



# Susan West

## Guest Collector

*This article is the third in a continuing series. The series features a mahjong collector in a question and answer interview and showcases one of their sets. Our guest this issue is Susan West. Susan plays mahjong using Chinese Rules. This interview features Susan and a fancy carved ivory set in a fully carved box.*

**The Mahjong Collector:** What started you collecting Mahjong sets?

Susan: I have been playing Chinese Rules Mahjong since 1969. However, I started collecting vintage Mahjong games sort of by accident in 2002.

My father and I were chatting about the game we used to play with in the 60's (which my father still owns by the way) and we were wondering if there were others online that we could look at.

So together we sat at the computer and headed to Ebay to take a look. As you can imagine we were overwhelmed by the number of games that popped up when we did our first search. But staring at us on page one was a lovely little Milton Bradley game. It looked to be in good condition and didn't seem to be too expensive. We smiled at each other and decided to bid. The auction was due to end that evening and we both mentally noted the end time and were back at the computer to watch the auction end together.

We had no doubt in our mind that this was going to be "our" new game. The seconds ticked by and we watched the price increase. Then the auction was finished ... by sheer luck we were the highest bidders ... the rest as they say is history.

**The Mahjong Collector:** How many sets do you have in your Collection?

Susan: I probably shouldn't admit to it but the total number of games I consider to be the core of my collection would total well over 450 games; if I were to count the actual number, it would probably lead to a divorce.



*The Mahjong Collector:* There is a wide variety of materials used in the manufacture of Mahjong sets, do you have a favorite material?

Susan: There are several materials I like: Real ivory – there is nothing quite like the feel of handling real ivory tiles. Bakelite - I have a fondness for the look and feel of enrobed games and have a particular cheerful bright orange game that I love.

*The Mahjong Collector:* Do you display your sets in your home or at your place of work?

Susan: Just in my home – I finished building a new home in the spring. Because we knocked down our old house and were able to design the new one from scratch I had the opportunity to incorporate two custom display cabinets into the design to show off many of the beautiful mahjong cases I own (please see page 22, Image 1). And in the future I am hoping to host Mahjong “stay and play” weekends where people can come and visit, stay in our separate furnished suite and play with the games in my collection.

*The Mahjong Collector:* When adding to your collection where do you concentrate your search for sets?

Susan: I still watch for unusual games online but a number of people contact me via my website\* and I have a few people that find games and contact me to see if I am interested. When traveling I do also check out antique stores, charity stores and have even found a game in a pawn shop.

*The Mahjong Collector:* There are many accessories in sets, ephemera, bone betting tokens, bettors and others. Do any of these form a separate part of your collection?

Susan: I try and keep accessories with their original game – if I remove them I ensure I document which game they belonged to – I think it is important to try and retain the integrity of games and their accessories.

Just recently I have started documenting the accessories I have. For example, I do have a NMJL score card from every year they were printed and I am putting together a display of pamphlets, accessories, score cards, personal notes and instruction books. I plan to add pictures of these to the website for everyone to share.

*The Mahjong Collector:* Since you are a well-established collector is there a set you are currently still searching for?

Susan: Because I have been collecting for so many years now I don't often come across anything that says “wow I must have that one” – I love coming across real ivory games – they tend to be extremely nicely carved and are just so beautiful to the touch!

*The Mahjong Collector:* Take us on a journey highlighting why collecting this game is important to you.

Susan: Prior to 2002 I was not a collector of anything ... my accidental introduction to collecting Mahjong has turned into a quest to own the best examples of a particular make or design and to own different colours or examples of games.

I was spurred on in my quest when I visited the Mahjong Museum in Chiba, Japan (before the collection was returned to China). To walk around the museum and be able to say (many times) “OMG I have one of those,” was just so exciting – it sort of validated that the games I have so lovingly sought are worthy of collecting.

As my collection grew and I realized I needed to make some sense of what I was collecting I knew I needed to start a website. I didn't want the website to be complicated to navigate

or have pictures of the games hidden behind watermarks – I simply wanted to share them with anyone who was interested. Initially I was just planning to put my collection online but as my games grew and more and more people were asking if I was prepared to sell any of my games I decided to streamline my collection and part with duplicate games. A labour of love!

And most recently I had the pleasure of being asked to share over 80 of my prized games, tiles and accessories in the recently published book: *Mah Jongg The Art Of The Game* by Ann Israel and Gregg Swain. I found the whole experience so much fun and another validation of the years I have spent collecting. Some would say my collecting has become an obsession – I guess anyone who owns over 450 of anything should ask themselves that question but I am proud of putting together so many fine examples of these historic games and I still get excited if I come across a game that I have never seen before and start the chase to own it!



*The Mahjong Collector:* Have you been involved in unusual experiences when acquiring sets?

Susan: I remember once being sent pictures of a game by a lady who said the game was ivory and had been given to her by her father. As you will be aware finding real ivory games is a rarity and I always expect the games to actually be bone. The young lady sent me pictures and not only was the game not ivory it was not even bone – it was actually a horribly cracked Bakelite set.

I always try and break bad news gently to prospective sellers but this lady was not hearing anything I said. In the end she accused me of trying to wreck her relationship with her family because I was telling her that her Dad, who proudly said the tiles were ivory, was a liar and why would I say such awful things. That was one lesson learnt the hard way.

*The Mahjong Collector:* Provenance is considered to be very important by some collectors. Do you try and identify the set's history when adding it to your collection?

Susan: I wish I had more historical knowledge about some of the games I own. What I do strive to find out is information on who owned a particular game and their family history. I think the story of who played with and owned the game is part of the games provenance. I religiously document any details I can about each of my games and keep these notes in the game boxes.

*The Mahjong Collector:* Any stories/anecdotes relating to any of your sets?



Artwork from a one dot tile. The design features a dragon in the clouds, chasing a pearl. The dragon's tail is wrapped around the top of its head.

Susan: I purchased a hawk style real ivory game from a rather different lady in New York. It took months of emailing between us to finally arrange the purchase. She sounded extremely eccentric, apparently rarely left the house and didn't really understand the concept of me sending her money and her mailing me her game. I eventually managed to find a FedEx store near to where she lived and arranged that they give her my envelope (with payment in it) and she give them the game and I paid for FedEx to wrap and ship the game to me. Mind you she can't have been too crazy – she certainly struck a hard bargain with her price.

*The Mahjong Collector:* Many collectors start out by inheriting sets from beloved relatives. Do you have any sets which are of sentimental value to you?

Susan: My father still has the original game we played with when we were kids in the 60's. Unfortunately it is not an unusual set, just a regular plastic two tone white and peach colour set in a zip up case. It is sentimental because I learnt to play with it but it is certainly not a rare game.



When I started collecting vintage games my mother and father would make a point of searching for games in antique stores on both the Isle of Man (where they lived) and in England which they visited frequently. They found two games for me – a bone and bamboo game in a traditional rosewood case and a bamboo game. My mother has sadly passed away but I have made it a point not to part with these two games – they are clearly

marked as being gifts from my parents even though they are not historically unusual games.

*The Mahjong Collector:* Have you been out-bid on any set which you spent sleepless nights wondering why you didn't make one more bid?

Susan: Just once ... a particularly delightful French ivory game with some of the most beautiful carvings I can remember. I know who owns it and every so often I check if they are ready to part with it – no luck so far. I remember being so miserable at not having bid higher ... that was when I realized I needed to get to grips with myself. My rule now is that if I bid and lose then the game was not meant to be mine and I never sweat it – really !

*The Mahjong Collector:* Any horror stories about sets you bought without fully inspecting them?

Susan: Anyone who purchases online remembers their "lemons" – I have had my fair share of them – the ones I remember the most are:

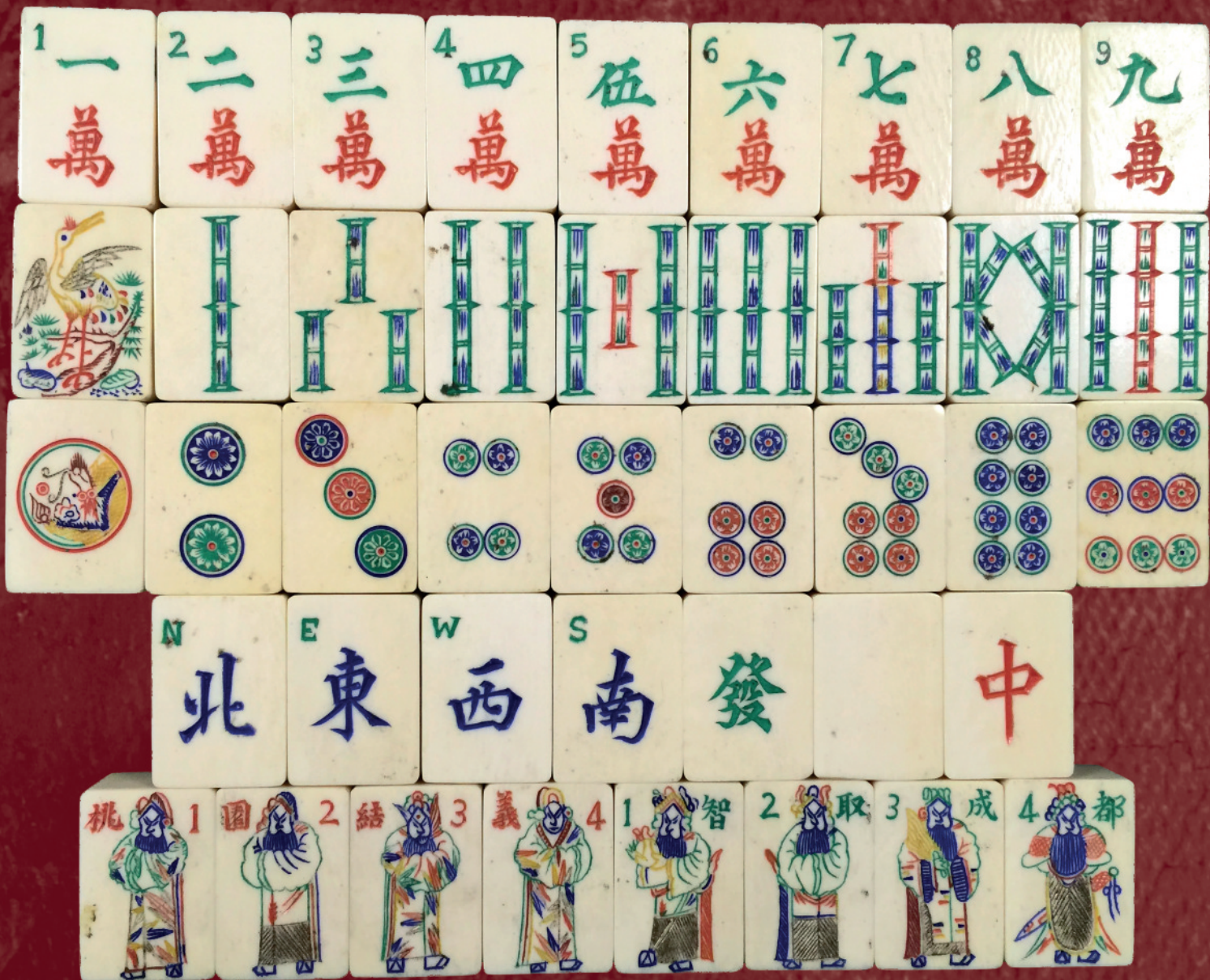
1. The tiles that someone painted (poorly) all the backs a hideous purple (which they neglected to mention in the listing).
2. The tiles where all the characters and circles were from one game and the rest of the tiles were from another and they were a slightly different size – I give them some credit they did look to be all the same colour ... I guess the seller didn't notice !
3. The worst one was the set I bought that the seller (despite being warned to pack them in a certain way) neglected to stop the tiles moving around when shipped and all the corners were chipped. Of course the seller blamed the shipper and vice versa for months – I gave up and chalked it up to experience.

*The Mahjong Collector:* If your house caught fire which set would you save first?

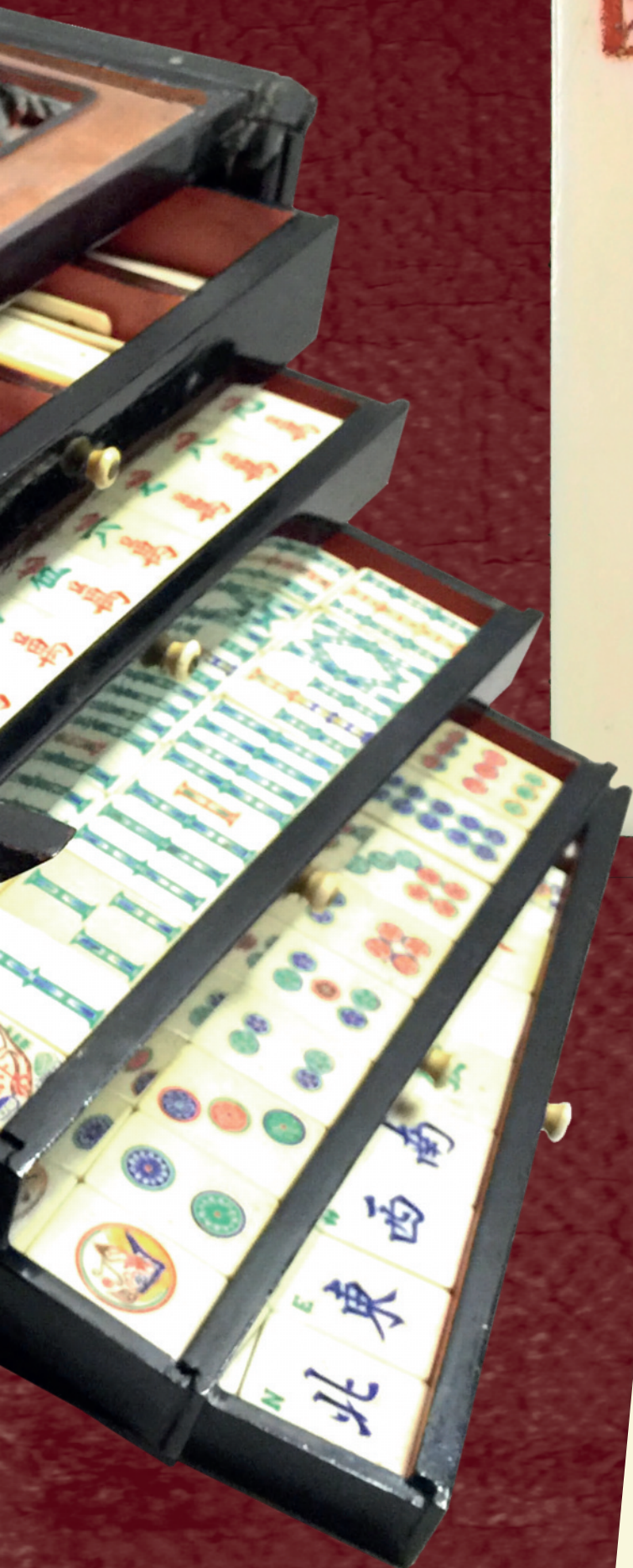
Susan: I would grab three sets (I have even worked out how to carry all three in a panic) ... two Shanghai Luck games (one real ivory and the other bone & bamboo) and an ivory hawk game – they are even located in a suitable spot to be grabbed as I run for my life !



**Image 1** One of Susan's built-in display cabinets in her home.







### The Set Details...

Susan's tile set showcases solid ivory tiles which are fancy carved and painted in cheerful colors. The one bamboo tiles feature finely carved crane birds, the one dot tiles feature fire-pearl dragons. Fantastic flower tiles tell stories from the Chinese novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Made from deeply carved wood, the five drawer box is decorated on five sides with ornate designs. The carved handle has figures on each side of its base. Each box side depicts men in a different scene surrounded by an intricate, scrolling leaf design. Given the clothing and weaponry, the scenes are most likely showing tales from a Chinese opera. Painted in black, umber, burgundy, with figures painted in metallic gold, Susan's incredible box is the perfect complement for her beautiful ivory tile set.





## The Flower Tiles...

The flower tiles are from the famous Chinese story, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and refer to two events, "swearing brotherhood in the peach garden" and the strategic plan to capture Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan and thereby establish the Shu Kingdom as a step in reunifying China under the Han Dynasty.

The top four tiles are the "swearing brotherhood in the peach garden" tiles: 桃園結義, Tao Yuan Jie Yi. The bottom four are 智取成都, Zhi Qu Cheng Du, "to take Chengdu by strategy".

In China, sworn brothers or sisters are called eight-bow friends (八拜之交), because as part of the ritual when they swear to be brothers or sisters, they need to bow down eight times in worship of great friends from history, respected as ideal models of true friendship. One of those historical groups of friends come from the *Three Kingdoms* story... "When saying the names Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, although the surnames are different, yet we have come together as brothers. From this day forward, we shall join forces for a common purpose, and come to each other's aid in times of crisis. We shall avenge the nation from above, and pacify the citizenry from below. We seek not to be born on the same day, we merely hope to die on the same day"

By Ray Heaton and Katherine Hartman

\*Susan's website: [www.mahjongmahjong.com](http://www.mahjongmahjong.com)

