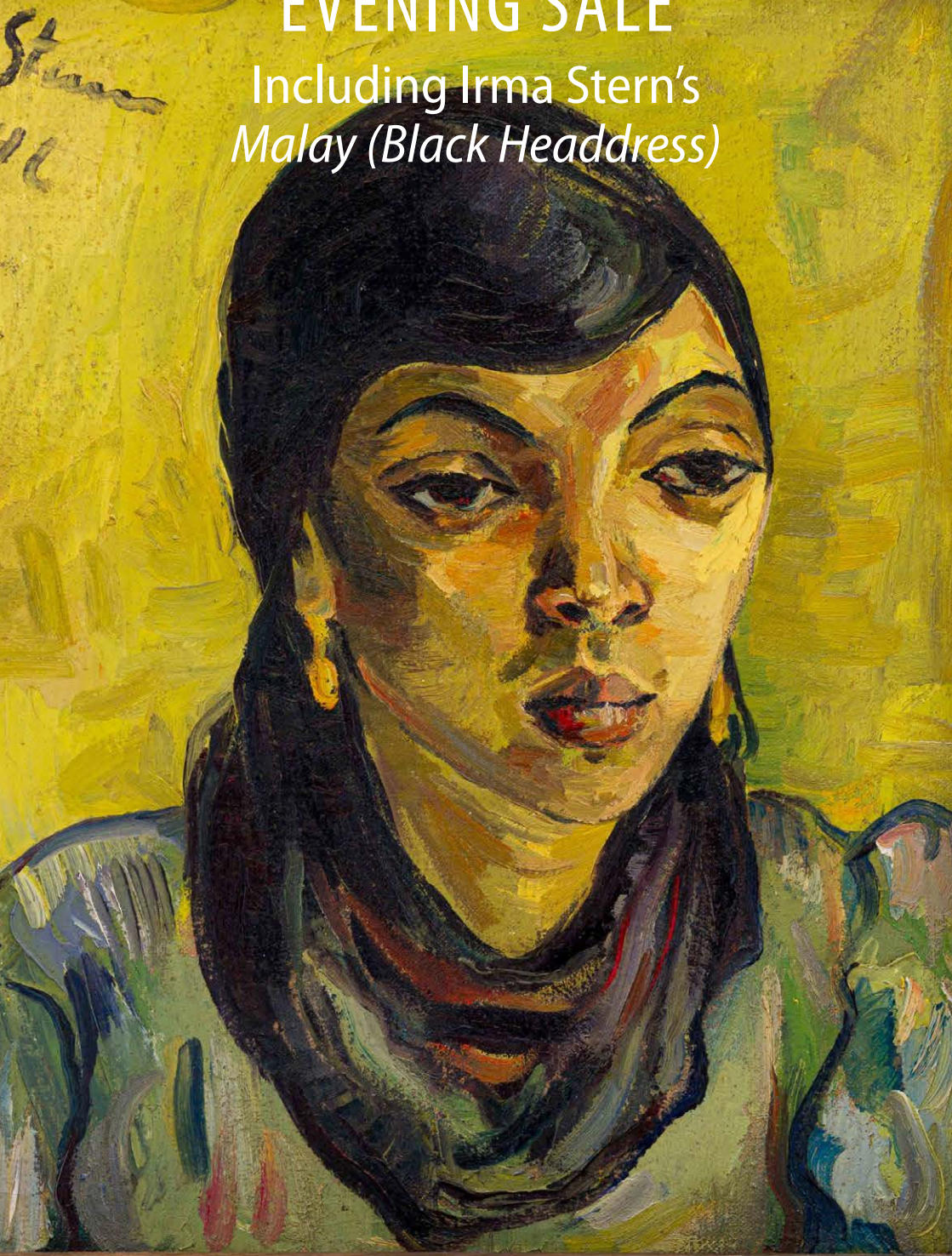


THE INTERNATIONAL EVENING SALE

Including Irma Stern's
Malay (Black Headdress)



Strauss & co



Strauss&co

Africa's Leading Art Auction House

THE INTERNATIONAL EVENING SALE

Including Irma Stern's
Malay (Black Headdress)

28 October 2025, 7pm
Strauss & Co, Cape Town

Virtual Live Auction

www.straussart.co.za

Lots 101–177

THE INTERNATIONAL DAY SALE

Friday 10 to Tuesday 28 October 2025, 2pm
Lots 1–107

PREVIEW

Monday 13 to Tuesday 28 October 2025,
9am to 5pm
Saturday 25 and 26 October 2025,
9am to 4pm

To view and RSVP for Strauss & Co events,
click here: www.straussart.co.za/events

Shipping Enquiries

shipping@straussart.co.za

Condition Report Enquiries

conditionreports@straussart.co.za

REGISTER TO BID

All lots are sold subject to the conditions
of business available on our website



151

Irma Stern

SOUTH AFRICAN 1894–1966

Malay (Black Headdress)

1946

signed and dated 1946

oil on canvas

55,5 by 50,5 cm

R7 000 000 – 10 000 000

PROVENANCE

Irma Stern Studio, 1946.

Private Collection.

LITERATURE

South African National Library, Cape Town, Irma Stern Archive, Photograph and Negative titled *Malay (Black Headdress)*.

[VIEW LOT](#)

In private hands for more than half a century, Irma Stern's magnificent 1946 portrait *Malay (Black Headdress)* returns to the market in a remarkable year for the artist. Following her inclusion in the 2024 *Venice Biennale*, Stern's output is currently the subject of a major career retrospective at the Brücke Museum in Berlin, *Irma Stern: A Modern Artist between Berlin and Cape Town*. A founding member of the *Novembergruppe* (November Group) and a close friend of the Brücke artist Max Pechstein, Stern studied painting in Weimar and Berlin and in the 1920s exhibited in the German capital's most important galleries. These formative years established the bold, highly coloured, and emotionally expressive style she brought back to the Cape. The current exhibition in Berlin explicitly repositions her as a pivotal figure in Expressionism and a key international modernist.¹ *Malay (Black Headdress)* dates from her peak South African years. At its centre is an unknown Cape Muslim woman, her black hijab draped around her head and neck. Stern renders this figure of quiet dignity and psychological intrigue in a bold impasto painting technique characteristic of her celebrated golden period (roughly 1933–48).

1946 was arguably the most significant year in Irma Stern's career. In a newspaper article from 8 March 1946, one journalist reviews her work: 'Shall I tell you that this is Miss Stern's magnum opus? I was ready to say she has reached her pinnacle, but on second thoughts I hope she may go yet farther; in any case, this is the finest she has ever given us.'²

Returning from her second transformative visit to Zanzibar in 1945, the artist was riding a wave of unprecedented creative energy and commercial success. She commenced the year with a spectacular exhibition at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town, which showcased important pieces like *The Smoker* (SOLD at Strauss & Co for R17 156 250), and ended it with producing works like *Congo Group* in 1946 (a seminal piece housed at the IZIKO South African National Gallery) – both now international benchmarks for her Zanzibari and Congo oeuvre.

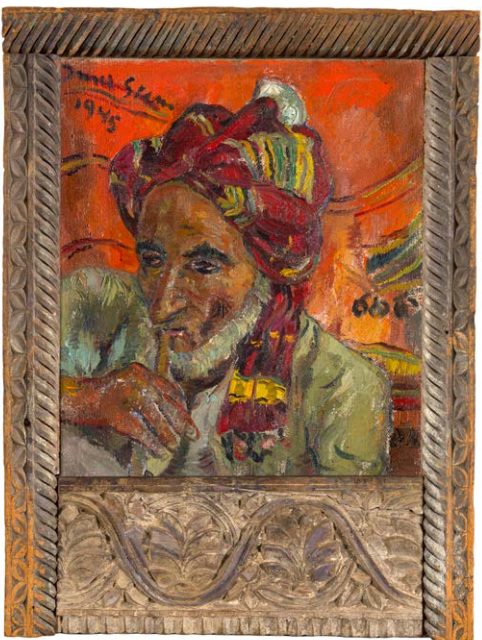


Fig 1. Irma Stern, *The Smoker*, 1945, Sold R17 156 250, Strauss & Co, 19 March 2024.

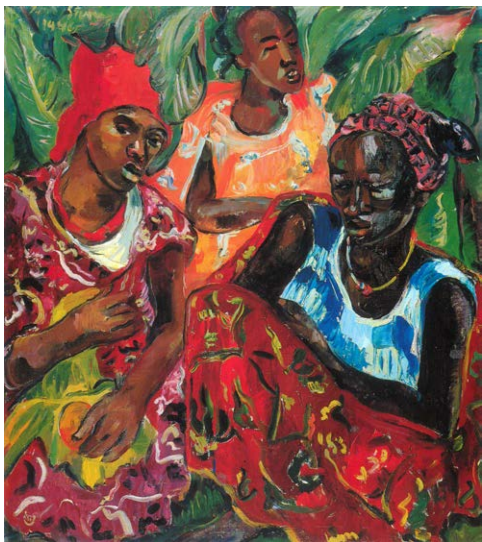


Fig 2. Irma Stern, *Congo Group*, 1946, image detail from Standard Bank Gallery, 2003, *Irma Stern Expressions of a Journey*, exhibition catalogue, illustrated in colour on page 55.



Fig 3. Irma Stern in her studio at The Firs, Cape Town, working on *Watussi Woman with Mountains*.
Image courtesy of South African National Library.

The frantic pace of this period is vividly captured in a letter she wrote to Richard and Freda Feldman on the 10th of March, 1946:

'The Show [Argus Gallery Exhibition] is a first class success. ... I am as tired as a dog! Having about 3-400 people in daily and just when I want peace at home – some more to come and buy from Studio –

*Sales are going very well too. ... I have so much work in getting things framed up for Johb. & orders here... So I am- as you may realise- just in a good old mental stew. Then of course I have to arrange for my trip to the Congo as a week after my Johb. show I am flying to Eville and am motoring on. ... Sigh with relief that you are not me. Love Irma.'*³

Stern spent the early months of 1946 working at a relentless pace, preparing for a Johannesburg show before departing for the Belgian Congo. The Rand Daily Mail published on the Bothner's Gallery exhibition on 29 April 1946, declaring that 'for the first time in her life she had found financial appreciation as well as friendship in her exhibition.'⁴

This painting, created in the fertile, high-pressure atmosphere of her studio, was almost certainly acquired in the flurry of collector demand that defined the period. Its subsequent history is unusually discreet: it passed into a private South African collection and has been absent from public display until now.

Stern herself signalled its importance by having the work photographed and annotated for her personal archive, a record she reserved for her most valued works. What makes this work so special is its synthesis of style and subject. It is a spectacular demonstration of the impasto, vibrant colour, and bold, expressive brushwork that defines her mature style, but beyond technique, it is the compelling dignity with which she renders her subject, a woman from the local Malay community in the Cape, that elevates it to an important artwork. It embodies Stern's unwavering commitment to portraying the

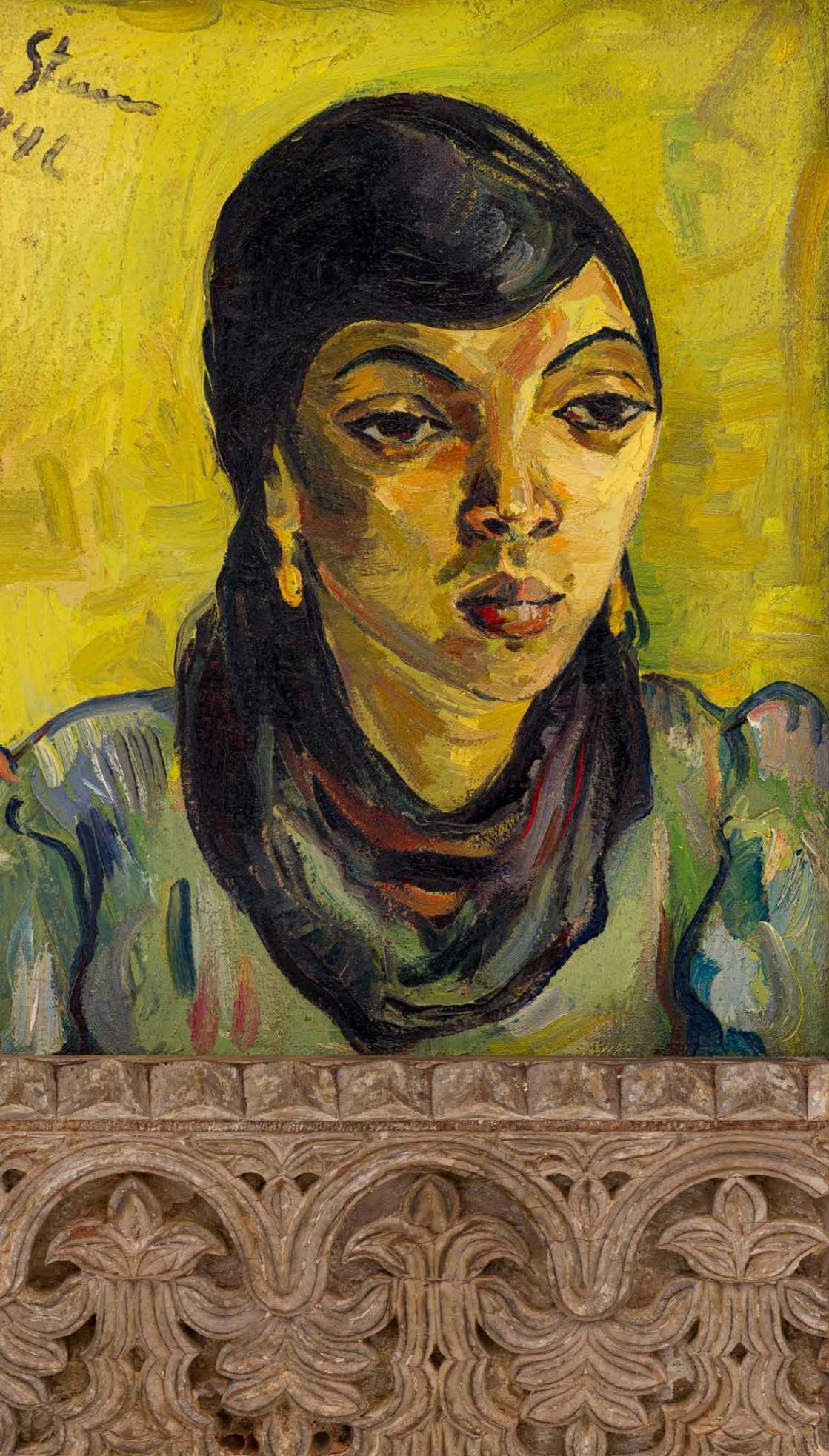


Fig 4. Irma Stern, *Malay (Black Headdress)*, 1946, image courtesy of the South African National Library.

richness of African culture, celebrating her sitters with both vitality and profound respect.

The importance of this painting must also be seen in the context of Irma Stern's global stature. She remains one of the highest-selling female artists from the African continent, and a true Expressionist pioneer whose legacy South Africa can be truly proud of.

1. Lisa Hörstmann and Lisa Marei Schmidt (2025) *Irma Stern, Catalogue for Brücke-Museum*, Berlin: Hirmer Verlag
2. Irma Stern's Journal, South African National Library Archive, accessed September 2025.
3. Sandra Klopper (2017) *Irma Stern: Are You Still Alive? Stern's Life and Art Seen Through Her Letters to Richard and Freda Feldman, 1934-1966*, Cape Town: Orisha, page 131.
4. Irma Stern's Journal, South African National Library Archive, accessed September 2025.



Steen
1946



DO YOU KNOW THE VALUE OF YOUR ART?

Contact us at art@straussart.co.za

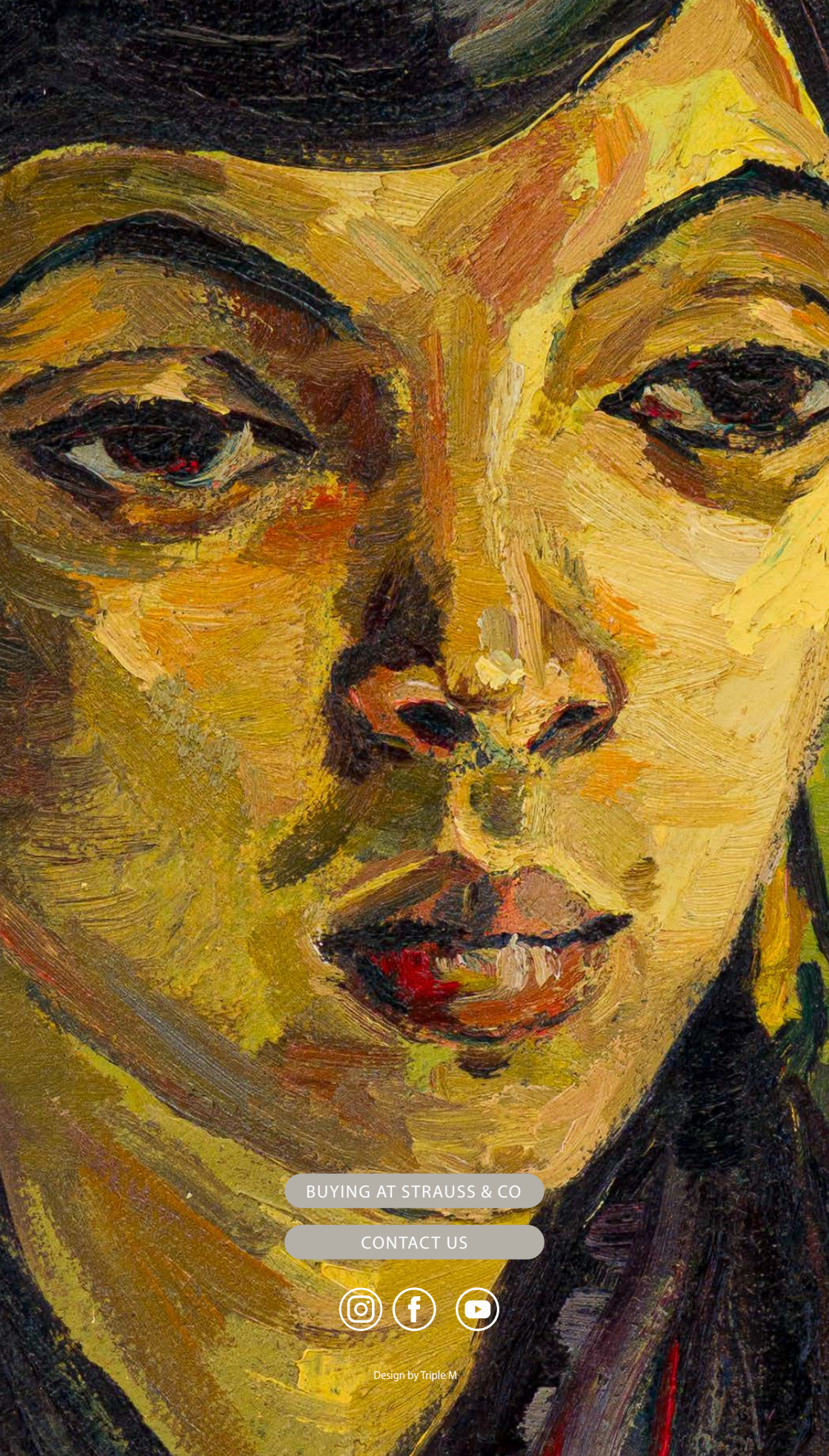
BUILD YOUR STRAUSS & CO WISHLIST

Never miss the opportunity to bid
on your favourite items.

Track and receive notifications on
artists, makers, designers, producers
and item categories you love.

www.straussart.co.za/wishlist

Lot 158 Sir William Russell Flint,
Nudes in an Interior (detail)



BUYING AT STRAUSS & CO

CONTACT US



Design by Triple M