

The old Modderfontein weather station, which was in daily use until 1948 when Jan Smuts airport became fully functional.
Now an administrative office, gold was extracted from this old laboratory dating from 1898. The process was

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EDUCATION

TOPIC TODAY

Lucas Sithole

As a clay-streaked little boy, Lucas Sithole was regularly berated by his parents for bringing mud into their Paynesville Township 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 Vlaktefontein 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.

This was the start of Lucas Sithole's long and successful relationship with the Adler Fielding Gallery — and the prominence he achieved through his many exhibitions there boosted him to international fame with exhibitions in London, Basel, Venice and Toronto — 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 sculptor with his work. Lucas Sithole and "Pregnant Women" which is in the Wits University collection.

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.

An extremely prolific sculptor, and painter, with pieces displayed on more than 75 exhibitions, he has been described as "a sculptor of great talent, whose work is in complete harmony with Africa. His work is indicative of the greatness which the new 'African art' will attain.

"There is no trace of European influence and tradition and his sculpture is indigenous both in form and concept. He has a creative imagination that is entirely his own, both technically and spiritually.

"His subjects are his fellowmen and wild creatures conceived in unusual form with vibrant vitality. His figurative sculptures are especially African in concept, and they are characterised by simplicity of form and a high degree of sensitivity." (E J de Jager and C Struik in Contemporary African Art in South Africa).

— Carolyn Demuster