

# PROFILE OF A SOUTH AFRICAN ARTIST

## *Johannes Meintjes, man of many talents*

THE 12th exhibition of Johannes Meintjes in Johannesburg can be seen at the Gallery 101 from July 14 until July 23. His first was held at the old Gainsborough Galleries in Pritchard Street in 1944 (then the leading gallery in the city for the avant garde painters) and had a sensational success.

He joined the small band of professional South African painters then and has worked professionally ever since, enjoying the loyalty and support of a considerable following.

Johannes Meintjes was born in 1923, the son of a sheep farmer of the Molteno district in the North-Eastern Cape. The early death of his father (at 35) caused the family to move to Riversdale, which was his mother's hometown.

His mother belonged to one of the most cultured families of the Western Cape. On both paternal and maternal sides, his family dates back nearly three centuries in South Africa.

He lived at Riversdale from the age of 5 to 15, knew the veteran painter Jan Volschenk in his last years, and was already drawing and painting from an early age. As a child he won all the prizes for painting on the local agricultural shows and bought his art material with his prize-money, including his first oil colours in which he began to work from 15 onwards.

With his mother and three sisters, Meintjes moved to Cape Town in 1938, where he attended the Jan van Riebeeck High School.

He now started his first academic tuition in the studio of Florence Zerff, the widow of Strat Caldecott. It was a thorough training over a period of five years, during which time he came to know all the painters at the Cape.

His was a startling talent, and the Cape artists took such a keen interest in his progress that one can say that all the leading artists of the Cape formed his art school.

After matriculation, there being few art schools of distinction then, he attended the University of Cape Town and proved a brilliant student of literature.

He never ceased painting, however, and about a year after graduation held his first one-man show in Johannesburg at the age of 21. The success he had enabled him to work professionally.

In 1945 he was appointed art master to the South African College School and the Jan van Riebeeck High School. At the end of the year he left the country on a troopship for London where he painted and studied for over a year, supporting himself by part-time duties on the African Service of the B.B.C.

He returned to Cape Town in 1947, took a studio in an old Cape Dutch house and exhibited locally and elsewhere.

He taught drawing to non-Whites at the Cape Technical College, and did a great deal of radio work, including the first art programme for youth ever broadcast in the country. He was also publishing numerous articles, essays and short stories.

His first book, a monograph on the painter Maggie Laubser, was written at 20 and published in 1944. It was one of the finest books ever printed in this country and is rare as Africana today. This was followed by a book of stories, illustrated by himself, in 1947, and a book on his lyrical paintings in 1948.

In 1949 Meintjes left Cape Town to settle on the family farm, Grootzeekog, in the district of Molteno. There he spent five years in almost total solitude, leaving the farm only to exhibit in various centres.

In that time he published a book on Anton Anreith, South Africa's first sculptor, and a play (with Uys Krige) which won a literary award in a competition organised by the National Advisory Board of Adult Education. He also took an exhibition on a lecture tour through the Free State for the Department of Adult Education.



Johannes Meintjes

In 1954 Meintjes moved to Johannesburg, retaining the farm as headquarters to this day.

Showing regularly on national and other group exhibitions throughout this time, he also showed his work in all our main centres, establishing a reputation which was considerable from the start.

In 1955 he published two more books, one on his farm experiences, and the other, a novel, won the highest award in Afrikaans in a literary competition organised by the Pretoria Municipality.

Recently he published a book on the Cape, "*Complex Canvas*," with 40 drawings, and soon to appear is the first volume of the journal Meintjes has kept for 20 years (*Dayboek 1*) which gives a gripping picture of the artistic life of the country.

Paintings by Johannes Meintjes have been acquired by many institutions and distinguished collectors throughout Africa and all over the world.

When possible he visits Europe for further study (as in 1958), and always he gives himself to his work with complete dedication.

His latest exhibition should arouse great interest and further enhance his reputation as a painter of integrity, totally personal and inimitable, with superb draughtsmanship and exceptional emotional and evocative power.

R.J.