

Bóite à Jeu / Board Games Compendium

Made by Catherine de Vantier/Shannon Wanty

Purpose

My purpose in constructing this was to have an appropriate gameboard that I could take to events and use, that my persona (or her brother) may have owned. I wanted to create something that looked right, that was aesthetically pleasing to myself, and with a selection of games that would have been played in the 16th century. I also wanted to give myself something that would extend/polish my very minimal woodworking skills, but that could be achieved within a reasonable period of time, and decided that the best way to do this would be to paint it. At this stage I would just like to say: HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. This *quick* version has taken me at least 200 hours to put together.

Inspiration

As I was looking at the very expensive end of period boardgames sets (I have a theory that boardgames sets were often only made for the extremely wealthy¹), they were made out of luxury materials and were really well constructed – there were also fewer of them made. Compounded with the effects of time, there just are not that many of them out there, and there was a rock and a hard place to choose from when it came to the still high end but not quite as wealthy sets. So basically, I had a relatively limited pool of pieces to draw on. I looked at more than the ones pictured here, but these are just the prime examples.

I based the shape and construction of the box on a late 15th century French one²:



I thought that the construction was simple enough that even I could cope with it, especially with help from Dad cutting it out.

Stylistically, I liked a German example from the early 17th century, which was made using a mother-of-pearl inlay for ornamentation.³ I liked this box set because the arrangement of the ornamentation was elegant and clean. I used the layout of the nine men's morris board to guide my layout of this and alquerque on my own compendium.

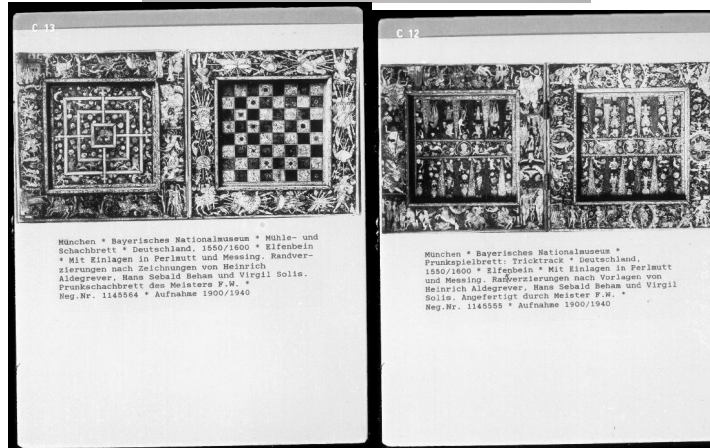


¹ I also have another theory that artists were lazy. In a painting featuring a deck of cards, you're most likely to see a picture of the five. In a painting featuring a chess board, you're most likely to see a lot of pawns, although interestingly courier chess boards actually crop up relatively often once you start looking. In any painting of a board game, the board is always going to be completely undecorated, because this is a hell of a lot easier to paint.

² From http://www.musee-moyenage.fr/pages/page_id18388_u1l2.htm downloaded 21/12/09

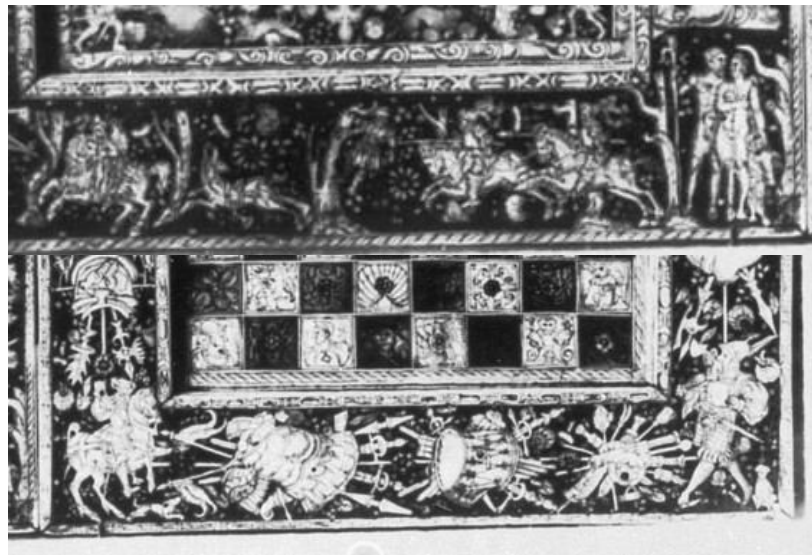
³ From <http://www.bildindex.de/bilder/M112456d09a.jpg> and <http://www.bildindex.de/bilder/M112456d10a.jpg> downloaded 21/12/09

The third example I liked was a Venetian gaming board.⁴ Again, I was saddened to find that it was made with inlays (way beyond what I thought I could realistically achieve at the outset) – but this time the wood had been dyed to create the effect. While the embellishment is a little busy, I did like the use of colours. Decorating the space between sides on the trictrac boards (as in both this and the preceding example) was common to a number of boards and I feature I quite liked, so I decided to follow it.



The late 16th century German box was a little too fancy and overcrowded for my tastes, although I did like the detailing on the chess and morris boards.⁵ Because of the ornateness, I thought that this may have been a painted set, but according to Karen Larsdatter the set is made in ivory with mother-of-pearl and brass inlays.⁶

Some close ups of bits of the above German box. Note that even the black and white squares of the chessboard have pictures on them, and are all unique:



⁴ From <http://www.khm.at/en/kunsthistorisches-museum/collections/collection-of-sculpture-and-decorative-arts/varia/?aid=3&cHash=1d77539f17> downloaded on 21/12/09

⁵ From <http://www.bildindex.de/bilder/MI07420c13a.jpg> and <http://www.bildindex.de/bilder/MI07420c12a.jpg> downloaded 21/12/09

⁶ <http://www.larsdatter.com/games-board.htm> read on 21/12/09

While the first compendium contains a Glic board, unfortunately there are no pictures of it. I did find a sole image of an extant Glic board, which is also the only example I could find of a surviving painted gamesboard.⁷ Since Glic involved playing cards, and I happen to know some people who print woodcut ones, I decided that I was including a gameboard for it. It turns out to be a very simple precursor for Poker, and an extremely easy way to move large amounts of money around quickly. Earl Dafydd ap Gwystl's article on period card games provided a set of rules that was trialled with great success.⁸



Materials, Tools, and Construction Method

From the outset the compendium was a compromise in terms of materials and construction, as my aim was to use paint to create something that mimics inlay. However, as I developed my ideas stylistically, it became something that used paint to achieve designs that *could* have been achieved with inlay, but look stylistically like painted designs. So it really sort of morphed into its own unique being, although it's not something that would not "fit".

The gamebox itself is made of 6mm MDF. I chose this because of severe budget constraints, ease of availability, durability, and because it is easier to work with, more forgiving of mistakes, and cheaper to replace than solid (more valuable) timbers might have been. Also it was going to be totally painted so it didn't really matter what went underneath.

I got Dad to cut the pieces for me on his table saw, then spent ages putting them together with copious quantities of PVA and a few nails, carefully sanding everything so it fitted together well. Then I spent a bit more time puttting in the holes where I'd accidentally sanded things unevenly and created concave or diagonal lines instead of flat ones.⁹

Initially I tried spray painting the box black with an acrylic-based enamel, in the hope of achieving a smooth base layer without visible brush strokes. This failed dismally, but applying two layers of gesso¹⁰ then three coats of acrylic-based paint worked really well. Painting the designs took two coats (green and brown), three coats (black, blue and red), and four to six coats (white and yellow). This took ages. I worked in sections by colour, so for ex

I chose my colours based on what wood stains and other materials were most readily available for use. This made for a relatively austere colour palette, as the easiest colours to achieve were brown,¹¹ red, yellow, green and white (ivory) on the black (ebony) background.¹² However, I did allow blue¹³ to make a guest appearance on the Glic board. Initially this was because I was basing the picture cards depicted on the set that Katherina Weyssin and I carved, and in them Kit and Will are wearing their blue suits, so I felt it was necessary to copy this. It turns out on rechecking that the image I've identified as the Jack or Knave on the extant Glic board is also wearing blue. One unexpected issue with the blue paint turned out to be that when I varnished the board the paint ran slightly, which was a little irritating. When I first started painting, I was nervous about it as it was a relatively untried skill for me, so my strokes tended to be light and

⁷ Image downloaded from <http://tarvos.imareal.oeaw.ac.at/server/images/7017069.JPG> 29/12/09

⁸ ap Gwystl, Earl Dafydd, *Still More Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Card Games*, downloaded from <http://www.greyclaydragon.org/> on 29/12/09

⁹ Seriously, I have absolutely *no* talent at woodworking, but I believe that it's good for you to persist at something you find difficult.

¹⁰ Daniel Thompson, *Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1956) discusses gesso in depth. It's fairly easy to make, and I could have made my own, but I had some commercial stuff that I wanted to use up and all the other materials were commercially prepared.

¹¹ I understand that this and variations on it are a fairly common feature among trees.

¹² For information on common woodstaining colours and the use of ivory, refer to the section below titled "Period Materials, Tools, and Construction (what I should have done)"

¹³ A dye colour for wood found in neither Theophilus nor Cellini, although they do provide general instructions for making dyes in "other" colours. I suspect these may have had varying success. I have not yet looked further abroad than these two for information on wood dyeing.

short, and the result was wavering lines. I found that what worked best was having a really good range of brush sizes to choose from, and not being too fussed about making mistakes as I went, as touching up afterwards worked really effectually.

I have finished each board with several coats of varnish. I intend to add more, to create more of a lacquer effect and hopefully preserve the boards better. I also am going to make a bag for storing it in, as it is still going to be a slightly delicate piece to transport.

Hinge-wise, I started out with using some brass hinges that I had. These turn out to have a problem: they cause the boards to sit offset from one another, so they are not square when they are closed, and one board sits 1mm higher than the other when opened flat. These are on the board at the moment as a temporary solution until I find the correct hinge type. Bunnings only sell butt hinges. I could make a hinge like the ones on the first example, but I would have altered my designs if I was going to do that. I need a hinge like the one in the third example, which you cannot see because the game is open. I will spend some time looking at hinges after Coronation. I also need some sort of latch to close it, and keep the leaves slotted into the outer shell, and preferably some sort of pin or latch on the leaves so that they can be pulled out and slotted back again easily. However, these are all more things that I will sort out after Coronation.

Layout and Design

The games that I chose to present in my box are trictrac/backgammon, fox and geese, nine men's morris, chess/checkers, courier chess, alquerque, and glic, as this seemed like a reasonable selection and all featured on the extant boardgames compendiums that I looked at.

As mentioned, I based the layout of the nine men's morris and alquerque boards on the second example. For the rest, I set the boards square to the edges, and then marked out areas for detailing around that.

In terms of design and style, I wanted something that was Renaissance and looked correct and appropriate, but that I also found aesthetically pleasing. I found it easiest to refer to period pattern books that I had printed out for embroidery. Reading the introduction to the reprint of Ostaus' *La Vera Perfezione del Disegno*, the editor points out that Ostaus actually borrowed everything from a French chap. He also goes on to mention that they're designs that are used in many areas of craftsmanship, not just for embroidery. One of the pages in Paganino's *Il Burato*, depicting a number of animals each in their own box, looks to have been lifted from a Bestiary, and on pLIX of Ostaus, the putti are not dissimilar in style to those on the casket below¹⁴, or those on Ghirlandaio's Nativity of the Virgin.¹⁵



I decided in the end to run three themes through the boards. The first was rabbits holding fronds, and generic foliage scrolling around an assortment of animals. The second was linear based or geometric designs. The third was green knotwork/scrollwork with red flowers. I thought that it was important compositionally to include a number of elements to really convey the eclecticism so often present in Renaissance decoration, but I also wanted to convey a sense of unity, so tried to ensure that the themes were equally represented across the boards, and that there was symmetry and balance in the designs. I ended up referencing p.LVI of Ostaus for most of the animals, although the unicorns and some of the dogs came from Egenolff's *Modelbuch*. I think that the knotwork/scrollwork and geometric designs were fairly evenly spread across Ostaus, Egenolff, and Paganino's *Il Burato*.

¹⁴ Colin Nouailher, mid 1500's, Frick Collection, NYC, image copied from http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/lucretia_art.html 6/7/10

¹⁵ Downloaded from http://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/article_images/The%20Nativity%20of%20the%20Virgin%20by%20Domenico%20Ghirlandaio.jpg 6/7/10

Period Materials, Tools, and Construction

I got sidetracked here and consequently learnt a reasonable amount about how you would have moved from a tree to a plank in period, and how you make tools from scratch. In fact, I learnt about all sorts of things I never knew about before, and found heaps of new interest areas. I'll list some of the highlights, and take out the rest.

Constructing the Box

Where I used putty to fill in my sanding mistakes, any similar gaps in the joins may have been filled using a cement mix similar to that described in the *Segreti per Colori*: "Take of Greek pitch 2 parts, pounded bricks, and a little mastic, and grind the whole up well, and then with a hot iron cement whatever you like."¹⁶ However, I suspect that workers manufacturing games boxes would have been significantly better at woodwork than I am, and that therefore there would be no need to use any filler.

It is possible that the box may have been glued together using cheese glue, again, perhaps with a recipe similar to that provided in the *Segreti per Colori*.¹⁷ I have not made cheese glue, but Master Brian and Edward Braithwayte from Cluain have attempted it and found it to be exceedingly strong.¹⁸ I do not know whether the box would also have been nailed together.

Wooden Inlays

Ideally, the games box should have been made using wooden inlays. This was the technique commonly used to manufacture such boxes in the 15th and 16th centuries, but was unattainable with my skill range, and I am unsure that even the really good woodworkers I know would be comfortable trying to achieve something of the level produced in period.

The wood of choice for games boxes was ebony, inlaid with ivory, neither of which are easily available to me today. I did come across an example, still made using marquetry, where more "ordinary" woods had been dyed with oils that had been coloured with natural or chemical pigmentation.

Alexis of Piemont provides a recipe for dyeing wood to resemble ebony, calling preferentially for hard woods as these dye brighter than softer woods. The recipe that he provides uses olive or linseed oil, mixed with "Roman Vitrioll" and "Brimstone", in which you boil the wood. The "Segreti per Colori" also has a recipe for dyeing boxwood black, which may also produce an ebony-like finish, but this recipe uses a different process to Alexis of Piemont's.¹⁹

Alexis of Piemont also provides recipes for dyeing wood green, red, yellow and black (these are not oil-based dyes), and one recipe to dye woods "of what colour a man will", which he claims to be of "such excellencie that one brother will not teache it to an other".²⁰

Allerley Mackel has almost identical recipes for dyeing (excluding the recipe to get it to resemble ebony, and the any colour recipe), except that he requires in all cases that the wood be soaked first in alum, and has this as a preliminary step separate from the recipes.²¹ Alexis of Piemont adds this information almost as an afterthought in his recipes for green and red dyes, as part of the ingredients for his yellow dye, and not at all for the several other recipes, although admittedly in the first recipe for green dye he does state that "before you dye anything, you must lay it halfe a day in Alome water, and then drye it well agayne".²² I do not know much about dyeing, but I think that the alum is acting as a mordant.

¹⁶ *Segreti per Colori* mid-15th century Italian, Chapter VIII recipe 383, transcription of translation by Mary Merrifield published in "Original Treatises on the Arts of Painting" in 1849.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Chapter VIII recipe 391.

¹⁸ "Yay for cheese glue!!! When I jumped on two bits of wood glued together, it just hurt my foot. Hit it with a rock and the wood broke rather than the glue, we were most impressed." Email from Brian Kwan to Canton of Cluain mailing list, 02/06/09

¹⁹ *Segreti per Colori* mid-15th century Italian, Chapter VIII recipe 376, transcription of translation by Mary Merrifield published in "Original Treatises on the Arts of Painting" in 1849.

²⁰ Transcription of cleaning and dyeing recipes from *The Secretes of the Reverend Maister Alexis of Piedmont*, translation from French to English by Wilyam Warde, printed by Jhon Kygnston in 1580, viewed at <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/dyes/alexis.html#36> on 28/12/09

²¹ Transcription and translation of Allerley Mackel's kunstbuchlein, originally printed by Peter Jordainim in Mainz, 1532. The translation was done in 2005 by Drea Leed in 2005.

²² Transcription of cleaning and dyeing recipes from *The Secretes of the Reverend Maister Alexis of Piedmont*, translation from French to English by Wilyam Warde, printed by Jhon Kygnston in 1580, viewed at <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/dyes/alexis.html#36> on 28/12/09

Paint & Period Pigments

Since I was painting my box, I also looked at period methods of creating paints. The easiest “quick and dirty” modern interpretation, would be to create tempera paint using egg yolks and modern cement colourants or other pigments, a technique learnt from Master Brian earlier this year.²³ I also considered making my own period pigments or paints using other methods. However, having read Theophilus’ “*On Divers Arts*” section on “*The Art of the Painter*” which I came to the conclusion that it was probably best not to make some of these as they would be dangerous to my health, while some of the others it would be extremely difficult to find the ingredients for.

What I would do differently next time

I would wear an apron and mask when sanding. Also I would not do this next to my newly-washed car.

Where to next

I have several distinct projects related to the boardgames compendium, that should keep me happily entertained for the next decade or possibly the rest of my life. They include:

- Gaming pieces:
 - I want to make small flat round ones carved out of bone like the one at the bottom right of the first image. There are also some more ornate French ones but I think it would probably be a good idea to start out fairly simply as I have not done any bone carving before. But this will also enable me to try out some bone dyeing techniques, which are awfully similar to the ones for wood.
 - I may make some clay chess pieces as there are some surviving clay pieces from an Italian workshop in the shapes of various courtiers. I can actually work with clay, and it would be fun and easy (but probably not quick) to make a set – and I could possibly base them on Lochac.
 - The other alternative for the chess pieces is to whittle them, which also means learning a new skill but I am quite keen to try this out. And then I could try wood dyeing techniques too.
- A very easy inlay on something like a jewellery box. Making the jewellery box out of wood would be a nice simple project that would help expand my woodworking skills, and I could try inlaying a simple linear border around the edge of each piece using a gouging method rather than a piecing one.
- Do primary research into how games were played, as currently my knowledge is based on secondhand sources.
- I would also like to make a writing desk like Henry VIII’s,²⁴ as this would also be an excellent chance to improve my woodworking skills. The decoration on his was done with paint onto leather (it was also gilded), so this would be an interesting and appropriate way to expand my painting skills. The leather was then applied to the desk, and the outer was also covered, possibly with sharkskin. It is seriously cool, and it would be fun to make something similar that my (clearly very rich) persona might have used, and that I could take to events (when I get a van).

²³ From an Arts and Sciences class at St John’s, in Cluain, July 2009.



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Please refer to footnotes throughout text for source information on images.

www.larsdatter.com has been an invaluable resource.

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<http://www.greydragon.org/trips/Paris%202004/index5.html>, visited on 28/12/09 photographs of furniture on display in the Cluny Museum in 2004, which I used to look at styles of (carved and painted) ornamentation on wooden items other than gameboards.

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