

CONCLUSION

Departing from Nicholas Thomas's discussion of settler primitivism in Australia, the aim of this study was to describe the different facets of South African settler primitivism and the interactions of its protagonists who moved between the poles of European modernism and local traditional cultures. Marked by great ambivalences, they oscillated between transnational and national approaches to an art production that appropriated indigenous landscapes, peoples and their visual cultures. Casting Black South Africans either as developmentally and/ or territorially remote from White settlers, and hence different, or as lost ancestors whose art was deeply linked to the land, South African settler primitivists transformed their non-White compatriots and their artistic heritage into cultural assets they considered fit for appropriation. This was a crucial step in the process of "indigenisation" of White settler artists – and by extension their audiences – that sought to establish a new national culture independent of the European mother nations. Primitivist ideals can be traced throughout the artists' works and remarks as well as in discussions of their artistic practice by the contemporary press. They partly account for the unusual importance of women artists for South African modernism, who were able to benefit from the proximity of an allegedly intrinsic femininity and primitivist concepts that both foregrounded intuitive, subconscious, naïve, close-to-nature and emotion-based approaches to fine art production. While artists' interactions in the most important networks at the time were not governed by primitivist discourses, they were instrumental in forging the change to a modernist understanding of fine art.

My first chapter positioned South African settler primitivism in the context of primitivist currents in other settler nations, using Margaret Preston (Australia), Marsden Hartley (USA) and Emily Carr (Canada) as case studies. Generally, settler primitivism, as Thomas has pointed out, in contrast to European primitivism, was "an effort to affirm a local relationship not with a generic primitive culture, but a particular one" and intended at settler artists' emancipation from Europe.¹ It is a process marked by strong ambivalences as native subjects and their visual culture were appropriated as a connection to such land but simultaneously denied any claim to it. South African settler primitivism differs from other settler primitivisms in its treatment of indigenous peoples who greatly outnumbered White settlers. Rather than referencing their visual culture, artists such as Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, Gregoire Boonzaier and Alexis Preller concentrated on depicting South Africa's Bantu-speaking

1 Thomas, *Possessions*, pp. 12–13.

peoples themselves, showing them in a way that clearly cast them as removed from, uninterested in and finally incapable of participating in any form of contemporary socio-political life. While Stern's and Preller's primitivisms exoticised Black South Africans leading "primitive" lives, Laubser's and Boonzaier's class primitivisms romanticised Black and Coloured farm labourers as well as Cape Malays as contently living pre-industrial existences that did not interfere with White modernity. When actually dealing with indigenous visual culture, settler primitivists such as JH Pierneef or Walter Battiss turned to San rock paintings as the San, due to their precedent disintegration, did not pose any political threat but could be idolised as cultural forebears. Battiss and Pierneef hence appropriated their form languages in order to develop a specifically South African art. Lippy Lipshitz, on the other hand, appropriated West African sculpture by using indigenous South African materials and thereby averted the problem of referencing the art of his oppressed compatriots whose rights and claims had to be reckoned with.

Examining the work of these seven most prominent settler primitivists as case studies, I have shown that four different kinds of settler primitivism can be differentiated in South Africa: stylistic, racial, gender and class primitivism. Those categories are not mutually exclusive but often overlap. Racial, gender and class primitivism all relate to a primitivism in content that is closely interlinked with subject appropriation. Stylistic primitivism – concomitant with stylistic appropriation – is especially important in the works of Laubser (appropriating children's art), Lipshitz (appropriating West African sculpture), Pierneef and Battiss (appropriating San rock painting) while it plays a subordinate role in the works of Stern, Boonzaier and Preller. All artists can be considered to adhere to a racial primitivism in their depictions of Black Africans. This is not surprising as it can be assumed – due to their political conformity and cooperation with the Union and apartheid governments – that all artists were interested in maintaining the discriminatory assumption common amongst White South Africans at the time that race was an indicator of difference and racial segregation hence necessary. Gender primitivism is most striking in the works of Stern, Battiss and Preller, who highly sexualise their subjects and comply with common stereotypes of femininity. Class primitivism is only noticeably detectable in Laubser's and Boonzaier's arcadian scenes of harmonious pre-industrial life in the countryside (Laubser) and non-White districts in Cape Town (Boonzaier).

The second chapter of this study traced the changes in the reception of South African settler primitivism between the 1920s and 1960s. South Africa's decision to participate in the Second World War in 1939 marked a turning point from a transnationalist orientation towards Europe to an increasingly nationalist rhetoric that spilled over to the field of art criticism. In the 1920s and 1930s, exhibition reviews of artists such as Stern were shaped on the one hand by a defence of the modernist style new to South Africa and on the other by discussions of Black South Africans as subjects. The former largely relied on transnational perspectives citing South African artists' successes overseas and the significance of primitivist ideals in Europe that substantiated a specifically South African modern art. The discussion of Black South Africans can largely be attributed to the changing relations between Whites and

Blacks during this time that was shaped by the fear of increasing racial integration and the consequent necessity to establish an alleged difference between White and Black South Africans. The concentration on primitivist ideals and portrayals of Black South Africans lay the preparation for the nationalist perception of South African settler primitivism defining the 1940s to 1960s that was heralded by discussions of Afrikaner artists and spread to reviews of English and Jewish art. Such criticism was shaped by a special emphasis on the themes of dissociation of Europe and “indigenisation,” South Africa’s spirit or soul, the South African soil and the importance of “native” art, all of which served the intention of authenticating a new national, specifically South African art.

In general, between 1920 and 1970, criticism of the seven South African artists discussed regularly relied on topics closely linked to primitivist discourses, such as truth, essentiality and childhood. Describing settler primitivists’ works as depicting truth served as a legitimation of their work and simultaneously gave further weight to racist ideas of difference between the works’ White audiences and Black subjects depicted as temporally, spatially or culturally removed. Indigenising phrases relating to essentiality emphasised the allegedly close relationship between settler primitivism and the South African land as the label “essentially South African” equalled a nationalist appropriation of this land. References to childhood were informed by primitivist ideals of unadulteratedness and subconsciousness and they lent authenticity and validity to the works reviewed. Additionally, artists’ myths that have been relevant for art historical writing and art criticism since Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* played an important role in discussions of settler primitivists during the period under investigation. With regards to my seven case studies, it can be differentiated between typical male artists’ myths and specific manifestations relating to Jewish and Afrikaner artists. Stereotypical male artists’ myths of the autodidact, “genius” child “discovered” by an expert and of the artist as suffering social outsider who reaches fame against all odds, which can be detected in texts on Boonzaier, in the case of the Jewish sculptor Lipshitz were conflated with stereotypes of the suffering, melancholic Jew and the common Jewish theme of tragedy. At the opposite end of the spectrum, stereotypes relating to the Afrikaner artist Pierneef become obvious in his presentation as the typically simple, sincere and steadfast Afrikaner with Puritan values, often featuring references to patriarchal family structures, egalitarian principles and ideas of self-reliance. It is likely that all three artists participated in the myths surrounding their own art production.

Female artists’ myths were discussed in the third chapter that positioned Stern and Laubser in the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] discourse originating in Weimar Germany during the first half of the 1920s and described stereotypes of intrinsic femininity associated with it. The latter resonate with primitivist ideals and hence help explain why South African settler primitivism was dominated by two women artists. Intrinsic femininity was considered to show itself in features such as motherhood, proximity to nature, intuition, harmony, sensitivity, emotionality and childlikeness that were employed by contemporary male and female authors to argue both ways: for and against the capability of women to be successful artists. 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 Stern and Laubser prompt the change from the prevalence of romantic realism to modernist artforms. Stern, who had quickly gained success in Germany building onto her symbolic capital as South African artist and expert on “primitive” cultures, upon her return to Cape Town presented herself as an acknowledged member of a male-dominated German modernism. Supported by mainly Jewish authors who reproduced translations of her German critiques in South African newspapers and publications, Stern developed successful self-narratives that cast her as the artist “genius” despised by the parochial South African art scene but recognised by important members of the German avant-garde. These narratives, that were taken up and multiplied by the press, resorted to ideas of intrinsic femininity such as intuition, sensitivity and emotionality and strengthened her position as South African settler primitivist.

Laubser, too, made a substantial contribution to the parameters determining the reception of her own work. She designed a Christianly informed self-narrative that embraced artists’ myths of artistic independence, characteristics such as simplicity and authenticity rooted in common Afrikaner self-conceptions, the divinity of specifically South African landscape, and childhood memories in which her parents’ farm played an important role. Moreover, in her deliberately childlike renditions of landscapes, animals and people, Laubser consciously complied with contemporary primitivist ideals and women’s preferential position within those. The reception of her work can be viewed within contemporary idealisations of *voortrekkervroue* [pioneer women] and *volksmoeders* [mothers of the people], Afrikaner variations of the *Neue Frau*, whose defining virtues were kindness, gentleness, modesty, discipline, housewifeliness, sense of religion, self-sacrifice, bravery, love of freedom and self-reliance. All of these qualities also fit closely with Laubser’s self-narrative of the Christian farmwoman that has informed biographies of the artist until today. Generally, monographs on Stern and Laubser published in South Africa re-privatise the artists by basing interpretations of artworks chiefly on biographical information. Stern’s obesity and supposedly unfulfilled love life have thus remained amongst the main points for discussions of her work. Additionally, the two women are often contrasted in comparisons shaped by feminine stereotypes that see Laubser as the gentle, harmony-seeking farmer’s daughter and Stern as the exuberant pioneer of South African modernism.

My last chapter offered an excursus on the networks that highlight the different interests shaping the South African art scene during the formation of settler primitivism in the first half of the 20th century. They aided the change from the obsolete patriarchal structures preeminent in South African art institutions by supporting its members that operated at the margins of said institutions, and hence often overlapped. The four most influential networks that can be identified in this context are women’s networks, Jewish diaspora networks, Afrikaner networks and the fore-mostly younger generation consolidating in the *New Group*. While all of the first three networks were identity-based, Jewish and women’s networks mainly intended to promote their protégées’ careers and Afrikaner networks were more ideologically

driven, often following a nationalist agenda. The *New Group*, founded in 1938 and comprising members of all of the three other groups, aimed at generally professionalising the South African art scene and therefore most pronouncedly worked towards the fall of the old elites. This did not mean, however, that its members were united in a modernist style since membership was often practically or even opportunistically motivated. The interactions of these groups – especially between Jewish and Afrikaner artists as well as between *New Group* and Afrikaner artists – were often coined by ambivalences arising from differing ideological beliefs and common structural aims. Interestingly, no comparable network was formed by British settlers.

Throughout my study, a number of research desiderata have emerged. The most striking ones are probably foundational studies on the artists Lippy Lipshitz and Cecil Higgs. Due to their importance for the South African art scene at the time, it is surprising that the latest more detailed examinations of their works and careers were published in 1969 and 1974 respectively. Additionally, I believe a better general understanding of the institutional landscape in the field of fine art during the period focused on in my study would be beneficial. This could include an examination of how different cultural institutions such as the SAAA, the *Afrikaanse Kunsvereniging* [Afrikaans Art Association], the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* [South African Academy of Science and Art] or the Institute of Race Relations worked with each other as well as with the government. Lastly, it would be certainly fruitful to expand my analysis of primitivism in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century to later artists such as Cecil Skotnes, Edoardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae and Dumile Feni whose approaches differed greatly from those presented here. It would be especially interesting to relate the work of Kumalo, Legae and Feni to other “Black primitivisms” like those of Négritude or the Harlem Renaissance in order to further differentiate it from the “White primitivism” described in this study.² Most of all, the latter offers a basis for comparative studies of different settler primitivisms.

2 Compare Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*. McGabe, “The Multifaceted Politics of Primitivism in Harlem Renaissance Writing.” Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora.” Chinitz, “Rejuvenation through Joy.” Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject*. Another interesting point for comparison could be the European Jewish primitivism described by Samuel J. Spinner. Compare Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism*.