











Left:  
**Theys, Conrad Nagel Doman** (b.1940)  
*First Clouds over Namaqualand* 1983  
 Oil on canvas, 38.5 x 46 cm

Right:  
**Naudé, Pieter Hugo** (1868-1941)  
*Spring Flowers, Namaqualand* Undated  
 Watercolour on paper, 20 x 28 cm

Opposite:  
**Naudé, Pieter Hugo** (1868-1941)  
*Landscape, Namaqualand* Undated  
 Oil on board, 24.5 x 34.5 cm

### *Namaqualand*

The springtime flowers in the dry and even arid Namaqualand, north of Cape Town, have been a source of fascination and inspiration for many South African artists who have responded to the region's stark geography and vivid flora in a wide range of personal styles. In *Looking at South African Art* (1988), Frieda Harmsen suggests that the mature Hugo Naudé, along with Strat Caldecott, is one of the "undisputed South African Impressionists".<sup>1</sup> Between 1889 and 1894 Naudé received his training in academic realism from the Slade School of Art in London and the Kunst-Akademie in Munich. He then spent a year in Barbizon, the French village where Pleinairism originated. Involving an abandonment of the studio in favour of painting entirely in the open air, this physical movement outside by the Barbizon painters is often cited as one of the inspirations that made the French Impressionists go out and look more directly at nature. Naudé returned to South Africa in 1896 and spent 16 years travelling in Namaqualand, Damaraland and to the Victoria Falls. In the undated *Landscape, Namaqualand*, his point of view is close to the ground, allowing the impressionistic rendition of spring flowers to fill most of the small canvas. Naudé's particular interest in flora extended to the design of both a rock garden for the 1936 *Empire Exhibition* in Johannesburg, and the Garden of Remembrance in Worcester. Like Naudé, Conrad Theys was regularly drawn north from the Cape to Namaqualand and Namibia. *First Clouds over Namaqualand* (1983) bears a strong stylistic resemblance to the work of Gregoire Boonzaier, under whom Theys studied privately between 1969 and 1970. Rather than focusing on the brightly coloured flowers that draw so many visitors in springtime, Theys uses a muted palette of vertical brushstrokes to organise the flat, simplified shapes of a rocky outcrop and desert trees. **Rory Bester**





## Irma Stern (1894-1966)

Irma Stern was born in Schweizer-Reneke, North West Province, in 1894. Her parents were prosperous German Jews who retained strong ties with the cosmopolitan culture of Berlin, often moving between Germany and South Africa during Stern's youth. Stern began her art studies in Berlin soon after her 18th birthday and quickly gravitated towards the Expressionist idiom, a direction confirmed by her meeting in 1917 with *Die Brücke* artist, Max Pechstein. Works by Stern were included in the *Frei Secession* exhibitions of 1918 and 1920; and in May 1919 she showed 33 drawings at the Fritz Gurlitt Gallery in what the *Berliner Tageblatt* described as "all kinds of modern styles". By the time she settled in Cape Town in 1920, therefore, Stern was a successful young cosmopolitan artist committed to Modernism in the sense that she used her art to communicate the intensity of her feelings about life.

Stern retained strong contacts with Germany until the rise of Hitler, at which time she broke off relations with childhood friends and even stopped writing in German. But she remained somewhat aloof from what she considered the provincial life of the Cape. She called her first exhibition in 1922 *An Exhibition of Modern Art* expressly to signal her cosmopolitan status, and the poor critical reception of this show and other early exhibitions appears only to have confirmed her sense of cultural superiority. The expressionism of Stern's early style disrupted conventional notions of beauty at the Cape; and the emotional and sexual nature of her subjects clearly made her conservative, anglophile public uncomfortable. In particular, her African subjects were viewed very differently in Cape Town from their reception in Germany where they were taken as direct testaments of the raw human spirit: Colonial Cape Town saw itself as an outpost of civilisation in Africa and was determined to keep all forms of primitivism at a distance.

The impression given in Max Osborn's monograph on Stern, which was published in Berlin in 1927, is that the artist's birth and domicile in Africa provided a rare authenticity to her images of the continent. In fact, traditionalism was already confined to the Native Reserve Areas that had been established by the Land Act of 1913 with the main purpose of providing a constant supply of cheap labour for industrialised South Africa. Thus Stern effectively constructed her image of Africa by choosing to work in the reserves in the first place and then selecting her subjects and carefully removing any sign of Western civilisation from them. In the local context – as distinct from Berlin – Stern's nostalgic representation of African life simply underscored the impossibility of assimilation. Her description in *The Cape Argus* (12 June 1926) of African people as "lovely and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar animal-like beauty" reflects her stereotypical view of African subjects.

The dismay that Stern, like others of her generation, expressed at the increasing Westernisation of South Africa's black peoples, led her not to develop closer relationships with them, but rather to seek out people who had not yet been "spoiled" as subjects for her art. Between 1937 and 1946 she undertook a series of remarkable expeditions to Dakar, Zanzibar and the Belgian Congo, publishing idiosyncratic accounts of the last two. In these travels Stern continued to seek out the exotic, notably what she saw as quintessentially Arab, types in Zanzibar and aristocrat types among the Watussi in the Congo. But, importantly, she also came to temper her expressionist search for the primitive by a more considered account of sheer physical presence, particularly in the form of portrait studies. In this development Stern gradually abandoned the angular, linear expression, with limited chromatic range of her early years, in favour of more concentrated compositions of rich, sensual colour.

Stern's travels contributed to the expression of a powerful decorative quality in her work through her constant discovery of exotic materials, particularly textiles. In her middle years, like Matisse, she came to present her art, whatever its subject and whatever its source, as an affirmation of the richness of life. In the same spirit she began a remarkable collection of objects from many different cultures, which she both displayed in her home and incorporated into her art: Many still lifes feature oriental ceramics or African sculptures from her collection and she frequently used fragments of Zanzibar doors to frame her paintings. Significantly, Stern's developing interest in the form her art took, rather than her early concern with an expressionist purpose, led her increasingly to view her production within the context of European art history. From the 1940s she appears to have rekindled an interest in the art of the old masters, particularly in their treatment of religious and mythological subject matter. After World War II, in a self-conscious effort to modernise her style, she looked closely at the work of Picasso and other artists of the French Riviera. These formal experiments tended to loosen the concentrated vigour of her style and introduce a somewhat anecdotal quality to her late work. Stern died in 1966, having achieved magisterial status in South Africa. **Michael Godby**

Opposite:  
Stern, Irma (1894-1966)  
*Still Life with Roses* 1953  
Oil on canvas, 68.5 x 86.5 cm





Left:  
**Meintjes, Johannes** (1923-1980)  
*The White Jug* 1978  
 Oil on board, 61 x 52 cm

Right:  
**Zerffi, Florence Louise Josephine** (1882-1962)  
*Flower Arrangement* 1934  
 Oil on canvas, 48 x 37 cm

Opposite and detail overleaf:  
**Oerder, Frans David** (1867-1944)  
*Peach Blossom* Undated  
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm

### Still lifes

Beyond the evocation of a domestic vignette or the focus on the subtle beauty of colours and textures, the still life seemingly does little to provoke debate or controversy. In art criticism the still life is often relegated to the lowest rung of the hierarchy of genres, of which history, portraiture and landscape take precedence. In each of these artworks the artist takes a commonplace image in the domestic vocabulary – a vase of flowers – as subject matter. However, in their diversity of expression, all speak to the historical context of both artist and subject through the portrayal of material culture. Born and trained in Rotterdam, Frans Oerder was versed in the stylistic preoccupations of the 17th century Dutch still-life tradition. His *Peach Blossom* (undated) recalls this historical emphasis on meticulous detail and a focus on the textures and play of light on the objects portrayed. Florence Zerffi was a founding member of the New Group. *Flower Arrangement* (1934) displays a vase of shocking pink blossoms doubled in the reflection of a mirror. In *Art and Artists of South Africa* (1970), Esmé Berman notes Zerffi's dislike for the harshness of the South African sun, and her consequent choice to paint mostly indoors, where the darkened interiors allowed her to retain an intensity of colour.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Oerder and Zerffi works, Johannes Meintjes's *The White Jug* (1978) is an assimilation of European technique and South African sensibility. Through its position at the window, the jug is located within a larger milieu: Three women wearing *doeks* [head scarves], sitting with their heads bowed in an arid South African landscape. In an echo of the turbulent politics in South Africa in the late 1970s, the visual saturation of floral vitality in the white jug stands in quite dramatic contrast to the pious and barren environment outside the window.















Left:  
**Richards, Colin** (b.1954)  
*In the Bud* 1992  
 Hand-coloured etching 13/50, 30 x 23 cm

Right:  
**Verster, Andrew** (b.1937)  
*Still Life* 1992  
 Hand-coloured drypoint on paper 13/50, 95 x 67.5 cm

Opposite:  
**Kentridge, William** (b.1955)  
*Iris II* 2005  
 Pigment print on cotton paper 13/50, 156.5 x 109.5 cm



Still lifes have often been associated with femininity. Their concentration on flowers, fruit and kitchenware, as well as the association of these images with reproduction, nurturance and domesticity, all speak to the cliché of the woman as mother, wife, homemaker and beautiful object. Feminism and postmodernism have permitted new readings of the still life and resulted in reinterpretations of this genre. In many ways the still lifes reproduced here are less conventional in form and content than the accumulated history of the genre. William Kentridge, who is one of South Africa's most successful contemporary artists, replaces the notion of the fecund and the domestic with the clinical and scientific in *Iris II* (2005). The vase, usually filled with life-giving water, is replaced by a scientific clamp that constricts the bloom. The cerebral nature of Colin Richards's still life employs proverbs rendered visually as a mode of social statement. Richards titles his work *In the Bud* (1992), derived from the saying "nipped in the bud". The beheaded rosebud floating in the upper register of the etching serves as a warning, its dangerous red hue the only colour in the composition. It is an ominous signal beneath an assemblage of disintegrating objects that breaks the security of the domestic still life. Andrew Verster's *Still Life* (1992) has a more optimistic tone. Verster here treats the still life – usually a foundational training tool for young artists to render perspective, light and tone – with a playful irreverence that has fruit jumbled in an utterly flat composition. Graphic patterns, executed with dynamic strokes, dance in a carnivalesque composition. **Catherine Green**