



LaNitra M. Berger. *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art.* London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. 192 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-18749-8.

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Published on H-Africa (May, 2021)

Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

South African Art: A Diasporic View

South African artist Irma Stern (1894-1966) painted portraits of Africans that express and convey her delight in their beauty, but there's a snag. According to art historian LaNitra Berger, Stern's letters and affiliations, and sometimes her images themselves, betray a lack of empathy with her subjects' plight as subordinated people. This tension (called here a "a racial paradox") between "Stern's racism" and her aesthetic appreciation of Africans lies at the heart of Berger's effort to present Stern to an American audience from the perspective of "the African diaspora" (pp. 12, xv). Her focus on the paradox is so tight that other possible observations about this renowned South African modernist are cast into shadow or omitted altogether.

Another way of looking at Stern's achievement is to stress that she participated in an important artistic dialogue between two continents at a particular historical moment: starting just after the First World War, she displayed in Europe new visions of Africa; shortly thereafter, she brought European modernism to South Africa, and she shared with other South Africans the beauties of the continent's peoples. Following in the lineage of Paul Gauguin's Polynesian adven-

tures and Pablo Picasso's celebrated inspiration by African sculpture in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), she chose to paint exotic Africa when it still had the power to thrill and surprise Europeans, before the distance between the two continents was shrunk by air travel. (The Union Castle Line typically took nearly two weeks to transport people from Cape Town to London.) In South Africa she helped to break down provincial attitudes among people who, despite revering their European heritage, were initially put off by the modernist art coming to them from Europe's cities.

Stern's life and work straddled the two continents. She was born in a Tswana-speaking area of northwest South Africa where her German Jewish parents had been drawn to farm, perhaps by the opening of diamond mines nearby. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six she lived back in Germany (Berlin and Weimar), where she would eventually find a ready audience for her African paintings among artists and gallerists who were similarly drawn to what she later confessed was her early "lovely fairytale outlook on Native life" (p. 123). Having to avoid Germany between 1933 and 1945, she traveled instead to Dakar (1937,

1938), the Congo (1942, 1946), and Zanzibar (1939, 1945) in search of visually thrilling folkloric sights. She drew and painted her findings—such as a vibrant “Congolese Beauty” and a lush “Zanzibar Garden”—and published two travel narratives.[1] Immediately upon the war’s end, she returned to Europe and either visited or exhibited there every other year, on average, until the end of her life. From 1960 she even shifted the subject matter of her paintings away from Africa to the Mediterranean, the European side.

Within South Africa from the 1920s Stern enjoyed great, though initially controversial, renown. She helped to break down stultifying South African artistic provincialism. (The question why white South Africans were offended by modern art remains an intriguing one.) In her own words, she “meant to shock the people of Cape Town” in 1922 by exhibiting nudes drawn in the bold, slashing Expressionist style she had imbibed during her residence in Germany from 1910 to 1920.[2] She succeeded. Nudity offended local sensibilities more used to decorum and pastels. Gradually she won popular acclaim for her eye-popping colors and simplified forms. Her choice of African subjects did not present a serious challenge to her local popularity in part because social critique was not on her agenda.

Especially from 1948 her devotion to folkloric scenes sat well with apartheid ideology that depicted Africans as fundamentally rural and tribal. Her local fame led her to be chosen to represent South Africa in two international biennales, and in 1951 the South African Association of Artists included her work in an exhibition otherwise devoted exclusively to European luminaries like Albrecht Durer and Camille Pissarro. Despite Berger’s claim that Stern “chose to accept support from the apartheid government to advance her career,” there is no evidence the government sponsored any of her shows, paid her travel expenses, or tangibly advanced her career (p. 12).

What support did the apartheid government actually give her?

From the 1930s to the 1950s Stern painted vibrant portraits of rural Black South Africans, such as a Xhosa woman wearing ochre make-up or a Zulu girl whose head is crowned with a chic *isicholo*. In the words of art historian Marion Arnold, Stern was using her African subjects “as picturesque vehicles for her modernist aestheticism.”[3] There is no doubt that Stern’s portraits present Europeans as individuals and Africans more as design challenges, confirming Berger’s insight that Stern had more “empathy,” and certainly more familiarity, with her European subjects.

Snippets of Stern’s letters convey her increasing discomfort with modern African politics: by 1955 she could no longer idealize African life “when I see the most lovely people acting not like children but like devils incarnate to the White people up in Kenya” during the Mau Mau revolt, adding that she understood why: Africans had awakened to the fact that “White raced people ... [have] their foot on [African] necks” (p. 123). The growth of Stern’s awareness that trouble was also brewing in South Africa is vividly evident in the painting that graces the cover of Berger’s book. After years of looking for and depicting folkloric Africa, Stern briefly turned to the city and in 1955 painted a maid in her uniform. The maid is not happy. She looks askance. Stern’s portrait bears honest witness to the gathering political storm, without judgement. That Stern was unable to participate in it is abundantly clear: she contributed only one painting to the Treason Trial Defense Fund in 1958 “[because I] don’t particularly want to be mixed up more in this business.”[4] Stern did shy away from struggle-era politics, but in what ways was she “complicit” with oppression (p. 14)?

Berger’s evident disquiet over the “racial paradox” sometimes leads her to make forced, and not entirely credible, interpretations of Stern’s words. Stern did indeed express colonial attitudes toward Africa. She blithely referred to cannibal-

ism, fetishes, and idols as if they characterized the African cultural landscape. Quite understandably alienated by Stern's ignorant words, Berger tends to interpret all the artist's statements through a political lens. For example, she concludes immediately after describing Stern's reaction to a "lifeless" Muslim bride at a Zanzibar wedding that Stern believed "colonialism was the best form of government for people of color" (p. 97). At these moments, the book's core mission—to lay out the quite real paradox that Stern appreciated Black South Africans "aesthetically, but never socially, culturally, or politically"—has crowded out subtlety (p. 154). (Wealthy Muslim brides at that time and place were meant to pose like splendid gifts.)

It would be a mistake to approach this book with expectations that range beyond its title.[5] *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art* does not put on display and discuss the range of Stern's subject matter, technique, and style and how they changed over time; a full biography of this difficult woman; the art world she inhabited in South Africa.[6] Ten of Stern's works are reproduced in color here, but the thirty-five black and white illustrations are so small that their content is largely mysterious. The book's production values do not foster a great deal of confidence in the editorial oversight of Bloomsbury Visual Arts. To give a couple of further examples: "Oppenheimer" is introduced without a first name or identity (p. 56); the content of footnotes 42 and 51 in chapter 2 already appear verbatim in the text. There are other errors. Some are linguistic: "Dumela Marena" is not mistranslated, but means "Greetings, Lord." Others are historical. To say that Britons came to South Africa to "experience a new 'frontier' lifestyle" simply does not capture the complex reality of immigration and industrialization (p. 42). The sketchiness with which the historical context is laid out is best illustrated by the fact that the pieces of legislation setting up the homelands—the official justification for the apartheid state—are omitted from the list of laws said to "form apartheid's core" (p. 107). Other errors oc-

cur in the citations: Marion Arnold did not "suggest that Stern's *work*, while problematic, was 'unremarkable for the time'"; the word "*work*" actually reads "*racism*" in the original text (p. 11).[7]

How is Stern regarded by Black South Africans today? In her introduction, Berger writes that Stern's name evokes "angry glares and negative comments" (p. 8). And yet, in her conclusion she quotes young artists from Johannesburg's Artist Proof Studio who do not agree. Duduzile More says Stern's "skill in color is what I can take away from her" (p. 147). Pule Ratsoma says he is inspired by Stern's documentation of the "beauty of life and her surroundings" (p. 148). The director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Khwezi Gule, says there is "nothing inherently racist" in her images (p. 141). Even Stern's contemporary, African American philosopher Alain Locke, appreciated as early as 1925 that Stern was "push[ing] the conventions of contemporary Black representation"; he thought Black American artists should be inspired by her (p. 151). It is easy to share Berger's disappointment with and ambivalence toward Stern, as well as to understand the relief with which she apparently embraced the idea that "even progressive art can be complicit with oppression" (p. 14). Berger is to be respected for concluding her book by evenhandedly quoting all these voices of people who show no evidence of sharing her particular diasporic perspective and need.

Notes

[1]. Both books—*Congo* (1943) and *Zanzibar* (1948)—were published by van Schaik in Pretoria.

[2]. Marion Arnold, *Irma Stern: A Feast for the Eye* (Winnipeg and Stellenbosch: Fernwood Press/Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation, 1995), 18. Arnold notes that Stern's first exhibit was not shut down by the police as Berger claims, perhaps based on the memoirs of Mona Berman, for whom the story may have been family lore. Mona Berman, *Remembering Irma* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2003), 42.

[3]. 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*, ed. Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 62.

[4]. Stern to Freda Feldman, November 13, 1958, quoted by Berger, 128.

[5]. Berger’s 2009 Duke University doctoral dissertation was entitled “Pictures that Satisfy: Race, Gender, and Nation in the Art of Irma Stern (1894-1966).” The insertion of “racial paradox” in the title indicates the centrality of that particular idea to this published volume.

[6]. Stern also painted still lifes and landscapes, and she sculpted and drew.

[7]. The actual citation comes from Arnold’s 2005 article (see note 3 above) rather than, as cited by Berger, from Arnold’s book *Women and Art in South Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

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Citation: Diana Wylie. Review of Berger, LaNitra M. *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2021.

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