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## South African painting discovered in use as a kitchen noticeboard valued at £1m

Arab in Black by Irma Stern, which was donated to fund Nelson Mandela's legal defence in the 1950s, found covered in bills and letters in a London flat



Detail from Arab in Black by Irma Stern, oil on canvas, 1939.  
Photograph: Bonhams

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## [Maev Kennedy](#)

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An art expert has spotted a painting valued at up to £1m, which was once sold to help fund Nelson Mandela's legal defence, being used as a noticeboard in a [London](#) flat.

The painting, Arab in Black, a 1939 work by Irma Stern – regarded as South Africa's leading artist, whose works have recently been soaring in value – was recognised by Hannah O'Leary, a specialist in South African art at Bonhams auction house, during a valuation visit to the flat.

“I spotted this masterpiece hanging in the kitchen covered in letters, postcards and bills. It was a hugely exciting find, even before I learned of its political significance,” she said.

Irma Stern set 'Arab in Black' in an antique Zanzibar frame. Photograph: Bonhams

Stern died in 1966, and [her old home in Cape Town is now a museum](#). Prices for her work have been rising steadily. Another of her paintings of subjects from Zanzibar, similarly framed in heavy, antique, carved timber, set a new world record at Bonhams in 2011 when it sold for £3.1m.

In the late 50s, the painting was given by the collector Betty Suzman – sister-in-law of the anti-apartheid activist and politician Helen Suzman – to a charity auction to raise funds for Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress activists, including Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo, who were on trial for high treason and faced the death penalty. In 1961, the case was dismissed after the trial had dragged on for five years, but three years later Mandela, Sisulu and others were re-arrested and given life sentences for treason. [Mandela was eventually freed in 1990](#), and went on to become his country's president.

Giles Peppiatt, director of Bonhams South African art department, said: “This painting was a significant part of Mandela's defence fund – there were other works of art given to the auction, but they were very minor. This was by far the most important piece.”

The heavy, ornate frame that protected the painting in pristine condition during its noticeboard years is itself a rare and valuable thing, made from the timbers of elaborately carved antique door cases from Zanzibar, which are now barred from export. Stern, who was born in 1894 in the Transvaal into a German Jewish family, spent several periods working in Zanzibar in the 30s and 40s, and used the frames for what she considered her best works.

The parents of the present owner emigrated to the UK in the 70s, bringing their auction prize painting with them.

“The words ‘shocked’ and ‘astonished’ would both apply to the present owners,” Peppiatt said. “They loved the painting and they knew it had some value, but they had no idea it was such an important work. In some ways they are very sorry to see it go, but it would be a great luxury to keep a million-pound painting hanging on a kitchen wall.”

The painting will be sold at the [Bonham’s auction of South African Art](#) in London on 9 September.

- This article was amended on 23 July 2015. An earlier version referred to Janet Suzman where Helen Suzman was meant.