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Amrita Sher-Gil's Journey in Art Practice (1913-1941)

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Abstract:

Art practice is done through different materials and techniques for expression of creator's thought process. In Indian context many artists having practiced with different mediums and techniques, like Water colour, Tempera, Gouache, Acrylic colour etc. But oil paint is unique medium which was introduced by European artists to Indian painters during the colonial period. Few Indian artists created artworks with oil paint since late 19th to early 20th century. Raja Ravi Varma and Amrita Sher Gil were the oil painters during that period. She created many paintings in oil medium on Indian subjects and showed the new way of Indian modern art.

Key Words: Amrita's life, Paintings style, Techniques, Language

1. Introduction:

Amrita Sher Gil was born in 1913 in Budapest. Her childhood was spent in foreign country. She was associated with cultural environment in her house because her father Umrao Singh Sher Gil a Sikh Pandit was from Sikh Jaminder family. Amrita Sher Gil's mother Marie Antoinette Gottesmann was also involved in cultural wings in her family. In 1921, she returned to Shimla, India with her family. From childhood, she learnt drawing and painting and her father decided to admit her in Art Institution for higher studies. That is why Amrita Sher Gil's family moved to Paris in 1929 and Amrita was admitted in Ecole des Bcaux Arts.

2. Literature Review:

Oil painting in India came along with European Artists and was prevalent for over 200 years. This unique style of painting was admired across the world. As an oil painting restorer dealing with various types of oil paintings. I developed a penchant for oil paintings and studied many oil paintings by different painters. My PhD theses was also on oil painting related subject. While studying oil paintings, I saw the paintings of Amrita Sher Gil. At the very young age her paintings were admired across the world. I was also impressed by her paintings and read many books and articles on her art works. I studied research related books regarding others painters like- Raja Ravi Varma, Hemen Majumdar, Jamini Roy, Rabindranath Tagore etc.

3. Objectives of the Study:

Amrita Sher Gil though an Indian was born and brought up in Budapest. Seeing her passion for paintings her father took her to France where she joined in Ecole des Bcaux Arts and did very well. In fact, she was the first Asian to get gold medal. However, she felt that proper subjects for painting would be available in India only. So, she came to India and travelled length breadth of India. The topics which drew her attention were the lives of poor people-like Mother India, Fruit Vendors etc. We see the poverty in Indian life in her work. These paintings have been done in modern context, where her training in Europe has played a part. Pictorial qualities of paintings are unique using earth base colours, flatness and techniques.

4. Journey of Amrita Sher Gil in Modern Art Practice:



Fig-1: Amrita in Her Studio 1937
(Image from Book- Amrita Sher Gil)¹

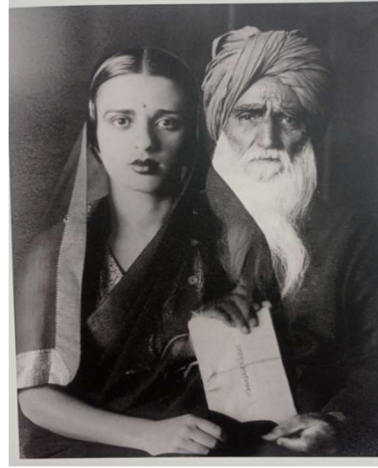


Fig-2: Amrita & father-Umrao Singh Sher-Gil
(Image from Book- Amrita Sher Gil)²

In Art Institution, Amrita learned academic style and techniques and historical aspects of European art. She enriched herself from various aspects of art in Paris and got recognition. Amrita was not satisfied about art practices; she searched new ways in art. She thought that Indian culture and society could help to create new language in art. Hence, she returned to India in 1934 and started to realize the Indian Art and cultural heritage. She began to visit different cultural heritage in India, like Ajanta, Ellora etc. and also traditional folk art of India (specially Pahari folk miniature paintings). The essence of Indian Art was studied properly and adopted in her art practice. She realized that new language would not be created unless the old Indian

¹Ananth, Deepak (2007). Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century. Tate Modern, London: Photoink.

² Ibid; Same as Footnote-1;

traditional cultural Heritage is not observed properly. She found out the actual route of art practice in Indian context.



Fig-3: Charcoal drawing on paper
(10x13 inches)-1930) Source- [SMRITI](#)³

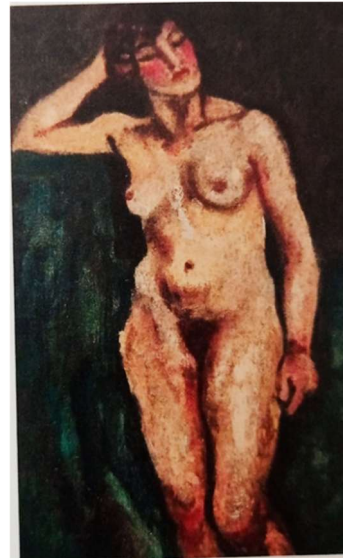


Fig-4: Nude Study-1930
Image from book- [SMRITI](#)⁴

On the other hand, she travelled to different places of India and observed the practical situation and daily life of remote village area where people survived in poverty. The social and cultural aspects of village environment influenced her to create new thought process in art and decided to explore in canvas as subject which would be Indian concept and language in art practice. That was the main motivation in her art journey. She was born in western country and studied in Paris but her family originated from India so she followed the Indian origin in her thought process. The oil medium was used in her art practice and created new style and technique where Indian essence was present in the paintings.

Amrita Sher Gil learned drawing and painting in her house in Hungary and she painted many water colours during little age (10-15 year). After she returned back to her country-India and then her father decided to send her to Paris for art education. She was admitted to [Art Institution-Ecola national des Beaux Arts of Paris \(1930-1934\)](#)⁵. After completion of Art Education in France, she continued her art practice for developing the self-language in art. She thought that Indian Art and culture and social aspects could bring the new aspect of art language which could express Indian features in painting.

³ Rajagopalan, E. Ashin and Rmanathan, Vaishnavi (2015). SMRITI. Mumbai: The Parimal Art Foundation

⁴ Ibid: Same as Footnote-3;

⁵ Ananth, Deepak (2007). Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century. Tate Modern, London: Photoink.



5. Time line of Amrita Sher Gil (1913-1941)⁶:

- Amrita Sher-Gil was born in 1913 in Budapest
- The Family returns to Shimla, India in 1921
- The Family moves to Paris in 1929
- Amrita is accepted by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris
- The family returns to India in 1934/35
- Amrita marries Victor Egan in Hungary in 1938
- Amrita and Victor return to India 1939
- Amrita dies aged 28 in 1941

6. Time line of Art Education, Amrita Sher Gil:

- Amrita Sher-Gil painted many water colours at the age of 10 to 15 years
- Sher-Gil went to France for taking Art Education from “Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts” of Paris (1930-1934)
- In Paris (1933), she was the first Asian Woman to get the recognition and awarded the gold medal.
- Gil was elected Associate of the Grand Salon, Paris (1933)
- Her works have been declared a National Art Treasure by the Archeological Survey of India, Govt. of India.
- Won the Bombay Art Society Award (1937)
- She also won the Shimla Society Fine Arts Prize in 1935
- She was awarded Padma Bhushan posthumously by Indian Government in 1976

7. European Influence in Art:

In France, the journey in art practice, the Impressionist and Post-impressionist art's influence was seen in her paintings. She liked the painting of Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse and Vincent Van Gogh etc. Brushing, application of colour, light and shade were reflected in her paintings. She acquired the academic skill during study in art institution. Her passion was to create painting with nude figures. She created self-portrait and self-nude, earlier and later period of nude paintings. The Indian features are found in later period painting.

⁶ Ibid; See Footnote-5;

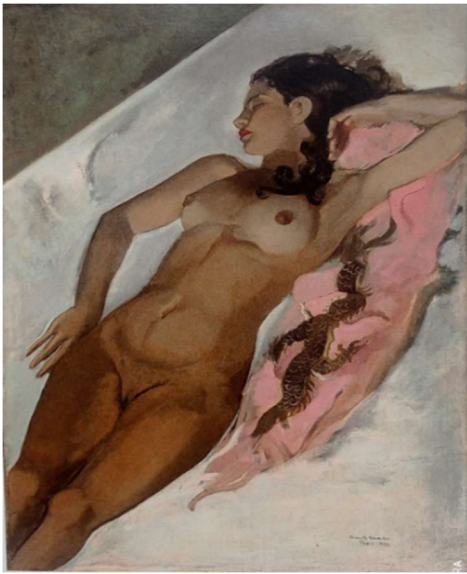


Fig-5: Sleep by Amrita Sher-Gil ,1932
(Image from book- Amrita Sher Gil)⁷

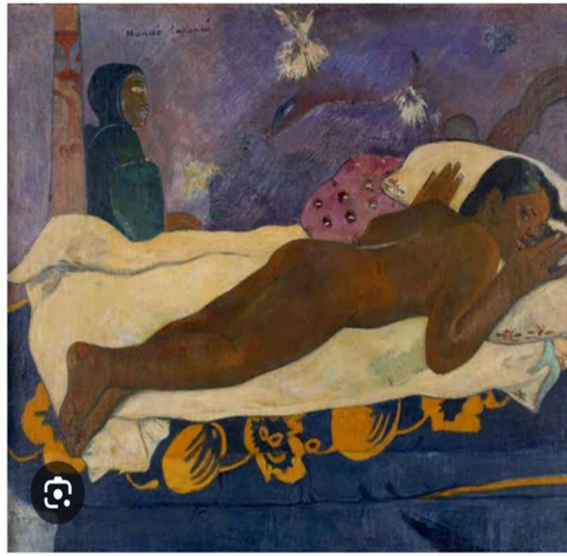


Fig-6: Tahitian woman by Paul Gauguin
(Image from internet)⁸

8. Self-Language in Art Practice:

Amrita was searching new path in art, for that purpose she returned to India. Indian social aspects could bring the special character in painting which represent Indian flavor. She started to visit Indian cultural heritage place and simultaneously observed Indian social and cultural aspects, especially rural village areas where people survived in poverty. Subjects representing the Indian characteristics became the main focus in her paintings. The application of colour in her painting has a significant role in reflecting the Indian traditional features of art. The academic style was gradually reduced by the flatness in paintings-the Indian characteristics of painting. Not only human beings she painted animals like-elephants, camels etc. during her travelling across India. It is observed in Amrita's painting that her knowledge of western painting had to some extent influenced the paintings. Example- South Indian Villagers going to market,1937, Red Veranda,1938 and Mother India etc.

⁷Ananth, Deepak (2007). Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century. Tate Modern,London:Photoink.

⁸ <https://share.google/KI8clGJ6YcBNS8y1R>



Fig-7: South Indian Villagers going to market, 1937; (Image from book-Amrita Sher Gil)⁹



Fig-8: Red Veranda, 1938 (Image from book- Amrita Sher Gil)¹⁰

On the other hand, she observed the contemporary Indian art at that time. Many Indian practicing artists worked in the art field. She liked paintings of Jamini Roy and Rabindranath Tagore.



Fig-9: Brahmacharis, 1937
Image from book- Amrita Sher Gil)¹¹



Fig-10: Bride's Toilet, 1937
Image from book- Amrita Sher Gil)¹²

9. Influence of Ajanta and miniature Painting:

Different elements of Ajanta paintings impressed Amrita, especially Indian red colour and flatness of painting, besides yellow and green colour etc. European academic style and Indian traditional style culminated in her paintings which created new style of painting. As she observed many Indian Pahari miniature paintings during her art practice, their influence especially Kangra

⁹ Ananth, Deepak (2007). Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century. Tate Modern, London:Photoink.

¹⁰ Ibid; Same as Footnote -9;

¹¹ Ibid; Same as Footnote -9;

¹² Ibid; Same as Footnote -9;

paintings are evident in her works. Some of Amrita Sher Gil's famous paintings like-Mother India, Group of three girls, Brahmacharis, Bride's Toilet, South Indian Villagers going to Market etc. have Indian flavor from the view of subject, techniques and use of specific colours etc.



Fig-11: Mother India 1935
Source -Amrita Sher Gil)¹³

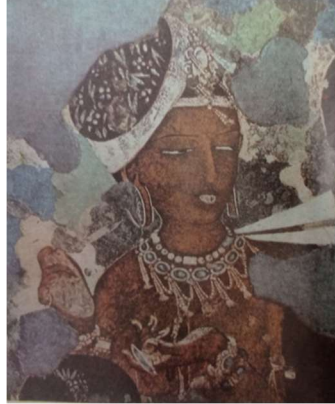


Fig-12: Apsara, Ajanta Mural
Painting; Source- Chitralakshana)¹⁴

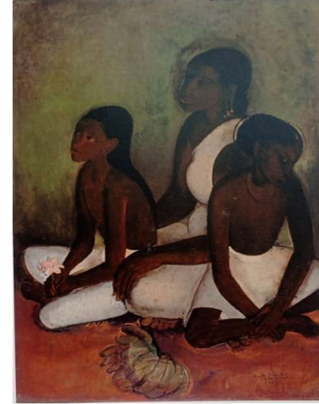


Fig-13: Fruit Vendors,
1937; Source-¹⁵



Fig-14: Story teller by Amrita Sher Gil, 1937
(Image from book-Amrita Sher Gil)¹⁶



Fig-15: Indian Miniature, Kangra Painting
(Image from book- Dictionary of Indian Artists)¹⁷

10. Composition, Form and colour:

Whatever Amrita Sher Gil observed in Indian context are daily life of people. These subjects were reflected in painting surface with oil paint. Composition of paintings were created with the help of Indian rural subjects in very simple composition. Social subjects were diverted in simple way and developed painting of rich aesthetic views with the help of colour line, form. A mysterious

¹³ Ananth, Deepak (2007). Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century. Tate Modern, London: Photoink.

¹⁴ Anand, Raj Mulk (1989). Chitralakshana, Story of Indian Paintings India: National Book Trust.

¹⁵ Ibid; Same as Footnote -13;

¹⁶ Ibid; Same as Footnote-13;

¹⁷ Seth, Pratima (2006). Dictionary of Indian Art & Artists. United States of America: Map in Publishing Pvt. Ltd.



harmony of different views is created in paintings which help to create significant characteristics of Amrita's paintings.

11. One of the Pioneers of Modern Art in India:

Her life was short, so she could not do more paintings, but from whatever she did has left a mark in the modern paintings across the world. She created new language in art assimilating Indian and western characteristics in art. Indian features reflected in her own way. She showed new way of Indian Modern Art

12. Conclusion:

Amrita Sher Gil was Indian by birth as her father was Sikh pandit and her mother was Hungarian musician, so this mix culture was present in Amrita. From her childhood she was fond of drawing and playing piano. For learning painting her father brought her to Paris and she became very popular. She got a gold medal but in spite of all this she felt she will come to find a new way of art in India. She travelled across India which is basically of poor society. This not only exposed poor India but also recognition. She unfortunately died at the age of twenty-eight if had she lived longer probably, she would gift the world with much better painting. Justifiably she is considered as one of the pioneers of Modern Art in India for her great contribution.

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