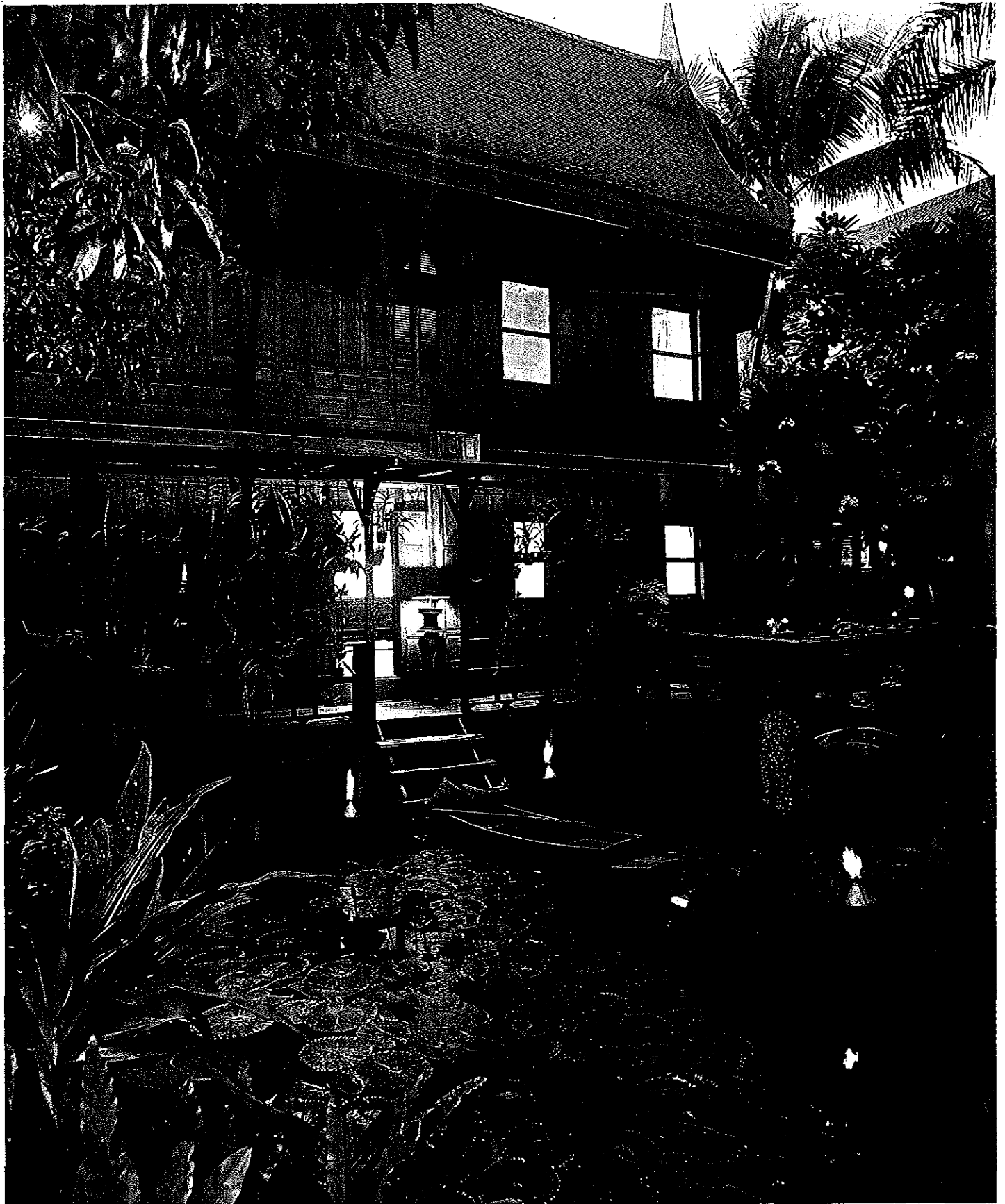
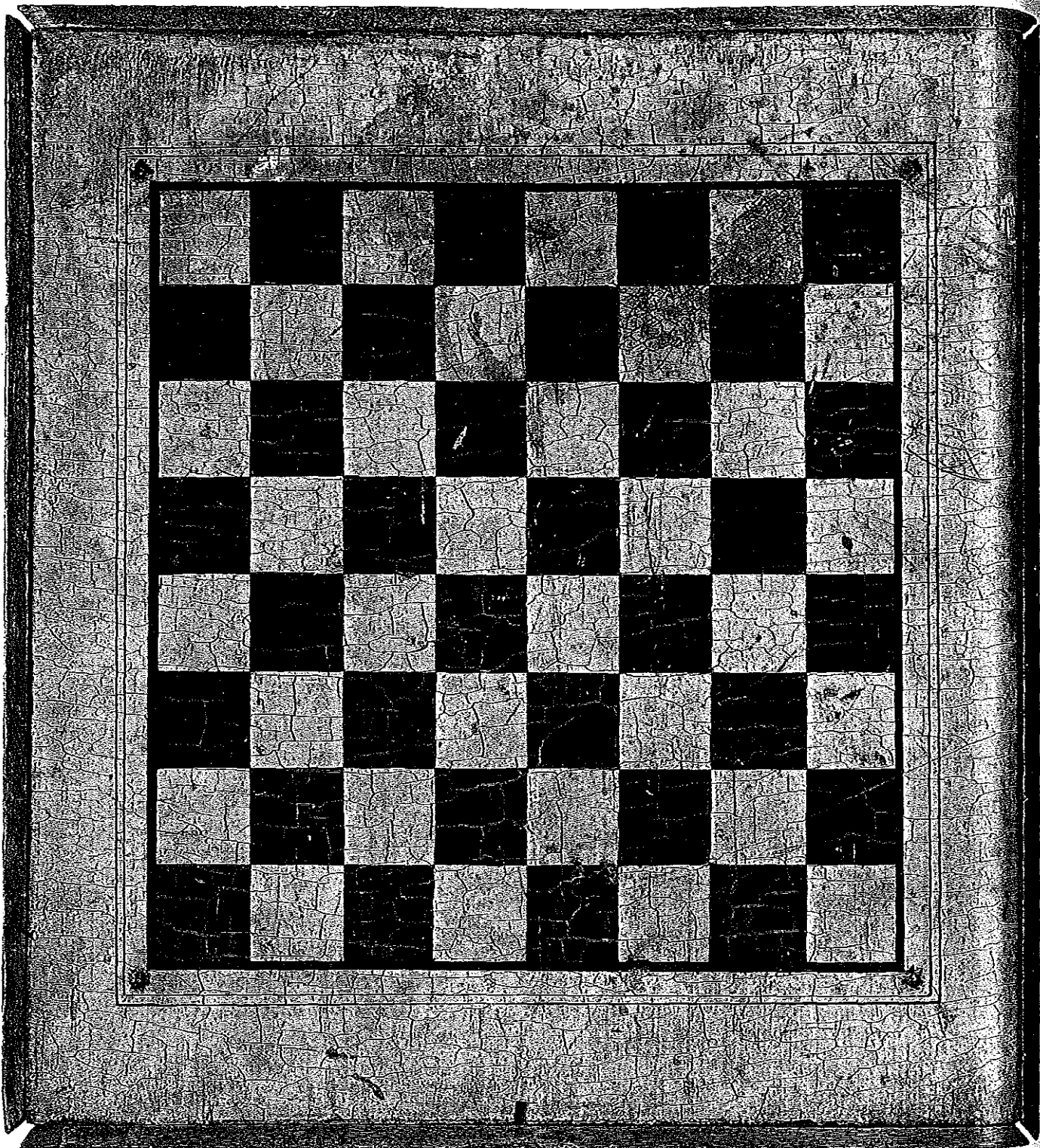


ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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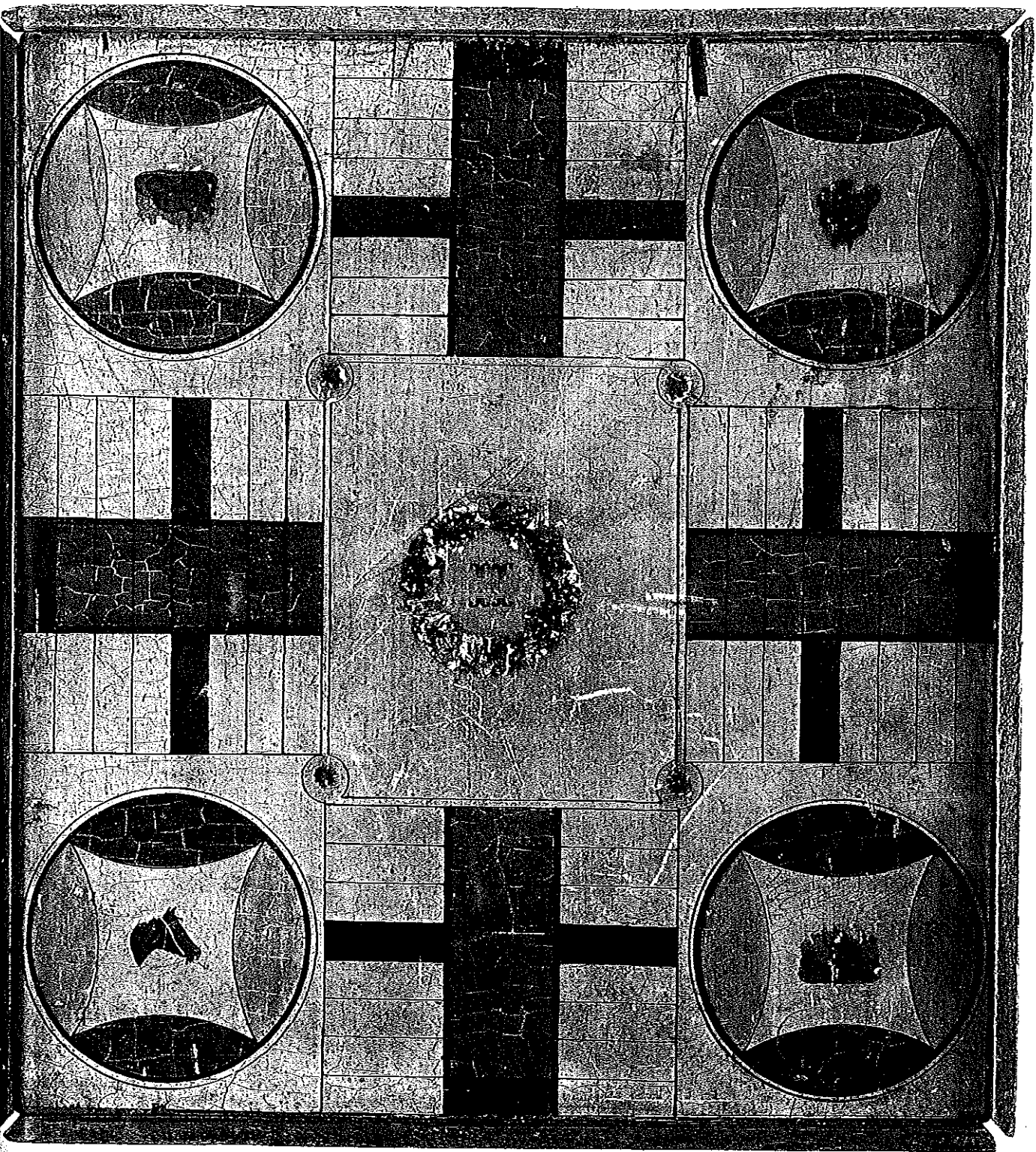




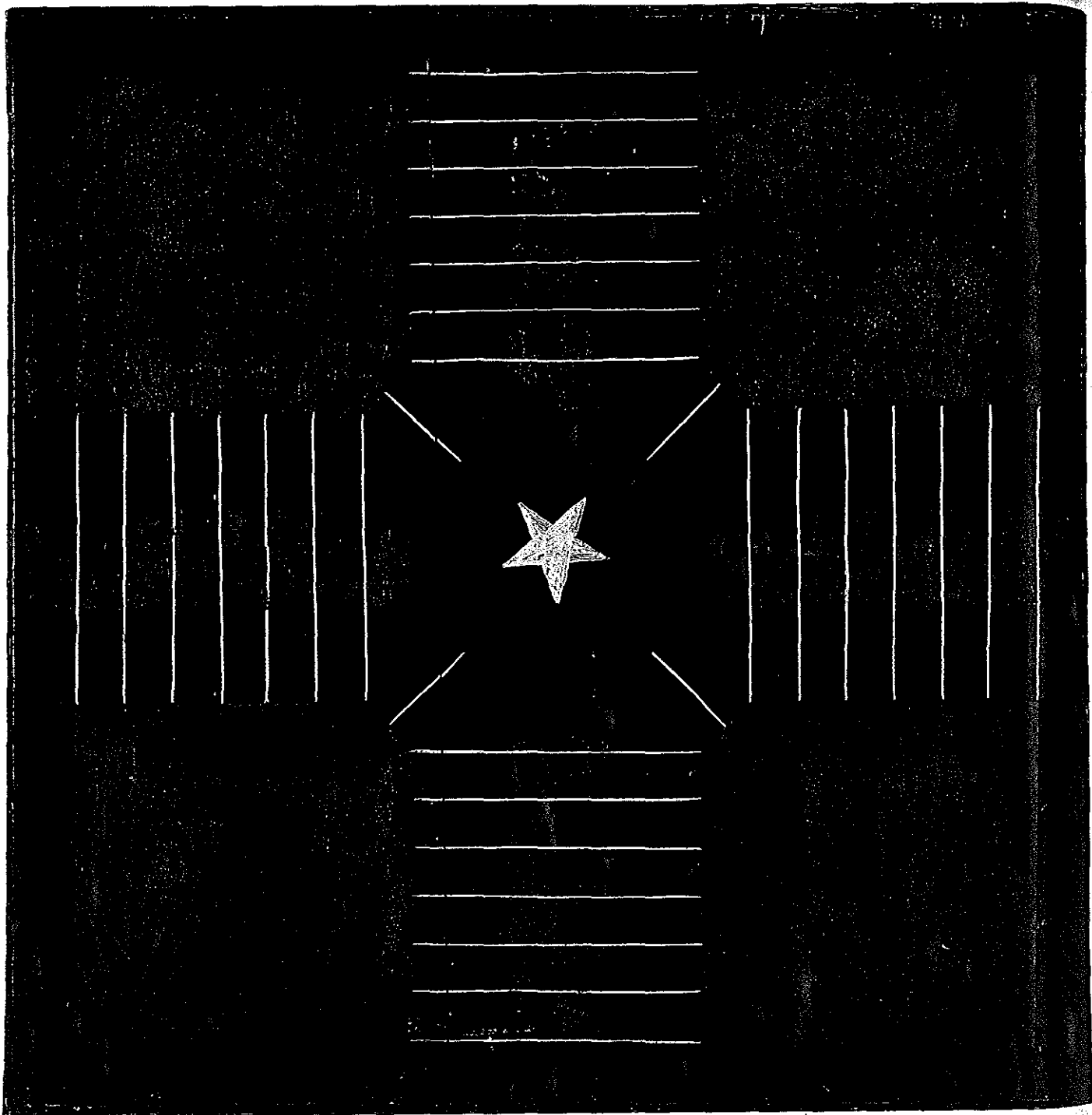
Antiques: American Game Boards

The Abstract Appeal of Folk-Art Amusements

TEXT BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE. *Double-sided Game Board*; United States (New England), circa 1875. Painted maple and pine; 17½" x 16". Made by untrained amateurs and skilled artisans alike, the rarely signed or dated game boards of the 19th century became a vehicle for artistic expression. Here, floral motifs and animal forms decorate a Parcheesi board, while its other side—a checkerboard—bears four small rosettes. Kenneth & Ida Manko, Moody, Maine.



ROBERT HOOPER

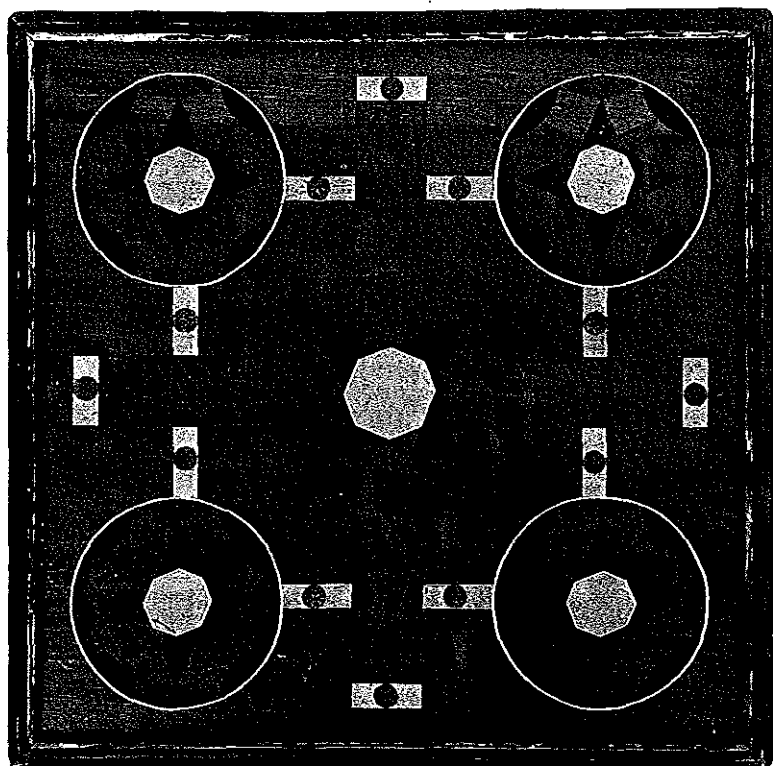
TO WALK INTO a room and see a checkerboard on the table is to meet up with an old friend. You've known this image since early childhood. Starting from about the age of five, you understood its language and recognized its constraints and possibilities. You knew what was expected of you. Put the round checkers on the darker, or positive, squares; avoid

the lighter, or negative, background. When you got a little older, and started to move chessmen rather than checker pieces around the same sort of board—and to realize that life and its decisions were more complicated than you thought before—some of the same rules would still apply. Not only are these gridded boards old friends, but they are old friends who

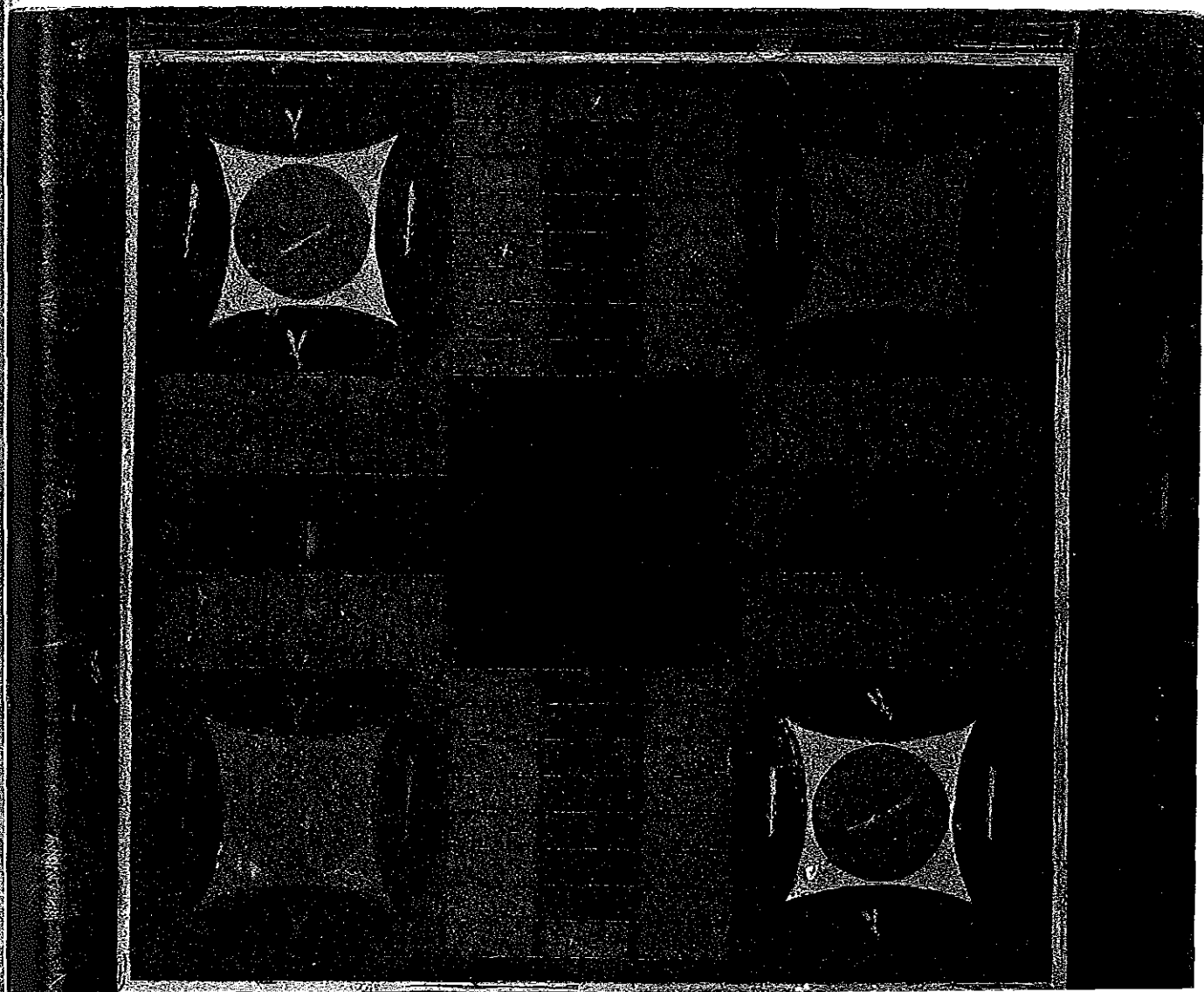
have had the decency to keep a few things constant.

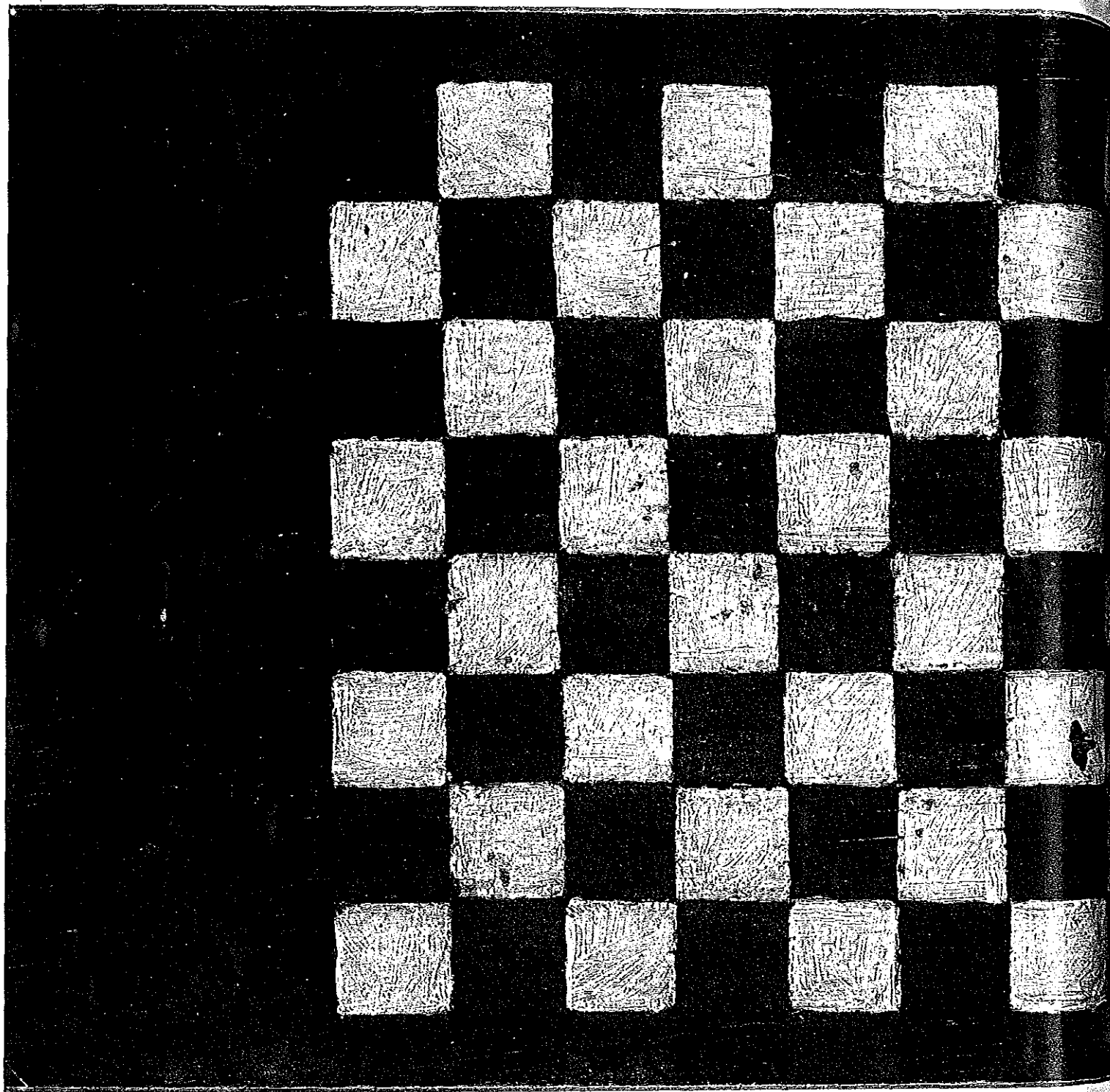
And like our favorite old friends, checkerboards—as well as backgammon, Parcheesi and other game boards—are best if they remain unaffected and not too gussied up. Game boards appeal especially when they are hand-painted and a bit rough at the edges—as long as they stick

Pachisi, the East Indian game from which Parcheesi developed, so fascinated the 16th-century Mogul emperor Akbar that he had a courtyard paved in marble in the design of the board and used 16 harem women as playing pieces. For 19th-century enthusiasts of North America, the board's layout lent itself to a wide variety of abstract interpretations.



OPPOSITE: *Parcheesi Game Board*, United States (New England), 1880s. Painted wood; 23" x 23". Patty Gagarin, Fairfield, Connecticut. RIGHT: *Parcheesi Game Board*, United States, late 19th century. Painted pine; 20" x 20". David A. Schorsch, New York. BELOW: *Parcheesi Game Board*, United States, circa 1880. Painted wood; 21½" x 25½". Don Walters Art & Antiques, Northampton, Massachusetts.





to the necessary rules. They should look spontaneous rather than studied. Their colors should be amusing, not soigné. They are about play, and they are at their very best when their design is playful too.

These are some of the reasons that folk-art game boards—which are usually wooden, and for the most

part painted by unnamed craftsmen—give terrific satisfaction. We like them flat or hanging, to use or simply to look at. A big part of their hold on us is that they can be beautiful in some of the same ways as fine geometric ornament or abstract art, while at the same time they strike a personal, and universal, note.

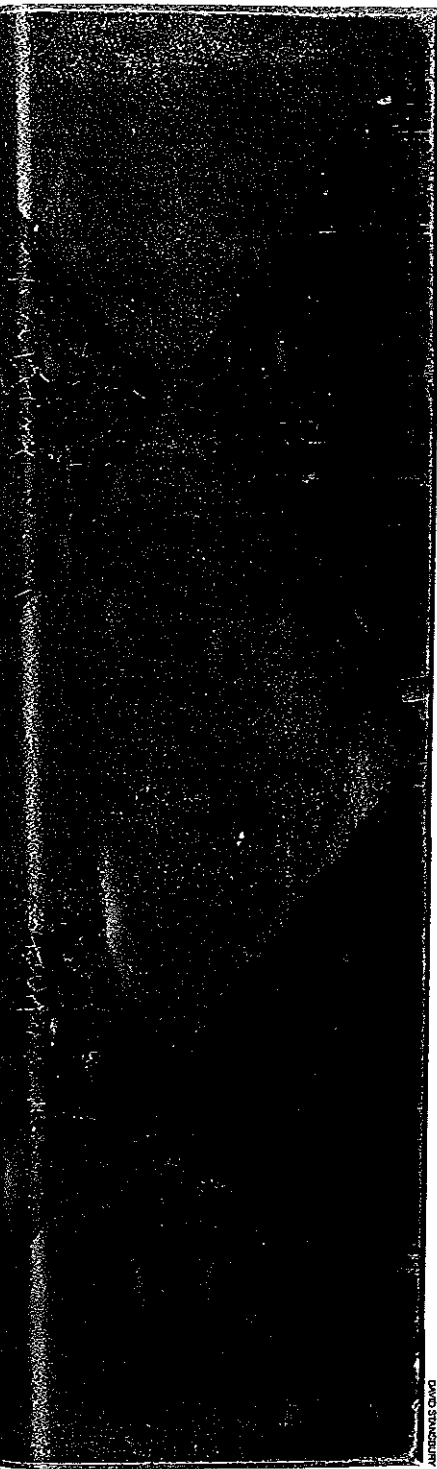
Home craftsmen
made these glorious
game boards all
over America.

The instinct to play board games is almost as old as humankind. It has long been a natural inclination to escape the pressures of daily living by means of a diversion with simple yes/no rules. Board games can fulfill some essential needs. The style of their refreshment imitates the form of the surfaces on which they are played: clear, crisp, law-abiding, untroublesome.

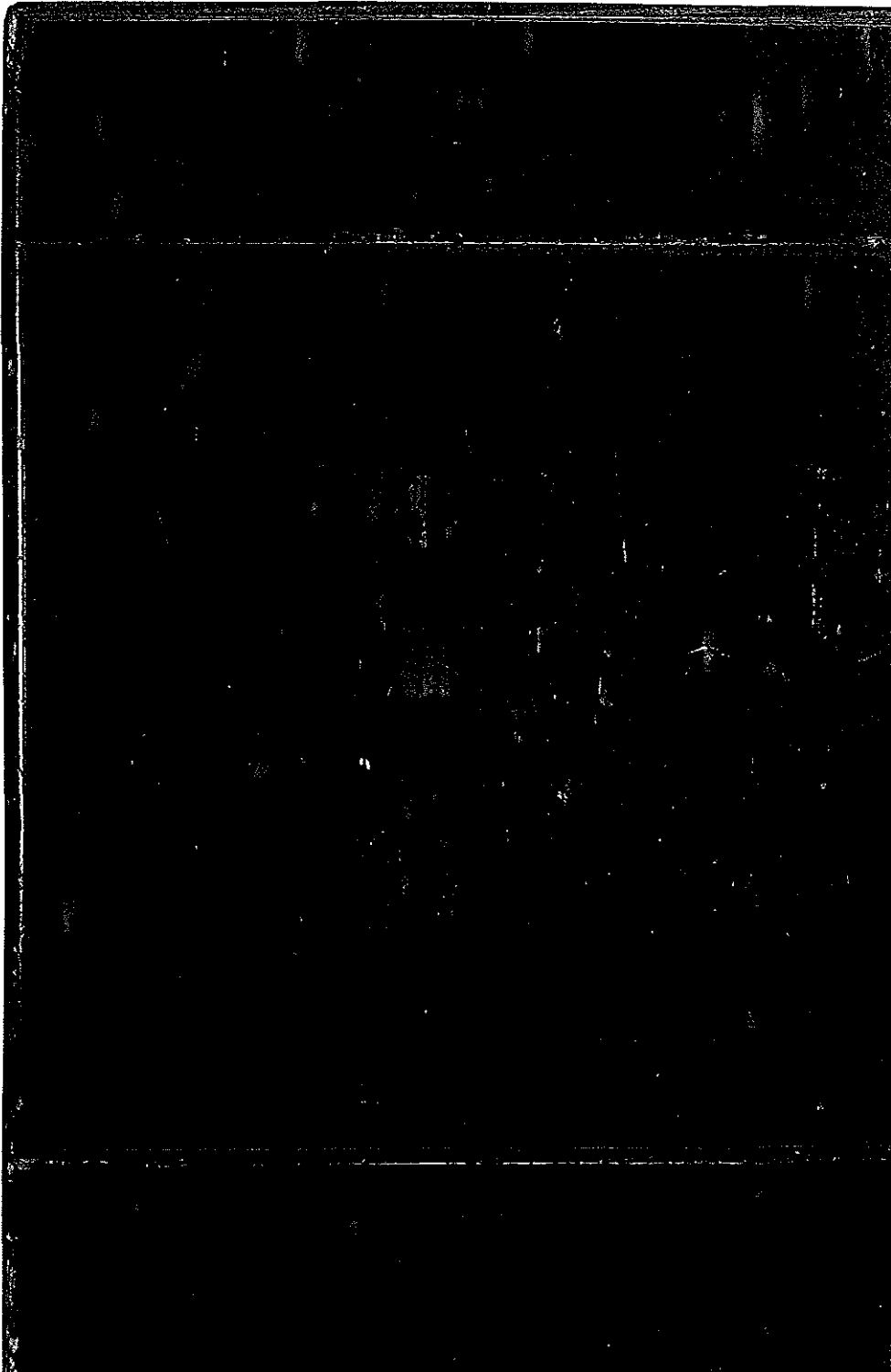
Our ancient predecessors probably

drew lines on the ground for such games. They would move around stones, bones or shells as the players. By the time of the reign of Amenemhet III in Egypt—1842-1797 B.C.—they had developed boards of ivory and other fine materials. A panoply of such objects turned up in Tutankhamen's tomb. They prevailed in Greek civilization too; both Plato and Homer mention checkers and other

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ARTIST'S CONCEPT



FILED IN

Believed by some historians to predate the royal game of chess, checkers—under different names—was played by the Egyptians, Romans, English and French, and was also known to both Plato and Homer, who mentioned it in their works. ABOVE: *Checkers Game Board*, United States (New England), circa 1845. Painted wood; 15" x 23". Charles L. Flint Antiques, Inc., Lenox, Massachusetts. RIGHT: *Checkers Game Board*, United States or Canada, circa 1900. Painted wood; 28½" x 18¾". America Hurrah Gallery, New York.

The Abstract Appeal of Folk-Art Amusements
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games. Board games have appeared in almost all earthly cultures, in some form or another, ever since.

One of the reasons these games have always been, and will continue to be, so necessary is that their rules are based on some essential human drives: to do battle, to hunt, to race, to occupy land or add to one's holdings. They confine such impulses to safe territory. Conquest is only make-believe. But as in life itself, possibilities for success depend on a blend of skill and chance.

These games also address the human need for competition, and generally put it on a friendly level. Be the game the Japanese go or some rather obscure Anglo-American species such as Skully, it depends on the opposition of at least two players. Even if one's opponent is as serious about his business as Bobby Fischer, the nature of the activity is still largely that of a diversion. The suggestion of pleasant camaraderie and sheer fun is one of the reasons that the sight of a nicely designed game board is so welcome.

In the case of the checkerboard (this does not apply as much to Parcheesi or backgammon), the visual pattern has also appeared in myriad cultures throughout time. The history of design has been marked by a universal urge to cover surfaces with alternating dark and light forms, and the checkerboard motif is almost as popular as floral patterns or scrollwork. It has appeared on archaic Greek vases, in the floor designs that show up in seventeenth-century paintings of Dutch interiors, and in abstract compositions of Paul Klee, Josef Albers and Piet Mondrian. The system offers order: a field of units identical in form and size. It also provides a challenge: how to use color to enliven and vary the regularity, and to create visual rhythm.

In the computer age, the grid, precise in its angles and measurements, seems to be an intrinsic part of everyday life. The particular enchantment of that grid in antique checker-

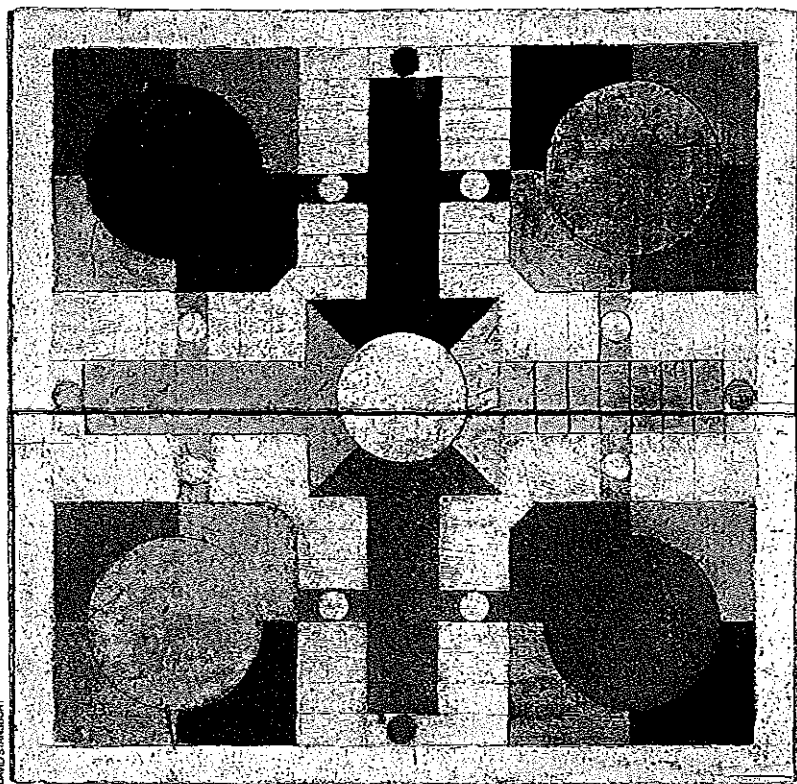
boards is that it is handmade, slightly irregular, and connected with diversion more than with business. Country-style backgammon and Parcheesi boards have the same charm of rendering a well-organized, highly rational system in an informal, inviting way. The tapered triangles of backgammon move like a marching band. Agon and Wheel of Fortune radiate like Gothic rose windows. Parcheesi is like a vibrant flag, a playground of make-believe. Forms spin, colors oscillate. With both Parcheesi and checkers, just when we think we have seen the last word in color juxtapositions or decorated borders, some further variation appears.

Home craftsmen made these glorious game boards all over America in the nineteenth century. They often battened them at the sides, and sometimes painted them on the reverse. Sometimes they constructed them in one type of wood and molded them

in another. Always they made them a manageable human scale, so that today we can hang them, place them flat, or carry them around with ease.

Especially since the recognition of the values of abstraction for its own sake, these objects in which abstraction served a purpose have become collector's items. Unlike pure abstraction, game boards invoke a defined course of action. They invite us to preoccupy ourselves in a way that has nothing to do with our usual daily concerns. Here are designs not just for ornament but in obeisance to knowable systems.

And so these unique objects simultaneously fulfill our need for art and for game playing. As charming and lighthearted folk art, they address some of the key issues of our lives. Our eyes and fancies are caught, and in that encounter we confront—for most of us happily—some of the seminal sides of our being. □



Parcheesi Game Board, United States (New England), circa 1845. Painted wood; 22" x 22½". Using geometric form defined by bold color, the board's maker unwittingly prefigures the images of modern art. Charles L. Flint Antiques, Inc., Lenox, Massachusetts.