

Regardless, the family selected a worthy piece to set within the house as a conversation starter. While the artist, Loustaunau is not well-known in the United States, his impressive artworks used to grace Paris salons (art exhibitions) winning him awards, including the Cross of the Legion of Honor<sup>5</sup> (the highest reward for French citizens for merit) at the Exposition Universelle of 1889 (the Paris World's Fair)<sup>6</sup>. Overall, he is best known for his military and genre pieces<sup>7</sup>, of which the "Partita Di Scacchi" presents both.

As one may guess from its title, the "Partita Di Scacchi" depicts a game of chess, yet there is more significance to this piece than a simple game. To be more precise, the print illustrates a French couple comfortably playing a game of chess on a patio during a bright summer's day. To the right, a lady sits relaxed (legs uncrossed), having played the winning move. To the left, a wounded French soldier sits with his leg resting on a cushion. His expression is a mixture of bemusement and frustration at the loss as he places his hand to cup the side of his face. His eyes are locked on the chess board while others are seen strolling or horseback riding in the distance. The scene is both serene and meaningful as the artist depicts a still of life and nature, while also subtly portraying deeper political and social themes.

What most individuals will not notice at first glance is how profound the themes of war and loss are within this design. The most obvious example is the wounded French soldier and the loss of the chess game. One can tell that the man is a soldier simply by examining his clothing; His attire consists of a red Kapi (typical French troop headwear) and red trousers streaked with a standard blue stripe. This uniform design is best

known for being worn during Napoleon III's generation<sup>8</sup>, which likely means that this man was injured sometime during the Franco-Prussian War (a conflict between Prussia and France during 1870-1871)<sup>9</sup>. If so, the man's injury (further symbolized by the walking cane leaning against the table), alludes to the sacrifices that French soldiers made during the harsh battles. Despite France's efforts, the country eventually lost the Franco-Prussian War (hence the lost chess game) and agreed to a peace treaty<sup>9</sup>. The serene atmosphere of the painting exhibits the return to everyday life that the treaty produced, yet it also illustrates how people were still recovering from the defeat. The black dog lying beside the soldier also reveals the soldier's enduring loyalty to his country<sup>10</sup>.

Conversely, the dead leaves scattered around the patio and the horseback riding in the background are less obvious examples of war and status. The leaves represent loss and death, though they are also perhaps a sign of the changing times<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, the Greek urn sitting on the patio reflects the power and prestige that the French military respected and had hoped to display on the battlefield<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, their efforts to claim victory did not come to fruition. Nonetheless, France's efforts are still shown through the artwork's display of horseback riding.

The dynamic horsemanship in the artwork's background looks to be individuals playing a game of carrousel. The game (originally called Carosella in Italian and Garosello in Spanish) meant "little war" and was played with a perfumed ball to improve horsemanship and dexterity<sup>11</sup>. The activity was adopted as military training but was also seen as aristocratic entertainment to display glory and power<sup>11</sup>. The most notable event (for reference) was the magnificent La Grand Carrousel of 1662 hosted in Paris by King Louis XIV<sup>12</sup>. The La Grand Carrousel was a festive spectacle and competition that celebrated the King's rule and France as a prosperous country<sup>12</sup>.

Loustaunau thus reflected France's old successes within his work which was perhaps a comment on the country's wealth existing in the past. The reality of life after losing the Franco-Prussian War was, after all, one of financial labor (since the country had to pay for the cost of occupation). It is not surprising then, why the Davis family would choose to obtain this art piece for its collection. The craftsmanship is clear, the symbolism is deep, and the piece could spark hours of discussion revolving around topics like nature, the Civil War, art, Europe, and everyday life. Most importantly though, the oleograph and its frame capture the Davis family's refined taste in intellectual and sophisticated work.

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