

Amrita Sher-Gil: Hungary, India, France

Notes

Precursor discourses foreign

On Van Gogh:

Do you know that picture of his, the cornfield with the black crows? It always puts me in a state of violent emotion & divine restlessness. In spite of the fact that till now my special favourite has been Gauguin, I sometimes feel Van Gogh was the greater of the two – the Elemental versus Sophistication (no matter how sublime) is apt to make the latter look a bit flat by comparison. I too have got an excellent book on him with some lovely reproductions. How beautiful his letters to Theo are! How inevitably the character reveals itself in one's work. Van Gogh's perhaps even more than usual. (letter to Khandalavala, 16 May 1937 in Sundaram, vol,1, 375; Dalmia, 2006, 87)

On European tradition:

The emotion she characterises in her subjects flows from sources in herself rather than from the subjects. Her own brooding and melancholic temperament was fed since her girlhood, on the European tradition – a tradition whose greatest achievements are born of a humanistic vision. She directly relates this tradition through the Romantic movement. The most important of her favourites are Beethoven, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann and Van Gogh - all in different ways, painful, intricately introspective and passionate, all partaking of a tragic consciousness. But it is the weaker version of these values which Amrita brings to her treatment of human beings. And here she is akin to the attenuated emotionalism of the lesser romantics whose humanism is prompted more by sentiment than by understanding. (Kapur, 1972, 42)

Amrita's Parisian education was a boon as well as a shortcoming. A boon because it opened to her the doors of much modern and traditional art of Europe and a shortcoming because it conditioned her expression as an artist. She chose the convention of using models for composing figures in her paintings (she could not work from memory, she confessed in one of her letters). As a result she drew nude and semi-nude figures rather deftly with an obvious simplification of details to make hirelings look authentic in the new roles she assigned to them (the middle figure in *Brahmacharis* was a Sikh).

... Basically Amrita was a figure painter. She seems to be tremendously involved in the act of painting human figures and shows scant regard for landscape. Perhaps this was yet another impact of Parisian training. During the entire period of her art education she hardly painted outdoors – a tendency she generally displayed throughout her career, which provides a clue for the enclosed isolation of her figures. (Sheikh, 1972, 58-9)

Teachers or direct influences

Ervin Baktay (1890-1963) her mother's younger brother, an Indologist, who had studied painting in München with Simon Hollósy (1857-1918) a supporter of artistic Naturalism in the line of Courbet or Zola (Németh, 1969, 14) who was also a founder of the Nagybánya artists' colony which established Impressionism in Hungary where there was no art school in the 19th century so many artists studied in München.

The Nagybánya School had transplanted the School of Paris methods to formulate their brand of modernism...[these] likely to have stoked her desire to transplant her Parisian painting to India...The founder Simon Hollósy, and his followers tended to paint outdoors, capturing the simplicity of rural life and reflecting the changing light on their canvases. They believed in preserving the authenticity of pure colours and presenting the immediacy of their vision without any modifications. ...The practice of introducing ordinary, simple people into paintings is what Baktay taught the young Amrita as she initially set about sketching her servants (Dalmia, 2006, 195)

A range of artists in some ways derived from Nagybánya School interested themselves in social predicaments:

Istvan Nagy used his fine draughtsmanship to evoke a deep, sympathetic understanding of poverty and thereby arouse people's conscience...Janos Nagy Balogh, who had to do hard manual labour to keep body and soul together, served as his own model or chose workers at the nearby brick factory to make rich and eloquent portraits of the impoverished...Gyula Derkovits, a carpenter's assistant with little artistic training, painted brilliantly coloured pictures filled with revolutionary zeal and sharp social criticism. Amrita's bend towards simple folk and depictions of poverty once she reached India was in many ways steered by these experiments. (Dalmia, 2006, 196)

See also the ‘coloristic Naturalism based on synthesis’ in Károly Ferenczy (1862-1917), *Evening in March*, 1902, for comparison with later works by Amrita after return from Hungary in 1938 (ill. Németh, 1969, pl.7)

The sequence of his [Ferenczy’s] pictures after 1900 demonstrates a progression towards just such a synthesized and decorative style, a search for close-knit composition based on its own laws of form and for a constructive order of composition...He analysed the relationship between areas of colour which he virtually reduced to flat surfaces un which there was only a hint of bodily form...Ferenczy achieved, through analysis, a picture in which motifs and atmospheric phenomena alike were balanced and coordinated within the totality of the composition. (Németh, 1969, 23)

Hal Beven-Petman (1894-1980) a Slade School–trained academic painter who taught Amrita briefly in Simla as a child, and who stayed in Pakistan as a portraitist after Partition.

Pierre Vaillant (1878-1939) at L’Académie de la Grande Chaumière, who left a 1929 portrait of Amrita.

Lucien Simon (1861-1945), a member of *La Bande Noire*, Professor at École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, after 1923, and winner of gold medal at Paris World Exposition in 1937 for panels at Pavilion of Luxemburg. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1 74, 76) Amrita took part in and came top in his newly organized sketching competition (ibid.77, 79). In 1937 she recalled:

The greatness of Lucien Simon lay in the fact that he never ‘taught’; he let us struggle with technical difficulties ourselves, but encouraged each of those students whose work interested him in his own individual mode of self-expression. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 323)

Contemporary discourses with period of artist’s activity

Use of other art as exemplary for own

See Sundaram, 2010, Vol.1, 100, for the following examples:

Vilmos Aba Novák, *Fair in Csikszereda*, 1915.

Béla Iványi Grünwald, *Gipsy Gerls*, 1935.

István Szyönyi, *Funeral at Zebegeny*, 1928. [compare Amrita’s use of white splotches in *Winter Scene* (1939) or simple folk submission to fate in *The Merry Cemetery* (1939), (Dalmia, 2006, 198)]

István Szyönyi *Summer*, 1934.

Note also similar use of emblematic motifs, the cedar for Csontváry, the elephant for Amrita:

Tivadar Koztka Csontváry (1853-1919) *Pilgrimage to the Cedars of Lebanon*, 1907

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....Both of them paint the basic centres of the already given life with an excitement in their first discovery. Both Csontváry and Amrita started from Hungary and arrived in Europe and Asia with the demand of the total winning of human plenitude. (Wojtilla, 1981, 19, quoting Miklos Losonczi)

On Hungarian influences, Miklos Losonczi notes the impact of place:

Dunaharaszti from 1917-1921; Zebegeny in 1932; and Kisunhalas in 1938. (Wojtilla, 1981, 72, article by Miklos Losonczi)

Yves Brayer (1907-1990), fellow student of Lucien Simon, independent artist but friend of *Nouveau Réalisme* founded by Francis Gruber (1912-1948).

Boris Taslitzky (1911-2005), briefly Amrita’s lover, a fellow student of Lucien Simon, was also associated with *Nouveau Réalisme* and was the subject of several portraits by Amrita.

Robert Humblot (1907-1962), artist who moved studio to that of Lucien Simon at same time as Amrita, and painted a portrait of two women facing each other (Dalmia, 2006, 27, 32) Activist of

Groupe *Forces Nouvelles* with former Simon students Georges Rohner and Henri Jannot from 1934-39.

Marie-Louise Chassany (1909-1940), fellow student of Lucien Simon, with whom Amrita briefly shared a studio.

Amrita's stylistic evolution

On Amrita's realism or new objectivity:

Her now independent compositions are about the intensity of observation, the objectivity of representation and at the same time for a viewpoint considered external, show evidence of the problems caused by models and motifs revealed with more plasticity than usual. (Katalin, 2001, 20)

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, more ironically than I have ever done. Less 'humanely' if you like to put it that way but also less romantically. That is why the moment I am fonder of the Moghuls, the Rajputs, and the Jains than of Ajanta. Also I am terribly fond of painting. I grow more and more fond of it, of painting itself if you know what I mean. (Letter fragment to Khandalavala, 13 April 1938 in Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 483; Dalmia, 2006, 106)

On Amrita's discovery of India:

Besides the feminine delicacy of intuition and instinctive feeling, robust and expansive power pulses in 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. (Wojtilla, 1981, 64)

The East and the modern West meet in her in a remarkable manner, and the style of the 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. (Wojtilla, 1981, 67, from Charles Fabri, 1937)

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 Buddhist monks did in the Ajanta cave-paintings or the Basholi miniaturists. (Wojtilla, 1981, 68, from Charles Fabri, 1937)

The panel depicts Krishna who is painted in a vivid Prussian blue making love to several Rubens Renoiresque women. They are orange, yellow, parrot green and rose white in colour(all as you will notice have light hair). The detail shows Krishna titillating the woman with his feet. The figures are extremely plastic. Everything is extremely plastic. Everything is powerfully and sculpturally treated. Nothing is left to chance, every detail is drawn and painted with concise precision and the flowers on the counterpane are as massive as the voluminous forms of the woman. (Note written by Amrita Sher-gil behind a Mattancheri Palace photograph probably of January 1937. Dalmia, 2006, 85 and n.27, 215)

While in Paris, India was probably a preconceived 'idea' for her, based on fragments of philosophy, art and culture she had encountered.[See 1934 letter to her parents]. This idea was overlaid with emotional-idealistic and romantic notions. She stated once, that in India 'lay her destiny as a painter'. She probably wanted to discover her roots in India – to gain her identity. She also had an ambition to perform a mission and at the same time conquer through her art, the backward territory that was contemporary India. This ambition must have been fed by a realization that she would never be an important painter in Europe. It belonged to Picasso, Matisse, and Braque as she later commented, while 'India belongs only to me. (Kapur, 1972, 41)

On her unsuccessful transfer of spatial concepts from miniature painting

Whereas...the miniaturists deliberately contradict any single view point, a precise vision and overall structure is maintained. She loses both these qualities and ends up with arbitrary space arrangements, hesitant little details of plants and trees, and a vague brushwork to camouflage the confusion. (Kapur 1972, 51, & Dalmia, 2006, 202)

She failed to understand that the basis for picture making in India was not necessarily a tableau set in linear perspective(or its reversal) or of duplicating or re-grouping the world seen and measured optically. Nor was it

a *simplification* of an optical experience. Rather it was a direct essence condensed from the variegated nature of reality: a contemplative synthesis of archetypal imagery, religio-social myths which are ingrained in tradition and the experiences of day-to-day living. Thus for the artist of Ajanta, as well as a miniaturist, the painting was a panorama of experiences, a visual narrative to be read in all its details. Amrita understood visual narrative when it was verifiable with optical experience as in the case of Brueghel, but she failed to understand the same in Indian art. Consequently in her paintings, details did not become integrated but served as space-fillers (The pot and table in *Woman resting on Charpoy* the wooden slippers in *The Swing*, and ladder in *Village Scene*). Sheikh 1972 60)

On colour in her late work:

Despite her enthusiasm for 'significant form' aesthetics, under the influence of painting and life around her (she came to India, after all, with the avowed intention of fulfilling herself as a colourist), Sher-gil's exultation in colour started rather to burst at the seams of a strait-laced aestheticism. If she still didn't have the wherewithal to transport colour outside the 'verifiable optical experience' logic, she certainly had the passion to suffuse, heighten, enrich colour, till its potency loaded feminine bodies with the life-endowing juices of nature. And body smells permeated living spaces and landscapes. Her last few paintings are integrated images of the complexity of her person and of its passionate relationship with the land she chose to belong to. Colour in the last unfinished painting breaks bounds on to the soil she had yearned contact with and towards new directions (Nelima Sheikh in a 1991 talk, Dalmia, 2006, 204).

On truth to life and emotion:

In the silent haunted faces that gazed out of her canvases, in the fierce interaction of colour which expressed her longings but which she sternly organized, in the relentless austerity of form which alone could reveal elemental truth, she saw, even if imperfectly, a vision of life –not of hope, peace and fortitude, but of stark inevitability which had crystallized into religion (Khandalavala, 1944, quoted in Iqbal Singh, 1984, 86; Dalmia, 2006, 93)

Amrita Sher-gil was half Western, half Indian; born to become a bridge between Indian and Western art; and whilst it has become a habit to claim her as 'totally Indian', she was, in fact. The miraculous marriage of Indian and Western, brought up in Western painting, suffused in her mental make-up with Indian feeling and attitudes. (Fabri 1962, cited in Dalmia, 2006, 100)

This search for religion and philosophy, this tendency to interpret all Indian art in terms of spiritual experience stood between the sensitive and aesthetically inclined student and a proper feeling for Indian art like a hazy, misty curtain, that veiled the truth: indeed hid the sheer loveliness of Indian works. (Fabri 1962, cited in Dalmia 2006, 101)

She possess an intelligence which is not always successful in defining categories and making arguments (e.g. her anti-romantic statements are very unconvincing) but which enables her to sort out her problems, which in turn lead her to carefully consider the content and meaning of her work. Underneath the arrogant veneer of her person and her aesthete's tastes, she possess a curiosity and *concern* with a people so irrevocably removed from her own life. (Kapur, 1972, 39)

The Two Girls (1938/9) ...has ambiguous, many-layered meanings. Both girls, one dark and the other white, are in their early adolescence and both are posed nude. The one aspect of this painting which relates to this essay is her attitude toward the Eastern, The Indian girl revealed by her juxtaposition with the white girl. The latter is conscious and assertive of her young womanhood; the dark one, innocent, withdrawn, though not less sensuous. With her subtle intelligence, Amrita is able to identify the crucial difference between them – the different levels of their self-consciousness.

..The characters in the *Woman resting on charpoy* and *The Swing* are more intimately perceived – they are cast in a mood of longing that flows from their impassive lives and pervades the entire atmosphere. Significantly, these paintings though influenced by the miniatures, become *poignantly realistic*.

..Amrita is most significant when she breaks out of her excessive subjectivism and her aestheticism, to apprehend, sympathetically, the reality around her. Moreover, when she dewlaps with human subjects in a palpably human way. And when she is able to touch some essential aspect of a subject's life and feeling – for example in her women, that combination of lassitude and sensuality, which is so haunting (Kapur, 1972, 51-52)

.. a haunting picture of two nudes, one black, one white, one earthy and tangible, the other transparent like a sprite, within a subtle palette of cream, pink, red brown and amber. The painting transcends the iconography (whatever it was) with a striking pictorial presence, made of an expert in working of light and dark areas. (Subramanyam, 1972, 71)

On lack of sales in her own lifetime:

Her sales might have been better had she been a little less tactless. Her pictures, though intrinsically worth a great deal more than she priced them, were beyond the means of the small appreciative collector, and she rather antagonized the wealthy type of buyer – who fancies his artistic judgement – by devastating comments, if in disagreement with the judgement. 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. Miss Sher-Gil had no charm, personal or otherwise, when it came to discussion on art, and no business ability of any sort. (Khandalavala, 1944, cited in Dalmia, 2006,81).

Successor discourses, ‘followers’ of

Sailoz Mookherjea (1907-1960) writing in 1947:

She produces a unique orchestration where the harmonies of white, cadmium, yellow ochre, Venetian red, vermillion, emerald green, ultramarine, and ivory black are well placed. Another thing equally surprising about Sher-gil: it is the breadth she gives to form. With what certainty she directs line! With what proficiency she controls the caprice of *Kangra*. (Sundaram, vol.2, 454,789)

Satish Gujral (b.1925), writing of an encounter in 1955:

Roop (Roop Krishna, d.1968, a Lahore artist who studied at Royal College of Arts, London and École des Beaux-Arts, Paris in early 1920s; Gujral regards him to be among the earliest communicators of modernist art styles to India) also had the remarkable capacity of erasing people he did not like from his memory. Once in the course of small talk I asked him what he thought of Amrita Sher-gil. For a moment he could not even recollect the name; then he drew a long breath and asked me, ‘You mean that stupid Hungarian girl? Ah, only that old Hungarian hack Charles Fabri thought she was a genius.’ I protested and told him that everyone in India agreed with Fabri’s assessment of her worth. He slapped his forehead and replied, ‘Well, you get what you deserve.’ It was then that he told me he had thrown Amrita’s paintings from the balcony of his flat above the Rama Krishna bookstore in Lahore. [As a boy of thirteen in 1938, attending the school for the deaf and dumb across the road, Satish Gujral had witnessed the paintings flying out the window followed by an irate Amrita coming down the stairs after them. See *Outlook India*, October 20, 2008] ‘Amrita,’ Roop continued, ‘had returned to India painting in the manner of thousands of students had been doing in the dormitories of the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. There was not much to her talent except a good hand at drawing bold lines.’ He had told her that to her face. But she had a big ego and a high opinion of herself. The only way to cut her down to size, according to him, was to toss her canvases onto the street. Roop was convinced that Amrita’s arrogance was based on a feeling of racial superiority. She had later accepted the same advice from the expatriate English artist J. B. Pittman, who had initially suggested that she seek Roop’s opinion.To him an artist had to be judged by the rules of the grammar of his chosen language. This in Amrita’s case was Western, and she did not measure up to Western standards. According to Roop her vocabulary was *passé* outdated by fifty years. Western art had radically changed from the conceptual experiments of early Impressionists like Paul Gauguin whom Amrita adopted as a role model. Roop could not accept Amrita as a modern by comparing her with her Indian contemporaries. The argument was to resurface in India in later years, but no one gave credit to Roop Krishna for having refused to worship at the altar of the goddess Amrita had become. (Gujral, 1997, 159-160)

Irrespective of its ‘out-dated’ and foreign origins, I found in it the emergence of a distinct indigenous flavour which was totally absent in the works of those artists who either in her times, or prior to her appearance, had adopted the oil medium as their vehicle. Invariably, all of these seemed to be cheap versions of the Pre-Raphaelites. (Gujral, 1993, 13, also cited Dalmia, 2006, 169-170).

Social and Historical Issues

Social milieu

the disharmony between Amrita’s father and mother:

Her father though smaller, more shrivelled than Tolstoy, actually looked like him, with a similar beard and loose belted shirt, and displaying the same sort of petulance when assailed by distaste for what he considered the unduly luxurious manner in which the household was conducted...Mme Shergil’s whole style of living-

bourgeois Viennese in the days of the Austro-Hungarian empire, transplanted to Simla, of all unlikely places – was displeasing to him. (Muggeridge, 1973, 48).

She would pound at the piano, he would engage in abstruse calculations or go to the roof to assiduously study the stars.

Up on the roof at night, he was a wild-looking figure; hair and beard dishevelled in the wind, peering intently through his telescope as though he hoped thereby to get nearer to the stars and their celestial music, and farther away from the Hungarian Dances whose strains reached him even there. (Muggeridge 1973, 48).

Chronology of Amrita Sher-Gil

(after Dalmia, 2006; Iqbal Singh, 1984; Kapur ed., et al, 1972; Sundaram, 2007; Sundaram, 2010);

- 1870 Amrita's father Umrao Singh Sher-Gil born into one of three major Sikh aristocratic lineages, where the benefactor of her great grandfather Raja Surat Singh of Majitha (1820s-1891), who was Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), had employed the German-Hungarian painter August Schoefft (in India 1838-41).
- 1883 Umrao married to Narninder Kaur (d.1907).
- 1907 death of Narninder, apparently after several years of marital breakdown.
- 1910 father Umrao Singh Sher-Gil (an amateur photographer of distinction since 1889, private student of Sanskrit and sciences), meets Amrita's future mother Marie Antoinette Gottesmann-Erdöbaktay in Lahore. She was a music student in London and went to India as companion of Princess Bamba Sofia Jindan (Bamba Sutherland, 1869-1957, granddaughter of Ranjit Singh, daughter of Maharajah Duleep Singh, exiled to Britain in 1849 after the British annexation of the Punjab). Marie-Antoinette's brother, Erwin Baktay (1890-1963) was a painter before becoming an Indologist and keeper of the Far Eastern Art collection at Ferenc Hopp Museum (see Wojtilla, 1981, 11-12).
- 1912 Umrao marries Marie Antoinette in Lahore, moves to Budapest.
- 1913 January 30, Amrita Dalma (birthname) born in Budapest, Hungary. Family apartment was in the same house as the composer Béla Bartók.
- 1914 Amrita's sister Indira is born.
- 1915 Umrao briefly became a supporter of the pro-independence and vigorously anti-colonial Ghadar party in Berlin.
- 1916 close childhood relation formed with Amrita's cousin, Victor Egan (1910-1997), whom she later married.
- 1917
- 1918 November 17, Amrita christened Antonia Amrita (Dalmia, 2006 10-1) perhaps to hide Jewish origins of part of mother's family.
- 1919 March 21, Hungarian Soviet Republic established. Crushed on August 1st by invading Romanian army, followed by Admiral Horthy right-wing regime, 1920-1944.
April 13, Jalianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, Punjab
Amrita joined local school at Dunaharaszti and did coloured illustrations of Hungarian folktales and Grimms' Fairy Tales.
- 1919-1920 White Terror carried out in Hungary against Jews and intellectuals seen as leaders of the communists.
- 1920 December, Amrita hypnotized by the psychoanalyst Dr Ujhelyi.
- 1921 January/February, family returns to India via Paris where Amrita sees Leonardo and goes to the Opera. They go first to Lahore where Umrao's younger brother Sunder Singh Matjitha (1872-1941) lived. His membership of the Viceroy's Imperial Legislative Council and political influence with British may have allowed Umrao and family to return to India after Umrao's 1915 involvement with Ghadar Party.
April, in Simla. Amrita and Indira tutored at home in English, French, piano and violin. Amrita's diary is written in English, but many of her images were of Hungarian origin. [Amrita's maternal language is Hungarian in which language she wrote most letters to her mother, she is bilingual in English and would become accomplished in French].
Around now aged eight or nine Amrita says she was taught to masturbate by a family servant in Simla. (Iqbal Singh, 1984, 93).
- 1922 December, Bauhaus exhibition opens in Calcutta.
- 1923 In Simla, Amrita soon expelled from the convent school she attended for declaring she was an atheist.

Summer, young Italian sculptor Giulio Cesare Pasquinelli (1887-1967) comes to Simla, converses with Marie Antoinette in Italian (she had been in brief correspondence with Puccini whose music she performed); he is commissioned to do portrait busts. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 516, 517)

1923-24 Umrao does a remarkable series of autochromes, the first in India.

1924 January 15, Amrita, Indira, and mother leave Bombay to go to Florence, escorted by Pasquinelli with whom Marie Antoinette was having an affair (later known to Amrita). February, admitted to an 'enormous, elegant but hateful school', Amrita's hostility to which caused their return to India in June.

Amrita later wrote in 1937:

..my nature rebelled against the type of external discipline that was imposed on me (I have always preferred voluntary, self-imposed discipline to enforced discipline), and my artistic individuality revolted against the stupid and lifeless routine of the drawing-class that tended to crush my personality instead of encouraging it to develop. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 321)

1925

1926 Marie Antoinette's brother Ervin Baktay visits India and reinforces recommendation of one of Amrita's art teachers, Hal Bevan Petman (1894-1980, finished at Slade School in 1917, a society portraitist who stayed in Pakistan after 1949), that Amrita should study art in Europe.

It soon became apparent that she loved this business of expressing 3-dimensional form on a flat surface with a pencil. She worked so hard, unremittingly, without pause, for I think she felt that this was something she could learn and desired passionately to accomplish. It was extraordinary how quickly she learned to express form with only a single line, and I soon realised that I had in my hands a rather unusual not to say remarkable little person who, if allowed to, might well become a real artist. She readily understood what I told her and soon knew what she was trying to do. She was happy with me, and I grew extremely fond of her and gave her all I could (Bevan Petman, recalled in later letter to Iqbal Singh, 1984, 13)

By this time Amrita was widely read in modern European literature and knowledgeable in music.

1927

1928

1929 February, family moves to Paris, after *en route* visits to Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Northern Italy. Amrita and Indira first studied at Alfred Cortot music school.

April, introduced by the Hungarian painter József Nemes (in Paris 1923-33, studied in München with Simon Hollósy along with Ervin Baktay), Amrita also enters Académie de la Grande Chaumière under Pierre Vaillant (1878-1939, who would do a portrait of her in October 1934, Iqbal Singh, 1984, 37), but Amrita decided to specialize in painting.

October 15, Amrita enrolls as part-time student (*élève libre*) at École des Beaux-Arts in the atelier of Lucien Simon (who had been followed by Vaillant at Académie de la Grande Chaumière).

1930 May, sees Rabindranath Tagore exhibition at Théâtre Pigalle. Amrita exhibits there at same time with Beaux-Arts Students Circle of Women.

June, Sher-gils go to Hungary. Summer spent there every year until 1934.

This year, *Portrait of a Young Man*. (Taslitzky)

1931 February – February 1935 (for this period there are recently rediscovered letters from Amrita to Victor whilst she was in Paris and on her return to India, Dalmia, 2006, 45-53) At the end of an affair with Taslitzky (1911-2005) in 1931, he later records in 1959, that Amrita told Taslitzky she was engaged with her cousin (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 454).

Taslitzky was a young communist activist deported to Buchenwald in July 1944 to leave notable neo-realist works of his experience there. (See Sundaram, vol.2, 646 for illustration). Taslitzky also published his *111 dessins faits à Buchenwald 1944-1945* in 1945, see Katalin, 2001, 23).

This year, paints *Nude Study*

which provides the lower frame of the picture; thus it determines the picture not as spectacle or an extract thereof, i.e. not as representation, but identifies the picture with the only large motif seen from close-up and resting on the 'frame': the strong, almost masculine back, which in its changing plasticity appears to be alive..... this is very different from the tradition of the framed, idealized nude. (Katalin 2001, 29-30 with further argument via Lebensteijn & Didi-Huberman)

The strangeness of her nudes painted from slightly above can be explained by her being a woman, the fact that they were pictures of women painted by a woman (Katalin, 2001, 35)

... Amrita's colleagues also had a preference for painting pairs of women [such as Jannot, Humbert, and Piroška Futásfalvi Márton]. In this narrow circle, the subject of observation or representation and the doubling of motifs was not femininity or of women's roles, as it was in the earlier (Ingres) odalisques, but the theme is women belonging together, and their intimate relationships without roles....femininity had been enriched by a new theme: as if women had been liberated from the obligatory relationship between men and women and with this new, unknown feeling for life and subtle relationships, had come to the surface, different from the habitual *friendship pictures* till then mainly representing men. (Katalin, 2001, 41-42)

1931 This year had an affair with Yusuf Ali Khan, broke off her engagement to Victor, then broke off engagement to Khan, but caught venereal disease. (Iqbal Khan, 1984 26-27; see her portrait of him, Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 60 & vol. 2, 800 Dalmia, 2006, 34-5).

This year did a self-portrait in lemon yellow and orange, one of three, probably *Self-portrait (4)* c.1931, Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 68 & vol. 2, 799; see technical description in letter to Victor in Dalmia, 2006, 48)

1932 May 1, Salon of *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* at which Yves Brayer (1907-1990, Simon's student and Amrita's classmate, member of Neo-Realists with Francis Gruber and Boris Taslitzky, Sundaram 2010, v.1, 96, 98) exhibits. Her friend Marie-Louise Chassany (1909-1940) also exhibits.

June, paints *Young Girls* which will win gold medal at Grand Salon.

August, apparently being treated by Hungarian doctor Toth for a venereal disease (Sundaram, 2010, v.1, 76, 83, 93).

October, Amrita is reading non-comical works by Frigyes Karinthy (1888-1938, the first thinker to propose the 'six degrees of separation' theory of cross-global linkages). Other Hungarian artists or their work known to Amrita included the musician Edith Láng László (with whom Amrita had an affair); István Szász (1894-1960); Vilmos Aba-Novak (1894-1941); Béla Iványi Grünwald (1867-1960); Edith Basch (1895-1980) [Sundaram vol.1, 98, 100, 112, 124-5]

1933 May, Amrita's very close friend Denise Proutaux (1913-1990s) publishes 'Femmes Peintres-Amrita Shergil', in monthly *Minerva*. (Proutaux will also publish recollections of Amrita in 1988).

May, admitted as an Associate Member (status for non-French members, Amrita is the first such Indian artist) of *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* for work *Young Girls*. (Sundaram, 2010, Vol.1, 216, 323; Dalmia, 2006, 50) Amrita also exhibited at Salon des Tuileries from 1934.

June, visits National Gallery in London where saw Hans Holbein The Younger's *Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan*; also saw in Tate Gallery Paul Gauguin's *Faa Iheihe/ Tahitian Pastorale*.

July, leaves École des Beaux-Arts sets up studio with friend Marie-Louise Chassany at 72 Rue Notre-Dame des Champs, 6^{ième}.

I have never had any sexual relation with Marie-Louise, and will not have one either. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 115) (See also Iqbal Singh, 1984, 28-29)

About this time Amrita does experiment sexually in a lesbian relationship with the pianist Edith Lang with whom Chassany once discovered her *in flagrante delicto*. (Iqbal Singh, 1984, 29)

This year paints *Reclining Nude, Professional Model, Sleep*.

1934 January 14, letter records hearing concert at which Bartók played. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 119).

February, meets Hungarian writers Deszö Szabo and Frigyes Karinthy (1888-1938) in Budapest.

May, exhibits *Young Man with Apples* at Salon des Tuileries where Francis Gruber sets up a separate room for young artists and at which Marie-Louise Chassany also exhibits (Katalin, 2001, 24).

Paints *Study of Model (2), Study of Model (3), Self-portrait as a Tahitian*.

Summer holiday at Veröce near Budapest, cousin and husband Victor Egan later records:

Amrita liked dancing. She did not drink or smoke. She enjoyed Hungarian food. Cakes, chestnuts with whipped cream. (Sundaram, 2010, v.1, 136)

Apparently she discovered that Victor was involved with someone else, slept with a number of artists, became pregnant by an unknown father, had a second abortion assisted by Victor, became septic and was hospitalized for more than a month. (Iqbal Singh, 1984, 32)

August, letter to mother (in Hungarian);

I have stopped painting blindly, more or less only depicting the objects in front of me. Sometimes I add something, sometimes I leave something out, that is I make a composition –I create and speculate. This is a good direction. It is quite a shame that it is only now that I have discovered that it is not enough to only *paint* well. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 149)

September, letter to mother and father (In English)

Our long stay in Europe has led me to *discover*, as it were, India. Modern Art has led me to the comprehension & appreciation of Indian painting & sculpture. It seems paradoxical but I know for certain that had we not come away to Europe I should perhaps never have realized that a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of sculpture in the Musée Guimet is worth more than the whole Renaissance! (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1., 165)

October, letter to mother (in Hungarian) mentions visits with Victor Egan, photographs of the couple suggest intimacy. Also mentions recurrent earlier obsession with facial hair, 'my beard'. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 175)

December, Sher-gils return to India, Amrita stays at Amritsar with family of uncle, Sunder Singh Matjithia whose help to Umrao may have spared him Amrita's acerbic criticism. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 112). Umrao and Marie-Antoinette go on to Simla.

In India, Amrita decides to wear only saris because of their beauty, because European dresses would identify her as Eurasian and would be more economical, so many types being required and subject to fashion obsolescence.

1935 January, in Amritsar paints *Group of Three Girls* for Salon of Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

February, or later, paints *Nude Group*, with one model Sumair (c.1918-2000's), daughter of Umrao Singh's son by Umrao's first marriage.

May/June, in Simla paints *Mother India*.

June, in Simla, meets British journalist and playwright Malcom Muggeridge [1903-1990, who in 1934 had first exposed Stalin's Ukraine famine, and during WWII will serve in MI6] and paints his portraits. (Muggeridge, 1973 & Muggeridge 1981)

A similar disharmony was apparent in Amrita's painting. Her subjects were nearly all Indian; many of them peasants working in the fields, executed in the destructive twentieth century style of the west- a mixture of something faint and dying and rather beautiful, and something furiously disintegrating. Rosewater and raw spirit. In the former mood, she sometimes seemed infinitely sad; in the latter, self-assertive, morally vacuous, even rather vulgar. Despite all the time I passed in her company, and our ostensible intimacy, I never felt I got to know her. Or was it that there was really no one to know? In any case, she had built a wall between herself and the world, behind which she lurked, brooding on some secret of her own, or perhaps despairing: her sensuality being just fire signals that she sent from her solitude to indicate where she was to any passing stranger. (Muggeridge 1973, p.48.) (on this relationship see Iqbal Singh, 1984, 47-52)

Summer, meets Barada and Sarada Ukil in Simla. On one occasion Amrita told Barada:

Naturalism at its best is only an empty formula, the faculty of copying more or less correctly the object before one. Real art is Stylization, the faculty of Creating, evolving new forms to correspond to one's conception of the essence, the inner meaning of one's subject. (Iqbal Singh, 1984, 45)

September 21, Amrita rejects H.H. the Raja of Faridkhot prize of The Simla Fine Art Society, five of her works being accepted, with the five rejected being better works in her opinion. Her letter also mentions her Associé status at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

September 23, letter to Muggeridge (in English).

The Exhibition, thank God, is over. I didn't win the Viceroy's Prize. I didn't win the Governor's prize. My five best pictures, The Man in White, The Woman in Blue, The Model, a small landscape and your portrait (the latter on the extremely valid ground that the hand was too long), were rejected.

The letter castigates the works of the minor resident British artists which were awarded the two main prizes. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 217; for analysis see Iqbal Singh, 1984, 39-43).

November, paints *Hill Women*.

December, paints *Hill Men*. These two works were sent to the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts in 1936. In one critique, her works remind the reviewer of Orozco. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 242)

This year paints *Group of Three Girls*, *Mother India*, *Man in White* (modeled by the philosopher Prem Chand, 1911-95)

Jawaharlal Nehru writes of *Mother India* in 1936 (*Autobiography* 1980, 429)

It is curious how one cannot resist the tendency to give an anthropomorphic form to a country. Such is the force of habit and early associations, India becomes Bharat Mata, Mother India, a beautiful lady, very old but ever youthful in appearance, sad-eyed and forlorn, cruelly treated by aliens and outsiders, and calling upon her children to protect her. Some such picture rouses the emotions of hundreds of thousands and drives them to action and sacrifice. And yet India is in the main the peasant and the worker, not beautiful to look at, for poverty is not beautiful. Does the beautiful lady of our imagination represent the bare-bodied and bent workers in the fields and factories? Or the small group of those who have from ages past crushed the masses and exploited them, imposed cruel customs on them and made many of them even untouchable? We seek to cover truth by the creatures of the imaginations and endeavour to escape from reality to the world of dreams? (cited Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 336, vol.2, 642)

1935-36 paints *Child Wife*, *The Little Untouchable*, *Composition* between Simla and Gorakhpur.

1936 March, Amrita exhibits at 5th Annual Delhi Fine Arts Exhibition (Secretary, Barada Ukil) in which her *Self Portrait* won two prizes.

March 25, letter to Proutaux (in French), gives the Self Portrait as 'the one I did in Paris, the green one which I find horrible now', (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 243)

September, eleven works included in Exhibition of Modern Indian Paintings in Cecil Hotel Simla, organized by Barada Ukil (1895-1967).

September, Barada Ukil publishes 'Amrita Sher-gil and her art' in Ramananda Chatterjee, ed. *The Modern Review*, vol. LX. no.3.

In 1937, March 6, letter to Khandalavala she writes:

I also have the conviction that Barada Ukil in his heart of hearts detests my work, but realising there is something in it, wants to take credit for being one of the first to have acknowledged it and thereby ensure his reputation as an "art critic" for the future also. (He doesn't know a thing about art criticism but having a few stock phrases & platitudes at his disposal, manages to pass off as one.) I have often told him this and attributed even lower motives to his interest in my art. (He is in love with me and would like to marry me.) (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 347).

October 4, Amrita described in no.8 of a newspaper series of 'Prominent Women of India', *The Sunday Statesman*.

November 1st, publishes an important text of her training and experience as a painter and her views on Indian Art. 'Modern Indian Art –Imitating the forms of the Past' in *The Hindu*. (Full text in Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 249, 251, 253, 255)

I have never imitated nature servilely; and now I am deviating more and more from naturalism towards the evolving of new and “significant” forms, corresponding to my individual conception of the *essence* of the inner meaning of my subjects.

My professor had often said that judging by the richness of my colouring, I was not really in my element in the grey studios of the West, that my artistic personality would find its true atmosphere in the colour and light of the East. He was right, but my impression was so different from the one I had expected, and so profound, that it lasts to this day.

It was the vision of winter in India –desolate, yet strangely beautiful – of endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land of dark-bodied, sad-faced, 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 of tempting Travel Posters, that I expected to see.

The aim of art being the deprivation of aesthetic emotion from abstract beauty, the beauty, the vitality of line, form, colour and design, as opposed to the pleasure derived from the prettiness of the object depicted in the picture.

Painting is the primary factor and the subject only the secondary factor in a picture. In highest forms of art mere human interest of the spectator is not played upon either by grimaces or physical contortions of the men and women that are depicted, nor yet by the human incidents or descriptive elements in a picture... but by those experiences that, having stirred the artist emotionally, are transmitted by him to canvas, not on the descriptive plane, but on the plane where there is no room for cheap emotional appeal, the plane of deep emotional significance –Line, Colour and Design.

Indian art at Ajanta

Started with the principle of the primordial importance of significant form.

On tradition

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.

With the eternal significance of form and colour I interpret India, and principally the life of the Indian poor, on the plane that transcends the plane of mere sentimental interest.

November 19, exhibits with Ukil brothers, Sarada and Barada, at Taj Mahal Hotel, Bombay

Meets Karl Khandalavala (1904-1995, see information from B. N. Goswami in Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 270) who introduces her to Pahari, Basjoli, Rajput and Mughal miniatures.

December 6, Karl Khandalavala publishes ‘Amrita Sher-gil and her art’ in *The Sunday Standard*, Bombay.

Visits Ajanta and Ellora with Barada Ukil.

Brides Toilette and *Brahmacharis* (1937) with their characters preparing for another life (such as novice priests and the bride), and their gestures (for instance the middle novice’s bestowing hand position) still bear the harmony of completeness and the specific Indian identity of the everyday and the divine. The genre painting is an essential formal counterpart for this in the wall paintings of the V-VIIIth century Buddhist themes mingle in them with scenes from everyday life, or they can be seen as such...and as is natural in the vital, myth-creating age of a culture. This is why the wall paintings had such a powerful effect on Amrita, who was responsive to the genre painting as a form: in them, the presentation of the divine and the representation of the divine are the same: they have not been separated into two picture types. With the help of ancient art, Amrita interpreted in her pictures the perceptible strangeness of the India around her: she represented the continual cognizance of the sensory and the super-sensory and its pervasiveness with the almost identical figures and movements and homogenous, warm colouring. (Katalin, 2001, 97-98).

December 23, letter to Khandalavala (in English):

Ajanta is painting with a Kernel, the painting of the Bengal school has only got a Shell. It is a lot of things built round nothing, a lot of inessential things and it would cease to exist if those inessential things were taken away from it. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 271)

December, visits Hyderabad where exhibits with Barada Ukil, meets Saronji Naidu (1879-1949, woman poet and Congress leader who married out of her caste. She applies pressure to get the Museum of Hyderabad to buy *Hill Women* by Amrita, and she will write a posthumous appreciation of Amrita in 1942. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 278, 281).

December, Goes to Trivandrum in Kerala with Barada Ukil.

1937 January 13, visits Cape Comorin where Mahatma Gandhi is speaking. Sketched him, and painted *Woman and Children of Travancore* later called *Fruit Vendors* which she would send to the Salon, and *Water carriers by the Seaside* later called *Women on the beach*.

January 15, Gold Medal for *Group of Three Girls*, 46th annual Bombay Art Society, Karl Khandalavala being on the judging committee.

January 17, to Khandalavala (in English)

Yes, I admit few women can paint & I think that it is because they are as a general rule not “passionate souls” but sentimentalists. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 297)

Amrita makes the exception for Suzanne Valadon and another woman artist whose work she has in Simla.

Goes to Cochin to see Mattancheri frescoes, on which Amrita has numerous observations (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 307, 309).

January 24, Khandalavala wrote of *Group of Three Girls* in *The Sunday Standard*:

As a colour harmony it is a triumph, for all the brilliance and luminosity of the bright-hued sarees have been retained without making them loud or noisy. This effect has been achieved by clever co-relation of colours to each other as well as to the background. (Sundaram, 2010, vol1, 296)

January and February, *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* vol. X, no.1, publishes “Amrita Sher-gil – *The Talented Artist*, written by herself.

I never paint “pictures that tell stories”. But place the significance of my paintings on the abstract yet vital plane of line, colour, form and design, my work will appeal only to those few who have apprehended the real significance of art. But being a pioneer in my form of artistic expression, I am also inclined to be a bit revolutionary in other respects and should like people to be able to look at art differently from the way they have been accustomed to see it, promising them in appreciation of pure “pictorial” beauty a much finer and subtler enjoyment than they have hitherto derived from the contemplation of the mere prettiness of the object depicted in the picture. (Sundaram, 2010, vol. 1., 325)

February 4, Amrita's exhibition closes at Allahabad University, meets R. C. Tandan. (details of catalogue & works, Sundaram, vol.1, 2010, 316)

February 17, to Khandalavala (in English)

Sarada Ukil [1888-1940, the more famous painter of the Ukil brothers] declares that my work does not represent the feeling of the People (with a capital P). He probably imagines that because his decadent pictures appeal to the degenerate taste of some middle-class Indians his work does! How some of these creatures loathe me almost as much as I detest their work. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 333)

February 27, to Denise Proutaux (in French):

A publishing house has offered me a fairly good commission to write a book on Indian contemporary art! (Except that it is a little difficult since there is no real painter or sculptor in India worthy of the name.) I have not responded yet, neither yes nor no. I cannot decide because I will certainly make many more enemies by saying exactly what I think of their “art”...an excellent art critic from Bombay wrote about these people:” They hate you for they know you are the Future and they are but the dead Past.” (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 343) Also asks her to send reproductions including of Gauguin, Modigliani and Picasso.

March 6, to Khandalavala:

You are right as usual; erotic painting and sculpture could not possibly have been inspired by religious fervour. As a matter of fact I think *all art, not excluding religious art*, has come into being because of sensuality: a sensuality so great it overflows the boundaries of the mere physical. How can one feel the beauty of a form, the intensity or the subtlety of a colour, the quality of a line, unless one is a sensualist of the eyes? (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 347; partially in Iqbal Singh, 1984, 82; Dalmia, 2006, 80).

March, Amrita published ‘Art and Appreciation’ in *The New Outlook*, and variously reprinted in *Picture Play: National Film Weekly of India*, April. 1937, and *The Usba III*, no.2, August 1942.

The appreciation of good Art is limited to the few because it has characteristics that are difficult for the average person to appreciate. It always tends towards Simplification, that is to say, it only considers the essentials of a form, the stress invariably laid on the *textural* and *technical* beauty of a work, instead of the beauty of the *subject* depicted. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 355)

April, Exhibits at Imperial Hotel, New Delhi, where again meets Jawaharlal Nehru who had been at a dinner to which she had been invited the night before.

April 17 to Khandalavala (in English)

Amrita reports Nehru as saying: I liked your pictures because they showed so much strength and perception. You have both these qualities. How different these pictures were from the pasty-faced lifeless efforts that one sees so frequently in India! (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 363)

In the same letter she also disapproves of Cousins' choices of Ravi Varma, Nandalal Bose for the new Sri Chitralayam Gallery in Trivandrum but approves of Jamini Roy.

April-November, in Simla, paints

Bride's Toilet (Letter to Khandalavala of June 15, Sundaram, 2010, vol. 1, 377, 379, 381; Iqbal Singh, 1984, 100-101, describes the attempt to create a *leitmotif*),'

Brahmacharis:

Each character is subtly differentiated from the others, yet belongs to a social context which is specified by hints of dress and habit. There is a remarkable balance between a realism which makes them credible characters and an extreme and lucid stylization by which the painting acquires not only its rhythm and design but its brilliant sense of unity. (Kapur in *Marg* 1972; cited in Dalmia, 2006, 90, & also described in letter to Khandalavala of June 15, Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 379).

The subtle modeling and expression on the faces of these boys magnificently reveal her insight into melancholy caused by a long tradition of inbreeding thoughts. Here her quest reaches a triumph and her academic accomplishment lends meaning. Here she stands beyond the frontiers of influence, alone, pointing a finger towards the meaning of modernity revealed by historic circumstance (Sheikh, 1972, 60)

The Story Teller,

South Indian Villagers Going to Market.

There is for the first time a suggestion of progression of time in the undulating movement of group gesture. The device of a complex body stance forming a coordinated gesture is often used by narrative painters of different traditions. (Nelima Sheikh in 1991, as cited by Dlamia, 2006, 91)

June 16, in letter to R.C.Tandan (in English)

I never speak of the Bombay School at all because I most emphatically feel that it has produced nothing worthwhile and stands for everything that is fifth-rate and commonplace, apart from the fact that it cannot pretend to the superficial technical facility of Western academicism (that putrescent corpse of Western art). (Sundaram, 2010, vol.1, 385)

July/August/September, expresses surprise and disagreement in letters to Khandalavala about his dislike of Rabindranath Tagore's painting.

October 2, Amrita's sister Indira marries Kalyan Sundaram, a Cambridge law graduate and member of the Indian Civil Service since 1929, later a senior post-Independence civil servant.

November 6, Amrita mentions Nehru's *Autobiography* in a letter to him. Her copy is signed by Nehru and dated March 1937.

November 21-27, exhibits thirty-three paintings in Faletti's Hotel, Lahore. Exhibition organized by Barada Ukil. Charles L. Fabri, an Hungarian indologist who came to India in 1932, wrote on the exhibition and was apparently in love with Amrita. She figures in his novel *Indian Flamingo*, (London: Gollancz, 1947).

Amrita invites to tea her former teacher Bevan Petman by chance staying in Lahore:

She was very much alive, joyous, and determined little person... Her work was excessively original, modern in expression, but in every way real Art, real Vision devoid of the eccentricities of the day and, what pleased me intensely, consistently informed with knowledge which I had impressed upon her that Drawing, Form, is the basis of all Art. (cited in Iqbal Singh, 1984, 13)

December 1, report of lecture by Amrita 'Art in the Indian Film', *The Civil & Military Gazette*, Lahore. (See note by Ashish Radhyaksha in Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 426)

December, late, letter to parents (in English) mentions meeting Badruddin Tyebji quite often. He later recorded in 1986 in communication to Kumar Shahani:

I see her sitting at Faletti's, eating oysters, going on ordering more and more, frightfully expensive. We knew that we'd have to pay for it. Her zest was inexhaustible.. her need for sexual encounters was constant. Something went wrong in Paris. She would go to bed with everyone, with no distinction. I found it unbearable. Friendship didn't depend on sex. She didn't give a damn. She was determined to live her life on its own terms. People were drawn to her, her attraction was so powerful. She got on as well with women. Women were almost enslaved by her – attractive women of the time – Helen Chamanlal. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 436; on Amrita's promiscuity see Khushwant Singh, 2002, 99)

1938 in Saraya, paints *Village Scene, Elephants bathing in a green pool, Red Clay Elephant*.

January, mentions in letter to Khandalavala her going to Europe to be married.

January, mentions in a letter to her parents that she wants to go to Hungary herself, and that if our marriage is not a success as you both seem to fear, you will have no one to blame but us.

Also writes that she had met Nehru again and fantasized about him proposing to her.

(Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 447) Her parents were worried about her financial insecurity and Victor Egan's having only just qualified as a Doctor) (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 460, later modifying their position in July, see Sundaram, 2010.vol.2, 506)

February 14, in letter from Saraya, Gorakhpur, to Khandalavala Amrita records:

As you see I have left Lahore after two nerve-racking experiences in portrait painting. I did however paint a head for my own pleasure and a little landscape with a red house in a green field surrounded by green trees, after which I felt better and left Lahore for village life and hard work. I have started two small compositions already. Elephants bathing in a pond of green green water with little bullock carts in the background, and another quieter composition, a group of women sitting in a field. In which I want to bring out the contrast between the hot reds & greens one finds in the Rajput miniatures I love so. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 455)

March, letter to Khandalavala from Saraya, mentions that exhibits at the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society in Delhi where the Gold Medal for the best picture by a lady artist was awarded to her *View from Studio* (Paris, 1934)

Needless to say the prize was awarded to the weakest of the five pictures I sent in, & I should imagine that Ukil (who was on the jury) was to a great extent responsible for the awards as well as the choice, from which you can perceive I have no illusions either way! (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 473)

Around this time has an affair with Reuters correspondent Walter Collins in Simla (Dalmia, 2006, 109)

April, in Simla paints *Red Verandah*.

June 13, letter to R .C. Tandan,

I must mention something which till now I have kept secret. I am getting married. Marrying my Hungarian cousin & hence my departure for Hungary. We will be returning (he is a doctor & will practice in India) in about a year & a half, for of course I couldn't bear to leave India for ever. My destiny lies here – (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 499)

June, sets sail to Hungary from Bombay.

August 13, Amrita marries her cousin Dr. Victor Egan in Hungary.

August 21, Nehru was in Budapest with his daughter, but there is no evidence that he met Amrita. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 516)

August 28, letter from Umrao to Amrita: Amrita in Hungary has heard that parents have cleared out many of her old letters, but Umrao writes to her that only a few unclassified letters had been destroyed. However after her death all of Amrita's letters sent to her by family and friends were destroyed by her mother and husband, but Umrao's letters to her survived in his carbon copies. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 513,514).

August-May 1939, paints *Potato Peeler, Two Girls, Hungarian Market Scene* (after a photograph by Amrita, Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 528).

September 23, Amrita in a letter to her parents, asks for their help in securing British approval for their return to India, including an appeal to their Uncle to guarantee Victor's living.

I have painted a couple of pictures, quite good. But my element is India. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 519)

- October 23, childhood friend Baldoon Dhingra, publishes 'Art and Amrita Sher-Gil' in *The Orient Illustrated Weekly*.
- 1939 February 2, Hungary joined the anti-Comintern pact.
- February/March, Amrita writes to Khandalavala thanking him for a copy of his book *Indian Sculpture and painting: an introductory study*, Bombay: Taporevala & sons, 1939, which illustrates Amrita's *Bride's Toilet* (Simla 1937) in colour.
- April 1, surrender of remaining Republican forces ends Spanish civil war with victory for the right under Franco.
- June 21, Amrita and Victor leave from Genoa on a German ship. They return to Simla via Colombo, Ceylon, and Mahaballipuram and Madurai in South India.
- July, from Delhi where staying with her sister, visits Mathura [near Agra], where sees Kushan sculpture. Also bought 'some Mauryan terracottas & several larger & small stone heads of the Kushan period'. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 599).
- Stays in parents' home in Simla with Victor, but tensions are high since mother still disapproves of Victor.
- September 1, German army marches through Hungary on way to invade Poland.
- Paints *Resting*.
- December 18 or before, goes to Majitha family estate at Saraya, Gorakhpur where Victor is employed as doctor at the Saraya Sugar Factory.
- December 18, Amrita writes to Khandalavala that she has submitted five Hungarian works to the Bombay Fine Arts Society but doubts that they will ever be accepted, but is shortly surprised to be told she is a prize winner for either *Resting* (Simla 1939) or *Hungarian Village Market* (Kiskunhalas, 1938), the latter being illustrated in the catalogue.
- 1940 January/February, long letter from Amrita to Umrao (in English) apparently incomplete, detailing false accusations by her mother and her mother's attacks on Victor, also noting Amrita's mother had had a nervous breakdown, and expresses her and Victor's profound apprehension about returning to Simla. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 615-625; Dalmia, 2006, 124-125. A later letter from Marie-Antoinette to Amrita of August 27 explains her psychological condition and apologizes for the pain caused to others. Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 664, 666)
- April, early, Amrita mentions that mother's letter was without 'touch of resentment or any trace of ill feeling'. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 635).
- April 13, Victor writes to Marie-Antoinette asking for an end to bitterness and misunderstanding (Dalmia, 2006, 126-129)
- May 4, Amrita mentions in a letter to Khandalavala she has done some modeling in clay of two tigers and a small elephant's head.
- July 1, Amrita's letter to Khandalavala,
 The Moghuls have taught me a lot. Looked at rightly, the Moghul portraitists can teach one everything almost that matters. Subtle yet intense keenness of form, acute & detached, somewhat ironical, observation, all the things I needed most at the time I got acquainted with them. It is funny that I always meet the very things I need at the very time I need them – Breughel & Renoir (the latter, till quite recently, I heartily detested) have in essentials, though they are seemingly so different, a great deal in common with the Moghuls, & I have discovered them at last to my great benefit. It is perhaps significant to note that studying present-day Indian painting, one comes to the conclusion that the imitators of the Moghuls have never erred so badly as the imitators of Ajanta. Ajanta *misunderstood* (and not one of our so-called Indian paintings has even remotely understood what Ajanta stands for) leads to a positively repulsive, revolting, sickly sentimentality and debility of form, subject-matter apart. The imitators of the Moghuls though feeble and limited are never guilty of quite such bad taste. Don't you think so? By the very things they stand for, they (the Moghuls) bar the way to the excessive degeneration of form conception. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 643; Dalmia, 2006, 134)
- July, separate letter to Khandalavala, makes extensive comments on Mughal, Persian, Basholi paintings, and attacks Nandalal Bose's work.
 The more I see of Nandalal Bose's work the more convinced I feel that his talent is merely an appearance, and illusion (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2. 649-655)

October 6, Jawaharlal Nehru speaks to peasants in Gorakhpur, meets Amrita for the last time in Saraya. Nehru later wrote:

A strange change had come over her since her return from France four years earlier. She was so full of confidence, so vital and self-possessed then. The self-assurance was no longer in evidence ... She was quiet. Artistically... she was also changing. From painting typical French *salon* pictures she was drifting to India in so many ways. I asked her to come for a few days to Allahabad and she promised to do so ... I was arrested. (cited in Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 680)

October 31 to November 10, Amrita exhibits at an exhibition for the War Fund at Indian Academy of Fine Arts in Amritsar. She won a prize for *Ancient Story Teller* (Saraya, 1940), and also showed *Elephant Promenade* (Saraya 1940) *Sleep* (Paris, 1933), *Siesta*, (Simla 1937), *Elephants* (Saraya, 1940), *The Swing* (Saraya, 1940).

December, meets Karl Khandalavala in Saraya who had joined the Indian Air Force. His memories of the visit were recorded later by Kumar Shahani in 1986. (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 770, 772)

As much as she loved me, she had no time for me when she wanted to paint. I've never seen someone so intense. Altering, sketching ... draw one figure, redraw the figure. 'Till I am absolutely satisfied I draw again and again, and then I put down the canvas.'

She also wanted to get a different effect from oil painting.

'Have you ever tried water colour?'

'There's nothing for me but oils.'

December 6, Amrita writes to Indira, comments on the absolutes between which Indira's moods swing, and mentions psychodynamics of her relation with Victor, their silences.

I and Victor are tremendously fond of each other & yet we seem to have nothing, absolutely nothing whatsoever to say to each other (Sundaram, 2010, vo.2, 691).

Amrita had also mentioned more generally:

You have a tendency to consider everything as absolute, whereas nothing is really so, except perhaps in the realm of the abstract in Art (although even of that I am not so convinced as I used to be). Well, the longer I live the more apparent it becomes to me that, there is nothing that is either this of that – *'La porte n'est jamais ouvert ou fermé mais toujours entre-ouverte'* – & the wisdom lies in realizing this.

(Sundaram, 2010, vo.2, 691; Dalmia, 2006, 139)

1940-1 paints *Ancient Story Teller*, *Woman resting on charpoy*, *The Swing*, *Bride*, *Elephants*, *Camels*.

1941 January, visited by Khandalavala, now in airforce.

early this year beset by an artist's block. (Dalmia, 2006, 141)

March 14, wrote to Indira about her own mood:

Feeling impotent, dissatisfied, irritable and unlike you, not even able to weep... There seem to be forces at work, elemental forces, disrupting, throwing things out of equilibrium (Dalmia, 2006, 141).

Indira had refused to let Amrita and Victor move back into the studio Indira had since occupied at Simla, and other petty jealousies admitted to by Indira meant their relationship was broken until Amrita's death (Indira's recollection, Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 720; Helen Chaman Lall's recollection in Iqbal Singh, 1984, 160-161)

April, Hungary enters war on Nazi side.

April 30, letter to Khandalavala, Amrita compares Basholi miniatures to Gauguin:

I have been looking at the Radha-Krishna once again: it belongs to you, doesn't it? I have also been looking at Gauguin. It reminded me of *Otabi*, a solitary reclining female figure with such a narrow blue horizon and an expanse of brilliant yellow below it – the similarity is startling. There is another of his that is very Basholi in the background treatment - a lovely thing – I have seen in the original *Pastorales Tabitiennes*. How significant of the fellowship of all great art that a mind of such completely different origin as Gauguin should have a common atavism with the Basholi miniaturists. (Sundaram, 201, vol.2, 717; Dalmia, 2006, 148; Iqbal Singh, 1984, 141)

June, Amrita and Victor make an exploratory visit to Lahore with a view to moving there.

July, writes to close friend Helen Chaman Lall.

I haven't touched a brush or gone near a canvas for four months. I don't know why. I am gripped by a sort of fear whenever I think of working again. (Dalmia, 2006, 143)

August in Simla, Amrita gives talk on All-India Radio from Lahore. (full text, Sundaram, 2010, vol. 2, 731, 733, 735, 737)

September 15 or 16, Victor and Amrita go to settle in Lahore which was in many ways the cultural capital of North India and the Punjab (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2 786-7)

Paints *The Last Unfinished Painting*.

November: left notes for a radio broadcast scheduled in mid-December, 'The effects of War on Art' (Sundaram, 2010, vol.2. 777, 779, 781)

December 4, Nehru released from imprisonment at Dehra Dun.

December 5/6, Amrita died of peritonitis and dehydration due to unknown causes: perhaps after mis-diagnosed and mis-treated bacillary dysentery (according to Iqbal Singh); perhaps after a botched abortion by her husband (according to Marie Antoinette, Khushwant Singh, 2002, 99); or perhaps a natural miscarriage due to her early contraction of venereal disease (Victor Egan), in Lahore, aged twenty-eight years.(Dalmia, 2006, 179-180)

December 7, Amrita's body cremated on banks of River Ravi with Sikh rites performed by Umrao Singh.

December 21, pre-planned and, in the event, posthumous exhibition of Amrita's work opens at Punjab Literary league in Lahore. (detailed discussion in Sundaram, 2010, vol.2, 791)

1942 *The Usba: Journal of Art and Literature* vol. III, no. II, Special issue on Amrita

1943 Amrita's nephew by Indira, Vivan Sundaram born.

1944 March 5, a clearly deranged Marie-Antoinette writes to Victor asking for poison to kill herself (Dalmia, 2006, 181-182).

1945 Amrita's niece by Indira, Navina Sundaram born.

1948 July 31, Marie Antoinette dies from shooting herself with Umrao's pistol.

1949 thirty-five paintings in Victor's possession acquired by the Indian state and subsequently sixty-one paintings donated by Umrao Singh and Amrita's sister Indira. Now located in the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. (On my visit to the Museum's storage area of 26th November 2009 many of these works were badly stored and conserved).

1954 May, Umrao Sher-Gil dies, aged eighty-four.

December, Victor Egan marries Nina Hydrie, twenty-three years his junior.

1975 Amrita's sister Indira dies.

1982 Amrita's work shown in exhibition of six Indian painters curated by Howard Hodgkin in London.

1993 Indira's husband Kalyan Sundaram dies.

1997 June, Victor Egan dies, aged eighty-six.

2006 biography of Amrita by Yashodhara Dalmia publishes some new material from Egan family.

2010 Amrita's nephew, Vivan Sundaram, publishes most of Amrita's surviving letters and texts in English, including for the first time many translations from originals in Hungarian and French, and systematically illustrates most of her surviving works.

Bibliography of Amrita Sher-Gil

I would like to thank Vivan Sundaram & Yashodhara Dalmia for copies of their important works, and the School of Art and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and the Indian Embassy in Paris for photocopies of texts otherwise unavailable to me.

Writings by Amrita Sher-gil:

Kapur, Geeta, see 1972 issue of *Marg* below.

Sundaram, Vivan, ed. and intro., *Amrita Sher-Gil: a self-portrait in letters & writings*, 2 vols, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2010. (reprints most of her own writings, including published articles and talks & has comprehensive bibliography and catalogue. On the partial destruction and survival of her letters, and destruction of correspondence from others see vol.2, 513, 514).

Surveys and catalogues of work:

Anand, Mulk Raj, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, New Delhi: [National Gallery of Modern Art](#), 1989.

Dalmia, Yashodhara, *Amrita Sher-Gil: The Passionate Quest*, New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 2014.

Das Gupta, Prodosh, 'Contemporary Indian Art-1940s', *Marg*, Supplement to vol. XXI, no.1, December 1967.

Dhingra, Baldoon, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, New Delhi: [Lalit Kala Akademi](#), 1981.

Hodgkin, Howard, cur., *Six Indian Painters, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher-gil, M. F. Husain, K. G. Subramanyam, Bhupen Khakhar*, London: Tate Gallery, 1982.

Kapur, Geeta, ed., Special Issue *Marg*, March 1972, vol. XXV, number 2:
with essays by Vivan Sundaram, 'Amrita Sher-gil –Life and Work'; Geeta Kapur, 'The Evolution of Content in Amrita Sher-gil's paintings'; Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, 'Amrita Sher-Gil – Dialectics of Academicism and Pictorial Situation of Traditional Indian Art'; K. G. Subramanyam, 'Amrita Sher-Gil and the East-West Dilemma'; Letters and Texts of Amrita Sher-Gil.

Khandalavala, Karl J., *Amrita Sher-Gil*, Bombay: New Book Co., 1944.

Nandan, Kanhaiyalal, *Amrita Shergil: Amrita Shergil ka Jivan aur Rachana samsar*, 2000.

Salim Ahmad, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A personal view*, Istaarah Publications, 1987.

Tandan R. C., Khandalavala, Karl, et al, *The Art of Amrita Sher-Gil*, Allahabad: Block Works, Series of the Roerich Centre of Art and Culture, 1943. [posthumous catalogue of 1937 exhibition in Allahabad]

Family context:

Sundaram, Vivan, *Re-take of Amrita*, New Delhi: Tulika, 2001.

Sundaram, Vivan, *Amrita Sher-Gil: An Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century*, (with essay by Deepak Ananth) New Delhi: Photoink & München: Schirmer / Mosel, 2007.

Umrao Singh Sher-Gil: his misery and his manuscript, (Foreword by Vivan Sundaram, Essay, 'The Gaze of the Amateur' by Deepak Ananth), New Delhi: Photoink, 2008.

Biographies and related material

Dalmia, Yashodhara, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life*, New Delhi: Viking/Penguin, 2006.

Doctor, Geeta, *Amrita Sher Gil - A Painted Life*, New Delhi: Rupa 2002.

Dyvorne, Denise [née Prouteaux] 'Amrita Sher-gil, premier peintre moderne de l'Inde, I', *Magazine of the Indian Embassy Paris*, no.251, Avril 1985.

Dyvorne, Denise [née Prouteaux] 'Amrita Sher-gil, premier peintre moderne de l'Inde, II', *Agenda de l'Ambassade de l'Inde [Paris]*, no.254, Janvier/Mars 1986. [thanks to Vivianne Tourtet for these copies].

Fabri, Charles, 'Amrita Sher-gil', *The March of India*, vol.IV, no.1, 1951 (see below in Bethlenfalvy, 1980, 93-97).

Fabri, Charles, 'Notes toward a biography of Amrita Sher-Gil', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* no.2, 1965.

- Gujral, Satish, 'It was a defining moment, I went to art school,' *Outlook India*, October 20, 2008 at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?238729>].
- Gujral, Satish, *a brush with life: an autobiography*, New Delhi: Viking, 1997.
- Gujral, Satish, *The World of Satish Gujral, in his own words*, New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd, 1993.
- Muggeridge, Malcom, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, Volume Two, London: Collins, 1973, (see p.46-49, 322).
- Muggeridge, Malcom, *Like it was: the diaries of Malcom Muggeridge*, (selected & edited by John Bright-Homes) London: Collins, 1981 (see p.128-137).
- Sharma, Vishwamitra, *Famous Indians of the 20th Century*, Pustak Mahal, 2003.
- Singh, Khushwant, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice: An Autobiography*, New Delhi: Viking, 2002. (96-99)
- Singh, N. Iqbal, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Biography*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1984. *Wikipedia*, biography of Amrita Sher-Gil, accessed 12 July 2009. www.sikh-heritage.co.uk, 'Amrita Sher-gil', accessed 19 February 2009.

Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungary

- Bethenfalvy, Geza, compiled & edited, *Charles Louis Fabri, his life and works*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1980.
- Katalin, Keserù, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, Budapest: Ernst Museum & New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 2001.
- Németh, Lajos, *Modern art in Hungary*, Budapest: Corvina Press, 1969.
- Wojtilla, Gyula, *Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungary*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1981.

Other Art History

- Fer, Briony; Batchelor, David; Wood Paul, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Hulten, Pontus, commissaire général, *Les Réalismes, 1919-1939*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980 [including the essay by Jean Clair, 'Données d'un problème'].

Modern Indian History

(mostly 1910s-1990s, see also in other sections under Ravi Varma & K. C. S. Paniker).

- Masselos, Jim, *Indian Nationalism, an history*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private, (1985) 3rd revised edition 1993.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal, *An autobiography*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal, *A bunch of old letters, written mostly to Jawaharlal Nehru and some written by him*, London: Asia House, 1960.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India*, London: Meridian Books, 3rd ed., 1951
- Spear, Percival, *India: a modern history*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961.
- Spear Percival, *A History of India*, volume two, London: Penguin Books, 1965, 1970.