

## Art.view

# African glories

### A South African Modernist gains global renown

Jan 26th 2008

ONE of the high points of the recent boom in the art market has been the single-nation sales now held by all three major auction houses, Sotheby's, Christie's and Bonhams. Over the past two years Greek, Russian and South African paintings, in particular, have attracted a wave of record-shattering bids from buyers made rich by the booming shipping industry and the worldwide rise in commodity prices.

So successful have these sales become that few auctioneers will now admit in polite company that much of what they are selling is derivative and downright dull, works that are recognisable principally for being copies of more famous works—if not copies of copies.

The Greeks have their pasty would-be Picassos, their muddy Cubists and Hellenic Arte Povera, and the Russians their painting-by-numbers Braques and Cézannes. But among the hyper-realist Xhosa girls and baobab-slaying elephants of the South African sales is one painter whose work has begun to attract significant interest beyond the sentimental diaspora of rich South Africans in Britain and America.

Irma Stern was born in South Africa, but studied under the German Expressionists. Her adult life was spent travelling widely, particularly within Africa, and her sense of being of the continent and yet outside it pervades all her work.

When she died in 1966, Stern was indisputably the *grande dame* of South African painting. But her reputation stagnated from then on, and it is only since two Sterns from Jack and Helene Kahn's collection sold in an auction at Sotheby's in Cape Town last February for £256,000



A thoughtful pose 2002-2007 Bonhams 1793 Ltd

(\$507,000) and £469,000 that her work has begun to gain significant international renown. The two star lots of Bonhams first South African sale in London last May were also both Sterns.

In Bonhams's upcoming South African auction on January 31st, 32 of her works will go under the hammer, including a rich-red portrait of the timid but passionate-looking wife of a rich Indian merchant from the Cape. Dirty and unframed, the picture has lain for a generation in the attic of its British owner who did not know what it was. Bonhams estimates the painting will sell for £80,000-120,000.

Most white artists of Stern's generation, Modigliani and Picasso included, painted Africans as objects—exotic, long-limbed and indistinguishable from each other. Stern, herself an outsider, both because of her Jewish heritage and her lifelong reputation for being rude, crotchety and mean, portrayed Africans as individuals. In an era that has begun to regard even Gauguin as a neo-colonialist, Stern had a fresh and prescient eye on another culture.

Next week's offerings include still lifes, landscapes, gouache and ink drawings, pencil studies, decorated ceramics and a wonderful Modernist view, painted in oils in the 1950s, of the fishing boats in the port of Funchal, Madeira, where Stern's ship often stopped on the route between Europe and the Cape. The South African Heritage Resources Agency considered placing export restrictions on all the Sterns in the sale, but ultimately chose only one, a 1935 portrait of a Zulu woman.

Two of her paintings, in particular, stand out. One is the haunting image of a Pondo woman that is on the cover of the catalogue (and pictured above). The painting dates from 1929, Stern's most sought-after period. The muted landscape and the plain white of the woman's robe and head-dress draw the viewer's eye intensely to the sitter's face. Her eyes look away, but her look, despite the stylised decorative markings across the cheeks, has something about it that could be haughty or just intensely private. Its power lies as much in its strength as in its mystery: you can't really tell what she is thinking, but thinking she is.

The second great Stern is her “Portrait of a Girl Eating Grapes”, painted four years later. Stern was not especially maternal, but the early 1930s saw the collapse of her marriage and the end of a love affair. A friend, Roza van Gelderen, allowed Stern free rein of the school where she was headmistress, and Stern painted many children over this period. Again, like the Pondo woman, “Portrait of a Girl Eating Grapes” shows a monochrome dress. And the lightness of the hands holding the black fruit contrast sharply with the dark almond eyes and a mouth that seems shaped by sorrow. It is impossible to look at this, as at other Stern portraits, and not see the darkness of apartheid South Africa that was to come.

*Thirty-two works by Irma Stern will be auctioned by Bonhams in London as part of their South African sale on January 30th. Estimates range from £800-1,200 for a chalk study of a head (Lot 109) to £300,000-500,000 for her portrait of a Pondo woman (Lot 78).*

