

## The art market

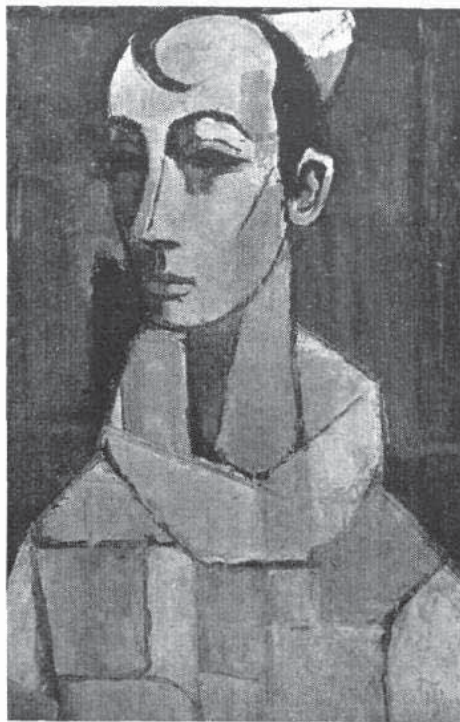
Art, traditionally, is a better business for a dead artist than for a live one. Rembrandt, who died in poverty, could have supported half his native city of Amsterdam on the recent proceeds of one work, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, bought by New York's Metropolitan Museum for R1½ million, highest price ever paid for any picture. Cezanne, whose wife used to rescue his paintings from the roadside where he left them, would have been bewildered to see his *Boy in a Red Waistcoat* realise R440,000 at Sotheby's in 1958.

**Posthumous success.** South Africa — like America — has not produced any artists of comparable dimension, and the pickings for late and great South African artists do not reach astronomical figures. Nevertheless, just prior to the fifth anniversary of J. H. Pierneef's death last week, a new owner parted happily with 550 guineas to acquire his *Valley of a Thousand Hills*, and this was only shortly after the Transvaal Provincial Administration had shelled out 600 guineas for another of the Transvaal master's works. The Cape landscapes of Tinus de Jongh, who died in 1942, are very much in demand, and a steady market exists for such pioneers of the South African school as Volschenk and Wenning.

**Alive and thriving.** Increasingly, art is providing a healthy living for numbers of South African artists who are still alive and able to enjoy the fruits of their creative efforts. Painters with established reputations command sizeable sums for their canvases, and can rely upon the support of a faithful following.

Gabriel de Jongh, son of Tinus, rarely shows a picture in the cities, but is said to earn something in the vicinity of R40,000 a year from painting. And he is not alone. W. H. Coetzer, expert in the realist style and depicter of South African historical events, also avoids dealers, but is rewarded very handsomely.

**Not fast enough.** Some artists have, in turn, been made by a city gallery. Thornley-Stewart (NEWS/CHECK September 14) lives a couple of hours by car from Durban, but finds little market for the paintings there. On the other hand, he cannot produce them fast enough to supply the demand, at anything from 150-500 guineas of Johannesburg's Pieter Wenning Gallery. Other artists, too, have reason to appreciate the talents of Everard



"THE WHITE CLOWN"—VAN ESSCHE  
*Teaching supplements*

Read, Wenning's owner, as a dealer: Clement Serneels, who fled the Congo following the Independence upheavals, feeds his viridian-and-umber-toned nudes and flowerpieces to Read as fast as he paints them, and during two recent days five were sold for sums between 125 and 300 guineas. Simon Hodge, who concentrates on the fauna of the South African bush, has sold out his exhibitions repeatedly in this gallery, and he rarely asks less than 80 guineas for a water-colour, averages 150 guineas for an oil.

**Marketable "moderns".** These painters represent the more conservative field. Of those who use the contemporary idiom, internationally-renowned Maud Sumner, whose latter work borders on the abstract, has fans all over the Republic. She sold more than fifty canvases, at around the 150 guinea mark, during her visit home this year. Long-established expressionist Irma Stern parted with 3,000 guineas worth of pictures at her last show, which opened the new Adler-Fielding Galleries in Johannesburg; top price: 360 guineas. Jean Welz, superlative craftsman, lauded as the doyen of contemporary art in South Africa, produces slowly and shows seldom, but his most recent exhibition in the above gallery realised 4,000 guineas in 24 hours, and many buyers would not hesitate to pay 750 guineas for a Welz.

Alongside these top sellers are a number of artists of quality who receive steady incomes from their work. Few of these rely entirely upon paint-

ing for their living: Maurice van Essche and Walter Battiss both teach, but neither ever sells for less than R2,000 at a one-man exhibition, and both can usually ask, and receive, sums averaging R180-R200 for a picture. Alexis Preller is another artist who shows infrequently, but the demand for his work is constant, and he has sold more than one canvas for over R400.

**Transvaal buyers.** Best market for abstract painting is provided in the Transvaal, but taste on the highveld is catholic, and the public buys the work it enjoys. Buyers exist there for both the most conservative and the most avant garde. Gregoire Boonzaaier, who in company with many Cape painters remains true to descriptive impressionism, exhibited in Johannesburg last month, and within four days had realised R3,000 on sales. In contrast, the total abstractions of Douglas Portway fared extremely well in August. Of 16 large canvases for sale, 11 were sold for a total of R1,600 — probably a record for an abstract exhibition in the Republic.

Biggest art surprise in recent months occurred in Durban, traditional graveyard of the arts. Maggie Laubser, an old and well-loved name in South African painting, exhibited at the Lidchi Gallery. The usually reticent public flocked to see her work: 400 people turned up at the opening alone, and a record sale for Durban of R2,400 was recorded.

**Collecting trends.** South Africans have long been interested in collecting Africana; work by such painters as Bowler and Baines of the 19th century, though infrequently of any great artistic value, are difficult to come by



"THE ARTIST'S WIFE"—SERNEELS  
*A profitable move*

and expensive to purchase. Earlier painters of this century have a steady following among collectors; there is always a ready buyer for a Wenning, a good Naudé or Amschwitz. Among living artists, the Cape is loyal to Cecil Higgs, May Hillhouse and Terence McCaw, the Transvaal is less predictable; but of late dealers have made an effort to promote younger artists, and many of these who prefer the abstract idiom are on their way to solvency through art.

On the whole, the up-and-coming painters do not ask very high prices for their work — where they do, they have often to be satisfied with good notices and small sales, and rarely is an abstract show a success outside Johannesburg or Pretoria. Young abstractionist George Boys experienced a total sell-out in his first one-man show in Johannesburg earlier this year, but his highest price was R80.

**Demand for "originals".** As an artist acquires recognition and reputation, so his work naturally rises in price. The public is beginning to accept that the artist is a professional earning his keep, and is thus prepared to give value for value received. But while there are growing numbers who regularly visit the commercial art galleries to look, compare, and possibly to buy, there are many who have no basis for their choice except the need for an attractive, uncomplicated decoration for their walls. These also provide a living for a certain class of painter. There are innumerable manufacturers of pictures, producing what are known in the profession as "pot-boilers" to cater for public demand for "originals". Among these are a number of skilled Italian exPOWs, who draw a very comfortable income churning out nostalgic views of a Venice that they have not seen for 20 years. Others hand their product over by the yard to dealers who travel the country, hawking their wares to beauty-hungry but unselective homeowners, and do very well out of this mass-production.

**The people's choice.** Then there is "Tretchie" — Vladimir Tretchikoff, Russian-born Cape Town painter. Darling of the populace, anathema to critics, his success is legend. Though he receives more brick-bats than bouquets from fellow-artists, his name is often on their lips—for the good reason that he possesses one faculty rarely found in the profession: business acumen. He will not reveal his earnings, though he revels in his luxury. But he provides a cheering reminder to struggling artists that painting can be a very profitable activity.