

Text Panels

Asian Games: The Art of Contest

The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment.

—Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1950

Games are primarily concerned with enjoyment, a way of having a good time with others. However, competition is inherent in most games, and playing them reflects an aspect of human nature: the desire to win, whether against the odds or another opponent.

From the earliest civilizations, games have found a place in almost every society. Stone boards for what were surely sedentary games appeared in the Middle East as early as 7000 B.C.E. The majority of early board games were played with improvised pieces, such as seeds or pebbles, on makeshift boards drawn on the ground. At the same time, rich patrons and connoisseurs were inspired to produce games that were fine works of art in themselves. Games have fascinated artists also, and works in literature and visual art that strive to capture the excitement and drama of games reveal much about the nature of games and the societies in which they are played.

This exhibition explores Asia's fundamental role in the development and refinement of games. *Asian Games* is pan-Asian not only in the origins of the objects on display but also in that many of the games represented in the exhibition originated in one part of Asia and traveled through others, changed in new cultural contexts, and sometimes found their way to the West, where they are still enjoyed today.

Tossing and Turning

Games of Chance

(panel to be placed at the beginning of exhibition in close proximity to pachisi case)

One who knows how to handle the dice and how to throw them is gifted with a special knowledge.

—Mahabharata (c. 2nd century CE)

The majority of the world's board games are races in which two or more players toss the dice to maneuver their pieces to get "home" first. Backgammon, invented in Rome or Persia, and *pachisi*, in India, are among the most successful of all race games, with histories spanning two millennia and three continents. Their remarkable success is probably due to the fact that they are fast moving and combine luck with a modicum of skill.

Round and Round the Houses

The Indian Game of *Pachisi*

Pachisi is a classic race game, played on a cross-shaped board of cloth subdivided into houses. The name means “twenty-five,” the highest possible throw of the dice. No one knows when *pachisi* first appeared. The game is played with four players, with those opposite one another acting as partners, traditionally using cowrie-shell dice. The great Mughal ruler Akbar (1542–1605) had a particular weakness for *pachisi* and had outdoor boards laid out in the courtyard at Fatehpur Skiri and elsewhere, so that he could indulge in contests with his courtiers in regal style, using beautiful girls for the pieces. *Pachisi* reached Europe and America in the middle of the nineteenth century, in greatly simplified versions.

The World Conqueror

Backgammon

Along with chess, the backgammon family of games were the most widely played board games of the premodern world. It was in Persia that the game took the form with which we are now familiar. One Persian text, *The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon*, recounts its invention. An envoy from India visited the court of the Persian ruler Khusrau I (r. 531–579) and challenged him to a game of chess, which was unknown in Persia at that time. The Iranian court was flummoxed until one wise minister, Buzurjmihir, not only beat the Indian at his own game but in the process invented a new game, *nard*, the equivalent of backgammon. Although the story itself may be apocryphal, a depiction on a gilded silver bowl indicates that the game was played in Persia by the early seventh century. From Persia, the game traveled east along the Silk Road. By the beginning of the Tang dynasty (618–906) it reached China, where it was known as double sixes (*shuang lu*), and Japan, where it was known as *sugoroku*.

War and Territory

Games of Strategy

(panel to be placed at beginning of chess section)

*A board three feet square
Becomes a battlefield.
Lay out the massed infantry
And let the two enemies engage.*

—Ma Rong (79–166 CE), *Rhapsody on Weiqi*

Games can be seen to mirror human life, especially those that embody the struggle of warfare or the competition for territory. The world's two greatest board games of strategy were born in Asia: chess in India and *weiqi* in China. Both are games of pure intellectual skill, in which strategy is paramount and luck or chance play no role. With chess the military origin is explicit: two sides confront each other as opposing armies, and the loser's king is vanquished. With *weiqi*, all pieces are equal and territorial superiority alone confers victory.

The Game of Kings

Chess

Chess, perhaps more than any other game, has been associated with political power and authority. It is believed to have evolved from the early Indian game *chaturanga* (Sanskrit, “having four limbs”), a reference to the four-branched Indian army composed of elephants, horsemen, chariots, and infantry, although no early Indian chess boards or chessmen survive. In Persia and in much of the Islamic world, chess was regarded as a royal game, as attested by its presence in miniature paintings of courtly settings and by references to it in Persian and Arabic literature. In the Arab world, chess pieces were usually highly stylized abstractions. This style was preferred in the Mughal (Islamic) courts of India, but elaborate sets in the form of armies began to appear, possibly in response to demands of the European market during the seventeenth century.

East Asia's Great Territorial Game

Weiqi/Go

The game of *weiqi*, better known in the West by its Japanese name *go*, was invented in China perhaps as early as the time of Confucius (551–479 BCE). Deceptively simple in its playing equipment and rules (the two players take turns placing black or white stones on a grid in an attempt to surround their opponent), the potential variables are incalculable and no computer has yet been able to defeat an accomplished player. Beginning from the sixth century, *weiqi* became one of the four cultural accomplishments (which included calligraphy, poetry, zither (*qin*), and painting at various times), considered essential for any cultivated person. In Japan, *go* was closely linked at times with Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony and was patronized by the shoguns from the sixteenth century onward.

East Asian Relatives of Chess

Xiangqi and Shogi

In China, Korea, and Japan, games similar to chess appeared after the eleventh century. Like chess, these games consist of two opposing armies, but the roles of the pieces are distinguished by written characters, not by different forms, and the movements of the pieces are governed by slightly different rules. In the Chinese game *xiangqi*, the pieces are circular, and in the Japanese game *shogi*, they are pentagonal. *Xiangqi* is still widely played in China; indeed, in terms of sheer number of active players, it is statistically the most popular board game in the world.

From Cards to Connoisseurship

Games of Memory and Matching

(panel to be placed before the painting showing men playing cards)

*In the rustling noise, I turn over the cards;
still enthusiastic after collating books, I rely on them to rid myself of annoyances.
Lighter than a cicada's wing, the autumn leaf's shadow glides,
slightly amazed that the fish-eggs-patterned paper has a trace of ink.
Calculating carefully, hoping to win;
playing the remaining cards in one's hand and then checking the fallen cards.
The falling blossoms are quiet; the curtains reach the floor;
gambling and weiqi games in the quiet courtyard add to the laughter and clamor.*

—Yongrong (1744–1790), son of Emperor Qianlong

Sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, a new type of game appeared in Asia and Europe. It differed from existing games in that it was played not with pieces on a board but with slips held in the hand. Unlike board games in which victory is achieved by movement of the pieces, card games depend on matching and the formation of sets and sequences. Among the many reasons for the popularity of card games are their convenience and versatility.

Playing Cards

The earliest mention of playing cards dates from 1294, when a court case was brought to the attention of Emperor Kublai Khan (1215–94) concerning some Chinese gamblers who were caught with cards and woodblocks for printing them. By the fourteenth century, cards had appeared in Europe and probably in Persia, whence they were transmitted to India. Indian cards known as *ganjifa* (derived from a Persian word for treasury) are remarkable not only for their characteristic circular shape but also for their large number of suits. Japan initially missed out on the craze, and it was not for another three centuries before Portuguese sailors introduced playing cards in the late sixteenth century. However, Japanese card-matching games involving images and poetry were rapidly developed.

Tile Games

Dominoes and Mahjong

Dominoes, invented in China no later than the thirteenth century, are essentially flattened cubical dice. The majority of Chinese domino games involved making sets or trick taking. Mahjong draws its inspiration from both Chinese playing cards (the use of suits) and dominoes (the use of tiles). The aim of the game is to create sets by discarding and picking the appropriate tiles. Invented in the first half of the nineteenth century, mahjong's rapid spread echoed that of cards many centuries earlier. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was established throughout China, and in 1919 it appeared in the United States. Mahjong was banned in China during the Cultural Revolution, as was every pleasurable activity, but the game has since been revived.

Power and Dexterity

Games of Physical Skill

(panel to be placed before the painting of the football players)

*Before speaking of anything else, I will speak of the magnificent Creator,
That creator of moon and sun, by virtue of whom the celestial
spheres began to move like a ball.*

*By virtue of him the heavenly orb spins, the polo mallet of the
crescent moon crouching in the corner.*

By his wisdom the polo stick of fate and ball of destiny clash.

—*The Ball and the Polo Stick or Book of Ecstasy*

Strength and hand-eye coordination are vital to survival in nature, and games of physical prowess are often directly related to activities such as hunting and warfare. In Asia, certain games retained this link, while others became increasingly ritualized, gradually losing much of their competitive element.

The Emperor of Games

Polo

Polo has been called the “emperor of games,” for no other ball game matches its combination of speed, excitement, and danger. Polo probably evolved from horseback chase games such as *buzkashi*, still played in Afghanistan and other parts of Central Asia. By the time of the Sasanian dynasty (c. 224–651), it was played in Persia and was enthusiastically adopted by the Chinese during the Tang dynasty (618–906). For the kings of Safavid Persia (1501–1722), it was the game by which many and heroic qualities were defined. The early Mughal emperors of India were equally passionate about the game, but gradually it fell from favor. British cavalry regiments stationed in Manipur, India, adopted the game of polo and subsequently brought it to the West.

Narrative Object Labels

Games of Chance

Cloth *pachisi* set and pieces

20th century

Board: velvet, cotton, cotton thread, and trim

Pieces: wood, paint, and shell

Private collection

Colorful cloth boards for *pachisi* lay out the ninety-six houses, or playing squares. The center square is the goal of each player's four pieces. Three squares on each arm are distinguished by embroidered crosses, which are safe houses for the men in play.

Devidasa of Nurpur

Shiva and Parvati Playing Chaupar

1694–1695

Photographic reproduction of ink, opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper

Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. J. C. Burnett, 1957

In early Indian sculptures, the deities Shiva and Parvati are often shown playing on what looks like a backgammon board, but miniature paintings characteristically depict them playing at *pachisi*. Parvati has four red and green pieces still in play, while her consort has just three yellow and black pieces. A discussion is evidently in progress.

Thomas Hyde (1636–1703)

De Ludis Orientalibus—Drawing of Pachisi

c. 1700 or before

Photographic reproduction of a page from a book; letterpress with engraved plates

Collection Cleveland Public Library

Thomas Hyde, professor of Hebrew and Arabic at Oxford and chief librarian of the Bodleian Library, was the first European to explore Asian board games in detail. His *De Ludis Orientalibus* included descriptions of *pachisi*, *weiqi*, chess, and *xiangqi*. This page illustrates the two squat long dice that came with his own *pachisi* set from India.

Women Playing Pachisi, Seated on a Yellow Patterned Floorspread

c. 1725

Photographic reproduction of an opaque watercolor and gold on paper
Collection San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binny 3rd Collection

Four ladies seated on a patterned floor spread play a leisured game of *pachisi*. All pieces are on the board, but none is yet “home.” The player at the lower left clutches the three stick dice, preparing the throw.

Backgammon set with pieces

20th century

Wooden inlay, paint, lacquer

Private collection

Along with chess, the backgammon family of games were the most widely played board games of the pre-modern world. Games with a resemblance to backgammon were known in various parts of the ancient world, including Rome, but it was in Persia that the game took the form with which we are now familiar. One of the few surviving Middle Persian texts, *The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon*, recounts backgammon’s invention during the reign of Khusraw I (reigned 531-579). Although the story itself may be apocryphal, we know from its depiction on a silver-gilt bowl that the game was played in Persia by the early seventh century.

From Persia, the game traveled eastward along the Silk Road, reaching China, where it was known as *shuanglu* (double sixes), by the beginning of the Tang period (618–906) and Japan, where it was known as *sugoroku*, at around the same time.

Buzurjmihir Inventing Nard (backgammon) in Answer to the Kain of Hind's Chess, from the Shahnama (Book of Kings)

1536–1537

Photographic reproduction of an opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper
Collection British Library

This scene depicts the story of the invention of backgammon. An Indian envoy to the court of the Persian ruler Khusrau I (reigned 531–579) challenged Khusrau to chess, a game unfamiliar to Persia at that time. Only the wise minister Buzurjmihir could decipher the rules of the game. He then challenged the Indian envoy to a game of his own invention, *nard*, or backgammon. The chessboard with its pieces lies before the Indian ambassadors, waiting to the lower right. Buzurjmihir sits under a canopy. He has already worked out chess and is shown in the process of inventing backgammon in reply. The concept is clear in his mind, and he is measuring out the last houses on the board.

Prince Watching His Companion Play Backgammon

Early 17th century

Photographic reproduction of an opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Courtesy Terence McInerney

Board games in play have proved a popular subject for artists of all kinds. The concentration of these backgammon players and the details of the board are clearly reflected here.

Games of Strategy

Xiangqi game and pieces

19th century

Board: lacquered wood and marble; pieces: wood

Private collection

In China, Korea, and Japan, games similar to chess appeared sometime after the eleventh century. These games are thought by some (but not all) scholars to be derivations of Indian chess. Like chess, the game consists of two opposing armies, but the roles of the pieces are distinguished not by differing forms but by written characters, and the movements of the pieces are governed by somewhat different rules.

In the Chinese game (*xiangqi*) the pieces are circular, and in the Japanese game (*shogi*), they are pentagonal. Neither *xiangqi* nor *shogi* ever attained the prestige of chess or their rival, *weiqi* (*go*). *Xiangqi*, however, is still widely played in China—indeed, in terms of sheer numbers of active players, it is statistically the most popular board game in the world.

Thomas Hyde (1636–1703)

De Ludis Orientalibus—Drawing of Xiangqi

c. 1700 or before

Photographic reproduction of a page from a book; letterpress with engraved plates

Collection Cleveland Public Library

Xiangqi (elephant game) is a Chinese board game similar to chess. Like chess, *xiangqi* uses thirty-two pieces, but unlike chess, they move on the intersections of the grid rather than in the squares. Many of the pieces move in similar ways to those of chess. The *shi/zu* (soldier) is similar to a pawn, the chariot moves much like a rook, and the horse has a dog-legged movement much like the knight; the *xiang* (elephant/minister) moves diagonally like a bishop, but only two points at a time. The general is equivalent to the

king, but there is no queen. The *pao* is distinctive—it can only capture a piece when another piece lies between it and its victim.

Nishapur chess set

20th century

Resin

Private collection

Chess, perhaps more than any other game, has been associated with political power and authority. It is believed to have evolved from the early Indian game *chaturanga* (Sanskrit, “having four limbs”), a reference to the four-branched Indian army composed of elephants, horsemen, chariots, and infantry. Although no early Indian chess boards or chessmen survive, the story of the Indian origin of Persian chess as well as the Persian name for chess, *shatranj*, a clear borrowing from the Sanskrit *chaturanga*, reinforces the theory of Indian origin. In Persia and in much of the Islamic world, chess came to be regarded as a royal game, as attested both by the many miniature paintings showing courtly settings and by references to it in Persian and Arabic literature.

Buzurjmihir Masters the Game of Chess, from an illustrated manuscript of the Shahnama (Book of Kings), dedicated to Shah Tahmasp

c. 1530–1535

Photographic reproduction of ink, colors, silver, and gold on paper

Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970

In this illustration from one of the most famous manuscripts of the *Shahnama* (the national Persian epic written by Firdausi around 1010), the drama of the chess contest is brilliantly portrayed as King Khusrau I and his courtiers gaze transfixed at the board and players. As is usually the case in such depictions, the wise Persian counselor Buzurjmihir makes his move while his opponent, the Indian envoy to the Persian court, appears passive and despondent, as if contemplating his impending defeat.

Chatrang-Namak: Persian Treatise on the Game of Chess

16th century

Photographic reproduction of a bound manuscript

Courtesy Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Codrington 211

This manuscript on Persian chess (*chatrang*) was long considered to date to the fifteenth century. The text and original plan of the illustrations may indeed date from this time, but the illustrations underwent extensive revisions and reworkings in northern India between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The diagrams of the chess games are of particular interest, since the pieces are represented by words (or letters), not shapes.

Islamic chess set

18th century
Bone and ivory
Private collection

This Islamic chess set is based on a seventeenth-century design, originally carved in ivory, from northwest India. The pieces are similar to each other, varying primarily in size, which is typical of the abstract style seen in Islamic sets. The two sides are represented through the finish of the pieces, one side in white and the other antique. Traditionally, Islamic sets used red and green for the opposing sides.

Polish wooden chess set board and pieces

20th century
Board: wood and paint; pieces: wood, varnish, and metal
Private collection

Although the origins of chess were in Asia, its popularity spread worldwide. This set was hand carved in Poland and uses stylized, Western interpretations for the pieces. For example, the elephant used in Asian versions of the game as the vizier, or king's counselor, has been replaced by a tower, representing the bishop, a change made in Europe in deference to the Catholic church.

Go board with pieces

19th–20th century
Board: lacquered wood, mother of pearl, and marble; containers A and B: lacquered wood; pieces: glass
Private collection

Weiqi, the game better known in the West by its Japanese name *go*, was in fact invented in China perhaps as early as the time of Confucius (551–479 BCE). It is now the world's longest-lived board game of skill. Deceptively simple in its playing equipment and rules—the two players take turns in placing black or white stones on a grid in an attempt to surround their opponent—the potential variables are incalculable; indeed, no computer has yet been able to defeat an accomplished *go* player.

From the sixth century onward, *weiqi* became one of the four cultural accomplishments (along with calligraphy, music, and painting) essential for any cultivated person. No other game has been so central to the elite culture of a society and no other game inspired so many poets and artists. In Japan its status was even higher; it was closely linked at times with Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony and was patronized by the shoguns from the sixteenth century onward. Although played in Korea and Tibet, *weiqi* was never transmitted to Western Asia, perhaps because of the dominance of chess there.

The Broken Tryst

19th century

Photographic reproduction of a hanging scroll and ink on silk

Collection British Museum

In late Qing-period pictures, *weiqi* no longer carried scholarly connotations but instead became a symbol of romantic liaison. The *weiqi* board and a single container in this painting are symbols of longing for an absent lover. Enhancing the sensual atmosphere of the scene is a candle and the “Buddha’s hand,” a type of fruit that sometimes had erotic connotations, piled high in the jar on the stand.

Katsushika Oi

Operating on Guanyu’s Arm

Early 19th century

Photographic reproduction of a hanging scroll, ink, color, and gold leaf on silk

Collection Cleveland Museum of Art

Painted by the daughter of the eminent *ukiyo-e* artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), this scroll depicts a scene from the famous fourteenth-century Chinese historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The general, Guan Yu, was wounded by a poisoned arrow but continued to be engrossed in a game of *weiqi* during the blood-letting operation to remove the poison.

“*Utsusemi*” chapter from *Genji Monogatari*, second page from a set of two albums

17th century

Photographic reproduction of ink, gold, and color on paper

Courtesy Mary Griggs Burke

Shown here is one of the highlights of the third chapter of *Tale of Genji*, the world’s first novel written around the year 1000 by Lady Murasaki. The scene depicts Genji secretly watching two aristocratic ladies, Utsusemi and Nokiba-no-Ogi, playing *go*. The ability to play *go* was considered an important talent among upper-class women; *go* sets were part of bridal trousseaux from the fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

Games of Memory and Matching

Mahjong game

18th century

Case: wood, lacquer, and brass; dice: ink and bones; tiles: bone and paint; dice case: bone; circular container: bone and paint; discs: bone and paint

Private collection

Mahjong draws its inspiration from both Chinese playing cards (the use of suits) and dominoes (the use of tiles). The aim of the game is to create sets by discarding and picking the appropriate tiles. Invented sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century in coastal China, it spread rapidly, echoing the expansion of cards centuries earlier. By the end of the century, it was established countrywide, and in 1919 it was brought to the United States by J. P. Babcock, formerly manager of the Fuzhou branch of Standard Oil. The game immediately became a craze. In China it was banned during the Cultural Revolution, because every pleasurable activity was banned as being bourgeois, but mahjong has since revived and is ubiquitous in Chinese communities worldwide.

Mahjong print

21st century

Ink and paper

Private collection

Mahjong is played with tiles, normally about 140 tiles for four players. The aim of the game is to create sets by discarding and picking the appropriate tiles. Pictured here are the Eight Immortals of Chinese mythology playing mahjong, attesting to the revered and elevated status of the game in China. At the left, traditional Chinese symbols of immortality are depicted in the crane and the peaches being offered by a servant.

***Karuta* (Cards)**

20th century

Cardboard

Private collection

Awase karuta, or matching cards, constitutes a major category of playing cards devised in Japan, which encompassed a wide array of botanical, zoological, historical, social, and literary themes. The aim was to successfully match two (sometimes four) predetermined pairs.

Hand-painted cards

19th century and 20th century

3 circular and 4 rectilinear cards; varnish and painted heavy paper stock

Private collection

The earliest mention of playing cards dates from 1294, when a court case was brought to the attention of Emperor Kublai Khan (1215–1294) concerning some Chinese gamblers who were caught with cards, along with woodblocks for printing them. If China was the originator of playing cards (cards used for drinking games had been in use there earlier), they must have spread like wildfire, because a fragment of a card found in Egypt has been attributed to the twelfth or thirteenth century. By the fourteenth century, they had appeared in Europe and probably in Persia as well, from where they were transmitted to India.

Hand-painted Mughul *ganjifa* cards

19th century

Cards: hand-painted heavy paper stock; box: hand-painted wood

Private collection

Indian cards known as *ganjifa* (derived from a Persian word for treasury) are remarkable not only for their characteristic circular shape but also for their large number of suits. Mughal *ganjifa* decks consist of eight suits, which represent the court household, treasury, armory, gold mint, women's quarters, administration, silver mint, and stores.

Men Playing Cards

18th–19th century

Photographic reproduction of a painting, album leaf, ink, and colors on silk

Courtesy Stark and Michael Ward

Playing cards were probably invented in China in the thirteenth century, and by the Ming period (1368–1644) they had become very popular. However, they lacked the prestige of board games such as *weiqi* and were rarely depicted in Chinese painting before the nineteenth century. The tall, narrow proportions of Chinese cards are clearly shown in this painting of four gentlemen playing a game in a pavilion. Outside in the garden, a *weiqi* board and containers lie neglected on a low stone table.

Katsukawa Shunshô and Kitao Shigemasa

Courtesans Morokoshi, Hananoe, Wakoku, Kotoura, and Kokonoe from the Echizenya Brothel Playing Cards, from A Mirror of the Beautiful Women of the Green Houses (Seirô bijin-awase sugata kagami)

1776–1777

Photographic reproduction of ink and color on paper
Takahiro Sasaki Collection

These courtesans are playing a game of One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets (*Hyakunin isshu*), suggested by the poet portraits depicted on the deal cards stacked in the center, which are also inscribed with the upper half, or seventeen syllables, of the thirty-one syllable *waka* verse. From the lower verse cards scattered on the floor, the players must find the correct match with the upper verse that was either turned over in the center or read out loud, requiring the players to know the verses by heart for a successful game.

Games of Physical Skill

Polo mallet and ball

20th century

Ball: plastic; mallet: bamboo, wood, and cloth

Private collection

Sir Winston Churchill, a fanatical polo player, rightly called polo the “emperor of games,” for no other ball game matches its combination of speed, excitement, and danger. In origin, polo probably evolved from horseback chase games such as *buzkashi*, still played in Afghanistan and other parts of Central Asia. By the Sasanian dynasty (c. 224–651), it was played in Persia and was enthusiastically adopted by the Chinese, both men and women, during the Tang dynasty (618–906). Increasing criticism of the game as dangerous and unbecoming led to its decline in China during the Song dynasty (960–1279). For the kings of Safavid Persia (1501–1722), however, it was the game by which manly and heroic qualities were defined; Shah Abbass (reigned 1587–1629) even organized his new capital at Isfahan around a central polo square. The early Mughal emperors of India were equally passionate about the game, but gradually it fell from favor until it was played only in outlying pockets such as Manipur on the borders of Burma (Myanmar). It was in Manipur that it was adopted by British cavalry regiments stationed there, who subsequently brought it to the West. For a time an Olympic sport, it is still widely played around the world, particularly in horse-breeding regions.

Formerly attributed to Ma Yuan

The Football Players

15th century

Photographic reproduction of a hanging scroll, ink, and light color on silk

Collection Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wilbure Cowett, 2004

In this painting, the game is being played by four casually dressed figures; three are gazing upward at the ball in the air above them. Whereas the players are disheveled from their exertions and resemble commoners, the more formally dressed spectators are scholars, or at least men of standing. In earlier times, the elite and even emperors had

been enthusiastic kickball players, but from the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) onward, the game increasingly became a commoner's pastime.

Qasim, son of 'Ali, supervised by Musavvir

Siyavush Plays Polo Before Afrasiyab, from the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp by Mir

c. 1525–1530

Photographic reproduction of ink, colors, silver, and gold on paper

Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. 1970

The legendary Persian prince Siyavush agrees to a game of polo suggested by his father-in-law, Afrasiyab, king of the Turanians, but demands that he can select Persians for his team.

So dominant are the Persians that Siyavush has to remind his players that this is a game, not war, and instructs them to let the Turanians win the ball for once. Siyavush is shown at the center of the composition, with a double plume and raised stick. Afrasiyab, with his entourage, watches from the horizon.

***Rajasthani scene of polo from manuscript of the Balakanda of the Ramayana—
Dasaratha's Four Sons Practicing Royal Pursuits***

1712–1713

Photographic reproduction of an opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper

Collection British Library

Royal pursuits in India included elephant riding, archery, and polo. Probably invented in Central Asia, polo was introduced to India as early as the eleventh century. As a game of high prestige, it was popular among the Mughal emperors and also spread to the Hindu courts. In Hindu mythology, Dasaratha was the father of Lord Rama, hero of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Here, Rama, identified by his blue skin, is shown engaged in each activity.