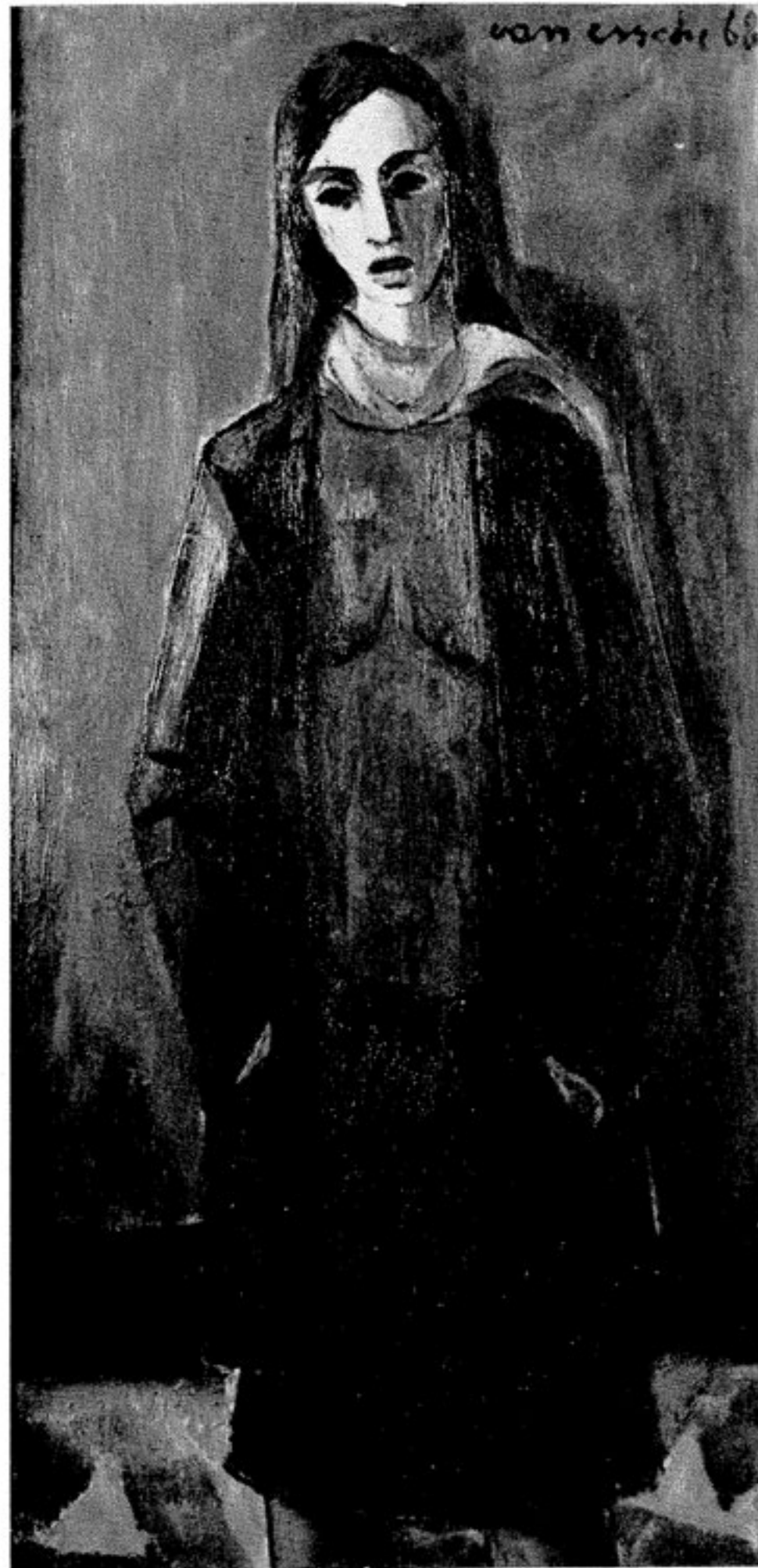


# HOMAGE TO MAURICE VAN ESSCHE

by LIPPY LIPSHITZ



*Coloured Girl.*



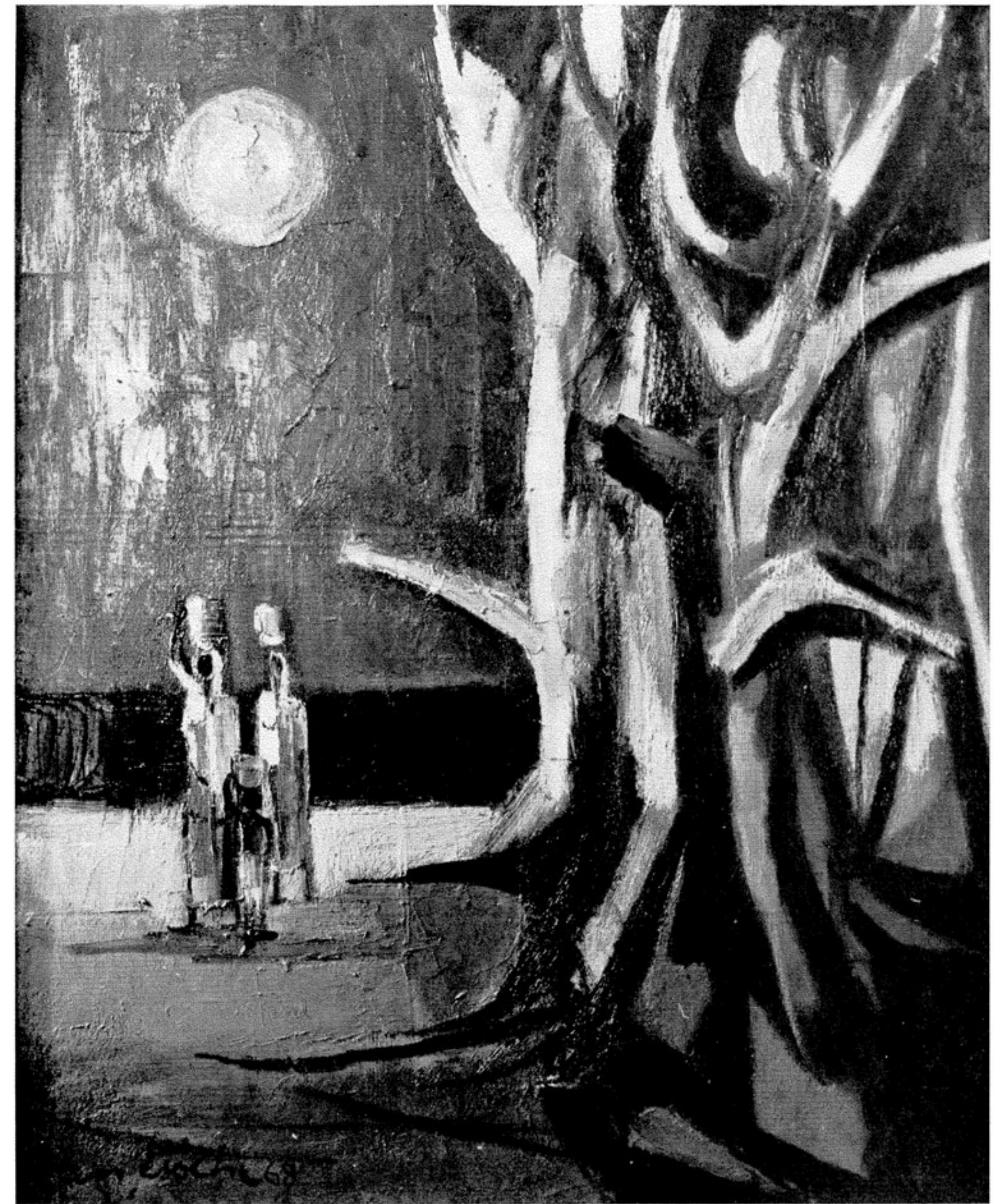
*The Guitar Player.*

Whether there is a specific South African art is a debatable question. Our country is still a melting pot of various imported art styles and synthetic elements of Bushman and African art. Nevertheless, artists such as Naudé, Strat Caldecott, Kibel, Pierneef and Irma Stern, stemming from different schools, have contributed to our aesthetic standards. In this respect, Maurice van Essche has been one of the most distinguished contemporary artists and teachers.

It can be said of van Essche that his paintings have retained their consistent and personal style throughout his career. This is characteristic of the true and inspired artist. Each work is a progression of its predecessors, never a deviation, never a fugitive distraction. Such artists are strong, secure and uncompromising,

unaffected by the seasonable and fashionable trends to which our careering contemporaries are so susceptible.

I have been privileged to see van Essche's recent work and three of his consummate paintings are the subject of this tribute. These paintings inspire deep respect and devotion. I am moved by their refined passion, their magical atmosphere and primaeva serenity. The subjective elements are filtered through the light and colours of the artist's vision—colours are perceived rather than observed, conveying the emotion and the compassion of the artist for his subjects. To me, van Essche's art conforms to Baudelaire's response to the question: "What is pure Art?" "It is to create a suggestive magic containing one and the same object and subject—the external



*The Black River.*

world and the artist himself." These paintings are for the contemplative, who will discover more than meets the eye—their quiet beauty and dignity, their subtle harmonies of shapes and spaces and their underlying abstract structure. In the first painting, "Coloured Girl", a mundane motif becomes a saintly presence. Her visage has the colour and lustre of polished ivory. She stands against the greenish, eerie hemisphere, in her russet blouse and olive skirt. She is not a type, but a revelation—a vision of human pathos and resignation—painted with deep tenderness and compassion.

The second painting, "The Guitar Player", is in a more vivacious key. It is of lovely youth wedded to music. The girl and the instrument combine and embrace in sensuous and sonorous colours.

The third painting, "The Black River", depicts the theme that has haunted van Essche ever since he came to Africa many years ago and which he has painted in many moods and versions. This imposing painting conveys vividly and intensely the magic and mystery of Black Africa. A huge, bare, bleached tree looms in the foreground, its roots astride the parched, red earth. Menacing are its spiky, tentacle-like branches jutting out of the red, blotched trunk. Behind is the dark, black mysterious river and alongside the greyish, linked human figures. The sun is a great burning eye.

In these profound paintings, van Essche seems to have attained what Matisse referred to as "vitality and energy from direct contact with the drama of nature".