



SEAN O'TOOLE

# Irma Stern

**AFRICAN IN EUROPE  
EUROPEAN IN AFRICA**

**PRESTEL**

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# Introduction



When she was fifteen, her life a constant toing and froing between newly unified South Africa and Wilhelmine Germany, South African-born artist Irma Stern began reading in earnest. “Up to then I had made my own fairy tales which I told my young brother at night”, she wrote in a 1926 essay. “I stopped painting and writing my own fantastic inventions. The curtain of the world’s theatre began to rise in front of me, childhood was leaving me.” Stern catalogued her discoveries in a reading list that she kept from 1909 to 1926. The breadth of her interests is astonishing. Her German library – up until 1933 Stern read almost exclusively German-language books – encompassed contemporary, classic as well as folk literature from Europe, the Arabic world, Asia and South Africa. Neither wholly South African nor fully German, books enabled the young artist to feed her exile’s imagination and roam the world, all before she actualised this possibility as a painter.

Books, though, also define what we know about Stern. For all the extraordinary acclaim she achieved in South Africa and Europe, especially in the decade after 1945, Stern had only been the subject of two slim monographs at the time of her death in 1966. One was published in Germany in 1927 and profiled her romantic early work, and the other appeared in South Africa in 1942 before her career-defining 1947 solo exhibition in Paris that featured all Stern’s major works from her four trips to Belgian Congo and Zanzibar between 1939 and 1946. Neither book featured colour illustrations. Colour, along with an unbending faith in figurative description and expeditionary encounter are the central pillars of Stern’s practice. This trinity manifests itself across all her distinctive periods: the early expressionist phase (1916–35) when her Berlin tutelage and faith in primitivism was most pronounced; the questing middle period (1935–48) when distant encounters informed her descriptive



**Fig. 39** *Iris*, 1941, oil on canvas, 61 × 61 cm. Private collection



**Fig. 40** *Still Life with Magnolias, Apples & Bowl, 1944/49, oil on canvas, 86.5 × 86.5 cm. Private collection*  
**Fig. 41** *White Lilies, 1936, oil on canvas, 67.5 × 64.5 cm. Private collection*





**Fig. 47** *Near Amanzimtoti, 1936, gouache on paper, 50 × 62 cm. Private collection*



**Fig. 48** *Congo Forest Scene*, 1946, oil on canvas, 68.5 × 68.5 cm. Private collection



**Fig. 49** *Portrait of a Young Mpondo, 1935, oil on canvas, 58.5 × 47.5 cm. Private collection*



**Fig. 50** *Young Xhosa Woman, 1941, oil on canvas, 61.5 × 61.5 cm. Private collection*

to the patience Stern invested in detailing her subject's face. Beads of brilliant colour, while obviously illustrative, function as a visual gift. Her substantial use of a palette knife is also typical. But who is the sitter? Stern's subject is not simply a type, a Xhosa-speaking Mpondo woman from the Transkei region, now Eastern Cape province. The particularities of her circumstance, though, are unknown.

As an artist, Stern was motivated by two contradictory impulses: the need for direct encounter in the field and what I call 'wish fulfilment'.

The conflict between her need to witness and experience reality while giving expression to her fantasies of pre-modern African life was resolved as much as intensified by her working method and choice of medium. In the field she primarily drew and painted with watercolour, leaving the ambitious work in oil for her studio in Cape Town. The result is an archive of divided outcomes. On the one hand, there are numerous works on paper instancing face-to-face encounter and spontaneity. Juxtaposed against these observational sketches are her grand monuments to the exotic. Typically manifesting as figure studies, these latter works sometimes function as portraits, describing actual people the artist met and observed.





**Fig. 65** *Arab, 1945, oil on canvas, 63 × 52.5 cm. Private collection*



Fig. 66 *Arab Youth*, 1945, oil on canvas, 86.4 × 61 cm.  
Rupert Art Foundation Collection, Stellenbosch

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*Frieze*, his monographic essays have appeared in recent books on Michael Armitage, David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, Jo Ractliffe and Mikhael Subotzky. He has edited three volumes of cultural essays, most recently *The Journey: New Positions on African Photography*

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