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## THE ART OF MISS IRMA STERN: UGLINESS AS A CULT

### SOUTH AFRICA AND THE FINE ARTS: AN INTRODUCTION

South African culture and art is not homogeneous because it reflects the cultural, linguistic and civilizational diversity of this country. In visual art, the oldest works of indigenous inhabitants of this region of the world are the very valuable and precious rock paintings of the Bushmen and the sculptures of the Bantu peoples. The white community, whose history really began in 1652 with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck (1619-1677), at first presented the country only through simple sketches and graphics shown on maps, in diaries and in various travel books. The true history of white art dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is connected mainly with the works of such artists as Thomas Bowler (1813-1869), Thomas Baines (1820-1875), Georg Angas (1822-1886) and Frederic I'Ons (1802-1887) and the creation and establishment of the South African Fine Arts Society in 1851 (Pawłowska, *Sztuka* 65-124).

Further development of South African Art came only after the arrival of two prominent Dutchmen in the Transvaal: the painter Frans Oerder (1867-1944) and the sculptor Anton van Wouw (1862-1945). The first of them painted mainly landscapes, still life and portraits, the second one proved to

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be a pioneer of bronze sculptures portraying both the characteristic human types of this area (e.g. Africans) as well as creating monumental monuments (e.g. monument of Paul Kruger in Pretoria and monument of the “Woman” in Bloemfontein – *Nasionale Vrouemonument*). Artistic emigration influenced the modest world of art in South Africa, which was previously limited to only a few artists, such as Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936) and Hugo Naudé (1868-1941). Soon after, the artists from the Netherlands, such as Pieter Wenning (1873-1921), who specialized in immortalizing scenes from the life of the Cape Country, joined the above mentioned artists which created in a very traditional Dutch Academic Style. Painters who came to South Africa from the Great Britain presented a slightly different form of expression, referring directly to romanticism: among others Edward Roworth (1880-1964) and Bertha Everard (1873-1965), who in the 1930s broke off with this tradition by means of creating a group of modernist artists.

The artists who gathered in an artistic circle focused around Daniel Boonzaier (1865-1950), who was a talented cartoonist himself, broke up with the ossified and fossilized artistic trends of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were, among others: the painter Irma Stern and the already mentioned Wenning (Pawłowska, “Czy istnieje” 157-162). It is the groundbreaking, revolutionary and innovative work of Irma Stern, due to the strong influence of expressionism in her work, that the main effort of this text will be devoted to.

### EARLY YEARS OF IRMA STERN’S LIFE

Irma Stern, who was nicknamed in recent decades as the “Great Lady of South African Art,” was born on October 2nd, 1894 in the small town of Schweitzer-Renecke in Transvaal, in an affluent family of German-Jewish immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Almost instantly after the outbreak of the bloody Second Boer War in 1899, the father of the future artist Irma Stern, along with her two elder brothers, became a prisoner of war because of his pro Boer views (Leśniewski).<sup>2</sup> This fact caused that Irma’s mother decided to move back with Irma and her younger brother, Rudi, to a family in Germany. Ever since

<sup>1</sup> Bibliography on Irma Stern is abundant: Osborn; Dubow, *Irma Stern*; Berman, *Art & Artists* 437-441; Dubow, *Paradise*; Berman, *Painting* 74-82; Schoeman; Arnold, *Irma Stern*; Arnold, *Women and Art* 77-89; Below and Hülsewig-Johnen; Below, *Hidden Treasures. Irma Stern*; Cullen.

<sup>2</sup> The Second Boer War lasted in the years 1899-1902.

then Irma has always felt that her second home is in Germany. After the Boer Wars, the wealthy Stern family often traveled between Germany and South Africa. Young Irma attended school in Berlin; and at the age of 19, i.e. in 1913, she joined the private Weimar Arts School to study painting. When World War I broke out, the Sterns had to stay in Germany for the duration of it.

However what is very significant about Irma's life is that if we read any older South African publications about Irma Stern, we will learn that she grew up in South Africa and that she visited Germany only a few times. However, based on Irma's diaries published in the mid-1990s, we now know quite well that the situation was quite the opposite (Schoeman 23). When Irma Stern finally settled permanently in South Africa in 1920, at the age of twenty six, she had practically spent less than 10 years of her life so far in her native country. Numerous trips and frequent stays in Europe in her youth, and especially in Germany, were of great importance for the evolution of her art and for her development as an artist. Thus, when Stern as a young artist settled in a colonial and largely provincial Cape Town, she was already in all respects a completely and artistically shaped German painter. It was this German culture with a dramatic, polemical and often violent character<sup>3</sup> that formed her as an artist. As Hermann Bahr wrote in his book entitled *Expressionismus* (1916), the interior of a man should be immediately released so that he can express all troubles and discontent that oppress him. Irma's stays in Germany were so important for the young artist, because Weimar and Berlin (where the Stern family mainly resided) before the outbreak of World War I and also in the period between the two world wars, were quite important cultural centers in Europe (Schoeman 47-50).

It can be mentioned, that as early as 1919 the Weimar was to become the first home of the famous Bauhaus-Universität (Pincini 216-219) and its revolutionary ideas for art and all kinds of crafts. However, during Irma Stern's studies, Weimar was still a very conservative city, as the *Grossherzoglich Sächsische Hochschule für bildende Kunst* (Grand Ducal Saxony School of Art), where she studied. But at the same time it was a cosmopolitan environment, which can be exemplified by her Weimar teacher – a Norwegian portraitist and genre painter Carl Frithjof Smith (1859-1917) and another foreigner teaching there, Gari Melchers (1860-1932) – an American painter specializing in panoramic historical and religious scenes (Scholz 23). Irma Stern later complained that she painted only plaster casts

<sup>3</sup> More on the subject of German culture in the early 20th century: Pincini 28-54; Peukert.

in the Weimar Academy and rarely saw a live model (Stern, “How I Began” 7-8). That is why the young student of art soon found Weimar’s environment on the eve of the outbreak of World War I too stiff and ossified. In 1914 Irma moved to a private school of Arthur Lewin-Funke in Berlin, where she was taught by Martin Brandenburg (1870-1919) – a painter associated with the Parisian impressionist environment. Perhaps in the Lewin-Funke studio she had an opportunity to meet the eminent Polish expressionist sculptor August Zamojski (1893-1970), who also studied there (Kossakowska-Szanajca 12).

### IRMA STERN AND GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

Irma Stern became interested very early in her life in the power of expression of German Expressionists,<sup>4</sup> with whom her own emotionalism was perfectly tuned. This predilection, towards expressive feelings presented in art, aroused the dissatisfaction of her first painting teachers and caused also that the artist abandoned this school. She made her decision to leave school in 1916, shortly after she had produced her first known work – *Eternal child* (in Rupert Art Foundation) (Stern, “How I Began” 7), which unfortunately was controversially received at Lewin-Funke art school. It was a painting showing an extremely mature portrait of a girl – a young war victim.

The tightly framed study was painted with broad impastos with a clear texture, in a subjective way, and at the same time completely devoid of notes of sentimentality, although it is known from historical accounts that the artist met in fact a girl traveling alone by train and was moved by her story. The viewer’s attention is attracted by large eyes emerging from the child’s slim face and small hands holding a bouquet of wild flowers. The modest dress that the young girl is wearing with a black sash on a white lace collar only emphasizes the tragedy and shortcomings of the war ravaging Europe. Reflecting on the origin of the title, it is impossible not to notice the echo of Jung’s interpretations of the archetypal *puer aeternus*, which leads “temporary life, because of fear of being caught in a situation from which one cannot escape, and his fate is rarely what he really wants.”<sup>5</sup> The artist’s

<sup>4</sup> The literature on German Expressionism is enormously rich. Among it, a strong emphasis on issues related to the importance of inspiration from non-European civilizations and primitivism, which was so important for the mature work of Irma Stern, is placed, for example, by: Herbert; Behr; Weikop; Price.

<sup>5</sup> For more information see Jung.

sensitivity presented in this work can be safely compared to a slightly older German graphic artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) with already well recognized market position and who also quite eagerly created drawings of children affected by war in the same period as Irma Stern. Similarly, one can find evident influence of the German proto-expressionist Paula Modersohn-Becker (1867-1907), whose works Irma Stern could have become acquainted with during exhibitions at the Paul Cassirer Art Gallery in Berlin (Stern, „How I Began” 7). Other German expressionists whose work Irma Stern must have seen personally, and probably also knew the artists in person, were Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. It is worth adding here that the motif of a child often appears in Kirchner’s work; an example combining expressive tendencies with fascination with primitive sculpture is a work from 1910 entitled *Fränzi in front of carved chair*. The frontal placing of the sitter suggests the influence of Munch, Van Gogh and Gauguin, and also recalls Primitive art<sup>6</sup>. The title character, Fränzi is one of the most powerful of Kirchner’s child portraits, as well as one of his most thought-provoking works in his entire oeuvre. In September 1910, a sketch of the girl was used on the cover of the catalog for the Die Brücke Group exhibition at the Arnold Gallery in Dresden. It is a woodcut made by another member of Die Brücke Group – Erich Heckel based on Kirchner’s work. The use of this model as the image of the group’s first really important exhibition and its continued appearance in numerous works created by these young German artists between 1919 and 1911 made it a symbol of Expressionist art during the Dresden period. In light of these facts, it seems very likely that Stern was also familiar with this work.

In the same year, when the portrait of the *Eternal Child* was created, Irma Stern met Max Pechstein (1881-1955) who was an important member of the Dresden Group *Die Brücke* and the Berlin *Novembergruppe*. The artist was very impressed by this painting to such an extent that he later became Stern’s mentor. He encouraged Stern to use extravagant colors and significantly influenced her early artistic work. As the founder of the anti-establishment movement of the New Secession in Berlin, he made sure that selected works of the young art student Irma were on display in the group’s

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<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered that Kirchner and his friends from *Die Brücke*, before becoming painters, had been students of architecture in Dresden, thus they had no formal art education, which probably had a positive effect on their greater freedom of artistic expression. This is perfectly evident in Kirchner’s utterance “The way of translating an experience into a work of art is free; the work of art is created deliberately through the will of its creator” (quote after: Ettliger 195).

Berlin exhibition in 1918. Almost at the same time in 1920, her first exhibition took place in the Ashbey Gallery in Cape Town. In the stable, colonial world of Cape Town's art, her modern and vibrant paintings outraged both the critics and the public, causing many negative reviews and remarks, such as "mad inspirations," "agony in oil" and "insult to human intelligence." One can only add that it was the same year in which the first exhibition of Black African and Oceania Art opened in Paris at the Devambe Gallery (Goldwater 26, 227). However, in the same period of the early 1920s, art critics mocked and scorned at the artist's exhibition in South Africa, labeling it, for example: "The Art of Miss Irma Stern – Ugliness as a Cult."<sup>7</sup> Even a police inquiry into public morality complaints had been initiated! (Stern, "How I Began" 7).

Adhering to deformations and sharp expressive color spots with strong contouring of objects, German expressionism was the background for the development of Irma Stern as an artist during war and shortly after World War I. Liberal ideals associated with modern art turned out to be a very strong impulse for her work. She also quickly identified with the important concept of modernism that visual language is a tool for self-expression and self-knowledge. It should be emphasized that in Europe the expressionist movement had its roots in the works and artistic attitudes characteristic of Post-impressionist painting, especially Vincent van Gogh, Edward Munch and Fauvism painters (such as Henri Matisse and André Derain) (Pincini 27).

An excellent example of the continuation of this tradition can be seen in the mature paintings of the aforementioned – Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, such as *Seated Woman with Wood Sculpture* (1912, Virginia Museum of Art) and *Negro Couple* (1911, Kirchner Museum Davos) as well as other works done by painters from the Die Brücke Group such as: Heckel's *Still life with Negro Mask* (Saarbrücken, Saarland Museum) and Schmidt-Rottluff's – *Still life with Negro Carvings* (1913, Bremen, Kunsthale). The above-mentioned works give the impression of being inspired by the statuary sculpture of the Bambara people (present-day Mali). At the same time, the emerging uninhibited nudity of the young people shown in the work *Negro Couple* evokes associations with a state of primal freedom. They all benefited and drew a lot from the non-European cultural achievements and they often searched there for inspiration. The main difference between them and the young

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from: Irma Stern Museum.

painter Irma from South Africa was that when all other admirers of the exotic, such as Paul Gauguin and Max Pechstein had to travel a long way in search of the 'Others' whom they could 'colonize artistically' and to find the idealized concept of 'primitivism,'<sup>8</sup> Irma Stern unfolded the vision of a person born in Africa and who originated from the 'Dark Land' and who was thoroughly and perfectly acquainted with Africa.

### AFRICA AS A MYTHICAL LAND IN THE PAINTING OF IRMA STERN

Irma Stern mythologized herself her childhood years spent in Africa, recalling it many times with pure joy and nostalgia. Even writing as a child, in her first diary, Stern reflected on her experiences growing up in 'Africa' and her love of the natural surroundings with "wide open veld under a broad blue and luminous sky" (Stern, Irma Stern Collection). Later in 1926, she wrote quite similarly about the Highveld plateau – the land of her childhood:

Its enormous size was one of my first impressions of this world, so full of beauty – fragments of yellow plains contrasted with a clear blue sky over the horizon and dark natives whose silhouettes emphasized its transparency (Stern, "How I Began" 8).

As early as 1927, the artist's first biographer, a well-known German historian and art critic of Jewish origin – Max Osborn, emphasized in his monograph that Irma Stern was an "exceptional case," because where: "Europeans, as a result of their cursory view, saw only the ugliness of physiognomy, she presented laughing faces, joy and an inexhaustible source of original beauty" (Osborn 28). Osborn emphasized that Stern did not come to Africa for a picturesque escapade (although, as he mentioned, she traveled in her own car around as the Transkei, Pondoland, Zululand, Natal, Swaziland,

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<sup>8</sup> The fascination with the exotic nature of Africa and the peoples inhabiting it was found in many artists from Europe from the late 18th century, when the concept of Noble Savage (French: *bon sauvage*) appeared among intellectuals. Without dwelling on this interesting phenomenon, it should only be mentioned that this concept referred to the idealized image of the 'primitive man' who was characterized by thinkers of the period of enlightenment and sentimentality, e.g. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) as a pure being uncontaminated by civilization. Although the 19th century, under the influence of colonialism, caused a disturbance in the goodness of the indigenous peoples, the fascination with non-European lands and artistic creations of their inhabitants gained strength at the beginning of the 20th century, when expressionist and cubist groups programmatically referred to the aesthetics of African art. Pawłowska, "Inspiracje kulturą Afryki" 71-90, and eadem, "Eksploracja sztuki afrykańskiej" 129-133.

Portuguese East Africa (today's Mozambique), the Belgian Congo (now Zaire), Senegal and Zanzibar (Osborn) (in order to study the living conditions of the indigenous people, but that it was her real home. For what she showed in her paintings was the world of her childhood and youth, with which she was connected "the world of dark peoples, forests, gardens and mountains, nature" (Osborn 28)). Works such as *Hunt* and *Repose* were created (private collections, 1927). According to the critic:

With the exception of a few trips to Europe, there was no longer period in which [Stern – A.P.] would not be in the surroundings reproduced in her paintings and drawings. And that's what ensured her individual position in the world of art. (Osborn 24)

Stern's unique position in the art of European modernism is also evidenced by the fact that other artists, to whom Osborn devoted his attention in the publishing series "Junge Kunst" (Young Art), are such coryphées of avant-garde art as: Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall and Wassily Kandinsky. The mythological character of Irma Stern was also influenced by the statements of Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein, who with some exaggeration described her as "the painter of Africans in German colonies in Africa" (Dubow, *Paradise* 99). Later publications which concentrated on the biography of the painter, e.g. Karel Schoeman's biography from 1994 or Marion Arnold's from 1995, corrected these romantic inaccuracies by emphasizing that Irma Stern's dependence on African culture, however very resonant in her art throughout her career, is quite complex and ambiguous but much more important for her artistic growth was in fact her artistic education received by in Germany and its significance cannot be overestimated.

Irma Stern herself was extremely aware of the importance of African art for the aesthetics of European modernism. She described her stay in Congo as follows:

It was really strange to be among such wild tribes of people and at the same time to fully realize their rare artistic taste, which for years has been exciting and stimulating for the European art world. Here are the creators of magnificent wood-carved sculptures, fetishes and masks, grotesque and beautiful explorers of the primitive cult of ancestors and the world living in spirits (...). (Quote after: Berman, *Remembering Irma* 91)

The Congo area has fascinated Stern in many ways. The painter's admiration was also manifested in her letters and diaries. It is worth mentioning that a



similar attitude towards Africa is revealed by the prose of white writers creating in a similar period of time: Olivia Schreiner, Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley. All these women artists seemed to be suspended between their 'white descent' and the African paradise in which they lived.

As Mona Berman, who was the daughter of the of Irma Stern's Jewish friends, the Feldmans – wrote later "Irma was extremely curious about the Mangbetu<sup>9</sup> – who, she heard, only one generation back had been man-eaters"<sup>9</sup> (quote after: Berman, *Remembering Irma* 91). She was determined to make contact with them. After meeting them and being allowed to paint them, she described the people with great admiration in her book *Kongo*:

It was strange to plunge right among so savage a tribe and yet only to be aware of a rare artistic taste which had for years been exciting and stimulating the art world of Europe. Here were the creators of magnificent pieces of sculpture, carved out of wood, of fetishes and masks, grotesque and beautiful revealing primitive ancestral worship and its world alive with spirits. (23)

The artist visited these areas several times during painting expeditions, later describing them in diaries.

Congo has always been a symbol of Africa to me – Stern wrote – its real heart. The sound of 'Congo' makes my blood dance, with a thrill of exotic excitement; this sound sounds like distant drums of natives and rushing tropical rivers flowing with the bubbling of water in their mystical depth. (Dubow, *Paradise* 19)

During her second stay in Congo in 1944, the painter noted with emphasis: "Here I am in the heart of Africa (...) so to say. I am working like hell – but it is a great task (...) the heat, the sun rays, the altitude (...)." (Dubow, *Paradise* 19).

Interestingly, when we recall another woman fascinated by Africa – the Danish writer Karen Blixen (1885-1962), her feelings associated with the special rhythm of the sounds of the continent are very similar:

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<sup>9</sup> The Congolese people of Mangbetu stood out in the eyes of European explorers because of their unusual elongated heads. According to its tradition, baby heads were tightly wrapped in fabric and rope to give them a distinctive look. This practice, called Lipombo, began to expire in the 1950s with the increasing Europeanization of this area. Because of the expressive appearance, it is easy to recognize the characters from the Mangbetu people in African art. Another reason for Europeans' interest in this people was the long-existing cannibalism among Mangbetu, which was described in the accounts of travelers residing in Belgian. The most important for spreading this fame in Europe was the two-volume daily *The Heart of Africa* (1874) of the German botanist Georg Schweinfurth. In 1870, Schweinfurth spent twenty-five days at the court of King Mangbet Mbunza, whom he described in his work as a powerful cannibal king. (Schildkrout and Keim, *African Reflections*).

Once man grasps the rhythm of Africa, he later notices that it repeats throughout the music of the continent. What I learned from animals also came in handy when I was dealing with local people (...) After meeting native African people, I adjusted the rhythm of my everyday life to the rhythm of the African orchestra. (Blixen, *Out of Africa*)

Under the influence of many journeys and trips deep into the African interior, the mature style of the painter Irma Stern fully developed, with a boldly used, vivid color palette, densely applied impastos, thick lines surrounding the shapes. The works which were created during this time are full of rhythm and extraordinary vitality and passion.

### COLONIALISM AND CIVILIZATION

Around 1933, Irma Stern, while traveling to Swaziland, noticed with sadness and anguish that the wild and mysterious world she had seen only a few years ago was beginning to disappear:

It was a shock to me – she said in an interview – to see how the natural picturesqueness of the native in his kraal had almost disappeared (...) Today he has submitted to civilization (...) he wears Everyman's clothes and boots [European – A.P.]. He looks odd and drab in this garb ... to those of us who saw the beauty of the native in his natural state the change is sad. ("Interview with Irma Stern")

As the artist and painter Irma Stern was by no means a critic of colonialism, but it is impossible not to hear in her words a certain coincidence with the opinions expressed two decades later, by an intellectual and thinker from the Martinique – Franz Fanon, who was perfectly aware of the ambiguous intercultural suspension he had experienced ("not yet truly white, not quite black anymore") (Reklajtis 5).

In such a convention of domestication and taming of fear of white people towards the symbolic Others (meaning in this case – the indigenous African people) was created her later date portrait entitled *Maid in uniform*, painted by Stern in 1955 (Arnold, *Irma Stern* 123).

The slender face of a relatively young maid with a pointed chin is combined with an oblique, nervous look at the viewer. The woman in the painting, although she is sitting on a chair with crossed arms, seems to say with her total attitude towards the viewer that it is inappropriate for her to sit while the white Madam is working hard (Stern, *Kongo* 1). The deformations

of the model's face in the painting *Maid in uniform*, such as a long nose, high and convex forehead emphasized by a starched white cap and clearly marked convex eyes, in the shape of hulled coffee beans are nothing more than a modern version of tribal masks Dagara<sup>10</sup> type from the Congo area. Apart from a clearly conscious reference to indigenous art; an interesting element of this painting is the flawlessly clean white apron – an integral attribute of every black maid in South Africa. This requirement for a kind of 'Europeanization' of domestic service in Africa, became almost mandatory and was very often practiced in wealthy white households after World War II. Traditional and extremely colorful costumes of Africans have been replaced with costumes referring directly to Victorian times, but they were nonetheless significantly simplified. The apron grew to become a determinant of the social status of a particular black woman. Irma Stern could not, therefore, restrain her own fear of the original character of her model and domesticated her image, giving her a socially acceptable appearance belonging to the maid.

In December 1942, Irma Stern exhibited her works, related to her stay in Congo, at the Gainsborough Gallery in Johannesburg. The exhibition opening was attended by Herman Charles Bosman – a South African literary legend who was absolutely delighted with the artist's painterly courage and later described his impressions in a review:

Africa is [alone – A.P.] pure art (...). I am personally grateful to Irma Stern for presenting to the whole world, in such a brave and uncompromising way, the only things in life that matter. She created a world full of breath and devoid of sensitivity, brilliant thanks to the raw colors of feelings, where (...) the land is spectacular and hope is the grain, and things change right in front of your eyes. (Rosenberg 134)

When discussing the subject of exoticism in Stern's work, one cannot ignore the fact that the artist's African models considered so appealingly primitive, in the eyes of the European audience, could not find recognition in South Africa, where 'natives' were everyday life resulting from unresolved racial issues inherent in the policy of the Union of South Africa. Emphasizing and highlighting the exotic and primitive nature of her black models, Irma Stern presented a stereotypical and conventional opinion about black people living on the African continent, perceiving them simply as:

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<sup>10</sup> More about Dagara masks of the Nagala people (Bacquart 136-139).

“leading a happy life, in close relationship with their land, beautiful in its primitive innocence (...) charming and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar, vital beauty” (Stern, “My Exotic Models”).

Irma Stern often marveled and admired many times the charms of life on the Old Continent, which she wrote about in high esteem and admiration in a letter to her good friend Richard Feldman:

I do not know how I shall fit into African boredom again – I have reacquired all my European habits to all the best – and have all the fashionable allures – red lacquered nails – a massage daily my hair is short and done by a good hairdresser – the most fascinating of hats and shoes are mine – If I think of Adderley Street I [main street in Cape Town – A.P.], I shudder. (Berman, *Remembering Irma* 57)

However, Nazism and Fascism, which had been on the rise in Europe since the end of World War I, made Stern fear for her life and she became afraid with the prospect of a longer stay in Germany. During the six months spent by Irma Stern in 1937 on the Old Continent, the artist repeatedly mentioned the possibility of the outbreak of war and anxiety, which she therefore felt. The fact that she was of Jewish origin meant that despite many successes at international exhibition (in Frankfurt, Hanover, Vienna, Paris, London and The Hague), she no longer felt safe in Europe. The painter was aware (like most Jews living in South Africa) of the ambiguity of her racial status<sup>11</sup> both in Europe and in South Africa sympathizing with Hitler.

That is why, during the years of World War II, Zanzibar became the place where she felt best and experienced the strongest artistic inspiration, where she was fascinated by Arab culture. As she wrote in her letters “I am conquering this area for my work and [artistic – A.P.] development. I paint dramatic paintings, compositions and faces” (Stern, *Zanzibar* 3).

This was the time when the artist created many beautiful and intriguing portraits, full of expression and deformation, of men and women from this region of Africa, which is culturally gravitating towards the Orient. The most fascinating and captivating of these Zanzibar paintings are: *The Golden*

<sup>11</sup> In South Africa, Jews were treated with hostility in the 1930s and 1940s. Many Afrikaners (i.e. the Boers) sympathized with Nazi Germany’s fascist organizations. Afrikaans’ organizations established in South Africa, such as “Louis Weichardt,” “Grayshirts” and especially the pro-Nazi “Ossewabrandwag” were overtly anti-Semitic. During this period, as a result of legal acts, the emigration of Jews from Nazi Germany to South Africa was very difficult. More: Payne 166-178.

*Shawl* (Iziko, National Gallery, Cape Town) and *Arab* (1939, private collection) as well as *Ramadan*, full of internal harmony and psychological depth. All paintings from this period were placed in wooden frames, elaborately decorated with carving, which the artist specially ordered from local woodcarvers, converting them from local carved doors. She chose herself the frames for her paintings and arranged them during exhibitions (Arnold, *Irma Stern* 77). The works from this period connected with the artist's stay in Zanzibar have become a perfect exemplification of the expressionist mannerism of painting developed by Irma Stern in authentic and intense contact with nature and the inhabitants of Africa.

The years of Nazi domination in the Old Continent and the outbreak of World War II were the exact moments in time when the artist finally liberated herself from the influence of German culture and art. This bleak time in world history was a period when expressionist art was recognized and treated by the Germans as Jewish and degenerated (the so-called *Entartete Kunst*), and artists associated with expressionist art were often interned in work camps or emigrated from the German Reich in panic. It was a time that Irma Stern lost all contact not only with her many friends and famous artists (Pechstein and Nolde who were removed from the Berlin Academy of Arts) but also with members of her own family who were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland (Berman, *Remembering Irma* 110).

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When the Second World War finally came to an end, Irma Stern went on a trip to Europe again in 1946. Her subsequent exhibitions in Paris, Venice and London were significant and noteworthy successes for her. However her original belief in the binary order dividing the world in two, into a civilized Europe on the one hand and an unbridled, violent, instinctive Africa on the other, unfortunately disappeared altogether and forever. As it strangely turned out, the 'noble' people of the Old Continent proved equally wild and terrible as the 'savages' of Africa. Therefore, the artist was no longer looking for signs of wildness and in the world, but rather created aesthetically tasteful paintings of French Nice's beaches and bays or Italian Venetian canals. When Irma Stern died on August 23rd 1966 in Cape Town, her high artistic position in South Africa was already very well established and it remained unchallenged to this day (Peter). Further art auctions only serve to prove this fact because all her painted works get consecutively

higher and higher prices. Only a few years after her death in 1966, a museum dedicated to her memory was organized in the artist's home enjoying a graceful name of 'Firs' which is located in Rosebank near Cape Town. This museum dedicated to her clearly testifies that Irma Stern's art is still vivid and fascinating to a lot of people. Strong expression, deformation and the influence of native African culture, which were often so irritating in the eyes of art critics at the beginning of the painter's career, became a real trade mark and a distinguishing feature of contemporary art originating from South Africa.

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## THE ART OF MISS IRMA STERN: UGLINESS AS A CULT

## Summary

The purpose of this article is to present the life and work of a well-known and celebrated South African painter of German-Jewish origin – Irma Stern (1894-1966). The artist was one of the first painters from South Africa whose works fitted well into the expressionist trend. Irma Stern's artistic development was influenced by numerous trips to Europe and her studies at German art schools and academies. Her African roots were another important source of inspiration for her. Stern, who travelled all over Africa (including South Africa, Zanzibar and Congo) created numerous portraits of its indigenous peoples surrounded by wild nature. In her works, she most often presented an idyllic vision of the African continent, but one whirling with life and dynamism, thus reflecting her personal views of Africa as a real 'paradise.'

**Keywords:** Irma Stern; South Africa; expressionism; painting, art.

## SZTUKA IRMY STERN: BRZYDOTA JAKO KULT

## Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie życia i twórczości znanej i cenionej malarki południowoafrykańskiej pochodzenia żydowsko-niemieckiego – Irmy Stern (1894-1966). Artystka była jedną z pierwszych malarek pochodzących z RPA, której prace dobrze wpisują się w nurt ekspresjonistyczny. Na rozwój twórczy Irmy Stern wpłynęły liczne podróże do Europy oraz studia w niemieckich szkołach i akademiach artystycznych. Ważnym źródłem inspiracji były też jej afrykańskie korzenie oraz liczne podróże po kontynencie afrykańskim (m.in. RPA, Zanzibar i Kongo). Malarka stworzyła liczne portrety rdzennych mieszkańców Afryki w otoczeniu dzikiej przyrody. W swoich pracach najczęściej prezentowała idylliczną, ale jednocześnie pełną życia i dynamiki wizję kontynentu afrykańskiego, co odzwierciedlało jej osobiste spojrzenie na Afrykę jako prawdziwy „raj na ziemi”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Irma Stern; Afryka Południowa; ekspresjonizm; malarstwo; sztuka.





1. Irma Stern, *The eternal child*, 1916, oil on board, 72.5x42 cm, Rupert Museum, Stellenbosch



2. Irma Stern, *Composition*, 1923. oil on canvas, 139×95.5 cm,  
Private Collection



3. Irma Stern, *The Hunt*, 1927, oil on canvas, 176.5×88 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town



4. Irma Stern, *The golden shawl*, 1945, oil on canvas, 65 x 53 cm,  
Iziko, National Gallery, Cape Town



5. Irma Stern, *Maid in uniform*, 1955, oil on canvas, 69x63 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town



6. Irma Stern, *Dahlias*, 1947, oil on canvas, 96 x 84 cm,  
Private Collection



7. Interior of the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town, 2018