

## Modern Art and the Art of Amrita Sher Gill

**Rishita Kamboj**

*Research Scholar*

*MIMT Dehradun is affiliate with*

*S.D.S.U University Garhwal*

*Email:kambojrishita01@gmail.com*

**Dr OM Prakash Mishra**

*Principal*

*MIMT Dehradun is affiliate with*

*S.D.S.U University Garhwal*

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**Rishita Kamboj**  
**Dr OM Prakash Mishra**

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### **Abstract**

*Amrita Shergill (1913–1941), a pioneering female Indian artist, used creative language to express her feminist viewpoint in her works of art. Shergill primarily aims to express herself and draw attention to the human condition, especially in her feminism-focused pieces. She was the first woman in the subcontinent to represent herself in her paintings as an artist. On a professional issue, she filled the gap between artists and models. She started to exhibit strange human indications. Her artwork captures the complexity of women while overcoming social conventions and cultural obstacles. Shergill is a talented artist who captures the many facets of the feminine identity. Her work questions conventional wisdom around gender and power dynamics. Everyone has been impacted by her art, no matter their age. Feminist art is used to contextualize Shergill's successor, emphasizing the art's continuing role in challenging social norms and promoting gender equality. Her artwork crosses national borders, providing light on human nature and sparking conversations about feminism, art, and life in general today. This abstract looks at Shergill's new concepts and emphasizes how her work is still helpful in challenging cultural norms and improving gender equality. Keywords: Feminism, Amrita Shergill, Indian modern art, Cultural identity, Creative language.*

## Introduction



The idea of art is complex and changing, reflecting society's ideals, charges, and difficulties. It is an outlet for ideas, feelings, and cultural identity, and it has the power to rewrite cultural norms and inspire social change, which in effect shapes society. In Indian art, women have been traditionally depicted in diverse roles, showcasing their beauty, grace, strength, and spiritual significance. In ancient Indian art, women were often depicted as goddesses embodying divine qualities and in human form, depicting everyday life, familial bonds, and societal roles. However, these representations have also been influenced by societal norms, often resulting in subservient or objectified depictions. Amrita Sher-gill, a well-known 20th-century artist, is renowned for her bold paintings that not only capture the spirit of her era but also provide a deep understanding of the depths of gender, identity, and systems of society. She highlights themes like women's rights, gender equality, and the complex nature of female identity in a society that is changing quickly through the language of art. Despite their skill or subject matter, women artists in India held a submissive role to their male counterparts before the time of Amrita. Contemporary Indian art has seen a shift in women's portrayal, with many artists challenging narratives and offering new perspectives on femininity, gender roles, and societal issues affecting women. Sher-Gil is still regarded as an inspiration by modern Indian artists who utilize their work to draw attention to the socioeconomic problems facing their nation (Mitter, 2007, p. 45). During the pre-colonial era, Amrita Sher-gill was one of the artists leading the charge in modernizing Indian art. She was a born artist. In just 28 years of his life, she has created some extraordinary works of art that earned her the reputation as one of the most talented, courageous, humanitarian, and protest artists of India. This artist was born in 1913 in Budapest (Art and Culture Amrita Sher-Gil (30 January 1913 – 5 December 1941) was a Hungarian–Indian painter. She has been called “one of the greatest avant-garde women artists of the early 20th century” and a pioneer in modern Indian art. Drawn to painting from an early age, Sher-Gil started formal lessons at the age of eight. She first gained recognition at the age of 19, for her 1932 oil painting *Young Girls*. Sher-Gil depicted everyday life of the people in her paintings.

### **Early life and education**

Amrita Sher-Gil was born Dalma-Amrita on 30 January 1913, at 4 Szilágyi Dezső square, Budapest, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>[1]</sup> Her father was Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Majithia, a Punjabi Indian Jat Sikh aristocrat from the Majithia family and a scholar in Sanskrit and Persian, and her mother was Marie Antoinette Gottesman, a Hungarian-Jewish opera singer who came from an affluent bourgeois family.<sup>[2][3]</sup> Her parents first met in 1912, while Marie Antoinette was visiting Lahore.<sup>[1]</sup> Her mother came to India as a companion of Princess Bamba Sutherland, the granddaughter of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.<sup>[1]</sup> Sher-Gil was the elder of two daughters; her younger sister was Indira Sundaram (née Sher-Gil; born in March 1914), mother of the contemporary artist Vivan Sundaram. The family were obliged to remain in Budapest until after the First World War. She was the niece of Indologist Ervin Baktay Baktay noticed Sher-Gil's artistic talents during his visit to Shimla in 1926 and was an advocate of Sher-Gil pursuing art. He guided her by critiquing her work and gave her an academic foundation to grow on. When she was a young girl she would paint the servants in her house, and get them to model for her. The memories of these models would eventually lead to her return to India.

At sixteen, Sher-Gil sailed to Europe with her mother to train as a painter in Paris, first at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière under Pierre Vaillent and Lucien Simon (where she met Boris Taslitzky) and later at the École des Beaux-Arts (1930–1934). She drew inspiration from European painters such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin and Amedeo Modigliani,<sup>[12]</sup> while working under the influence of her teacher Lucien Simon and through the company of artist friends and lovers like Taslitzky. While in Paris, she is said to have painted with a conviction and maturity rarely seen in a 16-year old.

In 1931, Sher-Gil was briefly engaged to Yusuf Ali Khan, but rumours spread that she was also having an affair with her first cousin and later husband Viktor Egan. Her letters reveal same-sex affairs.

### **1932–1936: Early career, European and Western styles**

*Young Girls*, 1932, oil on canvas, 133×164 cm, National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi

Sher-Gil's early paintings display a significant influence of the Western modes of painting, more specifically, the Post-Impressionism style. She practiced a lot in the Bohemian circles of Paris in the early 1930s. Her 1932 oil painting, *Young*

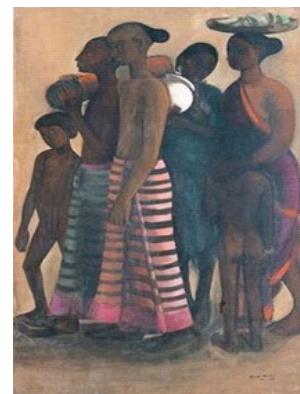


*Girls*, came as a breakthrough for her; the work won her accolades, including a gold medal and election as an Associate of the Grand Salon in Paris in 1933. She was the youngest ever member, and the only Asian to have received this recognition. Her work during this time includes a number of self-portraits, as well as life in Paris, nude studies, still life studies, and portraits of friends and fellow students.<sup>[18]</sup> The National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi describes the self-portraits she made while in Paris as “[capturing] the artist in her many moods – somber, pensive, and joyous – while revealing a narcissistic streak in her personality”.

In May 1935, Sher-Gil met the English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, then working as assistant editor and leader writer for *The Calcutta Statesman*. Both Muggeridge and Sher-Gil stayed at the family home at Summer Hill, Shimla and a short intense affair took place during which she painted a casual portrait of her new lover, the painting now with the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. By September 1935 Amrita saw Muggeridge off as he traveled back to England for new employment. She left herself for travel in 1936 at the behest of art collector and critic Karl Khandalavala, who encouraged her to pursue her passion for discovering her Indian roots. In India, she began a quest for the rediscovery of the traditions of Indian art which was to continue till her death. She was greatly impressed and influenced by the Mughal and Pahari schools of painting and the cave paintings at Ajanta. and

### **1937–1941: Later career, influence of Indian art**

Later in 1937, Sher-Gil toured South India and produced her South Indian trilogy of paintings *Bride's Toilet*, *Brahmacharis*, and *South Indian Villagers Going to Market* following her visit to the Ajanta Caves, when she made a conscious attempt to return to classical Indian art. These paintings reveal her passionate sense of colour and empathy for her Indian subjects, who are often depicted in their poverty and despair. By now the transformation in her work was complete and she had found her ‘artistic mission’ which was, according to her, to express the life of Indian people through her canvas. While in Saraya, Sher-Gil wrote to a friend: “I can only paint in India. Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse, Braque.... India belongs only to me.” Her stay in India marks the beginning of a new phase in her artistic development, one that was distinct from the European phase of the interwar years when her work showed an engagement with the works of Hungarian painters, especially the Nagybánya school of painting.



### **Later Life**

In 1937, she produced the “South Indian trilogy” (Brahmacharis, South Indian Villagers Going to Market and Bride’s Toilet). These works reflected her influence of Ajanta as well as Ellora. It was in these later years Amrita returned to Indian art. She started depicting natural elements in her work. This was reflected in her works such as “Elephants Bathing in a Green Pool” (1938), “Red Clay Elephant” (1938) and “The Verandah with Red Pillars” (1938), which introduced the element of decoration in the form of plants and animals. She also began depicting the suffering of the poor faced by her Indian subjects. Through her art, she made it her mission to express the life of the Indian people. This marks a major artistic development for the artist as she grew from the European style of painting.

### **Family**

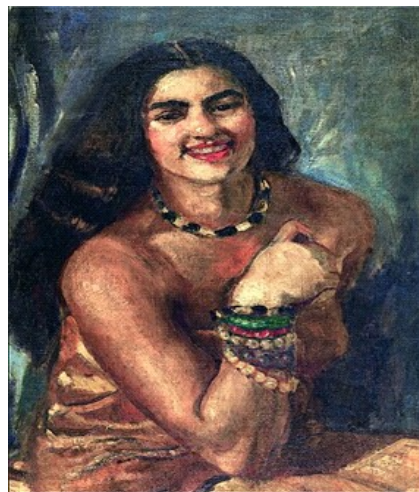
Amrita Sher-Gil was married to Victor Egan, a Hungarian Jew, in 1938. Egan, who played a significant role in Amrita’s life and art, was a supportive partner, assisting her in her artistic endeavors and navigating the complexities of her career. However, their marriage faced challenges, primarily due to Amrita’s intense dedication to her art and her struggles with societal expectations. The couple did not have any children, which further fueled speculation about Amrita’s commitment to her work over traditional family life.

### **Artistic Journey**

In 1926, Indologist Ervin Baktay, her uncle, noticed Amrita’s artistic talents. He encouraged her to pursue an academic education to grow in the art field. She began taking formal lessons in art from Major Whitmarsh and later by Ha Amrita Sher-Gil’s untimely death at the age of 28 on December 5, 1941, remains one of the most tragic events in the history of Indian art. She passed away under mysterious circumstances in her apartment in Lahore, and though the cause of her death was officially recorded as peritonitis, speculation about suicide or a possible poisoning has persisted over the years. Sher-Gil’s death marked the premature end of a promising and revolutionary career, leaving behind a legacy of groundbreaking works that bridged European modernism with traditional Indian art. Her bold, emotive, and introspective style challenged societal norms, especially in her depictions of women and marginalized communities. In the few years she spent actively creating art, Sher-Gil became an icon of modern Indian art, and her passing left a profound void in the cultural landscape. Despite her short life, her work continues to inspire and influence generations of artists, and her story remains a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and the enduring power of Amrita Sher-Gil valued personal expression & originality in her paintings. She sought to break away from the conventional and establish her own voice. This was reflected in her style, which combined realism with modernist abstraction, and in her choice of subjects that conveyed a deep connection to her Indian heritage.

**Painting Style & Techniques** Amrita Sher-Gil’s painting style and her works were created with a fusion of Western and Indian aesthetics, particularly in the Post-

Impressionist style. Sher-Gil's early works were influenced by the European avant-garde movements she encountered in Paris. Her initial pieces were characterised by a focus on form and colour, and reflected her experimentation with a range of styles. Upon returning to India in the late 1930s, Her work also explored themes of gender and identity. She often depicted women in a way that highlighted their inner strength and emotional complexity, challenging contemporary stereotypes and presenting a nuanced view of the female experience. Sher-Gil used her art as a platform to address social issues and critique societal norms. Her paintings often commented on the disparities and struggles within Indian society, providing a reflective perspective on social change. Famous paintings by Amrita Sher-gil include "Young Girls", "Self-Portrait", "Self-Portrait as Tahitian", "Study of a Man's Head", "Group of Three Girls", "Hill Scene", "Hill Women", "Bride's Toilet", "Two Women", "Siesta", "Still Life", "The Story Teller", "Red Brick House", "Woman on Charpai", "The Child Bride", "Village Scene", "Haldi Grinders", "In the Ladies' Enclosure", "Three Girls", "Brahmacharis", "Two Girls", "Camels", "Hungarian Market Scene", "Ancient Storyteller", "The Little Girl in Blue", "Torso", "Fruit Vendors", "Elephants Bathing in a Green Pool", "The Swing", and "Mother India". she absorbed during her time in Paris, while her choice to portray herself in this way signals her exploration of cultural "otherness" and her quest to understand her place in a colonial and postcolonial world.



The Bride's Toilet - Amrita Sher-Gil's The Bride's Toilet painting is a vivid and intimate portrayal of Indian womanhood, imbued with the artist's signature sensitivity and modernist perspective. Created in 1937, this painting captures the quiet yet charged moments of a bride preparing for her wedding, surrounded by women engaged in ritualistic and communal support. Sher-Gil masterfully blends European academic techniques with an



appreciation for traditional Indian aesthetics, resulting in a composition that exudes warmth and cultural depth. The muted earthy tones and nuanced expressions on the.



The Little Girl In The Blue Dress - Amrita Sher-Gil's *The Little Girl In The Blue Dress* painting is a poignant and evocative artwork that showcases her exceptional ability to capture the inner worlds of her subjects. Painted in 1934, this work features a young girl seated against a dark, minimalist background, her blue dress standing out vividly in contrast. The girl's expression is contemplative and tinged with melancholy, hinting at emotions far beyond her years. Sher-Gil's use of color, light, and texture imbues the scene with a sense of intimacy and depth, inviting viewers to ponder the child's thoughts and experiences. The painting exemplifies Sher-Gil's commitment to portraying the emotional complexity of her subjects, particularly women and children, often imbuing them with a sense of quiet dignity. This work also reflects her synthesis of European modernist techniques with an Indian sensibility, a hallmark of her influential career.



Besides these, "The Child Bride", "Siesta" and "Haldi Grinders" were some of other Amrita Sher-Gil's controversial paintings. Many of her nude figures were considered scandalous and provocative as they challenged the traditional perspective on femininity and sexuality.

#### **Characteristic Features Of Her Paintings**

Amrita Sher Gil used bold and expressive hues to convey mood and emotion, often employing a palette that enhanced the sensual quality of her subjects. Her paintings were known for their rich, vibrant colours. Many of her works focused on the lives of women, often portraying them in domestic settings or exploring their inner lives. Her subjects were depicted with a sense of intimacy and psychological depth.

Her subjects frequently included rural life and traditional themes, providing a critique of colonial and post-colonial conditions in India. She was inspired by Indian folk art and traditional painting styles, which can be seen in her use of simplified figures and stylised elements. This influence adds a unique texture to her modernist approach.

### **Impact on Indian Art**

Amrita Sher-Gil was considered a major influence on the Indian modern art movement. Her ability to merge Western and Indian artistic traditions helped pave the way for future generations of Indian artists. Her work introduced new perspectives and styles to Indian art, bridging Eastern and Western art forms. Her paintings often addressed social issues and her work influenced many contemporary Indian artists.



**A Renaissance Woman Using Art to Challenge Social Norms** Amrita Sher-Gil, a multilingual artist, traveled extensively between Europe and India, assimilating various art styles and cultures. Sher-Gil was a beautiful, charismatic personality and talented painter with a passion for piano, ballroom dancing, sculpture, cooking, and bridge (Priyanka P., 2022, p. 1-3). Dr Charles Fabri, a noted critic of the time, commented that Sher-gil was “nearer to the renaissance ideal of women universal (universal man) than any other he had ever met” (Singh, 1984, p.177). Amrita’s mid-30s style shifted due to Indian art sleeping with sociocultural issues, focusing on women’s complexities, roles, and challenges. Her paintings challenge traditional gender roles, showcasing women’s liberation and nuanced representation, reflecting the cultural context of the Indian independence movement and changing gender dynamics. According to Karl Khandalavala, a remarkable biographer of Amrita, *The Art of Amrita Sher-Gil* is the reaction to this decadence and an uncompromising statement that Indian modern art has to move forward along new, deeper ways. When one realizes how few of our fellow beings are capable of serious thinking, one naturally hesitates to single out art as displaying a marked paucity of thought; all too often a band that possesses skill and cunning lacks the mind to guide it. The amalgamation of Hungarian and Indian



cultural elements is evident in her paintings, reflecting her struggle with identity and a quest for belonging (Pozdnyakova, 2018, p. 22-23). Amrita explores societal norms and class dynamics, focusing on Hinduism's believers and lower-class women's lives. To unravel the intricacies of human experiences, she pioneers a novel artistic language named "silence"—an art form serving as a metaphor for unspoken narratives and latent emotions. This unique style, manifested through her visual language and facial expressions, becomes a powerful vehicle for expression. This silent protest of Amrita's feminist ideology aspires to foster a more inclusive environment, especially for women. In her iconic work, "Hill Woman" (1935), Amrita portrays the poignant loneliness, dissatisfaction, and sorrow experienced by women, using silence as a potent protest language. This innovative approach becomes synonymous with Amrita's artistic signature, encapsulating her feminist ideals and the overarching theme of creating a more equitable environment for all genders, with a primary focus on women. In this painting, three women and a young girl are portrayed. The scene features a woman standing gracefully, holding a brimming pitcher, symbolizing a domestic life. Positioned in the foreground is a teenage girl, while two other women are depicted on the right side of the canvas. Collections:

- Three Girls
- Bride's Toilet
- Self Portrait as Tahitian
- Shringar
- Young Girls
- Haldi Grinders

And more paintings with feminism and cultural values in depiction to women empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

Amrita Sher-Gil, a celebrated Indian painter, effectively bridged east & west through her art by synthesizing diverse cultural influences and artistic techniques from both traditions. While studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, she embraced European painting styles, particularly Post-Impressionism, which informed her use of color and composition. However, she remained deeply connected to her Indian heritage, often depicting Indian subjects, themes, and traditional techniques in her works. Sher-Gil's paintings, such as "The Bride's Toilet" and "Three Girls," exemplify this fusion, where she portrays Indian women with both sensitivity and strength, using bold colors and Western artistic techniques. By integrating the aesthetics of Western modernism with the emotional depth and cultural narratives of Indian life, Sher-Gil created a unique visual language that resonated with audiences across cultures, making her a pivotal figure in the dialogue between Eastern and Western art.

Whether through her beautiful paintings capturing Indian rural life or intimate portraits rich in emotion, Sher-Gil's creations continue to resonate with art enthusiasts globally. Her canvas paintings reflect an extraordinary ability to portray both cultural depth and human experiences, making them timeless works of art. Today, Amrita Sher-Gil artworks are highly sought after, with her oil paintings, wall paintings & prints commanding attention at prestigious exhibitions and auctions. Collectors around the world vie to acquire her works, driving up painting prices and cementing her status among the most valuable Indian artists. For those exploring the art market,

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