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alexis preller

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EXHIBITION

ALEXIS PRELLER: AFRICA, THE SUN AND SHADOWS

Standard Bank Gallery
Johannesburg
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'ALEXIS PRELLER: AFRICA, THE SUN AND SHADOWS' RUNS AT THE STANDARD BANK GALLERY FROM 13 OCTOBER TO 5 DECEMBER 2009. A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION, IT SHOWCASES THE WORK OF ALEXIS PRELLER (1911-1975) AND IS CURATED BY KAREL NEL.

Preller was a major South African artist, whose unconventional form of expression was impossible to classify in terms of the mainstream art movements of his time. Despite his art's elusive quality, his richly coloured paintings and distinctive, poetic vision earned him widespread critical acclaim and a host of loyal admirers.

Preller studied in London and Paris in the 1930s, where he absorbed the language of Western modernism (see fact file overleaf) to the extent that a critic, who had seen his work on a 1937 group exhibition in Johannesburg, called him "South Africa's Gauguin". He was also influenced by Van Gogh and later by the frescoes of Piero della Francesca, the Renaissance artist.

Alexis Preller, *The Feast*, 1946. Oil on canvas board, 44 x 58 cm. Private collection



In search of an art "rooted in the Africa soil", as he put it, Preller drew his initial inspiration from the Ndebele (Mapogga) people, who lived in the Pretoria vicinity, where he spent most of his life. To realise his goal of creating an art that was relevant to his time and place, he travelled to other parts of Africa, visiting Swaziland, the Seychelles, Zanzibar, Egypt and the Congo. While in Paris, he also sought inspiration from the African sculptures in the Trocadero Museum.

Critics in South Africa have labelled Preller a Surrealist, which the artist rejected. He has also been referred to as an Expressionist, particularly by Walter Battiss, who said, "the expressionist school counts as members - Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, Alexis Preller and others of like nature". It was also Battiss who invited Preller to join the New Group (see fact file overleaf) in 1938, particularly because he, along with others such as Laubser and Irma Stern, was seen as innovative and different to other artists of his era. From today's perspective, Preller is regarded as an important figure in the South African avant-garde (see fact file overleaf) movement of his time, and as an African modernist.

"IN HIS ART, PRELLER CREATED A WORLD OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS, SHAPING A PRIVATE COSMOLOGY, OR WORLD, IN WHICH THE MYTHS OF HUMANKIND ARE INTERCONNECTED AND INTERWOVEN"

Alexis Preller, *Ritual Mapogga*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 76.5 x 41 cm. Pretoria Art Museum



As an innovative artist, Preller's contribution to South African art lies in his combination of the language of modernism and a distinctly African frame of reference. By incorporating African influences, he broke away from the European tradition and developed a new form of artistic expression. "As a form of modernist vernacular" [or local art language], writes Clive Kellner, "Preller's artistic practice is distinguishable from European modernism. As Picasso was to Europe, so Preller is to Africa!"

In his art, Preller created a world of signs and symbols, shaping a private cosmology (see glossary word overleaf), or world, in which the myths of humankind are interconnected and interwoven - those from Greek, Egyptian and African cultures, for example. Kellner comments: "Ultimately, the synthesis of Preller's cosmological world is constructed in the mind of the viewer. Here the intersection of Greek mythology [see glossary word overleaf], Mapogga culture, hieratic [of or concerning priests] emblematic signs such as maize cobs, shells and African masks, and Egyptian motifs begin to represent another world - an ancient African universe."

"PRELLER WAS A MAJOR SOUTH AFRICAN ARTIST, WHOSE UNCONVENTIONAL FORM OF EXPRESSION WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO CLASSIFY IN TERMS OF THE MAINSTREAM ART MOVEMENTS OF HIS TIME"

Another important theme in Preller's work - the heroic man - evolved after a visit to Greece in 1968. On his return he started painting images of the biblical Adam, using as his reference images of *kouros*, sculptures representing the idealised (see glossary word overleaf) nude bodies of young athletes in ancient Greece. The highlight of Preller's *kouros* works was *Marathon* (1970), about which Esmé Berman writes: "... in its deeper metaphorical significance the painting celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, as well

mystical symbolism akin to magical realism associated with Latin American writers such as Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez that drew upon magical elements or illogical scenarios appearing in otherwise realistic or normal settings."

During the course of his 40-year career, Preller concentrated solely on his art, working daily in his studio and producing a vast number of exuberantly coloured imaginative compositions. 'Alexis Preller: Africa, the Sun and Shadows' showcases a wide selection of the artist's work, as well as a number of artefacts, documents and photographs relevant to his life. A contribution to understanding Preller as one of South Africa's pre-eminent artists, and as a pioneer who defined an African style in the 20th century, the exhibition follows the last major exhibition of the artist's oeuvre - the Retrospective Exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum in 1972.

The exhibition is accompanied by Alexis Preller, art historian Esmé Berman and artist Karel Nel's comprehensive monograph on the artist, which consists of two volumes: an extensive biography of Preller and a collection of his works.

Alexis Preller, *Boy with a Crocodile*, 1964/5. Oil on canvas, 127 x 127 cm. Private collection



Alexis Preller, *Three Women*, 1952. Oil on wood, 51 x 41 cm. Private collection

as Preller's own triumphant assertion of his inner [homosexual] identity."

Preller's art is poetic, visionary and rooted in the imagination. In conceptualising his perception of African (primarily Ndebele) culture, he gave form to the idea of a mythical race. The exact meaning of his work, however, is difficult to pin down. One way to look at him is as Kellner suggests: his work may "be described as

"BY INCORPORATING AFRICAN INFLUENCES, HE BROKE AWAY FROM THE EUROPEAN TRADITION AND DEVELOPED A NEW FORM OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION"

biography

Born in 1911, Alexis Preller attended Pretoria Boys' High School. On completing his schooling, he worked as a clerk before deciding to pursue a career as an artist. Encouraged by the architect Norman Eaton, he left for London in 1934, where JH Pierneef, who was working on murals at South Africa House at the time, advised him to enroll at the Westminster School of Art. He returned to Pretoria in 1935 via the East coast of Africa, and it was also in this year that he held his first solo exhibition.

Unable to afford formal training, Preller visited the Grande Chaumière studios in Paris in 1937, also studying in museums and galleries. On his return, he camped in Swaziland, where he painted continuously. During this time he exhibited in Johannesburg. He joined the New Group in 1938 and was included on its first exhibition. In the following year, he travelled by car to the Congo, returning to Pretoria at the outbreak of World War II.

During the War, Preller served in the Field Ambulance Corps. Captured, he was interned in North Africa and Italy until 1943. After his release, he continued to exhibit in Johannesburg, his work showing the influence of his war experiences. His next trip to Europe was in 1946, where he again spent time in the museums. In the following year, the first book was published on Preller: a small collection of black-and-white reproductions entitled 'Alexis Preller', with notes by Christi Truter.

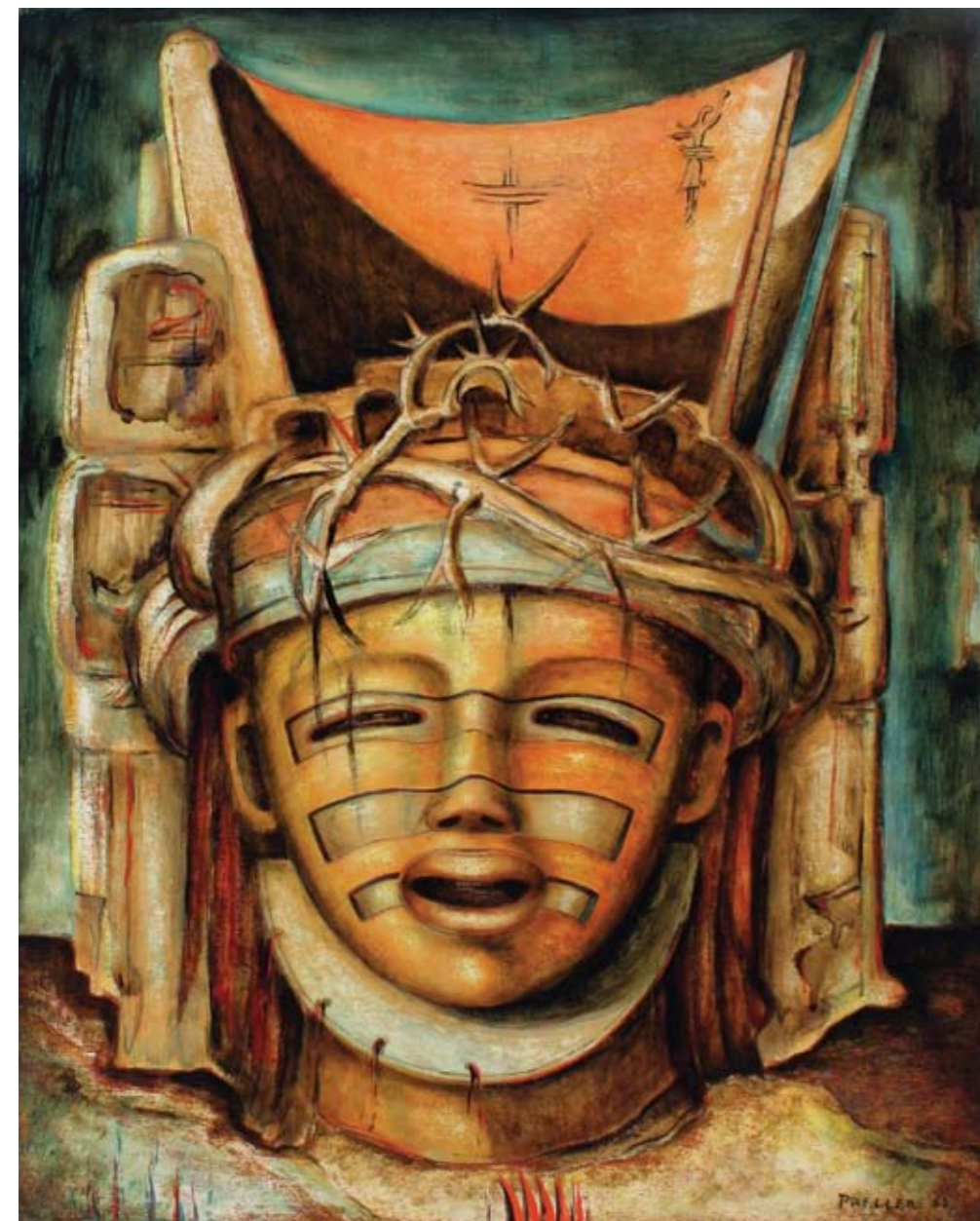
In 1948/1949 Preller travelled once more, this time to Zanzibar and the Seychelles, which, as with all his trips, was to prove influential on his work. At this time he also became a member of the South African branch of the International Art Club, along with other progressive artists like Walter Battiss and Irma Stern. Preller's next trip was in 1953 - to Italy, where he studied frescoes and was



Preller at the wheel of Sampie de Wet's car. Photo: Rand Daily Mail

much influenced by the work of Piero della Francesca. On his way back, he visited Egypt, which was also to have a huge impact on his work. In 1968 he visited Greece and Turkey followed by another trip to Greece and Italy in 1970. His last visit to Europe was in 1973, travelling to Paris and Holland.

Preller's contribution to South African art was acknowledged when he received the Molteno Award (jointly with Jean Welz) in 1953, and the Medal of Honour for Painting from the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie in 1955. He represented South Africa at the Venice Biennale on two occasions - in 1954 and 1956 - and was a featured artist at the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1973. In 1972 the Pretoria Art Museum held a major retrospective exhibition of his work. The following year Esmé Berman and Edgar Bold began filming a documentary on Preller. The film was interrupted because Preller took ill, but was completed in 1974. The SABC commissioned an extended version of this documentary in 1976, which was transmitted in July 1977. Preller held his last exhibition in 1975, the year in which he died of a heart attack following surgery.



Alexis Preller, *Christ Head*, 1952. Oil on wood, 51 x 41 cm. Iziko South African National Gallery

