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Topic Today: Lucas SITHOLE

As a clay-streaked little boy, Lucas Sithole was regularly berated by his parents for bringing mud into their home. But years later, the clay sculpting foundations found expression in vital wood carvings.

Lucas Sithole, born November 15 1931 in a Springs township, has since become one of South Africa's, and Africa's, top and best-loved sculptors.

Reminiscing about his youth – spent shaping forms in a wet river bed, he says: "Often my parents smacked me when I came home dirty with mud clinging to my pants, but I would find myself doing the same thing again the next day – even though I would return home panic-stricken."

Clay was not his only passion. He pulled the tail hairs from his dog and fashioned brush after brush to paint figurative and animalistic forms on whatever he could find.

Unfortunately his dreams of becoming a fine artist were abruptly ended by his parents who sent him to a vocational training school after he had been through the St Louis Catholic College.

Lucas could hardly complain as he was on a scholarship at the Vlakfontein Technical College. He learnt carpentry, bricklaying, chiselling, welding and cabinet-making and he learnt to use the tools he was to make use of as a sculptor.

For six months he transported concrete for a builder, after that he joined a soap factory, fashioned trinkets, worked in a curio shop – all the while buying more tools to whittle away at his wood carvings.

The breakthrough came when he was told about the Polly Street Art Centre where Cecil Skotnes helped young African artists explore the different mediums of paint, drawing and sculpture.

He trained there for 12 months in 1959/60 and then: "One day in early 1960 when the Adler Fielding Gallery was a mere tin shed on the roof garden of the old Pim's building in Kruis Street ... long since demolished ... a young, shy, very self effacing African walked timidly

into our workshops. He very hesitantly opened the canvas bag he was carrying and pulled out two wood carvings of African women," Major Aubrey Fielding, a partner at the gallery said.

The prominence he achieved through his many exhibitions boosted him to international fame with exhibitions in London, Basel, Venice – not to mention in all the major South African and Zimbabwean cities.

But not everybody knew of the young black artist. In April 1963, Lucas was detained for an hour at the Johannesburg Station because station officials presumed he had stolen the nude sculpture he carried under one arm.

The 60 cm high nude girl was highlighted with a green patina – a technique evolved by Lucas for his "antique" sculpture pieces, and the officials said it was definitely "too old" to be his.

Lucas was finally released – with police apologies – when a friend saw him, recognised his predicament and identified him as a genuine sculptor.

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