

## Reflections 5 : 2018 – Chess Pieces by Dr Advocate Lyndon Bouah

During the recent December vacation I read a fascinating book about chess pieces called Chess Masterpieces written by Gareth Williams ( Allen and Unwin : 2000, Australia).

The book travels through the ages and tells us about how the pieces tell us about the history of the time. It starts off with an ancient poem and I quote:

"O thou, whose cynic sneers express  
The censure of our favourite chess,  
Know that its skill is science' self,  
It's play distraction from distress,  
It soothes the anxious warriors in their art,  
When dangers threat and perils press:  
And healed us, when we need them most  
Companions in our loneliness."

- Ibn Al - Mutazz, circa 1040

Let us take a journey this year 2018 of exploring chess sets as I love chess sets! Williams starts off in his introduction with the following: open quote (page 6)

"Chess is normally regarded as a game of bloodless battles, a conflict of intellectual thought, between two adversaries, each controlling a miniature army on a battlefield of 64 squares. Yet this is not the only aspect of chess that has enthralled participants over the centuries. The development and form of the chessmen, with their captivating seductiveness, have stimulated the imaginations of artists, craftsmen and designers where the game of chess has been played. From virtually every society the design and style of these warriors of modest stature has reflected the spirit and culture of their environment. "End quote

In my travels across the South Africa, Africa and beyond I have indeed found this to be the case. At every market we are confronted with chess sets of impeccable design. The chess sets reflect various periods of history and ensures that we as chess tourists (yes indeed!) also purchase these chess sets!

The Lewis Chessmen is among the most well-known chess sets known to history. I bought a few pieces when I visited Norway during the 2014 Tromso Olympiad. According to Williams (p20) the Lewis chessmen was discovered on the Isle of Lewis, off the West Coast of Scotland in 1831 and appear to characterise a medieval Nordic army. Williams opines that the mysterious and attractive chess sets are ideally balanced and proportioned as a set created to be used for play, as well as being decorative.

These Lewis chessmen according to Williams, carved from walrus ivory, are an excellent example of good design, a chess set that is both aesthetic and practical - a twelfth century army, personifying a royal court of the period king, queen, bishop and knight. A Viking "Berserker" in place of a castle and boundary stones in place of pawns are the only difference between these ancient chessmen and modern chess set. Recent investigation suggest that the Lewis chessmen may have originated in Trondheim, the medieval capital of Norway, and home to the Norsemen during the eleventh and twelfth centuries who were overlords of the Isle of Lewis. It seems that that brought the chessmen with them from Norway when they voyaged to the island.



*The Lewis Chessmen*

I end off the first article with various chess sets that I have in my possession. Enjoy the chess sets which come from different parts of the world! I shall tell their stories too one day!



*Uganda set*



*Russian set*



*Chess set depicting the two nations*



*Russia*



*USA*

Enjoy the chess studies!

Regards

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