Pictures That Satisfy: Modernist Discourses and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Nation in the Art of Irma Stern (1894-1966)

by

LaNitra Michele Walker

Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies
Duke University

Date:____________________

Approved:

______________________
Richard J. Powell, Supervisor

______________________
Mark Antliff

______________________
Michael D. Harris

______________________
James Rolleston

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2009
ABSTRACT

Pictures That Satisfy: Modernist Discourses and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Nation in the Art of Irma Stern (1894-1966)

by

LaNitra Michele Walker

Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies
Duke University

Date:__________________

Approved:

________________________________________
Richard J. Powell, Supervisor

________________________________________
Mark Antliff

________________________________________
Michael D. Harris

________________________________________
James Rolleston

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2009
Abstract

This dissertation examines South African artist Irma Stern’s contributions to modernism in South Africa and to modernism as a global movement. It analyzes how Stern’s interactions with South Africans, combined with her early artistic training in Germany and her cultural connections to the South African Jewish community, helped her to bring critical issues of race, gender, and nation into focus through her work. This study goes beyond the work of previous scholars who have suggested that Stern was uninterested in social or political causes, arguing that Stern was acutely aware of how social and political themes contributed to modernism’s development in Europe. Moreover, this study concludes that Stern employed similar strategies to develop a South African modernism. Although she often spoke pejoratively about nonwhite South Africans, she was cognizant of the fact that the act of painting nonwhites made significant artistic and political statements.

Because Stern is virtually unknown in the United States, this study will do the following: 1) Introduce Stern to an American audience by discussing her work from the beginning of her artistic training in Germany in 1913 to her death in 1966; 2) Reconnect Stern to the larger global debates about modernism in the twentieth century; 3) Analyze Stern’s works that have received little or no attention in previous scholarship; and 4) Discuss the long-term influence that Stern’s work had in shaping the direction of South African art before, during, and after apartheid.

Formal analysis and close readings of Stern’s oil paintings, drawings, travel narratives, and watercolors are crucial in understanding how she used her artistic talents to record visual interpretations of South African culture history. As one of
only a few internationally respected South African artists of the apartheid era, an examination of Stern's work and career allows for a more complex understanding of how race, gender, and nation contributed to the development of modernism in South African art history.
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. IV  

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................................... VII  

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................................... XII  

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................................... 1  

CHAPTER 1: IRMA STERN AND GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM ................................................................. 25  

CHAPTER 2: IRMA STERN IN SOUTH AFRICA ..................................................................................... 69  

CHAPTER 3: IRMA STERN’S TRAVEL NARRATIVES ......................................................................... 128  

CHAPTER 4: STERN AND APARTHEID, 1948-1966 ............................................................................ 167  

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION, IRMA STERN IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA ...................... 201  

BIOGRAPHICAL TIMELINE AND SELECTED MAJOR EXHIBITIONS ............................................ 207  

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................................................... 210  

BIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................................................. 223  

ILLUSTRATIONS ..................................................................................................................................... 224
List of Figures

1. Irma Stern, *Page 43 From Stern’s Diary*, water color and ink, ca. 1917 Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town


3. Otto Mueller, *Seated Nude in a Meadow*; print, woodcut printed in gold and black on wove paper; 1912, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles

4. Max Pechstein, *Dancers and bathers at a forest pond*, Print, Lithograph with blue and green watercolor on heavy wove paper, 1912, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles

5. Carl Arriens, *Utensils for Ifa Workshop, Cups for Palm Nuts, with Women at Work*, Drawing, ca. 1910

6. Franz Marc, *Animal Fates*, 1913, oil on canvas, Kunstmuseum Basle, Switzerland


14. Max Pechstein, Berry Collectors, 1920


18. Oskar Kokoschka, *Murderer, the Woman’s Hope*, Drawing, 1910


25. Max Pechstein, *Yali and His White Wife*, Print (etching with drypoint on paper, 1922, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles


31. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Street Scene, Berlin*, oil on canvas, 1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York

33. Max Beckmann, *Die Kranke*, Lithograph, 1920

34. Irma Stern, *Umgababa*, oil on canvas, 1922, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

35. Irma Stern, *Indian Family*, oil on canvas, 1922, private collection


37. Irma Stern, Portrait of Hilda Purwitsky, oil on canvas, ca. 1930s, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

38. Irma Stern, Portrait of Roza Van Gelderen, oil on canvas, ca. 1930s, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

39. Otto Dix, *The Lawyer Dr. Fritz Glaser*, oil on canvas, 1921, private collection


41. Irma Stern, *Portrait of Dr. Louis Herrman*, oil on canvas, 1922, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

42. Irma Stern, *Cover Image, Black and White: Stories of South Africa by Richard Feldman*, 1935

43. Irma Stern, *Young Zulu Woman in Dance Dress*, charcoal drawing, 1925

44. Irma Stern, *Young Zulu Girl*, charcoal drawing, 1922

45. Jan Ernest Abraham Volschenk, *Nearing the Close of the Day (Klipplaat)*, oil on canvas, 1923, Sanlam Art Collection, Cape Town


47. Franz Marc, *Red Deer*, oil on canvas, ca. 1911


52. Irma Stern, *Portrait of Sarah Gertrude Millin*, oil on canvas, 1941, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

53. Irma Stern, *Native Woman, Dakar*, oil on canvas, 1938, private collection

54. Irma Stern, *Young Malay Maiden With Black Hair*, oil on canvas, 1938, private collection

55. Irma Stern, *Congo*, drawing, 1942

56. Irma Stern, *Congo: Woman With Bananas*, drawing, 1942

57. Irma Stern, *Congo: Mother and Young Child*, drawing, 1942

58. Irma Stern, *Congo: Portrait of a Woman*, drawing, 1942

59. Irma Stern, *Congo: Kuba Textile*, raffia cloth, 1942

60. Irma Stern, *Congo: Mangbetu Chief's Daughter*, oil on canvas, 1942


62. Irma Stern, *Watussi Queen*, oil on canvas, 1943, Mrs. Mona Berman

63. Irma Stern, *Congo Tutsi Woman*, drawing, 1942

64. Irma Stern, *Bahutu Musicians*, oil on canvas, 1942 Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg


67. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Mother and Child*, watercolor and ink, 1948

68. *Zanzibar Doors at the Irma Stern Museum*, Cape Town

70. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Sultan’s Palace*, oil on canvas, 1948

71. Irma Stern, *In the Harem*, oil on canvas with raffia mat frame, c. 1944

72. Irma Stern, *Arab Priest*, oil on canvas, 1945

73. Moses Kottler, *Mother and Child*, wood, c. 1940s

74. Irma Stern, *Asande Girl*, charcoal drawing, ca. 1942

75. Gerard Sekoto, *Sixpence a Door*, oil on canvas, ca. 1940s


77. Irma Stern, *Xhosa Woman*, oil on canvas, 1941, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

78. Irma Stern, *Malay Wedding*, oil on canvas, 1953, private collection

79. Irma Stern, *Malay Girl*, oil on canvas, 1939, Sanlam Art Collection, Cape Town

80. *Jewish Affairs, Cover, September 1957*


82. Irma Stern, *Day of Liberation*, oil on canvas, 1955, private collection

83. Irma Stern, *Intrigue*, oil on canvas, 1959


85. Irma Stern, *Harbour Scene With Tree, Spain*, oil on canvas, 1966, private collection

86. Heinrich Egersdörfer, *A Dandy Back From the Mines*, watercolor, 1895, William Fehr Collection, Cape Town

87. Irma Stern, *Zulu Woman*, charcoal drawing, 1925

88. Irma Stern, *Pondo Woman*, oil on canvas, 1929, private collection
**Acknowledgments**

In writing these acknowledgments, I am reminded that the dissertation is not a solitary process; it is really a team sport. This is my opportunity to thank everyone on my team.

First and foremost, I thank my parents, Florrie and Earnest Walker, Jr. Throughout my life, they emphasized the importance of education. They worked hard to give me everything I needed to ensure that my dreams were limitless, and they supported me every step of the way. This dissertation is a reflection of their love and sacrifice, for which I am eternally grateful.

My advisor, Dr. Richard J. Powell, was extraordinary in his scholarly guidance and his ability to see this project's potential as a dissertation topic. I am thankful that he suggested that I write my dissertation on Stern, and I am also thankful for his meticulous reviews of each draft. The other committee members, Dr. Mark Antliff, Dr. James Rolleston, and Dr. Michael Harris, also provided thoughtful and encouraging guidance for my research. I could not have asked for a more supportive committee.

Other members of the Duke community were also invaluable to the project. Dr. Patricia Leighten advised me on earlier drafts. Drs. Charles Payne and Thavolia Glymph were mentors both in academia and in life. Dr. Jacqueline Looney always made time for me when I stopped by her office. Connie Blackmore provided smiles in the AAAS department. The members of the Society of Duke Fellows provided fellowship and free food on many occasions.
Two dear friends, Curt Blackman and Jennifer Fitzgerald, passed away before I finished the dissertation. They were both extraordinary people who made the graduate school experience so much fun. I miss them both.

A number of researchers and library staff made tremendous contributions as well. Elizabeth Harney, Christine Mullen Kraemer, Roz Walker, and Janet Stanley supported my work in the summer of 2001 when I was a graduate research fellow at the National Museum of African Art. Irene Below at the Universitat Bielefeld was gracious enough to share her knowledge of Irma Stern and her resources with me. We had wonderful discussions about my project in her beautiful home. Liz Crossley was also generous with her time, resources, and friendship in Berlin, making my work in South Africa much easier. The staff at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town, Christopher Peter, Mary Von Blommenstein, Khay Mgedisi, and Nontembiso Sompeta, allowed me unlimited access to the museum and Stern’s archives. The archivists at the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town were also helpful. Suvashni Casoojee at the National Museum in Cape Town provided assistance as I finished the dissertation.

I had the privilege to participate in the AAAS Dissertation Writing Group. The members, Phil Rubio, Erica Edwards, Stephane Robolin, and Gordon Mantler, commented on several drafts and helped me to focus my research. Phil and his wife Paula also provided great food, true friendship, and a place to stay during my weekend trips to Durham.

In 2005, I joined a dissertation writing group called SisterMentors in Washington, DC. The women in the group were the positive support that I needed to...
finish the dissertation. Dr. Shireen K. Lewis, the group’s founder, changed the way I think about the doctorate. Dr. Adriane Williams read drafts and helped me through my writer’s block. Tisha Lewis and I spent many hours writing in the library and keeping each other sane. Fanta Aw, Renee Romero, Susan Ozawa, Dora Oduor, Dr. Carol Hedgspeth, Dr. Vivian Jackson, and Dr. Jessica Floyd gave more positive energy than I thought possible.

The following friends and family were also instrumental in the completion of this project: Maurice Martin, Ruby Huckabee, Tara McKelvey, Christine Rinne, Earnest Walker Sr., Lidia Berger, C.T. Woods-Powell, Samantha and Perry Wiseman, Selena Mendy Singleton, Garvel Newburn, Dinah Griggsby, Rhonda and Charles Fischer, Kelly Denson, Lionel Smith, Margaret Doyle, Marissa Vincenti, Mora Beauchamp-Byrd, Olivia and Bill Blackmon, Michael Kott, Lezli Baskerville, Jennifer Strauss, Tonija Hope Navas, Anthony Jewett, Karen Francis-McWhite, Karol and Anna Maria Berger, Susanna Berger, Antek and Malgorzata Berger, Magda Berger, Jeremy Hutchins, Ola and Ian Brabner, Neil and Bonnie Moynihan, Luke and Yuko Sato, Lana BenDavid, Karen Peters, Judy and Ian Peters, and Sheila Lawrence. Dana Goldblatt, one of my best friends, was there for me when I needed her the most, at the beginning and at the end.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Matthew M. Berger. Matthew was there for every leg of this journey, and he intrepidly followed me around the world as I completed my research. As I wrote, he read and edited drafts in between meetings and after long days at work. He was patient and kind even when I wasn’t. His love kept me going. This dissertation is for him.
Introduction

It is only through personal contact that one can get a few glimpses into the hidden depth of the primitive and childlike yet rich soul of the native, and this soul is what I try to reflect in my pictures of South Africa.

Irma Stern, “My Exotic Models,” Cape Argus, 3 April 1926

Although South African Irma Stern was a young artist when she made the statement above, it captures the essence of her life-long approach to her work. Despite describing black Africans as “primitive and childlike,” the richness of Stern’s technique, the breadth of her chosen subjects, and her preference for portraiture belie a more complex view of modern South African society. During her lifetime, however, Stern was not able to resolve the contradiction between her views on racial politics and the intense feelings of acceptance and belonging that she felt when she visited black communities.

This dissertation examines Stern’s contributions to modernism in South Africa and to modernism as a global movement. It analyzes how Stern’s interactions with South Africans, combined with her early artistic training in Germany and her cultural connections to the South African Jewish community, helped her to bring critical issues of race, gender, and nation into focus through her work. This study goes beyond the work of previous scholars who have suggested that Stern was uninterested in social or political causes, arguing that Stern was acutely aware of how social and political themes contributed to modernism’s development in Europe. Moreover, this study concludes that Stern employed similar strategies to develop a
South African modernism.¹ Although she often spoke pejoratively about nonwhite South Africans, Stern did support efforts to improve race relations during her lifetime, and she was cognizant of the fact that the act of painting nonwhites made significant artistic and political statements.²

Because Stern is virtually unknown in the United States, this study will do the following: 1) Introduce Stern to an American audience by discussing her work from the beginning of her artistic training in Germany in 1913 to her death in 1966; 2) Reconnect Stern to the larger global debates about modernism in the twentieth century; 3) Analyze Stern’s works that have received little or no attention in previous scholarship; and 4) Discuss the long-term influence that Stern’s work had in shaping the direction of South African art before, during, and after apartheid.

**Methodology**

This project was completed using several research methodologies, including historical analysis, archival research, and formal analysis. Archival research began in Berlin, Germany, in the fall of 2002. Materials at the Staatsbibliothek, the Kunsthistorisches Bibliothek, and the Bauhaus Archiv in Berlin were consulted for material related to Stern’s relationship with Max Pechstein and the *Novembergruppe*, as well as Berlin’s popular culture, while she lived in the city.

---

¹ See, for example, Neville Dubow, *Irma Stern* (Cape Town: Struik, 1974).

² Throughout this dissertation, the term “nonwhite” refers to black, coloured, Indian, and Asian South Africans. The term “coloured” is used to refer to a specific classification of mixed-race South Africans and members of the Cape Coloured community. For a detailed discussion of South African racial classifications, see Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). For more information about Stern’s views on painting African subjects, see Mona Berman, *Remembering Irma: Irma Stern* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2003).
Archival research was also completed in Bielefeld, Germany, at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld Library. Interviews were conducted with Professor Irene Below, who organized a 1996 exhibition of Stern’s work at the museum. Dr. Below provided access to all of the material that she recovered in Germany and South Africa, and she also facilitated contact with Liz Crossley, a South African artist living in Berlin who co-curated the Bielefeld exhibition. Ms. Crossley provided open access to her research material on Stern that she brought from South Africa, which included taped interviews with artists and scholars who were familiar with Stern and her work.

Research was also completed at the British Library in London, England, to examine primary sources on German Expressionism, such as catalogs from the Galerie Gurlitt, that were not available in Berlin. In 2003, archival material at the Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, California, was consulted for primary sources on German Expressionist print culture, the Novembergruppe, and on Stern’s participation in other group exhibitions in Weimar Berlin.

In 2004, archival research and interviews were completed in Cape Town, South Africa. Interviews with members of the Jewish community were conducted at the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. At the same time, research at the Irma Stern Museum in Rondebosch, Cape Town, and at the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town allowed access to Stern’s papers, financial records, personal effects, newspaper clippings books, and unpublished manuscripts, photographs, and sketches. Museum staff, including the director, Mr. Christopher Peter, were interviewed as were contemporary black and coloured South African
artists and critics to gain a better understanding of Stern’s position in South African art history in the post-apartheid era. The Irma Stern Museum and the National Gallery of South Africa both own a substantial amount of Stern’s work held in public collections, and the time spent in South Africa provided the unique opportunity to view a broad cross-section of Stern’s work.

Stern was a prolific artist, and her body of work includes hundreds of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and ceramics, as well as illustrated books and book plates. This broad collection provides perspective on how Stern’s career, as well as her artistic and intellectual interests, developed and changed over time. Thus, this project will focus on Stern’s works on paper and canvas, including her paintings, drawings, and illustrated books.

Review of the Literature

Scholarship on Stern exists in several languages, including, English, Afrikaans, German, and French, but the majority of the criticism of her work is written in English, Afrikaans, and German. From these different national viewpoints, scholars have drawn distinct conclusions of Stern and her work.

Historical events have also played a major role in defining the direction of Stern scholarship. The total destruction of many German cities during World War II meant that many Stern-related archives, library materials, and museum records were lost. The Nazis’ obsession with destroying modern art also resulted in the destruction of art historical scholarship. Additionally, Germany’s division following the second World War left some of the most important documents related to Stern’s collectors behind the Iron Curtain. In the early twentieth century, South Africa’s
geographic isolation made it difficult for outside scholars to travel to the foot of the African continent to study and interact with Stern. The rise of apartheid in 1948, followed by periods of intense political violence and anti-apartheid protests that led to the cultural boycott in the 1980s, prevented many scholars from conducting research on South African artists. In addition, most of South African art-historical material has only been readily accessible to scholars since the country became a democracy in 1994. The convergence of these historical, geographic, and social threads provides a brief explanation about the reasons for which there are so many gaps in the historical scholarship on Stern and on South African art in general.

Ironically, North America produced the earliest study on Stern. In Alain Locke’s 1925 essay, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” (which was published in his seminal work, The New Negro), this African-American philosopher and scholar calls on black artists to use their counterparts around the world, including Stern, to develop an Afrocentric modernism. As a seminal figure in the contemporary debates about the use of African sculpture and motifs in modern American art, Locke cites Stern and her mentor Max Pechstein as artists whose work, “represents a sustained and lifelong study of the painting of the particularly difficult values of the Negro subject.” Locke’s mention of Stern in The New Negro demonstrates how Stern made substantive contributions to global modernism early in her career. A nod from Locke, a well-known and respected black cultural critic in the United States, signified a recognition that Stern’s work went beyond the conventional representations of blacks in modern European art.

3 Alain Locke, The New Negro, 1968 ed. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1925), 261-2. In both places where he mentions Stern in the text, Locke erroneously refers to her as “Elaine Stern.”
In 1926, Austrian critic Josef Kalmer published the first scholarly analysis of Stern in Europe, “Die Malerin Irma Stern,” in *Menorah*, a journal of Jewish art and literature. Like Locke, Kalmer was struck by Stern’s interest in black African subjects, but he also mentioned South Africa’s racial diversity as an artistic asset, writing, “She has the good fortune of finding...the most that a painter could wish for, the mixture of people from Hindus to Dutch and the English are found in her African home.” Kalmer was one of the first European scholars to discuss South Africa’s significance as a subject for Stern, opening the door for a discussion of the social relevance of Stern’s work.

German art critic Max Osborn wrote the first monograph on Stern in 1927. As part of the *Junge Kunst* series of books on young modern artists, Osborn’s publication not only ranked Stern as a rising talent in Europe, but it also legitimized Stern as an artist in South Africa, where critics were initially skeptical of her chosen subjects and modern style. In his study, Osborn argued that because Stern spent part of her childhood in Africa, she was a “unique case” among her European contemporaries. He described Stern as “bringing a picture epic of the native world of South Africa” to Europe, placing her as an intermediary between modernism in Europe and South Africa.

In 1942, South African writer Joseph Sachs published *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*. By this time, Stern was viewed as one of South Africa’s most


6 Ibid.
accomplished artists. Sachs’ book is one of the most important meditations on the intersections between South African art and European modernism and the rest of the African continent from a South African perspective, even though many of his assertions and assessments of both Stern and the direction of South African art are incorrect. Although the book accepts many fallacies in African art scholarship that have since been refuted (i.e., that the Portuguese taught the Benin how to create ornate bronze sculpted heads using the lost-wax casting method), Sachs places Stern at the confluence of African and European modernism by describing her as a pioneering artist who moved South African art in new directions, writing:

When Irma Stern first began to exhibit, native studies were not popular in South Africa. There was a prejudice against the portrayal of native life in picture. Irma Stern was the first South African artist to turn away from landscape in order to deal with native life. ...she paints the crisis in the life of the dark races.7

Following Stern’s death in 1966, studies of her work proliferated in South Africa. Art critic Neville Dubow, who was also one of Stern’s personal friends, wrote a scholarly monograph on Stern in 1974 that described her contributions to South African art but suggested that Stern should not be considered among the great (mostly male) modern artists: “[Stern’s] work never attained the intellectual and innovative qualities that that would imply,” Dubow stated.8 Notably, Dubow also edited Stern’s posthumously discovered journal and letters for the 1991 publication, Paradise: The Journal and Letters (1917-1933) of Irma Stern.

In 1994, Karel Schoeman wrote a biography of Stern’s life up to 1933 in honor of her centenary titled, Irma Stern: The Early Years, 1894-1933. Schoeman’s book

---

8 Dubow, Irma Stern, 20.
provides valuable translations of primary sources, including Stern’s letters and newspaper accounts of her exhibitions, but its focus is on constructing a detailed biographical sketch of Stern’s early years rather than offering an analysis of her work or her career.

Greater scholarly interest in feminist art history in the 1990s coincided with the publication of South African art historian Marion Arnold’s lavishly illustrated book, *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye*. Arnold’s book analyzes Stern’s work from private collections, adding richness to the scholarship by expanding the number of images that are easily available for study. In her 1996 article in the book, *Women and Art in South Africa*, Arnold draws from feminist theory and social history to become one of the few scholars to suggest that Stern’s work was guided by a social conscience.

Feminist art historian Irene Below, a professor at the University of Bielefeld, has undertaken the most recent and compelling research on Stern since the artist’s death in 1966. Below discovered Stern through Bielefeld Kunsthalle Museum Director Dr. Wolfgang von Moltke, who wrote an assessment of Stern’s work for a German audience in 1960.9 Connected to South Africa through his dual German and South African heritage, von Moltke served as the scholarly bridge that joined African and European scholarship on Stern in the late twentieth century.10 Building on von Moltke’s early interest in Stern, Below, with co-curator Jutta Huselwig-Johnen,

---


10 Under von Moltke’s tenure, the Bielefeld Kunsthalle purchased two Stern paintings, which represent the sole holdings of her work in public collections in Germany.
wrote the 1996 exhibition catalogue *Irma Stern und der Expressionismus: Afrika und Europa*, which was the first major study to examine Stern within the context of both postcolonialism and feminism. In the catalogue and in her essay, “Peripherie und Zentrum: Irma Stern im Kontext,” Below uses evidence of Stern’s work with German women’s groups, such as the *Frauenkunstverband*, which was founded by artist Käthe Kollwitz, to strengthen her claim that Stern strongly identified with feminist causes and issues in Germany and South Africa. She also uses postcolonial theories of cosmopolitanism and globalization to argue that although Stern and other female artists have been left out of previous histories of modernism, research on these women’s contributions is vital to gain a more complete sense of how modern artists struggled with questions of identity related to gender and race. Below’s work, however, focuses on Stern’s early years in Germany and her reception at the end of career with an emphasis on examining Stern from a feminist perspective.

What is missing from previous studies is a discussion of how Stern used aesthetics and politics to build a successful artistic career during South Africa’s apartheid years. Little attention has been paid to Stern’s relationship to the apartheid government and its impact on her career. Stern’s exhibitions brought racial politics and aesthetics together in an area of South African culture that was one of the strongest bastions of conservatism. Despite racial tensions at home, many of Stern’s paintings of black life in South Africa projected a more harmonious image of race relations abroad.

---

Stern was invited to participate in several state-sponsored exhibitions and competitions including the Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Exhibition of 1952 that celebrated the 300-year anniversary of the first Dutch colony in South Africa. She also represented South Africa at each Venice and Sao Paolo Biennale from 1948 until her death in 1966. Her participation in these events helped her to become the public and international face of South African art. Although Stern only lived 18 years under apartheid, she developed a complex relationship with the apartheid government, and her life speaks to the difficulties in writing about an artist whose work, on one hand, was used by the government to support apartheid but on the other, also rebelled against state-supported arts organizations that were trying to establish a national artistic identity.

There are some limitations to this study. Because Stern exhibited frequently across Europe and Africa, as well as the Americas, criticism of her work exists in many languages, including, but not limited to: Afrikaans, English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. A majority of the material in this study comes from English, French, and German sources. Although some of the most crucial sources written in Afrikaans have been translated and are included in this study, more analysis of Afrikaans-language criticism of Stern’s work would have added an extra layer of knowledge about how Stern was viewed in the Afrikaner community. Additionally, in completing the archival research, writers and critics did not always identify themselves with a byline in their reviews, so it is difficult to determine how many individuals have reviewed Stern’s work or to follow one writer’s analysis throughout her career.
Stern’s work has been circulating through private collections and international art markets for more than 80 years. As a result, much of her work has changed hands several times, and many pieces are not available in the public domain. For example, Stern’s depictions of Cape Town’s District Six are presumed to be in private collections although curators at the Irma Stern Museum and the District Six Museum were unable to confirm their location. Marian Arnold’s 1995 book *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye* has made a significant contribution to scholars by locating and reproducing numerous Stern paintings in private collections. Also, the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town owns a large portion of Stern’s major pieces. In recent years, Stern’s work has increased in value in the international art market. Although the trends in prices for Stern’s work will be discussed in the conclusion, a lengthier study of sales of Stern paintings is necessary. Finally, Stern experimented with other media such as ceramics and sculpture, which will not be examined in this study.

**Brief Biographical Sketch**

Each chapter addresses the thematic and historical issues related to Stern and her work based on a chronological format with some overlap to maintain continuity between Stern’s activities in Europe and Africa. A timeline of important events in Stern’s life is included in the appendix.

Stern was born in the Schweizer-Reneke region of the Transvaal, South Africa, on October 2, 1894. Her mother, Henny Fels, was born in 1875 in the German town of Einbeck near Hannover, and her father, Samuel Stern, was born in an unknown
small town in Germany. Stern’s only sibling, her younger brother Rudi, was born in 1899.

The 1899 outbreak of the Boer War in present-day South Africa marked the first of many times in Stern’s life when political turmoil would leave its imprint on her psyche. The conflict between the British army and Boer farmers lasted until 1901. “Then one day I went to play with Eva,” Stern recalled, “Suddenly I stood enveloped in clouds of dust with a crowd of men around me. I sat down and waited for them to pass. I was so frightened. They were soldiers. The Boer War had begun.” Samuel Stern was arrested by British soldiers for aiding the Boers, and the rest of the Stern family, technically refugees, were sent to Cape Town.

Stern recorded some of her first thoughts on painting in 1900. From the beginning, she was fascinated by color. “In Cape Town I began to colour pictures with coloured pencils,” she wrote. “All the picture books were coloured in—all the children got red cheeks and blue eyes; my first attempt at painting.”

As soon as Samuel was released and joined the family in Cape Town in 1901, an outbreak of the bubonic plague forced them to flee to Germany, where they piqued the interest of many family members who were curious about their “African” lifestyle. As Stern had not received a formal education in the Transvaal, she

---

13 Ibid., 17.
14 Schoeman, 18.
15 Schoeman, 17-18.
16 Ibid.
struggled to learn written German. “At school I understood nothing at all,” she wrote in her diary. “Mother had to explain it all again.”

The Sterns returned to South Africa in 1909, settling in Wolmaranstaad, Transvaal. In 1910, Irma Stern’s family hired a German personal tutor for her named Dr. Johannes Prinz. Prior to moving to South Africa, Prinz was a university professor in Germany. In the Transvaal, he was responsible for teaching Stern everything from literature to tennis.

In 1913, Stern’s mother decided to move to Germany again so that her daughter could attend art classes at the Weimar Academy in Weimar, Germany. Stern studied with an international group of instructors, including artists Fritz Mackensen from Germany, American artist Gari Melchers, and German artist Max Brandenburg, who taught Stern how to use oil paint. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 forced the Sterns to stay in Germany until the conflict’s end. Although she did not directly participate in the conflict, Stern spent time in painting and entertaining soldiers at military hospitals.

Throughout their time in Germany, the Stern’s exposed their daughter Irma to all of the cultural and intellectual activities that they could afford, taking her to the opera, the theater, and musical concerts. In 1917, Stern met the German Expressionist painter Max Pechstein and began to develop her own artistic style that combined her memories of South Africa with the modernist techniques she learned in Germany. Pechstein (who had recently returned from Palau, a German colonial territory) was a member of several avant-garde artist groups, including Die Brücke,

---


18 Schoeman, 46.
and the *Novembergruppe*, and he invited Stern to participate in the groups’ meetings. As a result of her tutelage under Pechstein, Stern adopted painting techniques and color theories prevalent among German Expressionists and exhibited with groups such as the *Freie Sezession* (Free Secession) and the *Novembergruppe* (November Group).

Stern returned to South Africa in 1920, where she found it difficult to integrate into the conservative and male-dominated South African art world as a young female artist with a modern style. Her 1922 exhibition at Ashbey’s Art Gallery in Cape Town received scathing reviews. To ease her transition back into life in South Africa, Stern traveled to the country’s eastern coast and the surrounding rural areas, where she observed black Africans living and working in small towns. While visiting Umgababa, a region outside of the city of Durban, she completed an unpublished travel narrative, *Das Umgababa Buch* (The Umgababa Book), which included a collection of her observations of the area.

Stern’s family held traditional beliefs about women’s roles in society. She lived at home during her early adult years and was constantly monitored by her parents. “It’s as though life with my parents robs me of all strength to live myself,” she wrote to her friend Trude Bosse in 1921. As she became more independent as an artist, Stern began traveling alone throughout South Africa, painting people of all races.

---


“The only time when I feel properly happy is when I hold palette in hand and then I have a sudden sense of the right to exist...Otherwise my life swings spasmodically between self-denigration and self-evaluation,” she wrote in her diary in 1925.22

In April 1927, Stern married her childhood tutor, Dr. Johannes Prinz. Although she admitted being romantically interested in Prinz in her diaries shortly after his arrival in South Africa, the marriage served the more important purpose of allowing Stern to move out of her parents’ house. Stern and Prinz purchased a large home named “The Firs” in the Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch, near the University of Cape Town, where Prinz taught German literature. By this time, Stern’s career was showing promise in Europe, and moving into her own house guaranteed her the freedom to travel unaccompanied. She made frequent trips to Europe to exhibit and to visit art museums in Berlin, Brussels, and Paris, and her success in Europe began to attract critics’ attention. In the same year of her marriage, German art critic Max Osborn wrote the first monograph on Stern for the Junge Kunst series of art books in Germany, and Stern won the Prix d’Honneur for painting at the Bordeaux International Exhibition.

In the 1930s, Stern’s work was well received by European critics, and the reception of her work in South Africa was also improving. When the rise of fascism in Germany in 1933 made her future work in the country uncertain, Stern exhibited in England and The Netherlands instead. The many months of traveling and separation, however, took a toll on her marriage. In 1934, Stern divorced Dr. Prinz. Her career in South Africa took off after the divorce. Stern exhibited in every major

South African city, and her work was selling briskly. The South African government also expressed interest in Stern’s work, purchasing several pieces for foreign embassies, including the Washington, D.C., embassy in 1936.23

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 forced Stern to stay on the African continent. In the same year, she visited the island of Zanzibar for the first time. By the 1940s, Stern’s work was selling briskly in South Africa, and she gained a reputation as the nation’s first modern artist. She began to explore other African cultures, visiting the Belgian Congo in 1942 and Zanzibar again in 1945. To showcase her work in these regions, Stern published two travel narratives, Congo (1942) and Zanzibar (1948). The travel narratives afforded Stern the opportunity to explore African culture beyond South Africa’s borders and to develop a broader perspective on race relations on the continent. In 1944, Stern’s companion, Cape Town architect Dudley Welch, moved into Stern’s home. Welch assisted Stern with all aspects of her work, including preparing works for sale and accompanying her on trips to Europe.

In 1948, the South African government introduced apartheid, or racial separation, as the basis for new legislation that promoted white supremacy. With the assistance of the South African government, Stern’s career reached its pinnacle at the same time that apartheid was established. To deflect international criticism of its racist agenda, the government encouraged Stern to exhibit her paintings of blacks in international exhibition venues such as the Venice and Sao Paulo Biennales and invited her to participate in major national exhibitions such as the Cape Tercentenary and other major art competitions in South Africa.

23 "Two Pictures...Being Sent to Washington," Cape Times, 24 November 1936.
Stern continued to be a respected artist in Europe in the postwar period. She continued to work with art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt after the war and began showing at galleries in Germany and Austria. As abstract art became popular in North America and Europe, Stern became a vocal critic and continued to paint portraits, still lifes, and landscapes. Because she was diabetic, Stern had numerous health problems as she aged, and she spent more time painting in warm Mediterranean areas such as southern France, Italy, and Spain. She relied heavily on Dudley Welch to help her manage her art sales during her long convalescences abroad.

In the late 1950s, Stern exhibited in Berlin, Linz, and Munich for the first time since World War II ended. These exhibitions drew interest in Stern and her subjects, but international attention was focused on more important political developments in South Africa. Black political groups such as the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress were organizing sit-ins, demonstrations, and boycotts to raise international awareness of the atrocious living conditions and lack of political rights afforded to non-white South Africans under apartheid.

In 1960, Stern won the Guggenheim International Art Prize, one of the last international awards she would receive. The last five years of Stern’s life were filled with retrospective exhibitions and celebrations of her work in South Africa. Stern’s celebrity, however, was overshadowed by the political violence that resulted from the growing resentment of apartheid among non-white South Africans. Diabetes, obesity, and heart problems kept Stern bedridden and housebound during her last years, and she died on August 23, 1966. As South Africa became increasingly isolated...
during apartheid, Stern fell into obscurity internationally, and her groundbreaking artistic explorations of race and gender were left out of modern art history.

**Chapter Outline**

Beginning in 1913, Chapter 1 examines Stern’s studies in Germany with expressionist artists, arguing that Stern developed an interest in social themes in art during her meetings with Max Pechstein and her participation in the avant-garde *Novembergruppe*. Through Pechstein, Stern was introduced to the progressive art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt, who helped her gain recognition in Germany and may have played a role in the Nazis’ acquisition of her paintings during World War II.

Chapter 2 analyzes Stern’s development as an artist in South Africa, arguing that her political engagement in Weimar Berlin and friendship with Max Pechstein enabled her to become increasingly aware of South Africa’s political and social problems and to integrate them into her work. This chapter also looks at how Stern interpreted the development of South Africa’s national identity through her portraits of South Africans and paintings of the nation’s landscape. Stern’s depictions of South Africans of all races yielded a cross-section of South African society that demonstrated the nation’s cultural and racial diversity long before other artists or political figures saw these characteristics as assets.

Chapter 3 focuses on Stern’s two travel narratives, *Congo* (1942) and *Zanzibar* (1948). Because she was unable to travel to Europe during World War II, Stern spent time learning more about Africa and gained a much richer understanding of racial and social issues on the continent. She visited both the
Congo region and Zanzibar several times during this period, and her travel narratives reflect her awareness of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German travel narratives. Stern may have been familiar with the writings of the best-selling author and explorer Georg Schweinfurth and was acquainted with ethnologist Leo Frobenius through letter correspondence, newspaper reports, and books. In her travel narratives, Stern frequently juxtaposed art and text, using a new medium to explore race and cultural politics from a modernist perspective.

Chapter 4 considers the last two decades of Stern’s life, examining how her career changed during the early years of apartheid. Government agencies supported Stern financially by selecting her to participate in exhibitions of South African art at home and abroad. Despite the growing anti-apartheid movement, particularly in her own Jewish community, Stern failed to assume the modern artist’s role as social critic during one of the most violent periods in the nation’s history, raising interesting questions about how artists negotiate ethical boundaries and community expectations through their work.

Finally, Chapter 5 argues that Stern’s work plays a crucial role in the post-apartheid era and in twenty-first century South African art history. Almost fifteen years after apartheid’s demise, scholars and critics are still trying to balance the period’s skewed historical narrative with the multicultural stakeholders who seek to make their voices heard. This chapter advocates for an approach to art history that accounts for the omissions during the period of white rule. It cautions, however, against overcorrecting the historical narrative by ignoring or marginalizing white
artists’ roles in shaping South African art. This chapter also identifies gaps in the research on Stern, as well as next steps for further research.

**Essential Themes**

There are several themes that frame this study of Irma Stern’s life and work. Race is arguably the most critical theme for Stern and for South African art history. In the nineteenth century, European fascination with South African Sartjie Baartman (also known as the “Hottentot Venus”) fused conceptions of race and sexuality with pseudoscientific theories that helped define how Europe and white South Africans viewed the black female body, laying the groundwork for white reactions to Stern’s paintings in the 1920s. Yet, as rigid as racial categories appeared on the surface, they often overlapped and intersected in subtle ways. Stern played a major role in bringing discussions of race into the arts even as she attempted (unsuccessfully at times) to penetrate Eurocentric perceptions of blackness to illustrate her own insight into her subjects. Although she spoke out against racial equality, her sensual portraits of black women flirted dangerously with the fine line between refined culture and repressed sexual desire. Through her portraits of coloured women, Stern also brought attention to customs and traditions in the coloured community, which was marginalized from both black and white politics because of its mixed-race composition. As a recurring theme in this dissertation, Stern’s visual interpretations

---

of race in South Africa exemplify how even white artists wrestled with the social paradoxes that apartheid created.

Travel is one of the major threads that weaves together Stern’s story with the art history that she helped to shape. Frequent travel helped Stern to establish her artistic career and define her relationship with her subjects. As Susan L. Blake argues in her article on African travel narratives, “Travel is a problematic genre because it partakes of both autobiography and ethnography... It develops two kinds of knowledge—that of Self and that of an Other—each subjective, each more difficult to evaluate in the context of the other.”25 Through her own travels, Stern constantly struggled to draw distinctions between her knowledge of Self and Other, a conflict that she used her art to resolve. Her portraits of black and coloured women suggest that Stern searched for a sense of self-identity through her work but that she could not escape the European urge to view these women as the Other. It is clear through Stern’s statements, such as the one at the beginning of this chapter, that despite traveling long distances to paint nonwhite South African communities, the perceived racial differences between groups were nearly insurmountable.

Regarding questions of gender and South African discourses around the role of women in the arts, another significant theme in Stern’s work, one South African critic responded to an exhibition of Stern’s “native” drawings by questioning the need to expand the canon of great (male) European artists: “To have grown up loving Raphael, da Vinci, Rembrandt...Whistler, Manet, Millet—why extend the list?”26


Stern’s success in exhibitions in South Africa and Europe quickly proved that she was a rising star among modern artists. As a woman, however, Stern struggled to gain acceptance in a predominantly male field. Because of her gender, her independence raised eyebrows in Cape Town since art was considered a hobby, not a profession, for women. Stern’s mentor Pechstein and his art dealer Gurlitt introduced Stern to the Berlin art scene, and Stern was able to capitalize on her affiliations with artists and galleries in Germany to establish herself in Cape Town. Because she was unmarried at the beginning of her career, Stern was not able to live alone, which meant that her ability to travel alone was limited, and her activities were subject to criticism from her family. In spite of these obstacles, Stern managed every aspect of her own career from the beginning, turning criticism into good press and art sales.

As subjects, Stern’s paintings of women from many races, nationalities, and social classes reflect her lifelong interest in representations of gender and challenged the traditional ways in which females were depicted. Stern’s portraits of African women created a unique genre of images that explored the intersections between race and gender at a time during which blackness was viewed as a “pathology” and black womanhood was considered to be symbolic of unchecked primal sexuality. Stern’s portraits show black and coloured women displaying a variety of emotions, from poignant and haunting to resolute and defiant, creating a visual record of nonwhite women’s emotional responses to apartheid.

---

It is important to remember, however, that because Stern was classified as white, she was afforded the opportunity to move between racial and social groups in South Africa. According to South African art historian Marilyn Martin, “women have been, in many instances, the avant-garde of the South African art world.”

The apartheid system offered white South African women access to an abundance of cheap domestic labor that allowed them more free time to pursue creative endeavors, a practice that liberated some women by oppressing others. These gender paradoxes and contradictions will be explored throughout this dissertation.

In his landmark study of nationalism, scholar Benedict Anderson wrote, “Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” Stern articulated her vision of an “imagined” community through her works. More than any of her contemporaries, Stern painted multiple facets of South African culture and society. From South African Jewish intellectuals, to Chinese circus performers, Cape Malay wedding ceremonies, and portraits of Zulu women, Stern observed the cultural and social nuances of South African society and transferred them to the canvas. During apartheid, the ruling Afrikaner-led National Party attempted to create an all-white national identity by driving blacks and coloureds and their cultures to the margins of South African society. These groups, however, constituted the center of Stern’s artistic world and allowed her to imagine an alternative vision of a South Africa that did not necessarily support political equality but did place black and coloured women at the apex of

---


aesthetic beauty. This vision is what has made and continues to make Stern one of South Africa’s most noteworthy but controversial artists.

Southern Africa receives little attention in African art surveys and scholarly journals compared with central and west Africa. The prehistoric San cave paintings and the architectural ruins at Great Zimbabwe, as well as contemporary South African art, which has been the subject of many exhibitions and studies in the post-apartheid era, are the exceptions. Outside of these regions and time periods, there are fewer analyses of modern art and artists in Southern Africa compared with other regions in Africa. Yet, the confluence of African, Asian, European, and Indian cultures in this region served as a crucible for new and innovative interpretations of modernist trends that circulated the globe. Therefore, there is a need to broaden the scope of African art history to include additional examinations that contribute to a greater knowledge of how African-born artists interpreted race and ethnicity through the continent’s stylistic movements during the twentieth century.

Irma Stern’s life and art will be significant for art historians interested in developing a deeper understanding of modernism’s global impact, as well as the existing patterns of selection and emphasis in the modernist narrative. The chapters that follow will examine how the culture and politics of various geographic regions shaped Stern’s search for subjects and her artistic style.
Chapter 1: Irma Stern and German Expressionism

On page 43 of her illustrated diary, Irma Stern wrote, “Searching I roamed the world—to arrive at the origin—at beauty—at truth—away from the lies of everyday—and my longing was burning hot—then the darkness opened up and I stood at the source of the Beginning. –Paradise–” (fig. 1).† The text, in Stern’s nearly illegible handwriting, is written in heavy black ink over a watercolor drawing of a large orange sun with a bright red spot in its center. The next page depicts a slender, bare-chested African woman leaning back as if she were blinded by the sun on the opposite page (fig. 2). Another naked African woman crouches beside her under a palm tree, and a large bird flies overhead. Strokes of red watercolor paint mark the women’s clothing, hair, and bodies, as well as the fruit tree and the bird flying away in the background. The bright oranges and reds, combined with the sun on the opposite page, create a frenetic, heated scene that suggests Stern’s frustration with urban living and her longing for South Africa.

In general, Stern’s diary records the thoughts and feelings of a young South African woman living in early 20th century Germany. The drawing and diary entry on pages 43 and 44, however, specifically highlight how Stern connected her two worlds, rural South Africa and urban Germany, through her work. After World War I and its ensuing legacy of economic depression, spiritual nihilism, and social chaos in Weimar Germany, Stern, like other Expressionists, searched for a less technocratic and corrupt type of beauty and “truth” that she found in her African and non-Western subjects. These “primitive” subjects and their proximity to nature became

† Dubow, ed., Paradise, 51.
her sanctuary from industrialized Europe. Stern’s paintings, drawings, and lithographs during the nearly 10-year period she lived in Germany reflect the ways in which she began to synthesize African subjects with German Expressionist formal techniques and cultural politics.

This chapter examines Stern’s participation in Expressionism from her arrival in Germany to her departure for South Africa in 1920 on several levels: as artist Max Pechstein’s protégé, a South African living in Germany, a Jewish artist, and a woman. Although she is rarely mentioned in standard art historical texts on Expressionism, Stern was considered an important acolyte to the movement by her mentor and her female colleagues, and her timely presence during seminal moments in the history of German Expressionism merits reexamination. Stern’s early work in Germany demonstrates her realization that the production of art could harness significant political and social power.

As she gained more experience, Stern’s South African heritage played a vital role in her contribution to the development and expansion of the Expressionists’ desire to discover what they perceived as “authenticity” in cultures they believed to be “primitive.” Like painters Max Pechstein, Emil Nolde, and Paul Gauguin, Stern had lived outside of Europe, an experience deemed by the Expressionists to be crucial to the advancement of their agenda.
Beginnings

Between 1905 and 1933, Germany served as a cultural crossroads, bringing together artists from Russia to the Rhine who found ways to connect and discuss ideas about the direction of modern art. At the same time, Germany was also undergoing significant political upheaval as it struggled with nationhood. Many Expressionist artists used their work to respond to the ways in which Germany transformed itself and developed its national ethos.

The cultural contrasts that emerged in early twentieth century Germany became evident in the country’s art at the time. By the turn of the century, paintings of urban street scenes and café portraits eclipsed subjects such as Caspar David Friedrich’s barren seascapes as defining characteristics of German art, demonstrating how quickly the nation was modernizing. Along with cultural transitions at home, colonial expansion played a large role in developing German modernism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany possessed colonies in western and southern Africa, as well as the South Pacific island of Palau, and German museums welcomed the opportunity to catalog and display cultural artifacts from these farflung regions.²

Expressionism and some of its direct antecedents provided a means for artists to channel their youthful and rebellious energies into works that looked critically and skeptically at the German art establishment. In the late nineteenth century, a series of secessionist movements in Munich, Berlin, and Dresden provided artists who were not formally trained or politically connected with a place to exhibit their creations to

a sympathetic audience. In addition, German artists looked to their French counterparts, including Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cezanne, for further confirmation that art was moving away from state-sanctioned academic principles and toward a more vibrant sense of individualism.

Although there is no agreement on the origins of the term “Expressionism,” the movement took off with the founding of the Dresden art group Die Brücke (The Bridge) in 1905. Die Brücke laid the foundation for German Expressionist principles and ideas that Stern would later adopt as a young artist in Berlin. In its first artistic program, the group called for other artists who embraced the ideas of “immediacy and authenticity” to join. The founding members, who included Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, Karl Schmitt-Rotluff, and Stern’s mentor Max Pechstein, operated on the principle that spiritual renewal could not be found in history or religion. Instead, the artists found spiritual rejuvenation in what they perceived to be the “primitive” and, therefore, more authentic cultures of medieval Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, which they believed possessed a raw

---


4 Ibid., 67.


6 William Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 371. Donald E. Gordon’s chapter, “German Expressionism” discusses how ethnographic collections in German art museums influenced the Expressionists. Although Stern collected African sculpture and was interested in its formal elements, her early exposure to African culture came through its people rather than its sculptural traditions. Whereas the study of African and nonwestern sculpture influenced the way German Expressionists understood modern Germany, Stern’s interactions with the Expressionists and their interpretations of non-Western art helped her to articulate her African experiences.
and purer form of artistic energy that was uncorrupted by the moral decay of bourgeois society.\footnote{Wolf-Dieter Dube, The Expressionists (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972; reprint, 1996), 24.}

In addition to painting, Die Brücke artists and other Expressionists considered woodcuts, lithographs, and graphic posters as important media for the transmission of their modern ideas.\footnote{Ibid., 25.} Whereas painting enabled the artists to experiment with bold color combinations, woodcuts and the graphic arts allowed them to explore form, line, and shading through different printing methods and various writing instruments. By using several types of media, the Expressionists could explore multiple facets of the same subjects.

Beginning in 1906, Die Brücke artists created an annual collection of prints, drawings, and woodcuts that were compiled into portfolios and distributed to each member, as well as to art patrons who paid dues to the group.\footnote{Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, ed., German Expressionist Prints and Drawings, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Los Angeles and Munich: Prestel 1989). See also Klaus Grimberg, "Naked and Carefree. The Artists of ‘Die Brücke’ Broke with Convention 100 Years Ago.," review of 100 years of Die Brucke in Germany, The Atlantic Times, June 2005.} In “Die Brücke VII” (1912), the group’s seventh portfolio, the artists displayed the many ways they used different media to address the same subjects. For example, Otto Mueller’s woodcut, Sitzende Akt auf Weise (Nude Sitting in a Meadow), uses gold pigment against a black background (fig. 3). The nude woman sits under a large block of text that reads, “Brücke 1912 Pechstein,” and her form is delineated by only a few delicately drawn lines that cover most of her body. Compared with Max Pechstein’s lithograph with watercolor, Tanzende und Badende im Waldreic (Dancers and Bathers in the
Forest), from the same portfolio, the identical subject is addressed in a different way (fig. 4). By depicting the dancing, nude women in a dark blue color, Pechstein’s lithograph echoes Matisse’s radical use of color in paintings of nude women. Unlike Mueller’s woodcut, which focuses on abstract forms, Pechstein’s colored lithograph draws the viewer’s attention to the women through the use of bright color combinations and contrasts.

Women artists in the Expressionist movement were also able to carve out niches within the modern milieu. Commencing with Käthe Kollwitz, early twentieth century women artists used art to express their political views and demand equal status in the profession. Although fewer in number than their male counterparts, a handful of women artists figured prominently in Expressionist circles. Paula Modersohn-Becker, for example, was a member of the Worpswede colony, a group of artists led by Fritz Mackensen, one of Stern’s early instructors. Modersohn-Becker’s style shows how women artists in particular sought ways to legitimize their work outside of traditional artistic circles. Located in a secluded rural region near Bremen, Worpswede colonists painted mostly traditional landscapes. When Modersohn-Becker presented paintings that ignored perspective and depth, she was criticized for being too radical. As a result, she traveled to Paris, where she “found an endorsement and justification of her own attempts to join masses and planes in a unity fraught with tensions” after viewing French artist Paul Cezanne’s work at his dealer Vollard’s studio. Modersohn-Becker described Cezanne as “one of the three

---

10 Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 44.
or four painters who has acted upon me like a thunderstorm and a great adventure,” thereby establishing the impact that the older generation of male artists would have upon the growing number of young female artists in Germany.\textsuperscript{12} Modersohn-Becker’s work and her insistence on expressing independent thought among her male peers paved the way for a new generation of artists, including Stern, to work side-by-side with their male Expressionist peers.

**Stern’s Early Artistic Training in Germany**

During the time spent living in Germany between 1910 and 1921, Stern reinterpreted her childhood memories of South Africa within the cultural context of German Expressionism. In some ways, her recollections were more pastoral than her lived experiences in the Transvaal and in Cape Town. Arguably, her eclectic background largely fit the Expressionist agenda at the time. With formal artistic training and new social contacts, Stern’s work in Germany eventually focused on women and children in urban and rural settings, as well as on African women, demonstrating the new visual vocabulary she developed for illustrating her African birthplace.

The Stern family traveled between South Africa and Germany several times during the first decade of the twentieth century but settled in Berlin in 1910, when Stern was 16 years old, so that she could study art.\textsuperscript{13} Stern took several portrait classes at small studios in Berlin before entering the Grossherzoglich Sachsische Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Weimar (the Weimar Academy) in a special class

\textsuperscript{12} Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 44.

\textsuperscript{13} Schoeman, *Irma Stern: The Early Years*, 113.
for girls. At the Weimar Academy, Stern studied with several artists connected to contemporary art movements in Germany, including Carl Frithjof Smith, a Norwegian painter, and Worpswede founder Mackensen. Having access to progressive artists afforded Stern the opportunity to gain insight into the underpinnings of the German modernist aesthetic while South Africa was still alive in her memory and she was still formulating her own artistic style.

The Sterns exposed their children, Irma and her brother Rudi, to a life that few in Germany or South Africa could afford, providing Irma the educational advantages she would need to succeed as an artist. Her family lived in an upscale Berlin neighborhood and enjoyed long vacations in the German countryside and seaside, allowing her to observe the differences between Germany and South Africa. Through her family connections, Stern interacted with a community of writers, thinkers, and artists who helped to channel modernist impulses through the arts.

By 1912, Stern was becoming fully immersed in the nuances of German culture; she read profusely and regularly went to the theatre. Stern kept a “theatre list” describing the operas and plays she attended, many of which took place at top venues in Berlin, such as the Deutsches Theatre and the Künstler Theatre. In 1919,

---

14 Dube, The Expressionists, 12-13. Worpswede’s members also included Otto Modersohn and Gari Melchers, an American-born Dutch artist under whom Stern also studied.

15 Schoeman, Irma Stern: The Early Years, 44-46.

16 Ibid., 36.

17 “Theatre List,” Manuscript held in the archive at the Irma Stern Museum, the University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, Cape Town, South Africa.
for example, she saw Richard Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier* and a performance of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* at the Schauspielhaus. The list of books she read during her youth is more than a dozen pages long and includes an eclectic listing of titles from Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the *Tao Te Ching*.¹⁸

Although she quickly adapted to modern German culture, Stern’s childhood experiences in South Africa, nonetheless, served as the basis of her work. As a result, Stern’s relationship to Africa was different from her artistic compatriots. Whereas the Expressionist fascination with “primitive” arts and cultures was mostly derived from their readings of psychologists, art critics, ethnologists, and literary and scientific accounts of German travelers to Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, Stern’s initial embrace of the Expressionist visual lexicon was derived from her direct contact with a racially diverse group of South Africans in her daily life.¹⁹

**German Colonialism and Expressionism**

Stern lived in Germany during a time when its relationship to Africa was rapidly changing. At the end of World War I, Germany forfeited all of its colonial territories, but the loss did not erase them from its collective memory of Africa as a cultural and political idea. The African continent was a place where Germans could satisfy their interests in travel and exploration, academic study, and for some, sexual conquest. Even after Germany lost its African colonies, African culture came to Germany in many forms, including art, consumerism, journalism, literature, music, and scholarship. Stern’s experience in Germany would lay the foundation for her

---

¹⁸ Ibid.

dual interpretations of Africa from both direct experience and through imported artifacts and the lens of German culture.

The nineteenth century discipline of anthropology (also known as ethnology) became the bridge that supported the delivery of African objects into the hands of the Expressionists. German museums in Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Munich collected and documented artifacts brought back by explorers in Africa. In many cases, these works were meticulously catalogued and subsequently placed on display for public viewing. Anthropologists played a crucial role in digesting and presenting a specific vision of Africa to the German public. The way in which German audiences interpreted African cultures would have different implications for Stern, who as a young artist in Berlin, was trying to reconcile her firsthand experiences in Africa with a very different secondhand vision in Germany.

One of the scholars responsible for communicating information about Africa to German audiences was ethnologist Leo Frobenius. Between 1905 and 1915, Frobenius completed 12 expeditions to Africa. Frobenius’ study of African culture was twofold. First, he collected artifacts for the German museums that funded his expeditions. Second, he synthesized the information he had gathered about African cultures into a new historiographic model of African history that focused on the richness of its visual and oral traditions. Although he was progressive in his vision


\[21\] Ibid.

of new approaches to scholarship on Africa, Frobenius’ contradictory writings and
violent, erratic behavior towards Africans make him a difficult, yet compelling figure
to study within the context of the development of German ethnography and its
treatment of African cultural objects.24

Frobenius’ fieldwork and writings laid the groundwork for German scholars
(such as Negerplastik author Carl Einstein) to study African sculpture in museums.
According to cultural historian Assenka Oksiloff, Frobenius suggested that a visual
and experiential methodology would yield a better understanding of “primitive”
societies because the traditional disciplines that dealt with “primitive” cultures could
no longer support new research.25 Frobenius’ 1896 article, Die Kunst der
Naturvölker, explored the relationship between form and content in African
sculpture.26 The article is considered to be one of the first serious aesthetic studies of
African sculpture, but Frobenius’ ideas were not well developed, and he did not
attempt further research on the topic until 1913. Throughout his travels, however,

---

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid. According to Oksiloff, Frobenius disagreed with nineteenth-century scientific collecting
theories because he believed that they ignored the realm of visual and historical analysis. Frobenius
argued that these theories were rooted in the natural sciences, that some aspects of culture could not
be classified or quantified, and that the museum did not have an adequate way of displaying the
“essence” of these objects. He envisioned that ethnology would converge with the disciplines of
history and cultural criticism. The result would allow for a less condescending view of African and
Asian cultures, which he viewed as having developed out of innovation rather than an inherent
connection to nature. Frobenius devised a method of inquiry called “kinematography” that aimed “to
summarize all of the essential characteristics of a culture.” Although he wrote about
“kinematography” in several essays, Frobenius never seemed to implement this methodology in his
observations and field notes in Africa.

25 Oksiloff, Picturing the Primitive, 100.

26 Adrian A. Gerbrands, “The History of African Art Studies” in African Art Studies: The State of the

35
Frobenius documented African sculpture and masks, placing them within the context of the oral histories that he studied and recorded into his journals.

One of Frobenius’ largest studies of African cultures was *Und Afrika Sprach* (*The Voice of Africa*), published in 1912. The two-volume study is significant for its aesthetic treatment of African sculpture, as well as for its substantial number of drawings and illustrations by artist Carl Arriens (*fig. 5*). *Und Afrika Sprach* served as a manual of African sculpture for scholars and artists who could not go to Africa themselves. For example, Carl Einstein examined Frobenius’ writings while completing research for his 1915 publication, *Negerplastik*, which also became a foundational text for the study of African sculpture, and was widely read by German historians, cultural theorists, and artists, including Stern, who owned a copy of the book.

**German Romanticism and Modern Art**

In the same way that academic fields such as ethnology influenced modern art, German Romantic literature, poetry, and drama played a large role in helping Expressionist artists explore new forms of representation. The French Revolution in

---


29 A copy of the book is listed in Stern’s personal catalog of her library. Einstein’s *Negerplastik* has captured the imagination of artists and scholars since its original publication in 1915. *Negerplastik* is frequently mentioned in analytical texts on the relationship between primitivism and Expressionism.
1789 sparked a social disorder that changed the ways in which the Romantics viewed their relationship to society at the dawn of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{30} “Faced with an unrepresentable chaos on the political and intellectual landscape,” scholar Azade Seyhan argues, “the Romantic mind initiates a discursive plan intent on inventing new paradigms of understanding and redefining the objectives of criticism and representation.”\textsuperscript{31} As a result of their willingness to rethink traditional methods of representation, the German Romantics made contributions to the aesthetic theory that resonated with the German Expressionists, who were also struggling to make sense of political and social chaos.

Color theory was a critical element in the Romantics’ development of new forms of representation. Beginning with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s \textit{Farbenlehre}, a book of essays on color theory published in 1810, Romantic thinkers built from Goethe’s text and carefully considered the relationships between colors and the effect that these associations had on one’s spiritual well-being. The Romantics sought to determine how and why certain colors evoked different feelings in human beings. For example, the Romantic theorist Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder wrote in 1799, “The various spirits of nature speak to us through the individual colors, just as the spirits of the heavens speak through various sounds of musical instruments.”\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
Of the colors that fascinated the Romantics, blue captured the imagination of the majority. The writer and geologist George Phillip Freiherr Friedrich von Hardenburg, better known as Novalis, wrote about the color in his novels. In his novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), Novalis describes a young boy named Heinrich’s encounters with new and interesting people as he travels to his grandfather’s house in Augsburg. Heinrich meets a storyteller who mentions a blue flower, which he thinks about as he falls asleep that evening.33 “I yearn to get a glimpse of the blue flower,” he says, adding, “It is perpetually in my mind, and I can think of nothing else…”34 As a reference to the natural world that also carried political and social connotations, the color blue was useful in enabling the Romantics to embed multiple layers of meaning in a single symbol.

The Expressionists were strongly influenced by the color theories developed by the German Romantics. Pechstein, Franz Marc, Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, and other artists spent time thinking about the spiritual resonance of various colors and their pairings. Scholar Peter Selz even suggests that *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider), the artists’ group founded by Kandinsky, was named after Novalis’ *blaue blume* (blue flower).35 *Blaue Reiter* member Marc, for example, wrote prolifically about the spiritual, musical, and kinetic energy derived from colors. Following the Romantic tradition, blue played a prominent role in many of Marc’s 

---

paintings of animals, as well as his abstract work (fig. 6).\textsuperscript{36} As in many of Stern’s works, Marc attributed spirituality to the color blue but also believed that it expressed sadness. “If you mix serious spiritual blue with red, you intensify the blue to unbearable sorrow,” he wrote to fellow painter August Macke in 1910.\textsuperscript{37}

Like her Expressionist counterparts, Stern was influenced by the Romantics. Her interest in the Romantic literature and poetry began as an adolescent, and by the time she reached her twenties, Stern noted reading poems by Heinrich Heine and regularly attending theatrical performances.\textsuperscript{38} The Romantics’ interest in Near Eastern cultures and their fascination with nature provided Stern with a sense of purpose for her own early work. The tone of her illustrated journals draws heavily from her readings in German Romanticism by using text as a space for free play and to explore her memories of Africa. “This book should free me from everyday life,” she wrote on the first page of her diary in 1919, “a free and happy playing about in the realm of colourful imagination—an enjoyable ball game with colours and thoughts.”\textsuperscript{39}

The color blue is a theme throughout Stern’s diaries and paintings, and her frequent use of blue in a variety of contexts provides visual evidence that she, like

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{36} Dube, \textit{The Expressionists}, 128.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{38} Inventory of Stern’s library, courtesy of the Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town. Although her library’s catalog does not include works by Novalis, Stern’s pervasive use of and references to color in various contexts indicates that she was aware of Novalis’ writings about color and how these writings influenced her colleagues.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{39} Dubow, ed., \textit{Paradise}, 66.
\end{flushright}
her Expressionist contemporaries, was interested in exploring the color’s emotional and spiritual effects. In her journal, Stern wrote a short story that included a character called Das Blaue (The Blue One), a Promethean-like character who brings light and gold to a village of spherical huts. An image of Das Blaue appears on page 3 of the journal (fig. 7). The figure is androgynous, possessing both male and female characteristics. It has a brown face and black hair to suggest a connection to Africa, and the village to which it delivers light and gold could be a reference to organic African architectural structures. After a brief discussion of the effects of the Blue One’s gifts on the village, Stern writes, “it [the light] brought them to their knees, thus they hated the Blue One and nailed it to the Cross.” The Blue One plays the same role in Stern’s diaries as exotic characters in Romantic literature. Scholar Azade Seyhan writes, “The exotic other, excluded and misunderstood, emerges as the representation of a higher truth.” Stern’s 1916 blue figure also resembles Pechstein’s blue, nude dancers that he painted in 1912 (fig. 4). Although the story’s narrative is weak and mixes elements of Greek mythology and Christianity, Stern’s belief that the color blue held special, cross-cultural spiritual power is clear.

Stern’s paintings during World War I reflect a similar interest in experimenting with the color blue to evoke specific emotional reactions to her work. Two Stern paintings, for example, Aktstudie (Nude Study, 1915, fig. 8) and

---

40 Ibid., 66-7.

41 The figure’s androgynous characteristics are also supported by the fact that Stern used the neutral article Das in German rather than the masculine Der or the feminine Die to name the figure.

42 Seyhan, Representation and Its Discontents, 129.
*Junges Madchen* (Young Girl, 1917, **fig. 9**) illustrate the ways in which different shades of blue set the mood for her work. In *Aktstudie*, a voluptuous, nude woman dominates the painting’s foreground as she reaches into a fruit tree. The complementary shades of green in the hills and the trees in the foreground and background frame the blue sky and draw the viewer’s attention to the same shade of blue that is reflected in the woman’s skin. Standing in a bed of lush, dark green grass, the woman’s back is turned toward a clear, pale blue sky, recalling the biblical image of Eve reaching for the fruit of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. The rolling hills in the background are divided into patches of farm land, which helps set the painting’s bucolic tone. In *Aktstudie*, the soft blues and greens work together to bring a serene, calming effect to the painting. The blue sky plays a vital role in creating a sense of scale in the painting, illustrating what Kandinsky wrote about the color in 1910, “The inclination of blue to depth is so strong that its inner appeal is stronger when its shade is deeper.”

In her 1917 double-sided portrait, *Junges Mädchen*, Stern uses contrasting blue hues to create a mood of sadness for her portrait of a distressed young German girl. The juxtaposition of the two different shades of blue in the background and in the young girl’s dress produces a jarring, unsettling effect that echoes the uncertainty and social turmoil that characterize the period. The aquamarine background’s brightness belies the young girl’s dejected, tired facial expression, and it clashes with

---


44  The other side of the canvas was painted in 1915 and depicts a Gypsy family. Stern may have had to use both sides of the canvas to economize on space because of extreme supply shortages and rationing during World War I.
the girl’s navy blue dress, which is covered with a white apron. Although the background is painted with long, smooth brushstrokes, the blue color emphasizes the sharper, more angular strokes of the young girl’s pale face, which appears too worn for her age. She looks directly at the viewer, but her sad eyes reveal that she is focused on something else. One of her eyes is slightly closed, suggesting that she might suffer from an eye injury or disease. Her light brown hair is wispy and pulled back to reveal more of her furrowed facial expression and a pronounced widow’s peak. Like Kandinsky, Marc, and other Expressionists, Stern uses color to tell part of the story in *Junges Madchen*. The blue colors pair well with the young girl’s doleful portrait to express the feelings of sadness, loss, and hopelessness that pervaded German society during World War I.

**The Eternal Child**

The end of World War I represented a defining moment for modern art in Germany. Artists responded to the conflict in different ways. Some volunteered as soldiers and returned from the war disillusioned with their government. Those who stayed at home witnessed the economic hardships that most Germans faced. Many artists supported the war, but few were prepared for the violence that resulted from the use of trench warfare and new weaponry, such as chemical weapons and machine guns.

In 1916, Stern painted her own response to the war in an oil painting she called *Das Ewige Kind* (the Eternal Child, fig. 10), which she described as reflecting her awareness of the war’s effect on Germany’s youth. Being an upper middle-class family meant that the Sterns were isolated from many of the hardships faced by lower-class Germans. The *Eternal Child*, however, conveys Stern’s desire to empathize with their plight.

Completed under instructor Max Brandenburg, the *Eternal Child* depicts a young German girl sitting on a high-backed wooden chair, holding a bouquet of freshly cut flowers. Her wide-set, dark-brown eyes and long nose dominate her face. The child has a slightly disheveled look; the part between her shoulder-length braids is crooked, and the red and blue tie on her dress is askew. Her lips are pursed in a position that forms a slight frown, just enough to indicate that she is uncomfortable. Her dress, a patchy, red frock, has a white lace collar and frayed sleeves. The beige background gives no indication of location or time of day, forcing the viewer to focus on the child’s grim expression.

World War I, and specifically its impact on German youth, was a frequent subject of Stern’s work in Berlin. According to writer Heather Martienssen, the “*Eternal Child* was very close to the kind of evocative subject produced by war and the violated sensibilities everywhere around [Stern].” Although much of her work

---


uses bright colors that enliven the canvas, Stern’s subjects during this period embody the dark realities of life in a country at war. “Every festive light reminds me of the broken hearts of women, of bitter, innumerable tears shed by children, of disappointed hopes, of all this horror, of the war,” she wrote in her diary at Christmas in 1915.49 A photograph in the Irma Stern Collection at the National Library of South Africa shows Stern painting outdoors at a hospital in Germany in 1915.50

Stern’s *Eternal Child* stands out from the rest of her early work in Germany because it is considered her first serious painting that demonstrated artistic independence. The painting, “marked a new phase in Irma Stern’s development,” wrote Karol Schoeman in his biography on Stern.51 Unlike some of her previous paintings, Stern’s *Eternal Child* uses the image of a troubled young girl to illustrate the larger problem of a society faced with a generation of youth damaged by war. The *Eternal Child* not only reflected Stern’s new-found style, but it also revealed how she synthesized contemporary political events and transferred them to the medium of portraiture, a practice that she would continue to use throughout her career. “[The *Eternal Child*] marks the first declaration of Irma’s own artistic personality: it marks the break between the young student learning from academic precedent, and the proclamation of personal vision,” wrote Neville Dubow.52


50 South African National Library, INIL 11944

In the year after she completed the *Eternal Child*, Stern also painted and sketched several portraits of despondent young people, including *Junges Madchen* (Young Girl) and a drawing of a German soldier entitled *Portrait eines Mannes in Uniform* (Portrait of a Man in Uniform, fig. 11). Although the soldier is neatly dressed and is posing for the picture, his smile is slight and appears to be forced. Stern emphasized the man’s sunken cheek bones, revealing his malnutrition, a realistic interpretation of food shortages that affected most Germans during World War I. Stern’s work during 1916 and 1917 portends the bleak political and social climate that Germany faced at the time.

**Stern and Max Pechstein**

The *Eternal Child* attracted the attention of *Die Brücke* artist and social activist Max Pechstein, who would become Stern’s primary mentor and friend. The two artists developed a deep bond that was characterized not only by an interest in painting, but also by a shared worldview that connected the natural world to a metaphysical experience. In their letters and through the stylistic similarities in their work, it is evident that Stern and Pechstein were bound by their mutual desire to be innovative as artists while maintaining an awareness of the society in which they lived. Both were interested in painting non-Western cultures, as well as leveling social critiques of the modern German lifestyle.

---

52 The painting continued to be a source of debate for scholars for decades, with most agreeing that it launched her artistic career by gaining the attention of artists, including Max Pechstein. Some scholars, such as Karel Schoeman, argue that outside of a few diary entries, Stern’s life on the fashionable Kurfürstendamm in Berlin was shielded from the realities of the war. Meanwhile, German scholar Irene Below offers a completely different interpretation of Stern’s early adulthood: “As a child, Irma Stern was politically awakened by the arrest of her father during the Boer War, and as a young woman, by the First World War and the subsequent political turmoil in Germany (Expressions, 34).”

By her own account, Stern met Pechstein through her mother’s friend. Stern and Pechstein met sometime between 1916 and 1917, a period during which Stern was still trying to define her own identity as an artist. She described her initial encounter with Pechstein as follows:

I showed Mr. Pechstein some of my drawings and paintings to hear his opinion. To my great joy, he liked them all...The next day, he visited my studio. He spent the entire afternoon looking at my work, and when he left, it was as if we had known each other for years, such good friends we had become. Without further delay, Mr. Pechstein put me in contact with Mr. [Wolfgang] Gurlitt, the owner of the most prominent art gallery in Berlin. After he [Gurlitt] looked at my work, he immediately arranged an exhibition for me. I showed around 30 large oil paintings and a large selection of drawings and watercolors. This exhibition was surely my springboard into the art scene in Central Europe. Invitations to exhibit my paintings suddenly came from everywhere.

In introducing Stern to Wolfgang Gurlitt, Pechstein served as the bridge between Africa and Europe for her career. Gurlitt was known for his support of contemporary and avant-garde artists, especially women and those interested in Germany’s colonies in Africa and the South Pacific. He organized Die Brücke’s first gallery exhibition in Berlin in 1912. Having paid for Pechstein’s stay in Palau for

54 Irma Stern, *Audio Clip of Irma Stern Interview* (Jewish Museum of South Africa Exhibition). During the interview, Stern does not mention her mother’s friend’s name.


57 The importance of the Gurlitt family’s influence on Die Brücke and on modern art generally cannot be emphasized enough. Wolfgang Gurlitt’s grandfather, Louis Gurlitt (1812-1897), was a German painter. His son, Fritz Gurlitt (1854-1893), established the Fritz Gurlitt Gallery, where he specialized in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters. After Fritz Gurlitt’s death in 1893, his wife Annarella ran the gallery before transferring ownership to Wolfgang (1888-1965) in 1907. The family decided to keep the gallery’s name, the Galerie Fritz Gurlitt. Wolfgang’s uncle Cornelius (1850-1938) was also involved in the arts. An architecture professor whose lectures were attended by Die Brücke members Kirchner, Bleyl, and Heckel in 1904, Cornelius Gurlitt possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of European art history and made frequent connections between art movements and
one year, Gurlitt’s instant enthusiasm for Stern’s African paintings was no surprise.\textsuperscript{58}

Through Gurlitt, Pechstein and Stern were connected to a dealer who shared their interest in interpreting non-Western cultures for a contemporary German audience.

Pechstein, who was 13 years older than Stern, was born in Zwickau and attended the Dresden Kunstgewerbeschule, where he studied decorative arts.\textsuperscript{59} His early work was steeped in medieval and gothic aesthetics, as well as in the Jugendstil movement.\textsuperscript{60} Pechstein joined \textit{Die Brücke} in 1906, and in 1907, he went to Paris where he discovered Matisse and the Fauves and their brazen use of bright colors.\textsuperscript{61}

In 1914, Pechstein had seen Oceanic art in the ethnographic museum in Dresden and wanted to travel to Palau to observe its people and paint its tropical landscape. Seizing the opportunity to increase sales, Pechstein’s art dealer, Wolfgang Gurlitt, agreed to finance the trip if Pechstein gave him exclusive rights to exhibit his Palau work.\textsuperscript{62} A few months later, Pechstein and his first wife Lotte moved to Palau. They intended to stay for an extended period, but the outbreak of World War I forced them to return after one year. Pechstein had become immersed in his South Seas lifestyle, and his return to Europe affected him deeply. In a letter to Stern years after

---


\textsuperscript{60} Lloyd, \textit{German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity}.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
his return, Pechstein described his premature departure from Palau as being “like Adam banned from Paradise.”

In mentoring Stern, Pechstein found a kindred spirit who was interested in exploring similar themes in her work. Pechstein influenced Stern both stylistically and politically. Like the other Expressionists, Pechstein did not seek to imitate nature in his work; rather, he viewed his paintings as interpretations of nature’s emotional effects on himself. He tried to instill this view in Stern as well. The letters that they exchanged are filled with lively discussions of their work, words of encouragement, and painting suggestions. Pechstein noticed Stern’s unique background and urged her to follow her own desires and instincts when painting. “You are equipped with your own language and have your own things to say,” he wrote to Stern on July 19, 1917. Pechstein’s experience in Palau helped him to find common ground with Stern, and they often wrote of the importance of nature as a source of motivation. In the same July 19, 1917 letter, Pechstein added, “throw yourself into nature, then I will help you find your own path in your work and show you how it achieved such great value.”

To thank him for his “advice and support,” Stern sent Pechstein a South African stone with a painting from the ancient San culture on it. In giving

---


64 Selz, German Expressionist Painting, 111.


66 Irene Below, ”Peripherie Und Zentrum: Irma Stern Im Kontext,” in Irma Stern Und Der Expressionismus, ed. Irene Below and Jutta Hulsewig-Johnen (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 1996), 106. The original inhabitants of southwestern Africa, the San are one of the oldest-known human societies
Pechstein such a valuable gift, Stern not only expressed her appreciation but appealed to his art collecting sensibilities and impressed upon him her seriousness as an artist with strong ties to an African identity. Pechstein thanked Stern for the stone in a letter in which he wrote, “I gladly accept it--it is a pleasure for me to think, I will own such an old piece [to exhibit].”

Because Pechstein and Stern were both artists, many aspects of their relationship were expressed visually. Pechstein frequently illustrated his letters to Stern, adorning them with watercolors of landscapes, seascapes, and human figures. For example, in a letter to Stern dated July 16, 1917, Pechstein included a drawing of a nude woman nursing a baby (fig. 12). The woman’s body is obscured by the nursing child, but her face is visible, and its angularity and simplicity of form resemble an African mask. The fusion of Africa and Europe in this image reinforces how strongly Pechstein (and, by association, Stern) was connected to the Expressionist cultural agenda.

Early in their relationship, Stern’s work was stylistically similar to Pechstein’s. A few years later, however, Stern’s paintings show that her work with Pechstein evolved from imitation into a clearly defined style that combined all of the elements of Stern’s varied experiences. Although both artists were painting images of idyllic

---


68 Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town. MSC 2(3). These letters were written after Pechstein saw Eternal Child, but before the first Novembergruppe meeting, and they help to establish the artists’ mutual interest in non-Western subject matter as a central aspect of their relationship.
tropical paradises in the Expressionist style, they also frequently depicted non-Western subjects performing laborious outdoor tasks.

The labor theme is clear when comparing paintings by Pechstein and Stern from the same year—1920. Many of Stern’s paintings of blacks depict them completing arduous tasks such as carrying water, hunting and grinding stones. Stern’s 1920 painting *Der Steinklopfer* (The Stonebreaker, fig. 13), boldly portrays a broad-shouldered African man standing over a pile of broken stones. With his back toward the lush, rolling hills, the man is poised to crack into another stone with his large arms. Yet, the painting’s color scheme—bright yellows, blues, and deep purples—does not cast a dour, depressing atmosphere on the back-breaking labor. The colors of the stonebreaker’s clothing complement the hues and forms in the landscape, making him and his work harmonious with nature. In comparison, Pechstein’s 1920 painting, *Beerensammlerinnen* (Berry Collectors, fig. 14), depicts three women collecting berries in the forest. The woman are crouched over the bushes as they pull berries, using their muscular arms. Their determined facial expressions give an indication of their difficult task. Stern’s and Pechstein’s paintings both use sharp, angular lines to illustrate the lush scenery, but the importance of work in both paintings underscores their shared interest in non-Western people and their connections to nature and manual labor, subjects that contrasted starkly with the growing political unrest and instability in Germany’s industrializing economy.

The Novembergruppe and the Politics of Graphic Art in Expressionism

Although few Expressionist artists participated in organized political groups prior to World War I, affairs of state began to dominate their discourse and artistic
activities following the cessation of hostilities.\textsuperscript{69} The war’s end led to Germany’s political and economic collapse, leaving a void that dozens of political and social activists scrambled to fill. By November 1918, German society was rapidly reaching a crisis point, which culminated in the demise of the Imperial government, a communist uprising that was summarily repressed, and the establishment of a new socialist government. This final event was called the November Revolution, and it significantly altered the relationship between art and politics in Germany.

On November 9, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated the German throne and moved to Holland in exile. He was replaced by Phillip Scheidemann, a member of the Socialist party. Elections for seats in the National Assembly were not held until January 1919, so in preparation for the campaign, the new dominant Social Democratic Party and Independent Social Democratic Party commissioned artists, some of whom were Expressionists, to create political posters supporting each party’s respective positions. The perception that the new government would bring democracy and freedom to Germany inspired the artists to increase their political activity, either by producing educational posters for the government or by illustrating socialist journals and newspapers.

In response to the changing political climate, a group of radical artists established an organization called the Novembergruppe (November Group). The artists believed that the new socialist government would support artistic freedom, make contemporary art more accessible to all citizens, and allow artists from lower-class backgrounds the opportunity to attend trade schools and exhibit their work.

\textsuperscript{69} Dube, \textit{The Expressionists}. p. 204-06
The group had its first meeting on December 3, 1918, with Pechstein as one of its most vocal leaders. In 1919, the Novembergruppe published a pamphlet entitled An Alle Künstler (To All Artists, fig. 15), which featured an article by Pechstein called, “Was Wir Wollen” (What We Want). In the article, Pechstein wrote:

We hope that a socialist republic not only will make the situation in the art world healthy, but will create a unified art epoch for our generation. The beginning of a new unity of people and art will be heralded on the basis of craft, with each artist working in his own fashion. Art will no longer, as it has been in the past, [be] an interesting and genteel occupation for the sons of wealthy loafers. On the contrary, the sons of common people must be given the opportunity, through the crafts, to become artists. Art is no game, but a duty to the people! It is a matter of public concern.  

Members of the Novembergruppe came from several countries, represented many artistic backgrounds, and included artists such as Cesar Klein, Otto Mueller, and George Tappert. As a group, they took graphic art to a new level in the same way that Die Brücke had revolutionized the expressive potential of woodcuts just two decades earlier. Political posters, advertisements, and other graphic illustrations depicted the artists’ extreme disapproval of German political machinations, and the artists used their work to demand social change. The group remained active until 1932 but had made its most significant impact by 1927.

Pechstein invited Stern to become a founding member of the Novembergruppe, and she attended the inaugural December 3rd meeting. By this time Stern had also shown her work with the Freie Sezession (Free Secession), a


71 Weinstein, The End of Expressionism. 252, no. 16
splintered artists’ group that included many *Die Brücke* artists.\textsuperscript{72} Although her participation in the exhibitions demonstrated her acceptance into the innermost German artistic circles, Stern’s invitation to join the *Novembergruppe* showed her affinity for a group that defined itself on the first page of its manifesto as “the German organization of radical artists.”\textsuperscript{73} Much of Stern’s work during World War I dealt with social issues, including the conflict’s effect on young children. Moreover, her paintings of South Africa reminded German audiences of their failed attempt at colonialism and their uncomfortable relationship with racial difference. In this context, Stern’s work added depth to the *Novembergruppe*’s political agenda.\textsuperscript{74}

The *Novembergruppe*’s first exhibitions occurred as part of the Berlin Art Exhibition, which ran from July through September 1919. The exhibition was divided into separate sections for the *Berliner Sezession*, the *Freie Sezession*, and the *Novembergruppe*. According to photographs and exhibition programs, each room and painting were numbered to correspond with the program. The selected works for the exhibitions depicted a variety of subjects in several media with no uniting theme.

Critics were disappointed with the selected paintings for the exhibition, claiming that the artists did not live up to the standards set in the radical agenda that

\textsuperscript{72} Stern described her invitation to exhibit with the *Freie Sezession* as coming after she met Gurlitt. Because of their fragility and the way in which the exhibition catalogs were organized, it is difficult to determine exactly in which exhibition’s Stern’s work were shown, and in which artist’s groups she was included.


\textsuperscript{74} Several other female artists exhibited with the *Novembergruppe* in later years, including one of Stern’s good friends, Katharina Heise. For more information, see Galerie Bodo Niemann, *Novembergruppe* (Berlin: Galerie Bodo Niemann/Heinz Stein, 1993).
they proposed in their 1918 manifesto.\textsuperscript{75} Outside of a shared belief that Germany needed an artistic revolution, the artists who exhibited with the \textit{Novembergruppe} had varying political views and struggled to present a unified and coherent message.

Art critic Fritz Stahl accused the \textit{Novembergruppe} of relying on artists who were too early in their careers to produce great works, suggesting that these young artists believed that, “in politically wild times art [must also be] for its part wild.”\textsuperscript{76} Stern participated in the 1919 exhibition, and although it is unclear what precisely she exhibited, her work at this time focused on images from South Africa and would have challenged viewers’ conventional views about the country and its artists.

Stern exhibited with the \textit{Novembergruppe} in 1919, 1920, and 1927. She showed at least three paintings, \textit{Frauenbildnis} (Picture of a Woman) (1925), \textit{Drei Negerinnen} (Three Black Women) (1926), and \textit{Männerkopf} (Head of a Man) (1931).\textsuperscript{77} The dates of these works coincide with her trip to Swaziland, where she completed several studies of groups of black women. Her 1927 work, \textit{Die Früchttragerin} (Fruit Carriers), is similar in style and composition to the \textit{Drei Negerinnen} painting that she exhibited with the \textit{Novembergruppe} (fig. 16). The female fruit carriers in the 1927 image bare their breasts and wear traditional garments around their waists. Their bodies, which are each painted in different shades of brown, fill the entire canvas. Bursts of color—orange fabrics, green fruit,
and blue sky—give German viewers the impression that life in South Africa is lively and vibrant.

Race, gender roles, and sexuality were prominent themes in Weimar culture, and the selection of Stern’s paintings for exhibition with the *Novembergruppe* underscores how German artists considered South African experiences to be unique and valuable social commentary. For this reason, it is significant that Stern would show paintings of black women in an exhibition of radical artists. Her work was consistent with other works in the 1927 exhibition, many of which addressed the female body as an artistic theme. Stern’s friend Katharina Heise (who used the pseudonym Karl Luis Heinrich-Salze) exhibited an abstract drawing of the Madonna and Child (*fig. 17*), Berlin artist Anneliese Rotkowski showed a self-portrait, and Cesar Klein exhibited his oil and crayon portrait of a peasant woman.78

Stern had a complicated relationship with the German avant-garde. Because she was a foreign-born female artist, Stern’s work reflects an outsider’s perspective on German cultural politics. At the same time, however, her direct experience with other cultures (even in a colonial social environment) placed her at the center of a group of artists led by Max Pechstein who believed that the frontiers of modern art extended beyond the European continent. Like her fellow *Novembergruppe* members, Stern’s involvement in the organization signified her interest in art as a medium for social change, which is reflected in works that translate her observations on Germany’s changing social landscape, combined with her recollections of Africa, onto canvas.

78 Ibid.
Dumela Marena and Visionen: Stern’s Lithographs

Often considered secondary to painting, the graphic arts (lithography, engraving, silk screens, etc.) comprise a large part of German Expressionists’ work. Printmaking, and book illustrations in particular exemplify how Expressionist artists used the graphic arts to experiment with radical politics and abstraction. Building on a growing interest to revive the book as the “total artistic unity of type, decoration, illustration, and binding,” Expressionist illustrators boldly inserted themselves into a medium that was known for its staid conservatism.79

Aided by post-Impressionist illustrators of the French journal Revue Blanche and the Jugendstil artists (who helped revive interest in book illustration in Germany), Expressionist illustrators and the printing presses that published their work strove to challenge established conventions.80 Between 1907 and 1927, small German presses published hundreds of illustrated books and prints by Expressionist artists.81 According to historian Michael Brenner, “...German book illustrations developed a distinctive character around World War I with the productions of such Expressionist artists as Ernst Barlach, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Oskar Kokoschka.”82 The range of book titles that the Expressionists illustrated showed how the artists’ interpretations of both new and old literature created a symbiotic

---


80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

relationship between modern art and text. From classics, such as Voltaire’s *Candide*, to more contemporary plays and novels, Expressionist artists brought a new perspective to book illustration and literature.

In 1910, for example, Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka illustrated the text of his own drama *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murderer, the Women’s Hope). The play described a violent sexual relationship between a man and a woman based on Kokoschka’s readings of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche as well as his interpretations of Emil Nolde’s paintings.\(^{83}\) After its debut in Vienna, the play’s text was published with illustrations in the avant-garde Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* (The Storm). Both the play and its illustrations capture Expressionist artists’ use of non-Western art to help communicate Western ideas. Kokoschka, like Nolde, was inspired by carved wooden masks from the South Seas that he saw in ethnographic museums.\(^{84}\) The title page depicts a grotesquely drawn couple holding hands (fig. 18). Both have mangled bodies—the woman’s feet are curled and disfigured, and her long hair covers her body that is covered with scars or tattoos. The man’s skeletal face has been stitched, and his body is covered in cuts and scars. Below them, an emaciated dog stands between their legs. The play and its illustrations symbolize how Expressionist artists used illustrated texts to test the limits of social commentary.

Of the dozens of printing presses that emerged in Germany in the early twentieth century, the Galerie Fritz Gurlitt’s printing press was the leading publisher

---

83 Dorothy Pam, "Murderer, the Women’s Hope," *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 3 (1975).
84 Ibid.
of Expressionist illustrations, with 29 illustrated books credited to its name. In 1920, Wolfgang Gurlitt also established the Verlag für judische Kunst und Kultur (Jewish Art and Culture Press) specifically for publishing books about Jewish culture. The Galerie Fritz Gurlitt and the Fritz Gurlitt Press specialized in limited-edition works created for the seasoned collector with specific interests, such as erotic works by and about women, illustrated versions of literary classics, and colonial literature. Wolfgang Gurlitt represented some of the most progressive and confrontational modern artists during the Weimar era, which amplified his reputation for producing both avant-garde and salacious material in Berlin. For example, under Wolfgang Gurlitt’s direction, the Fritz Gurlitt Verlag published a series of erotic lithographs by Charlotte Berend-Corinth on Anita Berber, the infamous entertainer who dazzled the lesbian cabaret and dance scene and died of drug and alcohol abuse in 1928 at the age of 29 (fig. 19). Berend-Corinth completed three sets of lithographs for the Fritz Gurlitt Press that all address popular culture themes while depicting Berber in various erotic poses. The collection

---

85 Lang, Expressionist Book Illustration in Germany.
86 Brenner, The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany.
87 Meskimmon, We Weren’t Modern Enough, 54-5.
88 Anita Berber became a symbol of the cultural turbulence characterizing post World War I Germany. Otto Dix later immortalized Berber in a 1925 portrait, The Dancer Anita Berber, in which he painted the slender, drug-addicted entertainer in red dress against a red background. Berber’s pale white face, red lips, and sunken eyes showed the toll that years of abuse had taken on her body. Dix, whose paintings captured the decadence and decay of the Weimar era with meticulous detail, uses the monochromatic technique to set Berber ablaze, thereby capturing the incendiary nature of her work as a nude performer who constantly challenged the moral and social boundaries of 1920s Berlin. See Rewald, ed., Glitter and Doom.
appealed to a more sophisticated audience who also had a knowledge of popular culture.\textsuperscript{89}

Like her Expressionist colleagues, Stern’s lithographs shook up the traditional world of illustration. In 1920, Fritz Gurlitt published a set of Stern’s lithographs called \textit{Dumela Marena}, a traditional greeting in both Zulu and Swazi. Subtitled \textit{Images from Africa}, \textit{Dumela Marena} is a series of 12 lithographs (including the cover page), each measuring 29.5 by 40 centimeters. The images present Stern’s interpretation of Africa for a European audience.

Stern was intimately familiar with artistic trends in Germany, as well as with life on the African continent. More than just illustrations of Africa, however, Stern’s \textit{Dumela Marena} uses heavy crayon on stone to convey a sense of fluidity and freedom that is consistent with her other images of Africa that bear Expressionism’s mark. On the subject of lithography, Pechstein gave Stern the following advice: “Now I must write a few words about the lithographic Indian ink/water colors, which one must rub until one has a deep black liquid. Also when it is gray, one still gets good prints, but it is better to have perfect material.”\textsuperscript{90}

Stern uses broad strokes of lithographic crayon, making the figures less distinct but physically imposing. The images in the series are not mere copies of masks and sculptures in museums, nor are they conventionally nostalgic renderings of life in the colonies. Instead, the series shows how Stern conceived of the synergy

\textsuperscript{89} Meskimmon, \textit{We Weren’t Modern Enough}, 54-5.
\textsuperscript{90} Letter from Max Pechstein to Irma Stern, ca. 1917, Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town. Translation by Dr. Christine Rinne.
between the graphic medium and her interpretation of the Africa that she longed for while living in Germany.

Building on the foundational Expressionist principle of the work serving as a conduit for the artist’s emotions and feelings, *Dumela Marena* does not have a linear narrative. The depictions of the activities in each scene resemble a medieval book of hours, reflecting on regular activity (such as collecting water or tending livestock) that occurs at a specific time of day.

From its cover page, *Dumela Marena* introduces South Africa to a German audience. The title and first pages depict the same image, namely the bust of an African woman against a slanted horizon (fig. 20). The woman’s body partially blocks the sun in the background. Her facial expression is neutral, and she has a sharp, pointed chin, a broad nose, squinted eyes, and a broad forehead, similar to a Baule or Pende mask that Stern may have seen in a Berlin museum. Her head is supported by a thick, elongated neck. The woman’s breasts are conically shaped and look unnatural, conveying the expectation of exoticism that would have interested Wolfgang Gurlitt and his clientele.

The images that follow, however, depict the classic struggle between humans and their natural environment and the uncertainty that exists in this relationship, a theme that is much more humanizing and universal than might be expected based on the cover image. In the third image, for example, a nude man shoots an arrow into the sky (fig. 21). The man’s body is long and slender, and his arms are large and muscular. Tropical palms and other trees dot the landscape. The depiction of the individual alone in nature with his back turned to the viewer remotely recalls the
works of German Romantics painters, such as Caspar David Friedrich and serves to look back at German art history while looking forward to examine Germany’s relationships around the world.

In the fifth image, Stern shows her knowledge of other art historical time periods while emphasizing Africa’s characteristic wildlife (fig. 22). A young boy (who resembles the Italian putti in Baroque and Renaissance paintings) stands in front of three ostriches. He waves a stick in his right hand, almost as if he is conducting an orchestra. German audiences would have been familiar with ostriches and other exotic animals through visits to the zoo or from reading literary adventures from German colonies. The child’s lack of fear of the large animals shows how comfortable he is living amongst these exotic creatures, a completely foreign experience for Stern’s wealthy, urban German audience.

The depiction of work in the series reflects a piece of advice that Pechstein gave Stern in a letter from July 1917: “Especially experience a lot of sunrises and sunsets, the power of the green of a tree, the size and unity of a working person with the earth, which feeds us and especially let the freshness of a morning dew shake into your fingertips.”\(^\text{91}\) For example, in the ninth image, two men tend an ox with the sun shining high in the sky and village in the distance (fig. 23). In following his advice, Stern’s Dumela Marena is thematically more similar to Pechstein’s paintings of toiling fishermen than his works depicting relaxed natives in Palau.

In the final image of the series, Stern revisits a common theme in her work: the mother and child (fig. 24). A woman kneels on the ground cradling a young

child in her arms. As she leans back slightly, facing the viewer, her head is enveloped by the sun in the background, similar to the introductory image for *Dumela Marena*. She is also framed by tall, long leaves that angle toward her. The image is poignant and concludes the series on an optimistic note. The mood is a nurturing one, and it leaves the viewer with a positive, if primitivizing, image of life in Africa.

*Dumela Marena* reveals Stern’s artistic affinities with Pechstein and other Expressionists, in addition to how she staked a claim for a style specific to her South African background. Compared with Max Pechstein’s 1922 illustrations for writer Willy Seidel’s story, *Yali und sein Weisses Weib* (*Yali and His White Wife*), Stern’s images present a more humanized vision of Africa than other folios that depicted life outside of Europe. Also published by Fritz Gurlitt, Pechstein’s illustrations for *Yali* emphasize the differences between whites and their non-white colonial subjects. *Yali* is unique, even among Expressionist illustrations, because it depicts an interracial marriage between a man from the South Pacific and a white woman. On one page, the lithe and pale white woman’s body contrasts starkly against her massive South Seas husband, whose body is depicted as almost ape-like (*fig. 25*). Even though Pechstein had lived in Palau, his lithographs had to adhere to the conventions of Seidel’s story, a constraint that Stern did not face in illustrating from her own reflections on Africa.92

When viewed as a complete series, the plates in *Dumela Marena* present Stern’s memories of her African childhood to an audience of wealthy German art collectors who were interested in modern art. Her interpretations reflect an effort to

---

portray Africans as human beings versus the tropes and stereotypes that pervade many of her contemporaries’ work; the mixed results of her endeavors indicate the interpretive difficulties she faced as an African-born artist living in Germany. Some of the plates display the subject’s humanity, whereas others are more aligned with Germans’ atavistic ideas of African life.

In 1920, Stern completed another set of lithographs called Visionen: Zehn Steinzeichnungen von Irma Stern (Visions: Ten Lithographs From Irma Stern), published by the Hesperiden Verlag (fig. 26). The press’ publication of Stern’s lithographs represents the growing interest and demand for her work as social commentary. Stern’s Visionen reflects how the Hesperiden Verlag’s publishing interests differed from Fritz Gurlitt’s. Specifically, the series focuses on urban problems and social degeneration, a world away from Stern’s modernist recollections of Africa in Dumela Marena.

Visionen depicts roughly sketched figures in their daily activities in the city. The title implies that there is a mystical aspect to Stern’s observations of urban culture. Other artists, including Paul Klee, created several graphic illustrations whose titles occasionally included the word “Visionen.” In 1919, for example, Klee illustrated Curt Corrinth’s Ekstatische Visionen, whose title page includes a series of geometric shapes and symbols (including a sun, an eye, and what appears to be a Jewish Star of David) that exhibit supernatural qualities (fig. 27). In her personal diaries, Stern often mentioned an interest in mystical visions and her affinity for

93 Little is known about the Hesperiden Verlag except that it was short lived, based in Berlin, and that it published at least one other set of lithographs by German artist Erich Büttner in the same year as Visionen. See Arthur Silbergleit, Die Magd. Eine Legende von Arthur Silbergleit mit Handkolorierte Lithographien von Erich Büttner, 1919.
mysticism in her personal diaries, which was underscored by her collection of German Romantic poetry and fairy tales.\footnote{Personal notes, Irma Stern Collection, provided courtesy of Dr. Irene Below, Bielefeld, Germany}

Like *Dumela Marena*, there is no narrative in *Visionen*; each image is loosely connected to the others, and the general theme is social decay in urban society. With the roughness of the sketches, Stern captures the German malaise of the period. All of the figures seem to be sullen, unhealthy, and/or unhappy: common characteristics of postwar German life. Unlike *Dumela Marena*, however, the title page for *Visionen* is plain with no drawings and simple text. The folio’s mood is established as solemn at the beginning.

For example, on one of the lithograph’s pages, Stern shows a group of four despondent-looking people, two men and two women (fig. 28). Their faces are gaunt and portray suffering and despair. The woman in the upper-right corner exposes her breasts in an incongruous display of her sexuality. The image on another page depicts a man lying on a bed in a sparsely decorated apartment (fig. 29). The half-empty bottles on his nightstand indicate that he may be drunk or recovering from a night of heavy drinking. His face is flat like an African mask, and his sharply pointed chin reveals his sunken cheekbones. In the conventional Expressionist manner, Stern combines the geometry of African aesthetics here with the sharp lines of the German graphic arts. Throughout the series, Stern creates images that show just enough detail to depict her vision of the miserable side of life in Weimar Berlin. Objects are barely distinguishable from their background, markers of depth and scale are absent, and human bodies fade into the darkness. The effect is a young
woman’s chilling observations of a society decimated by war, economic depression, and moral decay.

Stern exhibits in the Visionen series her awareness of the growing class divides and sense of alienation urban life had created. This view is consistent with the “second generation” of German Expressionists, who (as described by historian Peter Guenther) embraced a “Love of humankind, sympathy for the downtrodden, [and] yearning for release from the loneliness of big cities...”\(^9\) Another page shows a street scene in which a young girl tries to sell flowers to a wealthy gentleman on the street (fig. 30). Dressed in a worn frock, the girl looks up at the man, and her skeletal face reveals her malnutrition, similar to the young girl in Stern’s Eternal Child. The scene also recalls painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Berlin streetscapes, which depict the bustling atmosphere of a rapidly modernizing city (fig. 31). Like Kirchner, Stern was also interested capturing Berlin’s many different types of urban social interactions in her work.

Illness is a common themes in Expressionist illustrations at this time, a period during which artists sought to expose the physical and psychological depths to which German society had fallen in the wake of its military defeat and political and social crises at home. One page features two very sick men in an apartment (fig. 32). Both men have pockmarked faces that indicate the seriousness of their illnesses. One man reclines while the other sits up and looks sadly at the other. As part of Stern’s “visions,” this image, and the series in general, do not present a positive outlook on Germany’s future. This sentiment was echoed by other Expressionists, such as Max

---

\(^9\) Barron, *German Expressionism 1915-1925*. [65]
Beckmann, who also looked toward Germany’s downtrodden as subjects for graphic illustrations. In a set of illustrated lithographs completed in 1921 for Lili von Braunbehren’s poem, *Stadtnacht* (Night in the City), Beckmann included a drawing called, *Die Kranke* (The Sick Woman), which depicted an ailing woman lying in bed ([fig. 33](#)). Beckmann’s illustrations, like Stern’s, reflect what Lothar Lang describes as “verism containing a strong current of social criticism,” with each artists’ lithographs confronting the real and metaphorical sicknesses that plagued Germany’s large cities.  

Although *Dumela Marena* and *Visionen* were completed at around the same time, the stylistic variations are striking. With its broad lines drawn with black crayon, *Dumela Marena* is stylistically more similar to Käthe Kollwitz’s work, and the subject of *Visionen* carries a weight that is reminiscent of Kollwitz’s social criticism. In *Visionen*, many of the scenes take place indoors, or in shadowy environs, compared with *Dumela Marena*, where the sun is present in almost every plate. Day and night are almost indistinguishable, and moral decay is prevalent in *Visionen*. There is no generational continuity in the series; children are present in many of the plates, as in *Dumela Marena*, but they are beggars or neglected figures in *Visionen*.

*Dumela Marena* and *Visionen* capture Stern’s perceptions of Germany’s emerging modernity based on her experiences with Expressionism through Max Pechstein, her association with the politically progressive *Novembergruppe*, and her work with Fritz Gurlitt, who sought to mine Stern’s African memories to satisfy a

---

96 Lang, *Expressionist Book Illustration in Germany*, 54.
German public that was fascinated by African culture. The contrast between the social utopia depicted in *Dumela Marena* and the social decline described in *Visionen* demonstrates how Stern’s desire for social change was deeply embedded in her work.

The fact that Stern published *Dumela Marena* and *Visionen* in 1920, just prior to her family’s return to South Africa, suggests that the chaos and decay of Weimar Berlin increased her nostalgia for the African continent. When she arrived in Berlin seven years earlier, Stern was still a child. But on the eve of her departure in 1920, Stern had become an adult artist. She would bring this split mindset back to her native country.

**Conclusion**

Stern’s contributions to modern German art have been overlooked and should be reinserted into the country’s historical narrative. German Expressionism formed the foundation of Stern’s approach to art and politics. Her participation in the *Novembergruppe*, as well as her interactions with German artists and intellectuals, proves her desire to engage in the discussions that shaped the Expressionist political agenda, which later defined her artistic legacy in South Africa. World War I’s devastation created a political and social vacuum that left an impression on Stern and an entire generation of artists who struggled to describe their frustrations about Weimar Germany in visual terms.

Because her family was displaced during the Boer War in South Africa, Stern became more attuned to social issues, and this experience equipped her well to work with the Expressionists. Stern’s African works, specifically the *Dumela Marena*
series, reflect a nostalgic sense of longing and homesickness for South Africa. At age 26, she had considerable artistic training under her belt in addition to a wealth of experiences and contacts that she made while living in Berlin.

As Stern prepared to return to Cape Town in 1920, however, her background in Expressionism and her experience with the beginnings of the tremendous social upheaval that ushered in the Weimar era were insufficient to prepare her for life in a British colonial outpost at the edge of the African continent. That said, Stern’s Berlin experience equipped her with the desire to express radical ideas through art and to challenge the art establishment’s *status quo*, qualities that immediately made her the leading avant-garde artist in conservative South Africa.

During her work with the *Novembergruppe*, Stern’s paintings of African women fit within the primitivist agenda that many radical European modernists embraced. Stern’s work surpassed that of artists who did not have direct experience living in Africa, but by merging modernist elements such as contemporary hairstyles, with primitivist elements such as exposed breasts and traditional clothing into her paintings of black women, she displayed her acute awareness of the need to define her niche within the German avant-garde. Her approach to painting African women that led to her participation in the *Novembergruppe* would pose a direct challenge to social conventions as she launched her career in South Africa.
Chapter 2: Irma Stern in South Africa

Irma Stern returned to South Africa from Germany in 1920 to establish herself as a South African artist. Compared with Berlin, Cape Town seemed like a provincial outpost, but it offered a young cosmopolitan woman like Stern the opportunity to bring a new and fresh perspective on art to an audience that was both anxiously trying to maintain connections to Europe while establishing its own traditions.

Stern’s arrival in Cape Town personified the collision between Europe and Africa that had turned modern European art on its ear just a decade earlier. The time that she spent examining African sculpture with the German Expressionists in Berlin showed her that Africa and the “idea” of Africa were relevant topics to explore in modern art. With this mindset, Stern began her career in Cape Town intent on finding ways to reconcile her artistic and political visions of Africa through her work.

This chapter considers how Stern’s work contributed to the development of a South African national identity. By analyzing press reviews and criticism of Stern’s work during the 1920s and 1930s, this chapter argues that Stern’s paintings provided white South Africans with a lexicon for discussing race and gender issues at a crucial time in the nation’s history when attitudes about these subjects were being shaped. From her first exhibition in Cape Town in 1920 to her departure for Dakar, Senegal, in 1938, this chapter will describe how South African critics received European modernism and began to form their own definitions of modernism. Stern’s audience and critics were not well versed in developments in contemporary European art that
had occurred in the years preceding 1920. Although they initially conflated modernism with the depiction of race in her paintings, the later attention Stern received came from the fact that her work elevated black, coloured, and Indian South Africans from the level of objects in ethnographic illustrations to subjects worthy of portraiture.

**Background**

From the beginning, South Africans’ precarious definitions of national identity have paralyzed the country’s art. Conflicts between the British and Afrikaners had always deeply divided the white population. This intense polarization created an inhospitable environment for South Africans caught in the conflict’s gray areas, particularly South Africa’s Jewish population that had largely emigrated from Eastern Europe.

By the nineteenth century, the Dutch descendants (Afrikaners) living in South Africa had developed political, cultural, and religious identities that were firmly rooted in Africa and completely separate from the Netherlands. For the largely rural Afrikaners, religion played a central role in daily life, and the arts were heavily inflected with religious overtones that symbolized the Afrikaners’ belief in their God-given mandate to occupy the South African veld.

---

1. Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 157. An historian, Thompson notes that the rise of nationalism in South Africa created more racial strife among the white population than between whites and blacks. “When whites talked about the ‘racial question,’” he writes, “they were referring to the ethnic cleavage between Afrikaners and English-speaking white South Africans. They vented much of their political energy through internal squabbles over symbols—postage stamps, anthems, and flags.”

In contrast, for the British settlers, the colonial project mandated the replication of British ideas, culture, and political structure in all colonized areas. To the British, artistic “progress” described the abilities of artists to recreate work that resembled British art in style, form, and, in some ways, subject matter. “Advancement in art” was strongly tied to the idea of “progress’ in nation building,” and it was considered to be part of the civilizing mission that would transform South Africa from an untamed wilderness into a respectable colony that embraced the strict moral and social codes of the metropole.3

In 1897, English-speaking South Africans established the South African Society of Artists (SASA)--the first official union of South African artists--in response to the growing number of artists who had studios in Cape Town in the late nineteenth century.4 The founding members included artists such as Sir Wyke Bayliss, Ethel Edwards, Gwelo Goodman, and J. S. Morland.5 In an effort to foster a sense of national identity, SASA members sought to create a style of art that could be designated specifically South African.6 Many SASA members were, like Stern, South Africans who had studied in Europe before starting careers as “South African” artists.7


4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 12.

6 Ibid., 6-7.

7 Schoeman, Irma Stern: The Early Years, 68. There were practical reasons for this phenomenon. For example, there were no established art schools in South Africa at the time, so aspiring artists who
Most SASA members relied on European trends in formal style, choosing to focus on South Africa’s unique subject matter as the primary means of establishing South African art. British-born artist and SASA member Goodman, for example, suggested that SASA focus on art in both Europe and South Africa, “where the work done by eminent artists who visited the country from time to time had attracted considerable attention.” A 1903 article in the Cape Times reiterated the importance of subject matter in shaping South African art:

…the majesty of the mountains, the solemnity of the veld, the picturesqueness of the native and the Indian…[for] when a South African school of artists devotes its whole ambition to reproducing these things on canvas, much of the construction of a South African nationality will have been accomplished.

In 1910, the Union of South Africa was created, which allowed Afrikaner and British leaders to reach a power-sharing agreement that consolidated authority into white hands, leaving blacks and mixed-race South Africans without franchise or access to economic opportunity. Yet, even with the agreement, Afrikaners were still significantly less wealthy than the British South Africans, and their resentment over these inequalities would fester until the dawn of apartheid. In the meantime, the arts continued to develop in spite of this looming political framework.

---

wanted serious training had to study abroad. Additionally, even for those artists of Stern’s generation who were South African born, most had foreign-born parents and, therefore, social and cultural connections to other countries.

8 Proud, ed., The Advancement of Art, 12.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
“Cape Town Society is Like Soda Water That Has Lost Its Fizz:” The Exhibitions at Ashbey’s Gallery

The South Africa to which Stern returned in 1920 was on one hand more racially and ethnically diverse than the Berlin she had left, but, on the other, less willing to embrace its diversity. Compared with other European metropolises, such as Berlin, London, Paris, and Rome, 1920s Cape Town offered few cultural amenities or thriving nightlife to stimulate artistic creativity.\textsuperscript{11}

Although Stern was not the only South African–born artist to study in Germany and settle in Cape Town, she was the first to exhibit works completed in the Expressionist style.\textsuperscript{12} In 1922 and 1925, Stern held major exhibitions in Cape Town at Ashbey’s Art Gallery. The resulting culture clash between conservative South African aesthetic tastes, Stern’s black female subject matter, and her German Expressionist style “caused [bewilderment] among a South African public unaware of recent developments in European art.”\textsuperscript{13}

The list of paintings at the first “Exhibition of modern art by Miss Stern” at Ashbey’s Art Gallery on Long Street, which lasted from February 7 to February 21, 1922 was as follows: \textit{Guinea Fowls; Hermanus} (Stern later claimed to have painted this one from memory); \textit{Zulu Woman; Malay Girls in Twilight; Water Colours; Woodcuts, Lithographs, Drawings, and Oils}.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{11} Schoeman, \textit{Irma Stern: The Early Years}, 69.
  \item\textsuperscript{12} Schoeman, p 70-1.
  \item\textsuperscript{13} Schoeman, p. 72.
  \item\textsuperscript{14} Exhibition Program, Ashbey’s Art Gallery, Irma Stern Scrapbook. \textit{Irma Stern Collection}, National Library of South Africa MSC 31(23) 1. Each of the named works represented a uniquely South African subject. Guinea fowl, indigenous to Africa and seen all over Cape Town, are obliquely shaped,
Elected officials often presided over exhibition openings to both add a sense
of pageantry and legitimize the work in the hope of creating a standard definition of
a national art. G.F.C. Faustman, a Dutch Reformed Church member and family
friend from Schweizer-Reneke, Stern’s birthplace, opened her Ashbey’s exhibition.¹⁵
In his remarks, Faustman’s expressed his appreciation of Stern’s independent spirit
and her choice of subjects.¹⁶ He also applauded Stern for her originality and for
painting South African subjects, which he implicitly believed would urge South
Africans to become more assertive in claiming a national artistic identity:

Nobody will deny that her [Stern’s] art is multi-faceted. One just
has to cast one’s eye on the exhibition to see proof of this. Above
all, Miss Stern is original. She has her own outlook on things; she
is completely and utterly independent and she thoroughly
expresses herself and her ideas on canvas.

In addition to this, Miss Stern is a South African through and
through. How true to life she expresses life in South Africa. No
one can argue that Europe has the most beautiful scenery and it
is indeed no wonder that many an artist get [sic] their inspiration
there. In this respect, South Africa does not have to stand back
(South Africa also has a lot to offer) and it is indeed a joyful sign
when artists, especially South Africans, remember South Africa.¹⁷

The exhibit at Ashbey’s established Stern as both an avant-garde and a South
African painter, one who was already pushing the envelope with her work in her

flightless birds with quail-like crests and spotted feathers. Hermanus is a seaside town on Walker Bay
that sits on the border between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and is known for its jagged cliffs and
the herds of humpback whales that migrate south every year. The pictures of the Zulu woman and the
Malay girls depict two distinct South African ethnic groups. Zulus mainly live in the eastern regions of
South Africa where the Zulu kingdom was historically located. “Malay” is a term that refers to the
descendants of former slaves brought to South Africa from the Dutch colony of Indonesia. For more
information about ethnic groups in South Africa, see Thompson, A History of South Africa, Allister

¹⁵ Schoeman, Irma Stern: The Early Years, 71. The exhibition was supposed to be opened by F.W.
Reitz, president of the Union Senate and former Secretary of the State of Transvaal, where he may
have met the Sterns. Reitz could not officiate and was replaced by G.F.C. Faustman.

¹⁶ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷ Ibid. Translation provided by Katie Irvin.
Cape Town debut. As early as 1922, critics began to associate Stern’s work with a change in South Africa’s social structure. A Cape Argus article entitled “Modern Art: New Wine in New Bottles, How to Regard It,” names Stern as a “member of the radical school of painting,” noting, “It is no wonder that the very latest art reflects strongly the social forces of our disturbed and unbalanced times.” In this single sentence, the piece captures the essence of the fundamental debates about modern South African art. The more critics tried to ignore artists like Stern who engaged their audience in questions about race and class in South Africa, the more obvious it became that these issues would define the direction of modern South African art. Stern’s exhibition at Ashbey’s established the terms under which this debate would take place by making the depiction of race a central theme in South African art. After the Ashbey’s exhibition, words, such as “social forces,” “exotic,” and “radical,” began to appear regularly in criticism of Stern’s work, specifically in reference to her “native studies.”

Some critics believed that Stern’s interest in race was genuine but not homegrown. Writer H.E. du P., for example, wrote in the February 8, 1922, Cape Argus, “I suspect that Miss Stern has a genuine sympathy for the exotic, but that she is strongly under the influence of painters who have the same preference seems to me to be clearly inferred.” Although the writer does not name the painters, he is most likely referring to Stern’s mentor, Max Pechstein, as well as other modern European artists whose interest in African sculpture raised questions about race and

18 “Modern Art: New Wine in New Bottles, How to Regard It.”
19 H.E. du P, ”Modern Art at Ashbey’s,” Cape Argus, 8 February 1922.
art in Europe. H.E. du P.’s remarks show how isolated and skeptical of outside influences white South Africans were becoming as they sought ways to allow discussions of race into public discourse.

The Ashbey’s exhibition established Stern’s presence in Cape Town’s arts community. Her paintings of nonwhite South Africans sparked curiosity among many citizens, as well as the press, and urged her audience not only to question conventional methods of visual representation, but also to reassess prevailing racial paradigms. By 1923, Stern had begun traveling throughout South Africa searching for new subjects. She packed her painting materials and headed east to Zululand and the Natal coast and for several weeks learn more about South Africa’s diversity. A 1923 Cape Argus article mentions that “Miss Stern is keenly interested in South African subjects and some time ago spent a few months living among the native tribes in Natal.”

Stern posed a unique challenge for critics because her work made it difficult for them to discuss art without addressing the racial and social issues. The reviews of Stern’s 1925 Ashbey’s exhibition reveal how critics were still uncomfortable with examining how race influenced modernism in her work. Critics expressed their “most profound distaste” for Stern’s paintings of blacks, viewing the term “modern” as being synonymous with her paintings of “native” types. “Colours, wild and shrieking, crude, fling themselves at the onlooker. Grotesque, malformed brown bodies slowly detach themselves…and fill the room with clamorous suggestions of

20 “Miss Stern: Her Work as a Set Designer,” Cape Argus, 10 March 1923.

21 W.P.M., "Modern Art in the City, Exhibition by Miss Irma Stern: Apotheosis of Significant Form," Cape Times, 18 February 1925.
customs entirely un-European,” wrote Stern’s friend, journalist Hilda Purwitsky. A reviewer for the *Cape Times* wrote:

Abounding vitality and a [word illegible] greediness for colour are the dominant impressions one receives after seeing the pictures exhibited by Miss Irma Stern at Ashbey’s Galleries today. A good many of us will be forced to do some elementary thinking about art when confronted with this challenging modernism. ...Miss Stern reveals a genius for black and white work...the two native studies reproduced on this page will challenge comparison with some of the finest work done in South Africa.23

The exhibitions at Ashbey’s Art Gallery were crucial in defining the terms by which Stern’s later work would be discussed and judged. As critics grappled with her “challenging modernism,” Stern proceeded to shape her artistic identity through her desire to paint black subjects.24 From that point forward, Stern’s work set the stage for modernism to be coupled with race in South African art criticism.

**Das Umgababa Buch**

In September 1922, Stern traveled to the Natal coast with her family, staying in a beach resort in the town of Umgababa. Located 20 miles south of Durban, the largest city on South Africa’s east coast, Umgababa was a lush, green town nestled on the dark blue waters of the Indian Ocean. Here, Stern completed her first paintings of tropical South Africa and her first written travel narrative, *Umgababa*.25


24 Ibid.

The trip to Umgababa made an impression on Stern, showing her that she occupied a liminal position between European and African cultures. Stern’s more simplistic interpretation of the tropical Natal originated from her unfamiliarity with this region of her country, which differed from anything that Stern had seen growing up in the dry interior Transvaal or along the Western Cape coast. The Natal region was filled with lush, green tropical forests and tiny villages of Zulus and other ethnic groups who had managed to maintain their cultural heritage despite the incursion of British soldiers and Afrikaner settlers who were continually moving eastward. The paintings at Umgababa exemplify a young artist’s awkward attempt to address the ambiguity of living on two continents and do not represent the more sophisticated merging of perspectives that Stern would regularly use in her later work.

Stern’s landscape oil painting, Umgababa, depicts the area’s lush, green foliage and tropical atmosphere (fig. 34). The painting is comprised of mostly dark blues and greens that barely distinguish the land from the river. It is radically bisected by a set of railroad tracks that disappear into the painting’s vanishing point. Faint rays of sunlight flicker behind large, grey clouds. In the foreground, a nude African woman stands carrying a bundle of sticks on her head. Everything in the painting is curvy and moves with fluidity.

In Umgababa, Stern saw the differences between the European and South African visions of the “exotic” for the first time. She realized that her conception of

---


27 Schoeman, Irma Stern: The Early Years, 65.
the exotic was different from that of her Expressionist counterparts.\textsuperscript{28} Whereas Pechstein and Gauguin visited small tropical islands as conspicuous observers, Stern was a South African citizen and had grown up among people of color, albeit in subordinate roles. Her view of the “exotic” was similar to Pechstein’s and Gauguin’s in that her curiosity was driven by an underlying sense of superiority to people of color. It differed, however, in that Stern’s understanding of the “exotic” distinguished between urban and rural blacks. She sought out blacks who seemed to be removed from South Africa’s industrializing urban society. In her travel narrative, she wrote, “Africa, where is it? Where are the free black people—where are the flowers...?”\textsuperscript{29}

Stern’s visit to Umgababa marked the beginning of a lifetime of sojourns in black communities in rural South Africa and set a precedent for future travels. She experienced what Pechstein and Gauguin saw in Palau and Tahiti, respectively—an escape from modern life—but her travels were driven by observations of the differences between black life in cities and in the countryside. Stern’s willingness to learn about black culture would eventually help her to gain avant-garde status in South Africa, but this status would also mirror South Africa’s rigid social and racial hierarchies.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{29} Stern, "Umgababa," 3.
“It is the art that is likely to reveal South Africa to the world:” Stern’s Early Press

By the mid 1920s, critics began shaping Stern as a modern artist by defining the modern element in her work as the representation of blacks in her “native studies.” They frequently challenged the relevance of terms, including “modern” or “Expressionism,” to South African art by placing them in quotation marks.

The association of modernism with the depiction of race in South African art began to occur more frequently at this time, and discussion of Stern’s work became a part of cultural debates. A 1925 Christian Science Monitor review of Stern’s exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery describes Stern’s work and its reception by a South African audience to American readers: “There is one artist in South Africa who is as deliberately modern as the others are deliberately conventional,” the article says about Stern.30 Stern’s modernism, according to the author, comes from her interest in non-white culture: “There is in the work of Irma Stern an Oriental obsession, the result of wanderings among the brown folk of the Cape.”31

One Stern painting from 1922 illustrates how her work reflected the intersection of European modernism and race against which South African critics reacted vehemently. Indian Family (1922), was probably painted during her family’s visit to the Natal, a region in which the Indian population outnumbered whites at the


31 Ibid.
The 3 foot by 2 foot oil painting depicts a group of five Indian family members, three women and two children. *Indian Family*’s style closely resembles German Expressionism’s primitivist strains; the subjects’ elongated eyebrows curve against their soft brown skin, connecting to their noses like African masks. Although the painting is colorful, the painting technique is more similar to Stern’s graphic work in *Visionen*, using black outlines to roughly sketch bodies that only have facial detail. The family also provided Stern with an opportunity to use figuration to illustrate South Africa’s early multiculturalism. The painting shows the family crowded into the portrait and dressed in traditional Indian clothing—bright red, orange, and green flowing saris, exquisite makeup, and sheer gold-embroidered veils. As the women grasp the children tightly to pose for the portrait, they look off into different directions. The painting is active and vibrant in its portrayal of a family that represented a vital cultural element of the Natal region.

There was a disconnect between the media’s perceptions of Stern—it expected her to be wild and erratic—and the genteel and soft-spoken epicurean who often invited critics to her house for tea. One critic was so disarmed upon visiting Stern that in his article, “The Revolutionary--Irma Stern,” he quipped, “A critic cannot be scathing, however modern the pictures that surround him, when there are cream buns and macaroons in profusion.” The critic’s perceptions of modernism as radical and revolutionary are stated throughout the text. “She [Stern] brought forth several canvases,” the critic writes, “many of them African studies. One can quite

---

understand these pictures, shocking suburbia—but they are indisputably fine. Say what you will, there is a tremendous individuality in these paintings that you cannot escape.”34 The critic describes what Stern’s portraits of “dark Africa” tell us about black South Africans: “The warm, foetid [sic] atmosphere of the African jungle overwhelms you. She has painted not merely the bodies of the natives but something of their queer, distorted minds.”35 Here, the critic reiterates the commonly held belief that race/skin color are indicative of group intelligence. Whereas Stern’s portraits of whites provide insight into the individuals on the canvas, the critic claims that Stern’s portraits of blacks, often referred to as “native types,” allow viewers to make generalizations about entire ethnic groups.

Stern always claimed publicly that she did not care what her critics wrote about her or her work, and her brisk sales validated her view. “People have often said why do you paint such a lot of native pictures?” she wrote in a Cape Argus article in 1926. “What do you see in them? These questions seem to me such strange ones.”36 Regardless of how critics evaluated her paintings, Stern’s exhibitions were still popular with the public. Ironically, the same conservative British South Africans who gasped at the sight of a portrait depicting a nude African woman had no problems purchasing a Stern portrait for private viewing. Race and sexuality were not issues that were comfortably raised in the public sphere, but they pervaded South African domestic life. Although the activities of blacks were heavily regulated in public

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
places, their primary roles as caregivers and groundskeepers drew them into the most intimate spaces of white South African homes. The fact that many of Stern’s paintings were purchased for private collections shows the contradiction between public and private opinions on the role of black sexuality in South African society.

Just as Europeans had first encountered African art in early-twentieth-century galleries in Berlin, London, and Paris, South Africans were simultaneously “discovering” black culture in their own country. The first three centuries of European presence in South Africa were fraught with ethnic cleavages, bloody territorial wars, and ruthless claims of land rights. South Africans spent so much time “othering” themselves that no ethnic group could consider its counterparts to be humane. Stern changed the debate over black art in South Africa by moving the discussion beyond ethnography and into aesthetics. Even though many of her paintings depicted women from specific ethnic groups, Stern’s work is more humanizing than the traditional “native types” that were common in South African art at this time. Her association with radical German artists and their political agendas provided a blueprint for Stern to bring issues that had divided South Africans—race, class, and sexuality—into the realm of the fine arts in Cape Town.

The South African Jewish Community’s Role in Stern’s Work

Although the Stern’s immigrated from Germany, the first Jews to arrive in South Africa came from Great Britain in the nineteenth century.37 By the early twentieth century, however, most of South Africa’s Jews emigrated from one region of Lithuania, the Kovno Province, which made the community more cohesive in its

religious and political beliefs. Because skin color determined social status in South Africa, Jews were classified as “white” and were, therefore, afforded many of the same opportunities as the English and Afrikaners. “One accepted the privileges ‘with both hands’ and allowed oneself to be served by the Africans just as all other whites did,” wrote Leibl Feldman, a Lithuanian immigrant.

Although Jews benefited from white privilege in South Africa, they were viewed with suspicion. In the 1930s, the Jews’ status as immigrants and the community’s embrace of Zionism aroused skepticism among Afrikaners, who were concerned about their ability to assimilate into white South African society. As a result, the Jewish community remained segregated from the other white communities in South Africa, which allowed it to become self-sufficient and more cohesive.

Stern’s family was part of a wave of wealthy German immigrants who came to South Africa in the nineteenth century to build businesses in the Transvaal. Class and religious differences caused a minor amount of friction within the South African Jewish community, but in general, it was cohesive enough in the early days of the republic to create a counterculture to the stodgy English colonial settlers and the

38 Ibid., 6.

39 Ibid. 6. In 1930, the South African parliament, led by Minister of the Interior Dr. Daniel Francois Malan, enacted an immigration quota law that significantly reduced Jewish immigration from Lithuania. Although the law did not specifically prohibit Jewish immigration, Malan stated that the bill’s intention was to prevent the intrusion of “an undigested and unabsorbable minority.”

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 1-3. See also Aleck Goldberg, Profile of a Community: South African Jewry (Johannesburg: The Rabbi Aloy Foundation Trust, 2002).
rural Afrikaners. As wealthy German Jews, the Sterns identified more with their German than their Jewish heritage. However, they considered themselves to be “culturally” Jewish and socialized within the Cape Town Jewish community.

Cape Town’s Jewish community provided Stern with a supportive audience for her work. For example, Stern created theatrical sets for stage plays, and her exhibitions were well publicized and attended by members of the Jewish community. In a 1922 photograph, a group of costumed men and women pose in front of one of Stern’s theatrical murals, which depict images of large, voluptuous nude Indian women, demonstrating the community’s more socially permissive views on nudity in art (fig. 36).

Like the English, South African Jews looked to Europe for artistic trends. In contrast to the English, however, they viewed modern art as the model that South African artists should emulate. South African Jewish critics embraced the idea that part of art’s function is to address social concerns, and they celebrated artists who tackled social issues in their work. Neither English nor Afrikaner, Jewish writers saw their community as a growing force in South African culture, one that would inject its own visions of race, class, and egalitarianism into an already diverse society.

The Jewish community in South Africa also criticized its own artists as it struggled to define a role for the arts in Jewish identity. In a 1925 Zionist Record article, Stern’s close friend Hilda Purwitsky asked, “Will South Africa yet produce a

---

42 Goldberg, Profile of a Community: South African Jewry, 4-5.
43 Schoeman, Irma Stern: The Early Years, 68-69.
Jewish ‘Jewish’ artist?”45 Although Purwitsky does not provide a clear definition of “Jewish” art in the article, she suggests that Jewish art should consider Jewish subject matter, writing that neither Stern nor Jewish sculptor Moses Kottler were “stirred to depict a Jewish idea.”46 Other critics weighed in on what distinguished Jewish art from Protestant art in South Africa. An article in the Jewish periodical, Hashalom Rosh Hashonah, entitled “Jewish Art in South Africa” notes that the difference between Jewish and Protestant South African artists is that Protestant artists painted the South African landscape whereas Jewish artists painted Jewish people.47 Along with Purwitsky, Stern’s friends Roza Van Gelderen and Richard Feldman, supported her career by profiling her for several Jewish and secular publications, shaping her in the press as a modern South African artist who defined her approach to modernism through her paintings of non-white South Africans.48

In the 1930s, Stern painted portraits of Purwitsky and Van Gelderen (fig. 37 and fig. 38).49 Both women were striking in opposite ways, and Stern brings out the ethnic differences between their Ashkenazi (Purwitsky) and Sephardic (Van

---

45 Purwitsky, "A South African Woman Painter: The Work of Irma Stern." Hilda Purwitsky immigrated with her parents to South Africa from Lithuania when she was a baby. She grew up in Cape Town and became a teacher at the De Villiers Street School where she met Roza Van Gelderen. Purwitsky wrote for South African publications, such as the Zionist Record, many of which focused on the Jewish community. See The Purwitsky Collection Donated to the University of Cape Town Libraries by Miss Hilda Purwitsky via the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies. List compiled by Margaret Curran, 1982.

46 Ibid. Kottler, who was trained in Munich and Jerusalem, spent time in Paris and sculpted in a Cubist style, and like Stern, chose a more cosmopolitan rather than a specifically Jewish approach to his work.

47 Lewis Sowden, "Jewish Art in South Africa," Hashalom Rosh Hashonah, September 1935.

48 Purwitsky and Van Gelderen wrote some articles together under the pseudonym, “Rozilda.”

49 Shortly before her death, Purwitsky bequeathed the paintings to the Irma Stern Museum in 1999. She requested that the paintings always hang together in the museum.
Gelderen) physical traits. Van Gelderen’s Iberian heritage comes out in her portrait. She wears a turban, which brings attention to her olive skin, dark hair, and strong facial features.\textsuperscript{50} Van Gelderen disliked the portrait so much that she hid it under her bed, and when she did show it, she claimed, “Look at this hideous thing that Irma did of me.”\textsuperscript{51} Purwitsky’s Eastern European roots are apparent through her light brown hair, pale skin, and more delicate facial features. She is elegantly dressed in a red coat and black pants, looking urbane and sophisticated. In addition to working at the DeVilliers Street School in Cape Town and occasionally writing articles together, Van Gelderen and Purwitsky were lovers. Their educational work in District Six as well as their personal relationship made them iconoclasts in Cape Town.

Although she does not reference Judaism in her work during this period, Stern’s paintings are clearly building on the modern European tradition of ethnic representation in portraiture. Expressionists such as Otto Dix painted portraits of prominent German Jews in the early 1920s, but their works emphasized ethnicity in an almost caricatured way, pointing to the growing anti-Semitic attitudes in Germany at the time.\textsuperscript{52} Dix’s 1921 \textit{The Lawyer Dr. Fritz Glaser}, for example, portrays Glaser, a lawyer, as physically unfit with gray, pallid skin, and a long, curved nose (\textbf{fig. 39}). Although German artists often depicted Jews as community outsiders, Stern depicted them as community insiders. This is reminiscent of the

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Rewald, ed., \textit{Glitter and Doom}, 105.
\end{flushleft}
ways in which Jewish artists in Europe, such as Chaim Soutine and Amedeo Modigliani (Stern’s contemporaries), emphasized ethnicity in their portraits of immigrants in 1920s Paris.\(^{53}\)

In contrast to Dix’s portrait of Glaser, Modigliani’s portrait of Polish-Jewish artist Moïse Kisling from 1916 uses abstract elements such as geometric shapes to paint Kisling, whose ethnic features identify him as part of the community of foreign-born artists who influenced the direction of modernism in France (fig. 40). The manner in which European artists used portraiture to make the connection between ethnic identity and modernism undoubtedly influenced Stern’s approach to her subjects in South Africa.

In the vein of her contemporaries in France, Stern’s portraits focus on ethnicity while creating a visual record of the rich history of South Africa’s Jewish community. In her 1922 portrait of Dr. Louis Herrman, for example, Stern portrayed the respected Cape Town scholar and educator in a distinguished manner (fig. 41). Herrman does not look directly at the viewer. Instead, his position presents his profile, revealing his jet black hair and receding hairline, long curved eyebrows, full pink lips, and olive skin. Herrman is wearing a dark blue jacket or sweater over a white shirt and thin black tie. A pair of thin, wire-framed glasses sits on his nose, giving him an intellectual and learned appearance.\(^{54}\)

---


\(^{54}\) Dr. Louis Herrman was well known and respected in the Jewish community for his commitment to education and his scholarship. He was vice principal for the Hopemill Hebrew Public School in Cape Town before teaching English, serving as principal of Cape Town High School until his retirement in 1943. His seminal work was a book called, *A History of Jews in South Africa*, which documented the Jewish presence in the country from its beginnings to the mid-twentieth century.
Writer and activist Richard Feldman was instrumental in shaping the social criticism of Stern’s work, commenting frequently about Stern’s role in changing the direction of modern South African art. Some members of the Jewish community distanced themselves from debates about race to avoid becoming targets of racism themselves. Feldman, however, confronted race and class issues head on. His reviews helped to bring Stern’s work to the attention of recently immigrated Jews with more left-leaning political views who were following modernist trends in European culture. Like Purwitsky, Feldman also wrote for the *Zionist Record*. Feldman’s 1926 review for the publication is one of the first to describe Stern’s fusion of modernist techniques with blacks as subjects as qualities of “an essentially South African artist,” writing that Stern was “the first artist to reveal, to use the soul of Africa’s black children.”


55 Shimoni, *Community and Conscience*, 16. The Jewish Board of Deputies in South Africa, the governing board of South African Jewry, faced difficult decisions about how to address racism. Because many recent Jewish immigrants had fled pogroms in Europe, the community sought to create a stable and safe social environment. On one hand, the Board wanted to encourage Jews to remain true to their religious mandate to be critical of social injustice. On the other, they did not want Jews to become victims of anti-Semitism as a result of their criticism.

56 A leftist intellectual who studied race relations in South Africa, Feldman and his family came to South Africa from a Jewish village in Lithuania. Notably, Feldman spoke and frequently wrote in Yiddish.

57 Feldman, “Irma Stern’s New Paintings.”
Feldman was a proponent of incorporating social themes into South African art and would serve as Stern’s moral compass on race relations for most of her life.\textsuperscript{58}

In the \textit{Zionist Record}, for example, he wrote:

\begin{quote}
Art cannot be based merely on sentimental idylls. It must reflect our life. When our times are stormy, the art of the day reflects the storm. Some succeed to portray the coming calm after the storm, others the peace before, but these are few in number and recognized in their own time.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Feldman used a Stern painting of a black African woman holding a bouquet of flowers on her head to illustrate his 1935 Yiddish-language book, \textit{Shvarts und Weis}, (Black and White) an analysis of the mining industry’s effect on South African race relations \textbf{(fig. 42)}.\textsuperscript{60} Because Stern did not paint images of blacks in urban settings, the work brings out the contradictions between perceptions and reality about black life in South Africa. Whereas Feldman’s book criticizes the exploitation of black labor in the gold mines, Stern’s painting refers to an idealized vision of pre-industrial black life. Yet, Stern’s painting on the cover of a book written in Yiddish shows how her work helped to advance members of the Jewish community’s cultural and social agenda, bringing attention to the inseparable relationship between modern art and politics in South Africa.

Stern’s paintings of both blacks and Jews illustrate ethnicity’s role in shaping modern South Africa. To other white South Africans, Jews, like blacks, symbolized

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. Even Feldman, however, was a product of racist times in which blacks were routinely infantilized. In the same articles, he continues to describe Stern’s “natives” in a patronizing manner, describing a black woman in a Stern painting as “Nature’s unspoilt child with a facial expression that is free of pose.”

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

objects of curiosity and an unbridgeable cultural divide. Jewish criticism of South African race relations only heightened suspicions among the English and Afrikaners, who wondered why Jews would complain about racial inequality rather than enjoy their privileged status. Even as the community struggled internally to define their place within South African society, many Jews opposed racism and worked to eliminate it through either political activism or social work. Their social and religious values placed them in a liminal position between blacks and whites. As Afrikaner politicians laid the foundations of apartheid, ethnicity would play as large a part as race in consolidating power.

German Modernism and Stern’s Development as a South African Artist

In the late 1920s, Stern continued to exhibit in Europe while she established herself in South Africa. She remained connected to the Galerie Gurlitt, and her European connections served her well as she built her reputation in Cape Town. South Africans were initially skeptical of Stern’s embrace of European modernism, but as modern art trickled down to South Africa, critics and audiences became more interested in Stern’s work and proud of her South African heritage. “Germany claims Irma Stern through her German parentage,” wrote one critic before adding, “She was born, however, in the small colony Schweizer-Reneke, in the Transvaal.”61

As in South Africa, Jewish publications in Europe were interested in Stern’s work. In 1926, Stern exhibited at the Hugo Heller gallery and bookshop in Vienna.62

---

61 "Germany Confers Honour on Cape Town Artist: Irma Stern Included in Junge Kunst Series," Cape Argus, 19 October 1927.
In a review of Stern’s work for the Jewish arts journal Menorah, Austrian art critic Josef Kalmer described Stern’s South African subjects to his European audience:

The people that she paints are wild. The landscape that serves as a motif is tropical, jungle, bamboo. There, as well as in the cities, she has the good fortune of finding the colors of the Orient, the most that a painter could wish for, the mixture of people from Hindus to Dutch and the English are found in her African home...all serve as subjects that Irma Stern has chosen for her Indian ink drawings, watercolors, and charcoal drawings.63

Kalmer’s comments show his lack of experience with the people and the land in South Africa, as well as the way in which critics in Europe and South Africa used a specific vocabulary to create different images of Stern. Kalmer’s use of words such as “wild,” “tropical,” and “jungle” draw an exotic picture of Stern’s work to a European audience unfamiliar with Africa. Feldman, on the other hand, used words such as “native,” “soul,” and “black,” to establish connections between race and national identity, encouraging white South Africans to think about the role of blacks in South African society.

In 1927, Stern enjoyed international success.64 She was awarded the Prix d'Honneur for painting at the Bordeaux International Exhibition in France, a prize so infrequently awarded to women that the accompanying certificate recognized “M.

---


63 Kalmer, "Die Malerin Irma Stern."

64 The year before, 1926, Stern married her longtime tutor, Johannes Prinz, who was also a lecturer in German at the University of Cape Town. Unlike most South African women, however, Stern had established an identity through her career before she married Prinz. Although Stern’s marriage would eventually end in divorce, it initially had a liberating effect, ironically, because it allowed Stern to move out of her parents’ house and live independently.
[Monsieur] Irma Stern.” In addition, German art critic Max Osborn wrote the first monograph on Stern for the Junge Kunst series of art books. The text included a critique of Stern’s work as well as a selection from her Umgababa narrative and reproductions of her charcoal drawings, mostly of South African subjects. Unlike previous texts, which described Stern as having European roots, Osborn’s book called Stern a child of Africa, a “unique case,” attributing her contribution to modern art as such. “With the exception of a few trips to Europe,” he wrote, “there was no time in which she did not find herself surrounded by dark peoples, by the woods, gardens, and mountains, the nature which she tried to reproduce in her paintings and drawings. And it is this which has given her an individual position in the art world.” By writing that Stern was “surrounded by dark peoples,” Osborn implies that Stern is exclusively qualified to paint black subjects and that her presence in Africa gives her a level of credibility that distinguishes her from other Expressionists.

The drawings selected for Osborn’s publication illustrate the extent to which Stern straddled Europe and Africa during the early stages of her career. Some of the drawings depict South African subjects whereas others offer more broad interpretations of African culture from a European perspective. One particularly striking drawing, Zulumädchen im Tanzschmuck (Young Zulu Woman in Dance

---


66 See back cover, Osborn, Irma Stern. When Osborn’s book on Stern was published, there were 50 total Junge Kunst monographs. The series featured such artists as Max Pechstein, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Cezanne, and Stern was one of four women (Paula Modersohn, Maria Uhden, and Marie Laurencin were the others) who were profiled.

67 Ibid., 24.

68 Ibid.
Dress, 1925), displays a level of cultural specificity that only a native South African could portray (fig. 43). Stern captures the young woman’s Zulu bone structure and facial features, as well as her traditional neck and arm jewelry, in detail. Another drawing, *Zulumädchen* (Young Zulu Girl, 1922), shows a Zulu woman with more generic features that combine elements of Europe and Africa (fig. 44). The woman’s hairstyle mirrors the fashionably short *Bubikopf* (or “Bob”) hairstyle of Weimar Berlin, and her simple jewelry and dress give a distinctly European style to her African features—thick, round lips and dark skin.

Osborn’s conclusion that Stern was a “unique case” because of her South African heritage caused South African critics to take a second look at her career. Though they previously reviled portraits of blacks, coloureds, Indians, and Jews, South African critics now noticed that these subjects were attracting Europeans to Stern. Stern’s “handling of South Africa’s native types and the barbaric colourings have...made the connoisseurs overseas joyous...” wrote one Cape Argus critic in 1927.69

By the end of the 1920s, forces in Europe and South Africa had combined to create a paradigm shift in South African aesthetic tastes. For almost 300 years, South Africans embraced the artistic genres of landscape, botanical, history, and ethnographic painting. The works’ subjects were more important than the style in which they were portrayed, but artists generally painted conservatively and favored realism. For example, Afrikaner painter Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk’s 1923 landscape painting *Nearing the Close of Day (Klipplaat)* depicts a vast, barren flat

---

69 "Germany Confers Honour on Cape Town Artist: Irma Stern Included in Junge Kunst Series."
land with a single, modest cottage nestled in the background at the base of the mountains (fig. 45). Outside of ethnographic and some history painting, blacks were excluded from the South African “landscape.” Artists catered to their patrons’ interests, including blacks in their images only if depicted as brutal savages or objects of sexual desire.

Because of the nature of South African race relations, its complex political structure based on segregation, and its tense domestic and international relationships, it is not a large leap to conclude that the act of painting in itself was political. Every action in South African society made some type of political statement. Visiting a different neighborhood, shopping at the supermarket, or speaking with someone on the street could all be construed as such in the nation’s racially charged environment. In urban areas, race relations were further politicized by the constant contact that South Africans had with each other.

As a social outsider due to her Jewish heritage but, at the same time, a cultural insider, Stern brought new artistic and political perspectives to South African art. Her exposure to the radical leftist politics of the Weimar period and her connections to artists such as Pechstein and schools including the Bauhaus kept her steeped in the most current developments in European modernism. All of these factors contributed to Stern’s success in Europe, which was not recognized in South Africa until after Osborn’s monograph in 1927. When local newspapers discovered that a respected German art critic had written about Stern, they began to reconsider the value of Stern’s work.
At the end of 1927, Stern began an eight-week visit to Swaziland, where she completed works in charcoal and pencil.\textsuperscript{70} Stern’s visit to Swaziland and other predominantly black areas built her self-confidence and provided personal affirmation of her artistic talent because she was welcomed and accepted as a peaceful (and intriguing) visitor. In her \textit{Cape Argus} article, “Painting among the Swazis,” for example, Stern mentions that the Swazis called her “Mushla,” meaning “nice” or “pretty.” Because these words were rarely used to describe Stern’s physical appearance or her paintings during this period, they allowed Stern to identify black areas as sanctuaries where she could find comfort and encouragement.\textsuperscript{71} As a result, Stern’s trip to Swaziland was one of her most successful, allowing her to produce some of her most sought after and respected work, including one of her most well-known and stylistically intriguing paintings, \textit{The Hunt (1927)} (fig. 46).

\textit{The Hunt} exemplifies the beginning of Stern’s transition from an Expressionist into a South African modernist.\textsuperscript{72} The painting shows the Swazi royal family preparing to participate in a hunt. Although Stern generally painted women, \textit{The Hunt} is one of only several paintings where she portrays the activities of black African men. The painting’s color scheme consists of basic reds, yellows, blues, and greens. The men in the foreground represent several generations of Swazi royalty,

\textsuperscript{70} “Painting among the Swazis,” \textit{Cape Argus}, 14 December 1927.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{72} The painting is tall and narrow, and it currently occupies a prominent position near the Irma Stern Museum’s entrance. The canvas is made of absorbent material that causes the colors to appear to be muted instead of shiny.
including an older gentleman with a gray beard and a much younger adolescent standing in the lower right corner, holding a spear and wearing a red cape.

The figures are lean, with those in the front having sleek and slender physiques. One figure on the right side is completely naked, his back turned toward the viewer with his buttocks clearly visible, a detail that was sure to shock South African audiences. There are also three dogs in the foreground, whose long snouts, small eyes, and beige color almost make them blend into the green foliage. Indeed, they closely resemble Expressionist Franz Marc’s paintings of red deer (fig. 47).73

In the same year that she painted The Hunt, the South African press began to recognize Stern’s “native” paintings as forging a new direction in South African art. A Johannesburg Star article stated, “To her [Stern] belongs the credit of breaking away from landscape and dealing with native life.”74 This shift in aesthetic thinking occurred simultaneously with the growing internal interracial conflict, increasingly strict racial segregation laws, and growing hostility towards blacks in particular. In their reviews of Stern’s work from Swaziland, critics began associating her paintings of blacks with a characteristic South African style. In contrast, previous assessments of her work treated Stern’s “native” paintings as exceptions to her artistic portfolio. The Star article goes beyond most analyses at the time by addressing whether Stern’s

73 Dube, The Expressionists, 132. Marc, a member of Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky’s Blaue Reiter group, was interested in portraying animals in his art. His work may have influenced Stern as she painted The Hunt.

74 "Swazis from the Brush: Colourful Canvases That May Influence South African Art," Johannesburg Star 1928 (approx.).
paintings accurately described native life, claiming that Stern’s work did not portray the grace and beauty of the “natives.”

Critics may have assumed that Stern’s rationale for traveling to black areas was more empirical than artistic. Prior to Stern, few people other than scientists and ethnographers had any interest in visiting such lands. Since most white South Africans viewed blacks as having no aesthetic or cultural value, they were puzzled at the reasons for which Stern would paint them. Her paintings confounded their understanding of the line between images as conveyors of scientific information and as conduits of beauty.

*Swazi Woman*, an oil painting Stern completed in 1927 based on her Swaziland visit captures the way in which her work complicated ethnographic views of blacks by creating a place for them as serious artistic subjects in South African art (fig. 48). The square painting depicts a Swazi woman standing in front of the green, mountainous Swazi landscape holding a bright yellow cloth behind her to shield her from the breeze. The warm orange and yellow colors of her dress are balanced by the cool greens and blues in the background. The dress drapes between the woman’s breasts, and a gusty wind blows her long, feather-tipped necklace away from her body. Her arms and wrists are adorned with metal bangles, and her ears also have long, feather-tipped accoutrements. The painting humanizes its subject, providing the woman with a feminine appearance. Her exposed breasts may have also shocked the South African audiences and critics, but in this painting, the Swazi woman’s breasts signify her femininity more than overt sexuality.

75 Ibid.
As Stern received more critical acclaim in Europe in the late 1920s, her work acquired a new significance for South African critics and audiences. With validation from Europe, Stern’s artistic credentials were solid, but her subjects continued to vex both her critics and supporters as she continued to challenge racial attitudes. Moreover, her work raised questions about race relations in South Africa at a time when the country was plunging deeper into racial segregation.

**Stern in the 1930s**

South Africans were slow to accept European modernism until it became their last chance to cling to Europe culturally. By 1929, Stern had successfully sold and exhibited her work in Europe for almost a decade. Catalyzed by Stern’s critical acclaim in Osborn’s *Junge Kunst* monograph, South African critics realized that despite her controversial subject matter, she was their strongest artistic connection to Europe.

In the late 1920s, Stern made frequent trips to rural areas in South Africa to complete paintings for her exhibits in Europe. Her travel schedule allowed her to expose European audiences to contemporary South African life. In 1929, Stern traveled to Pondoland on the Indian Ocean coast of South Africa, where she painted several portraits of Pondo women. She also held several major exhibitions in Europe during the same year in cities that included Frankfurt, Hanover, Paris, and Vienna. Additionally, Stern showed two water colors with the Paris Group in the International Jewish Exhibition in Zurich, one of the last international exhibitions of

---

76 Clippings book (Microfiche), Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town. According to papers in the same archive (MSC 31, 4 [2]), Stern exhibited at the Galerie Würthle in Vienna in 1929.
Jewish artists before the rise of fascism. She also represented South Africa in the Empire Art Exhibition in London, which served as one of the first official international designations of Stern’s work as representative of South African art.

As Stern received international recognition at the close of the 1920s, South Africa strengthened its identity as a racially segregated nation. Concerned that survival of their language and culture would be jeopardized by English rule and the black majority, Afrikaners had formed a cohesive political group. In 1929, James Herzog, leader of the Orange Free State was elected prime minister of South Africa. Herzog’s election signaled the country’s growing racial divisions and the gradual rise in Afrikaner nationalism.

Afrikaners were becoming more savvy about their ability to wrest political power from the English in the South African government. The Afrikaner Broederbond (Group of Brothers), a group formed in the 1930s consisting of Afrikaner religious and political intellectuals, had been dispatched to Europe to gain better insight into how to form an Afrikaner-dominated government and society. Members of the Broederbond traveled to the Netherlands and Germany to study how religion, philosophy, and politics could be used to create and justify a racially segregated society. Over the next decade, the Broederbond collected information and

77 Clippings book (Microfiche), Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.
80 Sparks, The Mind of South Africa, 177.
developed strategies to help them create a unified Afrikaner political party that they hoped would liberate the Afrikaners from English oppression.\textsuperscript{81}

Stern’s career was undoubtedly affected by the new political environment. As the country became increasingly segregated, Stern’s work became more popular with South Africa’s cultural elite. In 1929, the same year in which Stern traveled to Pondoland and represented South Africa with her paintings from Swaziland at the Empire Art Exhibition in London, Afrikaner leaders became more vocally opposed to what Herzog called “the Black Peril.”\textsuperscript{82}

British-Afrikaner relations had reached a low point during the First World War when South Africa sided with the Allies even though many Afrikaners supported Germany.\textsuperscript{83} The relationship remained tense into the 1930s with the cultural polarization expanding to cause a nearly irreparable divide. Language and history kept the two groups from finding much common ground. For Afrikaners, culture was directly connected to the Dutch Reformed Church and, therefore, reaffirmed the Afrikaners’ status as South Africa’s chosen people. The English, on the other hand, were motivated by their desire to maintain a respectable position within the British Commonwealth and remain connected to the international community, both culturally and politically. As English-speaking South Africans gained a greater voice

\textsuperscript{81} Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 183.

\textsuperscript{82} MacKinnon, \textit{The Making of South Africa}, 188.

\textsuperscript{83} Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 184.
in the arts, Afrikaners sacrificed international cultural recognition in favor of domestic consolidation of political power.\textsuperscript{84}

Stern was caught in the middle of the bitter battle over South Africa’s cultural past and its future. In their struggle for hegemony, British and Afrikaners argued over which language, religion, and social history would represent South Africa while racial issues were marginalized, and black and coloured voices on the subject were absent. Stern’s paintings brought racial issues to the center of the cultural debate by emphasizing South Africa’s rich ethnic diversity. Her portraits of Jewish South Africans reminded the British and Afrikaners that even “whiteness” would be difficult to define in a segregated society. Stern’s paintings of blacks in rural areas brought out cultural distinctions between ethnic groups that urban life had erased. Moreover, her paintings of coloured South Africans drew attention to a community that was not well known outside of South Africa but whose history best captures the country’s conflicting views on race and class.

**Van Riebeeck’s Children: Coloured in South African Art**

Stern’s paintings of South Africa’s coloured community, specifically coloured women, are perhaps one of her most significant contributions to South African art. Historians and critics, however, have not written as much about Stern’s portraits of coloured women as they have about her depictions of blacks or Cape Town society figures. Foreigners may have been less interested in coloureds than blacks community because of the former’s uniqueness to South Africa. For South African audiences, images of coloureds may have been considered to be less confrontational.

\textsuperscript{84} Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, 48.
than portrayals of blacks, which were in high demand in Europe. Works featuring coloureds may have also been unpleasant reminders of the racial mixing that occurred when the early Dutch settlers committed sexual transgressions and violated taboos.

No longer seeking to satisfy the European taste for primitivist images of Africa, Stern found that the coloured community in the Western Cape region offered an opportunity to paint one aspect of South African culture that would interest domestic audiences. As she did with blacks, Stern preferred to depict coloured women and children. In her 1928 painting, Malay Mother and Child, for example, she explores a well-known artistic theme through a uniquely South African lens (fig. 49). The pair hold a large bouquet of flowers, and they do not make eye contact with

---

85 Ibid., 74. South African racial politics have always been complicated by the fact that there are numerous racial classifications. In a country where even “white” citizens have deep political and social divisions, it is unsurprising that coloured, or mixed-race South Africans, would be given their own racial category and identity. The term coloured refers to two separate groups—South Africans of mixed African and European descent and the Muslim slaves brought from Indonesia by Dutch settlers. Afrikaans, the language most closely associated with white Dutch settlers in South Africa, also had its beginnings in the coloured community. Historians believe that Afrikaans was first spoken as a patois form of Dutch that was passed down to Afrikaners by their coloured servants.

86 Mohamed Adhikari, Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), xii. South African historian Adhikari has written a critical history of coloureds in South Africa, one of only a handful of analyses that examines how coloured identity was formed. Adhikari argues that contrary to popular understandings of identity, coloured identity has remained unchanged throughout South African history, and its stability can be attributed to three main characteristics. First, the community continously strived to assimilate into white society. Because of their mixed-race heritage, coloureds believed that they would eventually be recognized for possessing a fraction of whiteness. Second, coloureds had fewer social privileges than white South Africans but more than their black compatriots, meaning that as they strove to achieve equality with whites, they also did not want to jeopardize their privileged status above blacks. Third, their inability to assimilate into either white or black societies also shaped their activist strategies but set limits on the amount of progress they could achieve because they could not easily form coalitions with the other groups.

87 A majority of the coloured population lives in the Western Cape region, with many residing in the Cape Town metropolitan area near the site of van Riebeeck’s first Dutch settlement. A district of Cape Town in the city center known as the Bokaap, is still the cultural hub for coloured Muslims. This neighborhood has Islamic-influenced architecture, Muslim food stores, and several mosques. It has undergone few demographic changes since its founding in the 18th century.
one another or the viewer. In fact, the mother is painted in a flat manner with her back turned to her daughter and her face covered in a scarf. Although both are wearing modern clothing, their copper skin tone and jet black hair distinguish these coloured women from their fairer, white South African counterparts.

Like her paintings of blacks, Stern’s works featuring coloureds caused controversy, revealing even more about South African racial attitudes. The critical response to Stern’s renderings of coloured women demonstrated how South Africa’s strict racial categories made it difficult to analyze nontraditional art objectively. It was clear that the South African racial hierarchy had solidified and extended into the arts by the 1930s.

Yet, despite their widespread repulsion by images of black and coloured South Africans, white patrons supported Stern’s career in the 1930s. The demand for her work was high, and government officials chose Stern to represent the country in several international exhibitions. The disconnect between critical and public denouncement of her “savage” subjects and the immense popularity of Stern’s work

---

88 Even though they occupied a higher social status than blacks, coloureds were still subject to being primitivized and denigrated because of their cultural traditions. Stern’s renderings of coloured communities using modernist elements were an easy target for South African conservatives. For example, in 1930, the South African National Gallery (SANG) purchased Khalifa, a Stern painting depicting a Cape Malay performance. Critics had opposing views on the painting. One critic noted in a 21 August 1930 Cape Argus article that the Cape Malay dancers in the painting portrayed a “feeling of lethargy rather than the savage imagery demanded by the subject.” On the other side, a critic named “Brevis” described the modern painting as a “degenerate form of art.” To avoid future controversies, the museum’s board of trustees required its approval for all art purchases. The discussion exposed how members of the art establishment feared that the SANG’s purchase of Khalifa would sanction both modernism and multicultural subjects in South African art. See “Miss Stern’s Khalifa,” Cape Argus, 21 August 1930. See also “A Poster in Long Street,” Cape Argus, 29 August 1930. “Irma Stern’s New Painting,” Cape Argus, 9 August 1930.

among South African buyers is one of the central themes in the development of modern South African art.

**Transitioning Into Modernism**

In 1931, Stern was elected to the South African Society of Artists (SASA). Although she never exhibited in any of the organization’s annual shows, the honor signified an official recognition of her work by a group that claimed to play an integral role in defining the direction of South African art. By the early 1930s, many of South Africa’s most prominent white artists were members, including Amy Bertha Everard, Gwelo Goodman, Moses Kottler, Edward Roworth, and Nita Spilhaus, who promoted a more conservative direction in art at the time Stern was invited.

Stern’s interest in subjects that differed from the conservative white South African vision of art caused friction with Roworth, who openly condemned modern artists as “madmen.” SASA scholar Hayden Proud contends that “Stern was too powerful an individual to be either contained or in need of the supportive bonds of any society.” Ironically, the organization whose mission was to define South African art as a nation-building project was incompatible with the interests of

---


91 Ibid. See also Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann, eds., *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994* (Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005), 67 no. 6. And I. Lippy Lipshitz, "A Considered Reply to Prof. Roworth," *Trek* (7 November 1940). Race became a major issue for SASA at this time. Although he was never an official SASA member, Johannesburg-based black artist Moses Tladi participated in SASA-affiliated exhibitions. In 1931, the same year that Stern was elected into SASA, Tladi became the first black artist to have work displayed in the South African National Gallery.

92 Proud, ed., *The Advancement of Art*. 105
strong-willed artists, such as Stern, who insisted on painting race into modern South African art. For Stern, SASA membership was not a means for her work to gain acceptance by the English South Africans. Rather, it was a way for her to come into contact with the powerful, mostly male powerbrokers who controlled public access to South African art as a means of creating a greater market for her paintings. Already well respected in the Jewish community, Stern needed SASA membership to establish credibility with rich and influential English-speaking art collectors.

Stern’s exhibitions received different receptions in South Africa and Europe in the 1930s. European audiences yearned to experience African exoticism through her paintings whereas South Africans struggled to accept the encroaching modernity and their multiracial society. When South Africans left a Stern exhibition, they returned to a racially diverse society that was unsuccessfully dealing with its diversity. The issues brought out by Stern’s paintings, such as women’s social roles in society and the differences in social customs among ethnic groups, inevitably influenced South Africans’ views of their country.

**The Nazi Peril: South African Modernism and “Degenerate Art”**

While modern European art gained acceptance in South Africa in the 1930s, the Nazi government began its campaign to eliminate it and its influences in Germany. By this time, Stern was a respected artist in both countries. She continued to work with Wolfgang Gurlitt, who arranged her exhibitions and sales in Germany.93

---

93 In addition to her affiliations with German expressionists and her paintings of South African subjects, Stern’s relationship with the modern art dealers Wolfgang Gurlitt and Karl Nierendorf may have led to her work being labeled as “degenerate” by the Nazi government. Dealers, such as Nierendorf, were pressured into cooperating with the Nazis while others, such as Gurlitt, won lucrative contracts from the regime that allowed them to broker sales of works from state collections.
Stern was well aware of the Nazis’ anti-Semitic agenda, making her last visit to Germany in 1933 before the Second World War began. “I get terribly frightened when I think of Germany’s future,” she wrote in a letter to her friend Trude Bosse. Mona Berman notes that Stern ended her correspondence with Bosse because she knew that “[c]lose ties between Jew and German became suspect during those years...” In 1933, however, it would have been difficult for Stern to have understood the extent of the Nazis’ anti-Semitic agenda or the total destruction that the war would cause. She continued to travel and exhibit in Europe through 1937 and even mentioned listening to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini deliver a speech in Florence in a letter to Frieda Feldman.

Stern’s 1933 decision to stay away from Germany was wise because the Nazis began persecuting Expressionist artists in the same year. In Stuttgart, an exhibition called, *Novembergeist: Kunst im Dienst der Zersetzung* (The November Spirit: Art in the Service of Destruction) excoriated Expressionists who participated in leftist politics. The *Novembergruppe’s* (November Group) pamphlet, *An Alle Künstler* (To

Wolfgang Gurlitt, the son of Galerie Gurlitt owner Fritz Gurlitt, cooperated with the Nazis by helping them acquire stolen art from private collections. He may have worked with the Nazis to hide his relationship to a Jewish woman, Lily Agoston, or to mask his own partial Jewish heritage. Gurlitt facilitated sales of art to the Nazis, who then organized a large art auction in Switzerland, with the proceeds going to fund art purchases for planned museums in Linz, Austria, Hitler’s hometown. At the end of the war, Gurlitt relocated his gallery to Linz, where he continued to show Stern’s work. See Jonathan Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67.

94 Dubow, ed., *Paradise*, 105. Because she stopped traveling to Germany during World War II, Stern may not have been aware of Gurlitt’s relationship with the Nazis. In her letters, Stern does not acknowledge knowing anything about the fate of her work in Europe. That the Nazis considered Stern’s black subjects to be a threat to the purity of German culture, yet valuable enough to sell, is one indication of how her work became central to modernist discussions in Europe and South Africa.

95 Berman, *Remembering Irma*, 68.

96 Irma Stern to Frieda Feldman, 30 October 1937.
All Artists) was displayed as well as other Expressionist journals such as Der Sturm (The Storm) and Die Aktion (Action). Copies of the works published in the Junge Kunst volumes on Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, and Ludwig Meidner were also on display.97

Because of her affiliations with both the Novembergruppe and the Junge Kunst series, Stern’s works were consistent with the type of art the Nazis were trying to target.98 According to the inventory of confiscated works kept by the Nazis, several of Stern’s paintings were taken from either public or private collections and sold at auction, destroyed, or burned.99 These pieces are listed under the name “Stern” and the titles were listed as: Erdgeist (Earth Spirit), Sumerun (Sumerian) and Afrikanische Szene (African Scene) (2 paintings), and Negerin (Negro Woman), subjects that may have made them targets for destruction.100 That the Nazis considered Stern’s black subjects to be a threat to the purity of German culture, yet


98 Although Max Osborn’s monograph on Stern (number 51 in the series) was not listed in the Nazi inventory, at least four books from the series were displayed that do not have titles or series numbers, one of which could have been Stern’s. See Barron, 70-71.

99 Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, "Entartete Kunst : Typescript Inventory," ed. Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (Photocopy. London and Washington, DC: Harry Fischer Collection, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1942(?)). The archive is organized by city, and the Stern listings are in the “Dessau Gemaldegalerie” section. It is possible that the public museum owned some of Stern’s work, but most of its collection records were destroyed during the allied bombing of the city during World War II.

100 All five of the listed works are prints. The status, or final destination for each work was listed as: Erdgeist (Degenerate Art Exhibition), Sumerun (destroyed/burned), Afrikanische Szene (1 destroyed/burned, 1 sent to the Ewige Jude exhibition), and Negerin (Ewige Jude exhibition). Copies of the monographs from the Junge Kunst series were displayed in a ground floor room of the 1937 Munich Entartete Kunst exhibition.
valuable enough to sell, is one indication of how her work became central to modernist discussions in Europe and South Africa.

With the intense publicity and record-breaking attendance at these “degenerate art” exhibitions in Germany, Stern must have been aware of modern art’s perilous fate. Her correspondence with Wolfgang Gurlitt seems to have slowed down during this period, which corresponds with the Gurlitt family’s increasing involvement in helping Nazi leaders procure and sell modern art to raise money for grandiose art projects such as the construction of the Führer Museum in Linz, Austria, and the purchase of classical and Renaissance art for private and public collections.¹⁰¹

Even though the extent of the Nazi’s assault on modern art was not completely clear in the early 1930s, it was clear that they despised the European avant-garde for its embrace of abstraction and non-Western cultures as well as its rejection of bourgeois cultural values. Although there is no mention of the fate of her work in Europe, Stern knew that her participation in avant-garde art movements and sensuous representations of Africans, particularly of African women, would place her work in the Nazis crosshairs. Having survived the intense criticism of her art in South Africa in the 1920s, Stern understood the “value” of her work being labeled as indecent. Like the degenerate art exhibitions in 1930s Germany, curious visitors formed long lines outside of Stern’s exhibition at Ashbey’s Art Gallery to view paintings of black

---

¹⁰¹ After the war, Wolfgang Gurlitt moved his gallery from Berlin to Munich and then to Linz, Austria, where he continued to represent modern artists. Plagued by financial troubles, he eventually sold the gallery to the city of Linz, which maintained the space as a public museum called the Galerie der Stadt Linz. Gurlitt’s relocation to Linz most likely occurred because of his dubious involvement with the Nazis, who envisioned Linz (the city of Hitler’s birth) as the cultural epicenter of the Nazi empire.
African women that critics labeled as licentious and immoral. The resulting “negative” publicity from the Ashbey’s exhibit raised Stern’s profile as a South African artist, giving her career a significant boost. In the same way that her exhibit at Ashbey’s was a turning point for her in South Africa, the destruction of Stern’s work as part of the Nazi campaign against modern art secured her status as a key player in global modernism, as opposed to a minor figure from the periphery. Despite her growing concern about anti-Semitism in Germany, Stern was intrigued by the Fascist ideals expressed in Italy. During her visit to Florence in 1937, she wrote to Richard Feldman that the rising political tension “loads the air with a fluid of danger that is fascinating in some mysterious way.”

At this moment, Stern adopted an aura that allowed her to craft a strategy by which she could exploit morally ambiguous and politically dangerous situations to advance her career. This strategy would serve her well during apartheid.

Observing the German movement against “degenerate” art in Europe, South Africans were contemplating the resulting impact on their ability to sell their work. Edward Roworth, the anti-modern SASA president, was appointed director of the South African National Gallery in 1939. Upon assuming the position, Roworth continued his own campaign against modern art by blocking acquisitions and dismissing it as “degenerate bally-hoo.” In a 1940 lecture at the University of Cape Town, Roworth appeared to support the Nazis’ purge of “degenerate” art from state

---

collections, intensifying the growing divide between ‘traditional’ and modern artists.\textsuperscript{104}

Led by Jewish sculptor Lippy Lipshitz, the modernists quickly responded to Roworth’s remarks. Lipshitz wrote a searing essay that is worth quoting at length:

Any one of you has the right to prefer Roworth’s or Titus de Jongh’s paintings to Irma Sterns, for ignorance justifies bad taste. ...Prof. Roworth seems so self-assured, so unruffled by all of the rational criticism leveled at him by all the independent artists in South Africa because he feels there is nothing to stop him. It is up to the people of South Africa to take direct action against Prof. Roworth, or we may see in the near future an exhibition of ‘degenerate art’ on the pattern of Munich while every significant artist in this country will be given the choice between the lunatic asylum and the concentration camp [quoting Roworth].’ It is thus beyond doubt that Roworth looks greatly to Hitler...Roworth admires this Hitler, Hitler, the inferior watercolourist, who purged German art of Liebermann, Corinth, Kokoschka, and Kate [sic] Kollwitz...Indeed, Prof. Roworth’s speeches are mainly composed of such clap trap worthy of a soap box orator, who reviles the modern artists with vile vituperations (‘half wits,’ ‘degenerates,’ ‘mountebanks,’ and ‘madmen’), but is unable to offer any direct or intelligible criticism of their work from the purely aesthetic angle. [Artists] tend to provide rectification for the evils of society. Their function is to explore new values; they withdraw from blind alleys and seek fresh avenues of expression. ...Censorship makes them cease this exploration and imposes upon them the form of paralysis which seizes decadent institutions.\textsuperscript{105}

Based on Lipshitz’s comments, it is clear that the South African avant-garde knew that Stern’s work was labeled “degenerate” by the Nazis. In defense of Stern and other modern artists, Lipshitz’s article took a defiant stance supporting modern art’s social value in South African society. His essay also spoke on behalf of the Jewish community, whose unequivocal anti-Fascist stance caused conflict between them, many Afrikaners, and some English speakers (including Roworth), who supported the Nazis’ political platform. Lipshitz’s defense of Stern and other Jewish

\textsuperscript{104} Proud, ed., \textit{The Advancement of Art}, 46.

\textsuperscript{105} Lipshitz, "A Considered Reply to Prof. Roworth."
artists in the article helped to clearly establish Jewish artists as avant-garde leaders among the South African modernists.

The discussion about degenerate art among South African artists also underscored the cultural stratifications among the Jewish community. Lipshitz, an artist of Lithuanian Jewish origin, was fully immersed in the Jewish cultural and religious values that advocated social justice. Stern, on the other hand, remained silent during these debates, perhaps indicating her artistic independence but also reflecting her German-Jewish cultural values that were based on assimilation and financial security as benchmarks of success. The power of these entrenched values created a polarizing effect on the Jewish arts community. Stern’s singular pursuit of artistic success placed her at odds with many of the close friends and colleagues who defended her work. Unlike many of her more religiously observant Jewish compatriots, Stern was not burdened by a strict adherence to Judaism, which allowed her to thrive in the moral gray areas created by the intersections of art and politics.

Although she may have agreed with her friend Lipshitz, Stern also knew that she needed support from conservatives such as Roworth, regardless of their position on modern art, to be successful in South Africa. If she wanted to maintain her status as a modern, rather than as a Jewish artist, Stern had to be cautious about how her position on this issue was recorded in the press. In general, Stern was not an active participant in public debates about art—most of her pronouncements are in response to her own work. On this subject, however, her “silence” seems intentional as she became caught between the Jewish community’s defense of modern art and the
South African establishment’s anti-modernist, pro-Nazi views. These discussions would also lay the foundations for anti-apartheid debates that occurred twenty years later as the Jewish community struggled to pull its diverse factions together to create a united position against another oppressive government.

Stern’s inclusion in the Nazi movement against modern art affected her career in two ways. First, it placed her within the canon of European modern artists, including Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, and her mentor Max Pechstein, whose avant-garde status would be solidified in part because their work was defined as “degenerate” by the Nazis. Second, the Nazis’ persecution of artists and Jews forced Stern to stay away from Germany and focus on creating works strictly for a South African audience. This shift in focus helped to crystallize Stern’s South African artistic identity and enabled her to begin developing essential political relationships in South Africa.
Changes in Attitudes Toward Modern Art in South Africa

By the mid-1930s, Stern had an established reputation as “the most successful painter of the coloured races” in South Africa.106 Her May 1935 exhibition in Johannesburg, for example, drew more than 3,000 visitors in 2 weeks.107 During this period, Stern developed a more complex relationship with the South African government. Because they portrayed South Africa as a nation that embraced its multiculturalism, Stern’s paintings were an asset to the government in the 1930s as it sought global recognition and legitimacy in international affairs. Led by Afrikaners James Hertzog and Jan Christian Smuts, the dominant United Party wanted greater political autonomy from the British Commonwealth and seized opportunities to highlight South Africa’s unique national characteristics. Shortly after it purchased some of Stern’s still lifes in May 1935, the South African government began acquiring Stern’s paintings of black women. In June 1935, the government bought Swazi Water Carriers for the residence of local politician Rep. D. Steyn.108

Both national and local officials purchased Stern’s work strategically, choosing subjects that fit within their political agendas. In 1936, for example, the South African government purchased Red Camellias, an oil still life depicting a vase of red camellia flowers for display at the South African embassy in Washington, DC.

108 Rand Daily Mail, 15 June 1935. Throughout her career, Stern painted several versions of water-carrying women, which have become some of her most desired paintings and fetched some of the highest prices ever recorded at South African auctions.
The selection of this Stern painting, one of the few known to have reached the United States, demonstrated the government’s calculated imperative of defining its political objectives through cultural diplomacy. Unlike Stern’s paintings of Africans and coloureds that the government procured for the South Africa House in London and the Empire Art Exhibition in London, *Red Camellias* was a “safe” subject for the embassy in the United States. The painting showcased South Africa’s natural beauty without being provocative in segregated America, and it proved that South Africans were familiar with Western painting genres.

As Stern traveled through South Africa, it would have been difficult for her not to have perceived the palpable frustration among nonwhite South Africans of race relations that worsened with each passing year. The South African Native Trust was established in 1936 to foster the government’s purchase of land from Africans at unfairly low prices to create what would eventually become homelands for blacks. Massive migrations, both black and white, into urban areas prompted the government to create pass laws (travel restrictions) for nonwhites, which exacerbated racial tensions. In response, ethnic communities organized to fight against the South African government’s racist policies, but it was clear that whites, specifically Afrikaners, were making plans to institutionalize racial segregation.

---

109 "Two Pictures...Being Sent to Washington." The South African embassy in Washington, DC still owns *Red Camellias*, and the painting used to hang in the ambassador’s office. Floral still life paintings were also purchased for the South African houses in Paris and Berlin in 1935. See *Cape Times*, 1 September 1934


111 Ibid., 166.
Despite the ominous political scene, Stern’s life was filled with people who worked against the status quo in conservative Cape Town. As a recent divorcée and a businesswoman, Stern immersed herself in a progressive environment that was charged with homosexual energy and protofeminist ideas yet still conventionally retrograde on racial issues. In the late 1930s, Stern’s relationship with her Jewish friends, particularly writer Hilda Purwitsky and educator Roza Van Gelderen, allowed her to mentor aspiring young women artists at Girls Central High School in Cape Town, where Van Gelderen was the principal.113 The school was an experiment in interracial learning and was one of only a handful of integrated institutions in Cape Town that taught an expanded program of academics and craft and encouraged students to remain active in their communities.114 Because of Van Gelderen’s leadership, the curriculum was infused with feminist elements and progressive politics designed to produce graduates who were independent thinkers and empowered members of South African society, prompting Van Gelderen to declare proudly, “Our children have no sex complexes.”115 Although Van Gelderen’s statement could be construed in many different ways, it illustrates the typical ways in which she challenged social boundaries at the school.

112 The African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912, but it gained much of its apartheid-era momentum in the 1920s and 1930s. Coloureds and Indians also organized in 1902 and 1912, respectively, but their differing backgrounds made it difficult for them to form coalitions. See Ibid., 171.

113 In addition to working together at Girls Central High School, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen were lovers and life partners.

114 Hilda Purwitsky Papers, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, BC707.

115 Ibid.
Stern visited Girls Central High School frequently to give lectures on modern art, as well as art lessons. She mentored a few of the school’s young artists, including black artist Valerie Desmore (b. 1925), who later became the first non-European woman to exhibit at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in 1942.\textsuperscript{116}

At the same time that she was becoming increasingly involved with the students at Girls Central High School, Stern became more vocal about her role in modern art both domestically and abroad. In an October 1936 article in the Johannesburg \textit{Rand Daily Mail}, Stern firmly stated her position on where her work fit within the modernist debates, “I don’t give a damn whether my pictures are modern or not. But I don’t want people to get the impression that there’s a reaction in me. There isn’t.”\textsuperscript{117} Although she was a leading South African artist because she painted black subjects in a modern style, Stern’s anti-modernist remarks illustrate the tension between her artistic interests and how she wanted to be portrayed in the press.

In Europe and America, modern art moved closer to formalism and abstraction, superficially as a way to separate art from politics. Through artists such as Stern, the artistic and social elements of South African society were intertwined, and it became impossible to discuss art without also confronting the racial dynamics of South African society. Stern rendered these racial dynamics visible in the most

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{116} Elza Miles, \textit{Land and Lives: A Story of Early Black Artists} (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1997), 89. Other black artists accused Stern of being unwilling to mentor them. Desmore went on to study in the United States at the Horace Mann Experimental School, and she also studied with Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka in 1948. Segregation laws enacted in the 1940s and 1950s would eliminate interracial education that occurred at Girls Central High School, but Stern’s connection to the institution and her interest in the young artists demonstrated a willingness (if only partial) to mentor young blacks artists.

\textsuperscript{117} “Can Johannesburg Appreciate the Modern?,” \textit{Rand Daily Mail}, 17 October 1936.
\end{flushleft}
“colorful” ways, and in this sense, her work defined modern art in South Africa for nearly a generation and also fulfilled the Jewish community’s expectation that artists “aimed at portraying more than the surface of things, at getting at meaning beneath the skin, at the very mind and outlook of the people.”

A Path for Women: Irma Stern’s Relationship to Women in the Arts

South African women took control of and led the arts in the 1930s and 1940s, and their work engaged race and gender in significant ways. While male politicians were busy crafting legislation that would enshrine racial separation, women artists, such as painter Dorothy Kay and photographer Constance Stuart Larrabee, in addition to Stern, kept South African audiences engaged (albeit imperfectly) in how race relations defined South Africa culture. Although not considered a modern artist, Dorothy Kay (1886-1964) was Stern’s contemporary, and her work approaches race relations from a slightly different angle. Larrabee’s stylized black-and-white photographs of both rural and urban black life exposed segregation’s devastating social effects. Both Kay and Larrabee studied art in Europe (Ireland and Britain, respectively), which helped them to think beyond South Africa’s restrictive perspectives on race.

Larrabee’s 1946 photograph, *Witwatersand Goldminer Watching Sunday Mine Dance, Johannesburg, South Africa*, for example, captures the multiple layers of confinement that black mineworkers experienced (fig. 51). The photo depicts a

---

118 Sowden, “Jewish Art in South Africa.”

119 For more information on Laubser and Larrabee, see Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa.*
young boy standing in a fenced building as he watches other miners entertaining
themselves with mine dances. The shadow of the fence’s geometric grid pattern
reflects back onto the boy’s bare skin as he gazes longingly at the dancers beyond the
photograph’s frame. His facial expression reveals a sense of exhaustion and
frustration well beyond his years. The *Witwatersand Goldminer* photograph gives
the viewer a glimpse into the life of a black child laborer who is confined physically
to the premises, socially to a lifetime of dangerous, low-wage labor in the mines, and
mentally to the psychological effects of racism. Unlike Stern, who preferred to paint
in rural areas, Larrabee’s photographs of black life in the townships show the clash
between black culture and the brutal reality of urban racial segregation. When
juxtaposed with Stern’s paintings, Larrabee’s photographs present the markedly
different ways in which white South African artists created aestheticized visions of
black life, a task that was necessary in forming the cultural basis of apartheid years
later.

Notably, South African women went beyond the canvas to delve into the
connections between race and nation throughout the arts. Born to Jewish parents in
Lithuania in 1888, writer Sarah Gertrude Millin immigrated to South Africa as a
child and used fiction to explore the subject. In addition to working in a different
medium, Millin served as a contrast to visual artists Laubser and Larrabee by
explicitly expressing her pro-racist views in her work. Millin was specifically critical
of miscegenation, a taboo subject for public discourse that, nonetheless, formed the
basis of racial segregation in South African society. A proponent of scientifically
based theories of racial determinism, Millin believed that racial mixing would
destroy South African society by diluting “pure” white blood with inferior African blood.  

Millin’s beliefs are embedded throughout her 1924 novel, *God’s Stepchildren*. The book examines how racial mixing affects several generations of white missionary Reverend Andrew Flood’s family. Flood marries a Khoikhoi woman (referred to as a “Hottentot” in the book), they have children, and life becomes increasingly difficult for each generation of Flood’s descendants as they straddle black and white society. As he pondered how he would educate his mixed-race children, Millin writes, “He [Flood] had thought that a child with a white father might be different...It seemed to the missionary as if their [black children’s] minds were unlocked sooner, but also sooner locked again. He had a vague theory that it all had to do with the traditional hardness of their skulls.”

Ironically, Millin’s warnings against miscegenation did not encompass the glaring threat to ethnic purity that Afrikaners perceived Jews to be in South Africa. She could not reconcile the arbitrary differences between race and ethnicity that made Afrikaners as fearful of Jews as they were of blacks and coloureds relative to sexual relations. In addition, Millin discovered that she was unable to control the ways in which her work would be co-opted by groups that also espoused anti-Semitic views. To her horror, *God’s Stepchildren* was widely distributed in Germany as a

---


121 Sarah Gertrude Millin, *God’s Stepchildren*, 10th ed. (Grosset and Dunlap, 1924), 77.
Rassenroman (race novel) and used to support Nazi claims that Jews were mentally and physically inferior to ethnic Germans.\textsuperscript{122}

Stern and Millin were friends and supported one another’s work. In 1936, when the Rand Daily Mail questioned whether South Africa was ready to accept modern art, Millin responded by stating, “Miss Stern is the most intellectual, the most brilliant, and the most psychological painter we have in South Africa today.”\textsuperscript{123} Stern painted *Portrait of Sarah Gertrude Millin* in 1941 (fig. 52). In the painting, Millin has a serious and bookish appearance, with red glasses and a dowdy, light blue dress. Her dark, curly hair accentuates her pale skin and her light gray eyes. Like Millin, Stern also believed that blacks were suspended in a state of arrested development, a trait that she deemed essential to her work. “Only deep in the country do they live as I love them—beautiful creatures living under full tribal discipline, with ancient customs, throwing their shadows right back to Egypt,” she wrote in 1936.\textsuperscript{124} Both women were susceptible to the cycle of self-hatred and displacement that plagues minority communities. With their ethnic facial features and dark hair, Stern and Millin stood out as Jews among the fair-haired South Africans of Northern European stock. Referring to the problem of skin bleaching among blacks in Jamaica, scholar Christopher A. D. Charles, writes, “To acquire power, some women behave and manage their appearance to conform to the ideal

\textsuperscript{122} Blair, ""The Ugly Word"", 601.

\textsuperscript{123} "Outspoken," Sunday Express, 18 October 1936.

\textsuperscript{124} Irma Stern, "My Amazing Models," Sunday Express, 6 November 1936.
Although Stern and Millin did not resort to such drastic tactics as skin bleaching, they channeled their self-hatred into their respective representations of blacks, empowering themselves by conforming to the racist norms of white South Africa. The disconnect between the two women’s admiration of many aspects of black culture and their public support of racial segregation highlight the ways in which their double speak betrays their own struggles with self-esteem and ethnic identity.

Stern’s rising prominence in the 1930s South African art world was defined by these types of discussions about race. In the article “My Critics Some Home Truths,” Stern wrote a response to her critics’ negative attitudes toward her work. When one described the Zulus in Stern’s paintings as “miserable and mournful” and suggested that she “take [her] abode” in Europe where her work was better received, Stern responded, “After this eulogy I did not book my berth for Europe, but am looking forward to painting more Zulus soon.” These critical comments only strengthened her resolve to use race as the catalyst for her iconoclasm.

**Pictures that Satisfy: Redefining the Modern in South Africa**

At the opening of a Stern exhibition in Cape Town in 1936, High Commissioner Sir William Clark commented on Stern as a modern painter:

> Miss Stern is essentially a modern who delights in audacities of colour and design. Part of the paradox of modern art is its close affinity with the primitive and South Africa is a country rich in primitive themes for artists like Miss Stern. I am sure you will

---


find her studies of native like [sic] exceptionally interesting in the psychological understanding and technical achievement.

I notice that modern critics object to the word beautiful and prefer almost any other adjective. If we are not allowed to use that word I think that ‘satisfying’ is a very useful expression, and I am sure you will find that Miss Stern’s pictures, by their intellectual content and their artistic accomplishment, satisfy both your mind and your eyes.  

In her effort to “satisfy” her South African audience, Stern’s work introduced a new aesthetic that emphasized blackness in South Africa. This new aesthetic, however, was developed within the context of South Africa on the eve of apartheid, the country’s darkest historical moment. Rather than fetishize an “other” in a distant land, modern art in South Africa would be inextricably linked to a precarious vision of the “primitive” that pitted South Africans—Asians, blacks, coloureds, Jews, and whites—against each other in a racial purity contest. As a Jewish artist, Stern’s work raised important concerns about racial tensions in South Africa, but her personal support of racial segregation made her a controversial figure in her own community.

In 1938, Stern further complicated assessments of her racial views when she traveled to Dakar, Senegal. A beautiful and picturesque seaside city on the Atlantic coast, Dakar’s gleaming pink and white buildings and its mixture of French, Muslim, and African cultures provided an ideal place for Stern to paint. That said, she was deeply troubled by her observations of Senegalese society: Stern disapproved of the degree of racial integration that she saw in Dakar. In her statements to the press, Stern noted an incident in which she witnessed a black man using the same public restroom as a white man as an example of the type of racial mixing she deplored. To

Stern, Dakar’s racially integrated society made the city “the most beautiful place in the world and the most evil,” especially when compared with South Africa, which was a segregated nation well before apartheid.128

Stern produced several portraits and landscapes during her visit, including a stunning portrait of a Senegalese woman called *Native Woman, Dakar* (fig. 53). In the painting, Stern captures the woman’s imposing presence on the canvas by emphasizing her physical girth and her colorful clothing. The Senegalese woman’s broad cheekbones and the design on her red headscarf contrast against her deep blue top and beige shoulder wrap. She faces the viewer directly, and by looking at her short, thick arms, she appears to be shorter and heavier than Stern’s black South African subjects. The plain background gives no indication that the subject is in Senegal; she could have been anywhere in Africa.

Stern’s disapproval of racially integrated Dakar (which still had its share of racial tensions with the French colonial government) reinforced the complexity of her worldview and it influenced her painting. “Every person in Cape Town who talks about the colour bar should go to Dakar for a month. That would make them sit up,” she stated.129 Such statements are ironic given the vehement anti-Semitism in Europe and South Africa that caused South African Jews to worry about their community’s future. To many Afrikaners at this time, Jews seemed more threatening than blacks to white identity. By 1936, the Nazis’ anti-Semitic laws caused thousands of Jews to flee Germany. The several thousand who arrived in South Africa met

---


129 "No Colour Bar at Dakar," *Cape Times*, 3 March 1938.
strong resistance from Nazi sympathizers including the Greyshirts, an Afrikaner nationalist group that wanted to end Jewish migration to South Africa. Stern perceived herself to be immune from the vitriol directed at more recent Jewish immigrants, and her statement above typifies the ways in which she often miscalculated South Africa’s racial views vis-à-vis those of other countries.

As she traveled increasingly to other African countries, Stern’s racial and political views of South Africa changed. Although she enjoyed discovering new cultures and subjects to paint, Stern was uncomfortable with the more fluid racial and social boundaries that existed outside of South Africa. Her paintings and statements in the late 1930s and early 1940s reflect a gradual recognition of the social change occurring throughout Africa, as well as her fear of how these shifts would affect her work. Despite her exposure to different African cultures, however, Stern was a stubborn individual who resisted rapid change. Her press statements indicate that she believed that blacks were an inferior race even as her portrayals of black life reflected a sense of empathy and admiration for their physical beauty and their cultural values. She struggled to maintain both her racist views, which symbolized her view of societal order, and her deep affinity for black culture, which provided her with a romanticized escape from that rigid societal order.

Many critics and scholars connect Stern’s work to some of the social forces that defined South African culture in the 1920s and 1930s, but few, if any, assert that she played an integral role in shaping South Africa’s cultural landscape as part of its political destiny. From their association with the SASA to the increasing

130 Shimoni, Community and Conscience, 13.
consolidation of Afrikaner political power in the 1930s, South African artists always considered themselves as crucial to defining their country’s national character. Stern was no exception and led the visual artists’ engagement with race as part of South Africa’s national identity. Her experiences in Weimar Berlin and the support she received from South Africa’s Jewish community caused her to develop a sense of radicalism that she typically acknowledged by resisting critics’ interest in placing her in any one category.

Despite her resistance to categorization, Stern lived comfortably with the “degenerate artist” label. Although she raised concerns about the fate of Jews in Germany as soon as the Nazi Party gained control of the German government, she maintained her relationship with art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt throughout the war even as he helped the Nazis obtain and destroy modern art, including some her paintings. Stern was an artist, but above all, she was a businesswoman, and she understood the need to leverage situations for career advancement. Many of Stern’s statements, such as her comments about Dakar, sounded eerily similar to Nazi claims against Jews. This period of Stern’s life, caught between the turmoil in Europe and the growing racial divide in South Africa, represented a crossroad in her career. Rather than pursue the social activism agenda embraced by her Jewish friends Richard Feldman, Roza Van Gelderen, and Hilda Purwitsky, Stern chose instead to remain a free agent, blazing her own trail in South African art by painting blacks on her terms. In the short run, this strategy led to her success as a great South African artist. In the long run, however, her role in South African art history is complicated by her racist beliefs.
Stern defined the parameters of modern South African art without allowing herself to be characterized as a “modernist.” She started the debate on the role of blacks in modern art even without believing that they deserved equal treatment in South African society (or anywhere else). As World War II ended and apartheid drew closer, Stern’s travels to Europe became more restricted, and her painting and political views took a slightly different turn. She spent an increasing amount of time traveling around Africa and published more travel writing. She also discovered the Muslim communities in Zanzibar, creating a entirely new genre of work that reshaped the way she viewed the “other.” Beginning in the 1940s, her paintings, travels, and writings would document the most turbulent period in South Africa’s history.
Chapter 3: Irma Stern’s Travel Narratives

In the late 1930s and 1940s, Stern began to seek inspiration for her paintings outside of South Africa. Because the Second World War was underway in Europe, African travel became Stern’s most viable option for exploring cultures that existed beyond South Africa’s borders. At this time, Stern decided to redefine herself as an artist by articulating her travel experiences through a new medium: the illustrated travel narrative. Although steeped in the centuries-old European tradition of exploration, colonization, and conquest, the travel narrative allowed Stern sufficient freedom to put a modern twist on the medium by combining her interests in German Expressionist graphic illustration and literature with African themes.

This chapter argues that from 1939 to 1948, Stern used travel narratives to engage with African history and politics and that this engagement was crucial in the creation of a cultural ideology for apartheid. Stern’s accounts of her African travels portrayed large cultural and racial divides in Africa. The publication of Stern’s two travel narratives, Congo in 1942 and Zanzibar in 1948, further complicated the ways in which the relationship between African art and modernism were understood in South Africa, as well as the ways in which art conformed or rebelled against the politics of the time period.

This chapter will also examine how Stern’s utilization of the travel narrative medium allowed her to confront racial issues differently than in other media. Both publications were produced as limited editions of less than 300 copies each, meaning that the intended audience was probably South Africa’s social elite. The travel
narratives represented an era of South African internationalism that began to decline with the introduction of apartheid in 1948. Unlike Europeans or Americans, South Africans lived in close proximity to perceived “primitive” African cultures. Both *Congo* and *Zanzibar* describe the precarious tension between urban and rural, as well as civilized and uncivilized in a manner that would appeal to white South Africans who were acutely aware that they were outnumbered on the continent.

As the political and cultural terrain in Europe shifted during the Second World War, Stern’s travel narratives reflect her attempts to establish relationships in other regions of Africa that, like South Africa, were trying to develop a national identity by creating compromises between European and African political and cultural views. Having contributed to modernist art movements in Berlin in the early twentieth century, Stern was now in a position to influence and shape modernism in South Africa by placing its art history within an African context through her travel narratives.

It is critical to note that Stern clearly had political and social motivations to select the Belgian Congo and Zanzibar as travel destinations. Colonial territories with significant European cultural influences, the Belgian Congo and Zanzibar were both undergoing major political changes that had profound social and cultural consequences. These regions, like South Africa, were rich in culture and history and enabled Stern to continue exploring African and Muslim traditions as she did in South Africa. Stern made statements in the press that indicated her awareness of the political climate in the countries she visited, as well as how the idea of blacks living separately would appeal to her South African audience: “I traveled a lot, went into
districts where the natives live on their own away from European influences,” she said in an interview for the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1942.¹

**New Travels**

In the late 1930s, South Africa began to reexamine its position on the African continent as a predominantly black nation with a white-controlled government. As white politicians searched for ways to ensure permanent political dominance, the country became more isolated from its African neighbors and from the international community. Women, for instance, were enfranchised in 1930, but only to increase the white electorate.² Through the nation’s mineral riches and the establishment of the civil service, the white urban population, spurred by Afrikaners, grew and became wealthier.³ Blacks were pushed into large shantytowns while pristine and genteel all-white neighborhoods blossomed near the city centers.

Politicians and government officials searched for ways to use cultural history to justify white rule. At the same time, they sought to mask their efforts by promoting South Africa’s racial diversity abroad. As Afrikaners gained influence in South African politics, party leaders viewed the arts as a platform for their political agenda.

---


Around 1939, Stern forged a closer relationship with the South African government, and she became the public face of South African cultural diplomacy. Local politicians regularly attended her exhibitions, and her work hung in South African foreign offices in an effort to highlight the level of interracial contact present in South African society. Although they had actively denounced Stern’s paintings in the 1920s, officials in the 1930s and 1940s saw Stern as a homegrown artist who would make an ideal “representative” of the nation’s diverse society. Dr. H.D.J. Bodenstein, the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, for example, bought some of Stern’s paintings for foreign legations. As an unofficial spokesperson for South African culture, Stern’s role as an artistic ambassador allowed the government to create a “renegade” persona whereby Stern’s paintings represented South Africa’s multiculturalism, but the government could maintain its distance when she made volatile or incendiary comments.

Stern had developed an eye for capturing subjects that would appeal to South African audiences and conform to their carefully calibrated, race-based visions of modern art. At an exhibition/fundraiser for the South African Native Corps, for example, visitors donated £10 as an admission fee to the event, where they had the opportunity to purchase Stern’s paintings that featured South African themes, including landscapes and studies of black and coloured individuals. White South

5 “Two Pictures...Being Sent to Washington.”
6 “The Wanderer.” Like Stern, Bodenstein was of German origin but was not Jewish.
7 “For Native Corps,” Cape Argus, 20 January 1942.
Africans wanted the arts to confirm their distinct national identity, but they embraced European modernism because they wanted to emphasize their historic connections to Western civilization. Members of the South African elite eagerly volunteered to preside over the official opening of Stern’s exhibitions, which allowed them to rub shoulders with influential South Africans.8

Stern’s efforts to market herself as an African artist through her paintings and travel narratives fit perfectly into the government’s interest in creating a racially segregated society by emphasizing cultural difference. Her work became more acceptable to the South African government because it complemented its ethnic separatist agenda, which formed the basis of apartheid. With titles such as “Swazis Girls,” “Pondo Woman,” or “Young Zulu Girl,” Stern’s paintings were titled to draw attention to the ethnicity of blacks. Meanwhile, her portraits of Jewish South Africans revealed a community that was both physically and culturally distinct from other white South Africans. Stern’s visual renderings of these differences allowed the government to “celebrate” each of South Africa’s ethnic groups while building the case that they should live separately to preserve their unique qualities.

In October 1941, Stern held an exhibition of paintings of Cape Malays (Muslim and coloured South Africans) and District Six in Cape Town at the Gainsborough Galleries.9 District Six was the most integrated and multicultural section of Cape Town, and its residents’ subversive attitude helped to nurture the careers of many of South Africa’s cultural icons and later, its most vocal anti-

---

8 “Irma Stern Exhibition: Opening by High Commissioner,” Cape Times, 23 March 1938.

9 “Irma Stern’s New Show,” Rand Daily Mail, 17 October 1941. The current status of these paintings is unknown. There are no reproductions of these works available in historical or current texts.
apartheid activists. Because of District Six’s almost mythic status as an experiment in interracial living, these paintings referenced specific South African subjects that continue to elicit emotional responses from South African audiences but mean little to viewers unfamiliar with the nation’s history.\textsuperscript{10} To many conservative white South Africans, District Six’s existence represented everything that was wrong with the country—racial mixing, “lascivious” activities such as dancing and playing music, and most importantly, nonwhites occupying prime real estate in a major city.\textsuperscript{11} To everyone else, the neighborhood represented the \textit{real} South Africa and proved that racially integrated communities could thrive and prosper.

Because of its liberal politics and cultural values, Stern had several supporters who lived in District Six, including members of the prominent Indian Gool family, many of whom were leaders in coloured and communist politics. Rosa Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky also taught in District Six. Nevertheless, Stern’s display of her work in District Six came only three years after her trip to Dakar, where she was disturbed by the “absence of a colour bar.”\textsuperscript{12} The idea of District Six as a racially integrated neighborhood probably made Stern uncomfortable, but she understood that the area was a hotbed of progressive professionals and intellectuals in Cape Town who valued her modern paintings of black and coloured South Africans.

\textsuperscript{10} For more information about the history and culture of District Six, see Denis-Constant Martin, \textit{Coon Carnival: New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present} (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1999). And Allister Sparks, \textit{Tomorrow Is Another Country} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{11} District Six has remained underdeveloped since the multicultural neighborhoods were destroyed. There are still many empty fields, but development is increasing. Many residents who were forcibly removed are also pursuing legal means of reclaiming their land. See Sparks, \textit{Tomorrow Is Another Country}, 86–7.

\textsuperscript{12} “Stern Words on Dakar,” \textit{Johannesburg Sunday Times} 1938.
A late 1930s painting, *Young Malay Maiden With Black Hair*, depicts a coloured woman wearing a thin white tank top and blue skirt (fig. 54). Her clothing appears to be undergarments, which may indicate that she is at home or in a comfortable setting. The painting emphasizes the woman’s ethnic features. Her long, thick hair lays gently against her light brown skin, and her almond-shaped dark brown eyes stare into the distance. Although her location is unclear, the woman most likely lived in one of Cape Town’s coloured neighborhoods or in District Six (which also had a sizeable coloured population), giving an indication of the types of works she exhibited at the Gainsborough Galleries in 1941.

Despite receiving support from progressive circles in Cape Town, Stern espoused an essentialist view of black culture in Africa. Multicultural and integrated areas such as District Six were urban and therefore showed that blacks and coloureds were embracing Western culture, a reality that Stern tried to avoid. Referring to her upcoming visit to the Congo, she wrote to Richard Feldman in 1942, “There I can at least enjoy adventure of a more primitive nature—cannibals, or lions, or such things...” Even with South Africa’s wealth of cultural resources and natural beauty, Stern could not fully escape the fascination with an “untainted” version Africa that her European predecessors sought to discover. When she departed for the Congo in 1942, Stern was a nationally respected artist, and her trip to Central Africa represented an opportunity to reconnect South Africans to the rest of the continent through the work she would produce.

---

13 Berman, *Remembering Irma*, 84.
First Travel Narrative: *Congo* (1942)

Stern visited two central African regions during her journey: the Belgian Congo (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the Belgian colonial region in central Africa that today encompasses Rwanda. She spent the majority of her time with three ethnic groups: the Mangbetu and the Kuba in the northeastern section of the Congo and the Tutsi (referred to as “Watussi”) in Rwanda.14

The Belgian Congo’s vast geographic area and dozens of ethnic groups made it anything but a monolithic territory. Elizabethville, the capital, sat at the mouth of the mighty Congo River on the western side of the region and served as its major cosmopolitan center, where Europeans and Africans mixed in cafes and restaurants next to bustling street markets. Outside of the capital city, however, Europeans had limited political or cultural influence, which made the region attractive to foreign travelers looking for an “authentic” African experience.

Illustrated travel narratives played an important role in developing European colonialist views of Africa, yet they remain an understudied genre of both literature and art history. Most travel narratives about Africa are written from the perspective of the European explorer, providing the writer’s insights into the relationship between colonizer and colonized, visitor and host. Stern’s publication possesses a similar Eurocentric worldview that is apparent throughout her book, supplying her audience with stories and anecdotes about black Africa that helped them to

[14] Both of these regions have experienced prolonged periods of civil war, unstable governments, and genocide in Rwanda’s case, resulting from the ethnic divisions and arbitrary national boundaries created by the Belgians both before and after each country gained independence. With this information in mind, Stern’s observations in *Congo* reflect the beginnings of some of these cleavages.
distinguish themselves from neighboring countries. *Congo* was timely because, as scholar Sara Steinert Borella writes, “…the period [1930s and 1940s] was ripe for travel writing. The average citizen could not travel easily to the four corners of the globe but was eager to read about those who did.”¹⁵ The period that Borella describes provided Stern with an opportunity to delve into her subjects’ racial complexities in a way that would not have been possible with a less sophisticated audience fifty years earlier.¹⁶

In addition to embarking on a journey into “dark Africa,” Stern confronted the added stigma of being a single female traveler. Audiences generally viewed female travelers as promiscuous risk takers, which, paradoxically, was part of their appeal. “To get an audience, a woman needed to provide material that was reasonably exciting; to keep an audience, she needed to remain a lady,” writes literary scholar Kristi Siegel.¹⁷ From Homer to Herodotus to Pliny, some of the earliest recorded travel narratives were written by men who established the genre as a narrative

---


¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁷ Kristi Siegel, ed., *Gender, Genre, and the Identity in Women’s Travel Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). 2. Women writers such as Danish author and self-described “storyteller” Karen Blixen (a.k.a., Isak Dinesen) fit Siegel’s description well. Blixen’s 1937 memoir, *Out of Africa*, captivated audiences internationally with the story of her bucolic life on a coffee farm in colonial Kenya. The memoir’s success came from its gripping description of how Blixen managed the farm while searching for true love among the transplanted European aristocracy. Like Stern, Blixen traveled frequently between Europe and Africa, developing an understanding of how Europeans expected Africa to be portrayed in the arts. Both women were strong, independent, and had tortured relationships with men. Blixen was drawn to write about Africans and African culture in a similar way that Stern was motivated to paint African women. Both women were captivated by the vast cultural divide between Africa and Europe, but both adhered strictly to the belief that this divide created a necessary separation between the races. Despite forming emotional connections with black African individuals, race proved to be an insurmountable social barrier for Stern and Blixen. See Simon Lewis, "Culture, Cultivation, and Colonialism In "Out of Africa" And Beyond," *Research in African Literatures* 31, no. 1 (2000). See also Lynn R. Wilkinson, "Hannah Arendt on Isak Dinesen: Between Storytelling and Theory," *Comparative Literature* 56, no. 1 (2004). And Tim Youngs, ""Why Is That White Man Pointing That Thing at Me?" Representing the Maasai," *History in Africa* 26 (1999).
description of conquest and subjugation. This template was easily adapted to African travel, where, according to writer Tim Youngs, “Difficult terrain, illness, and native resistance created an image of heroic—usually masculine—and sometimes tragic endeavor to penetrate Africa’s interior.” To be successful in South Africa, therefore, Stern’s *Congo* needed to overcome gender stereotypes about the travel narrative medium while confirming white South Africans’ assumptions that racial difference mandated racial separation.

A combination of graphic design and narrative, *Congo* symbolized a new medium through which Stern communicated her travel experiences to the South African public. In her previous travels to Swaziland and the Natal, Stern completed dozens of paintings of black Africans as well as some unpublished essays, but *Congo* was her first serious attempt to write and publish a book about her experiences. The 50-page narrative is lavishly illustrated, and some of the drawings are mounted on Kuba textiles or raffia cloth.

Although Stern’s prose has little literary value, the combination of short textual passages and images reveals how her perceptions of the Mangbetu, Kuba, and Tutsi were influenced by previous European descriptions, specifically the travel accounts of German explorer Georg Schweinfurth and ethnologist Leo Frobenius.

---


19 Stern’s white female predecessors had faced similar challenges in representing Africa to a Western audience. Danish writer and novelist Karen Blixen (a.k.a Isak Dinesen), for example, described her experiences managing a farm in colonial Kenya in her 1937 book, *Out of Africa*. Comparisons between the Blixen’s descriptions of colonial Kenya in her book, *Out of Africa* have been compared with texts written by South Africans such as Olive Schreiner.
who helped to establish the travel route that Stern followed.\textsuperscript{20} The illustrations are not intended to be visual representations of the textual descriptions. Rather, they are evocative of the spirit of the moment and the types of people she encountered.

The publication is not divided into clearly distinguishable “chapters,” and Stern jumps between regions and includes short, poetic meditations in between major storylines. It is, however, roughly divided into separate “stories”—Stern’s encounter with the Mangbetu, her sojourn with the Kuba, and her attendance at the coronation of a Tutsi queen.

**Congo: Introduction**

Stern establishes her narrative’s tone on the first page in which she embraces the Western desire to witness “things that combined emotional and visual attraction.”\textsuperscript{21} The first image that the reader sees is a pencil drawing of a typeset


Notably, Stern shared a brief letter correspondence in the 1920s with Leo Frobenius, who, as mentioned in chapter 2, was a pioneer in the field of ethnology. His skill in collecting and trading objects on his expeditions gave him an edge among the international group of explorers in the region to garner material for museums in their respective countries. According to scholar Johannes Fabian, “...traveling ethnographers operated in economic and political situations in which contact with other cultures was crucially linked to the trade of goods.” Fabian goes on to note, “Collecting objects demonstrated to rulers, investors, and the European public at large the potential of Central Africa as a target of imperialism.” See Fabian, "Curios and Curiosity: Notes on Reading Torday and Frobenius," 83.

Frobenius recorded his experiences collecting objects in the Bakuba region in a chapter of his book, *In the Shadow of the Congo State*, called “Once again to the Bakuba peoples.” The text reveals his contempt for black traders and provides advice on how to bargain with them to pay the lowest price.
dropped capital letter “I” in front of a naked African man playing a set of drums to begin the sentence, “I am on the road to the interior of the Belgian Congo (fig. 55).” A zig-zag line represents Stern’s artistic rendering of body scarification, a telltale mark of African “savagery.” The text on the same page describes how the sounds of the Congo make Stern’s “blood dance with the thrill of exotic excitement.” In the introductory paragraphs, Stern establishes what art historians Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten describe as a relationship of contrast; the binary opposition between “primitive” and “civilized” that she will employ throughout the narrative.

*Congo*’s first illustration is a charcoal drawing of a Mangbetu woman carrying a bundle of bananas on her head (fig. 56). Stern’s sketched image fits with the text on the previous page in which she ruminates on how African culture reminds her of the days “when man was still in his childhood...in no way divorced by clothes

---

Many of Frobenius’ strategies involve trickery and deception: “If at all possible,” he writes, “one should begin by establishing friendly relations with women...Present a six-year old girl, following after her mother, with a few beads...give a little boy a toy trumpet...this is always the best means to make contact...” Stern may have read *In the Shadow of the Congo* or possibly received advice from Frobenius personally, since she employs some of his techniques when attempting to collect objects from the Mangetu and the Kuba. See Leo Frobenius, “Nochmals zu den Bakubavolkern” in *Im Shatten des Kongostaates*, Johannes Fabian, trans. Appendix to Chapter 4, “Curios and Curiousity” by Johannes Fabian in in *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa.*, p. 101.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.


26 Stern, *Congo*, 3.
or huts from nature."\textsuperscript{27} This language echoes the prevailing belief that Africans were not as far advanced as whites. The bananas conjure images of the 1920s black American dancer and entertainer Josephine Baker and the banana skirt that she wore while performing her famous dances in Paris.\textsuperscript{28} In Baker’s case, the bananas covered her sexuality, which was fetishized by male spectators and considered “exotic” because she was an African American. Yet, the exotic connotations of bananas themselves (especially when substituted for clothing) attracted attention to her lower body. Stern’s image of the young woman achieves the same effect. She chooses not to depict the woman’s breasts (more obviously sexualized body parts). Instead, the bananas stand in for sexual body parts and draw attention to her elongated head, which was the part of the Mangbetu body that European visual representations fetishized.\textsuperscript{29}

**The Village of the Chief of Ekibondo**

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 2.


\textsuperscript{29} Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, "Gender and Sexuality in Mangbetu Art," in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 198. Belgium’s cultural embrace of the Congo began in the late nineteenth century. The architectural style known as Art Nouveau was also referred to as “Le Style Congo” because its organic shapes and stylized patterns were reminiscent of forms found in central Africa. The enthusiasm for the Congo had spread to other European countries and the United States in the 1920s. In photographs of his automobile tour through the region sponsored by automaker Citroën, George Sprecht photographed the Mangbetu, specifically a woman named Nobosodrou. These photos later inspired artists in the United States, such as African-American artist Aaron Douglas, who drew an illustration of Nobosodrou for the cover of *Opportunity* magazine in May 1927 and Malvina Hoffman, who created a sculpture of a Mangbetu woman in 1930. See Richard J. Powell, "Re/Birth of a Nation," in *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. David A. Bailey and Richard J. Powell (London and Berkeley: Hayward Galleries/Institute of International Visual Arts and University of California Press, 1998), 26-27.
In Congo’s first story, “The Village of the Chief Ekibondo,” Stern believes that she has discovered an “authentic,” charming Mangbetu village. In fact, she has encountered a village that has been rebuilt as a tourist site to appeal to the interests of European visitors.⁴⁰ As a Mangbetu chief, the leader of the Ekibondo village hosted many artists, writers, and photographers. The villagers, particularly the women, were accustomed to being photographed, and the chief was a shrewd political leader with sharp business skills. He encouraged the village’s residents to cater to tourists’ desires. Writer Martin Birnbaum describes how “the Mangbetu actively [collaborated] in the construction of images of themselves” in 1939 when he wrote:

But when I met Chief Ekibondo, dressed in white duck and wearing a wrist watch, I began to suspect that all this charming grouping of forest giants and ornamental huts was done with a keen eye for business. He encourages women to show how they dress their hair, to pound manioc and other foodstuffs in the open, to pose for photographs... I felt that Ekibondo was as enthusiastic about “tourisme” as Mussolini himself... At any rate, he has not yet built a hotel or rest house for whites.⁴¹

If Stern suspected that the Mangbetu were constructing a different image of themselves for tourists, she made no indication of this knowledge in her narrative. During her visit to the village, the chief (referred to incongruously as the ‘Sultan’) sends a painter to meet with Stern to describe his fresco painting process.³² Stern

³⁰ The village name is Ekibondo, but both Stern and other writers refers to the king as Chief Ekibondo.

³¹ Schildkrout and Keim, "Gender and Sexuality in Mangbetu Art," 207.

³² Stern refers to the chief as both a Mangbetu and an Asande leader. These are two culturally distinct ethnic groups. The chief is the leader of a Mangbetu village. For more information on the social and political distinctions between the Mangbetu and the Asande, see Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, African Reflections: Art From Northeastern Zaire (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press and the American Museum of Natural History, 1990).
marvels at how the painter’s explanations of the painting process remind her of similar techniques used by “primitive Italians.”

Despite her astonishment at the technique and skill employed to paint the fresco decorations, Stern equates the painter’s work with that of “primitive Italians,” while she proceeds to use the Mangbetu villagers as models and subjects for her “modern” paintings.

Under the direction of the chief, the Ekibondo villagers profited from successfully marketing their culture to Western tourists, attesting to how ethnicity itself can become a commodity. Rather than playing into European desires by subserviently accepting their intrusion, the Mangbetu reflected these fantasies back onto their visitors, packaging themselves as a product requested by demanding consumers. Stern is careful, for example, to describe the commercial activities occurring in the village. During her visit to the market, Stern wrote, “A group of women who had brewed the beer and banana wine were busy ladling it out from the huge black earthenware pots into drinking vessels, amidst the chatter and laughter about price. Amongst this roaring trade babies were being suckled.”

A rough sketch of the nursing child precedes the description of the market (fig. 57). Stern’s charcoal drawing does not show the mother’s face, shifting the focus to her bare breast and young child, whose elongated head is wrapped in traditional Mangbetu accoutrements.

____________________________

33 Stern, Congo, 6.

34 Christopher B. Steiner, African Art in Transit (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 89.

35 Stern, Congo, 18.
Paintings and drawings are interspersed between each story in Congo. Despite the fact that some works of art are specifically illustrations, many are not intended to illustrate the text. They are, however, representative of how Stern used portraiture to create ethnic hierarchies among Africans. Jewish South Africans were at the top of Stern’s hierarchy and given named portraits. They were followed by central Africans, black southern Africans, and coloured South Africans, who were usually painted by ethnicity and not named. Because Europeans often referred to the Mangbetu as “The Parisians of Africa,” they were considered to be more culturally advanced than other Africans and therefore, Stern painted more specificity in their portraits.36

An unlabeled depiction of a woman, for example, illustrates how Stern’s work in Congo moves closer to portraiture than many of her previous paintings of black South Africans (fig. 58). Mounted on raffia cloth, the charcoal drawing emphasizes the ethnic features that are often attributed to the Mangbetu: elongated faces, attenuated noses, and high cheekbones. At the same time, the image also presents a more nuanced picture of an individual. In the portrait, the woman’s signature elongated head is a striking aspect of the painting. That said, her pensive expression and penetrating gaze reveal a deeply complex person, supporting the idea that Stern respects the Mangbetu or at least was enamored by their physical beauty.

**Treasure Hunt**

---

36 Schildkrot and Keim, "Gender and Sexuality in Mangbetu Art," 198.
Congo’s second story, “Treasure Hunt,” affirms Frobenius’ influence on Stern’s perceptions of the Bakuba (Kuba). The title alone indicates her familiarity with Frobenius’ voracious approach toward collecting objects in the region. In the story’s opening paragraph, Stern reiterates the myths produced in Frobenius’ and Schweinfurth’s travel accounts of cannibalism in the region by claiming that the Bakuba, instead of the Mangbetu, were described as “the most artistically creative race in the Congo, who only one generation back had been man-eaters.”

She begins this story by first referring back to her visit to the Mangbetu king before she returns to her discussion of the Kuba.

Upon arrival in the Kuba region, Stern uses terms to describe Kuba architecture that are sure to widen the chasm between her black subjects and her white readers. “To return to the country of the Bakuba,” she wrote, “I noticed the bridge supports carved with lovely two-faced idols. The sticks in front of the huts are decorated with fetishes; the people are alive with creative art.” After observing the buildings, Stern declares her reason for visiting the village. “I am a painter, and I am going to show all the pictures I paint in the Congo in my country, and after the war in Europe, so that people may learn to love the natives of the Congo as much as I do.”

She aims to collect objects from the Bakuba, “so that white people in [her] country...”

---

37 Stern, Congo, 23. The Kuba kingdom stretches over a large section of central Africa with as many as seventeen ethnic subgroups. The king is the central ruler, and art is used to define royal authority and determine social status in Kuba society. In addition to costumes, masks, and sculpture, embroidered cloth is the primary status symbol in Kuba society. Textiles are woven by men and embroidered by women, and innovation in designs and patterns is encouraged. See Judith Perani and Fred T. Smith, The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power, and Life Cycle Rituals (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 236-41.

38 Stern, Congo, 24.

39 Ibid.
may learn what beautiful things the black man in the Congo creates.”

Following Frobenius’ suggestion that “one should give a nice present” to increase trading possibilities, Stern arrives at the village with a truck filled with gifts, including “a bottle of whisky, a tin of pâté de foie gras, and various sweets and delicacies.”

In deciding what is worth collecting, Stern’s primary interest is in the “velours de Kassai,” or mats made of dyed raffia. She asks the women who made the mats to describe how they collect and dry the leaves, and she explains how they use a “primitive loom” to weave the raffia. Her use of the word “primitive” is similar in context to her use of the word in the first story to describe the fresco painter, implying that the artists use antiquated production techniques that Westerners abandoned centuries earlier. Employing the temporal meaning of the word, Stern again denies coevalness to her artistic contemporaries.

Interspersed between the narrative are inserted swatches of textiles. The Kuba are known for their patterned textiles, which alluded to social hierarchies within the community and were intricately woven with specific designs. The patterned cloths enhanced the experience of reading Congo by allowing primarily white audiences to touch real textiles from Stern’s adventures in the Belgian Congo. The raised jagged

---

40 Ibid.
42 Stern, Congo, 25.
43 Ibid.
44 Antliff and Leighten, “Primitive,” 171.
geometric patterns contrast to the feel of the smooth, flat cloth (fig. 59). For the
privileged reader who had access to book, of which only 220 copies were produced,
Congo provided an opportunity to get closer to “the heart” of Africa than any
museum could provide.

After presenting her gifts to the Kuba villagers and expressing her desire to
buy masks, cloth, and other objects, Stern receives an interesting request from the
king: a portable Remington typewriter from Johannesburg. Stern’s reaction is one of
shock and disbelief. “This king,” she states, “only one generation removed from
man-eating, the King of the Bakubas with six hundred and eight wives—a typewriter!
It does look as though centuries are leaped over.”46 The story ends after this
statement and is followed by several pages covered in mounted textiles. By jumping
between stories and abruptly ending her descriptions, Stern’s narrative collapses
time and space into a series of disjointed vignettes, leaving the reader with a few
chaotic snapshots of her experience in the Kuba village. By tossing several unrelated
and themes into the narrative—cannibalism, polygamy, technology—Stern eliminates
any opportunity to for the reader to make any emotional or cultural connections with
the Kuba.

Consistent with the narrative that jumps between discussions of the
Mangbetu and the Kuba, Stern’s portrait, Mangbetu Chief’s Daughter is placed at
the end of a discussion of the Bakuba (fig. 60). Painted against an ochre
background, the chief’s daughter sits in profile with a large red and white flower
adorning her ear, baring her breasts. Her signature Mangbetu coiffure is held

46 Stern, Congo, 25.
together with a long, gold pin. Although this painting is a portrait, its erotic overtones suggest that its main intent is to titillate Stern’s South African audience rather than portray a member of the Mangbetu royal family. The young woman’s breasts are painted unnaturally high on her chest to ensure that they are visible. In combination with her bare chest, the large flower signifies fecundity.

The Mangbetu Chief’s Daughter has both homosexual and heterosexual appeal. The young woman’s smooth brown skin, exposed breasts, and full lips would be appealing to Congo’s white male and, arguably, its lesbian audience. In addition to her own lifelong fascination with the black female body, Stern’s failed marriage and her friendships with progressive lesbian feminists such as Van Gelderen and Purwitsky also contributed to her physical and emotional attraction to black female subjects. The painting is loaded with sexual signals that underscore Stern’s own romantic frustrations. Details such as the woman’s sultry gaze and the phallic wooden stick under the subject’s coiffure, positioned slightly above the pink flower in full bloom, draw the viewer into the painting regardless of sexual orientation. These details, however, also reflect Stern’s sexual ambivalence. Despite the fact that she was briefly married, her most influential and emotionally intense relationships were with women. Throughout Congo, Stern’s illustrations draw attention to black female sexuality.

Féte Nationale

---

The third and final story describes the coronation of a new Tutsi queen at the *Féte Nationale* in Kigali. The story’s first page and title are dominated by a large drawing of a capital “F,” under which stand several androgynous figures, with elongated heads, in order to emphasize their tall, slender bodies *(fig. 61).* Stern does not play the explorer’s role in this story. She does not claim to have discovered a previously unknown village, nor is she considered to be a special guest at the event. Unlike the Mangbetu and the Kuba, according to Stern, the Watussi have embraced European contact.* Missionaries, “[g]overnment officials, and European dignitaries” are in attendance at the event.* As the “Queen Mother” takes her seat, Stern marvels at the osprey feathers that adorn her crown, comparing her to “an Egyptian statue” and making reference to the long-held belief that the Tutsi were descendants of the ancient Egyptians.*

When the new Queen enters, Stern comments on her “Egyptian” features as well, stating, “She purses her lips as the Egyptians did. From beneath her long, flowing robe her bare foot emerges. Never have I seen such beauty; it is like the black basalt foot of an Egyptian statue. It is expressive of a highly bred cultured ancient race. My chief desire is to paint the Queen.”* In this context, Stern is complimenting the Queen by comparing her with an ancient Egyptian sculpture,*

49 Ibid., 38.
50 Ibid.
51 Stern, *Congo*, 38.
52 Ibid.
which, in her mind, belongs to the Western artistic tradition and is, therefore, an acceptable standard of beauty. The homoerotics in this sensuous passage suggest that Stern was also physically attracted to the Queen. Notably, Stern does not include a portrait of the Tutsi queen in *Congo* despite declaring that painting the Queen was one of her objectives (*fig. 62*). She does, however, include a drawing of a beautiful Tutsi woman, her hair wrapped elegantly in a scarf, with a long neck and very delicate facial features (*fig. 63*). Her dark skin contrasts with the lighter areas of her head scarf and her clothing, and her long eyelashes bring attention to her almond-shaped eyes and her long, thin nose. Although the drawing is very basic, its simplistic elegance belies Stern’s complex view of the Tutsi. She respected them for their connections to Western civilization, but the intent of her trip to central Africa was to find black cultures that were “untainted” by European contact. Accordingly, the drawing of the graceful Tutsi woman symbolizes Stern’s acknowledgment that she may not have found the culturally isolated society for which she was looking, although she did find aesthetic fulfillment in her subjects.

In the *Fête Nationale* story, Stern uses additional terms and value judgments that impose Western artistic conventions on African culture. She modifies, for example, the word “ancient” with the phrase “highly-bred and cultured,” which does not have the same pejorative connotations implied by her use of the phrase “rigid old tradition” to refer to the Kuba mat-making process. In associating beauty with

---

53 The 1943 painting, *Watussi Queen* is a stunning portrait of the Tutsi queen. Capturing her long neck, elegant profile, and decorative coiffure, the queen has a regal appearance that is accentuated by Stern’s use of bright yellow and deep, rich brown colors as well a long, sweeping brush strokes that give the painting a sense of vibrant movement.

54 Stern, *Congo*. 
sculpture and rigidity with textile traditions, Stern reinforces the gendered Western hierarchy of artistic production that privileges male sculptors over female textile artists.

The remainder of her description of the coronation describes the dances performed by Tutsi men. The combination of musical drumming by Bahuto musicians and the vibrant, rhythmic movements of the dancers creates an image of uninhibited, Dionysian splendor for the reader. This description is accompanied by a painting, *Bahuto Musicians*, which visually depicts the chaotic and sonorous scene (fig. 64). “The rhythm of the dance goes faster,” Stern writes, “until it ends in a frenzy.” She mentions the dancers’ “whirling yellow loin-cloths” and their “blue tassels and fringes,” which are also depicted in the painting. The men blow into their long, ivory horns while one man in the foreground beats a drum, creating a sexually suggestive scene that allows Stern’s white audience to indulge in the excitement of the dance from a safe, comfortable distance.

As the concluding major story in her *Congo* narrative, Stern’s account of the *Féte Nationale* in Kigali reinforces the cultural divide between blacks and whites, but her decision to describe her encounter with the urbane Tutsis at the end of the text is an attempt to show how she has helped bridge this gap through her work. In addition to the physical beauty passed down by the ancient Egyptians, Stern argues, the Tutsi are also so sophisticated and evolved that, like Europeans, they too own slaves. Stern elevates the Tutsis’ status through her discussion of the Bahuto, “a conquered race in

---

55 Ibid., 43.
servitude to the Watussi.” She reinforces their sub-human status in Tutsi society in her painting of the Bahuto musicians in which the men have yellow eyes and an animal-like appearance.

In her construction of ethnic hierarchies throughout *Congo*, Stern presents a snapshot of a culturally diverse region fraught with political and social challenges. The travel narrative format allowed her the artistic freedom to illustrate the text with her own paintings and textiles that she collected during her travels. Because she was familiar with Schweinfurth’s and Frobenius’ previous accounts of the region, she was also able to borrow their travel routes and communications strategies. Although Europeans were already familiar with the Mangbetu when *Congo* was published in 1943, South African audiences were not as well-versed in Mangbetu iconography. As the social climate in South African became more racially charged, Stern’s celebration of ethnic differences among blacks in *Congo* could have easily been misinterpreted to confirm the need for segregation in South Africa.

**Congo’s Reception**

The South African press was eager to report on Stern’s travels to the Congo and the work that she exhibited upon her return. Overall, *Congo* was well received as

56 Ibid.
57 Stern perpetuated the existing divide between the Hutus and the Tutsis that eventually led to the 1994 genocide of Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda. To maintain its colonial power in the region, the Belgians exploited physical and cultural differences between the ethnic groups. Favored by the Belgians for their height and their more attenuated "European" facial features, the Tutsis’ slaughter by the Hutus represented decades of resentment of the Tutsis’ preferential treatment under colonialism. More than 800,000 Rwandans were brutally murdered between April and June of 1994. For two detailed studies of Rwandan history and the genocide, see Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003). And Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
an ethnographic study rather than as a pure piece of art or travel literature. Although she had no formal training in ethnography, analysts at the time considered Stern’s observations to have some type of scientific basis. One writer, for instance, commented that Stern was “interested in all tribes, their cultures, and their social significance.”58 Another noted that Stern’s Congo works were “une interresante causeire sur l’histoire et l’ethnographique du Congo Belge [an interesting review of the history and ethnography of the Belgian Congo].”59 The South African Jewish Times reported that “Stern saw the imprint of [the] Egyptian foot in Berlin [the Nefertiti bust at the Egyptian Museum], [and] compared it to the Watussi.60” The critics’ positive reviews of Congo validated Stern’s bold statements and opinions in the narrative to the press. Upon her return to South Africa, Stern declared that “the Watussi were probably the most aristocratic and cultured race on earth,” adding that luxury items, such as milk, honey, and banana juice, were dietary staples.61 Stern’s pronouncements and analysis in Congo, therefore, provided a degree of academic authority to her audience that allowed viewers and critics alike to accept the text as an accurate description of life in the Belgian Congo.

Congo also received praise from European scholars, further blurring the line between art and ethnography. In December 1942, after Stern’s return from the Congo, French archaeologist Abbe Henri Breuil opened an exhibition of Congolese sculpture at the South African Museum in Cape Town, where he called on South

58 “An Exciting Artist,” Forward, 4 December 1942.
60 “Irma Stern to Visit Central Africa,” South Africa Jewish Times, 30 October 1942.
61 Ibid.
Africa to establish a Pan-African museum of indigenous African art. Breuil was a well-known archaeologist who specialized in prehistoric rock art and became known for his “white lady of Brandberg” thesis that suggested that blacks were not responsible for the rock paintings found in South African caves. Breuil emerged as a popular figure in South African academic and political circles because of his role in legitimizing and reaffirming the paternalistic approach that whites used in establishing their historiography of African art. Breuil’s “thesis” and subsequent research on South African cave paintings was timely since the artworks provided evidence of ancient black societies inhabiting South Africa during prehistoric times, making them to the region’s original inhabitants. To contradict this evidence, Breuil’s research suggested that the presence of white painted figures in the cave indicated that the blacks who made the cave paintings must have been in contact with Mediterranean (white) societies.

---

62 "Exhibition of Congo Sculpture," Rand Daily Mail, 5 December 1942. Later, in 1946, Stern and Abbe Breuil would “collaborate” for a film produced by the South African Bureau of Information entitled “Pan-African Artist.” The film would depict Stern “as an example of Pan-Africanism,” showing Stern at work in various African locations such as the Congo, Lake Kivu, and Zanzibar. The film would be the third in a series of “cinemagazines” entitled “Africa,” following the first two that focused on the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Abbe Breuil’s discussion of prehistoric art, respectively.

63 See Abbe Henri Breuil, "The White Lady of Brandberg, South-West Africa, Her Companions and Her Guards," The South African Archaeological Bulletin 3, no. 9 (1948). And Abbe Henri Breuil, "The So-Called Bushman Art: Paintings and Engravings on Rock in South Africa and the Problems They Suggest," Man 46, no. July-August (1946). Breuil’s thesis asserted that a white painted figure in a South African rock painting from the Tsiab region was actually a Cretan or a Sumerian, which proved that these civilizations had contact with the Bushmen. Breuil was part of a school of archaeologists who believed that there was a historical or cultural connection between rock paintings around the world.

64 Breuil and South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts had a close relationship. Smuts believed that Breuil’s archaeological research was instrumental in establishing a white presence in the region during the prehistoric era to justify white claims to the South African land. When Breuil fled Nazi-occupied France, Smuts invited Breuil to work at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. While in Johannesburg, Breuil spent time analyzing reproductions of rock paintings from the
With its new emphasis on celebrating ethnic difference while keeping ethnicities separate, the South African government embraced Breuil’s use of the term “Pan-African” in an ethnographic context.

Congo’s critical acclaim showed Stern that the travel narrative was a successful outlet for distributing her work. It also provided her with a platform and an audience for expressing her strident opinions about race and class issues. With her reputation as South Africa’s premier artist and an audience eager to follow her adventures, Stern sought to fulfill the new interest in “Pan-Africanism” among South Africa’s political elite by traveling to the multicultural island of Zanzibar to write her second travel narrative.

Zanzibar

Stern departed for her second trip to Zanzibar on July 20, 1945. Her visit was sanctioned by the South African government, which provided her with diplomatic assistance that included credentials and a letter of introduction from Brandberg region in South Africa. After he discussed his “White Lady” thesis with Smuts, Breuil claimed that Smuts stated, “You have upset all of my history...When you publish these paintings, you will set the world on fire and nobody will believe you.” Breuil’s thesis was accepted as fact for years until scholars demonstrated that the white figure in the painting had a penis and that Greek explorers had not visited the area. Because Smuts was politically invested in connecting white South African identity to the rock paintings, Breuil became a respected academic authority and his thesis remained part of white South African folklore even after it was disproved. For more information on Breuil’s role in shaping the political dimensions of South African archaeology, see J.D. Lewis-Williams, “Image and Counter-Image: The Work of the Rock Art Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand,” African Arts 29, no. 4 (1996). See also Nick Shepherd, “State of the Discipline: Science, Culture, and Identity in South African Archaeology, 1870-2003,” Journal of Southern African Studies 29, no. 4 (2003).

65 Stern’s first visit to Zanzibar was in 1938.
South African Minister of Education and of Finance J.H. Hofmeyr. As a result, her goals in visiting the island may have been shaped by the political motives of her supporters.

With its long colonial history and central role in the east African trade system, Zanzibar offered Stern the opportunity to examine Arab culture, its Eastern influences, and its relationship to the African continent. Because of its location off the eastern coast of Africa, Zanzibar was often the final stop for explorers returning from central Africa, and Stern could have viewed a visit to Zanzibar as the completion of the route taken by her predecessors Schweinfurth and Frobenius. In addition, Zanzibar was popular with tourists because of its beautiful beaches, culinary delights, and “exotic” Arab and Indian cultures. Since she spent so much time with Cape Muslims in Cape Town, Arab culture was not foreign or even exotic to Stern, but the idea of visiting an Arab society that had been heavily influenced by Africa, India, and the Middle East gave Stern the opportunity to explore new directions in her work.

Like Congo, Zanzibar was intended to be read as well as to showcase Stern’s art. Both books were sold as limited editions published by J.L. Van Schaik Press in Pretoria, South Africa. In Zanzibar’s text, Stern takes an almost journalistic approach to interpreting and describing people, places, and events. Her vivid descriptions of colors, smells, and sounds provide readers with a detailed mental picture of the island, and Stern’s observations of the social relations between

---

66 Berman, Remembering Irma, 96. Hofmeyr served in President Jan Smuts’ cabinet. Smuts is credited with being South Africa’s most international leader. Educated at Cambridge University, he believed that closer relations with Britain would strengthen South Africa’s reputation in the British Commonwealth and in the world. He supported the formation of the United Nations and increased the country’s participation in international affairs. See Thompson, A History of South Africa, 157-8.
Zanzibaris of different races, classes, and genders make this narrative more thoughtful than Congo.

Although Stern’s writing and analysis is simplistic at times, Zanzibar is a more conceptually developed publication than Congo. In her second attempt at writing a travel narrative, Stern proves how she grew from her experiences in the Congo and gained confidence from the respect she earned in South Africa. She recognized that much of her previous work generalized her subjects. “I am painting dramatic pictures, compositions, and faces—not just types and races,” she wrote to Richard and Freda Feldman in September 1945.67 In Zanzibar, Stern addresses themes such as the role of women in Arab society, Muslim customs and religious traditions, and the relationships between people of different ethnic groups and varying class and social status, making comparisons between Arab, Africa, and European cultures. She begins the narrative with a historical overview of the island. “Gold, ebony, ivory, and slaves brought the Arabs to Africa,” she begins. “As early as the tenth century they came to settle in Zanzibar—the island of spices, the gateway into the centre of Africa.”68

Zanzibar’s first illustration is a watercolor depicting two seated Arab men engrossed in conversation (fig. 65). The pair are involved in an animated discussion. One listens intently while the other gesticulates wildly with his hands. Wearing white turbans and tunics, the men’s dark skin contrasts strongly against their clothing. There are few details—the men have no facial features, for example,

67 Berman, Remembering Irma, 97.

and the absence of these characteristics gives the painting an abstract quality that Stern began to favor beginning in the middle of her career.

Throughout the narrative, Stern appears to not only describe life on Zanzibar, but also to draw parallels between Zanzibar and South Africa. Below the first illustration, for example, she discusses slavery on the island. Stern makes an interesting statement regarding the abolition of slavery that may have resonated with her South African audience, for which slavery was a sensitive topic.69 “Even after slavery was officially abolished the people were so used to their position that they remained part of the Arab household. Call them what you will, every family still has its domestics who belong to the master and to the household.”70 For a 1948 South African publication, the reference to domestics who belong to the “master and to the household” was almost certainly an attempt to connect with white South African audiences, who had recently elected the Afrikaner National Party to control the nation’s parliament and secure white political and cultural domination.

Adjacent to a rough profile sketch of an Arab man holding a pipe, Stern describes Arab women’s positions in Zanzibari society (fig. 66). “The Arab may marry two or more wives,” Stern writes, continuing, “The women do not count, they have no say in the men’s lives. They bring the children into the world, they cook, they direct the servants, but they are of no consequence, as the Arab [sic] believe that

69 In response to the abolition of slavery in the Cape region in 1820, the Boers fled the area to search for a place where they could live outside of English laws, beginning their “Great Trek” into the Transvaal. The issue of slavery became one of the most inflammatory issues between the English and the Boers, laying the foundation for the friction between the English and the Boers that exists today. See Thompson, A History of South Africa, 42-5.

70 Stern, Zanzibar, 6.
women have no souls.”71 Stern divorced her husband, Dr. Johannes Prinz in 1934, and as a divorcee, she eschewed the South African social conventions that dictated proper women’s behavior. In addition to being self-conscious about being a single female traveler, her comments may have also reflected her frustration with gender roles in South Africa.

As in Congo, the images in Zanzibar are not intended to be illustrative of the text. Interspersed between each short narrative are a series of drawings and paintings, as well as photographs of wooden, sculpted objects. Some of the drawings are superimposed on textiles and presented in the same way they are in Congo. Many of the drawings show Muslim women and children, and in most, Stern depicts the women’s faces with an oval shape and almond eyes that venture further toward abstraction (fig. 67). “I am doing more geometrical and abstract of curious values,” she wrote to Freda Feldman, “May not be noticeable to the layman. But one day it will soon bring me the same freedom in form and composition as I have gained in colour.”72

In addition to moving toward abstraction, Stern also framed each of her paintings with carved wood from Zanzibar. Intrigued by their intricate abstract designs and symbolism, Stern used the frames to add authenticity to her work. She loved the carvings so much that she brought a set of wooden doors home to South

71 Ibid., 12.
72 Berman, Remembering Irma, 96.
Africa and had them installed in her home (fig. 68). Stern describes the meaning of various symbols and designs in Zanzibar:

The ornaments on the doors, like all ornamentation in the East, are symbolical: the chain holding and protecting the threshold; the lotus flower and leaves; the fish ornament...the leaves of the tree of eternal resurrection. The purpose of these symbols is to bring good fortune to the household and to chase away the evil spirits.

In the tradition of the German Romantics, Stern’s use of carved wood to frame her work expresses her interest in the arabesque, a term that art historian Frances Connelly uses to describe “visual structures [the Romantics] described to be ‘primitive.’” As Connelly notes, the Romantics were particularly interested in ut pictura poesis, or the relationship between visual images and verbal communication, which is why they studied hieroglyphics and totem imagery. For Stern, the designs in the carved wood served as both literal and symbolic framing devices for her paintings in Zanzibar by defining the physical boundaries of her work and providing a “frame” to help viewers interpret the meaning of her paintings. Furthermore Stern, intended the carved symbols in the wood to serve as a pre-modern form of communication that, combined with the “primitive” image on the canvas and Stern’s textual descriptions, confirmed for the white South African viewer that Arab cultures are interesting and exotic but, ultimately, still inferior to Western cultures.

---

73 Cullen et al., eds., Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey, 27. Stern’s removal of the doors from Zanzibar prompted the government to pass a law prohibiting the export of artistic objects without approval.

74 Stern, Zanzibar, 10.


76 Ibid., 44.
In the section called “The Bazaar,” Stern travels by rickshaw through the streets of Zanzibar to learn more about how its poor citizens live. This section is illustrated with rough sketches of Arab men, whose skin is much darker than the Arabs priests in the paintings she included in the narrative (fig. 69). Stern appears to use this section to reinforce the cultural divide between reader and subject. She observes how poverty and disease have taken a toll on Zanzibar’s least fortunate. In addition, Stern dramatizes the tropical nature of the island’s environment even though South Africa’s temperate climate produces similar items that are also sold in bazaars. “The tropical heat [brings] this smell [of decay] into a stench,” Stern writes, “a mixture of copra, cloves, and shark, with a virile smell of dorian, an Indian fruit which has the odour of decomposing meat—a smell of all the garbage swimming round on the stone-paved lanes.”

Obviously, this passage does not convey Zanzibar’s attractive qualities. Although very few white South Africans had the ability to visit the island, descriptions such as these make white South Africa seem like an island itself, culturally separated from the rest of Africa.

In a later section, Stern raises the issue of racial stratification in Zanzibar. She describes an encounter with “a fat, comfortable-looking negress, her dark skin shining in the sun.” Remarkably, Stern did not include an illustration of this woman in the travel narrative. Her comments reveal her discomfort with seeing a nude black woman in a predominantly Arab country where public nudity is strictly forbidden. Whereas she did not question nudity among black women in the Congo or during her travels throughout southern Africa (in fact, she frequently painted black

77 Stern, Zanzibar, 18.
78 Ibid., 30.
women nude), Stern is deeply troubled by both nudity and blackness in Zanzibar. “Her back was well formed, a black shiny back; her back was naked, her head was naked like an ebony ball,” asking, “Why was she naked? No woman was unclad.” At the conclusion of this section, Stern reveals that the woman has “enormously ill-formed stumps of ‘human legs,’” and suffers from elephantiasis, a disease that causes swelling in the legs and feet.\textsuperscript{79} As one of only a few discussions of blacks in the text, Stern’s language describes the woman’s disfiguring condition as though she is physically defective, ironically drawing conclusions about blacks similar to those that the Nazis came to about “degenerate” groups.

As in South Africa, the Indian community was instrumental in establishing Zanzibar as a major trade and commercial center, and in the narrative, Stern delves into the details of their status on the island. “The Indians have the trade in hand,” she writes, “They deal with ivory in a big way, with jewels and silk; in fact, most of the shops are run by Indians.”\textsuperscript{81} In comparison to the Arabs and the black Africans on the island, Stern writes, “How differently live the Indians. ...Modernly furnished rooms, pale blue walls, very shiny brass beds with huge mosquito nets over them.” During her visit, Stern became friendly with a young Indian women who had, as she described, “the gentle movements of a well-bred race.”\textsuperscript{82} As she marveled over how well the Indians lived in Zanzibar, Stern could not help but to place their success in a

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 33. 
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 32.
racial context for her South African audience that was familiar with the substantial Indian population that was concentrated in the Natal and its largest city, Durban. In 1947, a year before Zanzibar was published, Indians gained independence from England, but laws enacted by the South African government codified their inferior social standing.\textsuperscript{83}

In the same way that Stern attended events hosted by African royalty in Congo, she also visited the Sultana’s palace in Zanzibar. The section of the travel narrative illustrating this visit is accompanied by a framed painting of the palace, which depicts a large white stucco building with two palm trees at the entrance (\textbf{fig. 70}).\textsuperscript{84} Like the other framed works, the carved Eastern symbols (such as the lotus flower) on the frame contextualize the painting in a way that, regardless of Stern’s descriptions of wealth and fine living in Zanzibar, the island’s culture would always be viewed as exotic and, therefore, ‘primitive’ from the perspective of Zanzibar’s white South African audience. Nevertheless, Stern’s descriptions of her encounter at the palace signifies to her audience that her international reputation as an artist gives her privileged access to royalty in other countries. “Outside the gathering stood the population, the chauffeurs, the rickshaw runners, the usual crowd which wishes to see and live but cannot quite,” is how Stern describes a party attended by the

\textsuperscript{83} Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 194. Mohandas K. Gandhi, former South African lawyer, equal rights activist, and leader of the national independence movement in India, was also assassinated in 1948.

\textsuperscript{84} This painting was purchased by the French government in 1949.
Zanzibar elite: the Aga Khan and other wealthy Arabs, European diplomats, and members of the Indian business community.\textsuperscript{85}

\textit{Zanzibar} ends as awkwardly as it begins. There are more vignettes of Stern’s adventures, including her attendance at European dinner parties and an Arab wedding. She expresses concern about Arab men’s potential for violence, writing, “[The Arab] is kind, with sudden hatred and passion rising violent and untamed—and so is his dance.”\textsuperscript{86} Overall, Stern seems to have enjoyed her visit to the island and learned a great deal about its history and culture. She continues, however, to describe Arab culture as intriguing but ultimately too foreign to understand fully. In the last vignette, Stern attends a wedding and witnesses a traditional dance called the “Lelemama,” which Stern writes is “performed today mostly by prostitutes.”\textsuperscript{87} She adds, “Their dance is replete with highly suggestive sexual movement.”\textsuperscript{88} Unlike the blacks in the Congo, at whom Stern marvels for being one generation removed from cannibalism, she seems to lament the social change that is occurring on Zanzibar with the often-cited refrain that women who evolve from rural to urban dwellers must resort to prostitution to survive. Stern would later increasingly rely on this simplistic explanation as she struggled to find her conception of ‘authentic’ black subjects in an urbanizing South Africa.

As Stern absorbs her last moments in Zanzibar at the wedding, which includes dancing, drumming, and singing while guests feast on traditional food and spiced

\textsuperscript{85} Stern, \textit{Zanzibar}, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
coffee, it is apparent that the direction of her art would change upon her return to South Africa. Stern’s visit made it clear to her that her search for African subjects that were untainted by modernization and outside cultural influences would yield few results. It did, however, confirm to Stern and her audience that despite the development and economic progress in other African countries, South Africa was still unique on the continent because whites seemed to have gained complete control over the nation’s cultural and social direction. Stern’s illustrations and cultural commentary in *Zanzibar* reaffirmed what white South Africans already assumed about other African nations, namely that colonialism was the best form of government for nonwhites.

For both *Congo* and *Zanzibar*, Stern converted her observations into meditations on the evolution of race and social class on the African continent. In *Congo*, she claimed that she discovered evidence of a society of blacks who had quickly evolved from “man-eaters” into a civilized group that was sophisticated enough to own slaves. *Congo* sent coded signals to its South African audience that sophisticated black Africans did exist, but that they were still not as advanced as whites. *Zanzibar* signified an escape from reality to an exotic locale, but its focus on Indian and Muslim culture alluded to the political implications of legal segregation in a multiracial and multilingual nation like South Africa. Stern’s description of clear blue seas, spices, and rickshaws was not entirely distinct from the British colonial experience in other countries, South Africa included, and it secured the racial hierarchies that placed whites at the top, blacks at the bottom (as described in
Stern’s anecdote about the “negress”), and Indians and Arabs somewhere in between.

*Congo* and *Zanzibar* are Stern’s two attempts to add to the constructed narratives about African history and culture. In his essay, “Myth Today,” French philosopher Roland Barthes argues that “mythic speech” is one method of streamlining a historical narrative. “Myth does not deny things,” he writes, before adding, “on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply it purifies them, it makes them innocent.”

With their short and simplistic vignettes, Stern uses *Congo* and *Zanzibar* to connect to the mythical constructions embedded in the discourse on blacks in Central Africa and Arabs in East Africa by drawing conclusions about history and culture from her brief encounters in the Congo and Zanzibar. In essence, *Congo* and *Zanzibar* convey the complexity and diversity of artistic expression on the African continent, but Stern’s texts place these rich cultures into simple racial and social categories that were easily digestible for a white South African audience. The type of writing in *Congo* and *Zanzibar* illustrates the pitfalls in mining terms such as “Pan-African” for political purposes. Even Schweinfurth acknowledged the multiracial nature of African national identity in 1874, stating, “It cannot fail to strike the traveler as remarkable that in all African nations he meets with individuals with black, red, and yellow complexions...”

The postcolonial era allows for new ways to consider Stern’s work, including the intersections of social and art histories and the introduction of the diasporic

---


model of thinking about identity. The “Pan-African” label that Stern acquired during her African travels also took on a more racialized meaning in South Africa. By the 1950s, the term “Pan-African” referred to the Pan-Africanist Congress, a black anti-apartheid organization that split off from the militant African National Congress. As she reached the apex of her career, the artistic and social conditions that made Stern’s work so popular began to crumble. In Europe, contemporary artists began exploring abstraction to find new methods for artistic expression. In South Africa, apartheid’s suppression of political freedoms sparked violent protests and new restrictions on artistic expression. Rising anti-apartheid sentiments in black communities made it difficult for Stern to travel to rural areas. In her last two decades of life, Stern was forced to face the glaring contradictions between the South African government’s enthusiastic support of her work and the fate of the black and coloured communities she loved to paint.
Chapter 4: Stern and Apartheid, 1948-1966

“The 1948 parliamentary session will be electric,” wrote an unidentified columnist for the South African magazine Trek in January of that year, “and issues which are undreamed of to-day, will be created and will become issues of burning political controversy before Parliament is prorogued.”\(^1\) Aside from being a tremendous understatement, in retrospect, the columnist recognizes that South Africa had turned a corner in the period immediately following World War II. While many nations were banding together through political alliances and new international organizations, South Africa retreated into isolation, its racial divisions looming large. Over a period of twenty years, the country became more insular, both socially and politically.

Amidst this “electric” milieu, Irma Stern resumed her travels to Europe after a 10-year absence during World War II. In the same issue of Trek that predicted unprecedented political change in South Africa, Stern recalled her visit to war-ravaged Europe: “…it was with doubt in my heart that I set forth on my journey. These doubts have been dispelled and I know once and for all that Europe remains that art centre of the world.”\(^2\)

That Stern would turn her South African audience’s attention back to Europe after focusing on Africa for more than six years signaled yet another shift in her thinking about how to craft her image as South Africa’s most prominent artist. She used the work she produced during her trips to the Belgian Congo and Zanzibar as

---

\(^{1}\) "Political Tom-Tom," *Trek*, January 1948.

an entrée into the postwar European art world, thereby reconnecting South Africa culturally to its Western artistic heritage.

This chapter examines the final two decades of Stern’s life from the beginning of apartheid in 1948 to her death in 1966. It argues that as Stern evolved from being an avant-garde artist to a widely recognized mainstream artist, her work became a crucial element of the Afrikaner-led National Party’s efforts to promote apartheid. Although her political views were not necessarily aligned with those of the National Party, government officials routinely selected Stern’s paintings of South African ethnic groups for exhibition and purchase to emphasize racial differences and justify apartheid. In addition to reaching the apex of her career in South Africa at this time, Stern also sought to maintain a high profile in Europe even as artistic trends pointed toward abstraction. Her paintings during this period reveal her nostalgia for the time when her work was considered culturally provocative rather than politically expedient.

**Background**

The Second World War created large divisions in South African society that ultimately led to the Afrikaner-led National Party’s victory in elections held in 1948 and the implementation of its official policy of racial segregation: apartheid. During the conflict, South Africa officially sided with the Allies, but many Afrikaners were supportive of the Nazis and their racial purity platform.\(^3\) According to South African journalist Allister Sparks, “Afrikanerdom chose to intensify and codify the

\(^3\) Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, 171.
segregationist system and to articulate racism as a national policy at precisely the moment the rest of the world began moving in the opposite direction.”

English-speaking South Africans dominated the most significant sectors of the South African economy, including the mining and banking industries. By almost every indicator—education, wealth, etc. – Afrikaners lagged behind, which meant that sweeping changes were necessary to augment their social standing. The Allied victory and the international outrage against Germany and the Holocaust confirmed for Afrikaners that they needed to do more to insulate themselves and protect their culture. To accomplish this objective, they sought to gain control of South Africa’s government and its economy.

In addition to wresting political and economic control from English-speaking whites, Afrikaners were deeply troubled by what they perceived to be a liberalization of racial policies by Prime Minister Jan C. Smuts’ administration (1939-1948). J.H. Hofmeyr, Smuts’ deputy prime minister, once stated in Parliament, “I take my stand on the ultimate removal of the colour bar from our constitution.”

Although Smuts and Hofmeyr were ardent segregationists, they also wanted to elevate South Africa’s position in international affairs by appearing to support human rights. Nevertheless,

4 Ibid., 183.


6 Ibid., 180. General Jan Christian Smuts (1870-1950) was a charismatic and complex South African leader who, despite his Afrikaner heritage, was committed to developing close ties to England, as well as the international community. Smuts was also one of few South African politicians who was interested in South Africa’s standing in the world and forcefully worked to create an international community in which he intended South Africa to participate. As a lawyer who became a military general, Smuts believed in Afrikaner sovereignty and self-determination. He advocated for the separation of races, but he also paradoxically supported global struggles for human rights.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Stern received a letter of introduction from Hofmeyr for her trip to Zanzibar.
statements like these aroused fear among Afrikaners who believed that their culture would become diluted in an integrated society.  

In the late 1940s, South Africa was also undergoing major demographic and social changes, which disturbed the racial balance that agrarian life had fostered for nearly three centuries. More citizens, for example, were moving into cities where higher population densities meant more interracial contact. Most importantly, an increasing number of blacks were pursuing work in the mining industry, competing with lower-class Afrikaners for jobs. As a result, blacks flowed into major cities, such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban, to the dismay of whites. Fears of racial mixing in cities prompted whites, led by Afrikaners, to call for new government regulations to maintain racial segregation.

In May 1948, after decades of planning and political maneuvering, the Afrikaner-led National Party won the largest number of seats in Parliament, defeating Smuts' United party by a slim margin. The new prime minister, Dr. Daniel Francois (D.F.) Malan, an academic and an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, immediately began crafting legislation that would form apartheid’s core. Three major pieces of legislation were passed in 1950 that set the apartheid machinery in motion: the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, and the Immorality Act. The Population Registration Act created numerous

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Ibid., 169.}

\footnote{Sparks, The Mind of South Africa, 183. Blacks had been disenfranchised since the early twentieth century and were not permitted to vote in the 1948 election. The 1936 Native Representation Act removed additional Africans from the voting rolls.}

170
racial categories by which people would be classified. The Group Areas Act mandated that citizens must live with their assigned racial group. And finally, the Immorality Act criminalized interracial sexual relations. Together, these three pieces of legislation served as the cornerstone of apartheid policy, and their enforcement was effective in securing white supremacy in South Africa until 1994.

**Stern’s Return to Europe**

Upon the cessation of hostilities, Stern returned to Europe in 1947 to rebuild her relationships with galleries and museums. Her paintings from the Belgian Congo and Zanzibar cultivated a renewed interest in her work. In 1947, for example, Stern exhibited at the Gallerie des Beaux Arts in Paris, which resulted in the Modern Art Museum’s (also in Paris) purchase of her painting, *In the Harem* (fig. 71), a work that was reproduced with a woven textile frame in her travel narrative, *Zanzibar*.

In his introductory essay for the Gallerie des Beaux Arts catalogue, chief curator Jean Cassou described Stern as “une africaine [an African],” citing her birth “dans une ferme [on a farm]” in the Transvaal. According to Cassou, whose remarks were based on Stern’s recent work in the Congo and Zanzibar, Stern’s role as an artist was to interpret Africa through her art.

Sa vocation était de dire l’Afrique. C’est avec les visages africains que Mme Irma Stern a familiarité... Là est sa patrie, là résonnent, sur des instruments singuliers, les musiques capables de la délecter. C’est dans son pays, L’Afrique du Sud, et en Rhodésia, en Mozambique, à Dakar, à Madère, et à Zanzibar, dans le pays des Zoulous et dans celui des Bassoutos qu’elle poursuit la face humaine, et chez cette tribu de géants des rives du Congo ou elle s’assure d’avoir trouvé une forme pure et parfaite de culture.

---

[Her calling was to speak of Africa. It is with the faces of Africans that Ms. Irma Stern is familiar. Her universe is the African continent. That is her native land. In her country, South Africa, as well as in Rhodesia, Mozambique, in Dakar, Madeira, and Zanzibar, in the land of the Zulus and in that of the Basutos that she pursues the face of humanity, and it was in the tribe of giants of the Congo River that she was assured to have found a pure and perfect form of culture.]¹¹

Cassou’s essay was significant because it was not only an endorsement of Stern by a major European museum, but it was also a statement of her new role in postwar Europe. In her early career, Stern’s paintings and drawings represented her country of birth, South Africa, referencing a place with which European audiences were unfamiliar. By the late 1940s, Stern was viewed as “an African” in Europe and was expected to interpret “the meaning of Africa,” which was changing rapidly as a wave of decolonization began to roll over the continent.¹²

In addition to the Modern Art Museum’s purchase, the Roland, Browse, and Delbanco Gallery in London exhibited paintings from Stern’s Zanzibar visit. Her 1945 painting, Arab Priest, for example, was on display at the London gallery (fig.72). The painting, an oil with thick, impasto brush strokes, depicts an Arab priest dressed in a white tunic who is seated in a chair with his head tilted and resting in his hand. A reviewer for the Glasgow Herald criticized Stern for being “concerned more with color than character.”¹³ Stern’s palette for this painting, however, is limited to whites and shades of brown. Even if the writer was referring to the painting’s color scheme, the double entendre in the statement cannot be

¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
overlooked. Postwar Britain was a grim place. Much of London was nearly destroyed, including many of its art galleries. As Britain began to lose its colonial influence, Stern’s paintings of Arabs and Africans may have been an unpleasant reminder of Britain’s diminished status as a world power.

In 1948, the South African Association of Arts (SAAA), a small arts organization based in Pretoria, organized an exhibition of South African artists at the Tate Gallery in London. The event was a major undertaking for the association, but it produced large dividends by introducing a predominantly white group of South African artists to postwar Europe. Unlike the South African Society of Artists, which encouraged artists to explore their national identity through their art, the SAAA was quick to declare South African art as nonexistent. “There is no reason to speak of a South African school of painting,” the SAAA states in the exhibition catalog, “In the past 30 years, the main influences have come from European Art.”14

The SAAA’s exhibition at the Tate Gallery was designed to underscore the organization’s view that whites brought the idea of “being civilized,” which the catalog describes as “so dear an ambition for the white man,” to the African continent.15 Moses Kottler’s wooden sculpture, Mother and Child, for example, depicts a black woman nursing a child with simian-like qualities (fig. 73) Stern’s 1942 charcoal drawing, Asande Girl, is a profile study of a nude black woman bearing traditional facial scarification marks, full lips, and an elongated head that is characteristic of women in the region (fig. 74). Just as French curator Jean Cassou

---


15 Ibid.
declared Stern an interpreter of African culture, so too does catalog writer Geoffrey Long. “If Pierneef shows the winter of Africa [in the form of winter landscapes], then Irma Stern is high summer,” writes Long, before adding, “A most prolific and vigorous painter, her work has an almost sumptuous decorativeness. An exoticism in which are sensed the ferment and heat of the tropics. Her style has flowered in the hot-houses of the Congo and Zanzibar...”\textsuperscript{16}

In contrast, painter Gerard Sekoto, the lone black artist represented in the exhibition, is described as follows: “The position of Gerard Sekoto, a Bantu artist, is difficult to assess as he is divorced by race and environment from the European artists of the country—the most important problem in the sub-continent today.”\textsuperscript{17} Sekoto’s painting, \textit{Sixpence a Door}, depicted a more realistic, although slightly sterilized view of township life (\textbf{fig. 75}). In the painting, black South Africans crowd around a building in a shantytown. Barefoot children run in the streets, and crowds of people clog the alleys. Although the painting portrays a township, none of the filth and squalor—some of the main reasons blacks objected to living in them—is visible, which may explain why the painting was selected for the exhibition. In short, the SAAA exhibition contributed to the sanitized version of South African art that was promoted abroad. The primitivized and exoticized views about blacks espoused by

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 9.

white artists, such as Stern and Kottler, were privileged over Sekoto’s more pragmatic but bleak interpretation of black life.

**Art, Propaganda, Apartheid**

The South African government invested heavily in Stern’s success because her work projected an image of tolerance for multiculturalism. Prior to the National Party’s election, Stern had received support from South African Prime Minister, Jan C. Smuts and his administration. In 1947, she wrote to her close friends in Johannesburg, Richard and Freda Feldman, just before departing for Paris exhibition: “I am having a Government sponsored Exhibition in Paris and also maybe Rotterdam...I am traveling with letters from the Information Officers—Education Officers—the External Affairs and Finance Minister—in short a little suitcase full of script.”18

Although Smuts firmly supported Afrikaner causes and believed that nonwhites were inherently inferior, he embraced international affairs, supported Stern’s work, and encouraged her to travel and exhibit abroad.19 Stern received letters of introduction for travel and personal letters from the prime minister himself. On May 15, 1950, four months before his death, Smuts wrote a letter of introduction for Stern’s trip to Europe:

> This serves to state that Miss Irma Stern, a distinguished South African Artist [sic], is proceeding to France and Spain, and other Continental [sic] countries, where she intends spending some time. Any help given her, or courtesies extended to her on her own account, we shall be glad to arrange.

---

18 Berman, *Remembering Irma*, 130.

travels, will be much appreciated by me. (J.C. Smuts), Field Marshal.  

Smuts died in September 1950, and his passing was mourned across the nation. Stern was given an opportunity to express her opinion on the value of his contributions to South African history. In an article entitled, “Smuts Memorial Should Be” South Africans were asked how they believed Smuts’ memory should be preserved and honored. Stern responded with, “A monument of his birthplace. Perhaps there should be a memorial at his birthplace and at Table mountain and also a bursary [scholarship] for the study of race relations—of all races.” Whether she was suggesting that she receive funds for her own work or that her work was illustrative of South African race relations, Stern’s views, like Smuts’, were more liberal than the conservative National Party’s, but still paternalistic and patronizing toward nonwhites.

Despite her interest in black subjects, Stern ignored the effect that urbanization had on black communities. After a 1951 visit to the Ciskei region of the Eastern Cape, Stern began to acknowledge apartheid’s social impact on black populations. “Now I no longer feel at ease among primitive people,” she told an unnamed reporter for the Cape Argus, before adding, “On my painting tour in the Transkei a few months ago I found things had changed since my earlier visits—perhaps the change lay in the natives, perhaps in myself. But the old ease of


communication had gone.” Stern was observing the fomenting anger over black disenfranchisement. In 1951, the government dissolved the Natives Representative Council, which was blacks’ only means of political participation. Additionally, the Transkei region (home to black activists Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela) was at the center of the apartheid regime’s controversial plans to dilute the black vote by dividing black areas into “homelands,” or separate, self-governing nations. The “natives,” as Stern referred to blacks, were tired of being mistreated by white South Africans, and organized resistance movements were spreading throughout both urban and rural areas.

Stern was not the only white female artist who witnessed apartheid’s pernicious effects on blacks. Constance Stuart Larabee, an English-speaking, Pretoria-based artist spent much of her time photographing the Ndebele, an ethnic group based in central and northeastern regions of South Africa, as well as blacks in the Transkei, Natal, and Zululand. Like Stern, Larrabee trained in Germany, studying at the Bavarian State School of Photography in Munich from 1936 to 1937. Larrabee’s photographs reflect the same combination of ethnography and a modernist aesthetic that is present in Stern’s work. Unlike Stern, however, Larrabee also photographed black life in the townships. Her subjects are usually majestically posed among Ndebele architectural structures that are decorated with traditional geometric and abstract patterns. As fiercely independent artists, both women

---

22 "Artist Wants to Paint in the Holy Land," Cape Argus, 5 March 1953.

23 Established in 1936 and chaired by a white government official, the Natives Representative Council was designed to provide nonwhites with representation in government, allowing them to “advise” the prime minister and his administration on native affairs. See Thompson, A History of South Africa, 182.
challenged gender and artistic boundaries by boldly venturing into black areas. But, they also both produced work that leaned more toward ethnography than portraiture. For Larrabee, blacks were ideal subjects for photography: “Natives are the most photogenic people. They are a really marvelous medium for photography. Their skin reflects the light so well.”24 Meanwhile, Stern claimed that she was primarily interested in the “social significance” of black subjects even though she became frustrated when black life differed from her expectations.25

In her black-and-white photographs of the Ndebele, Portrait of the Ndebele Woman, South Africa, Larrabee’s shows a similar eye for ethnographic details to those found in Stern’s paintings. In the photo, a woman stands in front of a traditional Ndebele structure, looking into the distance (fig. 76). Wearing the beaded necklaces, head coverings, and cloaks that are characteristic of Ndebele culture, she fits perfectly into the frame created by the building. Larrabee carefully constructed the image that she photographed, presenting a timeless view of the Ndebele woman. In addition, she calls the photograph a portrait despite its lack of specificity. This photograph, like many of Stern’s paintings of blacks at the same time, captures the aesthetic and the social dynamic caused by racial segregation in South Africa: a desire to mine black culture for aesthetic purposes combined with a pseudoscientific curiosity about the “other.” It is no surprise, then, that blacks were growing increasingly resistant to white incursions.


25 "An Exciting Artist."
The 1952 Van Riebeeck Tercentenary

In 1952, South Africa celebrated the 300th anniversary of Dutch explorer Jan Van Riebeeck’s arrival to the Cape Coast. Considered the “father” of the Afrikaner people, the Tercentenary celebration was integral in consolidating political power around Afrikaner cultural values under apartheid. As they struggled to unify whites across linguistic and class boundaries, apartheid leaders seized the opportunity to commemorate Van Riebeeck as a national hero who confronted the indigenous population and made it possible for whites to settle the land. Architects of the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary sought to use it to unify the country.

South Africa, however, was anything but united around the Van Riebeeck celebrations. Black and coloured communities were firmly against participating in any of the events, and they organized boycotts in protest.26 As blacks endured squalid conditions in the townships and dwindling political rights, there was little to celebrate about life under Afrikaner rule, past or present. The African National Congress (ANC) National Treasurer S. M. Molema, for example, called the Tercentenary a “frenzy of self adulation,” during which whites would “embrace each other and shake their bloody hands in commemoration of their three hundred years of rapine and bloodshed.”27 The ANC harnessed anger over the celebration to launch


27 Ibid.
its Defiance Campaign in which blacks challenged segregation laws by peacefully breaking them.

There were many types of events planned to celebrate Van Riebeeck during the Tercentenary, including several parades, symbolic processions through Cape Town, and a pavilion that showcased all aspects of South Africa culture. The costs and scale of the festivities were intended to rival a European colonial exposition or World’s Fair, and the event reflected this nineteenth century mode of display. A history pageant contained a procession of floats that progressed from “Darkest Africa” to “We Build a Nation,” a float led by Mrs. D.F. Malan and flanked by white horses and the Union flag.28

Stern was asked to participate in the art exhibition portion of the Tercentenary, where she showed the painting, Transkei Native. The piece had been recently purchased by Sir Alfred Beit, who lent it to the exhibition, which also showcased works by other nationally recognized artists, including Cecil Skotnes and Sekoto.29 Stern’s Transkei Native may have resembled her 1941 painting, Xhosa Woman, which depicts a black woman in traditional Xhosa dress, including a blue headscarf and signature white chalk around her eyes (fig. 77). This work, in particular, would have been consistent with the tone of the Tercentenary

28 Ibid.: 457.

29 Cape Times, 31 January 1952. Sir Alfred Beit was a South African business magnate whose family invested heavily in Cecil Rhodes’ De Beers Consolidated Diamond Mines. In 1952, Beit and his wife purchased a castle in Russborough, outside of Dublin, Ireland, to house their extensive collection of European art. Stern’s work would join that of Vermeer and Reubens in the Beit Collection. It is also noteworthy that because the Beits were known to be extremely wealthy, the collection was the target of several robberies in the late twentieth century. The older European works were the target of these robberies, and it does not appear that Stern’s work was involved in any of the thefts. For more information on the art thefts and the Beit Collection, see Matthew Hart, The Irish Game: A True Story of Crime and Art (New York: Plume, 2005).
celebrations since the Transkei region was the crucible for the black resistance movement. The selection of Stern to show her painting of traditional life in the Transkei was more than anachronistic. Indeed, it was a tacit statement of the apartheid government’s overall plan to confront the black resistance movement by separating blacks into ethnic homelands. While resistance organizations like the ANC encouraged intraracial unity, artists such as Stern, with an outdated vision of black life, promoted the incorrect view that blacks still lived a peaceful and bucolic tribal existence.

The Battle with Abstraction

Modern art’s move toward abstraction posed the next challenge to Stern’s international reputation. After working diligently to satisfy varying aesthetic tastes in Europe and South Africa, Stern was now successful on both continents and wanted to remain popular in both places. Abstraction, however, was a style of painting that Stern resisted for most of her career. “People who really know about art in Europe are sick and tired of all the nonsense that is being exhibited under the guise of abstract art,” said Stern after returning from a trip to Europe.30

Despite her protests against abstraction, critics began to suggest that Stern’s work was moving in that direction.31 Her 1953 oil painting, Malay Wedding, for example, supports this view (fig. 78). Compared with her 1939 painting, Malay Girl, for example, Malay Wedding appears to be more abstract (fig. 79). Although

30 "‘Sick and Tired of Abstract Art’," Cape Argus, 23 October 1958.

31 "Irma Stern Has No Time for Abstraction," Johannesburg Star, 17 April 1951.
the subject was one of Stern’s favorites, she had completed several paintings of
coloured women throughout her career--her 1953 painting shifts the focus from the
subjects to the formal elements and composition.

In *Malay Girl* (1939), the young girl’s features under the pinkish glow of her
floral-patterned head scarf are soft and realistic. The melancholic expression on the
young girl’s face gives the viewer a way to connect emotionally to the subject. In
contrast, in *Malay Wedding*, Stern seems more concerned with formalism than
subject. The abstracted figures make an emotional connection more difficult. Sharp
lines and geometric shapes form the women’s faces. They stand in rigid poses with
long, black-outlined rectangular noses that extend upward to form perfectly curved
eyebrows. At least two of the three have closed eyes, and the woman on the right had
an implausibly long neck that is bent at an unnatural angle. The bright yellow
background gives no indication of location or that the women are participating in a
wedding, further depriving the work of a celebratory mood.

Stern made her living as an artist, and she had to remain conscious of the
amount of money her work could fetch in the market. She disapproved of modern
art’s embrace of abstraction, yet her work was clearly moving in the same direction,
with lucrative results. In the same year she painted *Malay Wedding*, 1953, the South
African government purchased two Stern paintings, and the South African National
Gallery purchased her 1927 painting *Swazi Girls* for the collection.³² Although her
popularity was at its apex, with critics still designating her “Native studies” as her

---
³² "Contrasts in Colour Mark Irma Stern Exhibition," *Sunday Chronicle*, 1 September 1953. See also
November 1953.
masterpieces, Stern’s suspicions of a communications breakdown between herself and her subjects caused her to search for places where she could paint.\footnote{"Contrasts in Colour Mark Irma Stern Exhibition." See also "Artist Wants to Paint in the Holy Land."}

**Changing the Subject**

Stern resented the growing resistance to apartheid in black communities because it limited her ability to find subjects who displayed the docile, carefree nature that she believed all black Africans should possess. Before her visit to Israel in 1953, Stern announced that she was traveling there in search of new subjects because she was “tired of painting people without religion, [the] whole of Africa outside of the Belgian Congo,” referencing the wave of decolonization movements that swept across Africa.\footnote{"Irma Stern to Visit Israel," *South African Jewish Times*, 13 March 1953.}

Stern’s contrast of blacks and Israelis proved to be far too simplistic. Instead of avoiding nationalist politics, Stern’s visit to Israel placed her in the middle of more complex discussions about nationhood. As blacks were achieving self-determination across Africa in the 1950s, Jews were building a new nation in the Middle East. Only five years old in 1953, Israel had already attracted thousands of Jews who were seeking a national identity that could be balanced with their religious values.

South African Jews were overwhelmingly Zionist and enthusiastically supported Israel.\footnote{Shimoni, *Community and Conscience*, 4.} They were joined by Afrikaners, who drew parallels between Israel’s status as a white nation among Arabs and their own situation on the African
continent. In the context of her views of how complicated black South African life had become, Stern seemed to assume that her trip would enable her to search for fresh subjects who embodied the spiritual qualities that she desired in her subjects without being tainted by the political realities of nationhood and nationalism. Her assumption was misguided; however, she was correct to assume that black life in South Africa was changing. The majority of South Africa’s population was suffering immensely under the apartheid system. Groups, including the ANC and the Pan-African Congress (PAC) worked to organize blacks in townships and in rural areas to resist apartheid.

**Stern and the Jewish Resistance to South African Apartheid**

When the National Party took control of parliament in 1948, Jews across South Africa feared that a pogrom would ensue.\(^{36}\) Known for harboring anti-Semitic views, the National Party had spoken out against issues including Jewish immigration to South Africa during World War II. A meeting between Jewish community leaders and Prime Minister Malan did not assuage their fears. Malan was vague and elusive about questions regarding the National Party’s history of anti-Semitism.\(^{37}\) As a result, the Jewish community, governed by the Jewish Board of Deputies, had to proceed cautiously with regard to any objections to apartheid.\(^{38}\)

---

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 22-23.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 2. The Jewish Board of Deputies was established as a membership organization in South Africa in 1912 with the purpose of monitoring activities and issues involving the Jewish community.
Some members of the Jewish community believed that their religious convictions mandated that they vocally oppose apartheid laws. In 1956, Rabbi Andre Ungar expressed his anger that a black student was denied a passport to accept a scholarship in the United States. He called the architects of apartheid, “arrogantly puffed up little men in heartless stupidity.” The controversy prompted some Jews to call for Ungar’s resignation as the leader of the Port Elizabeth congregation. Others in the community, however, applauded his bold statement and defended his actions. Ungar had recently arrived in South Africa from Hungary and did not yet have citizenship. After receiving a letter from the government stating that he was not welcome in South Africa, he left.

The Ungar incident underscored the difficult position in which the Jewish community found itself. The tension between speaking out against social injustice and preserving the community’s safety put a strain on its leaders. In 1956, the Board of Deputies adopted an official statement explaining its policy of “political noninvolvement” in apartheid. The statement was intended to affirm the community’s neutrality while addressing the fact that members of the Jewish community were already criticizing apartheid: “The Jewish community does not seek, nor is it able, to control the political freedom of the individual Jew, but neither can it accept the responsibility as a community for the actions of individuals.”

As much as possible, the official position of the Jewish Board of Deputies was to protect its members by remaining neutral to apartheid policies. In its official

39 Ibid., 36.
magazine, *Jewish Affairs*, issues related to promoting Zionism among youth and even Afrikaner poetry were covered in the 1950s.40

Stern’s paintings were frequently used to illustrate articles in *Jewish Affairs*. Clearly proud of Stern’s accomplishments as an artist, the magazine featured her work on its cover on several occasions. In most cases, Stern’s work is decorative rather than illustrative. Her painting of a black African woman, for example, was published on the cover of the September 1957 issue of the magazine (fig. 80). On the cover, the juxtaposition between Stern’s black subject and an article on Yom Kippur written by German Expressionist poet Elsa Lasker-Schuler brings Stern’s work full circle with her German beginnings, but it also reinforces the Board of Deputies’ interest in focusing on religious rather than social issues in the publication.

In 1956, one of South Africa’s most controversial political disputes and landmark legal decisions exposed the wide scale involvement of Jews in the antiapartheid movement. In December of that year, police arrested more than 150 people and charged them with treason and conspiracy to use violence to impose a communist regime. The accused represented all racial groups in the country, but most of the whites arrested were Jewish and included leaders of the South African Communist Party.41 To raise money for their defense, the Treason Trial Defense Fund was established by an interdenominational group of citizens. The epic trial

---


dragged on until 1961, when the last defendants were acquitted, so funds were badly needed to sustain the defense team’s legal efforts.42

Stern’s friend Freda Feldman helped generate funds for the Treason Trial Defense Fund, and she approached Stern in 1958 about donating some of her work. Stern donated one painting, but when asked for more, she wrote to Feldman: “As to the picture for the Treason Fund I have given them one here and don’t particularly want to be mixed up in more of this business. So I am sorry no.”43 The Treason Trial drew the line in the sand between those who opposed apartheid and those who were willing to tolerate it. The government made it clear that it would prosecute anyone who threatened its interests. As a recipient of government support, particularly to travel and exhibit abroad, Stern seemed unwilling to risk her artistic career for politics. By accepting government assistance and endorsements, however, she was implicitly condoning its policies, preferring to follow the Jewish Board of Deputies’ policy of noninvolvement rather than to support the growing antiapartheid movement in her community.

*Maid in Uniform: Stern’s Portrayal of Black Defiance*

Resistance to apartheid grew stronger with each passing year. More blacks joined resistance organizations, and interracial tensions rose across the country. Commencing with the Defiance Campaign in 1952, black South Africans had begun to wage vocal and organized protests against apartheid policies. In 1954, the multi-

42 The defense team included Sydney Kentridge, father of artist William Kentridge.

43 Berman, *Remembering Irma*, 141.
racial Federation of South African Women created the Women’s Charter, which demanded equal rights for women of all races.

In 1955, Stern painted *Maid in Uniform*, a portrayal of a black domestic worker *(fig. 81)*. This work is unique among Stern’s oeuvre because she rarely painted blacks in work uniforms, preferring instead to depict them in traditional ethnic dress. The painting deviates from many of Stern’s conventions for painting blacks. Most of her nonwhite subjects do not directly meet the viewer’s gaze, and they usually have neutral facial expressions. In contrast, in this painting, the woman has a defiant expression and is intentionally looking away from the viewer as though she has been forced to sit for the painting. The image is colorful, but not in the same way as Stern’s works set in rural Africa. The darker blues and grays create a somber and depressing mood that emanates from the canvas. The maid’s blue uniform has clashing blue colors: a more greenish blue at the top and periwinkle blue sleeves. The walls in the background are a drab color, as is the window.

*Maid in Uniform* provides a glimpse into the social dynamic between black and white women in South Africa. In her landmark 1978 study of black domestic servants, sociologist Jacklyn Cock described domestic servitude in South Africa as the “oppression of women by women.”44 According to Cock, the paradox of South African feminism resulted in white women being freed from household responsibilities by oppressing black female domestics.45 In other words, liberation for one meant indentured servitude for the other. In thinking about Stern and her

---

45 Ibid., 11.
relationship to black women throughout her career, Stern’s handling of black female subjects to advance her career exposes some of the existing tensions between black and white women. Stern’s success was largely based on her paintings of black women. Although she spent more time with black women in rural black communities than the average white citizen, she did not speak out against their poor treatment. And, when blacks began to protest against apartheid, she complained about their behavior.\textsuperscript{46} Although \textit{Maid in Uniform} lacks the specificity of an individual portrait, it clearly portrays the relationship between Stern and her black female subjects, revealing the fissures and tensions that came to a head during apartheid.

In 1955, the same year that Stern painted \textit{Maid in Uniform}, the ANC introduced its Freedom Charter that called for a nonracial democracy and equality for all South African citizens. The Freedom Charter’s principles resonated particularly with nonwhite women, who were not only disenfranchised by whites but were also marginalized within resistance organizations. In 1956, 20,000 African women delivered a petition to the prime minister’s office in Pretoria, South Africa’s administrative capital, protesting the government’s enforcement of pass laws on women.\textsuperscript{47} The women waited in silence for half an hour before chanting the phrase: \textit{Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo; uzokufa} [You have tampered with women. You have struck a rock. You will be crushed].\textsuperscript{48} Emboldened by their sheer numbers

\textsuperscript{46} "Artist Wants to Paint in the Holy Land."

\textsuperscript{47} Pass laws mandated that all nonwhites have written permission to stay in urban areas for more than 72 hours at a time. The law was intended to limit the number of nonwhites who came to the cities looking for work. Initially, only men needed passes because they were primarily migrating to cities to find work in the mining industry.

and simply fed up with low wages and sub-human treatment, black women increasingly expressed their discontent through these types of protests and demonstrations.

South African Art and Global Modernism

*Maid in Uniform* visually expressed black women’s resentment of apartheid. This resentment spread across the country, and South Africa became increasing unstable as protests, demonstrations, and police violence prevailed in the 1950s. After 1955, Stern’s personal and artistic interests turned toward Europe. She spent more time in the Mediterranean seeking medical treatment for diabetes and searching for new subjects. Stern may have also traveled to Europe to escape the tense political climate in South Africa.

Abroad, Stern was an ambassador for the arts in South Africa, exhibiting her work throughout Europe and in South America. In Europe, Stern was still working with Wolfgang Gurlitt, who had relocated to Linz after the Second World War.49 Stern held solo exhibitions and participated in major shows in Germany and Austria at least five times in the postwar period. Above all, her paintings of blacks continued to make a strong impression on global audiences. In a review of Stern’s work, a German radio report pejoratively referred to Stern as a “Negerlieber” (Negro lover) because of her paintings’ African subject matter.50

49 Gurlitt may have relocated to Linz, Hitler’s birthplace and the planned location of the Nazi’s monumental art museum complex, to shield himself from questions about his work with the Nazis during World War II.

50 “Reportages,” in *Sender Freies Berlin* (West Germany: 1956).
In 1957, Stern was selected as one of the main South African participants in the Sao Paolo Biennale. The South African government sent an official delegation of artists to Sao Paolo to exhibit in the Union’s section of the Biennale. Since its inception in 1951, the Sao Paulo Biennale had become the second most important contemporary art event after the Venice Biennale, and Stern’s inclusion in 1957 introduced her work to an audience that had more exposure to the African diaspora than European audiences. She sent at least ten paintings to Brazil, ranging in subjects from Turkish women to her more traditional paintings of African women.

*Day of Liberation*, was selected for exhibit in Sao Paulo (fig. 82). Painted during a visit to Turkey in 1955, the image depicts a veiled woman standing on a Turkish street, surrounded by tall buildings draped with large, red Turkish flags.51 The painting shows how Stern contemplated abstraction even though she never fully embraced it. A woman stands alone on the street among buildings, for instance, that are smashed together and appear to be standing at different angles. The bright red Turkish flags dominate the painting and contrast strongly against the dark blue sky.

*Day of Liberation* depicts an urban Turkish independence or liberation day celebration. The painting could be referring to the Greek-Turkish conflict that resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of Greeks from Istanbul in 1955.52 The event was historically significant and controversial, yet Stern felt more comfortable

51 Cullen et al., eds., *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey*, 189.

52 In September 1955, the Turks participated in what has arguably been called a pogrom by some historians in which Turkish citizens banished Greeks living in Istanbul from the city, burning their houses and businesses and raping Greek women. See E.G. Vallianatos, “The Mechanism of Catastrophe: The Turkish Pogrom of September 6-7, 1955 and the Destruction of the Greek Community in Istanbul (Book Review),” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (2006).
painting this politically charged event in Turkey than protests in South Africa, where government support was contingent upon steering away from criticizing apartheid.

In addition to the Biennale, the South African government arranged for the works chosen for exhibition in Sao Paulo to be part of a traveling exhibition of South African art that would be shown in the United States.\textsuperscript{53} Grant funds from the South African Department of External Affairs, the State Information Office, and the United States Information Service helped the South African Association of Arts send the Biennale works abroad two years later in 1959.\textsuperscript{54} With so much of her work traveling internationally, the government was grateful that Stern did not comment on South African politics. A South African official told the \textit{Cape Times}: “We are thankful that in Irma Stern we still have an artist of repute who believes that basically humanity is not bad and that nature, the creation of our Lord, remains fantastically wonderful.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{The Final Years}

As mentioned, leading up to her death in 1966, Stern shifted her focus from black South African subjects to Mediterranean Europe. She spent more time in southern France, Italy, and Spain. Stern received widespread national and international recognition for her artistic achievements in the last decade of her life. In 1958, Stern received a Molteno Award from the Cape Tercentenary Foundation,

\textsuperscript{53} "Union Will Exhibit in Brazil," \textit{Cape Argus}, 26 April 1957.

\textsuperscript{54} "Women in the Public Eye," \textit{Cape Times}, 20 February 1959.

\textsuperscript{55} "Irma Stern as Envoy for the Arts," \textit{Cape Times}, 25 February 1959.
and in 1960, she received the Peggy Guggenheim International Art Prize.\textsuperscript{56} Some of the praise offered by critics was couched in tongue-in-cheek caricatures of Stern and her work, some of which suggested that critics believed that Stern may have been a lesbian. These caricatures show that critics never became completely comfortable with Stern or her chosen subjects, particularly as race relations continued to deteriorate in the 1960s and it became evident that apartheid could not remain solvent indefinitely.

Amid the flurry of exhibitions and accolades, critics seized upon the opportunity to discuss Stern’s work. The day after Townley Johnson’s editorial was published in the \textit{Cape Argus}, critic Matthys Bokhorst compared Stern to Picasso in the \textit{Cape Times}. Bokhorst contextualized Stern’s work within the social turmoil that rocked the nation. He observed that both Stern and Picasso depicted human unrest and struggle; that both were the greatest painters in their respective countries, but neither is “one of the greatest human beings;” and that both painters had a “predilection for Native life.”\textsuperscript{57} Yet despite this “predilection,” Stern’s work did not deviate far from her original depictions of black life in the 1920s. Although she complained about social changes in South Africa, her work did not reflect blacks’ migration to cities, their challenges with township living, or their struggle to attain a better life. If anything, her paintings illustrated South Africa’s crumbling social fabric by showing how some of South Africa’s most privileged artists were ignoring apartheid’s detrimental effects on society.


In June 1960, journalist Neville Dubow, noticed some key trends among modern South African painters, most specifically that they rarely painted scenes of black “urban life” and that they preferred to paint blacks on the rural “native reserves,” the term used to describe the areas in which Stern painted earlier in her career. Dubow understood that the period was not only pivotal for South African history but for its art history as well. Major artists were painting in a vacuum, ignoring seminal events that were shaping South African politics. Three months before Dubow’s article, black demonstrators from the PAC stood peacefully outside of the Sharpeville police station near Johannesburg to protest “pass laws” that regulated where blacks could travel and work. The police fired on the crowd, killing 67 people. Known as the “Sharpeville Massacre,” the shooting sparked demonstrations across the country and led the government to make the first of many “state of emergency” declarations that allowed it to suspend citizens’ rights and freedoms. White artists remained eerily silent on the subject. The historical painting that was so crucial in helping whites define nationhood in the early twentieth century had suddenly disappeared.

Artists like Stern had an international stage and the world’s attention, yet they chose to remain silent about events in South Africa. Stern, for example, received the regional award from the Guggenheim International Art Prize Foundation in 1960. Selected by a panel of judges that included modern art scholar Robert Goldwater,

---

58 Neville Dubow, ”Importance of Cape Humanist Tradition Goes On,” Cape Argus, 4 June 1960.
regional award winners were chosen for creating work that supported “art and education in art and the enlightenment of the public, especially in the field of art.”

Stern was selected for her painting entitled, *Intrigue*, which Stern painted in the Transkei in 1959 (fig. 83). The painting was included in a special exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City that included a cadre of internationally renown modern artists such as Austrian Oskar Kokoschka; Dutchman Karel Appel (who won the top prize of $10,000); and Americans Clifford Still, Nathan Oliveira, Stuart Davis, and Robert Mallory.

*Intrigue* depicts two African women in one of Stern’s most bizarre paintings. The women have been nearly overtaken by their large headdresses adorned with birds, which crowd the canvas. Their necks are unnaturally long and thin, and their profiles make their heads look disproportionately small. Wearing traditional Transkei clothing, the women appear to be locked in serious conversation. After winning the prize, Stern described her interpretation of the painting, stating, “It is symbolic of the unrest I sensed in the countryside. Trouble among the natives always seems to start among the women and in the atmosphere they create danger threatens.” With this statement, Stern confirmed her conservative views of blacks and the apartheid structure. In the past, her paintings of black women provoked the ire of her conservative South African audience. In 1960, however, Stern’s depictions of rural blacks, specifically in the rebellious Transkei region, substantiated white beliefs that more regulations and restrictions on blacks would bring them under

---


60 "Miss Stern Wins Prize on the Eve of Holiday."
control. As a bona fide member of the white cultural establishment, Stern could only gain from criticizing black protesters and waxing nostalgic for more halcyon days.

For the remainder of her life, Stern continued to distance herself from her African subjects, and critics continued to debate how Stern should be viewed in light of her political views. In a 1961 article in the Human Angle section of the Jewish publication, Jewish Affairs, writer Bernard Sachs noted that Stern believed she was losing her African roots because she no longer felt sympathy with its people. But, in discussing the Congo’s recent independence after a long and violent struggle, Sachs lets Stern off the hook for losing interest in the region because “not even a Goya could paint the nightmare that is the Congo today.” Dubow, on the other hand, does not withhold judgement from white South African artists, who he argues failed to depict South African life accurately. “Broken contemporary rhythms of African urban existence have been interpreted not at all,” he wrote. “The artist still remains a traveler in Africa,” Dubow added. Not surprisingly, this debate took place among Jewish writers, who were becoming increasingly critical of artists whose work did not reflect the turbulent social times. Stern enjoyed unprecedented success precisely because she did not seek to expose the abject poverty and social unrest that plagued the townships. Because of her celebrity and wealth, along with her life-long connections to Europe, Stern was, as Dubow described, “a traveler in Africa.” She had the financial means and political support to travel the world, and she exercised

62 Ibid.
63 Dubow, "Importance of Cape Humanist Tradition Goes On."
this privilege more frequently, spending the majority of her time in southern Europe to escape South Africa’s political instability.

Stern’s 1962 oil painting, *Pimento Harvest*, represents the type of work that she painted in southern Europe during her final years (fig. 84). The big, bold spaces of color painting looks back to the nineteenth century works of the Fauves, such as Henri Matisse, whose works she had studied since she was a student in Berlin. The painting is blanketed with bright red pimento fields in the foreground, and a tall, rugged, and triangular Spanish mountain towers in the background. All of the figures in the painting are shrouded in black outlines, further accentuating the women’s white veils. The painting represents Stern’s general nostalgia for the perceived simplicity of rural life. Europe, like South Africa, was industrializing and undergoing political reform. On both continents, the rural life that Stern painted was becoming a relic of the past.

In the last two years of her life, Stern’s travels were dissected in local newspapers, her exhibitions were eagerly anticipated, and her every word was parsed by South African critics. A writer for the *Cape Times* Weekend edition called Stern the “most famous South African woman.”64 Stern was also being recognized as an artist who looked across racial lines for subjects. Writer Leah Bach wrote in the *Rand Daily Mail*, “Ships, fiestas, flowers, a street vendor, Black, White, Malay, Arab, her subjects have always crossed barriers as well as frontiers.”65 Like the comment in *Jewish Affairs* in 1954 about Stern’s inclusion in matric textbooks, such reductive


65 Leah Bach, "Larger Than Life...Portrait of a South African Artist They Once Called ‘Lunatic’," *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 April 1964.
and simplistic statements emphasize the fact that South Africa was being torn apart by racial strife. Anti-apartheid demonstrations spread like wildfire throughout the nation, and the government sought to extinguish them just as quickly as they erupted. Yet for many whites, race was an abstract concept that did not affect their daily lives.

In 1964, Nelson Mandela and several other black members of the ANC were convicted of high treason and sentenced to life in prison and later sent to the infamous jail on Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town. With Mandela’s conviction and sentencing, the armed struggle to end apartheid shifted gears, and tens of thousands of black and white South Africans began to put increased pressure on the government and the international community to end apartheid. Yet, criticism of Stern’s work continued to celebrate her as an ambassador for South Africa, citing her diverse subjects as evidence of her liberal and benevolent nature. Although the result was fame and international recognition for Stern, hundreds of black artists were persecuted, fled, or lived in obscurity.

On August 23, 1966, at the age of 71, Irma Stern died in a Cape Town hospital. Obesity and unregulated diabetes had finally taken their toll. She painted until the very end, and her final work still sits on an easel in the studio at her home. Her last paintings depicted life in southern France and Spain. One painting, *Harbour Scene With Tree, Spain* (1966), for example, resembles Stern’s paintings of Kalk Bay outside of Cape Town as well as the German Expressionists’ paintings of fishing boats docked at northern German ports, with images of small fishing boats docked on a shimmering blue bay (fig. 85). Stern held fast to these types of subjects,
relentlessly criticizing abstract artists even as her work moved in this direction.

“Most of their canvases look exactly as if the painter has put his backside into a pot and then printed off,” she said to a reporter for the publication *Femina and Woman’s Life* in 1965.66 This strong reaction to abstraction amidst the socially charged aesthetics of global modernism illustrates how Stern struggled to maintain her position as a relevant artist in both South Africa and Europe at this time. As the anti-apartheid movement began to use culture as a weapon in the “struggle” in South Africa and as socialism and Marxism merged with art in Europe, there was less room in the avant-garde for artists with ambivalent politics.

Unfortunately, Stern’s energies went against the changing artistic and social trends both internationally and in South Africa. Despite her protests and criticisms, abstract artists dominated international art in the 1960s. The political violence resulting from South Africa’s apartheid policies caused the nation to become an international pariah, directing the spotlight away from white cultural achievements. Much of Stern’s work in the last decade of her life reflects the bucolic sereneness of the Mediterranean locales where she went to convalesce during her illnesses. Paintings of beaches and field laborers suggest that Stern was, literally and metaphorically, out to pasture in her final years. She enjoyed a long and successful career and basked in the limelight, but her leadership as an avant-garde modernist had ended. Ironically, her two most provocative works of the period, *Maid in Uniform* and *Day of Liberation*, represent her strongest paintings, possibly because Stern chose contemporary subjects that captured the revolutionary spirit of women

---

66 “Award for an Artist: Irma Stern ‘Woman of the Year’ *Femina and Women’s Life*, 18 November 1965
who, like herself, were struggling to liberate themselves. The barely contained anger exuded in Stern’s *Maid in Uniform* and the sense of elation expressed in *Day of Liberation* serve as appropriate bookends to this final period of Stern’s career.

Apartheid played a seminal role in Stern’s postwar success. The government’s support of Stern’s work helped her to gain international exposure and critical acclaim. Unfortunately, her work was co-opted by apartheid’s social values and did not attempt to counteract the system’s unflinching racism. The true merger of art and social justice would be completed by the next generation of South African artists for whom the prospect of living in a segregated society was untenable. Stern, however, opened the doors for these artists to take the aesthetic and social debates about art’s role in modern South Africa to the next level. Ironically, the government’s patronage gave Stern the visibility that allowed her to begin the debate about the politics of race, gender, and nation in South African art.
Chapter 5: Conclusion, Irma Stern in Post-Apartheid South Africa

On a winter July day in 2004, I interviewed Nontembiso Sompeta, a black South African of Xhosa origin and an educational assistant at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town. When asked about her views on Irma Stern as an artist, Sompeta specifically mentioned Stern’s paintings from the Transkei, where her family lives. She described the “dignity” and “respect for their culture” that Stern had for blacks in the Transkei, mentioning that Stern’s paintings helped her to learn more about traditional customs that had been forgotten as blacks migrated to cities.¹ Sompeta’s belief that Stern accurately portrayed the Transkei women’s “graceful look” is one indication of Stern’s complexity as an artist and an individual.²

Despite being criticized for her participation in apartheid-era cultural politics, Stern has provided a new generation of South Africans with an artist’s perspective of their nation’s cultural development during the twentieth century. Since South Africa became a democratic nation in 1994, the country has become deeply introspective about its history, particularly how to make it more inclusive of its multicultural heritage and how to place the architects and agents of apartheid into context. For these reasons, discussions of Stern and her work are crucial in helping South Africa develop a richer understanding of its history and culture in the post-apartheid period.

In addition to bringing modernism to South Africa, Stern brought discussions of race and gender into the arts. Prior to her 1920 exhibition at Ashbey’s Gallery in

---

¹ LaNitra Walker, "Interview with Nontembiso Sompeta," (Cape Town, South Africa: 2004).
² Ibid.
Cape Town, blacks were not taken seriously as subjects of art. Instead, they functioned as ornament, ethnographic studies, or caricature. German-born painter Heinrich Egersdörfer’s 1895 work, *A Dandy Back From the Mines*, is one example of how blacks were marginalized and ridiculed in art (fig. 86). Stern’s paintings took a different angle than those of artists such as Egersdörfer. Straddling ethnography and portraiture, Stern used the “native study” genre to emphasize her newly acquired modernist tools and to study women whom she found artistically and culturally fascinating. Her 1925 drawing, *Zulu Woman*, for instance, portrays a woman with a penetrating gaze who appears to be strong, yet feminine, traits that Stern strived to cultivate in herself (fig. 87). Many of her subjects reflect a combination of inner strength and aesthetic beauty that, judging by her paintings, was prevalent among black women.

Although she took South African art in a different direction than her predominantly conservative and male predecessors, Stern made some decisions that call her moral judgment into question. Her life and work raise critical questions about artists’ ethical responsibilities in society. Stern lived during a turbulent historical period that dramatically reshaped her native South Africa as well as Europe. She witnessed her father’s arrest by British soldiers during the Boer War, painted among wounded German soldiers during the First World War, and criticized the Nazis’ persecution of Jews. Nevertheless, her views on race did not change even as apartheid was unraveling around her. She accepted the government’s endorsements while her closest friends supported anti-apartheid causes, and she scoffed when she could no longer visit black areas without hearing complaints about
racism. Like every white South African, Stern could have chosen to accept her privileged status, or she could have used it to help dismantle the racist regime. She decided to accept her privilege and use it to advance her career. Stern was a product of her time, and many whites espoused the view that blacks and coloureds were inferior. Although artists are not expected to be moral gatekeepers, Stern had suffered the consequences of anti-Semitism at home and abroad, and she should have known better. As Terry Teachout argued in an essay about artists and morality, “The ability to make great art excuses no man [or woman] from his [or her] basic human responsibilities.”

The themes of race, gender, and nation were central to this exploration of Stern’s career, but they should continue to guide future research. Stern’s mentoring relationship with black painter Gladys Mgudlanlu and its impact on the direction of Mgudlandlu’s work, for example, would shed light on whether Stern’s attitude towards blacks was different on a personal level. Additionally, an entire study could be devoted to Stern’s paintings of coloured South Africans, which emphasize aspects of the group’s unique history in South Africa. On the gender theme, the fact that South African women dominated modern art in their country at a time when women around the world struggled for recognition by major art institutions is also worth examining in greater detail. Finally, African-American scholar Alain Locke’s discussion of Stern in his seminal study of black culture, *The New Negro*, is an indication that globalization in the arts occurred early in the twentieth century. That

---


a black scholar would view a German-Jewish South African artists’ work in Berlin and recommend that African-American artists use her as a template for developing a black modernist aesthetic in Harlem speaks to the fluidity of communication across national and cultural boundaries well before airplanes, e-mail, and the Internet.

In the past few years, Stern’s work has sold for record-breaking prices in international auction houses. Interest in South African art in general is soaring as collectors discover the nation’s rich heritage and search for original works at affordable prices. In 2007, two Stern works in private collections each sold for over $1 million. Referring to one the paintings for sale, Stern’s 1929 work, Pondo Woman, The Economist noted: “…despite the stylised decorative markings across the cheeks, [the painting] has something about it that could be haughty or just intensely private. (fig. 88)” This statement is not very different from critics’ comments about Stern in the 1920s and 1930s. Upon her return from her 1929 trip to Pondoland, where she completed Pondo Woman, a critic wrote the following prescient remarks:

Her [Stern’s] natives are denizens of Africa...they are painted in the best traditions of modern and modernist European schools. If she forgets Paris and concentrates on Pondoland, she may develop into a truly great, originally creative artist.

Stern is regaining the international spotlight at the same time that South Africa has emerged as an arbiter of culture and politics on the African continent.

Although it did not become a major event like its counterparts in Venice and Sao

---

7 Ibid.
Paulo, the Johannesburg Biennale succeeded in bringing an international cadre of contemporary artists to South Africa to discuss how the arts shape postcolonial theory and cosmopolitanism in a region that is a virtual laboratory for these topics. In addition, the nation has also used its Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a model to help other countries such as the Sudan and Zimbabwe end conflict and heal festering wounds created by colonialism and civil war. These forays onto the global stage have given the nation the confidence and the fortitude to reconcile its tortured past and prepare to enjoy its very bright future.

A new generation of women artists in South Africa have taken the torch from Stern. Today, women of color stand on both sides of the canvas as artists and subjects. Stern’s pioneering work laid the foundation for artists such as Marlene Dumas, Tracey Rose, and Zanele Muholi, among many others, to explore issues of gender, sexuality, and national identity in the post-apartheid era. Dumas was, like Stern, born in South Africa and spends much of her time abroad. As a white South African, her oil paintings examine South African identity through corporeality. Her paintings depict race, women and children, violence, and sex in ways that reveal the flip side of some of Stern’s complacent images of black and coloured women. Rose, a coloured South African, uses performance to expose the cultural and political grey areas in which coloured South Africans existed before and after apartheid. Her work moves beyond Stern’s paintings of coloured women by interrogating the standards by which coloured identity was defined by the apartheid government—skin color, hair texture, and mixed-race heritage—giving her audience a deeper understanding

---

of how coloured South Africans view their role in a post-apartheid society. Finally, Maholi’s bold photographs of black lesbian women reflect the progress that black women have made in leading discussions of race and homosexuality in South Africa. In Maholi’s work, black female bodies strike homoerotic poses that are reminiscent of Stern’s early paintings of young, bare breasted black women. Yet, Muholi’s photographs show a more equal relationship between the artist and subject. These artists and their work confirm that Stern opened the door for South African women artists to maintain a prominent and influential position in the discourse of art in their country.

The study of a gifted artist such as Stern brings the centrality of modernist debates about the role of race, gender, and nation in art history into sharp focus. Without discussing these themes, it is impossible to understand the value that Stern, or any modern artist, adds to our understanding of social history. As a result, it is possible to conclude that Stern did create “pictures that satisfy” by merging, albeit controversially, aesthetics, politics, and modernist discourses into the South African national narrative.
## Biographical Timeline and Selected Major Exhibitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Born in the Schweizer-Reneke, Transvaal, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>First visit to Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>Brother Rudi born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Stern's father arrested during the Boer War; family moves to Cape Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Sterns move to Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Sterns resettle in Wolmaransstad, Transvaal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Sterns return to Germany via Zanzibar and Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Family returns to Wolmaransstad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Begins art classes in Berlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Transfers to Weimar Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Studied with Max Brandenburg in Berlin and later Gari Melchers in Weimar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Painted <em>The Eternal Child</em> and met Max Pechstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Exhibited with the <em>Novembergruppe</em> and the <em>Freie Sezession</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Held exhibition at Fritz Gurlitt Gallery, Berlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Published lithographic portfolios, <em>Visionen</em> and <em>Dumela Marena</em>; moved back to South Africa; Exhibited with the <em>Novembergruppe</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Held exhibition at Ashbey’s Gallery, Cape Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Second exhibition at Ashbey’s Gallery, Cape Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Wrote <em>Umgababa</em> unpublished travel narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Exhibited at the Empire Exhibition in London and Ashbey’s Gallery in Cape Town; also exhibited in German and Austria; visited Natal and Zululand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Married Johannes Prinz; met Richard Feldman; exhibited in the Champions’ Art Gallery in Bloemfontein and the Levson Gallery in Johannesburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Publication of Max Osborn’s <em>Junge Kunst</em> monograph; awarded the Prix d’Honneur at the Bordeaux International Exhibition in France; exhibited at Galerie Le Tryptique in Paris; bought home in Rondebosch, Cape Town, named it “The Firs”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1929  Traveled to Pondoland; exhibited in Cape Town and at the International Jewish Exhibition in Zurich, Switzerland; Exhibited at the Gallery Nierendorf in Berlin

1931  Visited Madeira

1932  Exhibited at the Galerie Kleikamp in The Hague and Foyles Gallery in London

1933  Ended visits to Germany due to Nazi rise to power; exhibited at Lazard Galleries in Johannesburg

1934  Divorce granted from Johannes Prinz; exhibited at the University of Stellenbosch

1935  Samuel Stern dies

1936  Exhibited at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and The Criterion in Johannesburg

1937  Visited Dakar and Italy

1938  Returned to Dakar

1939  Visited Zanzibar; exhibited at the Sun Buildings in Cape Town and the Transvaal Art Gallery in Johannesburg

1941  Exhibited at the Gainsborough Gallery in Johannesburg

1942  Traveled to Belgian Congo; wrote *Congo* travel narrative; exhibited at the Gainsborough Gallery in Johannesburg and the Argus Gallery in Cape Town

1945  Visited Zanzibar

1946  Returned to Europe

1947  Exhibited at the Wildenstein Gallery in Paris

1948  Exhibited at Tate Gallery in London, the Kunst Kring Gallery in Rotterdam, and Christie's Gallery in Pretoria

1950  Exhibited at the Venice Biennale; exhibited at the Association of Art Gallery in Cape Town

1951  Returned to Transkei and the Natal

1952  Participated in Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Celebration

1953  Exhibited at Galerie Andre Weil in Paris
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Travel to Turkey; exhibited at the Galerie Wolfgang Gurlitt in Munich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Exhibited at Galerie Wasmuth in Berlin and Stadt Galerie in Linz (Austria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Exhibited at the Sao Paulo Biennale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Received the Guggenheim International Art Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Visited Spain; exhibited at the Stadt Galerie in Berlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Received Oppenheimer Award for Best Painting, Durban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Exhibited at the Galerie Andre Weil in Paris and the Walter Schwitter Gallery in Pretoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Exhibited at the Wolpe Gallery in Cape Town; died on 23 August in Cape Town</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY

"A Poster in Long Street." Cape Argus, 29 August 1930.


"An Exciting Artist." Forward, 4 December 1942.


"Artist Wants to Paint in the Holy Land." Cape Argus, 5 March 1953.


“Award for an Artist: Irma Stern ‘Woman of the Year” Femina and Women’s Life, 18 November 1965

Bach, Leah. "Larger Than Life...Portrait of a South African Artist They Once Called ‘Lunatic’." Rand Daily Mail, 4 April 1964.


"Can Johannesburg Appreciate the Modern?" Rand Daily Mail, 17 October 1936.


Clark, Sir William. "'Pictures That Satisfy' Opening of Miss Irma Stern's Exhibition, High Commissioner's Eulogy." Cape Times, 3 March 1936.


"Contrasts in Colour Mark Irma Stern Exhibition." Sunday Chronicle, 1 September 1953.


Danilowitz, Brenda. "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzunza Ndebele: Performance and History Beyond the Modernist Frame." In


"Exhibition of Congo Sculpture." Rand Daily Mail, 5 December 1942.


———. "Irma Stern's New Paintings." Zionist Record, 18 June 1926.

"For Native Corps." Cape Argus, 20 January 1942.


"Germany Confers Honour on Cape Town Artist: Irma Stern Included in Junge Kunst Series." Cape Argus, 19 October 1927.


"Irma Stern Exhibition: Opening by High Commissioner." *Cape Times*, 23 March 1938.

"Irma Stern Has No Time for Abstraction." *Johannesburg Star*, 17 April 1951.


"Miss Stern: Her Work as a Set Designer." *Cape Argus*, 10 March 1923.

"Miss Stern's Khalifa." *Cape Argus*, 21 August 1930.

Morgan, C.S. "Dr. Malan and the Jewish Question: Stream of Immigration That Must Stop." *Cape Times*, 6 February 1935.


"No Colour Bar at Dakar." *Cape Times*, 3 March 1938.


"Outspoken." *Sunday Express*, 18 October 1936.

"Painting among the Swazis." *Cape Argus*, 14 December 1927.


"Reportages." In *Sender Freies Berlin*. West Germany, 1956.


Smuts, Jan C., 15 May 1950. Letter to Stern


219

———. "My Amazing Models." Sunday Express, 6 November 1936.


———. "My Exotic Models." Cape Argus, 3 April 1926.


"Swazis from the Brush: Colourful Canvases That May Influence South African Art." Johannesburg Star 1928 (approx.).


"The Revolutionary--Irma Stern." Cape Argus, 10 November 1924.


"Two Pictures...Being Sent to Washington." Cape Times, 24 November 1936.

"Union Will Exhibit in Brazil." Cape Argus, 26 April 1957.


W.P.M. "Modern Art in the City, Exhibition by Miss Irma Stern: Apotheosis of Significant Form." *Cape Times*, 18 February 1925.


"Women in the Public Eye." *Cape Times*, 20 February 1959.


**Archives**

Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

Irene Below Papers, Werther, Germany

Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin, Germany

Entartete Kunst Inventory, Victoria and Albert Museum, National Art Library (photocopy in Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Collection Archives).
Hilda Purwitsky Papers, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Irma Stern Museum, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, South Africa

Kunsthalle Bielefeld Art Library, Bielefeld, Germany

Liz Crossley Papers, Berlin, Germany

Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California
Biography

LaNitra Walker was born on April 14, 1977 in Fontana, California. She graduated from Stanford University in 1999 with a bachelor’s degree in art history and international relations.

In 1999, Walker enrolled in the art history doctoral program at Duke University, where she received a master’s degree in art history in 2002. Since 1999, Walker has held the Duke Endowment Fellowship in the Humanities. She has also received a Smithsonian Graduate Research Fellowship (2001), the Duke-Free University Exchange Fellowship (2002-2003), the Mellon Teaching Fellowship from the Franklin Humanities Institute (2003-2004), a Graduate School International Travel Fellowship (2004), and a Women’s Studies travel grant. In 2007, she received the Penny Patch Dissertation Award from the EduSeed Foundation.

Walker has written the article, “Women’s Role in Mob Violence: Lynchings and Abu Ghraib” for the book, One of the Guys: Women as Aggressors and Torturers (Seal Press, January 2007). She has also written the article, “The Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Faculty Diversity (with L. Baskerville and L. Smith)” in American Academic (volume 4/issue 1, March 2008).
Illustrations

Figure 1 Irma Stern, *Page 43 From Stern’s Diary*, water color and ink, ca. 1917
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa
Figure 2. Irma Stern, *Page 44 From Irma Stern’s Diary*, watercolor, ca. 1917, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 3. Otto Mueller, *Seated Nude in a Meadow*; print, woodcut printed in gold and black on wove paper; 1912, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles
Figure 4. Max Pechstein, *Dancers and bathers at a forest pond*, Print, Lithograph with blue and green watercolor on heavy wove paper, 1912, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles
Figure 5. Carl Arriens, *Utensils for Ifa Workshop, Cups for Palm Nuts, with Women at Work*, Drawing, ca. 1910
Figure 6. Franz Marc, *Animal Fates*, 1913, oil on canvas, Kunstmuseum Basle
Figure 7. Irma Stern, *Page From Irma Stern’s Diary*, watercolor and ink, ca. 1917, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 8. Irma Stern, *Nude Study*, oil on canvas, 1916, 149 x 82 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 9. Irma Stern, *Young Girl*, oil on canvas, 1917, 46.8 x 33.8 cm, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
Figure 10. Irma Stern, *The Eternal Child*, oil on canvas, 1916, 29 x 17 in, The Rupert Family Foundation for the Arts, Stellenbosch
Figure 11. Irma Stern, *Portrait of a Man in Uniform*, Drawing, 1916, 44 x 33 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 12. Max Pechstein, *Letter to Irma Stern*, Ink on paper, 1917, Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town
Figure 13. Irma Stern, *The Stonebreaker*, oil on canvas, 1920, 105.4 x 86.4 cm, The Rupert Family Foundation for the Arts, Stellenbosch
Figure 14. Max Pechstein, *Berry Collectors*, 1920
Figure 15. Max Pechstein, An Alle Künstler, Drawing, 1918, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles
Figure 16. Irma Stern, *Three Negro Women*, Gouache, 1926
Figure 17. Katharina Heise, *Madonna With Child*, Drawing, 1927
Figure 18. Oskar Kokoschka, *Murderer, the Woman’s Hope*, Drawing, 1910
Figure 19. Charlotte Berend-Corinth, *Anita Berber Portfolio*, lithograph, 1919
Figure 20. Irma Stern, *Dumela Marena Title Page*, Lithograph, 1920, 29.5 x 40 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 21. Irma Stern, *Dumela Marena: Man Shooting Arrow*, Lithograph, 1920, 29.5 x 40 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 22. Irma Stern, *Dumela Marena: Boy With Ostriches*, Lithograph, 1920, 29.5 x 40 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 23. Irma Stern, *Dumela Marena: Men With Ox*, Lithograph, 1920, 29.5 x 40 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 24. Irma Stern, *Dumela Marena: Mother and Child*, Lithograph, 1920, 29.5 x 40 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 25. Max Pechstein, *Yali and His White Wife*, Print (etching with drypoint on paper, 1922, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles
Figure 26. Irma Stern, Visionen: Title Page, Lithograph, 1920, 33 x 25 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 27. Paul Klee, *Ekstatische Visionen*, Lithograph, 1919
Figure 28. Irma Stern, *Visionen: Four People*, Lithograph, 1920, 33 x 25 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 29. Irma Stern, *Visionen: Man Lying in Bed*, Lithograph, 1920, 33 x 25 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 30. Irma Stern, *Visionen: Gentleman on the Street*, Lithograph, 1920, 33 x 25 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 31. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Street Scene, Berlin*, oil on canvas, 1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York
Figure 32. Irma Stern, Visionen: Men in Apartment, Lithograph, 1920, 33 x 25 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 33. Max Beckmann, *Die Kranke*, Lithograph, 1920
Figure 34. Irma Stern, *Umgababa*, oil on canvas 1922, 60.5 x 91 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 35. Irma Stern, *Indian Family*, oil on canvas, 1922, 91 x 60 cm, private collection
Figure 36. *Jewish Charity Event With Irma Stern’s Theatrical Set*, Photograph, 1922, Irma Stern Collection, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town
Figure 37. Irma Stern, Portrait of Hilda Purwitsky, oil on canvas, ca. 1930s, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 38. Irma Stern, Portrait of Roza Van Gelderen, oil on canvas, ca. 1930s, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 39. Otto Dix, *The Lawyer Dr. Fritz Glaser*, oil on canvas, 1921, private collection
Figure 40. Amadeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Kisling*, oil on canvas, 1916, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Figure 41. Irma Stern, *Portrait of Dr. Louis Herrman*, oil on canvas, 1922, 46.5 x 33 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 42. Irma Stern, *Cover Image, Black and White: Stories of South Africa* by Richard Feldman, 1935
Figure 43. Irma Stern, *Young Zulu Woman in Dance Dress*, charcoal drawing, 1925
Figure 44. Irma Stern, *Young Zulu Girl*, charcoal drawing, 1922
Figure 45. Jan Ernest Abraham Volschenk, *Nearing the Close of the Day (Klipplaat)*, oil on canvas 1923, Sanlam Art Collection, Cape Town
Figure 46. Irma Stern, *The Hunt*, oil on canvas, 1927, 176.5 x 88 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 47. Franz Marc, *Red Deer*, oil on canvas, ca. 1911
Figure 48. Irma Stern, *Swazi Woman*, oil on canvas, 1927, 70 x 70 cm, private collection
Figure 49. Irma Stern, *Malay Mother and Child*, oil on canvas, 1928, 98 x 98 cm, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
Figure 50. Irma Stern, *Red Camellias*, oil on canvas, 1935, South African Embassy, Washington, DC
Figure 51. Constance Stuart Larrabee, *Witwatersrand Gold Miner Watching Sunday Mine Dance, Johannesburg*, photograph, 1946, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Figure 52. Irma Stern, *Portrait of Sarah Gertrude Millin*, oil on canvas, 1941, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 53. Irma Stern, *Native Woman, Dakar*, oil on canvas, 1938, 72.5 x 97 cm, private collection
Figure 54. Irma Stern, *Young Malay Maiden With Black Hair*, oil on canvas, 1938, private collection
Figure 55. Irma Stern, *Congo*, drawing, 1942
Figure 56. Irma Stern, *Congo: Woman With Bananas*, drawing, 1942
Figure 57. Irma Stern, *Congo: Mother and Young Child*, drawing, 1942
Figure 58. Irma Stern, *Congo: Portrait of a Woman*, drawing, 1942
Figure 59. Irma Stern, *Congo: Kuba Textile*, raffia cloth, 1942
Figure 60. Irma Stern, *Congo: Mangbetu Chief’s Daughter*, oil on canvas, 1942, 50 x 60 cm, private collection
Figure 61. Irma Stern, *Congo: Fete Nationale*, drawing, 1942
Figure 62. Irma Stern, *Watussi Queen*, oil on canvas, 1943, 91.5 x 55 cm, Mrs. Mona Berman
Figure 63. Irma Stern, *Congo Tutsi Woman*, drawing, 1942
Figure 64. Irma Stern, *Bahutu Musicians*, oil on canvas, 1942, 135 x 145 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg
Figure 65. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Arab Men Talking*, watercolor and ink, 1948
Figure 66. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Arab Man With Pipe*, drawing, 1948
Figure 67. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Mother and Child*, watercolor and ink, 1948
Figure 68. Zanzibar Doors at the Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 69. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Sleeping Arab Boy*, watercolor and ink, 1948
Figure 70. Irma Stern, *Zanzibar: Sultan’s Palace*, oil on canvas, 1948
Figure 71. Irma Stern, *In the Harem*, oil on canvas with raffia mat frame, c. 1944
Figure 72. Irma Stern, *Arab Priest*, oil on canvas, 1945, 96.5 x 85 cm, Irma Stern Museum
Figure 73. Moses Kottler, *Mother and Child*, wood, c. 1940s
Figure 74. Irma Stern, *Asande Girl*, charcoal drawing, ca. 1942
Figure 75. Gerard Sekoto, *Sixpence a Door*, oil on canvas, ca. 1940s
Figure 76. Constance Stuart Larrabee, *Portrait of Ndebele Woman, South Africa*, photograph, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Figure 77. Irma Stern, *Xhosa Woman*, oil on canvas, 1941, 75.5 x 75 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 78. Irma Stern, *Malay Wedding*, oil on canvas, 1953, 83 x 65 cm, private collection
Figure 79. Irma Stern, *Malay Girl*, oil on canvas, 1939, 61 x 51 cm, Sanlam Art Collection, Cape Town
Figure 80. Jewish Affairs, Cover, September 1957
Figure 81. Irma Stern, *Maid in Uniform*, oil on canvas, 1955, 69 x 63 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town
Figure 82. Irma Stern, *Day of Liberation*, oil on canvas, 1955, 71 x 55 cm, private collection
Figure 83. Irma Stern, *Intrigue*, oil on canvas, 1959
Figure 84. Irma Stern, *Pimento Harvest*, oil on canvas, 1962, 75.5 x 95 cm, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
Figure 85. Irma Stern, *Harbour Scene With Tree, Spain*, oil on canvas, 1966, 75x90 cm, private collection
Figure 86. Heinrich Egersdörfer, *A Dandy Back From the Mines*, watercolor, 1895, William Fehr Collection, Cape Town
Figure 87. Irma Stern, *Zulu Woman*, charcoal drawing, 1925
Figure 88. Irma Stern, *Pondo Woman*, oil on canvas, 1929, private collection