

STERN, Isma.

No. 374. Portrait of Barbara.

Oil on canvas, $24\frac{1}{2} \times 20\frac{1}{2}$ (62 x 52)

No. 375. Native Musicians

Oil on canvas, 52 x 56 (132 x 142)

No. 376. Green Apples

Oil on canvas, 30 x 37 (76 x 94)

No. 377. Native Woman

Charcoal, $24\frac{1}{2} \times 18\frac{1}{2}$ (62 x 47)

Archives
Congo Musicians

JM/jw
11/6 (c.c. 13/3)

23 July 1987

Mr Dudley Hopkins
Syfrets Trust Ltd
Box 206
8000 Cape Town

Dear Mr Hopkins

COPYRIGHT: IRMA STERN

As mentioned to you during our telephone conversation on 22 July 1987, the Johannesburg Art Gallery would like to apply to hold permanently the copyright on the works of Irma Stern which are in our collection. I would appreciate it if you would discuss the matter with the Board of Trustees: Irma Stern copyright, at your meeting next week.

The list of the works in our collection are:

- 1 Portrait of a young girl ('Barbara'), 1944
Oil on canvas
62 x 52 cm
Inscribed tl: Irma Stern 1944
Accession no: 374
- 2 Congo Musicians ('Bahutu Musicians'), 1942
Oil on canvas
135 x 145 cm
Inscribed to right of bc: Irma Stern 1942
Accession no: 375
- 3 Green Apples, 1916
Oil on canvas
76 x 94 cm
Inscribed br: Irma Stern 1916
Accession no: 376

Irma Stern



Vol 4

TOPIC TODAY

EDUCATION

Irma Stern, more than any other South African artist of her day was to blaze a trail for future generations by dispelling the conservative attitude to art held by critic and public alike. This she achieved as much by her presence as by her paintings.

Irma was able to acquire a cosmopolitan background from her earliest childhood. Her parents were wealthy German-Jewish immigrants and in 1899 at the age of five, she accompanied her mother on the first of many sojourns in Europe, particularly Berlin. It was there and at Weimar that she received her schooling and art training.

A watershed year for Irma Stern was 1916 when she painted her first major work and met the German Expressionist painter Max Pechstein. By her own admission, this painting, which was to be later known as "The Eternal Child," formed the basis of her link with Pechstein.

The grim-faced little girl stares out of the picture, her hope for the future symbolised by wild flowers clutched tightly in both hands. A subject which could easily have become sentimentalised, especially by the emotional Irma, is treated with dispassionate compassion.

It is undoubtedly true that Stern was an intuitive expressionist urged on in this direction by German Expressionism and Pechstein in particular. She had a mastery command of line and colour which, when combined with her exotic subjects crammed into the picture plane, lent an opulence and immediacy to her work.

The South African public was not ready to accept what Europe did, namely Stern's distortions which, though at best, perverse. Her first exhibition in Cape Town at Ashbey's Galleries in 1920 caused an uproar to which the artist reacted with palpable anger.

Almost as if to prove her public wrong, she spent most of the Twenties gaining further recognition abroad, where it was fashionable to praise the primitive. Stern herself romanticised things ethnic, depicting Western influence on Africa, forming collections of African



"Congo Musicians," oil on canvas, 132 cm x 142 cm. It can be found in the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

art and art of early cultures and perpetuating, on canvas a noble image of tribal life.

Indeed Irma lived to a great extent in a make-believe world of fairy tales and costume doming. A photograph taken in 1924 shows her at the jazz Masque Ball with her future husband. Both are dressed in costumes representing ancient Egyptian characters.

In search of the exotic, Stern became an inveterate traveller. After her recognition at home towards the end of the Twenties she visited Madeira, Dakar, Zanzibar and the Congo more than once. She also continued her painting in South Africa.

It is generally considered that her Zanzibar and Congo works of the 1940s show Stern at her most mature. These canvases teem with ebullient, the colours chosen

brightly sensual to match the subject matter. (See: "Congo Musicians," 1942.)

Even when painting a still-life, the artist was able to imbue her work with a sense of cunning motion. (See "Chrystianthemuns," 1945.)

While the world was at war, Irma single-mindedly produced countless paintings and drawings in a frenzy of activity. She was, however, always a prodigious artist, almost using canvases or paper as a means of emotional release.

The Fifties and Sixties, up until her death, saw Irma Stern idealised by her public. Honours were bestowed on her at home and abroad. During this time her technique was to change from the earlier application of thick, heavy paint to a lighter, thinner use of this medium, sometimes to

This restless genius of SA art wrote . . .

"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!" Irma Stern.

the point where her canvases would break through rawly white. Throughout her life she was to move constantly between the two disparate cultures of Europe and Africa. With the eye of a European she interpreted an Africa, fast fading.

When she died in 1966 her house in Cape Town and its contents were left behind.

● Further reading: Neville de Duhoi, "Irma Stern," Esme Bernan, "Art and Artists of South Africa."



"Zanzibar," oil on canvas, 86.5 cm x 26.5 cm. Presented to the Johannesburg Art Gallery by Mr and Mrs H L Kernovsky.

kat nr/
cat no

- * Limpopo, 1970
Sifdruk/Screenprint, 45,7 x 60,9
G/s : 115/250 Battiss
Aankope/Purchase 1970
- * Initiation
Sifdruk/Screenprint, 52 x 64
G/s : Proof Initiation Battiss
Aankope/Purchase 1972
- 1964 ISRAEL ISAAC (LIPPY) LIPSHITZ (1903-1980)
- 47 (SA) Nude, 1938
Hout/Wood, 29,4
G/s : 1938 LIPPY LIPS
Bemaking van mev. Stella Loewenstein 1981
Bequest of Mrs Stella Loewenstein 1981
- 48 (SA) Portrait head of child : Janet, 1945
B, 23,5
G/s : LIPPY 1945
Geskenk deur mnr en mev. S. P. Suzman 1981
Presented by Mr and Mrs S. P. Suzman 1981
- 49 Nude (La Pucelle), 1946
Hout/Wood, 96,6
G/s : Lippy L. 1946
Aankope/Purchase 1946
- 50 (SA) Portrait head of Margaret, 1956
B, 30,6
G/s : 1956.LIPPY
Geskenk deur mnr en mev. S. P. Suzman 1981
Presented by Mr and Mrs S. P. Suzman 1981
- * Self-portrait (uit/from Twenty Prints, 1951-53)
Ets/Etching, 12,4 x 9,5
G/s : 20/100 Lippy L
Aankope/Purchase 1954
- 1965 IRMA STERN (1894-1966)
- 51 Green apples, 1916
O, 76 x 94
G/s : Irma Stern 1916
Aankope/Purchase 1941
- * Bahutu musicians, 1942
O, 132 x 142
G/s : Irma Stern 1942
Aankope/Purchase 1943
- 52 (SA) Portrait of a young girl ("Barbara"), 1944
O, 62 x 52
G/s : Irma Stern 1944
Aankope/Purchase 1944
- 53 (SA) Chrysanthemums, 1945
O, 86,5 x 86,5
G/s : Irma Stern 1945
Geskenk deur mnr en mev. H. L. Karnovsky 1980
Presented by Mr and Mrs H. L. Karnovsky 1980
- * Dahlia in a vase, 1956
O, 84,8 x 60
G/s : Irma Stern 1956
Aankope/Purchase 1968