

Mary Stainbank and popular culture: Images of the *indigene*

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In her experimental carvings, Mary Agnes Stainbank (1899 – 1996) depicted the South African *indigene* as subject matter. She continued its use in the popular cultural artefacts intended for mass production, which she made through the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein. While these artefacts are primarily decorative and ornamental, Stainbank nevertheless executed them according to the same aesthetic idioms, which she employed in her large-scale carvings. Considerations of “self” and “other”, as generated by her sculptures on the whole, apply, as Stainbank focused on those characteristics of her subjects, which identify them as *different*.

As was the case with some sculptors working in South Africa during the early part of the 20th century, such as Anton van Wouw and Coert Steynberg, the Durban-born Mary Stainbank also relied on public and private commissions for an income. For these commissions, she adhered to the representational, verisimilitude, and the conventions prescribed for portraiture and architectural decorations.¹ She further supplemented her income by making small ceramic figurines, bookends, ashtrays and other popular cultural artefacts through the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein.²

When Stainbank began during the early 1930s to make popular cultural objects for sale through galleries and department stores, she continued to use the South African *indigene* as her subject matter as she was doing in her larger carvings in stone and later in wood. Her studies at the Royal College of Art in London (1922 - 1926) led her to formulate a visual idiom, which is representational while simultaneously adhering to modernist notions of “significant form” and “truth to materials”. Once back in South Africa, she continued to render the indigenous identity in this manner in her carvings but also in small ceramic figurines. In addition to these mainly Zulu figurines, Stainbank also designed figurines of children for fountains and herb gardens,

and Voortrekker figures to commemorate the centenary celebration of the Great Trek in 1938. Stainbank’s popular cultural items therefore establish a discourse between “self” and “other”, as images of the colonizer and the colonized form the central subject matter of this genre as used by Stainbank.

The discourse of *difference* must be located within the broader context of Stainbank’s *oeuvre* as it functions between shifting polarities: Stainbank as a member of a colonial family and an artist making use of the *indigene* as subject matter for her sculpture; as female “other” to the colonial male; and as *avant garde* artist in the context of conservative art norms prevalent in Natal during the early 20th century. These popular cultural items therefore contribute to a post-colonial understanding of the artist’s creative output as well as to the construction of a specific cultural identity of *difference*. It is hence important to note that neither popular items nor public commissions and sculptures by Stainbank in which the iconography of the *indigene* prevails can be examined in isolation.

Seen in conjunction with her early portraits of Zulu personages from the family farm Coedmore,³ these small figurines elicit an understanding of their position and function as servant. Stainbank’s reference to servitude has a

binary application and oscillates between two attitudes: on the one hand, she represented the *indigene* definitively as servant. Conversely, the image of the *indigene* was used to passively serve various functions, which are useful, such as supporting books on a shelf, having an open mouth to receive ash from an ashtray, and to hold up crests and display plaques. Whereas the identity of the *indigene* as servant is communicated representationally in Stainbank's sculptures, the use of the appearance of the *indigene* as decorative occurs in her popular cultural items. It is unlikely, given the Stainbank family's supportive relationship with the indigenous people living and working at Coedmore, that these attitudes were ideologically informed beyond the colonial atmosphere of the time. The investigation of these small-scale works by Stainbank considers them as extensions of the formal and iconographic concerns she employed in her large carvings and therefore does not aim to determine their classification as "art" or as "craft".⁴ However, their popular function cannot be overlooked.

The earliest known example of a sculpture by Stainbank representing the *indigene* as servant is probably the modelled portrait *Miserable Elizabeth* (1921)(fig 1). Elizabeth is identified as a servant, not through any activity she is involved in, but through the blue *kopdoek* she is wearing. She is further identified by Webb (1985: 15 and 41) as a servant on the family farm, and as a person who earned the nickname "miserable" due to her temperament. Of the other images of *indigenes* as servants by Stainbank, or as servants' children, such identification occurs only through the titles of the works as listed in the catalogue of the artist's work.⁵ Aside from *Miserable Elizabeth* (1921), the only large-scale sculpture by Stainbank in which the *indigene* is as

overtly presented in a situation of servitude or even bondage, is in the relief panel called *Fate* (1937)(fig 2).

Miserable Elizabeth (1921) is certainly not the only work in the history of art in South Africa in which the *indigene* is represented as a servant. South African art history is also not the only history, which contains visual images of servants.



Figure 1.
Mary Stainbank, *Miserable Elizabeth* (1920).
Painted plaster of Paris, life size.

Such images were frequently produced in the visual and material culture of colonized countries as these images reflect the power and control exerted by the colonizer over the colonized. Stainbank was certainly familiar with some of these images, notably the well-known *Life in Philadelphia* (1828-1830) by Edward Williams Clay.⁶ The process of colonization, as implicit in the visual images it generated, contains a tacit moral: the "rescue" of the *indigene* from

a social and cultural construct, which the colonizer deemed inferior, if not uncivilized.⁷

Contemporaneous to Stainbank's representations of the *indigene* as servant, is Moses Kottler's *Meidjie*.⁸



Figure 2.
Mary Stainbank, *Fate* (1937). Sandstone,
134 x 150 x 26.5 cm.

This work represents the nude image of a young woman, but the title contains an explicit reference to the function of the model as servant, therefore also as “other”. Like Elizabeth, *Meidjie* is presented as inactive. Nothing about her – posture, activity, or her nakedness – can identify her as servant. The displacement of the figure from an indigenous cultural context to a colonial situation of subjugation is suggested by the title of the work, which indicates a perception of this figure as servant. The nudity of *Meidjie* parodies the history of the female nude as significant subject matter for art while simultaneously reflecting the nakedness of the indigenous person.⁹ It is within this context of the *indigene* as servant that Stainbank's popular cultural artefacts should be located.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, while working on the decorations and fountains for the Addington Children's Hospital in

Durban, Stainbank established a good working relationship with Gladys Short and Joan Methley of the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein. Decorating the Children's Hospital was the first government commission undertaken by the Ceramic Studio (Hillebrand 1986: 182), and coincided with Stainbank's return from London. The artists working at the Ceramic Studio were mostly Durban-trained artists such as Audrey Frank and Thelma Newlands-Currie (Hillebrand 1986: 182 and 1991: 4) who joined the Ceramic Studio in 1928. Usually the artists at this studio designed the work themselves, but sometimes the studio made use of designs by known artists such as Alfred Palmer, Eric Byrd and Erich Mayer (Heymans 1989: 5). Similarly, the Ceramic Studio approached Stainbank and Wilgeforde Agnes Vann-Hall (1896 – 1981)¹⁰ for designs and moulds for figurines, probably because Methley and Short, having been fellow students of Stainbank's at the Durban School of Art during the second decade of the 20th century, felt they could depend on Stainbank to provide quality work. Both ceramists also studied at the Royal College of Art prior to Stainbank's arrival at the College.

The Ceramic Studio made extensive use of Stainbank's talent for modelling three-dimensional forms. Stainbank said, with regard to her contact with the Ceramic Studio:

I never did ask for work from the “Ceramic Studio”, they always contacted me. I am a sculptor, and most of my work throughout the country is in bronze, stone and wood – I am not a potter, and have only modelled in clay as a means to an end, such as works to be carried out in bronze, ceramics, etc. When I did carry out work for the “Ceramic Studio” I supplied them with the plaster moulds, and they took the impressions from these moulds in their pottery clay (Heymans 1989:36).

The correspondence between Stainbank and the Ceramic Studio reveals that the Studio favoured indigenous subjects for their designs, including historical figures and events. From the correspondence between Stainbank and Short, it emerged that the idea to make small figurines and bookends to be cast and glazed at the Ceramic Studio came from Short. In her letter to Stainbank dated 29 September 1931, Methley tells of a letter from Short who was in Cape Town at the time. Short was discussing the possibility of opening an agency in Cape Town and said: "they seem to be interested in the idea of native figures – small ones either single figures or for book ends about 6" to 8" high". Methley asked Stainbank whether she would be prepared to make some figures or bookends for them "to take out of moulds?".¹¹ In a postcard dated 30 October but indicating no year, Short asked Stainbank for small figures and bookends to be ready for Christmas sales at Ashley's Galleries in Cape Town. Short stated: "He particularly wants Native, or something typical of the country before the ... tourists arrive here from England". Likewise, in a postcard dated 21 January but again not indicating a year, Stainbank was asked to model "a small figure or two or bookends to be done in pottery". Short stated in this message that they intended sending work to an agent in Johannesburg and she further discussed the process of making these and included reference to commission for the agent selling these objects. Audrey Frank had already made, at the Ceramic Studio, small African figurines about 13cm tall (Hillebrand 1991:23).

For Stainbank, a precursor to these small objects is *Native Head* (1924)(fig 3), which she made at the Royal College of Art in London, probably as a test piece to learn bronze casting.¹² In this head, which is culture specific due

to the *isicholo*,¹³ Stainbank applied the decorative in a twofold manner: iconographically as earrings to adorn the face; and as stylization of these earrings *per se*. The potential of combining three-dimensional, representational form with decoration is hence already present at an early stage in her career. The incentive for such a combination of approach can be ascribed to the abundant presence in the press in London during the mid-1920s, of Egyptian images following the discovery of Tutankamen's tomb.

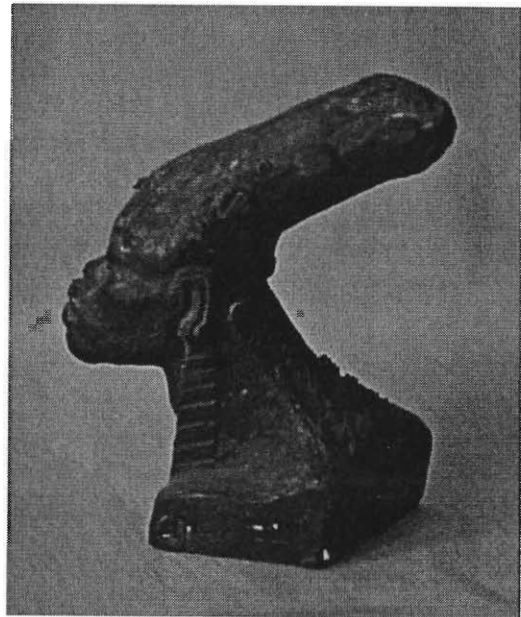


Figure 3.
Mary Stainbank, *Native Head* (1924).
Bronze, 20 x 15 x 12.

Stainbank accepted the opportunity for a new endeavour to experiment with an African motif. In a letter to Short, dated 3 November 1931, she wrote:

I am sorry I have not been able to send you up some casts of small native studies, (models) so far, but I hope to send them up very soon. I have two pairs of book ends, and two or three small [sic] ready, except for the making of the piece moulds, I will get these piece moulds of these done and send them off to you, while I get on with the others.

In a slightly earlier letter to Methley, dated 13 October 1931, Stainbank enquired after techniques and processes for casting these figurines. The colour of these little figurines were, for Stainbank, important:

... would you be able to leave the native figures in the biscuit, or whatever you call it, with just a glaze and perhaps a little colour here and there, or bead ornaments etc. All the brown colour I have ever seen on pottery I do not like. Would it be possible to carry out some of the smaller native figures in some of your stonewear [sic]?

The reference here to Stainbank's dislike of adding colour to describe the figure reflects the degree to which verisimilitude as well as formal considerations dictated the final product. It is important to note that Stainbank frequently coloured portrait busts she made of people she knew and of her family: *Native Study* (Sa) is painted a deep sienna; *Child's Head* (Sa) is a pale grey green; and *Sigcathyia* (1920 - 1921) resembles bronze. *Miserable Elisabeth* (1920)(fig 1) is painted realistically: blue *kopdoek*, dark brown skin and grey eyebrows. Such colouring can be considered integral in establishing and inscribing *difference* and as upholding the idea of ethnicity. The tourist orientation however of small-scale popular figurines further underscores the notion of "otherness" as curiosity.¹⁴ Suggestions Stainbank made to the Ceramic Studio with regard to the colouring of the bookends followed in a letter dated 2 December 1931, addressed to Short:

If I were you I would not bother to colour the bookends in brown. Couldn't you leave some of them in the biscuit stage and just touch up the headdress with also beads, and 'much' with colour? I would like to see some in cream with the cut in parts in a little darker cream. Try some in blue with other colours splashed in, also that nice greeny colour of yours.

In the ceramic figurines, colour once again became pertinent, albeit here from a more experimental vantage point, indicating that for Stainbank, the decorative and ornamental nature of these figurines was paramount.¹⁵ The extract above reflects that Stainbank's immediate reaction to the colour of the *indigene* was dictated by verisimilitude. However, this attitude towards colour and its function as particularizing *difference* was not fixed, as expressed in another, much later letter to Short, dated 5 August 1937:

Don't you think it would be nice to carry them out in various colours, not the natural 'nigger brown' colour? Vann-Hall saw some charming Italian figures while she was overseas, they were carried out in a variety of colours.

Here Stainbank entertained the idea of sacrificing verisimilitude, indicating on the one hand an aspect of her perception of the *indigene* which she had hitherto explored only obliquely in her carved figures: the decorative. On the other hand, she moved beyond descriptive colour while retaining the representational. It is possible, and likely, that Stainbank explored the potential of the "other" as decorative and stylish, as this was an opportunity her large-scale works could not accommodate. The issues of *identity* and *difference*, probably because the figures were mass-produced and popularized, and could therefore be taken liberties with, became essentially, non-issues. However, the figures represented contain an inherent *difference* as they can iconographically be identified due to the wearing of beads, and specific styles of headdress. The correspondence cited above indicates that colour decisions were based, at times, on visual effect rather than on inscribing ethnic identity. It is also not clear whether Stainbank was aware of the dichotomy in either her

sculptures or in popular cultural items, between the abstract nature of modernist form, and representation. From the interviews with Andries Botha (1989), no indications of Stainbank being aware of this phenomenon in her work could be found. Certainly, her use of non-descriptive colour on these figurines and on plaster of Paris portrait busts, underline and extend this dichotomy.

In a newspaper cutting in the Stainbank Archives (*The Natal Mercury* 22 July 1937), a photograph is shown of a small sculpture of the head of a Zulu male to be used as an ashtray, and a Zulu woman with an elongated *isicholo* and a sleeping infant on her back. This work resembles Alfred Martin's¹⁶ *Wonder* (c1930),¹⁷ particularly in the stylization of the hair along the brow and the posture of the woman. The inscription in the newspaper reads:

The carefree spirit of the Zulu is seen in these decorative pottery accessories. Caricature runs riot in her ashtray at the right where huge lips are open to receive the ashes from your cigarette. There is dignity in the table ornament at the left, where the piccanin's curly head rests on the shoulder of its parent. They are the work of a famous South African artist and they were caught by the *Mercury* cameraman during a shopping tow.

While the newspaper article does not stipulate that this is Stainbank's work, the photograph, albeit dark, under-exposed and poorly printed, shows unambiguously that these are the figurines made by her and to which there are numerous references in her correspondence with the Ceramic Studio (fig 4 and 5).¹⁸

In a letter to Methley, dated 5 August 1936, Stainbank instructed the Ceramic Studio how to prepare the moulds, presumably for the ashtrays mentioned in the newspaper article above, which she had sent them: "Mould 'C' is an ash tray or ash

container. The mouth will have to be hollowed out and left open and base [sic] of the neck filled in [sic] the cigarette is balanced on the nose!" Similarly, Stainbank explained to Short (26 September 1936): "Mould 'D' is a cigarette ash holder. The cigarette is balanced in the top of the woman's headdress. The inside of the headdress will have to be hollowed out and the bottom of the neck filled in to hold the ash".

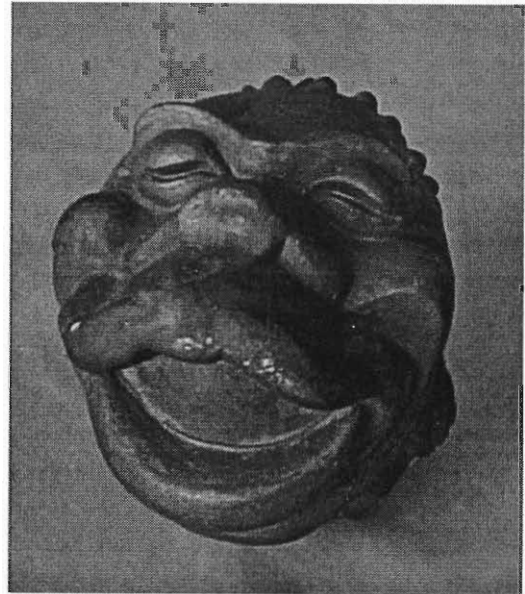


Figure 4.
Mary Stainbank, *Ashtray* (1937). Painted plaster of Paris, 9cm.

These ashtrays (1936)(fig 4) reflect some of the attitudes towards the *indigene* generally as occurring in popular culture and in advertisements at the time, both locally and overseas. In Britain and America, advertising during the colonial era implied power of some sort: either world power, or white supremacy (Pieterse 1992: 188). For this to occur, the image of the *indigene* was used in a variety of roles, but generally in ones where they were at the receiving end of white behaviour and demand: the slave, labourer, entertainer, servant, chauffeur and so on.

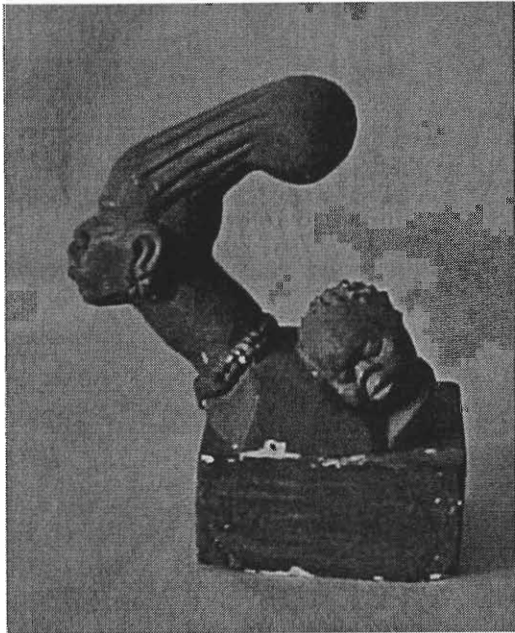


Figure 5.
Mary Stainbank, *Mother and Child* (1937).
Plaster of Paris, 15 cm.

According to Pieterse (1992: 188), these roles were usually reserved for black men, as such ascribed identities fulfilled the function of desexualizing the black male. The implication of this is that, once absorbed into Western or colonial economies and socio-cultural contexts, the black male is “civilized” and his ascribed “primal instincts” are no longer out of control. The figure of the black female, on the other hand, when used in advertisements, was often construed as erotic (Pieterse 1992: 206). This perception similarly carries a negative connotation: the black female had to be socialized into white behaviour to become “available”. Here, a feminist perspective intersects with the colonial construction of identity and power.

Ethnic characteristics of black cultures used in colonial advertisements were readily associated also with the exotic and the romantic (Pieterse 1992: 188). Such images presented the product advertised as desirable and exclusive. The coupling of the image of the *indigene* to a specific product such as tobacco implied owning the *indigene* (by owning the image) as well as the

product once the purchase has been completed (see Berger [1972] on the point of ownership of images). Ownership in this sense required the image of the *indigene* to be presented in a non-threatening manner, and this could only occur when the personage is controlled by and subjected to colonial rationality. Stainbank’s ashtray, designed to receive the ash presumably from the colonizer’s cigarette, perpetuated the myth of the contented and placid “other”. The mouth of the man in Stainbank’s ashtray is curled up in a coquettish smile, ready to receive the ash from his “owner” whilst the rest of the face holds an expression of bliss.

Since the seventeenth century, the black male has been associated in Europe with tobacco and tobacco products (Pieterse 1992: 189). The Pipe Maker’s Guild in 1619 used two Moors dressed in skirts made of tobacco leaves to support their arms (Meadows 1957: 40), a popular sign for tobacconists. Often, “black boys”, represented as “Negroes” took the place of the Moor. The Moor with an open, gaping mouth was used for apothecaries, as a sign of healing power, associated with Eastern herbs, intoxicants and exotic remedies. This image of the Moor was also used for breweries and the wine industry, hence carrying positive connotations (Pieterse 1992: 189). Stainbank’s use of the head of a black male for an ashtray is therefore not new and is in keeping with these notions of use and display.

Important to consider in the making of these artefacts is the caricature-like rendering of the subject. A possible explanation for its presence in Stainbank’s work might be found in the manner in which she often referred in her correspondence to Short, to “pretty’s” when asking for more information on public or privately commissioned work. This indicates that Stainbank was aware that a different taste-value governed the making of

popular objects, or objects for public or private commissions. Another possible explanation points to the diverse “craft” related subjects taught at the Royal College of Art: illustration, embroidery, various craft-related skills, and so on. The small scale of these works, combined with the popular intention of the work hence contributed to the identity of the objects as caricature-like.

Stainbank’s designs for architectural decorations for the Salisbury Public Offices reveal, similar to the Moor, the figure of a black woman holding up the city’s crest (fig 6). She is decoratively stylized: the *isicholo* forms a suave curve, which reflects the curve of the side of the crest. Beads further adorn her body. The perception of the *indigene*, not only as servant or as “other”, but also as decorative, is further supported by Stainbank’s many designs for architectural decoration of the period. It

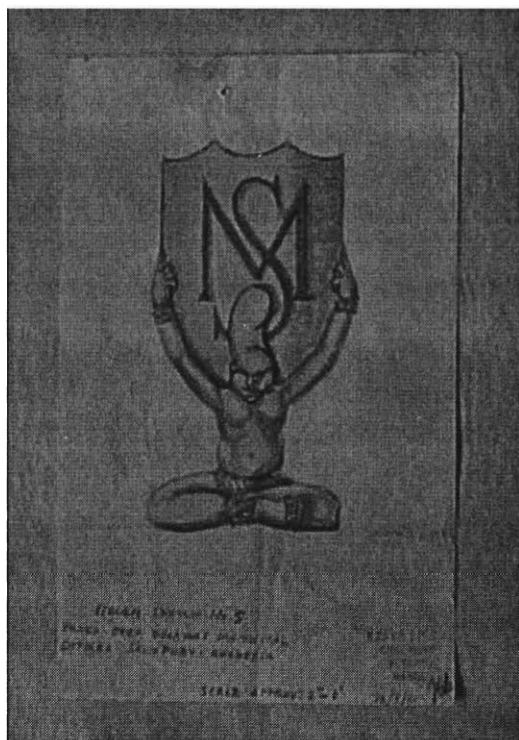


Figure 6.

Mary Stainbank, *Rough sketch No 5. Panel over doorway, Municipal offices, Salisbury* (1932). Pencil and wash on paper 20.5 x 13.

is not clear, particularly of the work done during the 1930s, whether her designs dictated the decorative characteristic of the ceramic figurines she made, or whether these figurines affected her drawings and designs.

From a consideration of public commissions for architectural decorations, it emerged that Stainbank rendered indigenous personages in these commissions mostly according to a decorative idiom. She applied three-dimensional form in combination with the decorative with apparent ease in the designs for relief panels for the erstwhile Native Affairs offices in Pretoria (fig 7). In these designs, the *indigene* is depicted, albeit stylized, in various activities and in traditional dress, underlining their cultural identity and appearance as *different*. These designs are reminiscent of the relief panels she designed whilst a student at the Royal College of Art. Similarly, she made use of brown paper as a ground onto which she drew the figures in white and black chalk. The result is a suggestion of three-dimensional form while the overall impression is one of pattern and shape. Stainbank achieved this tension between implied volume and the decorative through the repetition of bodies and limbs in a manner, which creates surface pattern and a visual rhythm.

What is significant about these designs is that Stainbank deliberately stylized ethnographic characteristics such as headdress, and placed the emphasis firmly on the body as decorative, thereby creating the overall impression (given the function of these panels as decoration, and the intention to give the building an African appearance) of the decorative. The Department of Native Affairs intended the decorations for this building to contribute towards creating an ethos of African culture:

The New Native Pass Office has had such features incorporated in its architecture as, it was felt, would appeal to the natives and would distinguish the building for them (Heymans 1989: 53)



Figure 7.
Mary Stainbank, *Figure for Native Affairs Building* (1937). Black and white chalk on brown paper.

The designs Stainbank submitted for the Empire Exhibition in 1936, are, in contrast to the designs for the Native Affairs buildings, naturalistic and “true to nature”. From the correspondence during 1936 between Stainbank and the Native Affairs Department, in which they discussed the panels for the Empire Exhibition (1936), her accuracy of cultural detail is, in comparison to the information provided by the Department, striking. Whereas the Department required paintings depicting “Natives” from Natal, Transvaal and the Cape, Stainbank’s response, dated 3 June 1936, in the form of pencil drawings, document the various cultural groups belonging to these areas. She accurately labelled each drawing according to the group typical of that

area, namely Zulu, Shangaan and Pondo. Stainbank placed these figures in naturalistic settings, quite unlike the decorative designs for the Native Affairs building. This indicates that her approach to her subject matter was deliberate as dictated by the nature of the commission, and not dictated by stereotypical attitudes and perceptions of the *indigene*. This also indicates that Stainbank was aware of public taste, and adapted her form to the requirements of the commission.

By the 1930s, the image of the black woman in tribal dress emerged generally in popular culture: ceramics, fabric design, and interior decoration.¹⁹ The designs Stainbank submitted for relief panels for the South African Museum (1930) in Cape Town are decorative in their execution, emphasizing the curved lines of the bodies and headdress moving elegantly across the flat pictorial field. The decorative treatment of the figures is extended to include, iconographically, objects and artefacts not considered as fine art but as “craft”, and hence also as decorative such as baskets, beads, fruit, and the produce of the Empire. The seemingly easy shift between a decorative and a naturalistic approach to the *indigene* appears to be characteristic of Stainbank’s working methods employed for commissioned projects. The nature and function of the commission hence determined whether her approach should be decorative and stylized, or representational.

Although the decorative is present in Stainbank’s “private”²⁰ sculptures, it takes up a subsidiary position as the identity of the sitter as a cultural construct is, in these works, the main focus. However, it appears that the decorative in popular cultural items, combined with the function of the work as ornamental or as embellishment, diminishes the identity of the personage depicted. It is also possible, given the

lengthy debate in the Durban press at the time, about *Baya Huba* (1933)²¹ and the negative public reception also of *Ozazisayo* (1927)²², that Stainbank avoided overt reference in her popular figurines to cultural identity aside from superficially recognizable features. Both *Baya Huba* (1933) and *Ozazisayo* (1927) received severe criticism in the press on the grounds that the faces of the figures were not realistically represented, and the formal exaggerations applied earned much scorn from the public. *Ozazisayo* (1927), a carving depicting a Bhaca mother with an infant on her back, was described as a “gorilla”, and as gross and unrefined.²³ Criticism of this kind reveal that the public of the day expected a work of art to be “true to nature”, and that the subject matter of this carving was unacceptable because it did not conform to popular opinion about the appearance of the *indigene* when represented in a painting or a sculpture. Stylization of the appearance of the *indigene* in the small-scale figures, including of the *isicholo*, beads, and earplugs, prevented these figures from similar criticisms as lodged against *Baya Huba* (1933). A similar stylization in a fountain figure intended for a herb garden, as well as its sentimental evocation, rendered images of this nature acceptable to the public and proved to be quite popular.

Stainbank continued the theme of the *indigene* as the bearer of modernist formal characteristics in her carvings as well as in her small-scale figurines and other so-called popular cultural items, until c 1940. Despite the fact that these were produced *en masse* through the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein, and sold through commercial outlets, Stainbank was aware of public response to these figures as visually uninformed.

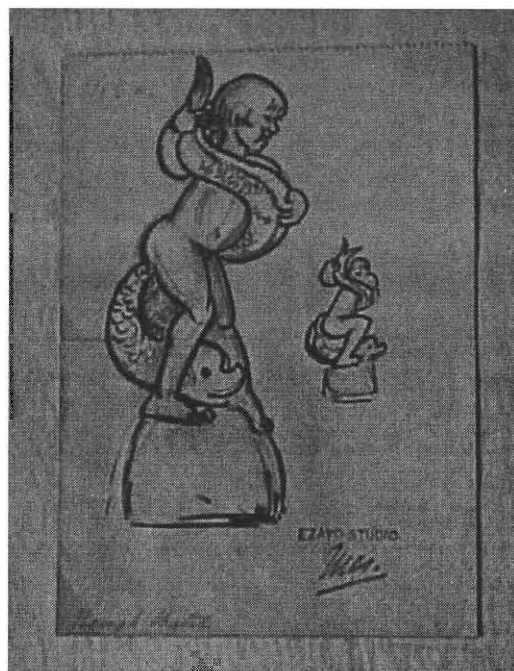


Figure 8.
Mary Stainbank, *Design for a Fountain Figure* (1932). Pencil and ink on paper 20 x 13.

This is reflected in a letter (7 April 1933) to Short, in which they discuss the number of figurines to be made:

There [sic] not the artistic type of people amongst the public out there to appreciate the limiting [sic] of works of art !! If we were working overseas I would say limit them, and charge a high price. For the people like to feel they are only a few in existence ...

This extract reveals that, though intended for the popular market, Stainbank considered these objects “works of art”, indicating her awareness of the discrepancies between fine and popular art production. Given Stainbank’s British education in art, and in light of the use of ceramics as a medium for sculptural work,²⁴ as well as Vermilion’s critique as cited above, the distinction between “art” and “craft” must have sprung to Stainbank’s mind. Decorations for this Children’s Hospital, as well as for public buildings in general, had to be considered suitable

for public taste, and it is unlikely that questions with regard to the art:craft debate and taste did not arise in the Ezayo Studio.

Stainbank's use of the *indigene* as subject matter for a variety of popular cultural items, as well as in her sculpture, imply firstly a deep-seated concern with and interest in the South African *indigene*. Secondly, the different approaches – modernist, realist and naturalistic, decorative, and stylized – can be seen as a reflection of the scope and potential she recognized in this subject matter. Her perception, interpretation and understanding of the *indigene* was hence not of a singular, restrictive nature. The significance of the popular artefacts she produced reside more in their subject matter and her interpretation thereof, than in their popular nature. These objects can be considered extensions of her formal concerns as expressed in her carvings in stone and wood. They offered her the chance to formulate a decorative function in her sculpture and the opportunity to experiment in a manner which art audiences of the time would not have found acceptable in sculpture.

It is not surprising that Stainbank indulged in the making of these artefacts, given the continued picturesque representations of *indigenes* in circulation at the time. It is further suggested that Stainbank's popular objects act as an indictment against popular taste, in that the objects do not conform to prevailing conservative norms for representing indigenous identities. There is no doubt that Stainbank was serious about the making of these objects, considering the general execution and technical perfection of the moulds. It is possible that Stainbank made popular artefacts in which form and subject matter were treated similarly to her carvings, to covertly express her disagreement with accepted conventions and norms. While

these small objects can more comfortably be situated in a popular cultural context, they are nevertheless significant as they continue her concern for the *indigene* as iconography and as bearer of a modernist idiom in South Africa.

Notes

1 There are cases recorded in the Stainbank Archives in which the artist did not conform to the specifications from the Public Works Department, and chose to revise her designs. One such example where the artist altered her design, is the revenue Office in Durban. Instead of adhering to the design indicating ribbons with fruit and foliage draped across the surface, the artist made use of grotesque heads dangling from chains. This indicates Stainbank's dissatisfaction with the conventional nature of many commissions she received.

2 Gladys Short and Joan Methley founded the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein near Pretoria in 1925 (Hillebrand 1991:4). This studio was once considered the centre of art in the Transvaal (Heymans 1989:4) as it not only made pots but also decorative panels for public buildings. The Ceramic Studio also received many government commissions as they specialized in "architectural *faience*" (Hillebrand 1986:182). Methley (1926:22) mentioned that the popularity of such *faience* in South Africa increased in Durban during the 1920s as it answered the demand for colour on buildings. The origin of colour on buildings probably came, according to Hillebrand (1986:214) from Alfred Martin, the British ceramist who taught Stainbank at the Durban School of Art during the second decade of the 20th century.

3 The farm is situated in Yellowwood Park, in Durban and is now the Stainbank Nature Reserve.

4 It is important to note that the first exhibition of the South African Institute of Art during July 1927 included, as did many other exhibitions of the Natal Society of Artists, a section on craft-based work. The critic of the day, Leo Francois, writing under the pseudonym Vermilion, stated that "there is big scope for art craft in South Africa, but it should be understood that exhibition work must be of the highest order and complete in every way, paying attention to originality of design and careful execution; the

commercial aspect should be of secondary consideration" (Vermilion, 1927a).

5 This catalogue was compiled by Valerie Leigh. It is not certain whether these titles had been given by Leigh or by Stainbank.

6 Stainbank's library holds an unidentified publication titled *Emigration* which contains lithographs of colonized peoples, caricatures etc. A few plates from *Life in Philadelphia* are included in this publication.

7 See Biddiss (1979), Coombes (1985), Kirby (1949) and Pieterse (1992) for a comprehensive account of attitudes towards colonized peoples.

8 Moses Kottler, *Meidjie* (1926). Cyprus wood, 155.5. Johannesburg Art Gallery.

9 While a number of South African artists represented indigenous personages in the role as servant or worker e.g. Maggie Laubser, Irma Stern, Dorothy Kaye and Anton van Wouw, it is not the intention of this article to consider the iconography of the *indigene* as servant in South African art.

10 Vann-Hall was born in Liverpool and met Stainbank at the Royal College of Art in London in 1922. Vann-Hall studied stained glass painting and decided to emigrate to South Africa in 1926. She was employed by Stainbank's mother Ethel to paint the history of the Stainbank family on the wall in the passage of the house at Coedmore. Stainbank and Vann-Hall immediately established the Ezayo Studio at Coedmore, where they worked together for the remainder of their creative lives.

11 Methley suggested Christmas time as being psychologically the correct time for an enterprise of this nature. Also, these objects would be, according to the letter, sold at 30/- apiece, and Stainbank would get a percentage of this price.

12 A notebook in the Stainbank Archives records in Stainbank's handwriting and illustrated with drawings, the process of casting this head in bronze.

13 According to the Eileen Krige (1950:134), the young Zulu women begins to knot her hair into knot or *kehla*, which develops into a bulbous shape in preparation for her marriage, and to indicate that the wedding day is near. The fully developed, bulbous shape is known as *isicholo*

and was used as a decorative motif in many of Stainbank's sculptures and designs.

14 The presentation of the colonized subject as object of curiosity during the 19th century formed the central focus of the so-called missionary and colonial exhibitions. In these exhibitions, actual black persons were presented as "trophies of victories" (Pieterse 1992: 95) and as "more animal than human" (Coombes 1985: 456 – 457). The appearance of the black person was also often the motivation for putting them on public display, as exemplified in the history of Sara Baartman (Kirby 1949). In South Africa, actual San people were put on display at the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg in 1936 (Gordon 1999: 269).

15 In an interview with two of Stainbank's students, Maureen Quin and Marianne Frank (27 August 1999), Frank said that Stainbank often spoke of the decorative nature of black people.

16 Martin was one of Stainbank's teachers at the Durban School of art.

17 Alfred Martin, *Wonder* (1930). Ciment Fondue. Durban Art Gallery.

18 These are in the Stainbank Archives at the Voortrekker Museum, Pietermaritzburg. While preparations were made for the reconstruction of the Stainbank studio at the Voortrekker Museum during October 1998, I found a box in the shed at Coedmore containing plaster of Paris heads, which matched their description in the correspondence between Stainbank and Short. Having read these letters, but not seen the actual objects, I was, and still am convinced that these casts, painted to resemble bronze, are test pieces cast by Stainbank before the moulds were sent to Olifantsfontein for casting.

19 See Wendy Gers's study (1999) of the ceramic wares produced during the 1950s.

20 Stainbank drew a distinction between sculptures made for commissions, and those carvings, which she made for herself. These she considered "private" (Webb 1985: 4 and 5).

21 Mary Stainbank, *Baya Huba* (1933) Warmbaths sandstone, 48 x 54 x 34. Durban Art Gallery.

22 Mary Stainbank, *Ozazisayo* (1927). Rhodesian red sandstone, 68.5 x 25.5 x 32.5 cm. The Mary Stainbank Sculpture Collection and

Archive, Voortrekker Museum, Pietermaritzburg.

23 See Hillebrand (1986) for a history of the Native Study in Natal during the early 20th century.

24 An example in which Stainbank made use of ceramic sculpture is the Children's Hospital in Durban. Here, a relief panel above the main entrance to the Hospital, depicting Christ with the little children, and figures of children for fountains and roundels representing ships, were cast in ceramics.

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