

VISUAL CENTURY

South African Art in Context



volume one
1907-1948

Jillian Carman
editor

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VOLUME 1 1907–1948 EDITED BY JILLIAN CARMAN



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Preface

It is often said that national liberation is based on the right of every people to freely control their own destiny and that the objective of this liberation is national independence ... the basis of national liberation is the inalienable right of every people to have their own history (Amilcar Cabral 1966).

If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes them aware that our Nation falls short of its highest potential. I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth (President John F. Kennedy 1963).

Nearly two decades after the fall of apartheid, these quotations from the revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral and President John F. Kennedy have lost none of their relevance for South Africans. In the era of decolonisation, Cabral stressed the importance of history for the once colonised people of Africa, and Kennedy elevated the role of artists in the United States and elsewhere.

Even though these leaders came from vastly different backgrounds, their words register a common concern for culture. They highlight the value of history to the construction of a national identity, and the role of the artist within culture. They reveal why so much of South Africa's visual art, music, literature and theatre, is inextricably linked to the desire for liberty and equality. The notions of culture of the colonial regime and the apartheid government valued neither South African art nor its artists. British colonial culture saw little value in anything other than its own reflection, and the apartheid regime excluded black artists from any role in interpreting the nation's art history.

Works of art can articulate particular moments in the life of a nation. Not all South Africa's visual artists had the liberty, the means or the will to connect their work to the politics of national liberation, or to hold a critical light up to their nation's moral potential. But those artists whose work did make these statements have become actors in the making of history, and their work is testimony to historical progress. Whether a rock painting, a wood sculpture or a video projection, such works have provided insights into how South Africans view themselves in their social and cultural environments.

The task of the *Visual Century* project has been to grapple with the uneven flow of South African contemporary art; to contextualise the relevance of artists and their works to the nation's cultural identity and, where possible, to place them in relation to the history of international art. Providing a balanced record of the never-ending production of art is a difficult yet vital task in contemporary South African culture. The constant creation of images and re-formulation of artistic concepts make art history a fluid body of facts and ideas. Art historical writing becomes a topological exercise similar to mapping a river.

One can picture the history of South Africa's art as a river meandering through the southernmost part of the African continent, growing in stature as it glides towards the estuary of the present. It connects to the history of the world's art just as rivers inevitably connect to the great oceans of our planet. In the twentieth century, some tributaries of this

waterway have been navigated by historians, and the records of their journeys have helped the editors and writers of *Visual Century* to determine where the river has flowed, and what has shaped its momentum and direction. But these early records also make it clear that one cannot know this river with any degree of certainty. Even with the most rigorous research, its topology remains sketchy. Theories as to its origins and what has dissolved into its stream will constantly change. To understand what commands its direction or progression will continue to challenge the historians mapping it. In a postmodern age, we have begun to accept that there are plural narratives of art history, and that all history writing remains incomplete. Over time, we might trace new tributaries or re-evaluate the contribution of individual artists to its flow. But the true temporal and spatial parameters of the river remain elusive.

Visual Century is the latest contextual survey of the river's bed, channels and sedimentary traces. The intention is to take you, the reader, along this lengthy waterway, and to leave you with an imminent sense of arrival in a different time and place. If the limited page extent of its volumes, gaps in research or simple oversight should distract from this historical journey, I hope that it will none the less offer more novel insights about art practice in South Africa than anything that has gone before.

The harsh political circumstances of twentieth-century colonial, Union and apartheid rule often eroded facts and shaped cultural fictions. The interpretation of art history was forced into narrow channels conforming to even narrower cultural perceptions. It divided achievement along racial lines, and restricted critical engagement with the wellspring of ideas from other African cultures. The challenge facing the writers in each volume of *Visual Century* was not to only immerse readers in the turbulence of the river, but also to expose some of what lies hidden in the sediment.

The revision of the river's tributaries, started by South African historians in the 1980s and continued after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, made it necessary to review a century of contemporary art. The predominance of Eurocentric art history in the teaching and discourses of art within South Africa also needed to be addressed so that a more accurate and layered map could be drawn. With the support of Z. Pallo Jordan, then the Minister of Arts and Culture, the *Visual Century* project was born at the end of 2006, with research beginning a year later.

The century under review begins in 1907, which marks the year the British restored self-governance to the Boer Republics after defeating them in the Second South African War. This in turn led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa (1910) that joined Afrikaner and British settlers under one government. The year 1907 also coincides with the epoch in which artists in Europe broke with prevailing conventions by assimilating African and other cultures into their practice to create European Modernism. Pablo Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is one of the striking examples of this fissure, alongside Henri Matisse's *Dance* (1907), which references the art of Asia and the Arab world.

The research for *Visual Century* took existing and new material and located these in the context of South African social history and international art history. The prominent themes that emerged from initial research prompted the division of the book into four volumes. The volumes have an open structure that avoids a single author narrative. Numerous writers were invited to interpret these themes and, where possible, to redress the racial and gender imbalance of colonial and apartheid art histories. This approach matched the spirit of the project's intentions, which recognised that there are plural narratives of

history. It allowed writers to retrieve the history of South African art from the political doctrines of colonialism and apartheid, and to uncover its essential African character. By avoiding a strict linear narrative, the information gathered does not claim to be finite or absolute. There are overlaps at the start and end of volumes. Occasionally this open structure creates coincidences of ideas across volumes and different readings of certain artists whose practice extends across eras. But the multiplicity of voices keeps the project open-minded about the scope and dimensions of the river of history, and the need to review who contributed what to South Africa's art history.

Any text about art only creates new meaning through engagement and comment. The editors and I hope that the chapters in this overview will be seen as an invitation to further scholarly research. The nature of mapping something fluid is that certain issues and artists inevitably rise to the surface, while others sink. To broaden and deepen our knowledge of this river beyond what is revealed in these four volumes, South Africa's visual art history must be constantly reviewed.

Gavin Jantjes
Visual Century project director
Oslo, 2011

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Gerard Sekoto: *Bernard the artist's brother*, c. 1945–7. Oil on canvas board, 50.5 × 40.3 cm. Whereabouts unknown.

Foreword

There is an ongoing dialogue among artists, art historians and art lovers about the history of the visual arts in the world. The Western view of the world and of humanity, which dominated the colonised world until the twentieth century, is now largely discredited. One of the few pockets of the world where this view remained largely unchallenged was South Africa. Because of the decades of apartheid that followed centuries of colonisation, South Africa clung to Western standards, and the notion that all things European were irreplaceable, for longer than most societies.

In South Africa's recent past, the ancient artworks of the Khoisan peoples, the works of Africans (be they ancient, medieval or contemporary) sometimes had curiosity or anthropological value, but were rarely regarded as 'high' or 'pure' art. When indigenous African works were acknowledged, this often came in response to new movements and artistic revolutions abroad; for instance Cubism, one of the movements initiated by Pablo Picasso and his contemporaries, owes a direct and widely acknowledged debt to African sculpture.

For far too long what was regarded as the mainstream of the visual arts in South Africa has been pale and male. These volumes take up the challenge of changing this perspective. But transforming the ways in which those considered authorities on the arts view the world is no easy task; it entails re-thinking and re-visioning the national and continental experience.

During the colonial period and the decades of white minority rule, anyone and anything that was not white and of European origin was classed as 'the other', something distant, unfamiliar and alien even though rooted in African soil. This mindset did immeasurable damage to the arts. In addition to the numerous forms of censorship, which controlled what could be seen and exhibited, the colonial ethos that othered all that was African and black, meant that black artists were mostly excluded from the most prestigious galleries and exhibition spaces.

Many works in these volumes were often first seen in small private galleries, at street stalls and in draughty municipal halls. They were only accepted into the mainstream later, mostly after the 1960s, when the value of African artistic expression was more widely appreciated in the rest of the world. The *Visual Century* project is, in one sense, a voyage of rediscovery into the immense field of talent that has often been obscured by the discriminatory practices of the apartheid system and the white elite. Perhaps it will compel us all to re-imagine our country's art history and the relevance of the South African experience in shaping the sensibility of creative persons throughout the world.

It was all too easy for a visual artist, black or white, who expressed anger against or opposition to unjust social conditions in his or her work, to incur official wrath. For example, Ronnie Harris, a Cape Town artist who dared to depict Christ as a black man, was forced to devise ways of smuggling his painting out of the country. Artists who were unable to survive in the hostile environment of racist South Africa left home to pursue their careers in other countries – Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto both found refuge in Paris. Dumile Feni fled during the 1970s and died in exile in New York. Thami Mnyele left South Africa to evade the apartheid regime's secret police, but was eventually murdered by them in a raid on Botswana in June 1985. There are countless other examples of artists exiled, estranged and lost to us.

The arts nonetheless played a significant role in the mass mobilisation against racial oppression. Working through their own organisations and in alliance with others, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, artists became an integral element of the struggle against apartheid. Two international conferences, one held in Gaborone in 1982, the second in Amsterdam in 1986, helped galvanise the progressive arts community.

The visual arts differ from other disciplines because they are so eminently democratic. Anyone who is sighted can interact with a visual creation without the benefit of prior training or instruction. Yes, the work of some visual artists is more difficult to comprehend than that of others. It is equally true that a work of art is not a photograph that captures on film and on paper what the person wielding the camera sees. The artist invites us to view reality through her or his eyes. But in so doing, we are also challenged to reflect on our own perceptions.

Twentieth-century South Africa offered the artist an extremely rich seam of human experience and natural beauty, in addition to a veritable storehouse of characters from which to craft great works of art. Apart from the human drama that has been played out in this country during the past century, ours is a society that has given the world some stirring examples of human courage, strength of character and nobility of spirit, alongside oppression, repression and bigotry. Mirth as well as tears arose from the appalling conditions in the informal settlements, urban townships and rural slums to which the majority of South Africa's population was confined. Love as well as anger was nurtured in the midst of suffering that was all too ubiquitous. The search for beauty and inspiration sustained the spirits of millions who lived in the hope of a better future. Honour, morality and human dignity somehow survived in an environment that conspired to snuff them out. It is these emotions that are portrayed, dissected and explored by the artists in these volumes. Their works form as significant a historical record as that rendered in the written word or in music.

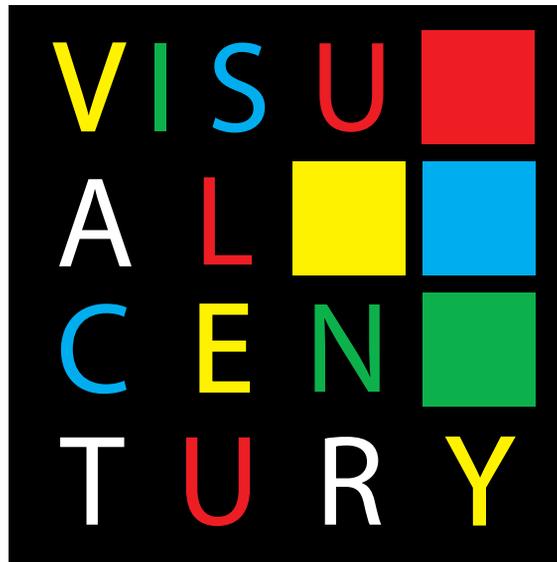
The arts are one of the most powerful ways human beings have devised to tell stories, record achievements, express emotions and transmit experience – good, bad and indifferent. Among the values of the arts is their ability to sensitise us to the extraordinary in the apparently ordinary. Art has the unique ability to open our eyes to that which another sees; to awaken our senses to what another feels; and to arouse our emotions concerning what another can perceive. Virtually every society has employed the arts to memorialise those we consider great. Whether in poetry or prose, with the paint brush or the sculptor's chisel, the human voice or a musical instrument, artists have persuaded us to see the good even in the most disreputable persons; they have helped us to detect flaws even in the most powerful.

Visual Century also presents an opportunity to revisit the complex relationship between Africa and the rest of the world. Here on the African continent we are faced with significant social and economic development challenges. Ours is the second largest continent on earth, and one of the most culturally diverse. South Africa is by no means unique on the African continent in bringing together the cultures of Africa, Asia and Europe.

Far from separating us, South Africa's cultural diversity is our collective strength, a strength that should benefit the entire world. It should be recognised and affirmed as a common heritage of humanity. These volumes eloquently convey this reality.

Z. Pallo Jordan

Former Minister of Arts and Culture, Republic of South Africa



SOUTH AFRICAN ART IN CONTEXT 1907-2007

INTRODUCTION

OTHER WAYS OF SEEING

JILLIAN CARMAN

Art is not a practice devoid of social and political influence. Volume 1, which opens the four-volume *Visual Century*, shows the overall approach of the publication – an interpretation of the history of twentieth-century visual art in South Africa against the backdrop of momentous social and political events. The volume begins and ends with two significant dates for South Africa and her position within the Commonwealth, formerly the British Empire: 1907 and 1948. The years bracket a tumultuous political period, both internationally and nationally. In South Africa it was a time of “Union and disunion”;¹ when political events, legislation, two world wars, recessions and strikes had profound impacts on people’s lives and rights, on the ways they lived, and their access to amenities.

In 1907 Britain granted responsible government to the former Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the same year, the Selborne Memorandum² was issued – a discussion paper on unification that led to the (whites-only) National Convention of 1908–9 and the proclamation of the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910 “eight years to the day after the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging” (Saunders and Southey 2001: 121). The Treaty had sealed Britain’s victory at the end of the South African (Anglo-Boer) War, 1899–1902, fought between Britain (with her South African colonies of Natal and the Cape) and the two Boer republics, which had tried to defend their independence. The post-war reconstruction of 1902 to 1910 was marked by bitter tensions between what were known at that time as the two races, the Afrikaner (Boer) and the English.³ Black people, whose mental capacity was believed to be “physiologically inferior to that of the average white man” (Phillips 1905: 135), were not acknowledged as cultural or racial equals of the white races, and their franchise and other rights were excluded from the South Africa Act of 1909, which led to Union.⁴

The period from 1907 to 1948 was characterised by the struggle for national identity, which became increasingly divisive in the white population. English-speaking settlers of mainly British origin were loyal to the ideals of the remnants of the British Empire and its Commonwealth. But the Afrikaners (of Dutch descent, in particular those who fought for the independence of the Boer republics) sought to free themselves from the imperial and Commonwealth yoke, and in 1914 the National Party was founded to promote Afrikaner interests. Both white “nations”, however, were united on one issue: opposing the rise of black nationalism. Black⁵ national leaders were excluded from the Union government of 1910, leading to the formation of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912 (changed in 1923 to the African National Congress). Every move by the SANNC to assert the rights of the black African population was met with repression by the Union government. The year after the SANNC was formed, the Union government promulgated the Natives’ Land Act of 1913, according to which black people could not own or rent land outside of wholly inadequate designated areas (Saunders and Southey 2001: xvii).

During this period, the fine art field in South Africa was hardly considered newsworthy, and certainly not comparable to the artistic milieu in Paris, where Pablo Picasso painted the watershed *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* in 1907. This, considered one of the key works in the history of early twentieth-century Western art, signified the “discovery” by Picasso and other Western artists of the indigenous art of Africa, and their appropriation thereof for their own artistic development and purposes.⁶

By contrast, indigenous art in South Africa (Figure 1) was not a source of inspiration for white artists in 1907. These artists, and their art-world in general, looked to the West for artistic excellence, whether in the form of artworks themselves or the teaching offered

1 The title of Part 5 of Saunders’s 1995 history of South Africa, which covers the period 1902–48.

2 The Selborne Memorandum, which argued that white unity would grant political and economic strength, was issued by Lord Selborne, Britain’s High Commissioner in South Africa at that time. It led to the National Convention of white representatives from Britain’s four South African colonies, which convened in different centres 1908–9, and resulted in the South Africa Act of September 1909 and the proclamation of the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910 (Saunders and Southey 2001: 121, 181–2). For further overviews and details of the period 1907 to 1948, see Cameron and Spies (1987), Saunders (1995), Davenport and Saunders (2000), and Saunders and Southey (2001).

3 Phillips (1905: 149, 164), for example, refers to the tensions between “the white races” and the “relations between the races”, excluding “the coloured inhabitants” from these racial relations other than to write that their presence accentuated the complexity of the situation. (“Coloured” in this context refers to all “non-whites”, as opposed to the use of “coloured” under apartheid.)

4 The average attitude of whites at that time towards black people is expressed by Lionel Phillips, a mining magnate and politician (Phillips 1905: Chapter V). He refers to black people in South Africa, and particularly on the Witwatersrand, en masse as the “Native problem”, asserting that “[f]or the present they are separated from white men, not by colour, not by wealth, not even fundamentally by education, but by a gulf of profound mental dissimilarity” (Phillips 1905: 135, 137). He argues that “natives” should not be enfranchised as their vast numbers might create an imbalance in parliament and threaten the security of the country. “[T]he most prudent course, therefore, will probably be that which combines a friendly and benevolent attitude towards the natives, with restrictions imposed without disguise to safeguard the ascendancy of the white races” (Phillips 1905: 148).

5 The term “black” in this volume is based on modern-day usage, described in the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Codes of Good Practice: “‘Black people’ for the purposes of ownership and management are African, Coloured or Indian persons” who were denied basic rights of citizenship before “the commencement date of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act of 1993” (information supplied by Ricci Schwab of Bell Dewar, email of 17 November 2005). The term “black African” today usually refers to the indigenous sector of the black population; at the time of Union, the term used was “native”.

6 The painting is today in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 2006, a loan exhibition comprising related works by Picasso



FIGURE 1. Artist unrecorded (possibly Shangaan): *Composite staff*, late 19th to early 20th century. Wood and leather. Karel Nel collection.

by art academies. Local fine art and art schools were not highly regarded, nor were art museums, of which there were really none to speak of in 1907. The national gallery, South Africa's first public art museum formally constituted as a public amenity in 1895, did not have proper premises at that time, and most of its small and indifferent collection was European. There were, however, flourishing art associations of an amateur nature and art schools, one of which, the Durban School of Art, was founded in 1907 (Hillebrand 1986: Addendum).

By 1948, the closing bracket of this volume, the fine art scene in South Africa was far more promising than forty years earlier, with one of the principal aspirations of local artists having been realised: international recognition of their art abroad.⁷ In September 1948, the Exhibition of Contemporary South African Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture (SAAA 1948–9) opened at the Tate Gallery in London and subsequently travelled to Europe, Canada, the USA and Cape Town⁸ (Figures 2 and 3). A Johannesburg branch of the International Art Club – which had its headquarters in Rome and included Henri Matisse, Fernand Léger and Picasso among its members – was established in that year (Berman 1983: 219; Carman 1996: 93–4). And Ernest Mancoba, who moved to Paris in 1938, exhibited with the avant-garde CoBrA group (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) in Copenhagen (Miles 1994: 36–7, 43–5, 79) (Figure 4). Ironically, as the white political scene was becoming increasingly insular, the white art-world was looking to Europe for identity. This rift challenges the normative view that white attitudes constituted a monolithic whole (although racism remained a shared ideology among most whites).

Local political events at the time were less positive. The country, as part of the Commonwealth, had recently fought in the Second World War (1939–45) on the side of Britain, which participation had been strongly resisted by anti-British members of the Afrikaner community. In May 1948, the National Party came to power “on a platform of apartheid” (Saunders and Southey 2001: xix). Black people, whose rights had been steadily eroded since the turn of the century, now entered an era of unprecedented repression.

The chapters in Volume 1 address the visual arts within the context of the tumultuous political events in South Africa between 1907 and 1948. They offer different perspectives on the art-world and the impact of political and social circumstances. Apart from Federico Freschi's chapter, which deals mainly with the 1930s, all chapters encompass the 1907–48 timeframe, and some overlaps are therefore to be expected. The essays address the same historical continuum from differing perspectives, the aim being to provide a complex, layered, questioning analysis of the period, rather than an authoritative history from one viewpoint. In this way, the chapters in Volume 1 differ from most twentieth-century histories of South African art, such as those of Esmé Berman (1970, 1975, 1983) and Hans Fransen (1982), in which an unfolding, chronological narrative⁹ of events is given by a particular historian. Both Berman and Fransen begin their overviews of Western-style art history in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries with “the founders of professional painting in South Africa ... [who] were mainly British settlers who had undergone professional training in the artschools of London and the [British] provinces” (Berman 1975: 2).¹⁰

Berman and Fransen give a developmental narrative of the first half of the twentieth century that identifies local professional artists as those who had received formal training, both locally and abroad. Their work is analysed in terms of Western art movements such as Impressionism and Expressionism. Black artists working in a Western style during the first half of the twentieth century are generally excluded from the mainstream of these stories.

(mostly from the Musée Picasso, Paris) and indigenous African objects was displayed in Johannesburg and Cape Town (Madeline and Martin 2006). For a discussion of the exhibition, see *Art South Africa* (2006).

- 7 There had been other minor exhibitions abroad before this, such as participation in the British Empire exhibition of 1924 in Wembley, London.
- 8 Information sourced from SAAA (1948–9) and annual reports of the SAAA (South African Association of Arts) for the years 1948 and 1949. The selectors consisted of a board appointed by the SAAA, working in collaboration with the Tate Gallery. Fifty-three contemporary artists were chosen. Although far from avant-garde in European terms, the exhibition displayed the modernist aspirations of a new generation of South African artists.
- 9 Donald Preziosi (1989: 13) describes this kind of grand narrative as grounded in “metaphors of linearity”.
- 10 Artists prior to the “professional painters” were considered recorders of “the flora, fauna and topography ... the colourful Malay community of Cape Town ... the Bushmen, Hottentots and Bantu tribesmen who inhabited the hinterland”, rather than “fine” artists (Berman 1975: 2). They were termed “pioneers”, and their works were described as “topographical” or “pictorial” (Berman 1970, 1975; Gordon-Brown 1975; Fransen 1982).

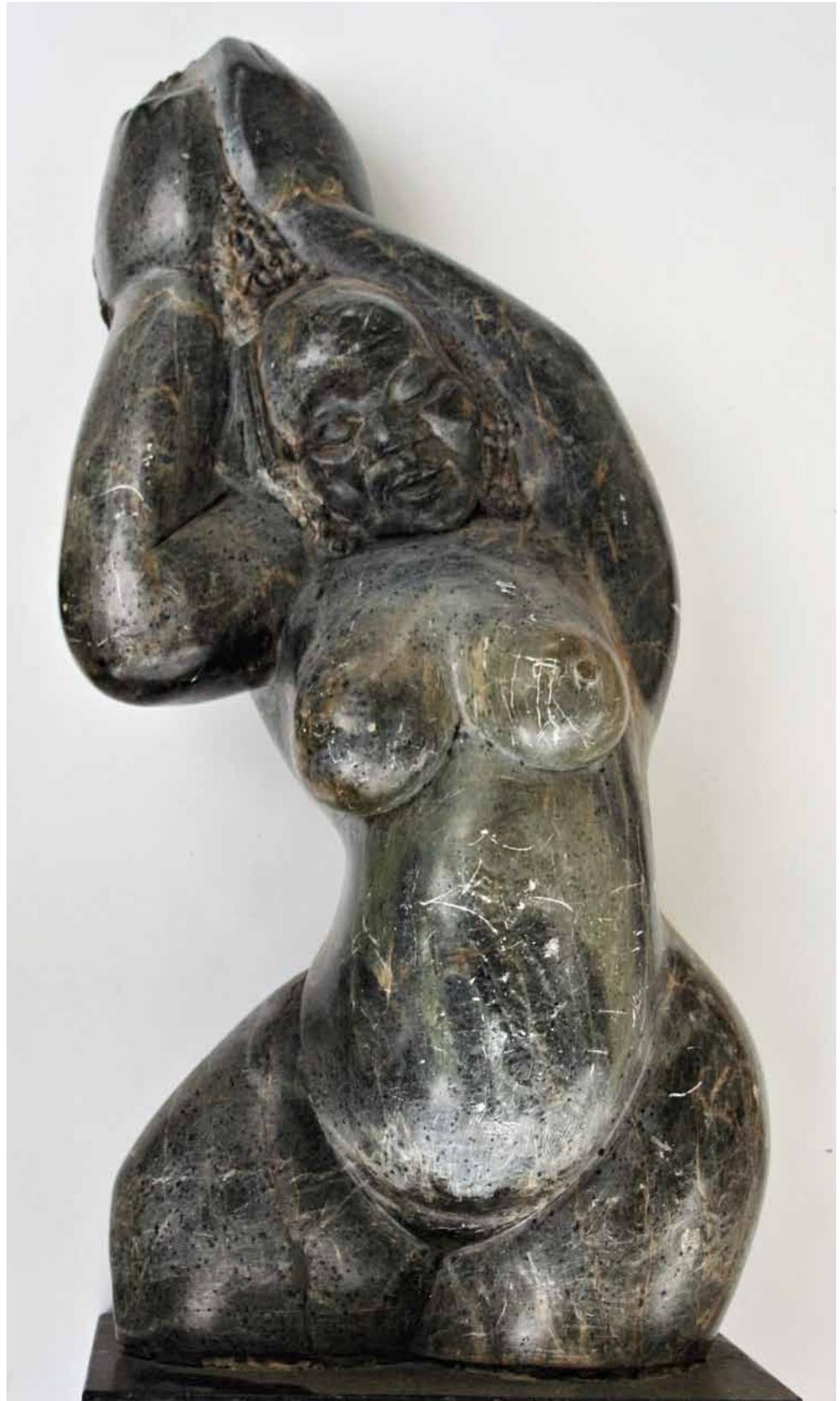


FIGURE 2. Mary Stainbank: *Mamatheka (Joy of living)*. Soapstone, 44 × 23 × 15 cm. Ann Bryant Art Gallery, East London.

Indigenous black artists are not featured at all.¹¹ In her overview of such histories¹² Lize van Robbroeck (2003: 12) refers to the need to “wound and rupture the hitherto seamless liberal humanist surface of discourse surrounding art in South Africa”. The collection of essays in this volume seeks to do this.

From an early twenty-first century perspective, a history of art between 1907 and 1948 cannot be contained within a seamless whole. There is no definitive interpretation, and the surrounding discourses have to be continually interrogated. A continuing enquiry that unsettles the certainties of previous histories of South African art began some thirty years ago. An overview of these interrogations is necessary in order to understand how Volume 1 is structured.

The “wounding and rupturing” of hitherto seamless histories started in 1979, when the Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art was begun at the University of the Witwatersrand and used to pioneer courses in indigenous South African art (Hammond-Tooke and Nettleton 1989, Freschi 2009). Exhibitions such as Ricky Burnett’s *Tributaries* (Burnett 1985) and the Johannesburg Art Gallery’s *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a new history of South African art* (Sack 1988) continued to “rupture the surface”. *Tributaries* gave equal status to black and white artists, while *The Neglected Tradition* drew attention to hitherto ignored black artists working within a Western tradition. Further exhibitions, publications, university courses and acquisitions by art museums of “ethnographic” items explored other ways of addressing art and its histories in this country,¹³ its exclusions, marginalisations¹⁴ and hierarchies.¹⁵

The question of whether there can be another type of art history beyond the limitations of its origins as a Western discipline has to be asked in the South African context, no matter how difficult this may be to answer. Nessa Leibhammer and Vonani Bila explore a way of addressing it in their chapter. One could argue that this question has been the basis, even if not directly addressed, of the interrogation of art and its histories in South Africa over the past thirty years.

Volume 1 brings together diverse topics with the purpose of showing the social complexities of the period and the impact historical events had on art practice. By interrogating past assumptions and bringing together topics that are often treated separately, it aims to expand the boundaries and find different points of reference – different lodestars – for early twentieth-century art history in South Africa.

The first chapter in the volume looks at the nature of local art galleries.¹⁶ From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, both the institutions and their holdings of South African art were marginalised. This fact is generally ignored (or not known) in sweeping histories that presume white South Africans were privileged in every area from the time of the first white settlement onwards. While this was true for many, local white artists and related cultural institutions were far from privileged and more likely to be ignored. When sizable donations entered public collections during this period, the works were almost without exception of British or European origin. Moreover, they were given to underfunded institutions that could neither house nor care for them professionally. The average curator – if there was one – was unqualified and paid little more than a janitor, or not at all if the position was euphemistically described as “honorary”. And he¹⁷ usually acted without accounting to any authority. Thus artworks were often damaged through unsuitable cleaning, storage or handling, lost or sold off, or, because of inadequate display facilities, kept from public view.

11 However, indigenous art (in particular rock art) was generally referred to in these earlier histories either in passing or in a separate section, such as Fransen’s two chapters on “Prehistoric rock art” and “Traditional black architecture and decoration” (Fransen 1982). Berman (1975), in a curiously titled chapter, “Urban colonial and rural indigenous”, uses the term “indigenous” to refer to self-taught white painters such as J.E.A. Volschenk, who lived rurally.

12 She describes them as “apartheid-era discourses” that were “part of the strategic containment and disablement of the anti-colonial, African Nationalist struggle” (Van Robbroeck 2003: 12).

13 Noteworthy publications that address new histories and collections include Hammond-Tooke and Nettleton (1989), Nettleton and Hammond-Tooke (1989), Richards (1990), Johannesburg Art Gallery (1991), Nettleton (1993), Rankin (1995), Oliphant et al. (2004), Arnold and Schmahmann (2005), Carman (1988, 2003, 2007). For an analysis and overview of the different exhibition and publication “bricks” used in “constructing a new South African art history”, see Nettleton (1995).

14 An important recent contribution in this field is Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann’s *Between union and liberation: Women artists in South Africa 1910–1994* (2005), which focuses on women artists and patrons, both black and white.

15 For hierarchies, different perceptions of “craft” and the exclusion of certain categories, see in particular Nettleton (1993), Schmahmann (2000), Oliphant et al. (2004) and Carman (2007).

16 The terms “art museum” and “art gallery” both refer to public art institutions with permanent collections, and were understood as such in the early twentieth century. Today, however, “art gallery” is usually understood to be a commercial exhibition and selling space, without a permanent collection.

17 These curators were mostly male, even though the instigators of the collections, like Florence Phillips and Ada Tatham, were often female. Unusually, until 1956 the Michaelis Collection had female heads, including the artists Florence Zerffi and Ruth Prowse (Bax 1981: 76).



FIGURE 3. Maud Sumner: *Eathorpe under snow*, c. 1937. Watercolour on paper, 48.5 × 63.6 cm. Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

FIGURE 4. Ernest Mancoba: *Drawing*, 1940. Ink on paper, 26 × 21 cm. Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, Silkeborg.

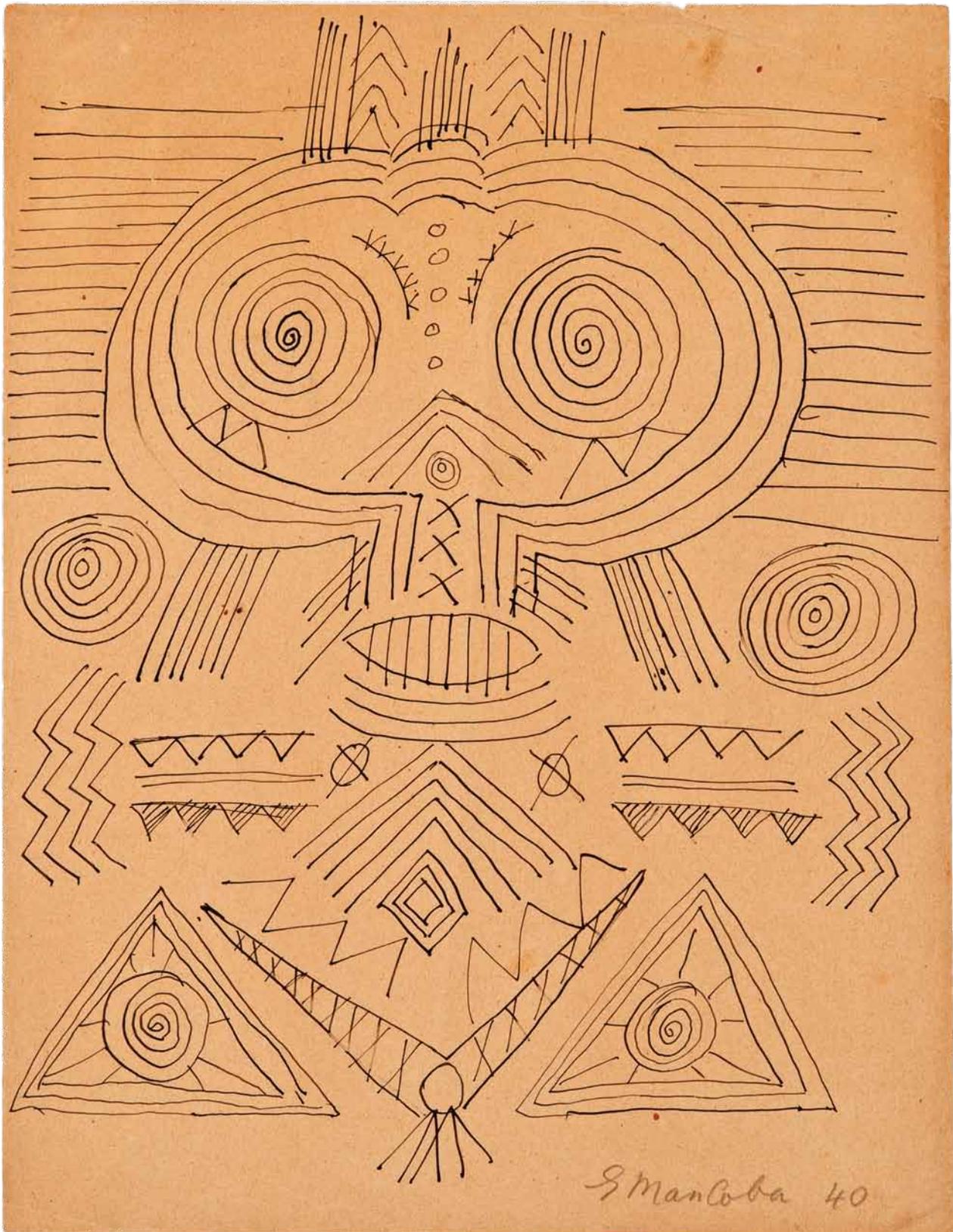




FIGURE 5. Artist unrecorded (Tsonga-Shangaan): *N'wana* (child figure), slender older type, mid-20th century. Wood, textile, glass and plastic beads, metal disks, thread, button, 19 × 5.8 × 5.8 cm. The Brenthurst collection of Southern African art, on loan to Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Ironically, items made by black South African “traditional” artists, rather than those made by “fine” artists (white or black) working in a Western tradition, were far more likely to be collected and conserved by local museums – and thereby to be considered of greater value – during the first half of the twentieth century. Such items were not considered fine art; along with their black African makers, they were identified as ethnographic specimens worthy of scientific study in the emerging professions of anthropology, ethnography and *Volkekunde* (ethnology). As a result, these items were collected, recorded and “copied” (in the case of plaster casts of people) by well-funded and respected natural history museums, principally the South African Museum in Cape Town.

In Chapter 2, Nessa Leibhammer tackles a twofold issue: how white anthropologists and ethnologists represented black people and their cultures in museum contexts; and how white artists represented black people in artworks. In the first instance, a scientific approach to taxonomies dominated, both in the making of plaster casts of different racial types, and in the collection and display of artefacts. The latter were assessed in terms of the cultural evidence they offered rather than as aesthetic objects.

In the second part of her chapter, Leibhammer looks at how white artists represented black people, finding some surprisingly empathetic and nuanced renderings, particularly in the portraiture. This suggests that representations by whites of blacks at that time were less often of the “exotic Other” type than might be expected.

Leibhammer and Vonani Bila collaborate in Chapter 3, with the intention of giving voice to an oral history of an art-making tradition unmediated by Western art historical or anthropological disciplinary constraints.¹⁸ The challenge here was to retrieve an archive of early twentieth-century practices and attitudes that was not tangibly recorded at the time. Bila focuses on his own community and family, which has lived in the region around Elim, Limpopo, for generations. He relates tales, passed down through the female side of his family, about initiation and other ceremonies of which artefacts were an essential part. These were inextricably linked to particular practices that continue, in changing forms, to this day, and include the dolls associated with a young girl’s initiation into womanhood (Figure 5), or the items worn and used by a traditional healer in her or his healing practice. Although such items may appear to have been made solely for utilitarian purposes, the preservation of objects that show recognisable styles of individual artists and collectives suggests that the aesthetic dimension was likely to have been considered as important as the more utilitarian features. Beadwork items, for example, produced in the early twentieth century by Tsonga-speaking women living in the Lowveld region of the Transvaal (now Mpumalanga and Limpopo), have become prized items in art museum collections and are considered “one of the finest aesthetic traditions to have emerged in southern Africa in the past century” (Nettleton 2007: 79).

Artists during the first half of the twentieth century who created items for ritual or other purposes, made with materials such as beadwork, grass, clay or wood, generally learnt the techniques within a family or community context. Artists who chose to work with Western-type media, such as oil on canvas and watercolour, were generally expected to learn how to use these materials at an art school, and preferably an art school “overseas” (usually Britain or France), if they aspired to a professional status. There was a vast difference in available amenities for black and white artists. In Chapter 4, Elizabeth Rankin relates how access to South African art institutions was severely limited for black artists. Artists such as Mancoba, Gerard Sekoto and George Pemba trained as school-teachers and sought opportunities to further their art training in other ways. In the case of Mancoba and

¹⁸ Leibhammer and Bila have collaborated before in the *Dungamanzi* exhibition, both in the catalogue (Leibhammer 2007), of which Bila was the Xitsonga language editor, and in the related DVD (*Dungamanzi* 2007).



FIGURE 6. Moses Tladi: *Landscape with trees*, c. 1932. Oil on canvas, 28.1 × 31.25 cm. Museum Africa, Johannesburg.

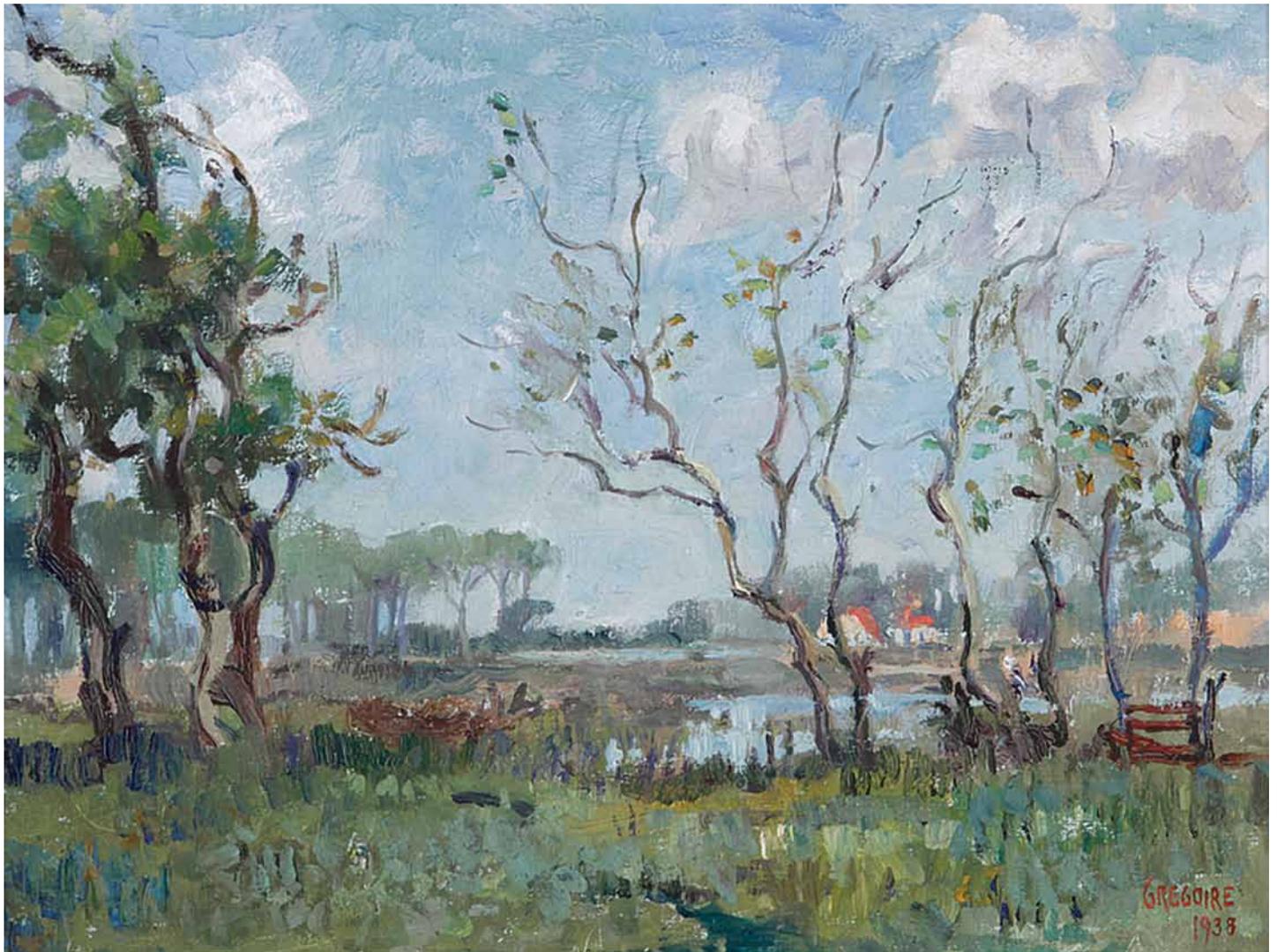


FIGURE 7. Gregoire Boonzaier: *Raapenberg*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 30.5 × 40.5 cm. Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

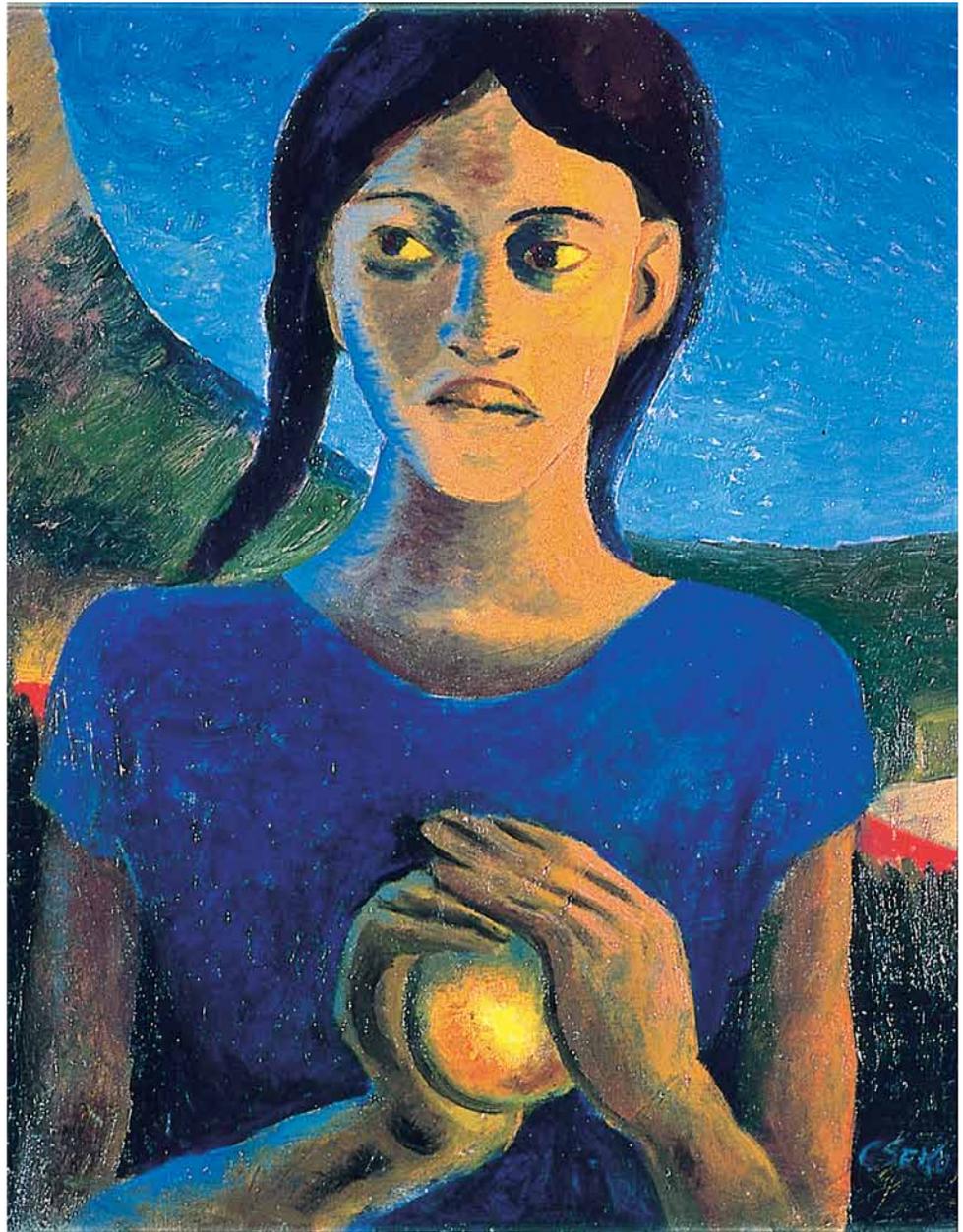


FIGURE 8. Gerard Sekoto: *Child with an orange*, 1943–4. Oil on canvas, 48.3 × 40 cm. Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Sekoto, the artists left for Europe in order to pursue their art in a more enabling climate. Although Rankin focuses primarily on the limited training opportunities for black artists, she also mentions the support of mentors, such as Howard Pim's patronage of Moses Tladi (Figure 6), and exhibiting opportunities, such as the Natal Society of Artists (started 1907), Eastern Province Society of Arts and Crafts (1918 onwards), and Johannesburg's South African Academy (1919 onwards) – at which John Koenakeefe Mohl won an award in 1943 for *Magaliesberg in mid-winter* (Chapter 4, Figure 9).

The aspirations of black artists and other cultural practitioners to promote a black national identity are addressed by Lize van Robbroeck in Chapter 5. Artists discussed include Pemba, Sekoto (Figure 8) and Mancoba, all of whom worked in a Western modernist manner “within the complex socio-political and intellectual context of emerging African nationalism”. Such an approach, at odds with traditional African practices, contributed to a growing political and social force that emerged outside of the exclusionary governmental structures of the day.

The white artistic community, described by Melanie Hillebrand in Chapter 6, was not aligned to any emerging nationalism, nor any particularly serious movement other than the façade of *petit bourgeois* respectability. In addition to important modernist artists in the Everard Group and New Group (1938) (Figure 7), Hillebrand highlights the amusing side of amateur art practice: larger-than-life characters like the flamboyant Durban art critic Leo François, rivalries between regional art societies, and the Durban July “season”, where fashionable attire was as important as tasteful art.

However, a close look at the large, vibrant and predominantly amateur art scene reveals that artists struggled with insufficient sales and commissions, and very few works made their way into public art collections. The situation began to change from the mid-1930s onwards, when institutions turned their attention to local acquisitions. Ironically, one of these early acquisitions was not a piece from the privileged white art community, but a painting by the black artist Sekoto, whose *Yellow houses: a street in Sophiatown* was purchased by the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1940 (Chapter 4, Figure 3).

In Chapter 7, Federico Freschi explores how public art and architecture were used to serve the political agendas of a ruling party and to justify white ownership of land. He covers the propagandist narrative of the time, which related the superiority of a ruling élite and their claim to a land and a past where Boer ancestors displayed selfless sacrifice as a biblical “chosen people” in pursuit of the ideal of freedom.

The final chapter picks up the deeply emotional issue of land ownership. The devastating land dispossession suffered by black people gives the context for artworks and literature that explore deep-rooted relationships with the land. White Afrikaner affinity to what they considered to be their God-given possession is also explored.

Landscape has always been a central theme in South Africa, not only in politics but also in the arts. Depictions thereof stake a claim of ownership over and above a reference to a particular scene or a style of painting. In the early twentieth century, landscape was often considered the appropriate subject for interpreting the essence of South Africa, reflecting the contestations of the recent South African War and the rise of different nationalisms (Figure 9). Leeb-du Toit revisits the subject from a fresh perspective, whereby previously neglected artists and established “nationalist” artists like J.H. Pierneef are brought into new relationships and interpretations.

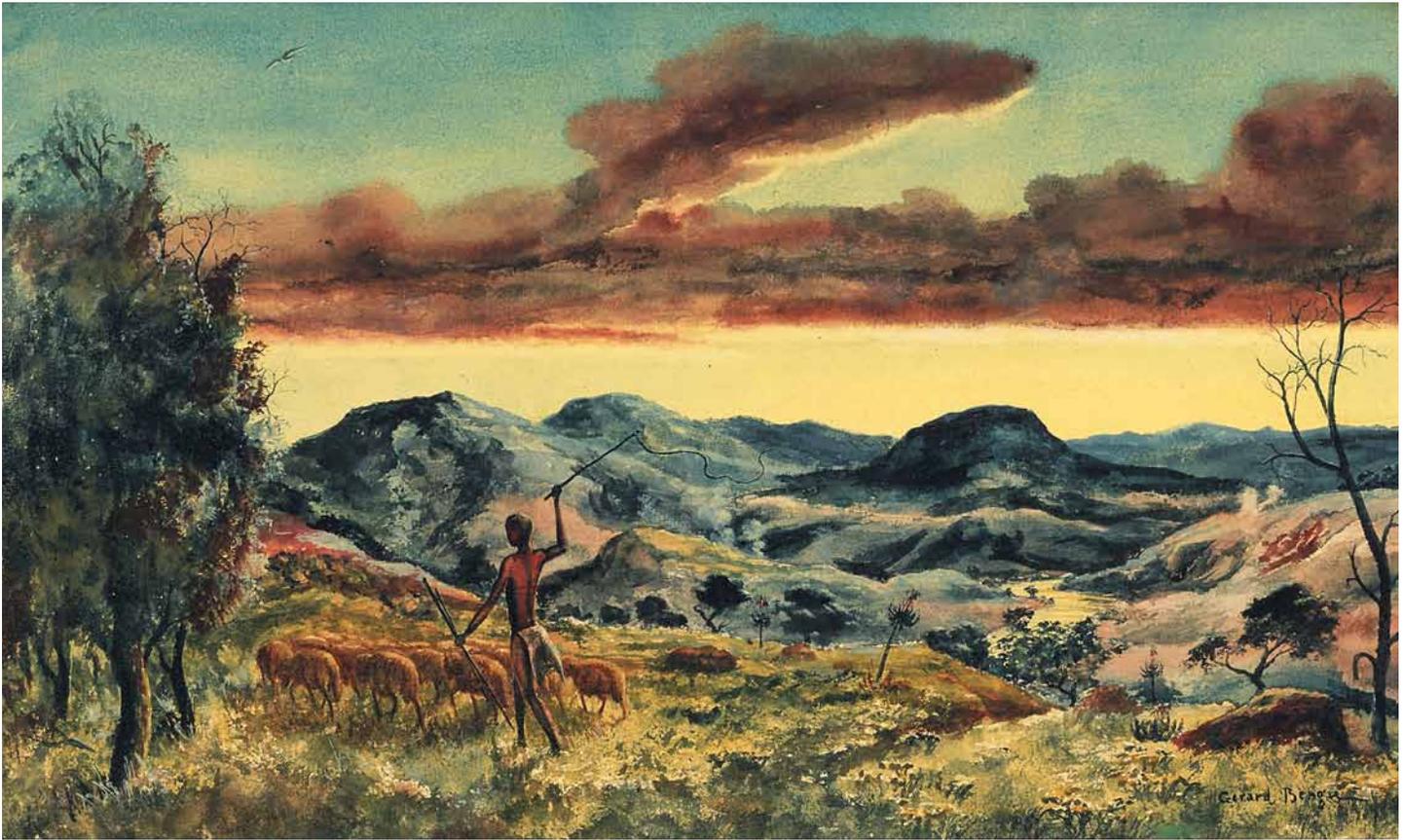


FIGURE 9. Gerard Bhengu: *Young boy herding fat-tailed sheep*. Watercolour on paper, 30 × 50 cm. Campbell Smith collection, Cape Town.

This volume points not only to different and multiple art histories, but to the myopia of mono-cultural history writing. *Visual Century* is a step along the road towards finding alternatives to the prototype of Western art historical writing that are appropriate to the South African context.

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