**Writer: Rakhee Balaram**

**Sher-Gil, Amrita [Born: Budapest, 1913 - Died: Lahore, 1941]**

The life of the artist Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) is well known in India. Striking and passionate, she was born of mixed Hungarian and aristocratic Sikh parentage and lived a brief but luminous existence against a backdrop of colonial India and emergent nationalism. Her devotion to painting and her allegiance to techniques that she honed in Paris produced startling imagery once she returned to India and rediscovered traditional art. By taking up everyday subjects she shaped the course of modern Indian art. Like other School of Paris artists of her generation, Sher-Gil assumed a heritage of Post-Impressionism which included adopting stylistic traits of Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin; her last unfinished landscape hinted further at underlying influences of Cubism and abstraction. In Hungary, the artist was inspired equally by folk and primitive sources and the open-air painting of the Nagybánya School. In India, Sher-Gil travelled widely and was drawn to ancient and medieval art. Here she discovered ‘form’ in the murals of the Ajanta caves and by studying Basholi miniatures and temple sculptures, which later influenced her sensitive depictions of the peasant population. Often compared with Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), the multi- and transcultural and bisexual Sher-Gil was resolute in her desire to be India’s most significant modern artist, declaring that Picasso and others may own Europe, but that “India belongs only to me.”

Sher-Gil’s cosmopolitan life included a childhood in Hungary, and later, India, a spell in Italy and student years in Paris. Still a teenager, she entered Lucien Simon’s studio in Paris armed with the myths, fairy tales and films of her upbringing in Hungary and India, and a fierce and uncompromising work ethic. In Paris, she encountered fellow students Boris Taslistky (1911-2005), Yves Brayer (1907-1990), Robert Humblot (1907-1962) and friend, Marie-Louise Chassany (1909-1940). During this bohemian period, Sher-Gil produced a number of self-portraits which show her questioning identity, such as *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934). As both muse and maker she consciously assumed the position of artist and object simultaneously, while challenging the primitive and exotic tropes of Western modernism.

Advised that the climate of Europe was ‘too grey’ for her, the artist was recommended to rediscover ‘colour’ in India. Sher-Gil returned to India in 1934 but later departed for Hungary, where her encounter with fascism in 1939 hastened her back to the country. Her meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru and interest in Mahatma Gandhi demonstrate Sher-Gil’s awareness of and sympathy for nationalist movements. The artist declared as ‘wishy-washy’ the watercolor techniques of the Bengal School artists - Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) and Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), as well as Rabinandranath Tagore (1861-1941) and others – who had been influenced by visits of Japanese artists such as Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913). Such practice contrasted with Sher-Gil’s own more European-style oil painting and pronounced emphasis on form. Her letters reveal the depth of her antagonism and occasional praise for the Bengal School, and indicate how her own internationalism shaped her perceptions of modern art in India.

**References and Further Reading**

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**Image**

Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian,* 1934. o/c, Private Collection.

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