1 SETTLER PRIMITIVISM IN SOUTH AFRICA BETWEEN THE 1920s AND 1960s

This chapter consists of two parts: a contextualisation of South African settler primitivism and seven case studies describing its different facets. I will first give an overview of contemporary publications on primitivism and fine art that were influential at the time. Those include Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* [Negro Sculpture] (1915), Roger Fry's *Vision and Design* (1920), Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1926) and Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (1938). Departing from Nicholas Thomas's application of the term 'settler primitivism,' I will then introduce primitivisms originating in three other settler nations by briefly discussing works by Margaret Preston (Australia), Marsden Hartley (USA) and Emily Carr (Canada). Rather than introducing in-depth investigations, these examples indicate the possibilities for further comparative studies that exceed the scope of my research, while still providing a context for the ensuing discussion. The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the examination of seven South African settler primitivists that were born between 1886 and 1911: Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, Lippy Lipshitz, Gregoire Boonzaier, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller. Differentiating between stylistic and content-related primitivism that may refer to gender, race or class, I analyse the artists' works and remarks in order to disclose different foci and agendas of South African settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, the discussion addresses the ambivalences inherent in their swaying between transnational and national perspectives as well as in the attempts at their own "indigenisation."

1.1 Theoretical background and context

Although there are many publications on primitivism in European art that are too numerous to discuss here,[1] this chapter offers a short overview of contemporary texts relevant to South African settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century. It intends to show how European ideas about African art have sparked an interest in the latter in South African artists who had thus far disregarded the visual culture of their Black countrymen and women. Getting in contact with ideas by theorists such as Carl Einstein, Roger Fry, Thomas Munro and Robert Goldwater through their encounters

1 A good overview is provided in Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*.

Publiziert in: Hörstmann, Lisa: (Trans)Nationalism and "Indigenisation": Ambivalences in South African Settler Primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s.
Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1081

with European art scenes, such thought is likely to have had a considerable impact on South African artists when trying to overcome the hitherto dominating academic naturalism at home. While it is known that some of the texts discussed in this chapter were read and highly regarded by artists such as Irma Stern and Lippy Lipshitz, others offer more general insights into primitivist discourses prevalent at the time.

1.1.1 Influential contemporary publications

The first influential theoretical treatment of African art was the German art historian Carl Einstein's publication *Negerplastik* of 1915. Soon after its release, it was widely read by artists and scholars in Europe but also by South Africans such as Irma Stern or Lippy Lipshitz. In his book, Einstein devotes five marked sections to "Method," "The Painterly," "Religion and African Art," "Cubic Treatment of Space" as well as "The Mask and Related Issues."[2] These rather brief explications are followed by 119 full-page illustrations of artworks for which Einstein chose not to provide any information such as origin or period. The objective of his publication was to criticise contemporary Europeans' degradation of African art and its producers by formally discussing the objects as pure works of art beyond any anthropological or ethnographical concerns.[3] Einstein had never been to Africa and, in the 119 photographs of African sculptures he collected for his volume, presents the works in a highly aestheticised, stylised and minimalist manner, effacing any "impurities" such as paint, nails, blades, cloth, etc. originally attached to the figures.[4] As Zoe S Strother puts it, "the photoarchive (or *Bilderatlas*) of *Negerplastik* defined the canon of African art displayed in museums."[5]

Reneging his own resolution of disregarding ethnographical concerns and focusing solely on the formal qualities of the sculptures reproduced, Einstein describes the works as religious art that he considers to be autonomous and transcending its creators. Einstein further asserts that, as African art is apparently determined by religious concerns, "it does not mean anything, it does not symbolise anything; it is the God that retains his enclosed mythical reality in which he includes the worshipper, transforming him into a mythical being and suspending his human existence."[6] As mentioned earlier, Stern and Lipshitz read Einstein's publication early on in their respective careers and both later organised exhibitions of African art in South Africa where it took until the 1940s until it was recognised as such. I will show in the discussion of the individual artists' works how spiritual concerns such as those proclaimed by Einstein played a significant role in South African settler primitivism, too.

---

2 Einstein, *Negerplastik*. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)
3 Ibid., pp. VII–VIII.
4 Also compare Strother, "Looking for Africa," pp. 8–10.
5 Ibid., p. 10.
6 Einstein, *Negerplastik*, p. XV.

Another important text, published five years after Einstein's *Negerplastik*, was the British painter and art critic Roger Fry's collection of essays *Vision and Design*. Amongst others, the volume includes chapters on "The Art of the Bushmen," "Negro Sculpture" and "Ancient American Art." In "The Art of the Bushmen," Fry claims that South African "Bushmen" (today usually referred to as San) were descendants of Palaeolithic man due to certain similarities between Altamira and San rock paintings. However, he maintains that the "Altamira drawings show a much higher level of accomplishment" and that the South African "Bushmen" are the "lowest of savages" that "are regarded by other native races in much the same way that we look upon negroes."[7] In a similar vein, in his essay on "Negro Sculpture," Fry states that African art is characterised by "complete artistic freedom" but that "for want of a conscious critical sense and the intellectual powers of comparison and classification [...] the negro has failed to create one of the great cultures of the world."[8] These racist, derogatory assertions clearly differ from Einstein's idealisation of African art. As Fry's unsubstantiated hierarchy places South African art at the bottom and below other African artmakers, it is logical that South African primitivists, who were trying to assign higher value to their country's cultural heritage, showed a greater interest in Einstein's work. However, it is likely that artists such as Walter Battiss were familiar with Fry's text when striving to place San rock painting in a hierarchy above the Altamira drawings.

The third text on African art to receive great attention in the early 20th century was the 1926 catalogue *Primitive Negro Sculpture* that was published by the French art dealer and collector Paul Guillaume and the American art historian and philosopher Thomas Munro in collaboration with the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania. Lippy Lipshitz for example read the book in the 1930s and recommended it to the Black South African artist Ernest Mancoba.[9] It takes on a more ethnographical approach describing the social and religious usage of works reproduced, the geographical areas they originated from as well as giving formal analyses. It also includes a short chapter on the influence of African art on contemporary artists which the authors consider a chance for new developments in European art.

A whole volume on primitivism in European art was published by Robert Goldwater in 1938, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*. Unfortunately, it is not known how this was received in South Africa. Goldwater argues that artists' interest in "primitive" art was caused by ethnological museums exhibiting "primitive" artefacts as art. He describes what he considers a "change in ethnology as a whole away from the evolutionary point of view and toward the intense study of primitive cultures as integral units."[10] He further undertakes a subdivision into four different kinds of primitivism: romantic primitivism (examples he gives for this are Henri Rousseau, Paul Gauguin, *les Fauves* [the Wild Beasts]), emotional primitivism (*Der Blaue Reiter*

7 Fry, *Vision and Design*, pp. 93–94.
8 Ibid., pp. 100–103.
9 Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99.
10 Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 42.

[The Blue Rider], *Die Brücke* [The Bridge]), intellectual primitivism (Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg) and primitivism of the subconscious (Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Jean Dubuffet). Goldwater's categories, however, cannot be meaningfully applied to primitivism in South Africa, and neither can George Boas and Arthur Lovejoy's categories of hard and soft primitivism symbolised by the noble savage on the one hand and the desire for a golden age on the other.[11] Judith Elisabeth Weiss convincingly contends that these attempts at classification are extremely problematic as the meanings and connotations of terms such as 'primitivism,' 'primitivity' and 'exoticism' are prone to constant shifts.[12] I will suggest other categories at the beginning of Chapter 1.2 that are more fit to describe South African primitivism as they refer to artists' iconographic programmes rather than intentions or psychologies.

1.1.2 Settler primitivism

The term 'settler primitivism' was coined by the Australian anthropologist Nicholas Thomas in order to describe the specific character of primitivism in the settler nations Australia and New Zealand. In *Possessions. Indigenous Art / Colonial Culture*, Thomas argues that "the ambivalence of settlers toward natives was sharpened by an emerging preoccupation with national identity [...] in British dominions such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand from the 1890s."[13] As a result, Thomas concludes,

> producers of culture [...] frequently turned to what was locally distinctive, either in the natural environment or in indigenous culture. 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. [...] While indigenous people's claims to the land are being denied or forgotten, elements of their culture are being prominently displayed and affirmed. The 'native' status of the new settler nation is proclaimed in a fashion that perforce draws attention to real natives who are excluded. Primitivism in settler culture is therefore something both more and less than primitivism in modernist art.[14]

In contrast to European primitivism, therefore, settler primitivism is ascribed a nationalist and more local focus. Additionally, it is characterised by a great ambivalence towards its native subjects whose culture is appropriated in order to form a connection

11 Boas & Lovejoy, *Primitivism and Related Ideas*, pp. 7–11.
12 Weiss, *Der gebrochene Blick*, p. 68.
13 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 12.
14 Ibid.

Fig. 1: Margaret Preston, *Aboriginal landscape*, 1941, oil on board, 40 × 52 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, D & JT Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982

Fig. 2: Margaret Preston, *Australian native pear*, 1942, oil on masonite, 20 × 16 cm, private collection

to the land, but who are simultaneously denied any claim to it.[15] Additionally, Thomas stresses that, again unlike 20th century European modernism, settler primitivism is not "necessarily the project of radical formal innovation stimulated by tribal art [...] but, rather, often an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one."[16] He describes different ways settler artists dealt with this culture: "some framed it nostalgically and sentimentally; some romanticized the colonial endeavor; others acknowledged its imperfections and struggled with the question of dispossession."[17]

With specific reference to Australia and New Zealand which form the focus of his study, Thomas argues that a settler iconography began to emerge in the late 19th century that drew on "images of indigenous artifacts and people, as well as kangaroos and kiwis" in order to "provide a solution to a problem of colonial identity" beyond a settler culture customarily described as "unavoidably derivative, and [...] a displaced and second-rate version of Britishness."[18] With reference to the visual arts, he employs the Australian painter and printmaker Margaret Preston as an example. In 1941, Preston had written that "the attention of the Australian people must be drawn to the fact that [Aboriginal art] is great art and the foundation of a national culture for this country."[19] Thomas argues that this and similar remarks frequently published by Preston at the time did not emanate from "a desire to emulate modernists elsewhere" but were "explicitly nationalistic" and "deeply inflected by a Ruskinian

15 Also compare Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," pp. 279–280.
16 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.
17 Ibid., p. 34.
18 Ibid., p. 96.
19 Cited in ibid., p. 97.

localism."[20] The two works *Aboriginal landscape* (1941, Fig. 1) and *Australian native pear, etc* (1942, Fig. 2) that originate from the same time as Preston's statement cited above are good examples of how the artist incorporated different Aboriginal form languages into her designs. Both works are executed in the traditional colours of red and yellow ochre and black charcoal. While the geometrical designs and patterns in *Aboriginal landscape* reference traditional rock and bark art, *Australian native pear, etc* also points at dot designs originating from ceremonial body and sand paintings. Additionally, both paintings portray a typical Australian fauna – in terms of general landscape as well as specific flowers, plants and fruit – and were given titles featuring adjectives that emphasise locality and nativity: "Aboriginal" and "Australian native." In contrast to South African settler primitivists, Preston never portrayed Aboriginal peoples themselves but rather objects they produced or environments they lived in.

In her PhD dissertation *Writing Native: The Aboriginal in Australian Cultural Nationalism 1927–1945*, Ellen Smith states that Margaret Preston "was perhaps the first to explicitly link the Aboriginal to an Australian national culture."[21] However, in contrast to Thomas, Smith maintains that even though Preston "describes herself as creating a domestic art in order to ground a provincial, national identity," she also locates her practice of referencing Aboriginal form languages within the larger context of primitivist tendencies in European modernism.[22] Smith concludes that "the Aboriginal is implicitly seen as part of a global conglomerate of primitive and colonized people, but is also claimed as a figure for Australian geographic isolation and cultural purity" and hence, for Preston, "must both signify local specificity, and at the same time introduce Australia to the world."[23] Smith therefore adds a transnational component to Thomas's description of Australian settler primitivism as local and crucial for an internal Australian identity in the visual arts. She emphasises how, to artists such as Preston, the representation of national identity abroad and the embeddedness of their primitivism in larger international discourses were important for the development of a national Australian art. The fact that the latter complied with and made use of stereotypes originating from colonial culture helped this project rather than hindering it. This positioning between intranational as well as transnational concerns was equally relevant for South African primitivists.

While South African and Australian primitivisms are not discussed in any of the significant publications on the relationship of primitivism and modern art, William Rubin's highly contested anthology *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* does contain a chapter on primitivism in another settler nation, the United States of America, by Gail Levin.[24] In this text, Levin draws a line from Arthur Wesley Dow and Max Weber

20 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 116.
21 Smith, *Writing Native*.
22 Ibid., pp. 24–25.
23 Ibid., p. 28.
24 Levin, "American Art." For criticism of Rubin's MoMA exhibition and the accompanying catalogue see Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, pp. 311–414. McLean, "Crossing Country," p. 603. Butler Palmer, "Renegotiating Identity," p. 187. Blackmun Visonà, "Agent Provocateur?," p. 121.

Fig. 3: Marsden Hartley, *Indian Fantasy*, 1914, oil on canvas, 119 × 100 cm, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with Funds from the State of North Carolina

to Marsden Hartley, followed by brief paragraphs on a number of other American artists such as Marius de Zayas, John Storrs, John Graham and George LK Morris. Like Margaret Preston and the South African artists portrayed in the next chapter, Weber and Hartley became interested in primitive art during their sojourns in Europe. While Weber adhered to his Cubist interest in African sculpture and especially masks upon his return to the US, Hartley concentrated on the "natives" of his own country in order

to develop a new national art based on America's indigenous "cultural assets."[25] A work characteristic for Hartley's engagement with Native American culture that is also discussed in Levin's chapter on American primitivism is *Indian Fantasy* of 1914 (Fig. 3). The work resorts to formal elements Hartley had seen used in different objects made by a large variety of Native American artists that were exhibited in Berlin at the time and also depicts objects themselves. Levin writes that "the color scheme of this painting, emphasizing red, yellow and green over a black background with white details, corresponds to that of an important Sio Hemis Kachina" displayed at the Völkerkunde Museum in Berlin.[26]

Elizabeth Hutchinson explains in *The Indian Craze. Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915* that, "while European American artists had been fighting off criticism that their representational work was derivative of European traditions for nearly a century, Native American art was seen to 'belong' to the country."[27] In January 1920, for example, Hartley wrote that "it is the redman who […] has shown us the significance of the poetic aspects of our original land. Without him we should still be unrepresented in the cultural development of the world."[28] In contrast to Preston, however, Hartley was not only interested in Native Americans' artistic form languages but also in their ways of living. In *The Great American Thing. Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935*, Wanda Corn asserts that his "Indianism was a complicated mix of infantilizing, veneration, and activism" as his "interests went beyond art and artifacts to finding modern-day values in the Pueblo Indians' religion, their attitudes towards the natural world, and their use of their bodies in ritual and dance."[29]

Hartley lived in New Mexico from 1918 to 1920, where he met other like-minded artists and intellectuals such as Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Hunter Austin or Georgia O'Keeffe, who came to the Santa Fe and Taos area because the "Pueblos' lack of interest in material wealth, their devotion to communal values, their healthy respect for human limitation and for the natural environment seemed a sane counterpoint" to the settler artists' modern lives.[30] While Mabel Dodge Luhan married and lived with a Pueblo Indian, Tony Luhan, and, as her biographer Lois Palken Rudnick puts it, "wrote numerous articles both for the popular press and for literary journals to convince her fellow Americans that salvation lay in the Indian way,"[31] Mary Austin was politically active in propagating Pueblo Indians' rights.[32] Primitivism in the US therefore often had an openly political component, unlike South African primitivism. As W Jackson Rushing rightly argues, this was only possible because, at that time, "'The Indian' (a) was no longer militarily able to oppose the exploitation of raw materials in the

25 Levin, "American Art." Also compare Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley*, pp. 171–174.
26 Levin, "American Art," p. 459.
27 Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze*, pp. 116–117.
28 Hartley, "Red Man Ceremonials," p. 174.
29 Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 255.
30 Palken Rudnick, *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, p. xi, also see p. 144.
31 Ibid., p. xi.
32 Lanigan Stineman, *Mary Austin*.

West (and elsewhere), (b) had been restricted to reservations, and (c) was perceived as vanishing, like any rare exotica," and therefore did no longer pose any threat to the White descendants of European settlers.[33]

Unlike in Australia, the American settler artists' demand for a new national art based on Native American culture in the early 20th century was a short-lived phenomenon. It faded in the 1940s, even though artists like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman still maintained an interest in Native American art. As a large proportion of Europe's avant-garde had migrated to the US leading up to and during the Second World War, the country quickly became the centre of the international artworld and no longer required a distinct national style rooted in native landscape or cultural heritage. As Nicholas Thomas puts it, American "postwar abstraction was defined to a much greater degree by formalist than nationalist criticism" and in general, "nationality did not need to be defined in indigenous terms."[34]

In Canada, this was different. The *Group of Seven*, a group of Ontarian artists who are still amongst Canada's most popular modernists, met in 1910 and started exhibiting together in 1920, famously travelled to rural Canada in order to sketch and paint northern landscapes and folk life in an effort of cultural nationalism.[35] In "'Naturalizing the Nation': The Rise of Naturalistic Nationalism in the United States and Canada," Eric Kaufmann shows that the "Group of Seven's travails were soon given mythical interpretation" when FB Housser, a Canadian art collector and husband to *Group of Seven* artist Bess Larkin Housser, in a 1926 publication "depicted Group members as heroic battlers for Canada fighting against the dead weight of Old World tradition."[36] Affiliated with them was Emily Carr, who has become Canada's best-known artist appropriating First Nations art forms and is considered "a founding figure of modern art in Canada."[37] According to Carmen Brinkle, Canadian "Natives, for both Carr and Canadian society, became mediators between White society and transcendentalist nature. For Carr, Natives and nature thus helped define the distinctiveness of Canadianness."[38] Carr, too, was influenced by the European primitivism she encountered during her studies in Paris in 1910/11, and developed her own interpretation of it upon her return to Canada. Like Preston, she has been criticised for building a career and reputation "on traffic in the Native image"[39] and, like Hartley, she conflated different First Nations cultures into a homogenous, generic "native" civilisation, "the Imaginary Indian."[40] In general, all these primitivists' treatments of "native arts" are contested as they exploited indigenous cultures rather than starting a dialogue. In contrast to Hartley's and Preston's works that propagate a supposedly timeless state of natural primitivity of the peoples they mean to represent, Carr's

33 Rushing, *Native American Art*, p. 12.
34 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 161, 163.
35 Kaufmann, "'Naturalizing the Nation'."
36 Ibid., p. 685.
37 Moray, "Emily Carr," p. 229.
38 Birkle, "Going Native," p. 32.
39 Moray, "Emily Carr," p. 229.
40 Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian." Fulford, "The Trouble with Emily."

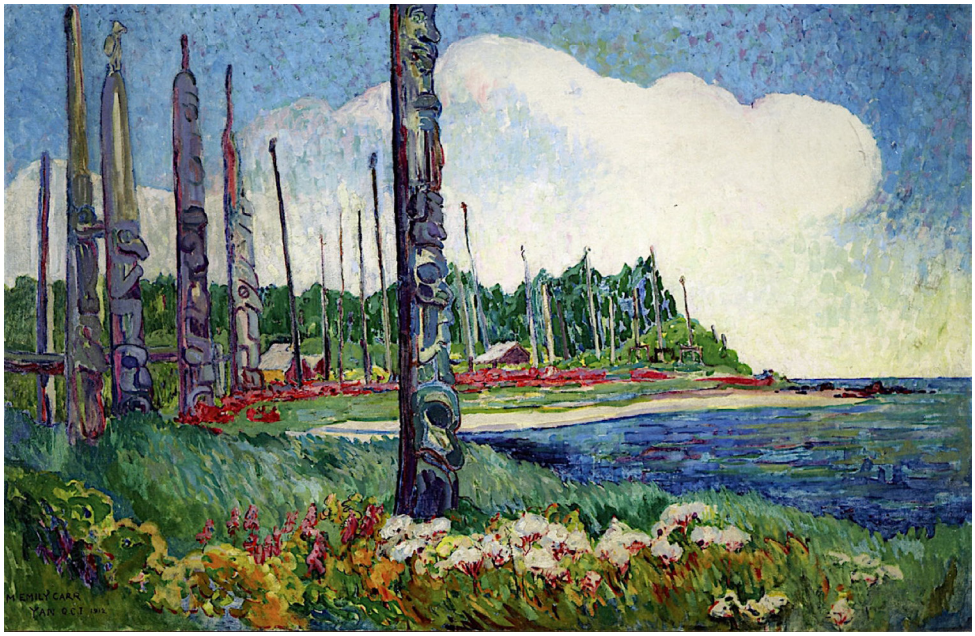

Fig. 4: Emily Carr, *Yan, Q.C.I.*, 1912, oil on canvas, 100 × 153 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Gift of Roy G. Cole, 1992

paintings portray the remains of a culture that no longer existed in the way she idolised it. The oil painting *Yan, Q.C.I.* of 1912 (Fig. 4) is a prominent example of this as it shows a deserted coastal village surrounded by an arc of wooden totems. While the totems are shown as attractive additions to the natural landscape composed of similar colours, the originators of these artworks have disappeared.

For South Africa, comparatively little academic research has been dedicated to settler primitivism. In *Art and Artists of South Africa* published in 1970, the influential South African art historian Esmé Berman in a glorifying way termed the primitivism of Alexis Preller and Walter Battiss "African Mystique."[41] In her view, European primitivists "took over only the outer forms; they did not probe the mystery."[42] In contrast to this, Berman describes Preller and Battiss as seeing Africa "not as the source of primitive forms but as a context of experience" and concludes that the "awakening to the specific climate of the African continent was the beginning of the psychological separation of South African art from its traditional European antecedents."[43] This is of course a very uncritical, idealised reading by a contemporary of the two artists from a similar cultural, social and political background. Clearly, Berman herself had a stake in the nationalist project of South African art after the Second World War. It is likely that she consciously never used the term 'primitivism' in relation to Battiss's and Preller's art in order to further differentiate them from European modernists.

41 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 12–13.
42 Ibid., p. 12.
43 Ibid., p. 13.

Nicholas Thomas's term 'settler primitivism' has only been employed in the South African context by the American art historian John Peffer.[44] In *Art and the End of Apartheid*, Peffer claims that "white South African artists looked to local cultures as a means to indigenize their engagement with modernist ideas borrowed from Europe, as well as to validate their own position as a dominant minority in a colonial setting."[45] Using Alexis Preller and Constance Stuart Larrabee as examples, he further argues that

> this kind of local modernist appropriation, whose eyes are dually fixed abroad and at home, also cuts two ways locally in that it both promotes and objectifies its subject, and it pays homage to local tradition while purloining its imagery and aesthetic.[46]

Peffer does not, however, describe any of the specificities of South African settler primitivism or trace its developments or changes. In her chapter on "Primitivism in South African Art" in the second volume of *Visual Century*, Anitra Nettleton differentiates between post-war settler primitivists such as Preller and Battiss and earlier artists such as Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. With reference to the latter group, she claims that the "formal qualities of these artists' works […] do not directly reference or grow out of African forms or those of any other so-called primitive cultures."[47] She further argues that the "reference to, and generalisation of, African formal qualities was to become a major feature of the styles of those artists working in a primitivist mode during the apartheid period," and calls the "native" Walter Battiss "the first South African artist to […] engage with European formal primitivism while searching for an African stylistic identity," paving the way "for others to raid African material culture to develop their own styles."[48] In line with the timespan predefined by this volume of *Visual Century*, Nettleton concentrates on the period between 1945 and 1976. The majority of her chapter is hence devoted to artists outside my scope of research, such as Cecil Skotnes, Edoardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae and Dumile Feni, who mainly began their careers in the 1960s. In this process, she differentiates between White artists "who turned to primitivism as a means of distinguishing themselves from modernist art elsewhere," and whose "claim to African identity was made in a spirit of individualist romanticism or settler nationalism," and Black artists who produced primitivist works in "an act of defiance through which African forms were elevated to a higher status, and which signified an indigenous authenticity."[49]

I would argue that the development from, as Nettleton indicates, "European" artists such as Stern and Laubser to "native" South Africans such as Battiss and

---

44 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 21.
45 Ibid., p. 6.
46 Ibid., p. 21.
47 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 144.
48 Ibid., pp. 145, 147.
49 Ibid., p. 159. Also see Nettleton, "Modernism, Primitivism and the Search for Modernity."

Preller is not as clear-cut as she implies. Her concept of nativity could certainly be questioned as Stern, Laubser, Battiss and Preller were all born in South Africa. Additionally, I would consider works by White settler artists more ambivalent than she describes since most of them genuinely participated in the project of elevating "African forms […] to a higher status" through their collecting and exhibiting activities. Interestingly, Nettleton does not mention earlier Black artists such as Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, who – at least for a short time – moved in the same artistic circles as South Africa's settler primitivists and exhibited alongside them.[50] As indicated above, South African settler primitivists were no political activists, as for example American artists such as Hartley or Austin considered themselves to some extent and for a certain time (using the most tentative definition of political activism when taking into account how they still appropriated and exploited indigenous culture). On the other hand, South African artists also did not deny the contemporary existence of indigenous peoples as did Emily Carr's pictures of the "Imaginary Indian" that only existed in the past. For South African primitivism, it was crucial to show 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 social and political life. In contrast to Preston's depictions of indigenous cultural objects and form languages propagating new Australian design emblems, South African artists therefore largely concentrated on portraying indigenous peoples themselves.

1.2 South African settler primitivists: seven case studies

In order to describe different facets of South African settler primitivism, it is beneficial to first establish categories of different primitivist foci permeating the various artistic oeuvres. This does not mean that all artists worked in either one or the other primitivist mode but sometimes employed a mix of different primitivisms. Generally, the main difference can be drawn between a primitivism in style and a primitivism in subject – which, again, are not mutually exclusive categories. 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 "the first, earliest age, period, or stage" in the 18th century until it arrived at its late 18th century reference to "aboriginals, inhabitants of prehistoric times, [and] natives in non-European lands" that was still in use in the first half of the 20th century.[51] In art historical terms, "primitive" has referred to "painters before the Renaissance," then to "all early

50 In 1943, for example, Battiss invited Sekoto to exhibit in the upcoming *New Group* show in Johannesburg. Rankin, "Lonely Road," p. 99.

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

art," and finally to "'tribal' art – Native American, Eskimo, African, and Oceanic."[52] In addition, the term has been used with reference to (European) folkloristic art as well as the art of children, mentally ill people and autodidacts.[53] Stylistic primitivism can therefore be said to reference artistic expressions of one or more of those groups – which is not to say that the groups themselves can be considered homogenic. It is hence closely related to stylistic appropriation.

Subject-related primitivism can also be subdivided into multiple categories. Again, it is interlinked with subject appropriation as members of supposedly "primitive" groups are represented by "outsiders."[54] The most common forms of subject primitivism are racial and gender primitivism. Those two primitivisms culminate in portrayals of non-White women such as Stern's paintings of African women or Laubser's depictions of Indian girls in Natal. Another form of subject-related primitivism that has less often been discussed in the visual arts is class primitivism. With reference to English literary texts of the late 19th century such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbevilles*, Emily Hinnov writes that "class primitivism reifies and romanticizes the 'simple,' pre-industrial, pre-capitalist life above the present without regard for the effects of disease or poverty often experienced in real-life non-industrial, non-capitalist peoples."[55] She further explains that modern artists idealised "lower-class working people as somehow more authentic or pure while also continually relegating them to a life of drudgery and poverty."[56] Referring to class primitivism in the United States of America which is often amplified by racial primitivism, she concludes that "practitioners of class primitivism simultaneously memorialized and displaced native peoples."[57] In *Victorian Anthropology*, George W Stocking differentiates between rural and urban primitivism within the category of class primitivism.[58] With regards to social primitivist discourses in Victorian England, Stocking writes:

> From the perspective of contemporary middle-class observers, the primitivism at the bottom of the social scale now had a dual character. On the one hand, there was the rural primitivism of the preindustrial world, marginalized in England and still flourishing on the Celtic fringe; on the other, there was the urban primitivism of preindustrial London, metastasizing in every industrial town and city.[59]

---

52 Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 19. Also compare Flam & Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, p. xiii.

53 In the 1940s, for example, "American primitives," i.e., self-taught artists, were of high interest in US-American artistic circles. Compare Janis, *They Taught Themselves*. Lipman, *American Primitive Painting*.

54 Young & Haley, "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere'," p. 268.

55 Hinnov, *Choran Community*, p. 40. On class primitivism in British literature in the early 20th century see Wachman, *Crosswriting the Empire*, pp. 135–201. Hackett, *Sapphic Primitivism*, pp. 88–119.

56 Hinnov, *Choran Community*, p. 40.

57 Ibid.

58 Also compare Lesko, *Aesthetics of Soft Focus*, pp. 64–67.

59 Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 213.

In line with Hinnov's definition, Stocking considers rural class primitivism as romanticising working-class villagers as representatives of pastoral "Merrie England." Urban class primitivism, however, according to Stocking is marked by the impact of poverty and physical decay disregarded or denied in rural primitivism. He explains:

> But there were no traces of 'Merrie England' to be found in the new city slums, which provided the subject matter of the urban reformer's science of social statistics. They remained, even in the process of reformation, a disturbing and alien phenomenon – so far removed from the amenities and the morality of civilized life that many observers, including Friedrich Engels and Henry Mayhew, were impelled to use racial analogies to capture the sense of difference.[60]

This type of urban class primitivism is clearly absent in South African settler primitivism.[61] Although there are portrayals of urban scenes – such as Gregoire Boonzaier's glorifying paintings of the "slums" in Cape Town's Malay quarter (today Bo-Kaap) or District Six – those do not depict poverty or disease as disturbing and alien phenomena but rather comply with Hinnov's classification of class primitivism as modernist romantisations of simple, pre-industrial life. I will therefore employ the term 'urban class primitivism' in her sense rather than in Stocking's. In contrast to earlier class-related romanticisms, the primitivist romantisations of pre-industrial life described by Hinnov are tied to a modernist quest for meaning in a society shaped by industrial capitalism.

As elaborated in my introduction, the selection of artists to whose work I will apply these categories is mainly based on their standing within the modern art scene in South Africa as well as the relevance of primitivism for their work. All artists discussed focus on different primitivist concerns and my selection therefore serves to map different facets of settler primitivism in South Africa. In this process, I will discuss individual works rather than giving a representative outline of the examined artists' entire oeuvre or iconographic programme. In line with my discussion of nationalist concerns and ambivalences, my focus will be on depictions and appropriations of indigenous South African cultural groups and their material culture, symbolism and style. The artworks will be correlated with written documents composed by the individual artists, either for publication purposes or in diaries or letters. Those texts were sourced from different archives as well as from biographical monographs and exhibition catalogues. The availability of such material varies considerably for each artist. Additionally, for some artists, such as Irma Stern, a large proportion of this

60 Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 213.

61 George Pemba's township genre painting is a rare example approaching such a type of urban class primitivism. However, the Black artist Pemba was little known at the time. As Barry Feinberg puts it, "it was only in 1990, with the eventual defeat of the apartheid system, that conditions were created for Pemba to begin to receive wider recognition." Feinberg, "Biographical Sketch," p. 28.

material has been published before while for others, such as Lippy Lipshitz, it has so far only been accessible locally at the respective archive.

As my focus is on White settler artists for whom it was possible to take an active part in the formation of a new national art scene in contrast to the overwhelming majority of their non-White colleagues, I will only briefly touch on Black artists. Overall, when speaking about the South African art scene, critics, audiences, production and reception in general terms, I primarily refer to White South Africans, since, due to extensive racial discrimination, the country's non-White majority were pushed to the extreme margins of such public concerns – a few exceptions such as Ernest Mancoba or Gerard Sekoto aside, in the first half of the 20th century, Blacks were chiefly artistic subjects.

1.2.1 Irma Stern (1894–1966): exoticising portraits of Black women[62]

South Africa's most prominent modernist, Irma Stern, was the daughter of German Jews who had immigrated to the Transvaal area in the late 19th century. She spent her life and career migrating between Africa and Europe and purposefully made use of these transnational links in order to establish herself as a successful artist. Stern studied at the Großherzoglich-Sächsische Kunstschule in Weimar from 1913 to late 1914, when she moved on to study with Martin Brandenburg at the Lewin-Funcke-Studio in Berlin. She received great support from Max Pechstein, whom she met in 1917 and who introduced her into Berlin's expressionist circles, where she was able to position herself as an "authentic African" artist and connoisseur of "primitive" cultures.[63] As Reinhard Wegener explicates, in contrast to the French cubist tendencies to employ African art in order to develop new aesthetics, the *Brücke* artists in Berlin closely related non-European art to indigenous peoples' fictional sense of life that was characterised by authenticity, naturalness and primitivity and presented an alternative to European civilisation.[64] The *Brücke* primitivism is thus ascribed a much stronger ideological component.

Stern, too, was committed to this ideology and, in her pictures of Black women whom she claimed she had grown up amongst, established an advantage over her

62 Stern's oeuvre is much broader than the selection that it is feasible to discuss in this context. In addition to her oil portraits of Black Africans discussed in this chapter, she also produced a large number of portraits of Cape Malays, Indians, South African Jews, Arabs and Europeans, still lifes, (charcoal) drawings, gouaches, sculptures, bookplates, travel narratives and journals. For the latter refer to Schoeman, *Irma Stern*. Below, "Irma Stern." For her travel narratives see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 77–104. For her bookplates: Below, *Hidden Treasures*. For her sculpture: Bourdin, *The Sculpture of Irma Stern*. Good overviews of her painterly work are rendered in Arnold, *Irma Stern*. O'Toole, *Irma Stern*.

63 Stern, "How I Began to Paint." The exchange of letters between Stern and Pechstein is analysed in Below, "‚... wird es mir eine Freude sein'."

64 Wegner, *Der Exotismus-Streit*, p. 36.

German colleagues, who knew their subjects only from occasional travels, visits to ethnological museums or interactions with Black performers participating in ethnological exhibitions or circus acts.[65] The German press continued Stern's "indigenisation" and further cultivated it by frequently mentioning her special role as an "African" artist, attributing to her a greater genuineness than to European artists such as Pechstein or Paul Gauguin.[66] On invitation of Pechstein, she became a founding member of the influential *Novembergruppe* [November Group] in 1918 and, a year later, she had her first solo exhibition at Wolfgang Gurlitt's gallery in Berlin, which also represented the *Brücke* artists.[67] As will be detailed in Chapter 3, through this early success in Berlin, Stern was able to introduce a new image of professional women artists into South Africa's conservative art scene and led the way for a female avant-garde.

Stern returned to South Africa in 1920, taking up residence in Cape Town. She took a copy of Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* with her, as well as his formal appreciation of African sculpture described above, and was one of the first South Africans to collect African art for mainly aesthetic reasons.[68] She also depicted objects of her collection in her artworks, especially in her exoticizing still lifes combining lush flowers and African sculpture.[69] Moreover, on at least two occasions she exhibited her paintings together with works from her collection with the explicit aim of raising the appreciation of art produced in African countries such as the Congo.[70] Generally, in a faithfully primitivist manner, she proclaimed the timelessness of true art and thus equated modern art and "primitive" sculpture. For example, in a 1961 radio talk, she proclaimed:

> Tonight I'm going to speak to you about modern art, that is, if there is such a thing as modern art. From my point of view there's art and no art. Because you can dive right down into the centuries and find one piece, bring it through the years and you have the latest modern art. I'm thinking here of a Mexican head – of a heavy black stone, which is the outer space and the inner space – the newest idea of sculpture now. Mexico was – how many thousand years back?[71]

65 Marion Arnold points out that, "although Stern's encounters with Africa were real and were presented as truth authenticated by the artist as authoritative eye-witness, her construction of Africa was a fictional, imaginative mixture of childhood memories, nostalgia and adult romantic idealism filtered through a German modernist concept of primitivism." Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile, p. 61.

66 E.g. Stahl, "Ausstellungen."

67 The gallery still operated under his by then long deceased father's name, Fritz Gurlitt.

68 Also see Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 129. Below, "Irma Stern," p. 47.

69 A good impression of these still lifes can be gained from Arnold, *Irma Stern*, pp. 125–149.

70 Kauenhoven Janzen, "African Art in Cape Town," p. 4.

71 Stern, "Is there such a thing as modern art?"

In 1922, Stern held the first exhibition of her paintings at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town, which she boldly called "An Exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern." It was the first time the word 'modern' was used in reference to South African art, and this as well as her following exhibitions received a predominantly negative response from the conservative South African art scene.[72] In addition to the modernist style pursued by Stern, critics were also shocked by her portraits of Black South Africans which were not common at the time. Jeanne van Eeden argues that primitivist tendencies in Stern's work were "felt to be one of the major alienating aspects of her oeuvre" since, in contrast to Europe where Stern's works had been very successful, in South Africa, "the primitive was a definite reality and not an illusory, Edenic fantasy."[73] Irene Below points out that Stern "caused a sensation because she applied the latest trends from Europe to the depiction of black South Africans who had previously been considered objects of ethnographic interest rather than members of impressive foreign cultures."[74] Below concludes that "such preoccupation with natives could only be legitimised through the interest and success Stern generated in Europe."[75] Stern's depictions of Black Africans vary between works that are foremostly studies of colour or composition, group scenes that often also have an ethnographical interest, types and actual portraits. It is often difficult to draw a clear line between the latter two but Stern herself perceived her portraits of Blacks as "not just types and races," and neither did her audience.[76] Marion Arnold notes that, even though "retrospectively, the racism in her remarks [and works] is troubling," at the time, "her opinions were controversial in South Africa because she endorsed black people as beautiful."[77]

Stern's primitivism has been discussed in two academic research projects. Without explicitly addressing the primitivist character of Stern's work, in her PhD thesis *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art. Audacities of Color*, the Afro-American art historian LaNitra Michele Berger (neé Walker) describes race as the most critical theme in Stern's work. Berger argues that Stern's "work raised questions about race relations in South Africa at a time when the country was plunging deeper into racial segregation."[78] In his MA dissertation of 2012, the former director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Clive Kellner, maintains that "Stern's paintings

72 Arnold, *Women and Art*, p. 80.

73 Van Eeden, "Irma Stern's first exhibition," pp. 95–96.

74 Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 118. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)

75 Ibid. (My translation, original German on p. 268.)

76 Quote from a letter from Stern to her close friends Richard and Freda Feldman cited in Berman, *Remembering Irma*, p. 97. Also see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 47–48. However, Stern did also conduct conventional type studies as exemplified in charcoal drawings such as *Head of a Woman* (1935), *Mother and Child* (1929) or *Mangbetu* (1942). In 1946, she writes to her friend and supporter Thelma Gutsche: "Have just now managed to make real contact with Dr. du Plessis – (the Malay du Plessis) – now I hope to choose my proper types and do some fine work amount [sic] the Malays." Stern, letter to Gutsche, 18 October 1946.

77 Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile," p. 64. For example, in Stern, "My Exotic Models," the artist writes that she intends to show "the primitive and childlike yet rich soul of the native" in her pictures.

78 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 99.

Fig. 5: Irma Stern, *Composition*, 1923, oil on canvas, 139 × 96 cm, private collection

Fig. 6: Irma Stern, *Lemon Pickers*, 1928, oil on canvas, 100 × 95 cm, private collection

from Umgababa, Natal and Swaziland exemplify an imaginary 'primitivist' ideal that seeks to define the 'other', and in particular black women's bodies, as synonymous with that of nature."[79] As examples, he analyses works such as *Composition* (1923; Fig. 5) and *Lemon Pickers* (1928; Fig. 6) that show Black female nudes surrounded by luscious nature. The fruits foregrounded in *Lemon Pickers*, for example, are read by Kellner as symbols of fecundity and linked to other works by Stern he considers to deal with motherhood.[80] In an argument that seems somewhat forced, Kellner links these to Paula Modersohn-Becker.[81] Moreover, he sees a strong influence of Pechstein in both works. With regards to *Composition*, he emphasises that the three nude women are shown "amongst a bush of Proteas, a specifically South African signifier that may suggest Stern's immersion into her 'primordial' context in a way her European counterparts were not."[82]

However, while Berger emphasises Stern's agency in navigating her career between aesthetic renewal, public acclaim and government support, Kellner presents a psychological reading that reduces Stern to an infantilely traumatised and sexually frustrated woman that uses her Black subjects to stabilise her own dislocated self. While both criticise racist tendencies apparent in Stern's remarks and works, Berger stresses political and social contexts whereas Kellner places a greater emphasis on individual psychology. Kellner's is a practice often employed in analyses of women

79 Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*, p. 72.
80 Ibid., pp. 68–70.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., p. 64.

artists' works and is rightly criticised by feminist art historians.[83]

An early work indicative of Stern's interest in primitivist modes of painting is *Stonebreaker* (Fig. 7), which was produced in the year of Stern's return to South Africa and shows a Black man breaking rocks with a hammer. It is likely that the subject refers to Stern's childhood in the Transvaal, a state that was home to gold and diamond mines owned by White businesses such as Cecil Rhode's De Beers diamond company, which exploited Black laborers as well as convicts from 1885. It is one of Stern's very few portraits of African men as well as an unusually early example of rural class primitivism. When it comes to style, her expressionist primitivism becomes obvious in formal elements such as black outlines, geometric forms and flat surfaces. Moreover, the man's face resembles an African mask. In general, this early painting is unusual as it depicts a Black South African at work, performing a non-traditional task in westernised work clothes. It could therefore be argued that, while Stern recurs to a formalist European primitivism in this work, the subject cannot as easily be placed within exoticising practices since she depicts a mineworker, a contemporary colonial reality, rather than a "noble savage." Nevertheless, this work is also no social criticism as its subject is shown in a rather relaxed and contemplative mood, set against a picturesque mountain/ savannah landscape. Rather than reflecting realities of exploitation or penal servitude, it can be considered a primitivist idealisation of the relationship between human and nature (resonating in the earthy colours, too) as well as of manual labour. Moreover, it complies with a "New Romanticism" that Karel Schoeman also detects in her writings of the 1920s.[84]

Fig. 7: Irma Stern, *Stonebreaker*, 1920, oil on canvas, 105 × 86 cm, Rupert Art Foundation

Stern seems to soon have discarded her interest in stylistic primitivism and instead fully concentrated on a subject-related primitivism; she focussed on depicting

83 E.g. Flagmeier, "Camille Claudel," p. 36.
84 Schoeman, *Irma Stern*, pp. 58–59.

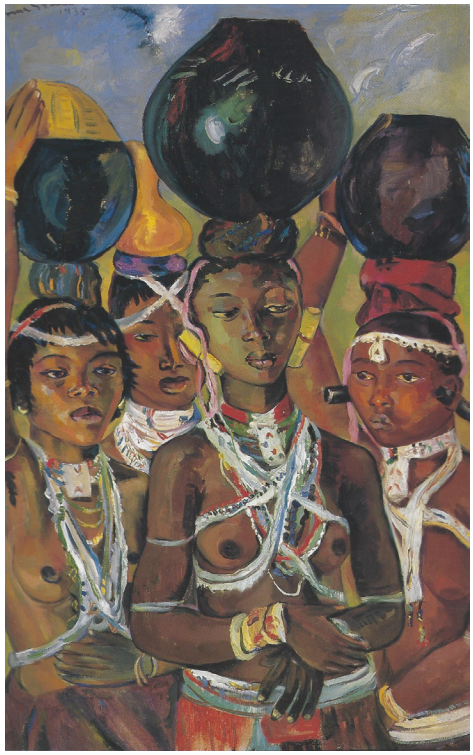

Fig. 8: Irma Stern, *Water Carriers*, 1935, oil on canvas, 126 × 79 cm, private collection

mainly African women in traditional dress, either relaxing or performing traditional tasks, supposedly untouched by "Western civilisation." It is these depictions of Black South Africans that Kellner analyses in his MA dissertation. Further good examples are *Water Carriers* of 1935 (Fig. 8) or *Bed Carriers* of 1941 (Fig. 9). Both paintings show traditionally dressed African women balancing objects on their heads as a means of transport. *Water Carriers* seems to approach an ethnographical study as the four women depicted can easily be identified as Ndebele through their remarkable beaded jewellery. Visits to local Ndebele villages were very common amongst South African artists in the 1930s and 1940s. In a diary entry of 26 October 1936, Lippy Lipshitz for example notes his plan to join Stern on her visit to an Ndebele village ten miles outside of Pretoria/ Tshwane.[85] In *Bed Carriers*, on the other hand, the half-naked bodies of the two women shown are depicted in a way that foregrounds composition and colour hues, contrasting blue with different tones of yellow, orange and brown. By closing in on the women's softly curved, exposed torsos and cutting off parts of the beds they carry as well as of their heads, hands and garments, the focus is clearly set on the interplay of lines and planes. The women's faces are only partly visible, and the prominence of their round breasts sexualises them explicitly.[86] Stern's paintings *Composition*, *Lemon Pickers*, *Water Carriers* and *Bed Carriers* can all be considered a combination of racial and gender primitivism making use of subject appropriation.

85 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 26 October 1936. Interestingly, the artist John Dronsfield and his partner, the journalist Denis Hatfield, took a similar trip to a mine compound in 1942 where they photographed Black mine workers in a class primitivist effort over eight days. Their interest in mine workers was, however, shared by very few other South African artists. Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 15 May 1942.

86 On sexualised racism in Stern's work see Wyman, "Irma Stern." Berger, *Irma Stern*. Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*.

In a newspaper article entitled "My Exotic Models" of 1926, Stern explains that, while in Europe, she was yearning to return to

> Africa, the country of my birth, the land of sunshine, of radiant colours, where the fruit grows so plentifully and the flowers seem to reach the summit of all joy; where the brown people live a happy life in close connection with their soil, beautiful in their primitive innocence.[87]

Works such as *Stonebreaker*, *Water Carriers* or *Bed Carriers* comply with this primitivist idealisation. In line with contemporary primitivist degradations, Stern describes South African "natives [as] lovely and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar animal-like beauty which adds a touch of the tragic to the expression of their faces – the heaviness of an awaking race not yet freed from the soil."[88] She further stresses that, in order to find such subjects, she "had to go where there was no sign of Europe, no trace of civilisation – just Africa lying in the sun with its stretches of untouched land and its dark people as it had been lying, one might imagine, since the day of creation."[89]

However, the artist was aware that this was not an easy task and knew that Black South Africans did not factually live in a temporal vacuum. When describing how "a beautiful statuesque Zulu woman fully decorated with all her beads, her leather skirt, her headgear and all the little artistic spices they add to adorn themselves" asked her if she was a taxi when her car passed by, Stern exclaims, "What was this? Was there no spot of ground on this earth untouched by the spider-like fingers of civilisation?"[90] In contrast to the arcadian idyll she usually portrayed in her descriptions of South Africa, in an article for the German magazine *Frau und Gegenwart* [Woman and Contemporary Life] published in 1927, she insinuates the struggles in the racially diverse country. In a racist story of a Zulu woman, Stern equates the futile but naturally strong struggle of a giant tortoise against the surf with the constant, inconclusive wrestling of Black

Fig. 9: Irma Stern, *Bed Carriers*, 1941, oil on canvas, 84 × 84 cm, Rupert Art Foundation

87 Stern, "My Exotic Models."
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.

South Africans against European customs.[91] In another article published in the *Cape Argus* in the same year, she is cited to complain about finding "the Zulu Princess dressed in a blue Sunday print, sitting on a mat with a Bible on her lap," and the Swazi King gaining a "reputation of being the best-dressed man in England" during his latest visit with the British King.[92] Six years later, she is reported to be shocked about the Swazis having "submitted to civilisation," wearing "Everyman's clothes and boots" and, as a result, having become "unhappy in the burden of civilised living."[93] These remarks are revealing illustrations of the ambivalences inherent in South African settler primitivism. In contrast to their European counterparts, South African primitivists were in regular contact with the people they portrayed as archaic, timeless and natural "primitives," and knew that by 1930, very few were living the life they admired. By depicting their Black compatriots as "noble savages" or pastoral farm workers, they purposefully disregarded their realities and fostered cultural differences instead.

A very unusual visualization of the ambivalences described above is Stern's 1922 painting *Umgababa* (Fig. 10). The work shows a luscious landscape around a river bend, cut into two across the middle by a glistening line of train tracks. They lead to a cloudy sky with a few rays of sunlight coming through where the tracks disappear into the hills. In the foreground, Stern depicts a nude Black woman carrying sticks on her head along a red dirt road. The title of the work reveals that the scene is located close to the trading station Umgababa near Durban, in the province that is today called KwaZulu-Natal. In her (as yet) unpublished text on Stern's travel narrative *Umagababa*, Irene Below considers the artist to visualise in this painting the threat of modern technology to the idealisation of supposedly "primitive" Africans. Indeed, in the travel narrative, which she wrote in German, Stern describes the train as the only connection to the world, an enemy, an evil lindworm, the serpent in paradise.[94] However, in her painting, the sun shines onto the disappearing tracks whose shiny light-blue colour can hardly be described as threatening. The train additionally signifies Stern's access to this remote place.

Jeremy Foster explains that, by the mid-1920s, South African Railways & Harbours had established the second largest state-owned railway system worldwide, embodying modernity and technological progress: "in remote parts of South Africa, the railways' twin ribbon of steel and attendant structures were often the only visible signs of modern governance and civilization in the landscape."[95] Foster also argues that

> although the railways weakened the contemplative, solitary, and local experience of an unspoiled landscape that lay at the heart of the cult of the

91 N.N., "Was eine Malerin in Afrika sah."
92 N.N., "Painting Among the Swazis."
93 N.N., "Natives No Longer Picturesque."
94 Stern, *Umgababa*, p. 45. Parts of the manuscript were published in Osborn, *Irma Stern*.
95 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 203.

Fig. 10: Irma Stern, *Umgababa*, 1922, oil on canvas, 61 × 91 cm, Irma Stern Museum

> veld, they fashioned instead a new subjectivity toward the landscape that was reflexive, collective, and national.[96]

The extensive railway system was hence itself perceived with great ambivalence by most South Africans and is depicted in this vein in Stern's *Umgababa*. I would thus interpret the work as expressing the contemporary contradictory feeling of pride in South Africa's technological progress and in supposedly archaic "natives" that were gradually turned into national cultural assets. With reference to German expressionism, Jill Lloyd argues that, in addition to "imaginative counter-images, primitivism provided modern artists [...] with a means of negotiating the internal paradox of modernity, of spanning between its positive and negative, its forward- and backward-looking tendencies."[97] She concludes that, "in the hands of the German Expressionists, primitivism became a nexus of contradictory currents, neither revolutionary nor conservative in exclusive terms, but potentially both of these things."[98] In a similar way, Stern considered herself a reformer of the dusty South African art scene that indeed introduced new aesthetics and paved the way for a female avant-garde, but at the same time held onto conservative and pejorative ideas about Black South Africans as nature-bound "primitives."

96 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 201.
97 Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, p. vii.
98 Ibid.

However, *Umgababa* is one of Stern's extremely rare depictions of Black South Africans including signs of modernity. Eleven years later, she would call the area around the trading station "a place unspoilt by civilisation."[99] The contradiction of hoping to find "primitive" peoples in a "civilised" state is further complicated by the fact that South African artists such as Stern were aware of European settlers' oppression of their Black subjects but not prepared to fight it. For example, in a letter to the Jewish author Richard Feldman of 25 July 1935, Stern writes that she is trying "to find out which places in Zulu land [sic] would still be O.K for primitive natives. It looks to me – this is my last trip triing [sic] to find things that are dying out – thanks to ourselves."[100] In a letter to Thelma Gutsche of 1948, Stern tells her friend and supporter about her African maid who "had her first pregnancie [sic] with the age of 14 – now she is 18 and is supporting 2 children and working to pay for her divorce – what a depth of tragedie [sic] we have around us if we only can see."[101] Even though such remarks are still full of racist stereotypes, they show a socio-political awareness that South African Stern scholars such as Neville Dubow or Marion Arnold deny Stern had.[102] As mentioned before, however, Stern and other artists of her time had little interest in changing these extreme imbalances. This becomes very clear in a later letter to Feldman, written in 1955, seven years after the rise of the apartheid regime:

> The lovely fairy tale outlook on Nativ [sic] life – which my early work had – can hardly continue – when I see the most lovely people acting not like children but like devilles [sic] incarnate to the white people up in Kyenja [sic] – . Of course – I can understand their sudden awakening and finding their land full of white raced people – who have their foot on their necks – but still I cannot say – I am looking happy & peacefully into the future of 'our' South Africa. We are just passionately awaiting a huge blood bath. Stoking it on daily – hourly – giving with the left hand only taking with the right.[103]

And, in a similar vein, Stern writes to her friend Betty Lunn a few years later:

> I am not chasing for a dream primitiv nativ [sic] at all – Betty – but am quite aware of the West ruining them in all ways. – Maybe if – once they have their own country independ [sic] of white – the influence of the Russian-European will come useful to them – God beware – I should not like to witness it myself. I have been in Dakar – that was quite enough for me.[104]

---

99 Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work."
100 Reproduced in Klopper, *Irma Stern*, p. 50. (Original spelling and punctuation.)
101 Stern, letter to Gutsche, 22 January 1948. (Original spelling and punctuation.)
102 Dubow, *Paradise*. Arnold, *Irma Stern*.
103 Reproduced in Klopper, *Irma Stern*, p. 182. (Original spelling and punctuation.)
104 Stern, letter to Lunn, 10 August 1959. (Original spelling and punctuation.)

Already in 1938, upon her return from Senegal, Stern had stated in an interview cited in the *Cape Times* that "every person in Cape Town who talks about the colour bar should go to Dakar for a month. That would make them sit up."[105] While Stern can in no way be considered to propagate Blacks' rights or anti-segregationist policies – on the contrary – it is clear that she was aware of the ambivalences surrounding her portraits of Black South Africans. Interestingly, many of her oil paintings depicting Africans from other countries such as Senegal or Congo differ from her oils of Swazi, Zulu, Ndebele or Mpondo women living in South Africa. When comparing works such as *Dakar Woman* (1938), *Congo Woman* (1942), *Watussi Queen* (1943; Fig. 11), *Watussi Girl* (1946; Fig. 12), *Watussi Woman in Red* (1946) or *Congolese Woman* (1946) with paintings such as *Tembu Woman* (1927), *Swazi Woman* (1927), *Portrait of a Pondo Woman* (1929), *The Water Carrier* (1937), *Pondo Woman* (1952) or the ones described above (Figs. 5, 6, 8, 9), it becomes clear that, in the former group, women are posed against either abstract, coloured backgrounds (as in *Watussi Queen*) or building structures (as in *Watussi Girl*), often wear more contemporary dress and exhibit a much lower degree of nudity. In the latter group, the women are depicted in front of generic landscape or nature settings and often show exposed breasts.[106]

Additionally, as LaNitra Michele Berger has pointed out, Stern's pictures and accompanying texts were "constructions of ethnic hierarchies" that also deliberately reproduced contemporary Hamitic theories.[107] The Hamitic myth prevalent from the mid-19th century until the Second World War saw ancient Egyptians as Caucasoid and therefore "capable of high civilization" and considered certain African groups such as the Tutsi (Watussi) "of Hamitic descent, and endowed with the myth of superior achievements."[108] As a result, Edith R Sanders argues, there existed "a widely held belief in the Western world that everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by these Hamites, a people inherently superior to the native populations."[109] The dignity and superiority displayed in Stern's two Tutsi women's portraits reproduced above is striking. Especially their refined and noble facial features including high cheekbones, thin noses and pointed chins fit well into contemporary Hamitic stereotypes. On the one hand, Stern's subscription to the Hamitic myth is a further

105 N.N., "No Colour Bar at Dakar."

106 This is not the case for her drawings and gouaches, which often show types rather than portraits. Berger, for example, stresses the sexualising character of Stern's drawings of nude Black women included in her 1942 travel narrative *Congo*. Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 83–93. Additionally, works such as *Watussi Queen* (1943) or *Watussi Girl* (1946) still propagate racial stereotypes, even though they are portrayed with more dignity than most of Stern's South African subjects.

107 Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 90–92. Berger argues that, additionally, Stern artistically and verbally perpetuated the Tutsi/ Hutu divide by portraying Tutsis as noble sovereigns and Hutus as animal-like slaves (pp. 90–91). When compared with her Tutsi portraits, Stern's depictions of Hutus are very uncommon, and the painting *Bahutu Musicians* (1942) described by Berger is a rare example. On the one hand, this makes comparisons less meaningful; on the other, it likely reveals Stern's preference for Tutsi subjects.

108 Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," p. 528.

109 Ibid., p. 532.

Fig. 11: Irma Stern, *Watussi Queen*, 1943, oil on canvas, 92 × 55 cm, private collection

Fig. 12: Irma Stern, *Watussi Girl*, 1946, oil on canvas, 92 × 69 cm, Irma Stern Museum

primitivising of South African Blacks and, on the other, her portrayal of the latter as part of the natural landscape ties in with what Nicholas Thomas has described as a deep connection between indigenous people and the land that settler primitivists utilised for nationalist purposes.

It is not surprising then that the apartheid government strategically acquired primitivist works and displayed them in their embassies abroad in order to showcase the alleged fundamental difference between White and Black South Africans in line with their persistent agenda of racial segregation.[110] This practice was very beneficial to Stern's career as she received official support for projects abroad, even though in a letter to Thelma Gutsche of December 1948, she calls the newly established apartheid government "so very savage."[111] In 1952, Gutsche asked Stern for an etching for a small publication by the Institute of Race Relations that also included texts by South African authors such Sarah Gertrude Millin and Nadine Gordimer. Gutsche writes that "it hopes […] to raise a little money and, at the same time, to be of some service in propagating the idea

110 Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile," p. 63. For nationalism and primitivism also compare Sinisi, *Irma Stern*, pp. 35–36.

111 Stern, letter to Gutsche, 28 December 1948. On government support of Stern, also see Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 62, 78–79, 111–117.

of harmonious race relations."[112] Stern sent her the etching shortly afterwards.[113] At the time, the Institute of Race Relations cautiously opposed racial segregation.[114] However, Millin's and Gordimer's diametrically opposed stances towards the relations between Black and White South Africans already indicate the ambiguity of the project.[115]

Either way, as indicated above, it is hard to argue that Stern endorsed the political empowerment of Black South Africans. In an interview with Bernard Sachs published in the *Southern African Jewish Times* in 1961, she expresses how African liberation processes affected her work. After claiming she was losing "her African roots," she, according to Sachs, "plunged right into the murkiness of Central African politics" by asking her interviewer: "What sympathy can I have for those who are murdering my people?" Sachs explains that "by 'people' she meant white people" and further quotes her: "My emotional attitude towards them has changed. I knew the Congo well. I am disturbed by what's going on there." As a result, Spain "replaced Africa in [her] artistic life." [116]

Due to the political hostility towards White South Africans, Stern ceased her travels within the African continent in the late 1950s and travelled to Southern France, Spain or Turkey instead. Changing her style from painterly, thick impastos of vivid colours to more graphical works with thinly applied paint and a sketch-like character, she now concentrated on Europe's "primitives": peasants and field workers, still largely female. When asked by a *Star* journalist in 1961 why her recent six-month visit to Spain had "caused these sudden upsurges of creative energy," Stern answers that "they usually came after visits to countries or places with a religious background of their own; Spain, for instance, or the Congo, Zanzibar or Madeira."[117] Stern thus implicates that, over the past 30 years, her primitivist subjects emerged from a quest for deeper meaning. In an interview with the apartheid publication *South African Panorama*, Stern further describes her primitivist motivation in turning to "people living in close contact with the elements."[118] She explains: "They respect the soil. […] They do not tell lies. With these people, one penetrates into something essential."[119] The terms 'soil,' 'truth' and 'essentiality' were closely linked to the settler primitivist project in South Africa as will be further elaborated in Chapter 2. The *Panorama* article concludes that her works reflect the "lives of simple people – Cape Coloureds and Malays, African natives, fishermen from Spain, Italy and Madeira."[120]

---

112 Gutsche, letter to Stern, 31 July 1952.

113 Stern, letter to Gutsche, 11 August 1952. Similarly, Stern supported Freda Feldman in generating funds for the Treason Trial Defense Fund in 1958 by donating one of her paintings. She however declined to donate a second one. Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 127–128.

114 E.g. J.D.F., "Nationhood and Nationalism in South Africa." Morse, "A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa."

115 Sean O'Toole characterises Stern's racism as moderate when compared to Millin's. O'Toole, *Irma Stern*, pp. 25–26.

116 Sachs, "Irma Stern: Painter."

117 N.N., "Decoration?"

118 Cited in N.N., "Irma Stern. Deur Akademie Bekroon," p. 35. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

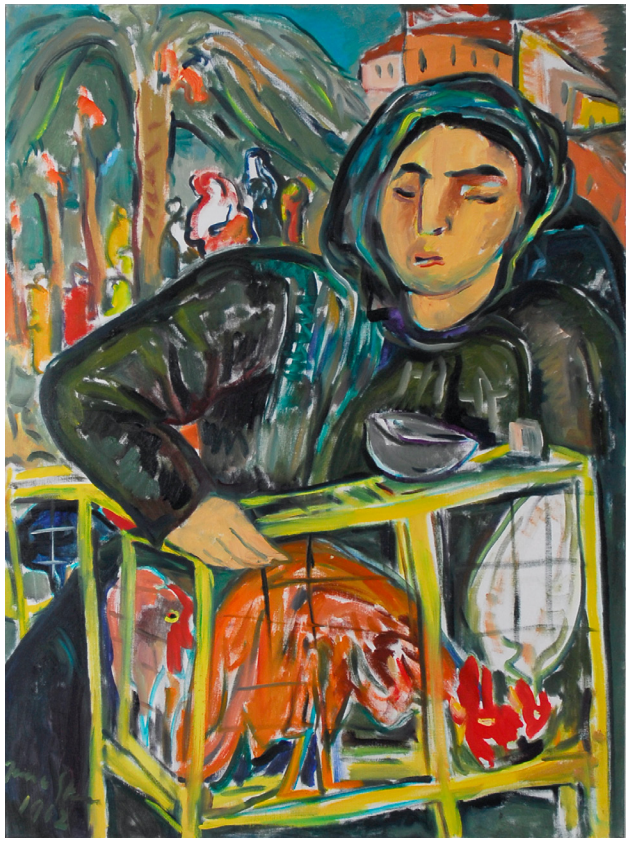

Fig. 13: Irma Stern, *Peasant Woman with Chickens*, 1962, oil on canvas, 92.2 × 73 cm, Durban Art Gallery

An example of Stern's late class primitivist works is *Peasant Woman with Chickens* of 1962 (Fig. 13). Probably painted in the South of Spain, the depicted woman seems to be returning from a market that can be seen in the background, holding a cage with three chickens. The palm trees shading the vendors and their customers indicate a southern Mediterranean location. The simple black dress and dark blue headscarf the woman is wearing further emphasise her class background. The difference in provision of context as well as in dress (or the amount of clothing and hence covering of the body) compared to Stern's portraits of Black South African women is striking. The peasant woman's head and body are covered in flowing, non-revealing fabrics and the market in the background contextualises her social standing, occupation and location. When comparing those works, Stern's Spanish class primitivism underlines the racial and gender primitivism in her earlier depictions of Zulu, Swazi or Mpondo women. While her Southern European subjects originated in a period when Stern was already an established artist whose currency had been overtaken by younger colleagues such as Alexis Preller and Walter Battiss, her paintings of South African themes were conducted in a time when "indigenisation" for Stern herself and nationalisation for the South African art scene in general were important issues. Her exoticising pictures of indigenous South African women of the 1920s to 1930s could be utilised to showcase her alleged familiarity with local cultures at home and abroad and affirmed to the South African art scene what Thomas terms "a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one."[121]

121 Thomas, *Possessions*, p. 13.

1.2.2 Maggie Laubser (1886–1973): domestication of land and labour

A few years older than Stern, Maggie Laubser began her artistic career later in life. This was probably because the conservative farming community which she grew up in did not support women in learning a profession.[122] Laubser studied painting in Cape Town – for a short time under Edward Roworth – and became a member of the *South African Society of Artists* (SASA) in 1907. As her works did not generate any financial success, she soon moved back in with her parents until her friend and patron Jan Hendrik Arnold Balwé provided her with financial support to study in Europe in 1913. Laubser attended classes at London's Slade School from 1914 to 1919 and after longer sojourns in Belgium, Northern Italy and South Africa, she moved to Berlin in 1922,[123] where she stayed until her return to South Africa in 1924. Like Stern, Laubser, too, was interested in German expressionism and formed a friendship with *Brücke* artist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.[124]

In general, Laubser's primitivism differs from Stern's in the conscious naïveté or simplicity of her approach to subjects such as landscapes, farm scenes, animals, still lifes or portraits. With reference to a primitivism in terms of style, her works have often been compared to children's art. *Figure in a Landscape: Woman Carrying Water, House and Tree in Background*[125] dated 1925 (Fig. 14) is a good illustration of this. The difference

Fig. 14: Maggie Laubser, *Woman carrying water; houses and trees in background*, undated, oil on cardboard, 46 × 39 cm, University of Stellenbosch

122 See Berman, *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 58.

123 Stern and Laubser met on one of Stern's trips to Europe in 1922. Stern put Laubser in contact with some of her friends in Berlin and the two artists enjoyed a brief friendship, including a joint summer holiday at the Baltic Sea. See e.g. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa,* p. 175. Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 13. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 41.

124 E.g. Schmidt-Rottluff, letter to Laubser, 21 January 1931.

125 While Stern's titles such as *Eternal Child* (1916) or *The Hunt* (1926) are somewhat mythicising, Laubser continued her rather commonplace subjects in her descriptive, factual titles.

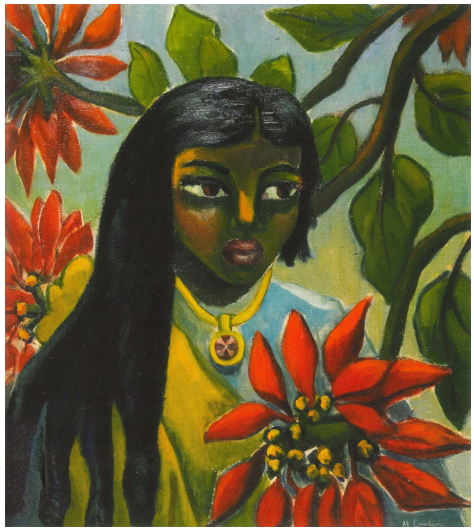

Fig. 15: Maggie Laubser, *Portrait of a girl with loose hair and pendant*, undated, oil on canvas, 59 × 53 cm, private collection

to Stern's *Water Carriers* (Fig. 9) is striking. Rather than emphasising the exotic character of her surroundings, like Stern did, Laubser focuses on domesticity and everyday life in South African farming contexts. The woman is wearing work clothes – apron and headscarf – and is clearly linked to the little hut in the background through the road visible on the right and the water bucket she carries on her head. Her face is a dark plane of colour, denying her any features. She is hence portrayed as a generic farm worker rather than a specific person or mere type.

Instead of luscious nature and "noble savages," Laubser's paintings largely show cultivated land and Black labour in an idolised setting. Exceptions of this are some studies of Black South Africans in traditional dress such as her portrait of an Ndebele woman of 1925 and her images of Indian girls and women she encountered during her travels in Natal in 1936. A good example of the latter group is *Portrait of a girl with loose hair and pendant* (Fig. 15).[126] The painting emphasises the girl's sexuality through her sensuous lips and eyes, loose hair and the large red flowers framing her upper body. Asked why she painted Indian women, Laubser answered: "The freedom in the Indian women's dress and the beautiful colours of the saris against the black-red hair are incredibly beautiful – that's why I want to paint them."[127] This remark shows that Laubser was more interested in formal issues when conducting paintings such as these, unlike her romanticised depictions of field labourers that were more ideologically framed.

In addition to the formal primitivism of her naïve manner of painting, Laubser concentrated on rural class primitivist depictions of non-White subjects that also include racial primitivism. Her landscapes and farm scenes in particular can be considered to naturalise the Afrikaner appropriation of South African land, nature and natives by proclaiming a God-envisioned harmony of (cultivated) land, (farm) animals and Black farm workers. In "Laubser, Land and Labour: Image-making and Afrikaner Nationalism in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s," Elizabeth Delmont argues that Laubser's success was based on her promotion by Afrikaner nationalist "culture brokers" such as the *Broederbond's Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* [Broederbond's Federation

126 Laubser generally rarely dated her paintings. She would sometimes add a date retrospectively and hence often incorrectly. Dalene Marais, together with Elizabeth Delmont, has conducted research into the different periods of Laubser's art production. She places *Portrait of a girl with loose hair and pendant* in the period of 1936–1940. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, pp. 243–244.

127 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)

Fig. 16: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with wheatfields and harvesters*, undated, oil on canvas on board, 20 × 27 cm, University of Stellenbosch

of Afrikaans Cultural Association] and the Afrikaans journal *Die Nuwe Brandwag* [The New Sentinel], who hosted her first successful exhibitions.[128] Delmont shows how Laubser, based on an interest in Christian Science and primitivism filtered through a European aesthetic, in her paintings portrays an alternative world that "is constructed as a timeless, dehistoricized pastoral idyll concretizing stable and harmonious feudal relations in the Western Cape farming community, where work is not presented as being determined by social and economic relations, but rather as an heroic activity obeying the repetitive cycles of nature."[129] I agree with this reading that offers an alternative to the common art historical reception of Laubser's works "as being emptied of ideological content" by other South African scholars such as Dalene Marais or Muller Ballot.[130] Ballot even subscribes to Laubser's romanticisation and writes with reference to *Landscape with wheatfields and harvesters* (Fig. 16) that "she wants to identify with the essentially positive frame of mind of the workers in the fields being harvested, performing the labour for which they are prepared to be held accountable."[131] He further calls her rhythmical compositions "part of the expressive image of haste to get as much of the day's work done as possible before the sunlight disappears completely, or before the approaching storm breaks – because after the hard work comes a time of rest."[132] Indeed, Laubser's three figures depicted can be read to adopt poses of haste and the large blue cloud on the right as an approaching storm. However, since Laubser does not portray any facial features, their positive frame of mind or nearing time of rest are highly speculative. Ballot's interpretation illustrates how in the recpetion of Laubser's works the power relations between White farmers and Black labourers are negated until today.

128 Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour."
129 Ibid., p. 7.
130 Ibid., pp. 13, 17. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*. Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*.
131 Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 177.
132 Ibid., p. 179.

In *Women and Art in South Africa*, Marion Arnold describes Laubser's landscapes as generalisations of "South Africa's physical geography" with the main purpose of providing "contexts for dark figures" that were "expressions of a religious world-view that did not engage with social realities but understood existence as the harmonious exchange of energy between nature and humankind."[133] Arnold further claims that, at the same time, "ideas about the land as place became conflated with the ideology of the land as nation" when Laubser's viewers subscribed to this idea of harmony between land and labourers.[134] According to WJT Mitchell, landscape painting usually functions as an "instrument of cultural power" portraying a supposed natural and social reality that is in fact a cultural construct.[135] Although Laubser's primitivist landscapes were far from depicting social realities, they are therefore still strong indicators of the social and ideological structures within which they were produced and received. Rather than manifestations of a purely personal religiosity, her works can be read within the discourse of landscape painting and national identity.

In his book on the relationship between landscapes and White South African nationalism, Jeremy Foster writes that, due to "powerful connections between landscape representation and the discursive construction of national identity, it comes as no surprise that the period of national formation from 1900 to 1930 was also the heyday of landscape in South Africa" and that "it is largely through landscape painting that art becomes national or indigenous."[136] Foster further explains that landscape painting as a nationalist form of art was especially useful to White South Africans as it was an appropriation of the land:

> Seemingly universal and objective, the view privileges (and naturalizes) individual, subjective perception as the most legitimate way of interacting with the physical environment. It also exemplifies the empowered, modern Western gaze that distances, objectifies, and attempts to control people or territory perceived to be in some way other.[137]

The fact that Laubser can be placed within this discourse can best be demonstrated when comparing her landscapes to those by Stern. As described above, Stern's primitivist depictions of South Africa's landscape and its inhabitants lay an emphasis on the supposedly wild and exotic – or at least on what was perceived that way by Europeans. She travelled to the places that to her seemed furthest away from "civilisation" in order to find her subjects, and when she considered civilisation too advanced in South Africa, she travelled to other African countries such as the Congo, Senegal or Zanzibar. *Natal Landscape* (Fig. 17) and *Congo Landscape: Jungle* (Fig. 18) are two examples of Stern's treatment of the landscape genre. In *Natal Landscape*,

133 Arnold, *Women and Art*, p. 60.
134 Ibid.
135 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power,* pp. 1–2.
136 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 68.
137 Ibid., p. 45.

Fig. 17: Irma Stern, *Natal Landscape*, 1936, oil on canvas, 77 × 84 cm, Irma Stern Museum

Fig. 18: Irma Stern, *Congo Landscape: Jungle*, 1942, oil on canvas, 70 × 70 cm, University of Cape Town WOAC

she chose to depict a savanna with soft hills that does not show any traces of human influences. It is an homage to the wilderness as well as to the colours and shapes of the South-Eastern landscape. In her frequent exhibitions abroad, this was the image that Stern conveyed to her European audience: a South Africa far removed from the problems and confusions of modern times.[138] When she included figures in her landscapes, they usually enforced the idea of wilderness and exoticism rather than indicating any form of governance of the land. *Congo Landscape: Jungle* is a good example of this as it shows a dark, presumably male figure – wearing nothing but a type of loincloth and carrying what might be a large fruit or vessel on his head – surrounded by a lush jungle.

In contrast to Stern's exoticism, Laubser concentrated on what might be called domesticity and chose subjects from her immediate surroundings to describe everyday farm life. Her painting *Landscape with cows, fields and mountains* (Fig. 19) stems from a similar time as Stern's *Natal Landscape*. Even though Laubser's work also does not include any human figures, the cow in the foreground is a symbol for farming and the use of animals for this purpose. The road that emerges behind the hill and disappears into the trees on the left margin of the painting also indicates human presence and at least some degree of infrastructure. Under the viewer's gaze, the animals, the land and the humans living in and of it are turned into one greater organism. Since Laubser takes the perspective of the (Afrikaner) farmer overlooking their property, the appropriation inherent in the gaze can be referred to the appropriation of such land and human beings. Without directly portraying Afrikaner culture, Laubser's paintings could thus be utilised to justify or rather naturalise the Afrikaner

138 Stern also describes this in her text *Umgababa* mentioned above.

Fig. 19: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with cows, fields and mountains*, undated, oil on cardboard, 34 × 43 cm, Sanlam Foundation

claim to hegemony by showing how farmers cultivated the land as well as animals and peoples inhabiting it. Jennifer Beningfield also argues that

> control of the myth of the farm was important not only in the battle for the ownership of the land, which served to consolidate political control and guide legislation, but also in the creation and retention of a cherished vision of a vanished rural existence at the heart of Afrikaner identity.[139]

As will be further detailed in Chapter 3, Laubser and her works were ascribed an important role in the formation of an Afrikaner identity in the visual arts by the Afrikaans-speaking press.

Laubser's 1924 painting *Figures in a landscape: male labourers* (Fig. 20) is a good example of the subsumption of Black labourers into an agricultural landscape governed by White settlers. The painting shows three male Black farm or field labourers whose faces are covered by hats and who – due to the colour of their clothing and skin – seem to merge with the soil and landscape surrounding them. It is worth

139 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 76.

Fig. 20: Maggie Laubser, *Figures in a landscape: male labourers*, 1924, oil on canvas on cardboard, 54 × 60 cm, Sanlam Foundation

mentioning that Laubser's paintings were also received in this vein by her contemporaries. With reference to *Harvesting Time*, a painting very similar to *Figures in a landscape: male labourers*, FEJ Malherbe, professor of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch at the time, writes in the government publication *Our Art* of 1959:

> Note the three little goblins at work. Note the unity between them and their work: in fact, the unity of everything. Their brown faces are as brown as the grain cocks, their shirts are as blue as the sky; the purple of the clouds is reflected in their clothes. They live in this earth like the firmly-rooted trees. […] What a radiant vision of beauty! Clearly we have here a new spiritual creation. […] The sombre expression in the Native's features accents Maggie Laubser's profound compassion, her sympathy with the brown and black people. She can paint them as little gnomes on the land, giving life to landscape (in fact, she was the first of our painters who brought the human figure into the landscape).[140]

140 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," pp. 37–38.

Malherbe's description of Black field labourers as little "goblins" or "gnomes" that are rooted in the South African earth like trees, "giving life to the landscape," highlights the deprivation of Black South Africans' humanity undertaken by Laubser's White audiences. They were considered part of the South African nature and therefore had to be governed and cultivated like the land rather than being allowed any claim to it. Malherbe further describes the view of the harvesting labourers as a highly aesthetic and spiritual experience and thereby evokes a superiority of the White gaze over the Black strain and exertion. Absurdly, he considers this an act of profound compassion and sympathy. Moreover, he credits Laubser with being the first South African artist to "activate" landscape painting in such a way. This illustrates the ambivalence of Laubser's practice that for the first time made visible the Black labour on which White settlers depended, while simultaneously placing it on par with nature itself. Before, landscapes in South Africa had been depicted as deserted in either a romanticising (e.g. Edward Roworth) or an exoticising (e.g. Stern) manner.

In general, the difference between Laubser's and Stern's primitivist landscapes described above also comply with Foster's two broad categories of nationalist landscape representations:

> rural landscapes, or pays, in which peasants appear to live in harmony with the land; and the wilderness minimally touched by civilization and modernity. The first of these categories has its roots in the classical (and biblical) pastoral, an arcadian (that is, timeless) relationship between human society and nature created by a regular round of the longue durée.[141]

It is this first category of arcadian pastorals that applies to Laubser's landscape paintings.[142] In general, pastorals are situated at the interface of Christian thought and nationalist landscape appropriations. They are generally considered to represent either a Golden Age in the past or "an idea about the timeless tranquillity of rural life."[143] In *An Archetypal Constable. National Identity and the Geography of Nostalgia*, Peter Bishop explicates:

> On the one hand, the ideal is imagined as being past and lost. A longing for return can therefore be balanced by a hope for a possible reconstruction in the future. On the other hand, the ideal is imagined to be an ever-present, archetypal level which, although achingly separate from everyday life, is ultimately accessible at any moment.[144]

141 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 48.
142 Also compare Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," pp. 14–15.
143 Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 19.
144 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 62.

He also refers to this as a "fantasy of an archaic locality."[145] I would argue that Laubser's pastorals can be subsumed into this description. As she herself links them to her childhood experiences and since they were received as truthful representations of reality, it is obvious that she does not depict a golden past or potential future, but the timeless fate of the indigenous inhabitants of the land that had become the nation of South Africa.[146] It comes as no surprise that Laubser's works gained so much acclaim in a time of increasing modernisation, urbanisation and complication of social structures. Like British landscape painting in the mid-19th century or French and German primitivism in the early 20th century, the longing for a return to the simplicity that Laubser's class primitivist works propagated had been prompted by an overall feeling of disorientation. In *The Empire of the Eye. Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875*, Angela Miller argues that representations of rural Arcadia "implied stability in a period of rapid change; its modulated topography was the expression of a yearning for uncomplicated social relations."[147] This thought was also expressed by Laubser herself: "I think that it is precisely this simplicity and determination that surprises the public in the time of confusion in which we live."[148] She considered an art that is based on a simplified connection between nature and religious belief a remedy for such a feeling of disorientation:

> We live in a time of inventions and changes, which brings a great hurry for us all; the artist sees it like a chaos that is caused by humans themselves. He feels there is no other way out than to go back to creation and start to work himself on simplifying his work. This is the reaction to the turmoil. The artist longs for rest and tries to find it by going back to nature and bringing peace into his work.[149]

This is of course an idea that is inherent in other primitivisms such as the *Brücke*'s, too. Bishop emphasises another concept that directly links the pastoral to the project of primitivism: that of nostalgia. For him, "nostalgia is about continuity and identity, whether national, local or individual."[150] He also quotes Gaston Bachelard's definition of nostalgia as born of the desire "to dream gently again, to dream faithfully. Reveries toward childhood: the nostalgia of faithfulness […] How solid should we be within ourselves if we could live, live again without nostalgia and in complete ardour, in our primitive world."[151] Nostalgia is hence connected with an undemanding,

145 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 126.
146 Also compare Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," pp. 7, 13, 25. Jennifer Beningfield argues that, in general, the pastoral "acted as a myth of stability and innocence which supported a transformation in the inhabitation and ownership of the agricultural landscape throughout the twentieth century." Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 77.
147 Miller, *The Empire of the Eye*, p. 14.
148 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)
149 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 268.)
150 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 86.
151 Cited in ibid.

primitive world. Another part of this concept of the "nostalgia of faithfulness" is the "reclaiming and poeticizing [of] childhood experiences" and memories.[152] This plays an important role in Laubser's self-presentation in most of her texts. For example, she stresses the importance of memories for her art in the 1939 article "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder" [Why and How I Paint]: "The painting must come from the artist, their awareness of colours, figures and lines. We call it memories but it's more than memory: it's the image that lives in one's own consciousness."[153] She therefore draws a direct line from memory and (sub)consciousness to her art. In the 1956 radio speech "Dit is mei kontrei" [This is my country], she gives a long and detailed account of her childhood memories and of how she used to feel one with the nature surrounding her.[154] She begins her account by emphasising the importance of childhood for geographical or national belonging:

> When you have lived in Europe for ten years, and stayed in a different city every year, then you have so many contacts that you almost feel like you do not belong to one particular place. However, the place where you received your first impressions in life, where you were a child within an intimate family circle, will always remain a special place, <u>your</u> country.[155]

In the undated manuscript "What I remember," Laubser recounts:

> I was one of those fortunate children, who are awakened every morning by the different sounds of nature, and who could watch the animals come home every night to their kraals; and these are among my earliest recollections and with joy I shall always remember them, for these farm memories have formed the basis upon which I later built up all the visions which constitute my art.[156]

This testifies to the importance of unmediated childhood experiences and the memories thereof for what Laubser considered truthful representations of landscapes and farm scenes. Due to the significance Laubser publicly attributed to childhood memories in accounts such as these, her works could be utilised to naturalise the appropriation of land and labour by referring to a "child-like" truth lying within her paintings.[157]

---

152 Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable*, p. 53.
153 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
154 Laubser, "Dit is mei kontrei."
155 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269. Laubser's original underlining.)
156 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 1.
157 Dekker, "In Standpunte," p. 11. Van Broekhuizen, "Maggie Laubser and Guido Gezelle," p. 19. P.H.W., "A Woman Painter of Maturity."

Other settler primitivists also subscribed to this idealisation of childhood and the state of being a child. Irma Stern, for example, mystifies her childhood in "How I Began to Paint" when writing:

> At a later period of childhood my life was that of a gypsy – travelling in various countries, seeing, taking in, finding the touch of mystery in all the strangeness of whirling life. Seeing the East, living in the North, wandering through the centres of old culture, I was always longing for something – something unspeakable, indefinable, something holy.[158]

She then describes how those experiences later informed her art. In "My Exotic Models," she additionally bases her interest in portraying Black South Africans on childhood experiences, exhibiting the racial primitivism that resonates in her artworks:

> From 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 on the high veld, and opposite 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.[159]

In a letter to Millie Levy, Lippy Lipshitz also idolises the state of mind of children: "The child in us is the mother of all our happiness. When the child is dead, we have lost all capacity for happiness. It is the child in us that nourishes that trustful delight in creation."[160] These references to childhood, especially to South African childhoods, on the one hand catered to general primitivist interests in simplicity, originality and unconsciousness and, on the other hand, rendered the artists' works more authentic and truthful in the perception of their audiences as will be further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Laubser often shows her female farm workers carrying babies in bundles on their backs. Examples of this are *Landscape with figure: woman carrying a baby on her back, trees and mountains in background* dated 1930 (Fig. 21) and *Landscape with huts, wood carriers and sheep* of 1950 (Fig. 22). The white apron worn by the woman in *Landscape with figure: woman carrying a baby on her back, trees and mountains in background* clearly identifies her as a domestic help. The presence of small babies accompanying their mothers on their daily tasks and duties in both paintings further stresses the harmonious naturalness of the relationship between female worker, land and labour Laubser invokes. In "What I remember," she recounts a similar scene of mothers with their babies on her parents' farm: "At the back of the house there was a large dam

158 Stern, "How I Began to Paint."
159 Stern, "My Exotic Models."
160 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 12 May 1936.

Fig. 21: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with figure: woman carrying a baby on her back, trees and mountains in background*, 1930, oil on carboard, 35 × 44 cm, private collection

and every evening I used to watch the cows coming to drink, and the coloured women with babies on their backs to fill their buckets. Near the dam the geese were kept."[161] This enumeration also illustrates her equation of farm animals and labourers that is reflected in her paintings.

Elizabeth Delmont convincingly draws on John Barrel's influential treatment on English landscape painting *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* for the ideological framework of the alleged harmony between land and labourers portrayed in Laubser's work. Barrell argues that the depiction of the rural poor in the English landscapes he discusses serves an ideological agenda as it portrays the fieldworkers in harmony with the land while refuting the realities of class conflict or social injustice.[162] He further claims that this can only be achieved by showing them as a natural part of the landscape – reduced to small scale generic figures rather than suffering individuals.[163] It is striking that between 1940 and 1950, an extremely important time for the formation of Afrikaner nationalist identity and the definition of the relationship between Black and White South Africans, Laubser moved her Black subjects more and more to the background. In earlier works such as *Figures in a landscape: male labourers* (Fig. 20), Laubser still set the focus on the labourers – regarding their position as well as the amount of detail with which she painted them, for example by showing them all in different clothing and postures. In *Landscape with huts, wood carriers and sheep*, on the other hand, the wood carriers are distant figures that seem of a rank equal to the trees or huts they are walking towards. The sheep in the foreground, again, refer to the farming context, that is, the cultivation of land and the use of farm animals by the Afrikaner settlers. The huts in which the three figures are living, too, become one with the landscape and hence further enforce the subsumption of labourers into the land.

What Delmont does not take into consideration, however, is the fact that depictions of non-White farm labourers were extremely rare in South Africa at the time.

161 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 1.
162 Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 5, 134.
163 Ibid., p. 157.

Fig. 22: Maggie Laubser, *Landscape with huts, wood carriers and sheep*, 1950, oil on cardboard, 55 × 40 cm, Sanlam Foundation

Beningfeld claims that, commonly, different landscapes were represented "as natural environments for different bodies" in South African art: "Reserve territory was defined as the natural landscape of the black South African, with its connotations of the picturesque and benign primitivism, while the veld and the farm were retained as symbolic landscapes by the white South African."[164] In the first half of the 20th century, laws such as the 1913 Natives Land Act and the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936 removed the presence of Black farmers from the landscape as well as from its representation "and replaced them with silent and invisible labour."[165] Beningfield explains that depictions "of black South Africans as farm labourers would have confirmed their participation in productive landscape, and therefore threatened the myths which required that the [White] farmers themselves be the primary provider of labour."[166] As a result, she concludes that

> the complex identity of the southern African farm and the racial diversity of its owners, occupants and tenants were simplified in the narration of a political narrative that depicted the pastoral landscape as the exclusive presence of the white man and his family.[167]

Laubser's painterly portrayals of Black and Coloured farm labourers as the central force of agricultural production are therefore much more ambivalent than they at first seem. Like Stern's portraits of Black South Africans, it is important to remember that depictions of non-Whites in contexts such as these were extremely uncommon at the time and raised public awareness of a group usually pushed into invisibility. At the same time, Laubser's landscapes were useful for the Afrikaner nationalist project as they show Black workers as natural parts of the landscape, and thereby naturalise their repression and categorisation into a different class of people or citizens. As pastorals they depict a supposedly timeless truth, an Arcadian simplicity that offers a (spiritual) escape from modern day's confusion.

164 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 89.
165 Ibid., p. 90.
166 Ibid.
167 Ibid., p. 77.

1.2.3 Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886–1957): primitivism in Afrikaner nationalism

Even though Jacob Hendrik Pierneef is usually not considered a modernist in line with other South Africans such as Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser or Lippy Lipshitz, he is still an important South African settler primitivist. His approach was more conservative and mainly appealed to an Afrikaner audience that co-opted Pierneef as an important figure of their solidifying national identity. His importance to the Afrikaner nationalist project becomes apparent throughout his reception. In her dictionary entry on the artist, Esmé Berman for example emphasizes that Pierneef "was born in the year that Jhb [Johannesburg] was founded; his father, Gerrit – a Hollander, built the first house in the new town (in Market St); his mother was the daughter of a Trekker."[168] Moreover, Berman calls him "a most congenial companion and an earnest crusader for the cause of Afrikaner art and culture" and includes two quotes by Pierneef at the end of the entry: "You must travel with your own people on the ox-wagon," and: "Truly national art has to be born of your own surroundings and your own soil."[169] JF van Staden writes in 1947 that, when asked "what he regarded as the mission of the South African painter," Pierneef replied: "He must be a prophet riding on the wagon with his own people."[170] Jennifer Beningfield points out that Pierneef joined the Afrikaner nationalist *Broederbond* [Fraternity] in 1918 and referred "to himself as a 'Voortrekker' [pioneer] for the arts during the 1930s and 1940s."[171] As Juliette Leeb-du Toit puts it, his landscapes "became intrinsically associated with Afrikaner nationalist patriotism, expressed in nostalgia for a predestined, self-ruled homeland."[172] Like Laubser's, Pierneef's primitivist landscapes are therefore closely linked to the Afrikaner appropriation of South African land.

Pierneef was born in Pretoria/ Tshwane in 1886 – the same year as Maggie Laubser. His father, Gerrit Pierneef, organised an auxiliary police force there during the Anglo-Boer War. Upon the seizure of the town through the British forces in 1900, the family was forced to leave for Rotterdam, where Pierneef studied at the Academy, but returned to South Africa after the end of the war in 1902. Originally having wanted to study architecture, Pierneef had to financially support the family by working first in a tobacco shop and then at the State Library in Pretoria. Encouraged by his godfather, the prominent sculptor Anton van Wouw, he continued his artistic practice during this time and, in 1917, was elected a member of the *South African Society of Artists*. After teaching engagements at Pretoria and Heidelberg Normal Colleges from 1920 to 1923, he focused on his career as an artist exclusively. Again like Maggie Laubser's, his career as a visual artist was hence less straight forward than that of other primitivists such as Irma Stern or Lippy Lipshitz, who greatly profited from their belonging to the Jewish diaspora that was more interested in fine art.

---

168 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 222.
169 Ibid., p. 223. Also compare Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 9.
170 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
171 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, pp. 41–42.
172 Leeb-du Toit, "Land and Landlessness," p. 183.

Fig. 23: JH Pierneef, preleminary drawings for the Ficksburg Panels, La Motte Museum

During his employment at Pretoria State Library, Pierneef came into contact with publications on prehistoric rock art such as *Native Races of South Africa* by George Stow (1905) and *Bushman Paintings* by Helen Tongue (1909). He studied the copies of South African rock art that the ethnographers had made and the accuracy of which is at best questionable. Additionally, through his friend, the artist Erich Mayer, Pierneef studied original tracings by George Stow owned by Dorothea Bleek in 1916.[173] When he received his first commission – eight panels for the assembly hall of Ficksburg High School – in 1922 from Samuel Henri Pellissier, who would six years later become Director of Education for the Orange Free State, Pierneef decided to base these on his second-hand studies of San rock art. NJ Coetzee argues that this decision "reflects Pierneef's interest at that time [and] may also indicate that Bushman art was not seen as unacceptable to the educated Afrikaners at that time."[174] He assumes that "the real reason for this acceptance of Bushman art by Afrikaners reflected a desire to identify with Africa rather than with England."[175] In a letter to his friend Erich Mayer, in which he forestalls the image of himself as *voortrekker* for the arts in South Africa, Pierneef wrote in 1916: "As time passes the more I feel that Hodler's decoration fits neatly with the Bushmen and that it can be an ideal basis for South African Art. In

173 Botha, "Pierneef," p. ix. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 222.
174 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 2.
175 Ibid.

Fig. 24: San rock painting capturing the "rain bull" ceremony, Drakensberg, Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand

this regard I hope we will be the Voortrekkers…"[176] This indicates that, rather than using San rock paintings as direct source material, Pierneef was more interested in the commonalities of these paintings and modern European art forms such as *Jugendstil* or Art Nouveau. It is possible that the latter, similar to German expressionism, offered another alternative to English-derived romantic realism. Therefore, it is not surprising that Pierneef began to navigate his art production at the intersection of graphical modernism and indigenous traditions.

The *Ficksburg Panels* (compare Fig. 23) show animal and hunting scenes that Pierneef largely based on Stow's liberal tracings of San rock art.[177] It becomes obvious straight away that they appropriate such art rather than being exact copies of individual artworks – shapes, colours and compositions deviate too strongly from original San paintings (compare Fig. 24). Since most contemporary viewers must have been unaware of this, the primitivism evident in the *Ficksburg Panels* is extremely problematic. According to Alexandery Duffy, "San metaphors were altered so that they lost their original symbolic meaning and merely became decoration."[178] However, it

176 Cited in Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 23.
177 For a more detailed description, see ibid., pp. 23–34.
178 Ibid., p. 24.

is likely that Pierneef, who at that point had never visited any rock art sites in person,[179] himself believed Stow's renderings to be accurate tracings.[180]

The pastel drawing *Adam and Eve* of 1925 (Fig. 25) can be considered another key work for Pierneef's engagement with San rock art. In "Pierneef and San Rock Art," Duffey shows that the drawing is a combination of tracings by Stow, Tongue and Carl Peters.[181] The male figure representing Adam is based on a Stow drawing that Pierneef is likely to have studied when viewing Dorothea Bleek's collection in 1916.[182] It is a fairly close copy apart from the fact that Pierneef distinctly lightened the man's skin tone. The female figure was taken from another Stow tracing in Bleek's possession.[183] Here, again, Pierneef lightened the figure's skin tone, and also changed the white face paint into the same light-brown colour. It is possible that, following racist stereotypes, his intention was to transform the two figures that contemporary viewers would otherwise likely interpret as being Black,[184] or even more specifically Xhosa,[185] into lighter skinned "Bushmen."[186]

Fig. 25: JH Pierneef, *Adam and Eve*, 1925, pastel on paper, 80 x 58 cm, La Motte Museum

Moreover, Pierneef added a right arm disappearing behind Eve's back and a left arm presenting a leafed twig to Adam. Although there appears to be a berry at the end of the twig, this curiously looks more like a peace offering than the sharing of a forbidden fruit. By depicting Adam and Eve as indigenous South Africans, he locates the Christian origins of mankind in his native country.

---

179 Although Pierneef later also made direct copies from rock paintings on the farm Ebenaezer near Fouriesburg in 1936, those did no longer figure into his art. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 223.

180 Compare Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," pp. 21–22, 32.

181 Compare ibid., pp. 35–36.

182 Ibid., pp. 22, 34. Stow's tracing is reproduced in Rosenthal, *Cave Artists of South Africa*, p. 77.

183 It is reproduced in Stow, *Rock-Paintings in South Africa*, plate 7.

184 Compare Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 34.

185 White face paint forms part of Xhosa male initiation rituals.

186 At the time, the San were not considered Black Africans. Curiously, Pierneef's colour change additionally turns Eve's face into a mask. Unfortunately, it is not known if Pierneef, like Irma Stern or Lippy Lipshitz, was familiar with West African sculpture at the time.

The abstracted baobab tree in the centre of Pierneef's drawing is an exact copy of a tree traced by Carl Peters.[187] It already presages the Afrikaner's later, famous focus on these trees (e.g. Fig. 26). This can be linked to White artists' efforts of "constructing indigeneity" by appropriating "pre-existing aesthetic dimensions identified with the indigenous population"[188] that Nicholas Thomas also detects in Margaret Preston's and Gordon Walter's employment of Australian aboriginal and New Zealand Māori imagery.[189] Similar to Preston, who utilises indigenous Australian flora in her paintings such as *Aboriginal landscape* (Fig. 1) or *Australian native pear* (Fig. 2) in combination with formal elements referencing Aboriginal art, Pierneef also develops an iconography uniting a specifically South African landscape and increasingly removed references to San rock paintings. Thus, his primitivism is foremostly stylistic.

With reference to works such as *Bushveld* of 1942 (Fig. 26), Federico Freschi argues that "Pierneef's empty, ordered landscapes (particularly his beloved bushveld scenes) are redolent of the controlling gaze of the nationalist."[190] According to Jennifer Beningfield, they "cohered with the belief that the Afrikaner as 'natuurmens' (natural man) possessed an inherent empathy with his environment and offered a visual means through which this connection to the land could be both expressed and made."[191] NJ Coetzee explains that it was "only when the severing of the Afrikaner's ties with the land occurred, as urbanization on a large scale began, that the Afrikaner became conscious of a closeness to the land."[192] He adds that, "for the Afrikaner, the God-forsaken wilderness was the city while the farm, the tamed wilderness was God-imbued."[193] Pierneef considered art a religion closely linked to the divine origin of the land as well as to the destiny of the Afrikaner people to

Fig. 26: JH Pierneef, *Bushveld*, 1942, oil on board, 45 × 60 cm, private collection

187 Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 36. Tracing reproduced in Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, p. 391.
188 Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 141.
189 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 111–163.
190 Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 9.
191 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, pp. 41–42.
192 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 24. Also see Van Rensburg, *A Space for Landscape*, pp. 17–18.
193 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 25.

harness the "empty land."[194] Coetzee stresses that, "as Calvinists, the Afrikaner also believed that they were placed in Africa in a position of overlordship" and that "the landscape was the bare geological phenomenon regarded by the Afrikaner as the *ware grootse Afrika* [true great Africa], the Africa God sent them to."[195]

In a 1947 article for the *Cape Times Week-end Magazine*, JF van Staden cites Pierneef as describing the South African landscape as "titanic and strong" and therefore unfit for treatments in "the European technique of painting."[196] Van Staden remarks that "Pierneef does not see many signs of a South African school in painting yet but thinks that the Bushman art offers an important basis for its development."[197] Although Africa and the arts of its indigenous San population played an important role in Pierneef's visualisations of Afrikaner "indigenisation," his racist reply to Erich Meyer's call to base a true African art on the art of Black South Africans was that this would mean the demise of White culture.[198] While this sounds contradictory, there probably was a crucial difference between basing a "South African school in painting" on San art and on Black South African art to Pierneef. Whereas the San had almost been pushed into extinction by the early 1900s, Bantu-speaking peoples and their material culture were still present in contemporary South Africa – in fact they represented the majority of the overall population. Unlike the San, who, at that point, were romanticised as "ancient Bushmen," they had a claim to the land of which they had been forcibly expropriated by European settlers. These claims were denied by artists such as Pierneef, who depicted the land as empty, Laubser, who showed it as harmoniously cultivated by White farmers using Black labour, and Alexis Preller, who depicted the Ndebele as contently living in the confines of their *kraal* [homestead], removed and separate from White society. In contrast, Pierneef must have considered it more in line with the White nationalist project to suggest basing a national South African art on appropriations of rock paintings produced by a people that was at the same time regarded irrelevant for contemporary politics and linked to the history of the South African land – thereby offering a possibility of "indigenisation." As mentioned above, the depiction of Adam and Eve as indigenous Souht Africans fits well into this project.

In 1925, Pierneef was commissioned by South African Railways & Harbours (SAR&H) to paint 28 mural panels and four smaller paintings for the new railway station in Johannesburg that was designed by Gordon Leith and Gerard Mordijk, who would also design the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria a decade later. According to a Department of Information publication, this was the first government commission to a painter in South Africa.[199] The panels were supposed to have either "historical" or "natural" subjects and were revealed to the public in 1932.[200] As described by Jeremy

194 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 20.
195 Ibid., p. 24.
196 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
197 Ibid.
198 Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, p. 2.
199 Harmsen, "Art in South Africa," p. 13.
200 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, p. 43.

Fig. 27: JH Pierneef, *JHB Station Panel – Amajuba*, after 1925, oil on canvas, 146 × 153 cm, TRANSNET, Rupert Foundation

Fig. 28: JH Pierneef, *JHB Station Panel – Graaf-Reinet*, after 1925, oil on canvas, 146 × 155 cm, TRANSNET, Rupert Foundation

Foster, the panels "offered a greatly expanded vision of the national territory within a single, centrally located public space that all long-distance travelers had to pass through."[201] They were composed of twelve landscapes from Transvaal, nine from the Cape Province, three from Natal, one from the Orange Free State, two from South West Africa (today Namibia) and one from Basutoland (Lesotho). Jennifer Beningfield stresses that, "as an organisation whose responsibilities also included tourism, SAR&H were involved in the presentation of the land to those separated from it," i.e. South Africa's urban population with an often nostalgic urge for simple countryside life.[202] She further explains that the organisation promoted bushveld safaris as "compensatory" experiences for South Africans living in non-rural areas and, in the process, presented the veld "as a place to which one could retreat to recall the timeless values of humans and nature, uncomplicated by the presence of other inhabitants."[203]

Most of Pierneef's panels show typical South African landscapes that at most include signs of human presence but never the inhabitants themselves. The portrayals of *Amajuba* (Fig. 27) in KwaZulu-Natal and *Graaff-Reinet* (Fig. 28) in the Eastern Cape Karoo are two examples of this. *Amajuba* shows a farmhouse with a street curving around it, farmed fields to its right and traditional Zulu huts on an uncultivated stretch of land in the foreground. While the farm is bathed in sunlight, the Zulu settlement lies in the shade. Rather than showing White governance and Black labour like Laubser's farm scenes, *Amajuba* stresses the divide between Afrikaner cultivation and African wilderness. The painting of *Graaf-Reinet*, on the other hand, shows an ungovernable rock landscape with steep rugged cliffs and no trace of any human activity. It is an example of the "titanic and strong" landscape that requires a distinctly

201 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, p. 204.
202 Beningfield, *The Frightened Land*, pp. 43–44.
203 Ibid., p. 44.

South African treatment as cited above. Both works are characterised by Pierneef's graphical, primitivist style of dark outlines and flat surfaces. Hints to San rock paintings such as animals are however missing from his works of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

1.2.4 Lippy Lipshitz (1903–1980): religiosity and indigeneity

Lippy (proper Israel-Isaac) Lipshitz came to the country as a young child in 1908 with the rest of the Jewish-Lithuanian family to join his father, who had migrated to Cape Town four years earlier. The grandfather built wooden synagogues and created religious wood carvings, as folk art was still very popular in Lithuania at the time. Lipshitz's biographers thus ascribe him an interest in parochial – especially Jewish – folk art that manifested in various sculptures of biblical themes throughout his career.[204] Additionally, a number of his works betray an interest in West African sculpture. This was first prompted by the Russian-Jewish sculptor Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, who moved to South Africa from Berlin in 1925. When he met Meyerowitz, Lipshitz became the only slightly older but more experienced artist's mentee and, under his influence, started specialising in wood.[205] He also joined Meyerowitz when the latter received a teaching position at the newly opened Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. However, in a diary entry of 21 August 1927, Lipshitz complains about the conservatism and backwardness governing the school.[206]

Meyerowitz took an uncommon stance towards African art for his time and considered himself a reformer and educationalist. In his report on village crafts in Lesotho, for example, he criticises the "particular type of history of Art and Art Appreciation which has been taught in the past 150 years" for being a "narrow-minded, intolerant [...] misrepresentation" taking a purely Western perspective.[207] However, Meyerowitz still takes the same Western primitivist approach when describing contemporary Basotho crafts as "the earliest form of pottery, similar to those examples found within the precincts of the earliest human habitations" and worries about their corruption caused by the tourist "curio" market.[208] Moreover, in a journal article

204 Frieda Harmsen even claims that all of Lipshitz's art, no matter whether it was "biblical, secular, pantheistic, is profoundly religious." Harmsen, "Art in South Africa," p. 26. Also compare Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, pp. 3–4.

205 Lipshitz, diaries 1920 to 1928, 21 August 1927.

206 Ibid. Meyerowitz was dismissed from Michaelis in 1929 because the government considered it more suitable for an art school to concentrate on fine art while "crafts should be taught at the Technical Colleges." Tietze, "The art of design," p. 7.

207 Meyerowitz, *A Report*, p. 5.

208 Meyerowitz, "Pottery in Basutoland."

published in 1936, he mixes primitivist ideals with social criticism in a typically ambivalent manner:

> How long will this paradise last? […] What will happen when Basutoland is incorporated into the Union of South Africa? Thinking of these proud, upright, happy people, of the joy we had witnessed that day, we compared them to the unfortunate folk a few hundred miles away in the Orange Free State carrying passes like human beings of an inferior order and crowded into locations.[209]

Meyerowitz also gave Lipshitz a copy of Einstein's *Negerplastik* in 1925. It is likely that Lipshitz had not been in close contact with West African sculptures before, as African art was not considered noteworthy or even art in South Africa at the time.[210] While he had great admiration for the artworks depicted in this volume, this first did not echo in his work. In 1928, however, he moved to Paris in order to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He stayed there for about four years and, in 1929, met Brancusi and visited his studio. Lipshitz later recalls:

> His [Brancusi's] work, and Zadkine's, the greatest carvers of the age, held me spellbound. The inspiration of primitive, and particularly of African Negro Art, embodied in their work, appealed to me, and released my long pent-up desire to base my art on the art of Africa.[211]

In another diary entry, Lipshitz also refers to the international importance of "Bushmen paintings" that far exceeded the reputation of major White South African artists such as Irma Stern.[212] Moreover, he expresses his and his fellow artists Elsa Dziomba's and Anton Hendriks's admiration for the African handiwork displayed at the Rhodesian and East African Pavilion at the "Empire Exhibition" shown in Johannesburg in 1936.[213] In addition to formal concerns, it is likely that Lipshitz was also interested in the religious/ spiritual component ascribed to African art. As described above, in *Negerplastik*, Einstein asserts that African art does not symbolise anything but is itself the religious or the spiritual, autonomous and more powerful than its producer, requiring no mediation.[214]

Lipshitz's combination of Jewish topics and a form language appropriated from West African sculpture for example becomes evident in *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* of 1946 (Fig. 29). The 70 cm tall sculpture is one of Lipshitz's medium-sized works and conducted in ebony, a material he did not use as frequently as others such as

209 Meyerowitz, "A Visit to the Bafokeng," p. 396.
210 E.g. Klopper, "South Africa's Culture of Collecting," p. 19. Knight (ed.), *l'Afrique*, pp. 25, 31–32.
211 Cited in Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 10.
212 Lipshitz, diaries 1928 to 1932, 28 March 1929.
213 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 17 September 1936.
214 Einstein, *Negerplastik*, p. XV.

Fig. 29: Lippy Lipshitz, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1946, ebony, height: 70 cm, Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections

stinkwood, marble, concrete or ivory. The shapes of the entwined figures' bodies clearly recall West African pieces like those depicted in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.[215] Additionally, Lipshitz followed the properties of the wood while shaping it, emphasising the work's materiality. Stereotypical characteristics (partly derived from African carving traditions) cited in Lipshitz's work – such as naked bodies with rounded bottoms, thighs and calves, exaggerated hands and feet as well as shaved, round heads – suggest that the artist was portraying Jacob and the angel as Black Africans. This fact is enhanced by his use of ebony, a material that, according to a contemporary review of an exhibition that most likely included this work, was "the wood traditionally associated with dark Africa."[216] Such a treatment was certainly considered unusual for a Jewish theme such as the Israelites' founding father's night-long struggle with the angel of the lord. Interestingly, Lipshitz produced a second sculpture in the same year of the same material and size that shows a mother and child in a similar embrace and is entitled *Africa*.[217] The kinship between the two works suggests a more local interpretation of the biblical subject that has received prominent artistic attention by painters such as Rembrandt, Delacroix or Gauguin, and by the sculptor Jacob Epstein, whose studio Lipshitz repeatedly visited during his sojourn in London in 1947/48.[218]

---

215 Einstein, *Negerplastik*, e.g. pp. 21, 36, 42, 53. As mentioned before, Einstein does not provide any information on the origin/ context of the artworks he reproduced.

216 Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," p. 38.

217 Reproduced in Artnott, Lippy Lipshitz, p. 150.

218 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 26. As Lipshitz had not been to England before 1948, it is unlikely that he was familiar with Epstein's *Jacob and the Angel* (1941) when working on his sculpture of the same topic.

Fig. 30: Lippy Lipshitz, *Tree of Life*, 1950, yellowwood, height: 127 cm,
Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections

Another work illustrating Lipshitz's interest in universal Jewish imagery combined with a localised formal and racial primitivism is *Tree of Life* of 1950 (Fig. 30). The 127 cm tall sculpture is made from South African yellowwood and depicts a mother and child study. It is one of Lipshitz's larger works. The two figures portrayed are again Black Africans and their features again show similarities to pieces of West

African sculpture illustrated in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.[219] In Judaism, the tree of life (*Etz Chaim* in Hebrew) has different meanings and usages: it is used to describe the individual wooden poles to which the parchment of a Sefer Torah is attached, it can figuratively be applied to the Torah itself, it is a common name for yeshivas and synagogues, it can refer to the biblical tree of life and, in Jewish mysticism, it is the central symbol of the Kabbalah. In Lipshitz's treatment of the subject as a mother and child study, the tree of life also retains another meaning: that of motherhood and ancestry. The fact that he chose yellowwood, a tree indigenous to South Africa that has since been declared the country's national tree, indicates a connection between soil, land and indigenous population.[220] Lipshitz again emphasises the locality of his topic and, on the other hand, draws a line from specifically Jewish symbolism to universal issues such as procreation, nativity and belonging.

In addition to such references to African sculpture in his own works, Lipshitz also showed a more general interest in African art. In 1941, for example, he organised an exhibition of "African Native Art" at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town with fellow artist John Dronsfield. The exhibition's goal was to promote the displayed works' status as fine art (as opposed to ethnographical objects) as well as the general appreciation of African art in South Africa.[221] A quarter of the exhibits were lent by Irma Stern, other works belonged to the Leopoldville Museum in the Belgian Congo, artists Gregoire Boonzaier and Maurice van Essche, or the South African Museum. They were produced in the Gold and Ivory Coasts, Congo, Nigeria and Benin. Moreover, Lipshitz was very interested in the works and careers of the Black South African artists Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, whom he supported with an attitude demonstrating the same prejudiced primitivism detectable in his artworks. Christine Eyenne describes how Mancoba's "imagery took another direction after his encounter with classical African art" facilitated, on the one hand, through visits to Irma Stern's collection and, on the other, through reading Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture* on recommendation of Lippy Lipshitz.[222] Lipshitz and Mancoba had regularly met between 1936 and 1938 when the latter moved to Paris, and Lipshitz considered his own art a great influence on the Black sculptor's work.[223] In a diary entry of 14 August 1936, Lipshitz also writes that he "persuaded Mankoba [sic] the native

219 The woman's head for example resembles the work reproduced on p. 14, while her body shows similarities with the illustrations on pp. 35, 50, 58, 67.

220 Also compare Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," p. 38: "By his preoccupation and constant experiment with South African woods and stones, yellow-wood, silverwood, […] he makes his works deeply-rooted and indigenous."

221 Lipshitz, "Introduction."

222 Eyenne, "Yearning for Art," p. 99. In a letter of 30 June 1938, Lipshitz also thanks his friend Cecil Higgs "for the book on Negro art you gave me before you embarked. The work is of the purest and finest in technique and design I have ever seen." It is unclear which book Lipshitz is referring to. Lipshitz also recommends meeting Mancoba during Higgs's sojourn in Paris. Cited in Bertram, *Cecil Higgs*, p. 37. Additionally, Lipshitz introduced Mancoba to the German Jewish sculptor Elsa Dziomba in the 1930s. Schrire, "The German Jewish Immigrant Contribution," p. 11.

223 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 2 and 14 August 1938. Lipshitz, "Sekoto," p. 20.

sculptor to write an article on 'The Misrepresentation of the Native in South African Art'" and that "the result has been very surprising for he is able to express himself with logic and dignity."[224] These remarks indicate the ambivalence between Lipshitz's appreciation of Mancoba and the political implications of such an appreciation as well as his racist stereotypes of Black South Africans as less intelligent.[225]

Lipshitz's racially primitivist attitude towards Black South African modernists becomes further obvious in his writings on Mancoba's friend and mentee, the painter Gerard Sekoto. In a letter to Millie Levy of 1948, Lipshitz describes Sekoto's works as exhibiting an "intimate glimpse and direct technique" and compares them favourably with the "effective and consciously naïve" works by Maggie Laubser.[226] He thus attributes Sekoto's supposedly "primitive" paintings a greater "authenticity" than Laubser's controlled primitivism. As the quest for a more authentic life was one of the foundations of the primitivist project, Lipshitz placed a high value on Sekoto's immediacy. However, in an article for *The African Drum* published in 1951, he argues that Sekoto's work had been deteriorating since he moved to Paris as he lost his roots and his authentic experiences of Black South African life:

> One still feels that, in spite of Sekoto's success in Paris and the effect of his work on American minds, his present paintings – drawing too much on his reminiscences – lack the power, clarity and simplicity that one finds in his South African works. Sekoto's talent is essentially realistic and intimate. No European can possibly possess and master the same intricate and peculiar knowledge of the South African bantu life and type. […] The Europeans, like Preller and Irma Stern, look at their Native subjects from the picturesque angle, as something exciting and attractive. Sekoto, on the other hand, identifies himself completely with his people and the things around them, painting them in situations and scenes that no European has ever dared to represent or has ever noticed. Sekoto can paint a crowd in a Native eating house, see and smell the atmosphere of a lodging in Shanty Town, the huddled masses of sweating flesh and rags – painting with livid colour and bold form as only one who has slept among them can.[227]

---

224 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 14 August 1936. Unfortunately, I was unable to retrieve the article – or any proof of it ever having been published.

225 Lipshitz also criticised his friend Heinz Hirschland, with whom he stayed in Johannesburg in 1936, for not welcoming Mancoba in his home "kindly and as an equal." Condemning Hirschland's hypocrisy, he adds: "'Yes my dear Lippy' said Heinz at the door, 'You would understand my position. You know that I adore African art and appreciate their dances. But what can I do more in Johannesburg?'" Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 2 August 1936.

226 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 1948.

227 Lipshitz, "Sekoto." Again, there is an obvious racism filtering through this description. Walter Battiss reveals a similar, if somewhat mitigated assessment of Sekoto. Battiss, "Gerard Sekoto."

Lipshitz's critique of Sekoto again stresses the importance of locality and indigeneity in South African primitivism when considering his style uninteresting and fleshless as soon as his work is divorced from the African context it had supposedly emerged from. His interest in the African painter seems purely primitivist. It is possible that Lipshitz was influenced in this view by his good friend and supporter David Lewis, who spoke of the alleged change in Sekoto's work a lot more disparagingly than Lipshitz did. Even before the painter left for Paris, he wrote:

> Yet to-day Sekoto presents the tragedy of decline, of the artist lifted from his surroundings to foreign influences which he endeavours to imitate without assimilating them and less, understanding them. […] Living amidst European art influences, he has gradually lost those instinctive elements which were the most valuable contributions to his art. He has succumbed to European art methods, not from weakness so much as divorcement, from his inability to recognize tradition in his own race history, and his utter alienation from ways and lives of his people, from their customs and his heritage. That is the tragedy of his decline: and this decline will never be revoked so long as he insists on living among European artists and art influences, until he re-establishes his basic elements in the life from which he has sprung and which represents all native living in South Africa.[228]

Lewis combines racist stereotypes of the Black artist as unintelligent and instinct-based with a subscription to apartheid principles of racial segregation and separate living spaces that was common in reviews of the time and will be further discussed in Chapter 2. In contrast to Lewis's slander, Lipshitz's criticism of Sekoto is much more ambivalent. Like his letter to Millie Levy, his article emphasises the authenticity that, in Lipshitz's opinion, makes Sekoto's work more interesting and relevant than that of contemporary settler artists such as Stern and Preller. His primitivist idealisation of authenticity is shared by other artists of the time. For example, in a letter to Lipshitz of 7 March 1939, Cecil Higgs relates an encounter with Jomo Kenyatta, who would over 20 years later become independent Kenya's first prime minister and president, in London. She praises his book *Facing Mount Kenya* of 1938 and summarises that "its especial interest & value is that it is written by someone who understands completely, is, in short, one of the tribe he writes about."[229] The book is composed of a collection of essays on Kikuyu society and gives an account of Kenyan history as an alternative to eurocentrism. The dustjacket shows a photo of Kenyatta in traditional dress. Higgs does not expand on the anti-colonial stance Kenyatta takes in this work but adds: "I think what art will emerge from the native of S. Africa is an extremely interesting speculation."[230] In contrast to other settler artists who were only interested in traditional African art, Higgs and Lipshitz hence

228 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, p. 32.
229 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 7 March 1939.
230 Ibid.

were also curious about contemporary works although they viewed them with the same racial primitivism as their colleagues. Revealingly, Walter Battiss expresses his astonishment in 1952 that, "out of the ten million black people," Sekoto was the only painter to produce interesting work:

> So we came to accept the aboriginal art as something belonging to the past and, moreover, our continual disappointment in never being able to find anything really exciting in the contemporary art products of the Bantu led us to except nothing but a decay of Bantu work through contact with disruptive European culture. But faith was restored, for out of the ten million black people suddenly appeared Gerard Sekoto who had something to say in paint. […] His happy way of painting his own Basuto people clothed in gay yellows and soft reds and greys has added to his reputation in depicting certain facts of native life with an innate understanding beyond that of the European painter.[231]

Battiss's reference to Sekoto's "happy way of painting" illustrates his patronising and primitivising approach. As John Peffer argues, "the white middle-class patrons, critics, collectors, and artists who constituted his [Sekoto's] main audience in South Africa saw him as a talented but 'primitive' Bantu artist who represented the everyday life of blacks in town in a manner they found palatable."[232] Interestingly, in two letters written to his friend Millie Levy, Lipshitz expresses a similar disapproval of the romantic glorification inherent in settler primitivism as criticised by Peffer. With reference to an exhibition of works by Gregoire Boonzaier, Lipshitz writes in 1939:

> It is, it seems more agreeable to look at his 'Malay quarters' with its pretty colouring & the picturesque representation of squalor and ruins, than to pay a visit to the real Chiappini Street! People seem to be more willing to buy pictures, inconsequential pictures that they can live with, that flatter or vindicate their narrow or disinterested outlook on life and humanity than to buy real works of art that challenge their outlook on life or mock their morals.[233]

These remarks approach social criticism by attacking Cape Town's contemporary art audience. In a later letter, he also criticises his fellow artists themselves. Telling Levy about the latest *New Group* exhibition, he complains:

> These artists are escapists. They have not the courage or the imagination to express the age. They are too much absorbed with the quality of their technique + have no heart in their subjects which are merely 'subjects' to show

231 Battiss, "New Art and Old Art."
232 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 4.
233 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 24 October 1939.

> off their knowledge and skill. Hence the many + variegated still-lives [sic] + landscapes so very pleasing and clever + cocksure – but saying nothing that is vital.[234]

Interestingly, Lipshitz does not locate his own practice of appropriating African sculpture within this field of tension. In general, he can by no means be described as a politically active artist interested in changing socio-political relations in the highly segregated South Africa. On the contrary, he sometimes took part in the nationalist project that encouraged many settler artists to work with South African themes. For example, in 1927/28 he created the carved relief *The Great Trek* (Fig. 31), partly in Cape Town and partly in Paris where it was first exhibited. He donated the work to the archives of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns [South African Academy for Science and Art] in 1964 upon being awarded the academy's gold medal. In the accompanying letter, he calls his work "a pioneering effort […] in a new and South African style of carving" and explains that "after many experiments I discovered for myself in this panel, a typically South African approach, using the indigenous natural forms and landscape of the Country."[235] The letter also includes a description of the artwork:

> The theme consists of a symphony in three movements. The lower section bordered by Table Mountain is composed of scenes and types from the old Cape and confines these burghers and their liberated slaves who stayed behind. Beyond the mountains the actual Trekking begins in various directions, with hardy Voortrekkers, wagons, whips and blunder busses. As it develops higher and higher, various sculptural forms, adventures and obstacles occur – mountains and warring Kaffirs and beasts – until the action finally subsides with the prominent Rising Sun and the Angel of Victory with outspread wings at the very top.[236]

Lipshitz's effectuations comply with common nationalist representations of the Great Trek as the journey of God's chosen people to a land where they can find the freedom and prosperity they deserve. While the steep ascent and the "warring Kaffirs and beasts" – who originally inhabited the land that the Boers considered themselves to be chosen to occupy – symbolise the hardships and struggles the *voortrekkers* had to face on the way, the rising sun accompanied by the angel of victory signifies the religious destiny of their efforts' gratification. This religious moment is further stressed towards the end of his letter when Lipshitz explains that the inscription on the scroll in Dutch, the language of the bible in South Africa at the time, "seemed appropriate to express the religious feeling to be conveyed by my relief."[237] Additionally, he re-

234 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 10 March 1941. (Original punctuation.)
235 Lipshitz, letter to Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, 25 September 1964.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.

Fig. 31: Lippy Lipshitz, *The Great Trek*, 1928, mahogany, 81 × 46 cm, Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns

lates that, in Paris, the relief was exhibited under the title *L'Exode du Cap de bonne Esperance* [The Exodus from the Cape of Good Hope] because to him, "the Great Trek was meant to express the modern Exodus of the Boers with the same pioneering and religious fervour and aspirations of the Israelites of old – a quest guided by Divine beneficence."[238] He therefore draws a connection between Afrikaner nationalists and his Jewish ancestors. In "Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender," Elsie Cloete explains that "armed with the belief of being God's elect people, the Afrikaner identified strongly with the Israelites of the Old testament" and that "parallels were found between the Israelites' epic journey through the desert on the way to the promised land and the Great Trek."[239] Lipshitz's manoeuvring between depictions of Black South Africans as aggressive warriors fighting the Afrikaners/ Israelites on their holy journey in *The Great Trek* and representations of Black South Africans as Jacob and the angel or the tree of life further stresses the ambivalence inherent in his work.

1.2.5 Gregoire Boonzaier (1909–2005): romantic "slum" scenes

Gregoire Boonzaier's primitivism differs from the other artists portrayed here in the respect that his mode of painting did not deviate strongly from the conservative norm that was prevalent in the South African art scene until the early 1940s. It can be attributed to what is commonly classified as Cape impressionism. According to Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa*, "this is a term that gained currency among art critics in the years around WW2" and "applies to a general style in SA painting, which is indirectly and derivatively related to the techniques of European Impressionism, and which has enjoyed its most consistent exposition in the Cape."[240] She further calls it a "second-generation version of the naturalistic landscape style, which was epitomized in the works of Gregoire Boonzaier, Terence McCaw and Robert Broadley."[241] Berman explains the popularity of this style was caused by the fact that "it related to what [the public] already knew and offered security amid the strange modern forms which were cropping up on SA exhibitions."[242] Nevertheless, Boonzaier has often been called "a bridge between the old and the new"[243] because – in spite of his traditional style and conservative artistic background – he was a founding member of the *New Group* and at the forefront of artists prompting a change in regime in the art world of South Africa.[244]

Gregoire Boonzaier was the son of the Capetonian cartoonist DC Boonzaier, who was well connected in the South African art scene of the time. Amongst his close

238 Lipshitz, letter to Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, 25 September 1964.
239 Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity," p. 43.
240 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 59.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid., p. 60.
243 N.N., "Dr. Tom Muller sal kunsuitstalling open."
244 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 17. Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 26.

friends were the protagonists of the "old guard," Edward Roworth, Bernard Lewis, Anton van Wouw, Pieter Wenning and Moses Kottler. Gregoire Boonzaier was introduced into this world early in his life. In his diary, DC Boonzaier stresses Roworth's support of his son and also points to his own efforts in promoting Gregoire's career by getting journalists to place articles on his exhibitions in the *Cape Times*, *Cape Argus* and *Die Burger* [The Citizen], which he was employed at himself.[245] As early as 1924, Bernard Lewis published a short text in the *Cape Argus* in which he "discovers" the genius of the 14-year-old Gregoire: "His work gives every indication of genius – and he has never had a lesson. Local artists are enthusiastic and I understand that Mr. Kottler, the sculptor, is taking an active interest in the boy's progress."[246] In the following year, Gregoire Boonzaier had his first solo exhibition at the age of sixteen at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town.

In 1934, Boonzaier broke with his father, who had been controlling his life and career and had not wanted him to attend any formal art training.[247] He saved the proceeds of the sale of artworks during his following exhibitions and was able to finance a study stay in London from early 1935 to late 1937. Lippy Lipshitz writes in a diary entry of 1935: "The art world was shaken up by the astounding success of Gregoire Boonzaier's exhibition, who sold 35 of his paintings at Derry's framing shop for 900 guineas and sailed for overseas in a German steamer to study at Heatherley's in London."[248] Upon his return, Boonzaier initiated the foundation of the influential *New Group* together with Terence McCaw, Freida Lock, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller and acted as its chairman (preceded by Charles Peers and followed by Ruth Prowse) for eight of the group's fifteen years of existence. As DC Boonzaier noted in a diary entry of 1 July 1941, Gregoire shared his new friends' opinion on Roworth's obsolete, traditionalist, dictatorial stance within South Africa's most important arts institutions, and aided his old supporter's fall.[249] DC records that, afterwards, "Roworth very naturally would have nothing more to do with him."[250] In 1944, Gregoire Boonzaier and Ruth Prowse successfully caused the *South African Fine Arts Association* that had been founded in 1850 and was responsible for assembling the core collection of

245 "Roworth has shown me nothing but kindness even since we first met and when Gregoire commenced to paint, and all through the years he remained with me, he (R) not only admired his work and encouraged him but did him many and many favours." Boonzaier, diary no. 42, 1 July 1941. "Yesterday, The Times and Argus each published a reproduction of a still life and on Monday there will be one in Die Burger. As usually, nearly all this work has fallen on my shoulders for the press as ever does not lend itself too willingly to propaganda for art. […] But for my personal association with newspapers, Gregoire would have remained practically unknown as a painter." Boonzaier, diary no. 32, 14 November 1931.

246 Cited in Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 11.

247 Compare Boonzaier, diary no. 34, 31 January 1934. Gregoire's income as an artist was entirely retained by his father and was used towards the family's daily expenses.

248 Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, 26 October 1936. According to Berman, "two exhibitions in Cape Town and Pretoria had netted R4,000." Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 44.

249 Boonzaier, diary no. 42, 1 July 1941.

250 Ibid.

Fig. 32: Gregoire Boonzaier, *Corner of Pentz and Wale Street, Malay Quarter*, 1938, oil, 40 × 50 cm, ownership unknown

artworks displayed at the National Gallery to dissolve.[251] In its place, they founded the *South African Association of Arts* (SAAA) together with Charles Ray and Charles te Water. The *SAAA* took over the role of Roworth's *South African Society of Artists* "as the official national arts body."[252] As representatives of this new body, Boonzaier and Te Water joined the board of trustees of the National Gallery in Cape Town.[253] Additionally, Martin Bekker reports that Boonzaier travelled to isolated areas in the Eastern Free State and Transvaal bushveld all the way up to Salisbury (today Harare, Zimbabwe) in order to exhibit and sell his paintings in small, presumably White, communities unfamiliar with art.[254] He also gave lectures on "art and good taste" at local schools where he spoke about artists such as Pierneef and Naudé but not about his own art. On these trips, he was often accompanied by Daantje Saayman of Nasionale Pers [National Press], who presented the publishing house's books, and cooperated with the Council of Adult Communication. He is therefore attributed an important role in developing South African art audiences at the time.

Similar to most of the other South African settler primitivists discussed in this chapter, Boonzaier's primitivism does not as much display an aesthetic as a thematic character and falls into the category of subject appropriation. He became

251 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 22. This collection mainly consisted of British and European art.
252 Ibid.
253 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 31.
254 Ibid., p. 33.

Fig. 33: Gregoire Boonzaier, *Corner of Common and Caledon Street, District Six*, 1971, oil, size and ownership unknown

most famous for his oil paintings depicting urban class primitivist scenes in Cape Town's Malay Quarter (today Bo-Kaap) or District Six (destroyed between 1975 and 1982). *Corner of Pentz and Wale Street, Malay Quarter* of 1938 (Fig. 32) and *Corner of Common and Caledon Street, District Six* of 1971 (Fig. 33) are two examples of this. They show street scenes in colourful cityscapes in non-White areas that point at harmonious, pre-industrial, working-class city life. People are depicted in relaxed situations, talking to each other or following their daily activities, accompanied by carts, animals and children. Additionally, the Malay Quarter scene also shows figures in traditional Muslim clothing and therefore has a more exoticising quality than the one set in District Six. This is also reflected in Boonzaier's recollections published in a *Huisgenoot* [Housemate] article in 1972:

> Even as a child I found old Cape Town an exotic place. […] There one finds the Malays with their fezzes, and the women with their colourful headdresses. Over all this, the minarets of a dozen mosques from where the Imam's cry daily summons the faithful.255

Significantly, in 1971, the year the District Six painting was finished, the apartheid government released its plan for the district: its inhabitants were forcefully removed to the Cape Flats and most of the buildings torn down to make space for White housing. It is not clear if Boonzaier wanted to illustrate the "colourful" cultural life that would be destroyed or whether he just chose to disregard the fate of the people

255 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 35.

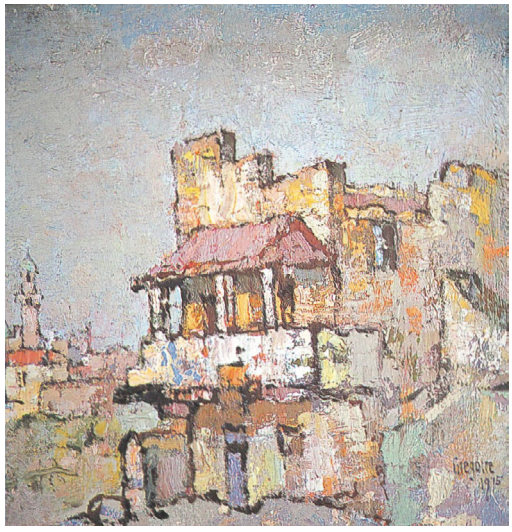

Fig. 34: Gregoire Boonzaier, *Old building and mosque, District Six*, 1975, oil, size and ownership unknown

Fig. 35: unknown photographer, used by Boonzaier as model for Fig. 34

depicted and portray a picturesque, romantic idyll instead. In the catalogue for his exhibition hosted by the University of the Free State of 1981, he writes:

> We refer to Pierneef's bushveld scenes, to Hugo Naudé's Namaqua-land flowers, Maggie Laubser's harvest scenes and Welz's nude studies. It is therefore not strange or wrong when people speak of Gregoire's slum scenes. There is a good reason why these form a recurring topic in my works. From childhood I have been unimpressed by new suburbs, anonymous cities with ugly skyscrapers, air pollution and the rush and hubbub of teeming traffic and freeways. These symbols of our modern, vulgar supermarket world depress and sadden me. All they do is to make me long for the stillness and integrity of nature as I knew it when I was a child. My slum paintings may well be a reaction against everything that glitters, or that is noisy and artificial. Time and again I feel the urge to break away from city life and seek a quiet spot, a lonely donkey cart in a District Six street, a clump of trees bending in the wind next to a location. These subjects appeal to me most.[256]

As he wrote these sentences while the removals and bulldozers had already been operating in District Six for at least five years, it seems more likely that Boonzaier's paintings were conducted from an escapist perspective linking class and racial primitivism. The same tropes concerning childhood, nostalgia and nature that are prevalent in Maggie Laubser's remarks on her work again surface in Boonzaier's explanation of his motivation in painting. Unlike Laubser's farm scenes, however, he

256 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, pp. 35, 40.

expands this to include pre-industrial, non-White city life. For contemporary viewers, it is difficult to identify his paintings as slum scenes in the first place. The comparison between the work *Old building and mosque, District Six* of 1975 and the photo it was based on (Figs. 34 + 35) shows that this disconnect originates from the fact that in, his painting, Boonzaier turns the derelict, squalid house still occupied by people into a picturesque, romanticised ruin reminding more of a castle-like structure. Additionally, he leaves out any signs of modernity such as streetlights, electric wires, asphalt roads or the car that dominates the photo. As the work's title locates the building in District Six a few years after the begin of the demolitions and removals, it is possible that it additionally romanticises this destruction of the quarter's former housing spaces as idyllic ruins in front of an exoticising background. The ambivalence in this work is caused by the fact that, in spite of its exoticising romantisation, it can still be considered to thematise the demolitions and removals and thereby a racist and discriminating political action which, as indicated above, was usually not addressed at all. The absence of human figures amplifies the feeling of nostalgia that resonates with primitivist practices but was usually not linked to contemporary segregationist policies. Boonzaier's abandoned District Six house shows parallels to Emily Carr's depictions of deserted First Nation villages (Fig. 4).

1.2.6 Walter Battiss (1906–1982): appropriating San rock paintings for a new national art

In *Art and Artists of South Africa*, Esmé Berman describes a change from the superficial "European" treatment of African forms and subjects by artists such as Stern, Laubser, Lipshitz or Boonzaier to a new spirit she calls "an intangible entity, which may be described as the 'African Mystique'."[257] She claims that this change was brought about by the two painters Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller. Berman's interpretation of 1970 has coined the following art-historical positioning of the two artists.[258] She explains that, in contrast to previous artists, for Battiss and Preller, Africa did not serve "as the source of primitive forms but as a context of experience."[259] In her description, she follows the same nationalist, primitivist approach as the artists themselves:

> In the desert, on the rocks and in recesses of primeval forest man has left a record dating from his earliest emergence. Etched into the continental crust and imprinted on the customs of its [Africa's] varied peoples, are vestiges of lost, inscrutable events. Because for so long these were unexplored and unexplained by visitors from the West, when finally Europe became alive to them they were either wrapped in the mystery of long-forgotten things or

257 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, pp. 12–13.
258 Also compare Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 149.
259 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 12.

> so securely locked in secret cult and magic as to seem impenetrable. […] The magical connotations, the vital energy, the violent rhythms and the primitive forms of African cult-objects seemed to be drawn from the very well-springs of man's creative inspiration.[260]

Berman argues that both Battiss and Preller were intuitively drawn to this intangible magic and "became the initial vessels through which the inevitable influence of the spirit of the continent was to project itself into South African expression."[261] Berman's objective of describing a new national art that is unique to South Africa and completely removed from European models becomes obvious in sentences such as these. More explicitly, she states: "the awakening to the specific climate of the African continent was the beginning of the psychological separation of South African art from its traditional European antecedents."[262] Again, this new art is closely linked with the land itself. With reference to Battiss's interest in San rock art, she details that "a further dimension to the African mystique is contributed by the presence in South Africa of a heritage of visual symbols from the past [that] have been known as 'Bushman Art'."[263] Hence, for Berman, "the emphasis in Walter Battiss' conceptions is on the mystique of Africa's forgotten past."[264]

Walter Battiss first came into contact with San rock art when he saw some of those works as a child close to his family's house in Koffiefontein in the Free State.[265] His formal art education only began in 1927 when he started to receive tuition at the Johannesburg Art School. He continued to study art and teaching at the Witwatersrand Technical College and the University of the Witwatersrand, starting his first teaching position in 1933. Battiss was also a co-founder of the *New Group* in 1938 that will be discussed further in Chapter 4. In 1936, he began to seriously start researching and writing on rock art and two years later, he travelled to Europe to study rock art in Southern France. On this occasion, he also met Abbé Henri Breuil, a French Catholic priest, archaeologist and professor of prehistoric ethnology who studied (prehistoric) cave paintings in Europe, China, Ethiopia, Somalia and Southern Africa.[266] Breuil believed that there was a connection between these paintings, and he attributed them to White authorship in line with the Hamitic myth described above. For example, in his "White Lady of Brandberg" theory, he argues that a white painted figure included in a rock painting on Namibia's tallest mountain, the Brandberg, depicted a Cretan or Sumerian person.[267] LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker) explains that "Breuil emerged as a popular figure in South African academic and political circles because of his role in legitimizing and reaffirming the

260 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 12.
261 Ibid., p. 13.
262 Ibid.
263 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 12.
264 Berman, *The story of South African Painting*, p. 132.
265 Skawran, "Introduction," p. 16.
266 Oliphant, "Modernity and Aspects of Africa," p. 21. Skawran, "Introduction," p. 16.
267 Breuil, "The White Lady of Brandberg." Breuil, "The So-Called Bushman Art."

paternalistic approach that whites used in establishing their historiography of African art."[268] After Breuil had moved to South Africa in 1942 and received a post at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1944, Battiss assisted him in his research activities. He had been invited to this post by prime minister Jan Christian Smuts, who, according to Berger, "believed that Breuil's archaeological research was instrumental in establishing a white presence in the region during the prehistoric era to justify white claims to the South African land."[269]

Battiss wrote to Pierneef in July 1938 from London after he had spoken to the British High Commissioner to the Union of South Africa, Charles te Water, about the scientific drawings of rock paintings he had conducted for Abbé Breuil.[270] Pierneef and Te Water had been planning to publish a book on "Bushman Painting" with the British magazine *Studio* some years earlier, and Te Water suggested contacting Pierneef about publishing a "De Luxe Edition" drawing on the collections of Battiss, Pierneef, Miss Wilman of Kimberley and Professor Riet van Lowe with "government financial help."[271] In his letter to Pierneef, Battiss writes that "time will have to admit that you were the leader for the artistic recording of these paintings, and you have most valuable material already collected," calling him "one of the greatest artist authorities on the Bushman."[272] However, there is no proof of any further correspondence between the two artists and also not of an ensuing collaboration on a book or other project. Nevertheless, Battiss independently published various texts on the topic.

In 1939, he issued his first book on San rock art, *The Amazing Bushmen*. In addition to information on their art, the volume contains anthropological and physical descriptions of the San so detailed that they even include the shapes of women's buttocks and labia minora as well as men's penises.[273] In addition to this scientific racism, Battiss's primitivist approach becomes clear in his comparison of the indigenous South Africans' lives with an arcadian world: "the painter people whose praises I would sing are those who lived in a Southern Arcadia with the god Kággen as their Pan."[274] He held onto this idea as reflected in his later painting *African Paradise* (Fig. 36) that was probably conducted around 1960. The work shows Black South Africans in rural scenes such as tending sheep, fishing, washing, carrying water or other foodstuff. Most – if not all – figures appear to be female. They are surrounded by antelopes and forest, red earth and dark water. The strong colours used, especially red, white, black and yellow, evoke "typically South African" colours like those used in traditional Ndebele beadwork. Battiss signed the painting in the bottom right corner and added the words "Atque in Arcadia Ego." This on the one hand points

268 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 154.
269 Ibid.
270 Battiss, letter to Pierneef, 12 July 1938.
271 It is not known to what extent Battiss was familiar with Frobenius and his collection of 500 San rock painting facsimiles that he sold to the South African Union government for £5,000 in 1931. Keene, *Leo Frobenius*, p. 18. The collection is not mentioned in Battiss's letter.
272 Battiss, letter to Pierneef, 12 July 1938. (Battiss's original underlining.)
273 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Amazing Bushman*, p. 9.
274 Ibid., p. 10.

Fig. 36: Walter Battiss, *African Paradise*, undated, oil on canvas, 122 × 248 cm, CJ Petrow Corporate Collection

to Nicolas Poussin's 1637 painting *Et in Arcadia Ego* [Even in Arcadia, there am I] depicting a pastoral with shepherds surrounding a tomb. In the case of Poussin, the phrase is usually interpreted to be uttered by Death and his painting is therefore considered a memento mori. On the other hand, "Atque in Arcadia Ego" could mean that Battiss believed himself to be in the Arcadia of rural Black women he depicted. Since he added the phrase right after his name, this is the more likely alternative. The racial and gender primitivism of his idea of Arcadia is striking. Although there is no clear reference to San rock painting in colour or shapes, the spatial treatment in the arrangement of groups of women simultaneously performing different tasks, all shown in one plane with no background/ foreground hierarchy, is reminiscent of rock painting compositions.

In *The Amazing Bushmen*, Battiss declares that "the Bushmen are the only folk in Southern Africa to create an indigenous art the quality and quantity of which entitle them to be considered among the world's greatest primitive artists."[275] This strongly opposes Roger Fry's degradation of South African rock drawings described at the beginning of this chapter. In his clearly nationalist project, Battiss in contrast to Fry also compares South African rock art favourably with European cave paintings:

> Fortunately I have seen the European cave paintings and comparing them with the best Bushman paintings (or Rockman engravings), there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that our art stands supreme. The fact that the European cave paintings may be very much older (30,000 years) does not affect an aesthetic issue. Referring to the Altamira Bison the Abbé Breuil remarked that 'they had not the same conception'. When I showed him my copies of the polychrome buck of the halcyon days he considered 'these

275 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Amazing Bushman*, p. 20.

Fig. 37: Walter Battiss, *The Early Men*, 1938, oil on paper and panel, 60 × 98 cm, collection Murray Schoonraad

> paintings the best of animals in primitive art – nothing better. They are the finest in their understanding and conception.'[276]

Of course, Battiss fails to mention that Abbé Breuil attributed White authorship to the works he saw in South Africa. Anitra Nettleton rightly stresses that Battiss's admiration of the aesthetic qualities of rock art and the fact that he did not question that they were produced by San artists were unusual at the time.[277] In an address to the annual general meeting of the South African Museums Association in 1941, he also proclaims that "despite all that has been written individual masterpieces from the kopies and rock shelters of South Africa are absolutely different from anything known in art before."[278] However, Nettleton emphasises, too, that his "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."[279] His first painting based on San rock art, *The Early Men* of 1938 (Fig. 37), treats the theme very freely. Although it shows figures resembling those in San rock art, their poses alluding to emotional states such as relaxation, pensiveness, attentiveness, pain or fear clearly differ from traditional depictions of rituals or hunting scenes – as does the abstract mountain landscape in the background. Curiously, the (all male) figures also appear to have blond hair on

276 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Amazing Bushman*, p. 21.
277 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 145.
278 Cited in N.N., "Bushman as an Artist."
279 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 145.

top of their heads. In general, the work strongly evokes European primitivists such as Henri Matisse.[280] The painting carries the following retrospective inscription on the back that indicates the artistic revolution Battiss nevertheless saw in his stylistic appropriation of San rock art:

> This is the first painting in which I break away from Impressionist art. I still continued my orthodox impressionist painting, working on primitive forms until it became a definite part of my style. I called this painting 'The early men'. This work is therefore the first painting by a South African artist using our primitive art as a direct reference.[281]

His monumental painting *Mantis* (Fig. 38) that probably originates from the mid-1960s shows a treatment of the San rock art theme that is completely removed from European post-Impressionist pictorial languages. Battiss portrays a praying mantis, an animal that symbolises cannibalism, violence and sexuality, composed of small, graphical depictions of animals, people, plants and other signs symbolising landscape elements such as water, which Battiss largely appropriated from South African rock paintings. It is likely that he understood the mantis – an animal he depicted frequently in line with his interest in primeval sexuality, for example in *Mantis Dance* (Fig. 39) – to represent Africa. The earthy colours he chose remind of the sand- or clay-coloured surfaces that rock paintings were usually found on. Additionally, they suggest an equation of mantis/ Africa and nature. With reference to works such as these, Andries Oliphant, in his 2005 essay for the exhibition catalogue of a Battiss retrospective

Fig. 38: Walter Battiss, *Mantis*, undated oil on canvas, 90 × 184 cm, Unisa Art Gallery

280 In his address to the annual general meeting of the *South African Museums Association*, Battiss did liken San rock painting to modern art's "purposeful eliminations." Cited in N.N., "Bushman as an Artist."

281 Cited in Oliphant, "Modernity and Aspects of Africa," p. 22.

Fig. 39: Walter Battiss, *Mantis dance*, undated, silkscreen print, 40 × 52 cm, Pretoria Art Museum

hosted at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg, writes that Battiss's "individualised re-workings of rock art paved the way for subsequent generations of South African artists to explore this and other aspects of indigenous art in new work with confidence," concluding that "this process of recovery and re-invention, begun by Battiss, has contributed to the liberation of South African art from colonial bondage."[282] This statement illustrates the ambivalence of Battiss's art that by a lot of South Africans until very recently has been considered to raise the appreciation and esteem of San rock art, in spite of its obvious racial primitivism, and to constitute a new national art. Battiss himself made clear that he saw in this revolution a way for South African art to find a new form language independent of European currents. Looking back, he argues:

> I was trying to find out what came before the Europeans came, take what I could from it, change it and build on it. This was something that was completely misunderstood. People thought that all I was doing was imitating the Bushman or just extending Bushman art or prehistoric art, but that is not what I was getting at at all. I think it is really necessary to make it quite clear now that what I had recognized was that in all of us there is still some aspect of primitivism — the vestigial Adam. There is still some of the primitive man in all of us, and we as Europeans were perfectly justified in taking what we wanted from our ancestors, and I looked upon the Bushman as rather a minor form of this big background…[283]

The close connection between primitivism and nationalism for Battiss is rendered obvious in this statement. Additionally, it shows that he considered it his and other White artists' right to take from their Black compatriots whatever they wanted as they shared the same ancestors. It is surprising, however, that retrospectively Battiss minimalises the importance of San rock art for his own work.

---

282 Oliphant, "Modernity and Aspects of Africa," p. 22.
283 Cited in McGee, "Indigenous Relations," p. 117.

In 1948, he published another volume, called *The Artists of the Rocks*. In this book, again, he stresses the supposed superiority of South African rock art over the art of other regions in Southern Africa: "the highest technical developments occurred in the Union of South Africa for in the departments of perspective and foreshortening, shading and composition, the southern painters contributed greatly to the glory of prehistoric art."[284] As Nettleton indicates, in addition to utilising for nationalist distinction the art of a people that had been made nearly extinct in something resembling a genocide by White settlers, he also appropriated it for his own artistic purpose. In a letter to art historian Murray Schoonraad, he writes: "I decided that prehistoric art in South Africa belonged to us, the artists. […] Fate sent it to me to go into action as an artist."[285] Elsewhere, he explains:

> The solution came to me while I was in Europe. I suddenly found that European artists like Matisse, Picasso and Braque and all the others were using forms from Africa – and had pilfered something that belonged to us. No, they did not steal the stuff, they were using rightly what was on earth and rightly what we should use.[286]

It is extremely unclear whom Battiss means when he says "belonged to *us*" or "*we* should use" but it is likely that he is referring to White South African artists. In general, he draws a clear difference between Black and "European" South Africans and even articulates a supposed cultural gap resulting in a mutual lack of understanding. Nevertheless, he evidently considers Black South Africans essential in the process of "indigenisation" of White settlers due to their proximity to the land itself. In the following quote from an SABC interview with Elaine Davie of 1981, the difference between "we" and "they" seems rather sharp:

> I am terribly fond of black people, Africans … They are a big mystery to me … I can't understand them and I am sure they don't fully understand me as a white person, but they are close to me through art … they are so near and part of the environment of Africa: they understand the soil and they understand the mountains and the rivers better than I do. This is the sort of kick I get out of them – it's their contact with this Africa in which I live […] they have come out of Africa – they have walked out of this soil. We have come from elsewhere, so we are foreigners in a way…[287]

Here, Battiss emphasises the negotiation of foreignness and indigeneity prevalent in his art and in his endeavour of establishing a distinctly South African art. For the latter, he considers the indigenous crucial due to the specific connection between

284 Battiss, *Art in South Africa. The Artists of the Rocks*, p. 66.
285 Cited in Skawran, "Introduction," p. 17.
286 Cited in Oliphant, "Modernity and aspects of Africa," p. 21.
287 Cited in Skawran, "Introduction," p. 16.

"natives" and land. He justifies his (and other White settler artists') appropriation of indigenous cultures through an allusion to Black and White South Africans' mutual ancestors, sharing their human existence from the "Cradle of Humankind" to the present time.[288] Obviously, like most of his White compatriots, Battiss did not consider this mutual origin referable to equality in other social or political realms. He thus also separated his admiration for the art of an "extinct" people that was no longer an entity to be reckoned with in terms of land claims or political co-determination from that of other African art. In a *Studio* article of 1952, he writes:

> From European painters comes almost the only manifestation of pictorial art in South Africa to-day; the black artist has become nearly extinct, leaving only his wonderful cave drawings as a legacy to be discovered by such enthusiastic searchers as the author of this article.[289]

In general, his stylistic primitivism is expanded by racial and also often gender primitivism (as in *African Paradise*, Fig. 36). His formal treatment of indigenous form languages is comparable to Hartley's apprehension of American Indian visual aesthetics, but he still depicts a supposedly "lost" culture in a similar vein to Carr. However, while Hartley and Carr wanted to record the indigenous cultures and form languages they admired, Battiss searched for a way of appropriating such form languages in a manner that would allow himself to be considered an artist with a specifically South African identity. As cited above, he wanted to develop a primitivism that spoke to White South Africans and connected them with the land they lived in.

1.2.7 Alexis Preller (1911–1975): primitivist mystifications of Ndebele women

Alexis Preller was born in Pretoria as the youngest child of an Afrikaner family with Dutch, German and Swedish roots and first studied art at the Westminster School of Art in London in 1934 upon recommendation of JH Pierneef. Back in Pretoria in 1935, he developed an interest in Ndebele artistic traditions – as had other artists such as Lipshitz and Stern – and regularly made weekend field trips to the small Ndebele settlement at Hartebeesfontein together with the photographerConstance Stuart Larrabee.[290] Early paintings such as *Native Study (Mapogges)* (Fig. 40), which was first exhibited in the "Empire Exhibition" in 1936, already indicate this interest

288 "The hollow of the mountain held a white man's farm. When I looked on the clear contours of the new white boy in Africa who had been born there in the Mopani Trees, who loved his father's cattle, who knew where to find under the ground the rare sweet honey of the small wild bee, who knew all the African boy knew, then I understood the white boy belonged to the ancient men and was thus, with me, a modern man." Battiss, *Fragments of Africa*, n.p.

289 Battiss, "New Art and Old Art."

290 Compare Danilowitz, "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele," p. 74.

that would retain a significant stimulus throughout his artistic career. While the influence of older artists such as Stern (figures, foreground) and Laubser (landscape, background) is clearly visible in his colouration and treatment of contours, *Native Study (Mapogges)* already suggests Preller's ensuing tendency towards stylisation and abstractions. The figures depicted do not show any individual features but simply highlight traditional Ndebele dress such as beaded neck, hip, arm and ankle hoops. They are all female and sexualised through an emphasis on their large, round breasts. Brenda Danilowitz argues that

Fig. 40: Alexis Preller, *Native Study (Mapogges)*, undated, oil on canvas, 61 × 71 cm, private collection

> the Ndebele settlement at Hartebeesfontein was at a distance sufficient to remove Larrabee, Eaton, Preller and others to a space where they could enact their 'pastoral dreams' and imagine a South Africa free of the inequalities, exploitation and degradation that had been inscribed in its history for three centuries.291

John Peffer adds that "Preller's use of the Ndebele figure [...] was for possibly voyeuristic consumption, or at most as an item in an iconic inventory whose elements constituted no deep concern with Ndebele culture, but rather with an eccentric personal mythology."[292]

In 1937, Preller continued his studies at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. Upon his return to South Africa in 1938, he took part in the formation of the *New Group* and participated in their first exhibition. Strongly influenced by Irma Stern, he spent some time in Swaziland and produced work that clearly resembled hers. An example of this is the charcoal drawing *Swazi Woman* of 1938 (Fig. 41), a type showing an emotionless woman averting her eyes from the viewer, permitting the latter's gaze. Works such as these visibly propagated racially primitivist ideas, often in combination with gender primitivism. Again similar to Stern, in 1939, Preller travelled to the Belgian Congo where, according to Esmé Berman, he was "impressed by tribal ritual and Negro sculptures."[293] In the same year, South Africa decided to support Britain in

291 Danilowitz, "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele," p. 87. Also compare Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 16.

292 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 20.

293 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 239. Berman was a close friend of Preller's and published the only monograph on the artist since 1948: *Alexis Preller. Africa, the Sun and Shadows* of 2010.

Fig. 41: Alexis Preller, *Swazi Woman*, 1938, charcoal on paper, size and ownership unknown

the Second World War. Alexis Preller, similar to other artists such as Neville Lewis or Terence McCaw, volunteered to serve in the army and, again on recommendation of JH Pierneef, joined the Field Ambulance Corps in 1940 that would deploy to Northern Africa.[294] Berman explains that Pierneef felt that Preller's "art was not yet sufficiently developed to qualify him for the duties of an Official War Artist" but Preller still wanted to support his country in its war efforts.[295]

His Corps first travelled to Cairo and he was taken prisoner by the Italian army in Tobruk, Egypt, in June 1942. After his release, Preller returned to Pretoria in 1943. Even though he was not an official war artist, he can be considered amongst those whose experience of war can be found most distinctly in his subsequent artworks. Berman argues that "his development received dramatic impetus as a result of his visit to the Congo and its immediate sequel in the upheaval of WW2."[296] She believes this to be due to a colourful volcano eruption Preller witnessed at Lake Congo that was later reflected in the nightly air-raids over Alexandria as well as to the supposed closeness of Congolese sculptures or masks to the injured soldiers patched back together in tent hospitals:

> Impressions of the ritually-distorted heads of Congo children and the cruelly-painted fetishes and tribal masks fused with the mutilated figures he observed in front-line operating theatres – and as he watched, the horrifying battle injuries were unconsciously translated by the act of merciful repair in which he was participating into mystical images of resurrection.[297]

Berman's description obviously dramatises and mystifies Preller's experiences and illustrates the idealised reception of Preller's surrealist primitivism that often evokes images of violence, battles and injuries – but also transformation. Two examples of this are *Fetish Enthralled* of 1945 (Fig. 42) and *Cracked Head* of 1947 (Fig. 43;

294 Berman, *Alexis Preller*, p. 59. In addition to military service in general, agreement to fight outside of South Africa was also voluntary. Ibid., p. 53.
295 Berman, *Alexis Preller*, p. 59.
296 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 241.
297 Ibid.

Fig. 42: Alexis Preller, *Fetish Enthralled*, 1945, medium, size and ownership unknown

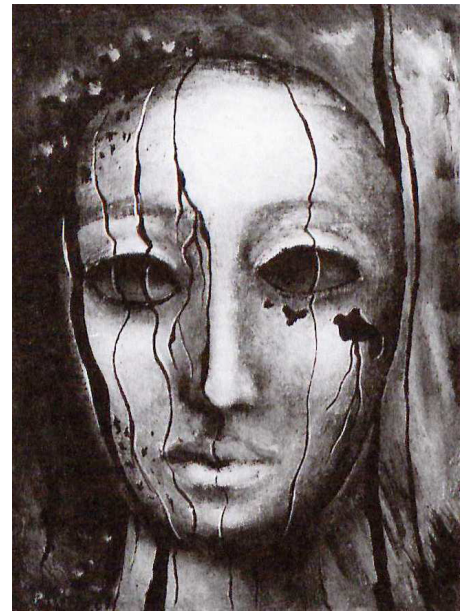

Fig. 43: Alexis Preller, *Cracked Head*, 1946, oil on panel, 28 × 40 cm, ownership unknown

both reproduced here in black and white). Both paintings show masks, the first surrounded by thorns, the other one cracked. Both also evoke religious images as the thorns in *Fetish Enthralled* remind of Christ's crown of thorns and the facial expression and slight tilt of the head in *Cracked Head* are similar to German mediaeval or Italian Renaissance saint statues such as those of the Virgin Mary. Thereby Preller adds to the frightening images of injured human faces a new hope for salvation or transcendence.

While the appropriation of masks in general is very characteristic of primitivism, *Fetish Enthralled*, as the title implies, has a stronger focus on African art itself than *Cracked Head*. As described above, it was a common belief at the time that African art was determined by religious concerns and writers such as Carl Einstein attributed a god-like spirituality and power of salvation to West African sculpture. Anitra Nettleton points out that Preller often referred to West African Dogon figures and masks in his paintings, which is certainly likely for *Cracked Head*, but also for *Christ Head* of 1952 (Fig. 44), which can be considered a continuation of the two earlier works.[298] The mask in this work seems to be protected by a kind of armour that however leaves broad slits for the mouth, nose and eyes, indicating simultaneous strength and vulnerability. There is a crack across the right eye and blood is leaking from the stiff collar that resembles a neck iron and hence might be a reference to Preller's experience as prisoner of war. On the other hand, the collar also reminds of beaded Ndebele neck rings. This is supported by the fact that Preller integrated coloured beads in

298 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 147.

Fig. 44: Alexis Preller, Christ Head, 1952, oil on wood panel with beaded frame, 51 × 41 cm, Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections

the frame of his painting. Nettleton concludes that the figures depicted in Preller's paintings "have an early science-fiction quality about them, having been painted in a highly convincing illusionistic manner. As such, they border on the surreal and clearly represent a primitivist fantasy that Preller built out of the Africa of his imagining."[299] In line with contemporary efforts to indigenise South African artists and develop a specifically South African art differing from European models, Berman also stresses the supposedly African character of Preller's works:

> Preller's idioms came direct from his immediate experience of Africa and not via the primitivist conventions of Europe. They are infused with an awareness of things unseen – a spiritual content, which has nothing to do with the purely superficial qualities of line and shape that European artists had adopted from traditional African carving.[300]

Such a statement is of course hugely problematic – not only because Preller was strongly influenced by Irma Stern's primitivism that clearly built onto German expressionism and had himself studied in London and Paris in the 1930s. Berman's insistent differentiation from European artists however supports the nationalist reception of South African settler primitivism. The quote also illustrates the importance of immediacy often attributed to primitivist artists that purportedly brought them closer to direct "realities." In addition, she attributes to Preller a spiritual awareness and receptiveness supposedly enhancing his physical experiences.

As John Peffer puts it, "Preller was in thrall to his own personal mystique of a tribal Africa and held traditional cultures out as distant, living in another age from

299 Nettleton, "Primitivism in South African Art," p. 149.
300 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 241.

Fig. 45: Alexis Preller, *Grand Mapogga II*, 1957, oil on canvas, 100 × 86 cm, private collection

his own, and ultimately inscrutable."[301] The works that illustrate this most clearly are Preller's portraits of Ndebele women from the 1950s that have come to stand for what Berman calls Preller's "African Mystique." For example, *Grand Mapogga II* of 1957 (Fig. 45), shows an Ndebele woman sitting on a stone throne. Although the figure wears a blanket, one of the most important features in Ndebele women's traditional dress, Preller again leaves her breasts uncovered – another parallel between his work and Stern's. With allusions to European surrealism and purism, and artists such as René Magritte (e.g. in the tree in the background) and Fernand Leger (e.g. in the shape of the woman's breasts), Preller completely decontextualises his subject. He places her in a fantasy context continuing his theme of Ndebele references in the wall decorations as well as the throne itself. Although the painting does not specify any locality in time or space, it still portrays an "African" identity. Marked by dress and surrounding architecture, the misplaced, anonymous figure is clearly Ndebele and therefore almost stereotypically South African.

In a truly primitivist manner that evokes a timeless truth, Preller says: "None of my images really belong to the past, present or future, they are a product of all."[302] His portraits are hence the ultimate disengagement of Black South African cultures from current political realities. In line with contemporary racial segregationist policies and the denial of land, he depicts the Ndebele as contently living in the confines of their *kraal* [homestead], removed and separate from White society. In a similar vein to Marsden Hartley (Fig. 3), he appropriates Ndebele form languages in order to portray a supposedly archaic indigenous South African culture. In contrast to Hartley's folkloristic style that exceeds the mere depicting of "tribal" objects but continues their

301 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 20.
302 Marais, "Alexis Preller," p. 21.

visual language into the remaining picture plane, however, Preller's portrayals are less primitivist in style than in subject. As Craniv Boyd points out in his MA dissertation on "Ndebele Mural Art and the Commodification of Ethnic Style during the Age of Apartheid and Beyond," the depiction of the Ndebele mural the figure is placed in front of is rendered fairly faithfully.[303] In general, although Preller's style could be described as surrealist and therefore often deviates from realistic depictions, his form and colour compositions are not noticeably based on Ndebele visual languages.

However, the painting *Grand Mapogga II* clearly propagates a racial and gender primitivism. It shows a generic figure whose individuality has been removed with the erasure of any facial structures. The cloths wrapped around the Ndebele woman's upper body evoke fur (the thick, soft blanket wrapped around her shoulders) and some kind of plant (the green material worn underneath), a clear deviance from original Ndebele clothing. These warm, natural materials receive an even stronger emphasis through the contrast of the grey, cold stone throne the figure is placed upon, symbolising the two poles of nature and culture. In general, the painting is governed by contrasts, soft curves and hard edges (also in the fabric and tree in the background). The woman's bulging belly and the focus on her lap signify fertility. In the description of a similar painting, Peffer also points out that the blankets covering the figure's upper body resemble an ear of corn and female genitalia.[304] He sees the model for the woman's pose in a photograph by Constance Stuart Larrabee of Ndebele women sitting on a stone bench outside of their decorated homestead.[305] The meaning of the poles in the background is extremely unclear – other than that they take up shapes from the Ndebele wall painting displayed behind the seated woman. Craniv Boyd interprets the white veil hung on the tree in the background as the white flag usually signifying that a son living in an Ndebele household is currently in *wela*, i.e. undergoing the male circumcision ritual.[306] Additionally, veil and apple are also Christian symbols often shown in depictions of Mary holding the infant Jesus. In general, paintings such as *Grand Mapogga II* evoke European Marian or nobility images that clearly idolise Preller's timely removed subjects.

1.3 Conclusion

The main difference between artists that can be categorised as settler primitivists and European primitivists is that settler primitivism is not, as Nicholas Thomas – who coined the term – put it, "necessarily the project of radical formal innovation stimulated by tribal art" but "an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic

303 Boyd, *Ndebele Mural Art*, pp. 31–32.
304 Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, p. 18.
305 Ibid., pp. 19–20.
306 Boyd, *Ndebele Mural Art*, p. 34.

primitive culture, but a particular one."[307] This effort was intended to result in the (self-)definition of White settler artists as native and as representatives of a specific, national art rather than an undefined European derivative. Overall, this process of "indigenisation" makes use of a cultural appropriation marked by strong ambivalences since native subjects and their visual culture were used as a connection to the land and simultaneously denied any claim to it.

When comparing primitivist artworks originating in different settler nations, varying foci can be detected. In the primitivism of the Australian settler artist Margaret Preston, the emphasis is set on material culture rather than on aborigines themselves. Their art was considered by Preston to offer design potentials for a new Australian art deviating from British models and bridging the gap between crafts and visual arts as a specifically Australian approach. Marsden Hartley, whom I have chosen as a case study of US American settler primitivism, on the other hand, was strongly motivated by finding an alternative to modern, industrial, capitalist life. He developed an interest in Native American culture prompted by his experiences in Europe where he saw ethnological expositions and exhibits at ethnological museum. This interest in art that "belonged" to the land and hence facilitated an "indigenisation" of White settler artists appropriating it was however short lived as, in the US, modern, capitalist culture soon became iconic and received a lot of attention from Europe and elsewhere. Canadian settler primitivism, as exemplified by Emily Carr, set a higher emphasis on "Northern" landscapes and the visual remains of First Nations cultures within such landscapes than on the people who had created the emblems shown. It was coined by a backwards-looking nostalgia portraying a supposedly lost indigenous culture. In contrast to South Africa, in all three of the other settler nations discussed, indigenous peoples were a minor concern in everyday social and political life as they had been considerably outnumbered by White settlers before the turn of the century.

My discussion has shown that, in South Africa, the situation was rather different. South African settler primitivists 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. Their works were either depictions of timeless arcadian figures in pre-industrial rural or urban landscapes (Laubser, Boonzaier) or of exoticised individuals showcasing the richness of South Africa's "native cultures" (Stern, Lipshitz, Preller), or they referred to "extinct" cultures that could be appropriated for a typically South African art due to their connection to the land (Pierneef, Battiss). This last stance is similar to Carr's approach in the way that the originators of this culture were regarded lost and therefore did not have any contemporary social or political relevance. But it also resembles Preston's in the way that visual design elements of an indigenous culture were used for nationalist appropriations. Since the originators of the visual culture referenced had allegedly

307 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.

vanished (i.e. they were eradicated), their artistic heritage was considered by artists such as Pierneef and Battiss to have passed over into the possession of all (White) South Africans and not as specifically linked to any of the non-White groups living in contemporary South Africa.

Different categories of stylistic and subject-related primitivism find varying degrees of application in the different oeuvres and are closely interrelated with style and subject appropriations respectively. Stylistic primitivism is especially important in the works of Laubser, Pierneef, Lipshitz and Battiss while it plays a subordinate role in the works of Stern, Boonzaier and Preller. While Laubser's works can be considered stylistically primitivist as they are reminiscent of children's art, Lipshitz in his carvings was concerned with spatial issues addressed by West African sculptors which he became familiar with through the perusal of Einstein's *Negerplastik* as well as his sojourn in Paris. Pierneef and Battiss, on the other hand, specifically worked with indigenous South African art which they found in San rock painting. They both started with fairly faithful reproductions of the latter and then continued to transfer them into increasingly abstracted appropriations. All artists can be considered to adhere to a racial primitivism in their depictions of non-White South Africans. This is not surprising as it can be assumed – due to their political conformity and cooperation with the Union and apartheid governments – that all artists were interested in maintaining the assumption common amongst White South Africans at the time that race was an indicator of difference and racial segregation hence necessary. Their racial primitivism is sometimes marked by the erasure of facial features (Laubser, Battiss, Preller), nudity (Stern, Lipshitz, Preller), stereotypically "African" shaped bodies alluding to West African sculpture or facial features complying with racist stereotypes (Stern, Lipshitz, Pierneef, Preller) or an exoticisation mainly marked by traditional dress (Stern, Boonzaier, Battiss, Preller) and background (Stern, Battiss, Preller). A gender primitivism is most striking in the works of Stern, Battiss and Preller. All three highly sexualise their subjects and comply with common stereotypes of femininity. A class primitivism is noticeably detectable only in Laubser's and Boonzaier's works. They both depicted arcadian scenes of harmonious pre-industrial life – Laubser in the countryside and Boonzaier in non-white districts in Cape Town.