



FUSION: Irene Walker works with two different coloured clays. Picture: SUPPLIED

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After decades of swapping pottery skills and teaching ceramics in SA and internationally, Irene Walker now lives in Rhodes village where she practices her craft inspired by solitude and the landscape that surrounds her.

At 75, Walker has amassed a lifetime of knowledge about how different cultures use clay to create functional and decorative pieces that are fired and glazed in various ways, depending on traditional community practices.

Her life has been devoted to finding ways to link rural and urban life and to find common ground between cultures so as to share rather than divide.

Working in a studio behind her brother Dave Walker's well-known Walkerbouts Inn, she fashions beautiful pieces of agateware, a technique taught to her by her potter grandmother Nan Rhodes-Harrison, who instilled in her a love of pottery and the three-dimensional form when she was three years old.

"Agateware is two different coloured clays sandwiched together and has become for me the essence of the surrounding landscape," says Walker.

"The layered volcanic mountains tell of millions of years of eruptions and settling.

"In my youth as a girl guide, it was the only way I could portray the frustration of what apartheid meant to me.

"I would go out to girl guide companies in Botshabelo Township and they were doing exactly the same activities as we did in town.

"But why [were they doing them] separately?"

"I squashed white and dark clay together like a hamburger patty and my interest in rural development work evolved.

"My wonderful grandmother taught me all I know about pottery. For me combining all these skills gave rise to making lamp bases, lanterns, carved lampshades and a host of other complex combinations of clay and wood."

Now she makes exquisite pottery pieces, whimsical clay Christmas tree decorations, artistic lamp bases entwined with curling animals and fish and tiles embossed with delicate ouhout leaves.

She is also commissioned to create items for Rhodes' annual Trout Festival.

Last year, she made glossy trout bowls and this year gorgeous trout coasters are in the making.

Her schooldays were not particularly happy. "Sub A and B were a living nightmare for me as I was continually reprimanded and



MASTER POTTER: Irene Walker turns and creates at her potter's wheel. Pictures: SUPPLIED

punished for trying to write from right to left. The recognition of dyslexia had not been made.

"In Std 1, a teacher recognised my need for help and my life was transformed."

Schooling may not have brought her much joy, but Walker found solace and pleasure in using her hands to make functional and beautiful things.

"My primary passion is sculpture and I grew up in a home where making articles was the norm.

"Our father was a phenomenal craftsman. When I was 12 he taught me how to weld and to turn on the wood lathe. School projects were never a problem.

"My mother taught me sewing on the Singer sewing machine and at an early age I was sewing dolls clothes and making dresses for myself."

Family weekends were spent at a family friend's farm near De Wetsdorp and this time in the countryside played a defining part in her worldview and career in ceramics.

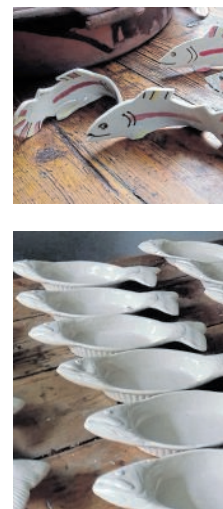
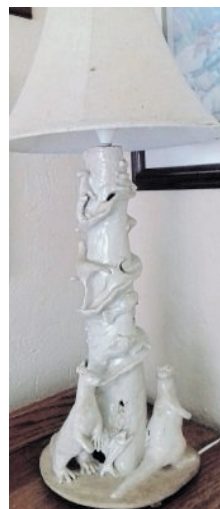
The Walker children spent many happy hours playing with local children and together they explored the farm, found fossils and Bushman arrow heads and visited Xhosa homesteads.

"I was intrigued by these small abodes and the making of medication from wild plants, and pots from a secret clay source, it was fascinating.

"One child introduced me to making oxen and cows from the clay her granny used to make pots and I took them home for my granny to fire.

"At last I had learned the origin of clay!"

Back in her Bloemfontein city home, the



young Walker would ruminate about ways to connect the two lifestyles she was exposed to.

"My precious grandmother had come to South Africa as an adult to marry our grandfather in 1912.

"They were both from England. In the early years she seemed not to understand my confusion.

"We talked often of ancient Greek and Roman pottery but somehow I had to find a link with the potters on the farm with her."

Whereas school in Bloemfontein bought little joy, studying sculpture and ceramics at Natal University signified the meshing together of Walker's two worlds.

"I was free to explore new methods of creating," she says.

Stints teaching ceramics at the Natal Technikon in the early seventies and later at the Free State Technikon were interrupted by serious bouts of encephalitis. She had to learn to walk again and to heal from double vision.

"At one stage I lived with a professor who retrained my eye muscles for single vision and I became very conscious of the depth of all objects and their dimensions.

"This in turn fed into my love of sculpture and memories of the clay oxen on the farm and finding ways and means to share skills with disempowered and disabled people."

Travels in Europe and Canada followed, and while in Switzerland in 1978, Walker used clay as therapy in a chateau housing people physically and psychologically affected by bomb blasts and other injuries in World War 2.

In her unflinching spirit of cultural skill

swapping, Walker worked with a priest in France who specialised in ash glazes and learnt from her how to make a traditional Zulu beer pot, fired with cow urine.

She tells the quirky story of how a farmer donated nine buckets of cow urine at the behest of the priest.

In Canada, an Ojibwe Indian woman showed Walker how to harvest tree bark for basket-making without damaging trees, a skill she shared with basket weavers in SA.

Her driving force of helping both ill and economically disempowered people once again came into play when, living in Makhanda in the 1980s, she broke her leg so badly that she was confined to a plaster cast for three years.

"Bored by sitting in a chair most days, I decided to find a group of unemployed mothers who had dependents at home and taught 12 women how to make pottery beads."

The initiative grew into the Umzwehemba Bead Project and was based in the Old Power Station.

"The best bead makers started painting the beads which were mostly exported to Europe.

"We developed other pottery products and those were happy years."

Walker's next move was to set up a funded training programme.

Working within a 200km radius of Makhanda, the Umthathi Training Project enabled trainers to provide training in food growing, cooking and nutrition, business skills and school gardens to communities that requested help.

Now in Rhodes village, Walker sculpts objects under the banner Irene Walker Ceramics.

Ever connected to nature, she uses leaves from the ouhout tree (*leucosidea sericea*) which is pressed into clay for a range of pottery she produces in her studio alongside assistant Malebohlang Letseki.

"The ouhout tree is the only indigenous species that grows in Rhodes, which is above the tree line.

"Its aromatic leaves and their shape make beautiful impressions on clay.

"In the Xhosa tradition, ouhout wood is greatly sought after as it burns through the night, keeping the home warm.

"I am never more happy than when I am carving clay with a scalpel. The pictures, tiles and bowls are popular with visitors. They love the fact that where the ouhout grows there are trout in the rivers and vice versa."

*To find out more about Irene Walker Ceramics, visit rhodesclaycafe.wordpress.com