

Strauss & Co

Africa's Leading Art Auction House

FACES OF CAPE TOWN

Portraits by Irma Stern



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Portraits by Irma Stern

13 - 23 February 2026

Weekdays 9am - 5pm

Saturday 14 and 21 | 10am - 4pm

Sunday 15 February | 10am - 4pm

Strauss & Co,
2nd floor Brickfield Canvas
35 Brickfield Road
Woodstock, Cape Town

CATALOGUE TEXTS BY
SEAN O'TOOLE

CURATED BY
ELMARIE VAN STRATEN

GUEST CURATOR
KAREL NEL

TO BOOK A PRIVATE OR GROUP BOOKING
haneem@straussart.co.za





IRMA STERN

SOUTH AFRICAN 1894–1965

CHRONOLOGY

- 1912–1920 **The Berlin Years**
Studies and Early Career
- 1920–1939 **Swaziland, Zululand, Transkei**
Return to South Africa and Early Journeys
- 1939–1946 **Congo, Zanzibar**
Expansion and Artistic Maturity
- 1947–1966 **The late years, Spain, Madeira, France**
Consolidation and Recognition



Irma Stern: The Berlin Years Studies and Early Career

1912–1920

Irma Stern's formative artistic years were shaped by her experiences in Germany, where she studied and began to establish herself within avant-garde art circles. Growing up in South Africa and Germany, Stern decided at the age of eighteen to pursue art studies in Berlin. In 1912 she enrolled at the Reimann School, remaining there for a year before moving to Weimar in 1913 to study at the Grossherzoglich Sächsische Hochschule für Bildende Kunst (Grand-Ducal Saxon School for Fine Arts). Trained by the Norwegian portrait painter Carl Frithjof Smith, Stern was part of the institution's first intake of women students, for whom a separate syllabus was devised.

Her studies were interrupted by a brief period spent in Cape Town and Wolmaransstad, after which she returned to Weimar to study under Gari Melchers, an American-born painter who served as Professor of Art at the School. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 brought formal teaching to a near standstill.

Stern found the academic environment increasingly restrictive, and her dissatisfaction with conservative instruction prompted her to return to Berlin, where she worked briefly under the Symbolist painter Martin Brandenburg. His rejection of her painting *Das Ewige Kind* (The Eternal Child) in 1916 proved decisive, leading Stern to leave his studio in search of a more sympathetic artistic environment.

A turning point came through her association with the Expressionist painter Max Pechstein, a member of the avant-garde group *Die Brücke*. Under Pechstein's mentorship, Stern found an approach to painting that aligned with her own intuitive and expressive instincts. He introduced her to progressive artistic networks, influential gallerists and curators, enabling her exhibition career to gain momentum. In 1919, Stern held her first major exhibition at the Fritz Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin, where she showed thirty-three drawings and watercolours alongside works by four other artists, marking a significant moment in her early career.



Her breakthrough in Germany was followed by years of instability after Stern's family decided to return to South Africa. Her work was initially met with hostility and disbelief in Cape Town, yet she remained determined to sustain an international profile, returning intermittently to Berlin to participate in exhibitions. Stern's experiences in Berlin, a city shaped by experimentation, cultural upheaval and the aftermath of war, were instrumental in forming the expressive visual language that would underpin her lifelong engagement with portraiture.



Irma Stern, *The Eternal Child* (1916)
Collection: Rupert Art Foundation, Stellenbosch



Irma Stern, *Still Life with Fish* (1920);
Sold by Strauss & Co, September 2022



Irma Stern: Swaziland, Zululand, Transkei Return to South Africa and Early Journeys

1920–1939

Following her return to South Africa in 1920, Stern entered a period of intense productivity shaped by extensive travel within the subcontinent. Journeys to Swaziland, Zululand and the Transkei provided both subject matter and emotional impetus for her work, as she sought to translate lived encounters into a modern pictorial language shaped by her affiliation to the Expressionist movement. Portraiture became central to her practice during this period, allowing Stern to engage with individuality, presence and psychological depth rather than ethnographic description.

These travels coincided with her growing visibility within South African art circles, where her work was initially met with resistance and misunderstanding. Critics frequently rejected her expressive distortion and use of colour, viewing her approach as excessive even alien. Stern nevertheless continued to exhibit widely, remaining committed to an artistic vision formed in Europe but increasingly grounded in the people and landscapes she encountered locally.

Painting excursions to Madeira in the 1930s provided Stern with physical distance from South Africa, offering respite from critical hostility and allowing her to rework memories and sketches into finished compositions. Travel, retreat and return became a defining rhythm of her working life, reinforcing her conviction that mobility was essential to one's artistic renewal.

LEFT

Irma Stern, *Woman Carrying Pot* (1927); Sold by Strauss & Co, June 2022, R1 024 200



Irma Stern, *Composition* (1923); Sold by Strauss & Co,
October 2013 R9 662 800



Irma Stern: Congo, Zanzibar Expansion and Artistic Maturity

1939–1946

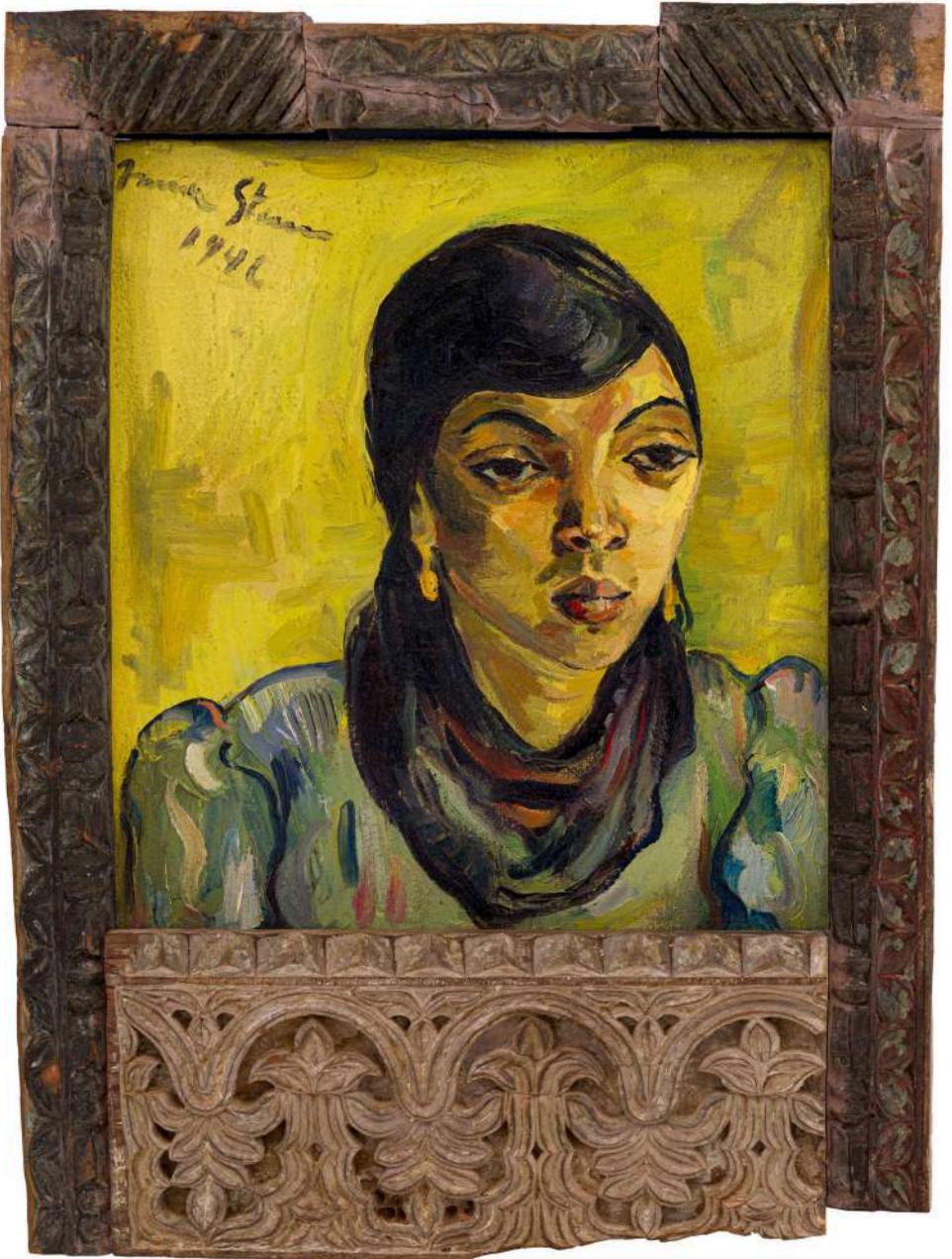
World War II in Europe fundamentally changed Stern's habit of annually travelling abroad. Starting in 1939, when she made her first painting trip to Zanzibar, Stern devoted much of the earlier 1940s to travelling in Central and East Africa. These travels marked a pivotal moment in her artistic development. In 1942 she travelled to the Belgian Congo, followed by a second visit to Zanzibar in 1945. She returned to Belgian Congo again in 1946.

These journeys exposed her to new visual environments, intensifying her engagement with colour, pattern and compositional structure. Portraits from this period are characterised by heightened sensuality and monumentality, with figures occupying the pictorial space with commanding presence. Rather than pursuing documentary accuracy, Stern approached portraiture as a means of conveying vitality, atmosphere and emotional immediacy. Her paintings from this period reflect a synthesis of observation and imagination, informed by earlier Expressionist influences, yet increasingly confident in their own authority.



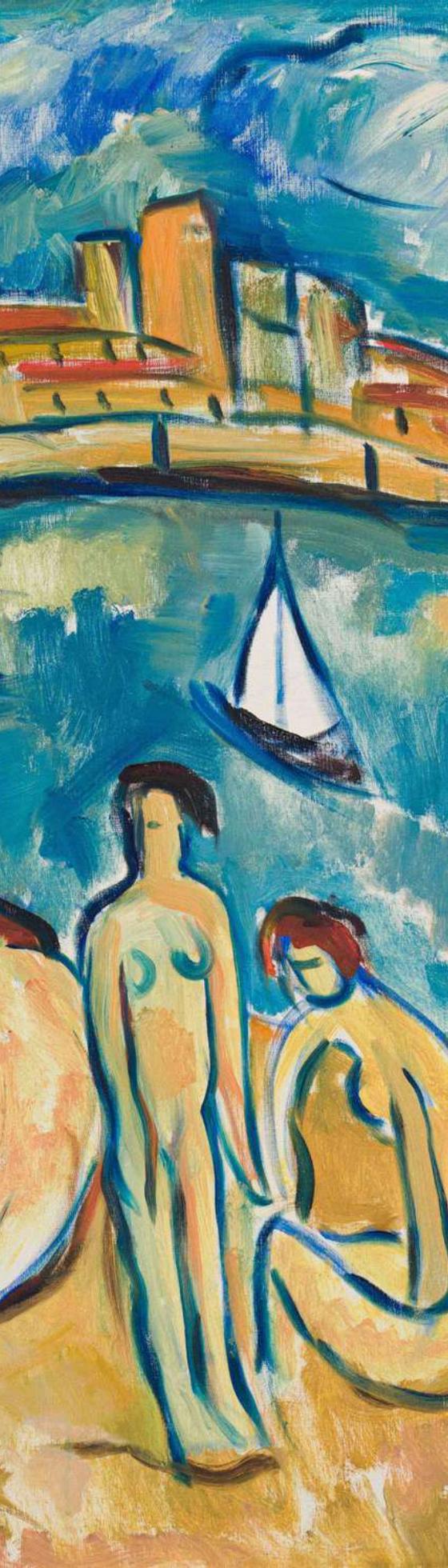
Irma Stern, *Young Arab and the Two Arabs (Father and Son)*; Private Collection.

LEFT
Irma Stern, *Young Arab* (1942); Sold by Strauss & Co,
March 2017, R13 641 600



Irma Stern, *Malay (Black Headdress)* (1946);
Sold by Strauss & Co, October 2025, R21 731 250

The works from these journeys are widely regarded as among the most accomplished of her career. This period also coincided with Stern's growing international reputation, particularly after her major solo exhibition at Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in 1947. Her work attracted sustained critical attention, and she was increasingly recognised as a significant modernist voice within both South African and broader colonial contexts.



Irma Stern: The Late Years — Spain, Madeira, France Consolidation and Recognition 1947–1966

In the decades following the Second World War, Stern travelled frequently to Europe, particularly to Spain, Madeira and France, while maintaining her home and studio in Cape Town. These journeys marked a period of consolidation in her practice. Her paintings during these years are characterised by freer brushwork, intensified colour and an increasing emphasis on atmosphere and inner life.

Portraiture remained central to her work, though figures are often rendered with greater abstraction and emotional economy. Drawing on decades of travel and observation, Stern revisited familiar themes with renewed freedom, distilling form and colour into an expressive shorthand. Her late works suggest an artist less concerned with external validation and more deeply attuned to personal vision.



Irma Stern, *The Mantilla* (detail), (1961);
R 3 000 000 - 5 000 000
Flagship Evening Sale, Tuesday 24 March | 7pm

By the time of her death in 1966, Stern had achieved significant recognition both locally and abroad, securing her position as one of South Africa's most important modern artists. Her legacy rests not only on the breadth of her travels, but on her unwavering commitment to painting as a means of encountering and interpreting the world.



Irma Stern, *White Sails* (1965); Sold by Strauss & Co, April 2025, R1 500 000



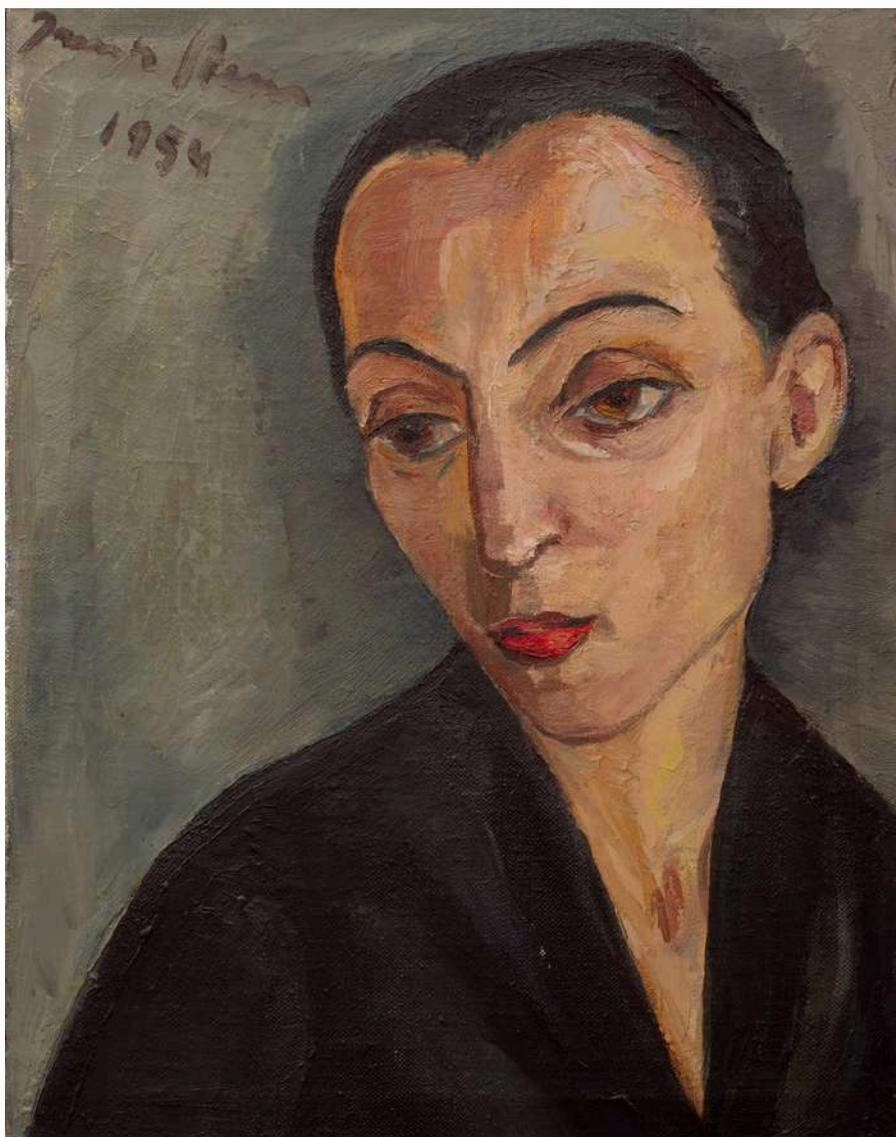
FACES OF CAPE TOWN

Portraits by Irma Stern

Strauss & Co, in partnership with Brickfield Canvas, is honoured to present Faces of Cape Town: Portraits by Irma Stern, a capsule exhibition showcasing a selection of portraits drawn from the Irma Stern Trust Collection. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to view Stern's deeply human depictions of the people who shaped her Cape Town world, from well-known cultural figures, to lesser documented sitters whose stories live on through her work.

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BRICKFIELD *Canvas*



1

Portrait of a woman: Ursula Schwittay

signed and dated 1954
oil on canvas
50,5 by 38,5 cm



Ursula Schwittay

1918–1996

Ursula Schwittay was a Cape Town–based fashion designer and educator, and a close friend of Irma Stern. She was portrayed by Stern on multiple occasions, indicating a sustained personal and professional relationship. Schwittay designed and tailored garments for Stern, contributing to the artist’s distinctive public appearance. Schwittay was the owner and director of the Cape Town School of Fashion until 1994 and played an influential role in fashion education in South Africa. Following Stern’s death, Schwittay regularly arranged for flowers to be placed on Stern’s studio desk, a commemorative gesture she maintained until her own death in 1996, in tribute to Stern’s artistic legacy.



2

Portrait: Anna Starke

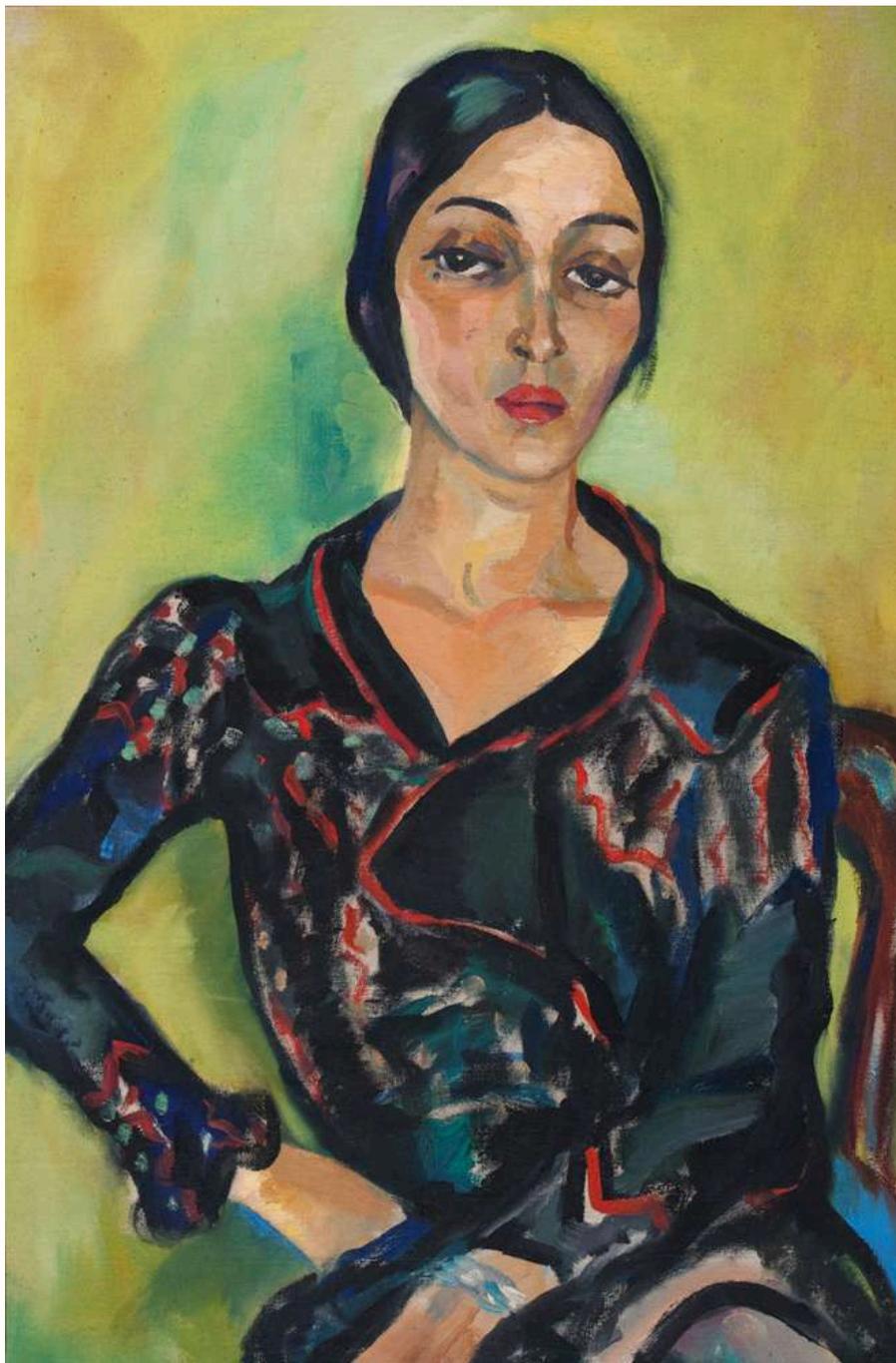
signed and dated 1964
oil on canvas
68,5 by 51 cm



Anna Starcke

1936–2025

Anna Starcke was a German-born cultural figure, journalist, and collector who became part of Cape Town's creative milieu in the 1960s. After relocating to South Africa with her husband, the artist Helmut Starcke, she became closely involved with the local art community and sat for portraits by artists including Irma Stern and Stanley Pinker. Starcke worked in galleries, boutiques, and bookshops in Cape Town and contributed to magazines before relocating Johannesburg in 1970. There she joined the Financial Mail and later served as editor of Management magazine, gaining recognition for her incisive writing on South African politics and socio-economic issues. Over several decades, Starcke assembled a significant and discerning collection of more than 150 works of African art, encompassing West and Central African traditions. The collection was offered at auction by Strauss & Co in November 2025.

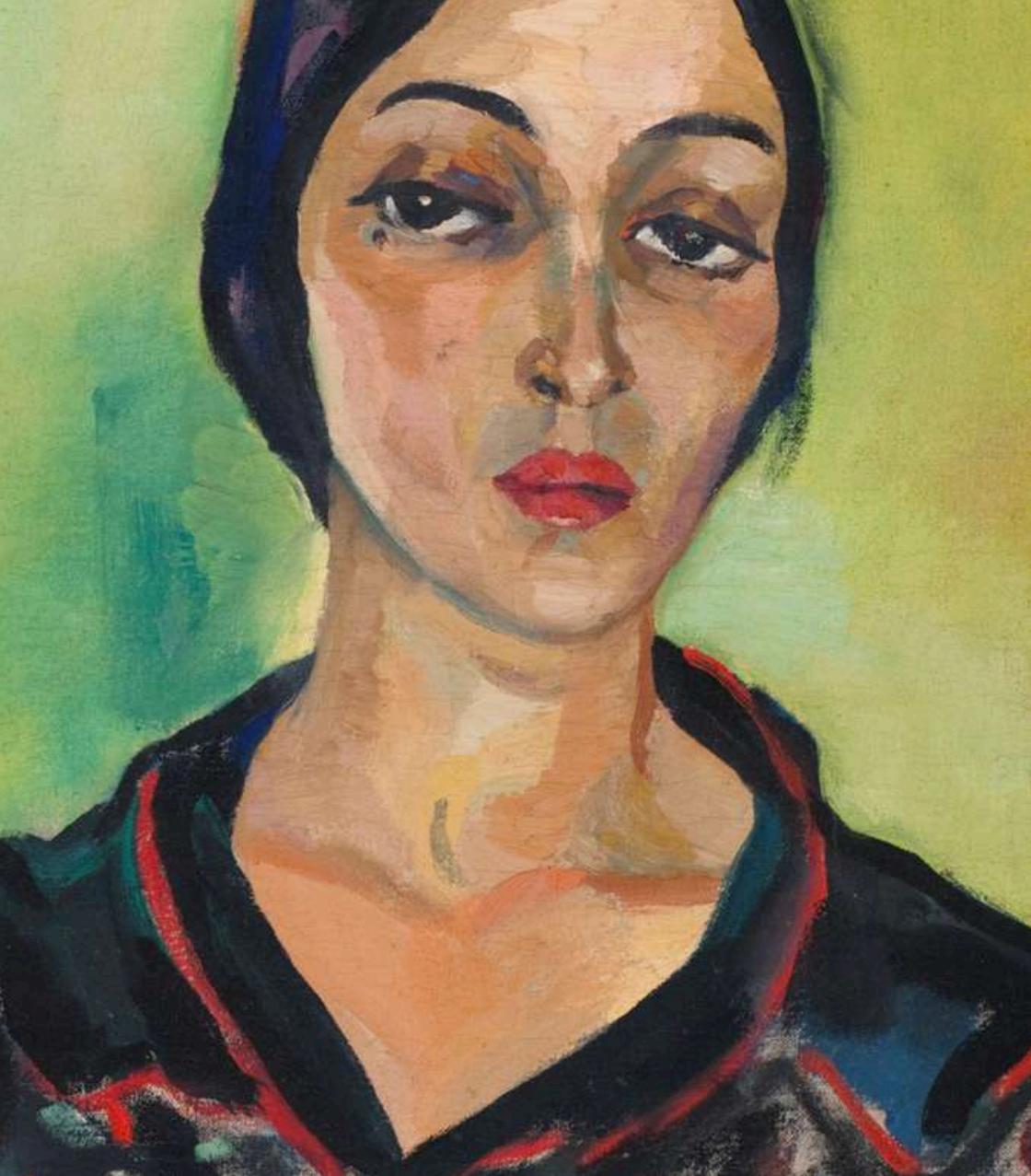


3

Woman's head and torso: Rebecca Hourwich Reyher

oil on canvas
90 by 61 cm

COURTESY OF THE IRMA STERN TRUST COLLECTION



Rebecca Hourwich Reyher

1897–1987

Rebecca Hourwich Reyher was an American author, lecturer, activist and cultural mediator whose wide-ranging career encompassed women's suffrage, journalism, travel writing and cross-cultural advocacy. Born in New York City to Russian immigrant parents, she became involved in the women's suffrage movement in the United States during the 1910s and later held leadership roles within the National Woman's Party in New York and Boston.

Reyher's engagement with the visual arts included a brief but significant association with Irma Stern. Reyher met Stern in 1924 during a six-month trip gathering material for the monthly magazine Hearst's International. She was immediately struck by Stern's paintings and subsequently transported works to New York, contributing to their early international exposure. This portrait of Reyher appeared in Stern's solo exhibition at Ashbey's Art Gallery in 1925. Reyher delivered the opening address.



4

Portrait of Roza van Gelderen

oil on canvas
58 by 47 cm



Roza van Gelderen

1890–1976

Roza van Gelderen was a prominent South African educator, cultural organiser, collector and early champion of modern visual culture in Cape Town. Born into a distinguished Dutch-Jewish family that emigrated to South Africa at the turn of the 20th century, van Gelderen qualified as a teacher and became the first Jewish principal of a government school in Cape Town, leading the Central Girls' School and embracing progressive educational ideals inspired by reformers such as A. S. Neill. Her work in education was characterised by a commitment to artistic, intellectual and social development. Van Gelderen's engagement with the visual arts included a lifelong friendship with Irma Stern, who portrayed her in multiple works, including *Portrait of a Woman in a Sari: Roza* (1929). The friendship was reciprocal: van Gelderen supported Stern's school initiatives and promoted her work, and Stern contributed illustrations and a mural to van Gelderen's educational projects. In 1935 van Gelderen donated Stern's *Swazi Girls* (1931) to the South African National Gallery. The portraits of van Gelderen attest to her singular presence in Stern's circle and to the role she played in extending cultural horizons beyond conventional boundaries.



5

Portrait of David Fram

signed and dated 1944
oil on canvas
51 by 51 cm



David Fram

1903–1988

The Lithuanian-born Yiddish poet, playwright and cultural figure David Fram immigrated to South Africa in the late 1920s, becoming a prominent member of the country's Jewish literary and artistic communities. His work engaged themes of migration, identity and the diasporic Jewish experience. Irma Stern painted Fram in 1944. Her portrait captures both his intellectual presence and the dynamic social and cultural networks of mid-century South Africa. The painting is one of several Stern executed of literary and artistic figures, reflecting her sustained engagement with contemporary cultural figures. These works reveal her interest in portraying the psychological depth of her sitters.



6

Siegbert Eick

signed and dated 1942
oil on canvas
_ by _ cm



Siegbert Eick

20th century

The German Jewish émigré Siegbert Eick was a well-known figure in Cape Town's intellectual and bohemian circles. He moved to South Africa in the later 1930s. A notable art and book dealer, he played an important role in Cape Town's artistic circles through his friendships, support of fellow artists, and advocacy for artistic talent irrespective of race or background. He was a close friend of Irma Stern, who portrayed him in both pencil drawings and paintings. Stern painted two portraits of Eick, in 1942 and 1947, one purportedly in exchange for a Dürer print that was sold from her estate after her death.



7

Portrait of Abbé Henri Breuil

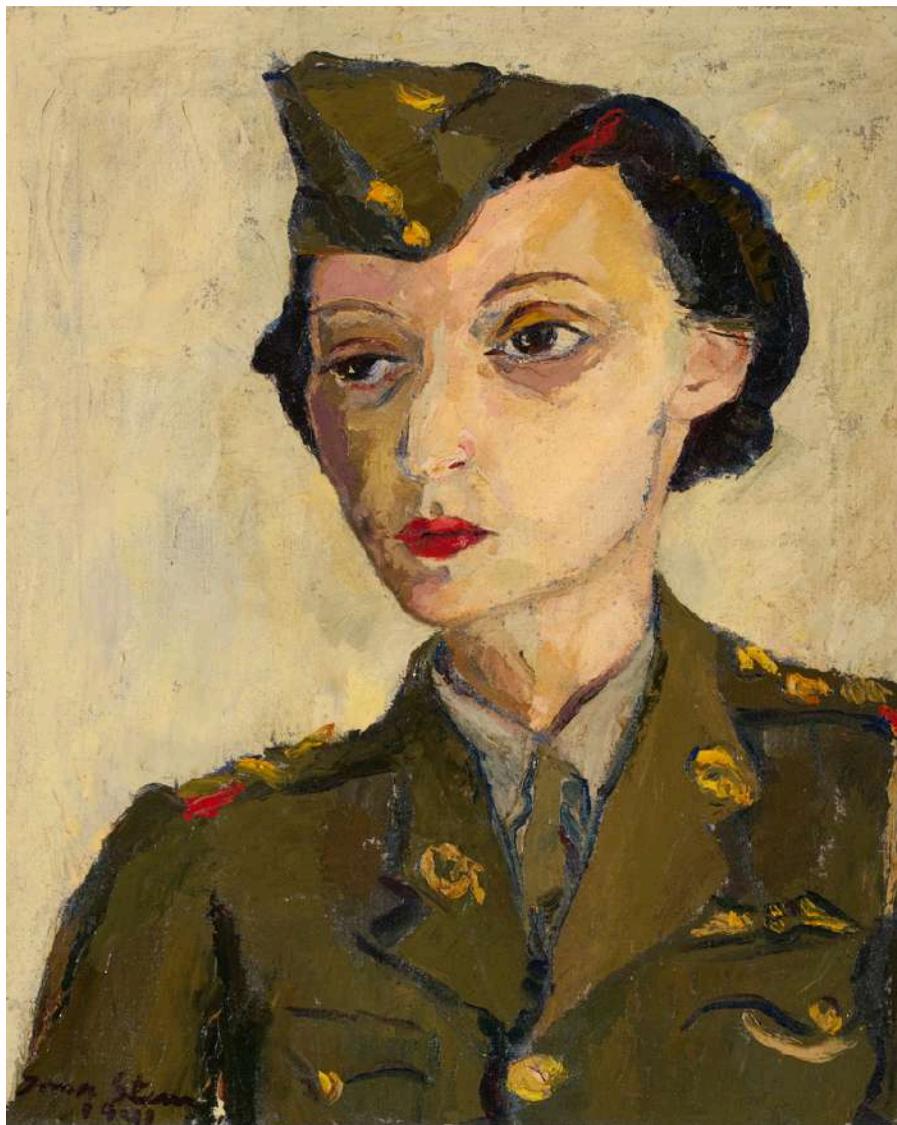
signed and dated 1945
oil on canvas
56 by 56 cm



Abbé Henri Breuil

1877–1961

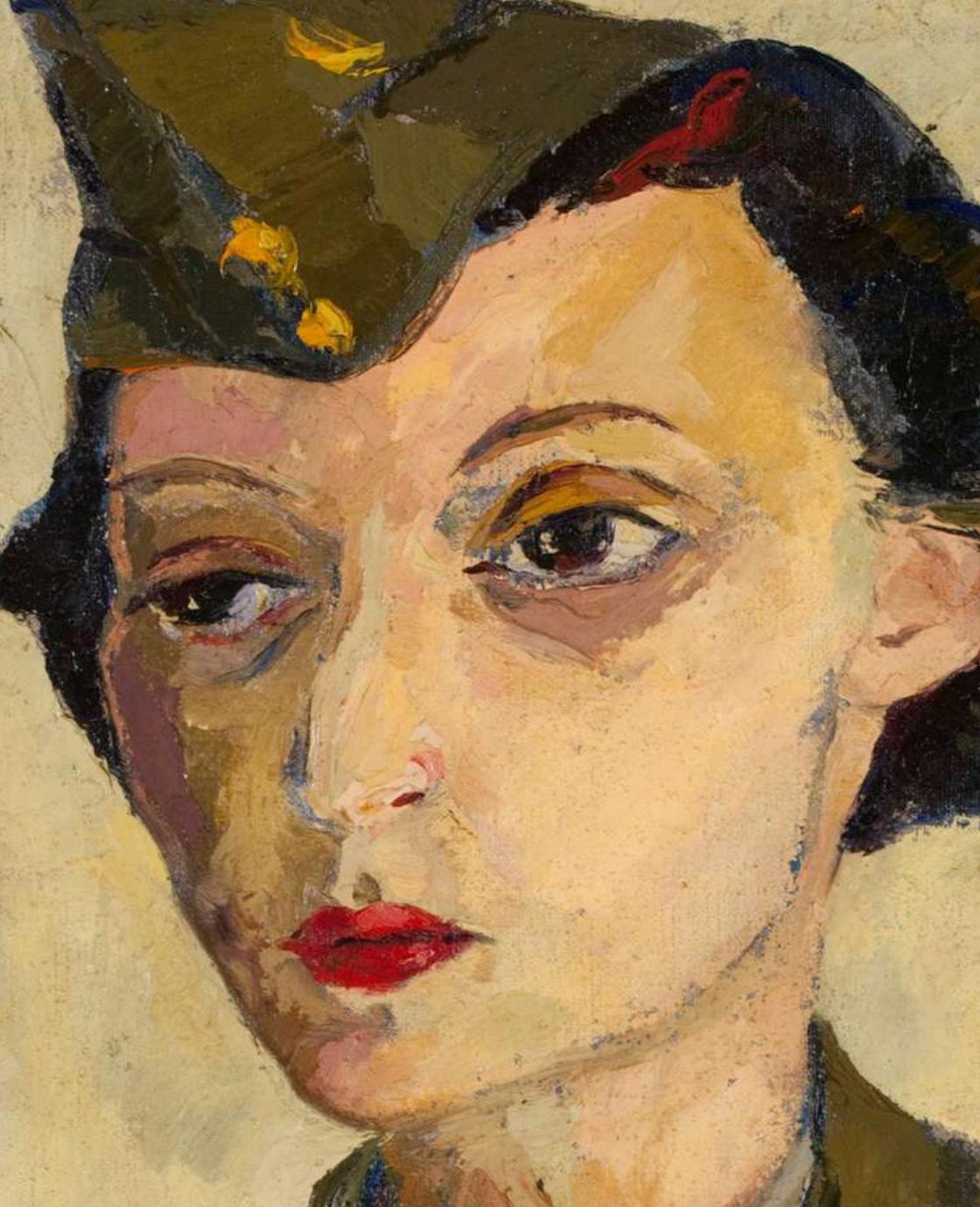
Abbé Henri Breuil was a distinguished French archaeologist and prehistorian, renowned for his pioneering studies of Paleolithic and rock art across Europe and Africa. His meticulous fieldwork and publications helped establish modern methods for recording and interpreting ancient visual culture. His admirers included Irma Stern and Walter Battiss. Painted in 1945, Stern's portrait situates Breuil at the intersection of her modernist portraiture and a broader intellectual and artistic network that included European and South African scholars and artists. The portrait captures Breuil's scholarly presence and affirms his importance to artists at a time when modern art was energised by anthropology and archaeology.



8

Woman in army uniform: Ann Apthorp

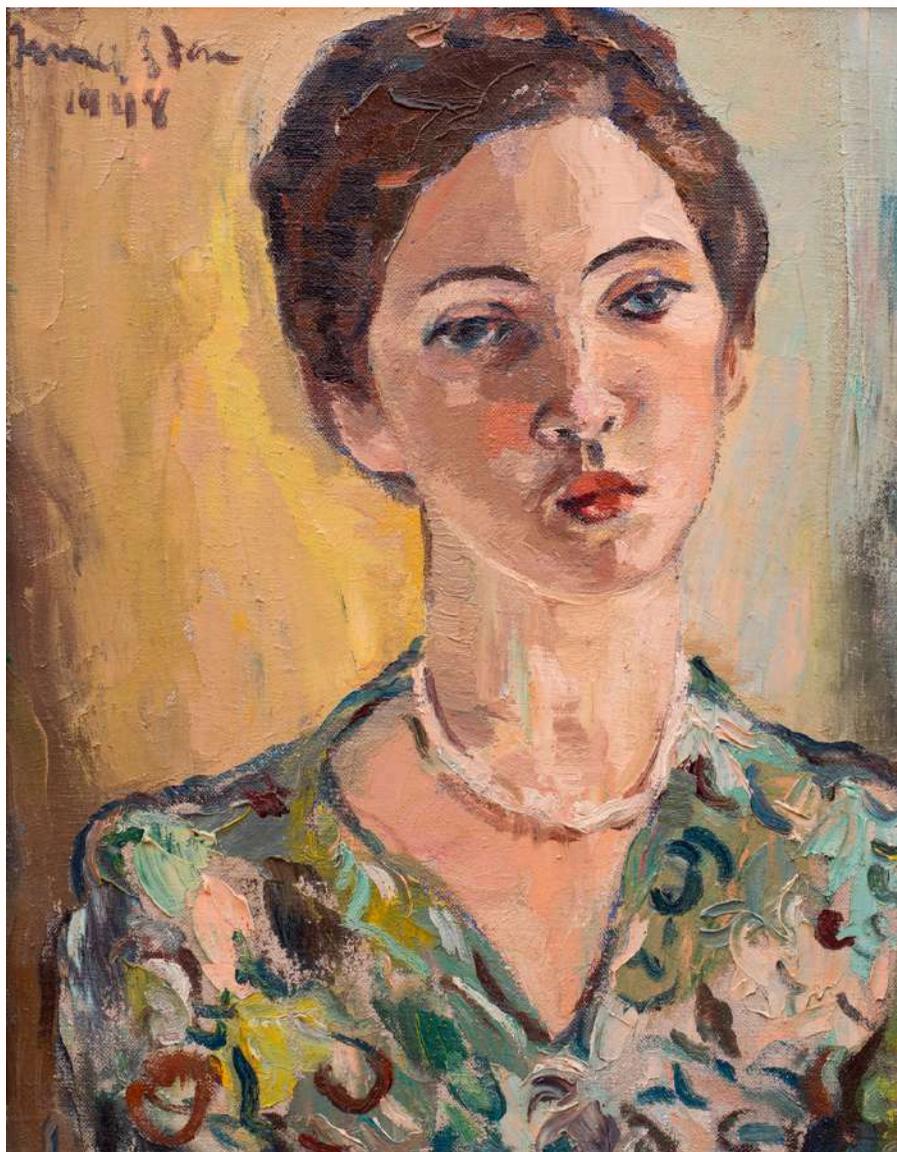
signed and dated 1941
oil on canvas
61,5 by 51 cm



Ann Apthorp

20th century

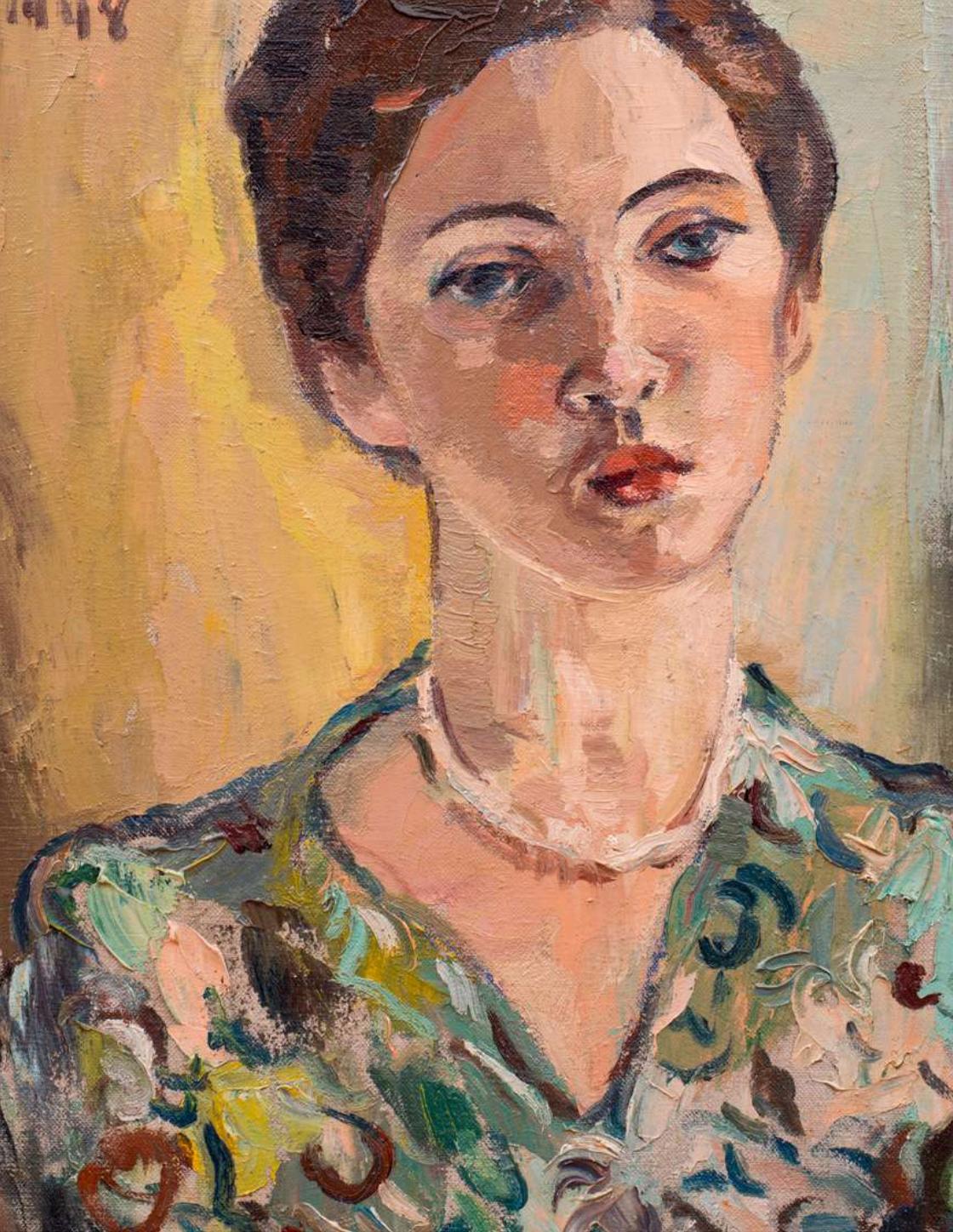
Ann Apthorp was a close friend of Irma Stern and part of the artist's intimate social circle in Cape Town during the Second World War. During this period, Apthorp served in the South African Women's Auxiliary Services. Stern's portrait of Apthorp in uniform derived from a period in which private lives and global events were increasingly intertwined. It, however, departs from conventional representations of military service, emphasising instead the sitter's individuality, poise and psychological presence. Through expressive colour and confident brushwork, Stern presents Apthorp not as a symbol of wartime duty, but as a modern woman shaped by the uncertainties and responsibilities of her moment. The painting reflects Stern's ongoing commitment to portraiture as a means of capturing character rather than status.



9

Portrait of Barbara Kuper: Irma Stern's niece

signed and dated 1948
oil on canvas
64 by 50 cm



Barbara Kuper

21st century

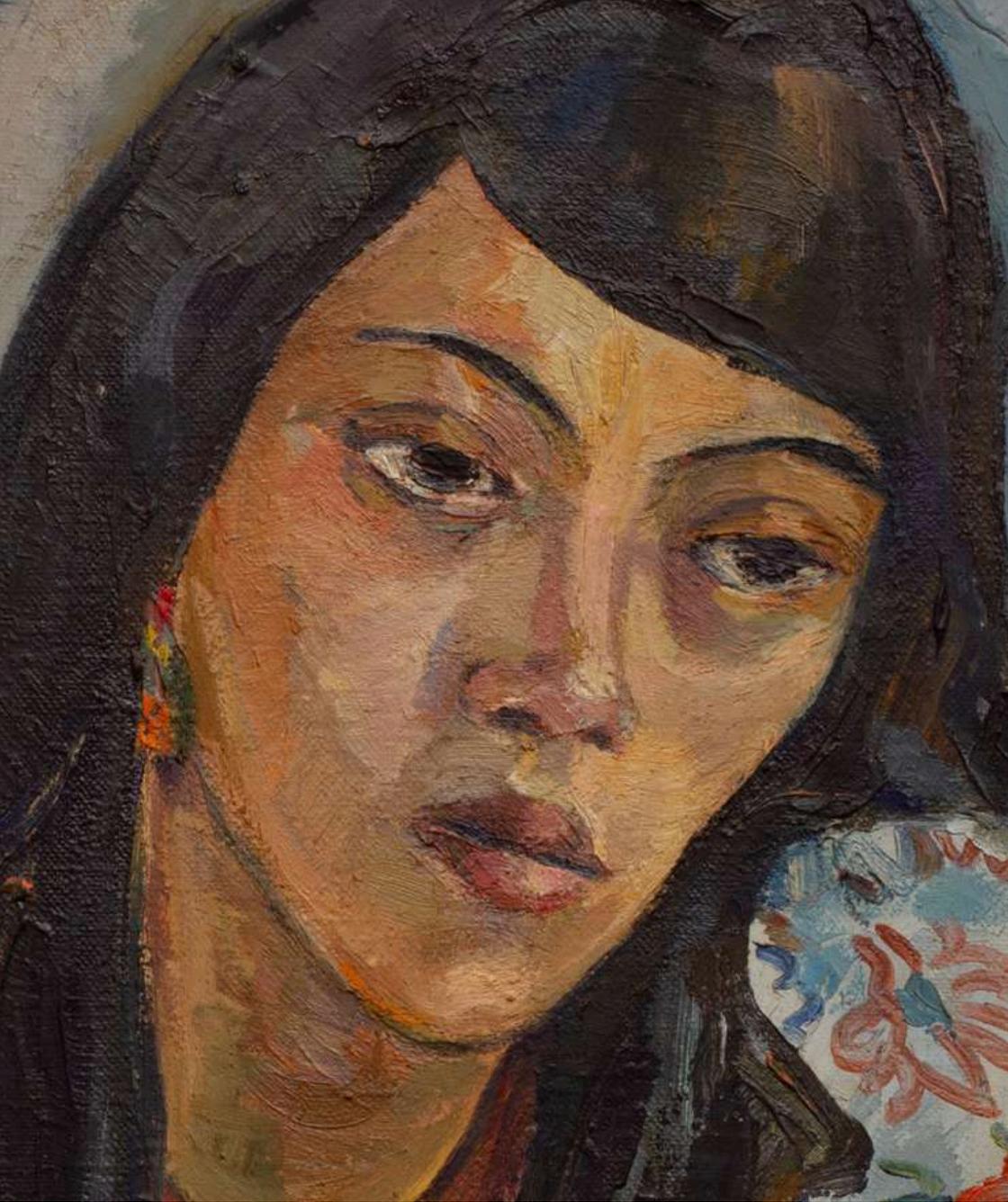
Barbara Kuper was Irma Stern's niece and a member of her close family circle in Cape Town. The daughter of Stern's younger brother, Rudi Stern, Kuper frequently spent time at The Firs, Stern's home and studio in Rosebank. Stern painted Kuper on several occasions, a testament to the familiarity and trust that shaped these portraits. Rather than formal commissions, the works reflect a sustained familial engagement, allowing Stern to explore character, mood and presence with unusual immediacy. These portraits underscore the importance of family relationships within Stern's portrait practice, in which emotional proximity informs both likeness and expression.



10

Malay girl

signed and dated 1950
oil on canvas
58,5 by 61 cm



Painted in 1950, *Malay Girl* marks a significant point in Irma Stern's engagement with the Cape Muslim community of the Bo-Kaap. While this community had been a primary focus during her "Golden Period" of the 1940s, this work demonstrates a shift toward a more fluid, painterly handling. Stern captures the sitter with a contemplative, downward-looking gaze, shifting the focus from the vibrancy of the surrounding neighbourhood to the private, internal world of the individual.

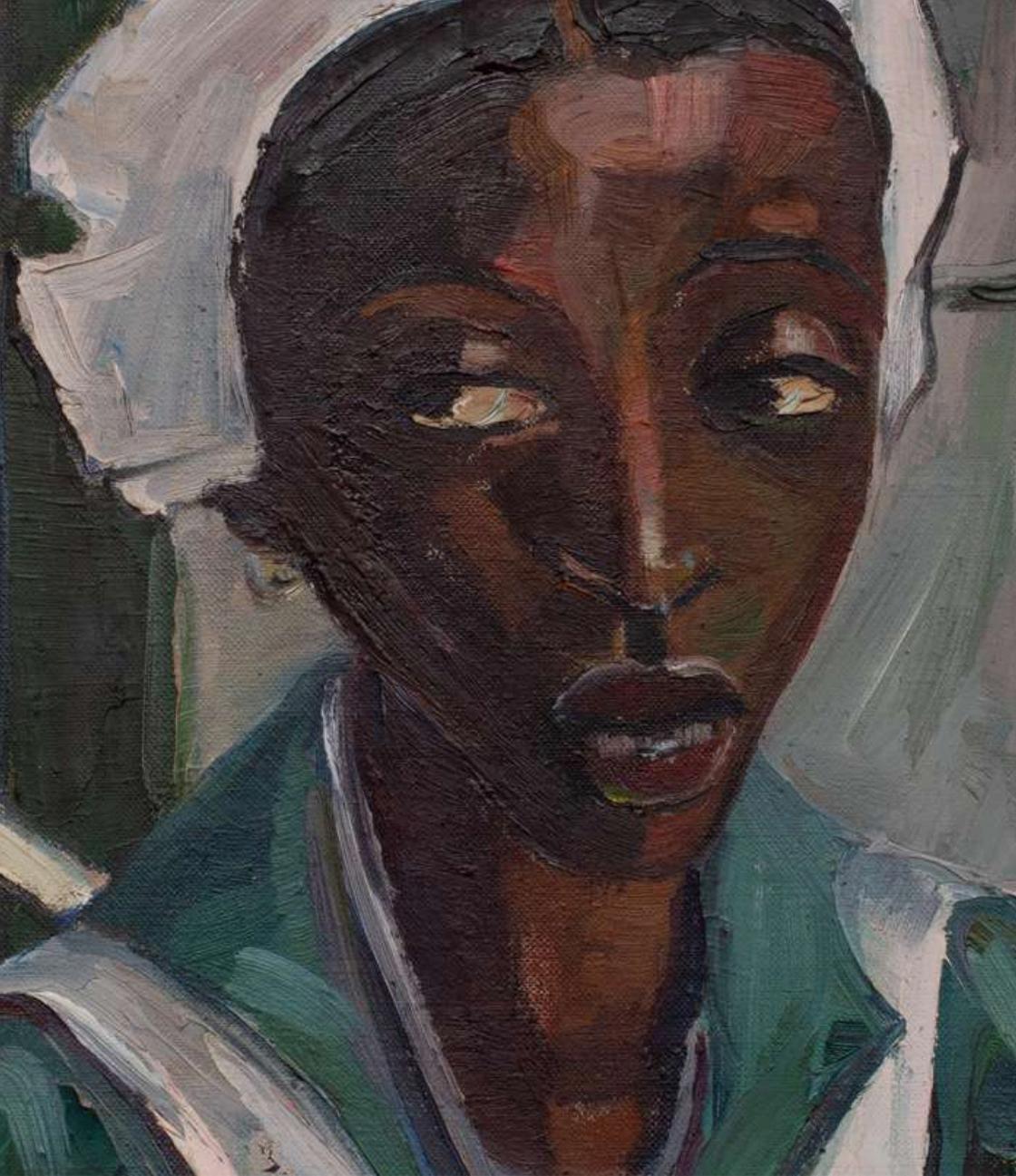
The composition is enriched by the inclusion of a still-life element, a bowl of fruit, which anchors the sitter in a domestic space while allowing Stern to experiment with volume and form. The intricate pattern of the girl's blouse and the deep, sculptural folds of her headscarf are rendered with a confident, rhythmic brushwork that characterizes Stern's mid-century mastery. In the context of *Faces of Cape Town*, this portrait exemplifies Stern's ability to find universal poise and quiet dignity within the specific cultural textures of the city.



11

Maid in Uniform

signed and dated 1955
oil on canvas
69 by 63 cm



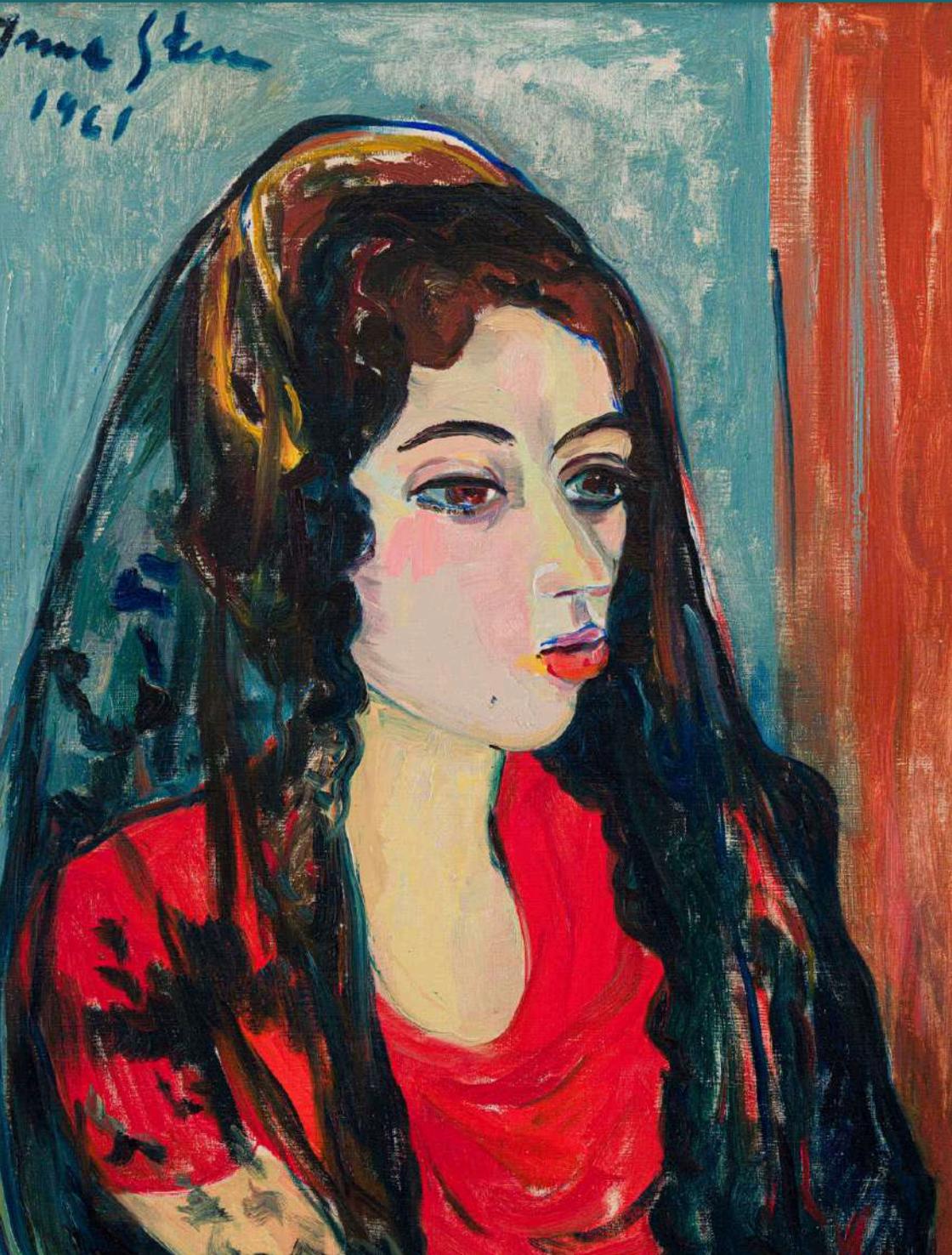
This 1955 portrait by Irma Stern has received considerable attention by revisionist historians and curators. The work explores the tension between social identity and individual interiority. While the title of the portrait and the starched white cap and apron of the sitter denote the sitter's role within the domestic sphere of mid-century Cape Town, Stern's approach is far from a mere study of a social "type." The sitter is rendered with a monumental physical authority, her crossed arms and sideways glance suggesting a self-possessed, confident, yet guarded, psychological depth.

The work belongs to Stern's late period, characterized by a more liberated and textural application of paint. The face is a complex mosaic of deep umbers, ochres and reds, demonstrating Stern's lifelong commitment to using expressive colour to convey vitality rather than literal likeness. The uniform serves as a formal structural element, a bright, geometric contrast to the darker skin tones, but it is the sitter's distinct, pensive gaze that commands the viewer's attention, asserting a private humanity that transcends her professional station.

Cape Town Auction Week

Tuesday 24 March – Wednesday 25 March

Flagship Evening Sale, Tuesday 24 March | 7pm



Irma Stern, *The Mantilla* (1961); R 3 000 000 - 5 000 000

UPCOMING AUCTION HIGHLIGHT

