



## *Introduction*

### 1

**F**ROM the summit of one of the gently rolling hills on the farm it was possible to see the seasons succeed one another with the uncompromising ferocity which characterises the South African climate. Spring would bring colour - harsh primitive colour sprawling over the countryside as lavishly as would the summer's serenity to follow. Winter would come, flecking the hills with snow and filling the air with the cold hard silence of mile upon mile of lonely veld. Then there would be storms to hurl the thunder crashing through the valley, lighting the scene with flashes which cut through the willows near the dam and terrifyingly struck blue flame from the rocks. But always there was colour.

Colour, too, in the collection of huts perched on the hillside, housing the Bantu labourers who, despite their contact with the white man, retained their customs and went shyly, proudly about their work, giving only the power of their dark bronze bodies and their devotion to their employers.

Tribal feasts or a communal wake brought dances beating insistently, monotonously beating through the night until the fires had subsided into white ash and the flames no longer cast long orange shadows on the ground reverberating to the thudding of frenzied feet. Screams, heard all too clearly in the homestead, told a terrified, fascinated boy huddled sleeplessly in bed that teeth, flashing in the light of the fires, had severed a finger as demanded by ritual, or that an unwilling girl, bartered for cattle, was being dragged off to a strange, frightening wedding bed. This formed the background to the first five years of Johannes Meintjes' life. The dark-eyed child, until his third year the younger of two children, admiringly

watched his father go about the business of the ancestral farm Groot Zeekoegat (the Great Pool of the Hippo), here curbing the temper of a spirited stallion, there skinning the wool off a sheep with shears that seemed to have become a part of his hand, so expertly he handled them. When he died suddenly at the age of 35, it was natural that the boy should feel deeply the loss of the father who was primarily the hero. This realisation of loss is apparent in Meintjes' work, notably in *The Deserted Farm* (Plate 32), which was painted in London 18 years later after repeated attempts at the subject had to be abandoned because the requisite atmosphere of nostalgic longing had consistently eluded the artist.

*The Deserted Farm* is obviously a memorial to the father-hero, a tribute to the force without which the farm of his extreme youth lost its significance and the boy discovered that his pedestal had been deprived of the only object it was at that time capable of bearing.

With their mother, who was now the sole recipient of their almost boundless love, the boy and his three sisters moved to Riversdale, in the Cape Province. School proved exceptionally distasteful to the young Meintjes, for it interfered with his drawing at which he had by this time become singularly proficient, and it encroached on and disturbed the world he was coming to believe in and trust to the exclusion of all reality a solitary and private world, but solitary only because of extreme shyness and the resultant difficulty in establishing friendships, and private because his extraordinary sensitivity precluded the sharing of dreams with those who might not have understood his enthusiasm for the indescribable purity of something as commonplace as an arum lily, or his ineffable sadness for the downward pull of a mouth, the manner in which moonlight might obliquely strike a stone and exalt it to the essence of longing, the absolute of loneliness—and although it would necessarily have to occupy a less important place in later years, the private domain of his dreams was still to be the dominant influence in his paintings by the time he had established himself as one of South Africa's most important young artists.

There is no doubt that it will always be the basis of his work.

At 15 Meintjes graduated from water colours and pencil to oil paint, purchased with the prize-money his drawings had won on agricultural shows, which were also aimed at the encouragement of talent generally. What technical knowledge he may have had of the medium came from his avid reading of encyclopaedias, to which he went mainly for the legends and folklore that were his favourite reading matter. There was no teacher available to instruct him in the use of the medium, nothing to point the way. The young artist had to learn by carefully experimenting with the precious paint.

After 10 years in Riversdale, the family moved on to Cape Town, mainly in preparation for Meintjes' forthcoming studies at the University of Cape Town. A larger school (co-educational in contrast with the boys' school he had attended previously), his first academic training at the age of 16, and subsequently his studies at the University, gave him more opportunities for the exchange of ideas he was finding increasingly important to his development, and a greater self-assurance in his approach to his painting, to which he was looking for all self-expression and to

which he now definitely intended to devote himself entirely. Always keenly interested in literature, he was introduced to his gods of that period—Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Rimbaud, the Dutchman Slauerhoff and A. Roland Hoist, and N. P. van Wyk Louw, greatest of Afrikaans poets.

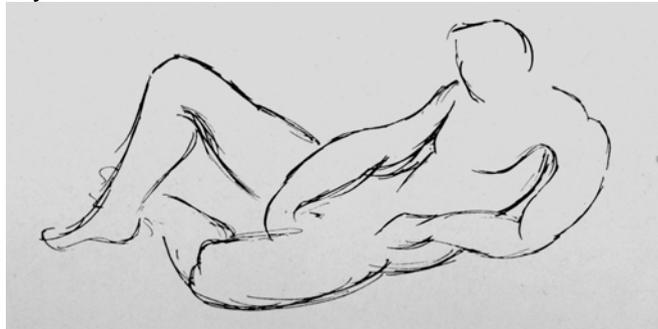
This interest, though coupled with almost feverish painting activity, resulted in a novel of 700 pages, traces of which, though the novel itself was condemned unpublished by Meintjes as inferior and summarily destroyed, can be found in his subsequent writings. To date he has published two *books*—*Kamerade (Comrades)*, a collection of short stories illustrated by himself, and an earlier work, an essay on his illustrious South African contemporary, Maggie Laubser, whose influence on his very early paintings is marked. This essay is now, however, dismissed by Meintjes as a "youthful indiscretion".

At the end of 1943, immediately after his graduation, Meintjes was painting with a heavy impasto in violent primary colours, his subjects drawn mainly from the Coloured community of Cape Town but already betraying signs of the intensification of the lyrical element which was later to dominate his work. Although the first seven reproductions in the present work sprang from this period, *The Sombre Drinking Song* (Plate 1) and *Malay Carnival Homewards* (Plate 2) are more representative. In them there is as yet merely a suggestion of the trend he was to start following soon after—the preoccupation with gesture, the unconditional capitulation to the language of dreams, to which the other reproductions testify.

The first public show of his work in the Gainsborough Galleries, Johannesburg, in August, 1944, prompted the critics to remark on his use of colour and the atmosphere his canvases undoubtedly possessed. But if the critics were interested, the public's enthusiasm was boundless.

By 1945, when he left for London, he had held two more exhibitions and generally come to be regarded as one of the country's leading younger painters.

One of his objects in going to London was to make direct contact with the work he had previously been able to study only in reproduction. Exploring the galleries, he found that Rembrandt, El Greco and the Flemish primitives, and Henry Moore, Picasso and Graham Sutherland held the greatest interest for him. He returned to South Africa in 1947, and his work, while never obviously influenced, immediately displayed the salutary effects of a widened outlook, a broadened scope.



It is difficult to determine the reason for the unique appeal of Meintjes' work, but difficult only until one realises that, with mature vision, he expresses the dreams, the unknown stirrings and indefinable longings of adolescence. His paintings recreate the exquisite solitary suffering for which there was, once, no expression ; and because he has traversed the small Gehenna, voiced the shrill uncertain anguish, a bond is established which is mainly emotional and invariably necessitates a total surrender to the mood of his canvases. His representation of adolescence is based on remembered experience ; his symbols are personal, often private. But whether or not there is immediate understanding of the importance he attaches to themes which constantly recur throughout his work, there can be no denying the degree to which one is moved by them, and it is in this power to affect emotionally that the full impact of his work lies.

The themes in Meintjes' paintings (recurrent, certainly, but in no way restricted) can readily be seen to conform to a pattern. An early absorption with flower themes, from *Voici des Fleurs* (Plate 7) and *Spring* (Plate 9) to the hauntingly beautiful *Flora* (Plate 31), has never entirely been sacrificed to later symbols, although there has naturally been the lessening of preoccupation which is essential to progress. Despite the fact that it was predicted in earlier works such as *Dream and Reality* (Plate 21) and *Man Singing to Swans* (Plate 22), *Sappho* (Plate 33) introduces a new element in birds of various colours hovering, almost entirely motionless, over the scene—bringing an atmosphere of greater serenity, providing escape from the oppressive elements in which the artist had until then been engrossed.

It is interesting to note that in a more recent work, *Self-Portrait with Flowers and Birds* (Plate 41), Meintjes has used both these themes to intensify his mood, at the same time utilising to the full the decorative qualities of the symbols.

Meintjes has painted comparatively few direct self portraits, but a glance at the portrait appearing as a frontispiece to the present work will betray the resemblance between the artist and the figures in his paintings. This use of himself is apparent in such diverse subjects as *Pieta* (Plate 4), *Vlei Beings* (Plate 15) and *Ecce Homo* (Plate 42), and has been the basis of considerable criticism and speculation. It would be well, however, to bear in mind the intensely personal nature of his work, and to recall the words of Carl Zigrosser, writing of Kaethe Kollwitz :

"From her numerous self-portraits .... one gets some idea of how she looked. She made practically no other portraits, which is natural in one whose expression was so strongly coloured by her own inner experience. In a sense one might say that her whole work was a self-portrait. From those so labelled, one can follow the traces left by time and experience over the years .... These records do not stem from a superficial narcissism but from frank self appraisal : they are psychological milestones."

In this connection it is of interest to note that Meintjes paints from a model only for a direct portrait. In the case of most of the paintings represented in this book, for example, he first made notes from a model for each subject but executed the paintings themselves entirely from memory, because he finds greater freedom

of expression in working away from the model. He believes in being master of his subject and not allowing his subject to master him. At the same time, working from his imagination, the unnecessary has been eliminated, the subject has become part of himself and consequently has more direct appeal for him.

In this book it has been possible to present only a very limited number of Meintjes' specifically lyrical paintings. The position has been aggravated by the fact that reproductions are not available of some of those works which are essential to an understanding and appreciation of the work of an artist who is destined to become one of the most powerful forces in South African art.

In conclusion, this : Meintjes has never painted a subject for which he does not entertain the deepest sympathy. In the downward glance of melancholy eyes, in the voiceless eloquence of an open hand, from the smiling madness of his *Lear* to the cruel despair of the *Ecce Homo*, there is the compassion which springs from the understanding of the artist who is also the lonely man. Meintjes is the entangled figure of the final reproduction : he is caught in the inexorable coils of loneliness, from which there is no escape, and which is the basis of human tragedy.

## PIETER MARINCOWITZ

