



RETURN OF THE
**ARAB
PRIEST**

BY IRMA STERN



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About Irma Stern (1894–1966)

Irma Stern was the daughter of German-Jewish parents, Samuel (1863–1935) and Hennie (1875–1944) Stern, and Hennie (1875–1944) Stern (nee Fels), who came to South Africa around 1886. Samuel Stern first opened a small shop in the Graaff-Reinet district of the former Cape Colony but later became a successful farmer in Schweizer-Reneke, former Transvaal, where Irma was born in 1894. In 1899, when Samuel Stern was interned by the British during the Anglo-Boer War on account of his pro-Boer sympathies, Irma and her mother left for Germany, returning to South Africa only at the end of the war in 1903 when the family relocated to Wolmaranstad in the Transvaal. The ensuing years of the South African War (Anglo-Boer War) provide insight into her early life, which was characterised by war, displacement, and a lost sense of belonging due to travelling between Germany and South Africa. However, these journeys laid a unique path for her as, “the duality of her roots, which encompassed both Europe and Africa, proved fundamental to the construction of Stern’s unique identity and vital stimulus for her early work.”

In 1913, Irma left South Africa to study art at the Weimar Academy in Germany but, dissatisfied with the tuition there, she transferred her studies to the Levin-Funcke studio in Berlin. However, it was only when she met Max Pechstein (1881–1955), a leading member of the German Expressionist group known as Die Brücke, that she felt she had found a true mentor. Between 1918 and 1919 her works were included in a number of exhibitions in Germany and she held her first solo exhibition in Berlin in 1919, after which she returned to South Africa.

Irma Stern’s first exhibition in South Africa in 1920 was held at Ashbey’s Gallery in Cape Town. In the staid, colonial art world of Cape Town, the vitality and exuberance of her work shocked and outraged critics and audiences, eliciting abusive descriptions such as “Agonies in Oils,” “Lunatic inspirations,” and “Insults to human intelligence,” and even a police investigation into complaints of public indecency. It took time for her espousal of modernism and her primary tools of colour and rhythm to find acceptance in the conservative art world of South Africa.

The Making of an Icon

Irma Stern constantly sought new visual experiences through travel. In particular, her journeys to Zanzibar in 1939 and 1945 and to the Congo in 1942 provided the stimulus for a flood of creative work that marked the high point of her career. At a time when travellers hesitated to penetrate “darkest Africa,” Irma Stern disappeared for weeks into central Africa,

1. Shain, M. and Pimstone, M. “Irma Stern 1894–1966” (*The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. Learn more about the Encyclopedia.*) <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/stern-irma>

2. Andrea Lewis, ‘The Life of Irma Stern,’ in *Brushing Up On Stern: featuring works from the Permanent Collection of the Iziko South African National Gallery*, eds. Carol Kaufmann and Andrea Lewis (Cape Town: Iziko Museums of South Africa, 2015), 33.

3. Shain, M. and Pimstone, M. “Irma Stern 1894–1966” (*The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. Learn more about the Encyclopedia.*) <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/stern-irma>

where her expeditions produced many fine studies of indigenous people. These travels, “gave her enough stimulus and material for a flow of creative work that defined the high point of her career.” Among her iconic works from this period is *The Arab Priest* painted in 1945, while in Zanzibar.

Decades later, *The Arab Priest*’s story continued. In 2011 it became the most expensive South African painting sold at auction when it was purchased by the Qatar Museum (formerly Qatar Museums Authority). The purchase was the first-ever acquisition of a work of art representing a Muslim subject by a major South African artist for a prestigious art museum in the Arab world.

A Heritage Decision That Made History

The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) regulates the movement of heritage objects to foreign countries. Permit applications to export heritage objects described on the Gazetted List of Types of Objects (No 42407 of 18 April 2019) are processed and assessed according to criteria with the aid of expert advisors. This process informs SAHRA’s decision to either grant the permit or to prohibit export. SAHRA refused to issue a permit for the export of *The Arab Priest*, because it forms part of the national estate. Among the reasons for prohibiting export were that the artwork painted in 1945, is “a valuable document of an itinerant South African Jewish artist whose works transcended and crossed boundaries” and that “the artist accords significant respect to a Muslim prelate”.

This was a landmark decision mandated by the provisions of the National Heritage Resources Act, No 25 of 1999 that enabled SAHRA to issue a temporary export permit, lending the artwork to the owner, Qatar Museums, for twenty years, on condition that South Africans have access to it every five years at QM's expense.

As part of this loan agreement, the artwork was on display at the Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) and at the Javett Art Centre at the Pretoria University, during 2019. The return allows continued dialogue, accessibility and reflection. This was well captured in the 2019 exhibition, Irma Stern's 'Arab Priest': Image and Context by ISANG. The exhibition sought to highlight and debate, "the assumed Orientalist subtexts that are evident in Stern's work, as well as in works by her contemporaries in the dominant colonial culture of South Africa of the 1940s."

What to Expect

This year, The Arab Priest returns and the dialogue continue. The return of 'The Arab Priest' by Irma Stern (1894-1966) to South Africa at this particular time, in the country's ever-influx transformation project and its contested contemporary art sector, presents an opportunity to engage at the intersections of art, politics, education, heritage, and the market. The painting returns to our shores, raising questions about nationhood, belonging, place, memory, identity, and how narratives about the past are created and understood outside of their context.

4. Neville Dubow, *Irma Stern* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1974) 18. 'Irma Stern's 'Arab Priest': Image and Context,' <https://www.iziko.org.za/exhibitions/irma-sterns-arab-priest-image-and-context/>

The painting will be hosted by the University of Pretoria Museums (Pretoria – March to September 2026) and the Iziko South African National Gallery (Cape Town - September 2026 to March 2027). The University of Pretoria Museums' curated exhibition will focus on the materiality, construction and the conservation-relevant interpretation of the work; as a unique case study of restitution and repatriation of African cultural property; what lessons can be drawn for artefacts/artworks that are considered as part of the national estate and a particular focus on Stern's biography and practice with particular reference to her engagements with the City of Tshwane.

The return reaffirms SAHRA's role towards safeguarding heritage and ensuring accessibility to cultural treasures. But as most well-crafted art, it continues to invite conversation within different contexts. Today our world is shaped by conversations of restitution and repatriation, and The Arab Priest provides an example of the different ways return is interpreted in light of these growing discussions.

