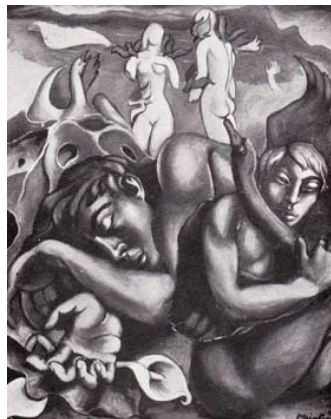


**JOHANNES MEINTJES**  
**1923-1980**  
**Artist, Author, Historian**



Summary

Meintjes was a painter who enjoyed tremendous public support for his art since early age and who also received international acclaim as an author later on. He is a well-known historian and one of South Africa's most versatile artists. The fame he enjoyed as a 21 year-old artist is completely unequalled in the South African history of art. Esmé Berman wrote in her authoritative *Art & Artists of South Africa* that 'the spectacular suddenness with which Johannes Meintjes catapulted to the headlines during the last years of WW2 is a phenomenon seldom equalled in SA cultural history. Before he was 22 years old the intense young artist enjoyed the kind of public adulation later reserved for youthful idols of the pop-music world'.

When Johannes Meintjes died in 1980 he had established himself as a major South African painter and writer. Apart from numerous articles and smaller literary works, he had published 35 books, amongst them authoritative works on South African history.

He had painted more than a thousand canvases, produced dozens of sculptures and exhibited in all of South Africa's major galleries - sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of artists such as Preller, Pierneef, Sekoto, Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser.

Dr Hermien McCaul-Dommisse indicated during her opening address at the prestigious memorial exhibition at the University of Johannesburg (RAU) in 1990 that Meintjes' work reflected something of the naivety of the African artist... a dimension beyond the purely European and that his canvases, painted with the knowledge born out of centuries of European experience, speak with the voice of Africa. Meintjes once said: 'Mine is the vision ... sprung from the soil of Africa and I have given it in a personal statement which may find a response in the heart and imagination of another generation.'

She said that his work, being the link between Europe and the legacies of Africa, would grow in importance and remain an abiding influence and inspiration in a new South African era.

Summary biography follows on the next seven pages

## JOHANNES MEINTJES SUMMARY BIOGRAPHY

Born: Riversdale, 19 May 1923

Died: Molteno, 7 July 1980

1923-1928

The son of a sheep farmer; spent his first five years on the family farm Grootzeekoegat in the Molteno district (Eastern Cape).

1928

After the early death of his father (Ernest Frederick Meintjes 1893-1928), the family moved to Riversdale; he became friendly with the elderly Volschenk, drew and painted from childhood and won his first prize at the age of 15 years.

1938

The family moved to Cape Town and the 15 year-old boy began serious art study under Florence Zerffi (widow of Stratford Caldecott). The speech Meintjes wrote for the Voortrekker Commemoration was broadcast countrywide (and also read by him).

1940

An exhibition of Maggie Laubser's work evoked his ardent admiration; he wrote a fan letter to her and a life-long close friendship developed.

1941-43

Studied languages at the University of Cape Town where he completed a BA degree and published a book on Maggie Laubser at the age of 21 (which became a sought-after Africana item later on).

During this period close and life-long friendships formed with individuals such as Hubert du Plessis, NP van Wyk Louw, May Hillhouse, Cecil Higgs and Nerine Desmond.

He became the youngest member ever of the exclusive 'K'-club and an exhibition of his paintings caused a sensation. He sold his first painting on 28 February 1942 for nine guineas.

He completed his first life-sized sculpture in 1942.

He published two articles during this period and won the prize for the best Afrikaans article in the Silver Jubilee Edition of 'Groote Schuur'.

1944

Moved to Johannesburg to assist Gerrit Bakker with his new bookshop and rented a studio in Market Street. During this period friendships were formed with *i.a.* Rosa Nepgen, Hermien Dommissie, Walter Battiss and Alexis Preller.

His first exhibition (Gainsborough Gallery, 29 August to 11 September 1944) caused a stir in Johannesburg and Cape Town and he became famous overnight. The fame he enjoyed as a 21 year-old artist is completely unequalled in the South African history of art.

Some of Meintjes' first short stories were published during this period.

Moved back to Cape Town and taught art at SA College School and Jan Van Riebeeck High School, Cape Town.

Group exhibition with Gerard Sekoto, Jean Welz and Maud Sumner.

1945

Designs for ballet costumes exhibited in USA (currently housed at the New York Public Library).

Successful exhibitions (Johannesburg and Cape Town) provided funds for study in London and Paris.

1945-1947

While in London, studying at the Central School of Arts, worked part-time as broadcaster for the BBC with Arnold van Wyk.

1947

Returned to Cape Town; worked at painting, broadcasting and writing.

Lectured at the Worcester School of Drama and lectured art at the Cape Technical College.

Decor and costume design for Aeonian ballet group.

Exhibitions in Cape Town and Pretoria. Publication of 'Kamerade'.

Group exhibition with Walter Battiss, Gregoire Boonzaier, Cecil Higgs and Maggie Laubser.

Lectures at the British Art Exhibition in company of Ruth Prowse, Gregoire Boonzaier and Nerine Desmond.

1948

Exhibitions in Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein and Cape Town.

Publication of 'Johannes Meintjes : Lyrical Works'.

Illustrations for the book 'Sebastiaan' (limited edition of 100 copies).

1949

Exhibitions in Johannesburg and Bloemfontein.

Won award from 'Die Vaderland' for 'most original SA painting'.

Also won an 'Oscar' art award (together with Maggie Laubser and Edoardo Villa).

The press speculates that Johannes Meintjes, Maggie Laubser and JH Pierneef will become the future 'SA Masters'.

Published further essays and short stories.

Retreated to family farm, Grootzeekoegat, to write and paint in total seclusion; restored the historical farm building, originally built in 1824.

1950

Exhibition in Cape Town, Queenstown, Bloemfontein and Pretoria.

Also group exhibition with Walter Battiss, Otto Klar and Maggie Laubser.

1951

Exhibition in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Publication of further articles as well as publication on SA sculptor 'Anton Anreith'.

Group exhibition with Erich Mayer, Maggie Laubser, Ruth Prowse, Lawrence Scully and Gregoire Boonzaier.

His drama 'Die Blanke Stilte' obtained the Literary Award during the Van Riebeeck Commemoration Festival (shared the award with Uys Krige).

1952

Exhibition at Van Riebeeck Commemoration Festival in Cape Town; also further exhibitions in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria. His 'pornographic' art caused a stir in Port Elizabeth.

Publication of 'Die Blanke Stilte'.

1953

Exhibition in Bloemfontein and Johannesburg.

Participated in group exhibition at Rhodes Festival in Bulawayo. (A quote from a fan letter at the time: 'I still feel like a Christian who had witnessed a miracle - exalted, uplifted and close to God').

1954

Exhibitions in Cape Town and Durban.

1955

Ended period of seclusion and returned to Johannesburg.

Exhibitions in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Publication of his novel 'Stormsvlei' which received an award at the Centenary Festival of Pretoria.

Publication of 'Frontier Family'. Public debate in press with Lawrence van der Post on the Afrikaner's attitude towards other ethnic groups. Met William Plomer and a life-long friendship followed.

1965

Exhibitions in Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Dame Sybil Thorndike requested him to do her portrait - which caused a sensation in the local press.

1957

Exhibitions in Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Heidelberg.

Art critics compared Meintjes as the South African equivalent of Cézanne, Gauguin and Chagall.

Meintjes' drama 'Die Soekendes' awarded by APB.

1958

Exhibition in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Left for Europe again to study art in Amsterdam and Paris.

Publication of 'Die Soekendes'.

1959

Returned to SA and held exhibitions in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

1960

Married Ronell Rossouw. Exhibitions in Pretoria, East London and Johannesburg.

Publication of 'Complex Canvas - The Cape Province'.

First stage production of his play 'Die Soekendes'.

Group exhibitions with *i.a.* Walter Battiss, Alexis Preller, Maud Sumner, Maurice van Essche, Otto Klar, Cecily Sash and G Cattaneo.

1961

Exhibitions in Pretoria, Durban, Springs, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Publication of 'Dagboek 1'.

Group exhibition at UNISA.

1962

Exhibitions in Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

1963

Exhibitions in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Publication of novel 'Gister is Vandag' and publication of 'Jeugjare'.

Press refers to Meintjes as the 'Golden Boy' of SA art scene.

Exhibition of Meintjes' works in the USA.

1964

Exhibitions in Molteno and Johannesburg. Exhibition in Washington, D.C.

Publication of 'Mallemeule', 'Manor House' and 'A. Lomax - Portret van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse Dorp'.

Group exhibition with *i.a.* George Boys, Gordon Vorster, Cecily Sash and Dirk Meerkotter by invitation of the Rembrandt Art Foundation.

1965

Received a literary award from PEN.

Returned permanently to Grootzeekoegat, Molteno.

Exhibitions in Cape Town and Pretoria.

Publication of biography 'Olive Schreiner - Portrait of a South African Woman'. (The President of the SA English Academy described this work in 1975 as the 'best study ever on Olive Schreiner').

Publication of 'The Silent Conspiracy'.

Group exhibition with *i.a.* Lucas Sithole, Christo Coetzee, Maggie Laubser, Armando Baldinelli and Maud Sumner.

1966

Exhibitions in Johannesburg and Molteno.

Participated by invitation in Republic Festival Exhibition in Pretoria as well as the opening of the Hester Rupert Art Museum.

Publication of his (commissioned) biography on General De la Rey, 'De la Rey - Lion of the West'. International acclaim as author followed. Publication of De la Rey in serial format in 'The Star'.

1967

Appointment as honorary curator of George Vice Memorial Museum, Molteno.

Exhibitions in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Publication of De la Rey in serial format in Afrikaans newspaper.

1969

Exhibitions in Johannesburg and Molteno.

Publication of biography on General Gideon Scheepers, 'Sword in the Sand - Gideon Scheepers' as well as (English) biography on President Steyn. Publication of 'Stormberg - A Lost Opportunity'.

1970

Exhibition in Port Elizabeth.

Publication of the (Afrikaans) biography on President Steyn, 'Steyn - Vader van sy Volk'.

Publication of biography on General Louis Botha; favourable comments in the press (from amongst others) by William Plomer (UK) and Declercq (Netherlands).

Publication of 'The Round Table in South Africa'.

His book on President Steyn is broadcast on national radio.

1971

Exhibition in Johannesburg.

Publication of biography on General Piet Joubert, 'The Commandant General - P J Joubert'.

Publication of 'Sandile - The Fall of the Xhosa Nation'.

Publication of short stories and essays, 'Siembamba'.

1972

Exhibition in Cape Town.

Publication of 'Dagboek 2'.

1973

Appointed as executive member of Burgersdorp Museum.

Exhibition in Johannesburg in commemoration of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Publication of 'The Voortrekkers' (prescribed at Oxford University; also published in Corgi paperback).

1974

Appointed as member of the 'SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns'.

Exhibitions in Cape Town and Molteno.

Publication of biography 'President Kruger'. Publication of '- Dorp van Drome: Molteno 1874 - 1974'.

1975

Exhibition in Bloemfontein and Johannesburg.

Publication of the commissioned book 'SASOL: 1950 - 1975' in both Afrikaans and English.

Publication of 'Dagboek 3'.

1976

Exhibition in Sasolburg.

Publication of 'The Anglo Boer War 1899 - 1902: A Pictorial History' (Afrikaans and English editions, later also published in German).

Publication of 'The Great Boer War: Arthur Conan Doyle 1'.

1977

Exhibitions in Stellenbosch, Bellville and Molteno.

Publication of 'With Bobs and Kruger: Frederic William Unger 2'.

1978

Exhibition in Lichtenburg.

Prestige group exhibition in Salisbury, Bulawayo and Johannesburg with Geoffrey Armstrong, Armando Baldinelli, Maud Sumner, Gordon Vorster, Walter Battiss and Rhona Stern.

1979

Exhibition by invitation at University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Exhibition in Ficksburg.

1980

Exhibition by invitation at University of Port Elizabeth.

Died on 7 July 1980.

At the time of his death, Meintjes had painted more than 1 336 oil paintings, produced dozens of sculptures as well as hundreds of sketches, temperas, graphic works and watercolours.

Several published books (35) and even many more unpublished manuscripts are all evidence of his creative energy.

More than 1 400 newspaper and magazine articles were written about Meintjes during his lifetime.

Following his death, most of Meintjes' manuscripts, letters, diaries, etc were presented to the National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown to be housed in a Johannes Meintjes Memorial Room.

1981

Publication of 'Eeu van Genade: NG Kerk Molteno 1881 - 1981'.

1982

Television programme on the life and work of Meintjes.

1983

Memorial exhibition at University of Orange Free State, Bloemfontein.

1986

Opening of Johannes Meintjes Room, Molteno. (Permanent exhibition).

1990

Prestige memorial exhibition at the Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg.

Dr Hermien McCaul-Dommisse (who had also opened Meintjes' first exhibition in 1944) opened this exhibition.

1990

Prestige memorial exhibition by invitation for the works of Meintjes and Alexis Preller in Pretoria.

1990

Prestige memorial exhibition at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein.

1996

Death of his widow, Ronell Meintjes.

Part of her collection of Meintjes' art works was bequeathed to the University of Stellenbosch.

2004

First electronic publication of some of Meintjes' books (Victoria, Australia)

2006

Archival website by The Haenggi Foundation (Basel, Switzerland)

<http://www.art-archives-southafrica.ch/MEINTJES.htm>

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Image: 'Icarus' 1948 (985x820 mm)

Meintjes Room · Molteno High School (published in 'Meintjes - Lyrical Work')

Enquiries: [cmt@iafrica.com](mailto:cmt@iafrica.com)