



Irma Stern's new lease on life

Rising damp and mould at artist's home make it unsuitable without refurbishment. **By James Sey**

- Consternation has erupted in the South African fine arts community, but especially in Cape Town, after the sudden closure of the Irma Stern Museum, located at Stern's old home, The Firs in Rosebank.

Outraged art lovers, concerned that Stern's heritage was being erased, launched an online petition in protest, which attracted thousands of signatures. The backlash resulted in a series of public consultations last week by the Irma Stern Trust, which looks after the Museum and the extensive Irma Stern Collection, which comprises original works by the artist, as well as a considerable collection of *objets d'art* she acquired, mostly on various travels through Africa, especially from the Congo and Zanzibar.

Stern's work is highly regarded, both locally and internationally. She holds the record for the most valuable single work by a South African artist (*Arab Priest*, sold at auction in London in 2011 for the then equivalent of R34m), and her work at auction regularly fetches multimillion-rand prices. She also currently has a successful solo exhibition in Berlin.

Given her position as a popular and respected South African artist with a major presence in our national heritage and culture, what's behind the closure of her dedicated museum?

Stern, having no heirs, left her entire collection and remaining assets to the Irma Stern Trust Collection when she died in 1966. The trust has permanent jurisdiction over her collection and is tasked with preserving and extending her artistic and cultural legacy. Today, the trust is owned by Nedbank. After Stern's death, an arrangement was made between the trust and University of Cape Town (UCT), who signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) in 1969. Under its terms, UCT would manage Stern's home in Rosebank, and the trust would manage the Irma Stern Collection. Shortly after this MoA was reached, it was decided to establish The Firs as a dedicated single artist museum, designed to display Stern's artwork and artefacts in her own home and garden.

UCT has decided that it cannot continue to be the custodians of The Firs, as is their right within the terms of the MoA. The establishment of the museum in The Firs was not a stipulation in Stern's will – and ownership of the property will revert solely to the trust.

Given that UCT was responsible for staffing and running the museum, it was decided to temporarily close it to strategise and implement a way forward that maintains and extends the integrity of the collection and expands the artist's legacy and influence, both

locally and internationally. This was primarily an administrative and business decision on UCT's part, but it has provided the trust with the opportunity to renovate and modernise The Firs, and to bring Stern's legacy and work into the 21st Century in exciting ways.

The trust is planning an expanded and more widely accessible programme of talks, educational programmes, media and other partnerships including international scholarly research. Much of this will remain located at The Firs when it reopens and will include digital and other media interaction with Stern's work and legacy.

The closure of the museum, while sudden, was also precipitated by the danger posed by the state of the building. While many art lovers, especially in Cape Town, have a sentimental attachment to the house as the Irma Stern Museum, it was not built as or intended to house and display fragile and valuable artworks. A professional architectural condition report, commissioned by the trust in 2023, advised that due to the deteriorating infrastructure of the house and the storage facilities that had been added over the years, and the extent and deep-seated nature of the rising damp and mould in the roof and walls, The Firs was not recommended as a space for the display and conservation of such an important art collection.

As part of the decision to temporarily close the museum, the collection will move to a custom-built storage facility at Nedbank's Clocktower headquarters in the V&A Waterfront, where a full set of museum-standard safety, security and conservation measures are under construction including archival storage facilities, fire safety systems and full temperature control. Access protocols for scholars and researchers will be put in place when the relocation is complete.

While this facility is in final preparation, the movement of works will begin. The trust has come to an arrangement with the Norval Foundation to store some of the more valuable and vulnerable pieces in their secure facility until the dedicated space at the Clocktower is ready. In the interim, the refurbishment of The Firs will only be finalised early next year.

The capital investment required for the care of the collection and the restoration of



Clockwise from top: A wall displaying Irma Stern artworks; a Stern vase; Stern artwork 'Rich Old Arab'; Irma Stern book project, flat copies, photographs, newspaper articles; and The Firs.

Pictures: MICHAEL LE GRANGE AND SEAN WILLSON

the museum necessitated the 2022 auction sale of some minor works and items from the collection to raise funds. The sale raised around R22m after costs, which has been reinvested to ensure all the stipulated activities in Stern's will – collection restoration and maintenance, insurance, storage and logistics costs, and the exhibition and marketing plans for the collection, can be properly financed, the trust has advised. These are not expenditures but a necessary investment in an important heritage collection, which is expensive to maintain and to continue to exhibit, as per Stern's instructions. Any major restoration of the buildings at The Firs will require additional

capital investment to bring the site to a state where it can safely store and display such an important collection.

In the last two weeks, extensive public consultations have taken place between the trust and provincial and national heritage agencies, culminating in a public consultation meeting which attracted hundreds of Stern enthusiasts. The extensive Q&A session dispelled fears that the museum would be permanently closed or that Stern's importance to the Western Cape and South African arts and culture heritage would be diminished. In fact, many people left the session, conducted by the trust, with renewed hope for Irma Stern's Museum and Collection.

