

## **Mary Stainbank, Modernism and the 'Spirit of Africa'.**

The intention in this paper is to investigate, through specific examples of sculptures by the Durban born Mary Agnes Stainbank (1899-1996), the relationship between an indigenous South African iconography, and a European-based modernist formal idiom. Stainbank identified her intentions as depicting the 'spirit of Africa'. It will be argued that a post-colonial approach is essential to the construction of cultural *difference*, which forms the basis of what Stainbank identified as the African 'spirit', as opposed to a primitivist approach, which describes the efforts of early 20<sup>th</sup> century European painters and sculptors to subvert those established aesthetic canons and conventions they considered restrictive and outdated. It is also significant (and ironic) to note that, in the absence of a South African modernist idiom at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the artist had to acquire such a formal 'language' in Britain, in order to represent what was for her, truly African.

Mary Stainbank was born on the farm Coedmore, in Yellowwood Park near Durban, at the close of the Victorian era. As a young child, her mother encouraged her creativity by taking her for walks in the indigenous forest surrounding the house, prompting her to identify images in the foliage and bush. It is therefore not surprising that she began her artistic career as a young child, carving figurines from wood, and modelling figures and animals from the clay she found in the pond near the house.<sup>1</sup> After she completed her schooling at St Anne's College in Hilton, she attended the Durban School of art (1916-1921) to study sculpture. Her studies at the Royal College of Art in London (1922-1926) was instrumental in reassessing the conventional modes of making sculpture which she acquired at the Durban School of Art, and after her return to South Africa in 1926, she set up the Ezayo Studio at Coedmore where she and her

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<sup>1</sup> Webb (1985.12-13) accounts how, as a young girl of five years old, Stainbank would model figures of people she knew on the farm, or carved these in wood, using a pen knife.

companion, Wilgeforde Agnes Vann-Hall (1895-1981),<sup>2</sup> lived and worked for the remainder of their artistic lives. Despite a prolific output, Stainbank's contribution to South African sculpture has only, as recent as the mid-1980s, come to light.

There are a number of reasons why Stainbank remained relatively obscure as an artist: she was a woman who followed a career not considered suitable; she lived in isolation on the farm Coedmore near Durban; and she was too concerned with art making to spend time promoting her own work. Her *oeuvre* includes numerous portrait busts of known identities such as George Cato, first major of Durban, George and William Campbell, Florence Powel etc., as well as architectural decorations for public buildings throughout South Africa, but notably in Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Pietermaritzburg. These works were all executed either through public or private commission,<sup>3</sup> and therefore had to follow prescribed conventions.<sup>4</sup> However, a body of carvings in which the image of the South African indigene<sup>5</sup> prevails as subject matter, illustrate the extent of her contribution to the history of South African sculpture as these reflect the progressive nature of her work. She labelled these works as her 'own true and honest work ... carved out as I wished, when and where I wished' (Webb 1985:4), thereby drawing a deliberate distinction between the experimental

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<sup>2</sup> Wilgie, as she became known, was born in Liverpool and joined the Royal College of Art in 1921. Her friendship with Stainbank resulted in her emigrating to South Africa in 1926, joining Stainbank in her return to the country. Together, the two women set up the Ezayo Studio at Coedmore, where they worked together on a variety of commissions and on their own private work. Wilgie studied stained glass painting, and book illustration. She also produced watercolour paintings and made ceramic tiles.

<sup>3</sup> Although Stainbank followed instruction sent to her by the Public Works Department, she altered the designs for the Public Offices in Durban. Instead of using the prescribed conventional tassels with swags of fruit and interweaving ribbons, she suspended two grotesque heads on chains on either side of the face of an elephant.

<sup>4</sup> Countries in which a nationalist ideology prevails, tend to resort to naturalism and realism in art works commissioned for public spaces. According to Bhabha (1986:156) colonial power "employs a system of representation that is structurally similar to realism".

<sup>5</sup> The term 'Native' was used during the early part of the twentieth century to refer to black people of South Africa. In America and in Britain 'Negro' was used but was more readily associated with America than with Africa, despite the fact that primitivism originated in Europe and referred to African culture. For the purpose of this paper, the terms 'black' and 'indigene' will be used.

nature of these works as opposed to the realistic and conventional images and techniques she employed for commissioned projects. The distinction between her privately made work and commissioned work, to which she referred to extensively in interviews with Adderley (1990) and Botha (1989 a and b)<sup>6</sup> indicates some awareness of her own non-conformist ideas and subjects in her sculpture, as well as the extent to which her 'private' works differ from conventional portraits and other publicly commissioned works.

Prior to her departure for the Royal College of Art in London, Stainbank studied sculpture at the Durban School of Art.<sup>7</sup> Her teachers were two British-trained artists, John Adams and Alfred Martin, who imparted to Stainbank a method of making art, which conformed to academic norms prescribed and promoted at the time by the Royal Academy in London. The beginning of her sculpture career was hence firmly based in the acquisition of historically, male-established conventions and prescribed techniques for making art. She, uncritically at this stage, followed these male-made conventions as the manner in which to approach art. As portraiture was considered a 'significant subject matter,'<sup>8</sup> Stainbank was encouraged to model heads in clay. She excelled in this *genre*, as exemplified in the portrait heads of two servants on the farm: *Miserable Elizabeth* (1921) and *Sigcathiya* (1920).

Stainbank's dissent against these conventions and systems of domination appear, probably subliminally, for the first time in her *oeuvre* in the portrait of Elizabeth. She was a servant on the Stainbank farm, and her portrait bust reflects those historically established ingredients which the Academy deemed

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<sup>6</sup> Stainbank often referred, in her correspondence with Gladys Short of the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein, to public commissions as requiring the 'pretty', indicating that she was well aware of the popular requirements of these commissions. Stainbank and Vann-Hall were given many private and public commissions through the Olifantsfontein studio.

<sup>7</sup> Now the Fine Arts Department at the Technikon Natal.

<sup>8</sup> The 'Great Masters' of the past determined such subjects, in tandem with the values promoted by classicism and the Academies: landscape, figure studies, still life, portraiture, religious and mythological subjects and historical scenes.

necessary to fulfill the convention of the portrait bust: verisimilitude, a detailed description of the features of the model, the absence of gestural marks to ensure that expression does not interfere with the description of the face, and a naturalistic approach. However, Elizabeth did not qualify as suitable subject matter for a portrait bust: she is not a significant male person, whose historical deeds or cultural contribution needed to be celebrated and eternalised through a portrait bust. Instead, she is an unknown and seemingly insignificant black woman working on a farm in a colony in Africa. Elizabeth was marginalised due to her cultural identity and colonial circumstance. Stainbank too was marginalised by the same patriarchal structure that considered Elizabeth as 'other' because black – but Stainbank was 'other' because female. Yet, Stainbank used the male-made visual conventions she was taught to describe Elizabeth. The choice of an insignificant 'other' as subject matter meant that Stainbank subverted, through iconography, the authority of the convention for the portrait bust. The fact that Elizabeth was, like Stainbank, a woman, opens up the colonial basis of this situation to a feminist interpretation. Stainbank's identification with this position as marginalised or as 'other' signifies her subversion of the notion of the artist as the Creative Genius who is in control of his model through control of his medium, and who colonises the female body through his gaze. When Stainbank made the portrait of Elizabeth, she did not gaze, but instead observed. Despite having been exclusively trained by male teachers at the Durban School of Art, Stainbank's looking was not masculine and she did not objectify the sitter, neither did she idealise her.<sup>9</sup> Instead, a continuum is set up in which the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' merge (see Bhabha 1986:149), thus avoiding a fixed binary configuration for cultural *difference*.

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<sup>9</sup> The history of art in the West reflects a history of male perceptions and attitudes to the female body through objectifying and idealising this figure, as evident in figure studies painted since the Renaissance: reclining figures (usually Venuses) and other mythological figures such as the Three Graces occupying the unstable *contrapposto* position.

When Stainbank departed for London in 1922, Natal continued its Victorian and colonial legacy. The province retained its largely colonial-British identity well into the early twentieth century, as most of Natal's population was English speaking (Hillebrand 1986:10) either due to being of British descent, or being British *per se* (Krut 1983:160).<sup>10</sup> British and to a lesser degree European culture provided the necessary determinants for styles and trends to follow in Natal in the absence of an own indigenous South African cultural identity. Also, as Durban was a harbour city, it facilitated direct contact with Britain (Bell 1988:15) and, not only did newspapers and other publications coming into South Africa carry esteem for British culture, a few artists and art teachers settled in Durban to practice and teach.<sup>11</sup> Victorian norms for making art were reflected in the collection of British paintings, put on display for the opening of the Durban Art Gallery in 1911.<sup>12</sup> These works of art also dictated the standards required by the Natal Society of Artists, which was formed a few years earlier.<sup>13</sup> Like much of the rest of the

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<sup>10</sup> Various settler groups entered the Colony of Natal during the nineteenth century through immigration agencies such as set up Byrne. Alan Hattersley (1940:11) recorded that Natal was advertised as a new Utopia in the British press, to encourage English immigrants to settle in the province.

<sup>11</sup> One of these was the British Alfred Palmer who travelled the country in a caravan whilst painting and drawing the South African landscape and its people.

<sup>12</sup> According to Hillebrand (1986:16), the Durban Art Gallery owned "the most comprehensive collection of British art in South Africa".

<sup>13</sup> The founder of the Natal Society of Artists (NSA), William Cathcart Methven (1849-1925), guided his society in the direction of "truth to nature" which professional artists and amateurs strove for in their work. Their work was exhibited at the society's annual exhibition, known as the July Exhibition. The indiscriminate acceptance of entries for these exhibitions, reflect the largely uncritical attitude of selectors and artists alike. Criteria hailed in newspaper reviews of these annual exhibitions were based in accurate representation and detailed observation, a worthy subject matter such as a landscape or portrait, accurate draughtmanship, a composition which was tightly structured and a polished 'finish'. Landscape painters such as Edward Roworth and Tinus de Jongh enjoyed much acclaim as their work fitted these criteria superbly, whereas the use of indigenous personages as subjects were, until well into the 1920s, taboo, also with the public at large. The reasons for this taboo can be largely found in Methven's rejection of postimpressionism (Hillebrand 1986:29) and supported by Leo François (1870-1938) who was elected chairman in 1918 (Berman 1983:177) and who perpetuated conservative norms by attempting to model the NSA on the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibitions (Hillebrand 1986:40). The study of indigenous subjects was considered as unfitting as 'significant' subject matter. The *genres* François promoted, specifically that of the landscape, along with suitable techniques, seemed to many to be the ideal to strive for. A positive result of this was that many artists, whether amateur or

Dominion, Natal was in the throes of attempting to resolve the political polarisation resulting from its colonial legacy. The formation of the Union in 1910 might have signified to some, the Dominion's independence from the Empire, but it simultaneously perpetuated a complex of struggles for recognition as the Union continued and increased those patriarchal power structures and domination usually associated with colonisation.<sup>14</sup>

Stainbank's teachers at the Durban School of Art were so impressed with her work that they encouraged her to proceed with her studies in sculpture at the Royal College of Art in London. After having completed the entrance examination to the Sculpture School shortly after her arrival in 1922, she was informed by the principal, Sir William Rothenstein (1872-1945) that she had failed. When she objected, having seen the male entrants' work and realising that her own was of a higher standard, it emerged that the College decided in 1921 "not to have any more women in our School of Sculpture" (Webb 1985:74). Stainbank graduated four years later, with distinction, but because she was a woman, she was not allowed to advertise this fact.<sup>15</sup> Stainbank was never formally accepted into the Royal College.

What was important about *Miserable Elizabeth* and *Sigcathya* was that Stainbank continued in these work the subject matter which had occupied her

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professional, placed high regard on careful observation and accurate draughtsmanship, and followed François' esteem for an overseas training. The Royal College of Art and the Royal Academy were the role models at which many students aspired to study. This admiration and need for an overseas training was also directed at Stainbank by her British trained teachers at the Durban School of Art who encouraged her to continue her studies in sculpture at the Royal College of Art in London. The NSA is still in existence and now owns its own art gallery in Durban. Importantly, Stainbank was never a member of the NSA.

<sup>14</sup> Particularly important in this regard is the formation of the African National Congress during the second decade of the twentieth century.

<sup>15</sup> Stainbank's fellow student at the Royal College and later her companion, Wilgeforde Vann-Hall (1895-1981) remarked in her diaries that Stainbank, whom she referred to as 'Elizabeth', "had been awarded Distinction for her Diploma work in the Sculpture School, had even been sent for by the examining committee and congratulated and thanked for the pleasure her splendid effort had afforded them – yet no mention of it was allowed to appear in her Diploma".

since childhood, and which she would sustain for the remainder of her artistic life. While studying in London, she diligently executed projects set by her sculpture teachers: figure studies and portraits, to be modelled in clay or wax. Yet she simultaneously introduced the image of the Zulu woman with an *isicholo*,<sup>16</sup> into self-motivated work, eg. *Lamentation* (1923), *Native Head* (1923) and *Gulliver* (1925). At the time, the Royal College, as did the Durban School of Art, upheld conservative and academic attitudes to, and norms for art making, and carving was not taught as a technique for sculpture, until well into the 1920s (Frayling 1987: 95). However, Stainbank's fellow students at the Royal College, Henry Moore (1898-1986), Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and members of the so-called 'Leeds Group'<sup>17</sup> were eager to re-introduce carving as a technique for making sculpture. This interest was justified by the presence in Britain of carvings by some of the leading *avant-garde* sculptors from Europe, notably Eric Gill (1882-1940),<sup>18</sup> Jacob Epstein (1880-1959), Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) and Henry Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915).

The *avant-garde* ideas and art works Stainbank encountered as a student at the Royal College encouraged her to reconsider and reassess those conventional and 'acceptable' ways in which to make a sculpture, which she had learnt at the Durban School of Art. This reassessment led her to change her representations of indigenous identities to more expressive images in a variety of materials such as stone, plaster of Paris and clay. The inherent link between modernism and primitivism, as embodied by most European modernists, underwent an

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<sup>16</sup> According to Eileen Krige (1950: 134) an *isicholo* is the bulbous shape into which the young Zulu woman begins to form her hair once she has been betrothed for marriage. On the day of her wedding, the shape would be complete.

<sup>17</sup> The 'Leeds Group' consisted of art students who came from Leeds, notably Moore and Hepworth, Edna Ginesi (b 1902) and Raymond Coxon (b1896). They frequently discussed the notion of the primitive and the related technique of carving (Frayling 1987:95). It is possible that Stainbank participated in, or overheard, some of these conversations.

<sup>18</sup> It is unlikely that Stainbank was familiar with Gill's work before she arrived at the Royal College. She traced his *Stations of the Cross* in the Westminster Abbey in London. This tracing is in the Stainbank Sculpture Collection and Archive at the Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg, and is labelled, in Stainbank's hand, that it is a tracing from Gill..

idiosyncratic change in Stainbank's vision and work. She saw Modigliani's *Head* (1913) in the Victoria and Albert Museum where it was on display from 1922 when the Museum acquired the work (Hammacher 1987:21),<sup>19</sup> and she also saw sculptures by Epstein,<sup>20</sup> leading her to reassess the relationship between form and representation.

One of the first works which reflect this 'new' attitude, was a stone carving called *Ozasizayo* (1923-1927). This work was a self-motivated project and describes a black woman with her baby tied to her back as is customary in South Africa. *Ozasisayo* has both Zulu and Bhaça references as reflected in the beadwork, cloth and hairstyle of both groups in one figure. The reason for such a conglomerate image could, in the absence of sufficient documentation, be ascribed to Stainbank's exposure to different cultural groups on the family farm as a result of the influx of black people to urban centres resulting from the Natives Land Act of 1913.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, this conglomeration of dress, bead styles and cultural origins, also suggests the subjective and conceptual approach characteristic of a modernist work of art as a construction rather than an imitation from nature. Stainbank's knowledge of the work of Modigliani, her contact with other modernists, as well as the invitation along with other students from the Royal College to view work in Jacob Epstein's Studio informed the formal disposition of planes and mass in this carving. Frayling (1987:95) records that, at this time, students at the Royal College such as Hepworth, began to carve rather than follow the conventional methods of modelling and casting

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<sup>19</sup> The Sculpture School of the Royal College was situated in Queens Gate in London, whereas the rest of the College was in the same building as the Victoria and Albert Museum. Stainbank therefore not only saw these sculptures, but also the large Plaster Collection and other artefacts on display at the time.

<sup>20</sup> The work she saw was probably Epstein's relief carving for *Rima* (1925) for the Hudson Memorial in Hyde Park. This work caused an outcry and it is likely that Stainbank was one of the 170 students who signed the petition against its removal from the park (Buckle 1963: 136).

<sup>21</sup> This act restricted black people from living permanently in any areas other than those designated by the local authorities. Black people therefore had to commute from their rural domicile to the urban centre to work or to look for work. The Stainbank farm was a stop-over for people from the southern coastal and inland regions, on their way to Durban.

taught at the Royal College. Stainbank recalled that she reacted to the academic requirements of the Royal College, viewing this as uncreative: "... that is exactly what I wanted to do ... to create my own shapes. I wasn't keen to copy things" (Adderley 1990). She worked from memory, as she obviously did not have access to Zulu models in London, requiring her to approach her subject matter in a conceptual rather than perceptual manner. This opened up opportunities for experimentation with form. These formal exercises were supported and probably suggested by the many artefacts of marginalised cultures she saw in the British and the Victoria and Albert Museums in London as well as reference to black cultures by contemporary artists such as Frank Brangwyn.<sup>22</sup> Students from the Royal College often spent time in the British museum drawing sculptures and other artefacts, often from other cultures. Archaic Greek culture and artefacts informed the modernist quest for a primeval origin to refer to, in order to renew a visual vocabulary which was more descriptive of, and in keeping with the twentieth century. Contact with such artefacts probably rekindled Stainbank's awareness of carved archaic figures.<sup>23</sup> In Britain, Roger Fry contributed much to cultivating knowledge of African art, through his writings and the African art exhibitions held in Britain. It is likely that these exhibitions and Fry's writings led students to realize that carving was not only suitable for artefacts made by so-called marginalised cultures, but that it contains expressive potential which had not yet been explored. African, Egyptian, Iberian and Mexican carvings indicated to the younger generation of sculpture students that its alternative forms of expression offered a visual escape out of the *cul-de-sac* sculpture had reached in Britain, and Stainbank was already familiar with some of the basic techniques for carving in wood, as evident from her biography (Webb 1985). Stainbank owned

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<sup>22</sup> Frank Brangwyn visited South Africa during the 1880s, and included reference to the colony in his work, particularly the panels he painted for the Royal Empire Exhibition. It is possible that Stainbank visited the exhibition he held in 1924 in Queens Gate, which was close to the Sculpture School of the Royal College.

<sup>23</sup> The British Museum does not hold a full kore figure, which could have informed the making of *Osasizayo*, but Stainbank was certainly familiar with Greek art history as she owned a text on Greek art, which contains images of kore-type figures from Nike and Samos. Also, Moore carved a little figure at the time which clearly resembles the kore form.

texts on carving techniques by Jack Denning and George Jack given to her at a young age.<sup>24</sup> Already as early as 1906/7, Picasso made use of African masks and Iberian carvings in a painting he titled *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. In this painting, his use of African and Iberian imagery led him to the realization that even though African carvings are not naturalistic, they are nevertheless representational, allowing him to focus on form for the sake of form, without having to resort to academic modes to create paintings which conform to the dictum of 'truth to nature'.

Within the context of European primitivism, it seems that Stainbank's reaction towards the African idiom emerging in the carvings of fellow-students at the College (such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth) might seem, at first, conservative. Vann-Hall (sa) described Stainbank's attitude to what became known at the Royal College as the 'Negroid' influence:

She was something quite different from the other students, for one thing she came from a 'black country' – and Negro sculpture had captured the imaginations of most forward-thinking students. She was almost as full of contempt for the plagiarists as for the revilers of the Negro influence ... she had a unique store of naturally acquired visual standards by which she judged the thin pretensions of those who 'took up' the 'new' culture as a means of enriching their own poor content. They were going the wrong way about it she declared with much vigor and not little scorn ... she could not put into words the exact meaning she had in mind, but Negro form was the outward showing of a 'different' life and growth – not merely a foreign one or a simpler one - .... (Vann-Hall, sa)

This extract shows that Stainbank's focus centred on the cultural identity and visual appearance of the black person in South Africa, and that she approached sculpture as representational. Despite the interest she shared with primitivism in 'otherness', primitivism did not appeal to her as her subject matter was rooted in

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<sup>24</sup> Denning, J. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, *Woodcarving for Amateurs*, London; Jack, G. (1913), *Woodcarving: design and workmanship*, London: John Hogg.

her home country, and formed part of her own identity as *different*.<sup>25</sup> Her objection to primitivism, as evident from Vann-Hall's diaries, resided not in the formal disposition of modernist works, but in the use of African art as a sign for knowledge about African people. For Stainbank, knowledge of the people was a prerequisite for developing a suitable visual language for depictions, as she considered person and place to shape content. In contrast, primitivism made references to cultural artefacts as a visual, formal and expressive tool without considering cultural identity. Stainbank's work shares with the work of Paul Gauguin the focus on person and place, but unlike Gauguin who had to leave his home country to become the Noble Savage in Tahiti, Stainbank was born and grew up in the country she refers to. Likewise, the African people in her home country created a 'spirit',<sup>26</sup> which she aimed at expressing, preventing her from following fashions or trends popular at the Royal College at the time. Vann-Hall noted in her diary while referring to the time they spent at the Royal College, that Stainbank was not easily swayed, as she was "an essentially unfashionably minded person" and Adderley (1990) recorded Stainbank saying that she had her "own ideas". In 1966, Stainbank confirmed Vann-Hall's observation that she was unaffected by fashions. In a letter to Erik Laubser and Neville Dubow, who were planning an exhibition of South African Art in New York, Stainbank wrote:

A short statement reflecting my own ideas and aims

I am to express in simplified form, the essence or soul of the subjects. I feel that the artist must not only have the individual point of view, but he must also strive to express in a unique manner, the impact of life on his personal feelings. Following "fashion trends" in art is fatal to individual development. The artist's thinking must be done with his own mind.

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<sup>25</sup> As a 'foreign' student in London, and despite being of English descent, Stainbank must have been aware of her own 'difference' from the local students.

<sup>26</sup> Stainbank often spoke about this 'spirit' as the core of her interest in indigenous black people. In the various interviews conducted by Botha during the 1980s as well as the interview by Adderley (1990) Stainbank frequently talked about this.

While she was a student in London, Stainbank received postcards containing images of indigenous South African faces and people, from her mother. These images probably enforced the notion that she, Stainbank, was foreign in a country, which did not acknowledge a subject matter she felt was integral to her own identity and consequent *difference*. Her images of black personages affirmed her identity as *different*, and it also acted as confirmation of the nature of that identity. In 1926, a sculpture Stainbank submitted to the prestigious Prix de Rome competition caused an outcry. The work represented an African figure, and she applied a loose modelling technique. The 'Negroid' subject matter, as referred to the *Evening Times* by the critic John Collier (1926),<sup>27</sup> exemplified the extent to which the presence of the black person in then contemporary art was still deemed problematic by many, and not only in South Africa. Stainbank hence began her career using an iconography, which in itself was deemed unacceptable both in South Africa and Britain, but which was, it now is clear, by South African norms, progressive. At that time the use of the black person as a subject in art was hotly debated not only in Britain but also in South Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Stainbank's use of black personages predates its 'official' acceptance in art in South Africa in 1926, when the Durban based industrialist Karl Gundelfinger, donated an annual prize of 20 guineas for the 'best painting of native life' (Hillebrand 1986:120). This event introduced a move beyond the colonial habit

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<sup>27</sup> Collier's description in *The Evening News* dated 22 March 1926, suggests that the work Stainbank submitted might have been *Umhlobogazi*. He was the Swazi escort who accompanied Sir Theophilus Shepstone and his party to the Transvaal during the late nineteenth century to prepare for British annexation. Umhlobogazi entertained the party with telling stories, and the writer Rider Haggard, who was also in the party, later absorbed many of these stories in his books, notably *Alan Quatermain* (1887).

<sup>28</sup> The British artist Alfred Palmer made several trips to South Africa to paint, while he was travelling in a caravan, the indigenous black people. His painting of South African black people generated a debate in Natal about the 'correct type' of indigene to depict. Palmer was central in this debate as he held pronounced ideas about the 'correct' type of image to use when representing black people. In Stainbank's collection of reference materials, cut form journals and magazines, are articles on the work of Marguerite Milward and Malvinia Hofmann, and the cultural 'types' they depicted. Importantly, Stainbank was absent from South Africa during this debate, and it is unlikely that she had access to newspapers from Natal reporting on this issue. See Hillebrand (1986) for a full account of the debate surrounding 'type'.

of constructing the 'other' as insignificant and degenerate (Bhabha 1986:154). Judgement of these works occurred at the Natal Society of Artist's annual July exhibition. Gundelfinger's intended to encourage the direct observation of indigenous peoples, not only to introduce an indigenous subject matter, but also to encourage artists to paint and draw the human figure in an art context ruled by landscape painting. The study of the human form was considered the ultimate aim in art, and therefore many artists turned to this genre (Hillebrand 1986:120-128).

It was during this time that Leo François<sup>29</sup> stated in his annual chairman's report that the black person as subject matter was becoming more and more popular, lifting the taboo that had existed in South Africa until about 1928. Much interest in African and South African indigenous cultures emerged at this time: Killie Campbell,<sup>30</sup> a fellow student of Stainbank's in Durban, was keenly interested in African cultures and Stainbank found their association encouraging, particularly since her focus in art centred in cultural identity and *difference*; Alfred Duggan-Cronin (1874-1954) established the first 'Bantu' gallery at Kamfersdam in 1925 (Humphries 1961: 73); and Anthropology appeared as a subject at the universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand during the early 1920s (Hammond-Tooke, 1997: 16 and 32) .

In South Africa, Stainbank's carved sculptures of indigenous black people,<sup>31</sup> despite being representational albeit simplified and stylised, were also severely

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<sup>29</sup> François wrote in the local press under the pseudonym Vermilion and, although conservative in his attitudes and a keen spokesman for Victorian culture, he favoured Stainbank's work as typically South African. He aimed at establishing a specific South African identity in art.

<sup>30</sup> The Campbell family was well known in Durban as their contributions to the fields of medicine, nature conservation, education and politics earned them prominence. Killie collected Africa, a collection which is now housed at the family home Muckleneuk in Durban and is known as the Campbell Collections. Stainbank's bust of William Campbell is on the house's verandah.

<sup>31</sup> 'Negroid' imagery was also associated in Britain with American decadence, jazz music and the general permissiveness of the post-First World War period. See Farr, R. (1995), *Mirage: enigmas of race, difference and desire*, London: Institute of

criticised by a literally minded audience who expected the art work to be a re-presentation of a specific life-situation, and described by a suitably literal title.<sup>32</sup> It is a characteristic of Stainbank's sculptures made not only as a student at the Royal College, but also as a practising artist after her return to South Africa in 1926, that she continued on the one hand to use the subject matter of the indigenous personage, notably the Zulu and Bhaça mother and child. Her intense interest in cultural 'otherness' is evident from the reference materials she collected, photographs and books in her library.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, her commissioned work conformed to the subjects and themes demanded by a public antagonistic towards abstraction and modernity. Exhibition reviews of the NSA's July exhibition, as well as ensuing correspondence in the local press, indicate that Stainbank's images of indigenous personages were largely rejected by a conservative and uninformed public despite some critical acclaim afforded her from François. Stainbank's modelled portraits were mentioned and praised as 'accomplished', but her carved images of indigenous personages were often rejected and even ridiculed. These carved works were not fully 'abstract'; but certainly displayed modernist characteristics such as oversimplification, exaggeration and severe stylisation, features that the conservative Natal audience found intolerable. Even so, these exhibited works display not only the inherent division in her creative output already present in since childhood namely carving and modelling, but firmly establish her 'private' sculptures as focussing on an indigenous theme as opposed to commissioned work.<sup>34</sup>

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Contemporary Art and Lemke, S. (1998), *Primitivist modernism. Black culture and the origins of transatlantic modernism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press for a full account of this aspect of modernity.

<sup>32</sup> The debate in the *Natal Mercury* and *The Daily News* of the title 'Baya Huba' in relation to the imagery in the work is a clear indication that the public at large expected a descriptive or explanatory title for a work of art.

<sup>33</sup> Stainbank collected pictures of African cultures from *The London Illustrated* and other magazines and journals. She was also a keen photographer, and her photograph collection contains many images, probably taken by herself, of the black and Indian people on the family farm.

<sup>34</sup> Stainbank preferred carving in stone and in wood to modelling in clay (Webb 1985: 4). She executed most of her commissioned portrait busts in modelled clay, which she cast in plaster of Paris before sending moulds off to the Vignali Foundry near Pretoria for

Stainbank's images of indigenes must be considered against the background of colonial images in circulation throughout Europe and America during the nineteenth century. Images produced by itinerant artists and travellers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflect, in varying degrees and ways, the colonist's conception of 'Africa', rather than focusing on the visual appearance and cultural identity of the personage involved and reflecting a subjective perception thereof.<sup>35</sup> These images were portrayed according to conventions for representing the human form, to be adopted for images of 'other' cultures. In Stainbank's library is a text entitled *Caricatures*,<sup>36</sup> in which the well-known series of coloured lithographic plates *Life in Philadelphia*<sup>37</sup> is reproduced. These plates offer an intended humoristic, though degrading view of the black personage as politically and culturally subjected to colonial power, and therefore create one-sided perspectives, which were accepted as accurate at the time. As a woman artist, Stainbank chose a subject matter not deemed suitable for the fine arts by a male construct, and which had been used to bear the power systems devised by colonialism. Through focusing on such a subject matter, Stainbank indicated not only her opposition to established conventions, but also her acceptance of the liberty this contained for her, to experiment. Her images of indigenous personages also differ ontologically from primitivist sculptures and paintings. Moore, as did the Primitivists, referred to African and ancient Mexican carvings as a source for art and as an emblem for dissent against the hold of classicism over art production at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Stainbank's interest, as discussed, centred on an indigenous South African identity, and in the finding of a suitable visual idiom to portray this interest. In

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casting. It is significant that Stainbank's public commissions were mostly modelled, whereas her private works were carved.

<sup>35</sup> See Brantlinger (1986), Coombes (1985), Dietrich (1993) Klopper (1983) and Pieterse (1992).

<sup>36</sup> This text was given to Stainbank by her mother, presumably during the early 1920s. No publication details are available.

<sup>37</sup> This series of Lithographs by Edward Williams Clay was published in 1828 and later reproduced and circulated in England. In this series, Clay dressed up caricatured black people in contemporary fashions, to ridicule not only the fashion but also the black person.

*Ozasizayo*, Stainbank addressed the problem of synthesising modernist form, a specific representational approach, and iconographic accuracy.

When *Ozasizayo* was first exhibited in South Africa in 1927, it was received with mixed feeling: the African subject matter was problematic, as it firstly presented a view of the black woman as Stainbank perceived her, and not according to what was then deemed the acceptable 'type'. Stainbank's figure conformed to her remembered experiences of Africa and did not heed any conventions. Secondly, the modernist idiom of the work, foreign to audiences in Natal at the time, elicited scornful comments from a conservative public, and Stainbank was nicknamed by the equally conservative critics of the day as 'South Africa's Epstein'. The 'exaggerated' feet and hands of the figure, as well as its rather squat appearance, lead critics to this conclusion. 1927 was also the second year of the Gundelfinger prize, and from newspaper cuttings it is obvious that the public had not yet accepted this new *genre* in art, having for so long been used to landscapes, still life's and classical figure studies. It is not surprising that Stainbank was ahead of her times in the use of an indigenous subject matter. Her isolation on the farm, along with her determined personality, probably encouraged her creativity, and left her untainted by notions of aesthetic and stylistic 'correctness'.

A comparison between *Head* by Dziomba and *Ozasizayo* by Stainbank exemplifies the difference between the use of a primitivist mode to construct the presence of an African ethos, as opposed to the focus on *difference* and *otherness*, thereby dealing with ethnicity. In Stainbank's carving, the decorative characteristics of beads and basketry, customary among South African indigenous peoples and known to Stainbank, suggested, in tandem with the design orientation of the Royal College at the time of Stainbank studying there, and the simplified carved forms she observed in the work of Modigliani, Gaudier-Brzeska and Dobson, a decorative approach to form whilst retaining representation. In an interview with Marianne Frank (1999), a student of

Stainbank's, it emerged that Stainbank often used the term 'decorative' when talking about the indigenous people. Using modernist sculptural form, which is characterised by simplification, a planar presentation of form and a strong delineation of planes as present in African carvings, Stainbank was able to pay homage to this decorative aspect, without losing sight either of cultural identity, or of Significant Form as defined by Roger Fry.

*Ozazisayo* was not only the harbinger in Stainbank's work of a changed attitude to sculpture; it also introduced the notion of self-projection. Stainbank never made any self-portraits despite having excelled at portrait making, and having been commissioned to make portraits of important Natal persons such as George Cato, mayor of Durban from 1854-1856, and members of the Campbell family. Her experience in London as 'foreign' because she came from Africa must have instilled in her a deep sense of identification with the Zulu woman, to the extent that her next stone carving, *Enigma* (1930) can be read as a self-portrait. This sculpture consists of the head of a young married Zulu woman, characterized by the elongated *isicholo*, depicted with her one arm next to her head holding a cluster of beads, while the other hand hangs limply in front of her face. *Enigma* is different from Stainbank's commissioned portraits busts: firstly, it is a carving in stone, whereas her other portraits were modelled in clay before they were cast in bronze. Carving, being a direct medium, held associations for Stainbank of a liberating and expressive, "primitive" activity, whereas modelling carried associations of the conventional and of public approval. Secondly, like *Miserable Elizabeth*, *Enigma* holds the face of an unknown indigenous person. The immediate assumption is that the face of *Enigma* is conceptual. However, the fact that this face resembles many young Zulu women in present-day KwaZulu Natal, indicates that Stainbank was also concerned with representational accuracy when sculpting the *indigene*. The hands and arms of *Enigma* are included - a deviation from most conventional portraits - and the eyes of the sitter are closed, as if in a state of sleep.

The Idler (*Natal Mercury*, 1936) said of *Enigma*: “This stone head of a native woman who holds a few beads in her hands expressed to me the very spirit of Africa”, and “[e]very piece of work done by this South African Epstein has raised a storm of controversy”. A concern with the metaphor has already been evident in some of Stainbank’s sculptures done at the Royal College of Art. Also, Stainbank here represented the sleeping woman in a naturalistic way: the face and hand fulfill the demands of “truth to nature”. Paradoxically, by “nature” Stainbank implied not the conservative, photographic image and narrative reading of a “worthy” subject matter demanded by a literally minded audience. Instead, “nature” here refers to Stainbank’s reality, which is, as explained above, the indigenous personage she identified with. The title, when read in conjunction with a representation of “otherness”, is evocative not of sleep *per se*, but of the primal identity of the “other” which, during sleep, cannot be affected or altered by colonial constructions of identity and “self”. Stainbank explained in an interview that *Enigma* (1930)(fig 7) expressed “an idea of African women”, as did some of her other sculptures depicting the African woman, and that she felt “they had a deep feeling inside them which we couldn’t understand” (Adderley 1990: 129). It is possible that this “feeling” constituted, for Stainbank, at least an aspect of that which she defined as the “spirit of Africa”.

Modernist works of art were often associated with decadence, and simultaneously in South Africa and in Britain, such modernist-derived imagery was coupled with radical notions and ideologies such as Bolshevism. The term was used by Collier to refer to the *Prix de Rome* exhibition of 1926 and appeared at the same time in the South African media, linking it to communism and immorality. François wrote a series of articles in the Durban newspapers, which he titled ‘Boshevism in Art’ and in which he attacked the manner in which the modernist artist reacted scornfully towards craftsmanship and finish. He accused modernists for ‘taking short cuts instead of striking deep ... . There is nothing new, or very little, in this Bolshevik creed’ (Vermilion 1930b). In the light of such criticism, it is logical that Stainbank made *Fate*, as this work, given the history of

conservatism and of marginalisation she had to endure, can be read as her 'manifesto' voicing her stance against women's discrimination and rejection in art and society.<sup>38</sup>

*Fate* is an important work as it indicates, through accurate drawing, that Stainbank was not in the habit of distorting the human figure for the sake of distortion and to voice her dissent in this manner; neither were the distortions in works such as *Ozazisayo* typical of modernist subjectivity. Instead, she allows the narrative to carry the meaning, and she further underscores this through a phrase from Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Aylmer's Field* (1793), 'Is there no stoning save with flint and rock?'. This renders her work subjective but without sacrificing female form, and as silently voicing dissent without conforming to the violent distortions of the female figure characteristic of the paintings by German Expressionists such as Kirchner, Ensor and Nolde. Her drawings indicate clearly that she wished to retain human proportion by superimposing her abstraction with academically sound figure drawing, in order to ensure correct human proportion. She was also aware of the history of the representation of the female form and of the theme of mother and child, underlining the belief that her 'exaggerations' can be read as calculated design.

The presence of the face of the judge, resembling that of her husband the Rev Cox, is a clear indication that, as the black woman is tied to this face, Stainbank identified with the body of the black 'other' to resemble 'self'. Stainbank's female figure is also not reclining or in a conventionally submissive or unstable position. The figure is literally bound, and is literally tugging at her shackles, the swaying hair an indication of the force with which she is pulling to free herself. This figure generates an understanding of the female experience, not only socially but also in terms of visual conventions, which have governed her rendering. Through identifying with the indigenous black woman, Stainbank prevents a stereotypical

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<sup>38</sup> This work was probably the last made by Stainbank before she entered war service in 1940. She accepted a teaching post at the Durban Technical College once she returned from war service.

association of the female form with a mythic or mythological figure, thus avoiding the problem of objectification. The association of herself with the black body permits her to approach this subject matter as 'significant' and thereby to move from a position of 'other' to a position of 'center' in post-colonial, and in post-modern terms. In this, Stainbank is approaching Luce Irigaray's (1985:76) suggestion of mimicry as a tool to dismantle male-made canons and stereotypes:

One must assume the female role [of mimicry] deliberately which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it. The play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing her to be simply reduced to it.<sup>39</sup>

Particularly significant about *Fate* is that Stainbank used a modernist idiom to describe a narrative which, firstly and obviously, describes the local position of the oppressed black female; and secondly, she used this narrative vicariously to elucidate her own position as woman and as artist in South Africa. The use of black persons as subject matter evokes a primitivist concern, whereas the planar, stylised and simplified form in which these images have been rendered are akin to sculptures by modernist artists which Stainbank most likely saw while she was a student in London. In a study of the female figure by modernist artists, specifically the Expressionists, 'other' does not signify that which is 'other' in cultural or ethnic terms, but instead in gender terms. In this sense, the modernist male artist 'colonised' the body of the 'other', to be used as a vehicle for subjective and emotive experience and projection. Even though modernists often worked from models, in conjunction with conceptual premises, their figure studies often lost their identity and became the carriers of male-established canons and forms.

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<sup>39</sup> Also see Jacques Lacan's 'Symbolic Order' in his essay 'The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud', in *Jacques Lacan Ecrits*, translated by A Sheridan [pp146-178] and 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis' [pp 70-113]. It is important for feminist enquiry into women artists' relation to male established canons, to equate this Order with canons established and developed by male artists.

A close study of Stainbank's carvings of the Zulu woman specifically, reveal that her identification with the 'other', being 'other' herself in a patriarchal society, and while in London, 'other' in terms of being non-British, had its beginnings in South Africa, but required knowledge of the European *avant-garde* and primitivism to come to fruition. Already at an early stage in her career, the black South African woman meant establishing a connection with that which was familiar to her, and which signified 'home', despite the 'other' being different to Stainbank. The reason for Stainbank's rejection of primitivism can therefore be found in this 'otherness' or *difference*, as subscribing to primitivist norms would have required her to ignore the specific cultural identity of the black personage in the quest for subjectivity. This would also have meant that for Stainbank, the search for the 'spirit of Africa' would have been a futile one.

The culture: nature paradigm used in much European Feminist theory to explain gender relations can not as readily or easily be applied to art making in South Africa. Instead, it appears that this binary perspective was used in South Africa to oppose colonial white: black divisions, which almost automatically generated ideological discrepancies between the cultural productions of indigenous black people and the white colonists. Because these discrepancies were used to explain the difference between 'art' and 'craft', it also reflects Modernist divisions between *avantgarde* and 'popular' culture. In addition, sculpture was historically considered male domain, whereas it was more acceptable for women to paint, as their leisurely lifestyle in the colonies, where there were ample servants, allowed them time to indulge in such creative activities.<sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, Stainbank's contact with modernism lead her to reinterpret her subject matter, particularly of the South African black personage, and to find a

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<sup>40</sup> It is only during the latter part of the twentieth century that the postmodernist sublation of categories between 'art' and 'craft' became obliterated, and artefacts made by black inhabitants of South Africa emerged in art galleries and museums. The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, and the ease of various discriminatory laws such as the lifting of the Group Areas Act coincided with the appearance of such artworks in hitherto exclusively 'white' collections.

formal language suitable to convey that subject matter. This contact with the then most recent European tendencies in art can be considered responsible for the change in direction of her work from the realistic images made as a student at the Durban School of Art to more complex and experimental images reflective of her experience and perception of what she considered to be the 'spirit of Africa'. Stainbank retained the conservative and conventional teaching she received from her British trained teachers at the Durban School of Art, and applied this visual knowledge to public and private commissions, without sacrificing her vision of 'Africa'. It is via this British training in South Africa and in London, in conjunction with colonial imagery that she was familiar with, that Stainbank managed to formulate her own idiosyncratic version of modernism, in which she referred to the actual black 'African' person as the source for her work rather than making use of African artefacts as reference point. Stainbank also formulated a visual idiom which for her, most closely resembled her notion of the 'spirit of Africa' in order to render and establish, vicariously, her own, South African identity.

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