

ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN NATAL 1910-1940

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of important trends in Natal art of the period 1910-1940, with a section on related architectural developments.

In Chapter One Natal's colonial background and continued dependence on Britain for cultural guidance is discussed. The foundation of art galleries and the Natal Society of Artists is followed by an examination of artworks produced until 1917. These were found to be mainly Victorian in character. Reliance on British art and an admiration for and emulation of the Royal Academy of Arts strongly influenced the organisation and development of the Natal Society of Artists.

Chapter Two examines the desire, during the 1920s and 1930s, to break away from foreign influence and the conscious attempts to establish a "national" style. This phenomenon is traced through the development of landscape painting in Natal.

Chapter Three, Survival versus progress, explores the relationship between the artist and the Natal public, in

particular those artists who experimented with what were then held to be avant-garde styles. An uninformed public and, consequently, a pronounced hostility towards modernism had a profound effect on the careers of many artists.

Chapter Four concerns the status of the practising artist in Natal. Amateurs outnumbered professionals at all major exhibitions, and the majority of these amateurs were women. (Professionalism and amateurism are defined in the text.) The history of the Durban School of Art and its role in the promotion of professionalism ends this survey on art trends.

Architectural development during this period is summarised in Chapter Five with reference to the correspondences between art and architecture. Examples are architectural decoration (especially sculpture and faience), stylistic trends, the response to modernism, and the professional status of the architect.

Artists and architects active in Natal during the period are identified and listed. This section includes lists of representative works and detailed references.

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### Part Two

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Author's statement

The whole thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work.

Although I am critical of the art and architecture of the period, I would not like those people who, during the course of my researches, have been kind and helpful, to think that any view expressed in my thesis is a reflection or denigration of them personally. It was my aim to discover facts and trends and to set them out as truthfully as possible.

## ABBREVIATIONS

act.	= active
A.R.A.	= Associate of the Royal Academy
A.R.I.B.A.	= Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects
A.R.W.S.	= Associate of the Royal Watercolour Society
b.	= born
bc	= bottom centre
Berg	= Drakensberg
bl	= bottom left
br	= bottom right
B.W.S.	= Member of the British Watercolour Society
cnr.	= corner of
Coll.	= collection
cr	= centre right
d.	= died
Dept.	= Department
D.H.S.	= Durban High School
Exh.	= exhibitions
F.R.I.B.A.	= Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects
F.R.S.E.	= Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh
ibid.	= in the same book
JHB	= Johannesburg
loc. cit.	= loco citato (in the passage already quoted)
L.R.I.B.A.	= Licentiate of the Royal Institute of British Architects
M.I.A.	= Member of the South African Institute of Architects
M.I.Struc.E.	= Member of the Institute of Structural Engineers
M.T.I.A.	= Member of the Transvaal Institute of Architects
mono.	= monogram

M.R.G.S.A. = Member of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia  
nd. = no date  
N.I.A. = Natal Institute of Architects  
N.P.I.A. = Natal Provincial Institute of Architects  
ns. = not signed  
NSA = The Natal Society of Artists  
o/b = oil on board  
o/c = oil on canvas  
o/c/b = oil on canvas laid on board  
O.F.S. = Orange Free State  
op. cit. = in the work quoted  
o/p = oil on panel  
Pl. = plate/illustration  
post. = posthumous  
P.W.D. = Public Works Department  
r. = recto (ie. the right side)  
R.A. = Royal Academician  
RAU = Rand Afrikaans University  
Ref. = references  
R.O.I. = Royal Institute of Painters in Oil  
R.W.S. = (Member of the) Royal Watercolour Society  
s. = signed  
S.A. = South Africa(n)  
S.A. Academy = South African Academy  
S.A.N.G. = South African National Gallery, Capetown  
S.A.S.A. = South African Society of Artists  
tc = top centre  
T.I.A. = Transvaal Institute of Architects  
tl = top left  
tr = top right  
U.K. = United Kingdom  
v. = verso (ie. the reverse)  
w/c = watercolour

NOTES ON THE TEXT:

(1) Text enclosed in square brackets is not confirmed by documentary evidence.

(2) All measurements are in millimetre.

(3) The style and presentation of references have been based on those recommended in P.J.A. Roux, Reference techniques, Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1981

(4) The use of a word processor offers many advantages over the conventional typewriter. However, it was found that even the most sophisticated technology has its shortcomings. Despite the best efforts of a number of software specialists, the system chosen obstinately refused to print certain characters. Thus the British pound sign had to be replaced in the text by the word "pound", and acute and grave accents had to be omitted from words such as Seneque.

(5) Titles are treated (as far as possible) as grammatical sentences. Only the first word is capitalised, and not an indiscriminate selection of nouns as in traditional British publications. However, titles in quotations have been printed in their original form, resulting in apparent inconsistencies. Thus a title may appear on the same page in both forms.

(6) Where possible contemporary writings have been quoted in the text, not only for their content, but to illustrate the particular means of expression used during the period. Readers should note that many words and phrases that were

taken for granted fifty years ago are now outmoded or disapproved of for professional reasons. Examples are "show" (art exhibition) and "art gallery" (art museum). In the text contemporary phraseology such as this has been avoided, except where appropriate or unavoidable. In these cases meaning is clarified in an endnote.

(7) Institutions are referred to by their original titles. Eg. The Pietermaritzburg Municipal Gallery (The Tatham Art Gallery).

(8) Titles are given in the language used by the artist. Translations (when available) are given in brackets.

(9) Plate numbers are referred to in the text in square brackets immediately following the relevant passages.

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Periodicals and newspapers

Note: It will be obvious from the text in Part One that the most important source for this thesis was the Natal Mercury, one of the Durban daily newspapers. This publication is notable for its comprehensive and generally impartial reporting of contemporary art and architecture throughout the Province. Other dailies and

weekend papers of the period were disappointingly uninformative. The Natal Witness, an excellent source for pre-1914 material, has little to offer after 1920 apart from social events and news for farmers. The Natal Advertiser covers events such as art exhibitions and building progress in Durban. However, reporting tends to be biased, and often sensationalised (see references to F. Graham Bell). This was rectified after the newspaper was renamed the Natal Daily News in 1937. After this date art events receive less space in the daily newspapers. Architecture, on the other hand, is covered with some enthusiasm: subjects range from construction progress of public structures to the running of "ideal home" competitions for architects.

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N.P.A. Building Services Library [Plan files of the Natal  
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## INTRODUCTION

Attend my fable if your ears be clean,  
In fair Banana Land we lay our scene -  
South Africa, renowned both far and wide  
For politics and little else beside:  
Where, having torn the land with shot and shell,  
Our sturdy pioneers as farmers dwell,

. . . . .

The 'garden colony' they call our land,  
And surely for a garden it was planned:  
What apter phrase with such a place could cope  
Where vegetation has so fine a scope,  
Where weeds in such variety are found  
And all the rarest parasites abound,  
Where pumpkins to professors are promoted  
And turnips into Parliament are voted?  
Where else do men by vegetating vie  
And run to seed so long before they die?

Roy Campbell, 1928

The opening lines of The Wayzgoose<sup>1</sup> describe what has become one of the most commonly expressed attitudes towards pre-World War II Natal: an agricultural backwater populated with ambitious mediocrities and incapable of supporting artistic endeavour. Add to this a popular image of Natal as a refuge for eccentric, conservative English-speaking South Africans<sup>2</sup> and one begins to wonder if the Natal of 1910 to 1940 could

possibly deliver enough material for research on art and architecture. This was the prospect when the idea was first mooted as a follow-up to Verbeek's Natal art before Union, and my own thesis on Aspects of architecture in Natal 1870-1914. The aims of the projected thesis were threefold:

1. To establish whether specific provincial identities existed after Union in 1910 and before the Second World War.

2. To identify the most important trends in the art and architecture in Natal of that period, and

3. To describe the developments that took place, supplemented by biographical indexes of artists, architects and their works.

### Art in Natal 1910-1940

South African art of the first half of this century has received very discouraging comment from many quarters. It has been variously described as academic, eclectic, traditional, and moribund. As recently as September 1985 the remarks by one of the judges of a national art competition demonstrate the attitude of many art historians towards South African art before 1950:

There has often been comment in the past on the dependence by generations of South African artists on styles and movements originating in the great artistic centres of the West. The results have occasionally been scornfully dismissed as provincial.

It may be tactless to resurrect the twin spectres of eclecticism and provincialism, especially in the light of Prof. Crump's next remark:

However, the work on this exhibition [The Cape Town Triennial 1985] permits no such facile denigration. Our best artists are addressing us in highly personal and confident voices and there should be no need to relate their work to phenomena outside this country.<sup>3</sup>

Although the concept of "nationalism" has undergone frequent changes over the past hundred years, attempts to establish "uniqueness" in South African art persist. Comments such as these serve to remind one of the old adage that people who ignore history are condemned to repeat it. And South African historians have been guilty of this for a number of years. Valuable evidence has been irresponsibly neglected while artists and art societies have attempted to leave their past behind them.<sup>4</sup> Writers such as Esmé Berman recall with dismay their efforts in the sixties to rescue minute papers and catalogues throughout the country.<sup>5</sup> How much more difficult

it is to trace forgotten evidence now that the personalities involved are no longer alive and their personal documents have been lost or destroyed.

Starting research under these circumstances is daunting. However, setting about the task in an almost archaeological fashion, it was possible to discover much new material in contemporary publications. Once sufficient evidence had been accumulated three important factors emerged:

Firstly, that Natal was not such a drowsy backwater as one had been led to suppose. Artists and organisers were highly ambitious and energetic, and thanks to their efforts, Natal became a major exhibition venue.

Secondly, what had started as an impartial listing of exhibiting artists grew into a fascinating human patchwork: personalities and their patrons jostled for attention, and the clash of wills between artists and their public, between the four provinces, and between rival factions, gradually assumed importance until they formed a backdrop to the artistic efforts as a whole. Durban, inevitably, emerged as the artistic capital of Natal.

Thirdly, the much-despised dependence on Britain for cultural support was found to be a strength rather than a

weakness. Styles and techniques derived from England and Scotland supplied Natal artists with the ability to produce works of lasting interest and quality. The waning of this influence and not its imposition was to be the cause of the provincial mediocrity and amateurism that reached its height during the forties and fifties in Natal. Indeed, the struggle for artistic independence and a "national" style deprived artists of both their cultural roots and the source of their technical expertise.

The development of art in Natal during this period is not discussed in strict chronological sequence. Each chapter deals with an historical or stylistic theme.

Chapter One describes Natal's colonial background and continued dependence on Britain for cultural guidance. The history of art in Natal opens with the foundation of the art galleries and the Natal Society of Artists in Edwardian Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Exhibiting artists of the period 1907-1917 are found to have predominantly Victorian taste. After Union Day in 1910 Natal showed no inclination to abandon her roots. Reliance on current art trends in Britain and admiration for British artists who visited Natal continued unabated, while the Natal Society of Artists'

annual exhibition, modelled faithfully on the lines of the Royal Academy, London, became one of the most important exhibition venues in South Africa.

Chapter Two, by contrast, examines the desire for a "South African" style and the rejection of foreign influence. This trend was to produce schools of landscape painting in Natal and the other provinces with distinctive characteristics.

Chapter Three, "Survival versus progress," explores the relation between the artist and his public, and in particular those artists who experimented with avant-garde styles who encountered extreme hostility from both patrons and fellow-artists.

Lastly, in Chapter Four, the status of the practising artist in Natal is discussed. Amateur artists outnumbered professionals at all major exhibitions, and the majority of these artists were women. The history of the Durban School of Art and the role of its lecturing staff in attempting to provide a professional body of artists ends this survey of art trends in Natal.

## Architecture in Natal 1910-1940

The development of architecture was included because of its important relationship with the art of the period. There are numerous links between the two disciplines. Many architects were successful practising artists; architects and sculptors co-operated in the decoration of buildings; there was both loyalty to traditional British styles and aspirations towards nationalism; and architecture students were admitted to the Durban School of Art and were able to compete for the same scholarships open to Fine Art students. On the other hand, architecture, unlike the art of the period, progressed rapidly towards professionalism and an international standard, and architects found little opposition to modernism when it was introduced to Natal in the thirties.

Bearing in mind the aims of this thesis, the reader will understand why it was necessary to limit this section to one chapter in which the most important styles and their exponents are discussed. While many interesting, and even eccentric phenomena presented themselves for investigation, their inclusion did not throw light on the main argument

which was to establish important trends. It was also apparent that, unlike the artists, architects had solved most of their professional difficulties by the late twenties and that a provincial architectural identity was not an important issue to them. Thus, it was with much regret that church buildings, and numerous shops, offices and cinemas had to be excluded. It is hoped, however, that this section will help to identify Natal as important within the general context of South African architecture.

Notes - Introduction to Part One:

<sup>1</sup>A Wayzgoose is a festival or dinner for printers. Campbell turned it into a literary picnic attended by his enemies. see P. Alexander, Roy Campbell: a critical biography, O.U.P., 1982

<sup>2</sup>This has long been kept alive by the mass media. As recently as 1980 a documentary on Natal entitled "The last out-post of the British Empire" was produced and televised for national consumption. This programme dealt with the survival of British customs in Natal, unfortunately dwelling on grotesque contemporary interpretations of colonialism rather than strictly historical phenomena.

<sup>3</sup>A. Crump, Harvest of diversity, Catalogue: Cape Town Triennial 1985

<sup>4</sup>see note to Appendix A

<sup>5</sup>Interview, Esmé Berman, 1985.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BRITISH CONNECTION

Natal's loyalties as a British colony made it inevitable that British culture would be imported during the years before Union. In 1910 the majority of white Natalians were English-speaking.<sup>1</sup> The gradual influx of compatriots from the other Provinces only made an impact after the Great War when the integration of the public services began to take effect. The compulsory use of Dutch, for example, drew forth much acrimonious comment,<sup>2</sup> and immigrants from the Transvaal and the Cape were subjected to that suspicious disapproval reserved for all non-British foreigners.

Matters to do with art were heavily influenced by the cultural establishment in London. In 1910 the Royal Academy, despite inroads made by the New English Art Club and other art associations, was as insular and self-assured as it had been during the Victorian era. As an arbiter of taste and outlet for exhibiting artists, the Royal Academy provided the ideal towards which aspiring colonists wished to strive. How the respective societies of Pietermaritzburg and Durban yearned for the amenities of the "Old Country" such as:

- their own "academy" - an exhibition venue for their local artists where prominent hostesses could vie sartorially on private viewing days.<sup>3</sup>

- their own art galleries - the opportunity to view and

obtain important art works without having to make pilgrimages "Home."<sup>4</sup>

- and, not least, the means to train and encourage young Natal artists who might receive that ultimate accolade: a painting accepted for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.<sup>5</sup>

#### The foundation of the Art Galleries

1910 was a significant year for art in Natal. It witnessed the opening of the Durban Art Gallery in its new, specially-designed premises in the new Town Hall.<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hudson's magnificent Baroque design provided the ideal setting for this unique collection of Victorian paintings.

[Pl. 1, 2]

The first steps to establish a gallery had been taken in 1892 by Cathcart William Methven<sup>7</sup> when he presented one of his own paintings to the Town Council. That year he acted as Chairman of the committee that organised a large "Fine Arts Exhibition" in Durban. In April 1892 The Natal Advertiser published an editorial called "Plea for Art" in which it was proposed that a permanent collection might be formed out of contributions from the forthcoming exhibition. This article is of some significance as an articulate expression of the

ideals listed above. The writer first castigates his fellow citizens:

The early prospect of an Art Exhibition in Durban brings into prominence the fact that although South Africa is not one of the youngest of British possessions she has done less towards the refinement of the tastes of her people than many other younger Colonies this side of the Equator.

He lays the blame on colonial greed:

A partial explanation of this artistic apathy may be owing to the fact that South Africa has been too much regarded as a place where a person might make money to be used afterwards in a life of retirement at Home. To amass a fortune, or at least a significant sum to live in ease and comfort in the Old Country was the sole aim and object of a large percentage of those who found their way to these shores. The country or its future was nothing to them so long as they could make money.....it is not to be wondered at, perhaps, that the people of South Africa have not betrayed a warmer interest in movements having for their object the furtherance of the intellectual or aesthetical interests of the community, and the consequence is that at the present day we are under the standing reproach of having hardly a single name of eminence in the world of art or letters.<sup>8</sup>

He epitomises the universal colonial problem: an emerging society, intent on exploitation, neglecting the niceties of civilisation. The editor proceeds to list the achievements of Canada, New Zealand and Australia: art galleries, art

schools, art associations, "prominent" artists, annual exhibitions, and even the sponsoring of artists to be sent to Paris, "the centre of the art world".<sup>9</sup>

The main purpose of the editorial was to persuade the municipality to buy paintings for the foundation of an art gallery. The collection would stimulate local students, the colonists might be persuaded to donate works, and it might attract tourists. "The Town Council annually vote some 200 pounds to our local bands to please our ears. Why should not a similar sum be laid aside for the purchase of pictures to please our eyes?"<sup>10</sup>

Methven brought this article to the attention of the Council, and, to show his support, presented one of his own paintings to the town: Durban Bay from Claremont. [Pl. 3] The city fathers couldn't match his generosity, however. Methven's painting remained the sole exhibit for a number of years.<sup>11</sup> It was not until 1899, when a further exhibition of paintings was brought to Natal, that the project was revived. Another "Plea for Art" was published, this time by the Natal Mercury.<sup>12</sup> The same arguments are plied - The other Colonies are referred to jealously; a reference is made to the usefulness of holding an exhibition every seven years; and, as before, an appeal is made to local civic pride:

We have in our midst a large number of fine pictures, and money would be well spent in purchasing a selection that would at once make a nucleus for a municipal gallery in the future of the dimensions we find in all the principal towns of Australia, Canada, and other parts of the Empire, that would afford the students at the Art Schools something to work up to, that would be a lasting pleasure to the burgesses, that would form a valuable addition to the attractions of the town so far as visitors are concerned, and that would bring us into line with all modern towns having any pretensions to being considered up-to-date.<sup>13</sup>

The exhibition had been selected by an English committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Edward Poynter, President of the Royal Academy. It was commissioned by the Cape city of Grahamstown and, thanks to the Natal Ministry of Education, was obtained for Pietermaritzburg and Durban that same year.<sup>14</sup>

This time the citizens of Durban were determined and therefore better organised. A small committee was appointed by the Durban Savage Club to obtain subscriptions, and, with the 800 pounds collected, eight works were purchased and presented to the Corporation.<sup>15</sup>

From a collection described as "far and away the best ever seen in South Africa"<sup>16</sup> the committee's choice is tasteful and conservative: it included a pleasant genre

painting of the Newlyn School (Elizabeth Stanhope Forbes's The new song), a neo-classical anecdote (Val Prinsep's The broken idol) and some nostalgic landscapes (R.B. Nisbet's Summer evening, Surrey and High Street, Kensington by Rose Barton).<sup>17</sup> The committee appears to have avoided the emotional excesses of Caton Woodville and the other history painters. But perhaps these works were simply not for sale. One is at a disadvantage not having access to reproductions of the other works on this exhibition. The majority of works available for purchase were by artists who were either A.R.A. or R.A. Possibly the President of the Academy would have favoured his fellow Academicians when choosing works for this exhibition.

Having set this precedent, Durban rigidly maintained its association with the Academy. The Town Council were persuaded to buy paintings at regular intervals and chose, as their London agents, the Victorian sculptor Hamo Thornycroft, and painter Frank Dicksee, later President of the Royal Academy. Not that the Durban citizenry had any objection to this. Donations that followed the original purchases amounted to nearly fifty paintings in the same style or genre. The donor list includes most of the prominent citizens of Durban: The Campbell family, the Ellis Browns,

W. Butcher, Acutt, Rennie, Currie, Henwood, and many others.<sup>18</sup> By 1910 Durban possessed the most comprehensive collection of British art in South Africa. It was with a certain amount of pride that these works were displayed in the new exhibition halls of the Town Hall. Pride, however, was to be the Committee's downfall. During that year Joseph Noel Paton's well-known work The pursuit of pleasure (1855) came on to the market. This was the first of his allegorical paintings, or "sermons in colour" as he called them. This elaborate allegory (which the British Art Journal described as "somewhat sensual")<sup>19</sup> was popularised by the widely-available engraving of it published soon after its exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy. The Town Councillors were no doubt impressed by such a handsome and obviously literary work when it was presented to them for consideration by the Gallery Committee. They balked at the price, however (1000 pounds). After several lengthy debates they reached a compromise: the painting was accepted, but there were to be no further purchases for an unspecified number of years.<sup>20</sup> This effectively reduced the Art Gallery Committee to a caretaker body until the mid-twenties, politely refusing all further offers from dealers and public, meeting occasionally to approve the use of the premises for

recitals, political meetings or local art exhibitions.

Pietermaritzburg's attempts had followed a similar course. Enthusiasm had been aroused by Mrs F.S. Tatham, wife of the Chief Justice of Natal. She had, with great energy, raised a large sum of money which the City Council matched, thus enabling her to visit England in 1904 in time for the summer exhibitions:

Before sailing, I wrote to my husband's cousin, Sir W.B. Richmond, R.A., to tell him of the venture, and he invited several of the members of the Royal Academy, as well as its President, Sir E. Poynter, P.R.A., to meet me. So the way was made easy for me, to deal directly with gentlemen who were interested in the foundation of an Art Gallery, in an English colony so far away as Natal!<sup>21</sup>

She returned with a remarkable selection of late Victorian works<sup>22</sup> and a loan exhibition of paintings from which further purchases and donations were made.<sup>23</sup> Accommodation in the City was always a problem. Mrs Tatham was first able to use space in the Natal Society Library which had previously been used as a museum.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Durban there were no specially designed halls to look forward to. After much lobbying the City Council was persuaded to hang the grander pictures in the Council Chamber [Pl. 5] and the others in a top floor room in the City Hall. This was their limit. No more money

was forthcoming and the Pietermaritzburg citizens lost interest after the first flush of excitement.

These two embryonic collections were of great significance to the art community of Natal.

Firstly, they helped to identify the artistic leaders: those judged competent to choose or produce skilful works of art. And those leaders in turn helped to establish outlets for aspiring local artists.

More important was the Galleries' role in providing the buying public with an aesthetic touchstone. The Natal public was not highly sophisticated and liked Victorian painting which was obvious in content and polished in presentation. Collections such as these reinforced popular opinion that these paintings by "eminent" artists from overseas represented The Good. By disrupting active collecting at the end of the Victorian era, the two municipalities were instrumental in the calcification of public taste after World War I. Patrons tended to judge the products of local artists according to the Victorian values found in the paintings bought by Methven's Committee and by Mrs Tatham: accurate draughtsmanship, high finish, finely observed detail, and "ennobling" subject matter. In a growing post-Colonial society local resources began to assume importance. In 1910

aspiring patrons lacked the opportunity to view and assimilate non-Academic British art and the more radical European avant-garde art movements were decidedly unacceptable.<sup>25</sup> It should not be assumed that artists in Natal were unaware of contemporary developments such as cubism and surrealism. But it can be argued that the Galleries, by reinforcing a popular preference for realistic narrative painting, were partly to blame for Natal's excessive hostility towards modernism in the twenties and thirties. The more enterprising artists were understandably reluctant to alienate prospective clients.

#### The Natal Society of Artists

The artists were, in any case, drawn together by that Victorian stalwart, Cathcart William Methven, who had already distinguished himself as the founder of the Durban Art Gallery and Chairman of its Committee. In 1907<sup>26</sup> he, and a small number of fellow artists, founded the Natal Society of Artists.<sup>27</sup> At the opening of their first annual exhibition on 16 December 1907 Methven outlined their ambitions:

For a long time, it had been felt that they ought to have some sort of organisation in the Colony as a sort of centre for the propagation (sic) and encouragement of the

arts of painting and sculpture, because up to the present that had been done more or less in a haphazard sort of way. The Colony had had exhibitions, to which paintings had been contributed by many throughout the Colony, but these exhibitions had not always been organised quite on the lines of the more ambitious exhibitions which they had at Home, where a good deal of discrimination had to be used in order to keep up the standard of the work.<sup>28</sup>

There were nineteen founder members including Methven himself, Wallace Paton and his wife, Clarice, Mrs Kingdon Ellis, W.H.T. Venner and his wife, B.W.R. Beaumont, Kate Haith, Bertha Froome and Henry H. Grellier. Their first exhibition was held in Durban at the London Chambers, West Street, and was opened by the Mayor, Charlie Henwood, who referred to it as "their first Royal Academy Exhibition."<sup>29</sup> Who knows what the said Academy would have thought of the random collection of oils, watercolours, pastels, drawings, stencil work, wood-carving, miniatures, "art" jewellery, beaten copper work and clay modelling?

The second exhibition was held in July 1908 and saw a distinct improvement in quality and status. Extra members had been recruited from the Cape and elsewhere (mainly from the older S.A. Society of Artists) and the Governor of Natal had been persuaded to include the opening in his busy Winter Season schedule.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the period under review the NSA was to hold an exhibition in Durban every July. (There were only two exceptions: 1918, because of the War, and 1927 to make way for the inaugural exhibition of the S.A. Institute of Art.) In 1909 [Pl. 6] this annual exhibition was thrown open to artists from the whole of South Africa and rapidly became one of the most important events of the Natal Winter Season.<sup>31</sup> It was, without doubt, the climax of Natal's art calendar. A survey of the NSA exhibitions alone would provide sufficient material for this history of art in Natal.

This survey would have to begin with a close examination of those personalities within the NSA who worked with such determination to make it successful. During the early period (i.e. 1907-1917) participating artists were dominated by the style and opinions of C.W. Methven and his close associates. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the majority of NSA exhibitors were enthusiastic but untrained. Methven and fellow architect, Wallace Paton, outshone the other Natal artists who participated. Because Victorian values reigned it was difficult for the amateur to compete with those who had mastered the techniques required for producing highly-finished representational paintings. Indeed, reviewers of the period regularly damned the

incompetent with faint praise.

[1909] The work displayed on the walls of the room in Castle Arcade in which the exhibition is held shows a higher average than last year. That is to say, the best pictures shown are equal to the best of the last exhibition, and there are fewer in which the crudities of colour and line are glaringly apparent.<sup>32</sup>

[1912] Miss Fripp's post-impressionist studies are the kind of thing some people may admire, but we have no liking for them, and can only regard them as bad art and a bad example.<sup>33</sup>

He [A.S. Langley] has a style quite of his own in his treatment of the ranges of the Drakensberg, but repeated again and again in the same washed-out and etherealised sort of way, the effect palls and becomes superficial.<sup>34</sup>

#### Cathcart William Methven

Despite the fact that Methven's career as an artist began during the Victorian era, a study of his paintings and theories is essential to an understanding of early 20th century painting in Natal.

He arrived in Natal in 1888. It was a time of energetic opportunism. Success in the colonies depended very much on professional versatility. Numerous talented individuals established themselves in Natal. For example,

William Emery Robarts, one of Methven's contemporaries, was an architect, surveyor and engineer, and took an active part in local and professional politics.<sup>35</sup> Robarts was elected Mayor of Durban in 1886 and was the first President of the Natal Institute of Architects. In a land where economic boom and slump alternated with frightening regularity, running a three-sided business was sensible and convenient.<sup>36</sup>

The 19th century colonist has a poor reputation as far as patriotism and civic duty were concerned.<sup>37</sup> But Methven had no doubts as to his loyalty. He was totally committed to his new land. In his first appointment as Chief Harbour Engineer his professional devotion to the problems of the Durban Harbour cannot be doubted.<sup>38</sup> His private activities were mainly cultural. He was an accomplished organist; he was involved with the installation of the pipe organ in the first Durban Town Hall and played regularly at St Paul's, Durban.<sup>39</sup> He was a compulsive sketcher, carrying his notepad everywhere, recording his surroundings in minute detail, to be reworked later in oil, or collected for publication, as in Greenock and its Harbours (1886) [Pl. 7] and Durban and its harbours (1891) [Pl. 8]. Even after his dismissal from the Harbour Office in 1895 and establishment in private practice as an architect and surveyor, his

activities were not conducive to the accumulation of wealth:

- painting and exhibiting paintings, addressing citizens on matters of taste, giving organ recitals, reorganising his new profession, dabbling in agriculture and amateur photography, and undertaking the occasional coastal survey.<sup>40</sup> He was a typical Victorian of the kind criticised by Maas:<sup>41</sup> dividing his energies between numerous demanding interests. One remains impressed, however, by the success of Methven's ventures. The founding of the Durban Art Gallery has already been described. His involvement with the Gallery's Advisory Committee only ended in July 1920.<sup>42</sup> The foundation of the Natal Institute of Architects in 1905 was largely due to his efforts.<sup>43</sup> Not least was the successful foundation and organisation of the NSA from 1907 until his retirement from the Council in 1921.<sup>44</sup> Even after this retirement from public life he continued to paint prolifically, holding five substantial one-man exhibitions in Johannesburg, Durban and Pietermaritzburg.<sup>45</sup>

Methven's artistic education is undocumented. His training as an engineer probably equipped him to handle landscape drawing and, as an architect, he must have learnt perspective and technical drawing. According to one source<sup>46</sup> he studied drawing under Fotheringham of Scotland,

and belonged to the Glasgow "Pen and Pencil Club". His interest in painting was undoubtedly nurtured by his family which included one highly competent portraitist: Eva Methven.<sup>47</sup> Works by Methven produced in Scotland have considerable naivety, but show characteristics that he was to develop in South Africa. Examples are Highland cattle, (1870) [Pl. 9] and Loch Lomond [Pl. 10]. His interest in topographical details and local atmosphere is immediately apparent, as is the tendency to use conventional compositional devices. The picture space is broken rigidly into foreground and background; the foreground covered with a pattern of natural detail, a tree, rock or group of animals supplying the visual boundary at the picture's edge; the background is bathed in atmospheric light with carefully observed cloud effects which are particularly well executed in his watercolours. Methven's skill as a watercolourist can be observed throughout his career. There is freshness and life in them lacking in the oils, and only found in open-air oil studies.<sup>48</sup> [Pl. 11] Methven was an admirer of the "finished" painting: the large studio painting worked and reworked for important exhibitions. Comparison between sketches and finished pieces (which he often exhibited together) did not always receive favourable comment:

His sketches portray bits of scenery in countries as far apart as Scotland and Switzerland, Natal and the Cape. Some of the sketches are open-air studies for larger pictures, and in some respects we even prefer his watercolour work to his finished pictures in oils. He is inclined, if anything, to elaborate the latter a little too much...<sup>49</sup>

Two important examples available for study are the watercolour sketch and finished work: The Port of Durban (or Durban Bay from Coedmore), 1910. [Pl. 12, 13] The two paintings were exhibited together at the NSA in July 1910<sup>50</sup> where the oil was regarded as the picture of the year:

It shows the Bay, the town, and the Point from Coedmore, and it is certainly much the best picture of the town we have seen. The flatness of the town makes it not an easy subject to deal with on canvas, but the point of view provides a foreground of bushclad hills and valleys through which the town is seen in the distance, and an excellent effect is obtained.<sup>51</sup>

The watercolour would hold its own in any Victorian collection. In its exquisite detail and sense of scale it can be compared with the work of J.F. Lewis or G.G. Kilburne. The difference in technique between Highland cattle and Port of Durban is immediately apparent. The masterly use of tone and texture place the latter among Methven's best works. Not so the oil. The paint surface is dull and overworked. The

tonal contrasts, handled so spontaneously in the watercolour obscure the description of space. The clumps of vegetation are reduced to stage scenery: flat set pieces dragged across the foreground limiting one's view of the skilfully painted hills surrounding the Bay.

Methven's attitude to painting is well documented in speeches and reviews. He was concerned exclusively with landscape: favourite subjects were Durban and the surrounding countryside, the Midlands farming area, and the Drakensberg. Some of his comments border on the eccentric. For example, he regrets the fact that Natal has mountains but no lakes, making them less picturesque. He suggests the appointment of a Government Commission to rectify the matter.<sup>52</sup>

His attitude to easel painting is essentially Edwardian. Painting should be "ennobling", above petty day-to-day matters. Subjects are chosen for their grandeur or breadth of vision:

A good picture is like a good book. Its influence is always beneficial, and its possession is a permanent joy. Art leads to the study of nature, and nature is the fount of all noble inspiration and great achievement in the domain of art. We all see nature differently, but it is to those who are gifted with the artistic sense that we have to rely upon for the interpretation of nature's

varying moods.<sup>53</sup>

This romantic view of nature can best be seen in his Drakensberg paintings. One especially admired by Natal critics was Giant's Castle - sunset after rain (1902) [Pl. 14]: "It is generally regarded as one of Mr Methven's best works, and is most impressive in its contrast of light and gloom, and its rendering of the stern grandeur of the scene chosen."<sup>54</sup> Nostalgia was probably the reason for the work's popularity, rather than accuracy of vision. Indeed, these are Scottish and not South African mountains: gloomy foothills, a rushing stream, and in the distance, forbidding peaks. A more impressive work is Mont-aux-Sources (1909) [Pl. 15], no longer idealised, but a portrait of a mountain with identifiably South African vegetation in the foreground. The sculptural qualities of the Berg obviously appealed to Methven, the architect. In pencil sketches the forms of the peaks are shown with clarity and precision. In Mont-aux-Sources the background peaks are convincingly solid compared with the relative flatness of the foreground. Here, one suspects, he is indulging in a favourite decorative obsession:

Among the striking features of South African scenery are very often the beautiful foregrounds of shrub, grass,

flowers and bush, and stream, and I think the growing fashion of largely ignoring foregrounds in landscape painting is one to be deplored.<sup>55</sup>

He was severely critical of "post-impressionist" tendencies to avoid the depiction of detail:

We cannot, I know imitate nature, but we can honestly try to give a true impression, but to omit the foreground of a picture and substitute a mere smudge is not one of the ways of doing this.<sup>56</sup>

Methven's draughtsmanship was always admired, but even his contemporaries found mechanical detail tiresome. Of Golden October, Deeside it was written, "He has put a great deal of work into the picture, and, indeed, this is so much the case that the effect is somewhat topographical."<sup>57</sup> And, with the waning in popularity of the Victorian style after World War I, his careful brushstrokes and sombre colour compared poorly with the work of younger artists:

His methods of expression belong very largely to the Victorian era, although there are slight suggestions in parts which show a leaning towards later methods. The colouring in many of the works has a tendency to look meagre and thin - that is, the fullness and richness of the colour has been spoiled by the addition of too much white...<sup>58</sup>

Another criticism often levelled at Methven was the use of a cold palette:

His two largest landscapes - Views of Durban from Stellawood and the Berea - in which trees are most happily grouped, will attract much attention and be much admired. The composition leaves nothing to be desired and the beauty of the pictures is only somewhat marred by a certain coldness of colouring, which one does not often notice in South African atmosphere. In his smaller landscapes, in watercolour, the greyness of tone is not noticeable.<sup>59</sup>

Despite this criticism, View of Durban from Stellawood [Pl. 17] is undoubtedly Methven's finest accomplishment. In it he combines the craftsmanship of the best Victorian painters and the freedom of form found in his watercolours and sketches. One is not conscious of that formal artifice so obvious in his other large paintings. Here the play of sunlight through swaying branches relates subtly to the distant Bay.

#### Early watercolourists in Natal

Many works of the period appear to be insipid versions of Methven's landscapes. It is as if Methven had unlocked the door to a "Natal" formula for subject and style. W.H.T. Venner, for example, the eccentric Art Master at the Durban Government School of Art, exclaimed on more than one occasion that there was nothing in Durban worth drawing and refused to

allow his pupils to undertake outdoor sketching.<sup>60</sup> His own paintings are perhaps a reflection of this dull attitude. An example, The Mooi River from Kamberg [Pl. 18], is a characterless imitation of Methven's Giant's Castle - sunset after rain [Pl. 14].

In one field, however, Methven's influence was certainly beneficial. Watercolour landscapes of the style and calibre of those produced in Britain were being produced in Natal from an early date as topographical records.<sup>61</sup> Itinerant watercolourists from Britain such as Percy Dixon (1862-1924) used South Africa as a source of exotic scenery for works to be exhibited in London.<sup>62</sup> [Pl. 19] And many superb examples of British watercolours had been imported by the Art Galleries and private collectors and were available for imitation.<sup>63</sup>

Foremost watercolourists in Natal include:<sup>64</sup>

Dorothea M. Vyvyan, who studied at the Slade, came to South Africa in 1900 and travelled with her kit, on horseback, through Zululand, the Midlands and the Berg;

Mary Elizabeth Butler, a British artist who taught in Pietermaritzburg, and whose work had attracted the attention of Ruskin;

A.S. Langley, Headmaster of the Durban High School for

Boys, a self-taught amateur;

Sir William Beaumont, a military man, later judge, also an amateur artist;

His son, B.W.R. Beaumont, who taught at Durban High School under Langley and painted in a similar style to him; and

Wallace Paton, who was probably taught watercolour technique by William Street-Wilson, the architect to whom he was articted.

W.H. Beaumont's Durban 1916 [Pl. 20] is decidedly reminiscent of Dixon's View of Durban (1885) [Pl. 19], but lacking in dexterity. This was not an exhibition piece, however. The convention, already observed in Methven's work, of producing studio paintings was used extensively by the watercolourists. A sketch exists for B.W.R. Beaumont's Giant's Castle [Pl. 21, 22] which demonstrates the artist's use of the medium. The spontaneity of the sketch is conspicuously absent in the larger painting which has been painted in a layered technique to produce the desired tonal effects describing the form of the mountain and rocks. The same attention to detail is seen in Langley's work. From the top of Tugela Falls (1911) [Pl. 23] is a dramatic view of the gorge from Mont-aux-Sources, looking down at the Tugela

River. This is probably an example of that "washed-out and etherealised" painting referred to by the Natal Mercury critic quoted above.<sup>65</sup> The ease with which Langley could rely upon technical conventions can be seen in later works. In Silverdale Farm (1924) [Pl. 24] the trees and details of the landscape are closely observed, and the tonal values subtly placed. There is no evidence of over-painting. And Giant's Castle from the Loteni (1933) [Pl. 25] is impressive in its use of line. It is obvious that Langley had no intention of abandoning a successful formula for the sake of critics.

There is a noticeable uniformity in the work of these artists. Mary Butler's Winter evening [Pl. 26] exploits the same dramatic point of view and the scaled-down figure in the foreground, as in Langley's Giant's Castle [Pl. 25], emphasising the breadth of the landscape.

Dorothea Vyvyan and Paton have much in common. The crisply painted details in Vyvyan's Mont-aux-Sources [Pl. 27] have an architectural quality also seen in Paton's Natal landscape [Pl. 28] and Snow on the Berg [Pl. 29]. These two artists also use very decorative brushwork to describe vegetation and water. Surprisingly, Vyvyan was better able to express distance and space. Compare her Cathkin Peak [Pl. 30] with Paton's Landscape with ploughed field [Pl. 31]

which is decorative and somewhat flat. Can one ascribe this to his architectural training? The habit of expressing objects in terms of mechanical scale drawings certainly influenced his outlook. In West street (1908) [Pl. 32] the romantic lighting and skilfully painted reflections on the wet pavement do not disguise his greater interest in rigidly accurate architectural elements. One turns with relief to one of his architectural elevations, Randles Bros. and Hudson [Pl. 33], in which his attention to superbly executed detail is not obscured by puddles and ricksha boys.

#### Wallace Paton

Such comments, while relevant to his watercolours, do not do justice to Paton's work as a whole. Of all Methven's contemporaries he is the only artist of stature and individuality. His work was greatly admired at the time, as can be seen from various press commentaries:

Mr Wallace Paton has excelled himself this year, which means a great deal, considering the very high standard of his work in previous exhibitions. Besides technical ability of a high order, he has the imaginative sense which enables him to see Nature in her most poetic and entrancing moods. The fleecy cloud, the breaking wave, the moon's pale pallor, the dying glow of the sun, appeal

to him in no ordinary way, and he has the gift and skill of recording his impressions in a truly artistic manner.<sup>66</sup>

And:

[Paton's landscapes] all reach a high level of achievement. They are full of fine feeling, and are strong in design, as all good painting should be. I confess frankly that I found his two small stencilled landscapes amongst the most complete and satisfying of the exhibits. That entitled "Sand Dunes" is a perfect example of the economy of means...[only a] true artist of temperament could possibly have achieved such a poetic statement with such limited means.<sup>67</sup>

Paton's artistic training is problematic. It can be assumed, as discussed above, that instruction in drawing and watercolour had been received from his employer (and later, partner) William Street-Wilson. His skill as an architectural draughtsman has been noted. However, there is little documentary evidence to substantiate his training as an artist. Berman refers to a tutor: the Belgian artist, Emmerich.<sup>68</sup> However, family sources state firmly that Paton was self-taught.<sup>69</sup> Berman also states that, after coming to South Africa in 1885, he "lived and worked in Durban for the rest of his life" and was "known to have left the town only once - on a painting trip to the Bushveld."<sup>70</sup> As he was only 11 years old when he arrived in Durban it is

unlikely that he would have received any significant art training in Britain. No records have been traced of an artist called Emmerich, but it is possible that minor European painters prepared to give lessons would have been visiting Durban during the last century. References to a French tendency in Paton's work suggest that contemporaries were aware of a continental connection.<sup>71</sup> It is more likely that Paton, as custodian of the Durban Art Gallery, would have studied the Victorian works in the collection, selecting formal and technical devices from works such as Sundown, by Arnesby Brown [Pl. 34], A Breton port, by F.L. Emmanuel [Pl. 35], and The heart of Great London, by F.J. Waugh [Pl. 36]. Paton's work shows considerable debt to Victorian painting.

His paintings fall into three distinct categories. The first includes a large number of seascapes, for which he was best known. It is difficult to estimate the value of these competent but overly romantic canvases and pastels. Many of the seascapes are moonlight scenes with dramatically lit breakers and clouds. [Pl. 37, 38] In the second group, mainly beach and cloud scenes, one detects a slackening of the Victorian influence. He uses a more subtle palette with shades of grey and low tonal contrasts. The compositions are more abstract and brushwork more painterly. [Pl. 39, 40] It

is in the landscapes, the third category, that one finds that strong sense of design and poetic quality referred to by Adams. The Anvil Cloud [Pl. 41], Landscape at Dargle [Pl. 42], and Farmlands, Natal [Pl. 43] are true products of the 20th century. The simplification of form and broken brushwork anticipate South African artists of the 1920s and 1930s such as the Everards who were to exploit these so-called modernist tendencies. There is no doubt, however, that to his contemporaries, his reputation rested on lurid sea scenes such as Moonshine, Durban Beach (Durban Art Gallery) [Pl. 37]. This reputation was confirmed in Roworth's essay on South African landscape painting in the special Studio issue, Artists of the British Empire overseas, where he is referred to as "our leading painter of the sea".<sup>72</sup> He was not satisfied with this fleeting reference, though:

...we went to Durban on Monday and saw Mr Paton. He was feeling very disgusted because the Studio summer number is about the art of the Empire and of course Africa comes in, and Roworth has written the article and put a great many reproductions in, but although he has mentioned Paton he has not reproduced any of his pictures. I ought to feel still more hurt as no mention at all has been made of mine.<sup>73</sup>

Accustomed to uncritical admiration in his home town, it is

obvious that Paton did not tolerate slights of any kind. This was, indirectly, the reason for his resignation as Hon. Curator from the Durban Art Gallery in 1919. The Council had requested an audit of the Gallery collection, and the resulting report contained some comical but ill-advised recommendations. Although it is recorded that Paton had not resigned "in a fit of pique" it is clear from his correspondence that the Town Council had insulted their foremost art expert.<sup>74</sup> He continued to serve the Gallery as a member of the Advisory Committee, handing over the Curatorship to E.C. Chubb, Curator of the Durban Museum.<sup>75</sup>

#### Leo Francois and Imperialism

Paton was soon to lose his status as the most influential art personality in Durban. Although continuing his committee work and exhibiting now and then, he was eclipsed after 1919 by a more aggressive propagandist, Leo Francois.

Francois was responsible for the promotion of Durban as a national art centre. The comments of Clément Sènèque in 1925 reveal the extent of his influence:

After an absence of four years [in France], I am

astounded at the progress that the Natal Society of Artists has made. The last exhibition I saw was in one of the galleries of the Municipal Buildings [Pl. 44] where only about 173 pictures were exhibited; today there are approximately 900 exhibits.

All that wonderful progress is due to the personal and unselfish efforts of our President, Leo Francois.<sup>76</sup>

The success of the NSA was probably also due to its very undemanding constitution, a factor which Francois was to exploit. Exclusivity was discouraged from the outset. Active membership was open to anyone who could submit "at least two of their unassisted original examples of work for the approval of the Council".<sup>77</sup> Members' works were automatically accepted for the annual exhibition and non-members were rarely refused hanging space.<sup>78</sup> The chief aims of the Society were (1) "to foster the Fine Arts, such as drawing, painting, sculpture, and craft work, in the Union of South Africa, but more especially in the Province of Natal," (2) to maintain "a suitable Club room," and (3) "to give financial assistance to promising students."<sup>79</sup> Very few artists disassociated themselves from the NSA or its aims, and those who did had personal reasons only.<sup>80</sup>

The NSA was also never associated with a particular style or genre:

The Society does not claim to fetter talent by

pedagogical limitations, and recognises that all sincere thought, sincerely expressed is good art - whether done in the polished academical style of the Pre-Raphaelites or in the vigorous method of Van Gogh.<sup>81</sup>

Francois was a devoted follower of Cecil John Rhodes, however,<sup>82</sup> and despite his deep loyalty to South Africa, regarded her as a part of the Empire and harboured considerable imperial ambitions. While vigorously promoting the establishment of a school of South African painting<sup>83</sup> he continued to model the NSA on the Royal Academy, London, as his predecessors had done. The annual winter exhibition was seen to be a counterpart in every detail of the Academy's summer exhibition at the height of the London Season, a fact not always appreciated by Durban's political leaders:

While on the subject, may I express the hope that our Municipal authorities will now give the Society that official recognition it is entitled to. The annual winter exhibition is not only a great event, but figures largely as a feature of our season, and has done much to advertise Durban as a place of culture.<sup>84</sup>

July was, socially, the most important month of the year. Visitors flocked from all parts of the Union to enjoy the moderate winter sun of Natal and to attend the month-long programme of events. The highlight of the Season was (and still is) the Durban July Handicap, run at the "Durban Turf

Club Great Winter Meeting (first day)", followed by the annual "July" Ball in the Town Hall.<sup>85</sup> A multitude of events were grouped about these two main attractions. Importance was gauged according to the attendance or non-attendance of titled persons. The NSA had established its credentials before Union by obtaining the patronage of the Governor of Natal. After 1910 Francois had succeeded in upholding the Society's prestige. The Jubilee show in 1930, for example, was opened by Princess Alice, a significant social accolade.<sup>86</sup>

In the tradition of the Academy, the NSA held a "varnishing day":

Wednesday, July 8, has been appointed varnishing day in connection with the 25th annual exhibition which is being opened on July 9 by Sir William and Lady Beaumont. Exhibitors are requested to put the final touches on their paintings, oiling, and polishing of frames and glasses. All rejected exhibits may also be removed on Wednesday and again on Friday, July 10.<sup>87</sup>

The best work was hung "on the line" [Pl. 45], and the "private viewing day" which took place in the afternoon on a day early in the Season was suitably ceremonious: [Pl. 46]

Shortly after 3 o'clock the strains of the National Anthem by the Municipal Orchestra drew general attention to the Chair, when Mr Francois, the President of the Society introduced His Royal Highness [Prince Arthur of

Connaught]...<sup>88</sup>

The highlight of the afternoon, for many, was not the art but the display of fashionable outfits. [Pl. 47] Newspaper reviews of the paintings are invariably accompanied by an even longer column written by the social editor:

Lady Evans, who was presented with a handsome bouquet of pink sweet-peas and gladioli, wore a becoming two-piece suit of Mediterranean blue marocain with graceful cap sleeves...Miss Edith Ward, who incidentally made a delightful speech, was most attractively gowned in Lomond blue marquisette with lovely embroidery...<sup>89</sup> [Pl. 48]

A frequent critic of the NSA and its foibles was W.H. Hill ["The Idler"], who wrote a daily column for the Natal Mercury: "Down our Lane" by the Idler. These comments on openings in general might easily apply to those of the NSA:

To my mind the opening days of an exhibition are things to avoid. The people who should be there are there and they shut off one's view of the pictures while they discuss the last "occasion" at which they were present, the weather, frocks and things like that. Women, it will be noted, predominate on opening days.<sup>90</sup>

On such occasions, according to Hill, the chatter was so loud that the opening speaker's remarks could not be heard.

The size of the exhibition (up to 900 works, as mentioned above) was also considered by some to be

detrimental to the overall quality of the works chosen. The NSA had, for many years enjoyed the free use of a room in the Durban Art Gallery. After the arrival of a large donation in 1920,<sup>91</sup> however, this privilege was ended. It was Francois who managed to obtain the use of the upper floor of Shaw Bros. Wool Mart on the Esplanade - an enormous room, capable of holding hundreds of paintings and spectators [Pl. 49]. This suited the Society's catholic selection policy, but often drew criticism.

As in all exhibitions of pictures, and particularly in exhibitions of this national or parental kind, when encouragement has obviously played more part in the selection than criticism there are many yards of bad pictures, bad workmanship, and lack of vision; pictures for which one can discover no reason why they should ever have been painted. The Royal Academy is the best known example perhaps for English-speaking people, for most of us have during the season wandered up and down those incredibly boring halls lined with the works of little men and women who see no further than their tubes of paint - in many cases hardly so far. And the Natal Society of Artists' Exhibition follows this domestic tradition with perhaps more reason.<sup>92</sup>

Francois's ambitions went beyond the successful organisation of a yearly exhibition in Natal. His ideal was no less than the unification of South African artists under a national academy.

The establishment of an Academy had been mooted in Natal shortly after Union by Lord Gladstone.

...he thought that the time had come for the establishment of a South African Artistic Union. ...they [the art societies] must link themselves up now; they had done good work in their own particular district, but they must get into touch, effective touch, with all other parts of the Union, so that each part of Union would benefit from the others. If they could establish, under the auspices of a South African Artistic Union, an exhibition of pictures which would be held in the greater towns of South Africa triennially, or even quinquennially, the effect must be excellent, both as regards raising the standard of artistic education in each part of South Africa, but also by stimulating the spirit of competition...<sup>93</sup>

However, a reviewer expressed the general sentiment towards such a Union:

For the present, at all events, more active work is likely to be done by the existing local societies than by a centralised body of artists. There is the practical difficulty of the immense distances between the chief centres of population where art must be cradled and . nourished before it attains the vigorous growth that would justify a scheme of art centralisation.<sup>94</sup>

After World War I the establishment and growth of provincial art centres resulted in the creation of a fruitful art circuit. The oldest existing art society in South Africa was a Capetown group, The South African Society of Artists, which

held its annual exhibition each December. After 1930 their exhibition was held in the National Gallery as the "Exhibition of contemporary S.A. art". The NSA, founded in 1907, held its annual exhibition in July and was followed closely by the Eastern Province Society of Arts and Crafts which held an exhibition every August/September.<sup>95</sup> Artists could arrange for unsold works to be sent from Durban to Port Elizabeth at the close of the NSA exhibition - a demonstration of the co-operation that existed between societies at the time.<sup>96</sup>

In 1919 the Association of Transvaal Architects founded the S.A. Academy. This was not an "academy" in the true sense of the word, but an annual exhibition open to artists throughout South Africa.<sup>97</sup> The first "S.A. Academy" was held in March 1920 at the Selbourne Hall in Johannesburg<sup>98</sup> and was held there annually until after World War II. Thus, by 1924 artists were able to exhibit freely at four important centres in the Union, throughout the year; and privately at numerous commercial venues, Lezard's in Johannesburg and Ashbey's in Capetown being the most popular.

In 1924 Francois raised the issue of founding a "Dominion Institute of Art" with the intention of obtaining a Royal Charter,<sup>99</sup> emphasising the need to establish a

recognisably South African school of painting.<sup>100</sup> He was publically scolded by Gwelo Goodman who wrote in an open letter to the press that "National art cannot be created by organisation of any sort or kind, it is the slow and sure development of national needs of form of expression."<sup>101</sup> Francois was stung, not so much by this statement, but by Goodman's insinuation that he was attempting to claim for himself "the mantle of Sir Joshua Reynolds". In his reply Francois disclaimed any connection with the Royal Academy and agreed, reluctantly, to drop the idea of a Royal Charter.<sup>102</sup>

The result of his efforts was the S.A. Institute of Art, founded in 1927 with Francois as its first President.<sup>103</sup> It was in the Cape that academic aspirations continued to run high. Considerable resentment had been caused in Cape art circles by the foundation of Francois's Institute. Many Cape artists regarded Francois and the NSA as ambitious upstarts and were of the opinion that the Cape Society, through seniority, was entitled to the greatest prestige. In 1932 they organised their own National Academy of Arts, with Edward Roworth as its first President.<sup>104</sup> The initial members were Gordon Leith, Hugo Naude, Pierneef, Roworth, T.A. Smith, Sydney Taylor, Timlin, Van Wouw, Prof. Wheatley, and Volschenk.<sup>105</sup> The Natal and Free State artists sent

representatives to the inaugural meeting in January 1932<sup>106</sup> but such prominent artists as Irma Stern, the Everards, and Gwelo Goodman were conspicuously absent. It was afterwards claimed that the Academy had been founded in secret and haste and that it was an insult to professional artists. Goodman was interviewed by the Cape Times, and his comments are very relevant to the failure in general of the Academy ideal in South Africa.

Heaven knows there is a strong enough case against academies in any country. Distinguished men have founded them, distinguished artists have been members of them, but, on the whole, their influence has undoubtedly been pernicious. At the worst they fall into the hands of charlatans who control them to their own advantage; at the best they encourage, in self-defence, a dead level of mediocrity and repel any artist who dares to question established traditions and conventions.

Will anyone pretend that the Royal Academy has rendered any service to Art in England during the last 60 or 70 years?

In any case it is presumption in so small a community of professional artists to think of founding an Academy, and the title R.A.(S.A.) can only make South African artists who achieve or acquire it a laughing stock overseas. We might as well start a House of Lords with our single peer.

There is, of course, nothing to prevent any body of men from forming any society they like and conferring upon each other any title which their ingenuity and vanity may suggest. But when people try to turn their

secret society into a national affair, the public, which, in due course, is invariably expected to contribute to its maintenance, is entitled to have some voice regarding its institution. It is announced that the headquarters of the Academy will be the National Gallery, which is a public building. Are the people of Cape Town going to allow their Art Gallery to be used and exploited by a self-elected body of artists as a sale room?<sup>107</sup>

Despite Goodman's remarks, Academies and those associated with them continued to hold enormous prestige in South Africa. Francois in his role as "Vermilion", art critic for the Natal Mercury, gave extensive coverage to all artists remotely connected with any organisation with a Royal charter. He, himself, was elected a full diploma member of the Royal British Colonial Society of Artists (R.B.C.) in recognition of his services to art in South Africa,<sup>108</sup> an honour of which he was inordinately proud. Any artist whose work was accepted for the Royal Academy exhibition received enthusiastic praise in his column, "Art Causerie".<sup>109</sup> Similarly, those whose work was chosen for the South African contribution to the British Empire Academy were greatly admired.

Dominion art did not enjoy very high status in London society, if Evelyn Waugh's opinion is anything to go by:

We...found ourselves at about teatime at the Empire

Exhibition at Wembley. We went to the Palace of Arts and walked through a blazing nightmare of colonial paintings...<sup>110</sup>

Of the Dominions Canada was generally regarded as the most superior artistically.<sup>111</sup> A common criticism of South African art by London writers was its lack of "originality": "The artists as a whole seem to have been content to model their style on the example of the Mother Country without evolving any new idea or manner..."<sup>112</sup> It is quite likely that the South African selectors were inclined to choose the kind of work which they expected to receive approval and to avoid those works which did not resemble those on regular display in London galleries. At the 1924 Wembley exhibition South African works included two portraits by Roworth, a native study by Constance Penstone, a portrait by Amschewitz, landscapes by W.G. Bevington, Pierneef, C.S. Groves, Sydney Taylor, Volschenk, Jack Pieters, and, from Natal, Wallace Paton and D.M. Vyvyan.<sup>113</sup> This was hardly an outstanding collection, but on a par with the so-called "modern oil paintings" exhibited by the British artists.<sup>114</sup>

## Temporary residents

For too many artists in South Africa there was little incentive to evolve a new style as long as they had to compete commercially with the numerous British artists who used South Africa as a temporary home. The buying public were prejudiced in favour of overseas paintings - a fact ruefully commented on from the beginning of the period.

He [Sir Daniel Hunter] thought it was rather a pity that there was not more encouragement given by those able to buy pictures to those local artists who produced them, and it was a striking commentary on the want of patriotism that during the six months that locally-painted pictures had remained in that gallery on exhibition not a single one had been purchased.<sup>115</sup>

One regular visitor was Alfred Palmer, a British painter and sculptor with impeccable credentials:

Being a member of the Royal Society of Oil Painters, the Societe Royale des Beaux Arts of Brussels and the Pastel Society, one is, of course, entitled to expect much and I am confident that visitors to this exhibition will not be disappointed.<sup>116</sup>

Palmer specialised in figure painting and came to South Africa at the instigation of the Bishop of Natal whom he had met in England. "The Bishop casually produced some snapshots

of Zulus and Mr Palmer exclaimed at the fine virile types of manhood."<sup>117</sup> This is not surprising, considering that Palmer's favourite composition consisted of muscular nudes in idealised poses grouped together as "Bathers" [Pl. 50] or "Revellers" [Pl. 51]. His style has much in common with fellow members of the R.O.I. An illustrated catalogue of their 1923 exhibition included numerous similar works in the same loosely painted manner. [Pl. 52, 53] Palmer's contribution to this particular exhibition is The green turban [Pl. 54]: a nude child sitting on a brightly lit beach. This, too, was a favourite theme. Another example is The Pool (Durban Art Gallery) [Pl. 55] in which one observes the same generalised, faceless children.

Palmer's first visit to Natal in 1925 proved successful and he was to spend the next twenty-five years moving between Britain and Africa. Like many itinerant artists he was attracted by the harsh southern light. Unfortunately many of his African and Mediterranean scenes are characterised by the use of garish colour. [Pl. 56] His favourite palette included a particularly crude turquoise and yellow, colours that "Vermilion" apparently found attractive: "Mr Palmer sees in our atmosphere a good deal of blue which may account for the fine subdued tones that are part of [his paintings']

particular charm."<sup>118</sup>

Despite Lefebvre's claim that the "picture-buying public prefers South African scenery",<sup>119</sup> the more successful visitors were, like Palmer, specialists in figure-work, portraiture, and non-South African landscapes. The comparative lack of good portrait painters in South Africa (and especially Natal) gave artists such as these a free hand. A typical example was H. Marriott Burton, a portraitist and landscape painter, who monopolised the social page from the moment he arrived in Durban.<sup>120</sup> He is seen posing with titled models [Pl. 57], at society functions [Pl. 47], giving lectures on Hong Kong [Pl. 58] and Singapore, or advertising his own exhibitions. He was even engaged to instruct the Durban Art School students in "outdoor sketching",<sup>121</sup> but students of the period have no recollection of any such classes taking place.<sup>122</sup>

Monica McIvor, another British artist who spent some time in Natal and the rest of South Africa (1931-1937), divided her energies between native studies and society portraits. These were an instant success at the NSA:

Those who value colour and rich blended tones will not fail to be impressed by the portrait that Monica MacIvor (sic) has done of Lady Stanley. [Pl. 59] There is more to the picture than the fact that Lady Stanley has a

beautiful face and that the artist has caught the likeness. She has draped her subject's shoulders with a cape which so holds the colour of the dress that one looks there first. The blending background is an inspiration.<sup>123</sup>

Even R.V. Gooding, "Vermilion's" extremely critical successor on the Natal Mercury, found McIvor's work refreshingly well painted.

Competence and freedom from mannerism and useless experiment make the portraits of Miss Monica McIvor...pleasant to pick out of the surrounding waste.<sup>124</sup>

The "surrounding waste" referred, of course, to works by local painters, allowing one to suspect that Gooding, like many others, was prejudiced in favour of overseas artists.

The majority of British visitors to Natal tended to treat exhibitions as a visual travelogue - the 20th century successors to the intrepid artist/explorers of the previous century.<sup>125</sup> These included:

Hilda May Gordon,<sup>126</sup> whose extensive sketching tours through Africa, India, Greece and the Far East were punctuated by timely exhibitions in the main centres. She exhibited at the NSA in 1930;<sup>127</sup>

Elizabeth Drake, another travelling artist, who held one-man shows in Durban in 1932 and 1939,<sup>128</sup> collected

sketches of exotic scenery for book illustrations; and

Dorothea Carey Morgan, a close friend of D.M. Vyvyan, who travelled in the Drakensberg, Swaziland and the Cape. Her speciality was the Cape Dutch gable.<sup>129</sup>

Overseas training

Francois's remedy for the aspiring South African artist who found himself upstaged by overseas interlopers was an overseas course of training:

To say that S. African art is in its infancy is to say a very obvious and inconclusive thing. The great handicap under which art labours in this country is that the schools where the best equipment can be obtained are necessarily overseas, and that there are no great centres of traditional inspiration, or storehouses of the best examples at our disposal. All that is obvious enough and cannot be remedied for many years to come. But that is no reason for destroying local talent. The fact that an overseas course of study is practically essential in art need not detract from the value of the local practice of it any more than it detracts from the status of local medical men who have completed their qualifications overseas.<sup>130</sup>

The constitution of the NSA had included, from the very beginning, a clause making provision for the financial assistance of deserving students. This clause implied that

students would be encouraged to study overseas rather than in South Africa. Indeed, the first student to be "sent Home to study art" was Helen Sinclair whom the NSA paid to study at the Royal Academy Schools in 1911.<sup>131</sup> The NSA Council tried, unsuccessfully, to interest the Minister of Education in the need for this kind of support.<sup>132</sup> In fact, much of the blame for the poor quality of South African art was laid at the feet of Government educators. This was discussed in an editorial in 1919:

The Union Government offers no facilities for art study in the Union or abroad and only in the Cape are there scholarships which provide maintenance allowances; and these are granted because of the necessity of creating a special type of teacher to carry on the art work in the schools. The young architect, painter, sculptor, designer, craftsman, and black-and-white artist of unusual ability (may be of genius) has to depend on his own resources, or perhaps on the generosity of a patron if he wishes to take advantage of art instruction here or to finish his studies in London or Paris. To show how short-sighted this policy is, one has to mention only two artists, South African born, who have been able to study their respective arts in European centres of culture, and who have now returned to enrich the country of their birth by their genius. One is Mr J.M. Solomon, the architect of the new University of Capetown, and the other is Mr Gwelo Goodman, the well-known landscape painter. South Africa still continues the bad system of importing her most capable art teachers from overseas instead of providing facilities for the adequate training

of her own sons and daughters. The War Memorial Committees in many parts of the country are deciding on sculptured monuments, without any idea where to obtain good work. There is scarcely a capable sculptor in the country, and no encouragement has ever been held out to young South Africans to become sculptors. The educational ladder in this respect is not complete in any Province of the Union.<sup>133</sup>

Students at the Durban School of Art were fortunate in being able to compete for the Emma Smith Scholarship, founded in 1920 by Charles G. Smith "for the purpose of enabling art students of outstanding ability who are attending the Durban Technical College School of Art, to continue their studies in Europe."<sup>134</sup> Not many of the students chosen made their mark, however. The first prize-winner, Elsie M. Currie, trained at the Royal College of Art, London, and returned to work at the short-lived Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein; another winner was the architect, William Hirst, who returned to design Howard College. Many others were chosen, travelled to London, and (one is reluctant to admit) were never heard of again.<sup>135</sup>

Those who had to rely on private funds were often the most determined and, ultimately, the most successful. Clement Seneque and Mary Stainbank were sent overseas by their respective families and were, without doubt, the two

most significant Natal artists of the period. Their respective styles, however, bore little resemblance to the British academic tradition held dear by those who looked forward to their return.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, one must ask oneself whether these artists owed anything to their exposure to overseas training, apart from new techniques. Their originality lay entirely in their ability to respond to local subjects and conditions; they were the first, in their separate ways, to shake off the British tradition.

Chapter one: notes

<sup>1</sup>E. Brookes and C. de B. Webb, A history of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1965, p. 250

<sup>2</sup>Maritzburg and bi-lingualism, The Natal Mercury, 10 July 1912 p. 7 col 1 (Editorial)

<sup>3</sup>see page 40f

<sup>4</sup>see page 11f

<sup>5</sup>see page 54f

<sup>6</sup>Municipal Gallery. The opening, The Natal Mercury, 12 February 1910 p. 13

<sup>7</sup>see Methven: Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>8</sup>5 April 1892

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Another contribution was made in 1898 by Cecil John Rhodes who presented A gallant deed by Frank Dadd. - Durban Art Gallery. Catalogue of the exhibits. 10th ed. 1948

<sup>12</sup>10 March 1899

<sup>13</sup>The Natal Mercury, 10 March 1899

<sup>14</sup>The Natal Mercury, 10 March 1899; Catalogue of oil paintings from England, Durban, 1899

<sup>15</sup>Mayor's Minute 1899, Durban Art Gallery, Catalogue, 1904. "On the 6th July last a deputation consisting of Messrs. C.W. Methven, A. Milligan, A. Elstob, W. Greenacre, W. Paton, J. Pardy, W.H. Powell, W.H.T. Venner, and Dr Hall waited upon the Council and handed over to the Corporation eight pictures, to form the nucleus of a Municipal Art Gallery, which you very cordially accepted in trust for the burgesses."

<sup>16</sup>The Natal Mercury, Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Durban Art Gallery, Catalogue of the exhibits, 10th ed., 1948 p. 3

<sup>18</sup>Durban Art Gallery catalogue, 1904. Durban was following the precedent of many British municipalities who "made a solemn pilgrimage to the Summer Exhibition with the laudable intention of supporting living art, but an art on which the seal of official respectability had been safely laid." - D. Farr, English Art 1870-1940, Oxford University Press, 1978 p. 272

<sup>19</sup>D. Irwin and F. Irwin, Scottish painters at home and abroad, Faber, 1975 p. 294.

The pursuit of pleasure (1855) o/c, 1537 x 2438mm. Purchased from Bennett & Sons, Glasgow. Other references include: Durban Art Gallery catalogue, 1911 p. 44f; The Pictorial, 2 February 1911 p. 557 (ill.); and The Natal Mercury, 28 January 1911 p. 11 col 1-2, in which the complex imagery is explained.

<sup>20</sup>Durban Town Council Minutes, 24 Nov 1910, 6 Jan 1911; Durban Art Gallery Report, July 1926. "In its efforts to improve the collection by the purchase of desirable works the Committee has for a number of years found itself handicapped through the Art Gallery's indebtedness to the Public improvement Account. When a number of pictures were purchased in 1911 the cost was charged to this account. It was subsequently pointed out by the Town Treasurer that the purchase of works of art out of the Public Improvement Account was irregular, and the Council then decided to repay the debt in annual instalments out of Borough rates charged to the Art Gallery. During recent years when the Committee has recommended the purchase of pictures, it has generally been met with the objection that no funds could be employed for this purpose until the debt to the Public Improvement Account had been liquidated.

<sup>21</sup>Tatham Art Gallery: Tatham papers

<sup>22</sup>These are now largely dispersed. They included J. Farquharson's Blinding drifts of snow and Havermaet's The restorer. The majority of Mrs Tatham's paintings were sold by auction in 1962-3 when the Art Gallery was re-organised by E. Lorimer, Director of the King George VI Art Gallery, Port Elizabeth. - Tatham Art Gallery, Minute papers, 1961-1964

<sup>23</sup>City Art Gallery, The Natal Witness, 8 March 1904 p. 6

<sup>24</sup>The museum collection had been moved to the recently opened Natal Museum in Loop St. - Mr David Buckley, Natal Society Library

<sup>25</sup>see Chapter 3

<sup>26</sup>Not 1905 as commonly believed. - NSA Constitution, 1921; Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 27 February 1922 p. 13

<sup>27</sup>Referred to throughout the text as the "NSA"

<sup>28</sup>Art in Natal, The Natal Mercury, 17 Dec 1907 p. 9 col. 1-2

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 21 July 1908 p. 8 col. 5-8

<sup>31</sup>Members held an additional cabinet exhibition in November/December.

<sup>32</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 22 July 1909 p. 9

<sup>33</sup>Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 10 July 1912 p. 9 col 1-4

<sup>34</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 11 July 1912 p. 10 col 5-6

<sup>35</sup>M. Hillebrand, Aspects of architecture in Natal, M.A.F.A., University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1975

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>see note 8

<sup>38</sup>Harbour Board Minutes, 1889-1895; C.W. Methven, Port and harbour progress, A century of progress in Natal,

Pietermaritzburg, Natal Witness, 1924 p. 51f

39 Local History Museum, Durban

40 see Methven: Artists in Natal 1910-1940

41 J. Maas, Victorian painters, London, 1969

42 Durban Art Gallery Advisory Committee minutes

43 M. Hillebrand, Op. cit.

44 see Appendix B

45 see Methven: Artists in Natal 1910-1940

46 E. Lezard, Catalogue of...paintings...by Cathcart W. Methven, Johannesburg, October 1921

47 A portrait by Eva Methven of C.W. Methven as a boy is in the possession of his granddaughter.

48 A documented example is Maritzburg from Town Hill, 1910 (coll: Byron)

49 Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 12 July 1912 W. ed. p. 13

50 The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1910 p. 11 col 2-6

51 The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1910 p. 11 col 2-6

52 Mr Methven's pictures, The Natal Witness, 12 June 1924 p. 8

53 Opening speech by Methven. Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 22 July 1909 p. 9

54 Natal artists' exhibition, The Natal Witness, 11 July 1911 p. 5 col 3

55 Mr Methven's pictures, The Natal Witness, 12 June 1924

56 Ibid.

57 Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 10 July 1912 p. 9 col 1-4

58 "Palette", Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 18 May 1921 p. 10

59 Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 24 July 1914 p. 11

60 see Chapter four

61 J. Verbeek, Art before Union, University of Natal,

Pietermaritzburg, 1974

<sup>62</sup>A. Graves, Royal Academy exhibitors, London, 1906, vol 2 p. 340

<sup>63</sup>Eg. The collection of W.H. Priestley, Durban architect and art connoisseur, included works by G.G. Kilburne, T.B. Hardy, John Faulkner, and W. Anstey Dolland. (Coll. Elstob, Pietermaritzburg)

<sup>64</sup>see Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>65</sup>The Natal Mercury, 10 November 1912 p. 9

<sup>66</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 12 July 1911 p. 8 col 5-7

<sup>67</sup>John Adams, Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1920. John Adams was the Headmaster of the Durban School of Art.

<sup>68</sup>E. Berman, Art and artists of South Africa, 1st ed., Capetown, Balkema, 1970, p. 220

<sup>69</sup>D. Johnson, Howick

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Of Paton's Botha's Hill: "...a different type of artistic visualisation, with a suggestion of the French school about it, but it is none the less pleasing." Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 21 July 1908 p. 8

<sup>72</sup>1917

<sup>73</sup>Letter from Bertha Everard to Edith King 12 June 1917, quoted in F. Harmsen, The women of Bonnefoi, Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1980 p. 56

<sup>74</sup>Durban Town Council Minutes, 1919. Amongst others things, the auditor had criticised Paton for hanging pictures of naked European women where "Kafirs and Coolies" might see them.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>South Africa's record art exhibition, The Natal Advertiser, 11 July 1925 p. 13

<sup>77</sup>NSA Constitution and Rules. 1921

<sup>78</sup>The Natal Mercury, 14 April 1926

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Eg. Mary Stainbank. Miss Stainbank, when interviewed, was reluctant to elaborate. Her comments suggest that she disliked the petty jealousies within the Society during the twenties and thirties. Her regular absence from the exhibitions and refusal to become a member was not well received.

<sup>81</sup>Official report. Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1923 p. 14

<sup>82</sup>see Francois, Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>83</sup>see Chapter 2

<sup>84</sup>President's report. Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 30 April 1925 p. 13

<sup>85</sup>Durban Season Programme; The Natal Mercury, 2 July 1936 p. 19

<sup>86</sup>The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1930 p. 15

<sup>87</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 7 July 1925 p. 11

<sup>88</sup>H.R.H. and South African art, The Natal Witness, 26 July 1923 p. 7

<sup>89</sup>The exhibition's social side, The Natal Mercury, 6 July 1935

<sup>90</sup>Down our lane, The Natal Mercury, 16 October 1926 p. 9 col 2

<sup>91</sup>The Whitwell collection. see Chapter 3

<sup>92</sup>Art exhibition in Durban, The Natal Advertiser, 1 July 1926

<sup>93</sup>Natal Society of artists, The Natal Mercury, 12 July 1911 p. 8

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>The Natal Mercury, 10 January 1928; 28 May 1924 p. 1

<sup>96</sup>The Natal Mercury, 10 June 1930 p. 13

<sup>97</sup>E. Berman, Art and artists in South Africa, Capetown,

Balkema, 1983 p. 371

<sup>98</sup>The Natal Mercury, 20 January 1920 p. 7

<sup>99</sup>Berman, op cit. p. 298

<sup>100</sup>see Chapter two

<sup>101</sup>Berman. loc cit

<sup>102</sup>newspaper cutting, The Natal Mercury

<sup>103</sup>see Chapter two

<sup>104</sup>J. Newton Thompson, Gwelo Goodman, Capetown, Timmins,  
p. 100

<sup>105</sup>Berman, op cit

<sup>106</sup>The arts in South Africa, Durban, Knox, 1933, p.  
177-9. Natal's Representatives were Dr Basil Sampson and  
Prof O.J.P. Oxley. Newton-Thompson states that Natal and the  
Free State were ignored. This is untrue.

<sup>107</sup>Newton-Thompson, op cit

<sup>108</sup>Who's who in Natal, Durban, Knox, 1933 p. 96

<sup>109</sup>These included Wallace Paton and D.M. Vyvyan

<sup>110</sup>M. Davie, ed., The diaries of Evelyn Waugh,  
Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976 p. 164

<sup>111</sup>The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1924 p. 15

<sup>112</sup>The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1924 p. 15

<sup>113</sup>Illustrated souvenir of the Palace of Arts, British  
Empire exhibition, 1924; The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1924 p.  
15; 29 July 1924 p. 7

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Natal Artists' Society, The Natal Mercury, 5 July  
1910 p. 11

<sup>116</sup>"Vermilion", Exhibition of paintings, The Natal  
Mercury, 17 September 1925 p. 13

<sup>117</sup>An artist in a caravan, The Natal Mercury, 5 May 1926  
p. 13

<sup>118</sup>The Natal Mercury, 17 September 1925 p. 13

<sup>119</sup>The S.A. Architectural Record, December 1930 p. 119

<sup>120</sup>The Sunday Tribune, 10 January 1937; 6 June 1937; The

Natal Mercury, 26 June 1937

<sup>121</sup>The Common Room Magazine, 1937

<sup>122</sup>Interview 9 December 1985, Beryl Newmann and Alex

Wagner

<sup>123</sup>F.V.P.H., The Natal Mercury, 6 July 1935

<sup>124</sup>R.V.G[ooding], The Natal Mercury, 2 July 1932 p. 15

<sup>125</sup>Eg. Thomas Baines

<sup>126</sup>Hilda May Gordon, Martin Gregory Gallery, 1984

<sup>127</sup>see Appendix A

<sup>128</sup>The Natal Mercury, 11 August 1932 p. 5; 6 June 1939

p. 8

<sup>129</sup>see Morgan: Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>130</sup>"Vermilion", The Natal Mercury, 28 July 1924 p. 5

<sup>131</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 12 July

1911 p. 8

<sup>132</sup>Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 10 July 1912 p.9

<sup>133</sup>The Natal Mercury, 18 August 1919

<sup>134</sup>The Technical College, The Natal Mercury, 27 April

1920 p. 9. The scholarship was given in memory of Smith's mother.

<sup>135</sup>1924: Maude Garland and Phyllis Hall; 1926: William Hirst; 1928: Miss Shimwell B.A.F.A.

<sup>136</sup>see Chapters 2, 3

CHAPTER TWO

ART AND POLITICS: A NATIONAL STYLE

In the previous chapter the dependence of Natal's artists on British styles and customs was examined. Those active during the early period were, in fact, little more than transplanted Britons helping to establish a replica of "Home" in Africa. The declaration of Union in 1910 had little effect on their style or desire for originality:

An artist should be cosmopolitan, and it should be immaterial where he works, but there are local influences which often make themselves felt, and serve to create what are called "schools", as for instance, we hear of the "Newlyn school", the "Glasgow school", and the "Barbizon school", and so forth. This is too young a country to talk of any school of painting, and we have too few professional artists of distinction to do any creative work of an outstanding original character which would influence young art students. There is also too little demand for art to induce men of artistic genius to come to South Africa to ply their art and become imbued with the atmosphere of the country and its varied types of life.<sup>1</sup>

Changes only began to take place during and after World War I when new personalities arrived in Natal to practise art or teach it. One of these personalities was John Adams who came to Durban in 1914 to take charge of the Durban School of Art. He gives some reasons for the awakening of a desire for a South African style:

In former years this country was flooded with factory

made memorials of an extremely poor type of design. We can at least congratulate ourselves that after the Great War very few examples of tawdry commercial memorials came into South Africa. This was partly because such things have been difficult to get, but it is more likely that the real reason is the enlightened demand for better craftsmanship and design, and the fact that there are now greater facilities in this country for creating finer memorials, using to a large extent the material of the country. ...There is no need to emphasise the finer feeling in having a man-made instead of a machine-made memorial, and the value such efforts have in contributing towards national self-respect and a national expression through the arts. These things mark a step in the advance of South Africa from a mere trading station to a great and cultured nation.<sup>2</sup>

Leo Francois also arrived in Durban in 1914. His imperialist contributions have already been noted. He did not see himself as a British propagandist, however. The ideal towards which he strove with so much energy until the end of his life was the unification of South African artists and that "national self-expression through the arts" referred to by Adams. Throughout his stay in South Africa Francois was closely associated with politics. In Kimberley he had belonged to the original Progressive Party of the Cape, an extremist British group opposed to the Afrikaner Bond.<sup>3</sup> But, he was an admirer of C.J. Rhodes and had come to South Africa at his instigation in 1891. He shared

Rhodes's ideal of an Anglo-Afrikaner federation, and applied this ideal to his plan for South African art.

Much political strife, unduly leavened with racial antagonism and combined with economic difficulties, has acted as a sort of damper on the development of art which in all new countries is like a tender plant in need of loving care and sympathetic treatment. ...Whatever may be said to the contrary there are clear indications right throughout the country that a South African Nation is awakening to its responsibilities...<sup>4</sup>

Whatever his other faults Francois could never be accused of racism. Throughout the period he used his "Art Causerie" column to promote fairly any artist who appeared to be striving towards this goal of achieving national identity:

Even at the risk of being denounced a dreamer, I have the temerity to say that a large section of Africaners have leant their ladder against that pedestal of national art, on the rungs of which many of them were climbing in the persuance of an ideal...<sup>5</sup>

As the first step towards his ambitions Francois built up the NSA annual exhibition into an event of national importance. Almost every practising artist in South Africa exhibited there between 1918 and 1940.<sup>6</sup> The selection process was limited to the elimination of the more grossly unfit and was not associated with stylistic preferences.<sup>7</sup> When he felt that his first aim had been accomplished he made

this announcement:

This exhibition is now recognised throughout the Union as the leading art event of the year to which, not artists alone, but a large number of the public also, look forward to with special interest. The President of the Society has made it clear ever since he assumed office, that in the organisation of these exhibitions on present somewhat gigantic lines, a great principle is involved. In order to create the proper understanding, the public must be made acquainted with all the different styles and outlooks which are the characteristics of South African artists who are striving for a distinct nationalism in art.<sup>8</sup>

Francois's efforts to establish a Dominion Art Institute have been described in Chapter One. Opposition to a Royal Charter was discussed, as well as the lack of enthusiasm for an academic coterie of practising artists. As explained, Francois's chief aim was to promote a national art, or, as he worded it in his formal proposal, "to bring about unity among artists and gradually work for a high standard."<sup>9</sup> This was one of the proposals put forward to the many delegates who met in Bloemfontein to discuss the formation of the Institute. Others included the arrangement of an annual exhibition, advising the Government on art education matters, lobbying for financial concessions for exhibiting artists (eg. the lifting of import charges on painting materials),

and the provision of scholarships for promising students.<sup>10</sup>

The question of a Royal Charter was, of course, mooted and severely criticised. The scheme as a whole was not received with great enthusiasm, except by Francois's colleagues from the NSA. The other Provincial delegates were afraid of interference. The S.A. Society of Artists resented being upstaged as the organiser of national art events.<sup>11</sup> The K Club in Capetown were anxious that modern art would be prejudiced by the scheme, and the E.P. Society of Arts and Crafts were radically opposed to a federation of South African art societies.<sup>12</sup> The scope and activities as finally laid down were disappointingly vague:

1. To promote the intercourse of societies and individuals interested in art in South Africa and elsewhere, and to encourage the holding of exhibitions of works of art.
2. To encourage the teaching of arts and crafts.
3. To emphasise the value of art as an element in culture and to work for the removal of any disadvantages which may be hindering its better cultivation.<sup>13</sup>

Far from removing hindrances, the S.A. Institute of Art, as it became known, appears to have removed those polite barriers which prevented the various art societies from expressing their opinions of one another too openly.

The artists themselves made their opinion felt by

boycotting the Institute's first exhibition in Durban. This was held in July 1927 in Shaw Bros. Wool Mart, the NSA having relinquished their claim on this venue for the Institute's benefit. There were only 198 paintings.

It is a matter of regret that so many South African artists are not exhibiting at the present exhibition. One would like to have seen this first exhibition of the South African Institute of Art more representative. There is a tendency at present for artists to reserve their works for one-man shows instead of sending them to representative exhibitions. If the artists themselves fail to support an Institution which aims at assisting and furthering the development of art in this country, they cannot blame the public - as so many of them do - for not giving all the support one would wish.<sup>14</sup>

Many artists disapproved of the proposed creation of a national style:

When I say it is the purest nonsense to say or believe that Academies and Institutes can develop Art, I do not deny that it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they might be useful in cheapening railway freights, reducing the duty on artists' materials and above all by providing a body of academic opinion for the real artist to react from.

For these three excellent reasons I have supported the idea of an Institute, but I have publically stated on more than one occasion that I consider the notion that such a body can foster a national Art as merely silly. ...The art-world of Europe is at present like a several weeks old battlefield. Most of the academies are already

dead and decently buried, but some, like the Royal Academy (as it has been said) are in an advanced state of decomposition.

I have high hopes for the future of art in South Africa, for we have no rotting body of "National art" to inter.<sup>15</sup>

Francois, with his charm and strong personality, had overcome many obstacles which had threatened to prevent the Institute from coming into being, and it was Francois who kept it alive for the few brief years of its existence. As Berman points out in her account of the Institute's history,<sup>16</sup> it received greatest support in Natal where Francois's involvement with both the Institute and the NSA lead to an unfortunate blurring of identity. In 1928 the S.A. Society of Artists accused the NSA of taking over the running of the Institute and used this as an excuse to persuade the Government to allow the SASA full responsibility for the Empire exhibit at Wembley as the only legitimate national art body. Francois was stunned.<sup>17</sup> This was not the final blow, however. In 1929 the Government obviously lost patience with the Cape society, as all financial support for the Wembley exhibition was summarily withdrawn and Prof. Wheatley of the Michaelis School of Art was appointed sole adjudicator.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, it was the Minister of Education (Dr D.F. Malan) who gave Francois the most enthusiastic support during the early days of the Institute.<sup>19</sup> But considering the appalling financial situation in South Africa after the Wall Street crash later that year it is very likely that the artists would have lost most Government support anyway.<sup>20</sup>

The death of the Institute was probably due to natural causes: the apathy of the artists, the inability to agree on headquarters after the Cape/Natal row, a distaste in some quarters for the encouragement of nationalism,<sup>21</sup> and, not least, the lack of enthusiasm for the projected annual exhibition. It was pointed out in Chapter One that artists enjoyed a convenient and well-planned exhibition circuit. The necessity for the Institute to hold an annual exhibition interfered with this arrangement. The other art societies didn't take kindly to relinquishing their most lucrative art event of the year for the sake of an idealistic art organisation.

But what of "national art"? Francois certainly didn't relax his efforts. In almost every "Art Causerie" he took the opportunity to remind the public that South Africa was developing a national art. The exasperated public sometimes wearied of this barrage of propaganda:

It has been my pleasure to view most of the Natal Society's picture exhibitions from its inauguration, and I feel impelled to add my opinion to several others that have appeared in your columns. I quite fail to see the present exhibition "shows that South Africa is evolving a school of its own - although it is in its infancy." To my mind there is far too much infancy! The last two or three exhibitions do not approach what I call "quality" in art expression as compared with most shows of a few years ago.<sup>22</sup>

And from William Plomer:

While you are to be congratulated on the amount of space you allow for your Art Causerie, and for news about painting generally, yet the enthusiasm of your contributor "Vermilion" seems at times likely to mislead those who may be influenced by what he writes. Is it not possible that all this striving after a South African national art may produce nothing but a self-conscious and academic coterie of very indifferent painters? We are in danger of too many veld-yearnings, too much Karoo-urge, too frequent sunsets on the Drakensberg, and moonrisings on Groot Constantia. A little less landscape and a little more portraiture would be highly stimulating.<sup>23</sup>

Plomer was touching what was to become a raw nerve.

#### Landscape painting in Natal

Critics regularly complained that landscape paintings outnumbered any other kind at exhibitions.<sup>24</sup> This was

partly the fault of the critics themselves. From an early date artists and public alike were encouraged to associate landscape with chauvenistic feelings.

Asked to define national art, the gentlemen [Francois and B.V. Bartholomew] said the geographical and physical features of South Africa were so unlike any other country in the world - in fact, the very atmosphere was so enchanting that art must find expression on quite distinct lines.<sup>25</sup>

In the following quotation Francois consciously associates the painting of landscape and indigenous subjects with patriotism:

The great feature of Mr Francois' address on a national art was his fervent appeal to the patriotism of South African artists. To weld the two great races with their wonderful art traditions of their ancestors into a homogeneous whole art would play one of the great factors. He said, "Love your country and paint it with the spirit of love. Study the mysticism of the land in which you live and you will achieve great things. There are different atmospheres which may produce different schools, but there is only one luminosity in South Africa unequalled, unrivalled in the world."<sup>26</sup>

In Natal the founder of the landscape school was undoubtedly C.W. Methven.<sup>27</sup> And Methven's concept of landscape was linked closely to his memories of Britain. Indeed, to some South Africans of the early 20th century,

this indigenous, hostile landscape lacked the beauties of Europe or "Home". John X. Merriman, in opening an exhibition of Italian and Dutch scenes by Edward Roworth, had this to say:

He did not know whether in these modern days South Africa would ever succeed in becoming an artistic country. We had no atmosphere. Everything was hard and clear. We had no trees, and no rivers, and without trees and water it was impossible to make a beautiful landscape.<sup>28</sup>

Natalians were quick to respond.

Mr Merriman gives way to this obsession in denying South Africa as a potential nursery of the art of painting. ...What has Mr Merriman been doing all these years with his eyes, when he moves about the Cape Peninsula or retires to his Stellenbosch home, re-visits the scenes of his boyhood in the Eastern Province or crosses the Hex River Mountains? The Garden Colony of Natal, from the picturesque coast, through the undulating Midlands, to the majestic Berg, with its bold eminences, its ravines and cascades might well be called a painter's paradise. ...It has taken centuries to produce pre-eminence in the landscape art in older countries. In order that art may flourish there must be a public that appreciates art, and is ready generously to encourage it by offering the artist commensurate rewards for his labours. South Africa is deficient in these conditions, but is not wanting either in the natural atmosphere or the topographical features proper for artistic inspiration.<sup>29</sup>

Merriman was probably referring to the vast expanses of

desert found elsewhere in South Africa. Before World War I these were considered very unpicturesque. Not at all like the pretty scenery referred to above. And, as long as there were places reminiscent of "Home", Natal artists were prepared to paint them. Methven introduced a repertoire of suitable subjects for landscape artists that were to be repeated in the same manner ad nauseam: the Drakensberg, the inland farming areas, [i.e. the green farming areas. Few artists of the period deigned to depict Northern Natal] sunsets on Durban Bay, sunrises on the South Coast [artists rarely painted the North Coast], Zululand, and, the Valley of a Thousand Hills.<sup>30</sup> This was satirised in Roy Campbell's poem, The Wayzgoose:

The Rising Sunset brightened on the scene  
Somewhere around the coast of Karridene -  
Seldom do suns such striking talent show  
As when they set Natalian woods aglow,  
And surely from the stir that this one made  
He must have been a student at the Slade -  
Save for his lack of frame and awkward size  
He might have won the Gundelfinger Prize:<sup>31</sup>  
A hundred guineas would have been his glow worth  
Had it been signed by Goodman or by Roworth.<sup>32</sup>

Styles of depiction were also, until about 1920, invariably based on those of 19th century Britain. It was often pointed out that the subject matter might be patriotic,

but the manner foreign. In a lecture given in Johannesburg in 1919 J.H. Amschewitz criticises this tendency to cling to overseas traditions:

Artistic expression [in South Africa] had not developed beyond landscape painting of a somewhat conventional and unimaginative type, and the demand caused the supply, for the artist must live. It had been suggested that it would be of great interest to have a room in the art gallery devoted to South African art. Well, the pictures would be South African in subject alone. To be quite candid, it would be a collection of somewhat mediocre European paintings.<sup>33</sup>

After the Great War artists slowly became aware of the less European aspects of South African scenery.

...it is on the Karoo and the vast expanse of the high veld, with its thunderstorms and evening light effects, that the real spirit of Africa reveals itself.<sup>34</sup>

These characteristics are eulogised in Roworth's essay on South African landscape published in The Studio in 1917.<sup>35</sup> Roworth himself was remarkably reluctant to take advantage of them, however. His landscapes are invariably of Cape Dutch houses nestling in the autumnal shade of large trees. It was only in the 1930s that landscape artists could claim to have come to terms with the "veld-yearnings" and "Karoo-urge" referred to by Plomer in 1925.

Te Water, High Commissioner for South Africa in London,

wrote his survey of South African art for The Studio in 1934. Enormous changes had taken place between these two issues. Accompanying the following extract from Te Water's article is a reproduction of Pierneef's Valley of desolation, one of the recently completed Johannesburg Railway Station panels.

...the eye accustomed to the African veld must instinctively create a perspective not dreamed of in European art: while the blinding mirage on every hot horizon, the sharp brilliancy of nature's palette, and the harsh, striated contours of mountain and limitless veld compels the African artist to a technique of colour and form which must often appear strange and even grotesque to the European eye. For there results an over-emphasis of light and shadow, and an angularity and architectural quality seldom seen in English, French or Italian landscape.<sup>36</sup>

Had Natal taken part in this artistic revolution? Or was there no development after Methven's Giant's Castle of 1913? Most histories of South African painting suggest that Natal's contribution to landscape was minimal.<sup>37</sup> This may be due to the absence in Natal of any outstanding painters. Clément Sèneque is the only Natal artist of the twenties and thirties to have received any recognition by later historians. Fransen refers to him as "the best Natal artist of the twenties" and, in a short essay in which he "rediscovers" Sèneque in 1968, Walter Battiss claims:

History is apt to play eccentric tricks with artists: some who are quite insignificant are remembered, some who are significant are forgotten.<sup>38</sup>

Battiss might have said, with more accuracy, that historians are apt to play eccentric tricks with artists. There is a tendency in writings on South Africa art to over-simplify.<sup>39</sup> Most recent South African art historians attempt to relate painting by white South Africans to the "Western" tradition in an inflexible compartmentalised fashion. This cannot be lightly brushed aside. Contemporary commentators were equally anxious to link local artists with significant overseas movements. A popular source of comparison was French Impressionism.

...Mrs Everard paints in the bold free manner of the French Impressionists and her work is of high artistic merit...<sup>40</sup>

And:

A.J. Bennett has several uncommonly bold efforts in the impressionist style.<sup>41</sup>

However, the problem lies, not with those works that can be related to European trends but with the vast majority that cannot. These are invariably associated with "academism":

One of our early publications, however, stands as a serious critical work: THE NAKED EYE by David Lewis.

Published in 1946 when art in South Africa was struggling to break the suffocating hold of moribund academism, it adopts a severe attitude towards visual cliché and eclecticism, and propogates personal involvement with subject and style and vigorous pictorial expression. It was perhaps the first essay published in book form that hammered the academic decorum and lifeless realism of the "establishment" artists while putting the significant art of the forties into a universal art context and judging it accordingly.<sup>42</sup>

What is "moribund academism"? Are academics those painters who followed outdated styles or methods and, in the face of reason, refused to be "avant-garde", or are they those who can't be forced into the convenient pigeon-holes of art historians. Berman also addresses the problem in The story of South African painting<sup>43</sup> but falls into the same trap as those writers she accuses of seeking artificial parallels between South African and European art. Painting (she seems to say) progressed through a series of "isms": Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Futurism, etc. Therefore we must find South Africa heroes to fit into the approved pattern. All outsiders who obstinately avoided art historical progress are indiscriminately labelled "academic" (the term being used in a derogatory sense). Unfortunately, the "academics" far outweigh the avant-garde, especially in Natal. This dilemma also exists in Britain.

Simon Watney discusses the problem at some length:

One result of this process has been the familiar readiness, particularly on the part of British critics and historians, simply to pair-off English and French painters in a series of what are seen as one-to-one relationships of direct and unmediated influence. Thus Duncan Grant, for example, has been consistently cast in the peculiar role of the British Matisse (he used colour!), with Spencer Gore as the British Cézanne and Ginner and Gilman fighting it out for laurels as the English Van Gogh, and so on. This is deeply unsatisfactory.<sup>44</sup>

How embarassingly familiar this is. Who has not heard of Irma Stern, the "expressionist", Caldecott, the "impressionist", Preller, the "surrealist", and Pierneef, the "cubist"? It is probably Natal's inability to produce an artist in any of these categories that has resulted in an unwillingness to investigate this period. It is highly ironic that many artists who were regarded at the time as daringly modern are now dismissed as "moribund" and "academic."

Those artists in Natal who aligned themselves with "modern" trends will be discussed in the next chapter. Meanwhile the problem of the so-called "academics" needs to be addressed.

South African painting during the twenties and thirties,

and especially landscape painting, was in a state of flux. There were no groups or manifestos with which artists cared to identify themselves, apart from the various clubs and societies whose allegiances, if any, were provincial. The NSA, for example, embraced a wide membership and artists exhibiting at the annual exhibitions came from every part of South Africa.<sup>45</sup> Even the NSA Sketch Club<sup>46</sup> was a purely amateur body existing for the convenience of those who needed companionship or guidance. Provincial self-interest was commonly the result of that geographical or political isolation that existed before Union and is referred to by the anonymous reviewer who objected so strongly, in 1911, to the idea of a South African academy:

For the present, at all events, more active work is likely to be done by the existing local societies than by a centralised body of artists. There is the practical difficulty of the immense distances between the chief centres of population where art must be cradled and nourished before it attains the vigorous growth that would justify a scheme of art centralisation.<sup>47</sup>

The South African Society of Artists in Capetown was the oldest establishment in South Africa. From an early date the Cape artists were distinguished by a greater sophistication and homogeneity of style:

In Capetown, as the oldest urban community in South

Africa, art has numerous votaries, and has even developed a style of painting which, while effective enough when used by the thoroughly well-trained artist, is a dangerous school for the beginner to follow...in which sketchiness is mistaken for breadth. It requires the hand of a master to get fruitful effects and detail as well by a few broad touches, and no attempts at brilliant colour schemes can ever compensate for careless drawing, or make a picture of a mere outline.<sup>48</sup>

Followers of Methven's meticulous Victorian landscapes were understandably shocked by the apparently slapdash brushwork of artists such as Roworth, Churchill Mace, Edwards, Constance Penstone, Glossop and Naude.<sup>49</sup> Another criticism was the tendency of Cape artists to exhibit works of an intimate rather than impressive nature:

We have had to comment at times on the large number of "postcard" pictures... Attempts at portraying the Drakensberg or Table Mountain on a bit of canvas or a board about 3 ins. by 4 ins. was absurd, and was not art in any shape or form. It was an outline devoid of modelling and monotonous in colour which some of the Cape artists affected to such an extent that it was a mere trick, and a very meagre apology for a picture. Big subjects, as a rule, demanded big canvases.<sup>50</sup>

Of all the landscape groups, the Cape artists were closest to a South African "impressionism". Hugo Naude, in particular, was sensitive to the French use of complementary colour in the building up of form. Natal critics found his use of blue

shadows particularly disturbing:

[Naude] treats his subjects boldly, but there is a coldness and occasionally a rawness, in his colour that sometimes detracts from what is otherwise excellent artistic work. Mr Naude seems particularly partial to cold purples in his landscapes...<sup>51</sup>

Natal critics were not only disconcerted by the unfamiliar but characteristic colouring of Cape scenery, but, one suspects, were wedded to the colonial idea that African landscapes had to be "hot". Francois was to acknowledge the distinctions between the various provinces,<sup>52</sup> but surely such distinctions were inimical to his ideal of a "national style"?

After 1910, as artists began to move from province to province, exhibiting freely throughout the Union, one is certainly aware of a blurring of stylistic outlines. There emerged national figures such as R. Gwelo Goodman whose prestige and opinion were so powerful that few landscape artists of the twenties escaped his influence. And, with the exchange of artists between provinces, one finds much borrowing of stylistic qualities. Indeed, provincial distinctions became associated with subject matter rather than style. Cape artists could be recognised by their frequent adherence to Table Mountain, Cape Dutch farmhouses,

and purple mountains, just as Natal artists found refuge in the Drakensberg and Durban Bay.

Despite these realignments, provincial rivalries continued with undiminished acerbity. Francois often commented on Cape hostility towards other Union artists,<sup>53</sup> and in an editorial published by the Natal Advertiser one finds an amusing description of prevailing attitudes between the Provinces:

It is symptomatic of the times that a wrangle should be going on as to which is the cultural centre of South Africa. It is equally symptomatic that the two main contestants should be Johannesburg and Capetown. Fortified by the recollection of close upon three hundred years of history, the mother city has still not acquired the dignified calm that should be time's chief endowment. It still ruffles its feathers when the parvenu "Rand" smiles at its claims of long descent. "How," says the Cape in effect, "do you reckon the cultural dimensions of a city? Is it in terms of art galleries, private picture collections, chamber music, unspoiled landscapes, the homesteads of the painters, the population of its Grub Streets? In all these matters we have achievements to boast that put us at once and for all time in a class by ourselves. We are, so far as South Africa is concerned, not merely first among equals. We are in a class by ourselves."

To which the Rand replies, after the fashion of the Nouveau Riche, "Bah! Where do the musical artists find most appreciation? Where are most pictures sold? Where does every artist migrate once he can raise the fare to reach the Transvaal? Ask the auctioneers, ask the booksellers. Ask the box office. They are the ultimate

judges on matters of this kind."

And at this stage, like the irrepressible clown in the farce, Durban bobs up with a grammar of dissent. "Art?" says Durban. "Why this town is its real home! Smaller in population than the other two major towns of the country, and poorer in revenue, nevertheless, this is culture's real headquarters.... Have we not the annual exhibition of the Natal Society of Artists? and did we not breed the only poet this land has produced - Mr Roy Campbell? Where but on the Eastern slopes of the Drakensberg could Orpheus play his lute as to the manner born, or pan his pipes as in the days when the world was young?"<sup>54</sup>

#### Landscape painting in Natal

Artists exhibiting at the NSA in the twenties and thirties found themselves in very mixed company. Sunday painters and students rubbed shoulders with a small number of teachers and full-time artists from Natal and elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> In such an environment it is inevitable that a handful of names should stand out in importance.

A number of Natal artists adopted those impressionist qualities used by the Cape painters. One popular landscape painter, Allerley Glossop, had indeed, started her South African painting activities in Capetown at the turn of the century.<sup>56</sup> She moved to Natal in 1925 and built her own

studio in the Natal Midlands. Her style hardly changed throughout her career. In the 1930s she was still producing those abbreviated works that Natal critics had so objected to in 1911. Cattle in a landscape [193?] [Pl. 60] in which several oxen make their way across a vague and inarticulate landscape, differs very little from The sea-mist [Pl. 61], an early Cape scene. Her output was enormous and, one regrets to say, monotonous, though her best work shares the freshness and bright colour of Naude. In The beech copse (1926) [Pl. 62] one finds a sensual use of paint, expressive colour and sense of space in common with Naude's Namaqualand scenes. These qualities can also be seen in some of the small Berg landscapes [Pl. 63, 64] in which she combines skillful simplification of form and glowing tones. Unfortunately, the majority of her landscapes lack sensuousness of any kind. Drakensberg scene [Pl. 65] is a typical example of her early work where dark brown and dark green predominate in an insubstantial composition. Larger works suffer from an inability to concentrate the viewer's attention on a focal point. In Southern Ramparts, Basutoland (1926) [Pl. 66] unrelated elements are combined in an unresolved composition. One has the impression that she would have preferred to divide the canvas into several

individual works.

Of the other Natal artists who explored this local impressionism only one did so with skill and accomplishment. This was William Sharp, an amateur who ran a picture-framing store in Durban. In his work Sharp was exposed to the styles of every exhibiting artist who came to Durban at that time. It is all the more surprising that his own work should exhibit such individuality. In Isipingo, the boy's hostel (1934) [Pl. 67] a range of pastel colours is used to define form and space. The sunlit building is viewed through a screen of trees. In the foreground blue shadows alternate with the startlingly bright sunlit field. Other works, such as Near Dundee, Natal [Pl. 68], show the possible influence of Paton, but on the whole his work stands alone, a fact acknowledged by critics of the time:

William Sharp is essentially a sincere painter, a lover of Nature, which he depicts in an unobtrusive manner as his mood dictates. He is little influenced by the methods of others, striving in his own way to realise what to him appears as the essential in art.<sup>57</sup>

Most artists were heavily indebted, not to European styles and movements, but to those South Africans who had made use of a Europe training to increase their prestige back in South Africa. The most influential painter at that time

was Gwelo Goodman, who had been sent to France to the Academié Julian and who exhibited in Natal for the first time in 1919.<sup>58</sup> He and Wallace Paton<sup>59</sup> were to dominate the style of Natal landscape until the thirties. Their influence was remarked on early in the period:

The work of Mr Goodman and Mr Paton has had an undoubted influence for good upon much of the work shown this year. The deliberately chosen bases of pattern, the building up of significant masses and tones, and the pure colour all point to the example of the older men.<sup>60</sup>

Goodman was regarded at the time as a colourist and was sometimes compared with Walter Richard Sickert, the English Impressionist.<sup>61</sup> He would probably have rejected such a comparison. Like Francois, he was a patriot strongly in favour of a South African style of painting. In a "Letter to the students" of 1919 Goodman outlined his ambitions for the art of the future:

A field as yet untouched and unrecorded, clamouring for expression, our landscape with its wealth of colour the fierce glory of our sunshine, great open spaces, mountain structure beyond compare, and vegetation of the greatest variety, a variety as great as our climate, all possessing the joy and delight of the unknown and unexplored in art; we have none of the faded and tired influences of Europe nor should we tolerate their importation. We must live by and express ourselves for ourselves; every man and woman who makes South Africa his

home must become a good South African and every boy and girl in South Africa must feel that only the best is good enough for our new and beloved country.<sup>62</sup>

In 1920 his painting Schoongezicht [Pl. 69], a view of the Cape home of John X. Merriman, was purchased by subscription from the NSA for the Durban Art Gallery.<sup>63</sup> Merriman, whose remarks about the South African atmosphere had offended Natalians in 1913 (see above) was Goodman's friend. He wrote the foreword for the catalogue of Goodman's first one-man show in Johannesburg in 1916.

Mr Goodman is a South African who has, with infinite pains and much self-sacrifice, conquered for himself a place in the artistic world. He has come to try and repay his debt to his Mother Country by interpreting South Africa to South Africans. To teach us what beauty there is in our vast spaces of desert, in our barren hills, in our glorious sunshine, and, above all, in those infinitely pellucid skies which the daily recurring wonder of dawn and sunset bring to refresh our souls.<sup>64</sup>

Schoongezicht was greatly admired at the time and is a useful example showing Goodman's style and technique. This is described in full by Newton-Thompson:

The picture has proved to be one of the most popular in the Gallery, the reason for this popularity being the strong sunlight which pours through the leafless fruit-trees onto the white gable and dapples the ground with pink and yellow spots of colour. Much of the

brilliance of the picture is due to the use of a Divisionist technique and canvas covered first with an even wash of burnt umber. The shimmering light of a summer day has been economically suggested by putting the colour on in dabs of brilliant yellow, orange and pink, which are thrown into dramatic contrast by the very dark background which edges each spot of colour. The sparkle of the picture is thus achieved by the juxtaposition of bright and dark. Signac employed the same Divisionist technique but, in his case, he used blues, green and pinks with a white canvas showing through.<sup>65</sup>

This use of a dark ground is very characteristic of painting taught at the academies during the early 20th century, and is one of the trends most often rejected by non-academic art movements such as Impressionism. It is the one feature that entitles historians to describe Natal painting as "academic".<sup>66</sup> Goodman's brushwork and colour sense, however, do not relate to British academism of the twenties:

The "Daily Telegraph" in a critique on Mr. Gwelo Goodman's pictures says that Mr. Goodman expresses his ideas with the utmost emphasis by means of sharp vigorous strokes of the brush each series of which tells against its neighbour.

Nowhere is there any trace of indecision, blurring of outline or vagueness of form or colour.

The critic declares that such technique might well not enable him to describe English scenery over which there always hangs a veil of atmospheric grey, but in the clear air of South Africa no method could be more nicely adapted to the purposes of pictorial art.<sup>67</sup>

This technique was used by almost every important landscape painter in Natal; it can certainly be seen in works by Sénèque, Francois, Williams and others. Decorative brushwork and colour was universal, as was the popularity of forms surrounded by dark outlines.

Sénèque's technique, as described by Francois, is very similar to that of Goodman:

He was anything but a haphazard painter. On the contrary, he would go back to a scene many times, gauging all its potentialities before putting his well-worn stump of charcoal to paper. Once having made up his mind, he would determine the composition in a few leading lines. If these pleased him, he would proceed to work it up in a more complete direct sketch in oil, watercolour, or gouache, and, should it be necessary for a large studio canvas, a still bigger colour drawing would be made with properly adjusted highlights and co-ordinate essential details. Only then, assuming that his drawing coincided with his original conception, would he start on the big canvas. His methods were simple, working on a previously prepared light umber ground, he made a careful line drawing in charcoal, not omitting a single detail. He rarely painted over another colour, and rather than manipulate his effects, the palette knife would remove the offending colour to make room for the right tones.<sup>68</sup>

Sénèque was openly hostile towards modernist tendencies:

Asked as to what was his opinion about present-day art in France, Mr Sénèque has no hesitation about the tendency

towards a more normal outlook. The works of so-called moderns: Cezanne, Gauguin, Manet, Degas, Pinaro (sic), representing a type of their times, were now fetching enormous prices, but whatever the influence of their outlook may have been felt by others, is not expressed by such men as Henri Lebasque, Rigaut and Pierre Laurence, who are among the great painters of the day. Eccentric freak-painting of questionable impressionism, futurism or cubism is rarely seen now, and a school of pure design, pattern and composition, together with true harmony in colours, is taking their place.<sup>69</sup>

So much for his classification by Battiss, Werth and others as an "impressionist".<sup>70</sup>

Influences on Sénèque's work are identifiable but hard to confirm. One can assume that Sénèque was familiar with the works of Goodman before his departure for France. And, apart from a greater awareness of architectural structure, there is little stylistic difference between works painted before and after his visit to Paris (1922-1924).<sup>71</sup>

Botanical gardens (1922) [Pl. 70] is a loosely painted, tropical scene, abstract and colourful, with bold brushwork. There is little artistic progression from this work to Alhambra gardens (1929) [Pl. 71].

Landscapes from the French period consist mainly of views of the French and Swiss Alps. Mont Blanc from Sallanches [Pl. 72], which was purchased for the Durban Art

Gallery on his return in 1925, shows a characteristic use of pattern and scale. Brushstrokes follow the contours of the mountains and are used with great economy to describe the village buildings in the foreground. In French Alps (1924) [Pl. 73], on the other hand, his bold use of tone gives the mountains a stereoscopic quality.

An alpine chalet (1924) [Pl. 74] shows very clearly that technique described by Francois in S  n  que's obituary, quoted above. The brushstrokes are separate, exposing the brown primer beneath, and are used decoratively to describe the architectural elements of the buildings. Tonal contrasts are sharp, and colours are decorative rather than descriptive.

Works produced after his return to South Africa show the same characteristics. In Cape Town, early morning (1926) [Pl. 75] one sees the same flat blue sky and sharp light effects, and in Gorge in the Valley of a Thousand Hills [Pl. 76], the same brilliant effect produced by many separate applications of pure colour on a dark ground. One of his most impressive works is Shongweni Dam (1927) [Pl. 76] (Durban Art Gallery), exhibited in 1927 at the S.A. Institute of Art in Durban:

Mr. Clement S  n  que's most ambitious canvas on view - one of the biggest, both in conception and actual size, that he has painted - is his impression of the Shongweni dam

under construction (No. 116). The workers are seen engaged in quarrying the stone under the overshadowing bulk of the giant rampart, while the winter sunshine reflected on to buttress and the overflow pool has been happily captured by the skilful brush of the artist.<sup>72</sup>

The similarities in draughtsmanship and scale sometimes lead to comparison between S  n  que and the English artist/architect, Frank Brangwyn.<sup>73</sup> Like Methven and Paton before him, S  n  que must have been influenced by his architectural training in Durban and Paris.<sup>74</sup>

S  n  que's importance to Natal, despite his relatively short career (he died at 34), is immense. Numerous contemporaries and younger artists admired and copied his style, thus producing what might be described as a Natal School of the twenties.

S  n  que never visited the Drakensberg so one can only guess at his response to mountain scenery in an African setting. But one can still draw comparisons between S  n  que's work and that of other landscape artists in order to pin-point relationships in style between Natal and the rest of South Africa.

There are three large versions of The Sentinel, a peak in the Drakensberg, painted from the same point of view by Gwelo Goodman, Edward Roworth, and a younger contemporary of

Sénèque's, Nils Andersen. The Roworth [Pl. 78] is recognisably the product of a Cape artist in its soft outlines and heavy paint. Goodman's The Sentinel [Pl. 79] is in pastel but nevertheless demonstrates his approach to colour and composition. There is a much greater variety of tone and texture. The dark shadows are sharply defined, and light areas are a mosaic of brilliant points of colour. It is obvious in the startling solidity of a work such as French Alps and the sparkling colour and brushwork in Gorge in the Valley of a Thousand Hills that Sénèque's style embraces qualities from both artists.

Turning to Andersen's Spring in the mountains [Pl. 80] it is immediately obvious that he has absorbed all Sénèque's mannerisms but lacks his ability to describe form. Much that is weak in Natal art of the period can be ascribed to this aping of Sénèque's technique. There is a lack of subtlety in Sénèque's work that was apparent to an objective critic such as John Adams but which escaped Leo Francois who regarded Sénèque as his protégé.<sup>75</sup>

There is a danger in a few of the landscapes by Mr Seneque...of the artist being led astray by the fascination of applying paint for its own sake, without sufficient regard to the more subtle qualities. This occasionally degenerates into certain mannerisms, such as the too frequent and obvious use of yellow to obtain the

effect of sunlight instead of studying more deeply the numberless changes which sunlight of varying quality in an endless succession of circumstances, may have upon the forms in nature.<sup>76</sup>

Andersen's debt to S n que is not always negative. In marine subjects such as Ship in dry dock [Pl. 81, 82] Andersen and S n que share an appreciation for the decorative qualities of scaffolding and rigging, a subject entirely suited to this very linear style. And Andersen's West Street, Durban (1932) [Pl. 83] compares very favourably with S n que's Town Hall, Durban [Pl. 84]. Although not an architect, Andersen was able to produce a more challenging interplay of form and space. The unusual use of the next door building seen at close quarters to the right of the picture contrasts with the street facade below seen in sharp perspective. The focal point is Durban's new skyscraper of the thirties, the Colonial Mutual Building, under construction, with the old Town Hall clock in the far distance.<sup>77</sup>

Andersen also owes his introduction to watercolour to S n que, through their association at the NSA Sketch Club. S n que was Chairman of this group and, with John Williams, a commercial artist, helped to run the clubroom. Its function (see Chapter 4) was to provide a live model once a week and

to organise sketching parties in and around Durban.

Watercolours and drawings were the most common products of the members and were shown at regular informal exhibitions.

Early watercolours by Andersen such as Relaxing aboard vessel [Pl. 85] and Fishing boats in harbour [Pl. 86] certainly justify the following remark:

Two years ago Mr N.S. Anderson (sic) could hardly draw, and now he has no less than five works on the wall.<sup>78</sup>

Palm trees (1928) [Pl. 87] (Durban Art Gallery) shows a dramatic improvement in draughtsmanship and technique and, in fact, surpasses a similar work by S n que: Durban Bay from the Esplanade (1926) [Pl. 88].

John Williams, fellow-member of the Sketch Club, also copied S n que, but with less success. Never a good draughtsman, Williams was at first barely able to paint. Berg scene with huts (1925) [Pl. 89], is a crude work. The mountains in the background are a pastiche of S n que's technique and the foreground is occupied by a totally inexplicable structure which forms a dark hole in the middle of the painting. By comparison The old shed [Pl. 90] (Durban Art Gallery), although insensitively painted, is a pleasing tonal composition. Williams is most successful when he is able to mimic other artists' visions of the Berg. The

Eastern Buttress [Pl. 91] is reminiscent of Glossop in its simplicity and of S  n  que in the pattern formed by the brushstrokes.

S  n  que was not the only artist to influence trends in Natal. Francois, besides being a critic and historian, was himself a prolific artist and, as "Vermilion", gave himself extensive publicity in "Art Causerie". A newcomer to the columns of "Vermilion" might well be taken in by his sincere tone when describing the works of Mr Francois:

The President of the Society, Mr Francois, is represented this year by a larger collection than usual, which in some respects is remarkable for its versatility in style. To those who know his enthusiasm, his work is a clear index to his ideas and ideals in art. No. 20 is a bold attempt of a powerful subject which at once appeals by its clever composition and the fine colouring of a moonshine atmosphere. No. 30, Umgeni Valley from the Ridge, is remarkable for its subtle treatment of neutral greens with a powerful foreground, while No. 34, Pool on the Umzimkulwana, is rich in colouring and composition and very alluring.<sup>79</sup>

There is no evidence that Francois employed a ghost writer to criticise his own works under his alias, so, outrageous though it may seem, one must believe that Francois was indeed guilty of this blatant self-advertisement. "Vermilion" curtailed his more extravagant praise after the appearance of

Roy Campbell's Wayzgoose, however:

Another 'painter' came as I presume  
Wheeled in a bath-chair by his nom-de-plume,  
Who weekly praised him (paint whate'er he might)  
In the third person - which was only right.  
How much he paid himself such tricks to do  
Only himself and his own alias knew,  
Yet oft he cursed the younger generation  
For 'scratching backs' and 'mutual admiration',  
For it is wrong that artists fight in pairs -  
Though any tradesman may exalt his wares  
Or join his fellows in an honest guild,  
Each by the other's admiration thrilled,  
And ready all, in one great yelping pack,  
To stab a single artist in the back -  
And it is wrong that two should fight abreast  
When by a thousand yelping curs oppressed:  
Far worse, when making rifles of our pens,  
We drive them howling back into their dens.  
How can young men such decent manners lack  
That when they mob us - we should hit them back? -  
Pass, 'painter', pass, take off that tearful gaze,  
And long live Francois in 'Vermilion's' praise!<sup>80</sup>

If Sénèque's paintings appear at times to be superficial, they are usually rescued from banality by an urgency and robustness. Francois's work lacks this urgency. Pleasant and decorative, but affected, his paintings carry artificiality to an extreme. He had a formula for everything: mountains, trees, rivers, bushes - his works are constant permutations of themselves. It is possible that

Francois was influenced by the young Transvaal artist, J.H. Pierneef. He was certainly an admirer of Pierneef's compositions and, more importantly of his striving towards nationalism, as his numerous reviews as "Vermilion" testify, and he would have been familiar with Pierneef's work from the early twenties. Two works by these artists, painted in 1930 show similar interests. Old road to the diamond fields [1930] [Pl. 92] (Durban Art Gallery) by Francois shows a dramatic cloud formation over a stony landscape. The composition is almost symmetrical with the cloud shape echoing the sunlit ground. Each stone is painted in the same detail neutralising the perspective in the foreground. In Pierneef's Summer clouds in the Bushveld (1930) [Pl. 93] his familiar pattern-making can be seen. The clouds that rear up in the background are flat shapes relating to the semi-circular crowns of the trees. The relationship between the work of the two artists is more obvious in two later paintings: Francois's The Intafufu, Pondoland (1937/8) [Pl. 94] and Pierneef's Landscape with meandering river (1937) [Pl. 95] are practically identical in composition and treatment. One sees the same frozen river, simplified tree to the right and gently sloping hills and bushes in the distance.

The majority of Francois's oils lack movement of any kind. Trees are often leafless providing Francois with the opportunity to create a delicate pattern of branches often against a background of garish colour [Pl. 96, 97]. Bushes and leaves are commonly expressed as simplified masses [Pl. 98, 99]. Most characteristic are Francois's hills and mountains. Forms are smoothly modelled and distance is suggested through the use of pastel shades [Pl. 100, 101].

Artists of the thirties, such as Nils Andersen, A.J. Bennett, Edith Ward and Basil Sampson, show the influence of both S  n  que and Francois in various personal versions of this Natal landscape style.

Nils Andersen's Kathkin (sic) Peak, Drakensberg [Pl. 102] , and Fever trees at Letaba [1934] [Pl. 103] show a marked similarity to Francois's manner and technique in the smoothly modelled mountains and stylised plant forms.

A.J. Bennett's earlier works such as Moonlight (1910) [Pl. 104] and The road to Banff [Pl. 105] show a startling use of pointillism influenced, no doubt, by a personal interpretation of Van Gogh. Critics accused him of having a "tendency to spottiness".<sup>81</sup> Jamieson Park (1933) [Pl. 106] is decidedly more subdued with echoes of S  n  que's Alhambra Gardens.

Edith Ward's works in oil are, unfortunately, only known from black and white reproductions. [There are no examples in public collections, and none could be traced in private collections.] However, a work such as Durban winter [1935] [Pl. 107] obviously relates strongly to Francois's Dawn, South Coast [Pl. 97] in its composition and treatment of elements such as the bare tree.

A comparative late-comer to Natal was Basil Sampson, a personal friend of George Clausen, who was sometimes accused of imitating his style.<sup>82</sup> There is certainly a freedom in Sampson's oils which relates to the late works of Clausen, and in particular, the watercolours, of which he owned a few examples [Pl. 108]. In the more relaxed critical climate of the late thirties such abstract works did not attract the kind of criticism which drove an aspiring modernist such as Frank Graham Bell away from Natal.

Bell, a student of the Durban School of Art, outraged the Durban public by exhibiting his mildly Cézannesque landscapes at his first one-man exhibition in 1931.<sup>83</sup> The experimental qualities of his works were interpreted as incompetence by a public accustomed to the neatness and propriety of older artists. Viewed in conjunction with the works discussed above, Bell's attempts at modernism are

startling. Compare his Morningside, Durban [1930] [Pl. 112] with Edith Ward's View of Morningside [Pl. 113] (described in the Natal Mercury as a "charming piece of decoration with excellent colour".)<sup>84</sup> Both artists have observed the repetition of square houses with hipped roofs; in Bell's version he exaggerates the acute angle of the hillside, piling up the roofs in the manner of Braque and punctuates the composition with an aggressively painted tree. Such departures from the norm were regarded with suspicion and alarm in many quarters, and not least because it was regarded by some as the true means to a national style.

Nationalism flourished, not in the Cape, not (alas for Francois) in Natal, but in the north, where Pierneef and supporters of Afrikaner nationalism were creating new images based on the dry Transvaal Highveld. Charles te Water's essay in The Studio was used to promote the image of the Afrikaner:

It is to be observed by the student of ethnics that here in Southern Africa is to be found a most interesting phenomenon of race. For in the long history of Africa here is to be found, for the first time, a white race to be counted, by all reasonable tests, as indigenous to Africa as are the black races which surround it.

The Afrikaner, unlike his British countryman, unlike the colonists of French, Portuguese or Italian Africa, has only Africa as his Home. His civilisation is no

superimposition as was the Roman civilisation of North Africa twenty centuries ago. He cannot withdraw to a mother-country in the face of adversity, or were Africa to arise against him, as it has done in the past, in all its patient and overwhelming power.<sup>85</sup>

This romantic view of man in a hostile world was more easily cultivated in the Transvaal, especially during the early thirties when a disastrous drought co-incided with the great depression.<sup>86</sup> The Afrikaner was not only sensitive to hostility from the elements, but to a traditional hostility between himself and British imperialism.<sup>87</sup> British hostility expressed itself in an irritating cultural superiority:

Our Dutch fellow-citizens have great artistic traditions, but generations of residence in the wilds seem to have blunted the senses...<sup>88</sup>

And:

It is always a standing wonder that in South Africa, which was founded at the time of the very zenith of the glory of Dutch art, when the artistic sense seemed imbued with the very fibre of that masterful, rugged, conquering people, the Dutch should so far have lost the traditions of their fathers as to welcome corrugated iron, and to adorn their houses with that supreme achievement, the coloured trade almanac. Shades of Mieris and Vermeer!<sup>89</sup>

Pierneef's career was established early in the

century.<sup>90</sup> By 1923 he had decided to paint full-time, and proceeded to establish himself as the South African artist par excellence. By 1926 he is referred to as an artist of "eminence."<sup>91</sup> In an interview in Pretoria published at the time<sup>92</sup> he set out his views on a national art. He said, "We must stop looking through European glasses when we are painting and designing," and:

In South Africa we possess a virgin soil and surroundings with inexhaustible material if we would only go back to nature and live at first hand. Why must we go on copying the past, doing things that have been done before and which to-day are only worth storing in museums, which after all are nothing more than coffins? Each country and each period has its own style, and why cannot we create a true South African one?<sup>93</sup>

He uses Holland as an example: "They have broken with tradition...they have created a new thought about art, and have done away with fossilised top-hat professors...."<sup>94</sup> Painters that he admired included Breitner, Jan Sluyters, Toorop, Van Konynenberg, Mondrian, and, in particular, Van Gogh who he describes as "the great revolutionist, a Christ in art" who "painted and drew like a hungry lion devouring a fresh kill."<sup>95</sup> Pierneef, having established his reputation, remained in the spotlight thanks to a habit of speaking bluntly in public. One of his more serious faux pas

was made through the Suid Afrikaanse Akademie regarding South Africa House.<sup>96</sup> At a meeting during which the "distinct English atmosphere" of South African radio was condemned, Pierneef moved that a letter be sent to the Minister of Internal Affairs to complain that

South Africa House was filled with work by Jewish artists who had only been in South Africa a short time and had not even smelt a 'mis' (manure) fire. The fault of the whole matter was that Sir Herbert Baker was in charge of the arrangements, and he wished to give everything as much of an Imperial air as possible.<sup>97</sup>

Pierneef did not confine his criticism to imperialists. In 1938 he accused Afrikaners of losing their cultural roots:

I am gradually becoming convinced that the only way of fostering truly Afrikaans art in this country would be to lock up all Afrikaners in concentration camps and destroy every sewing machine that the women possess.<sup>98</sup>

Made at the time of the Voortrekker centenary in 1938, this was hardly a tactful statement. The Star commented dryly:

The Voortrekkers, whose exploits are in everybody's mind today, did not eschew sewing machines because they were soul-destroying devices, but because sewing machines did not then exist.<sup>99</sup>

Ironically, much of the ceremony conducted during the centenary took place in "imperialist" Natal. The symbolic Trek;<sup>100</sup> and the unveiling of the Blood River memorial were

some of the highlights of the occasion.

The events of that year had an interesting effect on painting in South Africa in that it encouraged history painting.<sup>101</sup> Nils Andersen, among others,<sup>102</sup> produced emotive scenes from Afrikaner history such as Unto the bitter end [Pl. 114] and Crossing the Berg (1939) [Pl. 115] which are similar in spirit and treatment to equivalent works by W.H. Coetzer. Francois never lived to see this interesting development. He died in May 1938 after a short illness.

## Chapter two: Notes

<sup>1</sup>Art in Natal, The Natal Mercury, 23 July 1913 p. 9

<sup>2</sup>J. Adams, Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1920 p. 7

<sup>3</sup>E.A. Walker, A history of Southern Africa, Longmans, 3rd ed., 1962 p. 465-466

<sup>4</sup>"Vermilion", Art Causerie, The Natal Mercury, 11 August 1925 p. 16

<sup>5</sup>"Vermilion", Propaganda methods in art, The Natal Mercury, 9 April 1929 p. 13

<sup>6</sup>see Appendix A

<sup>7</sup>see Chapter 1

<sup>8</sup>"Vermilion", Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1924 p. 12. The President was, of course, Francois himself. To avoid confusion it should be pointed out that Francois, as "Vermilion", always referred to himself in the third person.

<sup>9</sup>National Institute of arts, The Natal Mercury, 29 April 1925 p. 17

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>The SASA was responsible for choosing works for the Wembley exhibitions.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>G.E. Pearse, The Bloemfontein Art Conference, The S.A. Architectural Record, March 1926 p. 17

<sup>14</sup>"Brush", Some of the exhibits, The Natal Mercury, 8 July 1927 p. 6

<sup>15</sup>E. Roworth, The development in South African Art, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1925 p. 11

<sup>16</sup>E. Berman, Art and Artists of South Africa, 2nd ed., Capetown, Balkema, 1983 p. 377-8

<sup>17</sup>"Vermilion", Cape and Natal art clash, The Natal Mercury, 29 March 1928

<sup>18</sup>Bombshell for South african art, The Natal Mercury, 15 March 1929 p. 9

<sup>19</sup>Berman, op cit

<sup>20</sup>The Natal Mercury, The Natal Advertiser, 1929-1932

<sup>21</sup>L. Francois, Art in South Africa, The Common Room Magazine, Winter 1936 p. 15. "There are people in the country to whom the very term 'nationalism' is anathema. Yet I venture to predict that art in South Africa will not reach the pinnacle we aspire to until we are truly conscious of our work of the spirit that expresses the soul of Africa."

<sup>22</sup>Letter to the Editor from "Sad at heart", The Natal Mercury, 14 April 1927 p. 20

<sup>23</sup>Letter to the Editor from William Plomer, The Natal Mercury, 19 February 1925 p. 6

<sup>24</sup>"...many who take an interest in this great art show [The S.A. Academy] deplored the fact that landscapes were preponderating." "Vermilion", The South African Academy, The Natal Mercury, 15 March 1930 p. 10

<sup>25</sup>A national art, The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1922 p. 5

<sup>26</sup>Art exhibition closes, The Natal Mercury, 14 August 1923 p. 11

<sup>27</sup>see Chapter one

<sup>28</sup>Art in South Africa, The Natal Mercury, 17 January 1913 p. 7

<sup>29</sup>Mr Merriman on art. (Editorial), The Natal Mercury, 18 January 1913 p. 9

<sup>30</sup>A survey of NSA exhibitions reveals a plethora of such titles.

<sup>31</sup>see below, under "The native study"

<sup>32</sup>Roy Campbell, The Wayzgoose, 1928, lines 61-70

<sup>33</sup>South African art: a candid critic, The Natal Mercury, 25 July 1919 p. 13

<sup>34</sup>Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 26 July 1923 p. 10

<sup>35</sup>The Studio, summer 1917

<sup>36</sup>C.T. te Water, The cultural heritage of South Africa, The Studio, Vol CVIII no 499 Oct 1934 p. 163f

<sup>37</sup>eg. H. Fransen, Three centuries of South African art, Donker, 1982, p. 281. Fransen devotes one brief paragraph to Natal painting as a whole.

<sup>38</sup>Our art No. 1, Lantern/SABC, 1968 p. 79

<sup>39</sup>"Most of our publications on art have been appreciative essays written primarily to introduce our art in general, or an individual artist in particular. The tone is personal and friendly rather than scholarly and objectively critical. A few writers, notably Alexander and Berman, have published critical surveys of the development of our art. Alexander's review was in general view, with the emphasis on certain categories into which Western art has been regimented, and he slotted South African art into that scheme. Berman focussed the attention more pertinently on South African art, but she, too, saw it in relation to the convenient Western categories. Both writers underscore the fact that, however isolated we may be geographically, culturally the majority of our artists are nourished by, and belong to Western traditions.

"Categories and subdivisions are useful and necessary when dealing with such a complex and volatile phenomenon as artistic expression. But they should not be shackles that bind us to a preconceived and unalterable concept." F. Harmsen, Looking at South African Art, Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1985 p. 175

<sup>40</sup>Natal Artists' Society, The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1910 p. 11

<sup>41</sup>The Imperialist, 22 July 1921

<sup>42</sup>Harmsen, op cit. p. 175

<sup>43</sup>E. Berman, The story of South of South African painting, Capetown, Balkema, 1974

<sup>44</sup>S. Watney, English Post-impressionism, London, p. 7-8

<sup>45</sup>see Appendix A

<sup>46</sup>see Chapter 4

<sup>47</sup>The Natal Mercury, 12 July 1911 p. 8

<sup>48</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 22 July 1909 p. 9

<sup>49</sup>see Appendix A

<sup>50</sup>Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 10 July 1912 p. 9

<sup>51</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 12 July 1911 p. 8

<sup>52</sup>"He stressed the point of the distinctive atmospheres in the different provinces, and of the effect that they had on art..." Art in South Africa: Mr Francois's address, The Natal Mercury, 13 August 1923 p. 8

<sup>53</sup>"...he continued to regret that these [Natal] contributions had met with such severe treatment at the hands of the Selection Committee at Capetown. ...Although he could not profess to judge the merits of the work submitted, he could speak of the manner in which the work had been attempted, and this was with great earnestness and sincerity, which made the treatment received the more regrettable - it was an aspect of South African art that had given him rather a shock." The Natal Mercury, 29 March 1924 p. 9

<sup>54</sup>The Natal Advertiser, 15 July 1933 p. 8

<sup>55</sup>see Appendix A

<sup>56</sup>see Glossop: Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>57</sup>"Vermilion", The July art show, The Natal Mercury, 1 July 1926 p. 10

<sup>58</sup>J. Newton-Thompson, Gwelo Goodman, Timmins, 1951 p. 47  
John Adams was to remark that Goodman was "the most technically accomplished painter that has yet painted the

landscape of this country."

<sup>59</sup>see Chapter One

<sup>60</sup>J. Adams, Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1920 p. 7

<sup>61</sup>Mr. Gwelo Goodman: striking exhibition of pictures, The Natal Mercury, 11 July 1923 p. 8

<sup>62</sup>R. Gwelo Goodman, Letter to the students, The Common Room Magazine, summer 1919 p. 6

<sup>63</sup>Valuable art gift, The Natal Mercury, 20 Sept 1920 p. 8

<sup>64</sup>Catalogue of pictures by R. Gwelo Goodman, Johannesburg, April 1916

<sup>65</sup>J. Newton-Thompson, Gwelo Goodman, Timmins, 1951 p. 65

<sup>66</sup>The Oxford companion to art, O.U.P., 1970 p. 564 "[The Impressionists'] elimination of black and their use of strokes of unmixed pigment on canvases primed with white instead of the traditional brown was empirical and based on direct observation..."

<sup>67</sup>Mr Goodman's art, The Natal Mercury, 23 June 1924 p. 9

<sup>68</sup>"Vermilion", A great painter architect, The Natal Mercury, 2 May 1930 p. 21

<sup>69</sup>"Vermil ion", Mr. Clement Sènèque, The Natal Mercury, 11 July 1925

<sup>70</sup>A. Werth, Sènèque 1897-1930, Pretoria Art Museum, 1964; W. Battiss, Clement Sènèque, Our art, Lantern/SABC, 1968 p. 79

<sup>71</sup>In most commentaries on Sènèque it is pointed out that he attended the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. Eg. The Natal Mercury, 11 July 1925, which is based on an interview with Sènèque. Brendan Bell, who is currently researching Sènèque, has received evidence that his training in Paris was probably informal. The Ecole has written, denying that Sènèque was ever registered as a student, as an artist or architect.

<sup>72</sup>Arresting art exhibition, The Natal Advertiser, 6 July

1927

<sup>73</sup>The Rand Daily Mail, 12 August 1927. (Remarks by Ernest Lezard)

<sup>74</sup>see note 71

<sup>75</sup>Interview, 1985, Mrs Babette Marais. Francois, who was also French-speaking, was keenly interested in S  n  que's career.

<sup>76</sup>J. Adams, Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1920 p. 7

<sup>77</sup>The Colonial Mutual was under construction during 1932.

<sup>78</sup>"Vermilion", July art show, The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1926 p. 10

<sup>79</sup>"Vermilion", Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1924 p. 12

<sup>80</sup>Roy Campbell, The Wayzgoose, 1928. lines 610-631. Francois earned Campbell's wrath by criticising him and William Plomer in a radio broadcast. P. Alexander, Roy Campbell: a critical biography, O.U.P., 1982

<sup>81</sup>"Palette", The Natal Mercury, 8 July 1921 p. 16

<sup>82</sup>R.V. G[ooding], The Natal Mercury, 2 July 1932 p. 15  
Sampson's personal papers include a collection of letters from Clausen. - Coll: Donnellan

<sup>83</sup>H.D.E., A young man's art, The Natal Advertiser, 3 March 1931 p. 10

<sup>84</sup>3 July 1936 p. 27

<sup>85</sup>The cultural heritage of South Africa, The Studio, October 1934 p. 164

<sup>86</sup>The Natal Mercury, 1930-1932

<sup>87</sup>It would be superfluous to mention the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. see: E. Brookes and Webb, A history of Natal, UNP, 1965. Chapter 20

<sup>88</sup>Art in Natal, The Natal Mercury, 23 July 1913 p. 9

<sup>89</sup>J.X. Merriman, Catalogue of pictures by R. Gwelo

Goodman, Johannesburg, 1916

<sup>90</sup>E. Berman, Art and artists of South Africa, 2nd. ed., p. 327

<sup>91</sup>The Natal Advertiser, 13 July 1926 p. 7

<sup>92</sup>Ibid

<sup>93</sup>Ibid

<sup>94</sup>Ibid

<sup>95</sup>Ibid. Francois would have disapproved strongly. see Chapter three, note 81.

<sup>96</sup>The Rand Daily Mail, 22 October 1934 p. 11

<sup>97</sup>Artist raises a storm, The Natal Mercury, 24 October 1934 p. 22 This was a barb aimed at Amschewitz who had been commissioned privately to paint three murals commemorating the Portugeuse.

<sup>98</sup>The Natal Mercury, 14 October 1938 p. 18; The Star, 15 October 1938

<sup>99</sup>Ibid

<sup>100</sup>This was reported in all Natal newspapers in 1938. W.H. Coetzer refers to the symbolic trek in his autobiographical W.H. Coetzer 80, CUM, Roodepoort, 1980 p. 42.

<sup>101</sup>Never attempted with much enthusiasm except by painters such as Amschewitz.

<sup>102</sup>Rosa Hope, for example, produced an etching, Die Voortrekkers (1938) (Tatham Art Gallery), depicting "Boekevat" (Bible-reading) in front of an outspanned wagon.

CHAPTER THREE

SURVIVAL VERSUS PROGRESS: MODERNISM IN NATAL

The historian examining South African art walks through a veritable minefield when discussing "modernism" and all that it implies. To many Natalians of the period under review "modernism" was outrageous, lascivious, infantile, insulting, a threat to established norms - all those clichés which art historians often associate with the uninformed public and therefore dismiss as irrelevant. But to the artist of, say, 1930 who wished to explore unconventional paths, the indiscriminating public far outnumbered the connoisseurs who might have supported his point of view. In Chapter Two the works of Frank Graham Bell were introduced. Viewed in the context of early 20th century European painting Bell's innocent landscapes and still lifes remind one, not of Picasso or Braque, but of the gentler modernism of Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury painters. It is not surprising to learn that in May/June 1929, two years before his controversial one-man exhibition, Bell would have seen works by Fry, Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and other exponents of British Post-impressionism<sup>1</sup> at the Durban Art Gallery in an exhibition called "Modern British Painters", organised by the Contemporary Art Society of London.<sup>2</sup>

Reaction to the 1929 exhibition was predictable:

[The exhibition] caused a great deal of fluttering in the

aesthetic dovescots, for the prevalent standards of aesthetic judgement were in many instances sorely outraged...<sup>3</sup>

Distortion was the main offender, in particular a painting by David Bomberg, The bath, which even Martin, the tolerant painting lecturer at the Durban School of Art, found difficult to swallow:

In modern examples one feels it [distortion] is frequently done to attract attention or is merely eccentric or beastly..."The Bath," although interesting as design, failed to be convincing and complete through this weakness.<sup>4</sup>

Leo Francois was more critical:

And, finally, there is (No. 50) "The Bath", by David Bomberg. If painting the female form [in] bright yellow with every conceivable anatomical deformity is great modernist art, then Mr Bomberg is a very great artist indeed.<sup>5</sup>

He does, however, encourage his readers to view the exhibition in perspective.

The fifty odd works generously loan (sic) to the Durban Art Gallery...is a mixed collection, comprising some very excellent paintings of semi-academic standard, and also a number of canvases of what is described the new order. I quite expect to find many Durban people shaking their heads in bewilderment, wondering that canvases by G[ilbert] Spencer, Paul Nash, David Bomberg, Roberts and a number of others should be considered art, even in its

wildest interpretation. But I would point out to them that most of these works were bought on behalf of the Contemporary Art Society by competent judges for the education of the masses.<sup>6</sup>

Whether the masses appreciated this effort on their behalf is debatable. Public reaction came in the form of derogatory letters to the press from such nom-de-plumes as "Lover of the beautiful" and "R.A." and the inevitable reply came accusing the public of having poor taste:

The public tolerates all kinds of rubbish perpetrated in the name of Art. It is at every street corner, it covers many over-dressed ladies, and is seen everywhere both in private homes and public places. But taste is so perverted that it is tolerated and as it does not upset the chocolate box standards of prettiness all is well.

It is necessary and desirable that the South African public should become acquainted with this modern movement, which springs chiefly from the Continent, and this particular exhibition is quite mild compared with many which are held regularly in Europe, England and America. Much of it is an expression of beastliness (No. 50, The Bath is an example), a neurotic expression of a neurotic age.<sup>7</sup>

Few writers came to Bell's rescue after the cutting response to his exhibition in 1931. The critic of The Natal Advertiser was particularly savage. Comments range from "a child could have done it better" to "Mr Bell has tried to ape the craze for bizarre in modern art circles at the price of

the talent he possesses, but he has been modest enough to refrain from sprawling his name over the foot of his work."8

Discouraged, Bell gave up painting and left Natal for London. Here he was drawn into the circle that eventually formed the Euston Road Group and was persuaded to resume his career.<sup>9</sup> When reports of Bell's success reached Natal in 1938 all was forgiven. Clive Bell's complimentary review of their London Group exhibition was quoted in full and was followed by this rider: "And many Durban people considered Graham Bell's painting nothing better than what a child of five could have done!"<sup>10</sup>

#### Public taste in Natal

The expectations of the "uneducated masses" were a perennial source of irritation to artists and connoisseurs alike. They voiced their uninformed opinion and interfered at every opportunity, their favourite prey being the Durban Art Gallery or its counterpart in Pietermaritzburg. Purchases; exhibitions; whether certain paintings were hung or not; the decisions of the Committee - the public eagerly expressed their opinion on these and other matters. The art galleries were caught between those who didn't know any better and the

connoisseurs who knew only too much. The first signs of trouble for the Durban Art Gallery followed the two important Whitwell donations.

Col. Robert Richard Harvey Whitwell, I.M.S. (1855-19??) was an eccentric recluse who travelled extensively and collected paintings and objets d'arts. His interest in South Africa is explained by his friend, Sir Thomas Watt, in a letter to the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg:

When in South Africa some years ago he had a great admiration for General Botha and his efforts to bring the two white races in South Africa into one common fold. Colonel Whitwell then conceived the idea of expressing his appreciation of the General's work by presenting his collection of pictures, etc. to South African municipalities.<sup>11</sup>

His first beneficiary was the Durban Art Gallery. By 1920 the growth of the collection had progressed rather slowly since the Pursuit of pleasure debacle in 1911.<sup>12</sup> The Committee and new Curator, E.C. Chubb, were delighted when Whitwell announced his proposal to donate 88 paintings and numerous oriental antiquities.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, in their excitement, they were not sensitive to Whitwell's dislike of publicity. A strict condition of the gift was that his name should not to be revealed to the public. This was adhered to, but Whitwell found the spate of newspaper articles and

reviews extolling the "anonymous donor" vulgar in the extreme. In 1923 he transferred his generosity to Pietermaritzburg. Sir Thomas Watt warned the Mayor in a private letter:

...I wish to inform you that Colonel Whitwell has a rooted dislike to any press notices, or, as he calls them, "gush", regarding his collections, and he is extremely annoyed with Mr. E.C. Chubb, the Curator of the Durban Art Gallery, for writing "a lot of stupid rot to the newspapers in spite of my requests and protests." If any critic is to be asked to criticise the Pietermaritzburg collection, when it has been received, he bars Mr. Chubb, who, he says, knows very little about Art.<sup>14</sup>

When the time came to open the collection Whitwell was taken aback by the City Council's extreme discretion.

Sir Thomas Watt writes me that you have taken the greatest care to prevent publicity... I was very touched when I read this and I am grateful, but I never meant that the public are not to be told. The gift is to the town and the inhabitants in and around, of course let it be known in any way you please and as often as you think it necessary.<sup>15</sup>

Pietermaritzburg's Whitwell collection was announced in one discreet press review by R. Crispe.<sup>16</sup> The Victorian paintings, collected with such care by Mrs Tatham,<sup>17</sup> were consigned to the City Hall basement to make room for the new

works. Whitwell was an admirer of French painting and those British artists who showed French influence: works by Sickert, the Camden painters, Wilson Steer, and Stanley Spencer were among those donated, as well as on oil by Alfred Sisley from Whitwell's personal collection.<sup>18</sup> It is characteristic of Pietermaritzburg citizens that awareness of the removal of their well-loved Victorian paintings in favour of these comparatively modern works was only noticed in 1927, two years after the re-opening of the Gallery. Attention was drawn to the neglect of Mrs Tatham's paintings in a strongly-worded article in the Natal Mercury: "Where art is shamed and forgotten."<sup>19</sup> The City Council hurriedly arranged to unearth them. A Pietermaritzburg reporter who was sent to observe progress detected a certain lack of reverence in the handling of the works:

Within a couple of weeks or so carpenters were seen busily erecting a scaffold against the wall where the lift works, and very soon a gang of workers was to be found hanging pictures all along the wall with great gusto.

...It is a pity...that more taste has not been displayed in arranging the pictures on the walls. They are huddled together with scarcely an inch of open space between frame and frame, so that the general effect is rather that which one would expect in visiting...the premises of a second-hand dealer than what is usually obtained in a Municipal art gallery.<sup>20</sup> [Pl. 116, 117]

Public apathy regarding the art gallery reigned once more until 1937 when the City Council announced plans to provide a new building for the collection in honour of the Natal centenary in 1938. Indignation was intense and long-winded; the interminable debate ended with a public referendum condemning the scheme.<sup>21</sup> It is ironic that the building of an art gallery should have met with such opposition at one of the few times when the Municipality could have afforded the expense.<sup>22</sup> It was eventually decided to lay the foundation stone as a compromise.<sup>23</sup> When the time came to erect the building in 1939 war had broken out, and the City Council could, with some relief, announce that the building operations had been postponed indefinitely.<sup>24</sup>

The Durban Art Gallery also experienced problems at the hands of the public. Money had been obtained, at last, for the purchase of art works. In 1925 S  n  que's Mont Blanc from Sallanches [Pl. 72] was bought from the NSA exhibition. Various correspondents to the press, signed "Burgess," objected bitterly. The work was not "pleasing to the eye", not "representative of South African scenery" and had been selected by "some apostles of precosity in art."<sup>25</sup> There

was even some objection to the purchase of works by South African painters in general. In 1930 the Durban Town Council queried the fact that money set aside "for the purchase of overseas works" had been used by the Committee to buy works from the NSA exhibition, and by members of the Committee at that. Francois's Old road to the diamond fields [Pl. 92] and A.R. Martin's sculpture, Wonder [Pl. 168], had been chosen for the Gallery by the full Committee which consisted of Francois, Martin, and six other members. H.D. Sweetman, Secretary of the NSA, came to their defence in a letter to the Town Clerk:

When the matter was agreed upon both the President [Francois] and Mr Martin, who are members of the Committee offered to retire, for which the other members saw no necessity, having every confidence in their integrity and judgement.<sup>26</sup>

The Council upheld the decision to the purchase the works, but the incident was an unpleasant one for those concerned.

Works chosen seldom coincided with the choice of the public. The artist most regularly clamoured for was Tinus de Jongh:

I venture to say that if a plebiscite of Durban people were taken, as to the best picture at the present exhibition, there would be a 90% vote in favour of one of Mr. de Jongh's pictures. In my opinion, and in that of

almost every person I have spoken to on the subject, this artist stands out head and shoulders above the other exhibitors. His paintings are magnificent, and it is a delight to sit down opposite them and look at these beautiful landscapes. He has caught the depth and luminosity of the South African atmosphere, his skies are wonderful, and his landscape superb in its detail and truth to nature. [Pl. 118]

I should like to see at least two of these masterpieces in the Municipal Gallery. In my opinion Mr de Jongh's works will live, and if he had his deserts, his reputation would outvie that of Gwelo Goodman.<sup>27</sup>

Alas, the average citizen, brought up in the Victorian era, continued to admire "detail" and "truth to nature". But, as landscape gradually evolved in that "post-impressionist" manner that Methven was so wary of, so the Natal public clung to what they thought still represented Victorian values:

Only slapdash work counts to-day. Such perfect and refined artists of the Wallace Paton type seem to have dropped out. And why? I am afraid, like many more, they cannot tolerate this lathe and plaster style of painting. Indeed, is it art at all? A few of the exhibits are very fine work - note Mr Tinus de Jongh's pictures and a few others.<sup>28</sup>

This public reverence for de Jongh who, even during the twenties was regarded as a mediocre artist,<sup>29</sup> was often lampooned in the press. Serious critics of the time were

content to refer to his and Roworth's work as "photographic", "pretty" and "sentimental"<sup>30</sup> The Idler [W.H. Hill], to whom nothing was sacred, shocked his readers with the following impiety:

Mr de Jongh wears a Vandyke beard, he affects a black velvet jacket and brown trousers, and he lives at "Rembrandt House." His four pictures are what one would expect from a gentleman who wears a Vandyke beard and commits the other crimes enumerated. He sees South Africa through a beautiful haze of crushed strawberry jam, and some of the clots of yellow on his canvas must be at least a quarter inch thick.<sup>31</sup>

Even Hill was surprised by the vehemence of the response. He wrote, "The art of Tinus de Jongh, I regret to discover, has many admirers in Durban. I had thought better of the town."<sup>32</sup>

A plebiscite such as the one suggested above was indeed undertaken, in the form of a light-hearted competition run by the Natal Mercury in 1929.<sup>33</sup> This "Art Ballot" was run during the annual NSA exhibition and the public was asked to name the painting they thought should be chosen to hang in the Durban Art Gallery. "Vermilion", as the Mercury's art spokesman, was brightly optimistic about the outcome.<sup>34</sup> He swallowed his words after the results were made known, sourly commenting that he thought the ballot was not

representative of Durban's taste. The winner? - Tinus de Jongh's Dwars River, Ceres, followed by Thorneley Stewart's Beach path and de Jongh's The outspan.<sup>35</sup> "Vermilion's" choice had been Alfred Palmer's Zulu mother and child [Pl. 123] which only came fourth.

### The "Native study" in Natal

Critics of Natal art were not only in despair of raising public taste, but failed conspicuously in their exhortations to the artists to establish a school of figure painting which would have represented to them the pinnacle of artistic achievement.

Speaking generally the NSA are mostly landscape painters. It is little to be wondered at, the country shows an unrivalled and wonderful variety of sea, lake, river, gigantic mountain ranges and endless plains, but we hope that there will arise a school of figure painting, which is the highest effort of all save perhaps sculpture.<sup>36</sup>

Francois, in his "Art Causerie" column, laboured the point, year after year, that the adoption of the native study as a genre would fill this gap:

Are there not Native subjects also? Here, I admit, the South African artist is failing lamentably because of his lack of anatomical knowledge, and his aversion to figure

composition. It is, therefore, left to the newcomer from overseas who, after a few weeks drawing from the model in the Native reserves, set to in producing pictures of Native life.<sup>37</sup>

One such newcomer was Alfred Palmer who, as discussed above, came to Natal specifically to draw Zulu types.<sup>38</sup> His modus operandi was simple. He lived in a caravan with his black servant and travelled through Zululand, Pondoland and Swaziland making charcoal and pastel sketches. He then hired a studio in Durban,<sup>39</sup> and painted until he had enough works for a one-man show which he then staged in Durban or Johannesburg. He was a regular contributor to the the NSA, especially after the establishment of the Gundelfinger Prize.

The Gundelfinger Prize was not, as Roy Campbell seemed to think, a prize for the best landscape but for "the best painting of native life."<sup>40</sup> Each year Karl Gundelfinger, a Durban industrialist,<sup>41</sup> donated twenty guineas to the NSA for the competition. The winner was chosen by a group of adjudicators. Francois used the Prize as part of his campaign to boost nationalism in art. He saw in the "native study" a means to encourage the use of local subject matter which would, in turn, lead to the establishment of a South African style. Some artists saw through this ploy. Erich Mayer was particularly critical of emotive subject matter:

...one of the grossest errors...namely, the illusion that it suffices to depict objects characteristic of this country like the Springbok, the Cape protea or the Zulu Ricksha Boy...in order to create a South African piece of craft work.<sup>42</sup>

Others responded enthusiastically, despite the public's reluctance to patronise what they felt was a distasteful subject and one that they did not desire on the walls of their houses.<sup>43</sup> It is quite likely that racism played a negative role here. By 1928 the subject was beginning to lose its unpleasant associations; as Francois reports:

"Whatever popular opinion may have been in the past regarding the aesthetic merit of Native subjects, a saner attitude is now becoming apparent..."<sup>44</sup> But, in order to seek popularity, the artist was obliged to use idealised scenes painted with a high degree of realism. Palmer was entirely at home under these circumstances. One of his aims was the depiction of a "superior" native type:

He does not in his delineation of native types seek the common negroid type with big flat nose and thick lips, but rather that finer cast of feature which he claims is typical of the pure-bred Bantu. He states that in Zululand to-day many pure-bred Zulus with features showing strong Arab characteristics<sup>45</sup> - the slender high-bridged nose and thin lips. ..."I don't go after the common type," he said, "That is the trouble. Many people look at my pictures and say I have idealised the

Natives, but I go for the finer type. You do not take the tired weary drooping person you find in a London suburban train if you are making a picture of a typical Englishman, so why should I take the coarse, animal, brutal, negroid type when I can find a higher, finer type?"<sup>46</sup>

Why, indeed, unless one's public also found the "coarse, animal, brutal, negroid type" repellent?

An example of Palmer's Arab type might be Native head (coll. Sharp) [Pl. 119], a pastel sketch of a man with North African features and dress, seen in profile. The majority of his Zulu portraits are no less dignified but have a cloying sweetness of expression. [Pl. 120] The figure studies are merely translations of his European figure groups: arrangements of tall, muscular men in poses which recur with suspicious frequency. Compare Men washing [Pl. 121] with Crayfishers [1935] [Pl. 122]. The two works are obviously studio compositions built up from various sketches. A contemporary reviewer remarks, cheekily, that "there is a similarity about [the figures] which may indicate that the artist has been sparing in choice of models..."<sup>47</sup> Works by Palmer which found greatest appeal were the "Mother and child" paintings, of which there were many. A 1929 version

won the Gundelfinger Prize of that year and was purchased for the Durban Art Gallery.<sup>48</sup> This particular work [Pl. 123] was also exhibited at the Royal Academy of the same year, and therefore represents what Palmer regarded as one of his better works. Viewed tonally it is certainly a painting of some monumentality. The two figures are finely modelled and have some of that sultry, brooding quality suggested in Roy Campbell's poem, The Zulu girl.<sup>49</sup> This effect is somewhat marred by the poor choice of colour. The woman's bright red clothing is in conflict with a patch of very English-looking grass. The bright, pastel-blue sky rounds off this unfortunate ensemble.

A common complaint, which might well be applied to Palmer, was that the native studies submitted for the Gundelfinger competition were not sufficiently "ethnic". Gundelfinger's original intention was to encourage a pictorial record of what he felt were vanishing traditions in Zulu tribal life. Francois remarks,

I am convinced that the donor had a great deal more in his mind than the mere painting of a few black figures, purporting to be natives. In South Africa we have a large number of races with many varying and distinctive characteristics in their homes and dwellings, mode of life and personal adornments. Although many of these races are of Bantu origin, they possess features peculiar

to their own tribe or clan which, one feels, should be recognisable in the artist's work.<sup>50</sup>

This emphasis on ethnological rather than aesthetic qualities resulted in works somewhat reminiscent of the 19th century artist/explorers such as Baines and Angas. Francois, in particular, was guilty of a number of etchings with such titles as A Basuto beau [Pl. 124] and Zulu maiden [Pl. 125], in which peculiarities of dress are somewhat incompetently drawn. Some more successful examples were produced by Constance Greaves whose early watercolours have a rare simplicity and detachment. Zulu girl [Pl. 126] (Africana Museum) is a well observed and unpretentious record of a town native in humble clothes. There are also numerous small portrait heads (e.g. Native study [Pl. 127] coll: Nixon) which have the same pleasant characteristics. As her work grew in popularity, so it deteriorated in quality and technique. Native study [Pl. 128] of 1934 is, no doubt, pleasing to those in favour of documentary scenes. As a painting it lacks cohesion and the depiction of distance and space is confused. The figures are obviously chosen to show kraal activities in the manner of a textbook illustration. Towards the end of the thirties Greaves lapsed into that pattern which she was to follow until her death after World

War II: endless repetitions, from memory, of native heads with formless bodies in "typical" clothing [Pl. 129]. The better examples such as Chief's daughter [Pl. 130], were at best careful and decorative. The few successful drawings from this late period were those drawn from the model. One of these is Portrait of Skannies [Pl. 131], a powerful character study, quite unlike the majority of her late works.

Two pitfalls faced the painter of native studies: sentimentality and melodrama. A few artists such as Alfred Martin attempted to give their works heroic grandeur. His Mayihlome! (Call to arms!) [Pl. 132] is a large painting of impressive composition and technique. The treatment of the subject is somewhat over-dramatic, but this was not regarded as a fault when the work was first exhibited in 1934. Many of Perla Siedle Gibson's native portraits are also dramatic, but lack Martin's craftsmanship. This is not always to her disadvantage. Her paintings of Basuto ladies [Pl. 133, 134] are fearlessly bold and overflow with character. This is only to be expected from a lady who was herself larger than life. [Pl. 135a] The comparison may be cruel but one is inclined to prefer Perla Gibson's amateurism to the limp professionalism of artists such as Peter Leftwich. [Pl. 135b]

The amateurs were certainly less mannered when tackling

native subjects. A comparison between Perla Gibson's woodcuts and those of Allerley Glossop underlines this point. Gibson's attempts, though crude, have a lively sense of design and originality. [Pl. 136, 137, 138] Glossop's woodcuts of native children are endearing but insubstantial as are her numerous oils and gouaches of the same subject. [Pl. 139, 140] Genre scenes with amusing titles also fail to impress. Gossip [Pl. 141] and Hen-pecked [Pl. 142] show an astonishing lack of form and dexterity for a full-time artist.

Not surprisingly the most authentically "ethnic" native studies were produced by black artists.

Little encouragement was given to indigenous artists during the first quarter of the century. It was assumed that the Zulu were incapable of artistic development because of the simplicity of their craftwork.<sup>51</sup> By 1930, however, attention was being given to "Bantu art"; exhibitions were being organised through the various mission stations,<sup>52</sup> and a few talented individuals contributed to group exhibitions.<sup>53</sup> The S.A. Institute of Art went so far as to make the following statement regarding "native aspirations":

Opinion on this matter was rather divided, as so far very little evidence had been produced that the Aboriginal Natives showed any distinctive leaning towards art.

However, the principle was laid down that art recognised neither race nor colour, and that Natives would be encouraged to submit work which would be tested on its merits.<sup>54</sup>

Critics felt uncomfortable, however, when called on to judge black art. Francois, faced with Ntuli's small modelled figures [Pl. 143, 144], complained of a lack of movement, comparing them with Bushman paintings as if he expected them to exhibit the same characteristics. He remarked, as if in mitigation: "I should be grieved to know if my opinion on the work I have seen were to be misunderstood. Art is art, always, irrespective of medium, age or race. There can be no differentiation or modified appraisalment."<sup>55</sup> One wonders what his expectations might have been, as Ntuli's work displays remarkable maturity for a man who grew up without exposure to Western art forms. His animal groups, in particular, are lively, well-observed and show unexpectedly sophisticated sculptural grouping.

Most black art of the period follows western convention, taught, no doubt, by the white teachers and missionaries with whom the artists came into contact.<sup>56</sup> The watercolours of Benghu [Pl. 145, 146] and Mnguni [Pl. 147] don't reveal any special characteristics that set them apart from most other watercolourists of the period, except for a more intimate

view of kraal life and people. Native studies by these artists show a curious mixture of personal interests and a wish to produce images required by their European patrons. Like Gundelfinger, the missionaries often encouraged these artists in order to record disappearing tribal customs.

An unpredicted result of the propaganda in favour of the native study genre was the scope it gave to artists exploring modernist tendencies. There were those who may not have agreed with Palmer's description of the average Zulu as a "coarse, animal, brutal, negroid type", but whose uncompromisingly honest images certainly emphasised these qualities. The work that was to receive most adverse criticism for these reasons was Mary Stainbank's Baya Huba (They sing, they dance) [Pl. 162, 163] (Durban Art Gallery).

Stainbank's enthusiasm for native subjects predated anybody's attempt to create an artificial genre.<sup>57</sup> Growing up, like many young Natalians of the period, on a farm surrounded by Zulu labourers gave her a more intimate knowledge of their customs, attitudes and visual characteristics than any visiting artist could hope to acquire. Works produced as a student at the Durban School of Art are precocious in their understanding of modelling and form. Most of these early pieces are routine student

assignments such as The kraal (1921) [Pl. 148] and Native head (1920) [Pl. 149]. But Miserable Elizabeth (1921) [Pl. 150] and Native head (1921) [Pl. 151] are built up directly from the models who were both servants working for her father, Dering Stainbank. Here her mature skill as a modeller enabled her to depict personalities rather than picturesque "native types".

Her lecturers at the technical College were John Adams and Alfred Martin<sup>58</sup> who were, ironically, both guilty of the latter. Adams found the Natal Zulu a cheerful and decorative subject, as can be seen in a maiolica plate, Hamba Kahle (Gowell) (1920) [Pl. 152], which depicts a ricksha boy<sup>59</sup> replendent in horns, feathers, and beads. Ricksha boys were the Art School's prime source of live models, as witness the numerous student drawings of the period [Pl. 153] and a sketch from the Common Room Magazine entitled A nightmare after too many Ricksha Boys as models.<sup>60</sup>

Stainbank acknowledges a great debt to the skill and encouragement of these two men, especially Martin, who, although not a sculptor by profession, took particular interest in her progress as a student. It was Adams, however, who persuaded her family to enrol her at his old art school, the Royal College of Art in London. She was duly

escorted to England and became the only woman student at the R.C.A. sculpture school.<sup>61</sup>

On her return to South Africa she was unable to bring much of her London work with her except for an ebony statue, Mother love [Pl. 154] and a small experimental bronze head [Pl. 155, 156], and prefers not to admit to any particular influence. There can be no doubt, however, that contemporary works by British sculptors such as Eric Gill and Jacob Epstein [Pl. 157] had a profound effect on her approach to form and decoration. While in London she continued to use the Zulu as inspiration despite opposition to what the College referred to as "negroid" influences.<sup>62</sup> Respectable London of the twenties associated blacks with America, cocktails, jazz, and decadence. In 1926 visitors to the Royal Academy were shocked by John Souter's entry: "Jazz, as the predominating art to-day, with the collapse of Western tradition under Negroid influence, is suggested by John Souter's "The Breakdown"... The picture shows a negro in evening dress seated on a fallen statue of Minerva playing a saxophone, while an 'Eton-cropped' nude white girl capers modern dance steps."<sup>63</sup> Stainbank adopted certain mannerisms such as the use of distorted limbs, sharp, angular forms and chiselled lines which were to reappear in much of

her South African work of the thirties.

On her return in 1926 Mary Stainbank, determined to pursue sculpture as a career, set up a studio on the family farm at Coedmore. She first sampled notoriety when she exhibited Ozazisayo (Dignity) at the S.A. Institute of Art exhibition in 1927,<sup>64</sup> alongside such works as Martin's Mayihlome. Francois, although hostile towards modernism, always approached her work with discretion. His critique is significant as an indication of the prevailing attitude to this kind of modernism and is therefore quoted in full:

Of course, it is inevitable that there are people who recognise in art only their own attitude in its approach, and who somewhat shortsighted, I think, are only too ready to condemn, what to them is either unconventional or is striving towards a new aspect in the conception of beauty. The merely photographic side of art which held sway for many years, is gradually giving way to a broader view which endeavours to convey the emotional side, thus making the appeal more to the inner self of the spectator than his outward vision. It is a matter of opinion in how far some of the ultra-modernists were justified in this analysis of mere form, seeing in the portrayal of essentials all that is necessary to convey their meaning. Tinus de Jongh, who has been quoted by one of the critics in the correspondent columns of the "Mercury," would be the first to acknowledge the power behind the conception of "Dignity" in this exhibition, in spite of the fact that his personal outlook is entirely opposed to advanced views in his own art. And this is just the point the

public should recognise in these matters which are so largely based on opinion.

I have already given my views on what is beauty, quoting some of the greatest authorities, philosophers, artists and giants in literature, and although the subject has been ably discussed for three centuries or more, we are no forwarder to-day towards the solution to this great problem. Many, needless to say, will not admit that this is a problem; to them the soul-searching inquiries of what beauty really is, is nothing but verbiage - they are quite confident that anything that pleases the eye, or in their opinion, is perfect in form, may be beautiful, and that ends the matter. This, of course, is piffle. Art can never be reduced to mere science; if it were, it would be no longer art, and thus we should probably quarrel in the ages to come. Is it therefore, unfair to decry Miss Stainbank's great effort. This small statue in stone is by no means perfect; it is not beautiful in the accepted sense of the term, because it is said there are really fine types of Native women who would have represented the object in view, namely, "Dignity," far more adequately. But how do we know whether the young artist was satisfied to see beauty in a Venus de Milo type of woman? And this is just the point. The praise meted to this young Natal sculptress by those who claim some understanding is fully justified, for they see in this work something that may lead to a very high attainment in art.<sup>65</sup>

Stainbank followed Dignity with two pieces which the public were to find even more disturbingly foreign to their taste:

Enigma and Baya Huba.

Enigma (1930) [Pl. 158, 159] depicts a Zulu woman with

an elaborate head-dress, leaning back with her eyes half-closed. The arms and head-dress form a diamond-shaped composition of impressive solidity. In contrast are the tilted face and hands which are carved sensitively with simple incised lines describing the main features. But there is a crudity in the arrangement of form, especially from the back [Pl. 158]. This crudity and unresolved design are magnified in Baya Huba (1932) [Pl. 160, 161, 162] her most controversial sculpture. Here three heads intertwine. Their grotesquely exaggerated features were the main cause for complaint. Here were those "coarse, animal, brutal, negroid" types so resented by Natalian exhibition-goers. Stainbank claims, with a certain naivety, that this is what singing Zulus look like,<sup>66</sup> and, indeed, the work as a whole suggests noise, and exuberent lack of inhibition. The public were speechless. Those who roused themselves to comment were reduced to weak criticisms of the words "baya huba". Did it mean "singing" or "dancing" or both? And what was the correct pronunciation?<sup>67</sup> In general Stainbank was received by art critics with acclaim as Natal's foremost young artist. There was a concerted effort to buy this work for the Gallery,<sup>68</sup> which did not please the average rate-payer:

Miss Stainbank's work is clever - conceived in a gross and exaggerated manner. Critics have pedestalled it because it strikes the birth of futurism in this country. It speaks of a morbid relishing of the ungainly, but surely it is the artist's duty to create beauty out of ugliness.<sup>69</sup>

Formally, a more successful piece is a small bronze nude [Pl. 163, 164, 165] [no date, but, taking style into account, probably cast during the thirties. The modelling technique is also not consistent with that of her student work or with portrait busts of the forties and fifties]. Here exaggeration is used with greater subtlety. She has distanced herself from the subject, which stands passively balanced. The slight twist of the body provides formal interest from all angles and there is a satisfactory play of light and shade on the smoothly modelled limbs. Stainbank regarded herself as a carver rather than a modeller. However, it is in work such as this that her skill is revealed. She appears to lack the ability to handle three-dimensionality in stone. In works such as Baya Huba there is a tendency to concentrate on surfaces and linear patterns to the detriment of form. One must remember, too, that the stone pieces were carved for her own enjoyment and were, to a certain extent, self-indulgent. In them a

cheerful whimsy is often apparent. This was not always to the liking of her commissioners. In the stone carvings for the new Government offices in Aliwal Street, Durban, she allowed her imagination to run away with itself. Instead of making the formal swags of fruit and tassels, as instructed, she replaced them with amusing native heads (one with spectacles). [Pl. 166] Her employers were surprised, to put it mildly. It is this sense of humour underlying these works that may lure the historian into a false appraisal of them as merely capricious. This would be a mistake. Because of her extreme isolation in the South African context Stainbank could experiment as she wished. Works that she produced for her own pleasure did not have to fit in with anyone else's sense of propriety. This probably accounts for her refreshing lack of sentimentality and grasp of the dignity of African subjects. Neither Kottler nor Van Wouw [Pl. 167] escaped that tendency among South African sculptors to stress the emotional content of their work. And especially not Martin, her old teacher, who attempted sculpture in the thirties. His Wonder [Pl. 168] may even be in imitation of Stainbank's work. This image of a Zulu woman staring into the unknown is truly grotesque in both concept and form. And what can one say of works such as Au!

(Surprised) [Pl. 169]?

### Art criticism in Natal

Painters who attempted the native study in a modern style received much less sympathy than sculptors.<sup>70</sup> The 'bete noire' of the thirties was Irma Stern whose native heads and portraits of the Malays received the most intolerant press reviews (see below).

One might ask, at this point, what reviewers of the time felt about their role as critics.

Most art writers and critics of the period relied heavily on daily publications. This was the situation nation-wide. In the Cape A.J. Smith wrote for The Argus, and Bernard Lewis, for Die Burger; in the Transvaal the most important critics were Hedley Chilvers, Errol Wilmot (The Rand Daily Mail) and Denys Lefebvre who wrote for The Star and was co-editor of The S.A. Architectural Record with Martienssen.<sup>71</sup>

In Natal Francois ("Vermilion") wrote prolifically for the Natal Mercury about any and every subject. He regarded himself as an educator of the public. If he is not promoting "national art", he reports on the latest successful

Academician, or expounds on beauty, or describes, in minute detail, the current NSA exhibition. His occasional remarks on the role of the critic are not very enlightening:

Modern criticism is based, only too frequently, I fear, on the purely mechanical side of painting, and if the critic should be an artist himself often he lays down in conscious authority certain dictums which he is pleased to consider as immutable axioms pertaining to art. This, of course, is nonsense. True knowledge and appreciation has nothing to do with mannerisms of technique or method.<sup>72</sup>

If, as this implies, he thought that the critic ought to be commenting on the "meaning" of art rather than technique, one is surprised to find this aspect conspicuously absent in his own writings. His NSA reviews are, on the whole, a meaningless collection of complimentary "notices": useful to the historian compiling statistics but hardly useful as an evaluation of the works themselves. Many reviewers, including Francois, give the impression that the exhibitors, mainly amateurs, must not, at any cost, be discouraged. This did not escape notice:

As a visitor to Durban I have spent several hours at the N.S.A. Exhibition. Having read your critic's opinion of the pictures, I must say I was considerably surprised. It did not seem to me to be a very adequate criticism, and it occurred to me that "C.L.B." may be possibly a local gentleman who made a point of praising the works of

his friends. This may be a kindly attitude, but it is hardly art criticism.<sup>73</sup>

A very different personality was R.V. Gooding, "Vermilion's" acerbic successor. His first critique was of the July exhibition in 1932, headed "Dull and futile pictures: incompetent work by Natal artists."<sup>74</sup> Francois, horrified, wrote to the editor, enclosing his own, gratuitous, review. If he had confined his remarks to "kindly" descriptions of the works on display all would have been well. However, his letter took the form of an attack on Gooding:

...who is this R.V. Gooding, this new commentator on art, who like Moses on the Mount, speaks in one breath of "dull and futile pictures, poor draughtsmanship, bad colour," the while rejoicing, albeit grudgingly, at what, he says, is a poor attempt at cubism.<sup>75</sup>

Gooding was willing and able to defend himself:

...Vermilion knows quite well who I am, just as the rest of the Durban public know who struts behind the pseudonym of Vermilion. He does not want to know really who I am. What I think he wants to say to me by his question is, in effect: "How dare you dispute my claim to fame. I am the art critic of Durban."<sup>76</sup>

Francois's real objection to Gooding's approach must have been to his abandonment of that patronising

"encouragement" favoured by those who looked on South African art as a "tender flower" ready to wilt a a moment's notice. This attitude is typical of most writing on art before the thirties. Here are some examples from Francois's pen:

Much political strife...has acted as a damper on the development of art which in all new countries is like a tender plant in need of loving care and sympathetic treatment.<sup>77</sup>

And:

I repeat, progress in art is necessarily slow in South Africa. Art is a tender flower, requiring careful and sympathetic nursing...<sup>78</sup>

Francois sincerely believed that his duty was to guide public taste and warn his readers about undesirable elements. Another shock, after the publication of Gooding's article, was the blatant admiration for "decadent" modernism, expressed, to Francois's chagrin, with a sophistication that suggested a deeper knowledge of the subject. Francois devoted a large amount of space to the criticism of post-impressionism.<sup>79</sup> Many of these articles display a surprising intolerance in a writer who customarily attempts to see both sides of any question. Francois objected to the element of surprise in many new art movements: "We do not think that the present extreme forms of art are likely to

survive, because the quality of shock by which they arrest attention is out of all proportion to their charm."<sup>80</sup>

("Charm" was Francois's favourite quality in a work of art.)

He was especially offended by Van Gogh whom he regarded as a charlatan, and those who followed him as gullible fools.<sup>81</sup>

It is greatly to the credit of the Natal Mercury that so much space was allowed for the discussion of these and other topics. Francois's statements were frequently challenged. One indignant letter signed F.G.B. (possibly Frank Graham Bell) objected to Francois's assertion that modernists were "Bolshevists."<sup>82</sup> And artists from as far afield as Capetown wrote to object to Francois's ignorance of the subject:

Whatever "Vermilion's feelings may be towards what is loosely called "Modern" art, I think he should remember this, that the public of S. Africa have had but small opportunity of ever seeing any; that here, as elsewhere, this art will come to its trial, and that indeed it is already beginning to do so; and that common fairness should prevent a critic - that is a man who in the mind of the public, is a judge - from deliberately at the outset predudicing (sic) the public and thus attempting to force a verdict without all the facts being known to it.

I am myself engaged at this moment on a series of studies on modern art, which, under the title "The Uncertainties of Modern Art," are appearing in Afrikaans in "Die Huisgenoot." I could wish some more authorised pen would undertake this work in an English-speaking

paper. Anyhow, many years spent in the frequentation of the cosmopolitan world of Montparnasse and in the academic studios of the Beaux Arts, many years of reading, and wide reading, on aesthetics and art philosophy; and in the visiting of exhibitions, and of painting, have brought me very far from "Vermilion's" conclusions. For they are conclusions, are they not? One feels it would be hopeless to expect them to be capable of modification. That there have been exaggerations, violences, faults of taste, and even - why not admit it - interested "boosting", does not weaken the fact that Cezanne, Matisse, Braque, Picasso, van Dongen, and Modigliani (to name only some painters) have in the highest sense created artistically. There has been thought behind the movements of Cubism and expressionism - too much thought perhaps, and one can say that a canvas is no place for metaphysical exercises. If "Vermilion" said that it would be well. But a lot of what he says is unjust and most of the rest is what some would call abuse. - Stratford Caldecott, Capetown<sup>83</sup>

Francois upheld his opinions, however, reserving his sharpest criticism for the works of Irma Stern.

Stern exhibited very infrequently in Natal, but always attracted attention when she did. Her first contribution to the NSA exhibition in 1924 aroused much controversy. [Pl. 170] Stern was associated for a short time with the Berlin Secessionists, a short-lived art movement of the early twenties, and Francois, whose origins were central European, had a particular dislike for "Secessionists" which, one

suspects, was his term for the German avant-garde.<sup>84</sup> His reaction to Stern's figure paintings is reminiscent of the French Salon's horror of Impressionism in the 1870s:

.. it is to those...who continually clamour for breaking away from old traditions that the three oil paintings by Irma Stern, of Capetown, must make a special appeal. While none will deny that these pictures are painted in all sincerity, there can be no doubt that they are the logical result of a degenerate spirit in art....

I frankly admit I do not understand the landscape, supposed to depict Las Palmas, which is gross in design and utterly devoid of "atmosphere." Yet I confess to a strange fascination by No. 655, a girl with flowers. While the gladiolus are more or less conventionally painted, the whole composition is almost repulsive, which is enhanced by an exaggerated drawing of the figure and face, suggesting almost terrifying sensuality and soul-killing voluptuousness.<sup>85</sup>

By the end of the thirties a more relaxed attitude prevailed. After the Surrealist exhibition in London in 1936<sup>86</sup> those who had previously fought against post-impressionism now retired in puzzled confusion. Many young Natal artists were encouraged to experiment with this style by a new generation of artists who had come out to teach at the Durban School of Art. One exponent was Eric Byrd whose style ranged from the pathos of Sick man [Pl. 171] to a variety of surrealism reminiscent of Dali. Music (1937)

[Pl. 172], for example, is an assemblage of hands in the process of performing on musical instruments, and Dance rhythm (1936) [Pl. 173] is almost a two-dimensional version of Baya Huba. The elements are identical: large clapping hands, the suggestion of frenzy, and a singing man with exaggerated features. Now that the critics had deserted the camp of the traditionalists it fell to the cartoonists to lampoon modernism. [Pl. 175] This particular painting was the subject of a rather childish pastiche described as "Jim Fish applauding the great feet of a compatriot." [Pl. 174]

The art of Merlyn Evans and his students will be discussed in full in the next Chapter. However, a short description of the main characteristics of his work is necessary to complete this discussion of modernism in Natal.

Merlyn Evans, who came to Natal in 1938, was a more adventurous surrealist than Byrd, - a follower of Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists. [see next Chapter] Those who claimed that modernists were bad craftsmen and didn't know how to draw were now soundly defeated. Evans was neither. His knowledge and ability in all techniques was superb, and his draughtsmanship impeccable. His paintings were nevertheless thoroughly incomprehensible, requiring lengthy explanations for their complicated symbolism. Many were

political satires related to current affairs, such as The chess-players (1939-1940) [Pl. 176] a comment on the German-Russian non-aggression pact, and The looters [Pl. 177], which was Evans's interpretation of Italy's occupation of Abyssinia. Some were simply abstract in form and meaning. Flight (1938) [Pl. 178] is a subjective assemblage of jagged shapes in the style of Wyndham Lewis, suggesting movement through the air.

With this invasion of truly professional artists from Britain of such uncompromising modernism, the public in Natal were finally alienated from the avant-garde. One could not poke fun at someone as articulate and aggressive as Evans, and it was very difficult for young artists embarking on a full-time career to ignore his persuasive rejection of what he called "the mists of impressionism."<sup>87</sup> From this moment on realism belonged to the amateurs and the old-fashioned.

### Chapter three: Notes

<sup>1</sup>as defined by Watney and Shone. see bibliography

<sup>2</sup>This interesting co-incidence was pointed out by Jill Addleson, Curator of the Durban Art Gallery, who also supplied a copy of the original catalogue.

<sup>3</sup>A.R. Martin, The Contemporary Art Society, The Common Room Magazine, Winter 1929 p. 25

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>"Vermilion", Contemporary British art, The Natal Mercury, 17 May 1929 p. 14

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Letter to the Editor from "Cobalt-Violet", The Natal Mercury, 4 June 1929 p. 16

<sup>8</sup>H.D.E., A young man's art, The Natal Advertiser, 3 March 1931 p. 10

<sup>9</sup>K. Clark, Paintings of Graham Bell, London, Humphries, 1947. The Euston Group included William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore, Bell, and Rodrigo Monyhan.

<sup>10</sup>Natal artist's success, The Natal Mercury, 20 April 1938 p. 11

<sup>11</sup>Letter from Sir Thomas Watt to Daniel Sanders, 30 July 1923. Tatham Art Gallery, Whitwell papers, 597/23

<sup>12</sup>see Chapter one

<sup>13</sup>Durban Art Gallery Advisory Committee minutes, 5 October 1920

<sup>14</sup>Letter from Sir Thomas Watt to Daniel Sanders, 21 July 1923, Tatham Art Gallery, Whitwell papers, 597/23.

<sup>15</sup>Letter from Col. Whitwell to the Town Clerk, 30 October 1923. Ibid.

- <sup>16</sup>Whitwell papers. Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup>see Chapter One
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>The Natal Mercury, 4 February 1927 p. 11
- <sup>20</sup>Art revival in the City, The Natal Mercury, 31 March 1927 p. 11
- <sup>21</sup>Resumption of Art Gallery controversy, The Natal Mercury, 24 August 1937 p. 15; Art Gallery "serial": umpteenth episode of a boring controversy, The Natal Mercury, 28 September 1937 p. 18
- <sup>22</sup>see Chapter Five: Natal experienced a building boom during the late thirties
- <sup>23</sup>This, too, found its way to the City Hall basement. It was relaid in 1933. - MH.
- <sup>24</sup>Tatham Art Gallery, minute papers: Pietermaritzburg centenary
- <sup>25</sup>Letters to the Editor from "Burgess" and "Another Burgess", The Natal Mercury, 29 July 1925 p. 3; 31 July 1925 p. 8
- <sup>26</sup>Art purchase for the Borough, The Natal Mercury, 9 September 1930 p. 14
- <sup>27</sup>Letter to the Editor from "Burgess", The Natal Mercury, 29 July 1925 p. 3
- <sup>28</sup>Letter to the editor from "Sad at heart", The Natal Mercury, 14 April 1927 p. 20
- <sup>29</sup>Berman refers to him tactfully as "synonymous with popular painting in South Africa." Art and artists of South Africa, 2nd ed., Capetown, Balkema, 1984 p. 111
- <sup>30</sup>"Pretty-pretty" pictures: Nace (sic) but not art, The Natal Mercury, 6 March 1931 p. 10
- <sup>31</sup>Down our lane, The Natal Mercury, 6 April 1927 p. 9 For reaction to these comments see Down our lane, The Natal Mercury, 7 April 1927 p. 9; 8 April 1927 p. 9; and 11 April 1927 p. 7.

- <sup>32</sup>11 April 1927 p. 7
- <sup>33</sup>Which pictures do you like best?, The Natal Mercury, 16 July 1929 p. 9
- <sup>34</sup>Psychology of an art ballot, The Natal Mercury, 25 July 1929 p. 19
- <sup>35</sup>The art ballot result, The Natal Mercury, 3 August 1929 p. 15; "Vermilion", The NSA July exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 14 August 1929 p. 9
- <sup>36</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1917
- <sup>37</sup>"Vermilion", Propaganda methods in art, The Natal Mercury, 9 April 1929 p. 13
- <sup>38</sup>see Chapter One; An artist in a caravan, The Natal Mercury, 5 May 1926 p. 13
- <sup>39</sup>In one year he was able to obtain a room at the Durban Art Gallery for his private use. see Palmer: Artists in Natal: 1910-1940
- <sup>40</sup>Gundelfinger prizewinner, The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1926 p. 10; Picture selling on the Rand, The Natal Mercury, 8 June 1928 p. 12
- <sup>41</sup>Who's who in Natal, Knox, Durban, 1933 p. 111
- <sup>42</sup>A real national art, The Natal Mercury, 14 May 1924 p. 17; E. Mayer, The need of a national style in our arts and crafts, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1938 p. 15
- <sup>43</sup>Natal Society of Artists: President's Report, The Natal Mercury, 29 September 1925. "It is a well-known fact that purely Native subjects in pictures is anathema with a large number of the public in South Africa..."
- <sup>44</sup>The Natal Mercury, 8 June 1928 p. 12
- <sup>45</sup>Why Palmer considered a Zulu with Arab features to be "pure-bred" is best known to himself. - MH.
- <sup>46</sup>An artist in a caravan, The Natal Mercury, 5 May 1926 p. 13
- <sup>47</sup>R.V.G[ooding], The Natal Mercury, 6 July 1935

<sup>48</sup>Durban Art Gallery catalogue, 1937 p. 13

<sup>49</sup>"Her body looms above him like a hill/Within whose shade a village lies at rest...". A book of poetry, London, Arnold, 1959 p. 339

<sup>50</sup>Natal Society of Artists, The Natal Mercury, 29 September 1925. The President's report.

<sup>51</sup>O.J.P. Oxley, Art in Natal, A century of progress in Natal, 1924, p. 119

<sup>52</sup>Eg. An exhibition of black art was organised in 1931 in Pietermaritzburg by R. Crispe through the American Mission. The Natal Witness, 19 August 1931 p. 17

<sup>53</sup>see Ntuli, Mnguni: Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>54</sup>16 January 1930 p. 9

<sup>55</sup>The Natal Mercury, 10 November 1930 p. 14

<sup>56</sup>Miss Nixon, Pietermaritzburg. G. Benghu received lessons from her father at Edendale.

<sup>57</sup>see Stainbank: Artists in Natal: 1910-1940. Information on Miss Stainbanks career can be found in M. Webb, Precious stone, Durban, Knox, 1985, which is based on her reminiscences. Miss Stainbank herself provided information on many of the sculptures.

<sup>58</sup>see Chapter 4

<sup>59</sup>"Ricksha boy" is a description of colonial origin. The Durban variety was observed with amusement by foreigners from an early date. "The ricksha men, irrespective of age, are all 'boys'. These gentry are arrayed most gorgeously in anything loud and blazing in colour that they can pick up...The grander of them boast head-dresses in which horns and porcupine quills figure largely. White socks, painted on fantastically with pipe-clay, adorn their legs." R.E.B., Durban: the white city, The Natal Mercury, 28 April 1913 p. 8, quoted from The West Australian.

<sup>60</sup>The Common Room Magazine, Winter 1920. Erich Mayer's complaints regarding the too frequent depiction of this

colourful character were directed as much to the students as to practising artists.

<sup>61</sup>This was not to the liking of the College authorities who thought sculpture was unladylike. Miss Stainbank's descriptions of the goings-on at the sculpture school are indeed alarming. From the seclusion of her private room she was to observe much vigorous horseplay in the main studio. She ascribes the reluctance of the Principal, Rothenstein, to enrol women to the wanton behaviour of previous women students.

<sup>62</sup>Interview with Miss Stainbank, December 1985.

<sup>63</sup>Royal Academy, The Natal Mercury, 1926 p. 11

<sup>64</sup>The Natal Mercury, 21 July 1927 p. 19; 27 July 1927 p. 8

<sup>65</sup>"Vermilion", Art exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 27 July 1927 p. 8

<sup>66</sup>Interview, 28 September 1985

<sup>67</sup>"Baya huba" and its meaning, The Natal Mercury, 17 July 1933 p. 10

<sup>68</sup>Can we honour genius? The Natal Mercury, 4 July 1933 p. 8

<sup>69</sup>Letter to the press, [1933] Cutting: Sampson collection

<sup>70</sup>Sculptors were so rare in South Africa. One gains the impression sometimes that they were praised no matter what they attempted.

<sup>71</sup>Art criticism, Standard encyclopedia of S. Africa, Capetown, 1970 vol I p. 557

<sup>72</sup>"Vermilion", Art Causerie, The Natal Mercury, 11 August 1925 p. 16

<sup>73</sup>Letter to the Editor from J.L.W., The Daily News, 5 July 1939 p. 10

<sup>74</sup>The Natal Mercury, 2 July 1932 p. 15

<sup>75</sup>Letter to the Editor from "Vermilion", The Natal

Mercury, 12 July 1932 p. 14

<sup>76</sup>Letter to the Editor from R.V. Gooding, The Natal Mercury, 13 July 1932 p. 12

<sup>77</sup>The Natal Mercury, 11 August 1925 p. 16

<sup>78</sup>South Africa's place in the world of art, The Natal Mercury, 6 July 1928 p. 18

<sup>79</sup>i.e. as defined by Roger Fry, et al.

<sup>80</sup>A national art, The Natal Mercury, 5 July 1922 p. 5

<sup>81</sup>Art causerie, The Natal Mercury, 8 July 1925

<sup>82</sup>Bolshevism in art, The Natal Mercury, 5 September 1930 p. 12

<sup>83</sup>Modernism in art, The Natal Mercury, 22 June 1925 p. 14 (letter to the editor)

<sup>84</sup>i.e. Expressionism, The Blaue Reiter, etc.

<sup>85</sup>"Vermilion" 1924 July exhibition, The Natal Mercury, 3 July 1924 p. 12

<sup>86</sup>The Natal Mercury, 9 July 1936 p. 9; 11 July 1936 p. 23

<sup>87</sup>The Common Room Magazine, December 1938 p. 24

CHAPTER FOUR

"AMATEURS" AND "PROFESSIONALS"

An analysis of the art community in Natal would not be complete without a discussion of the professional status, or lack thereof, amongst the individual members. What exactly were "amateur" and "professional" artists?

The idea that art could be used as a form of relaxation is a comparatively recent concept. Until the 18th century art, unlike music, was not a respectable pastime for a gentleman. However, with the development of watercolour in the 18th and 19th centuries painting became an acceptable "accomplishment", even for ladies. The passion for travel in Europe after 1750 also stimulated interest in the purely documentary use of watercolour, leading to its use for the recording of romantic scenery.<sup>1</sup> Amateur painters proliferated during the 19th century, together with the establishment of local societies for painting and drawing.<sup>2</sup>

This trend was introduced to South Africa in the late 19th century with the foundation of the S.A. Drawing Club (founded in Capetown in 1889) which was later absorbed into the S.A. Society of Artists.<sup>3</sup> The NSA Sketch Club (see below) played a similar role in Natal. The gradual invasion by amateurs of professional art associations and "the dubious economic status of the many professional artists who are not in regular employment"<sup>4</sup> has led to confusion regarding the

definition of the two terms. "Amateur", once used in its strictest sense to describe a person who cultivates a pursuit for "love", now has derogatory associations due to its connection with "popular" art. The amateur or "Sunday painter" of the 19th century was a humble person with no formal training but a certain amount of natural talent, who painted whatever he found pleasing in his spare time.<sup>5</sup> This description might equally apply to some of the "professional" artists of the 20th century who are alike in every respect except for their commercial success. "Popular art" in South Africa has been examined by various historians. Berman makes a tactful reference to it as art which is popular amongst the general public.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter three the discussion on public taste proved that certain paintings appealed more strongly to the public than others, and that there was a body of educated opinion opposed to this tendency. The admiration for an artist such as Tinus de Jongh, for example, was regarded by those with a modicum of discernment as poor taste. "Popular" art as a genre was, however, not recognised. The attitude of those who organised exhibitions and art sales was clear. If the public of the twenties and thirties could not discern between good or bad painting it was, therefore, ignorant and had to be educated.

If its members wished to patronise "bad" art nobody was going to stop them. But neither would anybody consciously exploit their preferences. Even Francois, whose taste was fairly catholic, would have disregarded "popular" painting as a category of art.

In a recent paper Farber takes a critical view of the subject as a current phenomenon. She discusses its place in the mass culture of the eighties and defines it as "a crowd-pleasing art" offering "instant satisfaction of the most superficial aesthetic needs of a wide public":

Popular art requires no effort - it offers the layman immediate appeal calling up a repertoire of scenes and symbols which are easily recognized and easy to deal with. Unlike avant garde art which often relies on a highly subjective vision, popular art relies on public symbols rather than private ones.

In imitating only the external appearance of traditional art, popular art is forced to substitute its own values in place of the conceptual values inherent in the original work. The substituted values frequently include sentiment, nostalgia or patriotism. Popular art thus offers not a direct translation of reality, but an interpretation thereof often based on romanticism and idealisation.<sup>7</sup>

It is very tempting to place Natal artists of the twenties and thirties in the same category as those discussed by Farber. Sentiment and patriotism have already been

identified as qualities regarded as desirable in the landscapes described in Chapter two, and the deteriorating quality in technique and originality were also noted. As far as subject matter is concerned, one only has to visit venues where popular art is shown<sup>8</sup> to find the numerous progeny of Methven's Drakensberg scenes, and Paton's moonlit beaches.<sup>9</sup> This does not detract from Paton and Methven's merit as artists. Nor can they be accused of the well-organised commercialism of much present-day amateur painting.<sup>10</sup> These men were amateurs in the true sense of the word.

Strictly speaking, most artists discussed so far were "amateurs". Artists that one can confidently describe as "professional" include all those who had undergone specialised training and who painted full-time and exhibited regularly. These include itinerant painters such as Palmer and McIvor who had arrived in Natal with their careers already established, and who maintained studios in Britain. There were also those involved with full-time teaching or lecturing, many of whom had qualified in Britain. The lecturers at the Durban School of Art fall into this category. There were a very few local artists who ran their own studios, such as Allerley Glossop at Lion's River,

and Mary Stainbank and her friend, Wilgeforde Vann-Hall, at Coedmore. Clement S  n  que practised painting full-time at the expense of his architectural practice,<sup>11</sup> but artists such as Francois, Methven, and Sir William Beaumont, whose output was also fairly prolific, only found time to paint seriously after retirement from their various professions. It is very obvious, considering the large number of artists active in Natal who did not fulfil these requirements,<sup>12</sup> that amateurs were in the majority.

One might describe an "amateur" as an untrained artist who painted for his or her own pleasure and, perhaps exhibited at his or her art club. A great many Natal artists of interest fall into this category. But what of those who fall into the grey area between amateurism and professionalism? This problem was the cause of much recurrent ill-feeling in South Africa:

The few outstanding painters, musicians, actors, and men of letters South Africa can boast of at the present time, have unfortunately erected a pedestal entirely their own, and from which, it is evident, they are loath to descend. In justice to them it should be conceded, however, that, in South Africa, the line of demarcation between professional and amateur status is but ill defined.

...[it was] pointed out to me that...the curse of this country was the fact that so many dilettantes posed as professionals. This, very naturally, at once raises the

query: What is a professional in art? Does the mere fact that a painter sells his pictures...make him either an artist or a professional in the sense one speaks of either professionalism or art. In the case of a painter, one generally looks upon him as a professional when, after a course of study in art colleges or under a master, he follows art as a means of livelihood...

Immediately the argument is put up that in South Africa to-day there are a number of soi-disant amateurs, people who actually follow another calling altogether for their livelihood, who...paint...considerably better than many of the professional men and women. I have no doubt the same position exists in the old countries also, but only to an infinitesimal degree, and naturally so, as the professional element there is bound to overshadow all amateur effort.

...in this Dominion, the opposite is precisely the case, a position which, in my opinion, is entirely due to...the attitude of the public, who have not as yet developed their critical faculties to discriminate the quality of the work which they are buying...<sup>13</sup>

As Francois is careful not to mention names one must speculate as to what his choice of "dilettantes" might have been. Many of them would have been women. Most female exhibitors were not taken very seriously. Over the years more than half the exhibitors at the NSA exhibitions were women and a considerable number of those were hobbyists. These ladies would not have offered very strong competition to professional artists. A typical example is Clarice Paton,

wife of Wallace Paton, who specialised in flower painting in watercolour and pastel. The two examples of her work chosen for illustration [Pl. 179, 180] were painted in 1911 and 1940, respectively. Although the proportions are ill-considered they both have that naive quality present in much folk art.

Clarice Paton and her contemporaries, Perla Siedle Gibson and Bertha Froome were founder-members of the NSA<sup>14</sup> and exhibited regularly. Flowers and watercolours appear to have been the common denominator amongst these artists. Froome's flower pictures [Pl. 181] are competent but repetitive: a safe formula that she liked to repeat. More interesting are the small open-air paintings that she made with her sketching companion, Daisy Collioud. Out-door expedititons were very popular among amateur artists of the period, and in contrast with the flower pieces, show a pleasing sense of discovery. Apart from a few faults of perspective, Durban Bay from the University [Pl. 182] could hold its own next to Seneque's watercolours. Other work shows a typical amateurish struggle with form. Durban from Currie Road [1935-40] [Pl. 183] might be the product of a school child, not the President of the NSA.<sup>15</sup> Perla Siedle Gibson might well have been an artist that Francois would

have classed as "dilettante." Her formal training equipped her with impressive skill in draughtsmanship [Pl. 184] which she proceeded to abandon as soon as she left art school. She attempted to combine the careers of operatic soprano and artist, with obviously detrimental results as far as art was concerned. Francois, it is reported, often rebuked her for trying to do too many things at once.<sup>16</sup> Her work is bold but undisciplined. This is especially apparent in a painting such as Bouquet of flowers [Pl. 185] where form is lost in the mass of detail. She often succeeds, however, when the composition relies on tone. In Gardens [Pl. 186], for example, the palm trees in the foreground and their shadows relate cleverly to the angle of the steps and the distant trees. Begonias [Pl. 187] which at first appears clumsy and ill-balanced, in fact reads well as an arrangement of forms in space and as a decorative pattern of light and dark.

An example of a professional with amateur capabilities is Irene Dyer. This artist settled in Durban in 1925 and started painting "professionally" in 1929.<sup>17</sup> Between 1930 and 1937 she held at least six one-man exhibitions, the majority at Lezard's in Johannesburg. Her watercolours are not remarkable. A typical example is Azaleas [Pl. 188] - in style and technique on a par with Froome and Gibson. She was

best known for delicately-painted Cape Dutch Houses [Pl. 189] surrounded by sketchily drawn foliage with dark speckled shadows. Her weaknesses are accentuated when she attempts oil painting. The better examples are poor imitations of Roworth and de Jongh. [Pl. 190] Others are large, incompetently painted versions of the watercolours. [Pl. 191]

Working on a larger scale and in an unsympathetic medium pushed her out of her depth: the paint is applied carelessly with an unpleasantly dry brush and details are badly drawn.

For those women who had trained as artists, locally or overseas, and wished to embark on a full-time career, the path was thorny and narrow. Such artists were regarded as quaintly eccentric<sup>18</sup> and were not expected to stand up to competition. Stainbank relates numerous unhappy stories of all-male committees awarding lucrative commissions to fellow-males on the grounds that a woman could not be expected to carry out work on scaffolding in public. Her first employers, the Public Works Department, had been persuaded, against their will, to appoint her to carve the stone reliefs on the new Aliwal Street Government Offices. Although decently covered in dungarees [Pl. 192], the sight of a lady in men's clothes was sufficiently unusual in Durban in the late twenties to attract unfriendly attention from

passers-by. Allerley Glossop, openly eccentric, obviously disregarded social pressures. Her normal dress included men's riding breeches and leggings, and a sola topi. [Pl. 193] She is reputed to have smoked cigars and drove her own cattle, and in 1938 apparently took part in the symbolic Trek dressed as a Voortrekker.<sup>19</sup>

The majority of women artists were either students or wished to find entertainment. The NSA Sketch Club was to provide a valuable service to both.

The Club came into being in a spirit of companionship. Let one of the first members tell the story:

As all artists will agree it is very difficult to work and improve without an artistic atmosphere, and it always requires terrific pertinacity of purpose to go out sketching quite alone, particularly in a town where the inhabitants are more inquisitive than well-mannered.

To obviate this embarrassment Mr Seneque and Mr John Williams, among others, used to go on sketching trips down the coast or to the quieter spots near town. As their artistic friends joined them from time to time, a feeling grew that indoor meetings would be equally enjoyable, and Mr Bartholomew [the architect] lent his office for this purpose. Meanwhile a resolution was proposed to the Committee of the Natal Society [of Artists] and carried requesting that body to form a proper Sketch Club. After several months however, despite the resolution nothing was done and an informal meeting of those interested was held independently of the Natal Society. At this meeting a Committee was elected

and a rough survey of the ideals and future activities of the Club dealt with.

This Committee decided to throw membership open to all students and artists... Syllabuses were printed showing where the Club would proceed each Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning; and also setting subjects to be done at other times and handed in each month for criticism and a quarterly prize.

Since the formation of the Club, affiliation to the Society [NSA] has taken place on certain conditions. Of these perhaps the most important is the help to be given in the form of a Club Room... (Natalie Field, nee Secker)<sup>20</sup> [Pl. 194]

The Sketch Club would probably never have succeeded had there not been a genuine community spirit in Durban at the time. One can detect a certain preciousness in some accounts of the activities, but the enthusiasm and enjoyment of these artists indicates a peaceful and tolerant atmosphere. Natalie Field, a student at the Durban School of Art at the time, expresses her response to Club activities:

Three most successful lectures have been held... There is always a delightful Bohemianism about the general informality of these gatherings. and the discussions of the most heated nature take place on each occasion.

It is really amazing how many charming subjects there are in Durban for sketching purposes....The vegetation varies so much as to include the tropical aspect of groves of palms, while the more quietly beautiful scenery of the old world can be found in such places as the grounds of Lady Campbell's garden, the old Fort, or other

lovely gardens of the Berea. Nothing here is hackneyed, everything is so fresh, and you have not the feeling following you everywhere that Whistler or Brangwyn or Muirhead Bone or someone else has already done it, and can do it better than you can possibly hope to do.<sup>21</sup>

This would explain the development of an artist such as Nils Andersen whose career began in the relaxed out-door expeditions of the Sketch Club. Early attempts give way to watercolours and pastels of dexterity and sophistication in the style of Clément S  n  que who was one of the leading lights in the Sketch Club, especially after his return from Paris. The stylistic similarity of much work of the late twenties<sup>22</sup> can be traced back to those weekend sketching parties.

### The Durban School of Art

That the Art School students should have been encouraged to take part in such activities gives some indication of the changes that had taken place since the days when W.H.T. Venner had refused to allow his charges out of the studio (see below).

The Art School, as part of the Natal Technical Institute, came into being in 1907, under Venner, who

retained his status as Art Master for the Government School of Art, a post which he had held since 1895.<sup>23</sup> The Government also retained financial control of the Art School and Venner obstinately refused to be transferred from the Government to the Institute.<sup>24</sup> This hampered progress considerably.

According to old pupils, Venner had run the Government School of Art with energy and enthusiasm. He had over 400 pupils as well as a Saturday morning art class for children.<sup>25</sup> When he moved to the Technical College he continued to teach according to British methods for the South Kensington exams.<sup>26</sup> In 1910 the College revised the prospectus as follows:

"the object of the School of Art is to give a thoroughly practical knowledge of drawing and painting and modelling and design, adapted to the requirements of artists, designers and craftsmen, as well as for teachers and those who study art as a branch of general education."<sup>27</sup>

By the time that John Adams took over in 1915 Venner had obviously lost interest:

His students spent their time copying masterpieces of art from post-card reproductions, which he stored in a large box in the art room. When he was urged by the Principal to take the classes for outdoor sketching, Venner's reply was that there was nothing out of doors in Durban worth drawing.<sup>28</sup>

In March 1915 Venner was transferred by the Government to Pietermaritzburg and the College took control. His replacement was sent, at the College's request, from the Royal College of Art: John Adams,<sup>29</sup> described by the Principal of the R.C.A. as "an exceptional man for an exceptional position."<sup>30</sup>

Adams played an important role in the establishment of the Art School's national reputation. In a short article written in 1938, Adams reminisces about the changes that he brought about in his six years in Natal:

Before the Technical College in 1915 it had been a Government institution. It had been concerned chiefly with what is called "Fine Art." A visiting art inspector from the Cape came once a year and the idea that time was to induce Durban to adopt the rather limited and truly Edwardian syllabus then in vogue in the Cape Province. In the Transvaal and the Free State advanced education could hardly be said to exist. I advised the College Council not to adopt the Cape scheme, but to build for the first time in South Africa on a broad application of painting, sculpture, architecture, and industrial design, to co-ordinate art education in the town, from the kindergarten up to the standards set by the art colleges overseas, and to do everything possible to develop the cultural values of art among the citizens generally. The President, the Principal, and the College Council gave me their unreserved confidence from the start, and before many years had passed, the work we did at Durban became

the plan on which art education throughout the Union was built. A few months after I resigned in 1921, the school became part of the University of South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

The difficulties of change must have been very trying to the few students in 1915 who remained faithful to the school... They gave up the painting of fatuous copies of English landscapes, and there were times, no doubt, when they questioned my belief in drawing as a foundation for all subsequent work. For a time, I fancy, more than one proud parent lamented the change from real oil paintings - anaemic shadows of the Royal Academy - to work which was more fundamental but far less sensational. After the Christmas vacation of 1915 I felt certain that my insistence on hard work and sound study had disheartened the few remaining students, and it was with surprise and relief that I saw them all turn up again the following February. Soon the life drawing began to get more sure of itself, the painting from life more exciting. Lace making, pottery, embroidery and other crafts began to make progress.

...Soon other students of ability joined the pioneers.  
...As time went on our activities included designing for stage settings with most successful performances, the founding of a school magazine, vacation courses for teachers, Saturday classes for children, and exhibitions of posters and of fine printing arranged in the Art Gallery. The natural summit of all this endeavour seemed to be reached when the Emma Smith scholarship for study overseas was instituted through the generosity of Sir Charles Smith. The ladder of opportunity for the South African art student was for the first time complete.<sup>32</sup>

The Art School under Adams seems to have been a place of optimism and vitality. It is extremely unfortunate that the

Durban of the early twenties was unsympathetic towards his ideals. He does not mention, in this short memoir, the disappointments and frustration caused by Government and public apathy. These he set out in a private letter to O.J.P. Oxley, then Art Organiser for the Natal Department of Education. This was published in the local press at the College Council's request. He complained bitterly of the Union Government's refusal to grant the Art School University status: "Meanwhile Johannesburg takes the initiative out of our hands by appointing a Professor of Architecture at a salary nearly twice as much as the commencing salary of my successor."<sup>33</sup> He chides the Durban public for being deaf to the College's appeals for help and sponsorship:

A hostel has been our pressing need for several years as there is no Art School in the Free State and the Transvaal, and the numbers at Durban could have been doubled by now had a hostel been founded. But Durban people are not interested. Yet Durban people are wealthy enough to have given us the Hostel and the new School Building. ...They rhapsodize over the progress of the students, the influence of the School in South Africa, the Tableaux etc. True! These are all bubbles until the foundations are properly laid, and they never have been..."<sup>34</sup>

The reason for Durban's lack of support may well have been a social one. The majority of students were women who

outnumbered men by at least five to one.<sup>35</sup> As mentioned above, ladies were not expected to have careers. And those who attended the Art School treated it, more often than not, as a local finishing school.<sup>36</sup> This attitude was eloquently described by Mary Stainbank. Her own family was reluctant to allow her to take up art seriously. The death of her father had resulted in the expectation that she would help out by earning a living as a shop assistant at Greenacre's.<sup>37</sup> Few of her contemporaries continued painting after their student days. The Common Room Magazine's news page for old students contained as many announcements of engagements, weddings and babies as of artistic attainments.<sup>38</sup> Mary Stainbank was a social oddity: she didn't want a husband, she didn't want to sell silk stockings - what else was there for a respectable young lady to do in Durban in 1920? It was Adams who rescued her from Greenacre's.

It is only implied in his memoirs, but one is given the impression that the parents were a most obstructive element. He and Martin, for example, wished to hold life drawing classes with a nude model. After much argument with the College authorities, Stainbank and her fellow students were locked in one of the college rooms and presented with a woman on a pedestal draped in muslin. This raised a storm of

protest amongst concerned parents and was summarily ended.<sup>39</sup>

Oxley took up where Adams had left off. Apart from the granting of University status in 1923,<sup>40</sup> the syllabus and methods remained the same. In 1925 the prospectus read as follows:

UNIVERSITY COURSE FOR A DEGREE IN FINE ART. The degree course covers a period of four years and is open to all Students who have matriculated.<sup>41</sup>

DAY CLASSES in Life Drawing and Painting, Modelling, Landscape Painting, Design, Architectural Perspective and the following crafts: - Lithography, Pottery, Embroidery, Black and White Drawing, Etching, Lettering, Illuminating and Wood-carving.<sup>42</sup>

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CHILDREN'S ART CLASSES Saturday mornings

A THREE AND A HALF YEAR'S COURSE for the Art Teacher's Certificate (Union Department of Education)<sup>43</sup>

Students remember Oxley as a good organiser, fervently interested in the development of art education.<sup>44</sup> Oxley was a craftsman rather than a painter, and continued the craftwork classes which had been started by Adams, leaving the teaching of drawing and painting to A.R. Martin and J.H.

Bradshaw.<sup>45</sup> He held strong views on the teaching of art in general which he expressed in numerous lectures and publications. For example, he disapproved of craftsmanship as an end in itself:

The pencil and brush are dangerous tools, for they are not ends in themselves but lend themselves to a facility, which may too easily lead the student away from the spirit of good craftsmanship.<sup>46</sup>

In his opinion giving a student the ability to appreciate art was the art teacher's principal goal:

One of the chief aims of the school is to develop the mentality of the student, together with his craftsmanship. The two are separate, but for all round progress they must be co-ordinated.<sup>47</sup>

The development of appreciation was of more value ultimately than skill in drawing, and future education should aim at inculcating the appreciation of beauty; of art and craftsmanship. By proper organisation there should be an unbroken chain of instruction from the kindergarten to the end of the secondary school period, which should, if necessary, be continued in the school of art.<sup>48</sup>

These sentiments suggest that Oxley, faced with that dilettantism discussed above, was at least attempting a compromise by giving all students a general art education, if not a vocation. He and his wife can not be accused of

lacking enthusiasm for the broadening of young outlooks. They organised regular student tours overseas,<sup>49</sup> carried on the tradition of producing "Tableaux vivants" [Pl. 195] started by Adams,<sup>50</sup> and Oxley, who was a theatre enthusiast, wrote plays and ballets in which he, the staff and students created the sets and acted on stage.<sup>51</sup> [Pl. 196]

In examining the student work of the period one must take into account the influence of the lecturers and their preferences. The Emma Smith Scholarship gives an indication of their concept of excellence in a student's work, although, in this case, outside adjudicators were also appointed. In 1926, for example, the judges were Prof. Oxley, Wallace Paton, and Alfred Palmer.

A general analysis has to rely on surviving works and, more importantly, on the School of Art's biannual publication, The Common Room Magazine, which was started in 1919 by Adams. This was edited by students but obviously contained what the staff considered to be outstanding work.

Early examples of student painting include two portraits (1915) of the same model by Lilian Tonkin (Mrs Foaden) [Pl. 197] and Perla Siedle Gibson [Pl. 198]. Apart from the slightly different point of view, the paintings are almost identical. As a painting exercise it is interesting to see

the insistence on carefully observed detail in the turban and beard and tight, precise brushstrokes. Another life portrait from a class of 1917 shows a very different approach.

Portrait of Lt. Forrester Lynell [Pl. 199] by Elise Milligan (Mrs Coulson) is equally well drawn but freely painted.<sup>52</sup>

Drawings from the twenties and early thirties consistently show the influence of Alfred Martin, who had trained under Augustus John and Robert Anning Bell, and had very specific ideas about good drawing methods. He allowed no rubbing out whatsoever,<sup>53</sup> and no rough blocking on the page beforehand. Lines had to be spontaneous, vital and confident, like the drawing of a child. "All primitive peoples and young children," he said, "draw in the right way naturally;...they put a clear line down without any hesitation, incorrect certainly from a realistic standpoint, but they draw by intuition and their method is sound."<sup>54</sup> His own drawings [Pl. 200, 201] reflect a Pre-Raphaelite meticulousness rather than John's nervous energy, and this can also be seen in the work of his students. [Pl. 202, 203, 204]

The strength of the College lay, not in painting or drawing, but in craft and design. Adams laid the foundation for this very successful section of the Art School. In the large number of disciplines offered, (see above) the

students' output clearly shows the influence of William Morris, through Oxley who was a fervent supporter of the Arts and Crafts Movement. [Pl. 205-215]

He [Oxley] defined art as 'quite sound and complete workmanship.' Art, he said, was not the frilling, but the thing complete. Therefore well-designed wallpaper, a carpet, chair, table, house, garden, dress, motor-car, engine or anything made by a human being for a human being came within the range of art.<sup>55</sup>

In his numerous lectures to industrial and commercial audiences he stressed the importance of sound craftsmanship and fitness of material in design. It was his aim that the numerous apprentices attached to the Art School would vitalize commercial design in Natal and elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> He didn't reject machinery, but blamed it for the decline in workmanship and design.<sup>57</sup> Industry, he said, was involved in the "soulless production of useless articles."<sup>58</sup>

Did the Art School succeed in providing Natal with a professional body of artists? Mary Stainbank is possibly their most notable success. They can also claim Nils Andersen who was a part-time student, and Frank Graham Bell: a succés de scandale. Eleanor Esmonde-White achieved success as a painter and designer of tapestries after her appointment to create murals for South Africa House.<sup>59</sup>

Natalie Field and Nils Solberg became full-time artists, and Barbara Tyrrell became known for decorative native studies. The many others who studied Fine Art between 1910 and 1937,<sup>60</sup> even those who obtained an Emma Smith Scholarship, failed to make their mark on South African art. As noted above, the School achieved most success in the encouragement of craftwork and its most successful students ran factories and drawing offices rather than art studios.

One of these was "The Ceramic Studio", a pottery works [Pl. 216] run in the late twenties and thirties by Gladys Short and Joan Methley, two former students who had received further training further at the Royal College of Art, London. Gladys Short had run a pottery studio in Durban for two years and was encouraged to move to the Transvaal by Roland Cullinan. They gathered about them a number of other graduates from the Durban School of Art: Audrey Frank, Mrs Gifford-Gayton, and Miss G. Scott<sup>61</sup> and set up their factory at the old Consolidated Rand Brick Pottery at Olifantsfontein in about 1928.<sup>62</sup> The Ceramic Studio specialised in architectural faience [Pl. 299, 300], a medium used by John Adams for a number of memorial plaques in Durban.<sup>63</sup> They were lucky to receive much Government support in the form of commissions, the first being for the Children's Hospital at

Addington.<sup>65</sup> [Pl. 217, 218] The venture only came to an end when war broke out in 1939.

The School of Art experienced a crisis in 1935 when Oxley was asked to choose between running the Technical College Art School and the Fine Art Department of the University of Natal. He had spent many years encouraging the applied arts, but, in the end found himself more committed to the fine art course and the training of art teachers. He had held professorial status since 1923 and saw no reason why he should not continue to run both departments. However, the Technical College refused to allow this and so the University College was forced to separate the two art schools. In October 1935 Oxley was informed of the decision and he was moved to Pietermaritzburg a year later.<sup>66</sup>

Oxley was joined there by Eric Byrd who had been with him in Durban, and by Rosa S. Hope, a British artist who had come to South Africa to teach at the Michaelis Art School in Capetown.<sup>67</sup> They proceeded to organise the department on much the same lines as the Durban Art School of the thirties.<sup>68</sup>

At the same time the Technical College set about finding a new Principal and John Adams was asked to assist. His choice was George D. How, an associate of the Royal College

of Art, who took over in Durban in April 1937.<sup>69</sup>

Like the proverbial new broom, How swept through the College, writing reports on the appalling conditions in the studios, and the lack of equipment.<sup>70</sup> He revamped the Common Room Magazine<sup>71</sup> to go with the Art School's new image as a centre for commercial and industrial design. And, not least, he appointed the young and dynamic Merlyn Evans as painting lecturer to replace Eric Byrd.<sup>72</sup> In the light of the following passage one wonders why How appointed a man who was technically and intellectually committed to the fine arts.

Design for living has replaced "Art for Art's sake" as the slogan of the modern art school, according to G.D. How, Principal of the Durban School of Art... The art school of twenty years ago taught students to paint pretty pictures of bowls of fruit and flowers, said Mr How. Today we run our art schools entirely on an industrial and commercial basis...We are training fashion designers, but they must be practical dressmakers. We are training commercial artists, but they must know all the details of the mechanical side of their craft. Our furniture designers must be practical craftsmen. We have pottery designers who are practical pottery workers.<sup>73</sup>

Not that Evans was unable to supply the kind of expertise required by commercial artists. He was a superb etcher and experimented constantly with painting techniques, especially

egg tempera.<sup>74</sup> Here, at last, was an artist of consummate skill, intimately acquainted with contemporary art movements in Europe, and unafraid to voice his radical<sup>75</sup> views on socialism and art.<sup>76</sup> R.V. Gooding hailed his paintings as "a welcome refuge in a sea of troubled amateurism,"<sup>77</sup> and painting students at the Durban School of Art spent those few years before the war absorbing a completely new approach to art.

His style was based loosely on that of Wyndham Lewis, whose work he had seen in London. [Pl. 219] Students who had worked under Oxley's mild allegiance to Arts and Crafts were plunged into futurism and the age of the machine. Unlike Lewis, whose politics were right-wing, but whose paintings were non-political, Evans expressed his angry socialism in a variety of fragmented images.<sup>78</sup> Students in his class were inevitably drawn to the use of social comment in their work. Beryl Newman, for example, produced works such as City life [Pl. 220], a depressing view of the Durban jail with broken machinery and two disreputable women in the foreground.

Much of Evans's work was documentary in mood. His pencil portraits are crisp, clean images, executed in a delicate style based on tempera technique. [Pl. 221] Paintings in this style include Zulu woman [Pl. 222], a small

tempera illustrating his use of the medium. The tiny brushstrokes are perfectly suited to the description of the individual beads and fibres in the woman's head-dress. The face is treated in planes reminiscent of Wyndham Lewis's portrait of T.S. Eliot [Pl. 223] (purchased in 1938 for the Durban Art Gallery soon after the Royal Academy controversy).<sup>79</sup> Other examples in this detached mood were a series of still lifes with real and imaginary objects, including Still life with fruit (1938) [Pl. 224] (Johannesburg Art Gallery) and Polynesian fantasy (1939) [Pl. 225].

Evans was fortunate to have a number of extremely talented students open to his methods. Nils Solberg, a precocious commercial art student from Eshowe, had been painting imaginative subjects before the arrival of Evans. Sea nymphs (1937) [Pl. 226] is a pleasantly decorative composition. After 1938 his forms became more strongly defined with sharp planes and hard edges. Prosperity [Pl. 227] and Civilisation (1939) [Pl. 228] are both rather emotive works using visual stereotypes in the manner of advertisements. The use of the "ideal family" in Prosperity is either very naive or depressingly reminiscent of Nazi propaganda images of the late thirties. However, as Solberg

was producing anti-fascist cartoons [Pl. 229] at the time one can assume that his image is simply intended to be "ideal".

Alex Wagner, a contemporary of Solberg, was profoundly influenced by Evans's symbolism and technique. His student works contains machine-like forms reminiscent of Vorticism. In The whale gunner [Pl. 230] the man is scarcely distinguishable from the instrument that he is handling. Head of a Zulu (1938) [Pl. 231] also displays that severe manipulation of form into angles and planes. Sons of Cain (1939) [Pl. 232] was exhibited at the NSA exhibition of that year, where it, and several other works, were described as "pictures to make pre-viewers blink." Wagner used complex images in this work which the reviewer patiently explained to his readers:

There is a morbid fascination about it all. You see Cain grieving over the Abel he has killed, and you see, symbolically, the sacrificial goat. You see the evolution of Man from the sea, and the creation of the world, and far in the distance from the monolith age you see the Cross.

It is a strange work.<sup>80</sup>

Evans volunteered for active service and, after the war, decided to return to England.<sup>81</sup> Quite apart from the devastating effect of the war on the College and students, this departure from the School of Art of the most talented

lecturer paved the way for a period of isolation. Art of the forties and fifties in Natal is still referred to with dismay by those who experienced its rapid decline in quality and output.<sup>82</sup> The twenties and thirties had not produced great art or artists. However, the interplay of personalities and activities made it a vital and interesting episode in the history of South African art.

Chapter Four: Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ruskin's drawings and watercolours fall into this category.

<sup>2</sup>The Oxford Companion to Art, Oxford University Press, 1970 p. 32-3

<sup>3</sup>E. Berman, Art and artists in South Africa, Capetown, Balkema, 1983 p. 376

<sup>4</sup>The Oxford Companion to Art, p. 33

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Berman, loc cit.

<sup>7</sup>L. Farber, Popular art within a South African framework, 1st Conference of the S.A. Association of Art Historians, 1985

<sup>8</sup>Eg. "Art in the Park," Pietermaritzburg; Cannon & Finlay Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

<sup>9</sup>"The South African landscape is a favourite subject for local popular artists. Scenes of the Cape, the Drakensberg, Northern Transvaal abound, as well as the depiction of what can be considered specifically South African fauna and flora - South African wildlife as well as fields of cosmos flowers and proteas." Farber, Op cit. p. 25

<sup>10</sup>"Art in the Park", for example, is the favourite venue of those Sunday painters who have built up a local following. The week-long event has proved very lucrative for artists and sponsors alike, with profits running into hundreds of thousands of rands. The event is advertised extensively in the local press and by the Pietermaritzburg Publicity Bureau. The quality of work shown is not important. Artists judge their worth according to sales. - MH.

<sup>11</sup>Interview, Mrs M.-T. Sènèque, 1984

<sup>12</sup>see Natal artists 1910-1940

<sup>13</sup>"Vermilion", Individualism in art, The Natal Mercury, 25 October 1928. Francois's remarks about professional artists who "pedestalled" themselves, refer without doubt to artists such as Gwelo Goodman and Mary Stainbank who held themselves aloof from bodies such as the NSA and S.A. Institute of Art. see Chapter one.

<sup>14</sup>see Chapter one

<sup>15</sup>Bertha Froome was President in 1938. see Appendix B

<sup>16</sup>Babette Marais, Interview, 1985. This is a common failing of amateurs in any field. see comments re. Methven, Chapter one

<sup>17</sup>see Dyer: Natal Artists 1910-1940

<sup>18</sup>Interview: Miss Stainbank, 1985

<sup>19</sup>see Glossop: Natal artists 1910-1940

<sup>20</sup>N. Secker, The Natal Society of Artists Sketch Club, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1920 p. 28

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>see Chapter two

<sup>23</sup>R. Krut, South Kensington to South Africa, M.Ed. thesis, Wits, 1983 p. 189

<sup>24</sup>W. Rees, The Natal Technical College 1907-1957, Univeristy of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1957 p. 27

<sup>25</sup>Krut, *ibid.* p. 190f

<sup>26</sup>The Natal Mercury, 1 February 1910 p. 10 "...large number of successes obtained at the South Kensington examination held last May."

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Rees, p. 51

<sup>29</sup>see Adams: Natal artists 1910-1940

<sup>30</sup>Rees, p. 89

<sup>31</sup>1923 - see below.

<sup>32</sup>J. Adams, Looking back, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1938 p. 29f

<sup>33</sup>Rees, p. 143-4

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>An analysis of student attendance is hampered by the Natal Technikon's destruction of past student records. However, a list of names culled from the pages of the Common Room Magazine reveals 91 women students and only 18 men.

<sup>36</sup>Oxley is reported to have been irritated by this attitude. Male students tended to receive his special attention. - Interview, R.B. Rutherford-Smith, Pietermaritzburg, 1983. Oxley's widow, Mrs E. Oxley, confirmed this.

<sup>37</sup>Miss Stainbank.

<sup>38</sup>The Common Room Magazine, 1919-1943

<sup>39</sup>Miss Stainbank didn't regret the loss of the nude model. The muslin obscured everything except her face.

<sup>40</sup>A chair of Fine arts for Durban, The Natal Mercury, 1923 p. 7

<sup>41</sup>The first Fine Art graduate was Doreen Shimwell. The Natal Mercury, 20 April 1928 p. 12

<sup>42</sup>In 1928 leather-work, jewellery and metal-work were added to the list

<sup>43</sup>The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1925

<sup>44</sup>Prof. Hilda Ditchburn (Hilda Rose); Audrey Frank; Mrs D. van Maasdyk (Diana Mellor); Alex Wagner

<sup>45</sup>His specialities were pottery, lettering, which he learnt at the R.C.A. under Johnston, illumination, and stained glass.

<sup>46</sup>The S.A. Architectural Record, 1933 p. 297-8

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1921 p. 8

<sup>49</sup>Art students return, The Natal Mercury, 26 February 1935

<sup>50</sup>The Natal Mercury, 15 August 1924 p. 12 On this occasion tableaux included a "greek plaque" (Miss Fraser and

Mr Harold Stuart, "midsummer nights dream" (Phyllis Hall), and a "medieval tapestry" (Miss Reid and Miss Williams)

<sup>51</sup>The Natal Mercury, 16 August 1924 p. 8

<sup>52</sup>One wonders whether the students were expected to complete life portraits such as this in one sitting.

<sup>53</sup>Mrs van Maasdyk (Diana Mellor)

<sup>54</sup>A.R. Martin, Drawing, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1920 p. 18

<sup>55</sup>Art and commerce, The Natal Mercury, 27 April 1923 p. 10

<sup>56</sup>Amongst others the Art School trained building apprentices, printing apprentices, and commercial artists. The Common Room Magazine, 1919-1940

<sup>57</sup>O.J.P. Oxley, Art and crafts, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1935 p. 6

<sup>58</sup>O.J.P. Oxley, Art in the life of the worker, The Common Room Magazine, Summer 1919 p. 16

<sup>59</sup>Natal artist at South Africa House, The Natal Mercury, 24 January 1936 p. 6

<sup>60</sup>Oxley's departure to Pietermaritzburg

<sup>61</sup>A centuries-old craft, The Natal Mercury, 16 May 1929 p. 8

<sup>62</sup>Notes by Audrey Frank, 1984

<sup>63</sup>see Chapter five

<sup>65</sup>see Chapter five

<sup>65</sup>It became difficult to obtain materials. - Audrey Frank, Notes. The name was changed and a utilitarian ware was produced known as Linn Ware, being under the control of the Cullinan family.

<sup>66</sup>W. Rees, The Natal Technical College 1907-1957, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1957 p.235

<sup>67</sup>see Artists in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>68</sup>Mrs E. Oxley, Interview, 1985

<sup>69</sup>Ibid. p. 235-6

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>The Common Room Magazine, Winter 1937

<sup>72</sup>Noted painter coming to Durban, The Natal Mercury, 12 May 1938 p. 9

<sup>73</sup>The Natal Mercury, 9 February 1938 p. 12

<sup>74</sup>Interviews: James Logan, 1984; Alex Wagner, 1985

<sup>75</sup>for Natal

<sup>76</sup>For a recent analysis of Evans's paintings of this period see The political paintings of Merlyn Evans 1930-1950, London, Tate Gallery, 1985

<sup>77</sup>The Natal Mercury, 1 July 1938 p. 7

<sup>78</sup>The political paintings of Merlyn Evans 1930-1950, Tate Gallery, London, 1985

<sup>79</sup>D. Farr, English art 1870-1940, Oxford University Press, 1978 p. 296. Augustus John resigned from the Royal Academy because of the rejection of this painting by the hanging committee in 1938.

<sup>80</sup>The Daily News, 29 June 1939

<sup>81</sup>This was not due to friction between himself and George How, as has been suggested. Evans would have like to have remained in Natal because of the sun and brilliant colour. He was discouraged from returning to South Africa because of his recent divorce from Phyllis Sullivan. - A. Wagner, interview, 1985.

<sup>82</sup>Interviews: James Logan, Dr Sylvia Kaplan, Durban, 1984

CHAPTER FIVE

ARCHITECTURE IN NATAL: 1910-1940<sup>1</sup>

The foregoing examination of the development of art in Natal and of the climate in which it grew has revealed numerous contacts between art and architecture: a number of architects were also amateur artists; architects and sculptors co-operated in the decoration of buildings; trainee architects attended the Durban School of Art and competed for the Emma Smith Scholarship; and the Natal Provincial Institute of Architects was represented on the committees of the NSA and the Durban Art Gallery. This suggests that architecture was following similar lines of development, and indeed there are interesting correspondences between the two disciplines: as in Edwardian Natal<sup>2</sup> there were strong emotional and stylistic ties with Britain; at the same time there was a striving for a sense of nationalism; there was experimentation with modernism; and successful attempts were made to organise the profession. The same personalities emerge: Methven, Paton, Sénèque and B.V. Bartholomew. These correspondences are, however, superficial. The conflict between amateur and professional ceased to exist for architects with the passing of the Architects and Quantity Surveyors' Act in 1927. From that moment there were, legally, no more amateur architects practising in South Africa. Thus much of the tension which makes art in Natal

such a fascinating study is not present. Apart from a few trifling court cases in which individuals are convicted for practising without registration<sup>3</sup> Natal was relatively free of professional controversy.<sup>4</sup>

### The Architects' Bill

Attempts to introduce the registration of architects were made before Union by the Natal Institute of Architects<sup>5</sup> and by the equivalent body in the Transvaal. In 1910 the various architectural bodies that had existed in the old colonies took steps to unify the profession nation-wide,<sup>6</sup> and by 1925 the proposed Bill had become a national issue. Objections came mainly from supporters of the building trade. Grievances included the accusation that non-architects encouraged "jerry-building", that the architects were attempting to monopolise building design, and that the profession would be dominated by "university men" who would compete with the "practical man."<sup>7</sup> Horace Chick, the Natal Institute's President replied, rather stiffly, that "Architecture has now passed the stone age period, and has become a very complex profession, and in a very rapidly moving century the public's interests should be protected."<sup>8</sup>

During that year the British architects failed to obtain registration and the South Africans prepared themselves for strong opposition.<sup>9</sup> When the Bill was placed before Parliament it was the subject of lengthy debate.<sup>10</sup> In the NIA minutes the Bill was described as having a "precarious passage":

One member of the House, whose constituency would appear to be far removed from the world of affairs, going so far as to assert that "any child of eight could draw a plan."<sup>11</sup>

Which proves that the artists were not alone in their intolerance of public ignorance. Wallace Paton expresses the general attitude of his colleagues towards the public:

The public may show traces of culture in music or literature or painting, but they are lamentably ignorant of architecture. They do not seriously want to know the difference between a plinth or a modillion, an attic base or a peristyle.<sup>12</sup>

The public's view of the architect was just as uncomplimentary. He was a man who charged iniquitous fees who wished to coerce parliament into protecting his rather expensive interests.<sup>13</sup> The Bill was accepted, however; registration came into being; the Provinces were united under one body but retained individual status; professional conduct was defined and enforced; and educational standards laid

down.<sup>14</sup>

The implications of the Act have already been touched on. Firstly, amateurism was eliminated.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, architects could form a national community in which it was possible for large centralised firms to extend their business throughout the Union,<sup>16</sup> thus encouraging professional unity and a gradual breaking down of provincial barriers in South Africa (see below).

#### Building activity in Natal: 1910-1940

National uniformity did not, of course, take place overnight. Provincialism persisted in various forms until the late thirties. In 1910 Natal was, understandably, British in style and spirit. The period opens with the completion of Hudson's Durban Town Hall [Pl. 233], the climax of Edwardian Baroque in Natal.<sup>17</sup> This opulent example of sub-tropical community pride was designed in 1903 in response to a competition, and took seven years to complete.<sup>18</sup> The opening took place in April 1910,<sup>19</sup> a month before Union Day.<sup>20</sup> The Durban Town Hall, with its magnificent Wren-like dome and lush detail, forms the final act in Natal's colonial drama. Between 1910 and the end of World

War I the building industry in Natal experienced severe economic difficulties,<sup>21</sup> which resulted in the closure of numerous practices. During this period architectural activity was very slack, consisting mainly of government projects such as schools and offices, and church building.<sup>22</sup>

Even after the war, a severe housing shortage<sup>23</sup> did nothing to stimulate business. One is only aware of renewed activity during the mid twenties.<sup>24</sup> The economic depression of 1930-1932 dealt the architects a further severe blow.<sup>25</sup> After the abandonment of the gold standard in 1933 the country's economy rapidly recovered<sup>26</sup> and with it, architecture. Durban, in particular, benefited from this new state of affairs. Between 1935 and the outbreak of war in 1939 the central business district and industrial areas were radically transformed.<sup>27</sup> Within a few years Durban had ceased to be a Victorian backwater and had entered the modern age.<sup>28</sup> [Pl. 235] Pietermaritzburg, by contrast, retained its sedate colonial atmosphere, conservatively resisting development. [Pl. 234] One sees a parallel in the reaction of the two centres to the Whitwell donations described in Chapter three. Durban was seen to be commercial, vulgar and too publicity-conscious and drove its benefactor into the arms of Pietermaritzburg: discreet, well-mannered and

cautious. This difference is also apparent in the architectural development of the two cities.<sup>29</sup>

This brief survey provides a framework for an analysis of building preferences in Natal.

### British styles in Natal

It was suggested above that Natal architects were as loyal to Britain as her artists had been. It should be remembered that most architects working in Natal between 1910 and 1930 had trained in Britain. And there is certainly a suggestion of imperialism in the survival of classicism in various forms.

In South Africa Herbert Baker is invariably associated with British classicism of a noble Edwardian variety. Many architects were profoundly influenced by his attention to local sites and conditions, use of materials, and elegant details based on a relaxed borrowing of styles.<sup>30</sup> For many years his name alone was associated with architectural prestige,<sup>31</sup> and many architects referred to him as the founder of "a national style in South Africa."<sup>32</sup> This was accepted in most quarters, but only as long as he designed Cape Dutch buildings.<sup>33</sup> When he was handed the commission

to design South Africa House Transvaal Afrikaners were dismayed by his choice of a conservative classicism for the building that was to represent South Africa in London. Pierneef was at the forefront of the attack, claiming that Baker "wished to give everything as much an Imperial atmosphere as possible."<sup>34</sup>

Edwardian classicism survived in Natal throughout this period in an elaborate version of the form which had been popular at the turn of the century.<sup>35</sup> Multi-storeyed commercial buildings and banks were given tightly articulated symmetrical façades often with heavily rusticated arches at street level or a verandah with classical columns. Some architects still referred to this style as "Free Renaissance,"<sup>36</sup> in acknowledgement of its unacademic use of Italianate details. This genre became common in South Africa after the introduction of steel-frame construction from America:<sup>37</sup> regular fenestration and pilasters suited the grid-like framework. Its popularity with the owners of banks and large department stores testifies to the continued strength of association in the choice of style. Twentieth century clients obviously recognised the aura of security and prosperity exuded by the use of Renaissance palaces as the Victorians had done during the previous century.<sup>38</sup>

Street-Wilson and Paton used this style in Durban for Stuttafords (1924-26) [Pl. 236], the Royal Hotel (1928) [Pl. 237] and Yorkshire House (1928-30) [Pl. 238, 239].

Stuttafords is a complex design showing all the features listed above. The vertical elements rise from the covered pavement, through the rusticated 1st floor, grand pilasters and upper storey fenestration. A heavy cornice separates the top floor which has an open balcony with a simple colonnade.<sup>39</sup>

This was a fussy style as can be seen in smaller shop fronts such as Randles Bros, West Street (1917) [Pl. 240] and Belmont Flats (1927-29) [Pl. 241], an extraordinary combination of disparate elements which nevertheless creates an impression of uniformity. The most successful examples were used for banks and building societies. Ing and Jackson's S.A. Permanent Mutual Building (1927) [Pl. 242] has a pleasing balance of detail in proportion to the size of the building. Standard Bank, Commercial Road, (1939) [Pl. 243] by the same firm, is almost identical in treatment, showing an almost antiquarian persistence. It was pointed out at the time that "a bank should have about it an atmosphere of permanence and reliability, particularly in a world which is changing almost daily."<sup>40</sup> Bank buildings by W.G. Moffatt also reveal a tendency to rely on stylistic formulas. His

Standard Bank, West Street (1928) [Pl. 244] shows a preference for smooth masonry and rusticated arches which is repeated in his Reserve Bank, Smith Street (1936-39) [Pl. 245-247]. This elegantly designed palace cum Roman temple, gives an impression of strong solidity.<sup>41</sup> The simple classical details are carried through into the interior in which coffered ceilings and bronze grilles are the only decorative elements.

A less imposing variety of classicism was used for flats and offices. In Burlington Court (1930) [Pl. 248], by Nelson Sercombe, the architect boasted of the use of "the pure classic."

It has been the aim of the architect to design a building which will not have one jarring note in its architectural assemblage (sic), and a glimpse of the building shows that this has been attained. There are too many buildings in Durban which embody various styles of architecture the whole forming a heterogeneous mass of various building styles. Even to the layman not acquainted with the principles of architecture these buildings are an offence.<sup>42</sup>

The authenticity of his design is perhaps marred by the use of a tiled roof with overhanging eaves. When he came to design Logan's Flats, Russell Street, (1934) [Pl. 249] he dispenses with this feature.

Other architects involved in the design of flats and

"mansions" found the shallow hipped roof with red marseilles tiles to be useful and picturesque. Modest plastered buildings with arched windows, colonnades and Italian details found general acceptance in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. King's Mansions, Esplanade, (1930) [Pl. 250] by Ing and Jackson; and Flats, 342 Essenwood Road, in Durban [Pl. 251], and Eastbourne Mansions, Chapel Street, in Pietermaritzburg [Pl. 252], are examples. Indian clients were particularly fond of this style, possibly because it had an Islamic flavour that could be adapted for their use. Indian shops proliferated throughout Natal in the twenties and thirties [Pl. 253]; and the Grey Street Mosque, Durban (1928) [Pl. 254], is, in effect, a classical building with eastern details.

An equivalent to this white plaster classicism is found in Pietermaritzburg in the form of modest buildings with red brick detail based on the domestic architecture of ancient Rome. Humble, but typical, are the numerous electric sub-stations in the city with their rough plaster and round brick windows. [Pl. 255] More elaborate examples are Temple Chambers [Pl. 257] and the Natal Society Library (1930) [Pl. 256]. A preference for red brick is seen in many areas, indicating, perhaps, a desire for economy. The National

Bank, Pietermaritzburg (1917, now Barclays Bank) [Pl. 258] by Payne and Payne and Public Hall, Kloof, (1924) [Pl. 259] by Chick and Bartholomew, are conservative, almost Victorian, designs.

### Government buildings in Natal

One area where economy was insisted upon, was in the erection of Government buildings.

Schools, hospitals, post offices, magistrates' courts and all government offices fell under the aegis of the Public Works Department in Pretoria, which accounts for their homogeneity of treatment. This monopoly was greatly resented by the private sector:

The P.W.D. Architectural Section had become so strongly entrenched that it could and did simply ignore all representations of some division of public work amongst practising architects in whose ranks are many of high attainment and experience and fully capable of designing and carrying out important building as the P.W.D. Moreover, they are not trammelled by routine and monotonous designs, so many of which emanate from that official source.<sup>43</sup>

The P.W.D. was accused of monopoly, monotony, inflexibility and meanness.<sup>44</sup> These accusations are certainly feasible;

unfortunately, detractors of the Government and Municipal departments were not exactly disinterested. It is hardly surprising that the Chief Architect ignored attacks such as that made by Gerard Mordijk.<sup>45</sup> Such critics did not take into account the P.W.D.'s interest in and support for the employment of sculptors, for the involvement of the local populace in government schemes, or their provision of work opportunities during bad times. It will be noted that government projects continued throughout the period regardless of the financial situation.<sup>46</sup>

It cannot be denied that many of the standardised buildings designed in Pretoria are dull and utilitarian. However, there emerged a dignified style, used mainly for schools and offices, and characterised by the use of red brick walls and classical details in stone or plaster which suited tight budgets and were fit for their purpose. [Pl. 260, 261] It must also be admitted that projects of this kind, given to private firms, are not noticeably better than those of their despised Government rivals. Kallenbach and Kennedy's Sastri Indian Teachers' Training College, Durban (1929) [Pl. 262], for example, follows exactly the same pattern as most Government school buildings.

A pleasant feature of Government offices is the use of

carved stone ornament, especially on Post Offices and Magistrates' courts. Greytown Post Office (1924) [Pl. 263, 264] is a typical example.<sup>47</sup> This simple one-storey building has an entrance at either end with an elaborate stone doorway. These have classical pillars and arches and, above the cornices, overflowing cornucopias. On large buildings, such as the Government Office, Aliwal Street, in Durban (1927-30) [Pl. 265], the sculpture was tendered for. In this case, the young Mary Stainbank was successful and was given the usual design to follow: swags of fruit, flowers and tassels, as well as a symbolic relief representing "labour" over the main entrance. Stainbank, disapproving of such conventional material, brought down the wrath of her employers by carving a coat of arms and amusing faces instead.<sup>48</sup> [Pl. 166]

An important project for The P.W.D. in Durban was the Children's Hospital at Addington. [Pl. 266] This was, in fact, a community project, motivated by Mrs Otto Siedle of the Durban Town Council.<sup>49</sup> The plans were drawn up by J.S. Cleland who included numerous decorative features which were carried out by local artists. This was an imposing building, designed around a series of open courts, the largest being that behind the main entrance. It is now obscured by later

building development. When completed it had an uninterrupted view of the Bay from its open balconies and verandahs. [Pl. 268] The main entrance facing Princes Street is still visible, however: a classical porte cochère with a della robbia panel designed by Mary Stainbank [Pl. 267] and executed by the Ceramic Studio, Olifantsfontein. Examples of her work were placed throughout the building. The main courtyard [Pl. 269], an elegant, colonaded space leading to the ground floor wards, has two ceramic fountains and a number of ceramic roundels. [Pl. 270] The other decorations were carried out by a number of artists: Alfred Palmer, Wilgeforde Vann-hall [Pl. 271], Nils Andersen and the Students of the Durban School of Art each contributed painted murals.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Wilgeforde Vann-Hall was commissioned to produce 51 stained-glass panels [Pl. 272-274] for all the windows in the building.<sup>51</sup>

#### The Cape Dutch Revival in Natal

One might ask why the Government department chose classical styles rather than Cape Dutch which was commonly regarded by many as national in character.<sup>52</sup> It could be that Cape Dutch gables were an undesirable expense.

The Cape Dutch style became popular in Natal after 1910 when it was used for the restoration of the old Church of the Vow in Pietermaritzburg, (1910-12) [Pl. 275]. The P.W.D. was, in fact, in charge of the scheme, and employed Collingwood Tully, an architect who had worked with Baker in the Cape, to supervise reconstruction. This "restoration" was nothing more than a rebuilding of an extremely plain structure in an emotive style imported from the Cape.<sup>53</sup> The walls were stripped and replastered, new windows "with heavy substantial teak frames of Dutch character" replaced the old, as well as a teak door of a "Dutch" type. Lastly, Dutch gables were built at either end.<sup>54</sup> Tully, who had won the competition for the new University building at Scottsville, made his home in Pietermaritzburg, and proceeded to populate the city with more Dutch buildings. The Y.W.C.A. in Chapel Street [Pl. 276] followed,<sup>55</sup> as well as a number of houses in Scottsville.<sup>56</sup>

This was, essentially, a domestic style. Clients admired the decorative gables and were, no doubt, reminded of those numerous Cape scenes depicted by Roworth and de Jongh in which Dutch farmhouses rest under spreading oaks. Architects such as Wallace Paton, who preferred classicism, tended to be critical, especially after its proliferation

during the twenties:

In South Africa we have witnessed, even in Natal, a determined effort to revive the methods and forms of the Dutch patroons. The new Groote Schuur is a notable example, with its seven - or is it seventeen? - gables, where the old builders in their simplicity used at most three: one in front, and an inconspicuous one at each end.

Are we not already tired of the curly gable planted, willy nilly, on to the four-roomed villa of our suburbs? Happily the speculative builder has seized on the idea, and so its doom is sealed. At Morgensten (sic) or Stellenberg, at Tokai or Constantia, it is fitting and beautiful behind its open pillared stoep. But what is it doing here? - An excrescence on a roof behind a covered verandah.<sup>57</sup>

Considering that he often designed Cape Dutch buildings, he must have suppressed these objections for the benefit of his clients. Those cool remarks about Groote Schuur might easily be applied to his Durban Country Club (1923-24) [Pl. 277-279], which was under construction while he was writing this article. This building has seven gables and a surrounding verandah with rows of white columns. The grape pergola is adapted to form a partially covered entrance. It must be acknowledged that the efforts of Paton and his colleagues are far more tasteful than those of the speculative builder. After the declaration of a new suburb

across the river at Durban North Cape Dutch spread uncontrolled like a weed. [Pl. 280] Pietermaritzburg, to the dismay of those with discriminating taste, was also overrun:

Every time I see a house going up in Maritzburg, with classical pillars, Dutch gables, and sometimes Gothic decoration, surmounted by a tin roof, I weep for the waste and incongruity of it.<sup>58</sup>

Small, ill-proportioned houses of the type referred to by Paton were advertised daily as cheap bargains for prospective home-owners.<sup>59</sup> Needless to say, architect-designed examples in the more exclusive areas were stylish and well-planned. An example by Paton in Musgrave Road [Pl. 281, 282], is an elegant two-storey mansion with beautifully carved doors, windows and shutters. The use of Cape Dutch was even extended to public buildings in a rather indiscriminate way. Flats which might just as well have had a classical portico or a parapet are decorated with gables (eg. Apsley Court, Musgrave Road [Pl. 283]).<sup>60</sup> A large number of shops, clubs and institutions were built in this popular style or else received new fronts as in the case of the Victoria Club, Pietermaritzburg. These examples are very distant relations of the spacious Cape farm houses so admired at the beginning of the century. [Pl. 284-286]

## The Spanish style in Natal

Apart from tradition,<sup>61</sup> the reason for the popularity of white houses with pergolas, tall ceilings, and pillared verandahs was their reputed suitability in the heat of Natal. It was a perennial complaint that architects had not attempted to solve this problem.<sup>62</sup> The summer heat experienced on the Natal coast and inland was tackled by the Victorians in the shape of cast-iron verandahs and balconies.<sup>63</sup> But architects of the twenties and thirties were repelled by things Victorian, and described this colonial standby as "a flimsy excrescence of wooden or cast-iron poles."<sup>64</sup>

One solution to the climatic problem was the adoption of the so-called "Spanish colonial/Californian/Mission" style:

Another style is the Californian, or "Mission," with its low roof, wide shady eaves, and simplicity of outline. It is particularly appropriate to a country of bright sunshine, wide spaces, and clear skies of intense, transparent blue.<sup>65</sup>

Its climatic suitability was emphasised by numerous architects who saw in it a compromise between classicism and Cape Dutch. Symmetrical designs of classic simplicity were

produced by Wallace Paton and W.B. Oxley [Pl. 287] in which U-shaped plans enclose an interior court with arcades and balconies.<sup>66</sup>

One of the champions of the Spanish style was Clement Sénèque.<sup>67</sup> In an article called "Character in architecture" he rejects the search for a national style:

...South Africa...cannot afford to evolve a new and original architecture of [her] own, and consequently the best available means of solving this difficulty lies in the practice of borrowing from some already approved style of architecture...<sup>68</sup>

He rejects Cape Dutch as being unsuited to the Natal climate, as well as the Victorian style:

...Natal has been most unfortunate, for its climate being sub-tropical, and virtually diametrically opposed to that of the Mother-country of its pioneers, precluded an adaptation of English architecture, so that at the present day Durban's domestic architecture can only be described as monotonous and utterly nondescript.<sup>69</sup>

His choice of the Spanish style is based on a number of factors. Firstly, he points out that Spanish buildings are simple and dignified, thus obviating the necessity of ornament which "leads to the production of ludicrous effects." Secondly, the lack of craftsmanship in Natal makes a simple style "a blessing in disguise." The important

climatic factor is considered. Small windows on the exterior keep out the sun, while casement doors leading on to interior balconies provide ventilation. Last, but not least it was a beautiful style:

Italian and Spanish domestic architecture, with their long pitch roofs, half-circular tiles, wide eaves, white walls, and beautifully spaced facades, are buildings of great beauty, and in a setting of sub-tropical plants which grow to such perfection in Natal, would combine features which could only enhance the beauty of Durban.<sup>70</sup>

Only two examples of Sénèque's domestic architecture were built: House Redondi [Pl. 290], and House Johnstone [Pl. 291], in Durban North and Morningside respectively. Both are assymetrical compositions with the features that he describes above. They do not live up to his expectations of beauty, however, as the proportions are somewhat heavy and do not relate well. Other examples of Spanish houses built at the same time also suffer from this clumsiness. In their eagerness to imitate a peasant style of architecture Natal architects failed to capture its simplicity or grace. [Pl. 292-294]

The style, when applied to flats and commercial buildings, was more successful, probably because of its decorative possibilities. Seneque designed a shop front in

the style for L'Etang's Building, Railway Street (1929, demolished) [Pl. 295]. The flatness of the facade is broken by the projecting balconies and deep eaves. Flats, Esplanade (1929) [Pl. 296], by Ing and Jackson, uses moorish details and a recessed entrance to provide variety. The corners elevations have projecting sun-balconies and pierced decoration. The architect's perspective drawing shows the building in a romantic setting, framed by palm-trees. Ritchie-McKinlay's Quadrant House (1927) [Pl. 297] exploits the same features. The architect has made decorative use of the corner site. Projecting and receding elements curve round the central tower with its colourful ceramic details.

#### Architectural ceramics

Ceramics played an importance role in architecture of the twenties and thirties as a means of introducing colour. Architectural faience was pioneered in Natal by John Adams at the Durban School of Art. His first attempt was the War Memorial for St Mary's, Greyville (1921).<sup>71</sup> [Pl. 298] This was placed across the facade, and consisted of a central figure of Christ in an arched niche, and maiolica panels on either side with the names of the fallen written by O.J.P.

Oxley in blue oxide.<sup>72</sup> The possibilities of using ceramics on buildings were greatly enhanced after the founding of the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein by Adams's pupils.<sup>73</sup> Their work consisted mainly of tiles and panels, best seen at the Childrens' Hospital, Addington. Mary Stainbank's Della Robbia panel on the main entrance [Pl. 299] and a large panel donated by the Jockey Club [Pl. 300], various roundels in the same medium, and glazed fountain figures were all modelled and cast in Durban and sent to the Transvaal to be built up, glazed and fired. The Ceramic Studio's own designs included the individual memorial tiles laid in the wall above each cot. The enterprise shown by Adams and Olifantsfontein was given much publicity. The public therefore waited in mild expectation when it was announced that the sculpture for Durban's War Memorial was to be made by John Adams and his colleagues at Poole's Pottery in England. They were in for a rude surprise.

The history of the War Memorial was punctuated with incident. Heated debates shadowed its development from the moment that a collecting fund for the monument was established in 1920 to the unveiling on 7 March 1926. Memorials such as this were often at the centre of emotional controversy. Durban's was no exception. The first episode

involved the choosing of the site. A three-man committee was appointed, consisting of John Adams, C.W. Methven, and Wallace Paton. They recommended the use of the Town Gardens.<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, there was a misunderstanding. The Town Engineer's office incorrectly informed the Town Council that the Committee had chosen a site near the beach involving the extension of Alice Street. The Committee, enraged, resigned in protest and handed over the evidence to the press.<sup>75</sup> The public entered the fray with gusto. Objections to the Town Garden site were that the existing statues would be tampered with, and it would also involve expensive levelling of the site. Alice Street did not appeal because of the proximity of the beach entertainments.<sup>76</sup> The controversy dragged on. The Council at one stage voted for the Alice Street only to be driven back in disarray after the publication of further cartoons and letters in the press deriding their choice.<sup>77</sup> On 14 August 1920 the Town Council decided for once and for all on the Town Gardens site,<sup>78</sup> and a competition was held which was won by Cape architect H.L. Gordon Pilkington.<sup>79</sup> The design, which underwent a number of changes before the acceptance of its final form,<sup>80</sup> consists of an obelisk bearing a sculptured group of angels carrying the spirit of the fallen warrior.

[Pl. 301, 302] The warrior's tomb, and a long sarcophagus bearing the names of the dead are placed on the top step below the obelisk. Bronze lions [Pl. 303] on plinths are placed on either side of the entrance. The work proceeded, with many delays, behind hessian hangings. At last the sculpture, modelled and built by Harold and Phoebe Stabler, of Poole's, was delivered and set in place. Leo Francois interviewed the architect before the opening and enthused:

Being executed in fayence, modelled on the tradition of the finest Assyrian works, it is meant to stand for all time. Its colouring, which I understand, has been eminently successful, can only be imagined from the enthusiastic description of the artists... Those who look for satisfaction in a simple cenotaph will receive, I fear, a shock...<sup>81</sup>

Before leaving Britain the completed figure group was publicised and greatly admired. Reports of its appearance were sent back to South Africa:

The work has been executed in glazed terra cotta, with the main forms picked out in glowing colours after the manner of Della Robbia. The angels' draperies are a full blue and the wings a mosaic of ranging blues, white, yellow and grey...The dramatic effect...will be increased by the tropical African sun...<sup>82</sup>

No one could have anticipated just how dramatic the unveiling would be. Conservative opinion bombarded the press. The

memorial was "shocking," "trash," "vile," and "as ostentatious and glaring as any Oriental or uncivilised heathen could wish for. It is like introducing the latest jazz melody into the middle of the Dead March in "Saul."<sup>83</sup> Connoisseurs who, incidentally, described the memorial as "somewhat severe",<sup>84</sup> referred scathingly to public ignorance and lack of appreciation:

It is with mixed feelings that one reads of the comparison drawn between the Memorial and an advertisement for "somebody's soap," when at the same time one learns that people in another part of the world, who know more than we do, are in ecstasies over the highly coloured and decorative trappings being taken from King Tutankhamen's tomb. Why must a memorial be a thing of granite or of graveyard solemnity?<sup>85</sup>

The angular figures and sun-burst at the head of the obelisk are indeed more reminiscent of the Tutenkhamen discoveries than the Babylonian wall mosaics that the architect had in mind. Viewed out of context, and unglazed, the angels [Pl. 304] even have a medieval feeling, with their sharply modelled vertical draperies and wings. In position they form a fitting climax above the monument as a whole, contrasting in detail with the severe granite pillar on which they are mounted. The work would probably have been received more sympathetically if it had not had such emotional

associations. The public's concept of a war memorial was very conservative, ranging from an undecorated monolith (London's cenotaph) to a Roman triumphal arch. (Pietermaritzburg's War memorial [Pl. 305]) One member of the public even suggested a "one-thousand-feet high pylon with a lamp of remembrance perpetually shining on the top."<sup>86</sup>

### The Tudor Revival

Popular opinion was just as potent in the affairs of architecture as it was in art. Just as Tinus de Jongh reigned over popular art of the period, so the styles used for cinemas and theatres dominated public taste in the architectural sphere. And this was hardly surprising as most cinemas in South Africa were designed with popularity in mind. Exteriors were lavish and imaginative, hinting of the pleasures within. Present day familiarity with the commercial images of Hollywood has made us blasé. When the Playhouse Theatre first threw open its doors in June 1935 the novelty of its design must have been startling.

Rogers Cooke, the architect, chose the English Tudor style for his new cinema in Durban, presumably because Natal was associated then (as now) with English preferences. The

planning stage was lengthy and drawings were eventually completed in 1931 and presented for public scrutiny. There was an immediate outcry from Prof. Oxley and other members of the Greater Durban Town Planning Association:

The design of our new theatre is a terrible thing. That type of building is all very well for a bazaar, but Elizabethan architecture is most unsuited to a modern town and Durban should have modern design in its streets. If we are going to have Sixteenth Century architecture, we might as well go back to Elizabethan times in every way. The timbered style is picturesque and very suitable to a wooded country, but this will be just a shell of the most modern machinery and fittings.<sup>87</sup>

A devotee of the Arts and Crafts Movement such as Oxley would have been horrified at the prospect of such a blatant sham as the proposed Playhouse. Others were merely concerned that a half-timbered building would be "out of place."<sup>88</sup> The representative of African Theatres made an interesting comment: "Whatever one does in Durban is sure to be criticised. I am not worrying about it at all."<sup>89</sup>

The controversy raged from one side to the other. Architects complained of the proximity of the classical Town Hall and the pseudo-Spanish Prince's Theatre next door. The editor of the Mercury retorted with a column titled, "Durban is so beautiful!" in which he lampoons the sudden concern of

Durban's architects for uniformity of style:

We are unaware that their artistic souls were shriven when Durban's modest skyscraper went up in Field Street next to humbler and undistinguished edifices; that their withers were wrung by examples of the pseudo-Spanish on the Beach front and Esplanade flanked by the pseudo-English; that their hearts have ever bled to see the warm red brick hideously cheek by jowl with cold, grey concrete. Is it possible that a green-eyed gleam has winked upon them while they have sat pondering the imaginative and splendid conception of the 150,000 pound building which is to remind the people of Durban of their ancestry and traditions?<sup>90</sup>

Oxley gradually found himself deserted by erstwhile supporters. The Institute of Architects withdrew, claiming ethical immunity, the Town Planning Association claimed that it did not support Oxley's views except for the unsuitability of the site,<sup>91</sup> and yet more letters rolled in damning both Oxley and the town planners.<sup>92</sup>

In the end the public received its new cinema in all its glory. The Playhouse<sup>93</sup> [Pl. 306] was a combination of Tudor inn and bear garden. The exterior, from its lead-paned windows to its half-timbered upper storey, to its Elizabethan chimneypots was an extravagant spectacle. The interior even more so. The main auditorium [Pl. 307] was decorated with castle walls and medieval details; reception rooms were

finished in Tudor-style woodwork. Furnishings consisted of wicker easy chairs and potted palms. [Pl. 308] The final incongruous touch was provided by the usherettes who were dressed as Georgian footmen.<sup>94</sup>

Not surprisingly, the chauvinist Nataliáns liked this new style. Tudor and "old English" houses [Pl. 309-312] were built in great numbers after the opening of the Playhouse, as well as hospitable-looking half-timbered hotels such as Caister House (1935-38) [Pl. 313], the Botha's Hill Country Club (1936) [Pl. 314] and the Tudor House Hotel, West Street (1937) [Pl. 315].

#### Modernism in Natal

It would be interesting to be able to relate the popularity of the cinema to the acceptance of modern architecture in Natal, but unfortunately there is little documentary evidence to support such a theory. Unlike the artists, architects in Natal met with very little opposition to modernism when it was introduced in the early thirties. The "modest skyscraper" of Field Street referred to above was the Theo Schloss Building (1930) [Pl. 316] by Ritchie McKinlay: an interesting composition with boldly simplified projecting

masses and geometric details.<sup>95</sup> This was followed by the Colonial Mutual Life Building, West Street, (1931-33) [Pl. 317], designed by an Australian firm with a penchant for Romanesque detail. This rose 13 storeys above the street and was claimed to be South Africa's highest building.<sup>96</sup>

### Art Deco

The style and decoration of this structure are in what is commonly referred to as the "Art Deco" style. This description, based on the words "arts décoratifs"<sup>97</sup> has been indiscriminately applied to certain buildings since the Art Deco revival of the seventies.<sup>98</sup> There is a conscious use of such a style in Natal, but its derivation can't be pin-pointed and the term is certainly foreign to contemporary writers. The basic elements are described by Farr:

The Russian Ballet, the art of Old and New Mexico, of Ancient Egypt and Brazil, Art Nouveau, Cubism, and even the Bauhaus have all been adumbrated as contributory factors to Art Déco or Jazz Modern.<sup>99</sup>

By this definition one could include the Durban War Memorial:

Its colours and forms are very characteristic of Art Deco, and especially the sun-burst and hard-edged geometric forms. Art Deco decoration was used in quite modest buildings such

as Adams Bookstore (1932) [Pl. 318] and Berea Court, Durban [Pl. 319]: zig-zags and stepped mouldings predominate. The style was most popular in the design of tall blocks of flats such as Enterprise Building, Aliwal Street, [Pl. 320] with its malevolent geometric eagle, Surrey Court, Currie Road, [Pl. 321] in which soaring verticality is emphasised by the repetition of fluted columns, and Victoria Mansions, Esplanade (1933) [Pl. 322] by Cornelius - a similar design with stylised flowers and lions heads.

### Skyscrapers

The height of buildings was of much greater interest to the public than their appearance. Bylaws in Durban<sup>100</sup> restricted buildings to "one and two-thirds the width of the street."<sup>101</sup> Anxiety was expressed when plans were submitted to the City Council for a 17-storeyed block of flats on the South Beach, not, the Council insisted, because they thought the height unattractive, but because they distrusted the building's ability to withstand high wind.<sup>102</sup>

The result of this debate was an amendment allowing architects buildings up to 100 feet on the street line, with an extra 25 feet if the additional storeys were set back.<sup>103</sup>

The influence of these regulations on building design can be seen in all so-called skyscrapers built from the late twenties on. It would account for the curious stepped effect of the Durban streetscape. The architects of Payne's Building, 1936-39, [Pl. 323, 324] (Payne and Payne) took advantage of this bylaw, placing the taller sections to the rear, piling block on block in receding perspective, giving an illusion of greater height from street level.

By 1939 modernism was firmly entrenched as desirable, as a review of the new building reveals:

Looking up at Payne's Building, one is reminded of the face of a precipice with crags at its head...It is designed on the most modern line and one glance at it immediately suggests spaciousness and luxury.<sup>104</sup>

The erection, in quick succession, of numerous large flats and offices was seen as proof of Durban's commercial success and importance as a city. Modernism was a symbol of freedom and "progress,"<sup>105</sup> diametrically opposed to classicism which, as seen above, was chosen for its stability and conservatism.

The new trends were eagerly debated. Ornamentation was the first issue. Some objected to the elimination of decoration:

...we find buildings consisting of a framework of steel

and concrete...where there is no place for the Greek and Roman column or the Roman arch, except as expensive and non-structural forms of decoration...The elimination of these and many other old structural features, which also assisted greatly in the general decoration of a building, has left the architect with large flat wall spaces...<sup>106</sup>

And with large flat wall spaces one was, of course, bereft of those comforting visual conventions with the long names that the plebeians so obstinately failed to appreciate.<sup>107</sup>

Others hailed the removal of ornament as a healthy and democratic sign. In 1925 W.B. Oxley calls for "efficient" buildings. "Beauty," he says, "is at its best when secured as a by-product. Ugly things are not made beautiful by clothing them with useless ornament."<sup>108</sup> In December that year A. Stanley Furner published an article on the modern movement in architecture in The S.A. Architectural Record in which he draws attention to "a new school of thought and fresh ideals...sweeping aside all our cherished conventions and inherited ideas."<sup>109</sup> According to Furner new materials and methods were the catalyst in this development:

Economy and the cost of labour...are having their influence in the forward movement by the gradual elimination of non-essential detail and by the steady improvement in economical design, the elimination of mouldings and by the increased use of colour.<sup>110</sup>

He describes the twentieth century reaction against the past, but warns against ignoring the past:

Originality, for which the whole world is clamouring, is after all, simply intelligent evolution.

The modern movement in architecture is thus the natural result of the current trend of thought and increased interest on the part of the public in the various countries of the world. It aims at making architecture more logical, direct and scientific and to allow it to reflect the tendencies and ideals of the twentieth century - the century of science and the machine - rather than those of a previous age.<sup>111</sup>

Under Rex Martienssen<sup>112</sup> the S.A. Architectural Record became a vehicle for the encouragement of modern architecture in South Africa. As the official journal of the Institute of Architects, it was read nation-wide. Unfortunately, Martienssen and his colleagues in the Transvaal began to monopolise what ought to have been a journal of national interest. Architects and architecture from the other provinces, and especially Natal, receive less and less space in the Record, until, in the late thirties and forties, their contribution is reduced to the annual report of the Provincial Institute's general meeting. It is not clear whether this was a result of Natalian apathy or the editors' conscious bias in favour of the Transvaal. However, the impression given is that Natal, by ignoring modernism, was

not given any space in the journal; hence Herbert's conclusion in 1975 that "In Durban at this time [1934-37] there is almost nothing to note."<sup>113</sup>

### The International Style in Natal

Source material for the development of modern architecture in Natal is found, not in national publications, but (like art) in the daily newspapers which eagerly reported the progress and completion of new buildings throughout the province. Far from being moribund Natal was entering a phase of intense building activity in 1934. By 1935 modernism was to be seen in numerous private houses between Durban and Hillcrest, as well as hotels, institutions and clubhouses. The characteristic arrangement of cubes and half-cylinders can be seen in "Bradlaugh", Manning Road, Durban, 1934. [Pl. 325-329] This house is uncompromisingly simple, both inside and out, even extending to the choice of furniture and fittings. Far from being suspicious of the International style, many Natal home-owners were quick to adopt it. [Pl. 330-334] The Natal Mercury reported in 1936 that "Durban is definitely showing signs of going modern."

This is most noticeable, of course, in the huge blocks of

flats which are leaping up and the blocks of offices and shops which are being built on the principal street fronts, but there is also a tendency to adopt this new spirit in the planning of small buildings and even homes.

Steel, concrete and glass are coming into their own; older types of materials are being replaced; flat roofs and terrace gardens are coming into vogue, and people are sleeping in the open air instead of in bedrooms.<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps the earliest example of the International Style in Natal was the Preventorium in Pietermaritzburg, 1934-36 [Pl. 335-337], by D. Calvert Macdonald. The original plan shows a low, flat, symmetrical building with a glass-enclosed entrance and stair.<sup>115</sup> The wards, when completed, had open balconies with cantilever roofs and curved corners. Similar features can be seen in the Drummond Hotel, 1936 [Pl. 338, 339], by Ralph Hamlin, the Yacht Clubhouse, Durban, 1935 [Pl. 340], and the Durban Technical College Clubhouse, 1938 [Pl. 341, 342], by Park-Ross. The exaggerated horizontality of these buildings and their cubistically arranged forms and window openings relate directly to contemporary European architecture, especially that of England, Holland and Germany.<sup>116</sup>

The buildings most suited to this style, for reasons of space and economy, were factories, warehouses and showrooms. These were utilitarian structures but architects,

nevertheless, produced designs of great elegance and subtlety. Durban Confectionery Works, 1938 [Pl. 343, 344] (Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner) has a recessed entrance flanked by curved windows and approached by a shallow stair. The use of the factory's name as a successful design element is noticeable in this and other examples. [Pl. 345, 346]

### American modernism

The majority of modern buildings developed along quite different lines, however. Horizontal compositions did not suit limited commercial sites in the city centre. Here, the American "skyscraper" style came into its own. Large numbers of austere flats and office blocks were built between 1937 and the outbreak of war. Some incorporated elements of the International Style such as curved balconies, windows and cantilever roofs, examples being Mackintosh House, 1936 [Pl. 347], (G. Le Sueur) Bales Building, 1936 [Pl. 348], (Moffatt and Hirst), and the new Hotel Edward, 1937-39 [Pl. 349, 350] (Rogers Cooke; Obel and Frolich).

It would be impossible to analyse the vast quantity of "modern" buildings in any detail, except to point out the most important trends. These can be seen in the following

examples: Killarney Flats, 1939 [Pl. 351] (G. Le Sueur); Fairhaven, 1939 [Pl. 352, 353] (Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner); Devonshire Court, 1938-39 [Pl. 354, 355] (William Barboore), Park View Court, 1937 [Pl. 356, 357]; Broadway Court, 1937-38 [Pl. 358] (Obel and Frolich); Grosvenor Court, 1936-3 [Pl. 359] (Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner); and Manhattan Court, 1937 [Pl. 360] (L.T. Obel). Most are offices and flats with a contemporary appearance. Their anonymous facades are built up of a grid of windows without ornament. Most designs are symmetrical, variations occurring, not in detail, but in the relation of the building to its site. Ironically, the interiors, especially hall-ways, are often elaborately decorated with patterned marble, ornate light fittings, and florid fabrics. The same cannot be said for the offices and flats themselves. At best they offer economical, compact living quarters; at worst, they are cramped and dull. This was the feature of modern building that traditional architects most feared: the reduction of individual space to unimaginative boxes. Many architects celebrated the freedom of the new building methods.

It was with the advent of steel and concrete structures that the architect was given freedom in his plan layout...

...modern buildings are a structural skeleton

surrounded by an envelope. A new conception of building based on realities had emerged and with it had come a new conception of space.<sup>117</sup>

This freedom was an illusion. Once committed to the steel-frame it seems that few were able or willing to give it up.

Chapter Five: Notes

<sup>1</sup>For source material on architects and buildings see Architects in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>2</sup>M. Hillebrand, Aspects of architecture in Natal, M.A.F.A., UN, 1975

<sup>3</sup>see Noble: Architects in Natal 1910-1940

<sup>5</sup>M. Hillebrand, op cit.

<sup>6</sup>G. Herbert, Martienssen and the international style, Capetown, Balkema, 1975 p. 12

<sup>7</sup>Functions of an architect, The Natal Mercury, 10 November 1925 p. 9

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The S.A. Architectural Record, March 1925 p. 27

<sup>10</sup>The Natal Mercury, 19 February 1927 p. 8; 26 February 1927 p. 10; 30 March 1927 p. 12; 2 April 1927 p. 13

<sup>11</sup>The S.A. Architectural Record, June 1927 p. 54

<sup>12</sup>W.Paton, The progress of architecture, A century of progress in Natal, 1924 p. 117

<sup>13</sup>The Natal Mercury, 29 July 1913 p. 10; Hillebrand, p. 150

<sup>14</sup>Architects and Quantity Surveyors' (Private) Act, 1927. (Act No. 18 of 1927)

<sup>15</sup>Legally, at any rate. Unqualified architects practising at the time of promulgation were accepted for registration if they had held voting rights in any of the provincial institutes. - Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>A Johannesburg firm such as Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner maintained branches in all the main centres of South Africa, including Durban

<sup>17</sup>Hillebrand, p. 70

<sup>18</sup>Hillebrand, p. 178

<sup>19</sup>Durban's municipal buildings, The Natal Mercury, 12 April 1910 p. 10-11

<sup>20</sup>31 May 1910. Brookes and Webb, A history of Natal, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1965, p. 247

<sup>21</sup>G.T. Hurst, History of the Natal Provincial Institute of Architects, Durban, 1945 p. 8

<sup>22</sup>An analysis of trends based on the study of plans passed by the various boroughs shows little other than government building during the slack periods.

<sup>23</sup>Durban municipality, Town Clerk's minutes, 1919-1924

<sup>24</sup>Durban experienced a short-lived boom between 1924 and 1926. Durban's changing face, the Natal Mercury, 25 February 1926 p. 8

<sup>25</sup>E.A. Walker, A history of Southern Africa, Longmans, 1962, p. 627f

<sup>26</sup>Walker, p. 634f

<sup>27</sup>Building boom record in Durban, The Natal Mercury, 30 January 1937 p. 11

<sup>28</sup>see Appendix C

<sup>29</sup>Durban became a city in 1934. see The Natal Mercury July 1934

<sup>30</sup>Eg. E.M. Powers, in a lecture refers to Baker's "rebuilding of the Dutch and Italian styles, of which our architecture is chiefly composed." The S.A. Architectural Record, December 1926 p. 105-6

<sup>31</sup>The pride with which communities boasted of owning a "Baker" house or church suggests comparison with the possession of a signed masterpiece in an art collection. Durbanites often boasted of their one Baker building [Eg. The Natal Mercury, 4 January 1929 p. 10]. This was St Mary's Greyville which was, in fact, designed by Baker's partner Fleming. This trend continues today. House-owners in Scottsville proudly resisted planned development as long as

they believed that their house was Baker-designed. When it was proved that it had been designed by one of his partners they promptly lost interest. - MH.

<sup>32</sup>A national architecture, The Natal Mercury, 4 January 1929 p. 10

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Painters in South Africa House, The Rand Daily Mail, 22 October 1934 p. 11. see Chapter two

<sup>35</sup>Hillebrand, p. 73f

<sup>36</sup>The Natal Mercury, 13 March 1939 p. 19. The new Standard Bank in Commercial Road, Durban is referred to as "in a Free Renaissance manner, adapted to South African materials and conditions."

<sup>37</sup>H. Franssen, Three centuries of South African art, Donker, 1982 p. 232

<sup>38</sup>Hillebrand

<sup>39</sup>Later additions have been made altering the roof line.  
- MH.

<sup>40</sup>The Natal Mercury, 13 March 1939 p. 19

<sup>41</sup>Considering that the vaults were built to "resist artillery attack," this impression is only appropriate. The Natal Mercury, 1 July 1939 p. 22

<sup>42</sup>The Natal Mercury, 13 February 1930 p. 13

<sup>43</sup>G.T. Hurst, 1945, p. 12

<sup>44</sup>N. Eaton, P.W.D....the ideal client, The S.A. Architectural Record, 1932 p. 1121

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>see note 22

<sup>47</sup>Another is the Pinetown magistrate's office

<sup>48</sup>see Chapter 3

<sup>49</sup>The Natal Mercury, 4 June 1926 p. 9

<sup>50</sup>The Natal Mercury, 4 June 1926 p. 9; 23 November 1926 p. 12; 1 February 1927 p. 11; 2 February 1927 p. 7; 27 August 1927 p. 14; 25 February 1928 p. 17; 1 December 1930 p. 16

<sup>51</sup>Most of these panels were vandalised by the patients and replaced by plain glass. - Miss Stainbank. An examination of the building will verify the absence of all but a few of these panels. - MH.

<sup>52</sup>Examples exist in Northern Natal: eg. Government building, Glencoe (1938)

<sup>53</sup>M. Hillebrand, p. 120f

<sup>54</sup>The Natal Witness, 28 October 1911 p. 5

<sup>55</sup>M. Hillebrand, op cit

<sup>56</sup>Information supplied by G. Small

<sup>57</sup>W. Paton, The Progress of architecture, 1924 p. 118

<sup>58</sup>What is our attitude towards art? The Natal Witness, 17 October 1928

<sup>59</sup>Natal newspapers, 1929-1930

<sup>60</sup>This building and many others from this period are still standing but have been extensively altered. It is most common to find that verandahs and balconies, once open, have been glazed, and extra storeys added, drastically changing the appearance of the facade.

<sup>61</sup>Architecture for South Africa, The Natal Mercury, 10 August 1937 p. 10. An architect is quoted as saying that the public are to blame for the lack of a national style: "Architects try to bring in something new...but people clamour for English or Cape Dutch, for to them there is tradition behind those types and they don't know of anything else."

<sup>62</sup>The Natal Mercury, 15 July 1919 p. 6 "...there will have to be something different from the usual dwelling erected in Natal. So far our architects have not evolved a building which suits our changing conditions."

<sup>63</sup>M. Hillebrand, p. 101f

<sup>64</sup>W. Paton, The progress of architecture in Natal, 1924 p. 118. In the same article he refers to "all the horrors of mid-Victorianism."

<sup>65</sup>The Natal Mercury, 24 May 1923 p. 7

<sup>66</sup>W. Paton, The progress of architecture, 1924 p. 118.

"In our Natal climate we must have verandahs and balconies...Spanish America has solved it, but they put their verandahs and balconies on to an inner court, and call it a Patio."

<sup>67</sup>His few buildings are all in the Spanish style

<sup>68</sup>The Natal Advertiser, 4 January 1927

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>The Common Room Magazine, Winter 1921 p. 11; Winter 1942 p. 20

<sup>72</sup>Problems encountered in the use of local clay, such as shrinkage and peeling were described by Adams in 1942. Unfortunately this decay continues. Adams's signature has almost completely flaked away. - MH.

<sup>73</sup>see Chapter 4

<sup>74</sup>the site eventually chosen.

<sup>75</sup>Durban War Memorial, The Natal Mercury, 20 March 1920 p. 10

<sup>76</sup>The Natal Mercury, 2 April 1920 p. 10; 29 June 1920 p. 5

<sup>77</sup>Eg. In The Latest, 12 June 1920, a cartoon was published showing a Councillor addressing a war widow at the Alice Street site: "We have thought of everything. The Memorial immediately behind you will help you to remember. The entertainments in front of you will help you to forget."

<sup>78</sup>The Natal Mercury, 15 September 1920 p. 8, Editorial

<sup>79</sup>Durban War Memorial, The Natal Mercury, 11 November 1921 p. 9

<sup>30</sup>The existing statuary in the Town Gardens became an issue. The public regarded the rearrangement of statues disrespectful.

<sup>81</sup>"Vermilion", An impressive cenotaph, The Natal

Mercury, 25 August 1925 p. 7

<sup>82</sup>Extract from a report in The Morning Post, The Natal Mercury, 22 January 1926 p. 12

<sup>83</sup>Various correspondence in the Natal Mercury and Natal Advertiser, March 1926

<sup>84</sup>E.M. Powers, Durban War Memorial, The S.A. Architectural Record, June 1926 p. 42

<sup>85</sup>Letter to the Editor from E.C.G., The Natal Mercury, 13 March 1926 p. 14. The completed monument still attracts strong criticism. Middle-aged members of the M.O.T.H. organisation who were recently interviewed complain bitterly that the War Memorial is ugly and undignified. They are usually unable to pin-point their dislikes. - MH.

<sup>86</sup>Hurst, p. 31

<sup>87</sup>New theatre design attacked, The Natal Mercury, 11 August 1931 p. 9

<sup>88</sup>The Natal Mercury, 12 August 1931 p. 11

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>The Natal Mercury, 13 August 1931 p. 10

<sup>91</sup>The Natal Mercury, 14 August 1931 p. 16

<sup>92</sup>Eg. "nobrow" who hoped that town planning would not be controlled by "those who have filled the Art Gallery with bobbing whales and sun-kissed mountains" - an obvious barb directed at Oxley who was on the Advisory Committee. The Natal Mercury, 14 August 1931 p. 14

<sup>93</sup>Presently being rebuilt for the Natal Performing Arts Council - MH.

<sup>94</sup>The Natal Mercury, 6 July 1934 p. 18-19

<sup>95</sup>The S.A. Architectural Record, December 1930 p. 127

<sup>96</sup>The construction company experienced many problems because of sand and water on the site. It was eventually decided to omit one floor from the design. The S.A. Architectural Record, 1933 p. 1130

<sup>97</sup>Derived from the 1925 Paris exhibition: "Exposition

internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes".  
D. Farr, English art, 1870-1940, Oxford University Press,  
1978 p. 265, 267

<sup>98</sup>Ibid

<sup>99</sup>Ibid. p. 267

<sup>100</sup>Pietermaritzburg was not troubled by skyscrapers  
until after World War II.

<sup>101</sup>The Natal Mercury, 17 March 1933 p.14

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>The Natal Mercury, 15 June 1933 p. 19

<sup>104</sup>Payne's striking building, The Natal Mercury, 21 July  
1939 p. 24-25

<sup>105</sup>Durban's striking progress, The Natal Mercury, 2 April  
1938 p. 7

<sup>106</sup>L.A. Elsworth, Architecture, the mother of the arts,  
The arts in South Africa, Durban, Knox, 1933 p. 163

<sup>107</sup> see Paton's remarks above

<sup>108</sup>W.B. Oxley, the town we would like to live in, The  
Common Room Magazine, Winter 1925 p. 8

<sup>109</sup>December 1925 p. 87; continued in March 1926 p. 6f

<sup>110</sup>Ibid

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

<sup>112</sup>who took over the editorship in 1931. G. Herbert,  
Martienssen and the International Style, Balkema, 1975. p. 55

<sup>113</sup>Ibid. p. 153

<sup>114</sup>Durban is going modern, The Natal Mercury, 21 January  
1936 p. 5

<sup>115</sup>This building, now a children's home, has  
unfortunately been extensively altered.

<sup>116</sup>H.R. Hitchcock, 19th and 20th century architecture,  
Harmondsworth

<sup>117</sup>The Natal Mercury, 8 May 1937 p. 25.

Much research undertaken in the humanities does not proceed from any pre-formulated hypothesis. This thesis was no exception. Apart from several well-documented lists of colonial artists and architects, Natal art and architecture had not been seriously explored hitherto. It was therefore necessary to start investigations at an elementary level. Once a reasonable body of information had been accumulated it became possible to express certain aims. These were listed in the Introduction to Part One:

1. To establish whether specific provincial identities existed after Union in 1910 and before World War II.
2. To identify the most important trends in the art and architecture in Natal of that period, and
3. To describe the developments that took place, supplemented by biographical indexes of artists, architects and their works.

The biographical lists, together with previously undocumented information on the NSA, were used to support much of the argument outlined in Part One. Another practical result of these findings was an unexpectedly novel view that they provided of South African art as a whole. The free participation of all practising artists in the enormous provincial group exhibitions between 1920 and 1940<sup>1</sup> contrasts

vividly with the idea propagated by writers of the late forties and fifties that there were a select number of artists working in isolation.<sup>2</sup> Another misconception on their part was the idea that art and architecture before 1940 was somewhat stagnant, an opinion which survives even in contemporary writing.<sup>3</sup> After listing the personalities active during the period it became obvious that this judgement was based on a lack of appropriate information. As indicated throughout the text, Natal artists were both active and ambitious. The annual exhibition of the NSA became a highlight of Natal's social calendar and of the South African art calendar. Professional artists as well as amateurs from as far afield as Capetown and Pretoria participated regularly. Encouraged by the success of these exhibitions the Society's most prominent members attempted to influence the organisation of South African art as a whole through the short-lived S.A. Institute of Artists. Leo Francois, founder of the Institute and President of the NSA, went so far as to attempt the creation of artistic unity throughout the Union by encouraging a patriotic or "national" art.

The idea of nationalism has changed many times since 1910 making it difficult perhaps for art historians of the eighties to sympathise with this trend. However, in the

newly-formed Union of South Africa with its fresh memories of the Second Anglo-Boer War, patriotism and national pride had a special meaning and monopolised literature of the period.<sup>4</sup> One result of the search for nationalism was the consolidation of provincial identity. Instead of merging immediately into an integrated whole South Africans obstinately polarised as factions in Natal, Transvaal and the Cape attempted to claim social, economic and cultural superiority. Taking into consideration Natal's history as an independent British colony, it was anticipated that Natalians would attempt to maintain a recognisably British identity. This was indeed the case. British influence in art and architecture was strong and beneficial. However, after World War I, attempts were made to put an end to outside influences which prevented the unopposed assimilation of European or American models. Thus a simplistic list of correspondences between trends in Natal and other countries could not be supported, as explained in Chapter Two.

Much of the evidence for this was gleaned from the periodicals and daily newspapers of the time. These publications played a more important role in cultural matters than they do at present. Lengthy reviews of current exhibitions and descriptions of newly-opened buildings kept

the public informed, and the public, in turn, responded with enthusiasm to any controversial subject. Because of the lack of an established body of professional artists and art historians the attitudes of the public tended to outweigh professional opinion. The public were, to a large extent, untrained and unperceptive. Art education in Natal for the average citizen was conservative, resulting in an admiration for 19th century values and an extreme distaste for "modernism". Even in architecture one finds a survival of the Victorian taste for styles in recognisable categories based on historical "revivals". Thus one could find, during the late thirties, manifestations of the "Renaissance Style", "Cape Dutch" mansions, "Spanish/Colonial" villas, and even Tudor cinemas.

Those artists who consciously attempted to improve public taste were often themselves lacking perceptive qualities that one would expect from professional individuals. The concept of "nationalism" served to create an awareness of landscape that led in turn to the formation of a school of landscape painters. In 1910 one finds a substantial number of competent artists led by Cathcart W. Methven and Wallace Paton. Despite their origins as loyal British colonists these men and women conveyed a genuine love

for their new home. The Drakensberg, Midlands and the Natal coastline were observed with perspicacity and, despite a reliance on Victorian techniques, originality. But the social and political implications of nationalism after 1918 seem to have sapped their artistic convictions. The search for national unity discouraged the imitation of European art. Landscape paintings began to assume a meaningless similarity as local artists, encouraged, no doubt, by the buying public who required art that was predictable and unchallenging, abandoned attempts to interpret their environment. Artists such as S  n  que and Francois supplied the prototypes for numerous superficial depictions of local beauty spots. Commercial tendencies were very prevalent in Natal in all fields including art. Hence Roy Campbell's attack on Edward Roworth in his poem, The Wayzgoose:

How aptly by some journalistic sage  
Was he misnamed the 'Turner' of our age -  
Reversing Midas' gift, who has been known  
To 'Turn' the style of Turner to his own.  
Through all the country it is his to range  
And with his district all his styles to change:  
Shrewd as a pedlar, every town he knows  
And changes his opinions where he goes:  
In Cape Town, to the moderns he inclines,  
In Durban - to Pre-Raphaelitic lines:  
And yet howe'er he copies, still appears

The parodist of what he most reveres.  
'Turner' and twister of a thousand styles,  
Over his toil the Muse of Business smiles,  
Pictures and public equally are 'sold,'  
And what he turns to dross, she turns to gold!<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that the most competent artists of the period were highly individualistic and were frequently associated with the architectural profession. Artists such as Methven, Paton, and S  n  que were practising architects, and Adams and Stainbank produced architectural sculpture and ceramics. Without their considerable contribution art of the period might have been truly insignificant.

It is unfortunate that, in an overview such as this, these and other individuals had to be treated somewhat briefly. The terms of reference were changed frequently during the course of the research. As a result many topics had to be compressed or omitted. The following are only a few of the themes that require extensive further research: crafts and commercial art; the development of art education in Natal; the social and economic influences on art and architecture in South Africa; the artistic and architectural role of the Indian population; and, not least, the quantity and diversity of religious architecture in Natal which was omitted in its entirety. Perhaps this thesis may serve as

an encouragement for future researchers who may wish to explore this promising and largely unexploited field of study.

Notes: Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>See Chapter Two and Appendix A

<sup>2</sup>This approach to South African art can be seen in A.C. Bouman's Kuns in Suid-Afrika which is a collection of essays on individuals rather than an overview.

<sup>3</sup>see Chapter Two

<sup>4</sup>see Chapter Two and The Natal Mercury and The Natal Witness 1902-1940

<sup>5</sup>R. Campbell, The Wayzgoose, 1923, lines 570-585. After his artistic successes in Britain Campbell found Durban a bitter disappointment. It was just as well that The Wayzgoose was only published after his return to London. Angry Natalians referred to "the monstrous egotism of the whole thing" and called it "a silly, peevish and unbalanced diatribe that is as far removed in wit or worth from Pope's Dunciad...as the Twentieth Century is removed from the Eighteenth." (Poets and poetasters, The Natal Advertiser, 17 February 1928.)