



South Africa's Spring Landscape

Through the Eyes of Historic and
Contemporary Artists



Piet van Heerden (1917–1991); "Landscape, Namaqualand"; Oil on Canvas; 46.5cm x 65.5cm; Signed: "Piet V Heerden" (Lower/Right)

Landscape painting has a long and embedded history in South African art, and the African terrain itself manifests in an incomparable variety of scenes both subtle and majestic. From the imposing magnitude of the Drakensberg mountain range to the sparse and arid Karoo desert; extensive coastlines to verdant wine lands; the South African landscape presents an endless array of natural resources for artists.

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Images: © GRAHAM'S FINE ART GALLERY

Scats Esterhuysen (1954-); "Boschendal Lily Pond"; Oil on Canvas; 101.5cm x 75.5cm; Signed: "Scats Esterhuysen" (Lower/Right); Dated: 2008



André Francois van Vuuren (1945-); "Before the Spring"; Oil on Canvas; 150cm x 200cm; Signed: "Van Vuuren" (Lower/Right); Dated: 2009

The extensive choice of vistas available to inspire painters in this country has resulted in various themes and subcategories developing, including that of the picturesque and idealistic South African landscape in spring time. Historically, landscape painting has been, and still remains, a predominant theme for many artists because of its diverse nature and compelling features. Landscapists have rendered views of the South African terrain in a wide range of approaches, traversing local and international art movements including Realism, Impressionism, Modernism, German Expressionism, and Post-Modernism.

In the South African art community, landscapes have traditionally comprised the largest *oeuvre*, and at the turn of the 20th Century, it seemed that the only variation from landscape painting were those works that were commissioned portraiture. Indeed, it is very rare to find that the landscape, as a genre, is ever totally excluded from an artist's collective work, as it is an enduring and enigmatic theme.

There are many historical examples of South African artists whose careers were predominantly dedicated to the delineation of this vast topography. In particular, the representation of such an environment bursting into fresh spring growth following the winter season has often captivated the imagination of artists.

One of the first and most significant landscapists was JEA Volschenk. Having previously only painted as a hobby and without any formal training, Volschenk became a professional artist in 1904. His focus on the Western Cape landscape was one he revisited time and again, never tiring of his obsession for nature, which he emulated on canvas in painstaking detail. Volschenk's skilful portrayal of colour and tone creates a sense of luminosity in his compositions. This is particularly evident in his later works, which contrast with the

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brooding, misty atmospheres characteristic of his earlier works. The picturesque qualities of Volschenk's unblemished, romanticised landscapes reflect his South African audiences' ingrained affection and nostalgia for this land. Volschenk's inimitable success as one of the country's earliest pioneering artists paved the way for other artists of this genre.

Another important South African landscapist was a contemporary of Volschenk, the acclaimed Pieter Hugo

Naudé. Showing great promise as an artist from an early age, Naudé became one of the first South Africans to travel abroad to further his artistic studies. In his travels, Naudé was involved with the Barbizon Group in Fontainebleau, France. This Barbizon school comprised several artists who focussed on depicting an idealised nature and rejected academic traditions in order to create their own ethos, which aimed to represent the purity of rural scenes.

Originally a part of the Realist art movement and associated with Romanticism, the Barbizon Group was also highly influenced by the English school of Landscape, of which John Constable was a noteworthy member. Their styles and ideology are considered to have set the foundations of Modernism by instigating the Impressionist movement, of which Naudé was a pioneering member.

An important technique used by this group was to paint *en plein aire*, to paint outside in the open, taking direct motivation from the scene itself. This was a practice that Naudé continued for much of his career. The impressionistic impasto painting style he used creates scenes of Africa that are full bodied, the vivid colours of this unique landscapes reflecting his ability to capture the remarkable tensions in nature of light and shadow, which he developed pictorially in his own personal application of Impressionism as a formal style. It is within these landscape paintings

that Naudé's admiration and pleasure for this subject matter is truly comprehensible.

Piet van Heerden studied under the tutorage of Naudé, living in his home until Naudé's death in 1941. The influence that this master artist had upon the life and work of Van Heerden is unmistakable in both subject and initial style. Van Heerden is considered a Cape Impressionist, part of the group of South African artists based in Cape Town who embraced the developing characteristic style of European Impressionism, yet applied these European techniques to an African subject. Van Heerden is best known for his portrayals of the lush Boland area though, as with many landscape artists, he was also fascinated by the striking beauty of Namaqualand in spring time, when the dry earth erupts with the splendid colour of wildflowers.

The extensive genre of Landscape has more recently been developed into what has been termed the "universal landscape," scenes of which are inspired by certain characteristics pertaining to celebrated areas such as the Karoo, Namaqualand or the Boland valleys. These portrayals evoke specific traits that form part of an idiosyncratic iconography for images.

Contemporary landscape artists such as Scats Esterhuyse integrate a wide view of South African landscapes. Esterhuyse,

travelling across the country, embarks on a search for the individual nature and structured identity that exists throughout the historic towns and regions which form the diverse and rich character of the South African nation. Esterhuyse's works deal with a layered set of elements and influences that come together to create a collection of paintings which are radiant, superlative and intriguing.

Yet another contemporary landscapist to take note of is André van Vuuren, whose typical subject matter ranges from an investigation of line and form, as seen in his early works, to a socio-political commentary on South Africa's transition into democracy during the 1990s. Van Vuuren's works are not only inspired by his home country but also his travels, which have taken him across the globe. In 1985, Van Vuuren spent some time in West Germany, where his work became much bolder and more colourful in reaction to German Expressionism. In 1999 he visited Zanzibar and East Africa. His paintings after this period mark a change in direction, exploring the East African landscape and the light and shade of Zanzibar's Stone Town. A trip to Italy followed in 2000, where Venice and Tuscany became favourite subjects.

When Van Vuuren is not dealing with figures and portraits, his subject matter is

often focused on landscapes, in particular those places he visits in pursuit of solitude and tranquillity. These landscapes are filled with a haunting luminosity, which, together with his skilfully-developed brushwork and sensitive colour pallet, create a scene imbued with hidden meaning and magnitude.

The vernal landscape is one which epitomises all that is beautiful and rejuvenated in the South African scene. As a specific subgenre in this illusive and eclectic category of artistic imagery, the spring landscape relays a set of works by both master Modern Impressionist artists and contemporary painters who are full of promise, conveying the optimistic beauty that belongs to a land engrained with historical and social complexity.

Graham's Fine Art Contemporary Gallery will be holding an exhibition of new works by celebrated artist André van Vuuren, opening on 1 October 2009. Scats Esterhuyse's 2009 exhibition of new works will open on 5 November, with a central focus on images of the beautiful Boschendal. 🌸

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Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936); "Amongst the Rocks and Aloes"; Oil on Canvas; 24.5cm x 30.5cm; Signed: "J Volschenk" (Lower/Right); Dated: 1925

