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GORDON VORSTER is a remarkable man. Artist, poet, writer, actor and film-maker, he is a man who excels in all he does and who tackles every new project with an enthusiasm and dedication that ensures his success. His talents, however, haven't only been applied to purely artistic endeavours. When he decided 18 years ago to "rough it" in rather civilised style in the Transvaal middleveld, he designed and built a house that still awes all who visit it.

Situated on granite boulders overlooking the junction of the

BELOW LEFT: Clinging to the granite slopes leading down to the Crocodile River is the self-built home of renowned artist, Gordon Vorster.



PARADISE IN THE VELD

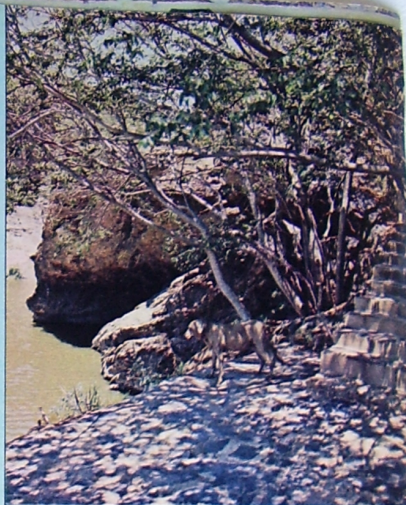
When renowned artist Gordon Vorster built his home on a granite rock overlooking the junction of the Crocodile and Jukskei Rivers, the moon told him where to put the bedroom

by ROSEMARY BARRETT
photographs by TREVOR BARRETT

LEFT: All the stone used in the building of the house was dug from under the ground, then washed and scrubbed before being used.

RIGHT: Because the plot was originally covered only in granite sheets, there was virtually no vegetation and all trees and shrubs had to be planted on loads of soil brought in.

BELOW: A shady outdoor patio with built-in seating is a spot much used for entertaining.





LEFT: Camouflaged by indigenous trees, many problems presented being built. Because it is built on sheets of granite that could possibly shift, heavy mine cables had to be used to stabilise the building surface.

RIGHT: Two gardeners are employed here and their job is to see that the garden does not become too civilised, but remains an extension of the veld rather.

BELOW: At the foot of the stone stairs leading to the studio, a small terrace with a view of the river and hills of the Crocodile River Valley.



LEFT: The stone terrace links the house to the semi-natural swimming-pool. All the stonework was done by Gordon and a labourer.



RIGHT: Natural rock forms part of the walls of the swimming-pool.





ABOVE: A view to inspire any artist. Khelims cover the built-in couches of the studio and form a very small part of a large collection of Khelims, all over 100 years old.

LEFT: The combined talents of the Vorster family are on display in this corner. Daughter Marianna painted the skull on parched earth, the hand-carved candles and pottery were made by Mrs Yvonne Vorster and the ikon by daughter Karen.





ABOVE: Gordon Vorster's studio comprises a number of rooms, each to serve his various artistic talents, whether they be painting in various mediums or film-making.

LEFT: The pottery of Tim Morris, Esias Bosch and Andrew Walford is displayed in the entrance hall beneath a painting by Gordon Vorster. Hand-woven curtains and Africana add to the cosy, welcoming mood.

RIGHT: A series of Gordon's paintings hang on a lounge wall. The stone of the walls and the slate of the floors were all found on the property.





ABOVE: A feature of the guest-room is the beautiful four-poster stinkwood and yellow-wood bed. Most of the rooms have a common wall on one side and windows on the other three to allow maximum enjoyment of the river and hillside views.

Crocodile and Jukskei Rivers, the complex of stone buildings that make up the house as a whole is, according to Gordon, unfinished.

"The house is one of those things that never gets finished. Building is a hobby of mine and it's taken 15 years to get this far. After two years, there was enough house to live in but building to me is like eating peanuts — I can't stop!"

Gordon first discovered the spectacular site in 1960 while working on a film called *The Hunters*. At that time, the property was part of a very large farm and the family who owned it had absolutely no intention of selling any part of it. Then there was the drama of Sharpeville and the land was rapidly cut into 20-ha plots and advertised. Gordon could hardly believe his good fortune when he was able to acquire the two plots which he considered the finest.

At that time, it was impossible to get a bond for a country home, so Gordon was fortunate to have building as his hobby. Architects who saw the granite-covered plot said to build on it was impossible, but the artist set out to prove them wrong.

The theory that a house built on a foundation of rock is a sturdy one, unfortunately does not always apply. Granite sheets such as these tend to move, a fact which could mean disaster. Determined to be his house on the exact spot he



wanted it, he, on the advice of a mining engineer, used huge strong steel cables to stabilise the granite building surface.

The stone buildings were constructed entirely by Gordon and a labourer. All the rock used was recovered from under the ground and had to be washed and scrubbed free of loose soil before it could be used. The complex comprises the main house where Gordon and his wife, Yvonne live, the studio, Yvonne's pottery workshop and a cottage for their children and friends.

The main house, overlooking the river which was dredged to make it deeper and wider, has been designed with the view in mind.

Says Gordon: "The house is very wasteful with walls. There are only common walls on one side of each room and windows on the other three sides. This is to get the most sunlight and view. Before I built the main bedroom I studied the pattern of the moon's rising and decided exactly where my pillow was going to be before I started."

It is not only the bedroom that has been given a lot of thought in its design and positioning but the kitchen as well. A gallery kitchen, it is designed in such a way that Yvonne need virtually never walk more than two steps to get to any part. An old stained-glass window serves as a skylight.

ABOVE: Gordon Vorster is renowned for his wildlife paintings, but dislikes being typecast — a wildlife artist.

LEFT: Before Gordon built the main bedroom he studied the pattern of the rising moon, and before the first stone was laid, he knew exactly where his pillow would be positioned.

RIGHT: Gordon Vorster at work on his latest painting, a massive interpretation of the Last Supper.



Dominating the lounge is a huge fireplace which was used regularly until available wood ran out. Now it serves as a cosy nook with a coal stove where stews and soups are cooked and bread baked on cold, wintry evenings.

"The stove is a reminder of my childhood days when I used to sleep next to one during winter in cold Kimberley. I'm very sentimental about things. I shouldn't be an artist — but then living is also an art," says Gordon.

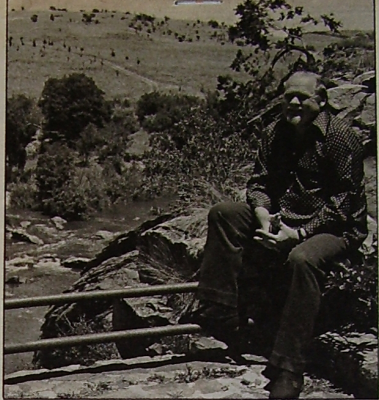
Each and every room features several khelims, all part of an extensive antique collection. The very large khelim in the lounge is thought to be possibly the biggest in the country. All are over 100 years old.

"The house has a sort of a rough look — it's handmade. So nomadic carpets, khelims, Belouches and Afghans suit it well. Besides that, you can't live with finer carpets if you have dogs, and we have three Weimaranas."

Gordon dismisses the furniture as "little bits and pieces that don't really make sense." But in fact there are many lovely pieces of Transvaal and Cape Africana to be seen as well as old oak, teak and rosewood. The old teak dining-room suite used to belong to actor, Gert van den Bergh. The dresser was discovered in the backyard of a fish and chip shop and took ages to clean.

Gordon Vorster's studio, with dolomite floor, comprises a series of spacious, high-





ABOVE: Gordon Vorster, artist, poet, actor, writer and filmmaker, built his home in the Transvaal Middleveld at the point where the Crocodile and Jukskei Rivers meet and merge into one.

ceilinged rooms. Skylights give him perfect conditions for painting.

He points out: "The light quality here is magnificent. It's very restful and very accurate, and there is no loss of colour tone. I paint in very understated tones, and if the lighting wasn't correct, my animals would disappear into the mist when the painting was taken out of the studio."

In the floor, there are drainage holes for washing out the studio as Gordon claims to be a "messy worker." Besides the main studio, there is a separate room for water-colour work and a projection room for Gordon's film work.

"I love making films. A change is as good as a holiday. After a big painting project it's good to have a break. I work an 18-hour day and have found that I spend two years out of three painting with six months writing movie scripts and six months poetry. That's not a rigid schedule, but just the way things have been happening."

TO date Gordon has had a hand in no less than 15 feature films. His latest project was as co-author with Emil Nofal, and director of *The Fifth Season*, released at the end of 1978. He also has about 100 documentaries on all subjects to his credit.

With his art, he has found that he is moving away from the wildlife paintings for which he is renowned. He dislikes the idea of becoming typecast as a "wildlife artist," and his work can now be described as a

microscopic look at the molecular structure of natural materials such as bark and stone.

"It's still Africa, but through a microscope," he says.

And Africa is all around him in the natural veld garden that surrounds the house and which abounds in about 200 different varieties of wild birds, monitor lizards, leguans and some small buck.

"The joy here is the tiny animals — watching them grow and discovering their nests."

Because of the vast sheets of granite, there was virtually no vegetation around the house and loads of soil had to be brought in so that scores of mainly indigenous trees, shrubs and plants could be grown.

Explains this multitalented artist: "In creating the garden we wanted a little civilisation — but not too much, more an extension of the veld. We have two gardeners and their main job is to keep things a bit wild and not to civilise it too much."

A stone terrace with built-in seating and braai serves the pool which has natural rock for some of its walls. Overlooking the river, this is an area where a great deal of time is spent and which is ideal for entertaining.

The river is well-stocked with fish — "all terribly tame because Yvonne feeds them. We don't catch them, they're pets."

Spangberg, in the heart of the Crocodile River Valley, is a paradise in the veld. It would be hard to imagine Gordon Vorster living anywhere else. ❀