





In public

The apartheid system had a dramatic effect on the organisation of personal and public space during the time that its discriminatory legislation was vigilantly implemented. Fourteen years into democracy, it continues to influence and even underpin many experiences of location and movement in contemporary South Africa. While the apartheid system endeavoured to police so much of public space, especially where people of different races came into contact with each other (in the instance of the city, for example), interiorised social spaces often permitted the constitution and expression of identities that were self-determined rather than being orchestrated by the hand of the state. S E B Ngcobo's *Musicians* (1955), set in an interior space that is probably more than just a musical venue, captures a creative moment that became the stock in trade of so many 'township' artists seeking examples of resilience in the face of oppression. The three musicians are large and dominant in their handling of the unusual combination of guitar, violin and accordion, and as with David Moganó's attention to the fashions of Alexandra's residents (pp.40-42), Ngcobo has paid particular attention to dressing his musicians with the individual details of socks and shoes. Ngcobo's *Musicians* was painted at the height of what is known as the 'Drum era', when the creative and artistic life of places such as Sophiatown were celebrated and immortalised in the photographs and stories that appeared in *Drum* magazine. George Pemba's *Hope* (1993), produced in the year before the first democratic elections, captures the easy mood of a public group celebrating arrival and return.

Rory Bester

Above:
Pemba, George Milwa Mnyaluza (1912-2001)
Hope 1993
 Oil and pencil on board, 53 x 76.5 cm

Opposite:
Ngcobo, S E B (Unknown)
Musicians 1955
 Oil on board, 69 x 97.5 cm



Maggie Laubser (1886-1973)

When referring to an artist, the usual convention is to use the surname, rather than the more familiar first name, which refers to the individual as a person. In Maggie Laubser's case this distinction became blurred when she entered the South African art arena in the late 1920s and 30s and was collected avidly by largely Afrikaans-speaking intelligentsia. It was common for collectors and critics alike to refer to a "Pierneef", an "Oerder", a "Van Wouw" and a "Maggie". Due partly to gender bias, this informal and affectionate familiarity was perhaps also encouraged by the kind of person she was, as well as her rural background which was to inform much of her subject matter throughout her life. A quiet, low-key, somewhat naive woman, born in the wheat-growing district of the Boland to the north-east of Cape Town, Laubser's art depicts a simple country life with a stable feudal order in broad strokes, bold palette and flat planes of colour. Laubser brought to her largely urban bourgeois market a vision of an idealised world where the pace is slow and where there is a Breughel-like vision of peasant life. Men work in the fields, harvest the wheat, tend sheep and catch fish, while women collect wood and water, all against the backdrop of the wheat farms of the Western Cape, the landscape of the eastern Free State, and in and near the fishing villages of Saldanha, Gansbaai and Langebaan.

Growing out of a tradition of late 19th and early 20th century primitivism (like Gauguin's paintings in Brittany), Laubser's farm and landscape scenes embody everything that is removed from modern, industrial, urban society. While residing in Europe between 1913 and 1924, Laubser always preferred to work away from the urban centres. In Holland in 1913 she stayed in an artists' colony in Laren, in the United Kingdom during the war years she spent as much time as possible in remote places like the Scottish highlands, and in Belgium (June 1919 to September 1920) she went to the countryside to paint *plein-air*. Italy, where Laubser worked at Lake Garda, symbolised for her (as with many English and American women) a space of unfettered freedom and spontaneity where she could walk "hatless and barefoot". She lived in Berlin, Germany, from 1922 to 1924, but spent a short time at an artists' colony at Ahrenshoop on the Baltic Sea where she met Irma Stern.

Laubser constantly referred to the influence of the German Expressionists on her painting style, noting how she used a primitivising simplification of form, which drew on the work of *Die Brücke*, particularly Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, and the spirit of the members of *Der Blaue Reiter* like Franz Marc. Although *Die Brücke* had not exhibited as a group for almost a decade prior to Laubser's arrival in Germany in 1922, she saw their work and met several of the artists. She admired the Expressionists for the apparent spontaneity and immediacy of their images, adopting the gestural brush mark, simplified block-like forms, and vivid palette on her return to South Africa in 1924.

Laubser's utopian vision was also connected to her life-long commitment to Christian Science. The first documented indication of Laubser's interest in Christian Science dated to 1921 when she was given a book of the same title by her friend, benefactor and lover, Jan Balwé. Balwé was an ex-Dutch Consul to South Africa and a successful businessman who was responsible for encouraging Laubser to leave South Africa at the age of 27 to travel in Europe. Christian Science is a metaphysical belief system of healing, proposing a transcendent spiritual world removed from everyday materiality. As a Christian Scientist she not only chose subject matter that was idyllic and harmonious, but through her painting style she simplified extraneous detail and reduced objects to their most recognisable and essential attributes. She wrote: "I did not want to paint things or events or ideas but wanted to paint visions. Whatever the object on my canvas ... it must only represent the final spiritual shape of that object."¹

Although the subject matter of Laubser's paintings fell within the accepted canon of genres in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century – landscapes, portraits and still lifes – the stylistic presentation of these themes was considered modern and avant-garde. Laubser found difficulty in sustaining this vanguard position, however, never leaving South Africa after 1924. She stayed on her parents' farm until 1936 and after moving to Cape Town, finally settled at her own home *Altyd Lig* [Always Light] in the Strand in 1947. She died in 1973 at the age of 87. Liz Delmont

Opposite:
Laubser, Maria Magdalena (Maggie) (1886-1973)
Landscape, Orange Free State Undated
Oil on board, 44.5 x 54.5 cm





The rural idyll

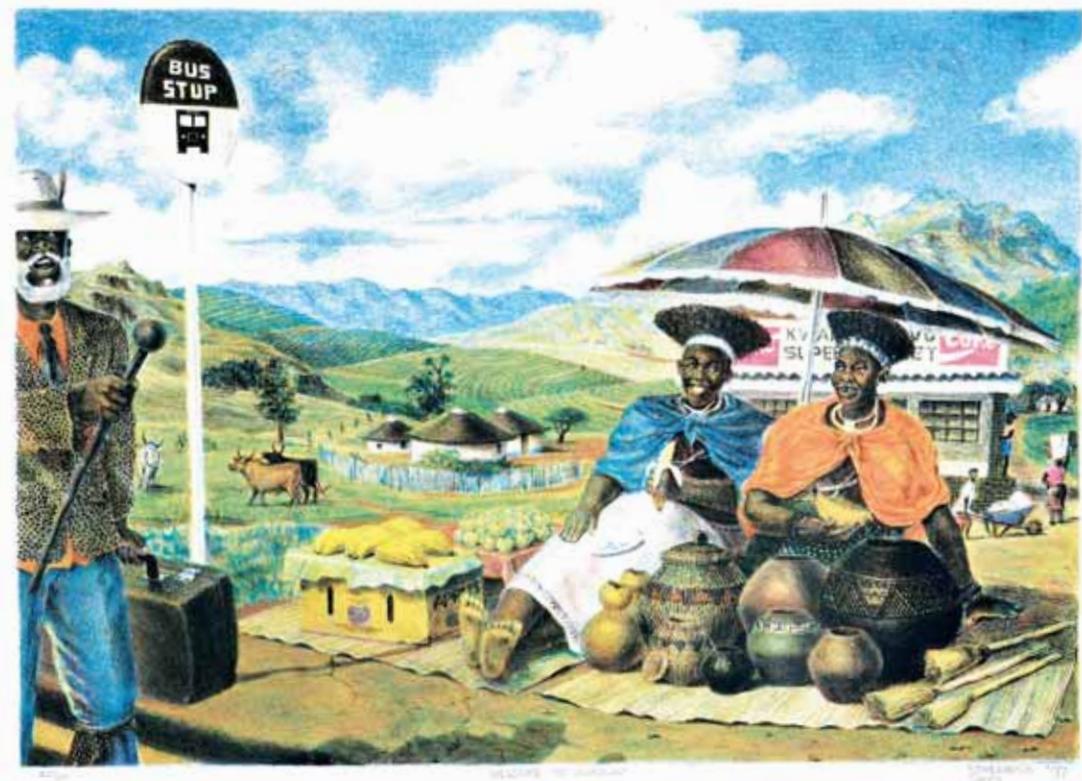
The visualisation of a picturesque scene, especially in treatments of rustic life, is a cornerstone of art history's fascination with the idyll. In South Africa the use of the thatched rondavel, a traditional round hut, is commonplace in landscape versions of such scenes. Like the similarly thatched fisher cottages in coastal views of the Cape coast, the architecture of the rondavel is often incorporated into the painting to signify the geographical region and/or frame the view of this geography. At the end of World War II, Robert Pohl travelled extensively in what are now the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces and in Mozambique, and his view here characteristically evokes a traveller's sense of distance. In Pohl's *Mount Anderson* (1956) the rondavel and its human inhabitants are placed in the right foreground, framing the view into the blue hills beyond. Otto Klar's undated *Huts* is dominated by a small settlement of rondavels and, like Pohl, offers a sentimental view that has little to do with the inhabitants of these dwellings. Unlike Klar and Pohl, Sthembiso Sibisi and David Mogano have integrated thatched rondavels into narrative scenes that explore the lives of individuals and communities. Sibisi's *Welcome to KwaZulu* (1997) has the rondavel as part of a number of other signifiers – including women in traditional dress, traditional ceramic pots and livestock – to signify an idyllic return to a rural environment. Where Sibisi has incorporated a number of contemporary elements into his lithograph, including Western dress and the supermarket, Mogano's undated *The Burning Kraal* is more traditional in its representation of the details of village life.

Rory Bester

Above:
Klar, Otto (1908-1994)
Huts Undated
 Oil on board, 29 x 90 cm

Opposite:
Pohl, Robert (1917-1981)
Mount Anderson 1956
 Oil on board, 60.5 x 83.5 cm

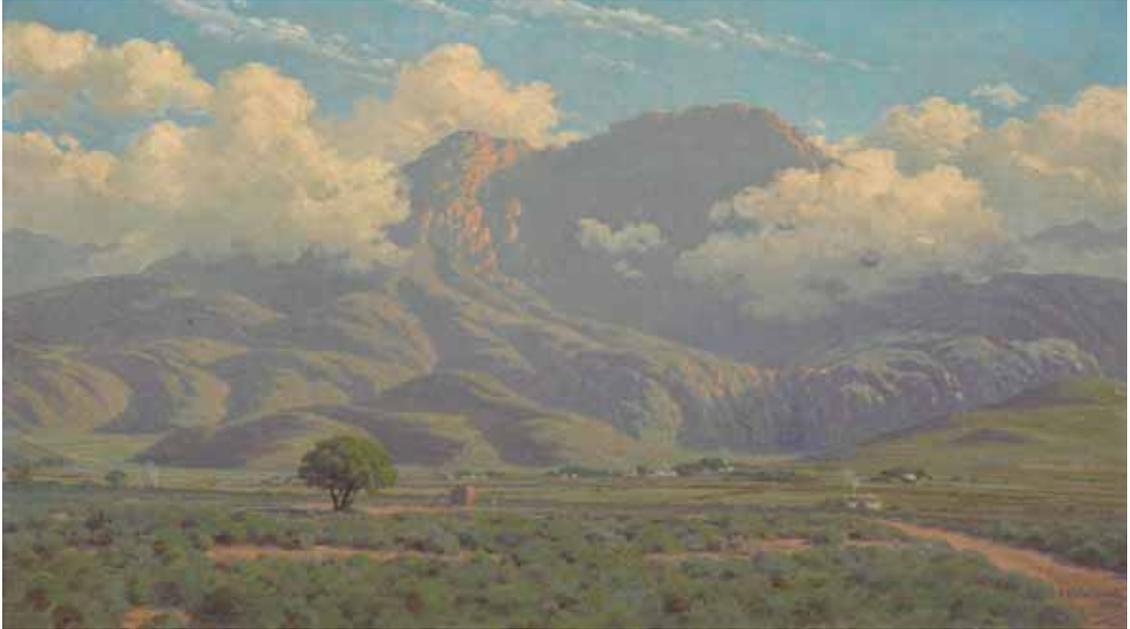




Above:
Sibisi, Sthembiso (1976-2006)
Welcome to KwaZulu 1997
Lithograph 22/60, 34 x 47 cm



Above:
Mogano, Phoshoko David (1932-2000)
The Burning Kraal Undated
Watercolour on paper, 50 x 71.5 cm



Pastoral scenes

Much like the idyllic and iconographic use of thatched rondavels in South African art, pastoral scenes commonly employ rural settings to paint a romantic picture of everyday life. Such scenes are normally associated with the care of livestock – usually sheep and cattle – and the use of land for animal pastures (as opposed to uses such as crop farming). Herdsmen, milkmaids, pastoralists, shepherds and shepherdesses are common figures in international examples of this genre, and the following extract from Christopher Marlowe’s poem, *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love*, captures much of the sentimentality of the pastoral:

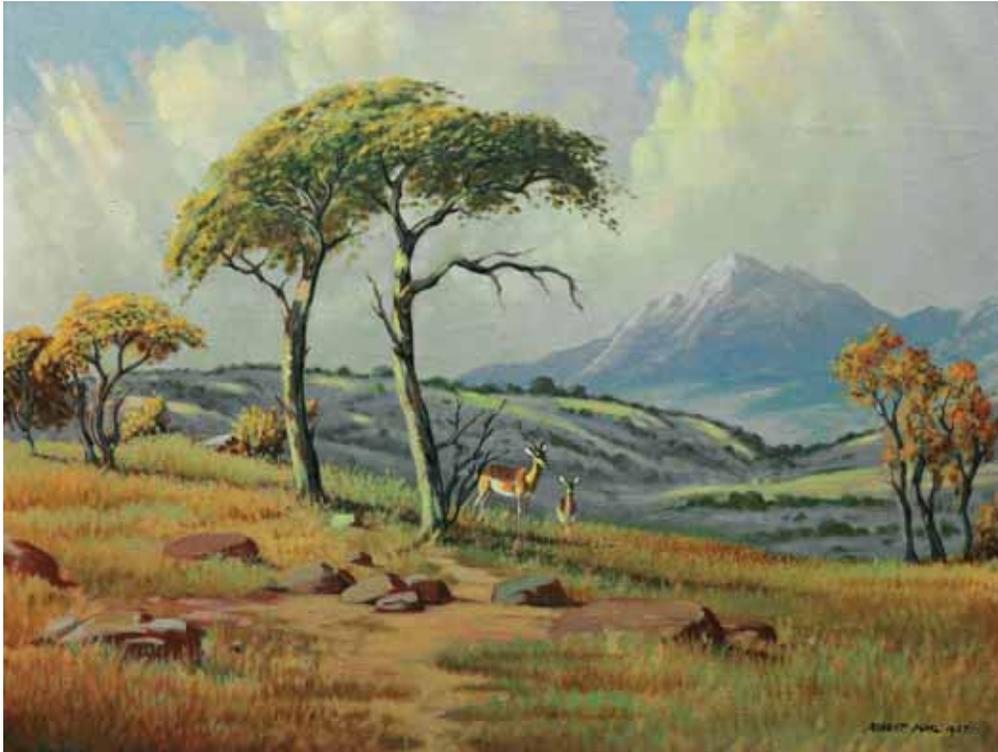
Come live with me and be my Love, / And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dale and field, / And all the craggy mountains yield.
There we sit upon the rocks / And see the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers, to whose falls / Melodious birds sing madrigals.

While pastoral scenes are set in places of striking beauty and often suggest a sense of simplicity, ease and leisure, many local examples of the genre are also adamant and even overt about the ownership and production of rural land. Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk’s *Bright Morning after Rain near Ladismith* (1920) is an idealisation of quiet, rural order. It offers a clear morning view across the Karoo scrubland that typically sustains grazing sheep, towards dispersed farm settlements and the predominance of the glistening mountain beyond. In W H Coetzer’s *The Drift* (1956) the composition is dominated by the presence of the Drakensberg mountain range and its attendant cloud formations. The line of the hill in the middleground is dotted with thatched rondavels. A head-laden woman and a child stand close by. But it is the foreground which defines the occupation of the landscape: Two women, wearing traditional Voortrekker *kappies* [bonnets], watch over the cattle and sheep drinking from the still water. **Rory Bester**

Above:
Volschenk, Jan Ernst Abraham (1853-1936)
Bright Morning after Rain near Ladismith 1920
Oil on canvas, 43 x 76 cm

Opposite:
Coetzer, Willem Hermanus (1900-1983)
The Drift 1956
Oil on canvas-covered board, 51 x 63.5 cm





Above:
Pohl, Robert (1917-1981)
Bushveld Scene 1957
 Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm

Opposite:
Lekgetho, Simon (1909-1985)
Landscape 1960
 Oil on board, 44 x 55 cm

Overleaf:
Coetzer, Willem Hermanus (1900-1983)
Springbok Flats 1942
 Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 86 cm

Bushveld scenes

The painted views by Robert Pohl and Simon Lekgetho, in their focus on the detail and specificity of geography, offer the viewer an intimate sense of pausing in a particular place. Pohl's use of flora and fauna, and Lekgetho's modulation of the riverbanks both work to keep the viewer's attention on the immediacy of each foreground and middleground. Their landscape formulations are quite distinct from the more sublime landscape that W H Coetzer has created in *Springbok Flats* (1942). Well known for his narrative representations of the human drama of Voortrekker history, this 'empty' landscape is dominated by a sky that consumes most of the composition. Rendered in a twilight scheme of blues and pinks, Coetzer has created a painting that shifts attention away from the immediate geography towards the vast open spaces of both the far distance and the sky above. It creates a momentum that is both an evocation and invitation to travel and journey through the land. This call to set forward is reiterated by the artist's characteristic use of distant smoke trails of ambiguous origins. The works of Coetzer, Lekgetho and Pohl stand in contrast to the dramatically stylised Bushveld landscapes produced by J H Pierneef, whose perspectival manipulations, exaggerations of tree formations and rigid compositional order created a series of 'heroic' landscapes. **Rory Bester**