

The Antique Dealer &
COLLECTORS GUIDE

December 1979

Christmas Number

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Christmas Presents

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The Harlequin

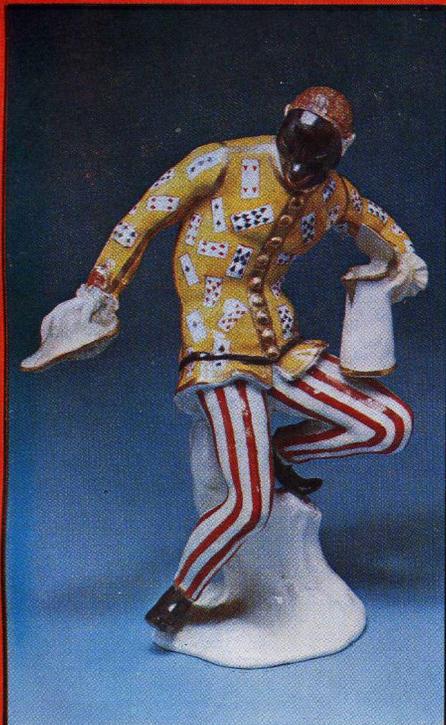
Theatrical Tinselled Prints

*19th and 20th
Century
Stained Glass*

Hatpins

Children's Plates

Dice and Dominoes



Of Dice and Dominoes

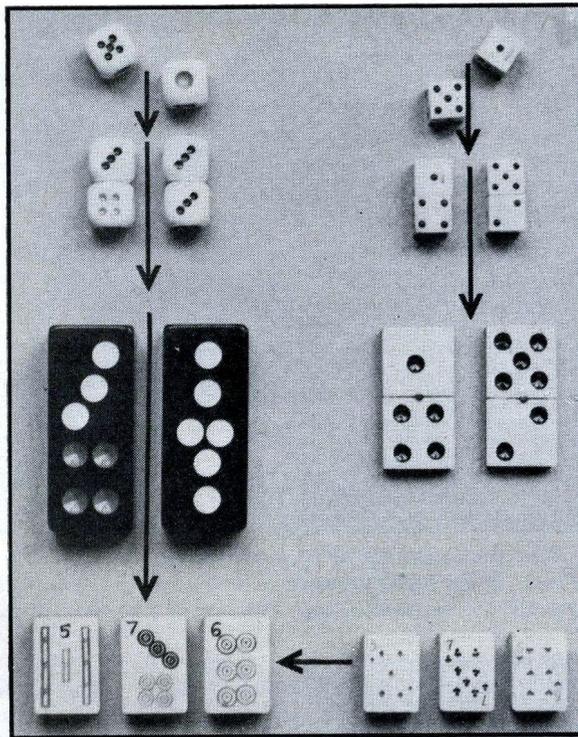
by St. John Stimson

THE superficial relationship between dice and dominoes is obvious. Put two dice side by side and one has a domino; but this obvious relationship becomes less clear with the development of the European domino, where a blank gives seven possibilities instead of six.

The games using dominoes are based on matching numbers rather than on their value. The development of double-nine and double-twelve sets for larger numbers of players takes the game still further from its origin.

In the Orient the relationship between dice and dominoes is much more direct. In the first place no blank is introduced, also the traditional colouring of red for the 'one' and 'four' faces is repeated on the dominoes. The oriental games too are related to the value of the numbers rather than simply the matching of like to like. A complication to the total family tree picture is the game of Mah Jongg. In this some of the tiles clearly relate to dominoes yet the total variety

1. Top right and centre. European dice and dominoes, bottom right: playing cards, bottom left: Mah Jongg tiles; top left and centre: Oriental dice and dominoes



of pieces in the game relates more closely to playing cards.

Gaming, the settling of disputes, and divination has long utilised the chance fall of small objects such as long and short sticks, cowrie shells, stones, bones, coins and seeds, in fact almost anything where a chance position can be readily identified. The use of these other gaming objects certainly predates the earliest dice discovered in a 3,000 year old Etruscan tomb.

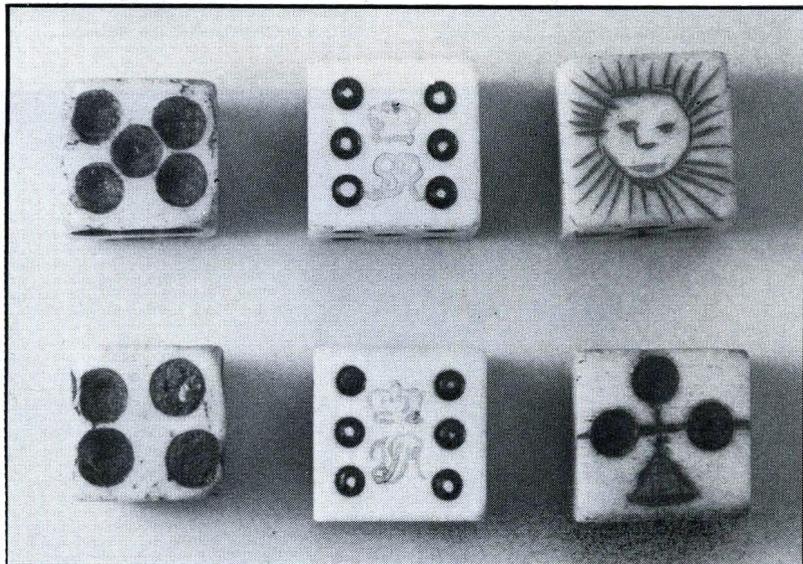
The collection of ancient dice and gaming devices falls rather more into Archaeological and Anthropological fields of study than that of the ordinary

dealer or collector. Early dice can be seen in museums of early cultures, other gaming devices used by primitive societies are so easily and quickly produced (where not actually naturally occurring as Cowrie shells) as to leave little interest to the collector unless in the context of a representative games collection.

Dice have always been the despair of the moralists in society Compulsive gambling has existed from the earliest times, long before its recent recognition as a psychological disorder. Over the years dice have been banned, made illegal and taxed but the simplicity of their manufacture, the ease of their secretion and man's love of gaming have made all efforts of control hopeless. In England the last attempt was made when George IV passed an Act (Act 9, Geo. IV C18) imposing a duty of 20 shillings on each pair of properly made dice. The dice were accordingly stamped and a penalty was imposed on the sale of unstamped ones. In 1862 the stamp duty was abolished, it probably had had little effect and proved impractical to enforce, other than in gaming clubs and other controlled situations. The making and sale of unstamped dice had continued; they were usually roughly made, and referred to as 'bones' from the common material of their manufacture.

The very simplicity of the dice has meant that the unscrupulous have constantly tried to vary the natural laws of chance in their favour! An encyclopaedia of 1796 describes several ways of loading the dice: "1. By sticking a hog's bristle in them so as to make them run high or low as they please. 2. By drilling and

2. Left. A pair of crudely made dice from a 'Prisoner of War' box. Centre: two dice with duty stamps, upper George IV, lower Victorian. Right: two from a Crown and Anchor set





3. Two dice boxes, the left is leather covered and fitted to take six pairs of dice, it was probably made circa 1840 when the duty alone would have been £6! On the right a bone 'Prisoner of War' box, circa 1800

loading them with quick silver which trick is discovered by holding them gently between two diagonal corners; when it is false the heavy side will always turn downwards. 3. By filing or rounding them'.

To the collector, loaded dice always add spice to a collection. The box illustrated in Fig. 3 contained one pair identical to the others, but without any odd numbers. There were two 'sixes' two 'fours' and two 'twos', but so arranged that this is not apparent from any one view. This is a more sophisticated method of loading the odds than those given above and one which could only be taken advantage of by a person fully understanding the normal odds. It is perhaps needless to say that this pair is not duty stamped, on either of their sixes!

In addition to standard dice numbered 1 to 6 there are also special dice for other games. For Crown and Anchor there is a set of three dice with the four playing card suits, a crown and an anchor on

the six faces. Fig. 2 shows at the right hand side two hand engraved Crown and Anchor dice. In this case, a sunshine face replaces the normal Crown. For the game Bell and Hammer there is a set of eight dice; each only has one face marked either with a number of pips—1 to 6—or with a Bell or a Hammer. The more recent Poker Dice have 5 in the set with playing card faces 9 up to King and Ace on their face.

Many children's board games rely on dice for moving the pieces and as an alternative the faceted top called a teetotum is sometimes incorporated to avoid childish contamination by the evil of dice. In fact the curious name derives from a gambling top where the letter T stood for totem, that is take all the pool. A simpler form of this game is Take and Put which is played with a special top with the instructions engraved on its face. Fig. 4 shows a Victorian six sided bone teetotum and a brass Take and Put top.

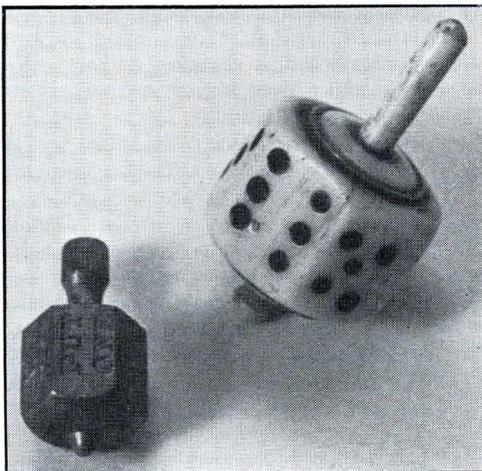
Dice can be thrown from the hand,

but where the stakes are high the fear of cheating is always great. The use of a cup or other device to throw the dice obviously reduces the possibility of manipulation. It is probable that originally any handy cup or cylindrical container would suit and it is difficult to determine whether a vessel is specially designed unless something in its decoration describes its use. The Romans designed a dice box with an angled ridged bottom to shoot the dice (a fritillus) and this principle of ridging to prevent the dice being slid is now the hallmark of specially designed dice cups.

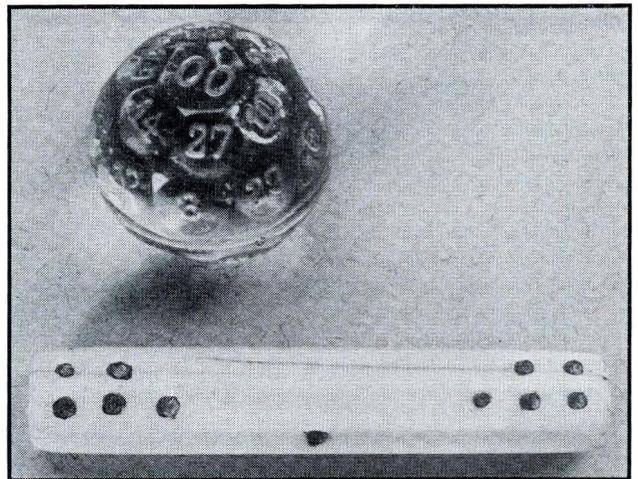
The dice shakers in Fig. 6 and 7 all show the internal grooving. The castle (Fig. 7) is a finely made Victorian cup in boxwood. The diabolo shaped shakers (Fig. 6) are of the design which evolved as a simple standard functional solution. Efficient in use, nice to hold and robust. It is the true gamesmans shaker.

Fig. 8 shows a 19th century Kobe figure imported from Japan and typical of this rather gruesome ware. The ivory eyes pop out on stalks and the hat unscrews to form a dice shaker and also serves to store the dice when not in use.

Mah Jongg is certainly an old if not an ancient game. Authorities vary greatly in their opinions as to the date of its origin, but it is clear that the vast majority of the sets in this country date from the 1920s and '30s when the great craze for the game spread in America and England. China obliged by marketing a great many sets and these were mostly housed in boxes specially made in this country. A complete set (Fig. 9) comprises 144 tiles plus 4 spare blank tiles, 2 or 4 dice in a small bamboo box, a cylindrical box or holder with 4 wind discs (The Tong) to indicate the wind-of-the-round and stick shaped counters. Sometimes the set comes with racks to hold the tiles, these are similar to Scrabble racks. The standard set has tiles with an engraved bone face dovetailed to a bamboo backing. Cheaper sets of card or just bamboo also occur as well as those made



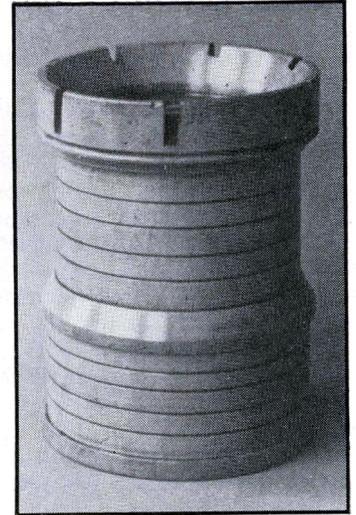
4. Two teetotums, right one of bone is numbered as a dice, 1in. between faces. The smaller top is a brass 'take and put' one



5. A glass 'roulette' Teetotum with faces numbered 1-30 plus 0 and 00, with an eight sided ivory rolling dice 2½in. long



6. Four dice cups of the diabolo shape. An everyday fruit wood shaker, a leather one and a Regency Lignum Vitae cup. The right-hand cup of ivory, with coquilla nut base, is Victorian



7 A Victorian boxwood dice shaker in the form of a castle. Height 3¼ in.



8. A Japanese Kobe figure with ivory 'popping' eyes. The hat unscrews, height 7 in.

of modern plastic compounds. Very rarely an ivory faced tile is used for top quality sets.

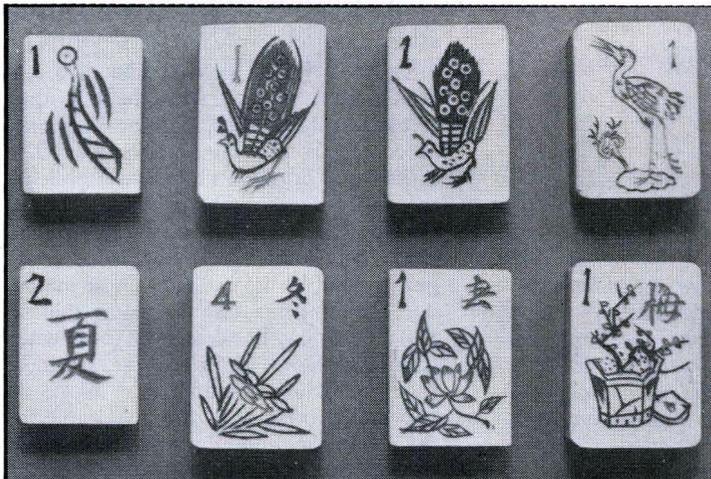
As it is so difficult to assess with accuracy the age of the set, its worth is better judged by the quality of the engraving on the tiles, the quality of the box and whether the box is tailored to the size of the tiles, the quality of the dovetail, the size of the tile and the thickness of the bone facing. The quality of the engraving is best observed on the one-of-bamboos which is represented by a bird and the flower and 4 season tiles which have small pictures on them. Fig. 10 shows at the top four different 'birds' and under them a selection of flower and season tiles. The engraving to the tiles is colour filled in the basic colours of red, green and blue.

9. A typical Mah Jongg set, imported into England in the 1930s. Four drawers of tiles and one for counters, dice and Tong



10. A selection of One-of-Bamboos and flower and season tiles showing the variation of design and quality of engraving in the more elaborate tiles
11. American card dominoes dated 1905. Cards 2½ in. × 1½ in. Instructions include the games of Sniff, Matadores, Sebastopol and Bergen

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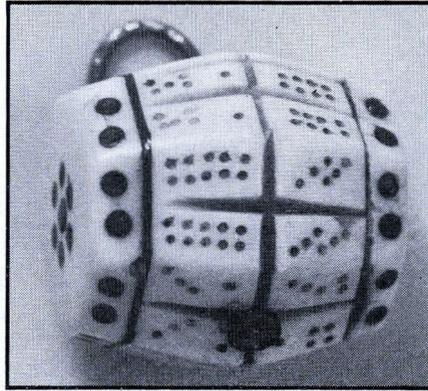


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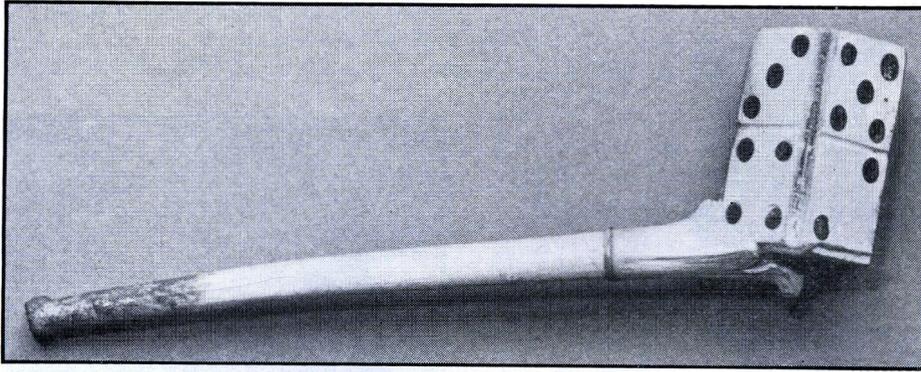


Chinese dominoes are extremely uncommon in England. There are 32 tiles in a complete set with 11 of these duplicated (the Military series) the remaining 10 are single (The Civil Series). In shape they are longer and thinner than the European domino. Fig. 12 shows a curious ivory 'barrel', possibly representing a Chinese garden seat, which has 32 faces engraved with a complete set of Chinese dominoes.

The earliest European dominoes are reported in Italy in the 18th century. From there they spread to France and England. Joseph Strutt in his book of 'Sports and Pastimes of the People of England' published in 1801 refers to dominoes as 'a very childish sport imported from France a few years back'.

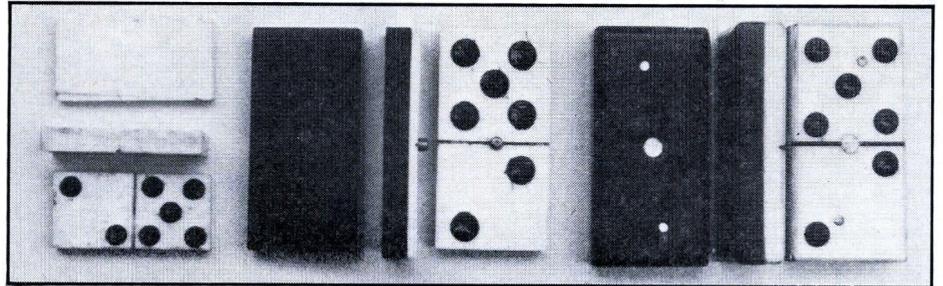


12. Ivory 'barrel' about 1in. long engraved with the complete set of 32 Chinese dominoes

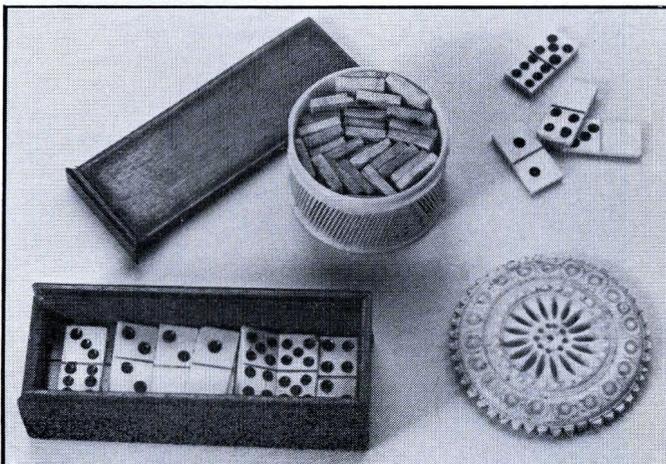


13. A novelty clay pipe with a domino bowl

14. Left, early bone dominoes; centre, mid-Victorian ivory or ebony set with a typical proud rivet of brass; right, bone and ebony with three aluminium rivets polished flush with the face



Among the earliest sets to appear in England were those made by French Napoleonic prisoners of war, and it is likely that it was these wars that helped



15. Two miniature sets of dominoes. The tiles are about 1/2 in. long. The traditional sliding top box is in mahogany, The circular box is ivory

introduce the game to England. Between 1795 and 1815 there were in England a great many French prisoners (up to 67,000 by 1815) many of whom were civilian craftsmen. Others learnt crafts during their long imprisonment to pass the time and earn money to purchase much needed comforts.

Fig. 14 shows pieces from three standard sets of dominoes. On the left a fairly crude hand made early bone set, in the centre a standard mid-Victorian set from a games box with ivory face and ebony back and a single brass rivet. The rivet projects proud of the face in common with many sets of this period which must have made shuffling difficult, not to say disastrous on a polished table! The third piece is from a good quality early 20th century double nine set, with bone faces and ebony back, the three rivets are aluminium polished flush with the face.

In its earliest days dominoes was the common man's game. Strutt says 'this silly game is, I am told, frequently seen at low public houses where many idle people resort and play at it for beer or trifling stakes of money' A natural association with the low public house would be the clay pipe. Fig. 13 shows a crudely carved novelty pipe with the bowl formed from four dominoes.

The Victorian taste for the curious

and quaint exploited the spread of dominoes as a new game in the 19th century. Many miniature sets of dominoes were made, often in unusual containers. Fig. 15 shows two such sets with a scale to assess the size.

The real joy of having fine dice and dominoes is to play with them. Unlike some collectors items, nothing but benefit comes from using these games. The shuffling of dominoes on a cloth polishes the ivory faces and handling matures the wood. Try the more elaborate domino games of Matador, Sebastapol and Muggins instead of the childish simple matching of numbers. Use Regency shakers and dice to play Backgammon (even when gaming with dice was illegal they could be used for Backgammon!) and above all play Mah Jongg. It is the total game for the collector combining sound, sight, touch, luck and skill! □