

# AMIR MOHTASHEMI



## **Embriachi Games Board**

Venice, Italy, 15th century

Wood and bone with metal mounts

57.5 cm long, 39.5 cm wide, 10.5 cm high (folded position);

80 cm long, 57.5 cm wide, 5cm high (flat)

Stock no.: A5226

Provenance: Property of German noble family since at least 1900.

This multi-use portable games board is checkered on the outside for a game of chess, and marked on the inside for backgammon. It folds in two, creating a space for the counters to be stored. The metal hinges are decorated with confronting portraits of a man and a woman contained within medallions, perhaps indicating that this games board was made as a marriage gift.

The marquetry inlay, sometimes known as *intarsia alla certosina*, is a less time-consuming way of creating a micro-mosaic. Thin rods of stained woods and bone are glued together, and cross-sections are sliced off to create tiles. This technique is thought to have been introduced to Christian Europe via Islamic Sicily and Andalusia. The 12th-century minbar of the Kutubiyya Mosque in Marrakesh, for example, is decorated with the same technique.

This kind of inlay is typical of the Embriachi workshop, active in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Venice.<sup>1</sup> Though the workshop primarily made devotional ivory with intarsia borders (see, for example casket [A.26-1952](#) and triptych [CIRC.98-1934](#) in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London), several examples of games boards from this workshop exist. A multi-use board dated to the 15th century is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [2010.109.4](#)). An example in the British Museum (accession no. [2004.1216.1.a-ii](#)) dated to the 15th century similarly accommodates both chess and backgammon. Though the craftsmanship is much rougher than ours, the diamond panels on the side of the box are very similar to the squares of the chess board. The use of bone rather than ivory, a cheaper material which could still be polished, painted, and gilded, means these workshops could serve a more middle-class clientele.<sup>2</sup>

Another example of a games board dated to 15th-century Venice but not attributed to the Embriachi workshop is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (accession no. [WA1964.14](#)).

[1] Nuttall, Paula. 'Dancing, love and the "beautiful game": a new interpretation of a group of fifteenth-century "gaming" boxes', *Renaissance Studies* 24.1 (2010), pp. 119–141: p. 122.

[2] Smith, Heather Alexis. 'New Contexts for The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem: Two Embriachi Plaques in the Museum of Art and Archaeology', *MVSE* 52 (2018), pp. 27–51: p. 28.