



Irma Stern's first exhibition in Pretoria, 1933

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This article focuses on the reception of Irma Stern's first art exhibition in Pretoria in 1933. Although Stern had by that time gained a considerable reputation as an artist in informed circles, her Modernist work was still regarded with some incomprehension by spectators in general. This exhibition in Pretoria attempted to redress this by trying to make Stern's work more accessible. Although favourable critical response was elicited from many formerly sceptical critics, the complexities of Modernism as manifested in Stern's oeuvre still made her work problematic concerning both style and subject-matter. The decision by the Town Council of Pretoria to buy two paintings by Stern was significant for its endorsement of Stern, and the author concludes with a short discussion of these two works.

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In hierdie artikel word na die ontvangs van Irma Stern se eerste kunsuitstalling in Pretoria in 1933 gekyk. Alhoewel Stern reeds aansien binne kunsringe as 'n kunstenaar geniet het, was haar Modernistiese werk vir die algemene toeskouer nog steeds onverstaanbaar. Hierdie uitstalling in Pretoria wou heersende negatiewe menings verander deur Stern se werke meer toeganklik te maak. Positiewe kritiek is wel ontvang, maar die komplekse aard van Modernisme soos weerspieël in Stern se oeuvre, het steeds haar werke problematies in terme van styl en onderwerp gemaak. Die besluit deur die Stadsraad van Pretoria om twee van Stern se skilderye aan te koop was belangrik in terme van die goedkeuring wat daardeur aan Stern verleen is. Die outeur sluit af met 'n kort bespreking van dié twee werke.

Introduction

Recent art historical scholarship in South Africa has been concerned with the re-interpretation of artists and texts. A valuable contribution has been made by Marion Arnold's (1995) study of Irma Stern, in which she convincingly positions Stern (1894 - 1966) as a white, female, colonial,

Modernist, South African artist. It is hence interesting to re-examine sources contemporary with Stern to see how she was understood in her time, and to gauge how myths, preconceptions and assumptions influenced her reception.

Given this context, this article will focus on one aspect of Stern's career, namely her debut exhibition in Pretoria, in the Macfadyen Hall, in 1933. This was Stern's first major exhibition in the "North" since her 1926 show in Johannesburg, and took place eleven years after her Cape Town debut in February 1922 (Arnold 1995: 18). Stern's exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s were generally provocative, yet increasingly many critics tried to get to grips with her idiosyncratic style and subject-matter. Obviously the language of art criticism in the 1930s differed considerably from that current today, and the positive reviews she received were not necessarily a reflection of the taste of the public. Stern exhibited in Pretoria again in 1935 and 1938, and I believe the reasonably positive reception she received in 1933 contributed to her wider recognition in the later 1930s.

I shall examine Stern's 1933 Pretoria exhibition primarily from the viewpoint of contemporary commentary, and shall indicate how critics attempted to explicate notions such as Modernism to a conservative audience. Stern's exhibition was crucial since it was one of the earliest examples of Modernism in Pretoria, subsequent to Maggie Laubser's exhibition in 1931 (Joubert 1987). The Macfadyen Hall exhibitions were arranged by the University of Pretoria's Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture under Pro-

fessor Martin du Toit. He used these exhibitions to showcase contemporary art, and deliberately confronted the Pretoria public with exponents of Modernism in the 1930s. Thereby he initiated debates on the nature of modern art, which had positioned itself in opposition to romantic realism and the "politely naturalistic scenic views" (Arnold 1995: 17) with which people were familiar.

Stern's debut exhibition in Pretoria was furthermore significant since it enabled the Town Council of Pretoria to buy two of her paintings for its small art collection (*Rand Daily Mail* 1933.04.27: 11). *Pondo Woman* (fig. 1) and *Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay* (fig. 2) were indubitably two of the earliest examples of Modernism in the collection, and will be briefly discussed at the end of this article.

Stern's Macfadyen Hall Exhibition

Stern's Macfadyen Hall exhibition was organised by Martin du Toit. Naturally he would have been familiar with her work, and it is furthermore probable that he and Stern's husband, Johannes Prinz, had been colleagues in the Department of German at the University of Cape Town between 1926 and 1927.¹

¹ Prinz was appointed Professor of German at the University of Cape Town in 1926 (Arnold 1995: 19), and Martin du Toit lectured in the same Department from 1926 to 1927 before moving to the University of Pretoria in 1927 (Joubert 1986: 3).



Figure 1 Irma Stern: *Pondo Woman*, 1929.
Oil on canvas, 86 X 73 cm.
Photograph: Pretoria Art Museum

Stern arrived in Pretoria on Saturday 15 April 1933, accompanied by Mrs. Frieda (Bertrand) Wessels, and stayed at Polley's Hotel (*Pretoria News* 1933.04.20: 6). The exhibition was opened on 20 April 1933 at 10:00 by the Mayor of Pretoria, Councillor Ivan Solomon.² According to Mrs. Lilian Solomon (1989), Stern had writ-

ten to the Mayor in 1932, asking whether he would open the exhibition.³ Since the Solomons had heard of the negative criticism which Stern had received at her 1926 exhibition in Johannesburg, they were initially somewhat reluctant to commit themselves to supporting her (Solomon 1989). The Mayor agreed, however, and when

² Councillor Ivan Solomon (1900-1987) was Mayor of Pretoria from 1932 to 1936. He and his wife Lilian (1899-) were especially concerned with cultural activities, and were also responsible for collecting money for many charitable organisations during the Depression years of the early 1930s. Concurrently with the Stern exhibition, for example, Lilian Solomon initiated a 'jersey fund' for the needy (*Pretoria News* April and May 1933).

³ The Solomons subsequently befriended Stern, and she stayed in their Waterkloof home when she held an exhibition in Glen's Gallery in Pretoria in June 1935. Stern was present at the Pierneef exhibition in the Macfadyen Hall, which was opened on 5 June 1935 by Ivan Solomon (*Die Volkstem* 1935.06.07: 2).

Lilian Solomon visited the Macfadyen Hall while the works were being hung, she was impressed by their quality.

The exhibition⁴ consisted of over 60 works of various sizes, comprising over thirty oil-paintings, almost twenty watercolours, as well as a few ink drawings, charcoal sketches, pencil drawings and temperas (De Kock 1933: 9). The genres on display were landscapes, still-lives, interiors, portraits, and figure studies (*Pretoria News* 1933.04.20: 6; *Die Burger* 1933.05.01: 3). Stern's works were evidently considered expensive:⁵ the oils cost between 25 and 50 guineas,

the watercolour were 10 guineas, and the cheapest charcoal sketch was 10 guineas (*Die Burger* 1933.05.01: 3). *Die Burger* (1933.05.01: 3) commented: "Her powerful pieces are naturally not a practical purchase for the normal person... . Few people will be able to afford Stern's prices".⁶ The potential art-buying public of Pretoria, in a population of under 60,000 whites, was obviously small, and the wretched economic conditions in the early 1930s made art an expensive luxury.

The opening of Stern's exhibition was well attended (De Kock 1933: 9). In his opening ad-

⁴ Since no catalogue could be found, this information is based on contemporary newspaper accounts.

⁵ Especially when compared to prices at other exhibitions in the Macfadyen Hall in the same year: J. A. Smith's prices were between £5 and £15; P. A. Hendriks' between 4 and 20 guineas; and M. Laubser's between 2 and 25 guineas (see Joubert 1989). The critic for *Die Vaderland* (1933.04.26: 5) criticised Stern's frames, and noted that her canvases had not been properly stretched. According to Arnold (1995: 50) Stern made her stretcher frames and framed all her works herself.

⁶ My translation of: "Haar kragtige stukke is natuurlik nie 'n praktiese aankoop vir die gewone mens nie ... min beurse [sal] nog Sternpryse kan bybring."

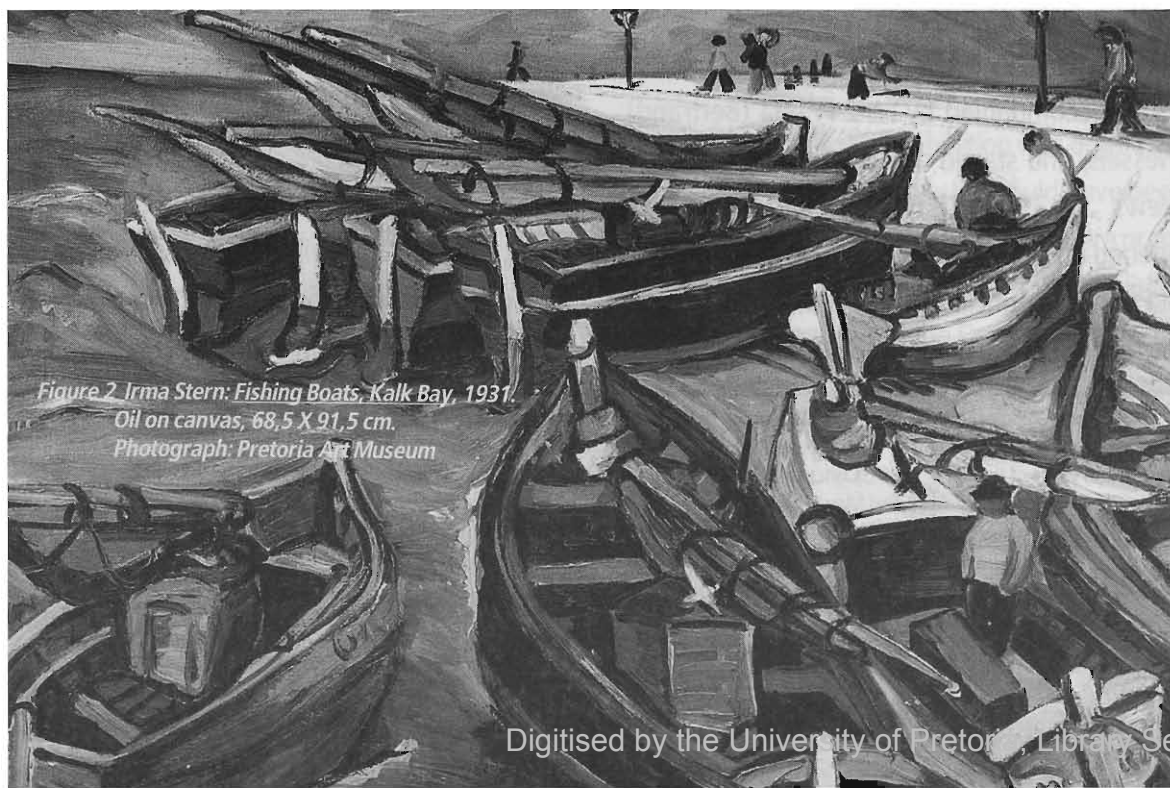


Figure 2 Irma Stern: Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay, 1931.
Oil on canvas, 68,5 X 91,5 cm.
Photograph: Pretoria Art Museum

dress Ivan Solomon introduced Stern and her work:

Entirely apart from the rich legacy which she will bequeath to the future, South Africa must be grateful to Miss Stern for the propaganda work which she has done overseas... . In South Africa, in Irma Stern, we have an artist whom we are proud to welcome here today. Although her work and reputation is widely known overseas, she is comparatively little known in her own country. She has exhibited in England, America, Holland and Germany, and her work has won favourable comment in those cultural centres. She has been written-up in a series of art biographies⁷ with such undisputed geniuses as Cézanne, van Gogh, Matisse and others (applause) (Pretoria News 1933.04.20: 6).

Stern and Modernism

Arnold (1995: 18) has pointed out that to "South Africans, the aesthetic rebellion of 'modern art' signified social radicalism."⁸ Thus Modernism was clearly not merely a stylistic notion. Arnold has indicated that Modernism, and specifically Expressionism, was taken up with alacrity by women artists in Europe because it encouraged ideals of personal freedom, artistic innovation, revolt against all forms of conformity, and the rejection of bourgeois values (Arnold 1995:47).

There can thus be no doubt that Stern accepted the visual and ideological implications of Modernism: indeed, she called her Cape Town debut in 1922 an "Exhibition of Modern Art" (Arnold 1995: 48).

Solomon situated Stern's provocative works in the arena of Modernism. He said that Stern combined "the best technique of the moderns in Europe ... with an inspiration that was peculiarly South African" (*Pretoria News* 1933.04.20:6). He explained that Stern's stylistic simplicity and honesty were characteristic of the modern school (De Kock 1933: 9), and suggested that a new way of approaching such works was imperative:

If there is an art in painting a picture there is also an art in looking at one. The remark 'I don't know much about painting, but I do know what I like' is often heard. But, do we really know what we like? It is very easy for the personal factor to prevent us from coming to a true conclusion. Works of art are seldom appreciated by contemporary opinions. It is left to posterity to discover genius. But the time has come when we should learn a lesson from a bygone generation and proclaim our faith in modern artists as they proclaim their faith in their art (Pretoria News 1933.04.20: 6).

Solomon explained that Stern's work was romantic, emotional and expressive, but added

⁷ Solomon was undoubtedly referring to the monograph by Max Osborn, part of the *Junge Kunst* -series, that had been published in Leipzig in 1927. According to Dubow (1991: 97) this was "the earliest significant text that tried to locate Irma Stern in an African context."

⁸ A comprehensive explanation of Modernism in relation to Stern is given in Arnold (1995: 45-49). Modernism in the 1930s in South Africa was often still "synonymous with decadence and degradation" (Van Rooyen 1974: 7). To negative critics in the 1930s Modernism indicated art that was anti-academic, anti-naturalistic, distorted, subjective, perverse, ugly, technically inferior, "difficult", subversive, pretentious, etc. . The Cape Town critic Bernard Lewis (who used the pseudonym "Brander" and knew Martin du Toit) wrote a series of articles in the early 1930s that criticised modern art, and he seems to have represented the views of many people (*Die Vaderland* 1932.10.29: 13; *Die Vaderland* 1933.03.25: 13).

that these qualities were tempered by an intellectual subtlety (*Die Vaderland* 1933.04.22: 6). In examining a statement such as this today, its vagueness is evident, and it is apparent that contemporaries were grappling with a new style, for which they did not have a satisfactory vocabulary.

Some critics were more specific in their formalist analyses of Stern, for example:

*The power that characterises the new movement radiates from all the works. The expansive, harsh, spontaneous paintings, that often suffer from a lack of perspective, overwhelmed and impressed the visitors, though did not really attract them (*Die Burger* 1933.05.01: 3).⁹*

Die Vaderland (1933.04.26: 5) emphasized Stern's poetic sense of line¹⁰ and lyrical spontaneity, and the *Pretoria News* (1933.04.20: 6) expressed admiration for her powerful execution: "There is never any impression of wishy-washiness." Most critics described Stern's forceful style as original, thereby implicitly complimenting her in terms of Modernism's endorsement of personal response and a break with the past.

Stern's use of expressive colour to create mood, revealing her Modernist leanings, was com-

mented on by all the critics. *Die Vaderland* (1933.04.26: 5) explained the impact of her colour:

it is not a fleeting impression that fades upon closer scrutiny, but one that deepens to fascination and emotion as one penetrates to the soul of her work.¹¹

Solomon had drawn attention to Stern's "blaze of rich colour" (*Rand Daily Mail* 1933.04.21: 11), and almost without exception critics noted that her colours were decorative and experimental (*Rand Daily Mail* 1933.04.21: 11).¹²

The critic in *The Star* (1933.05.11: 14) hailed Stern as "a brilliant modernist", pointing out that she concentrated on essentials rather than on accuracy of detail, and that this implied an inevitable deviation from naturalism:

[Her work] is essentially 'modern', if one can call modern what is largely a return to the elemental ... It is full of life and vitality and it proves, on closer study, that the new art has a beauty of its own that, in some respects, notably colour, decorative value and suggestiveness, far transcend the more obvious methods.¹²

Similarly, Martin du Toit (1933a: 194) explained that Stern did not necessarily heed conventional notions regarding artistic beauty. This departure from the representation of beauty was discon-

⁹ My translation of: "Uit alles straal die sterkte wat werk van die nuwer rigting kenmerk. Die breë, ruwe, spontane skilderkuns, wat dikwels ly aan 'n gemis aan perspektief, het die besoekers oorweldig en wel geïmponeer, dog nie eintlik aangetrek nie"

¹⁰ Scholz (1975: 28-29) maintains that Stern's decorative and evocative use of line was derived from her contact with Max Pechstein from 1916 onwards.

¹¹ My translation of: "Dit is geen vliedende (sic) indruk wat vervaag met nadere beskouing nie, maar een wat verdiep tot bekoring en ontroering na gelang mens inniger tot die siel van haar werk deurdring".

¹² This review was written about Stern's Johannesburg exhibition in May 1933, which opened a week after the end of the Pretoria exhibition. It is therefore likely that the same works were on display.

certing for contemporary spectators, as it demanded a new aesthetic sensibility from them.

Most of the critics intuitively recognised that Stern's use of what we would call 'significant form' was used for conveying some essential spiritual 'content'.¹³ Solomon (*The Star* 1933.04.20: 11) tried to explain Stern's ability to penetrate the superficiality of appearances:

although many of the artist's effects are startling in the extreme to the conventional mind, there is a definite, if subtle, sense of meaning behind each picture.

Du Toit (1933a: 193) observed that Stern's work generally lacked the tragic atmosphere or sorrow ("grote droefheid") that was typical of Laubser and Pierneef. For Du Toit a sense of brooding tragedy was characteristic of the best South African art. He commented: "She often has something sad to convey, but that is not the hallmark of her work" (Du Toit 1933: 193),¹⁴ which was in itself a significant deviation from European Expressionism.

It is indicative that Stern was consistently discussed in terms of Modernist principles instead

of a more specific Expressionistic style.¹⁵ Her paintings were called "expressionistic" on occasion, but the more comprehensive term Modernist seems to have been preferred. When asked whether her expressiveness had quietened down, Stern gave a typically Modernist reply: "I don't know. I paint what I feel" (*Rand Daily Mail* 1933.04.21: 5). Martin du Toit (1933a: 194) believed that her earlier exuberance had been tempered by self-control, and that had, according to him, made her works of the 1930s more accessible to the public.¹⁶ Similarly, the *Rand Daily Mail* (1933.04.21: 11) commented on "the remarkable progress" Stern had made since her last exhibition in Johannesburg in 1926.¹⁷

Stern and Primitivism

An interest in primitivism and exoticism was an important component of European Modernism, but primitivism obviously had other implications or connotations for the South African spectator. The significance of primitivism in Stern's work was frequently minimized in contemporary criticism, possibly since this was felt to be one of the major alienating aspects of her *oeuvre*.

¹³ "The soul is articulated from her technique and subject" ("Die siel spreek uit haar tegniek en onderwerp") (De Kock 1933: 9) and "she penetrates to the soul but still represents what she sees convincingly" ("[sy] dring tot die siel maar gee nog steeds oortuigend weer wat sy sien") (*Die Vaderland* 1933.04.22: 6).

¹⁴ My translation of: "Wel het sy dikwels ook iets droefs mee te deel, maar dit is nie die stempel van haar kuns nie".

¹⁵ Arnold (1995: 46) has indicated that there was an overlap in the use of these terms.

¹⁶ Dubow (1974: 18) explains this thus: "It was not precisely a question of Irma deliberately popularising, but of a public beginning to catch up".

¹⁷ This exhibition had been called a "Freak picture exhibition" by the critic Chilvers (1926:7). He claimed that it "had nothing whatever to offer. That is, nothing except ugliness. And we have plenty of that in the world without going to pictures for it" (Chilvers 1926: 7).

In Europe the taste for the primitive had been a "search by weary sophisticates for the primal essence, the life force that reposed in traditional primitive art" (Dubow 1974: 15-16). In Germany in particular, primitivism, with its notion of harmony with nature, was believed to be able to counter the effects of modern psychic stress (Arnold 1995: 69). In South Africa the primitive was a definite reality and not an illusory, Edenic fantasy. The depiction of black people that granted Stern recognition in Europe, led conversely to estrangement in South Africa. I believe one must also differentiate between the romantic valorization of primitivism in Europe in the 1920s and its equivalent in South Africa in the 1930s in terms of changing times, contexts and cultural paradigms.

According to Arnold (1995: 13) Stern contributed to the myth-making regarding the influence of Africa, primitivism and exoticism on her art. Stern remarked, for instance, that in the 1920s she undertook "a perfect orgy of painting in the wilds of Swaziland, taking as her models the native types and native settlements" (*Rand Daily Mail* 1933.04.21: 5). The *Rand Daily Mail* (1933.04.21: 5) furthermore reported that the "critic Fritz Stahl of Berlin ... said that she had done for South Africa what Gauguin (*sic*) had

done for the South Seas". Obviously Stern exploited the mythic construction of African primitivism in order to encourage interest in her work, and thereby tapped into a corresponding European enthusiasm.

The difference between Stern's exoticism and that of Europeans was that as a (South) African she was believed to embody "the primal essence — that life force that was perceived as the gift of tribal society in general, and African tribal art in particular" (Dubow 1991: 97).¹⁸ In other words, Stern symbolized the exotic and was felt by Europeans to have immediate access to a quintessential spirituality. The contrary supposition may also be true — that South African spectators had no place for the celebration of the primitive, precisely because it was for them an ominous force that had to be subjugated. Du Toit (1933a: 197) pointed out bemusedly that the exotic was not alien to Stern:

*Before her European artists have shown much interest in the black races and treated them as exotic figures, but for ... Stern they are the neighbours that she has known since childhood.*¹⁹

Arnold (1995) has moreover pointed out that Stern's portrayal of primitivism and exoticism was not as innocuous as was formerly believed.

¹⁸ Dubow (1991: 100) suggests that Stern did not actually attempt to "penetrate the soul" of her subjects but that she achieve[d] a sensuous external appearance imbued with a *genius loci* ... one may see in this yet another painterly version of that Rousseauesque identification with the noble savage in a state of grace. See also Sachs (1942) for a romantic examination of this topic.

¹⁹ My translation of: "Europese kunstenaars het voor haar veel belangstelling getoon in die swart rasse en hulle behandel as eksotiese figure, maar vir...Stern was hulle haar buurmense wat sy van kinds af ken."

As a white colonial woman Stern obviously had a specific mind-set regarding race and gender, and this meant her attitudes were often patronizing or based on stereotypical assumptions and ideas (Arnold 1995: 71, 73, 76, 101-102). Stern, herself "the other" in terms of a colonial, patriarchal society, in turn refracted the focus to the primitive "otherness" of Africa. I believe her empathy with black people has been overemphasised, and that Stern frequently painted them precisely because of their shock value for conservatively entrenched white spectators.

It is significant that in the quotation above Stern referred to "native types", and one of the stereotypes she habitually used was of the black woman in harmony with, or indeed analogous with nature. Not only was woman thus equated with nature, but specifically primitive woman was seen as the embodiment of a romantic ideal of nudity and naturalness. This emphasized the idyllic sphere of the black person, and reflected the primitivist intent of Modernism with which Stern identified (see fig. 1.).

If we turn to Stern's 1933 exhibition again, it is interesting to note the scant attention given to Stern's depictions of black people. Most critics mentioned that there were figure studies of "natives" to be seen, but given that this type of subject-matter formed a large part of Stern's *oeuvre* at the time, their reticence is indicative. The *Pretoria News* (1933.04.20: 6) noted briefly and vaguely:

The pencil and charcoal works are all studies of Pondo women and girls, with the exception of one Swazi girl. In these Miss Stern has interpreted the native in a remarkable manner.

Martin du Toit (1933a: 194) was the only critic who confronted the matter of race (and implicit nudity) openly. He observed that Stern's fondness for depicting black people had estranged her from South Africans. He explained, once again in terms of a 'significant form' argument:

Perhaps her Pondo and Zulu figures, with their naked bodies, will attract the most attention, but it is not true to say that she concentrates only on the portrayal of the coloured races. Especially in South Africa this type of statement does much damage since we do not yet realise that the subject that is depicted, has very little to do with the intrinsic value of the artwork ... Her work is foreign, as foreign as the native, whom she depicts with such love (Du Toit 1933a: 194).²⁰

Perhaps it was felt that Stern idealized, sentimentalised or romanticised black people, but it was perhaps also the recurrent association between race and nudity that upset contemporaries. At Stern's next exhibition in Pretoria in 1935, Lilian Solomon commented optimistically that "Stern's work has possibly helped to remove some of the old prejudice against the portrayal of native life in pictures" (*Rand Daily Mail* 1935.06.05: 9).²¹

Stern and Identity

As a woman, Jew, and Modernist artist, Stern was inevitably a marginalised and contentious figure in the 1930s. In examining the reception of

Stern's exhibition in Pretoria it is clear that spectators and critics were confronted with work that challenged their basic assumptions regarding art and identity. Stern upset many preconceptions, and yet she also contributed to the myth-making of herself as a stereotypical "artist". The *Rand Daily Mail* (1933.04.21: 5) commented approvingly:

Irma Stern is an artist to her fingertips, temperamental and impulsive, she has the power to command sincere friendship and some enmity, but whatever her moods about people and things, she never falters in her desire to create.

Arnold (1995: 12) has stressed Stern's transgressive role as a woman artist, since she was the "antithesis of a passive lady painter", especially in the conservative South African context. It seems, however, that the notions of difference and sexuality in Stern's *oeuvre* need to be more

fully explored. Du Toit (1933a: 193) was the only contemporary critic who alluded to the "rich eroticism" ("volle erotiek") in Stern's work. A nude study in the 1933 exhibition elicited one brief comment from the *Pretoria News* (1933.04.20: 6): "One of the most beautiful pictures in the exhibition is that of a figure in the nude." The neutrality of this remark is probably significant considering that similar works at Stern's Cape Town exhibitions in the 1920s had been severely censured.

Du Toit (1993a: 193) also seems to have been the only contemporary critic to refer explicitly to Stern's Jewish descent:

Although as a daughter of Jewish parents she reveals something that is unique to her descent, we nonetheless have to admit that ... Stern is in the first place South African, though strongly under European influence.²²

²⁰ My translation of:

Miskien sal haar Pondo- en Zoeloe-figure met hul naakte liggame die meeste aandag trek, maar dat sy haar slegs aan die skildering van die gekleurde rasse wy, is onwaar. Juis in Suid-Afrika doen so 'n bewering soveel skade waar ons nog nie besef nie dat die voorwerp, wat behandel word, so bloedweinig met die intrinsieke waarde van die kunswerk te doen het...Haar werk is vreemd, so vreemd soos ten slotte die naturel self is, wat sy met so 'n groot liefde behandel.

²¹ In August 1933 Anton Hendriks had his first exhibition in Pretoria in the Macfadyen Hall. He too exhibited studies of natives ("naturelle") (*Die Vaderland* 1933.08.26: 13, with photo of *Girl with Blanket*). The *Rand Daily Mail* (1933.08.28: 5) commented enthusiastically on the "delightful studies of native women in which the colouring of the skin makes an effective note in the composition." Thus the "otherness" of black people was virtually reduced to painterly experimentations in colour harmony. It would be interesting to compare Stern's imagery of black people with her contemporary, the Natal sculptor Mary Stainbank. Estelle Liebenberg (1996) has demonstrated that Stainbank too wrestled with the question of "the Other". She was in fact criticized at the Royal College of Art in London for her depictions of "indigenes", which were associated with negro decadence in America (see also Hillebrand "Mary Stainbank" in *Our Art 4* (Werth & Harmsen eds. 1993). I believe this context of Modernist decadence needs to be further explored in relation to Stern.

²² My translation of:

Hoewel sy as dogter van Joodse ouers ook wel sekerlik iets openbaar wat eie is aan haar afkoms, moet ons nogtans toegee dat...Stern in die eerste plaas Suid-Afrikaner is, wat egter sterk onder Europese invloed staan.

Vague accusations have been made concerning Du Toit's racism regarding Jews, but I have found no evidence of such bigotry. In 1936, during the organization of the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg, which Martin du Toit convened, he commented: Fortunately art is the terrain where we don't speak of Afrikaners, Englishmen or Jews, because it is the terrain where all sections of the population can meet one another on equal footing (*Die Vaderland* 1936.09.23:14) (my translation of:

... is kuns die terrein waar ons nog van Afrikaner, nog van Engelsman, nog van Jood praat want kuns is die terrein waarop alle seksies van die bevolking mekaar op gelyke voet kan ontmoet.).

In his opening speech Solomon had been careful to point out that Stern's "inspiration... was peculiarly South African"²³ (*Pretoria News* 1933.04.20: 6). Given the complexities of South African (and Afrikaner) nationalism in the 1930s, however, it is impossible to gauge how Stern was really perceived, but she indubitably qualified on many counts as "the other".

What made Stern inaccessible as a Modernist (and Expressionist) was not only her innovative style, but also her provocative or unconventional subject-matter.²⁴ Hence, as Arnold observes (1995: 70) Stern was "regarded as socially subversive in her choice of subjects and her depictions of black people were considered to be audacious".

Curiously, it appears that critics in 1933 avoided drawing undue attention to contentious aspects of Stern's style or subject-matter. The works highlighted in the press were her inoffensive still-lives, which the *Pretoria News* (1933.04.20: 6) called "vigorous and exquisite"; a few of her

Madeira portraits;²⁵ and figure studies, in which her ability to capture expression was complimented.

Evaluation of the Exhibition by Contemporaries

Stern's exhibition was considered important by all the critics. They invariably encouraged the Pretoria audience to view it more than once, since her work was so unfamiliar. De Kock (1933: 9) stressed the educational value the exhibition had for Pretoria, and *Die Vaderland* (1933.04.26: 5) called it "one of the most interesting exhibitions of paintings ... to be held in the capital in a long time".²⁶ Nonetheless, Martin du Toit's (1933a: 199) opinion that Stern could no longer be regarded the "infant (*sic*) terrible" of South African art was probably not shared by the majority of people who had seen the exhibition. An extensive excerpt from an article that appeared in *Die Burger* (1933.05.01: 3)²⁷ illustrates the disruptive impact Stern had in Pretoria:

²³ Compare this to the *Volkstem*'s (1931.11.24: 1) review of Laubser's Macfadyen Hall exhibition: Maggie Laubser [is] the first *pure Afrikaans speaker with a pure Afrikaans descent* ... to use this style [modernism] (my translation and emphasis). (Maggie Laubser [is] die eerste *suiwer Afrikaansprekende met 'n suiwer Afrikaanse afkoms* ... wat met hierdie kunsrigting [modernism] voor die dag kom.)

²⁴ It is interesting to compare this to German Expressionism, which had also been criticised for its uncomfortable subject-matter. The Germans, however, had been criticised as a result of their portrayal of the seamier side of life, and a general condition of *angst*. Stern's Expressionism was obviously different in extent and degree, but was nonetheless also considered perverse on occasion.

²⁵ These included a Madeiran hunchback and an old fisherman "whose lined, sardonic face brings the fascinated visitor back again and again" (*Pretoria News* 1933.04.20: 6).

²⁶ My translation of: "Een van die interessantste skilderytentoonstellings...wat lank laas in die hoofstad plaasgevind het".

²⁷ This article was probably written by Martin du Toit.

The Capital, which is quite isolated from novelties on the art scene, and which is hardly used to art works except for the sentimental-photographic kind, was shocked about a year ago by the exhibition of Maggie Laubser's strong, crude depictions on canvas.²⁸ She was not exceptionally modern, but still shocked Pretorians Pierneef, who is also vigorous, and well-known here, usually has a few works at his regular exhibitions that tend toward modernism. They are, however, only considered by the public as experiments and diversions by the artist. So completely has Pretoria been engrossed in conventional syrupy trifles, that even the exhibition of Kottler's sculptures²⁹ ... was seen as an example of contemporary eccentricity and license.

Today an exhibition of Irma Stern's works was opened ... this painter, the "wildest" we have, once again caused a shudder to rock Pretoria's joviality, despite Maggie Laubser's example Yet this collection of Stern works has apparently been chosen with the purpose of shocking old conventionality as little as possible.

This work, which is like a wild leap that deviates from the tender, restful sweetness that Pretoria is used to, is being held for interest's sake, but it is doubtful that she will find many buyers here.³⁰

This piece emphasises the novelty of Modernism when it was contrasted with the conventional art with which the public would have been more familiar — academic realism, sentimental "jacaranda paintings",³¹ and popular Schweikerdt reproductions.

Martin du Toit (1933b.11.08: 1) wrote to Stern in Cape Town later in 1933, stating

The talk about your show in Pretoria has not subsided yet, and there are two definite sections now; the friends and the enemies of Irma Stern's.

²⁸ Laubser exhibited in the Macfadyen Hall in November 1931 (Joubert 1987).

²⁹ Kottler exhibited in the Macfadyen Hall in September 1932 (Joubert 1989: 18-19).

³⁰ My translation of:

Die Hoofstad, wat taamlik afgesonder bly van nuwighede op kunsgebied en nouliks iets anders gewoond is as kunswerke met die ou sin vir die soetsappig-fotografiese, is ruim 'n jaar gelede geskok deur die tentoonstelling van Maggie Laubser se sterk, growwe voorstellings op die doek. Sy was nie oordrewe modernisties nie, maar het tog die Pretoriane uit die ou sloer geskud...Pierneef is wel fors en hier goed bekend en gewoonlik het hy op sy taamlik gereeld herhaalde tentoonstellings 'n paar werke wat 'n neiging tot die modernistiese vertoon. Dit word egter deur die publiek bloot as besienswaardige proefnemings en interessante tydverdrijf van die skilder beskou. So geheelal het Pretoria nog in die ou-konvensionele (*sic*) gesukkel met tierlantyntjie-stroperigheid geswem, dat selfs die tentoonstelling van Kottler se beeldhouwerke...beskou is as 'n voorbeeld van hedendaagse eksentrisiteit en vryheid.

Vandag is 'n tentoonstelling van Irma Stern-stukke geopen...Hierdie skilderes, die 'wildste' wat ons het, het weer 'n rilling deur die gemoedelikheid van Pretoria laat gaan, ondanks die voortrek van Maggie Laubser Tog is hierdie versameling van Stern-werke glo juis uitgesoek met die doel om die verouderde konvensionaliteit (*sic*) so weinig moontlik te skok.

Die werk, wat soos 'n wilde sprong is en dus afwyk van die teer rustige liefalligheid van wat Pretoria gewoond is, word vir interessant gehou, dog dis te betwyfel of sy hier baie kopers sal vind.

³¹ Martin du Toit (1935: 11), reviewing the exhibition of the Everard Group in the Macfadyen Hall in October 1935, commented that their work is however not of the usual sentimental kind that we have become so accustomed to by South African artists, and with which Pretoria is so amply blessed, namely the work of the jacaranda painters.

(My translation of: "is egter nie van die gewone soetsappige soort waarvan ons al so gewoond geraak het by Suid-Afrikaanse skilders en waarmee Pretoria so ryklik geseën is nie, nl. die werk van die Jakaranda skilders".)

*You certainly did a lot of good by stimulating the interest of the many people who usually do not take a keen interest in art.*³²

Stern commented tartly in a letter to her friend Trude Bosse that she had exhibited in Pretoria "with some success, though this [left] her 'stone cold'" (Dubow 1991: 105).

"Pondo Woman" and "Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay"

Despite the possibly ambivalent reception of Stern in Pretoria, the Town Council of Pretoria bought two of her oils for the municipal art collection. According to Stern's companion, Frieda Wessels (*Die Burger* 1933.05.01: 3):

*Irma Stern's exhibition is a great success. The Town Council is buying two of her large oil paintings for the new Town Hall.*³³

The support and enthusiasm of Ivan and Lilian Solomon made this acquisition possible, al-

though they subsequently received much negative criticism in the press for this action (Solomon 1989).

The two works bought by the Town Council were *Pondo Girl* (now known as *Pondo Woman*) and *Kalk Bay Boats* (now known as *Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay*) (*Rand Daily Mail* 1933.04.27: 11), which are both in the collection of the Pretoria Art Museum. It is not known whether Stern sold any other works during her exhibition, and she apparently did not donate a painting to the University of Pretoria, as was customary after exhibiting in the Macfadyen Hall.

Both *Pondo Woman* (1929; fig. 1) and *Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay* (1931; fig. 2) were typical of Stern's oeuvre. *Pondo Woman* was the result of Stern's frequent visits to Pondoland (the Transkei) during the 1920s. It shows a woman with down-cast eyes in an introspective or self-absorbed mood, and it exudes that gentle eroticism that was commonly believed to be a metaphor for

³² Stern continued to be involved in Pretoria's art activities in the 1930s. In June 1935 she exhibited in Glen's Gallery, attended the opening of Pierneef's exhibition in the Macfadyen Hall, and gave a lecture entitled "The relativity of colour and form in art" (*Pretoria News* 1935.06.14: 5). Stern's second exhibition in the Macfadyen Hall was offered in June 1938, and in the same month she opened an exhibition of 150 colour reproductions of modern European art at the Pretoria Technical College. This was called "probably the most representative exhibition of modern art ever shown in South Africa" (*Pretoria News* 1938.06.11: 7).

³³ My translation of: "Irma Stern se tentoonstelling is 'n groot sukses. Die stadsraad koop twee groot olieverfskilderye van haar vir die nuwe stadsaal."

The Pretoria Art Museum was not opened until 1964, but the Town Council of Pretoria had been collecting art works since at least the beginning of the century. In 1906 it had commissioned art works from F. Oerder and A. van Wouw to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Pretoria (*Pretoria News* 1906.04.25: 7). In December 1911 the Town Council donated £100 to buy paintings for the art collection. The paintings were selected by Messrs Beckett, De Vries and Simon (prominent Pretoria citizens) from the Pretoria Art Society exhibition (*Pretoria News* 1911.12.04: 3). These works were initially housed in the first Town Hall, and were moved to the new Town Hall in Paul Kruger Street on its completion in 1935. An important impetus to the collection was given by the addition of the Michaelis Bequest in 1932. Appeals for an art museum gathered momentum in the 1930s (*Die Vaderland* 1933.02.25: 6; *Pretoria News* 1935.02.27: 3).

primitivism and exoticism. The influence of German Expressionism is clear in this painting, specifically regarding the conjunction of (nude) figure and lush landscape.³⁴ Typical Stern stylistic elements were the merging of foreground and background, the overall flat treatment, the strong colours, the use of dark outlines and line for decorative effect, and the simplification of form.

Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay is more evocative in terms of a Fauvistic lyricism and *joie de vivre*, although Arnold (1995: 49) finds it "reminiscent of van Gogh in colour and subject". It depicts a Cape harbour scene that would have been familiar to Stern. It differs from *Pondo Woman* in having a lighter palette, more formal distortion, and a pronounced impasto technique. The only comment this work elicited in 1933 was formalistic in content:

Fishing boats at Kalk Bay show a mass of controlled colour, with a wonderful transparency in the green of the sea (Rand Daily Mail 1933.04.21: 11).

The choice of these two paintings is interesting since they are divergent in style and subject-matter, which may certainly have been the rationale behind the acquisition. *Pondo Woman* must have been more sensational for contemporary spectators in terms of its content, whereas *Fishing Boats, Kalk Bay*, with its conventional subject-matter, would presumably have been more acceptable. Yet it too invoked criticism for its stylistic "clumsiness" (Solomon 1989), which would have been seen as proof of the worst excesses of Modernism.

³⁴ See Scholz (1975: 38-41) for a comparison between *Pondo Woman* and Pechstein's *Palau Girl* (1917).

Two years after Stern's Pretoria exhibition the critic A. C. Bouman (1935: 97-98) commented on *Pondo Woman*: her limbs are as lush as the vegetation. All the lines are gracefully rounded, the breasts, the full arms, the hands. She rests like a ripe fruit, without movement, between the leaves. She is taken up by nature, the heat, the splendour of colour. That immersion in the environment, the absorption of the spiritual life in creation, is represented by the dreamlike facial expression, and through the unity and parallelism of lines between the bodily forms and the vegetation. Here one sinks into the infinite cosmos of Nirvana.

(My translation of:

haar lede is weelderig soos die plantegroei. Al die lyne is bevallig rond, die borste, die vol arme, die hande. Sy rus daar soos 'n ryp vrug, bewegingloos, tussen die gebladerte. Sy gaan op in die natuur, die warmte, die kleurprag. En daardie versenkenheid in die omgewing, die opgaan van die sielelewe in die skepping, word geskilder sowel deur die dromerige gesiguitdrukking as deur die eenheid en ewewydigheid van lyne wat daar bestaan, tussen die liggaamsvorme en die plantegroei. Hier sink die mens weg in die Nirwana van die oneindig heelaal.)

It is extraordinary how Bouman's evocative "purple passage" invokes analogies with Walter Pater's florid descriptions in the nineteenth century of, for example, the *Mona Lisa*.

In a similar vein Sachs remarked (1942: 50):

Her native women ... are plant-like beings lolling in a state of semi-consciousness amid the luxuriance of tropical flowers as if they were an organic part of the African flora.

Dubow (1991: 102) has shown that Stern's imagery and language were often Edenic: "Throughout her letters the metaphor of fruitfulness and fecundity is employed". It is interesting that many critics described her work with a corresponding organic imagery. Copyright requested from Irma Stern Trust 5 August 1996.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this article that Stern's debut exhibition in Pretoria in 1933 was discussed in contemporary criticism mainly in terms of the context of Modernism. The need to develop a new sensibility to accommodate the paradigm shift of contemporary art was continually stressed. The exhibition also confronted critics and spectators with the imperative to review their basic assumptions regarding the nature of

art, as well as their attitudes towards contentious subject-matter. I believe that basic research such as this is needed in order to locate the origins of prejudice and misconceptions regarding Stern. Although Stern's work was by this time no longer necessarily regarded as a "chamber of horrors", in many respects it was still considered problematic and alien in terms of style and subject matter.

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