

## A Native American Chess set

by Israel Raphaelli

I recently (again!?) purchased this interesting chess set and wanted to share with you. I hope to gather more information from chess collectors who may recognize the set or can provide more insight.



The pieces are made out of corn husk mounted on metal wire skeleton, erected on wooden bases. The set is charming, beautiful and very unique. Each piece represents a real character, people busy with their trade in a small village life. It is of stunning creativity and the level of detail is amazing, in my opinion impossible using corn husk as the main material to sculpture such pieces, each unique mending.

**The hunt:** On a nice sunny day, Remi and I are out shopping in a local market. I suddenly observe a pile (and I mean PILE) of little dolls on one of the dealers' table. Having the hunting instincts of a chess collector, I get closer to look and the seller tells me that these are little dolls made of corn husk and that he had a few "much bigger" that he sold earlier that day. I thank him and start to examine closely – they are the right size (about four inches tall), have round bases (!) and are of two different campaigns, one side being a little darker than the other. They are charming, very detailed, interesting and I'm trapped. As I continue to check, I find a couple of "ladies", two "lords" and, yes you guessed it right, four horses with "armored" riders. There are also many smaller figures of working people of different small village occupations. So, being a trained mathematician, I start counting but there are only thirty in total. Well, it looks like a chess set missing two pieces. I think that not even our very skilled friend from Florida will be able to make the replacement pieces, so after a short negotiation I leave it, move on and tell Remi about this (almost successful) treasure find,





A couple of hours later, Remi is a little late to our rendezvous place. When she arrives, I realize what a big mistake I made! Usually, her responses to my “finds” range from “I don't like it” to “you don't need it” or, on a good day, “nice”; This one she really loved. Believe it or not, she actually went looking for this dealer and tried to buy the set but he was already gone for the day. Oh well, you can imagine how I felt passing on it.

A few weeks later I returned to this market and the dealer was there, with the same pile of dolls. As I pay for them he casually tells me that “I found a couple more dolls in my car”. So we now have thirty two. Imagine my delight!

**About Corn husk dolls:** This is what I found (abbreviated). A corn husk doll is a Native American doll made out of the dried leaves or "husk" of a corn cob. Women braided the husks for rope and twine and coiled them into containers and mats. Shredded husks made good kindling and filling for pillows and

mattresses. The corncobs served as bottle stoppers, scrubbing brushes, and fuel for smoking meat. Corn silk made hair for corn husk dolls. Corn husk dolls have been made by Northeastern Native Americans probably since the beginnings of corn agriculture more than a thousand years ago. This art was later adapted by European settlers.

### The major pieces:



**The minor pieces:**

*Gold Miner    Smoker    Vagabond    Horseman    Guitar Player    Shaman    Wood Gatherer    Fisherman*



*Farmer (milkman)    Farmer (eggs)    Shepard (sheering)    Birds Hunter    Game Hunter    Small game Hunter    Wood Chopper    Accordion Player*



**A few Closeups:**





In conclusion, a great native, south American, village life chess set but I'm in search for provenance, maker, age and other interesting information. Please write to me at [chess@ogdir.com](mailto:chess@ogdir.com). Please visit my collection at [www.eosef.com/gsc](http://www.eosef.com/gsc) (no log-in required) where you can also find more photos of this (item #403) and many other sets.

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