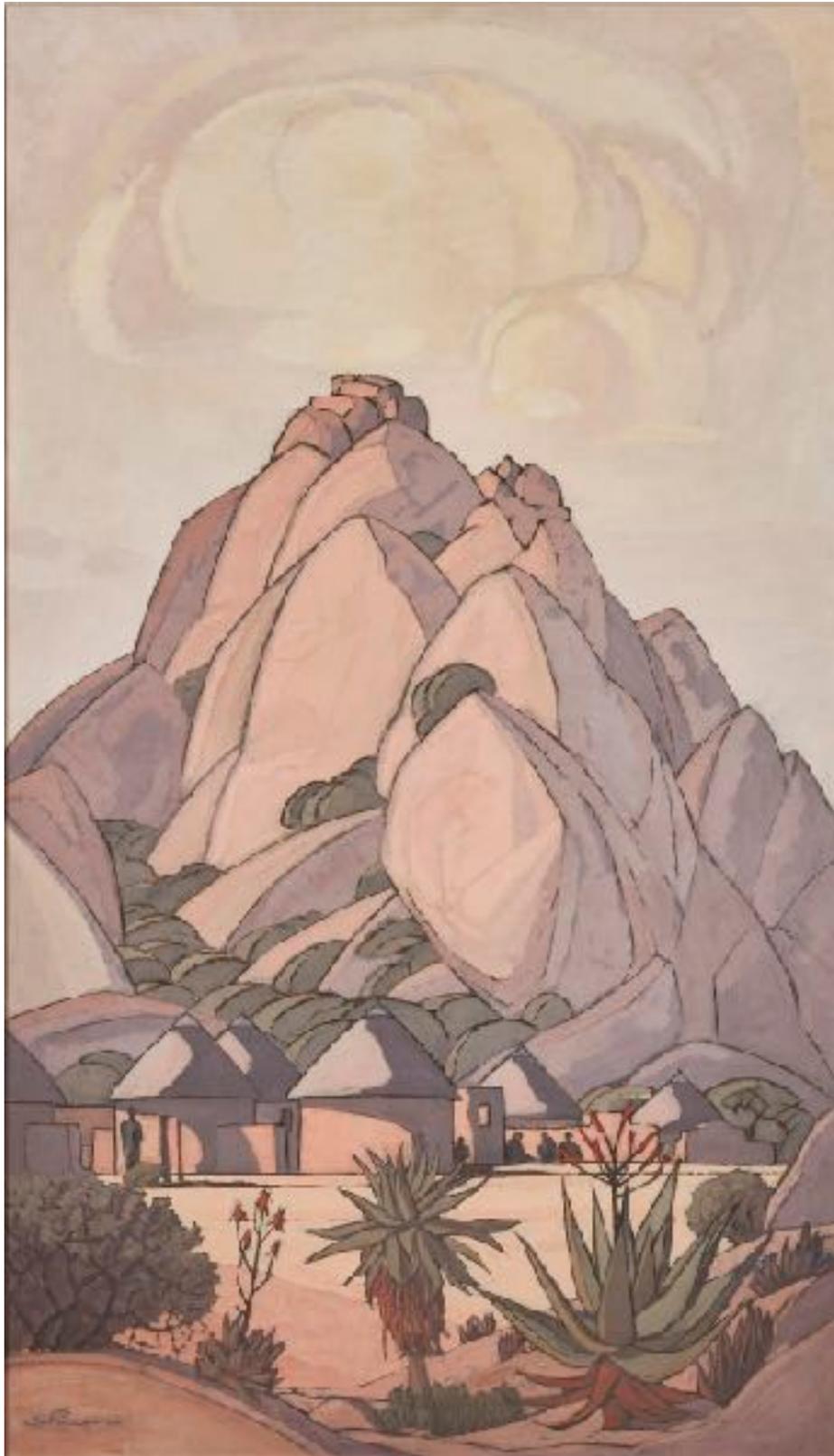


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J. H. Pierneef was approached in 1931 by Charles Te Water, then the South African High Commissioner in London, and Herbert Baker, architectural designer, to be among the artists contracted to populate the new South African High Commission with site specific artworks. The building was prominently located on Trafalgar Square and the remit was to showcase the history and natural beauty of South Africa.

Te Water and Pierneef became good friends and during one of the High Commissioner's visits to Pierneef's studio, he spotted an unfinished work in the corner. He encouraged Pierneef to complete the work. Pierneef later gifted the painting to Te Water. That painting, titled '*The Baobab Tree*' [fig. 1] sold in London in 2008 for more than R16, 000 000, then a record price



fig. 1

for the artist. It is worth taking note of certain details in '*The Baobab Tree*'. The recognisable planes of *Matlala's* mountain, with a scattering of rondawels, partly obscured behind a baobab tree to the left of the canvas, are critical to maintaining a balance within the overall composition, otherwise dominated by the massive baobab. Beneath the boughs of the majestic central baobab are a group of figures (*Bakone*) whose blankets and beadwork have been clearly articulated by Pierneef's deft brushstrokes.

Pierneef had completed the Johannesburg Station Panels in 1932 and planned to hold an exhibition in Johannesburg before leaving South Africa with his wife and young daughter for London in June 1933. Reporting from the Herbert Evans exhibition rooms on 31 May 1933, the Rand Daily Mail quoted Pierneef as saying that they hoped to find a cottage near

London, where he would be able to work in peace and their daughter could have plenty of fresh air. [fig. 2].

And that is where the story begins for the work herein referred to as

Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal" [fig. 3].

The mountain in this large and striking work is now known as the *Mmadikoti Hills* and is situated approximately midway between Pretoria and the Zimbabwean border. The mountain is also affectionately referred to as the *Mountain of Holes* as it is populated with a dense network of caves which are richly painted with rock art dating back thousands of years. The original inhabitants of the mountain were a group called the *Noepe* who were forced out of the area and went on to settle in Makgabeng¹ [fig.4].



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

¹ The Makgabeng Plateau in South Africa's Limpopo Province contains the largest body of African farmers' rock art in southern Africa. The art was created by Northern Sotho speakers and relates to initiation practices and forms of protest during the colonial era. While previous research has typically focussed on boys' initiation, emerging research demonstrates that there is also art linked to the concerns of girls and women. These findings have implications for studies of landscape, interaction, gender and feminism in rock art. The Makgabeng Community Rock Art Project also re-values the role of elders in sustainability of heritage tourism initiatives and the integration of a community structure as a sustainable "ready-made" framework to heritage management in Africa.

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Later occupiers, Chief Matlala and his followers (the *Bakone*), were successful in claiming the area for themselves. They established a permanent home at the foot of the mountain and its surrounds and it thus became known as *Matlala's* Location.

In 1894 and again in 1898, the *Bakone* resisted attempts by local white farmers in displacing them from the land. However a significant historical alliance formed between the *Bakone* and *Boers* during the *South African War* (1899 - 1902). Recognising the formidable protection that the mountain and its stronghold of caves provided, it was here during the war that the *Boers* and *Bakone* worked together to thwart capture by English soldiers.

J.F.W. Grosskopff, an early biographer of significant South African Artists, used the phrase 'aesthetic equilibrium' when describing the visual balance in the Pierneef's best works. In '*Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal*' (the frontispiece to this paper), there is a perfect balance struck between the foreground depicting aloes in bloom, the middle ground with the bustle of rondawel huts and inhabitants, and the background punctuated with the cubist-forms of the mountain itself. A lesser composition could find itself overwhelmed by the mountains which rise to their full height within two thirds of the composition. This harmony has been created through Pierneef applying the mathematical principles he admired in the influential Dutch Symbolist painter, Willem van Konijnenburg, whom he had met in 1925 while in the Netherlands.

Van Konijnenburg was known for his writing as well as his artistic work. He wrote about "the musical value of line and spatial organisation" and how art could succeed in unifying the spiritual and the material (Nel. 1990, p.135).

“A work of art in which the material does not appear in the mathematical figure to its upliftment, is aesthetically incomplete, and it will not achieve the aesthetic idea and become art” (Nel, p.135).

Further to this, van Konijnenburg believed that a strong mathematical foundation would be successful in restoring order to a rapidly changing artistic landscape in Europe. The application of this mathematical order is discernible in both artists’ stylistic development, notably Pierneef’s ideal of a grand stylised landscape capturing the vistas of South Africa (and which can be attributed to his admiration of van Konijnenburg). The pursuit of a perfect visual symmetry culminated in Pierneef’s approach to, and execution of, the Johannesburg Station Panels (1929-1932) and the South Africa House commission (1933-1934).

Another pivotal encounter took place slightly earlier in 1925 when Pierneef spent time in London before travelling to the Netherlands. As an artist representing South Africa at the Empire Arts Exhibition in Wembley, it is feasible to suggest that Pierneef would have travelled to the exhibition in order to see his own work. It is therefore possible that he saw the Canadian contribution to the show which was tightly curated around the then pioneering *Group of Seven*.

The *Group of Seven* were revered for the “clarity, simplicity of design and austere strength of form” [Proud, 2015, p.31] dominant in their work. The *Group of Seven*, active between 1920 - 1933, focused entirely on landscape painting, believing that they could develop a distinct Canadian art style through direct contact with nature. More recently, however, their artwork has been criticised for the complete erasure of the existence of First Nation people within their landscape compositions. The human figure is also fugitive in the paintings of Pierneef which makes them such a focal point of discussion in examining his

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oeuvre. His inclusion of figures in works publicly accessible are rare, and encourages scholastic debate, opening further areas of engagement within South African art history.

The current owner of *'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal'* is a collector in the truest sense in their commitment to the pieces they have added to their collection over time. Their love of Pierneef was sparked through a work which had been acquired at the artist's estate auction in 1957. The estate work included a single back-lit figure.

The figure in Pierneef's work resulted in this collector using that elusive motif in their search for other works by the artist. In 2002, *'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal'* appeared in London at a topographical sale and upon bidding successfully for this work, it returned to Cape Town and took pride of place in their home. Previous to *'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal'* appearing at auction, there had been no official record of its existence.

In 2015, the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg hosted an important retrospective exhibition titled *'A Space for Landscape: The Work of JH Pierneef'*. Despite being approached to exhibit *'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal'*, the owner decided not to loan the work. Instead, the compromise was reached where it was illustrated twice in the catalogue published for the exhibition. The work's material luminosity, the Cubist and mathematical precision of the overall composition, the rare inclusion of the flora in the foreground and figures in the middle ground, its unprecedented size, and its ties to the South Africa House commission, were all points used to try and persuade the owner to allow the work to be included in the physical show. These features had in fact also been duly identified previously by A.C. Bouman who had asked Pierneef to create a stylised graphic of the work for the front cover of his 1935 book *'Kuns in Suid Afrika'*.

In 1933, Pierneef had accepted the commission to create seven site specific works for South Africa House in Trafalgar Square, London [fig. 5].

In a letter to his friend, Thom Steel, Pierneef wrote that it had taken him and his family three weeks to find

suitable accommodation. The studio space made available for him in South Africa House had presented with many distractions with the telephones ringing far too often with London-based South Africans enquiring as to whether they could visit the artist. The South African government provided him with a stipend for the securing of a private studio but the amount would not cover the family's accommodation as well. The uncertainty of the family's circumstances was a source of huge distress to Pierneef who found himself unable to focus on the commission itself.

A chance introduction then led to the Pierneef family being offered a place to stay *gratis* and a private studio in which Pierneef himself could work, free of the distractions encountered in central London.

The original custodian of 'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal' was the person who offered Pierneef accommodation while the artist and his family were in London. When the original owner died, his daughter, Mrs Aurora Lambton, consigned the work to auction. She later told the story with which she had grown up:

"Pierneef enquired regarding payment for their rooms but my father told him that this was not necessary. My father mentioned that he was a huge admirer of Pierneef's panels for

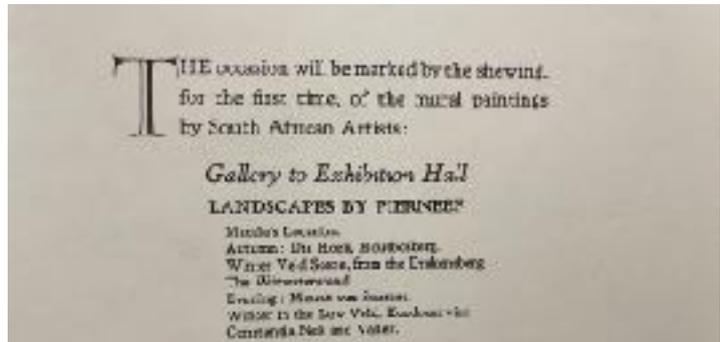


Fig. 5

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South Africa House and in particular the work depicting the majestic planes of a mountain with aloes, huts and figures. Pierneef gifted 'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal' to him."

It is not clear if the work was made as a fully realised reference for the South Africa House panel, 'Matala's [sic] Location, Transvaal' [fig. 6], or specifically for Pierneef's host. The two works, similar in size, differ in the arrangement of the flowering aloes in the foreground and the huts and figures in the middle ground. The arched formation of the billowing clouds above the mountain in the latter work, emphasises a spiritual synergy between the land and the sky. Pierneef used the *golden mean, or divine proportion*, a key



Fig. 6

point found in Willem van Konijnenburg's philosophies, as a primary way in which to realise the geometrical explorations in his work during the period 1928 - 1935. Academics and collectors concur that it is during these eight years of Pierneef's artistic output that the majority of his seminal works were created.

The panels in South Africa House came under threat in the post-1994 years. In 2000, Cheryl Carolus, then South African High Commissioner in London, wished to remove the panels, given the historical context during which the original interiors had been decorated. Fortunately, with the building and its contents having been declared a Grade II listed building since 1982, British officials were able to intervene. The Pierneef panels are still

there but 'Matala's [sic] Location, Transvaal' has been fronted by a plate-glass panel. The panel bears the etched wording of the Freedom Charter:

"We , the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people; that our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality..."

Excerpt from *The Freedom Charter*, adopted by the Congress of the People on
25 and 26 June 1955.

The current owner of 'Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal' repatriated the work to South Africa in 2002 but their interest in the subject continued. In 2003, they acquired a linocut by Pierneef of the same subject inscribed "*Aan W. v. Konijnenburg, met groete, Transvaal, Pretoria, 1936*" [fig. 7].



Fig. 7

Van Konijnenburg wrote to Pierneef in 1937 and thanked him

for the linocut and the letter that accompanied it. This was the last correspondence that Pierneef received from van Konijnenburg. The onset of the Second World War in 1939 made communications between the friends impossible. Van Konijnenburg passed away in 1943.

In 2006 the owner rounded off this chapter in their collection with the purchase of a watercolour of *Matlala's Location* [fig. 8]. It is plausible that the work, while undated, was exhibited in South Africa in 1934. When Pierneef returned from London he opened an exhibition on 25 September 1934 at Darter's Gallery, Cape



Fig. 8

Town. Included in that show were sketches of the murals that he had done in preparation for the South Africa House commission.

Stephan Welz, respected auctioneer and art specialist, knew the owner of '*Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal*'. He would invite them to company dinners where, seated on his right, they would be regaled with stories about Pierneef and important works by South African artists. Amongst the works Welz would describe would be his interpretations of their '*Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal*'. Welz, a longtime admirer of Pierneef, had in a 2010 address at the Rupert Museum in Stellenbosch, reminded the audience that despite the post-colonial rhetoric surrounding Pierneef's paintings and his being marginalised as an artistic vehicle of the Apartheid government, the Pierneef works gracing the walls of the Presidential and Vice-Presidential offices and homes in Pretoria had not been a source of offence for either President Nelson Mandela or President Thabo Mbeki.

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Louis Schachat was also an admirer of Pierneef as an artist and in particular in awe of this work. He personally congratulated the owner on their acquisition of the work and remarked that he would dearly have loved to have acquired it himself. *The Kunsamer*, helmed by Louis Schachat for more than half a century, was the preferred premier gallery destination for art collectors in Cape Town. He handled the best of the best and as the longtime tastemaker of major South African collections, Schachat was acutely aware that should this work come to market, it would be the first of its kind to be offered to collectors of South African Art.

'*Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal*' is undeniably one of Pierneef's most iconic landscapes. Resplendent with its imposing scale, luminous surface, *Bakone* rondawels and figures, uniquely South African flora, formal explorations of Cubism and mathematical precision, and heightened connection between heaven and earth.

For further information please contact Phillippa Duncan from Vault Research: +27 83 480 9189.

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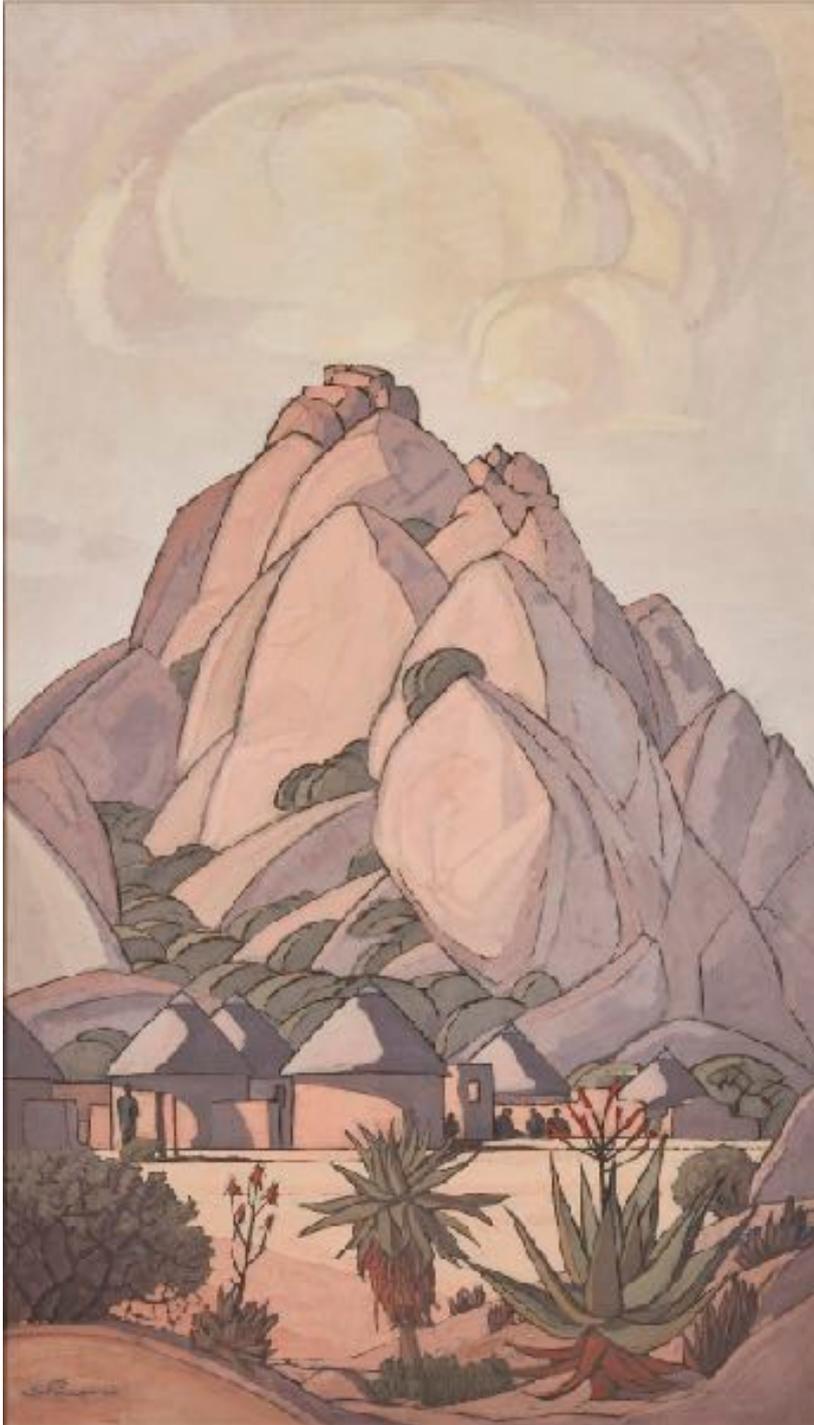
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J.H. Pierneef
Matlala's Mountain, Transvaal
1933

signed and dated
casein and tempera on paper
151 by 90cm