2 RECEPTION OF SETTLER PRIMITIVISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter highlights different topics that shaped the reception of South African settler primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s. While some themes such as artists' myths, the relevance of social criticism in modern art or primitivist discourses can be traced through all decades discussed, a turning point in politically informed approaches to settler primitivism was induced by South Africa's decision to support Britain in the Second World War in 1939. This decision caused an increasing dissociation of Europe and nationalisation that was reflected in contemporary art criticism. However, as is natural in temporal changes in art reception, there are no clear cuts distinctly marking the transition from a transnationalist to a nationalist perspective, and overlaps exist. The different topics shaping these two perspectives, too, are not mutually exclusive but usually interrelated. Additionally, the analysis below occupies no claim to absolute completeness but exemplarily examines the issues most striking in a broad number of exhibition reviews, artists' portraits, catalogues and other texts on South African settler primitivism published between 1920 and 1970 (with a minimal number of texts from a later date).

The following discussion mainly examines texts printed in South African publications — with a small number of exceptions such as reviews of the exhibition of South African art shown at the Tate Gallery in London in 1948 and at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1949 or articles featured in the British arts magazine *The Studio*. The German press on Irma Stern will be analysed in line with her professional self-fashioning in Chapter 3. Other than these examples, I could find little remarkable press on South African artists published abroad. While a number of the reviews and artists' portraits that appeared in South Africa were written in Afrikaans, most texts discussed below were composed in English. This is due to the fact that the interest in modern art was larger in the English-speaking than in the Afrikaans-speaking press at the time. However, the critics whose statements are cited in this chapter largely represent the three ethnic groups Afrikaner, English and Jewish with which the artists under investigation identified. While some texts featured were written by unknown journalists, the majority of accounts were issued by public figures including museum directors, university professors, politicians or well-known critics.[1] This is to show that the reception of South African settler primitivism discussed below also to a certain degree reflects the institutional approach

1 As South African (arts) institutions and politics were dominated by men at the time, most of these writers were male.

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to such art. The following analysis is therefore not based on an enormous mass of articles — even though more than 500 sources were consulted during the research process — but on a selection of texts that most aptly reflect the issues prevalent in art critical discussions of settler primitivism at the time.

2.1 Artists' myths

Irrespective of more specifically local or contemporary topoi, myths surrounding the lives and careers of artists have formed a significant strand in occidental art history and perception of artistic production. This is also the case for artists in South Africa in the period under investigation. Most pronouncedly starting with Giorgio Vasari's famous 16th century series of artists' biographies *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* [The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects], certain myths have been continuously reproduced in order to verify artistic creation and "genius." As feminist art historians have pointed out, such "myths of the great artist" combine stereotypically male claims to innovation, authority and authorship.[2] It is therefore reasonable to discuss them separately from women artists' myths to which, due to the extraordinary significance of women artists for South African settler primitivism, I dedicate a whole chapter: Chapter 3 on Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser and the image of the *Neue Frau* [New Woman]. In the following, I will exemplarily concentrate on the male artists Gregoire Boonzaier, Lippy Lipshitz and JH Pierneef in order to examine artists' myths relating to male South African settler primitivists in the first half of the 20th century.

2.1.1 Gregoire Boonzaier and male artists' myths

Departing from my selection of male primitivists examined in Chapter 1, Gregoire Boonzaier can be employed as a very suitable example of a South African artist whose discussion in the contemporary press was influenced by artists' myths. In 1934, the Viennese art historians Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz published the first in-depth examination of such myths in *Die Legende vom Künstler* [The Legend of the Artist]. They explain that the central myth in artists' biographies is the tale that the artist shows his — for those myths relate to male artists[3] — talent or "genius" as a child and autodidact who does not have a teacher or master but is directly inspired by nature. He is then "discovered" and taken under the wing of a (male) expert who guides the

2 Kessel (ed.), *Kunst, Geschlecht, Politik*, p. 8. Also compare Schade, "Künstlerbiografik, Künstlermythen und Geschlechterbilder im Angebot."

3 Compare Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Die Legende vom Künstler."

impecunious, clueless youngster to fame and social advancement.[4] The first review of Boonzaier's work closely resembles the myth of the autodidact, "genius" child "discovered" by an expert as explicated by Kris and Kurz. Very fittingly, it is titled "Genius Discovered." Since this 1924 article was written by Bernard Lewis, a close and long-term friend of Gregoire's father DC Boonzaier, it is likely that the staged "discovery" was intended to smooth the way for the 14-year-old Gregoire Boonzaier into South Africa's artistic forefront through Lewis's recurrence to the traditional authentication of creative "genius." As if he had never met Boonzaier before, Lewis writes:

> Two still life pictures caught my eye at Ashbey's to-day on account of their colouring. It was magnificent, and the pictures seemed to breathe the spirit of Wenning, the great South African painter of studies like these. The pictures were signed 'Gregoire', and I was astounded to learn that the artist was a fourteen-year-old boy, son of Mr. Boonzaaier [sic], the cartoonist. Young Gregoire is undoubtedly a 'find'. 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. Mr. Boonzaaier [sic] is not interfering with Gregoire's methods; he will allow the boy to develop, for a time, at any rate, without tuition or restraint. It is noteworthy that Gregoire has never been to an exhibition of paintings.[5]

In addition to his own appreciation of Boonzaier's works, Lewis quotes the sculptor Moses Kottler, another man with an established standing, as an expert supporting the young artist. Moreover, he stresses Boonzaier's natural talent that had not been corrupted by any outside influences such as teachers or art exhibitions. However, Lewis fails to mention that, in addition to Kottler, the well-known artists Anton van Wouw and Pieter Wenning were good friends of DC Boonzaier's and that Gregoire often accompanied Wenning on painting expeditions.[6] The image of the uninfluenced young artist also ties in with the idea common since 1800 that the "genius" creates from inside and acts from internal necessity.[7] In 1930, in an article for Martin du Toit's influential Afrikaans-speaking arts magazine *Die Nuwe Brandwag* [The New Sentinel], Lewis repeats his emphasis on Gregoire Boonzaier's autodidactic talent by emphasising that he worked "by instinct and not by the mind" and that "nature was his only teacher."[8]

Lewis's publicity and DC Boonzaier's network were greatly beneficial to Gregoire: in 1927, at the age of 18, he had already sold more than thirty oil paintings to an

4 Kris & Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, pp. 29–50.
5 Cited in Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 11.
6 Ibid., p. 10.
7 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, pp. 44–45.
8 Brander, "Gregoire Boonzaier," pp. 69, 71. Also compare Trümpelmann, "Gregoire Boonzaier," p. 73.

illustrious clientele comprising for example Sir Max Michaelis (mining magnate and arts patron), General JBM Hertzog (prime minister at the time), DF Malan (first prime minister of the apartheid government) and NC Havenga (finance minister under Hertzog and again under Malan and leader of the Afrikaner Party).[9] There are many accounts of Gregoire Boonzaier's financial success and it is said that his income from the sale of paintings had sustained his living "from early boyhood."[10] Nevertheless, in addition to the myth of the "genius" child brought to success by expert patrons described above, another myth has prevailed in the recount of Boonzaier's life: that of the suffering artist. Verena Krieger points out that, from the 19th century, the artist "genius" has been understood as a social outsider suffering from "a lack of appreciation, poverty, loneliness, tragic circumstances and his own self."[11] In line with this, Martin Bekker begins his 1990 biography of Boonzaier with the following paragraph:

> Gregoire Boonzaier's life story reads like a fairy tale. It is about an ordinary boy whose dedication and perseverance culminated in honour and recognition; a young man moulded to sagacity and maturity by conflict and lack of appreciation; and an artist who pursued his ideal through years of poverty and sacrifice. It is the story of the fulfilment of a dream.[12]

While one could regard Boonzaier's being born into an extremely well-connected family, with a father and his network of friends granting him extraordinary support, hugely beneficial to his artistic career, Bekker portrays him as a poor, hard-working boy who reaches fame and prosperity against all odds. The most obvious reason for this – apart from possibly making his book a more interesting read for contemporary audiences – is to give proof and render authenticity to Boonzaier's creative "genius" through the reproduction of an artist myth common since the 19th century.

2.1.2 Lippy Lipshitz and Jewish stereotypes

This latter myth of the suffering artist, as well as that of the artist as social outcast, also aligns with contemporary Jewish stereotypes. In the case of South African settler primitivists, this can best be observed in the reception of Lippy Lipshitz. Krieger argues that, in the 19th century, the (male) artist is given the "trademark" of being antibourgeois, which is closely related to the conception of an artistic avant-garde and lasts well into the present time.[13] In this line, in a review of Lipshitz's second solo exhibition held in Cape Town in 1934, a *Cape Argus* journalist announces that the

9 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, pp. 16, 106.
10 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 45.
11 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, p. 49.
12 Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 9. Also compare Trümpelmann, "Gregoire Boonzaier," p. 74.
13 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, p. 47.

show "is likely to arouse great interest, possibly violent controversy, in both artistic and more general circles" due to the "different" and "provocative" character of the artist's work.[14] This description casts Lipshitz as an outsider causing upheaval and combines artists' myths with Jewish stereotypes.[15] In addition, the author cites Irma Stern's opening address of the exhibition and her admiration of "any artist who does not work only to please his public." This fits in with Krieger's recount of the notion that it is impossible for the true "genius" to adapt to prevailing bad tastes, and therefore the image of the "misunderstood artist."[16] When compared to Stern's 1922 solo show at Ashbey's Gallery, however, Lipshitz's "controversial sculpture" caused little unrest in the South African artworld. Nevertheless, René Graetz, Lipshitz's friend and fellow artist, three years later stresses in another review that "Lippy's work is not akin to the bourgeois class."[17] In 1952, Joseph Sachs, an ardent supporter of Jewish artists who had also written the first monograph on Stern, describes Lipshitz as "a truant schoolboy" who "from the beginning […] found it difficult to conform to the conventional laws of Society" and "lived on the mountain and near the sea, keeping in close contact with nature, and developing his taste for solitude, while he fed his mind on fantastic tales which fortified his conviction that man was a creature of wonder and mystery."[18] Sachs thus casts Lipshitz as a lonely outsider from his childhood on, feeling closer to the fantastic and mysterious nature of the Cape than to "conventional laws of Society."

As mentioned above, linked to the artist's position as social outsider was his suffering.[19] Again, in the case of Lippy Lipshitz, this was enforced by stereotypes of the suffering, melancholic Jew and the common Jewish theme of tragedy.[20] Sachs, for example, comments that "his childhood here was not altogether unhappy" – without expanding on why one would assume it was unhappy in the first place.[21] Graetz, on the other hand, explains that Lipshitz's work "is representative of living man in an aggressive surrounding which distorts his very being" as well as characterised by "true emotion in the face of simple life-struggles."[22] Another friend of Lipshitz's, the poet Vincent Swart, too, asserts in an exhibition review of 1936 that the artist's sculptures were informed by his struggles:

> The attitude to which every curve has to be related in the work of Lippy is an attitude of depression of soul, aridity and poverty. The women he models are all of them thin, as though they have been starved in love and in body,

14 N.N., "Some Controversial Sculpture."
15 Also compare the stereotype of the "'Wandering Jew' who symbolized, among other perceived maladies, international Bolshevism […] and social upheaval." Koch, *Between Deeds and Dreams*, p. 20.
16 Krieger, *Was ist ein Künstler?*, p. 47.
17 Graetz, "A Living Art."
18 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.
19 Again, the male pronoun is deliberate.
20 Compare Pappas, *Mark Rothko*, pp. 153–155.
21 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.
22 Graetz, "A Living Art."

> the surfaces of his work are broken up into the splinters of struggle and defeat, and some of his figures are almost pressed out of existence; under a destructive element, a negation of being, pressed almost unplastic, pressed thin. His work expresses the climate of the age, an awareness of the losing battle that is being fought between the economic and the spiritual man, the last thin juices of the soul, under an economic burden, being pressed to death.[23]

Swart's last sentence also reflects primitivist and expressionist themes relating to the antagonism between spirituality and capitalist materialism. In her PhD dissertation on Jewish expressionism, Marycelka K Straughn argues that "expressionism suggested access to more 'authentic', creative aspects of Judaism art through its emphasis on subjectivity and spirituality" as it favoured "a distinctive art marked by an integrated form and content through the concept of *Erlebnis* (lived experience)."[24] In this sense, Graetz writes that "Lippy's work is 'felt' with all the consequences resulting from a life real with the age-old struggle for daily bread."[25] The latter also recalls the cliché of the poor Jewish artist in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century that is examined by Sepp Hiekisch-Picard in a text on Jewish artists and the *École de Paris* [School of Paris].[26] In his 1952 "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," Sachs includes a tragical and embellished description of Lipshitz's circumstances in Paris:

> Paris was a whirlpool of lost hopes and crushed ambitions — the waste-paper basket of Europe. He struggled with thousands of other artists who came to seek fame and fortune in the fay Capital on the Seine. Life was hard, but the ecstasy of creating was the stimulus cheaply bought at the cost of pain, hunger, neglect and oblivion. To be able to work and have materials and a chunk of bread was all an artist craved for. But sometimes even the chunk of bread gave out. […] In the winter, life was particularly trying. The days were so short and chilly, and there was no coal to light the stove. Hard, bitter frost was snapping his bones. He lived in a damp, fireless studio with a cement floor. There were no friends left from whom to borrow. Rent day was the Day of Judgment — but Paris still remained.[27]

Interestingly, Lipshitz strongly recurs to this image himself in his diaries retelling his time in Paris, which he transcribed for posterity and which are now archived at the University of Cape Town. In these diaries that are handwritten and thus emit an aura of authenticity, Lipshitz ensures to present his four-year sojourn in Paris as that

23 Swart, "Lippy Lipshitz's Exhibition," p. 17.
24 Straughn, *Jewish Expressionism*, pp. 6–7.
25 Graetz, "A Living Art."
26 Hiekisch-Picard, "Jüdische Künstler und die ‚École de Paris'."
27 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.

of the poor, bohemian artist reiterated in numerous myths.[28] It can therefore not be ruled out that Lipshitz, too, had some agency in the creation of the myths surrounding his art production. This is supported by the fact that most of the accounts discussed above were authored by friends or close acquaintances of Lipshitz's, mostly members of the Jewish community.

2.1.3 Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Afrikaner stereotypes

On the other hand, the reception of the Afrikaner artist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef was shaped by (male) Afrikaner stereotypes that were largely at the opposite end of the myth of the misunderstood, suffering artist "genius." Quite contrarily, descriptions of Pierneef presented him as the typically simple, sincere and steadfast Afrikaner with Puritan values.[29] Qualities regularly ascribed to Pierneef thus were modesty, charity, honesty and frankness.[30] Additionally, contradicting common conceptions of "creative genius" but in line with Puritan work ethics, Pierneef is reported to having been convinced "that art is five percent inspiration and the rest perspiration."[31] Moreover, in the review of an exhibition at the Argus Gallery in 1937, his work is described as "full of a certain straightforward strength which goes straight for the mark and hits it," with a "pleasant certainty" and an appeal that "is instant and direct and may be understood at once."[32] That is to say, there is nothing of the avant-gardist social outsider about this Afrikaner artist. The author continues: "He gives the feeling of knowing, as an artist, exactly what he wants and getting it. In a world of storm and stress and one filled with unsatisfied desires (artistic, political and so on), these are valuable qualities."[33]

It is not clear what unsatisfied political desires the author refers to, but the article was published in a period of political unrest for Afrikaner politics caused by the *skeuring* [split] of the Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party [Purified National Party] under DF Malan from JBM Hertzog's governing United South African National Party (short, United Party). In this conflicted time, Pierneef is presented as the steadfast Afrikaner who sees clearly and acts deliberately. By the 1930s, Melanie Hillebrand argues in her text for *Visual Century*, "a potent cultural myth had been invented of the Afrikaner as hero in a desolate, hostile world" and "artists such as Pierneef were quick to exploit this archetype."[34] She cites Charles te Water's 1934 article on "The Cultural

28 Lipshitz, diaries 1928 to 1932.
29 For a more detailed description of these male Afrikaner stereotypes in the late 19th and early 20th century see Hall, *The Representation of Aspects of Afrikaner and British Masculinity*, p. 46.
30 E.g. Paris, "A Farewell to Pierneef." Sapa, "S.A.'s Loss in Death of Pierneef."
31 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist," p. 5.
32 D.G., "An Essentially South African Painter."
33 Ibid.
34 Hillebrand, "White Artists in Context," p. 151.

Heritage of South Africa" in which Te Water asserts that, in contrast to his British compatriot, the Afrikaner – whose civilisation in South Africa cannot be likened to European colonialism since he has no other home than Africa – "cannot withdraw to a mother-country in the face of adversity, or were Africa to arise against him, as it has done in the past, in all its patient and overwhelming power."[35] Te Water's hierarchy also clearly places Afrikaner above English culture:

> The Union's population is composed, for the main part, of the Afrikaner, who is a new human type which three centuries of miscegenation between two of the most cultured and artistic races of Europe, the Dutch and the French, has produced, and for the other, of a large minority of Scottish and English stock which, for historic and political reasons, has been more slowly mixing with the older population over a century of time. It is to be observed by the student of ethnics that here in Southern Africa is to be found a most interesting phenomenon of race. For in the long history of Africa here is to be found, for the first time, a white race to be counted, by all reasonable tests, as indigenous to Africa as are the black races which surround it. […] That the art of this people, this white African race, should have new and original qualities, teasing the imagination and provoking the interest of the student, must, from this slight introduction to the character of the South African people, now be quite obvious.[36]

In his effort of indigenising the Afrikaner people, Te Water additionally writes: "Here, then, is a people whose deepest instincts are at work in its struggle for survival. Environmental and climatic influences have long since formed a type in as tough and hard a mould as the Black African himself."[37] He then describes Afrikaner artists such as Pierneef as tamers of their hostile environment since, unlike their European colleagues, they know how to depict the "hot horizon, the sharp brilliancy of nature's palette, and the harsh striated contours of mountain and limitless veld."[38] Similarly, in a 1933 review, Bernard Lewis describes Pierneef's favourite subjects, the trees, "South Africa's 'Children of Adversity'" struggling for existence, as "gnarled and twisted […] by storms and winds, scorched by burning sun, cramped by bitter frosts, retarded by years of drought, or by floods which have laid bare their roots, making them easily imaginable homes of 'tokolossies'."[39] In a 1946 article for the government publication *South African Panorama*, Jeanne Hugo closely links Pierneef's ability to depict such

35 Te Water, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa," p. 164.
36 Ibid., pp. 164–170.
37 Ibid., p. 164.
38 Ibid., pp. 173–174.
39 Lewis, "Pierneef. An Appreciation." "Tokolossies," or in its recognised spelling *tikoloshes*, are evil spirits originating from Zulu mythology.

Fig. 46: J.H. Pierneef, reproduced in *Rand Daily Mail,* 18 October 1933

Fig. 47: Lippy Lipshitz, photographed by Jim Credie, reproduced in *The Outspan*, 13 April 1934

harsh scenes to his character when she calls him one of the "chosen few" to whom "it is given to reinterpret" South Africa, and explicates:

> One does not ordinarily judge the artist by the man himself, but to know Pierneef is to understand why he can distil the fierce uncompromising spirit of the Transvaal Bushveld on his canvas in a way that no artist in any other country could have done. He is not overcome by the massive grandeur of her gaunt naked rocks, the limitless perspective of her never-ending veld nor by the white blaze of the African sun, but carefully, logically, he builds up his pictures into an architectural whole, which in its angular line and muted colour gives us at least one movement in this infinite symphony of space which is Africa.[40]

Here Hugo also recurs to common ideas of manliness and stereotypical masculinity that she sees demonstrated in Pierneef's logical, geometrical approach. Photographic portraits of Pierneef published in contemporary newspapers, too, enforce ideals of masculinity crucial to the artist's reception. This becomes especially obvious when comparing a photo of Pierneef published on 18 October 1933 in the *Rand Daily Mail* (Fig. 46) with a photo of Lipshitz published on 13 April 1934 in *The Outspan* (Fig. 47). Pierneef is portrayed facing the reader with clear eyes, returning the latter's gaze, his head held straight up, his hair neatly parted and combed back, dressed in a white shirt and tie underneath a stiff overcoat. Lipshitz, on the other hand, is shown absorbed in his work, with inward concentration, his head tilted downwards, averting his face from the viewer even though his upper body faces the latter. He is dressed in a high-collared garment out of an apparently soft, ornated dark fabric. In

40 Hugo, "Painting in South Africa," p. 45.

other photographic portraits, too, Lipshitz is frequently shown facing away from the beholder, a pose usually employed in portraits of women. It can certainly be argued that Lipshitz is portrayed in a way that exhibits the "soft manliness" characterised by traditional, effeminate rabbinic concepts still prevalent in the first half of the 20th century – even though increasingly threatened by dawning ideals of the "New Jewish Man" and the "Muscle Jew."[41] Photographic portraits of Pierneef, on the other hand, adhere to ideals of straight forward Afrikaner manliness.

In "'A Boer and His Gun and His Wife Are Three Things Always Together': Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion," Sandra Swart argues that, in the early 20th century, Afrikaner masculinity centred on patriarchal family structures, egalitarian principles and ideas of self-reliance.[42] The relevance of patriarchal family structures to Pierneef's reception becomes obvious, on the one hand, in references to the artist as "Oom [Uncle] Hendrik" or "Oom Henk"[43] and, on the other, in the portrayal of the Pierneef family. Pierneef, his wife Marian Frances and their "lively, delightful" daughter Marita-Jennifer – "called 'Mickie'" – are presented as a congenial and good-natured family whose atmospheric home "is a popular meeting place, not only of visitors from the Lowveld, but for artists and art-lovers of Pretoria and further abroad."[44] In line with contemporary Afrikaner (White) egalitarian principles, a *Cape Times* journalist reports on Pierneef that "the artist with his true values does not know the meaning of snobbery, and so Pierneef, his wife tells me, is at home with prince and peasant alike."[45] Ideas of self-reliance are evoked when Pierneef's favourite past-times of fishing and hunting are recounted or when the reader is told that the artist is building rondavels on his farm ("he became stonemason") and farming tomatoes.[46] In 1927, a journalist writing for *The Star*, contrasts Pierneef's hands-on self-reliance with common artists' stereotypes:

> Artists, generally, are not credited with gifts in the commercial or mechanical line. Mr. Pierneef, however, is an exception. He built his own house, arranged his own water supply and is in fact guilty of being a handyman.[47]

Descriptions such as these are also part of the myths or master-symbols connecting Afrikaners to the land. According to JM du Preez, these myths are shaped by the idea that South Africa is an agricultural country with Afrikaners or Boers as the people of farmers, that the country rightfully belongs to them and that they are threatened.[48] As mentioned above, the image of Pierneef as a farmer was a common one. The threat,

41 Kieval, "Imagining 'Masculinity'."
42 Swart, "'A Boer and His Gun and His Wife'." Swart stresses that the Boer Republican ideal of all men being equal referred to White men only.
43 E.g. Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home." M.G., "Oom Henk."
44 P.A.L., "Mr. J.H. Pierneef." Also see K.K., "You Will Enjoy."
45 K.K., "You Will Enjoy."
46 N.N., "Mr. J. H. Pierneef, the Artist." Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home." P.A.L., "Mr. J.H. Pierneef."
47 N.N., "Mr. J. H. Pierneef, the Artist."
48 Du Preez, *Africana Afrikaner*, p. 73. Also compare Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity."

too, was regularly articulated as illustrated in the articles by Lewis and Te Water quoted above. In addition to the threat of the land itself, however, an additional threat was perceived to be posed by other peoples inhabiting the land. In a 1945 article, a *Pretoria News* journalist first describes Pierneef's ownership of the land he inhabited:

> He has always loved Pretoria; here he has made him [sic] home for many years. At one time he lived in a queerly-shaped house on the outskirts of what are known as the northern suburbs. 'Oom Hendrik' loves the wide, open spaces, and there he was lord and master over what was nearly a block erven.[49]

Then, however, he describes how Pierneef's reign was threatened when Pretoria expanded northwards and the artist's house was surrounded by other settlements. He therefore moved his family further outside of the city:

> On a site of what was believed to have been a native kraal he found the atmosphere that appealed to him and there, for a time, he became stonemason. The rough stones of the veld he fitted into a pattern and around a wild gardenia arose his beautiful and comfortable home, 'Elangeni', about six miles east of Pretoria. He had hoped for seclusion for the rest of his life but that, alas, apparently, will not be the case. 'People are again building too near me', he is wont to say these days.[50]

This tale ties in with contemporary Afrikaner fears of being ousted first by British colonists and then by urban Blacks. According to David Welsh's *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, the number of urban Africans grew from 1936 to 1946 by 57% and both the Hertzog government in 1929 and DF Malan's apartheid government in 1948 had largely been successful by the recurrence to *swart gevaar* [black peril] in their election campaigns.[51] The perseverance against this threat was considered one of the famous *voortrekker's* [pioneer's] traits. In line with this, *Huisgenoot* [Housemate] editor JMH Viljoen calls Pierneef "*'n egte Boer*" [a true Boer] in an extensive portrait of the artist on occasion of his 60th birthday.[52] Additionally, in 1952, Pierneef is described in *Lantern*, another government publication, as "the Voortrekker, the scout, through whom we get to know the idealized and ordered beauty of the Afrikaans landscape."[53] Similarly, in his "Farewell to Pierneef" following the artist's death in 1957, John Paris, director of the National Gallery in Cape Town at the time, argues that the struggle for

49 Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home."
50 Ibid. Also compare N.N., "'Die Brandwag' Besoek Pierneef."
51 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, pp. 7, 18, 24.
52 Viljoen, "J.H. Pierneef," p. 33. Also compare Wetherell, "Deur Pierneef."
53 Quoted in Godby, *The Lie of the Land*, n.p.

the ownership of the land simultaneously entitled the Afrikaners' claim to the land and characterised Pierneef's art:

> Men come to a land and conquer it; but only by love, the love of fighters contending with equal fighters — men into land — do they possess it. And having possessed they praise. Pierneef knew this I think. He loved the land, and contended with it, and loved it because he had contended.[54]

2.2 Reception of settler primitivists in the 1920s and 1930s

This chapter and the following one give an overview of the reception of settler primitivists in South Africa between the 1920s and 1960s. In the period from 1920 to 1939, Irma Stern, as pioneer of modernist painting, played the most prominent role in public discussions of settler primitivism in South Africa. A large proportion of the newspaper articles under investigation in the following analysis therefore relate to Stern and her work. In addition, these two decades were shaped, on the one hand, by a defence of the modernist style new to South Africa and, on the other, by an emphasis on Black South Africans as subjects of such modernist art. The defence of modernism largely relied on two topics: transnationalism — the validation of modern artists such as Stern through their success in Europe — and primitivism — the validation of modern art depicting specifically South African subjects through the importance of primitivist ideals in Europe. The following discussion offers examples of these two methods of defence or authentication and relates them to their socio-political context.

2.2.1 Defence of modernist style through transnationalism and primitivism

It is my understanding that the general direction of criticism was shaped by the socio-political context in which artworks were viewed. The transnational perspective taken by the majority of reviewers of Stern's work in the 1920s and 1930s is logical when considering the general focus on Europe in South African culture and politics until the latter's decision in 1939 to support Britain in the Second World War, despite its alleged independence from the mother nation. The two decades were characterised by the negotiations of the governments lead by Jan Christian Smuts (as head of the South African Party until 1924) and JBM Hertzog (as head of the National Party from 1924 until 1933 and then of the United Party until 1939) with the British Empire on the status of the South African dominion. While Smuts and Hertzog both fought for "full recognition of the dominions 'as autonomous nations of an Imperial

54 Paris, "A Farewell to Pierneef."

Commonwealth'," they considered South Africa's membership in the Commonwealth important and useful.[55] Hence, even though South Africa achieved a "constitutional state of complete independence" in 1934,[56] the tight majority vote of the South African parliament to support Britain in the war in 1939 illustrates the country's ongoing orientation towards Europe.

As mentioned above, and as will be further investigated with relation to her self-narrative in Chapter 3, 1920s and 1930s reviews of Irma Stern's exhibitions, too, were influenced by the contemporary concentration on Europe and therefore often stress the artist's transnational positioning. In the criticism of her very first exhibition at Ashbey's Gallery in 1922, journalist and artist Enslin du Plessis contends "that she is strongly under the influence of painters" such as Gauguin and therefore simply a follower of a European fashion.[57] Attacking modernist art, he writes that "it becomes formula ridden and the arbitrary distortion of the human form into shapes as rigid as those of any mechanical rule is not freedom, but an almost slave-like devotion to an ideal."[58] Most of the ensuing discussions of Stern's work, however, refer to European developments in order to defend her style rather than attack it.[59] For example, in 1925, a *Cape Argus* journalist explains that Stern's exhibition "would to-day be considered an excellent exhibition" in Europe but "may cause a little flutter in Cape Town art circles."[60] Stern's friends and promoters Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen regret that this fact meant that a lot of Stern's works "are sent to Europe, where they find a ready and appreciative market."[61] In 1929, they even proclaim that "Stern paints for Europe and America. In South Africa, her birthplace and the inspiration of her canvases, she received but little honor."[62]

In Lippy Lipshitz's reviews, too, his success in Europe plays an important role. For example, in 1936 a *Rand Daily Mail* reviewer stresses that "his record in Paris is exceptional for his work has never been refused and he has exhibited at most of the famous galleries."[63] This clearly served as an authentication of the quality of Lipshitz's work. Interestingly, Bernard Lewis writes in a 1934 discussion of Pierneef's murals at South Africa House in London that "Pierneef, who was born in Pretoria and educated there, studied art in the Rotterdam Academy and in the art-centres of

55 Dubow, "The Commonwealth and South Africa," p. 290. Also see Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, pp. 8–9.
56 Devenish, "Cutting the Apron Strings," p. 318.
57 Du Plessis, "Modern Art at Ashbey's."
58 Similar attacks on Stern's modernist style were published in the *Cape Times* by a journalist who expresses "frank disgust at the general nastiness of the work" and calls it "post-war art degeneracy" and "astigmatic distortions." W.R.M., "An Exhibition of Modern Art." W.R.M., "Modern Art in the City."
59 Also compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 118.
60 W.J.M., "The After Dinner Hour."
61 Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern," p. 764. Rozilda was a pseudonym frequently used by Purwitsky and Van Gelderen.
62 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.
63 A.G.S., "The Arts in Pretoria."

Belgium, Germany and France."[64] While it is true that Pierneef attended classes at the art academy in Rotterdam in 1901 at the age of 15, he never studied in Belgium, Germany or France. This shows that even for the established Afrikaner artist Pierneef a transnational education or career was considered necessary in the 1930s.

Linked to references to their European success in the defence of South African modernists were descriptions of the importance of primitivism for modern art in South Africa. For example, in contemporary reviews of the work of Alexis Preller, it is frequently mentioned that Preller was interested in the influence of West African sculpture on European art during his sojourn in Paris and that he spent two months painting "natives" in Swaziland upon his return to southern Africa.[65] In their 1928 portrait mentioned above, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen, too, explain that Stern's "work is essentially modern, harking back in spirit to the strength and vitality and crudeness of primitive art."[66] In 1936, the *Cape Times* published an extract of British High Commissioner Sir William Clark's address delivered at the opening of an exhibition by Stern in Cape Town. Clark repeats Purwitsky and Van Gelderen's argument but links it to the specifically South African context in which the artist produced her work:

> Miss Stern is essentially a modern who delights in audacities of colour and design. Part of the paradox of modern art is its close affinity with the primitive and South Africa is a country rich in primitive themes for artists like Miss Stern.[67]

The fact that Stern's exhibition was opened by the British High Commissioner again illustrates the close ties to Europe as well as the political interest in the development of a new South African art. Another example of the latter was the opening of an exhibition by Lippy Lipshitz in Pretoria half a year later by HDJ Bodenstein, an Afrikaner nationalist who was then secretary of external affairs and Hertzog's closest adviser.[68] Although generally more sceptical of modern art than Clark, Bodenstein is cited in *The Star* as calling Lipshitz's "departure from naturalism" and "back to forms used by primitive peoples" sincere and courageous.[69] In addition to its importance for European art production at the time, primitivism therefore also offered South African audiences a chance for the development of an own cultural identity based on local specificities. The interest in the latter also resonated in contemporary celebrations of South African history and culture such as the festivities on occasion of the centenary of the Great Trek in 1938 including the cornerstone ceremony of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.

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64 Lewis, "South African Art in London," p. 28.
65 E.g. N.N., "The Arts in Pretoria." N.N., "Private View of Preller's Paintings."
66 Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern," p. 764.
67 Clark, "'Pictures That Satisfy'." Clark's address is also cited in D.G., "Art of Irma Stern."
68 Fry, "Agents and Structures," pp. 297–298.
69 N.N., "Modern Tendency in Art."

2.2.2 Black South Africans as subjects of modern art criticism

In addition to discussions of transnationalism and primitivism, reviews of modern art – and especially of Stern's exhibitions – in the 1920s and 1930s were shaped by an engagement with the "native" subjects of such art. I believe that this can largely be attributed to the changing relations between Whites and Blacks in South Africa during this time. In their essay on fear as a factor in right-wing White politics, Derek du Bruyn and André Wessels argue that "during the 1920s, the nature of white fears changed drastically when fear of anglicization began to turn into a fear of the racial integration" of Black South Africans caused by their increasing urbanisation.[70] They stress that this fear did not only concern right-wingers but was common amongst White South Africans generally and "became a political factor that would influence white voting patterns."[71] As mentioned above, the recurrence to *swart gevaar* in his election campaign for example secured Hertzog's success in the 1929 election.[72] LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker), in her PhD dissertation on the politics of race, gender and nation in Stern's work, contends that in the 1920s, "critics began to associate Stern's work with a change in South Africa's social structure."[73] As an example, she cites a *Cape Argus* critic who, in 1922, considers it "no wonder that the very latest art reflects strongly the social forces of our disturbed and unbalanced times."[74] Berger claims that "from that point forward, Stern's work set the stage for modernism to be coupled with race in South African art criticism."[75] While I agree with Berger on the new importance of the discussion of Blacks to modern art criticism in South Africa, I would like to stress that such discussions were shaped by contemporary stereotypes and served the aim of asserting difference and hence of fighting the threatening racial integration feared so badly by most White South Africans.

Even Richard Feldman, who is usually considered a social critic and communist activist,[76] displays the same stereotypes in an article from the mid-1920s. It is worth quoting a large part of Feldman's article as it is symptomatic of the contemporary perception of rural and urban Blacks and the primitivist ideals determining the idealisation of the former:

> Irma Stern is the first to reveal to us the soul of South Africa's black children. We view the scores of native studies and wonder. Where has the artist seen such childish simplicity, and such unconscious sadness? Is the artist guilty of a tendency to express her sympathy with the native? Why does her impressionism bring out the unfavourable traits in her European models,

70 Du Bruyn & Wessels, "Vrees as Faktor," p. 81. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
71 Ibid., p. 82. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
72 Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p. 7.
73 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 75
74 Cited in ibid.
75 Ibid., p. 77.
76 E.g. Ibid., pp. 89–90. Below, "Between Africa and Europe," p. 36. Braude, "Beyond Black and White," pp. 52–55.

> and the simple and good of the native? In the sadness of her European models we read ambition, suffering, hope, despair. In the sadness of her native models (and Irma Stern's native women all have a sad look about them) we behold the desolateness of Africa's wide horizons, the cheerlessness of an African twilight. The Native in his own surrounding is still Nature's unspoilt child with a facial expression that is free of pose. Irma Stern's sketches of the male native are comparatively few, but just as appealing. In the strong face and robust body we see the child. A mind free of care, at peace with nature, content. […] There is, however, just one water colour of a native woman in rags of full European attire. A derelict, an outcast. A product of the wilds of savagery transported in a civilized city. A terrible picture telling unequivocally the story of one part of a strong and healthy race that is deteriorating and degenerating. What a contrast to the native woman in her home![77]

While I do not want to completely discount Berger's argument that Feldman was one of the few White South Africans at the time who "confronted race and class issues head on,"[78] his continuous referral to Black South Africans as unconsciously sad (but at the same time carefree?), natural, simple and good children is replete with racist ideas placing Blacks on a lower stage of intellectual development than Whites. In contrast to Stern's European subjects whom he considers capable of expressing more sophisticated emotions such as ambition, hope and despair, he describes Stern's Black subjects as contently one with nature or equates their fundamental sadness with local, natural conditions such as "the desolateness of Africa's wide horizons, the cheerlessness of an African twilight." Especially interesting is the contrast between rural and urban Blacks in Feldman's description. While "the Native in his own surrounding is still Nature's unspoilt child," urban Blacks are portrayed as derelict, deteriorating and degenerating. The message filters through that Black and White South Africans should occupy separate habitats — Blacks in the wilderness and Whites in civilised cities — and was probably influenced by the widely-spread fear of *swart gevaar*. I would like to stress that, even though she was a proponent of "separate development" as mentioned in Chapter 1, I do not wish to imply that Stern herself was discussing fear of racial integration in her works, but that they were read in this context by contemporaries such as Feldman and others.

In general, Stern's portrayals of urban Blacks are very rare: the watercolour Feldman refers to, for example, is unknown and the only other examples I came across are *The Backyard* of 1925 and *Maid in Uniform* of 1955.[79] As shown in Chapter 1,

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77 Feldman, "Irma Stern." A similar view is presented in Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 47.

78 Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 50.

79 The latter is discussed in detail in Berger, *Irma Stern*, pp. 123–125. *The Backyard* has been "rediscovered" by the auction house Bonhams on occasion of their South African sale in October 2012.

Stern was more interested in exoticising Black South Africans in line with European primitivist ideals and, accordingly, most of her critics concentrated on her portraits of rural Blacks. Like Feldman, they linked them to the wild African landscape and thus stressed their supposed difference from White Europeans which helped them justify their racist discrimination, oppression and exploitation. In 1924, for example, a *Cape Argus* reviewer writes:

> In these native figures which Miss Stern has painted there is a revelation of dark Africa — the depths of the forest, the beating of drums, the glittering eyes of night. The warm, foetid atmosphere of the African jungle overwhelms you. She has painted not merely the bodies of these natives, but something of their queer, distorted minds.[80]

Purwitsky, too, lays a strong emphasis on difference and separate living spaces in an article for the Jewish *Reform Advocate* of January 1929. Like most of her colleagues, she asserts that "Stern paints natives as no one has ever painted them before" by portraying "them with sympathy and understanding."[81] Stern hence becomes an expert on rural Black life.[82] Purwitsky continues that Stern's Black subjects "still retain that quality of mysterious tranquillity, that supreme indifference to the beholder, which are rather disconcerting to the white man" and concludes that they "want nothing so much as to be left alone."[83] Even though written in primitivist admiration, this description leaves an impression of unease and possibly peril, again tying in with *swart gevaar* campaigns. For other writers, Stern's paintings themselves posed a threat as they challenged contemporary images of "laughing, heedless, joyous, care-free" — and therefore harmless — Blacks.[84] Interestingly, in an article published two years later, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen no longer mention any disconcert but describe Stern's Black subjects as of "simple primitive minds" and "untroubled souls."[85] They hence seem to have decided to subscribe to a more socially acceptable characterisation of Stern's work that probably made it more attractive to mass audiences.

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80 Gamboge, "The Revolutionary."

81 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.

82 Also compare Sinisi, *Irma Stern*, p. 28.

83 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter," p. 816.

84 R.A.N., "Of a Woman Artist," Also compare Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, pp. 46–49. Sachs contrasts contemporary perceptions of the Black South African as "carefree being with neither a sense of the future nor a memory of the past, [...] no integrated emotional life, [...] incapable of a sustained effort either in thought or in action" and Stern's depictions of Blacks displaying "some turbulent inner life" (p. 48). He concludes that "it is perhaps not the romantic memory of the past but the lack of adjustment to the present that makes them look so sad — unless it be the racial memory of the days when their kings ruled in Africa — the days before civilisation had reached their land and sold them into slavery" (pp. 48–49). Claims like these illustrate the ambivalences inherent in primitivist admiration shaped by racist stereotypes.

85 Rozilda, "South Africa's Jewish Artists," p. 10.

Other settler primitivists' work, too, was received in relation to these topics. In an unusually forceful review of an exhibition by Lippy Lipshitz from 1936, the poet Vincent Swart characterises Lipshitz's sculpture as "of destructive awareness."[86] He maintains that "conceiving the native to be the one indestructive [sic] force coming to destroy our civilisation, he [Lipshitz] can express him not as a defeatist fragment but as a full powerful force," articulating "the destructive element in a destructive civilisation."[87] In contrast to this uncommonly political reading, Black South Africans depicted in Alexis Preller's works were discussed under purely formal terms adhering to primitivist ideals. For example, two reviews in 1936 stress the "mystic expressions on their faces" or their "complete forgetting of what this day has been or what to-morrow is to be in the rhythm of the dance," again adhering to the ideal of the timeless "native."[88] Similarly, in a 1930 review of a Maggie Laubser exhibition in Stellenbosch for the nationalist newspaper *Die Burger* [The Citizen], AC Bouman likens the Black South Africans she paints to the nature they are surrounded by while describing them as "joyful like children."[89] Additionally, he stresses the difference between European and South African admiration of Black Africans by contending that "the preference for exotic subjects in some European artists can be a kind of degeneration, but in South Africa, such a love is the most natural and healthiest thing in the world."[90] This possibility of demarcating South African from European art probably also prompted Louise van Rensburg to write in another Laubser review published in 1937 that "it is often stated that the natives, from the point of view of the painter, are the only subjects in South Africa worth painting."[91] On an international level, this is reflected in the British weekly magazine *The Listener*'s coverage of the London exhibition "Art in the Dominions" that only reproduced works showing Black subjects as representatives of the South African section.[92] Within the concentration on primitivism and portrayals of Black South Africans therefore already lies the preparation for the nationalist perception of South African settler primitivists defining the following decades.

2.3 Reception of settler primitivists from the 1940s to 1960s

Art criticism from the 1940s to 1960s was largely characterised by a nationalist rhetoric. As mentioned above, the turning point was caused by South Africa's decision to support Great Britain in the war. As various scholars have pointed out, the

86 Swart, "Lippy Lipshitz's Exhibition," p. 20.
87 Ibid.
88 L.S., "Passion for Colour and Form." L.R., "Young Artist with Promise."
89 Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
90 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
91 Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud Kenmerk En Haar Kuns." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
92 N.N., "Art in the Dominions."

Second World War was "possibly the most important catalytic event in the nationalist mobilisation of Afrikaners."[93] The South African historian Suryakanthie Chetty describes that "the outbreak of the war on September 3, 1939, had a mixed reception in the South African parliament" as the then prime minister Hertzog favoured neutrality whereas Smuts wanted to support the British.[94] While Hertzog believed that a support of Britain in the war would threaten South Africa's unity, Smuts worried that Hitler might want to regain South West Africa and would then present an actual threat to the Union. Backed by a slight parliamentary majority, Smuts replaced Hertzog as prime minister and South Africa joined the British forces in their fight against German imperialism – as the government justified this action to their people. Consequently, Hertzog broke away from the United Party and, in January 1940, founded the Herenigde Nasionale Party [Reunited National Party] with DF Malan, leading to cumulative discussions on a new South African national identity and dissolution from the British Empire.[95] In the process, Afrikaner nationalists became increasingly active and visible while prime minister Smuts was largely absent travelling overseas.[96] It is thus not surprising that the rise in public nationalist rhetoric was reflected in contemporary exhibition reviews, especially when considering the potential artists had for articulating such a new national identity and the role they could play in the process of White settlers' "indigenisation" in South Africa through their focus on "indigenous subjects."

This becomes most obvious in a 1956 government publication containing a text by Deane Anderson, who at the time was art critic for the *Cape Argus*, senior lecturer in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cape Town and member of the Art Advisory Committee to the apartheid government's Ministry of Education, Arts and Science.[97] The foreword to his text concludes that Anderson "offers a lucid analysis of the movements and undercurrents which have led to the present vitality and growth of a truly national style among South Africa's painters and sculptors."[98] Anderson first answers to the common conception that art in South Africa lagged

93 Sapire, "The Prince and Afrikaners," p. 124.

94 Chetty, "'A White Man's War'," p. 303.

95 Du Bruyn & Wessels, "Vrees as Faktor." The latter was only achieved in 1961 through the founding of a Republic. Compare Devenish, "Cutting the apron strings."

96 Barber & Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, pp. 15–16. Also compare Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, p. 18.

97 Anderson was born in South Africa but educated in England. He worked as an architect in London, served in the Royal Air Force and returned to South Africa in 1947 where he took a post as lecturer at the University of Cape Town's School of Architecture. In 1962, he became a member of the Bord of Trustees of the South African National Gallery, first as representative of the *South African Association of Arts* and since 1969 of the University of Cape Town. Anderson, letter to Benfield, 1 August 1969.

98 Editor's foreword to Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 1. The State Information Office also published a French translation of Anderson's Fact Paper. Unfortunately, the purpose of this is unclear. Between 1955 and 1959 a total of 67 "Fact Papers" were published by the State Information Office as supplements to the journal *Digest of South African Affairs*. To my knowledge, Anderson's text has not received any attention by art historians in South Africa so far.

behind European art. He concedes that, at first, the "struggling pioneer people" was little interested in culture as it "was occupied with the basic and practical business of remaining in existence" – citing the national myth of the persevering *voortrekkers*.[99] However, he also stresses that the country's youth entailed "qualities very much to be admired and even envied" such as "vigour, a new and uninhibited approach to ancient problems and a certain innocence of vision."[100] To Anderson, the country was in an advantageous rather than inferior position as South Africa benefitted from the current worldwide interest in "primitive" art that placed the latter above European traditions.[101]

Moreover, Anderson argues that, before Stern and Laubser, "African themes were consciously or unconsciously Europeanised" in what was "essentially a Colonial art."[102] After the Second World War, however, "South African artists began to study and to assimilate the true flavour of Africa, no longer as a faintly comic curiosity but as an integral part of the national idea."[103] He calls these attempts "made to enter into the real spirit of the African scene or to investigate the indigenous art which had for so many centuries grown naturally and spontaneously out of the African soil."[104] This art, Anderson claims, had enabled South African artists

> to score over their opposite numbers in Europe; for the latter could only derive their inspiration at second hand, whereas in South Africa the artist is surrounded by superb examples of primitive art, and has only to drive a few miles to be in a landscape where living fossils grow and blossom.[105]

He calls the result "a truly national style" and concludes that "art in South Africa, young, strong and living among the roots of the Primitive tradition which has conditioned the *Zeitgeist* of the present art generation, has little to fear from the immediate future … and much to hope."[106] Anderson's nationalist (and primitivist racist) text offers a good summary of the terms that defined art criticism in South Africa from the 1940s to 1960s and that will be analysed in greater detail below: dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation," South Africa's spirit or soul, the South African soil and the importance of "native" art. Again, there are some overlaps as these themes were employed to serve the same intention: the authentication of a new national, specifically South African art.

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99 Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 1.
100 Ibid., p. 2.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., p. 14.
103 Ibid., p. 24.
104 Ibid., p. 14.
105 Ibid., pp. 24–26.
106 Ibid., p. 26.

2.3.1 Dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation"

As indicated above, the dissociation of Europe was an important step in the nationalisation of the South Africa art scene. It presents a clear break with the transnational perspectives governing the 1920s and 1930s presented earlier in this chapter that used artists' successes in Europe for their authentication in South Africa. In general, it can be observed that first manifestations of the process of nationalisation surfaced in reviews of Afrikaner artists' works in the mid-1930s as forerunners of the wider nationalist reception of South African art that gained momentum following the South African participation in the Second World War. Thus, nationalist discourses moved from the more right-wing Afrikaner part of South African society to its middle and then also affected discussions of English, Jewish and other artists.

I would like to examine three examples of such forerunner reviews that dissociated Afrikaner from European art pursuing a nationalist agenda. In a 1935 article for *Die Vaderland* [The Fatherland], Matthys Bokhorst, a Dutch immigrant who would become director of the Michaelis Gallery and of the South African National Gallery in the 1960s, disparagingly writes about Alexis Preller that "from his work, Europe speaks, not South Africa."[107] Bokhorst is in search of a distinctly South African style as praised by Anderson twenty years later. He also criticises that "the Afrikaner Preller" gave his works English titles and that one was "presented here again with an English 'list of pictures'." [108] This illustrates how Afrikaner nationalism was also influenced by anti-British sentiments. In an article of 1937, the Afrikaner politician and Cape administrator JH Conradie's opening address held at a Pierneef exhibition is cited in which Conradie calls Pierneef's work "essentially South African" as "he painted landscapes which could be found nowhere in the world but in South Africa."[109] In a similar vein, Martin du Toit, head of the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria, in his *Vaderland* reviews of the mid-1930s maintains that Laubser's work conveyed "a uniquely South African atmosphere" and was "genuinely national."[110] As indicated above, comparable nationalist reviews of non-Afrikaner artists followed in the 1940s. In 1939, a reviewer of a *New Group* exhibition describes the transition from the focus on European role-models to a new focus on a specifically South African art:

> While the use of European colour and subject matter is still all too evident in some of the work, this will pass as certain leaders reveal with intensity the South African approach to our life and landscape. Admittedly, both the classic and contemporary art of Europe are fountains of inspiration, so London and Paris call with insistence to the South African artist. Let him

107 Bokhorst, "Vollbloed-ekspressionis." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
108 Ibid. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
109 D.G., "An Essentially South African Painter."
110 Cited in Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," p. 186.

> learn how to paint overseas, then let him find what to paint here amongst his own people.[111]

The latter credo probably aptly reflects the ambivalent approach of the *New Group* to the two poles of transnationalism/ nationalism. In a letter of 7 May 1939, "owing to the present international situation," René Graetz asks Preller's opinion on whether "the New Group as a body [should] offer its services" by assisting the government with publicity such as designing posters.[112] A second letter written a week later reflects that Graetz, Preller and Terence McCaw, who was the only other *New Group* member that had replied to Graetz's query, agreed "that individuals who wish to may offer their services, but not the Group as a body."[113] This implies that the *Group* generally did not oppose nationalist agendas but was not interested in pursuing them as an official body either. The apparent lack of interest in the issue illustrated by the fact that only two members responded to Graetz's poll supports this assumption. Additionally, although the *Group* did not, as a body, seek an alignment with transnational modernism as is often wrongly assumed,[114] they clearly positioned themselves against the obsolete English-colonial naturalism propagated under the regime of Edward Roworth. Overall, as will be further detailed in Chapter 4, their aims were of a structural character rather than related to style or content. Nevertheless, the works of individual *New Group* members were often reviewed from a nationalist perspective.[115]

In the decades following the *New Group*'s formation, the dissociation of Europe and attempts at "indigenisation" of South African artists became more frequent in contemporary art criticism. For example, JF van Staden writes that "Pierneef is as indigenous as his favourite *kameeldoring* [camel thorn tree]"[116] and Preller's work is considered to have "unmistakeably African roots."[117] Johann van Rooyen professes that "Maggie Laubser had become a victorious symbol of an own indigenous culture"[118] and Eddy Sacks emphasises that Walter Battiss "drew his inspiration from the indigenous material of his home country."[119] In a portrait of Lipshitz of 1943, Battiss calls Lipshitz's sculpture born "in the primitive south […] pure and uncorrupt [sic]."[120] Comparing it to European art, he claims that "with increasing strength it stands like David to overwhelm the Goliath that would kill it."[121] Battiss thus indigenises Lipshitz

111 W.W.B., "The New Group. "
112 Graetz, letter to Preller, 7 May 1939.
113 Graetz, letter to Preller, 15 May 1939.
114 This circumstance is elaborated on by Kukard, *The Critical History of the New Group*.
115 Compare ibid., pp. 77–99.
116 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
117 N.N., "Preller — Golden Boy of Art."
118 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 6. Also compare Delmont, "Laubser, Land and Labour," p. 27.
119 Eddy Sacks, "Walter Battis [sic]."
120 Battiss, "The Sculpture of Lippy Lipschitz [sic]."
121 Ibid.

by attributing his sculpture to the "primitive south" and at the same time considers it superior to European art. Other reviewers further indigenise Lipshitz by listing the indigenous materials he used. Frede Leusoh, for example, writes that "by his preoccupation and constant experiment with South African woods and stones, yellow-wood, silverwood, stinkwood, South African lemonwood, soapstone, malachite, wonderstone, South African onyx, he makes his works deeply-rooted and indigenous."[122] In his comparison of Lipshitz with Henry Moore in the government publication *Lantern*, Rupert Shephard, too, asserts that "Lipshitz's enjoyment of African woods, [...] his feeling for work in ivory, coral, and other local materials; all these relate Lipshitz to South Africa."[123] Moreover, he alleges that

> it was noticeable when a collection of Henry Moore's sculptures came to the South African National Gallery for the Van Riebeeck Festival [in 1952], how hand carved, gentle, and natural Lipshitz's work looked beside the dynamic abstractions and highly polished surfaces of Moore's work.[124]

This meant a great departure from reviewers in the 1920s and 1930s, for whom it was the greatest compliment when a South African artist produced work resembling that of a European master. The superiority of primitivist South African to contemporary European art is also articulated in JFW Grosskopf's monograph on Pierneef of 1945 in which he calls European sculptors "who unashamedly aped" West African wood sculpture, decadent.[125] Pierneef, on the other hand, Grosskopf claims, was interested in "forgotten Busman artists" because their "primitive art expressions had been infallibly determined by the character of South African nature itself."[126] Grosskopf hence sees Pierneef's art to be shaped by the love for his country, South Africa.[127] Very similarly, Colin Legum writes with reference to Stern in 1947: "Hers was not a dissipated Gauguinian urge to 'escape' from the civilisation in Europe, to seek the simple delights of the black-skinned peoples of another culture; hers was a passionate stirring, and urging desire, to transcribe the life of Africa."[128]

The dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation" of settler primitivists hence was considered an important step for a "new national art" by art critics in South Africa. This can be further inferred from the Union's participation in the 1950 "Biennale d'Arte di Venezia" curated by John Paris, director of the National Gallery in Cape Town,

122 Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," p. 38.
123 Shephard, "Lippy Lipshitz," p. 374.
124 Ibid., pp. 374–375.
125 Grosskopf, *Hendrik Pierneef*, p. 18.
126 Ibid., p. 24.
127 This is common in Pierneef reviews. One author, for example, compliments Pierneef's "innate love of the South African veld and the sincerity with which he depicts it." Behrens, "Pretoria as a Home."
128 Legum, "She Speaks for Africa."

with FEJ Malherbe and Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke.[129] The catalogue entry stresses that, while before artists had been very much influenced by European trends, "today, many artists look to their own land and find a great riches of new vitality which they try to employ and interpret, each of them following their own character."[130] The aim of indigenising South African artists by linking them to their specifically South African heritage also received support on an international level. In American reviews of the comprehensive exhibition of South African art organised by the Union government and the *South African Association of Arts* which was first shown in London in 1948 and then travelled to Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Ottawa and finally Washington, the work of Alexis Preller and Walter Battiss received the largest attention as it was considered the most indigenous. For example, Florence S Berryman writes for the Washington paper *The Sunday Star* that "Preller's paintings are arresting, with their African native subject matter," and that she was "outstandingly" intrigued by "Walter Battiss, [who is] greatly interested in the prehistoric and Bushmen rock paintings of his own country."[131] The article is accompanied by a large reproduction of Preller's painting *Basuto Allegory*. A South African *Star* correspondent reports that *The Washington Post*, too, was "particularly impressed by the work of Gerard Sekoto, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller, illustrating its article with a reproduction of Battiss's 'Cattle and Agrets'," and that the *Newsweek* writes that "South Africa is now beginning to look to itself for its greatest inspiration."[132] The fact that these reviews were summarised in a South African newspaper suggests that local art critics were endorsed in advancing White settler artists who appropriated African cultural heritage by such international responses to an art that showed a clear link to traditional Black culture.

The effort of indigenising South African artists remained prevalent beyond the 1960s. For example, in one of the frequent juxtapositions of Laubser and Stern, Van Rooyen stresses in 1974 that Laubser's domestic primitivism characterised her as South African in contrast to Stern, whose exoticism he considers clearly European:

> The 'discovery' by Europe of African and Oceanic art at the turn of the century had led to an over-emphasis of the exotic as an ideal. Maggie accepted Africa and its peoples as an everyday norm. From choice she painted the Coloured people of the Cape, not as exotic creatures of nature, but as fellow beings in whom she perceived her own simple needs. […] She shared her

129 Malherbe was professor of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch and von Moltke assistant director as well as lecturer in art history at the Michaelis School of Art at the time. Von Moltke moved back to Germany where he became director of the newly founded Kunsthalle Bielefeld in 1962. For their collection, he acquired two paintings by Stern, whom he knew well, that also prompted the 1996 exhibition curated by Irene Below and Jutta Hülsewig-Johnen. Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 114. Von Moltke was also part of the committee that decided which paintings to include in the permanent collection housed at the Irma Stern Museum following the bequest of her property to the University of Cape Town. Lipshitz, letter to Feldman, 12 April 1968.

130 John Paris, "Sala LII: Sud Africa," p. 216. (My translation, original Italian on p. 269.)

131 Berryman, "News of Art and Artists."

132 N.N., "South African Art in America."

> high regard for the farm labourer and for labour as an act of piety with such predecessors as the French realist Millet and with Van Gogh. Irma Stern's interpretation of the African tribesman, the Malay and the Indian, on the other hand explored the exotic characteristics of these people from a strictly European point of view.[133]

2.3.2 South Africa's spirit and soul

Another theme shaping the nationalisation of settler primitivist art between the 1940s and 1960s were accounts of its reflection of South Africa's spirit or soul. Richard Feldman had laid down the foundation for this practice in the mid-1920s when he professed that Stern was "an essentially South African artist" because she depicted "the very soul of that which is South African."[134] A decade later he even writes that "the spirit, the very soul of the country, must find expression in the work of a free artist, living in South Africa," claiming that "Stern penetrates into the very soul of things — man, flower, tree."[135] At the root of these tales of South Africa's spirit or soul lay the personification and exoticisation of the country. While the former offered an image of the land being a person that could be subdued and appropriated — becoming most explicit in Feldman's sexualised language — the latter was an aid to the nationalist primitivist project that dissociated South Africa from Europe. As both men were important members of the literary Jewish community and both ardently supported Stern, it is likely that Joseph Sachs made reference to Feldman's two articles when titling his 1942 monograph on the artist *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*. He writes that "the spirit of Africa breathes in the canvases of Irma Stern" that reflect "the African spaciousness and sense of freedom," recapturing "the tropical exuberance of Africa, its luxuriant flora, and the dark denizens that have first peopled this land."[136] Sachs's text is informed by the same intention of appropriation and exoticisation as Feldman's.

From the 1940s, references to South Africa's spirit or soul increased rapidly. The *Mylady* writer Tom Mcdonald calls Stern "the pan-African artist" because "her work has caught not only the colour of Africa but the spirit of the place," revealing "something of the strange soul of Africa."[137] Of Lipshitz, too, it is said that "he expresses South Africa and the spirit of the country."[138] In a statement that also attempts to indigenise the White settler Preller, a *Trek* journalist claims that the painter "is so imbued with the African spirit that one can consider him a European exponent of

133 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 17.
134 Feldman, "Irma Stern."
135 Feldman, "Idylls of the Black."
136 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 7.
137 Mcdonald, "Irma Stern," p. 68.
138 Lewis, "The Sculpture of Lippy Lipschitz [sic]," p. 55.

African Art."[139] Additionally, FEJ Malherbe, professor of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch, describes Laubser's primitivist style as getting down to "the essential, the soul" of things.[140] He ascribes her work "a purely Afrikaans spirit" and considers it "part of the purest indigenous and most original art we have."[141] Similarly, in a text published in *Tydskrif vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [Science and Art Magazine], he stresses that Preller is "*eg Afrikaans*" [truly African/ Afrikaans] as his works articulate the spirit of Africa.[142] In another exoticisation of Africa, Joy Wood writes in an article for the government publication *Lantern* about Preller's mural *Ontdekking* [Discovery] that depicts the discovery of the ocean route to India around the Cape by the Portuguese Bartolomeu Diaz and Vasco da Gama in 1488 and 1498 respectively:

> We get a picture of all aspects of Africa — the damp jungle with a waterfall in the background of the middle panel; the sharply delineated mountains, emphasised by the sabre-like red shapes; the burning desert on the right, lifeless and scorching, with its giant palm trees. Here is the quiet voice of Africa — awesome and untamed.[143]

In a similar personification of the whole continent, Battiss argues that "a great change has come in Southern Africa with the growth of Expressionism, for it seems that some of the new painters and sculptors are able to penetrate and reveal the authentic moods of Africa."[144] Again, Battiss's language is surprisingly similar to Feldman's as he equally subdues "Africa" — with a great ambiguity to what the term actually means for Battiss — to the European settlers' gaze. In a text on Pierneef that significantly spearheads the presentation of 24 South African artists including Laubser, Boonzaier and Stern in the 1959 government publication *Our Art*, Anton Hendriks, too, implies that the artist "penetrated to its [South Africa's] soul or deeper spirit [...] in an effort to reach the authentic soul of the South African landscape, especially, to understand the Transvaal veld from the inside and express it in his own colours and lines with love and sincerity."[145] As in John Paris's Pierneef obituary discussed above, in this case, the submission of South Africa or the South African landscape is linked to love for the country itself. References to South Africa's spirit or soul are hence shaped by ambivalent ideas of sexualisation, appropriation, subjugation, "indigenisation" and love.

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139 N.N., "Round the Galleries."
140 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
141 Ibid.
142 Malherbe, "Erepenning vir Skilderkuns, p. 13.
143 Wood, "Preller Se Magnum Opus," p. 22. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 269.)
144 Battiss, "New Art and Old Art."
145 Hendriks, "Jan [sic] Hendrik Pierneef," p. 1. In a similar vein: Bierman, "Pierneef en ons Landskap." Three further extensions of *Our Art* were published in 1961, 1977 and 1993.

2.3.3 South African soil

In *Washed with Sun. Landscape and the Making of White South Africa*, Jeremy Foster argues that

> during the twentieth century, the preoccupation with finding some kind of psychic accommodation with 'the land' became a defining feature of white South African nationhood, an ever-present topic in art and literature, and a recurring anchor of identity.[146]

He further explains that geographical territory and nationhood are so powerfully intertwined "that it is almost impossible to talk about national consciousness in isolation from the physical territory with which that consciousness identifies itself."[147] The result, he argues, is the "reification of the land as icon of nationhood."[148] One pronouncement of such reification were increasing references to South African soil in contemporary art criticism that started in the mid-1930s and received greater importance in the 1940s, especially in discussions of Afrikaner artists. For example, in 1936, Zilla M Silva writes in an article for the *Sunday Express* that Laubser had told her "that in her opinion the South African public is undoubtedly awakening to the existence of an art indigenous to the South African soil."[149] With that, Laubser did not mean traditional African art but settler primitivism, and hence also participated in the project of "indigenisation" of the latter. Foremostly, the citation of Laubser's remark shows the burgeoning demand for a new national art. Ten years later, Norman Herd takes up the artist's words and calls her "a South African, yet a simple child of the soil," emphasising that "her art was, as now, truly representative – the European influences notwithstanding."[150] Similarly, a *Cape Argus* reviewer sees in her exhibition opened by EH Louw, minister of economic affairs, in 1949 the proof that "she is pre-eminently a woman of the soil of South Africa."[151] Once more, the fact that Laubser's exhibition was opened by a government representative shows the political interest in settler primitivism at the time.

In the discussion of works by other artists, too, references to the soil play an increasing role from the 1940s. Eric Allen, for example, portrays Lipshitz in a 1949 article for the *Star* and quotes him saying that every artist "needs to be rooted in some specific soil."[152] In the review of an exhibition Preller held at his studio in 1948, a *Pretoria News* journalist calls the "peasant-art quality" characterising the artist's work "the spirit of the soil from which it grew."[153] The primitivist quality

146 Foster, *Washed with Sun*, pp. 2–3.
147 Ibid., p. 15.
148 Ibid., p. 17.
149 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."
150 Herd, "Maggie Laubser," pp. 63–64.
151 P.H.W., "A Woman Painter of Maturity."
152 Allen, "He Loves Stone."
153 N.N., "Exhibition by Alexis Preller."

of this remark is striking. In the case of Pierneef, however, the importance of geographical territory symbolised by soil is most clearly pronounced. Recurring to the same personification of the country described above by referring to its spirit and soul, Roger Castle stresses the significance of South African soil for Pierneef's work in his opening address at an exhibition by the artist in Johannesburg:

> We, who are interested in the founding of a South African School, maintain that the only way to lay hold of the spirit of this vast sub-continent is to first soak oneself in the soil, to feel oneself filled with and overwhelmed by the great soul of the land, and secondly, to return to the primitives of this land for inspiration.[154]

The close connection between the nationalist desire for a specifically South African art, the physical land and its "natives" becomes obvious in this observation. In his 1945 monograph on Pierneef, Grosskopf, too, pays great attention to the painter's relationship with the South African soil:

> Soil; there is almost a mysticism in the way in which he honours the soil. Out of our own soil comes virtually all our constituents as material beings; to that soil we all return; while the soul of the volk irrevocably bears the stamp of the landscape and the character of the land. We are part of our soil. Much deeper then than the artisan's pleasure in the colours, forms and lines of the landscape, is buried in Pierneef's soul those child-like feelings of adoration for our soil and nature.[155]

In Grosskopf's account, Afrikaner nationalism evoked by phrases such as "the soul of the volk" mixes with primitivist ideals in which Pierneef is described as "child-like" and close to nature. The South African soil offers a point of departure for both. In his obituary for Pierneef, John Paris, too, links the artist's relation to the soil to Afrikaner nationalism and the *voortrekker* myth when he writes that "Pierneef tackled something huge that no one had ever been faced with in painting before; and he tackled it with the modesty of a man who walks over the land on his feet."[156] Paris thus describes Pierneef as the pioneer whose body is connected with the land, who subjugates the land and thereby creates a new national art. Generally, Isabel Hofmeyr explains, White settlers' relationship to soil figured significantly in justifications of land appropriation. She argues:

> African agriculture, for example, was considered derisory largely because it was seen as 'shallow'. Colonial farmers, on the other hand, ploughed 'deeply'

154 Cited in Pretorius, "Biography of JH Pierneef," p. 64. Also compare Van Robbroeck, "Afrikaner Nationalism," p. 56.

155 English translation of the original Afrikaans provided in Freschi, "Afrikaner Nationalism," pp. 9–10.

156 Paris, "A Farewell to Pierneef."

> and so apparently possessed — and earned a right to — the land in a way quite distinct from African farmers. In the perception of the Native Affairs Department, Africans did not 'love the soil' which under their 'scratching' became 'thin' and 'bodiless.' Europeans, on the other hand, practised 'good husbandry' and made the soil 'thick' by adding manure and fertiliser.[157]

2.3.4 "Native" art

The importance of the South African soil was closely linked to that of the culture of the alleged "Primitives of that soil."[158] One of the earliest tributes to this culture is Roger Castle's 1925 article "The art of the Bushman." Extremely unusual for the time but clearly taking a nationalist approach to art, Castle writes:

> My opinion, backed by the opinions of some of the younger painters working in this colony is that if a South African School of Painting is to be brought to birth, then the attention of the pupils and disciples of that school must be focussed on the Bushman. Whenever a new school has been formed, in recent years, the two main founts of inspiration have been, firstly, the Soil in which the Master and his Disciples have taken root. […] Secondly, one must turn to the Primitives of that soil for the first inspiration. Here in Africa we have these two foundation stones looming up large and unavoidable. Africa herself is strong enough and vast enough to intoxicate, very often to overwhelm. Her Bushmen are the ideal primitives. Their vision and their draughtsmanship sprang straight from this very soil on which our houses, clubs and theatres are built.[159]

The young painters Castle refers to are very likely Pierneef and his friend Erich Mayer. At the end of his article, Castle thanks "Pierneef for the two drawings, which he did direct from the originals, and also for all that I know of the Bushman art" and explicates that "Pierneef's own work shows a strong leaning towards the Bushman use of line, and he is, besides, the only person I have discovered who can adequately reproduce a Bushman drawing."[160] Through his admiration for San rock paintings, Castle thus establishes Pierneef, who appropriated such art, as the possible founder of a "South African School of Painting." He links both to the South African soil and thus nationalises Pierneef's as well as the San's art.

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157 Hofmeyr, '*We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told*', p. 72.

158 Castle, "The art of the Bushman."

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid. Curiously, later art historians such as Esmé Berman and Alexander Duffey established that Pierneef had visited rock art scenes for the first time in 1936. Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 223. Duffey, "Pierneef and San Rock Art," p. 24. As mentioned earlier, his 1920s copies were based on George Stow's and others' more than liberal tracings.

Castle's text can be considered a forerunner of the discussion of "native" art as it took until the 1940s for the appreciation of traditional South African art to reach public interest and for it to be linked to contemporary settler art. Lipshitz and Dronsfield, for example, in 1941 organised an exhibition of "African Native Art" at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in order to raise awareness of these national cultural assets.[161] In the contemporary press, too, such an awareness began to rise. For example, in 1945, gallery owner and arts patron Joan Harrison regrets in a *Trek* article that, although "Battiss is a great authority on Bushman painting," "his ordinary work is not more affected by his contact with rock-painting and that we only see a handful of experimental work, carefully segregated from the rest, in which he allows the influence of African art to dominate."[162] In the review of a 1946 Preller exhibition that the reviewer strangely considers "Mainly for Women," the artist is described as "essentially a South African artist as much of his work is inspired by Native art and life."[163] Reviewing the exhibition of South African art at the Tate Gallery in London for the British weekly *Time & Tide* in 1948, Maurice Collis laments that the show was not a "reflection of native Africa" as expected by British audiences.[164] In line with his South African colleagues cited above, he contends that "there can be no real vital South African art" until artists "identify themselves more directly with Africa."[165] Collis claims that "the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz has led the way" as his four exhibits "are not sculptures of Africans by a European, as are Kottler's, but the heart of Africa is in them."[166] All of these reviews illustrate the importance of the influence of traditional Black South African art on contemporary settler artists, especially for the development of a national art that was considered specifically South African.

In "A pen picture of Jacob Pierneef," JF van Staden in 1947 stresses the uniqueness of San rock paintings that "you cannot confuse [...] with any other art in the world" and maintains that, following their example, Pierneef "strives to portray the titanic features of nature with few colours and simple lines."[167] The potential of this endeavour for a national South African art is rendered obvious when Van Staden explains that, "although his has been an important contribution to the advancement of a South African painting style, Pierneef humbly says that he only wants to help encourage a style that will be known universally as typically our own."[168] Most of these texts are shaped less by an actual admiration for the art produced by Black South Africans than by the potential held by its appropriation for a White national art style. In this vein, Grosskopf describes the "strangely kindred artistic feeling" of Pierneef and "the primitive South African artist" but is eager to clarify that Pierneef "was not primarily interested in those races, as such; the fundamental thing for him was that,

161 Lipshitz, "Introduction."
162 Harrison, "Pretoria Painters," p. 23.
163 N.N., "Mainly for Women."
164 Collis, "The Tate and Other Exhibitions."
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
167 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
168 Ibid.

to his firm belief, these primitive art expressions had been infallibly determined by the character of South African nature itself."[169]

Such discussions therefore differ from those of rural Blacks of the 1920s and 1930s as they concentrate on the art of Black South Africans rather than on their lives and social conditions. They also differ from 1920s and 1930s allusions to primitivism as those centred on the European appropriation of African art rather than on specifically South African traditions such as San rock painting or Ndebele murals as it became common in the 1940s to 1960s. In "Ten South African Artists and the Primitive Revival," Deane Anderson thus writes about the White South African primitivist that

> not only is his whole vast country one of the world's greatest picture galleries in stone of Primitive art, but he is also surrounded by living people of the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages who still practise the arts and crafts normal to their stage of historical development.[170]

The racism and degradation of Black South Africans inherent in these remarks is striking. Consequently, Anderson considers it not only unproblematic but admirable that the work of the ten settler primitivists discussed in his article shows "how a sensitive artist can turn the possibilities of a local tradition to his own ends."[171] Like his *Fact Paper* for the State Information Office, Anderson's *Studio* article also highlights the contemporary meaning of the word "primitive" that was used to refer to African art appropriated by artists in Europe at the beginning of the century or to the San – but not to Black South Africans, who were instead labelled as "natives" and later also "bantoes."[172] The San, unlike Bantu-speaking peoples, were not perceived as a contemporary reality – a people that had a claim to the land – but distant forebears whom White settlers could idealise as "noble savages."

2.4 Other primitivist terms featuring in 1920s to 1960s art criticism

Further terms determining the primitivist discussions of settler art in the first half of the 20th century, that are less easily connected to any political developments, are 'truth', 'essentiality' and 'childhood'. Admittedly, those topics feature frequently in art reviews, irrespective of the style, nationality or time-period of the artist discussed. However, they play an especially important role in reviews of settler primitivist

169 Grosskopf, *Hendrik Pierneef*, pp. 18, 24.
170 Anderson, "Ten South African Artists," p. 70.
171 Ibid., p. 92.
172 Examples discussed in my text that testify to this use of the word "primitive" are Du Plessis, "Modern Art at Ashbey's." Castle, "The art of the Bushman," pp. 1–2. Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary. Irma Stern." Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 11. Grosskopf, *Hendrik Pierneef*, pp. 18, 24. Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, pp. 24, 26.

exhibitions in South Africa. This is due to the fact that supposedly unadulterated perception and representation were at the core of the primitivist project that idealised the uneducated — and therefore unspoilt, natural — approach of the child, autodidact or "primitive" artist. This is reflected in the regular references to truth, essentiality and childhood at the time. In some reviews, the word 'truth' is even spelled with a capital T. For example, a *Rand Daily Mail* writer cites Lipshitz's friend and supporter Wren-Sargent who maintained that Lipshitz's knife was "stripping off the clinging exterior of his subjects and presenting them as they are, delving into their very souls to find the Truth."[173] As a result, he is quoted, the artist's sculptures were shaped by "this honesty, this sincere search for Truth."[174] In his portrait of Pierneef published in the first edition of the Afrikaner art magazine *Nuwe Brandwag*, Anton Hendriks stresses the importance for (especially Afrikaner) artists of "being true to themselves" and "true to their people" in order to create their own national art.[175] He alleges Pierneef as an example of this. Norman Herd, too, emphasises that Laubser painted her South African subjects "with insight and truth."[176]

Describing settler primitivists' works as depicting truth on the one hand served as a legitimation of their work and on the other gave further weight to racist ideas of difference between the paintings' and sculptures' White beholders and the Black or Coloured individuals they depicted. Thus, the equation of art and truth also featured prominently in JH Viljoen's foreword to the Ministry of Education, Arts and Science's catalogue for the arts section in the South African contribution to the "Rhodes Centenary Exhibition" in 1953. The exhibition was held at Bulawayo Park in today's Zimbabwe in order to celebrate the birth of Cecil John Rhodes — but really to perpetuate the founding myths of the British Crown colony Southern Rhodesia.[177] The arts exhibition was organised in collaboration with the *Southern African Association of Arts* (headed by Deane Anderson), the National Gallery in Cape Town (headed by John Paris) and the Johannesburg Art Gallery (headed by Anton Hendriks). Viljoen stresses the importance of the arts for tinting "the enormous victories of science and technology which so vividly characterise our times […] by spiritual elevation and character building."[178] He then quotes the British poet John Keats, summarising that "art is truth — 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', but it is a much deeper truth than the truth of reasoning; it is the truth of the sense described as wisdom; this is the acme of our cultural possessions."[179] Viljoen concludes that

> it is for this reason that for the past number of years this Ministry has increasingly been paying attention to the promotion and encouragement of

173 A.G.S., "The Arts in Pretoria."
174 Ibid.
175 Hendricks [sic], "Beskouing," p. 64. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 270.)
176 Herd, "Maggie Laubser."
177 Compare Shutt & King, "Imperial Rhodesians."
178 Viljoen, "Foreword," n.p.
179 Ibid.

> the arts, which together with all other educational efforts are so essential in personality development.[180]

In addition to such equations of art and truth and righteousness, phrases relating to essentiality were employed in order to describe the close relationship between settler primitivists and the South African nation, often in conflation with the country's landscape. In addition to being part of the process of "indigenisation," the "essentially South African" quality attributed to their art meant a nationalist appropriation of the latter. Both Stern and Pierneef were repeatedly termed "essentially South African" painters by different journalists.[181] In the case of Maggie Laubser, this attribution becomes even more significant. It is possible that, since her domesticated farm scenes or still lifes were not as iconically South African as Pierneef's depictions of the veld or Stern's portrayals of "tribal" Blacks, art critics were at even greater pains to assert the specifically South African nature, and hence indigeneity, of Laubser's art. For example, in an exhibition review published in the *Star* in 1949, her work is described as interpreting "the essential beauty of South Africa."[182] In a 1965 "Tribute" to Laubser, a *Pretoria News* journalist writes that she "revealed the essence of the Cape in her expressionist manner, simplifying until only the essential was retained."[183] Similarly, Johann van Rooyen attests in his Laubser monograph that "above all, she was hailed for the essentially South African spirit of her paintings. Maggie Laubser had become a victorious symbol of an own indigenous culture."[184]

As mentioned above, references to childhood were another common trait in discussions of settler primitivists' works that were themselves informed by primitivist ideals of unadulteratedness and subconsciousness. In the State Information Office publication cited above, Deane Anderson purports that the relative youth of the South African nation renders a great advantage to the country's art "in the present stage of world art development, where the 'innocent eye' of the child, the unsophisticated and the primitive are admired (and even imitated) as never before."[185] This "'innocent eye' of the child" is hence evoked when art critics explain how the settler primitivists' art under discussion was informed by childhood experiences. Similar to the employment of the terms 'truth' and 'essentiality', references to childhood thus lent authenticity and validity to the works reviewed. Additionally, as described at the beginning of this chapter, it was an important narrative that the artistic "genius" was discernible already from childhood.[186] In his Stern portrait published early in her career, Richard Feldman therefore cites Stern telling him that her "early childhood was spent on the highveld. Its vast largeness was one of my first impressions of

180 Viljoen, "Foreword," n.p.
181 E.g. Feldman, "Idylls of the Black." D.G., "An Essentially South African Painter." D.L.S., "Irma Stern."
182 N.N., "Maggie Laubser Exhibition."
183 N.N., "Tribute to Cape Artist."
184 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 7.
185 Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 2.
186 Also compare Schade & Wenk, "Inszenierungen des Sehens," p. 356.

this world so full of beauty — stretched of yellow plains with blue, blue sky above, and the dark figures of natives forming silhouettes against its transparency."[187] This citation was supposed to show that Stern's subjects and feeling for colour were predefined in her early childhood. Similarly, Joseph Sachs, in *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, claims that "Stern was able at an early age to enter into the spirit of native life, to study their manners and customs, their primitive mode of life and their childlike natures at first hand."[188] He stresses that her art "was really a realism resting on the sound foundation of an experience that shaped her reactions as an artist since early childhood."[189]

In his "Profile on Lippy Lipshitz," too, Sachs recurs to the myth that Lipshitz's destiny to become a free-thinking artist already became apparent in his behaviour as a child. He holds that, in Cape Town, "Lipshitz first learned to find form in Nature" due to his childhood fascination with "the sphinx-like mountain with its air of knowing mystery" and the "divine sculpture in its rugged cliffs."[190] Sachs attempts to convince the reader that the stone of the mountain's boulders and the wood of the trees growing on its slope presented Lipshitz with his future materials as a sculptor. Disregarding the fact that the young Lipshitz had intended to become a writer, he exaggerates that, while he was on the mountain,

> destiny loomed on the horizon, steep and insurmountable, but one prayed to God and felt His presence and immense power, secure in the certitude that one would do great and beautiful work, and neither adversity, nor the envy of men, would extinguish the flame that flickered fitfully in this grey dawn of life.[191]

Opposing Sachs's emphasis on the importance of the Cape, Bruce Arnott, in his 1968 monograph on Lipshitz, sees the sculptor influenced by his early childhood at the side of "his grandfather, who was bookbinder, painter and woodcarver in the Lithuanian village of Plungian."[192] His grandfather, Arnott argues, worked in "the tradition of Jewish ceremonial art" and he consequently considers Lipshitz's sculpture largely shaped by this tradition.[193] As Lipshitz left Plungian, or Plungė, with his mother at the age of four, Arnott sees Lipshitz's destiny to become a sculptor to have been predetermined even earlier than Sachs professes.

In contrast, for Pierneef childhood memories are not considered to have been as important since he grew up in Pretoria and not on the veld, his famous subject as an adult artist. In order to compensate for this, Pierneef is himself often described as a

187 Cited in Feldman, "Irma Stern."
188 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 45.
189 Ibid.
190 Sachs, "Profile of Lippy Lipshitz," p. 6.
191 Ibid., p. 6.
192 Arnott, "Introduction," n.p.
193 Ibid.

child. Bernard Lewis, for instance, refers to his "sophisticated 'child-like' technique."[194] Van Staden states that "that naturalness so often suppressed in the modern child has not only been preserved in him but that it has steadily grown" as "he is a child of nature."[195] Anton Hendriks, too, maintains that "most people soon pass the stage of childlike interest in nature and before long little remains of it, but something of the child remains with an artist, and Pierneef always retained the rare gift of seeing the world through the eyes of a child."[196] In the case of Maggie Laubser, both childhood experience and similarities between the grown woman and a child are significant for her reception. As this topic ties in with the contemporary image of the *Neue Frau*, however, the special importance of childhood and childishness for the self-portrayal and reception of Laubser is described in more detail with reference to female stereotypes in Chapter 3. Mentions of childhood in Boonzaier reviews were already examined with relation to artists' myths at the beginning of this chapter. Nonetheless, in addition to common narratives of childhood "genius," reviewers also considered childhood experiences formative for Boonzaier's primitivist interest in Coloured communities. For example, in an article for the government publication *South African Panorama*, Jenny Basson asserts that "from childhood he roamed the streets of the Malay quarter and the twisting paths of District Six, sketchbook and pen in hand," and quotes Boonzaier explaining that "street scenes and old walls have always enchanted me. […] There is something romantic in the old mosques and the colourful buildings. […] I think Cape Town is the most beautiful city in the country."[197] Again, childhood memories are linked to patriotic feelings here.

2.5 South African settler primitivism and social criticism

It has already become discernible in the preceding discussions that social criticism played a changing role in South African art criticism between the 1920s and 1960s. While it fed into reviews of Stern's and Lipshitz's earlier portrayals of Black South Africans, it no longer featured in the period of increasing political interest in primitivist art from the mid-1940s. As mentioned above, in her PhD dissertation of 2009 that was published in book form in late 2020, LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker) shows how, from the early 1920s, South African critics considered Stern's work to reflect the changing social structures and unbalanced social forces of the time.[198] Berger argues that "Stern posed a unique challenge for critics because her work made it difficult for them to discuss art without addressing the racial and social issues."[199] In 1926, Richard Feldman, in his article on Stern quoted at length above,

194 Lewis, "Simplification and Decoration."
195 Van Staden, "A truly South African Artist."
196 Hendriks, "Jan [sic] Hendrik Pierneef," p. 1.
197 Basson, "Tribute to Gregoire Boonzaier," p. 22.
198 Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 75.
199 Ibid.

describes Stern as an artist aware of the "many social and cultural changes the 20th Century brought."[200] In a similar manner, but extremely unusual for the time, the socialist journalist and general secretary of the Labour Party Colin Legum compliments Stern on the social criticism he perceives in her art in 1947.[201] Legum writes in a rather ambivalent concurrence of criticism of and adherence to primitivist ideals:

> Soon she was to find that her youthful visions of 'brown people living a happy life in close touch with their soil, beautiful in their primitive innocence' were not as 'happy' and 'innocent' as they appeared. Her work brought her sharply into contact with their unhappiness and frustration; of souls simmering with resentment under the unfair and repressive laws of their European overlords. The effects of the conflict between European and primitive civilisations, of modern and ancient cultures, were too unmistakably present for so keen a student of human nature to miss. Her social consciousness was awakened and developed rapidly with her art. […] It is true that Irma Stern did find her innocent, happy Africans in their natal land — but that was only when she penetrated deeper into the interior of Africa and found her subjects comparatively unmolested in their natural surroundings, living as they did before the Arab slave-trader invaded the Continent of Africa, followed by the white commercial exploiter and the modern industrial appendages of expanding imperialisms.[202]

This was, however, an extremely rare stance on Stern's portrayal of Black South Africans. Even Feldman, almost ten years after his first appraisal, revokes his earlier assessment and declares that "Irma Stern is no social artist."[203] Unfortunately, he does not enlighten his readers on what changed his judgment. Whereas Feldman still greatly appreciates Stern's art and artistic achievement, though, the writer and art critic Uys Krige in a published letter to the *Cape Times* editor of 1938 not only criticises her lack of social awareness but also her style in general:

> Miss Stern seems to be a little worried about South Africa not appreciating her. Let me reassure her. She is [sic] very, very poor Pechstein. She knows less about natives — I mean their souls, not the colour of their skins, their beads, knob-kerries or the arrangements of their kopdoekies [head scarves] — than I about that amiable old buffer on the top of the moon. She uses them — and she hardly paints other human beings — only for their

200 Feldman, "Irma Stern."
201 On Legum's political role see Vigne, "Colin Legum." Shaw, "Colin Legum."
202 Legum, "She Speaks for Africa," p. 20.
203 Feldman, "Idylls of the Black."

> surface value, their decorative qualities. So she not only sentimentalises them but exploits them, artistically speaking.[204]

The criticism of the exploitation of Black South Africans discernible in Krige's and Legum's texts was extremely unusual at the time and does not seem to have had any noticeable echo. In general, however, artists were regularly confronted with the expectation that their art should reflect current social changes — caused by the South African involvement in the Second World War rather than by increasingly systematised racial discrimination. An exception to the latter was possibly Feldman, who clearly makes reference to social injustices when he laments that "our artists, be they writers or painters, still fight shy of the painful and tragic. They still divorce the ugly reality of our social structure from the beauty that remains unspoilt by industrial man."[205] Another exception is presented by Lippy Lipshitz, who, in a letter to his friend Millie Levy of 1939, sneers that, to Gregoire Boonzaier's buyers, "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 Chiappins Street."[206] Lipshitz concludes that

> 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.[207]

This view was taken up by Lipshitz's friend and supporter David Lewis in his influential study of South African art, *The Naked Eye*. Lewis writes that Boonzaier's paintings "are not paintings of the Malay quarter" but "merely derivations of the attitude found in paintings which the Englishman Christopher Wood painted of his Cornwall and French Brittany seaboard villages."[208] He criticises that, like Wood, Boonzaier rejected squalor and saw line and form, patterns, in the derelict houses "and not the sinking and falling of a history and a people who accept their decadence with a

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204 Krige, "Miss Irma Stern's Paintings." *Knobkerries* are traditional weapons. Since then, Stern has regularly been accused of sentimentalising her Black subjects and disregarding their social realities. However, a fact that is never mentioned — probably because she was later endorsed by the apartheid government — is that she was considering leaving South Africa upon the election of the, in her words "savage," nationalist government in 1948. Later, too, she expressed distress about South Africa's racist politics. Compare Gutsche, letter to Stern, 12 August 1948. Stern, letters to Gutsche, 28 December 1948 and 1 December 1954.

205 Feldman, "Idylls of the Black."

206 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 24 October 1939.

207 Ibid.

208 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, n.p.

fatal religious compliance."[209] The racism inherent in remarks such as these was not reflected upon or criticised. In general, Lewis's dismissal of Boonzaier's paintings as "empty shapes" mainly serves to contrast them with Lipshitz's sculptures which he considers violent rather than picturesque – "earth and form moulded into one primal frustrated creation."[210] Other critics such as AC Bouman, too, saw Lipshitz's sculptures to "have a colouring of social criticism."[211] In the opening speech of an exhibition by Lipshitz, Higgs and Dronsfield, JL Gray, head of the Department of Social Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, observes "with special interest the trend in the later work of Mr. Lipschitz [sic] to a human and affectionate realism" that distinguishes him as one of "the makers of a new society."[212]

In 1941, in another letter to Levy, Lipshitz writes with regard to a recent *New Group* exhibition that the exhibiting "artists are escapists" and "have not the courage or the imagination to express the age."[213] In contrast to his contempt for Boonzaier's buyers romanticising social inequalities, however, this later criticism refers to artists disregarding the effects of the war and can be linked to similar critiques of the time. In a letter to Lipshitz of May 1942, Cecil Higgs quotes the *Cape Times* criticism of a recent *New Group* show which bemoaned that "most of the works avoid reference to social change."[214] Higgs relates that, as a consequence, "there was a certain amount of correspondence" that "led finally to a sort of discussion meeting, a mixed brew of artists & laymen taking part, at the Argus one night."[215] As a result, Higgs reports three months later, Le Roux Smith Le Roux and Boonzaier named the upcoming *New Group* exhibition "The Artist looks at Life" in order to counter the *Cape Times*'s assessment "that the artists are either escapists or unconcerned with the war because their works show no marks of it."[216] Since this was a very open title, however, the next *New Group* exhibition was not marked by greater references to social change than the preceding ones. However, the *Cape Times*'s criticism was not echoed in later decades. Art criticism in South Africa simply returned to its earlier approach that art and social criticism were incompatible as art was supposed to show "genius" rather than

209 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, n.p. Martin Bekker later tries to make up for this dismissal of Boonzaier's art as picturesque and accommodating by claiming that "writers like Chekhov, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens and, particularly, Gorky and Zola, sharpened his political awareness," resulting in an interest in socialism. Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 18. Bekker also mentions Boonzaier's financial independence at the time of the Sharpeville massacre, stressing that his choice of subjects was informed by his special "personality" (p. 34). It is not clear why Bekker refers to Sharpeville, but the mention is still striking as no other South African artist's biography discussed here makes any reference to events after 1945.

210 Lewis, *The Naked Eye*, n.p.

211 Bouman, "Drie Belangwekkende Kunstenaars," p. 21. (Christina van Heyningen's translation of the original Afrikaans.)

212 Gray, "Text of speech made."

213 Lipshitz, letter to Levy, 10 March 1941.

214 Cited in Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 15 May 1942.

215 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 15 May 1942.

216 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 1 August 1942.

"fierce reality."[217] For example, in a review of a Preller exhibition of 1969, Afrikaner nationalist JF Marais writes that "it may be as well to reiterate the undeniable fact that artistic integrity has nothing to do with moral uprightness" but "with newness, freshness, ingenuity, with that element of surprise which takes one's breath away and makes one say, 'Aren't artists the most wonderful people on earth!'"[218] Pierneef is defended by a *Citizen* journalist in a similar way which clearly reflects the more common approach to settler primitivism and social criticism at the time:

> A pioneer like Pierneef (a lone one, as it turned out), painting perhaps to satisfy his deep hunger to somehow evoke a picture of his overwhelming love for this conflicting land of ours, will be scorned by those who expect a kind of political-social comment. Such people will feel that Pierneef failed. […] Undoubtedly he was as aware as the next man of the unfairness of life (that stretches back to perhaps even caveman cultures), but chose to concentrate rather on idealised painting than to even attempt to mirror the problems and difficulties of his times. Herein, unconsciously, lay his strength. […] It almost seems, as Pierneef must have decided, that an artist with an ability to paint wondrously, is better advised to pour love into his canvasses, than to bend his talent around whatever current problems prevail (although he is as aware of them as anyone else), thus producing work that might have delighted socially conscious minds, but would have been far less aesthetically inspiring to others.[219]

2.6 Conclusion

Criticism of settler primitivist art was influenced by different aspects between the 1920s and 1960s in South Africa: by overarching artists' myths; by politically informed approaches that changed from a transnational orientation in the 1920s and 1930s to a clearly nationalist stance between the 1940s and 1960s; by more general concepts relating to primitivism; and by the debate on the degree to which art should contain social criticism. Artists' myths have been relevant for art historical writing and art criticism since Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Looking at the example of Gregoire Boonzaier, it becomes obvious that stereotypical male artists' myths of the autodidact, "genius" child "discovered" by an expert and of the artist as suffering social outsider who reaches fame against all odds were also applied to South African settler primitivists. It is likely that they were intentionally appropriated by critics on friendly terms with the artist in order to give proof and render authenticity to Boonzaier's creative "genius." In the case of the Jewish artist Lippy Lipshitz such

217 Reinhardt, "Stand by for new art shock."
218 Marais, "Alexis Preller," p. 24.
219 N.N., "Wanted."

myths were conflated with stereotypes of the suffering, melancholic Jew and the common Jewish theme of tragedy. Reviewers gave special attention to his years in Paris and his "struggle for daily bread," recalling the cliché of the poor Jewish artist in Montmartre in the early 20th century. At the opposite end of such myths of the misunderstood, suffering artist "genius," stereotypes relating to the Afrikaner artist Pierneef were situated. He was presented as the typically simple, sincere and steadfast Afrikaner with Puritan values who sees clearly and acts deliberately. Additionally, reviews of Pierneef's work often featured references to patriarchal family structures, egalitarian principles and ideas of self-reliance, which were important for Afrikaner masculinity in the early 20th century. Stereotypes such as these also formed part of the myths or master-symbols connecting Afrikaners to the land.

In addition to such common artists' myths, art criticism at the time was shaped by politically informed approaches. A turning point can be seen in the South African decision to participate in the Second World War, marking the change from a transnationalist orientation towards Europe to an increasingly nationalist rhetoric. Analysing reviews of the work of Stern, who as pioneer of modernist painting played the most prominent role in public discussions of settler primitivism in South Africa at the time, it becomes clear that criticism in the 1920s and 1930s was shaped on the one hand by a defence of the modernist style new to South Africa and on the other by an emphasis on Black South Africans as subjects. The former relied firstly on a transnationalist approach that sought to validate modern artists such as Stern through their success in Europe and secondly on the substantiation of specifically South African modern art through the importance of primitivist ideals in Europe. The discussion of Black South Africans, on the other hand, can largely be attributed to the changing relations between Whites and Blacks in South Africa during this time. Fear of racial integration caused by the increasing urbanisation of Blacks made it necessary to establish an alleged difference between White and Black South Africans. The concurrent idealisation of rural Blacks and condemnation of urban Blacks in discussions of South African settler primitivism subversively made a case for separate living spaces of Whites and Blacks. Additionally, within the concentration on primitivist ideals and portrayals of Black South Africans already lay the preparation for the nationalist perception of South African settler primitivism defining the following decades.

The public increase in nationalist rhetoric following Hertzog and Malan's founding of the Herenigde Nasionale Party in January 1940, too, was reflected in contemporary art criticism. The latter was shaped by a special emphasis on the themes of dissociation of Europe and "indigenisation," South Africa's spirit or soul, the South African soil and the importance of "native" art, all of which served the intention of authenticating a new national, specifically South African art between the 1940s and 1960s. The dissociation of Europe through the continuous proclamation that South African settler primitivism was superior to contemporary European art was an important step in the nationalisation of the South Africa art scene. It presents a clear break with the transnationalist perspectives governing the 1920s and 1930s that used artists' success in Europe for their authentication in South Africa. Instead, artists were indigenised, and a "new national art" announced. Through personifying South Africa

by speaking of its soul or spirit, the land was imagined to be a person that could be subdued and appropriated. Such allusions to South Africa's spirit or soul were shaped by ambivalent ideas of sexualisation, "indigenisation" and love. The "indigenisation" of settler primitivists was further advanced through references to their alleged bond to the South African soil that was most significant for discussions of Afrikaner artists. The soil symbolising geographical territory was closely intertwined with ideas of White South African nationhood. Another important aspect for the development of a new national art that was specifically South African was seen by critics in the influence of traditional Black South African art on contemporary settler artists. Describing what was called "primitive" art as national cultural assets, art criticism was shaped less by an actual admiration for the art produced by Black South Africans than by the potential held by its appropriation for a White national art style. The word "primitive" was thereby used for the San but not for South African Bantu-speaking peoples in order to idolise the former who — due to their precedent disintegration — did not pose any political threat.

Other topics less closely linked to political developments in South Africa but to primitivist discourses in general that regularly featured in art criticism were truth, essentiality and childhood. Describing settler primitivists' works as depicting truth on the one hand served as a legitimation of their work and on the other gave further weight to racist ideas of difference between the works' White audiences and the Black or Coloured individuals that were depicted as different. In addition to equations of art and truth, phrases relating to essentiality were employed in order to describe the close relationship between settler primitivism and the South African nation that was often conflated with the country's landscape. In addition to being part of the process of settler primitivists' "indigenisation," regularly labelling their art "essentially South African" equalled a nationalist appropriation of this landscape. References to childhood were another common trait in discussions of settler primitivism that were themselves informed by primitivist ideals of unadulteratedness and subconsciousness. Similar to the employment of the terms 'truth' and 'essentiality', they lent authenticity and validity to the works reviewed. The question whether South African settler primitivism should include social criticism was a minor but recurring issue in art criticism at the time. While it fed into reviews of portrayals of Black South Africans before and during the Second World War, it no longer featured in the period of increasing political interest in primitivist art from the mid-1940s to late 1960s when reviewers pronouncedly preferred idealised artworks to socio-political comment.