



# It's About Art



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Koulla Xinisteris  
Curator

## **SABC Collection's Stern portrait featured in Zanzibari Years exhibition at Norval Foundation**

*Seated Arab Man*, a major portrait painted by Irma Stern during her second trip to Zanzibar in 1945, is currently on loan to the Norval Foundation in the Steenberg area of Cape Town, and features as part of an exhibition that runs at the art centre for the summer months. *The Zanzibari Years: Irma Stern* focuses on a small body of significant works produced by the artist during her two stays in Zanzibar and the period from 1939 – 1945.

It is the first time in nearly 40 years that these Zanzibari works, considered among her finest, are being exhibited together as a body of work. 'The paintings from her time in Zanzibar consist primarily of portraits of Arab imams and men at prayer or in groups at the mosque but also include portraits of fathers and sons, sheiks, merchants and fishermen as well as a striking series of Zanzibari women from Arabic, Indian, Bohari and Swahili communities,' reads the exhibition statement. 'These women have been captured dancing at marriage celebrations, in quietly meditative states or engaging directly with Stern as a painter. A number of sumptuous still lives also date from this period, as well as a handful of paintings of Arabic architecture and private walled gardens.'<sup>1</sup>

*Seated Arab Man* is one of several works by Irma Stern that is housed in the SABC Art Collection and testifies to the Collection's broad chronological embrace. Included in the Collection are South African artworks that span more than a century, from the 19th to the 21st century.

In this portrait, a bearded man wearing a loosely tied turban, sits in the doorway of what might be his seaside home. Through the doorway we see two Zanzibari dhows, traditional Indian Ocean sailing vessels, one with a mast and slanting, triangular lateen sail, bobbing on the ocean waves. The man's wizened face and working hands give the impression that he has endured some life struggles, but he has a nobility about him. His turban, white linen kanzu robe and jacket suggest that he has dressed for the occasion of the sitting with the artist. His hands are peacefully folded resting on his walking stick, and he is wearing a ring with a blue stone.



Irma STERN (1894 – 1966)  
Seated Arab Man  
1945  
oil on board  
70 x 70cm

Stern's superb handling of colour is strongly evident here—in the blue stone that picks up on the tones of the azure sea, and in the warm, earthy plum hues of the man's jacket which subtly echo the pink door in the background and the deep carmine red of the man's lips. Similarly her thickly applied and impassioned expressionist brushstrokes can be seen in her depiction of the motion of the sea, and the folds and rumples in the fabric of the man's jacket and turban.

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Like most of the portraits on the exhibition, *Seated Arab Man* is rendered all the more compelling by its well-preserved frame of decoratively carved wood. In a sculptural choice that was ahead of its time, Stern took the decision to work with found materials and frame her works using fragments of Zanzibari doors. 'The distinctive frames, made of lintels, bosses and decorative door edgings, read as windows or architectural framing devices that evoke a spirit of place,' reads the exhibition text.

Stern travelled widely from her teenage years onwards, but her frequent journeys to Europe came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of the Second World War. Instead, she travelled within Africa during this time, journeying first to Zanzibar and then to the Congo. The sights sounds and smells she experienced on these expeditions fuelled her artistic creativity and energy, and gave rise to the publication of two illustrated journals; *Congo* (1943) and *Zanzibar* (1948). The war years, 1939 to 1945, are widely viewed as Stern's finest period. The landscapes and people she encountered on her excursions appealed to her fascination with the exotic, and catalysed a creative outburst. 2

Strong critiques have been levelled against Stern for her romantic, orientalisng gaze, and her tendency to treat her sitters as exotic others—as types rather than as individuals with names and personal histories of their own. Avoiding the internal gaze, she never produced any self-portraits; instead she painted portraits of others. She has been criticised for her poor understanding of political and social realities; her reactions to the so-called 'other' were often limited by her own perspective, cultural mindset, ego and psychological make-up.

In this portrait, the sitter does not gaze directly at the painter/viewer but rather averts eye contact. This could be interpreted as evidence of the unequal power dynamic between painter and subject. At the same time, it could be read as a respectful engagement of negotiated intimacy between a Muslim man and Western woman in 1945. In several paintings on the exhibition at Norval Foundation, the figures in Stern's portraits have one partially closed or seemingly wounded eye. In *Seated Arab Man*, for instance, not only does the subject not engage the painter/viewer directly, his right eye squints slightly inwards toward his nose, further complicating the gaze. This could possibly signal that Stern was, herself, aware of the fraught cultural weight implicit in the act of looking, seeing or observing another.

This exhibition presents viewers with a rare opportunity to experience Stern's work first hand, think through the nuances entangled in these questions of artistic representation and decide for themselves.

Curated by the Norval Foundation's Senior Advising Curator, Karel Nel, *The Zanzibar Years: Irma Stern* runs until 28 March 2022.

## BIOGRAPHY

Irma Stern (1894 – 1966) was a major South African artist who achieved national and international recognition in her lifetime. Stern was born to German-Jewish parents in Schweizer-Reneke, a small town in what was then the Transvaal (now Gauteng). When her father was interned in a concentration camp by the British during the South African War because of his pro-Boer leanings, Irma and her younger brother, Rudi, were taken to Cape Town by their mother. After the war, the family returned to Germany and would constantly travel. This travel would influence Irma's work.

In 1913 Stern studied art in Germany at the Weimar Academy, in 1914 at the Levin-Funcke Studio and, notably, from 1917 with Max Pechstein, a founder of the Novembergruppe. Stern was associated with the German Expressionist painters of this period. She held her first exhibition in Berlin in 1919. In 1920 she returned with her family to Cape Town, where, at first, her work was derided and dismissed by critics, with one review titled 'Art of Miss Irma Stern—Ugliness as a cult.' Over the years Stern gradually won acceptance, and by the 1940s, she had succeeded in becoming an acclaimed artist.

Stern travelled extensively in Europe and Southern Africa, Zanzibar, Senegal, the Congo and the Congo region. These trips provided a wide range of subject matter for her paintings and gave her opportunities to acquire and assemble a collection of artefacts. Stern's dream was to travel extensively in her lifetime: in 1930 to Madeira, in 1937 and 1938 to Dakar, Senegal, 1939 Zanzibar, 1942 Congo, 1945 Zanzibar, 1946 Central Africa, 1952 Madeira, 1952 Israel, 1955 Congo, 1955 Turkey, 1960 Spain and 1963 France. She refused to either travel or exhibit in Germany during the period 1933 – 1945. Instead, she undertook several journeys into Africa.

Almost one hundred solo exhibitions were held during her lifetime both in South Africa and Europe: including Germany, France, Italy and England.

The Irma Stern Museum was established in Rosebank, Cape Town, in 1971 in the house the artist lived in for almost four decades. –Alexandra Dodd

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## SOURCES:

1 'The Zanzibar Years: Irma Stern,' Norval Foundation, <https://www.norvalfoundation.org/irma-stern-the-zanzibar-years/#> (Accessed 25 November 2021)

2 N. Dubow, *Irma Stern*, (Cape Town, 1974), pp.18–19.