

# The extraordinary life of an artist

She was and is one of India's most celebrated artists. Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings provide us a glimpse into the compelling and unorthodox life of a woman who died tragically young but left behind a formidable legacy, says art consultant **Farah Siddiqui**



Brahmacharis: Oil on canvas, March 1937

Bride: Oil on canvas, July 1940

Self-Portrait: Oil on canvas, c 1930



Young Girls: Oil on canvas, June 1932

If there was one word to describe Amrita Sher-Gil, it would be passion. Her brief life was filled with vibrant experiences of exploration of her own hybrid identity.

Born in 1913 in Budapest to a Hungarian mother, Marie Antoinette Gottesmann Baktay, a trained opera singer, and a Sikh father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, from landed aristocracy in Punjab, Amrita grew up in an artistic and intellectually stimulating environment. Her father's early adoption of camera technology and obsession with photography led to a detailed record of the world of an Indo-European family, a valuable document in the archives of modernity.

At the age of 16, Amrita enrolled in the most distinguished fine arts institution of its time, the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris. Among the many artists, Amrita was fascinated by was Gauguin, whose works she had encountered on a visit to the National Gallery in London. She was so inspired by Gauguin that it led to the depiction of paintings exploring her own non-western 'exotic' self. Her famous quote, "Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse and Braque and many others. India belongs only to me", sums up the legacy she cultivated for herself. The union of Amrita Sher-Gil's East-West identity and the reflection of this in her art works have long established her as one of India's most celebrated modern artists.

In a series of self portraits over time — on display at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in Mumbai till June 30 — Amrita appears as a woman in command of her own multiple identities, reflected in her clothes, posture and expressions. She wrote, "It seems to me that I never began painting, that I have always painted, and I have always had with a strange certitude the conviction that I

was meant to be a painter and nothing else. Although I studied, I have never been taught painting in the actual sense of the word, because I possess in my psychological make-up a peculiarity that resents any outside interference, I have always, in everything, wanted to find out things for myself."

The exhibition is a glimpse into the fascinating journey of a woman and her relationships with her family, friends, lovers and mentors, her own

In 1934, the family moved to India and set up home in Shimla, where Amrita began to move away from her trained academic realist approach of painting towards more modern compositions which were characteristically Indian in essence yet entirely remained her own. The painting titled *Three Girls* (1935) is an example of this phase. Expressive symbols of her surrounding human life, her works articulate these conditions through powerful and moving images. A recurring theme in Amrita's work is the isolated lifestyle of women immersed in their private feelings and desires.

Amrita's life was dotted with experiences that subtly sensitised the depiction of Indian life of the time. A new sense of movement and restrained colour were noticeable alternations post her travels over three months to southern India where she was exposed to 7th and 8th century cave paintings at Ajanta for the first time. A noticeable work from this period is *Brahmacharis* (1937), which depicts a group of young south Indian priests. In a letter to her friend and collector Karl Khandalavala in March 1937, she wrote, "As a matter of fact I think all art, not excluding religious art, has come into being because of sensuality so great that it overflows the boundaries of the mere physical. How can one feel the beauty of a form, the intensity or the subtlety of colour, the quality of a line, unless one is a sensualist of the eyes."

Amrita, who died in Lahore in 1941 when she was only 28, left behind a body of work that has contributed significantly to Asian art and is testimony to her own achievements as a pioneer of the modern movement. Her compelling and unorthodox life lives on, influencing and captivating the imaginations of generations more than six decades later.



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intellectual solitude and the "ruling passion" of her life — painting. The collection includes works from her early years in Paris. A large work from this time includes a painting of Amrita's sister Indira; the partially undressed figure in the foreground is a French friend, Denise Proutaux. The painting titled *Young Girls* was awarded a Gold Medal at the Grand Salon in 1933.