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**“Sithole – soaring in his
sculptures”**

HE has such an engaging manner that it's easy to picture Lucas Sithole as a little boy, looking disarmingly up at his Swazi grandmother who not only had a great influence on him, but might have been one of the reasons why, today, Sithole is probably the most famous Black sculptor in South Africa – and one of our leading sculptors to boot.

Sithole is always smiling. He lowers one shoulder, cocks his head upwards, and gives that warm, spontaneous smile that tends to make his eyes seem enormous.

Behind his naturally friendly way, you glimpse the child he must have been: good-natured, happy, and desiring to impress his grand-mother who was famous in her village (and far beyond) for the utensils and huge clay pots she made by hand.

Obedience

She was called NaMuimba: she was of royal blood and she was very strict and stern with those grandchildren who like six-year-old Lucas Sithole, she had taken under her wing.

She didn't talk much. She demanded obedience, but every once in a while she would tell her brood of grandchildren stories and fables about animals, birds and insects and these tales have had a great effect on Sithole's carvings.

You seem to sense that the old lady must have had a soft spot for the boy she looked after for about six years. But she in no way singled him out from her other protégés, though sometimes she stated that

something he made (clay animals, carved figures) or did (like painting her house with a variety of glaringly bright colours) must be left alone, must be preserved and not mocked.

Sithole is proud of his childhood background, which most people would call primitive: thatched huts with cow dung floors, sleeping at night on the ground, eating porridge from black, three-legged pots.

This environment, at odds with the more sophisticated life he now lives, still forms part of his life.

Several times a year he visits relatives in Swaziland and Zululand - his father was Zulu, his mother Swazi, and he was one of 10 sons - not only to keep in contact with his people, but also to find wood for his sculptures.

“The best material is found in dry riverbeds – gnarled, old, twisted tree limbs and trunks,” he said. “But I've always had a relative or two on hand as, in my absorption with the potential of some wood lodged in a huge tangle of storm-debris, it is highly likely I'd be attacked by wild animals or snakes.”

“Living near Johannesburg tends to make one forget how wild the remote areas of our country can be.”

He speaks five languages (Sotho, Zulu, Swazi, Afrikaans and English). He was featured on an Afrikaans TV programme and people were amazed at his naturalness (that engaging smile) and clear Afrikaans diction.

He is probably the first Black artist to have been invited to hold retrospective exhibitions at both RAU and the Pretoria Art Museum.

Wistfully, he admits to not having had the chance to see himself on TV. Astonishingly, he is so modest about his achievements (and many of his pieces are in important collections both here and

overseas), that you find yourself reminding him of what he's done, rather than the other way around.

He is prouder about his son (Progress, nicknamed Putchu) recently winning top prize for a Maize Board art competition, than for anything he's ever done himself.

Recognised

Perhaps his career truly started about 1960 when he won a prize at a huge annual group show at the now defunct Adler Fielding Gallery. He was a house painter who carved in his spare time.

A friend urged him to take his work to that gallery, and Sithole's individualistic talent was recognised. Art shows followed and, about a year ago, a book on his sculpture was printed.

His latest sculpture exhibition (at Gallery 21, Johannesburg) is the finest he's yet had.

But he remains amazingly modest – still a bit of the little boy as he arches up his head and gives his flashing, but mischievous smile.

He claims he always carries a saw and chopper in his car, so that he can tackle the wrenching-up for his “raw material” from dry riverbeds or the veld, whenever he sees anything that triggers off his inspiration.

His last thought, at night, is of the sculpture he's carving. His first thought, in the morning, is to get on with the carving (which doesn't endear him to his wife).

A man of the soil, it is in his carvings that he soars into the sky, far away from his beginnings, but always heavily influenced by them.

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