

“Primitivism” in Migration

Ambivalence and Locality in South African Modernism

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Modernism in South Africa was not only characterized by the migration of settler artists between the global “periphery” of South Africa and Europe’s urban centers, such as Berlin, London, or Paris, which their parents had left and where they themselves frequently returned to further their careers, but also by the migration of objects and concepts.¹ The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a rapidly increasing circulation of African artifacts into the West in various ways—ethically and unethically, some as desecrated religious objects and some specifically produced for trade—and their subsequent appropriation by the European avant-gardes. At the same time, and largely neglected in Western art historical narratives, the aesthetic appreciation of such objects returned to their countries of origin. This was mediated by, often Jewish, immigrants with substantial collections of African artifacts, on the one hand, and Western theory such as Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* (1915) on the other. Departing from this European appreciation of African art, Irma Stern (1894–1966), the so-called pioneer of South African modernism, and the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz (1903–1980) laid the foundations for a specifically South African “settler primitivism.”² Stern and Lipshitz can be considered settlers, as they migrated to South Africa early in their lives but kept close ties to their European origins, artistically as well as personally. Departing from Nicholas Thomas’s definition of “settler primitivism,” this article discusses the importance of ambivalence and locality in Stern’s and Lipshitz’s “primitivist” representations of their black compatriots, in which they sought to establish a South African culture distinctive from the English traditions that were formative at the time, furthering their own indigenization in the process. My analysis is based on their artworks, different writings produced by the artists collected from various archives, as

well as secondary texts on their works and careers. Before delving into the specific South African context, I will first attempt a brief localization of the terms “primitive” and “primitivism” in relation to the visual arts, as both terms are hugely problematic.

“Primitive” and “Primitivism”

In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Marianna Torgovnick shows how the word “primitive” has changed from its fifteenth century meaning of “original or ancestor” to the late eighteenth century reference to “aboriginals, inhabitants of prehistoric times, [and] natives in non-European lands” that is still in use today.³ In art historic terms, it has referred to “painters before the Renaissance,” then to “all early art,” and finally to “‘tribal’ art—Native American, Eskimo, African, and Oceanic.”⁴ The latter was the definition firmly established by the 1920s, and still largely accounts for the word’s use in art historical contexts today.⁵ This shift in definition and usage already shows that, as Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush put it, “‘primitives’... never existed. Only Western ‘primitivism’ did.”⁶ While “primitive” is “a racist designation... primitivism denotes an Occidental construction, a set of representations whose ‘reality’ is purely Western.”⁷ While some art historians relate Western “primitivism” to other colonial exploitations, since European artists used these “newfound” formal languages for their own artistic profiling,⁸ others include this phenomenon among the numerous cultural interrelations in the visual arts since antiquity.⁹

The latter stance is somewhat shortsighted, as it does not take into consideration the imbalanced power relations prevailing between supposedly “primitive” African, indigenous American, or South Pacific artists and their European counterparts, who largely came into contact through imperial-colonial contexts. While European artists usually benefited financially from such encounters, a lot of African or Oceanic art was taken from its original owners and entered European collections.¹⁰ These power imbalances were also reflected in one of the most prominent exhibitions on European “primitivism” of the last four decades, William Rubin’s *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, that was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1984. Immediately after its opening, the exhibition and its extensive catalogue were attacked by critics such as James Clifford and Hal Foster for their imperialist and dominating tendencies.¹¹ In more recent criticism, Rubin as well as his opponents have been criticized for retaining “the dialectical otherness of the ‘primitive’” instead of acknowledging that modern European art as well as what Rubin calls “tribal” art were both “aesthetic responses to modernization and its art markets.”¹² Attempts have been made by scholars such as Carolyn Butler Palmer to fill in the gaps, in particular with regard to Rubin’s de-historization and omission of context of the “tribal” works exhibited.¹³ Monica Blackmun Visonà criticizes Rubin’s Eurocentric portrayal of a one-way exchange in

which only European artists borrow from foreign populations. She suggests a counter-narrative such as Picasso's Nigerian contemporary, Aina Onabolu, who experimented with English eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions.¹⁴ With reference to modernism in general, Partha Mitter argues:

*In the cultural economy of global modernity, all artistic productions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America became marginal to the preoccupations of the core, that is, the art of Paris and later postwar London or New York. Set against the originary discourse of the avant-garde, emanating from these metropolitan centers, other modernisms were silenced as derivative and suffering from a time lag because of their geographic locations. Yet the significant point is that the center-periphery relation is not only one of geography but also of power and authority.*¹⁵

In line with Mitter's argument, South African modernism has largely been neglected by Western art history. It seems surprising that this is still the case today, even though the migratory processes involved in the genesis of modernisms in the global periphery—which usually developed out of colonial contexts—can be considered precursors of current artistic practices and realities. Additionally, in South Africa the ambivalence inherent in “primitivism” emanates most clearly as white artists and their audiences admired supposedly “primitive peoples” such as the Ndebele, Zulu, or Swazi while simultaneously denying their modern realities and politically as well as socially oppressing them. Rather than any obvious aesthetic variance, the difference to European “primitivism” is thus foremost the everyday coexistence of “primitivist” and supposedly “primitive” in the same space.

This concept of locality is central to “settler primitivism.” In the following discussion, locality refers to Africa in general, as South African artists were trying to distinguish themselves from their European counterparts, but also to the nation of South Africa specifically, as the Union and apartheid governments supported “settler primitivists” in order to foster a national culture. In *Possessions: Indigenous Art / Colonial Culture*, Nicholas Thomas introduces the term “settler primitivism” as a special type of “primitivism” whose agency can be clearly differentiated from that of the European form. With a focus on Australia and New Zealand, Thomas argues that, in order to establish a national identity different from that of the former mother countries, colonial “producers of culture... frequently turned to what was locally distinctive, either in the natural environment or in indigenous culture,” in an “effort to affirm a local relationship.”¹⁶ This can also be described as a process of indigenization. In line with Thomas's definition of “settler primitivism” that I use in this article, John Peffer explains that “white South African artists looked to local cultures as a means to indigenize their engagement with modernist ideas borrowed from Europe, as well as to validate their own position as a dominant minority in a colonial setting.”¹⁷

Irma Stern

The ambivalent engagement with locality is central to the work of one of South Africa's most prominent modernist artists, Irma Stern (1894–1966). Stern was the daughter of German Jews who had immigrated to the Transvaal area in the late nineteenth century. She spent her life and career migrating between South Africa and Germany, and purposefully made use of these transnational links to establish herself as a successful artist. She studied at the Großherzoglich-Sächsische Kunstschule in Weimar from 1913 to late 1914, when she moved on to study with Martin Brandenburg in Berlin. She received great support from Max Pechstein, whom she met in 1917 and who introduced her into Berlin's expressionist circles, where she was able to position herself as an "authentic" African artist and connoisseur of "primitive" cultures.¹⁸ Her pictures of black women, whom she claimed she had grown up among, demonstrated her superiority to her German colleagues, who knew their subjects only from occasional travels or ethnological museums.¹⁹ The press continued this indigenization of Stern, frequently mentioning her special role as an "African" artist and hence often attributing to her a greater genuineness than to, for instance, Gauguin or Pechstein.²⁰ This gave a substantial boost to her career, and she became a founding member of the influential *Novembergruppe* in 1918. A year later, she had her first solo exhibition, at Wolfgang Gurlitt's gallery in Berlin. Through this early success in Berlin, Stern was able to introduce a new image of professional women artists into South Africa's conservative art scene, and led the way for a largely female avant-garde.

She returned to South Africa in 1920, taking up residence in Cape Town. She took with her a copy of Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* from 1915, in which Einstein argues that African art should be perceived as such and condemns the European sense of superiority.²¹ He recommends a purely formal appreciation of African sculpture, removed from any ethnographical concerns.²² Einstein had never been to Africa and, in the 119 photographs of African sculptures he collected for his volume, presents the works in a highly aestheticized, stylized, and minimal manner, effacing any "impurities," such as paint, nails, blades, cloth, etc., originally attached to the figures.²³ As Z. S. Strother puts it, "The photo archive [*Bilderatlas*] of *Negerplastik* defined the canon of African art displayed in museums" as clean, aestheticized objects removed from any signs of usage.²⁴ In line with this, Stern was one of the first South Africans to collect African art for purely aesthetic reasons.²⁵ She also referenced objects from her collection in her artworks, especially in her exoticizing still lifes combining lush flowers and African sculpture. In 1922 she held the first exhibition of her paintings at Ashbey's Gallery in Cape Town, which she boldly called *An Exhibition of Modern Art by Miss Irma Stern*. It was the first time the word "modern" had been used in reference to art from South Africa, and this as well as her following exhibitions received an extremely negative response from the conservative South African art scene, due to their deviation from the traditional, romantic naturalist

mode of painting.²⁶ In addition to the “modernist” style pursued by Stern, critics were also shocked by her portraits of black South Africans, which were not common at the time. Jeanne van Eeden argues that “primitivist” tendencies in Stern’s work were “felt to be one of the major alienating aspects of her oeuvre,” since in South Africa “the primitive was a definite reality and not an illusory, Edenic fantasy.”²⁷

A work indicative of Stern’s interest in “primitivist” modes of painting is *Stonebreaker* (fig. 1), which was produced in the year of Stern’s return to South Africa and shows a black man breaking rocks with a hammer.²⁸ In this case, her expressionist “primitivism” becomes obvious in formal elements such as black outlines, geometric forms, and flat surfaces. Moreover, the man’s face resembles an African mask. In general, this early painting is unusual in that it depicts a black South African at work, performing a non-traditional task in westernized work clothes. It could therefore be argued that, while Stern references a formalist European “primitivism” in this work, the subject cannot as easily be placed within exoticizing practices, since she depicts a mineworker—a contemporary colonial reality, rather than a “noble savage.” Yet this work contains no social criticism, either, as its subject is shown in a rather leisurely and contemplative mood, set against a picturesque mountain/savannah landscape. Rather than reflecting realities of exploitation or penal servitude, it is a “primitivist” idealization of the relationship between human and nature—also resonating in the earthy colors—as well as of manual labor. Interestingly, *Stonebreaker* is also one of Stern’s very few depictions of African men.

In her later works, Stern seems to have discarded her interest in formal “primitivism” and instead fully concentrates on a subject-related “primitivism”; she depicts mainly African women in traditional dress, either at leisure or performing traditional tasks, supposedly untouched by “Western civilization.” Examples of this are *Water Carriers* (fig. 2) from 1935 or *Bed Carriers* (fig. 3) from 1941. Both paintings show traditionally dressed African women balancing objects on their heads as a means of transport. *Water Carriers* seems to approach an ethnographical study, as the four women depicted can easily be identified as Ndebele through their remarkable beaded jewelry. Visits to local Ndebele villages were very common among South African artists in the 1930s and ’40s. In a diary entry of October 26, 1936, Lippy Lipshitz, for example, notes his plan to join Stern on her visit to an Ndebele village ten miles outside of Pretoria.²⁹ In *Bed Carriers*, on the other hand, the half-naked bodies of the two women are depicted in a way that foregrounds composition and color hues, contrasting blue with different tones of yellow, orange, and brown. By closing in on the women’s softly curved, exposed torsos and cutting off parts of the beds they carry as well as of their heads, hands, and garments, the focus is clearly set on the interplay of lines and planes. The women’s faces are only partly visible, and the prominence of their round breasts sexualizes them explicitly.³⁰

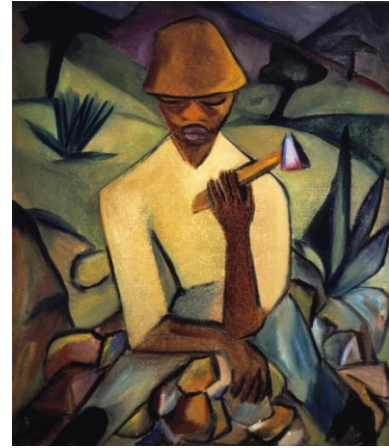


Fig. 1. Irma Stern, *Stonebreaker*, 1920, oil on canvas, 105.4 x 86.4 cm, collection Rupert Foundation. Courtesy of Pictoright Amsterdam 2019.

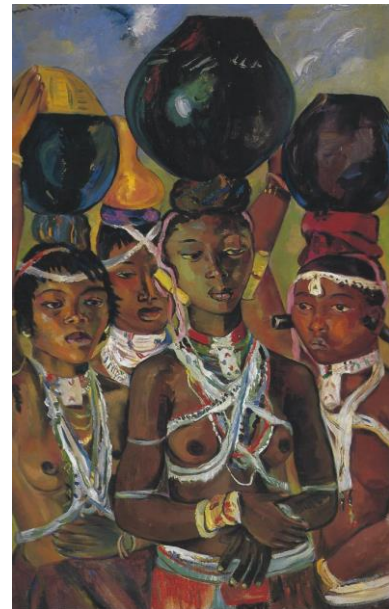


Fig. 2. Irma Stern, *Water Carriers*, 1935, oil on canvas, 126 x 79 cm, private collection. Courtesy of Pictoright Amsterdam 2019.

In a 1926 newspaper article entitled “My Exotic Models,” Stern explains that, while in Europe, she was yearning to return to “Africa, the country of my birth, the land of sunshine, of radiant colors... where the brown people live a happy life in close connection with their soil, beautiful in their primitive innocence.”³¹ Works such as *Stonebreaker*, *Water Carriers*, and *Bed Carriers* comply with this “primitivist” idealization. Stern further stresses that, in order to find such subjects, she “had to go where there was no sign of Europe, no trace of civilization—just Africa lying in the sun with its stretches of untouched land and its dark people as it had been lying, one might imagine, since the day of creation.”³² However, the artist was aware that finding a place without any Western influence was not an easy task, and knew that black South Africans did not factually live in a temporal vacuum. In an article published in the *Cape Argus* in 1927, she is cited to complain about finding “the Zulu Princess dressed in a blue Sunday print, sitting on a mat with a Bible on her lap,” and the Swazi King gaining a “reputation of being the best-dressed man in England” during his latest visit with the British King.³³ Six years later, she reported being shocked about the Swazis having “submitted to civilization,” wearing “everyman’s clothes and boots,” and as a result, having become “unhappy in the burden of civilized living.”³⁴

These remarks illustrate the ambivalence inherent in South African “settler primitivism.” In Europe, artists such as the *Brücke* members also disregarded colonial contexts and portrayed the indigenous people they encountered during their travels or at home as archaic, timeless, and natural “primitives” in the same vein as South African artists did. Those “primitives” played a peripheral role in their everyday lives and the political developments of their nation, however. In South Africa, on the other hand, white artists shared their country with a—even if highly oppressed and discriminated—black majority. South African artists knew that by 1930, relatively few of their subjects were living the “primitive” life they portrayed in their artworks. To idealize local peoples anyway was a clear decision on the settler artists’ part to disregard black modern realities and foster cultural differences instead. It is not surprising, then, that from 1948 the apartheid government strategically acquired “primitivist” works and displayed them in their embassies abroad in order to showcase the alleged fundamental difference between white and black South Africans, in line with their persistent agenda of racial segregation.³⁵

A visualization of this ambivalence is Stern’s 1922 painting *Umgababa* (fig. 4). The work shows a luscious landscape around a river bend, cut into two across the middle by a glistening line of train tracks. They lead to a cloudy sky with a few rays of sunlight coming through where the tracks disappear into the hills. In the foreground, Stern depicts a nude black woman carrying sticks on her head along a red dirt road. The title of the work reveals that the scene is located close to the trading station Umgababa near Durban, in the province that is today called KwaZulu-Natal. In her (as yet) unpublished text on Stern’s travel narrative *Umgababa*,



Fig. 3. Irma Stern, *Bed Carriers*, 1941, oil on canvas, 83.5 x 83.5 cm, collection Rupert Foundation. Courtesy of Pictoright Amsterdam 2019



Fig. 4. Irma Stern, *Umgababa*, 1922, oil on canvas, 60.5 x 91 cm, collection Irma Stern Museum. Courtesy of Pictoright Amsterdam 2019.

Irene Below considers Stern to visualize in this painting the threat of modern technology to the idealization of “primitive” Africans. Jeremy Foster explains that, by the mid-1920s, South African Railways & Harbours had established the second-largest state-owned railway system worldwide, embodying modernity and technological progress: “in remote parts of South Africa, the railways’ twin ribbon of steel and attendant structures were often the only visible signs of modern governance and civilization in the landscape.”³⁶ Indeed, in her travel narrative Stern describes the train as the only connection to the world, an enemy, an evil lindworm, the serpent in paradise.³⁷ However, in her painting the sun shines onto the disappearing tracks, whose shiny, light-blue color cannot be described as threatening. The train additionally signifies Stern’s access to this remote place. Foster also argues that the railways fashioned “a new subjectivity toward the landscape that was reflexive, collective, and national.”³⁸ The extensive railway system was hence itself perceived with great ambivalence by most South Africans, and is depicted in this vein in Stern’s *Umgababa*. I would thus interpret the work as expressing the contemporary contradictory feeling of pride in South Africa’s technological progress and at the same time in supposedly archaic “natives.”

Umgababa is one of Stern’s extremely rare depictions of black South Africans that include signs of modernity. Eleven years later, she would call the area around the trading station “a place unspoilt by civilisation.”³⁹ The contradiction of hoping to find “primitive” peoples in a “civilized” state is further complicated by the fact that South African artists such as Stern were aware of European settlers’ oppression of their black subjects, but not prepared to fight it. For example, in a letter to the Jewish author Richard Feldman of July 25, 1935, Stern writes that she is trying “to find out which places in Zulu land would still be O.K [sic] for primitive natives. It looks to me—this is my last trip triing [sic] to find things that are dying out—thanks to ourselves.”⁴⁰ In a letter to Thelma Gutsche of 1948, Stern tells her friend and supporter about her African maid, who “had her first pregnancie [sic] with the age of 14—now she is 18 and is supporting 2 children and working to pay for her divorce—what a depth of tragedie [sic] we have around us if we only can see.”⁴¹ This shows that Stern was aware of black South Africans’ modern realities. As mentioned before, however, she and other artists of her time had little interest in changing these extreme imbalances, as they were afraid of the consequences to their careers. White minority rule in South Africa was always threatened by the idea of an empowerment of the non-white majority, and there was simply no economically powerful audience for works openly addressing this threat. This becomes clear in a letter Stern wrote to Feldman in 1955, seven years after the rise of the apartheid regime:

The lovely fairy tale outlook on Nativ [sic] life – which my early work had – can hardly continue – when I see the most lovely people acting not like children but like devilles [sic] incarnate to the white people up in Kyenja [sic] – . Of course – I can understand their sudden awakening and finding their land full of white

raced people – who have their foot on their necks – but still I cannot say – I am looking happy & peacefully into the future of “our” South Africa. We are just passionately awaiting a huge blood bath. Stoking it on daily – hourly – giving with the left hand only taking with the right.⁴²

As a result of the political hostility towards white South Africans, Stern ceased her travels within the African continent in the 1950s and traveled to France, Spain, and Turkey instead. Changing her style from painterly, thick impastos of vivid colors to more graphical works with thinly applied paint and a sketch-like character, she now concentrated on Europe’s “primitives”: peasants and field workers, still largely female.

Lippy Lipshitz

One of South Africa’s most prominent sculptors, Lippy (or Israel-Isaac) Lipshitz (1903–1980) came to the country as a young child in 1908, with the rest of the family, to join his father, who had migrated from Lithuania to Cape Town four years earlier. In his childhood, Lipshitz was greatly influenced by his grandfather, who built wooden synagogues and fashioned religious wood carvings, as folk art was still very popular in Lithuania at the time.⁴³ This interest in parochial—especially Jewish—folk art can be detected in Lipshitz’s work throughout his career.⁴⁴ It later mixed with an interest in West African sculpture. This was first prompted by the Russian-Jewish sculptor H. V. (Herbert Vladimir) Meyerowitz (1900–1945), who came from Berlin to South Africa in 1925. Lipshitz soon became Meyerowitz’s mentee and, under his influence, started specializing in wood.⁴⁵

Meyerowitz took an uncommon stance towards African art, and considered himself a reformer and educationalist. In his report on village crafts in Lesotho, for example, he criticizes the “particular type of history of Art and Art Appreciation which has been taught in the past 150 years” for being a “narrow-minded, intolerant... misrepresentation” taking a purely Western perspective.⁴⁶ However, Meyerowitz still takes the same Western, “primitivist” approach when describing Basotho crafts as “the earliest form of pottery, similar to those examples found within the precincts of the earliest human habitations,” and worries about their corruption caused by the tourist “curio” market.⁴⁷ He precludes the possibility of a development in the Basotho’s artmaking by portraying it as timeless, as well as the possibility of an autonomous, market-oriented production. Meyerowitz also gave Lipshitz a copy of Einstein’s *Negerplastik*. It is likely that Lipshitz had not been in close contact with African sculptures before seeing *Negerplastik*, as they were not considered valuable or even art in South Africa at the time.⁴⁸ While he had great admiration for the artworks depicted in this volume, this at first did not echo in his work. In 1928, however, he moved to Paris to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He stayed there for about four years and, in 1929, met Brancusi and visited his studio. Lipshitz later recalled:

His [Brancusi's] work, and Zadkine's, the greatest carvers of the age, held me spellbound. The inspiration of primitive, and particularly of African Negro Art, embodied in their work, appealed to me, and released my long pent-up desire to base my art on the art of Africa.⁴⁹

In addition to formal concerns, it is likely that Lipshitz was also interested in the religious/spiritual component ascribed to African art. In *Negerplastik*, Einstein proclaims that African art does not symbolize anything, but is itself the religious or the spiritual, autonomous, and more powerful than its producer, requiring no mediation.⁵⁰

Lipshitz's combination of Jewish topics and a formal language influenced by African sculpture becomes evident in *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (fig. 5). The 70-centimeter-tall sculpture is one of Lipshitz's medium-sized works and conducted in ebony, a material he did not use as frequently as others, such as stinkwood, marble, concrete, or ivory. The shapes of the entwined figures' bodies recall Fang or Chokwe pieces like those depicted in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.⁵¹ Additionally, Lipshitz followed the properties of the wood while shaping it, emphasizing the work's materiality. Stereotypical characteristics (partly derived from West African carving traditions) cited in Lipshitz's work, such as naked bodies with rounded bottoms, thighs, and calves, exaggerated hands and feet, as well as shaved, round heads, suggest that the artist was portraying Jacob and the angel as black Africans. This fact is enhanced by his use of ebony, a material that, according to a contemporary review of an exhibition that probably included this work, was "the wood traditionally associated with dark Africa."⁵² This was certainly considered unusual for a Jewish theme such as the Israelites' founding father's night-long struggle with the angel of the lord. This importance of indigenization is also reflected in the contemporary press's interest in specifically South African art forms. For example, in 1948 a critic reviewing the exhibition of contemporary South African art at the Tate Gallery writes that Lipshitz's works "are not sculptures of Africans by a European, as are Kottler's, but the heart of Africa is in them."⁵³ This remark indicates that critics attributed to Lipshitz's "primitivism" a more specifically African nature than to works by Moses Kottler, an older generation sculptor, who was also a Lithuanian Jew and had migrated to Cape Town in 1916, where he practiced a more conservative and naturalist mode of sculpting.

Another work illustrating Lipshitz's interest in Jewish imagery combined with a localized "primitivism" is *Tree of Life* of 1950 (fig. 6). The 127-centimeter-tall sculpture is made from South African yellowwood and depicts a mother and child. It is one of Lipshitz's larger works. The two figures portrayed are again black Africans, and their features again show similarities to West African sculptures illustrated in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.⁵⁴ In Judaism, the Tree of Life (Etz Chaim in Hebrew) has different meanings and usages: it is used to describe the individual wooden poles to which the parchment of a Sefer Torah is attached, it can figuratively be applied to the Torah itself, it is a common name for yeshivas

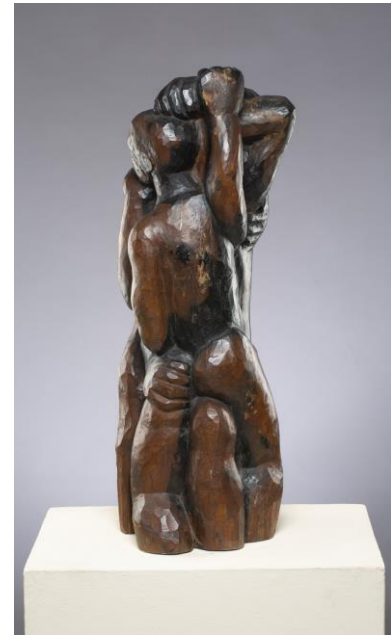


Fig. 5. Lippy Lipshitz, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1946, ebony, height: 70 cm, Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections. Photo: Nigel Pamplin, Iziko Museums.

and synagogues, it can refer to the biblical tree of life, and, in Jewish mysticism, it is the central symbol of the Kabbalah. In Lipshitz's treatment of it as a study of a mother and child, the tree of life also retains another meaning: that of motherhood and ancestry. The fact that he chose yellowwood, a tree indigenous to South Africa that has since been declared the country's national tree, indicates a connection between soil, land, and indigenous population.⁵⁵ Lipshitz again emphasizes the locality of his topic and, on the other hand, draws a line from specifically Jewish symbolism to universal issues such as procreation, nativity, and belonging.

In addition to such references to African sculpture in his own works, Lipshitz also showed a more general interest in African art. In 1941, for example, he organized an exhibition of *African Native Art* at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town with fellow artist John Dronsfield. The exhibition's goal was to promote the displayed works' status as fine art (as opposed to ethnographical objects) and an appreciation of African art in South Africa.⁵⁶ A quarter of the exhibits were loaned by Irma Stern.⁵⁷ Moreover, Lipshitz was very interested in the works and careers of the black South African artists Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002) and Gerard Sekoto (1913–1993). Lipshitz and Mancoba had regularly met between 1936 and 1938, when the latter moved to Paris. In his diaries, Lipshitz mentions that Mancoba visited him in order to talk about art, and emphasizes that he considered his own sculptures an important influence on the black sculptor's work.⁵⁸ Christine Eyenne describes that Mancoba's "imagery took another direction after his encounter with classical African art," facilitated, on the one hand, by visits to Irma Stern's collection and, on the other, through reading Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, on the recommendation of Lippy Lipshitz.⁵⁹ This 1926 publication contains an "overview" of West African sculpture popular at the time, as well as descriptions of its influence on modern art in Europe.

Lipshitz's "primitivizing" attitude towards black South African modernists becomes obvious in his writings on Mancoba's friend and mentee, the painter Gerard Sekoto. In a letter to Millie Levy of 1948, he describes Sekoto's works as exhibiting an "intimate glimpse and direct technique," and compares them favorably with the "effective and consciously naïve" works by the prominent South African painter Maggie Laubser.⁶⁰ He hence attributes Sekoto's supposedly "primitive" paintings a greater "authenticity" than Laubser's controlled "primitivism," venerating Sekoto's "immediacy" in line with the "primitivist" quest for a more authentic art. In an article for *The African Drum* published in 1951, he argues that Sekoto's work had been deteriorating since he moved to Paris, as he lost his roots and his authentic experiences of black South African life.⁶¹ He does not explain this impression and, retrospectively, there is no clear breach in style detectable. It is therefore likely that Lipshitz was referring to Sekoto's South African subjects. His critique again stresses the importance of locality and indigeneity in South African "primitivism." Additionally, Mancoba and



Fig. 6. Lippy Lipshitz, *Tree of Life*, 1950, yellowwood, height: 127 cm, Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections. Photo: Nigel Pamplin, Iziko Museums.

Sekoto themselves can be considered as actively joining the “primitivist” project when they, both mission-trained Christians, went on tourist visits to traditional Ndebele villages close to the school they taught at and incorporated Ndebele geometric designs into their respective formal languages.⁶² The “primitivist” concerns detectable in some of the works by Mancoba and Sekoto, who were largely considered to be untrained “primitives” by their white South African contemporaries, is another example of the ambivalences inherent in “primitivism” in South Africa.

Conclusion

Departing from the European appreciation of African art they came to know through their sojourns in Europe, as well as works such as Einstein’s *Negerplastik*, Stern and Lipshitz laid the foundations for a specifically South African “settler primitivism” that is characterized by strong ambivalences and a special concern with locality. The former was caused, on the one hand, by the fact that, in contrast to European artists, South African “primitivists” were in regular contact with the people whom they portrayed as “primitives” and knew that the ethnic tribal peoples they idolized were not representative of black South Africans at that point in time. By depicting their black compatriots as “noble savages,” they purposefully disregarded their realities and furthered cultural differences. On the other hand, South African modernists such as Stern and Lipshitz were aware of European settlers’ oppression of their black subjects, but not prepared to fight it. Instead, they utilized traditional black culture to proclaim their own indigeneity. The fact that Lipshitz references West African works illustrates the broadness in which such indigeneity was defined. Since the materials he used were largely specific to South Africa, however, his works, like Stern’s depictions of South African communities such as Ndebele, Swazis, or Zulus, were received as products of a new national culture by contemporary audiences in South Africa and abroad.

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1. When speaking about the South African art scene, critics, audiences, production, and reception in general terms, this article primarily refers to white South Africans, since, due to extensive racial discrimination, the non-white majority were pushed to the extreme margins of such public concerns; a few exceptions such as Ernest Mancoba or Gerard Sekoto aside, in the first half of the twentieth century non-whites were chiefly artistic subjects.
2. The fact that a lot of significant artists (Stern and Lipshitz included) and authors (e.g., Richard Feldman, David Fram, Sarah Gertrude Millin) as well as important collectors of African art in South Africa (e.g., Maria Stein-Lessing, Hilda Purwitsky, Roza van Gelderen) were Jewish immigrants can be explained through the hostilities toward Jewish elites in most European countries at the time. Jewish immigrants were usually well connected, in their countries of origin as well as internationally. Furthered by the strengthening of anti-Semitic movements such as the Afrikaner nationalist Broederbond, founded in 1918, or the Quota Act of 1930, which was intended to contain Jewish migration from Eastern Europe, they also formed close ties within South Africa.
3. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18–19.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 2.
7. *Ibid.* Also compare Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), xiii.
8. For example, Christoph Otterbeck, *Europa verlassen. Künstlerreisen am Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2007), 324.
9. For example, Robert Fulford, “The Trouble with Emily,” in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, eds. John O’Brian and Peter White (Montreal/Kingston/London/Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 223–228, 224.
10. This is, for example, reflected in the current restitution debate rendering new public attention to Europe’s ethnographical museums and colonial collections.
11. For a summary of the debate between 1985 and 1998, see Flam and Deutch, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 311–414.
12. Ian McLean, “Crossing Country: Tribal Modernism and Kuninjku Bark Painting,” *Third Text* 20, no. 5 (2006): 599–616, 603.
13. Palmer describes the cultural and political contexts in which objects such as the Kwakwaka’wakw mask reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue were produced and focuses on the exhibition’s indigenous audience. Carolyn Butler Palmer, “Renegotiating Identity: ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art as Family Narrative,” *Frontiers* 29, no. 2/3 (2008): 186–223.
14. Monica Blackmun Visonà, “Agent Provocateur? The African Origin and American Life of a Statue from Côte d’Ivoire,” *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 1 (March 2012): 99–129, 121.
15. Partha Mitter, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531–548, 540.
16. Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art / Colonial Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson 1999), 12.
17. John Pepper, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6.
18. Irma Stern, “How I Began to Paint,” *Cape Argus*, July 12, 1926. The exchange of letters between Stern and Pechstein is analyzed in Irene Below, “... wird es mir eine Freude sein, Ihnen Ihren eigenen Weg zu zeigen.’ Irma Stern und Max Pechstein,” in *Liebe macht Kunst. Künstlerpaare im 20.*

- Jahrhundert*, ed. Renate Berger (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000), 37–64.
19. Stern only spent some of her childhood in South Africa. The black South Africans she saw frequently were domestics or laborers, rather than the exotic “primitives” she depicted in her paintings. When she returned to South Africa as an adult in the 1920s, she purposefully traveled to areas in South Africa where she could meet black communities leading traditional lives and paint them.
 20. For example, Fritz Stahl, “Ausstellungen,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, January 13, 1918.
 21. Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (Leipzig: Verlag der Weissen Bücher, 1915), V.
 22. Einstein, *Negerplastik*, VII–VIII. Einstein does include chapters on what he calls African psychology, religion, and ritual, and thereby reneges his own resolution of disregarding ethnographical concerns.
 23. Also compare Z. S. Strother, “Looking for Africa in Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik*,” *African Arts* 46, no. 4 (2013): 8–21, 8–10.
 24. *Ibid.*, 10.
 25. Also see Marion Arnold, *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye* (Stellenbosch: Fernwood Press, 1995), 129; and Irene Below, “Irma Stern (1894–1966) - Afrika mit den Augen einer weißen Malerin. Moderne Kunst zwischen Europa und Afrika - Zentrum und Peripherie und die Debatte um moderne Kunst in nichtwestlichen Ländern,” *kritische berichte* 25, no. 3 (1997): 42–68, 47.
 26. Marion Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996), 80.
 27. Jeanne van Eeden, “Irma Stern’s first exhibition in Pretoria, 1933,” *South African Journal of Art History* 13 (1998): 89–104, 95–96.
 28. There is no indication that Stern was referencing other (class) “primitivist” works showing stonebreakers, such as Gustave Courbet’s 1849 painting, although her familiarity with the latter cannot be ruled out. It is likely that the subject refers to Stern’s childhood in the Transvaal, a state that was home to gold and diamond mines owned by white businesses such as Cecil Rhode’s De Beers diamond company, which exploited black laborers as well as convicts from 1885.
 29. Lippy Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, entry written on October 26, 1936 (University of Cape Town, Jagger Library Special Collection, BC856). Other South African artists who were strongly influenced by Ndebele visual culture were the painter Alexis Preller and the photographer Constance Stuart Larabee.
 30. On (sexualized) racism in Stern’s work see Marilyn Wyman, “Irma Stern: Envisioning the ‘Exotic,’” *Woman’s Art Journal* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 18–23; LaNitra Michele Walker, “Pictures That Satisfy: Modernist Discourses and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Nation in the Art of Irma Stern” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2009); and Clive Kellner, “Representations of the Black Subject in Irma Stern’s African Periods: Swaziland, Zanzibar and Congo 1922–1955” (MA diss., University of Cape Town, 2012).
 31. Irma Stern, “My Exotic Models,” *Cape Argus*, April 3, 1926.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. N.N., “Painting Among the Swazis,” *Cape Argus*, December 14, 1927.
 34. N.N., “Natives No Longer Picturesque. Woman Artist Finds Them ‘Civilised’ and Sad. Lost Beauty of Their Natural State,” *Cape Argus*, July 5, 1933.
 35. Marion Arnold, “European Modernism and African Domicile: Women Painters and the Search for Identity,” in *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910–1994*, eds. Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmähmann (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 51–70, 63. For nationalism and “primitivism,” also compare Sarah Sinisi, “Irma Stern (1894–1966), the Creation of an Artist’s Reputation in her Lifetime and Posthumously, 1920–2013” (MA diss., University of Cape Town, 2015), 35–36.

36. Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 203.
37. Irma Stern, *Umgababa* (unpublished manuscript; South African National Library, Special Collections, Irma Stern Collection, MSB31:1.15), 45. Stern composed the manuscript in German. Parts of it were published in Max Osborn, *Irma Stern. Junge Kunst* 51 (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Bierman, 1927).
38. Foster, *Washed with Sun*, 201.
39. Irma Stern, "Irma Stern and her Work," *South African Life and the Woman's Forum*, December 7, 1933.
40. Reproduced in Sandra Klopper, *Irma Stern: Are you still alive? Stern's life and art seen through her letters to Richard and Freda Feldman, 1934–1966* (Cape Town: Orisha Publishing, 2017), 50. This is the original spelling and punctuation.
41. Irma Stern, letter to Thelma Gutsche, January 22, 1948 (Johannesburg Public Library, S Store 759.9(68)Stern). Original spelling and punctuation.
42. Reproduced in Klopper, *Irma Stern*, 182. Original spelling and punctuation. In a similar vein, Stern wrote to her friend Betty Lunn a few years later: "I am not chasing for a dream primitiv nativ [sic] at all – Betty – but am quite aware of the West ruining them in all ways. – Maybe if – once they have their own country independ [sic] of white – the influence of the Russian-European will come useful to them – God beware – I should not like to witness it myself. I have been in Dakar – that was quite enough for me." Irma Stern, letter to Betty Lunn, August 10, 1959 (University of Cape Town, Jagger Library Special Collection, BC760). Original spelling and punctuation.
43. Bruce Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1969), 3–4.
44. Presumably for this reason, Frieda Harmsen claims that all of Lipshitz's art, no matter whether it was "biblical, secular, pantheistic, is profoundly religious." Frieda Harmsen, "Art in South Africa: A Short Survey," in *Report from South Africa*, ed. Department of Information (London: South African Embassy, July/August 1972), 1–39, 26.
45. Lippy Lipshitz, diaries 1920 to 1928, entry written on August 21, 1927 (University of Cape Town, Jagger Library Special Collection, BC856).
46. H. V. Meyerowitz, *A Report on the Possibilities of the Development of Village Crafts in Basutoland* (Moriya: Morija Printing Works, 1936), 5.
47. H. V. Meyerowitz, "Pottery in Basutoland," *Cape Times*, November 24, 1934.
48. For example, Sandra Klopper, "South Africa's Culture of Collecting: The Unofficial History," *African Arts* 37, no. 4 (2004): 18–25, 19. Natalie Knight, ed., *l'Afrique: A Tribute to Maria Stein-Lessing and Leopold Spiegel* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009), 25, 31–32.
49. Cited in Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz*, 10.
50. Einstein, *Negerplastik*, XV. Einstein changed this view already in 1926, when he pleaded for the ethnographical museum in Berlin to adopt a cultural scientific, art ethnographical approach contextualizing the works displayed. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz. Postkoloniale Perspektiven vom 16. bis 21. Jahrhundert* (Marburg: Jonas-Verl. für Kunst und Literatur, 2010), 212.
51. For example, Einstein, *Negerplastik*, 21, 36, 42, 53. As mentioned before, Einstein does not provide any information on the origin/context of the artworks he reproduced.
52. Frede Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," *Libertas* 4, no. 11 (October 1946): 37–39, 38.
53. Cited in Lippy Lipshitz, letter to Millie Levy, 1948 (University of Cape Town, Jagger Library Special Collection, BC856).
54. The woman's head, for example, resembles the work reproduced on page 14, while her body shows similarities with the illustrations on pages 35, 50, 58, and 67.
55. Also compare Leusoh, "Art in infinite dimensions," 38: "By his preoccupation and constant experiment with South African

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- woods and stones, yellowwood, silverwood... he makes his works deeply-rooted and indigenous.”
56. Lippy Lipshitz, “Introduction” in *Catalogue of the Exhibition of African Native Art* (Cape Town: Argus Gallery, June 1941).
 57. The majority of the remaining works originated from the collections of the Leopoldville Museum, in today’s Kinshasa, and the Belgian artist Maurice van Essche, who had moved to South Africa from Congo in 1940.
 58. Lippy Lipshitz, diaries 1932 to 1936, entries written on August 2 and 14, 1938 (University of Cape Town, Jagger Library Special Collection, BC856).
 59. Christine Eyenne, “Yearning for Art: Exile, Aesthetics and Cultural Legacy” in *Visual Century: South African Art in Context, Volume 2*, ed. Lize Van Robbroeck (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 96–119, 99.
 60. Lipshitz, letter to Millie Levy.
 61. Lippy Lipshitz, “Sekoto,” *The African Drum* (June 1951), 20–22.
 62. Compare Elza Miles, *Land and Live: A story of early black artists* (Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau, 1997), 77; Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid*, 3.