



So Bet Wisely!

by Alex Barker, Museum Director

Whether in times of doubt, of boredom, or of celebration, we take refuge in games. The Museum holds a range of works showcasing this dimension of the human experience, ranging from an ancient Greek Attic Black-Figure lekythos showing Ajax and Achilles at a gaming board (Fig. 1); Jason Miccolo Johnson's gelatin silver print photographs of the Capitol Pool and Checkers Club (Fig. 2); to an eighteenth century Egyptian senet board (Fig. 3). We even have dice spanning thousands of years, like the late Roman examples (Fig. 4) and depictions of dice in Robert Ecker's *Eve* (Fig. 5).

But my personal favorite has to be a seventeenth century painting titled *Card Game of Death*. Like death itself, there are many mysteries surrounding the work. An old label on the back identifies the artist as Giuseppe Erts, said to be a Venetian, but no one's ever heard of an artist by that name. A few years ago some colleagues examined the painting and suggested Giuseppe Erts might actually be Joseph Heintz the Younger (1600–1678), an Augsburg-born artist who spent most of his professional life in



Joseph Heintz the Younger (Swiss, 1600–1678)
The Card Game of Death, 1668
Oil on canvas
Gift of Russell M. Arundel (68.455)

(Continued on page two)



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

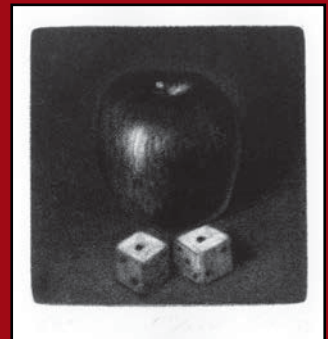


Fig. 5



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Venice. The dates and corruption of the name seem plausible enough, and it is certainly the kind of allegorical, mythologizing theme for which he was known. But our work lacks some of the head-scratchingly rich and slightly mad details that make Heintz's work so delightful—where are the phantasmic creatures dancing around the margins, distracting from the central composition, or the crowd of preoccupied secondary characters, adding veracity to the scene merely by witnessing it, making the finished work appear like the riotous love-child of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel? No, this mystery remains unsolved, and an Italian researcher, Alessandro Grassi, hopes to offer a new attribution soon. I look forward to the results of his work.

Another mystery is the game being played. Its mortal stakes seem clear enough, but what is the game itself? It's no small matter—other than a somewhat questionable ban on card games in Berne from 1367, the earliest evidence for European card games is from 1377—the year in which John of Rheinfelden published a treatise on card games, the *Ludus cartularum moralisatus*, which both explained the rules of play and more importantly presented such games as morality lessons, with the various suits linked to explicit didactic messages. Games are metaphors, too.

My best guess is that it's a game called *Primero*, dated as early as the sixteenth century and mentioned in an early Francesco Berni poem. While we're unable to read all the cards, none are hidden, and the artist has taken pains to make their faces visible. In



Joseph Heintz the Younger
Allegory (1674)
[Kunsthistorische Museum, Vienna](#)



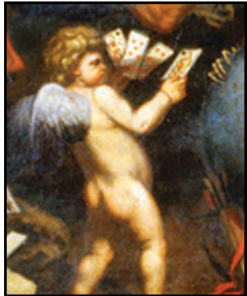
Circle of Master of the Countess of Warwick
Four Gentlemen of High Rank Playing Primero (1560s)
Private collection of the Earl of Derby

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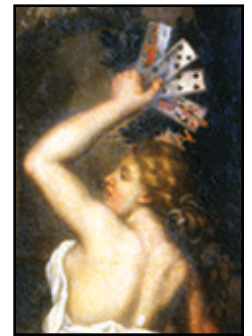


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some versions of *Primero* all fifty-two cards were used, in others the seven, eight, and nine or the eight, nine, and ten were removed, and the game played with the smaller and court cards. The values of the cards were unusual – court cards counted for ten points each, while the cards two through five counted for their face value plus ten (so a three was worth thirteen points). Aces counted for sixteen points, and sixes and sevens counted for triple their face value. As is true for many games (cricket springs to mind unbidden), part of the joy comes from knowing the arcane rules—and knowing others do not.



The distribution of cards in our painting may be revealing as well. No eights, nines or tens are present. Cupid tries to puzzle out a hand dominated by unidentifiable court cards in clubs (generally held to denote political power or ambition) and the six and seven of hearts (love). Time casts aside the jack of hearts, king of spades, ace of diamonds, and another unidentifiable court card. The court cards may symbolize temporal and religious power (in the Spanish version of these suits hearts were cups, and also symbolized the church, so that these court cards may symbolize nobles of church and state), along with wealth. Beauty holds the six and seven of clubs, along with court cards in diamonds (wealth), while Death holds the ace, five, six, and seven of spades (death cards, although spades can also signify nobility or strife).



Equally revealing may be the hands themselves. Based on various [reconstructions](#) of the game the most desirable hands are, in ascending order: *Numerus* (two or three cards in a single suit); *Primero* (one card from each suit); *Supremus* (the six, seven, and ace of a suit); *Fluxus* (or flush, four cards of the same suit; maximum value through the seven, six, five, and ace of a suit); and *Chorus* (four cards of the same face value). Death, then, holds a winning hand, the highest possible point value of *Fluxus*; he jabs his bony finger at the highest value card in his hand, the seven. The hand is actually also a *Supremus*, giving us the *Fluxus Supremus*—the final passing—in the suit of spades, the death suit.

What sharper *memento mori* could there be? But there's more to the message. Death holds the winning hand depicted in our painting, true, but it is not the best hand possible. That hand, the aptly named *Chorus*, trumps death itself. Those cards do not appear here, communicating what may be the central message of the painting by what's absent, not what's shown. Death overcomes age and beauty, love and ambition, and all earthly vanity. But *Chorus*, and by implication the divine heavenly chorus, overcomes Death. That makes our painting the ultimate Baroque *memento mori*. Most such works remind the viewer that death is inevitable, but here the implication is not that one comes to nothing in the end, but rather that in the end one comes to God. So bet wisely! ■

Fig. 1
Black-figure Lekythos (Oil Vessel): Achilles and Ajax
Playing a Board Game with Athena Standing Between
Greece, Athens, late 6th century BCE
Pottery
Gift of Saul and Gladys Weinberg in memory of C.H. Emilie Haspels (82.299)

Fig. 2 (Not Currently on Display)
Jason Miccolo Johnson (America, b. 1956)
The Lights are Always On, 1990
Photograph (gelatin silver print)
Gift of Dr. D. Michael Cheers/New African Visions, Inc. (95.6.133)

Fig. 3
Board for the Game of Senet
Egypt, possibly New Kingdom, ca. 1540–1075 BCE
Wood
Gift of Mrs. Josefa Carlebach (79.169)

Fig. 4
Gaming Pieces
Roman, 1st century CE, Egypt, Alexandria
Bone
Chom Memorial Fund (65.148a&b)

Fig. 5 (Not Currently on Display)
Robert Ecker (American, b. 1936)
Eve, 1978
Mezzotint on paper
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick P. Nause (80.18)

See the painting *The Card Game of Death*, currently on display,
in the Museum's gallery exhibition *The Art of Death*.