



Life Force

THE STILL LIVES OF IRMA STERN

RMB TURBINE ART FAIR
2018

Foreword

Irma Stern is an important figure in the history of South African art. An undeniable innovator, her portrait and still life paintings have been especially admired by generations of collectors. Nearly a half-century after her passing, Stern's legacy endures and she continues to outperform all other South African artists at auction. She is Strauss & Co's top-selling artist.

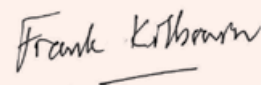
In March 2009, when Strauss & Co held its inaugural auction in Johannesburg, the sale included a selection of Stern's paintings and drawings including her enigmatic still life, *Magnolias in an Earthen Pot* (1949). I am delighted that Strauss & Co senior art specialist Wilhelm van Rensburg selected this important work for this timely exhibition of Stern's still lifes.

Stern produced many still lifes throughout her career. They were integral to her identity as a painter and enabled her to refine her expressionistic use of colour and dynamic detailing of objects. Strauss & Co is proud to underwrite the exhibition *Life Force: The Still Lifes of Irma Stern*. It is the biggest public exhibition of this aspect of Stern's output since the 2003 exhibition *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey* at the Standard Bank Gallery, also curated by Wilhelm van Rensburg. Strauss & Co's decision to participate in the 2018 RMB Turbine Art Fair with a Stern exhibition is based on the enthusiastic

feedback we received to last year's curated exhibition at the fair. That exhibition looked at another past master, J.H. Pierneef, in particular his remarkable prints.

This catalogue and the exhibition it supports form part of Strauss & Co's long-term strategy to support and encourage connoisseurship among new art audiences. Our support extends to nurturing interest in older artists and past masters among new art buyers and up-and-coming artists. To this end, Strauss & Co has produced an exhibition of still-life works by tertiary art students inspired by an encounter with Stern. Work from students at Artist Proof Studio, Imbali Visual Literacy Project, Open Window Institute, Tshwane University of Technology, the University of Johannesburg and the University of Pretoria is on display.

It is our hope that these on-going initiatives will serve to deepen the public's interest in South Africa's rich and diverse art history.



Frank Kilbourn
EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN
Strauss & Co



© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Still Life 1949 oil on board 68 by 64 cm THE SABC COLLECTION



© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Irises oil on board 80 by 80 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION







© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Gladioli 1939 oil on canvas 99 by 93 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION







© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Still Life with Red Flowering Gum 1936 oil on canvas 99 by 73 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



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Roses and Foxgloves 1948 oil on board 68 by 64 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



Life Force: The Still Lives of Irma Stern

Sandra Klopper

EMERITUS PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Many of Irma Stern's still life paintings include both fruit and flowers, more often than not in combination with objets d'art from her eclectic collection. Several also contain examples of her own ceramics. In most of these works, Stern arranged fruit nestling in bowls or scattered below unruly bunches of freshly-cut flowers. From time to time, she also sliced open watermelons, paw paws, peaches, even pumpkins to reveal their invitingly fleshy interiors, while in a few works dating to the 1920s and 1930s, casually displayed books seem to suggest the presence of a reader. Stern's obvious pleasure in producing these richly diverse works is palpably evident from a letter she wrote to her friends, Richard and Freda Feldman in 1942: 'I am at present painting Compositions around Zinnias – one just a Still life with fruit and yellow Pumpkins – one a Malay woman with Zinnias – ... one Zinnias and my morning Coffee set – It may sound dull to you but the latter two are most exciting. I wish it were daytime as I want badly to go on painting.'¹

Many of Stern's still life paintings are exuberant descendants of the murals preserved in Pompeii following the sudden eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Depicting bowls brimming with fruit – an abundance of peaches, apples, grapes, figs – these murals often include common household objects like pitchers and jugs, and

staple foods such as loaves of bread. Aptly described by Norman Bryson as the 'culture of the table',² they celebrate the simple pleasures of daily life. The modern expression of this genre, which first emerged in the 17th century when many artists started producing still life paintings alluding to the transience of life and the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures, also affords many points of reference. But like other 20th century artists who continued to pay homage to this tradition, Stern abandoned the moralizing constraints of this tradition. Painting works that are often vigorously energetic and intensely voluptuous, she chose, instead, to celebrate the lyrical potential of colour and the organic lushness of impasto oils.

Throughout her life, Stern returned again and again to the plants that were readily available either in her own garden, or from the flower market in Adderley Street in central Cape Town. Always concerned to preserve spontaneity, her seemingly haphazard arrangement of flowers, fruit, bowls, carpets and other items suggest lack of thought. Clearly, though, Stern remained keenly attentive to the spatial and compositional relationships between the different forms she chose to include in her works. But over time she also grew less interested in markers of place and space, noting in a letter dating to 1950: 'My new work is most interesting – partly from

Madeira – partly from all over the place – but not so much from where as how it is done.³

In another revealing comment from 1945, she indicated that her paintings had become more ‘abstract of curious values. Maybe not noticeable to the layman. But one day soon it will bring me the same freedom in form and composition – as I have gained in colour’.⁴

In most of her still life paintings, Stern’s studied but luscious attention to the luxurious colours and forms of fruits and flowers is balanced against carpets, raffia mats, bowls, vases, martabans and masks, all carefully selected to heighten the sense of vibrant excess that became increasingly characteristic of her work in the course of the 1940s. A reminder of her passionate life as a collector and her insatiable love of travelling, they anchor her compositions in the present while at the same time evoking distant destinations and other times and places.

1 24 March 1942. Spelling corrected for ease of reading. For an accurate transcript of the original letter, see 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 Publishing, 103.

2 Norman Bryson, 1990, *Looking at the overlooked. Four essays on still life painting*. Reaktion Books, 34.

3 See Klopper, 177.

4 See Klopper, 128.





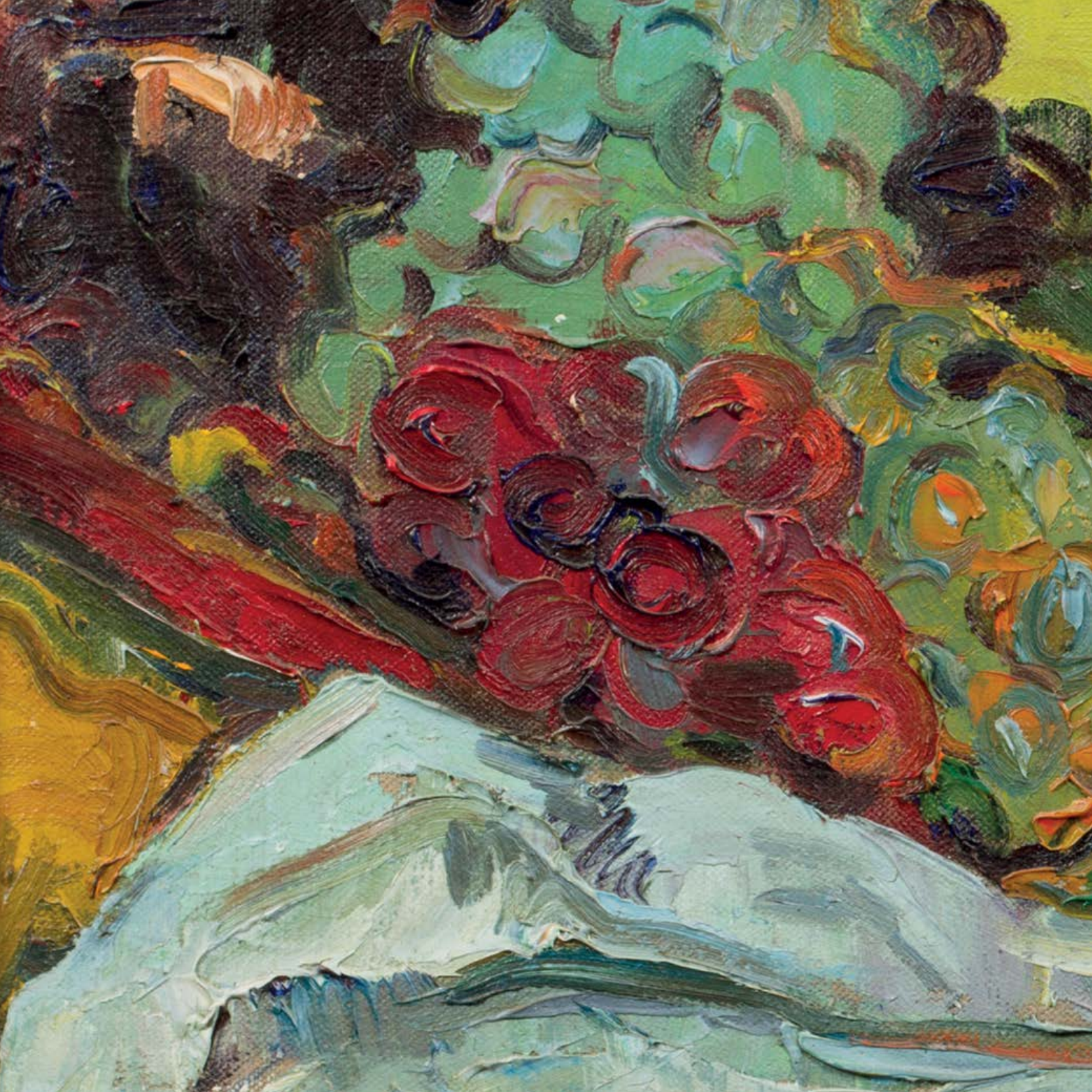
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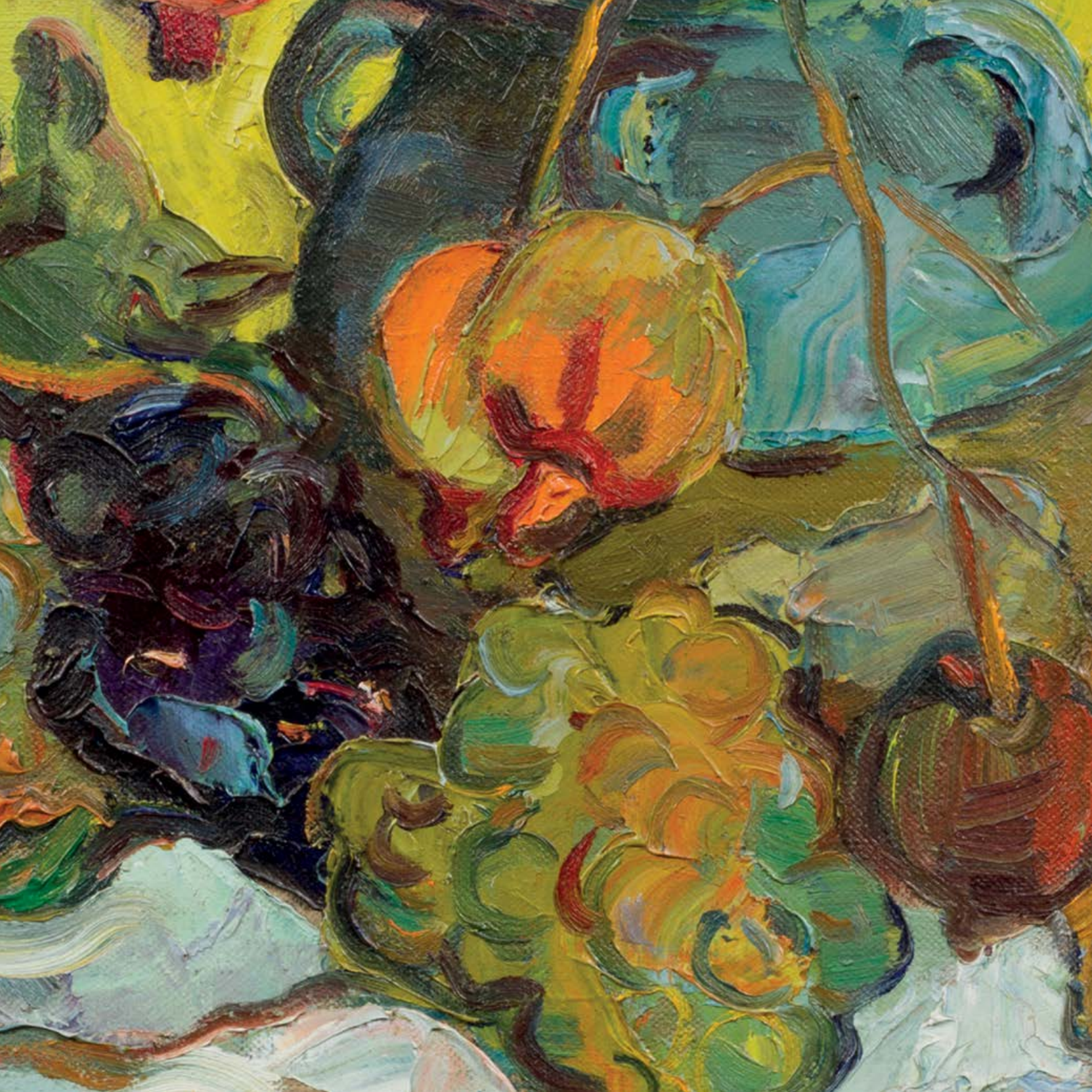
Still Life with Pomegranates 1947 oil on canvas 58 by 58 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Iceland Poppies in a Vase 1938 oil on canvas 58,5 by 58,5 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



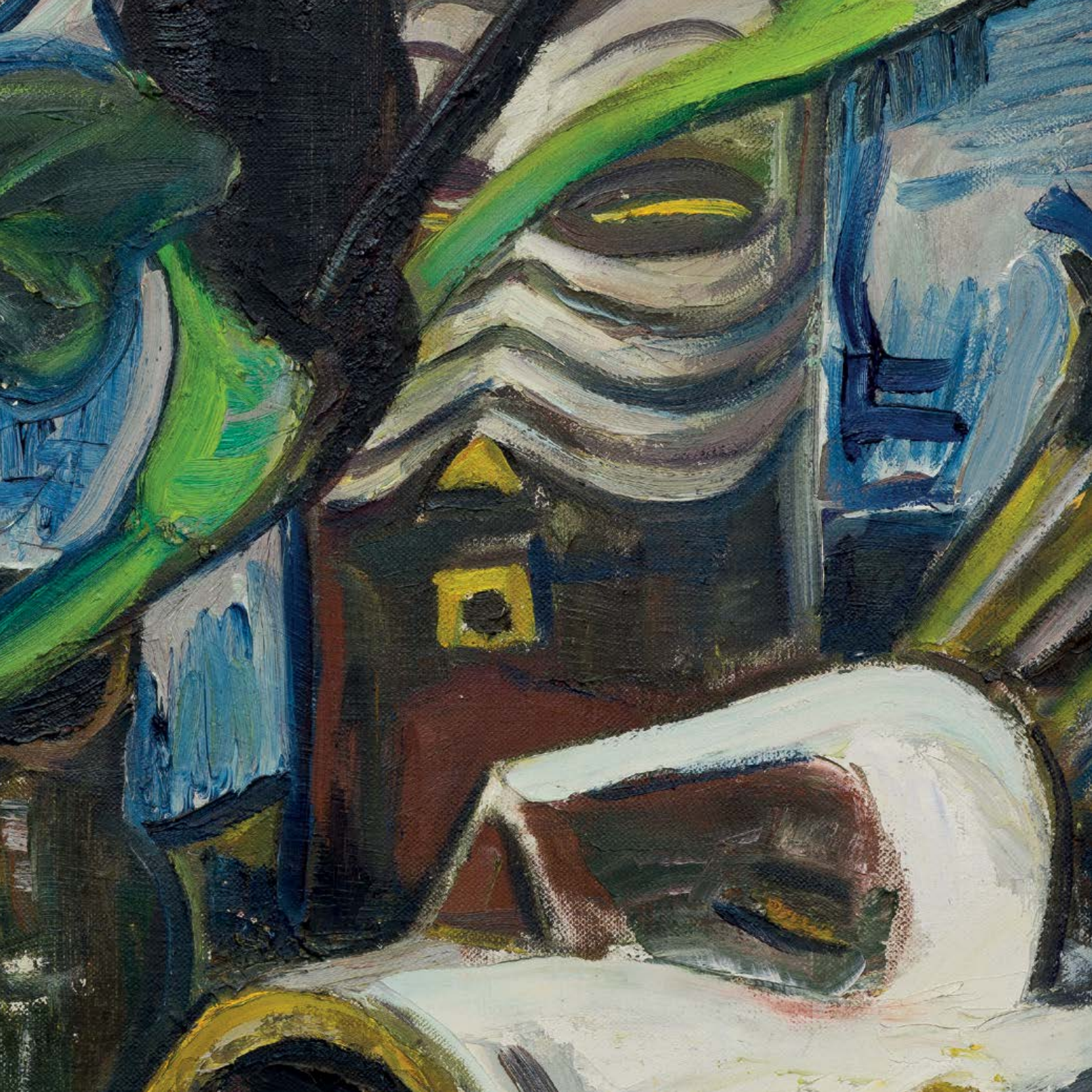




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Magnolias in an Earthenware Pot 1949 oil on canvas 68 by 84 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION







© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Still Life with Masks 1954 oil on canvas 60 by 60 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Delphiniums 1938 oil on canvas 99 by 73 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



The creation of Irma's still lifes – a personal view

Christopher Peter

CURATOR, IRMA STERN MUSEUM, CAPE TOWN

For me, Irma's still life works immediately evoke her studio! Her canary yellow studio! This beautifully proportioned room is at the end of the passage at 'The Firs', her former home, now the Irma Stern Museum, and is the heart of the house. It's the most elegantly proportioned room in what is really, a quite straight forward house, having been built as a single storeyed farm house in the mid-19th century. But it's an absolutely lovely house. Everyone who visits is captured by its atmospheric charm, its gravitas due to its contents and its spaciousness.

The main feature of the studio, is a pair of French doors with elegant late Cape Georgian folding shutters which open onto an uncovered verandah and thereafter one plunges into the studio garden, which is full of all sorts of delicious 'seasonals', like snow drops in winter and azaleas in spring. Tall over-hanging camellia's in red, pink and white, and a sturdy pomegranate tree, watch over this square garden. Beyond this is the giant magnolia grandiflora which produces luxuriant fragrant flowers which are a major role player in Irma's still lifes. The pink/mauve tulip magnolia also features but on a quieter more elegant note. The leaves of the grandiflora are also sublime with their glossy green top and toffee velvet suede underneath.

I feel that Irma's 'still life' painting days were days of

special happiness and contentment. A rare emotion for Irma. And excitement! A not so rare happening for Irma. This excitement I imagine was the result of plans having already been laid in her imagination which were then put into action by the creation of the tableaux on her studio table.

These rollicking, glamorous compositions of texture, form, colour and spirit are quintessentially Irma! Spirit is manifest in the choice of treasured religious items in her collection. We see a Pieta, a Buddha, and masks from the Congo.

Ancient Chinese martaban and some 20th century ceramic vases hold the flowers and Chinese bowls the fruit. The compositions render a co-dependence between the fruit and flowers. Voluptuous folds of fabric, or raffia mats look as though they have been placed there with the speed of summer lightning, which as you know, 'can be absolutely frightening' but here, whips us up into a visual frenzy! Her sensual engagement in the rendering of some fruits is seen in great slabs of pink watermelon and luscious, vivid orange paw paw and the paler spanspek.

People have been known to say that she ate her still lifes! Irma opened herself up to all sorts of catty comments, but I wonder if this urban legend is really true?

After all, she was so fastidious, and after a couple of days I'm sure paw paw from the pantry would have been far nicer! Maybe figs and persimmons, which she also

used, were eaten from the tableaux, as they are best when far gone!

It's so exciting to think of her association with her flowers and the choice thereof. People speculate about where they came from.

The garden at 'The Firs' at the foot of Devil's Peak is cold, shady and tricky. But like the house it has its own commanding mysterious beauty. Not nearly enough sun or the right soil for zinnias, larkspurs and delphiniums which often feature in her still lifes. Maybe I am making bold pronouncements, but after nearly forty years of association with this garden I hope that I am permitted to say that I doubt that these were grown here. Cape Town has always had many flower sellers and specialist growers of dahlias and chrysanthemums. Irma's favourite 'soup plate' dahlias and fabulous spidery double chrysanthemums were possibly grown lovingly by others, and sold to her. Nowadays both these are rare, and a joy to find when you can.

In the Irma Stern Museum collection we have three still lifes, they are amongst our most treasured works, we wish we had more but as can be seen from this exhibition they were highly prized and always sold from her exhibitions. It's also a privilege to be able on occasions to recreate these still lifes from the items still in the collection and the magnolia tree is still flowering!





© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Still Life with Watermelons 1949 oil on canvas 84 by 60 cm UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA ART COLLECTION



© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

White Lilies 1936 oil on canvas 67,5 by 64,5 cm THE KILBOURN COLLECTION



© Irma Stern Trust | Dalro

Still Life with Fruit 1947 oil on canvas 65 by 68 cm THE SABCO COLLECTION







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Magnolias and Fruit 1947 oil on canvas 85 by 97,5 cm PRIVATE COLLECTION



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illustrated on the front cover and on page 42

EXHIBITED

Irma Stern as a Flower Painter,

UCT Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town,

February 1982

LITERATURE

Marion Arnold, 1995, *Irma Stern: A Feast for
the Eye*, Cape Town: Fernwood Press.

Illustrated in colour on page 145

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Irma Stern
Still Life with Pomegranates
1947
Oil on canvas

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Sincere thanks to:

Marysia Avis, Gerard de Kamper, James Fox, Gordon Froud, Denver Hendricks,
Zuki Jantjies, Frank Kilbourn, Sandra Klopper, Carol Kuhn, Gordon Massie,
Vanessa Phillips, Christopher Peter, the Private Collectors, Dan Roberts, Avi Sooful,
Wilhelm van Rensburg, Justine Watterson, Debbi Windell, and Koula Xinisteris.

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