

Ulrike Franken and the Art of Pottery Making

Tshoganetso Mokowe

ceramic studies in her native country.

This is the centre where the best pottery in Germany is taught and displayed. Artistic expression runs in her family too, her mother was a Graphic artist.

She says of herself, "I was born an artist."

She came to Botswana in 1981 to visit an uncle, Bernard Klaus in a quest to explore Africa but instead she fell in love with the country and its people. "I had relatives working in the Kalahari School for the Bushmen and I was helping there. My uncle knew a lot of people and introduced me to them," she says.

When her uncle moved to another venture, starting a bee keeping project together with the Ministry of Agriculture she decided to start her own pottery project, with the help of local Attorney Doreen Khama but the plan fell through.

She subsequently worked as a cook in Tuli Lodge and befriended an 82-year-old potter-lady from a nearby village. She became an unofficial apprentice and learned traditional pottery and

its complicated ingredients (termite clay, scraped from the inside of the mounds, mica, volcanic sand, animal fats, oxides etc. etc.) and where to find them.

Ulrika also learned the firing technique, which is quite involved and difficult, using dry cow dung and wood stacked just so in a pit.

When she left Tuli Lodge, (due to her unwillingness to bend to what she perceived as racist behaviour) she worked as an artist at the National Museum in Gaborone and moved into a local hut in the village Gabane.

Several attempts to start a pottery venture with a local potter failed, until Gabane's Pelegano Village Industries became interested and listened to her enthusiastic plans to revive the dying local African pottery art. She adopted the villagers' lifestyle, to the extent of staying in a small mud hut like fellow villagers.

That was her home and life for 10 years.

"I started with one lady and it grew into a 7 ladies," she recalls. Ulrika relates the initial challenges getting clay soil for their pots because they could

not use imported clay from South Africa due to her strong stance against apartheid South Africa.

This self imposed sanction forced them (Gabane's Pelegano Village Industries) to use ordinary local clay from Kanye. Eventually when South Africa gained independence they imported clay from Grahamstown South Africa through Botswana Railways.

"Even now I import from Grahamstown. I usually get a Tonne, which lasts for a year" she explains. Fronting that making pottery has always been an art for Batswana surface to say a dying one today. However she says young people at Tlokweng CISS have expressed an interest to learn pottery.

After experimenting with wax resist techniques of making pottery Ulrika, became interested in Raku, an ancient Asian firing technique, which she "Africanised".

The glaze colours are limited to a lovely matt turquoise, similar to the colour on ancient Egyptian

pottery and matt Terra Cotta browns. Natural Raku colours are off-white crackles and mottled Smokey grey, the natural clay surface penetrated and character formed by the smoke process.

She says she is still inspired by Botswana's unique environment and uses local materials, thorns, leather, beads, and glass etc. to decorate her pots. The shapes are organic, often hand built, thrown or part-thrown.

At times she gets taken in by social issues or themes which she then depicts in stylised form on the pots for exhibitions, a kind of "Message-Art".

Her fulltime local helper Wendy Keorapetse Phatsima, with her for 10 years, hails from Gabane village. "Wendy has developed into a very able potter, great in hand built pots particularly, and has exhibited and sold her very own creations already," she observes.

The pots are sold in local shops like "World design" and "Botswana Craft" in Gaborone, "Ghanzi craft" and shops and lodges in Maun. The pottery is destined for the export market one day.