3 SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS AND THE IMAGE OF THE *NEUE FRAU*

This chapter examines the impact of the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] ideology originating in 1920s Weimar Germany on the South African art scene. The focus is set on a text-based analysis concentrating on the reception of the artists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, who both lived in Berlin around 1920. Even though Stern had left Germany for South Africa in 1920, she frequently returned to Berlin in order to exhibit her work or visit her friends and family. She also frequently corresponded with Berlin-based artists such as Max Pechstein or Katharina Heise.[1] Laubser lived in Berlin from 1922 to 1924 before returning to the Western Cape for good. As will be shown throughout this chapter, both women positioned themselves towards the *Neue Frau* image upon their return to South Africa in order to further their careers. It is feasible to discuss this issue within the context of settler primitivism as the *Neue Frau* manifestation in South Africa was specific in that women artists profited from the primitivist idealisation of properties such as intuition, authenticity and proximity to nature customarily ascribed to women. Additionally, as privileged members of a racially segregated society in which the exploitation of Black labour supported the White elite, settler women had a more elevated – and thus independent – social position than their European counterparts. Thirdly, the women settler primitivists Stern and Laubser were able to take advantage of the fact that, upon their return from Germany, the South African art scene was still very conservative, offering an opening for a female avant-garde.

Overall, the *Neue Frau* can be considered a global phenomenon and was coined by European and colonial interactions. In their 2008 anthology *The Modern Girl Around the World. Consumption, Modernity and Globalization*, a research group at the University of Washington comprised of the authors Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong and Tani E Barlow shows how variations of the *Neue Frau*, with locally specific elements, originated in various countries such as France, the US, India, China, the Soviet Union, Shanghai, Australia or Japan.[2] They mainly base their research on print advertising and other forms of consumer culture. Poiger explores racial and colonial constituents of the *Neue Frau* in Weimar and Nazi Germany.[3] She shows how, in the 1920s, changing advertising images depicting *Neue Frau* types together with racialised pictures

1 Compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 108.
2 Weinbaum et al. (eds.), *The Modern Girl Around the World*.
3 Poiger, "Fantasies of Universality?," pp. 321–325.

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of Africans referred to imperial issues of racial domination. This already indicates the significance of European and colonial interactions in female stereotypes that will be further discussed below. In an essay entitled "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," Thomas also discusses the influence of *Neue Frau* typologies on Black school-educated young women in the Black South African newspaper *Bantu World*.[4] This does not form part of the following discussion as it exceeds the scope of my project. A comparison between *Neue Frau* manifestations in South Africa's various ethnic groups would, however, be a fruitful point for further research.

In general, this chapter is positioned within the context of feminist interventions in art history aimed at "differencing the canon" that was most prominently advanced by Griselda Pollock, first in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (with Rozsika Parker) of 1981 and then in *Vision and Difference. Feminism, femininity and the histories of art* of 1988 (to which she included a new introduction in 2003).[5] I intend to add non-European perspectives to interventions such as these and show that South African women artists[6] such as Stern and Laubser consciously and strategically set the parameters for their reception within modernist discourses in order to steer their careers to their advantage. They were not, as is usually argued, merely compulsive or passive witnesses but guided by their own agency. In *Vision and Difference*, Pollock describes how "The Story of Art" (as opposed to "stories of art") has structurally omitted women artists from the canon and concludes that "the pluralization of the histories of art is especially significant since it opens out the field of historical interpretation beyond a selective tradition, The Story of Art, a canonical version masquerading as the only history of art."[7] My text is based on the understanding that this pluralisation should also comprise the inclusion of settler women working outside of Europe and North America, a practice that is still not very common as illustrated by Irma Stern's virtually non-existent reception outside of South Africa.

Pollock further argues that, traditionally, "token women are merely offered for re-introduction into a canon" that is "already a gendered and gendering discourse and thus will always position artists who are women as marked, othered, as *women* artists."[8] Despite this criticism, I consciously speak of *women* artists as they were the driving forces in South African modernism and I would argue that the fact that they were women contributed to their success. Additionally, Stern and Laubser can certainly not be referred to as "token women" as they were the main protagonists of South Africa's modernist avant-garde. In line with Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff's approach in *Ästhetik der Differenz* [Aesthetics of Difference], this text does not intend to proof the entanglement of European art history in colonial stories of art but to show

4 Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability."
5 Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. xxxi. Pollock & Parker, *Old Mistresses*.
6 Throughout the whole chapter, this term refers to White women as, due to extreme racial inequalities, women of colour were only later granted access to careers in the fine arts.
7 Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. xviii.
8 Ibid., p. xx. (Pollock's original italicisation.)

ambivalent modes of authorship in case studies discussing colonial women who used their privileged positions in order to transform South Africa's art scene.[9] Additionally, it can be positioned within projects such as Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius and Silke Wenk's publication *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* [Myths of Authorship and Femininity in the 20th Century] that examines traditions and operation principles of artists' myths as well as ways in which women artists have appropriated, reformulated or deconstructed such myths.[10] This chapter pays special attention to the active and strategic appropriation of different myths around art and femininity by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. In line with Curtius and Wenk's project, I do not intend to strengthen myths produced around artists such as Stern and Laubser or contrast them with any supposedly scientific truth but rather show the two women's agency and authorship within such myths.[11]

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part describes the *Neue Frau* as a historical phenomenon in 1920s Germany. In order to get a general understanding of the difficulties surrounding this ideology, I will first discuss current debates mainly dating back to the 1990s, the time which saw the highest interest in women's self- and extrinsic positioning as "new women." This will be followed by contemporary German texts that offer a deeper understanding of the ideologies at work which informed this topos. The second part begins with a description of the South African manifestation of the *Neue Frau* that pays special attention to colonial peculiarities. I then show how South Africa's most prominent artist, Irma Stern, positioned herself within the *Neue Frau* discourse and how she steered her perception in Germany as well as in South Africa. This analysis is based on press cuttings that are discussed in lose chronological order. The third part examines Maggie Laubser's self-portrayal that was based on her accounts of her Christianity, childhood experiences and life on her parents' farm. I then show how the Afrikaner manifestation of the *Neue Frau*, the *voortrekkervrou* [pioneer woman] or *volksmoeder* [mother of the nation], influenced the reception of Maggie Laubser especially in the Afrikaans-speaking press.

While my discussion of the *Neue Frau* in South Africa contains references to Cecil Higgs, who like Stern and Laubser was an important member of the female avant-garde, I do not dedicate a chapter to her. Even though she was engaged in the fight against South Africa's art establishment, she was less interested in shaping a self-narrative and much less has been written on her work than on Laubser's and Stern's. Significantly, when asked by Esmé Berman for biographical details to be included in her *Dictionary*, Higgs declines and answers: "I don't, you know, believe much in biography – 'these particulars are not my measure.'"[12] However, I would like to stress that this refusal of a self-narrative is still noteworthy as it is likely to have caused the interest in Cecil Higgs to be surprisingly low in South African art historical writing when compared to other women pioneers. This is especially striking when

9 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 9.
10 Wenk, "Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit," pp. 12–13.
11 Ibid., p. 17.
12 Higgs, letter to Berman, 27 November 1966.

considering that Higgs's abstract work might be regarded more controversial than Stern's and that Higgs was certainly as much an exponent of female emancipation.[13] Additionally, while art historians have widely speculated on Irma Stern's sexual preferences, Higgs's homosexuality has never been mentioned.[14] Contemporary reviewers furnished her work with stereotypically feminine attributes such as subtlety, intimacy, love and sensitivity.[15] AC Bouman, one of her greatest supporters, for example, writes in 1943: "Her feminine nature does not allow a grievous charge to rise from the portraits of underprivileged individuals. The portrait seems more like an act of consolation, as if the artist's sensitive hands were caressing the child."[16] In a similar vein, the influential art critics Deane Anderson and Matthys Bokhorst call her "essentially feminine."[17] There is a clear desideratum for further research on Cecil Higgs.

3.1 The *Neue Frau*

3.1.1 Current considerations of the *Neue Frau*

The image of the *Neue Frau* goes back to a discourse starting in Weimar Germany during the first half of the 1920s. Other definitions exist that root the "new woman" in the late 19th century suffragist movement by focussing on the greater political involvement women were pressing to take on in the British Empire,[18] and that was manifested for example in the founding of the *Women's Franchise League* by Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst in July 1889.[19] However, with reference to the South African art scene, the *Neue Frau* topos originating in Germany shows more relevance since it not only refers to women's new political responsibilities but also includes changing ideals in social life and feminine stereotypes related to marriage, motherhood, profession and leisure activities. Additionally, the *Neue Frau* is also more relevant to South Africa as it was an image largely propagated and spread by the media and

13 For example, she laments in a diary that she had "never met more than a dwarf's handful of women who understand what it is to be absorbed in a pursuit unconnected with the relations between men, women and children." Higgs, undated notebook, n.p.

14 Higgs writes with regard to her cousin, friend and housemate Christina van Heyningen's ignorance of her homosexuality: "J. [John Dronsfield] told me that Douglas says Christina has broken with E.W. because he lives with an Indian boy & is very bitter & tight lipped about homosexuality. But surely she knows about D & me?! But when I consider it – does she? Its [sic] almost incredible she shouldn't but it is possible. People watch their steps to an […] extent with her. I never remember launching on it with her, as I avoided many other stings." Higgs, diary, 2 June 1949, p. 35.

15 N.N., "Progressive Art in This Country." N.N., "Stimulating Art Exhibition." N.N., "The Art of Cecil Higgs." F.L., "Cecil Higgs." Serton, "Vir die Vroue."

16 Bouman, "Oor Boeke en Kuns." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 270.)

17 Anderson, "Poetry and Technique." Bokhorst, "Paintings in Tune with the Infinite."

18 See Devereux, "New Woman, New World."

19 E.g. Pankhurst, *Unshackled*. Pankhurst, *The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst*.

hence reached an enormous dissemination in contemporary culture. Even though enfranchisement still played an important role as will be seen in discussions of contemporary South African press in the following sections, the cultural dimension had a greater significance for the introduction of the *Neue Frau* into the South African art scene. It was with reference to stereotypes of female artists such as Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser or authors such as Sarah Gertrude Millin that it was usually received. Furthermore, the artists themselves were instrumental in spreading this image.

As Barbara Drescher explains in an essay of 2003, the *Neue Frau* was no absolute term but an idea charged from multiple perspectives.[20] According to Katharina Sykora, this is due to the interrelation of women's life realities and media images of a new type of woman that, constantly reacting to each other, formed the everyday myth of the *Neue Frau*.[21] This means that the *Neue Frau* was partially a product created by the newly emerging mass media following a consumerist agenda and manifesting itself in advertisements, cartoons and photographs published in magazines, in fashion shows, films and revues. However, the topos also incorporated emancipatory motivations as women saw it as an opportunity to break free of old, set and gender-specific patterns.[22] Drescher also convincingly argues that, even though it was intended to spark consumerism, the *Neue Frau* propagated by the mass media was probably based on an existing demand of women in 1920s Germany to escape the restraints enforced on them by their gender.[23] However, "new women" were not able to escape such feminine stereotypes but clung to traditional hierarchies and a supposedly intrinsic femininity.[24] Topoi such as motherhood, inferiority to men, proximity to nature, childlikeness and an emotion-based behaviour still played an important role, as will be shown in more detail in the subsequent analysis of contemporary texts.

It must be noted that, in addition to the consumerist properties of the *Neue Frau* propagating a fairly specific fashion comprised of the so-called *Bubikopf* [bob] hair style, knee-long dresses and skirts, cloche hats, red lipstick, etc., social aspects also played an important role. These social factors for example encompass the increasing visibility of issues related to enfranchisement, professionalisation, birth control and abortion.[25] Since a lot of Germany's male workers and wage-earners were first drafted for the First World War and then often returned injured or not at all, women had to step in to support themselves as well as their families. A lot of them retained their newly found "independence" and after the establishment of the Weimar Republic took on jobs such as typists or switchboard operators which had emerged from the increasing mechanisation. Atina Grossmann shows how this mechanisation and rationalisation prompted by German industrial corporations lead to a "disenchantment" of women's day-to-day activities that were supposed to be dominated by caring love

20 Drescher, "Die ‚Neue Frau'," p. 172.
21 Sykora, *Die neue Frau*, p. 15.
22 Ibid.
23 Drescher, "Die ‚Neue Frau'," p. 175.
24 Also see Barndt, *Sentiment und Sachlichkeit*, pp. 9–10.
25 Ibid., p. 14. Grossmann, "Die ‚Neue Frau'."

and support for children and husband rather than time and resource efficiency or organisational skills.[26] Grossmann explains how this new behaviour posed a threat to traditional ideas of intrinsic femininity characterised by irrationality but at the same time was necessary in German post-war households. The construct of the *Neue Frau* brought a solution to this dilemma: "a New Woman who could sufficiently and lovingly manage the tasks of housework, mothering, sexuality and wage-earning," who "would be thoroughly rationalised and thoroughly womanly, the sought-after synthesis of mother, housewife, and working mother."[27]

The synthesis of mother, wife and working woman is also part of the Afrikaner ideology of the *voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder* that will be discussed in further detail below. This ideology saw Afrikaner women as mothers of the nation and was employed by suffragists in their cause to establish White women's right to vote in South Africa leading up to 1930. Moreover, issues of motherhood and emotionality also played an important role for the *Neue Frau* as artist. Marsha Meskimmon describes how "during the Weimar Republik the increased interest in women as artists began to develop into a 'typology.'"[28] She explains that "women artists were constructed most commonly as 'creative' or 'bohemian' versions of the modern, urban neue Frau manifesting 'feminine' or 'womanly' sensibilities in their art."[29] Women artists hence were an ideal model for showing how *Neue Frauen*, even when seemingly approaching their male counterparts more or less on eye level, still remained different and separate (and ultimately inferior) due to their intrinsic femininity. Hans Hildebrandt's *Die Frau als Künstlerin* [Woman as Artist] of 1928 is a good illustration of this and will be an integral part of the following discussion.

3.1.2 Contemporary texts

One of the earliest influential texts on women as artists in Germany was the art critic Karl Scheffler's *Die Frau und die Kunst* [Woman and Art]. It was published in 1908 as a direct response to the "problem" of modern emancipation and suffragist movements in the German *Reich* [Empire].[30] Scheffler calls these movements for female liberation influential but wrong since nature had created men and women unequally and therefore would never allow happiness for men or women if they gained equal status. For Scheffler, however, no sex was better or worse than the other, but women were simply stronger in their emotional sentiment and weaker in their logical capacities.[31] Men therefore often scorned women for their deficient intellect and saw

26 Grossmann, "Eine ‚neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?," p. 161.
27 Ibid.
28 Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, p. 233.
29 Ibid.
30 Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst*, p. 12.
31 Ibid., pp. 7–12.

them either as servants or as saints but never as friends or companions. These roles arose from women's natural harmony with nature and their child-like state of mind and being. Man, on the other hand, was a creature of culture. He could only achieve short-term harmony through being with a woman (whom he perceived more as a member of a species than as an individual) or through the creation of artworks.[32] As woman already was harmony in her general being, she was incapable of any creative act as well as of really understanding art. She could, however, feel joy in beholding the products of the male urge for creativity. Scheffler concludes that if women, who were the opposite of the male aspiration to artistic "genius," nevertheless forced themselves to produce art, they would violate their own nature.[33] Additionally, he was convinced that art made by women could never be good as women were not capable of being original but only of mere imitation.[34]

Scheffler's text already marks the concepts that will remain important for the discourse on women as artists analysed in the following sections of this chapter: motherhood, harmony, childlikeness, nature, sensibility. It will become obvious in my discussion that these terms remain crucial as they are repeatedly being used to describe intrinsic femininity. While authors employed these characteristics to argue both ways – for and against the eligibility of women to be successful artists – they never questioned the validity of such stereotypes of womanhood and hence stuck to traditional myths of femininity. On the other hand, this gave South Africa's women artists an essential benefit in asserting their primitivist approaches. Erich Ranfft argues that, with the increasing popularity of expressionism, women artists "benefited from their categorisation within Karl Scheffler's male/female dichotomy, for now their instinctive, primitive and 'nature'-based qualities enabled them to contribute cultural and spiritual insights."[35] Similarly, Jill Lloyd writes that "for die Brücke these associations had positive rather than negative connotations, suggesting a life force and an intuitive, 'natural' alternative to the rationalizing and calculating 'masculine' temper of their times" but, in the end, they "reproduced many of the ruling prejudices of their times in a new and 'positive' guise."[36]

Even before Scheffler, in 1905, Anton Hirsch published a text that advocated the right for women to practise the fine arts as he considered those closest to a female "genius" and therefore the most suitable occupation for educated women.[37] He bases his argument on women's supposed superior sensibility and feeling for beauty and even asserts that women artists were not only imitators but sometimes [sic] capable of artistic independence.[38] While Hirsch clearly promotes the education of women, he warns that such an education might lead to reaching the limits of femininity that would for example be crossed if women got involved in politics. They would then

32 Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst*, pp. 14–27.
33 Ibid., pp. 28–33.
34 Ibid., pp. 40–42.
35 Ranfft, "German women sculptors," p. 44.
36 Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, p. 47.
37 Hirsch, *Die Bildenden Künstlerinnen*, pp. 8–9.
38 Ibid., p. 10.

turn into manly women which he finds as gruesome as womanly men.[39] He therefore distinctly opposes women's emancipation when linked to the suffragist movement that was gaining momentum in Germany at the time.[40] Like Scheffler, Hirsch thus denies women true intellectual capabilities that would authorise them to take part in shaping the politics of their country even though he argues that traditional feminine characteristics such as increased emotional capacities allowed some women to occupy positions in the arts on par with men.

Even Margot Rieß, in an article in *Frau und Gegenwart* [Woman and Contemporary Life] of 1927, resorts to these *urweiblich* [proto-feminine] characteristics.[41] In her critique of the exhibition "Das Schaffen der Frau in der Bildenden Kunst" [Woman's Creativity in the Fine Arts] that was shown from May to July 1927 at Künstlerhaus Berlin, she claims that the idea that an exhibition of art by women would be characterised by sentiment, delicacy, compliance and softness originated from a time when women artists were disparagingly charged with physiological debility, and had thus long been obsolete.[42] This was probably aimed at critics such as Scheffler. At the same time, Rieß describes women's aptitude for sharing others' suffering, feeling compassion and knowing/ comprehending through empathy, all of which showed in the motherly or sisterly qualities of their art – qualities that she calls proto-feminine.[43] This shows that even women who would call themselves emancipated and progressive perceived women artists based on traditional notions of intrinsic femininity. A few months earlier, an article was published in *Frau und Gegenwart* on Irma Stern's exhibition at Galerie Gurlitt in Berlin that included a short text written by Stern herself about her encounters with Zulu and Swazi women during her latest travels. It is therefore possible that Stern read Rieß's text, especially since Stern's good friend Katharina Heise's work was also exhibited in "Das Schaffen der Frau in der Bildenden Kunst." This would support my argument made in the introduction to this chapter that Stern was informed about the discourse on women and art in Weimar Germany in which the *Neue Frau* played an important role.

Another influential text, which I have already referred to above, is Hans Hildebrandt's *Die Frau als Künstlerin* [Woman as Artist] of 1928. Overall, it can be considered an appreciation of the work of women artists and includes a long catalogue with images of works in different disciplines. However, already in the introduction, Hildebrandt points out that the reader should not expect the discovery of a female counterpart to a "Lionardo [sic], Michelangelo, Grünewald, Bramante, Cimabue, Rembrandt, Rubens, Phidias" as no woman had ever achieved the highest artistic primal forces nor was it likely that she ever would.[44] Hildebrandt explains that this was rooted in the fact that the dualism of mind and body was unique to man since woman was closer to

39 Hirsch, *Die Bildenden Künstlerinnen*, p. 9.
40 Ibid., p. 8.
41 Rieß, "Vom künstlerischen Ethos," p. 10.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 8.

nature and thus possessed an overall unity. Yet, this could still enable her to produce great art.[45] For Hildebrandt, every woman was practising a primitive form of art when managing to at the same time become the best housewife, mother and social helper while making her outer appearance as attractive as (or sometimes even beyond what) nature would allow her.[46] When it came to actual artists, he thought that women's creativity was strongest when it emerged from a certain *Nichtkönnen* [inability] or *Nichtwissen* [unawareness] that had a quality also exhibited by "primitive" people or children.[47] He considers this a "primitive" artistry that was unconscious and indistinct and which highly relied on the use of colours.[48] These remarks render obvious that nature was still the defining character of such a "feminine" art. It also shows, again, how women artists could profit from the increasing interest in primitivism in the early 20th century.

In general, Hildebrandt was a strong advocate of the emancipation movement in political, juridical, social, academic and artistic terms: he writes that men had traditional power but women an idea and that ideas were always stronger than power.[49] He thus predicts a victory of the women's emancipation movement in various respects. Even though he expresses the certainty that even emancipated women still wanted a strong partner they could look up and subordinate themselves to, it was not a big problem if they did not find such a partner since the "new women" now had the right to get educated, vote, choose a profession and remain single.[50] This idea resonates with South African conceptions of modern women in the 1920s. An example of this is the description of the "superior girl" by art critics and educators Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen, close friends of Irma Stern's, that was published in the *Cape Argus* on 23 April 1927, one year before Hildebrandt's text.[51] In this article, the authors explain that clever, cultured and knowledgeable women usually remained unmarried as they considered their careers more important than love affairs. They describe "ordinary" girls as queens of the race as they were the ones who found husbands and started families, acquiring the crown of womanhood in becoming mothers. However, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen diverge from Hildebrandt's narrative when they conclude that all "superior girls" at a later age regretted not having had children and that this was a fate they had to suffer because men had not yet learned to think of women in terms of equality.

In direct response to this article, an author whose name is abbreviated to IAH counters that marriage was an instinct common to all women and that, therefore, the reason for the "superior girl" to remain unmarried was not because she did not want to marry but because she took marriage more seriously than others and could not

45 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 8.
46 Ibid., pp. 12–13.
47 Ibid., p. 24.
48 Ibid., pp. 31, 33.
49 Ibid., p. 106.
50 Ibid., p. 107.
51 Rozilda, "The Superior Girl." As mentioned above, Rozilda was a pseudonym used by Purwitsky and Van Gelderen comprised of their first names.

find an intelligent and cultured spouse who would be a suitable equal.[52] This shows that debates on emancipated womanhood in South Africa were similar to those in Weimar Germany and often centred around notions of partnership and motherhood. However, in contrast to the three South African authors who refer to a more or less autonomous and self-determined female reality, Hildebrandt argues that the *Neue Frau* was a result of male desire: since man in modern times needed a friend and companion more than a servant, this was what women were adapting to become. To him, therefore, despite an increased independence, women's art accompanied men's art, women's art lived off of men's art.[53] In the discussion of the perception of Irma Stern's art at the time, it will become clear how this stance was shared by other critics – in Germany as well as in South Africa.

Hildebrandt's traditional and sexist framework for analysing women's art becomes most obvious in his descriptions of the work of the artists Käthe Kollwitz, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Gabriele Münter and Marianne von Werefkin. Interestingly, these (mainly German) artists, especially Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker, were often used as examples in contemporary, as well as later, discussions of artworks by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. Hildebrandt describes Kollwitz as an apolitical painter who was using her motherly, feminine kindness to paint workers as people rather than raising awareness of class conflicts.[54] Obviously, this interpretation diametrically opposes the way Kollwitz's socialist works are usually being interpreted today.[55] About Modersohn-Becker he writes that her works were characterised by an inability in academic terms that gave them a lovely and pure quality. He describes how her works, that always portrayed a state of being rather than an action, emerged directly from her soul.[56] Karl Scheffler, too, describes woman as personifying an eternal state of being and man as personifying willpower.[57] Hildebrandt continues that Gabriele Münter accompanied Wassily Kandinsky for a while but was ultimately unable to follow him into the realm of abstraction and that Marianne von Werefkin's works, even though they showed a powerful visionary strength, were only half as radical as those created by Alexej von Jawlensky in the studio next door.[58] These classifications of the works of female artists make clear how, even in a eulogy on women as artists, authors of the time were not able to overcome stereotypes of intrinsic femininity that also determined the ideology of the *Neue Frau*. It also shows how the discourse on the *Neue Frau* was mainly shaped by male voices and, as evidenced in the case of Margot Rieß, asserted and further developed by women.

These contemporary texts form an important basis for the ensuing analysis of South African newspaper articles and other press items relating to ideals of intrinsic femininity and the *Neue Frau*. They illustrate the importance of terms such as

52 I.A.H., "The Superior Girl."
53 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, pp. 108–109.
54 Ibid., pp. 116–117.
55 E.g. Seeler, *Aufstand!.* Papenbrock, "Käthe Kollwitz." Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought*.
56 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 121.
57 Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst*, p. 26.
58 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 123.

'motherhood', 'harmony', 'colours', 'childlikeness', 'nature', 'purity', 'simplicity' or 'sensibility' for the reception of the work of women artists in and following the 1920s. The following discussion will draw upon these texts and further explain their relevance for the reception of the South African modernists Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser.

3.2 Irma Stern in the role of the *Neue Frau*

3.2.1 Particularities of the *Neue Frau* in the South African art scene

The *Neue Frau* took on an interesting part in the South African art scene of the late 1920s to 1950s, as issues surrounding this myth gained momentum in the press at the same time as women settler primitivists prompted the change from the English-derived and, by then, obsolete prevalence of romantic realism to modernist artforms. In 1944, the artist Johannes Meintjes writes that "the role of women in the history of South Africa is remarkable in many respects" as "in comparison with the small population, few other countries can claim the same number of women artists."[59] There are various reasons for the fact that it was indeed women who forced this change. Firstly, it was women artists who first started working in modernist fashions. This means that there were no male stereotypes associated with modern art production that to a South African audience was a complete artistic revolution – decades after it had entered the artistic mainstream in most European countries. Therefore, South Africa's women modernists did not have to justify why women could be part of a male-dominated avant-garde but instead filled the gap by forming a female avant-garde. The South African art critic, scholar and artist Marion Arnold explains how women artists benefited from the circumstance that the discourse on modernism in South Africa centred on issues such as personal feeling and individual choice.[60] As was described in detail above, these terms played an important role in contemporary characterisations of modern women in general. The discussion of contemporary press on Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser will give examples of how the supposed feminine nature of their artwork tied in with contemporary primitivist ideals and greatly benefited these two artists' careers.

It is also fertile to consider the special position of women in the (former) colonies. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff argues that, in Weimar Germany, many women enthusiastically supported colonialism as a space for emancipation since it gave them the possibility to transgress traditional gender roles.[61] A lot of women who were influential in revolutionising South Africa's art scene were indeed first or second-generation settlers from Europe: Irma Stern's parents were German immigrants, Hilda Purwitsky came to South Africa from Lithuania as a small baby, Roza van Gelderen was raised

59 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 42. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 270.)
60 Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 11.
61 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 203.

in the Netherlands, Sarah Gertrude Millin's parents had immigrated from Lithuania, Maria Stein-Lessing only immigrated from Germany via England to South Africa in 1936. Schmidt-Linsenhoff continues that the typology of the *Neue Frau* also came to incorporate the "modern amazon" that was defined by "daredevil" behaviour such as driving or flying, by professionalising in areas such as photography or publishing as well as by a general cosmopolitan bearing.[62] Britta Schilling asserts that the (former) colonies often functioned as a laboratory for a variety of female identities and that many colonial women were living a life proscribed as masculine by European societies. They undertook supposedly masculine activities such as hunting, shooting and driving or went into professions such as anthropology, flying, photo journalism or archaeology.[63] Irma Stern's husband, Johannes Prinz, for example, in a letter of 1933 congratulates his wife on passing her driving test and describes how he bragged in front of a hotel manager about his famous artist wife who was motoring through Africa in order to paint "natives."[64] The press, too, eagerly recounted how "she ventured into the interior of the Congo where few white men would have gone, and set up a studio in a Native village, miles from the nearest European, for a month."[65]

Another reason is rooted in racial inequalities. Most South African women employed several Black domestic servants that would take over chores typically performed by women.[66] Veronica-Sue Belling convincingly argues that managerial skills acquired by coordinating these servants "vastly increased women's confidence, and by the mid-1920s, the 'new woman' was boldly giving voice to new assertive attitudes" in her fight for political enfranchisement.[67] In the social study *The South Africans* of 1934, Sarah Gertrude Millin explains that "middle-class folk have opportunities in a dominion that would not be open to them anywhere else" and concludes that South Africa had a more egalitarian society than the UK in terms of gender and class.[68] In an essay included in the anthology *Between Union and Liberation. Women Artists in South Africa 1910–1994*, Arnold, too, stresses the importance of privilege of opportunity that was given to White women who wanted to become artists.[69] LaNitra Michele Berger further argues that the mere time made available to White women by the cheap domestic labour of Black women, who took over close to all household chores, meant that White women in the colonies were able to put more serious efforts into occupations such as the fine arts than women in Europe.[70] I would like to counter, though, that there were many women in European societies whose upper-class status similarly awarded them enough free time to pursue artistic endeavours. Additionally,

62 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz*, p. 203. On the impact of the *Neue Frau* myth on young Black women in South Africa see Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability."
63 Schilling, "Zwischen ‚Primitivismus' und ‚Modernität'."
64 Stern, letter to Prinz, 7 January 1933.
65 Cooper, "Irma Stern," p. 32. Also compare Lawless, "In the Limelight."
66 Compare Cock, *Maids and Madams*.
67 Belling, *Recovering the Lives*, pp. 118–119.
68 Millin, *The South Africans*, p. 107.
69 Arnold, "European Modernism and African Domicile," p. 52.
70 Berger, *Irma Stern*, p. 124. Also compare N.N., "Unique Situation at Art Exhibition."

Black domestic labour was not an invention of the 20th century but White women in the colonies had been profiting from this exploitation long before, without becoming dominant protagonists of colonial art scenes.[71] I would argue that cheap domestic labour was an aiding factor but that the increasing emancipation and professionalisation of women, as exemplified by the genesis of the *Neue Frau*, as well as the supposedly feminine qualities of primitivism played a larger role in the reception and success of South Africa's women settler primitivists.

It is important to emphasise again that, until well into the 20th century, romantic realism was the only approach to art tolerated by South Africa's leading institutions.[72] The person who saw to this most critically was the English painter Edward Roworth, who had been educated at London's Slade School and had come to South Africa in 1902 with the British forces engaged in the Anglo-Boer War. He gained more and more power by occupying posts such as president of the *South African Society of Artists*, director of the South African National Gallery and head of the Michaelis School of Art, which he held for more than 30 years. By the time Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser returned from Berlin to Cape Town in the 1920s, he was already firmly in control of the national art scene as well as of public opinion about what was worthy of being called art and what was not.[73] He was supported by other influential figures such as the cartoonist DC Boonzaier, father of the Cape impressionist Gregoire Boonzaier. After visiting Laubser at her parents' farm in October 1925, DC Boonzaier wrote in his diary:

> Maggie Laubser has had a romantic and interesting career in Europe, where she subsequently spent a number of years, learning more of love than of art, as far as I can gather. […] If a girl goes to Europe to 'study art' […] her career there can only have one ending, the old, old one. It has been so with her and it will be so with all those who come after her. Well, her little romance has ended – the man died. […] But she would not be a woman if her head is not stuffed also with many foolish and childish ideas, to which alas she clings obstinately.[74]

A few years earlier, Boonzaier had visited Irma Stern in her studio and afterwards exclaimed in his diary: "Poor Irma Stern! In a few years you will forget all about art as so many other women have done and no one will trouble about your nude girl with the strange crescent breasts."[75] In a similar fashion, the director of the National Gallery, Anton Hendriks, apologised for the "contradiction in terms" when describing the Johannesburg arts patron Lady Florence Phillips as "a very wise woman."[76] These

71 Compare Cock, "Domestic service and education for domesticity."
72 Compare Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 2.
73 See ibid., p. 253. Arnold, *Women and Art*, p. 65.
74 Boonzaier, diary no. 25, 24 October 1925. Laubser was a woman of almost 40 at the time of Boonzaier's observation that paints her as a naïve girl.
75 Boonzaier, diary no. 21, 24 December 1920.
76 Barrett, "In the Limelight," p. 35.

quotes clearly show what standing female artists had in South Africa's patriarchal art scene before it was revolutionised by women such as Stern and Laubser. However, this revolution did not take place before the 1940s. In the late 1930s, Edward Roworth told his students at the Michaelis School of Art that the internationally successful painter Cecil Higgs (who was 41 years old at the time) was just "a little girl from Stellenbosch who can neither paint nor draw."[77] Similarly, Bernard Lewis, who was the most influential art critic at the time and a friend of Boonzaier's and Roworth's, writes in 1937:

> Miss Cecil Higgs' paintings are imitative rather than creative. […] The Modernists (they were Parisians) who rose in revolt a generation ago against what is called academic art, were people of the strongest anti-social inclinations. […] They were able to create a sensation. They became fashion, which spread first to Munich and Berlin where their idiosyncrasies overstepped all the bounds of decency, and from there it went to Canada (as we have recently seen) and then to South Africa. It is interesting to know that the first of our painters to follow this fashion were women: Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser. And now here there is a third: Cecil Higgs. […] More and more I come to the conclusion that this way of 'composing' paintings is not a true revelation of the artist's soul. He or she – it is usually a she, for in art women imitate rather than create – has been taught to paint in that way in one of the big art schools in Europe, usually in Paris. I wonder if Miss Higgs will ever look beyond the walls of her studio and get away from the 'homework' that she had to do for her teachers and see the beautiful world outside.[78]

Two years later, this assessment was followed by a heated debate that had formed between Lewis and members of the *New Group* and reached its peak when Lewis attacked Higgs's painting *Pink Nude* exhibited in the *New Group* show at the Stellenbosch university library in August 1939. Lewis calls Higgs's three works included in the show "surely the ugliest ever exhibited here" and complains with reference to her *Pink Nude* that "the pink legs and arms may be held to represent nudity but a flat blob of pink paint cannot be taken for a face."[79] As a result of this attack, the painting was ordered to be removed from the exhibition by the head of the university.[80] As Bruce Arnott describes in his biography of Lippy Lipshitz, this controversy largely divided Cape Town's art scene in two camps: that supporting the "right wing" establishment and that supporting the "left wing" *New Group*.[81] Roworth had openly sympathised

77 Quoted in Bertram, *Cecil Higgs*, p. 44.
78 Brander, "Skilderye Deur Cecil Higgs." (Christina van Heyningen's translation of the original Afrikaans.) Brander was a pseudonym regularly used by Bernard Lewis.
79 Lewis, "New Exhibition at Stellenbosch."
80 Compare Holloway, *Cecil Higgs*, pp. 11–12. Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 8 August 1939. Van Heyningen, letter to Lipshitz, 20 August 1939.
81 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 20.

with the national socialists in Germany and in 1940, congratulated Hitler on giving the modernist producers of "degenerate" art in Germany "their choice between the lunatic asylum and the concentration camp."[82] Responses and reactions to these remarks by artists such as Lippy Lipshitz, Ruth Prowse and Gregoire Boonzaier (who had broken ties with his father DC a few years earlier)[83] finally lead to Roworth's gradual retreat from his official positions.[84] In June 1948, Prebble Rayner published an article in the *Cape Times* in which he writes that "once upon a time, though not so very long ago really, it was considered proper that woman confined herself to the gentler arts of the drawing room and the kitchen leaving the men-folk to be the law givers and wage earners" but that "now practically every avenue of activity has been explored by the ambitious female".[85] Rayner (himself a strong Roworth opponent)[86] continues with a list of women such as Stern, Higgs and Prowse, whom he considered amongst South Africa's most accomplished artists.

In 1964, art collector Denis Godfrey writes in an article for the *Sunday Chronicle* that he was "enamoured of South Africa's women painters whose work, in general, seems to me more important, talented and compelling than that of their male counterparts."[87] However, this does not mean that feminine stereotypes were abandoned in favour of more unprejudiced and gender-unrelated interpretations. Godfrey for example describes Stern's works as explosive and sensuous and Laubser's as "fey, delicious slabs of colour and dream scenes." This goes back to characterisations of women as emotional, close to nature, visceral, intuitive and removed from reality as described above. Similarly, Colin Legum writes in 1947 that Stern "speaks a language which is more impulsive than rational"[88] and May Hillhouse contrasts Laubser's and Stern's "sensitivity, imagination and understanding" with Vladimir Tretchikoff's "mechanically precise outlines."[89] In an overview on South Africa's modern art scene published in the *South African Digest* in 1969, Hugo Naudé's work is described as virile and Laubser's and Stern's as individualistic. Furthermore, Laubser's art is called naïve and nostalgic, Higgs's art exquisite. While the author considers Stern's work to be characterised by a "passionate abandon," they refer to Welz's as restrained with a "sensitive command of colour and brush" – whereas Welz is portrayed as in control of what he is doing, Stern is presented as highly impulsive.[90]

These descriptions support my argument that the main reason for women artists' success in South Africa can be seen in traditional transcriptions of intrinsic femininity which were incorporated into the myth of the *Neue Frau* that supposedly

82 Cited in Lipshitz, "A Considered Reply to Prof. Roworth," p. 20.
83 Compare Bekker, *Gregoire Boonzaier*, p. 26. On the relationship between Gregoire Boonzaier and Roworth also see Boonzaier, diary no. 42, 1 July 1940.
84 Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, p. 22.
85 Rayner, "Will Women Top the Bill."
86 E.g. Rayner, "Letters to the Editor." Rayner, "That's the Spirit!"
87 Godfrey, "Collector's Notebook."
88 Legum, "She Speaks for Africa," p. 37.
89 Hillhouse, "'n vreemde profeet."
90 N.N., "Century of Art," p. 8.

revolutionised the image of women in the early 20th century as independent and coequal to men while retaining established differences of the sexes. This intrinsic femininity corresponded to ideas of modernism such as art being founded on individualistic expressions based on emotions and intuitions rather than on realistic descriptions. Settler women's assertion was further aided by the circumstance that cheap Black labour enabled them to hand over their domestic tasks to the oppressed Black and Coloured members of South African society as well as by the fact that modernism was comparatively late to arrive in Africa. Women artists such as Stern or Laubser, who had been trained in Germany or other European countries, therefore did not have to compete with a male avant-garde that undermined their allegedly feminine approach to modern art but could present themselves as members of European modernist traditions that endorsed femininity. The following analysis of Irma Stern shows how she strategically employed such transnational links in order to further her career and establish modernism based on primitivsm in South Africa.

3.2.2 Irma Stern cultivates her image as *Neue Frau* with traditional values

It is important to understand that Irma Stern did not stage herself as *Neue Frau* by presenting herself as an independent professional woman artist who prevailed in a male dominated art world. She could probably be better described as behaving in a way that corresponded with the *Neue Frau* idea of finding new, self-determined ways in partnership and occupation and, at the same time, appeasing the traditionalist voices holding the power within the South African art scene.[91] In order to not cause any affront with the parochial institutions that might be necessary to further her career, she for example accepted her appointment for membership into the *South African Society of Artists* in 1931[92] and asked Edward Roworth to open her exhibition at the Martin Melck House in Cape Town in 1937.[93] She also did not get involved in the debate around Roworth's suitability as director of various institutions described above. In reciprocation, Roworth, a few years later, defended a work of Stern's that was publicly ridiculed.[94] Maggie Laubser, in contrast to this, became a member of the

91 Irene Below briefly touches on this idea in "Afrika und Europa," p. 117.

92 Berger (née Walker) convincingly argues that "For Stern, SASA membership was not a means for her work to gain acceptance by the English South Africans. Rather, it was a way for her to come into contact with the powerful, mostly male powerbrokers who controlled public access to South African art as a means of creating a greater market for her paintings." Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, p. 106.

93 Proud (ed.), *Brushing up on Stern*, p. 50. Also compare Berger, "In Defence of Irma Stern," p. 22.

94 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 8 June 1942.

New Group in 1938 and got involved in the dispute between *Group* members such as Cecil Higgs and Lippy Lipshitz with Bernard Lewis.[95]

Stern's appeasement of the conservative camp within South Africa's art scene also becomes obvious in public references to her private life. In an article published in the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1931, Stern is quoted in the following way:

> In discussing modern Germany, she said she experienced there an attitude of irresponsibility and instability which was reflected in the weakening ties of home and marriage. Her friends in Germany, she said, were astonished to find that she was still married to the same man when she returned to Europe after an absence.[96]

This shows that Stern wanted to represent herself as fully aware of modern lifestyles propagated by the *Neue Frau* ideology but as nevertheless remaining faithful to traditional values concerning "home and marriage."[97] In a letter sent in the same month (May 1931) to her good friend, the German sculptor Katharina Heise, she wrote that she wanted to free herself of her husband and be with many people.[98] The divergence between the newspaper article and this personal correspondence suggests that Stern consciously positioned herself in relation to the image of the *Neue Frau* that was still relatively new in South Africa in a rather ambiguous way. Additionally, instead of showcasing herself as a pioneer, Stern entered the South African art scene as a member of an artistic movement that had long been acknowledged and established in Germany. She used these transnational relations to legitimise her role as a painter who had already been accepted by the male avant-garde in Europe and was now confidently continuing her career in South Africa.

Her friendship with the German expressionist Max Pechstein plays an important role in this. Stern was introduced to Pechstein by a mutual acquaintance, an art collector, in 1917 in Berlin.[99] Probably prompted by their shared admiration of non-European cultures, Pechstein took an interest in the younger artist and helped her get settled into Berlin's expressionist circles. Stern quickly generated a lot of attention as she was able to position herself as an "authentic African" artist and connoisseur of "primitive" cultures, a theme which many influential artists were then working

95 Higgs, letter to Lipshitz, 22 June 1939. Laubser was planning to write an article in opposition of Lewis.

96 N.N., "Highway of Women."

97 Also compare Below, "Afrika und Europa," p. 117.

98 Stern, letter to Heise, May 1931. According to more recent research, Stern was romantically involved with the Jewish poet David Fram at this time. Godby, "Irma Stern's Portraits of Freda Feldman," p. 169.

99 Stern, "How I Began to Paint."

with.[100] Her pictures of Black women whom she claimed she had grown up amongst demonstrated her superiority to her German colleagues, who knew their subjects mainly from occasional travels and ethnological museums or expositions. As will be further detailed below, the German press took this up as well and frequently mentioned her special role as an "African" artist. Some critics hence attributed her a greater genuineness than Gauguin or Pechstein.[101] After her return to South Africa, Stern often travelled to Germany where she continued to exhibit until the outbreak of the Second World War. She used these occasions to further propagate her image as an "authentic African" artist. For the "Große Berliner Kunstausstellung" [Great Berlin Art Exhibition] in 1927, 1928 and 1929, she chose works such as *Markt in Lorenço Marques* [Market in Lorenço Marques], *Zulu-Frauen* [Zulu Women] and *Negermädchen mit Frucht* [Negro Girl with Fruit] in order to present her German audience with "exotic" subjects.[102]

Stern was certainly aware that it was not easy for women of her time to successfully establish themselves within Europe's art centres. In a letter of 14 May 1918, she thanks Pechstein for his support and for helping her manage the obstacles usually put in the way of women artists.[103] In one of her self-mythologisations, the article "How I Began to Paint" published in the *Cape Argus* in 1926, she writes that she considered it a great honour to have been invited by Pechstein to become one of the founding members of the *Novembergruppe* [November Group] – together with only one other female sculptor.[104] In this clever self-portrayal that was largely appropriated and reproduced by the press, she also describes the strong support given to her by Pechstein and thereby increased her credibility in Germany as well as in South Africa. Surprisingly, most exhibition reviews still portrayed her as an autonomous artist who was developing in an independent direction beyond Pechstein's range of influence.[105] This was especially unusual for women artists during a period in which they were typically accused of imitating their male colleagues and not being able to produce anything original.[106] It is likely that, in this case, Stern was an exception because she was able to set herself apart from even major European expressionists due to her symbolic capital as an "insider" who had grown up in Africa.

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100 For example, she is labelled an *",Afrikanerin'"* ['African'] in Alony, "Eine Malerin Afrikas." The inverted commas probably served to differentiate between the White settler Stern and Black African artists exhibiting in Europe at the time such as the "black Raphael" Kalifala Sidibé. On the latter see Yanagisawa, "La naissance du tableau en Afrique noire."

101 E.g. Stahl, "Ausstellungen."

102 Catalogues for all the exhibitions can be found in the archive of the Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen 1867 e. V., Archiv Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Unfortunately, the catalogues do not include reproductions of the exhibits and I was unable to find any further information on the three works mentioned above.

103 Stern, letter to Pechstein, 14 May 1918. Also see Below, ",...wird es mir eine Freude sein'."

104 Stern, "How I Began to Paint."

105 E.g. Stahl, "Zur Sache." B.E.W., "Die Malerin Irma Stern."

106 Also compare Flagmeier, "Camille Claudel."

This positioning was boosted by a monograph on Stern published in 1927 by the German art historian Max Osborn, who had already published a monograph on Pechstein in 1922.[107] The text on Stern appeared in the series *Junge Kunst* [Young Art] and followed an edition on Pablo Picasso.[108] It includes an extract from Stern's *Umgababa* travel journal and was probably developed in cooperation with Stern.[109] The fact that the monograph comprised an English translation of the German text (the Picasso book, for example, was only in German) shows that the publishers already had a South African audience in mind. Additionally, Osborn's monograph contributed to the exoticising of Stern as he writes with great exaggeration:

> With the exception of a few trips to Europe there was no time in which she did not find herself surrounded by dark peoples, by the woods, gardens and mountains, the nature which she tried to reproduce in her paintings and drawings. And this it is which has given her an individual position in the art world.[110]

It is not true that Stern only occasionally travelled to Europe; until her return to Cape Town in 1920 at the age of 25, she had spent about half her life in South Africa and half in Germany. Osborn must have been aware of this as he later refers to Stern's time at a school in Berlin.[111] This shows that Stern strategically used the support of influential men such as Pechstein, Wolfgang Gurlitt or Osborn to position herself as an expert on "primitive" cultures and a promising expressionist. In an article for *South African Life and Woman's Forum* of December 1933, Stern emphasises her transnational position right at the beginning when she writes:

> It was in Germany that I received my schooling, but half of the period was passed in journeying to and from South Africa. My travels left in my youthful mind deep impressions of the beauty of the scenery and the native life in Africa, and of the cultural values of Europe.[112]

She continues to list her successes in Germany such as her 1918 exhibition with Gurlitt – "one of the leading art galleries" – and following exhibitions "throughout the Continent" in cities such as "Chemnitz, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Hanover, Breslau, Vienna."[113] Stern also emphasises the support given to her by the European press. She concludes by saying that she had shown her best compositions of "native life" only in Europe "as 'native' studies were not very popular here [in South Africa] at that time."[114] This

107 Osborn, *Max Pechstein*.
108 Osborn, *Irma Stern*. Schürer, *Pablo Picasso*.
109 Osborn, *Irma Stern*, pp. 13–22.
110 Ibid., p. 24.
111 Ibid., pp. 25–26.
112 Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work."
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.

text clearly shows how Stern strategically positioned herself as an artist with great success in Europe in order to boost her career in South Africa. The following section of this chapter demonstrates how the press took up this narrative created by Stern and Osborn and how the South African newspapers did indeed draw on her reception in Germany.

3.2.3 Irma Stern in the German and South African press

Germany

The first important articles in the German press on Irma Stern were published in 1923, on occasion of her second solo exhibition at Salon Fritz Gurlitt in Potsdamer Straße, Berlin. One of those articles was written by the Jewish art critic, journalist and publicist Fritz Stahl, whose real name was Siegfried Lilienthal. Since it is exemplary for subsequent press reports, I am here giving a full translation of the review:

> The painter Irma Stern, who is showing a large exhibition at Gurlitt's, is a South African. She still underwent European schooling, possibly with Pechstein, whom she sometimes reminds us of. But in her works, form acquires a totally different character because, for her, the exotic is not a choice made to achieve certain artistic means, but experience: childhood experience. Blacks integrate into her pictorial form without losing the beautifully animalistic qualities of their movements that Europeans are never able to catch, but which they violate into a doll-like awkwardness through an artificial naiveté – the new convention. For her, they are not pictorial figures but creatures of a special kind that are intended to receive their full right to be human, even to have personalities. The difference in colour is hence of a similar magnitude. She sees hues where the European only sees one tone, she sees harmony where the European is attracted by foreign garishness. In short, form is completely filled with content, apparently the only right result of this content. Thereby any difficulty attached to preconceived form is ruled out.[115]

First of all, it is interesting that Stahl seems to have been unaware of the connection between Irma Stern and Max Pechstein but sees similarities in their paintings. Although a certain likeness does undoubtedly exist, there were many painters fascinated by non-European cultures working in expressionist modes in Berlin at the time and it is remarkable that Stahl specifically mentions Pechstein as a possible influence. It implies that Stahl considered it beneficial to name an accomplished male artist as a point of reference in order to legitimise Stern's aptitude to the reader. However, he straight away continues to assert the different character of their

115 Stahl, "Zur Sache." (My translation, original German on p. 270.)

works and Stern's superiority to any European artist depicting "primitive" peoples. He grounds this superiority on her instinctive rather than conscious approach that is rooted in childhood experiences as well as on her intuitive treatment of form and colour that excels a planned, intentional method. He considered this the only right way of depicting "exotic" subjects. The fact that Stahl appreciates Stern's supposed depiction of personalities in her portraits of Black South Africans reflects the contemporary primitivist interest in non-European peoples. In another review of 1924, Stahl again emphasises that the "exotic" that German artists romantically sought to find was a *Heimaterlebnis* [native experience] for Stern. He adds that her strong talent came through whenever she let feeling prevail and that she even exceeded Paul Gauguin in this respect.[116]

The Gurlitt exhibition of 1923 was also reviewed by Max Osborn in *Vossische Zeitung* [Voß's Newspaper] a week after Stahl. Osborn starts by stating that Stern was from South Africa but that her artistic home was in Berlin.[117] He hence immediately establishes the transnational relations that set the framework for most critiques of Stern's exhibitions. Osborn continues that Stern developed her strong "hands-on" talent as a student of Pechstein's but that she applied whatever she learnt from him to faraway Africa. He too, maintains that, what Pechstein had to search for in the darkness, Stern found right in front of her doorstep: an "exotic" world of strong colours and "primitive" peoples grown together with the soil. Osborn then attributes to Stern a womanly quality reminiscent of Paula Modersohn-Becker. Other authors, too, compared Stern to Modersohn-Becker.[118] In Osborn's case, it is not clear what sparked the comparison other than that both artists were women. It is possible that Osborn did so in adherence to Scheffler's dichotomy of masculine and feminine qualities. As mentioned before with reference to Erich Ranfft, these supposedly feminine qualities were often used to explain the special advantage of women expressionists when they were acting according to their alleged intrinsic femininity. Other themes emphasised by Osborn such as colour and nature also resonate with this idea.

Since Stahl and Osborn were both Jewish art journalists in Berlin and wrote about similar topics, it is likely that they knew each other. Unfortunately, it is not known how close they were or how much they appreciated each other. It is however interesting to see how similar their approach to Stern's work was and how instrumental they were in fostering her success in Germany and thereby also in South Africa. In an article on Stern published in the Jewish newspaper *The Reform Advocate* in 1929, Hilda Purwitsky translates the passage of Osborn's 1923 article concerning Pechstein as well as Stahl's 1924 article in almost full length.[119] By quoting Stahl, who raised Stern above Gauguin, and calling him "one of the severest and most dreaded of all German art critics," Purwitsky demonstrates Stern's standing in

116 Stahl, "Ausstellungen."
117 Osborn, "Bei Gurlitt."
118 E.g. Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 47. Below, "Irma Stern," p. 49.
119 Purwitsky, "South-African News-Letter."

Germany.[120] She further calls South African society ultra-conservative and outdated for not receiving Stern's modernism in the same way. Interestingly, in an article for the *Huisgenoot* [Housemate] published in 1931, AC Bouman also translates Stahl's 1924 article into Afrikaans.[121]

Josef Kalmer's 1926 article on Stern for the Jewish journal *Menorah*, too, presents Stern as an independently working artist benefitting from her supposedly feminine as well as non-European character traits such as emotionality and intuition. He claims that she was born in Cape Town and showed many similarities with Gauguin, "who had Peruvian ancestors" and therefore "hot blood in his veins."[122] Moreover, Kalmer contends:

> If one can speak about technique in her case at all, if one wants to remind of any role models from whom she might have learnt, because she did not know them, one might say that [...] her watercolours remind of Max Pechstein, who however only acquired his technique, his mannerism in the South Pacific, meaning that in this case, too, one can only speak of the influence of the milieu surrounding Irma Stern and not of the influence of a role model.[123]

In this rather ponderous statement, Kalmer recurs to the feminine stereotype that Stern's pictures did not show a lot of technique but attaches a positive assessment to this prejudice by simultaneously arguing that her style and/ or subject matter did not borrow from male artists' works but naturally emerged from her South African surroundings. He therefore bases his appraisal of her work on her immediacy and South African origin. Kalmer concludes his article by stating that Stern's exhibition with Fritz Gurlitt in Berlin and with Hugo Heller in Vienna made her well known in Central Europe.

In addition to her Gurlitt exhibition, in 1923, Stern also exhibited watercolours at Gerstenberger's cabinet for graphic arts. In a critique entitled "Aquarelle von Irma Stern" [Watercolours by Irma Stern], an unknown author again refers to her as a student of Pechstein's and considers her work not unskilled but also not exactly original.[124] The author assumes that the pieces, which were produced between 1920 and 1923, could not have been done onsite and therefore reflected an *Orient aus zweiter Hand* [second-hand orient] that was no new artistic achievement. They even call Stern's interest in "exotic" peoples and landscapes perverse. The critique clearly illustrates how Stern's work was likely to have been perceived without the knowledge that she was South African and had seen the people and places she painted first-hand.

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

121 Bouman, "Irma Stern."

122 Kalmer, "Die Malerin Irma Stern." (My translation, original German on p. 270.)

123 Ibid. (My translation, original German on p. 271.) Pechstein's sojourn on the Palau islands took place in 1914 prior to the outbreak of the First World War. It is unclear why Kalmer assumes that Stern could not have been familiar with his Palau paintings produced in 1917.

124 N.N., "Aquarelle von Irma Stern."

Without the advantage of being an "authentic African," the predominant perception would most likely have seen Stern as inferior to male artists of her time. Critics who were aware of Stern's background and not impressed by it were a clear minority. One rare example is the author of an article that appeared in the *Niederdeutsche Zeitung* [Low German Newspaper] in 1924: they describe the influence of Pechstein and Erich Heckel on Stern's work while pointing out that the men's work was clearly superior as the brush was apparently too heavy for Stern's tender hand.[125]

Texts promoting stereotypes as outdated as these, however, were certainly exceptions. There was a clear trend in the German press to portray Stern as superior to male artists such as Pechstein or Gauguin due to her "authentic" experience of growing up in South Africa and to her supposedly feminine approach that centred on feeling, empathy and natural intuition. Shortly before Hitler's rise to power that stopped public appreciation of primitivist modes of painting, in 1932, the author AY Alony for example emphasises that Stern had an advantage over Pechstein and Gauguin since she was an "African" herself.[126] In another article for *Vossische Zeitung,* reviewing Stern's exhibition at Galerie Gurlitt in 1927, Max Osborn again mentions Pechstein's and Gauguin's influence on Stern but plainly states that she had developed a completely new, personal expression departing from these influences. He further describes her as catching figures and faces of a race of mystical prehistoric times with gentle hands.[127] In his monograph on Stern of the same year, Osborn lists Stern's supposedly deep womanly sensibility and her unmediated devotion as her outstanding qualities.[128] In a review of the same Gurlitt exhibition published in *Frau und Gegenwart* in 1927, the unnamed author, too, stresses Stern's artistic independence from Pechstein, whose influence, they write, she had long outgrown.[129] As will be further explicated in the analysis of contemporary press on Maggie Laubser's works, issues of artistic independence and individuality were extremely important for women artists to gain credibility at the time. While Stern still had to refer to the approval of influential men such as Pechstein, Gurlitt or Osborn in order to clear the way for modernism to get established in South Africa, Laubser, whose career gained momentum after Stern had done the groundwork, always stressed that her art could not be attributed to any particular school or influence.

Stern ceased exhibiting in Germany during the reign of the National Socialists from 1933 until the 1950s when the galleries Gurlitt in Munich and Wasmuth in Berlin started exhibiting her work again. However, her reception in the press had changed: the interest in the South African settler artist had waned and her work was now considered derivative of German expressionists such as Pechstein. For example, the French-supported liberal newspaper *Der Kurier* [The Courier] published

125 N.N., "Kestner-Gesellschaft." It can be assumed that the author had never met Stern in person, who was probably about twice the size of Pechstein.
126 Alony, "Eine Malerin Afrikas."
127 Osborn, "Zwei Künstlerinnen."
128 Osborn, *Irma Stern*, pp. 11–12.
129 N.N., "Was eine Malerin in Afrika sah."

a review of her exhibition at the antiquarian bookshop Wasmuth in October 1956 which portrays her 1950s shows in Munich and Berlin as her very first presentations in Germany and falsely claims that she was a German artist forced to emigrate to Cape Town in 1933. The author concludes that "the typical expressionist yearning for lost origins, for the simple and pure life in creaturely [*kreatürlich*] innocence" had been "inculcated" in her by Pechstein.[130] Stern is presented as a "maverick" woman artist in the remote South Africa, whose outdated style imitated *Brücke* art.

South Africa

In South Africa, Stern's first exhibitions in Cape Town in the early twenties were largely received with incomprehension and even rejection. For example, the *Cape Times* published a review of her first exhibition in 1922 that expresses "frank disgust at the general nastiness of the work."[131] Three years later, the same author refers to Stern's work as "post-war art degeneracy" and "astigmatic distortions."[132] Still in 1933, an exhibition review in the *Sunday Times* was entitled "Agonies in Oil. Irma Stern's Chamber of Horrors. Crude Drawing. An Indian with Jaundice."[133] Sarah Sinisi points out that Stern's early exhibitions also received some positive reviews that are however frequently neglected by her biographers perpetuating "a somewhat romantic myth of an underappreciated artist."[134] I would argue that this is mainly due to the fact that Stern deliberately cultivated the image of herself as the misunderstood artist "genius" that was described in Chapter 2. In the article "My Critics" published in the *Cape Times* in 1930, she used the opportunity early in her South African career to shape the tale of herself as an avant-garde artist whose work was too advanced for her contemporaries.[135] Beginning with the destruction of work produced in her childhood by her small-minded father, she draws a line to the rejection of her "first picture" by her teacher Martin Brandenburg to the alleged closure of her first exhibition in Cape Town by three policemen and the general condemnation of her work by the South African press. At the same time, she writes, her paintings were celebrated and honoured by the European avant-garde.

Following more positive newspaper articles and other press reports on Stern and her exhibitions such as the 1929 article by Hilda Purwitsky mentioned above, the first South African book-length text on Stern was published by the Jewish writer Joseph Sachs in 1942.[136] According to Veronica-Sue Belling, Stern commissioned Sachs to write this monograph entitled *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*.[137] It is,

130 H.K., "Expressionismus aus Südafrika." (My translation, original German on p. 271.)
131 W.R.M., "An Exhibition of Modern Art."
132 W.R.M., "Modern Art in the City."
133 N.N., "Agonies in Oil."
134 Sinisi, *Irma Stern*, pp. 20–21. A similar argument is made by O'Toole, *Irma Stern*, p. 63.
135 Stern, "My Critics." Another example of this is Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work."
136 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*.
137 Belling, *Recovering the Lives*, p. 229. Sachs was also a collector of Stern's work. Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern*, p. 8.

however, unclear where Belling draws this information from. Since the book contains various passages of Stern's own writing, and paraphrases her article "How I Began to Paint" of 1926 in detail,[138] it is likely that Stern was at least involved in the process of its production, as she was in the development of Osborn's monograph to which she had also contributed a text. Sachs's book again adheres to stereotypes of intrinsic femininity and lays an emphasis on her South African soul, nature, colour and rhythm when describing her work. In the introduction, he calls her a "cultured artist with a primitive feeling for line and colour" in whose works the "spirit of Arica and that of Europe meet and mingle".[139]

Throughout his text, Sachs, too, resorts to the transnational links in Stern's upbringing and career in order to describe her singularity. For example, he starts his book with a chapter on South African art and a chapter on European modernism and thereby cleverly positions Stern in an art historical context spanning both continents. At the end of each chapter, he justifies Stern's uniqueness within each context and explains to the reader why Stern's art was so important on both continents. Following his description of art in South Africa, he writes that "South Africa is fortunate to be unburdened by academic tradition in art," but that "she lacks the confidence to create out of the fulness of her own life: instead she adopts the foreign moulds that are alien to her spirit."[140] He concludes that "an exception must be made in the case of Irma Stern" whose "work expresses the spirit of Africa as a whole."[141] Through this statement, he grounds Stern's role as a pioneer in South African modernism in her proximity to the "South African spirit" that so far no other artist had been able to capture. In short, he uses the same reasoning employed for Stern's success in Germany. Following his remarks on modern art in Europe that end with Gauguin, Sachs writes:

> Irma Stern did for South Africa what Gauguin has done for the South Seas, but she did not have to escape from her environment in order to reinforce her vitality by contact with primitive life, for she was born in the midst of the natives and felt the impact of Africa on her temperament before her art awoke.[142]

The similarities between Sachs's argument and preceding German critiques are obvious. Sachs then continues, as Purwitsky had done more than a decade earlier, with a translation of almost the entire 1923 article by Fritz Stahl, whom Sachs introduces as a "celebrated art-critic."[143] In addition to Stahl, Sachs also mentions other influential men who authorised Stern's artistic capabilities. He emphasises that Pechstein "foretold a great future to her, especially if she developed on her own lines without

138 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, pp. 29–34.
139 Ibid., p. 7.
140 Ibid., pp. 16–17.
141 Ibid., p. 17.
142 Ibid., p. 27.
143 Ibid., pp. 27–28.

allowing too much interference with her originality" and that he then "decided to further her career and brought her in contact with Herr Gurlitt, the proprietor of the most prominent art salon in Berlin, who, on examining her work, immediately arranged her first exhibition."[144] This narrative was certainly intended to impress a South African audience that was used to looking to Europe as the forerunner of artistic developments. As mentioned before, it was reproduced by most critics writing about Stern at the time.[145] Additionally, Sachs bases Stern's artistic distinction on supposedly feminine attributes such as intuition, sensitivity, emotionality, lack of intelligence and closeness to nature in line with Hildebrandt's characterisation of "womanly" art. In order to better understand this, it is worth quoting a very insightful passage of his text at length:

> Irma Stern's art is a natural exuberance that wells up from her being. This is her strength and also her weakness. It makes her art vital and spontaneous but lacking in intelligent discipline. […] Her work represents a great vital sensuousness and fertility but her originality is of an emotional rather than of an intellectual order. It is the product of a passionate temperament rather than of an unusual intelligence. Her development constitutes the growth of a natural force rather than the gradual mastery of intellectual and moral problems. It is true there is a deepening and softening expression as her work matures, but it is more akin to a ripening of physical nature than to a mellowing of the spirit. Yet her vitality extracts a living infinity from nature itself. The cry of earth is so forceful that it transcends what we are wont to regard as the purely physical. Her work, so overwhelming in its sensuousness, gives that stimulation which cannot work itself out on the sensuous plane. It stirs something more than a physical craving. It lights up nature herself in a spiritual incandescence: through sheer vitality still-lifes burst into flame and nature rises to a higher plane of being.[146]

As other critics before and after him, Sachs portrays Stern as an artist working from spontaneous, emotion-lead instinct rather than with deliberation. Irene Below has suggested that sketches housed at the Irma Stern Museum in Rosebank, Cape Town imply that this was probably not true, but that Stern carefully planned her compositions in advance. This circumstance certainly deserves further study that would however exceed the scope of my research project. Sachs's references to Stern's "fertility" and nature as woman ("nature herself") further illustrate the feminised description of her work. Terms referring to nature, body and physicality such as "wells up from her being," "deepening and softening expression," "ripening," "natural force," "living infinity,"

144 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, p. 34.

145 E.g. Gutsche, opening speech. Masson, "Irma Stern." Bean, "Only her Mother Would Buy." Barrow, "A Golden Jubilee." N.N., "Death of Irma Stern." Rozilda, "Irma Stern and her Legacy." Houghton, "Controversy Rages." Adams, "Irma Stern."

146 Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of South Africa*, pp. 36–37.

"sensuousness" and "vitality" exemplify the assumed intrinsicality of Stern's femininity.

His last sentence also shows that Sachs added ideas such as transcendence and spirituality to the usual description of Stern's approach. These issues are commonly discussed within analyses of expressionist art as is for instance demonstrated in Kristin Eichhorn and Johannes S Lorenzen's third volume of the journal *Expressionismus* [expressionism] on religion.[147] As will be further detailed below, spirituality or religion was an extremely important topic for Maggie Laubser. Later reviews of Stern's work recur to this issue as well. In an article entitled "Irma Stern Essays the Spiritual" of 1953, Matthys Bokhorst, president of the *South African Association of Arts* at the time[148] and later director of the National Gallery in Cape Town, writes that, in contrast to other artists such as Lippy Lipshitz, Maud Sumner or Pranas Domšaitis, who were prompted to depict Christian religious subjects by either the human aspect of the theme or personal creed, Stern's *Annunciation* (Fig. 48) was an "interpretation of the awe-inspiring thought for a woman to become the mother of God."[149] A little further along in the text, Bokhorst writes about another work of Stern's, *Herd-boy*: "when Irma Stern still concentrated on the expression of the animistic spirit of the Native, she could penetrate to such an extent into his attitude towards life that in her painting there was that unity between Nature and the human."[150] Bokhorst thus praises the coalescence of nature and spirituality in Stern's work, as becomes most obvious in his idealisation of the "native" as "animistic." Again, the use of a word such as "penetrate" emphasises physicality and, moreover, the sexualised and dominating context in which Black Africans were usually positioned. The harmonious unity between nature and human personified by the "native" in the South African landscape is also an important topos in contemporary interpretations of the work of Maggie Laubser.

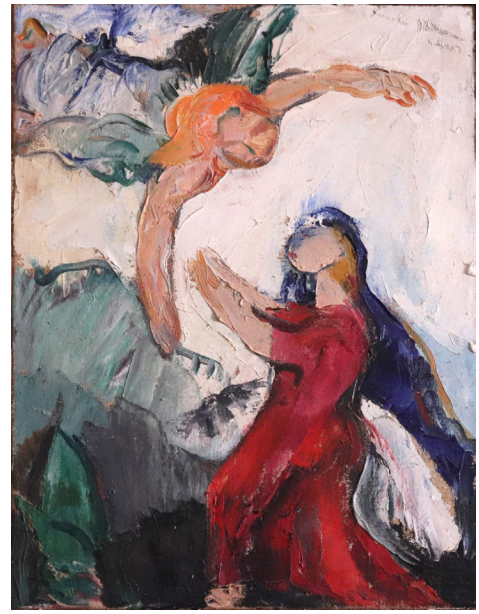

Fig. 48: Irma Stern, *Annunciation*, 1947, oil on canvas, 51 × 39 cm, Irma Stern Museum

147 Eichhorn & Lorenzen (eds.), *Expressionismus: Religion*.

148 The fact that Bokhorst, in his role as art critic for the *Cape Times*, wrote about the exhibition shown at an institution whose president he was illustrates the intricacy of the South African art scene.

149 Bokhorst, "Irma Stern Essays the Spiritual."

150 Ibid. (Bokhorst's original capitalisation of "Native" and "Nature.")

Additionally, in his analysis of Stern's *Annunciation*, Bokhorst foregrounds motherhood without any clear reason. Other than the fact that the painting was created by a woman, for whom caring for children was still considered one of the highest aims in life, as well as the fact that any annunciation per se addresses conception, nothing in the picture hints at a celebration of motherhood. It rather seems to portray the encounter of angel and woman, heaven and earth, spirit and body in mutual fertilisation. This is on the one hand indicated by the embrace offered by the angel to Mary which she returns and on the other by the diagonal division of the colours. Mary in her deep-red dress in front of a green, fertile landscape can be considered to represent physical life and groundedness in nature, while the angel dressed in light-blue floating in a white sky can be considered to represent spirit and transcendence. The colours could also be seen to refer to the different elements: the angel's flaming orange hair as fire and light-blue robe as wind, Mary's red dress as earth and flowing blue veil as water. These interpretations are certainly more obvious than Bokhorst's "awe-inspiring thought" of motherhood. The latter does, however, tie in with contemporary conceptions of womanhood surfacing in the reception of female artists such as Hildebrandt's treatment of Käthe Kollwitz described above.[151] It can also be considered part of a larger phenomenon in which art by women is usually interpreted with a focus on personal issues.

Recent criticism of Stern's work in South Africa

In 1988, Renate Flagmeier argues in an essay on the French sculptor Camille Claudel that it is striking how the perception of art made by women is governed by a certain "re-privatisation."[152] She argues that, in art historical texts, women artists are often called by their first names and their works are interpreted as personal statements of female individuals. This is certainly true for South African publications on Irma Stern or Maggie Laubser from 1970 onwards. For example, Maggie Laubser is constantly referred to by her first name in the monographs by Johann van Rooyen (1974), Dalene Marais (1994) or Muller Ballot (2016). Stern is called Irma in both of Neville Dubow's texts (1974 and 1991) as well as later essays by the author.[153] Interestingly, after the publication of Marion Arnold's monograph, authors started referring to Stern by her last name[154] while the newest publication on Maggie Laubser by Muller Ballot still uses her first name. This might have to do with the increasing recognition that Stern was an important professional artist pioneering modernism in South Africa while Laubser is still largely seen as a soft, gentle woman pursuing her highly individualistic art in the private realm of her farm. In general, none of the authors mentioned

151 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, pp. 116–117.

152 Flagmeier, "Camille Claudel," p. 36.

153 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*. Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*. Dubow, *Irma Stern*. Dubow, *Paradise.*

154 E.g. Wyman, "Irma Stern." Braude, "Beyond Black and White." Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*. Proud (ed.), *Brushing up on Stern*. Klopper (ed.), *Irma Stern.*

here interpret works by the two artists in any political way but closely base their interpretations on the women's biographies.

In her essay for *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert*, Reinhild Feldhaus argues that, whenever women artists were successful, their work was related to their lives in a way that only allowed for an interpretation of the works as illustrations of female biographies, beyond any larger historical framework.[155] Interestingly, right at the beginning of the entry on Cecil Higgs in Esmé Berman's standard work *Art and Artists of South Africa. An illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters & graphic artists since 1875*, Berman writes that "all biographical dates, other than those of formal [exhibitions] are speculative in the case of this reticent artist, who feels strongly that such matters are irrelevant to art."[156] This was a remarkable stance by one of the most important South African modernists and possibly intended at preventing the conflation of art and personality common in art critical texts on women artists such as Stern and Laubser. In her text on Stern for the 1959 government publication *Our Art*, Magda Sauer for example attributes Stern's expressionist style – manifested in a "rich and endless stream in a kind of frenzy of creation" – to her being an erratic woman which already showed in childhood:

> From her early years she wanted to be someone of note, but she could not make up her mind what – a violinist, a doctor, a painter. And from the beginning she showed the exceptional vitality and strong emotional reaction to everything about her which have remained so characteristic of her.[157]

In an interview with Irma Stern conducted a few years before her death, the Jewish author Bernard Sachs describes Stern as an obese, female Buddha.[158] He further explains that the interview ended when Stern's friend and supporter Freda Feldman came in, who complemented Stern on her hat while Stern complemented her on her dress: "I realised that this was no simple digression, so I stuck my pen in my pocket. […] I also learned quite a bit about scent and handkerchiefs that morning."[159] With these remarks, Sachs leaves the reader with the impression of two women – both important figures in the contemporary art world – discussing fashion accessories in a private manner. This is even more striking since the scene took place at Stern's

155 Feldhaus, "Geburt und Tod in Künstlerinnen-Viten," p. 73.

156 Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 142. Berman also states Higgs's year of birth as 1906 while it was really 1898.

157 Sauer, "Irma Stern," p. 103. Sauer generally dramatises Stern's career when she wrongly writes that she started studying art at the Levin Funke studio in Berlin at the age of 16, then attended classes at the fine art academy in Weimar and finally moved on to the Bauhaus, "then the leading centre of Expressionist Art in Germany, with a remarkable galaxy of teachers" (p.103). She also repeats the myth of the overall rejection of Stern's "Chamber of Horrors."

158 Sachs, "Irma Stern."

159 Ibid.

exhibition at the Adler Fielding Galleries, i.e., in a professional context and not in her private home. Sachs's privatisation of Stern hence seems forced rather than a logical consequence of the nature of his encounter with the artist. In 1966, Betty Lunn concludes her short obituary for Stern with the following remarks: "Her private life was not always smooth, although from birth she was relatively wealthy. She was married to a professor, whom she divorced in 1934, and she never re-married."[160] It does not need to be emphasised that information such as this would have never been given in an obituary for a male artist, especially since the marriage was relatively short-lived and had no impact on Stern's artistic career.

These two aspects, Stern's weight and her supposedly unfulfilled love life have remained amongst the main points for interpretations of her work in South Africa. In his publications *Irma Stern* of 1974 and *Paradise. The Journal and Letters (1917–1933) of Irma Stern* of 1991, the first director of the Irma Stern Museum, Neville Dubow, interprets Stern's work as depictions of beautiful women in whom Stern sought her own self: "Here she could escape from her ungainly body. Here, metaphorically, she could be naked amongst a host of graceful strangers."[161] His monograph *Paradise* even features a chapter entitled "Irma Stern in Love" in which he cites passages from Stern's letters to her German friend Trude Bosse that, Dubow argues, recurred to the *Leitmotif* of "unhappiness, loneliness, lack of love and loss of love."[162] The most comprehensive discussion of Stern's work, a monograph by Marion Arnold of 1995, argues in a similar way:

> Although Stern was separated by race from the culture of her models, she was united by gender. In portraying female sexuality, albeit in the guise of the other, she was conscious of her own femininity. Herself large and relatively unattractive, she painted many studies of the woman she would like to have been, projecting her internal self-image onto her models.[163]

She justifies this psychobiographical interpretation by arguing that Stern's "personality, life and art cannot easily be separated. Her life informed her art and the pivotal role art played in her life informed her responses to people and places."[164] In line with Hildebrandt's characterisation of women artists as childlike, emotional and intuitive, Arnold describes Stern's "emotional temperament" when she "translated observation and feeling into images, expressing herself impulsively in vigorously executed drawings."[165] She further explains that Stern was "emotionally immature, […] moody and querulous, but capable of impulsive generosity […] with a childlike sense of

160 Lunn, "Irma Stern."
161 Dubow, *Paradise*, p. 104. Also see Dubow, *Irma Stern*.
162 Dubow, *Paradise*, p. 89. For criticism of Dubow's approach for example refer to Below, "Afrika und Europa," pp. 124–125. Braude, "Beyond Black and White," pp. 45–48.
163 Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 71.
164 Ibid., p. 150.
165 Ibid., p. 11.

adventure."[166] A review of Arnold's book by Anthea Bristowe published in the *Sunday Times* in October 1995 indicates that this interpretation was accepted and shared by the South African public. Because it is quite revealing, I will quote the review at length:

> Stern was passionate, quarrelsome, snobbish, insecure but always superbly talented. And she never gave up her work. Maggie Laubser retired to the platteland to paint ducks, Maude Sumner denied her sexuality and sought refuge in Catholicism. Stern was audacious, her sexuality simmered through her work – images of beautiful women, darkly turbaned men and great slices of watermelon leap from her canvases. But as her critics are quick to point out, she was so singularly unattractive her love affairs were mostly imaginary. At the age of 32 she married a dreary creature called Johannes Prins [sic]. Cold and remote, Prins probably never consummated the marriage. Instead he collected pornography which he sent off to Germany. After seven years Stern divorced him. In 1934 it was a courageous decision although Prins continued to lodge at her Cape Town house. He was, however, denied the use of the chauffeur and had to pay for his own lunch.[167]

The text exemplifies the contrast between Stern and Laubser that is a common theme in the discussion of South African modernism: Laubser is usually described as the soft, gentle, harmony-seeking farmwoman while Stern is portrayed as the furious pioneer of South African modernism.[168] In a typical privatisation of the two women artists, Johann van Rooyen, for example, writes:

> Irma's international and worldly background and the heroic mould of her character had ensured the natural development of an exuberant and dominating personality. Maggie, on the other hand, was retiring, ever conscious of her simple roots as daughter of a farming community, unsophisticated and even puritanical.[169]

The idea of Stern as a strong *Neue Frau* is enforced in Bristow's reference to Stern's courageous decision to divorce Prinz and her business-like handling of her ex-husband after their divorce. The exaggerated sexualisation of Stern and her subjects but also of the artist Maude Sumner and Johannes Prinz illustrates the context in which women's art was received in South Africa at the time.

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166 Arnold, *Irma Stern*, p. 12.

167 Bristowe, "Towering Over the Wimps of the World."

168 The contrasting portrayal of the two women artists had started in the mid-1940s when for example Jeanne Hugo described Laubser as "caught in the eternal spell of this sleeping earth" and Stern as "an extrovert in form and colour and composition." Hugo, "Painting in South Africa," p. 45. Also see Anderson, *Fact Paper 19*, p. 17. Harmsen, "Art in South Africa."

169 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 17.

This focus is still reproduced in more recent interpretations. For example, in late 1999, Marilyn Wyman writes in a supposedly feminist treatise of Stern's work (Arnold, too, considers her approach feminist) that "Stern's gaze is not a feminist one sympathetic to her subjects" but that "she stands in a position of power that places her in a surrogate male role" – a behaviour that Wyman roots in Stern's insecurity caused by her unattractive outer appearance.[170] She concludes that "the idealized, even eroticized, African women that Stem painted early in her career may have become surrogates for her own desires for physical beauty."[171] In 2012, the former director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Clive Kellner, finished his MA dissertation on Irma Stern's Black subjects. He argues that "Stern's identity is that of her 'subjectivity' as formed through her gender, class and race but also contained in the various traumas she experienced in childhood and throughout her life."[172] For him, Stern's depictions of Blacks were her way of dealing with her dislocated, instable identity in creating "fixed" stereotypes.[173] Kellner's discussion in general is an insightful analysis of the primitivist tendencies inherent in Stern's work as was discussed in Chapter 1, but he still bases these on psychobiographical issues that relate to the artist's life (childhood and other traumata) rather than her artistic agenda or her position as strategically and transnationally operating professional artist. Clear deviations from these privatising accounts are publications by Irene Below, LaNitra Michele Berger and Sean O'Toole that attempt to place Stern in art historical, social and political contexts but interestingly were published outside of South Africa.[174]

3.3 Maggie Laubser and the ideology of *voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder*

3.3.1 Maggie Laubser sets the parameters for the reception of her work

Like Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, too, made a substantial contribution to the parameters that determined the reception of her own work, even though this has so far not been examined. I would like to argue that Laubser herself introduced a lot of the themes which played an important role for how her works were to be analysed. The most important ones were proximity to nature, simplicity and authenticity as well as childhood experiences. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 2, those topics were at the core of the reception of settler primitivism in South Africa more generally. I will

170 Wyman, "Irma Stern," p. 21. In her PhD dissertation, LaNitra Michele Berger (née Walker) offers an interesting and convincing analysis of the feminist potential and failure of Stern's work: Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy*, pp. 69–127.

171 Wyman, "Irma Stern," p. 21.

172 Kellner, *Representations of the Black Subject*, p. 83.

173 Ibid.

174 E.g. Below, "Afrika und Europa." Berger, *Irma Stern*. O'Toole, *Irma Stern*. O'Toole is a South-African author but his book was published by Prestel in Germany.

show in the following discussion how Laubser was able to link them in a Christianly informed self-narrative and thus establish herself at the forefront of South African settler primitivism.

Laubser, like Stern, was attracted to German expressionism during her time in Berlin from 1922 to 1924 and formed a friendship with *Brücke* artist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff that exceeded her sojourn in Germany. A letter from Schmidt-Rottluff to Laubser of 21 January 1931, for example, shows that she sent him photos of her works long after her return to Cape Town. Schmidt-Rottluff then critically judged her progress.[175] In contrast to Stern, however, Laubser subsequently disputed any influence by Schmidt-Rottluff or any other artist as her autonomy was especially important to her.[176] This ties in with Kris and Kurz's myth of the artist "genius" that has no teacher but only learns from nature discussed in Chapter 2.[177] In August 1939, *Die Huisgenoot* published an article by Laubser in which she describes the motivation and nature of her art. She emphasises throughout the text that her art emerged from her feelings and subjective impressions rather than any outside influence:

> I did not learn to paint objects, nor a model, nor to have a solid technique. […] I must be free to paint. […] Nobody can paint according to established rules; it has to be a pleasure from the heart, a personal awakening […] If an artist is honest and sincere to himself, he paints as he feels. […] It is the desire to be simple.[178]

These statements imply that Laubser did not even think that art could or should be taught but rather emerged from the artist's being.[179] In *Our Art*, FEJ Malherbe for instance takes up this thought and praises her "inner vision."[180] In an undated manuscript entitled "What I Remember," Laubser describes that she "began to be interested in modern painting, […] above all the German 'Brücke'," and that even though "the Expressionist art seemed to be exactly what [she] had been looking for," her "approach to art has nearly always remained the same."[181] In this declaration, Laubser again emphasises her independence from any preconceived styles or schools as well as the timelessness of her approach. The latter idea still influenced an obituary for the artist written by Elza Miles in 1973: "The work of Maggie Laubser is from

175 Schmidt-Rottluff, letter to Laubser, 21 January 1931.

176 Compare Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 13. Elizabeth Delmont, too, stresses: "Her striving for freedom and individuality, first noted by her reaction to painting at the Slade, continued in Germany. It was probably due to this conscious emphasis on independence that, in her curriculum vitae, she crossed out the references to Schmidt-Rotluff's [sic] help." Delmont, *Catalogue Raisonnée*, p. 129.

177 Kris & Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, p. 39.

178 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.)

179 Also compare Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 13. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 18.

180 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.

181 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 4.

yesterday, today and tomorrow."[182] This statement provokes a comparison with the supposedly timeless art of the San and can hence be seen as an attempt of indigenising the White settler Laubser. In June 1946, *Die Vaderland* [The Fatherland] published Willem de Sanderes Hendrikz's speech opening an exhibition of Laubser's paintings produced in the Orange Free State and Transvaal Provinces at the Constantia Gallery. In this speech, Hendrikz calls Laubser "essentially indigenous" and "a South African who expresses her feelings about her country in a way that is essentially her own."[183] Hendrikz's speech illustrates how notions of indigeneity and the untaught artist "genius" were merged in the reception of Laubser's work.

Moreover, Laubser's supposed immediacy and authenticity, emerging from her reliance on her own perception rather than on teachers, were appropriated by the Afrikaans-speaking newspapers in their project of describing the specifically Afrikaans character of her work. P Enseel, a pseudonym used by Martin du Toit, who three years later would become head of the Department of Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria, in an article for *Die Vaderland* of 1928 calls Laubser a "pioneer" who painted what she felt with her soul.[184] This was probably one of the earliest public reviews of Laubser's works. Du Toit was a very prominent and influential figure in promoting modernist artists in Afrikaner societies. He, for example, organised an exhibition on occasion of the founding of the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* [Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations] in Bloemfontein in December 1929 in which he showed works by Maggie Laubser, JH Pierneef, Anton van Wouw, Gerard Moerdyk and Gordon Leith.[185] His early support of Laubser was crucial for Afrikaners' perception of her works. For example, in a review of Du Toit's 1929 exhibition in Bloemfontein, a *Vaderland* journalist describes Laubser's style as "of the utmost simplicity" and revealing "a sober art, free from all silly sentimentality."[186] This description ties in with the image of the steadfast Afrikaner (as opposed to the Jewish bohemian) artist that was presented earlier.

It is probably in this context that one has to view Zilla M Silva's 1936 categorisation of Laubser as "the first of our proletariat artists."[187] She was essentially received as a down-to-earth *boerevrou* [farmwoman] who "has made a study of the coloured man against the background of his everyday surroundings."[188] Valeska Doll has shown how the French painter Suzanne Valadon's proletarian childhood had caused her the attribution of a *Volkstümlichkeit* [popularity] that in a primitivist context was equated with originality and honesty, and that let her rise into the male avant-garde.[189] A similar investigation with regard to Laubser has not been conducted yet.

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182 Miles, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.)
183 Hendrikz, "Mense." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.)
184 Enseel, "Tentoonstelling van skilderye."
185 Van Eeden, "Collecting South African Art," p. 171.
186 N.N., "Kunstentoonstelling te Bloemfontein." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 271.) It is not unlikely that Du Toit wrote this review himself as he often did so.
187 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."
188 Ibid.
189 Doll, *Suzanne Valadon*, p. 39–43.

However, this discussion illustrates the significance of her proclaimed simplicity and authenticity for contemporary Afrikaners. Consequently, the president of the *South African Association of Arts*, Matthys Bokhorst, in a review of an exhibition organised by his own institution in May 1954, describes Laubser as somebody who had "indeed influenced art in South Africa" and whose work had been "an eye-opener" for many Afrikaners.[190] Interestingly, in a 1960 text for the German publication *Museion*, Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, too, describes Laubser as an "extraordinary representative" of "Afrikaner aspirations."[191] Moreover, he casts her as an "upright, soft, friendly, mature woman who senses strongly and simply what is happening around her" – in contrast to Stern, whom he portrays as "a woman of great vitality […] expressing all of life's inner intensity in colours and large, moving forms."[192] He calls both artists "true children of the land/ nation."[193]

Additionally, Laubser's proximity to Christian values let her be considered an artist with a strong Afrikaans identity. Various exhibition reviews emphasise her humility or closeness to earth and nature as well as her naïve but sincere approach.[194] FEJ Malherbe even speaks of her intense "communion with nature."[195] These terms imply a Christian context in which her works were being viewed. Laubser was interested in Christian Science as is clearly demonstrated by the number of annotated *Christian Science Journal* issues (dating from 1942 to 1964) as well as other Christian journals (e.g. *Crusader*, *Daily Blessing*, *Daily Bread*, *Religious Science*, *Science of Thought Review*, in total about 100 items) that she owned.[196] In "Waroom en Hoe Ek Skilder" [Why and How I Paint] from 1939, Laubser describes how her Christian beliefs rendered the basis for her art:

> When I look at the wonderful creation that constantly speaks to me through the harmony of colours and shapes, the wonderful combination of unity and eternity fills me with a great longing and urge to express what I experience and so to praise and worship my Creator.[197]

She clearly describes how the divine origin of the South African landscape surrounding her was manifested in her paintings. In line with the myth of the "genius" artist

190 Bokhorst, "The Inspiration of Maggie Laubser."
191 Von Moltke, "Zwei südafrikanische Expressionisten," p. 263. (My translation, original German on p. 271.) Von Moltke was a lecturer in art history at the Michaelis School of Art and in 1962 became the founding director of Kunsthalle Bielefeld – a position in which he acquired two works of Stern's for the art gallery's collection. I could not find any further evidence of a reception of Laubser's work in Germany.
192 Ibid., pp. 263–264. (My translation, original German on p. 271.)
193 Ibid., p. 263. (My translation, original German on p. 272.)
194 E.g. Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud." Bokhorst, "The Inspiration of Maggie Laubser." N.N., "Tribute to Cape Artist."
195 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
196 Held at SU Ms 79/1/19–118.
197 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."

inspired by nature, she also sees this divineness as a reason for not following a particular school or teacher and declares that, instead of looking back to old masters, she looked at "the creation around us to create."[198] However, Laubser still seems to have endeavoured to place her work within an art historical context, likening her approach to that of Vincent van Gogh. In an undated manuscript with a similar focus as "Waroom en Hoe Ek Skilder," entitled "On Art," she describes her adoration of the Dutch painter. She places "his work above his contemporaries, Monet, Manet, Renoir, Degas, Whistler" as he was "conscious of God, therefore his ideals were higher, and had more vitality."[199] In another text, the manuscript for a radio speech giving an account of "her country," Laubser links her divine inspiration to the specificity of the South African land and exclaims:

> Sometimes my friends in Europe asked me whether I did not want to return to the South African sun, and every time my answer was no – no, not to the South African sun, but to the spaces of the South African landscape! This love for the spaces gives me a sense of freedom and liberty […] All these wonders of creation make me aware of the endlessness of everything.[200]

She thus designs a Christianly informed self-narrative that embraces artistic independence ranking nature over art schools, characteristics such as simplicity and authenticity rooted in common Afrikaner self-conceptions and the divinity of the specific South African landscape. The fourth topic shaping this narrative are references to childhood. For example, in "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder," Laubser recounts common reactions to her paintings of cats und ducks. She repeats the following conversation held during an exhibition in Cape Town: "Someone asked me […] 'Why do you paint ducks? That's only suitable for a child's room…' My answer was: 'Then I will always be a child. Because I love ducks, I must paint them.'"[201] In general, references to childhood or childlike ways of seeing and painting were important concepts in Laubser's self-portrayal. In texts such as "What I Remember," she consciously roots her art in childhood experiences. For example, she writes:

> I have always thought it a great privilege to be born on a farm. From earliest infancy the child accustoms his eye to wide spaces and deep horizons. Unconsciously within himself he develops a sense of security and possession, both already innate in every child. I was one of those fortunate children, who are awakened every morning by the different sounds of nature, and who could watch the animals come home every night to their kraal; and they are among my earliest recollections and with joy I shall always

198 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
199 Laubser, "On Art," p. 4.
200 Laubser, "Dit is mei kontrei," p. 5. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)
201 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

> remember them, for these farm memories have formed the basis upon which I later built up all the visions which constitute my art.[202]

She continues to list the things she saw around her parents' farm – such as cacti, waterlilies, cows, geese, ducklings and Coloured women carrying babies on their backs – that she would later depict in her paintings. Esmé Berman takes up this narrative when she writes in *The Story of South African Painting* that "an overwhelming love of nature and a sincere affection for the Coloured peasants with whom she had shared her childhood escapades conditioned her subsequent choice of subjectmatter and gave spiritual depth to her unusual compositions."[203] In "Waroom en Hoe Ek Skilder," too, Laubser professes that she only painted what she saw every day on the farm that she loved living on: workers, animals, geese and ducks.[204] In line with her appreciation of Van Gogh and her art historical self-entrenchment in "On Art," Laubser also explains that she admired the work of Henri Matisse as it "is very simple, and he is often compared to a child. His reply to that is, 'It is just that vision of a child which I am trying to get in my work.'"[205] By citing Matisse's response, Laubser implies that she shared his appreciation of childish vision. As mentioned before, the supposed similarity between women and children was a dominant topos in *Neue Frau* as well as modernist discourses at the time[206] and proved beneficial to women settler primitivists' careers in the early 20th century.

3.3.2 *Voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder*: Afrikaner variations of the *Neue Frau*

When positioning Maggie Laubser within the discourse on the *Neue Frau* in South Africa, it is fruitful to consult the *voortrekkervrou* and *volksmoeder* ideologies that offer more specific role models for Afrikaner women in the early 20th century. While the *voortrekkervrou* was an idealisation of Afrikaner women standing by their men's side in the brave and courageous project of finding new land unoccupied by British colonisers and fighting its indigenous inhabitants, the *volksmoeder* icon was strategically employed by Afrikaner suffragists in their fight for enfranchisement.[207] The *volksmoeder* was thereby stylised as the transferation of the *voortrekkervrou* into modern, post-trek times.

The image of the *voortrekkervrou* gained momentum in the Afrikaner nationalist project in the immediate aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War. In *Fields of Vision. Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, Stephen

202 Laubser, "What I remember."
203 Berman, *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 59.
204 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."
205 Laubser, "On Art," pp. 4–5.
206 Also compare Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, p. 47.
207 E.g. Vincent, "A Cake of Soap."

Daniels writes that "imperial nationalists, almost by definition, have been intent to annex the home-lands of others in their identity myths."[208] In Afrikaner nationalism, this relates especially to the *voortrekker* [pioneer] myth, i.e., to the hardships endured during the progressive eastward movement and cultivation of "hostile" land in the first half of the 19th century.[209] The fact that this land was usually inhabited by other peoples – Black Bantu-speaking farmers as well as hunter-gatherers such as the San – does not form part of this identity myth. In the process of appropriating allegedly unclaimed land, the *voortrekker* woman was usually awarded with a "determined courage" in clearing the way "shoulder to shoulder with her husband" and generally embodied a mixture of heroism and homeliness.[210] In his monograph on Maggie Laubser of 1944, the Afrikaner artist Johannes Meintjes writes that "it is alleged that the joint struggle for self-preservation of men and women during the Great Trek contributed greatly to the independence of South Africa's wife."[211] Louise Vincent describes contemporary perceptions of *voortrekker* women as "tough and self-reliant, they had done everything for themselves, from housekeeping to dressmaking and their singularity was demonstrated in even the most mundane of their chores."[212] This shows that the *voortrekkervrou* was considered an important partner to her husband in the Afrikaner nationalist project even though her qualities in the end remained in the domestic realm and conformed to traditional ideas of intrinsic femininity.

As part of the nation-building process of the Union of South Africa, the *volksmoeder* ideology emerged as a continuation of the *voortrekkervrou*. In a contemporary article by Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen on a talk on women's franchise in Cape Town's Labour Hall, the authors cite the speaker, a Mrs Walsh, who explained how "the same force which made a woman a good mother in her home, made her a good worker for the State" and that "the great mother-spirit was a vital factor in a nation – it sought invariably to do what was best not only for the children, but for all the children of the State."[213] Supporting female stereotypes, the *volksmoeder* ideal thus recurred to traditional domestic ideas of family and motherhood and transferred them to the greater project of nourishing and fostering the Afrikaner nation. Elsabé Brink describes the *volksmoeder* as demonstrating traditional "feminine" virtues such as kindness, gentleness, care, frugality and discipline combined with a "sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness (*huismoederlikheid*), nurturance of talents, integrity, virtue and [...] nurturing of the volk."[214]

She bases this description on the 1918 publication *Die Boervrouw, Moeder van Haar Volk* [The Boer Woman, Mother of her People] by the Afrikaner nationalist and Free State journalist Willem Postma that was commissioned by the *Nasionale*

208 Daniels, *Fields of Vision*, p. 5.
209 Compare Coetzee, *Pierneef, Land and Landscape*, pp. 23–24.
210 Contemporary press quoted in Du Toit, "Framing Volksmoeders," p. 60.
211 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)
212 Vincent, "A Cake of Soap," p. 11.
213 Rozilda, "Freedom Brings Responsibility."
214 Brink, "Man-made," pp. 274, 280.

Helpmekaar Vereniging [National Helping Hand Society] and the *Kultuurvereniging van die Reddingsdaadbond* [Cultural Society of the Bond of Heroism] and propagated the *volksmoeder* as an ideal for a young generation of women.[215] Even though the image of the *volksmoeder* had been established before Postma's publication, *Die Boervrouw* officially articulated this glorification of Afrikaner women as a new role model for Afrikaner girls.[216] Lou-Marié Kruger shows how, in 1919, Mabel Malherbe built onto Postma's endeavour when founding the first Afrikaans women's magazine, *Die Boerevrou*, which was made by women for women.[217] Kruger reads Malherbe's editorial to the first edition "as a call to Afrikaans women to participate in thinking about or negotiating the notion or identity of the *boerevrou* […] within the parameters of the *volksmoeder* discourse."[218] This illustrates how, like the *Neue Frau*, the *volksmoeder* ideology was created and propagated by male and female authors as well as on an institutional level.

3.3.3 Reception of Maggie Laubser as *Neue Frau* and *volksmoeder*

As described above, the defining virtues of the *volksmoeder* were kindness, gentleness, modesty, discipline, housewifeliness, sense of religion, self-sacrifice, bravery, love of freedom and self-reliance. The latter characteristics were clearly informed by the image of an ideal *voortrekkervrou*. Qualities such as these were often described in reviews concerning Laubser's work as well as her personality. In 1945, Gideon Malherbe published a critique in *Die Vaderland*, in which he declares that Laubser's "life story reads like that of some mediaeval martyr. Despite the most prejudiced, bitter and thoughtless opposition, she has ultimately achieved due recognition of her remarkable talent."[219] Malherbe's description of Laubser's virtually religious self-sacrifice on her journey evoking images related to the Great Trek links the myth of the misunderstood artist "genius" to that of the *voortrekkervrou*. This idea is clearly articulated further down in Malherbe's text. With reference to her achievement of introducing modernist styles of painting into the narrow-minded South African art scene, he adds:

> In Maggie Laubser, the Afrikanerdom may find another artist who can represent them with distinction abroad. […] That it may be done by a woman will not seem a coincidence to us if we consider the history of our people. […] As the voortrekkervroue have often taken the lead, she puts us to shame with her fearless guidance.[220]

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215 Postma, *Die Boervrouw*.
216 Compare Brink, "Man-made," p. 280.
217 Kruger, "Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie*."
218 Ibid., p. 221.
219 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)
220 Ibid.

Laubser was never married and did not have children which, at first sight, seems contradictory to this image of her leading the family to a new and safer home. The analogy becomes clearer, though, when considering the *voortrekkervrou* as *volksmoeder* taking on important duties within the nation. Motherhood is transferred from the nuclear family to a greater responsibility for the Afrikaner people. In the first monograph on Laubser of 1944, Johannes Meintjes writes that Laubser was facing the difficulty of being a woman as it was tough fulfilling the duties of a mother while also being a great artist who needed to live an unrestricted life in order to practice her art.[221] This seemingly controversial remark shows how the nationalist role as mothers of a (very distinct) people could also free women artists from conventional expectations of caring for actual children. Meintjes continues that "it is interesting that there is not a single good woman artist in South Africa who is married in the true sense of the word."[222] It is unclear what he means by "true sense of the word," but it is possible that many South African women artists chose to remain unmarried in order to stay legally independent.[223] Until the introduction of the Matrimonial Affairs Act in 1953, the husband was the sole administrator of the married couple's property and income. For any professional woman, this meant that she was not allowed to make any independent decisions about her material assets.

A concept that is significant for both the *Neue Frau* and the *volksmoeder* discourses is that of harmony. This is probably the word most frequently used for describing the specific quality of Laubser's art. As one of the writers introducing this theme, Martin du Toit writes in 1928 that "Laubser's composition of landscape and figure is of a special quality, as is her colour harmony."[224] Two years later, the Stellenbosch-based art critic and scholar AC Bouman adds that the harmony of Laubser's colours "is an individual possession" und thus links it to the individuality of her art.[225] Like this much-quoted individuality, Laubser herself, too, in "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder" emphasises the importance of harmony in her perception and describes how she saw in it the work of a heavenly creator prompting her artmaking.[226] As cited above, Denis Godfrey describes Laubser's works as characterised by "fey, delicious slabs of colour and dream scenes" and evokes connotations of transcendence in her colour harmonies.[227] Nap de Bruyn refers to the "great emotional experience, [...] the sudden awakening, which may be described as *invoeling* [empathy]" in Laubser's harmonic colours.[228] To him, it caused emotional redemption and salvation.

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221 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 44.

222 Ibid., p. 44. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

223 Laubser, for example, early in her career, denied her benefactor and friend J.H.A. Balwé's proposal to marry him because she considered her art more important. She stuck to this conviction throughout her life. Compare Marais, *Maggie Laubser*, pp. 26–27.

224 Enseel, "Tentoonstelling van skilderye." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

225 Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

226 Laubser, "Waarom en Hoe Ek Skilder."

227 Godfrey, "Collector's Notebook."

228 De Bruyn, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 272.)

This shows again how closely interpretations of Laubser's works were often linked with Christian or mystic themes.

Meintjes, on the other hand, employs Laubser's colour harmonies in order to compare her to Paula Modersohn-Becker. As mentioned above, Modersohn-Becker as well as Käthe Kollwitz were regularly instanced to position Stern and Laubser on an international level. Meintjes writes that Paula Modersohn-Becker's "work shows more than superficial similarities to Maggie Laubser's. She has the same great colour sensitivity, simplicity, intimacy, loving approach and soft mood."[229] Interestingly, for Modersohn-Becker, too, motherhood has played an important role in her reception even though she never raised children.[230] He continues with reference to Käthe Kollwitz: "Like Maggie Laubser, she brings along the greatest sympathy for the workers and shows them in an affecting way."[231] He thus also refers to characteristics such as kindness and care that are amongst the list of *volksmoeder* traits. AC Verloren van Themaat in 1931 writes that Laubser "paints nature as she sees it around herself; the children, the women, the old shepherd, the landscape, the flowers. But she weaves in her own soul, her love for human kind [sic]."[232] Her simplicity and modesty were also praised by writers such as Hendrikz, Ballot and other authors writing for different English and Afrikaans newspapers.[233]

As described in detail above, another *volksmoeder* trait that was prominently discussed by Laubser herself as well as by the contemporary press was her individuality or alleged freedom from any schools or styles. In her essay "Biographie und Geschlechterdifferenz" [Biographies and Gender Gaps], the German art historian Beate Reese argues that, in women artists' biographies, women's individual fate is usually recounted as the gradual unfolding of a personality that independently cuts her way through a male-dominated environment owing to her feminist virtues.[234] Even though this is very subtle in Laubser's case, who was not compared to male artists to the extent that Stern was and who did not engage in any gender discourse, Laubser clearly positioned herself as an independent artist with an individual expression. In "What I remember," she explains that, when she was younger, painting was not thought an appropriate profession for a woman and that she had to struggle to overcome this restriction.[235] This narrative of Laubser's journey from her parents' farm first to Cape Town, then back to the farm, to Europe, back to the farm again and then, finally, into her life as an independent and successful artist is retold in the

229 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
230 E.g. Feldhaus, "Die (Re-)Produktion des Weiblichen."
231 Meintjes, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 43. (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
232 Verloren van Themaat, "Een Middag."
233 N.N., "Maggie Laubser hou geslaagde uitstalling." Hendrikz, "Mense." N.N., "Maggie Laubser Exhibition." N.N., "Simple Art of Maggie Laubser." Head, "She Never Lost Her Sense of Wonder." Winder, "laid to rest." Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*, pp. 110, 153.
234 Reese, "Biographie und Geschlechterdifferenz," p. 177.
235 Laubser, "What I remember," p. 4. Laubser's aversion to convention is also quoted in Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."

biographies by Van Rooyen, Marais and Ballot.[236] Again, it ties in with Kris and Kurz's rendition of the artist myth in which "the youthful talent asserts himself against the difficulties that his choice of profession faces by his immediate surroundings."[237] In *Our Art*, FEJ Malherbe links Laubser's perseverance with character traits of the ideal *voortrekkervrou*:

> Maggie Laubser is fortunate in that her poetic vision has remained constant through the years of disparagement and derision yielding place to acceptance by a circle of admirers, and finally, public acknowledgement and praise. It is because the artist herself has remained constant in her innocence and simplicity.[238]

Laubser's claim to individuality, too, was enforced by the contemporary press. For example, in an article entitled "Expressionistic," the unknown author writes that Laubser "is an artist who thinks for herself and who does not merely copy the ideas of others."[239] They add that "for this reason the public often finds it [her work] difficult to understand, for it is completely different from the work of any other artist."[240] Deane Anderson refers to Laubser's extremely individual "personal idiom" and consistent "individual expression" and an author whose name abbreviates to CS describes her work as "a personal statement," "delightful world of fantasy," "seemingly naïve abstraction" and of a "strong indigenous South African quality which marks this artist, historically with Pierneef, as the most important contributor to the development of South African art as we now see it."[241] Significantly, both artists – Pierneef and Laubser – were Afrikaners. FEF Malherbe, in *Our Art*, establishes a similar link between indigeneity and Afrikaner culture when he writes:

> Laubser has interpreted the South African scene for us in a new manner. It stands to her great credit that she has applied a foreign style here in a purely Afrikaans spirit and in such a way that her work is part of the purest indigenous and most original art we have.[242]

The description of Laubser as naïve and childlike resonated, on the one hand, with her own references to childhood memories and childlike modes of perception and, on the other, with imagined similarities between women and children in *Neue Frau* descriptions such as Hildebrandt's.[243] Again, this was a concept taken up by the South African press. For example, the author of a review of a *New Group* show in 1941

236 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*. Marais, *Maggie Laubser*. Ballot, *Maggie Laubser*.
237 Kris & Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, p. 56. (My translation, original German on p. 273.)
238 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 38.
239 N.N., "Expressionistic."
240 Ibid.
241 C.S., "Laubser looks back."
242 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
243 Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*, p. 24.

attributes Laubser's landscapes a "childlike verve."[244] Laubser's fellow artists Gregoire Boonzaier and Walter Battiss, too, respectively refer to her childlike depictions of clouds and her "childish excitement on her return from the Free State, where she saw sheep and shepherds in the field."[245] FEJ Malherbe describes Laubser as "a person [...] who has always remained simple and sincere and spontaneously open to the beauty around her, in which she takes a childlike delight."[246] Neville Dubow likens the work of the Coloured artist Gladys Mgudlandlu to Laubser's and characterises it as a "fusion of childlike conviction and strength with an aggressive but pure inner spirituality."[247]

Other articles refer to a "child-like truth" that their authors see filtering through Laubser's works.[248] Interestingly, Gideon Malherbe and Deane Anderson questioned Laubser's supposedly childlike perspective. While Malherbe in 1945 spells out explicitly that, "in spite of this reckless expression and simplicity, there is nothing naive or primitive in Miss Laubser's work,"[249] Anderson sees Laubser as strategically employing implications of a childlike outlook in her art: "Behind the persuasive naivetés of her engagingly innocent variations on the themes of landscape, child and flower, there lies a world of calculation."[250] I would agree with Anderson's argument that, in her childlike renditions of landscapes, animals and people, Laubser aligned herself with contemporary ideas on primitivism as described in Chapters 1 and 2 and made use of women's preferential position within this current. Her regular references to childhood experiences certainly support such an argument.

I have also shown above how her proximity to nature played an important role in Laubser's self-portrayal. This, too, sat well within the contemporary *volksmoeder* and *Neue Frau* discourses and was repeatedly taken up by the press. For example, in 1937, Louise van Rensburg characterises Laubser as Erda, the heroic goddess symbolising mother earth.[251] This is an interesting analogy as it combines ideas of women as closely associated with nature and notions of nurturing motherhood. It therefore illustrates the connection between the *volksmoeder* ideology and the significance of national soil. About a decade later, in his opening speech, Willem de Sanderes Hendrikz claims that Laubser's "work is just as real, as clean, as lively and as tough as the trees that stand in our plains."[252] This remark, again, reveals the nationalist agenda behind the custom of discussing the special relationship between Laubser and her work and specifically South African landscapes or nature. Later texts discuss

244 N.N., "New Group show has vitality."
245 Boonzaier, "Introduction," n.p. Battiss, "Maggie was 'n ware staatmaker."
246 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser," p. 37.
247 Dubow, "Mgudlandlu exhibition." This statement also clearly has a racist quality.
248 E.g. Dekker, "In Standpunte," p. 11. Van Broekhuizen, "Maggie Laubser and Guido Gezelle," p. 19. P.H.W., "A Woman Painter of Maturity." Alexander, "Maggie Laubser stel ten oon." Liebenberg, "n Kuiertjie by Maggie Laubser."
249 Malherbe, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
250 Anderson, "Individual Idiom."
251 Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud."
252 Hendrikz, "Mense." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)

Laubser's bond to nature in more gendered terms. For instance, in his 1974 biography, Johann van Rooyen claims that her "paintings did not attempt to expound great intellectual theses, but recorded her spontaneous response to rural life."[253] Like the *New Group* exhibition review cited above, Van Rooyen contrasts Laubser's proximity to nature and farm life with the traditionally male stereotype of intellectual art.

References to Laubser's proximity to nature were often linked to her life on a farm that symbolised a certain Afrikaner self-reliance as idealised in the *volksmoeder*. With respect to German settler women in Southern Africa, Anette Dietrich describes colonial role models of the farmer's wife or the brave farmwoman as promising a greater freedom to women than more conservative gender stereotypes in the mother nation.[254] The farmwoman lived, whether married or widowed or sometimes even completely autonomously, on a farm and had to cope with the struggles of the new land. She represented purity, national values and a nostalgia for more nature-based modes of living. The emphasis on Laubser's life as child and later artist on a farm in her own accounts as well as in contemporary press reports is closely linked with primitivist ideals propagated by the settler artist and her peers. It also shows a clear position within the transnational ramifications of South African art at the time. For example, in an interview with Jan Schütte towards the end of her life, Laubser says: "I lived on a farm and have always been together with nature. […] Everything I know and am aware of taught me the farm … and not overseas study!"[255] Similarly, in "An artist devoted to farmlife," Zilla M Silva writes that "Maggie Loubser [sic], an artist known in cultural circles in both Europe and South Africa, finds almost all she wants to paint on her father's Cape farm."[256]

In contrast to the cosmopolitan Irma Stern, Laubser's portrayal as rooted in the soil and authentically South African hence benefited from her image as a farmer's daughter.[257] This becomes obvious in remarks such as those by the author of an article entitled "Eerste Afrikaanse Vroue-Skilder" [First Afrikaner Woman Painter]: "Miss Loubser [sic] has worked in recent years on a quiet farm near Cape Town and, like a true artist, she has not sought her inspiration elsewhere but in the life immediately around her."[258] A Transvaal journalist with the pseudonym Amelia writes in 1949 that Laubser "worked and studied for ten years in Europe, but today lives quietly at the Strand, where she spends her time gardening, housekeeping and painting."[259] In addition to the contrast between studying in Europe and housekeeping at the

253 Van Rooyen, *Maggie Laubser*, p. 22.
254 Dietrich, *Weiße Weiblichkeiten*, pp. 262–265.
255 Quoted in Miles, "Maggie Laubser." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
256 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."
257 The fact that Laubser lived on a farm which inspired most of her art works is for example mentioned in N.N., "Kunstentoonstelling te Bloemfontein." Bouman, "Nuwe Kunsstyl van Maggie Laubser." Verloren van Themaat, "Een Middag." Van Rensburg, "Diepe Eenvoud." Herd, "Maggie Laubser."
258 N.N., "Die Eerste Afrikaanse Vroue-Skilder." (My translation, original Afrikaans on p. 273.)
259 Amelia, "Party for Miss Maggie Laubser." A similar account is presented in N.N., "Maggie Laubser Paints in Quiet Strand Studio."

Strand, Amelia's text also exemplifies the *volksmoeder* and *Neue Frau* idealisation of combining professional self-fulfilment and housewifeliness. Strikingly, gardening and housekeeping are listed before painting. Silva, too, describes Laubser's everyday life in the following way:

> At the moment she is co-ordinating art and farming. When the day's work is done she will settle down by candle-light to Aldous Huxley or Beverley Nichols: she is a skilled horsewoman and wields a needle with the hand of an artist, but her life's ambition has always been to become a great singer.[260]

3.4 Conclusion

The preceding discussion has shown that it is fruitful to position Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern within the *Neue Frau* discourse originating in Weimar Germany during the first half of the 1920s. The *Neue Frau* was an image largely propagated and spread by the media and hence reached an enormous dissemination in contemporary culture. It cannot be considered an absolute term but an idea that was charged from multiple perspectives due to the interrelation of women's life realities and media images of a new type of woman that constantly reacted to one another. Additionally, the *Neue Frau* myth incorporated emancipatory motivations as women saw in it an opportunity to break free of gender-specific patterns. It was also specifically applied to women artists in a number of texts recurring to feminine stereotypes such as motherhood, proximity to nature, intuition, harmony, sensitivity, emotionality and childlikeness. Employing these characteristics to argue both ways – for and against the eligibility of women to be successful artists – the male and female authors stuck to traditional myths of intrinsic femininity. Due to their proximity to primitivist ideals, such stereotypes could also be employed by women artists to their advantage, as in the case of the South African pioneers Stern and Laubser. Returning to an extremely conservative and patriarchal art scene after their sojourns in Berlin in the early 1920s, feminine ideals expressed in the *Neue Frau* myth helped them prompt the change from the prevalence of romantic realism to modernist artforms. Aiding circumstances can be found in the facts that there was no male modernist avant-garde that had to be permeated, that modernism was comparatively late to arrive in South Africa and that cheap Black labour enabled White women to rid themselves of their domestic tasks. Making use of this, Stern and Laubser strategically incorporated *Neue Frau* ideals into their self-narratives in order to boost their careers.

Rather than showcasing herself as a female pioneer, Stern entered the South African art scene presenting herself as a member of German modernism and used these transnational relations to legitimise her role as a painter who had already been accepted by the male avant-garde in Europe and was now confidently continuing her

260 Silva, "An artist devoted to farmlife."

career in South Africa. In Germany, she made use of her symbolic capital as South African artist and expert on "primitive" cultures that gave her an advantage over male European primitivists such as Max Pechstein or Paul Gauguin. She quickly generated attention and a number of favourable press reports were published. The latter were extensively translated into English and Afrikaans by Stern's supporters and reprinted in South African newspapers and other publications. They resorted to ideas of intrinsic femininity such as intuition, sensitivity and emotionality and stressed her South African indigeneity. In clever self-portrayals that were largely appropriated and reproduced by the press, Stern additionally described the strong support given to her by recognised authorities such as Pechstein, the art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt or the critic Fritz Stahl. Moreover, she used the negative press her first exhibitions generated in Sout Africa to present herself as the misunderstood artist "genius." This myth, too, has been frequently reproduced in biographical texts on the artist. In general, monographs on Stern and Laubser that have appeared in South Africa up to now re-privatise the artists and do not interpret their works resorting to socio-political contexts but preferentially offer psychobiographical readings. Stern's weight and her supposedly unfulfilled love/ sex life have thus remained amongst the main points for interpretations of her work in South Africa. Additionally, the two women are often contrasted in comparisons shaped by feminine stereotypes that see Laubser as the gentle, harmony-bringing farmwoman and Stern as the furious pioneer of South African modernism.

Laubser, too, made a substantial contribution to the parameters determining the reception of her own work. In line with common artists' myths described by Kris and Kurz, she presented herself as an artist relying on her feelings and impressions of her natural surroundings rather than on outside influences provided by other artists or art schools. Nevertheless, she still sought an art historical contextualisation of her work and related it to Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse. Linked to her inspiration directly taken from nature were ideas of immediacy and authenticity that were also employed by Afrikaans-speaking newspapers in their project of describing the specifically Afrikaans character of her work. In general, notions of indigeneity and the untaught artist "genius" became merged in the reception of Laubser's work. The importance of Christian beliefs for her art production was another factor that let her be considered an artist with a strong Afrikaans identity. Overall, she designed a Christianly informed self-narrative that embraced artistic independence, characteristics such as simplicity and authenticity rooted in common Afrikaner self-conceptions, the divinity of specifically South African landscapes, and childhood memories in which her parents' farm played an important role. Moreover, in her deliberately childlike renditions of South African landscapes, animals and people, Laubser consciously complied with contemporary settler primitivist ideals and benefited from women's preferential position within this current.

Adhering to images of the *voortrekkervrou* and the *volksmoeder* – Afrikaner variations of the *Neue Frau* – the press took up a lot of the issues featured in Laubser's self-narrative. The *voortrekkervrou* was considered an important partner to her husband in the Afrikaner nationalist project even though her qualities in the end

remained in the domestic realm and, again, conformed to traditional ideas of intrinsic femininity. In the *volksmoeder* ideology as the post-trek continuation of the *voortrekker-vrou*, motherhood was transferred from the nuclear family to a greater responsibility for the Afrikaner people – which had the potential of freeing women artists from conventional expectations of caring for actual children. The defining virtues of the *volksmoeder* were kindness, gentleness, modesty, discipline, housewifeliness, sense of religion, self-sacrifice, bravery, love of freedom and self-reliance. All of these qualities that fit closely with Laubser's self-narrative as a Christian, Afrikaner farmwoman were frequently instanced by reviewers of Laubser's work as well as of her personality.