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NOTES

Painted after her first visit to Zanzibar (1939) and before her first Congo expedition (1942), *Black Lilies* is a fascinating work within Stern's still life oeuvre.

The exotic black lilies¹ have been captured in a rich palette of deep purples. Stern's keen sense of colour having understood that black in this case was not black, but a range of the deepest shades of a moonlit lake. Arranged in a Chinese ceramic in her collection



The list of works exhibited by Stern at Gallerie Wolfgang Gurlitt in 1955.



Irma Stern Trust Collection
Accession number: 529

(accession number 529 in the Irma Stern Trust Collection), the green stems of the lilies are offset by the deep glaze of the vase and the moody blues of the background. Next to the vase is a portion of spanspek, the melon known by South Africans as a summer fruit accompanied by a heady aroma.

The muted light source of the interior could be explained by the time of year. Spanspek is at its best in the months January through to early April and the heat in Stern's studio was likely unbearable. By closing the curtains and keeping the doors and windows open, Stern would have worked in a dimmed environment, periodically eating the fruit being

¹ Calla Lilies or Arum lilies, however, are indigenous to Southern Africa, and are commonly known as white. A well-known still life by Stern, featuring an African stool and white Arum Lilies is in the collection of the South African National Gallery. This painting, however, features the unusual black variety. The calla lily, or *zantedeschia*, is a genus of twenty-eight different species all native to the southern parts of Africa from South Africa up to the latitude of northern Madagascar.

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used in the still lives she was working on. The plane white cloth underneath the vase would have also assisted her in being able to properly view and articulate the composition while maintaining the low light.

Beautiful and elegant, black calla lilies are dramatic and rare blossoms thought to have originated in Africa. For Irma Stern, whose sumptuous still life's compose some of her greatest masterpieces, black lilies would have been a unique and fresh addition to the genre which she loved so much and which provided her with the opportunity for so much artistic freedom. The nuanced application of her palette add to the drama of the work.



The reverse of the painting.

This work is in a frame hand-painted by Thomas Rebok and is based on similar exhibition frames originally used by the artist. The original handwritten inscriptions were refixed to the reverse thus keeping the history of the work intact. It bears the artist's details on the reverse as well as the title and 75g (75 guineas). This amount

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was likely the listed price of the work at her 1941 exhibitions in Cape Town and Johannesburg where she exhibited this work for the first time. The off-white and graphic lines of black within the frame lend the work a freshness that belies its eighty two years.

There are no known or acknowledged self portraits in existence of the artist. This writer proposes that every still life work is an extension of the artist and by sharing personal details within these compositions, collectors and admirers of Stern have come to know the artist in a far more personal manner.

The quiet heat of summer, masterfully captured in Irma Stern's *Black Lilies*, can be acquired for your own collection.

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Irma Stern

BLACK LILIES

1941

signed and dated; inscribed with the artist's name, address and title on the reverse of the stretcher and the frame

oil on canvas

67 by 62cm

PROVENANCE:

Purchased from the artist in 1955 by ^^^.

Sold at Bernardis Auctioneers, Pretoria in approximately 2001.

Grahams Fine Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2008.

Sold Strauss & Company, Cape Town, 16 October 2017, lot 595.

Private Collection, Cape Town.

LITERATURE:

Sandy Shoolman (ed). (2008) *The Modern Palimpsest: Envisioning South African Modernity*, Catalogue No 5, Johannesburg: Graham's Fine Art Gallery, page 64, illustrated in colour on page 65.

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EXHIBITED:

Argus Galleries, Cape Town, 1941, cat no 22

Gainsborough Gallery, Johannesburg, 1941, cat no 9

Gainsborough Gallery, Johannesburg, 1951, cat no 15

Galerie Wolfgang Gurlitt, Munich, 1955 [fig.1]

Grahams Fine Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2008

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