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Ambivalences in South African Settler Primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s

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INTRODUCTION

This study scrutinises settler primitivism as the fundamental manifestation of South African modernism that started developing in the 1920s and 1930s and reached its height in the 1940s to 1960s. Its pioneers were the women painters Irma Stern (1894–1966) and Maggie (originally Maria Magdalena) Laubser (1886–1973), who paved the way for the modernist painters Walter Battiss (1906–1982) and Alexis Preller (1911–1975) as well as the sculptor Lippy (originally Israel-Isaac) Lipshitz (1903–1980). Working in a more conservative but also primitivist manner were Jacob (originally Jacobus) Hendrik Pierneef (1886–1957) and Gregoire Boonzaier (1909–2005). In contrast to European primitivism, Nicholas Thomas clarifies, settler primitivism was not

> necessarily the project of radical formal innovation stimulated by tribal art that we are familiar with from twentieth-century modernism. It was, rather, often an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one.[1]

The difference between South African settler primitivism and primitivisms in other settler nations such as Australia, the USA or Canada is mainly caused by a demographic phenomenon: while other colonial settler nations crucially decimated their indigenous populations, White[2] settlers have always been a minority in South Africa. South African settler primitivists were therefore at larger pains to differentiate between the "extinct" original inhabitants of the South African land, the San, who could be appropriated as cultural ancestors as they did not pose any political threat, and South African Bantu-speaking peoples, who were treated as African "native" immigrants and had to be portrayed as different in order to justify their oppression and exploitation as well as the seizure of their land.

By focussing on the themes '(trans)nationalism', 'indigenisation' and 'ambivalence,' I intend to highlight that these South African settler primitivists were required to continuously position themselves in relation to their European heritage, the newly emerging South African nation and the original inhabitants of the land they

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1 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.

2 I will be capitalising White and Black when they refer to race in order to stress that these are social rather than natural categories. Compare Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black."

occupied. Rather than rendering an all-encompassing definition, I consider it more adequate to demonstrate different facets of South African settler primitivism by discussing individual case studies. In this aim, my study interlinks with the approaches presented by Kobena Mercer in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* and Christian Kravagna in *Transmoderne* [Transmodernism], who look at global modernist art through a number of case studies instead of an overarching "'inclusive' global art history."[3] Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, too, stresses the advantages of "microhistories" over larger narratives in cultural and historical studies. She asserts that

> the case study is a suitable method for correcting the tendency of post-colonial and gender studies towards wide universalisations and for replacing generalising categories such as man and woman, white and black, orient and occident, the self and the other by a principally unlimited diversity in the concrete.[4]

Kravagna further explains:

> Contemporary discussions surrounding a global art history are often governed by the question if and how western practises of art historical writing may claim global validity. Instead of following such a generalising approach to the current globalisation of the history of art, it seems to be more effective to shift our attention from the immediate present to modernisms of the first half of the twentieth century in order to understand the 'globalisation' of art from its beginnings.[5]

In the case of South Africa, too, discussions of modern art originating from the first half of the 20th century have been subordinated to examinations of contemporary art, including "Resistance Art" during the reign of apartheid and post-1990 negotiations of identity in the "Rainbow Nation." There are a number of anthologies on specific themes that touch on modernist art in South Africa[6] but, so far, no detailed comparisons of its main protagonists and their interactions exist. This is the gap in which my research can be placed.

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3 Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, pp. 6–23, p. 8. Also see Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 28.

4 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 15. (My translation, original German on p. 267. The original texts of all my translations included here are presented on pp. 267–274 under the reference of the respective chapter and footnote.)

5 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 35. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)

6 E.g. Arnold & Schmahmann (eds.), *Between Union and Liberation*; includes a chapter on Irma Stern and the impressionist Bertha Everard. Freschi, Schmahmann & Van Robbroeck (eds.), *Troubling Images*; includes a chapter on the 1936 "Empire Exhibition" largely featuring JH Pierneef and a chapter on the Afrikaner sculptor Anton van Wouw.

State of research

Recent academic research into South African art has mainly concentrated on a revisionist practice of including discussions of Black artists into art historical narratives and on contemporary art from the 1970s onwards. The first of these latter surveys was artist Sue Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa* that was released in November 1989, two months prior to Nelson Mandela's release from prison.[7] In the "reissue of the classic" of 2004, Williamson writes that "the singleminded thrust of the book was to show the diversity of political thought and action as interpreted by a broad swathe of artists."[8] Departing from the Soweto uprising – protests by Black school students in the Johannesburg township Soweto in 1976 that were brutally dispersed by police resulting in many casualties – as a catalytic event, Williamson presents more than sixty individual artists and groups. She explains: "I was one of those jolted out of lethargy by Soweto, and this book concerns the way the artists of my generation responded to the truths made clear by the events of 1976, the issues we addressed, and the work that followed."[9] Taking an insider's perspective, she thus presents her own work in line with that of many others, mostly allowing one to three pages per artist which feature large-scale reproductions of artworks in colour as well as short texts. The majority of space is occupied by White male artists. The same holds true for the expansion of Williamson's project that she published together with writer and art critic Ashraf Jamal in 1996: *Art in South Africa. The Future Present*.[10] Presenting in total forty artists, the publication adds work created by some of the artists already featured in *Resistance Art* between 1990 and 1996 (including Williamson herself) as well as by some younger artists gaining attention within this period.

A more in-depth analysis of art opposing and/ or subverting segregationist, racist apartheid politics is John Peffer's *Art and the End of Apartheid* published in 2009. In nine chapters, Peffer draws a line from early "Modern Black Art" exemplified by Gerard Sekoto's paintings of the 1930s and 1940s to Santu Mofokeng's documentary photography of the mid-1990s. The book's "main interest is in the two decades preceding 1994" and it therefore covers a similar period to Williamson's.[11] However, in contrast to Williamson's encyclopaedic survey, Peffer's texts "alternate between historical overviews; individual case studies of artists; and analyses of aesthetic trends in popular art, late modernist art, and photography" with a focus on "urban-based black artists" and the "grey areas" they operated in.[12] Even though Peffer touches on the White settler artist Alexis Preller's depictions of South African Ndebele women and even uses the term 'settler primitivism,' he does so in order to contrast such colonial practices with the *Amadlozi Group*, who "exhibited work along nonracial lines" and shared "ideas about art across racial boundaries."[13]

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7 Williamson, *Resistance Art*.
8 Williamson, *Resistance Art. Reissue of the Classic*, p. 6.
9 Ibid., p. 8.
10 Williamson & Jamal, *Art in South Africa*.
11 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. x.
12 Ibid., p. xv.
13 Ibid., pp. 17–22.

In the same year as Peffer, Williamson published another survey, called *South African Art Now*, that describes how political developments influenced visual art production in South Africa between 1968 and 2008.[14] Twelve chapters each provide a brief summary of the (socio-)political context in which Williamson places close to one hundred artists working in various media such as painting, sculpture, photography, installation and performance, again assigning two to three pages to each artist which include full-page colour reproductions of individual artworks. Some artists are presented multiple times, in different contexts, which certainly causes an imbalance. In general, while Williamson's books cannot be considered academic as she omits the sources for her texts, they provide useful visual overviews. In 2018, Ashraf Jamal published 24 essays on contemporary South African artists working in diverse media.[15] Jamal's discussion moves on from linking artistic practices to political developments in South Africa and places them within a broader – African and global – framework. He includes artists such as Esther Mahlangu and Sam Nhlengethwa, whose careers started to set off before 1994, but also representatives of the post-apartheid generation such as Zanele Muholi, Wim Botha and Mary Sibande, who figure significantly in the contemporary art market. The book is carried by Jamal's subjective and skilful writing rather than an overriding argument.

In comparison to such and further overviews of contemporary art, South African modernism of the first half of the 20th century has received a rather secondary treatment. It is usually addressed in line with larger examinations of South African art. The latest major project of this kind was *Visual Century: South African Art in Context* of 2011, initiated and coordinated by the artist Gavin Jantjes. It is an anthology consisting of four volumes covering the years 1907 to 2007 which were edited by Jillian Carman (volume one: 1907–1948), Lize van Robbroeck (volume two: 1945–1976), Mario Pissarra (volume three: 1976–1992) and Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisi Majavu (volume four: 1990–2007). Each volume contains an introduction by its editors that contextualises the respective timeframe as well as seven to eight chapters by different art historians looking at the period at hand from different perspectives in order to prevent one-sided narratives. Almost every second page is filled with a large colour reproduction of an artwork. In the foreword to volume one, former minister of arts and culture Z Pallo Jordan writes with reference to the scope of the publication: "Far too long what was regarded as the mainstream of the visual arts in South Africa has been pale and male. These volumes take up the challenge of changing this perspective."[16] He further describes the project as "a voyage of rediscovery into the immense field of talent that has often been obscured by the discriminatory practices of the apartheid system and the white elite."[17]

14 Williamson, *South African Art Now*.
15 Jamal, *In the World*.
16 Jordan, "Foreword," p. xi.
17 Ibid.

In general, *Visual Century* is an important revision of previous art historical narratives in South Africa that largely marginalised works by Black artists prior to 1970.[18] The most striking example of such histories is Esmé Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa*. Berman first gives a twenty-page historical overview that starts with colonial "chroniclers" in the mid-19th century and ends with the "individualists" of the 1960s. Her dictionary then offers entries on a large number of painters and graphic artists working in South Africa between 1875 and 1970. She only includes a small sample of Black artists, some subsumed under the derogatory category "Primitives."[19] In *The Story of South African Painting* of 1975 that takes up a similar storyline but clusters artists according to ten different subjects, ranging from "Urban colonial and rural indigenous" to "The quest for identity," Berman again only mentions Black artists examplarily as members of movements such as "Township art."[20] Even though her accounts are highly biased and do not comply with present-day standards, however, Berman's role as pioneer of art historical writing in South Africa should not be disregarded. *Art and Artists of South Africa* has remained an important reference book up to this day and includes information on many artists on whom hardly any further art historical records exist. As indicated above, *Visual Century* offers a significant compensation of some of the shortcomings of Berman's fundamental work.

The two chapters addressing White settler artists in volume one of *Visual Century* are Nessa Leibhammer's "Dominant and Contrasting Patterns. The Representation of Black South Africans by White South Africans" and Juliette Leeb-du Toit's "Land and Landlessness. Revisiting the South African Landscape."[21] Leeb-du Toit briefly refers to the modernists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, whose art she labels "a form of post-colonial nationalism in which the local and indigenous, including the landscape and its people, reflected a spirit of place."[22] She then provides a more in-depth account of the landscapes of the Afrikaner nationalist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef to which I will recur in my later discussion of the artist. The second part of her chapter is dedicated to Black artists' treatments of landscape. Leibhammer's text, too, provides interesting insights but, due to its limited length, again, only touches on some of the modernists discussed in my study. Regarding White artists' portraits of Black South Africans, she writes that Stern depicted "both the essentialised Other as well as black

18 For a more in-depth review of *Visual Century* see Ogbechie, "Art, Nationalism, and Modernist Histories," pp. 78–84.

19 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 243–245.

20 Berman, *The Story of South African Painting*, pp. 210–212. "Rural Indigenous" in this case tellingly refers to the White South African born artists Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk and Hugo Naudé.

21 Additionally, institutional frameworks for mainly White art production are covered by Jillian Carman in the chapter "Art Museums and National Identity" and by Melanie Hillebrand in "White Artists in Contexts." Curiously, Hillebrand writes: "In a country as multi-cultural as South Africa, it may seem bizarre to reserve a chapter for white colonial artists of the pre-apartheid era." This statement illustrates the relatively tangential role of White South African modernism within the *Visual Century* project. Hillebrand, "White Artists in Contexts," p. 135.

22 Leeb-du Toit, "Land and Landlessness," pp. 175, 179.

individuals in a Western portrait style," that Walter Battiss "satisfied his deep desire to tap the energies of nature through what he felt was the primordial impulse manifest in the art of that quintessential Other, the San," and that Alexis Preller celebrated "the secret power of the archaic and the beauty, sacredness and sophistication of Africa."[23]

Volume two, the other volume that refers to the period covered in my research, includes three chapters overlapping with my topic: Federico Freschi's "Afrikaner Nationalism, Modernity and the Changing Canon of 'High Art'," Hazel Friedman's "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence. Ideology and Art in the Heyday of Apartheid" and Anitra Nettleton's "Primitivism in South African Art." Freschi shows that Pierneef's work was "seen as creating and reinforcing a powerful Afrikaner identification with the land, and the consequent inalienable right to its ownership" and briefly refers to Alexis Preller's murals *All Africa* (1952) and *Discovery* (1963) as examples of public commissions.[24] Other Afrikaner artists he discusses in more detail are WH Coetzer and Bettie Cilliers-Barnard, who do not fall into my research area. Friedman's chapter is dedicated to artists approaching socio-political criticism in their work prior to the Soweto uprising. She includes Battiss and Preller in her discussion and concludes that their works "demonstrate stylistic hybridity in their mediation of divergent cultural influences" and "succeeded in subverting aspects of the apartheid monolith" but that "the hybrid influences on these artists did not provide a polemic around, critique of, or commentary on South Africa's contemporary socio-political ills."[25]

Nettleton, too, includes Battiss and Preller into her survey of primitivism in South Africa. She excludes Laubser and Stern from her discussion as their primitivism "derived directly from German Expressionism" and did not "grow out of African forms or those of any other so-called primitive cultures."[26] In contrast, she argues, "Battiss's acceptance of the primacy of the San as his cultural ancestors, and his construction of their art as universally relevant, allowed him to use rock art as a sign of Africanness and thus of an 'authentic' national identity."[27] She further argues that the figures depicted in Preller's paintings "border on the surreal and clearly represent a primitivist fantasy that Preller built out of the Africa of his imagining."[28] The majority of Nettleton's chapter is dedicated to Black South African artists educated at the Polly Street and Rorke's Drift Arts Centres.

These extremely insightful texts gathered in *Visual Century* repeatedly feature in my following analysis. However, while they intermittently refer to five of the artists I focus on (Stern, Laubser, Pierneef, Battiss, Preller) in different contexts, they do not provide a comparative overview of settler primitivists working between the 1920s and 1960s. Since each is a roughly twenty-page long chapter, they also do not provide in-depth analyses but rather superficial, even if substantiated, overviews.

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23 Leibhammer, "Dominant and Contrasting Patterns," pp. 53, 61.
24 Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," pp. 11, 19.
25 Friedman, "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence," p. 35.
26 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," pp. 143, 145.
27 Ibid., p. 145.
28 Ibid., p. 149.

Furthermore, the painter Gregoire Boonzaier and the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz are only mentioned in passing.[29]

The gap disclosed by the current state of research as presented above is addressed by the following research question that has directed my dissertation project: What are the different facets of South African settler primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s? From this issue, three further questions emerged: What were the topoi guiding the perception of settler primitivism during this time? How did the women pioneers Stern and Laubser benefit from primitivist discourses? Which networks did settler primitivists form in order to overcome the threshold barriers of the conservative and parochial South African art scene? I tackle these questions in four interlinked chapters.

Settler primitivism

Overall, my study addresses the significance of settler primitivism for South African modernism and thus places this movement in a wider context. In "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited: The Global Diaspora of 'Primitive Art' and the Rise of Indigenous Modernisms," Ruth Phillips stresses the importance of a better understanding of "the primitivism of settler modernist artists" as it allows for comparisons of different settler primitivisms. She argues that such comparisons can reveal

> both parallels and variations – both the shared ideologies, colonial cultures and points of historical intersection that combined to form a world system of primitivist taste, and the local specificities and contingencies that shaped each art history's distinctive iteration of modernism.[30]

As demonstrated above, such localities and contingencies have not yet been described in the case of South African settler primitivism. The term originates from Nicholas Thomas's 1999 discussion of Australian and New Zealand settlers' appropriation of indigenous art presented in *Possessions: Indigenous Art/ Colonial Culture* and is taken up by Fred Myers in Christopher Tilley et al.'s 2006 *Handbook of Material Culture*, again in the context of Australian settler art.[31] With reference to South African art, it has only been employed by John Peffer, with reference to Thomas, in *Art and the End of Apartheid*. However, Peffer does not describe the specificities of South African settler primitivism but refers to Preller and the *New Group* as a consolidation

29 Boonzaier is briefly mentioned as a *New Group* artist working in an impressionist manner interested in the working class. Carman, "Art Museums and National Identity," pp. 21, 37. Hillebrand, "White Artists in Contexts," p. 154. Leeb-du Toit, "Land and Landlessness," p. 179. Proud, "Formalism in Twentieth-Century South African Art," p. 169. Lipshitz is mentioned with regard to his support of the Black artists Gerard Sekoto and Ernest Mancoba. Rankin, "Lonely Road," pp. 99, 109, 111. Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99. Proud, "Formalism in Twentieth-Century South African Art," p. 175.

30 Phillips, "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited," p. 10.

31 Thomas, *Possessions*. Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," pp. 279–280.

of artists that can be placed within this category.[32] As shown above, "Primitivism in South African Art" is further described by Anitra Nettleton in her chapter for *Visual Century*, but her main focus lies on Black artists educated at the Polly Street and Rorke's Drift Arts Centres.[33]

A more detailed overview over the time discussed here is offered in Deane Anderson's 1956 *Fact Paper 19* for the apartheid government's State Information Office that has received no descernible interest by art historical scholars so far.[34] In this paper, Anderson develops a genealogy from "prehistoric" San rock art to contemporary settler primitivism in what the foreword describes as "a lucid analysis of the movements and undercurrents which have led to the present vitality and growth of a truly national style among South Africa's painters and sculptors."[35] While his exhibition reviews are cited in individual artist biographies, Anderson's programmatic *Fact Paper* seems to have been forgotten.[36] I found a copy in the Esmé Berman papers held at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and assume that Berman's chronology provided in *Art and Artists of South Africa* partly draws on Anderson's text. *Fact Paper 19* provides an important basis for the nationalist reception of settler primitivism from the 1940s and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Thomas's study in which he coined the term shows that Australian settler primitivism was shaped by the search for a new, emancipated self-conception: "the deep association between indigenous people and the land provided strong and condensed reference points for a colonial culture that sought both to define itself as native and to create national emblems."[37] He thus refers to the same positioning between British dominion and independent nation state that engaged South African modernists. Fred Myers, too, writes with reference to Australia that "the effort to escape the anxiety of European influence and to express a unique experience has resulted in an appropriation of the 'native', the 'indigene', as a component of an authentic national culture."[38] Ruth Phillips describes the ambivalence of such an "appropriation of new ancestors"[39] that required modernists to insist "on retaining the core meanings of 'primitive' as primal, simple, and natural, converting the negative charges associated with these terms – irrational, pre-industrial, and unsophisticated – into a set of positive attributes."[40]

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32 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 14–22.
33 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art."
34 Anderson, *Fact Paper 19.*
35 Editor's foreword to Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 1.
36 There exists no book publication comprising Anderson's writings. The Anderson archive held at the University of Cape Town only contains a few documents; mainly drawings and poems that he composed. Anderson was art critic for the *Cape Argus*, senior lecturer in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cape Town and member of the Art Advisory Committee to the apartheid government's Ministry of Education, Arts and Science at the time of publication of *Fact Paper 19*.
37 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 12.
38 Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," p. 277.
39 Also compare Stokes Sims, "The Post-modern Modernism of Wifredo Lam," p. 87.
40 Phillips, "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited," p. 6.

In *Gone Primitive. Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, Marianna Torgovnick shows how the word "primitive" has changed from its 15th century meaning of "original or ancestor" to late 18th century references to "aboriginals, inhabitants of prehistoric times, [and] natives in non-European lands" that is still in use today.[41] In art historical terms, it has referred to "painters before the Renaissance," then to "all early art," and finally to "'tribal' art – Native American, Eskimo, African, and Oceanic."[42] The latter was the definition firmly established by the 1920s.[43] These shifts in definition and usage already indicate that, as Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush put it, "'primitives' [...] never existed. Only Western 'primitivism' did."[44] While "primitive" is "a racist designation, [...] primitivism denotes an Occidental construction, a set of representations whose 'reality' is purely Western."[45] The most important contemporary accounts of the importance of "primitive" art for European modernism are Alfred H Barr's flow chart on the cover of *Cubism and Abstract Art* of 1936 and Robert Goldwater's dissertation *Primitivism in Modern Painting* of 1938. Barr includes "negro sculpture" in his iconic flow chart as an important influence (marked by a red square) on Fauvism and Cubism in Paris around 1905.[46] Goldwater describes how exhibitions of "primitive" artefacts as art in ethnological museums prompted European artists' engagement with such objects and led to formal innovations in their artistic practice.[47] Unfortunately, it is not known whether South African settler primitivists were familiar with Barr's and Goldwater's works.

While some art historians relate Western primitivism to other colonial exploitations since European artists used these "new-found" form languages for their own artistic profiling,[48] others include this phenomenon amongst the numerous cultural interrelations in the visual arts since antiquity.[49] The latter stance is somewhat short-sighted as it does not take into consideration the imbalanced power relations prevailing between supposedly "primitive" African, indigenous American or South Pacific artists and their European counterparts, who largely came into contact through imperial-colonial contexts. While European artists usually benefited financially from such encounters, a lot of African or Oceanic art was taken from its original owners and entered European collections. These power imbalances were also mirrored in one of the most prominent exhibitions on European primitivism of the last four decades: William Rubin's *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* that was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1984. Immediately after its opening, the exhibition and its extensive catalogue were attacked by critics such as James Clifford and Hal Foster for their imperialist and

41 Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, pp. 18–19.
42 Ibid., p. 19.
43 Ibid.
44 Barkan & Bush (eds.), *Prehistories of the Future*, p. 2.
45 Ibid. Also compare Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, p. xiii.
46 Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, cover.
47 Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*.
48 E.g. Otterbeck, *Europa verlassen*, p. 324.
49 E.g. Fulford, "The Trouble with Emily," p. 224.

dominating tendencies.[50] In more recent criticism, Rubin as well as his opponents have been criticized for retaining "the dialectical otherness of the 'primitive'" instead of acknowledging that modern European art as well as what Rubin calls "tribal" art were both "aesthetic responses to modernisation and its art markets."[51]

Attempts have been made by scholars such as Carolyn Butler Palmer to fill in the gaps, in particular with regards to Rubin's de-historisation and omission of context of the "tribal" works exhibited.[52] Monica Blackmun Visonà criticises Rubin's Eurocentric portrayal of a one-way exchange in which only European artists borrow from foreign populations. She suggests counter narratives such as Picasso's Nigerian contemporary Aina Onabolu, who experimented with English 18th and 19th century traditions.[53] Partha Mitter, too, argues that Rubin's exhibition project "while reifying tribal artifacts as timeless high art erased Third World modernisms, denying the existence of contemporary tribal artists in the name of authentic traditional art."[54] With reference to global modernisms in general, Mitter writes:

> In the cultural economy of global modernity, all artistic productions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America became marginal to the preoccupations of the core, that is, the art of Paris and later postwar London or New York. Set against the originary discourse of the avant-garde, emanating from these metropolitan centers, other modernisms were silenced as derivative and suffering from a time lag because of their geographic locations. Yet the significant point is that the center-periphery relation is not only one of geography but also of power and authority…[55]

In order to counter such centre-periphery hierarchies, my discussion of South African settler primitivists affiliates to Kravagna's "postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts" [postcolonial art history of contacts] which he advocated in *Texte zur Kunst* [Writings on Art] in 2013. In this case, "postcolonial refers to critical perspectives on disparate relationships between western and non-western, white and black modernisms."[56] Kravagna argues that the dichotomy of western and non-European art history still shaping discussions of a global art history "can only be overcome through examining exchange relations and interactions between modernities and modernisms in different regions of the world in consideration of colonial and post-colonial

50 For a summary of the debate between 1985 and 1998 see Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, pp. 311–414.
51 McLean, "Crossing Country," p. 603.
52 Butler Palmer describes the cultural and political contexts in which objects such as the Kwakwaka'wakw mask reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue were produced and focuses on the exhibition's indigenous audience. Butler Palmer, "Renegotiating Identity."
53 Blackmun Visonà, "Agent Provocateur?", p. 121.
54 Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," p. 537.
55 Ibid., p. 540.
56 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 27. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)

power relations."[57] He stresses that, in this process, "concrete contacts and alliances between different actors" outweigh categories such as influence and reception.[58] In *Transmoderne*, Kravagna explains that such exchange relations and interactions facilitated by early transcultural modernisms were characterised by transnationalist reciprocations at eye-level that "transgressed the geographical, cultural and 'racial' borders of the colonial world order."[59]

Kravagna's postcolonial art history of contacts, of course, has to be adjusted for the South African context as I do not wish to imply that White South African modernists generally interacted with Black African artists at eye level or that such interactions were largely marked by mutual exchange rather than exploitation.[60] The situation is a lot less clear-cut than in the case studies discussed by Kravagna, and characterised by great ambivalences. While the White sculptor Lippy Lipshitz, for example, admired the art of the Black South Africans Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, his approach to them was still governed by racist stereotypes.[61] Additionally, Mancoba benefitted from the contact with White settler artists as he, for example, became familiar with West and Central African artworks through visits to Irma Stern's collection and through reading Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture* on recommendation of Lipshitz.[62] Moreover, when Stern returned from her trip to the Congo in 1942, she exhibited tradition-based sculpture she had bought from Kuba sculptors alongside her own work in exhibitions in Johannesburg and Paris, as she had promised to the Kuba king.[63] As Hal Foster argues, White modernists' "identification with 'the primitive,' however imaged as dark, feminine, and profligate, remained a *dis*identification with white, patriarchal, bourgeois society."[64] Nonetheless, in contrast to members of the Jewish diaspora discussed by Kravagna, Stern and Lipshitz did not channel their own experiences of being racially discriminated (and even persecuted) minorities into meaningful collaborations or alliances with Black artists.[65] Possibly induced by an increasing antisemitism in South Africa, especially leading up to the Second World War, Jewish artists such as Stern and Lipshitz did not rebel against the common oppression of their Black compatriots but overall

57 Kravagna, "Für eine postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts," p. 111. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)
58 Ibid. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)
59 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 41. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)
60 A meaningful exchange between Black and White South African artists only showed its beginnings in the foundation of the *Amadlozi Group* in 1963. Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 21–22, 42.
61 E.g. Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 2 and 14 August 1936. Lipshitz, "Sekoto."
62 Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99.
63 Kauenhoven Janzen, "African Art in Cape Town," p. 4.
64 Foster, "'Primitive' Scenes," p. 76. (Foster's original italicisation.)
65 Examples of members of the Jewish diaspora interacting with Afro-American artists are discussed by Kravagna in *Transmoderne*, pp. 101–129.

supported (Stern) or tolerated (Lipshitz) the segregation into White and non-White populations.[66]

Still, the genesis of South African settler primitivism was shaped by different contacts of centre and periphery: those between South African and European artists and their appreciation of West and Central African sculpture, and those between White settler cosmopolitans and local art traditions such as San rock painting and Ndebele visual culture.[67] As indicated above, both of these two forms of contact were governed by ambivalences on behalf of South African settler primitivists as they swayed between transnational and national perspectives, admiring appropriation, and degrading exploitation of Black cultural heritage in an effort of their own "indigenisation." Additionally, these relations were complicated by the Afrikaners' self-definition as the first "white African race" that was affirmed by officials such as High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa in London Charles te Water in the 1930s[68] and peaked in then prime minister John Vorster's exclamation in 1971: "We are not Europeans, we are of Africa as any other person is of Africa."[69] The placement of White South Africans hence poses a challenge when dividing the world into "the West and the Rest."[70] Moreover, the term 'Afrikaner' changed its meaning from "slaves born in Africa or the offspring of slaves, free blacks and Khoisan" to "colonists of Dutch, German and French descent" and was used by prime ministers JBM Hertzog and DF Malan "to refer both to a white South African patriot and also to a Dutch Afrikaans-speaking white alone."[71]

Ambivalence

As announced above, my discussion of settler primitivism is guided by the three concepts '(trans)nationalism,' 'indigenisation' and 'ambivalence.' The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'ambivalence' in psychoanalytical terms as "the coexistence in one person of profoundly opposing emotions, beliefs, attitudes, or urges (such as love and hate, or attraction and repulsion) towards a person or thing" – coined by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler – and in general contexts as "the condition of having

66 LaNitra Michele Berger, too, stresses that Jewish South Africans largely overlooked "Black peoples' poor treatment in favor of normalizing relationships with white South Africans." Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 38. On antisemitism in South Africa see for example Bloomberg, *Christian Nationalism*. Duffy, *The Politics of Ethnic Nationalism*, pp. 80–88.

67 Jacob Hendrik Pierneef's artistic appropriation of San rock painting started in the early 1920s and the first treatment of San rock art as specifically South African cultural heritage was published by Roger Castle in 1925. Castle, "The Art of the Bushman." Artists such as Lipshitz, Stern and Preller, but also Mancoba and Sekoto, began their visits to Ndebele villages close to Pretoria in the 1930s. Ndebele art continued to play an important role for the *Amadlozi Group* in the 1960s. Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 21–22.

68 Te Water, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa," pp. 164–170.

69 Cited in Miller, *An African Volk*, p. 45.

70 Hall, "The West and the Rest."

71 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp. 217, 359.

contradictory or mixed feelings, attitudes, or urges regarding a person or thing."[72] As I do not wish to psychologise settler artists and their work, the latter definition is the one employed here. While 'ambivalence' is a recurring topic in various contexts in the following discussions, the ambivalence inherent in settler primitivism mainly arises from the concurrent appropriation of modernist techniques from Europe and the demand for developing a specifically South African art as well as from the simultaneous oppression and appreciation of Black South African cultures.[73] Nicholas Thomas writes with regards to Australian settler primitivism:

> … appropriation was only one side, only the appreciative side, of a grotesque combination of affirmation and rejection. Moreover, this settler schizophrenia was not an anomaly in the history of colonization; the business of simultaneously exhibiting and exterminating the native is consistent with the enduring invasive logic of a settler-colonial-nation. On the one hand, a self-conscious national culture that seemed permanently in the making required Aboriginality for its localizing effect; on the other, Aboriginal sovereignty and autonomy diminished the authority and coherence of the settler nation, and were persistently suppressed. It is not a question of cultural property that defines the politics of the issue, but this strangely fundamental union of adoption and antipathy.[74]

Such ambivalences are inherent in the work of all South African settler primitivists discussed in my text: Stern's exoticising pictures of Black women were largely received as dignified portraits of individuals that had previously only been treated as ethnographic subjects; Laubser's harmonising domestication of land and labour rendered visible the Black farm labourers who had been banned from previous landscape paintings; Lipshitz promoted the recognition of African sculpture as art that were commonly considered ethnographic objects in South Africa at the time; Pierneef and especially Battiss acknowledged the San authorship of South African rock art that other scholars attributed to White migrants from northern Africa; Boonzaier's romantic "slum" scenes displayed the rich cultural life of District Six that was to be bulldozed in the 1960s; Preller's mystifications of Ndebele women idolised African source material. At the same time, all of these artistic approaches can also be considered colonial appropriations of oppressed indigenous cultures that served the aim of advancing the settler artists' own "indigenisation."

(Trans)nationalism

The brackets around the prefix 'trans' illustrate settler artists' shifting orientation between transnational and national perspectives that I have just indicated. While

72 "ambivalence, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/6176, last accessed on 26 February 2023.

73 Also compare Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 21.

74 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 213.

especially the pioneers Stern and Laubser had to legitimise their modernist work through links with European movements such as the German *Brücke* [Bridge] expressionism in the 1920s and 1930s, the increasing demand for a specifically South African art considerably gained momentum from the 1940s. There is no entry for 'transnationalism' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it defines the adjective 'transnational' as "extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers."[75] In *Transnational Connections*, Ulf Hannerz differentiates 'transnational' from 'international' as the latter "in the strict sense [involves] nations – actually, states – as corporate actors. In the transnational arena, the actors may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises."[76] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton argue in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration* that especially immigrants can be considered representative of such transnational actors: "immigrants live their lives across borders and maintain their ties to home, even when their countries of origin and settlement are geographically distant. […] migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders."[77]

The best example of this is certainly Irma Stern, who grew up between South Africa and Germany and whose work in both countries productively cross-fertilised up to the fascist takeover in Germany in 1933. The other settler primitivists, too, maintained their ties to their European heritage, even if this was sometimes defined more loosely than in the case of Stern. While Pierneef was oriented towards his father's country of origin, the Netherlands, others forged new ties with European artistic centers in England (Laubser, Boonzaier, Lipshitz), France (Lipshitz, Preller) and Germany (Laubser). While Battiss travelled extensively, his attachment to Europe was less pronounced. Indeed, he was the only settler primitivist discussed who did not study abroad. It might be due to this, in addition to his engagement with San rock art, that Battiss is sometimes singled out as "native" South African.[78]

'Nationalism,' on the other hand, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "advocacy of or support for the interests of one's own nation, esp. to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations."[79] In the context of 20th century South African history, nationalism is usually equated with Afrikaner nationalism.[80] Although this particular manifestation of South African nationalism plays an important role especially in the reception of the Afrikaner artists Maggie Laubser and JH Pierneef, a more generally nationalist stance can also be observed from the 1940s. A clear distinction, however, is difficult as Boonzaier and Preller were Afrikaners, too, and

75 "transnational, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/204944, last accessed on 26 February 2023.
76 Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, p. 6.
77 Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton (eds.), *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, p. xi.
78 E.g. Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 145.
79 "nationalism, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/125289, last accessed on 26 February 2023.
80 E.g. Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism." Freschi, Schmahmann & Van Robbroeck (eds.), *Troubling Images*.

even Stern's German parentage and upbringing was sometimes confused with an Afrikaner heritage.[81]

"Indigenisation"

The most contested of the three terms guiding my discussion is probably 'indigenisation.' It is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the act or process of rendering indigenous or making predominantly native" as well as the "adaptation or subjection to the influence or dominance of the indigenous inhabitants of a country."[82] The term thus usually either refers to the indigenisation of originally foreign cultural elements – such as Christian traditions – into local customs or to the "going native" of European settlers. However, I would like to propose using the term differently. In the following analysis, it will refer to White settlers' endeavour to proclaim themselves indigenous to the South African land. This enterprise also becomes apparent in the ethnonym 'Afrikaner' originating from the Dutch, and especially in the adjective 'Afrikaans' that is identical with the Dutch word for 'African' (adj.) and still in use today. According to Hermann Giliomee, "the first recorded occasion of a European using 'Afrikaner' as a name for himself" was when the Dutch-German descendant Hendrik Biebouw, caught causing drunken havoc in Stellenbosch, in 1707 exclaimed: "*ik wil niet loopen, ik ben een Afrikaander*" [I shall not leave, I am an Afrikaander].[83] However, their "self-indigenisation" did not mean that White settlers in South Africa declared to hark back to an African genetic heritage – as it has become a growing practice in Canada where White French descendants strive to identify an Indigenous ancestor born twelve generations ago in order to oppose Indigenous land and territorial negotiations[84] – but that they sought to establish themselves as a new "white African race."[85] I am therefore placing the word in inverted commas in order to stress that the process of "indigenisation" prompted by the settler primitivists discussed in my study was not an approximation to or alliance with South Africa's indigenous inhabitants but rather an effort of claiming roots in an alleged *terra nullius* [nobody's land].

In general, South African settler primitivists' "indigenisation" was critically advanced by ambivalent acts of cultural appropriation. In his discussion of the Australian settler primitivist Margaret Preston, Thomas writes that "if appropriations do have a

81 For example, in a German-language booklet on eight South African artists issued by the Information Service, Stern is said to be of "Jewish-German-Afrikaans" heritage. Bosman, *Acht zeitgenössische Maler aus Südafrika*, n.p. (Unfortunately, I was unable to find out, on what occasion this booklet was published.) In personal conversations held with art-interested individuals in South Africa, too, I often met with the misconception that Stern was Afrikaans. In addition to the proximity of the Afrikaans, Dutch and German languages, this might be due to the fact that Stern's father Samuel sympathised with the Boers during the South African War and was arrested by the British in 1900. As a result, the family relocated to Germany for some time in 1901.

82 "indigenization, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/94473, last accessed on 26 February 2023.

83 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 2003, p. 22–23. (Translation provided by Giliomee.)

84 Leroux, *Distorted Descent*, 2019.

85 E.g. Te Water, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa," pp. 164–170.

general character, it is surely that of unstable duality. In some proportion, they always combine taking and acknowledgement, appropriation and homage, a critique of colonial exclusions, and collusion in imbalanced exchange."[86] LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker), for instance, in 2004 interviewed Nontembiso Sompeta, an educational assistant at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town of Xhosa origin, who "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."[87] In general, cultural appropriation has also been seen "as ways in which hybrid cultures come about, which themselves may become reappropriated by the original groups as leavening for their own cultural renaissances."[88] However, James Young and Susan Haley convincingly argue that "the colonization of Indigenous cultures is a coercive process. Consequently, any representation of a colonized culture may be ethically suspect."[89] While this is certainly the case, it should be kept in mind that "appreciation and appropriation have been intimately connected, and are essentially double-sided processes."[90]

Cultural appropriation may for example refer to appropriations of artworks, styles or visual culture, but also to representations of other cultures. Young and Haley explicate that "subject appropriation occurs when members of one culture (call them outsiders for the sake of brevity) represent members of other cultures (insiders for the sake of convenience) or aspects of insiders' culture."[91] They further elaborate that "it occurs in the arts, when artists from one culture represent aspects of another culture, or people who belong to it."[92] Subject appropriation for example features in Stern's portraits of Black South Africans, in Laubser's depictions of Black farm labourers and in Boonzaier's Bo-Kaap or District Six scenes. While Pierneef and Battiss stylistically appropriate San rock art, Preller can be considered to appropriate Ndebele visual culture as well as Dogon sculpture. Lipshitz, too, strongly draws on West African sculpture. However, also Pierneef's and Laubser's landscapes can be considered appropriations when they are "understood against the background of the appropriation of land."[93] Jeremy Foster shows in *Washed with Sun. Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* how (visual) appropriations of landscape "helped mediate the construction of the cultural identity that came to be known as 'South African.'"[94] Landscape art therefore formed an imperative part in the development of a South African national identity. In a similar vein, Lize van Robbroeck argues that in White settler artists' "romanticised studies of 'natives' [...] settler identity is presented

86 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 141.
87 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 201.
88 Heyd, "Rock Art Aesthetics and Cultural Appropriation," p. 38.
89 Young & Haley, "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere'," p. 283.
90 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 158.
91 Young & Haley, "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere'," p. 268.
92 Ibid.
93 Young, *Cultural Appropriation*, p. 3.
94 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 3.

as indigenous by proxy."[95] Such appropriations therefore were a crucial instrument in settler primitivists' (and by extension their audiences') "indigenisation" into the South African land.

Unavoidable ethnic terminology

As South African society was organised along racial classifications during apartheid as well as in the time leading up to it, referring to different ethnic groups always bears the risk of reproducing racist terminologies. However, it seems impossible to write about this time without reverting to such categories to a certain extent. In my discussion, the term 'Afrikaner' refers to Afrikaans-speaking White South Africans (e.g. Maggie Laubser, JH Pierneef) or to White South Africans whose background or heritage was considered Afrikaans at the time (e.g. Gregoire Boonzaier, Alexis Preller). In addition, I refer to South Africa's first nations that for example produced the famous rock paintings in the Drakensberg as 'San.' Even though this is originally a derogatory exonym used by Khoe-speaking peoples, it has largely replaced the equally derogatory term "Bushmen" or, even worse, "Hottentot."[96] Other Black South Africans at the time under investigation mostly belonged to Bantu-speaking peoples who had settled in Southern Africa about 2,000 years ago – a fact that was concealed by the apartheid myth of the empty land which claimed that "the Dutch and Bantu-speaking Africans arrived in South Africa at approximately the same time."[97] In modern South Africa, the label 'English' usually refers to English-speaking South Africans and 'British' to British nationals. Moreover, I employ the terms 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' that are still in use today in order to relate to these two groups that, however, play a subordinate role in my study.

Case studies

The selection of my seven case studies is based on the one hand on their engagement with primitivism and on the other on their significance for the developments within the South African art scene at the time. As indicated above, Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser are largely considered the founders of modern art in South Africa. They both came into contact with German expressionism during longer sojourns in Berlin in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and thus with the European appreciation of African art. Building onto these affiliations, Stern established herself as first modern artist in South Africa, depicting "natives" as national cultural assets. Laubser benefited from this groundwork and soon came to be known as pioneer Afrikaner modernist. Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, too, largely profited from his Afrikaans heritage and patronage, and was one of the first artists to engage with San rock painting. His graphic appropriations of South African landscapes quickly became iconic representations of the approach to land by White South Africans. Lippy Lipshitz and Gregoire Boonzaier, on the other hand, were both instrumental in bringing about a regime change in the

95 Van Robbroeck, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 56.
96 Barnard, *Anthropology and the Bushman*, pp. 4–7.
97 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p. 30.

English-oriented South African art scene through the formation of the *New Group*. While Lipshitz took up West African form languages in his sculptures that he often executed in indigenous materials, Boonzaier produced romantic scenes of Cape Town's culturally diverse quarters District Six and Boo-Kap, which were classified as Cape impressionism. Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller are traditionally considered the first artists to consciously employ primitivist modes of painting in order to develop a specifically South African art, and are therefore the settler primitivists with the strongest nationalist project.

There are several other artists – such as Maurice van Essche or Pranas Domšaitis – who also worked in primitivist manners but who only arrived in South Africa fairly late and are therefore less relevant to discussions on the formation of a new South African art at the time. Likewise, there are a number of artists – such as Ruth Prowse or Cecil Higgs – who were important protagonists of the changing South African art scene but whose work cannot be categorised as primitivist. Nevertheless, I will repeatedly recur to them, especially Higgs, when outlining the structural difficulties faced by (women) modernists at the time. A more ambiguous case is presented by the painter and printmaker Cecil Skotnes. His contribution to primitivism in South Africa is undisputed and I srongly considered including him in my study. However, he is another fifteen years younger than the youngest artist discussed (Preller), with a career only starting to kick off in the 1950s. Skotnes ran the influential Polly Street Art Centre where he worked with artists such as Sydney Kumalo and therefore stands for a significantly different approach to Black South African art. Moreover, his contribution to the articulation of a Black primitivism has already received considerable attention.[98]

Timeframe

I focus on the time span between the 1920s and 1960s as it, on the one hand, marks the artistic career of Irma Stern in South Africa, who was the most influential pioneer of modernism in this country, and, on the other, as it can probably be considered the most concentrated period of White nation-building. In 1910, the British colony that had been forcefully constructed during the South African War (1899–1902) by fusing together the previously independent Boer Republics Orange Free State (today Free State) and Transvaal (Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West provinces) with the British Cape (today Eastern, Western and Northern Cape) and Natal (KwaZulu Natal) colonies was declared a nominally independent dominion as the Union of South Africa. The National Party, that was to institutionalise segregationist apartheid from 1948, was founded in 1914, for the first time showed its strength in the election of 1920 and took over government from the South African Party in 1924. The Union became fully sovereign under prime minister JBM Hertzog in 1931. From 1934 to 1948, the Union Party, which was a merger of the National and South African parties, ruled South Africa first under Hertzog, then under Jan Christian Smuts. In

98 E.g. Rankin, "Teaching and Learning." Miles, *Polly Street*. Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 192–194. Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art." Rankin, "Creating Communities."

1948, the National Party was re-elected to power and passed several segregationist laws that formed the basis of the racist apartheid state whose withdrawal would only start in 1990. The nationalist movement reached its peak in 1961 when a referendum open to White voters only turned the Union into a Republic under "apartheid architect" Hendrik Verwoerd, who was assassinated in 1966.[99] His successor John Vorster's period of governance was shaken by different crises such as the Soweto uprising of 1976, the Steve Biko crisis of 1977 and the Muldergate or information scandal that was uncovered in 1978.[100]

As shown above in the discussion of Sue Williamson's survey, the 1970s also saw the rise of "Resistance Art" in South Africa. Following the Soweto uprising, artists started becoming more vocal about the inhumanity of the apartheid system and art became increasingly political. At a conference hosted by the University of Cape Town in 1979, White artists "pledged to no longer allow their work to be sent overseas to represent South Africa until all state-funded art institutions were open to black as well as white students."[101] By this time, most of the settler primitivists discussed in my dissertation had died: Pierneef in 1957, Stern in 1966, Laubser in 1973 and Preller in 1975. Lipshitz gave up his teaching position at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1968. He joined his daughter Leonora in Israel in 1978 and died two years later. Little is known of the years between his retirement and relocation to Israel. Battiss abandoned his occupation with San rock art and launched the conceptual, multidisciplinary, farcical work "Fook Island," whose first happening took place during the opening of the Goodman-Wolman Gallery in Cape Town in 1974.[102] In *Visual Century*, Roger van Wyk describes this project in which Battiss conceived an imaginary island – crowning himself as its king – as a humorous and escapist effort of using "Eros as strategy" but also as challenging ideas of (White South African) nationalism.[103] Boonzaier, on the other hand, held on to his Cape impressionism and even continued painting romantic "slum" scenes of District Six after its demolition had already started.[104]

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is twofold: on the one hand, I am reading artworks as documents of settler primitivists' engagement with South African indigenous cultures, materials and landscapes, and on the other, I am analysing archival

99 Kenney, *Verwoerd*.

100 For good historical overviews refer to Davenport & Saunders, *South Africa*. Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*.

101 Williamson, *Resistance Art. Reissue of the Classic*, p. 9.

102 Friedman, "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence," pp. 47–49.

103 Van Wyk, "The (Non)Sense of Humour," pp. 165–169.

104 Boonzaier did, however, take on a Coloured pupil, the painter Conrad Theys, in 1969 and, according to his biographer Martin Bekker, he lent "assistance to black schools through the Argus company's TEACH programme" and donated "bursaries for black teachers." Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 100. Curiously, it is also said that Boonzaier was – at some point – a member of the Communist Party. Proud, "Formalism in Twentieth-Century South African Art," p. 169.

material in order to form suppositions on artists' motivations as well as the reception of their work. In addition to artworks being documents of artistic practice, they are also indicative of socio-political processes affecting their genesis. Moreover, the works of all artists discussed were exhibited in contexts in which they were intended to represent South African art, such as the "Empire Exhibition" in Johannesburg in 1936, the exhibition of South African art travelling from the Tate Gallery in London to Brussels, Paris, Ottawa, Washington D.C. and back to South Africa in 1948 and 1949, or the South African participation in the Venice biennales of 1950 to 1958. They were also acquired by South African legations in various countries where they were most likely supposed to visualise the alleged difference between South Africa's ethnic groups propagated by segregationist policies. As objects of the public realm, their reception is extremely telling. It therefore plays a crucial part in my discussion.

Drawing on archival research that entailed the analysis of close to 600 newspaper and magazine articles and more than 300 letters, as well as various exhibition catalogues, diaries, speeches and other manuscripts, obtained from in total 25 archival collections held at 10 different institutions, one of the major merits of this study is the comprehensive comparison of archival material on South Africa's most dominant modernists. Whereas earlier studies have focused on individual artists and their respective archives, my research is able to fill in gaps for example by examining correspondences between artists such as Lippy Lipshitz and Cecil Higgs, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Edward Roworth or Irma Stern and Thelma Gutsche that are kept at different archives. The following archives were consulted during three longer research trips to South Africa in 2016, 2017/18 and 2020 and a shorter one to the UK in 2019:[105]

- Johannesburg Public Library: Thelma Gutsche Collection, Thelma Gutsche Stern Collection
- National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria: JH Pierneef-Versameling
- National Library of South Africa, Cape Town: DC Boonzaier Diaries, Irma Stern Collection, Irma Stern (Miscl.) Collection, Irma Stern (Berman) Collection, Ruth Prowse Collection
- North-West University, Potchefstroom: JH Pierneef Collection
- Norval Foundation, Cape Town: Alexis Preller Archive
- Stellenbosch University: AC Bouman Collection, Maggie Laubser Collection, Cecil Higgs Collection
- University of Cape Town: Dronsfield Collection, Purwitsky Collection, Irma Stern Papers, Lippy Lipshitz Papers, Deane Anderson Collection, Hilda Purwitsky/ Roza van Gelderen Papers
- University of Pretoria: Irma Stern Archive, Alexis Preller Archive
- University of the Witwatersrand: Sarah Gertrude Millin Papers, Richard Feldman Papers, Esmé Berman Papers
- University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK: Michael Cardew Papers

105 A list of the exact designations of these collections including respective abbreviations used in my references can be found on pp. 237–238.

Documents of interest to my study contained in these archives were mainly writings by, to and on the seven South African settler primitivists serving me as case studies. Additionally, I consulted biographies of these artists as well as literature on the representation of South African landscapes such as Jeremy Foster's *Washed with Sun*, on the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] such as Katharina Sykora's *Die neue Frau* and Marsha Meskimmon's *We Weren't Modern Enough*, on artists' myths such as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's *Die Legende vom Künstler* [The Legend of the Artist] and Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtis and Silke Wenk's *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* [Myths of Authorship and Femininity in the Twentieth Century] as well as on the *New Group* such as Murray Schoonraad's "History of the New Group" and Julia Kukard's *Critical History of the New Group*. An important point of reference has also been Esmé Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa. An illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters & graphic artists since 1875*. Further details on each of these publications is provided in the context of the respective chapters.

Chapter Outline

This book is divided into four interrelated chapters. The first chapter contextualises South African settler primitivism by presenting an overview of contemporary publications on primitivism and fine art influential at the time and paying closer attention to Nicholas Thomas's discussion of the term 'settler primitivism.' Briefly introducing artists from the other settler nations Australia, USA and Canada provides a rough frame of reference. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to discussions of works and statements by my seven South African case studies: Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, JH Pierneef, Lippy Lipshitz, Gregoire Boonzaier, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller. These discussions carve out the individual primitivist aspects of each artist's approach by differentiating between stylistic and content-related primitivism that may refer to gender, race and/ or class. This does not mean that all artists worked in either one or the other primitivist mode but sometimes employed a mix of different primitivisms. They mainly concentrated on depicting indigenous South African peoples, showing the country's non-White majority in a way that would clearly cast them as removed from, uninterested in and finally incapable of participating in any form of modern, contemporary socio-political life.

My second chapter highlights different topics that shaped the art critical reception of South African settler primitivism in various print publications between the 1920s and 1960s. A caesura can be discerned in South Africa's decision to support Britain in the Second World War, dividing the period into first more transnationally and then increasingly nationally oriented criticisms. While the transnationalist perspective of the 1920s and 1930s concentrated on the defence of modernist art through references to European trends including an interest in indigenous cultures, recuring topoi in the nationalist criticism of the 1940s to 1960s were the dissociation from Europe and a concurrent "indigenisation," an allegedly South African spirit, soul and soil as well as "native" art. The other themes discussed in this chapter can be traced through all decades under investigation. They include more general primitivist discourses focussing on ideas of truth, essentiality and childhood, the relevance

of social criticism in modern art and male artists' myths that were employed by critics in order to position artists such as Boonzaier, Lipshitz and Pierneef within the discourse of the artist "genius" glorifying male creativity.

A whole chapter is then dedicated to women artists' myths and the examination of Irma Stern's and Maggie Laubser's self-narratives that boosted their careers. By placing them in the *Neue Frau* discourse, I show how they strategically used feminine and primitivist stereotypes in order to introduce modernist modes of painting into the patriarchal, conservative South African art scene. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first one describes the *Neue Frau* as a historical phenomenon in 1920s Germany, the second is dedicated to Stern's skilful transnationalist self-positioning between Germany and South Africa and the third one locates Laubser's self-portrayal as a Christian farmer's daughter in relation to Afrikaner *voortrekker-vrou* [pioneer woman] and *volksmoeder* [mother of the nation] ideals. Parts two and three both refer to the two women's own accounts as well as to their reception as *Neue Frauen*. In the case of Stern, the latter was shaped by an interesting synergy of German and South African press, and in the case of Laubser, Afrikaans-language reviews play a prominent role.

My last chapter offers an excursus on artists' networks that enabled South African modernists to achieve the recognition of modern art in South Africa pioneered by Stern and Laubser. The most important groups at the time were women's networks, the Jewish diaspora, Afrikaner networks and the *New Group*. While the Jewish diaspora and women's networks were mainly formed in order to generally support the careers of their members that were usually marginalised in mainstream society, the Afrikaner network was more identity-based and also had a political/ nationalist component. The foremostly younger generation organised in the *New Group*, on the other hand, intended to cause a transformation of the conservative, rigid and rusty structures governing the art scene in South Africa, and to professionalise its frameworks. All four networks often overlapped – with the exception of Jewish and Afrikaner networks that clearly occupied two different poles of ethnic representation – and its members frequently interacted. Even though the topic of primitivism did not feature as a point of discussion in any of those networks, they were of great importance for the careers of the settler primitivists surveyed here.

Limitations

A great regret is that three folders of the JH Pierneef collection held at the National Archive in Pretoria (Aanwins A941, records 18–20) were missing during both my research trips in early 2018 and 2020.[106] They contain writings by Pierneef such as lectures as well as contemporary texts on his art and were possibly last accessed by NJ Coetzee for his 1992 publication *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*.[107] It can be as-

106 In 2016, I did not visit the National Archive.

107 In his footnotes, Coetzee repeatedly refers to these three folders. Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*.

sumed that they still have not been retrieved as my persistent inquiries have lately remained unanswered.

Luckily, my research was only slightly affected by the restrictions put in place to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Although my last research trip to South African archives was cut short by a week, I had by then managed to close all the main gaps left open during my previous research stays. It is possible that a closer scrutinisation of the Alexis Preller Archive held at the Norval Foundation in the Western Cape might have been beneficial. But since this archive was uncatalogued and unsorted at the time of my visit in 2020, this would have required a very time-intensive effort. It remains for other researchers to make up for this involuntary omission. The same holds true for Esmé Berman's audio-visual material her daughter Kathy Berman conveyed to Wits Historical Papers in 2019 which was not yet accessible to the public during my visit in February/ March 2020.

1 SETTLER PRIMITIVISM IN SOUTH AFRICA BETWEEN THE 1920s AND 1960s

This chapter consists of two parts: a contextualisation of South African settler primitivism and seven case studies describing its different facets. I will first give an overview of contemporary publications on primitivism and fine art that were influential at the time. Those include Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* [Negro Sculpture] (1915), Roger Fry's *Vision and Design* (1920), Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1926) and Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (1938). Departing from Nicholas Thomas's application of the term 'settler primitivism,' I will then introduce primitivisms originating in three other settler nations by briefly discussing works by Margaret Preston (Australia), Marsden Hartley (USA) and Emily Carr (Canada). Rather than introducing in-depth investigations, these examples indicate the possibilities for further comparative studies that exceed the scope of my research, while still providing a context for the ensuing discussion. The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the examination of seven South African settler primitivists that were born between 1886 and 1911: Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, Lippy Lipshitz, Gregoire Boonzaier, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller. Differentiating between stylistic and content-related primitivism that may refer to gender, race or class, I analyse the artists' works and remarks in order to disclose different foci and agendas of South African settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, the discussion addresses the ambivalences inherent in their swaying between transnational and national perspectives as well as in the attempts at their own "indigenisation."

1.1 Theoretical background and context

Although there are many publications on primitivism in European art that are too numerous to discuss here,[1] this chapter offers a short overview of contemporary texts relevant to South African settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century. It intends to show how European ideas about African art have sparked an interest in the latter in South African artists who had thus far disregarded the visual culture of their Black countrymen and women. Getting in contact with ideas by theorists such as Carl Einstein, Roger Fry, Thomas Munro and Robert Goldwater through their encounters

1 A good overview is provided in Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*.

with European art scenes, such thought is likely to have had a considerable impact on South African artists when trying to overcome the hitherto dominating academic naturalism at home. While it is known that some of the texts discussed in this chapter were read and highly regarded by artists such as Irma Stern and Lippy Lipshitz, others offer more general insights into primitivist discourses prevalent at the time.

1.1.1 Influential contemporary publications

The first influential theoretical treatment of African art was the German art historian Carl Einstein's publication *Negerplastik* of 1915. Soon after its release, it was widely read by artists and scholars in Europe but also by South Africans such as Irma Stern or Lippy Lipshitz. In his book, Einstein devotes five marked sections to "Method," "The Painterly," "Religion and African Art," "Cubic Treatment of Space" as well as "The Mask and Related Issues."[2] These rather brief explications are followed by 119 full-page illustrations of artworks for which Einstein chose not to provide any information such as origin or period. The objective of his publication was to criticise contemporary Europeans' degradation of African art and its producers by formally discussing the objects as pure works of art beyond any anthropological or ethnographical concerns.[3] Einstein had never been to Africa and, in the 119 photographs of African sculptures he collected for his volume, presents the works in a highly aestheticised, stylised and minimalist manner, effacing any "impurities" such as paint, nails, blades, cloth, etc. originally attached to the figures.[4] As Zoe S Strother puts it, "the photoarchive (or *Bilderatlas*) of *Negerplastik* defined the canon of African art displayed in museums."[5]

Reneging his own resolution of disregarding ethnographical concerns and focusing solely on the formal qualities of the sculptures reproduced, Einstein describes the works as religious art that he considers to be autonomous and transcending its creators. Einstein further asserts that, as African art is apparently determined by religious concerns, "it does not mean anything, it does not symbolise anything; it is the God that retains his enclosed mythical reality in which he includes the worshipper, transforming him into a mythical being and suspending his human existence."[6] As mentioned earlier, Stern and Lipshitz read Einstein's publication early on in their respective careers and both later organised exhibitions of African art in South Africa where it took until the 1940s until it was recognised as such. I will show in the discussion of the individual artists' works how spiritual concerns such as those proclaimed by Einstein played a significant role in South African settler primitivism, too.

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2 Einstein, *Negerplastik*. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)
3 Ibid., pp. VII–VIII.
4 Also compare Strother, "Looking for Africa," pp. 8–10.
5 Ibid., p. 10.
6 Einstein, *Negerplastik*, p. XV.

Another important text, published five years after Einstein's *Negerplastik*, was the British painter and art critic Roger Fry's collection of essays *Vision and Design*. Amongst others, the volume includes chapters on "The Art of the Bushmen," "Negro Sculpture" and "Ancient American Art." In "The Art of the Bushmen," Fry claims that South African "Bushmen" (today usually referred to as San) were descendants of Palaeolithic man due to certain similarities between Altamira and San rock paintings. However, he maintains that the "Altamira drawings show a much higher level of accomplishment" and that the South African "Bushmen" are the "lowest of savages" that "are regarded by other native races in much the same way that we look upon negroes."[7] In a similar vein, in his essay on "Negro Sculpture," Fry states that African art is characterised by "complete artistic freedom" but that "for want of a conscious critical sense and the intellectual powers of comparison and classification [...] the negro has failed to create one of the great cultures of the world."[8] These racist, derogatory assertions clearly differ from Einstein's idealisation of African art. As Fry's unsubstantiated hierarchy places South African art at the bottom and below other African artmakers, it is logical that South African primitivists, who were trying to assign higher value to their country's cultural heritage, showed a greater interest in Einstein's work. However, it is likely that artists such as Walter Battiss were familiar with Fry's text when striving to place San rock painting in a hierarchy above the Altamira drawings.

The third text on African art to receive great attention in the early 20th century was the 1926 catalogue *Primitive Negro Sculpture* that was published by the French art dealer and collector Paul Guillaume and the American art historian and philosopher Thomas Munro in collaboration with the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania. Lippy Lipshitz for example read the book in the 1930s and recommended it to the Black South African artist Ernest Mancoba.[9] It takes on a more ethnographical approach describing the social and religious usage of works reproduced, the geographical areas they originated from as well as giving formal analyses. It also includes a short chapter on the influence of African art on contemporary artists which the authors consider a chance for new developments in European art.

A whole volume on primitivism in European art was published by Robert Goldwater in 1938, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*. Unfortunately, it is not known how this was received in South Africa. Goldwater argues that artists' interest in "primitive" art was caused by ethnological museums exhibiting "primitive" artefacts as art. He describes what he considers a "change in ethnology as a whole away from the evolutionary point of view and toward the intense study of primitive cultures as integral units."[10] He further undertakes a subdivision into four different kinds of primitivism: romantic primitivism (examples he gives for this are Henri Rousseau, Paul Gauguin, *les Fauves* [the Wild Beasts]), emotional primitivism (*Der Blaue Reiter*

7 Fry, *Vision and Design*, pp. 93–94.
8 Ibid., pp. 100–103.
9 Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99.
10 Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 42.

[The Blue Rider], *Die Brücke* [The Bridge]), intellectual primitivism (Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg) and primitivism of the subconscious (Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Jean Dubuffet). Goldwater's categories, however, cannot be meaningfully applied to primitivism in South Africa, and neither can George Boas and Arthur Lovejoy's categories of hard and soft primitivism symbolised by the noble savage on the one hand and the desire for a golden age on the other.[11] Judith Elisabeth Weiss convincingly contends that these attempts at classification are extremely problematic as the meanings and connotations of terms such as 'primitivism,' 'primitivity' and 'exoticism' are prone to constant shifts.[12] I will suggest other categories at the beginning of Chapter 1.2 that are more fit to describe South African primitivism as they refer to artists' iconographic programmes rather than intentions or psychologies.

1.1.2 Settler primitivism

The term 'settler primitivism' was coined by the Australian anthropologist Nicholas Thomas in order to describe the specific character of primitivism in the settler nations Australia and New Zealand. In *Possessions. Indigenous Art / Colonial Culture*, Thomas argues that "the ambivalence of settlers toward natives was sharpened by an emerging preoccupation with national identity [...] in British dominions such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand from the 1890s."[13] As a result, Thomas concludes,

> producers of culture [...] frequently turned to what was locally distinctive, either in the natural environment or in indigenous culture. The deep association between indigenous people and the land provided strong and condensed reference points for a colonial culture that sought both to define itself as native and to create national emblems. [...] While indigenous people's claims to the land are being denied or forgotten, elements of their culture are being prominently displayed and affirmed. The 'native' status of the new settler nation is proclaimed in a fashion that perforce draws attention to real natives who are excluded. Primitivism in settler culture is therefore something both more and less than primitivism in modernist art.[14]

In contrast to European primitivism, therefore, settler primitivism is ascribed a nationalist and more local focus. Additionally, it is characterised by a great ambivalence towards its native subjects whose culture is appropriated in order to form a connection

11 Boas & Lovejoy, *Primitivism and Related Ideas*, pp. 7–11.
12 Weiss, *Der gebrochene Blick*, p. 68.
13 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 12.
14 Ibid.

Fig. 1: Margaret Preston, *Aboriginal landscape*, 1941, oil on board, 40 × 52 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, D & JT Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982

Fig. 2: Margaret Preston, *Australian native pear*, 1942, oil on masonite, 20 × 16 cm, private collection

to the land, but who are simultaneously denied any claim to it.[15] Additionally, Thomas stresses that, again unlike 20th century European modernism, settler primitivism is not "necessarily the project of radical formal innovation stimulated by tribal art [...] but, rather, often an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one."[16] He describes different ways settler artists dealt with this culture: "some framed it nostalgically and sentimentally; some romanticized the colonial endeavor; others acknowledged its imperfections and struggled with the question of dispossession."[17]

With specific reference to Australia and New Zealand which form the focus of his study, Thomas argues that a settler iconography began to emerge in the late 19th century that drew on "images of indigenous artifacts and people, as well as kangaroos and kiwis" in order to "provide a solution to a problem of colonial identity" beyond a settler culture customarily described as "unavoidably derivative, and [...] a displaced and second-rate version of Britishness."[18] With reference to the visual arts, he employs the Australian painter and printmaker Margaret Preston as an example. In 1941, Preston had written that "the attention of the Australian people must be drawn to the fact that [Aboriginal art] is great art and the foundation of a national culture for this country."[19] Thomas argues that this and similar remarks frequently published by Preston at the time did not emanate from "a desire to emulate modernists elsewhere" but were "explicitly nationalistic" and "deeply inflected by a Ruskinian

15 Also compare Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," pp. 279–280.
16 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.
17 Ibid., p. 34.
18 Ibid., p. 96.
19 Cited in ibid., p. 97.

localism."[20] The two works *Aboriginal landscape* (1941, Fig. 1) and *Australian native pear, etc* (1942, Fig. 2) that originate from the same time as Preston's statement cited above are good examples of how the artist incorporated different Aboriginal form languages into her designs. Both works are executed in the traditional colours of red and yellow ochre and black charcoal. While the geometrical designs and patterns in *Aboriginal landscape* reference traditional rock and bark art, *Australian native pear, etc* also points at dot designs originating from ceremonial body and sand paintings. Additionally, both paintings portray a typical Australian fauna – in terms of general landscape as well as specific flowers, plants and fruit – and were given titles featuring adjectives that emphasise locality and nativity: "Aboriginal" and "Australian native." In contrast to South African settler primitivists, Preston never portrayed Aboriginal peoples themselves but rather objects they produced or environments they lived in.

In her PhD dissertation *Writing Native: The Aboriginal in Australian Cultural Nationalism 1927–1945*, Ellen Smith states that Margaret Preston "was perhaps the first to explicitly link the Aboriginal to an Australian national culture."[21] However, in contrast to Thomas, Smith maintains that even though Preston "describes herself as creating a domestic art in order to ground a provincial, national identity," she also locates her practice of referencing Aboriginal form languages within the larger context of primitivist tendencies in European modernism.[22] Smith concludes that "the Aboriginal is implicitly seen as part of a global conglomerate of primitive and colonized people, but is also claimed as a figure for Australian geographic isolation and cultural purity" and hence, for Preston, "must both signify local specificity, and at the same time introduce Australia to the world."[23] Smith therefore adds a transnational component to Thomas's description of Australian settler primitivism as local and crucial for an internal Australian identity in the visual arts. She emphasises how, to artists such as Preston, the representation of national identity abroad and the embeddedness of their primitivism in larger international discourses were important for the development of a national Australian art. The fact that the latter complied with and made use of stereotypes originating from colonial culture helped this project rather than hindering it. This positioning between intranational as well as transnational concerns was equally relevant for South African primitivists.

While South African and Australian primitivisms are not discussed in any of the significant publications on the relationship of primitivism and modern art, William Rubin's highly contested anthology *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* does contain a chapter on primitivism in another settler nation, the United States of America, by Gail Levin.[24] In this text, Levin draws a line from Arthur Wesley Dow and Max Weber

20 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 116.
21 Smith, *Writing Native*.
22 Ibid., pp. 24–25.
23 Ibid., p. 28.
24 Levin, "American Art." For criticism of Rubin's MoMA exhibition and the accompanying catalogue see Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, pp. 311–414. McLean, "Crossing Country," p. 603. Butler Palmer, "Renegotiating Identity," p. 187. Blackmun Visonà, "Agent Provocateur?," p. 121.

Fig. 3: Marsden Hartley, *Indian Fantasy*, 1914, oil on canvas, 119 × 100 cm, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with Funds from the State of North Carolina

to Marsden Hartley, followed by brief paragraphs on a number of other American artists such as Marius de Zayas, John Storrs, John Graham and George LK Morris. Like Margaret Preston and the South African artists portrayed in the next chapter, Weber and Hartley became interested in primitive art during their sojourns in Europe. While Weber adhered to his Cubist interest in African sculpture and especially masks upon his return to the US, Hartley concentrated on the "natives" of his own country in order

to develop a new national art based on America's indigenous "cultural assets."[25] A work characteristic for Hartley's engagement with Native American culture that is also discussed in Levin's chapter on American primitivism is *Indian Fantasy* of 1914 (Fig. 3). The work resorts to formal elements Hartley had seen used in different objects made by a large variety of Native American artists that were exhibited in Berlin at the time and also depicts objects themselves. Levin writes that "the color scheme of this painting, emphasizing red, yellow and green over a black background with white details, corresponds to that of an important Sio Hemis Kachina" displayed at the Völkerkunde Museum in Berlin.[26]

Elizabeth Hutchinson explains in *The Indian Craze. Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915* that, "while European American artists had been fighting off criticism that their representational work was derivative of European traditions for nearly a century, Native American art was seen to 'belong' to the country."[27] In January 1920, for example, Hartley wrote that "it is the redman who […] has shown us the significance of the poetic aspects of our original land. Without him we should still be unrepresented in the cultural development of the world."[28] In contrast to Preston, however, Hartley was not only interested in Native Americans' artistic form languages but also in their ways of living. In *The Great American Thing. Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935*, Wanda Corn asserts that his "Indianism was a complicated mix of infantilizing, veneration, and activism" as his "interests went beyond art and artifacts to finding modern-day values in the Pueblo Indians' religion, their attitudes towards the natural world, and their use of their bodies in ritual and dance."[29]

Hartley lived in New Mexico from 1918 to 1920, where he met other like-minded artists and intellectuals such as Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Hunter Austin or Georgia O'Keeffe, who came to the Santa Fe and Taos area because the "Pueblos' lack of interest in material wealth, their devotion to communal values, their healthy respect for human limitation and for the natural environment seemed a sane counterpoint" to the settler artists' modern lives.[30] While Mabel Dodge Luhan married and lived with a Pueblo Indian, Tony Luhan, and, as her biographer Lois Palken Rudnick puts it, "wrote numerous articles both for the popular press and for literary journals to convince her fellow Americans that salvation lay in the Indian way,"[31] Mary Austin was politically active in propagating Pueblo Indians' rights.[32] Primitivism in the US therefore often had an openly political component, unlike South African primitivism. As W Jackson Rushing rightly argues, this was only possible because, at that time, "'The Indian' (a) was no longer militarily able to oppose the exploitation of raw materials in the

25 Levin, "American Art." Also compare Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley*, pp. 171–174.
26 Levin, "American Art," p. 459.
27 Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze*, pp. 116–117.
28 Hartley, "Red Man Ceremonials," p. 174.
29 Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 255.
30 Palken Rudnick, *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, p. xi, also see p. 144.
31 Ibid., p. xi.
32 Lanigan Stineman, *Mary Austin*.

West (and elsewhere), (b) had been restricted to reservations, and (c) was perceived as vanishing, like any rare exotica," and therefore did no longer pose any threat to the White descendants of European settlers.[33]

Unlike in Australia, the American settler artists' demand for a new national art based on Native American culture in the early 20th century was a short-lived phenomenon. It faded in the 1940s, even though artists like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman still maintained an interest in Native American art. As a large proportion of Europe's avant-garde had migrated to the US leading up to and during the Second World War, the country quickly became the centre of the international artworld and no longer required a distinct national style rooted in native landscape or cultural heritage. As Nicholas Thomas puts it, American "postwar abstraction was defined to a much greater degree by formalist than nationalist criticism" and in general, "nationality did not need to be defined in indigenous terms."[34]

In Canada, this was different. The *Group of Seven*, a group of Ontarian artists who are still amongst Canada's most popular modernists, met in 1910 and started exhibiting together in 1920, famously travelled to rural Canada in order to sketch and paint northern landscapes and folk life in an effort of cultural nationalism.[35] In "'Naturalizing the Nation': The Rise of Naturalistic Nationalism in the United States and Canada," Eric Kaufmann shows that the "Group of Seven's travails were soon given mythical interpretation" when FB Housser, a Canadian art collector and husband to *Group of Seven* artist Bess Larkin Housser, in a 1926 publication "depicted Group members as heroic battlers for Canada fighting against the dead weight of Old World tradition."[36] Affiliated with them was Emily Carr, who has become Canada's best-known artist appropriating First Nations art forms and is considered "a founding figure of modern art in Canada."[37] According to Carmen Brinkle, Canadian "Natives, for both Carr and Canadian society, became mediators between White society and transcendentalist nature. For Carr, Natives and nature thus helped define the distinctiveness of Canadianness."[38] Carr, too, was influenced by the European primitivism she encountered during her studies in Paris in 1910/11, and developed her own interpretation of it upon her return to Canada. Like Preston, she has been criticised for building a career and reputation "on traffic in the Native image"[39] and, like Hartley, she conflated different First Nations cultures into a homogenous, generic "native" civilisation, "the Imaginary Indian."[40] In general, all these primitivists' treatments of "native arts" are contested as they exploited indigenous cultures rather than starting a dialogue. In contrast to Hartley's and Preston's works that propagate a supposedly timeless state of natural primitivity of the peoples they mean to represent, Carr's

33 Rushing, *Native American Art*, p. 12.
34 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 161, 163.
35 Kaufmann, "'Naturalizing the Nation'."
36 Ibid., p. 685.
37 Moray, "Emily Carr," p. 229.
38 Birkle, "Going Native," p. 32.
39 Moray, "Emily Carr," p. 229.
40 Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian." Fulford, "The Trouble with Emily."

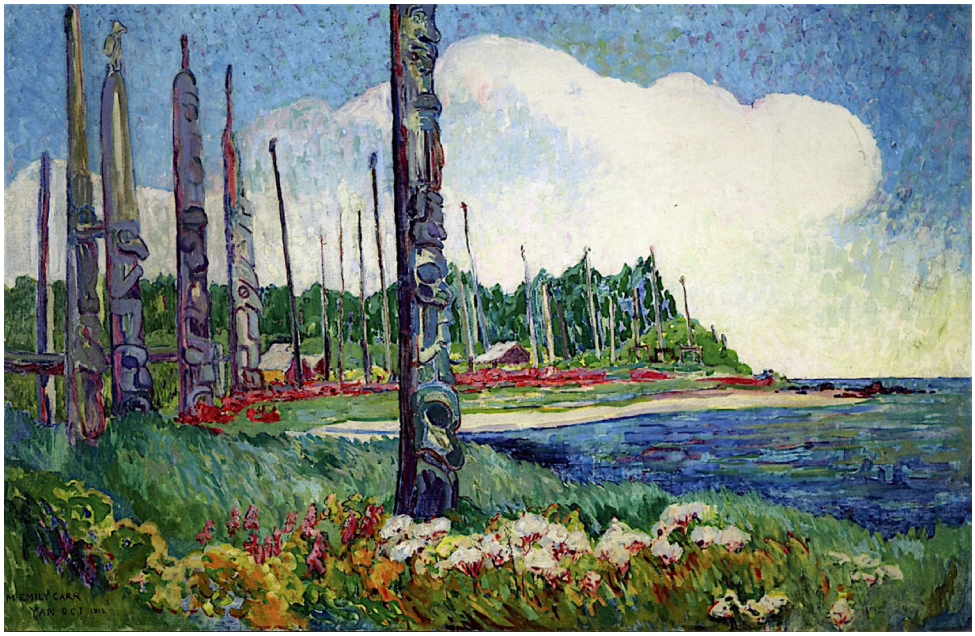

Fig. 4: Emily Carr, *Yan, Q.C.I.*, 1912, oil on canvas, 100 × 153 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Gift of Roy G. Cole, 1992

paintings portray the remains of a culture that no longer existed in the way she idolised it. The oil painting *Yan, Q.C.I.* of 1912 (Fig. 4) is a prominent example of this as it shows a deserted coastal village surrounded by an arc of wooden totems. While the totems are shown as attractive additions to the natural landscape composed of similar colours, the originators of these artworks have disappeared.

For South Africa, comparatively little academic research has been dedicated to settler primitivism. In *Art and Artists of South Africa* published in 1970, the influential South African art historian Esmé Berman in a glorifying way termed the primitivism of Alexis Preller and Walter Battiss "African Mystique."[41] In her view, European primitivists "took over only the outer forms; they did not probe the mystery."[42] In contrast to this, Berman describes Preller and Battiss as seeing Africa "not as the source of primitive forms but as a context of experience" and concludes that the "awakening to the specific climate of the African continent was the beginning of the psychological separation of South African art from its traditional European antecedents."[43] This is of course a very uncritical, idealised reading by a contemporary of the two artists from a similar cultural, social and political background. Clearly, Berman herself had a stake in the nationalist project of South African art after the Second World War. It is likely that she consciously never used the term 'primitivism' in relation to Battiss's and Preller's art in order to further differentiate them from European modernists.

41 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 12–13.
42 Ibid., p. 12.
43 Ibid., p. 13.

Nicholas Thomas's term 'settler primitivism' has only been employed in the South African context by the American art historian John Peffer.[44] In *Art and the End of Apartheid*, Peffer claims that "white South African artists looked to local cultures as a means to indigenize their engagement with modernist ideas borrowed from Europe, as well as to validate their own position as a dominant minority in a colonial setting."[45] Using Alexis Preller and Constance Stuart Larrabee as examples, he further argues that

> this kind of local modernist appropriation, whose eyes are dually fixed abroad and at home, also cuts two ways locally in that it both promotes and objectifies its subject, and it pays homage to local tradition while purloining its imagery and aesthetic.[46]

Peffer does not, however, describe any of the specificities of South African settler primitivism or trace its developments or changes. In her chapter on "Primitivism in South African Art" in the second volume of *Visual Century*, Anitra Nettleton differentiates between post-war settler primitivists such as Preller and Battiss and earlier artists such as Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. With reference to the latter group, she claims that the "formal qualities of these artists' works […] do not directly reference or grow out of African forms or those of any other so-called primitive cultures."[47] She further argues that the "reference to, and generalisation of, African formal qualities was to become a major feature of the styles of those artists working in a primitivist mode during the apartheid period," and calls the "native" Walter Battiss "the first South African artist to […] engage with European formal primitivism while searching for an African stylistic identity," paving the way "for others to raid African material culture to develop their own styles."[48] In line with the timespan predefined by this volume of *Visual Century*, Nettleton concentrates on the period between 1945 and 1976. The majority of her chapter is hence devoted to artists outside my scope of research, such as Cecil Skotnes, Edoardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae and Dumile Feni, who mainly began their careers in the 1960s. In this process, she differentiates between White artists "who turned to primitivism as a means of distinguishing themselves from modernist art elsewhere," and whose "claim to African identity was made in a spirit of individualist romanticism or settler nationalism," and Black artists who produced primitivist works in "an act of defiance through which African forms were elevated to a higher status, and which signified an indigenous authenticity."[49]

I would argue that the development from, as Nettleton indicates, "European" artists such as Stern and Laubser to "native" South Africans such as Battiss and

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44 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 21.
45 Ibid., p. 6.
46 Ibid., p. 21.
47 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 144.
48 Ibid., pp. 145, 147.
49 Ibid., p. 159. Also see Nettleton, "Modernism, Primitivism and the Search for Modernity."

Preller is not as clear-cut as she implies. Her concept of nativity could certainly be questioned as Stern, Laubser, Battiss and Preller were all born in South Africa. Additionally, I would consider works by White settler artists more ambivalent than she describes since most of them genuinely participated in the project of elevating "African forms […] to a higher status" through their collecting and exhibiting activities. Interestingly, Nettleton does not mention earlier Black artists such as Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, who – at least for a short time – moved in the same artistic circles as South Africa's settler primitivists and exhibited alongside them.[50] As indicated above, South African settler primitivists were no political activists, as for example American artists such as Hartley or Austin considered themselves to some extent and for a certain time (using the most tentative definition of political activism when taking into account how they still appropriated and exploited indigenous culture). On the other hand, South African artists also did not deny the contemporary existence of indigenous peoples as did Emily Carr's pictures of the "Imaginary Indian" that only existed in the past. For South African primitivism, it was crucial to show the country's non-White majority in a way that would clearly cast them as removed from, uninterested in and finally incapable of participating in any form of modern, contemporary social and political life. In contrast to Preston's depictions of indigenous cultural objects and form languages propagating new Australian design emblems, South African artists therefore largely concentrated on portraying indigenous peoples themselves.

1.2 South African settler primitivists: seven case studies

In order to describe different facets of South African settler primitivism, it is beneficial to first establish categories of different primitivist foci permeating the various artistic oeuvres. This does not mean that all artists worked in either one or the other primitivist mode but sometimes employed a mix of different primitivisms. Generally, the main difference can be drawn between a primitivism in style and a primitivism in subject – which, again, are not mutually exclusive categories. In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, Marianna Torgovnick shows how the word "primitive" has changed from its 15th century meaning of "original or ancestor" to "the first, earliest age, period, or stage" in the 18th century until it arrived at its late 18th century reference to "aboriginals, inhabitants of prehistoric times, [and] natives in non-European lands" that was still in use in the first half of the 20th century.[51] In art historical terms, "primitive" has referred to "painters before the Renaissance," then to "all early

50 In 1943, for example, Battiss invited Sekoto to exhibit in the upcoming *New Group* show in Johannesburg. Rankin, "Lonely Road," p. 99.

51 Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, pp. 18–19.

art," and finally to "'tribal' art – Native American, Eskimo, African, and Oceanic."[52] In addition, the term has been used with reference to (European) folkloristic art as well as the art of children, mentally ill people and autodidacts.[53] Stylistic primitivism can therefore be said to reference artistic expressions of one or more of those groups – which is not to say that the groups themselves can be considered homogenic. It is hence closely related to stylistic appropriation.

Subject-related primitivism can also be subdivided into multiple categories. Again, it is interlinked with subject appropriation as members of supposedly "primitive" groups are represented by "outsiders."[54] The most common forms of subject primitivism are racial and gender primitivism. Those two primitivisms culminate in portrayals of non-White women such as Stern's paintings of African women or Laubser's depictions of Indian girls in Natal. Another form of subject-related primitivism that has less often been discussed in the visual arts is class primitivism. With reference to English literary texts of the late 19th century such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbevilles*, Emily Hinnov writes that "class primitivism reifies and romanticizes the 'simple,' pre-industrial, pre-capitalist life above the present without regard for the effects of disease or poverty often experienced in real-life non-industrial, non-capitalist peoples."[55] She further explains that modern artists idealised "lower-class working people as somehow more authentic or pure while also continually relegating them to a life of drudgery and poverty."[56] Referring to class primitivism in the United States of America which is often amplified by racial primitivism, she concludes that "practitioners of class primitivism simultaneously memorialized and displaced native peoples."[57] In *Victorian Anthropology*, George W Stocking differentiates between rural and urban primitivism within the category of class primitivism.[58] With regards to social primitivist discourses in Victorian England, Stocking writes:

> From the perspective of contemporary middle-class observers, the primitivism at the bottom of the social scale now had a dual character. On the one hand, there was the rural primitivism of the preindustrial world, marginalized in England and still flourishing on the Celtic fringe; on the other, there was the urban primitivism of preindustrial London, metastasizing in every industrial town and city.[59]

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52 Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 19. Also compare Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, p. xiii.

53 In the 1940s, for example, "American primitives," i.e., self-taught artists, were of high interest in US-American artistic circles. Compare Janis, *They Taught Themselves*. Lipman, *American Primitive Painting*.

54 Young & Haley, "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere'," p. 268.

55 Hinnov, *Choran Community*, p. 40. On class primitivism in British literature in the early 20th century see Wachman, *Crosswriting the Empire*, pp. 135–201. Hackett, *Sapphic Primitivism*, pp. 88–119.

56 Hinnov, *Choran Community*, p. 40.

57 Ibid.

58 Also compare Lesko, *Aesthetics of Soft Focus*, pp. 64–67.

59 Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 213.

In line with Hinnov's definition, Stocking considers rural class primitivism as romanticising working-class villagers as representatives of pastoral "Merrie England." Urban class primitivism, however, according to Stocking is marked by the impact of poverty and physical decay disregarded or denied in rural primitivism. He explains:

> But there were no traces of 'Merrie England' to be found in the new city slums, which provided the subject matter of the urban reformer's science of social statistics. They remained, even in the process of reformation, a disturbing and alien phenomenon – so far removed from the amenities and the morality of civilized life that many observers, including Friedrich Engels and Henry Mayhew, were impelled to use racial analogies to capture the sense of difference.[60]

This type of urban class primitivism is clearly absent in South African settler primitivism.[61] Although there are portrayals of urban scenes – such as Gregoire Boonzaier's glorifying paintings of the "slums" in Cape Town's Malay quarter (today Bo-Kaap) or District Six – those do not depict poverty or disease as disturbing and alien phenomena but rather comply with Hinnov's classification of class primitivism as modernist romantisations of simple, pre-industrial life. I will therefore employ the term 'urban class primitivism' in her sense rather than in Stocking's. In contrast to earlier class-related romanticisms, the primitivist romantisations of pre-industrial life described by Hinnov are tied to a modernist quest for meaning in a society shaped by industrial capitalism.

As elaborated in my introduction, the selection of artists to whose work I will apply these categories is mainly based on their standing within the modern art scene in South Africa as well as the relevance of primitivism for their work. All artists discussed focus on different primitivist concerns and my selection therefore serves to map different facets of settler primitivism in South Africa. In this process, I will discuss individual works rather than giving a representative outline of the examined artists' entire oeuvre or iconographic programme. In line with my discussion of nationalist concerns and ambivalences, my focus will be on depictions and appropriations of indigenous South African cultural groups and their material culture, symbolism and style. The artworks will be correlated with written documents composed by the individual artists, either for publication purposes or in diaries or letters. Those texts were sourced from different archives as well as from biographical monographs and exhibition catalogues. The availability of such material varies considerably for each artist. Additionally, for some artists, such as Irma Stern, a large proportion of this

60 Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 213.

61 George Pemba's township genre painting is a rare example approaching such a type of urban class primitivism. However, the Black artist Pemba was little known at the time. As Barry Feinberg puts it, "it was only in 1990, with the eventual defeat of the apartheid system, that conditions were created for Pemba to begin to receive wider recognition." Feinberg, "Biographical Sketch," p. 28.

material has been published before while for others, such as Lippy Lipshitz, it has so far only been accessible locally at the respective archive.

As my focus is on White settler artists for whom it was possible to take an active part in the formation of a new national art scene in contrast to the overwhelming majority of their non-White colleagues, I will only briefly touch on Black artists. Overall, when speaking about the South African art scene, critics, audiences, production and reception in general terms, I primarily refer to White South Africans, since, due to extensive racial discrimination, the country's non-White majority were pushed to the extreme margins of such public concerns – a few exceptions such as Ernest Mancoba or Gerard Sekoto aside, in the first half of the 20th century, Blacks were chiefly artistic subjects.

1.2.1 Irma Stern (1894–1966): exoticising portraits of Black women[62]

South Africa's most prominent modernist, Irma Stern, was the daughter of German Jews who had immigrated to the Transvaal area in the late 19th century. She spent her life and career migrating between Africa and Europe and purposefully made use of these transnational links in order to establish herself as a successful artist. Stern studied at the Großherzoglich-Sächsische Kunstschule in Weimar from 1913 to late 1914, when she moved on to study with Martin Brandenburg at the Lewin-Funcke-Studio in Berlin. She received great support from Max Pechstein, whom she met in 1917 and who introduced her into Berlin's expressionist circles, where she was able to position herself as an "authentic African" artist and connoisseur of "primitive" cultures.[63] As Reinhard Wegener explicates, in contrast to the French cubist tendencies to employ African art in order to develop new aesthetics, the *Brücke* artists in Berlin closely related non-European art to indigenous peoples' fictional sense of life that was characterised by authenticity, naturalness and primitivity and presented an alternative to European civilisation.[64] The *Brücke* primitivism is thus ascribed a much stronger ideological component.

Stern, too, was committed to this ideology and, in her pictures of Black women whom she claimed she had grown up amongst, established an advantage over her

62 Stern's oeuvre is much broader than the selection that it is feasible to discuss in this context. In addition to her oil portraits of Black Africans discussed in this chapter, she also produced a large number of portraits of Cape Malays, Indians, South African Jews, Arabs and Europeans, still lifes, (charcoal) drawings, gouaches, sculptures, bookplates, travel narratives and journals. For the latter refer to Schoeman, *Irma Stern*. Below, "Irma Stern." For her travel narratives see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 77–104. For her bookplates: Below, *Hidden Treasures*. For her sculpture: Bourdin, *The Sculpture of Irma Stern*. Good overviews of her painterly work are rendered in Arnold, *Irma Stern*. O'Toole, *Irma Stern*.

63 Stern, "How I Began to Paint." The exchange of letters between Stern and Pechstein is analysed in Below, "‚... wird es mir eine Freude sein'."

64 Wegner, *Der Exotismus-Streit*, p. 36.

German colleagues, who knew their subjects only from occasional travels, visits to ethnological museums or interactions with Black performers participating in ethnological exhibitions or circus acts.[65] The German press continued Stern's "indigenisation" and further cultivated it by frequently mentioning her special role as an "African" artist, attributing to her a greater genuineness than to European artists such as Pechstein or Paul Gauguin.[66] On invitation of Pechstein, she became a founding member of the influential *Novembergruppe* [November Group] in 1918 and, a year later, she had her first solo exhibition at Wolfgang Gurlitt's gallery in Berlin, which also represented the *Brücke* artists.[67] As will be detailed in Chapter 3, through this early success in Berlin, Stern was able to introduce a new image of professional women artists into South Africa's conservative art scene and led the way for a female avant-garde.

Stern returned to South Africa in 1920, taking up residence in Cape Town. She took a copy of Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* with her, as well as his formal appreciation of African sculpture described above, and was one of the first South Africans to collect African art for mainly aesthetic reasons.[68] She also depicted objects of her collection in her artworks, especially in her exoticizing still lifes combining lush flowers and African sculpture.[69] Moreover, on at least two occasions she exhibited her paintings together with works from her collection with the explicit aim of raising the appreciation of art produced in African countries such as the Congo.[70] Generally, in a faithfully primitivist manner, she proclaimed the timelessness of true art and thus equated modern art and "primitive" sculpture. For example, in a 1961 radio talk, she proclaimed:

> Tonight I'm going to speak to you about modern art, that is, if there is such a thing as modern art. From my point of view there's art and no art. Because you can dive right down into the centuries and find one piece, bring it through the years and you have the latest modern art. I'm thinking here of a Mexican head – of a heavy black stone, which is the outer space and the inner space – the newest idea of sculpture now. Mexico was – how many thousand years back?[71]

65 Marion Arnold points out that, "although Stern's encounters with Africa were real and were presented as truth authenticated by the artist as authoritative eye-witness, her construction of Africa was a fictional, imaginative mixture of childhood memories, nostalgia and adult romantic idealism filtered through a German modernist concept of primitivism." Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile, p. 61.

66 E.g. Stahl, "Ausstellungen."

67 The gallery still operated under his by then long deceased father's name, Fritz Gurlitt.

68 Also see Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 129. Below, "Irma Stern," p. 47.

69 A good impression of these still lifes can be gained from Arnold, *Irma Stern*, pp. 125–149.

70 Kauenhoven Janzen, "African Art in Cape Town," p. 4.

71 Stern, "Is there such a thing as modern art?"

In 1922, Stern held the first exhibition of her paintings at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town, which she boldly called "An Exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern." It was the first time the word 'modern' was used in reference to South African art, and this as well as her following exhibitions received a predominantly negative response from the conservative South African art scene.[72] In addition to the modernist style pursued by Stern, critics were also shocked by her portraits of Black South Africans which were not common at the time. Jeanne van Eeden argues that primitivist tendencies in Stern's work were "felt to be one of the major alienating aspects of her oeuvre" since, in contrast to Europe where Stern's works had been very successful, in South Africa, "the primitive was a definite reality and not an illusory, Edenic fantasy."[73] Irene Below points out that Stern "caused a sensation because she applied the latest trends from Europe to the depiction of black South Africans who had previously been considered objects of ethnographic interest rather than members of impressive foreign cultures."[74] Below concludes that "such preoccupation with natives could only be legitimised through the interest and success Stern generated in Europe."[75] Stern's depictions of Black Africans vary between works that are foremostly studies of colour or composition, group scenes that often also have an ethnographical interest, types and actual portraits. It is often difficult to draw a clear line between the latter two but Stern herself perceived her portraits of Blacks as "not just types and races," and neither did her audience.[76] Marion Arnold notes that, even though "retrospectively, the racism in her remarks [and works] is troubling," at the time, "her opinions were controversial in South Africa because she endorsed black people as beautiful."[77]

Stern's primitivism has been discussed in two academic research projects. Without explicitly addressing the primitivist character of Stern's work, in her PhD thesis *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art. Audacities of Color*, the Afro-American art historian LaNitra Michele Berger (neé Walker) describes race as the most critical theme in Stern's work. Berger argues that Stern's "work raised questions about race relations in South Africa at a time when the country was plunging deeper into racial segregation."[78] In his MA dissertation of 2012, the former director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Clive Kellner, maintains that "Stern's paintings

72 Arnold, *Women and Art*, p. 80.

73 Van Eeden, "Irma Stern's first exhibition," pp. 95–96.

74 Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 118. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)

75 Ibid. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)

76 Quote from a letter from Stern to her close friends Richard and Freda Feldman cited in Berman, *Remembering Irma*, p. 97. Also see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 47–48. However, Stern did also conduct conventional type studies as exemplified in charcoal drawings such as *Head of a Woman* (1935), *Mother and Child* (1929) or *Mangbetu* (1942). In 1946, she writes to her friend and supporter Thelma Gutsche: "Have just now managed to make real contact with Dr. du Plessis – (the Malay du Plessis) – now I hope to choose my proper types and do some fine work amount [sic] the Malays." Stern, letter to Gutsche, 18 October 1946.

77 Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile," p. 64. For example, in Stern, "My Exotic Models," the artist writes that she intends to show "the primitive and childlike yet rich soul of the native" in her pictures.

78 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 99.

Fig. 5: Irma Stern, *Composition*, 1923, oil on canvas, 139 × 96 cm, private collection

Fig. 6: Irma Stern, *Lemon Pickers*, 1928, oil on canvas, 100 × 95 cm, private collection

from Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland exemplify an imaginary 'primitivist' ideal that seeks to define the 'other', and in particular black women's bodies, as synonymous with that of nature."[79] As examples, he analyses works such as *Composition* (1923; Fig. 5) and *Lemon Pickers* (1928; Fig. 6) that show Black female nudes surrounded by luscious nature. The fruits foregrounded in *Lemon Pickers*, for example, are read by Kellner as symbols of fecundity and linked to other works by Stern he considers to deal with motherhood.[80] In an argument that seems somewhat forced, Kellner links these to Paula Modersohn-Becker.[81] Moreover, he sees a strong influence of Pechstein in both works. With regards to *Composition*, he emphasises that the three nude women are shown "amongst a bush of Proteas, a specifically South African signifier that may suggest Stern's immersion into her 'primordial' context in a way her European counterparts were not."[82]

However, while Berger emphasises Stern's agency in navigating her career between aesthetic renewal, public acclaim and government support, Kellner presents a psychological reading that reduces Stern to an infantilely traumatised and sexually frustrated woman that uses her Black subjects to stabilise her own dislocated self. While both criticise racist tendencies apparent in Stern's remarks and works, Berger stresses political and social contexts whereas Kellner places a greater emphasis on individual psychology. Kellner's is a practice often employed in analyses of women

79 Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*, p. 72.
80 Ibid., pp. 68–70.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., p. 64.

artists' works and is rightly criticised by feminist art historians.[83]

An early work indicative of Stern's interest in primitivist modes of painting is *Stonebreaker* (Fig. 7), which was produced in the year of Stern's return to South Africa and shows a Black man breaking rocks with a hammer. It is likely that the subject refers to Stern's childhood in the Transvaal, a state that was home to gold and diamond mines owned by White businesses such as Cecil Rhode's De Beers diamond company, which exploited Black laborers as well as convicts from 1885. It is one of Stern's very few portraits of African men as well as an unusually early example of rural class primitivism. When it comes to style, her expressionist primitivism becomes obvious in formal elements such as black outlines, geometric forms and flat surfaces. Moreover, the man's face resembles an African mask. In general, this early painting is unusual as it depicts a Black South African at work, performing a non-traditional task in westernised work clothes. It could therefore be argued that, while Stern recurs to a formalist European primitivism in this work, the subject cannot as easily be placed within exoticising practices since she depicts a mineworker, a contemporary colonial reality, rather than a "noble savage." Nevertheless, this work is also no social criticism as its subject is shown in a rather relaxed and contemplative mood, set against a picturesque mountain/ savannah landscape. Rather than reflecting realities of exploitation or penal servitude, it can be considered a primitivist idealisation of the relationship between human and nature (resonating in the earthy colours, too) as well as of manual labour. Moreover, it complies with a "New Romanticism" that Karel Schoeman also detects in her writings of the 1920s.[84]

Fig. 7: Irma Stern, *Stonebreaker*, 1920, oil on canvas, 105 × 86 cm, Rupert Art Foundation

Stern seems to soon have discarded her interest in stylistic primitivism and instead fully concentrated on a subject-related primitivism; she focussed on depicting

83 E.g. Flagmeier, "Camille Claudel," p. 36.
84 Schoeman, *Irma Stern*, pp. 58–59.

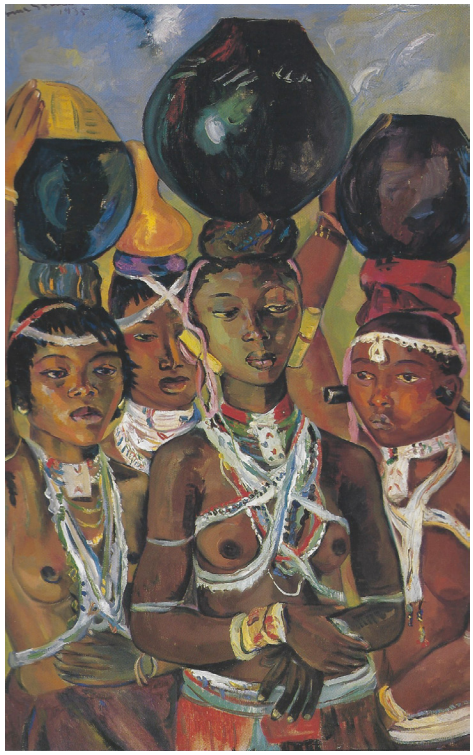

Fig. 8: Irma Stern, *Water Carriers*, 1935, oil on canvas, 126 × 79 cm, private collection

mainly African women in traditional dress, either relaxing or performing traditional tasks, supposedly untouched by "Western civilisation." It is these depictions of Black South Africans that Kellner analyses in his MA dissertation. Further good examples are *Water Carriers* of 1935 (Fig. 8) or *Bed Carriers* of 1941 (Fig. 9). Both paintings show traditionally dressed African women balancing objects on their heads as a means of transport. *Water Carriers* seems to approach an ethnographical study as the four women depicted can easily be identified as Ndebele through their remarkable beaded jewellery. Visits to local Ndebele villages were very common amongst South African artists in the 1930s and 1940s. In a diary entry of 26 October 1936, Lippy Lipshitz for example notes his plan to join Stern on her visit to an Ndebele village ten miles outside of Pretoria/ Tshwane.[85] In *Bed Carriers*, on the other hand, the half-naked bodies of the two women shown are depicted in a way that foregrounds composition and colour hues, contrasting blue with different tones of yellow, orange and brown. By closing in on the women's softly curved, exposed torsos and cutting off parts of the beds they carry as well as of their heads, hands and garments, the focus is clearly set on the interplay of lines and planes. The women's faces are only partly visible, and the prominence of their round breasts sexualises them explicitly.[86] Stern's paintings *Composition*, *Lemon Pickers*, *Water Carriers* and *Bed Carriers* can all be considered a combination of racial and gender primitivism making use of subject appropriation.

85 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 26 October 1936. Interestingly, the artist John Dronsfield and his partner, the journalist Denis Hatfield, took a similar trip to a mine compound in 1942 where they photographed Black mine workers in a class primitivist effort over eight days. Their interest in mine workers was, however, shared by very few other South African artists. Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 15 May 1942.

86 On sexualised racism in Stern's work see Wyman, "Irma Stern." Berger, *Irma Stern*. Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*.

In a newspaper article entitled "My Exotic Models" of 1926, Stern explains that, while in Europe, she was yearning to return to

> Africa, the country of my birth, the land of sunshine, of radiant colours, where the fruit grows so plentifully and the flowers seem to reach the summit of all joy; where the brown people live a happy life in close connection with their soil, beautiful in their primitive innocence.[87]

Works such as *Stonebreaker*, *Water Carriers* or *Bed Carriers* comply with this primitivist idealisation. In line with contemporary primitivist degradations, Stern describes South African "natives [as] lovely and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar animal-like beauty which adds a touch of the tragic to the expression of their faces – the heaviness of an awaking race not yet freed from the soil."[88] She further stresses that, in order to find such subjects, she "had to go where there was no sign of Europe, no trace of civilisation – just Africa lying in the sun with its stretches of untouched land and its dark people as it had been lying, one might imagine, since the day of creation."[89]

However, the artist was aware that this was not an easy task and knew that Black South Africans did not factually live in a temporal vacuum. When describing how "a beautiful statuesque Zulu woman fully decorated with all her beads, her leather skirt, her headgear and all the little artistic spices they add to adorn themselves" asked her if she was a taxi when her car passed by, Stern exclaims, "What was this? Was there no spot of ground on this earth untouched by the spider-like fingers of civilisation?"[90] In contrast to the arcadian idyll she usually portrayed in her descriptions of South Africa, in an article for the German magazine *Frau und Gegenwart* [Woman and Contemporary Life] published in 1927, she insinuates the struggles in the racially diverse country. In a racist story of a Zulu woman, Stern equates the futile but naturally strong struggle of a giant tortoise against the surf with the constant, inconclusive wrestling of Black

Fig. 9: Irma Stern, *Bed Carriers*, 1941, oil on canvas, 84 × 84 cm, Rupert Art Foundation

87 Stern, "My Exotic Models."
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.

South Africans against European customs.[91] In another article published in the *Cape Argus* in the same year, she is cited to complain about finding "the Zulu Princess dressed in a blue Sunday print, sitting on a mat with a Bible on her lap," and the Swazi King gaining a "reputation of being the best-dressed man in England" during his latest visit with the British King.[92] Six years later, she is reported to be shocked about the Swazis having "submitted to civilisation," wearing "Everyman's clothes and boots" and, as a result, having become "unhappy in the burden of civilised living."[93] These remarks are revealing illustrations of the ambivalences inherent in South African settler primitivism. In contrast to their European counterparts, South African primitivists were in regular contact with the people they portrayed as archaic, timeless and natural "primitives," and knew that by 1930, very few were living the life they admired. By depicting their Black compatriots as "noble savages" or pastoral farm workers, they purposefully disregarded their realities and fostered cultural differences instead.

A very unusual visualization of the ambivalences described above is Stern's 1922 painting *Umgababa* (Fig. 10). The work shows a luscious landscape around a river bend, cut into two across the middle by a glistening line of train tracks. They lead to a cloudy sky with a few rays of sunlight coming through where the tracks disappear into the hills. In the foreground, Stern depicts a nude Black woman carrying sticks on her head along a red dirt road. The title of the work reveals that the scene is located close to the trading station Umgababa near Durban, in the province that is today called KwaZulu-Natal. In her (as yet) unpublished text on Stern's travel narrative *Umagababa*, Irene Below considers the artist to visualise in this painting the threat of modern technology to the idealisation of supposedly "primitive" Africans. Indeed, in the travel narrative, which she wrote in German, Stern describes the train as the only connection to the world, an enemy, an evil lindworm, the serpent in paradise.[94] However, in her painting, the sun shines onto the disappearing tracks whose shiny light-blue colour can hardly be described as threatening. The train additionally signifies Stern's access to this remote place.

Jeremy Foster explains that, by the mid-1920s, South African Railways & Harbours had established the second largest state-owned railway system worldwide, embodying modernity and technological progress: "in remote parts of South Africa, the railways' twin ribbon of steel and attendant structures were often the only visible signs of modern governance and civilization in the landscape."[95] Foster also argues that

> although the railways weakened the contemplative, solitary, and local experience of an unspoiled landscape that lay at the heart of the cult of the

91 N.N., "Was eine Malerin in Afrika sah."
92 N.N., "Painting Among the Swazis."
93 N.N., "Natives No Longer Picturesque."
94 Stern, *Umgababa*, p. 45. Parts of the manuscript were published in Osborn, *Irma Stern*.
95 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 203.

Fig. 10: Irma Stern, *Umgababa*, 1922, oil on canvas, 61 × 91 cm, Irma Stern Museum

> veld, they fashioned instead a new subjectivity toward the landscape that was reflexive, collective, and national.[96]

The extensive railway system was hence itself perceived with great ambivalence by most South Africans and is depicted in this vein in Stern's *Umgababa*. I would thus interpret the work as expressing the contemporary contradictory feeling of pride in South Africa's technological progress and in supposedly archaic "natives" that were gradually turned into national cultural assets. With reference to German expressionism, Jill Lloyd argues that, in addition to "imaginative counter-images, primitivism provided modern artists [...] with a means of negotiating the internal paradox of modernity, of spanning between its positive and negative, its forward- and backward-looking tendencies."[97] She concludes that, "in the hands of the German Expressionists, primitivism became a nexus of contradictory currents, neither revolutionary nor conservative in exclusive terms, but potentially both of these things."[98] In a similar way, Stern considered herself a reformer of the dusty South African art scene that indeed introduced new aesthetics and paved the way for a female avant-garde, but at the same time held onto conservative and pejorative ideas about Black South Africans as nature-bound "primitives."

96 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 201.
97 Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, p. vii.
98 Ibid.

However, *Umgababa* is one of Stern's extremely rare depictions of Black South Africans including signs of modernity. Eleven years later, she would call the area around the trading station "a place unspoilt by civilisation."[99] The contradiction of hoping to find "primitive" peoples in a "civilised" state is further complicated by the fact that South African artists such as Stern were aware of European settlers' oppression of their Black subjects but not prepared to fight it. For example, in a letter to the Jewish author Richard Feldman of 25 July 1935, Stern writes that she is trying "to find out which places in Zulu land [sic] would still be O.K for primitive natives. It looks to me – this is my last trip triing [sic] to find things that are dying out – thanks to ourselves."[100] In a letter to Thelma Gutsche of 1948, Stern tells her friend and supporter about her African maid who "had her first pregnancie [sic] with the age of 14 – now she is 18 and is supporting 2 children and working to pay for her divorce – what a depth of tragedie [sic] we have around us if we only can see."[101] Even though such remarks are still full of racist stereotypes, they show a socio-political awareness that South African Stern scholars such as Neville Dubow or Marion Arnold deny Stern had.[102] As mentioned before, however, Stern and other artists of her time had little interest in changing these extreme imbalances. This becomes very clear in a later letter to Feldman, written in 1955, seven years after the rise of the apartheid regime:

> The lovely fairy tale outlook on Nativ [sic] life – which my early work had – can hardly continue – when I see the most lovely people acting not like children but like devilles [sic] incarnate to the white people up in Kyenja [sic] – . Of course – I can understand their sudden awakening and finding their land full of white raced people – who have their foot on their necks – but still I cannot say – I am looking happy & peacefully into the future of 'our' South Africa. We are just passionately awaiting a huge blood bath. Stoking it on daily – hourly – giving with the left hand only taking with the right.[103]

And, in a similar vein, Stern writes to her friend Betty Lunn a few years later:

> I am not chasing for a dream primitiv nativ [sic] at all – Betty – but am quite aware of the West ruining them in all ways. – Maybe if – once they have their own country independ [sic] of white – the influence of the Russian-European will come useful to them – God beware – I should not like to witness it myself. I have been in Dakar – that was quite enough for me.[104]

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99 Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work."
100 Reproduced in Klopper, *Irma Stern*, p. 50. (Original spelling and punctuation.)
101 Stern, letter to Gutsche, 22 January 1948. (Original spelling and punctuation.)
102 Dubow, *Paradise*. Arnold, *Irma Stern*.
103 Reproduced in Klopper, *Irma Stern*, p. 182. (Original spelling and punctuation.)
104 Stern, letter to Lunn, 10 August 1959. (Original spelling and punctuation.)

Already in 1938, upon her return from Senegal, Stern had stated in an interview cited in the *Cape Times* that "every person in Cape Town who talks about the colour bar should go to Dakar for a month. That would make them sit up."[105] While Stern can in no way be considered to propagate Blacks' rights or anti-segregationist policies – on the contrary – it is clear that she was aware of the ambivalences surrounding her portraits of Black South Africans. Interestingly, many of her oil paintings depicting Africans from other countries such as Senegal or Congo differ from her oils of Swazi, Zulu, Ndebele or Mpondo women living in South Africa. When comparing works such as *Dakar Woman* (1938), *Congo Woman* (1942), *Watussi Queen* (1943; Fig. 11), *Watussi Girl* (1946; Fig. 12), *Watussi Woman in Red* (1946) or *Congolese Woman* (1946) with paintings such as *Tembu Woman* (1927), *Swazi Woman* (1927), *Portrait of a Pondo Woman* (1929), *The Water Carrier* (1937), *Pondo Woman* (1952) or the ones described above (Figs. 5, 6, 8, 9), it becomes clear that, in the former group, women are posed against either abstract, coloured backgrounds (as in *Watussi Queen*) or building structures (as in *Watussi Girl*), often wear more contemporary dress and exhibit a much lower degree of nudity. In the latter group, the women are depicted in front of generic landscape or nature settings and often show exposed breasts.[106]

Additionally, as LaNitra Michele Berger has pointed out, Stern's pictures and accompanying texts were "constructions of ethnic hierarchies" that also deliberately reproduced contemporary Hamitic theories.[107] The Hamitic myth prevalent from the mid-19th century until the Second World War saw ancient Egyptians as Caucasoid and therefore "capable of high civilization" and considered certain African groups such as the Tutsi (Watussi) "of Hamitic descent, and endowed with the myth of superior achievements."[108] As a result, Edith R Sanders argues, there existed "a widely held belief in the Western world that everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by these Hamites, a people inherently superior to the native populations."[109] The dignity and superiority displayed in Stern's two Tutsi women's portraits reproduced above is striking. Especially their refined and noble facial features including high cheekbones, thin noses and pointed chins fit well into contemporary Hamitic stereotypes. On the one hand, Stern's subscription to the Hamitic myth is a further

105 N.N., "No Colour Bar at Dakar."

106 This is not the case for her drawings and gouaches, which often show types rather than portraits. Berger, for example, stresses the sexualising character of Stern's drawings of nude Black women included in her 1942 travel narrative *Congo*. Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 83–93. Additionally, works such as *Watussi Queen* (1943) or *Watussi Girl* (1946) still propagate racial stereotypes, even though they are portrayed with more dignity than most of Stern's South African subjects.

107 Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 90–92. Berger argues that, additionally, Stern artistically and verbally perpetuated the Tutsi/ Hutu divide by portraying Tutsis as noble sovereigns and Hutus as animal-like slaves (pp. 90–91). When compared with her Tutsi portraits, Stern's depictions of Hutus are very uncommon, and the painting *Bahutu Musicians* (1942) described by Berger is a rare example. On the one hand, this makes comparisons less meaningful; on the other, it likely reveals Stern's preference for Tutsi subjects.

108 Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," p. 528.

109 Ibid., p. 532.

Fig. 11: Irma Stern, *Watussi Queen*, 1943, oil on canvas, 92 × 55 cm, private collection

Fig. 12: Irma Stern, *Watussi Girl*, 1946, oil on canvas, 92 × 69 cm, Irma Stern Museum

primitivising of South African Blacks and, on the other, her portrayal of the latter as part of the natural landscape ties in with what Nicholas Thomas has described as a deep connection between indigenous people and the land that settler primitivists utilised for nationalist purposes.

It is not surprising then that the apartheid government strategically acquired primitivist works and displayed them in their embassies abroad in order to showcase the alleged fundamental difference between White and Black South Africans in line with their persistent agenda of racial segregation.[110] This practice was very beneficial to Stern's career as she received official support for projects abroad, even though in a letter to Thelma Gutsche of December 1948, she calls the newly established apartheid government "so very savage."[111] In 1952, Gutsche asked Stern for an etching for a small publication by the Institute of Race Relations that also included texts by South African authors such Sarah Gertrude Millin and Nadine Gordimer. Gutsche writes that "it hopes […] to raise a little money and, at the same time, to be of some service in propagating the idea

110 Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile," p. 63. For nationalism and primitivism also compare Sinisi, *Irma Stern*, pp. 35–36.

111 Stern, letter to Gutsche, 28 December 1948. On government support of Stern, also see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 62, 78–79, 111–117.

of harmonious race relations."[112] Stern sent her the etching shortly afterwards.[113] At the time, the Institute of Race Relations cautiously opposed racial segregation.[114] However, Millin's and Gordimer's diametrically opposed stances towards the relations between Black and White South Africans already indicate the ambiguity of the project.[115]

Either way, as indicated above, it is hard to argue that Stern endorsed the political empowerment of Black South Africans. In an interview with Bernard Sachs published in the *Southern African Jewish Times* in 1961, she expresses how African liberation processes affected her work. After claiming she was losing "her African roots," she, according to Sachs, "plunged right into the murkiness of Central African politics" by asking her interviewer: "What sympathy can I have for those who are murdering my people?" Sachs explains that "by 'people' she meant white people" and further quotes her: "My emotional attitude towards them has changed. I knew the Congo well. I am disturbed by what's going on there." As a result, Spain "replaced Africa in [her] artistic life." [116]

Due to the political hostility towards White South Africans, Stern ceased her travels within the African continent in the late 1950s and travelled to Southern France, Spain or Turkey instead. Changing her style from painterly, thick impastos of vivid colours to more graphical works with thinly applied paint and a sketch-like character, she now concentrated on Europe's "primitives": peasants and field workers, still largely female. When asked by a *Star* journalist in 1961 why her recent six-month visit to Spain had "caused these sudden upsurges of creative energy," Stern answers that "they usually came after visits to countries or places with a religious background of their own; Spain, for instance, or the Congo, Zanzibar or Madeira."[117] Stern thus implicates that, over the past 30 years, her primitivist subjects emerged from a quest for deeper meaning. In an interview with the apartheid publication *South African Panorama*, Stern further describes her primitivist motivation in turning to "people living in close contact with the elements."[118] She explains: "They respect the soil. […] They do not tell lies. With these people, one penetrates into something essential."[119] The terms 'soil,' 'truth' and 'essentiality' were closely linked to the settler primitivist project in South Africa as will be further elaborated in Chapter 2. The *Panorama* article concludes that her works reflect the "lives of simple people – Cape Coloureds and Malays, African natives, fishermen from Spain, Italy and Madeira."[120]

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112 Gutsche, letter to Stern, 31 July 1952.

113 Stern, letter to Gutsche, 11 August 1952. Similarly, Stern supported Freda Feldman in generating funds for the Treason Trial Defense Fund in 1958 by donating one of her paintings. She however declined to donate a second one. Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 127–128.

114 E.g. J.D.F., "Nationhood and Nationalism in South Africa." Morse, "A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa."

115 Sean O'Toole characterises Stern's racism as moderate when compared to Millin's. O'Toole, *Irma Stern*, pp. 25–26.

116 Sachs, "Irma Stern: Painter."

117 N.N., "Decoration?"

118 Cited in N.N., "Irma Stern. Deur Akademie Bekroon," p. 35. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

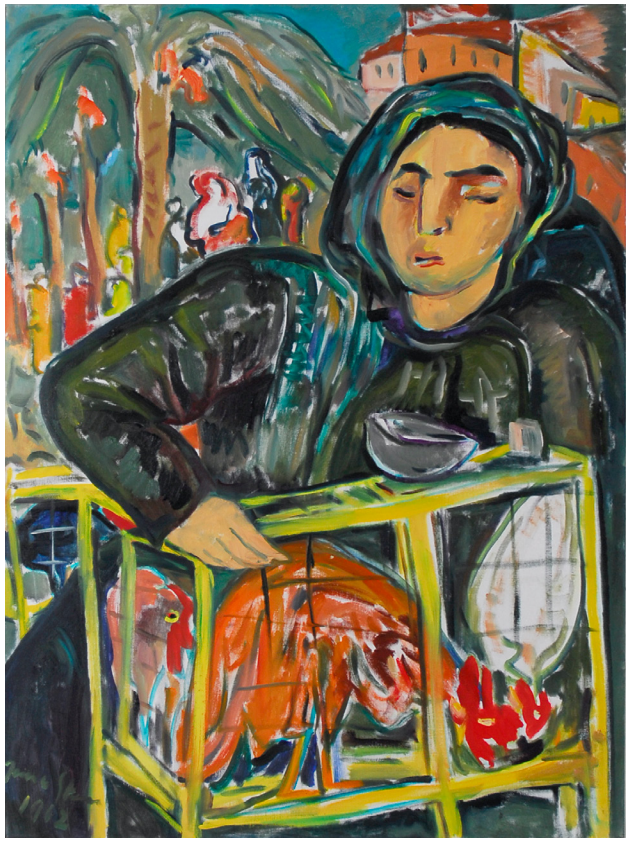

Fig. 13: Irma Stern, *Peasant Woman with Chickens*, 1962, oil on canvas, 92.2 × 73 cm, Durban Art Gallery

An example of Stern's late class primitivist works is *Peasant Woman with Chickens* of 1962 (Fig. 13). Probably painted in the South of Spain, the depicted woman seems to be returning from a market that can be seen in the background, holding a cage with three chickens. The palm trees shading the vendors and their customers indicate a southern Mediterranean location. The simple black dress and dark blue headscarf the woman is wearing further emphasise her class background. The difference in provision of context as well as in dress (or the amount of clothing and hence covering of the body) compared to Stern's portraits of Black South African women is striking. The peasant woman's head and body are covered in flowing, non-revealing fabrics and the market in the background contextualises her social standing, occupation and location. When comparing those works, Stern's Spanish class primitivism underlines the racial and gender primitivism in her earlier depictions of Zulu, Swazi or Mpondo women. While her Southern European subjects originated in a period when Stern was already an established artist whose currency had been overtaken by younger colleagues such as Alexis Preller and Walter Battiss, her paintings of South African themes were conducted in a time when "indigenisation" for Stern herself and nationalisation for the South African art scene in general were important issues. Her exoticising pictures of indigenous South African women of the 1920s to 1930s could be utilised to showcase her alleged familiarity with local cultures at home and abroad and affirmed to the South African art scene what Thomas terms "a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one."[121]

121 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 13.

1.2.2 Maggie Laubser (1886–1973): domestication of land and labour

A few years older than Stern, Maggie Laubser began her artistic career later in life. This was probably because the conservative farming community which she grew up in did not support women in learning a profession.[122] Laubser studied painting in Cape Town – for a short time under Edward Roworth – and became a member of the *South African Society of Artists* (SASA) in 1907. As her works did not generate any financial success, she soon moved back in with her parents until her friend and patron Jan Hendrik Arnold Balwé provided her with financial support to study in Europe in 1913. Laubser attended classes at London's Slade School from 1914 to 1919 and after longer sojourns in Belgium, Northern Italy and South Africa, she moved to Berlin in 1922,[123] where she stayed until her return to South Africa in 1924. Like Stern, Laubser, too, was interested in German expressionism and formed a friendship with *Brücke* artist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.[124]

In general, Laubser's primitivism differs from Stern's in the conscious naïveté or simplicity of her approach to subjects such as landscapes, farm scenes, animals, still lifes or portraits. With reference to a primitivism in terms of style, her works have often been compared to children's art. *Figure in a Landscape: Woman Carrying Water, House and Tree in Background*[125] dated 1925 (Fig. 14) is a good illustration of this. The difference

Fig. 14: Maggie Laubser, *Woman carrying water; houses and trees in background*, undated, oil on cardboard, 46 × 39 cm, University of Stellenbosch

122 See Berman, *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 58.

123 Stern and Laubser met on one of Stern's trips to Europe in 1922. Stern put Laubser in contact with some of her friends in Berlin and the two artists enjoyed a brief friendship, including a joint summer holiday at the Baltic Sea. See e.g. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa,* p. 175. Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 13. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 41.

124 E.g. Schmidt-Rottluff, letter to Laubser, 21 January 1931.

125 While Stern's titles such as *Eternal Child* (1916) or *The Hunt* (1926) are somewhat mythicising, Laubser continued her rather commonplace subjects in her descriptive, factual titles.

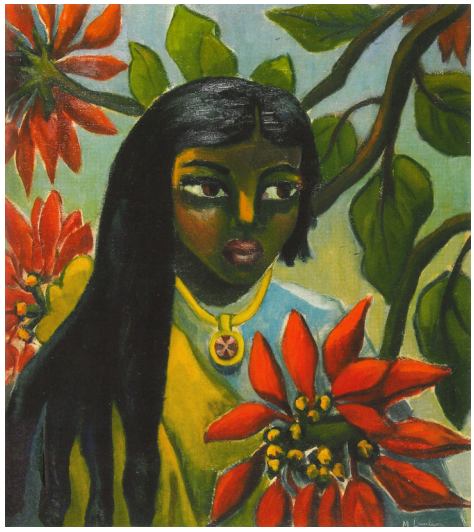

Fig. 15: Maggie Laubser, *Portrait of a girl with loose hair and pendant*, undated, oil on canvas, 59 × 53 cm, private collection

to Stern's *Water Carriers* (Fig. 9) is striking. Rather than emphasising the exotic character of her surroundings, like Stern did, Laubser focuses on domesticity and everyday life in South African farming contexts. The woman is wearing work clothes – apron and headscarf – and is clearly linked to the little hut in the background through the road visible on the right and the water bucket she carries on her head. Her face is a dark plane of colour, denying her any features. She is hence portrayed as a generic farm worker rather than a specific person or mere type.

Instead of luscious nature and "noble savages," Laubser's paintings largely show cultivated land and Black labour in an idolised setting. Exceptions of this are some studies of Black South Africans in traditional dress such as her portrait of an Ndebele woman of 1925 and her images of Indian girls and women she encountered during her travels in Natal in 1936. A good example of the latter group is *Portrait of a girl with loose hair and pendant* (Fig. 15).[126] The painting emphasises the girl's sexuality through her sensuous lips and eyes, loose hair and the large red flowers framing her upper body. Asked why she painted Indian women, Laubser answered: "The freedom in the Indian women's dress and the beautiful colours of the saris against the black-red hair are incredibly beautiful – that's why I want to paint them."[127] This remark shows that Laubser was more interested in formal issues when conducting paintings such as these, unlike her romanticised depictions of field labourers that were more ideologically framed.

In addition to the formal primitivism of her naïve manner of painting, Laubser concentrated on rural class primitivist depictions of non-White subjects that also include racial primitivism. Her landscapes and farm scenes in particular can be considered to naturalise the Afrikaner appropriation of South African land, nature and natives by proclaiming a God-envisioned harmony of (cultivated) land, (farm) animals and Black farm workers. In "Laubser, Land and Labour: Image-making and Afrikaner Nationalism in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s," Elizabeth Delmont argues that Laubser's success was based on her promotion by Afrikaner nationalist "culture brokers" such as the *Broederbond's Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* [Broederbond's Federation

126 Laubser generally rarely dated her paintings. She would sometimes add a date retrospectively and hence often incorrectly. Dalene Marais, together with Elizabeth Delmont, has conducted research into the different periods of Laubser's art production. She places *Portrait of a girl with loose hair and pendant* in the period of 1936–1940. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, pp. 243–244.

127 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)

Fig. 16: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with wheatfields and harvesters*, undated, oil on canvas on board, 20 × 27 cm, University of Stellenbosch

of Afrikaans Cultural Association] and the Afrikaans journal *Die Nuwe Brandwag* [The New Sentinel], who hosted her first successful exhibitions.[128] Delmont shows how Laubser, based on an interest in Christian Science and primitivism filtered through a European aesthetic, in her paintings portrays an alternative world that "is constructed as a timeless, dehistoricized pastoral idyll concretizing stable and harmonious feudal relations in the Western Cape farming community, where work is not presented as being determined by social and economic relations, but rather as an heroic activity obeying the repetitive cycles of nature."[129] I agree with this reading that offers an alternative to the common art historical reception of Laubser's works "as being emptied of ideological content" by other South African scholars such as Dalene Marais or Muller Ballot.[130] Ballot even subscribes to Laubser's romanticisation and writes with reference to *Landscape with wheatfields and harvesters* (Fig. 16) that "she wants to identify with the essentially positive frame of mind of the workers in the fields being harvested, performing the labour for which they are prepared to be held accountable."[131] He further calls her rhythmical compositions "part of the expressive image of haste to get as much of the day's work done as possible before the sunlight disappears completely, or before the approaching storm breaks – because after the hard work comes a time of rest."[132] Indeed, Laubser's three figures depicted can be read to adopt poses of haste and the large blue cloud on the right as an approaching storm. However, since Laubser does not portray any facial features, their positive frame of mind or nearing time of rest are highly speculative. Ballot's interpretation illustrates how in the recpetion of Laubser's works the power relations between White farmers and Black labourers are negated until today.

128 Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour."
129 Ibid., p. 7.
130 Ibid., pp. 13, 17. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*. Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*.
131 Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 177.
132 Ibid., p. 179.

In *Women and Art in South Africa*, Marion Arnold describes Laubser's landscapes as generalisations of "South Africa's physical geography" with the main purpose of providing "contexts for dark figures" that were "expressions of a religious world-view that did not engage with social realities but understood existence as the harmonious exchange of energy between nature and humankind."[133] Arnold further claims that, at the same time, "ideas about the land as place became conflated with the ideology of the land as nation" when Laubser's viewers subscribed to this idea of harmony between land and labourers.[134] According to WJT Mitchell, landscape painting usually functions as an "instrument of cultural power" portraying a supposed natural and social reality that is in fact a cultural construct.[135] Although Laubser's primitivist landscapes were far from depicting social realities, they are therefore still strong indicators of the social and ideological structures within which they were produced and received. Rather than manifestations of a purely personal religiosity, her works can be read within the discourse of landscape painting and national identity.

In his book on the relationship between landscapes and White South African nationalism, Jeremy Foster writes that, due to "powerful connections between landscape representation and the discursive construction of national identity, it comes as no surprise that the period of national formation from 1900 to 1930 was also the heyday of landscape in South Africa" and that "it is largely through landscape painting that art becomes national or indigenous."[136] Foster further explains that landscape painting as a nationalist form of art was especially useful to White South Africans as it was an appropriation of the land:

> Seemingly universal and objective, the view privileges (and naturalizes) individual, subjective perception as the most legitimate way of interacting with the physical environment. It also exemplifies the empowered, modern Western gaze that distances, objectifies, and attempts to control people or territory perceived to be in some way other.[137]

The fact that Laubser can be placed within this discourse can best be demonstrated when comparing her landscapes to those by Stern. As described above, Stern's primitivist depictions of South Africa's landscape and its inhabitants lay an emphasis on the supposedly wild and exotic – or at least on what was perceived that way by Europeans. She travelled to the places that to her seemed furthest away from "civilisation" in order to find her subjects, and when she considered civilisation too advanced in South Africa, she travelled to other African countries such as the Congo, Senegal or Zanzibar. *Natal Landscape* (Fig. 17) and *Congo Landscape: Jungle* (Fig. 18) are two examples of Stern's treatment of the landscape genre. In *Natal Landscape*,

133 Arnold, *Women and Art*, p. 60.
134 Ibid.
135 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power,* pp. 1–2.
136 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 68.
137 Ibid., p. 45.

Fig. 17: Irma Stern, *Natal Landscape*, 1936, oil on canvas, 77 × 84 cm, Irma Stern Museum

Fig. 18: Irma Stern, *Congo Landscape: Jungle*, 1942, oil on canvas, 70 × 70 cm, University of Cape Town WOAC

she chose to depict a savanna with soft hills that does not show any traces of human influences. It is an homage to the wilderness as well as to the colours and shapes of the South-Eastern landscape. In her frequent exhibitions abroad, this was the image that Stern conveyed to her European audience: a South Africa far removed from the problems and confusions of modern times.[138] When she included figures in her landscapes, they usually enforced the idea of wilderness and exoticism rather than indicating any form of governance of the land. *Congo Landscape: Jungle* is a good example of this as it shows a dark, presumably male figure – wearing nothing but a type of loincloth and carrying what might be a large fruit or vessel on his head – surrounded by a lush jungle.

In contrast to Stern's exoticism, Laubser concentrated on what might be called domesticity and chose subjects from her immediate surroundings to describe everyday farm life. Her painting *Landscape with cows, fields and mountains* (Fig. 19) stems from a similar time as Stern's *Natal Landscape*. Even though Laubser's work also does not include any human figures, the cow in the foreground is a symbol for farming and the use of animals for this purpose. The road that emerges behind the hill and disappears into the trees on the left margin of the painting also indicates human presence and at least some degree of infrastructure. Under the viewer's gaze, the animals, the land and the humans living in and of it are turned into one greater organism. Since Laubser takes the perspective of the (Afrikaner) farmer overlooking their property, the appropriation inherent in the gaze can be referred to the appropriation of such land and human beings. Without directly portraying Afrikaner culture, Laubser's paintings could thus be utilised to justify or rather naturalise the Afrikaner

138 Stern also describes this in her text *Umgababa* mentioned above.

Fig. 19: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with cows, fields and mountains*, undated, oil on cardboard, 34 × 43 cm, Sanlam Foundation

claim to hegemony by showing how farmers cultivated the land as well as animals and peoples inhabiting it. Jennifer Beningfield also argues that

> control of the myth of the farm was important not only in the battle for the ownership of the land, which served to consolidate political control and guide legislation, but also in the creation and retention of a cherished vision of a vanished rural existence at the heart of Afrikaner identity.[139]

As will be further detailed in Chapter 3, Laubser and her works were ascribed an important role in the formation of an Afrikaner identity in the visual arts by the Afrikaans-speaking press.

Laubser's 1924 painting *Figures in a landscape: male labourers* (Fig. 20) is a good example of the subsumption of Black labourers into an agricultural landscape governed by White settlers. The painting shows three male Black farm or field labourers whose faces are covered by hats and who – due to the colour of their clothing and skin – seem to merge with the soil and landscape surrounding them. It is worth

139 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 76.

Fig. 20: Maggie Laubser, *Figures in a landscape: male labourers*, 1924, oil on canvas on cardboard, 54 × 60 cm, Sanlam Foundation

mentioning that Laubser's paintings were also received in this vein by her contemporaries. With reference to *Harvesting Time*, a painting very similar to *Figures in a landscape: male labourers*, FEJ Malherbe, professor of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch at the time, writes in the government publication *Our Art* of 1959:

> Note the three little goblins at work. Note the unity between them and their work: in fact, the unity of everything. Their brown faces are as brown as the grain cocks, their shirts are as blue as the sky; the purple of the clouds is reflected in their clothes. They live in this earth like the firmly-rooted trees. […] What a radiant vision of beauty! Clearly we have here a new spiritual creation. […] The sombre expression in the Native's features accents Maggie Laubser's profound compassion, her sympathy with the brown and black people. She can paint them as little gnomes on the land, giving life to landscape (in fact, she was the first of our painters who brought the human figure into the landscape).[140]

140 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," pp. 37–38.

Malherbe's description of Black field labourers as little "goblins" or "gnomes" that are rooted in the South African earth like trees, "giving life to the landscape," highlights the deprivation of Black South Africans' humanity undertaken by Laubser's White audiences. They were considered part of the South African nature and therefore had to be governed and cultivated like the land rather than being allowed any claim to it. Malherbe further describes the view of the harvesting labourers as a highly aesthetic and spiritual experience and thereby evokes a superiority of the White gaze over the Black strain and exertion. Absurdly, he considers this an act of profound compassion and sympathy. Moreover, he credits Laubser with being the first South African artist to "activate" landscape painting in such a way. This illustrates the ambivalence of Laubser's practice that for the first time made visible the Black labour on which White settlers depended, while simultaneously placing it on par with nature itself. Before, landscapes in South Africa had been depicted as deserted in either a romanticising (e.g. Edward Roworth) or an exoticising (e.g. Stern) manner.

In general, the difference between Laubser's and Stern's primitivist landscapes described above also comply with Foster's two broad categories of nationalist landscape representations:

> rural landscapes, or pays, in which peasants appear to live in harmony with the land; and the wilderness minimally touched by civilization and modernity. The first of these categories has its roots in the classical (and biblical) pastoral, an arcadian (that is, timeless) relationship between human society and nature created by a regular round of the longue durée.[141]

It is this first category of arcadian pastorals that applies to Laubser's landscape paintings.[142] In general, pastorals are situated at the interface of Christian thought and nationalist landscape appropriations. They are generally considered to represent either a Golden Age in the past or "an idea about the timeless tranquillity of rural life."[143] In *An Archetypal Constable. National Identity and the Geography of Nostalgia*, Peter Bishop explicates:

> On the one hand, the ideal is imagined as being past and lost. A longing for return can therefore be balanced by a hope for a possible reconstruction in the future. On the other hand, the ideal is imagined to be an ever-present, archetypal level which, although achingly separate from everyday life, is ultimately accessible at any moment.[144]

141 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 48.
142 Also compare Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," pp. 14–15.
143 Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 19.
144 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 62.

He also refers to this as a "fantasy of an archaic locality."[145] I would argue that Laubser's pastorals can be subsumed into this description. As she herself links them to her childhood experiences and since they were received as truthful representations of reality, it is obvious that she does not depict a golden past or potential future, but the timeless fate of the indigenous inhabitants of the land that had become the nation of South Africa.[146] It comes as no surprise that Laubser's works gained so much acclaim in a time of increasing modernisation, urbanisation and complication of social structures. Like British landscape painting in the mid-19th century or French and German primitivism in the early 20th century, the longing for a return to the simplicity that Laubser's class primitivist works propagated had been prompted by an overall feeling of disorientation. In *The Empire of the Eye. Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875*, Angela Miller argues that representations of rural Arcadia "implied stability in a period of rapid change; its modulated topography was the expression of a yearning for uncomplicated social relations."[147] This thought was also expressed by Laubser herself: "I think that it is precisely this simplicity and determination that surprises the public in the time of confusion in which we live."[148] She considered an art that is based on a simplified connection between nature and religious belief a remedy for such a feeling of disorientation:

> We live in a time of inventions and changes, which brings a great hurry for us all; the artist sees it like a chaos that is caused by humans themselves. He feels there is no other way out than to go back to creation and start to work himself on simplifying his work. This is the reaction to the turmoil. The artist longs for rest and tries to find it by going back to nature and bringing peace into his work.[149]

This is of course an idea that is inherent in other primitivisms such as the *Brücke*'s, too. Bishop emphasises another concept that directly links the pastoral to the project of primitivism: that of nostalgia. For him, "nostalgia is about continuity and identity, whether national, local or individual."[150] He also quotes Gaston Bachelard's definition of nostalgia as born of the desire "to dream gently again, to dream faithfully. Reveries toward childhood: the nostalgia of faithfulness […] How solid should we be within ourselves if we could live, live again without nostalgia and in complete ardour, in our primitive world."[151] Nostalgia is hence connected with an undemanding,

145 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 126.
146 Also compare Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," pp. 7, 13, 25. Jennifer Beningfield argues that, in general, the pastoral "acted as a myth of stability and innocence which supported a transformation in the inhabitation and ownership of the agricultural landscape throughout the twentieth century." Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 77.
147 Miller, *The Empire of the Eye*, p. 14.
148 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)
149 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)
150 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 86.
151 Cited in ibid.

primitive world. Another part of this concept of the "nostalgia of faithfulness" is the "reclaiming and poeticizing [of] childhood experiences" and memories.[152] This plays an important role in Laubser's self-presentation in most of her texts. For example, she stresses the importance of memories for her art in the 1939 article "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder" [Why and How I Paint]: "The painting must come from the artist, their awareness of colours, figures and lines. We call it memories but it's more than memory: it's the image that lives in one's own consciousness."[153] She therefore draws a direct line from memory and (sub)consciousness to her art. In the 1956 radio speech "Dit is mei kontrei" [This is my country], she gives a long and detailed account of her childhood memories and of how she used to feel one with the nature surrounding her.[154] She begins her account by emphasising the importance of childhood for geographical or national belonging:

> When you have lived in Europe for ten years, and stayed in a different city every year, then you have so many contacts that you almost feel like you do not belong to one particular place. However, the place where you received your first impressions in life, where you were a child within an intimate family circle, will always remain a special place, <u>your</u> country.[155]

In the undated manuscript "What I remember," Laubser recounts:

> I was one of those fortunate children, who are awakened every morning by the different sounds of nature, and who could watch the animals come home every night to their kraals; and these are among my earliest recollections and with joy I shall always remember them, for these farm memories have formed the basis upon which I later built up all the visions which constitute my art.[156]

This testifies to the importance of unmediated childhood experiences and the memories thereof for what Laubser considered truthful representations of landscapes and farm scenes. Due to the significance Laubser publicly attributed to childhood memories in accounts such as these, her works could be utilised to naturalise the appropriation of land and labour by referring to a "child-like" truth lying within her paintings.[157]

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152 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 53.
153 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
154 Laubser, "Dit is mei kontrei."
155 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269. Laubser's original underlining.)
156 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 1.
157 Dekker, "In Standpunte," p. 11. Van Broekhuizen, "Maggie Laubser and Guido Gezelle," p. 19. P.H.W., "A Woman Painter of Maturity."

Other settler primitivists also subscribed to this idealisation of childhood and the state of being a child. Irma Stern, for example, mystifies her childhood in "How I Began to Paint" when writing:

> At a later period of childhood my life was that of a gypsy – travelling in various countries, seeing, taking in, finding the touch of mystery in all the strangeness of whirling life. Seeing the East, living in the North, wandering through the centres of old culture, I was always longing for something – something unspeakable, indefinable, something holy.[158]

She then describes how those experiences later informed her art. In "My Exotic Models," she additionally bases her interest in portraying Black South Africans on childhood experiences, exhibiting the racial primitivism that resonates in her artworks:

> From earliest childhood the native has been an element in my life that has given me joy. When I was a tiny child I sat on the clay floor of our farm house right on the high veld, and opposite me sat a native boy who played the concertina for me and showed me how to dance the native dances; and when I went to Europe to visit my grandparents I danced the same native dances and sang the tunes.[159]

In a letter to Millie Levy, Lippy Lipshitz also idolises the state of mind of children: "The child in us is the mother of all our happiness. When the child is dead, we have lost all capacity for happiness. It is the child in us that nourishes that trustful delight in creation."[160] These references to childhood, especially to South African childhoods, on the one hand catered to general primitivist interests in simplicity, originality and unconsciousness and, on the other hand, rendered the artists' works more authentic and truthful in the perception of their audiences as will be further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Laubser often shows her female farm workers carrying babies in bundles on their backs. Examples of this are *Landscape with figure: woman carrying a baby on her back, trees and mountains in background* dated 1930 (Fig. 21) and *Landscape with huts, wood carriers and sheep* of 1950 (Fig. 22). The white apron worn by the woman in *Landscape with figure: woman carrying a baby on her back, trees and mountains in background* clearly identifies her as a domestic help. The presence of small babies accompanying their mothers on their daily tasks and duties in both paintings further stresses the harmonious naturalness of the relationship between female worker, land and labour Laubser invokes. In "What I remember," she recounts a similar scene of mothers with their babies on her parents' farm: "At the back of the house there was a large dam

158 Stern, "How I Began to Paint."
159 Stern, "My Exotic Models."
160 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 12 May 1936.

Fig. 21: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with figure: woman carrying a baby on her back, trees and mountains in background*, 1930, oil on carboard, 35 × 44 cm, private collection

and every evening I used to watch the cows coming to drink, and the coloured women with babies on their backs to fill their buckets. Near the dam the geese were kept."[161] This enumeration also illustrates her equation of farm animals and labourers that is reflected in her paintings.

Elizabeth Delmont convincingly draws on John Barrel's influential treatment on English landscape painting *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* for the ideological framework of the alleged harmony between land and labourers portrayed in Laubser's work. Barrell argues that the depiction of the rural poor in the English landscapes he discusses serves an ideological agenda as it portrays the fieldworkers in harmony with the land while refuting the realities of class conflict or social injustice.[162] He further claims that this can only be achieved by showing them as a natural part of the landscape – reduced to small scale generic figures rather than suffering individuals.[163] It is striking that between 1940 and 1950, an extremely important time for the formation of Afrikaner nationalist identity and the definition of the relationship between Black and White South Africans, Laubser moved her Black subjects more and more to the background. In earlier works such as *Figures in a landscape: male labourers* (Fig. 20), Laubser still set the focus on the labourers – regarding their position as well as the amount of detail with which she painted them, for example by showing them all in different clothing and postures. In *Landscape with huts, wood carriers and sheep*, on the other hand, the wood carriers are distant figures that seem of a rank equal to the trees or huts they are walking towards. The sheep in the foreground, again, refer to the farming context, that is, the cultivation of land and the use of farm animals by the Afrikaner settlers. The huts in which the three figures are living, too, become one with the landscape and hence further enforce the subsumption of labourers into the land.

What Delmont does not take into consideration, however, is the fact that depictions of non-White farm labourers were extremely rare in South Africa at the time.

161 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 1.
162 Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 5, 134.
163 Ibid., p. 157.

Fig. 22: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with huts, wood carriers and sheep*, 1950, oil on cardboard, 55 × 40 cm, Sanlam Foundation

Beningfeld claims that, commonly, different landscapes were represented "as natural environments for different bodies" in South African art: "Reserve territory was defined as the natural landscape of the black South African, with its connotations of the picturesque and benign primitivism, while the veld and the farm were retained as symbolic landscapes by the white South African."[164] In the first half of the 20th century, laws such as the 1913 Natives Land Act and the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936 removed the presence of Black farmers from the landscape as well as from its representation "and replaced them with silent and invisible labour."[165] Beningfield explains that depictions "of black South Africans as farm labourers would have confirmed their participation in productive landscape, and therefore threatened the myths which required that the [White] farmers themselves be the primary provider of labour."[166] As a result, she concludes that

> the complex identity of the southern African farm and the racial diversity of its owners, occupants and tenants were simplified in the narration of a political narrative that depicted the pastoral landscape as the exclusive presence of the white man and his family.[167]

Laubser's painterly portrayals of Black and Coloured farm labourers as the central force of agricultural production are therefore much more ambivalent than they at first seem. Like Stern's portraits of Black South Africans, it is important to remember that depictions of non-Whites in contexts such as these were extremely uncommon at the time and raised public awareness of a group usually pushed into invisibility. At the same time, Laubser's landscapes were useful for the Afrikaner nationalist project as they show Black workers as natural parts of the landscape, and thereby naturalise their repression and categorisation into a different class of people or citizens. As pastorals they depict a supposedly timeless truth, an Arcadian simplicity that offers a (spiritual) escape from modern day's confusion.

164 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 89.
165 Ibid., p. 90.
166 Ibid.
167 Ibid., p. 77.

1.2.3 Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886–1957): primitivism in Afrikaner nationalism

Even though Jacob Hendrik Pierneef is usually not considered a modernist in line with other South Africans such as Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser or Lippy Lipshitz, he is still an important South African settler primitivist. His approach was more conservative and mainly appealed to an Afrikaner audience that co-opted Pierneef as an important figure of their solidifying national identity. His importance to the Afrikaner nationalist project becomes apparent throughout his reception. In her dictionary entry on the artist, Esmé Berman for example emphasizes that Pierneef "was born in the year that Jhb [Johannesburg] was founded; his father, Gerrit – a Hollander, built the first house in the new town (in Market St); his mother was the daughter of a Trekker."[168] Moreover, Berman calls him "a most congenial companion and an earnest crusader for the cause of Afrikaner art and culture" and includes two quotes by Pierneef at the end of the entry: "You must travel with your own people on the ox-wagon," and: "Truly national art has to be born of your own surroundings and your own soil."[169] JF van Staden writes in 1947 that, when asked "what he regarded as the mission of the South African painter," Pierneef replied: "He must be a prophet riding on the wagon with his own people."[170] Jennifer Beningfield points out that Pierneef joined the Afrikaner nationalist *Broederbond* [Fraternity] in 1918 and referred "to himself as a 'Voortrekker' [pioneer] for the arts during the 1930s and 1940s."[171] As Juliette Leeb-du Toit puts it, his landscapes "became intrinsically associated with Afrikaner nationalist patriotism, expressed in nostalgia for a predestined, self-ruled homeland."[172] Like Laubser's, Pierneef's primitivist landscapes are therefore closely linked to the Afrikaner appropriation of South African land.

Pierneef was born in Pretoria/ Tshwane in 1886 – the same year as Maggie Laubser. His father, Gerrit Pierneef, organised an auxiliary police force there during the Anglo-Boer War. Upon the seizure of the town through the British forces in 1900, the family was forced to leave for Rotterdam, where Pierneef studied at the Academy, but returned to South Africa after the end of the war in 1902. Originally having wanted to study architecture, Pierneef had to financially support the family by working first in a tobacco shop and then at the State Library in Pretoria. Encouraged by his godfather, the prominent sculptor Anton van Wouw, he continued his artistic practice during this time and, in 1917, was elected a member of the *South African Society of Artists*. After teaching engagements at Pretoria and Heidelberg Normal Colleges from 1920 to 1923, he focused on his career as an artist exclusively. Again like Maggie Laubser's, his career as a visual artist was hence less straight forward than that of other primitivists such as Irma Stern or Lippy Lipshitz, who greatly profited from their belonging to the Jewish diaspora that was more interested in fine art.

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168 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 222.
169 Ibid., p. 223. Also compare Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 9.
170 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
171 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, pp. 41–42.
172 Leeb-du Toit, "Land and Landlessness," p. 183.

Fig. 23: JH Pierneef, preleminary drawings for the Ficksburg Panels, La Motte Museum

During his employment at Pretoria State Library, Pierneef came into contact with publications on prehistoric rock art such as *Native Races of South Africa* by George Stow (1905) and *Bushman Paintings* by Helen Tongue (1909). He studied the copies of South African rock art that the ethnographers had made and the accuracy of which is at best questionable. Additionally, through his friend, the artist Erich Mayer, Pierneef studied original tracings by George Stow owned by Dorothea Bleek in 1916.[173] When he received his first commission – eight panels for the assembly hall of Ficksburg High School – in 1922 from Samuel Henri Pellissier, who would six years later become Director of Education for the Orange Free State, Pierneef decided to base these on his second-hand studies of San rock art. NJ Coetzee argues that this decision "reflects Pierneef's interest at that time [and] may also indicate that Bushman art was not seen as unacceptable to the educated Afrikaners at that time."[174] He assumes that "the real reason for this acceptance of Bushman art by Afrikaners reflected a desire to identify with Africa rather than with England."[175] In a letter to his friend Erich Mayer, in which he forestalls the image of himself as *voortrekker* for the arts in South Africa, Pierneef wrote in 1916: "As time passes the more I feel that Hodler's decoration fits neatly with the Bushmen and that it can be an ideal basis for South African Art. In

173 Botha, "Pierneef," p. ix. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 222.
174 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 2.
175 Ibid.

Fig. 24: San rock painting capturing the "rain bull" ceremony, Drakensberg, Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand

this regard I hope we will be the Voortrekkers…"[176] This indicates that, rather than using San rock paintings as direct source material, Pierneef was more interested in the commonalities of these paintings and modern European art forms such as *Jugendstil* or Art Nouveau. It is possible that the latter, similar to German expressionism, offered another alternative to English-derived romantic realism. Therefore, it is not surprising that Pierneef began to navigate his art production at the intersection of graphical modernism and indigenous traditions.

The *Ficksburg Panels* (compare Fig. 23) show animal and hunting scenes that Pierneef largely based on Stow's liberal tracings of San rock art.[177] It becomes obvious straight away that they appropriate such art rather than being exact copies of individual artworks – shapes, colours and compositions deviate too strongly from original San paintings (compare Fig. 24). Since most contemporary viewers must have been unaware of this, the primitivism evident in the *Ficksburg Panels* is extremely problematic. According to Alexandery Duffy, "San metaphors were altered so that they lost their original symbolic meaning and merely became decoration."[178] However, it

176 Cited in Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 23.
177 For a more detailed description, see ibid., pp. 23–34.
178 Ibid., p. 24.

is likely that Pierneef, who at that point had never visited any rock art sites in person,[179] himself believed Stow's renderings to be accurate tracings.[180]

The pastel drawing *Adam and Eve* of 1925 (Fig. 25) can be considered another key work for Pierneef's engagement with San rock art. In "Pierneef and San Rock Art," Duffey shows that the drawing is a combination of tracings by Stow, Tongue and Carl Peters.[181] The male figure representing Adam is based on a Stow drawing that Pierneef is likely to have studied when viewing Dorothea Bleek's collection in 1916.[182] It is a fairly close copy apart from the fact that Pierneef distinctly lightened the man's skin tone. The female figure was taken from another Stow tracing in Bleek's possession.[183] Here, again, Pierneef lightened the figure's skin tone, and also changed the white face paint into the same light-brown colour. It is possible that, following racist stereotypes, his intention was to transform the two figures that contemporary viewers would otherwise likely interpret as being Black,[184] or even more specifically Xhosa,[185] into lighter skinned "Bushmen."[186]

Fig. 25: JH Pierneef, *Adam and Eve*, 1925, pastel on paper, 80 x 58 cm, La Motte Museum

Moreover, Pierneef added a right arm disappearing behind Eve's back and a left arm presenting a leafed twig to Adam. Although there appears to be a berry at the end of the twig, this curiously looks more like a peace offering than the sharing of a forbidden fruit. By depicting Adam and Eve as indigenous South Africans, he locates the Christian origins of mankind in his native country.

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179 Although Pierneef later also made direct copies from rock paintings on the farm Ebenaezer near Fouriesburg in 1936, those did no longer figure into his art. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 223.

180 Compare Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," pp. 21–22, 32.

181 Compare ibid., pp. 35–36.

182 Ibid., pp. 22, 34. Stow's tracing is reproduced in Rosenthal, *Cave Artists of South Africa*, p. 77.

183 It is reproduced in Stow, *Rock-Paintings in South Africa*, plate 7.

184 Compare Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 34.

185 White face paint forms part of Xhosa male initiation rituals.

186 At the time, the San were not considered Black Africans. Curiously, Pierneef's colour change additionally turns Eve's face into a mask. Unfortunately, it is not known if Pierneef, like Irma Stern or Lippy Lipshitz, was familiar with West African sculpture at the time.

The abstracted baobab tree in the centre of Pierneef's drawing is an exact copy of a tree traced by Carl Peters.[187] It already presages the Afrikaner's later, famous focus on these trees (e.g. Fig. 26). This can be linked to White artists' efforts of "constructing indigeneity" by appropriating "pre-existing aesthetic dimensions identified with the indigenous population"[188] that Nicholas Thomas also detects in Margaret Preston's and Gordon Walter's employment of Australian aboriginal and New Zealand Māori imagery.[189] Similar to Preston, who utilises indigenous Australian flora in her paintings such as *Aboriginal landscape* (Fig. 1) or *Australian native pear* (Fig. 2) in combination with formal elements referencing Aboriginal art, Pierneef also develops an iconography uniting a specifically South African landscape and increasingly removed references to San rock paintings. Thus, his primitivism is foremostly stylistic.

With reference to works such as *Bushveld* of 1942 (Fig. 26), Federico Freschi argues that "Pierneef's empty, ordered landscapes (particularly his beloved bushveld scenes) are redolent of the controlling gaze of the nationalist."[190] According to Jennifer Beningfield, they "cohered with the belief that the Afrikaner as 'natuurmens' (natural man) possessed an inherent empathy with his environment and offered a visual means through which this connection to the land could be both expressed and made."[191] NJ Coetzee explains that it was "only when the severing of the Afrikaner's ties with the land occurred, as urbanization on a large scale began, that the Afrikaner became conscious of a closeness to the land."[192] He adds that, "for the Afrikaner, the God-forsaken wilderness was the city while the farm, the tamed wilderness was God-imbued."[193] Pierneef considered art a religion closely linked to the divine origin of the land as well as to the destiny of the Afrikaner people to

Fig. 26: JH Pierneef, *Bushveld*, 1942, oil on board, 45 × 60 cm, private collection

187 Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 36. Tracing reproduced in Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, p. 391.
188 Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 141.
189 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 111–163.
190 Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 9.
191 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, pp. 41–42.
192 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 24. Also see Van Rensburg, *A Space for Landscape*, pp. 17–18.
193 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 25.

harness the "empty land."[194] Coetzee stresses that, "as Calvinists, the Afrikaner also believed that they were placed in Africa in a position of overlordship" and that "the landscape was the bare geological phenomenon regarded by the Afrikaner as the *ware grootse Afrika* [true great Africa], the Africa God sent them to."[195]

In a 1947 article for the *Cape Times Week-end Magazine*, JF van Staden cites Pierneef as describing the South African landscape as "titanic and strong" and therefore unfit for treatments in "the European technique of painting."[196] Van Staden remarks that "Pierneef does not see many signs of a South African school in painting yet but thinks that the Bushman art offers an important basis for its development."[197] Although Africa and the arts of its indigenous San population played an important role in Pierneef's visualisations of Afrikaner "indigenisation," his racist reply to Erich Meyer's call to base a true African art on the art of Black South Africans was that this would mean the demise of White culture.[198] While this sounds contradictory, there probably was a crucial difference between basing a "South African school in painting" on San art and on Black South African art to Pierneef. Whereas the San had almost been pushed into extinction by the early 1900s, Bantu-speaking peoples and their material culture were still present in contemporary South Africa – in fact they represented the majority of the overall population. Unlike the San, who, at that point, were romanticised as "ancient Bushmen," they had a claim to the land of which they had been forcibly expropriated by European settlers. These claims were denied by artists such as Pierneef, who depicted the land as empty, Laubser, who showed it as harmoniously cultivated by White farmers using Black labour, and Alexis Preller, who depicted the Ndebele as contently living in the confines of their *kraal* [homestead], removed and separate from White society. In contrast, Pierneef must have considered it more in line with the White nationalist project to suggest basing a national South African art on appropriations of rock paintings produced by a people that was at the same time regarded irrelevant for contemporary politics and linked to the history of the South African land – thereby offering a possibility of "indigenisation." As mentioned above, the depiction of Adam and Eve as indigenous Souht Africans fits well into this project.

In 1925, Pierneef was commissioned by South African Railways & Harbours (SAR&H) to paint 28 mural panels and four smaller paintings for the new railway station in Johannesburg that was designed by Gordon Leith and Gerard Mordijk, who would also design the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria a decade later. According to a Department of Information publication, this was the first government commission to a painter in South Africa.[199] The panels were supposed to have either "historical" or "natural" subjects and were revealed to the public in 1932.[200] As described by Jeremy

194 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 20.
195 Ibid., p. 24.
196 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
197 Ibid.
198 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 2.
199 Harmsen, "Art in South Africa," p. 13.
200 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 43.

Fig. 27: JH Pierneef, *JHB Station Panel – Amajuba*, after 1925, oil on canvas, 146 × 153 cm, TRANSNET, Rupert Foundation

Fig. 28: JH Pierneef, *JHB Station Panel – Graaf-Reinet*, after 1925, oil on canvas, 146 × 155 cm, TRANSNET, Rupert Foundation

Foster, the panels "offered a greatly expanded vision of the national territory within a single, centrally located public space that all long-distance travelers had to pass through."[201] They were composed of twelve landscapes from Transvaal, nine from the Cape Province, three from Natal, one from the Orange Free State, two from South West Africa (today Namibia) and one from Basutoland (Lesotho). Jennifer Beningfield stresses that, "as an organisation whose responsibilities also included tourism, SAR&H were involved in the presentation of the land to those separated from it," i.e. South Africa's urban population with an often nostalgic urge for simple countryside life.[202] She further explains that the organisation promoted bushveld safaris as "compensatory" experiences for South Africans living in non-rural areas and, in the process, presented the veld "as a place to which one could retreat to recall the timeless values of humans and nature, uncomplicated by the presence of other inhabitants."[203]

Most of Pierneef's panels show typical South African landscapes that at most include signs of human presence but never the inhabitants themselves. The portrayals of *Amajuba* (Fig. 27) in KwaZulu-Natal and *Graaff-Reinet* (Fig. 28) in the Eastern Cape Karoo are two examples of this. *Amajuba* shows a farmhouse with a street curving around it, farmed fields to its right and traditional Zulu huts on an uncultivated stretch of land in the foreground. While the farm is bathed in sunlight, the Zulu settlement lies in the shade. Rather than showing White governance and Black labour like Laubser's farm scenes, *Amajuba* stresses the divide between Afrikaner cultivation and African wilderness. The painting of *Graaf-Reinet*, on the other hand, shows an ungovernable rock landscape with steep rugged cliffs and no trace of any human activity. It is an example of the "titanic and strong" landscape that requires a distinctly

201 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 204.
202 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, pp. 43–44.
203 Ibid., p. 44.

South African treatment as cited above. Both works are characterised by Pierneef's graphical, primitivist style of dark outlines and flat surfaces. Hints to San rock paintings such as animals are however missing from his works of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

1.2.4 Lippy Lipshitz (1903–1980): religiosity and indigeneity

Lippy (proper Israel-Isaac) Lipshitz came to the country as a young child in 1908 with the rest of the Jewish-Lithuanian family to join his father, who had migrated to Cape Town four years earlier. The grandfather built wooden synagogues and created religious wood carvings, as folk art was still very popular in Lithuania at the time. Lipshitz's biographers thus ascribe him an interest in parochial – especially Jewish – folk art that manifested in various sculptures of biblical themes throughout his career.[204] Additionally, a number of his works betray an interest in West African sculpture. This was first prompted by the Russian-Jewish sculptor Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, who moved to South Africa from Berlin in 1925. When he met Meyerowitz, Lipshitz became the only slightly older but more experienced artist's mentee and, under his influence, started specialising in wood.[205] He also joined Meyerowitz when the latter received a teaching position at the newly opened Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. However, in a diary entry of 21 August 1927, Lipshitz complains about the conservatism and backwardness governing the school.[206]

Meyerowitz took an uncommon stance towards African art for his time and considered himself a reformer and educationalist. In his report on village crafts in Lesotho, for example, he criticises the "particular type of history of Art and Art Appreciation which has been taught in the past 150 years" for being a "narrow-minded, intolerant [...] misrepresentation" taking a purely Western perspective.[207] However, Meyerowitz still takes the same Western primitivist approach when describing contemporary Basotho crafts as "the earliest form of pottery, similar to those examples found within the precincts of the earliest human habitations" and worries about their corruption caused by the tourist "curio" market.[208] Moreover, in a journal article

204 Frieda Harmsen even claims that all of Lipshitz's art, no matter whether it was "biblical, secular, pantheistic, is profoundly religious." Harmsen, "Art in South Africa," p. 26. Also compare Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, pp. 3–4.

205 Lipshitz, diaries 1920 to 1928, 21 August 1927.

206 Ibid. Meyerowitz was dismissed from Michaelis in 1929 because the government considered it more suitable for an art school to concentrate on fine art while "crafts should be taught at the Technical Colleges." Tietze, "The art of design," p. 7.

207 Meyerowitz, *A Report*, p. 5.

208 Meyerowitz, "Pottery in Basutoland."

published in 1936, he mixes primitivist ideals with social criticism in a typically ambivalent manner:

> How long will this paradise last? […] What will happen when Basutoland is incorporated into the Union of South Africa? Thinking of these proud, upright, happy people, of the joy we had witnessed that day, we compared them to the unfortunate folk a few hundred miles away in the Orange Free State carrying passes like human beings of an inferior order and crowded into locations.[209]

Meyerowitz also gave Lipshitz a copy of Einstein's *Negerplastik* in 1925. It is likely that Lipshitz had not been in close contact with West African sculptures before, as African art was not considered noteworthy or even art in South Africa at the time.[210] While he had great admiration for the artworks depicted in this volume, this first did not echo in his work. In 1928, however, he moved to Paris in order to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He stayed there for about four years and, in 1929, met Brancusi and visited his studio. Lipshitz later recalls:

> His [Brancusi's] work, and Zadkine's, the greatest carvers of the age, held me spellbound. The inspiration of primitive, and particularly of African Negro Art, embodied in their work, appealed to me, and released my long pent-up desire to base my art on the art of Africa.[211]

In another diary entry, Lipshitz also refers to the international importance of "Bushmen paintings" that far exceeded the reputation of major White South African artists such as Irma Stern.[212] Moreover, he expresses his and his fellow artists Elsa Dziomba's and Anton Hendriks's admiration for the African handiwork displayed at the Rhodesian and East African Pavilion at the "Empire Exhibition" shown in Johannesburg in 1936.[213] In addition to formal concerns, it is likely that Lipshitz was also interested in the religious/ spiritual component ascribed to African art. As described above, in *Negerplastik*, Einstein asserts that African art does not symbolise anything but is itself the religious or the spiritual, autonomous and more powerful than its producer, requiring no mediation.[214]

Lipshitz's combination of Jewish topics and a form language appropriated from West African sculpture for example becomes evident in *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* of 1946 (Fig. 29). The 70 cm tall sculpture is one of Lipshitz's medium-sized works and conducted in ebony, a material he did not use as frequently as others such as

209 Meyerowitz, "A Visit to the Bafokeng," p. 396.
210 E.g. Klopper, "South Africa's Culture of Collecting," p. 19. Knight (ed.), *l'Afrique*, pp. 25, 31–32.
211 Cited in Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 10.
212 Lipshitz, diaries 1928 to 1932, 28 March 1929.
213 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 17 September 1936.
214 Einstein, *Negerplastik*, p. XV.

Fig. 29: Lippy Lipshitz, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1946, ebony, height: 70 cm, Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections

stinkwood, marble, concrete or ivory. The shapes of the entwined figures' bodies clearly recall West African pieces like those depicted in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.[215] Additionally, Lipshitz followed the properties of the wood while shaping it, emphasising the work's materiality. Stereotypical characteristics (partly derived from African carving traditions) cited in Lipshitz's work – such as naked bodies with rounded bottoms, thighs and calves, exaggerated hands and feet as well as shaved, round heads – suggest that the artist was portraying Jacob and the angel as Black Africans. This fact is enhanced by his use of ebony, a material that, according to a contemporary review of an exhibition that most likely included this work, was "the wood traditionally associated with dark Africa."[216] Such a treatment was certainly considered unusual for a Jewish theme such as the Israelites' founding father's night-long struggle with the angel of the lord. Interestingly, Lipshitz produced a second sculpture in the same year of the same material and size that shows a mother and child in a similar embrace and is entitled *Africa*.[217] The kinship between the two works suggests a more local interpretation of the biblical subject that has received prominent artistic attention by painters such as Rembrandt, Delacroix or Gauguin, and by the sculptor Jacob Epstein, whose studio Lipshitz repeatedly visited during his sojourn in London in 1947/48.[218]

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215 Einstein, *Negerplastik*, e.g. pp. 21, 36, 42, 53. As mentioned before, Einstein does not provide any information on the origin/ context of the artworks he reproduced.

216 Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," p. 38.

217 Reproduced in Artnott, Lippy Lipshitz, p. 150.

218 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 26. As Lipshitz had not been to England before 1948, it is unlikely that he was familiar with Epstein's *Jacob and the Angel* (1941) when working on his sculpture of the same topic.

Fig. 30: Lippy Lipshitz, *Tree of Life*, 1950, yellowwood, height: 127 cm,
Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections

Another work illustrating Lipshitz's interest in universal Jewish imagery combined with a localised formal and racial primitivism is *Tree of Life* of 1950 (Fig. 30). The 127 cm tall sculpture is made from South African yellowwood and depicts a mother and child study. It is one of Lipshitz's larger works. The two figures portrayed are again Black Africans and their features again show similarities to pieces of West

African sculpture illustrated in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.[219] In Judaism, the tree of life (*Etz Chaim* in Hebrew) has different meanings and usages: it is used to describe the individual wooden poles to which the parchment of a Sefer Torah is attached, it can figuratively be applied to the Torah itself, it is a common name for yeshivas and synagogues, it can refer to the biblical tree of life and, in Jewish mysticism, it is the central symbol of the Kabbalah. In Lipshitz's treatment of the subject as a mother and child study, the tree of life also retains another meaning: that of motherhood and ancestry. The fact that he chose yellowwood, a tree indigenous to South Africa that has since been declared the country's national tree, indicates a connection between soil, land and indigenous population.[220] Lipshitz again emphasises the locality of his topic and, on the other hand, draws a line from specifically Jewish symbolism to universal issues such as procreation, nativity and belonging.

In addition to such references to African sculpture in his own works, Lipshitz also showed a more general interest in African art. In 1941, for example, he organised an exhibition of "African Native Art" at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town with fellow artist John Dronsfield. The exhibition's goal was to promote the displayed works' status as fine art (as opposed to ethnographical objects) as well as the general appreciation of African art in South Africa.[221] A quarter of the exhibits were lent by Irma Stern, other works belonged to the Leopoldville Museum in the Belgian Congo, artists Gregoire Boonzaier and Maurice van Essche, or the South African Museum. They were produced in the Gold and Ivory Coasts, Congo, Nigeria and Benin. Moreover, Lipshitz was very interested in the works and careers of the Black South African artists Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, whom he supported with an attitude demonstrating the same prejudiced primitivism detectable in his artworks. Christine Eyenne describes how Mancoba's "imagery took another direction after his encounter with classical African art" facilitated, on the one hand, through visits to Irma Stern's collection and, on the other, through reading Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture* on recommendation of Lippy Lipshitz.[222] Lipshitz and Mancoba had regularly met between 1936 and 1938 when the latter moved to Paris, and Lipshitz considered his own art a great influence on the Black sculptor's work.[223] In a diary entry of 14 August 1936, Lipshitz also writes that he "persuaded Mankoba [sic] the native

219 The woman's head for example resembles the work reproduced on p. 14, while her body shows similarities with the illustrations on pp. 35, 50, 58, 67.

220 Also compare Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," p. 38: "By his preoccupation and constant experiment with South African woods and stones, yellow-wood, silverwood, […] he makes his works deeply-rooted and indigenous."

221 Lipshitz, "Introduction."

222 Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99. In a letter of 30 June 1938, Lipshitz also thanks his friend Cecil Higgs "for the book on Negro art you gave me before you embarked. The work is of the purest and finest in technique and design I have ever seen." It is unclear which book Lipshitz is referring to. Lipshitz also recommends meeting Mancoba during Higgs's sojourn in Paris. Cited in Bertram, *Cecil Higgs*, p. 37. Additionally, Lipshitz introduced Mancoba to the German Jewish sculptor Elsa Dziomba in the 1930s. Schrire, "The German Jewish Immigrant Contribution," p. 11.

223 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 2 and 14 August 1938. Lipshitz, "Sekoto," p. 20.

sculptor to write an article on 'The Misrepresentation of the Native in South African Art'" and that "the result has been very surprising for he is able to express himself with logic and dignity."[224] These remarks indicate the ambivalence between Lipshitz's appreciation of Mancoba and the political implications of such an appreciation as well as his racist stereotypes of Black South Africans as less intelligent.[225]

Lipshitz's racially primitivist attitude towards Black South African modernists becomes further obvious in his writings on Mancoba's friend and mentee, the painter Gerard Sekoto. In a letter to Millie Levy of 1948, Lipshitz describes Sekoto's works as exhibiting an "intimate glimpse and direct technique" and compares them favourably with the "effective and consciously naïve" works by Maggie Laubser.[226] He thus attributes Sekoto's supposedly "primitive" paintings a greater "authenticity" than Laubser's controlled primitivism. As the quest for a more authentic life was one of the foundations of the primitivist project, Lipshitz placed a high value on Sekoto's immediacy. However, in an article for *The African Drum* published in 1951, he argues that Sekoto's work had been deteriorating since he moved to Paris as he lost his roots and his authentic experiences of Black South African life:

> One still feels that, in spite of Sekoto's success in Paris and the effect of his work on American minds, his present paintings – drawing too much on his reminiscences – lack the power, clarity and simplicity that one finds in his South African works. Sekoto's talent is essentially realistic and intimate. No European can possibly possess and master the same intricate and peculiar knowledge of the South African bantu life and type. […] The Europeans, like Preller and Irma Stern, look at their Native subjects from the picturesque angle, as something exciting and attractive. Sekoto, on the other hand, identifies himself completely with his people and the things around them, painting them in situations and scenes that no European has ever dared to represent or has ever noticed. Sekoto can paint a crowd in a Native eating house, see and smell the atmosphere of a lodging in Shanty Town, the huddled masses of sweating flesh and rags – painting with livid colour and bold form as only one who has slept among them can.[227]

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224 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 14 August 1936. Unfortunately, I was unable to retrieve the article – or any proof of it ever having been published.

225 Lipshitz also criticised his friend Heinz Hirschland, with whom he stayed in Johannesburg in 1936, for not welcoming Mancoba in his home "kindly and as an equal." Condemning Hirschland's hypocrisy, he adds: "'Yes my dear Lippy' said Heinz at the door, 'You would understand my position. You know that I adore African art and appreciate their dances. But what can I do more in Johannesburg?'" Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 2 August 1936.

226 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 1948.

227 Lipshitz, "Sekoto." Again, there is an obvious racism filtering through this description. Walter Battiss reveals a similar, if somewhat mitigated assessment of Sekoto. Battiss, "Gerard Sekoto."

Lipshitz's critique of Sekoto again stresses the importance of locality and indigeneity in South African primitivism when considering his style uninteresting and fleshless as soon as his work is divorced from the African context it had supposedly emerged from. His interest in the African painter seems purely primitivist. It is possible that Lipshitz was influenced in this view by his good friend and supporter David Lewis, who spoke of the alleged change in Sekoto's work a lot more disparagingly than Lipshitz did. Even before the painter left for Paris, he wrote:

> Yet to-day Sekoto presents the tragedy of decline, of the artist lifted from his surroundings to foreign influences which he endeavours to imitate without assimilating them and less, understanding them. […] Living amidst European art influences, he has gradually lost those instinctive elements which were the most valuable contributions to his art. He has succumbed to European art methods, not from weakness so much as divorcement, from his inability to recognize tradition in his own race history, and his utter alienation from ways and lives of his people, from their customs and his heritage. That is the tragedy of his decline: and this decline will never be revoked so long as he insists on living among European artists and art influences, until he re-establishes his basic elements in the life from which he has sprung and which represents all native living in South Africa.[228]

Lewis combines racist stereotypes of the Black artist as unintelligent and instinct-based with a subscription to apartheid principles of racial segregation and separate living spaces that was common in reviews of the time and will be further discussed in Chapter 2. In contrast to Lewis's slander, Lipshitz's criticism of Sekoto is much more ambivalent. Like his letter to Millie Levy, his article emphasises the authenticity that, in Lipshitz's opinion, makes Sekoto's work more interesting and relevant than that of contemporary settler artists such as Stern and Preller. His primitivist idealisation of authenticity is shared by other artists of the time. For example, in a letter to Lipshitz of 7 March 1939, Cecil Higgs relates an encounter with Jomo Kenyatta, who would over 20 years later become independent Kenya's first prime minister and president, in London. She praises his book *Facing Mount Kenya* of 1938 and summarises that "its especial interest & value is that it is written by someone who understands completely, is, in short, one of the tribe he writes about."[229] The book is composed of a collection of essays on Kikuyu society and gives an account of Kenyan history as an alternative to eurocentrism. The dustjacket shows a photo of Kenyatta in traditional dress. Higgs does not expand on the anti-colonial stance Kenyatta takes in this work but adds: "I think what art will emerge from the native of S. Africa is an extremely interesting speculation."[230] In contrast to other settler artists who were only interested in traditional African art, Higgs and Lipshitz hence

228 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, p. 32.
229 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 7 March 1939.
230 Ibid.

were also curious about contemporary works although they viewed them with the same racial primitivism as their colleagues. Revealingly, Walter Battiss expresses his astonishment in 1952 that, "out of the ten million black people," Sekoto was the only painter to produce interesting work:

> So we came to accept the aboriginal art as something belonging to the past and, moreover, our continual disappointment in never being able to find anything really exciting in the contemporary art products of the Bantu led us to except nothing but a decay of Bantu work through contact with disruptive European culture. But faith was restored, for out of the ten million black people suddenly appeared Gerard Sekoto who had something to say in paint. […] His happy way of painting his own Basuto people clothed in gay yellows and soft reds and greys has added to his reputation in depicting certain facts of native life with an innate understanding beyond that of the European painter.[231]

Battiss's reference to Sekoto's "happy way of painting" illustrates his patronising and primitivising approach. As John Peffer argues, "the white middle-class patrons, critics, collectors, and artists who constituted his [Sekoto's] main audience in South Africa saw him as a talented but 'primitive' Bantu artist who represented the everyday life of blacks in town in a manner they found palatable."[232] Interestingly, in two letters written to his friend Millie Levy, Lipshitz expresses a similar disapproval of the romantic glorification inherent in settler primitivism as criticised by Peffer. With reference to an exhibition of works by Gregoire Boonzaier, Lipshitz writes in 1939:

> It is, it seems more agreeable to look at his 'Malay quarters' with its pretty colouring & the picturesque representation of squalor and ruins, than to pay a visit to the real Chiappini Street! People seem to be more willing to buy pictures, inconsequential pictures that they can live with, that flatter or vindicate their narrow or disinterested outlook on life and humanity than to buy real works of art that challenge their outlook on life or mock their morals.[233]

These remarks approach social criticism by attacking Cape Town's contemporary art audience. In a later letter, he also criticises his fellow artists themselves. Telling Levy about the latest *New Group* exhibition, he complains:

> These artists are escapists. They have not the courage or the imagination to express the age. They are too much absorbed with the quality of their technique + have no heart in their subjects which are merely 'subjects' to show

231 Battiss, "New Art and Old Art."
232 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 4.
233 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 24 October 1939.

> off their knowledge and skill. Hence the many + variegated still-lives [sic] + landscapes so very pleasing and clever + cocksure – but saying nothing that is vital.[234]

Interestingly, Lipshitz does not locate his own practice of appropriating African sculpture within this field of tension. In general, he can by no means be described as a politically active artist interested in changing socio-political relations in the highly segregated South Africa. On the contrary, he sometimes took part in the nationalist project that encouraged many settler artists to work with South African themes. For example, in 1927/28 he created the carved relief *The Great Trek* (Fig. 31), partly in Cape Town and partly in Paris where it was first exhibited. He donated the work to the archives of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns [South African Academy for Science and Art] in 1964 upon being awarded the academy's gold medal. In the accompanying letter, he calls his work "a pioneering effort […] in a new and South African style of carving" and explains that "after many experiments I discovered for myself in this panel, a typically South African approach, using the indigenous natural forms and landscape of the Country."[235] The letter also includes a description of the artwork:

> The theme consists of a symphony in three movements. The lower section bordered by Table Mountain is composed of scenes and types from the old Cape and confines these burghers and their liberated slaves who stayed behind. Beyond the mountains the actual Trekking begins in various directions, with hardy Voortrekkers, wagons, whips and blunder busses. As it develops higher and higher, various sculptural forms, adventures and obstacles occur – mountains and warring Kaffirs and beasts – until the action finally subsides with the prominent Rising Sun and the Angel of Victory with outspread wings at the very top.[236]

Lipshitz's effectuations comply with common nationalist representations of the Great Trek as the journey of God's chosen people to a land where they can find the freedom and prosperity they deserve. While the steep ascent and the "warring Kaffirs and beasts" – who originally inhabited the land that the Boers considered themselves to be chosen to occupy – symbolise the hardships and struggles the *voortrekkers* had to face on the way, the rising sun accompanied by the angel of victory signifies the religious destiny of their efforts' gratification. This religious moment is further stressed towards the end of his letter when Lipshitz explains that the inscription on the scroll in Dutch, the language of the bible in South Africa at the time, "seemed appropriate to express the religious feeling to be conveyed by my relief."[237] Additionally, he re-

234 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 10 March 1941. (Original punctuation.)
235 Lipshitz, letter to Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, 25 September 1964.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.

Fig. 31: Lippy Lipshitz, *The Great Trek*, 1928, mahogany, 81 × 46 cm, Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns

lates that, in Paris, the relief was exhibited under the title *L'Exode du Cap de bonne Esperance* [The Exodus from the Cape of Good Hope] because to him, "the Great Trek was meant to express the modern Exodus of the Boers with the same pioneering and religious fervour and aspirations of the Israelites of old – a quest guided by Divine beneficence."[238] He therefore draws a connection between Afrikaner nationalists and his Jewish ancestors. In "Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender," Elsie Cloete explains that "armed with the belief of being God's elect people, the Afrikaner identified strongly with the Israelites of the Old testament" and that "parallels were found between the Israelites' epic journey through the desert on the way to the promised land and the Great Trek."[239] Lipshitz's manoeuvring between depictions of Black South Africans as aggressive warriors fighting the Afrikaners/ Israelites on their holy journey in *The Great Trek* and representations of Black South Africans as Jacob and the angel or the tree of life further stresses the ambivalence inherent in his work.

1.2.5 Gregoire Boonzaier (1909–2005): romantic "slum" scenes

Gregoire Boonzaier's primitivism differs from the other artists portrayed here in the respect that his mode of painting did not deviate strongly from the conservative norm that was prevalent in the South African art scene until the early 1940s. It can be attributed to what is commonly classified as Cape impressionism. According to Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa*, "this is a term that gained currency among art critics in the years around WW2" and "applies to a general style in SA painting, which is indirectly and derivatively related to the techniques of European Impressionism, and which has enjoyed its most consistent exposition in the Cape."[240] She further calls it a "second-generation version of the naturalistic landscape style, which was epitomized in the works of Gregoire Boonzaier, Terence McCaw and Robert Broadley."[241] Berman explains the popularity of this style was caused by the fact that "it related to what [the public] already knew and offered security amid the strange modern forms which were cropping up on SA exhibitions."[242] Nevertheless, Boonzaier has often been called "a bridge between the old and the new"[243] because – in spite of his traditional style and conservative artistic background – he was a founding member of the *New Group* and at the forefront of artists prompting a change in regime in the art world of South Africa.[244]

Gregoire Boonzaier was the son of the Capetonian cartoonist DC Boonzaier, who was well connected in the South African art scene of the time. Amongst his close

238 Lipshitz, letter to Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, 25 September 1964.
239 Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity," p. 43.
240 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 59.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid., p. 60.
243 N.N., "Dr. Tom Muller sal kunsuitstalling open."
244 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 17. Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 26.

friends were the protagonists of the "old guard," Edward Roworth, Bernard Lewis, Anton van Wouw, Pieter Wenning and Moses Kottler. Gregoire Boonzaier was introduced into this world early in his life. In his diary, DC Boonzaier stresses Roworth's support of his son and also points to his own efforts in promoting Gregoire's career by getting journalists to place articles on his exhibitions in the *Cape Times*, *Cape Argus* and *Die Burger* [The Citizen], which he was employed at himself.[245] As early as 1924, Bernard Lewis published a short text in the *Cape Argus* in which he "discovers" the genius of the 14-year-old Gregoire: "His work gives every indication of genius – and he has never had a lesson. Local artists are enthusiastic and I understand that Mr. Kottler, the sculptor, is taking an active interest in the boy's progress."[246] In the following year, Gregoire Boonzaier had his first solo exhibition at the age of sixteen at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town.

In 1934, Boonzaier broke with his father, who had been controlling his life and career and had not wanted him to attend any formal art training.[247] He saved the proceeds of the sale of artworks during his following exhibitions and was able to finance a study stay in London from early 1935 to late 1937. Lippy Lipshitz writes in a diary entry of 1935: "The art world was shaken up by the astounding success of Gregoire Boonzaier's exhibition, who sold 35 of his paintings at Derry's framing shop for 900 guineas and sailed for overseas in a German steamer to study at Heatherley's in London."[248] Upon his return, Boonzaier initiated the foundation of the influential *New Group* together with Terence McCaw, Freida Lock, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller and acted as its chairman (preceded by Charles Peers and followed by Ruth Prowse) for eight of the group's fifteen years of existence. As DC Boonzaier noted in a diary entry of 1 July 1941, Gregoire shared his new friends' opinion on Roworth's obsolete, traditionalist, dictatorial stance within South Africa's most important arts institutions, and aided his old supporter's fall.[249] DC records that, afterwards, "Roworth very naturally would have nothing more to do with him."[250] In 1944, Gregoire Boonzaier and Ruth Prowse successfully caused the *South African Fine Arts Association* that had been founded in 1850 and was responsible for assembling the core collection of

245 "Roworth has shown me nothing but kindness even since we first met and when Gregoire commenced to paint, and all through the years he remained with me, he (R) not only admired his work and encouraged him but did him many and many favours." Boonzaier, diary no. 42, 1 July 1941. "Yesterday, The Times and Argus each published a reproduction of a still life and on Monday there will be one in Die Burger. As usually, nearly all this work has fallen on my shoulders for the press as ever does not lend itself too willingly to propaganda for art. […] But for my personal association with newspapers, Gregoire would have remained practically unknown as a painter." Boonzaier, diary no. 32, 14 November 1931.

246 Cited in Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 11.

247 Compare Boonzaier, diary no. 34, 31 January 1934. Gregoire's income as an artist was entirely retained by his father and was used towards the family's daily expenses.

248 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 26 October 1936. According to Berman, "two exhibitions in Cape Town and Pretoria had netted R4,000." Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 44.

249 Boonzaier, diary no. 42, 1 July 1941.

250 Ibid.

Fig. 32: Gregoire Boonzaier, *Corner of Pentz and Wale Street, Malay Quarter*, 1938, oil, 40 × 50 cm, ownership unknown

artworks displayed at the National Gallery to dissolve.[251] In its place, they founded the *South African Association of Arts* (SAAA) together with Charles Ray and Charles te Water. The *SAAA* took over the role of Roworth's *South African Society of Artists* "as the official national arts body."[252] As representatives of this new body, Boonzaier and Te Water joined the board of trustees of the National Gallery in Cape Town.[253] Additionally, Martin Bekker reports that Boonzaier travelled to isolated areas in the Eastern Free State and Transvaal bushveld all the way up to Salisbury (today Harare, Zimbabwe) in order to exhibit and sell his paintings in small, presumably White, communities unfamiliar with art.[254] He also gave lectures on "art and good taste" at local schools where he spoke about artists such as Pierneef and Naudé but not about his own art. On these trips, he was often accompanied by Daantje Saayman of Nasionale Pers [National Press], who presented the publishing house's books, and cooperated with the Council of Adult Communication. He is therefore attributed an important role in developing South African art audiences at the time.

Similar to most of the other South African settler primitivists discussed in this chapter, Boonzaier's primitivism does not as much display an aesthetic as a thematic character and falls into the category of subject appropriation. He became

251 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 22. This collection mainly consisted of British and European art.
252 Ibid.
253 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 31.
254 Ibid., p. 33.

Fig. 33: Gregoire Boonzaier, *Corner of Common and Caledon Street, District Six*, 1971, oil, size and ownership unknown

most famous for his oil paintings depicting urban class primitivist scenes in Cape Town's Malay Quarter (today Bo-Kaap) or District Six (destroyed between 1975 and 1982). *Corner of Pentz and Wale Street, Malay Quarter* of 1938 (Fig. 32) and *Corner of Common and Caledon Street, District Six* of 1971 (Fig. 33) are two examples of this. They show street scenes in colourful cityscapes in non-White areas that point at harmonious, pre-industrial, working-class city life. People are depicted in relaxed situations, talking to each other or following their daily activities, accompanied by carts, animals and children. Additionally, the Malay Quarter scene also shows figures in traditional Muslim clothing and therefore has a more exoticising quality than the one set in District Six. This is also reflected in Boonzaier's recollections published in a *Huisgenoot* [Housemate] article in 1972:

> Even as a child I found old Cape Town an exotic place. […] There one finds the Malays with their fezzes, and the women with their colourful headdresses. Over all this, the minarets of a dozen mosques from where the Imam's cry daily summons the faithful.255

Significantly, in 1971, the year the District Six painting was finished, the apartheid government released its plan for the district: its inhabitants were forcefully removed to the Cape Flats and most of the buildings torn down to make space for White housing. It is not clear if Boonzaier wanted to illustrate the "colourful" cultural life that would be destroyed or whether he just chose to disregard the fate of the people

255 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 35.

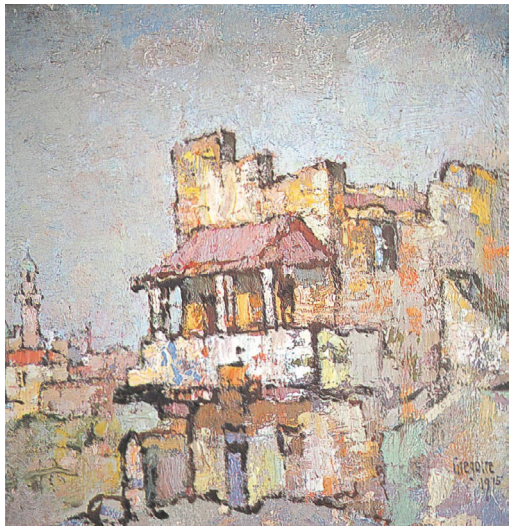

Fig. 34: Gregoire Boonzaier, *Old building and mosque, District Six*, 1975, oil, size and ownership unknown

Fig. 35: unknown photographer, used by Boonzaier as model for Fig. 34

depicted and portray a picturesque, romantic idyll instead. In the catalogue for his exhibition hosted by the University of the Free State of 1981, he writes:

> We refer to Pierneef's bushveld scenes, to Hugo Naudé's Namaqua-land flowers, Maggie Laubser's harvest scenes and Welz's nude studies. It is therefore not strange or wrong when people speak of Gregoire's slum scenes. There is a good reason why these form a recurring topic in my works. From childhood I have been unimpressed by new suburbs, anonymous cities with ugly skyscrapers, air pollution and the rush and hubbub of teeming traffic and freeways. These symbols of our modern, vulgar supermarket world depress and sadden me. All they do is to make me long for the stillness and integrity of nature as I knew it when I was a child. My slum paintings may well be a reaction against everything that glitters, or that is noisy and artificial. Time and again I feel the urge to break away from city life and seek a quiet spot, a lonely donkey cart in a District Six street, a clump of trees bending in the wind next to a location. These subjects appeal to me most.[256]

As he wrote these sentences while the removals and bulldozers had already been operating in District Six for at least five years, it seems more likely that Boonzaier's paintings were conducted from an escapist perspective linking class and racial primitivism. The same tropes concerning childhood, nostalgia and nature that are prevalent in Maggie Laubser's remarks on her work again surface in Boonzaier's explanation of his motivation in painting. Unlike Laubser's farm scenes, however, he

256 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, pp. 35, 40.

expands this to include pre-industrial, non-White city life. For contemporary viewers, it is difficult to identify his paintings as slum scenes in the first place. The comparison between the work *Old building and mosque, District Six* of 1975 and the photo it was based on (Figs. 34 + 35) shows that this disconnect originates from the fact that in, his painting, Boonzaier turns the derelict, squalid house still occupied by people into a picturesque, romanticised ruin reminding more of a castle-like structure. Additionally, he leaves out any signs of modernity such as streetlights, electric wires, asphalt roads or the car that dominates the photo. As the work's title locates the building in District Six a few years after the begin of the demolitions and removals, it is possible that it additionally romanticises this destruction of the quarter's former housing spaces as idyllic ruins in front of an exoticising background. The ambivalence in this work is caused by the fact that, in spite of its exoticising romantisation, it can still be considered to thematise the demolitions and removals and thereby a racist and discriminating political action which, as indicated above, was usually not addressed at all. The absence of human figures amplifies the feeling of nostalgia that resonates with primitivist practices but was usually not linked to contemporary segregationist policies. Boonzaier's abandoned District Six house shows parallels to Emily Carr's depictions of deserted First Nation villages (Fig. 4).

1.2.6 Walter Battiss (1906–1982): appropriating San rock paintings for a new national art

In *Art and Artists of South Africa*, Esmé Berman describes a change from the superficial "European" treatment of African forms and subjects by artists such as Stern, Laubser, Lipshitz or Boonzaier to a new spirit she calls "an intangible entity, which may be described as the 'African Mystique'."[257] She claims that this change was brought about by the two painters Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller. Berman's interpretation of 1970 has coined the following art-historical positioning of the two artists.[258] She explains that, in contrast to previous artists, for Battiss and Preller, Africa did not serve "as the source of primitive forms but as a context of experience."[259] In her description, she follows the same nationalist, primitivist approach as the artists themselves:

> In the desert, on the rocks and in recesses of primeval forest man has left a record dating from his earliest emergence. Etched into the continental crust and imprinted on the customs of its [Africa's] varied peoples, are vestiges of lost, inscrutable events. Because for so long these were unexplored and unexplained by visitors from the West, when finally Europe became alive to them they were either wrapped in the mystery of long-forgotten things or

257 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 12–13.
258 Also compare Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 149.
259 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 12.

> so securely locked in secret cult and magic as to seem impenetrable. […] The magical connotations, the vital energy, the violent rhythms and the primitive forms of African cult-objects seemed to be drawn from the very well-springs of man's creative inspiration.[260]

Berman argues that both Battiss and Preller were intuitively drawn to this intangible magic and "became the initial vessels through which the inevitable influence of the spirit of the continent was to project itself into South African expression."[261] Berman's objective of describing a new national art that is unique to South Africa and completely removed from European models becomes obvious in sentences such as these. More explicitly, she states: "the awakening to the specific climate of the African continent was the beginning of the psychological separation of South African art from its traditional European antecedents."[262] Again, this new art is closely linked with the land itself. With reference to Battiss's interest in San rock art, she details that "a further dimension to the African mystique is contributed by the presence in South Africa of a heritage of visual symbols from the past [that] have been known as 'Bushman Art'."[263] Hence, for Berman, "the emphasis in Walter Battiss' conceptions is on the mystique of Africa's forgotten past."[264]

Walter Battiss first came into contact with San rock art when he saw some of those works as a child close to his family's house in Koffiefontein in the Free State.[265] His formal art education only began in 1927 when he started to receive tuition at the Johannesburg Art School. He continued to study art and teaching at the Witwatersrand Technical College and the University of the Witwatersrand, starting his first teaching position in 1933. Battiss was also a co-founder of the *New Group* in 1938 that will be discussed further in Chapter 4. In 1936, he began to seriously start researching and writing on rock art and two years later, he travelled to Europe to study rock art in Southern France. On this occasion, he also met Abbé Henri Breuil, a French Catholic priest, archaeologist and professor of prehistoric ethnology who studied (prehistoric) cave paintings in Europe, China, Ethiopia, Somalia and Southern Africa.[266] Breuil believed that there was a connection between these paintings, and he attributed them to White authorship in line with the Hamitic myth described above. For example, in his "White Lady of Brandberg" theory, he argues that a white painted figure included in a rock painting on Namibia's tallest mountain, the Brandberg, depicted a Cretan or Sumerian person.[267] LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker) explains that "Breuil emerged as a popular figure in South African academic and political circles because of his role in legitimizing and reaffirming the

260 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 12.
261 Ibid., p. 13.
262 Ibid.
263 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 12.
264 Berman, *The story of South African Painting*, p. 132.
265 Skawran, "Introduction," p. 16.
266 Oliphant, "Modernity and Aspects of Africa," p. 21. Skawran, "Introduction," p. 16.
267 Breuil, "The White Lady of Brandberg." Breuil, "The So-Called Bushman Art."

paternalistic approach that whites used in establishing their historiography of African art."[268] After Breuil had moved to South Africa in 1942 and received a post at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1944, Battiss assisted him in his research activities. He had been invited to this post by prime minister Jan Christian Smuts, who, according to Berger, "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."[269]

Battiss wrote to Pierneef in July 1938 from London after he had spoken to the British High Commissioner to the Union of South Africa, Charles te Water, about the scientific drawings of rock paintings he had conducted for Abbé Breuil.[270] Pierneef and Te Water had been planning to publish a book on "Bushman Painting" with the British magazine *Studio* some years earlier, and Te Water suggested contacting Pierneef about publishing a "De Luxe Edition" drawing on the collections of Battiss, Pierneef, Miss Wilman of Kimberley and Professor Riet van Lowe with "government financial help."[271] In his letter to Pierneef, Battiss writes that "time will have to admit that you were the leader for the artistic recording of these paintings, and you have most valuable material already collected," calling him "one of the greatest artist authorities on the Bushman."[272] However, there is no proof of any further correspondence between the two artists and also not of an ensuing collaboration on a book or other project. Nevertheless, Battiss independently published various texts on the topic.

In 1939, he issued his first book on San rock art, *The Amazing Bushmen*. In addition to information on their art, the volume contains anthropological and physical descriptions of the San so detailed that they even include the shapes of women's buttocks and labia minora as well as men's penises.[273] In addition to this scientific racism, Battiss's primitivist approach becomes clear in his comparison of the indigenous South Africans' lives with an arcadian world: "the painter people whose praises I would sing are those who lived in a Southern Arcadia with the god Kággen as their Pan."[274] He held onto this idea as reflected in his later painting *African Paradise* (Fig. 36) that was probably conducted around 1960. The work shows Black South Africans in rural scenes such as tending sheep, fishing, washing, carrying water or other foodstuff. Most – if not all – figures appear to be female. They are surrounded by antelopes and forest, red earth and dark water. The strong colours used, especially red, white, black and yellow, evoke "typically South African" colours like those used in traditional Ndebele beadwork. Battiss signed the painting in the bottom right corner and added the words "Atque in Arcadia Ego." This on the one hand points

268 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 154.
269 Ibid.
270 Battiss, letter to Pierneef, 12 July 1938.
271 It is not known to what extent Battiss was familiar with Frobenius and his collection of 500 San rock painting facsimiles that he sold to the South African Union government for £5,000 in 1931. Keene, *Leo Frobenius*, p. 18. The collection is not mentioned in Battiss's letter.
272 Battiss, letter to Pierneef, 12 July 1938. (Battiss's original underlining.)
273 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Amazing Bushman*, p. 9.
274 Ibid., p. 10.

Fig. 36: Walter Battiss, *African Paradise*, undated, oil on canvas, 122 × 248 cm, CJ Petrow Corporate Collection

to Nicolas Poussin's 1637 painting *Et in Arcadia Ego* [Even in Arcadia, there am I] depicting a pastoral with shepherds surrounding a tomb. In the case of Poussin, the phrase is usually interpreted to be uttered by Death and his painting is therefore considered a memento mori. On the other hand, "Atque in Arcadia Ego" could mean that Battiss believed himself to be in the Arcadia of rural Black women he depicted. Since he added the phrase right after his name, this is the more likely alternative. The racial and gender primitivism of his idea of Arcadia is striking. Although there is no clear reference to San rock painting in colour or shapes, the spatial treatment in the arrangement of groups of women simultaneously performing different tasks, all shown in one plane with no background/ foreground hierarchy, is reminiscent of rock painting compositions.

In *The Amazing Bushmen*, Battiss declares that "the Bushmen are the only folk in Southern Africa to create an indigenous art the quality and quantity of which entitle them to be considered among the world's greatest primitive artists."[275] This strongly opposes Roger Fry's degradation of South African rock drawings described at the beginning of this chapter. In his clearly nationalist project, Battiss in contrast to Fry also compares South African rock art favourably with European cave paintings:

> Fortunately I have seen the European cave paintings and comparing them with the best Bushman paintings (or Rockman engravings), there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that our art stands supreme. The fact that the European cave paintings may be very much older (30,000 years) does not affect an aesthetic issue. Referring to the Altamira Bison the Abbé Breuil remarked that 'they had not the same conception'. When I showed him my copies of the polychrome buck of the halcyon days he considered 'these

275 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Amazing Bushman*, p. 20.

Fig. 37: Walter Battiss, *The Early Men*, 1938, oil on paper and panel, 60 × 98 cm, collection Murray Schoonraad

> paintings the best of animals in primitive art – nothing better. They are the finest in their understanding and conception.'[276]

Of course, Battiss fails to mention that Abbé Breuil attributed White authorship to the works he saw in South Africa. Anitra Nettleton rightly stresses that Battiss's admiration of the aesthetic qualities of rock art and the fact that he did not question that they were produced by San artists were unusual at the time.[277] In an address to the annual general meeting of the South African Museums Association in 1941, he also proclaims that "despite all that has been written individual masterpieces from the kopies and rock shelters of South Africa are absolutely different from anything known in art before."[278] However, Nettleton emphasises, too, that his "acceptance of the primacy of the San as his cultural ancestors, and his construction of their art as universally relevant, allowed him to use rock art as a sign of Africanness and thus of an 'authentic' national identity."[279] His first painting based on San rock art, *The Early Men* of 1938 (Fig. 37), treats the theme very freely. Although it shows figures resembling those in San rock art, their poses alluding to emotional states such as relaxation, pensiveness, attentiveness, pain or fear clearly differ from traditional depictions of rituals or hunting scenes – as does the abstract mountain landscape in the background. Curiously, the (all male) figures also appear to have blond hair on

276 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Amazing Bushman*, p. 21.
277 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 145.
278 Cited in N.N., "Bushman as an Artist."
279 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 145.

top of their heads. In general, the work strongly evokes European primitivists such as Henri Matisse.[280] The painting carries the following retrospective inscription on the back that indicates the artistic revolution Battiss nevertheless saw in his stylistic appropriation of San rock art:

> This is the first painting in which I break away from Impressionist art. I still continued my orthodox impressionist painting, working on primitive forms until it became a definite part of my style. I called this painting 'The early men'. This work is therefore the first painting by a South African artist using our primitive art as a direct reference.[281]

His monumental painting *Mantis* (Fig. 38) that probably originates from the mid-1960s shows a treatment of the San rock art theme that is completely removed from European post-Impressionist pictorial languages. Battiss portrays a praying mantis, an animal that symbolises cannibalism, violence and sexuality, composed of small, graphical depictions of animals, people, plants and other signs symbolising landscape elements such as water, which Battiss largely appropriated from South African rock paintings. It is likely that he understood the mantis – an animal he depicted frequently in line with his interest in primeval sexuality, for example in *Mantis Dance* (Fig. 39) – to represent Africa. The earthy colours he chose remind of the sand- or clay-coloured surfaces that rock paintings were usually found on. Additionally, they suggest an equation of mantis/ Africa and nature. With reference to works such as these, Andries Oliphant, in his 2005 essay for the exhibition catalogue of a Battiss retrospective

Fig. 38: Walter Battiss, *Mantis*, undated oil on canvas, 90 × 184 cm, Unisa Art Gallery

280 In his address to the annual general meeting of the *South African Museums Association*, Battiss did liken San rock painting to modern art's "purposeful eliminations." Cited in N.N., "Bushman as an Artist."

281 Cited in Oliphant, "Modernity and Aspects of Africa," p. 22.

Fig. 39: Walter Battiss, *Mantis dance*, undated, silkscreen print, 40 × 52 cm, Pretoria Art Museum

hosted at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg, writes that Battiss's "individualised re-workings of rock art paved the way for subsequent generations of South African artists to explore this and other aspects of indigenous art in new work with confidence," concluding that "this process of recovery and re-invention, begun by Battiss, has contributed to the liberation of South African art from colonial bondage."[282] This statement illustrates the ambivalence of Battiss's art that by a lot of South Africans until very recently has been considered to raise the appreciation and esteem of San rock art, in spite of its obvious racial primitivism, and to constitute a new national art. Battiss himself made clear that he saw in this revolution a way for South African art to find a new form language independent of European currents. Looking back, he argues:

> I was trying to find out what came before the Europeans came, take what I could from it, change it and build on it. This was something that was completely misunderstood. People thought that all I was doing was imitating the Bushman or just extending Bushman art or prehistoric art, but that is not what I was getting at at all. I think it is really necessary to make it quite clear now that what I had recognized was that in all of us there is still some aspect of primitivism — the vestigial Adam. There is still some of the primitive man in all of us, and we as Europeans were perfectly justified in taking what we wanted from our ancestors, and I looked upon the Bushman as rather a minor form of this big background…[283]

The close connection between primitivism and nationalism for Battiss is rendered obvious in this statement. Additionally, it shows that he considered it his and other White artists' right to take from their Black compatriots whatever they wanted as they shared the same ancestors. It is surprising, however, that retrospectively Battiss minimalises the importance of San rock art for his own work.

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282 Oliphant, "Modernity and Aspects of Africa," p. 22.
283 Cited in McGee, "Indigenous Relations," p. 117.

In 1948, he published another volume, called *The Artists of the Rocks*. In this book, again, he stresses the supposed superiority of South African rock art over the art of other regions in Southern Africa: "the highest technical developments occurred in the Union of South Africa for in the departments of perspective and foreshortening, shading and composition, the southern painters contributed greatly to the glory of prehistoric art."[284] As Nettleton indicates, in addition to utilising for nationalist distinction the art of a people that had been made nearly extinct in something resembling a genocide by White settlers, he also appropriated it for his own artistic purpose. In a letter to art historian Murray Schoonraad, he writes: "I decided that prehistoric art in South Africa belonged to us, the artists. […] Fate sent it to me to go into action as an artist."[285] Elsewhere, he explains:

> The solution came to me while I was in Europe. I suddenly found that European artists like Matisse, Picasso and Braque and all the others were using forms from Africa – and had pilfered something that belonged to us. No, they did not steal the stuff, they were using rightly what was on earth and rightly what we should use.[286]

It is extremely unclear whom Battiss means when he says "belonged to *us*" or "*we* should use" but it is likely that he is referring to White South African artists. In general, he draws a clear difference between Black and "European" South Africans and even articulates a supposed cultural gap resulting in a mutual lack of understanding. Nevertheless, he evidently considers Black South Africans essential in the process of "indigenisation" of White settlers due to their proximity to the land itself. In the following quote from an SABC interview with Elaine Davie of 1981, the difference between "we" and "they" seems rather sharp:

> I am terribly fond of black people, Africans … They are a big mystery to me … I can't understand them and I am sure they don't fully understand me as a white person, but they are close to me through art … they are so near and part of the environment of Africa: they understand the soil and they understand the mountains and the rivers better than I do. This is the sort of kick I get out of them – it's their contact with this Africa in which I live […] they have come out of Africa – they have walked out of this soil. We have come from elsewhere, so we are foreigners in a way…[287]

Here, Battiss emphasises the negotiation of foreignness and indigeneity prevalent in his art and in his endeavour of establishing a distinctly South African art. For the latter, he considers the indigenous crucial due to the specific connection between

284 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Artists of the Rocks*, p. 66.
285 Cited in Skawran, "Introduction," p. 17.
286 Cited in Oliphant, "Modernity and aspects of Africa," p. 21.
287 Cited in Skawran, "Introduction," p. 16.

"natives" and land. He justifies his (and other White settler artists') appropriation of indigenous cultures through an allusion to Black and White South Africans' mutual ancestors, sharing their human existence from the "Cradle of Humankind" to the present time.[288] Obviously, like most of his White compatriots, Battiss did not consider this mutual origin referable to equality in other social or political realms. He thus also separated his admiration for the art of an "extinct" people that was no longer an entity to be reckoned with in terms of land claims or political co-determination from that of other African art. In a *Studio* article of 1952, he writes:

> From European painters comes almost the only manifestation of pictorial art in South Africa to-day; the black artist has become nearly extinct, leaving only his wonderful cave drawings as a legacy to be discovered by such enthusiastic searchers as the author of this article.[289]

In general, his stylistic primitivism is expanded by racial and also often gender primitivism (as in *African Paradise*, Fig. 36). His formal treatment of indigenous form languages is comparable to Hartley's apprehension of American Indian visual aesthetics, but he still depicts a supposedly "lost" culture in a similar vein to Carr. However, while Hartley and Carr wanted to record the indigenous cultures and form languages they admired, Battiss searched for a way of appropriating such form languages in a manner that would allow himself to be considered an artist with a specifically South African identity. As cited above, he wanted to develop a primitivism that spoke to White South Africans and connected them with the land they lived in.

1.2.7 Alexis Preller (1911–1975): primitivist mystifications of Ndebele women

Alexis Preller was born in Pretoria as the youngest child of an Afrikaner family with Dutch, German and Swedish roots and first studied art at the Westminster School of Art in London in 1934 upon recommendation of JH Pierneef. Back in Pretoria in 1935, he developed an interest in Ndebele artistic traditions – as had other artists such as Lipshitz and Stern – and regularly made weekend field trips to the small Ndebele settlement at Hartebeesfontein together with the photographerConstance Stuart Larrabee.[290] Early paintings such as *Native Study (Mapogges)* (Fig. 40), which was first exhibited in the "Empire Exhibition" in 1936, already indicate this interest

288 "The hollow of the mountain held a white man's farm. When I looked on the clear contours of the new white boy in Africa who had been born there in the Mopani Trees, who loved his father's cattle, who knew where to find under the ground the rare sweet honey of the small wild bee, who knew all the African boy knew, then I understood the white boy belonged to the ancient men and was thus, with me, a modern man." Battiss, *Fragments of Africa*, n.p.

289 Battiss, "New Art and Old Art."

290 Compare Danilowitz, "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele," p. 74.

that would retain a significant stimulus throughout his artistic career. While the influence of older artists such as Stern (figures, foreground) and Laubser (landscape, background) is clearly visible in his colouration and treatment of contours, *Native Study (Mapogges)* already suggests Preller's ensuing tendency towards stylisation and abstractions. The figures depicted do not show any individual features but simply highlight traditional Ndebele dress such as beaded neck, hip, arm and ankle hoops. They are all female and sexualised through an emphasis on their large, round breasts. Brenda Danilowitz argues that

Fig. 40: Alexis Preller, *Native Study (Mapogges)*, undated, oil on canvas, 61 × 71 cm, private collection

> the Ndebele settlement at Hartebeesfontein was at a distance sufficient to remove Larrabee, Eaton, Preller and others to a space where they could enact their 'pastoral dreams' and imagine a South Africa free of the inequalities, exploitation and degradation that had been inscribed in its history for three centuries.291

John Peffer adds that "Preller's use of the Ndebele figure [...] was for possibly voyeuristic consumption, or at most as an item in an iconic inventory whose elements constituted no deep concern with Ndebele culture, but rather with an eccentric personal mythology."[292]

In 1937, Preller continued his studies at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. Upon his return to South Africa in 1938, he took part in the formation of the *New Group* and participated in their first exhibition. Strongly influenced by Irma Stern, he spent some time in Swaziland and produced work that clearly resembled hers. An example of this is the charcoal drawing *Swazi Woman* of 1938 (Fig. 41), a type showing an emotionless woman averting her eyes from the viewer, permitting the latter's gaze. Works such as these visibly propagated racially primitivist ideas, often in combination with gender primitivism. Again similar to Stern, in 1939, Preller travelled to the Belgian Congo where, according to Esmé Berman, he was "impressed by tribal ritual and Negro sculptures."[293] In the same year, South Africa decided to support Britain in

291 Danilowitz, "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele," p. 87. Also compare Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 16.

292 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 20.

293 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 239. Berman was a close friend of Preller's and published the only monograph on the artist since 1948: *Alexis Preller. Africa, the Sun and Shadows* of 2010.

Fig. 41: Alexis Preller, *Swazi Woman*, 1938, charcoal on paper, size and ownership unknown

the Second World War. Alexis Preller, similar to other artists such as Neville Lewis or Terence McCaw, volunteered to serve in the army and, again on recommendation of JH Pierneef, joined the Field Ambulance Corps in 1940 that would deploy to Northern Africa.[294] Berman explains that Pierneef felt that Preller's "art was not yet sufficiently developed to qualify him for the duties of an Official War Artist" but Preller still wanted to support his country in its war efforts.[295]

His Corps first travelled to Cairo and he was taken prisoner by the Italian army in Tobruk, Egypt, in June 1942. After his release, Preller returned to Pretoria in 1943. Even though he was not an official war artist, he can be considered amongst those whose experience of war can be found most distinctly in his subsequent artworks. Berman argues that "his development received dramatic impetus as a result of his visit to the Congo and its immediate sequel in the upheaval of WW2."[296] She believes this to be due to a colourful volcano eruption Preller witnessed at Lake Congo that was later reflected in the nightly air-raids over Alexandria as well as to the supposed closeness of Congolese sculptures or masks to the injured soldiers patched back together in tent hospitals:

> Impressions of the ritually-distorted heads of Congo children and the cruelly-painted fetishes and tribal masks fused with the mutilated figures he observed in front-line operating theatres – and as he watched, the horrifying battle injuries were unconsciously translated by the act of merciful repair in which he was participating into mystical images of resurrection.[297]

Berman's description obviously dramatises and mystifies Preller's experiences and illustrates the idealised reception of Preller's surrealist primitivism that often evokes images of violence, battles and injuries – but also transformation. Two examples of this are *Fetish Enthralled* of 1945 (Fig. 42) and *Cracked Head* of 1947 (Fig. 43;

294 Berman, *Alexis Preller*, p. 59. In addition to military service in general, agreement to fight outside of South Africa was also voluntary. Ibid., p. 53.
295 Berman, *Alexis Preller*, p. 59.
296 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 241.
297 Ibid.

Fig. 42: Alexis Preller, *Fetish Enthralled*, 1945, medium, size and ownership unknown

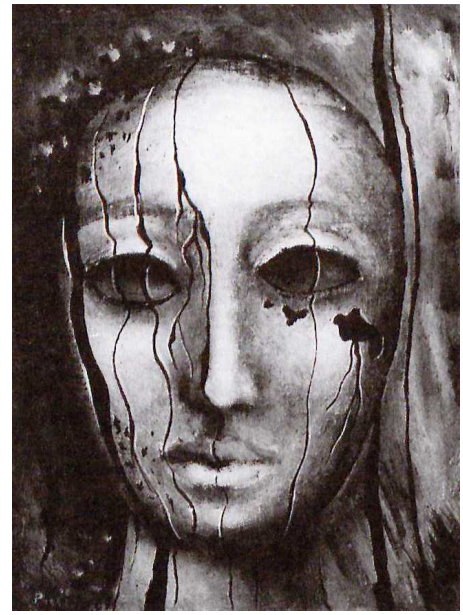

Fig. 43: Alexis Preller, *Cracked Head*, 1946, oil on panel, 28 × 40 cm, ownership unknown

both reproduced here in black and white). Both paintings show masks, the first surrounded by thorns, the other one cracked. Both also evoke religious images as the thorns in *Fetish Enthralled* remind of Christ's crown of thorns and the facial expression and slight tilt of the head in *Cracked Head* are similar to German mediaeval or Italian Renaissance saint statues such as those of the Virgin Mary. Thereby Preller adds to the frightening images of injured human faces a new hope for salvation or transcendence.

While the appropriation of masks in general is very characteristic of primitivism, *Fetish Enthralled*, as the title implies, has a stronger focus on African art itself than *Cracked Head*. As described above, it was a common belief at the time that African art was determined by religious concerns and writers such as Carl Einstein attributed a god-like spirituality and power of salvation to West African sculpture. Anitra Nettleton points out that Preller often referred to West African Dogon figures and masks in his paintings, which is certainly likely for *Cracked Head*, but also for *Christ Head* of 1952 (Fig. 44), which can be considered a continuation of the two earlier works.[298] The mask in this work seems to be protected by a kind of armour that however leaves broad slits for the mouth, nose and eyes, indicating simultaneous strength and vulnerability. There is a crack across the right eye and blood is leaking from the stiff collar that resembles a neck iron and hence might be a reference to Preller's experience as prisoner of war. On the other hand, the collar also reminds of beaded Ndebele neck rings. This is supported by the fact that Preller integrated coloured beads in

298 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 147.

Fig. 44: Alexis Preller, Christ Head, 1952, oil on wood panel with beaded frame, 51 × 41 cm, Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections

the frame of his painting. Nettleton concludes that the figures depicted in Preller's paintings "have an early science-fiction quality about them, having been painted in a highly convincing illusionistic manner. As such, they border on the surreal and clearly represent a primitivist fantasy that Preller built out of the Africa of his imagining."[299] In line with contemporary efforts to indigenise South African artists and develop a specifically South African art differing from European models, Berman also stresses the supposedly African character of Preller's works:

> Preller's idioms came direct from his immediate experience of Africa and not via the primitivist conventions of Europe. They are infused with an awareness of things unseen – a spiritual content, which has nothing to do with the purely superficial qualities of line and shape that European artists had adopted from traditional African carving.[300]

Such a statement is of course hugely problematic – not only because Preller was strongly influenced by Irma Stern's primitivism that clearly built onto German expressionism and had himself studied in London and Paris in the 1930s. Berman's insistent differentiation from European artists however supports the nationalist reception of South African settler primitivism. The quote also illustrates the importance of immediacy often attributed to primitivist artists that purportedly brought them closer to direct "realities." In addition, she attributes to Preller a spiritual awareness and receptiveness supposedly enhancing his physical experiences.

As John Peffer puts it, "Preller was in thrall to his own personal mystique of a tribal Africa and held traditional cultures out as distant, living in another age from

299 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 149.
300 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 241.

Fig. 45: Alexis Preller, *Grand Mapogga II*, 1957, oil on canvas, 100 × 86 cm, private collection

his own, and ultimately inscrutable."[301] The works that illustrate this most clearly are Preller's portraits of Ndebele women from the 1950s that have come to stand for what Berman calls Preller's "African Mystique." For example, *Grand Mapogga II* of 1957 (Fig. 45), shows an Ndebele woman sitting on a stone throne. Although the figure wears a blanket, one of the most important features in Ndebele women's traditional dress, Preller again leaves her breasts uncovered – another parallel between his work and Stern's. With allusions to European surrealism and purism, and artists such as René Magritte (e.g. in the tree in the background) and Fernand Leger (e.g. in the shape of the woman's breasts), Preller completely decontextualises his subject. He places her in a fantasy context continuing his theme of Ndebele references in the wall decorations as well as the throne itself. Although the painting does not specify any locality in time or space, it still portrays an "African" identity. Marked by dress and surrounding architecture, the misplaced, anonymous figure is clearly Ndebele and therefore almost stereotypically South African.

In a truly primitivist manner that evokes a timeless truth, Preller says: "None of my images really belong to the past, present or future, they are a product of all."[302] His portraits are hence the ultimate disengagement of Black South African cultures from current political realities. In line with contemporary racial segregationist policies and the denial of land, he depicts the Ndebele as contently living in the confines of their *kraal* [homestead], removed and separate from White society. In a similar vein to Marsden Hartley (Fig. 3), he appropriates Ndebele form languages in order to portray a supposedly archaic indigenous South African culture. In contrast to Hartley's folkloristic style that exceeds the mere depicting of "tribal" objects but continues their

301 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 20.
302 Marais, "Alexis Preller," p. 21.

visual language into the remaining picture plane, however, Preller's portrayals are less primitivist in style than in subject. As Craniv Boyd points out in his MA dissertation on "Ndebele Mural Art and the Commodification of Ethnic Style during the Age of Apartheid and Beyond," the depiction of the Ndebele mural the figure is placed in front of is rendered fairly faithfully.[303] In general, although Preller's style could be described as surrealist and therefore often deviates from realistic depictions, his form and colour compositions are not noticeably based on Ndebele visual languages.

However, the painting *Grand Mapogga II* clearly propagates a racial and gender primitivism. It shows a generic figure whose individuality has been removed with the erasure of any facial structures. The cloths wrapped around the Ndebele woman's upper body evoke fur (the thick, soft blanket wrapped around her shoulders) and some kind of plant (the green material worn underneath), a clear deviance from original Ndebele clothing. These warm, natural materials receive an even stronger emphasis through the contrast of the grey, cold stone throne the figure is placed upon, symbolising the two poles of nature and culture. In general, the painting is governed by contrasts, soft curves and hard edges (also in the fabric and tree in the background). The woman's bulging belly and the focus on her lap signify fertility. In the description of a similar painting, Peffer also points out that the blankets covering the figure's upper body resemble an ear of corn and female genitalia.[304] He sees the model for the woman's pose in a photograph by Constance Stuart Larrabee of Ndebele women sitting on a stone bench outside of their decorated homestead.[305] The meaning of the poles in the background is extremely unclear – other than that they take up shapes from the Ndebele wall painting displayed behind the seated woman. Craniv Boyd interprets the white veil hung on the tree in the background as the white flag usually signifying that a son living in an Ndebele household is currently in *wela*, i.e. undergoing the male circumcision ritual.[306] Additionally, veil and apple are also Christian symbols often shown in depictions of Mary holding the infant Jesus. In general, paintings such as *Grand Mapogga II* evoke European Marian or nobility images that clearly idolise Preller's timely removed subjects.

1.3 Conclusion

The main difference between artists that can be categorised as settler primitivists and European primitivists is that settler primitivism is not, as Nicholas Thomas – who coined the term – put it, "necessarily the project of radical formal innovation stimulated by tribal art" but "an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic

303 Boyd, *Ndebele Mural Art*, pp. 31–32.
304 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 18.
305 Ibid., pp. 19–20.
306 Boyd, *Ndebele Mural Art*, p. 34.

primitive culture, but a particular one."[307] This effort was intended to result in the (self-)definition of White settler artists as native and as representatives of a specific, national art rather than an undefined European derivative. Overall, this process of "indigenisation" makes use of a cultural appropriation marked by strong ambivalences since native subjects and their visual culture were used as a connection to the land and simultaneously denied any claim to it.

When comparing primitivist artworks originating in different settler nations, varying foci can be detected. In the primitivism of the Australian settler artist Margaret Preston, the emphasis is set on material culture rather than on aborigines themselves. Their art was considered by Preston to offer design potentials for a new Australian art deviating from British models and bridging the gap between crafts and visual arts as a specifically Australian approach. Marsden Hartley, whom I have chosen as a case study of US American settler primitivism, on the other hand, was strongly motivated by finding an alternative to modern, industrial, capitalist life. He developed an interest in Native American culture prompted by his experiences in Europe where he saw ethnological expositions and exhibits at ethnological museum. This interest in art that "belonged" to the land and hence facilitated an "indigenisation" of White settler artists appropriating it was however short lived as, in the US, modern, capitalist culture soon became iconic and received a lot of attention from Europe and elsewhere. Canadian settler primitivism, as exemplified by Emily Carr, set a higher emphasis on "Northern" landscapes and the visual remains of First Nations cultures within such landscapes than on the people who had created the emblems shown. It was coined by a backwards-looking nostalgia portraying a supposedly lost indigenous culture. In contrast to South Africa, in all three of the other settler nations discussed, indigenous peoples were a minor concern in everyday social and political life as they had been considerably outnumbered by White settlers before the turn of the century.

My discussion has shown that, in South Africa, the situation was rather different. South African settler primitivists mainly concentrated on depicting indigenous South African peoples, showing the country's non-White majority in a way that would clearly cast them as removed from, uninterested in and finally incapable of participating in any form of modern, contemporary socio-political life. Their works were either depictions of timeless arcadian figures in pre-industrial rural or urban landscapes (Laubser, Boonzaier) or of exoticised individuals showcasing the richness of South Africa's "native cultures" (Stern, Lipshitz, Preller), or they referred to "extinct" cultures that could be appropriated for a typically South African art due to their connection to the land (Pierneef, Battiss). This last stance is similar to Carr's approach in the way that the originators of this culture were regarded lost and therefore did not have any contemporary social or political relevance. But it also resembles Preston's in the way that visual design elements of an indigenous culture were used for nationalist appropriations. Since the originators of the visual culture referenced had allegedly

307 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.

vanished (i.e. they were eradicated), their artistic heritage was considered by artists such as Pierneef and Battiss to have passed over into the possession of all (White) South Africans and not as specifically linked to any of the non-White groups living in contemporary South Africa.

Different categories of stylistic and subject-related primitivism find varying degrees of application in the different oeuvres and are closely interrelated with style and subject appropriations respectively. Stylistic primitivism is especially important in the works of Laubser, Pierneef, Lipshitz and Battiss while it plays a subordinate role in the works of Stern, Boonzaier and Preller. While Laubser's works can be considered stylistically primitivist as they are reminiscent of children's art, Lipshitz in his carvings was concerned with spatial issues addressed by West African sculptors which he became familiar with through the perusal of Einstein's *Negerplastik* as well as his sojourn in Paris. Pierneef and Battiss, on the other hand, specifically worked with indigenous South African art which they found in San rock painting. They both started with fairly faithful reproductions of the latter and then continued to transfer them into increasingly abstracted appropriations. All artists can be considered to adhere to a racial primitivism in their depictions of non-White South Africans. This is not surprising as it can be assumed – due to their political conformity and cooperation with the Union and apartheid governments – that all artists were interested in maintaining the assumption common amongst White South Africans at the time that race was an indicator of difference and racial segregation hence necessary. Their racial primitivism is sometimes marked by the erasure of facial features (Laubser, Battiss, Preller), nudity (Stern, Lipshitz, Preller), stereotypically "African" shaped bodies alluding to West African sculpture or facial features complying with racist stereotypes (Stern, Lipshitz, Pierneef, Preller) or an exoticisation mainly marked by traditional dress (Stern, Boonzaier, Battiss, Preller) and background (Stern, Battiss, Preller). A gender primitivism is most striking in the works of Stern, Battiss and Preller. All three highly sexualise their subjects and comply with common stereotypes of femininity. A class primitivism is noticeably detectable only in Laubser's and Boonzaier's works. They both depicted arcadian scenes of harmonious pre-industrial life – Laubser in the countryside and Boonzaier in non-white districts in Cape Town.

2 RECEPTION OF SETTLER PRIMITIVISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter highlights different topics that shaped the reception of South African settler primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s. While some themes such as artists' myths, the relevance of social criticism in modern art or primitivist discourses can be traced through all decades discussed, a turning point in politically informed approaches to settler primitivism was induced by South Africa's decision to support Britain in the Second World War in 1939. This decision caused an increasing dissociation of Europe and nationalisation that was reflected in contemporary art criticism. However, as is natural in temporal changes in art reception, there are no clear cuts distinctly marking the transition from a transnationalist to a nationalist perspective, and overlaps exist. The different topics shaping these two perspectives, too, are not mutually exclusive but usually interrelated. Additionally, the analysis below occupies no claim to absolute completeness but exemplarily examines the issues most striking in a broad number of exhibition reviews, artists' portraits, catalogues and other texts on South African settler primitivism published between 1920 and 1970 (with a minimal number of texts from a later date).

The following discussion mainly examines texts printed in South African publications — with a small number of exceptions such as reviews of the exhibition of South African art shown at the Tate Gallery in London in 1948 and at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1949 or articles featured in the British arts magazine *The Studio*. The German press on Irma Stern will be analysed in line with her professional self-fashioning in Chapter 3. Other than these examples, I could find little remarkable press on South African artists published abroad. While a number of the reviews and artists' portraits that appeared in South Africa were written in Afrikaans, most texts discussed below were composed in English. This is due to the fact that the interest in modern art was larger in the English-speaking than in the Afrikaans-speaking press at the time. However, the critics whose statements are cited in this chapter largely represent the three ethnic groups Afrikaner, English and Jewish with which the artists under investigation identified. While some texts featured were written by unknown journalists, the majority of accounts were issued by public figures including museum directors, university professors, politicians or well-known critics.[1] This is to show that the reception of South African settler primitivism discussed below also to a certain degree reflects the institutional approach

1 As South African (arts) institutions and politics were dominated by men at the time, most of these writers were male.

to such art. The following analysis is therefore not based on an enormous mass of articles — even though more than 500 sources were consulted during the research process — but on a selection of texts that most aptly reflect the issues prevalent in art critical discussions of settler primitivism at the time.

2.1 Artists' myths

Irrespective of more specifically local or contemporary topoi, myths surrounding the lives and careers of artists have formed a significant strand in occidental art history and perception of artistic production. This is also the case for artists in South Africa in the period under investigation. Most pronouncedly starting with Giorgio Vasari's famous 16th century series of artists' biographies *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* [The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects], certain myths have been continuously reproduced in order to verify artistic creation and "genius." As feminist art historians have pointed out, such "myths of the great artist" combine stereotypically male claims to innovation, authority and authorship.[2] It is therefore reasonable to discuss them separately from women artists' myths to which, due to the extraordinary significance of women artists for South African settler primitivism, I dedicate a whole chapter: Chapter 3 on Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser and the image of the *Neue Frau* [New Woman]. In the following, I will exemplarily concentrate on the male artists Gregoire Boonzaier, Lippy Lipshitz and JH Pierneef in order to examine artists' myths relating to male South African settler primitivists in the first half of the 20th century.

2.1.1 Gregoire Boonzaier and male artists' myths

Departing from my selection of male primitivists examined in Chapter 1, Gregoire Boonzaier can be employed as a very suitable example of a South African artist whose discussion in the contemporary press was influenced by artists' myths. In 1934, the Viennese art historians Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz published the first in-depth examination of such myths in *Die Legende vom Künstler* [The Legend of the Artist]. They explain that the central myth in artists' biographies is the tale that the artist shows his — for those myths relate to male artists[3] — talent or "genius" as a child and autodidact who does not have a teacher or master but is directly inspired by nature. He is then "discovered" and taken under the wing of a (male) expert who guides the

2 Kessel (ed.), *Kunst, Geschlecht, Politik*, p. 8. Also compare Schade, "Künstlerbiografik, Künstlermythen und Geschlechterbilder im Angebot."

3 Compare Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Die Legende vom Künstler."

impecunious, clueless youngster to fame and social advancement.[4] The first review of Boonzaier's work closely resembles the myth of the autodidact, "genius" child "discovered" by an expert as explicated by Kris and Kurz. Very fittingly, it is titled "Genius Discovered." Since this 1924 article was written by Bernard Lewis, a close and long-term friend of Gregoire's father DC Boonzaier, it is likely that the staged "discovery" was intended to smooth the way for the 14-year-old Gregoire Boonzaier into South Africa's artistic forefront through Lewis's recurrence to the traditional authentication of creative "genius." As if he had never met Boonzaier before, Lewis writes:

> Two still life pictures caught my eye at Ashbey's to-day on account of their colouring. It was magnificent, and the pictures seemed to breathe the spirit of Wenning, the great South African painter of studies like these. The pictures were signed 'Gregoire', and I was astounded to learn that the artist was a fourteen-year-old boy, son of Mr. Boonzaaier [sic], the cartoonist. Young Gregoire is undoubtedly a 'find'. His work gives every indication of genius — and he has never had a lesson. Local artists are enthusiastic and I understand that Mr. Kottler, the sculptor, is taking an active interest in the boy's progress. Mr. Boonzaaier [sic] is not interfering with Gregoire's methods; he will allow the boy to develop, for a time, at any rate, without tuition or restraint. It is noteworthy that Gregoire has never been to an exhibition of paintings.[5]

In addition to his own appreciation of Boonzaier's works, Lewis quotes the sculptor Moses Kottler, another man with an established standing, as an expert supporting the young artist. Moreover, he stresses Boonzaier's natural talent that had not been corrupted by any outside influences such as teachers or art exhibitions. However, Lewis fails to mention that, in addition to Kottler, the well-known artists Anton van Wouw and Pieter Wenning were good friends of DC Boonzaier's and that Gregoire often accompanied Wenning on painting expeditions.[6] The image of the uninfluenced young artist also ties in with the idea common since 1800 that the "genius" creates from inside and acts from internal necessity.[7] In 1930, in an article for Martin du Toit's influential Afrikaans-speaking arts magazine *Die Nuwe Brandwag* [The New Sentinel], Lewis repeats his emphasis on Gregoire Boonzaier's autodidactic talent by emphasising that he worked "by instinct and not by the mind" and that "nature was his only teacher."[8]

Lewis's publicity and DC Boonzaier's network were greatly beneficial to Gregoire: in 1927, at the age of 18, he had already sold more than thirty oil paintings to an

4 Kris & Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, pp. 29–50.
5 Cited in Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 11.
6 Ibid., p. 10.
7 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, pp. 44–45.
8 Brander, "Gregoire Boonzaier," pp. 69, 71. Also compare Trümpelmann, "Gregoire Boonzaier," p. 73.

illustrious clientele comprising for example Sir Max Michaelis (mining magnate and arts patron), General JBM Hertzog (prime minister at the time), DF Malan (first prime minister of the apartheid government) and NC Havenga (finance minister under Hertzog and again under Malan and leader of the Afrikaner Party).[9] There are many accounts of Gregoire Boonzaier's financial success and it is said that his income from the sale of paintings had sustained his living "from early boyhood."[10] Nevertheless, in addition to the myth of the "genius" child brought to success by expert patrons described above, another myth has prevailed in the recount of Boonzaier's life: that of the suffering artist. Verena Krieger points out that, from the 19th century, the artist "genius" has been understood as a social outsider suffering from "a lack of appreciation, poverty, loneliness, tragic circumstances and his own self."[11] In line with this, Martin Bekker begins his 1990 biography of Boonzaier with the following paragraph:

> Gregoire Boonzaier's life story reads like a fairy tale. It is about an ordinary boy whose dedication and perseverance culminated in honour and recognition; a young man moulded to sagacity and maturity by conflict and lack of appreciation; and an artist who pursued his ideal through years of poverty and sacrifice. It is the story of the fulfilment of a dream.[12]

While one could regard Boonzaier's being born into an extremely well-connected family, with a father and his network of friends granting him extraordinary support, hugely beneficial to his artistic career, Bekker portrays him as a poor, hard-working boy who reaches fame and prosperity against all odds. The most obvious reason for this – apart from possibly making his book a more interesting read for contemporary audiences – is to give proof and render authenticity to Boonzaier's creative "genius" through the reproduction of an artist myth common since the 19th century.

2.1.2 Lippy Lipshitz and Jewish stereotypes

This latter myth of the suffering artist, as well as that of the artist as social outcast, also aligns with contemporary Jewish stereotypes. In the case of South African settler primitivists, this can best be observed in the reception of Lippy Lipshitz. Krieger argues that, in the 19th century, the (male) artist is given the "trademark" of being antibourgeois, which is closely related to the conception of an artistic avant-garde and lasts well into the present time.[13] In this line, in a review of Lipshitz's second solo exhibition held in Cape Town in 1934, a *Cape Argus* journalist announces that the

9 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, pp. 16, 106.
10 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 45.
11 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, p. 49.
12 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 9. Also compare Trümpelmann, "Gregoire Boonzaier," p. 74.
13 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, p. 47.

show "is likely to arouse great interest, possibly violent controversy, in both artistic and more general circles" due to the "different" and "provocative" character of the artist's work.[14] This description casts Lipshitz as an outsider causing upheaval and combines artists' myths with Jewish stereotypes.[15] In addition, the author cites Irma Stern's opening address of the exhibition and her admiration of "any artist who does not work only to please his public." This fits in with Krieger's recount of the notion that it is impossible for the true "genius" to adapt to prevailing bad tastes, and therefore the image of the "misunderstood artist."[16] When compared to Stern's 1922 solo show at Ashbey's Gallery, however, Lipshitz's "controversial sculpture" caused little unrest in the South African artworld. Nevertheless, René Graetz, Lipshitz's friend and fellow artist, three years later stresses in another review that "Lippy's work is not akin to the bourgeois class."[17] In 1952, Joseph Sachs, an ardent supporter of Jewish artists who had also written the first monograph on Stern, describes Lipshitz as "a truant schoolboy" who "from the beginning […] found it difficult to conform to the conventional laws of Society" and "lived on the mountain and near the sea, keeping in close contact with nature, and developing his taste for solitude, while he fed his mind on fantastic tales which fortified his conviction that man was a creature of wonder and mystery."[18] Sachs thus casts Lipshitz as a lonely outsider from his childhood on, feeling closer to the fantastic and mysterious nature of the Cape than to "conventional laws of Society."

As mentioned above, linked to the artist's position as social outsider was his suffering.[19] Again, in the case of Lippy Lipshitz, this was enforced by stereotypes of the suffering, melancholic Jew and the common Jewish theme of tragedy.[20] Sachs, for example, comments that "his childhood here was not altogether unhappy" – without expanding on why one would assume it was unhappy in the first place.[21] Graetz, on the other hand, explains that Lipshitz's work "is representative of living man in an aggressive surrounding which distorts his very being" as well as characterised by "true emotion in the face of simple life-struggles."[22] Another friend of Lipshitz's, the poet Vincent Swart, too, asserts in an exhibition review of 1936 that the artist's sculptures were informed by his struggles:

> The attitude to which every curve has to be related in the work of Lippy is an attitude of depression of soul, aridity and poverty. The women he models are all of them thin, as though they have been starved in love and in body,

14 N.N., "Some Controversial Sculpture."
15 Also compare the stereotype of the "'Wandering Jew' who symbolized, among other perceived maladies, international Bolshevism […] and social upheaval." Koch, *Between Deeds and Dreams*, p. 20.
16 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, p. 47.
17 Graetz, "A Living Art."
18 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.
19 Again, the male pronoun is deliberate.
20 Compare Pappas, *Mark Rothko*, pp. 153–155.
21 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.
22 Graetz, "A Living Art."

> the surfaces of his work are broken up into the splinters of struggle and defeat, and some of his figures are almost pressed out of existence; under a destructive element, a negation of being, pressed almost unplastic, pressed thin. His work expresses the climate of the age, an awareness of the losing battle that is being fought between the economic and the spiritual man, the last thin juices of the soul, under an economic burden, being pressed to death.[23]

Swart's last sentence also reflects primitivist and expressionist themes relating to the antagonism between spirituality and capitalist materialism. In her PhD dissertation on Jewish expressionism, Marycelka K Straughn argues that "expressionism suggested access to more 'authentic', creative aspects of Judaism art through its emphasis on subjectivity and spirituality" as it favoured "a distinctive art marked by an integrated form and content through the concept of *Erlebnis* (lived experience)."[24] In this sense, Graetz writes that "Lippy's work is 'felt' with all the consequences resulting from a life real with the age-old struggle for daily bread."[25] The latter also recalls the cliché of the poor Jewish artist in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century that is examined by Sepp Hiekisch-Picard in a text on Jewish artists and the *École de Paris* [School of Paris].[26] In his 1952 "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," Sachs includes a tragical and embellished description of Lipshitz's circumstances in Paris:

> Paris was a whirlpool of lost hopes and crushed ambitions — the waste-paper basket of Europe. He struggled with thousands of other artists who came to seek fame and fortune in the fay Capital on the Seine. Life was hard, but the ecstasy of creating was the stimulus cheaply bought at the cost of pain, hunger, neglect and oblivion. To be able to work and have materials and a chunk of bread was all an artist craved for. But sometimes even the chunk of bread gave out. […] In the winter, life was particularly trying. The days were so short and chilly, and there was no coal to light the stove. Hard, bitter frost was snapping his bones. He lived in a damp, fireless studio with a cement floor. There were no friends left from whom to borrow. Rent day was the Day of Judgment — but Paris still remained.[27]

Interestingly, Lipshitz strongly recurs to this image himself in his diaries retelling his time in Paris, which he transcribed for posterity and which are now archived at the University of Cape Town. In these diaries that are handwritten and thus emit an aura of authenticity, Lipshitz ensures to present his four-year sojourn in Paris as that

23 Swart, "Lippy Lipshitz's Exhibition," p. 17.
24 Straughn, *Jewish Expressionism*, pp. 6–7.
25 Graetz, "A Living Art."
26 Hiekisch-Picard, "Jüdische Künstler und die ‚École de Paris'."
27 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.

of the poor, bohemian artist reiterated in numerous myths.[28] It can therefore not be ruled out that Lipshitz, too, had some agency in the creation of the myths surrounding his art production. This is supported by the fact that most of the accounts discussed above were authored by friends or close acquaintances of Lipshitz's, mostly members of the Jewish community.

2.1.3 Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Afrikaner stereotypes

On the other hand, the reception of the Afrikaner artist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef was shaped by (male) Afrikaner stereotypes that were largely at the opposite end of the myth of the misunderstood, suffering artist "genius." Quite contrarily, descriptions of Pierneef presented him as the typically simple, sincere and steadfast Afrikaner with Puritan values.[29] Qualities regularly ascribed to Pierneef thus were modesty, charity, honesty and frankness.[30] Additionally, contradicting common conceptions of "creative genius" but in line with Puritan work ethics, Pierneef is reported to having been convinced "that art is five percent inspiration and the rest perspiration."[31] Moreover, in the review of an exhibition at the Argus Gallery in 1937, his work is described as "full of a certain straightforward strength which goes straight for the mark and hits it," with a "pleasant certainty" and an appeal that "is instant and direct and may be understood at once."[32] That is to say, there is nothing of the avant-gardist social outsider about this Afrikaner artist. The author continues: "He gives the feeling of knowing, as an artist, exactly what he wants and getting it. In a world of storm and stress and one filled with unsatisfied desires (artistic, political and so on), these are valuable qualities."[33]

It is not clear what unsatisfied political desires the author refers to, but the article was published in a period of political unrest for Afrikaner politics caused by the *skeuring* [split] of the Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party [Purified National Party] under DF Malan from JBM Hertzog's governing United South African National Party (short, United Party). In this conflicted time, Pierneef is presented as the steadfast Afrikaner who sees clearly and acts deliberately. By the 1930s, Melanie Hillebrand argues in her text for *Visual Century*, "a potent cultural myth had been invented of the Afrikaner as hero in a desolate, hostile world" and "artists such as Pierneef were quick to exploit this archetype."[34] She cites Charles te Water's 1934 article on "The Cultural

28 Lipshitz, diaries 1928 to 1932.
29 For a more detailed description of these male Afrikaner stereotypes in the late 19th and early 20th century see Hall, *The Representation of Aspects of Afrikaner and British Masculinity*, p. 46.
30 E.g. Paris, "A Farewell to Pierneef." Sapa, "S.A.'s Loss in Death of Pierneef."
31 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist," p. 5.
32 D.G., "An Essentially South African Painter."
33 Ibid.
34 Hillebrand, "White Artists in Context," p. 151.

Heritage of South Africa" in which Te Water asserts that, in contrast to his British compatriot, the Afrikaner – whose civilisation in South Africa cannot be likened to European colonialism since he has no other home than Africa – "cannot withdraw to a mother-country in the face of adversity, or were Africa to arise against him, as it has done in the past, in all its patient and overwhelming power."[35] Te Water's hierarchy also clearly places Afrikaner above English culture:

> The Union's population is composed, for the main part, of the Afrikaner, who is a new human type which three centuries of miscegenation between two of the most cultured and artistic races of Europe, the Dutch and the French, has produced, and for the other, of a large minority of Scottish and English stock which, for historic and political reasons, has been more slowly mixing with the older population over a century of time. It is to be observed by the student of ethnics that here in Southern Africa is to be found a most interesting phenomenon of race. For in the long history of Africa here is to be found, for the first time, a white race to be counted, by all reasonable tests, as indigenous to Africa as are the black races which surround it. […] That the art of this people, this white African race, should have new and original qualities, teasing the imagination and provoking the interest of the student, must, from this slight introduction to the character of the South African people, now be quite obvious.[36]

In his effort of indigenising the Afrikaner people, Te Water additionally writes: "Here, then, is a people whose deepest instincts are at work in its struggle for survival. Environmental and climatic influences have long since formed a type in as tough and hard a mould as the Black African himself."[37] He then describes Afrikaner artists such as Pierneef as tamers of their hostile environment since, unlike their European colleagues, they know how to depict the "hot horizon, the sharp brilliancy of nature's palette, and the harsh striated contours of mountain and limitless veld."[38] Similarly, in a 1933 review, Bernard Lewis describes Pierneef's favourite subjects, the trees, "South Africa's 'Children of Adversity'" struggling for existence, as "gnarled and twisted […] by storms and winds, scorched by burning sun, cramped by bitter frosts, retarded by years of drought, or by floods which have laid bare their roots, making them easily imaginable homes of 'tokolossies'."[39] In a 1946 article for the government publication *South African Panorama*, Jeanne Hugo closely links Pierneef's ability to depict such

35 Te Water, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa," p. 164.
36 Ibid., pp. 164–170.
37 Ibid., p. 164.
38 Ibid., pp. 173–174.
39 Lewis, "Pierneef. An Appreciation." "Tokolossies," or in its recognised spelling *tikoloshes*, are evil spirits originating from Zulu mythology.

Fig. 46: J.H. Pierneef, reproduced in *Rand Daily Mail,* 18 October 1933

Fig. 47: Lippy Lipshitz, photographed by Jim Credie, reproduced in *The Outspan*, 13 April 1934

harsh scenes to his character when she calls him one of the "chosen few" to whom "it is given to reinterpret" South Africa, and explicates:

> One does not ordinarily judge the artist by the man himself, but to know Pierneef is to understand why he can distil the fierce uncompromising spirit of the Transvaal Bushveld on his canvas in a way that no artist in any other country could have done. He is not overcome by the massive grandeur of her gaunt naked rocks, the limitless perspective of her never-ending veld nor by the white blaze of the African sun, but carefully, logically, he builds up his pictures into an architectural whole, which in its angular line and muted colour gives us at least one movement in this infinite symphony of space which is Africa.[40]

Here Hugo also recurs to common ideas of manliness and stereotypical masculinity that she sees demonstrated in Pierneef's logical, geometrical approach. Photographic portraits of Pierneef published in contemporary newspapers, too, enforce ideals of masculinity crucial to the artist's reception. This becomes especially obvious when comparing a photo of Pierneef published on 18 October 1933 in the *Rand Daily Mail* (Fig. 46) with a photo of Lipshitz published on 13 April 1934 in *The Outspan* (Fig. 47). Pierneef is portrayed facing the reader with clear eyes, returning the latter's gaze, his head held straight up, his hair neatly parted and combed back, dressed in a white shirt and tie underneath a stiff overcoat. Lipshitz, on the other hand, is shown absorbed in his work, with inward concentration, his head tilted downwards, averting his face from the viewer even though his upper body faces the latter. He is dressed in a high-collared garment out of an apparently soft, ornated dark fabric. In

40 Hugo, "Painting in South Africa," p. 45.

other photographic portraits, too, Lipshitz is frequently shown facing away from the beholder, a pose usually employed in portraits of women. It can certainly be argued that Lipshitz is portrayed in a way that exhibits the "soft manliness" characterised by traditional, effeminate rabbinic concepts still prevalent in the first half of the 20th century – even though increasingly threatened by dawning ideals of the "New Jewish Man" and the "Muscle Jew."[41] Photographic portraits of Pierneef, on the other hand, adhere to ideals of straight forward Afrikaner manliness.

In "'A Boer and His Gun and His Wife Are Three Things Always Together': Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion," Sandra Swart argues that, in the early 20th century, Afrikaner masculinity centred on patriarchal family structures, egalitarian principles and ideas of self-reliance.[42] The relevance of patriarchal family structures to Pierneef's reception becomes obvious, on the one hand, in references to the artist as "Oom [Uncle] Hendrik" or "Oom Henk"[43] and, on the other, in the portrayal of the Pierneef family. Pierneef, his wife Marian Frances and their "lively, delightful" daughter Marita-Jennifer – "called 'Mickie'" – are presented as a congenial and good-natured family whose atmospheric home "is a popular meeting place, not only of visitors from the Lowveld, but for artists and art-lovers of Pretoria and further abroad."[44] In line with contemporary Afrikaner (White) egalitarian principles, a *Cape Times* journalist reports on Pierneef that "the artist with his true values does not know the meaning of snobbery, and so Pierneef, his wife tells me, is at home with prince and peasant alike."[45] Ideas of self-reliance are evoked when Pierneef's favourite past-times of fishing and hunting are recounted or when the reader is told that the artist is building rondavels on his farm ("he became stonemason") and farming tomatoes.[46] In 1927, a journalist writing for *The Star*, contrasts Pierneef's hands-on self-reliance with common artists' stereotypes:

> Artists, generally, are not credited with gifts in the commercial or mechanical line. Mr. Pierneef, however, is an exception. He built his own house, arranged his own water supply and is in fact guilty of being a handyman.[47]

Descriptions such as these are also part of the myths or master-symbols connecting Afrikaners to the land. According to JM du Preez, these myths are shaped by the idea that South Africa is an agricultural country with Afrikaners or Boers as the people of farmers, that the country rightfully belongs to them and that they are threatened.[48] As mentioned above, the image of Pierneef as a farmer was a common one. The threat,

41 Kieval, "Imagining 'Masculinity'."
42 Swart, "'A Boer and His Gun and His Wife'." Swart stresses that the Boer Republican ideal of all men being equal referred to White men only.
43 E.g. Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home." M.G., "Oom Henk."
44 P.A.L., "Mr. J.H. Pierneef." Also see K.K., "You Will Enjoy."
45 K.K., "You Will Enjoy."
46 N.N., "Mr. J. H. Pierneef, the Artist." Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home." P.A.L., "Mr. J.H. Pierneef."
47 N.N., "Mr. J. H. Pierneef, the Artist."
48 Du Preez, *Africana Afrikaner*, p. 73. Also compare Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity."

too, was regularly articulated as illustrated in the articles by Lewis and Te Water quoted above. In addition to the threat of the land itself, however, an additional threat was perceived to be posed by other peoples inhabiting the land. In a 1945 article, a *Pretoria News* journalist first describes Pierneef's ownership of the land he inhabited:

> He has always loved Pretoria; here he has made him [sic] home for many years. At one time he lived in a queerly-shaped house on the outskirts of what are known as the northern suburbs. 'Oom Hendrik' loves the wide, open spaces, and there he was lord and master over what was nearly a block erven.[49]

Then, however, he describes how Pierneef's reign was threatened when Pretoria expanded northwards and the artist's house was surrounded by other settlements. He therefore moved his family further outside of the city:

> On a site of what was believed to have been a native kraal he found the atmosphere that appealed to him and there, for a time, he became stonemason. The rough stones of the veld he fitted into a pattern and around a wild gardenia arose his beautiful and comfortable home, 'Elangeni', about six miles east of Pretoria. He had hoped for seclusion for the rest of his life but that, alas, apparently, will not be the case. 'People are again building too near me', he is wont to say these days.[50]

This tale ties in with contemporary Afrikaner fears of being ousted first by British colonists and then by urban Blacks. According to David Welsh's *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, the number of urban Africans grew from 1936 to 1946 by 57% and both the Hertzog government in 1929 and DF Malan's apartheid government in 1948 had largely been successful by the recurrence to *swart gevaar* [black peril] in their election campaigns.[51] The perseverance against this threat was considered one of the famous *voortrekker's* [pioneer's] traits. In line with this, *Huisgenoot* [Housemate] editor JMH Viljoen calls Pierneef "*'n egte Boer*" [a true Boer] in an extensive portrait of the artist on occasion of his 60th birthday.[52] Additionally, in 1952, Pierneef is described in *Lantern*, another government publication, as "the Voortrekker, the scout, through whom we get to know the idealized and ordered beauty of the Afrikaans landscape."[53] Similarly, in his "Farewell to Pierneef" following the artist's death in 1957, John Paris, director of the National Gallery in Cape Town at the time, argues that the struggle for

49 Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home."
50 Ibid. Also compare N.N., "'Die Brandwag' Besoek Pierneef."
51 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, pp. 7, 18, 24.
52 Viljoen, "J.H. Pierneef," p. 33. Also compare Wetherell, "Deur Pierneef."
53 Quoted in Godby, *The Lie of the Land*, n.p.

the ownership of the land simultaneously entitled the Afrikaners' claim to the land and characterised Pierneef's art:

> Men come to a land and conquer it; but only by love, the love of fighters contending with equal fighters — men into land — do they possess it. And having possessed they praise. Pierneef knew this I think. He loved the land, and contended with it, and loved it because he had contended.[54]

2.2 Reception of settler primitivists in the 1920s and 1930s

This chapter and the following one give an overview of the reception of settler primitivists in South Africa between the 1920s and 1960s. In the period from 1920 to 1939, Irma Stern, as pioneer of modernist painting, played the most prominent role in public discussions of settler primitivism in South Africa. A large proportion of the newspaper articles under investigation in the following analysis therefore relate to Stern and her work. In addition, these two decades were shaped, on the one hand, by a defence of the modernist style new to South Africa and, on the other, by an emphasis on Black South Africans as subjects of such modernist art. The defence of modernism largely relied on two topics: transnationalism — the validation of modern artists such as Stern through their success in Europe — and primitivism — the validation of modern art depicting specifically South African subjects through the importance of primitivist ideals in Europe. The following discussion offers examples of these two methods of defence or authentication and relates them to their socio-political context.

2.2.1 Defence of modernist style through transnationalism and primitivism

It is my understanding that the general direction of criticism was shaped by the socio-political context in which artworks were viewed. The transnational perspective taken by the majority of reviewers of Stern's work in the 1920s and 1930s is logical when considering the general focus on Europe in South African culture and politics until the latter's decision in 1939 to support Britain in the Second World War, despite its alleged independence from the mother nation. The two decades were characterised by the negotiations of the governments lead by Jan Christian Smuts (as head of the South African Party until 1924) and JBM Hertzog (as head of the National Party from 1924 until 1933 and then of the United Party until 1939) with the British Empire on the status of the South African dominion. While Smuts and Hertzog both fought for "full recognition of the dominions 'as autonomous nations of an Imperial

54 Paris, "A Farewell to Pierneef."

Commonwealth'," they considered South Africa's membership in the Commonwealth important and useful.[55] Hence, even though South Africa achieved a "constitutional state of complete independence" in 1934,[56] the tight majority vote of the South African parliament to support Britain in the war in 1939 illustrates the country's ongoing orientation towards Europe.

As mentioned above, and as will be further investigated with relation to her self-narrative in Chapter 3, 1920s and 1930s reviews of Irma Stern's exhibitions, too, were influenced by the contemporary concentration on Europe and therefore often stress the artist's transnational positioning. In the criticism of her very first exhibition at Ashbey's Gallery in 1922, journalist and artist Enslin du Plessis contends "that she is strongly under the influence of painters" such as Gauguin and therefore simply a follower of a European fashion.[57] Attacking modernist art, he writes that "it becomes formula ridden and the arbitrary distortion of the human form into shapes as rigid as those of any mechanical rule is not freedom, but an almost slave-like devotion to an ideal."[58] Most of the ensuing discussions of Stern's work, however, refer to European developments in order to defend her style rather than attack it.[59] For example, in 1925, a *Cape Argus* journalist explains that Stern's exhibition "would to-day be considered an excellent exhibition" in Europe but "may cause a little flutter in Cape Town art circles."[60] Stern's friends and promoters Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen regret that this fact meant that a lot of Stern's works "are sent to Europe, where they find a ready and appreciative market."[61] In 1929, they even proclaim that "Stern paints for Europe and America. In South Africa, her birthplace and the inspiration of her canvases, she received but little honor."[62]

In Lippy Lipshitz's reviews, too, his success in Europe plays an important role. For example, in 1936 a *Rand Daily Mail* reviewer stresses that "his record in Paris is exceptional for his work has never been refused and he has exhibited at most of the famous galleries."[63] This clearly served as an authentication of the quality of Lipshitz's work. Interestingly, Bernard Lewis writes in a 1934 discussion of Pierneef's murals at South Africa House in London that "Pierneef, who was born in Pretoria and educated there, studied art in the Rotterdam Academy and in the art-centres of

55 Dubow, "The Commonwealth and South Africa," p. 290. Also see Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, pp. 8–9.
56 Devenish, "Cutting the Apron Strings," p. 318.
57 Du Plessis, "Modern Art at Ashbey's."
58 Similar attacks on Stern's modernist style were published in the *Cape Times* by a journalist who expresses "frank disgust at the general nastiness of the work" and calls it "post-war art degeneracy" and "astigmatic distortions." W.R.M., "An Exhibition of Modern Art." W.R.M., "Modern Art in the City."
59 Also compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 118.
60 W.J.M., "The After Dinner Hour."
61 Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern," p. 764. Rozilda was a pseudonym frequently used by Purwitsky and Van Gelderen.
62 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.
63 A.G.S., "The Arts in Pretoria."

Belgium, Germany and France."[64] While it is true that Pierneef attended classes at the art academy in Rotterdam in 1901 at the age of 15, he never studied in Belgium, Germany or France. This shows that even for the established Afrikaner artist Pierneef a transnational education or career was considered necessary in the 1930s.

Linked to references to their European success in the defence of South African modernists were descriptions of the importance of primitivism for modern art in South Africa. For example, in contemporary reviews of the work of Alexis Preller, it is frequently mentioned that Preller was interested in the influence of West African sculpture on European art during his sojourn in Paris and that he spent two months painting "natives" in Swaziland upon his return to southern Africa.[65] In their 1928 portrait mentioned above, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen, too, explain that Stern's "work is essentially modern, harking back in spirit to the strength and vitality and crudeness of primitive art."[66] In 1936, the *Cape Times* published an extract of British High Commissioner Sir William Clark's address delivered at the opening of an exhibition by Stern in Cape Town. Clark repeats Purwitsky and Van Gelderen's argument but links it to the specifically South African context in which the artist produced her work:

> 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.[67]

The fact that Stern's exhibition was opened by the British High Commissioner again illustrates the close ties to Europe as well as the political interest in the development of a new South African art. Another example of the latter was the opening of an exhibition by Lippy Lipshitz in Pretoria half a year later by HDJ Bodenstein, an Afrikaner nationalist who was then secretary of external affairs and Hertzog's closest adviser.[68] Although generally more sceptical of modern art than Clark, Bodenstein is cited in *The Star* as calling Lipshitz's "departure from naturalism" and "back to forms used by primitive peoples" sincere and courageous.[69] In addition to its importance for European art production at the time, primitivism therefore also offered South African audiences a chance for the development of an own cultural identity based on local specificities. The interest in the latter also resonated in contemporary celebrations of South African history and culture such as the festivities on occasion of the centenary of the Great Trek in 1938 including the cornerstone ceremony of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.

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64 Lewis, "South African Art in London," p. 28.
65 E.g. N.N., "The Arts in Pretoria." N.N., "Private View of Preller's Paintings."
66 Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern," p. 764.
67 Clark, "'Pictures That Satisfy'." Clark's address is also cited in D.G., "Art of Irma Stern."
68 Fry, "Agents and Structures," pp. 297–298.
69 N.N., "Modern Tendency in Art."

2.2.2 Black South Africans as subjects of modern art criticism

In addition to discussions of transnationalism and primitivism, reviews of modern art – and especially of Stern's exhibitions – in the 1920s and 1930s were shaped by an engagement with the "native" subjects of such art. I believe that this can largely be attributed to the changing relations between Whites and Blacks in South Africa during this time. In their essay on fear as a factor in right-wing White politics, Derek du Bruyn and André Wessels argue that "during the 1920s, the nature of white fears changed drastically when fear of anglicization began to turn into a fear of the racial integration" of Black South Africans caused by their increasing urbanisation.[70] They stress that this fear did not only concern right-wingers but was common amongst White South Africans generally and "became a political factor that would influence white voting patterns."[71] As mentioned above, the recurrence to *swart gevaar* in his election campaign for example secured Hertzog's success in the 1929 election.[72] LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker), in her PhD dissertation on the politics of race, gender and nation in Stern's work, contends that in the 1920s, "critics began to associate Stern's work with a change in South Africa's social structure."[73] As an example, she cites a *Cape Argus* critic who, in 1922, considers it "no wonder that the very latest art reflects strongly the social forces of our disturbed and unbalanced times."[74] Berger claims that "from that point forward, Stern's work set the stage for modernism to be coupled with race in South African art criticism."[75] While I agree with Berger on the new importance of the discussion of Blacks to modern art criticism in South Africa, I would like to stress that such discussions were shaped by contemporary stereotypes and served the aim of asserting difference and hence of fighting the threatening racial integration feared so badly by most White South Africans.

Even Richard Feldman, who is usually considered a social critic and communist activist,[76] displays the same stereotypes in an article from the mid-1920s. It is worth quoting a large part of Feldman's article as it is symptomatic of the contemporary perception of rural and urban Blacks and the primitivist ideals determining the idealisation of the former:

> Irma Stern is the first to reveal to us the soul of South Africa's black children. We view the scores of native studies and wonder. Where has the artist seen such childish simplicity, and such unconscious sadness? Is the artist guilty of a tendency to express her sympathy with the native? Why does her impressionism bring out the unfavourable traits in her European models,

70 Du Bruyn & Wessels, "Vrees as Faktor," p. 81. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
71 Ibid., p. 82. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
72 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p. 7.
73 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 75
74 Cited in ibid.
75 Ibid., p. 77.
76 E.g. Ibid., pp. 89–90. Below, "Between Africa and Europe," p. 36. Braude, "Beyond Black and White," pp. 52–55.

> and the simple and good of the native? In the sadness of her European models we read ambition, suffering, hope, despair. In the sadness of her native models (and Irma Stern's native women all have a sad look about them) we behold the desolateness of Africa's wide horizons, the cheerlessness of an African twilight. The Native in his own surrounding is still Nature's unspoilt child with a facial expression that is free of pose. Irma Stern's sketches of the male native are comparatively few, but just as appealing. In the strong face and robust body we see the child. A mind free of care, at peace with nature, content. […] There is, however, just one water colour of a native woman in rags of full European attire. A derelict, an outcast. A product of the wilds of savagery transported in a civilized city. A terrible picture telling unequivocally the story of one part of a strong and healthy race that is deteriorating and degenerating. What a contrast to the native woman in her home![77]

While I do not want to completely discount Berger's argument that Feldman was one of the few White South Africans at the time who "confronted race and class issues head on,"[78] his continuous referral to Black South Africans as unconsciously sad (but at the same time carefree?), natural, simple and good children is replete with racist ideas placing Blacks on a lower stage of intellectual development than Whites. In contrast to Stern's European subjects whom he considers capable of expressing more sophisticated emotions such as ambition, hope and despair, he describes Stern's Black subjects as contently one with nature or equates their fundamental sadness with local, natural conditions such as "the desolateness of Africa's wide horizons, the cheerlessness of an African twilight." Especially interesting is the contrast between rural and urban Blacks in Feldman's description. While "the Native in his own surrounding is still Nature's unspoilt child," urban Blacks are portrayed as derelict, deteriorating and degenerating. The message filters through that Black and White South Africans should occupy separate habitats — Blacks in the wilderness and Whites in civilised cities — and was probably influenced by the widely-spread fear of *swart gevaar*. I would like to stress that, even though she was a proponent of "separate development" as mentioned in Chapter 1, I do not wish to imply that Stern herself was discussing fear of racial integration in her works, but that they were read in this context by contemporaries such as Feldman and others.

In general, Stern's portrayals of urban Blacks are very rare: the watercolour Feldman refers to, for example, is unknown and the only other examples I came across are *The Backyard* of 1925 and *Maid in Uniform* of 1955.[79] As shown in Chapter 1,

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77 Feldman, "Irma Stern." A similar view is presented in Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 47.

78 Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 50.

79 The latter is discussed in detail in Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 123–125. *The Backyard* has been "rediscovered" by the auction house Bonhams on occasion of their South African sale in October 2012.

Stern was more interested in exoticising Black South Africans in line with European primitivist ideals and, accordingly, most of her critics concentrated on her portraits of rural Blacks. Like Feldman, they linked them to the wild African landscape and thus stressed their supposed difference from White Europeans which helped them justify their racist discrimination, oppression and exploitation. In 1924, for example, a *Cape Argus* reviewer writes:

> In these native figures which Miss Stern has painted there is a revelation of dark Africa — the depths of the forest, the beating of drums, the glittering eyes of night. The warm, foetid atmosphere of the African jungle overwhelms you. She has painted not merely the bodies of these natives, but something of their queer, distorted minds.[80]

Purwitsky, too, lays a strong emphasis on difference and separate living spaces in an article for the Jewish *Reform Advocate* of January 1929. Like most of her colleagues, she asserts that "Stern paints natives as no one has ever painted them before" by portraying "them with sympathy and understanding."[81] Stern hence becomes an expert on rural Black life.[82] Purwitsky continues that Stern's Black subjects "still retain that quality of mysterious tranquillity, that supreme indifference to the beholder, which are rather disconcerting to the white man" and concludes that they "want nothing so much as to be left alone."[83] Even though written in primitivist admiration, this description leaves an impression of unease and possibly peril, again tying in with *swart gevaar* campaigns. For other writers, Stern's paintings themselves posed a threat as they challenged contemporary images of "laughing, heedless, joyous, care-free" — and therefore harmless — Blacks.[84] Interestingly, in an article published two years later, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen no longer mention any disconcert but describe Stern's Black subjects as of "simple primitive minds" and "untroubled souls."[85] They hence seem to have decided to subscribe to a more socially acceptable characterisation of Stern's work that probably made it more attractive to mass audiences.

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80 Gamboge, "The Revolutionary."

81 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.

82 Also compare Sinisi, *Irma Stern*, p. 28.

83 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.

84 R.A.N., "Of a Woman Artist," Also compare Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, pp. 46–49. Sachs contrasts contemporary perceptions of the Black South African as "carefree being with neither a sense of the future nor a memory of the past, [...] no integrated emotional life, [...] incapable of a sustained effort either in thought or in action" and Stern's depictions of Blacks displaying "some turbulent inner life" (p. 48). He concludes that "it is perhaps not the romantic memory of the past but the lack of adjustment to the present that makes them look so sad — unless it be the racial memory of the days when their kings ruled in Africa — the days before civilisation had reached their land and sold them into slavery" (pp. 48–49). Claims like these illustrate the ambivalences inherent in primitivist admiration shaped by racist stereotypes.

85 Rozilda, "South Africa's Jewish Artists," p. 10.

Other settler primitivists' work, too, was received in relation to these topics. In an unusually forceful review of an exhibition by Lippy Lipshitz from 1936, the poet Vincent Swart characterises Lipshitz's sculpture as "of destructive awareness."[86] He maintains that "conceiving the native to be the one indestructive [sic] force coming to destroy our civilisation, he [Lipshitz] can express him not as a defeatist fragment but as a full powerful force," articulating "the destructive element in a destructive civilisation."[87] In contrast to this uncommonly political reading, Black South Africans depicted in Alexis Preller's works were discussed under purely formal terms adhering to primitivist ideals. For example, two reviews in 1936 stress the "mystic expressions on their faces" or their "complete forgetting of what this day has been or what to-morrow is to be in the rhythm of the dance," again adhering to the ideal of the timeless "native."[88] Similarly, in a 1930 review of a Maggie Laubser exhibition in Stellenbosch for the nationalist newspaper *Die Burger* [The Citizen], AC Bouman likens the Black South Africans she paints to the nature they are surrounded by while describing them as "joyful like children."[89] Additionally, he stresses the difference between European and South African admiration of Black Africans by contending that "the preference for exotic subjects in some European artists can be a kind of degeneration, but in South Africa, such a love is the most natural and healthiest thing in the world."[90] This possibility of demarcating South African from European art probably also prompted Louise van Rensburg to write in another Laubser review published in 1937 that "it is often stated that the natives, from the point of view of the painter, are the only subjects in South Africa worth painting."[91] On an international level, this is reflected in the British weekly magazine *The Listener*'s coverage of the London exhibition "Art in the Dominions" that only reproduced works showing Black subjects as representatives of the South African section.[92] Within the concentration on primitivism and portrayals of Black South Africans therefore already lies the preparation for the nationalist perception of South African settler primitivists defining the following decades.

2.3 Reception of settler primitivists from the 1940s to 1960s

Art criticism from the 1940s to 1960s was largely characterised by a nationalist rhetoric. As mentioned above, the turning point was caused by South Africa's decision to support Great Britain in the war. As various scholars have pointed out, the

86 Swart, "Lippy Lipshitz's Exhibition," p. 20.
87 Ibid.
88 L.S., "Passion for Colour and Form." L.R., "Young Artist with Promise."
89 Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
90 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
91 Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud Kenmerk En Haar Kuns." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
92 N.N., "Art in the Dominions."

Second World War was "possibly the most important catalytic event in the nationalist mobilisation of Afrikaners."[93] The South African historian Suryakanthie Chetty describes that "the outbreak of the war on September 3, 1939, had a mixed reception in the South African parliament" as the then prime minister Hertzog favoured neutrality whereas Smuts wanted to support the British.[94] While Hertzog believed that a support of Britain in the war would threaten South Africa's unity, Smuts worried that Hitler might want to regain South West Africa and would then present an actual threat to the Union. Backed by a slight parliamentary majority, Smuts replaced Hertzog as prime minister and South Africa joined the British forces in their fight against German imperialism – as the government justified this action to their people. Consequently, Hertzog broke away from the United Party and, in January 1940, founded the Herenigde Nasionale Party [Reunited National Party] with DF Malan, leading to cumulative discussions on a new South African national identity and dissolution from the British Empire.[95] In the process, Afrikaner nationalists became increasingly active and visible while prime minister Smuts was largely absent travelling overseas.[96] It is thus not surprising that the rise in public nationalist rhetoric was reflected in contemporary exhibition reviews, especially when considering the potential artists had for articulating such a new national identity and the role they could play in the process of White settlers' "indigenisation" in South Africa through their focus on "indigenous subjects."

This becomes most obvious in a 1956 government publication containing a text by Deane Anderson, who at the time was art critic for the *Cape Argus*, senior lecturer in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cape Town and member of the Art Advisory Committee to the apartheid government's Ministry of Education, Arts and Science.[97] The foreword to his text concludes that Anderson "offers a lucid analysis of the movements and undercurrents which have led to the present vitality and growth of a truly national style among South Africa's painters and sculptors."[98] Anderson first answers to the common conception that art in South Africa lagged

93 Sapire, "The Prince and Afrikaners," p. 124.

94 Chetty, "'A White Man's War'," p. 303.

95 Du Bruyn & Wessels, "Vrees as Faktor." The latter was only achieved in 1961 through the founding of a Republic. Compare Devenish, "Cutting the apron strings."

96 Barber & Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, pp. 15–16. Also compare Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p. 18.

97 Anderson was born in South Africa but educated in England. He worked as an architect in London, served in the Royal Air Force and returned to South Africa in 1947 where he took a post as lecturer at the University of Cape Town's School of Architecture. In 1962, he became a member of the Bord of Trustees of the South African National Gallery, first as representative of the *South African Association of Arts* and since 1969 of the University of Cape Town. Anderson, letter to Benfield, 1 August 1969.

98 Editor's foreword to Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 1. The State Information Office also published a French translation of Anderson's Fact Paper. Unfortunately, the purpose of this is unclear. Between 1955 and 1959 a total of 67 "Fact Papers" were published by the State Information Office as supplements to the journal *Digest of South African Affairs*. To my knowledge, Anderson's text has not received any attention by art historians in South Africa so far.

behind European art. He concedes that, at first, the "struggling pioneer people" was little interested in culture as it "was occupied with the basic and practical business of remaining in existence" – citing the national myth of the persevering *voortrekkers*.[99] However, he also stresses that the country's youth entailed "qualities very much to be admired and even envied" such as "vigour, a new and uninhibited approach to ancient problems and a certain innocence of vision."[100] To Anderson, the country was in an advantageous rather than inferior position as South Africa benefitted from the current worldwide interest in "primitive" art that placed the latter above European traditions.[101]

Moreover, Anderson argues that, before Stern and Laubser, "African themes were consciously or unconsciously Europeanised" in what was "essentially a Colonial art."[102] After the Second World War, however, "South African artists began to study and to assimilate the true flavour of Africa, no longer as a faintly comic curiosity but as an integral part of the national idea."[103] He calls these attempts "made to enter into the real spirit of the African scene or to investigate the indigenous art which had for so many centuries grown naturally and spontaneously out of the African soil."[104] This art, Anderson claims, had enabled South African artists

> to score over their opposite numbers in Europe; for the latter could only derive their inspiration at second hand, whereas in South Africa the artist is surrounded by superb examples of primitive art, and has only to drive a few miles to be in a landscape where living fossils grow and blossom.[105]

He calls the result "a truly national style" and concludes that "art in South Africa, young, strong and living among the roots of the Primitive tradition which has conditioned the *Zeitgeist* of the present art generation, has little to fear from the immediate future … and much to hope."[106] Anderson's nationalist (and primitivist racist) text offers a good summary of the terms that defined art criticism in South Africa from the 1940s to 1960s and that will be analysed in greater detail below: dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation," South Africa's spirit or soul, the South African soil and the importance of "native" art. Again, there are some overlaps as these themes were employed to serve the same intention: the authentication of a new national, specifically South African art.

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99 Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 1.
100 Ibid., p. 2.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., p. 14.
103 Ibid., p. 24.
104 Ibid., p. 14.
105 Ibid., pp. 24–26.
106 Ibid., p. 26.

2.3.1 Dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation"

As indicated above, the dissociation of Europe was an important step in the nationalisation of the South Africa art scene. It presents a clear break with the transnational perspectives governing the 1920s and 1930s presented earlier in this chapter that used artists' successes in Europe for their authentication in South Africa. In general, it can be observed that first manifestations of the process of nationalisation surfaced in reviews of Afrikaner artists' works in the mid-1930s as forerunners of the wider nationalist reception of South African art that gained momentum following the South African participation in the Second World War. Thus, nationalist discourses moved from the more right-wing Afrikaner part of South African society to its middle and then also affected discussions of English, Jewish and other artists.

I would like to examine three examples of such forerunner reviews that dissociated Afrikaner from European art pursuing a nationalist agenda. In a 1935 article for *Die Vaderland* [The Fatherland], Matthys Bokhorst, a Dutch immigrant who would become director of the Michaelis Gallery and of the South African National Gallery in the 1960s, disparagingly writes about Alexis Preller that "from his work, Europe speaks, not South Africa."[107] Bokhorst is in search of a distinctly South African style as praised by Anderson twenty years later. He also criticises that "the Afrikaner Preller" gave his works English titles and that one was "presented here again with an English 'list of pictures'." [108] This illustrates how Afrikaner nationalism was also influenced by anti-British sentiments. In an article of 1937, the Afrikaner politician and Cape administrator JH Conradie's opening address held at a Pierneef exhibition is cited in which Conradie calls Pierneef's work "essentially South African" as "he painted landscapes which could be found nowhere in the world but in South Africa."[109] In a similar vein, Martin du Toit, head of the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria, in his *Vaderland* reviews of the mid-1930s maintains that Laubser's work conveyed "a uniquely South African atmosphere" and was "genuinely national."[110] As indicated above, comparable nationalist reviews of non-Afrikaner artists followed in the 1940s. In 1939, a reviewer of a *New Group* exhibition describes the transition from the focus on European role-models to a new focus on a specifically South African art:

> While the use of European colour and subject matter is still all too evident in some of the work, this will pass as certain leaders reveal with intensity the South African approach to our life and landscape. Admittedly, both the classic and contemporary art of Europe are fountains of inspiration, so London and Paris call with insistence to the South African artist. Let him

107 Bokhorst, "Vollbloed-ekspressionis." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
108 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
109 D.G., "An Essentially South African Painter."
110 Cited in Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," p. 186.

> learn how to paint overseas, then let him find what to paint here amongst his own people.[111]

The latter credo probably aptly reflects the ambivalent approach of the *New Group* to the two poles of transnationalism/ nationalism. In a letter of 7 May 1939, "owing to the present international situation," René Graetz asks Preller's opinion on whether "the New Group as a body [should] offer its services" by assisting the government with publicity such as designing posters.[112] A second letter written a week later reflects that Graetz, Preller and Terence McCaw, who was the only other *New Group* member that had replied to Graetz's query, agreed "that individuals who wish to may offer their services, but not the Group as a body."[113] This implies that the *Group* generally did not oppose nationalist agendas but was not interested in pursuing them as an official body either. The apparent lack of interest in the issue illustrated by the fact that only two members responded to Graetz's poll supports this assumption. Additionally, although the *Group* did not, as a body, seek an alignment with transnational modernism as is often wrongly assumed,[114] they clearly positioned themselves against the obsolete English-colonial naturalism propagated under the regime of Edward Roworth. Overall, as will be further detailed in Chapter 4, their aims were of a structural character rather than related to style or content. Nevertheless, the works of individual *New Group* members were often reviewed from a nationalist perspective.[115]

In the decades following the *New Group*'s formation, the dissociation of Europe and attempts at "indigenisation" of South African artists became more frequent in contemporary art criticism. For example, JF van Staden writes that "Pierneef is as indigenous as his favourite *kameeldoring* [camel thorn tree]"[116] and Preller's work is considered to have "unmistakeably African roots."[117] Johann van Rooyen professes that "Maggie Laubser had become a victorious symbol of an own indigenous culture"[118] and Eddy Sacks emphasises that Walter Battiss "drew his inspiration from the indigenous material of his home country."[119] In a portrait of Lipshitz of 1943, Battiss calls Lipshitz's sculpture born "in the primitive south […] pure and uncorrupt [sic]."[120] Comparing it to European art, he claims that "with increasing strength it stands like David to overwhelm the Goliath that would kill it."[121] Battiss thus indigenises Lipshitz

111 W.W.B., "The New Group. "
112 Graetz, letter to Preller, 7 May 1939.
113 Graetz, letter to Preller, 15 May 1939.
114 This circumstance is elaborated on by Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*.
115 Compare ibid., pp. 77–99.
116 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
117 N.N., "Preller — Golden Boy of Art."
118 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 6. Also compare Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," p. 27.
119 Eddy Sacks, "Walter Battis [sic]."
120 Battiss, "The Sculpture of Lippy Lipschitz [sic]."
121 Ibid.

by attributing his sculpture to the "primitive south" and at the same time considers it superior to European art. Other reviewers further indigenise Lipshitz by listing the indigenous materials he used. Frede Leusoh, for example, writes that "by his preoccupation and constant experiment with South African woods and stones, yellow-wood, silverwood, stinkwood, South African lemonwood, soapstone, malachite, wonderstone, South African onyx, he makes his works deeply-rooted and indigenous."[122] In his comparison of Lipshitz with Henry Moore in the government publication *Lantern*, Rupert Shephard, too, asserts that "Lipshitz's enjoyment of African woods, [...] his feeling for work in ivory, coral, and other local materials; all these relate Lipshitz to South Africa."[123] Moreover, he alleges that

> it was noticeable when a collection of Henry Moore's sculptures came to the South African National Gallery for the Van Riebeeck Festival [in 1952], how hand carved, gentle, and natural Lipshitz's work looked beside the dynamic abstractions and highly polished surfaces of Moore's work.[124]

This meant a great departure from reviewers in the 1920s and 1930s, for whom it was the greatest compliment when a South African artist produced work resembling that of a European master. The superiority of primitivist South African to contemporary European art is also articulated in JFW Grosskopf's monograph on Pierneef of 1945 in which he calls European sculptors "who unashamedly aped" West African wood sculpture, decadent.[125] Pierneef, on the other hand, Grosskopf claims, was interested in "forgotten Busman artists" because their "primitive art expressions had been infallibly determined by the character of South African nature itself."[126] Grosskopf hence sees Pierneef's art to be shaped by the love for his country, South Africa.[127] Very similarly, Colin Legum writes with reference to Stern in 1947: "Hers was not a dissipated Gauguinian urge to 'escape' from the civilisation in Europe, to seek the simple delights of the black-skinned peoples of another culture; hers was a passionate stirring, and urging desire, to transcribe the life of Africa."[128]

The dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation" of settler primitivists hence was considered an important step for a "new national art" by art critics in South Africa. This can be further inferred from the Union's participation in the 1950 "Biennale d'Arte di Venezia" curated by John Paris, director of the National Gallery in Cape Town,

122 Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," p. 38.
123 Shephard, "Lippy Lipshitz," p. 374.
124 Ibid., pp. 374–375.
125 Grosskopf, *Hendrik Pierneef*, p. 18.
126 Ibid., p. 24.
127 This is common in Pierneef reviews. One author, for example, compliments Pierneef's "innate love of the South African veld and the sincerity with which he depicts it." Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home."
128 Legum, "She Speaks for Africa."

with FEJ Malherbe and Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke.[129] The catalogue entry stresses that, while before artists had been very much influenced by European trends, "today, many artists look to their own land and find a great riches of new vitality which they try to employ and interpret, each of them following their own character."[130] The aim of indigenising South African artists by linking them to their specifically South African heritage also received support on an international level. In American reviews of the comprehensive exhibition of South African art organised by the Union government and the *South African Association of Arts* which was first shown in London in 1948 and then travelled to Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Ottawa and finally Washington, the work of Alexis Preller and Walter Battiss received the largest attention as it was considered the most indigenous. For example, Florence S Berryman writes for the Washington paper *The Sunday Star* that "Preller's paintings are arresting, with their African native subject matter," and that she was "outstandingly" intrigued by "Walter Battiss, [who is] greatly interested in the prehistoric and Bushmen rock paintings of his own country."[131] The article is accompanied by a large reproduction of Preller's painting *Basuto Allegory*. A South African *Star* correspondent reports that *The Washington Post*, too, was "particularly impressed by the work of Gerard Sekoto, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller, illustrating its article with a reproduction of Battiss's 'Cattle and Agrets'," and that the *Newsweek* writes that "South Africa is now beginning to look to itself for its greatest inspiration."[132] The fact that these reviews were summarised in a South African newspaper suggests that local art critics were endorsed in advancing White settler artists who appropriated African cultural heritage by such international responses to an art that showed a clear link to traditional Black culture.

The effort of indigenising South African artists remained prevalent beyond the 1960s. For example, in one of the frequent juxtapositions of Laubser and Stern, Van Rooyen stresses in 1974 that Laubser's domestic primitivism characterised her as South African in contrast to Stern, whose exoticism he considers clearly European:

> The 'discovery' by Europe of African and Oceanic art at the turn of the century had led to an over-emphasis of the exotic as an ideal. Maggie accepted Africa and its peoples as an everyday norm. From choice she painted the Coloured people of the Cape, not as exotic creatures of nature, but as fellow beings in whom she perceived her own simple needs. […] She shared her

129 Malherbe was professor of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch and von Moltke assistant director as well as lecturer in art history at the Michaelis School of Art at the time. Von Moltke moved back to Germany where he became director of the newly founded Kunsthalle Bielefeld in 1962. For their collection, he acquired two paintings by Stern, whom he knew well, that also prompted the 1996 exhibition curated by Irene Below and Jutta Hülsewig-Johnen. Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 114. Von Moltke was also part of the committee that decided which paintings to include in the permanent collection housed at the Irma Stern Museum following the bequest of her property to the University of Cape Town. Lipshitz, letter to Feldman, 12 April 1968.

130 John Paris, "Sala LII: Sud Africa," p. 216. (My translation, original Italian on p. 269.)

131 Berryman, "News of Art and Artists."

132 N.N., "South African Art in America."

> high regard for the farm labourer and for labour as an act of piety with such predecessors as the French realist Millet and with Van Gogh. Irma Stern's interpretation of the African tribesman, the Malay and the Indian, on the other hand explored the exotic characteristics of these people from a strictly European point of view.[133]

2.3.2 South Africa's spirit and soul

Another theme shaping the nationalisation of settler primitivist art between the 1940s and 1960s were accounts of its reflection of South Africa's spirit or soul. Richard Feldman had laid down the foundation for this practice in the mid-1920s when he professed that Stern was "an essentially South African artist" because she depicted "the very soul of that which is South African."[134] A decade later he even writes that "the spirit, the very soul of the country, must find expression in the work of a free artist, living in South Africa," claiming that "Stern penetrates into the very soul of things — man, flower, tree."[135] At the root of these tales of South Africa's spirit or soul lay the personification and exoticisation of the country. While the former offered an image of the land being a person that could be subdued and appropriated — becoming most explicit in Feldman's sexualised language — the latter was an aid to the nationalist primitivist project that dissociated South Africa from Europe. As both men were important members of the literary Jewish community and both ardently supported Stern, it is likely that Joseph Sachs made reference to Feldman's two articles when titling his 1942 monograph on the artist *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*. He writes that "the spirit of Africa breathes in the canvases of Irma Stern" that reflect "the African spaciousness and sense of freedom," recapturing "the tropical exuberance of Africa, its luxuriant flora, and the dark denizens that have first peopled this land."[136] Sachs's text is informed by the same intention of appropriation and exoticisation as Feldman's.

From the 1940s, references to South Africa's spirit or soul increased rapidly. The *Mylady* writer Tom Mcdonald calls Stern "the pan-African artist" because "her work has caught not only the colour of Africa but the spirit of the place," revealing "something of the strange soul of Africa."[137] Of Lipshitz, too, it is said that "he expresses South Africa and the spirit of the country."[138] In a statement that also attempts to indigenise the White settler Preller, a *Trek* journalist claims that the painter "is so imbued with the African spirit that one can consider him a European exponent of

133 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 17.
134 Feldman, "Irma Stern."
135 Feldman, "Idylls of the Black."
136 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 7.
137 Mcdonald, "Irma Stern," p. 68.
138 Lewis, "The Sculpture of Lippy Lipschitz [sic]," p. 55.

African Art."[139] Additionally, FEJ Malherbe, professor of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch, describes Laubser's primitivist style as getting down to "the essential, the soul" of things.[140] He ascribes her work "a purely Afrikaans spirit" and considers it "part of the purest indigenous and most original art we have."[141] Similarly, in a text published in *Tydskrif vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [Science and Art Magazine], he stresses that Preller is "*eg Afrikaans*" [truly African/ Afrikaans] as his works articulate the spirit of Africa.[142] In another exoticisation of Africa, Joy Wood writes in an article for the government publication *Lantern* about Preller's mural *Ontdekking* [Discovery] that depicts the discovery of the ocean route to India around the Cape by the Portuguese Bartolomeu Diaz and Vasco da Gama in 1488 and 1498 respectively:

> We get a picture of all aspects of Africa — the damp jungle with a waterfall in the background of the middle panel; the sharply delineated mountains, emphasised by the sabre-like red shapes; the burning desert on the right, lifeless and scorching, with its giant palm trees. Here is the quiet voice of Africa — awesome and untamed.[143]

In a similar personification of the whole continent, Battiss argues that "a great change has come in Southern Africa with the growth of Expressionism, for it seems that some of the new painters and sculptors are able to penetrate and reveal the authentic moods of Africa."[144] Again, Battiss's language is surprisingly similar to Feldman's as he equally subdues "Africa" — with a great ambiguity to what the term actually means for Battiss — to the European settlers' gaze. In a text on Pierneef that significantly spearheads the presentation of 24 South African artists including Laubser, Boonzaier and Stern in the 1959 government publication *Our Art*, Anton Hendriks, too, implies that the artist "penetrated to its [South Africa's] soul or deeper spirit [...] in an effort to reach the authentic soul of the South African landscape, especially, to understand the Transvaal veld from the inside and express it in his own colours and lines with love and sincerity."[145] As in John Paris's Pierneef obituary discussed above, in this case, the submission of South Africa or the South African landscape is linked to love for the country itself. References to South Africa's spirit or soul are hence shaped by ambivalent ideas of sexualisation, appropriation, subjugation, "indigenisation" and love.

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139 N.N., "Round the Galleries."
140 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
141 Ibid.
142 Malherbe, "Erepenning vir Skilderkuns, p. 13.
143 Wood, "Preller Se Magnum Opus," p. 22. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
144 Battiss, "New Art and Old Art."
145 Hendriks, "Jan [sic] Hendrik Pierneef," p. 1. In a similar vein: Bierman, "Pierneef en ons Landskap." Three further extensions of *Our Art* were published in 1961, 1977 and 1993.

2.3.3 South African soil

In *Washed with Sun. Landscape and the Making of White South Africa*, Jeremy Foster argues that

> during the twentieth century, the preoccupation with finding some kind of psychic accommodation with 'the land' became a defining feature of white South African nationhood, an ever-present topic in art and literature, and a recurring anchor of identity.[146]

He further explains that geographical territory and nationhood are so powerfully intertwined "that it is almost impossible to talk about national consciousness in isolation from the physical territory with which that consciousness identifies itself."[147] The result, he argues, is the "reification of the land as icon of nationhood."[148] One pronouncement of such reification were increasing references to South African soil in contemporary art criticism that started in the mid-1930s and received greater importance in the 1940s, especially in discussions of Afrikaner artists. For example, in 1936, Zilla M Silva writes in an article for the *Sunday Express* that Laubser had told her "that in her opinion the South African public is undoubtedly awakening to the existence of an art indigenous to the South African soil."[149] With that, Laubser did not mean traditional African art but settler primitivism, and hence also participated in the project of "indigenisation" of the latter. Foremostly, the citation of Laubser's remark shows the burgeoning demand for a new national art. Ten years later, Norman Herd takes up the artist's words and calls her "a South African, yet a simple child of the soil," emphasising that "her art was, as now, truly representative – the European influences notwithstanding."[150] Similarly, a *Cape Argus* reviewer sees in her exhibition opened by EH Louw, minister of economic affairs, in 1949 the proof that "she is pre-eminently a woman of the soil of South Africa."[151] Once more, the fact that Laubser's exhibition was opened by a government representative shows the political interest in settler primitivism at the time.

In the discussion of works by other artists, too, references to the soil play an increasing role from the 1940s. Eric Allen, for example, portrays Lipshitz in a 1949 article for the *Star* and quotes him saying that every artist "needs to be rooted in some specific soil."[152] In the review of an exhibition Preller held at his studio in 1948, a *Pretoria News* journalist calls the "peasant-art quality" characterising the artist's work "the spirit of the soil from which it grew."[153] The primitivist quality

146 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, pp. 2–3.
147 Ibid., p. 15.
148 Ibid., p. 17.
149 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."
150 Herd, "Maggie Laubser," pp. 63–64.
151 P.H.W., "A Woman Painter of Maturity."
152 Allen, "He Loves Stone."
153 N.N., "Exhibition by Alexis Preller."

of this remark is striking. In the case of Pierneef, however, the importance of geographical territory symbolised by soil is most clearly pronounced. Recurring to the same personification of the country described above by referring to its spirit and soul, Roger Castle stresses the significance of South African soil for Pierneef's work in his opening address at an exhibition by the artist in Johannesburg:

> We, who are interested in the founding of a South African School, maintain that the only way to lay hold of the spirit of this vast sub-continent is to first soak oneself in the soil, to feel oneself filled with and overwhelmed by the great soul of the land, and secondly, to return to the primitives of this land for inspiration.[154]

The close connection between the nationalist desire for a specifically South African art, the physical land and its "natives" becomes obvious in this observation. In his 1945 monograph on Pierneef, Grosskopf, too, pays great attention to the painter's relationship with the South African soil:

> Soil; there is almost a mysticism in the way in which he honours the soil. Out of our own soil comes virtually all our constituents as material beings; to that soil we all return; while the soul of the volk irrevocably bears the stamp of the landscape and the character of the land. We are part of our soil. Much deeper then than the artisan's pleasure in the colours, forms and lines of the landscape, is buried in Pierneef's soul those child-like feelings of adoration for our soil and nature.[155]

In Grosskopf's account, Afrikaner nationalism evoked by phrases such as "the soul of the volk" mixes with primitivist ideals in which Pierneef is described as "child-like" and close to nature. The South African soil offers a point of departure for both. In his obituary for Pierneef, John Paris, too, links the artist's relation to the soil to Afrikaner nationalism and the *voortrekker* myth when he writes that "Pierneef tackled something huge that no one had ever been faced with in painting before; and he tackled it with the modesty of a man who walks over the land on his feet."[156] Paris thus describes Pierneef as the pioneer whose body is connected with the land, who subjugates the land and thereby creates a new national art. Generally, Isabel Hofmeyr explains, White settlers' relationship to soil figured significantly in justifications of land appropriation. She argues:

> African agriculture, for example, was considered derisory largely because it was seen as 'shallow'. Colonial farmers, on the other hand, ploughed 'deeply'

154 Cited in Pretorius, "Biography of JH Pierneef," p. 64. Also compare Van Robbroeck, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 56.

155 English translation of the original Afrikaans provided in Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," pp. 9–10.

156 Paris, "A Farewell to Pierneef."

> and so apparently possessed — and earned a right to — the land in a way quite distinct from African farmers. In the perception of the Native Affairs Department, Africans did not 'love the soil' which under their 'scratching' became 'thin' and 'bodiless.' Europeans, on the other hand, practised 'good husbandry' and made the soil 'thick' by adding manure and fertiliser.[157]

2.3.4 "Native" art

The importance of the South African soil was closely linked to that of the culture of the alleged "Primitives of that soil."[158] One of the earliest tributes to this culture is Roger Castle's 1925 article "The art of the Bushman." Extremely unusual for the time but clearly taking a nationalist approach to art, Castle writes:

> My opinion, backed by the opinions of some of the younger painters working in this colony is that if a South African School of Painting is to be brought to birth, then the attention of the pupils and disciples of that school must be focussed on the Bushman. Whenever a new school has been formed, in recent years, the two main founts of inspiration have been, firstly, the Soil in which the Master and his Disciples have taken root. […] Secondly, one must turn to the Primitives of that soil for the first inspiration. Here in Africa we have these two foundation stones looming up large and unavoidable. Africa herself is strong enough and vast enough to intoxicate, very often to overwhelm. Her Bushmen are the ideal primitives. Their vision and their draughtsmanship sprang straight from this very soil on which our houses, clubs and theatres are built.[159]

The young painters Castle refers to are very likely Pierneef and his friend Erich Mayer. At the end of his article, Castle thanks "Pierneef for the two drawings, which he did direct from the originals, and also for all that I know of the Bushman art" and explicates that "Pierneef's own work shows a strong leaning towards the Bushman use of line, and he is, besides, the only person I have discovered who can adequately reproduce a Bushman drawing."[160] Through his admiration for San rock paintings, Castle thus establishes Pierneef, who appropriated such art, as the possible founder of a "South African School of Painting." He links both to the South African soil and thus nationalises Pierneef's as well as the San's art.

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157 Hofmeyr, '*We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told*', p. 72.

158 Castle, "The art of the Bushman."

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid. Curiously, later art historians such as Esmé Berman and Alexander Duffey established that Pierneef had visited rock art scenes for the first time in 1936. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 223. Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 24. As mentioned earlier, his 1920s copies were based on George Stow's and others' more than liberal tracings.

Castle's text can be considered a forerunner of the discussion of "native" art as it took until the 1940s for the appreciation of traditional South African art to reach public interest and for it to be linked to contemporary settler art. Lipshitz and Dronsfield, for example, in 1941 organised an exhibition of "African Native Art" at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in order to raise awareness of these national cultural assets.[161] In the contemporary press, too, such an awareness began to rise. For example, in 1945, gallery owner and arts patron Joan Harrison regrets in a *Trek* article that, although "Battiss is a great authority on Bushman painting," "his ordinary work is not more affected by his contact with rock-painting and that we only see a handful of experimental work, carefully segregated from the rest, in which he allows the influence of African art to dominate."[162] In the review of a 1946 Preller exhibition that the reviewer strangely considers "Mainly for Women," the artist is described as "essentially a South African artist as much of his work is inspired by Native art and life."[163] Reviewing the exhibition of South African art at the Tate Gallery in London for the British weekly *Time & Tide* in 1948, Maurice Collis laments that the show was not a "reflection of native Africa" as expected by British audiences.[164] In line with his South African colleagues cited above, he contends that "there can be no real vital South African art" until artists "identify themselves more directly with Africa."[165] Collis claims that "the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz has led the way" as his four exhibits "are not sculptures of Africans by a European, as are Kottler's, but the heart of Africa is in them."[166] All of these reviews illustrate the importance of the influence of traditional Black South African art on contemporary settler artists, especially for the development of a national art that was considered specifically South African.

In "A pen picture of Jacob Pierneef," JF van Staden in 1947 stresses the uniqueness of San rock paintings that "you cannot confuse [...] with any other art in the world" and maintains that, following their example, Pierneef "strives to portray the titanic features of nature with few colours and simple lines."[167] The potential of this endeavour for a national South African art is rendered obvious when Van Staden explains that, "although his has been an important contribution to the advancement of a South African painting style, Pierneef humbly says that he only wants to help encourage a style that will be known universally as typically our own."[168] Most of these texts are shaped less by an actual admiration for the art produced by Black South Africans than by the potential held by its appropriation for a White national art style. In this vein, Grosskopf describes the "strangely kindred artistic feeling" of Pierneef and "the primitive South African artist" but is eager to clarify that Pierneef "was not primarily interested in those races, as such; the fundamental thing for him was that,

161 Lipshitz, "Introduction."
162 Harrison, "Pretoria Painters," p. 23.
163 N.N., "Mainly for Women."
164 Collis, "The Tate and Other Exhibitions."
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
167 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
168 Ibid.

to his firm belief, these primitive art expressions had been infallibly determined by the character of South African nature itself."[169]

Such discussions therefore differ from those of rural Blacks of the 1920s and 1930s as they concentrate on the art of Black South Africans rather than on their lives and social conditions. They also differ from 1920s and 1930s allusions to primitivism as those centred on the European appropriation of African art rather than on specifically South African traditions such as San rock painting or Ndebele murals as it became common in the 1940s to 1960s. In "Ten South African Artists and the Primitive Revival," Deane Anderson thus writes about the White South African primitivist that

> not only is his whole vast country one of the world's greatest picture galleries in stone of Primitive art, but he is also surrounded by living people of the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages who still practise the arts and crafts normal to their stage of historical development.[170]

The racism and degradation of Black South Africans inherent in these remarks is striking. Consequently, Anderson considers it not only unproblematic but admirable that the work of the ten settler primitivists discussed in his article shows "how a sensitive artist can turn the possibilities of a local tradition to his own ends."[171] Like his *Fact Paper* for the State Information Office, Anderson's *Studio* article also highlights the contemporary meaning of the word "primitive" that was used to refer to African art appropriated by artists in Europe at the beginning of the century or to the San – but not to Black South Africans, who were instead labelled as "natives" and later also "bantoes."[172] The San, unlike Bantu-speaking peoples, were not perceived as a contemporary reality – a people that had a claim to the land – but distant forebears whom White settlers could idealise as "noble savages."

2.4 Other primitivist terms featuring in 1920s to 1960s art criticism

Further terms determining the primitivist discussions of settler art in the first half of the 20th century, that are less easily connected to any political developments, are 'truth', 'essentiality' and 'childhood'. Admittedly, those topics feature frequently in art reviews, irrespective of the style, nationality or time-period of the artist discussed. However, they play an especially important role in reviews of settler primitivist

169 Grosskopf, *Hendrik Pierneef*, pp. 18, 24.
170 Anderson, "Ten South African Artists," p. 70.
171 Ibid., p. 92.
172 Examples discussed in my text that testify to this use of the word "primitive" are Du Plessis, "Modern Art at Ashbey's." Castle, "The art of the Bushman," pp. 1–2. Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern." Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 11. Grosskopf, *Hendrik Pierneef*, pp. 18, 24. Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, pp. 24, 26.

exhibitions in South Africa. This is due to the fact that supposedly unadulterated perception and representation were at the core of the primitivist project that idealised the uneducated — and therefore unspoilt, natural — approach of the child, autodidact or "primitive" artist. This is reflected in the regular references to truth, essentiality and childhood at the time. In some reviews, the word 'truth' is even spelled with a capital T. For example, a *Rand Daily Mail* writer cites Lipshitz's friend and supporter Wren-Sargent who maintained that Lipshitz's knife was "stripping off the clinging exterior of his subjects and presenting them as they are, delving into their very souls to find the Truth."[173] As a result, he is quoted, the artist's sculptures were shaped by "this honesty, this sincere search for Truth."[174] In his portrait of Pierneef published in the first edition of the Afrikaner art magazine *Nuwe Brandwag*, Anton Hendriks stresses the importance for (especially Afrikaner) artists of "being true to themselves" and "true to their people" in order to create their own national art.[175] He alleges Pierneef as an example of this. Norman Herd, too, emphasises that Laubser painted her South African subjects "with insight and truth."[176]

Describing settler primitivists' works as depicting truth on the one hand served as a legitimation of their work and on the other gave further weight to racist ideas of difference between the paintings' and sculptures' White beholders and the Black or Coloured individuals they depicted. Thus, the equation of art and truth also featured prominently in JH Viljoen's foreword to the Ministry of Education, Arts and Science's catalogue for the arts section in the South African contribution to the "Rhodes Centenary Exhibition" in 1953. The exhibition was held at Bulawayo Park in today's Zimbabwe in order to celebrate the birth of Cecil John Rhodes — but really to perpetuate the founding myths of the British Crown colony Southern Rhodesia.[177] The arts exhibition was organised in collaboration with the *Southern African Association of Arts* (headed by Deane Anderson), the National Gallery in Cape Town (headed by John Paris) and the Johannesburg Art Gallery (headed by Anton Hendriks). Viljoen stresses the importance of the arts for tinting "the enormous victories of science and technology which so vividly characterise our times […] by spiritual elevation and character building."[178] He then quotes the British poet John Keats, summarising that "art is truth — 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', but it is a much deeper truth than the truth of reasoning; it is the truth of the sense described as wisdom; this is the acme of our cultural possessions."[179] Viljoen concludes that

> it is for this reason that for the past number of years this Ministry has increasingly been paying attention to the promotion and encouragement of

173 A.G.S., "The Arts in Pretoria."
174 Ibid.
175 Hendricks [sic], "Beskouing," p. 64. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 270.)
176 Herd, "Maggie Laubser."
177 Compare Shutt & King, "Imperial Rhodesians."
178 Viljoen, "Foreword," n.p.
179 Ibid.

> the arts, which together with all other educational efforts are so essential in personality development.[180]

In addition to such equations of art and truth and righteousness, phrases relating to essentiality were employed in order to describe the close relationship between settler primitivists and the South African nation, often in conflation with the country's landscape. In addition to being part of the process of "indigenisation," the "essentially South African" quality attributed to their art meant a nationalist appropriation of the latter. Both Stern and Pierneef were repeatedly termed "essentially South African" painters by different journalists.[181] In the case of Maggie Laubser, this attribution becomes even more significant. It is possible that, since her domesticated farm scenes or still lifes were not as iconically South African as Pierneef's depictions of the veld or Stern's portrayals of "tribal" Blacks, art critics were at even greater pains to assert the specifically South African nature, and hence indigeneity, of Laubser's art. For example, in an exhibition review published in the *Star* in 1949, her work is described as interpreting "the essential beauty of South Africa."[182] In a 1965 "Tribute" to Laubser, a *Pretoria News* journalist writes that she "revealed the essence of the Cape in her expressionist manner, simplifying until only the essential was retained."[183] Similarly, Johann van Rooyen attests in his Laubser monograph that "above all, she was hailed for the essentially South African spirit of her paintings. Maggie Laubser had become a victorious symbol of an own indigenous culture."[184]

As mentioned above, references to childhood were another common trait in discussions of settler primitivists' works that were themselves informed by primitivist ideals of unadulteratedness and subconsciousness. In the State Information Office publication cited above, Deane Anderson purports that the relative youth of the South African nation renders a great advantage to the country's art "in the present stage of world art development, where the 'innocent eye' of the child, the unsophisticated and the primitive are admired (and even imitated) as never before."[185] This "'innocent eye' of the child" is hence evoked when art critics explain how the settler primitivists' art under discussion was informed by childhood experiences. Similar to the employment of the terms 'truth' and 'essentiality', references to childhood thus lent authenticity and validity to the works reviewed. Additionally, as described at the beginning of this chapter, it was an important narrative that the artistic "genius" was discernible already from childhood.[186] In his Stern portrait published early in her career, Richard Feldman therefore cites Stern telling him that her "early childhood was spent on the highveld. Its vast largeness was one of my first impressions of

180 Viljoen, "Foreword," n.p.
181 E.g. Feldman, "Idylls of the Black." D.G., "An Essentially South African Painter." D.L.S., "Irma Stern."
182 N.N., "Maggie Laubser Exhibition."
183 N.N., "Tribute to Cape Artist."
184 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 7.
185 Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 2.
186 Also compare Schade & Wenk, "Inszenierungen des Sehens," p. 356.

this world so full of beauty — stretched of yellow plains with blue, blue sky above, and the dark figures of natives forming silhouettes against its transparency."[187] This citation was supposed to show that Stern's subjects and feeling for colour were predefined in her early childhood. Similarly, Joseph Sachs, in *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, claims that "Stern was able at an early age to enter into the spirit of native life, to study their manners and customs, their primitive mode of life and their childlike natures at first hand."[188] He stresses that her art "was really a realism resting on the sound foundation of an experience that shaped her reactions as an artist since early childhood."[189]

In his "Profile on Lippy Lipshitz," too, Sachs recurs to the myth that Lipshitz's destiny to become a free-thinking artist already became apparent in his behaviour as a child. He holds that, in Cape Town, "Lipshitz first learned to find form in Nature" due to his childhood fascination with "the sphinx-like mountain with its air of knowing mystery" and the "divine sculpture in its rugged cliffs."[190] Sachs attempts to convince the reader that the stone of the mountain's boulders and the wood of the trees growing on its slope presented Lipshitz with his future materials as a sculptor. Disregarding the fact that the young Lipshitz had intended to become a writer, he exaggerates that, while he was on the mountain,

> destiny loomed on the horizon, steep and insurmountable, but one prayed to God and felt His presence and immense power, secure in the certitude that one would do great and beautiful work, and neither adversity, nor the envy of men, would extinguish the flame that flickered fitfully in this grey dawn of life.[191]

Opposing Sachs's emphasis on the importance of the Cape, Bruce Arnott, in his 1968 monograph on Lipshitz, sees the sculptor influenced by his early childhood at the side of "his grandfather, who was bookbinder, painter and woodcarver in the Lithuanian village of Plungian."[192] His grandfather, Arnott argues, worked in "the tradition of Jewish ceremonial art" and he consequently considers Lipshitz's sculpture largely shaped by this tradition.[193] As Lipshitz left Plungian, or Plungė, with his mother at the age of four, Arnott sees Lipshitz's destiny to become a sculptor to have been predetermined even earlier than Sachs professes.

In contrast, for Pierneef childhood memories are not considered to have been as important since he grew up in Pretoria and not on the veld, his famous subject as an adult artist. In order to compensate for this, Pierneef is himself often described as a

187 Cited in Feldman, "Irma Stern."
188 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 45.
189 Ibid.
190 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.
191 Ibid., p. 6.
192 Arnott, "Introduction," n.p.
193 Ibid.

child. Bernard Lewis, for instance, refers to his "sophisticated 'child-like' technique."[194] Van Staden states that "that naturalness so often suppressed in the modern child has not only been preserved in him but that it has steadily grown" as "he is a child of nature."[195] Anton Hendriks, too, maintains that "most people soon pass the stage of childlike interest in nature and before long little remains of it, but something of the child remains with an artist, and Pierneef always retained the rare gift of seeing the world through the eyes of a child."[196] In the case of Maggie Laubser, both childhood experience and similarities between the grown woman and a child are significant for her reception. As this topic ties in with the contemporary image of the *Neue Frau*, however, the special importance of childhood and childishness for the self-portrayal and reception of Laubser is described in more detail with reference to female stereotypes in Chapter 3. Mentions of childhood in Boonzaier reviews were already examined with relation to artists' myths at the beginning of this chapter. Nonetheless, in addition to common narratives of childhood "genius," reviewers also considered childhood experiences formative for Boonzaier's primitivist interest in Coloured communities. For example, in an article for the government publication *South African Panorama*, Jenny Basson asserts that "from childhood he roamed the streets of the Malay quarter and the twisting paths of District Six, sketchbook and pen in hand," and quotes Boonzaier explaining that "street scenes and old walls have always enchanted me. […] There is something romantic in the old mosques and the colourful buildings. […] I think Cape Town is the most beautiful city in the country."[197] Again, childhood memories are linked to patriotic feelings here.

2.5 South African settler primitivism and social criticism

It has already become discernible in the preceding discussions that social criticism played a changing role in South African art criticism between the 1920s and 1960s. While it fed into reviews of Stern's and Lipshitz's earlier portrayals of Black South Africans, it no longer featured in the period of increasing political interest in primitivist art from the mid-1940s. As mentioned above, in her PhD dissertation of 2009 that was published in book form in late 2020, LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker) shows how, from the early 1920s, South African critics considered Stern's work to reflect the changing social structures and unbalanced social forces of the time.[198] Berger argues that "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."[199] In 1926, Richard Feldman, in his article on Stern quoted at length above,

194 Lewis, "Simplification and Decoration."
195 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
196 Hendriks, "Jan [sic] Hendrik Pierneef," p. 1.
197 Basson, "Tribute to Gregoire Boonzaier," p. 22.
198 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 75.
199 Ibid.

describes Stern as an artist aware of the "many social and cultural changes the 20th Century brought."[200] In a similar manner, but extremely unusual for the time, the socialist journalist and general secretary of the Labour Party Colin Legum compliments Stern on the social criticism he perceives in her art in 1947.[201] Legum writes in a rather ambivalent concurrence of criticism of and adherence to primitivist ideals:

> Soon she was to find that her youthful visions of 'brown people living a happy life in close touch with their soil, beautiful in their primitive innocence' were not as 'happy' and 'innocent' as they appeared. Her work brought her sharply into contact with their unhappiness and frustration; of souls simmering with resentment under the unfair and repressive laws of their European overlords. The effects of the conflict between European and primitive civilisations, of modern and ancient cultures, were too unmistakably present for so keen a student of human nature to miss. Her social consciousness was awakened and developed rapidly with her art. […] It is true that Irma Stern did find her innocent, happy Africans in their natal land — but that was only when she penetrated deeper into the interior of Africa and found her subjects comparatively unmolested in their natural surroundings, living as they did before the Arab slave-trader invaded the Continent of Africa, followed by the white commercial exploiter and the modern industrial appendages of expanding imperialisms.[202]

This was, however, an extremely rare stance on Stern's portrayal of Black South Africans. Even Feldman, almost ten years after his first appraisal, revokes his earlier assessment and declares that "Irma Stern is no social artist."[203] Unfortunately, he does not enlighten his readers on what changed his judgment. Whereas Feldman still greatly appreciates Stern's art and artistic achievement, though, the writer and art critic Uys Krige in a published letter to the *Cape Times* editor of 1938 not only criticises her lack of social awareness but also her style in general:

> Miss Stern seems to be a little worried about South Africa not appreciating her. Let me reassure her. She is [sic] very, very poor Pechstein. She knows less about natives — I mean their souls, not the colour of their skins, their beads, knob-kerries or the arrangements of their kopdoekies [head scarves] — than I about that amiable old buffer on the top of the moon. She uses them — and she hardly paints other human beings — only for their

200 Feldman, "Irma Stern."
201 On Legum's political role see Vigne, "Colin Legum." Shaw, "Colin Legum."
202 Legum, "She Speaks for Africa," p. 20.
203 Feldman, "Idylls of the Black."

> surface value, their decorative qualities. So she not only sentimentalises them but exploits them, artistically speaking.[204]

The criticism of the exploitation of Black South Africans discernible in Krige's and Legum's texts was extremely unusual at the time and does not seem to have had any noticeable echo. In general, however, artists were regularly confronted with the expectation that their art should reflect current social changes — caused by the South African involvement in the Second World War rather than by increasingly systematised racial discrimination. An exception to the latter was possibly Feldman, who clearly makes reference to social injustices when he laments that "our artists, be they writers or painters, still fight shy of the painful and tragic. They still divorce the ugly reality of our social structure from the beauty that remains unspoilt by industrial man."[205] Another exception is presented by Lippy Lipshitz, who, in a letter to his friend Millie Levy of 1939, sneers that, to Gregoire Boonzaier's buyers, "it seems more agreeable to look at his 'Malay quarters' with its pretty colouring & the picturesque representation of squalor and ruins, than to pay a visit to the real Chiappins Street."[206] Lipshitz concludes that

> people seem to be more willing to buy pictures, inconsequential pictures that they can live with, that flatter or vindicate their narrow or disinterested outlook on life and humanity than to buy real works of art that challenge their outlook on life or mock their morals.[207]

This view was taken up by Lipshitz's friend and supporter David Lewis in his influential study of South African art, *The Naked Eye*. Lewis writes that Boonzaier's paintings "are not paintings of the Malay quarter" but "merely derivations of the attitude found in paintings which the Englishman Christopher Wood painted of his Cornwall and French Brittany seaboard villages."[208] He criticises that, like Wood, Boonzaier rejected squalor and saw line and form, patterns, in the derelict houses "and not the sinking and falling of a history and a people who accept their decadence with a

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204 Krige, "Miss Irma Stern's Paintings." *Knobkerries* are traditional weapons. Since then, Stern has regularly been accused of sentimentalising her Black subjects and disregarding their social realities. However, a fact that is never mentioned — probably because she was later endorsed by the apartheid government — is that she was considering leaving South Africa upon the election of the, in her words "savage," nationalist government in 1948. Later, too, she expressed distress about South Africa's racist politics. Compare Gutsche, letter to Stern, 12 August 1948. Stern, letters to Gutsche, 28 December 1948 and 1 December 1954.

205 Feldman, "Idylls of the Black."

206 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 24 October 1939.

207 Ibid.

208 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, n.p.

fatal religious compliance."[209] The racism inherent in remarks such as these was not reflected upon or criticised. In general, Lewis's dismissal of Boonzaier's paintings as "empty shapes" mainly serves to contrast them with Lipshitz's sculptures which he considers violent rather than picturesque – "earth and form moulded into one primal frustrated creation."[210] Other critics such as AC Bouman, too, saw Lipshitz's sculptures to "have a colouring of social criticism."[211] In the opening speech of an exhibition by Lipshitz, Higgs and Dronsfield, JL Gray, head of the Department of Social Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, observes "with special interest the trend in the later work of Mr. Lipschitz [sic] to a human and affectionate realism" that distinguishes him as one of "the makers of a new society."[212]

In 1941, in another letter to Levy, Lipshitz writes with regard to a recent *New Group* exhibition that the exhibiting "artists are escapists" and "have not the courage or the imagination to express the age."[213] In contrast to his contempt for Boonzaier's buyers romanticising social inequalities, however, this later criticism refers to artists disregarding the effects of the war and can be linked to similar critiques of the time. In a letter to Lipshitz of May 1942, Cecil Higgs quotes the *Cape Times* criticism of a recent *New Group* show which bemoaned that "most of the works avoid reference to social change."[214] Higgs relates that, as a consequence, "there was a certain amount of correspondence" that "led finally to a sort of discussion meeting, a mixed brew of artists & laymen taking part, at the Argus one night."[215] As a result, Higgs reports three months later, Le Roux Smith Le Roux and Boonzaier named the upcoming *New Group* exhibition "The Artist looks at Life" in order to counter the *Cape Times*'s assessment "that the artists are either escapists or unconcerned with the war because their works show no marks of it."[216] Since this was a very open title, however, the next *New Group* exhibition was not marked by greater references to social change than the preceding ones. However, the *Cape Times*'s criticism was not echoed in later decades. Art criticism in South Africa simply returned to its earlier approach that art and social criticism were incompatible as art was supposed to show "genius" rather than

209 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, n.p. Martin Bekker later tries to make up for this dismissal of Boonzaier's art as picturesque and accommodating by claiming that "writers like Chekhov, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens and, particularly, Gorky and Zola, sharpened his political awareness," resulting in an interest in socialism. Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 18. Bekker also mentions Boonzaier's financial independence at the time of the Sharpeville massacre, stressing that his choice of subjects was informed by his special "personality" (p. 34). It is not clear why Bekker refers to Sharpeville, but the mention is still striking as no other South African artist's biography discussed here makes any reference to events after 1945.

210 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, n.p.

211 Bouman, "Drie Belangwekkende Kunstenaars," p. 21. (Christina van Heyningen's translation of the original Afrikaans.)

212 Gray, "Text of speech made."

213 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 10 March 1941.

214 Cited in Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 15 May 1942.

215 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 15 May 1942.

216 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 1 August 1942.

"fierce reality."[217] For example, in a review of a Preller exhibition of 1969, Afrikaner nationalist JF Marais writes that "it may be as well to reiterate the undeniable fact that artistic integrity has nothing to do with moral uprightness" but "with newness, freshness, ingenuity, with that element of surprise which takes one's breath away and makes one say, 'Aren't artists the most wonderful people on earth!'"[218] Pierneef is defended by a *Citizen* journalist in a similar way which clearly reflects the more common approach to settler primitivism and social criticism at the time:

> A pioneer like Pierneef (a lone one, as it turned out), painting perhaps to satisfy his deep hunger to somehow evoke a picture of his overwhelming love for this conflicting land of ours, will be scorned by those who expect a kind of political-social comment. Such people will feel that Pierneef failed. […] Undoubtedly he was as aware as the next man of the unfairness of life (that stretches back to perhaps even caveman cultures), but chose to concentrate rather on idealised painting than to even attempt to mirror the problems and difficulties of his times. Herein, unconsciously, lay his strength. […] It almost seems, as Pierneef must have decided, that an artist with an ability to paint wondrously, is better advised to pour love into his canvasses, than to bend his talent around whatever current problems prevail (although he is as aware of them as anyone else), thus producing work that might have delighted socially conscious minds, but would have been far less aesthetically inspiring to others.[219]

2.6 Conclusion

Criticism of settler primitivist art was influenced by different aspects between the 1920s and 1960s in South Africa: by overarching artists' myths; by politically informed approaches that changed from a transnational orientation in the 1920s and 1930s to a clearly nationalist stance between the 1940s and 1960s; by more general concepts relating to primitivism; and by the debate on the degree to which art should contain social criticism. Artists' myths have been relevant for art historical writing and art criticism since Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Looking at the example of Gregoire Boonzaier, it becomes obvious that stereotypical male artists' myths of the autodidact, "genius" child "discovered" by an expert and of the artist as suffering social outsider who reaches fame against all odds were also applied to South African settler primitivists. It is likely that they were intentionally appropriated by critics on friendly terms with the artist in order to give proof and render authenticity to Boonzaier's creative "genius." In the case of the Jewish artist Lippy Lipshitz such

217 Reinhardt, "Stand by for new art shock."
218 Marais, "Alexis Preller," p. 24.
219 N.N., "Wanted."

myths were conflated with stereotypes of the suffering, melancholic Jew and the common Jewish theme of tragedy. Reviewers gave special attention to his years in Paris and his "struggle for daily bread," recalling the cliché of the poor Jewish artist in Montmartre in the early 20th century. At the opposite end of such myths of the misunderstood, suffering artist "genius," stereotypes relating to the Afrikaner artist Pierneef were situated. He was presented as the typically simple, sincere and steadfast Afrikaner with Puritan values who sees clearly and acts deliberately. Additionally, reviews of Pierneef's work often featured references to patriarchal family structures, egalitarian principles and ideas of self-reliance, which were important for Afrikaner masculinity in the early 20th century. Stereotypes such as these also formed part of the myths or master-symbols connecting Afrikaners to the land.

In addition to such common artists' myths, art criticism at the time was shaped by politically informed approaches. A turning point can be seen in the South African decision to participate in the Second World War, marking the change from a transnationalist orientation towards Europe to an increasingly nationalist rhetoric. Analysing reviews of the work of Stern, who as pioneer of modernist painting played the most prominent role in public discussions of settler primitivism in South Africa at the time, it becomes clear that criticism in the 1920s and 1930s was shaped on the one hand by a defence of the modernist style new to South Africa and on the other by an emphasis on Black South Africans as subjects. The former relied firstly on a transnationalist approach that sought to validate modern artists such as Stern through their success in Europe and secondly on the substantiation of specifically South African modern art through the importance of primitivist ideals in Europe. The discussion of Black South Africans, on the other hand, can largely be attributed to the changing relations between Whites and Blacks in South Africa during this time. Fear of racial integration caused by the increasing urbanisation of Blacks made it necessary to establish an alleged difference between White and Black South Africans. The concurrent idealisation of rural Blacks and condemnation of urban Blacks in discussions of South African settler primitivism subversively made a case for separate living spaces of Whites and Blacks. Additionally, within the concentration on primitivist ideals and portrayals of Black South Africans already lay the preparation for the nationalist perception of South African settler primitivism defining the following decades.

The public increase in nationalist rhetoric following Hertzog and Malan's founding of the Herenigde Nasionale Party in January 1940, too, was reflected in contemporary art criticism. The latter was shaped by a special emphasis on the themes of dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation," South Africa's spirit or soul, the South African soil and the importance of "native" art, all of which served the intention of authenticating a new national, specifically South African art between the 1940s and 1960s. The dissociation of Europe through the continuous proclamation that South African settler primitivism was superior to contemporary European art was an important step in the nationalisation of the South Africa art scene. It presents a clear break with the transnationalist perspectives governing the 1920s and 1930s that used artists' success in Europe for their authentication in South Africa. Instead, artists were indigenised, and a "new national art" announced. Through personifying South Africa

by speaking of its soul or spirit, the land was imagined to be a person that could be subdued and appropriated. Such allusions to South Africa's spirit or soul were shaped by ambivalent ideas of sexualisation, "indigenisation" and love. The "indigenisation" of settler primitivists was further advanced through references to their alleged bond to the South African soil that was most significant for discussions of Afrikaner artists. The soil symbolising geographical territory was closely intertwined with ideas of White South African nationhood. Another important aspect for the development of a new national art that was specifically South African was seen by critics in the influence of traditional Black South African art on contemporary settler artists. Describing what was called "primitive" art as national cultural assets, art criticism was shaped less by an actual admiration for the art produced by Black South Africans than by the potential held by its appropriation for a White national art style. The word "primitive" was thereby used for the San but not for South African Bantu-speaking peoples in order to idolise the former who — due to their precedent disintegration — did not pose any political threat.

Other topics less closely linked to political developments in South Africa but to primitivist discourses in general that regularly featured in art criticism were truth, essentiality and childhood. Describing settler primitivists' works as depicting truth on the one hand served as a legitimation of their work and on the other gave further weight to racist ideas of difference between the works' White audiences and the Black or Coloured individuals that were depicted as different. In addition to equations of art and truth, phrases relating to essentiality were employed in order to describe the close relationship between settler primitivism and the South African nation that was often conflated with the country's landscape. In addition to being part of the process of settler primitivists' "indigenisation," regularly labelling their art "essentially South African" equalled a nationalist appropriation of this landscape. References to childhood were another common trait in discussions of settler primitivism that were themselves informed by primitivist ideals of unadulteratedness and subconsciousness. Similar to the employment of the terms 'truth' and 'essentiality', they lent authenticity and validity to the works reviewed. The question whether South African settler primitivism should include social criticism was a minor but recurring issue in art criticism at the time. While it fed into reviews of portrayals of Black South Africans before and during the Second World War, it no longer featured in the period of increasing political interest in primitivist art from the mid-1940s to late 1960s when reviewers pronouncedly preferred idealised artworks to socio-political comment.

3 SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS AND THE IMAGE OF THE *NEUE FRAU*

This chapter examines the impact of the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] ideology originating in 1920s Weimar Germany on the South African art scene. The focus is set on a text-based analysis concentrating on the reception of the artists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, who both lived in Berlin around 1920. Even though Stern had left Germany for South Africa in 1920, she frequently returned to Berlin in order to exhibit her work or visit her friends and family. She also frequently corresponded with Berlin-based artists such as Max Pechstein or Katharina Heise.[1] Laubser lived in Berlin from 1922 to 1924 before returning to the Western Cape for good. As will be shown throughout this chapter, both women positioned themselves towards the *Neue Frau* image upon their return to South Africa in order to further their careers. It is feasible to discuss this issue within the context of settler primitivism as the *Neue Frau* manifestation in South Africa was specific in that women artists profited from the primitivist idealisation of properties such as intuition, authenticity and proximity to nature customarily ascribed to women. Additionally, as privileged members of a racially segregated society in which the exploitation of Black labour supported the White elite, settler women had a more elevated – and thus independent – social position than their European counterparts. Thirdly, the women settler primitivists Stern and Laubser were able to take advantage of the fact that, upon their return from Germany, the South African art scene was still very conservative, offering an opening for a female avant-garde.

Overall, the *Neue Frau* can be considered a global phenomenon and was coined by European and colonial interactions. In their 2008 anthology *The Modern Girl Around the World. Consumption, Modernity and Globalization*, a research group at the University of Washington comprised of the authors Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong and Tani E Barlow shows how variations of the *Neue Frau*, with locally specific elements, originated in various countries such as France, the US, India, China, the Soviet Union, Shanghai, Australia or Japan.[2] They mainly base their research on print advertising and other forms of consumer culture. Poiger explores racial and colonial constituents of the *Neue Frau* in Weimar and Nazi Germany.[3] She shows how, in the 1920s, changing advertising images depicting *Neue Frau* types together with racialised pictures

1 Compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 108.
2 Weinbaum et al. (eds.), *The Modern Girl Around the World*.
3 Poiger, "Fantasies of Universality?," pp. 321–325.

of Africans referred to imperial issues of racial domination. This already indicates the significance of European and colonial interactions in female stereotypes that will be further discussed below. In an essay entitled "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," Thomas also discusses the influence of *Neue Frau* typologies on Black school-educated young women in the Black South African newspaper *Bantu World*.[4] This does not form part of the following discussion as it exceeds the scope of my project. A comparison between *Neue Frau* manifestations in South Africa's various ethnic groups would, however, be a fruitful point for further research.

In general, this chapter is positioned within the context of feminist interventions in art history aimed at "differencing the canon" that was most prominently advanced by Griselda Pollock, first in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (with Rozsika Parker) of 1981 and then in *Vision and Difference. Feminism, femininity and the histories of art* of 1988 (to which she included a new introduction in 2003).[5] I intend to add non-European perspectives to interventions such as these and show that South African women artists[6] such as Stern and Laubser consciously and strategically set the parameters for their reception within modernist discourses in order to steer their careers to their advantage. They were not, as is usually argued, merely compulsive or passive witnesses but guided by their own agency. In *Vision and Difference*, Pollock describes how "The Story of Art" (as opposed to "stories of art") has structurally omitted women artists from the canon and concludes that "the pluralization of the histories of art is especially significant since it opens out the field of historical interpretation beyond a selective tradition, The Story of Art, a canonical version masquerading as the only history of art."[7] My text is based on the understanding that this pluralisation should also comprise the inclusion of settler women working outside of Europe and North America, a practice that is still not very common as illustrated by Irma Stern's virtually non-existent reception outside of South Africa.

Pollock further argues that, traditionally, "token women are merely offered for re-introduction into a canon" that is "already a gendered and gendering discourse and thus will always position artists who are women as marked, othered, as *women* artists."[8] Despite this criticism, I consciously speak of *women* artists as they were the driving forces in South African modernism and I would argue that the fact that they were women contributed to their success. Additionally, Stern and Laubser can certainly not be referred to as "token women" as they were the main protagonists of South Africa's modernist avant-garde. In line with Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff's approach in *Ästhetik der Differenz* [Aesthetics of Difference], this text does not intend to proof the entanglement of European art history in colonial stories of art but to show

4 Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability."
5 Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. xxxi. Pollock & Parker, *Old Mistresses*.
6 Throughout the whole chapter, this term refers to White women as, due to extreme racial inequalities, women of colour were only later granted access to careers in the fine arts.
7 Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. xviii.
8 Ibid., p. xx. (Pollock's original italicisation.)

ambivalent modes of authorship in case studies discussing colonial women who used their privileged positions in order to transform South Africa's art scene.[9] Additionally, it can be positioned within projects such as Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius and Silke Wenk's publication *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* [Myths of Authorship and Femininity in the 20th Century] that examines traditions and operation principles of artists' myths as well as ways in which women artists have appropriated, reformulated or deconstructed such myths.[10] This chapter pays special attention to the active and strategic appropriation of different myths around art and femininity by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. In line with Curtius and Wenk's project, I do not intend to strengthen myths produced around artists such as Stern and Laubser or contrast them with any supposedly scientific truth but rather show the two women's agency and authorship within such myths.[11]

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part describes the *Neue Frau* as a historical phenomenon in 1920s Germany. In order to get a general understanding of the difficulties surrounding this ideology, I will first discuss current debates mainly dating back to the 1990s, the time which saw the highest interest in women's self- and extrinsic positioning as "new women." This will be followed by contemporary German texts that offer a deeper understanding of the ideologies at work which informed this topos. The second part begins with a description of the South African manifestation of the *Neue Frau* that pays special attention to colonial peculiarities. I then show how South Africa's most prominent artist, Irma Stern, positioned herself within the *Neue Frau* discourse and how she steered her perception in Germany as well as in South Africa. This analysis is based on press cuttings that are discussed in lose chronological order. The third part examines Maggie Laubser's self-portrayal that was based on her accounts of her Christianity, childhood experiences and life on her parents' farm. I then show how the Afrikaner manifestation of the *Neue Frau*, the *voortrekkervrou* [pioneer woman] or *volksmoeder* [mother of the nation], influenced the reception of Maggie Laubser especially in the Afrikaans-speaking press.

While my discussion of the *Neue Frau* in South Africa contains references to Cecil Higgs, who like Stern and Laubser was an important member of the female avant-garde, I do not dedicate a chapter to her. Even though she was engaged in the fight against South Africa's art establishment, she was less interested in shaping a self-narrative and much less has been written on her work than on Laubser's and Stern's. Significantly, when asked by Esmé Berman for biographical details to be included in her *Dictionary*, Higgs declines and answers: "I don't, you know, believe much in biography – 'these particulars are not my measure.'"[12] However, I would like to stress that this refusal of a self-narrative is still noteworthy as it is likely to have caused the interest in Cecil Higgs to be surprisingly low in South African art historical writing when compared to other women pioneers. This is especially striking when

9 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 9.
10 Wenk, "Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit," pp. 12–13.
11 Ibid., p. 17.
12 Higgs, letter to Berman, 27 November 1966.

considering that Higgs's abstract work might be regarded more controversial than Stern's and that Higgs was certainly as much an exponent of female emancipation.[13] Additionally, while art historians have widely speculated on Irma Stern's sexual preferences, Higgs's homosexuality has never been mentioned.[14] Contemporary reviewers furnished her work with stereotypically feminine attributes such as subtlety, intimacy, love and sensitivity.[15] AC Bouman, one of her greatest supporters, for example, writes in 1943: "Her feminine nature does not allow a grievous charge to rise from the portraits of underprivileged individuals. The portrait seems more like an act of consolation, as if the artist's sensitive hands were caressing the child."[16] In a similar vein, the influential art critics Deane Anderson and Matthys Bokhorst call her "essentially feminine."[17] There is a clear desideratum for further research on Cecil Higgs.

3.1 The *Neue Frau*

3.1.1 Current considerations of the *Neue Frau*

The image of the *Neue Frau* goes back to a discourse starting in Weimar Germany during the first half of the 1920s. Other definitions exist that root the "new woman" in the late 19th century suffragist movement by focussing on the greater political involvement women were pressing to take on in the British Empire,[18] and that was manifested for example in the founding of the *Women's Franchise League* by Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst in July 1889.[19] However, with reference to the South African art scene, the *Neue Frau* topos originating in Germany shows more relevance since it not only refers to women's new political responsibilities but also includes changing ideals in social life and feminine stereotypes related to marriage, motherhood, profession and leisure activities. Additionally, the *Neue Frau* is also more relevant to South Africa as it was an image largely propagated and spread by the media and

13 For example, she laments in a diary that she had "never met more than a dwarf's handful of women who understand what it is to be absorbed in a pursuit unconnected with the relations between men, women and children." Higgs, undated notebook, n.p.

14 Higgs writes with regard to her cousin, friend and housemate Christina van Heyningen's ignorance of her homosexuality: "J. [John Dronsfield] told me that Douglas says Christina has broken with E.W. because he lives with an Indian boy & is very bitter & tight lipped about homosexuality. But surely she knows about D & me?! But when I consider it – does she? Its [sic] almost incredible she shouldn't but it is possible. People watch their steps to an […] extent with her. I never remember launching on it with her, as I avoided many other stings." Higgs, diary, 2 June 1949, p. 35.

15 N.N., "Progressive Art in This Country." N.N., "Stimulating Art Exhibition." N.N., "The Art of Cecil Higgs." F.L., "Cecil Higgs." Serton, "Vir die Vroue."

16 Bouman, "Oor Boeke en Kuns." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 270.)

17 Anderson, "Poetry and Technique." Bokhorst, "Paintings in Tune with the Infinite."

18 See Devereux, "New Woman, New World."

19 E.g. Pankhurst, *Unshackled*. Pankhurst, *The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst*.

hence reached an enormous dissemination in contemporary culture. Even though enfranchisement still played an important role as will be seen in discussions of contemporary South African press in the following sections, the cultural dimension had a greater significance for the introduction of the *Neue Frau* into the South African art scene. It was with reference to stereotypes of female artists such as Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser or authors such as Sarah Gertrude Millin that it was usually received. Furthermore, the artists themselves were instrumental in spreading this image.

As Barbara Drescher explains in an essay of 2003, the *Neue Frau* was no absolute term but an idea charged from multiple perspectives.[20] According to Katharina Sykora, this is due to the interrelation of women's life realities and media images of a new type of woman that, constantly reacting to each other, formed the everyday myth of the *Neue Frau*.[21] This means that the *Neue Frau* was partially a product created by the newly emerging mass media following a consumerist agenda and manifesting itself in advertisements, cartoons and photographs published in magazines, in fashion shows, films and revues. However, the topos also incorporated emancipatory motivations as women saw it as an opportunity to break free of old, set and gender-specific patterns.[22] Drescher also convincingly argues that, even though it was intended to spark consumerism, the *Neue Frau* propagated by the mass media was probably based on an existing demand of women in 1920s Germany to escape the restraints enforced on them by their gender.[23] However, "new women" were not able to escape such feminine stereotypes but clung to traditional hierarchies and a supposedly intrinsic femininity.[24] Topoi such as motherhood, inferiority to men, proximity to nature, childlikeness and an emotion-based behaviour still played an important role, as will be shown in more detail in the subsequent analysis of contemporary texts.

It must be noted that, in addition to the consumerist properties of the *Neue Frau* propagating a fairly specific fashion comprised of the so-called *Bubikopf* [bob] hair style, knee-long dresses and skirts, cloche hats, red lipstick, etc., social aspects also played an important role. These social factors for example encompass the increasing visibility of issues related to enfranchisement, professionalisation, birth control and abortion.[25] Since a lot of Germany's male workers and wage-earners were first drafted for the First World War and then often returned injured or not at all, women had to step in to support themselves as well as their families. A lot of them retained their newly found "independence" and after the establishment of the Weimar Republic took on jobs such as typists or switchboard operators which had emerged from the increasing mechanisation. Atina Grossmann shows how this mechanisation and rationalisation prompted by German industrial corporations lead to a "disenchantment" of women's day-to-day activities that were supposed to be dominated by caring love

20 Drescher, "Die ‚Neue Frau'," p. 172.
21 Sykora, *Die neue Frau*, p. 15.
22 Ibid.
23 Drescher, "Die ‚Neue Frau'," p. 175.
24 Also see Barndt, *Sentiment und Sachlichkeit*, pp. 9–10.
25 Ibid., p. 14. Grossmann, "Die ‚Neue Frau'."

and support for children and husband rather than time and resource efficiency or organisational skills.[26] Grossmann explains how this new behaviour posed a threat to traditional ideas of intrinsic femininity characterised by irrationality but at the same time was necessary in German post-war households. The construct of the *Neue Frau* brought a solution to this dilemma: "a New Woman who could sufficiently and lovingly manage the tasks of housework, mothering, sexuality and wage-earning," who "would be thoroughly rationalised and thoroughly womanly, the sought-after synthesis of mother, housewife, and working mother."[27]

The synthesis of mother, wife and working woman is also part of the Afrikaner ideology of the *voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder* that will be discussed in further detail below. This ideology saw Afrikaner women as mothers of the nation and was employed by suffragists in their cause to establish White women's right to vote in South Africa leading up to 1930. Moreover, issues of motherhood and emotionality also played an important role for the *Neue Frau* as artist. Marsha Meskimmon describes how "during the Weimar Republik the increased interest in women as artists began to develop into a 'typology.'"[28] She explains that "women artists were constructed most commonly as 'creative' or 'bohemian' versions of the modern, urban neue Frau manifesting 'feminine' or 'womanly' sensibilities in their art."[29] Women artists hence were an ideal model for showing how *Neue Frauen*, even when seemingly approaching their male counterparts more or less on eye level, still remained different and separate (and ultimately inferior) due to their intrinsic femininity. Hans Hildebrandt's *Die Frau als Künstlerin* [Woman as Artist] of 1928 is a good illustration of this and will be an integral part of the following discussion.

3.1.2 Contemporary texts

One of the earliest influential texts on women as artists in Germany was the art critic Karl Scheffler's *Die Frau und die Kunst* [Woman and Art]. It was published in 1908 as a direct response to the "problem" of modern emancipation and suffragist movements in the German *Reich* [Empire].[30] Scheffler calls these movements for female liberation influential but wrong since nature had created men and women unequally and therefore would never allow happiness for men or women if they gained equal status. For Scheffler, however, no sex was better or worse than the other, but women were simply stronger in their emotional sentiment and weaker in their logical capacities.[31] Men therefore often scorned women for their deficient intellect and saw

26 Grossmann, "Eine ‚neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?," p. 161.
27 Ibid.
28 Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, p. 233.
29 Ibid.
30 Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst*, p. 12.
31 Ibid., pp. 7–12.

them either as servants or as saints but never as friends or companions. These roles arose from women's natural harmony with nature and their child-like state of mind and being. Man, on the other hand, was a creature of culture. He could only achieve short-term harmony through being with a woman (whom he perceived more as a member of a species than as an individual) or through the creation of artworks.[32] As woman already was harmony in her general being, she was incapable of any creative act as well as of really understanding art. She could, however, feel joy in beholding the products of the male urge for creativity. Scheffler concludes that if women, who were the opposite of the male aspiration to artistic "genius," nevertheless forced themselves to produce art, they would violate their own nature.[33] Additionally, he was convinced that art made by women could never be good as women were not capable of being original but only of mere imitation.[34]

Scheffler's text already marks the concepts that will remain important for the discourse on women as artists analysed in the following sections of this chapter: motherhood, harmony, childlikeness, nature, sensibility. It will become obvious in my discussion that these terms remain crucial as they are repeatedly being used to describe intrinsic femininity. While authors employed these characteristics to argue both ways – for and against the eligibility of women to be successful artists – they never questioned the validity of such stereotypes of womanhood and hence stuck to traditional myths of femininity. On the other hand, this gave South Africa's women artists an essential benefit in asserting their primitivist approaches. Erich Ranfft argues that, with the increasing popularity of expressionism, women artists "benefited from their categorisation within Karl Scheffler's male/female dichotomy, for now their instinctive, primitive and 'nature'-based qualities enabled them to contribute cultural and spiritual insights."[35] Similarly, Jill Lloyd writes that "for die Brücke these associations had positive rather than negative connotations, suggesting a life force and an intuitive, 'natural' alternative to the rationalizing and calculating 'masculine' temper of their times" but, in the end, they "reproduced many of the ruling prejudices of their times in a new and 'positive' guise."[36]

Even before Scheffler, in 1905, Anton Hirsch published a text that advocated the right for women to practise the fine arts as he considered those closest to a female "genius" and therefore the most suitable occupation for educated women.[37] He bases his argument on women's supposed superior sensibility and feeling for beauty and even asserts that women artists were not only imitators but sometimes [sic] capable of artistic independence.[38] While Hirsch clearly promotes the education of women, he warns that such an education might lead to reaching the limits of femininity that would for example be crossed if women got involved in politics. They would then

32 Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst*, pp. 14–27.
33 Ibid., pp. 28–33.
34 Ibid., pp. 40–42.
35 Ranfft, "German women sculptors," p. 44.
36 Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, p. 47.
37 Hirsch, *Die Bildenden Künstlerinnen*, pp. 8–9.
38 Ibid., p. 10.

turn into manly women which he finds as gruesome as womanly men.[39] He therefore distinctly opposes women's emancipation when linked to the suffragist movement that was gaining momentum in Germany at the time.[40] Like Scheffler, Hirsch thus denies women true intellectual capabilities that would authorise them to take part in shaping the politics of their country even though he argues that traditional feminine characteristics such as increased emotional capacities allowed some women to occupy positions in the arts on par with men.

Even Margot Rieß, in an article in *Frau und Gegenwart* [Woman and Contemporary Life] of 1927, resorts to these *urweiblich* [proto-feminine] characteristics.[41] In her critique of the exhibition "Das Schaffen der Frau in der Bildenden Kunst" [Woman's Creativity in the Fine Arts] that was shown from May to July 1927 at Künstlerhaus Berlin, she claims that the idea that an exhibition of art by women would be characterised by sentiment, delicacy, compliance and softness originated from a time when women artists were disparagingly charged with physiological debility, and had thus long been obsolete.[42] This was probably aimed at critics such as Scheffler. At the same time, Rieß describes women's aptitude for sharing others' suffering, feeling compassion and knowing/ comprehending through empathy, all of which showed in the motherly or sisterly qualities of their art – qualities that she calls proto-feminine.[43] This shows that even women who would call themselves emancipated and progressive perceived women artists based on traditional notions of intrinsic femininity. A few months earlier, an article was published in *Frau und Gegenwart* on Irma Stern's exhibition at Galerie Gurlitt in Berlin that included a short text written by Stern herself about her encounters with Zulu and Swazi women during her latest travels. It is therefore possible that Stern read Rieß's text, especially since Stern's good friend Katharina Heise's work was also exhibited in "Das Schaffen der Frau in der Bildenden Kunst." This would support my argument made in the introduction to this chapter that Stern was informed about the discourse on women and art in Weimar Germany in which the *Neue Frau* played an important role.

Another influential text, which I have already referred to above, is Hans Hildebrandt's *Die Frau als Künstlerin* [Woman as Artist] of 1928. Overall, it can be considered an appreciation of the work of women artists and includes a long catalogue with images of works in different disciplines. However, already in the introduction, Hildebrandt points out that the reader should not expect the discovery of a female counterpart to a "Lionardo [sic], Michelangelo, Grünewald, Bramante, Cimabue, Rembrandt, Rubens, Phidias" as no woman had ever achieved the highest artistic primal forces nor was it likely that she ever would.[44] Hildebrandt explains that this was rooted in the fact that the dualism of mind and body was unique to man since woman was closer to

39 Hirsch, *Die Bildenden Künstlerinnen*, p. 9.
40 Ibid., p. 8.
41 Rieß, "Vom künstlerischen Ethos," p. 10.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 8.

nature and thus possessed an overall unity. Yet, this could still enable her to produce great art.[45] For Hildebrandt, every woman was practising a primitive form of art when managing to at the same time become the best housewife, mother and social helper while making her outer appearance as attractive as (or sometimes even beyond what) nature would allow her.[46] When it came to actual artists, he thought that women's creativity was strongest when it emerged from a certain *Nichtkönnen* [inability] or *Nichtwissen* [unawareness] that had a quality also exhibited by "primitive" people or children.[47] He considers this a "primitive" artistry that was unconscious and indistinct and which highly relied on the use of colours.[48] These remarks render obvious that nature was still the defining character of such a "feminine" art. It also shows, again, how women artists could profit from the increasing interest in primitivism in the early 20th century.

In general, Hildebrandt was a strong advocate of the emancipation movement in political, juridical, social, academic and artistic terms: he writes that men had traditional power but women an idea and that ideas were always stronger than power.[49] He thus predicts a victory of the women's emancipation movement in various respects. Even though he expresses the certainty that even emancipated women still wanted a strong partner they could look up and subordinate themselves to, it was not a big problem if they did not find such a partner since the "new women" now had the right to get educated, vote, choose a profession and remain single.[50] This idea resonates with South African conceptions of modern women in the 1920s. An example of this is the description of the "superior girl" by art critics and educators Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen, close friends of Irma Stern's, that was published in the *Cape Argus* on 23 April 1927, one year before Hildebrandt's text.[51] In this article, the authors explain that clever, cultured and knowledgeable women usually remained unmarried as they considered their careers more important than love affairs. They describe "ordinary" girls as queens of the race as they were the ones who found husbands and started families, acquiring the crown of womanhood in becoming mothers. However, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen diverge from Hildebrandt's narrative when they conclude that all "superior girls" at a later age regretted not having had children and that this was a fate they had to suffer because men had not yet learned to think of women in terms of equality.

In direct response to this article, an author whose name is abbreviated to IAH counters that marriage was an instinct common to all women and that, therefore, the reason for the "superior girl" to remain unmarried was not because she did not want to marry but because she took marriage more seriously than others and could not

45 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 8.
46 Ibid., pp. 12–13.
47 Ibid., p. 24.
48 Ibid., pp. 31, 33.
49 Ibid., p. 106.
50 Ibid., p. 107.
51 Rozilda, "The Superior Girl." As mentioned above, Rozilda was a pseudonym used by Purwitsky and Van Gelderen comprised of their first names.

find an intelligent and cultured spouse who would be a suitable equal.[52] This shows that debates on emancipated womanhood in South Africa were similar to those in Weimar Germany and often centred around notions of partnership and motherhood. However, in contrast to the three South African authors who refer to a more or less autonomous and self-determined female reality, Hildebrandt argues that the *Neue Frau* was a result of male desire: since man in modern times needed a friend and companion more than a servant, this was what women were adapting to become. To him, therefore, despite an increased independence, women's art accompanied men's art, women's art lived off of men's art.[53] In the discussion of the perception of Irma Stern's art at the time, it will become clear how this stance was shared by other critics – in Germany as well as in South Africa.

Hildebrandt's traditional and sexist framework for analysing women's art becomes most obvious in his descriptions of the work of the artists Käthe Kollwitz, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Gabriele Münter and Marianne von Werefkin. Interestingly, these (mainly German) artists, especially Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker, were often used as examples in contemporary, as well as later, discussions of artworks by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. Hildebrandt describes Kollwitz as an apolitical painter who was using her motherly, feminine kindness to paint workers as people rather than raising awareness of class conflicts.[54] Obviously, this interpretation diametrically opposes the way Kollwitz's socialist works are usually being interpreted today.[55] About Modersohn-Becker he writes that her works were characterised by an inability in academic terms that gave them a lovely and pure quality. He describes how her works, that always portrayed a state of being rather than an action, emerged directly from her soul.[56] Karl Scheffler, too, describes woman as personifying an eternal state of being and man as personifying willpower.[57] Hildebrandt continues that Gabriele Münter accompanied Wassily Kandinsky for a while but was ultimately unable to follow him into the realm of abstraction and that Marianne von Werefkin's works, even though they showed a powerful visionary strength, were only half as radical as those created by Alexej von Jawlensky in the studio next door.[58] These classifications of the works of female artists make clear how, even in a eulogy on women as artists, authors of the time were not able to overcome stereotypes of intrinsic femininity that also determined the ideology of the *Neue Frau*. It also shows how the discourse on the *Neue Frau* was mainly shaped by male voices and, as evidenced in the case of Margot Rieß, asserted and further developed by women.

These contemporary texts form an important basis for the ensuing analysis of South African newspaper articles and other press items relating to ideals of intrinsic femininity and the *Neue Frau*. They illustrate the importance of terms such as

52 I.A.H., "The Superior Girl."
53 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, pp. 108–109.
54 Ibid., pp. 116–117.
55 E.g. Seeler, *Aufstand!.* Papenbrock, "Käthe Kollwitz." Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought*.
56 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 121.
57 Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst*, p. 26.
58 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 123.

'motherhood', 'harmony', 'colours', 'childlikeness', 'nature', 'purity', 'simplicity' or 'sensibility' for the reception of the work of women artists in and following the 1920s. The following discussion will draw upon these texts and further explain their relevance for the reception of the South African modernists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser.

3.2 Irma Stern in the role of the *Neue Frau*

3.2.1 Particularities of the *Neue Frau* in the South African art scene

The *Neue Frau* took on an interesting part in the South African art scene of the late 1920s to 1950s, as issues surrounding this myth gained momentum in the press at the same time as women settler primitivists prompted the change from the English-derived and, by then, obsolete prevalence of romantic realism to modernist artforms. In 1944, the artist Johannes Meintjes writes that "the role of women in the history of South Africa is remarkable in many respects" as "in comparison with the small population, few other countries can claim the same number of women artists."[59] There are various reasons for the fact that it was indeed women who forced this change. Firstly, it was women artists who first started working in modernist fashions. This means that there were no male stereotypes associated with modern art production that to a South African audience was a complete artistic revolution – decades after it had entered the artistic mainstream in most European countries. Therefore, South Africa's women modernists did not have to justify why women could be part of a male-dominated avant-garde but instead filled the gap by forming a female avant-garde. The South African art critic, scholar and artist Marion Arnold explains how women artists benefited from the circumstance that the discourse on modernism in South Africa centred on issues such as personal feeling and individual choice.[60] As was described in detail above, these terms played an important role in contemporary characterisations of modern women in general. The discussion of contemporary press on Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser will give examples of how the supposed feminine nature of their artwork tied in with contemporary primitivist ideals and greatly benefited these two artists' careers.

It is also fertile to consider the special position of women in the (former) colonies. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff argues that, in Weimar Germany, many women enthusiastically supported colonialism as a space for emancipation since it gave them the possibility to transgress traditional gender roles.[61] A lot of women who were influential in revolutionising South Africa's art scene were indeed first or second-generation settlers from Europe: Irma Stern's parents were German immigrants, Hilda Purwitsky came to South Africa from Lithuania as a small baby, Roza van Gelderen was raised

59 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 42. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 270.)
60 Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 11.
61 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 203.

in the Netherlands, Sarah Gertrude Millin's parents had immigrated from Lithuania, Maria Stein-Lessing only immigrated from Germany via England to South Africa in 1936. Schmidt-Linsenhoff continues that the typology of the *Neue Frau* also came to incorporate the "modern amazon" that was defined by "daredevil" behaviour such as driving or flying, by professionalising in areas such as photography or publishing as well as by a general cosmopolitan bearing.[62] Britta Schilling asserts that the (former) colonies often functioned as a laboratory for a variety of female identities and that many colonial women were living a life proscribed as masculine by European societies. They undertook supposedly masculine activities such as hunting, shooting and driving or went into professions such as anthropology, flying, photo journalism or archaeology.[63] Irma Stern's husband, Johannes Prinz, for example, in a letter of 1933 congratulates his wife on passing her driving test and describes how he bragged in front of a hotel manager about his famous artist wife who was motoring through Africa in order to paint "natives."[64] The press, too, eagerly recounted how "she ventured into the interior of the Congo where few white men would have gone, and set up a studio in a Native village, miles from the nearest European, for a month."[65]

Another reason is rooted in racial inequalities. Most South African women employed several Black domestic servants that would take over chores typically performed by women.[66] Veronica-Sue Belling convincingly argues that managerial skills acquired by coordinating these servants "vastly increased women's confidence, and by the mid-1920s, the 'new woman' was boldly giving voice to new assertive attitudes" in her fight for political enfranchisement.[67] In the social study *The South Africans* of 1934, Sarah Gertrude Millin explains that "middle-class folk have opportunities in a dominion that would not be open to them anywhere else" and concludes that South Africa had a more egalitarian society than the UK in terms of gender and class.[68] In an essay included in the anthology *Between Union and Liberation. Women Artists in South Africa 1910–1994*, Arnold, too, stresses the importance of privilege of opportunity that was given to White women who wanted to become artists.[69] LaNitra Michele Berger further argues that the mere time made available to White women by the cheap domestic labour of Black women, who took over close to all household chores, meant that White women in the colonies were able to put more serious efforts into occupations such as the fine arts than women in Europe.[70] I would like to counter, though, that there were many women in European societies whose upper-class status similarly awarded them enough free time to pursue artistic endeavours. Additionally,

62 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 203. On the impact of the *Neue Frau* myth on young Black women in South Africa see Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability."
63 Schilling, "Zwischen ‚Primitivismus' und ‚Modernität'."
64 Stern, letter to Prinz, 7 January 1933.
65 Cooper, "Irma Stern," p. 32. Also compare Lawless, "In the Limelight."
66 Compare Cock, *Maids and Madams*.
67 Belling, *Recovering the Lives*, pp. 118–119.
68 Millin, *The South Africans*, p. 107.
69 Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile," p. 52.
70 Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 124. Also compare N.N., "Unique Situation at Art Exhibition."

Black domestic labour was not an invention of the 20th century but White women in the colonies had been profiting from this exploitation long before, without becoming dominant protagonists of colonial art scenes.[71] I would argue that cheap domestic labour was an aiding factor but that the increasing emancipation and professionalisation of women, as exemplified by the genesis of the *Neue Frau*, as well as the supposedly feminine qualities of primitivism played a larger role in the reception and success of South Africa's women settler primitivists.

It is important to emphasise again that, until well into the 20th century, romantic realism was the only approach to art tolerated by South Africa's leading institutions.[72] The person who saw to this most critically was the English painter Edward Roworth, who had been educated at London's Slade School and had come to South Africa in 1902 with the British forces engaged in the Anglo-Boer War. He gained more and more power by occupying posts such as president of the *South African Society of Artists*, director of the South African National Gallery and head of the Michaelis School of Art, which he held for more than 30 years. By the time Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser returned from Berlin to Cape Town in the 1920s, he was already firmly in control of the national art scene as well as of public opinion about what was worthy of being called art and what was not.[73] He was supported by other influential figures such as the cartoonist DC Boonzaier, father of the Cape impressionist Gregoire Boonzaier. After visiting Laubser at her parents' farm in October 1925, DC Boonzaier wrote in his diary:

> Maggie Laubser has had a romantic and interesting career in Europe, where she subsequently spent a number of years, learning more of love than of art, as far as I can gather. […] If a girl goes to Europe to 'study art' […] her career there can only have one ending, the old, old one. It has been so with her and it will be so with all those who come after her. Well, her little romance has ended – the man died. […] But she would not be a woman if her head is not stuffed also with many foolish and childish ideas, to which alas she clings obstinately.[74]

A few years earlier, Boonzaier had visited Irma Stern in her studio and afterwards exclaimed in his diary: "Poor Irma Stern! In a few years you will forget all about art as so many other women have done and no one will trouble about your nude girl with the strange crescent breasts."[75] In a similar fashion, the director of the National Gallery, Anton Hendriks, apologised for the "contradiction in terms" when describing the Johannesburg arts patron Lady Florence Phillips as "a very wise woman."[76] These

71 Compare Cock, "Domestic service and education for domesticity."
72 Compare Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 2.
73 See ibid., p. 253. Arnold, *Women and Art*, p. 65.
74 Boonzaier, diary no. 25, 24 October 1925. Laubser was a woman of almost 40 at the time of Boonzaier's observation that paints her as a naïve girl.
75 Boonzaier, diary no. 21, 24 December 1920.
76 Barrett, "In the Limelight," p. 35.

quotes clearly show what standing female artists had in South Africa's patriarchal art scene before it was revolutionised by women such as Stern and Laubser. However, this revolution did not take place before the 1940s. In the late 1930s, Edward Roworth told his students at the Michaelis School of Art that the internationally successful painter Cecil Higgs (who was 41 years old at the time) was just "a little girl from Stellenbosch who can neither paint nor draw."[77] Similarly, Bernard Lewis, who was the most influential art critic at the time and a friend of Boonzaier's and Roworth's, writes in 1937:

> Miss Cecil Higgs' paintings are imitative rather than creative. […] The Modernists (they were Parisians) who rose in revolt a generation ago against what is called academic art, were people of the strongest anti-social inclinations. […] They were able to create a sensation. They became fashion, which spread first to Munich and Berlin where their idiosyncrasies overstepped all the bounds of decency, and from there it went to Canada (as we have recently seen) and then to South Africa. It is interesting to know that the first of our painters to follow this fashion were women: Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. And now here there is a third: Cecil Higgs. […] More and more I come to the conclusion that this way of 'composing' paintings is not a true revelation of the artist's soul. He or she – it is usually a she, for in art women imitate rather than create – has been taught to paint in that way in one of the big art schools in Europe, usually in Paris. I wonder if Miss Higgs will ever look beyond the walls of her studio and get away from the 'homework' that she had to do for her teachers and see the beautiful world outside.[78]

Two years later, this assessment was followed by a heated debate that had formed between Lewis and members of the *New Group* and reached its peak when Lewis attacked Higgs's painting *Pink Nude* exhibited in the *New Group* show at the Stellenbosch university library in August 1939. Lewis calls Higgs's three works included in the show "surely the ugliest ever exhibited here" and complains with reference to her *Pink Nude* that "the pink legs and arms may be held to represent nudity but a flat blob of pink paint cannot be taken for a face."[79] As a result of this attack, the painting was ordered to be removed from the exhibition by the head of the university.[80] As Bruce Arnott describes in his biography of Lippy Lipshitz, this controversy largely divided Cape Town's art scene in two camps: that supporting the "right wing" establishment and that supporting the "left wing" *New Group*.[81] Roworth had openly sympathised

77 Quoted in Bertram, *Cecil Higgs*, p. 44.
78 Brander, "Skilderye Deur Cecil Higgs." (Christina van Heyningen's translation of the original Afrikaans.) Brander was a pseudonym regularly used by Bernard Lewis.
79 Lewis, "New Exhibition at Stellenbosch."
80 Compare Holloway, *Cecil Higgs*, pp. 11–12. Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 8 August 1939. Van Heyningen, letter to Lipshitz, 20 August 1939.
81 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 20.

with the national socialists in Germany and in 1940, congratulated Hitler on giving the modernist producers of "degenerate" art in Germany "their choice between the lunatic asylum and the concentration camp."[82] Responses and reactions to these remarks by artists such as Lippy Lipshitz, Ruth Prowse and Gregoire Boonzaier (who had broken ties with his father DC a few years earlier)[83] finally lead to Roworth's gradual retreat from his official positions.[84] In June 1948, Prebble Rayner published an article in the *Cape Times* in which he writes that "once upon a time, though not so very long ago really, it was considered proper that woman confined herself to the gentler arts of the drawing room and the kitchen leaving the men-folk to be the law givers and wage earners" but that "now practically every avenue of activity has been explored by the ambitious female".[85] Rayner (himself a strong Roworth opponent)[86] continues with a list of women such as Stern, Higgs and Prowse, whom he considered amongst South Africa's most accomplished artists.

In 1964, art collector Denis Godfrey writes in an article for the *Sunday Chronicle* that he was "enamoured of South Africa's women painters whose work, in general, seems to me more important, talented and compelling than that of their male counterparts."[87] However, this does not mean that feminine stereotypes were abandoned in favour of more unprejudiced and gender-unrelated interpretations. Godfrey for example describes Stern's works as explosive and sensuous and Laubser's as "fey, delicious slabs of colour and dream scenes." This goes back to characterisations of women as emotional, close to nature, visceral, intuitive and removed from reality as described above. Similarly, Colin Legum writes in 1947 that Stern "speaks a language which is more impulsive than rational"[88] and May Hillhouse contrasts Laubser's and Stern's "sensitivity, imagination and understanding" with Vladimir Tretchikoff's "mechanically precise outlines."[89] In an overview on South Africa's modern art scene published in the *South African Digest* in 1969, Hugo Naudé's work is described as virile and Laubser's and Stern's as individualistic. Furthermore, Laubser's art is called naïve and nostalgic, Higgs's art exquisite. While the author considers Stern's work to be characterised by a "passionate abandon," they refer to Welz's as restrained with a "sensitive command of colour and brush" – whereas Welz is portrayed as in control of what he is doing, Stern is presented as highly impulsive.[90]

These descriptions support my argument that the main reason for women artists' success in South Africa can be seen in traditional transcriptions of intrinsic femininity which were incorporated into the myth of the *Neue Frau* that supposedly

82 Cited in Lipshitz, "A Considered Reply to Prof. Roworth," p. 20.
83 Compare Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 26. On the relationship between Gregoire Boonzaier and Roworth also see Boonzaier, diary no. 42, 1 July 1940.
84 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 22.
85 Rayner, "Will Women Top the Bill."
86 E.g. Rayner, "Letters to the Editor." Rayner, "That's the Spirit!"
87 Godfrey, "Collector's Notebook."
88 Legum, "She Speaks for Africa," p. 37.
89 Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet."
90 N.N., "Century of Art," p. 8.

revolutionised the image of women in the early 20th century as independent and coequal to men while retaining established differences of the sexes. This intrinsic femininity corresponded to ideas of modernism such as art being founded on individualistic expressions based on emotions and intuitions rather than on realistic descriptions. Settler women's assertion was further aided by the circumstance that cheap Black labour enabled them to hand over their domestic tasks to the oppressed Black and Coloured members of South African society as well as by the fact that modernism was comparatively late to arrive in Africa. Women artists such as Stern or Laubser, who had been trained in Germany or other European countries, therefore did not have to compete with a male avant-garde that undermined their allegedly feminine approach to modern art but could present themselves as members of European modernist traditions that endorsed femininity. The following analysis of Irma Stern shows how she strategically employed such transnational links in order to further her career and establish modernism based on primitivsm in South Africa.

3.2.2 Irma Stern cultivates her image as *Neue Frau* with traditional values

It is important to understand that Irma Stern did not stage herself as *Neue Frau* by presenting herself as an independent professional woman artist who prevailed in a male dominated art world. She could probably be better described as behaving in a way that corresponded with the *Neue Frau* idea of finding new, self-determined ways in partnership and occupation and, at the same time, appeasing the traditionalist voices holding the power within the South African art scene.[91] In order to not cause any affront with the parochial institutions that might be necessary to further her career, she for example accepted her appointment for membership into the *South African Society of Artists* in 1931[92] and asked Edward Roworth to open her exhibition at the Martin Melck House in Cape Town in 1937.[93] She also did not get involved in the debate around Roworth's suitability as director of various institutions described above. In reciprocation, Roworth, a few years later, defended a work of Stern's that was publicly ridiculed.[94] Maggie Laubser, in contrast to this, became a member of the

91 Irene Below briefly touches on this idea in "Afrika und Europa," p. 117.

92 Berger (née Walker) convincingly argues that "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." Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 106.

93 Proud (ed.), *Brushing up on Stern*, p. 50. Also compare Berger, "In Defence of Irma Stern," p. 22.

94 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 8 June 1942.

New Group in 1938 and got involved in the dispute between *Group* members such as Cecil Higgs and Lippy Lipshitz with Bernard Lewis.[95]

Stern's appeasement of the conservative camp within South Africa's art scene also becomes obvious in public references to her private life. In an article published in the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1931, Stern is quoted in the following way:

> In discussing modern Germany, she said she experienced there an attitude of irresponsibility and instability which was reflected in the weakening ties of home and marriage. Her friends in Germany, she said, were astonished to find that she was still married to the same man when she returned to Europe after an absence.[96]

This shows that Stern wanted to represent herself as fully aware of modern lifestyles propagated by the *Neue Frau* ideology but as nevertheless remaining faithful to traditional values concerning "home and marriage."[97] In a letter sent in the same month (May 1931) to her good friend, the German sculptor Katharina Heise, she wrote that she wanted to free herself of her husband and be with many people.[98] The divergence between the newspaper article and this personal correspondence suggests that Stern consciously positioned herself in relation to the image of the *Neue Frau* that was still relatively new in South Africa in a rather ambiguous way. Additionally, instead of showcasing herself as a pioneer, Stern entered the South African art scene as a member of an artistic movement that had long been acknowledged and established in Germany. She used these transnational relations to legitimise her role as a painter who had already been accepted by the male avant-garde in Europe and was now confidently continuing her career in South Africa.

Her friendship with the German expressionist Max Pechstein plays an important role in this. Stern was introduced to Pechstein by a mutual acquaintance, an art collector, in 1917 in Berlin.[99] Probably prompted by their shared admiration of non-European cultures, Pechstein took an interest in the younger artist and helped her get settled into Berlin's expressionist circles. Stern quickly generated a lot of attention as she was able to position herself as an "authentic African" artist and connoisseur of "primitive" cultures, a theme which many influential artists were then working

95 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 22 June 1939. Laubser was planning to write an article in opposition of Lewis.

96 N.N., "Highway of Women."

97 Also compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 117.

98 Stern, letter to Heise, May 1931. According to more recent research, Stern was romantically involved with the Jewish poet David Fram at this time. Godby, "Irma Stern's Portraits of Freda Feldman," p. 169.

99 Stern, "How I Began to Paint."

with.[100] Her pictures of Black women whom she claimed she had grown up amongst demonstrated her superiority to her German colleagues, who knew their subjects mainly from occasional travels and ethnological museums or expositions. As will be further detailed below, the German press took this up as well and frequently mentioned her special role as an "African" artist. Some critics hence attributed her a greater genuineness than Gauguin or Pechstein.[101] After her return to South Africa, Stern often travelled to Germany where she continued to exhibit until the outbreak of the Second World War. She used these occasions to further propagate her image as an "authentic African" artist. For the "Große Berliner Kunstausstellung" [Great Berlin Art Exhibition] in 1927, 1928 and 1929, she chose works such as *Markt in Lorenço Marques* [Market in Lorenço Marques], *Zulu-Frauen* [Zulu Women] and *Negermädchen mit Frucht* [Negro Girl with Fruit] in order to present her German audience with "exotic" subjects.[102]

Stern was certainly aware that it was not easy for women of her time to successfully establish themselves within Europe's art centres. In a letter of 14 May 1918, she thanks Pechstein for his support and for helping her manage the obstacles usually put in the way of women artists.[103] In one of her self-mythologisations, the article "How I Began to Paint" published in the *Cape Argus* in 1926, she writes that she considered it a great honour to have been invited by Pechstein to become one of the founding members of the *Novembergruppe* [November Group] – together with only one other female sculptor.[104] In this clever self-portrayal that was largely appropriated and reproduced by the press, she also describes the strong support given to her by Pechstein and thereby increased her credibility in Germany as well as in South Africa. Surprisingly, most exhibition reviews still portrayed her as an autonomous artist who was developing in an independent direction beyond Pechstein's range of influence.[105] This was especially unusual for women artists during a period in which they were typically accused of imitating their male colleagues and not being able to produce anything original.[106] It is likely that, in this case, Stern was an exception because she was able to set herself apart from even major European expressionists due to her symbolic capital as an "insider" who had grown up in Africa.

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100 For example, she is labelled an *",Afrikanerin'"* ['African'] in Alony, "Eine Malerin Afrikas." The inverted commas probably served to differentiate between the White settler Stern and Black African artists exhibiting in Europe at the time such as the "black Raphael" Kalifala Sidibé. On the latter see Yanagisawa, "La naissance du tableau en Afrique noire."

101 E.g. Stahl, "Ausstellungen."

102 Catalogues for all the exhibitions can be found in the archive of the Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen 1867 e. V., Archiv Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Unfortunately, the catalogues do not include reproductions of the exhibits and I was unable to find any further information on the three works mentioned above.

103 Stern, letter to Pechstein, 14 May 1918. Also see Below, ",...wird es mir eine Freude sein'."

104 Stern, "How I Began to Paint."

105 E.g. Stahl, "Zur Sache." B.E.W., "Die Malerin Irma Stern."

106 Also compare Flagmeier, "Camille Claudel."

This positioning was boosted by a monograph on Stern published in 1927 by the German art historian Max Osborn, who had already published a monograph on Pechstein in 1922.[107] The text on Stern appeared in the series *Junge Kunst* [Young Art] and followed an edition on Pablo Picasso.[108] It includes an extract from Stern's *Umgababa* travel journal and was probably developed in cooperation with Stern.[109] The fact that the monograph comprised an English translation of the German text (the Picasso book, for example, was only in German) shows that the publishers already had a South African audience in mind. Additionally, Osborn's monograph contributed to the exoticising of Stern as he writes with great exaggeration:

> With the exception of a few trips to Europe 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 this it is which has given her an individual position in the art world.[110]

It is not true that Stern only occasionally travelled to Europe; until her return to Cape Town in 1920 at the age of 25, she had spent about half her life in South Africa and half in Germany. Osborn must have been aware of this as he later refers to Stern's time at a school in Berlin.[111] This shows that Stern strategically used the support of influential men such as Pechstein, Wolfgang Gurlitt or Osborn to position herself as an expert on "primitive" cultures and a promising expressionist. In an article for *South African Life and Woman's Forum* of December 1933, Stern emphasises her transnational position right at the beginning when she writes:

> It was in Germany that I received my schooling, but half of the period was passed in journeying to and from South Africa. My travels left in my youthful mind deep impressions of the beauty of the scenery and the native life in Africa, and of the cultural values of Europe.[112]

She continues to list her successes in Germany such as her 1918 exhibition with Gurlitt – "one of the leading art galleries" – and following exhibitions "throughout the Continent" in cities such as "Chemnitz, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Hanover, Breslau, Vienna."[113] Stern also emphasises the support given to her by the European press. She concludes by saying that she had shown her best compositions of "native life" only in Europe "as 'native' studies were not very popular here [in South Africa] at that time."[114] This

107 Osborn, *Max Pechstein*.
108 Osborn, *Irma Stern*. Schürer, *Pablo Picasso*.
109 Osborn, *Irma Stern*, pp. 13–22.
110 Ibid., p. 24.
111 Ibid., pp. 25–26.
112 Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work."
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.

text clearly shows how Stern strategically positioned herself as an artist with great success in Europe in order to boost her career in South Africa. The following section of this chapter demonstrates how the press took up this narrative created by Stern and Osborn and how the South African newspapers did indeed draw on her reception in Germany.

3.2.3 Irma Stern in the German and South African press

Germany

The first important articles in the German press on Irma Stern were published in 1923, on occasion of her second solo exhibition at Salon Fritz Gurlitt in Potsdamer Straße, Berlin. One of those articles was written by the Jewish art critic, journalist and publicist Fritz Stahl, whose real name was Siegfried Lilienthal. Since it is exemplary for subsequent press reports, I am here giving a full translation of the review:

> The painter Irma Stern, who is showing a large exhibition at Gurlitt's, is a South African. She still underwent European schooling, possibly with Pechstein, whom she sometimes reminds us of. But in her works, form acquires a totally different character because, for her, the exotic is not a choice made to achieve certain artistic means, but experience: childhood experience. Blacks integrate into her pictorial form without losing the beautifully animalistic qualities of their movements that Europeans are never able to catch, but which they violate into a doll-like awkwardness through an artificial naiveté – the new convention. For her, they are not pictorial figures but creatures of a special kind that are intended to receive their full right to be human, even to have personalities. The difference in colour is hence of a similar magnitude. She sees hues where the European only sees one tone, she sees harmony where the European is attracted by foreign garishness. In short, form is completely filled with content, apparently the only right result of this content. Thereby any difficulty attached to preconceived form is ruled out.[115]

First of all, it is interesting that Stahl seems to have been unaware of the connection between Irma Stern and Max Pechstein but sees similarities in their paintings. Although a certain likeness does undoubtedly exist, there were many painters fascinated by non-European cultures working in expressionist modes in Berlin at the time and it is remarkable that Stahl specifically mentions Pechstein as a possible influence. It implies that Stahl considered it beneficial to name an accomplished male artist as a point of reference in order to legitimise Stern's aptitude to the reader. However, he straight away continues to assert the different character of their

115 Stahl, "Zur Sache." (My translation, original German on p. 270.)

works and Stern's superiority to any European artist depicting "primitive" peoples. He grounds this superiority on her instinctive rather than conscious approach that is rooted in childhood experiences as well as on her intuitive treatment of form and colour that excels a planned, intentional method. He considered this the only right way of depicting "exotic" subjects. The fact that Stahl appreciates Stern's supposed depiction of personalities in her portraits of Black South Africans reflects the contemporary primitivist interest in non-European peoples. In another review of 1924, Stahl again emphasises that the "exotic" that German artists romantically sought to find was a *Heimaterlebnis* [native experience] for Stern. He adds that her strong talent came through whenever she let feeling prevail and that she even exceeded Paul Gauguin in this respect.[116]

The Gurlitt exhibition of 1923 was also reviewed by Max Osborn in *Vossische Zeitung* [Voß's Newspaper] a week after Stahl. Osborn starts by stating that Stern was from South Africa but that her artistic home was in Berlin.[117] He hence immediately establishes the transnational relations that set the framework for most critiques of Stern's exhibitions. Osborn continues that Stern developed her strong "hands-on" talent as a student of Pechstein's but that she applied whatever she learnt from him to faraway Africa. He too, maintains that, what Pechstein had to search for in the darkness, Stern found right in front of her doorstep: an "exotic" world of strong colours and "primitive" peoples grown together with the soil. Osborn then attributes to Stern a womanly quality reminiscent of Paula Modersohn-Becker. Other authors, too, compared Stern to Modersohn-Becker.[118] In Osborn's case, it is not clear what sparked the comparison other than that both artists were women. It is possible that Osborn did so in adherence to Scheffler's dichotomy of masculine and feminine qualities. As mentioned before with reference to Erich Ranfft, these supposedly feminine qualities were often used to explain the special advantage of women expressionists when they were acting according to their alleged intrinsic femininity. Other themes emphasised by Osborn such as colour and nature also resonate with this idea.

Since Stahl and Osborn were both Jewish art journalists in Berlin and wrote about similar topics, it is likely that they knew each other. Unfortunately, it is not known how close they were or how much they appreciated each other. It is however interesting to see how similar their approach to Stern's work was and how instrumental they were in fostering her success in Germany and thereby also in South Africa. In an article on Stern published in the Jewish newspaper *The Reform Advocate* in 1929, Hilda Purwitsky translates the passage of Osborn's 1923 article concerning Pechstein as well as Stahl's 1924 article in almost full length.[119] By quoting Stahl, who raised Stern above Gauguin, and calling him "one of the severest and most dreaded of all German art critics," Purwitsky demonstrates Stern's standing in

116 Stahl, "Ausstellungen."
117 Osborn, "Bei Gurlitt."
118 E.g. Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 47. Below, "Irma Stern," p. 49.
119 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter."

Germany.[120] She further calls South African society ultra-conservative and outdated for not receiving Stern's modernism in the same way. Interestingly, in an article for the *Huisgenoot* [Housemate] published in 1931, AC Bouman also translates Stahl's 1924 article into Afrikaans.[121]

Josef Kalmer's 1926 article on Stern for the Jewish journal *Menorah*, too, presents Stern as an independently working artist benefitting from her supposedly feminine as well as non-European character traits such as emotionality and intuition. He claims that she was born in Cape Town and showed many similarities with Gauguin, "who had Peruvian ancestors" and therefore "hot blood in his veins."[122] Moreover, Kalmer contends:

> If one can speak about technique in her case at all, if one wants to remind of any role models from whom she might have learnt, because she did not know them, one might say that [...] her watercolours remind of Max Pechstein, who however only acquired his technique, his mannerism in the South Pacific, meaning that in this case, too, one can only speak of the influence of the milieu surrounding Irma Stern and not of the influence of a role model.[123]

In this rather ponderous statement, Kalmer recurs to the feminine stereotype that Stern's pictures did not show a lot of technique but attaches a positive assessment to this prejudice by simultaneously arguing that her style and/ or subject matter did not borrow from male artists' works but naturally emerged from her South African surroundings. He therefore bases his appraisal of her work on her immediacy and South African origin. Kalmer concludes his article by stating that Stern's exhibition with Fritz Gurlitt in Berlin and with Hugo Heller in Vienna made her well known in Central Europe.

In addition to her Gurlitt exhibition, in 1923, Stern also exhibited watercolours at Gerstenberger's cabinet for graphic arts. In a critique entitled "Aquarelle von Irma Stern" [Watercolours by Irma Stern], an unknown author again refers to her as a student of Pechstein's and considers her work not unskilled but also not exactly original.[124] The author assumes that the pieces, which were produced between 1920 and 1923, could not have been done onsite and therefore reflected an *Orient aus zweiter Hand* [second-hand orient] that was no new artistic achievement. They even call Stern's interest in "exotic" peoples and landscapes perverse. The critique clearly illustrates how Stern's work was likely to have been perceived without the knowledge that she was South African and had seen the people and places she painted first-hand.

120 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.

121 Bouman, "Irma Stern."

122 Kalmer, "Die Malerin Irma Stern." (My translation, original German on p. 270.)

123 Ibid. (My translation, original German on p. 271.) Pechstein's sojourn on the Palau islands took place in 1914 prior to the outbreak of the First World War. It is unclear why Kalmer assumes that Stern could not have been familiar with his Palau paintings produced in 1917.

124 N.N., "Aquarelle von Irma Stern."

Without the advantage of being an "authentic African," the predominant perception would most likely have seen Stern as inferior to male artists of her time. Critics who were aware of Stern's background and not impressed by it were a clear minority. One rare example is the author of an article that appeared in the *Niederdeutsche Zeitung* [Low German Newspaper] in 1924: they describe the influence of Pechstein and Erich Heckel on Stern's work while pointing out that the men's work was clearly superior as the brush was apparently too heavy for Stern's tender hand.[125]

Texts promoting stereotypes as outdated as these, however, were certainly exceptions. There was a clear trend in the German press to portray Stern as superior to male artists such as Pechstein or Gauguin due to her "authentic" experience of growing up in South Africa and to her supposedly feminine approach that centred on feeling, empathy and natural intuition. Shortly before Hitler's rise to power that stopped public appreciation of primitivist modes of painting, in 1932, the author AY Alony for example emphasises that Stern had an advantage over Pechstein and Gauguin since she was an "African" herself.[126] In another article for *Vossische Zeitung,* reviewing Stern's exhibition at Galerie Gurlitt in 1927, Max Osborn again mentions Pechstein's and Gauguin's influence on Stern but plainly states that she had developed a completely new, personal expression departing from these influences. He further describes her as catching figures and faces of a race of mystical prehistoric times with gentle hands.[127] In his monograph on Stern of the same year, Osborn lists Stern's supposedly deep womanly sensibility and her unmediated devotion as her outstanding qualities.[128] In a review of the same Gurlitt exhibition published in *Frau und Gegenwart* in 1927, the unnamed author, too, stresses Stern's artistic independence from Pechstein, whose influence, they write, she had long outgrown.[129] As will be further explicated in the analysis of contemporary press on Maggie Laubser's works, issues of artistic independence and individuality were extremely important for women artists to gain credibility at the time. While Stern still had to refer to the approval of influential men such as Pechstein, Gurlitt or Osborn in order to clear the way for modernism to get established in South Africa, Laubser, whose career gained momentum after Stern had done the groundwork, always stressed that her art could not be attributed to any particular school or influence.

Stern ceased exhibiting in Germany during the reign of the National Socialists from 1933 until the 1950s when the galleries Gurlitt in Munich and Wasmuth in Berlin started exhibiting her work again. However, her reception in the press had changed: the interest in the South African settler artist had waned and her work was now considered derivative of German expressionists such as Pechstein. For example, the French-supported liberal newspaper *Der Kurier* [The Courier] published

125 N.N., "Kestner-Gesellschaft." It can be assumed that the author had never met Stern in person, who was probably about twice the size of Pechstein.
126 Alony, "Eine Malerin Afrikas."
127 Osborn, "Zwei Künstlerinnen."
128 Osborn, *Irma Stern*, pp. 11–12.
129 N.N., "Was eine Malerin in Afrika sah."

a review of her exhibition at the antiquarian bookshop Wasmuth in October 1956 which portrays her 1950s shows in Munich and Berlin as her very first presentations in Germany and falsely claims that she was a German artist forced to emigrate to Cape Town in 1933. The author concludes that "the typical expressionist yearning for lost origins, for the simple and pure life in creaturely [*kreatürlich*] innocence" had been "inculcated" in her by Pechstein.[130] Stern is presented as a "maverick" woman artist in the remote South Africa, whose outdated style imitated *Brücke* art.

South Africa

In South Africa, Stern's first exhibitions in Cape Town in the early twenties were largely received with incomprehension and even rejection. For example, the *Cape Times* published a review of her first exhibition in 1922 that expresses "frank disgust at the general nastiness of the work."[131] Three years later, the same author refers to Stern's work as "post-war art degeneracy" and "astigmatic distortions."[132] Still in 1933, an exhibition review in the *Sunday Times* was entitled "Agonies in Oil. Irma Stern's Chamber of Horrors. Crude Drawing. An Indian with Jaundice."[133] Sarah Sinisi points out that Stern's early exhibitions also received some positive reviews that are however frequently neglected by her biographers perpetuating "a somewhat romantic myth of an underappreciated artist."[134] I would argue that this is mainly due to the fact that Stern deliberately cultivated the image of herself as the misunderstood artist "genius" that was described in Chapter 2. In the article "My Critics" published in the *Cape Times* in 1930, she used the opportunity early in her South African career to shape the tale of herself as an avant-garde artist whose work was too advanced for her contemporaries.[135] Beginning with the destruction of work produced in her childhood by her small-minded father, she draws a line to the rejection of her "first picture" by her teacher Martin Brandenburg to the alleged closure of her first exhibition in Cape Town by three policemen and the general condemnation of her work by the South African press. At the same time, she writes, her paintings were celebrated and honoured by the European avant-garde.

Following more positive newspaper articles and other press reports on Stern and her exhibitions such as the 1929 article by Hilda Purwitsky mentioned above, the first South African book-length text on Stern was published by the Jewish writer Joseph Sachs in 1942.[136] According to Veronica-Sue Belling, Stern commissioned Sachs to write this monograph entitled *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*.[137] It is,

130 H.K., "Expressionismus aus Südafrika." (My translation, original German on p. 271.)
131 W.R.M., "An Exhibition of Modern Art."
132 W.R.M., "Modern Art in the City."
133 N.N., "Agonies in Oil."
134 Sinisi, *Irma Stern*, pp. 20–21. A similar argument is made by O'Toole, *Irma Stern*, p. 63.
135 Stern, "My Critics." Another example of this is Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work."
136 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*.
137 Belling, *Recovering the Lives*, p. 229. Sachs was also a collector of Stern's work. Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern*, p. 8.

however, unclear where Belling draws this information from. Since the book contains various passages of Stern's own writing, and paraphrases her article "How I Began to Paint" of 1926 in detail,[138] it is likely that Stern was at least involved in the process of its production, as she was in the development of Osborn's monograph to which she had also contributed a text. Sachs's book again adheres to stereotypes of intrinsic femininity and lays an emphasis on her South African soul, nature, colour and rhythm when describing her work. In the introduction, he calls her a "cultured artist with a primitive feeling for line and colour" in whose works the "spirit of Arica and that of Europe meet and mingle".[139]

Throughout his text, Sachs, too, resorts to the transnational links in Stern's upbringing and career in order to describe her singularity. For example, he starts his book with a chapter on South African art and a chapter on European modernism and thereby cleverly positions Stern in an art historical context spanning both continents. At the end of each chapter, he justifies Stern's uniqueness within each context and explains to the reader why Stern's art was so important on both continents. Following his description of art in South Africa, he writes that "South Africa is fortunate to be unburdened by academic tradition in art," but that "she lacks the confidence to create out of the fulness of her own life: instead she adopts the foreign moulds that are alien to her spirit."[140] He concludes that "an exception must be made in the case of Irma Stern" whose "work expresses the spirit of Africa as a whole."[141] Through this statement, he grounds Stern's role as a pioneer in South African modernism in her proximity to the "South African spirit" that so far no other artist had been able to capture. In short, he uses the same reasoning employed for Stern's success in Germany. Following his remarks on modern art in Europe that end with Gauguin, Sachs writes:

> Irma Stern did for South Africa what Gauguin has done for the South Seas, but she did not have to escape from her environment in order to reinforce her vitality by contact with primitive life, for she was born in the midst of the natives and felt the impact of Africa on her temperament before her art awoke.[142]

The similarities between Sachs's argument and preceding German critiques are obvious. Sachs then continues, as Purwitsky had done more than a decade earlier, with a translation of almost the entire 1923 article by Fritz Stahl, whom Sachs introduces as a "celebrated art-critic."[143] In addition to Stahl, Sachs also mentions other influential men who authorised Stern's artistic capabilities. He emphasises that Pechstein "foretold a great future to her, especially if she developed on her own lines without

138 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, pp. 29–34.
139 Ibid., p. 7.
140 Ibid., pp. 16–17.
141 Ibid., p. 17.
142 Ibid., p. 27.
143 Ibid., pp. 27–28.

allowing too much interference with her originality" and that he then "decided to further her career and brought her in contact with Herr Gurlitt, the proprietor of the most prominent art salon in Berlin, who, on examining her work, immediately arranged her first exhibition."[144] This narrative was certainly intended to impress a South African audience that was used to looking to Europe as the forerunner of artistic developments. As mentioned before, it was reproduced by most critics writing about Stern at the time.[145] Additionally, Sachs bases Stern's artistic distinction on supposedly feminine attributes such as intuition, sensitivity, emotionality, lack of intelligence and closeness to nature in line with Hildebrandt's characterisation of "womanly" art. In order to better understand this, it is worth quoting a very insightful passage of his text at length:

> Irma Stern's art is a natural exuberance that wells up from her being. This is her strength and also her weakness. It makes her art vital and spontaneous but lacking in intelligent discipline. […] Her work represents a great vital sensuousness and fertility but her originality is of an emotional rather than of an intellectual order. It is the product of a passionate temperament rather than of an unusual intelligence. Her development constitutes the growth of a natural force rather than the gradual mastery of intellectual and moral problems. It is true there is a deepening and softening expression as her work matures, but it is more akin to a ripening of physical nature than to a mellowing of the spirit. Yet her vitality extracts a living infinity from nature itself. The cry of earth is so forceful that it transcends what we are wont to regard as the purely physical. Her work, so overwhelming in its sensuousness, gives that stimulation which cannot work itself out on the sensuous plane. It stirs something more than a physical craving. It lights up nature herself in a spiritual incandescence: through sheer vitality still-lifes burst into flame and nature rises to a higher plane of being.[146]

As other critics before and after him, Sachs portrays Stern as an artist working from spontaneous, emotion-lead instinct rather than with deliberation. Irene Below has suggested that sketches housed at the Irma Stern Museum in Rosebank, Cape Town imply that this was probably not true, but that Stern carefully planned her compositions in advance. This circumstance certainly deserves further study that would however exceed the scope of my research project. Sachs's references to Stern's "fertility" and nature as woman ("nature herself") further illustrate the feminised description of her work. Terms referring to nature, body and physicality such as "wells up from her being," "deepening and softening expression," "ripening," "natural force," "living infinity,"

144 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 34.

145 E.g. Gutsche, opening speech. Masson, "Irma Stern." Bean, "Only her Mother Would Buy." Barrow, "A Golden Jubilee." N.N., "Death of Irma Stern." Rozilda, "Irma Stern and her Legacy." Houghton, "Controversy Rages." Adams, "Irma Stern."

146 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, pp. 36–37.

"sensuousness" and "vitality" exemplify the assumed intrinsicality of Stern's femininity.

His last sentence also shows that Sachs added ideas such as transcendence and spirituality to the usual description of Stern's approach. These issues are commonly discussed within analyses of expressionist art as is for instance demonstrated in Kristin Eichhorn and Johannes S Lorenzen's third volume of the journal *Expressionismus* [expressionism] on religion.[147] As will be further detailed below, spirituality or religion was an extremely important topic for Maggie Laubser. Later reviews of Stern's work recur to this issue as well. In an article entitled "Irma Stern Essays the Spiritual" of 1953, Matthys Bokhorst, president of the *South African Association of Arts* at the time[148] and later director of the National Gallery in Cape Town, writes that, in contrast to other artists such as Lippy Lipshitz, Maud Sumner or Pranas Domšaitis, who were prompted to depict Christian religious subjects by either the human aspect of the theme or personal creed, Stern's *Annunciation* (Fig. 48) was an "interpretation of the awe-inspiring thought for a woman to become the mother of God."[149] A little further along in the text, Bokhorst writes about another work of Stern's, *Herd-boy*: "when Irma Stern still concentrated on the expression of the animistic spirit of the Native, she could penetrate to such an extent into his attitude towards life that in her painting there was that unity between Nature and the human."[150] Bokhorst thus praises the coalescence of nature and spirituality in Stern's work, as becomes most obvious in his idealisation of the "native" as "animistic." Again, the use of a word such as "penetrate" emphasises physicality and, moreover, the sexualised and dominating context in which Black Africans were usually positioned. The harmonious unity between nature and human personified by the "native" in the South African landscape is also an important topos in contemporary interpretations of the work of Maggie Laubser.

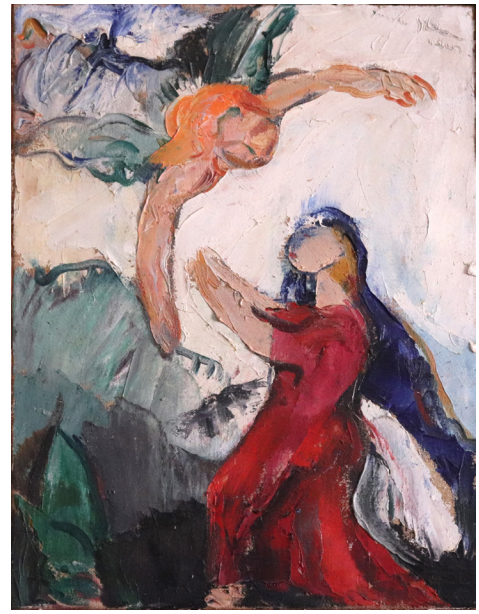

Fig. 48: Irma Stern, *Annunciation*, 1947, oil on canvas, 51 × 39 cm, Irma Stern Museum

147 Eichhorn & Lorenzen (eds.), *Expressionismus: Religion*.

148 The fact that Bokhorst, in his role as art critic for the *Cape Times*, wrote about the exhibition shown at an institution whose president he was illustrates the intricacy of the South African art scene.

149 Bokhorst, "Irma Stern Essays the Spiritual."

150 Ibid. (Bokhorst's original capitalisation of "Native" and "Nature.")

Additionally, in his analysis of Stern's *Annunciation*, Bokhorst foregrounds motherhood without any clear reason. Other than the fact that the painting was created by a woman, for whom caring for children was still considered one of the highest aims in life, as well as the fact that any annunciation per se addresses conception, nothing in the picture hints at a celebration of motherhood. It rather seems to portray the encounter of angel and woman, heaven and earth, spirit and body in mutual fertilisation. This is on the one hand indicated by the embrace offered by the angel to Mary which she returns and on the other by the diagonal division of the colours. Mary in her deep-red dress in front of a green, fertile landscape can be considered to represent physical life and groundedness in nature, while the angel dressed in light-blue floating in a white sky can be considered to represent spirit and transcendence. The colours could also be seen to refer to the different elements: the angel's flaming orange hair as fire and light-blue robe as wind, Mary's red dress as earth and flowing blue veil as water. These interpretations are certainly more obvious than Bokhorst's "awe-inspiring thought" of motherhood. The latter does, however, tie in with contemporary conceptions of womanhood surfacing in the reception of female artists such as Hildebrandt's treatment of Käthe Kollwitz described above.[151] It can also be considered part of a larger phenomenon in which art by women is usually interpreted with a focus on personal issues.

Recent criticism of Stern's work in South Africa

In 1988, Renate Flagmeier argues in an essay on the French sculptor Camille Claudel that it is striking how the perception of art made by women is governed by a certain "re-privatisation."[152] She argues that, in art historical texts, women artists are often called by their first names and their works are interpreted as personal statements of female individuals. This is certainly true for South African publications on Irma Stern or Maggie Laubser from 1970 onwards. For example, Maggie Laubser is constantly referred to by her first name in the monographs by Johann van Rooyen (1974), Dalene Marais (1994) or Muller Ballot (2016). Stern is called Irma in both of Neville Dubow's texts (1974 and 1991) as well as later essays by the author.[153] Interestingly, after the publication of Marion Arnold's monograph, authors started referring to Stern by her last name[154] while the newest publication on Maggie Laubser by Muller Ballot still uses her first name. This might have to do with the increasing recognition that Stern was an important professional artist pioneering modernism in South Africa while Laubser is still largely seen as a soft, gentle woman pursuing her highly individualistic art in the private realm of her farm. In general, none of the authors mentioned

151 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, pp. 116–117.

152 Flagmeier, "Camille Claudel," p. 36.

153 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*. Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*. Dubow, *Irma Stern*. Dubow, *Paradise.*

154 E.g. Wyman, "Irma Stern." Braude, "Beyond Black and White." Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*. Proud (ed.), *Brushing up on Stern*. Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern.*

here interpret works by the two artists in any political way but closely base their interpretations on the women's biographies.

In her essay for *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert*, Reinhild Feldhaus argues that, whenever women artists were successful, their work was related to their lives in a way that only allowed for an interpretation of the works as illustrations of female biographies, beyond any larger historical framework.[155] Interestingly, right at the beginning of the entry on Cecil Higgs in Esmé Berman's standard work *Art and Artists of South Africa. An illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters & graphic artists since 1875*, Berman writes that "all biographical dates, other than those of formal [exhibitions] are speculative in the case of this reticent artist, who feels strongly that such matters are irrelevant to art."[156] This was a remarkable stance by one of the most important South African modernists and possibly intended at preventing the conflation of art and personality common in art critical texts on women artists such as Stern and Laubser. In her text on Stern for the 1959 government publication *Our Art*, Magda Sauer for example attributes Stern's expressionist style – manifested in a "rich and endless stream in a kind of frenzy of creation" – to her being an erratic woman which already showed in childhood:

> From her early years she wanted to be someone of note, but she could not make up her mind what – a violinist, a doctor, a painter. And from the beginning she showed the exceptional vitality and strong emotional reaction to everything about her which have remained so characteristic of her.[157]

In an interview with Irma Stern conducted a few years before her death, the Jewish author Bernard Sachs describes Stern as an obese, female Buddha.[158] He further explains that the interview ended when Stern's friend and supporter Freda Feldman came in, who complemented Stern on her hat while Stern complemented her on her dress: "I realised that this was no simple digression, so I stuck my pen in my pocket. […] I also learned quite a bit about scent and handkerchiefs that morning."[159] With these remarks, Sachs leaves the reader with the impression of two women – both important figures in the contemporary art world – discussing fashion accessories in a private manner. This is even more striking since the scene took place at Stern's

155 Feldhaus, "Geburt und Tod in Künstlerinnen-Viten," p. 73.

156 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 142. Berman also states Higgs's year of birth as 1906 while it was really 1898.

157 Sauer, "Irma Stern," p. 103. Sauer generally dramatises Stern's career when she wrongly writes that she started studying art at the Levin Funke studio in Berlin at the age of 16, then attended classes at the fine art academy in Weimar and finally moved on to the Bauhaus, "then the leading centre of Expressionist Art in Germany, with a remarkable galaxy of teachers" (p.103). She also repeats the myth of the overall rejection of Stern's "Chamber of Horrors."

158 Sachs, "Irma Stern."

159 Ibid.

exhibition at the Adler Fielding Galleries, i.e., in a professional context and not in her private home. Sachs's privatisation of Stern hence seems forced rather than a logical consequence of the nature of his encounter with the artist. In 1966, Betty Lunn concludes her short obituary for Stern with the following remarks: "Her private life was not always smooth, although from birth she was relatively wealthy. She was married to a professor, whom she divorced in 1934, and she never re-married."[160] It does not need to be emphasised that information such as this would have never been given in an obituary for a male artist, especially since the marriage was relatively short-lived and had no impact on Stern's artistic career.

These two aspects, Stern's weight and her supposedly unfulfilled love life have remained amongst the main points for interpretations of her work in South Africa. In his publications *Irma Stern* of 1974 and *Paradise. The Journal and Letters (1917–1933) of Irma Stern* of 1991, the first director of the Irma Stern Museum, Neville Dubow, interprets Stern's work as depictions of beautiful women in whom Stern sought her own self: "Here she could escape from her ungainly body. Here, metaphorically, she could be naked amongst a host of graceful strangers."[161] His monograph *Paradise* even features a chapter entitled "Irma Stern in Love" in which he cites passages from Stern's letters to her German friend Trude Bosse that, Dubow argues, recurred to the *Leitmotif* of "unhappiness, loneliness, lack of love and loss of love."[162] The most comprehensive discussion of Stern's work, a monograph by Marion Arnold of 1995, argues in a similar way:

> Although Stern was separated by race from the culture of her models, she was united by gender. In portraying female sexuality, albeit in the guise of the other, she was conscious of her own femininity. Herself large and relatively unattractive, she painted many studies of the woman she would like to have been, projecting her internal self-image onto her models.[163]

She justifies this psychobiographical interpretation by arguing that Stern's "personality, life and art cannot easily be separated. Her life informed her art and the pivotal role art played in her life informed her responses to people and places."[164] In line with Hildebrandt's characterisation of women artists as childlike, emotional and intuitive, Arnold describes Stern's "emotional temperament" when she "translated observation and feeling into images, expressing herself impulsively in vigorously executed drawings."[165] She further explains that Stern was "emotionally immature, […] moody and querulous, but capable of impulsive generosity […] with a childlike sense of

160 Lunn, "Irma Stern."
161 Dubow, *Paradise*, p. 104. Also see Dubow, *Irma Stern*.
162 Dubow, *Paradise*, p. 89. For criticism of Dubow's approach for example refer to Below, "Afrika und Europa," pp. 124–125. Braude, "Beyond Black and White," pp. 45–48.
163 Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 71.
164 Ibid., p. 150.
165 Ibid., p. 11.

adventure."[166] A review of Arnold's book by Anthea Bristowe published in the *Sunday Times* in October 1995 indicates that this interpretation was accepted and shared by the South African public. Because it is quite revealing, I will quote the review at length:

> Stern was passionate, quarrelsome, snobbish, insecure but always superbly talented. And she never gave up her work. Maggie Laubser retired to the platteland to paint ducks, Maude Sumner denied her sexuality and sought refuge in Catholicism. Stern was audacious, her sexuality simmered through her work – images of beautiful women, darkly turbaned men and great slices of watermelon leap from her canvases. But as her critics are quick to point out, she was so singularly unattractive her love affairs were mostly imaginary. At the age of 32 she married a dreary creature called Johannes Prins [sic]. Cold and remote, Prins probably never consummated the marriage. Instead he collected pornography which he sent off to Germany. After seven years Stern divorced him. In 1934 it was a courageous decision although Prins continued to lodge at her Cape Town house. He was, however, denied the use of the chauffeur and had to pay for his own lunch.[167]

The text exemplifies the contrast between Stern and Laubser that is a common theme in the discussion of South African modernism: Laubser is usually described as the soft, gentle, harmony-seeking farmwoman while Stern is portrayed as the furious pioneer of South African modernism.[168] In a typical privatisation of the two women artists, Johann van Rooyen, for example, writes:

> Irma's international and worldly background and the heroic mould of her character had ensured the natural development of an exuberant and dominating personality. Maggie, on the other hand, was retiring, ever conscious of her simple roots as daughter of a farming community, unsophisticated and even puritanical.[169]

The idea of Stern as a strong *Neue Frau* is enforced in Bristow's reference to Stern's courageous decision to divorce Prinz and her business-like handling of her ex-husband after their divorce. The exaggerated sexualisation of Stern and her subjects but also of the artist Maude Sumner and Johannes Prinz illustrates the context in which women's art was received in South Africa at the time.

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166 Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 12.

167 Bristowe, "Towering Over the Wimps of the World."

168 The contrasting portrayal of the two women artists had started in the mid-1940s when for example Jeanne Hugo described Laubser as "caught in the eternal spell of this sleeping earth" and Stern as "an extrovert in form and colour and composition." Hugo, "Painting in South Africa," p. 45. Also see Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 17. Harmsen, "Art in South Africa."

169 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 17.

This focus is still reproduced in more recent interpretations. For example, in late 1999, Marilyn Wyman writes in a supposedly feminist treatise of Stern's work (Arnold, too, considers her approach feminist) that "Stern's gaze is not a feminist one sympathetic to her subjects" but that "she stands in a position of power that places her in a surrogate male role" – a behaviour that Wyman roots in Stern's insecurity caused by her unattractive outer appearance.[170] She concludes that "the idealized, even eroticized, African women that Stem painted early in her career may have become surrogates for her own desires for physical beauty."[171] In 2012, the former director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Clive Kellner, finished his MA dissertation on Irma Stern's Black subjects. He argues that "Stern's identity is that of her 'subjectivity' as formed through her gender, class and race but also contained in the various traumas she experienced in childhood and throughout her life."[172] For him, Stern's depictions of Blacks were her way of dealing with her dislocated, instable identity in creating "fixed" stereotypes.[173] Kellner's discussion in general is an insightful analysis of the primitivist tendencies inherent in Stern's work as was discussed in Chapter 1, but he still bases these on psychobiographical issues that relate to the artist's life (childhood and other traumata) rather than her artistic agenda or her position as strategically and transnationally operating professional artist. Clear deviations from these privatising accounts are publications by Irene Below, LaNitra Michele Berger and Sean O'Toole that attempt to place Stern in art historical, social and political contexts but interestingly were published outside of South Africa.[174]

3.3 Maggie Laubser and the ideology of *voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder*

3.3.1 Maggie Laubser sets the parameters for the reception of her work

Like Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, too, made a substantial contribution to the parameters that determined the reception of her own work, even though this has so far not been examined. I would like to argue that Laubser herself introduced a lot of the themes which played an important role for how her works were to be analysed. The most important ones were proximity to nature, simplicity and authenticity as well as childhood experiences. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 2, those topics were at the core of the reception of settler primitivism in South Africa more generally. I will

170 Wyman, "Irma Stern," p. 21. In her PhD dissertation, LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker) offers an interesting and convincing analysis of the feminist potential and failure of Stern's work: Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, pp. 69–127.

171 Wyman, "Irma Stern," p. 21.

172 Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*, p. 83.

173 Ibid.

174 E.g. Below, "Afrika und Europa." Berger, *Irma Stern*. O'Toole, *Irma Stern*. O'Toole is a South-African author but his book was published by Prestel in Germany.

show in the following discussion how Laubser was able to link them in a Christianly informed self-narrative and thus establish herself at the forefront of South African settler primitivism.

Laubser, like Stern, was attracted to German expressionism during her time in Berlin from 1922 to 1924 and formed a friendship with *Brücke* artist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff that exceeded her sojourn in Germany. A letter from Schmidt-Rottluff to Laubser of 21 January 1931, for example, shows that she sent him photos of her works long after her return to Cape Town. Schmidt-Rottluff then critically judged her progress.[175] In contrast to Stern, however, Laubser subsequently disputed any influence by Schmidt-Rottluff or any other artist as her autonomy was especially important to her.[176] This ties in with Kris and Kurz's myth of the artist "genius" that has no teacher but only learns from nature discussed in Chapter 2.[177] In August 1939, *Die Huisgenoot* published an article by Laubser in which she describes the motivation and nature of her art. She emphasises throughout the text that her art emerged from her feelings and subjective impressions rather than any outside influence:

> I did not learn to paint objects, nor a model, nor to have a solid technique. […] I must be free to paint. […] Nobody can paint according to established rules; it has to be a pleasure from the heart, a personal awakening […] If an artist is honest and sincere to himself, he paints as he feels. […] It is the desire to be simple.[178]

These statements imply that Laubser did not even think that art could or should be taught but rather emerged from the artist's being.[179] In *Our Art*, FEJ Malherbe for instance takes up this thought and praises her "inner vision."[180] In an undated manuscript entitled "What I Remember," Laubser describes that she "began to be interested in modern painting, […] above all the German 'Brücke'," and that even though "the Expressionist art seemed to be exactly what [she] had been looking for," her "approach to art has nearly always remained the same."[181] In this declaration, Laubser again emphasises her independence from any preconceived styles or schools as well as the timelessness of her approach. The latter idea still influenced an obituary for the artist written by Elza Miles in 1973: "The work of Maggie Laubser is from

175 Schmidt-Rottluff, letter to Laubser, 21 January 1931.

176 Compare Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 13. Elizabeth Delmont, too, stresses: "Her striving for freedom and individuality, first noted by her reaction to painting at the Slade, continued in Germany. It was probably due to this conscious emphasis on independence that, in her curriculum vitae, she crossed out the references to Schmidt-Rotluff's [sic] help." Delmont, *Catalogue Raisonnée*, p. 129.

177 Kris & Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, p. 39.

178 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.)

179 Also compare Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 13. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 18.

180 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.

181 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 4.

yesterday, today and tomorrow."[182] This statement provokes a comparison with the supposedly timeless art of the San and can hence be seen as an attempt of indigenising the White settler Laubser. In June 1946, *Die Vaderland* [The Fatherland] published Willem de Sanderes Hendrikz's speech opening an exhibition of Laubser's paintings produced in the Orange Free State and Transvaal Provinces at the Constantia Gallery. In this speech, Hendrikz calls Laubser "essentially indigenous" and "a South African who expresses her feelings about her country in a way that is essentially her own."[183] Hendrikz's speech illustrates how notions of indigeneity and the untaught artist "genius" were merged in the reception of Laubser's work.

Moreover, Laubser's supposed immediacy and authenticity, emerging from her reliance on her own perception rather than on teachers, were appropriated by the Afrikaans-speaking newspapers in their project of describing the specifically Afrikaans character of her work. P Enseel, a pseudonym used by Martin du Toit, who three years later would become head of the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria, in an article for *Die Vaderland* of 1928 calls Laubser a "pioneer" who painted what she felt with her soul.[184] This was probably one of the earliest public reviews of Laubser's works. Du Toit was a very prominent and influential figure in promoting modernist artists in Afrikaner societies. He, for example, organised an exhibition on occasion of the founding of the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* [Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations] in Bloemfontein in December 1929 in which he showed works by Maggie Laubser, JH Pierneef, Anton van Wouw, Gerard Moerdyk and Gordon Leith.[185] His early support of Laubser was crucial for Afrikaners' perception of her works. For example, in a review of Du Toit's 1929 exhibition in Bloemfontein, a *Vaderland* journalist describes Laubser's style as "of the utmost simplicity" and revealing "a sober art, free from all silly sentimentality."[186] This description ties in with the image of the steadfast Afrikaner (as opposed to the Jewish bohemian) artist that was presented earlier.

It is probably in this context that one has to view Zilla M Silva's 1936 categorisation of Laubser as "the first of our proletariat artists."[187] She was essentially received as a down-to-earth *boerevrou* [farmwoman] who "has made a study of the coloured man against the background of his everyday surroundings."[188] Valeska Doll has shown how the French painter Suzanne Valadon's proletarian childhood had caused her the attribution of a *Volkstümlichkeit* [popularity] that in a primitivist context was equated with originality and honesty, and that let her rise into the male avant-garde.[189] A similar investigation with regard to Laubser has not been conducted yet.

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182 Miles, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.)
183 Hendrikz, "Mense." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.)
184 Enseel, "Tentoonstelling van skilderye."
185 Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," p. 171.
186 N.N., "Kunstentoonstelling te Bloemfontein." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.) It is not unlikely that Du Toit wrote this review himself as he often did so.
187 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."
188 Ibid.
189 Doll, *Suzanne Valadon*, p. 39–43.

However, this discussion illustrates the significance of her proclaimed simplicity and authenticity for contemporary Afrikaners. Consequently, the president of the *South African Association of Arts*, Matthys Bokhorst, in a review of an exhibition organised by his own institution in May 1954, describes Laubser as somebody who had "indeed influenced art in South Africa" and whose work had been "an eye-opener" for many Afrikaners.[190] Interestingly, in a 1960 text for the German publication *Museion*, Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, too, describes Laubser as an "extraordinary representative" of "Afrikaner aspirations."[191] Moreover, he casts her as an "upright, soft, friendly, mature woman who senses strongly and simply what is happening around her" – in contrast to Stern, whom he portrays as "a woman of great vitality […] expressing all of life's inner intensity in colours and large, moving forms."[192] He calls both artists "true children of the land/ nation."[193]

Additionally, Laubser's proximity to Christian values let her be considered an artist with a strong Afrikaans identity. Various exhibition reviews emphasise her humility or closeness to earth and nature as well as her naïve but sincere approach.[194] FEJ Malherbe even speaks of her intense "communion with nature."[195] These terms imply a Christian context in which her works were being viewed. Laubser was interested in Christian Science as is clearly demonstrated by the number of annotated *Christian Science Journal* issues (dating from 1942 to 1964) as well as other Christian journals (e.g. *Crusader*, *Daily Blessing*, *Daily Bread*, *Religious Science*, *Science of Thought Review*, in total about 100 items) that she owned.[196] In "Waroom en Hoe Ek Skilder" [Why and How I Paint] from 1939, Laubser describes how her Christian beliefs rendered the basis for her art:

> When I look at the wonderful creation that constantly speaks to me through the harmony of colours and shapes, the wonderful combination of unity and eternity fills me with a great longing and urge to express what I experience and so to praise and worship my Creator.[197]

She clearly describes how the divine origin of the South African landscape surrounding her was manifested in her paintings. In line with the myth of the "genius" artist

190 Bokhorst, "The Inspiration of Maggie Laubser."
191 Von Moltke, "Zwei südafrikanische Expressionisten," p. 263. (My translation, original German on p. 271.) Von Moltke was a lecturer in art history at the Michaelis School of Art and in 1962 became the founding director of Kunsthalle Bielefeld – a position in which he acquired two works of Stern's for the art gallery's collection. I could not find any further evidence of a reception of Laubser's work in Germany.
192 Ibid., pp. 263–264. (My translation, original German on p. 271.)
193 Ibid., p. 263. (My translation, original German on p. 272.)
194 E.g. Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud." Bokhorst, "The Inspiration of Maggie Laubser." N.N., "Tribute to Cape Artist."
195 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
196 Held at SU Ms 79/1/19–118.
197 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."

inspired by nature, she also sees this divineness as a reason for not following a particular school or teacher and declares that, instead of looking back to old masters, she looked at "the creation around us to create."[198] However, Laubser still seems to have endeavoured to place her work within an art historical context, likening her approach to that of Vincent van Gogh. In an undated manuscript with a similar focus as "Waroom en Hoe Ek Skilder," entitled "On Art," she describes her adoration of the Dutch painter. She places "his work above his contemporaries, Monet, Manet, Renoir, Degas, Whistler" as he was "conscious of God, therefore his ideals were higher, and had more vitality."[199] In another text, the manuscript for a radio speech giving an account of "her country," Laubser links her divine inspiration to the specificity of the South African land and exclaims:

> Sometimes my friends in Europe asked me whether I did not want to return to the South African sun, and every time my answer was no – no, not to the South African sun, but to the spaces of the South African landscape! This love for the spaces gives me a sense of freedom and liberty […] All these wonders of creation make me aware of the endlessness of everything.[200]

She thus designs a Christianly informed self-narrative that embraces artistic independence ranking nature over art schools, characteristics such as simplicity and authenticity rooted in common Afrikaner self-conceptions and the divinity of the specific South African landscape. The fourth topic shaping this narrative are references to childhood. For example, in "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder," Laubser recounts common reactions to her paintings of cats und ducks. She repeats the following conversation held during an exhibition in Cape Town: "Someone asked me […] 'Why do you paint ducks? That's only suitable for a child's room…' My answer was: 'Then I will always be a child. Because I love ducks, I must paint them.'"[201] In general, references to childhood or childlike ways of seeing and painting were important concepts in Laubser's self-portrayal. In texts such as "What I Remember," she consciously roots her art in childhood experiences. For example, she writes:

> I have always thought it a great privilege to be born on a farm. From earliest infancy the child accustoms his eye to wide spaces and deep horizons. Unconsciously within himself he develops a sense of security and possession, both already innate in every child. I was one of those fortunate children, who are awakened every morning by the different sounds of nature, and who could watch the animals come home every night to their kraal; and they are among my earliest recollections and with joy I shall always

198 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
199 Laubser, "On Art," p. 4.
200 Laubser, "Dit is mei kontrei," p. 5. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)
201 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

> remember them, for these farm memories have formed the basis upon which I later built up all the visions which constitute my art.[202]

She continues to list the things she saw around her parents' farm – such as cacti, waterlilies, cows, geese, ducklings and Coloured women carrying babies on their backs – that she would later depict in her paintings. Esmé Berman takes up this narrative when she writes in *The Story of South African Painting* that "an overwhelming love of nature and a sincere affection for the Coloured peasants with whom she had shared her childhood escapades conditioned her subsequent choice of subjectmatter and gave spiritual depth to her unusual compositions."[203] In "Waroom en Hoe Ek Skilder," too, Laubser professes that she only painted what she saw every day on the farm that she loved living on: workers, animals, geese and ducks.[204] In line with her appreciation of Van Gogh and her art historical self-entrenchment in "On Art," Laubser also explains that she admired the work of Henri Matisse as it "is very simple, and he is often compared to a child. His reply to that is, 'It is just that vision of a child which I am trying to get in my work.'"[205] By citing Matisse's response, Laubser implies that she shared his appreciation of childish vision. As mentioned before, the supposed similarity between women and children was a dominant topos in *Neue Frau* as well as modernist discourses at the time[206] and proved beneficial to women settler primitivists' careers in the early 20th century.

3.3.2 *Voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder*: Afrikaner variations of the *Neue Frau*

When positioning Maggie Laubser within the discourse on the *Neue Frau* in South Africa, it is fruitful to consult the *voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder* ideologies that offer more specific role models for Afrikaner women in the early 20th century. While the *voortrekkervrou* was an idealisation of Afrikaner women standing by their men's side in the brave and courageous project of finding new land unoccupied by British colonisers and fighting its indigenous inhabitants, the *volksmoeder* icon was strategically employed by Afrikaner suffragists in their fight for enfranchisement.[207] The *volksmoeder* was thereby stylised as the transferation of the *voortrekkervrou* into modern, post-trek times.

The image of the *voortrekkervrou* gained momentum in the Afrikaner nationalist project in the immediate aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War. In *Fields of Vision. Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, Stephen

202 Laubser, "What I remember."
203 Berman, *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 59.
204 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
205 Laubser, "On Art," pp. 4–5.
206 Also compare Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, p. 47.
207 E.g. Vincent, "A Cake of Soap."

Daniels writes that "imperial nationalists, almost by definition, have been intent to annex the home-lands of others in their identity myths."[208] In Afrikaner nationalism, this relates especially to the *voortrekker* [pioneer] myth, i.e., to the hardships endured during the progressive eastward movement and cultivation of "hostile" land in the first half of the 19th century.[209] The fact that this land was usually inhabited by other peoples – Black Bantu-speaking farmers as well as hunter-gatherers such as the San – does not form part of this identity myth. In the process of appropriating allegedly unclaimed land, the *voortrekker* woman was usually awarded with a "determined courage" in clearing the way "shoulder to shoulder with her husband" and generally embodied a mixture of heroism and homeliness.[210] In his monograph on Maggie Laubser of 1944, the Afrikaner artist Johannes Meintjes writes that "it is alleged that the joint struggle for self-preservation of men and women during the Great Trek contributed greatly to the independence of South Africa's wife."[211] Louise Vincent describes contemporary perceptions of *voortrekker* women as "tough and self-reliant, they had done everything for themselves, from housekeeping to dressmaking and their singularity was demonstrated in even the most mundane of their chores."[212] This shows that the *voortrekkervrou* was considered an important partner to her husband in the Afrikaner nationalist project even though her qualities in the end remained in the domestic realm and conformed to traditional ideas of intrinsic femininity.

As part of the nation-building process of the Union of South Africa, the *volksmoeder* ideology emerged as a continuation of the *voortrekkervrou*. In a contemporary article by Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen on a talk on women's franchise in Cape Town's Labour Hall, the authors cite the speaker, a Mrs Walsh, who explained how "the same force which made a woman a good mother in her home, made her a good worker for the State" and that "the great mother-spirit was a vital factor in a nation – it sought invariably to do what was best not only for the children, but for all the children of the State."[213] Supporting female stereotypes, the *volksmoeder* ideal thus recurred to traditional domestic ideas of family and motherhood and transferred them to the greater project of nourishing and fostering the Afrikaner nation. Elsabé Brink describes the *volksmoeder* as demonstrating traditional "feminine" virtues such as kindness, gentleness, care, frugality and discipline combined with a "sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness (*huismoederlikheid*), nurturance of talents, integrity, virtue and [...] nurturing of the volk."[214]

She bases this description on the 1918 publication *Die Boervrouw, Moeder van Haar Volk* [The Boer Woman, Mother of her People] by the Afrikaner nationalist and Free State journalist Willem Postma that was commissioned by the *Nasionale*

208 Daniels, *Fields of Vision*, p. 5.
209 Compare Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, pp. 23–24.
210 Contemporary press quoted in Du Toit, "Framing Volksmoeders," p. 60.
211 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)
212 Vincent, "A Cake of Soap," p. 11.
213 Rozilda, "Freedom Brings Responsibility."
214 Brink, "Man-made," pp. 274, 280.

Helpmekaar Vereniging [National Helping Hand Society] and the *Kultuurvereniging van die Reddingsdaadbond* [Cultural Society of the Bond of Heroism] and propagated the *volksmoeder* as an ideal for a young generation of women.[215] Even though the image of the *volksmoeder* had been established before Postma's publication, *Die Boervrouw* officially articulated this glorification of Afrikaner women as a new role model for Afrikaner girls.[216] Lou-Marié Kruger shows how, in 1919, Mabel Malherbe built onto Postma's endeavour when founding the first Afrikaans women's magazine, *Die Boerevrou*, which was made by women for women.[217] Kruger reads Malherbe's editorial to the first edition "as a call to Afrikaans women to participate in thinking about or negotiating the notion or identity of the *boerevrou* […] within the parameters of the *volksmoeder* discourse."[218] This illustrates how, like the *Neue Frau*, the *volksmoeder* ideology was created and propagated by male and female authors as well as on an institutional level.

3.3.3 Reception of Maggie Laubser as *Neue Frau* and *volksmoeder*

As described above, the defining virtues of the *volksmoeder* were kindness, gentleness, modesty, discipline, housewifeliness, sense of religion, self-sacrifice, bravery, love of freedom and self-reliance. The latter characteristics were clearly informed by the image of an ideal *voortrekkervrou*. Qualities such as these were often described in reviews concerning Laubser's work as well as her personality. In 1945, Gideon Malherbe published a critique in *Die Vaderland*, in which he declares that Laubser's "life story reads like that of some mediaeval martyr. Despite the most prejudiced, bitter and thoughtless opposition, she has ultimately achieved due recognition of her remarkable talent."[219] Malherbe's description of Laubser's virtually religious self-sacrifice on her journey evoking images related to the Great Trek links the myth of the misunderstood artist "genius" to that of the *voortrekkervrou*. This idea is clearly articulated further down in Malherbe's text. With reference to her achievement of introducing modernist styles of painting into the narrow-minded South African art scene, he adds:

> In Maggie Laubser, the Afrikanerdom may find another artist who can represent them with distinction abroad. […] That it may be done by a woman will not seem a coincidence to us if we consider the history of our people. […] As the voortrekkervroue have often taken the lead, she puts us to shame with her fearless guidance.[220]

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215 Postma, *Die Boervrouw*.
216 Compare Brink, "Man-made," p. 280.
217 Kruger, "Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie*."
218 Ibid., p. 221.
219 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)
220 Ibid.

Laubser was never married and did not have children which, at first sight, seems contradictory to this image of her leading the family to a new and safer home. The analogy becomes clearer, though, when considering the *voortrekkervrou* as *volksmoeder* taking on important duties within the nation. Motherhood is transferred from the nuclear family to a greater responsibility for the Afrikaner people. In the first monograph on Laubser of 1944, Johannes Meintjes writes that Laubser was facing the difficulty of being a woman as it was tough fulfilling the duties of a mother while also being a great artist who needed to live an unrestricted life in order to practice her art.[221] This seemingly controversial remark shows how the nationalist role as mothers of a (very distinct) people could also free women artists from conventional expectations of caring for actual children. Meintjes continues that "it is interesting that there is not a single good woman artist in South Africa who is married in the true sense of the word."[222] It is unclear what he means by "true sense of the word," but it is possible that many South African women artists chose to remain unmarried in order to stay legally independent.[223] Until the introduction of the Matrimonial Affairs Act in 1953, the husband was the sole administrator of the married couple's property and income. For any professional woman, this meant that she was not allowed to make any independent decisions about her material assets.

A concept that is significant for both the *Neue Frau* and the *volksmoeder* discourses is that of harmony. This is probably the word most frequently used for describing the specific quality of Laubser's art. As one of the writers introducing this theme, Martin du Toit writes in 1928 that "Laubser's composition of landscape and figure is of a special quality, as is her colour harmony."[224] Two years later, the Stellenbosch-based art critic and scholar AC Bouman adds that the harmony of Laubser's colours "is an individual possession" und thus links it to the individuality of her art.[225] Like this much-quoted individuality, Laubser herself, too, in "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder" emphasises the importance of harmony in her perception and describes how she saw in it the work of a heavenly creator prompting her artmaking.[226] As cited above, Denis Godfrey describes Laubser's works as characterised by "fey, delicious slabs of colour and dream scenes" and evokes connotations of transcendence in her colour harmonies.[227] Nap de Bruyn refers to the "great emotional experience, [...] the sudden awakening, which may be described as *invoeling* [empathy]" in Laubser's harmonic colours.[228] To him, it caused emotional redemption and salvation.

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221 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 44.

222 Ibid., p. 44. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

223 Laubser, for example, early in her career, denied her benefactor and friend J.H.A. Balwé's proposal to marry him because she considered her art more important. She stuck to this conviction throughout her life. Compare Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, pp. 26–27.

224 Enseel, "Tentoonstelling van skilderye." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

225 Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

226 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."

227 Godfrey, "Collector's Notebook."

228 De Bruyn, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

This shows again how closely interpretations of Laubser's works were often linked with Christian or mystic themes.

Meintjes, on the other hand, employs Laubser's colour harmonies in order to compare her to Paula Modersohn-Becker. As mentioned above, Modersohn-Becker as well as Käthe Kollwitz were regularly instanced to position Stern and Laubser on an international level. Meintjes writes that Paula Modersohn-Becker's "work shows more than superficial similarities to Maggie Laubser's. She has the same great colour sensitivity, simplicity, intimacy, loving approach and soft mood."[229] Interestingly, for Modersohn-Becker, too, motherhood has played an important role in her reception even though she never raised children.[230] He continues with reference to Käthe Kollwitz: "Like Maggie Laubser, she brings along the greatest sympathy for the workers and shows them in an affecting way."[231] He thus also refers to characteristics such as kindness and care that are amongst the list of *volksmoeder* traits. AC Verloren van Themaat in 1931 writes that Laubser "paints nature as she sees it around herself; the children, the women, the old shepherd, the landscape, the flowers. But she weaves in her own soul, her love for human kind [sic]."[232] Her simplicity and modesty were also praised by writers such as Hendrikz, Ballot and other authors writing for different English and Afrikaans newspapers.[233]

As described in detail above, another *volksmoeder* trait that was prominently discussed by Laubser herself as well as by the contemporary press was her individuality or alleged freedom from any schools or styles. In her essay "Biographie und Geschlechterdifferenz" [Biographies and Gender Gaps], the German art historian Beate Reese argues that, in women artists' biographies, women's individual fate is usually recounted as the gradual unfolding of a personality that independently cuts her way through a male-dominated environment owing to her feminist virtues.[234] Even though this is very subtle in Laubser's case, who was not compared to male artists to the extent that Stern was and who did not engage in any gender discourse, Laubser clearly positioned herself as an independent artist with an individual expression. In "What I remember," she explains that, when she was younger, painting was not thought an appropriate profession for a woman and that she had to struggle to overcome this restriction.[235] This narrative of Laubser's journey from her parents' farm first to Cape Town, then back to the farm, to Europe, back to the farm again and then, finally, into her life as an independent and successful artist is retold in the

229 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
230 E.g. Feldhaus, "Die (Re-)Produktion des Weiblichen."
231 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
232 Verloren van Themaat, "Een Middag."
233 N.N., "Maggie Laubser hou geslaagde uitstalling." Hendrikz, "Mense." N.N., "Maggie Laubser Exhibition." N.N., "Simple Art of Maggie Laubser." Head, "She Never Lost Her Sense of Wonder." Winder, "laid to rest." Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*, pp. 110, 153.
234 Reese, "Biographie und Geschlechterdifferenz," p. 177.
235 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 4. Laubser's aversion to convention is also quoted in Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."

biographies by Van Rooyen, Marais and Ballot.[236] Again, it ties in with Kris and Kurz's rendition of the artist myth in which "the youthful talent asserts himself against the difficulties that his choice of profession faces by his immediate surroundings."[237] In *Our Art*, FEJ Malherbe links Laubser's perseverance with character traits of the ideal *voortrekkervrou*:

> Maggie Laubser is fortunate in that her poetic vision has remained constant through the years of disparagement and derision yielding place to acceptance by a circle of admirers, and finally, public acknowledgement and praise. It is because the artist herself has remained constant in her innocence and simplicity.[238]

Laubser's claim to individuality, too, was enforced by the contemporary press. For example, in an article entitled "Expressionistic," the unknown author writes that Laubser "is an artist who thinks for herself and who does not merely copy the ideas of others."[239] They add that "for this reason the public often finds it [her work] difficult to understand, for it is completely different from the work of any other artist."[240] Deane Anderson refers to Laubser's extremely individual "personal idiom" and consistent "individual expression" and an author whose name abbreviates to CS describes her work as "a personal statement," "delightful world of fantasy," "seemingly naïve abstraction" and of a "strong indigenous South African quality which marks this artist, historically with Pierneef, as the most important contributor to the development of South African art as we now see it."[241] Significantly, both artists – Pierneef and Laubser – were Afrikaners. FEF Malherbe, in *Our Art*, establishes a similar link between indigeneity and Afrikaner culture when he writes:

> Laubser has interpreted the South African scene for us in a new manner. It stands to her great credit that she has applied a foreign style here in a purely Afrikaans spirit and in such a way that her work is part of the purest indigenous and most original art we have.[242]

The description of Laubser as naïve and childlike resonated, on the one hand, with her own references to childhood memories and childlike modes of perception and, on the other, with imagined similarities between women and children in *Neue Frau* descriptions such as Hildebrandt's.[243] Again, this was a concept taken up by the South African press. For example, the author of a review of a *New Group* show in 1941

236 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*. Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*.
237 Kris & Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, p. 56. (My translation, original German on p. 273.)
238 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 38.
239 N.N., "Expressionistic."
240 Ibid.
241 C.S., "Laubser looks back."
242 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
243 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 24.

attributes Laubser's landscapes a "childlike verve."[244] Laubser's fellow artists Gregoire Boonzaier and Walter Battiss, too, respectively refer to her childlike depictions of clouds and her "childish excitement on her return from the Free State, where she saw sheep and shepherds in the field."[245] FEJ Malherbe describes Laubser as "a person [...] who has always remained simple and sincere and spontaneously open to the beauty around her, in which she takes a childlike delight."[246] Neville Dubow likens the work of the Coloured artist Gladys Mgudlandlu to Laubser's and characterises it as a "fusion of childlike conviction and strength with an aggressive but pure inner spirituality."[247]

Other articles refer to a "child-like truth" that their authors see filtering through Laubser's works.[248] Interestingly, Gideon Malherbe and Deane Anderson questioned Laubser's supposedly childlike perspective. While Malherbe in 1945 spells out explicitly that, "in spite of this reckless expression and simplicity, there is nothing naive or primitive in Miss Laubser's work,"[249] Anderson sees Laubser as strategically employing implications of a childlike outlook in her art: "Behind the persuasive naivetés of her engagingly innocent variations on the themes of landscape, child and flower, there lies a world of calculation."[250] I would agree with Anderson's argument that, in her childlike renditions of landscapes, animals and people, Laubser aligned herself with contemporary ideas on primitivism as described in Chapters 1 and 2 and made use of women's preferential position within this current. Her regular references to childhood experiences certainly support such an argument.

I have also shown above how her proximity to nature played an important role in Laubser's self-portrayal. This, too, sat well within the contemporary *volksmoeder* and *Neue Frau* discourses and was repeatedly taken up by the press. For example, in 1937, Louise van Rensburg characterises Laubser as Erda, the heroic goddess symbolising mother earth.[251] This is an interesting analogy as it combines ideas of women as closely associated with nature and notions of nurturing motherhood. It therefore illustrates the connection between the *volksmoeder* ideology and the significance of national soil. About a decade later, in his opening speech, Willem de Sanderes Hendrikz claims that Laubser's "work is just as real, as clean, as lively and as tough as the trees that stand in our plains."[252] This remark, again, reveals the nationalist agenda behind the custom of discussing the special relationship between Laubser and her work and specifically South African landscapes or nature. Later texts discuss

244 N.N., "New Group show has vitality."
245 Boonzaier, "Introduction," n.p. Battiss, "Maggie was 'n ware staatmaker."
246 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
247 Dubow, "Mgudlandlu exhibition." This statement also clearly has a racist quality.
248 E.g. Dekker, "In Standpunte," p. 11. Van Broekhuizen, "Maggie Laubser and Guido Gezelle," p. 19. P.H.W., "A Woman Painter of Maturity." Alexander, "Maggie Laubser stel ten oon." Liebenberg, "n Kuiertjie by Maggie Laubser."
249 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
250 Anderson, "Individual Idiom."
251 Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud."
252 Hendrikz, "Mense." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)

Laubser's bond to nature in more gendered terms. For instance, in his 1974 biography, Johann van Rooyen claims that her "paintings did not attempt to expound great intellectual theses, but recorded her spontaneous response to rural life."[253] Like the *New Group* exhibition review cited above, Van Rooyen contrasts Laubser's proximity to nature and farm life with the traditionally male stereotype of intellectual art.

References to Laubser's proximity to nature were often linked to her life on a farm that symbolised a certain Afrikaner self-reliance as idealised in the *volksmoeder*. With respect to German settler women in Southern Africa, Anette Dietrich describes colonial role models of the farmer's wife or the brave farmwoman as promising a greater freedom to women than more conservative gender stereotypes in the mother nation.[254] The farmwoman lived, whether married or widowed or sometimes even completely autonomously, on a farm and had to cope with the struggles of the new land. She represented purity, national values and a nostalgia for more nature-based modes of living. The emphasis on Laubser's life as child and later artist on a farm in her own accounts as well as in contemporary press reports is closely linked with primitivist ideals propagated by the settler artist and her peers. It also shows a clear position within the transnational ramifications of South African art at the time. For example, in an interview with Jan Schütte towards the end of her life, Laubser says: "I lived on a farm and have always been together with nature. […] Everything I know and am aware of taught me the farm … and not overseas study!"[255] Similarly, in "An artist devoted to farmlife," Zilla M Silva writes that "Maggie Loubser [sic], an artist known in cultural circles in both Europe and South Africa, finds almost all she wants to paint on her father's Cape farm."[256]

In contrast to the cosmopolitan Irma Stern, Laubser's portrayal as rooted in the soil and authentically South African hence benefited from her image as a farmer's daughter.[257] This becomes obvious in remarks such as those by the author of an article entitled "Eerste Afrikaanse Vroue-Skilder" [First Afrikaner Woman Painter]: "Miss Loubser [sic] has worked in recent years on a quiet farm near Cape Town and, like a true artist, she has not sought her inspiration elsewhere but in the life immediately around her."[258] A Transvaal journalist with the pseudonym Amelia writes in 1949 that Laubser "worked and studied for ten years in Europe, but today lives quietly at the Strand, where she spends her time gardening, housekeeping and painting."[259] In addition to the contrast between studying in Europe and housekeeping at the

253 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 22.
254 Dietrich, *Weiße Weiblichkeiten*, pp. 262–265.
255 Quoted in Miles, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
256 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."
257 The fact that Laubser lived on a farm which inspired most of her art works is for example mentioned in N.N., "Kunstentoonstelling te Bloemfontein." Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." Verloren van Themaat, "Een Middag." Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud." Herd, "Maggie Laubser."
258 N.N., "Die Eerste Afrikaanse Vroue-Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
259 Amelia, "Party for Miss Maggie Laubser." A similar account is presented in N.N., "Maggie Laubser Paints in Quiet Strand Studio."

Strand, Amelia's text also exemplifies the *volksmoeder* and *Neue Frau* idealisation of combining professional self-fulfilment and housewifeliness. Strikingly, gardening and housekeeping are listed before painting. Silva, too, describes Laubser's everyday life in the following way:

> At the moment she is co-ordinating art and farming. When the day's work is done she will settle down by candle-light to Aldous Huxley or Beverley Nichols: she is a skilled horsewoman and wields a needle with the hand of an artist, but her life's ambition has always been to become a great singer.[260]

3.4 Conclusion

The preceding discussion has shown that it is fruitful to position Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern within the *Neue Frau* discourse originating in Weimar Germany during the first half of the 1920s. The *Neue Frau* was an image largely propagated and spread by the media and hence reached an enormous dissemination in contemporary culture. It cannot be considered an absolute term but an idea that was charged from multiple perspectives due to the interrelation of women's life realities and media images of a new type of woman that constantly reacted to one another. Additionally, the *Neue Frau* myth incorporated emancipatory motivations as women saw in it an opportunity to break free of gender-specific patterns. It was also specifically applied to women artists in a number of texts recurring to feminine stereotypes such as motherhood, proximity to nature, intuition, harmony, sensitivity, emotionality and childlikeness. Employing these characteristics to argue both ways – for and against the eligibility of women to be successful artists – the male and female authors stuck to traditional myths of intrinsic femininity. Due to their proximity to primitivist ideals, such stereotypes could also be employed by women artists to their advantage, as in the case of the South African pioneers Stern and Laubser. Returning to an extremely conservative and patriarchal art scene after their sojourns in Berlin in the early 1920s, feminine ideals expressed in the *Neue Frau* myth helped them prompt the change from the prevalence of romantic realism to modernist artforms. Aiding circumstances can be found in the facts that there was no male modernist avant-garde that had to be permeated, that modernism was comparatively late to arrive in South Africa and that cheap Black labour enabled White women to rid themselves of their domestic tasks. Making use of this, Stern and Laubser strategically incorporated *Neue Frau* ideals into their self-narratives in order to boost their careers.

Rather than showcasing herself as a female pioneer, Stern entered the South African art scene presenting herself as a member of German modernism and used these transnational relations to legitimise her role as a painter who had already been accepted by the male avant-garde in Europe and was now confidently continuing her

260 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."

career in South Africa. In Germany, she made use of her symbolic capital as South African artist and expert on "primitive" cultures that gave her an advantage over male European primitivists such as Max Pechstein or Paul Gauguin. She quickly generated attention and a number of favourable press reports were published. The latter were extensively translated into English and Afrikaans by Stern's supporters and reprinted in South African newspapers and other publications. They resorted to ideas of intrinsic femininity such as intuition, sensitivity and emotionality and stressed her South African indigeneity. In clever self-portrayals that were largely appropriated and reproduced by the press, Stern additionally described the strong support given to her by recognised authorities such as Pechstein, the art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt or the critic Fritz Stahl. Moreover, she used the negative press her first exhibitions generated in Sout Africa to present herself as the misunderstood artist "genius." This myth, too, has been frequently reproduced in biographical texts on the artist. In general, monographs on Stern and Laubser that have appeared in South Africa up to now re-privatise the artists and do not interpret their works resorting to socio-political contexts but preferentially offer psychobiographical readings. Stern's weight and her supposedly unfulfilled love/ sex life have thus remained amongst the main points for interpretations of her work in South Africa. Additionally, the two women are often contrasted in comparisons shaped by feminine stereotypes that see Laubser as the gentle, harmony-bringing farmwoman and Stern as the furious pioneer of South African modernism.

Laubser, too, made a substantial contribution to the parameters determining the reception of her own work. In line with common artists' myths described by Kris and Kurz, she presented herself as an artist relying on her feelings and impressions of her natural surroundings rather than on outside influences provided by other artists or art schools. Nevertheless, she still sought an art historical contextualisation of her work and related it to Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse. Linked to her inspiration directly taken from nature were ideas of immediacy and authenticity that were also employed by Afrikaans-speaking newspapers in their project of describing the specifically Afrikaans character of her work. In general, notions of indigeneity and the untaught artist "genius" became merged in the reception of Laubser's work. The importance of Christian beliefs for her art production was another factor that let her be considered an artist with a strong Afrikaans identity. Overall, she designed a Christianly informed self-narrative that embraced artistic independence, characteristics such as simplicity and authenticity rooted in common Afrikaner self-conceptions, the divinity of specifically South African landscapes, and childhood memories in which her parents' farm played an important role. Moreover, in her deliberately childlike renditions of South African landscapes, animals and people, Laubser consciously complied with contemporary settler primitivist ideals and benefited from women's preferential position within this current.

Adhering to images of the *voortrekkervrou* and the *volksmoeder* – Afrikaner variations of the *Neue Frau* – the press took up a lot of the issues featured in Laubser's self-narrative. The *voortrekkervrou* was considered an important partner to her husband in the Afrikaner nationalist project even though her qualities in the end

remained in the domestic realm and, again, conformed to traditional ideas of intrinsic femininity. In the *volksmoeder* ideology as the post-trek continuation of the *voortrekker-vrou*, motherhood was transferred from the nuclear family to a greater responsibility for the Afrikaner people – which had the potential of freeing women artists from conventional expectations of caring for actual children. The defining virtues of the *volksmoeder* were kindness, gentleness, modesty, discipline, housewifeliness, sense of religion, self-sacrifice, bravery, love of freedom and self-reliance. All of these qualities that fit closely with Laubser's self-narrative as a Christian, Afrikaner farmwoman were frequently instanced by reviewers of Laubser's work as well as of her personality.

4 EXCURSUS: NETWORKS

Throughout my discussion, it has become obvious that the emergence of settler primitivism in South Africa was intertwined with a restructuring of the national art scene. It is therefore worth examing how settler primitivists got organised in different networks that played a major role in this reformation. Said networks can largely be categorised into four groups, with some overlaps: women's networks, Jewish diaspora networks, Afrikaner networks and the foremostly younger generation consolidating in the *New Group*. In the following excursus, I will describe each network and its most important members and show how they interacted. While the Jewish diaspora and women's networks were mainly formed in order to generally support the careers of their members that were usually marginalised in mainstream society, the Afrikaner network was more identity-based and also had a political/ nationalist component. The younger generation organised in the *New Group*, on the other hand, intended to cause a change in the conservative, rigid and rusty structures governing the art scene in South Africa and to professionalise its frameworks. It should be noted that my research did not show that the topic of primitivism featured as a point of discussion in any of the networks discussed below. Even though settler primitivism was hugely significant for the emergence of modernism in South Africa, it was not a uniting interest that resulted in specific networks. Rather than artistic interests relating to content or style, networks were born from identity-based or structural alliances – which is to say that members were supported either because they belonged to the same ethnic or gender group or because they strove for the same structural changes. This is emphasised by the fact that all networks discussed below were not only relevant for modernists but also for traditionally working artists – such as the *New Group* for Ruth Prowse or the Jewish diaspora for Moses Kottler. Nevertheless, for the careers of the settler primitivists who affected the change to modernism in South Africa's fine arts, these networks were of great importance.

4.1 Women's networks

The following section gives an overview of the way South African women supported each other, especially from the 1920s to 1940s. I take Irma Stern as an example, as she most markedly relied on the support of other women such as Freda Feldman, Hilda Purwitsky, Roza van Gelderen or Thelma Gutsche. Other women artists such as

Maggie Laubser and Cecil Higgs were less actively involved in women's networks than in the respective Afrikaner and *New Group* networks. Except for the social researcher and author Thelma Gutsche, all the women in Stern's network listed here were Jewish which means that there is a considerable overlap of women's and Jewish diaspora networks in this case. However, it is not feasible to subsume the women's network around Stern into Jewish networks for a two-fold reason. Firstly, Jewish networks surrounding male artists such as Lippy Lipshitz, Moses Kottler or HV Meyerowitz were not nearly as pronounced as the mutual support of women such as Stern, Millin, Purwitsky, Van Gelderen and Feldman. For example, even though Purwitsky and Van Gelderen also endorsed Lipshitz, their promotion of the sculptor does not come close to that of Stern. Additionally, as can be inferred from Lipshitz's diaries, while the male Jewish sculptors Meyerowitz, Lipshitz and Kottler initially supported each other, they soon shifted to regarding each other as competitors.[1] I am convinced that in women's networks such as Stern's, gender did matter and that the women discussed below deliberately supported each other as women.

Secondly, the feminist Thelma Gutsche played an important role for the promotion of Stern's as well as Millin's works even though she was not Jewish. Gutsche took a strong interest in Irma Stern and her career from the mid-1940s. With a strong academic background in film studies and philosophy and a PhD on the influence of European and American cinema on South African audiences, Gutsche was an important advocate of the women's emancipation movement and an active member of the National Council of Women in South Africa, becoming the Johannesburg branch president in 1950. In this capacity, she for example declared her "full support to 'Women for Strife' – strife against discrimination in all its forms: sex, color, race, culture, education, religion."[2] She also showed a profound interest in art and was a member of the Africana Museum Advisory Committee, a founding member, trustee and later honorary life president of the *Association of Friends of the Johannesburg Art Gallery*, member of the consultative committee of the Bensusan Museum of Photography as well as founding member of the Simon van der Stel Foundation. In a 1955 portrait of Gutsche, Corrie Dreyer describes an exhibition organised by her on behalf of the National Council of Women that included works of 300 "women achievers."[3] Unfortunately, the article does not list the participating artists.

Regular correspondence archived in the Thelma Gutsche Collection housed at the Library of Johannesburg shows that Gutsche and Stern were in close contact from 1946 until at least 1960. For example, Gutsche helped Stern with articles the latter published, opened her exhibitions or helped her organise shows in Johannesburg

1 E.g. Lipshitz's friendship with Kottler and Meyerowitz is stressed in his diary entries of 18 January 1924 and 21 August 1927, diaries 1920 to 1928. His dislike of them is articulated in his diary entries of 6 July 1936, 17 July 1936, 14 August 1936, 17 October 1936 and 9 April 1931, diaries 1928 to 1932 and diaries 1932 to 1936.

2 Gutsche, *Civilisation and the Interrupted Sex*, pp. 2–3.

3 Dreyer, "The Woman Who Did It."

and abroad.[4] Together, they planned to make a "pan African" film and to publish a book of Stern's drawings with Gutsche's publishing house Silver Leaf Books.[5] In 1952, Gutsche asked Stern for a print to be published in a book by the Institute of Race Relations whose board member Gutsche was.[6] Stern gave her the print as a birthday present.[7] A manuscript entitled "Ambassador for Africa" that Thelma Gutsche sent to the editor of the weekly magazine *The Outspan* on 12 August 1947 is significant for understanding how she intended to further Stern's career. She describes Stern as a strong personality that had already become apparent in her childhood rebellion against her oppressive father – a metaphor she uses for Stern's following struggle as an artist:

> Her father could throw her things [i.e. painting utensils] out of the window every day of his life – always she would get them back – nothing would stop her – she was going to do what she wanted. That little girl was Irma Stern, today unquestionably South Africa's greatest artist. The life of Irma Stern has proved one of continuous struggle. From those early days when she fought the unrelenting opposition of her parents, onwards throughout her career, she has stood embattled against forces which have attempted to dissuade her from a self-avowed purpose. Irma Stern wanted to paint from the days when she was first conscious of independent volition.[8]

So far, this account fits in with Stern's self-narrative of the misunderstood artist "genius" presented in her article "My Critics" of 1930.[9] However, Gutsche continues with misleading information about Stern's early career: she claims that she had studied all over Europe, that she had excelled over everyone else wherever she studied, that she had still been unsuccessful in Europe since her art was considered too "avant-garde and revolutionary."[10] It is interesting that this description does not correspond with Stern's self-portrayal as acknowledged member of German modernism taken up by most other contemporary journalists. Since Gutsche and Stern were working so closely together, however, it is likely that Stern was aware of Gutsche's exaggerated and sometimes even untruthful description which departed from her own narrative. It is possible that Stern, now that she was firmly acknowledged in South Africa, agreed to testing a stronger and more conventional tale of the "misunderstood artist." As explicated above, Beate Reese has shown how women's individual fate is usually

4 E.g. Stern, letters to Gutsche of 4 August 1946, 14 June 1947, 4 May 1956. Gutsche, letter to Stern, December 1948.
5 E.g. Stern, letters to Gutsche of 9 September 1946, 18 October 1946, 12 February 1947; exchange of letters between Stern and Gutsche of 13 May 1948 to 13 November 1949. Unfortunately, the scope of the "pan African" film is not mentioned in those letters.
6 Gutsche, letter to Stern, 31 July 1953.
7 Gutsche, letter to Stern, 11 August 1953.
8 Gutsche, "Ambassador For Africa."
9 Stern, "My Critics."
10 Gutsche, "Ambassador For Africa."

recounted as the gradual unfolding of a personality that independently cuts her way through a male-dominated environment owing to her feminist virtues.[11] Gutsche's approach fits with this custom and Stern might therefore have found it an interesting extension of her own report. However, there is no evidence that Gutsche's article was ever published or that Stern intended to continue this new narrative. Nevertheless, Gutsche influenced public perception of Stern's life and career until after her death: in November 1966, she supplied Esmé Berman with information on Stern for the comprehensive entry on the latter in Berman's influential *Dictionary*.[12]

In addition to other women's projects such as Stern's drawings book or Nadine Gordimer's first publication *Face to Face* (1949), Gutsche also planned to publish a book with short stories by Sarah Gertrude Millin with her publishing house.[13] Millin, on the other hand, brought Gutsche in contact with personalities that could be of help to Silver Leaf Books.[14] She often publicly spoke about issues relating to women's emancipation. For example, in 1911, she published a number of articles that portrayed different female stereotypes such as "The Colonial Girl," "The Woman Who Would Get On" or "The Vrouw" in which she made fun of a "Johannesburg Man" lecturing the male narrator on clichés of women.[15] In spite of its humorous approach, however, the text still vividly repeats and enforces stereotypes. In 1912, she wrote further articles in which a male narrator is in conversation with "The Johannesburg Girl" about men, women and partnership.[16] These conversations portray the contemporary demand of (young) women to be considered equal to men. By speaking as the man, who, in this conversation, succumbs to his female counterpart, Millin humorously frames women's struggle for emancipation as part of a flirtation between men and women. Although she stresses the seriousness of "The Johannesburg Girl" when she brings forward her demands for equality, by simultaneously revealing the male narrator's physical attraction to her, Millin diminishes her agency. In the article "Oh, a woman!" of 1929,[17] she decidedly rejects any stereotyping of women and in 1930, she writes to her friend Mrs George Pierce Baker: "You'll love Scandinavia. I did. It amazed me too how rationally everyone there considered women – not only the equals of men, but just people, as men are people. It isn't the tradition here. It isn't what I've even been made to feel myself!"[18]

From these sources, it can be concluded that Millin was a strong advocate of women's emancipation, even though her writings often do not overcome traditional ideas of womanhood. She was a very successful writer and for example travelled to America for a book tour on her own in the 1930s. She became good friends with

11 Reese, "Biographie und Geschlechterdifferenz," p. 177.
12 Berman, letter to Gutsche, 21 November 1966.
13 Gutsche, letter to Millin, 7 May 1948.
14 E.g. Gutsche, letters to Millin of 24 January, 3 June and 2 July 1948.
15 Liebson, "South African Types. 2." Liebson, "South African Types. 6." Liebson, "South African Types. 8." Liebson was Millin's maiden name.
16 Liebson, "The Johannesburg Girl. I." Liebson, "The Johannesburg Girl. VII."
17 Millin, "Oh, a Woman!"
18 Millin, letter to Baker, 16 March 1930.

Stern and the two women supported each other. In an interview published in the *Sunday Express* in 1936, Millin was quoted to call Stern "the most intellectual, the most brilliant, and the most psychological painter we have in South Africa today" and thereby used her acclaim as an internationally celebrated writer to foster her friend's standing.[19] Stern painted a portrait of Millin in 1941 that received great public appraisal by Richard Feldman, another close friend of Stern's, who was married to Freda Feldman.[20]

The friendship between Irma Stern and Richard and Freda Feldman is documented by the letters Stern wrote to the couple that were reviewed in a publication by the Feldmans's daughter Mona Berman, who had found said letters shortly after her mother's death in 1987, and in an anthology by the art historian Sandra Klopper.[21] Klopper's book also contains transcripts of all letters. Berman assumes that Stern met the Jewish intellectual Richard Feldman in 1925 and developed a friendship with him that was based on mutual support.[22] Feldman, for example, published some of the earliest positive reviews of Stern's works and Stern designed the cover for his collection of Yiddish stories *Shvarts un Vays* [Black and White] first published in Warsaw in 1935.[23] After he had married Freda Ginsberg in 1931, Stern started to develop a friendship with Freda as well that, after a few years, became more important than that with Richard. Freda Feldman supported Stern by organising exhibitions in Johannesburg, gathering information about other artists, art spaces and art dealers, procuring materials, making hotel reservations, hosting dinners for her, etc. In almost every letter Stern is either asking or thanking Feldman for a favour. It was Feldman, too, who after Stern's death was the most active advocate for turning Stern's former home into a museum.[24] The Feldmans also owned a large collection of Stern's works and Stern produced numerous portraits of both Richard and Freda.

Freda Feldman brought Stern in contact with other Jewish intellectuals. For example, she introduced her to Maria Stein-Lessing, who had fled from Germany to London in 1933 shortly after completing her PhD thesis in art history at the University of Bonn.[25] Stein-Lessing occupied various teaching positions, first at the Technical College in Pretoria, then at the University of Cambridge in the UK and the University of the Witwatersrand's Department of Fine Arts where she taught students such as Esmé Berman and Cecil Skotnes, on whom she had a profound influence.[26] She also introduced African art into the art historical curricula at Pretoria Technical

19 N.N., "Outspoken." On Stern's and Millin's friendship, also see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 63–64.
20 Feldman, "Art and the People." See a discussion of this in Godby, "Irma Stern's Portraits of Freda Feldman," pp. 163–166.
21 Berman, *Remembering Irma*. Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern*.
22 Berman, "A Friendship in Letters," p. 20.
23 Feldman, "Irma Stern's New Paintings." Feldman, "Irma Stern. A New Note in Art." Feldman, *Shvarts un Vays*.
24 E.g. Feldman, "Irma Stern Museum."
25 Knight (ed.), *l'Afrique*, p. 3.
26 Harmsen (ed.), *Cecil Skotnes*, p. 12.

College as well as at the University of the Witwatersrand.[27] She had started collecting African art in Germany in the 1920s and, later, together with her husband Leopold Spiegel, Stein-Lessing accumulated a large collection of African artworks that she specifically chose because they had thus far been overlooked in South Africa.[28] Some of those pieces she bought from Irma Stern, who also had a significant collection of African art, as did Hilda Purwitksy and Roza van Gelderen. In the 1940s, Stein-Lessing worked as Director of Bantu Arts and Crafts for the Native Affairs Department in Johannesburg and in the 1950s, she curated exhibitions such as the "Van Riebeeck Festival Exhibition on South African Art and Design" in Pretoria (1953), the "Historical Exhibition of South African Art" (1955) and "Contemporary Art in the Transvaal" (1955), with a foreword to the catalogue by Walter Battiss.[29] While Freda Feldman supported Stein-Lessing morally and financially by helping her sell jewellery to finance her opening of the probably first shop for African art in Johannesburg in the early 1940s and persuading her friends to buy from her, Stein-Lessing supported Stern by buying her paintings.[30]

Stein-Lessing also bought from and sold to other members of the Jewish community such as Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen,[31] a couple of educators and authors based in Cape Town. I have already described how Purwitsky helped further Stern's career by reproducing word-by-word translations of German reviews by critics such as Fritz Stahl and Max Osborn in South African newspapers in the 1920s.[32] Both women wrote numerous articles on Stern, either using their real names or compound pseudonyms such as Rozilda or Hora. They were probably most influential in reproducing and spreading the self-narrative Stern had developed in the South African press. By publishing various texts in Jewish newspapers and magazines, they firmly tried to position her as a Jewish artist.[33] Additionally, they bought multiple works and Stern produced portraits of both women. Stern, on the other hand, supported Purwitsky and Van Gelderen by giving art lessons at their school in Cape Town's District Six in the mid to late 1930s.[34] When in 1940 Van Gelderen was released as headmistress of the Vredehoek girls school that she had been leading for five years with a rather unconventional, autonomous and

27 Girshick, "Maria Stein-Lessing," pp. 37–38.
28 Knight (ed.), *l'Afrique*, p. 15.
29 Ibid., pp. 10,15.
30 Girshick, "Maria Stein-Lessing," p. 38.
31 Knight (ed.), *l'Afrique*, p. 15.
32 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter." Also see Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern."
33 E.g. Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern." Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter." Hora, "A South African Jewish Artist." Rozilda, "South Africa's Jewish Artists." Rozilda, "Trunk Call from the Cape." Purwitsky, "Irma Stern Exhibits in Munich." Rozilda, "Irma Stern and Her Legacy."
34 Rozilda, "Art and the Child." Also compare Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 63.

feminist approach, Stern responded with a letter to the *Cape Argus* containing the following passage:

> Why is it that people are so blind to progress? In the principal of the Central Girls' School we have a modern, well-equipped brain capable of using the best that our time provides working with psychology, with biology, giving the children free ideas in art, in music, in literature, in life generally, stimulating our youth, educating them with reason [...] Are we to see this being killed or stifled by nonsensical red tape?[35]

It is difficult to find any information about Stern's connections with other women artists in South Africa. While she was friends with male artists such as Lippy Lipshitz or Jean Welz or the Berlin-based sculptor Katharina Heise, whom she regularly corresponded with and wanted to help migrate to South Africa,[36] she does not often refer to other South African women artists in either her articles or her letters. Due to their mutual interest in German expressionism and their experiences in Berlin, it would have been plausible for Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern to form some sort of private or professional relationship. The two artists met at the latest on a ship from South Africa to Germany in 1922 when Laubser was moving to Berlin and Stern was on one of her trips to Europe. Stern put Laubser in contact with some of her friends in Berlin and the two artists enjoyed a brief friendship, including a joint summer holiday at the Baltic Sea.[37] However, this friendship seems to have ended very soon after Laubser's return to the Cape. The reasons are unclear, especially since the two artists could have formed a strong alliance against the conservative forces that were publicly disdaining their modernist approaches. On the contrary, they seemingly began to consider each other rivals. For example, in a letter to Freda Feldman in 1966, Stern complains about the fact that Maggie Laubser was mentioned in connection with her own name in a speech on occasion of her award of the medal of honour by the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [South African Academy for Science and Art].[38]

In 1948, the artist May Hillhouse published an article on Laubser, Stern and the younger Russian artist Vladimir Tretchikoff, whose prints were bought internationally and brought him great commercial success. She compares the women's work with that of Tretchikoff, who had seemed to appear as a "foreign prophet" in Cape Town and was immediately granted extreme popularity.[39] Hillhouse, like Malherbe and Anderson as described in Chapter 3, calls Laubser's drawings "deliberately naïve" and rebuffs critics who said she could not draw by referring to her education in Europe.

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35 Cited in Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern*, p. 39.
36 Compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 108.
37 E.g. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 175. Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser,* p. 13. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 41.
38 Reproduced in Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern*, p. 226.
39 Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet."

Fig. 49: Irma Stern, *Artists in a Boat*, 1946, oil on board, 100 × 150 cm, Irma Stern Museum

To her, the quality of Laubser's works was that they brought "us a world beyond the surface of our artificial civilization."[40] She had sent Laubser a letter from London in 1920 to warn her about being used and to advise her to let herself be guided, be humble and trust her own instinct and intuition.[41] Laubser was in either Belgium or Italy at the time.[42] This mysterious letter implies that there was a friendship between the two artists. About Stern, Hillhouse writes in her 1948 article that she had masterful control and that her paintings arose from the "need to express emotional tension."[43] She considers Laubser's and Stern's works superior and more in-depth than Tretchikoff's, which she argues were so popular because they resembled travel brochures in their superficial and kitschy advertisement aesthetics. While for the women's work the viewer needed the "key of sensitivity, imagination and understanding," Tretchikoff's world did "not need a key."[44]

Interestingly, the Irma Stern Museum in Rosebank owns a 1946 painting by Stern on which she depicted a member of the Molteno family, Ruth Prowse, herself, Cecil Higgs and Nita Spilhaus (from left to right)[45] in a boat in Table Bay with Dutch sailing ships in the background (Fig. 49). The Molteno family were the descendants of John Charles Molteno, an Anglo-Italian settler, who became the first prime minister of the Cape Colony on 1 December 1872. Molteno was generally portrayed in a very positive light in liberal circles as he fought for the Cape's independence from

40 Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
41 Hillhouse, letter to Laubser, 29 August 1920.
42 Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 3.
43 Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
44 Ibid.
45 This is the information provided by the museum. It is unclear whether a specific member of the Molteno family was meant.

Fig. 50: Charles Davidson Bell, *The Landing of Van Riebeeck, 1652*, 1850, oil on canvas, 76 × 92 cm, South African Library Collection

imperial interference and his government founded the universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch, introduced grants to build libraries and retained the non-racial franchise system.[46] As he was married three times and had 19 children, the Molteno family was very large. Amongst the more well-known family members were his eldest daughter, Elizabeth Maria Molteno, a racial equality activist and suffragist, his son Percy Alport Molteno, a liberal member of parliament, his son James Tennant Molteno, an anti-imperialist opposition leader and later parliamentary speaker, and his grandson Donald Barkly Molteno, a civil rights and anti-apartheid activist. The unspecified Molteno man in Stern's painting as well as the four women are richly dressed in 17th century Dutch clothing. The Molteno man, Prowse and Stern seem to be dressed in men's clothing with typical white collars (in Prowse's case an almost royal fur collar) and prominent, feathered hats, while Higgs and Spilhaus are wearing women's dresses and lace caps. Stern's garments closely resemble those of Jan van Riebeeck, first Commander of the Cape, in history paintings such as Charles Davidson Bell's famous 1850 work *The Landing of Van Riebeeck, 1652* (Fig. 50). Stern hence stages herself and the other three women as founding fathers and mothers of the Cape

46 Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir John Charles Molteno*.

colony as well as, through the presence of the Molteno man, of more recent imperial independence and liberal politics.

The gender differences portrayed in Stern's painting are curious. A general difference between the three figures on the left (Molteno, Prowse, Stern) and the two on the right (Higgs, Spilhaus) can be observed, as already indicated by their men's and women's clothing. Higgs is portrayed as youthful and attractive with red lips and dreamy eyes, Spilhaus is shown as an elderly lady with spectacles sitting quite low on her long nose. At the time, Higgs was 48,[47] Stern 52, Prowse 63 and Spilhaus 68 years of age. While the Molteno man, Prowse and Stern look at the viewer, Higgs gazes into the distance and Spilhaus at the flask and glass she holds on her lap, with her eyes half-closed. Stern and the Molteno man are drinking as well, the Molteno man from an amphora and Stern from a champagne glass. In general, the portrays can be described as humorous and self-deprecating. The Molteno man is leaning away from the women, into his drink. Prowse almost looks royal in her upright and respect-commanding position occupying the highest point in the picture, while Stern looks slightly drunk with her upper body bent forwards and eyelids heavy. In spite of the relative proximity in age and renown, Prowse and Spilhaus were considered an older generation, Stern the pioneer of modernism and Higgs of a younger generation represented by the *New Group*. In Stern's painting, Spilhaus, a very conservative, impressionist flower and landscape painter, appears to symbolise the outmoded past and Higgs, with a focus on increasingly abstract seascapes, the intangible future. Prowse and Stern are portrayed as the current lords of Cape Town's art scene. Stern as Van Riebeeck could even be regarded its founder. At the time, Prowse was keeper of the Michaelis Collection, Old Town House, Cape Town and two years later became trustee of the South African National Gallery. She clearly stood for an equal treatment of men and women artists.[48]

The painting is entitled *Artists in a Boat* and was originally intended for the Café Royal, an early 18th century structure in Church Street, Cape Town, that was used as a hotel from 1881. The plaque that the museum mounted next to it also includes the explanation that "John Dronsfield, a contemporary of the above group, once remarked that South African art was a ship with Ruth at its Prowse and Irma in the Stern."[49] It is not clear whether this remark predates the painting or vice versa. According to Christopher Peter, the recently retired director of the Irma Stern Museum in Rosebank, the work was a commission by the Café Royal Hotel, was acquired by Basil Trakman in the 1990s and entered the Irma Stern Trust Collection in 2009. It is unknown what prompted the commission and to what extent Stern independently chose the content. An archaeological investigation report of the Café Royal building that was commissioned by the then owner, Syfrets Ltd, prior to its demolition in 1995, states

47 According to Victor Holloway, Higgs's hair had turned silver in her thirties. Holloway, *Cecil Higgs*, p. 9.

48 N.N., "Artist and Keeper of Art."

49 Also compare Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern*, p. 196.

that the property was bought by I. Stern in 1922 and sold to Syfrets in 1981.[50] It is unclear if I. Stern was a family member of Stern's and how long they owned the property for. It is extremely unlikely that this was Irma Stern herself as this would have most likely appeared in the records. Interestingly, this self-portrait of Stern's is never mentioned by any of the Stern researchers who have stressed the unusualness of the lack of self-portraits in the artist's oeuvre, even after 2009. Neither does there seem to have been any noteworthy friendship or professional exchange between Stern and any of the three women artists, even though they were all important figures in Cape Town's art scene.

4.2 Jewish diaspora

As has become obvious in the preceding section of this chapter, Jewish women played a considerable role in women networks in the South African arts. In addition to protagonists such as Stern, Feldman or Millin, South Africa's Jewish diaspora also had significant male members. Best-known are probably Moses Kottler, Lippy Lipshitz, Wolf Kibel and HV Meyerowitz. They were all supported by Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen rather early in their careers,[51] and in the case of Lipshitz and Kibel even before they reached any noteworthy public acclaim in South Africa. In 1931, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen published a four-page overview of Jewish artists in South Africa in the *Hasholom Rosh Hashonah Annual* that included all the aforementioned as well as Eva Meyerowitz and Irma Stern.[52] In the introduction, they stress the importance of Jewish art to South African modernism:

> Jews play an important part in the current history of art in this country, where they hold positions as exponents of modern art tendencies and are doing much to build up an art tradition for the future. Irma Stern's fearless painting, Herbert V. Meyerowitz's practical school of art, Moses Kottler's sculpture, are definite accomplishment, not mere conjectures. They belong to and are part of South African tradition.[53]

Countering other receptions of Jewish art as a foreign element by purposefully situating Jewish artists within South African art traditions is a clear objective in such presentations. There were further attempts to root Jewish art in specifically South African experiences dating form this period of increasing Afrikaner nationalism and

50 Archaeology Contracts Office, *An Archaeological Investigation of the Café Royal Building*.
51 Kottler and Meyerowitz were 29 years old when the first article was published, Lipshitz was 26 and Kibel 25 years of age.
52 Rozilda, "South Africa's Jewish Artists."
53 Ibid., p. 10.

antisemitism.[54] For example, in 1932, a writer using the pseudonym Josephus published an article in the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* containing the following paragraph:

> Just as the Jew was one of the first to exploit the material wealth of this adventurous land, he seems to be the first to wrench from the dark soul of Africa its inmost secret. The names of Mrs. Millin, Kottler and Irma Stern are well known not only in South Africa but also in Europe, and to these may now be added the name of Mr. Lipshitz, quite a notable artist now exhibiting in Cape Town. There is, in this country, a vast amount of untapped material for artistic exploitation – the vast brooding spaces, the conflict of race and the clash of colour are subjects more suitable for artistic treatment than for political and sociological solution. The Jew who has succeeded in maintaining a certain detachment, and a complete racial purity in this country is more than others in a position to use his objectivity and perspective in the artistic handling of South Africa's problems.[55]

Interestingly, Josephus does not employ the word exploitation in any negative way but relates it to the supposed role of transnationally working Jewish artists to unveil South Africa's dark problems for which there are no political or sociological solutions. The idea of "racial purity" ties in with contemporary racist and nationalist discourses and places South African Jews on a higher step of the racist "purity ladder" than Dutch, French, German or British settlers who had notoriously mixed with Black South Africans since the beginning of European settlement in the Western Cape.

In addition to overviews such as the one mentioned above that purposed to indigenise Jewish artists, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen also published longer portraits of individual artists. Their promotion of Irma Stern has already been discussed above. Likewise, Purwitsky published two articles on the Jewish sculptor Moses Kottler in *The Zionist Record* in January and February 1925, and together with Van Gelderen two further articles in the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* in October 1928 and in *Ivri Onouchi* in November 1929.[56] In the same year, they wrote an article on HV Meyerowitz for *Ivri Onouchi* and one on the Polish-born Jewish painter Wolf Kibel for the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*.[57] Most of these articles introduce their subjects as promising young artists enriching the South African art scene. In early 1930, a two-page article including a photographic portrait appeared in *The Ivri* about Lippy Lipshitz in which the two authors, using the pseudonym Hora, pronounce him "A Young Jewish Artist with a Future."[58] They stress his first commission "for Miss Roga [sic] van Gelderen," the critical acclaim of his *De Groote Trek* [The Great Trek] in Paris and his similarities with

54 On antisemitism in South Africa in the 1920s and 30s compare Bloomberg, *Christian Nationalism*. Duffy, *The Politics of Ethnic Nationalism*, pp. 80–88.

55 Josephus, "On the Watchtower."

56 Purwitsky, "Moses Kottler." Purwitsky, "Jewish Apathy to Jewish Art." Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary." Hora, "Moses Kottler."

57 Hora, "Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz." Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. A Young Jewish Artist."

58 Hora, "Israel Lipschitz [sic]."

Paul Gauguin.[59] In addition to this publicity, Van Gelderen and Purwitsky also supported Lipshitz financially. In a diary entry of 7 January 1931, he writes: "Roza van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky from Cape Town, the dispensers of the bursary of six hundred francs I am to receive for the next six months were in Paris. They gave me the first remittance."[60] An entry dating from a few months later, shows how significant this network of such Jewish arts professionals as Van Gelderen and Purwitsky but also fellow artists such as HV Meyerowitz and Sandór Kónya was for Lipshitz:

> Konjar [sic] and Meyerowitz I hear have become personalities to reckon with in the Cape Town art world. Still they seem to be afraid of competition. I sent some of my drawings to Roza van Gelderen in Cape Town to be sold and she went to consult these authorities as to their monetary and artistic value. They pronounced them 'poor stuff.' Though I have received the best encouragement from leading Parisian critics and artists whose intelligence and sincerity renders them infinitely more qualified to assess my drawings, I am very sore about Konjar's [sic] and Meyerowitz's spiteful disapproval which will undoubtedly affect the sale of these drawings in Cape Town to the extent that nobody will buy them.[61]

Lipshitz's complaint shows how small the Capetonian art scene of the 1920s and 30s was and how much individual opinions mattered. Meyerowitz had just been released from the Michaelis School of Fine Art and set up the South African School of Applied Arts with his wife, Eva Meyerowitz, and the Hungarian architect and graphic designer Sándor Kónya, who had recently arrived in South Africa.[62] In an article of 2015, Anna Tietze illustrates how, "during its short life, this school posed a challenge to the anglophile distinction between the high-status fine arts training of the university and the low-status design training of the technical college."[63] After his return to Cape Town in 1932, Lipshitz continues his slightly bitter description of these "influencers" of the Capetonian art scene:

> The art world in Cape Town had not changed much, except that Messrs Meyerowitz and Konja [sic] had founded the S.A. School of Applied Art, in Stal Plein which they called the Primavera School and which seemed to be

59 At the time, the average reader of course did not know that Van Gelderen was part of the author-team Hora. Irritatingly, considering today's reception of Gauguin's South Sea escapades, the comparison was: "The artist of the type of Paul Gauguin cares nothing about people or things or conditions extraneous to his art, and in some respects Lipschitz's [sic] nature is like that of Gauguin." Hora, "Israel Lipschitz [sic]," p. 31.

60 Lipshitz, diaries 1928 to 1932, 7 January 1931.

61 Ibid., 9 April 1931.

62 It is not clear whether Kónya was Jewish himself but his last name and the fact that he is said to have worked for the Jewish newspaper *Egyenlőség* suggest so. Gergely, "Kónya Sándor." Additionally, he was included in antisemitic attacks by Roworth and Pierneef. Roworth, letter to Pierneef, 5 February 1932.

63 Tietze, "The art of design," p. 7.

> thriving. […] Meyerowitz and Konya were the art authorities of Cape Town, respected, consulted and boosted by the arty elite of Cape Town, prominent among whom were the overbubbling Roza van Gelderen and fussy music lecturer and celebrity hunter Lilian Isaacson.[64] Privileged were the struggling artists and musicians these ladies took under their wing and who were invited to talk and loll away an afternoon at Rosa's [sic] and her friend Hilda's bungalow at Clifton by the Sea.[65]

A prospectus from October 1930 also lists Irma Stern as a teacher of the new school that posed a serious threat to the conservative Michaelis School of Fine Art as its programmes tied in with current ideas of arts and crafts and a more applied approach.[66] According to Tietze, the school closed in 1934 when Michaelis – which had four years earlier terminated Meyerowitz's teaching contract because they considered his applied approach unsuitable for a fine art school – opened a Department for Applied Arts and Crafts themselves.[67] Lipshitz, on the other hand, explains in a diary entry that "Meyerowitz's co-principal Sandor Konya had secretly decamped and left Meyerowitz with the debts and debris of the Primavera School" and that he and his colleague and friend Wolf Kibel benefited from this as they were generously given the school's etching press by Meyerowitz.[68] This demonstrates how, despite his occasional misgivings, Lipshitz still benefited from Cape Town's Jewish network. In a diary entry of 13 July 1936, he also mentions an invitation to the Feldmans's for dinner during his stay in Johannesburg. He furthermore recounts the collection of works by Irma Stern displayed at their home.[69] A few years later, Richard Feldman published two very favourable reviews of Lipshitz's Johannesburg exhibitions of 1939 and 1942 in the *Jewish Times* and in *Forward*.[70] Purwitsky and Van Gelderen's support continued, too. In a review of an exhibition by the newly founded *New Group* of 1939, for example, Purwitsky describes Lipshitz's and the German Jewish sculptor Elsa Dziomba's works as the best exhibits in the show that featured most of South Africa's important contemporary artists.[71]

It is likely that the formation of strong Jewish networks such as the ones described above was partly a reaction against antisemitic sentiments within the South African artworld. For example, the doyen of the South African art scene until the 1940s, Edward Roworth, and the Afrikaner artist JH Pierneef, who was a member of

64 Isaacson, too, was Jewish.
65 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 1932.
66 Tietze, "The art of design," p. 8.
67 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
68 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936. Eva and H.V. Meyerowitz moved on to first Lesotho and then Ghana; Kibel died of tuberculosis in 1938 at only 35 years of age.
69 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 16 July 1936.
70 Feldman, "Bible Illustrations of Lippy Lipschitz [sic]." Feldman, "The Monotypes of 'Lippy' Lipschitz [sic]."
71 H.P., "Sculpture in New Group Exhibition."

the antisemitic *Broederbond* from its founding in 1918 to 1946,[72] openly attacked Jewish art. In early 1932 a new (and short-lived) *National Academy of Arts (South Africa)* was founded under the presidency of Roworth. Pierneef was elected one of its members but, due to illness, asked his friend Roworth to represent him during the first meeting that was also attended by DF Malan, Minister of the Interior, Education and Public Health at the time.[73] The founding of the *Academy* was criticised by a diverse group of artists and writers such as HV Meyerowitz, Sándor Kónya, Gwelo Goodman, Bernard Lewis and DC Boonzaier. In a letter of 5 February 1932 to Pierneef, Roworth writes:

> That its [the newly founded Academy's] power is already recognised is admirably shown by an hysterical outburst from Messrs Meyerowitz and Konya in this mornings [sic] Cape Times, in their rage and disappointment they profess to regard it as a huge joke and say that its effects on art will be tragic and so on and so on. These aliens are here today but gone tomorrow and their interest in South African art is one of the pocket only – if conditions for making money in art were more favourable in other parts of the world (which at the moment they are not) then the Yiddishes [sic] camp followers of art would take the next ship from our ports and we should hear of them no more. Of course one must expect criticism, but the Yiddishes [sic] contribution is mere idle abuse. If they write to you just let them have it straight from the shoulder. I don't see any reason for the policy of South African art being moulded by Nomads from Eastern Europe who managed to slip in just before the quota act![74]

The Quota Act that had been passed two years earlier, in 1930, restricted the increasing immigration from Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Palestine but was really aimed at restricting Jewish immigration to South Africa.[75] This as well as Roworth's recurrence to stereotypes of Jewish capitalism disclose the antisemitic character of his attack. As a result, Pierneef sent a letter to Malan warning him of "foreign influences" threatening a "Pure Afrikaans Art." On 10 February 1932, he writes:

> I sincerely hope that Your Honour will not let yourself be influenced by the volcanic eruptions of Mr. Meyerowitz and Konya + others. The above-mentioned gentleman is a great danger to a Pure Afrikaans Art, as he is fond

72 Ferreira, "Images of Pierneef's South Africa," p. 17.

73 Pretorius, "Biography of JH Pierneef," p. 78.

74 Roworth, letter to Pierneef, 5 February 1932. In her Pierneef biography for the University of Pretoria, Pretorius quotes the sentence starting with "These aliens…" but simply leaves out the word "Yiddishes" in her idealisation of Pierneef as the patriotic Afrikaner pioneer. Pretorius, "Biography of JH Pierneef," p. 78.

75 The act would not have affected Meyerowitz and Kónya, who immigrated from Germany and the USA respectively.

> of Bolshevist ideas and places the Coloured [*Kleurling*] above us in artistic terms, and it would be a disaster if we were dictated by such foreigners what Afrikaans art is. And since art is the spontaneous and supreme expression of our people who are of Dutch origin, it is essential that we as an Afrikaans people should take care, and guard, that foreign influences do not creep into our art.[76]

Again, words such as "Bolshevist" and "foreign" clearly relate to antisemitic stereotypes. A few days later, Roworth congratulated Pierneef on his letter to Malan and urged him to send another one to prime minister JBM Hertzog at his Cape residence on the Groote Schuur estate in Rondebosch, Cape Town. In a meeting there, Hertzog had already agreed with Roworth "that it was not necessary for the Academy to take any official notice" of the attacks by Boonzaier and "his Jewish friend Bernard Lewis" published in the *Cape Times* which, according to Hertzog, "always opposed any national movement" anyway.[77] The dispute around the *National Academy* shows that antisemitism even split Cape Town's conservative art circles – Roworth and Lewis were both good friends of DC Boonzaier's and would later vehemently fight on the same side against modernists such as Lipshitz and Higgs. In the same spirit of the 1932 debate, Roworth asked Pierneef in 1940 to consider becoming the keeper of the South African National Gallery's collection whose director he was at the time. Following his appeal, Roworth writes: "It would be just wonderful if we could both work together in the National Gallery to build together the foundations of our national art and death to this foul Jewish art which has been permeating our country."[78]

In 1934, Pierneef launched an antisemitic attack against fellow artist Jan Juta, who had worked with him on the interior decorations of South Africa House in London, during a meeting of the *Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Taal, Lettere en Kuns* [South African Academy for Language, Literature and Art].[79] The *Sunday Times* afterwards reported that Pierneef had called Juta's panels depicting Jan van Riebeeck and the *voortrekkers* [pioneers] "horrible monstrosities."[80] A day later, the *Rand Daily Mail* wrote that Pierneef had criticised that "South Africa House was filled with work by

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76 Pierneef, letter to Malan, 10 February 1932. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)

77 Roworth, letter to Pierneef, 13 February 1932.

78 Roworth, undated letter to Pierneef. This letter probably dates from 1940 as it was followed by another letter on 10 May 1940 in which Roworth informs Pierneef that the board of trustees did not appoint Pierneef keeper as a "Secretary-Accountant" requiring a lower salary was employed instead. Roworth sees a conspiracy in this as he believes that the board is intending to employ a different person as keeper within the next two years. He does not specify who he believes this person to be but writes that "if it comes out all according to plan, then God help South African Art!" Roworth, letter to Pierneef, 10 May 1940. Also see Pretorius, "Pierneef and the Artists of his Time," p. 161.

79 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 3. The academy was founded in 1909 on the initiative of J.B.M. Hertzog in order to promote the Dutch and Afrikaans languages in South Africa. It was renamed *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [South African Academy for Science and Art] in 1942.

80 N.N., "'Monstrosities.' Painter Attacks Panel at South African House."

Jewish artists who had only been in South Africa for a short while and had not even smelt a 'mis' fire."[81] A "mis" fire is a dung fire and presumably symbolised to Pierneef a nature-based way of living that only "true" South Africans were familiar with. Lize van Robbroeck justifiably argues that the

> fact that Pierneef himself was first-generation South African of Dutch descent suggests that an element of anxiety and insecurity possibly underpins these qualms, and that a tenuous hold on belonging is overcompensated by exaggerated claims of authenticity.[82]

But even AC Bouman, who otherwise treated modernists favourably, in an article of 1951, includes Lipshitz in a list of "foreigners" although the artist came to South Africa as a five-year-old child 43 years earlier and had spent more time of his life in South Africa than most other artists:

> If we look only at the trio of Lippy Lipschitz [sic], John Dronsfield and Florencio Cuairan, then it is apparent that they represent human groups and art attitudes with a different character from that which the Afrikaans community shows. Our people require time and energy to learn to understand the message that they bring. If the Afrikaans artists are not alert and energetic, there is a possibility that they will be outstripped by a relatively small number of individuals from across the sea, or South African art will be led into waters differing greatly from that of to-day.[83]

Even though Bouman's statement can be read as a warning against the alteration of South African (and especially Afrikaans) art by "foreigners," he still praises Lipshitz's sculptures and considers him a great and important modernist. Lipshitz himself resentfully protested his portrayal as a foreigner.[84] A letter to the editor published a few days later picks up on Bouman's ambivalence and indicates the nationalistically charged context in which such discussions were viewed:

> Was it intended as a warning against foreign influences or not? I view with alarm anything which encourages our artists to stray from the straight and narrow path of depicting the beauties of our country as God made them and not as these 'modernists' distort them.[85]

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81 N.N., "Painters in S.A. House."

82 Van Robbroeck, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 51.

83 Cited in N.N., "'Foreigners" Role in S.A. Art." According to Julia Kukard, Dronsfield, too, was Jewish. Unfortunately, I was unable to find information on the Spanish sculptor Cuairan's ethnicity. Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*, p. 57.

84 Lipshitz, "My South African Life."

85 N.N., "True Artists. From 'Scrutator' (Cape Town)." Similar discussions about Jewish modernism endangering "national art" were held by French anti-Semites at the beginning of the century. Compare Michaud, "Un certain antisémitisme mondain," p. 85.

Jewish journalists now, in contrast to their colleagues of the 1930s who had aimed at the indigenisation of Jewish artists, started stressing the benefits of Jewish cosmopolitanism. In August 1941, *The Jewish Herald* published an article in which the author stresses the supposedly universal truth of Lipshitz's sculptures:

> Though he grew up and was educated here, we cannot find in him any trace or influence that we may call South African. For Lippy is essentially a citizen of the world, and a member of the great brotherhood of spirit that knows no boundaries and unites all men. […] His art […] speaks but of one thing – an inner dynamical strength and a truth which is so deep and innate as only a great artist can conceive.[86]

In 1961, Jewish journalist Bernard Sachs conducted an interview with Stern, who told him that Jewish artists' "contribution was to give a cosmopolitan sweep to painting, away from the parochial" and that "Jews have helped to wash this egocentrism out with their universality of outlook."[87] In general, the discussions presented above show the antisemitic sentiments Jewish artists were facing that prompted them to form networks in which they supported each other. On the other end of this spectrum, Afrikaner networks can be situated.

4.3 Afrikaner networks

Networks relating to the Afrikaner community centred around JH Pierneef, Anton Hendriks and especially Marthinus (called Martin) Laurens du Toit in Pretoria in the 1930s. Martin du Toit was the son of Stephan George du Toit, one of the founder members of the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* [Society of True Afrikaners]. He studied German in Stellenbosch, Berlin and Vienna from 1921 to 1925 and returned to South Africa in 1926.[88] Jeanne van Eeden argues that "Du Toit's exposure to German thinking is significant in terms of the influence this seems to have had on his notions regarding national identity and a metaphysical conception of culture."[89] In 1929, he founded the Afrikaans journal *Die Nuwe Brandwag* [The New Sentinel] and was its chief editor until the cease of publication in 1933. Influential figures such as JH Pierneef, DC Boonzaier, Bernard Lewis, AC Bouman and Anton Hendriks regularly

86 Anchor, "Jewish Artists in South Africa."
87 Sachs, "Irma Stern, Painter."
88 Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," pp. 168–9.
89 Ibid., p. 169. Van Eeden also stresses that the influence of German fascist ideologies on Du Toit and his colleagues at the University of Pretoria as well as the tension between his involvement with the antisemitic *Broederbond* and simultaneous support of Jews such as Irma Stern need further scrutiny. She assumes that Du Toit's and Stern's friendship started when Du Toit and Stern's husband Johannes Prinz both taught German at the University of Cape Town in 1926/27.

contributed to the journal that discussed the works of such artists as Pieter Wenning, JH Pierneef, Anton van Wouw, Frans Oerder and Gregoire Boonzaier, but also Irma Stern or Moses Kottler. Each journal included between three and nine full-page reproductions of contemporary artworks and thereby gave its Afrikaans-speaking audience the possibility to familiarise themselves with art that was otherwise mainly exhibited in urban centres such as Cape Town, Johannesburg or Pretoria.

This educational agenda also becomes obvious in Anton Hendriks's text on Pierneef published in the very first edition of *Die Nuwe Brandwag* which is largely concerned with explaining to its readers why artists chose certain media, colours or techniques for certain subjects and what the merits of different degrees of abstraction were.[90] Rather than specifically discussing Pierneef's works, Hendriks hence enlightened his audience on artistic methods in general. According to an article by JW Barrett of 1947, Pierneef met the Dutch painter and critic Hendriks in Amsterdam in 1925 and invited him to South Africa in 1926 where he stayed and was later appointed director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.[91] In 1927, Pierneef and Hendriks opened an art school at the Pretoria Technical College together which, however, had to be closed in 1931 due to financial difficulties.[92] Additionally, Hendriks was a part-time lecturer at the University of Pretoria's Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture for four years under Du Toit's direction.[93]

In the first year of its existence, *Die Nuwe Brandwag* also organised a group show in Bloemfontein to coincide with the founding of the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* [Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations]. Elizabeth Delmont describes that Du Toit chose five artists to represent different artistic disciplines in this exhibition: Maggie Laubser for portraits, JH Pierneef for landscape, Anton van Wouw for sculpture, Gerard Moerdijk for church architecture and Gordon Leith for domestic architecture. She argues that, in the accompanying catalogue, Du Toit frequently recurs to terms such as '*volk*', '*Boer*', 'Afrikaner' and 'genius' in case of the male Afrikaner/ Dutch exhibitors and terms such as 'farm', 'intimacy', 'truth', 'faithfulness', 'honesty' and 'love' in the case of Laubser, the only female artist in the show.[94] 'Simplicity' and 'spirituality' are further terms that Du Toit applies to most of the artists discussed. In line with the terminology described in Chapter 3, this shows the strongly gendered and nationalist (and especially Afrikaner) context in which Du Toit viewed the artists he chose. His exhibition was the first one featuring Laubser's work after her return from Europe and therefore important for her career and position as an "authentic" Afrikaner woman artist. Letters archived in the University of Stellenbosch's manuscripts section illustrate Du Toit's sincere appreciation of Laubser and her works. For example, on 20 November 1930, he wrote: "I sincerely hope that you will soon be known throughout our country and enjoy the appreciation

90 Hendricks [sic], "Beskouing."
91 Barrett, "In the Limelight," p. 35. Also see Pretorius, "Pierneef and the Artists of his Time," p. 163.
92 Pretorius, "Pierneef and the Artists of his Time," p. 165.
93 Lamprecht, *Florrie's Dream*, p. 31.
94 Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," p. 7.

you deserve," promising to spend a weekend at her parents' farm.[95] Additionally, he assisted in selling her paintings over the years, offered to lend her money and was planning to write a "great and beautiful" monograph on her.[96] Moreover, using the pseudonym P Enseel, Du Toit wrote very favourable reviews of Laubser's exhibitions held at the University of Pretoria, some of which he had hosted himself, for the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Vaderland* [The Fatherland].[97]

From 1931 to 1938, Du Toit was the first head of the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria that was converted into an Afrikaans language institution in 1932. Van Eeden argues that he "was determined to make this department, the only one of its kind in South Africa at the time, a success" and "undertook an extended study tour to Europe in 1931 to observe recent artistic trends."[98] The latter shows his interest in modern art that interestingly did not conflict with his ambition of brokering Afrikaans art to an Afrikaner audience. During his time as head of department, Du Toit was responsible for a series of contemporary art exhibitions in the Macfadyen Hall featuring artists such as Maggie Laubser (1931 and 1933), Irma Stern (1933), Maud Sumner (1933), Anton Hendriks (1933) and Gregoire Boonzaier (1934).[99] Van Eeden assumes that

> the idea for these exhibitions was possibly planted by JJ Pienaar, Administrator of the Transvaal, when he suggested in 1932 that annual national art exhibitions should be held in South Africa and that the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture should organise them.[100]

As mentioned in my section on Pierneef in Chapter 1, Pienaar took an active interest in the development of a distinctively South African culture. Du Toit organised his exhibitions more regularly than annually and focused on contemporary South African artists. The embeddedness of such exhibitions in an ideology-driven Afrikaner context was extremely beneficial, especially to Afrikaans artists. In 1940, Gregoire Boonzaier explained to Lippy Lipshitz:

> I suppose that the fact that my show is being held under the auspices of the Dept of Afrikaans Kultuur of the University has had very much to do with my phenomenal success. Most people who have bought have, I think, done so primarily because I am an Afrikaner. This is carried out by a scrutiny

95 Du Toit, letter to Laubser, 20 November 1930. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 274.)
96 Du Toit, letters to Laubser of 9 March 1933, 15 March 1935, 22 November 1945. The last letter is dated 1945 even though Van Eeden states that Du Toit deceased in 1938. It is unclear who dated the letter but the ink is the same used for the rest of the text. Gregoire Boonzaier and Esmé Berman, too, were planning to write monographs on Laubser during her lifetime.
97 E.g. Enseel, "Tentoonstelling van skilderye." Enseel, "Maggie Laubser haar tentoonstelling." Enseel, "Opgewektheid Vervang die Tragiese."
98 Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," p. 170.
99 Ibid., p. 179.
100 Ibid., p. 176.

> of my list of buyers. Only one Englishman and no Jews! … All this goes to show that the 'other' side look upon any show managed by the university as a Afrikaner affair. A great pity that politics should enter into art, but then fortunately I have benefited through it, for had the English only taken me under their wing, I doubt whether I would have had as successful an exhibition.[101]

Through his exhibition practice, Du Toit also laid the foundations for the University of Pretoria's art collection as exhibiting artists would often donate an artwork at the end of their show.[102] He also founded the *Afrikaanse Kunsvereniging* [Afrikaans Art Association] in Pretoria in 1931 that was aimed at "promoting Afrikaans art; collecting Afrikaans art and cultural artefacts; hosting art exhibitions; and encouraging artists by means of personal contact with them."[103] Additionally, he convened and curated the South African art section of the "Empire Exhibition" held in Johannesburg from 14 September 1936 to 15 January 1937 which showed an overview of contemporary art at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.[104] In the catalogue for the exhibition, Du Toit stresses the contribution of the Afrikaner artist whose "young literature and his young art flourish."[105] However, as Lize van Robbroeck explicates in a recent article on the exhibition, his "main selection criteria were modernity and sophistication."[106] She describes Du Toit's selection as showcasing a modernist nationalism and argues that the "visual prominence of romanticised […] images of 'primitive Others' […] is ironically meant to signal settler identity, insofar as the paintings themselves accompany claims to a unique settler art imbued with a native 'spirit'".[107]

In addition to Du Toit, the Dutch literary theorist AC Bouman played an important role in 1930s and 1940s Afrikaner networks. Bouman obtained a doctorate in Dutch philology at the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht and migrated to South Africa in 1921 in order to take up a teaching position in German philology and Dutch history at the University of Stellenbosch.[108] He, too, was a stern advocate of Laubser's work, publishing many favourable reviews of her exhibitions in the Cape.[109] In addition, he greatly supported JH Pierneef from a relatively early stage in his career. For example, in letters dating from 1926 and 1927, he warned Pierneef that the influential Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* [The Citizen] feared that Pierneef had "come

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101 Cited in Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 25 April 1940. (Original spelling and punctuation.) In this letter to Higgs, Lipshitz quotes from a letter he had received from Boonzaier and concludes that the latter was "a pure opportunist."

102 Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," p. 162.

103 Ibid., p. 167.

104 Ibid., p. 164. For a list of exhibitors see Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 344.

105 Cited in Van Robbroeck, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 48.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid., p. 55.

108 Stutterheim, "Arie Cornelius Bouman."

109 E.g. Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." Bouman, "Kunstentoonstelling op Stellenbosch." Bouman, "Die Kunstenaarskap van Maggie Laubser."

under too much foreign influence" and would "soon lose the Afrikaans character" in his work.[110] Bouman reassuringly discounted these fears. He also tried to boost Pierneef's career by featuring reproductions of his works in high circulation publications. For example, in 1929, he was in the process of publishing a memorial book accompanying Stellenbosch's 250th anniversary and suggested to Pierneef including reproductions of woodcuts that he had produced in the area.[111] Bouman also wanted to use a drawing by Pierneef for the cover.[112] He argued that the edition of a few thousand or more copies would mean good publicity for the artist.[113] Three years later, Bouman wanted to suggest Pierneef's portrait of Paul Kruger for a book published by Professor de Vaays of the Department for Dutch Literature at the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht.[114] He also proposed to organise an exhibition of Pierneef's works at the University of Stellenbosch's domestic economy building.[115]

Interestingly, in a similar vein to Boonzaier as quoted above, Pierneef and Bouman also seemed to perceive a divide between English and Afrikaans art in South Africa. However, in contrast to Boonzaier's opportunist stance, this issue was more ideologically charged for them. For instance, during his sojourn in London in 1933, Pierneef heavily criticises contemporary English art: "The English are always too scared to acquire something individual and it is in their character to be afraid of everything that shows personality and is revolutionary, because the Empire collects colonies, but produces very little itself."[116] He adds that "annexing others was once their hobby."[117] In 1935, Bouman writes to Pierneef in order to discuss his long-existing plan of publishing "a collection of first-class reproductions of Afrikaans artworks and an 'explanation' of each work and artist printed underneath" that should also be distributed to schools as educational material.[118] Additionally, Bouman writes that he had detected "a great dissatisfaction amongst the English in Cape Town" that was caused by Bouman's omission of artists such as John Wheatly and Edward Roworth from his newly published book *Kuns in Suid-Afrika* [Art in South Africa], written in Afrikaans.[119] At the same time, both Bouman and Pierneef attacked Bernard Lewis's writings and were supportive of the younger artists later converging in the *New Group* in their fight against the conservative "traditionalists" governing the South

110 Bouman, letters to Pierneef of 10 May 1926, 6 July 1927. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 274.)
111 Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 26 August 1929. Bouman addresses Pierneef as "*waarde vriend Pierneef*" ["dear friend Pierneef"].
112 Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 14 September 1929.
113 Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 26 August 1929.
114 Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 23 February 1932.
115 Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 27 October 1935.
116 Pierneef, letter to Bouman, 23 November 1933.
117 Ibid.
118 Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 5 August 1935.
119 Ibid.

African art scene until the 1940s.[120] This illustrates the ambivalent forces driving Afrikaner artists' networks at the time: the wish to establish a new Afrikaner national art that contradictorily catered to a customarily conservative Afrikaner audience on the one hand and to fight the established English tradition and predominance within the South African art scene on the other. The latter aim, but also to a certain degree their pursuit of a new national South African art, was shared by the influential *New Group* that was founded in 1938 and also counted a considerable number of Jewish artists amongst its members.

4.4 The *New Group*

In 1936, artists and writers Uys Krige, Vincent Swart, Elsa Dziomba and her husband Jumbo Posthumus, Alexis Preller, David Goldblatt, David Fram and Lippy Lipshitz discussed founding a *New S.A. Society for Writers and Artists* – or *The New Unicorn* – in order to, as Lipshitz puts it in his diary, "put a stop to charlatanism in the arts in South Africa."[121] About the proposed structure of the society, Lipshitz writes:

> The society will consist of three classes of members – 1. foundation members (limited to 10 who are the executive body), 2. associate members consisting of professional artists and writers who are nominated by the executive and who must submit examples of their work for consideration, 3. an unlimited number of patrons and public subscribers. Thus Group 1 will have absolute control of the cultural activities of the society. Group 2 will be able to send in work for exhibitions, publication for consideration by Group 1. Group 3 will benefit by its patronage by attending the exhibitions, lectures, social functions of the society. This society if run on these lines, we think, should put a stop to dilettantism in the long run.[122]

A day later, he adds:

> Vincent Swart, Fram, Elsa Dziomba, Preller and Uys Krige and myself are the Executive Committee. Jumbo Posthumus is to be secretary and hold office for at least two years. The meeting took place at Alexis Preller's flat. The name of the society is to be 'The New Unicorn'. We intend printing a circular in English and in Afrikaans and at the bottom there will be a perforated slip which the recipients will be able to return, crossing out whether they wish to be members or patrons of the society. The subscription for members is to

120 Pierneef, letter to Bouman, May 1936. Pierneef also exhibited with the *New Group* in their second exhibition in 1938. The catalogue of the 1948 *New Group* exhibition even lists him as a member. Compare Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*, p. 162.

121 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 11, 17, 20 and 21 August 1936.

122 Ibid., 20 August 1936.

> be 2.2.0 Pounds a year and for patrons 25 guineas. We have a block already of the Unicorn with an apt quotation from an old poem. Krige is translating the circulars into Afrikaans. The heading of the circular will also be translated into Yiddish by David Fram. Goldblatt, the producer who will be a patron of the society will get the circular and the membership cards printed. 'It is a good idea to have the name of the Society in Yiddish as well,' enthused Fram, 'It will show up the international spirit of our Society.' Vincent Swart suggested the name 'Unicorn'. I suggested the 'New Unicorn' because there was a society here for literature, now long defunct, called 'Unicorn' and as it happens Swart has the printing block of its heading. It has been decided that the executive members should consist of six and should hold office for six years. The ordinary members will consist of creative artists and writers who must submit their work to the executive in order to prove their eligibility.[123]

This lengthy reproduction of Lipshitz's diary entries may seem disproportionate since, in spite of these very specific plans, *The New Unicorn* was never founded. The plans have, however, not been published before and are of significance as they show the great demand for a body professionalising the South African art (and literary) scene by various protagonists from the Cape and former Transvaal.[124] Additionally, it is interesting that *The New Unicorn* was supposed to cater to English, Afrikaans and Yiddish speaking audiences and thereby foster a (White European) multi-cultural approach – a thought abandoned by the later *New Group*. On the other hand, *The New Unicorn*, while opening the society to patrons and public subscribers, intended to leave the power over its activities and membership in the hands of the six foundation members. This is interesting to keep in mind when considering that the fall of the *New Group* is mostly attributed to its large, unmanageable and eclectic membership producing work of greatly varying quality.

The *New Group* was founded in February 1938 through the efforts of Gregoire Boonzaier, Terence McCaw and Freida Lock in the Western Cape and Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller in the former Transvaal. Its chairmen were Charles Peers from 1938 to 1944, Gregoire Boonzaier from 1944 to 1952 and Ruth Prowse from 1952 to the *Group's* dissolution in 1953.[125] In his "History of the New Group" published in the catalogue for a historical exhibition on the *Group* shown at the South African

123 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 21 August 1936.

124 According to Murray Schoonraad, Walter Battiss in 1937, too, "broached the idea that an independent art society or at least a branch of an art society should be formed in Pretoria." Schoonraad, "History of the New Group," p. 42.

125 Bekker, "Die Nuwe Groep," p. 54. Julia Kukard argues that Prowse resigned on 12 November 1952 and was followed by May Hillhouse and Maurice van Essche, although it is unclear whether Van Essche accepted his election. Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*, pp. 26–27.

National Gallery in 1988, Schoonraad cites that it wanted "to raise the standard of art in South Africa" and lists the following aims that determined its foundation:

1. To bring together artists and craftsmen in an effort to raise standards.
2. To help artists in financial difficulties.
3. To form Artists' Co-operatives to import and retail materials at cost.
4. To hold exhibitions all over the country, the standard of which would be controlled by the method of selection, i.e. secret ballot.[126]

In her MA dissertation on the *New Group*, Julia Kukard also stresses the economic reasons for establishing a structure independent of the existing establishment that would enhance art sales opportunities for members.[127] Professional artists were allowed to join upon invitation if they had had at least one solo exhibition and were elected by a majority of existing members. Works to be exhibited were chosen by secret ballot during member meetings.[128] The first exhibition of the *New Group* was held from 4 to 10 May 1938 at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town and included about 80 exhibits by 15 or 16 artists, mainly painters. According to Schoonraad, the exhibition and accompanying lunch hour lectures that introduced artists in person were attended by about 1,000 visitors.[129] The painters sold for over 200 Pounds.[130] For this, as well as for the following exhibitions, an entrance fee was charged, exhibition catalogues sold and an advice service provided to potential buyers. The latter were no longer a selected group of collectors but an increasingly wider public.[131] This was further aided by barter exhibitions where artworks were swapped for other goods or services determined by the respective artist's needs.[132] The *Group* had one branch in the Western Cape and one in the former Transvaal but organised exhibitions in the main centres as well as in country districts. Additionally, publicity was organised for its members in the form of newspaper articles, exhibition reviews and lectures.[133]

Martin Bekker, who published a monograph on Gregoire Boonzaier in 1990, points out the "amateurish" character of art criticism in South African newspapers and other media at the time and argues that the "New Group strove to create an artistic climate by writing letters to the press, by submitting authoritative articles which introduced art and its creators to the public, and by contributing reviews."[134] This practice had already been introduced when, for example, German artist and later *New Group* member René Graetz had published an article on Lippy Lipshitz in

126 Schoonraad, "History of the New Group," p. 44.
127 Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*, p. 24.
128 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 27.
129 Schoonraad, "History of the New Group," p. 44.
130 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 22 May 1938.
131 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, pp. 27–28.
132 Scott, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 17.
133 Ibid.
134 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 27.

The Guardian in 1937.[135] Two weeks later, Graetz reviewed the national "South African Exhibition of Contemporary Artists" and calls the majority of works exhibited "childish, nay, ridiculous, imitations of local art professors" by "ill-equipped amateurs."[136] At the same time, he complains about the exclusion of Wolf Kibel and Lippy Lipshitz from the show. The professor referred to by Graetz is most likely Edward Roworth. Roworth and the journalist Bernard Lewis were at the centre of the *New Group*'s journalistic efforts until their fall in the 1940s. The dispute with these two traditionalist gate keepers of South African art institutions determined most of the newspaper reports on *New Group* activities at the time. From an exchange of letters between Cecil Higgs and Lippy Lipshitz, it becomes obvious that the two artists together with Maggie Laubser, Gregoire Boonzaier, Ruth Prowse and Christina van Heyningen alternately wrote to the press in order to publicly attack Lewis's or Roworth's commentaries. For example, in June 1939, Lipshitz writes to Higgs:

> We have been having a very rowdy squabble at the Fine Arts Association meeting last week with Teddy [Edward Roworth] and the other decrepit animals. I believe a rather illuminating account of the circus was in the 'Cape Times' a few days ago. […] I am glad Maggie [Laubser] is going to exhibit in the Transvaal where she is usually very successful. I hope she will be able to influence the right people with her article for the 'Huisgenoot'. We must avail ourselves of every opportunity to tighten the noose round that perfidious Jackass's neck.[137]

Higgs replies a few weeks later:

> I did read about the stormy meeting of the Fine Arts Association & was rather sorry to miss the affair. By the way, do you remember at the opening of your show [Gregoire] Boonzaier urged me to join the F.A.A.? Well I did, at least I sent them a 10f note (which I could ill afford!) & asked if I could join but have met with complete silence. Why is that do you suppose? What has Bernard Lewis to do with it all? I suppose he feels himself a patron and prince of the arts. A man who criticizes the creative work of others so often feels himself superior to it, a godlike being dispensing judgement. Don't you think B.L. [Bernard Lewis] sees himself in that role? But he must beware. I don't think somehow that he will act so long on the throne of judgement, I feel a fall for him is imminent. I agree with you it can't be very long before he presents some opening for attack & attacked he must be. […] I hope 'Die Burgher' [sic] will ask Dr. Bouman to write a criticism of the New Group show here, as it did for our show in Stellenbosch.[138]

135 Graetz, "A Living Art."

136 Graetz, "S.A. Artists of To-day." For more information on the national exhibitions see Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 202–203.

137 Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 26 June 1939.

138 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 19 July 1939. Higgs's original punctuation and underlining.

The power of critics such as AC Bouman and Bernard Lewis was considerable at the time. For example, in 1947, Norman Herd writes that in the 1930s, "Maggie [Laubser] experienced the mortification of having sales cancelled after the purchasers had consulted the opinions of art-critic friends, or seen an adverse report on her work in the press."[139] As mentioned above, Bouman generally supported the *New Group* members in the dispute with the established gatekeepers. Reviewing an exhibition by Laubser in August 1939, he criticises Lewis and Melvin Simmers for glorifying "bloodless, colourless pictures, which cannot age because they were born lifeless" and for trying "to hurt artists whose work is completely beyond their reach."[140] Bouman was in close contact with Laubser, Higgs and the latter's cousin, Christina van Heyningen, a lecturer colleague of Bouman's at the University of Stellenbosch. In the publicly staged controversy around Roworth and Lewis, Van Heyningen would provide translations from English to Afrikaans and vice versa in order to cater for both audiences. In an undated letter to Lipshitz, Higgs writes:

> Dear Lippy, This is Christina's [van Heyningen] translation of Brander's [Bernard Lewis's] last exposure in last night's Suiderstem. Won't you attack it? C. [van Heyningen] offers to put what you say into Afrikaans. She herself means to write something, not as much on the painters but on certain aspects of Bernard Lewis![141]

In a letter to Higgs of 2 February 1940, Lipshitz reports that Bernard Lewis had been released from "his post as all-round Critic of Literature, Drama, Art and whatnot" at the *Cape Argus* and replaced by David Gamble, who had just returned from London.[142] Lipshitz adds that he learnt from Gamble that "the Editors were influenced in their decision to get rid of Lewis by the letters we wrote to the 'Argus' attacking & making a fool of him."[143]

They launched a similar attack against Edward Roworth, who was at the time director of the Michaelis Art School as well as of the South African National Gallery, and thereby accumulating considerable power.[144] For example, in a letter to Millie Levy of February 1939, Lipshitz writes that their "determined & concerted action has resulted that public's eyes are now open to what corruption has been going on in the art gallery for the last few years – and an enquiry is being held into affairs of the board of trustees!"[145] Additionally, in October 1940, Higgs drafted a petition against Roworth's excessive institutional influence which Lipshitz asked Ruth Prowse to circulate

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139 Herd, "Maggie Laubser," p. 64.

140 Bouman, "Die Kunstenaarskap van Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 274.)

141 Higgs, undated letter to Lipshitz. The *Suiderstem* [Southern Voice] was an Afrikaans speaking newspaper published by the Union Party and based in Cape Town.

142 Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 2 February 1940.

143 Ibid. Also compare N.N., "'Propaganda' in an art exhibition."

144 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 254.

145 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 17 February 1939.

around the *K Club* members and which was supposed to be sent to professional artists in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban and other art centres.[146] Unfortunately, I could find no information on what came of this petition. Moreover, Lipshitz circulated an address he had held at the *People's Club* in Cape Town, in which he condemned Roworth's dictatorial demeanour, to the *K Club* and to artists in Stellenbosch and the Transvaal.[147] A few weeks later, the address was published in full length in the newspaper *Trek* that supported Higgs and Lipshitz in this controversy.[148] In his speech, Lipshitz quotes Roworth's admiration of Adolf Hitler in Germany "who has given the exponents of modernism their choice between the lunatic asylum and the concentration camp" and calls upon "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."[149] In his reply published in *Trek* two weeks later, Roworth calls Lipshitz "negligible as an artist" and adds:

> I do not think that speaking as he was to an audience of mixed races, he might have had the good taste, if not the good sense, to refrain from once more cheap sneers at the expense of England, for it is only the courage and sacrifice of England (or more properly, Britain) which stands between people of his race and kidney [sic] and their entire annihilation![150]

This last remark illustrates the racially charged climate at the time as well as the contrasting efforts of "traditionalists" such as Roworth, who maintained a close connection to an outdated English art and imperial thought pattern, and the *New Group*, who aimed at strengthening South African art on a national level. The press, too, clearly expected the *New Group* to "create a national art" for South Africa which, however, it never managed to achieve.[151] Set aside the intention of professionalising South Africa's art scene, there seems to have been an increasing lack of like-mindedness or unity within the *New Group*. For example, while Lipshitz claims in 1938 that "there is nothing new in the New Group," he still considers its first exhibition "perhaps the best exhibition of its kind ever held in South Africa."[152] A year later, he calls the *Group*'s current exhibition "a very select show of pleasing mediocrities except for the

146 Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 17 October 1940. The *K Club* was founded in Cape Town in 1922, organised exhibitions and other art events and dissolved a few years after the foundation of the *New Group* as there was a great overlap of members. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 152.

147 Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 17 October 1940.

148 Lipshitz, "A Considered Reply to Prof. Roworth." This was a reply to the following article: Sibbett, "Against the 'Cult of the Ugly'." Sibbett was a pseudonym used by Roworth.

149 Lipshitz, "A Considered Reply to Prof. Roworth," p. 20.

150 Roworth, "Admiration and Abuse." In this case, the "audience of mixed races" probably majorly consisted of Afrikaners, Jewish and English South Africans.

151 Eglington, "The New Group. A Disappointment."

152 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 22 May 1938.

paintings of Maud Sumner and Cecil Higgs."[153] Another letter to Higgs from 1939, only a year after the *Group*'s establishment, suggests that membership was mainly a practical rather than ideological decision:

> Here is no heat or light in the artists that surround us, in these craats, [sic] crones, lemonade-veined dodderers and pale shades of Chelsea eunuchs; – in these [Gregoire] Boonzaiers, Ruth Prowses, Charles Peerses and [Terence] McCawses! Yet what else is there to do to stave off misantrophy [sic] in Cape Town but to group with them, babble with them and kick with them the ball of contention against goalkeeper Teddy [Edward] Roworth? It is great fun, begorrah, with old Bernard Bamboozle [Lewis] romping up and down as Referee crying for all his worth so many fouls and penalty kicks![154]

Although the *Group* was invested in the diminishment of the power of traditionalist gatekeepers such as Roworth and Lewis in line with their aim of supporting professional artists in South Africa, they did not align themselves as a body with European modernism.[155] This becomes obvious in the fact that the *Group* was divided on the controversy surrounding Higgs's *Pink Nude* painting described in Chapter 3. In a letter to Lipshitz of 20 August 1939, Van Heyningen writes that "the business about the nude grows worse + worse – but the greatest shock of all is the behaviour of those members of the Group who want to apologize to Dr Wilcocks," who had ordered the painting to be removed from the exhibition upon Lewis's disparaging review.[156] Van Heyningen adds that "these people [i.e. *Group* members] take the removal of the nude (+ the manner of its removal) as a matter that concerns Cecil only, when it is not only a denial of a fundamental principle, but also a blank insult to themselves as a Group."[157] In order to provide an exhibition space independent of institutional support, she consequently considered turning her loft into a gallery.[158]

In addition to such fissions between different camps within the *Group*, there also seems to have been discordances between the Cape Town and Transvaal branches. For example, in late 1938, Maggie Laubser's works were not accepted into the upcoming exhibition in Cape Town.[159] With the aid of Pretoria-based artist Alexis Preller, Laubser submitted her works for the Transvaal branch exhibition in Johannesburg where all of them were accepted. Additionally, Preller, founder member of the

153 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 28 April 1939.
154 Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 26 June 1939. (Original spelling and punctuation.) Boonzaier, Prowse, Peers and McCaw were all leading figures in the *New Group*.
155 The fact that the latter is often wrongly assumed is stressed by Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*.
156 Van Heyningen, letter to Lipshitz, 20 August 1939. (Original punctuation.)
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 18 November 1938.

Transvaal branch, reacted by briefly resigning from the *Group*. In a letter to Laubser of November 1938 he explains:

> By the way, Maggie, just before I heard the news of selection committee judgment in Cape Town against your work, I found several things quite unsatisfactory with regards to treatment I had received. And very 'hot-headedly' I resigned when I heard about the rotten treatment you had received.[160]

Laubser replies:

> Yes I can understand you also have had trouble with the Group because there are few native artists amongst them consequently they will not understand your work and feel that it is perhaps best that I resign – what do you think? It seems [Gregoire] Boonzaier, Frieda Lock (Boonzaier's friend) + a few other young boys scouts run the Group – they were present when the voting took place + so rejected all my work.[161]

Half a year later, Laubser complains to Preller that there was "a petty spirit in the Group" in Cape Town as her "work was hidden in corners" and calls Bernard Lewis "Gregoire Boonzaier's agent" who "hates modern work or anything that is not like Gregoire + Gregoire's friend's (Frieda Lock) work."[162] These remarks clearly show the hostilities within the *New Group*. On the other hand, Boonzaier offered Preller in 1941 to waive the hanging fees and annual subscription since he was short of money.[163] When Higgs resigned in 1943, Lipshitz again emphasises the practical character of his participation in the *New Group*'s endeavours:

> Personally I think that spiritually there is no real harmony in the Group with so many bad and academic artists in it […] But I suppose the principle reason for me & for Maggie [Laubser], [Jean] Welz, [Alexis] Preller + Maud [Sumner] in belonging to the Group, is that we are unconcerned with its supposed object in producing a school of important S.A. artists – but we use the Group as a means of exhibiting our work – and for me who otherwise could not show a bulk of new work in years – it has been very useful – to show a few sculptures there annually. Nevertheless, don't be surprised my dear Cecil, if I follow your lead in due course.[164]

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160 Preller, letter to Laubser, 23 November 1938.

161 Laubser, letter to Preller, 22 December 1938. (Original punctuation.) When writing "native artists," Laubser is likely to mean White South African-born artists as there were no non-White members. Neither Preller nor Laubser did effectually resign at the time.

162 Laubser, letter to Preller, 18 May 1939.

163 Boonzaier, letter to Preller, 1 February 1941.

164 Lipshitz, letter to Higgs, 20 October 1943. (Original spelling and punctuation.)

This already marks the demise of the *Group* that had been founded only five years earlier. As early as 1943, the press condemned the "large proportion of definitely inferior work" and the lack of "distinction between the art of the New Group and that of the South African Academy."[165] In 1945, the *South African Guardian* concluded that "the New Group has run its useful course."[166] In his monograph on Gregoire Boonzaier, FP Scott argues that the final dissolution of the *New Group* was marked by the resignation of the three central artists Lippy Lipshitz, Maurice van Essche and Jean Welz in 1953 when the *Group* "had become too large and heterogenous, embracing too many artists of divergent styles and learnings."[167] Martin Bekker further argues that, due to the economic upsurge following World War II in the early 1950s, artists received financial independence and "group acting was no longer necessary now that affluence had arrived."[168]

Additionally, the *South African Association of Arts* (SAAA) was founded to replace the *South African Fine Arts Association* in 1944 and took over a lot of the *New Group*'s roles. It was formed by the efforts of Sir Charles Rey, Charles te Water, Ruth Prowse and Gregoire Boonzaier. Te Water and Boonzaier, who was also acting as president of the *New Group* at the time, were nominated representatives of the *SAAA* on the board of trustees of the National Art Gallery.[169] The involvement of Te Water, who was an Afrikaner Nationalist – i.e. National Party representative of Pretoria in the Union parliament (1924–1929), High Commissioner in London under JBM Hertzog (1929–1939) and Ambassador-at-Large under DF Malan's apartheid government (1948–1949) – already indicates the political dimension of this new arts body.[170] According to its constitution, the *SAAA*'s purpose was "to integrate the Arts into the everyday life of the people of South Africa" and "to cover the advancement and encouragement of all the Arts, particularly in their relation to South African activities in the field of Industry, Commerce, Science and Education."[171] The *SAAA* therefore collaborated closely with the South African government as well as with important institutions such as the National Gallery in Cape Town. Accordingly, its first method listed was "holding, sponsoring, or otherwise assisting with or without the Union of South Africa exhibitions or demonstrations of the Arts and Crafts or any other activities amenable to artistic design or treatment."[172]

Most prominently, the *SAAA* in collaboration with the South African government organised the South African participations at the Venice and São Paulo art biennials from 1952, the art section of the "Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Exhibition" in 1952, the "Quadrennial Exhibitions" in 1956, 1960 and 1964 as well as the exhibition of South African art that travelled to Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, the United States and

165 V.J.B., "New Group." Leonard, "Paintings of the 'New Group'."
166 L.N.D., "New Group Exhibition."
167 Scott, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 17.
168 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 29.
169 Scott, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 31. Also compare N.N., "New Group Nears Its Teens."
170 Compare Lambert, "'To Back up the British Government'," pp. 26–27.
171 South African Association of Arts, information leaflet.
172 Ibid.

Canada and finally back to South Africa in 1948/49.[173] According to a US-American newspaper article, this exhibition shown at the National Gallery in Washington, DC in July 1949 comprised "nearly 170 picture and sculpture items, 149 of them contemporary [...] They represent 43 painters and 10 sculptors, 15 of whom are women."[174] The Belgian critics were cited to have been "surprised at the strong European influence on the work."[175] In South Africa, however, this show was perceived as of an "essentially South African character" and "as intensely a national product as a strip of biltong."[176]

In addition to shows featuring the works of contemporary artists, the *SAAA* also took an interest in African art which they considered an important part of national South African culture. In collaboration with the *South African Archaeological Association*, they organised an "Exhibition of Prehistoric Art in Southern Africa" in Cape Town in 1946. The committee also included artists such as Walter Battiss and Ruth Prowse. In the foreword to the catalogue, the exhibition is described as "probably the most comprehensive effort yet made in this country to present to its people what is described in this authoritative brochure as 'the most ancient habitual expression of man's artistry the world possesses.'"[177] The text stresses the worth of such heritage to South Africa and explicates that the exhibition will travel "to a considerable number of the larger and smaller towns in the Union in order simultaneously to carry a message to the people of this country, to give them pleasure, and to stimulate their interest in the Arts of Africa."[178] In the same year, the *SAAA* helped organise an exhibition of the work of African pupils of the Cyrene Primary School near Bulwayo, then Southern Rhodesia and now Zimbabwe. The following extract from an exhibition review published in the government publication *South African Panorama* illustrates how primitivism was quickly used to support ideas of difference in South Africa:

> There is an almost mediaeval note in their work, which opens wide vistas of what the future may be for the African artist, who is brought into discriminate contact with European art. Will he be able to hold his own, consistently to give his own interpretation? It is a difficult question, and if one reconsiders the impossibility of any European recapturing the spirit of native or Bushman art, one cannot but incline to doubt. And if, 25,000 years hence, another race of little rock-men, scratching amongst the queer ruins of our one-time picture galleries and houses, comes upon the remains of what were once our finest pictures and murals, will they have as much occasion for sound aesthetic speculation as their work now affords us? Stripped of all other content, how much of our European painting in South Africa would pass muster in their expert judgment? The best we can hope for

173 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 257. Also see F.F.P., "Important Exhibition by 'New Group' to be Opened."
174 Berryman, "News of Art and Artists."
175 N.N., untitled.
176 N.N., "On Show in Cape Town." Biltong is a South African speciality of dried meat.
177 South African Association of Arts, *Exhibition of Prehistoric Art in Southern Africa*, p. 2.
178 Ibid.

> is a reception something in the nature of that accorded to a collection of reproductions of Bushman paintings in London, which was discussed under the headline: 'Modern Art by Primitive Man.'[179]

The early work of the *SAAA*, manifesting itself for example in the exhibitions listed above, and its involvement with the South African government has so far largely been neglected by scholars and researchers and deserves further attention exceeding the brief excursus I am able to offer here.

4.5 Conclusion

The networks described above often served similar purposes and hence regularly overlapped. All of them aimed at forcing open the set and largely obsolete patriarchal structures preeminent in South African art institutions and supporting its members that operated at the margins of said institutions: women, Jews, Afrikaners and a largely younger generation of artists. While Jewish and women's networks mainly intended to promote their protégées in order to gain renown and financial security, Afrikaner networks were more ideologically driven and often followed a nationalist agenda. The *New Group*, in which members of all three other groups gathered and which represented a younger generation of artists, wanted to generally professionalise the South African art scene and therefore most pronouncedly worked towards the fall of the old elites. The interactions of these groups – especially between Jewish and Afrikaner artists as well as between *New Group* and Afrikaner artists – were hence often coined by ambivalences.

In order to demonstrate the power of women's networks, the networks surrounding Irma Stern form a conducive example. The most influential women supporting her were Thelma Gutsche, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Freda Feldman, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen, most of whom were also Jewish. While Millin, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen were of great help to Stern from early on in her career, Gutsche and Feldman influenced the artist's reception until well after her death. Through her own fame, Millin helped Stern by mentioning her friend's name in interviews and emphasising her "brilliancy." Purwitsky and Van Gelderen built up Stern's prominence by publishing translations of appraisals of her works that had appeared in the German press and by reproducing and spreading Stern's self-portrayal. They also repeatedly positioned her as a Jewish artist in order to fuel Jewish patronage of her work. As a result, Stern's works were collected by many affluent members of South Africa's Jewish diaspora. Feldman, one of those collectors, additionally supported Stern by helping organise her exhibitions and travels as well as by generally promoting the artist within her influential circle of friends. After her death, she was pivotal in advocating for maintaining Stern's home "The Firs" as a museum displaying her works and

179 Hugo, "Painting in South Africa," p. 145.

art collection. Gutsche, on the other hand, advocated Stern as "Ambassador for Africa" and crucially shaped Esmé Berman's entry on Stern in her *Dictionary*. Surprisingly, even though Stern depicted herself in the same boat with other important women artists, she did not form an alliance with other female pioneers such as Laubser or Higgs in order to systematically fight the patriarchal structures of the South African art scene.

Male Jewish artists such as Moses Kottler, Lippy Lipshitz, Wolf Kibel and Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz also received the support of journalists Purwitsky and Van Gelderen as well as of other authors writing for Jewish newspapers such as the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, the *Zionist Record*, the *Jewish Times*, the *Jewish Herald*, *Ivri Onouchi* or the *Hasholom Rosh Hashonah Annual*. These writers promoted Jewish artists from early on in their careers and first tried to indigenise them as integral parts of South African art traditions while later stressing the benefits of a supposedly Jewish cosmopolitanism and universal outlook. Both strategies were employed in order to counter contemporary perceptions of Jews as "foreigners" and further antisemitic sentiments. The latter were also spurred by members of the traditionalist art elite, exemplified by Edward Roworth, as well as by associates of Afrikaner networks such as JH Pierneef and AC Bouman. Afrikaner networks often aimed at brokering the consumption of art, including modernist art, to specifically Afrikaner audiences through a focus on identity. This was extremely beneficial to participating artists as they gained new and often highly focused audiences. Most successful in this aim was the university professor Martin du Toit due to his role as founder of the Afrikaans arts journal *Die Nuwe Brandwag*, as first head of the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria, where he organised numerous exhibitions, and as reviewer of such exhibitions in different Afrikaans-speaking newspapers. Another important figure was Bouman, also university professor, who supported the Afrikaner artists Laubser and Pierneef from the early stages of their careers. Laubser, Bouman and Pierneef were also interested in assisting the younger generation's *New Group* in bringing about the downfall of the conservative English arts elites.

Founded through the efforts of Gregoire Boonzaier, Terence McCaw and Freida Lock in the Western Cape and Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller in the former Transvaal in early 1938, the *New Group* aimed at raising standards, widening (buying) art audiences and professionalising South Africa's art scene in a democratic process. By realising those aims, they replaced the established institutional elite and attained a stronger interest in the arts by and collaboration with the South African government through the *South African Association of Artists* (SAAA) founded in 1944. However, many members joined the *Group* for opportunist reasons and there were various internal conflicts. The fall of the *New Group* followed in 1953 – caused by its large, unmanageable and eclectic membership producing work of greatly varying quality. The *SAAA* continued its work as most important representative body of South African arts professionals.

It is interesting to note that no comparable network was formed by British settlers. While many of the younger English artists converged in the *New Group*, the establishment, although artistically shaped by British traditions (e.g. Edward Roworth, Gwelo Goodman), in a way transcended ethnic identity since the "old

guard" comprised members such as the British settler Edward Roworth, the Afrikaner DC Boonzaier or the South African Jew Bernard Lewis. However, changing associations at the same time illustrate the ambivalent character of such alliances that were sometimes practically and sometimes ideologically driven. For example, JH Pierneef for a while formed an alliance with Roworth against Jewish artists and for a while with AC Bouman and the *New Group* against the hegemony of English art. Boonzaier and Lewis were supporters of Roworth's conservative understanding of art but at the same time opposed an English-style art academy. The matter becomes even more confusing when considering that, at some point, a majority of the professionally working artists in South Africa held a *New Group* membership and many of them worked in a traditional way. Nevertheless, these networks highlight the different interests shaping the South African art scene during the formation of settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century.

CONCLUSION

Departing from Nicholas Thomas's discussion of settler primitivism in Australia, the aim of this study was to describe the different facets of South African settler primitivism and the interactions of its protagonists who moved between the poles of European modernism and local traditional cultures. Marked by great ambivalences, they oscillated between transnational and national approaches to an art production that appropriated indigenous landscapes, peoples and their visual cultures. Casting Black South Africans either as developmentally and/ or territorially remote from White settlers, and hence different, or as lost ancestors whose art was deeply linked to the land, South African settler primitivists transformed their non-White compatriots and their artistic heritage into cultural assets they considered fit for appropriation. This was a crucial step in the process of "indigenisation" of White settler artists – and by extension their audiences – that sought to establish a new national culture independent of the European mother nations. Primitivist ideals can be traced throughout the artists' works and remarks as well as in discussions of their artistic practice by the contemporary press. They partly account for the unusual importance of women artists for South African modernism, who were able to benefit from the proximity of an allegedly intrinsic femininity and primitivist concepts that both foregrounded intuitive, subconscious, naïve, close-to-nature and emotion-based approaches to fine art production. While artists' interactions in the most important networks at the time were not governed by primitivist discourses, they were instrumental in forging the change to a modernist understanding of fine art.

My first chapter positioned South African settler primitivism in the context of primitivist currents in other settler nations, using Margaret Preston (Australia), Marsden Hartley (USA) and Emily Carr (Canada) as case studies. Generally, settler primitivism, as Thomas has pointed out, in contrast to European primitivism, was "an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one" and intended at settler artists' emancipation from Europe.[1] It is a process marked by strong ambivalences as native subjects and their visual culture were appropriated as a connection to such land but simultaneously denied any claim to it. South African settler primitivism differs from other settler primitivisms in its treatment of indigenous peoples who greatly outnumbered White settlers. Rather than referencing their visual culture, artists such as Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, Gregoire Boonzaier and Alexis Preller concentrated on depicting South Africa's Bantu-speaking

1 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.

peoples themselves, showing them in a way that clearly cast them as removed from, uninterested in and finally incapable of participating in any form of contemporary socio-political life. While Stern's and Preller's primitivisms exoticised Black South Africans leading "primitive" lives, Laubser's and Boonzaier's class primitivisms romanticised Black and Coloured farm labourers as well as Cape Malays as contently living pre-industrial existences that did not interfere with White modernity. When actually dealing with indigenous visual culture, settler primitivists such as JH Pierneef or Walter Battiss turned to San rock paintings as the San, due to their precedent disintegration, did not pose any political threat but could be idolised as cultural forebears. Battiss and Pierneef hence appropriated their form languages in order to develop a specifically South African art. Lippy Lipshitz, on the other hand, appropriated West African sculpture by using indigenous South African materials and thereby averted the problem of referencing the art of his oppressed compatriots whose rights and claims had to be reckoned with.

Examining the work of these seven most prominent settler primitivists as case studies, I have shown that four different kinds of settler primitivism can be differentiated in South Africa: stylistic, racial, gender and class primitivism. Those categories are not mutually exclusive but often overlap. Racial, gender and class primitivism all relate to a primitivism in content that is closely interlinked with subject appropriation. Stylistic primitivism – concomitant with stylistic appropriation – is especially important in the works of Laubser (appropriating children's art), Lipshitz (appropriating West African sculpture), Pierneef and Battiss (appropriating San rock painting) while it plays a subordinate role in the works of Stern, Boonzaier and Preller. All artists can be considered to adhere to a racial primitivism in their depictions of Black Africans. This is not surprising as it can be assumed – due to their political conformity and cooperation with the Union and apartheid governments – that all artists were interested in maintaining the discrimnatory assumption common amongst White South Africans at the time that race was an indicator of difference and racial segregation hence necessary. Gender primitivism is most striking in the works of Stern, Battiss and Preller, who highly sexualise their subjects and comply with common stereotypes of femininity. Class primitivism is only noticeably detectable in Laubser's and Boonzaier's arcadian scenes of harmonious pre-industrial life in the countryside (Laubser) and non-White districts in Cape Town (Boonzaier).

The second chapter of this study traced the changes in the reception of South African settler primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s. South Africa's decision to participate in the Second World War in 1939 marked a turning point from a transnationalist orientation towards Europe to an increasingly nationalist rhetoric that spilled over to the field of art criticism. In the 1920s and 1930s, exhibition reviews of artists such as Stern were shaped on the one hand by a defence of the modernist style new to South Africa and on the other by discussions of Black South Africans as subjects. The former largely relied on transnational perspectives citing South African artists' successes overseas and the significance of primitivist ideals in Europe that substantiated a specifically South African modern art. The discussion of Black South Africans can largely be attributed to the changing relations between Whites and

Blacks during this time that was shaped by the fear of increasing racial integration and the consequent necessity to establish an alleged difference between White and Black South Africans. The concentration on primitivist ideals and portrayals of Black South Africans lay the preparation for the nationalist perception of South African settler primitivism defining the 1940s to 1960s that was heralded by discussions of Afrikaner artists and spread to reviews of English and Jewish art. Such criticism was shaped by a special emphasis on the themes of dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation," South Africa's spirit or soul, the South African soil and the importance of "native" art, all of which served the intention of authenticating a new national, specifically South African art.

In general, between 1920 and 1970, criticism of the seven South African artists discussed regularly relied on topics closely linked to primitivist discourses, such as truth, essentiality and childhood. Describing settler primitivists' works as depicting truth served as a legitimation of their work and simultaneously gave further weight to racist ideas of difference between the works' White audiences and Black subjects depicted as temporally, spatially or culturally removed. Indigenising phrases relating to essentiality emphasised the allegedly close relationship between settler primitivism and the South African land as the label "essentially South African" equalled a nationalist appropriation of this land. References to childhood were informed by primitivist ideals of unadulteratedness and subconsciousness and they lent authenticity and validity to the works reviewed. Additionally, artists' myths that have been relevant for art historical writing and art criticism since Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* played an important role in discussions of settler primitivists during the period under investigation. With regards to my seven case studies, it can be differentiated between typical male artists' myths and specific manifestations relating to Jewish and Afrikaner artists. Stereotypical male artists' myths of the autodidact, "genius" child "discovered" by an expert and of the artist as suffering social outsider who reaches fame against all odds, which can be detected in texts on Boonzaier, in the case of the Jewish sculptor Lipshitz were conflated with stereotypes of the suffering, melancholic Jew and the common Jewish theme of tragedy. At the opposite end of the spectrum, stereotypes relating to the Afrikaner artist Pierneef become obvious in his presentation as the typically simple, sincere and steadfast Afrikaner with Puritan values, often featuring references to patriarchal family structures, egalitarian principles and ideas of self-reliance. It is likely that all three artists participated in the myths surrounding their own art production.

Female artists' myths were discussed in the third chapter that positioned Stern and Laubser in the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] discourse originating in Weimar Germany during the first half of the 1920s and described stereotypes of intrinsic femininity associated with it. The latter resonate with primitivist ideals and hence help explain why South African settler primitivism was dominated by two women artists. Intrinsic feminity was considered to show itself in features such as motherhood, proximity to nature, intuition, harmony, sensitivity, emotionality and childlikeness that were employed by contemporary male and female authors to argue both ways: for and against the capability of women to be successful artists. Returning to an extremely

conservative and patriarchal art scene after their sojourns in Berlin in the early 1920s, feminine ideals expressed in the *Neue Frau* myth helped Stern and Laubser prompt the change from the prevalence of romantic realism to modernist artforms. Stern, who had quickly gained success in Germany building onto her symbolic capital as South African artist and expert on "primitive" cultures, upon her return to Cape Town presented herself as an acknowledged member of a male-dominated German modernism. Supported by mainly Jewish authors who reproduced translations of her German critiques in South African newspapers and publications, Stern developed successful self-narratives that cast her as the artist "genius" despised by the parochial South African art scene but recognised by important members of the German avant-garde. These narratives, that were taken up and multiplied by the press, resorted to ideas of intrinsic femininity such as intuition, sensitivity and emotionality and strengthened her position as South African settler primitivist.

Laubser, too, made a substantial contribution to the parameters determining the reception of her own work. She designed a Christianly informed self-narrative that embraced artists' myths of artistic independence, characteristics such as simplicity and authenticity rooted in common Afrikaner self-conceptions, the divinity of specifically South African landscape, and childhood memories in which her parents' farm played an important role. Moreover, in her deliberately childlike renditions of landscapes, animals and people, Laubser consciously complied with contemporary primitivist ideals and women's preferential position within those. The reception of her work can be viewed within contemporary idealisations of *voortrekkervroue* [pioneer women] and *volksmoeders* [mothers of the people], Afrikaner variations of the *Neue Frau*, whose defining virtues were kindness, gentleness, modesty, discipline, housewifeliness, sense of religion, self-sacrifice, bravery, love of freedom and self-reliance. All of these qualities also fit closely with Laubser's self-narrative of the Christian farmwoman that has informed biographies of the artist until today. Generally, monographs on Stern and Laubser published in South Africa re-privatise the artists by basing interpretations of artworks chiefly on biographical information. Stern's obesity and supposedly unfulfilled love life have thus remained amongst the main points for discussions of her work. Additionally, the two women are often contrasted in comparisons shaped by feminine stereotypes that see Laubser as the gentle, harmony-seeking farmer's daughter and Stern as the exuberant pioneer of South African modernism.

My last chapter offered an excursus on the networks that highlight the different interests shaping the South African art scene during the formation of settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century. They aided the change from the obsolete patriarchal structures preeminent in South African art institutions by supporting its members that operated at the margins of said institutions, and hence often overlapped. The four most influential networks that can be identified in this context are women's networks, Jewish diaspora networks, Afrikaner networks and the foremostly younger generation consolidating in the *New Group*. While all of the first three networks were identity-based, Jewish and women's networks mainly intended to promote their protégées' careers and Afrikaner networks were more ideologically

driven, often following a nationalist agenda. The *New Group*, founded in 1938 and comprising members of all of the three other groups, aimed at generally professionalising the South African art scene and therefore most pronouncedly worked towards the fall of the old elites. This did not mean, however, that its members were united in a modernist style since membership was often practically or even opportunistically motivated. The interactions of these groups – especially between Jewish and Afrikaner artists as well as between *New Group* and Afrikaner artists – were often coined by ambivalences arising from differing ideological beliefs and common structural aims. Interestingly, no comparable network was formed by British settlers.

Throughout my study, a number of research desiderata have emerged. The most striking ones are probably foundational studies on the artists Lippy Lipshitz and Cecil Higgs. Due to their importance for the South African art scene at the time, it is surprising that the latest more detailed examinations of their works and careers were published in 1969 and 1974 respectively. Additionally, I believe a better general understanding of the institutional landscape in the field of fine art during the period focused on in my study would be beneficial. This could include an examination of how different cultural institutions such as the *SAAA*, the *Afrikaanse Kunsvereniging* [Afrikaans Art Association], the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [South African Academy of Science and Art] or the Institute of Race Relations worked with each other as well as with the government. Lastly, it would be certainly fruitful to expand my analysis of primitivism in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century to later artists such as Cecil Skotnes, Edoardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae and Dumile Feni whose approaches differed greatly from those presented here. It would be especially interesting to relate the work of Kumalo, Legae and Feni to other "Black primitivisms" like those of Négritude or the Harlem Renaissance in order to further differentiate it from the "White primitvisim" described in this study.[2] Most of all, the latter offers a basis for comparative studies of different settler primitivisms.

2 Compare Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*. McGabe, "The Multifaceted Politics of Primitivism in Harlem Renaissance Writing." Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora." Chinitz, "Rejuvenation through Joy." Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject*. Another interesting point for comparison could be the European Jewish primitivism described by Samuel J. Spinner. Compare Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism*.

ABBREVIATIONS FOR ARCHIVAL RECORDS

In order to comply with the guidelines on archival referencing provided by the various archivists who have supported my research, I use the following abbreviations in order to keep references concise while providing as much detail as possible on the respective archival items. (I also provide archival information for newspaper articles where appropriate. If no archival references are given, the respective article was accessed through general enquiries at the National Library of South Africa, Cape Town. In both cases, page numbers are mostly not available since the articles were provided as cuttings in which page numbers were often missing.)

Archives (in alphabetical order)	Abbreviations used in references
Johannesburg Public Library, Thelma Gutsche Collection, S Store 655.5(J)	JPL 655.5(J)
Johannesburg Public Library, Thelma Gutsche Collection, S Store 759.9(68)Stern	JPL 759.9(68)Stern
National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria, TAB, JH Pierneef-Versameling, Aanwins A941	NASA A941
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, D.C. Boonzaier Diaries, MSC 4	NLSA MSC 4
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Irma Stern Collection, MSC 31	NLSA MSC 31
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Irma Stern (Miscl.) Collection, MSB 923	NLSA MSB 923
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Irma Stern (Berman) Collection, MSB 1013	NLSA MSB 1013
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Ruth Prowse Collection, MSB 632	NLSA MSB 632
North-West University, Potchefstroom, Ferdinand Postma Library, J.H. Pierneef Collection	NWU Pierneef
Norval Foundation, Cape Town, Alexis Preller Archive, uncatalogued collection (as of March 2020)	NF Preller
Stellenbosch University Library and Information Service, manuscripts section, A.C. Bouman Collection, Ms 8	SU Ms 8
Stellenbosch University Library and Information Service, manuscripts section, Maggie Laubser Collection, Ms 79	SU Ms 79

Stellenbosch University Library and Information Service, manuscripts section, Cecil Higgs Collection, Ms 435	SU Ms 435
University of Cape Town, Jagger Library, Special Collections, Dronsfield Collection, BC 144	UCT BC 144
University of Cape Town, Jagger Library, Special Collections, Purwitsky Collection, BC 707	UCT BC 707
University of Cape Town, Jagger Library, Special Collections, Irma Stern Papers, BC 760	UCT BC 760
University of Cape Town, Jagger Library, Special Collections, Lippy Lipshitz Papers, BC 856	UCT BC 856
University of Cape Town, Jagger Library, Special Collections, Deane Anderson Collection, BC 1123	UCT BC 1123
University of Cape Town, Jagger Library, Special Collections, Hilda Purwitsky/ Roza van Gelderen Papers, BC 1271	UCT BC 1271
University of Pretoria, Archives, Irma Stern Archive	UP Stern
University of Pretoria, Art and Ceramics Collections, Alexis Preller Archive	UP Preller
University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, Sarah Gertrude Millin Papers, A539	Wits A539
University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, Richard Feldman Papers, A804	Wits A804
University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, Esmé Berman Papers, A2286	Wits A2286

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ORIGINAL TEXTS OF TRANSLATIONS

chapter	foot-note	original text	source
Introduction	4	Die Fallstudie als Methode ist geeignet, die Tendenz der post-colonial und gender studies zu groben Verallgemeinerungen zu korrigieren und pauschalisierende Kategorien wie Mann und Frau, weiß und schwarz, Orient und Okzident, das Selbst und das Andere durch eine prinzipiell unendliche Vielfalt im Konkreten zu differenzieren.	Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 15.
	5	Die gegenwärtigen Diskussionen um eine Global Art History sind häufig von der Frage geleitet, ob und wie westliche Formen der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung globale Geltung beanspruchen können. Statt einem solchen generalisierenden Ansatz zur aktuellen Globalisierung der Kunstgeschichte zu folgen, scheint es zielführender, die Aufmerksamkeit von der unmittelbaren Gegenwart auf die Moderne der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts zu verschieben, um so die „Globalisierung" der Kunst aus ihren Anfängen heraus zu verstehen.	Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 35.
	56	In meinem Sprachgebrauch steht „postkolonial" mehr für die kritischen Perspektiven auf ungleiche Beziehungen zwischen westlichen und nicht-westlichen, weißen und Schwarzen Modernismen, die an einem neuen Bild der Kunstgeschichte arbeiten…	Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 27.
	57	Die Diskussionen um eine Global Art History sind trotz ihres universalen Anspruchs nach wie vor von einer Dichotomie westlicher und außereuropäischer Kunstgeschichten geprägt. Diese lässt sich nur überwinden, wenn man Austauschbeziehungen und Wechselwirkungen zwischen Modernitäten und Modernismen in verschiedenen Regionen der Welt unter Berücksichtigung ihrer kolonialen und postkolonialen Machtverhältnisse untersucht.	Kravagna, "Für eine postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts," p. 111.
	58	Es geht dabei um konkrete Kontakte und Allianzen zwischen Akteuren und Akteurinnen statt um Kategorien wie Einfluss und Rezeption.	Kravagna, "Für eine postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts," p. 111.

	59	Im Unterschied zum Internationalismus der westlichen Moderne überschreitet ihr [der frühen transkulturellen Moderne] Transnationalismus die geografischen, kulturellen und „rassischen" Grenzen der kolonialen Weltordnung.	Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 41.
Chapter 1	2	Anmerkungen zur Methode Das Malerische Religion und afrikanische Kunst Kubische Raumanschauung Maske und Verwandtes	Einstein, *Negerplastik*, 1915.
	74	Bei Befürwortern wie bei Gegnern erregte Irma Stern also dadurch Aufsehen, dass sie das Neueste aus Europa mitbrachte, dies aber nutzte für die Wiedergabe von Menschen, die bisher höchstens als Objekte ethnographischer Neugier gegolten hatten…	Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 118.
	75	Dass Irma Stern sich in dieser Weise mit „Eingeborenen" beschäftigte, war nur legitimisierbar durch das Interesse und die Erfolge in Europa.	Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 118.
	118	Daar is patos en waardigheid in die leefwyse van mense wat in noue kontak met die elemente leef.	N.N., "Irma Stern. Deur Akademie Bekroon," p. 35.
	119	Hulle het eerbied vir die grond. […] Hulle vertel nie leuens nie. By hierdie mense dring 'n mens deur tot iets wesenliks, iets essensieels.	N.N., "Irma Stern. Deur Akademie Bekroon," p. 35.
	120	... die leefwyse van eenvoudige mense – Kaapse Kleurlinge en Maleiers, inboorlinge van Afrika, die vissers van Spanje, Italië en Madeira.	N.N., "Irma Stern. Deur Akademie Bekroon," p. 35.
	127	Die vryheid in die drag van die Indiervrouens en die pragtige kleure van die saris teen die blouswart hare, is vir my ongelooflik mooi – daarom wil ek hulle skilder.	Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
	148	Tog dink ek dat dit juis dié eenvoud en beslistheid is wat die publiek oorbluf, in die tyd van verwarring waarin ons leef.	Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
	149	Ons lewe in 'n tyd van uitvindings en veranderings, wat alles gejaagdheid meebring; die kunstenaar voel dit as 'n warboel wat deur die mensdom self veroorsaak is. Hy voel daar is geen ander uitweg as om nogmaals self veroorsaak is. Hy voel is daar is geen ander uitweg as om nogmaals terug te gaan na die skepping en van nuuts af aan vir homself te begin deur sy werk te vereenvoudig. Dit is die reaksie op die warboel. Die kunstenaar verlang na rus en probeer om dit te vind deur terug na die natuur te gaan en so vrede in sy werk te bring.	Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."

	153	Die skildery moet in die kunstenaar se binneste kom met bewustheid van kleure, figure en lyne. Ons noem dit geheue maar dit is meer as geheue: dit is die beeld wat lewe in die eie bewussyn...	Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
	155	As 'n mens tien jaar lank in Europa gewoon het, en elke jaar daarna vir 'n ander stad vertoef, dan het jy soveel wye kontakte dat jy byna voel of jy nie aan 'n bepaalde plek behoort nie. Waar 'n mens egter jou eerste lewensindrukke ontvang het, waar jy as kind met die intieme familiekring verkeer het, bly altyd weer dié besondere plekkie, jou kontrei.	Laubser, "Dit is mei kontrei."
Chapter 2	70	Gedurende die 1920's het die aard van blanke vrese ingrypend verander toe vrees vir verengelsing begin oorgaan het in 'n vrees vir rasse-integrasie en verswelging deur swart mense.	Du Bruyn & Wessels, "Vrees as Faktor," p. 81.
	71	... het vrees 'n politieke faktor geword wat stempatrone onder blanke kiesers vorentoe sou beïnvloed.	Du Bruyn & Wessels, "Vrees as Faktor," p. 82.
	89	... vrolikheid beoefen soos kinders.	Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser."
	90	Ek wil nie ontken dat die voorliefde vir eksotiese onderwerpe by sommige Europese kunstenaars 'n trek van ontaarding kan wees nie, maar in Suid-Afrika is so 'n voorliefde die natuurlikste en gesondste ding van die wêreld.	Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser."
	91	Dit word dikwels verklaar dat die naturelle, van die skilder se oogpunt beskou, die enigste mense in Suid-Afrika is wat die moeite werd is om te skilder.	Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud Kenmerk En Haar Kuns."
	107	Uit sy werk spreek Europa, nie Suid-Afrika nie.	Bokhorst, "Vollbloed-ekspressionis."
	108	Hoekom praat die Afrikaner Preller nie van solderkamertjie nie en waarom word mens ook hier weer 'n Engelse "list of pictures" in die hand gedruk?	Bokhorst, "Vollbloed-ekspressionis."
	130	Ma oggi parecchi artisti guardano alla loro terra trovandovi grandi ricchezze di nuova linfa, che cercano di adoperare e di interpretare, ognuno seguendo il proprio carattere.	Paris, "Sala LII: Sud Africa," p. 216.
	143	Ons kry 'n beeld van al die aspekte van Afrika – die klam oerwoud van die middelste paneel; die skerp afgetekende berge, beklemtoon deur die sabelagtige rooi gestaltes; die brandende woestyn regs, leweloos en skroeiend, met sy reuse-palmbome. Hier is die stil stem van Afrika – ontsaglik en ongetem.	Wood, "Preller Se Magnum Opus," p. 22.

	175	Wanneer ons kunstenaars opreg is en getrou aan hulself, dan sal hul getrou wees aan hul volk en dan sal hul natuurlikerwys nasionale kuns voortbring.	Hendricks [sic], "Beskouing," p. 64.
Chapter 3	16	Haar vroulike aard laat nie toe dat daar 'n skrynende aanklag opstyg uit die portrette van minderbevoorregte individue nie. Die uitbeelding lyk meer na 'n vertroosting, asof die gevoelige hande van die kunstenares so 'n kind gestreel en hom die rus gegee het om voor haar te sit.	Bouman, "Oor Boeke en Kuns."
	59	Die rol van die vrou in die geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika is in baie opsigte merkwaardig. In verhouding met die klein bevolking kan min ander lande aanspraak maak op dieselfde aantal kunstenaresse.	Meintjes, Maggie Laubser, p. 42.
	115	Die Malerin Irma Stern, die bei Gurlitt eine große Ausstellung veranstaltet, ist Südafrikanerin. Sie hat noch europäische Schulung genossen, vielleicht bei Pechstein, an den sie manchmal erinnert. Aber die Form bekommt dadurch einen ganz anderen Charakter, dass für sie das Exotische nicht Wahl für bestimmte artistische Absichten, sondern Erlebnis, Kindheitserlebnis, ist. Schwarze fügen sich in ihre Bildform, ohne das schön Animalische ihrer Bewegung zu verlieren, das die Europäer niemals treffen, eher noch durch künstliche Naivität, die neue Konvention, in puppenhafte Unbeholfenheit versehren. Sie sind ihr überhaupt nicht nur Bildfigur, sondern Wesen besonderer Art, die zu ihrem vollen Menschenrecht kommen sollen, sogar zu ihrem Persönlichkeitsrecht. Und ebenso groß ist aus demselben Grund der Unterschied in der Farbe. Sie sieht Tönungen, wo der Europäer einen Ton sieht, sie sieht Harmonien, wo den Europäer die fremdartige Grellheit lockt. Kurz, die Form ist ganz erfüllt von Inhalt, scheint nur die richtige Folge dieses Inhalts zu sein. Wodurch alle Problematik, die vorgefasster Form anhaftet, hier ausgeschlossen ist.	Stahl, "Zur Sache."
	122	Der französische Maler Paul Gauguin stammte von peruanischen Vorfahren ab: er hatte heißes Blut in seinen Adern…	Kalmer, "Die Malerin."

	123	Wenn von Technik bei ihr überhaupt gesprochen werden kann, wenn man an irgend welche Vorbilder erinnern will, von denen sie nicht gelernt haben kann, weil sie sie nicht gekannt hat, so darf man sagen, daß […] die Aquarelle an Max Pechstein erinnern, der aber zu seiner Technik, seiner Manier auch erst in der Südsee gekommen ist, so daß auch hier nur vom Einfluß des Irma Stern umgebenden Milieus, aber nicht vom Einfluß eines Vorbilds gesprochen werden kann.	Kalmer, "Die Malerin."
	130	Die typisch expressionistische Sehnsucht nach den verlorenen Ursprüngen, nach einem einfachen, reinen Leben in kreatürlicher Unschuld, die Pechstein ihr eingeimpft haben mag, ist aus ihren Oelbildern noch heute abzulesen.	H.K., "Expressionismus aus Südafrika."
	178	Ek het geleer om nie van voorwerpe de skilder nie, nie 'n model te hê nie, nie 'n vaste tegniek te hê nie. […] Ek moet vry wees om te skilder […] Geens mens kan volgens vasgestelde reëls skilder nie; dis 'n genot van die hart, 'n persoonlike ontwaking. […] As 'n kunstenaar eerlik en opreg is teenoor homself, skilder hy soos hy voel […] Dit is die verlange om eenvoudig te wees...	Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
	182	Die werk van Maggie Laubser is van gister, van vandag en van môre.	Miles, "Maggie Laubser."
	183	Indien daar een kunstenaar in hierdie land is wat as essensieel inheems beskryf kan word en wie se werk 'n positiewe weergawe van haar omgewing is, is dit Maggie Laubser. […] Maggie Laubser is 'n Suid-Afrikaner wat uiting aan haar gevoelens oor Suid-Afrika gee op 'n wyse wat essensieel haar eie is...	Hendrikz, "Mense."
	186	Haar styl is van die grootste eenvoud, en openbaar 'n sobere kunsinsig, vry van alle sieklike sentimentaliteit.	N.N., "Kunstentoonstelling te Bloemfontein."
	191	Maggie Laubser vertritt in ihrer Kunst die Aspirationen der Afrikaner […] Sie ist dadurch eine ausgezeichnete Repräsentantin der Buren…	Von Moltke, "Zwei südafrikanische Expressionisten," p. 263.
	192	Maggie Laubser malt, wie sie ist: als aufrechte, sanfte, liebenswerte, reife Frau, die stark und einfach empfindet, was um sie herum vorgeht. […] Im Gegensatz zu Maggie Laubser ist sie [I. Stern] eine Frau von großer Vitalität […] Alle innere Intensität des Lebens drückt sie in Farben und großen bewegten Formen aus…	Von Moltke, "Zwei südafrikanische Expressionisten," p. 263–264.

	193	Zu dieser Gruppe [Künstler, die in Südafrika geboren wurden] gehören zwei Malerinnen, die wahre Kinder des Landes sind…	Von Moltke, “Zwei südafrikanische Expressionisten,” p. 263.
	200	Somtyds het my vriende my in Europa gevra of ek nie verlang na die Suid-Afrikaanse son nie en elke keer was my antwoord nee – nee, nie na die Suid-Afrikaanse son nie, maar na die ruimtes van die Suid-Afrikaanse landskap! Hierdie liefde vir die ruimtes gee vir my ‘n gevoel van vryheid en ongebondenheid. […] Al hierdie wondere van die skepping maak my bewus van die eindeloosheid van alles.	Laubser, Dit is mei kontrei, p. 5.
	201	Iemand het my byvoorbeeld gevra: […] “Waarom skilder u eende? Dit is alleen geskik vir ’n kinderkamer...” My antwoord was: “Dan sal ek altyd ’n kind wees. Omdat ek van eende hou, moet ek hulle skilder.”	Laubser, “Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder.”
	211	Dit word beweer dat die gesamentlike stryd om selfbehoud van man en vrou gedurende die Groote Trek, baie bygedra het om die vrou van Suid-Afrika selfstandigheid te leer.	Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43.
	219	Haar lewensgeskiedenis lees soos dié van die een of ander Middeleeuse martelaar. Ondanks die mees bevooroordeelde, bittere en onnosele teenstand, het sy deurgeworstel tot die uiteindelike erkenning van haar merkwaardige talent.	Malherbe, “Maggie Laubser.”
	220	In Maggie Laubser mag die Afrikanderdom nog ‘n kunstenares vind wat hulle met onderskeiding in die buiteland kan verteenwoordig net […] Dat dit deur ‘n vrou vir ons gedoen mag word, sal geen toeval wees nie as ons die geskiedenis van ons volk nagaan. […] en soos die Voortrekkervroue dikwels die voortou geneem het, beskaam sy ons deur haar onverskrokke koersvastheid.	Malherbe, “Maggie Laubser.”
	222	Dit is dat daar nie ‘n enkele goeie kunstenares in Suid-Afrika is wat getroud is in die ware sin van die woord nie.	Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 44.
	224	Maggie Laubser haar samestelling van landskap en figuur is van ‘n besondere gehalte, so ook is haar kleureharmonie.	Enseel, “Tentoonstelling van skilderye.”
	225	En die harmonie wat sy bereik, is ‘n indiwiduele besit...	Bouman, “Nuwe Kunsstyl.”
	228	... ‘n groot emosionele ondervinding. Hierdie skielike ontwaking wat miskien beter as “invoeling” beskryf kan word, is juis wat die werk van hierdie kunstenaar sulke groot en suiwere kuns maak.	De Bruyn, “Maggie Laubser.”

	229	Haar werk het meer as oppervlakkige verwantskap met Maggie Laubser.	Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43.
	231	Soos Maggie Laubser keer sy haar met die grootste meegevoel tot die arbeiders en beeld hulle op aangrypende wyse uit.	Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43.
	237	... das jugendliche Talent setzt sich gegen Schwierigkeiten durch, die seiner Berufswahl oft von der engsten Umgebung bereitet werden	Kris & Kurz, *Legende vom Künstler*, p. 56.
	249	Maar ondanks hierdie inhibisielose uitdrukking en eenvoud is daar niks naiefs of primitiefs in mej. Laubser se werk nie.	Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser."
	252	... haar werk is net so eg, so skoon, so lewenskragtig en so taai soos die doringbome wat in ons vlaktes staan.	Hendrikz, "Mense."
	255	Ek het op 'n plaas gewoon en altyd maar met die natuur saam gewees […] Alles wat ek weet en ken het die plaas vir my geleer ... en nie oorsese studie nie!	Miles, "Maggie Laubser."
	258	Op 'n rustige plasie naby Kaapstad het mej. Loubser in die laaste jare gearbei, en soos die ware kunstenares wat sy is, het sy nie elders haar inspirasie gesoek nie, maar die onmiddellike lewe in haar met verf en kwas op die doek gebring.	N.N., "Die Eerste Afrikaanse Vroue-Skilder."
Chapter 4	40	... en hierdeur bereik sy 'n geweldige eenvoud en bring sy ons 'n wêreld wat ontdoen is van die oppervlakkigheid van ons kunsmatige beskawing.	Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet."
	43	... in haar skilderye geheelgetal beheer deur haar onmiddellike behoefte om uitdrukking te gee aan emosionele spanning.	Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet."
	44	Kortom dus, albei die vroue-kunstenaars het ons wêrelde gebied waarvoor 'n mens die sleutel van gevoeligheid, verbeelding en begrip nodig het. Mr. Tretchikoff se wêreld het geen sleutel nodig nie.	Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet."
	76	Van harte hoop ek dat u edelagbare u nie deur die vulkaniese uitbarstings van die heer Meyerowitz en Konya + ander sal laat beïnvloed. Bogenoemde heer is vir 'n Suiwere Afrikaanse Kuns een groot gevaar, daar hulle Bolsjewistiese idee is toegedaan en die kleurling bo ons stel aangaande kuns, en dit sou is ramp veer as ons deur sulke uitlanders moer gedikteer skryf word wat Afrikaanse kuns is. En daar kuns die spontane en hoogste uiting is van ons volk wat van Dietse oorsprong is, is dit noodsaaklik dat ons as Afrikaanse volk sorg moet dra, en waak, dat goi uitheemse invloede in ons kuns inkruip nie.	Pierneef, letter to Malan, 10 February 1932.

	95	... ek hoop van harte dat u nog deur ons hele land bekend sal word en die waardering sal geniet wat u toekom.	Du Toit, letter to Laubser, 20 November 1930.
	110	In de Burger las ik 'n stukje van 'n correspondent die vreesde dat je te veel onder vreemde invloeden was geraakt. "Die Burger" het selfs al gevrees dat jy die Afrikaanse karakter in jou werk son verloor.	Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 10 May 1926. Bouman, letter to Pierneef, 6 July 1927.
	140	Hier aan die Kaap geld dit veral Bernard Lewis en Melvin Simmers. "Positief" verheerlik hulle by voorkeur die bloedlose, kleurlose prentjies, wat nie kan verouder nie, omdat dit lewensloos gebore is. […] Negatief probeer hulle om kunstenaars sleg te maak wie se werk heeltemal bokant hul vuurmaak-plek lê.	Bouman, "Die Kunstenaarskap."

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This work describes different facets of South African settler primitivism and the interactions of its protagonists, who moved between the poles of European modernism and local traditional cultures. Marked by great ambivalences, they oscillated between transnational and national approaches to an art production that appropriated indigenous landscapes, peoples and their visual cultures in order to indigenise white settlers to the South African land. A focus is set on the women artists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, who were key to the development of South African modernism.