

## *Mary Stainbank — sculptress of Natal*

Miss Stainbank's work is clever — conceived in a gross and exaggerated manner. Critics have pedestalled it because it strikes the birth of futurism in this country. It speaks of a morbid relishing of the ungainly . . .

The above quotation which appeared in a Natal newspaper of 1929 is typical of much contemporary criticism of Mary Stainbank's use of avant-garde images. She is grudgingly credited with the introduction of a modern school of sculpture in South Africa. Opinions today, nearly sixty years later, have changed radically. Research into the art of Natal has confirmed her status as one of the leading sculptors of her day and, indeed, one of South Africa's foremost artists. Her work suffered undeserved controversy and neglect throughout her lifetime. This situation is about to be rectified as a group of artists and art historians in Natal make preparations for a comprehensive exhibition of her life's work to be held in Durban this year.

Mary Stainbank's career began in Durban in 1916 when she entered the Durban School of Art (now the Department of Fine Arts, Natal Technikon) under the renowned ceramicist, John Adams. Here she showed a remarkable talent for portrait modelling and design and was encouraged to choose sculpture as her career. Adams succeeded in overriding her family's dismay at the choice of such an unladylike calling and in 1922 persuaded them to enroll her at the Royal College of Art, London.

She obtained her diploma in 1925 but only after much opposition from the College. The Principal, with fresh memories of the wayward behaviour of Miss Barbara Hepworth in mind, had no desire to enroll any more women in his sculpture school. This determined colonial planted herself on his doorstep, however, establishing herself in the sculpture school (in a private studio) and working quietly in isolation from her fellow students. She was awarded a scholarship in her final year. The College deprived her of its use, however, claiming that only students from London were eligible. Much to her disgust it was transferred to an unknown prodigy from the Midlands, Henry Moore.

Another factor which militated against her was her preference for primitive African subjects, associated in Britain at the time with such notorious decadents as Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill and the Cubists whose styles and mannerisms she brought back to Natal in 1926. Determined to run her own business, she set up a studio at 'Coedmore', the Stainbank family estate

at Bellair near Durban. Here she worked on numerous architectural commissions including the decoration of the Childrens Hospital at Addington, The Government Offices, Aliwal Street, and the Port Elizabeth Magistrate's Court. But her sculptures — highly individual, often humorous, with simplified forms and decoration — did not attract patrons. The South African public admired an outdated Romantic realism kept alive by artists such as Kottler and Van Wouw. Free-standing figures by Stainbank met with hysterical public disapproval when they were shown at the conservative Natal Society of Artists exhibitions during the 1930s. As a result, much of her work was made for her personal enjoyment and was rarely exhibited.

During World War II she left her studio to join a military drawing office. This severely interrupted her creative output. In 1945, finding that she could no longer rely on the income supplied by public commissions, she decided to take up an offer to join the Durban School of Art where she taught sculpture until her retirement in 1957. Her later years were marred by the onset of arthritis which increasingly limited her output.

Without doubt, Mary Stainbank's most important work was produced between 1926 and 1940 when her links with the British avant-garde combined with a lively interest in the images of Africa made her one of the most important artists of her generation.

Her enthusiasm for 'native studies' predated any attempts by her contemporaries to create such ethnographic genres. Growing up, like many young Natalians of the period, on a farm surrounded by black labourers gave her an intimate insight into Zulu customs, attitudes and visual characteristics.

The fashion of 'native studies' produced during the first half of this century probably followed the trends of the 19th century when ethnographic documentation such as *The Kafirs Illustrated* was in demand. There were, however, few artists in Natal after 1910 skilled enough to reintroduce a school of figure painting based on anthropological interests. This reluctance was criticised by Leo Francois, writing for the *Natal Mercury* in 1929:

Are there not Native subjects also? Here, I admit, the South African artist is failing lamentably because of his lack of anatomical knowledge, and his aversion to figure composition. It is, therefore, left to the newcomer from overseas who, after a few weeks drawing from the model in the Native reserves, to set to in producing pictures of Native life.<sup>1</sup>

Another obstacle was the public's reluctance to patronise what was felt to be a distasteful genre. Picture owners who lived with coy Victorian nudes in classical settings were at first reluctant to buy semi-naked Zulus in tribal dress to put on their walls. By the late 1920s this prejudice had lessened. Karl Gundelfinger, a Durban industrialist, was persuaded to donate an annual money prize for 'the best painting of native life'.<sup>2</sup> One prizewinner was British artist Alfred Palmer who depicted a 'superior' native type in idealised poses:

He does not in his delineation of native types seek the common negroid type with big flat nose and thick lips, but rather that finer cast of features which he claims is typical of the pure-bred Bantu . . . [he said,] 'why should I take the coarse, animal, brutal, negroid type when I can find a higher, finer type?'<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, the average Natalian of the 1920s sympathised with Palmer's views. The acceptance of sentimental or melodramatic views of native life rapidly increased. Amateur artists contributed to the genre reinforcing attitudes which were, at best, antiquarian, at worst, patronising. Enter, then, Mary Stainbank, fresh from the London of Jacob Epstein and the young Henry Moore.

Her student assignments produced at the Durban School of Art show a precocious understanding of modelling and form. The most notable pieces include portrait heads built up directly and from memory of Zulu servants and labourers who worked on her father's farm. While in London she continued to use the Zulu as inspiration despite opposition to what the College referred to as 'negroid' influences. Respectable Londoners of the twenties identified Blacks with America (rather than Africa), jazz, cocktails and decadence. Mary adopted certain mannerisms now associated with the Jazz Age: distorted limbs, sharp, angular forms, and shallow chiselled decoration. Works exhibited in Natal in 1929 and 1930 caused an outcry. Her *Enigma* (1930, Artist's collection) depicts a Zulu woman with an elaborate headdress, leaning back dreamily. The public and critics were shocked by its crudity and lack of modelling. They were even more outraged by *Baya Huba* (1932, Durban Art Museum), which is still her most controversial work. Here three heads intertwine, their grotesque features deliberately expressing abandonment and frenzy. The title, which was rendered as 'we sing, we dance', was rejected as ungrammatical, and comparisons were drawn between Palmer's 'superior' native types and



Enigma

(Photograph: Author's collection)



Baya Huba

(Photograph: Author's collection)

Mary's 'coarse, animal, brutal negroid' creatures. As she worked in comparative isolation from her colleagues, everyone was taken by surprise. One is pleased to note, however, that fellow artists, for that short period, declared her to be Natal's foremost young artist.

It is almost unfortunate that she decided to remain in Durban after her return from London. She worked alone in the colonial atmosphere of Natal; she also had to fight the general intolerance towards women artists at the time. These were severe discouragements. Surely an artist of such originality would have received appropriate recognition had she been active in Johannesburg or Cape Town? The proposed retrospective exhibition will, it is hoped, bring to Mary Stainbank the recognition that she so richly deserves.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Vermilion, 'Propaganda methods in art', *The Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1929.
- <sup>2</sup> Gundelfinger prizewinner, *The Natal Mercury*, 5 July 1926, p. 10; Picture selling on the Rand, *The Natal Mercury*, 8 June 1928, p. 12.
- <sup>3</sup> An artist in a caravan, *The Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1926, p. 13.

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