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Representations of the Black Subject in Irma Stern's African Periods: Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo 1922-1955

Clive Kellner

University of Cape Town

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the major themes of Irma Stern's (1894-1966) representation of the black figurative subject in her African periods: Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo (1922-1955). Germane to these periods are Stern's childhood experience in the Transvaal and her training and influences in Germany. My research aims to do the following: (1) address a gap in the current literature on Irma Stern and her African periods (2) to consider whether Stern's mature periods, Zanzibar and Congo reveal an imaginary 'primitivist' mode of representation. Central to my research is the question of Stern's identity as a woman, settler and Jew, as it is critical to exploring the relation between Stern as a white settler and that of her black figurative subjects as viewed through the discourse of 'primitivism'. My methodology involves drawing from various archives, primary and secondary literature on Stern and Stern's own writings. My visual methodology includes a comparative analysis of Stern's early paintings in relation to her influences and formal and iconographic analysis of select 'mature' paintings.

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to Professor Colin Richards - In Memoriam

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Introduction

My interest in Irma Stern (1894-1966) emerges from my professional practice as a curator and former director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. At various stages of my career I have had the privilege to work with collections of modern and contemporary South African art. Invariably these collections have contained one or more works by Irma Stern and all have consisted of her African periods. Given the critical discourse of race and representation in much of modern and contemporary South African art, Irma Stern's portrayal of black figurative subjects remains a contentious issue. Stern's depictions of her black figurative subjects have led critics to claim that she viewed her subjects as exotic stereotypes rather than individuals (Arnold 1995: 102). This has particular relevance in post-apartheid South Africa today where issues of representation, race and identity are highly contested in various spheres of society and are part of a more general postcolonial interrogation not unique to South Africa.

My primary aim is to render visible a fuller or revised understanding of Irma Stern's African periods (Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo) with particular focus on her paintings of black figurative subjects and to register the iconographic and stylistic changes in her representation as she matured as an artist. Viewed through the discourse of 'primitivism', I would like to read Stern's imaging of black figurative subjects against the primary backdrop of her production and reception and that of her identity as a woman, settler and Jew. Key to this is the reading of her 'expressionism' as it developed throughout her African periods as influenced by the earlier period that Stern was actively engaged in the German Expressionist movement in Berlin. It is also important to state that the focus and scope of my research is on Irma Stern's portrait oil paintings. While I viewed many of Stern's drawings, watercolours and prints, her portrait oil paintings register the fullness of German Expressionism as a stylistic mode of painting together with her interest in African people, as key to her pictorial representation of black figurative subjects.

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I use the term ‘black figurative subject’ and hereafter, ‘black subject’ to indicate non-white or non-western people as defined by colonial discourse in determining the racial ‘other’ or as Frantz Fanon (cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000: 28) noted, “by the visibility of their perceived difference”. This ‘perceived difference’ was central to the colonial project and to the ‘primitivism’ that emerged within the German Expressionist movement. Classification of the racial ‘other’ included that of Africa, Oceania and the Orient as ‘primitive’ and set apart from white European society and its settlements. This has relevance for the black figurative subjects that Stern depicted from Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo.

Stern’s African periods can be defined as Swaziland (1922-1929) Zanzibar (1939-1945) and Congo (1942-1955). Her Swaziland period includes that of Umgababa and Natal where Stern began her travels searching for ‘authentic’ African subject matter in the form of indigenous peoples. After returning from Europe, Stern’s Zanzibar and Congo periods are widely recognised as Stern’s mature periods and some of the finest paintings of her career. According to Neville Dubow (1974: 20) “in the period between the First and Second World Wars, Irma Stern’s work achieved a peak of excellence that could stand comparison with representational paintings anywhere else in the west”. However, some German critics have defined Stern’s works as poor derivative versions of the ‘real’ German Expressionists (Below 1996: 32). What becomes evident is that Irma Stern’s images of black subjects tended to provoke debate and conflict. As such, her renditions of black subjects from these periods represent some of the more controversial and relevant images for study.

It is important to note that modernist ‘art criticism’ has undergone a significant shift since the 1920’s when Irma Stern began her career. The notion of primarily reading the artwork in a formalist tradition with the critic as ultimate authority, has given way to a discourse that takes into greater account the contextual and social issues relevant to the creation of the artwork. Griselda Pollock’s (cited in Whitely 1999: 106) statement from ‘trouble in the archives’ articulates the shift in ‘new art history’ from ‘traditional art history’:

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> The artwork, especially in the form of painting, is not treated as 'the window on the world' or the 'mirror of the soul' where vision is pure and the artist a kind of visionary. Instead, art is perceived as something made, produced, by a social mind and a psychically-shaped body which 'writes' upon its materials to produce a series of signs which have to be read like hieroglyphs or deciphered like complex codes.

Pollock's socio-political reading of artworks has bearing for the interpretation of Irma Stern's representations of the black body from Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo.

Stern's identity as a woman, settler and Jew is significantly embedded in the paintings she produced. Marion Arnold (1996: 77) makes the claim that Irma Stern's art and her life cannot be separated and that any reading of her work must take into account that as a woman her art was a means of self-discovery and revelation. Therefore, in chapter four, drawing on postcolonial and feminist theory in relation to the portrait paintings Stern produced in Zanzibar and the Congo, I create a discursive framework for interpreting the paintings that moves beyond formal analysis.

My research approach has been to undertake extensive analysis of archival material in the South African National Library (SANL) that contains the most significant and largest holdings of Stern's archives (MSC 31). These include the artist's scrapbooks containing exhibition invitations, photographs, newspaper clippings, notes and various records of financial transactions by the artist. Black and white photographic documentation includes images of The Firs, numerous photographs of the artist posing *in situ* or in her studio and of Zanzibar including several of her sitters. Her letters include those to and from Max Pechstein, Leo Frobenius and Agnes Humbert of the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris while other documents include Stern's contracts for her publications *Congo* and *Zanzibar* with Struik Publishers.

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Moreover, my research took me to Berlin to the Brücke Museum where I made contact with Max Pechstein's grandson, Alexandre, with the curator of the Neue Nationalgalerie, Dieter Scholz and with Anke Daemgen who undertook her PhD on the *Neue Secession* in Berlin. I also met with Christopher Peter of the Irma Stern Museum and investigated their archives, paintings and Stern's two print portfolios, *Dumela Morena* and *Visionen* (1920), that she produced while in Berlin, and made study notes of Stern's original journal *Paradise* (written in German). My research has also included several visits to the Rupert Collection in Stellenbosch that has several important Stern paintings in their holdings including *Playing Children* (1924) and *Bibi Azziza Biatta Jaffer* (1939). I am also fortunate to work professionally as a curator with the *gordonschachatcollection* that contains several important Irma Sterns, including *Mangbetu Chief's Daughter* (1942) and *Watussi Queen* (1943).

Furthermore, I undertook pictorial analysis of a select number of paintings using a combination of descriptive, period style and iconographic analysis. Moreover, I undertook comparative analysis of selected early paintings that reveal the period influences, primarily of Max Pechstein and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, on Stern.

Sources

In my research I have drawn extensively on three of the more established scholars who have written extensively on the life and work of Irma Stern. Neville Dubow, Marion Arnold and Karel Schoeman. A more general assessment of Irma Stern's artistic output includes Neville Dubow's publication, *Irma Stern* (1974) and Marion Arnold's publication, *A Feast for the Eye* (1995) that offer a broad reading of Irma Stern's artistic production and also raise a number of issues relevant to Stern's Zanzibar and Congo periods. Of similar importance is the 1991 translation of Stern's journal and letters to Trude Bosse, Paradise*: the journal and letters of Irma Stern* (1917-1933) with a commentary by Dubow. Karel Schoeman's historical and biographical publication *Irma Stern: the early years* (1894-1933) focuses exclusively on Stern's early years. Irene Below, who made a contribution to the field in the

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form of *Irma Stern und der Expressionismus* (1996) also contributed a text in English to the Standard Bank catalogue *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey* (2003). Also of significance is Mona Berman's publication *Remembering Irma Stern: a memoir with letters* (2003) in particular, Stern's correspondence with the Bermans during and as a result of her trips to Zanzibar and the Congo. I have used two other key documents, the first, a monograph published on *Irma Stern* by Max Osborn (1927) and the publication, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa* by Joseph Sachs (1942). Moreover, I have drawn from two titles written by Irma Stern, *Congo* (1943) and *Zanzibar* (1948). Both publications offer insight into the artist's experiences of the Congo and Zanzibar respectively. Claudia Braude's paper *Beyond Back and White: Rethinking Irma Stern* (2012) offers insight into Stern's Jewish identity and Daneel's *A Guide to Sources on Irma Stern* (1981) was crucial in analysing and selecting newspaper articles and critical reviews on Stern and her exhibitions of the time. Given that the majority of existing literature is dated and that Irma Stern's Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo periods have not been the focus of previous research, provides me with a clear rationale for undertaking my research.

My research also includes an overview of German Expressionism and 'primitivism' as integral to the period Stern spent living in Germany. Publications such as Donald Gordon's *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (1987) and Jill Lloyd's *German Expressionism, Primitivism and Modernity* (1991) posit clear historical analysis and overviews of German Expressionism and its relation to 'primitivism' citing many examples and illustrations. Marianna Torgovnick addresses the role of 'primitivism' within western society through high and low culture in her publication *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (1990) whereas Colin Rhodes's *Primitivism and Modern Art* (1994) follows a more traditional art historical view positioning modern artists in relation to 'primitivism' in a general sense. James Clifford's essay *Histories of the Tribal and Modern* (1985) and Hal Foster's essay *The Primitive Unconscious of Modern Art* (1995) move into more theoretical terrain offering critical insights into the politics of representation around 'primitivism' as a discourse but also in response to William Rubin's exhibition *Primitivism of the 20th Century*

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(1984). Of particular note is Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch's *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art* (2003) as integral to an understanding of 'primitivism' within the German Expressionist movement including numerous historical texts on the subject. Rose-Carol Washton Long's (ed.) *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (1993), Joan Weinstein's *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany (1918-1919)* (1990) and Christian Weikop's (ed.) *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism* (2011) are useful for their historical analysis of the various manifesto's, meetings and activities of the *Secession* exhibitions in Berlin, the events surrounding the *Novembergruppe* and the development of concepts such as *Heimatkunst, volkisch organicism* and *Bauerntum* that are intrinsic to the development of rural 'primitivism' within the Brücke movement.

Key texts on feminism include chapter three of Linda Nochlin's, *The Imaginary Orient The Politics of Vision: Essay's on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* (1989) in which Nochlin critiques a view of the 'orient' evident in the work of Eugène Delacroix. In The *Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (1989) Carol Pateman offers counter readings to that of several feminists including that of Sherry Ortner's essay *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* (1972) that is particularly useful in understanding the relationship between nature and woman, the biological and nature as a social space. Gill Perry's (ed.) *Gender and Art, Art and its Histories* (1999) was useful in understanding gendered associations with modernist theory and psychoanalytical theory that has influenced feminist theory. Patricia Mathews essay, *Returning the Gaze: Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon* (1991) presents a gendered view of the female nude that helps to position an understanding of the gaze.

My reading on postcolonialism related to race and colonialism include Homi Bhabha's essay *Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition* (1994). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.) *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2000) as a resource for defining terms and Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) offers insight into the discourses of the 'other', the colonial subject, gender & sexuality, hybridity

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and feminism. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is still one of the defining texts on the construction of the 'orient' by western hegemony (I have used the 2003 version that includes a new preface). Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff's (eds.) *Critical Terms for Art History* (2003) provides chapters on topics including modernism, primitive, ugliness, gaze, gender and identity. Les Back and John Solomos's (eds.) *Theories of Race and Racism, A Reader* (2000) presents historical material on racial difference and identity of the Jews.

Chapter Structure

In chapter one of my dissertation I address a gap in the current literature on Irma Stern and her African periods. This takes the form of a factual and historical biographical account of Stern's childhood, art training and influences in Berlin and her subsequent return to South Africa. My analysis in this chapter continues with a biographical account of Stern's Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo travels and the events that influenced her production during those periods. This chapter is key in presenting an overview of Stern's African periods and lays an important factual basis for the interpretive methodology that I employ later in my dissertation.

Chapter two of my research traces the historical development of rural primitivism within the Brücke movement in Germany. Understanding the influence of primitivism within the German Expressionist movement establishes a clear picture from which to draw analogies between Stern and her contemporaries. Locating Stern's practice within her time and place, facilitates my research to reveal the influences and stylistic mode of representation that Stern adopted during her formative years as an artist within the German Expressionist movement in Berlin. Key to her early formative years was Stern's imaginary 'primitivist' disposition as developed through the mentorship of Max Pechstein.

My third chapter examines Irma Stern's return to South Africa and her first solo exhibition in Cape Town in which she consolidates her Expressionist style and modernist outlook. Stern undertook several journeys during this time. Her travels in *Umgababa* suggest fecund

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metaphorical symbolism as captured in her journal *Paradise* (1919-1924) and through the numerous paintings she produced in Umgababa. Coeval to Stern's Umgababa paintings are her Natal and Swaziland works that show evidence of the stylisation and romantic view, that I argue, is a characteristic of an imaginary 'primitivism' where representations of the racial 'other' are depicted in relation to nature.

Chapter four of my dissertation focuses on Stern's Zanzibar and Congo periods through visual analysis of select paintings from these periods. It is here that I engage fully with Irma Stern's identity as a woman, settler and Jew. This has significance in terms of how Stern's paintings of Zanzibar and the Congo are understood in relation to 'primitivism' where Stern's depictions of black subjects reveal exotically romanticised stereotypes.

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Chapter 1

Early Years, Training and Travels: A Biography

> Confronting many different kinds of social reality in Africa and Europe, Stern was happiest as an artist when reality matched her expectations of an idyllic and exotic environment. In wishing that time could stand still and her concept of the 'primitive' and Utopian could be maintained, she showed scant understanding of the power imbalances created by colonialism in Africa or by class structures in Europe (Arnold 1995: 11).

In this chapter, I present a biographical overview of Irma Stern's African periods: Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo. Key to this is Stern's training and influences in Berlin as part of the German Expressionist movement and her return to South Africa, including her travels to Umgababa. Moreover, germane to this are Stern's travels to Zanzibar and the Congo and the numerous figurative paintings she produced as a result. This biographical overview establishes a firm grounding for the interpretive material and image analysis that follows in subsequent chapters, especially chapter four. Moreover, it also fills out as completely as possible that biography, confirming, correcting and adding to what has come before.

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Childhood 1894-1912

Irma Stern was born on the 2 October 1894 in Schweizer-Reneke, a small village in the western Transvaal at the time of Paul Kruger's Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek. Her parents, Samuel and Henny Stern had emigrated from Germany in the early1890s. Samuel and his brother Leopold had established a successful general dealers store that served the local farming community. It was a pleasant pastoral lifestyle, as Stern recalled of her childhood, a "prosperous and comfortable life in a South African village community" (Schoeman 1994: 13). However, as Max Osborn (1927: 25) points out, "into this idyll the Boer war breaks." According to Schoeman (1994: 17) Irma's father Samuel, arrested by British forces for being a Boer collaborator was imprisoned in Vryburg while Irma, her mother and sibling

Rudi travelled via Vryburg, to stay in Cape Town, technically as refugees. After signing a letter of allegiance to the Crown, the British authorities pardoned Samuel Stern. Thereafter, in 1901, the Stern family left South Africa for Germany on the *Kinfauns Castle*. The family settled in Berlin with Irma's maternal aunt, Grete, who was married to a successful stockbroker in Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial Berlin (Smuts 2007: 4). Returning to South Africa in 1903, the family departed again for Europe in 1904, returned to South Africa to settle in Wolmaransstad in 1909 and returned once again to Berlin in 1910.

At the time when the second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) broke out, five-year-old Irma Stern developed 'Egyptian eye disease', a form of ophthalmia. Stern writes of the experience of blindness as being one of "darkness and sadness" as though "stones were burning into my eyes" (Schoeman 1994: 14). Suffering pain, Stern recalled images of the sun, blue sky and all the bright flowers. During this period of her early years spent living in Schweizer-Reneke and Wolmaransstad (Fig. 1) Stern produced several drawings at various locations including during a family visit to the Victoria Falls in 1910. At this stage her drawings of nature were, "the little plants of our dry garden, the dry grass and the distant kopjie, the people around me, and a dance at our house with all the quaint figures of the backveld villagers" (Stern: 12 June 1926). Writing in her first diary Stern reflects on her experiences growing up in 'Africa' and her love of the natural surroundings as "wide open veld under a broad blue and luminous sky" (MSC 31).

Brought on by her blindness, the imagery captured in vivid description of Stern's memories of the Transvaal, is recalled in the first of her two-part diary. Contrary to their titles, *Tagebuch; aus meiner Sturm - und Drangzeit* (From the time of my Turmoil)[1], the diaries contain narrative descriptions of Stern's natural environment and a pleasant comfortable

[1] Irma Stern's two early diaries are contained in the Irma Stern Collection (MSC 31) at the National Library of South Africa, special collections, under Personal Papers – 1(1) *Tagebuch; aus meiner Sturm – und Drangezeit*. Diaries. Diary1: (1/1) 1909-11 and diary 2: 1(1/2) 1911-13. – 1(2). The diaries were hand written in German. Under section (1:3) are personal writings removed from the diaries including amongst others, *Mir träumte – to (day) dream* (27.12.1914).

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rural lifestyle. There appears to be little turmoil in her literary depictions of the flowers, earth and sky. Her diary entries, conveying aesthetic descriptions of her visible environment and her family's rural lifestyle, reveal an external world populated by sight, experience and colour. Yet, as the title suggests, there exists an internal struggle, an inner turmoil, within the young Irma Stern, an interiorisation that is characteristic of her personal life and reflective of the expressionist style she was to adopt while living in Berlin under the influence of the German Expressionists.

Figure 1. An early drawing by Irma Stern dated 1913 Wolmaranstad showing a pepper tree and insects in the Japanese style (Schoeman 1994: 24)

Germany 1912-1920

According to Helene Smuts (2007: 14) the German Romantic tradition made a great impression on Irma who collected *Märchen* or German fairytales all her life. Stern may have developed her love for *Märchen* from her Grandmother Sophy Fels, who lived in Einbeck, a small town to the south of Hanover, with only 9000 inhabitants. While Einbeck had its own medieval buildings, the larger medieval Bavarian village of Rothenburg ob der Tauber

provided Irma's romantic inspiration (Fig. 2). Apart from two pencil sketches, produced in 1911, Stern also wrote a prose piece, "An enchanted Sleeping Beauty castle, a remnant of the Middle Ages" (Schoeman 1994: 36). Other literary influences that inspired Irma included the 19th century Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) whom Stern related to on an emotional level.

Figure 2. A pencil sketch by Stern of the medieval town Rothenburg ob der Tauber, 1911

Writing to her childhood friend Trude Bosse, Stern states, "I love Dostoevsky more than all the other poets – he has suffered so incredibly much" (Smuts 2007: 13). Stern also exchanged correspondence with the German ethnologist, Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) whose publications on Africa were popular in Germany at the time. Smuts (2007: 12) notes, "Stern gave him a sketch she had made in 1913 of an ancient rock engraving near the family farm at Schweizer-Reneke." Having the book in her library at the Firs in Rosebank, Cape Town, another significant influence was the German author and art historian, Carl Einstein (1885-1940), whose widely read book on African sculpture, *Negerplastik* 1915, was a seminal publication that looked at the influence of African sculpture on European art, in particular cubism. According to Schoeman (1994: 58) although Stern was exposed to many of the modern and latest developments in art, music, literature and theatre, Stern's childhood

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experiences and traumas find expression in German Romanticism, a key aspect of German Expressionism:

> Her personal writings show that emotionally she remained firmly rooted in the German Romanticism of the early nineteenth century, which was linked to the *Sturm und Drang* (turbulence and urgency) movement of the eighteenth century and to the German Middle Ages and deeply influenced by folk literature, legends and *Märchen*.

While the influence of German Romanticism and *Märchen* is an important early influence on Stern, it later evolves finding fuller expression in her painterly Expressionist style and notions of fantasy found in her representation of black subjects living outside of the influence of western development.

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Early Teachers and Mentors 1912-1917

At the age of eighteen, on the 1st November 1912, Irma Stern began her formal art studies in a private studio in Berlin. By 1910, Berlin was the capital of the newly established Empire with a population of 3.7 million. According to Schoeman (1994: 34) it was the third city in Europe that included a rich and vital literary and artistic life. Stern resided in Berlin for a short period before being accepted on 4 April 1913 at the *Grossherzoglich Sächsiche Hochschule für bildende Kunst* (Grand Ducal Saxony School of Art) in Weimar, where she studied under Professor Carl Frithjof Smith, a Norwegian portrait and genre painter.[2] After a short sojourn in South Africa between August and December 1913, Stern returned to Weimar into an advanced class, where, as a female student, she was permitted to work from nature under the tutelage of Professor Gari Melchers (1860-1922), an American painter influenced by the French naturalist painters. Melchers had a brief influence in terms of technique on Stern. In a newspaper interview Stern said of Melchers, "Through the sensitive and tactful corrections he gave me [he] appealed to me very much and helped me a good

[2] A reference that is often quoted is that Irma Stern studied at the Weimar Academy (*Cape Argus* 1926). This error appears to occur as a result of an interview Irma Stern did with a newspaper where she claimed to have studied at the Weimar Academy, which was only formed in 1919, as a result of Walter Gropius merging the College of Fine Arts and the School of Arts and Crafts into the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar.

deal" (*Cape Argus* June 1926). Unfortunately after two terms, Melchers left the academy and Stern returned to study in Berlin in 1914 at the Levin-Funcke Studio.

It was here that Stern worked under the Neo-Impressionist painter Marin Brandenburg (1870-1919) whose use of strong colour would become a defining characteristic of Stern's later paintings. Brandenburg's influence and guidance gave Stern confidence to paint in oils (Arnold 1995: 16). Stern spent almost three years under Brandenburg's tuition and considered him not only a mentor but also a friend (*Cape Argus* 12 June, 1926). Evidently, Brandenburg's influence extended beyond mere technique to an awareness of fantasy. Osborn (1927: 26) referred to Brandenburg as a 'good teacher' whose forays into fantasy through the representation of fairytales and forest scenes may have made an impression on the young Irma Stern. This element of fantasy finds expression in Berlin where Stern is actively engaged in the German Expressionist movement and again in Umgababa where Stern searched for her 'authentic' black subjects.

After Melchers and Brandenburg, the German Expressionist painter, Max Pechstein (1881-1955) was the most influential teacher and mentor in Irma Stern's artistic development and training. Pechstein was a prominent figure in German Expressionism, hailed as one of the leaders of the *Die Brücke* movement who aimed to liberate themselves from the repressive values of the established Wilhelmine culture by "expressing their vision of spontaneity and renewal through the use of vibrant symbolic images that were defiantly anti-naturalistic" (Washton Long 1993: 21). *Die Brücke* (the Bridge) was founded in Dresden in 1905, by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Smidt-Rottluff and Fritz Beyl. In 1906, Heckel invited Pechstein to join the Brücke group. Pechstein subsequently relocated to Berlin in 1908 where be became a co-founder of the *Neue Sezession* in 1910. In 1911, he established the MUIM-Institut (institute for modern studies in painting) together with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. By 1912, he had left the Brücke group, which dissolved in 1913. Although the Brücke emerged out of an urban context, first in Dresden and then Berlin, it also encompassed a rural development comprised of artists who would leave the city to paint in

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the countryside depicting scenes of peasants and bathers and increasingly images of ‘exotic’ subjects and ‘primitive’ peoples close to nature. This is a theme I will address comprehensively in my next chapter, as it concerns my primary aim.

In 1914, Pechstein travelled to the Palau Islands, part of Micronesia in the South Pacific, in search of a romantically idealised world, an ‘earthly Paradise’ (Brücke Museum, 2012). Pechstein painted exotic figures, still lives and landscapes in a moderately Expressionist style. Expressionism as a style is characterised by the use of distortion and exaggeration, for emotional effect, through intense colour, disjointed space and agitated brushstrokes. Recognising a ‘kindred spirit’ (Osborn 1927:26), Pechstein had a significant influence on the young Irma Stern who “at last had found a guide who was fully involved in the most modern artistic developments of the time and also gifted with a romantic and adventurous spirit” (Schoeman 1994: 47).

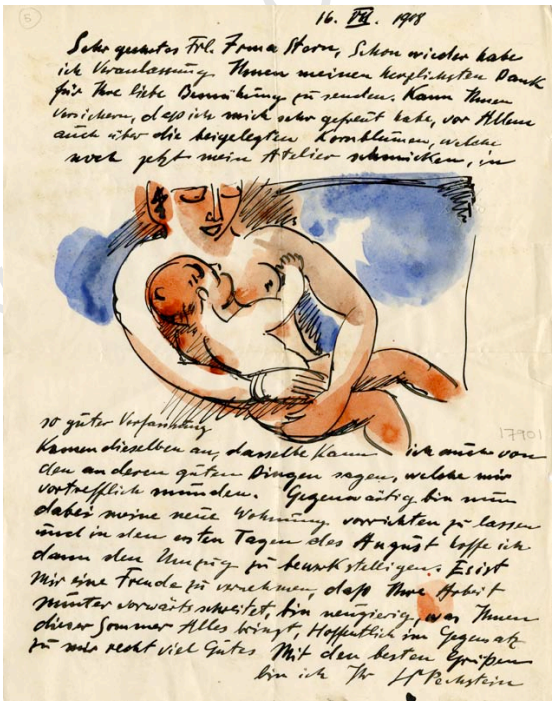

Figure 3. Letter from Max Pechstein to Irma Stern (1918) Irma Stern Archives (MSC 31) National Library of South Africa

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Stern first made acquaintance with Pechstein in 1917, who recognised an affinity between her *Das Ewige Kind* 1916 (the Eternal child) and his own practice. As a result of Brandenburg's inability to understand or approve of *Das Ewige Kind* (Schoeman 1994: 52) Stern broke off her apprenticeship under him.

During this time in Berlin, Stern exchanged correspondence with Max Pechstein. Contained in the archives of the South African National Library are six letters (Fig. 3) dated between November 1917 and May 1918. In the letters Stern wrote, "…for you have made me so contented, so eager to work and happy, with a few words you cast down all the dark hours of despair and inner conflict," and again, "I suddenly feel uprooted – stare after the migrating birds with intense longing and can find no rest or tranquillity for work." Two important themes begin to emerge from Stern's correspondence with Pechstein. The first relates to the inner conflict Stern felt and continued throughout her life. The second denotes an unsettledness or dislocation that Stern reflects on. This *unheimlich* (un-homely) or 'not feeling at home in the world' condition manifests throughout Stern's life, beginning with her unsettled childhood and relates to the German concept of *heimat* or homeland and Stern's *unheimlich* identity.

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Berlin 1918-1920

In May 1918, Irma Stern exhibited two paintings, *Mädchenbildnis* (Portrait of a girl) and *Felder* (Fields) in the *Freie Secession* exhibition in Berlin. Also from this period was *Negroes Sweeping* 1918 (Fig. 4) that was exhibited four years later in Stern's 1922 exhibition in Cape Town. In 1914, The *Freie* Secession, an association for mounting art exhibitions broke away from the former Berlin Secession (founded in 1892). Pechstein was part of the *Neue* Secession that had split from the Berlin Secession in 1910. Moreover, 1918 marked the final year of the First World War (1914-1918). Stern had lived in Germany throughout the war experiencing the harsh conditions, political turmoil and cultural revival that emerged. In November 1918, a revolution broke out as a result of the military defeat of the German Empire in the First World War. Triggered by a naval mutiny it spread

throughout the Empire. On 9 November, Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated and on 11 November, an armistice was signed between Germany and the Allies in Compiègne Forest in France.

On 3 December 1918, in response to the November Revolution, the *Novembergruppe* was founded in Berlin. "Like the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*, its goals were to bring art to the people, to serve the socialist revolution, and to formulate policies and establish institutions that would respond to the new-found freedom from Wilhelmine controls over the lives of artists" (Washton Long 1993: 210). The artists saw the workers role as effecting external, political revolution, while they, as artists, were responsible for an internal, spiritual revolution. According to Arnold (1995:16) Stern exhibited with and was a founding member of the *Novembergruppe*. A document of the founding of the *Novembergruppe* meeting held on 3 December 1918, titled, 'protocol meeting on 3 December 1918' lists the 16 founding members amongst whom was Max Pechstein. Stern, who attended the meeting, is listed as Miss I. Stern (Weinstein 1990: 252).

Figure 4. Irma Stern (1894-1966) Negroes Sweeping (1918) oil on canvas, dimensions unknown

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In May and June of 1919, Stern held her first exhibition at Fritz Gurlitt gallery in Potsdamerstrasse in Berlin and according to Schoeman (1994: 62) "In spite of general poverty, unrest and violence, art in all its manifestations continued to flourish in Germany in the immediate post-war period." Stern exhibited thirty-three drawings and watercolours with titles such as *Cape Town, Madeira, Still Life with Negro Sculpture* and *Still Life with Palm Trees*. Established in 1880, by Fritz Gurlitt, the gallery promoted contemporary German artists and was the first to publically exhibit the French Impressionists in Berlin. When Fritz died in 1893 his son Wolfgang took over the gallery. In 1912, he added Expressionist artists to the gallery organising the only Brücke exhibition. By 1915, the gallery was representing Max Pechstein and had extended its activities to printmaking. In 1920, Irma Stern produced her print portfolio, *Dumela Morena, Bilder aus Afrika (Greetings, Sir: Pictures out of Africa),* a set of 12 lithograph prints, with the gallery. Moreover, in the same year, Stern printed, *Visionen (Visions),* a portfolio of 10 lithographs published by Hesperiden Verlag in Berlin, inspired by the novels of Dostoevsky, "hours of wonder and admiration formed themselves into a series of visions – the first of my portfolio's *Visionen*" (Cape Argus, June 1926, p. 5). Irma Stern's production in Berlin establishes the key dimensions of her imaginary 'primitivist' disposition that I will discuss in my next chapter.

Return to South Africa 1920

As a result of the end of the First World War, Irma Stern and her family returned to South Africa in 1920. In her text *Umgababa Buch* (Umgababa Book) (1923), Stern wrote retrospectively of her experience returning to the country of her birth, "Africa – the word was the personification of everything desirable to me. The land of my childhood. The sun – its brown people – its sheer mountains. The endless sky…" (Schoeman 1994: 65). Furthermore, in her journal *Paradise* (1919-1924) Stern wrote, "And fled burning Europe into the land of strong colours" (cited in Dubow 1991: 70). However, in reality, the country that Irma returned to had changed.

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Cape Town, where the family settled, comprised an estimated population of 188 000, of whom 100 000 were white (Schoeman 1994: 65). The Coloured and Malay population were still prominent in the daily life of the town that was a mixture of Victorian and Edwardian buildings and Cape Dutch and Cape Gregorian buildings. According to Schoeman (1994: 66) "Life was predominantly colonial and English." In Cape Town, the popular style of painting at the time was English Romantic Realism or Cape Impressionism. Highly influential and dominating the South African art scene for many years, Edward Roworth (1880-1964) was one of the more prominent proponents of this style. In 1908 and again in 1918-20, Roworth was elected president of the South African Art Association. According to Kukard (1992: 51) artistically conservative and opposed to modern European art, "Roworth and other members of the establishment managed to control to a large extent the type of work produced and sold by influencing both the artists and the public taste in art."

Irma Stern held her first solo exhibition from the 7 to 21 February 1922 at Ashbey's Gallery, 91 Loop Street, in Cape Town.[3] Ninety-six watercolours, some oil paintings, hand printed woodcuts, lithographs and drawings were on display and for sale. Receiving a strong reaction, the exhibition raised a number of important issues related to Stern's provocative German Expressionist style and her depictions of the black body that I will discuss in chapter three.

Umgababa 1922

At this time, Irma Stern's search for an authentic 'Africa' was fuelled by childhood memories living in the Transvaal and her training and influences as a German Expressionist artist in Berlin. However, it was also a reaction to the British colonial settler culture she

[3] Neville Dubow has cited Irma Stern's first solo exhibition as dated 1920 in his publication, *Irma Stern* (1974) and again in *Paradise: the Journal and Letters of Irma Stern 1917 -1933* (1991). Dubow references two exhibitions at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town that are dated incorrectly as 1920 and 1921. Irma Stern's first solo exhibition was held at Ashbey's Gallery in 1922 (Exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern 7-21 February 1922). The date is correct in Arnold and Schoeman.

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experienced in the Cape colony. Stern described the provincial attitude that prevailed in Cape Town at the time, "…the English hotel – stereotyped like the people – like mineral water gone flat. Africa – where was it – where were the free black people – where were the flowers?" (Smuts 2007: 15). Schoeman (1994: 74) captures many of the key issues from this early period of Stern's life:

> Irma Stern was always aware of her African heritage, but in the circumstances it had thus far been the subject of remembrance rather than experience, seen mostly at a distance and in retrospect in the framework of her life in Germany: her image of Africa was composed of memories, dreams and desires in uneven proportions, and to a certain extent it may be said to have developed into a private myth, its effect heightened both by the Expressionists interest in the exotic and by the frustrations of her long confinement in wartime Germany.

A statement by Stern, written to her childhood friend, Trude Bosse, suggests a strong desire to flee 'civilised' Cape Town for the vitality of 'Africa', " my appearance is that of a well-dressed lady, but inwardly I run more and more wild" (Smuts 2007: 16).[4] Stern was in search of a romantic idea of 'Africa', a place free from the societal conventions of Cape Town and the experience of several years in Berlin. Stern was in search of subject matter that was 'authentic', not tainted by the colonialists where 'primitive' peoples lived in harmony with nature.

In 1922, Stern travelled to Umgababa, a small town in Natal's south coast, 35km from Durban between Amanzimtoti and Umkomaas. According to Schoeman (1994: 75) it was still a "lonely and little visited, save by a solitary curlew, ibis or wild duck, and an occasional geologist or seeker of shells." In her text *Umgababa Buch*, completed in 1923, and never published, she described how she was led to discover Umgababa, "So I went on my way, until one day, like a sign from heaven, a vision led me to the place where I believed

[4] Irma Stern wrote a number of letters in German to her childhood friend Trude Bosse in Einbeck, Germany, between 1917-1933.

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myself able to hear the heartbeat of Africa – Umgababa" (75). However, it would seem Stern heard of Umgababa from a local woman she had met at an international hotel she was staying in, presumably in Durban, "Her name was Aluisa and she lived near a large banana grove in the direction of Umgababa" (75).

Umgababa marks an important juncture in Irma Stern's artistic development. It was the source of her first encounter with what she described as 'real Africa' set apart from the constraints she felt and the burden of European civilisation. As such, it was in Umgababa that the 'artistic disposition' of German Expressionism and 'primitivism that Stern developed in Berlin manifested. I will discuss Stern's 'artistic disposition' in relation to Umgababa more intensively in chapter three.

Natal and Swaziland 1923 – 1929 and the 1930's

Stern's Natal and Swaziland period encompasses her emergent German Expressionist style, revealing the influences of her mentor, Max Pechstein and her encounters with black subjects in the rural environs of Natal, Zululand and Swaziland. Her travels reveal a search for 'authentic' African subjects outside of urban areas. It also includes a series of personal traumatic events that have a bearing on Stern's identity as a woman and Jew that I will discuss in chapter four.

Subsequent to her journey to Umgababa in 1922, Stern travelled to Zululand, Natal and Swaziland between 1924 and1927, and to Pondoland in 1929. From newspaper articles at the time, we gain insight into Irma's travels and the conditions in which she worked. In a published interview dated April 1926 titled, *My exotic models,* Stern described her travels in Swaziland and Zululand, "I travelled through a part of the country where all motorists said: You will never get through the road is impassable, the scenery very fine, but we warn you" (*Cape Argus* 3 April, 1926). In an unidentified newspaper article of 1927 we read, "The artist just left on an eight week visit to Swaziland in order to study the many picturesque types that assemble at the trading stores," and in another account, "She is at present staying

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at Ezulwini, a trading station in Swaziland, 10 miles from Mbabane… There she was called upon by King Sobhuza, who invited her to be present at a native dance at the royal kraal" (MSC 31). As a result of her travels, Stern held several exhibitions during this period. In chapter three, 'Embodied Fantasies: The Black Body as a Visual Trope', I will offer an analysis of several of Stern's paintings of this period and their critical reception in relation to her imaginary 'primitivist' disposition.

During this period, Irma Stern experienced a number of personal traumas that have a bearing on her identity as woman, a theme that I will discuss in chapter four. However, it is relevant to record some of these events in this biographical chapter. In May 1923, Stern travelled to Europe by steamboat on the *Usaramo* together with her family. During the voyage Irma made the acquaintance of a Portuguese author and professor, Hippolyto Raposo, whom she felt was her 'soul mate'. Although it was only a brief encounter lasting twelve days, for the young Irma Stern, it signified a deeper underlying passion, she fell in love. Raposo was already engaged to be married, his fiancé was waiting his arrival in Europe. Stern's response is recorded in a text she wrote titled, 'Johannesburg 1925' in which she described her emotions, "How much suffering, how many hours filled with tears, I set down before me here nakedly in cold words" and in the same text, "…I knew too that I could only be with him for twelve days. A sword lodged in my heart – slowly, quietly it bled, from the first moment. And I could not show him how I suffered…" (Schoeman 1994: 80). Schoeman refers to this experience as 'shattering' for Stern. Arnold (1995: 18) points out, that at the age of 30, Stern was a "lonely, unhappy woman, a romantic who sought grand passion but was frustrated in love." Trude Bosse, Irma's childhood friend from Germany, in a private recollection described Stern as follows, "She really led a most restless life. She was disappointed most of the time and felt that life gave her more suffering than she could bear" (Schoeman 1994: 83). This account exemplifies Stern's emotional and dramatic personality that finds an affinity with the intense emotional expressiveness of German Expressionism.

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A few years later, on the 1st April 1926, Irma Stern married Johannes Prinz, a Professor of German at the University of Cape Town. In the remote village of Schweizer-Reneke, Prinz had been Irma's tutor when she was 15. Stern was not in love with Johannes Prinz. In a letter to Trude Bosse, Stern wrote, "Dr Prinz, whom you already know, came out and wanted to marry me, and there I sit – the one I can't have, the other I don't want" (Schoeman 1994: 85). Irma was in love with someone else (not Raposo) but unfortunately he couldn't support her and her parents didn't approve of him. Apart from having her family's blessing, the marriage to Johannes Prinz presented Irma with the opportunity to establish her own home. In 1927, Irma bought, in her own name, The Firs, a double-storey Victorian house in Chapel Road, Rosebank, Cape Town, where she was to live until her death in 1966.[5] Officially divorced on 6 March 1934, Stern's marriage to Johannes Prinz lasted only seven years. These personal accounts of Stern's failed relationships and marriage suggest a dislocation and unsettledness as a woman, contributing to Stern's *unheimlich* identity that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

With the rise of the Nazi party in Germany in the early 1930s, Stern wrote a letter to her childhood friend, Trude Bosse, from Polleys Hotel in Pretoria on 24th April 1933, in which she stated, "I get terribly sad when I think of Germany's future – so much hatred that has to be overcome and so much blood that still has to be shed! The foreign countries stand shuddering with horror and wonder about the barbarism of the twentieth century" (Dubow 1991: 105). Irma cut ties with Germany and according to Arnold (1995: 20) "She maintained regular contact with Europe but refused to visit or exhibit in Germany under Hitler."

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[5] The Firs, was established as the Irma Stern Museum in 1971 and is governed by The University of Cape Town and the trustees of the Irma Stern estate. It also houses the Zanzibar door that Irma Stern had installed after her first trip to Zanzibar in 1939.

Figure 5. An archival photograph from the *Entarte Kunst* Degenerate Art exhibition, 1937 showing Room 3 containing works by Max Pechstein and several other Brücke artists. Above the sculpture, the wall texts states: *The Jewish longing for a wilderness reveals itself – in Germany the negro becomes the racial ideal of a degenerate art.*

This brings to the fore the question of Irma Stern's Jewish identity which I will address in chapter four. Irma Stern's relatives, her artistic circles in Germany and associations in South Africa were largely Jewish. The events in Berlin of 1933 had an effect on Stern. Max Pechstein was declared an 'unacceptable' artist and expelled from the Berlin Academy and Secession. Many Jewish artists and intellectuals had to flee into exile, were imprisoned or even killed. One of the more significant effects of the Nazi regime on the artistic life in Germany was the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition of 1937, held in Munich (Fig. 5) and later toured other cities in Germany and Austria. According to Altshuler (2008: 255) over 5000 artworks were destroyed by the Nazi regime while 650 confiscated artworks by approximately 112 artists were displayed in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. Travel restrictions to Europe, due to the advent of the Second World War (1939-1945) encouraged Stern's travels to Zanzibar in search of new 'exotic' subjects to paint.

Zanzibar 1939-1945

As indicated in a letter to Freda and Richard Feldman in 1939, Irma Stern's first journey to Zanzibar was for a period of four months, from June to October, and her second trip in 1945;

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"My plans for Zanzibar are – I am flying from Joburg on July 20" (Berman 2003: 96).[6] On 31 October 1945, Irma returned from Zanzibar via Nairobi to Johannesburg for three days, and then onward to Cape Town. Irma claimed it was the Cape southeaster that sent her to Zanzibar:

> Bored and lethargic, tired of this infernal wind, I was walking down Adderley Street one morning in 1938, remembering the stories told by our old Arab cook… when I was a child and he used to spend the time of day reminiscing about his island home… I walked into a travel bureau and asked: Can I motor to Zanzibar? (Arnold 1995: 21).

Today, the islands of Zanzibar, located on the East coast of Africa, form a semi-autonomous region of Tanzania. The name Zanzibar is derived from the Persian and Arabic suffix, 'coast' or *zang* and *bruin* meaning 'iron after rust'. During the *Age of Exploration* the Portuguese colonised Zanzibar until the time it fell under the Sultanate of Oman, in 1698. Under Arab rule, it became known as the 'spice islands' due to the extensive trade network of spices, ivory and slaves that operated both at sea and inland. The Sultan of Zanzibar controlled a substantial portion of the East coast of Africa known as Zanj. In 1890, Zanzibar became a British protectorate. In 1913, after a succession of Sultans and the end of the slave trade, the British appointed their own Residents or Governors (History of Zanzibar, 2012). It was into this culturally rich and diverse urban trading centre comprised of Arab, Swahili, Indian and British colonial cultures that Irma Stern travelled in 1939.

According to Berman (2003: 96) Stern arranged an introduction to the local authorities in Zanzibar via government officials in South Africa, "I am travelling up with a letter from

[6] Richard and Freda Berman were close friends of Irma Stern's for over thirty years (from approximately the mid 1930s until the mid 1960s). During this time they exchanged over one hundred and sixty-five letters. Richard Feldman was active in progressive politics in South Africa and regularly published articles on politics and culture.

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Hofmeyr and the High Commissioner to the Resident [British governor] of Zanzibar." In another letter written to her close friends Richard and Freda Feldman on 22 October 1939, Stern wrote of her experience in Zanzibar, "Had the most fantastic time in Zanzibar – a heap of new friends – partly white – partly brown. A life full of interest and fun – I am sorry to be back - as I find it more than dull and uncultured" (Berman 2003: 82). Revealing characteristics of Stern's unsettledness or *Unheimlichkeit,* Stern's comment displays a strong reaction to British settler culture and reveals her desire for 'exotic' subject matter outside of Cape Town.

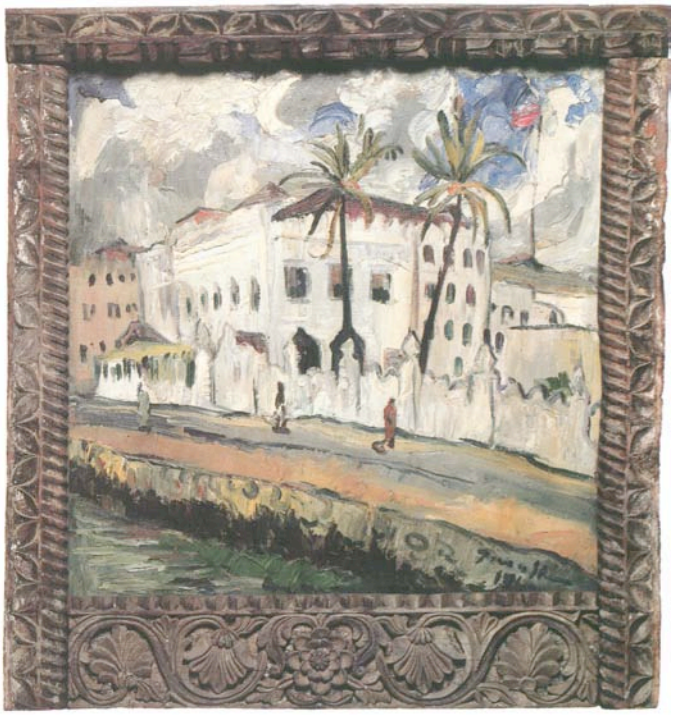
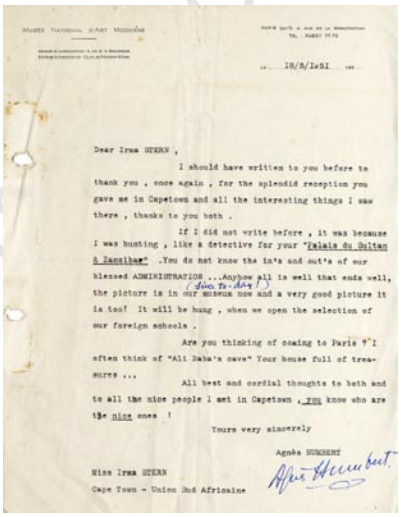


Figure 6. Irma Stern (1894-1966) Palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar (1944) oil on canvas, 71 x 71cm

On her second trip to Zanzibar in 1945, Stern may have had the intention of painting a portrait of the Sultan of Zanzibar, Khalifa bin Kharub (his full name being Sayid Sir Khalifa II bin Harib Al-Said) who reigned between 9 December 1911 until 9 October 1960. In a letter to the Feldmans, Stern made reference to this possibility, "For drinks comes a man – who is the local Hofmeyr and who is trying to fix up something for me – as the people think

the Sultan should be painted by me" (Berman 2003: 98). Thereafter, having received an official invitation to the Sultan's palace for tea with the Sultana, in a letter dated 21 September 1945 (MSC 31), Stern described the Sultana, "she is stout, and has huge, expressive Arab eyes… she smiles sweetly and is a kind woman". During her previous trip to Zanzibar, Stern painted a portrait of *Bibi Azziza Biata Jaffer* 1939, the lady-in-waiting to the Sultana of Zanzibar that I will discuss in chapter four.

Although Stern didn't paint a portrait of the Sultan or the Sultana, she did paint a rendition of the palace, *Palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar* 1944 (Fig. 6) that is currently in the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.[7] In a letter (Fig. 7) addressed to Irma Stern dated 18 May 1951, written on an official letterhead, Agnes Humbert described having searched for the painting, indicating that it would be on display at the museum amongst a selection of works of the museum's foreign schools.



Dear Irma STERN ,

I should have written to you before to thank you , once again , for the splendid reception you gave me in Capetown and all the interesting things I saw there , thanks to you both .

If I did not write before , it was because I was hunting , like a detective for your "Palais du Sultan à Zanzibar" .You do not know the in's and out's of our blessed ADMINISTRATION ...Anyhow all is well that ends well, the picture is in our museum now and a very good picture it is too! It will be hung , when we open the selection of our foreign schools .

Are you thinking of coming to Paris ? I often think of "Ali Baba's cave" Your house full of treasures ...

All best and cordial thoughts to both and to all the nice people I met in Capetown , you know who are the nice ones !

Yours very sincerely

Agnès HUMBERT

Miss Irma STERN
Cape Town - Union Sud Africaine

Figure 7. Letter from Agnes Humbert, Musée National d'Art Moderne (1951) Irma Stern archives (MSC 31) National Library of South Africa.

[7] The painting was exhibited in Paris at Galerie Des Beaux Arts from 3 October – 2 November 1947. The catalogue lists 115 paintings of predominantly Zanzibar and Congo period works including *Femme Watussi en Rouge, Danseurs Watussi* and *Jeune Arabe.*

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Stern's representation of daily life in Zanzibar includes several examples of Arab, Swahili and Indian cultures. Joseph Sachs (1942: 61) speaks of Stern's Zanzibar paintings as the high water mark of her art where her "canvases are full of gorgeous colour and the strange mysterious atmosphere of this tropical island, but they have also recaptured the spirit of the diverse humanity that is found on the East Coast of Africa." An aspect of this rich diversity is expressed in the *mestizo* or mixing of cultures and races to be found in Zanzibar, more especially in that of the Swahili that Stern sought to depict of 'exotic' peoples.

Figure 8. An image of the model posing for Swahili Dhow Woman (1945) Irma Stern archives (MSC 31) National Library of South Africa.

The Irma Stern archives (MSC 31) at the South African National Library contain a black and white photograph of the model for *Swahili Dhow Woman* 1945 (Fig. 8). She is depicted sitting on a carpet, placed on the floor of an interior in the pose seen in the painting. The furniture and architecture of the room reference Persian and Arabic culture with its ornate columns and pointed arches. A wooden chest, ornately decorated with copper, stands in the centre of the image with an elegant oriental urn positioned on top. On the right side of the

photograph hangs *Arab Woman and Child* and on the left *Arab Priest* 1945, both framed in wooden Zanzibari frames. The interior in the photograph depicts the Arab house that was loaned to Stern by the British government, in Zanzibar "she had the use of a cool and spacious Arab house owned by the British government on the sea front and set up her studio there."[8]

Irma stern's peripatetic lifestyle continued during the periods that she lived in Zanzibar. Most often travelling with her head 'boy', Mohammed, Stern travelled to Dar-Es-Salaam for the reception of the Aga Khan but also found sources of inspiration for her paintings at the local bazaar, probably in Stone Town. In her book Zanzibar (1948: 24) she describes the vibrant atmosphere and business of the market but also the naked women sitting begging at Darijani Bridge. After enquiring with a local policeman, Stern visited a number of different dances held one evening in Zanzibar, "First we have the Arab ladies dance and singing party. Then we have a Swahili men's dance in European clothes, near the Hollis Bridge. Further, we have the dance of 'Beating the Devil Out' and a few other native dances" (Stern 1948: 82).

Irma Stern published *Zanzibar*, a narrative of her travels in 1948, the year the National Party came into power in South Africa implementing a policy of racial segregation known as apartheid.[9] The book includes several short narrative passages under the following headings: *The Bazaar*, *The Meinza Well*, *Ramadan*, *Palaces*, *The Sultan's Palace*, *Ghosts*, *The Residency*, *Reception for the Aga Khan*, *Lelemama dance* and *Arab Wedding*. It is Illustrated with fragments of Arabic writing, photographic details of decorative motifs taken from

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[8] This reference is taken from an undated newspaper article titled, 'painting in Zanzibar' from the scrap books in the Irma Stern collection at the National Library of South Africa (MSC 31).

[9] Stern's publishing agreement with J.L. Van Schaik Ltd dated June 1947 contains five points. Irma Stern as the author was to provide exclusive rights to the publisher and supply the manuscript and images ready for publication. Details of the printing, size of publication and prices were at the discretion of the publisher. Stern would receive 15% of the net selling price as a royalty. The total number of limited edition copies printed was 500 of which 150 were specially bound copies

wooden doors, graphic shapes taken from carpets and textiles and illustrations of Irma Stern's paintings, drawings and gouaches all in black and white.[10] *Zanzibar* 1948, a key source of Stern's activities and descriptions of Zanzibar, forms an important part of my primary research.

Congo 1942 -1955

By March 1942, Stern had begun arranging her first trip to the Belgian Congo. In a letter to Freda and Richard Feldman (Berman 2003: 84) Irma described her plans that entailed getting letters of introduction to the Belgian Congo government and travelling by train to Elisabethville, then by car, sourcing a chauffer in Elisabethville and driving for three days - onward again by train as the road ends at which time Irma would arrive at Albertville. Intending to travel in May when the dry period began, Irma wrote that she intended securing a 'native driver-mechanic' in order to drive a journey of 2000 miles through the Lake district (Fig. 9). A month later, Irma's trip included some adjustments, travelling by train to Elisabethville, a few days by train and a river boat to Stanleyville then two days driving to Paulis, staying for a month to paint, and then driving to Lake Kivu where Irma intended to settle for some time to paint (86).

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[10] Stern's publications *Congo* 1943 and *Zanzibar* 1948 resemble Paul Gauguin's decorated book, *Ancien Culte Mahorie* 1892. While there is no direct link to Gauguin's publication and it is not evident whether Stern or the publishers J.L. Van Schaik were aware of Gauguin's publication, the resemblance is uncanny.

Figure 9. Historical Map of the Belgian Congo (1908-1960), Encyclopaedia Britannica

Irma wrote in her publication *Congo* in 1943, “The Congo has always been for me the symbol of Africa, the very heart of Africa” (Stern 1943: 1). Historically the region of the Congo was comprised of the Bakongo peoples who were colonised by the Portuguese in the late 1400s leading to substantial levels of slavery. The Berlin Conference (1884), or *Kongokonferenz* (Congo Conference) by European Imperialist nations, led to a division of the Congo establishing the Congo Free State as the private empire of King Leopold II of Belgium. In 1908, the Belgian parliament annexed the colony ending Leopold’s reign over the territory. In 1910, The French part of the Congo, known as Congo-Brazzaville was changed to French Equatorial Africa. On 15 August 1960, Congo-Brazzaville gained autonomy from France as a Republic (Belgian Congo, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013).

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Stern's representation of daily life in Zanzibar includes several examples of Arab, Swahili and Indian cultures. Joseph Sachs (1942: 61) speaks of Stern's Zanzibar paintings as the high water mark of her art where her "canvases are full of gorgeous colour and the strange mysterious atmosphere of this tropical island, but they have also recaptured the spirit of the diverse humanity that is found on the East Coast of Africa." This aspect of a 'diverse humanity' is expressed in the Arab, Indian and Swahili groups that Stern sought out in Zanzibar, more especially depicting the 'exotic' aspects of island life.

Stern's primary rationale for travelling to the Congo was to render images of the two groups of 'tribal' peoples living in the Congo, the Watussi and Mangbetu, "I shall want to paint the Watussi – and a tribe much further north still beyond the Kivu (Lake Country)" (Berman 2003: 84 & 85). Writing in her publication *Congo*, Stern (1943: 38) described her experience of the Watussi Queen's mother, "She looks like an Egyptian statue." Dispersed geographically between Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo, present day Tutsi's are historically known as the Watussi or Wahuma. In 1916, when the Belgians took over the colony, they believed the colony could be better governed if they continued to identify different populations. Following which, in the 1920s, they required people to identify with a particular ethnic group and classified them in a census. In 1935, the use of ID cards was enforced designating citizens as either Tutsi, Hutu or Twa (King Kigeli, 2009). Essentially the European colonialists viewed the Tutsi as descending from the Horn of Africa and North Africa due to their physical features encompassing 'a longer nose and longer neck', indicative of race studies of the time.[11]

Irma Stern travelled to the Fête Nationale at Kigali where the King of the Watussi, Mwami Mutara III Rudahigwa, and his new Queen were in attendance. They had travelled from his

[11] For a discussion on racial classification related to colonialism in terms of superiority and inferiority see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, pg. 198-206. The racial classification of peoples developed according to a typology of races where non-white peoples were assumed to portray 'essential' physical characteristics that meant they were less developed or 'primitive' in relation to 'Caucasians' as developed in the racial theories of Cuvier, Knox and Nott and Gliddon.

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residence at Nyanza accompanied by the Queen mother, Kangazi and the King's dancers. On 16 November 1931, as a result of the Belgian colonial authorities deposing his father due to his refusal to adopt the Roman Catholic religion, Mutara III Rudahigwa was crowned King of Rwanda. In her book *Congo,* Stern (1943: 43) described the fete; the market square that was turned into an arena, the government officials, European guests, other chiefs, the Watussi ladies and wealthy Arabs. Moreover, she described the various dancers, the atmosphere, strange rhythms and the geometrical patterns of the loincloths, "As evening fell, a magnificent cow dressed in a garland with tassels was brought in. The guides lead the cow to the Queen where they sang to the cow, you are the loveliest, you are the most precious, you are the most beautiful. The arena was filled with cows, dancers and guides who danced into a frenzy as night fell. The fete continued for two days and two nights." Stern's description exemplifies her notions of 'wild' and 'authentic' Africa and the Watussi embody her ideals of a noble 'tribe'.

As a result of Stern's encounter with the Watussi, a number of significant paintings were produced. Her primary desire, however, was to paint a portrait of the Queen. *Watussi Queen* 1943 will be discussed in chapter four. Irma also painted a portrait of the King's sister, Emma Bakayishonga, *Watussi Woman* 1942, who was known for her beauty. The portrait reveals the headdress and adornments worn by female royalty – a blue and white glass beaded hoop neckpiece and on her right wrist, a pink and red bracelet further indicating her status as a royal princess.[12] Having attended the Fête Nationale observing the dances and musicians, Irma Stern painted *Bahuto Musicians* 1942. In 1946, as a result of her second journey to the Congo, Stern painted several new portraits including *Watussi Girl* 1946, *Watussi Woman in Red* 1946 and *Congolese Woman* 1946.

The other ethnic group that Irma Stern made contact with and painted were the Mangbetu:

[12] Carol Kaufman, Curator of African Art at the Iziko South African National Gallery and His Majesty Kigeli V, have identified the sitter of the portrait for *Watussi Woman* 1942 as Emma Bakayishonga.

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> 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. Here live men who are treated with respect due to their artistic craft (Stern 1943: 23).

Stern made reference to a 'savage' tribe, which may be due to nineteenth-century European accounts of the Mangbetu, Bakusa and Batetela's ancestors reportedly having practiced cannibalism (Berman 2003: 91). Another striking aspect of the Mangbetu, apart from their artistic and musical abilities, was the cultural practice of wrapping babies' heads tightly with cloth to create distinctive features. According to Schildkrout (1999: 207), this practice died out in the 1950s due to the influences of westernisation.

In her publication *Congo*, Stern (1943: 5) gives an account of her visit to the potentate Chief Ekidondo of the Mangbetu:

> This chief is abundantly full of life; he does everything with an absolutely devastating overflow of vitality. His musicians play for him all through the day ceaselessly, even half through the night. His village is full to overflowing with his wives, the place is seething with his children; he is a great Chief and holds judgement daily.

Irma Stern wrote that on the following day, she would paint the musicians of the 'Sultan', as the Azande called their chief. The word Azande means, 'the people who possess much land' and refers to their history as conquering warriors. After meeting the musicians, Stern painted, *Azande Musicians* 1942, a composition depicting a group of three musicians with tribunal horns, drums and gongs. Each figure is wearing a little straw hat with plumes. Behind the musicians Stern painted a decorative backdrop echoing the geometric patterns in red and black found on Mangbetu mud-walled mural paintings thereby 'authenticating' the 'primitive' 'tribalism' of the scene depicted.

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In her letters and book, Stern (Berman 2003: 88) gave an account of her daily conditions:

> I am working like hell – but it is a great task – the heat – the sun rays – the altitude – I am at present rather high up on a plateau… one lives in constant fear of getting this and that and another here… the meat is full of worms I hear – we can only eat it when properly cooked. In some parts you cannot even wash in the water – it has Bilharzia in it... It is a marvellous country but my God – you must get used to it!

Stern also gave an account of her working environment:

> The place I am at now has no post – no telegraphic connection – no train – just a delivery bus passing and bringing food and mail once a week. There is a Hotel and I found luckily a lovely large room with a half kind of sitting room which I use as part …Studio…even bathroom and private lavatory (Berman 2003: 89).

Stern travelled to the Great Lakes region and returned to Elisabethville after an arduous journey travelling by train, riverboat and car for two weeks. Stern (1943: 45) described the Congo River, "Congo was the name of a great king. They called the river after him, that gigantic slow flowing mighty river, dominating the land, opening the land and they called the land Congo." After her exhibition in Elisabethville in October 1942, Stern planned to return to Johannesburg on 1 November.

Elisabethville is the former name given to current day Lubumbashi. Founded by the Belgians in 1910, and named after their Queen Elisabeth, wife of King Albert I, the city centre was reserved for the 'white' European population while the black population lived in the cité indigène called quartier Albert south of the city. Returning to Elisabethville, Stern

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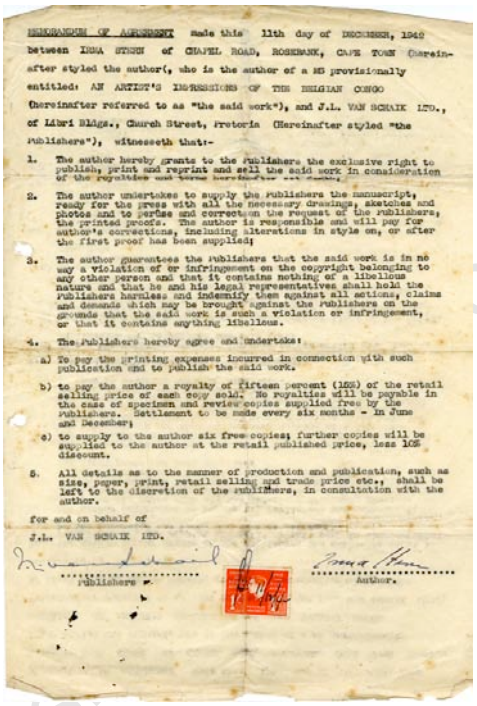
arranged an exhibition of her works at the Musée Ethnographique where she sold 11 works (*Bonhams* 26 October, 2011). The balance of paintings, drawings and gouaches, Irma had returned to South Africa in order to complete some of her paintings and to hold several exhibitions, predominantly in Cape Town and Johannesburg.



MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT made this 11th day of DECEMBER, 1942
between IRMA STERN of CHAPEL ROAD, ROSEBANK, CAPE TOWN (hereinafter styled the author(, who is the author of a MS provisionally entitled: AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSIONS OF THE BELGIAN CONGO (hereinafter referred to as "the said work"), and J.L. VAN SCHAIK LTD., of Libri Bldgs., Church Street, Pretoria (Hereinafter styled "the Publishers"), witnesseth that:-

1. The author hereby grants to the Publishers the exclusive right to publish, print and reprint and sell the said work in consideration of the royalties and terms hereinafter set forth.

2. The author undertakes to supply the Publishers the manuscript, ready for the press with all the necessary drawings, sketches and photos and to peruse and correct on the request of the Publishers, the printed proofs. The author is responsible and will pay for author's corrections, including alterations in style on, or after the first proof has been supplied;

3. The author guarantees the Publishers that the said work is in no way a violation of or infringement on the copyright belonging to any other person and that it contains nothing of a libellous nature and that he and his legal representatives shall hold the Publishers harmless and indemnify them against all actions, claims and demands which may be brought against the Publishers on the grounds that the said work is such a violation or infringement, or that it contains anything libellous.

4. The Publishers hereby agree and undertake:

a) To pay the printing expenses incurred in connection with such publication and to publish the said work.

b) to pay the author a royalty of fifteen percent (15%) of the retail selling price of each copy sold. No royalties will be payable in the case of specimen and review copies supplied free by the Publishers. Settlement to be made every six months - in June and December;

c) to supply to the author six free copies; further copies will be supplied to the author at the retail published price, less 10% discount.

5. All details as to the manner of production and publication, such as size, paper, print, retail selling and trade price etc., shall be left to the discretion of the Publishers, in consultation with the author.

for and on behalf of
J.L. VAN SCHAIK LTD.

.....
Publishers.

.....
Author.

Figure 10. Author's agreement between J.L. Van Schaik and Irma Stern
Congo (1943) Irma Stern archives (MSC 31) National Library of South Africa.

In 1943, J.L. Van Schaik Ltd published 300 copies of *Congo* by Irma Stern. The memorandum of agreement (Fig. 10) stated the provisional title as, 'An artist's impressions of the Belgian Congo'. The publishing terms were the same as *Zanzibar* 1948.

In 1946, Irma Stern undertook her second visit to the Congo, however, political change and instability were evident. Writing in her first letter to the Feldmans, care of the Consulate Union of South Africa, in Elisabethville on June 4, 1946 her letter written in pencil as no ink was available, Stern wrote, "Here I sit for a week – I am looking for a driver who can drive

– who can do running repairs – a native who will not slit my throat – once we are on the way" Berman (2003: 102). The 1940s saw the rise of African nationalism in the Congo and surrounding countries. The Brazzaville Conference took place between 30 January and 8 February 1944, which set in motion new policies for French colonies, including the abolition of the *code l'indigénat*, which had rendered the social and political activities of indigenous people illegal. Similar changes were occurring within the Belgian Congo resulting in Stern experiencing numerous challenges and difficulties. There were delays in her departure, a trip that would take 10 days by car, train and boat and according to Berman (2003: 103) her hotel was a "miserable dinge." Returning to South Africa, Stern described her second trip to the Congo as a 'hoodoo trip', having contracted Malaria, and having to spend eight hours on a lonely road in the forest after her car broke down (106).

Aside from the difficulties, the period Irma spent living and painting in the Congo at Lake Kivu was productive, the result being fourteen large canvasses, several charcoal drawings and a number of incomplete works. Located about a kilometre from any white inhabitants, Stern hired a house as a studio on the border of the Congo with Ruanda-Urundi, "It would not matter if there were only blacks here – but as the whites usually spoil the habits of the natives I felt unsure of staying there alone" (Berman 2003: 105). Stern also described how she had to paint on the veranda, as the light was poor inside the house. Nevertheless, as a result of this trip, Stern painted *Mangbetu Bride* 1947 and *Congo Group* 1946. In 1955, Stern returned to the Congo for a third time but didn't produce any paintings during that visit. Irma Stern died on 23 August 1966 just after the opening of her retrospective exhibition in July of the same year.

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Conclusion

This biographical account of Irma Stern's childhood, influences and travels establishes the necessary groundwork for the fuller interpretive analysis that follows in my subsequent chapters. The factual and historical data drawn mostly from primary sources offers a clear descriptive account of Stern's activities, travels and personal viewpoints. Moreover, it

clearly places Stern within the German Expressionist movement that was fundamentally influenced by ‘primitivism’, and as such, positions my research on Irma Stern and her search for exotic subjects within a ‘primitivist’ discourse. In my next chapter I will discuss the development of ‘rural primitivism’ within the Brücke movement in Germany, citing several examples that are relevant to an understanding of how a ‘primitivist’ mode of representation manifests in Stern’s artistic sensibility.

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Chapter 2

German Expressionism and 'Primitivism': Artistic Dispositions

> In 1979 Expressionists were said to seek 'regression' to states of preadult innocence or prehuman animality. And in 1983 the 'essence of Expressionism' was attributed to 'the belief that there exists a content beyond convention, a reality beyond representation – in short a Nature opposed to Culture' (Gordon 1987: 369).
>
> I suggest, however, that Black cultures played a seminal role in the emergence of a new aesthetic paradigm, modernism includes the presence of the so-called primitive at its heart, Lemke (cited in Flam & Deutch 2003: 409).

In this chapter, I will trace the historical factors that contributed toward a 'primitivist' mode of representation within the Brücke movement in Germany, between 1906 and 1920. This historical study is important in locating Irma Stern's artistic practice and the paintings she produced of black subjects within her African periods of Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo. Stern travelled in search of the 'other' in exotic locations in a similar way to that of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) who travelled to the Tahitian Islands in the Pacific in 1891, and Max Pechstein who travelled to the Island of Palau in Western Micronesia in 1914. Gauguin and Pechstein sought to depict images of 'primitive' peoples in nature, existing in an ahistorical and pre-modern state.

At the advent of the 20th century artists in Europe were influenced by the abstract forms that occurred in 'primitive' artworks and objects. According to Flam and Deutch (2003:3) this innovation produced a 'modern' development into the canon of western art history, a break with the preceding academicism and conservatism and a form of rejuvenation for western modern art:

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> These artists saw in Primitive art a unique kind of pictorial inventiveness and imagination, which was especially suggestive and meaningful in relation to their own ambitions. They expressed great enthusiasm and admiration for the objects they saw, they collected and studied them, and the objects had a marked influence on their own art.

Although the influx of 'primitive' tribal objects from Africa and Oceania as a result of the colonial enterprise provided a form of rejuvenation for western artists, primarily as a source of inspiration that led to formal and aesthetic innovations, for the most part, 'primitive' objects, peoples and cultures were perceived and defined as 'other' to western civilisation and culture. As Antliff and Leighten (cited in Nelson and Shiff 2003: 217) argue:

> In assessing the 'primitive' one should note that the term does not constitute an essentialist category but exemplifies a relationship. The relation is one of contrast, of binary opposition to the 'civilised': the term 'primitive' cannot exist without its attendant opposite, and in fact the two terms act to constitute each other. Within the context of modernism, 'primitivism' is an act on the part of artists and writers seeking to celebrate features of the art and culture of peoples deemed 'primitive' and to appropriate their supposed simplicity and authenticity to the project of transforming western art… Above all we should think of the concept of the 'primitive' as the product of the historical experience of the west and more specifically as an ideological construct of colonial conquest and exploitation.

'Primitivism' is then part of the binary relations of the 'civilised' in relation to that of its 'others'. It is in an unequal relationship in which the west has typically imagined, reproduced and consumed ideas, objects and images of and about 'other' cultures. In this way, 'primitivism' can be understood to represent what Thomas Docherty termed an 'unjust politics', Lemke (cited in Flam & Deutch 2003: 412). This is supported by Foster's (1995: 47) view of 'primitivism' as a metonym of imperialism that stresses the importance of economic exploitation and political oppression in the imperialist project of domination and colonialism. Foster sees the fact that European artists received inspiration from African art as an 'unjust politics' due to the imperialist nature of its influence. While this may take on

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various forms my primary interest is expressed in Lloyd's (1991: 102) statement, "The 'primitive' was an imaginary concept rather than a reality, used to debate and define by antithesis western notions of civilisation and modernity." Therefore Stern's painterly representations of the black subject might suggest an 'ethnographic fantasy'.

Germane to this understanding is the expressionist painterly style that Stern adopted in Germany under the influence of her teachers and mentors and as an active participant in the German Expressionist movement. However, according to Gordon (1987: 70) German Expressionism should not be understood to be a homogeneous movement or style but an impulse and cultural tendency that draws from a variety of influences and sources, including, Judgendstil, German Romanticism, Tribal art (African and Oceanic), folk art and non western influences such as 'orientalism'. However, certain characteristics and traits can be said to embody the term German Expressionism. Amongst these are vivid colouration and distorted naturalistic forms, the depiction of emotions emphasising strong feeling and sensation and an enhanced sense of reality that exaggerates certain features to make them more expressive that can result in highly stylised painting. Within the context of 'primitivism', the stylisation, distorted forms and exaggerated features can be attributed to the influence of tribal objects.

In the next section I aim to trace the development of a rural form of 'primitivism' or what Lloyd refers to as 'domestic primitivism'. I will trace this development by discussing several paintings by a number of Brücke artists that reveal an evolving iconography of an imaginary 'primitivism', expressed in the themes of peasants and bathers. This will make explicit the relationship between 'primitivism' and German Expressionism and lay the ground for an understanding of Stern's representations of the black subject. This historical analysis will provide a link between the German Expressionist painters, such as Max Pechstein, and Irma Stern's search for an 'earthly paradise.'

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Rural Primitivism

The Brücke artists' investigations into 'man' and nature extended to the rural countrysides of Germany and the Nordic countries. Its genesis lay primarily in the landscapes surrounding the Moritzburg lakes and the island of Fehmarn in 1909, 1910 and 1911. From these areas emerged numerous oil paintings, studies and watercolours by Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, Kirchner, Heckel and Pechstein. The fishermen from Nidden, depicted in Pechstein's paintings, are from the island of Fehmarn while the peasants and bathers scenes emerged from the Mortizburg lakes situated in the countryside north of Dresden. The Brücke artists' aim was to capture a simplicity and naturalness that was to be found in the rural countryside. According to Gordon (1987: 134) the attributes and qualities of this rural lifestyle exemplified a set of values that made a distinction between urbanised and rural societies:

> As early as 1887 in a famous study called 'Community and Society' Ferdinand Tönies established a distinction between natural 'community' and more advanced capitalist 'society'. Community or *Gemeinschaft* was the 'Folk's' mode of social organization, based on familial feelings of love, kinship and neighbourhood, whereas the 'educated classes' preferred a society of *Gesellschaft* based on individualism, contracts and commodity values.

The relationship between community, nature and national identity is an important one. The concept of a homeland art (*Heimatkunst*) as a conscious anti-urban and anti-cosmopolitan idea, was put forward by several German writers, most notably, Julius Langbehn (1851-1907) a follower of Nietzsche. While not directly influencing Brücke artists, Weikop (2011: 2) points out that "his [Langbehn's] significance in helping shape the cultural milieu out of which the Brücke grew was considerable." The Brücke artists adopted and implemented this notion of *Gemeinschaft* or community in part as a reaction to the bourgeois conservatism of urban society and as a means to a more progressive and avant-garde approach to their painting. As sources of inspiration, they identified with nature and 'natural' communities such as fishermen.

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A second significant aspect of the nature culture dichotomy manifests in the theme of 'decline and renewal' that is fundamental to an understanding of German Expressionism and 'primitivism.' According to Gordon (1987: 115) the first volume of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* appeared in 1918 and set the tone for an era. Germany's rapid industrialisation, mass migration to cities and wars had resulted in a view of the west in decline. Perhaps best expressed in Herman Hesse's 1919 essay on the Brothers Karamazov, subtitled *The Downfall of Europe,* Hesse introduces the idea of a rebirth of the East following the death of the west. Perceived like other 'primitive' cultures to be the 'source' or origin of humankind's development, the east or 'orient' embodied a pre-modern 'essence' that was untainted and free from 'civilisation'. This 'return' to a 'primitive' source was perceived by western artists to provide a form of rejuvenation. In this way, the Brücke artists viewed peasants and agrarian peoples as counter images to that of the dehumanised city.

Peasants

Wilhelm Riehl (1823-1897) saw the German city as a place of cosmopolitan decadence. Developing this argument further, Shearer West contrasts the evil urban proletariat with that of uncorrupted peasantry or *Bauerntum*. West (cited in Weikop 2011: 2) views the peasants as embodying all the fundamental qualities of German character. Moreover, the peasants represented a community that had not been corrupted by the urban metropolis, who existed close to nature in a pure and timeless state. As Weikop (2011: 3) suggests, the image of uncorrupted peasants *Bauerntum* is an important motif in the Brücke artists 'primitivist' expression:

> It should be observed that the German avant-garde response to the motif of the peasant in Northern European art can be interpreted as a form of 'domestic primitivism', a seeking out of the untainted quality of life in remote coastal and mountain locations, something that is evident in both the work of Brücke and Blauer Reiter artists. This resulted in some truly stunning Expressionist representations of Baltic, Bavarian and Swiss peasants.

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In 1909, Pechstein left Berlin to seek out the inaccessible and isolated East Prussian fishing village of Nidden (Fig. 11). In his monograph on Pechstein, Osborn (cited in Lloyd 1991: 195) emphasises the 'primitive' status of the Nidden fisherman "a forgotten human settlement, whose inhabitants have maintained their life and work, the flow of time, in a state as unaltered as the ocean." As fisherman their lifestyle consisted of a simplicity not seen in the urban metropolis. Evincing an unchanging and therefore ahistorical nature, the fisherman, living in harmony with their environment, represented a higher and nobler existence than that of urban city dwellers, who had lost touch with their souls, becoming corrupt.

Figure 11. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Fishermen in Boat* (1909) oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm.

Temporal conditions in the countryside differed from that of the city where mankind now experienced alienation, suffering and anxiety. As such, the rural peasants and fishermen appeared 'primitive' in contrast to urban educated citizens. It was this quality that the Brücke artists were seeking to render visible in their idealised and romanticised images of peasants and fisherman and as such chose to ignore the encroaching urbanisation and insdustrialisation that was inevitable.

Bathers

The evolution of rural 'primitivism' finds its expression in the motif of the 'bathers'. According to Lloyd (1991: 107) "The bathers theme in Brücke art was inspired by the nudist

cult which emerged in the 1890s as part of the anti-bourgeois and anti-modern reaction to city life." One of the leading proponents of the nudist movement Heinrich Pudor, influenced by the writings of Nietzsche and Langbehn, like many of his contemporaries, idealised the Middle Ages. According to Lloyd (1991: 108) Pudor viewed man as a potential work of art who had been perverted and made ridiculous by the trappings of civilisation.

Nudism *or Freiköperkultur* was one of several anti-urban reform movements that had a direct influence on the Brücke artist community, revealed in various paintings from the period. The notion of reforming modern man's lifestyle through the regenerating possibilities of nature was central to the zeitgeist of the time in Germany and a key aspect of 'primitivism.'

In 1906, the newly formed *German Association for Reformative Living* had as its aims, "a renewal of the bodily and spiritual strength of the people through education about the laws of nature." These principles were applied by the *Vegetarian and Fruit Trees Colony Eden* in Oranienburg north of Berlin, defining, once again, in oppositional terms the impact of modernity. " In Eden the sale of alcohol is forbidden, there are no tobacconists, no pornography, no modern cinema, no cabaret, no gambling, no casinos… all such concerns are turned away at the gates of Eden" (Lloyd 1991: 107). Suggesting a return to nature, to an Edenic state and a recovery of what had been lost in modern society, ideals, like those of Pudor's, were aiming for a pure, clean attitude to the body in antithesis to the dehumanised lifestyle of the city. This is a theme that I will address in chapter three where Stern travels in search of an 'earthly paradise' located 'outside' of western civilisation.

The Brücke artists identified with this lifestyle and according to Gordon (1987: 372) "some artists even went 'native' during summer vacations, living in the nude with their models and practicing a sexual camaraderie that phrased, so they thought, the supposed instinctual freedom of tribal life." This lifestyle manifested in the female bathers and mixed bathing scenes that emerged in 1909 as a result of Kirchner and Heckel's Moritzburg excursions.

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While I acknowledge that these and other examples of 'Bathers' may disrupt canonical notions of beauty within modernism, I have selected to focus my research on the Brücke group and more specifically tracing the themes and influences within Germany at the time.

Kirchner's *Bather's at Moritzburg* 1909/20 (Fig. 12) is a group composition of nude figures' bathing, sitting, crouching and lying along a riverbank. According to Lloyd (1991: 113) it references Cézanne and tribal objects, "From this date [1907] he could begin to combine references to Cézanne and non-European tribal art, just as Derain, Matisse and Picasso had done in 1906." In 1906, a group of predominantly French and German artists began to engage with sculptural objects from the African continent and South Seas. Maurice Vlaminck, André Derain, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso took as reference the formal properties associated with these objects. In doing so, according to Flam and Deutch (2003: 3) "they instituted a shift in western art from a predominantly mimetic tradition to that of distortions from naturalistic norms for expressive ends."

Figure 12. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) *Bathers at Moritzburg* (1909/1920) on canvas, 74,9 x 199,7 cm.

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Many of these tribal objects were contained in ethnographic collections founded at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of Germany's colonial expansion into Africa and Oceania, including the islands of Palau. Pechstein, Heckel and Kirchner visited the Dresden ethnographic museum on several occasions seeking inspiration from the objects on display and in the collections. The influence of 'primitive' objects is to be found in Kirchner's *Bather's at Moritzburg* where Kirchner exemplifies the 'primitivising' effect of the bathers by masking the facial features of the figures and through angular distortions of the figures bodies. This formal influence is as a result of the jagged, angular style of the Palau beams in the Dresden ethnographic museum that Kirchner repeatedly visited in 1910.

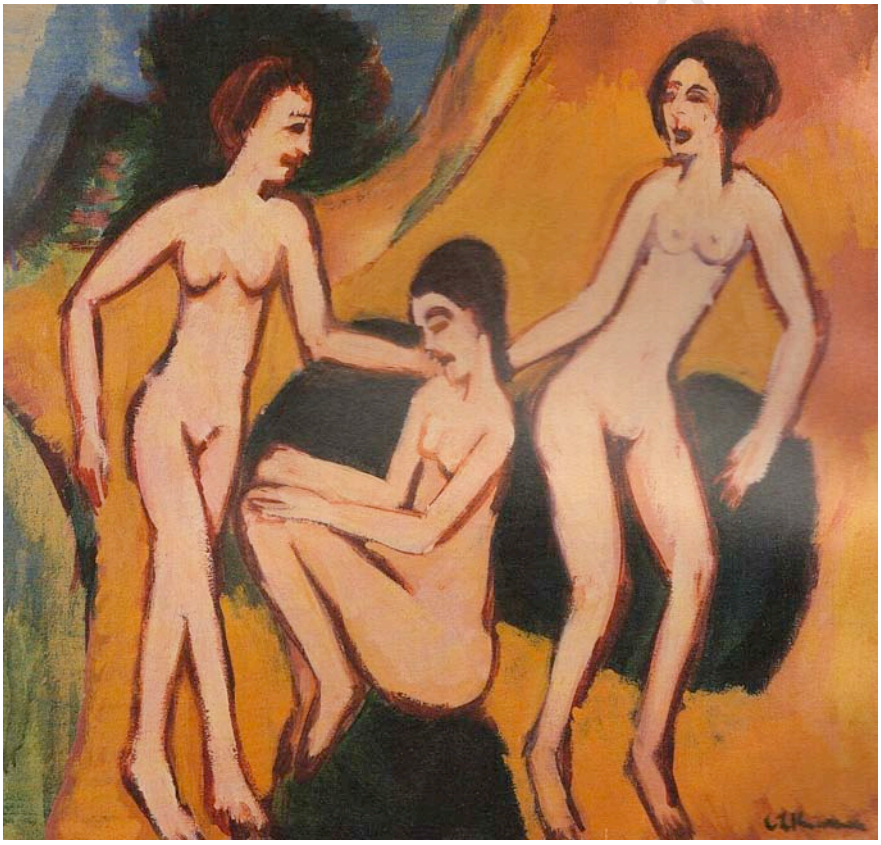

Figure 13. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) *Bathers at the Shore* (1913/1920) oil on canvas, 70 x 80 cm.

In *Bathers at the Shore* 1913/20 (Fig. 13) Kirchner's simplified treatment of the figures' denotes a stylistic shift, less illusionistic and more stylised as a result of the influence of tribal objects. The three models are heavily outlined in dark lines that follow the contours of their bodies. Moreover, their bodies are painted with flat planes of colour in contrast to the mimetic representation of their bodily form. Their positions within the picture plane are symbolic rather than actual with the landscape in the background made up of planes of ochre peppered with dark green foliage. It is an idea of bathers rather than a painting based on actual observation and corresponds with the highly stylised forms, dark outlines and flat planes evident in Irma Stern's early paintings such as *Composition* 1923, that I will discuss in chapter three.

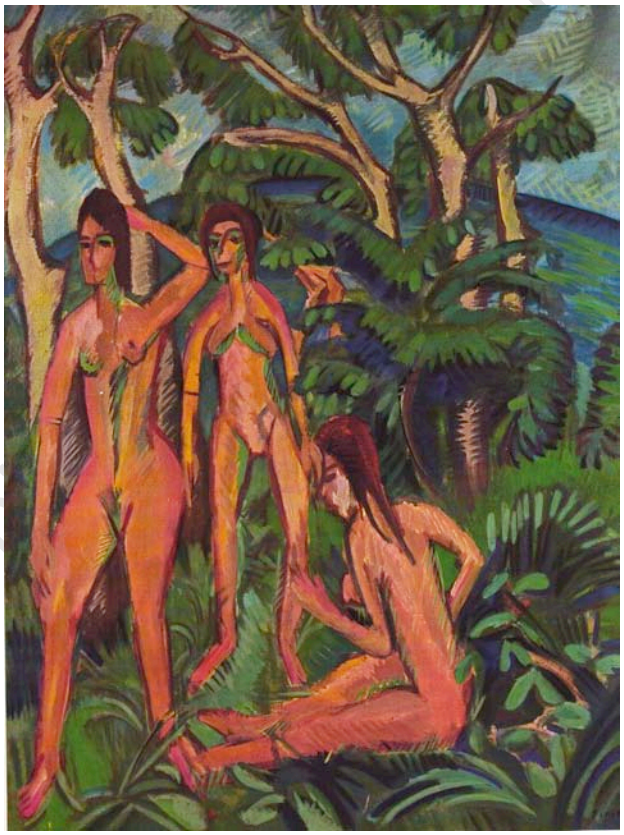

Figure 14. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) *Bathers Under Trees* (1913) oil on canvas, 151 x 120 cm.

Kirchner's *Bathers Under Trees* 1913 (Fig. 14) shows further evidence of the influence of 'primitive' art and objects on Kirchner's stylistic evolution. The figures now take on an additional dimension incorporating sculptural forms. The earlier angular geometry of the figures becomes more volumetric and according to Gordon (1968: 68) "represents the most authentic European parallel to the formal conception of 'primitive' African art." The geometric treatment of the figures' faces, breasts and torsos evoke the geometric stylisation of Cameroonian figure sculpture. Not only are the figures faces and bodies distorted but also that of the trees, foliage and sky depicted in the painting that clearly exemplifies the expressionist tendency to exaggerate and distort for emotional effect.

The painting's iconography evokes that of a dense garden or tropical jungle suggestive of an 'Eden' or 'idyll' set apart from civilisation. The three female figures are represented within nature and as Perry (1993: 7) emphasises, "out of a system of Eurocentric values through which both black people and nude woman came to symbolise some fantasy of free 'primitive' expression." This imaginary 'primitivism' includes an association between nude woman, the 'primitive' and nature in which "she [woman] functions as both a literal and symbolic representation of the 'primitive', of woman as nature" (Perry: 1993: 6). Similarly, 'primitive' peoples were portrayed as closer to nature and therefore inferior to western society.

Pechstein's exploration of the 'bathers' theme emerged in 1911 with numerous depictions of his wife, Lotte, his model, represented nude in the sea and dunes. According to Lloyd (1991: 197) "The nude bathing subjects provided him [Pechstein] with a new means of identifying the figure and nature, further removed from the 'civilised' trappings of dress and labour." Lloyd's statement links to the theme of 'decline and renewal' that positions women, nude bathers and 'primitive' peoples as separate from civilisation and locates them within a timeless, ahistorical nature as opposed to a 'developing' culture.

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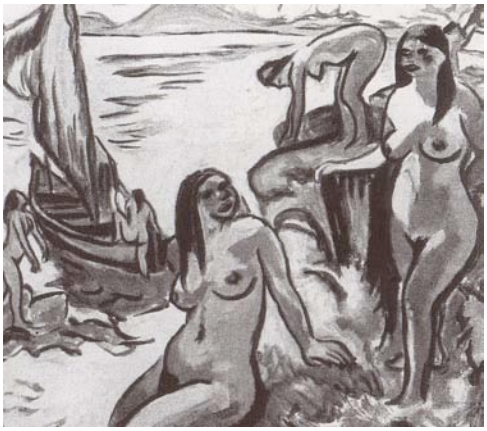

Figure 15. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Women with a Boat* (1911) oil on canvas, unknown.

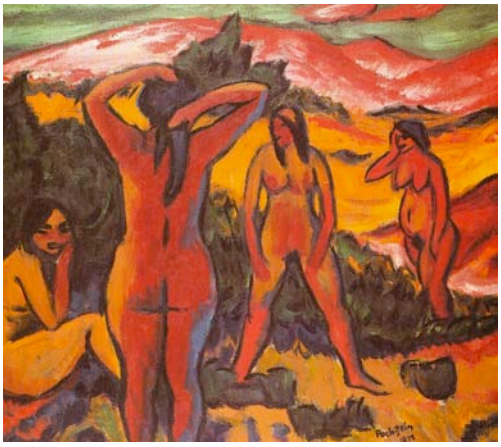

Figure 16. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Evening in the Dunes* (1911) oil on canvas, unknown.

In Pechstein's *Women with a Boat* 1911 (Fig. 15) and *Evening in the Dunes* 1911 (Fig. 16) a single model is repeated throughout the painting in a variety of poses; moving, bending and walking. The repetition of the figure makes visible a 'primitivist' mode of representation that shifts the emphasis from an individual figure or person to a repeated 'type'. The contours of the figures are heavily outlined in bold black lines and as Lloyd points out, "Pechstein's shift away from nature to a more imaginative approach in the Nidden bathers was an important step in the direction of the Palau scenes" (Lloyd 1991: 199). Pechstein's Palau scenes were developed during the period Pechstein lived and painted in the Micronesian islands. Pechstein's aim was to locate an 'authentic' and 'primitive' people living in harmony with nature as a counterpoint to western civilisation. It was soon after Pechstein's return from Palau that he and Irma Stern met in Berlin. Correspondingly, Irma Stern's pursuit of an imaginary 'primitivism', located outside of white colonial Cape Town society, in the early 1920s, I would argue, constitutes an "antidote to his [Gauguin's] hatred of European civilisation" (Gille, cited in Thompson 2010: 52).

Exotic Others

Pechstein's romantically idealised search for an 'earthly paradise' free from the constraints and trappings of western civilisation, was to be found in the islands of Palau in the South

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Pacific. Pechstein arrived in Palau in April 1914 and was forced to leave the islands in October 1914 due to the arrival of Japanese soldiers. Carl Gottfried Semper, a German ethnologist, had undertaken field research in Palau in 1891-2 in which according to Lloyd (1991: 201) "Semper described the Palau Islanders 'friendly', 'gentle' and 'noble' characteristics." In this way, the Polynesian people of Palau were associated with a 'soft' form of 'primitivism' as Panofsky (1955: 297) explains, "One view, termed soft primitivism in an illuminating book by Lovejoy and Boas, conceives of primitive life as a golden age of plenty, innocence and happiness."

According to Antliff and Leighten (cited in Nelson and Shiff 1996: 179) verbal and visual representations of the racial 'other' reveal two fundamental tropes:

i) Enlightenment principles evoking an image of the black as noble savage, in a state out of which whites had long ago evolved and which could be addressed by assimilation into a superior culture

ii) Racial theory evoking an image of the black as unregenerate and barbaric savage, which subhuman condition could be mitigated through control of a superior culture but could not altogether be suppressed.

The concept of the noble savage is expressed in Rousseau's *A Discourse on Inequality* (1755), in which Rousseau criticised modern European society's failure to preserve and maintain the natural innocence, freedom and equality of 'man' in his 'natural' state. Rousseau's discourse is located within the theme of 'decline and renewal' where a European nostalgia for a simple, pure and idyllic state is positioned against that of industrialism, sophistication and urban society. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2000: 210) argue, "in this way, images of the savage serve primarily to re-define the European. The crucial fact about the construction is that it produces an ostensibly positive oversimplification of the 'savage' figure, rendering it in this particular form as an idealised rather than a debased stereotype." Similarly, Irma Stern's representations of the black body, like that of Pechstein's, suggest a

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positive oversimplification that reveals an 'idealised' rather than a debased stereotype of the racial 'other.'

According to Lloyd (1991: 201) Pechstein's description of the Palau islanders follows the idealistic model of Rousseau's 'noble savage'. Pechstein recorded many of his experiences in his memoir posthumously published as *Max Pechstein: Erinneringen* in 1960. In the following account Pechstein describes the idyllic 'earthly paradise' of Palau:

> I was surrounded by an unsurpassable natural lushness. Incomparably fertile growth extended everywhere, plants never before seen, palms and breadfruits rose up, bamboos and sugar beet. The glowing sun threw out beams of light which Europeans would never suppose to exist. In such nature, out of such nature, the brown natives grow. Slim, bronzed beings in their godly nudity.

Pechstein's narrative account reveals several key aspects of an 'imaginary primitivist' sensibility. His description suggests a 'first encounter' in which the 'wonders' of this idyllic and exotic place were being revealed for the first time to Europeans. It was a sensational experience where nature is fertile, abundant and good. At the same time, the 'natives', described as part of nature, were naked and therefore in a primordial or 'primitive' state that sets them apart from clothed, civilised Europeans.

Stern's writing as a child in her first diary *Tagebuch* evokes the same kind of literary devices that reveal a 'wonder' and sensationalist view of nature. Later in her journal *Paradise,* Stern also referred to the indigenous people of Natal as 'brown people'. As Lloyd (1991: 202) emphasises, Pechstein's visual and literary representations of Palau were used primarily to lend validity to his own fiction. Presenting an image of an ideal of the 'other' as existing in an essential and timeless way outside of change and the influence of colonial culture, Stern, like Pechstein, created an 'imaginary' ideal based on fantasy rather than

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reality. The trope of the ‘noble savage’ as I will show, becomes a significant motif in Irma Stern’s depiction of ‘native’ life in her Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland paintings.

Figure 17. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Palau Triptych* (1917) oil on canvas, 119 x 353 cm.

Produced after his sojourn to Palau, Pechstein’s *Palau Triptych* 1917 (Fig. 17) exemplifies the notion of an imaginary ‘primitive’ idyll. It is a large panoramic painting depicting several different scenes. The left hand panel shows a family comprised of a father, mother and child standing on a boat. The male figure holds a stick in one hand while his other arm embraces a female figure who holds a small infant in her left arm. The central panel contains a group of female figures sitting on land in front of their thatched domicile. One figure holds a bowl of fruit on her head while some of the other female figures gesture to three male figures in a boat located in the right hand panel.

Palau Triptych represents traditional ‘native’ life encompassing fishing, bathing and feasting and symbolises as Norbert Wolf (2004: 84) suggests, “ the elements of water, earth and sky in conjunction with fish, men and birds.” Highly stylised with flat planes of colour and dark outlines on the figures, the scenes rendered are a picturesque motif of ‘native’ life. Pechstein’s treatment of the painting evokes the simple graphic scenes depicted on the Palau house beams that Pechstein saw at the Dresden Ethnographic Museum and which inspired him to travel to Palau. (Fig. 18) shows a traditional men’s house in Palau including its

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decorative beams. Pechstein also chose to depict a traditional men's house in *Palau Triptych*.

Figure 18. A Traditional Men's House in Palau, Micronesia.

In 1917, the year that Pechstein painted Palau Triptych, he and Irma Stern established contact in Berlin. As discussed in chapter one, the period that Stern spent in Berlin between 1917 and 1920 is significant in terms of Stern's artistic development and the formation of her artistic sensibility and disposition toward 'primitivism'. In 1918, due to Pechstein's influence and support, Stern exhibited in the *Freie Secession* in Berlin, attended the founding meeting of the *Novembergruppe* and in May and June of 1919 held her first exhibition at Fritz Gurlitt gallery in Berlin. In 1920, Stern produced and printed her print portfolio, *Dumela Morena, Bilder aus Afrika* (Greetings Sir: Pictures out of Africa), a set of 12 lithograph prints that depicted according to Smuts (2007: 12) "idealised African figures living in timeless harmony with nature."

Dumela Morena, Bilder aus Afrika, continues with the theme of 'native' daily life in nature as an 'antidote' to civilised Europe, similarly expressed in Pechstein's *Palau Triptych.* The

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first image shows a mother holding an infant in her arms (Fig. 19), the second lithograph depicts a hunting scene of a man shooting a bow and arrow while the third image contains two figures with fruit. The series continues with images of African 'tribal' life showing figures dancing, sleeping, fetching water and women with children.

Figure 19. Irma Stern (1894-1966) An image from *Dumela Morena, Bilder aus Afrika* 1920, colour lithograph.

The colour images are portrayed in a gestural expressionistic style, the bold dark lines revealing the grainy lithographic process. A soft form of 'primitivism' in which 'native' life as an idyll, represented by happy frolicking 'brown' people, hunting, bathing and eating, evokes the image of the 'noble savage' as a counter image to that of the industrialised west in its dehumanised fallen state. But, as a fantasy envisaged by Pechstein, Stern and other Brücke artists who imagined an exotic people who were 'other' to themselves, living without history, knowledge and development, Foster (1985: 58) argues:

> Historically, the primitive is articulated by the west in deprivative or supplemental terms: as a spectacle of savagery or as a state of grace, as a socius without writing or the Word, without history or cultural complexity; or as a site of originatory unity, symbolic plenitude,

> natural vitality. Usually as a subordinate term in its imaginary set of oppositions (light/dark, rational/irrational, civilised/savage). This domesticated primitive is thus constructive, not disruptive, of the binary ratio of the west; fixed as a structural opposite or a dialectical other to be incorporated, it assists in the establishment of a western identity, centre, norm, and name.

In this way, the Brücke artists search for a primordial state of purity suggests a recuperation of what had been lost, namely, western modern mankind's soul. Hereby, 'primitive' mankind is held up as an ideal antithetical image to that of modernity. It is an image that is constructed in binary opposition to that of 'civilised' Europe as cultured and 'primitive' peoples as synonymous with nature. In this way, the occidental west defines by antithesis it's 'other'. An 'other' that is represented as noble, pure and timeless or as Roland Barthes suggests as a form of 'mythic speech' where "the label empties its referent of historical contingency and cultural specificity and instead subsumes it within an unchanging nature" (Antliff & Leighten 2003: 217). Pechstein's depiction of Palau peoples effectively essentialised the peoples represented in the paintings and rendered them as ahistorical and therefore 'primitive'. Similarly, Irma Stern's romantic and idealised notions of the 'primitive' and exotic 'other' as a counter image to that of western civilisation, developed in Berlin while under the mentorship of Max Pechstein.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reveal a development within the Brücke movement known as rural or domestic 'primitivism'. As a counter image to the modern west, 'primitivism' incorporated an imaginary notion of the 'other' as located within nature and as inferior to western civilisation. From this emerged the trope of the 'noble savage' who existed in an 'earthly paradise' outside of historical development. Brücke artists, such as Max Pechstein sought to depict this idyll through travels to exotic locations.

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This historical analysis is important in understanding the background factors that contributed toward a ‘primitivist’ sensibility in Irma Stern. The period Stern spent in Berlin established an aesthetic disposition for Stern whose nascent production registered the influence of German Expressionism together with an imaginary ‘primitivism’. As I will show in my next chapter, her exploration of this disposition or sensibility manifested on her return to South Africa where Stern undertook several journeys in search of her black figurative subjects.

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Chapter 3

Embodied Fantasies: The Black Body as a Visual Trope

> Nevertheless, whatever the shortcomings of the colonial reality he [Gauguin] found, the age-old myth of the Earthly Paradise persisted in his imagination and informed his art, coming to the fore in some of the more complex, multifigured compositions that he painted in the later 1890s (Thompson 2010: 205).

> Irma Stern's life, her work, the way she presented herself, and the reception of her person and her work in Germany and in South Africa, offer diverse points of departure for concrete engagement with the myths and constructs of Eurocentric art historical writing. This puts the spotlight on the relationship between periphery and centre, and the way 'primitivism' of the European avant-garde is rooted in colonialism and the construct of the 'other' in the context of the search for alternative images to the industrialised capitalist world (Below 1996: 32).

In this chapter, I will explore the themes that emerge in relation to Stern's production, travels and writings, from the time of her return to Cape Town in 1920, including visual analysis of specific paintings from her Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland periods. Germane to this period is Stern's journal *Paradise* (1919-1924) and the critical reception of Stern's paintings of black subjects. Here, Stern's imaginary 'primitivist' disposition is rendered visible. Equally significant to this period is the stylistic mode of representation that Stern employed, that of German Expressionism.

An Earthly Paradise

Was Irma Stern's search for Paradise – a place where 'primitive' man lived in harmony with his natural environment, consistent with that of other German Expressionist artists? Are there similarities and differences to that of Max Pechstein and Erich Heckel who sought inspiration for their painting from exotic locations? In the following statement, Gordon (1987: 387) describes Heckel's artistic disposition toward 'primitive' peoples:

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> Manfred's accounts of Africa [Heckel's brother Manfred was living in Africa] would have sparked Heckel's interest in going there. He expressed the hope to go to Africa in order finally to find a 'savage' life, people in a natural environment… a friend characterised his wanderlust as a longing for a return to primordial nature, *Urnatur*.

In a similar way, Irma Stern, on her return to South Africa from Germany expressed the desire to find 'primitive' people untainted by the influence of western society. A key aspect of Stern's 'primitivist' disposition, like Heckel's, was her wanderlust for *Urnatur* as a result of her *unheimlich* or, 'not at home in the world' sensibility, that I will discuss in chapter four as it relates to Stern's identity as a settler, woman and Jew.

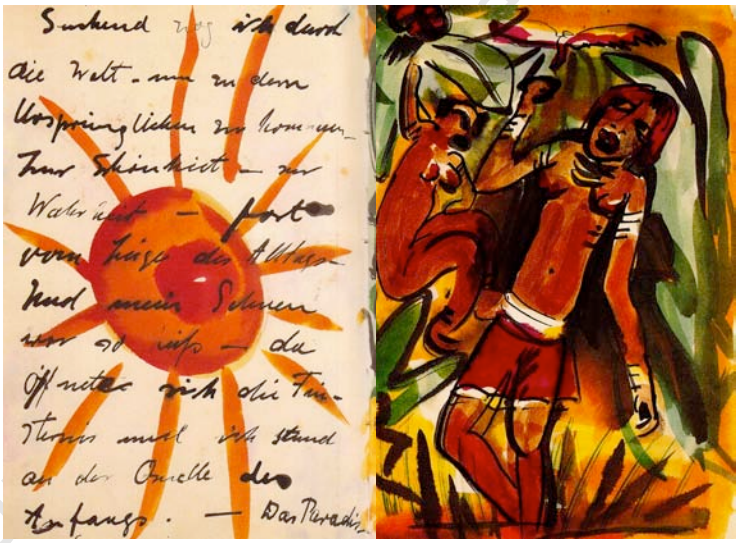

Figure 20. Pp.43 and 44 from Irma Stern's journal *Paradise* (1917-1924).

In a 1926 newspaper interview (Cape Argus, 3 April, 1926) titled, 'My exotic models', Stern described her search for an exotic 'idyll' outside of western civilisation that clearly articulates her 'primitivist' disposition:

> During these years I spent in Europe studying there was always an idea on my mind – back to Africa, the country of my birth, the land of sunshine, of radiant colours. To find all this I had to go to 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 peoples as it has been lying, one might imagine since the day of creation.

Stern's statement evokes the notion of an 'earthly paradise' of nature as an idyllic place described in the book of Genesis as "a place of particular beauty, where man lived in perfect harmony with nature until the Fall. Western culture thus incorporated an idea of nostalgia and a desire to recover that lost idyllic place" (Museo Carmen Thyssen, 2012). In 1922, as a result of the strong reaction she received to her first solo exhibition held at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town, Irma Stern undertook her first journey to Umgababa. According to Arnold (1995: 18) Stern's reaction was an attempt to flee the conservatism of Cape Town but also initiated the beginnings of her travels to various African locations:

> After the stress of her exhibition Stern determined to escape from Capetonian provincialism. In an attempt to confirm her idyllic childhood memories, she decided to explore and to find the real Africa. 'So I went on my way, until one day, like a sign from heaven, a vision led me to the place where I believed myself able to hear the heartbeat of Africa – Umgababa.

Arnold remarks on Irma's 'idyllic childhood memories' as confirming an ideal notion of authentic Africa. As shown in chapter one, Stern's childhood memories were based on a combination of observation and fantasy. These manifest in her writings contained in her diaries *Tagebuch aus meiner Sturm - und Drangzeit* From the time of my turmoil (diaries 1 & 2) and in the numerous drawings and studies she did at Schweizer-Reneke, Wolmaranstad and the Victoria Falls. Her diaries also reveal through her literary accounts and in its title, the emotional and melancholic sensibility of the young Irma Stern. Characteristic of the German Expressionist repertoire, these lead to dramatic visionary episodes that continued in Stern's life.

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Particularly significant to an understanding of Stern's Umgababa period, is an aspect of her visions related to fantasy. Having collected fairytales, Stern was particularly drawn to the German literary and musical proto-Romantic tradition from the Middle Ages of which the *Sturm und Drang* 'turbulence and urgency' or 'storm and stress' movement forms part. In reaction to the perceived constraints of rationalism imposed by the Enlightenment, the counter-enlightenment movement highlighted individual subjectivity and extremes of emotion that were given free expression. Hereby, Stern's notions of real or 'authentic' Africa were as a result of fantasy developed both through childhood memories and from influences and mentors in Berlin where her artistic disposition emerged.

Paradise The Journal (1919-1924)

The symbolism contained in Stern's journal *Paradise* (1919-1924), and the period between 1922-1929 when the peripatetic Stern first encountered her black subjects in the seaside town of Umgababa, and later Swaziland period paintings, is particularly fecund. Significantly, the journal identifies the notion of 'paradise' as an imaginary place based on Stern's fantasies about Africa and primordial peoples (Fig. 20) as a form of personal mythology of the black subject.

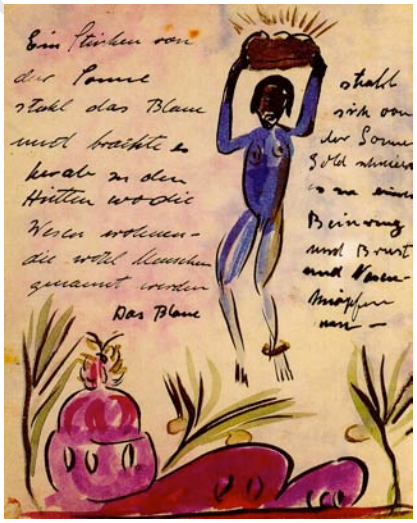

Figure 21. The 'Blue One' illustrated on p.3 of Irma Stern's journal *Paradise* (1917-1924).

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Referencing key moments in her life, *Paradise* draws from Stern's experiences both in Germany and South Africa. The journal was started in Germany in 1919 and marks Stern's return to South Africa in 1920. It contains references to her 1922 exhibition and to Umgababa in 1923 and concludes in 1924 with an image of Table Mountain. On one level it is autobiographical, as a confessional or allegory of Stern's life and on another, it contains biblical symbolism and themes, richly embedded within the romantic and emotional language of German Expressionism.

Starting with an introduction, the journal's real beginning emerges with the 'Blue One' or *Der Blaue* (Fig. 21), "a mythical being who steals a piece of the sun and brings it down to the earth" (Dubow 1991: 73). The 'Blue One' forges pieces of the sun into an anklet and studs for the breast and nose. Arnold (1995: 47) describes Stern as identifying herself as the 'Blue One', "In Paradise she refers to herself as 'the 'Blue One' (Journal 3, 5) and draws herself as a blue figure, a bringer of gifts to a reluctant mankind." As a result of their weakness, the people or humans hated the 'Blue One' and crucified it. Metaphorically representing Stern, the 'Blue One' also refers to a God-like figure. Hereby, Stern's identification with the primitive is denoted through the embellishments – anklets and breast and nose studs. Moreover, Dubow (1991: 73) reads the significance of the colour blue as an allegory for the inner mystical structure of the world, aligned to German Expressionist *Weltanschaung* and to the spiritual values Kandinsky attached to colour, especially the *Blaue Reiter*.

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Perhaps the most remarkable and revealing statement from *Paradise* is contained on p.43:

> Searching I roamed the world – to arrive at the origin – at beauty – at truth – away from the lies of everyday – and my longing was burning hot – then the darkness opened up and I stood at the source of the Beginning – Paradise

This statement is followed by the word, 'Umgababa' on p.45 and 'Brown people – peace' on p.46. Confirming one of the most revealing aspect of the colonial view of the 'other', Stern's

statement reinforces the notion of the primordial, pre-modern beginning that exists outside of time and in nature, locating the non-western subject within it. In this way, Stern's idea of the 'other' functions as a 'fetish of an imagined stereotype' or as Hight and Sampson (2004: 7) argue, "the image of the colonial other becomes a trope of desire for the western viewer, who subconsciously wishes to realise a 'pure, undifferentiated origin." In this sense, within the theme of 'decline and renewal', Stern's own desire is bound within the trope of the 'noble savage' as a counter image to western civilisation.

The dichotomy between Europe and Africa, city and nature, and between civilisation and 'primitivism' is expressed in the following references. Reflecting mankind's alienation and the emotional dimensions of Expressionism, a figure, on p.9 is depicted alone in an urban environment with the words 'abyss', 'fear' and 'turmoil'. Moreover, on p.14, the city infected by decadence is highlighted in, "vice walks the streets." On pp.23-24, the influence of Kirchner who painted numerous paintings reflecting Dostoyevsky's theme of suffering and loss is evident, "And sad was the ball as never before." And lastly, on p.29, the themes of exile and expulsion are portrayed, "And fled burning Europe for the land of strong colours".

In her journal, on pp. 39-40, Stern makes specific reference to her 1922 exhibition, 'And painted pictures with my heart's blood' … 'And gave them to the people and stood alone – and all laughed and slung mud at me' (Dubow 1991: 71). Stern is rejected even though she offered her paintings as 'gifts', according to Gordon (1987: 140) exemplified as hero and victim:

> The Expressionist artist tends to see himself as hero or victim, sometimes simultaneously… in the first sense, the Expressionist man is that tragic, questioning being described by Nietzsche bereft of his god, his roots, and his ethical tradition – and yet, for all that, alive with the promise of Dionysian self-affirmation. In the second sense he is a German man who, in addition to this, has the specific challenge of identity confusion – that void at the

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> centre of the German character which led historically, to excessive self-assertion or equally excessive self-surrender.

The themes of expulsion and redemption manifest clearly in relation to that of 'decline and renewal'. Suffering alienation and trauma as a result of her exhibition held in the urban 'civilised' environment of Cape Town, the young Irma Stern flees 'burning Europe' for the 'primitive' spaces of the natural environment, to Umgababa, discovered through a vision.

Stern's disposition toward ecstatic and visionary experiences, particularly as a child, contributed toward a notion of fantasy. The symbolism contained in Stern's journal clearly exemplifies the German Expressionist tendency toward emotion and heightened or ecstatic experiences coupled with religious subject matter. Moreover, Stern's visions provide insight into her inner condition and to the paintings she produced between 1923-1929. In the following section I will discuss several of Stern's paintings from Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland in relation to Stern's 'imaginary 'primitivist' disposition.

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Composition 1923

Composition 1923 (Fig. 22) embodies one of Irma Stern's earliest depictions of black women. It was painted during Stern's travels to Umgababa. It depicts a scene of three naked, black female figures 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. In the background a stream, mountains and fragmented sky are portrayed. The central figure stands in full frontal pose and looks out at the viewer, draped with a golden yellow cloth, her arms by her sides. Her hair is plaited and around her neck and arms are bracelets and a necklace. On her side sits a figure leaning back with her eyes closed. The third figure sits in a pseudo foetal position holding a bunch of black grapes, and a basket of fruit is foregrounded in the image.

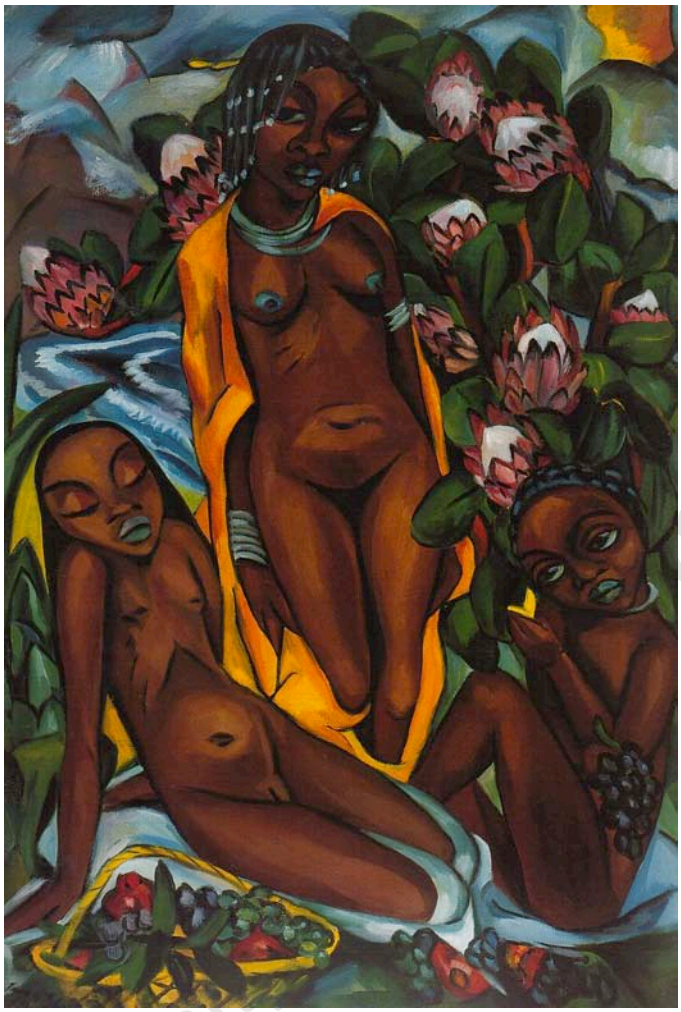

Figure 22. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Composition* (1923) oil on canvas, 139 x 95,5 cm.

Composition is not based on actual observation of the three figures represented, but is, according to Arnold (1995: 49) "a contrived arrangement of shapes, the painting shows the young artist trying to transfer local subject matter – brown bodies and proteas – to the bathers theme." Accordingly, Stern's representation of the three women depicted in the painting is decorative and portrays the stylistic influence of Max Pechstein's Palau period axiomatic of flat planes of colour, angular shapes, geometric patterns and graphic quality. It also evokes the dark black lines and contours of the figures typical of German Expressionist painting and evokes Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Rendered with disjointed and angular body shapes and flat picture plane, *Les Demoiselles*

d'Avignon show the influence of African masks that transform the female subjects into a 'primitive', almost savage rendition of femininity.

In this painting, Stern identifies the women's bodies with nature. This is evident in the symbols of fruit in the foreground of the composition and the proteas whose conical shapes are echoed in the stylised forms of the women's heads. The topos of nubile girls, flowers and fruit are a consistent theme in Stern's early representation of the black body. The young women depicted in *Composition* suggest an 'Edenic' environment where 'primitive' humankind is located within and proximate to nature. This proximity becomes important in light of Rousseau's 'noble savage' and the aims of the Brücke painters to recover what had been lost in relation to the theme of 'decline and renewal'. According to Hight and Sampson (2004:7):

> Through the repetitive, fetishistic dissemination of stereotypes, the colonial subject becomes mummified, to use Fanon's evocative term. The imagined/imaged stereotypes perpetuate racial myths, and, in the process, particular ethnic groups and individuals are consigned to a condition of relative invisibility, of never being present in any vital human sense.

Laid bare to be gazed upon, the three female figures exist as a construction of the western imagination. As such, they are not depicted as individuals with agency but are rendered as decorative additions to nature, fulfilling a particular notion of fantasy for Stern, perhaps an eroticised desire or projection of sexualised femininity that is not made fully explicit but is suggested through the depiction of genitals and nipples of the figures.

Repose 1927

Repose 1927 (Fig. 23) is a large oil on canvas from Stern's Swaziland period depicting two young women within an exotic idyll setting. Arnold (1995: 28) describes *Repose* as 'Gauguinesque' with the painting's depiction of young woman lying amongst flowers and plants typical of the idyllic and lush environment that Gauguin sought to represent. Echoing

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the organic foliage and landscape around them, *Repose* embodies an exotic space in which the two female figures pose resting on their elbows with eyes half closed and their torsos depicted in an angular and rhythmic fashion. Containing decorative qualities, the painting reveals the influence of Pechstein's Palau period paintings suggestive of the 'edenic retrieval', evident in many of the Brücke artists' works.

Figure 23. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Repose* (1927) oil on canvas, 121 x 189 cm.

Central to the iconography of the image is the aspect of 'sexualised exoticism', a key dimension of 'colonial desire', as defined by Young (cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000: 40). The two female figures in *Repose* embody a sensual and submissive pose. The figure in the foreground engages the viewer's gaze, her eyes half closed in a coquettish gesture. The shape of the woman's brown body and breasts are fecund representations of the exotic flora and fruit found in this idyll. It is an 'eroticised vision' in which according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2000: 41) it engenders a "seductive but enervating world of the 'native' to which the coloniser yields at his (or even more her) peril." In this way, the

colonial view of black sexuality, and in particular, the black female body is portrayed as overtly sexualised. According to Hermand (cited in Schoeman 1994: 79) "the black was repeatedly and explicitly coupled with 'the erotic and orgiastic': blacks almost always appear as oversexed, in heat, constantly in motion, emitting yowls of lust, or at least casting steaming glances about." The two female figures depicted in *Repose* are on display, like that of the tropical environment around them, available for conquest or as Mathews (1991: 428) observes, "as representative of the naïve, passive 'primitive'" consistent with the trope of the 'noble savage'.

Lemon Pickers 1928

In the *Lemon Pickers* 1928 (Fig. 24) the pictorial motif of young women in nature is foregrounded by a group of figures picking lemons, their limbs dancing, establishing a rhythm within the painting suggestive of the bathers scenes of Pechstein's wife, Lotte. In a subtle way, the shape of the figures torsos and their movements contrast with those of the upright trees. Punctuating the soft hues of the green leaves are the bright yellow lemons, a blue cloth hanging over the frontal figure and the red loincloth of a figure in the background.

Fruit as a motif within Stern's paintings, and the symbolism contained therein, can be traced back to Stern's earlier studio paintings of young girls, in particular, *Playing Children* 1924. As Arnold (1995: 44) highlights in reference to *Playing Children*, "the theme of puberty is explored in the two nude girls playing with fruit, which symbolises fecundity." In reference to discussing Modersohn-Becker's *Kneeling Mother and Child* 1907, Gordon speaks of the creative force embodied in the mother and child figures. It is not primarily the fact of puberty that is fecund but the fact that women have the capacity for child bearing. Once again a symbol of regeneration, being female implies being able to bear children. Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Requiem* 1908, written in memory of Modersohn-Becker who died soon after childbirth at age thirty-one, encapsulates Expressionist references to women, fruit and child bearing:

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> And so you also saw women as fruit and you saw children so. Driven from within into the forms of their existence
>
> And, finally, you saw even yourself as fruit, distorted, took yourself before the mirror and let yourself lose yourself down to your very gaze
>
> But this remained vast and did not say "that is me" but instead, "this is" (Gordon 1987: 127).

Figure 24. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *The Lemon Pickers* (1928) oil on canvas, 100 x 95 cm.

In the *Lemon Pickers*, we see how women and fruit are symbolic of a 'primitive' ideal that identifies 'native' women with fecundity. Like fruit, the women represented in *The Lemon Pickers* are portrayed as 'ripe' and 'fertile'. Their ability to produce children is reinforced through the imagery of the lemons as symbols of fecundity, suggesting a reductive depiction of gender and race that positions women as equal to nature. Gaze (2011: 490) describes the correlation of women, fruit and fecundity, referring to Modersohn-Becker's depiction of

women and children, “a kneeling breast-feeding mother is surrounded by fruit and plants, symbols of her fecundity.” Arnold (1995: 44) makes the connection between puberty and fecundity, referring to Stern’s Playing Children (1924), “The theme of puberty is explored in the two nude girls playing with fruit, which symbolises fecundity.”

Daydreaming 1927

Similarly, *Daydreaming* 1927 (Fig. 25) falls within a genre of an ‘earthly paradise’ as that of *Repose* and the *Lemon Pickers*, however, with a shift in painterly treatment. While consistent with an idyllic nature scene, *Daydreaming* stands in contrast to the highly stylised ‘primitivism’ depicted in *Composition* and *Repose* that recall Pechstein’s Palau period paintings.

Figure 25. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Daydreaming* (1927) oil on canvas, 97,8 x 100,3 cm.

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A single female figure lies in the foreground of the painting, her face glancing out from the picture plane, her head turned. Behind her a sitting figure and two women stand with their backs towards the viewer. The green vegetation, not as decorative as that depicted in *Repose,* is lush and dense. Behind the three figures, pink flowers, such as bougainvilleas or azaleas common to Natal and Swaziland are blossoming. Each of the women wears a traditional red Swazi garment with its patterned motif, a necklace and earrings. Their short-cropped hairstyles are indicative of their status as unmarried Swazi maidens. The young women portrayed are isolated, separated from young men denotative of the *uMcwasho* period, before boyfriends and marriage. Presented as young women who are ready for marriage, from the French *nubile* 'marriageable', or Latin *nubilis*, 'marriageable', their red togas and necklaces are culturally symbolic of their social status within Swazi traditional society.

The frontal figure's facial features and characteristics are distinct, unlike *Composition*, *Repose* and the *Lemon Pickers,* where the facial features are either highly stylised or not shown at all. In this way the evolution of Stern's iconography suggests a move from 'stylised' representations of black figurative subjects toward observed subjects. However, this shift still constitutes a form of 'ethnographic present' that places the figures within a perpetually 'timeless' fantasy that is, according to Hight and Sampson (2004: 7), "a fixed reality which is at once 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible." The result produces a 'fixing' of the colonial subject as a racially and culturally inferior type that exists outside of historical development and progress. In a 1933 newspaper article (The Cape Argus, July 5, 1933) titled, 'Natives no longer picturesque, woman artist finds them civilised and sad', Stern expresses her dissatisfaction with the changes occurring among the local 'native' population confirming her desire for an unspoilt 'primitive' ideal:

> It was a shock for me to see how the natural picturesqueness of the native in his kraal had almost disappeared. Six years ago I saw him as a joyous, untrammelled creature, the spirit of Africa at its happiest and most colourful. Today he has submitted to civilisation. He wears

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> Everyman's clothes and boots… The joy of life is no longer there. He seems unhappy in the burden of civilised living. To those of us who saw beauty in the native in his natural state the change is sad.

Stern's paintings 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. These examples explore the stylistic and formal influence of Pechstein and German Expressionism on Stern's 'primitivist' sensibility. These images also register iconographically the notion of an exotic, 'primitive' 'other' as imagined rather than real, as observed by Lloyd (1991: 102):

> The sophisticated exoticism of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings testifies to the impossibility of achieving a pristine 'primitive' ideal, not least because the societies late nineteenth-century artists held up as alternatives to modernity – be it the indigenous countryside or distant exotic lands – were themselves undergoing racial historical change under the impact of industrialisation and colonial rule.

Irma Stern's painterly representations of black woman, or 'natives' as Stern referred to her subjects, present an imaginary notion of an untouched people residing in nature apart from the influence of western civilisation. As such, Stern perceived them to be closer to nature, without progress, politics or personal ambition. She illustrates this through her representation where the 'native' is depicted as a 'noble savage', 'primitive' and in an exotic idyll free from the influence of industrialisation and colonialism. The notion of attempting to portray a pristine 'primitive' ideal manifests in the critical reception to Stern's paintings of Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland that I discuss in my next section.

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Critical Reception

Irma Stern's first solo exhibition held at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town in 1922, received strong reactions due to its modern expressionist style and depiction of black figurative subjects. Titled, *An exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern*, the exhibition drew crowds and critical attention. Amongst the watercolours, oils, drawings and prints were images of 'natives' including *Malay couple, Native girl, Native dance and Zulu woman* (Schoeman 1994: 70).

Prior to the opening, "Boonzaier later heard from the sculptor Moses Kottler, it seems two policemen arrived to see if the pictures were not indecent" (Schoeman 1994: 72). The (*Cape Argus* 11 Feb, 1923) reported, "There is a constant stream of visitors… at least once during lunch hour the crowd was so great that waiting queues had to be formed." The (*Cape Times* MSC 31) review expressed, "disgust at the general nastiness of the work." The responses were largely as a result of the modern expressionist style that Irma Stern had introduced to Cape Town where English Romantic Realism was the predominant style, presided over by the conservative landscape painter Edward Roworth. Moreover, Arnold (1995: 70) points out, "her depictions of black people were considered audacious at the time and her use of a modernist style was seen as socially subversive." By way of contrast, responses from critics in Germany to Stern's depictions of the black body, at the time, reveal a strong affinity to German Expressionism in terms of subject and style (*Das Kunstblatt*, September 1923) "Although African by birth and still at home in the bush, she paints exotic humanity and landscapes in the European manner, seen through Pechstein eyes, as it were." German critics, more accustomed to German Expressionism as a style and the subject of the black body, made comparisons to the work of Max Pechstein.

Between 1925 and 1929, Stern held several consecutive exhibitions of paintings produced as a result of her trips to Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland at galleries in Cape Town, Bloemfontein and Johannesburg. Referring to the "storms of abuse and denunciation" that

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greeted Irma Stern's first Cape Town exhibition, Hilda Purwitsky (*Zionist Record* 17 July, 1925, p. 35) wrote the following review in 1925:

> Gone is the usually sedate atmosphere of the room. Colours, wild, shrieking, crude, fling themselves at the onlooker. Grotesque, malformed brown bodies slowly detach themselves from the closely packed conglomeration with clamorous suggestions of customs entirely un-European… There is something crazy in that abundance of colour-harsh and blinding and immoderate. It is strong and virile, but so unrestrained and chaotic as to be almost indecent. There is no apparent law and order here – only a reckless smothering turmoil… But then, tropical nature is like that and tropical men.

Purwitsky's comments reveal a 'primitivist' stance where she draws an analogy between wildness, colour and brown bodies as being un-European and indecent. Hence, the 'primitive' – 'tropical nature and man' is understood to be virile, chaotic and 'savage', unlike Europeans who have order, morals and are civilised. In the visitor's book at the Bloemfontein exhibition, a viewer wrote, "though we may not like to understand the work shown, it remains of interest as an example of a new type of art, and, to Bloemfontein, it is decidedly unique" (Schoeman 1994: 93). A newspaper headline in Johannesburg stated, "Freak picture exhibition" and "Art of Miss Irma Stern, Ugliness as a cult" (Schoeman 1994: 93). In the Rand Daily Mail, a critic, possibly Hedley A. Chivers, signed 'A', writes, "While the art of Irma Stern continues to shock me, I am prepared to admit that it is interesting. It repels and yet attracts. It is mysterious" (Schoeman 1994: 94).

During the 1930s attitudes and critical perceptions of Stern's work began to change. David L. Kahn, writing in the Cape Times in 1933, points out Stern's significance, "whom many believe to be the greatest creative artist in South Africa today" (*Cape Times* 31 August, 1933, p. 10). In an article published in *The South African Lady's Pictorial*, an influential society magazine, titled, *The woman question in South Africa*, the author identifies Stern amongst other successful creative women in South Africa at the time, "It is perhaps in the field of literature and art that South African women are best known abroad – Sarah Gertrude

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Millin, Ethelreda Lewis and Pauline Smith in literature and Irma Stern in art have all made their mark in and been acclaimed by the world outside South Africa" (*The South African Lady's Pictorial* June 1933, p. 29).

The reception of Stern's paintings of black figurative subjects took place in an extremely conservative, predominantly British colonial society. Modern art was not widely practiced and images of the black body were infrequently represented and were predominantly of an ethnographic nature. Local critics reacted strongly to Stern's expressionist style, and many critics viewed her use of wild brush marks and strong colour as unorthodox. Reactions to her representations of the black body reveal a dominant attitude that viewed the native population as 'primitive' and 'uncivilised' as expressed by Purwitsky.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, Stern's paintings from her Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland periods register the formal and stylistic influences of German Expressionism together with an imaginary 'primitivist' disposition. After her return to Cape Town from Berlin, Stern held her first solo exhibition and as a result of the criticism she faced, Stern fled Cape Town in search of 'real' Africa, an 'earthly paradise' that she depicted in her paintings but also narrated in her journal, *Paradise*. Like that of several Brücke artists, including, Max Pechstein, Stern held to an ideal that positioned indigenous peoples as counter-images to that of the industrialised and 'civilised' west. Through the theme of recovery and regeneration, the trope of the 'noble savage' is made explicit.

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Chapter 4

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?[13]

> The construction of identity – for identity, whether of orient or occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct experiences, is finally a construction – involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us". Each age and society re-creates its "others." Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of "other" is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies (Said 2003: 325).

In this chapter, I will discuss Irma Stern's identity as a woman, settler and Jew as it forms an intrinsic part of the coloniser colonised relationship. I have show, Stern developed her 'primitivst' disposition in Germany and returned to South Africa in 1920 in search of 'exotic' and 'native' subjects. Against the backdrop of socio-political changes in South Africa and Germany, Stern continued to pursue her romanticised vision of 'primordial' peoples in nature, travelling to the Congo and to Zanzibar in search of a more 'exotic' expression. In the second part of this chapter, I will analyse a selection of Stern's portrait paintings from the Congo and Zanzibar. Central to this is the maturing of Stern's painterly German Expressionist style and secondly, an iconography of race that is foregrounded in her production.

One of the more recurring and compelling features of South African society is that of the representation of the racial 'other'. It is a contested space that has and continues to produce conflicting images, histories and narratives. As academic and scholar Edward Said asks:

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[13] This title is a reference to Paul Gauguin's painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897. It is useful in locating Stern's production within a narrative of the representation of the 'other' historically and discursively but also asks epistemological questions about identity.

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> How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilisation) a useful one, or does it always get involved in either self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones? (Said 2003: 325).

The thesis or central argument Said put forward in his seminal publication *Orientalism* 1978 states that the occidental west has typically portrayed a stereotypical view of the "orient' and 'oriental' subjects as extension of the west's definition of itself. In this way, visual and literary representations and depictions by western artists have been said to constitute what Gayatri Spivak called an 'othering' of non-western peoples (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000: 171). This has relevance for the study and analysis of Irma Stern's Zanzibar period 1939-1945 and Congo period 1942-1955 paintings where her representation of the 'other' reveal racial and cultural tropes. According to Baxandall (1988: 1) "painting is the deposit of a social relationship." As such, Stern's portraits from Zanzibar and the Congo register the artist's impressions, but, also constitute a 'politics of looking' that reflects a material embodiment of ideology.

Coloniser and Colonised

Irma Stern's childhood can be described as peripatetic. She spent her formative years in South Africa until age seven when the Stern family departed for Germany due to the second Anglo Boer war. They returned to the Transvaal two years later and departed again for Berlin, for five years, returning in 1909 only to settle again in Berlin in 1910. In 1912, when Stern embarked on her formal art studies in Weimar at age eighteen, she had spent nine years living in South Africa and nine years living in Germany.

As a young woman of twenty-six years of age, Irma Stern was painting representations of black subjects in a modern style, at the time of the conservative British romantic-realist

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school under Edward Roworth, one of the key figures of Cape Impressionism. She both challenged and complied with the accepted notions of a 'proper woman artist', so rigidly defined and propagated in the ideologies of femininity at the time. Stern was both engaging in and resisting colonial structures and powers of male authority. As Loomba (1998: 170) emphasises, "To explore European women's relation to colonial discourses as fraught with these contradictions – they participated in the imperial mission, and were tangential to or at odds with it as well." An example of this includes Stern requesting assistance from local government officials to write letters of introduction to the Belgian Congo government authorities who would enable Stern to undertake her painting expeditions reasonably unhindered. Yet, Stern's travels were fairly unorthodox for the time. She would mostly travel alone or with a single escort, often in remote locations, travelling by car, train, aeroplane and on occasion by boat.

Max Osborn (1927: 24) in his monograph on Stern views her as "A unique case!" Moreover, Osborn describes Stern's childhood experience growing up in Schweizer-Reneke as fundamental to the worldview she developed in her art making, "Not as a guest, not on a trip to study conditions and life did Irma Stern pass through this land so distant from us and still so dark – this was her home." Through intense proximity to the 'other', 'foreign' and 'dark' environment of the Transvaal, Osborn posits that Stern was closer and therefore better positioned to depict her black subjects. However, as I have shown, Stern's 'primitivist' disposition, developed during the period she was active in the German Expressionist movement, confirmed her primary aim was to travel to exotic locations in order to paint images of 'primitive' peoples in an idyllic natural setting, similar to that of Max Pechstein. Her association to Africa or the 'affinity' that Osborn describes is a 'troubled' one, predicated on a coloniser colonised relationship. It is within this relationship of self and 'other' that I wish to explore Stern's identity in relation to the paintings she produced from Zanzibar and the Congo, in order to achieve more nuanced and complex relations under the rubric 'primitivism'.

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An archival photograph (Fig. 26) c. 1930s of Irma Stern, Dudley Welch and an unidentified person being served tea on the veranda at the Firs in Rosebank, Cape Town, (MSC 31) suggests a typical colonial 'enactment'. The 'whites' sit posing for the photographer while two black servants serve tea in uniforms, each wearing a fez. This is not a parody or an attempt by Stern to subvert the colonial attitudes of the day. Rather it reveals the residue of colonial culture still prevalent in white society at the time. As a form of colonial comportment, Stern still adhered to many of the functional aspects of white urban society, such as 'taking tea'.

Figure 26. Irma Stern, Dudley Welch and unidentified person at The Firs, c. 1930s Irma Stern archives (MSC 31) National Library of South Africa.

As Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2000: 211) state, "settlers are displaced from their own point of origin and may have difficulties in establishing their identity in the new place… and their own identity depends in part, at least initially, on retaining their sense of difference from the 'native' population." Given Stern's need to identify with her models and subjects, albeit imaginary and idealised, but also the need to distance herself, we can observe why she made numerous patronising and derogatory verbal and written comments in statements,

interviews and her writings about ‘natives’. Yet, in other ways Stern distanced herself from white colonial society in Cape Town and, similarly, made disparaging remarks and statements about the ‘whites’, “Like commercial mineral water gone flat” (Schoeman 1994: 65). Such were the complexities and contradictions of Stern’s search for a romanticised idea of Africa.

Woman, Settler and Jew

What did it mean to be Jewish and a settler? Samuel Stern was born in 1863 in Reichensachsen, a village in Hesse, Germany, the son of Jonas Stern. The area of Hesse during this time comprised a small Jewish community of Ashkenazi origin. Given the location of the Rhineland, Schoeman (1994: 11) concludes, “and most likely came from a family of small farmers, cattle dealers and traders… he does not seem to have been particularly well educated or even literate man.” This is not the impression gleaned from Irma Stern’s diaries that portray an image of the Stern family as wealthy settlers in Schweizer-Reneke. However, archival photographic documentation confirms very humble beginnings for the Stern family with Samuel Stern struggling to make his way in life:

> Father is a so-called ‘self-made man’. He left the little town where he was born in order to seek his luck in America. After many hopes had been shattered, he came to Africa. There he worked himself up, returned to Germany and married my mother, an extremely young and very pretty girl with no fortune (Schoeman 1994: 12).

According to Jacobsen (cited in Back & Solomos 2000: 247) literature on Jewish assimilation in America in the 1920s and 1930s posed questions around race and Jewish identity in the New World, “What of today and of America? Asked Ludwig Lewisohn, ‘were the Jews Germans? Are they Americans? I am not talking about citizenship and external loyalties. What are the inner facts?” The inner facts have remained a critical question of Jewish identity by Jewish people for generations. Understanding what constitutes ‘Jewishness’ takes on racial, biological, religious, sociological and political

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dimensions. An immigrant novel, *The Island Within* 1928, traces several generations of a German-Jewish family from Germany to America in the early twentieth century that explores these inner facts:

> How was it, the novel's young hero, Arthur, wants to know, that before they went to school, always and always, as far back as the awakening of consciousness, the children knew that they were Jews? There was in the house no visible symbol of religion or race Jacobsen (cited in Back & Solomos 2000: 247).

In an uncanny and remarkable racial positioning of 'other' races, the western European conflates and describes the racial features of the 'African' and the 'Jew' as biologically, racially and physically 'ugly', thus, distinguishable from beautiful races such as white Europeans. Notably Stern has been described as ugly (Fig. 27), "The eyebrows were, however, too thick, her nose too big and her hair frizzy, and she could hardly have been called beautiful or attractive. Moreover, she might at the kindest be described as plump, stout would be a more accurate term" (Schoeman 1994: 83). I use this analogy not to reinforce notions of racial or biological characteristics of race but to assert a notion of Stern's own poor self-image, as Gilman (cited in Back & Solomos 2000: 232) suggests:

> By the mid-century, being black, being Jewish, being diseased, and being 'ugly' came to be inexorably linked. All races, according to the ethnology of the day, were described in terms of aesthetics, as either 'ugly' or 'beautiful'… the blackness of the African, like the blackness of the Jew, was believed to mark a pathological change in the skin, the result of congenital syphilis… One bore the signs of one's diseased status on one's anatomy, and by extension, in one's psyche.

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Figure 27. Irma Stern posing in her studio in Cape Town in the early 1920's.

Here Stern's subjectivity comes to the fore. In the 1920s Jacob Wasserman, (Gilman cited in Back & Solomos 2000: 233) chronicled the ambivalence of the German Jews towards their own bodies and their own difference. Was Stern, as Pajaczawska (cited in Perry 1999: 229) indicates, "a divided subject… spilt between conscious beliefs or thoughts that can be spoken and rationally articulated and other non-rational motivations that might contradict or underlie the former?"

Colonial Ambivalence

Arnold (1995: 97) holds the view that, "Although Irma Stern was an astonishingly prolific artist, she painted no self-portraits. This is an extraordinary fact." Arnold's axiomatic statement concerning Irma Stern's identity as a woman is significant. Stern was not an attractive woman and she expressed dissatisfaction with her own self-image in a letter to Trude Bosse in 1921, "So strong is my feeling of self consciousness – my body bothers me – I am afraid of the eyes of strangers" (Dubow 1991: 84). Given that Stern never painted her own image and she was deeply unsatisfied with her own physicality might suggest a 'projecting' of her own identity, as an 'ugly' woman, onto that of the 'beautiful' models, the

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women sitters in her portraits. As Arnold (1995: 71) emphasises, "In portraying female sexuality… she was conscious of her own femininity. Herself large and relatively unattractive, she painted many studies of the woman she would have liked to have been, projecting her internal self-image onto her models." According to Rose (cited in Perry 1999: 242):

> There is no position, she claims, for either women or men, which is ever simply achieved. Sexual identity is neither simply given then, nor absolutely stable or fixed. Furthermore our sense of ourselves as male or female subjects (our subjectivities) is achieved only at some cost, which entails a whole series of losses and separations, these losses necessarily leave the subject incomplete and fractured.

Germane to 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.[14] In this way a series of 'losses and separations' in Irma Stern's life: her peripatetic upbringing, her experience of opthalmia, her father's incarceration in the Boer War camps, their refugee status, her broken heart, divorce and the Nazi persecution of the Jews, all contributed to a dislocated and unstable identity.

Irma Stern's identity as a, settler, Jew and woman can be understood as a split self or 'split colonial subject'. In objectifying the 'other', Stern creates a stereotype that is 'fixed' and assumed to be 'knowable' as visibly pure. Hence Stern's images are without ambivalence, and not 'open' to multiple interpretations other than the 'fixed' stereotypical ideas inherent within the image. Stern, writing to Freda and Richard Feldman (Berman 2003: 97) from Zanzibar, states, "I am painting dramatic pictures, compositions and faces – not just types and races." In a rare statement by Stern she acknowledges this awareness toward her

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[14] Subjectivity: The concept of subjectivity problematises the simple relationship between the individual and language, replacing human nature with the concept of the production of the human subject through ideology, discourse or language. These are seen as determining factors in the construction of individual identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000: 220).

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subjects. However, as Jan Mohammed (cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000: 135) has shown, "Threatened by a metaphysical alteration that he [she] has created, he quickly retreats to homogeneity of his own group." Correspondingly, Stern's encounters in Zanzibar and the Congo invariably cause her to return to her lifestyle in Cape Town where she continues to paint and exhibit.

Stern's split-self identity informed how she viewed others and the kinds of images she produced. Her unstable identity conflated with her 'primitivist' disposition produces a projection of 'self' onto 'others'. According to Arnold (1995: 98):

> Many of Stern's portraits are both studies of the model and projections of self. She sees herself in others and explores her own identity – woman, white German South African, Jewish, spinster/wife/divorcée, artist. In trying to come to terms with her own complexity and the disjunction between her outward appearance and internalized self-image, she paints many different people. In her studies of black and white, male and female, young and old, eminent and ordinary people, she seeks to understand her identification with and estrangement from others.

Furthermore, this 'projection' results in a both and attraction and repulsion, an identification with and distancing from her subjects. Stern's perception of her black subjects is then not neutral but is informed by her 'primitivist' disposition. As Williams and Chrisman (1994: 117) argue:

> Colonial identities are always oscillating, never perfectly achieved. The divide between black skin and white masks is not, Bhabha explains, a neat division, but a 'doubling, dissembling image of being in at east two places at once… It is not the Colonised Self or the Colonise Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness – the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body."

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As I have shown, Stern's identity as a woman, settler and Jew was 'unstable'. Her disposition suggests one of colonial ambivalence and a 'projection' of her identity onto the black subjects she depicted in her paintings. I would like to examine how and in which way this 'projection' manifests in her Zanzibar and Congo paintings. Given that Stern's unstable identity functions within an imaginary 'primitivist' disposition might suggest that Stern's representations of 'other' races continues to define the 'other' as an exotic and 'primitive' 'type' to that of western 'civilisation'.

Zanzibar

The island of Zanzibar located on the East coast of Africa evokes romantic and exotic imagery. For centuries it was a significant trading centre for slavery and a strategic harbour. Colonised by the Arabs, Portuguese and British, it suggests a cosmopolitan melting pot of ancient cultures, vibrant colours and exoticism. An unnamed critic writing in *The Star* newspaper (March 1948, p.6) describes Irma Stern's Zanzibar experience as follows, "No artist has expressed, as Irma Stern has done, the essential beauty, mystery and romance of Zanzibar in painting." This statement expresses several key aspects that are relevant to Stern's portrayal of Arab and Swahili sitters. Does Stern's representation of the 'Arabs' in her Zanzibar paintings suggest an 'othering' of her subjects? Are her paintings suggestive of an essentialising of her sitters characteristics and culture and therefore can be said to constitute stereotypes?

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According to Arnold (1995: 103), "Stern used the term 'type' quite unselfconsciously and without any awareness that categorisation is not egalitarian." This may highlight Stern's use of 'generic' identifications for her models as opposed to actual names. For example Stern would employ the term 'Indian Woman' or 'Arab' in her titles rather than referencing the name of the individual in the painting. Acutely aware of her models social status, Stern attributed their 'functional' status within society, to signify their personal identity. In this way, Stern designates the identity of her subjects as a form of 'appellation'. Who they are is not as important as what they signify.

In presenting my analysis of Stern's paintings of Zanzibari figurative subjects, I would like to draw on two fundamental tropes that function within an imaginary 'primitivist' mode of representation, that of an idealised and debased 'other'. In these examples I will discuss how Stern's imaginary 'primitivist disposition manifests through these two tropes. I will also look at aspects of Stern's painterly treatment as it corresponds with her German Expressionist mode of painting.

The Untouchable 1945

The Untouchable 1945 (Fig. 28) portrays a dejected and downcast woman. The expression on her face reveals the agony of a suffering woman. She is an untouchable, one of the lowest members of the Indian caste system, considered as 'polluted' or unclean. Untouchables live in poverty often working as ignominious members of society with jobs that include working with human and animal waste or carcasses. To be born into an untouchable segment of society meant having no agency or social mobility, a fate comparable to death. As Hampton (The Untouchables, 1997) states, "In some cases it was like they were not even considered to be human but more like a dog with rabies." According to Athanassoglou-Kallmyer (cited in Nelson & Shiff 2003: 285), Adorno defined ugliness as a "category of prohibitions." In this way the woman's ugliness as an untouchable and 'polluted' figure renders her invisible and insignificant to society. Stern describes a scene of outcasts in her book *Zanzibar* (Stern 1948: 24):

> At the Darijani Bridge, the side of the morning-shade, beggar women sit on the bare ground, begging for food, a mouthful of rice, a grilled manjoka, a cooked banana. They sit along the bridge and sell small bits of broken iron, empty cigarette tins. When the sun gets hotter they sleep under a piece of dirty matting. They also cover their nude bodies with matting. They sit day and night and beg.

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Figure 28. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *The Untouchable* (1945) oil on canvas, unknown

Stern assimilates the motif of a woven mat in the background of the painting. The mat's oval shape echoes that of the woman's sari that functions as a head covering. While *The Untouchable* appears to be a form of social commentary on a member of the lower classes of Zanzibar society, we know nothing of the woman depicted in the image. Her status and designation is 'all knowing' and 'fixed' in a process of 'othering'. Rather than an idealised stereotype she is depicted as a debased form of representation. Hereby, Stern interpellates or 'calls forth' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000: 21) her subject, not in a personal and subjective sense, but as an 'object' signifying difference. As Porter (2010: 37) argues:

> The dominant culture is equally and simultaneously enthralled and repulsed by indigenous people (Gelder and Jacobs 1998). That ambivalence is exposed in the simultaneous 'cherishing' and 'denigration' of indigenous people and culture (Thomas 1994). The cherishing of a 'more natural, more spiritual' (indigenous) mode of being is at the same time

> a denigration, because of its patronising desire to nurture something from its exotic, fading value. It is also a stereotype, an 'anxious repetition' of what is already known about the other (Bhabha 1994: 66). Stereotype, for Bhabha is simultaneously a play for fantasy and defence, it turns on the notion of fetishism, the desire for originality that is then threatened by the difference that erupts.

Stern's depiction of the woman in *The Untouchable*, suggests a shift from her earlier idealized fantasy representations of Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland to that of a denigrated fetish. Here Stern's ambivalence comes to the fore. Her desire to see the 'other' as a counterpoint to white western 'civilisation' is underscored by Jan Mohammed's notion of 'Manichean allegory' (Loomba 1998: 104) in which the discursive opposition between races is produced. Depictions of the 'oriental' in regions such as Tangier, Morocco and Algeria, by western artists, include those of Alfred Dehodencq (1822-1882), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), Jean-Léon Gérôme and Henri Matisse (1869-1954) reveal an idea of the 'orient' often imagined rather than real. In this sense, the west establishes an idea of the 'orient' as separate and different from itself, as Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2000: 168) elaborate:

> The significance of orientalism is that as a mode of knowing the other it was a supreme example of the construction of the other, a form of authority. The Orient is not an inert fact of nature, but a phenomenon constructed by generations of intellectuals, artists, commentators, writers, politicians and more importantly constructed by the naturalizing of a wide range of orientalist assumptions and stereotypes.

Depicting an untouchable oriental, Stern reinforces a notion of the 'other' as knowable and separate from herself. As such, the constructed image of a subjugated 'other' suggests an 'anxious repetition' that defines by antithesis, a western notion of idealisation and denigration of the black body. Stern's *The Untouchable* suggests a denigrated stereotype of a racial and 'exotic' 'other' within Stern's 'primitivist' mode of representation, not as an image of desire, or 'projection' of self onto the 'other' but as a counter-image of difference to Stern's identity as a woman, settler/coloniser and Jew.

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Arab Priest 1945

Stern painted *Arab Priest* 1945 (Fig. 29) on her second trip to Zanzibar. It is also reproduced in her book *Zanzibar* in which Stern (1948: 12) writes, "The most distinguished Arab, the truly wise and religious father, is dressed in a pure white robe with a turban around his white skull cap." Stern has depicted the African prelate sitting on a white chair resting on one arm, his feet folded under him. He glances out from the picture plane lost in his thoughts. Although largely monochromatic, Stern's painterly treatment of her subject is alive with lush marks and expressive gestures. In the folds of the figure's garment traces of blue illuminate the shadows. His skin is a rich mix of olive and ochre hues with bits of green lingering on his arm. Although *Arab Priest* denotes a stylistic shift from Stern's earlier Swaziland Period paintings, evocative of Pechstein's Palau style works, it represents a fuller, more mature form of German Expressionism comprised of bold expressive brush marks and vivid colourisation that give emotional expression to the image.

As I have discussed in chapter one, Stern undertook numerous journeys to exotic locations to depict an imaginary 'primitive' people. For Stern, it was vital that they were untainted and pure, free from the influence of western civilisation. In an article for the National Council of Women, Stern (NCW News 1954, p.8) writes:

> In the midst of this [heat, noise & traffic] sat an Old Arab selling beads. He was unaware of everything. He sat in mental isolation. He lived in a world of his own, a spiritual world, untampered by travels and noise and desire for money or goods. He prayed. From this period in Zanzibar amongst the Arabs, there was born in me a desire to work amongst people who have a definite philosophy of life. In this I found a new truth – a truth from early times and handed down from age to age, a worship of spiritual forces.

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Figure 29. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Arab Priest* (1945) oil on canvas, 97 x 86 cm.

Stern's statements, as in her painterly representation, reveal how this 'othering' manifests. Stern's desire for a pure and noble people who were spiritual and unaffected by the world becomes apparent. Unconcerned with worldly matters of travel, commerce and society, the Zanzibar Arabs represented a mysterious and wise ancient culture who in their mediation of 'truth' from age to age, produced no new knowledge and are as Olin (cited in Nelson & Shiff 2003: 326) states, "living in a timeless presentness outside history." However, in reality many Arabs were traders consciously preoccupied with worldly matters. In this way, Stern imagines a fetish of the characteristics, customs and culture of Arab society. These symbols, contained in the gesture of the figure, his white robes, *Keffiyeh* and his beard,

essentialise the character traits of the anonymous sitter whose only appellation is that of an Arab Priest. The figure depicted in *Arab Priest* is as Bhabha (1994: 66) describes, a fetish of an imagined stereotype consistent with the colonial view of the 'other' as an 'anxious repetition'.

Bibi Azziza Biata Jaffer 1939

Bibi Azziza Biata Jaffer 1939 (Fig. 30) the Lady-in-Waiting to the Sultana of Zanzibar represents the subject of female authority. A stout, middle-aged, matriarchal figure, Bibi Azziza Biata Jaffer's status is attributed to her position within the hierarchy of the Sultan's Palace as companion, messenger and confidante to the Sultana. Stern shows the sitter as an authority figure and a relative of the Sultana by representing her within the architectural environment of the palace. In the background of the image are two archways leading to the left and right. Moreover, placed centrally in the image, the Lady-in-Waiting is framed by a large arch leading to the exterior painted in a purple haze suggestive of dusk. Finely attired in a crimson dress with white decorative patterning that mimics the circular shapes of the Persian arches, the figure wears an array of jewellery; bracelets, rings and earring and a green emerald necklace that confirms her authority.

Furthermore, the portrait of Bibi Azzia Biata Jaffer represents the subject of a middle-aged woman. Gazing aside, she does not look out at the viewer, her thoughts are internalised. Stern's depiction of her body suggests neither passivity nor overt sexualisation. However, according to Mathews (1991: 427), "the enterprise of objectification requires that women act within it, that they acquiesce to this definition of femininity, and they incorporate it into their self-representation." As such, Stern depicts the woman in Bibi Azzia Biata Jaffer within her defined feminine role rather than acting outside of it. Stern's portrayal of the Lady-in-Waiting to the Sultana suggests a pictorial commentary about the status and decorum of women in Arab society signifying her role within larger societal structures. According to Chrisman (cited in Williams and Chrisman 1994: 502):

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A system of matrilinearity did not indicate an elevation of female status in political terms, for contemporary anthropologists, these writers (including Darwin, Westermarck, Tylor) consolidated a definition of 'power' as constituted by political rights and property ownership. As women in most 'primitive' societies appeared to them to lack this form of power, it could be argued that they had no power at all.

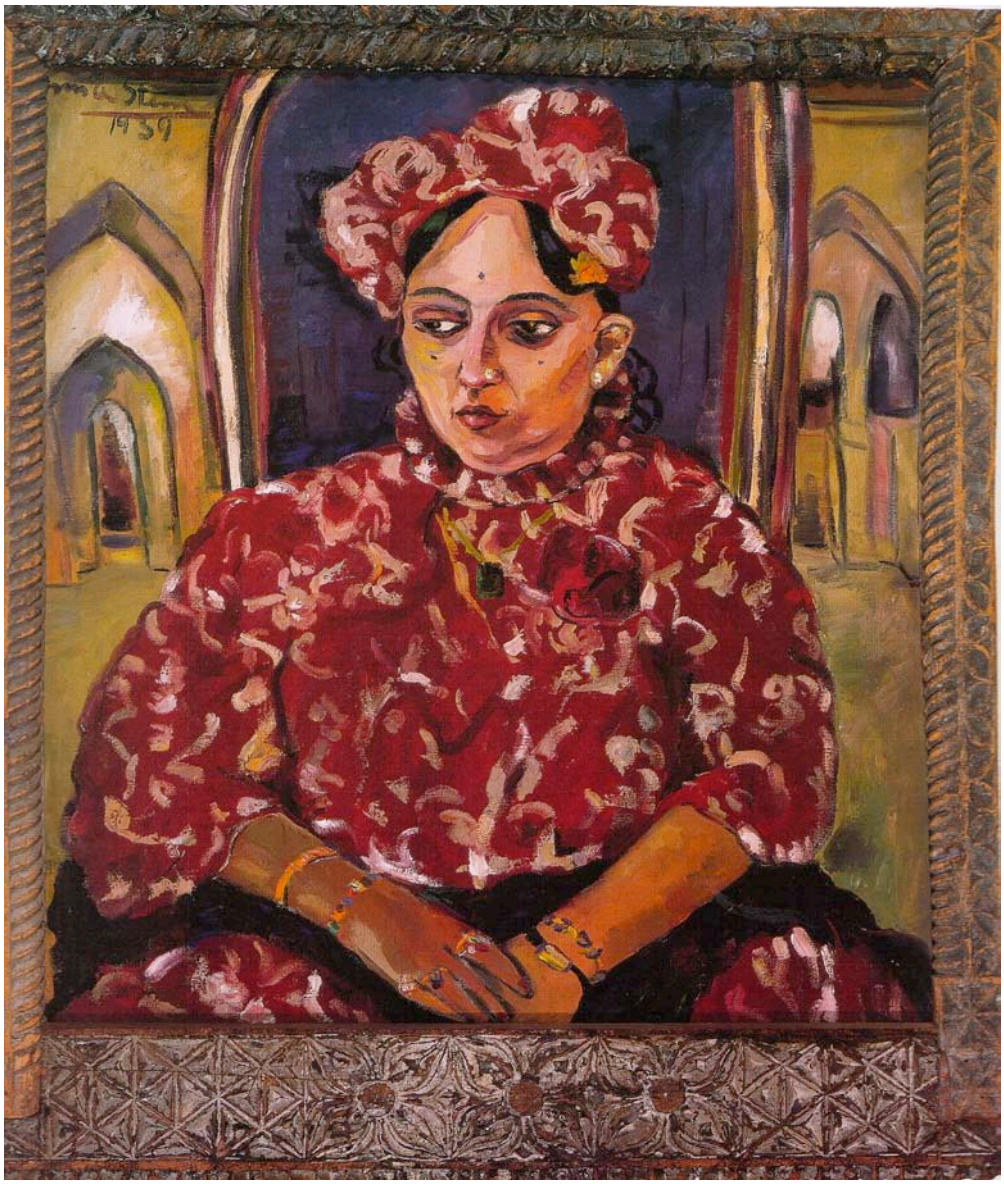

Figure 30. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Bibi Azzia Biata Jaffer* (1939) oil on canvas, 91,7 x 84,8 cm.

In this way Bibi Azzia Biata Jaffer's authority was largely symbolic and absent of any real power. Moreover, her status and role is defined according to male systems of patriarchy. Similarly, Stern, functioning within the British colonial patriarchal system painted portraits of subjects who were under colonial rule. These colonial hierarchical systems were predicated on racial and gender classifications of difference. Mathews' (1991: 427) deployment of Foucault's definition of power as descriptive of women artists is useful for an understanding of Stern's identity:

> By describing power as productive rather than simply repressive, he offers a possible means to understand how women artists…can at times duplicate patriarchal constructions of the feminine in their images. For Foucault, power does not exist in a monolithic, concentrated way. Instead, 'it acts upon [our] actions… It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier and more difficult.

Stern's depiction of women, colonial subjects and 'other' races conformed to existing patriarchal structures of power. By participating in these structures, Stern duplicated the already existing views of women as defined by male society both within colonial and colonised societies.

Congo

The Congo presents a more 'troubled' area of representation. Unveiling the iconography of Irma Stern's representation of her figurative subjects, a myriad of presuppositions, misrepresentations and stereotypical views need to be traversed in order to demystify the culturally and politically 'loaded' terrain that is the 'Congo'.

Perhaps best signified by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* 1902, in her interviews and writings, Stern expressed her own assumptions and prejudicial view that associated the Congo with a 'dark continent', that according to Stern (1943: 1) represented 'real' Africa:

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> The Congo has always been for me the symbol of Africa. The sound 'Congo' makes my blood dance, with the thrill of exotic excitement, it sounds to me like distant native drums and a heavy tropical river flowing, its water gurgling in mystic depths… the forest is green and luscious, the forest is endless like a green dream of Creation Day.

Viewing white civilisation as declining and its antithesis, the ethnic 'other', as culturally regenerating, Stern's association of the Congo with a 'dark continent', was important to her as a cultural marker of difference.

Associating the 'other' with the natural environment was an integral aspect of the nature culture dichotomy. Germane to this are Stern's writings and statements made in interviews that augment its representation in her paintings. Moreover, her writings and comments can be closely associated with the colonial comportment of the time where dominant derogatory views of other races were pervasive. As I have already shown, this was an important aspect for Stern to distinguish herself from the 'natives'. In the Congo, Stern's primary interest was to paint images of two ethnic groups, namely, the Mangbetu and the Watussi.

***Mangbetu Chief's Daughter* 1942**

In 1929, writer and filmmaker, Grace Flandrau, published an account of her visit to the village of Ekibondo that was, according to Schildkraut (cited in Phillips & Steiner 1999: 207), "increasingly becoming a magnet for tourists, photographers and filmmakers with the Mangbetu actively collaborating in the construction of images of themselves." According to Loomba (1998: 176), "The term 'ethnicity' has dominantly been used to indicate biologically and culturally stable identities, but Hall asks us to decouple it from it's imperial, racist or nationalist deployment and to appropriate it to designate identity as a constructed rather than a given essence." Having relevance for Stern's painterly representations of the Mangbetu, Stern (1943: 23) writes in her book *Congo*:

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> Here I was in the region of the Bakuba, the most artistically creative native race in the Congo, who only one-generation back had been man-eaters. It was strange to plunge right among so savage a tribe, and yet only 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 Africa in all its fear-ridden phantasy…

Stern's portrayal of the Mangbetu as 'noble savages' who evinced creative skills but were formerly cannibals, positions the 'primitive' tribe in relation to the 'civilised' and 'modern' art world in Europe. In her portrayal of the Mangbetu, Stern doesn't engage with the Mangbetu's 'construction of images of themselves', but, rather seeks to depict the Mangbetu as a 'given essence', thereby, reifying their 'biologically and culturally stable identities'. In so doing, Stern constructed a stereotype of the 'other' consistent with her view of the Congo as the 'symbol of Africa'.

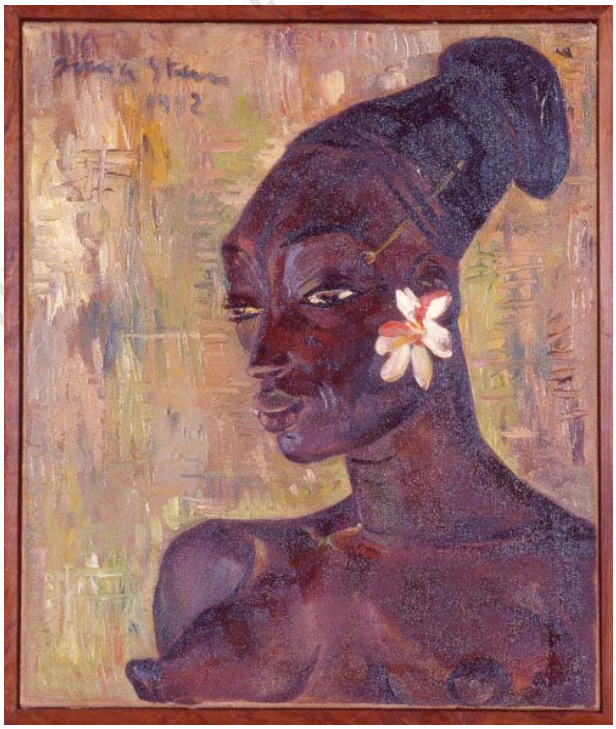

Figure 31. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Mangbetu Chief's Daughter* (1942) oil on canvas, 65,6 x 55 cm.

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The female figure depicted in *Mangbetu Chief's Daughter* 1942 (Fig. 31) is the central motif of the image. Her head and upper torso including her breasts are exposed, making her the focus of the viewers gaze. She wears a conical raffia headdress that appears to elongate the shape of the figure's head and enhance the aesthetic appeal and beauty of the wearer. The headdress was also a symbol of 'tribalism' and therefore 'primitivism', and, as shown in chapter one, due to the influence of westernisation, the practice of wrapping babies' heads to produce elongated features, ceased from the 1950s.

The woman wears a white flower in her ear. Since the woman depicted is young and beautiful, does the flower merely function as an item of adornment? Was it the sitter's choice to place the flower behind her ear or did Stern position it? Its presence becomes significant as it places the female figure in nature as an object of beauty rather than as a woman with consciousness and agency. Like the 'rare artistic taste' that the Mangbetu display, *Mangbetu Chief's Daughter* becomes an object of 'excitement and stimulation' for European eyes. The background of the image is an abstract field of green and flesh tone hues contrasted against the dark silhouette of the figure. The background is silent on the environment of the sitter and therefore implies a context of timelessness outside of history. For Stern, the significance of the sitter was the woman's beauty and her status as the Chief's daughter, suggesting a fetish of an imagined stereotype that fixes her racially and culturally.

Watussi Queen 1943

Travelling to the Fête Nationale at Kigali in 1942, Stern was able to paint a portrait of Queen Rosalie Gicanda. Recently married to His Royal Highness King Mwami Mutara III Rudahigwa, Stern (1943: 38) described her experience of the Queen:

> She casts down her languid eyes, closing her eyelids, which shine blue. On her brow she wears the symbol of the horns of the sacred cow. Two long shaped cream coloured bands are held on her forehead by little square beads. Her hair is a huge arrangement of black, just perfectly proportioned to the size of her long oval-shaped head. She purses her lips as the

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> Egyptians did. From beneath her long flowing robe her bare foot emerges. Never have I seen such beauty; it is like the black basalt foot of an Egyptian statue. It is expressive of a highly bred cultured ancient race. My chief desire is to paint the Queen.

Claiming to be descendents of whites, the Watussi, or Tutsi from Rwanda viewed themselves as a noble race in relation to other ethnic groups (Buckley-Zistel, 2006, p. 135). Mythologising the Watussi as an ancient race descending from North Africa was an important aspect of the colonial view of the 'other'. Attributed to a dominant colonial anthropological view of races who viewed the Watussi as more beautiful than other African tribes due to their elongated and refined features, Stern described the elegance and beauty of the Queen in relation to that of the Egyptians:

> The Europeans believed that some Tutsis had facial characteristics that were generally atypical of other Bantus. They sought to explain these purported divergent physical traits by postulating admixture with or partial descent from migrants of Caucasoid stock, who usually were said to have arrived in the Great Lakes region from the Horn of Africa and/or North Africa. Some Tutsi also believe they are descendants of the ancient Israelites and had a mystical connection to Israel (Tutsi, April 2012).

Stern's description of the Queen reinforces the dominant colonial anthropological view of races, whereby, reducing ethnicity to a single source of 'origins' was an attempt to establish a pure and noble race that was timeless and therefore without historical development. In this way, 'the white man's artifice [was] inscribed onto the black man's body'.

The figure depicted in *Watussi Queen* 1943 (Fig. 32) is elegant, graceful and feminine. In rendering the Queen's attire, her golden yellow shirt, flowing white wrap and headdress displaying two cream coloured bands, Stern conveyed her status as royalty. Moreover, indicative of her cultural ethnicity, her black hair is neatly coiffured in a beehive style. Around the Queen's neck hangs a red and black beaded necklace. Each of these items represents an 'ethnographic present' in which the Queen is 'fixed' as a fetish of colonial

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ambivalence. In a newspaper article (NCW News, 1954, p.8) Stern recounts her experience of the Congo and Watussi:

> The Congo drew me back, and back again. I felt like an explorer. The savagery of the landscape and the people, of snakes and wild birds, of tropical vegetation, of the tiny pygmies of the Bronze Age culture, the giant-like Watussi, a living relic of Neolithic culture, the snow-capped mountains of the equator, the slow moving Congo River – all this meant to me the life and beauty of Africa.

Irma Stern's imaginary 'primitivist' disposition finds expression in her statement above where ancient peoples, savages, mountains, animals and plants form part of a visual register that identifies 'primitive' cultures with nature. Exemplified in the embodiment of the Queen, Stern found an elegance and beauty in the Watussi.

Figure 32. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Watussi Queen* (1943) oil on canvas, 91,5 x 55 cm.

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However on her second painting trip to the Congo in 1946, Stern (Berman 2003: 104) writes, “The models… well maybe after Zanzibar are not quite as lovely – as the *outer* shell has ceased to interest me to that extent and an inner development of course – is quite beside the point. I find the Watussi – so far unbearable – the others more or less paintable.” As discussed in chapter one, instability in the Congo caused many of the indigenous peoples to seek political change and independence from the Belgian and French colonial authorities. For Stern, this embodied a disruption of the romantic ideal of ‘noble savages’ living in harmony with nature where the influence of western civilisation and political instability threatened her ‘primitivistic’ view of the ‘natives’ living in a timeless ‘idyll’ outside of historical development and change.

Critical Responses

How do we understand Stern’s politics, or lack thereof in the face of ideological, racial and systemic violence both in Germany and South Africa? With the rise of the Nazi party in Germany in 1933 and the advent of Apartheid in South Africa in 1948, periods during which Stern actively travelled in search of her exotic subjects.

In response to the rise of the National Party in South Africa, Braude (2011: 58) makes a claim for Stern’s fears and concerns of “Nazi-inspired Afrikaans nationalist anti-Semitism.” In a letter written to the Feldman’s in September 1949, “Stern referred generally to life under the changed political reality as, ‘unbearably poisoned through all the mental and social barricades’” and again “I am anxiously seeing what other hair raising news the papers bring and when the first word against the Jew strikes soil here” (Braude 2011: 58). In an earlier letter to the Feldman’s just prior to her departure for Zanzibar, Stern included in her letter a newspaper clipping from Die Burger, “Here a cutting from our Nazi paper” she proclaimed (Berman 2003: 87). Yet Stern was not a political artist or commentator. And perhaps her statement made in a letter to Trude Bosse after the Second World War, summarises her attitude and disposition toward outward ideology and politics:

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> I have buried the past that is why I have kept silent. One shudders when one thinks of a country, its culture, its well-disposed people, all in mass grave, hence my silence, Now you know. There is scarcely anything personal involved. Everything that comes from Germany is like a vanished age to me, like an echo from a sunken world (Schoeman 1994: 112).

Stern's artistic project was not political in any overt sense neither was her concern advocacy. As Alan Crump points out, "Stern, though always having leftist leanings, only partially embraced the political arm of socialism. Her art was political in…that it embraced and elevated a culture deemed inferior by the white minority, but she was never one to take up the cudgels in her art for a political cause" (cited in Braude June 2011: 49).

However, Richard Feldman, politically active in South Africa from 1943 as a member of the South African Labour Party and a long time friend of Irma's, wrote the following critical review of Stern's representation of black figurative subjects in 1935, just prior to Stern's departure for Zanzibar (cited in Arnold 1995: 73):

> The controversy over Irma Stern's work has centred mainly round her native studies. Few see the native as does Irma Stern, and so even the friendliest of her critics condemn it as 'highly idealised.' Irma Stern paints Africa's children as Africa created them not as the stranger sees them… No doubt they are idealised. They are 'idylls [sic] of the Black.' Yet, Irma Stern is no social artist. She is little concerned with the native away from his natural surroundings. She has not yet seen the proud Zulu as kitchen boy, the joyful Swazi broken in spirit as he emerges from the bowels of the earth, the mighty Basuto as a beast of burden. 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.

Portrayed as exotically romanticised stereotypes, Feldman articulates the key aspect around Stern's representation of her black figurative subjects. Although Stern travelled extensively

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in search of her subject matter and was prolific in her production, her artistic sensibility and imaginary 'primitivist' disposition ostensibly continued to manifest in her Zanzibar and Congo representations of the 'other.' Moreover, although depicting diversity in age, gender and social strata, her representations of black subjects "fix on the essentials of his [or her] ethnic and cultural character" (Sachs 1942: 52). In doing so, Stern's representations of the 'other' constitute fetishistic stereotypes of racial difference that establish a fixed opposition between the 'self' and the 'other' as exemplified in JanMohammed's 'Manichaean allegory'.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how this 'self and other' dialectic manifests in Stern's identity as a settler, Jew and woman as key aspects of the coloniser and colonised relationship. Stern was both an insider and an outsider, participating in and outside the conventions and colonial comportments of the time. As a settler and a Jew, Stern was the perpetual 'historical outsider' (Back & Solomos 2000: 241) persistently seeking an alternative to western 'civilisation' through a personal 'mythology' of the racial 'other' as 'primitive'. As a woman and as an artist, suffering from a poor self image that resulted in an 'unstable' identity, Stern's artistic disposition suggests colonial ambivalence as she projects her desires, fantasies and insecurities onto her black figurative subjects. In seeking to portray an idealised 'other', Dubow (1991: 104) states:

> Here she could escape from her ungainly body. Here, metaphorically, she could be naked amongst a host of graceful strangers. Here was the Other. For her this was more than a reflection of an idealised self; it was the confirmation of the Other within herself and the chance to define herself as an artist through it.

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Conclusion

Irma Stern's (1894-1966) search for an exotic idyll that lay outside of western 'civilisation' has resulted in some of the more provocative and contentious images of racial and cultural difference in South Africa. Developed through childhood memories and recollections, Stern's imaginary 'primitivist' disposition was inscribed in her early diaries. This 'primitivist' disposition flourished in Berlin under the mentorship of Max Pechstein and other Brücke artists who responded to the regenerating impulse that 'primitive' art and tribal objects provided them through the colonising process. Stern incorporated this 'primitivist' disposition in her self-identity, which manifested on her return to South Africa in 1920 where she rejected white colonial society in Cape Town in pursuit of an unspoilt 'primitive' utopia in Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland. With the advent of the Second World War and the ever-increasing influence of western 'civilisation' encroaching upon the local 'native' populations, Stern embarked on further afield journeys to exotic locations in search of her black figurative subjects. For Stern, the Congo represented the 'symbol of Africa' and Zanzibar a 'spiritual world' where 'exotic' and 'primitive' peoples lived in a timelessness outside of history. As a result, Stern depicted imaginary stereotypical fetishes of racial and cultural difference.

The aim of this dissertation has been to address a gap in the current literature on Irma Stern and her African periods: Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo (1922-1955) and to consider whether Stern's mature periods: Zanzibar and Congo (1939-1955) reveal an imaginary 'primitivist' mode of representation. The focus of my research has been on Stern's representation of black subjects from these periods. Integral to this research has been Stern's identity as a settler, woman and Jew that drew on the binary relation of coloniser and colonised, but also complicated it

Furthermore, drawing from primary research in the form of archival material (photographs, letters, notebooks), interviews, newspaper articles, Stern's writings and by analysing her

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production and reception from these periods, I have begun to fill a gap in the current literature on Stern's African periods. This factual and historical data was written up in chapter one of my dissertation and appears in parts throughout.

In addressing my aims, the empirical evidence drawn from my research offers a fuller understanding of Stern's African periods in the following ways:

Stern's imaginary 'primitivist' disposition while recognisable at childhood was developed under Max Pechstein's mentorship while Stern was actively participating in the German Expressionist movement in Berlin between 1912 and 1920. As I have shown, 'primitivism' provided a regenerating force within the Brücke movement in Germany that also drew from the German Romantic tradition. This fed into Stern's artistic sensibility where heightened emotions, romantic tendencies and visions all contributed toward her imaginary 'primitivist' disposition that sought a space outside of current politics.

Stern's German Expressionist style shows a progression from her earlier Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland paintings that register the formal and stylistic influences of Max Pechstein's Palau period, maturing later, with a fuller stylistic expression in her Zanzibar and Congo paintings. Similarly, the imaginary 'primitivist' iconography that manifests in her earlier Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland period paintings continued to manifest in her later mature Zanzibar and Congo period works.

Stern's painterly representations of the black body evoke fetishistic stereotypes of racial difference in which the 'other' is 'fixed' in a timeless 'primitivism'. Key to this is the nature of cultural dichotomy in which the 'other' is perceived to be in a primordial state outside of historical development. Although Stern depicted diversity in terms of age, gender, race and class, her representations were consistent with a visual trope in which the 'native' is portrayed as either idealised or debased as two aspects of a 'primitivist' view.

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In the self and other relationship of the coloniser and colonised, Stern's unstable identity as a woman, settler and Jew suggests the possibility of a projection of Stern's identity onto that of her black subjects. In some ways she may have identified with them, at least in the ways she perceived her subjects through her 'primitivist' sensibility. Such oppositions as Loomba (1998: 104) argues, "are crucial not only for creating images of the outsider but equally essential for constructing the insider, the (usually white European male) self." Hence, the west has historically defined itself by establishing a hegemonic framework in which 'others' are positioned as racially and culturally inferior.

The limitations of my research were largely determined by the scope and focus of my investigation. By using a 'primitivist' framework for inquiry into Stern's representations of black figurative subjects, I was able to draw out the key aspects of the 'self' and 'other' relationship that is foundational to her depictions of the racial 'other.' Moreover, it was important to trace the historical development of this 'primitivist' disposition through the Brücke group and Max Pechstein's influence - a contribution I hope this dissertation has made. I didn't address counter arguments or images to that of 'primitivist' discourse as they offer little in terms of altering my existing argument. The evidence available, largely from primary sources, substantially confirms my central research question.

In her pursuit of an exotic romanticism, Irma Stern was, in many ways, trapped in her own history (Mathews 1991: 427). A history entangled with an evolving modernity between Europe and Africa. While our current social and political views of race, class and gender infer an egalitarian and democratic understanding, it would be unproductive to dismiss Stern's images of the racial 'other' as pure negation. As Arnold (1995: 11) emphasises:

> Whilst her adoption of a modernist style gives her historical importance, she is still relevant to current debates on transculturalism. Like many other South African artists, black and white, past and present, Stern had to come to terms with different cultures, visual traditions and aesthetic values. At stake is not reconciliation of differences, but the problem of how to

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> express difference creatively so that it becomes a provocative attribute of meaning and not a discriminatory, judgmental factor.

Stern's African period paintings were produced in a particular time and under specific conditions. As such, they can be viewed as a 'deposit of social relations', registering the socio-cultural contexts of Swaziland, Zanzibar and the Congo, albeit, particularly subjective depictions thereof. Hence, Stern's paintings are valuable for scholarship where the issues of race and representation are central to debates in South Africa today. In conclusion, Lemke (cited in Nelson & Shiff 1996: 412) makes the following proposition:

> This investigation did not set out to discover grounds for a 'just politics'. But in disclosing a cross-cultural dialectic in which the socially marginalized have contributed to shaping the centre of modernism, we may have taken a step toward interrelating race, modernism and ethics.

What becomes apparent is that the 'voice' of the 'other', represented in Stern's painterly depictions of the black subject are absent. It is Stern's particular 'journey' that helps us reflect on the larger discourse of 'primitivism' and within it, gender, race and class dynamics in settler communities.

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Appendix 1: Chronology

1894 Irma Stern born to German-Jewish parents in Schweizer-Reneke, Transvaal, South Africa

1899 Second Anglo Boer War begins (1899-1902)

1900 Samuel Stern arrested and imprisoned by the British authorities during the second Anglo Boer War

1901 The Stern family depart for Germany as refugees

1903 Return to South Africa to either Wolmaransstad or Schweizer-Reneke

1904 Depart for Europe, settle in Berlin

1909 Irma Stern and her family return to the Transvaal, South Africa

1910 Family visits the Victoria Falls

Depart for Europe, settle in Berlin

Union of South Africa

1912 Irma Stern begins her art studies in Berlin

South African National Native Congress (SANNC) later ANC founded

1913 Irma Stern undertakes formal art studies in Weimar

August-December 1913 Stern visits South Africa

Natives Land Act passed

1914 The beginning of the First World War (1914-1918)

1915 Carl Einstein publishes *Negerplastik*

1916 Irma Stern paints *The Eternal Child*

1917 Irma Stern's friendship with Max Pechstein begins

1918 Irma Stern exhibits two paintings on the *Freie Secession* exhibition in Berlin

9 November revolution in Berlin

Irma Stern attends the founding meeting of the *Novembergruppe* in Berlin

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1919 Irma Stern holds a solo exhibition at the Fritz Gurlitt Galerie in Berlin

Irma Stern begins her journal: *Paradise* (1919-1924)

1920 Exhibits for a second time at the *Freie Secession*

Stern's print portfolios are published: *Visionen* and *Dumela Morena*

Irma Stern and her family return to South Africa and settle in Cape Town

1922 Irma Stern holds her first solo exhibition in Cape Town at Asbey's Gallery titled: *An exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern*

Irma Stern travels to Umgababa on the Natal south coast

1923 Irma Stern writes *Umgababa Buch* (Book)

1924 Stern travels to Zululand and Natal

Exhibits at the Empire Exhibition, Wembley, London

1925 Stern travels to Swaziland

Afrikaans becomes an official language

1926 Stern travels to Swaziland and Zululand

Stern exhibits in Johannesburg and Bloemfontein

1 April, marries Johannes Prinz

1927 Max Osborn's monograph on Irma Stern is published

Stern travels to Swaziland

Irma Stern acquires The Firs, in Rosebank, Cape Town

Stern exhibits in Berlin, Breslau and Paris

1928 Exhibits in Brussels

1929 Stern travels to Pondoland

Exhibits in Cape Town, Frankfurt, Hannover, Vienna and Paris

1930 Exhibits in Amsterdam and the Hague

1931 Stern visits Madeira producing a body of work known as her Madeira Period

1933 Hitler appointed German Reichs Chancellor

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Irma Stern ceases to speak or communicate in German

Stern ends her correspondence with Trude Bosse (1917-1933)

1934 6 March, Stern divorces Johannes Prinz

1935 Stern exhibits in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town

1936 Stern exhibits in Johannesburg and Cape Town

Starts making sculptures

1937 Stern exhibits in Cape Town, London and the Hague

1938 Stern travels to Dakar

Stern exhibits in Cape Town

1939 Stern travels to Zanzibar in June for a period of four months

Beginning of the Second World War (1939-1945)

1940 Stern exhibits in Johannesburg and Cape Town

1941 Stern exhibits in Johannesburg

1942 Stern travels to the Congo

Stern exhibits in Elizabethville (Congo), Johannesburg and Cape Town

Joseph Sachs monograph *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa* published

1943 *Congo* published

Exhibits in Johannesburg and Cape Town

1944 Exhibits in Johannesburg and Cape Town

Henny Stern dies

1945 Stern travels to Zanzibar

1946 Stern travels to the Congo for a three-month painting tour of Lake Kivu

Exhibits in Johannesburg and Cape Town

1947 Exhibits in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Paris, Rotterdam, London and Brussels

1948 Exhibits in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria, Paris and the Venice Biennale

Zanzibar published

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	Beginning of Apartheid as the National Government's policy of racial segregation
	Exhibition of Contemporary South African Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture opens at the Tate Gallery, London
1949	Exhibits in Cape Town
	Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act
1950	Participates in the Venice Biennale
	Visits Picasso
1955	Stern travels to the Congo
	Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress of the People
1957	Retrospective exhibition in Cape Town
	Exhibits on the Sao Paulo Biennale
1958	Participates in the Venice Biennale
1959	Awarded the Molteno Prize
1960	Receives the Regional Award of the Peggy Guggenheim International Art Prize
	ANC banned
	State of Emergency declared
	White referendum on establishment of a republic
1963	Awarded the Oppenheimer Trust Award at Art SA Today
1965	The Medal of Honour bestowed on Irma Stern by the SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns
1966	Retrospective exhibition held in Cape Town
	Verwoerd assassinated, B.J. Vorster becomes Prime Minister
	Irma Stern dies on 23 August in Cape Town

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