

**Irma Stern (1894-1966), the Creation of an Artist's Reputation
in her Lifetime and Posthumously, 1920-2013**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the reception of the artist, Irma Stern, from 1920 until 2013. Irma Stern has, since her lifetime, been one of South Africa's most celebrated artists. She has received a great deal of scholarly attention, attention in the popular press and on-going recognition in the market place. Through an evaluation of press clippings, literature, archival material (photographs, the minutes of meetings and letters) and market results, this study questions how Stern has come to assume such a privileged position, why she is of such scholarly interest and how she is valued in the market.

The impact of different variables on Stern's reception – including social, political and intellectual factors – is investigated. It is proposed that, initially, the artist actively promoted herself, thus playing an important role in establishing her fame. However, her reputation has been built over time and what emerges as important is that audiences have approached and interpreted Stern differently at different times. During the artist's lifetime she was admired for her perceived ability to capture the 'spirit of Africa', apparently evident in her paintings of those culturally different from her. These paintings – of black African, Indian, coloured and Arab subjects – have remained an integral aspect of the artist's reputation and they are at the centre of much of the scholarly debate on the artist in the 1990s and 2000s. Stern has provided rich material for writers at different times and of different ideological positions – from colonial to postcolonial discourse and feminist studies.

Also relevant to Stern's sustained reputation is the international recognition the artist has received. Stern's links to German Expressionism and recognition from foreign scholars and institutions served to legitimate the artist to a South African audience in her lifetime and posthumously. Moreover, the market has had an impact on Stern's reputation. While she was commercially successful in her lifetime, in the early 2000s her market values exceeded those of earlier periods and surpassed those of other twentieth-century South African artists. As a result, Stern's reputation in the 2000s is linked to her high market values; this dissertation closely investigates some of the factors that have influenced this market value.

In conclusion, this dissertation fills a gap in the literature because it 1) analyses the artist's market and 2) provides an in-depth investigation of the development of the artist's reputation. A study in reception, it does not add to the already plentiful appraisals of the artist's work but considers instead how this work has fared within the context of the academic, popular and commercial art world.

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the conditions surrounding and factors affecting the reception of the artist Irma Stern (1894-1966). Stern has maintained a constant presence in the South African art market and in its canon from her lifetime to the present. She was a prolific artist holding over one hundred exhibitions and her works are today accessible through their inclusion in numerous public and corporate collections as well as through their display in the Irma Stern Museum in Rosebank, Cape Town.¹ The artist has, since her lifetime, also been the subject of many books, conference papers, journal and catalogue essays and innumerable newspaper articles. Moreover, Stern has received on-going recognition in the art market. Initially enjoying commercial success in her lifetime, in recent years Stern has come to dominate the South African art market. Her works have regularly sold at auction with a number of important records being set in the 2000s. Most notably, *Arab Priest* (1945) sold for £2.7 million (R30 320 000.00) at Bonhams auction house in London in 2011.² This remains the highest price paid for a Stern but what is significant is that her acknowledgement in the art market is greater than that of other early twentieth-century South African artists. J.H Pierneef (1886-1957) and Maggie Laubser (1886-1973) were, for example (in 2013), ranked directly below Stern in terms of auction value. Their records were, however, considerably lower, Pierneef's being £720 thousand (R11 160 000.00) and Laubser's R4 million.³

The acknowledgement of Stern by the current art market and her enduring acknowledgement in critical writing is the subject of this study on reception. I question how Stern has come to assume such a privileged position, why she is so appreciated in the market and why the artist is at the centre of so much scholarly debate. This dissertation will consider the artist's reputation in South Africa in her life and posthumously, from when the young artist arrived in Cape Town – returning from Germany – in 1920, until 2013. An investigation of this extensive period will aim to draw attention to many of the variables, including social, political and intellectual factors that have impacted on the artist's reputation. It will highlight the variety of ways that Stern has been understood and in so doing reveal the mutability of art history.

This study is based on the premise that different audiences – at different times – find different values in the same artworks and that these may differ enormously from anything envisaged by the artist. The insecurity of meaning is of course today not an unfamiliar idea. Indeed, a

¹ According to Alexander (1968:8) "Stern held one hundred and one one man shows".

² The hammer price, before the addition of auction house commissions or any taxes, is always used. When an artwork is sold in a currency other than Rands the Rand price as per the exchange on the day of the auction is given in brackets.

³ Stern's prices relative to other artists are assessed in more detail in chapter five. However, auction records up until the end of 2013 show that Pierneef's *The Baobab Tree* sold for £720 thousand (R11 160 000.00) in 2008 and Laubser's *Mother and Child* (1924) for R4 million in 2006.

variety of approaches including semiotics, hermeneutic theory, reception theory and the work of theorists associated with post-structuralist thought such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have questioned pure authorial intention and made the point that meanings are not secure but in a constant state of evolution. Each approach and theorist offers a different hypothesis as to how and why meanings shift and while I do not draw upon all approaches some of the ideas found in hermeneutic theory and the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) have been useful.

Contemporary hermeneutician and German philosopher, Gadamer, maintained that the interpretation of and meaning attributed to a text is ever changing. In his work *Truth and Method* first published in 1960 Gadamer argued that literature (or art) goes beyond the intentions of the creator and can be understood in ways very different to their original intentions.⁴ An artwork will take on different meanings over time and this is because, to Gadamer, understanding is developed from the interpreter's viewpoint. One's worldview influences the ways in which an artwork is understood and the work thus takes on different meanings in different cultures and time periods (D'Alleva, 2005:124-127; Wolff, 1984:99-103).

For Gadamer interpretation cannot be completely objective, rather it is what he called 'a fusion of horizons'. The contemporary interpreter cannot recreate the original conditions of reception or the artist's intentions. Both interpreter and artist are bound to their own cultural, social and intellectual horizons. The interpretation of a work, for Gadamer, is thus a process or dialogue where each new interpreter needs to shift his or her horizon to include the work's horizon. Both horizons change and interpretation is an interactive process where the interpreter projects preconceived ideas onto a work but should ideally review them in light of their actual contact with the work. In this way new interpretations are continually developed (D'Alleva, 2005:124-127; Wolff, 1984:99-103). Gadamer's theory acknowledges as inevitable the interpreter's prejudices and views interpretation as an on-going process. In his words, "the work of art is one with the history of its effects" (Gadamer, 1989:477).

Hermeneutic theory allows a view of the changes in Stern's reception in light of the idea that interpretation is constantly in a state of flux and that each interpreter will bring their own values to their reading of the artist and her work. This dissertation, however, provides a very practical account of how Stern's reputation has been built and maintained, and the writing of art historians who have studied the reception of specific periods and artists was helpful in developing my approach. Here books including Gerald Reitlinger's (1960) *The Economics of Taste Vol. 1: The Rise and Fall of Picture Prices 1760-1960* and Frances Haskell's (1976) *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France* have been useful. So too have a number of publications including Emma Barker's (1999)

⁴ *Truth and Method* was first published in German in 1960. It has also been published twice in English. In 1979 *Truth and Method* was translated by William Glen-Daepel (published by Sheed and Ward) and in 1989 by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (published by Crossroad).

'The Making of a Canonical Artist: Vermeer', Frances Suzman Jowell's (1974, 1990) 'Thoré-Bürger and the Revival of Frans Hals' and 'The Rediscovery of Frans Hals', Michael Levey's (1960) 'Botticelli and Nineteenth-Century England' and Stanley Meltzoff's (1942) 'The Rediscovery of Vermeer'.

Within these authors' writings there are many examples of changes in artist's reputations, particularly in the nineteenth century.⁵ At this time artists such as the Italian artists Sandro Botticelli (c.1445-1510), Piero della Francesca (c.1415-1492) and Caravaggio (1593-1610), the seventeenth-century Dutch artists Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) and Frans Hals (c. 1580-1666) and the seventeenth-century French, Le Nain brothers, Louis (1595-1648), Antoine (c.1599-1648) and Mathieu (1607-1677) underwent dramatic revivals of reputation. These artists are not the focus of this dissertation but by reviewing historical examples of shifting artists' reputations I was able to examine how different variables influence reception. It is thus worthwhile to briefly elaborate on some of the factors that contributed to their receptions. By drawing on the cases of Vermeer and Hals and, to a lesser extent, Botticelli, a number of significant variables were highlighted.

Botticelli can today be considered a household name but there was little mention of the artist between his death and the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, by the end of the century he had undergone a substantial revival and between 1900 and 1920 there were more books published on Botticelli than any other painter (Levey, 1960:291). His rise in popularity can be viewed as a result of many different factors but of particular significance was a shift in what was viewed as valuable in his art. In the mid-nineteenth century, Botticelli's Early Renaissance paintings seemed obscure oddities, very different from the work of High Renaissance artists such as Da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo. Formal elements in the artist's work such as his lack of three-dimensional realism were viewed as deficiencies (Levey, 1960:305). Moreover, his pagan images caused uneasiness for many viewers (Levey, 1960:299).

However, in the late nineteenth century a new intellectual development, the Aesthetic Movement, freed Botticelli from these prejudices. The Oxford don, writer and Aesthete Walter Pater (1839-1894) played an important role in reframing the artist and can be viewed as a 'tastemaker' in Botticelli's narrative. Pater was an influential figure within the Aesthetic Movement. Against overtly social and political meaning in art the Aesthetes' concern was with beauty and emotion (Wollheim, 2007). They emphasised beauty for the sake of creating the most intense emotional response and their idea of beauty emphasised formal elements such as line and pattern over the established realism found in academic circles. Within this

⁵ The nineteenth century provides particularly strong examples of changes in reputations. It was a time that "witnessed much 'knocking down and putting up' – a startling series of revelations of the art of the past that have affected our appreciation and understanding to this day" (Haskell, 1980:21). For an in-depth study of 'rediscoveries' at this time see Francis Haskell's (1980) *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France*.

context, formal elements such as Botticelli's lack of three-dimensional realism could be considered to be what made the works beautiful (Levey, 1960:305).

Pater was a "professed pagan" although he also celebrated Christian ceremony: he "inhaled, with voluptuous pleasure, the incense of High Anglican ceremonial" (Clark, 1971:11) and his concept of Botticelli fitted into themes which were prevalent in much of his work, "the duality of Christianity and Paganism" (Levey, 1960:302). In his essay 'Sandro Botticelli', first published in 1870 in *The Fortnightly Review*, Pater found his uncommitted religious position mirrored in Botticelli's Madonnas, "although she holds in her hands the 'Desire of all nations', she too is one of those who is neither for Jehovah or for His enemies" (Pater, 1912:74). What is more, Pater found great appeal in what had been regarded as Botticelli's "peculiar character" (Pater, 1912:76). The author's appreciation for 'sadness' and 'melancholy' evidenced in the description: "[Botticelli] paints the story of the goddess of pleasure.....but never without some shadow of death in the grey flesh and wan flowers" (Pater, 1912:76). To Pater the Botticelli spectator experienced the "peculiar quality of pleasure which we cannot get elsewhere" because Botticelli's works in their melancholy, conveyed something of "the true complexion of humanity" (Pater, 1912:76-77). Pater's appreciation for Botticelli's work thus facilitated a re-interpretation of the artist and greatly contributed to the growth in his popularity.

Vermeer and Hals are also today widely regarded as canonical artists. They were well-known and respected in their lifetimes but fell into relative obscurity after their deaths. Their current reputations were only established towards the end of the nineteenth century. Again, this can be attributed to a complex set of variables, but a number stand out as particularly important. Their revival can be viewed as arising from a Europe-wide increase in the appreciation for Northern art and Dutch art in particular, which had begun as early as the mid-eighteenth century (Meltzoff, 1942:145). This developing taste in Dutch art can be considered as being tied to political changes. There was a gradual shift towards progressive, democratic values in Europe and Dutch genre painting, then considered as depicting 'ordinary' people and accessible to ordinary people, could be aligned with these values.⁶

The French art historian and political journalist Théophile Thoré (1807-1869) also acted as a catalyst for the widespread increase in interest towards both artists and can be viewed as an important tastemaker. Thoré promoted Dutch art and artists and this was tied to his personal political ideals. He was a liberal thinker and his left wing politics ultimately earned him exile from France in the period 1848-1859 – during which time he travelled to England, Switzerland, Belgium and Holland. For the period of his exile Thoré could not keep up with

⁶ The word genre has two meanings, which are used within this dissertation. Firstly, genre can refer to the class or category of art such as landscape, still-life or portraits and secondly to a specific category depicting ordinary domestic scenes. It is the later definition which is applicable here.

French contemporary painting and he turned his attention to Dutch painting.⁷ He acted as a campaigner for Vermeer and Hals and wrote extensively on the artists. It was of course important for Thoré that there existed an audience that shared his democratic values. This meant that they could be receptive to his ideas. Moreover, Thoré was already a respected art historian and his writing was included in reputable publications. His research on Vermeer and Hals was, for example, published in the respected *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1866 and 1868 respectively – giving further credibility to his ideas.

Also significant for Vermeer's reputation in the nineteenth century were new styles in contemporary painting. Stanley Meltzoff (1942:146) has noted that the rediscovery of Vermeer occurred, "at a point when his style approximated that of the early Impressionists, who were at the same time late Realists". Meltzoff suggested that the similarity aided in the development of a new appreciation for Vermeer and Emma Barker further considered this argument. Barker said that, in the nineteenth century, Thoré viewed Vermeer as a forerunner to artists such as Courbet; "an ancestor of artists in love with nature, of those who understand and express it in all its appealing sincerity" (Thoré, 1819 cited in Barker, 1999:210). Barker (1999:211) argued that "this characterization of Vermeer as a peculiarly modern artist" can be considered to have "made it possible to admire aspects of his art that could otherwise have presented problems".

By today's standards Vermeer's painting may be viewed as highly realistic but Barker used texts from the time when Vermeer was becoming well-known to show that his style was then viewed as unusual. In an analysis of *View of Delft* (c. 1660-1661) Maxime du Camp (1857 cited in Barker, 1999:211) said that the work was "painted with a vigour, a solidity, a strength of impasto rare in Dutch landscape painters". Thoré (1819 cited in Barker, 1999:211) noted that Vermeer "pushed the impasto to an exaggerated degree such as we occasionally find today with Monsieur Decamps" and Charles Blanc (1860-3 cited in Barker, 1999:212) described the painting as "crude, the impasto brutal". Referring to *The Milkmaid* (c. 1660) Blanc (1860-3 cited in Barker, 1999:212) continued that "you find nothing similar in other schools, unless it is in France among our modern realists. Courbet, Leleux and Bonvin, for example, often pursue similar effects". These texts indicate that a nineteenth-century audience found difficulties with Vermeer's approach. Indeed, his work was very different from the "minute detail and highly polished surfaces" (Barker, 1999:212) of Dutch genre painters, popular at the time, such as Gabriël Metsu (1629-1667) and Frans van Mieris (1635-1681). What is significant is that writers (Thoré and Blanc) looked to artists of their own day in order to understand Vermeer. This suggests that new developments in contemporary painting "could have fostered appreciation of [Vermeer's] exceptional qualities" (Barker, 1999:212).

Finally, once Vermeer and Hals had undergone reappraisals their market values also increased. According to Reitlinger (1982) real market interest in both artists only really began

⁷ In exile Thoré wrote using the pseudonym William Bürger (Barker, 1999:206).

in the mid-1870s.⁸ This was after Thoré's reappraisals of 1866 and 1868 and does suggest that there was a direct relationship between critical reappraisal and increased market value. It is, however, important to note that the market must also be receptive to or 'need' a reappraisal. The French art dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun (1748-1813) had, for example, already promoted the 'rediscovery' of unknown artists during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He spoke highly of Vermeer but this did not lead to a revival or increased market values. There may be many reasons why a large-scale revival did not occur at this point but it has been suggested that one reason for this was that there was no need for the market to seek out new artists. Haskell (1980:37) summed this up in a question, "Why buy a Vermeer when a Metsu is available?" There was, in the early nineteenth century, also an interest developing in early Italian artists such as Botticelli, but it too did not grow into a large-scale revival. Of this Haskell (1980:38) asked, "Who wants a Masaccio or a Botticelli when a Guido Reni can be had for the asking?" Haskell (1980:38) continued that many artworks were removed from "time-hallowed sanctuaries" as a result of the wars and invasions that followed the French Revolution. The implication is that this resulted in an increased supply of artworks in the market. It may today seem odd to favour Metsu or Reni over Vermeer or Botticelli. However, in the early nineteenth century there existed a greater appreciation for these artists and a steady supply of their works slowed down the urgency to look to other artists for new 'stock'.

In the above reception studies it is important that there was a coming together of influential events at the same point in time. They show that innumerable factors influence artists' reputations; a number of areas, however, stand out. Shifts in the area of 'ideas and ideology' have played a substantial role. Here changes in an intellectual movement, politics or an attitude to a country have had implications for how artists were valued. The importance of specific individuals can, however, not be underestimated and writers and historians such as Thoré and Pater played an important part in changing the ways in which artists were understood. These individuals can be considered 'tastemakers'. The audience has also been important because they need to be receptive to the tastemakers' ideas. Moreover, the practising art world has an influence and has promoted artists from the past whose styles and ideas have resonated with their own. Lastly, the art market has played a role, supporting previously unvalued artists when in need of new 'stock' or artists to market.

The reverence today enjoyed by artists such as Vermeer, Hals and Botticelli can, of course, also be attributed to the high quality of their art but reception studies show that an artist's fame is not necessarily determined by aesthetic excellence. This observation, together with the influential factors noted above, is important for my study. Returning to Stern, it must be noted that the cases of artists such as Vermeer, Hals and Botticelli are chronologically remote from the story of Stern's reception. Moreover, Vermeer, Hals and Botticelli went from being

⁸ For a breakdown of the increases in prices see Reitlinger (1982) as follows; Vermeer, pp.140-141 and 483-484 and Hals, pp. 141-142 and 336-338.

almost unknown to highly respected in the canon of Western art. Stern has been well-known in South Africa since her lifetime, although criteria by which her work is valued have shifted. There are many artists who, like Stern, maintained fame over time. Examples include Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and more recently Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Andy Warhol (1928-1987). In South Africa Walter Battiss (1906-1982) and Maggie Laubser have both been relatively well-known in the country since their lifetimes. What is important about the examples used is that there is a great deal of research and writing on them. This allows them to be reviewed. Because the changes in reputation were so large, they also serve to effectively highlight variables that can influence reception. Of course, different reception studies may have highlighted different areas of influence. It was, within the parameters of this dissertation, not possible to look at all reception studies. Those selected can, however, be viewed as good examples because they have been thoroughly researched and reveal a great deal about the mechanisms of reception. They show that the same artist and artwork can be understood in very different ways at different times. This observation together with the above noted over-arching areas of influence - 'ideas and ideology', tastemakers, the audience, the practising art world, and the art market have informed and guided my approach.

Sources

In my research I have undertaken an extensive analysis of reviews and articles in the popular press in South Africa. Stern's scrapbooks housed at the National Library of South Africa were particularly useful for assessing her reception in her lifetime. To add to this, press clippings in the Iziko Art Collections Library and on SA Media – a press cutting service indexed online from 1978 to the present – were used. Published literature on Stern, including books dedicated to the artist, exhibition catalogues and journal articles were also assessed. It must be noted that not all texts on Stern are analysed. Rather, those viewed as dominant narratives and those key to new views of the artist are used. Moreover, a number of general reference books on South African art were consulted as they included important literature on Stern and provided insights into the South African art world. Esmé Berman's (1970, 1975, 1993b) books on South African art were drawn on extensively. Alexander and Cohen's (1990) *150 South African Paintings: Past and Present* was also useful, as were a number of chapters in the recently published *Visual Century: South African Art in Context* (Pissarra et al., 2011). In South Africa Stern has been written about in the popular press and general reference books in English and Afrikaans. The majority of material is in English and this study has drawn primarily from English sources. More analysis of Afrikaans-language material would have added an additional layer of evidence to the study.

In researching the impact of Stern's own collections, her home and the development of the Irma Stern Museum on the artist's reputation, I made several visits to the University of Cape Town's Administrative Archives. Images of the artist's home in Stern's archives (MSC 31) at

the National Library were also assessed, as was archival material at The Irma Stern Museum. Additionally I met the Director of the Irma Stern Museum on a number of occasions in order to gain his insights into changes at the Museum. I have also drawn on material produced by the market, including auction catalogues and press releases. Sales prices published by the auction houses Strauss & Co, Stephan Welz and Co. and Bonhams have been consulted, but when analysing market results I have largely drawn on results as published in the online database, Artprice.com.⁹

Literature on Stern

There has been a great deal of writing on Stern. The artist began her career in Germany training and exhibiting there between 1912 and 1920 and much early writing was thus produced outside of South Africa.¹⁰ Stern was included in a North American publication when mention was made of her in Alain Locke's 1925 essay, 'The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts' (first published in, *The New Negro*).¹¹ The following year, in 1926, a scholarly analysis on Stern was published by an Austrian critic, Josef Kalmer, in his article, 'Die Malerin Irma Stern' in the *Menorah* – a journal dedicated to promoting Jewish literature and art. The first monograph on Stern appeared in 1927 when German critic, Max Osborn published *Irma Stern* as a part of the *Junge Kunst* series. Osborn's publication is discussed in chapter one and illustrates that Stern's recognition in Europe was important to a South African audience. In 1942 Joseph Sachs was the first South African writer to publish on Stern. His book, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*, along with Stern's own publications documenting her travels – *Congo* (1943) and *Zanzibar* (1948) – are analysed in chapter two.

There was little new published on Stern in the 1950s and 1960s but the artist died in 1966 and the early 1970s produced some new writing on her. Esmé Berman's entries on Stern in her 1970, *Art and Artists of South Africa: An Illustrated Biographical Dictionary and Historical Survey of Painters & Graphic Artists since 1875* and 1975, *The Story of South African Painting* and Neville Dubow's monograph *Irma Stern* published in 1974 were the first texts to record the artist's entire career. These publications are considered in chapter three.

There was again little new writing on Stern in the 1980s but in the 1990s and early 2000s studies offering new information and views on her art and life proliferated. In 1991 Neville

⁹ Artprice.com is a subscription based website which supplies art market information and publishes auction results.

¹⁰ Stern's diary entries indicate that she first started art school in Berlin in 1912 and continued to train and exhibit in Germany until her return to Cape Town, South Africa in 1920 (Schoeman, 1994:44-64).

¹¹ Walker (2015b:3) notes that while Locke referred to Elaine Stern, he "is almost certainly referring to Irma Stern".

Dubow published *Paradise: The Journal and Letters (1917-1933) of Irma Stern*. The book included Stern's posthumously discovered journal and letters and a commentary by Dubow, offering insight into the artist's formative years. Also addressing the artist's formative years, in 1994, Karel Schoeman published *Irma Stern: The Early Years, 1894-1933*, a detailed biography on Stern up until 1933. The book provided important new research into the artist's life but did not offer an analysis of her work.

In the 1990s and 2000s the art historian Marion Arnold produced a number of publications analysing Stern's art and life. In 1995 she published *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye* a lavishly illustrated book including images of numerous artworks especially from private collections. The book included biographical information and analysed Stern's work by genre. Arnold positioned Stern as a woman artist and again drew on her identity as a woman in articles in the 1996 publication *Women and Art in South Africa* and the 2005 publication *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*. Also drawing on Stern's identity as a woman, German art historian Irene Below undertook new research in the 1990s. In 1996 she wrote the exhibition catalogue *Irma Stern und der Expressionismus: Afrika und Europa*, together with co-curator Jutta Huselwig-Johnen. Below analysed Stern within the context of feminism and postcolonialism, placing an emphasis on a feminist perspective.

In the 2000s focused articles and exhibition catalogues have also addressed the artist. In her article, 'Irma Stern: Envisioning the "Exotic"' (2000), Marilyn Wyman criticised Stern from a feminist perspective and argued that she painted an 'exoticised other'. In 2008 Andrea Lewis studied the artist's connection to German Expressionism in the exhibition catalogue *Journeys to the Interior: Unseen Works by Irma Stern, 1929-1939* and in 2009, Claudia Braude considered the political nature of Stern's work in the article 'Beyond Black and White: Rethinking Irma Stern'. The most substantial research in recent years was, however, undertaken by LaNitra Walker in 2009. In her doctoral dissertation Walker viewed Stern as politically astute and argued that the artist built her career in apartheid South Africa through successfully using both aesthetics and politics. Many of the above authors also contributed to the exhibition catalogue *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey* in 2003 and selected catalogue essays, together with many of the above texts, are examined in chapter four.¹²

These previous studies have largely focused on biography and analysis of Stern's art and life, often offering new ways in which to interpret the artist and her work. This dissertation, however, differs from previous literature in that it is primarily concerned with the artist's reputation. Its aim is not to assess whether or not she deserves the recognition she has

¹² *Expressions of a Journey* was an impressive show of Stern's work and the catalogue including writing by Elza Miles, Wilhelm van Rensburg, Irene Below, Marion Arnold, Neville Dubow and Alan Crump. However, only Dubow, Arnold and Below can be considered key contributors to the greater literature on Stern. They have all published extensively on the artist and it is their catalogue essays that have been assessed in this study on reception.

received. It is also not to analyse the quality of Stern's art or offer new interpretations of her art and life. The focus is rather on taking a dispassionate position and investigating the ways in which the artist has been valued and understood at different times.

In 2003 Marion Arnold contributed an essay, 'Irma Stern: A Reputation in Print' to the *Expressions* catalogue. The essay bears some similarity to this study in that it is an explicit assessment of the artist's reputation. Arnold discussed how Stern worked to develop her own reputation and noted that, since Stern's death, art historians have approached the artist from different angles. The text is a valuable introduction to how Stern's reputation has been made. It is, however, a very brief (four page) catalogue essay and does not cover the topic in depth. This dissertation reviews a longer period. It also assesses the popular press and academic writing in detail and investigates the impact of shifts in art history and in the broader environment. In chapter five, the market in the 2000s is also analysed and the substantial growth in Stern's prices is viewed as important to her reputation in this period. In her dissertation, Walker (2009:11) noted that, "In recent years, Stern's work has increased in value in the international art market." While the author briefly addressed Stern's prices she also argued that "a lengthier study of sales of Stern paintings is necessary" (Walker, 2009:11). Indeed, since this time articles written by Claudia Braude (2011) and Federico Freschi (2012) have addressed the sale of Stern paintings. Both articles specifically question the market's motivations for valuing Stern. While addressing the market's motivation, chapter five of this dissertation also offers a broader account of how Stern has come to be valued in the market in this period. The dissertation thus contributes to the literature on Stern by investigating the development of her reputation and adding to the literature on the artist's market.

Key texts

While reception studies have guided my approach, a number of other texts have also been important. Brandon Taylor's chapter 'Managing 'Modern Foreign' Art: An Extension at the Tate Gallery' (Taylor, 1999) provides an account of how the British were influenced by modern French art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the early twentieth century South Africa looked to British modern art and Taylor showed that by looking to Britain, South Africa was in turn influenced by French modern art. I draw on Taylor's text in chapter one and it is important because it shows that Stern's German modern art was largely unfamiliar to a local audience. A large portion of chapter three departs from an analysis of texts in order to consider Stern's personal collections and her home (now the Irma Stern Museum) and how these have impacted on the ways in which the artist is understood. Here, I am indebted to Rosemary Matthews' article 'Collectors and Why they Collect: Isabella Stewart Gardner and her Museum of Art' (Matthews, 2009). Matthews gives an account of Isabella

Stewart Gardner's collecting practices and her text is useful in understanding how collectors' deepest impulses can be reflected in their collections.

Art criticism has undergone significant shifts in the period of this study and in chapter four the impact of postcolonial criticism on Stern in the 1990s is considered. Linda Nochlin's text 'The Imaginary Orient' (Nochlin, 1989) provides an analysis critical of the colonial worldview of the 'other' and is helpful in understanding postcolonial criticism of Stern. In considering the various factors or variables that may affect the reception of an artist, I have also consulted texts that are specifically concerned with the art market and the construction of exchange value and systems of valuation. Robert Hughes' article 'Art and Money' (Hughes, 1984) gives important insight into how recent a phenomenon is the idea of investing in art and I argue that this shift in thinking laid the foundation for Stern to be viewed as a sound investment in the 2000s. To add to this Michael Carter and Adam Geczy's 'The Work of Art as Commodity' (Carter & Geczy, 2006) has been useful in evaluating the criteria for valuing art as have Michael Stevenson's study *The Art Market, its Intermediaries and the Components of Value of Art Works in an Historical Perspective* (Stevenson, 1992) and Koerner and Koerner's 'Value' (Koerner & Koerner, 1996).

Chapter outline

The first chapter examines Stern's early South African reputation, from 1920 to the mid-1930s. The artist's reputation underwent a large shift during this period. In the 1920s a conservative South African audience initially largely disapproved of Stern but as the decade progressed she became popular. Stern had trained in Germany and German Expressionism influenced her art in the early 1920s. In South Africa she was initially defined by her difference and her foreign modern (German Expressionist) art was a source of scorn within a conservative South African art establishment. But outside of South Africa, Stern received positive reviews. At the time South Africans regarded foreign art as superior to locally produced work and I argue that Stern's worth in South Africa was first proven using foreign acceptance. As the decade progressed Stern's image shifted from that of a 'foreign' to a 'true South African' artist. I propose that this identity was linked to Stern's paintings of black Africans and the belief that Stern was an artist 'in touch' with Africa.¹³

¹³ Stern painted people of many different races and, while the use of racial categories is a complicated area, I have found it necessary in analysing her work. I have drawn on categories used by the national statistical service, Statistics South Africa: black African, coloured, Indian or Asian and white (Statistics South Africa, 2011). African rather than black African is often used. Moreover coloured must be defined in terms of South African usage. "In South Africa, contrary to international usage, the term *Coloured* does not refer to black people in general. It instead alludes to a phenotypically varied social group of highly diverse cultural and geographic origins. [...] The Coloured people were descended largely from Cape slaves, the indigenous Khoisan population, and other black people who had assimilated to Cape colonial society by the late nineteenth century. Since they are also partly

Chapter two investigates Stern's reputation in the late 1930s and 1940s – a period which can be defined by the artist's travel in Africa, specifically to the Congo and Zanzibar. Stern's widespread popularity increased during this time, and shifts in the South African art world and changes in the artist's style are explored as important contributory factors. The chapter also addresses appreciation for Stern's portrayals of subjects 'other' to her, including subjects from Zanzibar and the Congo.¹⁴ All these subjects can be viewed as being a part of the, then termed, 'native life' genre and its growing popularity is explored.¹⁵ Moreover, the artist's portrayal of 'natives' is identified as integral to her reputation as an admired artist at this time.

The third chapter considers the final period of Stern's life, from 1950 to her death in 1966. It is also the first chapter to address the artist's early posthumous reputation (1966 to 1980). It is argued that in this time Stern was secure in her position as a major figure in South African art. This is evident in writing on the artist and in the opening of the Irma Stern Museum in 1972. The museum housed in the artist's home, 'The Firs', showcases Stern's art and her personal collection of artefacts and the ways in which the home and collections have shaped Stern's reputation is investigated.

There was little new material on Stern in the 1980s. In chapter four I propose that this can be attributed to the political climate in South Africa at the time and I argue that the focus of the South African art community was on recognising black artists rather than further studying already well-established white artists.¹⁶ In the 1990s there was, however, a renewed interest in Stern and the chapter is focused on an analysis of publications between the years 1990 and 2011. Feminist appraisals are considered first. A number of new interpretations on Stern – informed by feminist notions of art history – emerged post-apartheid and I show that Stern provided rich grounds of enquiry for feminist art historians.

At the core of each feminist author's writing was, however, also the question of Stern's approach towards those of other races. Postcolonial criticism – prevalent from the 1980s – was critical of those who spoke for cultures other than their own. Within this context I investigate how authors have addressed Stern's motivation for painting the 'other'. While some of the academic literature is critical of Stern it is striking that a number of authors have formed views of the artist that show her in a positive light.

descended from European settlers, Coloureds are popularly regarded as being of 'mixed race'" [author's capitalisation] (Adhikari, 2005:2).

¹⁴ The classification of the racial 'other' was an important aspect of the colonial project. As Frantz Fanon has noted, the 'other' were classified "by the visibility of their perceived 'difference'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000:28). For Stern the 'other' included black Africans, Arabs, coloureds, Indians and Asians.

¹⁵ The term, 'natives' was widely used in media coverage of Stern's art, to refer to black Africans, throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It is, however, no longer used in writing on Stern's work, due to the negative stereotypes – of primitive and backward cultures – that it invokes.

¹⁶ 'Black' in reference to the political fight for equality in South Africa is used in its inclusive sense to collectively refer to black Africans, coloured and Indian people.

The final chapter overlaps chronologically with the period covered in chapter four, however, now the market for Stern's work in the early 2000s, between 2000 and 2013, is addressed. I argue that the market in this period is unique because Stern's prices increased so much that her works were considerably more valuable than those of other modern South African artists. I view the high prices obtained for Sterns in this period as influencing the ways in which she was viewed in the popular press and in academic writing and the chapter considers the reasons for Stern's market value. Throughout this entire study, Irma Stern's reputation is interrogated with a view to show that many variables have impacted on the ways in which the artist is understood. Over time, she has held different meanings for different audiences and this is precisely what has kept her famous.

Chapter 1: Irma Stern's Early South African Reputation – from German Expressionist to 'True' South African Artist

Irma Stern's childhood was characterised by travel and relocation. Moving from South Africa to Germany and back a number of times before she was sixteen.¹⁷ In December 1910 the Sterns moved to Berlin and remained in Germany until 1920.¹⁸ The city was a thriving cultural centre at the time and when she returned to South Africa (in 1920), the South African art community was small and largely conservative. Stern's art, heavily influenced by German Expressionism, created a sensation.¹⁹ A study of newspaper reviews from the early 1920s reveals that Stern was subject to scathing criticism although she did simultaneously enjoy early critical acclaim. Nevertheless, according to Arnold (1995:12) she sold very few paintings in her first decade in South Africa. In fact, at Stern's first South African exhibition at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town in 1922, she only sold one work (Arnold, 2003:42). By the mid-1930s this situation had changed, collectors had started to buy Stern's work and her art had begun to be regarded as fashionable.²⁰

Over the course of the decade Stern's reputation underwent a substantial shift. Using newspaper and magazine reviews and articles, often in response to Stern's first two South African exhibitions at Ashbey's, this chapter aims to show that in South Africa in the 1920s Stern changed from being regarded as a foreign modern artist (a German Expressionist) to being regarded as an essentially South African artist.²¹ Key to this shift was the promotion of

¹⁷ In 1899 the Sterns left Schweizer-Reneke for Cape Town, relocating to Berlin in Germany only two years later in 1901. The family returned to South Africa in 1902, settling first in Wolmaransstad, a neighbouring town of Schweizer-Reneke and moving to Schweizer-Reneke in 1903. The following year the family once again relocated to Berlin and returned to Wolmaransstad in 1909.

¹⁸ During this time the Sterns paid one short visit to South Africa in 1913.

¹⁹ Stern's initial training and experience as an artist was in Germany. The artist's diary entries indicate that she was at art school in Berlin from 1912 and in 1913 she enrolled at the Weimar Academy. In Germany Stern studied under a number of international instructors including Norwegian genre and portrait painter Carl Frithjof Smith (1859-1917), American artist Gari Melchers (1860-1932) and German artist Martin Brandenburg (1870-1919). In 1917 Stern met the German Expressionist painter Max Pechstein (1881-1955) who became an important mentor to her (Schoeman, 1994; Walker, 2009).

²⁰ This is evidenced in a 1935 *Rand Daily Mail* article which reported that Stern was "grimly pleased about the remarkable success of her recent exhibition in Capetown [sic]. 'I exhibited some things there,' she remarked acidly, 'which they yelled at before. Now they think them quite good. But there are people in Capetown [sic], you know, who really buy my work because they like it, not just because they think I have become fashionable'" (Found Natives 'Too Fearfully Civilised' in Basutoland: Irma Stern on her Works, 1935).

²¹ It must be noted, that the views communicated in the media were exclusively those of white South Africans. The British had, in 1910, negotiated a political settlement that resulted in an agreement of shared self-governance of the former British colonies (Cape and Natal) and Boer republics (Orange Free State and Transvaal). The Union of South Africa was thus an agreement between English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans, which from the outset restricted the rights of those the Union defined

Stern as an artist who knew the 'real' Africa, an assertion supposedly evident in her paintings of black Africans referred to as 'the natives'. I argue that that in the early 1920s Stern 'broke all the rules' in South African art. By considering the conventions – identified as largely conservative and derived from a British model – of South African art in the early twentieth century, it is evident that Stern was at odds with the norm. However, I further argue that Stern's deviation from accepted conventions was exactly what established her in South Africa. Identified as distinctly modern, her art was foreign to most South Africans, but the attention this generated gave her career a significant boost. Stern exhibited in South Africa and Europe throughout the 1920s. While the European and especially German press wrote on her, the concern in this dissertation is not with her reputation in the European press but only with how this was used in South Africa. Ultimately, Stern's worth was proven using foreign recognition. As the decade progressed, the focus shifted to Stern as an artist 'in touch' with the 'natives'. I propose that her 'native paintings' satisfied a need for a different type of South African art which would offer a local audience an alternative to conventional landscapes, popular at the time, and which ultimately resulted in Stern being labelled a "true South African" (Rozilda, 1931), shifting from a controversial figure, appreciated by few, to a widely popular artist.

South African art in the early twentieth century

In South Africa, art and the development thereof had not been a priority in the early twentieth century – a reality reflected in the lack of serious consideration given to art museums. Generally, art museums received little attention from government, acquisitions were principally enabled by gifts or bequests, curators were often part-time, honorary and unpaid and lacked professional curatorial qualifications (Carman, 2011:35). Furthermore, although the country had an established museum community when the Union of South Africa was proclaimed in May 1910, only three out of the fourteen museums in the country were art museums and all were situated in the former British colonies of the Cape and Natal (Cape Town, Durban and Pietermaritzburg) (Carman, 2011:23).²² Later in 1910 a fourth was added when the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) collection opened in temporary premises on the 29 November, but the situation was to remain little changed until the mid-twentieth century.²³

as 'Natives, Asiatics and Coloureds' (Hillebrand, 2011:135) who were also not a part of the cultural space occupied by Stern.

²² The South African Gallery (after 1932 the name South African National Gallery was gazetted and it is today named the Iziko South African National Gallery) in Cape Town, the Durban Art Gallery and the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg (Carman, 2011:21).

²³ The Ann Bryant Gallery opened in East London in 1948, followed by The William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley in 1952, the King George VI (today the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum) in Port Elizabeth in 1956 and the AC White Art Gallery (today the Oliewenhuis Art Museum) in Bloemfontein in 1960. The Pretoria Art Museum, although endowed with a collection in 1932, only opened in 1964 (Berman, 1983).

While the white population were of both Dutch and British descent, the small art world of the early twentieth century followed a predominantly British model.²⁴ For a start, the initial art museums were in the former British colonies. To British settlers, British ideas, culture, and political structure needed to be replicated as a part of the colonial project. The function of South African art museums was to educate the citizens – and artists – of the colony. Local art was, largely, believed to lack quality and collections consisted primarily of British and European paintings (Carman, 2011). This is not to say that local artists were completely disregarded by the public. However, those who were popular often mimicked a conservative British academic tradition and produced descriptive works. Artists including Gwelo Goodman (1971-1939), J. M. Amshewitz (1882-1942), Sydney Carter (1874-1945) and Edward Roworth (1880-1964) were amongst the country's most admired painters in the 1920s and into the 1930s.²⁵ All were British-born, regular exhibitors on the Royal Academy and concentrated primarily on landscape and still-life (Berman, 1993b:61). Their works were sought after by the viewing public who, according to Esmé Berman, "found their representational styles desirable to look at and not difficult to understand" (Berman, 1993b:61).

While a conservative British academic tradition prevailed, some modern art was introduced to South Africa in the early twentieth century. In regards to modern art South Africa, however, also looked to Britain and the British had in turn looked to France. According to Taylor (1999:132-133), this particular preference of the British had its roots in political alliances. Before 1870-1871 Britain's artistic affiliations had lain with Germany. The Franco-Prussian war had, however, created sympathy for the French. As an indirect result, a wave of artistic francophilia emerged in Britain and this was evident in a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century exhibitions.²⁶ At the time, the reaction to French modern art in Britain did take different directions.²⁷ Conservative critics were in support only of local artists who

²⁴ This is not to say that there was not also a link with Dutch heritage. In 1916 the Michaelis Collection of early Netherlandish art was opened in Cape Town. Furthermore, artists including Frans Oerder (1867-1944) and Pieter Wenning (1873-1921) drew on a Dutch tradition. A detailed account of the Dutch tradition in South Africa is given in 'A Link with the Earliest Dutch Settlers', in Berman (1993b:21-35).

²⁵ Roworth is particularly notable. From his arrival in Cape Town in 1902, the artist was very active in South African art organisations. He was President of the first organisation to cater for practicing artists, the South African Society of Artists (SASA), Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School and Director of the South African National Gallery (SANG). His successive roles made him a formidable force in South African art throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As a great supporter of the academic British tradition he also had the power to influence the taste of the public from within art institutions (Berman, 1993b:5&7).

²⁶ Initially, in 1870 a show of Impressionist paintings was held at Paul Durand-Ruel's gallery in New Bond Street. In 1905 Durand-Ruel put on a major exhibition at the Grafton Galleries of three hundred and fifteen paintings by artists including Cézanne, Degas, Monet, Morisot, Pissarro and Renoir, and in 1910 Roger Fry organised *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, followed by the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* in 1912, both at the Grafton Galleries in London (Taylor, 1999:132-133).

²⁷ This debate is illustrated by Brandon Taylor (1999). In the chapter 'Managing 'Modern Foreign' Art: An Extension at the Tate Gallery' the author offers an account of how these opposing positions were felt in the collecting policy of the Tate in the early twentieth century and how French modern art was canonised in Britain.

produced familiar scenes for the Royal Academy. But a new circle of progressive critics in support of French modern art had also emerged and what is significant is that it was ultimately French – as opposed to German modern art – that was canonised as the only serious ‘modern foreign’ art in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In South Africa the tendency to look to British (and thus French) modern art is evident in significant early twentieth-century collections. The original JAG collection which opened in 1910 was, in fact, shaped by a British model on two accounts: the approach to the gallery and the composition of the collection. The project was funded by Randlord wealth and the institution subscribed to a view popular in Britain at the time. The purpose of art museums was there seen as one of stimulating and developing good taste among the people. Accordingly, the Randlords’ motives – although complex – were partly driven by a desire to educate the people and artists of Johannesburg – a rough mining town – and turn it into a place where British immigrants would like to settle (Carman, 2011:29). The Anglo-Irish art dealer, Hugh Lane, was tasked with assembling the collection. In the United Kingdom, Lane was a part of a circle of progressive critics in support of modern art. He was a talented curator and was renowned for founding a gallery of modern art in Dublin in 1908. In South Africa his compilation of the JAG collection took a distinctly different direction from that of other art galleries in the country. Whereas acquisitions elsewhere had been fairly haphazard, the JAG collection was the first to have a defined collection policy, “the representation of *British modern* art and its immediate roots (Victorian) and influences (French Barbizon and Impressionist)” [emphasis added] (Carman, 2011:29).²⁸

Sixteen years after the JAG collection opened a similar trend – towards British and French art – is evident in the bequests made by Alfred de Pass to the South African Gallery (today the Iziko South African National Gallery). De Pass was a serious benefactor to the Gallery between 1926 and 1949.²⁹ It is important to note that the authorities paid little attention to the Gallery’s collection in its early years. No purchase grant was given until the end of the 1940s and the role of early bequests was thus very important. In fact, de Pass’ gifts were to become the basis of the South African Gallery’s collection of nineteenth-century European art (Martin, 1995:7).³⁰ What is interesting is that, with the exception of a Persian miniature and a few

²⁸ A detailed account of the establishment of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the important role played by Florence Phillips can be found in Carman (2006) *Uplifting the Colonial Philistine: Florence Phillips and the Making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery*.

²⁹ De Pass was a part of a wealthy family with business interests in South Africa and while he was born in South Africa he spent most of his life in Britain. Initially involved in the family business, de Pass officially retired in 1897. He had developed a serious interest in collecting art in 1888 and while his initial purchases were personal, in the early 1900s he started donating large numbers of works to institutions. Initial donations were made to British institutions but in 1926 de Pass relocated to Cape Town at the age of sixty-five, and was to become a serious benefactor to the South African Gallery until 1949 (Tietze, 1995).

³⁰ Many of de Pass’ later donations included South African artists and these were to become the basis of the Gallery’s twentieth-century South African art collection (Martin, 1995:7).

prints, none of the works given predate 1800, in fact few predate 1850 – the bequest was “essentially a collection of modern art” (Tietze, 1995:14). Moreover, until the late 1930s, de Pass’ donations were mainly of the French and British schools (Tietze, 1995:15).³¹ Anna Tietze (1995:15-16) has argued that de Pass “cannot have failed to notice when he first visited the Gallery that it contained no modern French work at all”. She continued that, “With his first gifts in the twenties in particular, he sought to fill this gap, giving bronzes by Dalou, Barye and Rodin, and paintings and drawings by leading figures of the Barbizon landscape and Realist schools.” (Tietze, 1995:15-16)

The JAG’s collection, and – to an even greater extent – de Pass’ bequests were not necessarily examples of truly progressive art in the early 1900s. Picasso had for example painted *Les Femmes d’Alger* in 1907 and certainly nothing in the South African collections came close to this kind of radical break with tradition. While the notion of modern art communicated in each collection may seem conservative today, British and certainly South African taste – while looking to France – was very conservative in comparison to the French. What is important is that both collections indicate that South Africa, in its conception of modern art looked to Britain, who had looked to France. Thus, when Irma Stern returned to South Africa, her modern *German* art was at odds with the dominant conventions of the South African art world. Firstly, conservative works following the British academic tradition were most popular and secondly, where modern art *had* made an entrance, a British model which distinctly excluded German modern art (but included French) was followed. Stern’s 1920s works were shaped by her training in Germany. Characterised by strong angular forms and a dark palette, works such as *Red Earth* (1925), *Composition* (1923), *The Avenue* (1925) and *Umgababa* (1922) (**figs.1-4**) displayed much of the angst and inner torment of the German Expressionist painters – an aesthetic almost completely foreign to a South African audience. Despite her difference, Stern however, quickly rose to prominence in South Africa.

Before looking at Stern’s rise to prominence it must be noted that, although differing from dominant conventions, she did enjoy substantial support from the South African Jewish community where culture was not defined by British traditions. In the early twentieth century many Jews had emigrated from Lithuania and surrounding areas. Stern’s family was, however, part of a group of wealthy German immigrants who had come to South Africa in the nineteenth century. Although there was minor friction – largely related to religious and class differences – in general the Jewish community was cohesive and there existed a counterculture to that of the more conservative English within this community (Walker, 2009:83-85). While also looking to Europe for artistic direction, there was a belief amongst Jewish collectors and artists that South African art should develop along distinctly modern lines and that Jewish artists could play an important role in building this tradition (Rozilda,

³¹ Later, from the 1930s, de Pass gave more and more works by contemporary South African artists (Tietze, 1995:15).

1931). Stern found a supportive audience amongst Jewish South Africans. She painted backdrops for their plays, her exhibitions were well-attended by the Jewish community (Schoeman, 1994:68-69), and Jewish writers, including Richard Feldman, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen, published articles supporting and promoting her. Support for Stern, however, soon extended beyond the Jewish community and her early rise to fame can be understood in terms of her exceptional ability to promote herself but also as a result of the attention afforded her precisely because her modern art challenged existing conventions in her home country.

Stern as self-promoter

Stern did not achieve many sales in the first decade of her career in South Africa. Nevertheless, she was not only an artist but an entrepreneur and a shrewd businesswoman, keeping careful records of her sales and accounts (Arnold, 1995:12). Acutely aware of the power of publicity and public image, Stern valued media coverage and made tactical public alliances – strategies that ultimately contributed to her becoming one of South Africa’s most famous artists. Although journalists often published harsh criticism, Stern “was ever ready to give interviews” (Arnold, 1995:12) and her unconventional life and art always provided good copy. What’s more, Stern appears to have been a gracious hostess, generously catering for her guests. As one *Cape Argus* journalist observed: “A critic cannot be scathing, however modern the pictures that surround him, when there are cream buns and macaroons in profusion.” (The Revolutionary – Irma Stern, 1924)

Stern’s willingness to entertain and her capacity to provide journalists with rich material will have contributed to the large amount of South African press coverage she received from the time of her return in 1920. Stern kept cuttings of her media coverage – both positive and negative – and carefully filled three large scrapbooks in her lifetime. The books are today housed in the South African National Library, and Stern’s collection and maintenance of the volumes certainly suggests that she valued all the publicity afforded to her. While she firmly believed in the value of her art, she was also, to an extent, astute and sensitive to social conventions, a point reflected in the choices she made as to who would open her exhibitions. In 1922 the first exhibition at Ashbey’s was opened by Rev Dr Faustman, a Dutch Reformed Church member who was possibly known to the Sterns from Schweizer-Reneke.³² According to Schoeman (1994:72), “one can only imagine that it was deemed advisable for Irma Stern’s somewhat startling work to be launched under a banner of irreproachable respectability”, suggesting her choice was indeed strategic. Stern’s second South African exhibition in 1925,

³² The exhibition was supposed to be opened by the President of the Union Senate, F.W. Reitz, who was previously State President of the Orange Free State (today the Free State) – and also possibly known to the Sterns, but he had to travel to Bloemfontein at the last moment for a funeral (Schoeman, 1994:71).

also at Ashbey's, was opened by an American journalist, Miss Rebecca Hourwich. A less obvious choice than the upstanding South African citizen, Miss Hourwich nonetheless brought into focus an important element of Stern's South African reputation of the mid-1920s. Highly appreciative of Stern, in her opening speech Hourwich (cited in 'A Significant Artist' Miss Stern's Exhibit: American Woman's Appreciation, 1925) told the audience that in Stern she "recognise[d] an artist who would be regarded as significant anywhere in Europe or America". At the time, foreign appreciation for Stern's art was becoming integral to her local acceptance. This point is explained later in this chapter; however, the fact that Miss Hourwich was able to foreground the issue does suggest that Stern's choice of an opening speaker was again strategic.

Stern's early South African reputation defined by her modern art

Stern's vigorous self-promotion certainly aided in keeping her in the public eye. Most of the considerable media coverage of the early 1920s, however, specifically focussed on her 'modern art'. While her modern German works acted as a major factor in setting Stern up against the conventions of the time, it was also exactly what defined Stern, and her reputation in the early 1920s was largely based on this identity. Stern actively promoted the image of the 'modern artist', in fact calling her first exhibition at Ashbey's in 1922 an *Exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern*. It was, however, in the media that her reputation as a modern artist was most clearly defined. In fact, a great deal of interest was generated amongst critics precisely because she broke with 'treasured conventions'. Criticism took two directions. Some critics were disapproving of Stern's 'new art' while others praised it as progressive, but both groups used her variation from the norm to motivate their positions.

Those who were critical of Stern dismissed her particular brand of modern art, some even framing her work merely as an insincere attempt to shock. One particularly unsympathetic *Cape Times* writer established their dislike by outlining that, after initial amusement, one will feel only "disgust at the general nastiness of the work" (An Exhibition of 'Modern Art', 1922). This same writer went on to suggest that Stern wished to deliberately shock her audience but that "no serious attention need be paid to this attempt to startle the susceptibilities of Cape Town art lovers" (An Exhibition of 'Modern Art', 1922). In 1925, again in the *Cape Times* (although the name of the writer is not given so one cannot tell if it is the same writer), a similar sentiment appeared. Describing their feeling to the show as "one of most profound distaste", again it was insinuated that Stern mobilised the shock factor: "Quite apart from mere eccentricity or perversion, accentuated by grotesque drawing and design, I came away with the feeling that the whole thing was affectation, and that Miss Stern could do differently if she so desired." (Modern Art in the City, 1925)

It is worth noting that the early dismissal and poor reception – especially of Stern’s 1922 exhibition – has been highlighted in many present-day publications on the artist (Berman, 1983:438; Arnold, 1995:18; Berman, 2003:42; Arnold, 2003:41; Arnold, 2005a:61; Pollock, 2006:65; Freschi, 2012:28). However, the repetition of the criticism levelled at Stern can be understood as contributing to a somewhat romantic myth of an underappreciated artist. Although her exhibition was not a commercial success, there was not only criticism but also a healthy appreciation for Stern’s work. A *Cape Argus* writer, for example, offered a distinctly different view: “The studies are strong picturesque and expressive, and the artist has a *real genius* for getting her effects with the fewest possible lines, omitting everything that is not absolutely essential to express her idea.” [emphasis added] (Art and Applied Art: In Miss Stern’s Studio, 1922) The writer continued: “Unaccustomed as [South Africans] are to the work of the modern schools, it goes without saying that her work will raise a storm of criticism, but in its very departure from the beaten track there is much interest.” (Art and Applied Art: In Miss Stern’s Studio, 1922) What is appreciated here is exactly that in which discouraging critics found fault – Stern’s modernity and deviation from dominant conventions in South Africa.

Foreign recognition is used to legitimate Stern’s value in South Africa

Stern had developed her ‘modern style’ as a young artist in Germany. As discussed earlier in this chapter, in 1920s South Africa it was widely accepted that foreign art was more advanced than local art. This belief ultimately served Stern well, and foreign recognition of her art was a key factor in establishing her reputation as an important artist. Making reference to foreign exhibitions and galleries, artists and critics, the South African press used her recognition in Europe to promote her locally. As early as 1922, the article in the *Cape Argus* – already discussed above – validated Stern’s worth using foreign exhibitions: “Young as she is she has exhibited very successfully in many of the big art centres of Europe, where it will be admitted standards are higher, competition keener and criticism more severe than here.” (Art and Applied Art: In Miss Stern’s Studio, 1922) The writer continued that Stern had even exhibited at “the celebrated Art Gallery Gurlitt, which puts, as it were, the hallmark on works exhibited within its walls” (Art and Applied Art: In Miss Stern’s Studio, 1922). The gallery was known to support modern art and Stern had exhibited there in 1919.³³ Stern was most likely introduced to the Gurlitt by her mentor, Max Pechstein (1881-1955). Pechstein was a well-known German Expressionist and member of *Die Brücke*, and in South Africa it was important that Stern had learnt from a “great European artist” (Art and Applied Art: In Miss Stern’s Studio, 1922).

³³ The first exhibition of French Impressionist works in Berlin was held at the Gurlitt Gallery in 1883 (Schoeman, 1994:63).

In addition to exhibiting at a German gallery and her relationship with a well-respected artist, foreign critics also gave Stern's work their stamp of approval and again the South African media found value in this. In 1923 an article titled 'Miss Irma Stern: Success in Germany' said that Stern was enjoying great success in Europe and that her work was favourably commented on "by art critics in leading newspapers" (Miss Irma Stern: Success in Germany, 1923). Elaborating on critics' admiration, a writer pointed out in 1924 that even "Fritz Stahl, the most dreaded of all German art critics, has nothing but praise for her work" (Items of Interest, 1924). While foreign recognition was used to legitimate Stern's value from the early 1920s, the first monograph on Stern, published by German art critic Max Osborn in 1927, really brought foreign acceptance into focus. The book was part of the *Junge Kunst* series on young modern artists. The series included over fifty monographs and featured well-respected artists such as Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne and Max Pechstein. That a German critic had dedicated a book to Stern was widely celebrated by the South African press. Applauding the publication, headlines such as 'Germany Confers Honour on Cape Town Artist: Irma Stern Included in Junge Kunst Series' and 'A Monograph on a South African Artist: German Appreciation of Irma Stern's Genius', both in the *Cape Argus* in 1927, indicate the esteem with which the book was regarded.

Irma Stern and the claim to know the 'real' Africa

Foreign critics had convinced a South African audience of Stern's worth. Next, Stern's South African reputation became intrinsically linked to her claim to know the 'real' Africa. Supposedly revealed in her paintings of black African subjects reflecting her unique connection with the 'natives' – Stern's portrayal of Africa would ultimately facilitate her being claimed as an essentially South African artist. While press coverage throughout the 1920s shows some appreciation for Stern's 'connection to Africans', the theme was most clearly brought into focus through Osborn's 1927 publication. The volume on Stern focused on her work of African subjects and the author framed her as unique amongst her European contemporaries because she had grown up in South Africa.³⁴ As a result, Osborn claimed, Stern could bring Africa to Europe in a way that European artists could not. Presumably, Europeans were not as 'in touch' with the primitive as Stern who had 'lived amongst them' (Walker, 2009:7). In understanding Osborn's approach it is important to note that Stern's paintings of Africans and indeed all those 'other' to her can be considered to have arisen from a Primitivism that emerged in the late nineteenth and continued into the early twentieth centuries (Nettleton, 2011:141). Gauguin went in search of a supposed simple and exotic life in Tahiti in the 1890s, while Max Pechstein travelled to the Palau Islands in 1914. From the

³⁴ Osborn's book included a critique of Stern's work, extracts of her *Umgababa* narrative (*Umgababa* was Stern's first book written in the 1920s. The book remains unpublished but the original transcript is housed in the National Library in Cape Town) and reproductions of charcoal drawings of mostly African subjects (Walker, 2009:93).

1920s and throughout her life Stern travelled in search of an idealised world. Within a colonial worldview, of which Primitivism was a part, her perceived ability to portray the 'real' Africa was admired in Europe. This provided the context for Osborn's publication and also held relevance to a South African audience.

To date, the local press had largely focused on Stern as a foreign, modern, German Expressionist. South African coverage of Osborn's book, however, focused on his interpretation of Stern as an artist 'in touch' with Africa. Bringing this clearly into focus, a *Cape Argus* writer, in reference to the book, described, "her handling of South Africa's native types" as having "made the connoisseurs overseas joyous with the discovery of an artist whom they describe as being the only person 'who has understood the nature of the original inhabitants of South Africa'" (Germany Confers Honour on Cape Town Artist: Irma Stern included in Junge Kunst Series, 1927). Another writer attributed to Osborn the belief that Stern saw in African subjects not quaint exoticism but inner nobility. Importantly, this writer further recognised that Osborn's appraisal of Stern should not be limited to Europe but that "unprejudiced [South African] observers" should also see "her understanding of the [African] people she prefers to paint" (A Monograph on a South African Artist: German Appreciation of Irma Stern's Genius, 1927), indicating that the Stern who knew the 'real' Africa had serious South African relevance.

It is important to note that the assumption that Stern's art was shaped by African roots has since been refuted. Osborn's analysis was based on the premise that Stern was exclusively qualified to paint Africa because, unlike artists such as Gauguin who had gone in search of the exotic in Tahiti, she had actually grown up in the 'exotic' Africa she painted. Karel Schoeman in his 1994 publication, *Irma Stern: The Early Years, 1894-1933* was the first to research Stern's early years in detail. Using Stern's German diary entries, he gave an account of her early life and made it evident that 'exotic' Africa was not a part of her childhood reality. Stern had grown up in Germany and Africa and in South Africa had lived mainly in Schweizer-Reneke, an area in the north of the country where the landscape is a harsh, dry *veld* – hardly a lush, tropical or 'exotic' Africa (**see fig. 5**). Marion Arnold (1995:13-14) concurs with Schoeman, pointing out that when Stern settled in Cape Town in 1920 she had spent fewer than ten years in South Africa. Stern's art education and formal schooling had occurred in Germany and it was therefore German culture that initially shaped her art. Considering Schoeman and Arnold's assertions, it would seem that Stern imagined and (later) went in search of the exotic in much the same way as her European counterparts. Her mythologised African roots and claim to know the 'real' Africa however remain relevant in the development of Stern's South African reputation and was a myth perpetuated by the artist and developed by critics. Stern had, in fact, even contributed to Osborn's interpretation as, according to Arnold (2005:62), Osborn relied "on information from Stern, whose recollections of her youth were both selective and embroidered with fancy".

Osborn's exaggerated 1927 commentary was based on Stern's youth and African roots. As a young adult in South Africa in the 1920s, she however also went in search of what she considered 'genuine' African subjects. In fact, throughout the 1920s Stern travelled in southern Africa to places few ordinary white South African women (or men) ventured and this – together with her mythologised roots – cemented her image as an artist in touch with the 'real' Africa.³⁵ An Africa supposedly captured in the products of her journeys – paintings of Africans devoid of European influence – such as *Repose* (1927), *The Lemon Pickers* (1928), *Swazi Girls* (1929) and *Portrait of a Pondo Girl* (1929) (figs. 6-9). Using her first-hand experiences in Africa to explain her paintings, in 1926 Stern informed a *Cape Argus* journalist: "It is only through *personal contact* that one can get a few glimpses into the hidden depth and childlike yet rich soul of the native, and this soul is what I try to reflect in my pictures of South Africa." [emphasis added] (Irma Stern: *My Exotic Models*, 1926) Statements such as these clearly position Stern as assuming the role of an artist 'in touch' with Africa, an assertion increasingly developed by critics. In fact, for the South African media, it was primarily Stern's paintings of African subjects that marked her out as a serious artist. Here the journalism of her friends, Roza van Geldemen and Hilda Purwitsky (who sometimes wrote articles together under the pseudonym 'Rozilda') was important. In a 1931 article Rozilda praised Stern by claiming that it was in her "studies of the natives [that] she displays her peculiar talent to its best advantage". Taking this further, Rozilda attributed her success to "[Stern's] deep insight into the psychology of the natives" (Rozilda, 1931). Although there still existed a disapproving element in opinions on Stern, a column in response to Stern's 1932 show at Ashbey's, for example, described her work as a part of 'The Cult of the Ugly' (Lewis, 1932), from the second half of the 1920s this element was in a minority. More and more, the press praised Stern as Rozilda had, and few questioned her genuine portrayal of her African subjects.³⁶ In fact media coverage overwhelmingly signalled an approval of Stern's assertion that she knew the 'real' Africa.

A new kind of South African art

According to Esmé Berman (1983:243), landscape was the primary theme for South African artists in the early twentieth century. Elaborating on this point, and offering an explanation for the preference, Hillebrand (2011:149) noted that after the First World War culture in South Africa (and by culture she referred to the belief, customs and especially art of white, English and Afrikaans, South Africans) was used to promote a political agenda. With the formation of the Union of South Africa, Afrikaner and British leaders reached a power sharing agreement,

³⁵ In 1923 Stern travelled to Umgababa in KwaZulu Natal, in 1924 to the Northern Transvaal and Zululand, in 1926 again to Zululand, to Swaziland in 1926 and 1927 and to Pondoland in 1929.

³⁶ One of the few examples that questioned Stern knowing the 'real' Africa appeared in a *Star* article in 1928, which said that she did not actually capture the grace and beauty of her African subjects (Walker, 2009:97-98).

but Afrikaners were still considerably less wealthy. They resented these inequalities and tensions ran high between the two groups. In an effort to overcome this divide, nationalist policies such as South Africanism – supported by the political leaders Louis Botha and Jan Smuts (first and second Prime Ministers respectively) – encouraged English and Afrikaans-speakers to work together to create a new nation. This brand of nationalism was “favoured by the majority of art societies” (Hillebrand, 2011:149), where there was a belief that art and culture could bring together the different fractions of (white) society. As such, landscape – depicting recognisable topographical areas – was seen as offering a solution to the development of a new national style. Indeed, many of South Africa’s late nineteenth and early twentieth-century painters celebrated the country’s natural features.³⁷ However, although remaining popular (and still popular in the current day), complaints were made against the genre from as early as 1919. In that year, Johannesburg based artist Amshevitiz objected in *The Natal Mercury* that local art had developed no further than a type of conventional landscape (Hillebrand, 2011:149). In 1925, again in *The Natal Mercury*, author William Plover further questioned the genre. Highly critical of a national art confined to what he regarded as unremarkable and predictable landscape, Plover suggested that more portraiture would be welcome (Hillebrand, 2011:149). To add to this the portrayal of black Africans was a subject matter that can be considered to have been growing in significance. Alexander and Cohen (1990:15) have noted that from the 1920s artists such as Dorothy Kay (1886-1964) painted many portraits of Africans. They add that by 1926 the subject matter was seen as significant enough for Karl Gundelfinger, Honorary President of the Natal Society of Artists, to even offer an award encouraging paintings portraying the customs and life of South African 'natives'.

This dissatisfaction with the landscape genre and growing significance of Africans as subject matter coincided with Stern’s first decade as an artist in South Africa. A large proportion of her oeuvre consisted of portraits, particularly of Africans, and it would seem Stern satisfied a need for a different type of art, offering South Africans an alternative to the national landscape. In fact, from the latter half of the 1920s critics started to consider Stern’s portraits, and more specifically her ‘native’ studies, as essentially South African. One of the first examples appeared in a 1926 review, ‘Irma Stern’s New Paintings’, by Richard Feldman in the *Zionist Record*. To Feldman, it was Stern’s paintings of African subjects that defined her as a South African artist (Walker, 2009:89). Approximately, two years later, a *Johannesburg Star* reviewer, recognising that Stern offered an alternative to landscape, stated: “To [Stern] belongs the credit of breaking away from landscape and dealing with native life.” (Swazis

³⁷ Notable early examples include Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936), whose paintings largely celebrated the Riversdale area in which he lived and Pieter Hugo Naudé (1869-1941), who is best known as a landscape painter and travelled around the Cape, to the Drakensberg and as far as Victoria Falls in order to paint. Later, Pieterneef found the landscape a lifelong source of inspiration and was one of the first painters to focus on the South African *bushveld* instead of Cape scenes. Esmé Berman (1983:244) provides a comprehensive list of South African landscape painters in *Art and Artists of South Africa*, which by her own admission are somewhat arbitrarily categorised as ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’.

from the Brush: Colourful Canvasses that may Influence South African Art, 1928 (approx.)) Taking this observation a step further, a writer for *The South African Menorah* praised Stern and South African-born novelist Sarah Gertrude Millin and noted “that with both artists the native is the chief motif of their works” (Alony, 1932). The writer linked their talent and success to revealing the life and feeling of their African subjects, thus implying that understanding the ‘real’ African and representing ‘native’ life, was a trait which might become a defining factor of what was considered a national South African art.

Irma Stern had entered the South African art scene as a foreign, modern, Expressionist. Initially ridiculed by many, her foreign identity served her well and legitimated her local value. The focus, however, soon shifted to a Stern who understood the ‘real’ Africa and who communicated this in her paintings of African subjects. This Stern was largely embraced by a South African public in search of an alternative to a national landscape and after Stern had spent a decade in South Africa the local audience claimed her as their own: as Rozilda (1931) proclaimed, “Irma Stern is a true South African.” The period, from the 1920s to the early 1930s, can be considered to have established Stern as an important South African artist, specifically praised for her portrayal of black Africans. It was, however, only the beginning of the artist’s rise to fame. Over the next period, from the late 1930s to the 1940s, the artist continued to grow in stature in South Africa. Significantly, the themes introduced in this period, most specifically the belief that Stern had a special ability to capture ‘the natives’, would be built upon until the artist can be considered to have reached a zenith in her creativity.

Chapter 2: Irma Stern in the late 1930s and 1940s – The African Traveller at the Height of her Creativity

In the 1920s Stern had travelled in southern Africa – to Natal, Zululand, Pondoland and Swaziland – in search of idyllic subjects. The true situation for black South Africans was however far from idyllic. They lived in dire and increasingly deteriorating conditions, the economic gap between black and white having been entrenched early in South Africa's colonial history. In 1913 the Native Land Act was legislated and Africans' ownership of land thus became limited to reserves that only constituted about seven percent of the land in the Union of South Africa (this had increased to around eleven percent by 1939). The land allocated to Africans carried a large concentration of people and by the 1920s it was deteriorating – soil was eroding, streams were drying up and vegetation was disappearing. People in the reserves were unable to produce enough food to sustain themselves and the quality of life declined. By 1936 a large proportion of the men who lived on reserves were temporarily absent because they had to find work on white farms, in a white town or on a mine (Thompson, 2006:159-160).³⁸

This southern Africa of dire poverty did not suit Stern and, as rural southern Africa changed, Stern lost interest in it. Marilyn Wyman (2000:22) succinctly articulated: "As the picturesque Africans were forced to accommodate to the demands of industry and labour, Stern became disenchanted with them as models." From the early 1930s, there is evidence of Stern's dissatisfaction in comments made by the artist in newspaper interviews. After a 1933 journey to the northern parts of South Africa, Stern was distressed at the changes over the previous six years, shocked at how the 'natives' had almost completely lost what she called their picturesqueness; she was recorded as being disappointed that they had "submitted to civilization" (Natives no Longer Picturesque, 1933). Two years later Stern expressed a similar sentiment after attempting to paint in Basutoland, where she complained that she "found the natives too fearfully civilised" (Found Natives 'Too Fearfully Civilised' in Basutoland: Irma Stern on her Works, 1935).³⁹ Towards the end of the 1930s, growing anti-Semitism and the Second World War prevented Stern from travelling to Europe from 1938 to 1947. This, combined with Stern's disappointment with the local 'native', resulted in her travelling further afield in Africa – to Zanzibar and the Congo – in search of the exotic she desired.

³⁸ For a detailed discussion of the deteriorating situation of black South Africans from 1910-1939 see, Thompson (2006:158-172).

³⁹ Basutoland was renamed The Kingdom of Lesotho in 1966.

This period of Stern's life can largely be defined by her travels into Africa and her late 1930s and 1940s works, and particularly the portraits she painted in the Congo and Zanzibar, were highly praised in the press when they were first exhibited. In 1940 a *Cape Argus* writer proclaimed that her works from her first trip to Zanzibar were "some of the best work[s] that she has ever done" (Irma Stern's Latest Exhibition: The Results of her Visit to Zanzibar, 1940). Of her second trip to Zanzibar, Elizabeth Moore (1946) writing in *The Monitor* said that although Stern was established, the latest Zanzibar exhibition showed "added maturity" and "a greater quality of balance and control than has been evident in her earlier collections". In an article in *Milady* Tom Macdonald (1946:70) was full of praise for the work from her second trip to the Congo, "I held my breath" he declared, "her portraits of the Watuzzi [sic] are magnificent". In fact throughout the 1940s, writers believed her work to be constantly improving; in 1948, a *Cape Argus* writer again declared her latest work as "the best work she has done for many a day" (Irma Stern's Pictures: Inspiration from Zanzibar, 1948).

This chapter seeks to investigate why Stern's works painted in the late 1930s and 1940s held such great appeal to a South African audience at the time. The focus is not to make judgements of her art but rather to understand how and why her audience came to understand and value these works. I firstly consider how shifts in the South African art world impacted on the artist's popularity. The South African art world was, at this point, becoming far less conservative than when Stern had embarked on her career in the early 1920s. I argue that this shift was important and that the search for new ideas made the audience for South African art increasingly receptive to Stern's work. To add to this I propose that the artist's style also shifted and that she moved away from her initial German Expressionist influence and adopted a style more reminiscent of aspects of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist technique popular in South Africa at the time. The shifts in the art world and Stern's style offer an explanation for her popularity, generally. I, however, continue to investigate what was particularly praised in the artist's work and propose that – as in the late 1920s and early 1930s – Stern was greatly admired for what was considered her capacity to capture the 'real' Africa. I further propose that in this period Stern's ability to paint 'native life' extended beyond her capacity to see the 'real' Africa and that the artist came to be viewed as a cultural expert or ethnographer of sorts. This is significant because 'native life' was a genre growing in popularity and I argue that it was even defined as a part of the national character of South African art in the press and that this view also had official support from the government at the time.

'Winds of change' – the South African art world and audience becomes less conservative

While a conservative tradition had prevailed in South African art in the early twentieth century, by the late 1930s there developed a growing rejection of a conservative aesthetic and a new

appreciation for modern ideas. Artists such as Stern and Laubser, whose art was also shaped by German Expressionism, had been exhibiting regularly from the 1920s.⁴⁰ A South African audience was thus growing familiar with these artists' initially shocking aesthetics. By the late 1930s, both Stern and Laubser were gaining acceptance and a new generation of artists including, amongst others, Wolf Kibel (1903-1938), Freida Lock (1902-1962), Lippy Lipshitz (1903-1980), and Alexis Preller (1911-1975) continued to work against a conservative academic tradition and increasingly introduced a South African audience to new ideas and aesthetics.⁴¹ These 'winds of change' were clearly manifest in new developments in artists' associations in the late 1930s, specifically in the move of many young artists from the South African Society of Artists (SASA) to the New Group. The SASA was the oldest association for artists in South Africa. It was first established in 1897 and its constitution was drawn up in 1902 (Hillebrand, 2011:143). The society's aim was "the encouragement of Art and Artists, Architects, Sculptors and Decorative Designers in the whole of South Africa" (Berman, 1983:380). The initial members of the group were enthusiastic and active and, according to Esmé Berman (1983:380), it became an influential organisation in South African art for twenty years or more. The group, however, became progressively conservative, their influence waned and by the late 1930s many of the young and more progressive members left the association for the New Group which was founded in 1938 (Berman, 1983:380). The majority of these young artists were opposed to the aesthetics of the SASA (Berman, 1983:307) and essentially, the New Group was borne from resentment for the conservative views of the society which were in turn influencing public taste (Berman, 1993b:91). The founding members were the Cape Town artists Gregoire Boonzaier (1909-2005), Freida Lock, Terence McCaw (1913-1978) and Lippy Lipshitz, while Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller from

⁴⁰ Laubser had studied at the Slade School in London from 1915-1918. Between 1922 and 1924 she worked amongst the German Expressionists in Berlin and was encouraged by Karl Schmidt-Rotluff (1884-1976). She returned to South Africa in 1924 and held her first exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in early 1925. The exhibition was a financial and critical failure, but she continued to exhibit until 1970 and by the 1940s had already gained general recognition as an artist (Ballot, 2012:16).

⁴¹ These artists all completed some training overseas, many had been influenced by the modern art movements they encountered there and exhibited works promoting new ideas and aesthetics to a South African audience. Kibel was born in Grodziska, near Warsaw, Poland. He studied in Poland briefly under visiting London painter Appelbaum and from 1923-1925 under Prof Pick-Morino in Vienna. Kibel came to South Africa in 1929 and in 1931, held his first exhibition. According to Berman (1983:232) the influence of modern masters such as Renoir, Soutine, Kokoschka, Matisse and Chagall is evident in his work. His first exhibition was criticised but by the mid-1930s, he started receiving favourable reviews. Lock studied at the Heatherley School of Art and Central School of Art, London between 1932 and 1934. In 1935 she returned to Cape Town. According to Berman (1983:268) many of her landscapes show a formative influence of Van Gogh. Although, she only held her first solo exhibition in 1943, Lock had regularly participated in New Group exhibitions from 1938. Lipshitz was born in Plungian, Lithuania. He studied sculpture in Paris under Antoine Bourdelle from 1928-1932 and held his first solo show in Cape Town in 1932. Lipshitz was a distinguished sculptor but also a graphic artist and painter, he worked outside of conservative conventions, and Berman (1983:266) described his figures as "boldly and expressionistically conceived and rendered with the minimum of descriptive detail". Preller studied at the Westminster School of Art in London in 1934 and in 1937 at Grande Chaumière, Paris. His early works have been described as "reminiscent of Van Gogh" (Berman, 1983:349). Preller held his first exhibition in Pretoria in 1935.

Pretoria in the Transvaal (today a part of the Gauteng province) were also brought on board. The organisation's aims were:

1. To bring together artists and craftsmen in an effort to raise standards;
2. To help artists in financial difficulties;
3. To form Artists' Co-operatives, to import and retail materials at cost;
4. To hold exhibitions all over the country, the standard of which would be controlled by the method of selection, i.e. secret ballot (Berman, 1983:308).

Although their exhibitions were not necessarily revolutionary, the New Group were open to new ideas, included some of the country's most progressive 'modern' artists and introduced many South Africans to art that was very different "from the allegorical scenes and picture-postcards on which most of the public had been reared" (Berman, 1983:308). Furthermore, while arising from dissatisfaction with the existing order, the Group also modified the environment – through their professionalisation of the visual arts, promotion of new ideas and exhibits of new aesthetics. The New Group became extremely influential from their inception in 1938 until around 1949 when their prominence started to wane. The Group's heyday coincided with a period when Stern was widely accepted and appreciated and which can be considered as the height of her career. It must be noted that Stern was not actually a member of the group although she did show with them (Wyman, 2000:22). But, crucially, the very existence of such an organisation and their promotion of new ideas through countrywide exhibitions indicates that the South African public were becoming more accustomed to a less conservative art and therefore more able to accept Stern.

A shift in Stern's style makes the artist's works more acceptable

As discussed in the previous chapter Stern was already regarded as quite fashionable by the mid-1930s. By the 1940s her appeal had, however, increased to such a degree that it even became a topic of discussion in the media, where opinions took different directions. In 1941 Richard Feldman, writing for the publication *Forward* attributed the ever increasing appreciation for Stern's work not to Stern stooping to popular taste but rather to "a greater understanding of her work" among the public (Feldman, 1941). Indeed, the environment had changed since the 1920s, as illustrated by the formation of and objectives set by the New Group, only three years prior to Feldman's comment. An environment where there was a serious drive towards new ideas and aesthetics will almost certainly have fostered a 'greater understanding' for Stern's work. Only five years later, in 1946, Elizabeth Moore, writing for *The Monitor*, however, raised another important point. In opposition to Feldman, she attributed Stern's success to a shift in the artist's style and not to the audience's understanding. To Moore (1946) the growing appreciation for Stern's art was due to "the

more realistic presentation” that Stern had started to employ instead of “the extreme modernism which had made her work unacceptable to many”.

Stern’s style certainly had changed from the early 1920s. In the previous chapter, the point was made that Stern’s 1920s works were characterised by strong angular forms and a dark palette with works such as *Red Earth* (1925), *Composition* (1923), *The Avenue* (1925) and *Umgababa* (1922) (**figs. 1-4**) displaying much of the angst and inner torment of the German Expressionist painters. This aesthetic was almost completely foreign to a local audience in the 1920s. But in the 1930s Stern’s cultural ties with Germany were cut. She did not keep up with the latest advances in modern art in Europe. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) had, for example, replaced German Expressionism as a creative topic in Germany, in the 1920s and 1930s (Lewis and Albert, 2006:29). Although some of the original German Expressionist influence remained, essentially Stern began to develop her own style. By the 1940s dark, angular forms were largely replaced by softer and rounder forms and a brighter palette, including a wider chromatic range. As a result, Stern’s 1940s works can be viewed as exhibiting a stronger stylistic affiliation with examples from Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists. Both movements, and particularly Post-Impressionism, do encompass a wide variation of styles. The distinct dots of colour in Georges Seurat’s Pointillism are, for example, very different to Van Gogh’s swirling brushstrokes. What is significant is that there are correlations between Stern’s works and some Impressionist and Post Impressionist artists. Examples of orchard scenes painted by Stern in the 1940s, for example, hold some stylistic affiliations with those of Claude Monet from the 1880s. Stern’s *Blossoming Fruit Trees* (1940) exhibits some of the impasto paint and lighter palette seen in Monet’s *Bordighera* (1884) and *Springtime* (1886) (**figs. 10-12**). The work differs from the Impressionist examples in that Stern used broad brushstrokes in contrast to Monet’s small dabs of colour. In *Orchard* (1942) (**fig. 13**), Stern again made use of a light palette and impasto paint application but the artist also painted the long grass in the foreground using short brushstrokes which, although bolder than Monet’s dashes of colour, do show some resemblance to his treatment of the groundcover in *Springtime*. Similarly, the branches and leaves of Stern’s fruit trees are painted in short strokes of swirling colour that, to some degree, resemble the trees in *Springtime* and *Bordighera*.

While some affiliation with the Impressionist artist exists, Stern’s loose brushstrokes can also be viewed as having a stylistic affiliation with examples of Van Gogh’s work from the 1880s. The longer loose strokes Stern used for the grass in her orchard scenes are similar to those used by Van Gogh in *The White Orchard* (1888) and *The Pink Orchard* (1888) (**figs. 14&15**). Similarly, Stern’s portraits from the 1940s such as *Arab Youth* (1945), *African Woman* (1940) and *Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* (Henny Stern) (1943) (**figs. 16-18**) also bear a stronger visual resemblance to the softer palette, looser brushstroke and impasto paint in works such as Van Gogh’s *Portrait of a Prostitute* (1885) (**fig. 19**) than they do to the more dramatic,

more angular portraits of her mentor Max Pechstein such as *Bowl of Oranges (Woman Peeling Oranges)* (1910) or *Charlotte Pechstein with Mirror* (1917) (figs. 20&21).

What is significant is that these 'softer' works can be considered in line with a fashionable aesthetic – influenced by Impressionism and Post-Impressionism – prevalent in South Africa at the time. The point was made in the previous chapter that the modern art that had made its appearance in South African museums – for example, at JAG in 1910 – followed a British model which had in turn been influenced by French modern art, particularly Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Alexander and Cohen (1990:18) note that in the early twentieth century, “the impact of European innovations on South African painters, with few exceptions, came from French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism”.⁴² Berman (1993b:94-95) too, has noted that between the two World Wars (1918-1945) many young South African artists trained at English art schools. There they would have been exposed to British modern art and the French art that had made its way into the British canon; examples include Freida Lock, Le Roux Smith Le Roux (1914-1963), Maud Sumner (1902-1985) and Gregoire Boonzaier. Moreover, a few South African artists (such as Sumner who also studied in London) chose to study in Paris and they too derived inspiration from Impressionist and Post-Impressionist ideas rather than other modern approaches such as Cubism. Thus while Impressionism and Post-Impressionism had ceased to be new in France in the early twentieth century these stylistic tendencies continued to wield a substantial influence in South Africa into the 1940s. Feldman raised a valid point claiming that the audience had developed a greater understanding of Stern's art. However, it must also be acknowledged that her style shifted, showing an Impressionist and Post-Impressionist influence. Stern's new works may have thus seemed less challenging to a late 1930s and 1940s audience – an audience more accepting of new ideas but also familiar with the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist mannerisms now employed by the artist.

An authority on 'native life' – from artist 'in-touch' with the 'real' Africa to cultural authority

The previous chapter outlined a substantial shift in Stern's South African reputation, from modern German Expressionist to a true South African artist in touch with the 'real' Africa and this aspect of her reputation remained pivotal to Stern's reputation throughout the late 1930s and 1940s. Nowhere is this clearer than in the first South African publication on Stern, Joseph Sachs', *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa* published in 1942. The title is the first indication that Sachs believed Stern to be a talented painter of 'native life'. Sachs' Stern was,

⁴² Alexander and Cohen (1990:18), identified Stern, Laubser and Kibel – all influenced by German Expressionism – as exceptions to the overriding impact of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

however, not new and there are a number of similarities between his approach and that of Stern's first biographer, Max Osborn. Like Osborn, Sachs (1947:27) said that Stern knew Africa because she spent her childhood in South Africa, claiming that, "she was born in the midst of the natives and felt the impact of Africa on her temperament before her art awoke". To Sachs, Stern's early encounter with the 'African native' allowed her a special insight into their psyche, and he argued that as her art developed she began to "know them more and more intimately, to fathom the dark depths of their souls and to reflect their true nature in her canvases" (Sachs, 1942:45). Sachs' description acted to reinforce Stern as a painter in touch with and of 'native life'.

Of course, a defining factor of Stern's life from the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s were her travels into Africa – to the Congo and to Zanzibar – and her subjects thus came to also include Zanzibari Arabs. Arab people became a well-recognised part of her oeuvre at this time and, in the press, Stern's works of those 'other' to her – were often praised in a similar fashion. Tom Macdonald (1946:68) writing for *Milady*, about her Congo works, for example, highlighted that Stern had captured "not only the colour of Africa but the spirit of the place" and that her paintings showed "something of the *strange soul* of Africa". Taking a similar direction, Elizabeth Moore (1946), in *The Monitor*, described Stern as 'in touch' with the Arab people she painted in Zanzibar, claiming her portrait studies to "poignantly express fatalism that is the very *essence* of the personality of the Mohammedan peoples" [emphasis added]. Confirming that Stern was viewed to have a talent for capturing 'others', a *Cape Times* writer in 1949 articulated the preference, saying that Stern was naturally "more receptive for the beauty of the Coloured races", elaborating that: "Her art remains European, but penetrates deep into the psyche of these peoples, for example the beautiful portrait of a Watussi woman in red against a gold background." (South African Art, 1949)

While Stern was clearly admired for her capacity to portray the 'real' or 'spirit of' Africa, in the 1940s her perceived connection to Africa went beyond this. At this time Stern first used a new medium – the illustrated travel narrative – to communicate her ideas, publishing two books, *Congo* in 1943 and *Zanzibar* in 1948. The books were lavishly illustrated and were meant to showcase Stern's art as well as be read. In both, the artist gave an account of life and culture in the respective countries. The publications resulted in the artist portraying herself as, and subsequently being seen as, an *authority* on life and culture in Africa, and this acted to further legitimise her status as a painter of 'native life'.

Congo is, more or less, divided into sections where Stern recounted meeting with the Mangbetu, her visit with the Kuba and the coronation of the Tutsi queen. Throughout she made reference to the cultural practices of the people. In relation to the Mangbetu, Stern described the dress of the chief's musicians and documented the process used to dye their clothing.⁴³ Also outlined was an occasion when a painter sent to meet her by their chief

⁴³ Walker (2009:141) has noted that while Stern referred "to the chief as both a Mangbetu and an

relayed his method for fresco painting (Stern, 1943:6). In the section on the Bakuba (or Kuba) Stern (1943:23) maintained that they were "the most artistically creative native races in the Congo". She discussed their carvings noting that bridge supports were "carved with lovely two-faced idols" and that the Kuba "make the most beautiful masks" (Stern, 1943:24). Also discussed was the weaving technique of the Kuba and Stern described how leaves were cut, dried and woven on a loom then dyed (Stern, 1943:25). In the final section Stern gave an account of the coronation of the new Tutsi Queen at the *Fête Nationale* in Kigali. She wondered at the new Tutsi (referred to as the Watussi) Queen's elaborate traditional dress and make-up and explained how a dance of celebration went on "for two days and two nights" (Stern, 1943:24).

As in *Congo*, in Stern's second book *Zanzibar* she again wrote about the cultural practices of the people she encountered. The artist noted that language and music had been influenced by the Portuguese who conquered and occupied Zanzibar in 1503 (Stern, 1948:7). Language included some Portuguese; "words such as 'bass' which means 'final'" as well as many other Portuguese words were "in daily use" (Stern, 1948:7). Moreover, Swahili melodies reminded Stern of Portuguese folk-songs. Also described was the architecture of Arab houses. Stern (1948:7) noted that they were "austere in style, architecturally rough and rugged". She continued that they "have beautifully carved entrance doors" (Stern, 1948:8) and elaborated that the ornaments on the doors were symbols and that their purpose was to "bring good fortune to the household and to chase away evil spirits" (Stern, 1948:10). In a section on Ramadan Stern detailed this religious practice and described how a crowd of people – waiting for the new moon – watched the horizon at sunset each day (Stern, 1948:41). In another section, 'Dances' Stern wrote about different dances performed by each cultural group; Arabs, Swahilis and Indians.

In the publication Stern also discussed the relations between genders. Describing the position of Arab women she noted that "women do not count, they have no say in the men's lives" (Stern, 1948:12) and that in "this Eastern world the woman has no rights" (Stern, 1948:45). Also highlighted, throughout the publication, were differences in social positions between races (Indian, Muslim and Swahilis). Arab families had settled in Zanzibar since the tenth century. They were landowners and "the mainstay of that eastern world of Africa" (Stern, 1948:45). The Indians lived differently and Stern noted that they were a part of the business community. They "have trade in hand" and also ran the majority of shops (Stern, 1948:33). Arabs and Indians were a part of the wealthy elite but, as in South Africa, black Africans were not a part of this group. In fact in one of the only accounts of a black Zanzibari, Stern (1948:30) recalled an encounter with a woman she called a 'negress' who was

Asande leader. These are two culturally distinct ethnic groups. The chief is the leader of a Mangbetu village".

disfigured and suffered from elephantiasis. The woman was naked in the street and most likely begging for a living.

By describing the people – in both *Congo* and *Zanzibar* – Stern was able to go beyond the scope of the painter and include information on the societies and their cultural practices. Walker (2009:152) has noted that while she had no formal training Stern even came to be regarded as a kind of ethnographer because "analysts at the time considered Stern's observations to have some type of scientific basis". In evidencing her claim Walker quoted the writer of a 1942 article in the publication *Forward* who said that Stern was "interested in all tribes, their cultures, and their social significance" (An Exciting Artist, 1942 cited in Walker, 2009:152). Similarly, Elizabeth Moore (1946), discussing Stern's second Zanzibar trip, presented her as an expert on local custom and culture; architecture, work ethic, trade and dress. Moore (1946) recounted how Stern asserted that "one of the main features of the island is the magnificent old houses built out of white coral rock". She continued that "the people of Zanzibar are an industrious people who work day and night", that the "ivory trade is one of the principle occupants of Zanzibar" and that other industries "deal with cloves, rope-making and products as well as fishing, mat-making and copper-work". In relation to local dress it was noted that women wore garments known as kengas, which were similar to Indian saris. Moore (1946) quoted Stern as saying that that "the designs upon them [were] printed with old wood blocks" and added further details of changing fashion trends in kengas. With these comments Stern communicated that she was not just in touch with the 'spirit' of Africa but that she had knowledge on different cultures and customs. The artist's publications together with press coverage thus shifted Stern's image from artist into the realm of ethnographer.

'Native life' – a part of the 'national character' of South African art

In the previous chapter the point was made that in the 1920s and 1930s Stern's works of 'native life' offered an alternative to conventional landscape. It is, however, significant that in the 1940s, when Stern came to be viewed as an authority on 'native life', the genre was also growing in popularity and was even receiving tacit government support. In Sachs' 1942 publication, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*, he confirmed that in Stern's early years in South Africa "native studies were not popular", explaining that "there was a prejudice against the portrayal of native life in picture" (Sachs, 1942:47). Sachs (1942:47) proposed that Stern was "the *first* South African artist to turn away from landscape in order to deal with native life" [emphasis added].⁴⁴ While it is arguable that she may not actually have been *the* first, Sachs' assertion implied that by the early 1940s other South African artists were also recognised as

⁴⁴ Sachs focused on Stern's images of 'native life'. These works have formed an important part of the artist's oeuvre and reputation. It must, however, be noted that she never completely turned away from landscape and continued to paint them throughout her career.

dealing with 'native life'. Indeed, black and white artists including Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), Maggie Laubser and Alexis Preller all painted 'native subjects' and by the end of the decade the genre can even be viewed as one representative of a national South African art, a point well-illustrated in the selection of work for, and public response to the 1948/1949 'Overseas Exhibition of South African Art'.⁴⁵

This exhibition was government sponsored and the South African Association of Arts organised and assembled the works which were widely considered to be representative of South African art.⁴⁶ In the catalogue foreword, Sir Jasper Ridley (1948:6), asserted that it was the "first representative exhibition of South African painting ever to be shown in the country [the United Kingdom]". While not all South Africans agreed – a disgruntled Mr Lewis (1948) in his letter to the *Argus* upheld that "the collection listed is certainly not representative of our contemporary art" – a great deal of South African press coverage was supportive. A *Cape Argus* writer, for example, praised the exhibition for the works' insistence on colour, variety and national character. Concurring with Sir Ridley, that the show was representative, the *Argus* writer even labelled the works as of "essentially South African character" describing the show "as intensely a national product as a strip of biltong" (Art Exhibition that went Overseas, 1949). The *Argus* writer did, however, not elaborate on what was included on the show or what defined the works as of national character.

In looking at the exhibition catalogue it is evident that there were many examples of the well-established genre of South African landscape. The catalogue also praised South African artists for their landscapes and Sir Ridley (1948:6) said that South Africa's "painters' talents are best expressed in an essentially landscape art". In the press, support for landscape was also evident. To R. Cope (1948), writing in *The Studio*, a true South African impact was to be found in painters' experiments with colour and form and their reaction to the landscape and this is where they "contributed valuable work both original and strongly individual". Significantly, there was, however, also a strong representation of 'native life' on the exhibition. Examples included works by John Dronsfield (1900-1951), Anton Hendriks (1899-1975), Neville Lewis (1895-1972), Maurice van Essche (1906-1977), Moses Kottler (1896-1977), Alexis Preller, Gerard Sekoto, Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern. Commenting on the exhibition, a *Cape Times* correspondent agreed with the *Cape Argus* and *The Studio* writers,

⁴⁵ Other black artists such as John Koenakeefe Mohl (1903-1985) and George Milwa Mnyaluza Pemba (1912-2001) also dealt with 'native life' but Sekoto had received more recognition within the – predominantly white – South African art establishment. The Johannesburg Art Gallery purchased Sekoto's *Yellow Houses: A Street Scene in Sophiatown* (1940) in 1940. This was the only representation of a black artist in a South African public collection until the 1960s (Rankin, 1995:60). Moreover, he was prominent on large exhibitions and the only black artist included in the 1948/1949 'Overseas Exhibition of South African Art' and the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Exhibition at the Cape Town Castle and the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1952 (Rankin, 2011:101).

⁴⁶ While it was initially shown at the Tate Gallery in London, the show subsequently toured Holland, Belgium, France, Canada and the USA before returning to the South African National Gallery (today the Iziko South African National Gallery) in Cape Town.

saying that one of the main features of the exhibition was “the powerful, often exotic colour sense of the artists”. However, the correspondent added that a further defining factor was “the evident fascination for a great many South African artists of the everyday life of the native and Coloured peoples” (S. African Art in London: Exhibition in Tate Gallery, Message from Dr. Malan, 1948). While some still regarded landscape as quintessentially South African, art representing ‘native life’ held a prominent position within the exhibition, suggesting that it too was becoming associated with a South African identity and art of national character.

Further to being sponsored, the exhibition actually received support and was promoted by the South African government. To the government the exhibition must also have represented a special South African national character as they even wished the audience abroad to come to know South Africa through the artworks on show. At the opening in London the South African High Commissioner, Mr Leif Egeland, read a message from Prime Minister, DF Malan. The message related that, Malan believed that art could promote “goodwill between nations” (S. African Art in London: Exhibition in Tate Gallery, Message from Dr. Malan, 1948). Moreover, it was the hope of Malan and his colleagues that the “exhibition will be well received in the sphere of art but more so that it will prove to be a silent ambassador for goodwill and better understanding” (S. African Art in London: Exhibition in Tate Gallery, Message from Dr. Malan, 1948). South African political leadership – Malan’s government and indeed Jan Smuts’ government before – regarded African, coloured and Indian South Africans as inferior, promoting policies that did not allow them basic human rights. With this in mind, their support for an exhibition where artists showed a serious interest in the lives of these individuals could be considered curious.

In this regard, La Nitra Walker (2009) offered an interesting and politically motivated explanation for government support of artworks depicting ‘native life’. Specifically addressing Stern, Walker (2009:130-132) said that the South African government supported her from the 1930s and by 1945 even provided official support for Stern’s second trip to Zanzibar.⁴⁷ Walker elaborated that this support was gained because Stern’s works of different races, of ‘native life’, were actually in line with their interest in separate development. Government promoted the idea that races were different and should not mix, a sentiment succinctly expressed by Prime Minister Jan Smuts when he commented that, “everybody in this country is agreed that European and African should live apart and preserve their respective cultures” (Smuts, 1942 cited in Ingham, 1986:218).⁴⁸ Difference was thus emphasised as part of a

⁴⁷ On Stern’s trip to Zanzibar in 1945 she received diplomatic assistance including a letter of introduction from South African Minister of Education and of Finance J.H. Hofmeyr (Walker, 2009:154-155). In 1947 Stern received support from Jan Smuts’ government when she held a government sponsored exhibition in Paris and in May 1950 Smuts wrote a letter of introduction for the artist’s European trip (Walker, 2009:175). In 1953 the South African government purchased two Stern artworks and she was also included in state-sponsored exhibitions (Walker, 2009:182). The Venice Biennales in 1950 and 1958, the São Paulo Biennale in 1957 and the Jan van Riebeeck Tercentenary Exhibition in 1952.

⁴⁸ Jan Smuts served as the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919-1924 and again from 1939-1948.

strategy of maintaining a racially segregated society. Stern's paintings and travel narratives emphasised cultural difference and, to Walker, could therefore be used to promote the government's interests. Essentially, "visual renderings of these differences [between racial groups] allowed the government to 'celebrate' each of South Africa's ethnic groups while building the case that they should live separately to preserve their unique qualities" (Walker, 2009:132). Promoting Stern overseas actually allowed the government to showcase racial diversity and multiculturalism as unique national characteristics and hence divert attention from its racist policies (Walker, 2009:114).

In the late 1930s and 1940s Stern's art can be considered to have been more easily acceptable to a South African art world increasingly open to new ideas. Additionally the artist's style moved away from its early German Expressionist influence and increasingly showed an affinity to Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles popular in the country at the time. What is, however, particularly important is that the artist's reputation was strongly linked to her identity as a painter of 'native life'. Stern had initially been admired for her capacity to capture the 'real' Africa but in the 1940s she was even considered a cultural authority on 'native life'. This is significant because it was a genre growing in popularity. It can be considered to have been viewed as a part of the national character of South African art and even have received government support. The combination of the above factors contributed to Stern's substantial fame in the late 1930s and 1940s. These were, however, the last decades in which Stern's focus was centred so strongly on Africa. Towards the end of her life she spent increasing amounts of time travelling in Europe.⁴⁹ However, she remained one of South Africa's most well-recognised artists and the next chapter will consider the artist's reputation in the period from the 1950s until her death in 1966 and in the early posthumous period, from 1966 to 1980.

⁴⁹ Stern's travels towards the end of her life are briefly discussed in chapter three but it is worth noting that the artist travelled extensively in Europe, although she did also visit the Congo in 1955 and North Africa in 1962 (Arnold, 1995:153).

Chapter 3: The Institutionalisation of Irma Stern in Texts and in the Establishment of the Irma Stern Museum, 1950-1980

From the time of Stern's arrival in South Africa, in the early 1920s and until the end of the 1940s, the artist's reputation had undergone substantial changes. Initially, largely disapproved of as a 'foreign modern' artist by a conservative South African audience, by the late 1920s Stern had increasingly gained critical acclaim. She was first admired because she had been accepted in Europe. However, her ability to capture 'native life' resulted in her being viewed as a 'true South African' artist more and more, and by the 1940s Stern was widely praised as one of the country's finest. In essence, her reputation had steadily been growing. In this chapter, I propose that in the period from the 1950s to her death in 1966 and also in the early posthumous period – from 1966 and throughout the 1970s – the artist's fame was assured and remained consistent. For most of this period, Stern maintained a presence in print – in the popular press and art publications. To add to this, the Irma Stern Museum opened in 1972. In effect, by the 1950s Stern had become an institution, her importance unquestioned. This chapter addresses the ways in which print media and the Museum – housed in the artist's home – sustained and shaped the image of the artist in this period.

From the 1950s Stern can be considered to have shifted her focus from Africa to Europe. As a result, the artist's subject matter increasingly included European subjects. Her painting style also changed and became less avant-garde. Nonetheless, while no longer at the forefront or 'cutting edge' of South African art, I argue that Stern's position as South Africa's most well established artist was secure. She was frequently celebrated in reference books, exhibitions and by the awards bestowed upon her. Her reputation was, however, particularly evident in publications. This chapter considers how the admiration for Stern was evident in the popular press towards the end of the artist's life and an assessment of press clippings from the 1950s and 1960s indicates that critics consistently praised her. As for larger publications, there was little writing on Stern from the 1950s until the 1990s. There was, however, some writing. Shortly after her death commemorative exhibitions, accompanied by catalogues, were held in 1967 and 1968. Larger publications were, however, produced in the decade after her death – the 1970s – and here Neville Dubow and Esmé Berman made contributions.⁵⁰ Their publications were the first to record Stern's entire career. They discussed the artist's life in detail and assessed the quality of her oeuvre. What is significant

⁵⁰ In 1986 Steven Bank's, *Irma Stern – As a Collector: A Selection from the Wide Range of Articles and Artefacts collected by the Artist Irma Stern and Housed in her Former Home, "The Firs", now the UCT Irma Stern Museum, South Africa* was also published but this focused on Stern's collections not the individual or her art.

is that the exhibition catalogues and publications also conferred on Stern the status of a major figure.

From discussions of the print media the chapter goes on to consider the Irma Stern Museum and the two collections it houses – Stern’s artworks and her personal collection of art and antiques. The Museum contains a large collection of Stern’s artworks and so allows the display of a broad spectrum of the artist’s oeuvre. There are nonetheless imbalances in the collection and I propose that this is suggestive of market preferences in Stern’s own lifetime. The Museum also houses Stern’s personal collections. Stern displayed these collections at her home, ‘The Firs’, and I argue that they contributed to her reputation as a fascinating figure in her lifetime. Her collections have since been displayed in the Irma Stern Museum and I propose that, posthumously, they help perpetuate a sense of the artist’s identity, emphasising her love of the exotic and her desire to escape suburbia.

Textual considerations of Stern’s reputation

In the 1950s and 1960s Stern spent less time travelling in Africa and more in Europe. She had avoided travel in Europe during the Second World War but could return once it had ended. It has, however, been argued that deteriorating race relations in South Africa further motivated her return, that Stern “travelled to Europe to escape the tense political climate” (Walker, 2009:188) and that the artist’s deteriorating health also led her to seek medical treatment outside Africa.⁵¹ While she still painted African subjects and travelled on the continent, her focus can be considered to have shifted from Africa to Europe and her subject matter included European fisherman, field workers and harvesters.⁵² To add to this, the artist’s work became less adventurous. In South Africa a new generation of artists such as Walter Battiss, Larry Scully (1922-2002) and Erik Laubscher (1927-2013) had embraced new international developments including abstract art. However, while Stern’s modern (German Expressionist) painting style defined her as at the forefront of avant-garde art in South Africa early in her career, by the 1950s the artist was outspoken against new trends. A 1958 *Cape Argus* interview, for example, cited Stern as saying that, “people who really know about art in Europe are sick and tired of all the nonsense that is being exhibited under the guise of abstract art” (Sick and Tired of Abstract Art, 1958). Similarly, the *Rand Daily Mail* quoted

⁵¹ The political situation, in South Africa, was growing increasingly tense during this period. In 1948 the National Party had won the general election and started to implement its policy of apartheid, exercising rigid control over and reducing the already poor rights of all black South Africans. Black leaders, working to confront the regime originally largely employed a policy of passive resistance. This approach, however, proved ineffective against a state that used violence to implement increasingly repressive legislation and by 1960 black leadership embarked on a campaign of revolutionary violence. A detailed description of the resistance to apartheid in this period can be found in, *A History of South Africa* (Thompson, 2006:199-207).

⁵² Stern travelled to the Transkei in 1951, to the Congo in 1955 and to North Africa in 1962.

Stern's view that "most abstract art today is going – nowhere" (They called her 'La Picasso', 1961).

However, while Stern moved further and further away from the 'cutting edge' and could no longer be seen as a leader in the development of modern South African art, her position as a highly respected, well-known, and highly admired artist went uncontested. Dubow (1974:20) has noted that, "throughout the Fifties and up until her death in 1966 the relationship between Irma, the art public and also the art establishment was one of mistress and ardent admirers". With this comment Dubow highlighted the fact that the artist, once ridiculed, had come to occupy an exceptionally secure position and this is reflected in awards bestowed on her, the many exhibitions of which she was a part, entries in art reference books and mentions in the popular press. In 1960 the artist received the Regional Award of the Peggy Guggenheim International Art Prize, in 1963 the Oppenheimer Trust Award, and in 1965 a Medal of Honour from the SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns. To add to this she was included in large exhibitions: internationally the 1950 and 1958 Venice and 1957 São Paulo Biennales and locally the 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary celebrations in Cape Town (Berman, 1983:286).

In general reference books on South African art, Stern featured prominently as one of the country's leading artists. In the 1949 publication *Painters of South Africa*, Bouman (1949:71) had already called her "one of the most glamorous painters South Africa has produced". In 1962 F.L Alexander selected Stern's *The Golden Shawl* (1945) to be included in his publication *Art in South Africa since 1900: Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Work/Kuns in Suid-Afrika sedert 1900: Skilderkuns, Beeldhoukuns en Grafiek* in which he discussed just over 100 paintings which were, to him, "either important or typical of South Africa" (Alexander, 1962:vii). In a discussion highlighting Stern's use of colour, the author praised Stern as "South Africa's colourist *par excellence*" (Alexander, 1962:36). The following year, in 1963, Neville Dubow, wrote an entry on Stern for *South African Artists 1900-1962* (Jeppe, 1963) in which he presented Stern as a leading and established artist, noting that, "her work is in all our leading galleries" and that she was "one of the most important and dynamic painters produced by South Africa" (Dubow, 1963b:93). It was, however, in the popular press that Stern was most often presented as South Africa's leading artist. A *Sunday Times* writer, noting the shift in the artist's reputation, for example, said: "If her bold and powerful [early] work was regarded as advanced in Europe it was howled down in conventional South Africa. Now, of course, she is recognised as one of our leading painters." (Reinhardt, 1964) Similarly, a *Rand Daily Mail* writer confirmed Stern's importance by noting: "Any South African gallery without her work would be incomplete." (Larger than Life...Portrait of an SA Artist they once called a 'Lunatic', 1964) In fact by 1965, the year before the artist's death, Stern's fame had grown to such proportions that sales and attendance records were broken at her exhibition at the South African Association of Arts (SAAA) Gallery in Cape Town. The exhibition received considerable media attention and the *Cape Argus* reported that records

were set for the number of people at the opening and the number of visitors to the show. Moreover, the paintings sold for higher prices than those of any other exhibition in the previous five years (Art Show's Records, 1965).

On her death in 1966 Stern was again hailed as the country's most famous artist. She received numerous tributes in the press with many members of the South African art community paying her homage. Mr Willem Gravett, curator of the Michaelis Collection, for example, noted that "Miss Stern was easily the most important artist in South Africa" (Death of Irma Stern: Great S.A. Artist, 1966). Similarly, in a *Cape Times*, article Prof van Essche, Director of the Michaelis School of Fine Art, was quoted as saying that Stern was one of the "very best painters" (Fellow Artists pay Warm Tribute to Irma Stern, 1966). While there was an abundance of coverage on Stern in the popular press, in the 1950s and up until her death in 1966 there was, however, little of substance published on the artist. In fact, while Stern had been included in general reference books, the last publication to discuss her in detail was Sachs' 1948 *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*.

Shortly after her death two commemorative exhibitions were dedicated to Stern and a catalogue accompanied each. In 1967 *Irma Stern, Memorial Exhibition: Paintings of Europe and the African Continent 1914-1965* was held at the Grosvenor Gallery in London and in 1968 *Homage to Irma Stern 1894-1966* was shown at the South African National Gallery (today the Iziko South African National Gallery) in Cape Town.⁵³ Both exhibitions were surveys of Stern's entire artistic career and, in light of Stern's stylistic move away from her early German Expressionist influences (discussed in the previous chapter), it is interesting that both also questioned the 'Expressionist' label. While *Memorial* argued that that Stern's "manner and technique" (Grosvenor Gallery, 1967:no pagination) had expressionistic origins it was claimed that she was not as intellectual an artist as most German Expressionists. In *Homage* it was proposed that critics "over-rated the influence of German Expressionism" (Alexander, 1968:8) and that a French influence had emerged after the artist's early years. Alexander (1968:8) noted: "The influence of Delacroix and of Van Gogh can be traced in Irma Stern's palette of the 1930s and 1940s when she was at the height of her powers." However, "in her youth, the style of Irma Stern was somewhat influenced by German Expressionist Max Pechstein" (Alexander, 1968:9).

Significantly, both catalogues also presented the artist as a leader in the field of South African art. The *Memorial* catalogue argued that Stern "became accepted as the most important single artist born and active in [South Africa]" (Grosvenor Gallery, 1967:no pagination). Similarly, the *Homage* catalogue praised the artist. Drawing attention to Stern's overseas success relative to her contemporaries it was said that she "gained renown in more countries than any other local artist" (Bokhorst, 1968:6). Moreover, according to the catalogue Stern

⁵³ The exhibition was a collaborative effort between the South African National Gallery and the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation and was integrated into the Cape Arts Festival of 1968.

was a prolific artist who created a large body of excellent work and that even her more 'casual' works of presumably lesser artistic quality did not impair "the extraordinary value of her contribution to South African art" (Alexander, 1968:11).

The two above catalogues, while confirming that Stern was regarded as an undisputed leader in South African art, only offered short texts but the decade after her death – the 1970s – saw two more detailed pieces of writing on the artist. Firstly, Esmé Berman included commentary on Stern in her 1970, *Art and Artists of South Africa: An Illustrated Biographical Dictionary and Historical Survey of Painters & Graphic Artists since 1875* and 1975, *The Story of South African Painting*. Both general reference books on South African art, they nonetheless included detailed commentaries on Stern. Secondly, in 1974, Neville Dubow published *Irma Stern* – a largely biographical account of the artist – as part of the South African Art Library series.⁵⁴ The publications were the first to document the artist's entire life in detail but they also confirmed that Stern was recognised as occupying a secure position in South African art history. Berman (1963, cited in Berman, 1970:286), quoting an earlier broadcast review, for example, described the artist as "not just a ranking artist in this country" but as "a national institution". Similarly, Dubow (1974:14) noted: "In the South African context there is no doubt that she was the major figure of the pioneer generation of modern South African artists."

The establishment of the Irma Stern Museum and the canonisation of the artist

While writing on Stern confirmed the esteem in which she was held, the establishment of the Irma Stern Museum in the 1970s can be considered of particular significance to the memorialisation of the artist. On her death in 1966, the artist left the majority of her estate to the promotion of art. Stern gave her Trustees considerable flexibility in how they carried out her wishes and – without discussing the will in detail – it is worth noting that she gave general instructions in two key areas. Firstly, the artist specified that she bequeathed to her Administrators in Trust her "collection of paintings, drawings, graphic, antiques, native collection, and other such items" (Stern, 1960:2). She instructed the Committee to select items from her "artistic works, rugs, carpets, furniture etc." (Stern, 1960:2) and stated that the Trustees should maintain the selected collections (known as 'the Irma Stern collections'), that the collections should not be separated and that they should, from time to time, be exhibited in or outside of South Africa. Secondly, with the exception of specified items, Stern left her entire estate, including the proceeds of her residence if sold and works of art not selected by the Committee, to be used as capital. This capital was to be invested, and the income used to finance the maintenance and exhibition of the collections, provide bequests to other galleries, scholarships in art and generally encourage and promote art inside and outside of South Africa.

⁵⁴ The series included publications on a number of canonical South African artists including Maggie Laubser, Walter Battiss and Hugo Naudé.

The Committee of Trustees was thus left with the substantial task of deciding what items from Stern's own art and collections would be kept and where they would be displayed. At one stage, the University of Cape Town (UCT) proposed that an area on its grounds be used to build a site for the collections, and The South African Cultural History Museum also made an offer to house them (Scholtz, 1971:2). However, at a meeting held in January 1967 the Committee of Trustees decided that 'The Firs' would be used as a permanent home for the Irma Stern collections.⁵⁵ Moreover, the Committee decided that UCT would be asked to acquire ownership of 'The Firs' for a nominal sum, on the condition that it be used to house the Irma Stern collections. The University would be responsible for administering the museum and maintaining the property and its contents and an annual grant would be made available by the Trustees (Scholtz, 1971:2). By 1969 – and in a process strongly facilitated by Clive Corder who was both the chairperson of the Committee of Trustees administering Stern's estate and chairperson of the University Council (Peter, 2015a) – an MOA of sale was signed, defining the use of 'The Firs' and very much in line with the Trustees' original proposal (Memorandum of Agreement, 1969).

While the Trustees had primarily been responsible for the selection and display of Stern's collections, the University now also played a substantial role and in February 1970 the University Council appointed a User Committee. The Committee's main responsibility was to make decisions concerning the arrangement of the collections and the establishment of the Museum (Read, 1972:3).⁵⁶ Notably, Neville Dubow was a member of the Committee and – together with Bruce Arnott – was responsible for the plans for the arrangement of the house.⁵⁷ In 1972 Dubow was also offered the Directorship of the Museum (Read, 1972:4). Dubow, who had been a substantial voice in writing about Stern and who published on the artist from the 1960s to the 2000s was thus also a pivotal figure in the establishment of the Irma Stern Museum which opened to the public in July 1972 (Floyd, 1973).

At her death, Stern still owned a great deal of her art. The Trustees thus had a large body of work from which to compile a permanent collection. While they sold some of her work a

⁵⁵ 'The Firs' thus became a house museum, a category of museum that to Dubow (2003a:45) occupied "a special niche in the crowded field of museum culture". Dubow (2003a:45) noted that the house museum differed from other museums: "the Destination museum (Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao), the Encyclopaedia museum (the Metropolitan, the Louvre) and the Taste-arbiter museum, the mega-boutique of officially sanctioned contemporary art of which MoMA, New York is the paradigm". The house museum is different because; "Its scale is manageable. Its contents are there because one person (the artist) wanted them to be there. The art in the house museum glows (as the critic Peter Schjedahl observed) with Blakes 'lineaments of gratified desire'." (Dubow, 2003a:45) Other house museums include Monet's Giverny, the Musée Rodin – Meudon, the Museo Frida Kahlo in Mexico City and in South Africa, Kruger House in Pretoria and Helen Martins', The Owl House in Nieu Bethesda.

⁵⁶ The Committee was chaired by Prof. D. P. Inskip, Chairperson of the University Council Building Committee. Prof. J. du P. Scholtz (representing the Trustees), Prof. C. Strauss Brink, Mr Bruce Arnott (Assistant Director of the South African National Gallery), and Prof Neville Dubow (Director of the Michaelis School of Fine Art) were all members (Read, 1972:3).

⁵⁷ Reports held at the Irma Stern Museum indicate that Dubow and Arnott submitted and revised plans for the Museum in February and March 1970 (Dubow, 1970; Arnott and Dubow, 1970).

considerable collection of the artist's production was maintained so that, as Christopher Peter (2012), the Director of the museum has noted, it now houses the largest number of Sterns of any public collection.⁵⁸ This is important because it enables the museum to show a wide spectrum of the artist's oeuvre and her development over time. Indeed, Peter (2011 cited in Freschi, 2011:96) has argued that, "from the point of view of the evolving of her style over time, the collection is unique. [Stern] kept key works that would otherwise have been very difficult to acquire for the collection". However, while the art collection is large and illustrates a wide area of Stern's oeuvre there is an interesting imbalance in the collection in that it contains a large number of portrait paintings. Many of the portraits are not of Stern's well-known black African and Arab subjects but rather of white sitters unhappy with the results of their commissions. There is also a noticeable gap in the Zanzibar works (Peter, 2011 cited in Freschi, 2011:96). Although no comprehensive record of Stern's sales or why she kept particular works exists, the imbalance is perhaps reflective of the market for Stern's work, buyers having a preference for Zanzibar works and aversion to familiar portraits during the artist's lifetime.

A large portion of the museum is also dedicated to Stern's own collection of artefacts which included – amongst other items – African sculptures, Chinese ceramics, Etruscan terracottas and Far and Middle Eastern carpets, textiles and tapestries.⁵⁹ Little is known about the exact provenance of the objects – when she started collecting nor when, why or how each item was acquired. There is, however, some evidence that Stern was interested in collecting from a young age. A *Cape Times* article, for example, noted that, "while a student in Europe, she was offered a now priceless collection of Egyptian tomb figures and other archaeological items" (Van Rooyen, 1966). Stern could not afford the collection at the time. The writer suggested that Stern collected for most of her adult life, noting that: "She since became a dedicated collector, spending the major part of her income on works of art." (Van Rooyen, 1966) According to Banks (1986:foreword) Stern purchased many items from dealers and often visited the stalls on the Grand Parade in Cape Town where, "in her day all sorts of minor treasures were to be found". Stern's trips in Africa and Europe also presented her with opportunities to collect and here there are occasional records of her collecting. In the Congo she, for example, traded directly with villagers and was also the recipient of gifts, with King Neapu of the Mangbetu giving her a prestigious collection of Congolese raffia pile-cloth mats – the Velours de Kasai (Floyd, 1973).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ In regards to the original sale of works, the *Cape Argus* reported that twenty-eight oil paintings and fifty gouaches and drawings were auctioned (Good Prices at Irma Stern Sale, 1968).

⁵⁹ A complete list of the collection can be found in the *Catalogue of the Collections in the Irma Stern Museum* (Irma Stern Museum, 1971).

⁶⁰ Helene Smuts noted that Stern traded directly with villagers in the Congo. The town crier would announce her visit (Smuts, 2007:18). To add to this her driver reportedly called out a greeting telling locals to bring out their rubbish because the "mad white woman" would buy it, when they arrived in villages in the Congo in the 1940s (Smuts, 2007:inside cover).

Stern, however, rarely collected the work of her South African contemporaries or of European artists. Instead her collection was of objects – created by past cultures and cultures other than her own. This kind of collection was unusual in Cape Town. Smuts (2007:17) noted that Joe Wolpe, a prominent Cape Town art dealer, recalled that there were “only two other collectors of African art in the city at the time: Ralph Nash and Philip Goodman”.⁶¹ Stern displayed the collection in her home and as a result it contributed to a view of the artist as fascinating and ‘exotic’ in her own lifetime. Neville Dubow (1972), who often visited Stern maintained that “her own private collections – catholic in their choice; superb in quality – were an important part of the fascination of an evening with Irma at The Firs..”. Access to the artist’s surroundings was, however, not limited to friends. The home was also featured in the popular press. Helene Smuts (2007:2) noted: “At the height of her career ladies’ magazines liked to feature Irma Stern *At Home*.” In one such article, published in *Milady* in 1946, the writer described his experience on arriving at the carved front door from Zanzibar, “as I knocked I felt that such a door could only open into a temple – perhaps into some place with Aladdin touches” (Macdonald, 1946:68). He continued that the door may have opened “the way into the atmosphere of the Arabian nights”, adding that it did in fact “open into a temple of treasures” (Macdonald, 1946:68). The article included an image of the carved front door and rooms in Stern’s home showing European and African antiques and the passage lined with African masks. With these images and comments the author drew attention to the ‘exotic’ quality of Stern’s home and the collections it housed, consolidating her reputation as the great maverick of the South Africa art world.

After Stern's death a large proportion of her collection was included in the display at the Irma Stern Museum and one of the fascinations of the private collection made public is the light it can shine on the collector's deepest impulses and motivations. Critical theorists have argued this position and it has been applied to the analysis of many serious collectors.⁶² Rosemary Matthews (2009:183), for example, maintained that Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) “collected in response to losses throughout her life”. Gardner was a patron of the arts. She amassed a remarkable collection over a period of three decades, and in 1903 founded the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. While Gardner's reasons for collecting can be attributed to a wide spectrum of motivations, Matthews (2009:183) has suggested that the most important force in Gardner’s drive to collect was loss. Tracing this theme through her life, Matthews established links between the loss of Gardner’s only child and husband and changes in her collection. Gardner purchased her first Old Master after the death of her son; at this time she also reinvented herself using a collection of designer

⁶¹ Joe Wolpe ran the Wolpe Gallery in Hope Street, Gardens, between 1964 and 1990. Prior to this he had slowly started to become involved in selling artworks when working as a framer in his father's framing business, which he later inherited (The AVA Gallery, 2001).

⁶² See, Jean Baudrillard ‘The System of Collecting’ in *Cultures of Collecting* edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (1994).

dresses. Similarly, the formation of her museum can be viewed as connected to her husband's death.

It might be argued that similarly deep impulses underlay Stern's private collecting. She was dissatisfied with her surroundings in Cape Town, finding them parochial. Indeed, she described Cape Town and its people as "without European animation. Like commercial mineral water gone flat" (Stern, 1923 cited in Schoeman, 1994:65). Her travels to Europe and Africa allowed her to escape this reality and she collected many objects while travelling and – especially in Zanzibar and the Congo – collected directly from the locals. These items, displayed in Stern's home, can be viewed as reflective of the artist's lifestyle, her adventurous spirit and love for the exotic but also of her desire to escape suburbia. In a sense, Stern can be considered to have created a 'fantasy world' and her private collection, while documenting the artist's transient escapes, became a permanent escape from suburban reality once established within her home.

For the writers Helene Smuts and Neville Dubow, Stern's collection at 'The Firs' also reflected the artist's deepest self. In *At Home with Irma Stern* Smuts (2007:22) described how, "Irma Stern's presence is felt in her sitting room, at the front door end of the passage, with her collection of precious things". Similarly, Dubow (2003a:45) noted,

Few artists could have left more of a personal touch on their surroundings. Irma Stern is the supreme example of that special breed of artist who imprint their personalities on their houses to the extent that they become more than enclosures of worldly goods: they become in a very real sense the repository of the artist's spirit.

For Smuts and Dubow the artist's personality was reflected in her home and collection and, as noted by Dubow (1972), this was why "any memorial to her lifework should be bound up with her home in Rosebank".

However, the Irma Stern Museum is not a facsimile of the artist's house as it looked in her lifetime. Some collectors make explicit that their homes and collections are not to be altered. Gardner's will, for example, detailed that the way she arranged her collection could not be changed (Matthews, 2009:189). Stern, however, did not even specify that her home should be a museum. She gave the Trustees freedom in deciding what to exhibit and how to exhibit it. The result is that although the museum is arranged to some extent consistently with how it was in Stern's lifetime, changes were made when the home became a museum and further changes have since occurred. Initially only the dining room, living room, studio and passage were left in an arrangement similar to that found in the artist's life. Stern's oils were exhibited upstairs and her collection downstairs. But, in one of the most significant adjustments, the

upstairs rooms were converted into a gallery for temporary exhibitions in the early 1980s.⁶³ As a consequence, many of Stern's oil paintings were moved downstairs and exhibited in the living and dining rooms alongside her collection. The result was that these rooms became fuller, with paintings and items from the collection covering the walls, almost from floor to ceiling.⁶⁴

Stern had filled her spaces, as Dubow (2003:46) noted, "Irma has a horror vacui – a dislike of empty spaces. Thus she covered every available window, door, cupboard, with her own designs." Photographs of the interior during her life, however, show far less crowding than in the museum in the 2000s. An undated photograph of Stern's living room (**fig. 22**) (which must be from, at least, after the artist's 1940s Zanzibar trips as indicated by the paintings of Arabs in Zanzibar frames to the left) shows three paintings and various ornaments below the picture rail and a wooden carving above; a similar view from 1965 shows one painting below and two masks above (**fig. 23**). By contrast, almost all available space is filled in a current view of the room (**fig. 24**).

The photographs also indicate that the wall colour was not always as exuberant as it is today. Christopher Peter (2011 cited in Freschi, 2011:96) has noted: "Professor Dubow and the committee decided almost from the outset to begin using more colour – this was a big change from the way that the house appeared when it was first converted into a museum." Evidently, this was also unlike how the house appeared, at times, in Stern's own life. In figure 22, the living room walls look very light, possibly white, and the same can be said for 1965 views of the living and dining rooms (**figs. 23&25**). Currently the walls are turquoise and red respectively (**figs. 24&26**). These colour selections have been based on assumptions, "the colour of the dining room, for example, was found on the inside of one of the cupboards in the lounge" and the living room colour from "samples taken from the walls" (Peter, 2011 cited in Freschi, 2011:96). According to Peter (2015a) the colour is a feature that possibly relates to life at the house from the 1920s to the 1940s but maybe not later. He expects that it was more sober later – rich, but with a certain restraint, and this is certainly evidenced in the photographs from the 1960s. In terms of colour the museum shows the house at its most opulent – an opulence further emphasised by the quantity of objects on display. Thus while the artist can be considered to be fairly represented by the museum, it must be remembered that it also amplifies and reinforces the celebrated characteristics of her persona. As it

⁶³ The Director's report from July 1982 to June 1983 noted that the period had been an active one and that the most notable event of the year under review was the conversion of the Upper Galleries (Dubow, 1983).

⁶⁴ Although after the 2013 cut-off for this study further changes have been made at the museum. In a process that began in 2014 and was completed in 2015, two new exhibition rooms were made available in the downstairs section. The rooms allow for the exhibition of additional Stern works and for works by other artists. The Director has noted that they have received positive feedback on the changes with many maintaining that it has given the museum a 'new lease on life'. Peter also noted that further changes are under consideration and that the space in the entrance may be used for a 'timeline exhibition' of Stern's life (Peter, 2015b).

stands, the Irma Stern Museum is a monument, to the 'exotic' rather than to a more sober personality that possibly emerged later in her life.

The period under review in this chapter can thus be considered significant for Stern's reputation in two main areas. Firstly, her status as one of South Africa's greatest artists was affirmed. Secondly, a particularly 'exotic' image of the artist was preserved at 'The Firs'. Criticism in the popular press, towards the end of Stern's life, confirmed her position. After she died, the *Homage* and *Memorial* exhibition catalogues and Dubow and Berman's publications reaffirmed her celebrated position within South African art history. What is, however, particularly notable from the 1970s was the opening of the Irma Stern Museum. The establishment of a museum dedicated to the artist reaffirmed the esteem in which she was held and confirmed the artist's centrality to the history of South African art. Accurately or otherwise, it canonised Stern as an 'exotic' outsider and provided a concrete memorialisation of her life and character.

Chapter 4: Irma Stern's Reputation between the Years 1990 and 2011 – The Impact of Feminist and Postcolonial Theory

While Stern's status as a major artist had been affirmed in the period from 1950 to 1980, there were few new developments in the 1980s. This chapter is concerned with Stern's reputation between 1990 and 2011 but it is firstly important to consider briefly why little happened in the 1980s. The Irma Stern Museum continued to exhibit the artist's collections and also held themed shows of the artist's work.⁶⁵ However, very little was published on Stern in this decade and while there may be many reasons for this; the growing resistance to apartheid and a desire within the South African art community to work towards a non-racial society and recognise black artists does offer one explanation. By the 1980s the apartheid state was falling into crisis. Internationally, criticism for the South African government – led by P.W. Botha – was growing and, as international pressure increased, local resistance also grew. The government made some attempts to adapt to the changing circumstances; in 1984 the all-white parliament was, for example, changed to include a small percentage of the Indian and coloured population groups.⁶⁶ Reforms were, however, severely limited – there was no sacrifice of white power and violent opposition ensued. In 1985 there was a call from the African National Congress (ANC), to the youth to make South Africa 'ungovernable' and an unprecedented number of strikes and boycotts followed. Between 20 July 1985 and 7 March 1986 the government instituted a state of emergency in many parts of the country. On the 12 June 1986 – in a greater effort to gain control – they extended this to a nationwide state of emergency, characterised by censorship, mass detentions and violence. While the government certainly maintained some support, opposition, internationally and from both black and white South Africans, continued to grow. South Africa was thus forced into a period of serious political transition that would eventually result in the first non-racial election in 1994 (when Nelson Mandela was sworn in as President on 10 May) (Thompson, 2006:215-233).

Within this political context the South African art community also underwent changes. In the 'officially sanctioned' canon of South African art – the art historical publications and museums, historically presided over by whites – 'black art' had, for a long time, been the poorer cousin to art by white South Africans. In fact, according to Lize van Robbroeck (2011:81), Esmé Berman's (1983) definitive *Dictionary of Art and Artists of South Africa*

⁶⁵ In 1981, an exhibition of portraits by Stern was, for example, held and in 1982 an exhibition of flower works and another of works from Zanzibar were shown.

⁶⁶ This new parliament consisted of a House of Assembly of one hundred and seventy-eight whites elected by whites, a House of Representatives of eighty-five coloureds elected by coloureds and a House of Delegates of forty-five Indians elected by Indians. When joint sessions were heard, whites however held the majority (Thompson, 2006: 218-219).

included only eighty-three black artists compared to one thousand six hundred and seventy white artists. Van Robbroeck (2011:81) noted that Berman's book was actually the first attempt to integrate black artists with white artists in the national canon. In her foreword to the *Dictionary* Berman (1983:VIII) outlined that 'public encounter' was the primary criterion for selection to the publication; "this meant representation in museums and public galleries". It was, however, not the only criterion and Berman developed a table comprising of twenty-three variables including, major national exhibitions, international exhibitions, prize winners on significant competitions and the winners of important awards. "A minimum of three criteria (one of them preferably gallery representation), was deemed necessary for individual consideration." (Berman, 1983:VIII) As such the book can be viewed as a reflection of artists recognised by South African institutions. It was reflective of who was included in the canon. But, while the canon was dominated by white artists, during the years of struggle there developed a substantial drive from within the South African art community to effect change and work towards a non-racial society. As a result a focus on officially recognising black artists developed.

As early as 1979 a conference was held at the University of Cape Town on 'The State of Art in South Africa'. The absence of black artists was noted with great concern. Accordingly, the conference declared that equal opportunities should be available to artists of all races (Martin, 2001:37). The effort to recognise black artists gained momentum throughout the 1980s and by 1987 a conference of the South African Association of Art Historians set out to address the question of re-writing South African art and architectural history. The following year *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art, 1930-1988*, a seminal exhibition which aimed to trace the development and influence of black South African artists, was held at JAG. A number of writers including Anitra Nettleton (1995), Elizabeth Rankin (1995), Alexander Duffey (1999) and Sabine Marschall (1999) have since commented on the revisionist approaches of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁶⁷ What is significant is that a revisionist approach cast a spotlight on research into black artists. There were, for example, more publications and exhibitions dedicated to Gerard Sekoto in the late 1980s than at any other time before or since.⁶⁸ Stern an already-established white artist fell outside of revisionist concerns.

⁶⁷ Nettleton (1995) discussed exhibitions between the years 1988 and 1992 and their contribution to re-defining South African art history. Rankin (1995) considered the collecting policies of public art galleries, documenting the gaps which reflected the country's inequalities and the attempts made since the end of the 1980s to acknowledge the contribution of black artists. Duffey (1999) investigated the history and transformation of art history in South Africa and referred specifically to a revisionist approach which started in the 1980s. Marschall (1999), using the radical re-ordering of the late 1980s and early 1990s as a point of departure, investigated the formation of a new canon of South African art in the second half of the 1990s.

⁶⁸ In February 1988 a solo show, *From Sophiatown to Paris: Drawings by Gerard Sekoto* (29 February-12 March) was launched at Cassirer Fine Art in Rosebank, Johannesburg. Later that year, on 17 November, *Gerard Sekoto*, a lavishly illustrated book by Barbara Lindop (1988), including text edited from Sekoto's own letters, was published, and Sekoto was included in the exhibition *The Neglected Tradition* which ran at JAG from the 23 November to the 8 January 1989. The following year, the

However, from the 1990s and throughout the 2000s there were a number of new publications – offering new interpretations – on the artist. Notable examples include Neville Dubow's *Paradise: The Journal and Letters (1917-1933) of Irma Stern* of 1991, Karel Schoeman's *Irma Stern: The Early Years, 1894-1933* of 1994, Marion Arnold's *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye* of 1995 and Mona Berman's *Remembering Irma: Irma Stern, a Memoir with Letters* published in 2003. The articles 'Irma Stern: Envisioning the 'Exotic'' by Wyman, 'Back to Africa: From Natal to Natal in the Locations of Memory' by Pollock and 'Beyond Black and White: Rethinking Irma Stern' by Braude were published in 2000, 2006 and 2011 respectively. In addition, chapters addressing Stern were included in books: *Blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After* (Herwitz, 1998), *Women and Art in South Africa* (Arnold, 1996b) and *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994* (Arnold and Schmammann, 2005). In 1996 an exhibition of Stern's work, *Irma Stern und der Expressionismus: Afrika und Europa: Bilder und Zeichnungen bis 1945* was held at the *Kunsthalle* Bielefeld. And in 2003 the exhibition *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey* was held at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg.

One of the most interesting new approaches to emerge from these texts was that of a feminist art history. The chapter first considers women and feminism in South African art in order to offer an explanation as to why feminist enquiry into Stern emerged in the mid-1990s. From this time and into the 2000s, Stern provided rich grounds of enquiry for feminist art historians. I propose that Marion Arnold, Irene Below and Marilyn Wyman drew on feminist art history and that their writing made a substantial contribution to the artist's reputation. At the core of each feminist author's writing was, however, also the question of Stern's approach towards those of other races and her travels in southern Africa and to the Congo and Zanzibar in search of subjects 'untouched' by European influence.

Stern's attraction to different cultures and the resultant works were admired and an important part of her reputation during her own life. However, from the 1980s postcolonial criticism has problematised the act of speaking for cultures other than one's own. Here Stern's attitude has been labelled as colonial – referring to the appropriation and misrepresentation of other cultures. Within this context many authors – feminist and other – have addressed Stern's motivation for painting other cultures. In the second part of this chapter I aim to show that Stern's travels and attitude towards other cultures can be regarded as an important theme in the literature between 1990 and 2011. I view Stern's paintings, travels and writing as having offered rich material for writers, and while a number of authors approached Stern's attitude towards and works of other cultures I focus on the work of Marion Arnold, Neville Dubow,

Sowetan purchased a portfolio of drawings that were displayed in an exhibition which opened at the Gertrude Posel Gallery at Wits in October. Shortly thereafter, *Gerard Sekoto: Unsevered Ties*, a retrospective exhibition accompanied by a thoroughly researched catalogue (Spiro, 1989), ran at JAG from the 31 October 1989 to the 10 February 1990 and his work was again exhibited at Cassirer Fine Art, this time sharing the platform with painter and collagist Sam Ntlangethwa (1955-).

Irene Below, Claudia Braude, Marilyn Wyman and Lanitra Walker. They have been selected because they can, arguably, be considered to have offered diverse interpretations on the artist and to have published more widely. Considering the writing of these authors, I argue that what is striking is that despite the criticism of Stern as colonial, the artist is ultimately viewed in a positive light.

Feminism in South African art

While the feminist movement had made a significant impact in art in the Western world from the mid-1970s onwards, in South Africa its impact was less pronounced and society still appeared largely male-dominated.⁶⁹ This is not to say that there were no women artists. In fact women, or at least white women, were particularly prevalent in the art world (and still are today). As early as the 1920s Stern joined a growing number of female painters including Emily Fern (1881-1953), Nita Spilhaus (1878-1967), Ruth Prowse (1882-1967) and Maggie Laubser. Women artists were also recognised in the literature on South African art. *Arts in South Africa*, a dictionary of living artists published in 1933-1934, for example, included eleven (out of twenty-seven) female artists (Martin, in press).⁷⁰ Marilyn Martin (in press) has noted: "The inclusion of women artists sets South African art historiography apart from what took place at the time in Europe and America." In considering general overviews of South African art prior to 1970 Martin (in press) further noted that women were always included.⁷¹ Indeed, the prominence of women artists was so great that in 1975 the well-known American art critic, Clement Greenberg, remarked on their presence in a lecture at the Rand Afrikaans University (today the University of Johannesburg) (Skawran, 1994:275).

To add to the prominence of women artists, many academics, authors, gallery directors and art dealers in South Africa have been women. An early such example includes Pauline Thomas who became the first keeper of the Michaelis collection in Cape Town in 1914 (Berman, 1993a:435).⁷² Later examples, from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, include:

⁶⁹ For an account of the history of feminism in art history, in the Western world see, Gouma-Peterson and Mathews (1987).

⁷⁰ Published in Durban by Knox, the book's editor was known only as W.H.K (Martin, in press).

⁷¹ Martin's overview considered the following publications: *Pictorial Art in South Africa during Three Centuries to 1875* (Gordon-Brown, 1952), *The Arts in South Africa* (W.H.K, 1933), *Kuns in Suid-Afrika* (Bouman, 1935), *Kuns en Kunswaardering* (Bouman, 1942), *Painters of South Africa* (Bouman, 1949), *Skone Kunste in Suid-Afrika* (Nienaber, 1951), *The Collector's Guide to South African Artists* (Read, 1953), *Art in South Africa since 1900: Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Work/Kuns in Suid-Afrika sedert 1900: Skilderkuns, Beeldhoukuns en Grafiek* (Alexander, 1962), *South African Artists 1900-1962* (Jeppe, 1963) and the *Register of South African and South-West African Artists 1900-1969/Register van Suid-Afrikaanse en Suidwes-Afrikaanse Kunstenaars* (Anonymous, 1969) compiled by the Headquarters of the South African Association of Arts.

⁷² Esmé Berman (1993:435), noted that the artist, Nita Spilhaus had wanted the position but was not eligible because she was German.

Professor Karin Skawran who established the History of Art Department at The University of South Africa (UNISA) in 1961, remaining active in the department until her retirement in 1996, Esmé Berman, one of many South African women writers, who wrote the well-known: *Art & Artists of South Africa*, first published in 1970 (and revised in 1983) and *Painting in South Africa* (1993), amongst other publications, Nel Erasmus who was the Director of JAG from 1964-1977 and was followed by Pat Senior, who died in 1983. Also in Johannesburg, Linda Goodman opened The Goodman Gallery, a leading South African contemporary art gallery, in 1966.⁷³ That women have made a substantial contribution to South African art is a point widely acknowledged by South African writers.⁷⁴ Although somewhat beyond the scope of this study, the reason for women's prevalence does pose an interesting question.⁷⁵

What is, however, relevant is that even though there were many women working in the South African art world, feminism was not a major concern. In the literature, a review of *Artlook* and *De Arte*, South African art publications produced in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (although *Artlook's* last publication was in June/July 1976), reveals little concern with feminist issues.⁷⁶ There were many reviews and profiles on the work of women artists and many women writers contributed to the publications, while both had women editors for long periods (Hope Eglinton was editor of *Artlook* from 1968 to 1972 and Frieda Harmsen of *de arte* between 1975 and 1980).⁷⁷ But despite this, there was very little focus on feminist analyses of the work of either men or women artists. Moreover, it has even been argued that, as a feminist approach to art focused on women's issues was growing internationally (specifically in America and Europe), women in South Africa approached art as largely 'gender neutral'. In

⁷³ A more comprehensive list of South African women artists, educators, writers and administrators can be found in 'South African Women and the Fine Arts' (Skawran, 1994:281-282 & 275-277).

⁷⁴ Ivor Powell (1985:6) commented that "a very significant proportion of what might be called the ruling elite of the South African art world is – and always has been composed of females" in his essay for the catalogue *Women Artists in South Africa*. In the same publication Diana Kenton (1985:10) argued: "The predominance of women among South Africa's artists of excellence constitutes the single most distinguishing feature of the fine arts scene here." To add to this Karin Skawran (1994:275) noted that "white women artists, art historians, critics, administrators, and writers on art have indeed played a significant role in the history of South African art". Marion Arnold (1996:1) concurred that women "have made a substantial contribution. Certainly there are many well-known white women artists, gallery directors, academics, teachers and authors".

⁷⁵ Notably, both Marion Arnold (1996:1) and Karin Skawran (1994:275), in part, attribute the prevalence of women in the arts to its being viewed as an unmanly career.

⁷⁶ *Artlook* was an illustrated periodical first published in Johannesburg between 1966 and 1976. It was commercial and space could be purchased. As a result, content was eclectic, it varied in quality and did not gain much stature as a scholarly publication of serious criticism. But it did act as a link between the art community and art lovers (Berman, 1983:45-46). *De arte*, on the other hand, is a scholarly journal published by UNISA. A single pilot issue was published in 1965. In 1967 it was revived; however in the 1970s publications were erratic due to funding problems. In 1981 funding became more regular and the journal is still in circulation.

⁷⁷ Some of the women artists written about were Bettie Cillers-Barnard, Ruth Prowse, Alice Goldin, Maud Sumner, Barbara Greig, Berrel Jensen, Olivia Watson, Cynthia Villet, Anna Voster, Judith Mason, Aileen Lipkin, Cecil Higgs and Rhona Stern. Women writers included Frieda Harmsen, Esmé Berman, Anna Vorster, Margaret Alison, Natalie Knight, Linda Goodman and Nel Erasmus, amongst others.

1981 a Commission of Inquiry into the Creative Arts was established by the Nationalist government. The commission comprised ten men. Marion Arnold (1996:14) has noted that, when questioned on the selection, well-known art historian Esmé Berman said that in art there was no special women's view point, a view with which Pat Senior, the then Director of JAG, concurred. Arnold (1996:14) continued that this uncritical stance towards a women's viewpoint could "be attributed to South Africa's international isolation and local cultural politics". Indeed, South Africa's policies of racial exclusion had resulted in its becoming progressively isolated from the international world. South Africa was, for example, excluded from the Venice Biennale from 1968 until 1993 (Friedman, 2011:31).⁷⁸ Increasingly cut off from international art events, movements and developments in postmodern culture, many South African artists and writers may not have had the opportunity to engage with feminist ideas. What can, however, be considered to have been of even greater impact on the slow uptake of feminism was the preference given to the fight against race inequality in South Africa.

In the post-apartheid period, a number of South African feminist art historians have acknowledged that throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the fight against race inequality in South Africa was often regarded as a more pertinent issue than gender equality. Brenda Schmahmann (1999:52) noted that, "the country's history of racial oppression has made a focus on gender politics seem, for many, to be of minor importance", a sentiment with which Arnold concurred. Referring to the years of struggle in South Africa, Arnold (2005b:4) maintained: "Individuals were urged to see race, not gender, as their primary identity because race determined experiences of privilege or oppression, opportunity or deprivation, wealth or poverty, freedom of movement or restriction." As such, the art community developed a focus on race politics. From the late 1950s and reaching a peak in the 1980s, artists created work addressing race inequality.⁷⁹ To add to this – and as already discussed – race inequality became a pertinent issue in South African art history. There was a drive to re-assess the canon of South African high art which had largely excluded black artists and this revisionist approach – focusing on race rather than gender – became particularly prevalent in the 1980s.

While the concern with race politics was the dominant concern in South African art, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, an interest in women's issues, albeit not as pronounced, did begin to emerge in the 1980s. Artists including Penny Siopis (1953-) and Sue Williamson (1948-), who both also had an interest in race politics and history, created works dealing with

⁷⁸ South Africa was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale again in 1993 when the then Director of the Biennale, Achilo Bonito Oliva, extended an invitation to the South African department of foreign affairs. For a more detailed account of the importance of and South Africa's participation in the Venice Biennale see Martin (2003).

⁷⁹ A number of notable examples include Albert Adam's triptych, *South Africa 1959* (1959), Ronald Harrison's *Black Christ* (1962), Dumile Feni's *African Guernica* (1967), Jane Alexander's *The Butcher Boys* (1985/6), Paul Stopforth's *Elegy* (1981) and Lucas Seage's *Found Object* (1981).

gender.⁸⁰ To add to this, a number of events occurred which focused on women in art, with 1985 standing out as an important year. In this year the South African National Gallery (now the Iziko South African National Gallery) in Cape Town held the exhibition 'Women Artists in South Africa'. The exhibition coincided with the conference 'Women, their Achievements and Opportunities' held by the Women's Bureau and a Women's Festival of Arts was also held at different venues in Johannesburg. 'Women Artists in South Africa' focused on the art of women from the early days to 1985, especially profiling the art of black women. The Women's Festival of Arts differed in approach. Works were accepted with no adjudication. Arnold (1996:15) pointed out that there was a lack of "unity in objectives" which resulted in a failure to communicate a clear message to the public. The positive result of the exhibition was, however, that many women artists who had felt isolated realised that they were a part of a community and started to "understand that gender was central to their identity" (Arnold, 1996:15). The raising of awareness of women artists can be considered at the core of both exhibitions. Neither, however, placed a focus on Stern. Thus while the 1980s exhibitions are relevant because they are indicative of a growing interest in women artists, they had little direct impact on Stern's reputation.

Post-apartheid there was, however, further art historical interest in feminist interpretations and this became an important period for new readings of Stern. After the first democratic elections in 1994 the academic and art historical landscape shifted. As Marion Arnold (2005b:9) explained: "In 1994 academic links were re-established, cultural exchanges were promoted and South Africa was reinserted into the global art community." By this time feminist theory was well-established internationally. To add to this, South African art history was no longer overshadowed by race politics as it had been in the struggle years. South African scholars could thus more easily engage with feminist interpretations, and international scholars with an interest in feminist analysis could look to South African artists such as Stern for new subjects of study. The years from 1995 to 2005 thus marked a period of new (women focused) interpretations which proved important to Stern's reputation.

Core feminist appraisals of Stern and her art in the years 1995-2005

One of the first feminist scholars to write on Stern, post-apartheid, was German art historian Irene Below. Below has a research interest in feminist art and first encountered Stern when she discovered two of her works in the Kunsthalle Bielefeld collection during a study project in

⁸⁰ Examples include Siopis' *Dora and the Other Woman* (1988). After spending seven months in Paris in 1986, Siopis developed an interest in Dora (Ida Bauer), an hysteric who had been analysed by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. In the work Siopis (along with other feminists) considered Dora's hysteria as a resistance against patriarchy. Williamson, on the other hand, looked to South African women and is well-known for her work *A Few South Africans*, produced in the 1980s and depicting women involved in the struggle.

1986. According to Below (2003:31) the project was “characterised by notions of feminist art”. She focused on what was included and excluded from the museum’s collection and also considered how to make women artists more visible within it. Ten years later Stern was to become the sole focus of another project when Below, together with South African artist Liz Crossley, initiated an exhibition of Stern’s work in Bielefeld. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, *Irma Stern und der Expressionismus: Afrika und Europa: Bilder und Zeichnungen bis 1945* including the essay, ‘Peripherie und Zentrum: Irma Stern im Kontext’ written by Below. In 2003 Below also produced an essay ‘Between Africa and Europe’ for the *Expressions of a Journey* catalogue, where she discussed the concept of the exhibition and reflected on responses to it.

Much of Below’s writing on Stern was influenced by feminist theory, examining the artist in the context of feminism (and postcolonialism). In her writing Below used Stern’s identity as a woman to celebrate and champion the artist, showing that from a young age Stern succeeded in an art world dominated by men. She noted that the artist was, “able to establish herself in the male-dominated Expressionist avant-garde of the Berlin metropolis” and also that “[Stern’s] involvement in the artistic revolution [in Berlin] was through her role as the only female founder member and collaborator of the Socialist-inspired November Group in 1919” (Below, 2003:34). With this statement Below also suggested that Stern was a politically aware artist. Below’s view of Stern as politically aware is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. What is significant here is that Below extended Stern’s political awareness to women’s causes. LaNitra Walker (2009:9) noted that, in the essay ‘Peripherie und Zentrum’, Below presented Stern as identifying with feminist causes because she had worked with German women’s groups, including the Frauenkunstverband, a group promoting female art and founded by artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945). In this regard Below’s view of Stern – as politically aware and involved – is at odds with other authors. Neville Dubow (2003b:54), for example, took a different view. In direct response to Below’s political angle he argued:

For anyone who knew [Stern], this is difficult to take seriously. As far as the narrow politics of art was concerned, politicking had one primary function: to gain her the recognition she felt, justifiably, was her due. But in the wider sense she was apolitical (Dubow, 2003b:54).

For Dubow, Stern’s involvement with politics was only a means of self-promotion. Although he was not referring specifically to Stern’s involvement with feminist causes it is worth noting that, while Stern had affiliations with women’s groups, the promotion of or identification with feminist causes is not a theme which is apparent in the press coverage from her lifetime or in Stern’s own writing. This does suggest that, while Stern raised important questions regarding gender, and fertile grounds of enquiry for feminist art historians such as Below, the artist’s own interests were not driven by an identification with women’s causes.

Writing in the same period as Below, from the mid-1990s Marion Arnold also published extensively on South African art from a feminist perspective and her writing became pivotal to Stern's post-apartheid reception. In 1995 Arnold published *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye*. In 1996 she published *Women and Art in South Africa* and in 2005 co-edited (with Brenda Schmahmann) *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*.⁸¹ Each of the books included essays written by Arnold that dealt with Stern: 'Re-positioning Irma Stern' and 'Portraits of Servitude' in *Women and Art*, and 'European Modernism and African Domicile: Women Painters and the Search for Identity' in *Between Union and Liberation*. Additionally, her, 'Irma Stern: A Reputation in Print' was included in the *Expressions of a Journey* catalogue in 2003.

In *A Feast for the Eye*, Arnold positioned Stern as a woman as well as a modernist South African artist. To date the most comprehensive publication on Irma Stern, Deon Herselman (2013), Director at the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, has noted that ten thousand five hundred and forty books were printed and the last copies were sold in 2013.⁸² No other text on Stern has been so widely distributed and *A Feast for the Eye*, together with Arnold's articles on Stern, has given her a powerful influence in contemporary understandings of the artist. In fact, due to the sheer volume of her contributions and widespread distribution of *A Feast for the Eye*, Arnold could be considered to have shaped much of Stern's post-apartheid reception in South Africa. Drawing on various aspects of what was by then a well-established feminist literature, Arnold (1996:preface) stated that she wanted to make visible women who were overlooked and also to correct "distorted perspectives on some historically well-known artists". Stern was already one of South Africa's most famous artists and it was Arnold's second concern, to correct 'distorted perspectives', that was pertinent to her re-interpretation. To Arnold, most appraisals had taken the 'German Expressionist' and 'the spirit of Africa' approach, but this overlooked what the writer considered to be at the centre of Stern's creativity. She was a *woman*. Arnold encouraged her audience to consider Stern's identity as a woman as key to understanding her art, and while the theme is most strongly evident in her 1996 essay 'Re-positioning Irma Stern', it is also pivotal to her 1995 and 2005 writings.

Arnold used Stern's identity as a woman to celebrate and champion the artist and, in this regard, her approach was similar to Below's. Throughout Arnold's writing, Stern was

⁸¹ *Women and Art in South Africa* consists of a series of essays on women and art in South Africa, all written by Arnold, while *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994* looks specifically at the period 1910-1994, and comprises essays by different writers considering the history of women's art in South Africa.

⁸² Seven thousand one hundred and thirty English copies and three thousand four hundred and ten Afrikaans copies were printed. It must also be noted that books on South African art and artists have become highly collectable. While there is a large discrepancy in pricing, *A Feast for the Eye* is on sale and has sold for between R850 and R2 400.00 at selected dealers (In March 2016, *A Feast* sold at a Swelco auction for R850 and copies were on sale at Clarke's Books in Cape Town for R1 500.00 and the Collector's Treasury in Johannesburg for R2 400.00).

portrayed as a 'strong independent woman'. This was largely achieved by showing that Stern's behaviour and her art were at odds with the expectations of the conservative and male-dominated society in which she lived. In *A Feast for the Eye* Arnold (1995:12) explained that while women were expected to show a discreet restraint in matters of self-promotion, Stern was "assertive in her professional life", constantly promoted herself and was a "shrewd business woman who kept meticulous records detailing sales, and accounts which were being paid off". In Arnold's (1995:12) view these characteristics made her the "antithesis of a passive lady painter". Stern also travelled, in Europe and Africa, throughout her life. Explaining that few women travelled alone, especially in Africa, in her 1996 publication Arnold used this fact to further differentiate Stern as independent and even aligned her with other independent women: "As a traveller, Stern shows the courage that characterises the expeditions of women like Marianne North, Mary Kingsley, and Gertrude Bell." (Arnold, 1996:87) In 'European Modernism and African Domicile' Arnold elaborated on Stern's travels. Quoting Cynthia Enloe, she explained that in numerous societies, femininity is associated with home and masculinity with travel and a major difference between the sexes lay in the acceptance of men traveling away from the 'home'. Stern disregarded "the European association of femininity with 'home'" (Arnold, 2005a:53) and the artist was thus again at odds with her society's expectations of women. Additionally, Arnold said that Stern's modern painting defied conservative norms.

Stern's alignment with Modernism was not restricted to the adoption of a contemporary visual language. It was a demonstration of cultural transgression, a declaration of independence and rebellion against social conformity. Those women who adopted Modernist language proclaimed their rejection of official art, bourgeois social values and prescribed gender roles. In Berlin Stern is likely to have seen the work of German artists like Käthe Kollwitz, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Gabriele Münter; the Russian, Marian von Werefkin; Dutch-born Jacoba van Heemskerck; and Swede, Sigrid Hjertén. These artists had struggled to gain adequate training from a system that discriminated against women. In exhibiting their work, they asserted their right to be regarded as professional artists despite the common assumption that men were artists and women merely dilettantes (Arnold, 1996:79-80).

Here Arnold aligned Stern with modern women artists in Europe, suggesting that Modernism, in general, gave women a means to declare their independence. In 1920s South Africa, the art world was, however, more conservative than in Europe and Arnold further described how Stern's modern art challenged cultural norms in the country. For Arnold (2005a:51), Stern's works, "executed in a raw, expressionist style [...] challenged the tasteful romantic realism characteristic of the art scene in South Africa's mother city [Cape Town]". Stern thus undermined "the prevailing notion that women painters were refined young Englishwomen whose education was completed by the acquisition of pictorial skills demonstrating

accomplishment, rather than professional commitment born of formal art training” (Arnold, 2005a:51).⁸³

For Arnold then, Stern’s independence – as seen in her business acumen, travel and association with Modernism – challenged parochial South African society in the early twentieth century. However in ‘European Modernism and African Domicile’ Arnold went a step further and argued that Stern not only challenged the conservative art world but rose above what could be considered an impediment. By the 1940s Stern was one of South Africa’s most famous artists and Arnold (2005a:66) attributed this to her refusal “to allow the restrictions of gender, nationality or geography to shackle her creative drive”. Moreover, Arnold suggested that Stern’s success was in part due to the fact that she could use her difference – particularly her identity as an independent woman – to her advantage. To Arnold (2005a:64), Stern recognised the power of public image and “she wanted to acquire a distinctive voice and to insert herself as representative of the ‘new woman’ in the parochial, conservative South African art scene”. While her identity as a ‘new woman’ was a possible source of contention, Arnold (2005a:64) suggested that ‘all publicity is good publicity’: “As it was, her independence, forceful personality, adventurous lifestyle and prodigious creative energy won recognition in South Africa and Europe.” In conclusion to the essay ‘European Modernism and African Domicile’ Arnold said:

[Stern] entered a man’s world and vanquished the men who initially denigrated her and then became irreverent when she received attention about her distinctive assertive work, frequent well-publicized exhibitions and her ability to maintain celebrity status. Stern’s career as a white South African artist indicates that an emphatic adoption of modernist practice engaged productively with the politics of representation, and that gender was not necessarily an impediment to artistic and social success (Arnold, 2005a:67).

With this Arnold summed up her ‘strong independent woman’ framing of the artist. Stern is presented to a 1990s and 2000s audience, not as transgressive, but as a personality to be admired and celebrated.

While portraying Stern as assertive, Arnold also argued that she was vulnerable and insecure and this argument is most clearly presented in her 1996 ‘Re-positioning Irma Stern’. To Arnold, Stern was a contradictory woman: “She desperately needed affirmation but projected an air of assurance. Highly emotional, moody, introspective and insecure in almost all her personal relationships, she was nevertheless assertive in her personal life and absolutely

⁸³ It is worth noting that Stern was not the only female artist challenging conservative norms in South Africa. As I have already discussed there were many women artists working at this time and Maggie Laubser is another example of a modern artist from the same period. Stern, however, promoted her art far more vigorously and was very outspoken and can thus be considered to have posed a greater challenge than her contemporaries.

convinced of the value of her art.” (Arnold, 1996:77) Key to Arnold’s interpretation of Stern as vulnerable was the artist’s identity as a woman. She maintained that fundamental to her feminist approach is the “assumption that a woman’s life and her art cannot be divorced” and that Stern’s imagery was thus “infiltrated by her personal and social history and experience” (Arnold, 1996:77). Stern did not fit into the conservative expectations of the time but she also did not possess the kind of physical appearance conventionally desirable for a woman. Using Stern’s diary and personal letters, Arnold showed that the artist’s ungainly body caused her great distress. She quoted a diary entry in which Stern recounted her weight problems as a teenager as well as Stern’s communication to her friend Trude Boss that she was unhappy with her body (1996:83).

In a psychological reading of Stern’s art, Arnold then suggested that her paintings of idealised, particularly black African, women were a projection of her own desire to be ‘free’ and ‘beautiful’. Arnold (1996:83) argued that in her paintings from Natal (today Kwa-Zulu Natal), Swaziland and other rural areas, Stern painted rural women as “idealised beings” who could “display their bodies unselfconsciously”. These women represented a fantasy: “aspiring to be lithe and beautiful and knowing that she was not, Stern projects the concepts of female beauty on to the forms she creates” (Arnold, 1996:84) and in so doing eased the pain she experienced as a conventionally unattractive woman. Arnold (1996:84) continued that, “Painting also healed her, offering a realm of salvation where she could create images of fruitfulness, sumptuousness and sensory delight. The beautiful rural women she found and depicted were the antithesis of her self, lonely and unhappy.” Elaborating on her psychological interpretation of Stern the woman Arnold further suggested that her paintings of women were a form of self-portrait. Stern completed almost no self-portraits and Arnold argued that:

Instead she painted fantasised self-portraits when painting others. Although she painted portraits of middle-aged and old men, particularly in Zanzibar, Stern seldom painted old or care-worn women. Invariably her models – black and white – were young and graceful, at ease with their sexuality and beauty. She cherished an ideal of beauty which she sought to locate in life and to interpret in art (Arnold, 1996:87-88).

Arnold concluded (1996:89) that Stern’s art is a reflection of her vulnerability and strength: “Her work encodes the personal, and when this is acknowledged, she can be re-positioned within South African art and celebrated as a major woman artist.”

Both Below and Arnold used a feminist position to champion Stern but in 2000 Marilyn Wyman, another author with an interest in women’s art, took a more critical view. Wyman (2000) made an important contribution to the literature on Stern with her article ‘Irma Stern: Envisioning the ‘Exotic’’, published in the *Woman’s Art Journal*. Wyman claimed that, in her paintings of black Africans, Stern painted an exoticised ‘other’. She maintained that this was

an important theme for the artist and, using excerpts from Stern's own writing and her imagery of both men and women, argued that her use of a "colonising framework" (Wyman, 2000:21) was deliberate. This is an important argument, within post-apartheid literature, and it is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. What is significant here is that, like Arnold, a substantial section of Wyman's argument was concerned with Stern's imagery of African women and she drew on feminist notions of art history in order to understand Stern's treatment of female African subjects. To Wyman (2000:21), one must, however, firstly be aware of the concept of "engendered colonialism". She explained: "When we examine the work of male painters and their use of 'exotic women' as models, we address our critique to the overarching umbrella of empowerment and submission." (Wyman, 2000:21) But in South Africa 'woman' is not a stable category "she is white, coloured, or black; Afrikaner, English, Indian, or Native; urban or rural" (Wyman, 2000:21). Each of these categories "comes with its unique set of restricted and prescribed behaviours, creating patterns of superordination and subordination" (Wyman, 2000:21). Thus, for Wyman (2000:21), "Stern's gaze is not a feminist one sympathetic to her subjects. She stands in a position of power that places her in a surrogate male role, a position that South African feminist Olive Schreiner called 'parasitism'."

To illustrate her point Wyman noted that Stern was not confident with her physical appearance and felt she was unattractive. She thus described Stern's paintings of African women, such as *Pondo Woman among Kreepers* (1929) (**fig. 27**), as "idealized, even eroticized" claiming that they "may have become surrogates for her own desires for physical beauty" (Wyman, 2000:21). For Wyman, Stern was thus in a 'male' position of power and the author further argued that, later in her career, Stern also approached African female domestic workers from this position, suggesting that in *Maid in Uniform* (1955) (**fig. 28**), "the sitter's downcast eyes and generally introverted demeanour do not engage the viewer as an equal" and that the portrait rather "reaffirms the lack of social status inherent in domestic service" (Wyman, 2000:21). It must, however, be noted that Stern painted many of her subjects – male, female, black and white – in similar poses, with downcast eyes. A few examples from the 1940s and 1950s include: *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (Henny Stern) (1943), *Portrait (Young Girl)* (1944), *Portrait of Lippy* (1944) and *Portrait of Mrs Norton* (1959) (**figs. 18&29-31**). When considered in relation to these paintings *Maid in Uniform* may be interpreted, not as a comment on Stern's approach as unsympathetic to the position of the African woman domestic worker, but simply as a favourite pose for the artist – perhaps indicative of Stern approaching all her subjects from a position of power. Moreover, an alternative to Wyman's (2000:21) description of the woman of "generally introverted demeanour" who does "not engage the viewer as an equal" can be offered. Her folded arms could point to her dissatisfaction with her position. Her downcast eyes could be read as a refusal to meet the gaze of the viewer indicative of her dissatisfaction. *Maid in Uniform* then could be said to show Stern's sensitivity towards the position of domestic workers.

Wyman, however, took a view of Stern as unsympathetic to women's causes. In this regard she differs to (the feminist art historian) Below who understood Stern to have been sensitive to women's issues and aligning herself with women's groups. This indicates that, during the period of discussion, feminist interpretations allowed very different and often contradictory views on the artist. Wyman's Stern bears some similarity to Arnold's psychological reading in which she claimed that Stern's images of 'native' women were a reflection of her vulnerability as a woman. Wyman and Arnold, however, drew very different conclusions. For Arnold, Stern painted African women because she was vulnerable, and acknowledging the personal in Stern's art allowed her to be celebrated. Wyman dismissed Stern's African women as 'exoticising' and was critical of the artist who she said occupied a 'male' position of power. Essentially, Arnold – and Below – used feminist ideas to champion Stern while Wyman, also drawing on feminist notions of art history, found fault with the artist. For all the differences among these feminist scholars, their work in the 1990s and early 2000s added substantially to the literature on Stern and it does indicate that feminist interests were important for Stern's reputation at this time. However, beyond their interest in feminist ideas, it is relevant that at the core of each author's writing is also the question of Stern's attitude to her subjects of other cultures, her search for cultures untouched by Western influence and her resultant paintings of black African, Indian, Arab and coloured subjects – the 'other'.

Changing and contrasting interpretations of Stern's attitude to cultures other than her own

Stern's works of the 'other', often (although not always) devoid of Western influence, from South Africa, Swaziland, Zululand and Pondoland and further afield from Zanzibar and the Congo and largely painted in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s – were pivotal to the artist's reputation in her lifetime. These images were, and still are, often labelled as 'exotic' and this aspect of Stern's reputation in her own lifetime was covered in chapters one and two. It is, however, important to reiterate some of the main points. Early in her career Stern was admired in Europe for being 'in touch' with 'primitive' Africans and this was made clear in German art historian Max Osborn's 1927 publication, *Irma Stern*. While Stern's foreign acceptance (for example Osborn's publication) was important to Stern's early acceptance in South Africa, the belief that Stern knew the 'real' Africa characterised local reviews of the artist in the 1920s. In fact, by the late 1920s critics were even considering her 'native' studies as the works that defined Stern as a true South African artist. In the late 1930s and 1940s 'native life' became an increasingly popular genre in South Africa, Stern was progressively seen as an authority on African culture and even regarded as a kind of ethnographer. At this time she also travelled to the Congo and Zanzibar and her authority thus extended beyond southern Africa to the culture of Africans and Arabs further afield. It must be noted that Stern's paintings of 'others' were always problematic to some. In the 1930s Richard Feldman (1935:10) suggested that her work could be greater if she moved from painting 'exotic'

images of Africans to addressing the people of South Africa in more realistic urban settings – showing, for example, the “hard-worked girls of District Six”. During Stern’s own life, her travels in search of other cultures and her resultant paintings of ‘others’ were, however, largely regarded as a positive aspect of her reputation. Conversely, postcolonial criticism has provided a different ideological position and here Stern’s search for ‘exotic’ cultures untouched by Western influence and her resultant images of ‘others’ are viewed as problematic.

From the 1980s postcolonial criticism emerged as a popular ‘approach’ in cultural studies, literary criticism and the humanities in general (Cornwell, 2007). A broad and diverse field, post colonialism has offered a line of discussion critical of the colonial world’s view of the ‘other’. In the visual arts Linda Nochlin presented an important analysis in her ‘The Imaginary Orient’ in 1983 and her article is useful in understanding the criticism levelled at Stern. Drawing on Edward Said’s theoretical perspective on Orientalism which revealed the West’s patronising preconceptions of the East, Nochlin analysed the nineteenth century genre of Orientalist painting. She focused on paintings of Middle Eastern markets, temples, harems and mosques by artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). An important component of Nochlin’s analysis purported that the Orientalist genre did not actually tell the audience about the cultures it claimed to represent. Rather it told us about the French culture that consumed them and was indicative of this consuming culture’s beliefs and needs. To Nochlin, Orientalist paintings portrayed imagined fantasies and stereotypical subjects – types who were, for example, violent, lazy or lustful. Nochlin maintained that while Orientalist art claimed to show the immorality of the East, it was actually satisfying the sexual appetite of the West. She also pointed out that there were no Europeans in the paintings – as if the East were timeless and untouched by outside influence. By painting types and excluding European influence a view of the ‘other’ as a group of people very different from the French was created. For Nochlin Orientalist images served to remind their audience that the West was supposedly the centre of morality. They showed a culture that, apparently, needed rescuing and Nochlin proposed that their political purpose was to validate the West’s intervention in the East (Hatt and Klonk, 2006:223-230).

There are many differences between the Orientalists genre and Stern’s works.⁸⁴ In fact Stern’s conception of the ‘other’ can be considered to have more directly derived from German Expressionism and Gauguin. Stylistically she painted distorted forms using non-naturalistic colours in order to produce what Nettleton (2011:143) has termed “romanticised images of Africans as exotic Others”. What is important is that postcolonial analysis, of which Nochlin is an example, does provide a framework in which Stern’s search for cultures

⁸⁴ Stern, for example, did not attempt to paint accurate portrayals of her subjects. This is significant because Nochlin said that the technically detailed and realistic approach of the French painters added to the idea that their images were true depictions.

untouched by Western influence and resultant paintings can be viewed as appropriating, misrepresenting other cultures and serving the West's needs for an 'other'. In this regard the terms 'colonial' and 'exotic' can be used to describe Stern and her work in a critical and negative light. Many of the authors who have written on Stern, and who are discussed below, have acknowledged that Stern can be viewed critically as a colonial. It is, however, not a label with which all authors agree. Nonetheless, what is striking is that much of the literature between the years 1991 and 2011 does focus on Stern's search for and paintings of 'others' and authors have taken distinctly different positions on the matter.

Both Marion Arnold and Neville Dubow recognised that Stern might be considered colonial. Arnold (1995:150) succinctly stated that Stern can be viewed as "a white colonialist" and Neville Dubow (1991:103) acknowledged: "As an artist Stern did colonise whole areas of African experience." But both regarded the label as inappropriate and suggested that Stern needed to be seen in context. Arnold (1995:71) proposed that Stern was merely 'of her time'; "[Stern] did not live in the 'new South Africa'". Arnold (1995:71) continued that when Stern travelled in Africa she "looked for subjects that would constitute expressive pictorial statements because they could be interpreted in strong colour and lively brushwork", asserting that, "painting not social comment was her objective". With this comment Arnold shifted the focus from what could be perceived as an insensitive approach to other cultures to the more formal aspects of the artist's work, praising Stern's conviction as an artist and her rich oeuvre. Similarly, Dubow (1991:103) asserted that "viewed from the standards of post-colonial Africa, it is all too easy to stigmatise a pioneer artist like Irma Stern". He continued that "Irma's attitude to her 'native' subject matter does not fit comfortably into our present value system" (Dubow, 1991:103). As such he argued that she should be seen in context and offered an interpretation not dissimilar to Arnold's psychological reading – albeit without the focus on Stern's identity as a woman.

In *Paradise*, Dubow analysed Stern's journal in conjunction with letters to her friend Trude Bosse. According to Dubow (1991:7), these texts gave "insight into the more vulnerable areas of Irma's psyche". Using the letters and diary, Dubow framed Stern as an emotional and complex individual, asserting that her attraction to 'exotic others' was driven by personal factors. Self-conscious of her ungainly body, Dubow (1991:100) suggested that Stern found a freedom amongst other cultures that she could not find in her own: "What seems probable is that Irma, in pursuit of the untrammelled, the exotic, the Other, is really in pursuit of her own freedom." Building on this argument in the 2003 *Expressions* catalogue he further explained that in one sense Stern identified with and found freedom amongst her African subjects: "Here she could escape from her ungainly body. Metaphorically she could be naked amongst a host of naked strangers." (Dubow, 2003b:55)

For Dubow and Arnold, Stern's appearance was a source of insecurity. They also attributed her paintings of 'exotic' African women to her own psychological search for a kind of freedom. Dubow first proposed this argument in the 1991 publication *Paradise*. When Arnold started

writing about Stern in the mid-1990s she drew from Dubow's argument and also used Stern's letters to Trude Bosse (published in *Paradise*). Arnold, however, added a further layer of complexity to her argument, asking the reader to first see Stern as a woman. To Dubow, Stern was a complex individual but to Arnold (1996:89) she was "an enormously complex woman". What is of particular significance is that their readings avoid the issue of a Stern who appropriated and misrepresented other cultures. Instead the authors offered a more comfortable reading to an audience of the 1990s and 2000s by emphasising Stern's psychological impulses.

Arnold and Dubow's readings presented Stern as primarily driven by subjective urges. This Stern was in contrast to the sensitive, socially critical and politically aware artist who – along with her promotion of Stern as a woman – Irene Below first introduced at the 1996 Bielefeld exhibition. Discussing the exhibition in the *Expressions* catalogue Below (2003:33) stated that from the "distanced perspective of the outside observer" she was able to gain a different perspective. In looking through Stern's letters, unpublished texts and publications Below (2003:33) found "a sensitive, acutely observant, qualified artist". She claimed that Stern was first "politically awakened" (Below, 2003:33) as a child when her father was arrested in the Boer War and then, as a young woman in Germany, by the First World War and the political turmoil which followed.

In offering a view of Stern as socially critical, Below suggested that Stern portrayed the oppressed in a sensitive manner. She maintained that when Stern was living in Germany in 1913, "she sketched the domestic servants in a socially critical fashion, recalling the works of Käthe Kollwitz" (Below, 2003:35). Moreover, Below (2003:36) argued that in South Africa "Irma Stern's theme in the second half of the 1930s was the reality of black and coloured people in South African cities". Below noted that Stern had possibly been inspired by Richard Feldman, a socialist Yiddish writer and friend of the artist, and used Feldman's writing on Stern to evidence her case for the artist as socially aware. Below said that Feldman had previously (in 1936) criticised Stern for only depicting scenes outside colonial modernisation, but quoted an extract from a 1941 article to show that he then saw her taking a new direction:

These oils are works of art of social and historical value. They will tell future generations of the tragedy of the country's outcasts, of those who are neither White nor Black, and telling the story of their social degradation, these pictures will also convey the story of an existence in a state of perpetual semi-starvation and ill-health (Feldman, 1941 cited in Below, 2003:36).

Below (2003:36) did not know which works Feldman was writing about and noted that "the individual paintings referred to by Feldman in this review have, until this day, not been traced". She, however, continued that "a few other well-known works that still exist, can give an indication" (Below, 2003:36) but did not give examples of the works to which she referred.

It is worth noting that few examples that fit Feldman's description can be located amongst known works by Stern. Although no comprehensive catalogue raisonné exist, a preliminary survey of her works held in public collections and those sold on auction reveals few examples which, I believe, show "the reality of black and coloured people in South African cities" (Below, 2003:36). Works from the second half of the 1930s including; *Woman in the Kitchen* (1941), *Portrait of a Girl* (1939), *The Flower Seller* (1935) and *Malay Girl* (1939) (figs. 32-35) can be considered to fit Below, and Feldman's, descriptions. They, however, only constitute a small portion of the artist's output, perhaps not large enough to qualify the area as "Irma Stern's theme in the second half of the 1930s" (Below, 2003:36).

Nonetheless, Below used Feldman's reference to images of the suffering of South Africa's coloured population as evidence for Stern as socially critical and sensitive. In addition, the author built on her argument by proposing that Stern's images of 'others' were motivated by the artist's sensitivity to and genuine interest in other cultures. Using Stern's lithographic portfolio *Dumela Morena* (produced in Germany in 1920) as an example, Below (2003:35) firstly acknowledged that Stern did portray Africa as a "paradise populated by timeless creatures living in harmony with nature". She continued: "Here, as with other works of this era, she shares the Expressionist 'primitivism' and its idealising and dehistoricising view of the 'other'." (2003:35) Below, however, maintained that Stern's work also differed from other Expressionists in that it showed a greater sensitivity to other cultures. She said that Pechstein, for example, "in his paintings of the South Pacific, projects European gender patterns onto the life of the islanders" but that "Irma Stern based on the knowledge she gained locally, represents the widely divergent spheres of the sexes" (Below, 2003:35). On Stern's return to South Africa in 1920 Below considered this gap – between Stern and European Expressionists – to have grown. To Below (2003:35), Stern's painting changed as "real models replaced the idealised images which she had painted from memory". She explained:

In contrast with the European tendency to represent an uncultured and a-historic continent, in which only one human race lived in its original state, Irma Stern presented images of an ancient endangered high culture, accompanied by cultural historical commentaries on the way of life, customs and mentalities of the different ethnic groups, written by herself or by Hilda and Roza van Gelderen, friends and reviewers of her work (Below, 2003:35).

With this comment Below suggested that Stern had a genuine interest in different cultures, a point emphasised in noting:

Irma Stern also discovered the cultural, ethnic and social diversity in South Africa. She depicted Indians at concerts, Chinese actresses, Cape Malays and others. With this, she increasingly distanced herself from the 'primitivist' concept of German Expressionism and its generalising and abstracting terminology" (Below, 2003:35-36).

In 2011 another author, Claudia Braude, used Below's politically astute Stern as an entry point for her own interpretation in her article, 'Beyond Black and White: Rethinking Irma Stern'. While Braude was critical of much of the post-apartheid literature on Stern because she felt that it did not adequately address the political nature of her work, she found some affinity with Below's interpretation and interpreted Stern "through Below's eyes" (Braude, 2011:57). However, instead of positioning the artist in relation to the South African political situation, as Below had, Braude positioned Stern in relation to German politics and Nazi anti-Semitism. Braude is an independent academic and research fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation who has an interest in research and writing related to Jewish history and identity, particularly in South Africa.⁸⁵ Consistent with this interest in Jewish identity, she formulated an analysis of the artist as a politically astute *German-Jew* and questioned Stern's relationship to German Expression.⁸⁶ In so doing the author offered a new interpretation of Stern's paintings of 'others' arguing that the attraction to the 'other' should not be viewed as that of a colonial appropriating other cultures. To Braude Stern's paintings of 'others' should rather be viewed as a search for a civilisation that would offer an alternative to the horrors committed by European civilisation.

Braude firstly emphasised that, as a German Jew, Stern would have been deeply affected by the horrors of World War Two and used an excerpt from Stern's letter to Trude Bosse to evidence her claim. Dated the 24 April 1933, less than three months after Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany, Stern wrote: "I get terribly frightened 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." (Stern, 1933 cited in Braude, 2011:55) Stern wrote this letter on her way to Namaqualand and Swaziland and continued that "I am going to see the 'savages' [den Wildern] and probably I shall meet cultured people there" (Stern, 1933 cited in Braude, 2011:55). To Braude (2011:55), "Stern's comment about 'savages' embodied a profound critique of Western civilization." The author continued: "Justifiably disillusioned with Europe with Hitler's rise to power, Stern looks for an alternative to European 'civilization' in what others consider darkest Africa. In the process, she inverts the colonial relationship to Africa, equating Africa with civilisation and Europe with barbarianism." (Braude, 2011:55-56)

⁸⁵ In 2001 Braude edited *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology* (University of Nebraska Press), she is research associate for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and created the Litvish Legacy Foundation to provide research on Lithuanian Jewish presence in South Africa.

⁸⁶ Stern's ties to German Expressionism had also been questioned in the 2006 exhibition, *Journeys to the Interior: Unseen Works by Irma Stern, 1929-1939* at the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, researcher, Andrea Lewis, however focused on the development of Stern's style in relation to the movement, unlike Braude who drew on the link to German Expressionism and Stern's German-Jewish identity in an exploration of her paintings of 'others'.

Like the other authors already discussed, Arnold, Dubow and Below, Braude acknowledged that Stern could be criticised for her colonial attitude but also regarded the interpretation as inappropriate. Braude quoted Stern in a *Cape Argus* article relating to the artist's 1933 trip to Swaziland and Namaqualand: "It was a shock to me to see how the natural picturesqueness of the native in his kraal had almost entirely disappeared. Six years ago I saw him a joyous, untrammelled creature, the spirit of Africa at its happiest and most colourful. Today he has submitted to civilization." (Stern, 1933 cited in Braude, 2011:55) Using this quote Braude then noted that Stern's search for those she termed 'savages' and her subsequent disappointment at finding them too 'civilised' could be used to interpret her as "a white, colonial racist pursuing an idealised, exotic 'other'" (Braude, 2011:56). But she continued that this would be a decontextualised assessment and offered an alternative interpretation based on Stern's German-Jewish identity. Stern's works of the 'exotic other' assume "an entirely different significance when, recognising the significance in Stern's life and work of her German-Jewish identity, they are read in relation to her fears of Nazism" (Braude, 2011:56). To Braude (2011:56), Stern's German-Jewish identity firstly allowed her search for 'savages' to be interpreted as a search for "alternative environments and societies untouched by European 'civilisation'". Secondly, it allowed her disappointment at failing to find them to be viewed, not as "the disappointed response of the colonial unsuccessfully seeking the exotic subject", but rather as "the depression of the German-Jewish modernist failing to find an environment untouched by the European 'civilization' responsible for the hatred unfolding in Europe" (Braude, 2011:56).

While Braude introduced her claim that Stern was searching for an alternative to European civilisation by reference to the artist's early trips in southern Africa, she also extended her argument to include the artist's travels further into Africa in the late 1930s and 1940s: "In the years leading up to and throughout the war, Stern's quest for the cultured 'savage' in response to European barbarism took her to still-strongly traditional Zanzibar and Congo." (Braude, 2011:56-57). Braude linked these trips to a political motive of Stern's, to keep German Expressionism alive. Stern first travelled to Zanzibar in 1939 and to the Belgium Congo in 1942. By this time the Nazi's assault on modern art was well underway. Pechstein had been expelled from the Berlin Academy in 1933. In the same year the Nazis had burnt books – including publications by Stern's biographer, Max Osborn – in a campaign to purge Nazi Germany and Austria of literature 'un-German' in spirit. That the Nazi campaign against modern art and literature and Stern's travels took place in the same period was significant to Braude:

At a time when Stern's former friends and collaborators in Berlin had been expelled from the academies, banned from public display, displayed in the Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich in 1937, gone into exile or imprisoned in death camps, Stern purposefully and physically went into the heart of the African societies whose art had been so influential in modernist art from the turn of the century (Braude, 2011:57).

She continued: "Having sought and found alternatives to European 'civilization' in 'savage' Zanzibar, Stern energetically represented them in her work. Stern's production in these years should be considered a *continuation* of German Expressionism." (Braude, 2011:57) Thus, "rather than 'clutching' at a lost cultural moment" the artist "*reinvigorated* and breathed new and unexpected life into German Expressionism" [emphasis added] (Braude, 2011:56). With this comment Braude suggested that Stern's journeys into Africa, and her resultant paintings, could be linked to a desire – based on Stern's politics and identity as a German Jew – to keep German Expressionism alive.

By foregrounding Stern's identity as a German-Jew Braude thus accounted for all of Stern's travels into Africa and paintings of 'others' – particularly Africans and Arabs. Braude's Stern is politically motivated and completely freed from postcolonial criticism's tendency to view her as an appropriator of other cultures. Appropriately titled, 'Beyond Black and White', her article re-positioned Stern outside of black and white race relations and instead constructed her only in relation to the German political situation – where it was possible for her to be free of the more difficult, colonising aspects of her reputation. In offering an alternative, and positive, reading to Stern's 'exotic' imagery of 'others', Braude's approach bears some similarity to that of the authors discussed above – Dubow, Arnold and Below. Each author offered an alternative to Stern the coloniser. Dubow and Arnold proposed that Stern was not a political commentator but was driven by psychological impulses. Below argued that Stern was politically and socially sensitive and that she was interested in portraying social realities and understanding those she painted. Braude argued that Stern was political, but in relation to German and not South African politics. While the authors are not in agreement and their interpretations are often contradictory they all acknowledged that Stern's approach to other races can be viewed as problematic (although they do not personally view the artist as such).⁸⁷ They, however, also all offered readings that can be considered to portray a positive image of the artist but the academic literature does not always view Stern's approach to 'others' positively. A critical view is evident in Lucy Alexander and Evelyn Cohen's *150 South African Paintings: Past and Present* published in 1990. Marilyn Wyman and LaNitra Walker, however, offer more in-depth interpretations in support of the view that Stern appropriated other cultures and was a coloniser in search of the exotic.

Alexander and Cohen (1990:69) noted that Stern "appropriated Africa and its landscape". Analysing a painting of a white South African, *Portrait of Roza van Gelderen* (1931), they argued: "The treatment is very different from the simplified curved contours and impassive mask-like expressions which she accords her African subjects, whose settings and clothing

⁸⁷ As already quoted Arnold (1995:150) noted that Stern can be viewed as "a white colonialist". Dubow (1991:103) said that Stern can be viewed "as a colonialist, an imperialist, even a racist". Below (2003:35) acknowledged that Stern did at times hold an "idealising and dehistoricising view of the 'other'" (also already quoted) and Braude (2011:56) maintained that Stern's own reference to 'savages' in Swaziland could be read "to confirm perceptions of her as a white, colonial racist pursuing an idealised, exotic 'other'".

are often more important to Stern than their faces. Roza is a unique individual; Stern's Africans are 'other' people" (Alexander and Cohen, 1990:69). Similarly in a discussion of the still-life, *Arum Lilies* (1951) the authors proposed that Stern viewed African people as mere objects representative of 'exotic' Africa:

This wooden figure is painted in a very similar way to Stern's portraits of living African people, with angular contours and simplified curves. This still life shows as much about the artist's full-bodied use of paint as it does of her romantic excitement about Africa, the mythical and mysterious 'Dark Continent' (Alexander and Cohen, 1990:70).

Ten years later, Wyman addressed Stern as an appropriator of other cultures. Wyman applied a feminist analysis to Stern but she was also critical of her as a colonial subject in search of an 'exotic other'. The author noted that in Osborn's 1927 biography he implied that Stern had a special understanding of 'wild' Africa because she grew up in South Africa. She, however, also stated that in 1994 Karel Schoeman had shown this to be incorrect – Stern did not spend her childhood in a 'wild' or tropical Africa.⁸⁸ Wyman (2000:19) thus argued that it is therefore "clear that the images of native peoples that populate Stern's painting, especially during her early career, were as exotic to her as the Pacific Islanders to Gauguin and Pechstein". Building on this argument Wyman noted that when Stern returned to South Africa in the 1920s she did travel into Africa but that these journeys were as much in search of an 'exotic other' as those of European artists:

In the spirit of Pechstein's sojourn in the South Pacific Stern travelled up the coast to Natal, spending time in Umgababa, and later in Swaziland and the Congo, where she painted native women in much the same way that she later painted still lifes drawn from her extensive African art collection – as fascinating objects expressively rendered in paint (Wyman, 2000:19).

Moreover, using examples from the artist's diary, press interviews and an analysis of her imagery, Wyman argued that Stern intentionally approached her subjects as 'exotic' and 'other'. An excerpt from Stern's diary from her 1910 trip to Victoria Falls was quoted: "I went hunting, searching for black people, built up a collection of negroes whom I captured on fine white Ingres paper." (Stern, 1914 cited in Wyman, 2000:19-20) Using this quote Wyman (2000:19) claimed that, for Stern, "the people and their objects were merged into a single colonial vision not unlike the prevailing zoological tropes within Germany". Thus, unlike ethnographic artists such as Barbara Tyrrell, "Irma Stern was less interested in documenting native culture than in romanticizing, mythologizing, and exoticizing it" (Wyman, 2000:20). Also quoted by Wyman was a 1926 article written by Stern for the *Cape Argus*:

⁸⁸ Schoeman's argument was addressed in chapter two.

I had to go where there was no sign of Europe, no trace of civilization – just Africa lying in the sun with its stretches of untouched land and its dark people as it had been lying...since the day of creation. I found the natives lovely and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar animal-like beauty which adds a touch of the tragic to the expression of their faces – the heaviness of an [awakening] race not yet freed from the soil (Stern, 1926 cited in Wyman, 2000:20).

Using this excerpt as evidence Wyman (2000:20) further argued that “Stern recognized the native as exotic”. For Wyman this was an important theme in Stern’s painting and she further analysed the painting, *The Hunt* (1926) (**fig. 36**) to illustrate that Stern approached her subjects as ‘exotic’ and ‘other’. The painting is of a group of Swazi men, and their dogs, waiting for the king to arrive:

The figures have been neutralized and there is little of the individual evident in this carefully constructed composition, a decision not unusual for Stern, who defined native peoples not as human subjects but as types or objects to be painted. In fact, there is no clearly established hierarchy among the subjects portrayed, either through colour or line, so that the men, shields, spears, and dogs all carry the same visual weight (Wyman, 2000:20).

Wyman’s criticism can be summed up with her statement that Stern’s “construction of native imagery within a colonising framework was *deliberate*” [emphasis added] (Wyman, 2000:20).

Nine years later, in 2009, another scholar, LaNitra Walker, proposed a view of Stern, which although not directly criticising her as a colonial, problematised the artist’s position towards other races. In her doctoral thesis, Walker argued that although Stern mixed in liberal circles critical of apartheid policies she still maintained a relationship with the apartheid government. Essentially because this relationship was good business: “Stern was an artist, but above all, she was a business woman and she understood the need to leverage situations for career advancement.” (Walker, 2009:126) One of many ways in which Walker evidenced her claim was by using Stern’s reaction to a request to donate to the Treason Fund. In apartheid South Africa, in December 1956 over one hundred and fifty were arrested and charged with treason. The main trial continued until 1961 and the Treason Trial Defence Fund was established to assist with funds for the defence. Freda Feldman (Richard Feldman’s wife and Stern’s friend) raised money for the fund and in 1958 asked Stern to assist. Stern agreed to donate one painting. However, when Freda Feldman asked her for more the artist declined. Walker interpreted this act as Stern implicitly condoning the apartheid government. To Walker (2009:187), “The Treason Trial drew the line in the sand between those who opposed apartheid and those who were willing to tolerate it.” The author continued that the government had made it clear that they would prosecute those who threatened them. Stern had received government support for travel and overseas exhibitions and for Walker (2009:187) the artist “seemed unwilling to risk her artistic career for politics”.

It is interesting to note that Braude (2011:58) took a very different view of this event. As stated earlier in this chapter Braude put forward a view of Stern which foregrounded her identity as a German-Jew. Braude noted that the National Party which had risen to power in South Africa held a pro-Nazi stance and that Stern was aware of this. She continued that, many South African Jews were, “starting to deal with the knowledge of the fact and extent of the destruction of Jewish communities throughout Europe” (Braude, 2011:58). To Braude, Stern was thus fearful that the pro-Nazi stance would “be accompanied by formal anti-semitism” (Braude, 2011:58). The author then proposed that Stern’s refusal to donate a second painting to the Treason Fund was motivated by the artist wanting to “avoid official attention” (Braude, 2011:58). Quoting Mona Berman (Freda Feldman’s daughter) Walker elaborated: “well aware of the fate of fellow artists in Germany during the war, and having already expressed fears regarding anti-Semitism in South Africa, [Stern] was clearly uneasy about the attention she might draw to herself if she continued to donate paintings to the Treason Fund” (Berman, 2003 cited in Braude, 2011:58).

The authors’ strikingly different interpretations of this event highlight the extent to which academic interpretations of artists are constructed and ever-changing. Indeed, in this late posthumous period Stern’s images of 'exotic others' and approach to other races have not only been viewed differently by different authors. They have taken on meanings very different from those attributed to the artist and her works in Stern’s lifetime. Viewing Stern as a colonial white artist could have been catastrophic for her reputation in a postcolonial society. But what is important is that authors have found ways to re-position her. An interest in feminist art history and South African women artists can be considered to have raised Stern’s profile from the mid-1990s and into the 2000s. Here Wyman was critical of the artist, but both Arnold and Below used Stern’s identity as a woman to champion her. Their analysis often focused on Stern’s approach to those of other races and her resultant paintings of 'others'. It is worth remembering that Stern painted many other themes – still-lives, landscapes, seascapes, scenes of harvesters and fishermen. In this late posthumous period a great deal of focus has, however, been placed on the narrow area of her portraits of the 'other'. This can be attributed to postcolonial criticism having created a discourse around the colonial world’s view of the 'other'. Postcolonial criticism has, however, also created an atmosphere in which Stern can, and has, been criticised as a colonial. What is significant is that although authors like Alexander and Cohen, Wyman and Walker have, to a point, offered a view critical of Stern’s attitude to other races a considerable proportion of the literature – particularly Dubow, Arnold, Below and Braude – have presented a favourable reading of the artist to an audience in the 1990s and 2000s.

Chapter 5: Irma Stern's Reputation in the Market in the early 2000s

This chapter is primarily concerned with Stern's reputation in the market in the early 2000s. The period up until 2013 is considered but of particular interest is the substantial market interest in the artist between 2010 and 2011. Before proceeding with an outline of the intentions of the chapter it is important to establish why this period is of interest. While the market for Sterns has been positive from the artist's lifetime, until 2010 her prices could be considered as being on a par with other modern South African artists such as Pierneef and Laubser. However, between 2010 and 2011 the market value of Stern's works increased dramatically, setting her pricing apart from previously comparable artists. In Stern's lifetime, while her very first exhibitions in the early 1920s were not commercially successful, the artist soon found commercial success. As noted by Christopher Peter (2012), "There was hardly a time when she was not commercially successful." After her death Stern's market remained strong. In Stephan Welz's review of the market between the years 1969-1995 she was, for example, listed as amongst the highest priced twentieth-century South African artists (Welz, 1996:7).

Examining auction records it further becomes evident that Stern was always amongst the highest priced artist (although not always the highest). Her highest price in the period 1969-1995 was, for example, equal to Pierneef's.⁸⁹ Moving to the 2000s, in November 2006 the highest price for a South African artwork at auction was for Laubser's *Mother and Child* (1924) at R4 million. The following year the record increased to R6.6 million for Stern's *Indian Woman* (1936). But in 2008 Pierneef's *The Baobab Tree* surpassed this, selling for £720 thousand (R11 160 000.00). In 2010 Stern again became the highest priced South African artist: *Gladioli* (1939) sold for R12 million and a week later *Bahora Girl* (1949) sold for £2.1 million (R23 310 000.00). The following year, in 2011, Stern's record price increased again when *Arab Priest* (1945) sold for £2.7 million (R30 320 000.00). With the sale of *Bahora Girl* the margin between Stern's pricing and that of artists such as Pierneef and Laubser (whose records had not increased since 2006 and 2008 respectively) grew exponentially and the gap became even larger with *Arab Priest*. The artist was thus no longer merely on a par with other modern South African artists; her prices were substantially higher and this differentiates Stern's market in the early 2000s from earlier periods.

This meteoric rise in Stern's prices received a great deal of coverage in the popular press in the early 2000s and especially between 2010 and 2013. In fact the majority of coverage on

⁸⁹ In June 1993 R209 000.00 was paid for Stern's *Still Life of Delphiniums* (1938) and in May 1995 the same figure was paid for Pierneef's *Landscape* (1925).

the artist related to the high prices of her work. Articles were written about each new auction record, with papers sporting headlines such as 'Stern breaks Record Barrier' (*The Star*, 2010) and 'R34m Stern Steals Show at Auction of SA Art' (*Cape Times*, 2011). To add to the media coverage, interest in Stern's market value was also evident in scholarly writing. In 2011 Braude raised questions about the market for Stern in 'Beyond Black and White'. In 2012 Federico Freschi asked why the market favoured particular works in the article 'Self and Other' and, at the 2013 South African Visual Art Historians (SAVAH) conference, Nic Botha presented a paper 'Stern's Status: Constructing and Collecting an Icon' which considered how Stern's reputation as one of South Africa's most collectable (and valuable) artists was built. Stern's reputation was previously based on aspects of her art and personality, on her status as a foreign modern artist and then as an artist 'in touch' with Africa. More recently, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the artist was viewed as a strong woman worthy of admiration and a colonial artist appropriating other cultures. In the 2000s, and perhaps peaking around 2010, Stern's reputation appears to have been largely tied to the values obtained for her works and her potential as an 'investment artist'.

The chapter will seek to investigate how Stern has come to be so extremely valued and asks what is actually valued, in Stern, by the market. Auction catalogue entries and results up until 2011 are analysed.⁹⁰ To add to this, popular press, interviews with market experts and scholarly articles on the artist – extending beyond 2011 to 2013, thus considering reflections on the records achieved in 2010 and 2011 – are considered. Before looking at Stern in detail, the broader environment is taken into account. I suggest that a global shift towards valuing art as an investment, which first started in the 1960s, and a growth in the view that South African art was a good investment in the 2000s, laid the foundations for Stern's increase in price. The chapter next evaluates how key players in the South African art market – auction houses, dealers and collectors – have influenced the market for Stern. Auction houses trading in South African art increased in number in the 2000s. A number of auction houses were thus competing to achieve good sales. Evaluating their sales structures I aim to show that record prices achieved for Stern can be considered to have shifted the pricing level for the artist's work. I then argue that dealers, who also trade in Sterns, have actually worked to increase the value of South African art – and specifically Stern. To add to this, collectors can be viewed as having influenced value. Established South African art collectors have supported Stern. New South African collectors, who can be viewed as following a 'herd mentality', can also be considered to have joined the market for Stern and I propose that, while difficult to prove, wealthy collectors may also have purposefully pushed up Stern's prices. To add to the local collectors, new international collectors are also credited with

⁹⁰ In assessing auction results I used Welz's (1996) *Art at Auction in South Africa: The Market Review, 1969 to 1995*. The book lists some of the more substantial or higher prices reached for Sterns on auction between 1969 and 1995 but of more use was the website artprice.com which lists all sales at auction from 1991 to the present.

bringing large sums of money into the Stern market and thus having a substantial influence on the increase in price.

International collectors highlight the relevance of international recognition to Stern's growing market and I propose that in addition to international market recognition, recognition by international institutions, and Stern's ties to German Expressionism are valued in the market. These international links can be viewed as important in establishing Stern's value in the market. However, I also investigate why particular Sterns are more valued than others and propose that Stern's 'exotic' portraits of 'others' – particularly from the late 1930s and 1940s are considered the artist's most desirable. The preference has been viewed as a reflection of a bourgeois art-buying public reinforcing social hierarchies (Freschi, 2012). In the final section of the chapter I turn to promotional material from the market in an attempt to discern how different works are in fact promoted. Here, recognisability, literature, ownership and display history and the rarity of an artwork are assessed.

Art as investment

The idea of investing in art may, in the current time, be a well-known concept. It is, however, a fairly recent phenomenon and Stern's 'investment potential' and 'record prices' can be situated as a part of this trend. In his 1984 article 'Art and Money', Robert Hughes offered an explanation as to how this situation developed. He, in part, attributed the possibility for art to be considered an investment to the liquidity of modern capital. "There is far more cash in circulation today. Far more money is printed than was minted. Very large amounts of credit are available, and the highly abstract qualities of modern finance favour the swift conversion of assets into cash." (Hughes, 1984:391) In preindustrial Europe the wealthy were asset-rich but cash-poor because their money was tied up in land. Selling land was difficult and to do so for a painting would have been "considered improvident lunacy" (Hughes, 1984:392). To Hughes, the availability of cash aided in the development of art as an investment but what was of more influence was that Western culture had been "schooled to think of works of art as investment commodities" (Hughes, 1984:391). Hughes proposed that, since the 1960s, the art market had been working to convince buyers that art is worth large investment. While admitting that it is difficult to identify a starting point, Hughes argued that the shift began when the Times-Sotheby Art Indexes were created in the mid-1960s. The Indexes, which became popular in London and New York, were conceived by a public-relations man hired by Peter Wilson, then chairperson of Sotheby's, who was working to shift the auction house's conservative image. They charted the prices of artworks and, embellished with graphs, made visible the rises in prices, essentially objectifying the idea of art as an investment. Hughes (1984:396) maintained that from this time the concept grew and that by the 1980s 'art as an investment' was a familiar idea.

Hughes was writing in 1984. While he noted that the collector as investor fell out of favour in the 1980s, since this time, and certainly in the 2000s, art has continued to be marketed as an investment. In 2013 numerous art price indexes and databases were in existence. Similar in concept to the Times-Sotheby's Indexes they were, however, often larger and more detailed. Examples include Artprice, Artfact, Artnet and the Art Sales Index.⁹¹ Most of this art market information is easily available via subscription websites. Subscribers can gauge value and track price progress in order to evaluate which artists will deliver the largest profit, suggesting that the tendency to view art as an investment is more than ever applicable in the 2000s.

South African art as investment

In the 1960s, when Hughes argued that art was promoted as an investment in the large art centres of New York and London, South African art was also considered to have investment potential – at least within the local market. In 1962 Esmé Berman addressed the topic in an article 'The Art Market' published in the periodical *News/Check*. Berman noted that while South African art was not reaching the astronomical prices of international artists, there was a healthy local market for South African works (Berman, 1962 in Berman, 1972:5).⁹² Ten years later Berman published *The South African Art Market 1971/72*.⁹³ The book included general information on the art market, a discussion of recent trends and a price survey which to Berman's knowledge was the first "attempt ever to provide an objective study of the South African art market" (Berman, 1972:3). In the publication Berman (1972:9) noted that art was

⁹¹ The Artprice database (www.artprice.com) includes price levels and indices covering over 400 thousand artists and over 25 million auction results. The website also includes regular articles on the art market and an art market confidence index. Artfact (www.artfact.com) lists price results from over 1000 auction houses, Artnet (www.artnet.com) includes a price database covering more than 3.5 million auction sales and the Art Sales Index (www.art-sales-index.com) records the price and information of fine art sold at auction and holds over 2.5 million auction entries.

⁹² Berman noted that Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* had been bought by New York's Metropolitan Museum for R1.5 million and that Cézanne's *Boy in a Red Waistcoat* had sold at Sotheby's for R440 thousand in 1958. By comparison Pierneef's *Valley of a Thousand Hills* was, in 1962, sold for R1 155.00 – and this was considered a high price for a South African work.

⁹³ The book was originally conceived of as an annual or biannual publication. Berman had obtained assistance from knowledgeable people in the art world including "museum directors, academics and gallerists" (Basson, in press). Basson (in press) notes that, these individuals were asked "to qualitatively assess" a list of artists which had been compiled using gallery and auction records from the period March 1971 to June 1972. A 'star' system was used to rate which artists were considered the most 'collectable'. This system, however, resulted in controversy. Shortly before the book's release an article titled 'Now you can Play the Art Game' by Lin Menge appeared in the *Rand Daily Mail*. The subtitle was 'Six brave Men and Women have allocated Star Gradings [sic] to South Africa's Artists' and a list of whom to buy showing the top artists and their star ratings was included. Shortly after the article appeared a well-known Johannesburg artist contacted Berman wanting to know why he was not among the top artists. The criterion used had not been included in the article and Berman did, at the time, not have time to explain them to the artist. Discontent from others followed and there were soon many letters from unhappy artists in the newspapers. Berman did also receive support for the project but she was so devastated by the incident that she destroyed the undistributed books of which there were several hundred (Basson, in press).

developing as an area of business, that there had been “a tremendous upsurge in interest in art-as-investment” and that works by well-known South African artists had “appreciated considerably in market value in recent years”.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the idea that South African art could be an investment remained relevant. This is attested to in auctioneer Stephan Welz's publications on the art market in 1989 and 1996. In both publications Welz maintained that there was a good market for South African art and that collectors remained interested in trends and values. Moving to the period of study, the 2000s, it must firstly be noted that some South African dealers discouraged viewing art as an investment. In 2007 Michael Stevenson (cited in Toffoli, 2007) argued that investment should not be "the motivating principle" in buying art. Similarly, Mark Read (cited in Parker, 2011), proposed that art, "can't be reduced to the same level as stocks and shares". For Read (cited in Parker, 2011): "Art should be made because people are compelled to make it; and it should be bought because people are compelled to live with it." Nonetheless, South African art was, in the early 2000s, often promoted as a good investment. Art historian, Rory Bester (2009:45) has noted that the topic commanded a great deal of attention in the popular press.⁹⁴ Indeed, media including *The Sunday Times*, *CNN*, *Blouin Artinfo* and *Art South Africa*, published headlines such as 'Art is the new Blue Chip' (Piliso, 2006), 'Boom Theory' (O'Toole, 2007a), 'South Africa's booming Art Market' (Curnow, 2010) and 'South African Art Market continues to Grow' (O'Toole, 2009). To add to this, in 2010, Strauss and Co, a large South African auction house, reported that prices for major South African artworks had increased by over five hundred percent over the preceding five to ten years (Curnow, 2010). Moreover, between the years 2009 to 2011, South African art's status as an investment option was confirmed by the development of a number of services catering specifically to the art market.

In 2009 AuctionVault (www.auctionvault.co.za) was the first art web portal to offer an archive of exclusively South African auction results.⁹⁵ In 2010, Sanlam launched their Art Advisory Service, offering clients expert advice on building a collection, and in 2011, the Citadel Art Price Index – documenting changes in the value of art sold on auction in South Africa – was launched. Each of these services offered art collectors insight into the South African art market, assisting them to track developments in the market. To add to this, they can also be considered to have given South African art credibility as an investment. AuctionVault and the Citadel Art Price Index, for example, track the market using graphs and in this way make visual the growth of the market, objectifying the idea of art as an investment in much the same way as the Times-Sotheby's Indexes did in the 1960s. Stern's investment potential and

⁹⁴ Rory Bester is an art historian, critic and curator. He is the art advisor at the South African Reserve Bank and Head of the Wits History of Art Department.

⁹⁵ These results were, to a large extent, already available on larger, international sites including Artprice and Artnet. However, the subscription costs to these sites are substantially higher making them less accessible.

her astronomical prices thus do not stand in isolation but can be situated within an increasing tendency to view South African art as a good investment, and a resulting 'boom' in the market for South African art.

Auction houses

A great deal of art is sold through the auction system and in the market for South African art, the auction world changed and grew substantially in the early 2000s particularly between 2006 and 2009. In 2006 the largest auction house trading in South African art was Stephan Welz and Co. (Swelco), holding six art sales per annum.⁹⁶ In 2007 Welz sold the company and in that same year, London auction house Bonhams joined the market.⁹⁷ Bonhams had occasionally included South African works in their *Exploration, Travel and Topographical Pictures* sale.⁹⁸ In 2006 Gerard Sekoto's *Self-portrait* (1947) sold on such a sale for £100 thousand (R1 126 000.00), nearly ten times its low estimate (£12-18 thousand). According to Hannah O'Leary, Bonhams' head of department for South African art, the sale caused the auction house to take notice of South African art (Bailey, 2008).⁹⁹ Giles Peppiatt (2012), Director of South African and Contemporary African art at Bonhams, said that the 'South African Sale' was then initiated as a part of the auction house's 'regional sales' marketing strategy. Bonhams already held sales of, for example, Canadian and Greek art. Peppiatt (2012) maintained that, like these, the South African sale was a way for them "to focus on a market and expose, advertise and market the sale to the end users, the buyers of this work". Bonhams has, since this time, held bi-annual sales of South African art, bringing an international outlet to the South African art market.

In 2009 Stephan Welz re-entered the auction market, opening Strauss and Co (Strauss).¹⁰⁰ The auction house holds four art sales per annum. The total sales with a focus on South

⁹⁶ Other regional auction houses such as Bernadi Auctioneers in Pretoria and Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town were in operation. This account of the growth in the South African auction system, however, focuses on companies with a larger presence operating in more than one location.

⁹⁷ Swelco was owned by Stephan Welz who acted as Managing Director and auctioneer. In 2007 he sold the company to Mark Kretschmer and Jack Rosewitz.

⁹⁸ The *Exploration, Travel and Topographical Pictures* sale was held under the Travel Pictures department which according to the Bonhams' website features works "of a particular interest based on their geographical location, exploratory nature and historical content" (Bonhams, 2001-2015). The *Exploration, Travel and Topographical Pictures* sales include many artworks depicting former colonies from Africa, the East and Australia. However, the sales had sometimes also included modern artists from these areas and South African artists such as Laubser, Boonzaier, Sumner, Preller and Pierneef had been included prior to 2006.

⁹⁹ O'Leary started specialising in South African Art prior to Bonhams' first South African Sale in 2007 and was appointed head of department in 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Strauss and Co was founded by Stephan Welz together with Dr Conrad Strauss and Elisabeth Bradley. Welz held the position of Managing Director at Strauss. He passed away on the 25 December 2015. At the time of his death he was considered an influential figure in the South African art world. As noted in his company's obituary, "Stephan was the longest practising fine art expert and auctioneer in

African art therefore doubled – from six in 1994, to twelve in 2011. Each auction house works to promote South African art. Before each sale an illustrated catalogue is produced and sent to possible clients, sales are advertised in magazines and newspapers, social events are held, along with the exhibition of artworks prior to sales, and promotional talks are given. All of this can be considered to have contributed to a more competitive and vibrant market for South African art. It is, however, of particular significance that a number of pivotal events – the Kahn sale of 2007 and record prices achieved for Stern's *Congolese Woman* (1946), *Gladioli* (1939), *Bahora Girl* (1949) and *Arab Priest* (1945) – occurred between 2007 and 2011 and can be considered to have had a lasting impact on Stern's market.

Before considering these events it is important to firstly understand pricing at auction. An auction is a highly publicised and publicly visible method of sale (unlike the world of dealers who rarely publish their sales results). The auctioneer calls out bids in increasing increments, selling the artwork to the highest bidder. The sales results are then made publicly available, usually on the auction house's website and on databases such as artprice.com. High prices also regularly receive media attention, and a high price, which quickly becomes public knowledge, can be considered to shift the entire market. South African art dealer, Warren Siebrits, succinctly explains this occurrence:

The moment a new value for an artist's work is chalked up, and you can show that a further piece by the same artist is for all intents and purposes similar to the work sold, there's every reason to say that all further similar pieces are worth the same and possibly more. And this is where the investment value of art becomes important: especially when the market sustains this higher price (Siebrits cited in Bester, 2009:47-48).

Essentially, a record price can shift the entire pricing level. Looking at Stern's auction prices in the 2000s, specifically at her record prices, the artist appeared to be steadily increasing in value. In 1999 Stern's highest price was for *Still Life with Fruit and Dahlias* (1946), which had sold for R1 million. The following year *Cape Girl with Fruit* (1930) sold for R1 599 909.00. This record remained unchanged until 2006 when *Lady of the Harem* (1945) sold for R2.2 million. A major shift occurred in 2007 at the auction of the collection of Jack and Helene Kahn. The auction was an important event and is worth considering in some detail.

Swelco held the Kahn sale on the 13 February 2007 and it was a highly publicised event receiving a great deal of media attention. What made it of particular interest was that it was a private collection of considerable value that had not been known to many. It was described in the *Sunday Times* as "one of the country's best kept secrets" (Piliso, 2007). To add to this,

South Africa with over 35 years of experience with Sotheby's in London, Amsterdam and South Africa. He had a vast knowledge of South African art and antiques making him the most respected 'Generalist' in these fields." (Strauss, 2016)

Mr and Mrs Kahn, who had died in 2005 and 2006 respectively, had wished for the proceeds of the sale to go to charity. Prior to the sale the auctioneers estimated that it could achieve more than R22 million (Piliso, 2007). The collection outperformed their expectations, attaining over R23 million, and a number of auction records were broken. The success of the Kahn sale was considered by some to have had a significant positive effect on the market. Philip Bishop (cited in Grange, 2007), an appraiser at 5th Avenue Auctioneers, for example, reported that the sale had a “ripple effect”, noting that their sale “a day after the ground breaking Kahn auction in Cape Town made in excess of R40m”. Significantly, the sale was also regarded as important for the Stern market. According to the Swelco website:

The market for works by Irma Stern exhibited remarkable growth [in 2007]. The excitement generated by the exceptional Single Owner Collection from the Estate of the Late Jack and Helene Kahn sold in February this year, achieved unprecedented auction results, breaking many South African records and sparking renewed interest among the public in general and Stern collectors in particular (Swelco, 2007b).

Viewing the auction sales results, it is clear that the prices achieved for Stern on the Kahn sale were remarkable. *Still Life with Flowers in a Vase, Books and a glass Ashtray* (1956) sold for R2.4 million, *Still Life with a Bowl of Fruit and Flowers in a brown glazed Vase* (1947) for R1.7 million and *Pondo Woman* (1952) for R3.6 million. However, most notable was *Indian Woman* (1936) which sold for R6.6 million – a record for the artist and a record price for any work of South African art sold on auction. The previous record for Stern was R2.2 million; the increase was thus R4.4 million or two hundred percent – a substantial gain in a period of only three months. Over the remainder of 2007 a further eleven Sterns were sold at auction. While the majority of these works exceeded the auction house estimates, few came near the prices of the Kahn sale. The closest price was, for example, £155 thousand (R2.1 million) for *Tomato Picker* (1961) sold at Bonhams in London in May. On the 12 December, the record price for Stern was again broken when *Congolese Woman* (1946) sold for £490 thousand (R6.7 million) at Christie’s in London (although the work sold to a South African collector). While it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty what the exact impact of the Kahn sale was, the media coverage does suggest that it increased confidence levels. To add to this, *Congolese Woman* is, in some ways, similar to *Indian Woman*. They are both portraits, of women, of cultures different from Stern's own. In light of Siebrits’ assertion (cited above) that a high price for one work justifies a comparable price for a similar work, *Indian Woman* can be considered to have laid the foundation for the price paid for *Congolese Woman* ten months later.

In 2008 and 2009 no works exceeded R6 million. However, in October 2010 *Gladioli* (1939) sold for R12 million at Strauss. Such a high price for a still-life was unusual and the sale can be viewed as having set a new precedent for the price of Stern's still-lives. The following month, *White Lilies* (1936) sold for R10 million and, in March 2011, *Still Life of Delphinium*

(1938) sold for R9.5 million. However, only a week after *Gladioli* sold, *Bahora Girl* (1949) sold for £2.1 million (R23 310 000.00) – another huge increase for the artist. Five months later, in March 2011, *Arab Priest* (1945) sold for £2.7 million (R30 321 000.00) to the Qatar Museums Authority. These prices remain the two highest auction results for Stern (measured until the end of 2013).

The impact of *Bahora Girl* and more specifically *Arab Priest* on the market is difficult to discern. In 2011 other works did sell for prices well above the pre-2010 records. *Seated Nude with Oranges* (1934), for example, sold for £1.5 million (R16 845 000.00) in March 2011 and *Two Arabs* (1939) for R19 million in September 2011. However, no work achieved a price even close to that of *Arab Priest*. Ian Hunter (cited in Bester, 2009:48), a specialist from Swelco, noted that, “it’s important to get similar quality works into the market within twelve months. If nothing becomes available there is a possibility the market will come to question the higher price as an anomaly”. *Arab Priest* was considered to be a work of such importance and quality that The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) even refused to issue an export permit allowing it to leave the country (SAHRA, 2011a).¹⁰¹ Works that came onto the market after *Arab Priest* may not have been considered as of ‘similar quality’ in the market. *Two Arabs* does, however, bear some similarities; it is a work of Arab men from Zanzibar, painted with similar swirling brushstrokes and impasto technique, of a similar period and framed in an original Zanzibar frame. Both works also have a good provenance, literature and exhibition history. The importance of these histories is discussed later in this chapter. What is relevant is that *Arab Priest* can be considered to have a more ‘prestigious’ history. The work was selected by Stern as the opening illustration for her book *Zanzibar*, “attaching significance to it as one of the best works produced during her Zanzibar period” (Bonhams, 2011:no pagination) and was also exhibited at the Irma Stern Museum for many years. The work’s history may have been a contributing factor in its sale but the fact that nothing has since reached a similar price also means that it can be considered an anomaly.¹⁰² It is, however, notable that Stern’s high pricing has allowed her to be viewed as comparable to European modernists. Federico Freschi (2011:92), for example, noted that the “meteoric rise” in Stern’s prices, “in effect assured Stern’s status as a significant modernist, at least on a par – in market terms – with later German Expressionists like Max Pechstein”. While Pechstein’s works sell – on average – for higher prices, *Arab Priest*’s R30 million is comparable to Pechstein’s auction high of €2.9 million (R31 523 000.00) and Freschi’s

¹⁰¹ A great deal of controversy surrounded this decision. The Qatar Museums Authority originally appealed the decline of a permanent export permit (SAHRA, 2011b). However, a decision was reached allowing for the work to be temporarily exported to Qatar and for it to be returned to South Africa from time to time (Maregele, 2012).

¹⁰² Peppiatt (2012) has also noted that many considered the sale an anomaly because they believed that the Qataris, who are major international art buyers, would have paid any sum for the work. However, he argues that there is no way of knowing exactly what they were willing to pay and further pointed out that many bidders were involved in the bidding.

association highlights the power of auction results to shift the ways in which an artist's market is understood.¹⁰³

Dealers

In addition to auction houses, dealers have also traded in Stern's work on the secondary market. Dealers operate differently from auction houses. In selling works they either trade works that they own or sell works on behalf of a client. If the works are their own they can take as long as they wish to sell them – unless, of course, their own financial demands pressure them into a sale. But even if an artwork belongs to a client, a dealer will usually have a longer period to sell the work than an auction house – although auction houses market works pre-sale, they must essentially sell the work on the evening of the auction. A dealer can wait for a buyer willing to pay their asking price. This would suggest that they can achieve consistently high prices. However, it is difficult to assess because, unlike auctions, their sales results are not publicly available and it is therefore rarely clear what price was achieved for an artwork or if it even sold. In South Africa a number of dealers have traded twentieth-century art on the secondary market. Notable examples include Graham Britz, Warren Siebrits and the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg (although the Everard Read also has a smaller branch in Cape Town) and Johans Borman, Louis Schachat and Michael Stevenson in Cape Town. The landscape of dealing in this market also changed substantially in the 2000s. Warren Siebrits and Michael Stevenson, for example, shifted their focus to contemporary art. What is significant is that some dealers applied a pricing strategy that focused on charging higher prices than before. Here Louis Schachat and Graham Britz can be considered to have made an impact on the market for Stern.

Schachat was a lawyer who originally built a personal collection including works by twentieth-century artists such as Boonzaier, Laubser and Stern. Believing that South African art was “outrageously undervalued and under-priced” (Barron, 2013) he decided to open a gallery, Die Kunsamer in 1971.¹⁰⁴ The gallery traded in twentieth-century South African art as well as some contemporary works and Schachat can be considered to have brought a new approach to pricing to the market. In an article, 'Louis Schachat: 'Inventor' of Value for SA Art' the writer noted: "More than anyone, [Schachat] was responsible for the rise in the monetary value, recognition and status of SA art." (Barron, 2013) According to Schachat (cited in Barron, 2013) when he started dealing there was a tendency to “talk prices down”. But his approach was different; he believed South African art was worth more and his prices reflected that. While many thought his works overpriced, Schachat became a respected and

¹⁰³ Pechstein's *Weib mit Inder auf Teppich (Vorderseite), Früchte II (Rückseite)* (1910) sold for €2.9 million (R31 523 000.00) on auction in Germany in 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Louis Schachat died in 2013. His wife, Charlotte Schachat continued operating Die Kunsamer which moved to her home in Fresnaye, Cape Town.

influential dealer. By the time he died in 2013 he was referred to as the “doyen of South African art dealers” and his clients included notable South African collectors such as the Rupert family and Christo Wiese (Barron, 2013). Moreover, Schachat regularly attended auctions, purchasing works to sell in his gallery or on behalf of clients whom he advised. At auctions, he further put into practice his belief that South African art was undervalued. Often seen sitting in the front row of such events, Schachat was resolute in his bidding, continuing to place bids until he had outbid all other parties. In this way he can be considered to have been influential in raising auction prices. As noted in the *Sunday Times*: “He continually raised the bench at auctions, usually holding the record for the highest price paid for a local work.” (Barron, 2013) Schachat also had a preference for Irma Stern’s work. According to Warren Siebrits (cited in Rabe, 2012) he “believed in her” and in 2010 – on behalf of an undisclosed client – paid R12 million for *Gladioli*, an important record and the highest price paid for a South African artist at the time.

Another dealer considered instrumental in the increased values for South African art and who, to a large extent, followed in Schachat’s footsteps, was Johannesburg dealer Graham Britz. Britz, who has a background in auctioneering, also viewed South African art as undervalued. He believed that there was substantial room for growth in the market and this prompted him to open Graham’s Fine Art Gallery in Fourways, Johannesburg in 2001.¹⁰⁵ While Schachat had taken an almost understated approach (he operated from a small gallery and did not produce substantial publications), Britz’s approach was bolder. As noted by Sean O’Toole (2008), Britz produced “posh catalogues” placed “ads in *Financial Times*” and worked from “offices that offer[ed] a sense of modern classicism”. This can be considered to have aided the dealer in pitching to a “new class of wealthy buyer” (O’Toole, 2008). Like Schachat, Britz also believed in Stern, labelling her a ‘blue-chip’ artist along with Pierneef, Sekoto and Laubser (Buys, 2009). Indeed, in 2007 he paid a record R6.7 million – on behalf of a client – for Stern’s *Congolese Woman* at Christie’s in London. But, as Schachat, he also priced works in his gallery at a high level. By his own admission Britz “aggressively price[d] works” but elaborated that this was only for works he believed to be of “absolute quality” because “for a top work there is no relative price” (Britz cited in Bester, 2009:47). Britz has been criticised for his pricing strategy. As O’Toole (2007b:124) has noted, many said he was “too expensive”. Rory Bester (2009:47) on the other hand observed that “the long-term significance of Britz’s strategy” is that it had “the consequence of recalibrating the prices fetched for a particular artist in the secondary market”. This suggests that Britz’s strategy, which, like Schachat’s, consistently included buying and selling at the high end of the market, contributed to increased values.

¹⁰⁵ In 2012 the gallery relocated to Bryanston, Johannesburg.

Collectors

While intermediaries – auction houses and dealers – played a role in Stern’s increase in value, buyers, or collectors, can also be considered to have had an impact on value and collectors fall into a number of categories: established and new wealthy local collectors and new collectors based outside of South Africa. Locally, it is firstly relevant that Stern received support from well-established collectors. Dealer Warren Siebrits attributed Stern’s commercial success, in part, to the fact that business tycoon and established art collector Anton Rupert was one of her biggest collectors (Rabe, 2012). Rupert and his wife began collecting in the 1940s and, according to Deon Herselman (2013), Director of the Rupert Museum; they collected throughout their lives (Anton and Huberta died in 2006 and 2005 respectively). Herselman (2013) noted that they collected approximately seventy percent of their Sterns in the 1960s. In 1995 The Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation – a foundation set up by the Ruperts – published *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye*. The book was conceived by Anton Rupert and written by Marion Arnold. Moreover, the Ruperts' support was further made evident in 2005 when the Rupert Museum opened in Stellenbosch. A large portion of their private collection is displayed at the museum. Almost an entire wing of the three-wing building is dedicated to Stern and – in the 2000s – the display can be considered a public testament to the Ruperts' support for the artist.

While the Ruperts were long-time supporters of Stern, in the 2000s a new breed of wealthy collector was considered to have emerged in South Africa. As Michael Stevenson (cited in O’Toole, 2007b:125) noted, “There is a new group of players who have made vast amounts of money in property, banking and so on.” Stevenson and Warren Siebrits, who both chose to leave the market for twentieth-century art in order to trade in contemporary South African art, were critical of these collectors and argued that their dislike of new wealthy collectors contributed to their leaving the market. In a 2008 interview Stevenson (cited in Siebrits, 2011:2) maintained that he no longer wanted to trade in twentieth-century art because unlike the “collectors who were buying art fifteen years ago” the art buying public had become “speculative and provincial” and were “only interested in the possibility of financial return”. Similarly, Siebrits (2011:2) said of the market that he “remain[s] deeply troubled by the insatiable levels of greed and selfishness displayed by the current capitalist model”.

The collector described by Siebrits and Stevenson bears some similarity to the puritan collector in Hughes' ‘Art and Money’. Describing a new art collector (of contemporary art) in the 1980s, Hughes argued that they were attracted to the ‘glamour’ of the art world and driven by the belief that art could be a good investment. Hughes was critical of the way these collectors bought art. “Most of the time they buy what other people buy. They move in great schools, like bluefish, all identical.” (Hughes, 1984:402) To Siebrits, many Stern collectors were also adopting a ‘herd-mentality’. Buying “purely for status and investment purposes” he elaborated that, “the sad reality is that many of these new buyers show little insight into why

Stern is considered such a pioneering and talented painter” (Siebrits cited in O’Toole, 2007b:125). A more favourable view on new collectors was, however, also evident. In 2007 Bina Genovese, the then office manager at Swelco, Cape Town, was cited in *Leadership SA*: “Apart from the omnipresent old-school collectors and dealers, a growing number of young bankers, entrepreneurs, and socialites are flocking to our auctions. They represent a good demographic mix and have discerning tastes underpinned by their desire for sophisticated things.” (Hammering Home the Good Stuff, 2007)¹⁰⁶ Regardless of new collectors' motives – whether they adopted a 'herd-mentality' or were 'discerning' – they will have increased the number of buyers. More buyers bidding on a work have the capacity to increase the price and – in this regard – it is hardly surprising that auction houses took a more positive view.

Siebrits further argued that, in addition to those he labelled ‘herd-mentality’ collectors, another type of collector, whom he also viewed as questionable, influenced the market. He noted that “the dynamic and stratospheric growth in art prices” was “fuelled largely by mega-wealthy collectors who blindly abide by their motives to push up the market by any means necessary” (Siebrits, 2011:2). Indeed, collectors can be considered to have the capacity to ‘push up’ the market and there is a financial motivation for them to do so. This is because new price levels have the potential to increase the value of similar works – a concept that was discussed in the auction section of this chapter. Thus, if a collector had previously purchased a number of Sterns for an average of R2 million each and similar works then sold for R5 million, the accepted price level may shift and their entire collection could increase in value. The practice of purposefully pushing up prices is one that is difficult to assess accurately. While auction prices are published, the buyers are rarely named. Nonetheless, in 2009 Rory Bester (2009:49) did note that, “over a few years collectors such as Gordon Schachat and Dave King took turns to drive up the Stern market in a series of sales that saw her record price triple”. While it is known that Dave King purchased *Cape Girl with Fruit* (1930) in 2000 for R1 599 909.00, a record price at the time, Schachat’s purchases or other purchases by King have not been made public. What is clear is that the perception exists – certainly within the popular media – that collectors have purposefully influenced Stern’s pricing.

While new collectors in South Africa have been viewed as having driven up Stern’s prices, new collectors from outside the country were also considered to have had a significant impact on the market. Giles Peppiatt (2012) viewed the emergence of buyers from outside South Africa as pivotal to growth in the art market and Stern’s market in particular. After Bonhams’ first ‘South Africa’ sale in 2007 Peppiatt (cited in Meyer, 2007) was reported as saying that “he was delighted with the international interest”. He continued: “It justifies our decision to sell these pictures in London. The demand for the great South African artists is no longer confined to South Africa – it is now truly an international market.” (Peppiatt cited in Meyer,

¹⁰⁶ Genovese, at the time of this comment was office manager for Swelco Cape Town but in 2009 left to open the Strauss Cape Town office.

2007) Peppiatt (2012) confirmed that in 2007 approximately eighty percent of the buyers came from South Africa and the remaining twenty percent were not South African residents. However this changed. By 2012 the percentage of international buyers increased to approximately fifty percent and of this about fifty percent were emigrants and fifty percent non-South Africans.

Peppiatt maintained that this international interest was predominantly focused on Stern. In a 2011 interview he affirmed that non-South African buyers were “largely confined to Stern” (Coulson, 2011) and in earlier interviews attributed their attraction to her to what he viewed as the artist’s originality and centrality in the narrative of twentieth-century South African art history. In 2007 he argued that international collectors – no longer concerned with where an artist came from – were interested in Stern because they recognised, “artists that are truly ground breaking and original” (Peppiatt cited in Philip, 2007). Moreover, in 2008 Peppiatt (cited in *A Posthumous Place on the Global Stage*, 2008) noted that, “Stern is the most important artist within SA’s modern painting movement. She was and is at the apex of this movement”. For Peppiatt what made Stern particularly attractive outside of South Africa was her price, which he viewed as low when compared to other artists of her calibre. “For international collectors to be able to buy works of this significance and quality within the range of \$500 000 to \$1m is relatively inexpensive. In no other market can you buy the leading proponent of that school or movement for this price.” (Peppiatt cited in *A Posthumous Place on the Global Stage*, 2008)

For Peppiatt (2012) non-South African buyers, introduced by Bonhams, actually “made the market”. What is more, he argued that their interest was a direct result of Bonhams’ entry into the market. The auctioneer noted that they exhibited the works on their sales internationally – in London, although they also took highlights to New York (Peppiatt, 2012). This allowed clients, who may not have previously been exposed to artists such as Stern, to view the works. Bonhams also holds sales and exhibits works regularly (twice a year) and Peppiatt (2012) argued that this resulted in an increased level of confidence amongst non-South Africans. However, auction houses’ opinions on the importance of international sales differed and South African auction houses took a different position. In 2008, Swelco’s Genovese (cited in Lamond, 2008), in response to their sale of Stern’s *The Somali Woman* (1943) for R3.4 million, noted: “Forget what happens in London, that is proof that South Africans buy South African art.” Similarly, auction house Strauss and Co, reported after their inaugural sale in 2009: “The old adage that ‘a work of art sells best in its country of origin’ was proved at the first auction of Important South African Paintings, Watercolours and Sculpture conducted by Strauss & Co.” (Strauss & Co, 2009) The conflicting views taken by local and international auction houses can be understood as a part of the auction houses’ marketing strategies. With each promoting the buying and selling of South African art in their geographic location in a bid to persuade their audience that they are market leaders. Beyond

the auction houses' claims, the influence of international collectors is a difficult area to assess with any level of certainty. As noted, auction houses rarely disclose the identity of their buyers so it is impossible to know exactly how many works are sold to new non-South African collectors. It is also not possible to ascertain if buyers outside of South Africa have a preference for purchasing works from Bonhams.

Peppiatt has, however, given some evidence to support his claim for the entry of new internationally based buyers. In 2008 he was reported as saying that "in our last sale [January 2008] five of the top six Sterns were purchased by non-South African collectors" and that "these collectors are largely based in London and New York" (Peppiatt cited in *A Posthumous Place on the Global Stage*, 2008). In 2011, Peppiatt also noted that there had been five major bidders on *Bahora Girl* – a work which finally achieved a new auction record for Stern. Although he did not specify if buyers were actually non-South African he said that bidders had included two from North America (although the buyer was London-based). To add to this, in 2011 *Arab Priest* was purchased by the Qatar Museums Authority – a sale, which, deviating from the norm, was highly publicised.

While opinions on where South African art sells best differ, evidence does suggest that Bonhams introduced new international buyers to the market. Many high prices have been achieved locally but the two highest prices for Stern were set in London at Bonhams for *Arab Priest* and *Bahora Girl*. Both works sold well above the estimates set by the auction house. In order for a work to exceed the high estimate, especially by such large margins, it is necessary for a number of bidders (or at least two) to bid against one another until the eventual buyer has outbid all competitors. The inclusion of just one extra bidder willing to pay a high price can thus lead to competitive bidding and result in very high prices. With this in mind it is worth noting that if, as Peppiatt suggested, new international collectors were attracted to Stern with Bonhams' entry into the market in 2007, their participation may well have contributed to the substantial increase in the artist's prices shortly after that.

The importance of recognition from outside of South Africa to the Stern market in the 2000s

Non-South African collectors buying from the London based auction house, Bonhams, appear to have contributed to Stern's increased market value. The significance of recognition from outside of South Africa, however, goes beyond market interest. Recognition from international museums and Stern's links to a European art movement (German Expressionism) can both be considered to have impacted on her reputation in the market – locally and abroad – in the 2000s. In firstly considering the impact of international museums, professionals in the South African art world have taken different positions. Warren Siebrits (2011:5) argued that Stern had not received any international recognition of value.

We won't ever see Irma Stern, J.H. Pierneef or Alexis Preller being the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, so why do these guys (and gal) have no chance of having a retrospective exhibition anywhere of prominence. Put in simple terms, when there is a bigger, larger and more interesting art world out there, why do we continue to waste our time on such poor and inferior reflections of ourselves?

While not taking the same critical stance, Christopher Peter (2012) agreed that she has seen little interest from international museums. Peter concedes that there was, of course, interest from the Orientalist Museum when they purchased *Arab Priest*. However, he viewed this as an exception to the norm and added that the museum was not interested in Stern per se, but rather the subject matter of the work – an Arab Priest.¹⁰⁷ For Peter (2012) “[Stern] is still completely stuck here”. What is striking is that a different view was taken by auction house Strauss and Co. In a 2012 press release seeking to explain why a Stern is 'SAs most expensive artwork', the writer cited recognition by major international institutions as a contributing factor. “Irma Stern is the only South African modernist to receive serious international recognition.” (Bedford, 2012) The press release evidenced this claim using the 1996 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld in Germany, a show they described as “a major survey exhibition” and added that, “the National Museum of Modern Art, Centre Georges Pompidou owns *The Sultan's Palace in Zanzibar*, painted in 1944” (Bedford, 2012). The question of whether the Bielefeld show and Pompidou work validate Strauss' claims aside, it is significant that the auction house that works to promote Stern's market has credited her with international recognition indicating that international recognition is valued in the market.

Also relevant in the 2000s market is Stern's affiliation with German Expressionism – and this emerged as important for international and South African collectors. Giles Peppiatt (2012) noted that, “the fact that Stern trained under Pechstein and has that lineage from the Expressionists is important to international buyers”, adding that “people like to do that [classify artists]”. With this comment Peppiatt highlighted the market's affinity for ‘movement labelling’. Carter and Geczy (2006:118) have argued that an artist's place in a movement can allow them an “immediate place within Art History”. The authors maintain that artistic movements or ‘isms’ are a major characteristic of the traditional story of modern art. In the nineteenth century, each artistic movement led to the next, either developing or reacting against the ideas of its predecessor. This kind of narrative is useful for the art market, always searching for new areas of and reasons for investment. “As one movement appears to exhaust itself, the market is able to maintain its buoyancy through the prospect of a new

¹⁰⁷ According to *Mail and Guardian* journalist Matthew Krouse (2011), the Qatar museum has “one of the most significant collections of Orientalist art” and they wished to procure *Arab Priest* because it was an “early portrait of a Muslim cleric, painted in Zanzibar in 1945 by Stern – a South African Jewish painter of German origin”.

school emerging on the horizon.” (Carter and Geczy, 2006:118) With this in mind, it is interesting to note that a trend for German Expressionist art is reported to have developed in the secondary market in the early 2000s.

In a 2008 article in *Art+Auction* it was noted: “Colourful and dynamic, German Expressionist painting is fast becoming the ultimate trophy for serious collectors.” (Dobrzynski, 2008:132)¹⁰⁸ The writer outlined that German Expressionist artists had been performing particularly well at auction and listed a number of record prices including Ernest Ludwig Kirchner’s *Berliner Strassenzene* (Berlin Street Scene) which sold at Christies in New York for \$38.1 million in November 2006 and Franz Marc’s *Weidende Pferde III* (Grazing Horses III) which sold at Sotheby’s in London for a record £12.3 million (\$24.3 million) in February 2008. While acknowledging that it was difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for the emergence of the trend, a number of possible reasons were discussed (Dobrzynski, 2008:132). According to Jane Kallir, co-director of Galerie St. Étienne in New York, German Expressionism was an underappreciated movement (Dobrzynski, 2008:132). Recognised in its time some dealers maintained that anti-German sentiment after World War II decreased demand, even though the Nazis actually shunned German Expressionist works. The author argued that others felt that the style simply fell out of favour and looked dated but that: “Today their intense emotionalism seems incredibly modern, partly because collector preferences have moved beyond the formalist views of the twentieth century, which valued abstraction, Minimalism and postmodernism, and partly because of the lack of any coherent ‘ism’ in contemporary art.” (Dobrzynski, 2008:134) Moreover, the interest in German Expressionism can be considered to have been driven by the new popularity and high prices for their Austrian neighbours Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) and Egon Schiele (1896-1918) and by the substantial Museum exposure given to the German art in the early 2000s.¹⁰⁹ Dobrzynski (2008:134) argued that, “collectors of all nationalities who are building strong collections of twentieth-century art” were buying German Expressionists and that they were not only buying ‘top-tier’ artists. In other words they were also looking for works by lesser-known artists. Although Stern is not mentioned in the article, it is worth considering that her placement in the German Expressionist category not only gave her a place within a traditional European art historical narrative but also included her in a category appealing to international collectors in the 2000s.

While Peppiatt drew attention to the importance of German Expressionism for international collectors, in South Africa Stern’s relationship to German Expressionism was also promoted. Britz (cited in *A Posthumous Place on the Global Stage*, 2008) argued: “Although she worked in relative isolation on the southern tip of Africa, Stern was really part of the German Expressionist movement.” He continued that, “paintings from this school are sold for up to

¹⁰⁸ *Art+Auction* is a, New York based, monthly art magazine published by Louise Blouin Media.

¹⁰⁹ In 2003 the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a Max Beckmann retrospective and the Walker Art Centre, in Minneapolis showed ‘Franz Marc and the Blue Rider’ in 2001 (Dobrzynski, 2008:134).

£15m. So, for a Stern to go for substantially less, speaks of exceptionally good value” (Britz, cited in *A Posthumous Place on the Global Stage*, 2008). It can be argued that Stern was more influenced by, than a part of the German Expressionist movement. What is, however, clear is that Britz promoted the artist as a German Expressionist and her German Expressionist affiliation was further highlighted in auction houses’ promotional material.

A Swelco catalogue, for example, reminded readers of Stern’s relationship to German Expressionism: “Stern identified herself as a Modern artist and [German] Expressionist.” (Swelco, 2008b:126) In particular, her relationship with Max Pechstein was regularly highlighted. In a Strauss catalogue it was argued that “Stern’s exposure to European Modernism and her engagement with German Expressionists such as Max Pechstein, encouraged her understanding of the nature of contemporary art” (Strauss, 2010b:104). Similarly, it was noted in a Swelco catalogue that, “Stern’s most formative artistic influence had been her period of study under Max Pechstein” (Swelco, 2008b:126). Catalogue writers, however, also elaborated on the Expressionist influence by showing how it was evident in the artworks on sale. In the text accompanying *Cape Town Harbour* (1956) Stern was described as, “using Expressionist brush marks” (Swelco, 2008a:98). *Still Life with Gladioli and Fruit* (1934) was said to be “a superb example of Stern’s mastery of her medium displaying some of the lessons learnt from her mentor, German Expressionist painter Max Pechstein” (Strauss, 2010a:152). Likewise, the catalogue entry for *The Lemon Pickers* (1928) noted that, “the strong influence of German Expressionist artists like Max Pechstein is evident both in the exaggerated forms and the dramatic colour contrasts employed to achieve intense emotional and spiritual effects” (Strauss, 2011a:124). The auction houses’ promotional material drew attention to the significance of Stern’s relationship to German Expressionism and the German Expressionist link emerged as important for local and international collectors – a point which is highlighted by Peppiatt and Britz. It is, however, worth remembering that in the 1920s the South African press used Stern’s recognition in Europe and affiliation with German Expressionism to promote her locally (a point covered in chapter one). While by the late 1920s Stern came to be valued as a truly South African artist, the promotional material cited above does suggest that international links are still considered to increase the artist’s market value in the 2000s. Thus while South Africans may have claimed the artist as their own her reputation is still bound up in foreign recognition and Stern’s links to German Expressionism.

Stern’s most prized works in the 2000s

While Stern’s relationship to German Expressionism was used to valorise the artist in the market, it is not actually the works which exhibit the strongest affinity to the movement that were regarded as most valuable. The influence of German Expressionist artists Pechstein is,

for example, evident in *Lemon Pickers* (1928) (**fig. 7**). A stylistic affinity is apparent between the work and examples from Pechstein such as *Akte im Freien (Under the Trees)* (1911) (**fig. 37**). Like Pechstein, Stern painted elongated bodies, used black outlines, intense colour and distorted forms – although her distortion and colour are somewhat less intense. In the market the German Expressionist influence was acknowledged and the work highly praised: “*Lemon Pickers* is one of the most exciting Irma Stern paintings to come to the market in recent years.” (Strauss, 2011a:124) There was, however, a general consensus that Stern’s portraits, particularly from Zanzibar and the Congo, and where the Expressionist influence is not as pronounced, were the artist’s most desirable. This was clearly articulated in Swelco’s catalogue entry for her 1945 work *Young Arab*. The portrait is referred to as “a vital work in Irma’s coveted oeuvre from her trips to Zanzibar” (Swelco, 2011:85). The writer continued: “Together with her equally passionate works from her Congo trips, these mainly portrait studies, remain the finest of her illustrious career. *Young Arab* is certainly a highlight from Irma’s ‘Golden Period’.” (Swelco, 2011:85) Similarly, Bonhams claimed that, “the works she produced in Zanzibar in 1945 mark the period of her greatest genius” (Bonhams, 2011:no pagination) and Strauss concurred with, “Irma Stern’s Zanzibari paintings are amongst the most sought-after of all her works” (Strauss, 2011b:152). It must, however, also be noted that, while the Zanzibar and Congo works are pinpointed as the pinnacle of Stern’s career, the label is sometimes extended to include portraits of black African and Indian subjects painted at a similar time. The catalogue entry for *African Figure with Blue Headdress* (1938), for example, noted that “it epitomises the best of Stern’s portraiture at this critical period in her career” (Bonhams, 2008:66). Similarly, a Swelco catalogue promoted *Indian Woman* (1936) by saying that when she painted it, “Stern was secure in her genre and at the height of artistic confidence in both motif and medium” (Swelco, 2007a:34).

What is clear is that Stern’s portraits of ‘others’, from the 1930s and 1940s, painted after the artist had begun to move away from her original German Expressionist influence and started to use a lighter palette and thicker impasto paint application (outlined in chapter two), are consistently promoted as the most desirable in the market in the 2000s. Sales results also confirm this. *Lemon Pickers* went on auction at Strauss in March 2011. The work was promoted as a very important work by the auction house but failed to sell.¹¹⁰ Moreover, all of Stern’s highest priced ten works (until the end of 2011) were from the late 1930s and 1940s (**fig. 38**). The list includes four still-life works but the highest prices are for portraits. In fact the five highest results are portraits and the difference between the most valuable portrait and most valuable still-life is considerable, *Arab Priest* sold in 2011 for just over R30 million and *Gladioli* sold in 2010 for R12 million. What is striking is that portraits of Stern’s social circle, fellow white South Africans, are almost completely absent from her high-priced works. There

¹¹⁰ Not only did the auction house claim that the work was “one of the most exciting Irma Stern paintings to come to the market in recent years” (Strauss, 2011a:124) (as cited above), they also used it on the front cover of their auction catalogue.

are none in the 'top ten' and while it must be acknowledged that there are fewer such examples, works such as *Carla* (1944), *Portrait of Zoë Randall* (1944) and *Portrait of Vera Poppe Playing the Cello* (1943) (figs. 39-41) have nonetheless been offered for sale in the 2000s. These works are painted using an impasto technique, swirling brushstroke and distortion of figures similar to that of high priced works such as *Arab Priest*, *Bahora Girl* and *Two Arabs* (figs. 42-44). Their values are, however, significantly lower. *Carla*, which sold for R5 million in October 2009, is the highest priced work of a white sitter, while *Portrait of Zoë Randall* failed to sell in May 2009 and *Portrait of Vera Poppe* had a disappointing history at auction, failing to sell twice and eventually selling for well below the original estimate.¹¹¹

This does raise questions as to why the market valorises some works so much more than others. This question and the preference for works of the 'other' was addressed by Federico Freschi (2012) in his article 'Self and Other'. On the subject of the *Portrait of Vera Poppe*, Freschi (2012:26) argued that the work was unusual because it departed from the artist's "familiar repertoire of 'exotic' African and Arabs and well-heeled bourgeoisie". This led to a questioning of the market's preference for works he labelled as, "lush, overblown and, above all, exotic" (Freschi, 2012:28) – works of the 'other' primarily from the late 1930s and 1940s. Freschi (2012:28) asked, "what exactly is being bought? What 'symbolic capital' – to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrase is being accrued in spending lavish sums on these quintessentially colonialist constructions of Otherness?" The question of whether the works are in fact "colonialist constructions of Otherness" aside, in viewing the works as such Freschi suggested that the 'symbolic capital' resides in two areas. Firstly, they are "dazzlingly decorative objects, sanctioned by a long history of the canonical values of modernism and its insistence on the integrity of the painterly surface" (Freschi, 2012:29). But secondly, and more importantly, he proposed that the preference reinforced social hierarchies.

The catalogue of 'exotic' Arabs, Indians and Africans frozen perpetually in a prelapsarian idyll bespeaks an unquestioning nostalgia for the past as well as a means of projecting fantasies of otherness onto an unreconstructed sense of the 'exotic'. The symbolic capital here is somewhat more difficult to discern, but seems to reside where it always has in the long history of images of those who are socially inferior to, or culturally different from, the bourgeois art-buying public: a secure and uncomplicated sense of self, serene in its ability to negotiate and command social hierarchies (Freschi, 2012:29).

¹¹¹ *Portrait of Vera Poppe* was originally on a Strauss auction in May 2011 for an estimate of R7-10 million. It did not sell. The work was then offered for auction at Bonhams in October 2011, again it did not sell. In March 2013 the work was finally sold at Bonhams for £90 thousand (R1 628 100.00).

In South Africa art buying has been acknowledged as 'a white sport'. Bester (2009:49) noted that "historically speaking, it is mostly white men who have substantial private art collections" – an observation with which Giles Peppiatt concurred. "There are no real black buyers [...] In South Africa it's the wealthy whites." (Peppiatt, 2012) With this in mind Freschi does raise a pertinent question about the motives of a market valorising works of subjects different from them. His proposition is however difficult to prove. He seems to be referring to what Carter and Geczy have termed the 'use value' for art. "The use value of a particular object (or service) is its ability to satisfy an identifiable need or desire present within the members of the group to whom it is available." (Carter and Geczy, 2006:95) Carter and Geczy (2006:96), however, continued that it is difficult to identify the use value of art "without straying into the land of hot air and vague generalisations". Indeed, collectors of Stern are unlikely to attribute their preferences to the maintenance of social hierarchies. Within the market other, somewhat more tangible, explanations as to why Stern and particular areas of her oeuvre are valorised can be considered, recognisability, literature, display on exhibitions and in galleries, provenance and the rarity of works all being relevant factors.

The importance of recognisability, literature, display, provenance and rarity in the marketplace

According to a number of art market professionals and journalists Stern's popularity can, in part, be attributed to her recognisability. A *Cape Argus* journalist wrote that, "most art buyers tend to stick to the recognised names, like betting on the favourite" (Grange, 2007). Similarly, Michael Stevenson (1990:40), noted that "people like to buy well recognised works and names". This, Stevenson (1990:40) believed, "is why artists like Pierneef, Laubser and Stern are often overbought". Likewise, acknowledging the value attributed to recognised names, Stephan Welz (cited in Bester, 2009:49) said that he regularly received "calls from people saying they need a Stern, a Pierneef and a Sekoto". He elaborated: "They have been told that if they have these three artists on their walls, they can invite people around for dinner with pride." (Welz cited in Bester, 2009:49) While promotion within the art market – for example, sale's exhibitions and illustrations in catalogues – may contribute to the artist's recognisability, literature and exhibitions can, over time, increase a collector's familiarity with an artist and artwork.

Carter and Geczy (2006:23) have argued: "Publications of monographs or articles in scholarly journals, even when produced under the neutrality of scholarship cannot help in drawing the interest of a wider circle of individuals." It is thus relevant that more has been published on Stern than on her contemporaries – other South African modernists such as Pierneef and Laubser. And what is significant is that Stern's works of 'others' have been at the centre of much of the literature. In Stern's lifetime, Osborn and Sachs' publications promoted a view of Stern as unique in her portrayal of African subjects. Stern's reputation as linked to her ability

to capture the 'essence of Africa' was discussed in earlier chapters but of particular importance are the artist's publications, *Congo* from 1943 and *Zanzibar* from 1948. They highlight the esteem in which the artist held these periods and the works she selected for inclusion. They are regularly referenced in marketing material and texts from *Zanzibar* were cited in the catalogue entries for *Arab Priest* and *Bahora Girl*. The text accompanying *Arab Priest* included Stern's description of the Priest: "The most distinguished Arab – 'the truly wise and religious father'." (Stern, 1948 cited in Bonhams, 2011:no pagination) Similarly, *Bahora Girl* was catalogued using Stern's writing, although in this case the entire entry was an excerpt from *Zanzibar* where Stern described her meeting with the Bahora girl.

To add to early publications it is further relevant that the same works of 'others' have been at the centre of much of the more recent literature on the artist. Postcolonial attitudes kept Stern's engagement with 'others' of interest to writers and this was a core issue in the writing of, for example, Arnold (1996), Dubow (1991), Wyman (2000) and Braude (2011).¹¹² To add to this, Stern's engagement with the 'other' was a major theme in the Standard Bank's *Expressions of a Journey* exhibition in 2003, with many of the authors in the catalogue, including Arnold, Dubow and Below, addressing the issue. While authors took different positions on the topic it nonetheless, along with the other literature, draws attention to this area of Stern's production. And if as Carter and Geczy (2006:23) note, "intellectual interest can quickly transform into economic interest" then it stands to reason that the market's interest in the works of the 'other' may indeed be influenced by the literature on the topic which started in Stern's own life.

Examining auction catalogues, it is also clear that the illustration of an artwork in the literature, its line of provenance and its display on exhibitions and in galleries are valued in the market place. Literature, provenance and display histories are carefully included in auction catalogues. They function to promote the work as prominent and the record-achieving *Arab Priest* provides a good example because its lists are more substantial than most Sterns on auction (the catalogue entry is reproduced in **fig. 45**). The work was listed as being included in Stern's *Zanzibar* published in 1948, Dubow's *Irma Stern* published in 1974 and Smuts' *At Home with Irma Stern* published in 2007. It was also noted that the work was purchased from the artist by Frida Baumann and often publicly displayed. It was exhibited at Galerie des Beaux Arts in Paris in 1947, in the *Expressions of a Journey* exhibition in Johannesburg in 2003 and at the Irma Stern Museum, from circa 1970-2010 – the relevance of which was highlighted in an Iziko press release press. "During this period the *Arab Priest* was seen [at the Stern Museum] by innumerable visitors and admirers of Stern's work. This

¹¹² Postcolonial attitudes were discussed in chapter four, 'Irma Stern's Reputation between the Years 1991 and 2011 – The Impact of Feminist and Postcolonial Theory'.

contributed to its prominence and its 'iconic' status with experts and the public alike." (Iziko South African National Gallery, 2012)

Also tied to the artwork's value is the concept of rarity. In 2010 Stefan Hundt (cited in Hudleston, 2010), curator of the Sanlam collection, was quoted as saying that Stern's works were "becoming rare and are therefore becoming increasingly desirable". Hundt highlighted that the rarity of an artist's work may contribute to its value and it stands to reason that in a competitive market prices will increase. His statement does, however, warrant interrogation. An assessment of Stern oil paintings available on auction (as listed on artprice.com) during the period 2000-2011 actually indicates that there was a general increase in the number of paintings for sale (see fig. 46). In 2000 there were twenty-three paintings on auction but in 2011, the year following Hundt's comment, the figure was forty-five. According to these figures Stern's works were actually more available than previously.

While Hundt viewed Stern works in general as rare, a closer inspection of the marketing material also reveals that specific areas of her oeuvre were often promoted as rare. Speaking about an upcoming sale at Bonhams at which *Bahora Girl* was to be auctioned, Catherine Harrington (cited in Hudleston, 2010), a specialist at the auction house, promoted the work saying that good portraits "are quite rare". Similarly, Stern's Congo works have been identified as rare. Christopher Peter has been quoted discussing *Congolese Woman* sold at Christies. He noted that it was an important work and partly attributed this to the fact that works from the Congo are rare (Minnaar, 2007). Stern visited the Congo twice; *Congolese Woman* was from her second trip and she found this trip particularly challenging, only returning home with fourteen oil paintings completed (Minnaar, 2007). It is, however, not only the valuable portraits that are said to be rare. In a 2008 auction, Cape Town harbour as subject matter was promoted as rare. "The Harbour theme was constant in Irma Stern's work, recurring throughout her career as an entry point to new and exotic worlds. Paintings of Cape Town Harbour are however rare." (Swelco, 2008a:98) The cachet of rarity is clearly valued in the market place. It has been applied to Stern's work in general, to 'good' portraits, to Congo works and to works of Cape Town harbour. Stern was a prolific artist; she painted in different genres – portrait, landscape and still-life and also in many different locations in Africa and Europe. 'Good' still-life and landscape could thus, arguably, be viewed as equally rare, as could harbour scenes or other paintings produced in the many different countries visited by Stern.¹¹³ Thus, while Congo works can be shown to be rare it must be acknowledged that the criterion of rarity is a marketing tool often invoked even when there is no real evidence of it.

To return to the question of why Sterns 'exotic' works of 'others' are most valued, the portraits from the Congo are in fact rare and this may contribute to this group's value. To add to this Freschi has argued that the popularity of Stern's works of 'others' can be linked to the works'

¹¹³ Some of the places Stern visited and painted in include, Umgababa, Swaziland, Pondoland, Dakar, Venice, Zanzibar, Spain and the French Riviera.

symbolic capital, which acts to reinforce social hierarchies. It has been shown that in South Africa, the art buying public is predominantly white and, with this in mind, Freschi makes a pertinent point. His claim is, however, difficult to prove and certainly not one acknowledged in the market place. Stern – and particularly her works of 'others' – have a long history in the literature and on display in exhibitions and galleries. Literature and display as well as provenance are used by the market to promote works and create a sense of prestige. It is suggested that in order to understand why Stern is viewed as a good investment and why her prices increased so much in the early 2000s, a large number of factors should be considered. The promotion of art as an investment that first emerged in the 1960s and the recent view of South African art as a good investment can be regarded as having laid the foundations for the increases in Stern's market. Within the art market, auction houses, dealers and collectors all contributed to Stern's increase in value. In questioning what the market values Stern's long history in literature and on exhibitions has made her recognisable. It has been argued that recognisability is important in the market but 'international links' have been viewed as of particular relevance to Stern's market in the 2000s. New international buyers can be considered to have contributed to Stern's increased value. In the local market Stern is valorised using her recognition by international institutions such as the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Moreover, the artist's association with German Expressionism is held in high regard by the local and international market. 'Foreign recognition' also contributed to Stern's initial recognition in South Africa in the 1920s. Although she was admired as a 'true' South African artist by the 1930s, with links outside of South Africa, 'foreign recognition' can still be identified as an integral part of the artist's reputation in the market of the 2000s.

Conclusion

Stern has, since her lifetime, been one of South Africa's most celebrated artists. As Neville Dubow (1972) noted "Irma Stern, more than any other South African artist was a legend in her own life time." After her death the artist remained a legend. In 1996, thirty years after Stern died, Marion Arnold (1996:77) began, 'Re-positioning Irma Stern' with the assertion; "Irma Stern, one of South Africa's most prolific and best-known artists." In 1999 the artist was ranked seventy-three on a list of South Africa's most influential people and her fame has been sustained in the 2000s.¹¹⁴ In 2015 – two years after the 2013 cut-off for this study – the introductory wall text for the exhibition 'Brushing Up on Stern' at the Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) maintained that Stern is still "celebrated as our most eminent artist" (ISANG, 2015a).

Irma Stern undoubtedly occupies a central position in the narrative of South African art history. It has, at times, been suggested that her fame is a direct result of the artist's creativity, talent and personality. Speaking of the artist's talent and devotion to her work Dubow (1961) commented, "Irma Stern stands out as a committed artist; not in the social sense but in the sense that she is able, in intense flurries of creativity, to make a forthright statement." Two years later he noted that Stern, "remain[ed], as ever, an astonishingly creative artist" (Dubow, 1963a). Similarly, the 2015 ISANG text praised the artist; "Stern's range of work is of such prodigious creativity that her work still reverberates today." (ISANG, 2015a)

In this dissertation I have, however, not looked to the artist's talent as the primary reason for her fame. The quality of Stern's work and whether she deserves the recognition she has received has not been my focus. The aim has been rather to investigate the way in which an artist's reputation is constructed by the art world, both in her lifetime and posthumously. I have asked, what are the variables that affect an artist's reception? Drawing from research in the form of press clippings, published literature, archival material (photographs, the minutes of meetings and letters) and interviews I have sought to argue that factors unrelated to the quality of her art have played an important role in the ways in which Stern has been valued and that her reputation has been built over time.

¹¹⁴ The list was published in *The Citizen*. "Publisher JJ Human and historian Trehwella Cameron put forward one hundred and twenty names which were placed on the News24 Internet website. The public were invited to vote on the rankings and to nominate others for inclusion. The influence of the personalities did not have to be positive." (Williams, 1999) Williams (1999) acknowledged: "Any list of influential South Africans of the twentieth century is certain to arouse debate." Voting will have been limited to those with Internet access who visit News24. Nonetheless, the list does give some insight into personalities well-known to this group.

Initially, the artist played an important role in establishing her reputation. Recognising the importance of publicity, she valued media coverage and used it to promote herself. What is significant is that while Stern's self-promotion aided in establishing her in the South African art world her actions also influenced the ways in which she was perceived. In the early 1920s Stern shaped her reputation as a modern artist. Later, she contributed to the view – prevalent from the late 1920s and into the 1940s – that she was an artist 'in touch' with Africa. In chapter one I showed that the artist's travel in Africa (an unconventional practice in her time) and assertion that contact with the 'natives' allowed her insight into their 'souls', contributed to the view that she had a unique understanding of the continent. Also significant for Stern's public image was her personal collection of art and antiques, including African, Chinese, Etruscan, Far and Middle Eastern objects. This kind of 'exotic' collection was unusual in Cape Town during Stern's lifetime and in chapter three I argued that the collection contributed to Stern's reputation as a fascinating and 'exotic' figure – a view that has since been memorialised at the Irma Stern Museum.

While Stern played an active role in establishing her fame, reviewers in the popular press and writers including Max Osborn and Joseph Sachs also contributed. What is significant for the subsequent development of the artist's reputation is that a great deal of textual material on the artist was produced. Marion Arnold (2003:39) noted that Stern's "formidable reputation in print [in Stern's life] sustained by paintings, drawings, prints and some ceramics and sculpture" has "with passing time, yield[ed] to new angles of enquiry". Indeed, key contemporary commentators on Stern, including Arnold, Below and Dubow, have drawn on the artist's writing (letters and diaries), press reviews and publications from Stern's lifetime in developing new interpretations. However, while writers have returned to early material, it is important that they have found new ways to understand the artist. That Stern has been re-interpreted in different times is an integral aspect of her sustained fame. I have investigated some of the key ways in which the artist has been understood and the underlying reasons for changes in interpretations. In identifying the variables that influenced her reception I worked with some overarching categories identified in the historical examples in the introduction to this dissertation; changes in political and intellectual ideas and ideology, tastemakers, the audience, the practising art world (or contemporary artists) and the art market.

In the case of the Old Master artists, shifts in reputation were fuelled by the emergence of new intellectual perspectives and political change in the societies of their audiences. Likewise, in this study on Stern, I have argued that the ways in which the 'other' was viewed in colonial and then postcolonial discourse, the growth of new feminist enquiries and recent changes in political circumstances in South Africa have played pivotal roles in the creation of Stern's reputation. Stern's paintings of those culturally 'other' to her – black Africans, Arabs, coloureds and Indians – formed a large proportion of the artist's oeuvre and her approach can be considered to have arisen from a Primitivism that emerged in the late nineteenth century. From the 1920s and throughout her life Stern travelled in search of an idealised world. In

chapters one and two I showed that Stern's travel in Africa in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and the 'native' subjects she painted there were an integral part of her early reputation. Within a colonial worldview, of which Primitivism was a part, her perceived ability to portray the 'real' Africa was admired in Europe and later held relevance for a South African audience.

Later, within postcolonial criticism, the idealisation of supposedly exotic societies came under criticism. Nettleton (2011:143) noted that, from the 1980s onwards, the idea of the pure and simple 'primitive' came to be regarded as based on "basically racist assumptions of European superiority". In chapter four I argued that, within this context, Stern can and has been viewed as a colonial appropriating other cultures. Alexander and Cohen, Wyman and Walker offered a view that included criticism of Stern's attitude to other races but Dubow, Arnold, Below and Braude presented more sympathetic readings to a 1990s and 2000s audience. Whether viewed favourably or otherwise, Stern's approach to the 'other' has provided rich material to different generations of writers and has kept the artist topical from her lifetime onwards.

Over the period of this study South African politics has undergone serious changes that have impacted on Stern's reputation. In chapter two I noted that, during Stern's life, South African political leadership viewed blacks as inferior and promoted separate development between races, leading to the formal implementation of the apartheid system. Although Stern showed an interest in the lives of black subjects she received government support and it has been argued that this was, in part, because her paintings of other cultures precisely emphasised difference between races and this was in line with their policies of separate development (Walker, 2009).

South African politics of course underwent dramatic changes after Stern's lifetime and it continued to impact on the artist's reputation. In chapter four I argued that as opposition to apartheid grew in the 1980s, the South African art world took measures to reassess its canon and a focus on recognising previously unrecognised black artists developed. Little new material on Stern was produced within this climate of revisionist concerns so at this point a diminished interest in the artist was attributed to politics. Another consequence of the political focus on race equality was that feminist concerns, which were increasingly receiving attention in art history in Europe and the United States, received little attention in 1980s South Africa. But, post-apartheid, feminist approaches were no longer over-shadowed by race politics and after 1994 and into the 2000s Stern was an interesting subject for study for feminist art historians.

Historically, the work of individual 'tastemakers' cannot be underestimated. In the creation of the Irma Stern narrative, many writers have played a role. The contributions of Neville Dubow, Marion Arnold and Irene Below, however, stand out. All three writers were established in the field of art history and presented their audience with favourable views of Stern. Dubow wrote in the press, published books and played an important role as the founding Director of the Irma Stern Museum. Arnold contributed through her many

publications from the 1990s onwards and Below made an important contribution through her publications and exhibition in Bielefeld, Germany. Both Arnold and Below introduced new feminist views on Stern. And, while not all South Africans agreed with her views Below, also gave Stern an international exposure that has proved an important aspect of the artist's reputation – especially in the market in the 2000s.

For any individual's ideas to be widely accepted a receptive audience must exist. In the case of Stern, audience expectations played a substantial role in forming her reputation. In the early 1920s she was criticised in South Africa. This was because her art, influenced by German Expressionism, was at odds with a British and largely conservative tradition popular in South Africa at the time. Popular taste, however, shifted. By the late 1930s there developed a growing appreciation for modern art and promotion of new ideas. Significantly Stern's style also shifted at this time. In the 1920s her paintings had many stylistic affiliations with German Expressionism but by the 1940s a stronger stylistic affiliation with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism emerged. This brought Stern more in line with popular taste. To add to this her subject matter was also responding to changing tastes. In chapter one I showed that, in the 1920s, landscape had been a popular theme but while it remained popular the genre of 'native life' grew in status. It became a key theme of Stern's to the point where, by the 1940s, the artist was regarded as an authority on 'native life'. Stern's fame in her lifetime can thus be linked to her style and subject matter appealing to a South African audience. It must be noted that in this initial period of acceptance, the practising art world also played a role. Artists were active in fighting against conservative conventions and promoting new ideas in South Africa. This is evident in the formation of the New Group and the promotion of more progressive ideas by artists can also be considered as contributing to Stern's art being viewed more favourably.

Also critical to Stern's reputation in her lifetime was the respect South African audiences had for foreign recognition. In chapter one I argued that the acknowledgement Stern received outside of South Africa played an important role in the growing respect for her within her home country. Foreign recognition as significant for Stern's reputation is, however, not limited to early audiences. In chapter five I identified that, in the 2000s, the recognition Stern received from international institutions (the exhibition in Bielefeld, Germany and ownership of a work by the Centre Georges Pompidou) and the artist's ties to German Expressionism were both used to promote Stern in the marketplace.

While the market for Stern has always been strong, it saw dramatic increases in the 2000s, especially between 2010 and 2011. This occurred shortly after a period of renewed scholarly interest in the artist. In chapter five, I argued that Stern provided rich material within postcolonial discourse and for feminist art historians in the 1990s and early 2000s. While one cannot be certain this does suggest that there was a correlation between increased critical interest and increased market value. Indeed the market often used critical literature to promote Stern. Moreover, Stern's works of 'others', which have been at the centre of much of

the critical writing, were the works that received the greatest market interest. In addition to the impact of scholarly interest a market must, however, be receptive. In Stern's case the promotion of art and particularly South African art as a good investment and an increased international interest in South African and also German Expressionist artists contributed to market interest in the 2000s.

What was important in the market and in the creation of Stern's reputation for the entire period of this study, from 1920 to 2013, is that there was a coming together of variables. Contributions have been identified in the areas: 'ideas and ideology', 'tastemakers', 'the audience', 'the market' and to a lesser extent 'the practising art world'. Shifts in each area have contributed to the creation of Stern's reputation. A number of contributing factors, however, arise as consistently important. That Stern can be viewed as having received international recognition is a vital aspect of the artist's reputation because it was relevant to different audiences at different times. Also, integral to the artist's reputation, from her lifetime to the 2000s, are her paintings of 'others', or 'native studies' as they were often called in Stern's time. Although Stern painted across different genres including still-life, landscape and portraits of fellow white South Africans, the 'other' occupies a central position in commentary on the artist. Writers in different periods have found rich material in Stern's works of and approach to other cultures. What is important is that the artist has been re-interpreted over time. Stern has generated a large critical discourse in the period up until 2013 and there is every indication that this ever-varying construction of the artist will continue well into the future.

Postscript

This study has shown the ways in which Stern's reputation has been created in her lifetime and posthumously. The artist has been interpreted differently by audiences over this time. But her story does not end here. Only shortly after the end point for this study there was already another large exhibition dedicated to the artist. 'Brushing Up on Stern' was held at ISANG from July to November 2015. The exhibition showcased works from the Gallery's permanent collection, as well as a selection of works from private collections. The Iziko website outlined that one of the aims of the exhibition was to explore "the extraordinary rise in popularity of a South African woman painter" (ISANG, 2015b). This aim is not dissimilar to that of this dissertation but the curators also presented new views. They examined "the Islamic/Arabic influences of the work of Irma Stern" (ISANG, 2015b).

In the exhibition wall text, the curators presented a view of Stern as having an understanding of the importance of the history of Arab people in southern Africa. Using the artist's own writing from *Zanzibar* and her interest in Cape Muslims they argued that,

[Stern] was aware of the long and enduring maritime contact between Africa and the Arabian and Indian Ocean worlds, and the impact this had on the shaping of southern African society, particularly the early colonial period at the Cape. In *Cape Muslims* she saw the roots of their ancestry in the Indian Ocean world, the Swahili coast and the slave trade. In this sense she was not only better informed than many, but modern in her thinking and attitudes which set her apart from her contemporaries (ISANG, 2015a).

Included on the exhibition, and adjacent to the above text was the painting, *Malay Bride* (1942). A display box beneath included a number of objects related to the work and the book *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-Apartheid* was amongst these items. The publication asks how "Muslims fit into South Africa's well-known narratives of colonialism, apartheid and post-apartheid?" (Baderoon, 2014:front dust-jacket). "*Regarding Muslims* argues that the 350-year archive of images documenting Muslims in South Africa is central to understanding the development of concepts of race, sexuality and belonging." (Baderoon, 2014:front dust-jacket) Stern's, *Malay Bride* is the cover image for the publication and Baderoon made reference to the artwork in a discussion of a kind of gaze described to her by Muslim cooks she interviewed. It is a gaze "turned back, but obliquely, without being seen to look, a technique of simultaneous observation and subversion" (Baderoon, 2014:5). Baderoon (2014:5) argued that this gaze is evident in Stern's *Malay Bride* "whose sideways glance is complex and questioning, refusing to easily accept the regard of the viewer". For Baderoon Stern held the capacity to sensitively and effectively portray this complex gaze and this view was reinforced on the ISANG exhibition where a text written by Baderoon and describing this gaze was included next to *Malay Bride*.

Stern is being put forward as an artist who is well informed about and sensitive to the history of Muslims in Cape Town. Of course, the Arab Muslim subject was also an important aspect of the Qatar Museums Authority's purchase of *Arab Priest* in 2011, and it will be interesting to see if as a result of their acquisition, ISANG's exhibition and Baderoon's writing, Islamic/Arabic influences become an increasingly important aspect of Stern's reputation.

In addition to the ISANG exhibition a number of publications on Stern are being planned. LaNitra Walker's doctoral dissertation has formed the basis of a book titled *Pictures that Satisfy: Irma Stern and Modern Art in South Africa*. As of November 2015 the book was under review by Syracuse University Press (Walker, 2015a). Walker was also invited to present a lecture 'In Defence of Irma Stern: Thoughts on Art and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa' at the closing event for 'Brushing up on Stern' on 1 November 2015. Walker has a longstanding interest in South Africa. She notes that as "an African-American who grew up in the 1980s, South Africa was my introduction to racial injustice in real time" (Walker, 2015b:8). As a child she watched news reports about what was happening in apartheid South Africa and after 1994 her interest intensified. South Africa ignited in Walker a racial consciousness and interest in social activism that the author says "became a life-long

intellectual interest and commitment to fostering social activism amongst youth" (Walker, 2015b:9). Significantly, she views her research on Stern as a part of this activism. Walker first encountered Stern in her first semester of graduate school in 1999. She saw the artist's works in an auction catalogue at the Lilly Library at Duke University. Intrigued, she wrote a semester paper on the artist. Although she had planned another topic for her dissertation her advisor suggested that Stern was a good topic and Walker agreed (Walker, 2015a). She has now been engaged in research on Stern for nearly seventeen years.

In her lecture Walker noted that some scholars are of the view that white South African artists should be excluded from African studies (Walker, 2015b:2). She disagrees with this view and believes that Stern is relevant, "in a post-apartheid, post-Civil Rights, postcolonial, twenty first-century world" (Walker, 2015b:2). For Walker Stern raises important issues about "race, gender, and national identity in her work", that "continue to vex South Africa, the United States, and many other parts of the world" (Walker, 2015b:2). Studying Stern allows an engagement with many of these issues and Walker argues that while there is a lot to celebrated there is "even more to question" (Walker, 2015b:12). This, to Walker, is why Stern is worthy of study (Walker, 2015b:12-13).

Walker has found Stern to be a valuable pedagogical tool. She teaches at the George Mason University Honors College. Viewing the University curriculum as centred on Eurocentric topics Walker decided to start teaching a class, 'Conceptions of Self in Modern South Africa' (Walker, 2015b:13). The class investigates "how South Africa's modern identity is shaped by its past" (Walker, 2015b:13) and includes Irma Stern. In her teaching Walker finds Stern useful because she shows students that "narratives are not neatly constructed" and raises concerns for how they are constructed (Walker, 2015b:9). Her class also includes other South Africans; Zoe Wicomb, Zakes Mda, Steve Biko, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, amongst others (Walker, 2015b:14). She challenges students to consider not only "Biko's impact, but the connection between Stern's work in the 1950s and 1960s leading up to Biko's rise" (Walker, 2015b:14-15). While the majority of students know little of South Africa when starting the class, by the end they have developed an understanding of how identity is shaped by culture. The author's interest in Stern, as well as her students' interest in her class on South Africa, can be viewed as indicative of a burgeoning intellectual interest in South Africa. Moreover, Walker's identity as an African-American allows her to develop a new approach to Stern. She can interrogate Stern's approach to those 'other' to the artist from a new perspective and as an American she can hold an outsider's view. The author can be considered to be emerging as an important new voice on Stern and it will be interesting to see if Stern's American audience grows and if a South African audience embraces the views of this new Stern academic.

To my knowledge, there are also two other books planned for publication. *Raisonné Publishers*, whose focus is "selected South African modern artists and their artworks" (*Raisonné Publishers*, 2013a), aims to produce a compilation on the artist. *Federico Freschi*,

(a South African art historian), is the editor-in-chief for the project. The planned date for publication is unclear but their aims include producing a "boxed set of three volumes: one by [Esmé] Berman drawing on her memories and archival material; another consisting of essays by respected South African art historians; and a third comprising a comprehensive collection of images spanning the artist's entire oeuvre" (Raisonné Publishers, 2013b). Their aims are ambitious but such a publication would not only bring new views on Stern to the public but also a comprehensive collection of images, which would constitute a useful resource for future research. Moreover, Sandra Klopper and Michael Godby, established South African art historians, are currently working on a publication drawing on Stern's correspondence with Trude Bosse. The publication, which has been accepted by UCT Press, is "an edition of the letters that Irma Stern wrote to Richard and Mona Feldman" (Godby, 2015). Godby and Klopper, "are annotating the letters, explaining identities of persons mentioned in them, identifying exhibitions, other events, even single art works that are mentioned, etc." (Godby, 2015). The authors are also collaborating with Mona Berman, the Feldmans' daughter and the collection of letters will be introduced with essays on Stern's work by Godby and Klopper and on the Feldmans by Berman.

The ISANG exhibition has already introduced a South African audience to new views on Stern and the publications planned for the near future by Walker, Raisonné Publishers and Godby and Klopper will no doubt bring new insights into the artist. They will take Stern's reputation in new directions and add to the ever-changing narrative of her life and work. What is clear is that Stern's reputation has been created over time. The artist has been differently viewed by different audiences but through it all her reputation has continued to grow. My analysis of responses to Stern in her lifetime and beyond has been a study of the mutability of art-historical interpretations and the particularly enduring nature of one artist's reputation.

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Red Earth* (1925) oil on canvas, 88.5 x 70 cm, Private Collection



Figure 2. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Composition* (1923) oil on canvas, 139 x 95.5 cm, Private Collection



Figure 3. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *The Avenue* (1925) oil on canvas, 86.4 x 83.8 cm, Private Collection



Figure 4. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Umgababa* (1922) oil on canvas, 60.5 x 91 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 5. Schweizer –Reneke in about 1910 in; Schoeman, K., 1994. *Irma Stern: The Early Years, 1894-1933*. Cape Town: South African Library, p.16.

According to Schoeman (1994:16), although the image was taken a few years after the Sterns left it cannot have changed much in the interval.



Figure 6. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Repose* (1927) oil on canvas, 121 x 189 cm, Private Collection



Figure 7. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *The Lemon Pickers* (1928) oil on canvas, 109.9 x 95.7 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 8. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Swazi Girls* (1929) oil on canvas on board, 99 x 94 cm, Private Collection



Figure 9. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of a Pondo Girl* (1929) oil on canvas, 59.1 x 49.2 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 10. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Blossoming Fruit Trees* (1940) oil on board, 62.5 x 62.5 cm, Sanlam Art Collection, Cape Town, South Africa.



Figure 11. Claude Monet (1840-1926) *Bordighera* (1884) oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81.3 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer Collection, Chicago, United States of America



Figure 12. Claude Monet (1840-1926) *Springtime* (1886) oil on canvas, 64.8 x 80.6 cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom.



Figure 13. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Orchard* (1942) oil on canvas, 64 x 64 cm, Standard Bank Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa



Figure 14. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) *The White Orchard* (1888) oil on canvas, 60 x 81cm, The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Figure 15. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) *The Pink Orchard* (1888) oil on canvas, 65 x 81cm, The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



Figure 16. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Arab Youth* (1945) oil on canvas, 86.4 x 61 cm, Private Collection



Figure 17. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *African Woman* (1940) oil on canvas, 59 x 49 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 18. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of the Artist's Mother (Henny Stern)* (1943), oil on canvas, 51 x 51 cm, Private Collection



Figure 19. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) *Portrait of a Prostitute* (1885) oil on canvas, 46.3 x 38.5 cm, The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Figure 20. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Bowl of Oranges (Woman Peeling Oranges)* (1910) oil on canvas, 100 x 101 cm, Private Collection, New York, United States of America



Figure 21. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Charlotte Pechstein with Mirror* (1917) oil on canvas, 80.5 x 69 cm, Private Collection



Figure 22. A photograph of Irma Stern having tea with a guest in the living room at The Firs, Rosebank, Cape Town. National Library of South Africa Cape Town campus, Irma Stern archives (MSC 31, 5 (5), 11994)



Figure 23. A photograph of Irma Stern seated in her living room at The Firs, Rosebank, Cape Town, 1.9.1965. National Library of South Africa Cape Town campus, Irma Stern archives (MSC 31, loose images)



Figure 24. A photograph of the living room at The Irma Stern Museum, Rosebank, Cape Town, 28.10.2015 (Photo: S Sinisi, 2015)



Figure 25. A photograph of Irma Stern in her dining room at The Firs, Rosebank, Cape Town, 1.9.1965. National Library of South Africa Cape Town campus, Irma Stern archives (MSC 31, loose images)



Figure 26. A photograph of the dining room at The Irma Stern Museum, Rosebank, Cape Town, 28.10.2015 (Photo: S Sinisi, 2015)



Figure 27. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Pondo Woman among Kreepers* (1929) oil on canvas and hardboard, 85 x 71 cm, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria, South Africa



Figure 28. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Maid in Uniform* (1955) oil on canvas, 69 x 63 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa

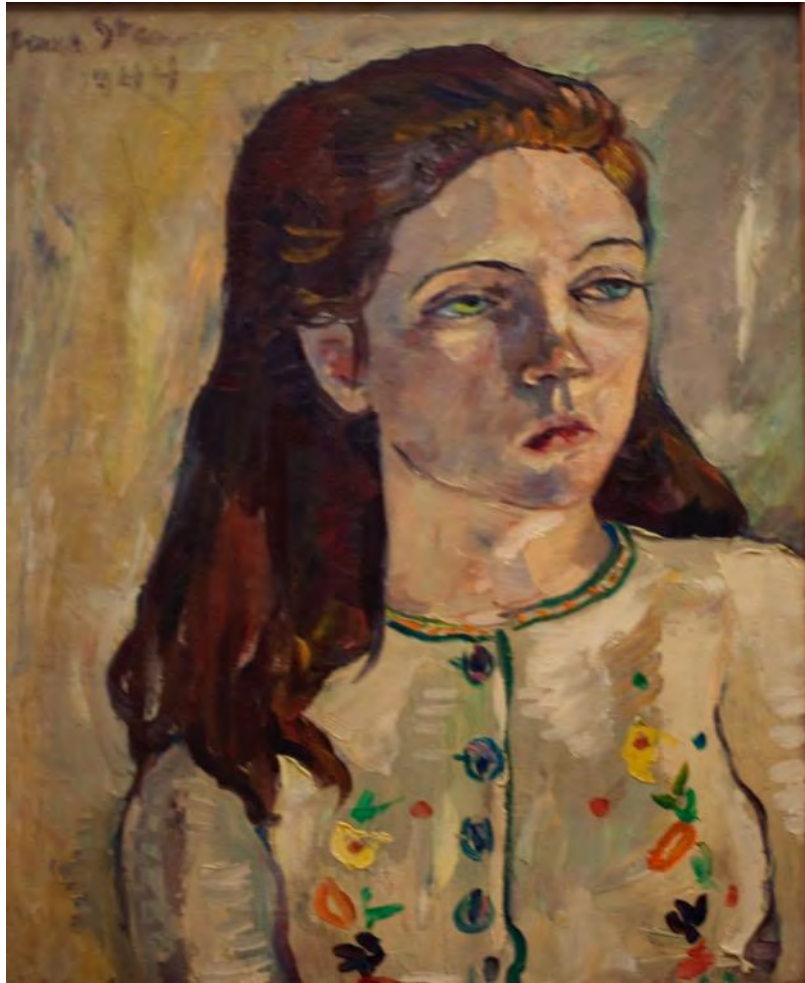


Figure 29. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait (Young Girl)* (1944) oil on canvas, 59.7 x 49.5 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa



Figure 30. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of Lippy* (1944) oil on canvas, 61 x 56 cm, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.



Figure 31. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of Mrs Norton* (1959) oil on canvas, 63.7 x 51 cm, Private Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa



Figure 32. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Woman in The Kitchen* (1941) oil on canvas, 76 x 68 cm, Private Collection, Cape Town, South Africa



Figure 33. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of a Girl* (1939) oil on canvas, 58 x 47 cm, Private Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa



Figure 34. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *The Flower Seller* (1935) oil on canvas, 81 x 73.5 cm, Tatham Art Galley, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa



Figure 35. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Malay Girl* (1939) oil on canvas, 62 x 51 cm, Sanlam Art Collection, Cape Town, South Africa



Figure 36. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *The Hunt* (1926) oil on canvas, 152.4 x 91.4cm cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa



Figure 37. Max Pechstein (1881-1955) *Akte im Freien (Under the Trees)* (1911) oil on canvas, 73.7 x 99.1 cm, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, United States of America

Irma Stern - High Prices

No	Date	Auction House	Title	Medium	Size	Dated	Hammer Price	Total (Rands)
1	23-Mar-11	Bonhams	"Arab Priest"	Oil on Canvas	97 x 86cm (within frame)	1945	£ 2 700 000.00	R 30 321 000.00
2	27-Oct-10	Bonhams	"Bahora Girl"	Oil on Canvas	87 x 71cm	1949	£ 2 100 000.00	R 23 310 000.00
3	26-Sep-11	Strauss	"Two Arabs"	Oil on Canvas	58 x 84	1939	R 19 000 000.00	R 19 000 000.00
4	23-Mar-11	Bonhams	"Seated Nude with Oranges"	Oil on Canvas	88x83cm	1934	£ 1 500 000.00	R 16 845 000.00
5	26-Oct-11	Bonhams	"Watussi Woman" (Portrait of Princess Emma Bakayishonga)	Oil on Canvas	85.5 x 85.5cm	1942	£ 1 000 000.00	R 12 720 000.00
6	11-Oct-10	Strauss	"Gladioli"	Oil on Canvas	99 x 93cm	1939	R 12 000 000.00	R 12 000 000.00
7	01-Nov-10	Strauss	"White Lilies"	Oil on Canvas	67.5 x 64.5cm	1936	R 10 000 000.00	R 10 000 000.00
8	07-Mar-11	Strauss	"Still Life of Delphiniums"	Oil on Canvas on Board	99 x 73.5cm	1938	R 9 500 000.00	R 9 500 000.00
9	16-Aug-11	Swelco	"Young Arab"	Oil on Canvas	50 x 55cm	1945	R 8 750 000.00	R 8 750 000.00
10	01-Nov-10	Strauss	"Lilies"	Oil on Canvas	60 x 65cm	1944	R 7 500 000.00	R 7 500 000.00

Figure 38. A list of Stern's highest priced paintings until the end of 2011 (compiled by Sarah Sinisi)



Figure 39. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Carla* (1944) oil on canvas, 55 x 49.5 cm, The Elisabeth Bradley Private Art Collection



Figure 40. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of Zoë Randall* (1944) oil on canvas, 51 x 50.5 cm, Private Collection



Figure 41. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Portrait of Vera Poppe Playing the Cello* (1943) oil on canvas, 101 x 83 cm, Private Collection

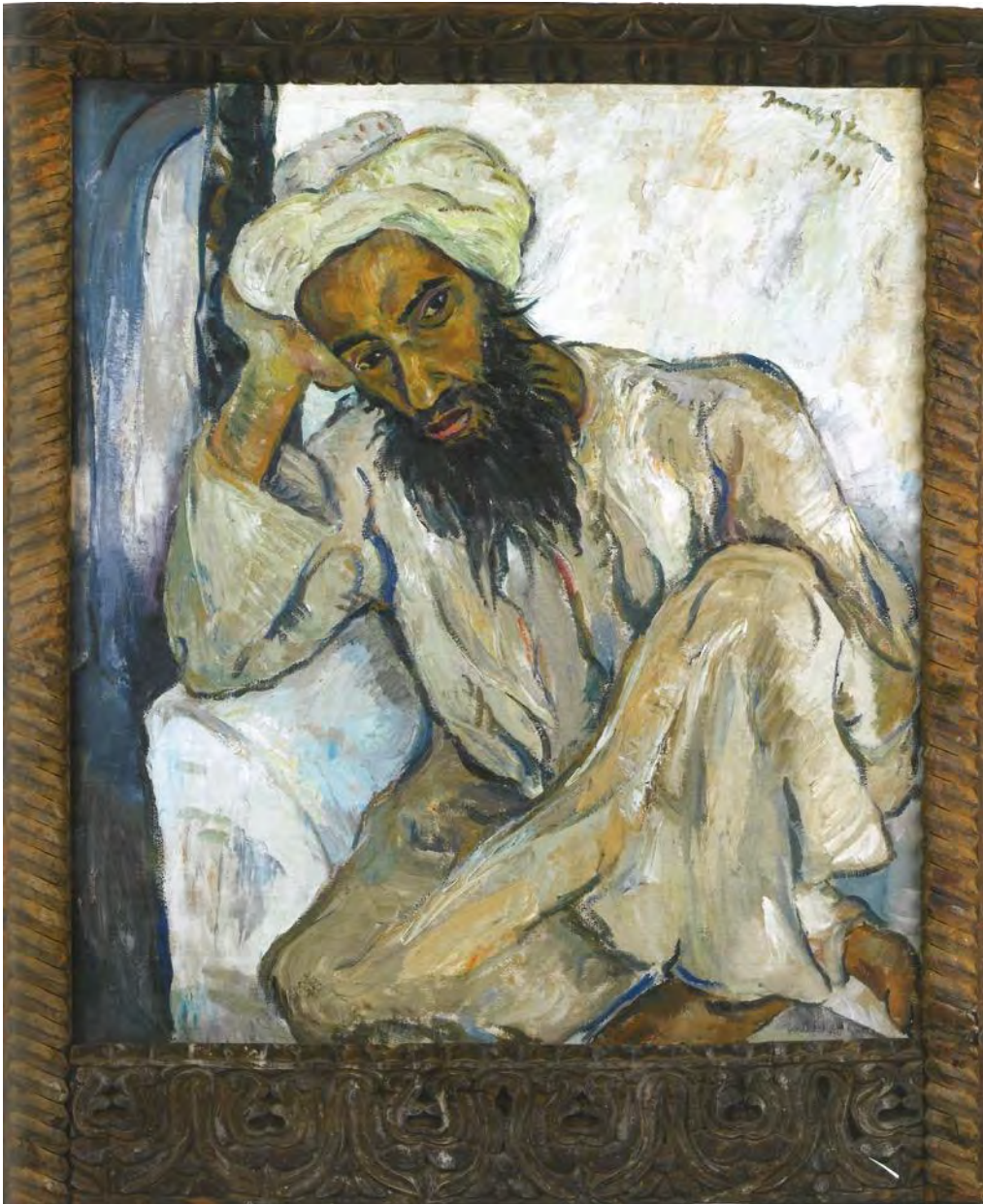


Figure 42. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Arab Priest* (1945) oil on canvas, 97 x 86 cm, The Qatar Museums Authority, Doha, State of Qatar.



Figure 43. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Bahora Girl* (1945) oil on canvas, 87 x 71 cm, Private Collection



Figure 44. Irma Stern (1894-1966) *Two Arabs* (1939) oil on canvas, 58 x 84 cm, Private Collection, Cape Town, South Africa.

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Irma Stern
Arab Priest

Irma Stern

(South African, 1894–1966)

Arab Priest

'signed and dated 'Irma Stern / 1945' (upper right);
inscribed with title, '450 GNS', artist's name and
address

(to stretcher verso); signed and inscribed

'Irma Stern / Cape Town'

(twice, to frame and canvas verso)

oil on canvas

97 x 86cm (38 3/16 x 33 7/8in).

within original Zanzibar frame

£1,500,000 - 2,000,000

ZAR17,000,000 - 23,000,000

2 700 000

Provenance

Collection of the artist

Purchased from the artist by Frida Baumann

Thence by direct descent to the current owner

Exhibited

Paris, Galerie Des Beaux Arts, 1947

Johannesburg, Standard Bank Gallery, *Irma Stern:*

Expressions of a Journey, 25 September - 29 November
2003, illustrated p.70

Cape Town, Irma Stern Museum, circa 1970-2010

Literature

I. Stern, *Zanzibar*, (Pretoria, 1948), illustrated

N. Dubow, *Irma Stern*, (Cape Town, 1974), illustrated
p.49

H. Smuts, *At Home With Irma Stern*, (Cape Town, 2007),
illustrated p.10

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

This lot is in South Africa. Therefore it is not subject to V&T on either the hammer price or the buyer's premium. It will be available for viewing at the Everard Read gallery in Johannesburg. Payment for this lot may be made in Sterling in London or in South African Rand through our Johannesburg office using the published rate of exchange on the date of the auction and collection must be made through our Johannesburg office. Buyers who intend to export this lot from South Africa must apply to the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) for the relevant export permit. Please contact the department for further information.

Figure 45. Catalogue entry for *Arab Priest* (1945) in; Bonhams., 2011. *Masterpieces - The South African Sale, Wednesday 23 March 2011*. [auction catalogue] London: Bonhams, no pagination.

Irma Stern Oil Paintings available at Auction, 2000-2011

