INTRODUCTION

This study scrutinises settler primitivism as the fundamental manifestation of South African modernism that started developing in the 1920s and 1930s and reached its height in the 1940s to 1960s. Its pioneers were the women painters Irma Stern (1894–1966) and Maggie (originally Maria Magdalena) Laubser (1886–1973), who paved the way for the modernist painters Walter Battiss (1906–1982) and Alexis Preller (1911–1975) as well as the sculptor Lippy (originally Israel-Isaac) Lipshitz (1903–1980). Working in a more conservative but also primitivist manner were Jacob (originally Jacobus) Hendrik Pierneef (1886–1957) and Gregoire Boonzaier (1909–2005). In contrast to European primitivism, Nicholas Thomas clarifies, settler primitivism was not

> necessarily the project of radical formal innovation stimulated by tribal art that we are familiar with from twentieth-century modernism. It was, rather, often an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one.[1]

The difference between South African settler primitivism and primitivisms in other settler nations such as Australia, the USA or Canada is mainly caused by a demographic phenomenon: while other colonial settler nations crucially decimated their indigenous populations, White[2] settlers have always been a minority in South Africa. South African settler primitivists were therefore at larger pains to differentiate between the "extinct" original inhabitants of the South African land, the San, who could be appropriated as cultural ancestors as they did not pose any political threat, and South African Bantu-speaking peoples, who were treated as African "native" immigrants and had to be portrayed as different in order to justify their oppression and exploitation as well as the seizure of their land.

By focussing on the themes '(trans)nationalism', 'indigenisation' and 'ambivalence,' I intend to highlight that these South African settler primitivists were required to continuously position themselves in relation to their European heritage, the newly emerging South African nation and the original inhabitants of the land they

1 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.

2 I will be capitalising White and Black when they refer to race in order to stress that these are social rather than natural categories. Compare Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black."

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occupied. Rather than rendering an all-encompassing definition, I consider it more adequate to demonstrate different facets of South African settler primitivism by discussing individual case studies. In this aim, my study interlinks with the approaches presented by Kobena Mercer in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* and Christian Kravagna in *Transmoderne* [Transmodernism], who look at global modernist art through a number of case studies instead of an overarching "'inclusive' global art history."[3] Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, too, stresses the advantages of "microhistories" over larger narratives in cultural and historical studies. She asserts that

> the case study is a suitable method for correcting the tendency of post-colonial and gender studies towards wide universalisations and for replacing generalising categories such as man and woman, white and black, orient and occident, the self and the other by a principally unlimited diversity in the concrete.[4]

Kravagna further explains:

> Contemporary discussions surrounding a global art history are often governed by the question if and how western practises of art historical writing may claim global validity. Instead of following such a generalising approach to the current globalisation of the history of art, it seems to be more effective to shift our attention from the immediate present to modernisms of the first half of the twentieth century in order to understand the 'globalisation' of art from its beginnings.[5]

In the case of South Africa, too, discussions of modern art originating from the first half of the 20th century have been subordinated to examinations of contemporary art, including "Resistance Art" during the reign of apartheid and post-1990 negotiations of identity in the "Rainbow Nation." There are a number of anthologies on specific themes that touch on modernist art in South Africa[6] but, so far, no detailed comparisons of its main protagonists and their interactions exist. This is the gap in which my research can be placed.

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3 Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, pp. 6–23, p. 8. Also see Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 28.

4 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 15. (My translation, original German on p. 267. The original texts of all my translations included here are presented on pp. 267–274 under the reference of the respective chapter and footnote.)

5 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 35. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)

6 E.g. Arnold & Schmahmann (eds.), *Between Union and Liberation*; includes a chapter on Irma Stern and the impressionist Bertha Everard. Freschi, Schmahmann & Van Robbroeck (eds.), *Troubling Images*; includes a chapter on the 1936 "Empire Exhibition" largely featuring JH Pierneef and a chapter on the Afrikaner sculptor Anton van Wouw.

State of research

Recent academic research into South African art has mainly concentrated on a revisionist practice of including discussions of Black artists into art historical narratives and on contemporary art from the 1970s onwards. The first of these latter surveys was artist Sue Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa* that was released in November 1989, two months prior to Nelson Mandela's release from prison.[7] In the "reissue of the classic" of 2004, Williamson writes that "the singleminded thrust of the book was to show the diversity of political thought and action as interpreted by a broad swathe of artists."[8] Departing from the Soweto uprising – protests by Black school students in the Johannesburg township Soweto in 1976 that were brutally dispersed by police resulting in many casualties – as a catalytic event, Williamson presents more than sixty individual artists and groups. She explains: "I was one of those jolted out of lethargy by Soweto, and this book concerns the way the artists of my generation responded to the truths made clear by the events of 1976, the issues we addressed, and the work that followed."[9] Taking an insider's perspective, she thus presents her own work in line with that of many others, mostly allowing one to three pages per artist which feature large-scale reproductions of artworks in colour as well as short texts. The majority of space is occupied by White male artists. The same holds true for the expansion of Williamson's project that she published together with writer and art critic Ashraf Jamal in 1996: *Art in South Africa. The Future Present*.[10] Presenting in total forty artists, the publication adds work created by some of the artists already featured in *Resistance Art* between 1990 and 1996 (including Williamson herself) as well as by some younger artists gaining attention within this period.

A more in-depth analysis of art opposing and/ or subverting segregationist, racist apartheid politics is John Peffer's *Art and the End of Apartheid* published in 2009. In nine chapters, Peffer draws a line from early "Modern Black Art" exemplified by Gerard Sekoto's paintings of the 1930s and 1940s to Santu Mofokeng's documentary photography of the mid-1990s. The book's "main interest is in the two decades preceding 1994" and it therefore covers a similar period to Williamson's.[11] However, in contrast to Williamson's encyclopaedic survey, Peffer's texts "alternate between historical overviews; individual case studies of artists; and analyses of aesthetic trends in popular art, late modernist art, and photography" with a focus on "urban-based black artists" and the "grey areas" they operated in.[12] Even though Peffer touches on the White settler artist Alexis Preller's depictions of South African Ndebele women and even uses the term 'settler primitivism,' he does so in order to contrast such colonial practices with the *Amadlozi Group*, who "exhibited work along nonracial lines" and shared "ideas about art across racial boundaries."[13]

7 Williamson, *Resistance Art*.
8 Williamson, *Resistance Art. Reissue of the Classic*, p. 6.
9 Ibid., p. 8.
10 Williamson & Jamal, *Art in South Africa*.
11 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. x.
12 Ibid., p. xv.
13 Ibid., pp. 17–22.

In the same year as Peffer, Williamson published another survey, called *South African Art Now*, that describes how political developments influenced visual art production in South Africa between 1968 and 2008.[14] Twelve chapters each provide a brief summary of the (socio-)political context in which Williamson places close to one hundred artists working in various media such as painting, sculpture, photography, installation and performance, again assigning two to three pages to each artist which include full-page colour reproductions of individual artworks. Some artists are presented multiple times, in different contexts, which certainly causes an imbalance. In general, while Williamson's books cannot be considered academic as she omits the sources for her texts, they provide useful visual overviews. In 2018, Ashraf Jamal published 24 essays on contemporary South African artists working in diverse media.[15] Jamal's discussion moves on from linking artistic practices to political developments in South Africa and places them within a broader – African and global – framework. He includes artists such as Esther Mahlangu and Sam Nhlengethwa, whose careers started to set off before 1994, but also representatives of the post-apartheid generation such as Zanele Muholi, Wim Botha and Mary Sibande, who figure significantly in the contemporary art market. The book is carried by Jamal's subjective and skilful writing rather than an overriding argument.

In comparison to such and further overviews of contemporary art, South African modernism of the first half of the 20th century has received a rather secondary treatment. It is usually addressed in line with larger examinations of South African art. The latest major project of this kind was *Visual Century: South African Art in Context* of 2011, initiated and coordinated by the artist Gavin Jantjes. It is an anthology consisting of four volumes covering the years 1907 to 2007 which were edited by Jillian Carman (volume one: 1907–1948), Lize van Robbroeck (volume two: 1945–1976), Mario Pissarra (volume three: 1976–1992) and Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisi Majavu (volume four: 1990–2007). Each volume contains an introduction by its editors that contextualises the respective timeframe as well as seven to eight chapters by different art historians looking at the period at hand from different perspectives in order to prevent one-sided narratives. Almost every second page is filled with a large colour reproduction of an artwork. In the foreword to volume one, former minister of arts and culture Z Pallo Jordan writes with reference to the scope of the publication: "Far too long what was regarded as the mainstream of the visual arts in South Africa has been pale and male. These volumes take up the challenge of changing this perspective."[16] He further describes the project as "a voyage of rediscovery into the immense field of talent that has often been obscured by the discriminatory practices of the apartheid system and the white elite."[17]

14 Williamson, *South African Art Now*.
15 Jamal, *In the World*.
16 Jordan, "Foreword," p. xi.
17 Ibid.

In general, *Visual Century* is an important revision of previous art historical narratives in South Africa that largely marginalised works by Black artists prior to 1970.[18] The most striking example of such histories is Esmé Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa*. Berman first gives a twenty-page historical overview that starts with colonial "chroniclers" in the mid-19th century and ends with the "individualists" of the 1960s. Her dictionary then offers entries on a large number of painters and graphic artists working in South Africa between 1875 and 1970. She only includes a small sample of Black artists, some subsumed under the derogatory category "Primitives."[19] In *The Story of South African Painting* of 1975 that takes up a similar storyline but clusters artists according to ten different subjects, ranging from "Urban colonial and rural indigenous" to "The quest for identity," Berman again only mentions Black artists examplarily as members of movements such as "Township art."[20] Even though her accounts are highly biased and do not comply with present-day standards, however, Berman's role as pioneer of art historical writing in South Africa should not be disregarded. *Art and Artists of South Africa* has remained an important reference book up to this day and includes information on many artists on whom hardly any further art historical records exist. As indicated above, *Visual Century* offers a significant compensation of some of the shortcomings of Berman's fundamental work.

The two chapters addressing White settler artists in volume one of *Visual Century* are Nessa Leibhammer's "Dominant and Contrasting Patterns. The Representation of Black South Africans by White South Africans" and Juliette Leeb-du Toit's "Land and Landlessness. Revisiting the South African Landscape."[21] Leeb-du Toit briefly refers to the modernists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, whose art she labels "a form of post-colonial nationalism in which the local and indigenous, including the landscape and its people, reflected a spirit of place."[22] She then provides a more in-depth account of the landscapes of the Afrikaner nationalist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef to which I will recur in my later discussion of the artist. The second part of her chapter is dedicated to Black artists' treatments of landscape. Leibhammer's text, too, provides interesting insights but, due to its limited length, again, only touches on some of the modernists discussed in my study. Regarding White artists' portraits of Black South Africans, she writes that Stern depicted "both the essentialised Other as well as black

18 For a more in-depth review of *Visual Century* see Ogbechie, "Art, Nationalism, and Modernist Histories," pp. 78–84.

19 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 243–245.

20 Berman, *The Story of South African Painting*, pp. 210–212. "Rural Indigenous" in this case tellingly refers to the White South African born artists Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk and Hugo Naudé.

21 Additionally, institutional frameworks for mainly White art production are covered by Jillian Carman in the chapter "Art Museums and National Identity" and by Melanie Hillebrand in "White Artists in Contexts." Curiously, Hillebrand writes: "In a country as multi-cultural as South Africa, it may seem bizarre to reserve a chapter for white colonial artists of the pre-apartheid era." This statement illustrates the relatively tangential role of White South African modernism within the *Visual Century* project. Hillebrand, "White Artists in Contexts," p. 135.

22 Leeb-du Toit, "Land and Landlessness," pp. 175, 179.

individuals in a Western portrait style," that Walter Battiss "satisfied his deep desire to tap the energies of nature through what he felt was the primordial impulse manifest in the art of that quintessential Other, the San," and that Alexis Preller celebrated "the secret power of the archaic and the beauty, sacredness and sophistication of Africa."[23]

Volume two, the other volume that refers to the period covered in my research, includes three chapters overlapping with my topic: Federico Freschi's "Afrikaner Nationalism, Modernity and the Changing Canon of 'High Art'," Hazel Friedman's "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence. Ideology and Art in the Heyday of Apartheid" and Anitra Nettleton's "Primitivism in South African Art." Freschi shows that Pierneef's work was "seen as creating and reinforcing a powerful Afrikaner identification with the land, and the consequent inalienable right to its ownership" and briefly refers to Alexis Preller's murals *All Africa* (1952) and *Discovery* (1963) as examples of public commissions.[24] Other Afrikaner artists he discusses in more detail are WH Coetzer and Bettie Cilliers-Barnard, who do not fall into my research area. Friedman's chapter is dedicated to artists approaching socio-political criticism in their work prior to the Soweto uprising. She includes Battiss and Preller in her discussion and concludes that their works "demonstrate stylistic hybridity in their mediation of divergent cultural influences" and "succeeded in subverting aspects of the apartheid monolith" but that "the hybrid influences on these artists did not provide a polemic around, critique of, or commentary on South Africa's contemporary socio-political ills."[25]

Nettleton, too, includes Battiss and Preller into her survey of primitivism in South Africa. She excludes Laubser and Stern from her discussion as their primitivism "derived directly from German Expressionism" and did not "grow out of African forms or those of any other so-called primitive cultures."[26] In contrast, she argues, "Battiss's acceptance of the primacy of the San as his cultural ancestors, and his construction of their art as universally relevant, allowed him to use rock art as a sign of Africanness and thus of an 'authentic' national identity."[27] She further argues that the figures depicted in Preller's paintings "border on the surreal and clearly represent a primitivist fantasy that Preller built out of the Africa of his imagining."[28] The majority of Nettleton's chapter is dedicated to Black South African artists educated at the Polly Street and Rorke's Drift Arts Centres.

These extremely insightful texts gathered in *Visual Century* repeatedly feature in my following analysis. However, while they intermittently refer to five of the artists I focus on (Stern, Laubser, Pierneef, Battiss, Preller) in different contexts, they do not provide a comparative overview of settler primitivists working between the 1920s and 1960s. Since each is a roughly twenty-page long chapter, they also do not provide in-depth analyses but rather superficial, even if substantiated, overviews.

23 Leibhammer, "Dominant and Contrasting Patterns," pp. 53, 61.
24 Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," pp. 11, 19.
25 Friedman, "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence," p. 35.
26 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," pp. 143, 145.
27 Ibid., p. 145.
28 Ibid., p. 149.

Furthermore, the painter Gregoire Boonzaier and the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz are only mentioned in passing.[29]

The gap disclosed by the current state of research as presented above is addressed by the following research question that has directed my dissertation project: What are the different facets of South African settler primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s? From this issue, three further questions emerged: What were the topoi guiding the perception of settler primitivism during this time? How did the women pioneers Stern and Laubser benefit from primitivist discourses? Which networks did settler primitivists form in order to overcome the threshold barriers of the conservative and parochial South African art scene? I tackle these questions in four interlinked chapters.

Settler primitivism

Overall, my study addresses the significance of settler primitivism for South African modernism and thus places this movement in a wider context. In "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited: The Global Diaspora of 'Primitive Art' and the Rise of Indigenous Modernisms," Ruth Phillips stresses the importance of a better understanding of "the primitivism of settler modernist artists" as it allows for comparisons of different settler primitivisms. She argues that such comparisons can reveal

> both parallels and variations – both the shared ideologies, colonial cultures and points of historical intersection that combined to form a world system of primitivist taste, and the local specificities and contingencies that shaped each art history's distinctive iteration of modernism.[30]

As demonstrated above, such localities and contingencies have not yet been described in the case of South African settler primitivism. The term originates from Nicholas Thomas's 1999 discussion of Australian and New Zealand settlers' appropriation of indigenous art presented in *Possessions: Indigenous Art/ Colonial Culture* and is taken up by Fred Myers in Christopher Tilley et al.'s 2006 *Handbook of Material Culture*, again in the context of Australian settler art.[31] With reference to South African art, it has only been employed by John Peffer, with reference to Thomas, in *Art and the End of Apartheid*. However, Peffer does not describe the specificities of South African settler primitivism but refers to Preller and the *New Group* as a consolidation

29 Boonzaier is briefly mentioned as a *New Group* artist working in an impressionist manner interested in the working class. Carman, "Art Museums and National Identity," pp. 21, 37. Hillebrand, "White Artists in Contexts," p. 154. Leeb-du Toit, "Land and Landlessness," p. 179. Proud, "Formalism in Twentieth-Century South African Art," p. 169. Lipshitz is mentioned with regard to his support of the Black artists Gerard Sekoto and Ernest Mancoba. Rankin, "Lonely Road," pp. 99, 109, 111. Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99. Proud, "Formalism in Twentieth-Century South African Art," p. 175.

30 Phillips, "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited," p. 10.

31 Thomas, *Possessions*. Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," pp. 279–280.

of artists that can be placed within this category.[32] As shown above, "Primitivism in South African Art" is further described by Anitra Nettleton in her chapter for *Visual Century*, but her main focus lies on Black artists educated at the Polly Street and Rorke's Drift Arts Centres.[33]

A more detailed overview over the time discussed here is offered in Deane Anderson's 1956 *Fact Paper 19* for the apartheid government's State Information Office that has received no descernible interest by art historical scholars so far.[34] In this paper, Anderson develops a genealogy from "prehistoric" San rock art to contemporary settler primitivism in what the foreword describes as "a lucid analysis of the movements and undercurrents which have led to the present vitality and growth of a truly national style among South Africa's painters and sculptors."[35] While his exhibition reviews are cited in individual artist biographies, Anderson's programmatic *Fact Paper* seems to have been forgotten.[36] I found a copy in the Esmé Berman papers held at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and assume that Berman's chronology provided in *Art and Artists of South Africa* partly draws on Anderson's text. *Fact Paper 19* provides an important basis for the nationalist reception of settler primitivism from the 1940s and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Thomas's study in which he coined the term shows that Australian settler primitivism was shaped by the search for a new, emancipated self-conception: "the deep association between indigenous people and the land provided strong and condensed reference points for a colonial culture that sought both to define itself as native and to create national emblems."[37] He thus refers to the same positioning between British dominion and independent nation state that engaged South African modernists. Fred Myers, too, writes with reference to Australia that "the effort to escape the anxiety of European influence and to express a unique experience has resulted in an appropriation of the 'native', the 'indigene', as a component of an authentic national culture."[38] Ruth Phillips describes the ambivalence of such an "appropriation of new ancestors"[39] that required modernists to insist "on retaining the core meanings of 'primitive' as primal, simple, and natural, converting the negative charges associated with these terms – irrational, pre-industrial, and unsophisticated – into a set of positive attributes."[40]

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32 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 14–22.

33 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art."

34 Anderson, *Fact Paper 19.*

35 Editor's foreword to Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 1.

36 There exists no book publication comprising Anderson's writings. The Anderson archive held at the University of Cape Town only contains a few documents; mainly drawings and poems that he composed. Anderson was art critic for the *Cape Argus*, senior lecturer in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cape Town and member of the Art Advisory Committee to the apartheid government's Ministry of Education, Arts and Science at the time of publication of *Fact Paper 19*.

37 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 12.

38 Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," p. 277.

39 Also compare Stokes Sims, "The Post-modern Modernism of Wifredo Lam," p. 87.

40 Phillips, "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited," p. 6.

In *Gone Primitive. Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, Marianna Torgovnick shows how the word "primitive" has changed from its 15th century meaning of "original or ancestor" to late 18th century references to "aboriginals, inhabitants of prehistoric times, [and] natives in non-European lands" that is still in use today.[41] In art historical terms, it has referred to "painters before the Renaissance," then to "all early art," and finally to "'tribal' art – Native American, Eskimo, African, and Oceanic."[42] The latter was the definition firmly established by the 1920s.[43] These shifts in definition and usage already indicate that, as Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush put it, "'primitives' […] never existed. Only Western 'primitivism' did."[44] While "primitive" is "a racist designation, […] primitivism denotes an Occidental construction, a set of representations whose 'reality' is purely Western."[45] The most important contemporary accounts of the importance of "primitive" art for European modernism are Alfred H Barr's flow chart on the cover of *Cubism and Abstract Art* of 1936 and Robert Goldwater's dissertation *Primitivism in Modern Painting* of 1938. Barr includes "negro sculpture" in his iconic flow chart as an important influence (marked by a red square) on Fauvism and Cubism in Paris around 1905.[46] Goldwater describes how exhibitions of "primitive" artefacts as art in ethnological museums prompted European artists' engagement with such objects and led to formal innovations in their artistic practice.[47] Unfortunately, it is not known whether South African settler primitivists were familiar with Barr's and Goldwater's works.

While some art historians relate Western primitivism to other colonial exploitations since European artists used these "new-found" form languages for their own artistic profiling,[48] others include this phenomenon amongst the numerous cultural interrelations in the visual arts since antiquity.[49] The latter stance is somewhat short-sighted as it does not take into consideration the imbalanced power relations prevailing between supposedly "primitive" African, indigenous American or South Pacific artists and their European counterparts, who largely came into contact through imperial-colonial contexts. While European artists usually benefited financially from such encounters, a lot of African or Oceanic art was taken from its original owners and entered European collections. These power imbalances were also mirrored in one of the most prominent exhibitions on European primitivism of the last four decades: William Rubin's *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* that was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1984. Immediately after its opening, the exhibition and its extensive catalogue were attacked by critics such as James Clifford and Hal Foster for their imperialist and

41 Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, pp. 18–19.

42 Ibid., p. 19.

43 Ibid.

44 Barkan & Bush (eds.), *Prehistories of the Future*, p. 2.

45 Ibid. Also compare Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, p. xiii.

46 Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, cover.

47 Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*.

48 E.g. Otterbeck, *Europa verlassen*, p. 324.

49 E.g. Fulford, "The Trouble with Emily," p. 224.

dominating tendencies.[50] In more recent criticism, Rubin as well as his opponents have been criticized for retaining "the dialectical otherness of the 'primitive'" instead of acknowledging that modern European art as well as what Rubin calls "tribal" art were both "aesthetic responses to modernisation and its art markets."[51]

Attempts have been made by scholars such as Carolyn Butler Palmer to fill in the gaps, in particular with regards to Rubin's de-historisation and omission of context of the "tribal" works exhibited.[52] Monica Blackmun Visonà criticises Rubin's Eurocentric portrayal of a one-way exchange in which only European artists borrow from foreign populations. She suggests counter narratives such as Picasso's Nigerian contemporary Aina Onabolu, who experimented with English 18th and 19th century traditions.[53] Partha Mitter, too, argues that Rubin's exhibition project "while reifying tribal artifacts as timeless high art erased Third World modernisms, denying the existence of contemporary tribal artists in the name of authentic traditional art."[54] With reference to global modernisms in general, Mitter writes:

> In the cultural economy of global modernity, all artistic productions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America became marginal to the preoccupations of the core, that is, the art of Paris and later postwar London or New York. Set against the originary discourse of the avant-garde, emanating from these metropolitan centers, other modernisms were silenced as derivative and suffering from a time lag because of their geographic locations. Yet the significant point is that the center-periphery relation is not only one of geography but also of power and authority…[55]

In order to counter such centre-periphery hierarchies, my discussion of South African settler primitivists affiliates to Kravagna's "postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts" [postcolonial art history of contacts] which he advocated in *Texte zur Kunst* [Writings on Art] in 2013. In this case, "postcolonial refers to critical perspectives on disparate relationships between western and non-western, white and black modernisms."[56] Kravagna argues that the dichotomy of western and non-European art history still shaping discussions of a global art history "can only be overcome through examining exchange relations and interactions between modernities and modernisms in different regions of the world in consideration of colonial and post-colonial

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50 For a summary of the debate between 1985 and 1998 see Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, pp. 311–414.

51 McLean, "Crossing Country," p. 603.

52 Butler Palmer describes the cultural and political contexts in which objects such as the Kwakwaka'wakw mask reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue were produced and focuses on the exhibition's indigenous audience. Butler Palmer, "Renegotiating Identity."

53 Blackmun Visonà, "Agent Provocateur?", p. 121.

54 Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," p. 537.

55 Ibid., p. 540.

56 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 27. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)

power relations."[57] He stresses that, in this process, "concrete contacts and alliances between different actors" outweigh categories such as influence and reception.[58] In *Transmoderne*, Kravagna explains that such exchange relations and interactions facilitated by early transcultural modernisms were characterised by transnationalist reciprocations at eye-level that "transgressed the geographical, cultural and 'racial' borders of the colonial world order."[59]

Kravagna's postcolonial art history of contacts, of course, has to be adjusted for the South African context as I do not wish to imply that White South African modernists generally interacted with Black African artists at eye level or that such interactions were largely marked by mutual exchange rather than exploitation.[60] The situation is a lot less clear-cut than in the case studies discussed by Kravagna, and characterised by great ambivalences. While the White sculptor Lippy Lipshitz, for example, admired the art of the Black South Africans Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, his approach to them was still governed by racist stereotypes.[61] Additionally, Mancoba benefitted from the contact with White settler artists as he, for example, became familiar with West and Central African artworks through visits to Irma Stern's collection and through reading Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture* on recommendation of Lipshitz.[62] Moreover, when Stern returned from her trip to the Congo in 1942, she exhibited tradition-based sculpture she had bought from Kuba sculptors alongside her own work in exhibitions in Johannesburg and Paris, as she had promised to the Kuba king.[63] As Hal Foster argues, White modernists' "identification with 'the primitive,' however imaged as dark, feminine, and profligate, remained a *dis*identification with white, patriarchal, bourgeois society."[64] Nonetheless, in contrast to members of the Jewish diaspora discussed by Kravagna, Stern and Lipshitz did not channel their own experiences of being racially discriminated (and even persecuted) minorities into meaningful collaborations or alliances with Black artists.[65] Possibly induced by an increasing antisemitism in South Africa, especially leading up to the Second World War, Jewish artists such as Stern and Lipshitz did not rebel against the common oppression of their Black compatriots but overall

57 Kravagna, "Für eine postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts," p. 111. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)
58 Ibid. (My translation, original German on p. 267.)
59 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, p. 41. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)
60 A meaningful exchange between Black and White South African artists only showed its beginnings in the foundation of the *Amadlozi Group* in 1963. Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 21–22, 42.
61 E.g. Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 2 and 14 August 1936. Lipshitz, "Sekoto."
62 Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99.
63 Kauenhoven Janzen, "African Art in Cape Town," p. 4.
64 Foster, "'Primitive' Scenes," p. 76. (Foster's original italicisation.)
65 Examples of members of the Jewish diaspora interacting with Afro-American artists are discussed by Kravagna in *Transmoderne*, pp. 101–129.

supported (Stern) or tolerated (Lipshitz) the segregation into White and non-White populations.[66]

Still, the genesis of South African settler primitivism was shaped by different contacts of centre and periphery: those between South African and European artists and their appreciation of West and Central African sculpture, and those between White settler cosmopolitans and local art traditions such as San rock painting and Ndebele visual culture.[67] As indicated above, both of these two forms of contact were governed by ambivalences on behalf of South African settler primitivists as they swayed between transnational and national perspectives, admiring appropriation, and degrading exploitation of Black cultural heritage in an effort of their own "indigenisation." Additionally, these relations were complicated by the Afrikaners' self-definition as the first "white African race" that was affirmed by officials such as High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa in London Charles te Water in the 1930s[68] and peaked in then prime minister John Vorster's exclamation in 1971: "We are not Europeans, we are of Africa as any other person is of Africa."[69] The placement of White South Africans hence poses a challenge when dividing the world into "the West and the Rest."[70] Moreover, the term 'Afrikaner' changed its meaning from "slaves born in Africa or the offspring of slaves, free blacks and Khoisan" to "colonists of Dutch, German and French descent" and was used by prime ministers JBM Hertzog and DF Malan "to refer both to a white South African patriot and also to a Dutch Afrikaans-speaking white alone."[71]

Ambivalence

As announced above, my discussion of settler primitivism is guided by the three concepts '(trans)nationalism,' 'indigenisation' and 'ambivalence.' The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'ambivalence' in psychoanalytical terms as "the coexistence in one person of profoundly opposing emotions, beliefs, attitudes, or urges (such as love and hate, or attraction and repulsion) towards a person or thing" – coined by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler – and in general contexts as "the condition of having

66 LaNitra Michele Berger, too, stresses that Jewish South Africans largely overlooked "Black peoples' poor treatment in favor of normalizing relationships with white South Africans." Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 38. On antisemitism in South Africa see for example Bloomberg, *Christian Nationalism*. Duffy, *The Politics of Ethnic Nationalism*, pp. 80–88.

67 Jacob Hendrik Pierneef's artistic appropriation of San rock painting started in the early 1920s and the first treatment of San rock art as specifically South African cultural heritage was published by Roger Castle in 1925. Castle, "The Art of the Bushman." Artists such as Lipshitz, Stern and Preller, but also Mancoba and Sekoto, began their visits to Ndebele villages close to Pretoria in the 1930s. Ndebele art continued to play an important role for the *Amadlozi Group* in the 1960s. Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 21–22.

68 Te Water, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa," pp. 164–170.

69 Cited in Miller, *An African Volk*, p. 45.

70 Hall, "The West and the Rest."

71 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp. 217, 359.

contradictory or mixed feelings, attitudes, or urges regarding a person or thing."[72] As I do not wish to psychologise settler artists and their work, the latter definition is the one employed here. While 'ambivalence' is a recurring topic in various contexts in the following discussions, the ambivalence inherent in settler primitivism mainly arises from the concurrent appropriation of modernist techniques from Europe and the demand for developing a specifically South African art as well as from the simultaneous oppression and appreciation of Black South African cultures.[73] Nicholas Thomas writes with regards to Australian settler primitivism:

> … appropriation was only one side, only the appreciative side, of a grotesque combination of affirmation and rejection. Moreover, this settler schizophrenia was not an anomaly in the history of colonization; the business of simultaneously exhibiting and exterminating the native is consistent with the enduring invasive logic of a settler-colonial-nation. On the one hand, a self-conscious national culture that seemed permanently in the making required Aboriginality for its localizing effect; on the other, Aboriginal sovereignty and autonomy diminished the authority and coherence of the settler nation, and were persistently suppressed. It is not a question of cultural property that defines the politics of the issue, but this strangely fundamental union of adoption and antipathy.[74]

Such ambivalences are inherent in the work of all South African settler primitivists discussed in my text: Stern's exoticising pictures of Black women were largely received as dignified portraits of individuals that had previously only been treated as ethnographic subjects; Laubser's harmonising domestication of land and labour rendered visible the Black farm labourers who had been banned from previous landscape paintings; Lipshitz promoted the recognition of African sculpture as art that were commonly considered ethnographic objects in South Africa at the time; Pierneef and especially Battiss acknowledged the San authorship of South African rock art that other scholars attributed to White migrants from northern Africa; Boonzaier's romantic "slum" scenes displayed the rich cultural life of District Six that was to be bulldozed in the 1960s; Preller's mystifications of Ndebele women idolised African source material. At the same time, all of these artistic approaches can also be considered colonial appropriations of oppressed indigenous cultures that served the aim of advancing the settler artists' own "indigenisation."

(Trans)nationalism

The brackets around the prefix 'trans' illustrate settler artists' shifting orientation between transnational and national perspectives that I have just indicated. While

72 "ambivalence, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/6176, last accessed on 26 February 2023.

73 Also compare Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 21.

74 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 213.

especially the pioneers Stern and Laubser had to legitimise their modernist work through links with European movements such as the German *Brücke* [Bridge] expressionism in the 1920s and 1930s, the increasing demand for a specifically South African art considerably gained momentum from the 1940s. There is no entry for 'transnationalism' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it defines the adjective 'transnational' as "extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers."[75] In *Transnational Connections*, Ulf Hannerz differentiates 'transnational' from 'international' as the latter "in the strict sense [involves] nations – actually, states – as corporate actors. In the transnational arena, the actors may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises."[76] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton argue in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration* that especially immigrants can be considered representative of such transnational actors: "immigrants live their lives across borders and maintain their ties to home, even when their countries of origin and settlement are geographically distant. [...] migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders."[77]

The best example of this is certainly Irma Stern, who grew up between South Africa and Germany and whose work in both countries productively cross-fertilised up to the fascist takeover in Germany in 1933. The other settler primitivists, too, maintained their ties to their European heritage, even if this was sometimes defined more loosely than in the case of Stern. While Pierneef was oriented towards his father's country of origin, the Netherlands, others forged new ties with European artistic centers in England (Laubser, Boonzaier, Lipshitz), France (Lipshitz, Preller) and Germany (Laubser). While Battiss travelled extensively, his attachment to Europe was less pronounced. Indeed, he was the only settler primitivist discussed who did not study abroad. It might be due to this, in addition to his engagement with San rock art, that Battiss is sometimes singled out as "native" South African.[78]

'Nationalism,' on the other hand, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "advocacy of or support for the interests of one's own nation, esp. to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations."[79] In the context of 20th century South African history, nationalism is usually equated with Afrikaner nationalism.[80] Although this particular manifestation of South African nationalism plays an important role especially in the reception of the Afrikaner artists Maggie Laubser and JH Pierneef, a more generally nationalist stance can also be observed from the 1940s. A clear distinction, however, is difficult as Boonzaier and Preller were Afrikaners, too, and

75 "transnational, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/204944, last accessed on 26 February 2023.

76 Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, p. 6.

77 Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton (eds.), *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, p. xi.

78 E.g. Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 145.

79 "nationalism, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/125289, last accessed on 26 February 2023.

80 E.g. Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism." Freschi, Schmahmann & Van Robbroeck (eds.), *Troubling Images*.

even Stern's German parentage and upbringing was sometimes confused with an Afrikaner heritage.[81]

"Indigenisation"

The most contested of the three terms guiding my discussion is probably 'indigenisation.' It is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the act or process of rendering indigenous or making predominantly native" as well as the "adaptation or subjection to the influence or dominance of the indigenous inhabitants of a country."[82] The term thus usually either refers to the indigenisation of originally foreign cultural elements – such as Christian traditions – into local customs or to the "going native" of European settlers. However, I would like to propose using the term differently. In the following analysis, it will refer to White settlers' endeavour to proclaim themselves indigenous to the South African land. This enterprise also becomes apparent in the ethnonym 'Afrikaner' originating from the Dutch, and especially in the adjective 'Afrikaans' that is identical with the Dutch word for 'African' (adj.) and still in use today. According to Hermann Giliomee, "the first recorded occasion of a European using 'Afrikaner' as a name for himself" was when the Dutch-German descendant Hendrik Biebouw, caught causing drunken havoc in Stellenbosch, in 1707 exclaimed: "*ik wil niet loopen, ik ben een Afrikaander*" [I shall not leave, I am an Afrikaander].[83] However, their "self-indigenisation" did not mean that White settlers in South Africa declared to hark back to an African genetic heritage – as it has become a growing practice in Canada where White French descendants strive to identify an Indigenous ancestor born twelve generations ago in order to oppose Indigenous land and territorial negotiations[84] – but that they sought to establish themselves as a new "white African race."[85] I am therefore placing the word in inverted commas in order to stress that the process of "indigenisation" prompted by the settler primitivists discussed in my study was not an approximation to or alliance with South Africa's indigenous inhabitants but rather an effort of claiming roots in an alleged *terra nullius* [nobody's land].

In general, South African settler primitivists' "indigenisation" was critically advanced by ambivalent acts of cultural appropriation. In his discussion of the Australian settler primitivist Margaret Preston, Thomas writes that "if appropriations do have a

81 For example, in a German-language booklet on eight South African artists issued by the Information Service, Stern is said to be of "Jewish-German-Afrikaans" heritage. Bosman, *Acht zeitgenössische Maler aus Südafrika*, n.p. (Unfortunately, I was unable to find out, on what occasion this booklet was published.) In personal conversations held with art-interested individuals in South Africa, too, I often met with the misconception that Stern was Afrikaans. In addition to the proximity of the Afrikaans, Dutch and German languages, this might be due to the fact that Stern's father Samuel sympathised with the Boers during the South African War and was arrested by the British in 1900. As a result, the family relocated to Germany for some time in 1901.

82 "indigenization, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/94473, last accessed on 26 February 2023.

83 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 2003, p. 22–23. (Translation provided by Giliomee.)

84 Leroux, *Distorted Descent*, 2019.

85 E.g. Te Water, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa," pp. 164–170.

general character, it is surely that of unstable duality. In some proportion, they always combine taking and acknowledgement, appropriation and homage, a critique of colonial exclusions, and collusion in imbalanced exchange."[86] LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker), for instance, in 2004 interviewed Nontembiso Sompeta, an educational assistant at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town of Xhosa origin, who "described the 'dignity' and 'respect for their culture' that Stern had for blacks in the Transkei, mentioning that Stern's paintings helped her to learn more about traditional customs that had been forgotten as blacks migrated to cities."[87] In general, cultural appropriation has also been seen "as ways in which hybrid cultures come about, which themselves may become reappropriated by the original groups as leavening for their own cultural renaissances."[88] However, James Young and Susan Haley convincingly argue that "the colonization of Indigenous cultures is a coercive process. Consequently, any representation of a colonized culture may be ethically suspect."[89] While this is certainly the case, it should be kept in mind that "appreciation and appropriation have been intimately connected, and are essentially double-sided processes."[90]

Cultural appropriation may for example refer to appropriations of artworks, styles or visual culture, but also to representations of other cultures. Young and Haley explicate that "subject appropriation occurs when members of one culture (call them outsiders for the sake of brevity) represent members of other cultures (insiders for the sake of convenience) or aspects of insiders' culture."[91] They further elaborate that "it occurs in the arts, when artists from one culture represent aspects of another culture, or people who belong to it."[92] Subject appropriation for example features in Stern's portraits of Black South Africans, in Laubser's depictions of Black farm labourers and in Boonzaier's Bo-Kaap or District Six scenes. While Pierneef and Battiss stylistically appropriate San rock art, Preller can be considered to appropriate Ndebele visual culture as well as Dogon sculpture. Lipshitz, too, strongly draws on West African sculpture. However, also Pierneef's and Laubser's landscapes can be considered appropriations when they are "understood against the background of the appropriation of land."[93] Jeremy Foster shows in *Washed with Sun. Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* how (visual) appropriations of landscape "helped mediate the construction of the cultural identity that came to be known as 'South African.'"[94] Landscape art therefore formed an imperative part in the development of a South African national identity. In a similar vein, Lize van Robbroeck argues that in White settler artists' "romanticised studies of 'natives' […] settler identity is presented

86 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 141.
87 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 201.
88 Heyd, "Rock Art Aesthetics and Cultural Appropriation," p. 38.
89 Young & Haley, "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere'," p. 283.
90 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 158.
91 Young & Haley, "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere'," p. 268.
92 Ibid.
93 Young, *Cultural Appropriation*, p. 3.
94 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 3.

as indigenous by proxy."[95] Such appropriations therefore were a crucial instrument in settler primitivists' (and by extension their audiences') "indigenisation" into the South African land.

Unavoidable ethnic terminology

As South African society was organised along racial classifications during apartheid as well as in the time leading up to it, referring to different ethnic groups always bears the risk of reproducing racist terminologies. However, it seems impossible to write about this time without reverting to such categories to a certain extent. In my discussion, the term 'Afrikaner' refers to Afrikaans-speaking White South Africans (e.g. Maggie Laubser, JH Pierneef) or to White South Africans whose background or heritage was considered Afrikaans at the time (e.g. Gregoire Boonzaier, Alexis Preller). In addition, I refer to South Africa's first nations that for example produced the famous rock paintings in the Drakensberg as 'San.' Even though this is originally a derogatory exonym used by Khoe-speaking peoples, it has largely replaced the equally derogatory term "Bushmen" or, even worse, "Hottentot."[96] Other Black South Africans at the time under investigation mostly belonged to Bantu-speaking peoples who had settled in Southern Africa about 2,000 years ago – a fact that was concealed by the apartheid myth of the empty land which claimed that "the Dutch and Bantu-speaking Africans arrived in South Africa at approximately the same time."[97] In modern South Africa, the label 'English' usually refers to English-speaking South Africans and 'British' to British nationals. Moreover, I employ the terms 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' that are still in use today in order to relate to these two groups that, however, play a subordinate role in my study.

Case studies

The selection of my seven case studies is based on the one hand on their engagement with primitivism and on the other on their significance for the developments within the South African art scene at the time. As indicated above, Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser are largely considered the founders of modern art in South Africa. They both came into contact with German expressionism during longer sojourns in Berlin in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and thus with the European appreciation of African art. Building onto these affiliations, Stern established herself as first modern artist in South Africa, depicting "natives" as national cultural assets. Laubser benefited from this groundwork and soon came to be known as pioneer Afrikaner modernist. Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, too, largely profited from his Afrikaans heritage and patronage, and was one of the first artists to engage with San rock painting. His graphic appropriations of South African landscapes quickly became iconic representations of the approach to land by White South Africans. Lippy Lipshitz and Gregoire Boonzaier, on the other hand, were both instrumental in bringing about a regime change in the

95 Van Robbroeck, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 56.
96 Barnard, *Anthropology and the Bushman*, pp. 4–7.
97 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p. 30.

English-oriented South African art scene through the formation of the *New Group*. While Lipshitz took up West African form languages in his sculptures that he often executed in indigenous materials, Boonzaier produced romantic scenes of Cape Town's culturally diverse quarters District Six and Boo-Kap, which were classified as Cape impressionism. Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller are traditionally considered the first artists to consciously employ primitivist modes of painting in order to develop a specifically South African art, and are therefore the settler primitivists with the strongest nationalist project.

There are several other artists – such as Maurice van Essche or Pranas Domšaitis – who also worked in primitivist manners but who only arrived in South Africa fairly late and are therefore less relevant to discussions on the formation of a new South African art at the time. Likewise, there are a number of artists – such as Ruth Prowse or Cecil Higgs – who were important protagonists of the changing South African art scene but whose work cannot be categorised as primitivist. Nevertheless, I will repeatedly recur to them, especially Higgs, when outlining the structural difficulties faced by (women) modernists at the time. A more ambiguous case is presented by the painter and printmaker Cecil Skotnes. His contribution to primitivism in South Africa is undisputed and I srongly considered including him in my study. However, he is another fifteen years younger than the youngest artist discussed (Preller), with a career only starting to kick off in the 1950s. Skotnes ran the influential Polly Street Art Centre where he worked with artists such as Sydney Kumalo and therefore stands for a significantly different approach to Black South African art. Moreover, his contribution to the articulation of a Black primitivism has already received considerable attention.[98]

Timeframe

I focus on the time span between the 1920s and 1960s as it, on the one hand, marks the artistic career of Irma Stern in South Africa, who was the most influential pioneer of modernism in this country, and, on the other, as it can probably be considered the most concentrated period of White nation-building. In 1910, the British colony that had been forcefully constructed during the South African War (1899–1902) by fusing together the previously independent Boer Republics Orange Free State (today Free State) and Transvaal (Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West provinces) with the British Cape (today Eastern, Western and Northern Cape) and Natal (KwaZulu Natal) colonies was declared a nominally independent dominion as the Union of South Africa. The National Party, that was to institutionalise segregationist apartheid from 1948, was founded in 1914, for the first time showed its strength in the election of 1920 and took over government from the South African Party in 1924. The Union became fully sovereign under prime minister JBM Hertzog in 1931. From 1934 to 1948, the Union Party, which was a merger of the National and South African parties, ruled South Africa first under Hertzog, then under Jan Christian Smuts. In

98 E.g. Rankin, "Teaching and Learning." Miles, *Polly Street*. Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, pp. 192–194. Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art." Rankin, "Creating Communities."

1948, the National Party was re-elected to power and passed several segregationist laws that formed the basis of the racist apartheid state whose withdrawal would only start in 1990. The nationalist movement reached its peak in 1961 when a referendum open to White voters only turned the Union into a Republic under "apartheid architect" Hendrik Verwoerd, who was assassinated in 1966.[99] His successor John Vorster's period of governance was shaken by different crises such as the Soweto uprising of 1976, the Steve Biko crisis of 1977 and the Muldergate or information scandal that was uncovered in 1978.[100]

As shown above in the discussion of Sue Williamson's survey, the 1970s also saw the rise of "Resistance Art" in South Africa. Following the Soweto uprising, artists started becoming more vocal about the inhumanity of the apartheid system and art became increasingly political. At a conference hosted by the University of Cape Town in 1979, White artists "pledged to no longer allow their work to be sent overseas to represent South Africa until all state-funded art institutions were open to black as well as white students."[101] By this time, most of the settler primitivists discussed in my dissertation had died: Pierneef in 1957, Stern in 1966, Laubser in 1973 and Preller in 1975. Lipshitz gave up his teaching position at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1968. He joined his daughter Leonora in Israel in 1978 and died two years later. Little is known of the years between his retirement and relocation to Israel. Battiss abandoned his occupation with San rock art and launched the conceptual, multidisciplinary, farcical work "Fook Island," whose first happening took place during the opening of the Goodman-Wolman Gallery in Cape Town in 1974.[102] In *Visual Century*, Roger van Wyk describes this project in which Battiss conceived an imaginary island – crowning himself as its king – as a humorous and escapist effort of using "Eros as strategy" but also as challenging ideas of (White South African) nationalism.[103] Boonzaier, on the other hand, held on to his Cape impressionism and even continued painting romantic "slum" scenes of District Six after its demolition had already started.[104]

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is twofold: on the one hand, I am reading artworks as documents of settler primitivists' engagement with South African indigenous cultures, materials and landscapes, and on the other, I am analysing archival

99 Kenney, *Verwoerd*.

100 For good historical overviews refer to Davenport & Saunders, *South Africa*. Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*.

101 Williamson, *Resistance Art. Reissue of the Classic*, p. 9.

102 Friedman, "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence," pp. 47–49.

103 Van Wyk, "The (Non)Sense of Humour," pp. 165–169.

104 Boonzaier did, however, take on a Coloured pupil, the painter Conrad Theys, in 1969 and, according to his biographer Martin Bekker, he lent "assistance to black schools through the Argus company's TEACH programme" and donated "bursaries for black teachers." Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 100. Curiously, it is also said that Boonzaier was – at some point – a member of the Communist Party. Proud, "Formalism in Twentieth-Century South African Art," p. 169.

material in order to form suppositions on artists' motivations as well as the reception of their work. In addition to artworks being documents of artistic practice, they are also indicative of socio-political processes affecting their genesis. Moreover, the works of all artists discussed were exhibited in contexts in which they were intended to represent South African art, such as the "Empire Exhibition" in Johannesburg in 1936, the exhibition of South African art travelling from the Tate Gallery in London to Brussels, Paris, Ottawa, Washington D.C. and back to South Africa in 1948 and 1949, or the South African participation in the Venice biennales of 1950 to 1958. They were also acquired by South African legations in various countries where they were most likely supposed to visualise the alleged difference between South Africa's ethnic groups propagated by segregationist policies. As objects of the public realm, their reception is extremely telling. It therefore plays a crucial part in my discussion.

Drawing on archival research that entailed the analysis of close to 600 newspaper and magazine articles and more than 300 letters, as well as various exhibition catalogues, diaries, speeches and other manuscripts, obtained from in total 25 archival collections held at 10 different institutions, one of the major merits of this study is the comprehensive comparison of archival material on South Africa's most dominant modernists. Whereas earlier studies have focused on individual artists and their respective archives, my research is able to fill in gaps for example by examining correspondences between artists such as Lippy Lipshitz and Cecil Higgs, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Edward Roworth or Irma Stern and Thelma Gutsche that are kept at different archives. The following archives were consulted during three longer research trips to South Africa in 2016, 2017/18 and 2020 and a shorter one to the UK in 2019:[105]

- Johannesburg Public Library: Thelma Gutsche Collection, Thelma Gutsche Stern Collection
- National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria: JH Pierneef-Versameling
- National Library of South Africa, Cape Town: DC Boonzaier Diaries, Irma Stern Collection, Irma Stern (Miscl.) Collection, Irma Stern (Berman) Collection, Ruth Prowse Collection
- North-West University, Potchefstroom: JH Pierneef Collection
- Norval Foundation, Cape Town: Alexis Preller Archive
- Stellenbosch University: AC Bouman Collection, Maggie Laubser Collection, Cecil Higgs Collection
- University of Cape Town: Dronsfield Collection, Purwitsky Collection, Irma Stern Papers, Lippy Lipshitz Papers, Deane Anderson Collection, Hilda Purwitsky/ Roza van Gelderen Papers
- University of Pretoria: Irma Stern Archive, Alexis Preller Archive
- University of the Witwatersrand: Sarah Gertrude Millin Papers, Richard Feldman Papers, Esmé Berman Papers
- University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK: Michael Cardew Papers

105 A list of the exact designations of these collections including respective abbreviations used in my references can be found on pp. 237–238.

Documents of interest to my study contained in these archives were mainly writings by, to and on the seven South African settler primitivists serving me as case studies. Additionally, I consulted biographies of these artists as well as literature on the representation of South African landscapes such as Jeremy Foster's *Washed with Sun*, on the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] such as Katharina Sykora's *Die neue Frau* and Marsha Meskimmon's *We Weren't Modern Enough*, on artists' myths such as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's *Die Legende vom Künstler* [The Legend of the Artist] and Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtis and Silke Wenk's *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* [Myths of Authorship and Femininity in the Twentieth Century] as well as on the *New Group* such as Murray Schoonraad's "History of the New Group" and Julia Kukard's *Critical History of the New Group*. An important point of reference has also been Esmé Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa. An illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters & graphic artists since 1875*. Further details on each of these publications is provided in the context of the respective chapters.

Chapter Outline

This book is divided into four interrelated chapters. The first chapter contextualises South African settler primitivism by presenting an overview of contemporary publications on primitivism and fine art influential at the time and paying closer attention to Nicholas Thomas's discussion of the term 'settler primitivism.' Briefly introducing artists from the other settler nations Australia, USA and Canada provides a rough frame of reference. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to discussions of works and statements by my seven South African case studies: Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, JH Pierneef, Lippy Lipshitz, Gregoire Boonzaier, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller. These discussions carve out the individual primitivist aspects of each artist's approach by differentiating between stylistic and content-related primitivism that may refer to gender, race and/ or class. This does not mean that all artists worked in either one or the other primitivist mode but sometimes employed a mix of different primitivisms. They mainly concentrated on depicting indigenous South African peoples, showing the country's non-White majority in a way that would clearly cast them as removed from, uninterested in and finally incapable of participating in any form of modern, contemporary socio-political life.

My second chapter highlights different topics that shaped the art critical reception of South African settler primitivism in various print publications between the 1920s and 1960s. A caesura can be discerned in South Africa's decision to support Britain in the Second World War, dividing the period into first more transnationally and then increasingly nationally oriented criticisms. While the transnationalist perspective of the 1920s and 1930s concentrated on the defence of modernist art through references to European trends including an interest in indigenous cultures, recuring topoi in the nationalist criticism of the 1940s to 1960s were the dissociation from Europe and a concurrent "indigenisation," an allegedly South African spirit, soul and soil as well as "native" art. The other themes discussed in this chapter can be traced through all decades under investigation. They include more general primitivist discourses focussing on ideas of truth, essentiality and childhood, the relevance

of social criticism in modern art and male artists' myths that were employed by critics in order to position artists such as Boonzaier, Lipshitz and Pierneef within the discourse of the artist "genius" glorifying male creativity.

A whole chapter is then dedicated to women artists' myths and the examination of Irma Stern's and Maggie Laubser's self-narratives that boosted their careers. By placing them in the *Neue Frau* discourse, I show how they strategically used feminine and primitivist stereotypes in order to introduce modernist modes of painting into the patriarchal, conservative South African art scene. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first one describes the *Neue Frau* as a historical phenomenon in 1920s Germany, the second is dedicated to Stern's skilful transnationalist self-positioning between Germany and South Africa and the third one locates Laubser's self-portrayal as a Christian farmer's daughter in relation to Afrikaner *voortrekkervrou* [pioneer woman] and *volksmoeder* [mother of the nation] ideals. Parts two and three both refer to the two women's own accounts as well as to their reception as *Neue Frauen*. In the case of Stern, the latter was shaped by an interesting synergy of German and South African press, and in the case of Laubser, Afrikaans-language reviews play a prominent role.

My last chapter offers an excursus on artists' networks that enabled South African modernists to achieve the recognition of modern art in South Africa pioneered by Stern and Laubser. The most important groups at the time were women's networks, the Jewish diaspora, Afrikaner networks and the *New Group*. While the Jewish diaspora and women's networks were mainly formed in order to generally support the careers of their members that were usually marginalised in mainstream society, the Afrikaner network was more identity-based and also had a political/ nationalist component. The foremostly younger generation organised in the *New Group*, on the other hand, intended to cause a transformation of the conservative, rigid and rusty structures governing the art scene in South Africa, and to professionalise its frameworks. All four networks often overlapped – with the exception of Jewish and Afrikaner networks that clearly occupied two different poles of ethnic representation – and its members frequently interacted. Even though the topic of primitivism did not feature as a point of discussion in any of those networks, they were of great importance for the careers of the settler primitivists surveyed here.

Limitations

A great regret is that three folders of the JH Pierneef collection held at the National Archive in Pretoria (Aanwins A941, records 18–20) were missing during both my research trips in early 2018 and 2020.[106] They contain writings by Pierneef such as lectures as well as contemporary texts on his art and were possibly last accessed by NJ Coetzee for his 1992 publication *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*.[107] It can be as-

106 In 2016, I did not visit the National Archive.

107 In his footnotes, Coetzee repeatedly refers to these three folders. Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*.

sumed that they still have not been retrieved as my persistent inquiries have lately remained unanswered.

Luckily, my research was only slightly affected by the restrictions put in place to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Although my last research trip to South African archives was cut short by a week, I had by then managed to close all the main gaps left open during my previous research stays. It is possible that a closer scrutinisation of the Alexis Preller Archive held at the Norval Foundation in the Western Cape might have been beneficial. But since this archive was uncatalogued and unsorted at the time of my visit in 2020, this would have required a very time-intensive effort. It remains for other researchers to make up for this involuntary omission. The same holds true for Esmé Berman's audio-visual material her daughter Kathy Berman conveyed to Wits Historical Papers in 2019 which was not yet accessible to the public during my visit in February/ March 2020.