AMRITA SHERGIL AND HER CONTEMPORARIES

ABSTRACT

THESIS
SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
Doctor of Philosophy
IN
FINE ART

BY
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Under the Supervision of
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DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS
ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY
ALIGARH (INDIA)
2001
ABSTRACT
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The beginning of twentieth century witnessed many changes in the artistic activities of India. Emerging out of the Raja Ravi Varma era the Bengal School produced many artists of repute who synthesized the wash technique with Indian national themes. Abanindranath and his student Nandalal Bose being prominent ones. Some artists of repute however distanced themselves from the Bengal school, Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and 'Came India via West' Amrita Shergil which revolutionized the Indian art scene, brought fresh fragrance and earned world wide recognition.

Amrita Shergil, a legendary figure attracts a lot of inquisitive interest due to her bold and daring approach towards her life as well as artistic milieu. Undoubtedly she heralds a new era in Indian art world which attracted a lot of critical appreciation even during her life times. In a way she consciously or unconsciously opened a new chapter for the future generation of the artists to complete her task, as she herself was not bestowed much life to give a concrete shape to her own quest.

To analyse the work of an artist is just an effort to quench our curious mind for our own satisfaction though this effort can not in any way surpass the artist's own expression. The thesis starts with a brief account of the Medieval Indian painting in
the context of Renaissance art, the Interaction of Indian painting with European arts and goes on to describe the efforts and achievements of the legendary oil exponent Raja Ravi Varma to probe into the then status of Indian painting. It goes on to cover the Indian Renaissance and the establishment of the Nationalist School of Art, an outcome of the movement for national awareness and the considered efforts of the E.B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore. This Bengal school later groomed renowned artists such as Nandalal Bose, Kshitindranath Majumdar, Asit Kumar Haldar and Sarada Charan Ukil among others. The chapter describes their contributions and goes on to briefly discuss four leading Indian artists who remained independent of the Bengal school and who were great pioneers of Indian modernism which they backed up with their exceptionally rich and creative imagination. They are the celebrated poet Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore and the revolutionaries Jamini Roy and Amrita Shergil.

Amrita Shergil was undoubtedly a promising artist of her age whose work has been acknowledged the world over. Chapter II traces a life sketch of Amrita Shergil. Amrita, a lady Indian painter of Hungarian origin, was brought up in West but part of the blood circulating in her veins was Indian. She was born in Budapest on January 30, 1913, and her formative years passed in Europe, she was trained in Paris and on her return to India she painted several great art pieces. She was awarded
many times.

Her vast contribution to modern art, her large number of works in her limited life time are very important aspects of her career as an artist.

The chapter deals with the essence of Amrita’s whole artistic career. This chapter discusses the period which Amrita has spent in India and traces her achievements. Her effective return to India was in 1934 after which she has painted major paintings and it was then that she developed her latest and most mature Indian style. Amrita herself felt that her newer style was much better than the academic one. She visited different parts of India from North to South, and as a result her art pieces reflect the bright and glorious cultural values and artistic developments of India.

Chapter III identifies and describes Amrita’s masterpieces and deals with the themes and their treatment coordinated by the style and technique. It is both interesting and important to study an artist’s style and technique of painting. Amrita Shergil will be ever remembered for her masterly style and technique. Her paintings have a unique and individual characteristic. She is projected as the exponent of an original style rooted in the matrix of India, in its ethos and imagery, yet stridently modern in its execution with a contemporary awareness. In her very choice of the medium of oil colour, Amrita Shergil achieved a
This chapter also presents a study of the influence of Renaissance art and impact of European artists, particularly Cezanne and Gauguin. It outlines the training she received from Maestro Lucien Simon and the influences of Braque, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Hungarians Endre Ady, Margit Gasper, Bezso Szabo and Frigyes Karinthy.

The vigour of her drawing shows the immense intellectual quality of the artist. The most remarkable thing is her extraordinary brilliant ideas of composition and her sober colour scheme. She co-ordinated her magnificent colour sense and exceptional sensitivity for form into certain combinations which are great works of art. Her master-pieces, due to the action of some mysterious laws, awaken a deep emotional response in a knowledgeable student of art.

Chapter IV deals in the interpretation of the indigenous elements in Amrita's paintings and goes on to describe her concept of form and treatment of space. It has been found that in all her works simplicity and plastic effect always remained her guiding principles. This she could achieve through her conscious attempts to synthesize the principles of early Indian sculpture with those of ancient and medieval Indian Painting.

This chapter goes on to discuss Amrita's concept of form.
He treatment of form derived its earliest motivating power from Cezanne and Gauguin and later from synthesization of early sculpture with the principles of ancient and medieval Indian paintings. She almost invariably used models as she thought that simply relying on one's imagination was far too demanding. She arrived at her decisions to implement deliberately and consciously and used the people of the soil as the models of her compositions. She admitted that "consciously it is always the pictorial beauty of a scene or a face that implies me to sit down to paint it". She never abandoned the principles of her form of classicism even in her boldest experiments.

The chapter includes a study of Amrita's treatment of space in her compositions. It is found that in Amrita's work space is ordered with an absolutely clear vision. All her compositions are wonderfully 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. It is however found that her studies of single figures are not as successful as the compositions in which two or more figures have been utilized.

The last chapter describes Amrita's achievement and her recognition as an artist. It is observed that Amrita's exquisite art is organically rooted in the most valuable Indian traditions and at the same time it is both modern and international in the best sense of the words. During her training in Paris Amrita was not
only noticed, applauded and awarded for her excellent creations. But she was also elected as an associate of the Grand Salon, a rare distinction for a teenage girl of 18.

Upon her return to India in 1934 from Paris Amrita Shergil found the true atmosphere in colour and light of the East, her paintings received unusual appreciation from all art critics of substance.

Chapter goes on to discuss her famous contemporaries, recognised for their originality and their impact on the state of modern Indian art. Efforts of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and some other modern artist of that age who contributed in Indian Renaissance such as George Keyt, Krishna K. Hebbar, and Sailoz Mookherjea find brief description, and a profactory note on their art. Chapter V also contains the conclusion. It is brought out that notwithstanding serious negative criticisms that have been put forward from one critic or the other, Amrita retains her legendary status, through her captivating and stimulating creations, even almost after 60 years of her death someone rightly observed her as a "national treasure,“. The appendices attempt at enlisting Amritas paintings and the Bibliography.
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AMRITA SHERGIL

(1913 – 1941)
I dedicate this work
to my parents
for all the pride they takes in me,
The faith they imposes in me,
and for all that they means to me.
CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Ms. Talat Shakeel student of Ph.D. has completed her thesis entitled "Amrita Shergil and her contemporaries", under my supervision.

To the best of my knowledge and belief that this research 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.

(Dr. Sirtaj Rizvi)
CHAIRMAN
Deptt. of Fine Arts
A.M.U., Aligarh
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(Talat Shakeel)
Chapter- 1

Introduction
# LIST OF PAINTINGS DISPLAYED IN INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF PAINTINGS</th>
<th>ARTIST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 1: From left to Right</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(i) Mother and Child</td>
<td>Krishna K. Hebber</td>
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<td>(iii) Three Pujarins</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iv) Sati</td>
<td>Nandalal Bose</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Row 2: From left to Right</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Women</td>
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<td>Sailoz Mokherjea</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iv) Gopini</td>
<td>Jamini Roy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Row 3: From left to Right</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Camels</td>
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INTRODUCTION

MEDIEVAL INDIAN PAINTING: CONTEXT OF RENAISSANCE ART AND RAJA RAVI VARMA

Europeans, beginning with Vasco Da Gama's sea voyage to the Malabar coast towards the end of the fifteenth century, started coming to India in numbers as traders, missionaries, envoys, travellers, fortune seekers and adventures. Their contact with the ruling classes, nobles, traders, scholars and general masses and their subsequent interaction with them, their culture, their arts and traditions led to many an exchange of the then state-of art to mutual benefits which resulted in adoption and adaptation of techniques and forms, science and culture, religious tolerance and growth of academic endeavours.

The Indian response during the first two centuries of this interaction is very fascinating and revealing when we study the Imperial Mughal school in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which flourished under royal patronage of the Mughal dynasty.

It is a natural conjecture that the art in this era should have a deep influence of the then persian art given that there was a continued flux of art and artists from persian mainland and royal patronage could be secured with comparative ease.

However this period has been described rather a 'hybrid blend' of east and West and Wilkinson observes that European share in Mughal painting was greater and more permanent than that of Persia, an influence not always fully recognised.
Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) is said to have been interested in the exotic aspect of art. Perhaps it was one of the most weighty factors in the development of mughal paintings, especially when we bring it face to face with European art. As the influx of Europeans, became more organised when three official Jesuit missions arrived at emperor Akbar's court between 1580 and 1605.

Even before the arrival of the three official Jesuit missions between 1580 and 1605 at his court, Akbar had contact with Europeans in 1573, and again in 1578. It is expected that Akbar could have acquired some specimens of European art during this period. The reception accorded to the three Jesuit missions provided ample opportunities to the court artists to familiarize themselves with the themes and techniques of the European art. The first Jesuit mission from Goa led by Rudolph, Aquaviva and Monserrate presented to Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri in 1580, a copy of the seven volumes, out of eight, of paintings Polyglot Bible, written in five languages and illustrated with engravings, of religious subjects, executed largely by Italianised Flemish artists, who most probably belonged to the Quentin Matsys School (1466-1531). There volumes remained in the Imperial Mughal Library for fifteen years, till 1595. Besides these volumes, Akbar possessed other Bible and concordances, works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius, and of scholastic writers, etc. Monserrate showed Akbar many illustrated sacred books when the latter was marching towards Kabul. Apart from books the Emperor was

presented with many independent paintings on several occasions by the Jesuits.

Patronage to European art was also accorded by the nobles and high officials of the Mughal Emperors. For example during Akbar's reign, 'Aziz Koka' a renowned noble desired on two occasions to have a copy of the 'Madonna' and 'The Christ', presented to him. Exotic paintings were also acquired by Muqarrab Khan, Kamalu Hasan, Asaf Khan, Mirza Beg among others nobles. Similarly Akbar's successors, Jahangir (1602-1627) and Shahjahan (1628-1657) both displayed a great enthusiasm in acquiring paintings from Europe and in their imitations. These examples suffice to indicate the trend of opportunities available to the elite for acquainting themselves with exotic art. Non elite sections of the society also came into contact with the European art by exhibition of churches thrown open to the public. Jesuit fathers in 1580 set up a chapel within the palace enclosure at Fatehpur sikri and exhibited a copy of the Madonna of St. Luke which drew a large crowd. Again, in 1602 they exhibited at Agra a copy of the Madonna del Popolo. These exhibitions provided opportunities to the people to get an exposure to the European paintings.

The Indian artist picked up so much so that the subject matter and themes derived from the Old or New Testaments could easily be traced in the works of the Mughal court artists. It is found that the theme, 'Madonna and Child Christ' was very popular at the Mughal atelier. It is

observed that a large number of the European paintings and drawings were either carefully copied or adopted and modified or reinterpreted by several Indian artists under the Mughal patronage.

The Indian artists were quick to notice the difference between their own two dimensional paintings and three dimensional European paintings. They soon began to appreciate both the linear and atmospheric perspectives found in European art. It was however only after 1575 that the elements of European perspective began to be consciously employed in Indian art on a modest scale⁴.

The methods of light and shade and chiaroscuro effect, strong features of European art, soon became acceptable to the Indian artists. Gradually the deep shading and heavy modelling become a conspicuous feature of the art of Indian artist. Nevertheless they did not prefer 'Oil Medium' for painting and adhered to the conventional technique of tempera painting. It is recorded that when Sir Thomas Roe presented a picture executed in oil medium to Jahangir, he did not like it since it was executed in oil pigments. This Imperial rejection seems to have sent a message to the artist too who worked for the royal patron. This trend continued till the close of seventeenth century. It is also found that the Deccan centres of painting which were not patronised by the Great Mughals also did not remain unaffected by the influences of European art. Similarly the Rajasthani, Pahari and Sikh schools of painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also show fascination for the European themes and techniques of art.

⁴ Qaiser, A.J., Indian Response to European Technology and Culture, New Delhi, 1982, p. 95.
Further, many a change were introduced in the field of art with the activities of the British East India company which was established on 31 December 1600 AD\textsuperscript{5}.

The impact of Europe brought in an entirely new set of conditions. The Europeans who came to India had no ‘intention of settling in India and appear to not have been really interested in a cultural synthesis between East and West.'\textsuperscript{6} The contact of India with Britishers brought about certain changes in many directions and did affect the indigenous artistic expression. The British artists having had some education at some school of Art, were trained in European modes and trends of Expressions.

The Britishers often commissioned Indian artist to work for them. One such glaring example is of an album preserved at V & A, London, made in 1774 for Colonel Gentil, who between 1763 and 1775 worked for Shujauddaula (1754-75). Gentil employed a group of Indian artists to make paintings for himself, illustrating the manners and customs of the people of India. Besides these paintings also provided a fascinating account of life at the court. These paintings clearly show how Indian artists were adapting European techniques and the style to suit a European patron. Thus, there emerged a realistic style imbued with physical reality\textsuperscript{7}.

In the latter part of 17th century the school of Rajputana was also affected with a certain amount of European influence but the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} National Exposition of Contemporary Art, New Delhi, 1991, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Mukherjee, Ajit, Art of India, Calcutta, 1952, p. 34.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Archer, M., Company painting, USA. 1992, p. 44.
\end{itemize}
influence does not seem to have penetrated an artist's soul. The natural isolation of the Punjabi hills prevented the influences from touching the art of the Kangra valley till the beginning of the 19th Century. Nevertheless, the art which flourished in the Punjab plains, during the Sikh period largely influenced by the Kangra, Guler and Jammu School of Hill painting, got seriously mixed up with elements of European art, resulting in the neglect of the traditional quality and peculiarities of the great Kangra school. By the middle of the 19th century, the tradition of Indian painting came to be thoroughly neglected and the unsettled conditions of the times and the want of patronage brought about a complete deadlock in art. This interaction of European art with the traditional art seriously affected artistic organism of the country. Copying of European paintings and the imitation of the European techniques changed the traditional modes trends and ideas of painting. The accumulative result of such endeavours of imitation can be seen in its true aspect in the latter part of the 19th century when we come face to face with a conscious effort to give a new turn to Indian pictorial art under European masquerade by the great Indian artist Ravi Varma who felt the desirability of bringing fresh ideas in Indian art.

It is not out of place to observe that whatever any painter of substance derives from various traditions gets assimilated in his work and becomes a part of his expression. Subsequently, his work does not just represent borrowed styles. The artist must master ancient techniques

and his passion should breath spirit into his work. All these features were perhaps best represented by Raja Ravi Varma who became immensely popular when he applied European methods and techniques of painting to execute the Indian Mythological subjects.

It was in 1868 that Theodore Jenson, a portrait painter of Dutch origin, visited Ayilyam Thirunal's court at Travancore with a letter of commendation from Sir John Lawrence, the then Viceroy. It is observed that it was not uncommon with the European portrait painters of those days who probably were not too successful at home, to come to India and extol in gold and velvet the pillars of the British Raj in all their paraphernalia, the Rajas and Maharajas wreathed in oriental splendour, the nobles, merchants, princes, and the nouveau rich, in return for fabulous fees and costly presents. The Indian clientele, in particular, deemed it an honour to be painted by European artist, for these were times when the elite of the country cultivated British tastes most assiduously, and longed to be treated as 'civilised' by the British masters. The style they brought with them, was the Academic Realism then in vogue in Britain and the European main land and this was obviously pleasing to the sitters as it did justice to their 'likeness'. The beauty of oil colour used lent and added glitter to the visages and costumes of the subjects and this too, the sitters found flattering. Other than these professional portrait painters, there were other British artists working in India, notably Tilly, Kettle and Wilson in the 18th century, and Hadges the Daniells, uncles and nephew, Chennery, Ainsley and others in the 19th century. Mostly they painted the landscape to be shown to the British
at home, to give them an idea of the country over which they ruled. These works were seldom seen in public in India.

Jenson was commissioned by the Maharaja of Travancore, who admired the young artist in Raja Ravi Varma, to do some portraits of him and his beautiful consort Nagercoil Ammachi. The Maharaja desired that Jenson give lessons in painting to his young protege, Raja Ravi Varma. Though Jenson declined to fulfil Maharaja's desire yet he could be persuaded to allow Raja Ravi Varma to hang around while he worked on his subjects. Ravi Varma watched him at painting and observed closely his methods for about a month, but art of mixing colours was never told to Ravi Varma. Evidently Jenson did not like to pass on to an Indian any knowledge that could bring an Indian clearly at par with him and thus his position as an Artist is challenged and his access to the royalty threaten Ravi Varma hardly derived much from Jenson. He however did get the psychological satisfaction that he had some training. The interaction with Jenson was all that Ravi Varma ever received a formal training in art or otherwise, in the European style of painting.

Apart from this he had access to the albums of some Italian masters of the European Renaissance. The European artists who interested him were Frenchmen, Louis Boulanger, Gustay Boulanger and Adolf Borguereau - all his contemporaries. The prints of these artists were available in India at that time and having nothing better to compare then with Raja Ravi Varma probably took them for major achievements of

Western Arts. It would seem that Ravi Varma was particularly fascinated
by the female figure of the elder Boulanger by Borguereaus Triumph of
Venus and Charity both of which were available in popular engravings.¹⁰
To sum up, it is clear from the above description that Indian painters
much before Raja Ravi Varma, had already acquired the knowledge of
European techniques of painting. Further, the Mughal artists did not
practise oil medium and worked throughout in tempera technique.

In case of Raja Ravi Varma it is explicit that he mastered not only
the European techniques but also largely accepted the oil medium.
However, he never attempted at the European themes, while we find that
the European themes are the subjects of many a Mughal painter’s work.

RAJA RAVI VARMA (1848-1906)

Raja Ravi Varma was born on April 29, 1848 in Kilamanoor, a small
hamlet in Kerala and was a member of the ruling family of Travancore¹¹.

He was extraordinary and even as a boy of five or six would fill the
walls of his home with pictures of animals and vignettes from every day
life. His uncle Raja Raja Varma was an artist himself who spotted, the
signs of a genius in the making. There was no formal schooling for Ravi
Varma; his uncle took keen interest in him and taught the first lessons in
pictures making, especially drawing. Raja Raja Varma gave his nephew

¹⁰. Venniyoor, E.M., Raja Ravi Varma, The Government of Kerala, India,
¹¹. Chaitanya, K., Raja Ravi Varma, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi,
1960, p.3
all the lessons he could, but it was not much considering that he was himself an amateur and painting to him was no more than a hobby. However, the young Ravi Varma persisted, his ability to convey likeness improved, and his lines developed a rare sensibility.

Ravi Varma was brought to the Travancore capital in 1862, to participate in the royal swayamvaram, where the bride chooses her groom from an array of youngsters. Ravi Varma was rejected there. He perceived the rejection as a blessing in disguise and later he would tell his brother, Raja Raj Varma, “Would the world have come to know of me, had I confined myself to the cozy and tranquillising comforts of a royal groom”.

In May, 1862 Ravi Varma was taken to Thiruvananthapuram where he was to stay and learn oil painting. Ravi Varma's house was situated near Thevarathu Koik Kal palace, inside the Thiruvananthapuram fort. This was an ideal atmosphere for the painter. The king, Ayilam Thirunal took great personal interest in nurturing Ravi Varma's talent and exposed him to the famous paintings of Italian painters.

The training at Thiruvananthapuram lasted for about nine years. But Ravi Varma knew that he had a long way to go before he could achieve excellence in oil painting. In 1866 Ravi Varma, having been married in the same years, received a gift of oil box from Kerala Varma who was to later make a big name in the annals of Malayalam literature and was married to Rani Lakshmi Bai, elder sister of Ravi Varma's wife.

Poorooruttati Nall Tampuratty. Ravi Varma used the oil colours to paint Kerala Verma and his wife and this was his first earnest attempt at portraiture, and as it turned out, the result found favour with the sitters. Ravi Varma also painted the portraits of another young couple, Atlingal Mootha Thampuran and his wife, Sethu-Lakshmi Bai, using a concoction consisting of olive oil and several other things. He kept on and on for nine years and handled his created paints through an encouraging phase of trial and error. Ravi Varma learnt the technique of mixing colours and could create a likeness without effort, could compare and construct with a sense of balance, and for the first time in the annals of Indian Art, mastered and introduced the principle of perspective.

The only person is Travancore who knew the technique of oil painting was the palace artist Ramaswami Naicker. Ravi Varma once approached him to illustrate certain aspects of oil painting. Naicker refused to help him. This rejection only strengthened Varma's resolve to became an oil painter of greater repute. Another painter in the Capital, Naicker's student, Anumugham Pillai did want to help Ravi Varma, but could not do so without the consent of his guru. He would stealthy share his knowledge with Ravi Varma. In 1868, when Theodore Jensen, a portrait painter of Dutch origin was commissioned by the king to do some portraits, he also like Naicker, refused to teach Ravi Varma, for probably identical reasons. Soon, Ravi Varma painted the portrait of the Governor of Madras, then the Duke of Buckingham. The day the portrait was unveiled, European Painters were also present. They were taken a back

at the beauty and excellence of the painting. The grateful and knowledgeable Governor did not spare words to applaud and appreciate the young artist.

Ravi Varma however was not satisfied with his modest efforts and feeling the need of perfection in his technique, he went for meditation at the Mookambia Temple with a desire to be an oil painter of repute. It was only after that that Ravi Varma met Kizhokke palat. Krishna Menon, the Sub judge of the Calicut court, painted his portrait and received the first remuneration for his art14.

Subsequently Ravi Varma returned to Trivandrum, to resume his art. His working method was an art in itself.

Ravi Varma received a lot of encouragement from his royal patron Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal presented the highest honour of Vira Sringhala to Ravi Varma for his portraits of the king and his wife. This was for the first time a Vira Sringhala award was presented for painting. Where Governor's gold medal was awarded to Ravi Varma for his "Nair Lady at the Toilet".

In 1873, the Madras Governor Lord Hobart organised an International art show. Ravi Varma exposed his extraordinary sense of Arts, when he painted a typical Kerala beauty and went to Madras to participate in the competition. He took two pictures to Madras. During 1879 and 1880 he was busy in painting portraits of different classes.

Further he plunged into painting such themes as "Nala Damayanti", "Shantanu and Matsyagandha", "Shantanu and Ganga", "Radha and Madhava", "Kasma Maya", "Shrikrishan and Devaki" "Subhadra", "Draupadi Vastraharan", "Harishchandran and Taramati", "Vishwamitra and Menka", "Sita Swayamvaram", "Young Bharat and Lion Cub" and so on.

There is no doubt that Indian painting came under the West orbit mainly with Raja Ravi Varma who was the pioneer of oil technique in India 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 subjects 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.

Along with this achievement the radical vision of the new "realism" implicit to the European techniques was accommodated. Indian painters abandoned religion and mythology and turned to earthy subjects of more immediate experiences. Even Raja Ravi Varma some times painted subjects like poverty.

In 1894, Ravi Varma's lithographic press started rolling in Bombay. During 1902 Ravi Varma remained in Travancore for eight months and in October Ravi Varma visited his own lithographic press for the last time. He went to Madras from Bombay and painted some more pictures.

16. Joseph, James, Modern Indian Painting, Indian Art Since the Early 40's a Search for Identity, Madras, 1974, pp. 24-25
painted the portrait of the Madras Governor Havelock and presented it to the Memorial Committee. Ravi Varma was immensely praised by Havelock.

Before it all Ravi Varma painted the portrait of Rajput warrior Maharana Pratap Singh based on miniature. He also painted portraits based on photographs.

The year 1903 was also memorable as the year of the publication of his first biography “Ravi Varma, The Indian artist”, a small book with a brief account of his life and twenty three monochromes. The Madras Art exhibition of 1904 was the last show for which Ravi Varma sent pictures directly. When the Mysore King wanted Ravi Varma to paint the Kheda operation of scaring elephants in order to please King George who was fond of hunting, Ravi Varma returned home where he completed the Kheda pictures as well as “Kadambari playing upon the Veena”. Through the oleographs coming from Ravi Varma Press, Ravi Varma's paintings became very popular. He received excellence in both portraits and composition. Both types of works prove his merit as an exceedingly sensitive and competent artist. No other Indian painter, till today, has been able to supersede Ravi Varma in portraiture, in the oil medium. He could add an extra ordinary grace to the sitter's personality capturing minute details like different shades of complexion, individual facial expression and even textures of different fabrics, rendering a rare tactile quality never achieved in India before or after.
In his compositions the elements of depth, shadow and perspective pictorially apprehend the real and this could not be achieved by any of the traditional forms then available to the artist. These possibilities of realism were first and most successfully achieved in the oil portraits by Ravi Varma. He became a professional painter by breaking away from his family tradition and he worked under the constraints of traditional craftsman inspite of the liberal patronage of the elite. The years from 1870 to 1878 brought several important portrait compositioins of the Indian aristocracy and British officials. 

Ravi Varma has rooted himself in the British Tradition of academic painting. It is with this background of the western academic tradition that the Indian art was epitomized in the work of Raja Ravi Varma and some other artists of that age. Ravi Varma has painted lots of mythological paintings in academic style. But Ravi Varma's work was also influenced by the Sanskrit dramatic poetry, the Kathakali and the Parsi-Urdu- Gujarati theatre which was very popular between 1860 by 1905.

Along with his portraitures he very successfully painted many an Indian women based on live models, e.g.

— ‘The Malabaer (Malabar) beauty’,
— ‘Amma, Papa is coming’,

— 'A Muslim lady at her Toilet',
— 'Bride proceeding to the Pandal',
— 'A parsi beauty',
— 'The Karuvanar of South India',
— 'Remembering a sister,
— 'A Marathi women by the well side',
— 'A singer in Bombay',
— 'Maharastrian beauty' etc.

Illusionist oil painting technique had empowered Ravi Varma with a means of capturing the physical presence of the painted object. Where women's images were concerned the technique particularly allowed him to play up the sensuality and fullness of their bodies as well as the tactile gloss of their costumes and jewellery. He had in his paintings to make a passage from Western to Indian, from the real to the iconic. Today when the medium is taken for granted, a hundred years back it was like a discovery for an almost self taught artist. It was the perfect medium for Ravi Varma where form was given meaning because of the substances which acquired relevance. His efforts are a mix of indigenous and Western elements, while he chose the grammar of the European salon, the gloss he put on its was recognisable Indian. This pictorial language gave him the power to represent a colonial experience. Ravi Varma had attained his goal as a national hero. Tacitly accepted as the painter to the Raj, he was the only artist to receive the ultimate imperial accolade, Kaiser-i-Hind.
At the same time Ravi Varma was feted by Congress as the painter who helped in nation building. Unlike traditional painters in receiving an idea, in grasping a situation clearly and enacting upon it swiftly, Ravi Varma's example created an aura around the profession of an artist.

INDIAN RENAISSANCE AND THE NATIONALIST SCHOOL OF ART

Basil Gray the noted author observes in his 'The Art of India' that "Modern Indian art is an out growth of European colonization and by the same circumstance it is hybrid, split at the root. Personal and cultural identity are always reciprocally determined. In India the need for a national identity arose even as the intelligentsia assimilated the modern concept of a unique individuality."\(^\text{21}\)

Indian painting reached almost a dead end towards the close of the nineteenth century as the ancient Mughal and Pahari schools had both exhausted their vitality so that an arid lack of spirit and mere formalism pervaded Indian art at that time. Towards the beginning of twentieth century, these major indigenous movements of Indian art, had been pushed out through the impact of European naturalistic art, which was becoming the order of the day in India. The various folk and Bazar styles of course continued, but even they were affected, to some extent, by the European influence. In the schools of art, attached to the various teaching institutions of India, Greek and Roman models were being copied by the students according to the curriculum of education which the British had introduced.\(^\text{22}\) After the British conquest there was no serious art form that could attract an all Indian audience. Towards

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the end of the nineteenth century, however, a movement for national awareness was also beginning to take shape where in some prominent liberal Britishers and enlightened Indians did do a certain amount of heart searching. They argued the 'definition' of 'art and tradition' and debated the relation of art to nationalism and as a result there of Indian creativity began to stir again around 1900. The said movement started an interpretation of Indian life and vision through Indian eyes. The early champion of this first renaissance was the noted artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) who is famous for his mythological and epic works such as Ravana and Jatya and who reintroduced Indian subjects and cherished national ideals and visions. Others with reputation who followed in the steps of Raja Ravi Varma were Dhurandhar in Maharashtra and Mukherjee and J. P. Gangooly in Bengal and their art, based on visual realism, was confined to portraiture, landscape and imaginative composition inspired by Indian mythology. Their art was, however "not the art that touches the life of masses but did rouse some interest about the art of painting among the educated gentry."

It was a first step. The next step forward, from national themes to a national style, proved to be more difficult.

This was the time when government aided schools of art were established in the presidency towns of Madras (1850), Calcutta, (1854) Bombay (1857) and Lahore (1875) with a view to understand form and finish in the objects of daily use and taste of Indian people at large, and

several artists of repute were recruited to practice, teach and experiment with art. When the noted British teacher and accomplished artist E.B. Havell came to India and became the principal of the Calcutta School of Arts (1896), after heading the Madras School (1884-96), an important vital element got infused into Indian painting. Havell was the first Englishman to appreciate Indian art for its own values and he and his colleague, Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1915), self consciously put themselves against the idea of copying the Greek and Roman models, and such other imitative efforts as were in practice in the Calcutta school. Havell was a theosophist by inclination and had a deep regard and reverence for India’s past. Abanindranath Tagore was sympathetic to the Brahmo faith, which was a kind of synthesis of the Sanatan Dharma with modern European developments, and was current in the middle class society of Bengal in those days. The two teachers put emphasis on recapturing the great spiritual past of India which resulted in inspiring their Indian students to look back in their origin. All these efforts resulted in what came to be identified as the Bengal school. Later this school was referred to as nationalist school of arts. The Bengal school thus represents the first important art trends of modern time after what was comparatively a dark age.

Bengal school originated with the devoted creative activity and concerted efforts of Abanindranath Tagore, and readily this school got national status in the field of art. The name Bengal school applies to a

style rather than a regional development or period of time. When Abanindranath Tagore became the principal of the school of art at Calcutta after Havell he continued with the Havell doctrine to inspire Indian artists to look back in to their origin. Besides an Indian Society of Oriental Art was formed in Calcutta 1907 and was an association of Indian and European gentlemen.

ABANINDRANATH TAGORE (1871-1915)

Abanindranath Tagore was born in 1871 at Jarasanke, the Tagore residence in Calcutta. Abanindranath's formal education consisted of some years, spent at the Calcutta Sanskrit College (1881-1890) which groomed his understanding and love of Indian classics. At this stage he also came across a few Irish illustrations and an album of Mughal miniatures, and between these two trends of art, one foreign and the other inland, Abanindranath's discerning eye found some strange affinity, and a new gate to the world of art opened wide before him and he created a new series of Radha-Krishna paintings. Though the subject matter remained traditional, he adopted some features of folk style also. In 'Krishna Slaying the Horse Kesu', the dynamic quality is notable and the animals, birds and people stand out in straight forward simplicity. In his 'Sita' we see the embodiment of a national ideal. The European and Japanese influence can be traced in 'The Banished Yaksha', 'The passing of Shahjahan', 'Siddas of the Upper Air',

'Aurangzeb examining the Head of Dara', etc. but the significance of these paintings is in their essential Indianness\(^2\). Abanindranath's teaching methods were widely appreciated in Bengal school. Though he was tolerant yet he insisted that the students should have sound knowledge of their own historic culture. His pioneering efforts gave a new direction to Indian art, ably carried on by his students. He served the art of painting as a promulgator and teacher of art. He created a batch of brilliant students such as Kshitindra Nath Majumdar, Sarada Charan Ukil and Asit Kumar Haldar followed by a host of later practitioners. This trend was thought to be more truly Indian. Each of them derived different techniques and a highly personal style. Several were appointed as principals of the various art schools spread over the country and they influenced art throughout India for several years. They favoured the wash technique, developed and mastered by their influential teacher, Abanindranath Tagore.

**NANDALAL BOSE (1882-1966)**

After Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose is acknowledged as the major painter of Bengal school. He had great respect for the Indian tradition not only in art but also in life, and so he treated mythological themes more realistically. His constant reference to reality gave added vigour to his paintings. In 1910 he visited Ajanta and the Bagh caves having been commissioned by Lady Herringham to copy Ajanta murals. His best works are undoubtedly rooted in the cultured ethos associated

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with Indian art inspite of his many eclectic paintings. His forms were conventional and linear and could show bold and free use of brush under the influence of Chinese and Japanese arts besides exhibiting an intense feeling for designs based on stylized forms of flora and fauna. He was also the first exponent of tempera technique which was also adopted by some of his contemporaries. Nandlal however stands tall among his contemporaries with an abundance of creative genius of a master mind.

OTHERS

Kshitindra Nath Majumdar, one of the early disciples of Abanindranath showed promise and acquired fame for the impressive simplicity in his pictures. His paintings reflect the joys and sorrows, the customs and gatherings, the religious leaders and the people of the rural Bengal, where he grew up. Using the wash technique of Abanindranath Tagore, Kshitindranath's skill manifests itself in the emotive quality of his line. Majumdar's artistic talent is cherished for its native realism and gentle Indian flavour.

Asit Kumar Haldar, another distinguished disciple of Abanindranath Tagore was different from his colleagues in his wealth of style and subject-matter. In early stage of his career he made so many copies of the paintings at Ajanta, Bagh and Jogimara using tempera, oil or water colour whichever suited to the requirements of the subject as his medium. In the process he also discovered a special technique lacquered painting on wood also known as lacsit. 28

Sarada Charan Ukil was also among the foremost artists of the renaissance movement who painted in the traditional style but with a novelty. In beginning he would paint rural life in black and white only. Afterwards he painted religious, historical and general themes.

Students of Havell and Abanindranath, became teachers in the Art School at various places in India, and almost groomed and brought up two generations of students blindly to believe in the lifeless, over sentimentalised and spiritual figures of their paintings, as the models of progress. And with the rise in the intensity of the British contempt for India's culture this so called 'national art of India', which was mainly revivalist, went on the defensive and pitted itself against Europe as a 'spiritual art' against the 'materialist naturalism' of the west. The alien British rulers did not offer too many opportunities for artists to acquaint themselves with what was happening during the last three decades in Europe so that the Indian artists grew up in solitary isolation, clinging to the illusions of India's mighty past, making romantic gestures to prove how deep and profound were the symbols of Hindu religion and how deep were the impulses behind Indian art. They even did not look at the formal aspects of the gigantic Indian tradition in painting and sculpture. It was pointed out that "The consequences of this revivalism, helped by the pioneer critics, have been tragic in the extreme though, perhaps, the tragedy has an air of inevitability about it."29

The Bengal School would insist on form as one of the artist's main

preoccupations, and would seek significance in story telling and a spiritual symbology, of the most abstruse kind. It was a movement in which few of the artists actually believed, except decoratively. Because of these and some other basic drawbacks this so called Bengal School could not remain alive for long and came to an end by the last days of its moving spirit and founder – the maestro Abanindranath Tagore. However the contributions and efforts done by the artists of the Bengal School for the renaissance movement shall ever remain alive in the history of Indian art. The significance of the Bengal school lay in the fact that the art style became a symbol of cultural renaissance and national aspirations, for independence and emancipation from foreign rule, and took almost the form of a cult. It appears as though emissaries were sent to all corners of India with the message of a new awakening and very soon the style manifested interesting accents of regional variations blended with local legends and folklore\(^{30}\). However the new and younger generation soon revolted against orthodox sentimentalism and curiously, and as it happened in Bengal itself. Jamini Roy attempted to synthesize his gift for colour and line with the realities of village life, and his Calcutta group of younger contemporaries, Rathin Moitra, Pradosh Das Gupta, Gopal Ghose and others revolting against the revivalists began to question the premises of the older generation. It was then that Amrita Shergil registered her arrival and synthesized through her genius, a modern colour sense with a deep, almost

harrowing sensitiveness to the sadness of India's people.\textsuperscript{31} She could discover the sorrow of Indian villages and their sufferings.

During the first half of the twentieth century, of the number of painters who remained independent of the Bengal School, Gaganendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Shergil were prominent and outstanding. These four leading artists were great pioneers of Indian modernism, which they backed up with their exceptionally rich and creative imagination.

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE (1861-1941)**

First among them to be noticed was the celebrated poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) whose style was all his own, even if it was said to have been inspired by that of Paul Klee who too had an equally strong sense of rhythm. Rabindranath Tagore was thus the first man in India who painted in Modern style. His pictures have three common essential features:

(i) they are unmistakably modern in style and feeling,

(ii) they are entirely individual, and

(iii) they are very Indian.

Rabindranath Tagore did not lean on myth or legend for his inspiration. It may be remarked that as Rabindranath did not undergo any regular training, he was also free from preoccupation with technique which occasionally obscure rather than serve to express the

inner vision. Designed with extreme simplicity, many of his compositions, especially the head studies, have a broading subjectivity, a charge of talent meaning carried up from, the depth of the subconscious. Expressionism today derives ample prestige from his example. He was a 'natural'.

GAGANENDRANATH TAGORE (1867-1938)

Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938) was technically more adept. He realised that wash was not the only technique with possibilities. He had drawn black and white sketches. His works reveal versatility and his brush drawings bear Japanese trends. In choice of subjects, and their interpretation, he was first in India to caricature social facts and evils and made experiments in semi-cubistic pictures. He also did a large number of portraits with a brush drawing technique. His landscapes, in monochrome or soft dull shades, are the most naturalistic of his works. His later semi abstract works mostly portray the exterior of houses, silent and uninhabited, such as 'the desolate house'. Abstraction dominates Gaganendranath's cubist work. Where the elements cannot be recognised, small angular shapes are manipulated in such way as to create the impression of movement on the canvas. Gaganendranath gave confidence to many younger artists who felt that conformity to revivalist practice would not help them to express themselves freely.

32. Goetz, H., Art of the world, Indian Art through Ages, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Delhi, 1959, p. 46.
Jamini Roy, the distinguished master artist from Bengal was painfully dissatisfied with the prevailing academic style and with city life and turned to the folk art of Bengal for his inspiration. At first the Bazar paintings of Kalighat, a suburb of Calcutta, drew his attention. He gave a modern accent to an old tradition after pioneer efforts in the western manner which completely failed to satisfy him. Jamini Roy emerged from a crisis of the spirit in 1921 with an intense desire to evolve a more vigorously expressive style. Revivalist doctrine and practice did not find favour with him because he noticed their tendency to lean heavily on literary associations and the anemia which affected the vision of form in the case of the less gifted among their ranks. In Bankura, the folk tradition was still vigorous in spirit of the encroachments of industrialisation so that he went back for inspiration to the 'Pat' and 'scroll' the clay dolls and pottery decorations of humble village artisans. If his art was revitalised by refreshing itself at the fountains in which originate the streams of folk art traditions, these in turn underwent significant transformations in his hands. From about 1925 Jamini Roy started painting, in the glowing colours and flowing curves of this style, those subjects that really mattered to him. His manner was daringly simple. His compositions had all the subtlety of the mature artist. His vigorous, coherent statement of form mediates

34. Goetz, H, Art of the world, Indian Art through Ages, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Delhi, 1959, p. 46.
today between the younger artists and the folk art tradition to which they turn for inspiration.

Jamini Roy continued to paint village subjects, studied and painted the magnificent physique of the Santhals to turn later to the theme of the life of Christ only to return to his earlier style, i.e. to the subject of Bengali village art.

AMRITA SHERGIL (1913-1941)

The greatest among all these rising young artists who distanced themselves from the Bengal School was the outstanding Amrita Shergil. Because of her extraordinary drawing and painting abilities Amrita came to be known as the most remarkable personality in the field of modern Indian art. In her short life time this talented lady painter made a revolutionary entry in the Indian art world so that a radical change emerged.

Even with their sustained and long directed efforts the British rulers were not able to introduce western technique in India. Amrita however introduced the western technique of oil painting in India very smoothly (easily). Her effort was highly successful. She lead from the front.

Trained in Paris, Amrita declared on her return to India that she was keenly interested in Indian traditions and culture. She made numerous masterpieces. Some of her marvellous paintings are 'Hill Men', 'Hill Women', 'Child Wife', 'Banana Seller', 'Women on the Charpai' and 'South Indian Villager Going to the Market', etc. Amrita
was deeply curious for simplified naturalism, for fulfilment of her mission to project the India of her perception. She did new experiments not only in technique but also in her choice of subjects. She gave an entirely new touch to art with the assimilation of Indian tradition and western technique of oil, going for rural beauties and village life. As Gauguin searched Tahitian women Amrita discovered India's rich traditions. Amrita died at Lahore in 1941, at a premature bare young age of twentynine after having lived out her life in a mood of intense dedication and having revealed that modernism can generate as religious and ardent a loyalty as revivalism. Amrita was an ideal artist. Her creative, expressive and emotional imaginative power is clearly visible in her paintings. She was more than successful in expressing them in real sense, and her paintings justified her passion for India and the Indian people.

Her early death and subsequent political developments leading to partition and Independence of India in 1947 left indelible marks on her young contemporaries who followed in her footsteps to make some of her dreams come of age.
Chapter- 2

Amrita Shergil a legend
**LIST OF PAINTINGS DISPLAYED IN AMRITA**

**SHERGIL A LEGEND**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF PAINTINGS</th>
<th>ARTIST</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 1: From left to Right</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Village Scene</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Haldi Grinders</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) The Swing</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 2: From left to Right</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(i) Siesta</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Horse and Groom</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 3: From left to Right</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) The Ancient Story Teller</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Elephant Promenade</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Hill Scene</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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AMRITA SHERGIL: A LIFE SKETCH

Amrita Shergil, a legend in the history of Modern Indian Art, a pure Indian spirit, was born on 30th January 1913, in Budapest, the beautiful capital of Hungary. Budapest, situated on the banks of the river Danube, is about four century old and is famous for its scenic beauty with the snow clad Duea hills in the background, and is quite modern. Her father was Sardar Umrao Singh Majithia. Umrao Singh's father a renowned warrior who first fought with the Sikhs against the British but later fought on the British side and rewarded with the title of a Raja and was given lands and estates in Punjab and U.P. Umrao Singh's brother was the famous Sir Sunder Singh Majithia who served as minister in the undivided Punjab for several years and set up sugar factories in Saraya in the Gorakhpur where he had consolidated his land and holdings.

Umrao Singh, a man of philosophical bent, was a great scholar of Sanskrit and Persian, studied philosophy and religion, dabbled in Astronomy, spoke five languages with ease and passion for his hobbies—carpentry and photography. He was a great admirer of Tolstoy. He met the charming and beautiful mother of Amrita and Indira, his two daughters at a party in Simla in 1911. They fell in love and married and after their marriage they left for Budapest, where Amrita was born. Her mother Marie Antoinette O'Gottesman came from a well to do family. She was an accomplished musician and an opera singer of repute. She was later known as Madame Sher-Gil and had quite a
few artist on her side of family. Amrita was born just before the outbreak of the first world war which completely transformed the political map of Eastern Europe with a great impact on Hungarian social life. The Hungarian society was feudal and the economy, by and large was capitalist oriented, the main source of livelihood of the majority of people being agriculture. In the field of culture, the trend was towards liberalism.

It was a climate of political instability that the Shergil family settle in Dunaharaszti found itself in at the outbreak of first world war which improved their financial position so that they shifted to the Grand Hotel in Margaret Island, in Budapest, and lived a life of luxury for a while. They, however, had to go back to their family in Dunaharaszti and it was in the picturesque environs of Dunaharaszti that Amrita began to draw with coloured pencils and in the words of her mother "it was remarkable how well she could copy all the toys around her - dolls, carts and teddybears." Before the age of seven Amrita could compose her own fairy stories, illustrating with coloured crayons. She would draw or paint on any bit of paper she could find, even on a torn envelope or any scrap paper she could lay her hands on. She would paint on the walls and her house used to be littered with her drawings. She was not interested in black pencil; it had to be coloured.

The family left Budapest on January 2, 1921 and spent two weeks in Paris en-route. It was here that for the first time Amrita was able to

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see some great works of art in original including Leonardo Da Vinci's Monalisa at the Louvre.

Her mother Marie Antoinette insisted on educating Amrita at home before she was admitted in January, 1924, to the Italian school of Santa Anunciate famous for its orthodoxy and rigid discipline. She rebelled in less than six months and was expelled because she was drawing nude women.

In her life as an artist, 1927 was to be an important year during her short stay in Simla. Ervin Baktay, her uncle who arrived in Simla to stay with her family, spotted her potentials and suggested to her that she should draw from live models, a practice that she continued to follow all through her life. May be that is how she developed her life long affection for the hill men and women and the peasants of Saraya (her village) who continued to haunt her even when she was in Paris. The life-long influence of Ervin Baktay is evident from what she told him - "It is to you I owe my skill in drawing".  

Reaching Paris in 1929, she joined the Ecole des Beaux Art, and for the next five years was engaged in learning oil painting. She admired Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Most of her work, done during the period she was in Simla, with a brief interlude in Florence, consists of water colours and drawings. A majority of water colours were of human figure-some European, others oriental, in the Omar Khayam tradition- with a background of forests and foliage. In those

days she was an introvert. In her own words, "Before leaving for
Europe as a very young girl, I had been so wholly an introvert that
I had never really seen or observed anything around or outside
me. I worked entirely from imagination in those days, and living
on pictures instead of reality I conceived India through the
medium of those unutterably mediocre specimens of fifth rate
Western art....."  

Amrita Shergil never regarded herself as anything but an Indian
though her first eight years were passed in a pure typical European
atmosphere in which she learned Hungarian language and studied
European art which kept her from developing any Indian form of
expression in her early art education. Her mother Madame Sher-Gil
was very anxious that her two daughters Amrita and Indira should
achieve a high degree of proficiency in music but Amrita gave up
learning of music to devote to her interest in painting. Amrita was
passionately fond of music, was an accomplished pianist, loved
Beethoven and whenever she was depressed or miserable she would
lock herself in a room and would play the piano for hours together. In
her first (1921) visit to India she was taught art by a conventional art
teacher, Major Whitmarsh who to her dislike made her draw the same
object again and again. His dismissal brought in Hal Bevan Petman
who loved to make portraits of fashionable young ladies in pastels and
assessing that Amrita possessed unusual talent pursuaded Madame

Delhi, 1984, p. 19.
Shergil to let Amrita have a proper training preferably in Europe.

In Paris she learned from Pierre Vaillent at the Grant Chaumiere and later from the distinguished professors Lucian Simon, an exacting task master and a man of great perception, at the famous Ecole Nationale des Beaux Art. Since Amrita disliked being shown how to do a thing and Lucian Simon never "taught" there was a warm rapport between the teacher and the taught. Lucian Simon let Amrita struggle with technical difficulties herself and encouraged her own individual mode of self expression and creativity. His methods were to Amrita's likings and she not only flourished but attracted the attraction of many art critics of repute who commended the forcefulness and vigour of her exhibits at the Grant Salon. Her "young girls" was adjudged the "picture of the year" in 1933 and at age of 18 she was honoured with election as an associate of Grand Salon, a rarer distinction at that age. The most remarkable features of Amrita's artistic personality was her independence but this does not mean that she could not have spontaneous relations. One person who seem to have made a deep and lasting impression on her during her Paris days was Marie Louise Chasseny about whom she spoke with great affection till her very end. Her disastrous association with the handsome and dashing Yusuf Ali Khan to whom she was engaged for some time and her life long association with her medico cousin Victor Egan, and her comparatively short interlude with the celebrated writer Malcolm Muggeridge are of significance in her otherwise short span of youth.

It was in 1933 that Amrita painted 'Reclining Nude'. The year 1933, was a remarkable year in Amrita's life for not only she became an Associate of the Grand Salon, but she began to think seriously of returning to India. In fact, Lucian Simon advised her that her virile art and powerful sense of colour would have greater scope for expression in India and as Amrita put it "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" and she returned to India in 1934.\(^6\)

After spending several months in Simla till the winters she shifted to Saraya, in Sardarnagar in the district of Gorakhpur, the winter retreat of the Majithia family, in February, 1936, where she started to paint like a mad working literally from morning till evening on a small boy, on a girl, Sir Sunder Singh, and landscape and her target was work, work and work.

When Amrita came back to Simla she met Barada Ukil and his brother, Sarada Ukil who painted in the style known as the Bengal school. Later Amrita held an exhibition with the Ukil brothers which opened on 20 November, 1936 on the First Floor of the Taj Mahal Hotel at Bombay. The Times of India described Amrita Sher-Gil as being, one of the most promising of the younger generation of Indian painters. Her paintings heralded the arrival of a new

phenomenal singularity and naturalness and were received with unusual 
applauds from the distinguished art critics of *The Bombay Chronicle*, 
The Bombay Sentinel, The Kaiser-i-Hind, The Evening News of 
India (in The Bombay Man's Diary), The Sunday Standard and a 
host of others. The noted and perceptive art critic of *The Sunday 
Standard*, Karl Khandalavala described her as "the greatest artist 
this country has produced and one of the greatest of this 
century." On seeing her paintings he "immediately realised that her 
work was of an outstanding genius." Maqbool Fida Husain, just a 
youngster at that time, found her devastating and was much impressed 
by her work and even made copies of her work—just to make a study. 
The paintings exhibited included *Child Wife*, *Hill Men*, *Hill Women*, 
*Villagers*, *Group of Young Girls*, *On the Terrace*, *Studio Courtyard* 
and *Portraits of My Father*.

After she left Bombay in the last week of November 1936, the 46th 
annual exhibition of the Bombay Art Society (held on January 15, 1937) 
awarded the Society's gold medal to her "Group of Three Girls", 
one of her four entries.

From Bombay Amrita headed for south and arrived in Hyderabad 
on December 3, 1936 where an exhibition of her paintings was opened 
by His Highness the prince of Berar on December 8, 1936 which was 
visited, among distinguished local nobles and dignitaries, by Maharaja 
Sir Kishen Pershad Bahadur, Prime Minister of Hyderabad, and the

Delhi, 1984, pp. 65-66.
famous poet-politician, Sarojini Naidu, popularly known as "The Nightingale of India".

She was immensely impressed by Sarojini Naidu and in Amrita’s own words "I have met a wonderful woman at last – Sarojini Naidu."

The Hyderabad Bulletin highlighted her work as attraction in Hyderabad and described her as "one of the most outstanding figures in the younger generation of modern artists".8

Amrita had an interesting encounter with the famous and rich Nawab Salarjung, who after keeping the "Reclining Nude" and "Group of Three Girls" for longer than desired declined to buy either, may be in retaliation to Amrita’s blunt comments on his tastes as a collector and connoisseur of art. During her entire stay in Hyderabad, she had been able to sell only one picture and that was Two Children on a Hill-side which she had painted when she was in Zebegeny in Hungary.

She spent two days, accompanied by Barada Ukil in Madurai and Rameshwaram, which she found "exceedingly interesting" and then they drove to Trivandrum. She found the road between Madurai and Trivandrum to be "wonderful". She visited the New Art Gallery in Trivandrum, and travelled to the shores of Cape Comorin. There during her stay of eleven days she painted "Fruit Vendors" showing women on the Beach, a tiny composition - 'one of the best things' by her own standards - a woman with two children on an apple green

background. It was a coincident that Mahatma Gandhi paid a visit to Cape Comorin while she was there. Although she did not make an attempt to meet him she nevertheless made a sketch of Gandhiji addressing one of his prayer meetings. From Cape Comorin, Amrita went to Cochin, via Trivandrum where she stayed a few days. There she devotedly visited and studied the marvellous old paintings and frescoes of the deserted Matancherri palace and she thought the frescoes to be comparable, though quite different in style, to the frescoes at Ajanta. She was ecstatic about her findings.

God had given Amrita almost everything—beauty, sufficient means, genius, perseverance, and an extraordinary capacity for work. She was a great scholar of art. "Amrita's fame as an artist, her glamour as a women of great beauty short, sallow complexioned, black hair severely parted in the middle; thick sensual lips, stubby nose passably good looking which she gave credence to in some of her self portraits",⁹ are also described by the Indian Civil Servant and later a diplomat and Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, Badr-ud-Din Tyabji who found her "a delightful person with whom to banter over trivialities and personalities. She was a really strikingly beautiful woman. Her wit and gaiety, her power of articulation on a wide variety of subjects, her careful choice of words; her remarkable eyes; in which intelligence, sensibility, mischief, and coquetry, seemed always to be playing a non-stop show, either singly or in combination with each other made an

⁹. Singh Khushwant, Women and Men in my life (Amrita Shergil), New Delhi, 1995, p. 97
entrancing companion" and regarding her paintings he thought them in every way worthy of her own personality.

She was married "on the ground of belief and conviction" to Victor Egan her mother Marie Antoinetto's sister's son, a Hungarian doctor. She stood out also as a unique product of her society which was both orthodox and chauvinistic.

By studying in Paris for five years Amrita was able to do what no other Indian artist had done before her as she learnt different styles of painting and acquired thorough education. The villages of both south and north inspired her. Her spiritual world was very much influenced by the greatest poet of 20th century Hungarian literature writer Endre Ady. She was also inspired by Dostavesky and Tolstoy.

Her life was completely dedicated to art. She remained, rock like true to her principles and she was deeply conscious of "her mission".

She felt she had to decline a prize offered to her by the Simla Fine Art Society so as not to identify herself with prevailing trends feeding exclusively on mythology and romance. Many ultra-conservatives accused that this aggressive tendency was a present day evil. They spoke with hushed reverence of the time when faminism was unknown.

Faced with a lack of appreciation she was amongst those talented souls whose merits had been ignored in their life time. Amrita Shergil possessed a vigour and directness of mind and seldom indulged in ambiguities or compromised a principle to justify a violation because it were a sentimental aura.
Talking about her last few hours many years later her husband Victor Egan said "she never complained, she never said anything, she went, first into a sort of semicoma, she kept on numbling about colours, blues, reds and greens and violets all sorts of colours unconsciously or subconsciously she was still thinking about colours and light and shade."

Her contribution to Indian painting will be ever remembered. She represented through her life and work the freedom of the modern artist. Her name will be ever remembered in history of art.

Amrita always painted like mad. She was a real artist. She paid a rich tribute to the magnificence of our art and culture. Her early death was a dark page in the dictionary of art.

It was a midnight December 1941, when Amrita died. Amrita died at about the bewitched hour of midnight. As her parents had decided that she would be cremated and it would be a Sikh funeral, her body was taken to be burning ghat on the bank of the river Ravi, on 7th of December 1941.

The last rites were performed by Amrita's father, Umrao Singh. He lit the funeral pyre and the body of that precious, elegant and beautiful Amrita was consumed by the leaping flames.  

AMRITA SHERGIL'S CAREER AS AN ARTIST IN INDIA

Amrita had her first experience of India as an eight year old child which lasted for three short years but after a six-month schooling in Italy she returned for a five year long span (1924-1929) before going for a five year stay in Europe, particularly Paris (1929-1934)\textsuperscript{11} and on her return she wrote "As soon as I put my foot on Indian soil, not only in subject, spirit, but also in technical expression, my painting underwent a great change, becoming more fundamentally Indian" and went on to add: "I realised my real artistic mission then: to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially; to paint those silent images of infinite submission and patience; to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me; to interpret them with a new technique, my own technique, that transfers what might otherwise appeal on a plane that is emotionally cheap, to the plane which transcends it and yet conveys something to the spectator who is aesthetically sensitive enough to receive the sensation."\textsuperscript{12}

She also came India via west, not as an alien critic but with a burning desire so that her artistic personality could find its true atmosphere in the colour and light of east; but was shocked to find that far from the voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial India she had

\textsuperscript{11} Singh, N. Iqbal, Amrita Shergil, Roopa Lekha, New Delhi, Vol. 53, No. 1-2, March 1982. p. 56
expected it was a "desolate, yet strangely beautiful, it had endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land, it offered dark-bodied, sad-faced, incredibly thin men and women who would 'move silently looking almost like silhouettes', an India over which an 'indefinable melancholy' reigned".¹³

During 1935 when Amrita came back, India was going through severe depression. The country was being ruled by the British who had rejected the Indian tradition and culture to follow their imperialistic doctrine that if you want to rule over a country first destroy its culture. They would harass Indian people and force them to follow western culture. The selfish politics of Britishers lead to a vulgar distribution of wealth, islands of affluence in a sea of poverty, which made Indian people to lose their self confidence to became handicapped and insecure. This vulgar distribution of wealth strengthened only the higher classes who accepted all the dirty policies of Britishers for their own profits while others, particularly the labour class and farmers suffered a lot. The stagnation in agriculture in the beginning of 20th century led to the weakness and decay of Indian society. So that thoughtful Indians began to look (think) for the defects of their society and for ways and means of removing them. Amrita was also among those great personalities who saw and felt the pain of her own society. She saw poverty, famines and the ruining of Indian culture and resolved to paint it all on her canvas.

It is said that art is a mirror of an artist's own society and his brush and colours are instruments through which an artist can attempt to remove evils from his society. It is by this instrument that Amrita vigorously opposed evils; she carried on a persistent struggle against the religious and social evils which were widely prevalent in the country, particularly imperialism, unemployment, superstitions, child marriages, etc.

For example 'Man with Lemon' and 'Banana Seller' show dissatisfaction of earning. Perhaps two lemons are symbol of less income and a single bunch of Banana reveals the vulgar distribution of wealth. Another canvas 'Child Wife' is an appeal to social leaders, a question in itself, to the then status of Indian women and their suffering; it is reminding us of the painful condition of women in the era before India became Independent.

Amrita had come back to India with a mission to declare that she is not anything else but Indian; that her soul and spirit was purely Indian. She turned her eyes from the academies of France to the land of numberless villages and hills, of wide stretching meadows and fields of corn, of the poor, contended folk of the countryside with their melancholy face, and it was here that she found inspiration for her art. Her work became strongly individual and very original and with her resolve it was able to receive appreciation (notice) from a multitude of people in India and outside, Amrita could establish herself as a one person phenomenon. She studied the status of the prevalent contemporary Indian art which mainly concentrated on depicting the
pleasant aspects of Indian life which to her appeared sort of lifeless and she reacted by revealing the other side.

She was a rebel who revealed both sides of India, the dynamic and passive, but in the nineteen thirties her message could not easily be understood. It is natural that her accidental half conscious of time, found satisfaction in spontaneous outburst of excitement. In conversation, she was emotional, critical, aggressive, but in her painting, wholly, almost motionless, conscious that she had to paint and to go on painting.\textsuperscript{14}

As an artist, Amrita felt that her arrival in India signified an almost revolutionary change. She rejected the trend to paint pictures that tell stories outrightly. The significance of her paintings lay in "the abstract yet vital plane of line, colour, form and design....."\textsuperscript{15} Within two months of her arrival in India, while in Amritsar, she finished painting a picture entitled 'Group of Three Girls', a painting which clearly indicated that her approach to painting had already acquired a new dimension.

The 'Group of Three Girls' later won the Bombay Art Society's \textbf{first prize and Gold medal} for the best work, in the Society's exhibition in January 1937. Writing about this picture, one of Bombay's newspaper art critics said: "it is a striking yet restful study in modernist style of 'Three Indian Girls' in thoughtful pose; the clear lines and

\begin{itemize}
\item Dhingra, Baldoon, Shergil: Contemporary Series of Indian Arts, In. Ed. Jaya, Appasamy, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1965, p. 4
\item Singh, N. Iqbal, Amrita Shergil: A Biography, New Delhi, 1984, p 38.
\end{itemize}
simple but effective colour hold the attention....."

Other pictures that Amrita painted during her stay in Amritsar were "Girl in Blue" between the time of her arrival and the month of September, she painted two more pictures namely, 'Beggar Women' and 'Portrait of Father'; which were among those that she sent to the Sixty-Third annual exhibition of the Simla Fine Arts Society. The annual exhibition of the Simla Fine Arts Society was perhaps among the best known art exhibitions held in India and every artist desired to exhibit his work. There Amrita, sent some of her paintings - ten in all. Five were accepted. One of her paintings, 'Conversation Piece', was awarded His Highness the Raja of Faridkot Prize for a portrait or figure study.\textsuperscript{16}

She saw the starving faces, the hopeless resignation in the eyes of the masses, trodden down alike by man and fate. The dumb voice of the millions of Indians found an echo in her heart. Amrita herself regarded her pictures in her newer style better than her earlier work which followed the trend of the more academic western schools. In her work in India shows her powerful and individual talent found its climate. Her paintings are considered as an unique gift in Indian art history which gives inspiration even to the present day younger generation. The character of Indian people that we see in her paintings is not found in the paintings of other Indian artists.

In 1935 Amrita painted eleven pictures - two of them portraits. In the succeeding year she won two prizes for a self portrait in Delhi Fine

Arts Exhibition. But it was not till she held an exhibition of her paintings in Bombay later that year in November that her merit as an artist of great significance was recognised. She received an unprecedented acclaim. And, it was in Bombay that she discovered the richness and greatness of Rajasthani and Basholi miniature paintings. Bombay was followed by two exhibitions in Allahabad and Hyderabad. After this began her odyssey to South India. On her way back to Simla, she stayed in Delhi for a while and held an exhibition. Back in Simla, she began to paint. It is this period of her paintings that a number of art critics considered her to be most fruitful and successful. There is no doubt that during this period, which she described as one of "regurgitating of her South Indian impressions on canvas"; she attained marvellous control on her subjects. This consists of three large canvases entitled "The Bride Toilet", "The Brahamcharis" and "South Indian villagers going to the market". Even the contemporary critics who tried to decry her work, conceded that at least one of these paintings, namely "The Brahamcharis", is a great work of art. In November, 1937 Amrita went to Lahore to hold a solo show of her work. This exhibition created a tremendous impression, particularly on discerning art lovers. Here an observation of an art critic is relevant. He writes "while there are thirty paintings on display: each ones seemed to excel the other in art and presentation", Dr. Charles Fabri the renowned art critic of the Lahore Civil and Military Gazette at that time, termed it as a "revelation". During the year of 1939 she painted superb pictures like "Woman resting on a charpoy", "Elephant bathing", "The
ancient story teller", "The Haldi Grinders" and "Camels". In 1941 she shifted to Lahore and there in December Amrita started preparation for holding another solo show. And, for the first time since her arrival in Lahore, she started to paint a picture exhibiting Buffaloes; but it remained uncomplete due to her early death.  

She was completely successful in the interpretation of Indian people through her paintings, 'Child wife' being one of her best pictures. The subject sits in the familiar Indian pose, one knee up the other leg lying sideways, sharply bent at the knee. By elongating the limbs so that the raised knee is almost at the shoulder level, the artist gives the impression of child's thinness, further accentuated by the straightness of the startlingly white blouse. The face of the child appears inexpressibly sad. The large eyes look out from under the straight long hair. The title explains the sadness. The thick lips, strongly highlighted, express an almost sulky resentment not generally found among older women in India, accustomed as they are to have their fate decided for them by others."  

In her major works like 'Hill Men' and 'Hill Women' she took local folk for models. She again presented the experiment in 'The Bride's Toilet', 'The Brahmacaries' and 'South Indian Villager Going to the Market'. Her 'Beggar Woman' is the best example of Indian village culture.

'Banana Seller' is yet another remarkable work which she did during her stay in India. It is a nearly exact representation of those Indian people who are living their life under poverty line, their tanned skin, sad big black eyes and lost dreamy looks are telling the stories of their suffering. In this painting Amrita has shown three figures only with a single bunch of Bananas which is clearly showing the economic conditions of Indian villagers. They lost their hope but still there is some hope in the eyes of woman and girl who is having a flower. May be this flower has been shown in symbolic way; the eyes of the girl show that somebody may come and buy the bunch of Bananas. All these things reveal the sensitivity of the artist towards the suffering class. Her achievements as an artists, her contribution to Modern Indian Art will be ever remembered.

Amrita was attracted to the unpolluted and indigenous, original folk traditions and could capture successfully a few folk elements such as modelling, colours, etc. in her paintings, in line with several other well known important contemporary artists like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy. But she was mainly impressed by Jamini Roy who thoroughly concentrated on folk style. The basic characteristic of folk art is that its forms are simple, bold and clear. Their strong lining, shapes, and bright colours contribute to a vigour and animation not to be found in more complex art. The history and characteristic features of folk art will be seen to have played a singularly important role in the development of Fine Arts. Its origin goes back to the primitive society.
Bihar and Bengal are important centres of living folk art. Folk art is a continuous tradition which is handed down from generation to generation by their ancestors. Of any particular culture it is practiced among the rural areas and no moderation or changes are done in any case. The material or colour used in this particular art expression is taken from nature or prepared from chalk, geru, stone, flowers, plants, etc. which are local substances.

The themes of these art expressions are religious motifs, symbols, patterns, finger prints and often related to witch craft used for removal of fear healing and seeking wellbeing etc.\(^9\)

When Amrita came in India she realised that folk style of painting is a tradition of the land. It represents originality of Indian culture and artistic development. Amrita took folk art with a gesture of tribute to Indian traditional art.

For fulfilment of her mission she captured a few folk elements in her paintings, such as modelling, colours, large head and bold brush strokes. In general she had a strong influence of Indian folk style in her paintings. Her paintings also derived from the frescoes of Ellora, Ajanta and Mattancheri.

In her paintings figures are generally painted in very simplified manner, less complicated, much bolder, gives pupil like effect which clearly resembles with that of folk style of modelling. Earth colours are usually laid flat used in her paintings which is a distinct quality of folk

\(^{19}\) Lalit Kala, Contemporary Indian Painting Series, No. 34, January 1987, p. 20.
art. In some of her painting such as 'Banana Seller', 'Red Clay Elephant', 'Camel' and in 'Elephant Bathing' she goes for rich colours. In all her paintings folk elements are clearly visible.

It seems that in Amrita's painting figures are always finished with bold brush strokes. Sometimes lines are also visible. The richness of her technique apart, the uniqueness of her style apart, the choice of her purposeful themes apart, her sensitivity apart, Amrita should have lived beyond the years she was destined to live to see through the celebrated declaration of her beloved India's independence in the shadow of the horrors of partition.
# LIST OF PAINTINGS DISPLAYED IN ART OF AMRITA SHERGIL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF PAINTINGS</th>
<th>ARTIST</th>
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Row 1: From left to Right

(i) Hungarian Market Scene  
   Amrita Shergil
(ii) Woman at Bath  
   Amrita Shergil
(iii) Resting  
   Amrita Shergil

Row 2: From left to Right

(i) Potato Peeler  
   Amrita Shergil
(ii) Torso (Amrita's own back)  
   Amrita Shergil
(iii) Still life  
   Amrita Shergil

Row 3: From left to Right

(i) South Indian Villagers Going  
   to the Market  
   Amrita Shergil
(ii) Group of Three Girls  
   Amrita Shergil
(iii) Professional Model  
   Amrita Shergil
ART OF AMRITA SHERGIL

MASTER PIECES OF AMRITA SHERGIL

During the years 1930-32, she painted several pictures, mostly in oils and they were either portraits or portrait studies, with the exception of a couple of landscapes done in Hungary. In 1938, while in Hungary, she described 'Professional Model' as her "First Essay in Art" and therefore "Rather Treasured" by her. 'Professional Model', a nude study of a professional model, whom she would paint twice again as a study in brown and study of a model (in green), is a picture of a sad ageing woman who is feeling old and neglected; perhaps. She is also a sick woman. As a work done in academic style, its execution is most competent. It highlights the undercurrent of melancholia which a woman, who has seen better days when she was young and healthy, would tend to suffer from. Other pictures that she painted during these two years include a self portrait in green and a portrait of her best friend, Marie Louise Chasseny. In 1932, she had painted 'Torso', which was exhibited at the Grand Salon annual art exhibition held that year and attracted the attention of the art critic of journal 'des Arts'. In the issue dated, May 1932 he spoke of "a back painted in strong light by Shergil".¹

and simple handling for the medium. The twist in the back of the model is wonderfully suggestive and the tonal value of the planes admirably correct. The pose is no doubt academic but that should not hinder our appreciation of this highly accomplished work.

**Self Portrait, 1932** - This is a self-portrait among the paintings with the Gottesmanns which deserves some remarks. According to 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".

**The Gipsy Girl from Zebegeeny, 1932** is an early painting from the study years done in the Hungarian village Zebegeeny 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 their 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 girls, show looks like a vendor. The picture reveals a kind of melancholy but we feel the "Stopping energy" in the body of the girls 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.

The Hungarian Village Church, 1932 - It 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 steeple. (Its towers are of different heights). The portal with its interesting roof is only symbolical. No human figure is visible.

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 Natraja, the dancing Shiva. This is the first example where Amrita painted “speaking hand”.

Another picture she exhibited in 1934, ‘Conversation’ eventually know as ‘Young Girls’, which gave her the great honour of being elected associate of the Grand Salon the first Asian to be so honoured.

‘Hungarian Church Steeple, 1938’, is a very good example of the Western inspiration in which the background is 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. The painting is not monotonous because the roofing tiles shine forth in the foreground and contrast with the rough
and ready picture of the houses, some of which are painted very
detailfully. The church is identical with the church painted in the
'Hungarian Market Scene'.

During her stay in Paris Amrita did many studies from nude
models. Amrita in fact always enjoyed painting women whether nude,
half-nude or fully clothed instead of men. That is why her painting 'Nude'
is a remarkable picture of that time but some time she has painted nude
male also. The 'Male Torso' is a masterly study of the back of a
nude.

'Nude, 1938', is one peculiar piece among the numerous similar
works. The girl is standing in front of a drapery of blue black ground tint
decorated with yellow and red flower. The face and the arms are
brownish and vary from the body painted with 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.

'Potato Peeler, 1938', presents 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 a knife. Her head some how sorrowfully
looks down which gives the feeling that she does not look at the potato.
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.
The potato is a staple food in Hungary and especially it was a staple
food for the lower classes before the liberation and the potato peeling
was a routine chore in the peasant house holds. Amrita observed her potato peeler peasant woman as is the case of poor Indian villagers and painted her. The whole picture is treated by western style of painting; a bold treatment where in the strokes are clear and bold. Colour scheme also shows a great European impact on the personality of the artist. This work is realistic, typical and full of emotion.

**Winter, 1939**, 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. The vicinity of man is expressed by the house situated near the border of the horizon.

**Two Girls, 1939** has two juxtaposed nude girls. The composition, is based on contrast of the figures which is derived from their position and colour of skin. Whereas the white girl, standing numblegs, provokingly looks at the world with her striking blue eyes which have a geometric form and unbelievable blue colour, the dark girl is painted with soft, rounded contours. The contrast gets a further affirmation by the position of hands which indicate exhibitionism with the white girl and self-imposed seclusion with the dark girl. The white cover around her makes this feeling even stronger. In spite of this there is no irreconciliable opposition between them as to the character. It is shown by Amrita with the representation of the special gesture of the hand of the white girl which is laid on the shoulder of the dark.
'Hungarian Peasant, 1939', 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 characterize the inhabitants of the Great Hungarian plain who are sharp-eyed, knowing even the smallest secrets of nature, but are extra-ordinarily soft-spoken. The face and the posture of the man reflects the characteristic unfatigued power and energy of the Hungarian peasants.

'My Grand Mother, 1934', a portrait of her Hungarian grandmother, to whom she was very deeply and affectionately attached, portrays a jovial old woman. She is lineated with great accuracy, almost naturalistically, the wrinkles, the cross feet, the dress or even her necklace and this portrait stands out as a composition different from Amrita's other portraits. It almost reflects the deep attachment of the artist to her subject.²

The Trilogy (Bride's Toilet, The Brahmacharis and South Indian Villagers going to Market)- These were painted after the end of Amrita's South Indian tour. It is beautiful in colour and it has an almost gentle rhythm when contrasted with the severe dispositioned of lines to "The Brahmachris" or the listless candences of 'South Indian Villagers Going to Market", yet all the three canvases of the Trilogy akin in spirit.

The Ancient Story Teller, 1940 "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 Story Teller" eschews all idealistic suggestions. As a pictorial Statements it just avoids the stark manner of the artists earlier work, as if she had made a conscious effort to stem her mental processes fearing they might dictate a different orientation of the scene. The treatment of the Kine is particularly sensitive and already indicates that mastery over animal form and characterization which she exhibited in later canvases.

The Swing 1940, These paintings point to Amritas the nostalgia of Saraya in the white wall and the domed structure which bounded the family house of the Majithias.

Elephant Promenade ..... It is a powerfully conceived painting 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 elephants and gaily dressed men and children are mingled is heightened by the drama of the landscape setting.

Camels, 1941 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. It is from the almost perfect organization of colour and form that her pictures derive not only their visual loveliness, but also their full significance.

**Woman at bath, 1940** - The bathing woman 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 soft green stream of her dress hanging on the wall.

**Hill scene 1938**- ‘Hill Scene’ done in Simla reveals a new aspect of her talent, namely the subtility with which she could sender atmospheric comparison to her treatment of the effects of warmer sunshine on the yellow grey stretches of land “Ganesh Puja” and elephants bathing in a Green Pool”.

‘Women in Red’ belongs to the year 1938. “Women in Red” an extra ordinarily compact and effective grouping echoes the mood of her South Indian period.

“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. Their faces are largely stylized.³

Amrita Shergil's figures are always static, but her colour organizations are vibrant glowing and intense. The last unfinished canvas once again introduces

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³ Khandalavala, Karl, Amrita Shergil, Bombay, 1944, pp. 38-69
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 Shergil's work in a large measure possessed the character of things elemental. She had evolved her own idiom.
Amrita discovered herself and established her unique image of the genius on her return to India, she observed the other side of it, a side which presented the misery, the poverty, and the sufferings of the people and she resolved to paint their silent images of infinite submission and patience, to depict their angular brown bodies which to her were strangely beautiful in their ugliness.

To fulfill her resolve she harnessed the methods of modern painting, she learnt in Europe, taking more influence from Gauguin rather than from Cezanne. In the architecture of her pictorial relations reaching out for a monumental simplicity in the patterning Cezanne was the obvious preceptor but for her very imager, the sensuous outlines and symbolic colours in primary oppositions, the posturing of the human types and their welding in compositions of solemn grandeur, in a rediscovery of abstraction within realism, she owned to Gauguin. She became an exponent of an original style rooted in the matrix of India, in its ethos and imagery, but stridently modern in its execution with a contemporary awareness.

In her choice of the medium of oil colour, Amrita achieved a contextual modernity and her decision to concentrate on painting of oils was probably the turning point in her artistic development. "In the arrangement of her Palette she found the emotional outlet for a strong sense of colour, and her forthright approach to her subject, deftness of

4. Appasamy, Jaya, Amrita Shergil, Contemporary Series of Indian Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1965, p.4
outline, and confident presentation of bold planes would have been impossible in any other medium" but some times she also practised in water colour. "A majority of the water colours are of human figures, some European, other oriental, in the Omar Khayyam tradition with a background of forest and foliage."

Her work became the starting point of experimental ventures, of striding impulses unshackled by imitative, stagnant art forms. It was eventually to the heritage of India that she turned naturally. She thought that she could no longer paint at all in Europe, and that she could only paint in India so much so that she was shy of her, self confidence as she thought she was not natural otherwise".

She returned, emancipating herself, to the plastic rhythm of the Ajanta frescoes, the glyptic purity of the Gupta sculpture and the calligraphic delicacy and vivid humanity of Basohli and Kangra paintings, which she integrated to re-create a vital, living India of dark bodied, sad faced, and indefinable pathos.

She had an insatiable appetite for pure decorative colours which she put to very original lyrical or romantic uses, disposing them in planes of flat relief. Her uncanny facility in placing sheer blacks and white to stress emotive points of focus is brought out by her "Bathing Elephants" a compositional success painted in glittering black against a decorative ribbon of bullock carts done in translucent white.

Her unquestioned mastery of style and technique derives from

brilliant draughtsmanship, of which her early "Resting Nude" is a fine example in which the adventitious detail is ironed out to mould the fundamental plasticity of the human form which she was more specifically to organise under the inspiration of Ajanta. More notably in her "Bride's Toilet" and in the "South Indian Villagers Going to the Market" she recreated the architectural rhythm, the plastic design and the ineffable atmosphere of the Buddhist frescoes rather than their format symbolism, while the tones of heightened colour and the warm humanity of her "Story Teller" are clearly assimilated from the lively lyricism of the Pahari minatures. She strove continually towards the purity of basic forms in plain relief, without the slightest concession to the abiding humanism she achieved in her more outstanding figure studies, such as "Group of Three Girls" and compositions "Hill Men" and "Child Wife". The monumental simplicity and vitality of primitive art with something of its primordial quaintness and naivete is vivid in her later "Ganesh Puja".

The appraisement of her work, like her own tragic life, must end in a broken arc because its perfect round was never to be. Amrita introduced a certain coldness, detachment and asceticism, which were to her, characteristic features of Indians; the passionate intensity she kept to herself. Her painting thus became controlled rather than effusive, poised rather than passionate.6

As her technique improved a greater degree of coldness set in

6. Appasamy, Jaya, Amrita Shergil, Contemporary Series of Indian Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1965, p. 5
which is reflected in one of her most important works - "The Brahmacharis", which makes one feel she was painting for the sake of painting. She always dreamt of a kind of harmony between contemplation and activity. And yet the contemplative side of her detached passionless nature was far more reflected in her painting. The figures she painted had a certain inner peace which is reflected in her illustration to a volume of "my poems", which she did in 1938. In the background is a village scene with villagers and cattles, in the foreground four women huddled together, one of them playing a Veena. The way she arranged these figures is really remarkable and application of colours are beautiful.

Though she had a chequered and tragic life but the shadow of her work stretches over the entire panorama of contemporary Indian art. Amrita's drawings are vast in number and varied in technical interest. She was indefatigable in her search for forms and colours and had an unusual perception of the true spirit of Indian tradition.

Having studied the Ajanta paintings she had no difficulty in understanding that the ancient artists used human figures not as an end in itself but as a creative means. While India was passing through a period of cultural discovery, in her own art, Amrita blended the new formal values she learnt in Paris with those she discovered from the study of Indian murals and miniatures. Naturally her concept of tradition was different from those of her contemporaries. She observed "I am an

7. Appasamy, Jaya, Amrita Shergil, Contemporary Series of Indian Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1965, pp. 5-6.
individualist evolving a new technique which though not necessarily Indian in the traditional sense of the word will yet be fundamentally Indian in spirit".8

She painted her art pieces with new hopes and confidence. She hammered out her genius on the forge of hard work; she willed her progress and deliberated in advance. On the course it should take, a frame of mind reflected in her increasing need for architectural order and structural solidity. She looked upon the new emotions stirred within her. She visited the different European art museums and started a new style of painting flats colour patterns, instinct with a quaint melancholy.

Diffidently at first she modified her palette. The old, ill considered lossing of colour, as advanced towards a new conception of colour, simpler, wider in range, much more refined.

Mostly she would put her colour directly on the canvas without bothering about a ground sketch, and take obvious pleasure in extending the variety of her tones and stepping up yellows, greens and reds to a rich and sonorous pitch, destined to revolutionize the art of painting by her special style and technique. In an article "The Art of Amrita Shergil" Prof. R.C. Tandon of Allahabad University traced her background and her achievements till 1937, and went on to observe:

"Even during the last days of her stay at Paris Kumari Amrita Shergil had begun to depart from the academic style of her early

training. This departure has continued to become more and more pronounced in her work, so that today, she may be said to be nearing the achievement of a new style altogether, and a technique all her own. Tandon quoted the French art critic Gaston Dery's opinion that in her more recent work "her powerful and individual talent seems to have found its climate." Rabindranath Deb, writing for "The Leader" found that Amrita's technique "according to modern western canons" was "perfect".⁹

She was curious about drawing, tonality, brush work, the norms of physical beauty in men and women she considered as elements essential in a good composition. She looked for literary flavour and content in her creations; the dramatic grouping; the hill view of the valley and the valley view of the twilit mountains, ice, snow, rain, monsoon, weather, etc. but she took an idea for painting from local colours, from common people, she always tried to understand the pain of her society, – the struggle of the life and sufferings have been interspersed in her compositions. Thus in her painting 'Winter' she does not depict only the outer scene of winter but in reality she shows inner sufferings of people associated with winter. Amrita was an admirer of realism and liked to depict the sorrow of Indians, particularly those people who lived under depression of poverty, who lost the hope of life, and lived without ambitions: through their dead big black eyes and tanned skins she emphasised the weaker and backward constituents of our society.

which indicates her devotion to her country and its culture.

She was striving towards an epic in painting, a something sadly absent in the compositions of her contemporaries whose inspiration seemed spasmotic and directed to finish a cameo. Along with Abanindranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore she is in the direct line of authentic Indian expressionist.

Her paintings, had an addition of strangeness to beauty and had what all romantic art must have. Normally Amrita's pictures were built up round a central core that was simply a daub of paint; this she proceeded to "modulate" as she described the operation broadening it with successive strokes and patches of colour until the whole canvas stood covered and above all balanced. She would coordinate her magnificent colour sense and exceptional sensitivity for form into certain combination which would become very great work of art, due to the action of some mysterious laws that awaken a deep emotional response in a knowledgeable spectator.

Her art was based on subjects she looked outwards rather than within, and her normal practice was to paint from human models. Besides the feminine delicacy of intuition and instinctive feeling, robust and expansive power pulses are found in each and every work of Amrita Shergil in her thorough study of India, through which she discovered an entirely new face of her country, a face for which the westernized Indian or Anglo-Indian painter had no eyes at all. She could discover the deep sorrow of India, the hopeless endurance of a lonely and destitute nation, the poverty which gazed on us from big black eyes.
Amrita’s art, after her return to India became radically Indian, yet her universal expression grew stronger, her way of seeing became more distinct, clear and simple and readily a private and original style emerged.

Her greatest pictures were painted between 1935 and 1937, and in all of them her own style is plain. Certain elements – the melancholy, aloofness of the figures, the air of huddled grouping, the eyes gazing in different directions, spring from partial adoption of Gauguin’s manner. But many of her colours were absent and the result was totally new. She surged ahead to establish her own style of painting which she nursed to interpret the solemn gravity of Indian life in the then stark and brutal age.¹⁰

She had no illusions about her style. She would interpret them with a new technique, which 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 the plane of deep, emotional significance line, colour and design. And it is this manifesto which in fact explains her style.¹¹

The main Ajanta style expressed a fundamental aspect of Indian sensibility, and in responding to India, Amrita became more vitally and deeply Indian. Indian qualities of feeding took command, and the result

¹¹. Fabri, Charles, Notes towards a biography of Amrita Shergil, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, p. 30.
was a style which despite its western affinities had a vital relation to its ancient Indian form. Indianness of feeling was, in fact the clue to Indianness of style.

All her acclaimed paintings are done in oil, and through her chosen large canvases there is a surprising amount of force evident in her work. Her graceful, gentle style was particularly suited to paintings, contrasting cool with warm colour. She was able to suggest the brilliance of her ideas of compositions. She used bold and flat brush strokes in her paintings. She always did her paintings or compositions in a sophisticated manner.

Someone wrote of the Indian art of her era and her: "In an age of effiminate painting she was singularly masculine in her approach."
INFLUENCE OF RENAISSANCE ART, IMPACT OF EUROPEAN ARTISTS: CEZANNE AND GAUGUIN

Environmental effects in which a child takes his first breath are quite natural to his personality. The lap of his or her mother, the family, the social, political, and economic conditions etc. leave a great impact on the child’s personality.

A creative painter, like the creative poet, transcends climate and culture. Tradition for an artist is an organic entity, changing and developing with growth. Artist’s work is like honey drawn from authentic flowers. If art is a formalized human experience and form is the end of art, and art is communication of the inferential truth, then art is of the people, by the people but not necessarily for the people; if by people we mean the lowest common evaluators of human experience.  

Many years of Amrita’s early life were spent in Europe where she opened her eyes and started to play with colours and that is why she was influenced by the European style of oil painting and other western techniques. Young Amrita after a few years in India was in Paris as an art student from 1929 to 1934, a period which by no means is revolutionary on the European art scene all by itself. Most of revolutionary changes had already taken place before 1920, some much earlier. Paris at that time was no longer the Paris of the post-impressionist giants. Post impressionism in truth is a somewhat loose

12. Lalit Kala, Contemporary Indian Painting, Series No. 34, January 1987, p. 46
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 impressionist, par excellence. That the work of Cezanne and Guaguin gave Amrita's notion of form and colour a new intellectual direction is apparent from the last canvases painted in Paris. She thoroughly adopted western methods and moulded herself in western canons of art.

For three years, 1929 to 1931, she won first prizes at the annual portrait and still life competition at her school where she learnt from the great Maestro Lucien Simon. After two years of study in Paris she had her first exhibition in the Grand Salon. She earned the rare distinction of being elected as an associate member of the Salon and one of her paintings 'Young Girls', was awarded the first prize. Amrita had many exhibitions in Paris which were great success and in the process was definitely influenced by western technique. In the two decades before Amrita reached Europe in 1929, Cubism, Fauvism, Chirico's Surrealism and the differing abstractions of Kandinsky, Delaunay and Joan Miro had established themselves as artistic fashion and paintings were continuing to be done in these styles. That European art of the period did not create any great impression on Amrita is seen from the fact that she did not attempt any of these styles. The paintings she did in Europe—nudes, self-portraits are in the academic style, competent but not distinguished. It was her sudden conversion from being an introvert to developing into an extrovert which could have led her to

being influenced by Gauguin whose paintings probably could have, compelled Amrita to re-evaluate Indian art and might have driven her to affirm a new type of romantic sensuality leading to the kind of painting that was later blossomed by George Keyt. Yet the frigidity in her temperament would not let it happen; it was rather the existence in Gauguin of a second and contradictory strand which explains the influence which he actually exerted on her. Earlier she was deeply impressed by Cezanne.

The two important artists, Cezanne and Gauguin, more than any others, appear to have determined her style and it is mostly out of her responses to their pictures that a manner emerged which became firmly and decisively her own.

Amrita imbibed first Cezanne and then Gauguin, and went on to create her own form of expression choosing, not cubism or surrealism but post impressionism.

Cezanne, born in 1839, had begun as a realistic painter who had leanings towards Courbet and Manet and in his prime he observed the formal effects of colour shapes, and in his picture ‘L’Oncle Dominique’, he deliberately treated the moustache and beard as a dark brown circle enclosing a pink one and balanced in a particular way with the shapes of creamy white and brick red made by the collar and tie. According to R.H. Wilenski two distinct qualities were apparent – ‘a warm deep sympathy with the spirit of the sitter as a human being and an aesthetic

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concern with colour and form as such". By the eighteen eighties his concern for form and colour had gone much further and the underlying structure of the landscape rather than its surface appearance determined the character of a picture. Architecture was his prime concern; the cylinder, the cone and the cube, were his ultimate objectives and as a result his whole art was a striving for simplification. According to Wilenski 'Content with the quietest attitudes and the simplest accessories, Cezanne built up a formal structure touch by touch, working first from one centre and then from another, each group of touches being governed both by their mutual relations and by their combined relation to the structure as a whole.'

The resulting picture was, different from the pattern or composition contemplated by an art school. It was rather a study of the sitter in terms of the artist's whole attitude or temperament. The general convention was one of naturalism, but simplification gave it grandeur. Life was purged of pettiness, and it is perhaps this moral quality quite as much as its aesthetic virtues which impressed the young Amrita Shergil'. "Naturalism simplified, became her goal, and by 1933 she was moulding her forms in a Cezannesque manner conveying a strong sense of volume but expressing, above all, a monumental dignity."16

Until the autumn of 1933 Amrita's style was, in every way, much closer to Cezanne's than to Gauguin's. In the following winter, however, Amrita's fascination with Gauguin's work became so strong that it

seems almost to have haunted her. E. Narayanan has recorded that Cezanne inspired her. beyond all others but that she liked Gauguin best of all. This passionate adhesion became decisive – in creating her own style. It is interesting to note that 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 the young Amrita and led to fertile results. Yet it was not these qualities but the second which seems to have stirred Amrita Shergil, occasioning the liking, which was to play such a supreme role.

Later Amrita studied Braque who captured her fancy more than any other modern painter and she could emancipate herself from Gauguin. Of the other people who impressed her, Dostoevsky was outstanding though she had great respect for Tolstoy who was admired by her father also. To Amrita, Dostoevsky was a supreme artist, a relentless seeker, always true to his art. What interested her was that Dostoevsky, face to face with the extremities of evil, never sought to hide it or shun it, but rather sought to search for the soul of goodness in it. Dostoevsky, to her was a free soul who remained an artist to the end. Amrita felt with Dostoevsky that suffering and self sacrifice are to be offered consciously and without constraint. Amrita admired Tolstoy for propagating puritanism and advocating non-violence but she thought that one had to invent Tolstoy if only to serve as a foil to Dostoevsky. According to Baldoon Dhingra it was the great humanity of Dostoevsky
that inspired Amrita and which richly influenced her attitude to her painting.\textsuperscript{17}

Amrita Shergil could synthesise her Hungarian experience, the Indian traditions and the demands of the modern painting. That is how one can judge her artistic talents. Amrita's art before her departure from Paris, was decisively influenced by the Hungarian scenery and intellectual quality which was quite un-Indian.

She was surrounded by a rich intellectual atmosphere created by the best circles of Hungarian intelligentsia. Her spiritual world was considerably influenced by the greatest poet of twentieth century Hungarian literature, Endre Ady, and she had face to face encounters with Hungarian writers Margit Gasper, Bezso Szabo and Frigyes Karinthy who impressed her forthwith. She first saw the trees, clouds, horses, cows and calves in Dunahasztí, a place where she spent the first period of her consciousness-a small village, a place for summer rest, located at the bank of River Danube some 20 km from Budapest.

Hungarian landscapes gave her inspiration too. She painted a few motives of Zebenegy, a picturesque village of the Danube bend and a favourite resort for painters and Kiskunhalas, a typical market-town. Dunahasztí and its surroundings motivated the young Amrita from 1917 to 1921 and she visited Zebenegy in 1932, where she made fresh artistic sketch of a facade of the Transylvania church. Amrita visited Kiskunhalas in 1938 where the peasants of the neighbouring

\textsuperscript{17} Appasamy, Jaya, Amrita Shergil, Contemporary Series of Indian Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. 1965, p. 2.
villages in their colourful folk costumes offered a very picturesque milieu at the weakly fairs, and could draw a parallel with her experiences of Indian towns. At Kiskunhalas she saw, “in the milling market the reflection of Indian women carrying carpets, jugs, banana. The corn cobs have symbolic power as the old people dressed in black too, who were characterised ethnographically in a very precise way.”

Her choice of subject shows her deep knowledge of typical Hungarian problem and her special attitude towards the simple events concerning common people. It is notable that Amrita's colours in the Hungarian pictures are different from the "Indian" ones. A special tone is the mixture of green black grey always repeating and the illustration of the sky, water or general background. Her 'Hungarian Market Scene' and the "Merry Cemetery" stand out among her various paintings done in Hungary. However 'Woman Peeling Potatoes' may also be recognised as a masterpiece.

In her portraits, still life and in compositions, bold treatments and solidity of lines and uniqueness of colours clearly show that she was deeply influenced by western techniques and we are bound to say that she was deeply stirred by the art of the post impressionists, Cezanne and Gauguin in particular. Amrita’s paintings done in Hungary are entirely European in their colour, mood and sensibility.

"The Hungarian Market Scene, 1938" is her most well known canvas, which according to a letter Amrita wrote to Karl Khandalavala

On 9th Nov. 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." In Europe she encountered not only the masterpieces of Italian, French and German painters from the fourteenth century onwards, but also the French masters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Between the earlier painting and the later, Amrita did not discern any revolutionary difference. It can be said that the inspiration from Breughel apart, Amrita was imbued with the love towards the common people. The scenes offered simple everyday life in India and also in Hungary. That could be the reason that she painted scenes only in India and Hungary, besides the numerous portraits in France.

Even in her paintings of Indian village scenes the virile style of the post impressionists is obvious. Karl Khandalavala observed, "The Paris sketch books show that Amrita was as a talented hard working student imbibing various influences and occasionally displaying in her drawings as suggestion of that powerful handling of form which she was later to develop." The influences primarily are those of Cezanne and Gauguin, though there seems no doubt that Negro art also created quite an impression on her mind, because she became an ardent admirer of Modigliani. Modigliani's own work had been profoundly affected by Negro and Primitive art, particularly Negro sculpture.

She realised the importance of organization of form and colour. The richness and decorative quality of her colour may have had something to do with Gauguin's use of colour, just as the pictorial structure that she created with the use of colour perhaps finds an echo in Cezanne. Gauguin and Cezanne were the two painters she greatly admired at that stage of her artistic development.

Theiboult Sisson, the art critic, wrote in 'Le Temp' of 12 May 1933 that "the two young women...dressed in rich and brilliant materials" were "painted with exceptional mastery over light and shade by the Hindu Amrita Shergil". Denise Droutaux wrote that her canvases stood up "because of the exceptional vigour of her brush and sharp realism of her subject".20

Thus Amrita could learn the intricacies of the western art as an excellent student and practice the sophistications with masterly dexterity and carve a name. For herself even before being obsessed by her urge to return to the India of her dream and stamp on its arts scenerio with indelible impression so that later generations would say "Once upon a time......".

Chapter- 4

Interpreting Amrita Shergil
# LIST OF PAINTINGS DISPLAYED IN INTERPRETING AMRITA SHERGIL

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<td>(i) Village Scene</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td>(ii) Haldi Grinders</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td>(iii) The Swing</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td><strong>Row 2: From left to Right</strong></td>
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<td>(i) Siesta</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td>(ii) Horse and Groom</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td><strong>Row 3: From left to Right</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(i) The Ancient Story Teller</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td>(ii) Elephant Promenade</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<td>(iii) Hill Scene</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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INTERPRETING AMRITA SHERGIL

INDIGENOUS ELEMENTS

Amrita Shergil, daughter of Hungarian mother, conceived her emotional anchorage to be in the land of her Sikh father, India. Undoubtedly her whole upbringing was European i.e. un-Indian; She first set her foot on Indian soil in 1921, finally returned to India in 1934. On her arrival she convinced herself that at the touch of the Indian soil her paintings, underwent a sea-change, not only in the subject and the spirit, but also in its technical expression, becoming more fundamentally Indian.

The superb stylization of Mughal Portraiture and the frame work of the early Rajasthani and Akbar school miniatures had also begun to claim her increasing admiration. She emancipated herself to the Plastic rhythm of the Ajanta frescoes, the glyptic purity of Gupta sculpture and the calligraphic delicacy and vivid humanity of Basohli and Kangra painting, while she was doubtless appreciative of Ajanta; “that really great and eternal example of pure painting”.

Once she wrote “Modern art has led me to the comprehension and appreciation of Indian painting and sculpture”. Paradoxically enough she felt that had she never come to Europe, she may never have realised the greatness of Indian art or that, as she put it “a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of sculpture in the Museum Guimet (Paris) is worth more than a whole Renaissance,“.

In all Amrita’s work the simplicity and plastic effect always remained her guiding principles, these qualities were achieved in own work by a

1. Rao, P.R. Ramachandran, Modern Indian Painting, Madras, India, 1953, p. 10.
conscious attempt to synthesize the principles of early Indian Sculpture with those of ancient and medieval Indian Painting. She was always found of Indian flavour. In some of her paintings Amrita used a wide spectrum of colours and achieved overall harmony inspite of strong contrast, recalls Ajanta without mechanically imitating it. In "Bride Toilet" the variations near many, from the green of the dress of the women to the brown of their skin, the ivory complexion of the Bride's and the jet black of her hair. For her palette she derived inspiration from Rajput miniatures too. She wrote "I want to bring out the contrast between the hot reds and greens one finds in the early Rajput miniatures. I love so."

She used such exciting contrasts in "Elephants Bathing" where the jet black, huge, blocky forms of the elephants are planted right in the middle of the green pool, as is done in both the Ajanta mural and the Rajput miniatures. In all these paintings she has not slavishly imitated tradition but was creatively modulating it, not Indian in the traditional sense of word, it being yet, fundamentally Indian in spirit. She was great admirer of Indian tradition and culture. During her stay in Simla she painted some of her well known canvases such as Hill men and Hill women. In these pictures she took the local Folk models. The life of the peasantry to which her sensitiveness and sympathies deeply responded and above all her very personal discovery of Ajanta and the Rajput miniature are the most important and through these, Amrita's art developed a genuine Indianness.

Amrita urged her contemporary painters not to cling to "traditions that were once vital, sincere and splendid and which are now merely empty formulae, nor to imitate fifth rate western art slavishly and to break away

from both and produce something vital connected with the soil. Something essentially Indian"\(^4\), to the fulfilment of this mission she concentrated on the representation of the gloomy side of human life of India silence, tired moment, sorrow and gaze with empty eyes are some of the special features of her canvases. She was rooted in the matrix of India and became the window of India on to the international expression in art, a catalyst in the evolution of Modern Indian painting. Shamlal, said that "for all her western background Amritas work carries richer intimations of Indian life than the feeble work of many whose background is wholly indigenous".\(^5\) Amrita's most fascinating subjects are studies of Indian women and childrens which shows that she was totally Indian by spirit. Her exquisite art is originally rooted in the most valuable Indian tradition. The 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 must have observed that Amrita's work had instead of bought back into modern Indian paintings several important characteristics of ancient Indian frescoes and book illustrations.

Nobody denies the many features she derived from European art. But what she realised through their use was profoundly Indian. In short span of her life she produced several works where her identification with the Indian tradition and spirit was completely proved. The Bride Toilet of 1937 has, a Bhattacharya points outs, a lyrical grace and innocence which are very specifically Indian in flavour.

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5. Chaitanya, Krishna, Ibid, p. 188.
CONCEPT OF FORM

In assessing the influence of Amrita's academic training in Paris, on her works executed in India, we find that training to be of small significance. Her purposeful simplification of forms and positive draughtsmanship were achieved, in some measure by her intelligent understanding of the human anatomy. The training at school served as a vehicle of inspiration, but it was the artist's right thinking that ensured discipline and technical knowledge of the subject. It is said that those who possess vision surmount its pitfalls and those who lack it even confuse competency for an aesthetic truth.

The Paris sketch books show Amrita as a talented hardworking student imbibing various influences and occasionally displaying in her drawing a suggestion of that powerful handling of form which she was later to develop. Writing on her own art education in Paris she said, "I had not in those days learnt that simplification 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 it happens to be pleasing to the age".

Amrita's intense desire to return to India followed a new found understanding of Cezanne and Gauguin who respectively influenced the organization of form and colour. That Cezanne and Gauguin gave Amrita's notions of form a new intellectual direction is apparent from the last canvasses she painted in Paris. But her work in India was directly influenced by Indian sculpture and painting. It may be mentioned that the principles which some of the post-Impressionists had adopted are noticeably present in both oriental
and early medieval European art, but this fact is often only inadequately recognized. Some observers often fasten on post impressionism when they view a picture in which form is severely simplified and plastic.\(^6\)

The fact is that every great artist borrows freely from the experience of his predecessors but always strives for a new orientation of the principles of the older masters. Amrita's treatment of form did derive its earliest motivating power from Cezanne and Gauguin, 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 principle of early sculpture with the principles of ancient and medieval Indian painting. This method gave her some degree of satisfaction in solving the problems of form. She invariably worked with methods believing that the medium of oil in which she painted exclusively, and the simplification of form which she sought, demanded the use of models and that to rely on one's imagination was too demanding.

She believed that the masters of Ajanta had achieved both simplification and amazing plasticity of form by relying on sheer observation, coupled no doubt with a rigorous guild training. But as Amrita herself remarked "they were different" Amrita knew that to control and organize form from memory was one of the most difficult things to achieve and it required years and years of a specialized type of training, different to that which she had received. She saw before her eyes the unholy mess into which most Modern Indian painting had slipped by underestimating the technical knowledge and intense

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training required to use the methods of Ajanta. She had the wisdom to realize that the methods of Ajanta were beyond her. She was quick to realize that if she permitted her search in the realism of form and colour to be superceded by the emotional distress which she was undergoing, her work would soon degenerate into the production of sentimental subject pictures, the delight of the bourgeois and the damnation of art.

She arrived at her conclusions consciously and deliberately and used the people of the soil as the models for her compositions. She would typify them because she was not concerned with individual characterizations. Dark skins, angular or undernourished bodies, and a variety of garments all presented to her fascinating problems in the organization of form and colour.

Her canvases, show interaction between colours which expressed her longings and the relentless austerity of form she saw, even if imperfectly, a vision of life not of hope, peace, or fortitude but of stark inevitability which had crystalized into a religion. She never found a protecting God head in any form to which she could anchor her mind. By inclination she desired sanctuary, but she would with visionary fervour have painted the walls of a Christian chapel, or Buddhist cave, and perhaps found repose. She agreed that: "The Mughals have taught me a lot. Looked at rightly the Mughal portraitists can teach one everything almost that matters, subtle yet intense. Keenness of form, acute and detached 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... The imitators of the Mughals have never erred quite so badly as the imitation of Ajanta... by the very
things they stand for they (the Mughals) bar the way to excessive
degeneration of form conception. So you see in me now a Mughal convert.
And accept to see my paintings develop accordingly (for develop it with and
is continually developing ....). There were already qualities of painting (the
way the red trousers of the central figure and the face of the woman on the
extreme left were painted) and form in the largish picture ‘Resting’ that I did
not possess before. I have been doing some smallish things about the size
of “Ganesh Puja” and in which this is very apparent though of course they
still lean mainly on colour. They are very lovely as colour, I am progressing
in that direction too, though I do not attach so much importance to it, for
colour is my domain and I am on terms of easy domination with it, my sense
of form on the other hand is only developing now and still has a strong
tendency to evade me. It very often happens that I grasp it only for a short
period and only sections of my picture are good as a consequence. But I still
consider it something that I master it even if as yet only in portions."

She laid great stress on the intellectual discipline required for the
organization of form and colour. There was an awareness that she herself
was incapable of carrying the belief to its logical conclusion and experiencing
complete satisfaction from the production of even abstract art. She admitted
that “consciously it is always the pictorial beauty of a scene or a face
that impels me to sit down to paint it”7

It was during her tour of South India that she saw the frescoes of the
Buddhist shrines of Ajanta. In the dimly lit Viharas and Chaityas where the

sun's rays reveal the supreme vision of the ancient masters, she encountered
the most profound aesthetic experience of her short life " Ellora Magnificent
Ajanta curiously subtle fascination. She said " I don't think I have ever seen
anything that can be equal to it. Simply extraordinary. " Ajanta gave her a
direction but she knew that she would have to find the way. Her powerful
drawings of forms are really good. To her way of thinking all art fell into only
two categories. It was either '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 with in the ambits of their respective
limitations.

Amrita could see and think only in terms of high achievement. "The
Bride Toilet", "The Brahmacharis" and "South Indian Villagers going to
the Market" are her three paintings which represent her grandest
achievement. In later years she arrived at a co-ordination of form and colour
of perhaps greater subtility, but in monumental qualities and restrained power
the Trilogy was never surpassed.

"South Indian Villagers going to the Market" marked the end of a
period in which the experiences in form and colour, derived from Ajanta and
Ellora, dominated the artists work. Superficial resemblances are absent yet
no other Indian painter has achieved a finer assimilation of the principles
underlying these supreme masterpieces of the past, or used those principles
to such effect and purpose in the interpretation of the present.

"Women in Red" painted in 1938 is a canvas of much smaller

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proportions. It is the last of her noteworthy works in which the influences of this phase are remarkably present. Two little canvases, “Siesta” and “The Story Teller” with their gem like beauty, indicate that experience. One often feels that a ‘strange melancholy’ radiates from her figures and paintings otherwise but she appears to be a little happier in mind when she was painting her smaller compositions. Among these “Ganesh Puja” done in 1938, almost has a note of subdued merriment. Again she writes “there is a village scene I painted in U.P. with a vermillion 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. In the same phase while staying in Saraya she painted “Elephant bathing in a Green Pool.” along with another composition of a group of women sitting in a field.

She was never a landscape painter in her closest approach to pure landscape being in “Hill side.” In her plain air studies she often used various landscape motifs which in actuality were unrelated to each other and yet were organized with in the limits of her canvas, not as a mere natural background for her figures, but as an integral part of the composition and colour organization. She used quiet decorative tendency using landscape paraphernalia, such as trees, foliage, flowers, and huts, in the stylized manner of the Rajput and Pahari miniature schools and of the Jain mss. illustrations.

The superb stylization of Mughal portraiture, and the frame work of the early Rajasthani and Mughal school miniatures, had also begun to claim her increasing admiration. Her work in the last phase often discloses a sensitive analysis of these new found experiences. In “Elephant Promenade” where the great pachyderm dominates the foreground and receding planes;
in "The Swing" with its close knit grouping of staid and almost formal figures; and in the exquisitely stylized "Horse and Groom" against a flat monochrome background, new trends in composition, form and facial construction are observed. "The Ancient Story Teller" and "Woman Resting on a Charpoy" also point to this period, though "Haldi Grinders" and "Camels" point back to the colour rhythm of "Resting". The most noticeable feature of her work in Saraya was the constant fascination which the elephants in the village exercised on her. The Indian sculpture and painter from the earliest times of Bharhut and Sanchi has always displayed a predilection for the majestic form and ponderous slow rhythm of the elephants. It was a heritage manifesting itself in her and attuned to her aesthetic vision, elephants formed a part of her pattern of 'things inevitable and only vaguely understood.' Her sketches were made only with a view to understand some problem of form which evaded her comprehension, and but for a very few rare occasions, she never recorded colour.

From July to November 1939 Amrita stayed at Simla and also for a short time at Delhi with her sister Indira and during this period she was in a somewhat restless state of mind due to the ongoing world war and the uncertainty of her future plans. She did not paint much at Simla. Yet, "Resting" one of her finest achievements, for its sheer colour beauty, belongs to this period of unrest. 'The vogue pensive haunting faces still persisted but a change in the handling of form and colour was apparent. There was a greater standardisation 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'. Clive Bell's theory of significance of form recognizes the truth that
forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way.  

Amrita's art was a direct antithesis of what prevailed in India at the time she came back to India. Her art had elemental power and was animated by a serious purpose. It was not random painting, the outcome of sudden impulses, nor just pictorial documentation but a search for ultimate truth through the medium of aesthetic organization. It has been observed that great art is that synthesis of form and colour which is not concerned with superficial sensations, prettiness or bald narrative but which is directed to the revealment of things mainly insolvable and which we variously designate as the beauty, the illusion, the mystery, and the rhythm, of life. The mode of expression often vary widely and the means employed are often dissimilar yet in the ultimate analysis it is found that the purpose is the same and the controlling basis is organization. The great Nataraja of Tiruvelagadi and the famous Buddha of the Jamalpur Mound, though so different in concept, have both achieved aesthetic truth through the almost perfect organization of form. When one work of art moves us more than another work of art, it is probably due to the fact that its organization is in closer accord to those mysterious laws which govern the power of form to arouse our deepest and most intense emotions. It has been observed that it was this attitude to art which tolerated nothing that was trivial, superficial, sentimental, or indeterminate, that resulted in Amrita Shergil's complete antagonism to the trends of Modern Art as she saw them in India, and drove her into that

loneliness which characterized her mental and emotional existence as an artist. Her earliest contacts with ancient Indian art had been through the medium of sculpture. Her later contacts with Indian fresco and miniature painting resulted in a modifications of her methods of construction. She tended to paint in mass rather than in line, and used colour to organise volume and spatial relation in a composition.

It is interesting to compare the severity of planes in her treatment of drapery in ‘Hill Men’ and ‘Hill Women’ with the expanses of solid stone found in early Indian sculpture. The efforts have an admirable simplicity of form. They signified to her the essential immobility of the men and women in her canvases pointing to an immobility of frustration. Her depth of understanding of early Indian sculpture eliminated superfluities in her pictures and like those early stone carvers she sought purity of form and very cleverly avoided all ornamentation having nothing but decorative purpose and intent. The plastic art of Medieval India was a warning to her of how overwrought surfaces, with their display of intricacy and skill, had often sacrificed the intellectual appeal of simplicity to that manner of prettiness which evokes popular admiration.

Amrita painted naturalistically in keeping with her training in Paris and her work in Paris was often described as distorted and such critics attributed these oddities to a lack of technical skill. By then, however she knew that great art did not concern the appearance of reality but great art did concern the organisation of form and colour. This organisation, she learnt, was effective for the expression of emotion associated with reality. The appearance of reality in fact has never been concentrated upon by truly
great artists who have addressed and mastered structure, form and colour there by enforcing their aesthetic significance. It is only when form is simplified to the bare essentials that the intensity, power and aesthetic appeal of a great work is immeasurably enhanced. Simplification of form in fact clarifies its rhythm the organisation of rhythm being in turn manifested in the organisation of form which also includes colour.

There is an apparent contradiction in Amrita's work. Her figures are always static but her colour organisations are vibrant, glowing and intense. This is an expression of the character of her own emotions as both her life and her art were a strange combination of the static and dynamic.

It was a sheer chance that her models in ‘Hill Men’ and ‘Hill Women’ were from the hills; they could as well have been from the plains. These titles were just labels to say one work from another. These are not portrait studies- there is no attempt to authenticate costumes or colours to the largely stylized faces and her models represent only a frame work for organisation of form and colour. These are in fact only means to express her vision in which the faces reveal a kindredship of experience. Amrita ‘created an unmistakable world of her own and there is a feeling of unity in all her best works. These canvases were facets, albeit very varied, of the same stone.’

The use of water pots and water vessels in several of her pictures was not merely for compositional ends or for the tactile sensation of form, but was symbolic of harvest. “Child Wife” is later in point of time than “Group of Three Girl”, but like all her studies of a single figure it is not quite so successful as the compositions in which two or more figures have been
utilized. This category also includes the striking, "Man in White". Single figures did not give her that scope for her composition and for balance of form and colour in which she delighted. Consequently she tended to particularize the face in these single figure canvases to give such works a romantic emphasis. It is the feeling of mystery and a sense of grouping to understand things inscrutable, expressed through form and colour which give to her pictures the magnetic quality which is possessed by all great art.

"Story Teller", "Siesta", "Ganesh Pooja", "Elephants Bathing in a Green Pool", and "Hill Scene" are small or medium sized compositions each of them a revelation in colour with increasingly passionate emphasis. Here in her handling of form all detail is uncompromisingly eliminated. The pictorial relationship between the landscape motif and the figures in each picture is effected with a highly developed sense of balance and though the figures in these paintings can be clearly differentiated from the figures of her famous canvas, ‘Trilogy’ and other earlier canvases, yet the whole gamut of her work displays a marked emotional cohesion which is so characteristic of Amrita Shergil.

The pictures of this period though loosely related as a group are widely different in their structure and exposition. Her painting unifies the separated groups of figures. "The Story Teller" is almost a portrait, like the cowered scenes so dear to the Pahari miniatures. The treatment of the line is particularly sensitive and already indicates that mastery over animal form and characterization which she exhibited in later canvases. The striking large canvas “The Red Verandah” is not in the mode of these small compositions.
though it belongs to the year 1938, and "Women in Red" an extraordinarily compact and effective grouping done in same year, echoes the mood of her South Indian period. The head of the girl in the lower left corner is reminiscent of Modigliani but in truth the inspiration for the elongated facial type came from a South Indian bronze of the Vijayanagar period. Each face, both in structure and expression ensures on almost perfect balance for this closely knit group of half-length figures which are supported by the massive hand of the women on the right. Though the introduction of the hand superficially fulfils the function of holding the child, the device is typical of her carefully worked out methods of construction.

"Resting" done in Simla in 1939 was a prelude to the Saraya period and possesses several affinities to the "Haldi Grinders" which has an almost complete elimination of faces and is one of the Amrita's most daring and successful essays both in form and colour. Both the pictures bespeak to an agitated mind seeking to control itself though strange to say, the title of "Resting" is intended to suggest rest.

Amrita Shergil was truly classic in that she never abandoned the principles of her form of classicism even in her boldest experiments. In relation to her pictures in which animals figure it must be clearly understood that she was not an animal painter using the phase in its popular sense. The rhythms and form of certain animals yielded her an aesthetic experience much in the same manner as the rhythms and form of body, or of a fragment of landscape.10

TREATMENT OF SPACE

The rule of space in painting is great since a composition defines the space and marks a dignified central space for the main themes. Other objects complementary to it fill the space to make the composition vivid and varied. Space in painting is further defined by the rhythmic lines and form and the visual perspective. The sense of depth and three dimensional effect are further complementary to it. The chiaroscuro-effect itself is important in this context.

An ideal composition of a theme comprises all the elements of compositions such as forms, space, perspective, depth, the decorative richness and texture of colours. In case of Amrita Shergil's paintings one can see that in her work all the elements were organised in a very natural manner. But in classical Indian paintings, especially at Ajanta, the standard of composition, is quite at variance. At Ajanta compositions are over crowded as a result of which the neighbouring scenes get mixed up into one another. There is almost a lack of definite frame for a scene and also a free space for the movement of an eye is wanting.

In Amrita's work space is ordered with an absolutely clear vision. All her compositions are wonderfully 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, (Turmeric Grinders)" and "Women Resting on Charpoy (Cot)", are outstanding examples of the carefully husbanded space. The whole picture represents an actual background of a village household. It also reveals the artist's sense of scientific perspective and balance of composition.

Another creation, "The Ancient Story Teller" shows a superb disposition
of figures against a serene open space. Here we find the most admirable composition combining the virtues of Eastern and Western schools of painting. It is notable that earlier to it all these qualities are not found united in one person. In a brief span of seven years of pictorial activity Amrita has left behind a name that is gratefully remembered by all who love beauty and appreciate creative art.

Expression and such a philosophical depth being the essential background of her paintings, it is no wonder that her paintings have very little of other background. Formally speaking, they are flat, living in a premier plane of human attentions. Her art is decorative to the extreme. It is in this direction that she must find herself."

For example "Hill Scene", shows green hill sides, green upon green Rohodendron trees with stiff scarlet flowers and a row of figures advancing towards the spectator. Little women in brilliant colours look like parrots; in fact there is something bird like about them. Amrita wrote about the picture, "In the Ladies Enclosure", that she had painted while at Saraya, "It is a composition in which horizontal lines dominate. A slab of pale green sky, a horizontal coral coloured wall in the distance, slice of flat ground dotted with tiny figures carrying pitchers, and enclosed by a low alive green grass studded with pink and red birds. A row of sitting women in pungent colours and a thin black dog accentuate the horizontal lines. A couple of hibiscus bushes with crimson blossom and standing girls break the horizontal accent even so slightly". The broad planes of her subject and the plastic effects

which she tried to achieve in her canvases is really remarkable.

Some critics have pointed out that Amrita used water pots in her pictures mainly as 'space fillers without adding to the organic unity of the pictures, Karl Khandalawala, however, did not agree with this view and thought that the water pots have instead a symbolic value in the Indian context. To him the water-pots spelt harvest to the tired anxious tillers of the parched soil."\^\textsuperscript{13}

In "\textit{Siesta}" we find that languor, which predominated in much of her work, permeating the whole scene. The figures bespeak apathy, the surroundings are fantastically foreboding, the spinning wheel is still. These are not the works of the fields or the drudges who toil to keep body and soul together, and yet they reveal a kinship of existence to them. As a composition it has departed from the simple yet difficult groupings of the Trilogy and adopted a more intricate design. This design is based on an elliptical and not on a horizontal or vertical frame work as was her wont in her earlier pictures. It is full of interesting devices such as the oppositional lines of the circular pillow and of the wheel which keep the eye gently rotating with in the bounds of the picture. The modified perspective, though it offends against academic notions, lifts the landscape background out of the common place and unifies the separated groups of figures.\^\textsuperscript{14}

In Amrita’s paintings done in Saraya she used the long ochre road dotted with red clay images, the wayside trees, the yellow mud huts, the bullock carts laden with sugarcane, and the lumbering elephants of the local Zamindars. She painted some of her well liked paintings like "\textit{Siesta}" "\textit{Hill}

\^\textsuperscript{13} Bhuvanendran, N., Interpretation of Indian Art, Heritage Publisher, New Delhi, 1991, p. 161.

\^\textsuperscript{14} Khandalavala, Karl, Amrita Shergil, Bombay 1944, p. 62.
Men" "Hill Women", "Elephant Bathing in a Green Pool" and many others. It was then that she began to employ the decorative motif using trees, flowers and foliage in her painting.\(^{15}\)

The superb stylization of Mughal portraiture, and the frame work of the early Rajasthani and Akbar school miniatures; had also begun to claim her increasing admiration. Her work in the last phase often disclosed a sensitive analysis of these new found experiences assimilated into the fabric which was the basis of her art. In "Elephant Promenade" where the great pachyderms dominate the foreground and receding planes; in "The swing" with its close knit grouping of staid and almost formal figures, and in the exquisitely stylized "Horse and Groom" against a flat monochrome background; one clearly discerns new trends in composition, form and facial construction. "The Ancient Story Teller" and Woman Resting on a Charpoy", also bear the impression of this period.\(^{16}\)

Amrita was not a landscape painter, but her closest approach to landscape is well noted in "Hill side". Fortuitously adjacent fragments of nature an ordering a readymade design or impression had no appeal to her as material for her manner of art. In her plain air studies she often used various landscape motifs. Which in actuality were unrelated to each other, but were organized with in limits of her canvas, not as a mere natural background for her figures, but as an integral part of the composition and colour organization. To fulfil the colour organization she freely ignored the natural colours of her landscape motifs. It is in these plain air compositions that she for the first time manifests delightfully subtle and quiet decorative tendency using


\(^{16}\) Khandalavala, Karl, Amrita Shergil, Bombay, 1944, p. 46.
landscape paraphernalia, such as trees, foliage, flowers and huts some what in the stylized manner of the Rajput and Pahari miniatures schools and of the Jain mss illustration. She depicts wider perspective with the manifestation of trees, huts, ponds and fields; however, at times, she also projects heavy structures in greater detail accentuating the natural forms and making them more exuberant. She keeps on the ordination of space by a combination of inorganic forms she has painterly discipline, and is quite sensitive in approach. She has synthesised various natural elements in her canvasses with a sense of colourfull design. There is indeed an immediate appeal which invokes a curiosity of exploring the uneven chosen forms. She always creates sensitive compositions.

As a colourist, Amrita's work surpass. In her works the colour effect is often imbued with the qualities of charm and embellishment. It was her originality that the pigments also hinted at the vastness and space in her work and no part of the picture plane is left isolated.

Chapter- 5

Amrita Shergil and her Contemporaries
# LIST OF PAINTINGS DISPLAYED IN AMRITA SHERGIL AND HER CONTEMPORARIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF PAINTINGS</th>
<th>ARTIST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 1: From left to Right</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Mother and Child</td>
<td>Krishna K. Hebber</td>
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<tr>
<td>(ii) Veena Player</td>
<td>Raja Ravi Varma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Three Pujarins</td>
<td>Jamini Roy</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iv) Sati</td>
<td>Nandalal Bose</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Row 2: From left to Right</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(i) Women</td>
<td>Rabindranath Tagore</td>
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<tr>
<td>(ii) Village Family</td>
<td>Sailoz Mokherjea</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iii) Huen Tsang</td>
<td>Abanindranath Tagore</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iv) Gopini</td>
<td>Jamini Roy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Row 3: From left to Right</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(i) Camels</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
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<tr>
<td>(ii) Coming of Princess</td>
<td>Gaganendranath Tagore</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iii) Red Verandah</td>
<td>Amrita Shergil</td>
</tr>
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Amrita's work right from the moment she was noticed as an artist around 1927 received attention and her personality and her art have been, before and after her death in 1941, paid attention to by many a critic of substance, the outstanding among them being Karl Khandalavala, Mulk Raj Anand, Charles Fabri, Herman Goetz, Jaya Appasamy, G. Subramanyan, Gitakapur and Vivan Sundaram. She was adored by the liberal minded Indians to whom she was a representative, through her life and work, of the freedom of the modern artist and she went on to become almost a legend even in her short life time.

Amrita Shergil made her appearance as a real pioneer in the thirties. Her exquisite art is organically rooted in the most valuable Indian traditions and at the same time it is international and modern in the best sense of the word.¹

In 1934 she returned to India and started to create in the exotic surroundings with enthused vigour. Her first exhibition in India drew great attention. The young artist also received notable criticism as her art was considered too modern. During these

years, essays, studies and reviews appeared in leading Indian papers and periodicals, a collection of reproductions of her paintings was published and a noted Indian art critic contributed a review on her art. He observed that "her paintings had a somewhat revolutionary impact on the Indian art and that she unexpectedly and suddenly broke into India's artistic world by her surprising and perturbing art. He further observed that even her offenders understood that there was something new and different. He added that Amrita's art was modern in the best sense of word but her modern style was not in keeping with the modernism of so many painters and that her style did not have any lack of knowledge or imperfection in craftsmanship. Her superior and steady drawing and constructive structuring of forms were so powerful, that they could be a credit to a male painter as well. Besides the feminine delicacy of intution and instinctive feeling. There are robust and expansive power pulses in each and every work of her. She made a thorough study of India. She discovered on entirely new face of India which her wetsernized Indian or Anglo Indian Contemporaries had no eyes at all.

Amrita's art shocked and made nervous the artistic circle of india and she no doubt brought new message. She contributed to find a stream for a new and viable art. Amrita's painting left an indelible mark upon the whole modern art of India, which is the outward success of her lifes work. Those who knew her intimately
believed that her greatness could not be measured by such outward signs only. The unforgettable thing about this brilliant young woman was that she had lived among her fellow artists and critics with a mission, and that all her art sprang out of an inner urge, a call that was stronger than any instinct.  

She fervently hoped that impelled by an inner urge a new and vital movement would come into being. Judging from the vitality of current Indian art scene one can only say that her prophesy has come true. On a proposal to write a book on Indian art, a request of an Allahabad publisher she accepted, as an after thought she expressed her apprehensions to Karl Khandalavala in a letter “You know my views on art and if I do write I won’t make any concessions, I assure you. They will set on me like a pack of hyenas and tear me to bits, shall I do it notwithstanding? Mulk Raj said her painting glowed with extraordinary fusion, fusion of sensibility, which had growth out of realism into an imaginative process”, Mulk Raj further said “For the first time an Indian painter had the courage to paint ordinary people; human beings even of the down trodden world of the hill state of North India. And she reproduced in their agony the sadness in their faces, and the colours the grey colours in the hill men, the extraordinary sensitiveness the

reaction to their inner pair. The remains technically, from the point of view of the use of new materials and from the points of saying what she wanted to say, a new kind of revolution in painting in India. She left her unique paintings as a gift for us. Her own precious record of self expression, moving and beautiful. They are the blossoming of her own rich personality in her discovery of India, as it was then unfolding itself before her gaze after her sojourn abroad. Activated by the complex surging of forces of her own heritage which stirred deep within her heart. She even tried to recast these impressions through the prism of her own personal experience. Her paintings have the strength of her personality and the wistfulness of her sympathetic approach and understanding undoubtedly they are a great contribution to our cultural life.

No wonder Amrita developed such a passion for colour; pictorial element is also such an essential features of her work. The columnist of the illustrated weekly of India, commenting on her wrote “Those few people in Simla who know anything about modern painting have been immensely impressed by the five paintings of the young Indian girl artist, Amrita Shergil” and he finally summed up, “Its great merit, however to all who have eyes to see, lies in its fundamental solidarity of construction, simplicity and sobriety of design, brilliant brush
work and really masterful composition”, And he concluded “there is no question of Miss Shergil's being in the front rank of women painters of today”, Muggeridge remarked “Amrita was a remarkable painter”, The Hindustan Times of New Delhi had described her self portrait as being one “amongst the most striking picture by the more well known younger artists”, The Times of India wrote that Amrita Shergil’s portraits struck “a definite note of self confidence” and thought that is another exhibits, ‘Man in while’, She had achieved a remarkable success.  

Karl’s monograph which came out in 1944 as a companion volume to the portfolio of Amrita’s painting brought out by the Kitabistan of Allahabad in 1934 was reviewed by the noted Mulk Raj Anand who considered her as a genius of first rank who as one of the first of the few Indian painters gave a new direction to the Indian art and while examining the finer aspects of her works put emphasis on the structure of objects in terms of paint and canvas, organisation of form and colour which are indicative of her loyalty to modernism aesthetics. 

Amrita was one of the most secretive persons of her times who had only disdain for the prudish morality of the period and that is why even after many years after her death the legend

5. Anand, Mulk Raj, Lines Written to an Indian Art, Bombay, 1949, p. 60.
persists. Though her name is not any more a hot name in art circles today it cannot be denied that more than any other artist of her generation and the one that followed, her impact on contemporary Indian art has been profound and inescapable, so much that some critics said that the year of Amrita's entry into Indian art scene can be called 'water shed in the annals of Indian art'.

Amrita survived and shined irrespective of the hostility she faced from the contemporary Indian art environment. The very mention of her name would evoke despise in artistic circles, despite the efforts of supportive critics like Karl Khandalavala, Hermann-goetz, Charles Fabri, Mulk Raj Anand among others. Some of the epithets used to describe her art have been listed as 'hideous faces' 'deformed limbs', 'incorrect drawing', faulty composition', 'unnatural colours', 'uncouth', etc. The hostility is evident from the fact that her paintings sent to the All India Exhibition, Trivandrum in 1937 were rejected on the advice of Dr. James Cousins who was incidently an ardent Champion of the Bengal School. Asit Kumar Haldar of Marg publication felt that despite her Indian father her work 'Smells of West'.

Sarda Ukil thought that her work did not represent "the

feeling of the people". Even her claim as an Indian Painter was often questioned. This could be one of the reasons why Karl Khandalavala had to go extremes to prove that her art was rooted in Indian tradition, and went on to defend her against the criticism that she was inspired by Cezanne and Gauguin.

Karl put forward the theory that Amrita's art was a reaction against the Bengal School of painting. He conceded that the work of the pioneers like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Ganendranath, Venkatappa, Jamini Roy and a few others who are responsible for the renaissance of Indian paintings, was of undoubted value. Yet, those who followed them lacked in inspiration and they were carried away by the surface effects, Amrita's work was a reaction against the "wrapped and unmeaning imitation of the masterpieces of the past".⁸

Noted art critic Subramanayam observed: "The unmistakable honesty and sensitivity of her work, their considerable virtues, her perspicacious if limited awareness of India's artistic past and her deep concern with overcoming the constrictions of her academic training to getting a fresh contact with the local environment and its history, all too rare among the Indian artists of her time, and rather remarkable in her, considering her divided ancestry, training and social environment", However, Subramanayam compared her to

her advantage with the Indian artist of her time, referring obviously
to the Revivalist; and every weakness mentioned in the case of
Amrita was seen in them to a far more glaring extent. Subramanyam saw Amrita as "Sharply prototypical of the modern Indian artist, an intellectual whose one foot is in the west and one in east", Subramanyam sees the later not doing too well in his attempt to come to terms with his history and the changing times and environment, driven at the same time as he is by an inordinate desire for global contemporaneity. And he adds 'that this did not drive Amrita into a bewidlerised esoteric dreamland, like it did many before her and after her, is a tribute to the robustness of her approach, and that a number of her paintings, emerge out of this conflict with moving and persuasive images is a fact of no mean merit."

P.R. Ramachandran Rao observes: "Amrita Shergil repudiated the Bengal school with ruthless condemnation, for its devitalised effeminacy for feeling almost exclusively on the position of mythology and romance," for its insensible and endless imitation of the forms of the past. Her coruscating mind was endowed with a keen critical sensibility and she would not, being a trifle dogmatic and impatient, suffer plodding foolishness in art however self righteous, she proceeded unconcernedly to make her own aesthetic discoveries, expressing them in terms of her urgent experiences, in visual equivalents created by that very expression. She was
naturally incomprehensible in the context of the archaistic hieratic art of the day and that's why her work was understood less and less.⁹

But ultimately Amrita found a solution for the problem of identity of the modern Indian artists and intellectuals, in fact of modern man generically and that, as far as contemporary Indian painting is concerned, the best work has been influenced directly or indirectly by her example.¹⁰

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⁹ Rao, P.R. Ramachandran, Modern Indian Painting, Madras, 1953, p. 58.
CONTEMPORARIES OF AMRITA SHERGIL AND MODERN ARTISTS

Amongst the most notable contemporaries of Amrita Shergil are Nandalal Bose, Sarda Charan Ukil, Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and some other modern and progressive artists of India who followed the footstep of Amrita Shergil such as, Krishna Hebber, Sailoz Mukherjea and George Keyt. All these painters while showed a fascination of folk art from of India some of them like Hebbar and Mukherjea are found closer to Amrita's art. However, and overall impression of Indianness and respect for traditional art of India, commonly found in the masterpieces of these great painters drew them closer and hint at an established link in the progress of the Renaissance in Indian art during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A brief note on these painters follow to illustrate above observation.

NANDALAL BOSE (1882-1966)

Nandalal Bose was born in Kharagpur in Bihar, and joined the Calcutta school of art in 1905 for five years. He was a member of Lady Herringham's team in 1910-11 for copying the Ajanta murals. In 1920 he joined Shantiniketan and accompanied Asit Kumar Haldar during his visit to Bagh caves and copied the murals.
Further in the year 1924, he accompanied Tagore to Burma, China, and Japan. Later he became the head of the Kalabhavan at Shantiniketan, Nandalal was not only the leader of Bengal school of painting but is also recognised as one of the master artists of the world. He never allowed any style or school of painting to influence him fully. He, however, had close association with the leaders of the Japanese Renaissance who gave him a certain insight into the technical nature of painting and Nandalal later learnt from them a bold and free use of brush. It was only his own country's past and classical art of Ajanta which inspired him too much. Nandalal Bose's art has its roots in the cultural ethos of India. His largely nurtured indigenous art. This forms are conventional and linear. His graceful calligraphy has a broad oriental foundation, suggested in part by the Mughal and Rajput schools. His great works show the sculpturesque quality of the ancient art. He has all the imaginative sensibility of a sensitive artist and the strength of a creative genius Venkatappa of Mysore lies in his utter simplicity and the sincerity of his art.

In delineation, he remains preeminent in modern Indian painting which has hardly any thing to match his masterly "Natir Puja" its mere out lines attain subtlety and plastic architecture, Among other examples of his linear vitality are the "Veena Player"

and the "Dance of Nati" remarked by a further simplification.

The name of Nandalal stands out as a artistic phenomenon. He depicted the mythological stories in the traditional technique of the Ajanta mural painting. The enthusiasm for antiquity was surely the ideological reflection of the struggle over the choice of technique.¹²

His greatest achievement was when he made art history in this country by becoming the official architect and designer of the Indian National congress and created those magical cities at Haripura and Faizpur out of such common stuff as split bamboos, with brown paper and earthen pots.¹³

**SARDA CHARAN UKIL (1890-1940)**

He painted in the manner of Bengal school "Classicism" is watered down in his work into an unsubstantial style of pale, sentimental colourwashes that trail off in whispered undertone. He painted numerous pictures of Lord Krishna and Lord Buddha in this style. His earlier pieces before he adventured on his professedly lyrical style, have robustness and substance, as in his "Sita in Captivity", a picture of quiet desolation. These qualities

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¹³. Venkatachalam, G., Contemporary Indian Painters, Nalanda Publication, Bombay, p. 33.
are hard to find in his later stylisation\textsuperscript{14}. In his paintings there appear linear depiction of forms; and the human forms emerge idealistic. He shows a strong tendency towards idealism. His landscapes are more ideal than real. The lyrical quality of his lines, forms and colours makes his pictures full of life and feeling but clearly distinguish from the Shergil's modernism close to indigenous trend.

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE (1861-1941)**

A poet painter, Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861; a painter of some originality and merit all rolled into one he studied at the Bengal Academy, Calcutta and University College, London. Rabindranath began his career as poet and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. He started painting as a hobby. He was not trained in any school of art. He took art seriously from 1920 onwards, held his first solo exhibition at the Gallery Pigalle, Paris in 1930 and then exhibited at the different places of India and abroad till 1939. He was one of our very few real colourists who used colour as not only invoking philosophical or contemplative moods, but also directly for creating and moulding forms, even as Renoir did and not as embellishment or fillers to outlines, although he indubitably was stronger with his pen than his brush. His pen drawings are really original and there is freshness and uniqueness

\textsuperscript{14} Rao, P.R. Ramachandran, Modern Indian Painting, Madras, 1953, pp.21-22.
His portrait studies display extreme distortions and executed in this way are indeed strikingly clever. His landscape sketches have a distinct atmosphere, especially those he painted in coloured inks. He has a partiality for ordinary liquid colours and the rich effects he effected out of them is amazing. His designs are genuinely calligraphic and he became a master of graceful calligraphy.

Asit Haldar, who had observed the poet in his pictures, wrote, “As regards the composition of his paintings our poet painter displays masterly skill. Once he determines the subject of his picture, the outline and spacing come off spontaneously. There is not the slightest faltering or indecision. The work progresses with a series of sweeping movements, the lines are drawn with a sure hand. His pictures became his “Versification in lines” and linear rhythm is the bass of his expression”.

He executed strange and fantastic drawings in pen and ink, throughout his artistic career he continued to use ink. Indeed the great bulk of his work is in that medium. He did not try his hand at oils certainly not more than twice or thrice still his paintings surpass most the creations of modern Indian painter.

Tagore technically gains a greater amplitude in the landscape for here he controls his rhythms and gives greater attention to texture, colour and tone.\textsuperscript{17} His unique synthesis, his unity of colour and line ushered in a new chapter in the history of Indian painting. The accurate spacing established a live, pulsating, dynamic point in each work and the lively use of colour activated the whole surface of the paper. The results were surprisingly modern and yet very inexplicably Eastern.

Rabindranath carried no import for succeeding Indian painting talents. An exploration of the subconscious, of the reserves of an inner sensibility, is always a personal involvement. The type of indigenous expressionism displayed by the Rabindranath Tagore was significant in itself, for its accent of modernity and for its daring personal vision. He is found to have leaped the boundaries of the national traditions, establishing kinship with the international art expression.\textsuperscript{18}

GAGANENDRANATH TAGORE (1867-1938)

It is a tribute to the daring originality of Gaganendranath Tagore that his eclectic genius functioned entirely outside the ambit of the revivalist movement around him. His major work is grounded

\textsuperscript{17} Chaitanya, K., A History of Indian Painting, Modern Period, Abhinov Publication, 1994, p.120.

\textsuperscript{18} Rao, P. R. Ramachandran, Contemporary Indian Painting, Hyderabad, 1969, p. 9.
on his robust visual perceptions and does not depend for its import on an illustrative or allegorical content; the symbols of his art are neither abstract nor archaic, but intensely real with a quivering vitality. He was concerned with forms, not mainly for their intrinsic aesthetic significance but rather as the vehicles of communicable emotions.

His brush drawings bear Japanese trends. He painted folk lore paintings, caricatures from Indian life and made experiments in semi-cubistic pictures. Cubism was a discovery of the west, but Gaganendranath Tagore introduced it in India in 1922, under the influence of Europe. It is a new way of creation in which the reality is reduced to simple forms of coherent cubes.  

**JAMINI ROY (1887-1972)**

Jamini Roy was born in at Beliatore, a small village in the Bankura District of West Bengal, an area especially rich with a folk art tradition. Roy's father, sensed the boy's capacity and in 1903 at the age of 16 he sent his son to study at the Government school of Fine Arts in Calcutta.  

He went through the usual deadly academic routine at the school of Art. European traditional painting undoubtedly taught him

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that sureness of the drawn line which makes his work live. He copied American and Chinese painters whose sensitive feelings for line became characteristic of Jamini Roy's pictures. He was also superficially influenced by the Tagore's movement of painting. But was only experimenting all kind of techniques to discover for himself his best and perfect mode of expression. It was only his childhood memory of the doll maker's art, with its make believe forms and patterns, its fancy designs and colours which was pursuing him all through his career like a deep undercurrent. He found a lot of peace and joy in this world of his childhood's memory and old village art of Bengal. Its newer designs and fresher colours and the rich dandies drew his all attention. His own genius seemed to find its best expression in that kind of art; and his feelings for line, his skill in draughtmanship, and his vivid imagination considerably enhanced the value and beauty of this folk art.\footnote{Venkatachalam, G., Contemporary Indian Painters, Nalanda Publications, Bombay, N.D., pp. 85-89.}

In his Ramayana Series his subject helped him in the manner of best folk art, to express the grand simplicity of the epic. Roy has stuck fast to his own tradition which is also the tradition of Indian art.

Roy, with his urge for simplification, felt and expressed the affinity between himself and the village artist. Roy went to his
village to sit at the feet of humble artisans and learn what integrity and fierce sincerity in art meant. These despised artisans, no more artists, who paint our remarkable impressionistic pats, taught him the secret of the fundamental rapid line, the expressive contour enclosing the human form in one vital sweep. Most of his remarkable work has been done in this technique. Sometimes he experiments in the vertical line, which is also folk art influence. After getting inspiration from folk art, the first thing he did was to change his palette. He went for the natural pigments mainly used by the villagers to being brought into direct touch with their native soil.

His stroke became rapid and decisive, the colours were applied in a smooth and uniform manner almost as though to remove any semblance of reality from his subjects and then out lined with heavy dark lines. He reduced the details to a minimum, deliberately ignored perspective, and eliminated any hint of chiaroscuro or volume from his forms. The colour only rarely in subtle gradations such as antique rose, golden yellow, turtle dove gray, were placed in flat colour areas boldly juxtaposed; green and red, black and blue, brown and red with an occasional touch of white. For subject matter Roy drew fully from the life and activity of his people. Roy did not seek human expression in his figure. On the countary, he wanted to give them, as do the
patas, a symbolic significance to capture the universality of nature on canvases.²²

Roy was among the few painters of his age who achieved a really pure and vital intensity of creative expression. He also frequently touched on “heterodox” themes seeking inspiration from the West. Therefore, he created typical figures of christian saints and portraits of christ.

A contemporary of Amrita Shergil, Roy is among the most representative of Modern Indian culture and certainly the most widely discussed for the quality and originality of his work. A few critics consider him to be, with Amrita Shergil and George Keyt, among the country's most sincere and powerful personalities. Roy died in 1972 aged about 84. Like Amrita Shergil he was also a path finder and as such did not belong to the Bengal school of Abanindranath. He turned to the vital Indian folk art of the day for release from the over powering influence of the West. But he was at once a deeper student and critic of the West as well, deeper than any other artist of his generation. He always discovered himself in terms of his own self, his radical and national genius and the known art of a wider world.²³

His frieze like pictures, as has been pointed out by Amrita

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²³ Indian Art since the Early 40's - A Search for Identity, Madras, 1974, p.8.
Shergil, recall the relief representations in Bishnupur terracotta tiles. He picked up decorative motifs from kanthas [embroidered quilts] and alpana (Floor decorations) and used them unobtrusively in the flowing drapery of his feminine figures.

GEORGE KEYT

George Keyt, a Srilankan of Indo-Dutch descent, was born in Kandy, on April 17, 1901; he studied art briefly under George de Niese, and was mercifully spared a school of art instruction the "indescribably mediocre stirrings towards the Victorian and Edwardian levels of European naturalism". The obvious debt was owed by George Keyt, in his adult phase, to Picasso, Braque and Cezanne, Hindu and Buddhist sculpture and Srilankan frescoes of Sigiriya rather than to the Bengal school of art. He applied the cubist vision with outstanding success to a realisation of the images of Indian religious art; but it has been observed that the borrowing was integrated into an original style of Keyt's own. This style consists of a coruscaling in which not merely outlines the masses but cuts through the planes to achieve a continuity of flowing forms; this technique is made the vehicle for his conveyance of Indian mythology and romance and Buddhist legend.24

SAILOZ MOOKHERJECA

Sailoz Mookherjea was born in 1908 and was educated at the school of Art, Calcutta. During a study tour of Europe he met Matisse and was profoundly influenced by him. He was a painter who spans the tradition from the past to the present. His work seen against the art environment that dominated the Indian art scene before Independence and the modern phases of art that arose after it, defines his role. He was a bridge, a connecting link and mediator. His art partakes of and unites the old and the new.

The basic inspiration of much of Sailoz Mookherjea's painting was Matisse and Modigliani. But Mookherjea was bearer to Modigliani than Matisse, apart from these manifest influences, Mookherjea has confessed to his vital impulsions to lie in the folk art of India and of the Basohli miniatures of the Pahari school. He is paralleled in his derivative idiom by Amrita Shergil, although she arrived at her metier by way of Gauguin and less perceptibly Cezanne, Both Amrita and Mookherjea achieve a decorative orchestration of luminous colour in two dimensional pattern of exquisite serenity.


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Hebbar was born in Kattingeri, south Kanara, on June 15, 1912 and was educated at the Sir J.J. School of Art, Bombay. Hebber like his other contemporaries of 1930s went through a rigorous training of academic type in the western style and ultimately turned in search of his personality trying to link his creative efforts to the rich traditions of his country. Naturally we find him in 1940's struggling to be free from the eclecticism of styles like impressionism of the Western school on the one hand and the conventional Mughal and Rajasthani style of our country on the other. Those were the days when the dazzling metamorphosis of Indian and the post-impressionistic style by Amrita Shergil was in vogue. It is no wonder Hebbar had a short interlude with this prevailing trends. A new world of form was opened before him and that aspect of modern art where line and form metamorphose almost in the Indian traditional way became most acceptable to his brush. Till then he had tried to express Indianness with the technique of the western painting.  

CONCLUSION
Celebrating Shergil in her Hungary

By Mohua Chatterjee

NEW DELHI: Did Amrita Shergil belong as much to Hungary as she did to India? What else could be the reason for over 700 people having gathered at the opening of an exhibition of Amrita Shergil’s paintings in Budapest this week. After all, her Hungarian connection goes beyond her parentage. Not only was she born to a Hungarian mother, she even married her Hungarian childhood sweetheart Victor Egan. This exhibition, is the first ever of Shergil's paintings outside India. And what better place than Budapest to host it?

But that’s not the end of Hungary’s interest in Shergil. A feature film on her life and times is all set to be shot by a Hungarian director. Though Hungary has never really laid claim on her they actually can, says filmmaker Ramesh Sharma. “There is a lot of excitement about her there — an artist who was born there, grew up in that environment and yet rediscovered herself in India. Hungarian youth today are discovering an artist who was nurtured on their land and became a truly international artist. Shergil trained in Paris and evolved out of Hungarian culture initially but her western schooling did not subvert the Indians. Indeed it influenced her western style of work giving it a new dimension,” says Sharma who is leaving for Budapest on Monday to co-produce the film to be directed by one Hungary’s best regarded cinematographers, Shandor Sara, who was also the president of Hungary’s Duna TV.

“Sara was so excited by the project when I first talked to him about it that he offered to be the director of the film which is going to be an Indo-Hungarian project with actors from both countries,” says Sharma, the director made famous by the political film, New Delhi Times.

Part of a cultural exchange programme between the governments of India and Hungary, the exhibition of 25 of Shergil’s representative works opened at the prestigious Ernst Museum on Wednesday. It included her Ecole de Beaux Arts phase – portraits, nudes, still lifes, studio pictures, her later paintings inspired by Mughal and Basoli miniatures, Ajanta frescos, Matelcheri palace murals and some of her work on women.

According to the Indian ambassador in Hungary, Lakshmi Puri: “Since Shergil is a national treasure — she is considered one of the seven great masters of modern Indian art — the exhibition required a cabinet approval.” It got it, a measure of her continuing relevance, almost 60 years after her death.
CONCLUSION

Till the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the major attempts to revive Indian art had been worked out through the impact of the naturalistic art of Europe. In the schools of arts only Greek and Roman models were the subject of imitation and adaptation by the students. Nevertheless there appeared a zeal for national awareness at the end of the nineteenth century and this zeal led to the Indian Renaissance emerging first in Bengal and later spreading all over the country.

Among the pioneers of Bengal school E.B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Krishtindranath Majumdar, K. Venkatappa, Asit Kumar Haldar, etc. were outstanding artists. However some artist like Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and Amrita Shergil were major artists who reacted against the Bengal school.

The greatest amongst all the artists who distanced themselves from the Bengal School was Amrita Shergil. Through her most distinct forms, extraordinary drawing and for her creative abilities she earned recognition as the most remarkable painter in the field of modern Indian painting. In her short span of her life, Amrita made a revolutionary entry in the world of Indian art which promised a radical change. Amrita Shergil inherited a rich background of philosophy and aesthetics and
her formative years were passed in Europe where she studied at the Ecole des Beaux Art, Paris for three years, earned scholastic distinctions and exhibited her work at the grand salon. During her stay in Europe she was highly impressed by the two renowned artists: Cezanne and Gauguin of Post impressionist era.

Amrita embodied first Cezanne and then Gauguin and went on to create her own form of expression. On her effective return to India in 1934 she formulated the Gauguinesque style in which her major pictures were painted and the peasants became her veritable ancestor gods. Her romantic tangle with India in which the Indian peasant might easily have become the martyr, was resolved with remarkable intelligence. Indeed she foresaw those numerous dilemmas of sentiment and style that Indian artist would experience for the next coming generation. Avid for colours, she understood how traditional Indian painting counterpose, the sensuous and decorative use of colours. When she came back in India she realised her folk style of painting. Her art represented, signs of Indian culture, an affiliation with the traditional trends developed in India. Amrita considered the folk art with a gesture of tribute to Indian environment and traditional art. At the same time, she shed her academic competence in favour of economical stylized delineation of forms and employed the narrative format of Rajput miniatures to
portray the cloistered reverie of the women in elite class. She herself realized that the paintings underwent a great change after her arrival in India. It is so experienced not only in her themes of paintings but also in the spirit fundamentally Indian, lying behind them. It appeared to be that she had a mission to declare that she is none but Indian. Her works testify her to be a person with soul and spirit. Her works are strongly individual and very original. They earned for her an appreciation (notice) from a multitude of people in India and outside. Amrita could establish herself as a one person phenomenon. First she studied the status of the prevalent contemporary Indian art which mainly concentrated on depicting the pleasant aspects of Indian life which to her appeared sort of lifeless and then she reacted by revealing the other side.

Her paintings are nearly exact representation of those Indians who lived under poverty line and their tanned skin, sad big black eyes and lost dreamy looks are telling the story of their sufferings of their life. All these things reveal the sensitivity of the artist towards the suffering class. Amrita was an ideal artist and her creative ability, eloquent and emotional imaginative power are clearly visible in her paintings. She was more than successful in representing ordinary men and their life. Truly her paintings justified her passion for common people of India. Further her masterpieces reveal her impressive
sensitivity and humanistic elements.

These could be considered as an unique gift to Modern Indian Art, which inspire us even today. Still further her works are the representative of the freedom of expression in art, for which her contribution will be remembered for ages in the history of art. Amrita Shergil was an artist who paid a rich tribute to the magnificence of our art and culture, and represented both aspects of its, i.e. dynamic and passive.

In her choice of the medium of oil colour, Amrita achieved a contextual modernity. Amrita was indefatigable in her search for forms and colours and possessed an unusual perception of Indian traditions. She painted quite freely which encompassed originality and progressive nature in her art. She was modern in the best sense of word but her style was in contrast to the modernism of so many painters of that age. Her drawings were superior and steady and her constructive structuring of forms were powerful. In an age of effeminate painting she was singularly masculine in her approach.

Her early death and subsequent political developments leading to partition and Independence of India in 1947 left indelible marks on her young contemporaries who followed in her footsteps to fulfil some of her dream. To sum up, her paintings have left an indelible mark upon the whole modern art
of India.

Most of Amrita’s contemporaries had already distanced themselves from the Bengal school and though they did show a fascination for the folk art forms of India, developed their distinctive identities by being close to Amrita’s agenda of form and content.

Notable contemporaries such as Rabindranath, Gaganendranath, Jamini Roy and some other modern artists who followed her foot steps such as, Krishna Hebber, Sailoz Mukherjea and George Keyt. They gave an overall impression of Indianness and showed respect for the traditional art of India. That these features are outstanding and revealing in the masterpieces of these contemporary artists bring them closer to each other and this affinity hints at an established link in the progress of Renaissance in Indian art to lead their endeavours to the doorsteps of the every evolving trends of the art scene as it stands today.

In short, Amrita Shergil’s art imbibing indianness with an amalgum of folk art traditions and trends of conventional art of India developed at Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari centres of art in addition to the influence of western art finds a singular place in the history of the modern art. Her excellence and uniqueness is understood in terms of her originality in the creations of the
forms and rendering of the sensitive and meaningful figures. Truly, this short lived painter shall be remembered for generations to come for her contribution to Indian art, and bringing it on the international horizon with distinction. As a creative painter she is found superb and no paralleled of her amongst her near contemporaries.

Neverthless she cannot die,
And if on earth we pass her by,
How vacant must our Minds appear.

*Alfred de Musset*
### LIST OF PAINTINGS DISPLAYED IN BIBLIOGRAPHY

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<td>(ii) Group of Three Girls</td>
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To whom it may concern

This is to certify that Ms. Talat Shakeel (who is student of Aligarh Muslim University, Deptt. Of Fine Arts, Aligarh) student of Ph.D. used our Library during the period from Jan. 2000 – July 2001 in connection of her study and reference work.

(MAHJABEEN AKHTAR)
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अनुसंधानगत सफलता हेतु

शुभकामनाओं सहित

29.2.2009
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<td><strong>Row 3</strong>: From left to Right</td>
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<td>Plate-10</td>
<td>Portrait of my Sister</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>Plate-11</td>
<td>Young Man with Apples</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Plate-12</td>
<td>Boris Tachlitzky</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Plate-13</td>
<td>Alfred Cortot</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Plate-14</td>
<td>Brahmacharīs</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>Plate-15</td>
<td>Women</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>Plate-16</td>
<td>Horse and Groom</td>
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<td>Plate-17</td>
<td>Elephants Bathing</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>Plate-18</td>
<td>Bride's Toilet</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Plate-19</td>
<td>Banana Seller</td>
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<td>Plate-20</td>
<td>South Indian Villagers Going to the Market</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>Plate-21</td>
<td>Sikh Musicians</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>Plate-22</td>
<td>Group of Three Girls</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>Plate-23</td>
<td>Hill Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plate</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>Plate-24 Hill Women</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>Plate-25 Namaskar</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>Plate-26 Study of a Model</td>
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<td>27.</td>
<td>Plate-27 Man in White</td>
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<td>Plate-28 Child wife</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>Plate-29 Elephant Promenade</td>
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<td>30.</td>
<td>Plate-30 Camels</td>
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<td>31.</td>
<td>Plate-31 Village Scene</td>
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<td>32.</td>
<td>Plate-32 Red Clay Elephant</td>
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<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Plate-33 Hill side</td>
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<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Plate-34 Woman at Bath</td>
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<td>35.</td>
<td>Plate-35 Haldi Grinders</td>
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<td>36.</td>
<td>Plate-36 Ancient Story Teller</td>
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<td>37.</td>
<td>Plate-37 Hungarian Church Steeple</td>
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<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Plate-38 The Last Unfinished Buffaloes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PLATE-29

PLATE-30
SKETCHES OF AMRITA SHERGIL
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.NO.</th>
<th>NAME OF SKETCHES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Judith (being Amrita herself)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Nude in Charcoal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sketch from Ajanta</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Sketch of Gandhiji</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Mother and Child</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>The Cow</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Sketches for Standing</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Sketches for Two Girls</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Sketches of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Letters to Karl Khandalavala</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Judith (being Amrita herself)
Sketch of a Model
Nude in Charcoal
Sketch from Ajanta
Sketch of Gandhi
Mother and Child
The Cow
Sketches for Standing
Sketch of two girls
Sketch of Women
Untitled
meet myself - photos. I am sure in spite of you! 18.4.1928

My dear Hald (Can I have the enclosed photo back?)

Do forgive me for not having acknowledged the colour reproduction of Bertha before as when it arrived but for once I have a valid excuse.

I was on the eve of my departure for Simla and still had several uncompleted pictures on hand which I wanted to finish before I left. I did eventually manage to do so but only at the expense of every other obligation & occupation of time.

I am going to disappoint you - I am afraid I don't have you an enthusiasm for the print. There is an awful hardness about it in line as well as colour. For instance (to speak only of the colour) the flesh tones of the woman on the extreme left, a rather trans -
I was in a great hurry, and you kindly tell him that fully.—
I was far from being afraid to go up in
the aeroplane; it was quite an other reason
that prevented my going. Secondly—
that I did have a ride on the pull out seat
of Jawahri's motor bike. And was left with
my legs in the least.
Also let him that when Mummy read his
last letter to me and came across the remark
"To emphasise men with women is an insult" to
men, she made some very disparaging remarks
concerning the soundness
of this judgement!
Now I shall have to stop as I must write
numerous other letters.

Hoping you are well and keeping
out of mischief!

I remain yours
Affectionately

Omji.
Her Childhood
Amita with Marie Louise Chasseny
Amrita with Victor Egan