



AMRITA SHER GIL - A NEW ERA IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF

Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A)

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1997

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This is to certify that Miss Darakshan Khan of Master of Fine Art (M.F.A.) has completed her dissertation entitled "Amrita Sher Gil - A New Era in Contemporary Indian Art" under the supervision of Prof. Ashfaq M. Rizvi and co-supervision of Dr.(Mrs.) Sirtaj Rizvi (Reader).

To the best of knowledge and belief of the Supervisor, the work is based on the investigations made, data collected and analysed by her and it has not been submitted in any other University or Institution for any Degree.

ALIGARH.


(MRS. SEEMA JAVED)
CHAIRMAN



Dated.....

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that Miss Darakhshan Khan of Master of Fine Art (M.F.A.) has completed her dissertation entitled "Amrita Sher-Gil - A New Era in Contemporary Indian Art" under my supervision and co-supervision of Dr. (Mrs.) Sirtaj Rizvi (Reader).

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20th May 1997

(Prof. Ashfaq M. Rizvi)
Supervisor

**Dedicated to
My loving parents
Who always stood as pillars of help
Inspiration and encouragement throughout
my studies.**

CONTENTS

PAGE NO.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

PREFACE

LIST OF PLATES

CHAPTER - I	INTRODUCTION - AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART - EARLY 20th CENTURY	1-10
CHAPTER - II	AMRITA SHER-GIL - A LIFE SKETCH ✓	11-20
CHAPTER - III	EARLY WORK OF AMRITA SHER-GIL AND WESTERN INFLUENCE	21-31
CHAPTER - IV	AMRITA SHER-GIL'S APPROACH IN INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART	32-45
CHAPTER - V	AMRITA SHER-GIL AS A MODERN INDIAN ARTIST - SUBJECT AND STYLE	46-59
CHAPTER - VI	COLLECTION OF AMRITA SHER-GIL'S PAINTINGS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART	60-75
	- SKETCHES	
	- SCULPTURES	
CONCLUSION		76-81

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Initially my whole acknowledgement goes to my supervisor **Prof. Ashfaq M. Rizvi** for his valuable guidance and suggestions which helped me a lot.

I express my gratitude to my Chairperson, **Mrs. Seema Javed** for her all type of help and support.

My thanks also goes to the **teachers** of the Department and particularly to **Dr. (Mrs.) Sirtaj Rizvi** for her able guidance and taking a great interest in my project. I am also thankful to **Bader Apa** who have helped me in every respect with her time and devotion.

I also acknowledge to the **Director of National Gallery of Modern Art** and other **members** of the Gallery who had directly or indirectly helped me. I am very much thankful to **Mr. Subhash Chandra** (Photographer) who had helped me a lot in taking colourful photographs.

I am also thankful to **my uncle Mr. Shahroz Khan** who helped me and encouraged in every respect with their time and devotion.

Now I acknowledge to my **best friends Humaira Jaleel, Reenu Kumar, Nigar, Sabiya and Anuradha Saini** for their efforts and moral support which helped me in completing my dissertation.

I am indebted to my family, especially **Miss Zaibi Khan, Miss Shahzi Khan and Sheeraz Khan** whose continuous moral support and encouragement in my study is of great help.

I would like to acknowledge efforts and all type of support of my **grand mother, Late Sanjeeda Begum**, who dreamt what I am today. But, **Alas**, she could not see her dream to come true.

Last but not least, I would like to thank **Mr. S. Arif Ali** for good typing.

I thank all once again.

D. Khan
(**DARAKHSHAN KHAN**)

PREFACE

The present study is intended to bring at one place all the significant and latest information available on - the life and works of one of the renowned artists of India - Amrita Sher Gil. In this study, an attempt has been made to cover all the aspects of Amrita Sher Gil as a modern Indian artist - her life, her works, subject, style etc.

The primary sources which were consulted for compiling this work are -

1. Maulana Azad Library, A.M.U., Aligarh.
2. Seminar Library, Department of Fine Arts, A.M.U., Aligarh.
3. National Gallery for Modern Art, Delhi.
4. Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi.

I am hopeful that this detailed study will prove to be helpful to all those who want to know about Amrita Sher Gil and her work as an artist.

LIST OF PLATES OF MY WORK

<u>TITLE</u>	<u>PLATE NO.</u>
Women's journey - through life	1
Embrance	2
Women's plight	3
Individualistic world	4
Remembrances	5
Untitled	6
Full Figure Drawing	7
Full Figure Drawing	8



THE ARTIST AT WORK

Chapter. I
INTRODUCTION

I N T R O D U C T I O N

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY INDIAN
ART EARLY 20th CENTURY

The art of India is a unique chapter in the history of human endeavour. It is essential to have some appreciation of it in order to understand the soul of India. Art holds up a mirror to all that the country has stood for through the ages. The richly felt and exquisitely expressed art creations of India provide an infinite range of material for a sympathetic study of her religious thought and emotions. The creative quality of the Indian genius is beginning to be known better through her heritage of art.¹

Art in India was seen as a way of life and was largely utilitarian in purpose, that is to say the theory of "art for art's sake"² scarcely influenced or determined Indian art. This is not to imply that the arts such as music, dancing and portrait painting were not cultivated as individual accomplishments.

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- 1 1. Indian Art through the ages, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Old Secretariat, Delhi.
2. Tolstoy Art for Art's Sake Theory.

The growth of metaphysics, of ritual and iconography near succeeded wholly in drawing the voice of humanism in Indian Art. A great deal of medieval and later art of India is concerned with Puranic Hinduism. The super world that the Puranas have created is only a glorified form of this world of ours. The gods and goddesses with their blissful domestic felicity are the supreme Ideals.

Indian art remained a collective expression of the racial experience of the people. India has manifested a peculiar genius to assimilate and absorb foreign element so well as to leave hardly any trace of the original influence. This pronounced trait in the Indian character exerted a profound influence in shaping the social order, culture and art of India. The process of absorption and giving a "new look" to the older features was a long one extending from the Vedic age far down into the medieval period of Indian history.

Briefly, in speaking of Indian art, it should be remembered that it is the art of a vast-continent and has a long history with well-developed conventions. Therefore, it would be wrong to generalize or to limit its character and qualities.³

3. K. Bharata Lyer, Indian Art a Short Introduction, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi.

The tradition of painting in India is made up mainly with the tradition of miniature* painting and that of mural painting. The miniature tradition began by about the 10th century; the mural tradition had begun earlier to it. The modern easel painting which started to appear in India by about the middle of 19th century had, to begin with, nothing to do with the two traditions. The medium was new and the workmanship in it totally unpracticed in the country. It called for a very different sense of space and scale and also for novel technique of drawing and colouring. It is this that constitutes the central problem in modern Indian painting, the problem about the new technique.

The unorthodox techniques and the related mental equipment came to be had in India during the nineteenth century A.D. second hand from Europe. Painters in Europe had standardised space with geometrical perspective, the figure with anatomy and a succession of painters down to Rembrandt** had helped to evolve the related techniques of drawing and colouring. Their methods could be had for Raja Ravi Varma as perhaps to

* Miniature painting under the name of Rajasthani School but it was started by the impact of 'Upblansha Shaily'.

** Rembrandt Van Rijn 1606-1669 Leiden Dutch Painter.

others in similar circumstances in the country from European tutors. Raja Ravi Varma developed a proficiency in them and went on to become the first major modern painter in the country.

/ But the new concept of space, the definition of objects and the unorthodox statement of the human subject, all of which go to define the new "realism"^{*}, stood queerly at odds in Ravi Varma's work with traditional views and norms on these matters. They stood, so to say, clearly out of caste. For that reason and for the irreverence it implied, the practice of the new craft stayed confined to the alienated public found at that time around the European establishment in India.

From such a start a history of about eighty to ninety years takes us to the present. This period in our history has been one of commotion, anxiety and enterprise. For the most part the nationalist movement rode high over waves of radicalist, revivalist and reformist sentiments. Agitated minds broke through traditional reserves, took to modernistic media and searched them for possibilities of self expression. Personally rebellious but collectively reminiscent was the sort of spirit that emerged during this period. As

* Realism - the tendency to view

far as painting was concerned, such spirit soared over the "caste" distinction between traditional and modern craft and found expression in the Bengal movement of the twenties and the thirties.

The Bengal movement initiated the struggle to gain mastery over the new medium. In the work of the Bengali painters and that of many others who started coming out into the open, this struggle happily persisted, intensified quickly and in a remarkably short period of fifteen to twenty years brought off impressive achievement. One has only to consider the work of a painter like Husain during the forties to get an idea of the technical proficiency Indian painters had realised in the new medium.

Along with this achievement the radical vision - the new "realism" - implicit to the European techniques came to be accommodated in the country. Indian painters abandoned religion and mythology and turned to earthy subjects of more immediate experience.¹

/ The term Renaissance is often used to describe the cultural efflorescence that took place in 19th and early 20th century Bengal. Actually its use here is

1. W.G. Archer, *India and Modern Art*, Jaya Appasomy Ruskin House, 1959.

misleading for a Renaissance means a rebirth, what occurred in Bengal was not a rebirth but a gradual development in many areas making Bengal the first of the Indian provinces to possess a rich and modern milieu, with the necessary vitality to explore and create new achievements in several parallel fields. A significant point about these cultural movements in their evolution from within Indian society. They were not syncretist nor yet.¹ The Bengal revival claims to have brought about a renaissance in Indian painting. It is to be feared that far from fulfilling its vast ambitions, this school is actually responsible for the stagnation that characterises Indian painting today. It is greatly to be deplored that while there is in existence such a significant and potent school of painting and sculpture in the West, India should remain ignorant or, worse still, foolishly derisive of it. I am speaking of the modern school, it is a significant fact that modern painting and sculpture have innumerable points of contact with the Eastern art of the good periods. Great art every where has the same roots and the comprehensions of one brings in its wake the true appreciation of the other. Were our artists to seek inspiration from the modern Western art, just as the moderns discovered a new means of self-expression through the study of Eastern

1. Jaya Appasomy, Abanindranath Tagore and the art of his time.

sculpture and painting, not only would they infuse new life into Indian painting, but it would help them really to understand the underlying principles of the ancient art of their own country. I like to hope that the day is not far off when, impelled from an urge from within, stagnation will come to an end and in place of the synthetically and artificially planned revival, a new and more vital movement will come into being. (Indian Art Today).

This passage, written some years after her return to India, exactly expresses the position to which her experiences had brought her in 1934.

The first revolt against the prevailing state of affairs was and initiated in Bengal under the guidance of an Englishman, the late E.B. Havell, who inspired Abanindranath Tagore and his group of pupils and fellow workers to rediscover the glories of Indian art. Thus came into being the renaissance of modern Indian painting in Bengal, its objects were noble, its early work brimful of a fine pioneer spirit it awakened a new artistic consciousness in India and augured great things. But eventually it lost its way and gave up the quest for the summit to rest by pretty pools and soft verdure.

It became a haven of utility company schools in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and Lahore.

E.B. Havell principal of the Calcutta School of Art. First and Englishman who appreciated Indian art for its own values.

Books on Ajanta murals, Rajput miniature, and archaeological survey of India were done in 1902.

Appreciation of the beauty of Indian Art and the ideals which inspired it was understood.

Indian artist turned for inspiration to the truly native tradition.

Origin 1895 with Abanindranath Tagore Nephew of poet Rabindranath Tagore. The name was given as, "Bengal School" Renaissance of Indian art.

refer to the style not regional development or period of the time.

First important movement in modern India.

E.B. Havell said that the way western art is and the method, therefore, is wrong.

Acc to him to B. Havell total change is not possible.

The revolution carried out by E.B. Havell Abanindranath was simply to sow the seeds of Indian traditions.

Abanindranath was a genius artist with a creative mind.

1907 L.B. Havell and Abanindranath founded the Indian Society of Oriental Arts" Indian Society of oriental Arts".

1908 Exhibited the painting of Abanindra, Nand Lal Bose, Vankatappa, Gaganendra Nath and others.

Later it spread to Bombay, Madras, Delhi, Punjab, Gujrat, Lucnow, Kaipur and Hyderabad.

Wash technique water colour.

assimilation of European and started as impressionism, **Post-Impressionism**,* faulism, cubism, surrealism and new experiments like, Neo Primitivism.

* Post-Impressionism non figurative style 19th century.

Though Amrita Sher-Gil is not directly associated with the revolution started in India during early 20th century. She is considered to be a contemporary of Bengal School of Artist. While other artists were engaged to recover or recognize there traditional Art Form, Amrita Introduced a more metune and modern outlook with the knowledge of classic Art. In a way she was ahead of the time.

Chapter. II

CHAPTER - II**AMRITA SHER GIL - A LIFE SKETCH**

"The artist has every right to reject or accept public estimates of her work. When the public makes a mistake regarding a picture, it is the business of the artist by some gesture to show that the public is unformed and dull".¹

To Amrita, it was Dostoievsky who was the supreme artist, for he was a relentless seeker, always true to his art. What interested her was that Dostoievsky, face to face with the extremities of evil, never sought to hide it or shun it, but rather to search for the soul of goodness in it. Dostoievsky, she said, was a free soul who remained an artist to the end. Amrita felt with Dostoievsky that suffering and self-sacrifice are to be offered consciously and without constraint even more than that of Sonia in **Crime and Punishment**. Amrita admired Tolstoy the artist who died long before he took to propagating puritanism and advocating non-violence.

1. Gyula Wojtilla, Amrita Sher Gil and Hungary, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1981.

She found his humanitarian sentimentality anathema as well as that kind of puritanism which was viciously negative. As we tried to defend our heroes I can now see the significance of the unkind but witty critic who once said that one had to invent Tolstoy if only to serve as a foil to Dostoievsky. It was the great humanity of Dostoievsky that inspired Amrita and which richly influenced her attitude to her painting.²

In the City of Budapest on the 30th of January 1913 Amrita Sher Gil was born. Her father, Sardar Umrao Singh, a Sikh aristocrat of the Sher Gil Majithia clan was a man of learning widely read in the philosophical systems of the East and the West. He had married a Hungarian lady with artistic inclinations and contacts.

The commencement of hostilities among the great powers in 1914 made the passage to India impossible and the Sher Gils with their two daughters Amrita and another girl named Indira, had to remain in Hungary.

After 1916 they were compelled to stay in the small village Dunaharaszti where the Gottesmanns had a country-house. The village is circa 28 km far from the centre of Budapest and situated on the banks of the smaller off-shoot of Danube river.

2. Jaya Appasamy, A Contemporary Series of Indian Art Amrita Sher-Gil, Published by B.C. Sanyal, Secretary - Lalit Kala Akaemi, New Delhi.

When the financial problems were over they returned to Budapest and rented an apartment at the Grand Hotel in the Margaret Island. That meant a basic change for the children. Their parents arranged private tutors for them. They were living in a wonderful environment which was rather exclusive. The part of the Margaret Island with the special trees and flowers offered something else than Dunaharaszti. Moreover, the Island breathed a peculiar atmosphere which inspired artists, poets, writers, (also the snobs!), and the isolated upper classes. It was a meeting place of intellectuals.

Her first eight years were passed in Europe, and not until 1921 was she able to visit her father's country. Her childhood, in fact, was quite un-Indian, and this, it would be thought, might well have disqualified her from developing any Indian form of expression. Yet despite this disadvantage, her mixed ancestry was to have important consequences. However, strong may have been her mother's character, her father's influence was uppermost, and from the period of her adolescence on into womanhood, Amrita Sher-Gill never regarded herself as anything but Indian. Her father came from a leading Sikh family. His home was India. It was there that she grew up and despite certain visits to Europe it was

Indian which aroused her most intense devotion. Yet for art her mother's Western contacts were crucial significance. As mother said she very attentively listened to the discussions of adults. The meeting of illustrious of adults. The meeting of illustrious persons therefore must have left some impression on her mind.

Their home was in Simla on the terraced slopes of Summer Hill and here Amrita received an Old world education which included music and drawing lessons. She apparently evinced a more than ordinary enthusiasm for drawing and accordingly Madame Sher Gil, who believed that the dominant inclinations shown by her children should be encouraged and developed, took Amrita to Florence in January 1924 to study at the school of Santa Annunciata. The experiment was a failure. The child resented routine discipline and was brought back to India in the June of the same year. Thereafter she remained in India till April 1929 residing either at Simla or at the family estates of Saraya in the Gorakhpur district of the United Provinces. No one could have realized at the time how powerful a formative influence the little village of Saraya was to be in the development of her genius.

During this period it became increasingly clear that Amrita did not regard painting as a mere accomplish-

ment. She has already in some measure begun to display that intensity of feeling and capacity for prolonged work which was to mark the seven last years of her life. It was decided she should study art in France and in April 1929 she found herself in Paris. She commenced her studies under Pierre Vaillant at the Grand Chaumiere and later was accepted as a pupil by Lucien Simon at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts. The professor thought highly of the initiate and prophetically remarked - "One day I shall be proud that you have been my pupil".

By studying in Paris for five years, Amrita Sher-Gil was able to do what no other Indian artist had done before her - acquire a thorough education in modern art. Instead of encountering modern art through books and reproductions, she was able to explore it in the milieu which had actually created it. She could master it from the inside, and such an education was to prove the foundations of her art. Oil paintings, had been practised in India in the eighteen-eighties by Ravi Verma, but although maintained at certain art schools, it had gone out of fashion except for academic portraiture. In adopting this thoroughly Western method, therefore, Amrita was setting her face firmly to the West. Yet her innate skill was so great that despite its un-Indian

character she quickly showed exceptional understanding. For three years, 1929 to 1931, she won the first prize at the annual portrait and still life competitions at the school, in 1932 she exhibited at the Grand Salon, and a year later was elected an Associate. Such an achievement proves that almost from the very first she was able to paint with accuracy and precision. She could represent what she saw, and however much she might later depart from natural appearances, the ability to copy Nature was hers. Looking back at the stage which she had reached in 1933, she described her pictures as 'purely Western, in fact, almost academic. That, however, is an excuse rather than a condemnation. She was, in fact, a young artist who had avoided short cuts, had submitted to all the rigours of strictly academic discipline, and in the process had mastered an arduous technique. The question was whether she would halt at this particular point, becoming in the process an academic portraitist - a European - or in response to the inventions of the modern movement would develop an original style, a manner that would be both Indian and modern.

The answer to this question is provided by the years 1933 and 1934. Side by side with attending classes at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Amrita Sher-Gil had avidly explored galleries, museums and exhibitions. She had

there encountered not only the masterpieces of Italian, French and German painting from the fourteenth century onwards, but also the French masters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Between the earlier painting and the later, Amrita Sher-Gil did not discern any revolutionary difference. The best examples of modern art, she thought, conformed to the same basic principles as did works of an earlier time, and in a passage written after her return to India she defined these principles with lively vigour.

"Good art always tends towards simplification, that is to say, it only considers the essentials of a form, the stress is invariably laid on the textual and structural beauty of the work instead of the beauty of the subject depicted. It is characterised by the vitality of execution, pungency and never has the slightest trace either of prettiness or sugariness. It is invariably stylised. Form is never imitated it is always interpreted. Bad art, on the other hand has always been characterised by softness of execution and conception, floridity, effeminacy of treatment and stress on unessential detail. Form is either photographically imitated or stylised in the wrong sense, i.e. idealised in the sense of feeble prettiness. It is diametrically

opposed to the vital and significant stylisation of form that characterises the sculpture and the painting of Ellora, Ajanta, Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, Early Christian, Impressionist and Post Impressionist Art".

Such standards when applied to contemporary Indian painting could admit of only one conclusion. As early as 1930, when she saw Rabindranath's Paris exhibition, she had fully accepted his novel distortions of line and colour - "I like his drawings better than his poetry even," she exclaimed. The neo-Bengal school, on the other hand, filled her with aggressive scorn.³

In 1938 she came to Hungary again and married her cousin Dr. Victor Egan. This was the time of discovery of Kiskunhalas* where her husband spent the period of his compulsory military service. Kiskunhalas the typical country-town of the Grand Hungarian Flatland is also a part of the Kiskunsag inhabited by a characteristic Hungarian population. This place got near to her heart! She writes about this to Karl Khandalavala : "I am not at

3. Gyula Wojtilla, Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungary Allied Publishers New Delhi, 1981.

* Kiskunhalas is the centre of the so-called Kunsag, a prominent part of Hungary from historical and ethnographic point of view, it is a typical market-town.

present that (at Budapest), having followed my husband like a good Indian wife to where he is stationed for the time being. I like this place, it is called Kiskunhalas and there are Windmills also. I love windmills. How do you like me as a peasant maid?"

Budapest was again boring. She writes to her father, "I long to be at home, to work, to work I feel the necessity to create in short I feel what is commonly called 'inspired' and here I must lie, it is terrible, terrible."

Zebegeny** with the landscape, with the people and summer camp did not cause disappointment. This last period in Zebegeny was not a continuation of the nice old days, the problems around her marriage, some existential problems and the menacing fascism threw a shadow on it. The last asylum in Hungary where Amrita could work as Kiskunhalas.

After her return from Europe on the 3rd December she was ill, her condition rapidly worsened. One morning - it was the Tuesday we expected her to dinner - I received a call saying Amrita was in the grip of death. We drove quickly to her flat. At the foot of the stairs we were told she was no more. But Amrita is not dead.

** Dunaharszti is located on the bank of River Danube some 20 km from Budapest. This small village and it was a place for summer rest in Amrita time also.

From blue Heaven and life's unconquered song
Death learns, for all the bitter doom he bears,
He is not quite so strong.⁴

On the at midnight she was far away from war and
her death in 1941 did not make possible for her to see
the destruction of Hungary of nations religious
communities and individuals from the rage of fascism.

Time will judge the verdict herein when the
years in which she lived are forgotten and only her work
remains. Was, it no more than the embodiment of
unfulfilled talent or was it a revelation of life and
colour like to the vision that came to the great Silpins
in the ancient sanctuary of Ajanta.

Her ashes were cast into the waters of the
Ravi - the Hydroates of the Greeks.

4. Jaya Appasamy, A Contemporary Series of Indian
Art Amrita Sher-Gil, Published by B.C. Sanyal,
Secretary, Lalit Kala Akaemi, New Delhi.

Chapter. III

CHAPTER - III**EARLY WORK OF AMRITA SHER-GIL AND WESTERN INFLUENCE**

The period between 1921 and 1945 was the Horthy-era or the Counter Revolutionary Regime. The Horthy regime was basically conservative and towards the end fascist. When Amrita was a student in Paris and visited Hungary in the summer vacations the country lived the worst period. Unemployment was extremely high and the class struggle was sharpening and climaxed in 1930. Due to the financial support of her father, Amrita did not feel the consequences of the situation. The place, Zebegeny, where she mostly stayed proved to be an asylum, isolated from the regime and social problems.

She first saw the trees, clouds, horses, cows and calves in Dunaharaszti^{*} - this is the place where she spent the first period of her consciousness, here, in the surrounding forest she had long walks with her father. Sardar Umrao Singh, who was not only a distinguished Sikh nobleman but also a painter himself. The Hungarian landscape gave her inspiration too - she has painted a

* Dunaharaszti is located on the bank of River Danube some 20 km from Budapest. This is a small village and it was a place for summer rest in Amrita's time also.

few motives of **Zebegeny**^{*} and **Kiskunhalas**^{**} Dunaharaszti its surroundings motivated the young Amrita from 1917 to 1921, and she visited Zebegeny.

The most remarkable features of her artistic personality is the independence but this does not mean that she can not have spontaneous "relatives".

Her picture "Swing" was inspired by the "Swinging Krishna" a miniature by Pal Merse Szinyei, and the memory of her own swinging in Dunaharaszti. The brown colour - like on the works of Mihaly Munkacsy - means the wisdom and calmness.

Neither Istvan Szonyi nor she has painted fresco, so besides the landscape of Zebegeny which touched both of them, the feeling of want in their art links the two painters together. Her brave code system reminds us of the sovereignty of Tivadar Csontvary Kosztka. They are companions in the total exploration and recognition of the objects the intensity of power of expression - the similarity lies in the method and not in the motives. While Csontvary represented the world with a cedar tree,

* Zebegeny is a picturesque village of the Danube Bend a resort for painters.

** Kiskunhalas is the centre of the so-called Kunsag, a prominent part of Hungary from historical and ethnographic point of view. It is a typical market-town.

Amrita used the symbol of the elephant. Both of them live deeply together with their surroundings and they paint only those which they possess. The typographical variety of their art of painting is similar - it traverses the distance between Kiskunhalas to Simla and from Selmechanya to Morocco respectively. Both of them paint the basic centres of the already given life with an excitement of their first discovery. Bot Csontvary and Amrita started from Hungary and arrived in Europe and Asia with the demand of the total winning of human pentitude.

Amrita has obtained from Hungary the essential experiences required so deeply in launching her artistic mission and it is a matter of pleasure that the hungarian landscape, origin, intellectual surroundings and the characteristics of the Hungarian art of painting contributed to her artistic achievements.¹

In 1933 her picture "Conversation" led to her election as an Associate of the Grand Salon. It was a coveted academic distinction, but in truth it had little meaning in the art world of Paris that really mattered. It probably thrilled Amrita at the time. She was only nineteen.

1. Gyla Wojtilla, Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungary, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 72-73.

The fresco painting classes at the Beaux Arts had a special interest for her and though she never worked the fresco process in India, her approach in all her finest canvasses was that of a wall painter and she evolved a technique in soils, unfortunately fraught with grave risk of deterioration, which gave her work the effect of tempera murals.

In assessing the influence of her academic training on her later work in India, one finds it to be of small significance, save that her purposeful simplification of form and positive draughtsmanship were achieved, in some measure, by an intelligent understanding of human anatomy, resulting from constant figure drawing as evidenced by the pages of her Paris sketch books. Paris equipped Amrita Sher Gil to practise the craft of the painter, but it had no part in the real enfoldment of her genius. It provided the training without which mere talent has never progressed to achievement. The classrooms of modern academic institutions had only replaced the workshops of the early guides. The school routine though it often cramped inspiration and right thinking, ensured discipline and technical knowledge. Those who possessed vision surmounted its pitfalls those who lacked it even mistook competency for aesthetic truth.

The Paris sketch books show Amrita as a talented hardworking student imbibing various influences and occasionally displaying in her drawings a suggestion of that powerful handling of form which she was later to develop. Her colour sense judged by academic standards was sound but offered no hint of the mastery of those splendid colour organizations which became the keynote of her best work. Writing of her art education in Paris she said, - "I had not in those days learnt that simplicity is the essence of perfection. One sees with such exuberance, so uncritically, when one is very young that one is liable to sacrifice the artistic whole to unessential detail if it happens to be pleasing to the eye".

During the last year of her apprenticeship in Paris there came a realization - albeit imperfectly understood - that she had arrived at a parting of ways. This first phase was over.

Until the autumn of 1933 her style was, in every way, much closer to Cezanne than to Gauguin's. During the winter of 1933 to 1934, however, fascination with Gauguin's work became so strong that it seems almost to have haunted her. 'She used to say', E. Narayanan has recorded, 'that Cezanne inspired her beyond all others but that she liked Paul Gauguin best of all.' This

passionate adhesion was to prove decisive - it was actually to precipitate her own adult style - yet when we examine its influence upon her, we are driven to a surprising conclusion. There are certain qualities in Gauguin which make him the most 'Indian' of Western artists. Equally, there is another quality which is quite un-Indian - a quality which arises from his personal predicaments and expresses his private view of life. The first of these qualities might easily have affected a young Indian and led to fertile results. Yet it was not these qualities but the second which seems to have stirred Amrita Sher-Gil, occasioning the 'liking' which was to play such a supreme role.

Such a turn in her career is hardly to be wondered at, for, in most cases without a willing surrender to an established master, without the unconscious adoption of a great style, a private manner can hardly be achieved. In imbibing first Cezanne and then Gauguin, therefore, Amrita Sher-Gil was resorting to the most practical means of creating her own form of expression.²

When she was attracted to Gauguin it was not only his forms and colours which fascinated her, but his

2. W.G. Archer, *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-87.

magnificent blending of the new and the old. Just as Gauguin discovered himself by leaving France to imbibe the spirit of freedom in Martinique and Tahiti, so too Amrita thought she would discover India. Gauguin was in short a way to discovering her soul, the spirit of India.³

Cezanne,^{*} and Gauguin^{**} is seen in her early work. One indicated a way to the organization of form, and the other to the organization of colour. It has repeatedly been said that Amrita Sher Gil's work was always influenced by Post impressionism, Post Impressionism in truth is a somewhat loose classification for the work of a group of artists who, though differing in their individual methods and aims, are sought to be differentiated from the Impressionists *par excellence*. That the work of Cezanne and Gauguin gave Amrita Sher Gil's notions of form and colour a new intellectual direction is apparent from the last canvases painted in Paris.

3. Joya Appasamy, Contemporary Series of Indian Art Amrita Sher-Gil, New Delhi, 1965.

* as the "father of Post Impressionism" or the rather the "Father of Modern Art", is Paul Cezanne 1889-1906.

** Gauguin 1848-1903 was a Impressionist painters he was belong the catholic family.

Amrita Sher Gil was not living in the days of Cezanne and Gauguin but in the Paris of 1934. She was very conscious of the direct indebtedness of the later adherents of Post Impressionism to Negro art, Primitive art, and to the art of the East in general. She was an admirer of the brilliant Modigliani who had based his work on Negro sculpture, and was familiar with the Oriental collections in the Louvre and Musée Guimet. The artist who dwelt in the Mecca of painters and sculptors, and yet longed to return to India, knew well that her emancipation lay in the great artistic heritage of her own country.

In Paris her attachment to the work of Gauguin had been almost instinctive. It filled a void which existed within her while she worked there and offered visual compensation for a dream of wonderful, sun hotted, joyous exuberant colour which to her symbolized her half forgotten homeland. The dream had a sordid awakening but it never ceased to haunt her and in it she found her salvation.

When we attribute influences to an artist we must, if we possess any critical faculty, differentiate between imitation and the legitimate assimilation of principles and theories which represent the evolution of art. Each great artist is not an isolated phenomenon.

He is the logical outcome or the logical reaction of a long and many sided process of aesthetic evolution.

Amrita Sher Gil's first intellectual contacts with form and colour were through the medium of Cezanne and Gauguin. Cezanne himself had in the beginning come under the influence of Courbet, and later of Pissaro whose colour theories afforded him a starting point for further experiment. Gauguin's early work was impressionistic in the style of Guillaumin, but the development of simple archaic form in his Tahitan figure compositions was derived from Gothic statuary. Every great artist has borrowed freely from the experience of his predecessors but always striven for a new orientation of the principles of the older masters.

Her treatment of form had derived its earliest motivating power from Cezanne and though simplicity and plastic effect always remained her guiding principles, these qualities were achieved in her own work by a conscious attempt to synthesize the principles of early Indian sculpture with those of ancient and mediaeval Indian painting. It was a method which gave her some degree of satisfaction in solving the problems of form which presented themselves to her and with which she was in a state of perpetual struggle. Self satisfaction was no part of her aesthetic code.

The opinion that Amrita Sher Gil's work belong to the category of Modern European Painting proceeds from a dual form of ignorance - a singularly deficient knowledge of ancient and mediaeval Indian painting and sculpture, and an unwarranted belief that no painting which does not subscribe to the formula and surface effects of the Modern Bengal School can be classified as Indian painting. Incidentally most of the exponents of the Modern Bengal School are eclectic to a degree. In fact if any three artists were to be selected as more basically Indian in their best work than all others, they would be Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher Gil and Nandalal Bose. And yet the first two have repeatedly been characterized by the casual critic as imitators of Modern European Painting.

It is strange and regrettable that the vast majority of literate folk will inflexibly and even aggressively mouth a variety of opinions on works of art without ever having devoted a single hour to the serious study of aesthetics and art evolution. The very basic for a critical faculty in art has to be developed by a conscious effort and by intense study. It is not something that just happens. Even many of those who paint and sculpt with proficiency and have acquired some local renown, toil through an entire life time without

developing any analytic faculty and in abysmal ignorance of what is and what is not good art. As Amrita Sher Gil herself once remarked - "Left to their own initiative (except a few who are blessed with an exceptional artistic sensibility) the great majority of people lapse into the common error of trying to discover in pictures emotional pegs on which to hang their feelings (usually sentimental or romantic) and imagine that what they derive from the process is synonymous with the ecstasy of real aesthetic emotion".

I have digressed considerably from my narrative as it is essential to avoid loose thinking if there be any desire in the reader to understand this artist whose intellectual power and deep emotional content guided her to glimpse a vision of life - the quest of the Masters through all ages, the quest of the Knights of old for the Holy Grail.

In November 1934 Amrita Sher Gil left behind her for ever the cold grey studios of Paris to return to India - the happy colourful land of a dream.

Chapter. IV

CHAPTER - IV

AMRITA SHER-GIL'S APPROACH IN
INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

"I don't think I shall paint at all in Europe. I can only paint in India. Else where I am not natural. I have no self confidence. Europe belongs to **Picarro, Henri Matisse,*** Broque, and many others. India belongs to me" - Undated letter.

This was the feeling which rejects her love and longing to Indian soil which her return to her one origin India in 1934.

In November 1934 Amrita Sher-Gil left behind her for ever the cold grey studios of Paris to return to India. The happy colourful land of dream. She expressed it in her own oft quoted words - "I began to be haunted by an intense longing to return to India feeling in some strange inexplicable way that there lay my destiny as a painter. It was the vision of a winter in India - desolate, yet strangely beautiful, - of endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land, of dark bodied, sad faced,

* He is the most famous artist of the Fauvist group born in the North of France in 1869 influenced at first impressionism.

incredibly thin men and women who move silently looking almost like silhouettes and over which an indefinable melancholy reigns. It was different from the India, voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial, the India so false to tempting travel posters, that I had expected to see".

When she returned to India in 1934 she was unknown in this country. She had decided to make painting her profession and naturally regarded the various big Provincial art exhibitions as a medium through which she could acquaint the public with her work, and win recognition. She must have been very ignorant of the calibre of the judging committees of these exhibitions, and still more ignorant of public taste in India to have entertained such hopes.

In 1935 she sent ten pictures to the Simla Fine Arts Society's exhibition. She was living in Simla on her return from Paris and as the Simla exhibition was one of the best known of the annual shows it attracted her notice as affording a fit opportunity to exhibit her work. Five out of her ten entries were rejected and of the accepted ones, one was awarded a prize. Most artists making their debut before the Indian Public would have regarded the result as highly satisfactory. But Amrita Sher Gil was not an ordinary artist. Despite a

constant desire to the end of her life to be appreciated and to be admired by the public she was never prepared to pander to public taste. Even in the days of her greatest need to be 'successful' in selling pictures, she never for a moment faltered in her decision to search only for aesthetic truth though she knew she was making it impossible for herself to have a successful professional career. With her impetuosity, which lessened in later years, and her outspoken contempt for ignorance which she never ceased to show, she decided not to accept the prize awarded to her. It must indeed have been a most outraged committee which received the following letter, admittedly not in the best of taste, yet refreshing. What did this revolutionary care for good or bad taste. Her only concern was good art, and ignorance of what was good art was anathema to her. She was a remarkably tolerant person in all matters save art. Therein she had no time for fools if they crossed her path.

Even despite her first experience of the Simla Arts exhibition she sent five pictures to the same exhibition in 1939 - "Needless to say none of my things were even commended, I am surprised they were accepted at all. But now no more of these horrid things" - Letter dated 29th November 1939.

She put on a brave front of disdain to all unintelligent criticism of her work but in truth it worried her and made her unhappy - "By the way I saw a violent criticism of your book in the 'Statesman' some time back Its a strange thing but I felt the same sort of pang that I experience when reading an adverse criticism of my own work (even when it is most utterly idiotic criticism)." - Undated letter.

That was the truth, though earlier she had written to say - "I am not in the least surprised that some people described my work as rubbish. I know the type and am perfectly satisfied that they should dislike my work, it reassures me. In fact (for lack of intelligent criticism) the extent of their aversion is the standard I go by. I should begin to feel very diffident about the quality of my work if it appealed to them!" - Letter dated 23rd December 1936.

The ensuing years embittered her and though she still desired recognition, her integrity as an artist was never affected. In 1940 she writes - "I am starving for appreciation, literally famished. My work is understood and liked, less and less, as time goes on." - Undated letter.

Her first exhibition in India drew great attention. This attention was not unequivocal. The young Indo-Hungarian artist also received notable criticism, as her art was considered too modern. It became too difficult for her to fight the prevalent trend strongly established with the Bengal School artists who were not at all ready to acknowledge Amrita Sher-Gil as a serious artist. Her Indian and Western combination of work was beyond them. "Those few critics in India who blamed her for being too western are usually those who have never studied the ancient art of India carefully, otherwise they might have observed that Amrita Sher Gil work has brought back in to modern Indian painting several important characteristics of ancient Indian frescoes and book illustrations."

Within living memory no artist in this country has aroused so much controversy or engendered so much hatred and jealousy in her fellow artists. Nor has any artist suffered so much ridicule from an ignorant public. Her work was a living challenge to decadence and bad taste.

Amrita Sher-Gil never belonged to Bengal School. Though she did not possess unmixed admiration for Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy she respected them as sincere seekers of aesthetic truth and she had a genuine liking for the

painting of Rabindranath Tagore. But with the main development of the Bengal School as a national revival she had little patience - "I could describe the characteristics of Ajanta and the Bengal School in two words. Ajanta is painting with a **Kernel** and the painting of the Bengal School has only got a shell, it is a lot of things built round nothing, a lot of unessential things and it would cease to exist if those unessential things were taken away from it. Don't think I say this because as you once suggested I am prejudiced against Indian Art (Modern). It is because I think that there are so many possibilities in Indian Art and I am so bitterly opposed to those who haven't explored its possibilities and decry those who have misunderstood it pictorially. You would be surprised my dear Karl to know how I long to, how I crave to see a really good picture in the Indian Style. Fundamentally I am an enthusiast. it gives me more pleasure to enjoy a good picture than to decry a bad one" - Letter dated 23rd December 1936). This shows that how different approach Amrita and Bengal School of Art had. She had to face lack of true recognition of her absolute sincerity and gifted aesthetic vision.

In 1936 she planned a tour to exhibit her work at many important centres including Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad and Allahabad. Her work received favourable, if not very

intelligent comment in the press, but failed to arouse more than curiosity in the public who visit art exhibitions. She sold little, but the tour as a far term policy could be adjudged a success. It acquainted many centres with her work and even those who scoffed were not always easy within themselves. Tradition and training bid the academic mind regard her as an outrage, and yet there was a strange power about these seemingly heretical paintings. Museum curators either did not take kindly to her work or felt they might be taking a leap in the dark if they advised a purchase.

Uncompromising and terse, she could lay bare ignorance with unpalatable candour and precision. She alienated many whom she might have turned into friends had she possessed a little more tolerance. She has been accused of overwhelming conceit, and she undoubtedly gave much cause for that charge, but the truth is that inwardly no artist approached her task with greater humility - "I must cease because you will begin to think me (not the most intolerant person because I wouldn't mind that) but the most conceited person alive and people often jump to the conclusion that one doesn't like the work of others because one has too high an opinion of one's own. Its not that I am clever, its the others that are stupid, however" - letter dated 15th January 1987.

She felt the futility of reconstructing the past which she realized was necessarily a self deception. In an article on the 'Appreciation of Art' she writes - "The fundamental idea of that form of Indian Art which drew its inspiration from Ajanta (that really great and eternal example of pure painting) was right to begin with because it started with the principle of the primordial importance of significant form, but unfortunately except for a few men of talent who have wrestled successfully with the coils of mythological convention this Art has developed an illustrative tendency that has gone to the detriment of the fundamental principles and tends to devitalize and render it effeminate in execution. It has committed the mistake of feeding almost exclusively on the tradition of mythology and romance and no art can do that with impunity for any length of time. Art cannot imitate the forms of the past".

It was during her tour of the South that she saw the frescoes of the great Deccan rock shrines of Ajanta. In the dimly lit viharas and chaityas where the sun's rays reveal the supreme vision of the Gupta masters, she encountered the most profound aesthetic experience of her short life - "Ellora Magnificent! Ajanta curiously subtle and fascinating.

Ajanta gave her a direction but she knew she would have to find the way.

She also visited Cochin and Travancore going right upto Cape Comorin. "Travancore appeals to me immensely." She wrote, "I wish I would live and work here". She visited the Padmanabhapuram Palace to see the mediaeval frescos which had been discovered there but confessed that she did not know what to think of them. - "They are as different from Ajanta as the Southern Indian temples are from the Northern Indian ones" - Letter dated 15th January 1937. But her reactions to the Cochin frescoes at the Mattancheri Palace were very different indeed and she made several sketches and observed them with care.

She was not an antiquarian* and her interest was more in their construction than in their history or detailed characteristics.

Her marked preference for the Mattancheri frescoes to those of Padmanabhapuram showed the sensitiveness of her judgment, which at its best and free from the stress of controversy, was always valuable and penetrating. Though her trenchant criticism of Modern Indian Schools of Painting was both justified and

* Antiquarian - Connected with study.

reasoned, her appraisal of individual pictures of undoubted merit and interest, was often marred by her inability to detach her mind from the unrelieved mediocrity and debility which characterized the vast majority of the productions of these schools. To her way of thinking all art fell into only two categories. It was 'good' or 'not good'. She permitted herself no other distinctions and was wanting in that catholicity of taste which evaluates various forms of artistic expression within the ambits of their respective limitations. She could see and think only in terms of high achievement.

At Trivandrum she saw for the first time the art of Kathakali - the dance dramas of Kerala. They made a profound appeal to her because they displayed that elemental power which characterized her own artistic vision - "Grotesque and subtle at the same time, an unusual combination. Magnificent" - Letter dated 15th January 1937.

At Cape Comorin she felt an urge to paint though she was in the midst of an exhibition tour, and here she stayed for several days working on the brilliantly conceived "Fruit Vendors" and another small composition, later purchased by Sir Amarnath Jha of Allahabad and reproduced in colour in the Allahabd University Magazine

and in the Kitabistan publication on Amrita Sher Gil. She always remained very fond of this small composition though most of her work passed through the phase when she could see no faults, and the reaction when she could discern only their shortcomings.

The tour ended in Delhi. It had taken its toll on her physical and mental energy - "the strain of the trip told on me when it was over, such a lassitude and morbid lethargy descended upon me that I couldn't even take up a pen You must have guessed by this time I am in Simla. In fact I returned here on the 27th of last month and have spent my time recuperating. I resurrected about a week ago and started working in right earnest. I feel happy - I am doing a good thing. I am regurgitating my South Indian impressions on canvas" - Undated letter.

It was before her return to Simla that she met Jawaharlal Nehru, in Delhi. Apart from her nationalistic bias she had only a passing interest in politics but had always expressed a keen desire to meet the great patriot and leader -" I met Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi. I had been longing to meet him. I think he liked me as much as I liked him. He came to my exhibition and we had a long talk. He wrote to me some time back, 'I liked your pictures because they showed so much strength and perception. You have both these qualities. How

different these pictures were from the pastry faced lifeless efforts that one sees so frequently in India"

The new understanding which she had derived from her aesthetic experiences in the South began to be worked out on canvas and resulted in the three paintings which represent her grandest achievement - "The Brides Toilet" (Plate 4), "The Brahmacharis" (Plate 5) and "South Indian Villagers going to Market" (Plate 6). her South Indian Trilogy as she called them.

In later years she arrived at a co-ordination of form and colour of perhaps greater subtlety, but in monumental qualities and restrained power the Trilogy was never surpassed, strange melancholy that hung over the stretches a yellow grey land, and over the sad faced incredibly thin men and women.

In June 1938 she left for Hungary to marry her cousin Dr. Victor Egan. Before leaving she wrote - "I have a curious desire to sculpt nowadays. When I go to Hungary I shall take up sculpture. I don't think I shall paint at all in Europe. I can only paint in India. Elsewhere I am not natural, I have no self confidence. Europe belongs to **Picasso, Matisse, Braque** and many others. India belongs only to me." - Undated letter. Though half Hungarian there was little in her mental make-up which was not characteristically Indian and she

had a very deep affection for the soil and those that belonged to it.

She did paint a few pictures in Hungary but limited her work to Hungarian scenes. Painting was her very existence and though she was aware that her work in Europe was far removed in emotional content from her Indian canvases her intellectual processes eternally craved for experiment in form and colour. Delightful as these Hungarian studies are they are but a detached episode and as unrelated to her real development and fulfilment as the technically excellent work of her student days in Paris.

She returned to India in July 1939 with her husband. War clouds were hanging over Europe again.

Till the November of that year she stayed at Simla and also for a short time at Delhi with her sister Indira. She was in a somewhat restless state of mind due to the war and the uncertainty of her future plans. She did not paint very much at Simla but "Resting" (Plate 12) one of her finest achievements for its sheer colour beauty, belongs to this period of unrest. The vague pensive haunting faces still persisted but a change in the handling of form and colour was apparent. There was a greater standardization of form and an increased faculty for compressing the essentials of a face, a body, a hand,

a foot, into the most subtly simple of moulds. Her colour began to quiver with almost fierce accents and subtly controlled light. This development could be foreseen in the earlier "Hill Scene" (Plate 11), and was in contrast to the more deliberate rythm of masses of glowing colour which could be felt in her former work.

Chapter. V

CHAPTER - V**AMRITA SHER-GIL AS A MODERN INDIAN ARTIST
SUBJECT AND STYLE**

It may be especially interesting for us, that for example in painting, the early died exceptionally talented Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) Hungarian from maternal side, made her appearance as a real pioneer in the thirties her exquisite art is organically rooted in the most valuable Indian tradition and at the same time it is international and modern in the best sense of the word. The best part of her life work is deposited in a representative collection in the central state-room of the National Gallery (New Delhi). Amrita Sher-Gil had a great influence on the young generation of Indian artists, accelerated the effective development of modern painting that was also convincingly proved by the exhibition of Indian fine arts organised in Budapest in January 1956.

She returned to India in 1934 and evolved her own peculiar style in that the ancient tradition of India was combined with the best of modern trends. From 1937 she made a growing impact on the young generation of function artists she was in Budapest in 1938.

Very important role was played by Rabindranath Thakur in the course renaissance of the Indian art and by his two relatives who happened to be talented painters. They established an art school where the ideas of ancient Indian art dominated. Several outstanding talents developed valuable and renewed art on the basis of the past styles. As a reaction to the Western naturalism they disobeyed the study of the nature. For them the spiritual manifestation, the inner message were most important. All this led to a stage where talented and meaningful artists simply could not draw, they didn't know the human figure, they had no idea of structure, construction, accepted forms. Sentimental and incoherent, tepid styles have been created as a result of this only a few extraordinary talent succeeded in producing new and really artistic pieces in ancient forms.

Amrita Sher-Gil, the Indo-Hungarian lady-painter unexpectedly and suddenly broke into this artistic world by her surprising and perturbing art. Even her offenders understood that there is something new and different. Amrita Sher-Gil is modern, in the best sense of word - but her modern style - in contrast to the modernism of so many painters - did not cover the lack of knowledge, imperfection in craftsmanship. Her superior and steady drawing, constructive structuring of forms are so

powerful that they can be a credit to a male he-painter as well.

Besides the feminine delicacy of intuition and instinctive feeling, robust and expansive power pulses in each and every work of Amrita Sher-Gil. She had made a thorough study of India, on her life and she discovered an entirely new face of her country, for which the Westernized Indian or Anglo-Indian painters had no eyes at all.

She discovered the deep sorrow of India, the hopeless endurance of a lonely and destitute nation, the poverty which is gazing on us from big black eyes. She could see all this not merely because she was realistic or she intended to paint only slum inspired generous, it was the unhappy, destitute soul of millions that manifested in front of her through forms, lines and colours. This is how the art of Amrita Sher-Gil (after her return to India) became radically Indian. But at the same time her universal expression grew stronger, her way of seeing became more distinct, clear and simple.

In India she found herself at once, she found the inner, radical contact between the world and herself. As is the case of every art with the sense of vocation and totality her ability became an art originating from national ethnical roots, naturally in the best sense of

national and ethnical feelings which cannot be mixed up with jingoism.

The art of Amrita Sher-Gil shocked and made nervous the artistic circle of India and she brought new message. No doubt, she contributed to find a stream for a new and viable art for India as 1939. When she had already developed her latest and most mature Indian style, she was able to paint during a visit to her native Hungary, such superb masterpieces as Woman Peeling Potatoes or Hungarian Market Scene.

To Paul Gauguin, Tahiti was an exotic and enthralling country, full of luscious and sensuous women, whom he could paint with an almost primeval gusto and set against undreamt-of horizons, strange, sun-drenched and blessed by luxuriant fertility. But the India which Amrita Sher-Gil painted was her own familiar country. At the age of nine she came to live in the village of her uncle. And what she saw there impressed her more than anything else - the peasants with their sad, thin faces, with their dreamy, lost look, their slow, swaying gait. These peasants were not strange, odd creatures of another exotic world, but her own sisters and brothers. It was not sensuous apperception that dominated her canvas, but an almost melancholy sympathy and fellow-feeling, and it is characteristic of her work

that her figures, these dream-like, gently moving folk of the villages of India's hills and plains, are almost static, often sitting motionless on their haunches, or gazing unmoved into eternity. In her whole artistic oeuvre Amrita Sher-Gil never painted a single Indian in action, running or gesticulating or dancing or rejoicing. All her figures are like her huge elephants or buffaloes: lazily lounging or placidly moving with gentle steps. Great, dead walls, large, static trees add to the peace and breathless silence of her work. And because of the static peace and extreme simplicity of her work one constantly feels that most of her great paintings were meant for large wall surfaces and that she would have made a superb mural painter.

Most important among these is the use of great, even, flat surfaces, covered with a single tint, without shading. Gauguin and other post-impressionists have gone a long way in the simplification of their colour patches, in Amrita Sher-Gil we are back at the simplicity of Ajanta frescoes or Pahari painting, in which a face is painted in one single tint, with hardly any shading at all. The East and the modern West meet in her in a remarkable manner, and the style of this ultra-modern "western" painter in oils is much nearer to ancient Indian prototypes than the works of those modern

painters of India who relish soft transitions and gentle shading both absolutely alien to the whole spirit of Indian painting in the past.

In the treatment of shadows too Amrita Sher-Gil, through the post-impressionist, has come much nearer to ancient Indian miniature work or the wall-paintings than other present-day artists of this country. Already Manet "abbreviated" his shadows almost into a line, and Vincent Van Gogh often eliminated shadows altogether, as in his famous picture of his chair. Amrita hardly uses shadows she would use cast shadows, often on the ground, but otherwise she would reduce shading to a minimum, and, in her latest work, it is often a single black line that takes the place of naturalistic shadows. Now this is exactly what the Buddhist monks did in the Ajanta cave-paintings or the Basohli miniaturists. In **The Ancient Story-teller** none of the human figures show any shadow at all, there is a little cast shadow under the woman's feet, and under the cupola of the background, in **The Swing** there are hardly any shadows at all, certainly none in the faces.

If these are characteristically Indian traits, in her composition, Amrita shows clearly her western traditions, not her Indian ones. Indian paintings, especially at Ajanta, almost always fail on the score of

composition. Ajanta is overcrowded, the neighbouring scenes melt illogically into one another, there is lack of order, lack of lucidity and lack of free space. In Amrita's work space is ordered with an absolutely clear vision. All her compositions are winderfully arranged in the given frame, leaving empty space just sufficient for the eye to rest upon, yet making the central subject of the painting prominent enough. **The Haldi-grinders** is lovely example of carefully husbanded space and **The Ancient Story-teller** shows a superb disposition of figures against a peaceful, open space.

Here, therefore, is the most admirable combination of the virtues of Eastern and Western painting. never before have all these qualities united in one person as they have in that short-lived painter. Amrita Sher-Gil. In seven brief years of pictorial activity, she has left behind, after her tragic death, a name that is gratefully remembered by all who love beauty and creative art.

She was, in a sense, a late descendant of the masters who created the mural paintings in the caves of Ajanta, some 1,300 years ago, and yet, again, she was also a spiritual pupil of that great modern master of French wall-painting. Puvis de Chavannes, whose noble, calmly stepping figures of classical simplicity in the

sacred groves of Sainte Genevieve she often watched on the walls of the Pantheon in Paris. Nothing indeed, is more striking than the **monumental*** element, the grandiose conception of Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings, even if their actual size is small, she manages to convey to the beholder a sense of power, an almost heroic impressiveness that must be considered astonishing from the delicate, small hands of the fragile little girl that she was serving for a monument of historical.¹ Two aspects, then - the mood of melancholy, the choice of subjects - can be related to Gauguin. But it is a third consequence, the projection of her own original style which is by far the most important.

Her paintings are mostly of pastoral subjects - village women seen in what might be called their lyrical activities, or even in a charming idleness. The figures fill the space. In earlier works they are more monumental, in later more part of a general pattern. Sometimes this pattern is frieze-like, in others projected onto the canvas surface or yet again continued into its depth. The figures are arranged in planes and defined especially by colour. There is hardly any use of line except for delicate details as in parts of the faces and hands. The forms themselves are simplified and lyrical with flowing contours and a languid grace, Their

* monumental - serving for a moment, of historical.

1. Gyula Wojtilla, Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungary, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 62-68.

large pensive heads are poised or drooping from delicate necks, their sheathed bodies ending in large feet that serve to anchor the forms to the ground.

Sher-Gil, Gauguin's models were all drawn from the villagers, and Amrita's own words, 'To interpret the life of Indians pictorially', could equally serve as a description of Gauguin's programme for Tahitians. In terms of Indian art, her paintings were revolutionary, but it was her 'liking for Gauguin' which had nerved her to break so sharply with the past.

Two aspects, then - the mood of melancholy, the choice of subjects - can be related to Gauguin. But it is a third consequence, the projection of her own original style, which is by far the most important.¹

Although trained in Western oil-painting, Amrita Sher-Gil was acutely conscious of her Indian nationality. She was avid to be Indian and, although contemptuous of neo-Bengal painters, was proudly aware of India's artistic tradition. Accordingly, in announcing her artistic mission - 'to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially' - she had no illusion about her style. She would 'interpret them with a new technique, my own technique', and this technique,

1. W.G. Archer, *Op.cit.*, pp. 93-94.

'though not technically Indian in the traditional sense of the word will yet be fundamentally Indian in spirit.' It would be a technique in which 'experiences are transmitted not on the descriptive plane but on the plane of deep emotional significance - line, colour and design'. And it is this manifesto which in fact explains her style.¹

In India, on the other hand, emotions were out of place, and she turned instead to problems of technique. It was no longer what she painted that mattered. It was merely the method.

She wrote to Karl Khandalavala in April 1938,

'I don't know whether it is a passing phase or a durable change in my outlook, but I see in a more detached manner and more ironically than I have ever done. Less "humanely", if you like to put it that way but also less romantically. That is why at the moment I am fonder of the Mughals, the Rajputs, the Jains than of Ajanta. Also I am terribly fond of paintings. I grow more and more fond of it, of painting itself, if you know what I mean. I wish you could see the things I have done recently. There is a village scene I painted in the U.P.

1. Ibid., pp. 96-97.

with a vermilion clay elephant in the foreground, on the pale yellowish ground. A row of little archaic figures at the back with trees and little clay huts that I am very fond of ... I have tried to give all the figures in these pictures the flat relief of cardboard figures pasted on to canvas. I want to bring out the contrast between the hot reds and greens one finds in the early Rajput miniatures that I love so. I can not control my appetite for colour.

In her parents house in Shimla she painted "**Hill Men**" and "**Hill Women**" - using as models people from nearby villages, although these two pictures are in fact some of her greatest productions, two others - "Three Girls" and "Child Wife", also painted in 1935 - betray the same intense interest. In 1936 she toured extensively in the south, immersing herself in village life, and out of this visit came another study, "**Fruit Vendors**", painted while she was in Madras. But it was in Shimla in 1937 that her south Indian impressions achieved their maximum effect. Working from sketches taken during her travels, and aided by local models, she gradually built up three great compositions - "**The Bride's Toilet**", "**The Brahmacharis**" and "**South Indian Villagers going to Market**". These portray Indian villagers in exactly the way she had laid down. She told Barada Ukil,

'I want to be an interpreter of the atrocious physiological misery that abounds in our country, my aim is an art connected with the soil.'

Such an obsession with abstract colour, with colour viewed independently of all emotional associations, had only one consequence - a drying - up of the pictures significance. Paintings such as "Elephants Bathing" with its shrill greens or "Camels resting" with its strident reds are trivial and vapid in the extreme. This is village life as a travel poster might show it.¹

Sher-Gil's palette is her strongest virtue. It is very sumptuous and luminous, especially given to the use of a wide range of middle tones picked out or broken by sharp whites or blacks. Browns, greens, vermilion and purple are common in a great variety of combinations, her use of transparent glazes is masterly. Technically, her use of oil gave her much greater range than the Bengal School and a luminosity difficult to achieve in tempera. Her colour is extremely thin, almost reminiscent of water colour. The luminous quality of greens or blues is of transparent glazes over a yellow base, with out occurrences of earth colours. The effects of white and black against these much harmonies

1 . ibid., pp. 98-99.

are generally startling. While the main characters of her pictures are placed firmly in the front, the small insignificant details in the background strike necessary notes, are more intuitively felt and help to fix the composition firmly to its frame. Even the smallest flat coloured shapes possess a clearly felt vitality and presence.

Sher-Gil's sensuousness and feeling express themselves, not through the corporeal reality of the body, but in the curvilinear forms she essays and in the vegetative turgidity of her shapes. The entire tempo of her works is one that moves with the languid heavy rhythms of the earth, there is no restlessness in the quiet contained and wistful faces turned only partially toward the spectator.

* Her earlier pictures have no background. They consist of figures seen against space, mass and space intertwined as one motif. In her later works she essays internal recession with tokens of landscapes, architecture and animals. All these are distributed on the surface as pattern, the eye is led to roam within the picture but still there is a complete lack of activity, there is only a colour-filled stillness. Consecutively figures grow more and more abstract. In 'Resting' (1939)

we see a group of women, but they are not defined as such. They are only coloured shapes and shadows fitted together like some marvellous exotic flower breathing a particular fragrance.¹

1. Jaya Appasomy Abinindranath Tagore and the Art of his time, pp. 94-96.

Chapter. VI

CHAPTER - VI**COLLECTION OF AMRITA SHER-GILL'S PAINTING AT THE
NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART**

There is a consensus among the art historians and critics commenting on Amrita's paintings done in Hungary about the divergence of these works from the paintings executed in India. They are "entirely European in their colour, mood and sensibility." In the following pages we are going to represent the most important ones in detail and to speak about the genesis of these works, and to introduce the less known pieces to the reader.

These paintings are kept at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, or possessed by private persons. A lot of them were never exhibited and there is no reference to them in the Indian literature. The distribution of paintings is as follows:

National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

1. Girl in Field, 1932
2. Boat, 1934
3. Klara Szepessy, 1934
4. My Grandmother, 1934
5. The Potato Peeler, 1938
6. Hungarian Market Scene, 1938

7. Nude, 1938
8. Hungarian Peasant, 1939
9. The Merry Cemetery, 1939
10. Winter, 1939
11. Brahmacharis, 1937
12. The Ancient Story Teller, 1940
13. The Swing, 1940
14. Camels, 1941
15. Group of Three Girls, 1935
16. Woman at Bath, 1940
17. Self Portrait, 1939
18. Professional Model
19. Hill Scene
20. Musicians, 1940
21. Women on Charpai, 1940
22. Two women
23. Three Women
24. Study of Model
25. Namaskar, 1937
26. Village Girls
27. Woman Holding Fan
28. Hill Side Scene
29. Bride's Toilet, 1937
30. Mother India, 1933

31. Haldi Grinders
32. Still Life
33. Resting
34. Boy with Lemons 1936
35. Village Girl
36. Village Scene, 1935
37. Banana Seller, 1937
38. Bride, 1940
39. The Last Unfinished Picture, 1941

Description of Painting Present in NGMA (National Gallery of Modern Art

Boat, 1934 - The deep and unusually broad boat without hoars is rolling on the water reproducing the different tones of the green colour. The white background in the upper part of the painting is perhaps the quicksand. This seems to be suggested by the images of trees, houses reflected by the surface of the water. The reflected image of the reddish-brown boat makes the form of the boat longer. The picture of the boat painted from a top-view spreads calmness and loneliness at the same time.

Klara Szepessy, 1934 - There are two portraits: Klara Szepessy and her grandmother. As usual Amrita painted her cousin in a sitting position. The picture shows a

bright tone which perfectly corresponds with the youth of the woman.

My Grandmother, 1934 - Amrita was very deeply attached to her Hungarian grandmother. It is striking that she is lineated with great accuracy, almost naturalistically, the wrinkles, the crow's feet, the dress of the woman or even her necklace.

The Potato Peeler, 1938 - depicts a woman dressed in a black or dark-blue striped garment sitting in front of a greenish background. She is peeling a piece of potato with knife. Her head somehow sorrowfully looks down. Beside her there are green paprika and some vegetables and a water-jar on a shelf or small table. The gloomy colours and the big hands roughened by the too much physical work create sorrow in the beholder. This work is realistic, typical and not free from emotion.

The Hungarian Market Scene, 1938 - in NGMA is her most well-known canvas the genesis of which is told by Amrita herself. She wrote to Karl Khandalavala on 9th November 1938 "I am going to paint a picture, a village church in the background, a market place with little figures in black, the sky grey and the church tower white. Rather Breughelesque, I imagine it. Do you know the work of

Breughel the Elder? I have developed a regular passion for it.

Nude, 1938 - The girl is standing in front of a drapery of blue-black ground tint decorated with yellow and red flowers. The face and the arms are brownish and vary from the body painted with a lighter tone. The face is regularly round dominated by the big, glittering white eyes. The presentation of the hair is merely symbolical, the figure purses up her lips with airs and graces. The enormously big ear is strange. The lifeless arms and the motionless body are contrasted only by the glancing look which gives some life to the figure.

Hungarian Peasant, 1939 - The painting represents a typical old Hungarian peasant with sun-dried face and hands. He is wearing a greenish shirt and his eyes are also greenish, even the white of the eye. Amrita emphasized the thick nose with black contours. The peasant with pipe in hand has a walrus moustache. The vigilant eyes and the fact that the moustache almost covers the mouth also characterize the inhabitants of the Great Hungarian Plain.

The Merry Cemetery, 1939 - In this picture a small chapel can be seen with the stations of the Cross marked

by white small houses. People dressed in black clothes are hurrying in front of the stations. The sky is almost dark, nearly black. In the foreground crosses made of wood, stone and iron are standing. Some are bent down. In the underpart of the canvas a fresh bunch of narcissus blooms in white and yellow colours and a little bit far there is a red tulip on a grave.

Winter, 1939 - The painting shows a snow-covered Hungarian landscape, the monotonous whiteness of which is broken only by the leafless trees and pole supporting electric wires. In the almost lifeless countryside the life is represented by a black crow put in the centre of the composition, a bird which is at home equally in Hungary and India. The vicinity of man is expressed by the house situated near the border of the horizon.

The Trilogy (Bride's Toilet, The Brahmacharis and South Indian Villagers going to Market) - was commenced after the end of her South Indian Tour. In "The Bride's Toilet" even the auspicious occasion fails to afford the artist a different outlook, it is beautiful in colour and it has an almost gentle rhythm when contrasted with the severe disposition of lines to the Brahmacharis" or the listless candences of 'South Indian Villagers Going to

Market, yet all the three canvases of the Trilogy are the akin in spirit.

The Trilogy had taxed her energies and she sought relief to an entirely different Idiom of expression typified by the "Story Teller" "Siesta" "Ganesh Pooja" "Elephants Bathing in a green pool" and Hill Scene to these pictures, which are small or medium sized compositions as contrasted with the large canvases of the Trilogy she seemed to indicate that despite her initial outlook on life, there was joy to see.

The Ancient Story Teller, 1940 - The ancient (Story teller and Swing there appears again the nostalgia of Saraya in the white wall and the domed structure which bounded the family house of the Majithias.

The face and hands of the based in "The Ancient Story Teller" are obviously the outcome of her investigations into Moghal portraiture and the detail reveals her remarkable talent for distilling only the essentials out of each aesthetic experience.

The Swing, 1940 - In the 'Swing' dreariness and futility are again markedly present and the same ennui lovers over "Woman Sleeping on a Charpoy".

The influence of the Moghal miniaturists can again be seen in the subjective of all her paintings.

This same influence can be discerned to the powerfully conceived "Elephant promenade" which is charged with emotion and once more introduces the nostalgia of saraya in the white wall and domed structure. The excitement of the scene, in which the towering beasts and gaily dressed men and children are mingled is heightened by the drama of the landscape setting.

Camels, 1941 - There is no real demarcation between the artist's Saraya period and the short lived aftermath in Lahore. "Camels" retain the mastery of her elephant pictures one could have guessed that camels would fascinate the artist almost as much as the elephants of Saraya.

In 'Camels' she had a very cleverly organized the daring accent of the brilliant saddle cloth by placing two light haired camels against black tree trunks.

Group of Three Girls, 1935 - There is an almost lingering softness over the three figures whose destinies according to time honoured customs will be determined for them by others. The quiet pensive faces seem to dwell on the unknown future which to the artist's saddened vision signifies the inevitable-life that never knows the meaning of true joy.

DS-2884

Woman at Bath, 1940 - The woman bathing sits on low stool with her back toward us, she herself is like an earthen picture, her pneumatic form like a golden base complemented by the red and black earthen pots and the pink stream of her dress hanging on the wall, flowing and broken by the soft green brassiere.

Professional Model - In the nude study of a "Professional Model" painted many years earlier. The interest is the line and its delineation of form. The sitter is very, ugly, with a breeding acceptance of fate. Her flesh tones are luminous, small lines and shapes are echoed in the background like to the landscapes. This work, which is probably one of her best nude studies, is descriptive, but she also makes the painting a stark and powerful design with its sharp contrasts and sagging contours.

Hill Scene - 'Hill Scene' done in Simla reveals a new aspect of her talent namely the subtlety with which she could send atmospheric comparison to her treatment of the effects of warmer sunshine on the yellow grey stretches of land at Saraya as seen in "Ganesh Puja" and "Elephants Bathing in a green pool". The Elephants belonged to her uncle Sir Sunder Singh and were used for

shooting expeditions. She spent many hour watching them, spellbound by their movements.

The striking Large Canvas "The Red Verandah" is not in the mood of these small composition though it belongs to the year 1938, and "Women in Red" an extraordinarily compact and effective grouping done in some year, echoes the mood of her South Indian Period.

"Resting" - Resting done in Simla in 1939 was a prelude to the Saraya period and possesses several affinities to the "Haldi Griders" The letter with its almost complete elimination of faces is one of the artist's most during and successful essays both in form and colour.

The following paintings are not present in NGMA but are either with Mr. Sundaram, New Delhi or with Mrs. Erno Gottesmann, born Viola Egan, Budapest.

Mr. Sundram, New Delhi

1. Hungarian Village, 1932
2. Hungarian Church Steeple, 1938
3. Two Girls, 1939

Mrs. Erno Gottesmann,, born Egan, Budapest

1. Gipsy Girl Zebegeny, 1932
2. Portrait of Victor Egan, 1932
3. Portrait of Mrs. Erno Gottesmann, Viola Egan, 1934
4. Self-Portrait, 1932

D.S. Majithia

1. Hungarian Market Scene (Copy by the Artist)

Dr. Victor Egan (Sardar Nagar, District Gorakhpur)

1. Portrait of Victor Egan in military uniform, 1938

The Hungarian Village Church, 1932 - shows a two-steepled Church. The surrounding is the greyish, stormy sky. From this luring background rises the view of the church with its white walls and red steeples. (Its towers are of different height). The portal with its interesting roof is only symbolical. No human figure is visible.

Hungarian Church Steeple, 1938 - The composition is built up on a strong contrast effect. The background here is also the greyish-white sky from which the church emerges with its tower showing a special tone consisting of the tones of the yellow, grey and white. The heaven-aspiring dark steeple is similar to the leafless, black, curved branches of the tree in the foreground. These two elements the church and the tree dominate the picture.

Two Girls, 1939 - There are two nude girls juxtaposed in the painting. The white girl is standing numb legs, provokingly looks at the world with her striking blue eyes having a geometric form and unbelievable blue colour. The dark girl is painted with soft, rounded contours this contrast gets a further affirmation by the position of hands which indicate exhibitionsim with the white and shy, self-imposed seclusion with the dark one.

"Hill Men and Hill Women" - In Hill Men and Hill Women it merely happened that her models were hill folk, and hence the titles of the pictures. 'Hill Men and Hill Women' are not portrait studies of particular inhabitants of Simla. The faces are largely stylized and there is no attempt to authenticate costumes or colours.

The Gipsy Girl from Zebegeny, 1932 is an early painting from the study years done in the Hungarian village Zebegeny during the summer vacation. She was keenly interested in common people of the village and the peculiar features of Gipsy people did not escape her attention. The girl is sitting - this is a characteristic position with Amrita - and the oriental complexion of the girl's face is outstanding. Also as a striking feature can be considered the stout arms which are almost the same as the legs. The basket with fruits refers to the occupation of the girl, she looks like a vendor. The picture reveals a kind of melancholy but we feel the "Stopping energy" in the body of the girl taking rest for a short time.

The Portrait of Victor Egan, 1932 is the first portrait of Dr Victor Egan. Amrita's cousin and later on her husband. The face of the young man radiates peace of mind, strong recollectedness and truly corresponds with

the description given by his sister (Mrs. E. Gottesmann, born Viola Egan). She said Victor was a tall and good looking but not sweet-looking man. He wears a broad-brimmed hat and an overcoat. The great mass of the low-keyed garment and the blue background both focus our attention to the face which is almost in the centre of the canvas.

Portrait of Mrs. Irno Gottesmann Viola Egan, 1934 - The position of the hand of the figure is particular. The right hand takes the position defined by the Shilpashastras *gajahastamudra* "the state of the elephant's trunk". This mudra mostly occurs with Shiva Nataraja, the dancing Shiva. This is the first example where Amrita painted "speaking hand".

Self Portrait, 1932 - There is a self-portrait among the paintings with the Gottesmanns which deserves some remarks. We simply quote Losonczi "Pure and true sensualism can be read on her falling black hair and the playful smile of her round eyes. Her look is full of expectant desire and the ash coloured background blunts the expressive gestures of her fiery-red lips, the message of a girl becoming women".

Figs. 1,2,3 sketches for standing which relate to the standing figure in "The haldi Grinders are characteristic of her method, as also Figs. 4,5,6,7 and 8 'Sketch of horse and boy sketch for 'Camels' Fig. 7, sketch for unfinished sketch of a calf which have been chosen from several similar studies in one of her sketch books.

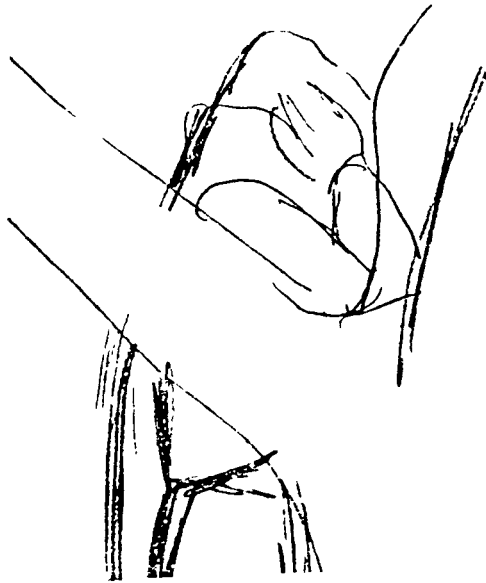
She had also sketched on occasions during her visits to various sites but her purpose was never faithful and careful representation as can be seen from Fig.8 done at Ajanta, her sketches were made only with a view to understand some problem of form which evaded her comprehension, and save on very rare occasions, she never recorded colour she was possessed of a high degree of concentration and an ability to impress indelibly on her mind the experience.

Amrita Sher-Gil figures are always static, but her colour organizations are vibrant glowing and intense. This contradiction which is apparent throughout her work, is an expression of the character of her emotions, both in life and art, which were a strange combination of the static and the dynamic.

The last unfinished canvas once again introduces a slow ponderous animal form, this time in the Slate-black buffaloes, inert and perforce submissive to

arrogant crows and the heat of an Indian day. Old Lahore with its jumbled front-like dwellings rises in the background and the uncompleted brushwork leaves them as though they were ruins.

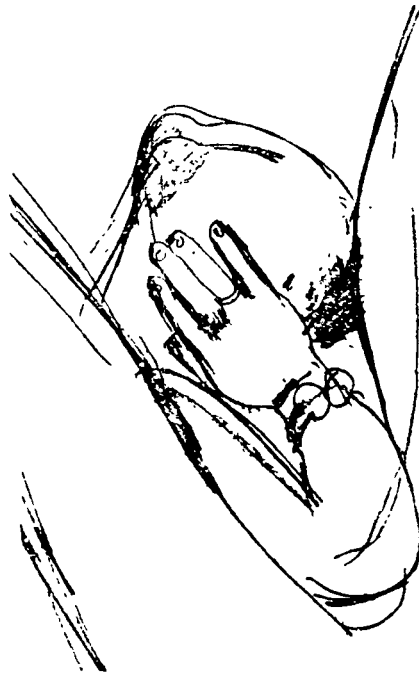
Amrita Sher Gil's work in a large measure possessed the character of things elemental. She had evolved her own idiom regardless of the fact whether or not her work would appeal to that nebulous body called the art loving public. She sacrificed popularity and success in her devotion to an aesthetic ideal, though unquestionably she suffered much mental distress at the thought that her work was completely misunderstood. She winced under neglect because she had many human frailties, though she struggled to show that she was unmindful of lack of recognition. Her mode of life and surrounding circumstances could not have given her any support to help her along what seemed a very barren path, but a fanatical zeal for her creed and the inherent intensity of her aesthetic emotions enabled her art to survive the complex of life as she lived it, and to leave her vision of truth unobscured.



1

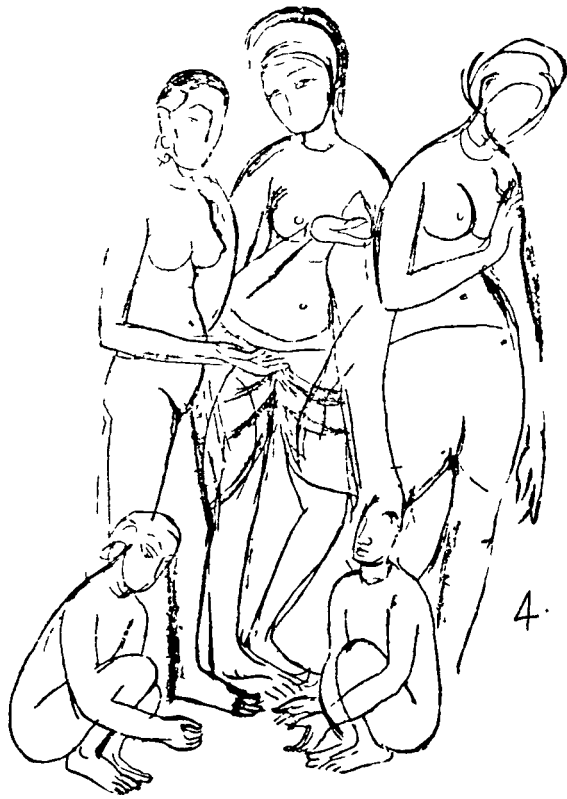


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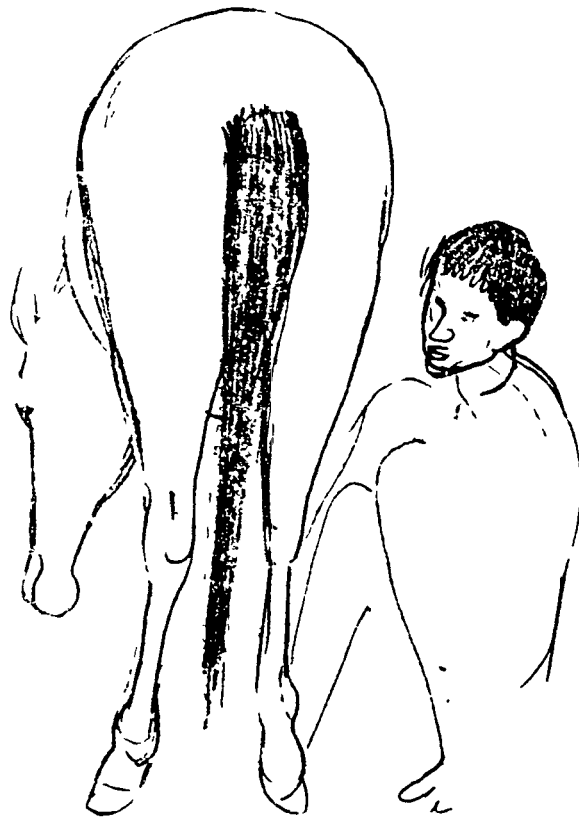


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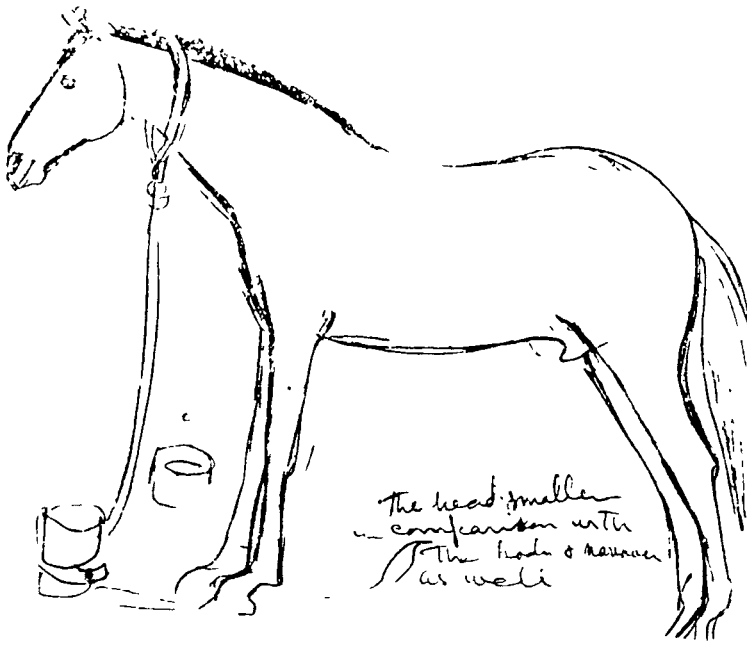
SKETCHES FOR A STANDING IN PLATE
THE HALDI GRINDERS



4. SKETCH OF THE AJANTA



5 SKETCH OF HORSE AND BOY

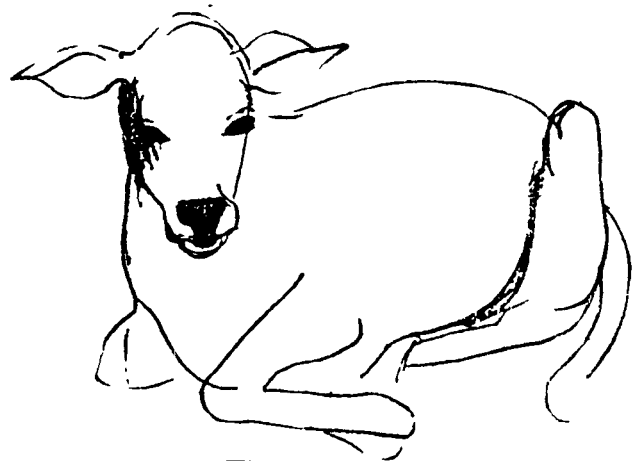


The head smaller
— comparison with
the head & neck
as well

6. SKETCH FOR HORSE
AND WORN



7. SKETCH FOR PLATE 20 UNFINISHED



8 SKETCH OF CALF



9 HEAD OF DANCER



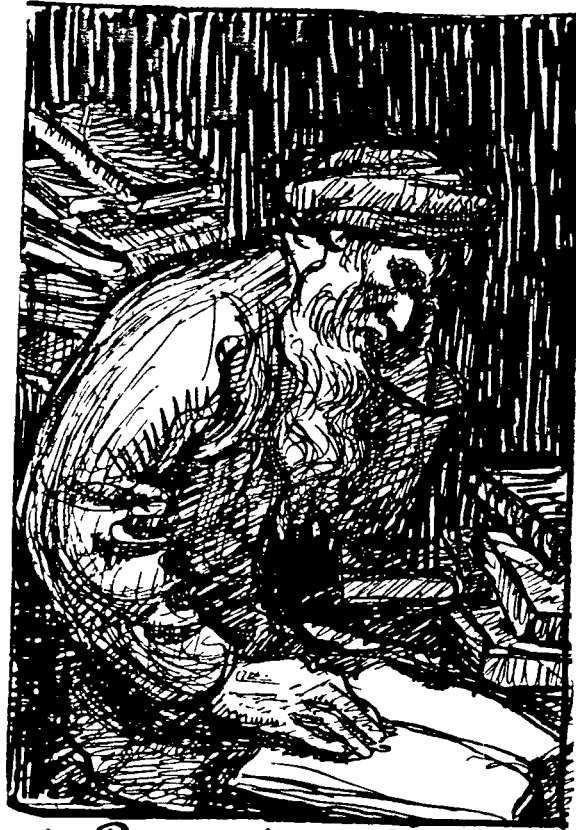
10 MAHATMA GANDHI



44 SCULPTURE



12 SKETCH FOR CAMELS



MON PERE, Auntie. Shu Gfl. 22.1932

13 THE ARTIST'S FATHER



14 SKETCH OF FUNERAL

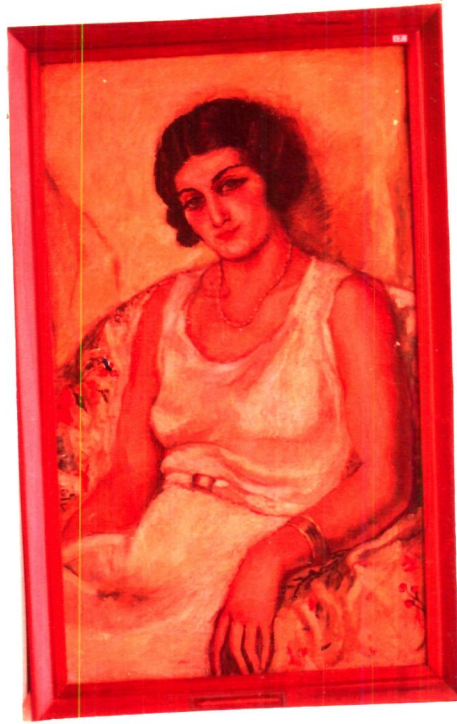


PLATE NO: 1

KLARA SZEPESEY 1934

C.S. 63.5 X 99.5 CM.

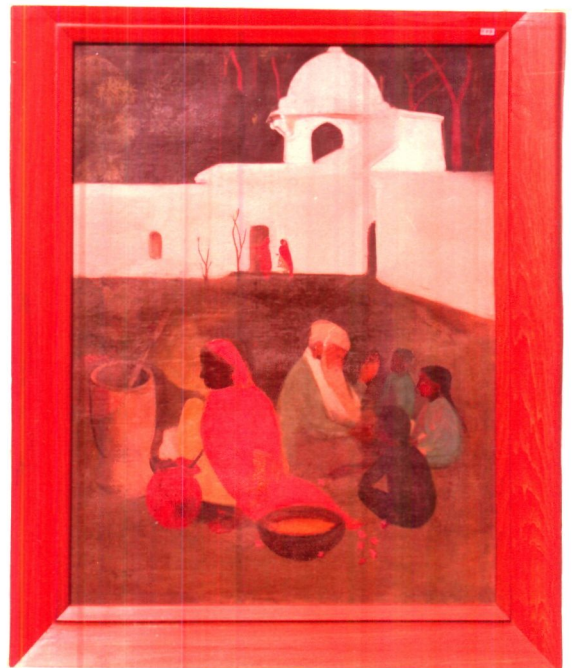


PLATE NO: 2

ANCIENT STORY TELLER 1940

OIL ON CANVAS 70X89 CM.



PLATE NO: 3
SELF PORTRAIT 1932
OIL ON CANVAS 49 X 65.5 CM.

PLATE NO: 4
PROFESSIONAL MODEL
72 X 100 CM.



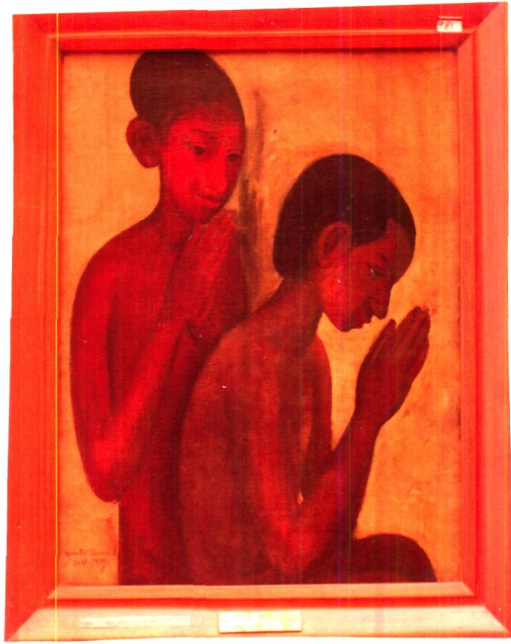


PLATE NO: 5
NAMASKAR 1937
38X 48.7 CM

PLATE NO: 6
STUDY OF MODEL
73X 98 CM.



PLATE NO: 7
WOMAN HOLDING FAN
59 X 82.5 CM.

PLATE NO: 8
HILL SIDE SCENE
65 X 87.5 CM.





PLATE No: 9
HALDI GRINDERS
74.7 x 100 CM.



PLATE NO: 10
BRAHMACHARIS OIL ON CANVAS 144 X 86.5 CM.
1937



PLATE NO: 11
CAMELS 1941 OIL ON CANVAS

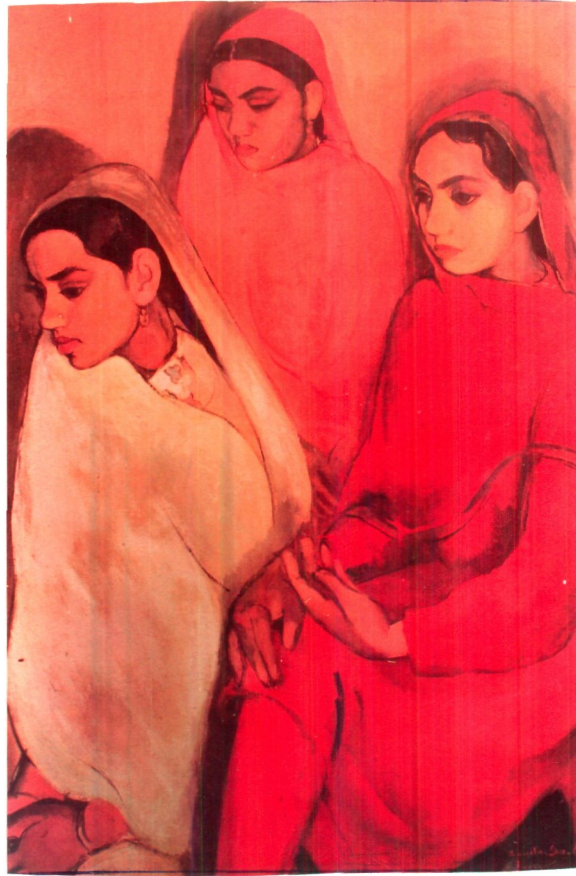


PLATE NO: 12
GROUP OF
THREE GIRLS 1933
OIL ON CANVAS
66.5 X 92.8 CM.



PLATE NO: 13
MUSICIANS 1940
OIL ON CANVAS
67.5 X 93 CM.



PLATE NO: 1
WOMEN'S JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE
OIL ON CANVAS 20X30 CM



PLATE NO: 2
EMBRACE
OIL ON CANVAS
20X30 CM.



PLATE NO: 3
WOMEN'S PLIGHT
OIL ON CANVAS 20x30CM

PLATE NO: 4
INDIVIDUALISTIC
WORLD
OIL ON CANVAS
20x30 CM





PLATE NO: 5
REMEMBRANCES
OIL ON CANVAS 20x30CM



PLATE NO: 6
UNTITLED
OIL ON CANVAS
20x30 CM



PLATE NO: 7
FULL FIGURE DRAWING
OIL ON SHEET



PLATE NO: 8
FULL FIGURE DRAWING
OIL ON SHEET

Chapter. VII
CONCLUSION

CHAPTER - VII

C O N C L U S I O N

From the previous discussion we came to the conclusion that at the end of the nineteenth century. The major Indigenous movement of Indian Art such as the Mughal and Rajpoot had petered out through the impact of European naturalistic art, which was coming into the country. The various Folk and Bazar style still continued, but even this were affected to some extent by foreign invasion in the schools of art, attached to the various universities of India, Greek and Roman Models were being copied by the students, according to the curriculum of education which the British had introduced about the end of 19th century, however, the movement for national awareness was also beginning to take shape. In the wake of this a great artist namely Amrita Sher-Gil was born.

Amrita Sher-Gil does not need introduction to people who know something about Indian art. The books and articles about her life and art embraced many aspects and the critics clearly attributed her place in the pantheon of art.

She was an Indian lady painter of Hungarian origin from the maternal side - the pioneer of the modern, progressive painting in India.

Miss Amrita Sher-Gil was born in Budapest, her father being Sardar Umrao Singh Sher-Gil poet and philosopher and her mother a Hungarian lady of great artistic talent, a gifted singer and musician, with such heritage from both sides it is no wonder that both she and her sisters, Miss Indira Sher-Gil (Now Mrs. Sundarram), showed from their earliest years a great inclination towards art. After a thorough education in Budapest, Vienna and Paris, Miss Amrita Sher-Gil spent many years in the French capital. Notwithstanding the fact that she had studied in and been deeply influenced by the west Sher-Gil's work must be considered as a clear sign of the artistic awakening in India.

"Amrita had a most promising future with her nascent high talents but that we should be very careful with her, as she could be easily influenced, with possibly disastrous effects" - **Dr. Ujhelvi in a letter.**

Between 1923 and 1983 she stayed in Paris during this period. The impact of Nagybanya school can be felt on more than one generation of Hungarian painters, therefore, it deserves some attention in the discussion

of Ameita's formation. The Nagybanya painters started from Munich but were also influenced by French art. The Nagybanya plain air painting transplanted the principles of impressionism into Hungarian Fine arts.

She studied in Paris from 1930 and her style was influenced by two European artist name's Cezanne and Gauguin. Sher-Gil's first introduction to the method was through Gauguin. Even then the actual colour organization in her work cannot even remotely be likened to that of Gauguin, unless we are to discount all sensitivity to colour organization.

In 1934 Amrita returned to India and evaluated her own peculiar style in which the ancient tradition of India was combined with the best of modern trends. From 1937 she made a growing impact on the young generation of Indian artists.

In India she was only inspired by the art of Rabindranath Tagore she was also impressed by the colour of 'Phulwari'.

She was a great admirer of Indian culture and mostly women are her subjects. Simla is where she painted some of her major work. Amongst these are Hillmen and Hillwomen for which she took the local folk for models. She repeated the experiment in Three Girls

and Child Wife. The villages, of both the North and South, inspired her. It was in her Simla studio, working on drawings made during her travels with local models to help her, that Amrita produced what some believe to be her best works, including the famous trio : The Bride's Toilet, The Brahmacharis, and South Indian villagers going to Market. Here, as in many others, she sought to awaken the conscience of the people "to the atrocious physiological misery that abounds in my country", for her aim was : "an art connected with the soil".

On a fateful day 56 years ago, in 1941, passed away from among us a young woman of twentyeight, the like of whom we shall not meet again. While Amrita Sher-Gil's painting left as indelible mark upon the whole modern art of India, which is the outward success of her life's work, those who had the privilege of knowing her intimately believe that her greatness cannot be measured by such outward signs only. The unforgettable thing about this brilliant young woman was that she has lived among us with a mission, a divine and fatal mission, and that all her art sprang out of an inner urge, a call, that was stronger than any instinct. Amrita Sher-Gil was stronger than any instinct. Amrita Sher-Gil was inspired.

For three years, 1929 to 1931, she won the first prize at the annual portrait and still life competitions at the school where she was studying in Paris. In 1932 she exhibited at the Grand Salon, and a year later was elected an Associate. She never ceased to crave for banbles such as medals and prizes even though she was fully conscious how little they meant. - "You will be surprized to hear that I have been awarded the prize for the best picture in oils and the Golf medal for the best picture by a lady artist at the "All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society's Exhibition, in Delhi in few days back. Needless to say the prize was awarded to the weakest of the five pictures I had sent in from which you can perceive I have no illusions" - **Undated letter.**

Ameita Sher-Gil's work was remarkable for which she can be considered a turning point in the 20th century and her work has been very influential. She painted in India for seven years and died in 1941 when only 28 years old. Her mastery in oils showed what could be done with this new medium which was not necessarily incapable of expressing indian feeling. Her connections with the post-Impressionist trends in Paris led her to use colour and form for purely pictorial ends rather than to

illustrate ideas. In spite of her small output her work was more effective than that of other individualists who reacted to or remained independent of the Bengal School, because she pointed out a new direction which was followed by younger painters.

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