

Deurdagte Reis – ‘n viering van vrouekunstenaars Thoughtful Journey – a celebration of female artists

Sumner is op 16 September 1902 in Johannesburg gebore. Sy is wyd bekend en geniet groot bewondering as skilder (olie en waterverf) – dat sy ook ‘n digter was, is egter minder bekend. Gedurende haar kinderjare het die gesin gereeld na Engeland gereis. Sy was toe ook ‘n loseerder in die koshuis by Roedean Skool in Johannesburg waar sy kunsklasse van A.E. Gyngell ontvang het.

In 1922 is Sumner na Cherwell Edge (nou St. Anne's College in Oxford), waar sy ‘n meestersgraad in Engelse Literatuur en Franse digkuns verwerf het. Haar eerste formele kunsopleiding het sy in 1925 aan Westminster School of Art, Engeland ontvang. Die jaar daarna is sy na Parys om daar verder te studeer. Gedurende haar vroeë Parys-jare het sy aan verskeie groep-uitstallings van Salon d'Automne en Salon des Tuileries deelgeneem en later het sy van haar werke gereeld by die salons se jaarlikse uitstallings vertoon.

Verdere opleiding het studies by Ateliers d'Art Sacré en Academie de La Grande Chaumiere ingesluit. Tydens sosiale byeenkomste by kunsskole het Sumner met meesters soos Henry Matisse, Eduard Vuillard, Gino Severini, Camille Claudel en Maria Blanchard kennis gemaak. Sy het haar kunsloopbaan tussen Londen, Parys en Johannesburg verdeel.

Sumner se eerste solo-uitstalling in Suid-Afrika het bestaan uit 31 werke wat in November 1932 by die Ashbey Galery, Kaapstad vertoon is. Die werke is in Engeland, Frankryk en Suid-Afrika geskilder. Ander uitstallings die jaar daarna was dié in die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie (weer in 1941) en Lezard Galery, Johannesburg. Tydens haar verblyf in Suid-Afrika het sy lesings oor die Franse Kuns aan die Suid-Afrikaanse publiek aangebied.

In 1934 is sy terug na Parys, met portrette (sy het **Cecil Higgs** ook geskilder) as dominerende genre in haar werk in daardie stadium. In 1935 het Sumner haar eerste solo-uitstalling in Engeland, in die French Gallery, Berkeley Square, Londen gehou – 40 werke wat in Frankryk, Engeland en Suid-Afrika geskilder is, sowel as skilderye van hawens op haar roete tussen Suid-Afrika en Europa. Sumner het Spanje in 1936 besoek, waar werke van El Greco (16de-eeuse Spaanse skilder) ‘n blywende indruk op haar gelaat het. Werke wat in dieselfde jaar deur Sumner in haar Parys-ateljee geskep is, getuig van ‘n sterk Spaanse invloed. Die werke is ook later in Suid-Afrika uitgestal. Die spesifieke werke is net voor die uitbreek van die Spaanse Burgeroorlog geskep en vandag word die skilderye veral hoog geag weens hul historiese verwysing.

In 1937 het Sumner saam met **Irma Stern** by ‘n groep-uitstalling in Gainsborough Galleries, Johannesburg uitgestal. As lid van die **Nuwe Groep** het Sumner, op uitnodiging van Walter Battiss, vier van haar skilderye by die Transvaal-uitstalling van 1938 ingesluit. Met die uitbreek van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog het Sumner Parys verlaat en na Warwickshire verhuis om haar kunsloopbaan daar voort te sit, voordat sy vanaf 1941 tot vroeg in 1947 weer in Suid-Afrika woon. In dié tydperk het Sumner landwyd aan 16 solo- en 5 groep-uitstallings deelgeneem. Die belangrikste, Sumner se eerste solo-uitstalling in Suid-Afrika na haar terugkoms, is in Junie 1941 by die Henri Lidchi Galleries, Johannesburg geopen.

In die vooroorlogse jare het Sumner hoofsaaklik as ‘n Parys-kunstenaar geïdentifiseer – haar werke is deur energie, vreugde, kleur en rykheid (post-impressionisme) gekarakteriseer. Sy is as ‘n verteenwoordiger van die “Franse styl” gesien en het die tradisies van die École de Paris in Suid-Afrika voortgesit. Dit is in die na-oorlogse jare in Suid-Afrika waar haar styl ‘n verandering ondergaan het – meer eksperimenteel en abstrak, met die skilder Paul Berçot as invloed en weens haar bewondering vir Delaunay, Villion en Feininger. In die jare wat gevolg het, veral die laaste 10 tot 15 jaar (die sewentigerjare) het Afrika ‘n groot invloed op Sumner se werk gehad – die kontinent wat gekenmerk word deur sy groot ruimtes en misterie was dominant in haar werk. Haar werk het ook meer ingetrokke geword en ‘n vereenvoudiging, geestelik en fisies, kan waargeneem word – temas sluit veral visies van die kosmos, sowel as woestynlandskappe, land en lug in.

Sumner se lewensverhaal kan teen die agtergrond van haar skilderye en digkuns vertolk word, omdat dit meestal outobiografies is. In 1971 het sy ‘n Erepennig vir Skilderkuns van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns ontvang. Sy is op 14 Januarie 1985 in Johannesburg oorlede.

Sumner was born in Johannesburg on 16 September 1902. She is widely known and much admired as a painter (oil and watercolours) – that she was also a poet, might come as a surprise. During her childhood years she and her family undertook many trips to England. At that time she was a boarder at the Roedean School in Johannesburg and received art classes from A.E. Gyngell.

At Cherwell Edge (now St. Anne's College in Oxford), in 1922, Sumner obtained a master's degree in English Literature and French poetry. She received her first formal art education in 1925, at Westminster School of Art, England and the year thereafter she left for studies in Paris. During her early years in Paris, Sumner exhibited in group exhibitions of Salon d'Automne and Salon des Tuileries. She later featured in annual exhibitions of most of these salons.

Further education includes studies at Ateliers d'Art Sacré and Academie de La Grande Chaumiere. Socialising at art schools resulted in her meeting masters such as Henry Matisse, Eduard Vuillard, Gino Severini, Camille Claudel and Maria Blanchard. She divided her art career between London, Paris and Johannesburg.

Her first solo exhibition in South Africa consisted of 31 works at the Ashbey's Gallery, Cape Town in November 1932. The works on show were painted in England, France and South Africa. Other exhibitions at the South African Academy (again in 1941) and Lezard's Gallery, Johannesburg followed the year after. While in South Africa, she delivered talks on French art to the South African public.

In 1934 she returned to Paris, with portraits (she also painted **Cecil Higgs**) being the dominant genre in her work at that stage. In 1935 she held her first solo exhibition in England, at the French Gallery, Berkeley Square, London. On show were 40 works painted in France, England and South Africa and paintings of ports along the way while travelling from South Africa to Europe. In 1936 she travelled to Spain and was inspired by the works of El Greco (16th century Spanish painter). Works inspired by this trip were created while she was in Paris during the same year – later, these works were also exhibited in South Africa. These specific paintings were created just before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and are, today, especially valued for their historical reference.

In 1937 Sumner exhibited with **Irma Stern** in a group exhibition shown at Gainsborough Galleries in Johannesburg. As a member of the **New Group**, Sumner had four paintings on show at the 1938 Transvaal exhibition, upon an invitation from Walter Battiss. With the outbreak of World War II Sumner left Paris and went to Warwickshire to continue her art career there, before residing from 1941 to early 1947 in South Africa. This period saw, amongst others, 16 solo and 5 group exhibitions by her across the country. The most important, her first solo exhibition in South Africa after her return, was opened in June 1941 at the Henri Lidchi Galleries, Johannesburg.

Sumner mostly identified as a Paris artist in the pre-war years. Works of this period were characterised by energy, joy, colour and richness (post-impressionism). She was seen as representing a “French Style” and carrying the tradition of the École de Paris in South Africa. It is in the post-war years in South Africa that her style became more experimental and abstract, influenced by painter Paul Berçot and her admiration for Delaunay, Villion and Feininger. In the years that followed, especially her last 10 to 15 years (the 1970's), the influence of Africa, its vast spaces and mysteriousness, dominated her work. As Sumner's work became more introspective, the greater became its simplicity (spiritually and physically) – themes included cosmic visions, desert landscapes, land and sky.

Sumner's life-story can be traced against the background of her paintings and poetry, as most works are autobiographical. In 1971 she received the Medal of Honour for Painting from the South African Academy for Science and Arts. She passed away in Johannesburg on 14 January 1985.

AFTERWARDS

*When all is said and done
And the long spun silken thread
Growing thinner, breaks is broken,
I shall go home.*

*So strange a thread
Full of tough knots and splints and tangles
A messy affair, not of my choice,
though of my spinning
Will it shine silver when I am dead?*

*Will the sun burnish it to gold then
And will some pattern, now obscure, be seen?
And all this painful long futility
Seem not a nightmare then,
but some weird dream?*

Maud Sumner

Maud Sumner (1902 – 1985)

Bronne / Sources:

Harmsen, F. 1992. *Maud Sumner: Painter and Poet*. J.L. van Schaik. Pretoria.



Sumner, Maud (1902 – 1985)
Galilee at dawn, 1961
Olieverf op doek / Oil on canvas

Versameling / Collection:
Rupert Kunststiging / Rupert Art Foundation, Stellenbosch