Chapter - 2
Early Works and Western Influence

Environmental effects in which a child takes his first breath are quite natural to his personality. The lap of his or her mother, the family, the social, political, and economic conditions etc. leave a great impact on the child's personality.

A creative painter, like the creative poet, transcends climate and culture. Tradition for an artist is an organic entity, changing and developing with growth. Artist's work is like honey drawn from authentic flowers. If art is a formalized human experience and form is the end of art, and art is communication of the inferential truth, then art is of the people, by the people but not necessarily for the people; if by people we mean the lowest common evaluators of human experience.¹

Many years of Amrita's early life were spent in western countries. She opened her eyes in an European background

¹ Lalit Kala Contemporary Indian Painting Series No. 34, January 1987, p. 46.
where she started to play with colours and that is why she was highly influenced by the European style of oil painting and other western techniques. Young Amrita studied painting in Paris and at that time Cezanne and Gaugin influenced her. Amrita's innate skill was so great that despite its unIndian character she quickly showed exceptional understanding of the western techniques.

For three years, 1929 to 1931, she won first prizes at the annual portrait and still life competition at her school. She spent many years with Maestro Lucien Simon in Paris.

After two years of study she had her first exhibition in the Grand Salon. She became the member of the Salon and one of her paintings Young Girls, was awarded the first prize. Thus she stayed many years in Paris where she exhibited with great success and in the process was influenced by western technique. Her sudden conversion from being an introvert to developing into an extrovert led to being influenced by Gauguin whose paintings could have, one may guess, compelled Amrita to re-evaluate Indian art and might have driven her to affirm a new type of romantic sensuality leading to the kind of painting that was later blossomed by George Keyt. Yet the frigidity in her temperament would not let it happen; it was the rather
existence in Gauguin of a second and contradictory strand which explains the influence which he actually exerted on her. Earlier she was deeply impressed by Cézanne. When she saw Rabindranath Tagore's exhibition in Paris in 1930 she only appreciated his paintings and remarked, accepting his novel distortions of line and colour, — "I like his drawings better than his poetry even' and observed about the Bengal revival — "this school is responsible for the stagnation that characterises Indian painting today."

The two important artists, Cézanne and Gauguin, more than any others, appear to have determined her style and it is mostly out of her responses to their pictures that a manner emerged which became firmly and decisively her own.

Amrita imbibed first Cézanne and then Gauguin, and went on to create her own form of expression choosing, not Cubism or surrealism but post impressionism taking refuge in safe and the dead.

Cézanne, born in 1839, had begun as a realistic painter who had leanings towards Courbet and Manet and in his prime he observed the formal effects of colour shapes, and in his

picture *L'Oncle Dominique*, he deliberately treated the moustache and beard as a dark brown circle enclosing a pink one and balanced in a particular way with the shapes of creamy white and brick red made by the collar and tie. According to R.H. Wilenski two distinct qualities were apparent — 'a warm deep sympathy with the spirit of the sitter as a human being and an aesthetic concern with colour and form as such". By the eighteen eighties his concern for form and colour had gone much further and the underlying structure of the landscape rather than its surface appearance determined the character of a picture such as *La Route Tournante*. Architecture was his prime concern; the cylinder, the cone and the cube, were his ultimate objectives and as a result his whole art was a striving for simplification. According to Wilenski 'Content with the quietest attitudes and the simplest accessories, Cezanne built up a formal structure touch by touch, working first from one centre and then from another, each group of touches being governed both by their mutual relations and by their combined relation to the structure as a whole.'

'The resulting picture was, in no sense, the kind of pattern or composition contemplated by an art school. It was rather a study of the sitter in terms of the artist's, whole
attitude or temperament. The general convention was one of naturalism, but simplification imparted to it a kind of grandeur. Life was purged of pettiness, and it is perhaps this moral quality quite as much as its aesthetic virtues which impressed the young Amrita Sher-Gil'. 'Naturalism simplified', became her goal, and by 1933 she was moulding her forms in a Cezannesque manner conveying a strong sense of volume but expressing, above all, a monumental dignity.3

Until the autumn of 1933 Amrita's style was, in every way, much closer to Cezanne's than to Gauguin's. In the following winter, however, Amrita's fascination with Gauguin's work became so strong that it seems almost to have haunted her. E. Narayanan has recorded that Cezanne inspired her beyond all others but that she liked Paul Gauguin best of all. This passionate adhesion became decisive — in creating her own adult style. It is interesting to note that there are certain qualities in Gauguin which make him the most Indian of western artists. Equally, there is another quality which is quite un-Indian, a quality which arises from his personal predicaments and expresses his private view of life. The first of these qualities might easily have affected the young Amrita and led to

fertile results. Yet it was not these qualities but the second which seems to have stirred Amrita Sher-Gil, occasioning the liking, which was to play such a supreme role.

Later Amrita studied Braque who captured her fancy more than any other modern painter and she could emancipate herself from Gauguin.

Of the other people who impressed her, Dostoevsky was outstanding though she had great respect for Tolstoy who was admired by her father also.

To Amrita, Dostoevsky was a supreme artist, a relentless seeker, always true to his art. What interested her was that Dostoevsky, face to face with the extremities of evil, never sought to hide it or shun it, but rather sought to search for the soul of goodness in it. Dostoevsky, to her was a free soul who remained an artist to the end. Amrita felt with Dostoevsky that suffering and self sacrifice are to be offered consciously and without constraint even more than that of Sonia in Crime and Punishment. Amrita admired Tolstoy the artist who had died long before he took to propagating puritanism and advocating non-violence and she found his humanitarian sentimentality anathema as well as that kind of puritanism which was
viciously negative. She thought that one had to invent Tolstoy if only to serve as a foil to Dostoevsky. According to Baldoon Dhingra it was the great humanity of Dostoevsky that inspired Amrita and which richly influenced her attitude to her painting.

Amrita Sher-Gil found the synthesis of her Hungarian experience, the Indian traditions and the demands of the modern painting. That is how one can judge her artistic talents. Amrita's art before her departure for Paris, was decisively influenced by the Hungarian scenery and intellectual quality which was quite un-Indian.

She was surrounded by a rich intellectual atmosphere created by the best circles of Hungarian intelligentsia. Her spiritual world was considerably influenced by the greatest poet of twentieth century Hungarian literature, Endre Ady.

Her face to face encounters with Hungarian writers Margit Gasper, Bezso Szabo and Frigyes Karinthy impressed her forthwith. She first saw the trees, clouds, horses, cows and

calves in Dunaharazti, a place where she spent the first period of her consciousness - a small village, a place for summer rest, located at the bank of River Danube some 20 km from Budapest.

Hungarian landscapes gave her inspiration too. She painted a few motives of Zebegeny, a picturesque village of the Danube bend and a favourite resort for painters and Kiskunhalas, a typical market-town and centre of Kunsag, a prominent part of Hungary from historical and ethnographic point of view. Dunaharazti and its surroundings motivated the young Amrita from 1917 to 1921 and she visited Zebegeny in 1932, where she made fresh artistic sketch of a facade of the Transsylvania inspired church. Amrita visited Kiskunhalas in 1938 where the peasants of the neighbouring villages in their colourful folk costumes offered a very picturesque milieu at the weakly fairs, and could draw a parallel with her experiences of Indian towns. At Kiskunhalas she saw, "in the milling market the reflection of Indian women carrying carpets, jugs, banana. The corn cobs have symbolic power as the old people dressed in black too, who were characterised ethnographically in a very precise way."

Her choice of subject shows her deep knowledge of typical Hungarian problem and her special attitude towards the simple events concerning common people. Her Hungarian education and the experiences accumulated there facilitated the proper expression of her message. It is notable that Amrita's colours in the Hungarian pictures are different from the "Indian" ones. A special tone is the mixture of green black grey always repeating and the illustration of the sky, water or general background. Her 'Hungarian Market Scene' and the "Merry Cemetery" stand out among her various paintings done in Hungary. However 'Woman Peeling Potatoes' may also be recognised as a masterpiece.

In her portraits, still life and in compositions, bold treatments and solidity of lines, uniqueness of colours clearly show that she was deeply influenced by western techniques and we are bound to say that she was deeply stirred by the art of the post impressionists, Cezanne and Gauguin in particular. Amrita's paintings done in Hungary are entirely European in their colour, mood and sensibility.

The masterpiece, "The Hungarian Market Scene, 1938" is her most well known canvas, which according to a letter Amrita wrote to Karl Khandalavala on 9th Nov. 1938 : "I am going to
paint a picture, a village church in the background, a market place with little figures in black, the sky grey and the church tower white. Rather Breughelesque, I imagine it. Do you know the work of Breughel the Elder? I have developed a regular passion for it." In this painting the left half of the picture the white church towers in the sky painted with dark tones. Beside that greyish yellow buildings close the horizon. In the foreground the market moves on turbulently, more precisely the last hour of the market when every body has already sold or bought. An old man resting on a stick is talking to an old women wearing a black kerchief, a typical mode of dressing of old village women. Of their face only the noses made reddish by the chilly weather are visible. A hay-cart is coming, two horses draw it, the driver wears a wide sheepskin-coat reaching down to the heels – the typical costume of the Hungarian Great plain, with a whip in his hand. A man is carrying a sack in the hinderpart on the right side. A little bit closer to the underpart red apples (beloved fruit in Hungary) look red from a barrow, and resemble the face of the woman which is red because of cold. In the left side a woman wearing many skirts, according to the traditional Hungarian fashion. takes out her luncheon pack. The peasant with pipe sitting on a barrow
appears as a central figure of the painting. The grey hair and moustache indicate his face; his head is covered by a fur-cap. Beside him on the ground there are glaring carrots, cabbages and pumpkins. The resting old man is so typical a Hungarian figure. So is the woman wearing a red skirt who is resting on a barrow. On her shoulder there is the Hungarian folk costume, a thick black woolen shawl is so realistically painted that one can feel the warmth of it. The whole picture is vivid, the details are naturalistic and true."

In Europe she encountered not only the masterpieces of Italian, French and German painters from the fourteenth century onwards, but also the French masters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Between the earlier painting and the later, Amrita did not discern any revolutionary difference. It can be said that the inspiration from Breughel apart, Amrita was imbued with the love towards the common people. The scenes offered simple everyday life in India and also in Hungary. That could be the reason that she painted scenes only in India and Hungary, besides the numerous portraits in France.

During her stay in Paris Amrita did many studies from nude models. Amrita in fact always enjoyed painting women

whether nude, half-nude or fully clothed instead of men. That is why her painting 'Nude' is a remarkable picture of that time but some time she has painted nude male also. The 'Male Torso' is a masterly study of the back of a nude.

'Nude, 1938', is one peculiar piece among the numerous similar works. The girl is standing in front of a drapery of blue black ground tint decorated with yellow and red flower. The face and the arms are brownish and vary from the body painted with lighter tone. The face is regularly round, dominated by the big glittering white eyes. The presentation of the hair is merely symbolical, the figure purses up her lips with airs and graces. The enormously big ear is strange. The lifeless arms and the motionless body are contrasted only by the glancing look. Which gives some life to the figure. The way she applied colours in the picture is something close to the way of a western artist.

'Hungarian Church Steeple, 1938', is a very good example of the Western inspiration in which the composition background is also the greyish white sky from which the church emerges with its tower showing a special tone consisting of the tones of the yellow grey and white. The heaven aspiring dark steeple is similar to the leafless, black, curved branches of the tree in the
foreground. These two elements, the church and the tree, dominate the picture. The painting is not monotonous because the roofing tiles shine forth in the foreground and contrast with the rough and ready picture of the houses, some of which are painted very detailfully. The houses appear as brown-claret-coloured marks or spots, nothing else is visible, best their roof. The church is identical with the church painted in the 'Hungarian Market Scene'.

'Winter, 1939', shows a snow covered Hungarian landscape, the monotonous whiteness of which is broken only by the leafless trees and pole supporting electric wires. In the almost lifeless countryside the life is represented by a black crow put in the centre of the composition. Crow is a bird which is at home equally in Hungary and India. The vicinity of man is expressed by the house situated near the border of the horizon.

'Two Girls, 1939' has two juxtaposed nude girls. The composition, is based on contrast of the figures which is derived from their position and colour of skin. Whereas the white girl, standing numblegs, provokingly looks at the world with her striking blue eyes which have a geometric form and unbelievable blue colour, the dark girl is painted with soft, rounded contours. The contrast gets a further affirmation by the
position of hands which indicate exhibitionism with the white girl and self-imposed seclusion with the dark girl. The white cover around her makes this feeling even stronger. In spite of this there is no irreconciliable opposition between them as to the character. It is shown by Amrita with the representation of the special gesture of the hand of the white girl which is laid on the shoulder of the dark.

'Hungarian Peasant, 1939', represents a typical old Hungarian peasant with sun-dried face and hands. He is wearing a greenish shirt and his eyes are also greenish even the white of the eye. Amrita emphasized the thick nose with black contours. The peasant with pipe in hand has a walrus moustache. The vigilant eyes and the fact that the moustache almost covers the mouth characterize the inhabitants of the Great Hungarian plain who are sharp-eyed, knowing even the smallest secrets of nature, but are extra-ordinarily soft-spoken. The face and the posture of the man reflects the characteristic unfatigued power and energy of the Hungarian peasants.

'Potato Peeler, 1938', presents a woman dressed in a black or dark blue striped garment sitting in front of a greenish background. She is peeling a piece of potato with a knife. Her head some how sorrowfully looks down which gives the feeling
that she does not look at the potato. Beside her there are
green paprika and some vegetables and a water jar on a shelf
or small table. The gloomy colours and the big hands
roughened by the too much physical work create sorrow in the
beholder. The potato is a staple food in Hungary and especially
it was a staple food for the lower classes before the liberation
and the potato peeling was a routine chore in the peasant
households. Amrita observed her potato peeler peasant woman
as is the case of poor Indian villagers and painted her. The
whole picture is treated by western style of painting; a bold
treatment wherein the strokes are clear bold. Colour scheme
also shows a great European impact on the personality of the
artist. This work is realistic, typical and full of emotion.

'My Grand Mother, 1934', a portrait of her Hungarian
grandmother, to whom she was very deeply and affectionately
attached, portrays a jovial old woman. She is lineated with
great accuracy, almost naturalistically, the wrinkles, the cross
feet, the dress or even her necklace and this portrait stands out
as a composition different from Amrita's other portraits. It
almost reflects the deep attachment of the artist to her subject.

'The Merry Cemetery, 1939', is a masterpiece with a
curious title. According to Christianity the earthly life is
followed by the afterlife and finally comes the resurrection.
The inscription on the gates of Hungarian Cemeteries —
"Feltamadunkl" (we shall rise again), proclaims this idea and the
dead man is also called "happy" which means he is happy after
a troublesome earthly life. From the medieval times the
Cemetery is situated near the church. In this picture a small
chapel can be seen with the stations of the Cross marked by
white small houses. People dressed in black clothes are hurrying
in front of the station. The sky is almost dark, nearly black. In
the forepart crosses made of wood, stone and iron are standing.
Some are bent down. Amrita painted on one of them the
common Hungarian inscription "Itt nyugszik" (Here lies.........)
and on some the name of the deceased persons: Glaser Jozsef,
Glaser Jozsefne, Glaser Franciska. The burial mounds are merely
a sketch and they look dim in the greenish, brownish
surrounding. In the underpart of the canvas a fresh bunch of
narcissus blooms in white and yellow colours and a little bit
for a there is a red tulip on a grave. These motives sharply
contradict the leafless trees and the obvious winter scene
because such flowers bloom in Hungary only in spring, in the
months March-April-May. The great Christian festival, the
Easter, when the christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus
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Christ, is particularly held in March-April. In Amrita's works these flowers are used in symbolical meaning. They convey the message of spring in the beginning of winter. She lived together with Christians in the small village Zebegeny. She must have experienced the funerals and visited the Cemetery. This painting once more advocates the genius of Amrita because she painted it with great skill as if she were a great Hungarian Christian artist.

Even in her paintings of Indian village scenes the virile style of the post impressionists is obvious. But according to Anthony Elsey the grouping is also suggestive of Chou Fang (the Chinese master of the late 8th century). Her vigorous outlines and the intentness of expression depicted in the figures are reminiscent of the sharply characterized figures absorbed in the drama of the moment that Chou Fant so ably painted. And in these works there is also a hint of calm and dignity of the figures which are distinctive features of the paintings of Yen Li Pen (ob 673); or turning to the Kamakura and Edo periods of Japan, the broad contrasting planes in many of her canvases recall the works of Fujiwara Takanobu (1142-1205) and Sharaku (1794).

Karl Khandalavala observed, "The Paris sketch books
shows Amrita was as a talented hard working student imbibing various influences and occasionally displaying in her drawings as suggestion of that powerful handling of form which she was later to develop." The influences primarily are those of Cezanne and Gauguin, though there seems no doubt that Negro art also created quite an impression on her mind, because she became, an ardent admirer of Modigliani. Modigliani's own work had been profoundly affected by Negro and Primitive art, particularly Negro sculpture.

She realised the importance of organization of form and colour. The richness and decorative quality of her colour may have had something to do with Gauguin's use of colour, just as the pictorial structure that she created with the use of colour perhaps finds an echo in Cezanne. Gauguin and Cezanne were the two painters she greatly admired at that stage of her artistic development.

She used to repeat his oft quoted saying "I want to express, want to express, with greens and with reds, the terrific, the terrific human passion" much, much later, she gowned up to her, admiration for Renoir.

This was the art milieu in which Amrita found herself on arrival in Paris. Then Amrita was introduced to Professor Pierre Vaillant. He was most impressed with Amrita's work. He immediately admitted her to the Grand Chaumière. She started working there with her characteristic zeal and energy. The human form being of special interest to her she made a lot of sketches of nude models, thus fully acquainting herself with all the intricacies of human anatomy. When she was in Ecole National des Beaux Art every year she won the first prize for portraits and still life.

During the years 1930-32, she painted several pictures, mostly in oils and they were either portraits or portrait studies, with the exception of a couple of landscapes done in Hungary. In 1938, while in Hungary, she describe 'Professional Model' as her "first essay in art" and therefore "rather treasured" by her. 'Professional Model', a nude study of a professional model, whom she would paint twice again as a study in brown and study of a model (in green), is a picture of a sad ageing woman who is feeling old and neglected; perhaps. She is also a sick woman. As a work done in academic style, its execution is most competent. It highlights the undercurrent of melancholia which a woman, who has seen better days when she was young.
and healthy, would tend to suffer from. Other pictures that she painted during these two years include a self portrait in green and a portrait of her best friend, Marie Louise Chasseny. In 1932, she had painted 'Torso', which was exhibited at the Grand Salon annual art exhibition held that year and attracted the attention of the art critic of journal 'des Arts'. In the issue dated, May 1932 he spoke of "a back painted in strong light by Sher-Gil".  

'Torso' is a picture of Amrita's own back with a framed painting of a nude woman in the background. This painting of a nude is remarkable for the cleverness of drawing, the bold modelling, the perfect command and simple handling for the medium. The twist in the back of the model is wonderfully suggestive and the tonal value of the planes admirably correct. The pose is no doubt academic but that should not hinder our appreciation of this highly accomplished work.

Another picture she exhibited in 1934, 'Conversation' eventually know as 'Young Girls', which gave her the great honour of being elected associate; of the grand salon, the first Asian to be so honoured.

Theiboult Sisson, the art critic, wrote in 'Le Temp' of 12 May 1933 that "the two young women...dressed in rich and brilliant materials" were "painted with exceptional mastery over light and shade by the Hindu. Amrita Sher-Gil. Denise Droutaux wrote that her canvases stood up "because of the exceptional vigour of her brush and sharp realism of her subject".  

Thus Amrita could learn the intricacies of the western art as an excellent student and practice the sophistications with masterly dexterity and carve a name. For herself even before being obsessed by her urge to return to the India of her dream and stamp on its arts scenerio with indelible impression so that later generations would say "Once upon a time......".