The Historic New Orleans Collection presents

Play Chess with Paul Morphy

Lesson 1, History
In the winter of 1857, 20-year-old Paul Morphy had just returned home to New Orleans after defeating the best chess players in the country at the first American Chess Congress, held in New York City.
Because of Morphy’s accomplishment, a chess craze swept New Orleans.
Soon after Morphy’s victory, the New Orleans Chess Club elected him as president. The meetings were held at the Mercantile Library Association, located on Exchange Alley. At these events, Morphy entertained crowds with extraordinary feats on the chessboard.

New Orleans Chess Club announcement in the
*Times-Picayune*, January 13, 1858

Lithograph illustration of *Exchange Alley*, ca. 1870, by Marie Adrien Persac. (THNOC, The L. Kemper and Leila Moore Williams Founders Collection, 1950.39)
Modern chess developed in the Mediterranean during the 15th century, as part of the Italian Renaissance. Around this same time, Europeans began to voyage to Africa and the Americas. Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English ships spread the game of chess—along with plants, technology, and disease—throughout the New World.

*Taking Possession Of Louisiana And The River Mississippi . . .*, ca. 1860, by Jean-Adolphe Bocquin (THNOC, 1970.1)

*Sauvage matachez en guerrier*, 1735, by Alexandre De Batz (courtesy of Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University)
In New Orleans, the game grew in popularity as francophone émigrés poured into the city following the French and Haitian Revolutions at the turn of the 19th century.

Map of New Orleans and Mississippi River, 1833, by Charles F. Zimpel (THNOC, 1945.13 i-xix)
It was within this community of chess players that Paul Morphy trained.

His life (1836–1884) spanned a time of great change in the city and around the world, as colonies throughout the Americas challenged Old World control. The feats that Morphy accomplished on the chessboard in Europe from 1858 to 1859 served as a microcosm of events taking place on the world political stage.

This series of lessons, released over the next few weeks, will look at world history through the game of chess, leading up to the period of Morphy’s death.
That’s our chess master, Paul Morphy!

Now, let’s get into the game itself. Continue to part 2 of lesson 1, where we’ll get acquainted with the chessboard, notation, and the role of rooks.