

# Johannes Meintjes—Versatile Artist



**W**HEN Johannes Meintjes is asked when he began to paint he replies: "Even before I could speak." That is not unusual in a child, but perseverance is.

He spent his first five years on the family farm in the Molteno district. His mother was a Borcherds, descended from the renowned Meent Borcherds. His father died suddenly at the age of 35 and Mrs. Meintjes moved to Riversdale, where Johannes had been born five years before. The old painter Volschenk still lived there, and Meintjes knew him and saw his work, but the old man died when Meintjes was still very young.

He began to show his work at the annual agricultural shows, using the prize-money to buy his first oil paints, beginning to work in oils at 15.

In 1938 Mrs. Meintjes and her four children moved to Cape Town and Johannes studied under Florence Zerffi, widow of the Impressionist Strat Caldecott, and from her he learnt much. Then he discovered Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser and knew at once the direction in which he had to work—towards Expressionism. He was not influenced by Maggie Laubser but by the source of her inspiration, German Expressionism.

Leaving school, he went to the University of Cape Town to study languages, though he worked so hard at his painting that it is surprising that he found time to take a degree. He was learning from all the local artists: Lipshitz, Gregoire, Ruth Prowse, Jean Welz, May Hillhouse, and others.

He graduated at 20, and a bookseller asked him to go to Johannesburg as his representative, so that he became familiar with the work of Alexis Preller, Anton Hendriks, Walter Battiss, and others. He first showed at the Gainsborough Galleries (1944) at the age of 21, selling enough work to be independent for a year.

Back in Cape Town he began to prepare for an exhibition there and his work was well received. He sold so well that he was eventually able to go to Europe, studying in London for 18 months.

His first book, a monograph on Maggie Laubser, appeared in 1944. In 1947 appeared a volume of short stories, and in 1948 a book about his lyrical painting.

In 1949 he left Cape Town to spend five years on the family farm at Molteno, producing a book on Anreith and a play in collaboration with Uys Krige. Since 1954 he has spent his time partly at Molteno and partly in Johannesburg, with regular exhibitions in the larger towns. Since 1955 he has published various books and part of his diary.

Some opinions about his work are:

"Meintjes seems to be concerned not only with the moment of reality, but the preparation before it, and the length of time that lies beyond it" (Neil Sack, 1954.)

"The most interesting quality in Meintjes's work is that his surrealism reflects an unmistakably South African atmosphere." (Anna Vorster, 1959.)

"His present exhibition shows again that passionate introspective quality possessed by this most poetic of younger South African painters." (*Cape Argus*, 1959.)

"Meintjes remains a very interesting painter. A sentimentalist and a romantic he is, and where this has spoiled his work he has been justly criticized. But such criticism often overlooks an important aspect of his work, perhaps the most important, and that is its particular poetic intensity." (Neville Dubow, 1961.)