



UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL

**The Sculpture of Irma Stern (1922-1955)**

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présenté par  
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## Abstract

This thesis proposes an unprecedented critical study of the sculptural production of the South African-born, German-Jewish artist Irma Stern (1894-1966). It seeks to open new perspectives on the art, the career, and the historical significance of a figure who is commonly celebrated for her pioneering contribution to the development of modern South African painting.

This thesis' contribution is twofold. Firstly, it offers the first comprehensive catalogue of Stern's sculptural oeuvre, bringing into focus a corpus of roughly thirty to fifty works, produced between the years 1922 and 1955 in a variety of different media, which display a consistent focus on the African female subject. Secondly, it analyzes and interprets Stern's complete sculptural oeuvre. Mapping the narrative of Stern's sculptural production onto the plot of her life and work as a painter of African subjects, it seeks to offer a richer understanding of the desires, anxieties, and concerns that underpinned Stern's thirty-year-long engagement with African subject matter as well as an account of the racial power dynamics that are at play in her oeuvre. Through dedicated studies of Stern's production in clay (1922), cement (1936-1945), and wonderstone and verdite (1936-1945), guided by concepts drawn from postcolonial, phenomenological, and sculptural theory, it tracks the changes in Stern's sculptural approach to her subject matter and analyzes them in terms of Stern's changing relationship with her African models. These analyses ultimately offer new directions for approaching Stern and framing her position in the history of South African art.

### Keywords:

Stern, Irma (1894-1966)

South Africa – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Sculpture – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Women, black, in art

Global modernisms

## Résumé

Le présent mémoire se veut être une étude critique portant sur un thème qui n'a pas été traité à ce jour : l'œuvre sculptural d'Irma Stern (1894-1966), artiste d'ascendance juivo-allemande née en Afrique du Sud. Il s'agit de dégager des perspectives nouvelles sur l'art, la carrière et l'importance historique d'une personnalité qui est d'ordinaire acclamée pour sa contribution à l'essor de la peinture sud-africaine moderne.

Notre visée est double. Nous proposons d'abord le premier catalogue exhaustif des sculptures d'Irma Stern : sont présentées environ trente à cinquante œuvres qui furent réalisées entre 1922 et 1955 dans divers média et dont le trait commun est de représenter des femmes africaines. Nous proposons en second lieu une analyse interprétative du corpus, dans son intégralité. Il s'agit de corréler l'œuvre sculptural d'Irma Stern aux méandres de sa vie et de son travail de peintre déterminée à représenter des sujets africains. Notre but est de parvenir à une compréhension fine des désirs, des préoccupations et des angoisses qui animèrent l'artiste dans sa confrontation, longue de trente années, avec des thèmes africains ainsi que des dynamiques de pouvoir qui se dégagent de son œuvre. En portant tour à tour notre attention aux sculptures en argile (1922), en ciment (1936-45) et enfin, en pierre à savon et en verdite (1936-45), et en empruntant aux cadres conceptuels fournis par les théories postcoloniales, phénoménologique et sculpturale, nous mettons en évidence les évolutions qu'a connues le rapport de l'artiste à son sujet et ce qu'elles nous disent sur la relation, mouvante, qu'elle entretenait avec ses modèles. Les analyses que nous proposons sont susceptibles d'ouvrir de nouvelles pistes et de modifier le regard porté à Irma Stern et à sa place dans l'histoire de l'art sud-africain.

### Mots-clés:

Irma Stern (1894-1966)

Afrique du sud – 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle

Sculpture – 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle

Femmes, noires, dans l'art

Modernismes globaux

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## **Prologue**



Years before she ascended to fame as South Africa's foremost painter of African subjects, a young Irma Stern scribbled a strange anecdote on a set of loose pages. Writing in 1923, the twenty-nine-year-old artist recalled an incident that had occurred some months previously, on a trip to a small settlement by the name of Umgababa on the South Coast of Natal. This was the start of what she later called *Das Umgababa Buch*:

*The burning desire – to see and to understand everything in this new – so immensely rich world – drove me to the huts of a potter – which he had built on a hill. A palm grove protected them from the stormy winds of the sea – he lived there like a king – overseeing the green plain with the river that curled between the ridges – listening to the roaring of the sea – he sat there making clay pottery. Beautiful black shiny pots – made for drinking beer – for scooping water. Bowls for grinding the corn of the daily meal. Beautiful pure forms with spare ornamentation. Sitting there, working the clay – surrounded by his children – his wife nursing a fat, ever-hungry baby – they did the kneading and the moulding together. She had learned this art from her father – and he [the potter] had learned it from her. His son, a little boy whose eyes sparkled with intelligence, helped him – to swing the clay vessels over the fire until they changed from dark red to metallic blue-black. The blazing heat of the sun spread in every direction – like a layer of gelatine, agile but stiff.*

*The clay enticed me to make shapes. I sat on a straw mat – in front of me a block of wood – I began to pile layer upon layer. The clay was soft but also tough – in it was already a lurking sensuous life – which the touch of a finger was enough to awaken. It was a wondrous game. In front of me rose the cone of a Kaffir head with curved lips – that laughed and cried at the same time – with temples so delicate in construction.*

*But suddenly it all collapsed. It wasn't properly balanced – the splatter of the wet clay – I awoke appalled from my creative spell – and looked into the regretful faces of those black people. They advised me: "Make it smaller, then it [the clay] will hold." There was such a distinguished manner in their regret! There I sat – the white creature – enjoyed their hospitality – used their clay – learned from them how to treat it. I wanted to show them that you could create other things than only vessels from it and my failure was not met with the slightest sneer. I thought of sophisticated salons and I blushed with shame.*

*A second trial and the head stood – but now there was not enough clay. I was at a loss. Then the potter took a vessel that had not yet been baked, crushed it with his own hand and handed it to me – so that I could finish my head. [The head, now finished, provoked great surprise. It looked indeed like a human being – secretly the (illegible) sneaked over to the next hut and lured out a young beauty – he told her there was a strange man in her father's hut – she should come and see him. Quickly she fastened the most beautiful beads and hurried out. A cry of horror: 'It's a dead man!' She was gone – they all laughed at this most successful prank.]<sup>1</sup> I left with an immense respect for both of these human beings and the feeling grew strong in me – what pitiful people we are, us whites – how inimical to nature is the life that we must lead – that so much that is good and noble has self-evidently been buried alive.*

- Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), p. 28-32

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<sup>1</sup> This passage is crossed out in the manuscript.

## **Introduction**

This thesis tracks the rises and falls of Irma Stern's (1894-1966) sculptural career from clay beginnings in 1922 to earthen endings in 1955. From the elusive and previously unstudied material documents of the artist's sculptural oeuvre, it constructs a narrative of successive engagement and disengagement with the third dimension, with various materials and techniques, and with the bodies of African subjects. Mapping this narrative onto the broader plot of Irma Stern's celebrated life and artistic career, it attempts to bring new texture and dimensionality to existing accounts of the artist's engagement with African subject matter.

### *Biographical sketch*

Born in 1894 to a prosperous German-Jewish family in the small Transvaal village of Schweizer-Reneke (see **Figure 1** for map),<sup>2</sup> Irma Stern rose to fame in the 1930s as a “pioneer painter [of] native<sup>3</sup> types.”<sup>4</sup> She kept this reputation until her death in 1966. She is commonly known today as a pioneering figure in the development of South African modernism. The trajectory that led her to acquire this status is a complex one.

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<sup>2</sup> The Transvaal is the name of the geographical area that lies to the north of the Vaal River in the present-day Republic of South Africa. Established in 1852, the Transvaal Republic was annexed again by the British in 1900 during the South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War). It became the Transvaal Province with the unification of the colonies in 1910. Since the fall of the apartheid regime in 1994, the territory has come to encompass the new provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga, as well as segments of the North-West Province and KwaZulu-Natal. The village of Schweizer-Reneke is situated in today's North West Province.

<sup>3</sup> When it is used to refer to the black populations of South Africa, the term “native” belongs to the vocabulary of settler colonialism. The term was an integral element of official policy and common parlance in the years covered by this study, namely in the context of broader debates over the so-called “Native Question,” which were central to the development and the entrenchment of apartheid. Other terms which carry similar valence are “Bantu” and “Non-European.” The term “African” will be used throughout this study, except where explicit quotations of primary sources are given. Like the term “Black,” the term “African” was adopted by the anti-apartheid resistance and its present-day connotations are shaped by this history. For a full discussion of the various discourses that surrounded the term “native” over the course of South African history, see Suren Pillay, “Where do you belong? Natives, foreigners and apartheid South Africa,” *African Identities* vol. 2, no. 2, 2004. For a more general history of South African racial terminology, see J. Sharp and E. Boonzaier, *South African Keywords: Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts* (1988).

<sup>4</sup> “Veld and Native through the Eyes of a Modern Painter,” *The Star*, June 6, 1931.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 1:** Map of the Union of South Africa (1910-1961), with areas and localities of significance to Irma Stern. Adapted by Lara Bourdin.

Having left South Africa for the first time at the age of six, Stern spent the greater part of her youth in Germany and did not return to the country of her birth until 1920, when she was aged twenty-six. By that time she had been fully acculturated as a German, living in an affluent Berlin neighbourhood, regularly attending cultural events, and taking part in the vibrant milieu of the Wilhelmine city. While she had received academic training at the Weimar Academy, she had truly honed her burgeoning affinities for colour and paint under the mentorship of the Expressionist painter Max Pechstein, whom she met in 1916. It was he who gave her the impetus to combine her memories of Africa with modernist artistic techniques, a quest that would become the key to her self-definition as a modern artist. In addition, he introduced her to patrons

such as Wolfgang Gurlitt, who were to provide crucial support for her as she made her name. By the time she left Germany in 1920, she had exhibited with leading and predominantly male avant-garde groups such as the *Novembergruppe* and the *Freie Sezession* and had established her career as a modern artist.

Stern continued to work in a modernist vein when her family moved back to South Africa in 1920. However, her reception in Cape Town was a far cry from the support she had been accustomed to receiving in German artistic circles. Her first exhibition in the southern nation, held in 1922 at Ashbey's galleries, was perceived as an unabashed affront to the arts, as many local critics expressed their "frank disgust at the general nastiness"<sup>5</sup> of her paintings, drawings, and linocuts. The affront was actually double: she foregrounded the African figures traditionally relegated by her South African forebears to the status of decorative elements in Romanticist or Impressionistic landscape paintings, and she did so in a thoroughly non-academic style.

Although she lamented the invectives that were levelled at her, Stern did not relent. Shortly after the close of her 1922 exhibition, the young artist made the first of what was to become a series of voyages up the coast of South Africa in search of the "primitive"<sup>6</sup> subjects whom she had been visualizing from memory since her German years. This search brought her to settle at a locality named Umgababa on the South Coast of Natal<sup>7</sup> for several weeks in September and October of that year (see **Figure 1** for map). In the travelogue that she penned upon her return, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), Stern professed to have found her sought-after African "Paradise." In a manner consistent with the formulae of the modernist travelogue, she constructed the trip as her artistic homecoming. In the years that followed, she continued to travel regularly outside of her home base in Cape Town, seeking out opportunities to capture what she called "the hidden

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<sup>5</sup> W.R.M., "An Exhibition of Modern Art," *The Cape Times*, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> The term "primitive" has a loaded history as an element of colonial and neo-colonial vocabulary, having been used with both straightforwardly denigrating and paternalistically positive connotations to designate wide cross-sections of the world's non-Western populations, their belief systems, their lifestyles, and their cultural production, and to mark their opposition vis-à-vis a self-professedly "civilized" West. However, because the term and the ideas associated with it are integral to the cultural discourses discussed in this thesis, it will appear throughout the forthcoming pages without scare quotes for the sake of reading facility.

<sup>7</sup> Formerly the British Colony of Natal (1843-1910), Natal is the shortened name that was given to the south-eastern province of South Africa from the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 to the official fall of the apartheid government in 1994. Merged with the Bantustan of KwaZulu in 1994, it is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Its largest city is Durban, present-day South Africa's third-largest urban centre. The segment of the Natal coastline commonly designated as the "South Coast" stretches over roughly 150 km, from Durban to the border between KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape at Port Edward. It is now a very popular destination for coastal tourism.

depths of the primitive and childlike yet rich soul of the native” and “Africa and all its overwhelming, rugged, vast beauty.”<sup>8</sup> Her primitivist quest in fact consistently brought her to seek subjects in the country’s native reserves, areas of land sequestered under proto-apartheid legislation such as the 1913 Land Act.

It was precisely in the years when the reserve system was brought into crisis by its failure to “contain” the country’s African populations that Stern’s career took off in South Africa. While she had depended on European patronage for her artistic validation in the 1920s, in the decade that followed, South African audiences took an increasing interest in her work. Indeed, by the time she held her first exhibition of sculptures in 1936, she was celebrated by her white, middle-class audiences for her alleged – and allegedly unique – capacity to give “insight into the Native mind.”<sup>9</sup>

Her rise to fame in South Africa was crucial insofar as the rise of Nazism in Germany forced her to break her ties with the country where she had grown up and, as of 1937, to halt her travel to Europe for a full ten years. As a result, she focused all the more on developing her career in South Africa, although she found this project jeopardized precisely by what she perceived as the “disappearance” of the Africans who peopled her paintings. These circumstances eventually brought her to travel even further afield throughout the African continent on a series of trips that few in her social milieu would have conceived of undertaking: first, to Dakar in 1938, where she lamented the absence of a colour bar but professed to have found “the most paintable spot ever struck”;<sup>10</sup> then to Zanzibar in 1939 and again in 1945, where she relished the “spirituality” of the island and its people; and finally to the Belgian Congo, where she wrote that she had found “the heart of Africa” (1942: 1). Stern also took advantage of these trips to amass new additions to the eclectic collection of objects with which she decorated her Capetonian home.

Political and socio-economic shifts in South Africa and Europe in the mid-1940s may have determined the significant changes that Stern’s art underwent in those years. The end of the

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<sup>8</sup> Stern, “My Exotic Models,” *The Cape Times*, April 3, 1926.

<sup>9</sup> “In the Cape Peninsula,” *The South African Lady’s Pictorial*, April 1936, p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> Stern, “No Colour Bar at Dakar,” *The Cape Times*, March 3, 1938, p. 8.

Second World War in 1945 made it possible for her to rebuild her bridges with the European art world and to resume her travels to the northern continent, which she did in 1947. The 1948 elections in South Africa propelled the Afrikaner Nationalist Party (NP) to power, with the ideology of *apartheid* as its political slogan (“apart-ness” in Afrikaans). A set of legislative measures was soon passed to enforce total segregation in South Africa in the name of white supremacy and Afrikaner minority rule. In a 1955 letter, Stern noted that she was “not looking happily and peacefully into the future of South Africa.”<sup>11</sup> Still, she continued to participate in government-sponsored exhibitions and to represent the country in international art shows and fairs. The paintings she exhibited, however, no longer represented the Africans, Malays and Indians of her earlier years, but rather still lifes, Christian and mythological subjects, and the quaint Mediterranean resorts where she was spending increasing amounts of time. She remained highly successful both in South Africa and abroad until her death in Cape Town in 1966.

### *Literature review*

As a study of a previously unexamined corpus by Irma Stern, this thesis will aim to build upon the body of writings that have centred on the artist and her pictorial works. Although she is now primarily known in South Africa, her purposeful positioning at the crossroads of international art worlds brought an international character to her media coverage from the outset. Indeed, this body of literature is in itself a compelling reflection of the fact that debates over modern art took on a global character long before the rise of a self-consciously “globalized” art history. In the same way, it is a fascinating example of a cult surrounding a modern artist being sequentially created, nourished, laid aside and revived, with new stakes, in response to various evolving nationalisms. Stern actively fed her own self-singularizing mythology throughout her lifetime, and much of the scholarship devoted to the artist continues to reflect an unwavering conformity to the life-and-works formula – a choice that Marion Arnold justifies in the following claim: “her personality, life, and art cannot be easily separated. Her life informed her art and the pivotal role art played in her life informed her responses to people and places” (1995: 150).

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Richard and Freda Feldman, February 1955.

While it is outside the purview of this study to deconstruct the Stern cult, it is worth flagging the shifts in its rhetoric to understand the stakes in our current research.

Stern's early press aimed to establish her African roots as the basis for her credentials as a modern artist. While the first articles on Stern in the German press date back to 1918, the first significant piece of writing devoted to her is German art critic Max Osborn's 1927 monograph *Irma Stern*. Published as no. 51 in the *Junge Kunst (Young Art)* series, which had featured issues on such renowned figures as Gauguin, Picasso, and Stern's early mentor Pechstein, Osborn's study was instrumental in elevating the young Stern into the ranks of Europe's avant-garde. His rhetoric drew heavily on the *topoi* of primitivist discourse: by first emphasizing and eventually mystifying Stern's birthplace in (South) Africa, the critic posited an authenticity in her representations of the continent and its people that distinguished her work from that of her European contemporaries and raised her above their class as a painter of primitive subjects. His account was heavily inspired by Stern's self-promotion, and specifically by two articles she wrote for the *Cape Argus* in 1926: "My Exotic Models" and "How I Began to Paint."

Transnational trends of artistic validation determined that Stern's press increased dramatically in South Africa after the publication of Osborn's monograph. From 1927 onward, she was the subject of numerous articles in the white-dominated and white-controlled mainstream media, as South African audiences embraced her as their nation's foremost representative on the European artistic scene. These acclamatory accounts were consolidated and re-articulated in South African art critic Joseph Sachs' 1942 monograph *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*, the second major work published on the artist. Sachs essentially redeployed Osborn's discursive strategies and sentimental vocabulary to position Stern as the herald of the modernist stream in South African art. The text is a compelling repository of early South African modernist discourse.

Stern's press remained abundant in South Africa until her death in 1966 and her passing gave rise to several retrospective exhibitions. This tide of eulogy culminated in the publication of Neville Dubow's monograph *Irma Stern* in 1974. A rising critic at the time, Dubow had befriended the artist in her last years and was the director of the museum newly opened in her name. Undoubtedly coloured by his affection for his late friend, Dubow's approach is essentially



formalistic and biographical in nature, as it locates the drive behind Stern's pictorial practice in her unrequited romantic-sexual desires, her capricious personality, and her restless temperament. Although his volume abandoned many of the historical fallacies and aggrandizing tropes of previous literature, it essentially rearticulated Stern's privileged position in the history of South African art. Indeed, the book ends with the following statement: "Her importance as a liberating force in South African art should not be underestimated [...]. Her personal commitment to her art was total and in her dynamic projection of this commitment lies her singular achievement" (1974: 21). Nevertheless, Dubow did make a lasting contribution to the literature on Stern by isolating her dual heritage as a source of creative tension in her practice and by arguing that the resolution of this "African/European" dualism constituted her "artistic *raison d'être*" (1974: 7).

Dubow's text remained the principal resource on the artist for nearly two decades, as political developments in South Africa led to the country's isolation from the international art world and to the stagnation of art historical scholarship within its borders. These were years of escalating violence, as the apartheid regime instituted some of its most oppressive policies: the introduction of compulsory Afrikaans language instruction in schools triggered the Soweto Uprisings of 1976, and the 1980s were marked by violent repression of the struggle. The international community responded with a cultural boycott. Largely isolated from debates occurring abroad, South African art history remained more or less dormant, and the literature on Stern with it.

The year 1994 brought a revival of scholarship on the artist, as the centenary of her birth coincided with the year of South Africa's first democratic elections. With the end of the cultural boycott, South African art could once again be exported abroad, and the erstwhile "grand dame of South African art"<sup>12</sup> was propelled back to the top of the national arts canon. The centenary of her birth was namely celebrated with the publication of Karel Schoeman's extensively researched biography of her early years, which covers the artist's trajectory between her birth and her rupture with Germany in 1933. Simultaneously, the rise of global art history, feminist studies, and postcolonial studies made Stern an attractive case study for foreign scholars and their contributions have dominated the literature on the artist. With her significance as a

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<sup>12</sup> *Inter alia*, the Regional Award of The Peggy Guggenheim International Art Prize (1960), the Oppenheimer Trust Award at Art South Africa Today (1963) and the SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns Medal of Honour (1965).

modernist providing the starting point for most discussions, scholarship on Stern essentially picked up where Dubow had left off, re-interpreting her “African/European dualism” by invoking the terminology of “self” versus “other.” The most significant development that has occurred since 1994 has accordingly been the emergence of the question of Stern’s agency: as a woman, as an artist, and as a transnational subject. Thus, the majority of studies since 1994 have endeavoured to answer the following questions: who was Stern as an artist? To what extent can considerations of her identity as a German-Jewish-South African woman inform our understandings of her artistic production? Was her outlook on Africa essentializing or did it reflect sensitivity to cultural, ethnic and individual differences? How may we conceptualize her contribution to the development of global modernism?

The first author to study Stern after 1994 was British-Zimbabwean art historian Marion Arnold, who published a monograph titled *Irma Stern: a Feast for the Eye* in 1995. The book integrates rich formal analyses of a welter of previously unstudied works from private collections and relates them to general considerations of Stern’s position in German and South African society. While Arnold states the relevance of postcolonial and feminist theory to the study of Stern’s work, her monograph represents only a tentative first step toward a veritable reappraisal of the artist. Indeed, after stating that Stern “did not live in the ‘new South Africa’” and that “as a personality and citizen she reveals insensitivity, emotional immaturity, and civic shortcomings,” her conclusion is that “as an artist she worked with total conviction” and that “her vision of life, transformed into art, could and did change ways of seeing” (Arnold 1995: 150).

This sublimation of the political stakes in Stern’s oeuvre is characteristic of the discourse on the artist that survives to this day in the public domain. It has been expressed in exhibitions such as the 2003 retrospective *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey* and its accompanying catalogue, as well as in the 2006 exhibition *Journeys to the Interior*, organized by the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. This exhibition sought to elucidate Stern’s concentration on African subject matter between 1930 and 1939 through a consideration of the artist’s changing relationship with Germany and Expressionism. However, as researcher Andrea Lewis pointedly states in her introduction to the catalogue, the exhibition’s approach aimed to be “tangential” to post-apartheid and postcolonial debates on the artist and sought to focus on the “*formal foundations of Stern’s art*” (her italics) (2006: 15).

A far more decisive step in the re-direction of Stern studies was taken by German scholar Irene Below, who in 1996 organized a retrospective exhibition on Stern at the Kunsthalle in Bielefeld with the principal aim of countering the prevailing image of the artist as an unreflective, self-involved, and ultimately insensitive artist with little perception of the social, political, and gendered reality in which she was working. Titling her expository essay “Between Africa and Europe,” Below complemented Dubow’s dualistic framework with a reading of Homi Bhabha’s writings on hybridity to explicitly re-present Stern as a “sensitive and careful observer” whose work reflects how powerfully she internalized the experience of her two radically disparate worlds (1996: 33). In so doing, she built up a significantly more sophisticated theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of Stern’s identity formation. However, this sophistication is not necessarily borne out in her conclusions. Below argues that Stern’s contact with radical social thought in Berlin necessarily led her to develop a political conscience and thus determined her pictorial approach vis-à-vis her African, Indian, and Malay models. Indeed, she makes a somewhat surprising leap in claiming that Stern’s background brought her to an interest in the “concrete conditions of existence of different ethnic groups,” which were deteriorating as segregation became further entrenched (1996: 35). This conclusion is based in large measure on the small body of pithy statements that Stern made in private correspondence about the impact of segregation in South Africa and about later independence movements in the Congo and Kenya, which clearly show that her interest, although assuredly earnest, was mediated by self-interest. In this way, Below’s text brings into evidence the strange results that can emerge when the complicated question of transnational agency is divorced from considerations of the specific contexts in which that agency is wielded and that modulate both its force and its impact.

Two contributions have explicitly taken up Below’s prescriptions in order to emphasize the political valences in Stern’s oeuvre. In her 2009 doctoral thesis on the artist, *Pictures that Satisfy: Modernist Discourses and the Politics of Race, Gender and Nation in the Art of Irma Stern*, LaNitra Michele Walker expands on Below’s arguments to claim that Stern was “acutely aware of how social and political themes contributed to modernism’s development in Europe” and that she “employed similar strategies to develop a South African modernism” (2009: 1). While there is ambiguity in Walker’s stance vis-à-vis Stern’s political intentionality, she suggests novel and useful ways of evaluating how her representations of African, Indian, and Malay

persons could cohere with the segregationist vision of South Africa sustained by the apartheid regime. Lastly, in her article “Beyond Black and White: Rethinking Irma Stern” (2011), which is the most recent addition to the literature on Stern, Claudia Braude considers the ways in which the artist’s Jewish roots and ties to Germany and Expressionism in the fraught atmosphere of the early twentieth century could – and in her view, must – have led her to develop a political voice in her oeuvre.

Some contributions have resisted engrained and emerging orthodoxies on Stern. American art historian Marilyn Wyman put forward the most pointedly postcolonial account of the artist’s oeuvre in her 2000 article “Envisioning the Exotic.” Taking aim first at the “mythologized” narrative of Stern’s life prevalent in the early literature (2000: 18), Wyman targets the artist’s “romanticizing and exoticizing” approach to her African subjects and presents it as tantamount to an assertion of white colonial power over the individuals portrayed (2000: 19). Another contribution of note is Griselda Pollock’s 2008 article “Back to Africa: from Natal to natal in the locations of memory,” which revisits the sources of the mythologized accounts of Stern’s life and experience in the context of a broader argument aimed at articulating the concept of “natal memory.” Pollock provides a compelling counterpoint to previous approaches to Stern by highlighting the relevance of psychoanalytic theory to the study of the artist and specifically to the study of her relationship with her birth continent.

Meanwhile, Stern’s sculptures have never been addressed, having been relegated for the most part to passing mentions in the course of discussions of her more abundant and accomplished paintings. Indeed, the most extensive “study” to date remains in Arnold’s 1995 monograph, in which she correctly identifies the beginning and end dates of Stern’s sculptural production in a chapter endnote (1995: 52).

### ***Thesis statement***

This thesis aims to contribute to the historiography of Stern’s art and life through an examination of a corpus that has not been studied thus far: her sculptures. This corpus consists of

roughly thirty to fifty works,<sup>13</sup> produced in several different media and materials, between 1922 and 1955. All save for four represent African women. These works are inventoried for the first time in the catalogue appended to this thesis (Appendix A.2).

The paucity of attention given to Stern's sculptures is readily explained by the privileged status the artist herself ostensibly gave to her pictorial works, their greater quality and their abundance. Furthermore, her sculptural corpus is elusive: of the fifty-one works inventoried here, fifteen can be viewed in public collections (fourteen at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town and one at the SASOL Museum in Stellenbosch), and an additional ten can be seen in photographs only. The remainder are recorded solely in exhibition catalogues in the Irma Stern archives at the National Library of South Africa. Although there is only one record of a sculpture having been sold, Stern is known to have given at least three sculptures away as gifts, which suggests that there are very likely more in private collections. Rather than viewing the vagaries of the archive as roadblocks or as symptoms of the corpus' insignificance, I have endeavoured to exploit the materials that are available to their full analytical potential. Indeed, Stern's sculptures need to be brought to light.

Stern's sculptural career spanned three periods of varying lengths and intensities, separated by near-total hiatuses from the medium. The first occurred in 1922, shortly after her first exhibition in South Africa. She created three sculptures in clay in her characteristic early Expressionist style, two of which have since disappeared. The bulk of her production dates from the years 1935 to 1945, when she created between twenty-five and forty-five sculptures in clay, cement, wonderstone, and verdite. She exhibited these works in four exhibitions – twice in 1936, once in 1939, and once again in 1945 – and they were received as confirmation of her unparalleled ability to portray African subjects. She created her last four sculptures in plaster, bronze, and fibreglass between 1950 and 1955.

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<sup>13</sup> It is regrettably impossible to fine-tune this estimate to any further degree, given that the visual documentation of Stern's sculptural output is lacking and that the existing textual documentation is laden with inconsistencies. The catalogue appended to this thesis numbers fifty-one sculptures in total because it reflects a cautious approach to the archive at hand: I believe it is highly possible that many of the entries do in fact overlap, although it is impossible to certify that this is the case. See the methodological preface to the catalogue (A.1.1) for more information on the reasoning that underpinned the catalogue's design.

The duration of Stern's sculptural career maps precisely onto the duration of her engagement with African subject matter. Furthermore, her turns to and hiatuses from the medium match the dates of important shifts in her relationship with Africa and her African models. Accordingly, the principal contention of this thesis is that Stern's prolonged and multi-media foray into sculpture must be viewed as an integral component in her prolonged artistic engagement with African subject matter. Her successive incursions into and breaks from the medium, as well as her shifts in terms of sculptural media and materials, are in my view indicative of a long-lasting struggle to find a medium with which to represent African female subjects. Thus, my objectives in this thesis will be twofold: firstly, to account for the artist's shifts to and away from sculpture in terms of her overarching representational project; and secondly, to explore the significance of Stern's various bodies of sculptural works for broader understandings of her protracted relationship with African subject matter.

### *Historiographical positioning*

Insofar as this study aims to enrich current understandings of Stern's artistic identity, it remains within the domain of artist-centred studies. Moreover, given that the dates covered by the study cover the near entirety of the artist's career, it will be almost monographic in scope. However, its purpose is neither to reinvent Stern as a sculptor nor to use her sculptural corpus as an anchor for a wide-ranging and full-fledged re-interpretation of her entire oeuvre across media. Rather, this thesis will exploit the novelty of the corpus and the specificity of its subject matter to generate new directions for approaching the artist and specifically her African-themed works.

As it necessarily brings us to address Stern's artistic engagement with African subject matter, this corpus provides an opportune springboard for more critical engagement with the racial dynamics that animated her artistic production for over thirty years. This aspect of her oeuvre has not received the kind of focused critical attention one might expect in the post-apartheid era, and its occlusion is therefore politically significant. Indeed, the ongoing reiteration of Stern's importance as a modern South African artist will continue to sit very uneasily with present-day movements toward the "re-processing" of South Africa's cultural history (Crewe 2005: 27) and the "liberation of South African culture," as heralded by Judge Albie Sachs in

1990,<sup>14</sup> so long as it is not accompanied by a dedicated critical engagement with the powerful ways in which race mediated her relationship with her models and thus shaped her artistic approach.

To this end, this thesis proposes to approach Stern from the perspective of a broader body of literature concerned with unpacking the “whiteness” of twentieth-century South African cultural production.<sup>15</sup> This orientation proceeds from a basic acknowledgment of the fact that subjectivities are produced in social frameworks where race mediates relationships, and from a corollary desire to address the ways in which cultural objects reflect the subjectivities of their producers and in which these themselves participate in the production, the regeneration, and the reinvention of racial dynamics in social spaces.<sup>16</sup> Its aim is neither to perpetuate any form of racial determinism nor is it to racialize cultural discourse itself by positing race as the primordial factor shaping cultural production. Nor is it to re-centralize whiteness in cultural discourse, although the dangers of this interpretation emerging are real and must be acknowledged. Rather, as South African literary scholar Sarah Nuttall argues in a 2001 article titled “Subjectivities of Whiteness,” “whiteness” can provide a prism for understanding “how race works in psychic, symbolic, and political terms” and especially how it shapes cultural production (2001: 115).<sup>17</sup> As she states of the South African context:

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase “liberation of culture” comes from Judge Albie Sachs’ highly influential and incredibly stirring paper “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom,” originally given as an address to a seminar convened by the African National Congress in 1990. Sachs’ main goal in this paper was to address the question of culture’s role in the broader liberation that followed the transition of 1994.

<sup>15</sup> This theoretical orientation has yet to be proposed in the literature devoted to Stern, but it has been acknowledged as necessary by authors working on twentieth-century South African cultural production at large. In her 2006 doctoral dissertation on modernist discourses in the historiography of twentieth-century black South African art, Lize van Robbroeck offered the following charge: “It is imperative that race be dealt with boldly and fearlessly, even at the risk of opening old wounds. [...] To do this, race must no longer be investigated as a significant modality only in relation to black artists – more work needs to be done to explore whiteness as a major determining factor in South African visual culture. Such studies should not only be undertaken in relation to contemporary artists who self-reflexively explore white identity, but can also be applied retroactively to South Africa’s iconic artists who perhaps never thought of their art as significantly ‘white’ – Battiss, Stern, Pierneef, Van Wouw and Preller come to mind as particularly interesting artists to deconstruct as bearers/performers of whiteness” (2006: 254).

<sup>16</sup> Race is understood here in the Foucauldian sense as a form of “governmentality,” or, as Sarah Nuttall defines it in her 2001 article, as a “set of apparatuses and technologies, [...] which] regulate everyday perceptions, imaginations, and behaviours of people on a large scale” (2001: 118). Likewise, the concept of a racial dynamic is invoked to describe the complex ways in which these perceptions, imaginations, and behaviours play out in and fashion the interaction between people in social spaces.

<sup>17</sup> The seminal text in the study of “whiteness” in South African cultural production is South African author J.M. Coetzee’s 1988 *White Writing*. In this book, the author aims to bring to the fore the symptoms of what he calls the “historical insecurity of the artist of European heritage in the South African landscape” in the works of nineteenth

While race has been a vector of segregation, especially in terms of macro spatial arrangements and judicial dispositions, it is also clear that in everyday life there have been spaces – some public, others private, domestic – in which if not intimacy, at least a close proximity of “oppressor” and “oppressed” developed. [...] The ambiguities of “being together” and the rituals of interaction, the shared epistemologies that developed, were not devoid of violence or cruelty, but they are yet to be opened to critical scrutiny in South Africa. (2001: 119)

It is precisely the aim of this thesis to illuminate and unpack the ways in which Stern’s art can be seen as the site of her negotiation of fraught situations of intimacy, proximity, and “being together” with persons who were defined as – and whom she defined as – her racial others. Thus, like previous studies, it will seek explanations for her subjective identity formation in her Expressionist training and will look in particular to the ways in which Expressionism configured her conceptions of and attitudes toward Africa and Africans. However, it will also give unprecedented attention to the ways in which these conceptions and attitudes were complicated by her actual experience in Germany and South Africa and by her movement between. This will allow me to emphasize the situations of distance, real and imagined, that emerged in Stern’s transnational trajectory. These had an equal if not greater impact on the conceptions she developed of Africa and Africans and the attitudes she displayed.

By adopting this model, this study will aim to counter the suspicious haste of post-colonial accounts, to move beyond the facile reiteration of Stern’s position between Africa and Europe, and to problematize the vague indeterminacy of the “self” versus “other” model, as a means of moving toward a more complex understanding of how the artist’s identity and artistic production were bound up in her ongoing negotiation of her relationships with Africa and Europe, Africans and Europeans.

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and twentieth century writers (1988: 62). His concern is, specifically, to identify the manifold tropes and literary constructions through which white writers have manifested a desire to “find a language to fit Africa, a language that will be authentically African” in a framework in which “language, consciousness and landscape are crucially interrelated” (1988: 7). This desire is, I believe, at the heart of Stern’s oeuvre. However, Coetzee’s study is primarily concerned with the relationship of writers to the African landscape. Accordingly, while it draws essential attention to the ways in which fantasies and projections have been embedded in whites’ articulation of their experiences on the continent, it does not provide a sufficient theoretical cast with which to understand the inter-subjective dimension of those experiences.



### *Theoretical framework*

In keeping with the historiographical positioning outlined above, the theoretical framework of this thesis is designed to articulate and to explain the relationship between the racial dynamics that animated Stern's relationship with her African models and her desire to sculpt those models at two highly specific points in her career. Furthermore, it is designed to explain the artist's specific choices of sculptural media and materials. Accordingly, it combines general literature on the twentieth-century phenomenon of painter-sculptors with concepts drawn from postcolonial, phenomenological, and formalist sculptural theory.

On a basic level, my attempt to explain why Stern turned to sculpture takes its cue from sculpture historian F. David Martin's account of the twentieth-century phenomenon of painter-sculptors, represented most prominently by figures such as Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Arp, and de Kooning, to name but a few. In attempting to articulate what "drives painters to or keeps them in sculpture," he introduces the concept of necessity: namely, painters' "need to reveal that which eludes painting: the actual three-dimensionality of things and our 'with-ness' with them in enlivened space" (Martin 1996: 228). This formulation provides an apt point of entry into the problematics that are at the heart of this thesis. From centuries of debate over the *paragone* a consensus has emerged that one of the most distinctive properties of sculpture is its capacity to create a three-dimensional likeness of the human body. By extension, the problematics of identification and objectification, empathy and rejection, desire and possession are central to the creation and the experience of sculpture. I believe Stern's various sculptural forays can be understood as the symptoms of her need to reveal and to work through her fraught desire for "with-ness" with her African models.

On a second level, I aim to understand more precisely how Stern's specific media and materials instantiate different approaches to this search for "with-ness." My own approach to her different sculptural media is based on the following premise, drawn from Griselda Pollock's 1994 article "'With my Own Eyes': Fetishism, the Labouring Body, and the Colour of Sex":

Different media, forming the basis for different practices of representation, service different psychic needs which determine for each [represented] element [...] a specific place and role in an economy of representation which is both an economy of desire and an economy of power. (1994: 354)

In my case studies of Stern's various bodies of sculptural production, my goal will be to relate the specificities of each medium to the specific psychic needs she may be seen to have felt as a result of her interaction, or lack thereof, with her African models. Special attention will be paid to the symbolic connotations of each material – clay, cement, and wonderstone – and to the particular mythologies associated with each technique – modelling, casting, and carving. The stylistic approach that Stern developed in each medium will be analyzed in relation to her pictorial oeuvre. Comparisons will be made with historical precedents in each case.

### *Chapter outline*

This thesis is structured to explain Stern's "sculptural turns" of 1922 and 1935 and the shifts in materials and media that they entailed. Accordingly, it is divided into two parts, defined by medium and time frame: Part I will be concerned with the four works in clay that Stern produced in 1922 (**Cat. 1-3**). Part II will address the period 1935-45, and the artist's estimated thirty to forty-five works in cast cement and carved wonderstone and verdite (**Cat. 4-44**). Given that they represent Stern's shift away from African subject matter, her four final works of 1950-1955 in plaster, bronze and fibreglass (**Cat. 45-48**) will be addressed in the conclusion.<sup>18</sup>

Each part will consist of three chapters. The first is a biographical and historical survey of the period preceding Stern's sculptural turn, which addresses the factors that may have propelled the artist to engage with the three-dimensional medium. The focus will be on the problematics of Stern's identification with her African roots and her self-constitution as a modern portrayer of African subjects. These will be framed as explicative of the specific formal approach that she adopts in her respective sculptural bodies of work. They will also be considered to be important determining factors of the public or private nature of her sculptural endeavours. The subsequent two chapters in each part will be devoted to formal analyses of Stern's various bodies of sculptural works, defined by medium and technique.

The chapter division is as follows. Chapter 1 will cover the period between 1894 and 1922 so as to draw a broad portrait of the young artist who began to sculpt in her Cape Town studio in

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<sup>18</sup> The material of the final three sculptures in the catalogue is unknown. They will not be addressed in the thesis.

1922. The focus will be on Stern's self-constitution as an Expressionist portrayer of African subjects in Germany between 1916 and 1920, and on the ways in which her identification with her African roots and African subjects was complicated by her experience in colonial Cape Town between 1920 and 1922. Chapter 2 will examine the three Expressionistically styled clay sculptures that the artist created in her studio between March and August 1922. It will demonstrate that she turned to the medium of clay in response to her need to give form to the subjects who subsisted solely in her memories, distorted as these memories were by Expressionist projections, and whom she therefore could not find in Cape Town. Chapter 3 will be devoted to an in-depth study of the fragment of text from Stern's 1923 travelogue *Das Umgababa Buch* wherein she narrates the collapse of her clay sculpture at a potter's hut in Natal. Because the factual basis of this passage is contentious, I will treat it as what literary scholar Hayden White calls a "fiction of factual representation" (1978): namely, as a point of insight not into the "facts" of the artist's engagement with sculpture but rather into the ways in which she framed her experience as part of an overarching narrative of self-discovery. Using Sartre's phenomenology of "slime" (le *visqueux*) from *L'Être et le néant* (1943) as a theoretical anchor for my analysis, I hope to show how this passage can be used as a direct point of insight into the way in which Stern's subjectivity as a white artist was constituted through an experience of "intimacy between oppressor and oppressed" which itself mediated, and was mediated by, an experience with sculpture. This chapter will carry significant explicative weight in the overall narrative of Stern's sculptural career, especially insofar as it marks the onset of a thirteen-year-long hiatus from the medium. Indeed, my analysis in this chapter will explain the shift from what I name her medium of engagement with her African subjects to the two media of domination and possession that she began to adopt in 1935.

Chapter 4 will cover the period between 1923 and 1935. It will essentially seek to explain the connection between Stern's putative sculptural failure in the Umgababa bush in 1922 and her decision to reconnect with the medium in a highly public fashion thirteen years later. The focus will be on her self-consolidation as a leading portrayer of African subjects in South Africa. Chapter 5 will address Stern's sculptures in cast cement, which display an idealizing approach to the representation of the African body. Her engagement with the medium will be explained in

terms of her attempt to capture what she called the “primitive yet rich childlike souls”<sup>19</sup> of her African subjects. Chapter 6 will examine Stern’s sculptures in carved wonderstone, which display a singular “Africanizing” aesthetic. My goal will be to show how the artist engaged with this medium as a means of capturing an abstract spiritual essence associated not with her subjects but with a romanticized conception of the African continent itself. The conclusion will briefly show how the artist’s final four sculptures can be understood as the symptoms of her disengagement with African subject matter.

The appendices contain the essential primary source documents that were used to elaborate the narrative of Stern’s sculptural career. In addition to the catalogue of sculptures (Appendix A), they include a collection of plates showing the totality of photographs of Stern’s sculptures found in the National Library of South Africa archives (Appendix B); a complete chronology of the artist’s life, based on primary as well as secondary sources (Appendix C); scans and transcriptions of the potter’s hut fragment from *Das Umgababa Buch* (Appendix D); and transcriptions of the catalogues of Stern’s exhibitions of sculpture (1936-1945) (Appendix E). In addition, throughout the thesis, I will endeavour to bring into view a maximum amount of primary source information relating to Stern’s sculptures: these include records of her contacts with sculptors (African and European), as well as all of the statements she made publicly and privately about sculptors and sculpture. These materials will be integrated into my analyses to the furthest extent possible as a means of gaining maximal insight into the artist’s evolving relationship with the medium and specifically into the role that sculpture played in her public and private self-representation.

### ***Methodology***

The findings and arguments presented in this thesis are largely the result of a research trip to Cape Town undertaken between August and December 2011. As the city where Irma Stern spent the greater part of her artistic career and the place where she was put to rest, it continues to lie at the centre of what Wyman calls “the nexus of materials for Stern studies” (2000: 22) and thus constitutes a compulsory destination for anyone wishing to study the artist. The majority of

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<sup>19</sup> Stern, “My Exotic Models,” *The Cape Argus*, April 3, 1926.

the materials consulted are preserved in two institutions. The Irma Stern Museum (ISM) stands as a privileged site for visual analysis of Stern's work and for insight into the artist's life more generally. As home to roughly half of the sculptures discussed in the thesis, it was a recurrent destination throughout the research process. The time spent at the ISM was complemented by visits to other public institutions housing her works and those of her contemporaries, namely the South African National Gallery in Cape Town and the SASOL University Museum and Rupert Art Foundation in Stellenbosch. Research undertaken on the Irma Stern archives (MSC 31) at the National Library of South Africa yielded a wealth of insight into the development of Stern's career and particularly into the evolution of her reception by the press. The voluminous Press Clippings Scrapbook that covers the years 1914-67 (MSC 31:18-19) was extensively studied, as were the files containing photographs, correspondence, personal manuscripts, transaction details, and other miscellaneous documents amassed over the course of her life. Moreover, conversations with arts professionals, scholars, and South Africans of various walks of life significantly enriched my perspective on the artist and on her position in the contemporary cultural domain.

Secondary source research on Irma Stern and, more generally, on South African art and history was completed at the University of Cape Town Libraries and the Art Collection Library of the South African National Gallery, while sources on European art and on sculptural, phenomenological, and postcolonial theory were researched at the Tate Britain Library, the University of Toronto Libraries, the McGill University Libraries, and the Bibliothèques de l'Université de Montréal.

**PART I**

***CLAY (1922)***



**Chapter 1**  
*Shaping (1894-1922)*



She stands squarely in the centre of the picture frame, shoulders back, braced to meet the camera. Her white smock is marked with paint, and her dark hair insolently escapes from a bun at the back of her head into a tousle at the front. Her gaze is steady beneath furrowed black brows, while her plush lips, pursed into a narrow pout, deny any expectation one might have of a smile. She meets the camera at a three quarter angle, her chest turned toward a painting of a dark silhouette carrying a child in its lap. Behind her on the left is the three-dimensional head of an African woman on a turntable, which faces the camera at a three quarter angle as well. The blurred lines of the artist's face do not soften the impact of her dark-eyed stare. Her expression is one that falls somewhere between tired ennui and exasperated defiance. One wonders if it is a loose hand or a clenched fist that holds the end of a paintbrush just high enough for it to show above the bottom edge of the picture frame (**Plate 1**).

This arresting photograph of Irma Stern is one of two early photographs preserved at the National Library of South Africa that show her as a creator of sculptures.<sup>1</sup> The other is similar in composition, showing the artist in what was presumably the same studio, and sitting between her multimedia creations (**Plate 2**): on the right is a painting of a plate of fish, and on the left, the same African female head, albeit seen in profile and cast in darkness. Taken from a closer angle, the photograph shows the artist looking considerably more relaxed: she appears to be seated, as her forearm rests on the turntable, and her eyes, opened wider, are largely devoid of the sombre resolution she conveys in the other photograph. She is clearly aware that she is being photographed, and the staged elements in the shot – the turntable pressed up to the wall, the canvas facing the camera – suggest that the shoot was designed to record her creative process. Yet while her gaze is more inviting, it is hardly secure: there is in fact a hint of vulnerability in her eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> While the space represented in these two images will be referred to as a “studio” in the forthcoming chapters, it is not certain that it was in fact a dedicated studio space. It is impossible to identify the flasks and jars that appear on the shelves behind Stern: they could indeed be condiments just as they could be paints and thinners. Christopher Peter, Director of the Irma Stern Museum, suggested to me that this room may in fact have been the kitchen of the Stern family home at 34 Breda Street in Oranjezicht, Cape Town. His observation is based on his extensive familiarity with the Stern archives. The peculiarity of this location suggests that Stern did not yet have a studio space of her own at this time. This hypothesis is consistent with the fact that she was still in the early years of her career.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Plate 1.** Irma Stern with a sculpted female head and a painting of a mother and child, c. 1922, photograph, 11 x 16.5 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Plate 2.** Irma Stern with a sculpted female head and a painting of a plate of fish, c. 1922, photograph, 11 x 16.5 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

These early portraits of the artist at work are pasted to the pages of a folder titled “Personal photographs, Snapshot album 1920s,”<sup>2</sup> where they are captioned with the year “1922.” The rest of the folder is made up mainly of portraits of Irma and photographs of interiors, ostensibly taken in and around the Sterns’ first family home in Cape Town at 34 Breda Street, in Oranjezicht, presumably by a family member or a friend. The title of the album, together with the intimate setting of the photographs, suggests that it was destined for private viewership. While this fact may conceivably account for aspects of the pose the artist strikes, it does not explain why the sculpture is cast in shadow when she is sitting next to it and at the same level, while it is shown illuminated and turned to a three quarter angle when the artist is standing and towering above it. Is it an accident that Stern’s eyes convey a measure of vulnerability when the sculpture is turned away from her, yet brash defiance when she turns away from her creation? What is the relationship between artist and sculpture that is conveyed in these two photographs?

While the precise dating of the photographs is unknown, there is good reason to believe they were taken between March and August.<sup>3</sup> This was a period of significant shifts in the artist’s trajectory. She had returned to South Africa two years earlier after a youth spent in Germany and after successful beginnings as an Expressionist painter in Berlin. In February 1922, she held her first exhibition as a modern artist in the southern nation. Both of these events ostensibly shook her relationship to her African roots, and they are widely cited as the triggers for her trip to the small Natal settlement of Umgababa in September and October of that same year. Griselda Pollock has situated in this period Stern’s “crisis of artistic subjectivity” (2006: 70). The present chapter will accordingly pave the way for an analysis of Stern’s sculptural production of 1922 by retracing the complex sequence of physical and psychic dislocations and relocations between South Africa and Germany that led her to engage in that art form at this juncture.

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<sup>2</sup> On the front page of the folder, there is a note reading “Pictures removed from original mounting and ‘album’ reconstituted,” which suggests that the photographs were indeed originally pasted to an album.

<sup>3</sup> Irene Below suggests that the photographs were taken after Stern’s trip to Umgababa in September and October 1922 (2006: 312). She does not, however, give any explanation in support of her reasoning. My suspicion that Stern sculpted in the studio before travelling to Umgababa in September 1922 is based on two considerations. Firstly, the basic laws of probability make it far more likely that she sculpted in the first nine months of 1922 than in the final two. Secondly, the subject matter of the two paintings identifiable in **Plates 1** and **2** is inconsistent with her production of the months following her trip. As I will show in Chapter 3, Stern’s trip to Umgababa furnished her with a veritable effusion of primitive subjects, and it is to them that she devoted her production in the months following her return. As a result, it is unlikely that she would have been at work on a still life of a plate of fish at that time. By extension, I believe it is highly likely that Stern’s studio sculptures preceded her trip.

## 1.1. From natal memories to Expressionist expectations (1894-1920)

The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question.

- Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (2000), 179.

[I do] not think this divided upbringing a good one, for it leaves one with the feeling of belonging to nowhere.

- Irma Stern, Interviewed in "Highway of Women," *The Rand Daily Mail*, May 28 (1931), 7.

The crisis to which the two 1922 photographs possibly allude has roots that go back to Irma Stern's birth, in 1894, to a German-Jewish family in the Transvaal village of Schweizer-Reneke, and to the multiple displacements that ensued. To be more precise, her relationship with Africa was complicated by her triple identity: as a settler, as an *émigrée*, and as an exotic-hunting modernist. As none of these *topoi* is sufficient in and of itself to capture the specificities of that relationship, all will be invoked in the biographical survey that follows.

### 1.1.1. *Schweizer-Reneke (1894-1901)*

In her 2006 article on Irma Stern, Griselda Pollock coins the concept of "natal memory" to theorize the bond linking the artist to the African location where she was born:

[Natal memory is that] deep, often unrecognized memory of place and space associated with where we are born and pass those years of early childhood during which we absorb a feeling of location without the fear of separation that renders the remembered, imagined location poignant in estrangement. Thus it marks our earliest and slow emergence into a sense not of place as a topographical landscape but of emplacement in a phenomenological world. (2006: 53)

The phenomenological world into which Irma Stern was born was land riven by competing claims to indigeneity and power, scorched by sun and lack of rain, and teetering on the brink of war. Diamonds had been discovered near the town of Kimberley in 1867, and gold had been found on the Witwatersrand escarpment in 1886: South Africa's mineral revolution was in full swing. Like all of the villages in the surrounding area, Schweizer-Reneke was very much a product of these watershed events. In 1885, Boer armies, moving to expand their control over the area, in reaction to increasing encroachment by the British, opened the area for white settlement by defeating the indigenous Kora tribes in a battle known as the Battle of Maamusa Hill. Two Boer soldiers, Capt. C.A. Schweizer and Field Cornet C.M. Reneke, were killed in battle, and the

village was named after them. The battle marked the end of the last functioning Kora community.<sup>4</sup>

The Sterns were part of the massive wave of immigrants who settled in the area in search of fortune in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>5</sup> Samuel Stern (Irma's father) and his brother Leopold owned a department store catering to the Boers who tended cattle in the dry, locust-infested land (Schoeman 1994: 11). They appear to have prospered despite the adverse circumstances: in later recollections, Irma Stern would write about a "splendid house newly built for us" as well as "big wax dolls" and "driving out on Saturdays with fine black horses."<sup>6</sup> They also appear to have had a rather insular lifestyle: according to Karel Schoeman, all of the Sterns' friends in the Transvaal had German names (1994: 25). As foreigners, they would have had an ambivalent relationship with the Boers, whose trek from the Cape in the early nineteenth century had engrained in them a deep hostility for perceived outsiders (*Uitlanders* in Afrikaans).<sup>7</sup> However, the Sterns' Jewish identity also served as a bond of mythical kinship: Boers could sympathize with them precisely

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<sup>4</sup> The Kora (or Korana) were a nomadic pastoralist Khoekhoe (or Khoikhoi) tribe, closely related to the hunter-gatherer San. The former were known as "Hottentots" in European colonial vocabulary, whereas the latter were (and continue sometimes to be) referred to as "Bushmen." Their original chiefdoms were in the southwestern Cape, but they trekked to the interior in the seventeenth century to flee white settlers. Through assimilation, they have now completely disappeared as a separate group.

<sup>5</sup> Censuses indicate that the German community in the Transvaal numbered roughly 5,000 people at the outbreak of the South African War in 1899 (Judd and Surridge 2013: 35). The Jewish population in South Africa numbered roughly 10,000 people in 1890, having swollen from 4,000 since 1880 (Shimoni 2008: 13). For most of the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants to South Africa came from Britain. By the end of the century however, a massive wave of immigration from Eastern Europe (especially Lithuania) was underway. I have not been able to find information on the number of German-Jews in South Africa at this time.

<sup>6</sup> National Library of South Africa, MSC 31:1/2, *Diary 2 (1911-1913)*, p. 26, translated and quoted in Schoeman 1994: 13.

<sup>7</sup> Known as the "Great Trek," this massive migration of the 1830s and 1840s is a foundational event in the history of South Africa's Afrikaner population and particularly in its nationalist mythology. South Africa's Afrikaner community has its origins in the Cape, where the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established a base in 1652. By 1806, when the Cape Colony passed into the hands of the British, substantial numbers had migrated to the eastern frontier region, where they lived either as semi-nomadic pastoralists or as settled farmers and artisans. The primary motivation behind their migration to the future Natal and Transvaal regions is generally thought to have been discontent with British rule and all that came with it: anglicization, the revision of laws on slavery (and its eventual abolition), and economic oppression. The Trek gave rise to numerous conflicts with indigenous populations, notably with the Zulu. The most (in)famous episode was the Battle of Blood River (December 16, 1838), where a vastly outnumbered contingent of Boers allegedly overcame twelve thousand Zulu warriors. While the mythologized contours of these events have been extensively disputed and their historical basis re-examined, their powerful symbolism unquestionably fed into the consolidation of Afrikaner nationalism in the twentieth century. For an analysis of the foundations of Afrikaner nationalist rhetoric, see Saul Dubow (1999), "Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid, and the Conceptualization of 'Race,'" *The Journal of African History*, vol. 33, no. 2, p. 209-237.

on the grounds of their common experiences of exile and of their common claims to the title of “chosen people” (Saron and Shain 2008).

Whatever conflicts may have characterized their relationship with the Boers, there is no doubt that the Sterns’ white skin ensured them a privileged status in the Transvaal polity. As a Republic founded in large measure on the Boers’ discontent following the abolition of slavery in the Cape, the Transvaal was a society defined by racial stratifications. The constitution of 1858 stated explicitly that “no equality between coloured people and the white inhabitants of the country, either in church or state” was to be permitted (Posel 2001: 90). A slew of measures had been put into place in the 1870s in order to move Africans into the labour market and to prevent squatting on white-owned farms. As historian Colin Bundy has explained, relations between African and white farmers were of a “quasi-feudal” nature, the latter exhibiting a hostility to “kaffir-farming”<sup>8</sup> that was “ubiquitous and enduring” (1979: 205). These racial stratifications inevitably impinged also on the daily life and outlooks of non-farmers such as the Sterns.

Irma Stern herself would of course have been too young to be aware of the complexities of the society into which she was born, let alone to intellectualize them. They were part, nonetheless, of the “natal memories” that grounded her sense of emplacement in South Africa. A baby photograph, taken at J.E. Middlebrook studio of Kimberley in 1896, offers compelling insight into the ways in which racial divisions would have framed her earliest years. Dressed up in a puffy white dress and seated on an ornate wooden pedestal, she is held up by a dark-skinned woman, likely Indian. The woman sits at her side, turning her cheek to the camera to look gently at her while her own infant eyes stare into a distance beyond the left edge of the picture frame (**Figure 2**).

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<sup>8</sup> “Kaffir” (or *Kaffer* in Dutch) is a derogatory term used to refer to black Africans. It is derived from an Arabic word for non-believer or infidel, typically transcribed as *kafir*. The first recorded use of the term is in Richard Hakluyt’s *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, the first volume of which was published in 1591. It was used in the colonial period both as a noun and as an adjective to refer to indigenous people, plants, animals, and objects, among others. Today its use constitutes a hate crime in South Africa. For more on the term, its history, and the politics of its usage across the centuries, see Gadeba Baderoon (2009), “A language to fit Africa: ‘Africanness’ and ‘Europeanness’ in the South African Imagination,” in Maria Olausson and Christina Angelfors (eds.), *Africa Writing Europe: Opposition, Juxtaposition, Entanglement*, p. 67-94.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 2.** Irma Stern as a baby with nanny, 1890s, photograph, 16.5 x 11 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

Stern's first displacement occurred at the end of 1899, as the South African War spread across the Transvaal.<sup>9</sup> Like most Germans, the Sterns had supported the armies of the Boer leader Paul Kruger, and like them too, they became targets when British troops deployed across the region. Stern's recollections of this period reveal that an uprising by the Africans or the remaining indigenous Kora was feared: "We were waiting for a chance to get to Cape Town. Every night I went to bed fully dressed, only my shoes were taken off, so that we might escape as quickly as possible if the Hottentots revolted."<sup>10</sup> Leopold and Samuel were arrested on charges of aiding the enemy Boers in May 1900 and imprisoned in the fort of Vryburg,<sup>11</sup> leaving Henny Stern and her children to flee Schweizer-Reneke and seek temporary refuge in Cape Town along with twenty-five thousand other *Uitlander* refugees (Bickford-Smith et al. 1999:

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<sup>9</sup> The South African War (also known as the Second Boer War or the Anglo-Boer War) pitted the forces of the British Empire against those of the two Boer Republics (Transvaal and Orange Free State) and was fought from October 11, 1899 until May 31, 1902. It resulted from over a century of conflict between the Boers and the British. Tensions escalated at the end of the 1890s, as both white nations vied for control of the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. The war was won by the British and concluded with the Treaty of Vereeniging, which authorized the British annexation of the two Boer republics.

<sup>10</sup> MSC 31:1/3, Personal writings removed from diaries, "Vater ist ein sogennanter 'self-made man,'" translated and quoted in Schoeman 1994: 17.

<sup>11</sup> Vryburg was the site of one of forty-five tented camps built by the British for Boer captives. Sixty-four were also built for Africans. The English term "concentration camp" was used for the first time to describe the camps operated during this conflict. They mainly housed women and children, as the majority of men were sent overseas.

13). They did not stay there long, as the bubonic plague caused them to leave the country entirely and to settle in Germany in 1901.<sup>12</sup> Irma was six years old.

### ***1.1.2. A divided upbringing (1901-1916)***

The Stern family's move to Germany marked the beginning of a ten-year period of relatively frequent relocations. The end of the war in 1902 allowed Samuel Stern to resume business in the Transvaal, and his wife and children accompanied him. However, family ties, schooling opportunities, and cultural attachments, re-kindled through the short years spent in Berlin, anchored them there increasingly as time wore on. They spent the greater part of the years 1904 to 1908 in Berlin, re-integrating their assimilated middle-class Jewish social circles,<sup>13</sup> and setting up residence on the elegant Kurfurstendamm. Irma Stern's diaries from this period suggest that her attachments to her African home loosened significantly, as the superior comfort of life in Germany and the prospect of attending art school there took over. For instance, the entries that record her feelings about the family's trip to the Transvaal in 1909 express frustration with life in the rural subcontinent: "Here one day passes like the next, like one drop of water falling after the other until the container is full and the year of my stay in Africa is over. [...] When I get to Berlin I'll be sixteen, and then life will really begin, then I'll have dancing lessons and go to the theatre a lot."<sup>14</sup> When they did arrive in Berlin in 1910, Stern wrote with some relief that her family of "gypsies finally had a home of [their] own."<sup>15</sup> Save for a short trip to the

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<sup>12</sup> The turn-of-the-century pandemic swept through China, Australia, parts of Europe, South America, and South Africa. The conditions were particularly ripe for it to hit Cape Town, because the war in the Transvaal had brought an overflow of immigrants to the city, causing overcrowding and rising indigence. Cape Town was all the more vulnerable to infection as it was a major entry point of the British Army to South Africa (Bickford-Smith et al. 1999: 18). The plague reached its peak in March 1901, with 81 cases reported in one week. In total, 766 people were affected and 371 died, with the Coloured population suffering the highest mortality rate (Bickford-Smith et al. 1999: 19).

<sup>13</sup> Judaism did not play a major role in Stern's life. In one of her rare references to Judaism in September 1911, Stern wrote: "Today is the Jewish New Year. Father is in Göttingen. I was glad, it meant I don't have to go through all the ceremonies. I'm certainly not going to fast on the Day of Atonement. I think it's quite ridiculous. It reminds me of the wild animals in the zoo who aren't fed on Wednesday and walk up and down their cages hungry and Thursday they fling themselves on the meat as though they were crazy. [...] They withhold themselves from nourishment in order to withdraw into themselves and not think about other things. When I'm hungry I only think about food and don't withdraw into myself." MSC 31:1/2, *Diary 2 (1911-1913)*, p. 13-14, quoted in Schoeman 1994: 40.

<sup>14</sup> MSC 31:1/1, *Diary 1 (1909-1911)*, p. 4-5, translated and quoted in Schoeman 1994: 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67, quoted in Schoeman 1994: 21.



Transvaal between 1913 and 1914, Berlin remained the Stern family's home until 1920, when they moved back to South Africa permanently.

Stern's diaries of her teenage years conjure a life of considerable comfort and affluence, marked by frequent trips to stylish resorts on the North Sea and regular visits to museums, theatres, and concert halls. Her *Theatre List* contains an extensive listing of the plays, operas, and ballets that she attended, ranging from performances of Shakespeare at the Schauspielhaus to Wagner at the Philharmonie (Schoeman 1994: 37). The list also confirms that she was an avid reader, with eclectic tastes that ranged from German fairy tales to foreign literature. In contrast, the only references to Africa are in the form of vague fantasies and recollections, which are mediated primarily by the young woman's sensitivity to colour.

After taking private portraiture classes in various studios for a year, Stern enrolled at the Weimar Art Academy<sup>16</sup> on April 2, 1913. The pre-Bauhaus academy had a special art class for women and the eighteen-year-old Stern was delighted to enrol (Schoeman 1994: 44). Over the three years that she spent there, she worked under several different tutors, with varying degrees of satisfaction: first under the Norwegian landscape painter Carl Fritjhof Smith, then under the Dutch portrait and landscape painter Gari Melchers, and finally under Martin Brandenburg, a member of the Berlin Secession who maintained some distance from the staff of the Academy and in whom Irma Stern found a kindred spirit and a friend. It was he who taught her to use oil paint (Schoeman 1994: 46). While the teenage Stern left few notes on her academic training, she would later describe these years as a time of dreadful boredom. In her 1926 article "How I Began to Paint," she wrote:

Conventional lifeless things were put in front of me, masks and busts. What a disappointment! This sort of copying work had not the slightest attraction for me; it was nothing novel to me.<sup>17</sup>

In the same article, she stated that her moment of salvation came when she was "at last allowed to enter the class of living models." It was there, on her account, that she discovered in herself a particular fascination with the representation of the human body:

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<sup>16</sup> In 1919, Walter Gropius merged the School of Fine Arts and the College of Arts and Crafts into the Staatliches Bauhaus.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cape Argus*, June 12.

The human body appeared to me to be an instrument for expressing the emotions of the soul. What sorrow lay in a bowed head, in a curved back; what joy and force in a figure standing upright! This was a new land, and I set out to conquer it with keenest intensity.

The paintings of Stern's academic period (1912-1916) confirm the dissonance between her "keen intensity" and the formal curricular requirements at the Academy. For instance, in her 1916 *Nude Study* (**Figure 3**), an ambitious large-scale frontal representation of a sturdy Germanic apple-picking Eve figure posing against a pastoral landscape, the young artist's inclination toward thick delineations of form, flattened perspectives, and rich tonal contrasts is manifestly in tension with the lessons in subtle modulation of colour and realistic perspectival depth that she was presumably expected to apply.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 3.** Irma Stern, *Nude Study*, 1916, oil on canvas, 142 x 89 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Figure 4.** Irma Stern, *The Eternal Child*, 1916, oil on canvas, 77 x 44 cm, The Rupert Foundation for the Arts, Stellenbosch.

In the same year that she completed her *Nude Study*, Stern painted the work that scholars typically characterize as her first mark of self-assertion as an artist. It also represents the young woman's most articulate response to the war. Titled *The Eternal Child*, the painting is a portrait of a wide-eyed young girl holding a bouquet of flowers. The artist's mottled application of

colour and lithe lines lend a fragility to her subject that contrasts vividly with the slick surfaces and stocky forms of the *Nude Study*. In later years she would claim that she chose her subject to express “the suffering and agony that a war means to all life.”<sup>18</sup> She said that the painting caused a row with Martin Brandenburg, her teacher at the time, and that his miscomprehension ultimately caused her to leave him.<sup>19</sup> This painting also indirectly led her back to Africa.

### 1.1.3. *Expressionism (1917-1920)*

Stern consolidated her identification to her African roots through her immersion in German Expressionism and her meeting with Max Pechstein. A central figure on Berlin’s avant-garde art scene, Pechstein had been a founding member of the since-splintered collective *Die Brücke* and he remained closely involved with radical-minded groups such as the *Novembergruppe* and the various secession movements that formed during the war years in Germany.<sup>20</sup> Stern referred to him as “the recognized leader of the modern school of painters in Germany” and fondly wrote of her contact with him:

To this truly generous and noble-minded artist I owe more gratitude than to anyone else. [...] To my greatest satisfaction he liked everything I had done on my own much better than anything I had done under the supervision of a teacher, particularly my unfortunate “Pathetic Child” and my native heads.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stern, “My Aim in Art,” *N.C.W. News*, November 1954.

<sup>19</sup> Stern, “How I Began to Paint,” *The Cape Argus*, June 12, 1926.

<sup>20</sup> *Die Brücke* and the *Novembergruppe* are two seminal collectives that existed in succession in the first two decades of the twentieth century. *Die Brücke* (German for “The Bridge”) was a group of painters and printmakers that is commonly associated with the birth of the Expressionist movement. Founded in Dresden in 1905 by four architecture students, Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, it later attracted such visual artists as Max Pechstein, Emil Nolde, and Otto Mueller, as well as international artists Cuno Amiet, Kees van Dongen, and Akseli Gallén-Kallela. In the manifesto penned by Kirchner in 1906, the group’s aims were stated as follows: “We call all young people together, and as young people, who carry the future in us, we want to wrest freedom for our actions and our lives from the older, comfortably established forces.” While rifts between members caused the group to disband in 1913, many continued to work together in the years that followed. Indeed, their common interest in avant-garde aesthetics and radical leftist politics led some to congregate anew in later years, in groups such as the *Novembergruppe*, which was formed in 1918. Named after the month of the revolution that propelled Germany from Empire to Republic, the *Novembergruppe* brought artists and architects together around a set of shared socialist ideals. The group was active through the 1920s, urging for radical artists to become involved in public culture and to put an end to the bourgeoisie’s hold on the arts. It was banned in 1933, following Hitler’s rise to power.

<sup>21</sup> Irma Stern, “How I Began to Paint,” *The Cape Argus*, June 12, 1926.

With her reference to “native heads,” Stern gives a rare hint that she had begun to delve into her memories of her childhood in Africa in search of bodies to represent. However, neither her writings nor the traces that remain of her artworks from the period that preceded her encounter with Pechstein suggest that her explorations were anything more than tentative. Nor do they suggest that she had any particular desire to leave Berlin to return to South Africa. While it is impossible to fully disentangle the complex mix of artistic ideals, Expressionist influence, and personal needs and motivations that may explain her turn to African subject matter, what is certain is that her production of African-themed works took off following her meeting with Pechstein and that it was essential to her self-constitution as an Expressionist artist.

Stern’s shift to African subject matter was based on two major premises of Expressionist aesthetic ideology. Most central is what art historian Jill Lloyd calls the “Expressionist aspiration of transforming life into art” (1991: 210), which is in turn associated with the modernist conception of the work of art as the site of a person’s “total investment” (Heinich 1996: 37).<sup>22</sup> It was the vehicle through which the artist channelled his or her subjectivity and uncovered “primal layers” of the self (Wiedmann 1995: 4). The Expressionists’ project for subjectivity was also tied to their fascination with the idea of the “return to home soil” (Perry 1993: 40). As art historian Gill Perry argues, a recurring theme in modernism and German Expressionism is the neo-Romantic belief that “certain creative characteristics and powers of the individual are in some invisible, intangible but nevertheless undeniable fashion the direct result of contact with the soil which the individual and his forefathers have inhabited” (1993: 40). In other words, it was held that physical connection to the land of the “self” could activate channels of expression that would allow that “self” to express itself directly and authentically: the nourishment provided by the soil was none other than the gift of creative expression.<sup>23</sup> This ideology is what led many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists to seek out nurturing soils in remote, supposedly unspoiled environments: most notably, in fishing villages along the Baltic Sea and in the villages

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<sup>22</sup> “Ces dons innés de la conception moderne de l’artiste sont notamment un investissement total de la personne, le don inné, l’inspiration, l’individualité, l’originalité.”

<sup>23</sup> The direct correlate of this idea was that the art produced through such ventures would undoubtedly bear the mark of the artist’s “authenticity” of connection. In *White Writing*, J.M. Coetzee notes that modern European pastoral literature is deeply inflected with the idea that “when people are ‘at home in’ or ‘at harmony with’ a particular landscape, that landscape speaks to them and is understood by them” (1988: 10).

of Worpswede near Bremen and Moritzburg in Saxony (März 2004: 21). It was also to prove decisive in grounding Stern's identification to her African birthplace.

The second premise of Expressionist ideology that oriented Stern toward African subject matter is the belief, pervasive amongst modernist artists and thinkers, that self-discovery and self-cohesion are also achievable through "something that comes close to merging with the Other" (Taylor 1989: 471). As previous studies have shown, the leaders of the German avant-garde movement were heavily invested, like their colleagues in France and to a lesser extent in Britain and Belgium, in an exploration of the variegated potential that contact with the "primitive" could hold for their personal and artistic development. Projecting onto the foreign and faraway all that they could not find in their increasingly industrialized German homes, the Expressionists fetishized all peoples, places, and art forms that bore the signs of what they considered "primitiveness" and "exoticism": dark skins, organic materials, foreign names. These had become increasingly visible as a consequence of German colonial expansion in Africa and Asia and industrialization in German urban centres.<sup>24</sup> Travel also held an important place in this variant of the Expressionist project: Gauguin's vanguard voyages to the South Seas inspired many Expressionists to set sail themselves, in the belief that their immersion in faraway locales would allow them to tap into the same "savage" instincts that had allegedly led the Frenchman to revolutionize his own art. It so happened that at the time when Stern met Max Pechstein, the seasoned artist had himself recently returned from a Gauguinesque odyssey to the Polynesian island of Palau, where he had gone seeking a "unity of man with nature" (quoted in Lloyd 1991: 195). Like Gauguin and other exotic-hunting Europeans before him, he had in fact been

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<sup>24</sup> German colonialism is an understudied aspect of the country's history and of postcolonial studies at large. As Sara Friedrichsmeyer usefully notes in her volume on the subject, the Germans are a colonizing people with centuries of experience, having undertaken missionary and commercial projects in South America and West Africa long before the nineteenth century (1998: 8). However, as she explains (1998: 8), it was only after German unification in 1871 that official state-sponsored colonialism became a possibility. In addition, Otto von Bismarck's wariness of colonialism delayed the acquisition of colonies to 1884, when South-West Africa (now Namibia), East Africa (now Tanzania), Togoland (now Togo) and Cameroon were declared German protectorates. Furthermore, while there was in unified Germany an averred enthusiasm for empire, the nation never engaged in the sort of all-encompassing social and cultural engineering projects that typified British and French imperialism: from the outset in 1884 to the end in 1919, Germany's policy aims were more or less exclusively economic. The volume *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and its Legacy*, edited by Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, and published in 1998, provides a collection of essays covering critical aspects of the German colonial enterprise and offering a critical counterpoint to the subject's historiographical occlusion. For a collection of essays addressing the impact of the German colonial enterprise on visual culture, see David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (2011).

disappointed: even the southernmost island of the archipelago was “corrupted,” mined by the German South Seas Phosphate Company. His sketches nevertheless depicted a Pacific Paradise, replete with supple brown-bodied nudes and luxuriant vegetation.

The Expressionist brand of primitivism that Irma Stern absorbed was given to the same homogenizing tendencies as other modernist enterprises: it glossed over cultural differences and conflated most non-Western societies under the overarching category of “the primitive.” However, within this scheme of alterity Africa received a special status. As Achille Mbembe writes in his seminal *On the Postcolony*, “it is in relation to Africa that the notion of ‘absolute otherness’ has been taken farthest” (2001: 2).<sup>25</sup> More so than any other real or fictional geographical entity outside Europe’s frontiers, Africa stands in the Western imagination as the ultimate antithesis to the values that the West assumes as its own: barbarism vs. civilization, instinct vs. reason, animism vs. monotheism, passions vs. intellect. This mythologizing of Africa was epitomized in vulgar and hyperbolic fashion by the *negrophilia* movement that swept across Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century and to which the Germans were not immune. Jost Hermand has noted that the period between 1910 and 1925 saw a proliferation of signs and tropes of the continent in the German cultural domain (1986: 83). To take but a few examples, the German Colonial Film Society brought African sceneries to the screens of the nation, and trade publications, collectible stamps, posters, pictures, and packaging materials disseminated similarly racialized images of thick-lipped, loincloth-wearing Africans in the public sphere.<sup>26</sup> Colonial stereotypes were also brought to life through the staging of commercial ethnographic exhibitions (*Volkschäueren*) in major urban centres.

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<sup>25</sup> Mbembe continues: “It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, as a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity.”

<sup>26</sup> According to German scholar Astrid Kusser, the black community in imperial Germany was a small but highly visible one, with Africans and African-Americans working in the entertainment industry and with colonial imagery flourishing in popular visual culture (2009: 90). In cinema, Africans were represented in the short-lived but substantial production of colonial films, beginning with pictures covering the Herero Uprising of 1904. In 1917 and 1918, the Deutsche Kolonial-Filmgesellschaft (“German Colonial Film Society”) produced at least three fiction films and one animated short film that presented the agrarian side of life in the colonies, upholding metropolitan mythologies of complacent colonial subjects (Führmann 2009: 149).

Negrophilia arguably provided the prism through which Stern defined her conception of the African female body. Of particular appeal for Expressionists and exotic-minded Germans at large were the African performers who plied their talents on the stages and dance floors of cabarets, variety shows, circuses, and music halls. It was they who embodied most potently the fantasies of boundless freedom, sexual liberation, and spiritual exaltation that were intrinsic to primitivist conceptions of the African body.<sup>27</sup> A vivid example of this phenomenon is to be found in the excited discourse that surrounded Josephine Baker's stint in Germany in the mid-1920s. A native of St. Louis, Missouri, who launched her dancing career in the vaudevilles of the Harlem Renaissance, Baker became the face of *négrophilie* in 1925 when she introduced her eroticized dance style to the *Revue nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Shows in other European capitals, Berlin included, soon followed. A reviewer for the journal *Comedia* captured the excitement of European audiences: "When Miss Baker raises her arms in phallic invocation, this pose evokes all the enchantment of Negro sculptures. We are no longer facing the frolicking Dancing Girl, but the Black Venus" (quoted in Pieterse 1992: 197). Such blatantly paradoxical conflation of Baker's jerky, frenetic moves with the angular, yet utterly static forms of African sculpture confirms that the kernel of European fetishizations of the African body was the idea of primal, unmediated, animistic energy. It was this energy that Expressionist artists sought to replicate when they employed the African body as a motif, as for instance Emil Nolde did in his 1913 lithograph *Tänzerin (Dancer)* (**Figure 5**).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 5.** Emil Nolde, *Dancer*, 1913, lithograph, 53.3 x 68.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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<sup>27</sup> In the 1920s black music and dance were so popular in Paris and Berlin that "Negro balls" were held in many dance halls and cabarets. Guests came dressed up and in blackface to dance the Charleston: this practice was called *negern* in Germany, *faire nègre* in France (Pieterse 1992: 197).

The images Stern produced in these years reveal the extent to which her memories of Africa were distorted by Expressionist ideals. They namely show how her conceptions of Africans were profoundly mediated by primitivist discourse and imagery. For instance, her 1920 lithograph series *Dumela Marena: Bilder aus Afrika*<sup>28</sup> is a series of ten plates depicting African subjects engaging in a number of conventionally exoticized activities (**Figure 6**).<sup>29</sup> Pechstein's influence clearly comes through in plates such as *Dancing Figures*, which shows five brown-skinned figures dancing, nearly naked, under a bright yellow sun. As in Pechstein's plate from his series *Palau* (**Figure 7**), the figures are drastically depersonalized. The zigzagging forms of their bodies, rendered with vigorous lines, suggest that the artist was more interested in experimenting with the pictorial rendering of rhythm, movement, and energy than with the representation of individuals. Images such as this one cannot be read as the naturalistic mnemonic transcriptions of a vividly remembered youthful environment but, rather, as the visual construction of what Edward Said calls an "imaginary geography" (1978: 50): a re-imagining of the known physical space into a hybrid creation made up of more elements of desire and projection than of transparent memory of a lived-in past. What one reads is not, in that sense, South Africa – neither the parched earth of Stern's natal Transvaal nor the wine lands of the Cape – but "Africa" writ large and securely between quotation marks, Africa "transmuted from content to form [and] from referent to signifier" (Hegglund 2005: 43), "Africa" extrapolated from Africa, from South Africa, and certainly from Schweizer-Reneke.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The title combined a greeting phrase from Sotho-Tswana ("Greetings, Sir") with the tagline "Pictures from Africa" (Schoeman 1994: 63).

<sup>29</sup> *Dumela Marena* was one of two series of lithographs that Stern produced in 1920. The other, titled *Visionen: Zehn Steinzeichnungen von Irma Stern* (*Visions: Ten Lithographs by Irma Stern*), was similar in its sketchy style, but different in subject matter. A series of hazily drawn, black-and-white images of degraded urban scenes, the *Visionen* lithographs are clearly intended to be reflections on the moral and economic depression of post-war Germany. These themes were prevalent in Expressionist painting and sculpture of the late 1910s and 1920s, as for instance in the oeuvre of Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix. The contrast between Stern's two lithographic series captures the tension that underpinned Expressionist primitivism and illustrates how Stern's nostalgia for Africa was likely accentuated by the desolation caused by the war.

<sup>30</sup> For further discussion of the idea of "Africa" and the discourse that surrounds it, see literary scholar Valentin Y. Mudimbe's remarkably rich *The Idea of Africa* (1994). Historian Paul Stuart Landau also provides an interesting discussion of how this idea has been nourished and imaged in European and North American visual culture in his *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (2002).



[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 6.** Irma Stern, *Dancing Figures*, Plate 8 from series: *Dumela Marena: Bilder aus Afrika*, 1920, coloured lithograph, 40 x 29.5 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Figure 7.** Max Pechstein, *Drei Akte vor Vulkan*, Plate 6 from *Südsee, Palau* (South Seas, Palau), 1918, hand-coloured chalk lithograph, dimensions unknown, private collection.

Stern used these images, and others, to promote herself as a representative of primitive Africa in Berlin. By 1920, Stern had exhibited with the *Freie Sezession* (in 1918), the *Novembergruppe* (in 1919), and had even held her first solo exhibition at the prestigious Fritz Gurlitt Gallery (in 1919). The catalogues of these exhibitions contain records of pictures with titles such as *Portrait of Man with Hut*, *Negroes Sweeping*, and *Girl with Palm Wood*. Moreover, the catalogue for her first exhibition at the Gurlitt Gallery informed attendees that “these works partly came into being in the Transvaal (South Africa), the artist’s home” (Schoeman 1994: 63).

Historic circumstance precipitated Stern’s return to the South African home soil that she had come to see as the springboard for her artistic *épanouissement*. In March 1920, right-wing groups attempted a coup d’état in Berlin. Karel Schoeman suggests that this likely impelled the Stern family to flee, as they had the status of foreigners (1994: 64). By the summer of that year,

they were once again boarding a steamer for the long journey southward. In an entry from her illustrated journal dated 1920,<sup>31</sup> Irma Stern portrayed herself leaving a burning European cityscape with palette in hand and easel underarm, and on the threshold of a verdant and ordered town lying under a blazing red sun (**Figure 8**). The caption reads: “And fled from burning Europe into the land of strong colours” (c. 1920: 29-30). As a foreign Jew, she had no option but to go. As an Expressionist, it was a move that she had come to seek.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 8.** Irma Stern, *Paradise*, pages 29 and 30, c. 1920, watercolour and ink, 16.5 x 24 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

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<sup>31</sup> Stern’s journal *Paradise* is a poignant document of the crucial years between 1919 and 1924. It is comprised of fifty-two pages, each including a vivid gouache illustration and a short text written in black ink. The frontispiece includes the following note: “This book should free me from everyday life – a free and happy playing about in the realm of colourful imagination – an enjoyable ballgame with colours and thoughts.” Griselda Pollock describes it as a “disjointed narrative that is at once a mytho-poetic self-analysis and a self-portrait of an artist unable to find a place” (2006: 67). It can be viewed online at <http://www.irmastern.co.za/artist.htm>.

## 1.2. From Expressionist expectations to Capetonian disappointments (July 1920 - February 1922)

The most evocative record of Stern's thoughts and impressions upon her return to South Africa in 1920 is to be found on the opening page of the travelogue she wrote in 1923 under the title *Das Umgababa Buch*. Written on the decks of the ship *Usaramo*, which was in fact bringing the artist back to Germany after three years spent in South Africa, it begins with a recollection of the wistful sentiments that coursed through the young woman's mind as the boat entered the Cape Town harbour in the late summer months of 1920:

Daybreak: the steamer's engine slows down. Soon we will be there.

Africa – the word was the personification of everything desirable to me. The land of my childhood. Its sun – its brown people – its sheer mountains. Its endless sky. The splendour of its flowers saturated with colour. The fruit with its so sweet and yet so sharp fragrance – the joy of my life!

There it lay before me now, lights glittering in the dimness before the dawn. Jagged dark mountains – the most delicate heavens above.

How would it be, this Africa, after all the yearning years of waiting?<sup>32</sup>

The lines that follow reveal that the “land of strong colours” was not forthcoming:

Now the engine stops. Shrill crying of the half-castes<sup>33</sup> – dust – intense heat – the smell of sweat. The creaking of tireless cranes – dreary harbour – everything sober. Then the English hotel – stereotyped like the people – petty and dusty horizons without the tranquillity of nature – without European animation. Like commercial water gone flat.

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<sup>32</sup> “Morgengrauen – die Maschine des Dampfers geht langsamer. Bald mussten wir dort sein. – Afrika – wie war das Wort der Inbegriff alles Ersehenswerten für mich. Das Land meiner Kindheit. Der Sonne – der braunen Menschen – der schroffen Berge. Der unendlichen Himmel – Der farbenprächtigen Blumenpracht – der Früchte mit dem süßen und doch so herben Duft – Der Freude meines Lebens! – Da lag es nun vor mir – Lichter funkelten in der Dämmerung vor Sonnenaufgang. Zackige dunkle Berge – zartester Himmel darüber. Wie würde es sein – dieses Afrika – nach all den langen sehnsuchtsvollen Jahren des Wartens?”. Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), MSC 31:1/15, page 1. Translation by Karel Schoeman, 1994: 65.

<sup>33</sup> Stern's description of the dockworkers as “half-castes” likely referred to members of Cape Town's “Coloured” community. This heterogeneous group is formed of people of mixed ancestry variously descended from Cape slaves, the indigenous Khoisan population of southern Africa, and black Africans assimilated into colonial society. The grouping was given theoretical and legislative reality under apartheid policy as one of the country's four major races. While the Coloured were the victims of colonial and apartheid structural violence throughout their history, they were generally accorded more civic rights than South Africa's black African majority. At the time that Stern arrived in South Africa, the dock workers had in fact recently returned to work after a mass strike, led for three weeks in 1919 by the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), one of the major early twentieth-century trade unions bringing together African and Coloured workers (Bickford-Smith et al. 1999: 81).

The passage concludes with a question: “Africa – where was it – where were the free black people – where were the flowers?”<sup>34</sup>

Stern’s return to Cape Town arguably marks the onset of the crisis of artistic subjectivity that is, I believe, at the crux of her sculptural efforts of 1922. Her accounts of her return, in *Das Umgababa Buch* and elsewhere, make it clear that the real, colonial Cape Town was a far cry from the “Africa” she had expected to find. Her descriptions of the “dreary” Capetonian harbour and the “stereotyped” people at the English hotel immediately call to mind the laments of many an exotic-seeking modernist before her, who, upon arriving at the alleged antipodes, deplored the ubiquitous signs of European colonial presence.<sup>35</sup> Stern’s comments also point to what Griselda Pollock designates as the trigger for the experience of psychic dislocation:

Yet when we learn that these deep impressions [of our place of birth] are in some sense false, they are not the grounds of a consolidated identity, but merely a contingency, the chance of being born there because of whatever vagaries of one’s parents’ political or economic migrancy, then a profound dislocation occurs within the psychic spaces furnished by visual and spatial memory. It is at this level of collision between knowledge and phenomenological sensation of the given world that the experience of dislocation is produced. (2006: 62)

Her references to “free black people” and “fragrant fruit trees” in particular show that her primitivist epistemology of African people and space clashed with her experience of the colonial city.

Cutting through the melodrama that permeates the opening lines of her *Umgababa Buch*, one can pinpoint the reasons for Stern’s discontent. As the oldest European settlement in Africa, Cape Town is a city steeped in the history of imperialism, slavery, and colonialism, and these legacies have always saturated its urban space. But while the city had thrived on the gross injustices committed by its elites in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the decades between 1890 and 1910 very much destabilized its claims to political, cultural, and economic supremacy.

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<sup>34</sup> “Nun stoppt die Maschine. Grelles Geschrei der Halbschwarzen – Staub – stechende Hitze – Schweissgeruch – Knarren unermüdlicher Kräne – trostlose Haffennüchternheit. Dann das englische Hotel – Schablone – wie die Menschen kleinlich und verstaubte Horizonte – ohne die Ruhe der Natur ohne europäische Beweglichkeit. Wie abgestandenes – künstliches Mineralwasser.” Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), MSC 31:1/15, page 1. Translation by Karel Schoeman, 1994: 65.

<sup>35</sup> The pattern of disappointment upon arrival in the realm of the foreign is a common trope in modernist writing. Gauguin famously arrived disappointed in the Marquesas after leaving Tahiti, as he found the signs of French colonialism too prevalent, and Gautier before him, upon arriving in Algeria, famously declared that “L’Algérie est un pays superbe où il n’y a que les Français de trop” (Lettre à la famille Gautier, August 19, 1845, in Lacoste-Veysseyre, *Correspondance générale*, Paris: Droz, p. 280).

The discovery of diamonds on the Rand in the 1890s had precipitated the relocation of foreign capital and commercial enterprises to Johannesburg and the concomitant shift of maritime commerce to the Indian Ocean port of Durban (Bickford-Smith et al. 1999: 46). In turn, the unification of the colonies in 1910 had demoted Cape Town from Imperial Capital of the Cape Colony to seat of the legislative branch in the new state's tricameral political arrangement. By 1920, Cape Town's sparkle as the southern jewel in the crown of the British Empire had waned: modernization was underway, but culture sagged, and segregation loomed large.

The city had in fact become more colonial than ever in both outlook and appearance. While the administrators of the newly unified South African state laboured to curtail Britain's legal power to intervene in its affairs, the political elite of Cape Town chose to define the city's modern identity precisely in terms of its imperial heritage. The early decades of the twentieth centuries were in effect when Cape Town truly donned its matriarchal frock of "Mother City," positioning itself as the repository of past lore in a new state where the juvenile Johannesburg was inevitably the star. The "Cape Dutch" movement reconfigured the city's architectural landscape, as Cecil Rhodes hired the young British architect Herbert Baker to reinterpret Dutch vernacular styles on the city's major thoroughfares. Meanwhile, a miscellany of societies and institutes had come into being in common concern for the promotion of the city's white, Cape origins. Rhodes himself had been memorialized on the slopes of Table Mountain, with a monument by Baker in 1912. The Van Riebeeck Society had been launched in 1918 to commemorate the city's founding fathers and the Historical Monuments Commission had been instituted to protect all material remnants of their passage. Sealing the city's reputation as a centre of learned wisdom was the 1918 founding of the University of Cape Town on land bequeathed by Rhodes.

Modernization was predicated on segregation. As South African historian Martin Legassick has argued, the crucial formative period for the policy of segregation in South Africa was precisely the period that stretched between the end of the South African War in 1902 and the onset of the First World War in 1914 (1995: 45).<sup>36</sup> A landmark event in the entrenchment of

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<sup>36</sup> Legassick defends a widely shared account of twentieth-century South African history whereby the development of segregation can be understood as the by-product of the radical transformation of relations of production that came with the shift to a capitalist-based economy in the early twentieth century. For more information as well as more

segregationist ideology and policy was the gathering, in 1903, of the South African Native Affairs Commission. It was to “gather accurate information on affairs relating to Natives and native administration, and [...] offer recommendations to the several governments concerned with the object of arriving at a common understanding on questions of native policy” (quoted in Legassick 1995: 47). The recommendations that it made laid the groundwork for state-enforced segregation: most prominently, the establishment of native reserves based on “ancestral lands held by their forefathers”; the spread of Christianization; the promotion of hard labour; and government through tribal administration (Pillay 2004: 222). While these developments affected South Africa as a whole, they entailed particular shifts in the Cape Province. In particular, they brought about the definitive erosion of the liberal voting franchise, that colonial institution which, although born of unquestionably paternalist intent, had at the very least distinguished the British Cape from the Boer Orange Free State and Transvaal as far as the management of racial relations was concerned (Worden 1995: 46). Moreover, in Cape Town, the bubonic plague of 1901-2 had led to the establishment of the city’s very first “urban location” for Africans on a farm named Uitvglut near the present-day suburb of Pinelands. In response to pervasive white fears about hygiene, which were spurred on by racist rhetoric on the part of the medical bureaucracy, the areas of African settlement in the City Bowl and on the slopes of Table Mountain had been razed to force inhabitants into a temporary settlement made up of bleak dormitories and corrugated-iron huts. This drastic measure had been facilitated by the 1902 passing of the Locations Act in the Cape Colony, a piece of legislation that was to prove foundational for the many that came afterwards to institute divisions of space, ownership, and experience in urban centres.

Stern’s identification with her African roots was further complicated by the decidedly inhospitable environment that she found in Cape Town’s artistic scene. The community of professional painters in the city scarcely numbered one hundred members, and institutions and amenities for the arts were lacking (Berman 1975: 4). Aesthetic tastes were calibrated with those of the British, albeit with a delay of twenty years or so. The dominant force in the art world was the South African Society of Artists, which faithfully defended the styles of British Romantic Realism or Impressionism and staunchly rebuffed modernist developments occurring in Europe.

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perspectives on this complex subject, see the 1995 volume *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, edited by William Beinart and Saul Dubow.

The market for sculpture, meanwhile, was virtually non-existent, in a country where there was little tradition of arts consumption to begin with and where the few patrons of the arts that existed took greater interest in pictorial works than in the three-dimensional. Indeed, the only sculptors who were able to eke out a living from their art at the time were those who worked in the realm of portraiture, producing conventional busts for Cape Town's well-heeled elite (Rankin 1989: 18). Furthermore, while the artistic establishment strongly encouraged painters to devote themselves to the representation of "distinctively South African" themes as a means of encouraging the development of a "national spirit," the range of acceptable themes was tightly checked by the alleged necessity of promoting the moral development of the young nation (Proud 2002: 9). The representation of African subjects was confined to the traditions of picturesque landscape painting and ethnographic illustration, in which they were either to be represented as quaint details dwarfed by majestic landscapes, or else as the anodyne representatives of exotic customs and modes of dress.

These circumstances seem to have brought the young Stern back to her familiar feelings of imprisonment and stifled self-expression. Her letter to her friend Trude Bosse reveals the disdain with which she viewed Cape Town and its people: "You can't picture it to yourself [...]. Everything that's new – and almost everything is new to these narrow-minded people – is simply laughed at, scorned, and afterwards imitated. It's so unpleasant living in the restrictions of such a small town."<sup>37</sup>

Stern launched her career as an artist in South Africa with a solo exhibition at Ashbey's galleries in February 1922.<sup>38</sup> Established as a picture framing and artists' materials shop in 1891, Ashbey's was one of the few commercial galleries in Cape Town at the time and it was typically

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<sup>37</sup> Irma Stern, Letter to Trude Bosse, June 15, 1922, quoted in Schoeman 1994: 74. It is worth noting that she was not alone in this sentiment: some distance up the coast and some years later, the poet Roy Campbell would express a similar disenchantment with the staid conservatism that he was sullenly finding in his South African hometown of Durban after being exposed to modernist movements in England and France in the years 1918 to 1925. Of the city of his birth, he raged in 1927: "Durban, the Mecca of Moronism, the unbroken ignominy and dullness of whose history is only relieved by the inexplicable phenomenon of my birth there" ("A 'Long Range' Attack," quoted in Chapman 1985: 119). While Campbell's haughty words may make Stern's grievances seem clement in comparison, it is worth noting that both of these South African-born but acculturated Europeans eventually went on to predicate their modernist gestures on a common profound disillusionment with what they perceived as the excessive European-ness of their birth country's urban centres.

<sup>38</sup> Ashbey's was an important gallery in the first decades of the twentieth century. It also hosted the first solo exhibitions of other important modernists such as J.H. Pierneef and Tinus de Jongh. Stern herself exhibited there repeatedly throughout her career. It continues to operate today as one of South Africa's leading auction houses.

used by members of the SASA. Solo exhibitions were rare, and one must assume that personal funds allowed Stern to finance her show. The title was evidently designed as an act of provocation: “An exhibition of pictures in the *modern* manner by Miss Irma Stern” (my italics) (Schoeman 1994: 71). It featured ninety-six watercolours, oils, woodcuts, lithographs, and drawings representing primarily South African subject matter and executed in a uniformly Expressionist style. The outcome of this bold gesture is now an element of Stern lore. Newspaper reports indicate that visitors came in droves: for instance, the *Cape Argus* reported on February 11 that, “as a ‘draw’ to the public, no show [had] ever succeeded like the exhibition by Miss Stern. There [was] a constant stream of visitors throughout the day, and once, at least, during the lunch hour, the crowd was so great that waiting queues had to be formed in Long Street.”<sup>39</sup>

In one of several reviews he wrote of the show, the arch-conservative Cape Town art collector and critic D.C. Boonzaier stated that he had heard from the sculptor Moses Kottler that “two policemen [had come] to see if the pictures were not ‘indecent.’”<sup>40</sup> While they passed muster with the authorities, reactions from the public and the press were overwhelmingly negative. Stern was pegged as a representative of the “radical school of painting”<sup>41</sup> and her works promptly dismissed with such inventively biting labels as “agonies in oils,” “lunatic inspirations” and “insults to human intelligence” (Shain and Pimstone 2009). The reviewer for the *Cape Times* stated that although a first visit could cause “undoubted amusement,” on “subsequent inspections this feeling vanishes, to be replaced by frank disgust at the general nastiness of the work.” He concluded with the definitive statement that although “one may be conversant and even sympathetic with modern art methods, no serious attempt need be paid to this attempt to startle the sensibilities of Cape Town art lovers.”<sup>42</sup> The most charitable of the reviewers was perhaps the critic H.E. du Plessis of *The Cape Argus*, who opined, with a modicum of sympathy, that he “[could] not help regarding Miss Stern’s exhibition as a notable act of self-sacrifice.”<sup>43</sup> Stern in the end sold a single work, a small pencil drawing, for ten shillings and sixpence (Arnold 1995: 23 fn 23).

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<sup>39</sup> *The Cape Argus*, February 11, 1922.

<sup>40</sup> Boonzaier Papers, February 12, 1922, quoted in Schoeman 1994: 72.

<sup>41</sup> “Modern Art: Old Wine in New Bottles, How to Regard It,” *The Cape Times*, February 6, 1922.

<sup>42</sup> W.R.M., “An Exhibition of Modern Art,” 1922.

<sup>43</sup> “Modern Art at Ashbey’s: Miss Stern’s Exhibition,” February 8, 1922.



An entry from her illustrated journal *Paradise* (**Figure 9**) suggests that the artist viewed herself as a martyr as well. Over a spread of two pages, she painted herself turning her back to a crowd of indistinct faces watching her work at a painting of two figures at her easel. Whereas the crowd stands on a white page, she is surrounded by mud brown, and red dots drip down from her palette. The caption graphically reads: “And [I] painted pictures with my heart’s blood, and gave them to the people and stood alone and all laughed and slung mud at me” (c. 1922: 39-40). As Griselda Pollock notes in her discussion of Stern’s journal, images such as this one are potent examples of the artist’s use of the expressionistic tropes of “isolated and wounded subjectivity, longing for impossible community, alienat[ion] from the metropolitan world” (2006: 70). On a deeper level still, Pollock diagnoses these expressions of disappointment as the symptoms of a “haemorrhaging of [Stern’s] identity” (2006: 67), a “hypostasis of uncanniness and anxiety” that can be understood as the product of a “caesura between emplacement and location”: namely, between Stern’s emplacement in Cape Town and the “African” location that she had imagined as the terrain of her natal memories (2006: 53).

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 9.** Irma Stern, *Paradise*, pages 39 and 40, c. 1922, watercolour and ink, 24 cm x 16.5 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

As suggested earlier, the two photographs that show a grim Stern in her studio were likely taken in the weeks or months after her exhibit at Ashbey’s. Like the artist’s journal entries

from this period, I believe these photographs can be viewed as the symptoms of her experience of dislocation. Indeed, both her defensive stance and the vulnerability in her eyes are consistent with her self-representation as a modernist martyr in *Paradise*. These photographs are also the crucial indices of her desire to sculpt at this time. Stern's ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis the head in the two photographs can be read as the evidence that her desire to sculpt was bound up in her need to negotiate her sentiment of disconnect from the Africans whom she had projected as her ideal subjects.



## **Chapter 2**

*Modelling (March-August 1922)*

This chapter shifts the focus from Stern herself to the clay sculptures she crafted in her Cape Town studio between March and August 1922. The portraits of the artist in her studio are in fact two of a total of six archival photographs that document her sculptural production of this period. The other four are individual shots of three works: the African female head that appears in the studio portraits (**Cat. 1a** and **b**); another head, likely of an African male (**Cat. 2**); and a sculpture of an African mother and child (**Cat. 3**). Each of the photographs shows the sculpture from a close angle and against a white background, as though they were taken for a portfolio. However, given that the four photographs are also located in the same folder of “Personal Photographs” from the 1920s as the two portraits, it is plausible that they were never seen by anyone but the artist and perhaps her family and friends. Like the portraits of Stern in her studio, these photographs appear to have been taken as private mementos of her sculptural production.

The photographs are in fact the sole traces that remain of the two heads. While the *African Mother and Child* fortuitously re-emerged on the market in 2008 – only to withdraw again into the hands of a private collector in 2012<sup>1</sup> – the two heads have never resurfaced. They are nowhere to be seen at the Irma Stern Museum today, and there are no records indicating that she exhibited them in any of her exhibitions of the mid- or late 1920s. Their fate is thus a matter of conjecture: perhaps Stern sold them early on, perhaps she gave them away, or perhaps she simply discarded them. These conjectures notwithstanding, we may venture some hypotheses as to why she sculpted the works in the first place. As they appear in the photographs, the sculptures reveal a clear thematic and stylistic consistency with Stern’s production of the early 1920s. The heads, for instance, recall works such as her 1920 lithograph of a woman’s head from the series *Dumela Marena* (**Figure 10**), much as her sculpture of the mother with child can be associated with the numerous drawings and paintings that she created in those years (**Figure 11**). These consistencies suggest that the artist’s basic purpose in sculpting was to give form and volume to the subjects that she had already begun to explore as a painter: Africans whom she had imagined as embodiments of a supposedly primitive human nature over her years in Germany, and whom she had thus found absent in Cape Town.

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<sup>1</sup> The sculpture was withdrawn from auction twice before it was finally sold, in Bonhams’ *Sale of South African Art* (October 16, 2012) at a price of £ 5000. The records of these sales also contain a more recent photograph of the work, which can be seen in Cat. 3b. I am grateful to Ms. Lucy Gregory at Bonhams’ London for information concerning the sculpture’s history at the auction house.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 1a and b.** Irma Stern, *African Female Head*, 1922, terracotta, dimensions and location unknown.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 2.** Irma Stern, *African Male Head*, 1922, terracotta, dimensions and location unknown.

**Cat. 3a.** Irma Stern, *African Mother and Child*, 1922, terracotta, 30 cm (h), private collection.

She did not give form to these subjects in a uniform manner, however: the heads have an angularity that is altogether absent in the smoothly modelled forms of the *Mother and Child*, and the surfaces of the latter work reflect a tenderness of approach that is absent from the heads. Indeed, the formal differences between the clay sculptures suggest that Stern was seeking to draw on the various artistic possibilities offered by the medium of modelling to articulate specific relationships with her absent subject matter. Accordingly, my goal in this chapter is to show how the different modelling techniques she used in the two sculptures may be seen as her attempt to find new ways of palliating her crisis of artistic subjectivity.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 10.** Irma Stern, *African Woman*, from series: *Dumela Marena: Bilder aus Afrika*, 1920, coloured lithograph, 40 x 29.5 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Figure 11.** Irma Stern, *African Mother and Child*, from series: *Dumela Marena: Bilder aus Afrika*, 1920, coloured lithograph, 40 x 29.5 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

## 2.1. The clay heads and *African Mother and Child*

Stern's two clay heads of 1922 can be described as Expressionistically styled head studies of African types. Judging by the size of the *African Female Head* in relation to Stern herself in the two studio photographs of the artist, it appears to be slightly smaller than life-size. While we lack such scalable evidence for the male head, with the female head it forms a complementary gendered pair. Only marginal details differentiate the figures and register their genders, however: in addition to the difference in hairstyle, the features of the head from **Cat. 1** and **Plates 1** and **2** are modelled with a softness that is absent in the more angular rendering of the head from **Cat. 2**, which I believe suggests that the former work represents a female and the latter a male. Yet it is there that their individuality ends, subsumed by their more fundamental racialized identity, by the gesture of the artist, and by the vagaries of her personal style.

Indeed, the busts as they appear in the photographs of the National Library of South Africa are stylized to the point that they resemble one another in most respects. Both figures have highly drawn cheekbones, sharply pointed chins, raised half-moon brows, and prominently enlarged eyes, lips, and noses. Together, these features combine to confer a generic "African" identity to the figures' physiognomies that is in line with the stereotyped representations of Africans propounded in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific treatises and illustrated in visual culture. This effect is compounded by the forensic-style format of the photographs themselves: the shots of the female head in particular show the work from perfectly frontal and side angles, in a manner reminiscent of pseudo-scientific nineteenth-century photographs. The significance of this staging will be discussed at greater length in section 2.3.1 of this chapter.

If Stern's clay heads are striking in their angularity, Stern's *African Mother and Child* is distinctive for the softness and rotundity of its forms. Its theme is also far more symbolic in nature. Standing at thirty centimetres, the work is a diminutive Africanized variation on the conventional theme of the nursing Madonna, or *Maria lactans*. The mother figure is shown from the hips up, with upper arms closely hugging her sides and forearms turned inward to cradle the body of her child as it rests on her left side. Tucked into the crease between the woman's arm and her torso, the small figure clings to its mother, limbs curling around her trunk and head nestling deeply into her breast, thereby locking their bodies in close embrace. The mother's



shoulders lift ever so slightly, as though to offset the weight of the child and to raise it even closer to her chest in a gesture subtle but suggestive, compounding the unity of the two figures. Head tilting diagonally downward, the mother gazes at her nursing child. The sculptures' surfaces are smooth, evoking the figures' nudity, while the dark brown colour of the terracotta material indexes the tone of their skin. Stern's treatment of the clay effaces all physiological details that could sexualize the maternal figure.

Stern's modelling fuses the two figures, signalling a desire on her part to signify the ideal harmony that binds the mother with her child. While the sculpture is configured so that the mother's body envelops that of her child, the smoothness of the sculpture's forms makes it seem as though both bodies are encased by one, all-enveloping sculptural skin. The figures' physiognomies likewise display a notable emphasis on rounded forms, which contrasts with the angular volumetric modulations of the clay heads: the mother's cheeks and lips are prominently swollen to create perfectly convex forms, unbroken by any recessions, surface inflections or details. These in turn echo the rotundness of the figure's breasts as well as the spherical form of her head, which is also highlighted by her conveniently cropped hairstyle. The only formal element that disrupts the sculpture's perfect integrity of form and the smooth finish of its surfaces is to be found in its lower truncation. I will return to this element in section 2.4.1 of my analysis.

Stern's compositional arrangement directly echoes the age-old iconography of the maternal archetype, evoking innumerable Madonnas from the Western canon. The artist's treatment of material and form amplify the symbolic value of the theme: the notable smoothness of the surfaces, the softness and rotundity of the volumes, and the compact density of the total sculptural form all serve to strengthen the formal unity between the represented mother and her child and thereby to augment the sense of loving and nurturing intimacy that is the symbolic essence of the type.

## 2.2. Stern's search for a style to suit her

As noted previously, all three of the artist's clay sculptures show significant stylistic and thematic affinities with her pictorial works of the 1920s. For instance, her stylized treatment of the clay on the two heads is continuous with her pictorial representations of African figures, such as the female figure that adorns the frontispiece to her 1919 *Dumela Marena* lithograph series (**Figure 10**). The angular use of line to render form, the reductive treatment of physiognomy, and the blunt modulations of depth and volume that characterize the style of the lithograph are all translated into the sculptures. In a further sense still, the roughness and coarseness that are the hallmarks of the artist's treatment of the pictorial surface find stylistic equivalents on the surfaces of her three-dimensional works, namely in the marked traces of her tool across the cheeks of the *Male Head*.

It is clear that Stern went to significant lengths to use the particular opportunities offered by the clay medium to go beyond the two dimensions of the lithograph plate. The lighting of the photographs usefully dramatizes the contrasts between positive and negative form that mark the surfaces of the represented faces: most prominently, in the deep crevices that sink between the figures' highly arched brows and the sharply protruding ridges of their eyelids, in the sleek, curvaceous swelling of the male figure's nose, and in the shapely angularity of his lips. The cavities that mark the tip of the female figure's nose clearly index the pressure of the artist's fingertips, just as the emphasis placed on physiognomic details such as the cleft between the figures' noses and lips tangibly indicates the pains she took to lend rhythm, variety, and contrast to her volumetric surfaces. In short, it appears that Stern took full advantage of the characteristic malleability of her medium to engage a highly stylized approach to the human figure that would be in line with the distortionary Expressionistic style she had learned and was developing.

Similarly, Stern's clay *African Mother and Child* is the sculptural interpretation of a theme that she had been exploring extensively in her Expressionist production. For instance, her *Dumela Marena* also contains a plate representing a nude African mother nursing a child, with head and eyes cast downward and arms enveloping her baby (**Figure 11**). However, the rounded forms of the sculpture are at odds with the angular style of the lithograph. Whereas Stern relied on a near-erasure of line and a blending of colours to collapse the silhouette of the child's body onto that of its mother in the lithograph, in the sculpture Stern achieves an effect of

compositional unity through smooth volumetric transitions between curving forms. In this sense, Stern appears to have used the medium of modelling to achieve aims that were more sentimental than purely stylistic. Nevertheless, insofar as they were to consolidate the authenticity of her connection to her subjects, these aims were also integral to her personal development as an Expressionist artist.

Stern would not however have learned the art of modelling from her German colleagues. As several art historians have shown, the few Expressionists who seriously engaged in sculpture exhibited a marked preference for carving (*bildhauerischen*) media, namely wood, over plastic media such as clay (Barron 1984; Wagner 2011: 71). While some lone figures such as the Berlin-based architect Paul Rudolph Henning defended the latter medium for the “freedom” it offered to the artist (1917, quoted in Barron 1984: 41), most modernists denigrated it for its associations with new industrial ductile materials. It was also found to be reminiscent of the art of Rodin, which was seen as epitomizing the bourgeois vices of excessive fancifulness and creative fraud (Curtis 1999: 77). These values stood in opposition to the Expressionist ideal of authenticity, which was presumed to be achievable through the hard toil involved in carving an object from a trunk. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who was perhaps the Expressionist painter who experimented most extensively with the medium of woodcarving,<sup>2</sup> eloquently expressed the position espoused by many of these artists: “Rough wood educates the artist through spiritual and earnest work, while the pliant clay ensnares him to playful activity” (quoted in Wagner 2011: 79).<sup>3</sup> This is the type of lesson that Stern would have absorbed from Pechstein, who is known to have created roughly twenty works in wood but none in clay.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kirchner’s sculptural oeuvre encompasses roughly one hundred works. The majority are in wood and can be dated to the years 1912-1920. However, he began creating sculptures as early as 1904, and was in fact given to “playful activity” in clay: he namely produced a set of twenty-four tiles as decoration for a stove in Berlin. The size of his production and his extensive theoretical writings on the medium have led art historians such as Wolfgang Henze to argue that Kirchner’s plastic work goes beyond that of a painter-sculptor: more than a simple side project, it is on Henze’s view “an integral part of his whole oeuvre because of its theoretical and practical relationships with other techniques, [and] qualitatively it is also important” (1984: 114).

<sup>3</sup> “Das spröde Holz erzieht den Bildner zur geistigen ernsten Arbeit, während der schmiegsame Ton Ihn leicht zur spielerischen Tätigkeit verführt.”

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of the subject of Expressionist woodcarving, see Monica Wagner’s 2011 article “Wood – ‘primitive’ material for the creation of ‘German’ sculpture” in Christian Weikop (ed.), *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism*. Expressionist wood sculpture will be discussed at greater length in chapter 6 of this thesis, as part of my study of Stern’s stone carvings.

Idiosyncratic as it is, Stern's turn to modelling can still be compared to those of other artists such as Matisse and Picasso who were primarily painters, but who took up the three-dimensional art as a means of engaging with the volume, weight, and density of the human figure in a way they could not with paint. In his 1966 *Sculpture and Enlivened Space*, historian of sculpture F. David Martin confirms that the vast majority of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century artists who turned to sculpture made their transition via the soft materials of plaster and clay. According to him, this is because many artists found that their images "kept forcing themselves out of their canvases," and soft materials provided them with the means to transcribe them volumetrically in a style similar to that which they had developed pictorially (1966: 227). In her discussion of Matisse's sculpture, Ellen McBreen notes that the artist developed the fundamentals of his primitivism in 1906 and 1909 primarily while working in clay (2007: 8). In his own words, Matisse took up sculpture because "what interested [him] in painting was a clarification of [his] ideas." He continued, "[sculpture] was done for the purpose of organization, to put order into my feelings, and to find a style to suit me" (Flam 1995: 298 fn 11).

Accordingly, I believe modelling served similar purposes of clarification and organization for the young Stern: namely, it allowed her to clarify the idiosyncratic style that she had developed to represent her memorialized African subjects. Indeed, it is clear that none of the three sculptures was sculpted from live models: more mannered than naturalistic, they reveal more about the representational style that Stern was fashioning for herself at the time than they give insight into the appearance or the psyche of any specific African individuals. The formal similarities and the gendered complementarity that link the two heads suggest that Stern likely crafted them as a means of extending the purview of her representations of Africans as far as possible: of defining her style for representing both genders, in both two and three dimensions. Likewise, the extraordinary formal unity that characterizes the *Mother and Child* shows that Stern was intent on exploring the possibilities offered by the malleable three-dimensional medium for amplifying the symbolic efficacy of the theme. In a more general sense, Stern's shift to modelling can be interpreted as the index of an effort on her part to push herself into new representational territory in her portrayals of African subjects, and thereby to safeguard the authenticity of her artistic project.

In the next sections we will move to a closer study of the three works: first, the two heads and, subsequently, *African Mother and Child*. I believe Stern's handling of the medium in each of the respective sets of works reveals a different approach to the problem of giving form to absence that is at the crux of her shift to modelling in 1922.

### 2.3. Modelling absent subjects: the clay heads

The art of modelling has an intimate historic relationship with the representation of specifically non-Western "Others." Indeed, Stern's use of modelling for her physiognomic head studies is consistent with the nineteenth-century practice of ethnographic sculpture. Straddling the domains of art and science, ethnographic sculpture was practised by trained sculptors-cum-explorers with the specific purpose of lending visual form to the European ontologies of non-Western physiognomies that were being developed and propounded by their colleagues in the disciplines of phrenology, anthropology, and natural science (Kinkel 2011: 6). As Marianne Kinkel has explained, the purpose of the sculptures was to complement these textual documents by "facilitat[ing] the morphological assessment of the human body and the physiognomic decipherment of facial features" (2011: 6). In other words, ethnographic sculptures were to serve as stand-ins for the actual people whose features were to be examined. As I hope to show, Stern's modelled heads may likewise be seen to index her own attempt to "decipher" and to clarify for herself the physiognomies of her remembered African subjects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The practice of ethnographic sculpture emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century out of the fusion of three interrelated developments: the expansion of the European colonial enterprise, the rise of the discipline of anthropology, and the development of the museum as an institution bringing together both didactic functions and popular entertainment. As Todd Porterfield explains in *The Allure of Empire*, the term *ethnographie* was coined in 1831 and was defined as the study of the distinction of human races by understanding idioms, physiognomies and social status (1998: 138). When a commission was established in 1831 to debate on the opening of an ethnographic museum in Paris, it was established that the purpose of the discipline would be: "to know in an exact and positive (scientific) manner the degree of civilization of the peoples barely advanced on the social ladder" (quoted in Porterfield 1998: 138). When the Musée ethnographique du Trocadéro was opened in 1878, the Baron de Watteville (Ministre de l'Instruction publique) explained that ethnographic sculptures were to aid in the task of establishing "des comparaisons illimitées entre les civilisations primitives des populations existantes ou éteintes du monde entier" (Hamy 1890: 289).

### 2.3.1. *The heads as ethnographic types*

The most salient feature of Stern's head studies that associates them with the genre of ethnographic sculpture is their typed aspect. As art historian Charmaine Nelson explains in her discussion of the practice, the artist's task in each case was to "portray racial 'types' through the amalgamation of individuals into composites" (2005: 53). Indeed, ethnographic sculpture can be said to have been complicit in what Edward Said calls the typically Western "impulse to classify nature and man into types," which he describes as a widespread "penchant for dramatizing general features, for reducing vast numbers of objects to a smaller number of orderable and describable types" and which he locates at the epistemological foundation of many European academic disciplines, racial science foremost among them (1978: 118). In the case of African types, ethnographic sculptors would have been expected to lend form to a figure with traits roughly corresponding to those described by Johann Kaspar Lavater in his *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe* (1775-1778), a foundational study of physiognomy: "[the African is distinctive by] the inclined aspect of his profile, the distance between his eyes, the thickness of his nose and in particular his large swollen lips, prominent and firm" (quoted in Honour 1989: 17). This type was visualized in pictorial documents such as Ernst Haeckel's *Family of Man* (**Figure 12**). The deep complicity between the disciplines of physiognomy, racial science, and visual illustration is clearly illustrated in the latter image, where the figure of the "negro" appears in the second line from the top, representing an intermediate stage between the Caucasian above and the apes below.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 12.** Artist unknown, *Inventing the Family of Man*, from E. Haeckel, *Die Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, 1902, The British Library, London.

The photographs of Stern's works potently underscore the typed aspect of her representations. Indeed, as noted previously, the frontal and side views of the two photographs of the *Female Head* eerily echo the formats used for the massive production of ethnographic photographs that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, the two photographs of the female head are consistent in style with an 1870 photograph of a "Hottentot" from the files of British anthropologist Thomas Henry Huxley (**Figure 13**). As historian of photography Anne Maxwell explains, Huxley and his colleague John Lamprey were the first to use photography to support the Darwinian theory of human development (2010: 34). To this end, they appropriated the guidelines of anthropometry, a system of measurement previously developed by the seventeenth-century German physician Johann Sigismund Elsholtz, to develop a method of representing and distinguishing the human races that would make it possible to determine their evolutionary status relative to one another (Maxwell 2010: 29). In Lamprey's model, the subjects were to pose before a grid, whereas in Huxley's, it was a ruler. By the turn of the century, the Royal Anthropological Institute's *Notes and Queries* contained the following specifications about the methods to be followed to capture types:

With regards to portraits, a certain number of types should always be taken as large as possible, full face and square side view; the lens should be on a level with the face, and the eyes of the subject looking straight from the head should be fixed on a point at their own height from the ground. [...] It is desirable [sic] to have a soft, fine-grained, neutral tinted screen to be used as a background. This screen should be sufficiently light in colour to contrast well with the yellow and brown skins. (quoted in Green 1984: 31)

One can imagine Stern or her photographer following precisely the same instructions to take the photographs of her two clay heads. Accordingly, I believe Stern's photographs of her sculptures are significant to our understanding of the sculptures themselves. They testify to the way in which the artist's visual conception of Africans was inflected with the visual culture of racial science, and thus lend credence to the hypothesis that she was herself intent on representing racial types.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 13.** Photographer unknown, *Hottentot*, early 1870s, photograph, dimensions unknown, College Archives, Imperial College, London.

### 2.3.2. *A pseudo-scientific medium*

Modelling provided an ideal medium for the representation of human types. As Marianne Kinkel has shown, its malleability offered the possibilities both of imitating nature and re-imagining it (2011: 6), and was thus ideally suited to the process of assemblage that was at the root of the ethnographic sculptor's trade. Charles Cordier explained his process to the Société d'Anthropologie in 1862 in the following terms:

Je prends [mes modèles] autant que possible dans leur propre pays, et je procède comme tout artiste le ferait pour représenter sa propre race. J'examine d'abord et compare entre eux un grand nombre d'individus, j'étudie la tête, les traits de leur visage, l'expression de leur physionomie ; je m'attache à saisir les caractères communs à la race que je désire représenter, je les apprécie dans leur ensemble comme dans leurs détails, j'embrasse, pour chacun d'eux, l'étendue des variations individuelles, j'arrive à concevoir l'idéal ou plutôt le type de chacun de ces caractères, puis groupant tous ces types partiels, je constitue dans mon esprit un type d'ensemble où se trouvent réunies toutes les beautés spéciales à la race que j'étudie. (1862: 65)



Cordier's statement reveals the importance that was given to the sculptor's actual contact with the individuals who were to inspire the creation of the type. As Kinkel explains, the leaders of the genre took their inspiration directly from the discipline of ethnography in advocating the use of fieldwork for their trade (2011: 27). Cordier himself undertook missions to Algeria in 1856 and Egypt in 1866 and 1868, thanks to funding provided by the Second Empire government.

Cordier's 1861 *La câpresse des colonies* (also known as the *Vénus africaine*) (**Figure 14**) is arguably the most celebrated of the busts he produced on these trips.<sup>6</sup> Representing an elegant dark-skinned woman, the sculpture clearly evidences Cordier's endeavour to create a "face with harmony and balance" that could represent what he called "the essential moral and intellectual character of the Ethiopian race" (quoted in Nelson 2005: 55). One of the work's most salient formal features is undeniably the use of polychrome bronze as a means of evoking the dark colour of the invented subject's skin.<sup>7</sup> However, it is essential here to bear in mind that the finished work was crafted from a clay model.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, *La câpresse des colonies* shows how modelling allowed Cordier and other like-minded sculptors to create their own subjectively informed renderings of artificially identified types from the wide variety of real faces examined. Those representations could be stylized with such realism that they could be perceived by European museum-going publics as veridical portrayals of those faraway faces. Modelling thus provided a dual guarantee of authenticity: on the one hand, that of the artist's being-there

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the British artist Herbert Ward, who was likely the most famous representative of the generation of ethnographic sculptors that followed Cordier, based his entire production of life-size figure studies of Congolese "types" on drawings he completed during his five-year stay in Central Africa as part of Sir Henry Morton Stanley's expedition (1893-1898). His work will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> For a more focused discussion of Cordier's use of polychromy in his *Vénus Africaine*, see Charmaine Nelson's 2005 essay "*Vénus Africaine*: Race, Beauty and African-ness," in Jan Marsh (ed.), *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900*. Nelson's 2007 book *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject* is also worth mentioning here as a highly interesting study on the use of colour in nineteenth-century American neoclassical sculpture. Nelson highlights the ways in which the latter art form was involved in the illustration of prevalent racial discourses and in the visual construction of the black female subject.

<sup>8</sup> The account quoted above is in fact framed by a broader argument in which the artist fervently defends his practice of modelling as opposed to that of casting subjects from life, thereby positioning himself squarely on one side of what was a serious debate in late nineteenth-century discussions of sculpture's relationship to the human body (Kinkel 2011: 7). Involving the "mechanical" production of plaster casts from real human bodies, the practice of casting was believed to offer "claims of veracity" and "scientific objectivity" that made it possible to conceive of the represented figures as "authentic substitutes" (Kinkel 2011: 7). However, these very claims to scientific value were undercut, in the eyes of many ethnographic sculptors, by the medium's failing on artistic grounds. In the eyes of artists such as Cordier, to cast a subject from nature was tantamount to killing it, and in effect to "eliminating its physiognomy altogether" (Kinkel 2011: 8).

(indexed in the sculptures' realism), and on the other, that of his or her imaginative capacities (indexed in the sculptures' generic and evocative quality).

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 14.** Charles-Henri-Joseph-Cordier, *La câpresse des colonies*, 1861, Algerian onyx-marble, bronze, gilt bronze, and enamel, 95.9 x 59.1 x 31.1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Like Cordier, Stern manifestly took great creative liberties in designing the features of her African figures, surely drawing on common European stereotypes of African physiognomy while manipulating them to satisfy her personal aesthetic criteria. What is crucial, however, is the extent to which Stern's aesthetic criteria differed from Cordier's. While the latter was motivated by pretensions of creating realistic works that could serve as valid scientific documents, the same cannot be said for Stern: in line with the interpretation I am offering here, Stern's most important goal was to create documents of her highly personalized Expressionist approach to African subject matter, and to bridge the gap that separated her from the African subjects she had imagined during her German years. Indeed, if, as Anne Roquebert notes in her discussion of the practice of ethnographic sculpture, "l'ethnographie semble avoir eu besoin du modelage pour donner forme à son objet, absent par définition" (1994: 8), then I believe Stern's 1922 modelling efforts can similarly be understood as the indices of her own need to give form to the subjects who were to provide the cornerstone of her identity, who were vividly absent from her studio, and only present in her nostalgic memory.

#### **2.4. Modelling an ideal mother: *African Mother and Child***

Stern's *African Mother and Child* instantiates a different relationship between form and absence. If Stern's two clay heads indicate a need to bridge the distance that separated her from her African subjects, then her third clay sculpture indicates a need to erase it completely. It is difficult not to see in the softness of the sculpture's surfaces and in the delicacy of its forms the signs of the artist's own tender affection and desire for an intimacy of connection with her subject. Whereas the heads reveal the marks of her tool, the smoothly modelled, curvaceous shapes of the sculpture appear to index the touch of the artist's hand, evoking a caress akin to that which is represented in the composition itself. Much as the sculpture is the depiction of unity between two subjects, it may well have symbolized Stern's own yearning for a deep connection with an African motherland. The inherently tactile nature of the clay may have provided an ideal means for her to create that connection symbolically. In other words, it arguably allowed her to establish what J.M. Coetzee calls a "dialogue with Africa, a reciprocity with Africa that could allow an identity better than visitor, stranger, transient" (1988: 11). Indeed, if, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, the process of touching can give rise to "une organisation ambiguë où les deux participants peuvent alterner dans la fonction de 'touchant' et 'touché'" (2002: 106), then I believe we can read in this work what is arguably the most integrated and cohesive expression of the artist's effort to find and anchor her roots in African soil.

##### **2.3.1. *Maternity, land, creativity: the iconography of the African Madonna***

Stern's sculpture of an African mother and child is an embodiment of two maternal archetypes. In the tenderness of her gesture, the figure evokes the Madonna, or archetypal "good mother" of the Western canon. Simultaneously, the mother's African identity associates her with the archetypal "primal mother," or "earth mother." Whereas the Madonna archetype embodies a chaste and loving fertility, the "primal mother" is inherently ambivalent: she represents the power of natural creation and also destruction. The conceptual link between these two figures lies in notions of fertility, which in turn ties them to the idea of the soil and of belonging. Accordingly, whereas the "good mother" is associated with the ideal of the motherland, or *mère*

*patrie*, the “primal mother” represents at once humans’ most primordial connections with the earth and also nature’s power to overcome them (Knight 2011: 78).

Stern’s two-dimensional renderings of African motherhood all carry these themes in varying degrees. For example, her *African Mother and Child* from *Dumela Marena* clearly mobilizes the Western conception of the dark-skinned mother as the most “earthy” femininity of all (**Figure 10**). Representing an African figure nursing a child against a bright background of sunny sky and rich green vegetation, it is infused with the same symbolic associations as Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings, unquestionably the most famous modernist representations of primitive motherhood. For instance, his *Maternité II* (**Figure 15**) shows three brown-skinned, dark-haired Tahitian belles against an abstracted backdrop composed of rounded planes of warm colours, evoking an otherworldly natural setting. The maternal figure is shown kneeling in the bottom right-hand corner, much like Stern’s. In both paintings, the maternal figure is juxtaposed with other fertility icons, from foliage and flowers to ripe fruit. Moreover, in both images, the figure’s kneeling position underscores her rootedness in the soil: in Gauguin’s work in particular, the mother’s legs are rendered in a notably cruder and bulkier fashion than is her torso, the unmodulated plane of darker brown evoking the figure’s weight. While Stern’s *Mother and Child* is not shown kneeling, the truncation at the level of her waistline arguably conveys the same effect of rootedness, as the uneven surface of the sculpture evokes the texture of bare earth.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 15.** Paul Gauguin, *Maternité II*, 1899, oil on burlap, 95 x 61 cm, private collection.

Stern's second two-dimensional representation of an African mother and child adds a new valence to the symbol of the African mother: that of creativity. Painted with aqueous gouache in her journal *Paradise*, the plate juxtaposes the loosely drawn silhouette of a female figure nursing a child with a semi-abstract green vegetal shape (**Figure 16**). The caption is telling: "And images grew and hope flourished and joy." The plate that faces it, a representation of a sailboat at sea, reads: "And all the terror came from the burning land of sorrow." Both of these plates were likely painted shortly after Stern's arrival in South Africa, in 1920 or 1921, and they convey Stern's conception of Africa as a wellspring of creative energy vis-à-vis postwar Berlin. The brown maternal figure can indeed be seen as a symbol of the creative force that makes Stern's images "grow" and her hope "flourish." Stern's inspiration for this image could have been drawn directly from Pechstein, who used the motif abundantly in his work. He used it, for instance, in a 1917 letter to his young protégée (**Figure 17**) as a means of illustrating the following advice: "Especially experience a lot of sunrises and sunsets, the power of the green of a tree, the size and unity of a person working with the earth" (Pechstein, July 1917, quoted in Walker 2009: 61).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 16.** Irma Stern, *Paradise*, pages 35 and 36, c. 1920, watercolour and ink, 16.5 x 24 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Figure 17.** Max Pechstein, *Letter to Irma Stern*, 1917, 28 x 21.6 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

Stern's third two-dimensional representation of an African mother is markedly different from the first two (**Figure 18**). It appears in the centre of a striking photograph from Stern's album of Personal Photographs of the 1920s, which represents what was likely the young Stern's bedroom at 34 Breda Street in Oranjezicht. The painting depicts a dark-skinned haloed Madonna

and child enthroned in an exotic natural setting composed of tall lily-like plants in full bloom and plants with large star-shaped forms. The Madonna's long veil extends outward to wrap around two short, dark-skinned figures standing at her sides in full frontal perspective, creating a pyramidal form in the centre of the painting that culminates in the two aureoles, one dark, one light, that surround the Madonna's head. Rendered in a distinctively angular style, the two diminutive dark figures resemble African statues: they are either the Madonna's human subjects or her guardian idols. The dramatic spiritual charge of the painting is echoed by the composition of the photograph itself: the space around the painting is arranged to extend the symmetry within it, as the shelves on either side of Stern's bed are topped with candles – a menorah, and a single candlestick – and statuettes of Christian religious figures, while a laughing Buddha sits on her bedside table. This hybrid and yet perfectly ordered arrangement of objects powerfully evokes the young artist's attempt to infuse her living space with spiritual energy. It also speaks to the young artist's desire to immerse herself in her African identity at this point in her life. Perfectly aligned with the bedframe itself, the composition looms over the bed and dominates the space seen within the photograph: one might imagine that it was placed there to consecrate the sleeping artist herself.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 18.** Bedroom in the Stern family home, 1920s, photograph, 11 x 16.5 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

More so than the two other images, this one is clearly a representation of the “primal” or Earth Mother figure. It therefore attests to the potency of this mythology in the artist’s conception of her African roots. However, the formal unity of Stern’s sculpture indexes a will on Stern’s part to do away with, or at least to sublimate, the psychic threat that is embodied in this figure and whose so-called dangers she would have learned to fear through her youth in a deeply racist environment. Accordingly, I believe Stern’s sculpture of an African mother and child shows a need on her part to travel back to an idealized moment of union with her African origins, and more generally speaking, to an idealized moment of self-cohesion that her Expressionist training had taught her to view in mythical terms.

#### ***2.4.2. A childish medium***

Clay modelling has inherent associations with ideas of primordial creation, primitivity, and Africa. The inherently tactile nature of the clay would have offered the artist a mode of relating to her subject matter that is commonly believed to be “less mediated” or “deeper” than that afforded by visual media such as paint. The core of this idea reaches back at least as far as ancient Greece and the writings of Aristotle who, in his analysis of the nature of each sense, identified “touch” with the “paramount sense organ,” or *sensus communis* (Bacci 2011: 135). Thomas Aquinas reiterated this conception of touch as a sense with a superordinate function or status over the others when he referred to it as “the first and in a way the root and foundation of all senses” (Aquinas, quoted in Bacci 2011: 135). Theoretical accounts of the medium of modelling later exploited these conceptions to argue for its particular virtues over and above other visual media. For instance, in response to a questionnaire on the *paragone*, the sixteenth-century sculptor Niccolò Tribolo stated that “sculpture is the art of using one’s hands to show what is true,” in support of his claim that “sculpture is the real thing while painting is a lie” (quoted in Smith and Wilde 2002: 69).

The constructions that position touch as the most foundational, and essential, of all the sense media intersect with those that portray it as the most primitive and childish. Many nineteenth-century accounts of sculpture exploited this association to devalue the medium as well as non-Western peoples. For instance, in his own classic entry to the *paragone* debate,

Baudelaire famously raised the art of painting above that which he dismissively labelled as an “art des Caraïbes” by claiming that there was in the former “un mystère singulier qui ne se touche pas avec les doigts” (1846).<sup>9</sup> However, as modern artists began to take interest in non-Western art forms as well as in the art of children, so did modelling come to take on positive connotations. Indeed, these artists precisely saw in the art of primitive peoples a form of “deep insight” into an “elemental,” or “spiritual reality,” which came through the channel of their physical engagement with their (primitivized and spiritualized) lands. This conception is evident in Emil Nolde’s reverent reflections on “the products of primitive peoples”:

The products of primitive peoples are created with actual material in their hands, between their fingers. Their motivation is their pleasure and love of creating. The primal vitality, the intensive, often grotesque expression of energy and life in most elemental form – that, perhaps, is what makes these native works so enjoyable. (Nolde 1994: 42)<sup>10</sup>

These associations of modelling with primitivity are directly in line with those that associate clay specifically with the African continent, which has long figured in Western imaginaries as the “cradle of humankind” (Martin-Granel 2001: 207). Moreover, as Moira Vincentelli usefully points out, the figure of the African potter is a recurrent one in nineteenth-century travelogues and illustrated accounts of European expeditions. In these depictions, the potter typically appears as an embodiment of the quintessential primitive: a figure bound to the land, connected to the ancient, mystical life allegedly inherent to it, and utterly incapable of transcending this mode of existence to attain a civilized identity (2003: 43). An aquatint plate from Samuel Daniell’s 1804

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<sup>9</sup> *Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse* is a chapter from Baudelaire’s review of the Salon of 1846. The essay is framed within his broader defense of Romantic painting, which he saw to be most promisingly embodied in the work of Delacroix. Baudelaire essentially argues that sculpture is at once antithetical, inferior, and subservient to painting, which he esteems as “un art de raisonnement profond et dont la jouissance même demande une initiation particulière.” The distinction that Baudelaire draws between painting and sculpture is anchored in a contrast of the essential material properties of the respective media, but it maps onto an implicit hierarchy of “civilized” versus “primitive” cultures. Sculpture was indeed, for Baudelaire, a fundamentally primitive art, “brutal and positive like nature,” and to be associated with fetish-carvers (non-Western peoples) and peasants. Baudelaire’s views had become more nuanced later on in his life. In his review of the Salon of 1859, he conceded that the art form may also involve the faculties of intellect and imagination. However, while he granted aesthetic significance to antique sculpture and to the art of Michelangelo, he persisted in denying it to modern sculpture.

<sup>10</sup> Nolde was one of the Brücke artists who were most interested in primitive art and culture. He first began to observe and to sketch artifacts at the Berlin Ethnographic Museum in 1911, beginning his uncompleted study *Artistic Expression Among Primitive Peoples* that same year. He travelled to New Guinea in 1915. As Shearer West notes, his fascination with primitivism stemmed “partly from admiration and partly from repulsion: he appreciated the spiritual force of non-Western cultures, but he had a racist disgust of cultural intermixing” (1988: 68). He was later to join the Danish branch of the National Socialist party.



series *African Scenery and Animals* illustrates this point well (**Figure 19**).<sup>11</sup> Titled *Booshuana Woman Manufacturing Earthenware*, the plate is an exoticizing pastoral scene representing a group of two faceless, brown-skinned women and two children engaged in the production of clay pots, large and small, within a barren earthen enclosure set against a quaint green landscape. The accompanying text buttresses the visual construction of primitivity that is enacted in the image: “Although these people have made some progress in civilization, they retain that common feature of a savage state which condemns the weaker sex to perform the severest labour and the greatest drudgery” (quoted in Vincentelli 2004: 43). Accordingly, in sculpting her *African Mother and Child*, Stern could imagine herself to be at once employing a material that was directly indexical of her subject matter and a medium that allowed her the deepest possible connection with it.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 19.** Samuel Daniell, *Booshuana Women Manufacturing Earthenware*, plate 23 from the series *African Scenery and Animals*, 1804, coloured aquatint, 25.4 x 35.6 cm, The Stapleton Collection, London.

As a conclusion to the study of Stern’s *Mother and Child*, it is worthwhile to compare her work with a clay sculpture by another modernist who modelled primitive mothers. Gauguin’s *Oviri* (**Figure 20**) is a representation of a nude female figure clutching the head of a wolf at her hip while straddling what appears to be the lifeless body of another wolf at her feet. She is

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Daniell completed this series in his capacity as the artist recruited to accompany a British expedition to Southern Africa in 1801. The name “Bechuanaland” refers to present-day Botswana.

neither beautiful nor sensual like the figures in his *Maternité II*, however: her arms are sinewy, her hands disproportionately large, and her head rests heavily on her shoulders. Gauguin created the sculpture in France, following his first trip to Polynesia, and soon before his second trip in 1895 (from which he would never return). On a woodcut representation of the figure, he described it as an “étrange [sic] figure cruelle énigme [sic]”; in an 1897 letter to Vollard, he called it “la tueuse”; and on a drawing, which he published in *Le Sourire* in 1899, he called it a “monstre étreignant sa créature” (Landy 1967: 242). Gauguin’s sculpture is, in short, an image of a destructive primal mother.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 20.** Paul Gauguin, *Oviri*, 1894, stoneware, 75 x 19 x 27 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Like Stern’s *African Mother and Child*, Gauguin’s sculpture refers to his relationship with the primitive land in which he sought self-consolidation. Indeed, the title *Oviri* means “the savage,” a word that bore great significance in Gauguin’s thought: he often identified himself as a savage, and delighted when his friends called him one. However, commentators generally agree that Gauguin’s identification is not to the mother, as an embodiment of creative might, but rather to the beheaded wolves in the clutch of her grotesquely powerful hands. As Christopher Gray has argued, the sculpture reflects Gauguin’s “profound disillusionment and

discouragement,” his stifled creativity in France, and his deep-set knowledge that his stay in Tahiti had planted a desire for ultimate return that would never be fulfilled (1963: 66).

Like Stern with her diminutive good African mother in clay and her colossal two-dimensional primal mother in majesty, Gauguin wished to keep the sculpture figure close to him. However, the intimacy he desired was not for the purposes of creative inspiration: in a 1900 letter to Daniel de Monfreid, Gauguin asked that the statue be sent to Tahiti to be placed on his tomb. Gauguin’s approach to the figure of the primal mother is thus directly antithetical to Stern’s. While both sculptures grow out of white modernist artists’ feelings of thwarted subjectivity in the land of the “Other,” Stern’s *African Mother and Child* is in my view precisely a potent expression of hope in the possibility of overcoming the alienation suffered. Indeed, insofar as it registers the artist’s effort to establish an intimacy of connection that she had extensively tried to establish in paint, it should be considered a powerful and articulate document of her desire to cultivate the authentic identification to Africa that she had projected as fundamental to her identity as an Expressionist artist.

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It was shortly after she created these three sculptures that Stern left her Cape Town studio in favour of more earthy African soils. Leaving the “Mother City” in September 1922, she headed eastward up the coast of South Africa, in search, it is generally assumed, of a place that looked more like the “Mother Africa” she had envisioned. This voyage ultimately led her back to the clay medium. It did not, however, procure the outcome she seemed to be seeking.

### **Chapter 3**

***Collapsing (September-October 1922)***

This chapter examines Irma Stern's fourth documented sculptural endeavour of 1922. This endeavour purportedly took place at a potter's hut outside the small settlement of Umgababa, on the South Coast of Natal, in September or October of 1922. The experience is narrated in the sixth chapter of Stern's ten-chapter travelogue, *Das Umgababa Buch*.<sup>1</sup> On Stern's own account, the Umgababa clay "lured [her] into moulding the head of an African man" – only to "collapse," seconds after taking form, back onto the earth.<sup>2</sup> What ensued was an existential awakening to her position as a white woman in Africa. In my view, this charged fragment of text is rife with insight into Stern's self-constitution as a modern artist in Africa.

Stern's trip to the tiny settlement was her first excursion into rural Africa as an adult and as a professional artist. She recorded her impressions of her trip in several vehicles – in paint and in her journal – but her travelogue is unquestionably the most complete and evocative repository. She began the manuscript upon her return to Cape Town in late 1922 and completed it while on a steamer returning to Germany in the early months of 1923.<sup>3</sup> She also completed a series of rough illustrations and stylized initials in black ink to accompany the text: these include a stylized "E," which is set against a drawing of a mother and child (**Figure 21**). As scholars have rightly noted, these illustrations suggest that she intended the manuscript for publication. This step was never completed, however, and the travelogue and the accompanying illustrations remain in manuscript form in Irma Stern's archives at the National Library of South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The passage is reproduced in full in the prologue to this thesis. Scans of the manuscript version of the passage are included as **Appendix D**. Selected passages of the fragment will be reproduced, as relevant, in the portion of this chapter devoted to an analysis of the fragment (Section 3.2).

<sup>2</sup> National Library of South Africa MSC 31:1/15, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), p. 31-32. All translations in this chapter are courtesy of Philippe Bourdin, Tom Güldemann, and Elisabeth Otto.

<sup>3</sup> The manuscript ends with the following note: "Geschrieben 1923 in Kapstadt. Beendet auf der Schiffsreise nach Deutschland auf der Usaramo." ("Written in 1923 in Cape Town and completed on the passage to Germany on the Usaramo"). The *Usaramo* was a German ship that operated passenger and cargo services on the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie, linking Germany and East African, West African and South African ports, between 1920 and 1940. It was named after a location in the central highlands of German East Africa (now Tanzania).

<sup>4</sup> Portions of the travelogue were reprinted in Max Osborn's 1927 monograph on the artist. However, the portions that were selected are those that uphold the construction of Stern's trip as a moment of artistic self-absolution. The fragment on the potter's hut is not included. Osborn's monograph will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 21.** Irma Stern, Stylized Letter “E” for the *Umgababa Buch*, 1922, ink on paper, 8 x 16 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

Displaying Irma Stern’s characteristically histrionic style, replete with idiosyncratic punctuation and effusive descriptions of places and people, the travelogue is a quintessential exemplar of what literary historian Susan Blake describes as the “modern paradigm of the narrative of a journey into Africa as a journey into self” (1991: 191).<sup>5</sup> Its fifty-six pages are connected by a loose narrative thread: the first chapter describes Stern’s arrival in South Africa in 1920 (quoted in Chapter 1); the second, her escape from colonial Cape Town to an equally colonial Durban; and the following eight narrate various excursions and meetings in and around Umgababa, culminating in her description of a Zulu wedding ceremony in Chapter 10.<sup>6</sup> The episode with the potters is one of these meetings.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The most paradigmatic exemplars of this genre are the novels *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1899), *King Solomon’s Mines* by H. Rider Haggard (1885), and *Journey without Maps* by Graham Greene (1935). In a highly polemical and now seminal 1976 article titled “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Nigerian author Chinua Achebe scathingly decried what he called the “preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance” that resides in this literature’s reduction of Africa “to the role of props for the breakup of petty European minds” (1976: 9).

<sup>6</sup> The third and fourth chapters narrate Stern’s conversations with Nancy Gele, a washerwoman at the hotel where Stern and her friend stayed; the fifth tells the history of the station at Umgababa; the seventh narrates her encounter with a Zulu king; the eighth is an enigmatic description of a threatening cloud; and the ninth narrates her meeting with Nancy Gele’s family.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars have typically characterized Stern’s trip to Umgababa as her artistic homecoming. For instance, Schoeman states that: “the time she spent at [Umgababa] was of the greatest importance to her development as an artist” (1994: 79). The passage that describes her encounter at the potter’s hut has been reproduced twice in the extant literature on the artist. First, Helene Smuts reproduces the central passage, which describes the collapse of the

It is impossible to determine the factual basis of Stern's narrative, as the artist liberally uses many tropes of modernist travel writing. The most prominent is what literary scholar David Spurr calls the "insubstantialization" of space: as he explains, this rhetorical gesture "makes the experience of the non-Western world into an inner journey, and in so doing renders that world as insubstantial, as the backdrop against which is played the drama of the writer's self" (1999: 142). This is evident, for instance, in Stern's description of her arrival at the potter's hut, where she alleges to have been guided by a "burning desire to understand everything in this new and so immensely rich world." On the other hand, some passages contain vivid and detailed descriptions that conjure plausibly real situations and one may accordingly suppose that the narrative is at the very least loosely based on real events. In this chapter I will be treating Stern's narrative as what literary scholar Hayden White calls a "fiction of factual representation" (1976: 21): namely, as an account of a historical event that, whether real or imagined, draws its significance primarily from the way in which it is narrated in the context of the author's broader autobiographical narrative.<sup>8</sup>

Before turning to an analysis of Stern's self-fictionalizing self-representation, it is worth reviewing the "facts" of her trip to Umgababa.

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clay sculpture, in her 2007 Guide to the Irma Stern Museum. It is one of many primary source materials reproduced in the book. She does not analyze the passage, however. The same central fragment is reproduced in Irene Below's 2006 article "Zwischen den Kulturen," which is an analysis of *Das Umgababa Buch*. She does not analyze the fragment in detail: her analysis is limited to the observation that the passage underscores that "the visual arts are the means of communication" between Stern and the potters (2008: 235).

<sup>8</sup> Literary scholar Hayden White explains this precept as follows: "Postmodernism presumes that since historical writing is a kind of discourse, and especially a narrative discourse, there is no substantial difference between representations of historical reality and representations of imagined events and processes. But it goes further than this and maintains that modernist literary writing is more 'objective' than historical writing based on facts *insofar as it features its own modes of production as elements of its 'contents'*" (2010: 313).

### 3.1. From the painter's studio to the potter's hut

So I went on my way, until one day, like a sign from heaven, a vision led me to the place where  
I believed myself able to hear the heartbeat of Africa – Umgababa.

- Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), p. 5.<sup>9</sup>

Although Stern's narrative obscures many of the facts of her travels to and within Umgababa, it is possible to reconstruct a tentative picture of the circumstances that framed her trip. Leaving Cape Town in August or September 1922, she travelled with her friend Miriam Levy to Durban, which had become a busy port city since the mineral revolution of the late nineteenth century and was the main hub for travel in Natal. Predictably, Stern was disheartened to find a city just as Europeanized as the one she left behind. In chapter two of the *Umgababa Buch*, she writes: "I was on the coast, surrounded by all the emptiness of an international hotel – by unwritten laws that weigh heavily in their monotony. People around me reduced to a formula."<sup>10</sup> Stern does not describe her trip from Cape Town to Durban, but she presumably travelled on one of the newly launched long-distance train lines of the South African Rail & Highways Corporation (SAR&H).<sup>11</sup>

Stern was in fact taking part in a growing white tourist culture in South Africa, one encouraged by the development of the SAR&H. This was the era where reduced seasonal excursion fares were introduced between the Witwatersrand and a number of coastal cities, from Lourenço Marques (now Maputo, Mozambique) to Cape Town; where sea resorts sprang up from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth to Port St. Johns; and where foreign cruise ships were enticed into South African harbours with the promise of "Round-in-Seven" tours between veld,

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<sup>9</sup> "Wie ein Wegweiser des Himmels führte mich eines Tages eine Wundererscheinung zu dem Platze, wo ich den Herzschlag Afrikas zu hören vermeinte."

<sup>10</sup> "Ich war damals an der Küste, eingebettet in die ganze Hohlheit eines internationalen Hotelbetriebes - in ungeschiebene Gesetze, die schwer lasten in ihrer Monotonie. Menschen um mich, die zur Formel geworden." MSC 31:1/15, *Das Umgababa Buch*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> As Jeremy Foster writes: "at a time where cars were expensive, proper roads rare outside urban areas, the train was the only viable mode of long-distance transportation" (2003: 665). Established as a government corporation by the South Africa Act in 1909, the SAR&H was a hugely influential agent of change in the Union of South Africa. Used to promote agriculture and rural resettlement after the South African War, the railway expanded to transform South Africa's import-dependent economy into an export-oriented one. It also laid the foundation of the country's overseas mail service, forestry, road haulage, broadcasting, electrification, manufacturing, and film-making industries. As Foster writes, by the mid-1920s, the SAR&H had become the most powerful single corporation in the sub-continent and the second largest state-owned railway and harbour system in the world (2003: 661).



mountains, and game reserves on land (Foster 2003: 666). According to cultural geographer Jeremy Foster, the promotion of tourism was closely related to the Union of South Africa's early governments' desire to "encourage the different parts of the country – until very recently, opponents in what had effectively been a civil war – to identify with or at least understand each other" (2003: 664). It was integral to the Union of South Africa's nation-building project.

Stern contended in her travelogue that it was a young African woman by the name of Alusia who drew her to Umgababa:

And among this crowd, where every original thought is practically stoned to death as a sin, there emerged a creature that was like a dream belonging to a lost world: skin bare and glistening – limbs slender and gently rounded, a short black scarf knotted taut around her leg – breasts rigid between white strings of beads – and eyes full of happiness and sun and merry insouciance. Her name was Alusia and she lived near the big banana grove – near Umgababa.<sup>12</sup>

It is more likely that Stern found her incentive in the SAR&H's publicity of its South Coast Branch Line. Located some thirty-five kilometres south of Durban and perched atop a rocky promontory on the stretch of coastline known as the "Bluff," Umgababa was one of a string of coastline ports that had been connected to the colonial city by rail at the turn of the century in the interest of stimulating coastal development. However, whereas neighbouring settlements such as Amazimtoti and Karridene were witnessing an influx of wealthy Durbanites, Umgababa seems to have remained off the itinerary taken by most tourists at the time. When the SAR&H released its first guidebook in 1903, it advertised the settlement as "a lonely and little visited [... yet...] lovely spot, abounding, like many other places along the coast, in arum lilies, bulrushes and the most delicate, as well as the hardiest of ferns and other plants" (Ingram and Harrison 1903: 184). Seven years after Stern's stay at the site, a guidebook to the South Coast would still claim that

no place along the South Coast [had] preserved the care-free atmosphere and tranquil solitude more than Umgababa, and the numerous walks inland are brimful of interest for those who would study the native in his pristine simplicity or tread dangerous paths in close touch with Nature. (Natal South Coast Visitors' Guide 1929: 17)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Und zwischen dieser Menge, wo jeder originelle Gedanke als Sünde fast gesteinigt wird, ging wie ein weltverlorener Traum daher ein Wesen: barunglänzende Haut – sanft gerundete schlanke Glieder, ein knappes, schwarzes Tuch um die Schenkel gespannt – die Brüste starr zwischen weissen Perlenschnüren – und Augen voll Glück und Sonne und lebensfroher Unbekümmertheit." MSC 31:1/15, *Das Umgababa Buch*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> The description continues: "So thickly populated is the Natal South Coast becoming and so numerous are the resorts, that the visitor views with surprise the stretch of virgin country between Karridene and Umkomaas, in the centre of which lies Umgababa. [...] Surfing, swimming, and bathing are lifelong pastimes at the beach and in the pools, the venue changing as some new formation of sands is ever appearing, although a little to the south, where a rocky promontory guards the mouth of the Umgababa river, the bathing is delightful throughout the year. Umgababa

Photographs published in SAR&H guidebooks show a landscape of rolling green hills and tranquil rivers, where the only trace of modernity is in effect the rail line itself (**Figure 22**).<sup>14</sup>

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 22.** Unknown photographer, *Views of Umkomaas*, from: Ingram and Forsyth, *Natal: An Illustrated Official Railway Guide and Handbook of General Information*, 1903, photograph.

It appears indeed that the only commercial constructions present at the site at the time of Stern's trip would have been the railway station and the Beach Hotel, where the artist and her friend stayed.<sup>15</sup> The same guidebook quoted above states that the Umgababa Beach Hotel was the "only place of European residence" at the site (1929: 17). It also advertised itself as the "most attractive spot on the coast" (**Figure 23**). This is certainly the impression that the artist

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is a favourite haunt for fishermen, and is frequently the venue for competitions, when the various points of vantage along the beach are thick with enthusiasts. The river, too, provides the fisherman with excellent sport, while its sluggish waters and verdant banks are a perpetual invitation to the oarsmen."

<sup>14</sup> Stern does explicitly mention the train that brings her to Umgababa: "The railway track drilled its way, almost like a worm, through the endless rocky mass. And then, all of a sudden, we had arrived. Umgababa! Our bags were taken off the train, which then went on its way. We stood there – palm trees, hills, and nothing else. The rails of the track cut across the countryside like a knife." ["Die Bahn bohrte sich fast wie ein Wurm ihren Weg durch die unendliche Fülle von Stein. - Und dann waren wir plötzlich angelangt. Umgababa! Unsere Koffer wurden aus dem Zug hinaus gesetzt - dann fuhr er weiter. Wir standen da - Palmen, Hügel, und sonst nichts. Quer durch das Land wie ein Messer schnitten die Schienen der Bahn. Erstaunen - Ernüchterung - nun war man also in Umgababa - und wo war es denn eigentlich - was wurde denn so genannt? Wir gingen den Schienen hilfeschend entlang." MSC 31:1/15, p. 9]

<sup>15</sup> The precise dates of Stern's stay in Umgababa are unknown. Stern sent a letter to Trude Bosse from Umgababa that is dated early September 1922. Several other items of correspondence survive from Stern's stay there: she received a letter from her father in October, and a letter from Max Pechstein was forwarded to her there (Schoeman 1994: 85).

conveyed in the records that she kept. In a letter to Trude Bosse dated early September 1922, she wrote:

Dear Trude,

How does it sound to you – Umgababa? For me it is how I imagine the holy Paradise. We're living close to the beach, surrounded by palms – banana palms. That's the way the house is positioned. Put yourself in my shoes. By coincidence, there is everything I need here. Sea, beautiful tropical plants, Blacks – beautiful like Gods – really. When I see those brown bodies with the baskets on their heads, and moving extremely elegantly, I feel like I'm dreaming, pictures appear in my mind. Seldom does one feel such satisfaction without bitterness.<sup>16</sup>

She illustrated her description with a vigorously drawn sketch showing an aerial view of a construction nestled in a dense mass of palm trees, set between rounded cliffs and what appears to be a beach (**Figure 24**).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 23.** Advertisement for the Umgababa Beach Hotel, from South Coast (Natal) Publicity Association and the South African Railways and Harbours, *Natal South Coast Visitors' Guide*, 1929, 10 x 10 cm.

**Figure 24.** Irma Stern, *Letter to Trude Bosse*, dated September 22, 1922, ink on paper, 28 x 21.6 cm, University of Cape Town.

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<sup>16</sup> “Liebe Trude, wie klingt Dir das – Umgababa – ? Es ist gerade so – wie ich mir das Paradies vorstelle. Wir wohnen dicht am Meere – einem wilden tobenden Meere – Palmenhaine rings um uns herum – Bananenpalmen. – So ungefähr liegt das Haus... Denke dir num meine Lage. Ich findet hier ganz per Zufall alles was das Herz begehrt – Meer, wunderbare tropische Vegetation – Neger – so schön wie Gotter. Wirklich – wenn mann an den Fluss geht und die braunen schlanken Gestalten dahin wandeln sieht – mit den schönen schwarzen Tongefassen auf den Köpfen und den herrlichen harmonischen Begeugungen – dann komme ich mir vor – als ob ich alles trauma... mir fallen Bilder in den Schoss. Selten, sass Erfüllung so ohne Bitterkeit ist.”

Stern's narrative contains extensive descriptions of conversations with the Beach Hotel's washerwoman, a young Zulu woman named Nancy Gele. Stern describes her as "a wizened little person with a lined face and wise little eyes [... who was] a product of the mission school and spoke English."<sup>17</sup> Gele acts as Stern's primary interlocutor throughout the narrative, and the detail and anecdotal quality of their (reported) conversations suggest that Stern's reports are to some degree based on reality: the two women exchange notes on gender roles (Chapter 3), Nancy tells Irma the story of a local thief (Chapter 4), and she also looks at the artist's pictures carefully, identifying the sitters as specific persons from the area. If Stern did indeed visit the hut of a potter, it is likely Gele who sent her there, although this is not explicit in the narrative.

It is Nancy Gele who explains the history of Umgababa to Irma Stern. This history is worth explaining insofar as it relates to the sequence of events that follows at the potter's hut. The land of Umgababa was part of the reserve known as Umnini, home to the amaThuli chiefdom. It was therefore one of the parcels of the territory of the Union of South Africa that was designated specifically for black African habitation, as part of the overarching system of land segregation being deployed in the nation at the time. Colonial policies enforced in Natal as early as the mid-nineteenth century established this system, which was further institutionalized by the passing of the Land Act in 1913 as one of the policy measures implemented by the early government of the Union to address the pressing "Native Question." The Act allocated exactly seven percent of the land area of the Union to the creation of "African reserves" and forbade the purchase of land by Africans outside of those reserves' boundaries (Worden 1994: 79). While it was instituted under the cover of "protecting" Africans from the erosion of their societies and from the influence of European culture, it is commonly agreed that its real purpose was to create conditions that would free up the majority of the territory of the Union for white settlement and ownership, while restricting Africans' mobility, land tenure rights, and political and economic autonomy. Under legal protection that maintained white political control through a dual legal system of "indirect rule," the Union's reserves laid the basis for the homelands of the apartheid era (Thompson

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<sup>17</sup> "So Nancy, die Waschfrau, die dünne kleine Person mit dem zerfurchten Gesicht und den witzigen äugelchen. Sie war ein Produkt der Mission und sprach auch Englisch." MSC 31:1/15, p. 10.

2000: 98).<sup>18</sup> Stern's artistic "homecoming" therefore took place within a space circumscribed by whites to be home to Africans, and to Africans alone.

Stern offered the following response to Nancy Gele's account of the institution of the reserve system:

How touching it was – they were expelled from their land – were given another in exchange – because a European port was planned – at the exact location where the tribe of the Zulus had taken root.<sup>19</sup> In their childlike innocence they praised the cruel invader as though he were a benefactor.<sup>20</sup>

This remark is one of the first of a series Stern would make over the course of her lifetime in which she displayed a modicum of lucidity about the circumstances that framed her artistic project. However, her casual and paternalistic tone also shows that she did not go so far as to consider how they benefited her artistic project. I now propose to show how these realities – only scarcely in evidence in her rapturous narrative – may indeed have erupted in the curious passage that plays out in the sixth chapter of her book.

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<sup>18</sup> Generally considered to have been one of the most distinctive and despicable hallmarks of apartheid state policy, the "homeland" (also known as Bantustan) system represented the radicalization of the reserve system and its full alignment with the ideology of "separate development." Under the presidency of Afrikaner leader Hendrik Verwoerd (1958-1966), ten homelands (or "Bantustans") were created to house Africans according to their ethnic identity: Venda, Lebowa, Qwaqwa, Ciskei, KwaZulu, KaNgwane, Transkei, Gazankulu, KwaNdebele, Bophuthatswana. These amounted to a total of thirteen percent of the territory of South Africa, the remainder being reserved for whites. The creation of the homelands involved a massive program of forced dislocations, with an estimated three and a half million people forced from their homes between the 1960s and the 1980s. In theory, the homelands were to be self-governing statelets that could provide the basis for national self-determination. In reality, the chiefs who ruled the homelands were selected and supported by the regime, and those who did not comply with the latter were forcibly deposed. These states within the state served as labour reservoirs for white-owned industries. The Transkei was the first homeland to be declared independent, followed by Tswana, Venda, and Ciskei. All were failed states, run by corrupt leaders, with no means of generating a local economy and entirely dependent on the rule of white supremacist leaders. For more information on the homeland system, see Beinart and Dubow (1995).

<sup>19</sup> The relationship of the amaThuli to the land of Umgababa is a complex one, in light of the chiefdom's long history of forced exiles and displacements. The amaThuli are a people of Nguni ethnicity originating from the Zululand interior, specifically from the upper Mathikhulu area. According to their oral histories, the amaThuli migrated to the coastal region south of Durban in the 1770s or 1780s, forced by the incursion of the chiefdom known as Qwabe on their territory. After two decades of occupation of the Bluff area, the amaThuli were conquered by the armies of Shaka kaSenzangakhona in 1823. Fleeing their homesteads and plantations, they retreated into the thick bush outlying the coast. In the same year, the first white settlers arrived in the Bay of Natal. As the first colonial government of Natal was established in 1843, the Bluff area was earmarked for colonial development and the case of the amaThuli became a matter of contention among the white administrators (Sparks 2002: 8). The "solution" proposed by the Natal government was that the amaThuli be relocated to Umgababa. This resettlement was effected on the terms of an indenture called the Mnini Trust, dated May 27, 1858, and named after the chief Mnini. The Trust exists to this day. For a complete study of the history of the amaThuli and the Mnini Trust, see Neo Ramoupi's 1998 M.A. thesis, "The amaThuli and the Mnini Trust: A Documentary and Oral History" (Durban: University of Natal). I am thankful to Catherine Burns for orienting me toward resources on the history of the amaThuli and Umgababa.

<sup>20</sup> "Rührend war es – da wurden sie von ihrem Lande vertrieben - bekamen ein anderes dafür – weil ein europäischer Hafen geplant war – gerade wo sich der Stamm der Zulu's festgesetzt hatte. Sie priesen den Grausamen als Wohltäter in ihrer kindlichen Unschuld." MSC 31:1/15, p. 12.

### 3.2. At the potter's hut

The burning desire – to see and to understand everything in this new – so immensely rich world – drove me to the huts of a potter – which he had built on a hill. A palm grove protected them from the stormy winds of the sea – he lived there like a king – overseeing the green plain with the river that curled between the ridges – listening to the roaring of the sea – he sat there making clay pottery. Beautiful black shiny pots – made for drinking beer – for scooping water. Bowls for grinding the corn of the daily meal. Beautiful pure forms with spare ornamentation.

Sitting there, working the clay – surrounded by his children – his wife nursing a fat, ever-hungry baby – they did the kneading and the moulding together. She had learned this art from her father – and he [the potter] had learned it from her. His son, a little boy whose eyes sparkled with intelligence, helped him – to swing the clay vessels over the fire until they changed from dark red to metallic blue-black. The blazing heat of the sun spread in every direction – like a layer of gelatine, agile but stiff.

- Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), 31.

The space of the potter's hut arguably represents the true terminus of Stern's quest for identity in *Das Umgababa Buch*. The chapter is positioned in the centre of Stern's narrative, in chapter six of its total ten, on pages twenty-eight through thirty-two of its total fifty-six. Moreover, Stern's description of the homestead constructs it as a space full of potential for modernist self-absolution. Not only does the potter's homestead carry the trappings of a mythical space of Edenic human origins, it also represents a space of quintessential primitive life and potential artistic fulfilment. The family of potters whom Stern portrays arms-deep in clay, woman moulding earth as she nurses and young man brazenly stoking a fire, can be compared to the faceless brown-skinned individuals whom Samuel Daniell shows at work in his exoticized pastoral genre scene (**Figure 18**). They are the representatives of a clichéd traditional society bound by a rigid patrilineal order and living close to an archetypically defined "nature," and, in much the same discursive scheme, the personifications of an imagined ancient human creativity.

Stern's description of her modelling process brings to mind many of the associations between the art of modelling and notions of primitivity and childhood, as reviewed in the previous chapter in relation to the artist's studio sculptures:

The clay enticed me to make shapes. – I sat on a straw mat – in front of me a block of wood – and I began to put layer upon layer. – The clay was so soft and yet tough – it contained in it lurking sensuous life – which awoke by the slightest touch of a finger. It was a wondrous game. In front of me rose the cone of a Kaffir [head] with curved lips – that laughed and cried at the same time, with temples so delicate in form.

Indeed, this passage suggests that Stern was seeking to open the channels of interpersonal communion that she had initially tried to establish through her experiments with clay in her studio.<sup>21</sup>

My focus in this section is on the second half of Stern's description of her sculptural experience. If the first half can be read as the exalted narration of her ascent to the verge of what is at once a moment of artistic achievement, interpersonal, and implicitly interracial, communion, and thus personal self-fulfilment, then I believe the second half can only be understood as the confession of her fall into creative bereavement, social alienation, and utter – albeit temporary – self-dissolution. It is from this typically modernist mapping of artistic and personal/social meanings that the passage draws both its narrative and its meta-narrative force. I aim to bring out these layers of signification through my analysis. My primary contention is that the hinge that separates the two halves of this shift lies in the narrative moment that separates Stern's tactile engagement with the clay from the collapse of the material between her hands. Accordingly, I believe that Stern's narration calls for a reading that highlights the way in which the evolution and devolution of her manipulation of clay crystallized a radical change in her relationship to her African roots, her relationship to her African subjects, and her identity as an artist in Africa.

An instructive theoretical framework for the desired reading can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's famously visceral analysis of the substance he calls the "slimy" (*le visqueux*) in his seminal 1943 treatise of existentialist phenomenology *L'Être et le néant*. Sartre describes "le visqueux" as "une substance entre deux états" (1943: 654). Neither liquid nor solid, it is a substance that reveals itself, for Sartre, as "essentiellement ambigüe" because

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<sup>21</sup> As elsewhere in the *Umgababa Buch*, Stern's heavily mystifying narrative is dotted with curious observations. Her reference to beer-making is correct: the art of pottery in Zulu communities is primarily focused on the creation of vessels for transporting, storing, and serving Sorghum beer (*utshwala*), a nutritious drink consumed daily and for celebrations in honour of ancestor spirits (*amalodzi*). The carbonized firing, which turns the clay pots black, is not designed to strengthen the vessels but rather to entice the spirits, who are said to prefer black vessels (Armstrong 2009: 515). The gender roles that she establishes are perplexing, however. The art of pottery in isiZulu-speaking communities – as in many communities in Africa – is a woman's art (Armstrong 2009: 414). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that there was in fact a growing practice of figurative clay sculpture in the region near Umgababa at the time of Stern's passage. The most prominent representative of this tradition in sculptor Hezekile Ntuli, who began to work near Eshowe beginning in 1931 (Calder 1998: 64). This practice grew gradually over the twentieth century in response to demands from white tourists.

la fluidité existe chez lui au ralenti; il est empatement de la liquidité, il représente en lui-même un triomphe naissant du solide sur le liquide [...]. Le visqueux est l'agonie de l'eau; il se donne lui-même comme un phénomène en devenir, il n'a pas la permanence dans le changement de l'eau, mais au contraire il représente comme une coupe opérée dans un changement d'état. (1943: 654)

Thus, “slime” exhibits the same ambivalent and changeable materiality as Stern’s “soft and yet tough” clay (1923: 31). By extension, it possesses the same character of “instabilité figée” (Sartre 1956: 654) that implicitly causes Stern’s clay creation to “collapse into itself” (1923: 32). Crucially for our purposes, the thrust of Sartre’s text is precisely to expose the way in which the physical manipulation of slime can give rise to, or even necessarily impose, reflections of a vividly existential order.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the conceptual and analytical tools that he develops to articulate the “revelations” offered by “slime” can offer potent insight into what is at stake in the moment of “awakening” that Stern describes in her narration of her experience with clay.

The second half of Stern’s narrative can in my opinion be divided into three stages, each of which will be analysed in light of a different passage from Sartre’s text. Following my analysis of the moment of “awakening” informed by Sartre’s phenomenology of “slime,” I will go on to use Sartre’s analysis of the emotion of shame in order to gain insight into the relational and specifically racial dynamics that are at play in Stern’s own professed humiliation vis-à-vis the potters and vis-à-vis imagined European salon-goers. Lastly, I will draw on Sartre’s account of subject formation in order to elucidate the significance of Stern’s self-identification as a white woman in the passage.

### 3.2.1. *From clay to slime*

But suddenly –  
Everything collapsed into itself – the splatter of the wet clay –  
I awoke appalled from my creative spell.

- Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), 31.

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<sup>22</sup> Sartre’s analysis can be found in his chapter “De la qualité comme révélatrice de l’être,” in which his essential aim is to articulate what he calls a “psychanalyse de chose” (1943: 646). On his account, this amounts to an attempt to “expliquer la signification qui, véritablement, appartient à la chose” or to capture the “immense symbolique universelle qui se traduit par nos répugnances, nos haines, nos sympathies, nos attirances pour des objets dont la matérialité devrait, par principe, demeurer non-signifiante” (1943: 652). “Slime” is for Sartre precisely one of those substances which offers a deep “révélation de l’existence,” (1943: 653) because its peculiar material quality awakens sensations and sentiments of attraction, repulsion, desire, and hate to an unusually potent degree.



Stern's "appalled" reaction to the collapse of her clay sculpture marks her utter disbelief at the failure of her artistic project. However, Sartre offers the means to see how the erratic behaviour of Stern's clay is actually intelligible, if not predictable. It is indeed altogether consistent with that of the substance he names "slime." Slime is, for Sartre, fundamentally "louche" or deceitful (Sartre 1943: 653). Behind its alluring characteristics of "mollesse," "docilité," and "compressibilité," lurks its more fundamental character of "instabilité figée." Indeed, if slime readily yields to the hands of the one who manipulates it, takes the form he or she chooses, morphs to his or her will, it is also always ready to dissolve, to escape, or in Sartre's words, to "faire d'une fuite épaisse" (1943: 654). It is always ready, in other words, to thwart the manipulating agent's attempt to appropriate it for his or her purposes (1943: 654).

In this way, Sartre allows us to bring into view the reversal of power dynamics that is implicitly at work in Stern's text, as the "sensuous life [that had] awakened at the touch of [her] finger" overwhelms her own agency in the moment that the sculpture breaks. As Sartre explains, slime not only has a life of its own, but it is also invested with veritable power. In his characterization, this power is twofold. Firstly, it is a power of resistance: "il y a, en effet, dans ce visqueux qui se fond en lui-même, [...] une résistance visible, comme un refus de l'individu qui ne veut pas s'anéantir dans le tout de l'être" (Sartre 1943: 654). It is simultaneously a power of subversion: "seulement, au moment même où je crois le posséder, voilà que, par un curieux renversement, c'est *lui* qui me possède" (Sartre 1943: 655). In short, Sartre makes it possible to see how Stern's "appalled" reaction to the breaking of her sculpture may actually signal a reaction to a far more insidious shift: a radical inversion of the canonical hierarchies of human/non-human and form/matter. This effectively robs her of her agency over the passive matter, and it lodges the powers of manipulation and possession firmly in the latter.

It is clear from the radical shift in tone between the first and second halves of the passage that this transfer of agency has occurred. From the exalted narration of her communion with the clay, Stern shifts into a mode of narration that carries a distinctively defeated tone. This is precisely the posture that Sartre's human subject is forced to adopt vis-à-vis the vindictive slime. For, as he explains, "slime" reacts to its erstwhile holder's "plan d'appropriation" by effectively engulfing him or her in its own "viscosité," blending his/her physicality with its own materiality,

bringing his/her body into a near absorption in itself to the point where the sentient subject actually finds his or her own identity embedded in the slime:

le visqueux, c'est *moi*, du seul fait que j'ai ébauché une appropriation de la substance visqueuse. Cette succion du visqueux que je sens sur mes mains ébauche comme une *continuité* de la substance visqueuse à moi-même. Ces molles et longues colonnes de substance qui tombent de moi jusqu'à la nappe visqueuse (lorsque, par exemple, après y avoir plongé ma main, je l'arrache) symbolisent comme une coulée de moi-même vers le visqueux. (Sartre 1943: 656)

As he goes on to state, “la viscosité [me] renvoie mon image” (1943: 658): it shows the subject, in effect, that he/she too is slime. This can amount to nothing else than showing the subject that his/her own identity is just as collapsible, just as unstable – just as *slimy* – as slime itself.

Stern's defeat is in effect far more than an artistic one: it is one that touches upon the very foundations of her identity, refracted as these implicitly are in the wet texture of the clay splattered on the stiff African earth and, one may imagine, still clinging to her hands. Indeed, if we are to suppose that Stern's experience with the capricious wet clay is analogous to Sartre's sentient subject's experience with slime, then the vivid self-consciousness that she professes to feel is tantamount to the terrible collapse into insecurity that is registered in Sartre's text. Like Sartre's slime, Stern's clay discloses to her the instability of her identity as an artist and as a person; as a sculptor of African earth; and as an African *tout court*.

To be sure, there is arguably a second “revelation” that is at work in the collapse of Stern's clay sculpture. The clay can also be seen as indexical of Africa itself, as an entity outside of, and different from Stern. Specifically, I believe that the clay's collapse can be interpreted as Africa's revolt against Stern's attempt to appropriate it as “Africa” for the purposes of her self-consolidation. This reading is further borne out by the reflections that follow from Stern's awakening: namely, her realization that the clay material is not made, or refuses, to take the form she would like to give it. This realization comes first through the regretful advice of the potters, who in telling her to “make it smaller, then it will hold” remind her that she has violated the very structural properties of the material by moulding it to such extreme proportions rather than coiling it. Secondly, it comes through her remorseful recollection that she had “wished to show [the potters] that they could make other things than vessels with [the clay].” In both cases, Stern is implicitly exposing the host of preconceptions that moulded her engagement with the African clay, which are derived not from her African background but from her European experience: her

stalwart insistence on an additive form-giving process, and her valuation of “art” (figurative sculpture) over supposed “craft” (vessels). Consequently, the clay’s shift to “sliminess” can be understood as Africa’s rebellion against the “Africa” that Stern tried to graft onto it through her European artistic process.

In light of the foregoing analysis, the silent moment that separates the two halves of Stern’s narrative can in fact be seen to be loaded with meaning. Sartre’s text allows us to foreground the mechanisms through which Stern’s phenomenological experience of the clay leads her from her disembodied creative trance to a deeply unsettling “awakening” onto the “sliminess” of her own mode of relating to Africa; onto the inherently self-collapsible, ungrounded, and ungroundable nature of her African identity, and onto the plain impossibility of basing her artistic project upon it in the way she had decided. Indeed, Sartre allows us to see how the dissolution of the clay serves as a conduit for Stern’s realization of the “between-ness” to which she has been fated by virtue of her early displacement from Africa, and which she has been unable to overcome by virtue of her continuing trust in ideas of “Africa” over and above open engagement.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2.2. *From slime to shame to white self-pity*

I awoke appalled from my creative spell – and looked into the regretful faces of those black people. They advised me: 'Make it smaller, then it will hold.' There was such a distinguished manner in their regret.

There I sat – the white creature – enjoyed their hospitality – used their clay – learned from them how to treat it. I wanted to show them that you could create other things than only vessels from it. My misfortune did not call forth the slightest sneer. I thought of sophisticated salons and I blushed with shame.

- Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), 32

Like the collapse of the sculpture itself, the stultifying self-awakening that comes with it is only momentary. In the line that follows, Stern shifts her gaze away from the splattered clay before her to meet the eyes of the black potters. And in the same moment, the feeling of

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<sup>23</sup> “Slime” is a feminized substance in Sartre’s text. He describes it as “une activité molle, baveuse, et féminine d’aspiration” before going on to compare the movement of slime to the “raplatissement des seins un peu mûrs d’une femme qui s’étend sur le dos.” Indeed, the vengeance of slime is for him “[une] revanche douceâtre et féminine.” Given that “slime” represents for Sartre the type of threat that can obstruct an individual’s self-definition as a free subject, feminist interpretations of Sartre’s text have presented these passages as essentially misogynistic. For more information on this topic, see Julien Murphy’s 1999 *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*.

“appalled” terror that briefly consumed her as she found her self-identity thwarted by the clay segues into a new emotion: shame. It follows that the “awakening” that is narrated in this passage can be understood not only as Stern’s awakening to the nature of her relationship with the African clay (that is, to her own nature *vis-à-vis* Africa as the land that anchors her identity), but also, and crucially, as her awakening to the nature of her relationship with the African potters, which was precisely obscured by her engagement with the clay. In other words, the dynamics at stake in the passage are no longer merely artistic, or simply personal – but social, relational, racial.

Sartre’s famous analysis of the emotion of shame can inform our understanding of how Stern’s self-identification *vis-à-vis* the potters occurs. In much the same way that his analysis of a human subject’s engagement with slime can be seen to parallel Stern’s description of her own engagement with the clay, the example he uses to articulate his conception of shame evokes the sequence of events that Stern describes in her narrative:

Je viens de faire un geste maladroit ou vulgaire: ce geste colle à moi, je ne le juge ni le blâme, je le vis simplement. Mais voici tout à coup que je lève la tête: quelqu'un était là et m'a vu. Je réalise tout à coup toute la vulgarité de mon geste et j'ai honte. (Sartre 1943: 276)

Shame, for Sartre, is the feeling of vivid self-consciousness that occurs in the experience of the encounter with another subject. It amounts to the feeling of being objectified by the Other. This objectification operates via the Other’s look:

J'ai honte de moi tel que j'apparais à autrui. Et par l'apparition même d'autrui je me suis mis en mesure de porter un jugement sur moi-même comme sur un objet car c'est comme objet que j'apparais à autrui. (Sartre 1943: 276)

Much as she implicitly positioned herself as the object (if not the victim) of the clay’s agency, Stern tacitly positions herself as the object of the potters’ judgment.<sup>24</sup> Even while she repeatedly insists on the sympathetic attitude that the potters demonstrate toward her (her misfortune “does

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<sup>24</sup> While Stern’s description places the potters in a position of power in the intersubjective encounter, it is impossible to discount that she is unquestionably in the position of power in the racialized social, economic, and political ordering that frames the encounter. Likewise, Sartre’s theoretical account of the exchange of looks is written from the vantage point of a powerful subject position. While it is accordingly apposite for this analysis, which focuses on Stern’s experience of the encounter, it is important to note that the exchange of looks is reciprocal. Frantz Fanon’s 1952 *Peau noire, masques blancs* contains a famous critique of Sartre’s account of intersubjectivity: it is based on his rejoinder that Sartre does not take into account the way in which the “fact of race” mediates the intersubjective encounter. Fanon articulates his critique by giving the example of a white child who exclaims to his mother “Tiens, un nègre! [...] Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur!” (1952: 90). On his account, the African subject is powerfully alienated in the encounter with the white because he or she finds his or her identity over-determined through the arsenal of racial stereotypes that are projected through the white’s gaze.

not call forth the slightest sneer,” and rather than chastising her for her blunders with the clay, the potters offer her “advice” on how to treat it), she persists in identifying herself as a “white creature” against them. In so doing, she inverts one of the hierarchies that implicitly informed her approach to her hosts in the first place, namely the Western discursive tradition of characterizing Africans (and other non-Western peoples the world over) as “animals,” against the “rational” humanity of Europeans (Pieterse 1992: 132). Indeed, she devalues her selfhood while elevating their humanity (“I parted with an immense respect for these human beings”), thereby passing judgment on herself as an object in relation to them.

In this way, Stern’s description of her self-recognition in the face-to-face with the African potters evokes what is in fact a common trope in the literature of the ethnographic encounter, described by literary scholar Michael Bell as the “rebound by which the otherness of the primitive culture is internalized as self-recognition” (1997: 149). Indeed, historian Greg Dening states that the ethnographic experience always amounts to a “mirror[ing] of the self in the vision of the other,” and consequently, to a mirroring of “those hegemonies that suborn the self in the suborning of the other” (1996: 108).

While I believe this mechanism unquestionably characterizes Stern’s shamed self-consciousness vis-à-vis the potters, in the sentence in which she actually explicitly describes herself “blushing with shame,” she is not in fact positioning herself in relation to the African potters. Rather, she is positioning herself in relation to European salon-goers, presumably imagining what they would think if only they too had seen her blunder so extensively with a medium so primitive. On this interpretation, then, the shame that Stern describes in this fragment is fundamentally double: she perceives herself to be objectified not only by Africans, but also by Europeans. It is a shame that places her once again between communities and between identities.

Stern’s shame can be seen to slot her in the same position as the figure of the white poet or painter of the South African landscape whose tropes J.M. Coetzee analyzes in his 1988 *White Writing*. In his consistent incapacity to find what Coetzee calls “a language with which to speak to Africa, to dialogue with Africa,” this figure displays “another failure, by no means inevitable: a failure to imagine a peopled landscape, an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in

which there is a place for the self” (1988: 9).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Stern’s failure to conceive of a place for herself at the potter’s hut (and by extension, in Africa) stands in for a far more insidious failure. Stern’s feeling of objectification is predicated on her incapacity to conceive of hers, the potters’, and even the Europeans’ mutual claims to human subjectivity. It is, in Achille Mbembe’s words, an incapacity to recognize “the body and flesh of ‘the stranger’ as flesh and body just like mine,” to acknowledge “the *idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others,*” which he characterizes as “long-standing problem for Western consciousness” (2001: 2).

### 3.2.3. *From white self-pity to stable subjectivity*

A second trial and the head stood – but now there was not enough clay. I was at a loss. Then the potter took a vessel that had not yet been baked – he crushed with his own hand and handed it to me – so that I could finish my head.

[Passage crossed out in the original manuscript: The head, now finished – provoked great surprise. It looked just like a man – secretly the [boy?] sneaked out to the next hut and elicited a young beauty – there was a strange man in her father's hut – she should come and see him. Quickly she put on the most beautiful pearls and hurried out. A cry of horror – it's a dead man. She was gone – Everybody laughed at the most successful prank.]

I parted with an immense respect for both of these human beings and the feeling grew strong in me – what pitiful people we are, us whites – how inimical to nature is the life that we must lead – that so much that is good and noble has self-evidently been buried alive – smothered.

- Irma Stern, *Das Umgababa Buch* (1923), 32

Stern’s self-identification as a white woman might not be a positive one, but it is a positioning all the same. Entwined with her defeated and debilitating self-pity is an acceptance of her racial identity as a white woman. This posturing is arguably what allows her to escape from the agonizing identitary limbo she felt in her the experience of the (slimy) clay and under the gazes of the potters. It is what allows her to build her subjectivity anew.

Once again Sartre’s text gives us insight into the mechanisms that Stern implicitly invokes to define herself as a white subject. If, as Sartre contends, the experience of slime and that of

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<sup>25</sup> Coetzee theorizes this figure based on his observation of landscape art and landscape writing from the beginning of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, where the motif of the desolate, inhospitable, barren *veld* extensively recurs. However, he states that his arguments are generalizable to the following group: “people of European, or if not European identity, then a highly problematical South African-colonial identity” (1988: 7).

shame have the effect of de-stabilizing the subject's identity, then they also encourage the subject to stabilize the lost identity. The experience of slime "transforme le projet d'appropriation en projet de fuite" (1943: 657). This is because, in his words, "une conscience qui *deviendrait visqueuse* se transformerait donc par empatement de ses idées" (Sartre 1943: 657). That is to say, "a consciousness which became slimy" could not provide the basis for a sustainable mode of being in the world. The same is true of the experience of shame, which forces the subject to "flee" its own objectification by compelling it into an acceptance of its position among other subjects:

La honte est sentiment de chute originelle, non du fait que j'aurais commis telle ou telle faute, mais simplement du fait que je suis "tombé" dans le monde, au milieu des choses, et que j'ai besoin de la médiation d'autrui pour être ce que je suis. (Sartre 1943: 328)

Stern's whiteness is in effect the identity into which she has "fallen," not because she has "committed" any "particular fault," but simply because she is. In this passage it is indeed also what allows her to account for and to sublimate the faults she has actually committed – her misguided attempt to give form to the clay, her misguided attempt to give form to the Africans. By that same token, her whiteness is also what allows her to regain her sense of subjectivity. In effect, it is from the standpoint of her whiteness vis-à-vis the black Africans and in alignment with white Europeans that she can obtain the "mediations" to be who she ultimately wants to be – an artist, representing Africans, for whites.

### 3.3. From the potter's hut to the painter's studio

Stern appears to have stayed away from sculpture for at least four years following her departure from Umgababa.<sup>26</sup> The same did not apply to painting, however. Stern had made numerous sketches during her time in the settlement, and, between her return to Cape Town and her departure for Germany in early 1923, she transferred them to paint with what appears to have been feverish intensity. The body of works that can be traced back to her stay in Umgababa includes works such as the large-scale oils on canvas *The Beer Dance* (**Figure 25**) and *Composition* (**Figure 26**). Representing a triad of brown-bodied nude female figures standing

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<sup>26</sup> The first sign of sculptural activity on Stern's part following her trip to Umgababa is to be found in a newspaper clipping dating to 1926. There are four such clippings in total. They will be discussed in Chapter 4.

against a background of lush protea bushes and flowing blue waters, *Composition* is an exemplar of the artist's primitivizing experimentation with the conventional theme of the bathers, evoking Gauguin's variations on the same theme. *The Beer Dance*, meanwhile, likely represents Stern's rendering of her impressions of the Zulu wedding she describes in Chapter 10 of her *Umgababa Buch*.<sup>27</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 25.** Irma Stern, *The Beer Dance*, 1922, oil on canvas, 179 x 82 cm, High Commission of South Africa, London.

**Figure 26.** Irma Stern, *Composition*, 1923, oil on canvas, 139 x 95.5 cm, private collection.

Notably more exuberant in their primitivist stylizations than were Stern's paintings from the period preceding her trip, these works testify clearly to the artist's spirited engagement with Expressionist pictorial techniques. In both paintings bodies and space are flattened through Stern's planar compositional arrangements and perspective is shrunken through the dense accumulation of forms in the upper areas of the picture planes. The convenient indeterminacy of

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<sup>27</sup> Her description reads as follows: "The limbs were spinning around – joyful motions – the people became passions. All had lost awareness of their bodily selves. Arms and legs were the only means of expression, the weird eyes saw no more – the sun rested on those moving bodies in a strange way." ["Die Glieder flogen – losgelöste Bewegung – die Menschen wurden zu Leidenschaften... jeder einzelne verlor das Bewusstsein seines körperlichen Ichs – Arme und Beine waren nur noch Ausdrucksmittel – die wirren Augen sahen nicht – der Mund verklärte Leidenschaft – Seltsam weilte die Sonne auf den zuckenden Leibern."] MSC 31:1/15, p. 55.



the backgrounds situates the figures firmly in the timeless space of the “exotic.” These works have generally been taken to represent Stern’s first truly affirmative pictorial statements as a portrayer of African subjects, and thus to mark the consolidation of her early-career painterly style. This is unquestionably true. However, the foregoing analysis of Stern’s narrative in *Das Umgababa Buch* makes it possible to see how her consolidation as a painter of African subjects may in fact have been predicated on the deeply destabilizing experience that she seems to have had in Umgababa, which was mediated by her experience with sculpture.

My analysis of Stern’s encounter at the potter’s hut can explain the artist’s renderings of Africans in her post-Umgababa paintings. I would like to suggest that Stern’s luxuriantly coloured primitivist paintings of her post-Umgababa period be interpreted as defensive attempts on her part to recover her artistic agency and subjectivity after her failed experience with sculpting Africans at the potter’s hut. Sartre offers us insight into the mechanisms that would have underwritten such a process. He describes the “objectivation of the Other” as “a defense on the part of my being which, precisely by conferring on the Other a being-for-me, frees me from my being-for the Other” (1956: 269). Explaining the mechanism that ensures this defense, Sartre writes:

Ainsi, autrui-objet est un instrument explosif que je manie avec appréhension, parce que je pressens autour de lui la possibilité permanente qu'on le fasse éclater et que, avec cet éclatement, j'éprouve soudain la fuite hors de moi du monde et l'aliénation de mon être. Mon souci constant est donc de contenir autrui dans son objectivité et mes rapports avec autrui-objet sont faits essentiellement de ruses destinées à le faire rester objet (Sartre 1943: 358)

Seen in this light, Stern’s post-Umgababa paintings can be understood as “ruses” that Stern designed to make the African subjects she encountered in Umgababa subsist as beautiful objects, cut off from the real world of colonialism in which she knew herself to be a powerful participant. They can be seen to represent her attempt not to give form to, but in fact to compress and to render intelligible the experiences that temporarily robbed her of her own sense of (artistic) subjectivity. This is not only because painting is the medium that Stern mastered, nor is it simply because painting is a more “European” than “African” medium: painting is also the medium that could afford her the distance necessary to maintain the subject-object distance on which her subjective and artistic integrity depended. According to theoretician of sculpture David F. Martin, painting maintains the “subject/object dichotomy” that is evoked through experiences such as shame (1966: 169). Conversely, because sculpture “returns [artists] to a closer unity with

likenesses of the human body,” it can offer the means to “overcome ‘the look’ and the ‘self-consciousness’ that alienate humans from others” (1966: 169). Considering Stern’s focus on painting and her denial of sculpture from this angle, it seems Stern short-circuited the opportunity to do what she revealed herself incapable to do in Umgababa: to overcome her own self-consciousness, to overcome her self-pitying identification with her whiteness, and to conceive of Africa as a place where her claims to subjectivity were not mutually exclusive with those of the Africans before her.

Stern may not have sculpted in the years that followed her trip to Umgababa, but she did continue to travel back into the reserves in search of visual fodder: back into the reserves, whose borders were designed to contain much the same explosion that she feared – the spilling of Africans out of the bounds of the “ancestral lands” allocated to them by whites, toward the cities, into a modernity appropriated thus far as the preserve of South Africa’s white population. It was at the same time that Africans began to move in masses that Stern’s paintings made her famous. And it was shortly after that she would start looking for new ruses with which to make her African subjects remain objects.



**PART II**  
***STONE (1935-1945)***



**Chapter 4**  
*Consolidating (1923-1935)*

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 1936, *The Cape Times* published a statement that promised Capetonians a “surprise” at Irma Stern’s upcoming exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers:

She will show studies of native women in watercolours, in oils, in charcoal, in pencils and in –  
But that is a surprise. Miss Stern has been at work during the past three months secretly in her studio  
that is likely to cause quite a stir in art circles when it is exhibited next month.<sup>1</sup>

It was the same newspaper that let the secret out on February 29, publishing a series of images, in two separate parts of the newspaper, that clearly disclosed the new directions of Stern’s art. The first photograph (**Plate 3**) showed a wide-angle view into her studio, a carefully cultivated chaos of works of art, artist’s tools, and collected objects of diverse provenance, clearly staged for the camera’s lens. The viewer’s gaze was not enticed to dwell on these, however, but was guided to the centre of the picture, where the artist shared the limelight with another three-dimensional figure, this one made not of flesh and bone but of sculpted cement. Three more African women in stone emerged above and behind the artist’s head. Two of the stony figures re-appeared in their own individual shots, along with a third, on a page of the *Supplement* to the same issue (**Plate 4**). The caption confirmed Stern’s sculptural turn: “IRMA STERN TURNS SCULPTOR.”

These publicity theatrics paved the way for Stern’s official public debut as a sculptress at the Selwyn Chambers on March 2, 1936. The exhibition featured fourteen sculptures alongside one hundred of her paintings. The catalogue for the exhibition listed six casts in artificial stone (listed as “art-stone”), four works in terracotta,<sup>2</sup> as well as three works carved in soapstone and one in malachite.<sup>3</sup> Even though they were dwarfed in numbers by Stern’s paintings, these sculptures were clearly staged to stand their ground in and even to stand out within the show. A photograph shows Stern standing proudly by the sculptures *Grief* (**Cat. 10**) and *Kneeling Mother* (**Cat. 12**), each raised on pedestals at some distance from a wall covered in paintings (**Plate 6**).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Man on the Spot” [Pseudonym], “Stern Exhibition – A Surprise,” *The Cape Times*, February 7, 1936, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> For reasons that are impossible to determine, the medium listed in the catalogue for three of these four sculptures is “fired clay.”

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix E.1** for a transcription of the catalogue. As I explain in the appendix on Stern’s sculptural materials (**A.1.2**), it is more likely that Stern used wonderstone and verdite.

<sup>4</sup> Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers followed closely on the heels of a highly successful exhibition at Johannesburg’s Criterion Restaurant, which had drawn an impressive three thousand visitors in two weeks (“Irma Stern to Exhibit in Johannesburg,” *The Rand Daily Mail*, May 14, 1935).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 3.** Irma Stern in her studio at the Firs, 1936, photograph, 13 x 16 cm,  
Source: "The Man on the Spot: Artists and their Studios," *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 4.** Newspaper Clipping with photographs of  
*Awakening, Contemplation* and *Grief*, 1936,  
newspaper clipping, 20 x 20 cm,  
From: MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1914-1946),  
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

**Plate 6.** Irma Stern with her work at the  
Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town, 1936,  
photograph, 12 x 10.5 cm,  
Source: *The South African Lady's Pictorial*,  
March 1936, National Library of South Africa,  
Cape Town.



All fourteen works on display appear to have been sculpted in the few months between November 1935 and March 1936.<sup>5</sup> This period of intense productivity marked the beginning of a ten-year span of sculptural creation, during which Stern produced roughly forty to fifty works. She displayed sculptures alongside her paintings in three other exhibitions: the first was held at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg in October 1936, and the others were held in Cape Town in 1939 and 1945.<sup>6</sup> Each of these shows was well attended, with the opening nights drawing a wide cast of Cape Town's elite, and with prominent local personalities delivering the opening speeches. Critics were almost uniformly enthusiastic, seizing on what they saw as a sudden shift to the third dimension and invoking it to buttress claims they had already been making about the artist's supposedly unparalleled ability to capture her African models in their "natural state" with both "sympathy" and "dynamism."<sup>7</sup> Stern's shift to sculpture was presented and perceived as the confirmation of her pre-eminence in the South African art world.

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The press photographs of Irma Stern with her sculptures certainly show a woman entirely different from the one who stared agonizingly into the camera in 1922. In both photographs, Stern is quietly imperious: she appears calm and collected, with brows relaxed, carriage loosened, and eyes at ease. These photographs show a woman with no qualms about being photographed for the world to see. However, what we know of Stern's early beginnings as a sculptress gives us cause to be sceptical about these ostensible signs of confidence. It also gives us reason to question her decision to take up sculpture once more, and in an entirely new set of materials.

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<sup>5</sup> As I will show later in this chapter, the earliest traceable reference to Stern's sculpting activities dates to November 1935. The evidence available suggests that she created at least four other sculptures in wonderstone before the year's end, namely the works *Native Figure* (Cat. 21), *Eve* (Cat. 22), *Girl with Lamp-holder* (Cat. 23), and *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24). It is impossible to know when she began to engage in cement casting. In any event, the brevity of the period when she was in her studio in 1935 and 1936 suggests that she must have been carving, modelling, and casting either in parallel or in close succession, while also painting.

<sup>6</sup> Stern never exhibited her sculptures in Europe, probably much to her dismay, keen as she was on maintaining a transcontinental reputation. The catalogue for her 1937 exhibition at London's Lambert House informed visitors that "Stern [had] as of late taken up modelling, but the casts were too unwieldy for transport" (Clipping from "South Africa," MSC 31:18).

<sup>7</sup> "Naturelle-leww as Kunsmotief: Irma Stern lewer ook beeldhouwerk: wend nuwe medium met baie moontlikhede aan," *Die Burger*, March 3, Cape Town, p. 8.

The only explanation Stern offered about her shift to the third dimension is to be found in an article published by the *Rand Daily Mail* on April 4, 1936:

Miss Stern [said] yesterday that she had always felt that representation in a two-dimensional medium was not full enough. Especially in her drawings of natives she had always felt that the work was incomplete because of the limits that the medium imposed upon the expression of form in the round. She therefore decided to make an incursion into the kindred art of sculpture.

Stern's explanation is confined to the materiality of the medium. However, I propose to show that this justification is itself insufficient. Indeed, I believe it is more important to see her turn to sculpture as an attempt at mending some of the connections that were broken in Umgababa in 1922: namely, her identification with the art form and her subjects. On this account, Stern's turn to sculpture in 1935 points to a need to repair by (giving the impression of) building, or to a need to salvage by (giving the impression of) expanding. The materiality of her sculptures is a useful clue in this regard: for what material is more solid, more enduring, more recalcitrant – and less slimy – than stone?

My analysis in this chapter will be divided into two sections: in the first, I offer a broad overview of Stern's personal and artistic trajectory of the years 1923 through 1932. In the second, I focus on the events of the years 1933 through 1935 in order to shed light on the potential triggers of her sculptural turn. This historical-biographical account provides the contextual foundation for the two following chapters, in which I engage a focused analysis of Stern's two bodies of sculptural works of 1935-1945, in cast cement (Chapter 5) and carved wonderstone and verdite (Chapter 6).

#### **4.1. A cross-continental ascent to fame: before Stern's sculptural turn (1923-1932)**

If Stern's dual attachment to Europe and to Africa was arguably at the source of her self-dissolution in 1922, then it is also what allowed her to build her career in the years that followed. Although we have seen how they likely impacted her on a subjective level, neither her experience at Ashbey's nor that at Umgababa shook her resolve to predicate her artistic identity on her pictorial portrayals of African subjects. The story of how Stern ascended to fame over the years 1923 to 1933 is thus essentially the story of how she exploited her connections to her two home continents in order to build her reputation as a modern artist: devoting herself with what

appears to have been increasing confidence to her art, travelling extensively, developing an increasing business savvy, and building strategic connections. It is also the story of how she shaped and simultaneously benefited from the country's gradual acceptance of modernism. These developments played out against the backdrop of several important historical shifts in South Africa: the consolidation of a white middle class, united by common aspirations to a modern settler identity; the entrenchment of segregationist ideology and policy; and, consequently, the development of a set of discourses, anchored in liberal political thought, which alleged the "vanishing" of traditional African cultures. These factors will emerge as decisive in Stern's reception and career strategies.

#### **4.1.1. *Mending ties (1923-1925)***

Just a few months after she completed *Das Umgababa Buch* in 1923, Stern organized an exhibition of her Umgababa paintings at the Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin. The show was a success, as critics responded favourably to her new representations of a colourful, exotic Africa. Shortly after the exhibition closed, Stern boasted to her friend Trude Bosse that she had sold a painting for eight million marks.<sup>8</sup> This success appears to have solidified her resolve to continue working as an Expressionist. One of her most positive journal entries dates from this period and confirms her developing sense of aggrandized responsibility as a modernist working between two cultures: "And I brought all this manifold beauty [of Africa] to the poor sun-starved people – and they thanked me for it" (c. 1923-24: 48-49). She went on to hold exhibitions in Frankfurt, Chemnitz, Leipzig, and Vienna, and concluded her European tour with a visit to Paris and a showing at the 1923 Empire Exhibition in London.

After returning to South Africa in 1924, she went with her parents on an extensive tour, which took them to the western and northern parts of the Transvaal, Natal, as well as neighbouring Mozambique and Swaziland. She exhibited the paintings from this trip in an exhibition at Ashbey's in 1925. The show attracted a large number and variety of viewers, "among them people who never think of coming to an art gallery in the ordinary way," as Hilda Purwitsky, the critic who was later to become a friend of the artist's, reported in *The Zionist*

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<sup>8</sup> Letter to Trude Bosse, November 7, 1923, translated and quoted in Schoeman: 82.

*Record*.<sup>9</sup> Reactions to the show were as impassioned as they had been in 1922, but slightly less negative. In her description of the exhibition, Purwitsky wrote of “colours, wild, shrieking, crude, fling[ing] themselves at the onlooker” and “grotesque, malformed brown bodies slowly detach[ing] themselves from the closely packed conglomeration with clamorous suggestions of customs entirely un-European.” And while headlines such as “Freak Picture Exhibition” and “Ugliness as a Cult” did ring in once more, there was the occasional plaudit. The critic for *The Cape Argus* dubbed Stern a “revolutionary” and opined that “one can quite understand these pictures shocking suburbia – but they are indisputably fine. Say what you will, there is a tremendous individuality in these paintings that you cannot escape.”<sup>10</sup>

Stern’s 1922 exhibition at Ashbey’s is commonly cited as a major catalyst for the South African art world’s embrace of modernism (Arnold 1995: 20; Walker 2009: 77). However, the shift in the rhetoric surrounding her exhibitions is also consistent with broader and related developments in South African society. The mid-1920s are usually viewed as a turning point in the consolidation of a modern white settler identity in South Africa. Age-old tensions between the Afrikaner and British communities, which had been brought to the fore at the founding of the Union in 1910, gradually began to abate in the post-war years, as the rapid development of the manufacturing and industrial sectors fed into dreams of technological, economic, and moral grandeur (Foster 2008: 34). This burgeoning South Africanism was, in Jeremy Foster’s words, “grounded in the belief that differences between English speakers and Afrikaans speakers could be sublimated to produce a common imperial South African identity,” compatible at once with the nation’s enduring ties to the Commonwealth and with its claims to singularity.<sup>11</sup> The English and Afrikaners were also joined by new immigrants from Europe, who came to South Africa in large numbers in the years after the war. They too were interested in taking part in the efflorescence of the southern nation, although they were also keen to maintain their cultural and intellectual ties to Europe (Foster 2008: 34). This double-edged nationalism was favourable for Irma Stern, as it created the conditions for her to promote her art on the grounds of its success in Europe and of its relevance in South Africa.

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<sup>9</sup> Hilda Purwitsky, “A South African Woman Painter: the Work of Irma Stern,” *The Zionist Record*, July 17, 1925.

<sup>10</sup> Gambodge, “The Revolutionary Irma Stern,” *The Cape Argus*, November 10, 1924, Cape Town.

<sup>11</sup> Foster also cites a number of external factors as contributing to the cohesion of a sense of white national identity during the 1920s, including the clarification of the nation’s territorial boundaries and increased international attention that invited white South Africans to see themselves through others’ eyes (2008: 37).

Also favourable were evolving debates surrounding the development of the “native study” as a genre. This development occurred across the aesthetic disciplines. On the side of photography, Alfred Duggan-Cronin and others set up practice in the mid-1920s with the explicit task of documenting South Africa’s “native life.” Duggan-Cronin’s 1928 series *The Bavenda* is particularly representative of the genre of photographic native studies. In photographs such as *Venda Water Carriers at Sibasa* from his 1928 series *The Bavenda* (**Figure 27**), Duggan-Cronin staged his African subjects in poses evocative of classical statuary and set them against vast, rural landscapes, to which he lent a distinctively atmospheric quality through his use of soft focus and gentle lighting (Godby 2010: 63). Meanwhile, on the side of the arts establishment, escalating pressures for the development of a truly “national art” coalesced with those that demanded the creation of a school of figure painters to counteract the established landscape painting tradition (Hillebrand 1986: 1; Proud 2002: 30). A significant development in this direction occurred in 1926, as the German industrialist Karl Gundelfinger introduced a prize of twenty guineas to be awarded at the Natal Society of Artists’ July Exhibition for the “best painting of native life” (Proud 2002: 30). As the critic Vermillion put it, the impetus behind the prize was to encourage artists to “go out into the kraals<sup>12</sup> to study Native life and find the inspiration that will distinguish South African art.”<sup>13</sup> This inspiration was, naturally, constrained by the demands of the academic art tradition, for “the best painting” could only be one that depicted the African as an idealized type. The painter Alfred Palmer offered this rationalization for paintings such as his 1935 *Zulu Mother* (**Figure 28**): “I don’t go after the common type... That is the trouble. Why should I take the coarse, animal, brutal negroid type when I can find a higher, finer type?”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Originally an Afrikaans and Dutch word signifying an enclosure for cattle or other livestock, “kraal” is also used in South African English to refer to the type of dispersed homestead characteristic of Nguni-speaking peoples of Southern Africa. It also refers to the social unit inhabiting the structures surrounding the enclosure. In KwaZulu Natal, the kraal consists of a number of huts arranged in a circle around a cattle corral.

<sup>13</sup> “Great July Exhibition,” *Natal Mercury*, July 10, 1926.

<sup>14</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1926, quoted in Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2001: 38.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 27.** Alfred-Martin Duggan-Cronin, *Venda Water-Carriers at Sibasa*, Plate XI from *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa: the Bavenda*, 1928, photograph.

**Figure 28.** Alfred Palmer, *Zulu Mother*, 1925, oil on canvas, dimensions and location unknown.

The many forms of the “native study” shared a set of common objectives and formal features. First and foremost was a concern for “documenting native life,” with “native life” being understood in a very narrow sense: not the life of the miner, not the life of the domestic worker, not the life of the slum dweller, but systematically that of the rural, tribalized African. Across all visual media, the Africans portrayed are shown in rural settings from which all references to the industrial world are erased – a construction that naturally reinforced the idea that the Africans were “of the land” and by implication at a more primitive stage of social and technological development than whites (Peffer 2006: 16). Simultaneously, representations of Africans were consistently beautifying and idealizing, visually constructing their subjects in poses reminiscent of European art while effacing all signs of individuality. In short, the visual culture of South African subjects displayed what historian Paul Stuart Landau describes as distinctive features of colonial representational practices: “Because images of deindividuated people were and nearly always are images of the disempowered, the pinnacle of authenticity in colonial representations

of Africans would be a ‘revealing’ portrait of a distanced and generalized figure” (Landau 2002: 152). As we shall see, Stern would use her modernist representational idiom to create new conceptions of “authenticity” in the aesthetic representation of Africans in South Africa.

Historian Premesh Lalu states that the “general interest in native life” that rose in the mid-1920s can be explained in terms of the “increasing disciplinization of the native in a rapidly industrializing South Africa” (2009: 177). Indeed, Africans were moving in increasing numbers toward the cities, as conditions on the reserves were inexorably declining. Most reserves were carrying such a heavy concentration of people and livestock that the original vegetation was disappearing, streams and waterholes were drying up, and the soil was eroding at a dramatic rate (Thompson 2000: 163). These conditions brought about the collapse of African farming and, as historian Nigel Worden observes, “made a mockery of the idealized perception that the reserves could be a repository of a ‘traditional’ way of life for all Africans” (1994: 78). Because these conditions brought to the fore the failure of white supremacist attempts to manage African lives and livelihoods, they precipitated what can be called a veritable crisis in the “Native Question.”

It was precisely in response to this crisis that social anthropology stepped in to promulgate the very same idealized portrayal of “traditional culture.” The discipline had begun to establish itself in South Africa in the early 1920s: the prominent British anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Browne was invited to set up a course in social anthropology at the newly-formed University of Cape Town in 1921<sup>15</sup> and the same year saw the launch of “Bantu Studies” at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (Kuper 2007: 27). Over the course of the 1920s, social anthropology increasingly came to supplant physical anthropology, which had essentially posited race as the determinant of human identity and thus as the basis for the management of the “native.” The school of thought that Radcliffe-Browne brought from Britain capitalized on the contradictions that were increasingly being identified in the epistemological foundations of the physical model,<sup>16</sup> in order to advance the notion of “culture” as explicative of human behaviour (Dubow 1995: 54). Social anthropology was to be understood as the “comparative study of social structures” or “cultures” which, in turn, were to be understood as integrated and holistic systems,

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<sup>15</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Browne held the first chair in social anthropology anywhere in the British Empire (Kuper 2007: 20).

<sup>16</sup> See Saul Dubow’s chapter in *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* for an extensive discussion of this topic (1995).

such that any change to one part would have repercussions for the rest of the system (Kuper 2007: 21). Incorporating the structural-functionalist thought of Bronislaw Malinowski and the cultural relativist thought of Franz Boas, this model provided a compelling means of addressing the issue of “culture contact” in an industrializing South Africa and conceptualized the danger of such “contact” leading to the “vanishing” of African cultures (Gillespie 2011: 506).

Radcliffe-Browne articulated the most basic tenet that was to guide discourse on “vanishing” African cultures when he stated that whites had “inaugurated something that must change the whole of [Africans’] social life” (quoted in Kuper 2007: 21). One of his most vocal disciples and a figure who was in fact to play a crucial role in both academia and policy-making circles was the anthropologist Winifred Hoernlé. In her 1923 article, “The Primitive,” she defined the position that was to gather many liberals around the idea of a “benevolent” form of segregation, seen as the only way through which “separate but equal” races could be prevented from disintegrating, losing their purity and contaminating one another:

A primitive people, when it comes into contact with white civilization, experiences a more or less rapid, and more or less complete, disintegration of its culture, and its problem is to build out of the ruins of the old and the fragmentary acquisition of the new, a set of beliefs and behaviour patterns by which adults can successfully meet the problems of their adult lives (1923: 332).

The discipline of anthropology thus conveniently provided what anthropologist Kelly Gillespie calls “a field of knowledge upon which interventions in governance could be explained” and segregation justified (2011: 507).

By giving visual form to the “knowledge” of the African propounded by the field of anthropology, the aesthetic disciplines played a decisive role in buttressing the discourse of the “vanishing culture”: essentially, they allowed white publics to visualize the African as a non-threatening, distant entity who existed in a temporal sphere dissociated from that of the modern industrial economy. As Premesh Lalu explains, photographs such as Duggan-Cronin’s mobilized the motifs of “nostalgia, melancholy, and a sense of loss” (2009: 177) and “reinvented the category of the ‘tribe’ as the site of lost history” (2009: 180). Likewise, the paintings of beautified African subjects that were to lay the basis for a “distinctively South African art” made it possible for white publics to envision a modern white South African nationhood that could go on building itself unthreatened by the “modernization” of African subjectivities or by the



collective mobilization of Africans in the cities. These developments represent a rise in interest in African life that would prove essential to Irma Stern's career development.

#### 4.1.2. *Strategic self-promotion and first signs of success (1926)*

The year 1926 marks an important shift in Stern's professional trajectory, as it was then that she began to assert publicly her identity as a modern South African artist and that she was embraced as one in turn. This essentially involved capitalizing on the singularizing rhetoric that was already circulating about her to incite the public to view her as a unique asset to South Africa rather than as an impudent eccentric from Europe. Thus, in April and June, she published two articles for the daily paper *The Cape Argus* in which she offered an account of her life story as a basis for explaining her choice of subject matter and her approach to art in general.

In "My Exotic Models," published in April, Stern's focus was on justifying her choice of subject matter. To this end she embedded in her romanticized narrative of artistic evolution a clear argument about the legitimacy and the value of her paintings of African subjects. She opened her article with a scarcely concealed retort to her South African critics, stating:

People have often said why do you paint such a lot of native pictures? What do you see in them? These questions seem to me such strange ones. From my earliest childhood the native has been an element in my life that has given me joy. When I was a tiny child I sat on the clay floor of our farm house right away on the high veld, and opposite to me sat a native boy who played the concertina for me and showed me how to dance the native dances; and when I went to Europe to visit my grandparents I danced the same native dances and sang the tunes. [...] Then, in later days, our natives who worked for us in the house told me fairy tales of their tribes [...]. Thus our black brother folk have always been a distinct source of joy to me.<sup>17</sup>

In the next paragraph, she brazenly described her years in Europe as a period of exile from the "land of sunshine, radiant colours" and "beautiful, happy brown people," and indicated that it had been there that she had devoted her art to African subject matter.

The thrust of Stern's article, however, lay in describing and explaining the methods that she employed to represent "Africa and all its overwhelming, rugged, vast beauty." In these sections, Stern adopted the posture of the ethnographer, delivering a series of anecdotes and trite observations about the various types that she had encountered in her travels: the Swazis, she

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<sup>17</sup> Stern, "My Exotic Models," *The Cape Argus*, April 3, 1926.

claimed, were “especially merry,” while the “graceful figures” of the Indians “touched [her] imagination and awakened the atmosphere of the Far East.” Indeed, she clearly asserted, in highly essentialist terms, that an integral part of her artistic process involved “trying to understand [...] all that constitute[d] the special character of [her] exotic models”: their “life, their psychology, their superstitions.” Predictably, her focus was more on herself than on her models, whom she thoroughly exoticized in her descriptions:

In each new place it is very difficult to get the first native to pose for me. If I try surreptitiously to sketch a group of women and their babies, they will run away as quickly as possible and cover up their little ones to protect them from the evil eye of the white person. But once I find a plucky soul who, out of curiosity, will stand for me in a pose I wish, crowds and crowds will come and also want to be drawn, and if through lack of time I cannot draw them all, the faces of those left out will drop even though I give them the same reward as the others. I generally go about with bags of sugar sticks, matches, and cigarettes – sugar sticks please them all.

This pseudo-ethnographic section of “My Exotic Models” contains a reference to her sculpting activities on the reserves. What is more, this anecdote appears to be drawn directly from the chapter in *Das Umgababa Buch* that describes Stern’s experience at the potter’s hut. However, Stern chose not to share her recollections of her failed attempt at sculpting but, rather, the success story that followed:

One day I was busy polishing a piece of clay sculpture when I heard the native shouting in distress: “A dead man’s head, look at the dead man” and I realized they were afraid of the clay head I had modelled.

While Stern’s inclusion of this anecdote confirms that the Umgababa episode left a mark on her, it also shows how she exploited these memories for the purposes of publicity: in this case, she cast her African models as superstitious people incapable of discerning and much less appreciating naturalistic images, while setting herself up as a proficient master of their own, allegedly primitive medium. In this way, Stern’s descriptions must be understood as enacting what James Clifford calls the ethnographer’s “specific strategy of authority,” whereby he or she claims to be the purveyor of truth by “evoking a participatory presence, a sensitive contact with the world to be understood, a rapport to its people, [and] a concreteness of perception” (1988: 25). Stern’s description of her sculptural activity, like the rest of her narrative, should indeed be seen as a strategic inclusion, selected to assert her authoritative knowledge of South Africa’s rural African populations and, above all, her authority to represent them. She cemented this posturing in her closing statement:

It is only through personal contact that one can get a few glimpses into the hidden depths of the primitive and childlike yet rich soul of the native, and this soul is what I try to reflect in my pictures of South Africa.

Implicit in this statement is a desire on her part for her modernist pictures to be seen as providing something that ethnographical accounts on “cultures” and other variants of “the native study” did not. Indeed, with this statement, Stern can be seen to have been making a critical link between her artistic process, her modernist idiom, and the virtues of aesthetic insight into the “souls” of Africans.

It is also worth examining how Stern’s claims in “My Exotic Models” were complemented by those that she gave in “How I Began to Paint” three months later. In the June article, Stern situated her choice of African subject matter in the context of a broader artistic trajectory that was clearly informed by romantic conceptions of the artist’s vocation and subjectivity. After rhapsodizing anew about her early childhood on the High Veld, noting how its “vast largeness” had been “one of her first impressions of this world so full of beauty,” and explaining how it had grounded her need to “express something unknown,” she reviewed the tribulations of her early years and the frustrations she had suffered in the German school system, only to describe her “salvation” in Max Pechstein. Her narrative built up to a symphonic ending:

I am happy to say that my work is still the greatest pleasure of my life. Each day brings along new problems and teaches me the lesson that learning will never end. But this persistingly [sic] pushing forwards towards a new goal which seems to retire further and further is a source of continual and never-ceasing interest and a painfully sweet satisfaction to me. The more I strive, the better I grasp the eternal truth of Michelangelo’s beautiful words: ‘he alone will obtain the mastership [sic] who penetrates the depths of art and life.’

Read together, Stern’s two articles can be understood as a cohesive statement of artistic purpose. Although the artist does not state explicitly what her receding goal might be in “How I Began to Paint,” one might assume that it is none other than the objective she named in “My Exotic Models”: to “reflect the souls” of South Africa’s African populations.

In tandem with her essentializing use of the term “native,” which was consistent with the vocabulary of her time, Stern’s all-encompassing use of the term “soul” brings to mind those discourses which describe Africans as semi-animal creatures who are bound to the land, supposedly connected to it through their practice of manual agriculture and animistic beliefs, as well as their lack of reliance on the mediating processes of technology and industry (Peterson 2011: x). Indeed, Stern’s rhetoric on the “soul” of her subjects resonates with a set of discourses

that deny the possibility of conceptualizing African interiority in the same terms as that of the Western subject. As literary scholar Carla Peterson explains in her discussion of the doctrine propounded by nineteenth-century abolitionists in the United States, the tenets of “romantic racialism” (her term) stringently “circumscribed the capacities of African interiority” by “celebrat[ing] Africans for a naïve spirituality [... while] perceiv[ing them] as immutably fixed in a state of childhood, unselfconscious, inarticulate, and hence incapable of mature self-representation” (2011: x).

Stern’s self-promotion strategies worked. Only a week after the publication of “How I Began to Paint,” the paper *The Zionist Record* published an article that not only reiterated but indeed validated the arguments Stern had articulated in her own. This article, which was in effect the first wholeheartedly positive critique of Stern’s work, was penned by Robert Feldman, at the time a young critic and left-wing activist who, with his wife Freda, was later to become one of Stern’s closest friends and confidants.<sup>18</sup> The opening statement summarily announces what were to become the main tenets of the exceptionalizing discourse that developed in the latter half of the 1920s. Feldman pronounces Stern “an essentially South African artist” with special insight into the “native soul” whose work sows the seeds of the South African nation building project, thus corroborating Stern’s own arguments:

The work of Irma Stern interests us not only as those of a modern impressionist, but also of an essentially South African artist. It is not enough to paint South African landscapes and scenes, South African people or animals. One must know the very soul of that which is South African. And Irma Stern understands the South African native.<sup>19</sup>

Feldman’s article is also useful insofar as it shows that what was sought in representations of South African “souls” was their essential difference from the souls of whites, epitomized in their different types of sadness:

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<sup>18</sup> A member of the Jewish Lithuanian community in South Africa, Feldman devoted his life and work to advocacy for Socialist and Zionist causes. He was a member of the South African Labour Party, a party that represented the interests of the white working class. As a founding member of the local branch of the Zionist Socialist movement, he was instrumental in establishing the South African branch of the international training organization *Ort*. His devotion to educational causes and his liberal views on racial questions also led him to contribute to several boards and funds that aimed to provide schooling and bursaries to African students in Johannesburg. He wrote prolifically in English throughout his life, regularly publishing a wide range of articles on current political and cultural matters in local newspapers and journals. His and Freda’s Johannesburg home was a central meeting place for the city’s Yiddish-speaking communities and for the white left-leaning intelligentsia. As Claudia Braude notes, it was also Stern’s “obvious cultural home in Johannesburg” (2006: 52). Stern stayed with the couple regularly throughout the 1930s and 1940s and her letters reveal the deep affection she had for them.

<sup>19</sup> “Irma Stern’s new paintings,” *The Zionist Record*, June 18, p. 21.

Irma Stern is the first to reveal to us the soul of Africa's black children. We view the scores of native studies and wonder. Where has the artist seen such childish simplicity, and such unconscious sadness? Is the artist guilty of a tendency to express her sympathy with the native? Why does her impressionism bring out the unfavourable traits in her European models, and the simple and good of the natives? In the sadness of her European models we read ambition, suffering, hope, and despair. In the sadness of her native models (and Miss Stern's native women all have a sad look about them), we behold the desolateness of Africa's wide horizons, the cheerlessness of an African twilight. The native in his own surroundings is still nature's unspoilt child with a facial expression that is free of pose.<sup>20</sup>

Feldman was presumably describing paintings such as Stern's *Swazi Youth* (1927) (**Figure 29**). The downward skew of the figure's neck, the slight furrow of her brow, and the narrow slant of her eyes do lend an undeniable pathos that is further amplified by the sweeping lines and curvilinear forms with which she is rendered.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 29.** Irma Stern, *Swazi Youth*, 1927, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 97.5 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

By the end of 1926, Irma Stern was cultivating roots in South Africa, both on personal and professional levels. On April 1, 1926, she married Dr. Johannes Prinz, her erstwhile tutor and a recent appointee to the Department of German at the University of Cape Town. However, while Prinz had been the object of her wandering teenage affections in Germany, the prospect of marrying him in 1926 appears to have left her more or less indifferent. To Trude Bosse, she wrote rather flatly: "My husband and I get on well together – that's the main thing."<sup>21</sup> In fact, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Trude Bosse, July 13, 1926, translated and quoted in Schoeman 1994: 88.

union appears to have been mostly a marriage of convenience for Stern: it might have been appealing because it allowed her to leave the house of her parents, which she had always found oppressive, and to settle in one of her own. Early in 1927, she purchased, in her own name, a double-storeyed Victorian house named the Firs, on Chapel Road in Rosebank. With its large garden, its view over the Cape Flats, and its ample interior spaces, this house was to become Stern's personal and artistic haven, and she soon began to fill it with the multitude of objects she was amassing on her scavenging missions through European thrift shops and her travels into Africa. It soon became the subject of lore in Cape Town. Many critics, artists, and members of high society reported with enchantment in the years that followed on the confounding medley of objects they beheld while sipping tea and munching cream puffs with the singular artist.

#### ***4.1.3. Straight shooting (1927-1932)***

In 1927, the momentum Stern had gathered over ten years in Europe propelled her to fame. Her ascent began with the publication of Max Osborn's monograph for the well-established *Junge Kunst* ("Young Art") series, which placed her among the ranks of such eminent artists as Pechstein, Grosz, Modersohn-Becker, and even Picasso, who had been featured in the issue immediately preceding Stern's.<sup>22</sup> In this short text, the German critic borrowed liberally from Stern's "My Exotic Models" and asserted the authenticity and exoticism of her renderings of South Africa:

Perhaps many of those who saw the first exhibitions of Irma Stern – the first was in 1919 – thought that here was another of those artists who had made a trip to the equator in search of new experiences and material. Anyone, however, who had followed the work of the young artist and understood the wonderful and great familiarity with the life from which her pictures of South Africa were created, soon saw that hers was quite another case. A unique case! Not as a guest, not on a trip to study conditions and life did Irma Stern pass through this land so distant from us and still so dark – This was her home. [...] And this is [what] has given her an individual position in the art world. (1927: 24)

The critic's facts may have been inaccurate and his reasoning misguided, but his conclusion was correct. Stern's April show at the Gurlitt gallery was reviewed together with those by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and the young George Grosz, who were also exhibiting in Berlin at the same

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<sup>22</sup> Max Osborn (1890-1946) was the art critic for the *Vossische Zeitung* (one of Germany's oldest and most widely circulated papers) between 1914 and 1933. He fled Nazi Germany in 1935, living first in Palestine, then in Paris. He finally emigrated to the United States in 1941.

time (Schoeman 1994: 96). She was awarded the prestigious *Diplôme d'honneur* at the Exposition Internationale des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux held that year, and her exhibitions in Paris and Breslau were well received.

In keeping with the trends of South African cultural self-definition that had been building over the course of the 1920s, Stern's accolades from abroad cemented her reputation in the southern nation. On October 18, 1927, shortly after the publication of Osborn's monograph, *The Cape Argus* published an article, "Germany Confers Honour on Cape Town Artist: Irma Stern Included in *Junge Kunst* series," in which the critic observed that the artist's "handling of native types made the connoisseurs overseas joyous." Her ascent to fame was swift: the national press began to track her every move across the country, galleries and museums began to seek out her works, and the South African government itself extended its support. The year 1929 was pivotal: the South African National Gallery purchased its first Irma Stern in anticipation of its opening in 1930, and the artist was selected to represent South Africa at the Empire Exhibition in London.

While it is important to recognize the extent to which Stern's shift from infamy to fame in South Africa originated in Europe, it is essential to bear in mind the local circumstances that framed this ascent. Specifically, the consolidation of her reputation as a modern South African artist at the close of the 1920s played out against the strengthening of the ideals of modern, white, South African nationhood that gained momentum in the mid-1920s. The publics with whom Stern had begun to network in the early 1920s had, by the end of the decade, coalesced into a genuine middle class, bound by a common interest in seeing their country represented on the international scene. For instance, 1929 was the year when the South African Association for the Advancement of Science convened a joint congress with the British Association in Cape Town and Johannesburg, the first since 1905. The discussions, which centred on South Africa's achievements in the realm of scientific knowledge production and technological advancement, were decisive both in defining South Africans as "Western" and in asserting the African origins of humankind (Dubow 1995: 13).<sup>23</sup> Two years later, the Statute of Westminster would give legal sanction to South Africa's newly won autonomy within the British Empire.

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<sup>23</sup> The event was attended among others by the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius and the French archaeologist Abbé Breuil, two figures who likely influenced Stern's collecting practices in the 1930s and 1940s. While it is not certain that Stern met the Abbé Breuil at this time, it is likely that she met Frobenius, for her correspondence

Historians have noted that it was around 1930 that a substantial shift occurred in the meaning of the “racial question” in South Africa, as the phrase ceased to refer to tensions between English and Dutch or Afrikaans speakers and began to denote instead those between whites on the one hand and Africans and Coloureds on the other (Foster 2008: 34). As the country weathered the Great Depression, the white community developed a sense of unity that was largely based on widely shared racial fears. This unity was of course shallow and circumstantial, for enduring Afrikaner resentment toward British and Jewish capitalists, exacerbated by the depression and compounded by differing views over the “solution” to the “native question,” would eventually explode again in the mid-1930s following the establishment of a British-Afrikaner coalition government under Jan Smuts and J.B.M. Hertzog. Yet this sense of a common white destiny was sufficient to ensure that segregationist ideology and policy were entrenched by the late 1920s and early 1930s. The same year that saw Irma Stern propelled to international prominence (1927) saw the passing of the Native Administration Act, which effectively re-tribalized people by placing them under the direct authority of a chief who himself reported to two “Supreme Chiefs”: the Governor General and the Native Affairs Department (Worden 1995: 74).

By 1932, Stern was famous both in South Africa and Europe. While Expressionism had given way to the more sober *Neue Sachlichkeit* in Germany, her exhibitions of pictures of exotic Africa continued to appeal. In South Africa, she had managed to negotiate a profitable balance between fame and sheer provocativeness: some continued to be rebuffed by her art, but most were won over, many even fascinated. In 1931, a critic for the Johannesburg *Star* proclaimed: “To Miss Stern I think goes the honour of being the pioneer painter in this country where native types are concerned.”<sup>24</sup> And in the same year, the South African Society of Artists – that long-time bastion of conservatism, many of whose members had decried Stern’s first exhibition in 1922 – recognized her contribution to the nation’s art by electing her a member. However, as Hayden Proud writes, “Stern was too strong an individual to be either contained or in need of the supportive bonds of any society” (2002: 52). Although she was never to participate in any of the union’s exhibitions, her membership was useful to the extent that it allowed her to build a

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contains a letter from him in which he makes reference to a meeting (MSC 31:2/7). Stern’s relationships with these two men will be covered in more depth in Chapter 6.

<sup>24</sup> A.M.S., “Veld and Native Through the Eyes of the Modern Painter,” June 6.



network with the powerful, mostly male powerbrokers who controlled public access to South African art and thus to expand the market for her paintings (Walker 2009: 106). And as capital flowed into white pockets, this market did indeed expand.

#### **4.2. Stern's sculptural turn (1933-1935)**

It was precisely when Irma Stern's identity as a transnational artist had been secured that its foundations were shaken. Stern's capacity to stride two continents and cultures came to an abrupt halt with the Nazis' accession to power on January 30, 1933.

##### **4.2.1. *The rupture with Germany***

The Nazis' policy of systematic anti-Semitic persecution was rapidly deployed: on April 1, 1933, the first boycott of Jewish businesses took place, and by May 10 "un-German" books were being burned on the Opernplatz (now Bebelplatz) in Berlin. It was not long before Irma Stern's closest colleagues in the German art world, Max Pechstein among them, were branded "degenerate" and their work censored, confiscated, and destroyed. Stern herself was directly affected by the Nazis' notorious anti-modernist policies. LaNitra Michele Walker has shown that the inventory of confiscated works includes several titles bearing the name "Stern" that could plausibly be ascribed to Irma. Two prints, *Erdgeist* ("Earth Spirit") and *Negerin* ("Black Woman"), were featured in the *Entartete Kunst* ("Degenerate Art") and *Ewige Jude* ("Eternal Jew") exhibitions held in Munich in 1937-1938, and *Sumerun* ("Sumerian Man") and *Afrikanistische Szene* ("African Scene") were burned (Walker 2009: 108).

It is not certain that the artist was aware of these confiscations or destructions, but the new political climate inevitably affected her in highly personal ways. Although her family was culturally assimilated and she did not identify strongly with her Jewish roots, her contacts in Germany, as in South Africa, belonged largely to the Jewish community. While she was rarely one to make reference to the political events of her time, she confided as early as April 24, 1933, in her long-time friend and correspondent Trude Bosse (still living in Einbeck at the time): "I get

terribly frightened when I think of Germany's future – so much hatred that has to be overcome and so much blood that has to be shed" (quoted in Dubow 1971: 105). Her rupture with the German language and her definitive switch to English are especially eloquent: as Karel Schoeman points out, from 1933, all of the notes and captions in her scrapbook are in English, a shift that was never to be reversed (Schoeman 1994: 111). Even when the war had ended and she could resume her correspondence with Bosse, she would rhetorically ask: "Do you know that I can barely write German anymore?" (quoted in Schoeman 1994: 111).

Although Stern continued to travel to Europe until 1937, she never returned to the country where she had grown up. In the same letter to Trude Bosse, she wrote:

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

In Schoeman's words, "[1933] marked the end of the world that Irma Stern had known," namely the end of the arrangement that had facilitated her cross-continental artistic development (1994: 107). For twelve years, South Africa was to be her one and only home.

The importance of this rupture for Stern's life and career should not be underestimated. As of 1933, the artist was obliged to create a professional and personal centre in a country with which she entertained what could at best be called a complex relationship. While she had by this time made a niche in Capetonian society, her disdain for the people she had called "petty-minded" in 1922 had never subsided, and Europe had remained her cultural centre of gravity. Indeed, the advent of Nazism inaugurated a period of shifts that has led Marion Arnold to describe the mid-1930s as Stern's "midlife crisis" (1995: 20). These included her abrupt decision to divorce her husband on October 25, 1933, as well as her extensive travels in 1933, 1934, and 1935 and, perhaps most prominently, the drastic formal changes that manifested themselves in her paintings. As Arnold has rightfully noted, from 1935 onward Stern paid increasing attention to "transcribing reality, albeit with a fluid painterly mark and concern for colour relationships" (1995: 71). In her own analysis of the artist's trajectory, Andrea Lewis has called the 1930s a decade of "artistic experimentation" (2010: 34).

Stern's decision to sculpt can be understood as another symptom of this crisis. As I hope to show, it is consistent with the other re-directions that she took following 1933.

#### 4.2.2. *New freedoms: Stern's renewed sense of artistic freedom and purpose*

Scholars generally concur that 1933 gave fuel to Stern's purposefulness as an artist and to her desire for artistic freedom. On October 25, she delivered a harsh sentence to her husband of seven years, Dr. Johannes Prinz: "I have come to the conclusion that our marriage is a failure and I have decided to leave you" (quoted in Schoeman 1994: 109). While the precise reasons for the divorce are unknown, it bears noting that Prinz had maintained close connections with his homeland throughout his years in South Africa and seems in fact to have harboured sympathies for the Nazi regime.<sup>25</sup> Karel Schoeman attributes the failure of their marriage to the fact that it was loveless in the first place and suggests that Stern may have found herself hard pressed to reconcile the demands of domesticity and matrimony with the goals she entertained for her career (1994: 109).<sup>26</sup>

The events that followed give credence to this suggestion. With Prinz out of her way, Stern spent longer periods of time at the Firs, ostensibly painting with even more gusto than she had in years past. Her pictorial production swelled to even more prolific proportions, and her exhibitions in South Africa multiplied, after having stagnated for the better part of ten years. Between 1933 and 1935, she held as many shows in South Africa as she had in her first ten years in the country, and the pace was to accelerate in the years that ensued. This was to a large extent a professional necessity, as the dissolution of her ties to Europe meant that she needed to rely wholly on her South African audiences for patronage and support. It was fortunate for her that the South African art world was at this point far better equipped than it ever had been to support her career. The efflorescence of the national economy was bringing capital to South Africa's

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<sup>25</sup> Prinz was in Germany at the time of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of the Third Reich. Although his letters to his wife contain no mention of the change of regime itself, his letter of February 4, 1933, does include the following note: "I have read a great deal lately, but very little that was worthwhile. Let's hope that contemporary literature may also experience a resurgence under Hitler's guiding hand!" (quoted in Schoeman 1994: 107).

<sup>26</sup> Marion Arnold further notes that Prinz was a "cold, unemotional intellectual and a collector of esoteric pornography which he sent to Germany to have bound in tooled leather." To him, "Irma was a little girl, charming, irresponsible, and not to be taken too seriously when moody" (1995: 19).

white middle class and allowing for a significant expansion of the art market. Galleries were flourishing in the country's major cities and other points of sale for the arts were multiplying.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Stern was able to count increasingly on the support of the Jewish community, which was growing in numbers due to the steadily worsening situation in Europe and also becoming increasingly cohesive on account of Afrikaner nationalist hostility and fears of "Jewish unassimilability" (Mendelsohn and Shain 2008: 106). As the adverse climate reinforced their liberal attitudes in politics and the arts, the Jewish community in South Africa made a significant contribution to the growing success and influence of modernism in the 1930s. That is not to say that Stern returned the support in kind. Her connections to the community remained personal and professional, but were never really political. Indeed, LaNitra Michele Walker even suggests that Stern manoeuvred to use her ties to the Jewish community to her own purposes and "craft[ed] a strategy by which she could exploit morally ambiguous positions and politically dangerous situations to advance her career" (2009: 110). Although her remarks to Trude Bosse and her refusal to speak German testify to an acute sense of distress and alienation, she did not become a political artist in 1933: if anything, the rise of Nazism made her more career-focused and opportunistic than ever. Her shift to sculpture in 1935 is arguably consistent with this renewed focus on her career.

#### ***4.2.3. New fears: changes in Stern's relationship with her African models***

The first direct trigger for Stern's 1935 shift to sculpture is arguably to be found in her changing relationship to her models. Her first reaction to the rise of Nazism was to travel to the places that she had long associated with the purity of primitive nature: the reserves. In the same 1933 letter to Trude Bosse in which she had confided her anguish about Germany's future, she also stated: "I am going to the savages and probably I shall meet cultured people there." This pithy statement potently suggests that the advent of Nazism gave new importance and certainly new urgency to Stern's ongoing search for the realization of the ideals of personal integrity,

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<sup>27</sup> The galleries that emerged in the early 1930s included the Argus Gallery, the, Martin Melck House, and City Hall. Some bookstores, including Maskew Miller's Bookshop, H.A.U.M. Bookshop, and I.D. Booksellers, also became important points of sale (Kukard 1992: 56).

community, freedom, and independence that she thought could be found in South Africa's rural African communities.

Leaving in May 1933, she undertook what turned into a five-month-long trip from Cape Town to Namaqualand, across the Transvaal and eventually to Swaziland, only to return disappointed in October. On July 5, the artist relayed her impressions to the *Cape Argus*:

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. He wears Everyman's clothes and boots. He looks odd and drab in this garb, and its unnaturalness seems to have cramped his spirit. The joy of life is no longer there. He seems unhappy in the burden of civilized living. To those of us who saw beauty in the native in his natural state the change is sad.<sup>28</sup>

This was Stern's first in a series of statements in which she explicitly adopted the rhetoric of the "vanishing culture." It was a rhetoric that had, as we have seen, helped considerably in bolstering her ascent to fame, but until then it was not clear whether she had ever taken note of any concrete changes that supported it. Although one could suppose that she made this statement in order to stir the interest of her liberal Capetonian publics, it was more likely an honest expression of shock and dismay at what were indeed significant changes. As we have seen, South Africa was in 1933 at the crest of an economic boom, fuelled largely by the country's abandonment of the gold standard the previous year. With South African exports viable on the international markets once more, the manufacturing industry was exploding and the open-ended demand for additional labour in the cities was causing ever greater numbers of Africans to move there. In the 1930s, the population of cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth increased dramatically, as Africans settled in large numbers on their outskirts, forming the communities that are today named "townships." Because of this exodus, the reserves that Stern found on her 1933 trip would have been considerably smaller than those she visited in 1922.

For reasons that will become clear in the following section, I believe it highly plausible that Stern's expressions of dismay at the changes underway in the reserves preface her decision to sculpt in 1935. Her disillusionment seems to have given new urgency to her search to capture the supposed essence of her African subjects. Much as this need had driven her to the medium in 1922, it may well be that it propelled her to give form to her "disappearing" subjects in 1935.

#### 4.2.4. *New forms: Stern's changing relationship to form and volume*

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<sup>28</sup> "Natives no longer picturesque; woman artist finds them 'civilized' and sad."

As of 1933, the formal developments that had been underway in Stern's pictorial production since the late 1920s consolidated into what scholars have generally termed her mature or "accomplished" style (Arnold 1995: 20). For the jarringly colouristic approach of her early years, she progressively began to trade a more naturalistic style, loosening her line to create more sensuous, shapely silhouettes, relaxing the interdependency of figure and ground to introduce new perspectival depth to her compositions and, above all, reeling in her brazen application of colour to give it a new referential purposefulness. Simultaneously, her compositions became much simpler and her production of portrait-like works substantially increased. While these paintings were systematically given ethnographic titles, they revealed a significantly more probing approach to their subject matter. Indeed, it is Stern's production of the mid-1930s that has typically elicited affirmations of the artist's sensitivity vis-à-vis her African models.

Even Stern's most complex group studies of this period, such as her 1935 *The Water Carriers* (**Figure 30**), are notably mellower in style and mood than were works of similar theme and composition of the previous decade, such as her 1927 *Fruit Carriers* (**Figure 31**). Indeed, while the water carriers' nudity and tribal accoutrements implicitly place them in primordial nature, they are no longer visually conflated with its shrubs or its flowers, and they could just as well be standing against the plain sheet of a portrait studio. Against this simplified background, the association between the figures' nude bodies and the shapely vessels atop their heads becomes more optical than symbolic, and the blackness of the pots further diminishes potential connotations of abundance or fertility. Although the water carriers' faces remain little more differentiated than those of the fruit carriers, they have lost the saucer-like eyes and unnaturally shapely mouths that were characteristic of Stern's expressionistically styled figures. In fact, while they remain half-closed, the eyes of the water carriers do not convey the same mournful and lethargic ennui as those of their fruit-bearing predecessors. It is, rather, the lethargy of an incipient awakening that comes across through the slits between their eyelids, especially so in the almost sly look of the central figure.<sup>29</sup> It is not Stern's rendering of physiognomy but of physique that neutralizes the figures' vivacity. The graceful movement of the fruit carriers is nullified, in the water carriers, into stillness – the stillness, one might even say, of statues.

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<sup>29</sup> The motif of the "awakening" African will be addressed at greater length in Chapter 5.

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[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 30.** Irma Stern, *The Water Carriers*, 1935, oil on canvas, 126 x 79 cm, private collection.

**Figure 31.** Irma Stern, *The Fruit Carriers*, 1927, oil on canvas, 80 x 85.5 cm, The Rupert Family Foundation for the Arts, Stellenbosch.

Scholars and critics such as Arnold have rightfully discussed Stern's shift from bold Expressionism toward a more subtle naturalism in terms of her artistic maturation. However, none has extensively analyzed how this shift reflected a changing rapport to colour, form, and volume. It is a nuance worth noting and examining, I believe, for it brings into focus the way in which Stern's desire to lend greater volume, depth, and solidity to her artworks was bound up in her desire to produce works that offered a penetrating representation of their subject matter at a time when she was concerned that those subjects might, precisely, be disappearing. Indeed, it gives meaning to her 1936 lament about the "limits" that she felt painting imposed upon "the expression of form in the round." By extension, it may provide yet another explanation for her decision to sculpt.

Stern's curiosity about form can arguably be traced back to a spell of dissatisfaction with colour. This dissatisfaction veered toward insecurity, as the following quote from a June 1931 edition of the Johannesburg *Star* makes clear:

It was at her 1930 exhibition in Paris while hanging her pictures that she found that she had difficulty in giving a total impression of her work without repeating her colour schemes. The brown bodies of the natives, with orange, red and green, were domineering colours in her canvases, and this made her think that her palette was limited.<sup>30</sup>

This sentiment grew over the course of the 1930s. In a 1937 letter to the Feldmans, Stern expressed an unbounded admiration for the one artist who is reputed to have explored the relationship between colour and form in the most dedicated and sophisticated fashion: Cézanne. Writing to Richard and Freda from the spa town of Marienbad, in then-Czechoslovakia, where she was making a short pit stop on her cross-European tour, she spoke in glowing terms about her encounter with the artist's work on her recent visit to Paris – all the while snubbing the art of two others:

At present I feel I can do the same as the best here and that is to say the best living and strangely enough Gauguin and mostly Van Gogh seem to me very much like a level I have also reached – not so Cézanne. He has painted pictures before and so unhampered of [sic] the world of the flesh. There is a painting of onionons [sic] in the Louvre.<sup>31</sup> I think it is the best picture painted or shall I say on the level of the highest art. (August 7, 1937)<sup>32</sup>

Stern's self-positioning in relation to Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne clearly brings into focus the direction that she wished for her art. Whereas Van Gogh and Gauguin were, and are, renowned for their contributions to the Impressionist era's "liberation" of colour, Cézanne has consistently stood apart for his characteristically analytic handling of the latter. Marion Arnold has noted that Stern's personal papers contain a scrap of paper on which the artist copied Cézanne's famous dictum: "traiter la nature par le cylindre – la sphère – le cône."<sup>33</sup> Paintings such as *The Water Carriers* may indeed reveal the artist's embrace of the technique of "modulation," which essentially involved the subtle handling of gradations and contrasts of colour for the purpose of illusionistically rendering volume and relief (Rowell 1997: 22).

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<sup>30</sup> A.M.S., "Veld and native through the eyes of the modern painter," June 6, 1931.

<sup>31</sup> The painting that so enraptured the star-struck Stern is almost certainly Cézanne's *Still Life with Onions* (c. 1896-98). Exhibited for the first time at the Salon d'Automne in 1907, it is emblematic of the artist's production of still-lives of 1907-1912, which he is known to have used as a testing ground for his innovative, proto-Cubist experimentations with the organization of the pictorial field and with the interaction between colour and form.

<sup>32</sup> Her gossip did not stop there, for she went on: "El Greco is a fake – to my humble idea. Either the pictures have not been painted by him at all or he is definitively a mediocre painter. [...] I have spoken to [Jacob] Epstein [the British sculptor] about him – he agreed."

<sup>33</sup> This dictum is drawn from a letter sent by Cézanne to the young artist Émile Bernard in 1902. In the same letter, he precisely advised Bernard to "turn [his] back on the Gauguins and the Van Goghs" (quoted in Smith 1995: 146).



In the same way, one notes Stern's embrace of Cézanne's broader approach to representation. According to art historian Margit Rowell, Cézanne's goal in these formal explorations was "to render the solidity and the stillness of nature," to render it as "more depth than surface" (Rowell 1997: 24). However, as she goes on to note, Cézanne also discovered that nothing is stable or still, so that "his vision and articulation of the pictorial field elided matter, colour, and form into a uniform and transparent film of reality, connoting an elusive instability" (Rowell 1997: 24). He expressed this goal in the following terms in 1902:

The transposition made by the painter, from a perspective of his own, gives a new interest to that part of nature which he has reproduced; he makes it into painting in an absolute sense – that is to say something other than reality. This is no longer straightforward imitation. (quoted in Smith 1995: 163)

Stern's admiration for Cézanne's rendering of a world "so unhampered by the world of the flesh" indicates that she may have found in his pictorial language a compelling idiom for rendering her African models: one that could allow her, simultaneously, to give more depth and probity to her representations of Africans, and at the same time to convey the elusiveness of their presence, or at the very least to sublimate her own anxieties about their pending disappearance. I believe her turn to sculpture, as the logical extension of her pursuit of a greater mastery of form, can likewise be understood as the index of her desire to gain fuller aesthetic mastery of her subjects – and by extension, to gain fuller possession over their bodies.

South African publics reacted to these changes in Stern's paintings with enthusiasm. However much they had grown to accept her bold Expressionistic style, the artist's more muted pictorial approach to her African models was evidently more palatable. Melvin Summers articulated what seems to have been a commonly held opinion of paintings such as *The Water Carriers*: "There is evidence of the new phase in the artist, a new searching for finer organization than heretofore, and subtler, though no less brilliant, harmonies of colour."<sup>34</sup> Her style was certainly more in line with the conventions of the "native study" genre, which favoured naturalism over stylization, and critics seem to have been thrilled to see in this "new phase" a refinement in Stern's capacity to provide "insight" into the minds of Africans. In a short piece entitled "Irma Stern Interprets the Bantu," the critic "The Man About Town" stated: "Miss Stern has this time caught the natives in their reflective moods and there is hardly a picture of hers that

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<sup>34</sup> "Irma Stern as sculptor; impression of dynamic force; exhibition to be opened today," *The Cape Times*, March 2, 1936, p. 17.

does not speak of the bewilderment, the sadness, and – at times – the fear that is to be seen on the faces of the Territory natives when in repose.”<sup>35</sup> One might suppose that these critical commentaries gave Stern further incentive to develop her style in this direction.

#### 4.2.5. *New friends: Stern and modern South African sculptors*

In attempting to understand the origins of Stern’s sculptural turn, it is impossible not to note that she began to demonstrate a pronounced interest in the activities of her sculptor colleagues working in Cape Town. In a rare display of public support for a fellow artist, she delivered the opening speech for Lippy Lipshitz’s solo exhibition at Ashbey’s Galleries on March 27, 1934. One can surmise that Lipshitz, who was at the time making only his second exhibition in South Africa, chose Stern for her reputation as a staunch and successful defender of modernism in painting and also in the expectation that she could bring some credibility to his own attempt to stake a claim for modern sculpture. Stern seized the occasion to emit some typically individualistic pearls of her modernist wisdom: “an artist expresses his art by giving what he feels. I admire any artist who does not work only to please his public.”<sup>36</sup> She was likely aware that Lipshitz was coming under fire on much the same grounds as she had ten years previously. The same *Cape Argus* reviewer who quoted the above statement went on to note that “Mr. Lipshitz [did] not give a rap for his public” and that his exhibition was “likely to arouse [...] violent controversy in both artistic and more general circles.” Such sensationalizing critiques parallel almost perfectly those that were published when Stern herself made her *début*, in that very same exhibition space, in 1922.

As one of several South African-born artists who had recently returned home after receiving training abroad, Lipshitz was at the forefront of what was at the time a burgeoning modern sculptural movement in South Africa.<sup>37</sup> The practice of the medium had changed somewhat since the 1920s. As sculptor and art historian Bruce Arnott points out, the economic

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<sup>35</sup> *The Cape Times*, November 6, 1935.

<sup>36</sup> “Some Controversial Sculpture: Work of Lippy Lipshitz on View,” *The Cape Argus*, March 27, 1934.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Stainbank was at the time bringing the lessons of Moore and Hepworth to Natal, setting up practice in Durban in 1928. Ivan Mitford-Barberton, another graduate of London’s Royal College of the Arts, held his first solo exhibition in Cape Town in 1930.

boom of the early 1930s was allowing a greater place for sculptural production (1969: 54). In turn, the establishment of the Vignali foundry in Pretoria in 1930 had opened the possibility of casting in metal (Rankin 1994: 6). Yet, as the review of Lipshitz's exhibition shows, receptivity to the medium lagged. For instance, Mary Stainbank's *Baya Huba* (**Figure 32**), a representation of two African figures clapping and laughing, caused an outcry when it was exhibited in 1932. Critics called it "uncompromisingly crude," a "gross exaggeration," and a "morbid relishing of the ungainly" (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 1998: 115). Likewise, Lipshitz's 1934 *Venus* inspired the arch-conservative critic Bernard Lewis to accuse its creator of fomenting the "cult of the ugly" in South Africa.<sup>38</sup> These artists were routinely accused of cultivating in South Africa what conservative critics called "Epsteinism" – a derogatory neologism from the name of Jacob Epstein. As one of the leaders of the school of modern British sculpture, Epstein manifestly stood in South Africa for all of the taboo values that conservative critics associated with modernism. He was their primary scapegoat when they sought to trace the roots of the "decadent" art of South African-born sculptors.

Hostile reviews being better than no reviews at all, modernist sculptors found strength and solidarity in that marginalized and embattled position and in the retrograde attacks of their detractors. This was presumably the very type of solidarity that the now-famous Stern was seeking, as she began to cultivate friendships with sculptural practitioners. Lippy Lipshitz became one of her closest friends, and Moses Kottler became a regular attendee at her exhibitions.<sup>39</sup> In her later years, Stern also found a friend in Merle Freund, a woman sculptor who was to become an important figure in the generation that brought public acceptance for the medium in the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, she kept painters at arms' length. She famously reviled her fellow Expressionist painter Maggie Laubser,<sup>41</sup> whose paintings of Africans in rural settings

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<sup>38</sup> "Some Modern Sculpture," *The Cape*, March 29, 1934.

<sup>39</sup> Kottler was present at her very first exhibition at Ashbey's in 1922, as well as at her 1936 exhibition in Johannesburg ("Author Criticizes Modern Art, Exhibition by Irma Stern," *The Rand Daily Mail*, October 16, 1936).

<sup>40</sup> Freund was part of the first group of artists who exhibited sculptures as a collective in a private gallery, namely the Wolpe Gallery in Hope St., in 1964. This group was largely made up of Lippy Lipshitz's students from the Michaelis Art School, including Bruce Arnott, William Davis, and Richard Wake (Arnott 1969: 30).

<sup>41</sup> Stern's hostility toward Maggie Laubser could easily be understood as an exemplary phenomenon of artistic rivalry: the pair could arguably be cast as the South African modern female equivalents to Matisse and Picasso. It appears to have been largely one-sided, with Stern fervently rejecting comparisons between Laubser's work and her own. Like Stern, Laubser (1886-1973) was South African-born but received her artistic training in Europe. While she spent the majority of her ten years abroad in Britain, she claimed German Expressionist aesthetics as the

made her an obvious rival (**Figure 34**) and she is not known to have entertained particularly cordial relationships with any of her contemporaries in South Africa.

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[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 32.** Mary Stainbank, *Baya Huba*, 1933, Warmbaths sandstone, 48.6 x 54 x 34 cm, Durban Art Gallery.

**Figure 33.** Maggie Laubser, *Women Carrying Water*, 1930, oil on canvas, 450 x 500 cm, private.

Stern was in fact to associate with the figure who most polarized South African audiences. She appears to have met the sculptor Jacob Epstein for the first time at an exhibition she hosted in London in 1937. She reported the meeting in no fewer than three letters that she sent to the Feldmans during the summer of that year, in what appears to have been something of a feverish need to boast about her new association with a prominent figure of the European avant-garde. Her letter of June 26 is particularly telling:

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principal inspiration for her work, quoting the artists of *Die Brücke* and especially Karl Schmidt-Rottluff as her most significant sources of influence (Delmont 2001: 13). Stern and Laubser are known to have met in Germany in the late 1910s, but their friendship dissolved when Laubser returned to South Africa in 1924 (Arnold 1995: 13) – that is, to turf Stern had already claimed as her own. This did not stop critics from drawing associations between them: for instance, in 1930, the arch-conservative Afrikaner critic A.C. Bouman suggested, in the pages of *Die Burger*, that “Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern are two of the only artists that have shown an outspoken love for the natives of South Africa as an object of their art” (“Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser Tentoonstelling op Stellenbosch,” October 18, 1930). These comparisons survive to this day in the historiography of South African art. However, as Stern is generally accorded the title of pioneer painter of *South African* modernism, the terms of Maggie Laubser’s hagiography have been somewhat displaced, with some critics emphasizing her Afrikaans roots to construct her as the leading representative of a specifically Afrikaner strand of modernism. For a discussion of Laubser’s connections to the Afrikaans cultural movement, see Elizabeth Delmont’s 2001 “Laubser, Land, and Labour: Image-Making and Afrikaner Nationalism in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s” (*De Arte*, vol. 64).

I did tell you that I met Epstein in London – that he loved my work – spent a few hours in my exhibition and said – at last a painter who can paint comes to London! Do you know that nobody living can paint flowers better than you can – that the Renoir roses – I just saw look like paper against your flowers – this is the most important thing that happened to me since my departure. If I have told you before – well and good – you here [sic] it again – He was like a good old friend to me. It was a wonderful experience to feel – how at one I can be with a total stranger – through the same love and striving in my life as in his.

Stern's enthusiasm about this new friendship appears to have been founded in no insignificant measure on Epstein's praise for her work. His compliments placed her above an esteemed artistic figure and they did so precisely in terms of her ability to render form and volume. This was the primary aesthetic goal that Stern was pursuing at the time, and we may surmise that she would have been particularly proud to have received encouragement in this regard from a master sculptor.

Marion Arnold argues that Stern associated with sculptors such as Lipshitz because they did not pose any threat to her livelihood nor to her reputation as South Africa's leading modernist (1995: 13). Undoubtedly so, but I believe further nuance is warranted: namely, the links that tie Stern to sculptors in the 1930s suggest that she may have been seeking them out precisely because of a desire for solidarity with other controversial figures. One might even suppose that her identification with these artists provided a way for her to relive vicariously the bygone days where she too had been an incendiary figure. Lastly, it is possible that her association with these sculptors, and her growing awareness of the vanguardism that could be associated with the medium, provided some of the incentive for her to take it up herself.

#### **4.2.6. *A decisive trip***

Much as the factors just discussed likely influenced Stern's turn to sculpture in 1935, the most immediate and plausible trigger is to be found in a trip she made in 1935 and in her contact with one particular sculptor on that occasion. After staying in Cape Town in 1934 and holding one last exhibition there in January 1935, she set out on what was to be an eight-month-long trip in early February of that year. This trip, which was her longest yet, brought her to two places of significance to her: first, to the area of the Transvaal where she had grown up, and secondly, to the same stretch of coastline where she had first sought creative inspiration for her paintings and encountered a family of potters in 1922. On February 25, she wrote to the Feldmans:

My plans – well I am trying to find Zululand which seems the most difficult thing out [illegible]. Went down to Karradene [sic] yesterday it was not the right place. – Well I think after Sunday I might have some information about it. – I am seeing Mary Stainbank and that is to me the first interesting thing – that has happened here in the way of people of course. [...] – Well my plans are to stay here for another week – so as to do some work of the near surroundings and I am trying to find out which places in Zululand would still be OK for primitive natives. It looks to me – this is my last trip trying to find things that are dying out – thanks to ourselves. Am going to the technical college this morning – Prof. Oxley is explaining to me how to make pottery. I hope to save a course of a few months – this morning. – On Sunday there is a large native dance here in Durban. I am going – but the charm has gone – If one is used to the real thing the next best is of no use.

Karridene is a settlement that lies three kilometres south of Umgababa. The collective guilt that she pointedly articulates suggests that her disappointment was tinged with a bitterness that it had not carried three years before when she had judged the Swazis “civilized”. In the absence of primitive people – and perhaps indeed, primitive potters – she turned to the few white sculptors who were present in the region. Professor Oxley was the head of the Natal Technical College School of Art, and Mary Stainbank was working on infusing stone, clay, and plaster with what she called “the spirit of Africa” (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2001: 2).

When Stern wrote next to the Feldmans, on November 13, she was back in her Cape Town studio:

I am at present just in a slight state of depression – suffer from terrible dreams and am taking it easy for a few days – getting my hats and shoes in order and so forth. Am working at a large soap stone figure – very hard boddie [sic] work quite apparte [sic] from the other [?] but it is great fun.

This statement likely refers to the work she titled *The Woman*, her largest work in wonderstone. In the three following months, Stern produced at least fourteen sculptures in clay, cement, wonderstone, and verdite. And on February 7, 1936, she began to regale Capetonian publics with announcements of “secrets” and “surprises.”

Scholars have typically stated that at this stage Stern was guided by a greater desire to “transcribe reality” (Arnold 1995: 72) and by an increased business savvy. They have not, however, examined the relationship between these two drives, nor have they fully situated them in terms of Stern’s reconfigured relationships with her white South African patrons and her black South African models. Stern’s greater attention to form, volume, depth, and the rendering of naturalistic detail may in fact have been the result of a deep-seated anxiety about the potential “disappearance” of her models, which was intensified by her trips of 1933 and 1935. This interpretation is especially plausible when one considers that it was an anxiety that she shared

with her South African patrons, who at the time constituted her primary support. Indeed, one may imagine that the portraiture quality of Stern's paintings of African subjects was the result of an effort on her part to produce representations that would at once be penetrating and static, that would reveal the souls and capture the bodies of persons who might otherwise elude both hers and her public's grasp and that would, in effect, provide her the mediation she needed to be who she was as an artist in South Africa. This is also the interpretation that most straightforwardly explains Stern's decision to sculpt in 1935.

**Chapter 5**  
***Casting (1935/6-1945)***



Of all the sculpted African women on display in Irma Stern's exhibitions, three were made to stand out more than all the others. Nearly life size in proportions, they occupied the exhibition halls in a way that the smaller works in wonderstone and the two-dimensional paintings on the walls could not. Although their grey cement flesh would have made them look dull in comparison to their colourful pictorial counterparts, their emphatic gestural quality gave them a peculiar vivacity. Referred to in the catalogues as *Contemplation* (Cat. 9), *Grief* (Cat. 10), and *Awakening* (Cat. 11), these three stony belles were the first in Irma Stern's repertoire of African women to have titles of a symbolic rather than descriptive or ethnographic character.

The titles Stern gave to her cement sculptures set these works apart from the blandly named wonderstone *Head*, *Two Heads*, and *Native Figure* also featured in her exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> She clearly valued her three symbolically named cement sculptures above all her other pieces, giving them price tags higher than those of her wonderstone works, and even her paintings. Stern's production of the 1920s to mid-1930s includes only one painting with an explicitly symbolic title, *Fate* (1935), which represents a white woman sleepily winding thread around a spindle (Figure 34).<sup>2</sup> In 1937, Stern followed up on this work with a painting titled *Loneliness*,<sup>3</sup> but after that she produced no more allegorical or symbolic paintings until the 1950s when she came out with works such as her 1959 *Intrigue* (Figure 35), which earned her the 1960 Peggy Guggenheim International Art Prize.

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<sup>1</sup> In his 1984 article "Entitling," philosopher of aesthetics John Fisher remarks, in a somewhat glib fashion, that "not everything is entitled to be titled, although everything is entitled to be named. Names can be given to anything, but titling can be given for some special acknowledgment of value or relationship" (1984: 299).

<sup>2</sup> In the catalogue to her retrospective exhibition on the artist, Marion Arnold notes that *Fate* is "an unusually symbolic painting for Irma Stern" (1995: 45). According to her, the rationale for the title is the following: the painting "depicts a woman contemplating a spindle and a thread and pondering on fate and the meaning of life. The mood is sustained by muted colours and a dark background" (1995: 45). While it is possible that Stern painted other allegorical or symbolic works in these years, *Fate* is the only work of this type that I have been able to trace.

<sup>3</sup> A hit at Stern's 1937 exhibition at the Martin Melck House in Cape Town, this painting is presently impossible to view, for it was sold to Roza van Gelderen for 41 guineas in 1938 (along with a *Soapstone Head*, for 21 guineas) (MSC 31:8, Stern's Ledger of Sales). Nevertheless, the reviews of her exhibition give some insight into its representational content. For instance, the columnist for "The Man on the Spot" wrote: "Some [of Stern's paintings] were beautiful, especially one called *Loneliness*. The subject was a woman, sitting. She had a very lonely face, which looked ever so sad, and she was clasping her hands" (*The Cape Times*, February 17, 1937).

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**Cat. 9a/b** Irma Stern,  
*Contemplation*, 1936, cement, 52  
x 41 x 30 cm, Irma Stern  
Museum, Cape Town.

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**Cat. 10a/b** Irma Stern, *Grief*,  
1936, cement, 64.5 x 35 x 29 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

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**Cat. 11 a/b** Irma Stern,  
*Awakening*, 1936, cement, 58 x  
40 x 22 cm, Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town.

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[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 34.** Irma Stern, *Fate*, 1935, oil on canvas, 47 x 58 cm, private collection.

**Figure 35.** Irma Stern, *Intrigue*, 1959, oil on canvas, dimensions and location unknown.

While they bear few, if any, similarities to her symbolically titled pictures of the period, Stern's cement sculptures can be usefully associated with her ethnographically named pictorial works. Like her 1922 sculptures, they can be seen to instantiate a move from two dimensions to three. For instance, figure in *Contemplation* closely resembles the figure in her 1935 painting *Zulu Woman* (**Figure 36**); *Grief* can be associated with works such as her 1935 charcoal drawing *Congolese Woman* (**Figure 37**); and the figure in *Awakening* resembles her 1933 *African Woman with Headband* (**Figure 38**).

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**Figure 36.** Irma Stern, *Zulu Woman*, 1935, oil on canvas, 58 x 48 cm, private collection.

**Figure 37.** Irma Stern, *Congolese Girl*, 1935, charcoal on paper, 62 x 48 cm, private collection.

**Figure 38.** Irma Stern, *African Woman with Headband*, 1933, watercolour, gouache, and charcoal, 49 x 36 cm, private collection.

However, Stern's use of cement in *Grief*, *Contemplation*, and *Awakening* denotes a finality that is at odds with the open-ended, endlessly adaptable medium of clay modelling. In my view, this represents a desire not merely to give form as she did with clay but to fix, to solidify, and to keep. In fact, the titles of Stern's cast cement works indicate that these sculptures were designed to give form to an entity that the artist dearly valued: African souls.

In this chapter, I will consider Stern's trio of titled sculptures as the representatives of a broader corpus that includes five other cement works – one other half-length bust (**Cat. 16**), one full-length statue (**Cat. 12**), and three heads (**Cat. 13, 17, 20**) – all of which were sculpted between 1935 or 1936 and 1945.<sup>4</sup> While the titles of these five works are descriptive, all share a set of basic formal features with *Contemplation*, *Grief*, and *Awakening*. All are figurative sculptures in the round, presumably cast from clay models,<sup>5</sup> and all represent African women in a style that is more idealizing than Stern's 1922 works in clay. Their physiques are shapely and lean, their facial features are markedly elegant, and none carry any significant marks of individuality beyond slight differences in hairstyle and apparel. The formal consistencies among these works suggest that all were crafted with similar representational aims. However, given that *Contemplation*, *Grief*, and *Awakening* patently represent the most sophisticated examples of this spiritualizing sculptural approach, it is to them that I turn my attention in this chapter.

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<sup>4</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, it is impossible to determine whether Stern began casting in cement in 1935 or 1936. The dating of Stern's cast cement works in relation to those in wonderstone is not significant, in my opinion, given that she must have engaged in both art forms either simultaneously or in very close succession.

<sup>5</sup> Casters typically work either from clay or plaster models. My hypothesis regarding Stern's sculptures is based on consideration of her documented engagement with clay, as well as on the following quote from the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger*: "For the first time she exhibited her sculptures. Firstly sculpted from clay for weeks, and then cast in cement. This was something new for her and the results were quite promising considering the type of material." ["Vir die eerste maal vertoon sy beeldhouwerk. Dit is wekewat eers uit klei hemodelleer is enwaarvan toe sementmodelle gegiet is Dit is iets nuuts wat haar betref. Die resultate is nogal belowend met hierdie sort material." Translation courtesy of François Brand.] ("Naturelle-leww as Kunsmotief," March 3, 1936). The only clay model surviving is the one for the work titled *Youth* (**Cat. 13**). It is on view at the Irma Stern Museum.

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**Cat. 12.** Irma Stern, *Kneeling Mother*,  
c. 1936, cement, 57 x 20 x 53 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Cat. 16.** Irma Stern, *Young Native Girl*,  
before 1939, cement, 51 x 37 x 28 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

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**Cat. 13.** Irma Stern, *Youth*,  
c. 1936, terracotta, 32 x 22 x 22 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Cat. 17.** Irma Stern, *Head of a  
Native Woman*, before 1939,  
cement, 35 x 22 x 16 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Cat. 20.** Irma Stern, *Head of an  
African Girl*, date unknown,  
cement, 32.5 x 22 x 22 cm,  
Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

### 5.1. Three African women cast in stone

The most obvious distinctions between Stern's three figurations of African souls lie in the works' compositions: each is shown holding a different gesture, each is shown sporting a different hairstyle, and each wears different apparel. Furthermore, while all are truncated above the hips, their truncations are placed at slightly different levels on their torsos. As we shall see, however, there are also more subtle differences in Stern's formal treatment of her cement material. While the artist elected to conserve the pockmarked and porous quality of the cement on all three sculptures, there are nevertheless variations in her treatment of surfaces, in her modelling of forms, in her treatment of volumes, and in her handling of line. These in turn create differences in the figures' degrees of expressivity, overt sexuality, and autonomy.

These differences are emphasized in the set of three archival photographs that show the sculptures resting on plinths in what appears to be Stern's garden.<sup>6</sup> Like the photographs of Stern's 1922 clay works, these photographs show each of the works individually and from a close angle. However, there are also marked differences in the staging of the three works: namely, in the angle of the camera, in the plinths used to support the sculptures, and most dramatically, in the lighting of each of the shots. Although the photographs are undated, I believe it highly plausible that they were taken during Stern's lifetime and that she was accordingly responsible for their staging. While my analytical description of each of the sculptures will be based principally on my observation of the works, I will also bring to bear elements of the staging of these photographs. Indeed, these elements will emerge as decisive for our understanding of the different forms of interiority portrayed in the sculptures.

#### 5.1.1. Awakening

*Awakening* portrays a nude African woman with cropped hair who is reaching her right arm across her chest and clasping her left shoulder with her right hand. The sculpture is truncated at the figure's waistline, just below her bent elbows. Pressed tightly to her body, her right arm

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<sup>6</sup> While *Awakening* and *Grief* are shown against backgrounds of foliage, it is possible to identify a set of stairs and a short slope of grass in the background of the photograph of *Contemplation*. These features can be found in Stern's garden.

conceals her right breast but leaves her left one uncovered, its conical form protruding in the triangular space between her raised right forearm and slackened left upper arm. The contrast between concealment and unabashed display is one of the perplexing aspects of the sculpture's pose. The figure's head is turned to the side, the central axis of her face nearly in line with the shoulder she is clasping. This asymmetrical pose gives the sculpture a dynamic feel, as the viewer is obliged to move around the figure to meet her gaze and to understand her pose. When she is viewed from an angle perpendicular to her chest, the zigzagging line created by her bent arms guides the viewer's eye in a sinuous movement from left to right, even as the line of her jaw leads the eye to the space above her right shoulder. In other words, these lines entice the viewer to shift his or her position so as to meet the figure's furtive gaze. Yet she remains difficult to access even when she is viewed from the side, for this angle reveals that her fingers are in fact curling over the top of her shoulder, as though pulling it forward to align it with her face and to keep the viewer at a distance. This side angle view also emphasizes the dissymmetry between the two sides of the figure's face and thereby highlights the imperfection in Stern's rendering of the figure: her left cheek bulges significantly more than the right, and the bottom eyelid is present on the left but not on the right. One might presume that these features would have been visible to the viewers attending Stern's exhibitions and that, by extension, they are the result of conscious decisions on the artist's part.

It is from this side angle that the archival photograph is taken, and its dramatic lighting emphasizes the salient features that emerge from an *in situ* viewing. The sculpture is shown resting on a plinth made of roughly hewn wood against a background of dark foliage. While the right side of the figure's face and body are cast in darkness, the left side is brightly illuminated, creating areas of deep shadow beneath her arm and her breast. Even as the angle of the photograph conceals the right side of the figure's body entirely, the shadows also accentuate the weight of the visible breast, thereby amplifying the sense of sexual enticement that is present when the figure is viewed from an angle perpendicular to her chest. The lighting simultaneously underscores the futility of making eye contact with the figure: her left eye appears as a deep, impenetrable crevice, while the shadows under her upper right eyelid make it seem as though her gaze is once again skirting the viewer's. Her perfectly impassive expression augments the dynamic autonomy of her stance: she appears regal, indifferent, perhaps even defiant vis-à-vis the viewer. The lighting of the photograph also emphasizes one of the sculpture's most

distinctive features, which is the coarse treatment of surfaces. These irregularities substantially amplify the lively quality of the figure: emphasizing the materiality of her cement skin and drawing further attention to the imperfection of the modelling, they offset the idealized aspect of her features and bring her closer to the realm of the “real.” This coarse treatment is especially noticeable on the figure’s breast, as it accentuates its imperfect materiality and gives the sculpture an unattractively sexualized aspect. Overall, Stern’s treatment of the figure’s skin amplifies the confounding character of her pose, its heightened textural quality attracting the viewer’s hand even as its distinctively coarse quality repels it.

In short, the archival photograph dramatizes the formal properties that give the represented figure an air of dynamism, liveliness, and autonomy. These qualities are consistent with the notions of flux, change, and movement that are evoked in the title. As we shall see, they are also the qualities that set the sculpture apart from the two others in the set.

### 5.1.2. Grief

*Grief* represents an African woman looking downward with her hands clasping her ears. She wears bands on her arms and a thick band over her braided hair. Her braids are rendered as straight vertical coils of cement, which are pressed tightly to her head and descend close to her brow. Her chest remains bare and visible between her raised arms. Her breasts are much more spherical than the breast of the figure in *Awakening*, and their rendering seems almost affected: the half-spheres look as if they were pasted directly onto the figure’s torso. The truncation of the sculpture is the lowest of all three, at a level slightly below her navel.

The vitality of *Awakening* is suppressed in this sculpture into a sense of pressurized stasis, as the curving lines and the asymmetrical forms and volumes of the former sculpture are replaced by a perfectly symmetrical rendering of physique and physiognomy. The tension that characterizes *Grief* results from the contraction of forms at the level of the figure’s shoulders and head. The figure’s head protrudes from between her hunched shoulders, which are raised so high as to make her neck disappear entirely. The tension is both vertical and horizontal: the elongation of her torso is counteracted by the strong downward pull of her elbows and chin, both of which



are rendered as markedly pointed forms, even as the inward contraction of her arms and hands to her torso and face creates an effect of strong pressure. All of these effects are, ultimately, brought into confounding tension with the utter impassivity of the figure's facial expression. Her lips remain sealed, the line of her brow, barely visible, is straight, and her eyes are rendered as empty recessions. The disconnect between the volumes of the body and those of the head is in that sense mirrored and amplified in the incongruity between the expressiveness of the figure's gesture and the vacuity of her face. These contradictions are difficult to resolve: one is left to suppose that the figure is so overcome with emotion that she cannot muster an exclamation, or that the emptiness of her eyes is a sign that she is no longer truly alive.

The sculpture's staging in the archival photograph underscores the ambiguities in the composition. Like the photograph of *Awakening*, this one shows the sculpture resting on a wooden plinth against a background of foliage. While the wood is much smoother than the plinth supporting the figure in *Awakening* and its circumference is wider, there is nevertheless some continuity between the texture of the wood and the texture of the sculpture's skin, as it too appears to be notably less rough than that of *Awakening*. This effect is mainly due to the lighting in the photograph, which illuminates the sculpture from an angle that is almost perfectly aligned with the three-quarter angle of the camera itself. Indeed, the lighting of the photograph completely smoothens the surfaces of the sculpture, erasing the pockmarks and the pores of the cement as well as the surface recessions that can be seen in more recent photographs of the work. Thus, even as the dramatic lighting that shone on *Awakening* enlivened the sculpture by emphasizing the texture of its surfaces, the excessively bright lighting of the photograph of *Grief* deadens the figure. At the same time, as it seals the breathing surfaces of the cement, this lighting effect amplifies the sense of containment evoked in the composition, figuratively denying the tight-lipped figure the breath of life. Lastly, the source of light is placed high enough to create deep shadows under the figure's eyelids and thus to emphasize the figure's spectral appearance.

The figure in *Grief* thus appears to be one step closer to death than that in *Awakening*. While the woman in *Awakening* repels the viewer because of her self-assured autonomy, the woman in *Grief* keeps him or her at a distance because of the incommensurability between the heightened emotion of her gesture and the lifelessness of her gaze. This inherent contradiction gives her an unsettling vulnerability and makes her expressivity altogether paradoxical.

### 5.1.3. Contemplation

The tension present in the two former works is entirely absent in the sculpture titled *Contemplation*. Portraying an African woman resting her head in the palm of her left hand, the work is characterized by a sense of utter inertia. The beehive-shaped headdress (*isicholo*) atop her head, the beads across her chest, and the rings around her arms all identify her as a Zulu bride.<sup>7</sup> She tilts her head slightly backwards as her heavy-lidded eyes gaze ahead into an undefined distance. Her shoulders are raised, but the effect is not one of anguished contraction, as in *Grief*, but of lethargy, indolence, and resignation. Her right forearm stretches horizontally across the base of her truncated torso and her hand clasps her left elbow, concealing her breasts as well as the truncation below. In the archival photograph, this compositional choice visually connects the figure's body to the brick base beneath her, thereby emphasizing the weight of her cement body and rooting her to the ground.

Much as the sculpture's bottom-heavy volumes sap the sculpture of life, Stern's treatment of line likewise roots both sculpture and viewer to the spot. The lines of the figure's arms and jaw lead the eyes neither laterally, as in *Awakening*, nor vertically, as in *Grief*, but in a circular motion, from shoulders to waist and back upwards again to rest on the figure's placid and serene face. Moreover, her features are notably more idealized than those of the figure in *Awakening*: the eyelids are almost perfectly identical and have none of the curious dissymmetry that characterizes the latter work. In contrast with the other two sculptural figures, the woman in *Contemplation* gazes directly at the viewer. The latter is given little incentive to move around the sculpture, although he or she can rest assured that the figure will not resist his or her attempt to view her from all angles. The subdued nature of her expression, marked simply by the high arches of her brows, makes her far more approachable than the figure in *Grief*, and the lethargy in her demeanour contrasts with the dynamism of *Awakening*. Yet the mellowness of her mood is precisely what makes engagement difficult. She appears to be at some remove from the realm of "real life" that is inhabited by *Awakening* and that is presumably at the source of *Grief*'s

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<sup>7</sup> *Isicholo* is the Zulu word for a style of headdress worn by married women. In the nineteenth century, it designated the small tuft of hair that married women left on their otherwise shaved heads. This tuft of hair was typically smeared with a mixture of fat and red ochre. The hairstyle gradually changed until it took a longer, thinner and more conical form. It exists in many forms today, reflecting regional and personal preferences.

heightened emotion: perhaps it is reverie that is stealing her away, or perhaps it is life that is leaving her.

The archival photograph subdues the figure further. Of the three shots, it is the only one that shows the sculpture from a perfectly frontal angle, as though to incite the viewer to adopt the same languid inertia as the figure herself. Softer than the lighting of the photograph of *Grief* but strong enough to reveal the marks of Stern's chisel, the lighting evokes the gentle luminosity of a setting sun. The irregularities that it reveals on the figure's skin are not the coarse bumps of *Awakening*, but rather, the flat planes created by the scraping motions of Stern's tool. As such, they lend the figure a weathered aspect that contrasts with the liveliness evoked by the skin of *Awakening* and the pressurized containment of *Grief*. Because they exacerbate the compositional choices that lend the sculpture a corpse-like air, these textural effects thoroughly desexualize the figure, inciting the viewer to respectful and distanced contemplation of him or herself.

In brief, Stern's formal choices in each of these three abstractly titled cement sculptures lend a different degree of vivacity and autonomy to each of the represented figures, as well as different displays of sexuality, suggesting that these effects are designed to conjure different states of the African soul. The question that remains is how these different combinations of composition and treatment of cement surface, form, and volume combine to articulate different conceptions of that soul.

## **5.2. Three African Eves: the iconography and titles of Stern's cement sculptures**

The most obvious markers of interiority on the figures are in the associations between the figures' gestures and their titles. For each sculpture, Stern associates a conventional gesture from the history of European art with a symbolic title that clearly denotes an interior state. However, while both title and gesture each have long iconographic histories, the particular combinations thereof are not necessarily conventional themselves. Given Stern's extensive familiarity with European art history, we can assume that she was consciously creating these particular associations with a view to lending a highly specific meaning to each sculpture. Let us analyze each sculpture in turn.

### 5.2.1. *A sinner*

The title *Awakening* denotes a change of state: in its most literal use, from being asleep to being awake, or, metaphorically, from states such as sloth, inaction, and indifference. Representations of “awakenings” are not bound by any particular iconography. The gesture of Stern’s figure gives a clear indication of the type of “awakening” denoted in the title. The gesture of the arm across the chest is the *pudica* of ancient statuary, as seen for instance in sculptures such as Lely’s *Venus* (**Figure 39**), where the figure’s arm reaches over her shoulder to conceal her chest and her legs crouch to conceal her pubic area. While the forearm of Stern’s figure is mostly hidden due to the sculpture’s truncation, it shows just enough to suggest that her hand might be covering her pubic area as well. Beginning in the Renaissance, this signifier of modesty was reinterpreted and rechanneled into Christian iconography as a signifier of penitence and shame. Indeed, Eve figures are commonly shown in the *pudica* pose in representations of the expulsion from the Garden, such as Masaccio’s famous example (**Figure 40**).

Stern’s sculpture therefore links the metaphor of “awakening” specifically with the story of Eve’s “awakening” to the world of sin. The emotionless autonomy of Stern’s figure clearly suggests responsibility: she is neither the passive, recumbent Eve of other *Awakenings*, nor the grief-stricken Eve of Masaccio’s rendering of the Expulsion. The dynamism and the defiance of her stance clearly suggest that she is consciously moving into the world of sin.

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**Figure 39.** Anonymous, *Crouching Aphrodite*, or *Lely’s Venus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, 112 cm (h), marble, British Museum, London.

**Figure 40.** Antonio Masaccio, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*, Cappella Brancacci, c. 1427, fresco, 208 x 88 cm, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

### 5.2.2. *A mourner*

These associations between sin, femininity, and the biblical narrative of the Fall carry through into the second figure in the series. Once more, however, they are not obvious at first glance. Signifying “deep and violent sorrow,” usually caused by someone’s death, the emotional state of grief has a specific iconography. Usually featuring in scenes representing the death of major mythological figures or in lamentations of Christ, grieving figures are typically shown weeping with their heads buried in their hands, or with their arms outstretched to the sides, exclaiming their sorrow. For instance, Tintoretto’s representation of Venus lamenting the death of Adonis shows her kneeling at her lifeless lover’s side, with her arms outstretched in the air (**Figure 41**). Conversely, William Bouguereau’s 1888 depiction of Adam and Eve mourning the death of their son Abel shows a rose-skinned Eve kneeling at the feet of a dark, seated Adam, her head nestled into his chest and her face buried in her hands (**Figure 42**). The lifeless body of Abel lies outstretched, with no lack of sensuality, across Adam’s legs.

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**Figure 41.** Domenico Tintoretto, *Venus Lamenting the Death of Adonis*, c. 1590, oil on canvas, 108.6 x 142.6 cm, University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson.

**Figure 42.** William Bouguereau, *The First Mourning*, 1888, oil on canvas, 203 x 252 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.

Another artist’s variation on the same theme of the “first mourning” clearly shows the difference in meaning between the gesture of Stern’s *Grief* and the classic iconographic signifiers for this emotion. William Blake’s 1826 painting *The Death of Abel* shows Adam and Eve and their two sons against a gloomy background of dark jagged mountains lying under a

yellow sky inflamed by a blood-red sun (**Figure 43**). Eve is shown kneeling over the prone body of Abel, head bowed and arms stretched before her in a pose that registers her searing sorrow. Meanwhile, in the foreground, Cain is shown running away from his slain brother's grave. It is he, the murderer, who clasps the sides of his head with his hands, and his gesture can thus be read as an indication of his guilt and anguish. Indeed, the gesture finds precedence in representations of the torments of the damned, as seen, for instance, in depictions of the Last Judgment such as Rogier van der Weyden's 1434 altarpiece (**Figure 44**). In these cases, the gesture has a twofold function: on the one hand, it signifies the terrible agony of resurgent remorse, the fear of the demons that await, and the burning pain of the flames of Hell as they begin to devour the flesh. It is simultaneously a protective gesture, the sinner's last defence as he or she endeavours to block out the horrific evil that lies without. Both of these layers of meaning find their way into the modern canon's most famous exemplar of a figure covering its ears, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (**Figure 45**). As art historian Sue Prideaux has contended, Munch's screaming figure is an icon of the crisis of the modern consciousness, a "visualization of Nietzsche's 'God is dead and we have nothing left to replace him'" (2007: 151). It is, in other words, a representation of the private hell experienced by the modern individual as he or she confronts the alienating forces of industrialization, secularization, urbanization, as he or she contends with the existential guilt that comes with his or her awareness of his responsibility in a world without salvation, and as he or she endeavours to protect his already corrupted selfhood against all that may cause its further decay.

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**Figure 43.** William Blake, *The Death of Abel*, c. 1826, pen and tempera on mahogany, 325 x 433 cm, Tate Britain, London.

**Figure 44.** Rogier van der Weyden, *Altar of the Last Judgment* (detail), 1434, oil on wood, Hotel Dieu, Beaune, France.

In sum, Stern's association of title and gesture shows that she associated the emotion of grief specifically with the sentiments of agony and alienation. Through her oblique references to representations of the damned, also opens the possibility for an interpretation that layers a sense of culpability onto the emotional state of grief, typically associated with blameless loss. The ambiguity of this association is consistent with the history of interpretations of Eve's role in the fall of humankind. It is the same association that is arguably found in Gauguin's small pastel drawing *Breton Eve*, which depicts a nude female figure sitting at the foot of a tree, clasping her ears while a serpent hisses enticing proposals close to her ear (**Figure 46**).

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**Figure 45.** Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, oil, tempera, and pastel on cardboard, 91 x 73.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo.

**Figure 46.** Paul Gauguin, *Breton Eve*, 1889, pastel and watercolour on paper, 31 x 33 cm, Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, TX.

### 5.2.3. *A melancholic*

The third sculpture brings a *dénouement* to the sequence evoked in the first two. Whereas “awakening” refers to a process, or a change of state that is forward-directed, and “grief” refers to an emotional state that is specifically a state of crisis over a past event, “contemplation” denotes interior stability and complete present-ness. Referring to the action of beholding, or looking with intense attention and thought, it involves a complete absorption of the self in the object of thought. In its theological sense, it refers to the devout musing that leads to the soul's communion with God. Thus, if “awakening” evokes the stirring of body and consciousness and “grief” refers to an emotional state, “contemplation” can be understood as a state of purely mental activity.

Of the three sculptures, *Contemplation* is the only one whose gesture is consistent with her title. Representations of figures in contemplation often portray the subjects gazing intently at an object or a landscape with their heads resting in the palm of their hands. This object is typically the symbol of something that is lost, or that will be: for instance, figures in contemplation are often shown gazing at a crucifix or a *memento mori*. The most famous exemplar of the gesture is Dürer's *Melancholia I* (**Figure 47**). As several commentators have shown, Dürer's famed melancholy angel can be understood as a representation of the condition of repentant alienation that accompanies the modern subject's detachment from God in favour of the world of knowledge. As Giorgio Agamben states in his evocative analysis of the image, the angel's melancholy is "the consciousness that she has adopted alienation as her world": she is estranged from the ideal past of childhood, the unknowable future, symbolized by the geometer's tools that surround her, and she therefore subsists in an agonizingly empty present (1994: 67). In Freud's famous formulation, "melancholia is triggered by the loss of a desired object" (1917: 245). Unlike mourning, which is a healthy response to the emotion of loss and is always finite in character, melancholia is portrayed as a pathological state that is interminable in nature because it thwarts all possibilities of substituting the lost object. Thus, unlike the mourner who is able to express her grief, the melancholic subject is reduced to a state of permanent, idle contemplation.

States of melancholic contemplation figure prominently in the iconography of modern figures, and particularly modern women. Indeed, the nineteenth century brought about a gendering of the condition of melancholia, as scientists such as Gerbeault depicted Eve as the "first neurasthenic" while simultaneously specifying the cause of her disease as the "excessive collisions and shocks of modernity" (Menon 2005: 163). In his *Night Café at Arles*, Gauguin portrays his model Mme Ginoux in a contemplative pose (**Figure 48**): sitting alone before a glass of absinthe, the drink of the modern melancholic *par excellence*, she watches the bustle of the Parisian café go by with an air of knowing acceptance. Her gesture is mirrored by the figure of a prostitute in the background. Although this woman is surrounded by suitors, she is arguably even more solitary than Mme Ginoux. She is modernity's ultimate fallen woman: Eve at the end point of her fall.



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**Figure 47.** Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I*, 1514, engraving, 24 x 18.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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**Figure 48.** Paul Gauguin, *Night Café at Arles*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow.

In sum, it is possible to see how Stern drew on specific combinations of conventional gestures and symbolic titles to create a thematically coherent set of sculptures. Each sculpture depicts an interior state that involves a distinct posturing vis-à-vis an experience of loss. These different positions can be mapped onto the sequential ordering suggested through the analysis of the sculptures' differing degrees of liveliness: the sculptures can be read as a progression moving from the incipient "awakening" to the sheer enormity of the loss, which depends on the subject's vivacity; to the "grief" that swells when the loss is measured and acknowledged, which brings the subject into a state of tensed paralysis; to the state of idle, static "contemplation" that follows when the dramatic significance of the loss has settled in. As we have seen, these different temporal positionings in relation to the experience of loss are encoded in the sculptures' titles: "awakening" carries a transitive, future-oriented connotation, in contrast with the fundamentally intransitive, cause-directed "grief," and the ambiguously transitive "contemplation," which implies neither activity nor passivity but enduring stasis: in other words, an unbounded and unmoving present-ness.

If the sculptures' titles give the series its grammar, the gestures provide its allegorical meaning. The distinct allusion to Eve in the first sculpture, *Awakening*, makes it possible to view the set as an allegorical variation on the biblical narrative of humankind's fall from grace: in other words, it makes it possible to see *Grief* as a representation of Eve undergoing the terrible

crisis of conscience that arises as she acknowledges her fallen state, and *Contemplation* as a representation of the state of dejected, penitent melancholy that follows once she has entered the world of sin. The metaphorical loss evoked in the titles and gestures can in that sense be understood as Eve's loss of innocence.

### 5.3. The series as an allegory of an African Fall

Stern was of course not the first to portray the non-Western woman as an allegorical Eve figure. Gauguin's monumental canvas *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (**Figure 49**) is a parable of life based on the narrative of the Fall. In this colossal symbolist panel, Gauguin depicted three groups of Eve figures as embodiments of the different stages in the life cycle: from right to left, these are birth, personified in the figures gathered around a newborn child; life, personified in the figures plucking and eating the fruits of a tree; and death, embodied by the figures who sit at the feet of a resplendent blue idol, one languid and the other covering in the face of her impending demise. As Hans Belting has argued, this philosophical *oeuvre de fin de vie* can be interpreted as Gauguin's homage to the Tahitians, his triumphant rejection of Western civilization and its individualism (2001: 200).

Stern's three sculptures arguably carry a similar allegorical charge. Let us examine the political resonances of her trio of African women in stone.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 49.** Paul Gauguin, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?*, 1897-98, oil on canvas, 139.1 x 374.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

### 5.3.1. *The rhetoric of the “falling” African*

I would like to suggest that Stern’s three sculptures articulate a cohesive conception of the African soul that is consistent with broader discourses on the “modernization” of African subjectivities. Indeed, the pathos embodied in the series may be associated with the “sadness” that Stern herself described in her 1933 account of her trip to Swaziland, when she stated that the “joy of the picturesque native in his kraal had gone.” By extension, the “loss of innocence” that binds the three figures can be interpreted as the African subject’s loss of her traditional way of life, as conceptualized by European accounts of the “vanishing culture” outlined in Chapter 4. These figures can thus be seen to give form to what Lize van Robbroeck designates as the “two-worlds theory of modern African subjectivity” (2003: 191). As she explains, this theory rests on

the out-dated anthropological notion that individual subjectivities are entirely shaped by their particular cultural monad of origin, and that the loss of this encultured existence generates a conflicted identity characterized by deprivation and bewilderment. (2003: 191)

It follows, on this account, that “the modern black is the confused, childlike and bewildered victim of the modern world, not the ‘master of his fate’ in the tradition of heroic, enlightenment subjectivity” (van Robbroeck 2003: 186). Associated in particular with liberal advocates of a protectionist form of segregation, this rhetoric is founded on the belief that the African is a body with a soul but without a mind: a being of passions but not intellect, emotion but not reason (Johnston 2001: 72).<sup>8</sup> On this account, contact with the forces of European modernization necessarily brings about the African’s demise insofar as it impels him or her to mobilize a rational faculty that is fundamentally underdeveloped. Simultaneously, it forces him or her to enter the European’s linear temporality, which is radically at odds with the circular, unmoving present associated with his or her traditional mode of existence.

What is at stake in Stern’s allegorical series, therefore, is a representation of the putative movements of the African “soul” that result from the radical transformations in the relationship between body and mind impelled by contact with European modernity. As we have seen, Stern’s

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<sup>8</sup> As Jessica Johnston explains, “social conceptualizations of racial differences have displayed divisions similar to the mind/body split inherent in Cartesian dualism,” such that the African was wholly reduced to the conceptual category of the “body” in opposition to the figure of the European, which was conceptually equated with the category “mind” (2001: 72). Given that these same dichotomizations were collapsible onto gendered dichotomies, the figure of the African female in particular was taken to embody the basest corporeality, which was also conceived as a “form of degenerate sexuality” (Johnston 2001: 72).

formal language encodes a shift from liveliness to death. Reading the allegory of the fall into her formal language, it therefore becomes possible to see how the series encodes a conception of African subjectivity whereby the African subject's development of self-consciousness and intellect is equated with the death of her body. It is worth recalling at this point that the sin of Eve is traditionally associated with the pursuit of knowledge. Insofar as Stern's *Awakening* is endowed with a sense of autonomy, it seems that Stern may in fact have been representing the Africans not as the victims of modernity but as the masters of their own – tragic – fate.

### 5.3.2. *The motif of the “awakening” African*

By viewing Stern's three sculptures as an allegorical sequence leading from an energetic awakening to a state of melancholic contemplation, it becomes possible to see how she may in fact have been both re-channelling and expanding upon conventional representations of an “awakening” Africa. In this particular iconographic tradition, the awakening figure is implicitly represented as the successor and the antithesis to the figure of the “sleeping” Africa that abounded in sixteenth-century allegorical representations of the four continents such as Dirk Barentsz's 1534 engraving *Sleeping Africa* (**Figure 50**). In images such as this, the gesture of the head resting on the hand was in fact mobilized to evoke the putative irrationality and indolence that characterize the African condition pre-conquest. These are the same supposed characteristics that were invoked to legitimate colonial incursions into Africa.

As Babatunde Lawal explains in his article on the subject, figures of awakening Africa exploited these same gendered and racialized associations to link the stirring figure with movements such as the emancipation of slaves and the development of discourses asserting the existence, the value, and the valour of African souls. For instance, in her 1863 sculpture *Africa* (**Figure 51**), the American abolitionist sculptor Anne Whitney recuperated the composition of earlier works such as Barentsz's and, modifying the figure's gesture slightly, cast her as the embodiment of a positive movement in the African condition.

Stern's series unquestionably articulates a different appraisal of the African “awakening.” By casting her *Awakening* as the first figure in her series, Stern categorically represents Africans' emancipation from the reserve system and their putative confrontation with modernity as a

negative development. Indeed, rather than constructing a narrative that celebrates the existence of African souls, she takes the spirituality of Africans as her point of departure to warn against its impending disappearance.

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**Figure 50.** Dirk Barentsz, engr. Johannes L. Sadeler, *Sleeping Africa*, c. 1581, engraving, 17.8 x 22 cm, New York Historical Society, James H. Hyde Collection, New York.

**Figure 51.** Anne Whitney, *Africa*, 1863-4, plaster, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.

Stern's project may be compared with the work of the sculptors Herbert Ward and Mary Stainbank, both of whom were white sculptors who devoted their art to the representation of the "spirit of Africa" through figurative sculptural form. Let us examine their works in turn.

### ***5.3.3. Herbert Ward's sculptures of the Congo***

Herbert Ward (1863-1919) was a British explorer, writer, and sculptor. He spent five years in the Congo Free State, between 1894-1899, first as an employee of the International African Association, then for Sanford Exploring Company, and lastly in the Emin Pasha Relief expedition led by Henry Morton Stanley. Basing himself on drawings made during his expedition, he produced a body of highly naturalistic sculptural representations of Congolese figures upon his return to Europe. Ward was among the painters and sculptors of the turn of the century who were successful working with African subjects (Roquebert 1994: 5). His naturalistic treatment of materials and form answered academic standards of the time and his sculptures were bought by several important institutions of scientific and ethnographic research, including the Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren and the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

There is no way to know whether Stern was familiar with Herbert Ward's work before she began to sculpt in 1935. It is certain that she encountered it in 1937, when she is known to have visited the Musée du Congo in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren (today the Royal Museum of Central Africa)<sup>9</sup> where a number of casts of Ward's sculptures were – and continue to be – prominently exhibited. She likely visited the museum earlier in her life (for example, when she visited Brussels in 1928), in which case she would have encountered Ward's work. Finally, Stern could also have encountered his sculpture *Distress* during one of her many visits to Johannesburg in the 1920s and 1930s, as the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquired a cast in 1913 (**Figure 52**).<sup>10</sup>

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**Figure 52.** Herbert Ward, *The Captive (or Distress)*, 1912, bronze, Johannesburg Art Gallery.

**Figure 53.** Rodin, *Eve*, 1881, bronze, 174 x 52 x 58 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Stern would probably have found this work highly compelling. The sculpture represents a nude male African figure of smoothly modelled musculature, standing upright with head bowed and arms crossed against his chest, one hand gripping the opposite shoulder and the other the back of his ribcage. Calling to mind representations of grief such as Bouguereau's and Blake's, the sculpture's subject is the pathos of forced transformation. In fact, its source material is none other than Rodin's *Eve* (**Figure 53**). As Mary-Jo Arnoldi explains, "this acutely expressive work [was] supposed to represent the tragedy of the Congo" (1998: 199): namely, the tragedy of a land

<sup>9</sup> "We are staying here a week and I shall spend it in the Museums alone – today whent [sic] to the Kongo Museum here and felt quite home-sick [sic]." Letter to the Feldmans, June 26, 1937.

<sup>10</sup> I am thankful to Reshma Chhiba at the Johannesburg Art Gallery for her assistance in uncovering this information.

purchased with unspeakable avarice by a despotic Belgian king, of a people subjected to inhumane exploitation on rubber farms and in the ivory trade, and living at the mercy of raids unleashed by the tyrannical forces of the *Force Publique*.

Ward's sculptural rationale was closely aligned with Stern's. He described his project in the following terms:

In all these things, the idea was to make something symbolical – not an absolutely realistic thing like wax works in an anatomical museum – but to make something which demands two different requirements: the thing must have the spirit of Africa in its broad sense, and at the same time it should fill the requirements of the art of sculpture. (quoted in Holmes 1924: 20)

Insisting that his works were art and not scientific illustrations, he stated that his first-hand contact with his models had given him a personal connection to them and that it was this connection that allowed him to tap into their “spirits.” There is in that sense a close parallel between Stern's professed commitment to rendering the “primitive yet child-like souls” of Africans<sup>11</sup> and the aims that Ward stated when he expressed his determination to “convey the spirit of something deep within [him] – a feeling for the Central African Natives.”

#### ***5.3.4. Mary Stainbank's sculptures of Zulu women***

It is certain that Stern was familiar with the second of the two sculptors who committed her practice to the representation of spiritualized African figures. Born in South Africa in 1899, Mary Stainbank is undoubtedly the country's most important early twentieth-century female sculptor. Trained at the Royal College of Art in London between 1922 and 1925, Stainbank set up her practice in 1926 on a family farm near the village of Coedmore in Natal. While she did succeed in garnering a small number of large-scale commissions, gender discrimination and rampant hostility toward modernism in the arch-conservative artistic milieu of Natal determined that she devoted the bulk of her production to small-scale, “personal” works and much of her time to instruction at the Durban Art School.

As noted in Chapter 4, Irma Stern visited Stainbank in her studio in November 1935 – only a few months before she began to sculpt herself – and spoke in positive terms of this meeting.

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<sup>11</sup> “My Exotic Models,” 1926.

This suggests that she admired the sculptress' work and likely that she related to her on a personal level as well. During this visit, Stern would have found in Stainbank's studio a number of sculptures with symbolic titles, which were destined, in the artist's words, to capture the "spirit of Africa." These included works such as her 1930 *Enigma* (**Figure 54**). The sculpture depicts the head of a young Zulu bride, distinctive by her long *isicholo*. She is shown holding one hand close to her face while the other clutches a strand of beads just below her chin. Carved from a block of sandstone, the figure is tightly compressed within the block. The resulting effect of strong pressure is itself in tension with the quiescent expression on the figure's face. Her eyes are closed, suggesting either a state of sleep or searing emotion.

[Illustration retirée /  
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**Figure 54.** Mary Stainbank, *Enigma*, 1930, Ladybrand stone, 45.5 x 56 x 32.5 cm, Vooretrekker Museum, Pietermaritzburg.

**Figure 55.** Mary Stainbank, *Ozazisayo [Dignity]*, 1927, stone, 68 cm (height), The Stainbank Trust.

In a later interview, Mary Stainbank explained that *Enigma* (1930) expressed an "idea of African women" and stated that she felt "they had a deep feeling inside them which we [whites] couldn't understand" (quoted in Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2001: 18). While Stainbank was subject to many negative critiques over the course of her career in the staid milieu of Natal, some critics did identify in her works the same "feeling" for which Stern was lauded at the time. For instance, the critic "The Idler" of the *Natal Mercury* stated in 1936 that "this stone head of a native woman who holds a few beads in her hands expressed to me the very spirit of Africa" (quoted in Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2001: 18). Her body of works also includes a number of other sculptures with allegorical titles, including her 1927 *Ozazisayo*, a representation of a woman carrying a child on her back. "Ozazisayo" loosely translates into English as "dignity" (**Figure 55**).



As I suggested in the previous chapter, Stern's meeting with Mary Stainbank was likely one of the major factors that compelled her to sculpt upon her return to Cape Town at the end of 1935. Based on the close similarities between the two artists' choice of subject matter, we can indeed suppose that this meeting allowed Stern either to design or to refine her sculptural project.

#### **5.4. Sculpture and the pathos of forced transformation: Rodin and Michelangelo**

It is possible now to turn to a closer discussion of Stern's choice of cement as a sculptural medium for the representation of African pathos. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Stern drew on a number of models of expressive European stone sculpture to develop her general conception of the African subject experiencing a fall from grace. Stern's writings contain evidence of her captivation with seminal sculptural portrayals of the human spirit's struggle to transcend the base materiality of daily existence. Drawn from her writings of 1926 and 1937, respectively, her reflections are separated by an eleven-year span that frames her 1935-6 sculptural début. As we shall see, they can give us significant insight into the ways in which her sculptural representations of Africans in 1935 may have been inspired by her knowledge of and admiration for seminal prototypes of expressive European sculpture.

In "My Exotic Models," Stern evocatively describes the scenery that enchanted her on her most recent trip to Zululand:

I found the natives lovely and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar animal-like beauty that adds a touch of the tragic to the expression of their face – the heaviness of an awaking race not yet freed from the soil, so well portrayed by Rodin in his *Iron Age*.

This statement is significant on two levels. Firstly, it evinces a common trope in colonial representational practices, which consists in representing or describing the colonized subject as a sculpture. As Michael Godby notes, "European travellers from the earliest times compared young African men and women to antique sculpture" (2010: 63), and this practice was repeated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Enid Schildkrout notes, for instance, of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial representations of the Congolese, that "it is clear that the body is being described as an object, indeed as a work of art" (2008: 76). This can be seen in the anthropologist Emil Torday's description of a Bushuon nobleman: "[he was] shining like a diamond in the sky, groomed, oiled, combed to perfection [...] like a perfect statue" (1925: 82).

This sculptural re-imagining is of course tantamount to other aestheticizing tropes of colonial representation, which amount, as we have seen, to a form of objectification of the figure of the “Other” – or, what Paul Stuart Landau describes as the production of colonized subjects as images “to be experienced as potent, authentic, knowable, reproducible” (2002: 152). In a related fashion, it is also consistent with the broader set of discourses that portrayed Africa as a prelapsarian Eden. Consequently, Stern’s comparison of the “primitive and childlike” Africans to a well-known sculpture from the European artistic canon confirms that she too held up a fantasy of an African Golden Age and that her vision of Africans was also filtered through European art.

Stern’s choice of this particular sculptural model is significant on a further level. Rodin’s *Iron Age*<sup>12</sup> (**Figure 56**) is a life-size representation of a nude male figure of lean musculature standing in a pose that evokes searing distress. While his smoothly modelled legs are slackened with almost liquid liteness into a *contraposto* stance, his upper body is tensed to a heightened degree. The figure grabs his hair with one hand while his other arm bends to the side, his hand loosely clenching into a fist just above his shoulder level. Like the contrast between his relaxed lower body and his tensed torso, where every muscle and every sinew is rendered as a subtle protrusion, the contrast between the tension in his flexed biceps and the looseness in his fist create the impression of a strained upward movement, as though he were struggling to combat a tremendous pressure from above. His chin tilts upward toward the crease of his elbow, while his eyes closed and his brows contract into a delicate furrow that indeed lends a tragic effect to his expression: it is an expression of contained, but searing agony.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Iron Age* is only one of many of the titles that has been associated with Rodin’s famous sculpture. Rodin completed it over the course of eighteen months in 1875 and 1876, while living in Brussels, where he had fled in 1870 in anticipation of the Paris Commune. The model for the sculpture was a young Flemish soldier named Auguste Neyt and the work was initially titled *Le vaincu ou le soldat blessé* when it was exhibited in Brussels. Given that Rodin intended for the sculpture to mark his return to Paris after seven years in exile and that he expected it to establish his reputation in his birth country, it is likely that he gave it this title as a patriotic gesture of consolation for his defeated nation. However, just before its debut, Rodin removed the spear and fillet that the figure was supposed to carry and abruptly changed its title to *L’âge d’airain*. It was later to be associated with the titles *L’âge de pierre* (1872); *L’homme des premiers âges*; *L’âge de fer*; *Le Fils prodigue* and *L’éveil de l’humanité* (1907). All of these titles evoke the same themes of transformation and metamorphosis in reference to the earliest periods of the human race. The literature continues to reflect the diversity of these titles, although most volumes tend to refer to the work as either *L’âge d’airain* (bronze) or *L’âge de fer* (iron).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 56.** Auguste Rodin, *The Age of Iron*, 1876-7,  
180.4 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The sculpture is commonly interpreted as a personification of humankind's emergence from its earliest developmental stages. It is, in Jeanne Mayo Roos' words, a representation of "a being coming into consciousness, awakening to an awareness of the potential for good and evil both" (Roos 2010: 38). Stern's reference to this sculpture in her description of Africans as an "awakening race not yet freed from the soil" therefore shows that her conception of her subjects was powerfully mediated by her familiarity with, and admiration for, the French master's expressive rendering of the pathos of transformation. In other words, her familiarity with Rodin's sculpture manifestly gave her a compelling reference point as she endeavoured to understand the movements of the "souls" of her subjects in 1926. One may suppose that this vision of the African subject endured through to 1935: indeed, we may imagine that her decision to create an expressive sculptural rendering of her subjects was linked to her perception that they had by that point "awakened from the soil" all the more.

The second and third quotes under consideration confirm this suggestion. Both are drawn from the body of personal writings that Stern composed about her stay in Florence in October 1937. This stay came at the end of an extensive European tour, which turned out to be the last that she would make before the outbreak of the war. The first quote of this set is from a short text labelled "Italy 1937 – Notes" that is preserved in the folder "Personal Papers 1909-1937" in the Irma Stern archives at the NLSA. Written on loose sheets of paper in a stream-of-consciousness style that is reminiscent of her 1923 *Umgababa Buch*, this text is essentially a wistful homage to the city of Florence, its artistic and architectural jewels, its history, and its people. It records the artist's awe at the Tuscan sunlight, her amblings through streets and gardens, and her reverence

for the “great men [who] had breathed the cool air of the city.” Among the whimsical anecdotes that make up her narration, there is a reference to one master in particular:

In the Academia I was passing one of my many visites [sic] to Michelangelo’s slaves – one day I find a scaffold around one of these figures. They are casting it for d’Annuncio [sic] has wished to receive two casts of the two slaves for his villa – and under [this] very figure I learned who to cast – with all the efficiency an Italian craftsman can show.

The two “slaves” are the marble sculptures known as the *Dying Slave* (**Figure 57**) and the *Rebellious Slave* (**Figure 58**), both of which were cast for the villa of the Gabriele d’Annunzio, the Italian poet, journalist, novelist, and dramatist who is generally regarded as a major precursor to the Fascist movement.<sup>13</sup> Each representing a nude male figure emerging from a mass of unhewn marble, they are part of a series of sculptures that Michelangelo began in 1515 as part of an elaborate plan for the tomb of Pope Julius II. He did not complete them, however, as the project’s scale and funding were dramatically reduced. As a result, the works remained unfinished, and it is from the dramatic effect of their unfinished forms that they draw their titles as *Slaves* or *Prisoners*. Encased within their stone blocks, their finely sculpted bodies appear to be struggling to free themselves from the marble.

**[Illustration retirée /  
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**Figure 57.** Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*,  
1513-16, marble, 215 cm (h),  
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

**Figure 58.** Michelangelo, *Rebellious Slave*,  
1513-6, marble, 209 cm (h),  
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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<sup>13</sup> Known as the *Vittoriale degli Italiani*, d’Annunzio’s villa was a luxurious hillside estate overlooking Garda Lake. It had been passed onto him at the close of the First World War after the Italian State confiscated it from the German art historian Henry Thode. In the words of Fred Licht, the villa stands as a “peculiarly pure example of the insidious links between major trends of modern civilization to the power-politics of Italian Fascism” (1982: 318). The casts of the *Slaves* were made to flank the bed of the master bedroom, along with a cast of Michelangelo’s *Dusk*, which was placed above the bed.

It is this general idea of a struggle between spirit and matter that appears to have left an impact on Stern, for the second quote of this 1937 set has her referring to the *Slave* series once more. Drawn from a letter to the Feldmans dated October 30, this quote is nearly identical to the first:

When I am tired of working I stroll about and run into a gallerie [sic] for an hour – have seen a rieliefe [sic] work by Michelangelo – partly finished partly half finished – and partly in the vague raw stone. It was a private lesson he gave me – who to sculpture.

The similarity that binds these two quotes confirms that her strange use of the expression “*who to cast*” / “*who to sculpture*” is not to be dismissed as a simple instance of her strange choice of words or her careless handwriting – one might have assumed that she had been meaning to write the more grammatically sound “*how to sculpt.*” In both of these quotes, Stern seems to be suggesting that she found a strong resonance between Michelangelo’s representations of beings struggling to break free from the entrapment of the earthly realm and the figures she herself had been casting in Cape Town. Thus, while it is difficult to assess to what extent the experience of these works may have actually impacted her ulterior productions, given that only one of her viewable works in cement was produced after 1937 (**Cat. 17**), these curious statements confirm to what extent Stern found the metaphor of the soul emergent from matter compelling for her conceptualization of the African condition.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, we may return to a commonality shared by Michelangelo’s and Rodin’s works. Both artists articulated their subject matter by exploiting one of the fundamental defining features of the art of sculpture: namely, the tension between the literal materiality of the medium and the evocative or immaterial charge of the forms. It is this paradox that has been characterized as the “Pygmalion problem,” in reference to the Greek sculptor Pygmalion who, when faced with the cold, hard, inertness of the statue he had fashioned of the nymph Galatea, found himself desperately wishing her to be invested with life. Alex Potts has explained the Pygmalion problem

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<sup>14</sup> Rodin himself was strongly affected by his own encounter with Michelangelo’s works on his 1875 trip to Florence, which he had undertaken precisely to “discover the secret of movement” in the master’s art (Crone 2006: 14). Upon his return, he wrote: “I have studied Michelangelo, and I believe the great magician will probably reveal a couple secrets to me. [...] Nights, in my room, I have been making drawings, but not after his works – of the scaffoldings that I have been building in my imagination in an attempt to understand him (Rodin, quoted in Crone 2006: 14). Of the impressions and the “secrets” that he brought back, he noted the way in which Michelangelo’s works “express[ed] the painful withdrawal of the being into himself, restless energy, the will to act without hope of success, and finally the martyrdom of the creature who is tormented by his unrealisable aspirations” (Rodin, quoted in Crone 2006: 14). These are unquestionably the same effects that he invested in his *Age of Iron*.

in the following terms: “Because the image of the represented figure is identical to the inanimate mass of the sculpture, the disparity between the illusion of living flesh and the reality of the inert material is more acute than in painting” (2000: 35). Platonicist interpretations of the Pygmalion problem have posited that the challenge of the sculptor is to exploit the material to the ends of rendering the life of the human spirit, and it is a convention of art history that the uniqueness of sculptors such as Michelangelo or Rodin resides in their ability to endow their works with a spiritual charge through their evocative handling of material. For instance, Paul Barolsky has observed that Michelangelo used the *non finito* technique precisely to register the idea of metamorphosis on the surfaces of the sculptures themselves: by drawing attention to the marks of his own chisel on works such as the *Slaves*, he could create a symbolic link between the temporality of his own sculptural process and the painful temporal extension of the process of becoming that was the subject of his works (1994: 76). Rodin famously found in Michelangelo’s *non finito* a potent means of lending expressive vivacity to his sculptures. According to Potts, Rodin’s *non finito* heightens the tension between inert matter and animated form, thereby inciting spectator to fill unfinished forms with subjective projections (2000: 74). In this way, the tension between the expressive life of the forms and the surfaces on the one hand, and the heightened materiality of the medium on the other, becomes a compelling metaphor for the interior split depicted in the compositions themselves.

I believe it highly likely that this aspect of Rodin’s and Michelangelo’s sculptures also struck a chord with Stern. This is because the conflict between spirit and matter that is dramatized in those artists’ sculptures symbolically maps onto the epistemological conflict that is at the heart of the conception of African subjectivity that is evoked in the sculptures’ titles and gestures’: namely, the conflict between the African woman’s identity as essentially corporeal and her emergent intellect, self-consciousness, and rationality. This conception is aptly expressed in Stern’s description of the Africans as beings “not yet freed from the soil.” We may accordingly suppose that her desire to sculpt Africans was based in no insignificant measure on her recognition of the possibility of manipulating the medium in such a way that the tension between the African woman’s “earthiness” and her “higher” faculties be registered in the tensions in the material itself.

As we have seen, Stern did indeed manipulate her cement material in a highly specific way, leaving the surfaces of *Awakening* unfinished while smoothing those of *Grief*. Although she used neither bronze nor marble to create her sculptural representations of African women in 1935, we may suppose that Rodin's and Michelangelo's models gave her further inspiration for the means through which to approach her own brief of representing African transformation in sculpture. It is to this aspect of her works that I turn in the following section.

### 5.5. Three African Galateas: Stern's treatment of the cement medium

By its very nature, cement is a weighty, thick, granular material. These qualities metaphorically evoke the ideas of rootedness and *gravitas*. At the same time, the material's porosity lends it a breathing quality that distinguishes it from materials such as bronze and marble. As we have seen, Stern exploited these features to lend her figures differing degrees of vivacity and thus to articulate different representations of the relationship between African soul and body. Firstly, she opted to leave the porous texture of her cement visible on all three of her sculptures, albeit to different degrees: there are clear differences to be observed between her treatment of surface and form on *Awakening*, *Grief*, and *Contemplation*. If *non-finito* evokes expression and life, while *finito* is associated with the lifeless restraint of classical figures, then the progression from *non-finito* to *finito* allowed her to conjure the transformation of the African woman from a being still alive and enlivened by her putative connections to the African soil, to a being freed from the soil but trapped in alienated modern life.

While Stern can be seen to have devised her approach to the problem of representing spirituality in stone from masters such as Rodin and Michelangelo, her choice of cement as a material is likely ascribable to her contact with early twentieth-century modernist precedents. Indeed, cement was a popular material with artists such as Aristide Maillol and Alexandre Archipenko, who were drawn to it not only for its affordability but also for its particular temporal connotations (Curtis 1999: 227). As historian of sculpture Penelope Curtis writes, these artists saw in the inherent weightiness of the cement, combined with its porous and granular texture, compelling resonances with the formal properties of the archaic monuments and sculptures they were admiring in institutions such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the

Berlin Ethnographic Museum (1999: 227). Accordingly, these sculptors sought to exploit the material to endow their own works with the qualities of age, anonymity, and timelessness, associated by definition with the notion of ancient “spirituality” (1999: 227).

The Expressionists in particular adopted cement for the production of spiritualized figures in the post-war years. In keeping with the practices of their painter colleagues, these artists sought to employ the human form for the representation of spiritual or psychological themes. Through distortions and distensions of gesture and form, these artists sought to create works that could convey an “excess of feeling” and thus demand an “empathetic response from the viewer” (Barron 1984: 18). These sculptures ranged widely in size and style, from the colossal and aggressively carnal cement figures of Gela Förster (Alexander Archipenko’s wife) (**Figure 59**) to the slender and supple women sculpted by Wilhelm Lehmbrück (**Figure 60**).<sup>15</sup>

[Illustration retirée /  
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[Illustration retirée /  
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**Figure 59.** Gela Förster, *Awakening*, 1919, cement, dimensions unknown, lost.

**Figure 60.** Wilhelm Lehmbruck, *Kneeling Woman*, 1911, cast stone, 176.5 x 142.2 x 68.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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<sup>15</sup> While these works were often monumental in proportions, few were produced as commissions or as commemorative pieces. Indeed, Expressionist sculptors typically sculpted their friends or popular cultural figures whose troubles or inner turmoil mirrored the chaos of the era (Barron 1984: 27). In this regard, art historian Stephanie Barron usefully notes that Expressionist sculpture engaged particularly strongly with the psychological dimensions of the war experience: first with nationalistic hopes and the utopian ideals, and later with the anguish and the bitterness that ensued (1984: 17).



Stern drew on these Expressionist precedents to develop the sculptural language of her cement works. Her collection contains a synthetic stone bust by Wilhelm Lehmbruck (**Figure 61**) that is exemplary of the artist's spiritualizing representational style. Although it is not possible to determine when Stern acquired the bust, it is certain that it was in her collection in 1936, for it is mentioned in a March 1936 article in the *South African Lady's Pictorial* titled "Irma Stern Invites You" as part of an extensive description of the most distinctive items in the artist's collection. The formal similarity between this bust and her *Young Native Girl* (**Cat. 17**) suggests that it may have served as a prototype for the latter. One notes, for instance, the similarity between the figures' high foreheads, their disguised brow lines, the almond shapes of their eyes, and above all, the striking elongation of their necks. Indeed, Stern appears to have borrowed the German sculptor's characteristically sinuous lines and slender forms in her design for her sculptures, likely in an effort to lend to her African figure the same air of melancholy grace that exudes from the former. Equally striking are the parallels between Stern's *Kneeling Mother* and Lehmbruck's *Kneeling Woman* (**Figure 60**). As Lehmbruck's principal monographer Reinhold Heller points out, the sculpture is a secular take on the iconography of the kneeling Madonna; in his words, the work "serve[d] a new religious art clothed in a new iconography of subjective emotion and contemplation" (1972: 27).<sup>16</sup> Stern manifestly borrowed Lehmbruck's design to create her African variation on the theme: like his sculpted figure, Stern's is shown kneeling on one leg, with torso uncovered but legs draped in a sculpted fabric. In both sculptures, the narrow width of the supporting platform emphasizes the breadth of the figure's stride, while visually matching her slim vertical poise to lend her an expansive, elongated, weightless appearance. While the pyramidal form of the sculptural space gives the figures solidity and stability – especially in Stern's sculpture, where the draping between the figure's legs weighs her mass down – the soft linearity of their bisecting lithe limbs and tall torsos invests them with a striking lightness and openness, as though their bodies were splaying outward from a centre of gravity located not in their anchored feet but in their navels.

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<sup>16</sup> The poet Theodor Daubler (1874-1934) designated Lehmbruck's *Kneeling Woman* as "the preface to expressionism in sculpture." He described it in the following terms: "Here we can no longer find prayer but rather devotion, a faith in the [ethical] verticality yet to come. [...] Modern self-contemplation accompanied again by a steep, conscientious, structural thrust" (quoted in Heller 1972: 27).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 61.** Wilhelm Lehmbruck, *Bust*, 1913, synthetic stone, 44 cm (height), Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

The formal similarities between Stern's and Lehmbruck's works give further credence to the suggestion that Stern drew on German models in the design of her sculptural approach to the representation of African pathos and spirituality. It is highly likely that she was aware of Gela Förster's work as well, given that she exhibited with her while she was still in Germany: Förster exhibited with the Berlin *Sezession* in 1919 (Barron 1984: 72). In a more general sense, Stern's sculptural language suggests that she was intent on exploiting the timeless quality of the cement material to her own representational ends. To be sure, it is possible to see how she used the spiritualized archaic associations of the material to different effect for each of the three sculptures. In the case of *Awakening*, the distant temporal sphere evoked is the Edenic traditional past that is conceived as the point of departure for the African's movement toward modern life. It is, in other words, a past that is part of what James Clifford designates as the spatio-temporal continuum linking "primitive" life to "modern" existence in European anthropological discourse. In contrast, the timeless past of *Contemplation* is removed from this continuum: the archaic quality of the sculpture does not evoke the past of history, but the timelessness of death.

Notwithstanding these precedents, however, it is possible that cement, by its very constitution, offered a compelling sculptural material for Stern. Cement is a compound of crushed stone – usually lime – and aggregate. On a fundamental level, then, is it not, by definition, nature transformed? This aspect of cement was not lost on some nineteenth-century commentators, who disparaged the material for its associations with the ideas of artifice and fraud, and struggled with the problem that the material had no aesthetic of its own (Prudon 1989:

79). We might suppose that Stern precisely found this aspect of the cement appealing to the extent that it connected symbolically to the growing artificiality of the identities she was trying to portray.

### **5.5. Whose shame? Whose grief? Whose melancholy?**

In summary, the three sculptures *Awakening*, *Grief*, and *Contemplation* that were the stars of Stern's exhibitions of 1936, 1939, and 1945 should in my opinion be interpreted both as a set and as a sequence. As a set, they represent the putative transformation in the relationship between the African body and the African soul provoked by the process of modernization. In other words, they represent the movement of the African soul as the African body "vanishes." As a sequence, they represent the successive stages in that supposed transformation: from the African's "awakening" into a world of sin (white modernity), to the crisis that follows, to her degeneration into a state of idle contemplation. As we have seen, Stern achieved this representational unity and narrative progression by drawing upon the established iconography of Eve's fall from Eden, symbolic associations related to the medium of cement, and sculpting techniques associated with previous masters of the European tradition.

Whereas Stern ostensibly sought in clay the means to forge new links with African subjects, it seems that she sought in cement the means to forge a relationship of an entirely different type: one predicated on fear rather than hope, a false sense of security rather than naïve anticipation. These dynamics can be read into the photograph that shows her at work on her cast sculpture (**Plate 5**). Published in the April 1936 issue of the *South African Lady's Pictorial*, the photograph is a close angle shot of Stern working on *Contemplation* in her studio. Stern stands behind the sculpture, applying a chisel to the figure's shoulder with what appears to be utmost care: her gaze is directed firmly downward at the spot she is touching with the chisel, and her two-handed hold on the tool suggests that she is keeping the pressure of the blade in tight check, as though she were trying to caress the sculpture's cement skin rather than to incise it. Her body tilts slightly to the side, partially hidden by the figure's own, as though she wished neither to disturb her contemplative state nor to overtake her place in the spotlight. There is a world of difference between this stance and the one she adopted in the 1922 studio photographs wherein she stands side by side with her clay sculptures: gone is the defiance and the defensiveness, and

gone too is the palpable sense of insecurity. There is, in short, a strongly maternal quality to her stance vis-à-vis the sculpture: a sense of care, concern, and proud possessiveness.

It is precisely therein that lies the crux of Stern's casting project. However doting Stern may be toward her sculpture, she is also clearly the one in control: even as she accords her sculpture the spotlight, she surreptitiously siphons it for herself, encasing her sculpture's body with her own and overtaking it from above. There is a sheer contrast between the utter passivity of the sculpture and the controlled resolution of the sculptress that finds resonance in the equally stark contrast between the dark shade of the sculpture's nude torso and the immaculate whiteness of Stern's covered body. The signs of struggle that were present in the 1922 photographs – the dark marks on Stern's frock, the tousle in her hair, the tension that permeated the space between Stern's disturbed eyes and the silhouette of the sculpture – are absent in this shot: Stern is relaxed and in control, and her lips even appear to be curling into a smile. The power dynamics are similar in the other photograph that shows her posing with her cast sculptures (**Plate 3**): although she keeps her distance vis-à-vis the dynamic *Kneeling Mother* and sits at her eye level, her legs surreptitiously fasten around the table that supports the sculpture, and the framing of the photograph clearly establishes her centrality and her control over sculpture and surrounding space.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Plate 5.** Irma Stern sculpting *Contemplation*, 1936, photograph,  
15 x 10 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

It is in this light that we must understand Stern's decision to cast her 1935 works in cement. Cement is a material that is infinitely more durable than the slippery, malleable, collapsible clay, and the technique of casting is one that precisely enables the artist to enact and oversee the process of solidification. Indeed, casting as a technique has intrinsic associations with the natural processes of petrification, as well as with pseudo-scientific processes such as taxidermy: it involves the literal entrapment of malleable (i.e. live) material, and its replacement with a material that, although dead, offers the comparative benefits of solidity, durability, immutability. For this reason, I believe we may understand Stern's choice of cement casting through the same framework as Pauline Wakeham's analysis of colonial representational practices as "taxidermic" in nature (1996: 2008). Analyzing the early ethnographic filmmaker Edward Curtis' 1914 film *Land of the Headhunters*, Wakeham explains that the camera functions for the white cinematographer and director as a "hunting tool": it is an instrument of "instantaneous capture" that makes it possible for the white subject to enforce imaginatively his or her control over the livelihood of the indigenous subject (2008: 94). As she writes of Curtis' cinematography:

[it] framed its object matter into the future perfect tense, framing native bodies as 'what will have been.' Thus, the moment of the camera's instantaneous capture – the moment that supposedly ensured the preservation of the vanishing race" in the image of permanence – was actually the moment that marked native bodies for pending death.

As Wakeham convincingly argues, taxidermic representational technologies draw their particularity from the way in which they "manipulate the categories of humans and animals, culture and nature, and life and death in the service of white supremacy." They provide a means of "protecting against loss" by making possible the "transcendence of the body" (2008: 6). It is no surprise, in this sense, that Stern's three sculptures were the ones that drew the most favour from critics and publics: crafted according to the codes of European artistic representation, they offered white South African audiences compelling projection surfaces for the anxieties that circulated about the pending "disappearance" of primitive Africans. As such, they offered these publics the means to deflect imaginatively the same threat that they evoked. And for Stern, casting Africans in stone offered her the means to create "pure" African presences that she could keep with her: repositories of African spirit that would continue to exhale in the garden of the Firs even after the original bodies had disappeared outside its gates.

**Chapter 6**  
***Carving (1935-1945)***

Cement was not the only stone medium that Stern used to develop a “fuller” representation of her African subjects. The bulk of Stern’s production of 1935 to 1945 is in fact made up of small-scale sculptures carved in wonderstone and verdite.<sup>1</sup> While it is impossible to determine the number of sculptures that make it up, this corpus may have included up to twenty works. Those that remain viewable today at the Irma Stern Museum and in photographs are four sculptures carved in high relief from two bisecting planes of their original quadrangular blocks (**Cat. 23, 24, 26, 41**), four sculptures carved in low relief from a single plane (**Cat. 21, 22, 25, 28**), and two carved from irregularly shaped blocks (**Cat. 42, 43**). These ten works are the remaining representatives of an eclectic corpus of sculptures that appear to have been the eccentric and anonymous companions to Stern’s illustrious life-size and symbolically titled cast cement works. They were certainly dwarfed by the latter in Stern’s exhibitions: with the exception of the large-scale *The Woman* (or *The Water Carrier*) (**Cat. 25**), all of the sculptures that can be seen are relatively small in size, with dimensions ranging from nine to thirty centimetres in height. Most were given generic or minimally descriptive titles – for instance, *Head*, *Two Heads*, *Mask* – and they were listed at much lower prices than her works in cement.<sup>2</sup>

The banality of the sculptures’ titles belies the oddity of their stylizations. With their angular volumes, their rough surfaces, and their compact and quadrangular silhouettes, these works evince an approach to the rendering of the human figure that is radically different from that which is visible in her cast cement works and from her pictorial style of the mid-1930s as well. The contrast is especially striking when one considers three works in particular: namely, the sculptures titled *Girl with Basket* (**Cat. 23**), *Standing Young Girl* (**Cat. 24**), and *Standing Half-Length Figure* (**Cat. 41**). In these three works, the sensual forms of the bodies are divided into sharply contoured geometric fragments, defined by shallowly incised lines, in a matter that

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<sup>1</sup> There is a pattern of inconsistency in the archival records concerning Stern’s sculptural media. Namely, the primary source records indicate that her works were produced in soapstone and malachite whereas the secondary source records indicate that they were produced in African wonderstone and verdite. I address this conflicting information and offer my reasons for referring to her materials as wonderstone and verdite in the preface on Stern’s sculptural materials that is appended to the catalogue of sculptures (**A.1.2**).

<sup>2</sup> Stern’s works in carved stone ranged in price from 15 to 30 guineas in her exhibitions of 1936 and 1939, in contrast with her cement works which were listed at 25 to 125 guineas. The prices of her carved works were raised slightly in her 1945 exhibition, in tandem with the prices of her productions in other media. The only exception to this rule is in the valuation of the work *The Woman / The Water Carrier*, whose price was raised from an astronomical 175 guineas in her first exhibition to an even more outrageous 250 guineas in her 1945 exhibition.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 23**  
Irma Stern  
*Girl with Basket*  
1935  
Wonderstone  
24.5 x 22 x 20 cm  
Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town.

[Illustration retirée  
Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 24**  
Irma Stern  
*Standing Young Girl*  
1935  
Wonderstone  
22.5 x 14 x 8.5 cm  
Private collection.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 41**  
Irma Stern  
*Standing Half-Length  
Figure*  
Undated (c. 1935-1945?)  
Wonderstone  
23.5 x 12.5 x 8 cm  
Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 26**  
Irma Stern  
*The God of Plenty*  
1936  
Wonderstone  
9.5 x 7 x 9.5 cm  
Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town.



**[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 22**  
Irma Stern  
*Eve*  
1935  
Wonderstone  
Dimensions and  
location unknown.

**[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 21**  
Irma Stern  
*Native Head*  
1935  
Wonderstone  
Dimensions and  
location unknown.

**Cat. 28**  
Irma Stern  
*Two Heads*  
1936  
Wonderstone  
15.5 x 15.5 x 7.5 cm  
Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town.

**[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 25**  
Irma Stern  
*The Woman*  
1935  
Wonderstone  
Dimensions and  
location unknown.

**[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]**

**[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 21**  
Irma Stern  
*Head*, 1936  
Wonderstone  
15.5 x 15.5 x 7.5 cm  
Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town.

**[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 42**  
Irma Stern  
*Mask*, n.d.  
Verdite  
16 x 14 x 19 cm  
Irma Stern Museum,  
Cape Town

is fundamentally at odds with Stern's other productions. The degree of abstraction displayed in the rendering of the human form in these sculptures is all the more perplexing when one considers that it comes from the hand of an artist who famously decried European art's shift toward abstraction (Berman 2003: 55).<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is a level of abstraction that Stern would not even approach until the mid-1940s, when she self-professedly began to "[do] more and more geometrical and abstract things of curious values,"<sup>4</sup> as for instance in her 1952 *Composition* (Figure 62).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 62.** Irma Stern, *Composition*, 1952, gouache, 90 x 60 cm, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

While the curious geometry of Stern's carved sculptures could be explained away in terms of the novelty of the medium or the artist's awkward handling of her sculpting tools, I believe it reveals a particular purposefulness. Specifically, Stern's stylized carvings display formal similarities with works that rarely entered the spaces of Cape Town's or Johannesburg's galleries: African carving traditions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, with their anthropomorphic forms and their

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<sup>3</sup> In a 1958 interview for *The Cape Argus*, Irma Stern opined 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," *The Cape Argus*, October 23).

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Richard and Freda Feldman, June 1945, quoted in Berman 2003: 96.

<sup>5</sup> I use this term in awareness of the host of discursive problematics that are involved in its use. Three are particularly salient. The first pertains to the use of the term "art" with reference to the material production of Africans, and indeed peoples working outside of the Euro-American tradition at large. The second pertains to the use of the encompassing term "African art" to refer to the highly diverse body of objects produced on the African continent and contentiously defined as "art." The third pertains to the use of the epithet "traditional" to designate a

diminutive sizes, the three sculptures named above are reminiscent of the portable wooden figurines endemic to African sculpture.

My goal in this chapter is to examine the significance of Stern's "Africanizing" approach in terms of her broader aims for her 1935 sculptural turn. Using Stern's three carved stone statuettes as an anchor for my analysis, I aim to show how this particular formal approach to the representation of African women can be understood in relation to her stated goal of gaining fuller mastery of the form of her subjects, as well as in relation to her presumed desire to access the "spirit of Africa" through artistic means. Thus, by bringing Stern's carved works out of the relative obscurity in which she herself confined them, I hope to show how her humble experimentalism in carved wonderstone can be understood both as distinctive from and absolutely complementary to her more stately project in cast cement.

### **6.1. Three African women cornered into stone**

African wonderstone is distinctive first and foremost for its grey-green hue, its matte sheen, and its soapy feel. Lacking the porosity of cement, it is a dense, hard, and opaque medium. All of these qualities of the stone are emphasized in Stern's sculptures: in fact, the most striking feature that unites the works and that distinguishes them as a set is the strong sense of intimacy between the hard, dense, quadrangular stone block, the composition, and the highly stylized rendering of the human form. On all three works, the diminutive format of the composition and the configuration of its constituent forms appear to have been dictated principally by the limits of the blocks: the represented figures' limbs are tightly pressed to their

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particular sub-field within this broader, and already questionably named, field of production. For more on these respective issues, see: (1) Valentin Y. Mudimbe's 1986 article "African Art as a Question Mark," in which he concisely describes the "aestheticization" of African art as part of two historical processes that constitute and sustain the hegemony of Western cultural values: the "metamorphosis of concrete realities into abstract categories," and, complementarily, the "possible transformation of those realities into cultural objects with a financial value" (1986: 3); (2) Monica Blackmun-Visionà's review of the problematics attached to the epithet "African" in *A History of Art in Africa* (2001: 15); (3) Sherry Errington's 1994 article "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" and Sidney Kasfir's 2012 article "African Art and Authenticity: a Text without a Shadow" for useful critiques of the use of the qualifier "traditional" and on the mythology of the "one-tribe-one-style." In this chapter, I will be referring to a body of works which was viewed by European artists *as* homogeneous: while I do not endorse their essentialist view of the arts of Africa, I use the term in order to refer to a body of production defined by the continent's geographical frontiers. Where specific examples are concerned, I will give maximal contextual information in order to counteract the tendency that they be viewed simply as exemplars of a fictitious "African" aesthetic.

trunks, contorted into unnatural positions; their heads sit directly on their shoulders; and their quadrangular silhouettes clearly evoke the cubic forms of the original wonderstone blocks. Furthermore, the shallowness of the incisions, the angularity of the forms, and the roughly hewn aspect of the surfaces all suggest that the stone acted as a significant impediment on the design.

On all three works, one of the four sides of the original block remains untouched and uncarved, while the others bear the burden of visual weight. The flat grounds are patently made to go unseen. While the sculptures are sufficiently carved to be visually interesting in some way from most angles, with shallow incisions creating patterns on the stone and deeper crevices creating sculptural forms, these elements only cohere into an anthropomorphic composition when the works are seen from a single, specific angle. For each sculpture, this optimal angle of view is directly perpendicular with the central axis of the three-dimensional composition, which itself corresponds to one of the original block's four vertical edges. On *Girl with Basket*, the axis is marked by the figure's right knee and calf; on *Standing Young Girl*, it is her right shoulder and arm; and on the *Standing Half-Length Figure*, the axis is squarely aligned with the figure's vertical midline. These effects are plainly visible in the archival photographs that remain of her works. The sculptures titled *Standing Half-Length Figure* and *Girl with Basket* were each photographed in individual shots, where they appear from a close angle against a plain background of fabric (**Cat. 23** and **41**). The sculpture titled *Girl with Basket* also appears in another photograph, where she is shown side by side with the *Standing Young Girl* (**Plate 13**).

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Plate 13.** Photograph of *Standing Young Girl* and *Girl with Basket*, c. 1946, 16.5 x 11 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:19, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1946-64).

A critic for the Afrikaans-language paper *Die Vaderland* described the particularity of these sculptures by stating that the artist had made use of the “cornering effect” and “of the original form of the stone as ground.”<sup>6</sup> Let us see how these techniques are manifested in each of Stern’s three works.

### 6.1.1. Standing Young Girl

*Standing Young Girl* is a representation of a nude woman with crossed arms and closed eyes. She appears to be sleeping. In the photograph where she appears with *Girl with Basket*, her silhouette is only roughly anthropomorphic: while the lines of her head and shoulder are defined on the right side, the left side of her body remains a smooth, flat surface. The side lighting dramatizes this lack of definition by creating a straight line along the left side of her body, suggesting that the part cast in shadow is flat. The figure’s bodily components are configured in a highly unnatural fashion: her left shoulder lifts higher than her right, such that its upper line is aligned with the slits of her closed eyes, and her neck is wholly collapsed onto her chest. The sculpture’s truncation is ambiguous, as the area below the figure’s crossed arms is marked with deep vertical dents that have no explicit referential purpose. While they vaguely evoke legs, their purpose rather seems to be to elongate the figure illusionistically.

Considered together, these elements suggest that the block acted as a significant constraint on the sculpture’s composition. A more recent photograph of the sculpture confirms that the block’s form was irregular (**Cat. 24b**). The side angle view clearly shows the slanting form of the portion of the block that is hidden in the archival photograph. This shot intimates that Stern precisely endeavoured to exploit the particular volumetric shape of the block in such a way as to maximize the overall size of the composition and thus to minimize her modifications to the block. Furthermore, it suggests that the archival photograph was taken with a view to concealing the least finished portions of the sculpture and to emphasizing the parts that were the most anthropomorphic.

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<sup>6</sup> “By haar weke in seepsteen vin dons berskeie voorbelde waar sy gebruik maak van die hoekeffek terwyl sy in ander gevalle weer die oorspronklike vorm van die steen as grondmotief gebruik.” From: “Irma Stern in Londen,” November 3, 1936. Translation courtesy of François Brand.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 24b. Irma Stern, *Standing Young Girl*, side view.

### 6.1.2. Standing Half-Length Figure

*Standing Half-Length Figure* represents a nude African woman standing with her arms at her sides. Rendered through light incisions, the figure's features have the same Africanized aspect as Stern's other sculptures: the mouth is carved as a shallow protrusion, marked in its centre with a shallow horizontal line to create the forms of lips. The eyes are rendered simply as small, lightly carved ovals, set far apart on both sides of a wide nose. The figure is truncated just below the level of her hips, which is marked with a lightly carved horizontal line. Her proportions are stunted, as her head has nearly the same width as her shoulders and her right arm has a thickness roughly equivalent to a third of her trunk's total breadth. The excessive width of her face is augmented further by her shoulder-length hair, which sits like a helmet atop her head. Vertical striations in the stone evoke braids along the sides of her face, while a large, bulging mass of stone juts down between her eyebrows. Her breasts are asymmetrical: her right breast is rendered as a spherical volume that protrudes from her trunk, whereas her left breast is barely carved out from the block. Vertical chisel marks descend across its centre, visually connecting it to the right side of the figure's silhouette.

Of the three sculptures, this one is the most block-like in appearance, as the lack of formal definition in the figure's trunk and the square shape of her enlarged head clearly evoke the original shape of the wonderstone block. Photographs taken of the work in 2011 make it possible

to see that the composition visible in the archival photograph is carved from two bisecting faces of the original block (**Cat. 41b** and **c**). Furthermore, these photographs reveal that symmetry of the figure's body is illusory: the side on which her arm is carved is much wider than the other.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 41b/c.** Irma Stern, *Standing Half-Length Figure*, side views.

### 6.1.3. Girl with Basket

*Girl with Basket* is the most naturalistic of the three sculptures. The sculpture represents an African woman sitting in a crouched position with a basket under one arm. In the archival photograph, she is sitting at a three-quarter angle to the viewer, such that the right side of her body is exposed and both of her knees jut forward. Her left forearm can be seen wrapping around the basket, held up to her head, while her right arm is folded across her chest such that her two hands almost meet. Her right elbow is bent at a sharp angle that mirrors the sharp bend of her leg. Her pose is compact, but it is not as affected as the poses of the other two sculptures, for her complete figure is shown, and all of its constituent parts are either defined through carved recesses and incisions or judiciously concealed: for instance, the space between her legs is filled with dense stone that is carved with vertical lines, evoking fabric. Although the figure's legs are notably more bulky than her trunk, her proportions are more naturalistic than those of the other two figures. While the quadrangular shape of the block remains visible, negative space is created on all four of the sculpture's sides to create a full silhouette, and the composition has sufficient depth to evoke a lifelike form. Finally, the figure's head is rendered far more naturalistically than the head of *Standing Half-Length Figure* and certainly than that of *Standing Young Girl*: her face has a spherical shape, her braids are evenly defined, and her features have far more volume than

those of the other two figures. Her lips are each given formal definition and even appear to be curling into a slight smile. The compactness of her pose and the upward slant of her shoulder make the near-erasure of her neck plausible, and the slight tilt to her head gives her an expressiveness that is lacking in the other two sculptures. Indeed, the air of tranquility on her face attenuates the tension in her compact pose and makes it seem not only natural but relaxed.

This is thus the sculpture for which Stern used the “cornering” technique to most naturalistic effect. From all other angles, the composition loses its anthropomorphic integrity and its depth. For instance, a view of the work from above reveals that the original block was not cubic but rectangular in volume. It also shows that the figure’s right knee marks the spine of the block and thus the angle from which Stern designed the composition. Similarly, a back view of the work reveals that the back of the figure’s body is flat (**Cat. 28b** and **c**).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn] [Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 23b/c.** Irma Stern, *Girl with Basket*, back and top views.

The compositional decisions perceptible in these sculptures were certainly intentional. Wonderstone is a relatively soft, if remarkably weighty stone, being generally classified at number 3 on the Mohs scale of hardness. None of the few traceable examples of wonderstone sculpture from Stern’s time display the same use of the original stone as ground, nor do they display the cornering effect: for instance, both Stainbank’s *Medusa* (**Figure 63**) and Moses Kottler’s *Standing Nude* (**Figure 64**) are freestanding works carved fully in the round. While we might admit that Stern was less adept at handling her chisel than were her colleagues, who were professional sculptors, her use of high relief on all three of these works is certainly purposeful.



[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 63.** Mary Stainbank, *Medusa*, undated, wonderstone, dimensions and location unknown.

**Figure 64.** Moses Kottler, *Standing Nude*, 1940, wonderstone, 38 cm (h), private collection.

We might firstly suppose that her decision to use the cornering effect was due to considerations of economy and practicality. Photographs taken of the interiors of the Firs in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s clearly show that she placed all of her carved stone works in corners: for instance, the sculpture *Standing Young Girl* can be seen in the corner of a windowsill of Stern's studio in a 1946 photograph of the artist at her desk (**Plate 10**). Similarly, a 1955 photograph from the *South African Lady's Pictorial* shows *Standing Half-Length Figure* in the windowsill of the artist's lounge (**Plate 13**). Presuming that it was Stern's intention to place her works in this manner from the outset, we might assume that she designed her works with a view to maximizing the size of her compositions while sparing herself the energy and the difficulty of carving figures fully in the round.

By revealing the way in which Stern curated her high relief figurines, these photographs may give us further insight into the formal choices that guided her in the first place. Indeed, we might suppose that Stern made use of the cornering effect because it was sufficient to make her carvings blend in with the other figurines with which she decorated her home: specifically, African figurines. Let us examine Stern's Africanizing stylizations.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 10.** Irma Stern at her desk, 1946, photograph, 16.5 x 15 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

**Plate 13.** Irma Stern at the Firs with sculptures and vases, 1955, photograph, 17 x 15 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

## 6.2. Stern's selective borrowings from African carving traditions

Whereas Stern's stylistic and compositional choices for her 1922 clay sculptures and her 1935 works in cast cement can be traced to her previous works in paint, the precedents for her carvings are to be found outside the artist's own production: specifically, in the photographs of African figurines that appear in Stern's collection of books on African art and perhaps as well in the figurines that are present in her collection of exotica. These books are all authored by prominent early twentieth-century German anthropologists and art critics. They include Leo Frobenius' 1912 *Der Sprach der Afrika (The Voice of Africa)*, Carl Einstein's seminal 1915 *Negerplastik* and 1921 *Primitiven Kunst (Primitive Art)*, Wilhelm Hausenstein's 1920 *Exoten Skulpturen und Märchen (Exotic Sculptures and Stories)*, Eckhart von Sydow's 1921 *Exotische Kunst (Exotic Art)*, and Herbert Kühn's 1923 *Die Kunst der Primitiven (The Art of the Primitives)*. In addition, Stern's collection numbers approximately forty anthropomorphic wooden sculptures, most of Congolese origin, which are comparable in size and style to Stern's 1935-1945 carvings: these include, for instance, a number of figurines from the Baluba and Bakuba kingdoms of the Central Congo (**Figure 65**), as well as the star of her collection, the *Buli*

*stool*, also by a carver from the Baluba group (**Figure 66**). However, it must be noted that Stern acquired the majority of these works on her voyages to the Belgian Congo of 1942 and 1946, after she began to sculpt. Moreover, because she kept no record of her collection, it is impossible to know which of these objects was present in her home at the time that she sculpted and it is consequently also impossible to assert that she was directly inspired by these objects. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the sculptures' basic stylistic features can be seen to echo the features of the works in her collection and in her illustrated books.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn] [Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 65.** Baluba figures, Democratic Republic of Congo, wood, 11.5 to 25.5 cm (h), Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Figure 66.** Buli Master, *Chief's stool*, wood, 50 cm (h), Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

### 6.2.1. *Comparison with the Baluba figurines in Stern's collection*

To begin, the characteristic that I named as most distinctive of Stern's works – her “use of the original form of the stone as ground” – likens them to most of the sculptures illustrated in her books as well as to the Baluba and Bena Lelua figurines in her collection. Indeed, the elongated, quadrangular silhouettes of these figures clearly evoke the original form of the wooden trunk from which they were carved. As Monica Blackmun-Visioná explains, Central and West African figurative carving styles are typified by compact, static, and rooted compositions, where negative space is generally either minimized or else contained within a larger form. Even in works such as the Buli Stool – a sculpture that is distinctive for the outward expansion of its forms – the perfect

symmetry of the composition and the skews in proportions ensure that the cubic volume of the original trunk remains perceptible.

The other features that accentuate the “stoniness” of Stern’s works are also consistent with basic properties of African figurative carving styles. Stern’s geometrical treatment of the physiques and physiognomies of her sculptures is clearly in line with the rendering of the human form evinced in the sculptures in her books. As Ellen McBreen writes in her discussion of the Africanizing sculptures of Henri Matisse, the “rugged geometricalization of conventionally sensual forms” (2007: 42) is a distinctive feature of African figurative sculpture. This is evident for instance in the Baluba figurines, in which the bodies are fragmented into interlocking angular forms and the figures’ physiognomies are rendered as amalgams of mirroring triangular shapes. Moreover, we might see some resonances between the sharp angularity of the arms of Stern’s *Girl with Basket* and the arms of the figure in the Buli Stool. Finally, the roughly hewn aspect of Stern’s sculptures is consistent with the treatment of surface on many of the sculptures in Stern’s visual repertoire of African carvings. For instance, the Baluba works in her collection have distinctly rough surfaces, as the long, vertical planes that make up their wooden skins evoke the quick scraping motion of the sculptor’s knife to the trunk of wood.

In short, Stern clearly exploited the cubic form of her wonderstone blocks with the aim of creating her own personalized replicas of African figurines. She selected blocks with dimensions roughly equivalent to those of the wooden figurines that were illustrated in her books on African sculptures (and indeed to those that she would collect en masse in later years), and carved them in such a way that they may resemble those works. Presuming that it was her intention from the outset to display her sculptures in the corners of her home, we might indeed suppose that she wished for them to blend in with the other carved objects that she collecting.

### **6.2.2. Stern’s carved figurines as settler primitivist works**

Stern’s apparent appropriation of stylistic elements from African sculpture could be seen to exemplify a form of what art historian Nicholas Thomas calls “settler primitivism.” While coined in specific reference to the production of settler artists in Australia and New Zealand, Thomas’

term can be extrapolated to the practices of mid-century, white avant-garde artists in other settler colonies as well. For these artists, the “exotic other” fetishized by European artists was not a distant but a *local* other. While metropolitan modernist artists such as Picasso and Braque sought to nourish their projects of radical formal innovation through generalized, abstract “primitive” forms, settler primitivists were, according to Thomas, motivated by a desire to “affirm a *local* relationship” (my italics) (1999: 12). Accordingly, the local culture that served as a source of inspiration was not a generic but a *specific* one; it was not the “primitive art” or *art nègre* which, for artists like Picasso, subsumed models from Africa as well as Oceania, but the art of the Maori (in New Zealand) or the Haida (in Canada), for example.

A paradigmatic example of “settler primitivism” practised in the South African context is to be found in the work of the white visual artist Walter Battiss (1906-1982). Battiss is best known for his lifelong exploration of the aesthetics of San rock art, for which he came to acquire the title “Bushman painter” (Peffer 2009: 285 fn 45). A native of Somerset East, in the Little Karoo region of South Africa, Battiss launched his artistic career in the 1930s by touring rock art sites in his country to study and to sketch the parietal images of the San, Southern Africa’s indigenous populations. Strongly taken by what he saw as “pure” aesthetic quality of these paintings, Battiss embraced a mystical view of San art as the primal trace of a lost and pure past, which was in line with contemporary discourses of his time. In the design and composition of his paintings, he drew heavily from his engagement with these art forms and from his research on San cosmology and mythology, as can be observed in his 1966 oil on canvas titled *Mantis* (**Figure 67**). As art historian Anitra Nettleton explains, the pointillist effect in this work is achieved through the repetition of miniature images of humans and animals designed to be reminiscent of rock-art pictographs (2011: 147). Moreover, paintings such as this one reveal how Battiss actually adapted the formal structure of his works to reflect the experience of encounter with the rock face (Skotnes 2005: 204): the framing of the image is designed to imply a continuous unframed area beyond the picture plane, the intricate pointillist gradations lend a texture to the image that evokes the effects of erosion on rock, and the translucency of the dark motif conjures the filmy quality of pigment on stone. While Battiss’ appreciation for San art was mediated by romanticizing fantasies and Western schemes of aesthetic valuation, it is certain that his appropriation of the parietal motifs was grounded in his recognition of their embeddedness in

a specific culture and semiotic system, and in his desire to engage with that culture artistically. In this vein, Pippa Skotnes judges that he was “the most important of South African artists to mediate and to interpret the images of the San” (2005: 204).

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 67.** Walter Battiss, *Mantis*, 1966, oil on canvas, 90 x 184 cm, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria.

### **6.2.3. *Unsettling the settler primitivism in Stern’s carved figurines***

Stern’s sculptures in carved stone do not display any comparable depth of engagement with local referents. Nor do they evince any significant engagement with any specific sculptural tradition from the African continent. Indeed, the design of the sculptures Stern carved in the round deviates in important aspects from the carvings that are more prevalent in the subcontinent. Most prominently, her use of the “cornering effect” is fundamentally at odds with some of the most basic principles of African sculpture. Whereas African works of comparable sizes are almost always carved fully in the round, such that they can be viewed from a full three-hundred-and-sixty degree range (Blackmun-Visioná et al. 2001: 17), Stern’s works in the round remain emphatically frontal in their compositions. Relief sculpture is rare in sub-Saharan Africa: while important traditions of two-dimensional painted, engraved, or raised designs do exist, most art in Africa is carved, moulded or constructed into three-dimensional forms (Blackmun-Visioná et al. 2001: 17).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The famous Benin bronzes are one exception to this generalization. This collection of more than nine hundred brass plaques from the Kingdom of Benin is comprised of rectangular plaques depicting ceremonial scenes from the court of Benin in high relief. Over two hundred were looted by the British in 1897 and transferred to the British Museum. As Annie Coombes writes, the European reception of these plaques is an exemplar of the “essential

Moreover, Stern's sculptures are not the portable objects endemic to most African carving traditions, but static works designed to be viewed from a fixed point. Indeed, the weightiness of their wonderstone medium undercuts all possibilities of lifting and manipulation. In fact, this choice marks Stern's most fundamental point of divergence from African carving traditions, in which wood is the dominant material. While several non-figurative stone carving traditions exist in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>8</sup> stone was not a common material for figurative sculpture in pre-colonial African societies (Shillington 2005: 181). Moreover, of the stone carving traditions that have existed, most have come from north of the Zambezi river (see **Figure 68** for map highlighting sites of stone carving findings). In his 1969 survey of figurative stone carving traditions in sub-Saharan Africa, Belgian anthropologist André Vrydagh notes the finding of roughly one hundred soapstone figurines in Zimbabwe, which range from 2 cm to 15 cm in height and are likely datable to 500-1500 AD (Vrydagh 1969: 47). Present-day South Africa is now home to only two nearly life-sized stone heads, discovered during the Boer War near Kimberley and presently housed at the MacGregor Museum in that same city (Vrydagh 1969: 47; Blackmun-Visionà et al. 2001: 483).<sup>9</sup>

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Figure 68.** Map of Africa with stone carving sites (indicated with numbers), highlighting sites south of the Zambezi River. Adapted by Lara Bourdin.

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ambivalence of colonial response to material culture from West Africa and other colonies," as the admiration professed by colonizers was couched in a racialized discourse of degraded savagery (1994: 10). They have been at the centre of debates over the restitution of museum objects from former colonial territories.

<sup>8</sup> These include the zoomorphic sculptures from Ife (Nigeria) and the Shona sculptures of birds (Zimbabwe). It is also worth noting that non-sculpted stones are commonly used as cult objects in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Vrydagh 1969 : 7).

<sup>9</sup> Named after the site where they were discovered, these heads are dated between AD 500 and 800, making them one of the oldest known forms of African sculpture.

There is no way to ascertain whether Stern was aware of these sculpting traditions, although their scarcity and obscurity make it unlikely. In fact, if Stern was aware of any African stone carving traditions at all, it is far more likely that she knew of the West and Central African varieties. These include the *nomoli* figures of the Upper Guinea Coast (c. 1400-1600 AD) (**Figure 69**), the *pomdo* figures of the inland areas of present-day Guinea and Sierra Leone (c. 1200-1400 AD) (**Figure 70**), the sculptures found at the Yoruba sites of Ile-Ifé and Esié in present-day Nigeria (c. 1400-1900 AD) (**Figure 71**), and the *ntadi* sculptures of the Congo basin (**Figure 72**). All of these had been documented by European anthropologists by the early twentieth century. In the most plausible of the numerous connections that link Stern to African stone carving traditions, one may suppose that she knew of the sculptures of Ile-Ifé, which were documented by the early twentieth-century German explorer and anthropologist Leo Frobenius. However, Frobenius appears to have been unimpressed with the stone sculptures he found at this site, and his volume contains no illustrations of these works.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, it is highly unlikely that Stern found direct models for her works in African stone carvings. More generally speaking, it is difficult to attribute Stern's decision to carve in stone to a possible effort to engage with real models from African sculptural traditions.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Figure 69.** Seated male, *nomoli* figurine, c. 1400-1600 AD, stone, 14 x 7 x 7.9 cm, Sierra Leone.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Figure 70.** Male figure, *pomdo* figurine, c. 1200-1400 AD, stone, 20 x 11 x 8 cm, Guinea.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Figure 71.** Èsié statue, Yoruba, 19<sup>th</sup> century, soapstone, 61 cm (h), National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Lagos, Nigeria.

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Figure 72.** Bound noble, *ntadi* figurine, Congo Basin, 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, stone, 43.3 cm (h), location unknown.

<sup>10</sup> Frobenius was fascinated by the court arts of Ile-Ifé, and namely by the naturalistic life-size heads in terracotta. These works, which go back roughly 1100-1200 AD, are representations of rulers and officials of the Ife royal dynasty. Comparing these terracotta works to the soapstone figures that were also presented to him, Frobenius wrote: "Here were the remains of a very ancient and fine type of art, infinitely nobler than the comparatively coarse stone-images not even well preserved" (1912: 88). Stern's connections with this figure are explored at greater length later in the chapter, as part of my discussion of Stern's interest in African art.



Insofar as their most distinctive features are also the ones that mark their most radical divergence from African carving traditions, Stern's sculptures should not, in my opinion, be considered instances of what art historian Nicholas Thomas terms "settler primitivism." I would rather like to suggest that Stern's works in carved stone be considered as highly idiosyncratic sculptural experiments that have more in common with the appropriative "primitivist" projects of non-settler European modernists than with the work of artists such as Battiss.

### 6.3. Fetishizing fetishes, collecting carvings: Stern and African figurines

A preliminary explanation for Stern's equivocal stylistic engagement with African figurative carving traditions can be found in an excerpt from her writings of the 1920s and 1930s. Written on a loose sheet of paper, the fragment is indexed under the title "Fragment on an encounter with a black sculptor" in the folder titled "Personal papers: 1909-1937"<sup>11</sup> in the Irma Stern archives at the NLSA:

- In this bag I have men and women. You want to see?
- Who made them?
- I made them.
- Why men and women?
- But don't you see there [sic] two breasts are women and this — and he quickly showed a nicely carved penis — is a man!
- Who taught you to make them?
- I make them.
- But who showed you?
- I make them.

Black God who makes man

I mean black man who makes Gods [sic].

Much as Stern's records of her visit to the Accademia can inform us about how she saw spirit in expressive European figures, this short fragment of text shows that she saw carved African figurines as the repositories of potent spiritual forces. Indeed, Stern's reported dialogue brings us directly to the heart of the conceits that shaped her interest African carving traditions: a focus on the statuettes' animistic charge, a disregard for the particularities of their design, and a conception of the African sculptor as a medium-like figure. As I will show in this section, these

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<sup>11</sup> MSC 31:1/11.

attitudes originated in Stern's European experience. Moreover, I believe they explain the particularities of Stern's own designs: the eclecticism of her style and her use of the "cornering" effect.

### **6.3.1. *Irma Stern's attitudes toward African sculpture***

Stern's interest in African figurative statuettes can be traced back to her involvement with the German Expressionists. These artists participated in the modernist embrace of primitive art forms on much the same terms as their British, French, and Belgian counterparts, elevating to artistic status the objects that were filling the display cases of ethnographic museums nationwide (Goldwater 1938: 104). Although no German city could rival Paris or London as a repository of colonial booty, substantial objects did flow into the halls of the imperial nation's museums of ethnography in Berlin, Dresden, Munich, Hamburg, and Leipzig from the turn of the century onward (Barron 1984: 23), as Germany compensated for its lack of territorial acquisitions by devoting sizable funds to sponsoring large-scale ethnographic expeditions to Africa and Oceania. The Expressionist embrace of primitive art began around 1910, as both Emil Nolde and Ernst Kirchner proclaimed to "discover" the primitive masks of Oceania and Africa in the Dresden Museum. Others soon followed suit, Pechstein included. In fact, the period 1916-1920 was one of significant development in discourses surrounding the aesthetic value of primitive art in German modernist circles: Carl Einstein's seminal *Negerplastik* was published in 1915, and Leo Frobenius had been publishing extensively since the turn of the century and had built up an archive for ethnographic research in Berlin (Schoeman 1994: 50). These two studies laid the foundation for the others that are in Stern's collection.

It has been extensively shown that the modernists' fascination with so-called primitive modes of expression was a direct symptom of their rejection of illusionistic art, associated with the corruption of modern Western society and its bourgeois cultural values. The objects displayed in ethnographic museums resonated with a set of ideas, grounded in Enlightenment thought and given further stimulus through evolutionary theory, that presented non-Western people as the embodiments of an earlier stage of human development, associated with animistic belief systems, and a life of instincts, passions, emotions. These were precisely the instincts that modernist artists sought to cultivate in themselves. Because they were abstract and vague by

definition, they were associated non-discriminately with a wide panorama of art forms, from Mesoamerican, to Oceanic, to African examples. For instance, Nolde stated in 1912 that what interested him in primitive sculpture was “its absolute primitiveness, its intense, often grotesque expression of strength and life in the simplest form” (quoted in Goldwater 1938: 104).

Nevertheless, African figurines did occupy a privileged status in the Expressionist imaginary of primitive art forms. As Sherry Errington argued in her 1994 article “What became of authentic primitive art?,” African statuettes were in fact considered the prototypes of primitive art, or what she somewhat sardonically names “High Primitive Art” (1994: 219).<sup>12</sup> In line with evolutionary discourses that portrayed Africa as the “absolute other” to the “civilized” West, African figurines could be linked more closely than any other art forms to the ideas of primitive spirituality, superstition, and idol worship. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts of primitive art uniformly stressed the centrality of these objects in what they depicted as barbaric rituals and asserted that they were used to express superstitions and to exorcize demons (1994: 213). This conception is in evidence in a drawing from Herbert Ward’s 1895 *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals*, which depicts a dancing African man holding up a small fetish figure to the sky (**Figure 73**). Because of their cultish associations and their ostensible non-referentiality, African figurines also embodied more than any other art forms the modernist fantasy of the transcendent art object (Errington 1994: 219). Picasso’s description of the genesis of his 1907 masterpiece *Les Femmes d’Alger* makes this point clear:

They were against everything – against unknown threatening spirits... I too, I am against everything. [...] I understood what the Negroes use their sculptures for... All fetishes... were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious... they are all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum with the masks... the dusty mannequins. *Les Femmes d’Alger* must have been born that day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting – yes, absolutely! (quoted in Errington 1994: 213)

Some years later, Edward Gelett-Burgess would photograph Picasso in his Paris studio at the Bateau-Lavoir, surrounded by figures that he called his “mediators” (**Figure 74**). It was arguably

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<sup>12</sup> This category consists of objects that, in her words, “actually did influence, or look as if they could have influenced the likes of Picasso and de Vlaminck: they are African; they were collected by the turn of this century; they are in the shape of a mask or an ancestral figure, to wit, an anthropomorphic form in a certain range of size; they are made of wood; they are ritual objects rather than utilitarian ones” (1994: 219). As she goes on to explain, the reasons for the modernists’ exaltation of these objects are ultimately traceable to the circumstances that framed their collecting: in her words, “primitive art was invented at the same time as collecting.”

the same rationale that guided Max Pechstein to collect African figurines extensively as of 1914 (Goldwater 1938: 138).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn] [Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 73.** Herbert Ward, *The Antics of the Charm Doctor*, 1891, drawing, 8.5 x 22 cm, in Ward, *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals*, 1891, p. 41.

**Figure 74.** Frank Gellert Burgess, Picasso in his studio at the Bateau Lavoir, 1908, RMN: Picasso Archives.

Stern is known to have been exposed to the ideas of the two figures who were most decisive in orienting tastes vis-à-vis African sculpture in Germany. Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) is commonly credited with having been one of the first ethnographers to advocate seriously for recognition of the aesthetic value of “primitive art.”<sup>1</sup> As early as 1894, Frobenius published a study of secret African societies in which he drew particular attention to the “strange” aesthetic quality of masks and sculptures (Honour 1989: 218). Between 1904 and 1935, Frobenius undertook no fewer than twelve expeditions to the continent, accompanied by a team of three hundred and fifty aides and assistants. The writings that he put forward in the following years were crucial to the development of the sacralizing modernist conception of African art and material culture. Indeed, these exalted dissertations were part of a broader theory of “cultural soul” that he articulated around the concept of *paieduma*. Approximating the Hegelian *Zeitgeist*, Frobenius presented *paieduma* as “an organic unity which [...] imposes itself on men” and that follows its “own laws of development.” Intended to be “broader and deeper” than the concept of “culture,” *paieduma* accounted for what he termed the “lofty views, the deep religion, and the exalted poetic sense” of Africans. As such, he argued that African art forms were exemplary of a “daemoniac or intuitive apprehension of the core of their civilization” (1983: 39). Stern was

closely aware of these theories: her *Theatre List* indicates that she read several of Frobenius' writings in the early 1920s, and her personal correspondence shows that she met him during his visit to Southern Africa of 1928-1929.<sup>13</sup> His influence is visible in her own writings on the African soul.

Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* is commonly cited as a seminal text in the development of modernist discourses surrounding African art. Einstein essentially argued that the primitive statuettes displayed in Germany's ethnographic museums represented a sophisticated formal system that was radically at odds with the Graeco-Roman tradition. He called this system "pure sculptural vision" and explained it in the following terms:

An African sculpture is oriented not toward the viewer but in terms of itself; the parts are perceived in terms of the compact mass, not at a weakening distance. Hence, they and their limits are reinforced. (Einstein 1915, quoted in Flam 2003: 83)

Following up on Frobenius' arguments, he attempted to draw out a conceptual frame in which the putative formal system of African sculpture could be understood in terms of its religious significance in the societies of origin. Stating that "African art is, above all, religious," he claimed that the African sculptor "maintains a distance from his work because this work either is or contains a specific god (Einstein 1915, quoted in Flam 2003: 82).

Einstein's theoretical ideas about the formal system of African sculpture are arguably in evidence in the formal choices that Stern herself made in her carved statuettes. In addition to his rather vague assertion that "the African artwork signifies nothing, it symbolizes nothing," Einstein wrote of the question of compactness of form:

Form must be grasped at one glance, but not as a suggestion of the objective; anything that is an act of motion must be fixed as absolute. The parts situated in three dimensions must be depicted as simultaneous; that is, the dispersed space must be integrated in a single field of vision. The 3D can be neither interpreted nor simply given as a mass. Instead, it has to be concentrated as specific existence, which is achieved as follows: the thing that lets us see in 3D terms and that is felt normally and naturalistically to be movement is shaped as a formally fixed expression. (1915, quoted in Flam 2003: 85)

On his account, the "self-containment" of the African sculpture's form is what ensures its "autonomy" and its "power": he went on to state that "the artwork is real because of its closed

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<sup>13</sup> In the letter that survives in the NLSA archives, Frobenius thanks Irma Stern for a letter dated February 5, 1931 and for the "enclosed rock-copy images" (MSC 31:2/7). Helene Smuts suggests that this letter refers to drawings Stern may have made for Frobenius based on rock art found on her family's farm in the Transvaal (2007: 29).

form; since it is autonomous and extremely powerful, the sense of distance is bound to produce an art of enormous intensity” (1915, quoted in Flam 2003: 83). This idea was hugely inspirational for modernist artists seeking to create transcendent and autonomous artworks and in particular for those who were seeking to revolutionize the art of sculpture, so long “imprisoned” by architecture and condemned to allegedly extra-artistic functions. We may also find it reflected in the compacted compositions of Stern’s own Africanizing sculptures.

Furthermore, Einstein’s ideas about the distortion of figural proportions in which relative size is less important than “cubic expression” may have influenced Stern. Analyzing the formal means through which African sculptors achieved their “clarification of form,” he asserted that African sculptures were typically centred on one side and that their composition was typically articulated around “cubic *points centraux*.” On his account, these “functional centres” simultaneously ensured a “powerful subdivision” of the elements of the design while also ensuring the “integration of the sculptural” (1915, quoted in Flam 2003: 87).

Thus, it is arguably possible to see in Stern’s sculptures an effort to achieve what Einstein called “cubic sculptural vision.” Her disarticulation of the human form, the emphatically static quality of her works, and her exploitation of the bisecting angles of the block’s sides are all consistent with the formal devices identified by Einstein as characteristics of “cubic vision.” Furthermore, insofar as Einstein asserted that these formal aspects of African sculpture were intrinsic to the ritual value of the objects, we may suppose that Stern sought to emulate them with a view to endowing her own objects with spiritual charge. At the same time, it must be noted that the qualities of Stern’s works that were previously identified as divergent from basic features of African carving are also discordant with elements of Einstein’s theory: for instance, the German critic warned categorically against the use of formal devices such as frontality, relief, and silhouette, which he associated with the European painterly penchant of European art (50). On his account, indeed, “frontality cheats us of the third dimension by intensifying the image on one side” and silhouette merely “hints at the cubic” by a trick of perspective (Einstein 1915, quoted in Flam 2003: 85). All of these devices are clearly in evidence in Stern’s work. In that sense, as suggested earlier, Stern was arguably trying to maximize her engagement with general features of African art while minimizing the effort she would need to invest in cutting the stone. Stern’s concern for economy of design over dedicated engagement with specific

African figurines is therefore intelligible in terms of the primitivist framework of ideas that she likely inherited from her Expressionist training and that she found articulated in books such as Frobenius', Einstein's, and the others that made up her collection.

### **6.3.2. *Irma Stern's collecting practices***

Stern's collection undoubtedly offers the most potent insight into the nature of her interest in African art, and specifically into her interest in the so-called "spiritual" nature of African figurines. Although I suggested earlier that none of Stern's works were directly inspired by specific African models, an examination of her collecting practices may nevertheless inform our understanding of her formal choices.

From their beginnings during her German years to their apogee in the 1930s and 1940s, Stern's collecting practices were inseparable from her quest for spiritual energy and creative stimuli. For instance, we know that in the early 1920s, Stern slept under the watchful eyes of two wooden Christian figures in prayer, while a menorah rested on her shelf, a small, crying jade Buddha figure rested on her night table (**Figure 18**). If she did not possess African objects at this point, it was surely not out of discriminatory views: insofar as the artist and her objects were themselves overseen and guarded by the body of a primal African mother in majesty, it is clear that Stern's collecting tastes were from the outset wedded with a conception of Africa as the ultimate seat of sacred elemental energy. The eclecticism of the objects in her collection, together with the absence of African objects, also clearly intimate that her collecting practices were grounded first and foremost in an interest in spiritual energy rather than specific art forms.

Stern only began to acquire African figurines in earnest at a time when she was palpably concerned about the "disappearance" of primitive spirituality in Africa. She acquired the bulk of her African collection on her trips to the Congo of 1942 and 1946, which, as several scholars have observed, were clearly motivated by her disenchantment with the urbanization of Africans in South Africa. Her *Congo* travelogue testifies clearly to the influence of Einstein's writings on her attitudes vis-à-vis the objects she collected. Writing of the Bakuba of the inner Congo basin, whom she designated as the "most artistically creative native race in the Congo," she stated:

Here were the creators of magnificent pieces of sculpture, carved out of wood, of fetishes and masks, grotesque and beautiful revealing primitive African all its fear-ridden phantasy [sic], with its witch-craft and taboos, with its ancestral worship and its world alive with spirits. Here live men who are treated with the respect due to their artistic craft. They do nothing but their own creative work. (Stern 1944: 23)

The objects that she brought back from Central Africa and thereafter exhibited, promoted, and kept, were very much consistent with European tastes for African art. Most of her collection derived from groups living in the northern, southern, and central parts of the Congo: namely the Azande, Mangbetu, Bena Lulua, Luba, Kuba, Songye, Yaka, Lega, and Pende. These were none other than the groups that were most represented in African collections in Europe (Schildkrout and Keim 1998: 21).<sup>14</sup>

Irma Stern does not appear to have taken any interest in the social significance of the objects that she collected or in that of non-Western art forms in general. Unlike artists such as Mary Stainbank and Walter Battiss, she never took any notes on the objects she collected.<sup>15</sup> She does not even seem to have been particularly concerned with guaranteeing the “authenticity” of her collection, adopting objects out of what appears to have been pure visual interest or plain exoticizing fancifulness. An anecdote relayed in a 1936 issue of the Cape Times illustrates the point:

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<sup>14</sup> Stern was a devoted advocate for the aesthetic merits of the objects that she brought back. In her *Congo* travelogue, Stern recorded a conversation that she putatively had with the King of the Mangbetu: “I am a painter, and I am going to show all the pictures I paint in the Congo in my country, and after the war in Europe, so that people may learn to love the natives of the Congo as much as I do. [...] Now I have come here to try and collect from you some of the lovely work your tribe is known to produce. And then I shall also show your people’s work with my pictures, so that the white people in my country may learn what beautiful things the black man in the Congo creates (Stern 1944: 24)” She held true to this promise: in October 1942, she exhibited the objects she had collected at the Musée de la vie indigène in Elizabethville, and upon her return to South Africa, in 1942, she exhibited pieces of Congo sculpture along with her paintings. She repeated this practice through the following years, even bringing pieces of her collection with her to Paris in 1947 for her exhibition at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts. Finally, in 1952, she exhibited pieces from her collection in *The Meaning of Sculpture*, one of the first major exhibitions to be devoted to the art form in South Africa. While Parisian audiences would have been well accustomed to viewing these objects and would certainly have perceived them as confirmation of the artist’s native links to the Dark Continent, in South Africa her collecting practices were unusual if not extraordinary. As art historian Anitra Nettleton has pointed out, interest in African art in South Africa was virtually inexistent until the 1970s, both on an institutional as well as on a private level (1989). The important Cape Town art dealer Joe Wolpe allegedly remembers only two other collectors of African art in the city during Stern’s lifetime, namely Ralph Nash and Philip Goodman (Smuts 2007: 17).

<sup>15</sup> Stainbank’s archives contain a large collection of articles from magazines and journals on the customs, habits and cultural practices of various African and Aboriginal cultural groups, indicating her intense interest in cultural differences (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2001: 23)



Irma Stern, by the way, has hanging on the walls of her studio at the Firs, Rosebank, some West African masks carved with simplicity out of reddish wood, ornamented with strange hair, the eyes gouged as in the eyes of an Epstein. – “I never knew you’d been to West Africa.” – “I haven’t,” laughed Irma Stern. “I bought them somewhere in Cape Town, in a barber’s shop!”<sup>16</sup>

Stern was also unaware of the significance of objects such as the Buli stool, which is by far the most valuable of the objects in her collection (Davison 1993: 35; Crump 2003: 25) and which may in fact be one of the most valuable pieces of African art in South Africa (2003: 25).<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding her professed carelessness in collecting, Stern’s tastes in African art were discriminating in at least one respect: her collection is notably limited in objects of South African manufacture. Patricia Davison notes that there are fewer than ten items in her collection from people living south of the Limpopo river (1993: 35).<sup>18</sup> The irony here is of course difficult to miss, given that she travelled extensively in Swaziland, Zululand, and Pondoland, as well as in the Transvaal, where several woodcarving traditions have been identified (Nettleton 1988).<sup>19</sup> This observation about Stern’s collecting practices highlights the extent to which her interest in African art corresponded to European tastes.

In her appraisal of the artist’s collecting practices, Patricia Davison contends that “Stern’s drive to assimilate the aesthetic vigour of things exotic was a vital component in [her] construction of an ideal vision [... It was] inseparable from her quest for self-realization” (Davison 1993: 31). Her collecting practices should in that sense be understood in the same

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<sup>16</sup> “Masks and Studios,” *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936.

<sup>17</sup> Art historian Susan Vogel has written the most extensive study to date on the works of the carver known as the Buli Master. In her 1980 article “The Buli Master, and Other Hands,” she explains that this carver, who is the author of at least twenty known works, is the first anonymous master of traditional African art to be recognized and named (1980: 72). She contends that his name was Ngongo ya Chintu and that he lived at the end of the nineteenth century (1980: 74). On her account, the carver “blends expressionism and naturalism in a personal way that is rare in traditional African art.” She goes on to suggest that “one might see in his oeuvre a sensitive individual’s reaction to the changes he saw about him, and a reflection of the doubts his confident society began to feel as it came increasingly into contact with the vastly alien, and infinitely more confident, Europe of the Victorian era” (Vogel 1980: 72-3).

<sup>18</sup> These include pots and bowls from Ovambo, in Namibia (items 294, 295, and 296 in the Irma Stern Museum Catalogue); a basket and a vessel from an unknown location in Zambia (items 301 and 302); and three mats from an unknown location in Mozambique (items 303, 304, and 305).

<sup>19</sup> Woodcarving is particularly prevalent among the Tswana, Tsonga, and the Venda, who use the medium principally for the creation of headrests, mortars, and other objects typically considered “utilitarian.” However, these practices have traditionally been occluded from art historical literature, due in large measure to colonial schemas of valuation and their legacy, which privilege freestanding, figurative, and ostensibly “non-utilitarian” objects. The widely accepted view is indeed that there is no tradition of figurative sculpture comparable to those of West and Central Africa in the southern region of the continent. South African art historian Anitra Nettleton has written extensively on these misconceptions and has also published on the corpuses themselves. See Nettleton 1988.

terms as the collecting efforts of other European artists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Herbert Ward, which have been analyzed at length by critics such as Johannes Fabian and James Clifford. In Clifford's words, modernist artists' collecting practices reflect modernism's taste for "appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image" (1988: 193). As the ultimate repositories of African spirituality, African figurines would have played a central role in Stern's appropriative project.

#### **6.4. Truth to materials**

Writing in 1930, Henry Moore articulated the main principles that had been guiding those modern sculptors who, like him, had "removed the Greek spectacles" from their eyes and clay and plaster from their hands to embrace the "primitive" art of "carving direct[ly]":

One of the first principles of art so clearly seen in primitive work is truth to material; the artist shows an instinctive understanding of his material, its right use and possibilities. [...] This removal of the Greek spectacles from the eyes of the modern sculptor [...] has freed him to recognise again the importance of the material in which he works, to think and create in his material by carving direct. (Moore quoted in Wilkinson 2002: 104).

Historians and critics concur that the pan-European revival of "direct carving" as a sculptural technique in the early decades was symptomatic of modernism's assimilation of "primitive art." Espoused not only by trained sculptors, the technique actually attracted artists from across visual media. For how better to access the "pure" creative drives of the "primitives" than by imitating their techniques?

##### ***6.4.1. The philosophy of truth to materials***

A fundamental premise orienting the philosophy of direct carving is the notion that the material is itself the repository of a powerful metaphysical value – a kernel of truth, an immaterial spirit. This value, abstract and vague by definition, was often conceptualized in relation to the material's place of origin: the spirit in question was the spirit of Germany, or Britain, lodged in the wood or the stone from time immemorial and preserving in itself the immaterial traces of the history of its surroundings (Curtis 1999: 75). In Germany, the art of

woodcarving, whether in sculpture or in the production of woodcuts, came to stand as a “new German art, arising out of the soul of the wood” (Wagner 2011: 74). Similarly, across the English Channel, stone was privileged above all for its connections to Britain’s prehistoric and ancient Celtic past, associated with sites such as Stonehenge.

This conception of the spiritual essence of the material is what grounded the belief in the sculptor’s role as medium. To be true to one’s material through direct carving was thus to treat the material in such a way that its putative truth could emerge. Constantin Brancusi, one of the most impassioned advocates of *taille directe* in Paris, expressed this precept: “It is while carving stone that you discover the spirit of your material and the properties particular to it. Your hand thinks and follows the thoughts of the material” (quoted in Martin 1966: 176). It is on these terms that the process of direct carving could itself be conceived as a spiritual experience. Many artists spoke of their artistic process as a form of communion between themselves and their materials: an organic, mutually directed process, which culminated in the final work’s revelation as the reflection of the combined wills of artist and material (Curtis 1999: 86).

Central to this ideology was what sculpture historian Penelope Curtis and others have termed the “cult of the original block” (1999: 87). Traceable to Michelangelo’s famous writings on the poetry of the marble block (“in every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action”), this cult essentially consisted in an exaltation of the blocks and trunks that served as the material base for sculptural endeavours. As Penelope Curtis explains, the block featured both as an inspiration and as an impediment, for it was believed that the blocks contained sculptures already within them and that these could only emerge through a process of “slow and gentle communion” (1999: 86). Indeed, with their unhewn, rugged, surfaces and their compact, bulky volume, these masses of stone and wood could be apprehended as the brute vehicles of the spirit inherent to the materials. Consequently, the final result could be conceived as a reflection of the material’s inner will and primordial energy and the product of the sculptor’s sensitivity, honesty, and artistic integrity (Zilczer 1981: 45).

Stern’s decision to take up carving can thus be understood in line with these tenets. Quarried but eighty kilometres from her birthplace in the Transvaal, the African wonderstone

might have represented for Stern the ideal repository of the African genius loci she was seeking at this time. Moreover, the radically block-like forms of her works intimate that she may have partaken in cultish attitudes toward her blocks of wonderstone. Finally, the Africanizing stylizations of her works are very much in line with the practices of direct carvers, most of whom had never been trained in the technique and typically embraced the simplified look of their creations (Curtis 1999: 79). Moreover, as I will now show, Stern had extensive contact with European and white South African devotees of direct carving. Thus, although her record of her encounter with the black sculptor does suggest that she had direct contact with indigenous carvers over the course of her career, it is in my opinion far more likely that her formal choices for her own sculptures were mediated primarily by European ideologies.

#### **6.4.2. German Expressionist precedents**

Stern's first exposure to modernist carved sculpture likely came through her training with the German Expressionists. As Stephanie Barron explains in the catalogue for the 1984 exhibition *German Expressionist Sculpture*, the majority of the *Brücke* artists experimented with direct carving, with Erick Heckel, Ernst Kirchner, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff standing out in particular for their extensive bodies of sculptural production (Barron 1984: 11). Kirchner is estimated to have produced over one hundred sculptures, beginning in 1909 and continuing to the end of his creative life (Henze 1984: 113). These included works such as his 1910 *Crouching Woman* (**Figure 75**). Schmidt-Rottluff began later, around 1917, creating a number of block-like, swiftly hewn, and emphatically masklike works, including his *Grüner Kopf* (*Green Head*) (**Figure 76**). Although most of these carvings were produced as private works and were thus not featured in exhibitions, one may presume that Stern visited the artists' studios, or was at the very least familiar with their practice.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn] [Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 75.** Ernst Kirchner, *Crouching Woman*, 1910, wood, dimensions and location unknown.

**Figure 76.** Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Grüner Kopf*, 1917, wood, 41 cm (h), private collection.

The Expressionists' attraction to the practice of carving was aligned with the philosophy of truth to materials. As Monica Wagner writes, "it was stressed over and over again that wood was the appropriate material for the organic revival and the spiritualization was achieved through truth to materials" (2011: 79). Kirchner was particularly impressed with African sculpture, proclaiming in 1919: "How much more advanced is the African in this kind of carving" (quoted in Henze 1984: 116). The exaltation of the wood block was an integral component of this celebration of truth to materials. In a letter to Gustav Schiefler dated 1912, Kirchner explained that "besides the freedom of drawing, [wood sculpture] provides me with that compelling rhythm of form closed in the block. [... It provides] instinctive picture-building. Instinctive, not doctrinaire" (quoted in Gordon 1968: 24). He also praised his early wood sculpture *Crouching Woman* as a "cube-compacted composition of the body," and highlighted "the rhythm of the closed form of the block" (quoted in Wagner 2011: 80).

Stern was presumably familiar with Kirchner's and Schmidt-Rottluff's wood sculptures. She is sure to have been exposed to the creations of one Expressionist in particular: Pechstein experimented extensively with sculpture between 1915 and 1920, and was in fact regarded by many of his contemporaries primarily as a sculptor (Wieteck 1984: 168). Furthermore, as Stephanie Barron has noted, his sculptural experiments appear to have grown directly out of his experience in the South Seas. Indeed, of the twenty wooden sculptures by Pechstein that can presently be identified in photographs (most of which have been destroyed), most bear the mark of direct observation of local peoples and several share titles with the indigenous works that inspired him (Barron 1984: 25). These works include his 1919 *Quarter Moon*, a freestanding

sculpture representing an elongated, mask-like face (**Figure 77**), and his untitled wooden sculpture of the same year, a full-length relief representation of a naked indigenous figure (**Figure 78**). Distinctly totemic in format, both works clearly testify to the artist's experimentation with the angular and geometric forms he had already begun to explore in the woodcut medium. In both sculptures, Pechstein's fascination with the scarification practices of local Palau peoples is clearly in evidence in the grid-like patterns incised onto the figures' wooden skins. Presuming that Pechstein kept these in his home or studio alongside the other primitive works of his collection, it is likely that they were intended to act as the artist's personal vessels of creative energy.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn] [Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 77.** Max Pechstein, *Quarter Moon*, 1919, wood, dimensions unknown, destroyed.

**Figure 78.** Max Pechstein, Untitled sculpture, 1919, wood, dimensions unknown, lost.

Pechstein's works display a number of features that are also apparent in Stern's carvings: the representation of an indigenous figure, the experimentation with a geometric treatment of the human form, and the use of relief. It is therefore possible that Pechstein's works served as inspirations for Stern's forays into carving in 1935. More generally speaking, Stern's Expressionist foundations surely laid the groundwork of her interest in direct carving and led her to conceive of the technique as one that could bring her the type of authenticating creative experience that was associated with primitive artists. However, her choice of stone rather than wood for her own creations also clearly testifies to the distance that separated her from these models, and definitely points to a desire for individuality on her part.

### 6.4.3. *Modern South African precedents*

The most direct precedents for Stern's 1935 experiments with direct carving may be found in her interactions with white South African modern sculptors. As I showed in Chapter 4, Stern was in the mid-1930s highly eager to develop and cultivate relationships with sculptors such as Mary Stainbank, Lippy Lipshitz, and Moses Kottler, who at the time formed a small community of avant-garde practitioners of the art form in South Africa. This community also included the artists Coert Steynberg, Ivan Mitford-Barberton, and Elsa Dziomba. Because all of these sculptors received their training in modernist enclaves in Europe, all were highly devoted to the motto of truth to materials (Rankin 1989: 13).

As Elizabeth Rankin has shown, when these artists brought back their lessons to South Africa, most were intent on articulating a response to their new context. Specifically, most selected local materials – woods and stones – to arrive at the kernel of what they called the “African spirit.” The sculptor Coert Steynberg, for instance, claimed in his 1982 autobiography that his interest in local materials derived from his childhood experience:

The clay oxen of my black playmates were strange to me at the time – they were not true to nature. I only realised later that they were in the right. From then I learnt something about sculpture that is very important: the respect for the material out of which a sculpture is made. (quoted in Rankin 1989: 15)

The motto of truth to materials was at the root of Steynberg's later life experimentation with indigenous woods, as in his 1950 *Dansende Meidjie*, a representation of a dancing African woman in stinkwood (**Figure 79**). Similarly, according to Lipshitz's student and primary biographer, Bruce Arnott, the sculptor was keenly interested in “expressing South Africa and the spirit of the country” through an “investigation of the stones and woods that [were] to him expositions of the natural character of the country itself” (1961: 62). Thus, works such as his 1929 *Cape Mother and Child* are, in Arnott's opinion, to be interpreted as “statements of the universal concept of motherhood, but particularly South African motherhood” (1961: 63) (**Figure 80**).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn] [Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 79.** Coert Steynberg, *Dansende Meidjie*, 1950, stinkwood, 79.5 x 19.5 x 23 cm, National Cultural History and Open-air Museum, Pretoria.

**Figure 80.** Lippy Lipshitz, *Cape Mother and Child*, 1929, wood, dimensions unknown, private collection.

As we saw earlier, some of these sculptors experimented with wonderstone, although it was by no means a common material.<sup>20</sup> Moses Kottler created at least one work using the grey-green stone, a figure titled *Standing Nude*, in 1940 (**Figure 64**). Stainbank's corpus includes a work titled *Medusa* (**Figure 63**) and Steynberg's includes a work titled *Bushman Girl*. Lipshitz produced at least three works in the stone in the 1940s, including one titled *Mother and Daughters* (1943) (**Figure 81**). It is impossible to tell from the photograph whether he used the "cornering effect" for this sculpture, but his confrontation with the stone block is clearly in evidence in the compactness of the composition, the roughness of the surfaces, and the chisel marks covering the figures' skins.<sup>21</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Figure 81.** Lippy Lipshitz, *Mothers and daughters*, 1943, wonderstone, 38 x 34 x 30 cm, artist's collection.

<sup>20</sup> The works cited here account for the totality of works in wonderstone that I was able to trace.

<sup>21</sup> Lipshitz also created a number of works in verdite, including a mask of Robin Harvey, dated 1936, which he offered to Irma Stern in 1944 in exchange for a painting.



Irma Stern's links to these trends in modern South African sculpture are somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, she was clearly invested in the exploration of truth to materials on the same grounds as these sculptors were, namely for the purposes of engagement with the putative spirit of Africa. However, at the same time, she applied stylizations that were far more Africanizing than theirs. We may plausibly attribute this idiosyncrasy to the fact that none of the abovementioned sculptors are known to have developed an interest in African art comparable to hers, nor did any amass a collection of primitive artworks. Thus, in spite of the great distance that separates them from actual models of African sculpture, Stern's works can be considered more dedicated experiments with African matter and style than those of her contemporaries.

### **6.5. Truth to what? Truth to whom?**

However different they may be in appearance from any of Stern's previous works, Stern's Africanized carvings must be considered to be altogether consistent with her broader project of accessing the spirit of Africa through sculptural means. With their diminutive formats and their distinctively primitivizing stylizations, these works clearly attest to the artist's attempt to create her own variants on African anthropomorphic carvings, long conceived by Europeans to be the most potent repositories of the continent's deep spiritual forces. The eclecticism of her style is in line with the practices of other European artists, who found in primitive art forms generic sources of creative inspiration and valued the supposedly spiritual process of carving above dedicated formal engagement with specific works.

But if Stern wished to engage with an idea of Africa, why did she not use wood? As we have seen, wood was not only the preferred medium of African carvers, it was also the medium preferred by most of her colleagues in Germany and South Africa. Furthermore, her wonderstone medium evidently imposed significant constraints on her compositions, compelling her to use the cornering effect as a means of maximizing the size of her compositions while sparing herself what she called the "difficult boddie [sic] work" that came with the process of carving.<sup>22</sup> Why did she go through the trouble of carving figures in stone in high relief, when she might have been able to create much more literal imitations of African carvings in wood? Why did she

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to Richard and Freda Feldman, November 13, 1935.

choose the obscure medium of African wonderstone as her point of access to an African *genius loci*, when her South African colleagues experimented extensively with the indigenous woods of stinkwood, ebony, and yellowwood? How do we account for the emphatically stony quality of her carvings?

The answer to these questions might be found in a photograph of the artist at her turntable. In 1946, Irma Stern staged herself hard at work in her studio for the cameras of *Life Magazine* (**Plate 11**). In what is arguably one of the most arresting photographs ever taken of the artist, she is shown in a literal standoff against her *Girl with Basket*. With her sturdy frame and dark clothing, Stern blends in with the dark armoire behind her, creating a large opaque mass on the right side of the picture that dwarfs the diminutive sculpture in the centre. Her downward gaze is as firmly set as are her flexed arm and chisel-wielding fist, both dramatically frozen in the instant before blade digs into stone. Her elbow is bent at the same sharp right angle as that of the sculpted figure. Yet the mimicry veers on cruel mockery: for while Stern's gesture allows her to steady the arm that holds the weapon, the sculpted figure appears to be clutching her basket in self-defence, as though cowering under the arm that faces her.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 11.** Irma Stern sculpting *Girl with Basket*, 1946, photograph, 16 x 21.5 cm, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

In no other photograph of the artist at work is her relationship with her creation staged in such a dramatic fashion. Photographs of Stern at her easel typically show her engaged but at ease, and the contrast with the two photographs in which she represented herself at work on her cement casts could not be starker (**Plates 3 and 5**). As we have seen, the photographs of Stern with *Contemplation* and *Kneeling Mother* show her doting, caring, and maternal, wielding her chisel like a brush rather than like a weapon. If fierce will to work and stoic authority were attitudes that she reserved for her self-representations as a carver, then we might suppose that they were precisely the ones that she sought to cultivate through the technique of stone carving.

Stern's choice of wonderstone can in that sense be understood in terms of the British variants on the truth to materials ideology, which generally exalted intractable stony media above wood. For instance, when accounting for his fascination with the "stoniness" of Mexican art, Henry Moore cited its "tremendous power without loss of sensitiveness, its astonishing variety and fertility of form invention" (quoted in Braun 1986: 173). According to art historian Barbara Braun, Moore's conception of "stoniness" can in fact be distilled to the simple formal qualities of density, hardness, and weight (1986: 174). These were the qualities of stone that wood could not equal. Considered in this light, Stern's choice of wonderstone signals her desire to take on an artistic challenge that would push her form-giving capacities to new limits, and thereby confirm the authenticity of her creative drives and the strength of her artistic powers.

If this is the case, then there may be more in common between Stern's self-representations as a carver and a caster than meets the eye. For the process of carving can in the final instance be understood as a technique of "control" on the same grounds as that of casting: indeed, underlying direct carvers' proclamations of subservience to their blocks was a tacit self-attribution of primary agency and god-like, form-giving powers. It is not difficult to locate the self-deifying resonances in Michelangelo's famous dictum: "in every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it" (translated in Longfellow 2008: 150). Henry Moore clearly expressed this same ideal in a 1951 article for *The Listener*: referring to the soapstone *pomdo* figures of Sierra Leone that he knew from the British Museum, he noted that "the material is dominated by the artist in almost every case" (quoted in Wilkinson 2002: 106). Implicit in this profession of admiration for the African

carvers is the idea that by dominating the material, the artist could by the same token imagine himself or herself to be appropriating the immaterial values that it supposedly contained. This is presumably what Stern also sought to do as she valiantly confronted the hard, tense, stoniness of her wonderstone block.

Although it may have brought her creative and spiritual fulfilment, Stern's appropriation of African spirit through stone necessarily came at the expense of her engagement with that putative spirit through human souls. Stern's carved figures are abstracted and de-individualized to a degree unprecedented in her other sculptural works. They are figures literally and symbolically graven in stone, compacted into their blocks and thereby made as solid and as immutable as the latter. In this way, I believe they reveal an approach to the representation of human form that is analogous to that which art historian Anne Wagner describes as a "reversal of the Pygmalion ideal" (2005: 22). Describing Henry Moore's use of English stones such as limestone and alabaster, Wagner states:

It is not that these local materials are preferred because they are more 'flesh-like.' On the contrary the opposite is true. They are chosen for their specially matte and stony surface, in which both time and place are revealed. [...] No Pygmalion, Moore aimed not at figural transformation (stone into flesh), so much as toward a figurative material presence (stone where flesh should be). (2005: 22)

In their matte, dense, and hard stoniness, Stern's sculptures evince an approach to the representation of the African body that is arguably much more reifying than those she employed in clay, cast cement, and paint. In that sense, I believe the un-fleshy bodies of Stern's carved sculptures can be read as the indices of an ultimate deflation of Stern's artistic project involving African women. They are bodies literally reduced to object form, emptied of any kind of represented subjectivity, and made to stand instead for the artist's creative power. Indeed, they call to mind Penelope Curtis' observation that "the products of direct carving are the intimate and inalienable products of the sculptor" (Curtis 2004: 300). Stern's carved works should be understood first and foremost as the indices of her desire to create intimate and inalienable three-dimensional symbols of her hard-fought creative appropriation of the putative spirit of Africa: symbols that, along with her other trophies and possessions, could remain with her like silent and steadfast companions long after the so-called spirit had faded outside the doors of her home.



## **Conclusion**

Not unlike the period discussed in this thesis, the first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by an upsurge in Irma Stern's commercial success both in South Africa and abroad. In 2011, Stern became one of the world's five top-selling women artists, as her 1942 painting *The Arab Priest* was sold for a record-breaking price of three million pounds at Bonhams' South African art sale. A recent survey by Bloomberg indicates that she is just shy of reaching the ranks of the ten top-selling women artists of all time, her 82.9 million dollars in total sales earning her the slot between Cindy Sherman at number ten and Berthe Morisot at number twelve.<sup>1</sup> While a large part of this revenue flows from a seemingly perennial demand for the artist's richly coloured still lifes, it derives in no insignificant measure from an equally enduring and undoubtedly more troubling lure toward her luxuriant paintings of dark-skinned belles. The rich colours and sensuous surfaces of Stern's canvases are still seducing and selling, testifying to the survival of the primitivist imaginary that she inherited and that she drove forward in seminal ways, both within South Africa and far across its borders. And yet art history has remained largely silent on the racial dynamics that are central to her art: Stern has repeatedly been examined as a transnational painter, as a woman painter, and, most insidiously of all, as a painter *tout court*.

The purpose of this thesis has been to contribute to contemporary understandings of the artistic identity of South Africa's most famous modern artist through a dedicated study of her sculptural oeuvre. Without seeking to reinvent the illustrious painter as a sculptor, it has rather aimed to exploit the novelty and the particularities of this corpus as a starting point for a broader investigation into the desires, the anxieties, and the concerns that underpinned her thirty-year-long engagement with African subject matter. In so doing, it has brought unprecedented focus to the dynamics of identification, mis-identification, desire, and power that animated her relationship with her African models.

My narrative of Stern's sculptural production has more specifically brought into relief a succession of engagements and disengagements from the third dimension, which can in turn be linked to highly sensitive moments in the artist's ongoing negotiation of her relationship with her African models. I have tried to show how Stern's desire for "with-ness" with her models was

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<sup>1</sup> "Top Selling Women Artists of All Time," <http://www.bloomberg.com/visual-data/best-and-worst/top-selling-women-artists-of-all-time-artists>.

crucially predicated on racialized projections and fantasies derived from her Expressionist training in Germany and then complicated by her experience in a South Africa deeply fractured along racial lines. Thus, as we have seen, Stern was driven to sculpt in 1922 out of a need to develop a closer relationship with an African continent and African people whom she had imagined from Germany. As a tactile, soft, malleable substance, clay offered her a compelling means of imaginative experimentation at a time of artistic self-definition. In contrast, when she sculpted in 1935, Stern was ostensibly seeking to connect with Africa she believed to be “vanishing” under the effects of rapid industrialization. Her shift to stone sculpture can accordingly be understood as an index of her anxiety about the putative disappearance of her models: as a hard, durable, and solid medium, stone sculpture could offer her a sense of control over the bodies of her subjects.

If Stern was driven to sculpt out of a need for “with-ness” with her African models, then it is logical that she was driven away from sculpture when that need disappeared. Indeed, after wrestling with clay and stone for thirty-three years, Stern bid adieu to the third dimension in the early 1950s with a final set of four sculptures in plaster, bronze, and fibreglass. The first is a relief panel in fibreglass that represents a trio of awkwardly modelled angels (**Cat. 45**). The second is a representation of a kneeling woman, presumably made of plaster (**Cat. 47**). The final two are conventional representations of reclining nudes (**Cat. 46** and **48**), reminiscent of Matisse’s bronze sculptures of the same period. Created at a time when the artist was forsaking Africa in favour of a Europe newly accessible thanks to the end of the war, these sculptures are the indices of Stern’s final and decisive retrenchment as a portrayer of African subjects. Two years after she created her final sculpture, Irma Stern was calling Africa a “dull and stupid place”<sup>2</sup> and was setting her sights firmly on the quaint Mediterranean resorts where other European modernists were seeking solace.

Debates over Stern’s agency as a white artist do not match the urgency of debates about the directions that must be taken to explore the long-occluded contribution of black African artists to South African modernism and to uncover, to understand, to celebrate, and also to bring into critical perspective the forms of creative agency that developed in conditions of extraordinary

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to Richard and Freda Feldman, November 1957.



[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 47.** Irma Stern, *Relief Panel with Angels*, early 1940s, fibreglass, dimensions unknown, collection of Mona and Kim Berman.

**Cat. 47.** Irma Stern, *Kneeling Figure*, c. 1950, dimensions and location unknown.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

[Illustration retirée /  
Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 47.** Irma Stern, *Reclining Nude*, 1950, bronze, 14.5 x 21 cm (base), SASOL University Museum, Stellenbosch.

**Cat. 48.** Irma Stern, *Reclining Figure*, c. 1955, dimensions and location unknown.

oppression. But the questions I have raised about Irma Stern's racialized imaginary, her colonial representational strategies, and her agency as a transnational white artist are questions that need to be posed, if only to offset the mythic account of her artistic identity that is continuously recycled without being critically reassessed. Indeed, this account bars productive inquiry into her significance both in her time and in the present. As Jonathan Crewe argues in an article on the poet Roy Campbell, Stern's contemporary, "reprocessing rather than denial or attempted erasure of the past is [...] incumbent on historiography and/or cultural studies" in the post-apartheid era (2007: 28). In his view, this reprocessing is necessary "if a non-racial yet multicultural South African future is to be shaped without supposing that it can be surgically separated from the past or from contemporary global contexts by the political and legal termination of apartheid" (2007: 28). The rising success of Stern's paintings clearly shows that her art is very much alive today, even as the silence of scholars on the topic of her race shows that the particular links between her art and life are a source of discomfort. It is time that Stern's vivacity be reflected and framed within a responsible history of twentieth-century South African and transnational visual culture.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Catalogue of sculptures**

#### **A.1. Preface**

- A.1.1. Catalogue methodology
- A.1.2. Irma Stern's sculptural materials

#### **A.2. Catalogue entries**

- A.2.1. Clay (Cats. 1-8)
- A.2.2. Cement (Cats. 9-20)
- A.2.3. Wonderstone and verdite (Cats. 21-44)
- A.2.4. Other or unknown materials (Cats. 45-51)

## **Appendix A.1. Preface**

### **A.1.1. Catalogue methodology**

Detailed below is the methodology that I employed in the elaboration of this catalogue. This appendix is divided into four sections:

- I. A description of the principal sources I consulted;
- II. A review of the major obstacles I encountered in the synthesis of the resultant data;
- III. A break-down of the steps that I took to generate the final catalogue entries;
- IV. An overview of the logic underpinning the contents and ordering of the catalogue entries.

#### ***I. Sources***

Listed below are the principal sources of information that I drew upon in order to build this catalogue of Irma Stern's sculptures. The sources are listed in the order in which I gave them precedence in the elaboration of the catalogue. This ordering reflects a basic preference for original source materials over and above the records that were produced after Irma Stern's death: while the latter are likely more reliable as far as Stern's sculptural media are concerned (see **Appendix A.1.2**), the original materials are more useful insofar as they relay sets of information that were presumably obtained directly from Irma Stern herself.

#### **1. Original exhibition catalogues**

*These four catalogues are pasted to the pages of Irma Stern's Scrapbook of Press Clippings in the archives of the National Library of South Africa (MSC 31:18). See **Appendix E** for complete transcriptions of each of the four catalogues.*

- i. **Titles:** The titles provided are the works' original titles, most likely given by Irma Stern herself.*

- ii. Dates:* The recorded month and year of the exhibition generally permit a precise dating of the works' production, except in cases where works were being featured in the exhibition for a second or third time.
- iii. Sculptural media:* The information that is given in the original catalogues regarding Stern's sculptural media nearly always conflicts with the information given in the secondary source materials. Correspondences can however be made based on available visual and textual sources. See **Appendix A.1.2** for an explanation of the way in which I treated the conflicting information contained in the source materials.
- iv. Prices:* The prices listed in the exhibition catalogues are at least roughly reflective of the cost of the sculptures' materials and of their dimensions. In addition, they are arguably reflective of the importance Stern accorded to her various works.

## 2. Press reviews of the exhibitions:

*I was able to find forty-eight articles that explicitly cite or discuss Stern's sculptures in their reviews of her exhibitions of 1936-1945. These are drawn from a variety of publications, most prominently the newspapers The Cape Argus, The Cape Times, The Star and The Rand Daily Mail; as well as various magazines, such as Trek and the South African Lady's Pictorial.*

- i. Titles, dates, and media:* Given that the reviews likely drew on the information provided in the exhibition catalogues, these data generally match those given in the former documents.
- ii. Descriptions:* In cases where the reviewers offered a description or a critique of a specific sculpture, I used their account to match the title to works photographed or viewed at the Irma Stern Museum. I also used these accounts in my analysis of the works in order to gain a sense of public attitudes toward Stern's sculpture.
- iii. Illustrations:* Some of the reviews are illustrated. These photographs often made it possible to determine and/or to confirm the date of production for works that are listed in the original exhibition catalogues.

### 3. Irma Stern Museum catalogue:

*This document was compiled in 1971, at the time of the inauguration of the Irma Stern Museum. It provides a complete listing of the fourteen sculptures in the museum's collection. Mr. Bruce Arnott, a renowned South African sculptor and a former professor of sculpture at Cape Town's Michaelis School of Art, was the person responsible for inventorying Irma Stern's sculptural works for the ISM catalogue.*

- i. **Titles:** The titles given are generally descriptive titles, and they do not match the original titles given in the exhibition catalogues. They are nevertheless recorded in the catalogue entries under the rubric "Other titles." In cases where there is no evidence that allows me to match a work from the collection with any title given in the exhibition catalogues, I use these descriptive titles in the body of my thesis.*
- ii. **Dates:** The only work for which a year of production is listed is *The God of Plenty* (Cat. 26). The others are undated.*
- iii. **Media:** The media listed in the museum catalogue do not match the media listed in the original exhibition catalogues. Correspondences can however be made based on available visual and textual sources. See **Appendix A.1.2.** for an explanation of the way in which I treated the conflicting information contained in the source materials.*
- iv. **Dimensions:** The dimensions given in the ISM catalogue are correct, albeit incomplete. In most cases, only the height of the sculpture is specified. I took full measurements of each sculpture to supplement the missing information.*

### 4. Catalogue, *An Homage to Irma Stern Retrospective Exhibition at the South African National Gallery (1968)*

*Five of Stern's sculptures were featured in the retrospective exhibition held at the South African National Gallery in 1968. I was not able to trace any other records of posthumous exhibitions that featured her sculptures. The section of the catalogue listing the sculptures includes a note that reads as follows: "Sculpture with the kind permission of the trustees of the Estate of Irma Stern." One can thus presume that the sculptures that were on exhibit were*

works that are now part of the ISM collection. See **Appendix E.5** for a full transcription of this catalogue.

- i. Titles:* The titles given are generally descriptive. They do not match the original titles given in the exhibition catalogues. They are recorded in the catalogue entries under the rubric “Other titles.”
- ii. Dates:* The only work for which a date is provided is the work titled “Small Figure,” allegedly produced in malachite in 1926 (although it is likely that this date is incorrect; cf. **Cat. 26**). The others are undated.

## 5. Photographs of works from MSC 31:

*The Irma Stern archives at the NLSA contain a number of photographs of Irma Stern’s sculptures. These provided valuable visual documentation for several of the works listed in this catalogue. They are stored either in the folder of Stern’s photographs of the 1920s (MSC 31:5/4), of Stern’s photographs of sculptures and ceramics (MSC 31:6/4), or they are pasted in her scrapbook of press clippings (MSC 31:18).*

- i. Titles:* The titles cited in the captions for the photographs either match those given in the exhibition catalogues (e.g. *Contemplation*), or they provide alternate generic titles (e.g. “Figure”). The latter are recorded in the entries under the rubric “Other titles.”
- ii. Dates:* The photographs are generally undated. However, given that the Scrapbook is organized in chronological fashion, the page where the photographs are pasted in the book generally gives an indication as to the year in which the featured works were produced (ex: *Girl with Lamp-holder/Basket*, **Cat. 23**).

## ***II. Obstacles and challenges***

Listed and detailed below are the principal challenges that I negotiated in the process of building this catalogue. The problems that remain are also highlighted and explained.



### **1. Lack of visual documentation**

There is a significant discrepancy between the number of works documented in textual form and the number that can at present be seen, whether in public collections or in photographic images. This striking paucity of visual documentation arguably constitutes the major obstacle to research into this corpus (and into South African sculpture at large), a difficulty that is further compounded by the fact that the images that are accessible are often un- or mis-identified. These issues greatly limit the possibility of accurately determining the number of works constituting the corpus.

### **2. Low-resolution imaging**

It must be noted that two of the images in the catalogue (**Cats. 47 and 48**) are in fact details from scans of periodicals preserved in microfilm format at the NLSA (**Plates 14 and 15**). They are nevertheless included in the catalogue insofar as they do provide basic evidence of the existence of the two works, of the works' location at given points in time. They also provide sufficient material for rudimentary formal analysis.

### **3. Titles: generic and non-generic**

The great majority of the fifty-three works listed in the catalogue bear titles that can be described as “generic” (e.g., *Native Head*). In this thesis, I argue that these trends in naming have significant implications for the interpretation of the works. Since these generic titles are purely descriptive in nature, they are subject to a high degree of variability, such that the same sculpture can bear two distinct titles. Conversely, it is impossible to determine whether the same generic title, repeated across several catalogues, refers to one and the same work or to several distinct ones. Positive identifications of titles to images, where possible, must thus be based upon other considerations (correspondences in medium, dates, dimensions).

### **4. Media and multiples**

Irma Stern's sculptures in cement belong to an artistic form that is inherently reproducible in nature. While many of these sculptures are listed in the exhibition catalogues

as single casts, these same catalogues also contain records of a number of works in clay that could plausibly have served as base models for further casts (e.g. *Youth*, **Cat. 13**). Given that these clay works generally bear generic titles and that in many cases the titles re-appear with considerable frequency across the exhibition catalogues, it is possible the doubling references in fact denote multiple casts from the same model. In the absence of visual evidence permitting definitive identifications between listed objects, potential doublings will be signalled in the catalogue entries for the works concerned.

### ***III. Procedure***

In order to build the corpus documented in this catalogue and analysed in this thesis, I:

1. Identified exhibition catalogues containing records of sculptural works through the Irma Stern archives at the NLSA [MSC 31:18 – Scrapbook 1914-46];
2. Retrieved all archival photographs representing Stern's sculptures through the archives at the NLSA [MSC 31:18, MSC 31:5/4 – Personal Album, 1920s, and MSC 31:6/4, Photographs: sculptures, ceramics, etc.];
3. Identified the works exhibited at the Irma Stern Museum;
4. Retrieved all non-archival information concerning Stern's sculptures:
  - i. Contacted major auction houses in South Africa and abroad regarding potential past sales of Stern's sculptures: Stephan Welz & co., Strauss & co., Bonhams', Christies'.
  - ii. Contacted major art institutions in South Africa regarding potential records of Stern's sculptures in their collections: the South African National Gallery (Cape Town), the Rupert Art Foundation (Stellenbosch), the SASOL University Museum (Stellenbosch), the Durban Art Gallery, the Pretoria Art Museum, the University of Pretoria Art Gallery, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Museum Africa (Johannesburg), the Standard Bank Corporate Collection (Johannesburg), and Knight Galleries (Cape Town).
  - iii. Contacted individuals with links to Irma Stern for information about her sculptures.

With the full available amount of documentary evidence on hand, I cross-referenced the records of exhibited and illustrated works with the titles listed in the catalogues in order to construct a full technical sheet for each work.

#### ***IV. Notes on the contents and the ordering of the catalogue entries***

The catalogue lists a total of fifty-one sculptures. This number is not reflective of the total number of sculptures that Irma Stern produced over the course of her career. In light of the documentary issues detailed above, it is impossible to know exactly how many sculptures Stern produced. Accordingly, the proposed catalogue documents all of the works that emerge from the total documentation pertaining to Stern's sculptural production, after cross-referencing between the various sources listed above. It reflects a cautious approach to the archive: in cases where there is incontrovertible evidence indicating that a match can be made between several records, the various records are condensed into one entry. In cases where strong uncertainty persists, the records are listed in separate entries. The potential overlap between entries is indicated in the notes accompanying each of the entries concerned. The advantage of this approach is that full details are given about each of the archival records, in separate entries, thereby allowing for further examination and evaluation of the various problematic cases.

The entries are classified into four groups according to sculptural material: clay and terracotta, cement (and derivatives), wonderstone and verdite, and unknown or other materials. Within each group, the entries are ordered chronologically.

### A.1.2. Irma Stern's sculptural materials

There is a set of fundamental inconsistencies running through the data concerning Stern's sculptural materials. In effect, the names of materials that are listed in the primary sources (original exhibition catalogues, press reviews, scrapbook) do not match any of the names that are listed in the secondary sources. Insofar as visual and other forms of documentation reveal that many of the works listed in the primary sources are identical with works listed in the secondary sources, it is unquestionable that this is a case of conflicting data.

There is, at the very least, a regularity running through these conflicts. The primary sources provide a cohesive set of data concerning Stern's sculptural materials and the secondary sources provide another set. By comparing the data given in each respective type of source for a select number of works, I was able to draw out the following conclusions:

- Works listed as having been produced in **artificial stone** in the primary sources are listed as having been produced in **cement and terrazzo** in the secondary sources.
- Works listed as having been produced in **soapstone** in the primary sources are listed as having been produced in **wonderstone** in the secondary sources.
- Works listed as having been produced in **malachite** in the primary sources are listed as having been produced in **verdite** in the secondary sources.

In the following sections, I elucidate some of the reasons for these conflicting sets of data and account for my choice of terminology in the thesis.

#### *I. Possible explanations*

The first plausible explanation for this trend of inconsistency would be that the terms provided in each of the respective sources are in fact synonymous and refer to the same material. However, it is clear that this is not the case, as each of the pairings refers to two chemically or geologically distinct materials. One must accordingly presume that one of the two sources of information relays false information.

I do not explore the possibility that all of the sources provide false information. This would imply that Stern as well as all of her cataloguers were misinformed when they created the records of these sculptures. I assume that for each case of divergent data, one of the two possibilities is indeed correct.

It is impossible to gauge the reliability of primary source documents on this point: while I presume that the data given in these documents was provided by Irma Stern herself, I am unable to certify that this is the case. Bruce Arnott's identifications in the ISM catalogues likely carry more weight than these primary sources. However, given that this is the first study of Stern's sculptures, I believe it is useful to investigate these conflicting data by looking directly to the materials themselves. In the following section, I evaluate each case of discrepancy separately by setting the data known about each material against a formal analysis of the sculptures themselves. I draw my own conclusions from these comparisons.

## ***II. Case by case analysis***

In order to determine which material would make the most likely match with the sculptures in question, I evaluated each case based on two criteria: the materials' formal and chemical properties, and their availability in 1930s and 1940s South Africa.

### **i. Artificial stone vs. terrazzo vs. cement (Chapter 5):**

The problem concerns the following visually documented sculptures: *Contemplation* (**Cat. 9**), *Grief* (**Cat. 10**), *Awakening* (**Cat. 11**), *Kneeling Mother* (**Cat. 12**), *Youth* (**Cat. 13**), *Young Native Girl* (**Cat. 16**), *Head of an African Girl* (**Cat. 20**); as well as the following sculpture, for which there is no visual documentation: *Sitting Zulu Woman* (**Cat. 14**).

#### ***Formal/chemical properties:***

Artificial stone is a mix of cement and aggregate. The material derives its name from its distinctive versatility: it can be used to imitate virtually any type of stone typically used in sculpture, with its final appearance depending on the types of aggregate and cement used and the

pigments added to the compound. It is generally cheaper than natural stone (Rich 1988: 237). In turn, terrazzo is a specific type of artificial stone, generally produced by mixing cement with an aggregate composed of large and varied-coloured particles (Rich 1988: 358). Lastly, cement is itself a compound of lime and earth-clay.

Because they are all derived from cement and thus possess a common chemical composition, all of these materials share broadly similar formal features: they are heavy, strong, and durable, and they are generally impervious to the elements. These similarities are reflected in the visual similarity of all of Stern's cast works. In short, it is difficult to determine from visual analysis whether Irma Stern used a pure form of cement, or a blend of cement and aggregate for her casting work.

### ***Availability in South Africa:***

While the NLSA archives do not contain any information regarding suppliers from whom Stern could potentially have purchased her cementitious sculpting materials, it is unlikely that she had trouble finding suppliers. All of the composite elements of cement have long been mined in South Africa, with limestone deposits being widespread in the Western Cape. Moreover, cement was widely used for architectural purposes in early twentieth-century South Africa. Consequently, it seems plausible to suppose that cement and its compounds were widely available commercially at the time that Irma Stern began to sculpt.

### ***Conclusion:***

In this thesis, I consider Stern's casting materials to be variants of one and the same material, namely cement.

## **ii. Soapstone vs. wonderstone (Chapter 6):**

This problem concerns the following visually documented sculptures: *Native Head* (Cat. 21), *Eve* (Cat. 22), *Girl with Basket* (Cat. 23), *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24), *The Woman/The Water-Carrier* (Cat. 25), *Two Heads* (Cat. 28), *Head* (Cat. 36) *Standing Half-Length Figure*

(**Cat. 41**); as well as the following sculptures, for which there is no visual documentation: *Dawn* (**Cat. 27**), *Native Girl* (**Cat. 29**), *Nude* (**Cat. 30**), *Head* (**Cat. 31**), *Mother and Child* (**Cat. 32**), *Native* (**Cat. 33**), *Swazi Head* (**Cat. 34**), and *Girl with Shawl* (**Cat. 35**).

***Formal/chemical properties:***

Both stones come in shades of dark grey. Wonderstone varies in colour from dark grey to black, sometimes with a burgundy-red plume. Soapstone generally ranges in colour from white to gray, with some varieties coming in light green. While the two materials have similar visual properties and similar industrial uses, their geological compositions are significantly different. These physical properties are relevant to their sculptural uses. The most noteworthy difference between the materials concerns their respective degrees of hardness. Soapstone being derived principally from talc, it is a very soft stone. It is generally ranked at either 1 or 2, the lowest levels, on the Mohs scale of hardness, making it well suited to carving, especially for beginners. In contrast, wonderstone is classified at 3 on the Mohs scale: a mineral compound of aluminum silicate hydroxide, derived from volcanic ash and known scientifically as “pyrophyllite,” it is significantly harder, and therefore more difficult to sculpt.

***Availability in South Africa:***

Major deposits of soapstone/talc are widespread throughout the world, including southern Africa. They can namely be found in the present-day provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Gauteng and Northern Cape (Cairncross 1995: 205). On the other hand, wonderstone is endemic specifically to north-eastern South Africa and to Zimbabwe. The largest mine is at the farm Gestoptefontein, lying eight kilometres north of the locality named Ottosdal in present-day Gauteng (formerly the West Transvaal). This particular mine was incorporated in 1937 as Wonderstone Ltd.; in other words, just one year after Stern began sculpting in the dark grey stone. Because of its prevalence in this region, it is also often referred to as “African wonderstone,” or simply, “African stone.” While I was regrettably unable to locate more specific information on suppliers who may have furnished Stern with her carving materials, it is certain that both materials were available to sculptors in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s as several of Stern’s contemporaries (Moses Kottler; Lippy Lipshitz; Mary Stainbank; Coert Steynberg) are known to have used them. See Chapter 6 for examples.

**Conclusion:**

I believe it is more plausible that Stern's sculptural material was wonderstone. The sculptures do not have the soapy tactile quality of soapstone, and they are remarkably weighty given their compact sizes. This means that the 1936 and 1939 catalogues contain erroneous information, which in turn suggests that Stern was misinformed when she purchased her sculptural materials in the 1930s.

**iii. Malachite vs. verdite (Chapter 6):**

This conflict concerns the sculpture "Crouching Figure" (**Cat. 26**) from the ISM collection. The ISM records indicate that this sculpture was made from verdite, yet the primary sources do not list a single work in that medium. They do, however, cite one title in malachite, *The God of Plenty*, in the catalogues for Stern's exhibitions of 1936 and 1945 (see **Appendices E.1, E.2, and E.4**). This medium appears again in the catalogue for the 1968 exhibition *A Homage to Irma Stern*, associated to the title "Small Figure," allegedly produced in 1926. I believe there are good reasons to believe that these three titles all refer to one and the same work (see **Cat. 26**). Unfortunately, however, potential synonymy does not provide a way out of this conflict: while verdite and malachite are visually similar materials, they are not identical.

This problem is compounded by the fact that the ISM catalogue lists another work as a verdite, namely the work titled *Mask* (**Cat. 42**). The stone used for this sculpture is significantly brighter than that used for the sculpture *The God of Plenty*.

**Formal/chemical properties:**

Malachite and verdite are both green-coloured minerals that come in various hues and with different degrees of lustre, with malachite generally displaying a brighter, more vitreous quality than the denser and more muted verdite. Verdite can sometimes have an emerald-like quality, however, and it occasionally displays brown and green striations. Both materials are well suited to both jewellery and sculpture, with verdite carrying a superior prestige due to its greater hardness and its greater rarity. Verdite is indeed considerably more difficult to sculpt than



malachite: while the former ranks between 7 and 9 on the Mohs scale of hardness, the latter generally ranks between 3.5 and 5.

### ***Availability in South Africa:***

Both materials are mined in South Africa. A belt of malachite deposits stretches across the northern frontiers of the country and into Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Swaziland, with the densest concentrations lying in the present-day provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga (Cairncross 1995: 139). The most important verdite deposits in South Africa are found along the greenstone belt of the Barberton district of Mpumalanga. It is also mined in Zimbabwe (Cairncross 1995: 266). However, verdite is significantly rarer than malachite.

### ***Conclusion:***

Barring in-depth mineralogical analysis, it is very difficult to determine which of the two materials Stern used to sculpt *The God of Plenty*. Because verdite does have a greater range of colour variations (which can plausibly include the colour of both this work and *Mask*) I believe it more likely that it is in fact the one that she used. This tentative conclusion is in line with Mr. Arnott's appraisal.<sup>1</sup>

## ***III. Summary***

My conclusions regarding the nature of Stern's various sculptural media are tentative. I believe that the evidence lends stronger credence to the secondary source materials: on the one hand, based on my formal analysis of the works concerned; and on the other, based on the authority and the reliability of ISM cataloguer Bruce Arnott's judgment.

While it is unfortunate that these documentary uncertainties remain, I do not believe that they pose any significant constraints on the analysis of Irma Stern's sculptures. Insofar as my approach is primarily anchored in a formal analysis of the finished works, over and above an

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Serge Occhietti for his insights on this matter. In his capacity as a professional geologist, he confirmed that first-hand mineralogical analysis would be necessary to determine with any certainty which of the two materials is in fact the one that was used to create this work. He also confirmed that it was possible that the work titled *The God of Plenty* was indeed carved in verdite.

approach that would be concerned with the details of the sculptures' processes of making, I am only interested in those properties of the materials that bear directly on our understanding of Stern's general interaction with her various sculptural media, as evidenced in her finished pieces. My tentative suggestions regarding Stern's specific media are sufficient to carry out these broad analytical aims.

In the body of the text, I refer to Stern's materials in the following manner:

- Chapter 5: cast cement
- Chapter 6: carved wonderstone and verdite

In the catalogue, I list both materials in each case of discrepancy. It is my hope that further research and analysis will shed light on the problems articulated here, and eventually bring us to a fuller understanding of Stern's sculptural materials and her process.



**A.2. Catalogue**

**Sculptures in clay**  
***(Cat. 1-8)***

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Working title:** *African Female Head*

**Year of production:** 1922<sup>2</sup>

**Date and location of exhibition:** N/A<sup>3</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Clay / terracotta<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>5</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** N/A<sup>6</sup>

**Other images:**

- Untitled photograph of Irma Stern with a sculpted African female head and a painting of a mother and Child, c. 1922, MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, Snapshot Album 1920s, 11982 (**Plate 1**)
- Untitled photograph of Irma Stern with a sculpted African female head and a painting of a plate of fish, c. 1922, MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, Snapshot Album 1920s, 11982 (**Plate 2**)

**Cat. 1a [Frontal view]**

**Image source:** MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, Snapshot Album 1920s, 11986.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 1b [Side view]**

**Image source:** MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, Snapshot Album 1920s, 11984.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> There is at present no clear record that indicates that the work seen in these photographs was ever exhibited. It was not featured in Stern's 1922 exhibition at Ashbey's in Cape Town, nor in her subsequent exhibits from the 1920s. There is however a possibility that it was featured in her 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town, as the catalogue from that exhibition lists three "native" figures in fired clay. It would likely have been one of the two *Native Girls* (see **Cats. 4 and 5 and Appendix E.1**).

<sup>2</sup> The images are included in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) and are signed "I. St. 1922". They are pasted alongside **Cat. 2a/b** and **Cat. 3**.

<sup>3</sup> See note 1.

<sup>4</sup> There are no written records to certify that this work was made in clay. This suggestion is based on the ostensible smoothness of the sculpture's surfaces and the fluidity of the modeling, as seen in these images and in **Plate 2**. Furthermore, Stern's *African Mother and Child* (**Cat. 3**), a work that was produced at the same time, is confirmed to have been made in terracotta (Bonhams: 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Judging from the proportions of the head to Stern's own in the two photographs that show them side by side in Stern's studio (**Plates 1 and 2**), it appears to have been sculpted with slightly smaller than life-size proportions.

<sup>6</sup> If the photographed work does indeed match one of the three sculptures in fired clay cited in the 1936 Catalogue, then it was priced at 30 guineas.

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Working title:** *African Male Head*

**Year of production:** 1922<sup>2</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Clay / terracotta<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** N/A<sup>5</sup>

## Cat. 2

**Image source:** MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, Snapshot Album 1920s, 11985.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is no clear record of this work having been exhibited. It was not featured in Stern's 1922 exhibition at Ashbey's in Cape Town, nor in her subsequent exhibits from the 1920s. There is however a possibility that it was featured in her 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town, as the catalogue from that exhibition lists three "native" figures in fired clay. It would likely have been the *Native Head* (cf. **Cat. 6 and Appendix E.1**).

<sup>2</sup> The image is included in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) and is signed "I. St. 1922". It is pasted alongside **Cat. 1a/b** and **Cat. 3**.

<sup>3</sup> There are no written records to certify that this work was made in clay. This suggestion is based on the ostensible smoothness of the sculpture's surfaces and the fluidity of the modeling, as seen in these images and in **Plate 2**. Furthermore, Stern's *African Mother and Child* (**Cat. 3**), a work that was produced at the same time, is confirmed to have been made in terracotta (Bonhams: 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Given the similarities between this work and the female head (**Cat. 1**) in terms of technique and style, one may presume that it was also crafted with slightly smaller than life-size proportions.

<sup>5</sup> If the photographed work does indeed match one of the three sculptures in fired clay cited in the 1936 Catalogue, then it was priced at 30 guineas.

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Other title:** *African Mother and Child*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** 1922<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Terracotta<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** 30 cm (height)

**Current location:** Private collection

**Price:** Sold for £ 5000 in 2012

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 3a

**Image source:** MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, Snapshot Album 1920s, 11986.

*Also:* Scrapbook (MSC 31:18), page devoted to the year 1925.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 3b

**Image source:** Bonhams January 30, 2008 South African Sale, Bond Street, London:  
<http://www.bonhams.com/eur/auction/15681/lot/106/>.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is no record of this work having been exhibited during Stern's lifetime. It was not featured in Stern's 1922 exhibition at Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town, nor in her subsequent exhibits from the 1920s. The only record that it could possibly match is the record of a *Mother and Child* shown at Stern's last exhibition of sculptures at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in 1945 (cf. **Cat. 8**).

<sup>2</sup> This is the title that was listed for the work when it re-appeared on the auction circuit at the South African Sale on January 30, 2008 at Bonhams London. The medium and dimensions are also drawn from the catalogue for that sale (Source: <http://www.bonhams.com/eur/auction/15681/lot/106/>).

<sup>3</sup> The image is included in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) and is signed "I. St. 1922". It is pasted alongside **Cat. 1a/b** and **Cat. 2**.

<sup>4</sup> The work was withdrawn from auction twice (January 30, 2008; March 21, 2012) before it was sold on October 16, 2012.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 1. African Female Head*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 16. Young Native Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 20. Head of an African Girl*

**Exhibition title:** *Native Girl*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936<sup>2</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 112)<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Fired clay<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 30 guineas<sup>5</sup>

**Press commentaries:**

“In art-stone, in soapstone, in terra-cotta and in clay, there were figures and heads and masks in the mood of her well-known native studies in oils. Standing just inside the door were two well-dressed natives deep in contemplation of a head in clay. Asked what they thought of it, the reply came in perfect English, with an utter lack of self-consciousness. ‘We think Miss Stern has a wonderful insight into the Native mind. She sees below the surface. Most European artists when they paint out people go no deeper than the *arme skepsel* conception.’”

*(The South African Lady’s Pictorial, April 1936)*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> This title is listed in the catalogue for Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town (MSC 31:18). There is at present no evidence that could make it possible to match the record with any visual document of a sculpture. Nevertheless, it is possible that it corresponds to the clay head that Stern produced in 1922 (**Cat. 1**). In a more unlikely scenario, it could correspond to a clay model for one of two works currently exhibited at the Irma Stern Museum that were likely produced at the same time (cf. **Cats. 16** and **Cat. 20**). It could also refer to another work.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



[No image available]

Possible matches:

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 1. *African Female Head*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 16. *Young Native Girl*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 20. *Head of an African Girl*

**Exhibition title:** *Native Girl*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936<sup>2</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** 2-14 March 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 113)<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Fired clay<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 30 guineas<sup>5</sup>

**Press commentaries:**

“In art-stone, in soapstone, in terra-cotta and in clay, there were figures and heads and masks in the mood of her well-known native studies in oils. Standing just inside the door were two well-dressed natives deep in contemplation of a head in clay. Asked what they thought of it, the reply came in perfect English, with an utter lack of self-consciousness. ‘We think Miss Stern has a wonderful insight into the Native mind. She sees below the surface. Most European artists when they paint out people go no deeper than the *arme skepsel* conception.’”

(*The South African Lady’s Pictorial*, April 1936)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> This title is listed in the catalogue for Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town (MSC 31:18). There is at present no evidence that could make it possible to match the record with any visual document of a sculpture. Nevertheless, it is possible that it corresponds to the clay head that Stern produced in 1922 (**Cat. 1**). In a more unlikely scenario, it could correspond to a clay model for one of two works currently exhibited at the Irma Stern Museum that were likely produced at the same time (cf. **Cats. 16** and **Cat. 20**). It could also refer to another work.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 1. African Female Head*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 2. African Male Head*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 20. Head of an African Girl*

**Exhibition title:** *Native Girl*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** before 1936

**Dates and location of exhibition:** 2-14 March 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 114)

**Medium:** Fired clay<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 30 guineas<sup>3</sup>

**Press commentaries:**

“In art-stone, in soapstone, in terra-cotta and in clay, there were figures and heads and masks in the mood of her well-known native studies in oils. Standing just inside the door were two well-dressed natives deep in contemplation of a head in clay. Asked what they thought of it, the reply came in perfect English, with an utter lack of self-consciousness. ‘We think Miss Stern has a wonderful insight into the Native mind. She sees below the surface. Most European artists when they paint out people go no deeper than the *arme skepsel* conception.’”

(*The South African Lady’s Pictorial*, April 1936)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town. There is at present no evidence that could make it possible to match the record with any visual document of a sculpture. Nevertheless, it is possible that it corresponds to one of the two clay heads that Stern produced in 1922 (cf. **Cats. 1** and **2**). Given that there are two records of sculptures of female subjects in the catalogue, it is more likely that this record would correspond to a sculpture of a male. In this case, it is more likely that it would correspond to **Cat. 2**. In a more unlikely scenario, it could correspond to a clay model for the head in artificial stone exhibited at the Irma Stern Museum under the title *Head of an African Girl* (cf. **Cat. 20**). It could also refer to another work altogether.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*[No image available]*

*Possible match:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 47. *Kneeling Figure***

**Exhibition title:** *Kneeling Girl*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 8)

**Medium:** Terracotta<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 75 guineas<sup>3</sup>

**Press commentaries:**

“And for those who are displeased with eccentricities of form I commend such representational, but powerful pieces, as ‘Despair’ and ‘Repose’; while ‘Kneeling Girl,’ in terracotta, leads the eye to the more interpretative ‘Mother and Child.’”

(P.W.H., “Irma Stern’s Art Exhibition,” *The Cape Times*, February 9, 1945, p. 8)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue for Stern’s 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. It is possible that the title *Kneeling Girl* matches the work identified in the above photograph from 1955 (classified as **Cat. 47**), given that this sculpture ostensibly represents a kneeling female figure. However, there is no way of ascertaining that the photographed work is in terra cotta. See **Cat. 47** for more details.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> This price tag being relatively high, especially for a terracotta sculpture, one could expect that the work in question be fairly large in size. This factor effectively weakens the plausibility of the match with the sculpture identified as **Cat. 47**, which appears to have had the dimensions of a table-top or desk decoration. The price of 70 guineas would be disproportionately high for this sculpture.

[No image available]

Possible match:

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 3. *African Mother and Child*

**Exhibition title:** *Mother and Child*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945<sup>2</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 9)

**Medium:** Terracotta<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown<sup>5</sup>

**Price:** 50 guineas

**Press commentaries:**

- “And for those who are displeased with eccentricities of form I commend such representational, but powerful pieces, as ‘Despair’ and ‘Repose’; while ‘Kneeling Girl,’ in terracotta, leads the eye to the more interpretative ‘Mother and Child.’”  
(P.W.H., “Irma Stern’s Art Exhibition,” *The Cape Times*, February 9, 1945, p. 8)
- “A small *Mother and Child* in baked clay, imprisons yet reveals the whole conception of motherhood and *The God of Plenty* is an amusingly delightful adaptation of the original shape of the green malachite.”  
(“Irma the Astonishing,” *Trek*, February 9, 1945)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue for Stern’s 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. The only potential match that can be made with other known and visible works is with the 1922 terracotta sculpture *African Mother and Child* (cf. **Cat. 3**). The descriptions of the work given in the two press reviews from the *Cape Times* and *Trek* are consistent with the appearance of the 1922 sculpture, which may lend some plausibility to the match,

<sup>2</sup> If the 1945 record does indeed match the *Mother and Child* identified in **Cat. 3**, then could have been produced as early as 1922.

<sup>3</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18).

<sup>4</sup> If this record does indeed match Stern’s 1922 *Mother and Child*, then its dimensions are the ones listed in the Bonhams Auction catalogue record for that work (30 cm high).

<sup>5</sup> If it is indeed the case that this record matches Stern’s 1922 *Mother and Child*, then it is currently in a private collection.



**Sculptures in cement**

***(Cat. 9-20)***

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 9a [Frontal View]

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/4, Photographs, sculpture, ceramics, etc. Caption: "Zulu Woman."

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 9b [Side view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**Exhibition title:** *Contemplation*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Woman, Hand Against Cheek*<sup>2</sup>

**Other titles:** *Bantu Woman with Hand Against Cheek*;<sup>3</sup>  
*Zulu Woman*<sup>4</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936<sup>5</sup>

**Dates and locations of exhibitions:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 101)
- October 15-?, 1936 Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 153)
- *A Homage to Irma Stern*, S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town, 1968 (no. 109)

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>6</sup>

**Dimensions:** 52 x 41 x 30 cm<sup>7</sup>

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Price:** 125 guineas<sup>8</sup>

**Other images:**

- *Cape Times Supplement*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 4**)
- *South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936 (**Plate 5**)
- S.A. National Gallery, *A Homage to Irma Stern*, 1968

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> An image of this work appears in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) with the caption "Contemplation." Another appears in the February 29, 1936 issue of the *Cape Times Supplement* with the caption "She has called the [centre] piece 'Contemplation.'" Based on these references, the photographed work can be matched to the record of the work titled *Contemplation* in the catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> S.A. National Gallery, *A Homage to Irma Stern*, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> MSC 31:6 /4, Photographs, sculpture, ceramics, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18), Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town.

<sup>6</sup> Both exhibition catalogues list the medium as "Art-stone, One Cast Only." The ISM catalogue lists the work as having been produced in cement. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>7</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> MSC 31:18, Catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 9c [Back view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**Press commentaries:**

- “Her feeling for form, for expression in the round, leads her naturally to three-dimensional work. That feeling is exaggerated in certain of her sculpture, but when it is restrained as in ‘Contemplation,’ ‘Grief’ and the smaller works in soap-stone, it leads to extremely interesting results.”  
 (“Irma Stern Exhibition,” *The Rand Daily Mail*, October 15, 1936)
- “Onder hierdie aantal beelde deur har is no. 101 ‘Contemplation’ miskien die treffendste. Dit is van ‘n Pondo-meid wat met die hande onder die kin sit en mymer. Die uitdrukking is baie raak weergegee en die benaming baie beskrywend van die indruk wat hierdie skepsel op ‘m mens maak. Fyner, en daarby meer beslis bewerk, is ‘n kleiner beeld in gebakte klei (no. 112). Daar is ook verskeie ander wat van die wekkrag van die kunstenaars getuig.”  
 (“Naturelle-lewwe as Kunsmotief,” *Die Burger*, Tuesday March 3, 1936)<sup>1</sup>
- “Mej. Stern hou haar ook besig met modelleer en houtsnouwerk en so lewenswaar het sy haar figuur: “Bepeinsing” (no. 153) uitgebeeld dat die ou meid wat die regmaak van haar ateljee in Kaapstad moes onderneem, volstrek geweier het om dit te doen aanfiesien sy ban was dat haar suster met haar sou begin praat!”  
 (“Irma Stern in Londen,” *Die Vaderland*, Tuesday November 3, 1936)

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<sup>1</sup> “Of all the sculptures the one that seems to stand out the most is number 101 ‘Contemplation.’ It is of a Pondo maid with her hands under her chin pondering. The expression is very striking in the impression it conveys” (“Natural Life as a Motif in Art,” *Die Burger*, March 3, 1936). Translation courtesy of François Brand.



**Exhibition title:** *Grief*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Woman, Hands Over Ears* (no. 141)<sup>2</sup>

**Other titles:** *Bantu Girl with Hands over Ears*<sup>3</sup>

**Date of production:** Before 1936<sup>4</sup>

**Dates and locations of exhibitions:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 102)
- October 15-?, 1936 Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 154)
- S.A. National Gallery, *A Homage to Irma Stern*, Cape Town, 1968 (no. 111)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** 64.5 x 35 x 29 cm<sup>6</sup>

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Price:** 125 guineas<sup>7</sup>

### Cat. 10a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/4, Photographs: Sculptures, ceramics, etc.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 10b [Side view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A photograph appears in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) with the caption 'Grief.' Another appears in the February 29, 1936 issue of the *Cape Times Supplement* with the caption "She has called the [centre] piece 'Contemplation.'" Based on these references, the photographed work can be matched to the record of the work titled *Contemplation* in the catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> S.A. National Gallery, *Homage to Irma Stern*, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> The work clearly appears in images from the *Cape Times* and the *Cape Times Supplement*, February 29 1936, confirming that it was crafted before 1936.

<sup>5</sup> Both of the 1936 catalogues list the medium as "Art-stone, One Cast Only." However, these references are inconsistent with the other available records: the Scholtz Catalogue lists the work as "terra cotta," while the work on exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum is evidently made of cement. Furthermore, the 1968 S.A. National Gallery catalogue records the medium of the work as "red cement," which is consistent with the original "art-stone" label ("art-stone" being a variety of cement). However, the dimensions are listed as 35 cm (height), a value significantly inferior to the 64.5 cm of the sculpture exhibited at the Irma Stern Museum. The data retained in the present entry was thus gleaned from the original 1936 catalogue and the author's first-hand observations at the Irma Stern Museum. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>6</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> MSC 31:18, Catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

**Other images:**

- *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 3**)
- *The Cape Times Supplement*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 4**)
- *The Cape Argus*, March 3, 1936 (**Plate 6**)

**Press commentaries:**

- “Her feeling for form, for expression in the round, leads her naturally to three-dimensional work. That feeling is exaggerated in certain of her sculpture, but when it is restrained as in ‘Contemplation,’ ‘Grief’ and the smaller works in soap-stone, it leads to extremely interesting results.”  
(“Irma Stern Exhibition, New Outlook Revealed,” *The Rand Daily Mail*, October 15, 1936)
- “Another piece entitled ‘Grief,’ a half-length figure of a Pondo woman cradling her bowed head in her hands, holds a similar though simpler magnificence of construction.”  
(Melvin Summers, “Irma Stern as Sculptor,” *The Cape Times*, March 2, 1936)
- “[All of Stern’s sculptures] show a deep and intimate understanding of her materials and one especially, ‘Grief’ (no. 102) is an achievement of a high order. Simple yet strong, it is a very remarkable piece of work.”  
(D.G., “Art of Irma Stern,” *The Cape Argus*, March 3, 1936)
- “The sculpture strikes one as still a little experimental. Her training and modernistic tendencies lead her to go far afield to escape the restraints that she has been obliged to recognise in her other works in oil, tempera or pencil. The results are not always satisfying, though she is often successful in rendering an emotion, such as in ‘Grief,’ and one or two other pieces. As yet she has not succeeded in imparting her undoubted talent in design and colour to the difficult medium that the sculptor must employ.”  
(D.L., “A Clever Woman Artist,” *The Star*, October 16, 1936)

**Exhibition title:** *Awakening*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Woman I*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936<sup>3</sup>

**Dates and locations of exhibitions:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 104)
- October 15-?, 1936 Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 155)<sup>4</sup>

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** 58 x 40 x 22 cm<sup>6</sup>

**Current Location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Price:** 100 guineas<sup>7</sup>

**Other images:**

- *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 3**)
- *The Cape Times Supplement*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 4**)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 11a [Frontal view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 11b [Side view]**

**Image source:** MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (years 1946-1964).

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> A photograph appears in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) with the caption "Awakening." This information makes it possible to match the photographed work with the record for a work titled *Awakening*, listed in the catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cape Times Supplement*, February 29, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> MSC 31:18, Catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; both catalogues specify that the work is "One Cast Only."

<sup>6</sup> Scholtz 1971.

<sup>7</sup> MSC 31:18, Catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

**Exhibition title:** *Kneeling Mother*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Woman, Child on Back*<sup>2</sup>

**Other title:** *Native Mother and Child*<sup>3</sup>

**Year of production:** 1936<sup>4</sup>

**Dates and locations of exhibitions:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 106)
- October 15-?, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 156)<sup>5</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement or terrazzo<sup>6</sup>

**Dimensions:** 57 x 20 x 53 cm<sup>7</sup>

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Price:**

- 45 guineas (March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town, 1936)
- 80 guineas (October 15-?, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg)<sup>8</sup>

### Cat. 12a [Frontal view I]

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/4, Photographs: sculptures, ceramics, etc. (not indexed).

**Other images:**

- *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 3**)
- *The Cape Argus*, March 3, 1936 (**Plate 6**)
- Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18). Caption: "*Kneeling Mother*, 1936, Art-Stone"
- Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18). Caption: "Native Mother and Child"

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Press commentary:**

"One particularly fine piece is No. 106, 'Kneeling Mother.' The feeling for movement is admirably combined with majestic poise, and the group is finely designed to appear vital from any viewpoint – a most stimulating piece of work."

(Melvin Summers, "Irma Stern as a Sculptor," *The Cape Times*, March 2, 1936)

### Cat. 12b [Frontal view II]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The image appears in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) with the caption "Kneeling Mother, 1936 Art-stone." This makes it possible to identify the photographed work with the *Kneeling Mother* listed in the catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18).

<sup>4</sup> See note 1.

<sup>5</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

<sup>6</sup> Both of the catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions list the work as a single art-stone cast, which suggests that the same object was exhibited in both locations that year. This information conflicts with the record in the Scholtz catalogue, which refers to a work in terrazzo. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>7</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogues for Stern's 1936 exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town and at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 12c [Back view]**

**Image source;** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**Exhibition title:** *Youth*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Woman, Hand Under Chin* (no. 146)<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936

**Dates and locations of exhibitions:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 108)
- March 15-?, 1939, Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 67)
- February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 2)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Cement / limestone (from a terracotta model)<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** 32 x 22 x 22 cm<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

**Price:**

- 20 guineas (terracotta model; March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town)
- 100 guineas (limestone cast; March 15-?, 1936, Sun Building, Cape Town)
- 150 guineas (limestone cast; February 7-20, 1936, Argus Gallery, Cape Town)

**Cat. 13a [Frontal view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**Press commentaries:**

- “Yet another very fine head is that in which a single hand supports the chin. This head conveys a sense of suppressed ecstasy, a feeling tensified [sic.] by the outward turning of the palm of her hand.”

(Melvin Summers, “Irma Stern as a Sculptor,” *The Cape Times*, March 2, 1936)

- “Those who arbitrarily state that she cannot draw or has no understanding of true form, that her vision is warped, should look at her purely representational pieces, such as *Despair* and *Repose*, or *Youth*. Here there is a realism together with characterisation, sense of form and emotional value.”

(P. Rayner, “Paint and Plastics, Irma the Astonishing,” *Trek*, 9 February 1945)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Other image:**

Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31 :18)

**Cat. 13b [Three-quarter view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> There is no archival visual documentation that would make it possible to match the images given above with the work titled *Youth* that is listed in no fewer than three of the four catalogues for Stern's exhibitions of sculptures. However, I believe the identification is highly plausible.

Firstly, a comment made by the *Cape Times* art critic Melvin Summers in his March 2, 1936 review, signals that the photographed work was on show at the 1936 Selwyn Chambers exhibition. In his critique, Summers cites a "fine head is that in which a single hand supports the chin." This description accurately matches the work currently on view at the Irma Stern Museum.

The further proposition that the title corresponding to the work is *Youth* is based on my observation of trends in the naming and in the press' treatment of Stern's sculptures. Of the fourteen sculptures exhibited in Cape Town in 1936, seven can be matched to other visually documented works (cf. **Cat. 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20**). The six works that remain as potential matches for the work described by Melvin Summers. are: *Sitting Zulu Woman* in art-stone, two *Native Girls*, one *Native Head*, and *Youth* in fired clay/terra cotta

It is possible to exclude the art-stone given that its title does not match the subject of the work under scrutiny.

While it remains entirely possible that the work is in fact one of the *Native Girls* or, in a more unlikely scenario, the *Native Head*, I suggest that it be matched with *Youth* based on the following reasoning: given that the work under scrutiny is one of the most stylized that Stern produced and that her stylized works were generally the ones that bore non-generic/metaphorical titles, one could expect that this sculpture should have borne such a title.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> The work titled *Youth* listed in the 1936 catalogue is in terracotta. The 1939 version is a single cast in limestone. Finally, the 1945 catalogue indicates that the work is a single cast, yet it does not specify the medium. In light of the earlier record and given that only one cast was produced, one can assume that that medium is limestone. However, the ISM catalogue cites the medium as cement. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> These are the dimensions of the work that is in the collection of the ISM and that bears the title *African Girl with Hand Under Chin*.

*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Sitting Zulu Woman*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** 1936<sup>2</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 2-14, 1936,  
Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 107)<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 25 guineas<sup>5</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town. There are no visual traces of any sculpture in cast stone that could match this title. Accordingly, I believe that the work titled *Sitting Zulu Woman* has either disappeared into a private collection, or has been lost or destroyed.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. The catalogue further specifies that it is "one cast only."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Mask*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936<sup>2</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 2-14, 1936,  
Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 105)<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Artificial stone<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 35 guineas<sup>5</sup>

**Press commentary:**

“In art-stone, in soapstone, in terra-cotta and in clay, there were figures and heads and masks in the mood of her well-known native studies in oils.”

(*The South African Lady's Pictorial*, April 1936)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town. There is a work preserved in the ISM under the title *Mask* (cf. **Cat. 42**): it is the only other title in the records of Stern's sculptural production that includes the word "mask." However, the medium listed for the work in the 1936 catalogue is art-stone, whereas the medium listed for the ISM work is verdite. Given that the two materials are drastically different, it is highly unlikely that the works in question are one and the same.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

**Exhibition title:** *Young Native Girl*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Woman II* (no. 144)<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939,  
Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 68)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** 51 x 37 x 28 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Price:** 50 guineas<sup>4</sup>

**Other images:**

- *The South African Lady's Pictorial*, April 1936, p. 3.
- MSC 31:5/5: Photographs from Life Magazine, 11994 (**Plate 8**)

**Cat. 16a [Frontal view I]**

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/4, Photographs: sculptures, ceramics, etc. (not indexed).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 16b [Frontal view II]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. This title can be matched to the sculpture at the ISM by deduction. Firstly, the ISM work is known to have been present at that exhibition, as it can be seen in a photograph taken at that exhibition and published in the *South African Lady's Pictorial* April 1936 issue. Secondly, according to the catalogue, only three of the nine exhibited works are not in soapstone; the remaining works being *Youth* (limestone), *Young Native Girl*, and *Head of a Native Woman* (no medium specified, one cast only). There is good reason to believe that *Youth* can be matched to another work (cf. **Cat. 13**). Furthermore, given that the work under consideration here is a half-length bust, it cannot be matched to the title *Head of a Native Woman*. By default, therefore, it can be matched to the title *Young Native Girl*.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> The catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition does not indicate the medium of this work, although it does specify that only one cast was made. The ISM catalogue records the medium for this sculpture as cement. Had the medium been specified in the original catalogue, it is likely that it would have been listed as "artificial stone," in conformity with the other records of Stern's works in cast cementitious stone.

<sup>4</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town.

**Exhibition title:** *Head of a Native Woman*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *African Girl with Plaited Hair*<sup>2</sup>

**Other title:** *Head of Bantu Girl*<sup>3</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939

**Dates and location of exhibition:**

- March 15-?, 1939, Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 69)
- S.A. National Gallery, *A Homage to Irma Stern*, 1968 (no. 110)

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** 35 x 22 x 16 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

**Price:** 60 guineas

**Other images:**

- *The Cape Times*, Saturday March 18, 1939, p. 8.  
Caption: “[...] a stone head of a young native girl.”
- MSC 31:5/5: Photographs from Life Magazine, 11992 (**Plate 7**)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 17a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/9, Photographs of collections, interiors, things that particularly interested Irma Stern.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 17b [Back view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern’s 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. This title can be matched to the sculpture at the ISM by deduction. Firstly, the ISM work is known to have been present at that exhibition: the *Cape Times* 18 March 1939 article “In Town and Out; a Week of Art Exhibitions; Painting and Sculpture” includes the **Cat. 17a** photograph and announces that it will be shown at Stern’s exhibition at the Sun Building. Secondly, according to the catalogue, only three of the nine exhibited works are not in soapstone; the remaining works being *Youth* (limestone), *Young Native Girl*, and *Head of a Native Woman* (no medium specified, one cast only). There is good reason to believe that *Youth* and *Young Native Girl* correspond to other works (cf. **Cats. 13 and 16**, respectively), it is overwhelmingly likely that *Head of a Native Woman* is the title of the photographed work given here.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> S.A. National Gallery, *Homage to Irma Stern*, 1968. While it is not possible to ascertain that this is the work corresponding to the title *Head of Bantu Girl*, it is highly likely that the match is correct given that the work cited in the catalogue and the work referenced here have identical dimensions and both were produced in artificial stone/cement.

<sup>4</sup> The 1939 catalogue does not indicate the sculptural medium used for this work, although it does specify that only one cast was made. Both the ISM and the 1968 exhibition catalogues record the medium for this sculpture as cement.

[No image available]

Possible match:

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 10. *Grief*

**Exhibition title:** *Despair*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 3)

**Medium:** Unknown casting medium<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 150 guineas

**Press commentaries:**

- “Those who arbitrarily state that she cannot draw or has no understanding of true form, that her vision is warped, should look at her purely representational pieces, such as *Despair* and *Repose*, or *Youth*. Here there is a realism together with characterisation, sense of form and emotional value.”

(Rayner Prebble, “Paint and Plastics, Irma the Astonishing,” *Trek*, February 9, 1945, p. 20)

- “And for those who are displeased with eccentricities of form I commend such representational, but powerful pieces, as ‘Despair’ and ‘Repose’; while ‘Kneeling Girl,’ in terracotta, leads the eye to the more interpretative ‘Mother and Child.’”

(P.W.H., “Irma Stern’s Art Exhibition,” *The Cape Times*, 9 February 1945, p. 8)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern’s 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. There are no visible works that could plausibly be matched to this title. The only sculpture in cast stone that is unaccounted for is Stern’s *Head of African Girl* (Cat. 20). However, the neutrality of the facial expression on that bust is incongruous with the expressiveness connoted by the title *Despair*. It is accordingly more plausible that this title refers to a work for which there is no visual documentation. Alternatively, it could refer to the work titled *Grief*, which Stern exhibited in 1936 (Cat. 10). If this were the case, it would mean that Stern exhibited the same work twice under different titles.

<sup>2</sup> While the catalogue does not specify the medium of this work, it does include the note “one cast only.” This suggests that the sculpture is in artificial stone/cement. The *Cape Times*’ February 7, 1936 review for the exhibition lists the sculptural media on show as the following: “wonderstone, terracotta, baked clay [...], malachite and cast stone.” Given that cast stone is the only casting medium on this list, one may presume that it is the one that was used to create *Despair* (as well as *Repose*, Cat. 19).

**[No image available]**

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 9. *Contemplation***

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 16. *Young Native Girl***

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 17. *Head of a Native Woman***

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 20. *Head of African Girl***

**Exhibition title:** *Repose*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 4)

**Medium:** Unknown casting medium<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 150 guineas

**Press commentaries:**

- “[...] Those who arbitrarily state that she cannot draw or has no understanding of true form, that her vision is warped, should look at her purely representational pieces, such as *Despair* and *Repose*, or *Youth*. Here there is a realism together with characterisation, sense of form and emotional value.”

(Rayner Prebble, “Paint and Plastics, Irma the Astonishing,” *Trek*, 9 February 1945, p. 20)

- “And for those who are displeased with eccentricities of form I commend such representational, but powerful pieces, as ‘Despair’ and ‘Repose’; while ‘Kneeling Girl,’ in terracotta, leads the eye to the more interpretative ‘Mother and Child.’”

(P.W.H., “Irma Stern’s Art Exhibition,” *The Cape Times*, 9 February 1945, p. 8)

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern’s 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. The only potential match among the visible works in cast stone that are unaccounted for is Stern’s *Head of African Girl* (Cat. 20). It is however equally plausible that the title *Repose* refers to a work for which there is no visual documentation. Alternatively, it could refer to a work that is listed elsewhere under a different title (e.g. *Contemplation* from the 1936 exhibitions, or *Young Native Girl* or *Head of a Native Woman* from the 1939 exhibition (Cats. 9, 16, and 17).

<sup>2</sup> While the catalogue does not specify the medium of this work, the designation “one cast only” suggests that the sculpture is in artificial stone/cement. The *Cape Times*’ February 7 review for the exhibition lists the sculptural media on show as the following: “wonderstone, terracotta, baked clay (in work like native modelling), malachite and cast stone.” Given that cast stone is the only casting medium on this list, one may presume that it is the one that was used to create *Repose* (as well as *Despair*, Cat. 18).

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Other title:** *Head of an African Girl* (no. 153)<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Unknown

**Medium:** Artificial stone / cement<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** 32.5 x 22 x 22 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 20a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 20b [Three-quarter view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is at present no evidence or information that could make it possible to ascertain whether or not this work was exhibited during Stern's lifetime. This is surprising, given its finished quality and given the fact that it was cast in stone – a medium that Stern selected for her most valuable pieces (cf. **Appendix A.1.2**). There are a number of possible matches that emerge from the archive, although none provides an entirely convincing fit. The only work in art-stone that is left to be accounted for is the 1936 *Sitting Zulu Woman* (cf. **Cat. 14**). This match is however unlikely given that the work would presumably have been a full-length sculpture. Other potential matches would be the two *Native Girls* (cf. **Cats. 4, 5**) or the *Native Head* (cf. **Cat. 6**) in fired clay that were exhibited in 1936. One of these works could have served as the model for this work before it was cast in cement. Alternatively, the catalogue for Stern's exhibition of 1945 provides a number of possible matches. The two works *Despair* and *Repose* were likely cast in stone (cf. **Cats. 18 and 19**). Only the latter title could plausibly be matched to this work, however. Indeed, considering that the represented figure bears such a neutral facial expression, in the style of a generic head bust, it seems more likely that it would have borne a generic title. In this scenario, the work could be matched to one of the three *Native Heads* that Stern exhibited in 1945 (cf. **Cats. 49, 50, and 51**). No medium is indicated for any of these works.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Cement is the medium listed in the Scholtz ISM catalogue. Given the regularities in the naming of Stern's sculptural media across the available data, it is likely that this medium would have been listed as "artificial stone" in the original exhibition catalogue. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information.



**Sculptures in wonderstone and verdite**  
*(Cat. 21-44)*



**Exhibition title:** *Native Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Other title:** *Native Study*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** 1935<sup>3</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 110)<sup>4</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown [collection of Mr. Clelland?]<sup>6</sup>

**Price:** Not for sale<sup>7</sup>

**Other image:**

Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18). Caption: "Native Head (soap stone) 1935 Mr. Clelland" (**Plate 14**)<sup>8</sup>

## Cat. 21

**Image source:** *The South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936.

**Press commentary:**

"Her sculptures, too, are very interesting, and include two very delightful little experiments in soapstone."

("Pictures that Satisfy – Opening of Miss Stern's Exhibition, High Commissioner's Eulogy," *The Cape Times*, March 3, 1936, p. 10)

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town.

<sup>2</sup> *South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for the 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>6</sup> Irma Stern's Ledger (MSC 31:3/8) contains a reference to a "Mr. Clelland (PWD)" residing in Johannesburg. This man was in all likelihood John Stockwin Clelland, an architect who was employed from 1932 to 1939 as Secretary of the South African Public Works. Given that Irma Stern is known to have given another soapstone work produced around this time and exhibited in the same show, *Eve* (cf. **Cat. 22**), to Sir William Clark, it is plausible that *Native Head* was a gift from Stern to Mr. Clelland. This suggestion would explain both why his name appears next to the photograph in MSC 31:18 as well as why the work was not listed as having been for sale in the exhibition catalogue.

<sup>7</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for the 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers. See note 6.

<sup>8</sup> The photograph is a photo of this work side by side with the *Eve* (**Cat. 22**) which she offered to Mr. Clark. The shadow cast by the sculpture shows that the block had some depth.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Exhibition title:** *Eve*<sup>1</sup>

**Other title:** *Native Study*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** 1935<sup>3</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 111)<sup>4</sup>

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown [collection of Sir William Clark?]

**Price:** Not for sale<sup>6</sup>

**Other image:**

Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18). Caption: "Native Head (soap stone) 1935 Mr. Clelland" (**Plate 14**)<sup>7</sup>

**Press commentaries:**

- "Irma Stern, so well known as a painter, is likely to create quite a sensation by appearing in a new role – that of sculptor – at her exhibition [...]. Here are three interesting examples of her new work, native studies in soapstone."

(*The South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936)

- "I shall indeed be delighted to accept the soapstone 'Eve.' She will be a most delightful memento of the occasion and of your admirable show."

(Letter from William Clark, dated 5.3.1936, MSC 31:2/7 [Correspondence: Misc. 1930s])

**Cat. 22**

**Image source:** *South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town.

<sup>2</sup> *The South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. See **Appendix A.1.2.** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. See note 7.

<sup>7</sup> Given the date, it is likely that Stern offered the sculpture to Sir William Clark as a thank-you gift for opening her exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers. This piece of information also explains why the work was listed as "not for sale" in the exhibition catalogue. The photograph is a photo of this work side by side with the *Native Head* (**Cat. 21**) which she offered to Mr. Clelland. The shadow cast by the sculpture shows that the block had some depth.

**Exhibition title:** *Girl with Basket*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *Girl with Lamp-holder* (no. 147)<sup>2</sup>

**Other titles:** *Soapstone Carving*, *Native Girl*<sup>3</sup>

**Year of production:** 1935<sup>4</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939, Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 75)<sup>5</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>6</sup>

**Dimensions:** 24.5 x 22 x 20 cm<sup>7</sup>

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

**Price:** Unknown [20 guineas (?); 30 guineas (?)]<sup>8</sup>

### Cat. 23a [Frontal View]

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/4: Photographs: sculptures, ceramics, etc. (not indexed).

*Also in* MSC 31:19, with caption “Soapstone Carving 1935-6”

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 23b [Back view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The information available does not make it possible to ascertain that this work was ever exhibited. However, I believe it highly possible that it can be matched to the title *Girl with Basket*, which appears in the catalogue for Stern’s 1939 exhibition (MSC 31:18; see **Appendix E.3**), given that this title accurately describes the figure in **Cat. 23a**. However, this match is complicated by the fact that a caption in the Scrapbook indicates that the work was made in 1935. This would presumably indicate that it was exhibited close to that date; i.e., in one of the two 1936 exhibitions. It is not possible that it was exhibited in the first given that all of the works in soapstone from that exhibition’s catalogue are accounted for. If it was exhibited in 1936, it would thus have been in the October exhibit in Johannesburg. The only potential match in this exhibition would be with the generically titled *Native Girl* (**Cat. 29**). However, given that the photographed work includes an evident iconographic element (i.e.; the basket/lampholder), it seems unlikely that it should have been given a generic rather than descriptive title in the catalogue for the show in which it was exhibited. As such, I suggest that it was exhibited in 1939 under the title *Girl with Basket*. Alternatively, given the unstable character of generic titles such as *Native Girl*, it is still possible that it was indeed exhibited in 1936 as *Native Girl* and thereafter in 1939 with a new title. Lastly, it is possible that it was never exhibited at all.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Both of these titles appear next to photographs of the work pasted to the pages of Stern’s Scrapbook of Press Clippings [MSC 31:19].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. See note 1.

<sup>5</sup> See note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:19) lists the work as having been produced in soapstone, whereas the more recent Scholtz catalogue lists it as wonderstone. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern’s sculptural media.

<sup>7</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> The sculpture titled *Girl with Basket* was listed at 30 guineas in the catalogue for the 1939 exhibition. If the work can also be identified with **Cat. 29** (*Native Girl*, 1936), then it was listed at 20 guineas at the 1936 Johannesburg exhibition.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 23c [Top view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**Other images:**

- Untitled photograph of Irma Stern sculpting a soapstone figure, 1946 (**Plate 11**)
- Untitled photograph of Irma Stern sculpting a soapstone figure #2, 1946 (**Plate 12**)
- Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:19). Caption: "Soapstone Figure, 1935" (**Plate 13**)

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Other title:** *Standing Young Girl*<sup>2</sup>

**Date of production:** 1935<sup>3</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** 22.5 x 14 x 8.5 cm<sup>6</sup>

**Current location:** Private collection

**Price:** 89 120 R (2011)<sup>7</sup>

**Other image:**

Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 24a [Frontal View I]

**Image source:** Auction Catalogue, Strauss & Co., *Fine South African, British and Continental Art*, Cape Town, May 16, 2011, p. 21.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 24b [Frontal View II]

**Image source:** <http://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/A-Standing-Young-Girl/98ACCC50851EC1A8>. Consulted February 8, 2011.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There are no clear records indicating that this work was exhibited: no title is given in the caption accompanying the photograph in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18), and as such it is impossible to match it to any of the titles given in the exhibition catalogues. Possible matches include the soapstone works *Dawn* (Cat. 27) and *Native Girl* (Cat. 29) listed in the catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg (see Appendix E.2). It is also possible that it was never exhibited at all.

<sup>2</sup> Auction Catalogue, Strauss & Co., *Fine South African, British and Continental Art*, Cape Town, May 16, 2011, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> The photograph of the work that appears in the Scrapbook is captioned with the year "1935."

<sup>4</sup> If the work shown here does indeed match one of the two titles from the catalogue of the exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg, then those would be its dates of exhibition.

<sup>5</sup> The record in the Strauss & Co. Catalogue indicates that the work was produced in wonderstone. See Appendix A.1.2 for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss & Co. Auction Catalogue, 2011, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Sold at Strauss & Co. Auction in 2011: see Auction Results at <http://www.straussart.co.za/auctions/results/17>. If the work was in fact exhibited at the 1936 exhibition in Johannesburg, then it could either have been listed at 15 guineas under the title *Dawn*, or at 20 guineas under the title *Native Girl*.

**Exhibition titles:** *The Woman, The Water Carrier*<sup>1</sup>

**Other title:** *Native Study*<sup>2</sup>

**Date of production:** 1935<sup>3</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 103)
- February 7-20 1945, the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 1)<sup>4</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown (approx. 60 cm in height)<sup>6</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:**

- 175 (Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town, 1936)
- 250 guineas (Argus Gallery, Cape Town, 1945)<sup>7</sup>

## Cat. 25

**Image source:** *South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936

**Other images:**

- *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936 (**Plate 3**)
- MSC 31:5/5, Photographs from *Life Magazine*, 1946, 11991 (**Plate 9**)

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to ascertain that the title *The Woman* matches the work in this photograph. My suggestion is based on an inference from the sources available surrounding the 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town: namely, the catalogue from Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18) and the *South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936 images. The *SALP* confirms that the photographed work was exhibited at the Selwyn Chambers and that it is a "native study in soapstone." Given that the only two other soapstone works listed in the catalogue are already accounted for (see **Cats. 21 and 22**), the photographed work is the only possible candidate for this third slot. I believe that this sculpture can also be matched to the title *The Water Carrier*, listed in the catalogue to Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town (MSC 31:18, see **Appendix E.4**). The exorbitant price tag given to this work at the 1945 exhibition suggests that it was large in size and ambitious in facture. The only large-scale work in soapstone/wonderstone that Stern is known to have produced is the sculpture in this photograph. Given that this work does indeed represent an African woman carrying a vessel on her head, it seems plausible that Stern re-exhibited that sculpture under this new title. This suggestion is borne out by the fact that the sculpture appears in a photograph taken for *Life* magazine in 1946 (**Plate 11**), which confirms that it was still in Stern's possession until that date.

<sup>2</sup> *South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936.

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Freda and Richard Feldman dated November 13 1935, Stern mentions working on a “large soap stone figure”: given that *The Woman* is the only one of Stern’s (known) works in soapstone to have large dimensions, it is likely that it is the one she was referring to in her letter.

<sup>4</sup> Catalogues for Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town (**Appendix E.1**) and the 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town (**Appendix E.4**) (MSC 31:18).

<sup>5</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern’s sculptural media.

<sup>6</sup> This price range makes this work the most expensive of Stern’s exhibited sculptures.

<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to determine this information given that no dimensions are given in the catalogues. Nevertheless, they can be estimated from photographs in which the work is seen in Stern’s home and workspace (**Plates 3 and 9**). In **Plate 3**, the panel is juxtaposed with Stern’s cast stone sculptures *Grief* and *Awakening*, which stand at 65.4 cm and 58 cm, respectively. The three sculptures are placed at roughly the same depth of the photographic field. Although the panel is resting on a support that is lower vertically than the other two works that frame it, its height looks to be roughly commensurate with those two works. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the panel stood/stands at a height of roughly 60 cm.

**Exhibition title:** *The God of Plenty*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Small Figure, Crouching Figure*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** 1936<sup>3</sup>

**Dates and locations of exhibitions:**

- March 2-14, 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town (no. 109)
- February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 13)<sup>4</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Malachite / verdite<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** 9.5 x 7 x 9.5 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

**Price:** 15 guineas (1936); 50 guineas (1945)<sup>6</sup>

**Press commentary:**

“*The God of Plenty* is an amusingly delightful adaptation of the original green malachite.”

(“Irma the Astonishing,” *Trek*, February 9, 1945)

### Cat. 26a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** Scholtz, *Catalogue of the Collections of the Irma Stern Museum*, 1971.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 26b [Back view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2012.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This title is listed in the exhibition catalogues for Stern’s exhibitions at the Selwyn Chambers (1936) and the Argus Gallery (1945) in Cape Town (MSC 31:18). However, there are no archival images that make it possible to associate this title with a visible work. See note 2.

<sup>2</sup> I believe it is highly plausible that this work can be matched to the work titled *Crouching Figure* on view at the Irma Stern Museum, and likely also to the work listed as *Small Figure* in the catalogue for the 1968 retrospective exhibition *Homage to Irma Stern*. The ISM records indicate that the work listed as *Crouching Figure* was produced in 1936 in verdite. Of the archival records of works produced in that year, only one sculpture is not listed as having been produced in artificial stone or soapstone; i.e., the sculpture titled *The God of Plenty*. While it is listed as a malachite, I believe it is highly likely that the labels “malachite” and “verdite” refer in fact to one and the same material: see **Appendix A.1.2** for more information.

If *Crouching Figure* is identical with *The God of Plenty*, then the work titled *Small Figure* in the 1968 catalogue can also be identified with the latter title. Insofar as the works that were displayed in the 1968 exhibition were drawn from the collections of the Trustees of the Irma Stern estate, there is no doubt that *Small Figure* is identical with *Crouching Figure*. Accordingly, I believe it is possible to establish a correspondence between the three titles.

<sup>3</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See note 2.

<sup>6</sup> Stern’s scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogues for Stern’s 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers and 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery.



[No image available]

Possible matches:

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 23. *Girl with Basket*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 24. *Standing Young Girl*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 41. *Standing Half-Length Figure*

**Exhibition title:** *Dawn*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Girl with Lamp-holder* (?), *Standing Young Girl* (?), *Standing Half-Length Figure* (?)<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936

**Dates and location of exhibition:** October 15-?, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 158)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown<sup>5</sup>

**Price:** 15 guineas

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg. At present, there are no visual documents that could make it possible to match this title to a sculpture. I believe the most plausible matches would be with the soapstone work *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24), or with the soapstone work *Standing Half-Length Figure* (Cat. 41). Records indicate that the first work was produced in 1935, while the date of production for the latter is unknown. Nevertheless, given the stylistic affinities between both of these works and Stern's other known soapstone production from 1935-6, I believe it is highly likely that the *Standing Half-Length Figure* was also produced in that time frame – thereby making it a potential match with *Dawn*. In an alternative but in my opinion less plausible scenario, the title could be matched to the soapstone work on display at the ISM under the title *Girl with Lamp-holder* (Cat. 23). I believe that one of the former scenarios is to be preferred given that there is a higher likelihood that *Girl with Lamp-holder* was exhibited at the 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town under the title *Girl with Basket* (Cat. 23).

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2.** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> If this title can in fact be matched with the *Girl with Basket* (Cat. 23), then it stands at a height of 24.5 cm. If it can be matched with the *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24), then it stands at a height of 22.5 cm. Lastly, if it can be matched with the *Standing Half-Length Figure*, then has a height of 23.5 cm (Cat. 41).

<sup>5</sup> If this title can in fact be matched with either the *Girl with Basket* (Cat. 23) or the *Standing Half-Length Figure* (Cat. 41), then it is currently on display at the Irma Stern Museum. If it can be matched with the *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24), then it is in a private collection. This is also likely the case if it does not match any of the three proposed works.

**Exhibition title:** *Two Heads*<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *Composition with Two Heads* (no. 151)<sup>2</sup>

**Date of production:** 1936

**Dates and location of exhibition:** 15-? October, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 159)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** 15.5 x 15.5 x 7.5 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

**Price:** 20 guineas<sup>4</sup>

### Cat. 28a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 28b [Three-quarter view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg. The proposed match is based upon the close similarity between the titles given in the 1936 catalogue and in the Irma Stern Museum Catalogue entry for this work. Moreover, the work bears close similarity to Stern's other known works in soapstone from 1936 (e.g. **Cats. 21** and **22**). Lastly, there are no other known records of sculptures representing more than one figure. Even in light of all these considerations, however, it is impossible to *certify* that this match is correct, given that there are no original photographs of this work nor is it described in any of the press reviews.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2.** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

**[No image available]**

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Other titles:** *Girl with Basket* (?); *Standing Young Girl* (?); *Standing Half-Length Figure* (?)<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936

**Dates and location of exhibition:** October 15-?, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 160)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 20 guineas<sup>5</sup>

*Cat. 23. Girl with Basket*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 24. Standing Young Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 41. Standing Half-Length Figure*

**Exhibition title:** *Native Girl*<sup>1</sup>

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**NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg. There are at present no visual documents that could make it possible to match this title to a sculpture. I believe the most plausible matches would be with the wonderstone work *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24), or with the wonderstone work *Standing Half-Length Figure* (Cat. 41). In an alternative but in my opinion less plausible scenario, the title could be matched to the soapstone work on display at the ISM under the title *Girl with Lamp-holder* (Cat. 23). I believe that one of the former scenarios is to be preferred given that there is a higher likelihood that "Girl with Lamp-holder" was exhibited at the 1939 Sun Building exhibition under the title *Girl with Basket*. Lastly, it is possible that this title cannot be matched with any of the works presently viewable in photographs or at the ISM.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 15 guineas is consistent with the prices known to have been attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23, 28**).

<sup>5</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

[No image available]

Possible matches:

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Exhibition title:** *Nude*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Standing Young Girl (?)*; *Standing Half-Length Figure (?)*<sup>2</sup>

**Date of production:** Before 1936

**Dates and location of exhibition:** October 15-??, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 161)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 15 guineas<sup>5</sup>

Cat. 23. *Girl with Basket*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 24. *Standing Young Girl*

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg. There are at present no visual documents that could make it possible to match this title to a sculpture. I believe the most plausible matches would be with the soapstone work *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24), or with the soapstone work *Standing Half-Length Figure* (Cat. 41). Records indicate that the first work was produced in 1935, whereas the date of production for the latter is unknown. Nevertheless, given the stylistic affinities between both of these works and Stern's other known soapstone production from 1935-6, I believe it is highly likely that the *Standing Half-Length Figure* was also produced in that time frame – thereby making it a potential match for *Native Girl*. It is also possible that this title cannot be matched with any of the works presently viewable in photographs or at the ISM.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 15 guineas is consistent with the prices known to have been attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23** and **28**).

<sup>5</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1936

**Dates and location of exhibition:** October 15-??, 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg (no. 162)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>3</sup>

**Current location:** Private collection<sup>4</sup>

**Price:** 20 guineas<sup>5</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg. There are no visually documented works in soapstone/wonderstone that could match this title.

<sup>2</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>3</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 20 guineas is consistent with the prices typically attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cat. 23, 28**).

<sup>4</sup> Irma Stern's Ledger of sales contains a record in the section pertaining to the year **1937** that states that a "Soapstone Head" was sold to Ms. Roza van Gelderen, along with a painting titled *Loneliness* (MSC 31:3/8). Ms. van Gelderen appears to have paid 21 guineas in one instalment for the sculpture. Incidentally, it is one of only *two* records of Irma Stern's sculpture having been sold (the other is an undated record of a sale of 30 guineas to Mrs. E. Fell). A prominent Cape Town personality, especially in the Jewish mid-upper class social circles, she was the partner of Ms. Hilda Purwitsky. The couple's (tormented) friendship with Irma Stern lasted for over forty years (Berman 2003: 114; Lewis 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Mother and Child*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939,  
Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 70)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>3</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 20 guineas<sup>4</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. There are no visually documented works in soapstone/wonderstone that could match this title.

<sup>2</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>3</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 25 guineas is consistent with the prices typically attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cat. 23** and **28**).

<sup>4</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Exhibition title:** *Native*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Standing Young Girl (?)*; *Standing Half-Length Figure (?)*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939, Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 71)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 25 guineas<sup>5</sup>

*Cat. 24. Standing Young Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 41. Standing Half-Length Figure*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. Given the generic nature of this title, it could arguably match one of the works in soapstone that are not affirmatively accounted for (cf. **Cats. 24** and **41**). However, given that these works can more plausibly be matched with other titles, there are at present no obvious potential matches for this catalogue entry.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 25 guineas is consistent with the prices typically attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23** and **28**).

<sup>5</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Swazi Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939,  
Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 72)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>3</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 15 guineas<sup>4</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. The only soapstone head for which there is visual documentation is the work titled *Head* from the ISM collection (**Cat. 43**). However, given that this work does not present any specific iconographic indicators of Swazi (or any other) ethnicity or origin, I do not believe that it makes a likely match for this title. As a result, there are no potential matches for the work titled *Swazi Head* among the soapstone/wonderstone sculptures currently viewable in photographs or at the ISM.

<sup>2</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>3</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 15 guineas is consistent with the prices typically attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23** and **28**).

<sup>4</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town.



*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Girl with Shawl*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939,  
Sun Building, St. George's Street, Cape Town (no. 73)

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>3</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 15 guineas<sup>4</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. There are no visually documented works in soapstone/wonderstone that could match this title.

<sup>2</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>3</sup> It is plausible that this was a small-scale work, given that its selling price of 15 guineas is consistent with the prices typically attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (Cf. **Cats. 23 and 28**).

<sup>4</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg.

*[No image available]*

*Possible match:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

Cat. 43. *Head*

**Exhibition title:** *Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1939<sup>2</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** March 15-?, 1939, Sun Building, Cape Town (no. 74)<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>5</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 20 guineas<sup>6</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town. Given that the title is so generic, is impossible to match it with any certainty to any of the other titles or visually documented works that emerge from the archive. However, there is a potential match in the work titled *Head*, listed in the ISM museum catalogue (**Cat. 43**). At present, there are no other visible works that could fit this description. Likewise, there are no other titles that could match the ISM work better. Accordingly, I believe the match is plausible.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> In the ISM catalogue, the medium of the work is listed as being wonderstone. However, all the archival data contains references to works in soapstone. I believe the correct label is wonderstone. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>5</sup> If the title from the 1939 exhibit does indeed match the ISM work, then the 1939 work had dimensions of 28.5 x 19 x 13 cm. These dimensions are consistent with the work's price of 20 guineas, which is in the range of prices typically attributed to Stern's smaller works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23 and 28**).

<sup>6</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building in Cape Town.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Exhibition title:** *Figurine*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Standing Young Girl (?)*; *Standing Half-Length Figure (?)*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 10)

**Medium:** Wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 75 guineas

*Cat. 24. Standing Young Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 41. Standing Half-Length Figure*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Given that this is such a generic title and that Stern had an abundant production in wonderstone/soapstone (see note 2), it is difficult to provide a precise match for this work. Two visible works in wonderstone/soapstone are left to be matched to archival titles: namely, *Standing Young Girl (Cat. 24)* and *Standing Half-Length Figure (Cat. 41)*. However, given that these works were both likely produced around 1936, it is more likely that they should be matched to one of the generic titles listed in the catalogues for Stern's earlier exhibitions. Alternatively, it is possible that some of Stern's sculptures were exhibited twice under different, generic titles. One could accordingly suppose that titles like *Native*, from the 1939 exhibit, could refer to the same work as titles like *Figure*, from 1945. Given that these suppositions are unverifiable, the question remains open concerning the referent of the title *Figure*.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> I believe this record is correct. However, it bears noting that the archives are laden with inconsistencies regarding Stern's sculptural materials, namely concerning her use of wonderstone (versus soapstone). See **Appendix A.1.2** for more details.

[No image available]

Possible matches:

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Exhibition title:** *Figure*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Standing Young Girl (?)*; *Standing Half-Length Figure (?)*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 11)

**Medium:** Wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 50 guineas

Cat. 24. *Standing Young Girl*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

Cat. 41. *Standing Half-Length Figure*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Given that this is such a generic title and that Stern had an abundant production in wonderstone/soapstone (see note 2), it is difficult to provide a precise match for this work. Two visible works in wonderstone/soapstone are left to be matched to archival titles: namely, *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24) and *Standing Half-Length Figure* (Cat. 41). However, given that these works were both likely produced around 1936, it is more likely that they should be matched to one of the generic titles listed in the catalogues for Stern's earlier exhibitions. Alternatively, it is possible that some of Stern's sculptures were exhibited twice under different, generic titles. One could accordingly suppose that titles like *Native*, from the 1939 exhibit, could refer to the same work as titles like *Figure*, from 1945. Given that these suppositions are unverifiable, the question remains open concerning the referent of the title *Figure*.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> I believe this record is correct. However, it bears noting that the archives are laden with inconsistencies regarding Stern's sculptural materials, namely concerning her use of wonderstone (versus soapstone). See **Appendix A.1.2** for more details.

<sup>4</sup> The price of 50 guineas is consistent with the price range that Stern gave to her smaller-scale works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23 and 28**).

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Exhibition title:** *Figure*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Standing Young Girl (?)*; *Standing Half-Length Figure (?)*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 12)

**Medium:** Wonderstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 45 guineas<sup>5</sup>

Cat. 24. *Standing Young Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

Cat. 41. *Standing Half-Length Figure*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Given that this is such a generic title and that Stern had an abundant production in wonderstone/soapstone (see note 2), it is difficult to provide a precise match for this work. Two visible works in wonderstone/soapstone are left to be matched to archival titles: namely, *Standing Young Girl* (Cat. 24) and *Standing Half-Length Figure* (Cat. 41). However, given that these works were both likely produced around 1936, it is more likely that they should be matched to one of the generic titles listed in the catalogues for Stern's earlier exhibitions. Alternatively, it is possible that some of Stern's sculptures were exhibited twice under different, generic titles. One could accordingly suppose that titles like *Native*, from the 1939 exhibit, could refer to the same work as titles like *Figure*, from 1945. Given that these suppositions are unverifiable, the question remains open concerning the referent of the title *Figure*.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> I believe this record is correct. However, it bears noting that the archives are laden with inconsistencies regarding Stern's sculptural materials, namely concerning her use of wonderstone (versus soapstone). See **Appendix A.1.2** for more details.

<sup>4</sup> The price of 45 guineas is consistent with the price range that Stern gave to her smaller-scale works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23** and **28**).

<sup>5</sup> The price of 45 guineas is consistent with the price range that Stern gave to her smaller-scale works in soapstone/wonderstone (cf. **Cats. 23** and **28**).

*[No image available]*

**Exhibition title:** *Bas-relief*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945,  
the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 14)

**Medium:** Slate<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 40 guineas<sup>3</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town.

<sup>2</sup> This work is the only recorded sculpture in slate by Irma Stern.

<sup>3</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town.

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *Standing Half-Length Figure* (no. 150)<sup>2</sup>

**Other titles:** *Native Figure* (?), *Nude* (?), *Native* (?), *Figurine* (?), *Figure* (?)<sup>3</sup>

**Year of production:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>5</sup>

**Dimensions:** 23.5 x 12.5 x 8 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

**Other image:**

*Sarie Marais*, January 5, 1955, p. 40 (**Plate 16**)

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 41a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** MSC 31:6/4, Photographs: sculptures, ceramics, etc. (not indexed); also Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:19), with caption "Soap Stone Figur" (sic).

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 41b [Side view I]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It is not at present possible to ascertain that the work shown here was exhibited during Stern's lifetime. Given its affinities in medium and style with works such as *Girl with Basket* (**Cat. 23**) and *Standing Young Girl* (**Cat. 24**), there is reason to believe that it was sculpted contemporaneously with them, namely in the mid-1930s. If this is the case, then it is possible that it was exhibited under one of several titles: it could be matched to the work titled *Dawn* (**Cat. 27**) or to the work titled *Nude* (**Cat. 30**), both of which were exhibited in Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg. Alternatively, it could be matched to one of the following generic titles, from later exhibits: either *Native* (1939, **Cat. 33**), or the *Figurine* (**Cat. 37**) or *Figures* (**Cats. 38 and 39**) from 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> See note 1.

<sup>4</sup> See note 1.

<sup>5</sup> The work is listed as having been produced in soapstone in the archival material: i.e., in the MSC 31:6/4 photo caption. However, it is listed as wonderstone in the ISM catalogue. I believe it is more likely that the material was in fact wonderstone. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more details regarding this evaluation and regarding the inconsistencies in the records relating Stern's sculptural media.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Cat. 41c [Side view II]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.



**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *Mask* (no. 148)<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Unknown

**Medium:** Verdite / malachite<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** 16 x 14 x 19 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 42a [Frontal view]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 42b [Side view I]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Cat. 42c [Side view II]

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is no evidence or information that could make it possible to ascertain whether or not this work was exhibited during Stern's lifetime. The only archival record of a sculpture carved in natural stone is the record for the work titled *The God of Plenty*, which I believe can be matched to another work at the Irma Stern Museum (cf. **Cat. 26**). Moreover, although there is a record of one other work titled *Mask* in the archives, listed in the catalogue for Stern's first exhibition of sculptures in Cape Town in 1936 (cf. **Cat. 15**), the medium listed for that work is art-stone. Given that verdite and art-stone are drastically different materials, it is highly unlikely that the two masks are one and the same.

It is possible that this work can be matched to one of the three *Native Heads* listed in the catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. No medium is listed for any of these works, which leaves open the possibility that the title refers to this sculpture. There is regrettably no additional information available that could either confirm or disprove this supposition. In other words, there is only weak evidence to suggest that this work was ever exhibited during Stern's lifetime.

It is possible that it was exhibited under the title *Lying Head* in the retrospective exhibition *A Homage to Irma Stern*, held at the SA National Gallery in 1968. See **Cat. 44** for more details.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more details regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records relating to Stern's sculptural media.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 43a [Frontal view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 43b [Three-quarter view]**

**Image source:** Photograph by Lara Bourdin, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, 2011.

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**ISM title:** *Head* (no. 150)<sup>2</sup>

**Other title:** *Lying Head* (?)<sup>3</sup>

**Year of production:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Dates and location of exhibition:** Unknown<sup>5</sup>

**Medium:** Soapstone / wonderstone<sup>6</sup>

**Dimensions:** 19 x 28.5 x 13 cm

**Current location:** Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town

**Price:** N/A<sup>7</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to ascertain whether or not this work was exhibited during Stern's lifetime. The title listed in the ISM catalogue, *Head*, is too generic to allow for a secure match to be made with any of the works listed in the archival records. Nevertheless, it is plausible that this work can be matched to the generically titled soapstone *Head* exhibited at Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building. See **Cat. 36** for more information.

<sup>2</sup> Scholtz 1971, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that this work was exhibited in the retrospective exhibition *A Homage to Irma Stern*, held in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and London in 1968. See **Cat. 44** for more details.

<sup>4</sup> If the work can indeed be matched to the title *Head* from the 1939 catalogue, then it was created before 1939.

<sup>5</sup> If the work can indeed be matched to the title *Head* from the 1939 catalogue, then it was exhibited in 1939.

<sup>6</sup> In the ISM catalogue, the medium for this work is listed as wonderstone. However, all the archival data contains references to works in soapstone. See **Appendix A.1.2** for more details regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records relating to Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>7</sup> If the work can indeed be matched to the title *Head* from the 1939 catalogue, then it was priced at 20 guineas when it was exhibited in that year.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Exhibition title:** *Lying Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Mask (?)*; *Head (?)*<sup>2</sup>

**Year of production:** Unknown

**Dates and location of exhibition:** S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town, 1968 (no. 112)

**Medium:** Green wonderstone / soapstone<sup>3</sup>

**Dimensions:** 14.5 cm (length)<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

Cat. 42. *Mask*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

Cat. 43. *Head*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The only existing record of this title is in the S.A. National Gallery's *Homage to Irma Stern* exhibition catalogue (1968). The objects in that exhibition were drawn from the collection of the Trustees of the Irma Stern Estate, who oversee the Irma Stern Museum. The title *Lying Head* could arguably match either *Mask (Cat. 42)* or *Head (Cat. 43)* from the ISM collection, although neither provides a perfect match. The former is made of a grey wonderstone, and the latter is made of a green verdite. For both works, the measurement 14 cm (5.5 inches) corresponds to the height of the highest point on the stone ground, whereas the 1968 record suggested that this measurement was for the work's width. It is impossible to determine which of the two works is denoted by this listing.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> See **Appendix A.1.2** for more information regarding the quirks and inconsistencies in the records concerning Stern's sculptural media.

<sup>4</sup> S.A. National Gallery, *A Homage to Irma Stern* catalogue, 1968.

**Sculptures in other and unknown media**  
*(Cat. 45-51)*

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Working title:** *Relief Panel with Angels*

**Year of production:** early 1940s

**Medium:** Fibreglass

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Collection of Mona and Kim Berman

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 45**

**Image source:** Photograph courtesy of Ms. Kim and Ms. Mona Berman.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> This work was never exhibited, as Irma Stern gave it directly to the Feldman family as a gift. I am indebted to Kim and Mona Berman for informing me of this work's existence and for providing me with all of the information that is recorded in this entry.

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Resting Nude*; *Reclining Nude*<sup>2</sup>

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Year of production:** 1950<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Bronze

**Dimensions:** 14.5 cm x 21 cm (base)<sup>4</sup>

**Current location:** Rupert Art Foundation, Stellenbosch and SASOL University Museum, Stellenbosch.<sup>5</sup>

**Cat. 46a [Frontal view]**

**Image source:** Photograph courtesy of Mr. Deon Herselman, Rupert Art Foundation, Stellenbosch.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 46b [Side view I]**

**Image source:** Photograph courtesy of Mr. Deon Herselman, Rupert Art Foundation, Stellenbosch.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 46c [Side view II]**

**Image source:** Paul Cullen (2003), *Expressions of a Journey: Irma Stern*, Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, p. 70.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> There is no evidence to indicate that the work was ever exhibited during Stern's lifetime. There are no sculptures listed in the catalogues for Stern's exhibitions of the 1950s.

<sup>2</sup> Both the Rupert Art Foundation and the SASOL Museum in Stellenbosch hold bronze casts of this work in their respective collections. The Rupert records list the cast under the title *Resting Nude*, whereas the SASOL Museum lists it under the title *Reclining Nude*.

<sup>3</sup> The records from both institutions indicate that the work was produced in 1950.

<sup>4</sup> The SASOL Museum's technical sheet for the work indicates that it was cast from a plaster model. There is a photograph of this plaster model in Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:19), with the note "Resting Nude 1950, plaster, Prof. Scholtz, C.T." It is pasted to the same page as two of her ceramic plates.

<sup>5</sup> This work entered the SASOL University Museum through the large bequest by collector Johannes du Plessis Scholtz, which also included a number of Stern's paintings. He was a Trustee of the Irma Stern Estate.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Cat. 47**

**Image source:** “Irma Stern’s Pictures and Pottery,”  
*The Cape Argus*, March 14, 1950, Cape Town, p. 6.  
(Plate 15)

**Exhibition title:** Unknown<sup>1</sup>

**Other titles:** *Kneeling Girl* (?)<sup>2</sup>

**Working title:** *Kneeling Figure*

**Year of production:** c. 1950

**Dates and location of exhibition:** Unknown<sup>3</sup>

**Medium:** Unknown<sup>4</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** Unknown<sup>5</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> There is no evidence that indicates that this work was ever exhibited. The image given here is a detail taken from a photograph published in the March 14, 1950 *Cape Argus* issue. It is to my knowledge the only image of this sculpture. Given that it ostensibly represents a kneeling female figure, it could match the terracotta *Kneeling Girl* that exhibited in Stern’s 1945 exhibition at Cape Town’s Argus Gallery (**Cat. 7**). However, there is no way to ascertain that the photographed work is in terracotta. Accordingly, this match is bound to be speculative.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

<sup>3</sup> If this work does indeed match the *Kneeling Girl* from 1945, then it was exhibited between February 7-20, 1945, at the Argus Gallery, Cape Town.

<sup>4</sup> If this work does indeed match the *Kneeling Girl* from 1945, then it is in terracotta. This could be consistent with the appearance of the work seen in the photograph. However, the whiteness of the material suggests that it may have been created in plaster. Regrettably the poor quality of the image makes it difficult to formulate any more secure judgments on this matter.

<sup>5</sup> If this work does indeed match the *Kneeling Girl* from 1945, then it was priced at 75 guineas. However, it must be noted that the price of 70 guineas would be disproportionately high for the sculpture seen in the above photograph, which appears to have had the dimensions of a table top or desk decoration. This factor effectively weakens the plausibility of the match with the sculpture identified as **Cat. 7**.

**Exhibition title:** N/A<sup>1</sup>

**Working title:** *Reclining Figure*

**Year of production:** c. 1955

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Medium:** Unknown<sup>2</sup>

**Dimensions:** Unknown<sup>3</sup>

**Current location:** Unknown

### Cat. 48

**Image source:** *Sarie Marais*, January 5, 1955, p. 40 (Plate 16).

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is no evidence to indicate that this work was ever exhibited. The image given here is a detail taken from a photograph published in the January 5, 1955 issue of the Afrikaans women's magazine *Sarie Marais*. While the work closely resembles the known sculpture *Reclining Nude* (Cat. 46), which was cast in bronze in 1950, it is possible to discern from the photograph that it is not identical with that sculpture. More specifically, whereas the 1950 *Reclining Nude* represents a figure with two lowered arms, the work photographed in *Sarie Marais* is resting her head on her left arm. As such, it must be considered as a separate work.

<sup>2</sup> While the poor quality of the image makes it difficult to visually determine what may be the material of the work therein illustrated, the object's whiteness suggests that that material may have been plaster. This would be consistent with Stern's method of producing works for casting in bronze, as it is known that she made a plaster model for the similar work *Reclining Nude* (Cat. 46), which she cast in bronze in 1950. If she did indeed produce finished bronze casts from this model, their whereabouts are unknown.

<sup>3</sup> Based on an analysis of the spatial relationships in the photograph of this sculpture, it seems likely that it would have been roughly commensurate in size with the similar work *Reclining Nude* (Cat. 46). That sculpture's dimensions are 21 x 14.5 cm (base).



*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

**Exhibition title:** *Native Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 5)

**Medium:** Unknown

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 100 guineas<sup>2</sup>

Cat. 20. *Head of an African Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

Cat. 42. *Mask*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

Cat. 43. *Head*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Given that this is such a generic title, it is difficult to provide a precise match for this work. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the medium is not specified in the catalogue. Accordingly, several works, in several media, could potentially be matched to this title: namely, *Head of African Woman* in artificial stone/cement (**Cat. 20**), *Mask* in malachite/verdite (**Cat. 42**), and *Head* in soapstone/wonderstone (**Cat. 43**). Alternatively, it is possible that some of Stern's sculptures were exhibited twice under different, generic titles. One could accordingly suppose that titles like *Head*, from the 1939 exhibit, could refer to the same work as titles like *Native Head* from 1945. One can also question the repetition of this title three times in the same catalogue, with the same price tag in each case (i.e., **Cat. 49** and **51**): it is possible that the three works form a series. Lastly, one could interpret the absence of details regarding the medium as an indication that the work was produced in a medium that does not appear elsewhere in the records. Given that these all of suppositions are unverifiable, the question remains open concerning the referent of the title *Native Head*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 20. Head of an African Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 42. Mask*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 43. Head*

**Exhibition title:** *Native Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, the Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 6)

**Medium:** Unknown

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 100 guineas<sup>2</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Given that this is such a generic title, it is difficult to provide a precise match for this work. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the medium is not specified in the catalogue. Accordingly, several works, in several media, could potentially be matched to this title: namely, *Head of African Woman* in artificial stone/cement (**Cat. 20**), *Mask* in malachite/verdite (**Cat. 42**), and *Head* in soapstone/wonderstone (**Cat. 43**). Alternatively, it is possible that some of Stern's sculptures were exhibited twice under different, generic titles. One could accordingly suppose that titles like *Head*, from the 1939 exhibit, could refer to the same work as titles like *Native Head* from 1945. One can also question the repetition of this title three times in the same catalogue, with the same price tag in each case (i.e., **Cat. 49** and **51**): it is possible that the three works form a series. Lastly, one could interpret the absence of details regarding the medium as an indication that the work was produced in a medium that does not appear elsewhere in the records. Given that these all of suppositions are unverifiable, the question remains open concerning the referent of the title *Native Head*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*[No image available]*

*Possible matches:*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 20. Head of an African Girl*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 42. Mask*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Cat. 43. Head*

**Exhibition title:** *Native Head*<sup>1</sup>

**Year of production:** Before 1945

**Dates and location of exhibition:** February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town (no. 7)

**Medium:** Unknown

**Dimensions:** Unknown

**Current location:** Unknown

**Price:** 100 guineas<sup>2</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Stern's scrapbook (MSC 31:18): Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Given that this is such a generic title, it is difficult to provide a precise match for this work. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the medium is not specified in the catalogue. Accordingly, several works, in several media, could potentially be matched to this title: namely, *Head of African Girl* in artificial stone/cement (**Cat. 20**), *Mask* in malachite/verdite (**Cat. 42**) and *Head* in soapstone/wonderstone (**Cat. 43**). Alternatively, it is possible that some of Stern's sculptures were exhibited twice under different, generic titles. One could accordingly suppose that titles like *Head*, from the 1939 exhibit at the Sun Building in Cape Town, could refer to the same work as titles like *Native Head*, from the 1945 exhibit at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. One can also question the repetition of this title three times in the same catalogue, with the same price tag in each case (i.e., **Cat. 49** and **50**): it is possible that the three works form a series. Lastly, one could interpret the absence of details regarding the medium as an indication that the work was produced in a medium that does not appear elsewhere in the records. Given that these all of suppositions are unverifiable, the question remains open concerning the referent of the title *Native Head*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**Appendix B**

**Plates: Photographs of Stern's sculptures**

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 1**

Irma Stern with a sculpted African female head and a painting of a mother and child

1922

Photograph

11 x 16.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:5/4: Personal Photographs, 1920s, 11982.

**Description:**

*This photograph shows Irma Stern in what was likely her studio, in her family home at 34 Breda St. in Cape Town, in 1922. The painting of a mother and child at Stern's side is consistent with Stern's Expressionist pictorial style of the early 1920s. The head is a clay model of an African female figure (Cat. 1).*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 2**

Irma Stern with a sculpted female head and a painting of a plate of fish

1922

Photograph

11 x 16.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:5/4, Personal Photographs, 1920s, 11978.

**Description:**

*This photograph shows Irma Stern in what was likely her studio, in her family home at 34 Breda St. in Cape Town, in 1922. Stern produced many still-life paintings of plates of fish during the 1920s. The head is a clay model of an African female figure (Cat. 1).*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 3**

Irma Stern in her studio at the Firs

1936

Photograph

13 x 16 cm

Source: "The Man on the Spot: Artists and their Studios," *The Cape Times*, February 29, 1936.

**Description:**

*This photograph shows Irma Stern in her studio at the Firs, Rosebank, working on the sculpture Kneeling Mother (Cat. 12). The photograph shows several paintings, sculptures, as well as items from Stern's collection. Two masks can be seen hanging at the top of the frame, and a large vessel (likely from Zambia, Namibia, or Mozambique) can be seen on the dresser in the top right-hand corner. The painting in the bottom left-hand corner is likely a portrait of a Pondo or Swazi woman. The three sculptures behind Stern are, from left to right: Grief (Cat. 10), The Woman (Cat. 25), and Awakening (Cat. 11).*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

#### Plate 4

Newspaper Clipping with photographs of *Awakening*, *Contemplation* and *Grief*  
1936

Newspaper clipping

20 x 20 cm

Source: *The Cape Times Supplement*, February 29, 1936. In: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings, Years 1914-1946.

#### Description:

*This clipping shows the sculptures Awakening (Cat. 11), Contemplation (Cat. 9), and Grief (Cat. 10). The sculptures appear to have been photographed individually, on the same wooden support, against a background made of black velvet. The caption reads as follows: "Three examples of the work of Irma Stern, the well-known South African artist, whose exhibition of painting and sculpture will be opened by the High Commissioner, Sir William Clark, at 118 St. George's Street next Monday. This is the first time that Miss Stern has exhibited this branch of her art and it will be interesting to discover the public's reaction to it. She has called the centre piece 'Contemplation' and the third 'Grief.'"*



[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 5**

Irma Stern sculpting *Contemplation*

1936

Photograph

15 x 10 cm

Source: *The South African Lady's Pictorial*, March 1936

**Description:**

*This photograph shows Stern sculpting Contemplation in her studio (Cat. 9). The caption reads: "Irma Stern has sprung a surprise on the art world of South Africa. From painting she has turned to sculpture. She is seen here in her studio, with some of her new work."*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

## Plate 6

Irma Stern with her work at the Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town  
1936

Photograph  
12 x 10.5 cm

Source: "Pictures that Satisfy: The Opening of Miss Stern's Exhibition: High Commissioner's Eulogy," *The Cape Argus*, March 3, 1936, p. 10, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

### **Description:**

*This photograph shows Stern on the opening day of her exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town. She stands next to the sculpture titled Grief (Cat. 10), while her Kneeling Mother can be seen in the bottom left-hand corner. The caption reads: "The Artist and her Work: A picture of Miss Stern taken yesterday afternoon among her pictures and sculptures at her exhibition, which was opened by Sir William Clark."*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 7**

Hallway at the Firs with *Head of a Native Woman*

1946

Photograph

15.5 x 9.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:5/5, Photos from Life Magazine, 11992.

**Description:**

*This photograph is one of a series taken for Life Magazine in 1946. It shows a hallway at the Firs, decorated with painted panels by the artist as well as objects from her Central African collection. The silhouette of a Congolese stool can be seen on the left-hand side, and a mask can be seen in the background. The sculpture on the table in between the two panels is Stern's Head of a Native Woman (Cat. 17).*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

### Plate 8

Irma Stern and guest in the lounge at the Firs

1946

Photograph

12.5 x 19 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:5/5, Photos from Life Magazine, 11994.

### Description:

*This photograph is one of a series taken for Life Magazine in 1946. It shows Stern and an unidentified man (perhaps a reporter, or her companion Dudley Welsh) sitting in the lounge at the Firs. Paintings from Stern's Zanzibar period hang on the wall to the left, and objects from her collection appear on the shelves, the fireplace, and the tables. Stern's Young Native Girl (Cat. 16) can be seen on the table on the left-hand side of the photograph. The photograph is an evocative representation of the interior space at the Firs in the 1940s.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 9**

Doorway at the Firs with *The Woman*

1940s

Photograph

9.5 x 15.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:5/5, Photos from Life Magazine, 11991

**Description:**

*This photograph shows the entrance to the lounge at The Firs. The walls are adorned with raffia textiles from Stern's collection of objects from the Congo. Her sculpture The Woman (later titled The Water Carrier) (Cat. 25) can be seen resting on the floor to the right of the doorway.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 10**

Irma Stern at her desk, with sculptures: *Head of a Native Woman*, *Two Heads*, and *Standing Young Girl*

1946

Photograph

16.5 x 11 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1914-1946).

**Description:**

*This photograph shows Stern looking through what appears to be a sketchbook, in her studio, in 1946. The cement sculpture titled *Head of an African Woman* (**Cat. 17**) can be seen on her desk. In addition, the wonderstone sculptures titled *Standing Young Girl* (**Cat. 24**) and *Two Heads* (**Cat. 28**) can be seen on her windowsill.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 11**

Irma Stern sculpting *Girl with Basket*

1946

Photograph

16 x 21.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:19, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1946-64).

**Description:**

*This photograph of Irma Stern is arguably the most dramatic ever to have been taken of her over the course of her career. It shows her sculpting the wonderstone figure Girl with Basket (Cat. 23) in her studio at the Firs. Once again, it is clear that the photograph was staged. It is not certain whether it was ever published. Stern's now famous painting The Arab Priest can be seen in the shadows on the background to the left.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 12**

Irma Stern sculpting *Girl with Basket*

1946

Photograph

21.5 x 16 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:19, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1946-64).

**Description:**

*Like Plate 11, this photograph shows Stern sculpting Girl with Lampholder. The photograph is markedly less dramatic and looks less staged. Stern can be seen wearing a smock and the sculpture is not resting on a base but on an unidentifiable black support. It is not clear whether the photograph was taken in Stern's studio or in her lounge. The painted armoire can be seen in the background.*



[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 13**

*Standing Young Girl and Girl with Basket*

c. 1946

Photograph

11 x 16.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:19, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1946-64)

**Description:**

*This snapshot shows Stern's two sculptures Standing Young Girl and Girl with Lampholder, suggesting Stern was intent on keeping records of her works.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 14**

*Native Head and Eve*

c. 1946

Photograph

11 x 16.5 cm

Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (1946-64).

**Description:**

*This snapshot shows Stern's two sculptures Native Figure (Cat. 21) and Eve (Cat. 22), suggesting Stern was intent on keeping records of her works. The caption below the image reads "Mr. Clelland" for the sculpture on the left, and "William Clark" for the sculpture on the right, suggesting that she wished to keep records of these works before she gave them away as gifts.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

**Plate 15**

Irma Stern painting in her studio

1950

Photograph

10.5 x 14.5 cm

Source: "Irma Stern's Pictures and Pottery," *The Cape Argus*, March 14, 1950, p. 6, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

**Description:**

*This photograph shows Stern in her studio working on a painting of an Indian or Malay woman. One can see a sculpture of a kneeling figure on the table in the foreground (Cat. 47). It appears to be made of plaster. Several of her ceramic pieces can be seen on the shelves in the background, as well as on the table in the foreground.*

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

## Plate 16

Irma Stern at the Firs with sculptures and vases

1955

Photograph

17 x 15 cm

Source: "Untitled," *Sarie Marais*, January 5, 1955, p. 40, National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

### Description:

*This photograph is drawn from the Afrikaans women's magazine Sarie Marais. It shows her standing at the Firs with what is likely a plaster model of a reclining female figure (Cat. 48). This is the only known photograph of the work. One can see her wonderstone figure Standing Half-Length Figure (Cat. 41) on the windowsill in the background. In addition, three of her ceramic vases can be seen on the chest. The caption reads: "Irma Stern standing before a beautiful antique chest in her house. In her hands is one of her works." ["Irma Stern afgeneem by 'n mooi antieke kis in haar huis. In haar hand en tangs haar is van haar eie werk."].*



**Appendix C**  
**Chronology of Irma Stern's Life and Sculptural Career**

- 1894:** October 2: Irma Stern is born to Jewish-German parents Samuel and Henny Stern, in Schweizer-Reneke, Transvaal.
- 1896:** Travels to Germany with her parents for the first time.
- 1899:** Accompanies her mother to Berlin.
- 1900:** May: the British occupy Schweizer-Reneke.  
September: Samuel and Leopold Stern (Irma's uncle) are arrested. Henny, Rudi (Irma's brother), and Irma leave for Cape Town.
- 1901:** The family leaves for Europe and settles temporarily in Germany.
- 1902:** The family returns to South Africa and settles in Wolmaraanstaad, Transvaal.
- 1903:** The family returns to Schweizer-Reneke.
- 1904:** The family travels to Europe via Zanzibar, Naples, and Rome. They settle in Berlin.
- 1909:** The family returns to South Africa with Johannes Prinz, Irma Stern's tutor. They settle again in Wolmaransstad.
- 1910:** August: the family visits Victoria Falls.  
December: the family leaves Cape Town for Berlin, travelling via the East Coast of Africa.
- 1912:** November 1: Irma Stern begins her art studies at the Weimar Academy, studying under Prof. Frijhof Smit.  
August-December: the family visits South Africa.
- 1914:** Irma returns to Weimar to study under Gari Melchers.  
Studies under Martin Brandenburg at the Levin-Funcke studio.
- 1916:** Paints *Das Ewige Kind* (The Eternal Child), her first major work.  
Meets Max Pechstein.
- 1918:** May: exhibits two works with the *Freie Sezession* in Berlin.  
December 3: the *Novembergruppe* is established in Berlin, with Stern as a founding member.
- 1919:** May-June: Irma Stern holds her first solo exhibition at the Fritz Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin.
- 1920:** Exhibits with the *Freie Sezession* and the *Novembergruppe*.  
Begins writing in her *Paradise* journal.  
Publishes *Visionen* and *Dumela Marena*, portfolios of lithographs.  
The family returns to South Africa, settling in Cape Town in December.
- 1922:** February 7-21: Irma holds her first exhibition in South Africa, an "Exhibition of Modern Art," at Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town.

September-early October: travels to Umgababa via Durban.

Irma (allegedly) produces her first sculpture at a potter's hut near Umgababa (cf. *Das Umgababa Buch*, 1923, p. 28-31).

**1923:** Writes the *Umgababa Buch*.

Travels to Europe on the *Usaramo*.

November: exhibits at the Galerie Gürlitt in Berlin.

Visits London and Paris.

**1924:** Exhibits in Frankfurt, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Vienna, Berlin, and at the Empire Exhibition in London.

Returns to South Africa on the *Tanganyika*.

March-September: travels to the northern Transvaal, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zululand and Natal (it is possible that she sculpted on one of these trips).<sup>1</sup>

Stops writing in the *Paradise* journal.

**1925:** February: holds her second exhibition at Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town, and shares a studio with Ruth Prowse at 16 Wale St.

May: spends the month in Johannesburg.

Travels to Swaziland.

September: spends the month in Karridene on the South Coast of Natal (it is possible that she sculpted on this trip; cf. note 1).

**1926:** March: travels to Swaziland and Zululand (it is possible that she sculpted on this trip; cf. note 1).

April 1: marries Johannes Prinz, lecturer in German at the University of Cape Town.

April 3: publishes "My Exotic Models" in the *Cape Argus*.

June: exhibits at the Levson Gallery in Johannesburg. Richard Feldman writes a glowing critique of her work in the *Zionist Record* (June 18).

August: exhibits in Bloemfontein.

September: holds her third exhibit at Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town.

December: exhibits in Johannesburg and Bloemfontein.

Travels to Europe on the *Saxon*.

**1927:** August: visits London, Leipzig, and Berlin. Holds exhibits in Breslau and at the Galleries Le Triptyche and Billiet Vorms in Paris.

Receives the Prix d'honneur at the Bordeaux International Exhibition.

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<sup>1</sup> "[...] One day I was busy polishing a piece of clay sculpture when I heard the native shouting in distress: 'A dead man's head, look at the dead man' and I realised they were afraid of the clay head I had modelled. [...]" (Irma Stern, "My Exotic Models," *The Cape Argus*, April 3, 1926)



Max Osborn's monograph *Irma Stern* is published as no. 51 in the *Junge Kunst* series.

April: Irma Stern returns to South Africa and buys *The Firs* in Rosebank.

October-November: spends this time in Ezulwini, Swaziland, where she models heads.<sup>2</sup>

**1928:** Exhibits at the Galerie Themis in Brussels.

**1929:** Travels to Europe, exhibits in Paris, Berlin, Hannover, Vienna, London, and at the International Jewish Exhibition in Zurich.

September: visits Pondoland.

Exhibits at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town.

**1930:** Exhibits in Amsterdam, the Hague, Berlin, and the South African Artists' Exhibition at the Burlington Gallery in Cape Town.

**1931:** September-November: spends this time in Madeira.

Elected a member of the South African Society of Artists.

**1932:** March: exhibits at Foyle's Gallery, London; Galerie Gürlitt, Berlin; Galerie Billiet Worms, Paris.

November: exhibits at Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town.

**1933:** May: travels to the Transvaal.

Exhibits at McFayden Hall in Pretoria and Lezard Galleries in Johannesburg.

September: travels to Namaqualand and Swaziland.

October 25: asks for a divorce from Johannes Prinz.

**1934:** February: exhibits at Newlands House in Cape Town.

March 6: the divorce of Irma Stern and Johannes Prinz is granted.

March 27: Irma opens Lippy Lipshitz's exhibition of sculptures.

**1935:** Death of Samuel Stern.

February: Irma exhibits at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town.

Late February: meets Mary Stainbank and Prof. Oxley (head of the Natal Technical College) in Durban, at the beginning of an 8-month long trip.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "She is at present at Ezulwini, a trading station in Swaziland, 10 miles from Mbanbane. Ezulwini means 'the place where heaven and earth meet.' There she was called upon by Kind Sobhuza, who invited her to be present at a native dance at the royal kraal. Miss Stern is not only making sketches, but she is modelling native heads and figures. These are being burnt by an experienced native to enable them to travel and to be used freely without breakage." ("Irma Stern in Swaziland," *The Cape Argus*, November 1927)

<sup>3</sup> "I am seeing Mary Stainbank and that is to me the first interesting thing – that has happened here in the way of people of course," [...] "Am going to the technical college this morning – Prof Oxley is explaining to me how to make pottery I hope to save a course of a few months – this morning" (Irma Stern, Letter to Freda and Richard Feldman, February 25 1935).

May: exhibits at the Criterion Restaurant in Johannesburg.

June: exhibits at Glen's Music Shop in Pretoria and gives a talk to the Pretoria Women's Club. Sells three paintings to the City Council.

July: participates in a group exhibition at McFayden Hall. Exhibits at the Durban Art Gallery. The Gallery acquires *Magnolias* and *Swazi Water-Carriers*.

August-October: travels to the Eastern Province, the Transvaal, and Natal.

November: begins working in soapstone/wonderstone.<sup>4</sup>

November-December: Irma creates the following sculptures:

- *Native Figure* (**Cat. 21**) (cf. MSC 31:18; *The Rand Daily Mail*, April 4, 1936)
- *Eve* (**Cat. 22**) (cf. MSC 31:18; *The Rand Daily Mail*, April 4, 1936)
- *Girl with Lamp-holder/Basket (?)* (**Cat. 23**) (cf. MSC 31:18)
- *Standing Young Girl* (**Cat. 24**) (cf. MSC 31:18)
- *The Woman* (**Cat. 25**) (cf. Letter to the Feldmans, November 13, 1935)

### 1936:

January-March, Irma creates the following sculptures:

- *Contemplation* (**Cat. 9**)
- *Grief* (**Cat. 10**)
- *Awakening* (**Cat. 11**)
- *Kneeling Mother* (**Cat. 12**)
- *Youth* (**Cat. 13**)
- *Sitting Zulu Woman* (**Cat. 14**)
- *Mask* (**Cat. 15**)
- *The God of Plenty* (**Cat. 26**)
- *Native Girl* (**Cat. 4**)
- *Native Girl* (**Cat. 5**) (unless she produced it in 1922, **Cat. 1**)
- *Native Head* (**Cat. 6**) (unless she produced it in 1922, **Cat. 2**)

February 7: *The Cape Times* publishes the first (oblique) mention of her sculptural activity: "Miss Stern has been at work during the past three months secretly in her studio that is likely to cause quite a stir in art circles when it is exhibited next month" (*The Cape Times*, February 7).

February 19: Irma meets with the African sculptor Ernest Mancoba at her studio.

February 29: *The Cape Times* publishes a photograph of Irma Stern sculpting in her studio (see **Plate 3**).

<sup>4</sup> "I am at present just in a slight state of overwork and depression – suffer from terrible dreams and am taking it easy for a few days – getting my hats and shoes in order and so forth. Am working at a large soapstone figure – very hard boddie [sic.] work quite apparte [sic.] from the other[?] but it is great fun" (Irma Stern, Letter to Freda and Richard Feldman, November 13 1935). The work in question is likely "The Woman" (**Cat. 13**).

March 2-15: Irma includes sculptures in an exhibition for the very first time in her career, at her exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers in Cape Town (cf **Appendix E.1**).

April: after a visit to the Feldmans in Johannesburg (late March), Irma Stern returns to Cape Town and moves her sculptures into her garden.<sup>5</sup>

August-September: travels to Johannesburg via the South Coast of Natal.

September-January: exhibits works at the Empire Exhibition, including some charcoal drawings of African heads.

October 16-?: includes sculptures in an exhibition for the second time, at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg (cf **Appendix E.2**).

**1937:** February: exhibition at Martin Melck House in Cape Town (opened by Sir Edward Roworth). Irma sells *Loneliness* (exhibited at the show) and *Soapstone Head* (not exhibited) to Roza van Gelderen (cf. MSC 31:8, Ledger of Sales).

Visits Dakar en route to Genoa.

Visits Europe and exhibits in London and The Hague. Meets Jacob Epstein and receives praise from him for her art. (cf. Letters to the Feldmans, June 20, 26 and August 7).

October-December: spends four months in Italy. Marvels at Michelangelo's *Slaves* in Florence (cf. Letter to the Feldmans, October 30, and MSC 31:1/20. Italy 1937). She meets a potter in a pottery factory and is deeply impressed (MSC 31:1/20, Italy 1937).

**1938:** Revisits Dakar for one month on her way back to South Africa from Europe  
Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

1939: January-February: prepares exhibition in Cape Town by sculpting.<sup>6</sup>

March 15-28: third exhibition of sculpture, held at the Sun Building in Cape Town. (See **Appendix E.3**.)

June-September: visits Zanzibar.

**1940:** Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**1941:** Exhibits in Johannesburg.

**1942:** Exhibits in Cape Town.

May-November: travels to the Congo.

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<sup>5</sup> "My studio seems to have grown small – and smaller. Today I have planted my statues into the garden for lack of space," Letter to the Feldmans, April 6.

<sup>6</sup> "I have been painting Malays and modelling natives casting them and having a lot of fun and work. Shall have an exhibition here soon," Letter to Freda Feldman, February 22.

October 13: exhibits paintings and collected objects at the musée de la vie indigène in Elizabethville

November: holds a “Congo” exhibition in Johannesburg, where Prof. C. Riet van Lowe reads a paper by the Abbé Breuil (cf. “Art of the Congo Natives,” *The Star*, December 5).

**1943:** Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**1944:** Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Publishes *Congo* travelogue.

November: death of Henny Stern.

**1945:** February 15-?: holds her fourth (and last) exhibition of sculptures, at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. (See **Appendix E.4.**)

July-October: visits Zanzibar.

**1946:** Revisits Central Africa.

Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

July: travels to Europe (for the first time after the war) and exhibits in Paris, Rotterdam, London, and Brussels.

**1948:** Her work is included in the South African Exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, and later in Washington D.C.

**1949:** Exhibits in Cape Town.

Begins experimenting with pottery in her Cape Town studio: plates, pots, and modelled figurines.

**1950:** Travels to Madeira, Madrid, and the south of France. Sees Picasso working in his studio in Monaco.

Exhibits at the Venice Biennale.

Exhibits her pottery for the first time at the Association of Arts gallery in Cape Town.

**1951:** Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg (including pottery).

Travels to Natal.

**1952:** Exhibits at the Cape Tercentenary celebrations.

Exhibits at the Venice Biennale.

She is awarded a Molteno Grant for her “outstanding work.”

Travels to Europe, visiting Paris and Rome.

**1953:** Exhibits in Cape Town and Paris.

**1954:** Exhibits in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria.

Exhibits at the Venice Biennale.

Produces the monotype series *A Series of Women in Stone*.

- 1955:** Exhibits in Cape Town.  
Visits Europe and exhibits in Germany.  
Travels to Turkey.
- 1956:** Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.  
Visits Europe and exhibits in Berlin.
- 1957:** Exhibits at the São Paulo Biennale.  
Holds a retrospective exhibition (1916-1957) at the Association of Arts Gallery in Cape Town.
- 1958:** Exhibits at the Venice Biennale.  
Exhibits in Cape Town.
- 1960:** Receives regional award of the Peggy Guggenheim International Art Prize.  
Visits Spain.
- 1961:** Visits Europe, paints in Spain.  
Exhibits in Cape Town.
- 1962:** Visits Madeira and North Africa.  
Exhibits in Cape Town and Johannesburg.
- 1963:** Receives Oppenheimer Award.  
Visits France.
- 1964:** Exhibits in Cape Town (“My Three Madeiras 1932 1950 1963”).  
Holds a retrospective of her graphic work in Cape Town.
- 1965:** She is awarded the Medal of Honour at the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Werenskap en Kuns.  
Exhibits in Paris, paints on the French Riviera.
- 1966:** August 23: dies in Cape Town.
- 1967:** Memorial exhibition held at the Grosvenor Gallery, London.
- 1968:** Memorial exhibition, *An Homage to Irma Stern*, held in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town. It features five sculptural pieces. (See **Appendix E.5**.)
- 1971:** Stern’s house, The Firs, is converted into the Irma Stern Museum, administered on behalf of the trustees of the Irma Stern Estate by the University of Cape Town.

**Appendix D**

**Scans and Transcriptions of *Das Umgababa Buch* (pages 28-32)**

*Dieses Brennen – alles  
zu sehen u. alles zu  
verstehen trieb in  
dieser neuen – so  
unendlich reichen Welt  
– trieb mich zu den  
Hütten eines Töpfers –  
der seine Wohnstätte  
auf einem Hügel  
aufgebaut hatte.- Ein  
Palmenhain schützte  
sie vor den  
stürmischen Winden  
des Meeres – Er  
haufte dort, wie ein  
König – übersah die  
grüne Ebene mit dem  
zwischen den  
Hügelketten sich  
windenden Fluße –  
hörte das Brausen des  
Meeres – Saß und  
machte Tontöpfereien.  
Schöne –  
schwarzglänzende  
Gefäße – zum  
Biertrinken - zum  
Wasserschöpfen.*

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

*Schaalen für das  
Korn zum täglichen  
Mahle. Reine-schöne  
Formen mit  
spärlicher  
Ornamentik. Saß  
und knetete den Ton  
– seine Kinder um  
ihn – seine Frau  
einen dicken-ewig  
hungrigen Säugling  
an der Brust –  
kneteten und formten  
gemeinsam. Sie  
hatte diese Kunst  
von ihrem Vater  
erlernt – er das  
töpfen von ihr. Sein  
Sohn [ein] kleiner  
Bursche mit klugen-  
glänzenden Augen  
half ihm – schwang  
die Tongefässe über  
das Feuer bis sie  
von dem (duften) Rot  
zum metallischem  
Blau-schwarz sich  
wandelten.- Das  
Feuer nährten sie  
mit trockenen  
Palmbblättern. ein  
blauer dünner  
Rauch stieg zum  
Himmel empor.  
Heiße Sonnenglut  
lag über all den  
(Wegen) – wie eine  
Schicht*

Irma Stern  
Das Umgababa Buch,  
page 29  
Scanned from original  
manuscript  
MSC 31:1/15  
National Library of  
South Africa,  
Cape Town.



**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*Gelatine. beweglich  
und doch starr. –  
Der Ton lockte mich  
zum Formen. - ich  
hockte auf einer  
Strohmatte - vor mir  
ein Holzklötz - und  
begann eine Schicht  
auf die andere zu  
Häufen.- Der Ton  
war so weich und  
doch zahe – er hatte  
schlummerndes -  
sinnliches Leben in  
sich. daß durch den  
geringsten  
Fingerdurch  
erwachte.- Es war  
ein wundersames  
Spiel – vor mir  
(wollte) sich ein  
Kegel von Kafer mit  
geschwungenen  
Lippen – die lachten  
und weinten zugleich  
mit Schläfen so zart  
im Bau – doch  
plötzlich sank alles  
in sich zusammen.  
Es hatte kein  
genügendes  
(Gleich)-gewicht –  
Das klatschen des  
feuchten Ton`s – ich  
erwachte entsetzt  
aus meinem  
Schaffenstraum auf -  
und sah in die  
bedauernden  
Gesichter*

Irma Stern  
Das Umgababa Buch,  
page 30  
Scanned from original  
manuscript  
MSC 31:1/15  
National Library of  
South Africa,  
Cape Town.

**[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]**

*dieser schwarzen  
Menschen. Sie rieten  
mir: „mach es  
kleiner - dann hält  
der Ton“. – Es war  
eine solche  
Vornehmheit in  
ihrem Bedauern! Da  
saß ich. das weiße  
Wesen – genoß ihre  
Gastfreundschaft –  
gebrauchte ihren  
Ton – lernte von  
ihnen. wie man ihn  
zu behandeln hatte.-  
Wollte ihnen zeigen  
– daß man auch  
noch anderes als  
Gefäße daraus  
schaffen kann und  
mein Mißerfolg rief  
nicht das geringste  
Lächeln des Hohns  
in ihnen hervor. Ich  
dachte an gebildete  
Salons und die  
Schamröte stieg mir  
auf die Stirn.- Ein  
zweiter Versuch und  
der Kopf stand -  
aber nun reichte der  
Ton nicht mehr aus.  
Ich war ratlos. da  
nahm der Toepfer  
ein ungebranntes  
Gefäß. zerdrückte es  
mit eigener Hand u.  
reichte ihn mir –  
damit ich meinen  
Kopf beenden*

Irma Stern  
Das Umgababa Buch,  
page 31  
Scanned from original  
manuscript  
MSC 31:1/15  
National Library of  
South Africa,  
Cape Town.

[Illustration retirée / Image withdrawn]

*Der nun beendete Kopf  
 –rief großes Erstaunen  
 hervor. er sah ja aus  
 wie ein Mensch—  
 Heimlich schlich der (o  
 sich zur nächsten  
 Hütte. und lockte eine  
 junge Schönheit  
 heraus—es sei ein  
 fremder Mann in ihres  
 Vaters Hütte—sie solle  
 kommen u. ihn sehen.  
 Schnell die schönsten  
 Perlen umgegürtet  
 eilte sie heraus. Ein  
 Schrei des Entsetzens—  
 es sei ein Toter  
 Menschenkopf. fort  
 war sie—alles lachte  
 über den  
 wohlgelungenen  
 Scherz.— Ich schied  
 mit einer  
 unermesslichen  
 Hochachtung von  
 diesen beiden  
 Menschen. Und das  
 Gefühl wurde in mir  
 stark – was sind wir  
 Weißen für ein  
 armseliges Volk. was  
 müssen wir für ein  
 naturfeindliches Leben  
 führen – daß so viel  
 Gutes und Edles – was  
 Selbstverständliches –  
 verschüttet.*

Irma Stern  
 Das Umgababa Buch,  
 page 32  
 Scanned from original  
 manuscript  
 MSC 31:1/15  
 National Library of  
 South Africa,  
 Cape Town.

## **Appendix E**

### **Transcriptions of Stern's Exhibition Catalogues**

**E.1. Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town**

**E.2. Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg**

**E.3. Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building, Cape Town**

**E.4. Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery, Cape Town**

**E.5. Catalogue for the 1968 exhibition *Homage to Irma Stern***

**Appendix E.1. Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Selwyn Chambers,  
Cape Town**

***Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings, Watercolours, and Sculpture by Irma Stern [Catalogue]  
2-14 March 1936, Selwyn Chambers, Cape Town***

*Transcribed from MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (years 1914-1946)*

*Sculptures* [price in guineas]

101. Contemplation (Art-stone, One Cast Only) [125]
102. Grieve (Art-stone, One Cast Only) [125]
103. The Woman (Soapstone) [175]
104. Awakening (Art-stone, One Cast Only) [100]
105. Mask (Art-stone, One Cast Only) [35]
106. Kneeling Mother (Art-stone, One Cast Only) [45]
107. Sitting Zulu Woman (Art-stone, One Cast Only) [25]
108. Youth (Terra Cotta) [20]
109. The God of Plenty (Green Malachite) [15]
110. Native Head (soapstone) [not for sale]
111. Eve (soapstone) [not for sale]
112. Native Girl (fired clay) [30]
113. Native Girl (fired clay) [30]
114. Native Head (fired clay) [30]

**Appendix E.2. Catalogue for Stern's 1936 exhibition at the Carlton Hotel,  
Johannesburg**

***Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings, Watercolours, and Sculpture by Irma Stern  
15-? October 1936, Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg***

*Transcribed from MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (years 1914-1946)*

*Sculptures* [price in guineas]

- 153. Contemplation (Art Stone, One Cast Only) [125]
- 154. Grief (Art Stone, One Cast Only) [125]
- 155. Awakening (Art Stone, One Cast Only) [100]
- 156. Kneeling Mother (Art Stone, One Cast Only) [80]
- 157. The Woman (Soapstone) [125]
- 158. Dawn (Soapstone) [15]
- 159. Two Heads (Soapstone) [20]
- 160. Native Girl (Soapstone) [20]
- 161. Nude (Soapstone) [15]
- 162. Head (Soapstone) [20]

**Appendix E.3. Catalogue for Stern's 1939 exhibition at the Sun Building,  
Cape Town**

***Exhibition of Oil Paintings, Watercolours, and Sculpture by Irma Stern  
15-28 March 1939, Sun Building, St. George's Street, Cape Town***

*Transcribed from MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (years 1914-1946)*

Sculptures [price in guineas]

- 67. Youth (lime stone) (one cast only) [100]
- 68. Young Native Girl (one cast only) [50]
- 69. Head of Native Woman (one cast only) [60]
- 70. Mother and Child (soap stone) [20]
- 71. Native (soap stone) [25]
- 72. Swazi Head (soap stone) [15]
- 73. Girl with Shawl (soap stone) [15]
- 74. Head (soap stone) [20]
- 75. Girl with Basket [30]

**Appendix E.4. Catalogue for Stern's 1945 exhibition at the Argus Gallery,  
Cape Town**

***Exhibition of Paintings, February 7-20, 1945, Argus Gallery, Cape Town***

*Transcribed from MSC 31:18, Scrapbook of Press Clippings (years 1914-1946)*

*Sculptures* [price in guineas]

1. *Water Carrier* (wonderstone) [250]
2. *Youth* (one cast only) [150]
3. *Despair* (one cast only) [150]
4. *Repose* (one cast only) [150]
5. *Native Head* [100]
6. *Native Head* [100]
7. *Native Head* [100]
8. *Kneeling Girl* (terra cotta) [75]
9. *Mother and Child* (baked clay) [50]
10. *Figurine* (wonderstone) [75]
11. *Figure* (wonderstone) [50]
12. *Figure* (wonderstone) [45]
13. *The God of Plenty* (malachite) [50]
14. *Bas-relief* (slate) [40]



**Appendix E.5. Catalogue for the 1968 exhibition *Homage to Irma Stern***

***Under the rubric: "Sculpture etc. [Sculpture with Kind permission of the Trustees of the Irma Stern Estate]"***

- 108. Small Figure, 1926, Malachite, 3 ½ " h.
- 109. Bantu woman with hand against cheek, Red cement, 20 ½ " cm.
- 110. Head of Bantu Girl, Cement, 13 ½ " h.
- 111. Bantu Girl with hands over ears, Red cement, 13 ½ " h.
- 112. Lying Head, Green wonderstone, 5 ½ " l.





