

# Pottering around in Africa: Erich Mayer's search for an indigenous South African style as exemplified in his ceramic designs

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## Abstract

This article investigates the ideas, ideals and contribution of the German-Jewish artist Erich Mayer, who was born in Germany in 1876. He settled in South Africa in 1898, where he developed an affinity with the early Boer pioneers living in the rural areas.

Mayer's background was solidly European as he was trained at the various art academies of Germany. Shortly after settling in South Africa, he realised that a knowledge of European art history or, indeed, any awareness of an aesthetic consciousness concerning the fine and applied arts was sadly lacking within South African society in general. His interest in arts and crafts prompted him to conduct research into and document examples of folk art among the different cultural groups in South Africa in an attempt to establish an aesthetic awareness in South Africans. Mayer was of the opinion that the development and marketing of these cultural objects and artefacts would contribute towards a uniquely indigenous South African national character and artistic style.

## Introduction

Owing to ill health the German born artist Erich Mayer (1876–1960) came to South Africa where he settled in 1898. He soon developed an affinity with the Boer pioneers in the rural areas and this natural connection was one of the main motivations behind his participation in the Anglo-Boer War. In 1900 he was captured, along with Commandant Sarel Eloff at Mafeking and sent to St Helena as prisoner of war until his repatriation in 1902 back to Germany (Berman 1994, 279).<sup>1</sup>

With his sound European background and training at various art academies in Berlin, Karlsruhe and Stuttgart, Mayer soon realised, after his return to South Africa in 1911, that knowledge of European art history or an awareness of an aesthetic consciousness concerning the fine and applied arts was sadly lacking within the general South African com-

munity and more specifically, amongst the early Afrikaner pioneering farmers.

As a student Mayer had already developed a keen interest in the traditional German arts and crafts which, according to him, had contributed to the development of a specifically national Germanic character. This interest prompted him, on his return to South Africa, to research and document examples of folk art among the rural Afrikaners as well as other indigenous communities. It was also part of his attempt to establish and nurture an aesthetic awareness in South Africans, but more specifically among Afrikaners. Mayer was of the opinion that the development and marketing of these cultural objects and artefacts could contribute towards the establishment of a unique art identity with a distinctly South African national character and style. When his parole conditions were finally lifted after World War I, Mayer started travelling widely in South Africa lecturing on his ideas and the importance of an indigenous South African style. During these travels he also collected and documented a vast variety of cultural objects and artefacts (e.g. vernacular architecture, furniture design and household articles), all of which he sourced amongst the different South African communities.

Although he did not contribute towards the development of South African pottery as such, Mayer did for a while focus his interests on the wide variety of pottery designs which he sourced and appropriated amongst various indigenous African groups. Mayer was also interested in South African wildlife and, on the basis of both this interest and his interest in indigenous pottery designs, he redesigned a range of pottery. Mayer saw this as an ideal vehicle for promoting and emphasising his ideas on the establishment of an indigenous South African art identity and style.

## The 'lie of the land' and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism

Mayer settled in Vrede in the Orange Free State in 1898. His prolonged illness and the fact that he had been bedridden for two years prior to this may have facilitated his rapid psychological bonding with the dry, hot and sunny landscape and the pioneering life of South Africa. It would, however, be another nine years before he could finally return and settle in the

then Union of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> It can be deduced from Commandant Eloff's notice of discharge on 7 August 1902 at Deadwood Camp, St Helena, that Mayer had every intention of returning to South Africa and making it his adopted country:

Ik certificeer dat de Heer Erich Mayer voor den Oorlog Asst. Landmeter in Vrede O.V.S. heeft zich als Vrijwilliger bij den storm op Mafeking op de 12de Mei 1900 dapper gedragen en was gedurende de Krijgsgefangenschap te St Helena getrouw en werkzaam voor de Afrikaner zaak: *hij verdiend dus mijn inziens ondersteuning in zijn doel: een nationale schilder voor het Afrikanervolk te worden* [My italics].

[I hereby certify that Erich Mayer Esq. who, before the war, was an Asst. Land-Surveyor in Vrede O.F.S., conducted himself as a brave Volunteer at the storming of Mafeking on the 12th May 1900 and worked loyally for the Afrikaner cause during captivity at St Helena: *in my opinion he thus deserves support in his goal: to become a national painter for the Afrikaner nation* [my italics]].

(Mayer documents, *Notice of Discharge*, 7 August 1902).

Historically, the southern German regions of Hesse, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg were known to be the heartland or *Heimat* of the so-called *Deutsche Völkische Kultur-Ideologie* or German folkish cultural-ideology. Given that he was born in Karlsruhe, it is not only likely that Erich Mayer would have come into contact with some of these ideas, but also that his life and worldviews would, in fact, have been shaped by these ideologies. According to Petropoulos (1996, 28–29),

The *völkisch* groups originated as a phenomenon in Germany around the turn of the century (the most prominent were the *Dürrerbund*, the *Werdandibund* and, later, the Bayreuth Circle) and are aptly characterised by the term “radical traditionalists”. Key elements of the *völkisch* cultural program included the idealisation of the German peasant, the rejection of all non-traditional aesthetic styles (often referred to by the catch-all epithet “cultural bolshevism”), and a propensity toward racism based on the supposition that artistic expression and “blood” are inextricably linked.

Correspondence between Mayer and his close friend, Alfred von Faber, makes it clear that these young Germans were aware of the activities of the *Dürrerbund*, which endorsed and encouraged German folk traditions. Von Faber was a keen supporter of these activities and, in his many letters written to Mayer over a number of years, Von Faber discussed the activities of the group and the views of some of the supporters of a folkish ideology.<sup>3</sup> In later years many of these ideas and viewpoints would gain an affinity with the awakening nationalism of the Afrikaners with whom Mayer identified closely. It should, however, be noted that, at heart, Mayer was apolitical and that, in his lectures, articles and draft letters, he used ideological terminology such as ‘nationalism’ inconsistently. Mayer often used the term ‘national art’ which, in certain instances, alluded to ‘nationalism’ as an ideological worldview. Owing to his close affinity with the early Boer pioneers, he also quite often used the terms ‘national’ and ‘Afrikaner’ together. In other instances, the term ‘national’ was used as an umbrella term to describe the fundamental or intrinsic nature of broader South African society. When, for instance, Mayer wrote on the decorative work and designs of Africans, he often referred to these objects as contributing to a ‘national art’ in South Africa.

The political climate which prevailed when Mayer settled in South Africa in 1898 was fraught with tension between British and Boer interests, tensions which culminated in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. As mentioned earlier, Mayer felt a close affinity with the Boer pioneers. That said, he must have been equally aware of the claims of the English-speaking South African sector, given that much of his support in later years, after unification, came from the English press as well as English-speaking art collectors.

In the introduction to their book: *The rise of colonial nationalism*, Eddy and Schreuder (1988, 3) describe the distinct British colonial nationalist style which developed in South Africa at the turn of the century as follows:

The sense in which colonial nationalism, a civic sense of ideal citizenship, was both ‘inclusionist’ in its populism and yet ‘exclusionist’ – especially in relation to indigenous peoples, but also to migrants from



1 Erich Mayer, *Kookfontein, Namakwaland* (Sept. 1930). Pencil and watercolour on paper, 15,5 x 25,3 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC7014/278.

Asia – stands out in the regional contributions to this book. In one extreme case, that of South Africa, the colonial nationalism which underlay the making of the state of 1910 was fundamentally based on the principle of white unity, excluding the majority African citizens from the political nation – a very curious and inhumane legitimising of power.

Bear in mind, too, that the already well-established social, church and traditional Dutch-Afrikaner cultures would play a crucial role during the early years of the twentieth century in the pursuit and realisation of an eventual Afrikaner nation. As far as this important breeding-ground for future Dutch-Afrikaner nationalism was concerned, Richard Jebb (in Eddy & Schreuder 1988,199), in 1906, had already proclaimed the following:

At Vereeniging the Afrikanders accepted the flag and the crown, to which they will prove to be no less loyal than the French Canadians. But apart from these symbols, they did not accept a South African nationalism – a man cannot bind his soul by willing. They always refer to the Vereeniging compact, not as the Terms of Surrender, which is our affectation, but as the Treaty of Peace, which is the fact. In other words, Vereeniging signified a truce between two national ideals for South Africa, both surviving. Bowing to Fate's decree, the Afrikanders quietly annexed the symbols to their own national ideal, leaving only the question of independence for time and Providence to determine.

As far as can be established, Mayer was the first artist who called for the establishment of a national art identity in South Africa. He discussed his ideas regarding a 'national' art in letters to his friend Pierneef, and presented lectures and published many articles. The article published in *Die Brandwag*<sup>4</sup> of 10 December 1914 can be considered as one of the very first manifestations of this concept of a 'national' art. On the one hand, it seems as if Mayer strove to accomplish a double ideal by looking holistically at the creative work of all cultural groups, since he fully believed that a 'national art' could be developed in South Africa. On the other hand,

this ideal seemed to be ambiguous because Mayer often referred directly to the 'national art expression' of the Afrikaner as a group. In many instances it would seem as if Mayer was obliged to write articles or to present lectures for a specific readership or audience with a distinct worldview. In the case of emerging Afrikaner nationalism, he would then use terms as mentioned above, whilst he would often also refer to 'South Africanism' or 'South African nationalism' when addressing a more English orientated audience.

Note here that 'South Africanism' and black nationalism developed parallel to Afrikaner nationalism and, at times, strongly influenced the political and economical realities of the day. The National Party was formed in 1914 in Bloemfontein and, eventually, Afrikaner nationalism would exert its influence on all aspects and terrains of South African society and even dominate the cultural development of other cultural groups. In political terms, 'South Africanism' comprised the so-called conciliation policy favoured by Generals Botha and Smuts. According to this policy, Afrikaans and English speakers would strive towards a common goal, namely, to build a new nation within a united South Africa. General JBM Hertzog, on the other hand, firmly opposed the policy of 'South Africanism' as he was concerned that the Afrikaner would be swamped by the dominance of the English language and culture. Hertzog foresaw the parallel development of both the English and the Afrikaners until such time that the Afrikaners' language, culture and political identity could be established within a broader South African whole. According to de Villiers (1971, 367),

[t]hese two conceptions of nationhood, a 'pure' Afrikaner unity on the one hand, and a broadly based white South African unity on the other, were to vie one another with periodic intensity in the years ahead: after the Anglo-Boer War in the Botha-Smuts era, before and during the Second World War in the Hertzog period, and finally after South Africa had become a republic in 1961.

Ever since the Afrikaners' first attempts in 1875 onwards to establish some form of national unity amongst themselves, widespread instances of black resistance occurred

throughout South Africa. In the nineteenth century, there were protests in the Kat River settlements, bitter wars were fought on the Eastern Frontier and, in later years, the Coloured communities in the Cape Colony protested against their possible removal from the voters' role. A Native Educational Association was formed in 1880 and, in 1882, an association with more or less the same goals as that of the Afrikanerbond came into being, namely the *Ibumba Yama Nyama*. One of the main aims of this Association was 'to unite Africans in political matters, so they could band together in fighting for national rights' (Marks and Trapido 1987, 6). It should be noted that, in 1910, blacks were excluded from the unification of South Africa, a step which paved the way for the founding of the South African Native National Congress in 1912 (known from 1923 onwards as the African National Congress). The much discussed *Naturelle Grond Wet* of 1913 gave rise to the further development and strengthening of the ANC.

### Land and landscape and the search for an indigenous artistic style

According to Grobbelaar (1974, 30), there are three fundamental issues at stake in the initial bonding of a group of people; these issues will eventually contribute to the formation of a nation, and are: religion, language and a sense of nationalism. Apart from these three markers, a fourth and crucial issue may be added namely the identification of, and connection with, a specific physical environment which is embodied in the soil and the landscape, and appropriated by such a nation.

As mentioned earlier, Mayer's training as an artist was in the European art school tradition. The cold climate of Europe very often forced artists to remain indoors and focus their attention on the depiction of interiors, portraits and still life painting. The rain and overcast weather conditions of Europe had a distinct influence on artists' use of light and colour in the depiction of the landscape, which often resulted in landscapes being rendered in dim grey light.

Apart from the rich warm colours of the soil and grassland, it was the distinct textures of the South African landscape, the effect of light on the wide open spaces as well as the vast variety

of organic forms which fascinated Mayer (1). In October 1924, an art critic formulated his views on Mayer's work as follows:

Mr Mayer, though born in Europe, evinces a passionate love for the sunshine of South Africa, and some of his pictures are bathed in it. It is a treat to see that, unlike some painters, he has grasped the fact that South Africa possesses more than one species of tree, and very faithful are his reproductions . . . The whole exhibition is delightfully South Africa.

In this mainly untouched warm *milieu*, which greatly enhanced and influenced both Mayer's spirit and his health, Mayer often camped in the bush for lengthy periods to collect specimens and to paint and document his immediate surroundings. This gave him the opportunity to introduce his work, on a small scale, to the rural Afrikaner farming communities who, until then, had had no exposure to any form of creative art work. In contrast to the rich European background of his childhood and which he was accustomed to, Mayer gives an apt description in a letter to his sister, Olga, of the pioneering spirit which prevailed in the rural regions and the total lack of any kind of cultural activity in these areas (2). The unsophisticated pioneering life with its old traditions was one of the most important sources for Mayer's ideas, this being to give structure to an as yet unformed cultural heritage and to help form a Boer or Afrikaner (cultural) identity:

. . . In den letzten Tagen habe ich einpaar feine Studien gemalt, darunter eine ganz grosse Studie von einem typischen Achterfeldburen . . . Vielleicht male ich auch nur noch einpaar Burenstudien, wozu ich ja sonst nicht leicht so gute Gelegenheit finde. Die guten Leute hier habe sich so langsam an meine Arbeit gewöhnt und vertrauen, dass ich die Studien nicht missbrauchen werde um sich lächerlich zu machen, was immer im Anfang ihre Befürchtung ist, da sie echte Kunst, selbst gute Bilderbücher, nicht kenne

[. . .] In the last few days I have painted some fine studies, amongst them a huge study of a typical Boer of the Backveld . . . I might possibly also paint some more Boer studies, as I do not often get the opportunity.



2 Erich Mayer, *On Commando* (no date). Pencil and watercolour on paper, 17,8 x 11,5 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HG 54131.

The good people here took some time to get used to my work and to trust me, therefore I would not like to abuse these studies to depict them as comical, which were their initial fears, as they have no knowledge of true art or of art books<sup>5</sup>].

At the remote missionary stations, farms, small settlements and towns that Mayer visited, he came across a pure and unexploited source of handicraft and other forms of creative work created by these communities and other cultural groups (3). These examples of craft and other decorative functional objects (e.g. basketry and pottery) set him on a course of searching for possibly unique elements in these objects; in other words, elements that could contribute towards the development of a distinct national art identity in South Africa. In an effort to capture these specific characteristics, Mayer turned his attention to the most mundane functional objects and utensils used in the Boer homesteads such as chairs, walking sticks, embroidery and furniture (4).

Since Mayer was initially trained as an architectural draughtsman, he never lost interest



3 Erich Mayer, *Missionary Station* (1928). Etching, plate size: 13,5 x 17 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC 7014/195.



4 Erich Mayer, *Study of chairs and 'riempiesbank'*. (no date) Pencil on paper, 13 x 22,2 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC 7014/323

in the built environment and, wherever he travelled in South Africa, he keenly observed and documented the vernacular architecture of the specific region, as can be seen in his depiction of the homestead at *Klompboom* in Namakwa-land (5).

By documenting a wide variety of objects

and by depicting landscape elements and the mundane human activities taking place within these landscapes (e.g. ploughing, planting and threshing or the drying of tobacco in the tobacco sheds in the Rustenburg area of the Transvaal), Mayer also sought to sensitise the early Boer pioneers and to instil in them some



5 Erich Mayer, *Klompboom* (1921). Pencil and watercolour on paper, 12,4 x 20,1 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC 7014/254.



6 Erich Mayer, *Farm scenes* (1921). Pen and pencil on paper, 22,8 x 17,7 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC 7014/175.

sort of aesthetic awareness. In contrast to the work of J.H. Pierneef (1886–1957), where nature and landscape elements formed the central theme, it was the human activity within these landscapes which became the object of overriding interest throughout Mayer's long career as an artist (6).

As mentioned earlier, the identification with, and the appropriation of land, would in later years become the breeding ground for an exclusivist worldview. This worldview would contribute to the Afrikaner's distinctive ideas regarding the place of other cultural groups who also lived on the land and worked the soil within the same geographical confines. This phenomenon of domination and expansion of power over other groups also features in the German example, where the Third Reich was to develop a kind of imperialist nationalism. The German role model of domination and eventual

oppression of other cultural groups or nationalities became a distinct ideal – albeit for a limited time – of self-determination amongst a select group of Afrikaner intellectuals and opinion makers.

### **Close collaboration between Mayer and Pierneef on a South African art identity**

Mayer approached the rise of Afrikaner nationalism from a distinct European point of view and lost track of the diverse cultural, social and economic circumstances in the Union at the time. His views on the establishment of a national art identity or an indigenous South African style were, consequently, over-idealistic and eventually proved to be quite unrealistic. Indeed, Mayer remained an idealist; he worked on his vision for a national art identity through-



out his life. In later years, however, the practicability of his ideas were questioned by his friend Pierneef, fellow artist Anton Hendriks (1899–1975), and other Afrikaners who held different views on these issues. These differing opinions resulted in lengthy polemics in newspapers and public lectures.

Apart from Mayer's search for and the documentation of the craftwork of the early Boer and Afrikaner pioneers in the arid, rural areas of South Africa, both he and Pierneef focused much of their initial discussions and attention on rock art and on the wide variety of decorative motives on functional objects (e.g. pottery made by the various indigenous cultural groups in South Africa (7)). In the early 1920s, the ideological manipulation of the cultural aspirations of these groups had not yet been clearly defined or politically structured, which gave artists such as Mayer and Pierneef the opportunity to research and document their interests unhindered. Both these artists were of the opinion that many of the decorated vessels and artefacts of the various cultural groups were worthy carriers and representative of those elements which could constitute a 'national art identity' or style. However, it was Mayer who was in search of very specific characteristics amongst these arts and craft forms which, according to his ideas, could be defined as 'national art forms' and become the bearers of, and develop into, a 'national art identity'.

From his early childhood in Pretoria, Pierneef was exposed to the creative decorative work of indigenous cultural groups who lived on the outskirts of the town, such as the Ndebele, who were initially settled to the north-east of Pretoria. This exposure led to his early interest in rich visual sources such as rock paintings, which he also researched and documented. In later years, however, owing to his increased popularity as painter of typical South African landscapes, Pierneef sought to establish his identity as an artist by attracting a more intellectually minded audience amongst both Afrikaner and English patrons and collectors. Mayer, on the other hand, could only resume his interests and documentation of handicraft and decorative motives of these groups in the early twenties, owing to his long years of internment as a German subject during World War I. (Mayer was interned from 1914 until his release on provisional parole on 28 July 1916.) Although no



7 Erich Mayer, *Man with vase* (no date). Pencil on paper, 25,5 x 20 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC 7014/54.

documents have been traced, it seems as if Mayer's parole conditions were eventually set aside in 1920; however, his frail mental and physical health for a while prevented him from travelling to the remote areas of the country where he could continue his research and documentation.

As far as their common search for the intrinsic or fundamental characteristics of a unique art style or identity is concerned, the author FW made the following distinction between the two artists' fields of interest:

Hij [Mayer] wil dit nie, soos sij vrind Pierneef, bereik deur 'n hoër verder ontwikkeling van die rudimentaire kuns van die inboorlinge[en]Boesmans . . . nie. Hij soek in die eerste plek na die verstrooide klein kunsprodukte van die Afrikaners . . . Hij en Pierneef disputeer graag en baing hieroor. Ieder volg sij persoonlike weg en altwee strewe tog na dieselfde ding. En waarskynlik sal hulle later, afgesien van die persoonlike uiting van die stijl, heel nabij mekaar uitkom.

[He [Mayer] does not want to achieve

this, like his friend Pierneef, through a further development of the rudimentary art of the natives and Bushmen . . . In the first instance he is searching for those scattered, small art products of the Afrikaners . . . He and Pierneef regularly discuss these points. Both are pursuing their own paths and both are also striving towards the same goal. Apart from a personal expression of style, they might possibly be pursuing the very same goal] (1917, 309–310).

## The influence of indigenous cultures on the establishment of a South African art identity

In November 1922 Mayer was invited by The Association of Transvaal Architects to present a lecture on his most recent research and ideas on the establishment and development of an indigenous art identity. Present at this lecture were the well-known architects Gordon Leith and Professor Charles Pearce. This lecture was by far Mayer's most important to date, since it clearly conveyed a consolidation of his ideas on the creative and decorative work of indigenous cultural groups and their influence on the broader art community and in the field of applied art:

Mr Mayer gave some remarkably interesting slides of Bantu (sic) decorative work in rondavels and walls and pots and sculpture, the last having been discovered within the last ten years. During a visit to Alexandria, Cape, he (the lecturer) had also been much struck with the yellow ochre blankets, ornamented with simple designs in black, worn by the native women there. He suggested that more use should have been made of these designs in pottery manufactured till recently at the Cullinan works at Zuurfontein and at the Pretoria Weavery, also now closed down. He could think of no more fascinating occupation for South African artists than to unite these various elements into one artistic whole (*The Star*, 15 November 1922).

Mayer's lecture was published in the December 1922 issue of the influential architectural journal *Building*, which was an important mouthpiece for, especially, English-speaking

architects and opinion makers within the building industry in the Transvaal and the other provinces. In his lecture, Mayer emphasised the importance of a national art identity and style which, according to him, lay in the inner strength of a nation's traditions:

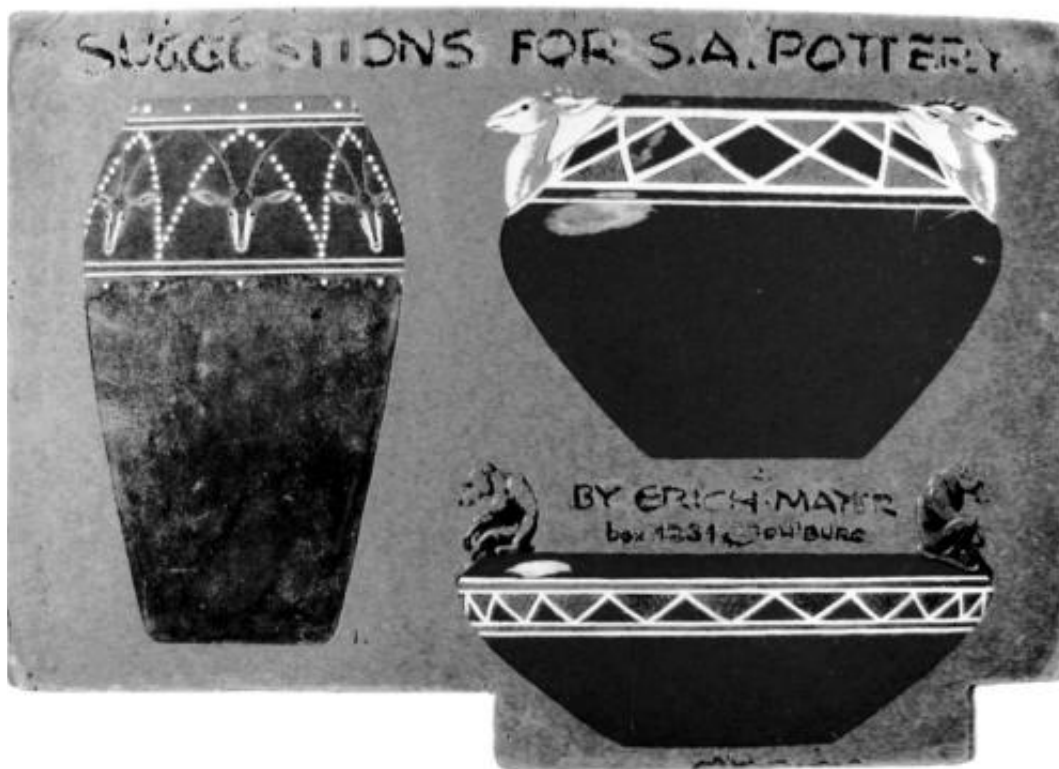
For though the appreciation of Art is international, the creation of all great Art has always been national, especially in its foundations. Great Art always reflects the spirit and soul of the races and nations that produced it . . . Modern nations often lost their individual style of expression temporarily under the influence of stronger or more original nations, but when they were strong themselves, they soon went back to their own traditions and built on it a new, strong style (1922,117).

Of particular importance was the study and appropriation of indigenous design elements. According to Mayer, the simplicity captured in these decorative motifs was an important creative source which was not fully recognised by artists and designers in South Africa:

We need not be ashamed of learning from the lower races [sic]. Other modern nations have done so with success . . . Holland has only got a distinctive decorative style of her own since her artists have introduced the decorative forms, line and colours of the Malay races under her rule. Our country is especially rich in such artistic forms that may be developed into a higher South African style (1922,118).

As examples, Mayer cited the decorative red and black clay pots produced in the Pretoria and Rustenburg areas, as well as the metallic black and beautifully engraved clay pots with their graceful forms made on the Natal South Coast (8). He also referred to the artistically designed decorations which were carved onto calabashes (gourds) and wooden spoons which, at the time, Pierneef was painstakingly documenting:

I can only tell you what I heard from Pierneef about the most perfect beerpots of the Bantu (sic) near the northern border of Transvaal, who use the most original designs in the most beautiful colours made of rare green or blue stones (the genuine lapis lazuli) (1922,119).



8 Erich Mayer, *Suggestions for S.A. Pottery* (c.1933). Gouache and pencil on board, 32,8 x 46,6 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HC7014/724.

In 1923 Mayer published a further informative article in *Die Boerevrou*, in which he encouraged the incorporation of indigenous craft products into the South African home. The phrase he used for the (South) African home was 'die Afrikaanse woning', which he identified as a home in Africa and which should not be mistaken for 'Die Afrikaner se woning', which refers to the nationality of the inhabitants of such a home.

In this article Mayer concentrated on the furnishing of the Transvaal homestead and how organic objects such as hunting trophies could be successfully utilised within the home. He lamented the fact that a truly 'Afrikaans' home or room could as yet not be installed or furnished as a 'decorative Afrikaans style' and that a 'distinct Afrikaans craft industry' did not exist. According to Mayer, a room with distinct 'Afrikaans' characteristics would house authentic Bushveld 'riempie' furniture, hides and skin rugs

('karosse') on the floor, as well as horns, teeth and skulls of game and tortoise shells:

Maar die eintlike Bantoe (sic) kunswerke, wat soms die bewondering selfs van die beste Europese kunskenners wegdra, en, op die regte plek geplaas, selfs 'n rykere witmanswoning tot sieraad kan strek, word nog veels te min gewaardeer.

[But the actual art works of the Bantu (sic) people, which are frequently praised by the foremost European connoisseurs and, placed correctly, could even embellish the home of a wealthy white man, are still not fully appreciated] (1923,12).

Mayer emphasised the use of clay pots in the home as fresh water vessels. Through the slow evaporation of water stored in these pots, the water always remained cool: an important advantage especially in the year-round hot Bushveld climate. He also referred to the use of

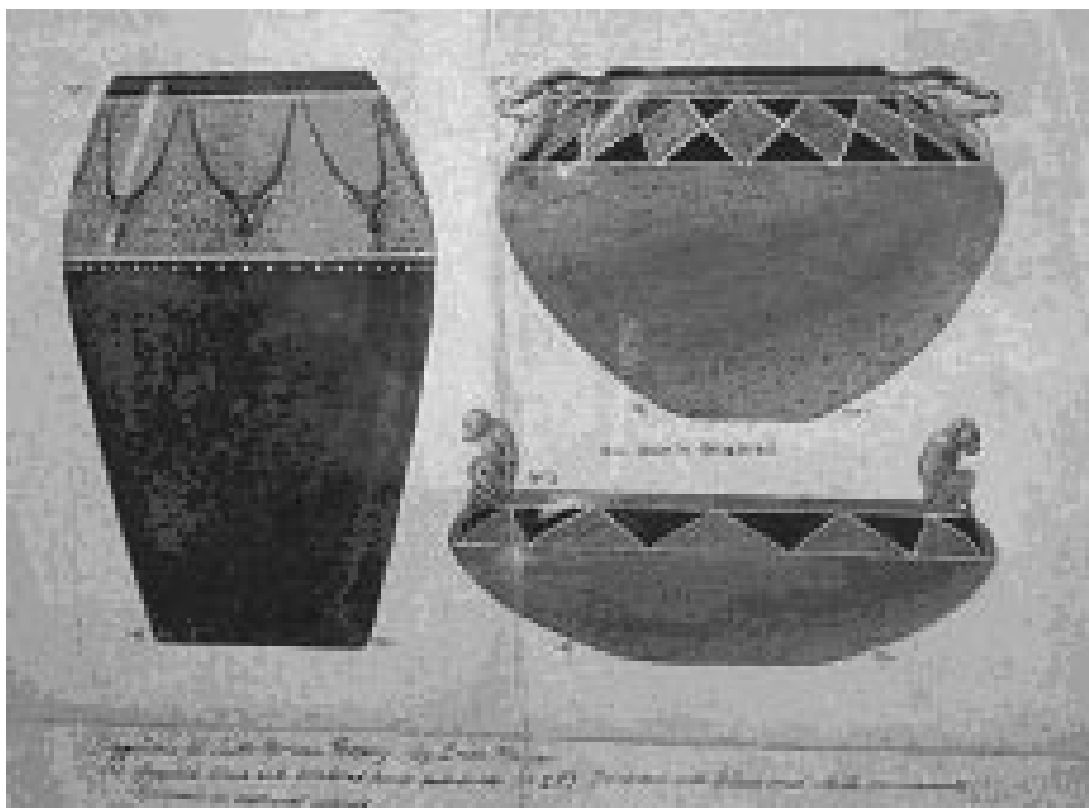
clay pots as planters and to wooden objects such as bowls, 'knopkieries' (walking sticks) and baskets (1923,13).

Whilst on a short visit to Bloemfontein in October 1928, Mayer was again invited to present a lecture on his research into 'Bantu and Bushmen art'.<sup>6</sup> His lecture included a slide show of reproductions of Bushman drawings he had made on his different travels throughout the Orange Free State, as well as various examples of clay pots, uniquely decorated by different cultural groups (9).

An issue which Mayer raised for the first time in this public lecture was the question of race. With reference to his research and documentation of the arts and crafts of other racial groups, he emphasised that he did not study his subject matter from a scientific point of view, but purely from an aesthetic perspective. Only the cultural products were of importance to him; the racial groups who created these objects were not. Given Mayer's pacifist worldview, this approach

can be accepted as a sincere point of departure in his endeavour to research and document these cultural products along an aesthetic line without the interference of any underlying political agenda.

At a time when General JBM Hertzog was Prime Minister and his party was using the 'Native Question' ('Naturellevraagstuk') to drive its 1929 election campaign, and General Smuts was being represented as the 'apostle of a black native state',<sup>7</sup> Mayer held a strong holistic view and appealed for the recognition of the creative work of other indigenous cultural groups. According to Mayer, this creative work would form part of a developing national or indigenous style in art and these strong decorative designs would be of particular importance for the creative or artistic industries (up until then, those industries had no real market within the Union of South Africa). With a clearly defined national artistic style, in which the work of other cultural groups had been identified and pro-



9 Erich Mayer, *Black and ochre pots* (c.1930). Gouache and pencil on board. No. 1 Graphite black with brick red band, 24,5 x 16,8 cm; Nos 2 and 3 Brick red with black and white ornaments. Animals in natural colours, 14,3 x 21,1 cm and 10,5 x 23,1 cm. Collection: University of Pretoria.

moted, South Africa could compete in the field of design with the rest of the world market:

Hoe kan ons o.a. aan die produkte van ons pottebakerye, wewerye, mandevlegwerke (sic), dekorasieskilderye ens.'n duideliker Afrikaanse karakter verleen, as deur die verwerking en veredeling van die dikwels voorbeeldig mooie versierings van egte Bantoepotte(sic), kalbasse of mandjies, of die toepassing van die unieke Boesmantekenings, wat b.v. Pierneef dikwels in sulke verruklik mooie ontwerpe vir tapyte en naaldewerk omgeskep het?

[How could we, for instance, lend a clearer African character to our potteries, weaving concerns, basketry, decorative paintings etc., than through the adaptation and refining of examples of the exquisitely beautiful decorations on authentic Bantu pots, calabashes (gourds) or baskets, or the application of unique Bushman drawings, which Pierneef, for example, often reworked into beautiful designs for carpets and needlework? (*Die Volksblad*, 4 January 1930).

## Erich Mayer and the women of the Ceramic Studio at Olifantsfontein

Even during Mayer's frequent and lengthy stays at the farms of various friends to regain some of the strength he had lost to his debilitating lung disease, he did not stop looking for opportunities to promote his ideas on an art identity and a distinct artistic style for South Africa. At the same time, he also looked at ways and means of improving his financial situation. One such opportunity materialised during his stay at the farm *Swerwerskraal* in the Potgietersrus district in August 1931, from where he started corresponding with Gladys Short and Joan Methley (Hillebrand 1991:4).

These two women held key positions at the Ceramic Studio of Sir Thomas Cullinan's company at Olifantsfontein, which was known as the *Consolidated Rand Brick, Pottery and Lime Company Limited*. Cullinan was the director of this company and director of his other better known concern, the *Premier (Transvaal) Diamond Exploration Company* (Heymans 1989:20). Because of his interest in ceramics, Cullinan established a pottery at his Olifants-

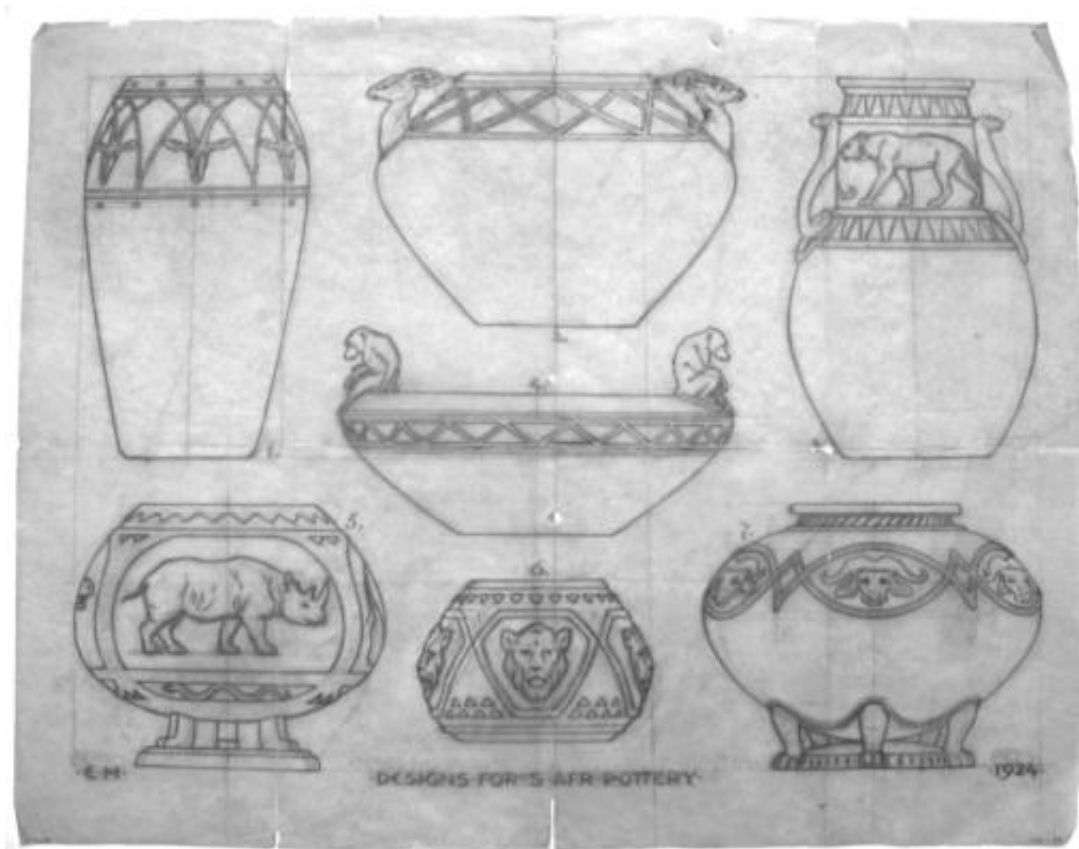
fontein company, which came to be known as *Transvaal Potteries*. Through the work of Short and Methley, the Ceramic Studio (which formed part of the Potteries) would gain further prominence.

The Ceramic Studio became well known for its production of high-quality ceramic tiles which were used in various prominent government commissions. Examples of such commissions were the Johannesburg Station building, which was built in the late twenties and early thirties of the previous century and the numerous police stations and post office buildings found throughout the country. Where these tiles featured in government buildings, they very often depicted typical natural or historic scenes relating to the relevant town or region. Apart from the production of tiles, in later years the Ceramic Studio became well known for its household ceramics and crockery (known as 'Linnware').

Mayer's idea of establishing contact with Misses Short and Methley developed when the two women visited his wife, Marga Mayer, in Pretoria in his absence. Both women were keenly interested in the establishment of an authentic South African style in the applied arts industry and Marga Mayer was the ideal person to talk to since she was a social worker involved in various weaving projects amongst the poor whites in Pretoria and the surrounding areas.

For Mayer this was an ideal opportunity and an outlet for his continued visual documentation of authentic South African designs, designs which could be transferred onto thousands of tiles and used as decoration in various important government buildings. On 20 August 1930, he enthusiastically wrote to the two women of Olifantsfontein:

If the authorities would agree to pay me 20 pounds a month for some time, I would like to spend half a week at your studios at Olifantsfontein evolving [...] for South African pottery out of my numerous designs of Bantu pots and calabashes. Quite aware of the fact that a design thought out on paper might be quite unsuitable for execution in a given material, I feel the necessity of keeping in touch with the workshop and kiln where the potteryware is moulded and finished. (10)



10 Erich Mayer, *Cartoon for South African pottery designs* (1924). Pencil on tracing paper, 50,4 x 65 cm. SA National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. Acquisition no. HG 31156.

The design of ceramic tiles would have ensured a steady income for Mayer and, ideally, the women would have supported his continued presentation of designs to the Ceramic Studio since they endorsed his plea for an authentic South African art identity:

'There is a big demand for tiles', said Miss Short. 'We set out to introduce as much South African atmosphere as we can. We have a number of old Dutch homesteads and a series of Native life studies, as well as a collection of South African trees and bushes' . . . Miss Short [said] . . . that it was the policy of the Ceramic Studio to give out as much design work as possible to South African artists (Anon. 1939. *The Natal Mercury*).

Both Pierneef and Mayer frequented the Ceramic Studio in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Pierneef was closely involved with the

Johannesburg Station building and was especially interested in the design of the blue and white tiles which were to be used in the station building. He frequently visited the Studio together with the architect, Gordon Leith. Both Pierneef's and Mayer's designs of Bushman drawings were used in the murals and tiles of the Ceramic Studio. Other popular motifs and designs reproduced by the Studio were a series of tiles depicting the South African *flora* and *fauna*. It seems as if Mayer contributed a great deal to the design of these floral and wildlife themes (Heymans 1989, 5, 65).

In an incomplete draft letter which was located amongst the Mayer documents, Mayer requested the Secretary of Public Works, J.S. Cleland, to pay him a temporary salary so that he, Mayer, could carry on with his research and documentation of authentic South African designs. These designs could then be used in the ceramic designs at Olifantsfontein. Mayer's

reference to 'work with a more national expression', and 'students who had the desire to develop something like a South African spirit . . .'<sup>8</sup> and so on, indicates that he understood the term 'national' to be a uniform collective term that incorporated the whole country and its inhabitants rather than the ideologically driven notion of 'nationalism'.

As mentioned earlier, it seems as if the two women of Olifantsfontein supported the idea of a South African style, but they clearly misunderstood Mayer's ideas of a national art identity and interpreted these ideas as being nationalistic. Miss Short's views regarding the arts, however, were openly Eurocentric, as illustrated in a letter to Mayer:

As regards a National Art, if I may express my small opinion, it is not as though we have as yet become a purely South African nation; there is an intermingling of so many races . . . One has been brought up in a tradition of the country of our origin, and, although we have adapted ourselves, to a certain degree, to the circumstances of South Africa, we all cling to the European traditions . . . unconsciously and consciously, we gain inspiration from the art of the older countries, which has been evolved through generations of culture.<sup>9</sup>

Mayer's contact with and his involvement at the Ceramic Studio entailed frequent working sessions at Olifantsfontein. Here his designs were traced and taken up in the studio design books, to be used at a later stage on tiles and bigger panels for incorporation into official building commissions (11).

Misses Short and Methley were especially impressed by Mayer's meticulous documentation of the wide variety of pottery designs of the different African tribes and tried their utmost to persuade Mayer to give his permission for these designs to be copied directly for use on tiles and wall panels. Mayer, however, was reluctant to part with his lifelong research and documentation without substantial compensation. In a carefully worded letter, Mayer expressed his views on this issue as follows:

If I would now allow anybody to make careful copies of a series of the best specimens of native pottery, even for a "compensation of a few pounds", I would



11 Erich Mayer, *South African pottery designs* (no date). Crayon on paper, 24,2 x 20,3 cm. Private Collection.

not only forfeit the priority in utilising my own studies collected in many years, but I would thereby enable skilled artists as you and Miss Methley to deduct from these copies as many variations as my whole collection of Bantu pots contain . . . if, in other words, our responsible departments expect to reap fruit where no seed have been sown, . . . they cannot expect a hard struggling artist, who besides has lost years of his life by needless internment and ensuing illness, and yet kept alive his interest in the development of a truly South African art – to give away the pick of his lonely research work for a couple of pounds to keep up the pretence that all was well with our applied art.<sup>10</sup>

Mayer made it clear that his research was at the disposal of all interested parties but that, in return, he wanted financial compensation to complete his research in this field and to present his findings in an acceptable manner. No further information on Mayer's involvement with projects of the Ceramic Studio or his further contact with the women of Olifantsfontein could be located.

## Conclusion: an idealist caught up in nationalist aspirations

The contribution of Erich Mayer as an artist, writer and philosopher, a man who had far-reaching and innovative ideas about the development of the visual and applied arts in South Africa, should not be underestimated. Apart from his own creative work, Mayer certainly contributed to the establishment of an aesthetic awareness and the development of a certain cultural identity amongst the early South African pioneering Boer farmers.

Mayer was one of the first European artists to realise that the creative craftwork of Africans constituted a much neglected source of inspiration that could be profitably used by the applied arts industry in South Africa. He concentrated much of his collecting and documentation efforts on the creative craftwork of groups such as the Northern Sotho, Ndebele, Zulu, Namas and Griekwas, people whose craftwork was being threatened by encroaching European influences and, of course, urbanisation. Mayer identified closely with and saw the creative possibilities of incorporating these objects and designs into his ideas for the establishment of a distinctly 'national' style in South African art and design. For a while he concentrated on collecting and documenting African pottery with its distinct decorative motifs. In his drawings and designs Mayer tried to find ways of adapting these vessels and infusing them with wildlife images in an effort to depict and 'nationalise' an indigenous artistic style.

It seems, though, that Mayer's pottery designs remained on paper: it could not be ascertained whether any of these designs were ever fired at the Ceramic Studio or, for that matter, anywhere else. As such, Mayer did not contribute to the development of a South African ceramic tradition. However, this exercise gave him yet another opportunity to test his ideas regarding the establishment of a truly South African art identity.

These ideas were, however, over-idealistic and, in the end, unrealistic simply because Mayer failed to take the nationalistic aspirations of the fledgling Afrikaner nation into account. As a pacifist and someone who was essentially apolitical, Mayer looked at the establishment of a so-called national art identity from a European point of view and did not pay nearly enough

attention to looming political, cultural, social and economic issues in a country whose recent history had been clouded by the effects of the Anglo-Boer War, the Rebellion and World War I. Mayer pursued his ideals and vision for a truly South African art style throughout his lifetime and was often caught up in polemical debates regarding the practicability of his ideas; this was particularly true of his idea to incorporate the creative work of other ethnic groups. Mayer worked on his ideas at a time when both Afrikaner and English ideologues were spelling out their ideals regarding ethnicity and the segregation of the various cultural groups in the country and during a period which would eventually see the rise and domination of Afrikaner nationalism.

## Notes

- 1 See Mayer documents: *Bewijs van Identiteit, no 12931, Commando: Commandant S. Eloff, Informatie-Bureau van het Roode Kruis, Pretoria*. Please note that when I undertook my research on the work and the contribution of Erich Mayer towards South African art and crafts, the Mayer documents were housed in the Art Archive of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria. These documents now form part of the Archive of the Merensky Library at the University of Pretoria.
- 2 In the winter of 1902 his health failed him once again and his critical lung condition forced him to return to a dry climate. From Germany he returned via London to Africa where he settled in Tunis for a few months before returning to Berlin in May 1903. During this time Mayer studied décor and design for five months at the *Steglitz Werkstätten* before he had to leave Germany once again for the dry, desert-like climate of German South-West Africa where he arrived in 1904 and stayed until the end of 1907 (Roos 1978, 20). During his stay he was commissioned, in 1905, by the Windhoek Branch of the *Swakopmunder Buchhandlung* to produce six drawings of the town of Windhoek which would be used as postcards both locally and for distribution in Germany. This commission, as well as another commission to paint the facade of the *Deutsche-Afrika Bank* in Windhoek, enabled Mayer to return to Karlsruhe in southern Germany in 1907, where he received formal art training for the first time. He returned to German South-West Africa in 1908, where he worked on yet another commission of four murals for the recreation hall of the *Beamptonkasino* in Windhoek. This building was



demolished in 1950, but black and white photographs of these murals are housed in the State Archive in Windhoek. From 1909 to the end of 1910 Mayer once again returned to Germany for further formal training in the fine arts at the *Königliche Lehr- und Versuchswerkstätte* in Stuttgart.

- 3 See the correspondence of many years' standing between Mayer and Von Faber in the Mayer documents.
- 4 Mayer, E. 1914. Oor die toekoms van 'n nasionale kuns in Suid-Afrika. *Die Brandwag*, 10 Desember.
- 5 See Mayer documents, letter from Mayer to his sister Olga, 19 July 1914. Letter no. 0007.
- 6 Anon. 1928. Bantoe- en Boesmankuns. Lesing van mnr E. Mayer. Ons ryke bronne vir 'n eie kunsstyl. *Die Volksblad*, 4 Oktober.
- 7 See Muller, CFJ. (ed). 1990. *500 jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis*, 3de hersiene uitgawe. Pretoria: Academica, p.422.
- 8 See Mayer documents, draft letter from Mayer to JS Cleland, 24 Aug. 1931. Letter no. 0238.
- 9 See Mayer documents, letter from Miss Short to Mayer, 31 Aug. 1931. Letter no. none.
- 10 See Mayer documents, letter from Mayer to Miss Short, 8 Nov. 1931. Letter no. 0244.

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