

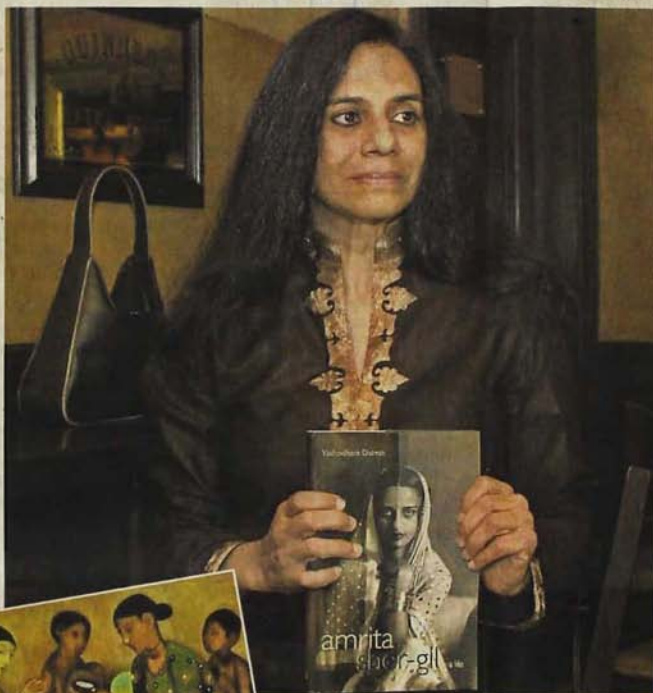
Cutting through the quick

Art historian and curator Yashodhara Dalmia spoke of Amrita Sher-Gil's unique position as an insider and outsider

Born to a Punjabi Sikh father and a Hungarian mother, Amrita Sher-Gil, in her short lifespan of 28 years, reached several artistic zeniths, distinguishing her as one of India's greatest artists of all time. Art historian Yashodhara Dalmia, in a curatorial talk held last week at the National Gallery of Modern Art, brought to light Amrita's artistic genius. "In many ways, Amrita was in a position in being an insider and an outsider. She was able to catch the quick of her subject's personality while retaining a distance intuitively aware of the deeply sensuous rhythms of women's lives. She also empathised with the frustrations of their truncated selves."

Yashodhara spoke of Amrita's path-breaking works. "She was to step outside the sheltered realms of her existence when she decided to make a trip to the South. This actually was a path breaking trip for her because it was in the South that she created her iconic masterly works, such as *Bride's Toilet*. The works that came out of her southern trip were to mark a watershed. She was spellbound by cave paintings and sculptures at Ajanta and Ellora. The sonorous rhythms of Ajanta, undulating figures that seem to rise from the deeply-hewn caves and the subtle and brilliant hues sent her reeling on a sensuous journey. The moulded rhythms of Ajanta began to be assimilated in the painting like *Bride's Toilet*, which actually she made on her return to Shimla."

Yashodhara observed that Amrita moved towards surer ground with her painting *Brahmacharis*. "A group of young Brahmin boys wearing their sacred thread and white dhotis



CRAFT OF ART Portrait of an artiste as a master PHOHO: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

create an impression of both mobility and vulnerability. *Brahmacharis* is indeed a masterpiece, perfectly poised between the serenity of ritual tradition and the turbulence of diversity."

In June 1938, Amrita returned to Hungary to marry her first cousin Victor Egan, despite the disapproval of her parents. During this period, she made a marvellous composition, *Two Girls*. "Her extreme simplicity of form is modulated by tones of white and brown. *Two Girls* seems to be a very simple work, very frontal,

and yet it's a very secret painting and it's full of complexities. The young women are startling in their whole frontality but secretive, at the same time. The physical and emotional longing for the women for one another has many connotations, including social and racial. It is also the embodiment of two aspects of Amrita's own personality: the West and the East. It's a painting overloaded with significance."

After her marriage in Budapest, Amrita returned to India and spent a considerable period at the family estate at Saraya in Uttar Pradesh. "She had an opportunity to watch village



women go about their daily routine and to apprehend the rhythms of their lives. She was also able to observe women's ennui and longing within the four walls of their cloistered existence. In *Woman Resting on the Charpoy* she reflects the sequestered feminine world which was her domain and became the rich ground to represent the female body that is layered."

Amrita also had a fascination for the Mughal miniatures for "their subtle, yet intense keenness of form, acute and detached observation." Amrita and her husband returned to Lahore in 1941, where they enthusiastically went about setting up their place. Writers, poets and other intellectuals used to congregate at their place. Amrita was enjoying life to the hilt, but on December 3, she suddenly took ill, and passed away on the midnight of December 5.

"The cause of her death remains unknown, but a close friend Iqbal Singh, who later wrote a book on her, was present in the last few hours and mentions that she kept talking of colours. She kept mumbling about colours, blues, reds, greens and violets. Subconsciously she was still thinking of colours in light and shade. Then she went into a deep coma."

An exhibition of Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings is on view till April 30 at the National Gallery of Modern Art, 49 Palace Road. Call 22342338.

SRAVASTI DATTA