

Katalin Keserü:

Amrita and Baktay

In this presentation I am trying to evoke the memories of both Amrita Sher-Gil and her uncle Ervin Baktay who died 50 years ago. I will mainly rely on documents recently transferred from Baktay's estate into public collections and on the latest important literature on Amrita Sher-Gil, in an attempt to draw a more accurate and detailed picture of the Hungarian implications of her art.

In Ervin Baktay's photo album No.II, there is photograph dated "Simla August 1926" and inscribed "To my beloved master from his devoted pupil Ervin". This snapshot of a portrait of a man in a turban, presumably his brother-in-law Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, by the former student of painting who was travelling in India at the given date probably captures what he gifted to Umrao Singh Sher-Gil. (It would be important to look for this painting in the family's estate, here. It was Umrao Singh who introduced him to the world of eastern sciences and culture. This is not the earliest "Indian" photo in Baktay's albums – it deserves a separate study who the photos were taken by – but this photo connects the painter to the Indologist.¹ The dual life of the youngest offspring of the Gottesmann family began when – in 1912 – he glued photos, received from his eldest sister Marie Antoinette from India, among the merry snapshots taken in the Munich or Técső (today Ukraine) studios of young painters rallied around a popular master of Central European would-be painters, Simon Hollósy. They are seductive photos of a young woman wearing a sari in a luxuriant garden or among palms, showered with all earthly blessings at the time of her wedding in Lahore² where she could pursue her European habits and acquaint herself with those of the local expatriate society at the same time. She had the good fortune of a carefree life allowed by the paternal inheritance of her husband (part of Raja Surat Singh's family holdings in Benaras and Dumri). It is perceptible that the photographer Umrao Singh was enthralled by every gesture of his wife.

¹ In his book *Indiai éveim* [My years in India] (Budapest, Palatinus, 2004. 25) he names the Hungarian translation of the Sanskrit *Sakuntala* as his first "Indian" experience, but he was not yet interested in painting at that time. The photo albums are at the Hopp Ferenc Museum of East Asian Art (abbrev. HFKÁM).

² At the age of 31 Marie Antoinette Gottesmann married in Lahore on 4 February 1912. On the family data see Sundaram, V.: Prologue. Sundaram, Vivan (ed.): *Amrita Sher-Gil. A self-portrait in letters and writings I-II*. Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2010. vol.I. pp. XXI-XLI.

I explain the connection between their daughter, Amrita and Baktay in four steps and two excursions, collecting well-known documents around this subject and interpreting some works of Amrita from this view-point.

1. Amrita³ spent her early childhood in Hungary and had a rural and at the same time family-centred life in Dunaharaszti, to the Gottesmann family house (no. 174, Fő utca) where Ervin Baktay was also born. She could meet him rarely because Baktay was serving in the army in World War I.⁴ In Budapest however he had also taken part in the parties of the Hungarian-Indian family extended with friends. This circle of friends also took note of the growing little girl's sensitivity and talent.⁵

Amrita's early childhood drawings and memories of Hungary are not known. When her later recollections also refer to the Hungarian years, we can learn that she drew tales, also wrote some, but the sketchbook she had received from "Uncle Ervin" for Christmas 1920 was not fully filled in Hungary. On 2 January 1921 the family set out for India. Amrita kept writing her short texts – inspired by Hungarian folk tales – about beautiful princesses, fairies and peasant maidens still in the Hungarian language. Instead of action, she described imaginary creatures and their environment always with the accurate determination of colours, giving vent to her fanciful imagination. (One of her tales is about a tree that constantly changes the colour of its blossoms. Another story of a mere six sentences is about an incessantly dancing fairy once in a blue, once in a pink and once in a "peacock" dress of other colours. Round forms of different colour spread out in two dimensions (skirts) drawn in colour pencil and watercolour fill the pages like sights of a dazzling gyration, with the tiny head of the dancer in the middle of the circles.)

Without inferring preposterous conclusions from them one may contend that little Amrita was thinking in terms of colour and elementary forms even if the general source of these images can be traced to illustrations and various artistic publications of secessionism.⁶ Ervin Baktay had an eye for her talent when he

³ The certificate of baptism issued on 25 Nov. 1918 claims she was given (on 17 Nov.) the names of Antonia Amrita. She was probably baptised because of the Spanish flu pandemic which the girl also contracted (Dalmia, Yashodhara: *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life*. Viking/Penguin, New Delhi, 2006, p.10). Sundaram: *op.cit.*, vol.I, p. XXXVI mentions another name (Mary Magdalene) given in her first school report. The birth certificate says both her parents have no religious demonimation, but in the certificate of baptism the mother is Roman Catholic.

⁴ Simon Hollósy's letters to him (HFKÁM) reveal that he was a territorial at a Budapest address in spring 1915, and in 1918 he was already a lieutenant in the 37th Hungarian infantry division.

⁵ Sher-Gil, Antoinette: A Biographical Sketch of Amrita Sher-Gil. *Usha*, Special issue dedicated to Amrita Sher-Gil, Lahore, 1942 (III) Aug. (No. II) p. 60. Later they kept in touch with Jászai by correspondence and with Fábri in person.

⁶ Napló [diary] I. 1920-1924. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, I. pp.2-15.

gave her a sketch-book as a parting gift with the title he had written: “*Amrita Shergil’s writings and drawings*”. It was he allegedly who turned Amrita’s attention to flesh-and-blood people and realistic environments later in India. He arrived in Simla, “the summer capital of India” in the summer of 1926.⁷ However, in his book about his stay there and his peregrinations in India (*My Years in India*) he does not mention that he and Amrita ever once spoke about painting.⁸ Nor did Vivan Sundaram publish any diaries of Amrita for this period, but he presents quite novel drawings: studies of heads, not only of fairies or ideal, charming or heroic ladies.⁹ They are studies of the quintessence of drawings: of the creation of bodily forms and the connection of forms, drawn from live models. A trained teacher must have been behind them, perhaps at times the uncle. A sort of head-studies approved and signed by EB (Ervin Baktay) are there in the legacy of Amrita. (She allegedly expressed her thanks for her drawing skills to him.¹⁰) At any rate, Hall Bevan Petman, former tutor of the London Slade School of Art, Amrita’s art teacher and Baktay could register the achievements as their joint success. (fig.1) Baktay also painted several faces and other pictures, some of them in Simla at his sister’s place or in the vicinity. When in 1929 he returned home to Hungary, Marie Antoinette and her family were again in Europe. Both of Amrita’s “teachers” recommended that she continue with her artistic studies in France. Since she was only 16 and her younger sister also displayed talent, the whole family left India.

2. Baktay’s “hand” reached out to them in Paris: his friend the painter József Nemes,¹¹ a fellow student at Hollósy’s courses in Munich and Técső in 1912-14 and a fellow fighter in World War I, was living in Paris at that time, also participating in some exhibitions, so he could be of help with Amrita’s schooling. He introduced her to Pierre Vaillant at the atelier of the Grande Chaumière where Umrao Singh regularly accompanied his daughter. Seeing the rapid progress Amrita had made as she first encountered live nude models and began learning the proportions, forms and harmony of the body parts here, Nemes suggested that in the autumn they should try the École des Beaux-Arts. He introduced her to Lucien Simon, the master famous for his Breton genre

⁷ Baktay: *op.cit.*, p. 139.

⁸ There are only references to the Baktay’s pictures of that time in his book.

⁹ 1926-1928. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, p. 51

¹⁰ Dalmia: *op.cit.*, p. 25

¹¹ *Küldetésben Horthy futáraként. Haranglábi Nemes József festőművész emlékiratai.* [Being Horthy’s courier. Memoirs of painter József Haranglábi Nemes] Budapest, Hungarovox, 2012.

scenes painted in the 1890s, who admitted her into his class, though she was still under the officially required age.¹²

József Nemes was a regular guest of the family in their elegant home rented at no. 11 Rue Bassano, and Amrita also invited her colleagues from the École (fig. 2, 3). Nemes painted the ~~the~~ portrait of Umrao Singh now insisting on his Sikh costume already in Europe (*Reading Man*, fig.4). Most probably, Baktay also visited them when in 1930 he was in Paris and travelled to the French Riviera, perhaps together with Nemes.¹³

During her Paris studies Amrita spent the (often much extended) holidays in Hungary, mainly in Zebegény where an aunt of hers, Mrs Ella Szepessy born Gottesmann and her family spent the summers.¹⁴ (fig. 5) It is not far from Verőce, where the third Gottesmann sister Blanka lived with her husband of Irish origin, Viktor Egan and the children, Viola and Viktor junior.¹⁵ Amrita spent a lot of time with them, especially in her last summer in Hungary in 1934. Sometimes her parents also accompanied her (e.g. in 1930) or her uncle also visited Zebegény (e.g. in the summer of 1931) with whom she visited the wife of count László Károlyi, who had the “blue houses” of Zebegény built for the public good.¹⁶ In the first years Amrita painted several portraits of members of her family¹⁷ or of her suitor visiting Hungary (*Yusuf Ali Khan*, 1931) which present the conclusions from her studies (strong colours, thick layers of paint, plastic forms, powerful physicality without the fluency of her drawings). In her letters to her parents she did not touch on her paintings. In her letters from Paris to Viktor Egan jr., however, she wrote about the pictures she was just working on and about her conviction that she was born for art; about her experience that she could only produce good things with powerful, deep emotions and purpose; about her professional doubts whether her experiments were leading her along the right course. This might suggest that she had not found a real master and she did not have close artistic contacts with her fellow students in Paris who were brought up on constantly changing European art, because at that time she was

¹² On Amrita's years in Paris: Keserü Katalin: *Amrita Sher-Gil*. Kelet Kiadó, Budapest, 2007.

¹³ Baktay's photos taken in France in 1930 are in the folder Amrita and her family 1913-1934 (HFKÁM). By Nemes Mediterranean seascapes are known dated around the time in question.

¹⁴ The late Ernő Gottesmann recalled in conversation that the cause of her long visits was her intimate relationship with her cousin Viktor Egan jr.

¹⁵ The copy of Amrita's letters written like diary notes to Viktor from Paris (1931-35) has recently been found in the Egan family in India. Dalmia: *op.cit.*, pp.45-53. She writes principally about her studies, her artistic calling, but also notes that there is nothing to bind her to the people there.

¹⁶ Sundaram: *op.cit.*, p.56 mistakenly identifies Mrs Károlyi with Katinka Andrássy. Viktor Egan sr. was the leader of countess Károlyi's charity „office”.

¹⁷ The portrait of her cousin *Klára Szepessy, My Grandmother* (NGMA), *Viktor Egan* (whereabouts unknown).

preoccupied by the fundamental questions of art in the European sense.¹⁸ Baktay could not be an appropriate partner either, because – as she put it later – he had always been in pursuit of his own things.¹⁹

3. After the third year in Paris when painting in the open was the subject-matter her painterly approach and her themes changed in Zebegény. The tentative attempts at the academy must have matured here. Hungarian art history has pinpointed the tie between Amrita and Hungarian art in her plein-air pictures. It was in the summer of 1932 that her holiday letters to her mother included the remark that she was painting all day. The theme was a Gypsy girl (a favourite theme in that-time Hungarian art), or a peasant girl, “in plein air”, as well as landscapes and still-lives in which she was experimenting with new solutions that filled her with excited expectation.²⁰

The unmoving pose of models torn from their environments in the atelier, the local colours and descriptive painting based on them were not viable methods out in the open. In nature everything appears in correlation with everything else and all is in constant motion,²¹ which is closer to the practice and problems of painting. Amrita thus had to face the real questions of painting in Zebegény instead of simple representation. She discovered the colour relations and the values of individual brush strokes that had been constant topics of Simon Hollósy and his pupils (including Baktay and Nemes) as well as Hungarian art in general from the 1880s.

The *Girls in Conversation*²² (fig. 6) can be seen as a variant of *Girls*, a genre scene in an interior completed the next year and exhibited with great success at the Paris Salon (fig. 7). They are like mirror images of each other: a blond girl is sitting closer to the picture plane and a brunette a bit withdrawn, facing each other; the postures and gestures are identical, only the sides are changed. While the Zebegény “conversation” takes place in the yellow field with green spots of shadow, the setting in Paris is a room with heavy dark and red wall and floor,

¹⁸ Amrita’s letters to Viktor Egan Jan. 1932, Aug. 1933. Dalmia: *op.cit.*, pp.51, 49.

¹⁹ Amrita’s letter to her mother 9 Nov. 1938. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, II. pp.529-531. In a similar vein she wrote to her mother on 14 Jan. 1934, and to Indira in Oct. 1932, expressly disapproving of his behaviour and temperament. *Ibid.* I. pp.87, 99, 119.

²⁰ Her letter to her mother from Zebegény, 3 Aug. 1932. Sundaram, *op.cit.*, pp.83-85. The editor’s note claims that the large painting of two young girls (*Children on the Zebegény hillside*) was sold in India in 1937. From among the paintings entitled *Gypsy Girl* one is private property in Hungary, another is latent and a third (*Girl in the Field*) is in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi (NGMA).

²¹ In a letter of August 1933 she wrote to Viktor about the logic of nature she had just discovered. Dalmia: *op.cit.*, pp. 50-51.

²² The size of the picture is identical with that of *Girl in the Field (Hungarian Gypsy Girl)* or the *Zebegény Church (Hungarian Village Church)*. This picture might be identical with the one entitled *Children on the Zebegény Hillside*.

the models in the studio clad in garments with stress on the material quality while the peasant girls' dresses are painted with light-handed brush-strokes. It was then by herself that Amrita began discovering the secrets of plein air painting in patches, although it is possible that József Nemes, who had taken leave of the Sher-Gil family in Paris in the spring,²³ was also in Hungary at that time and visiting the young women in Zebegény made some comments on the professional problems.²⁴ (fig.8) He could do (or could have done) so for after Hollósy (and the war) he resumed his studies with Károly Kernstok and took part in his free school at Nyergesújfalu in 1919, evidenced by his painting *Female Nude in Plein-air*.²⁵

Stillness of conversation pieces

The Zebegény initiative was more than the overture of the painterly quality in Amrita's oeuvre. The theme of "two girls" returned in 1938, on a large canvas also painted in Hungary.

This painting is still full of enigma, so it is worth pondering about again and again (fig.9). The posture of the girl sitting in the foreground is identical in nearly every mentioned picture with the difference that the girl in front is dark-complexioned and this change has an importance, and the one at the back is "white" and standing. According to their placing they seem to be models. For the "dark" girl a Gypsy model might be thought of, if we did not know the Indian portrait of the *Village Girl* painted around 1937. The appearance of the dark model might be influenced by its and the painter's early self-portraits' memory. The (rigidly) standing model without pupils is not identified. Both faces are expressionless. The two figures do not turn toward each other, unlike all their predecessors, but they look out of the picture - and this is the second change – as though demonstrating something to the viewer which is more than a representation of two models or an action. The painting seems to be a presentation of a unique situation in the history of conversation pieces i.e. a company of a black and a white girl which might be a familiar one in the painter's personal Hungarian memories, at the same time. (On her works in

²³ Amrita's letter to her mother, May 1932. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, pp.68-69.

²⁴ Sundaram: *op.cit.*, p.84 shows a photo dated to the early 30s (Amrita, Indira, their cousin Klára and a friend) in which the unidentified man in a bathing suit might be József Nemes.

²⁵ Picture no.36 at the exhibition of works by the participants of the Nyergesújfalu free school in 1919, held at the Balassa Bálint Museum in Esztergom in 1969. Padányi Lajos: *Kernstok Károly és az 1919-es Nyergesújfalui szabad iskola*. [Károly Kernstok and the free school in Nyergesújfalu in 1919]
<http://www.nyergesujfalu.hu/index.php/nyergesujfalu/nyergesujfalu-tortenete?start=28>

India she never mixed European with Indian people, nor she did Gypsies with Hungarians.)

One puts her arm round the other (third change: a gesture that was unimaginable in that-time India). After some years in India where she observed a special language of bodies she created her own in a more Western way and genre i.e. the gesture itself realizes the connection between the two. Both figures are nudes (fourth change), and these reductions underlines the importance of this minimalist body-language. While for a “western” girl nudity was natural²⁶, it was Amrita herself who began to paint (half-)naked Indian young models, using her sister and herself as models at first. As against the sharp-formed white girl, “eastern” figure is wrapped in drapery on the *Two Girls* (fifth change), thus protecting her chastity – or/and accentuating?? her sensuality. If this picture is also a picture of friendship just like *Girls*, then it is a real masterpiece, showing the children of the East and West, together. From a Western view-point of traditions, it is an anti-orientalist attitude. The large hands and feet of the adolescents, the strong planarity, the angular and primitive forms characterize both of them.

This painting with two models could be a presentation of a thematic (social) and painterly interpretation. It illustrates the fusion of Gauguin’s and Cézanne’s style over a peculiar theme, and the dual roots of Amrita in the alloy of the two styles and maybe the duality of her identity. Some other important works grant to suppose that her paintings from Hungary (made in between) might be selfportraits.

The memory of a large studio painting belongs here. (fig.10) Amrita began the picture in Paris and later she cut it up, although she wrote with great enthusiasm about it to Viktor. That picture was also the portrait of her younger sister Indira and a friend, Denise Proutaux similarly to *Girls*, but opposite them a professional model was depicted whose white, thin, aging body was in sharp contrast with the young ones. “I wanted to express sadness in my compositions. (...) I am preoccupied by the idea of this great theme. (...) A marvelous, marvelous feeling!”²⁷ Around that time, sorrow was present in other Amrita pictures, too. Exhibited in 1933, *The Professional Model* painted of a sickly, sad nude whose figure is all but transfigured by light was thought to have been her best work by her fellow artists so far.²⁸ Their opinion was probably inspired by more than the Cézannesque modelling of forms and the saturation of colours

²⁶ See the secessionist depictions of children, in Hungary by the Gödöllő artists, for example.

²⁷ Letter of 1931, without dating. Dalmia: *op.cit.*, p.47.

²⁸ Amrita’s letter to Viktor, February 1933. Dalmia: *op.cit.*, p.50.

with light; they must have been captured by the “female glance/gaze” which does not objectify but perceives herself in the sight as well, resulting in an emanation of compassion. The importance of this aspect becomes obvious from Sundaram’s volume of documents: the reproduction of the studio painting permits the assumption that the *Self-portrait as a Tahitian* (1934, fig.11), the identification of loneliness and sorrow – as well as the challenge of the East – with herself, was the re-painting of the upper part of the nude model of the large studio canvas.

In her last years in India she became the captive of ‘sadness’ oozing from a still life devoid of revolt and change.

Another example of crystallizing the theme in Hungary is *Trees*. Its precedent is *From Studio*, an overhead view of a bifurcating leafless tree trunk (with a whiff of starting leaves on one branch) yearning upward from the dismal courtyard of a Paris block (1934). *Trees* might be the pendant of *From Studio*. Against the dim blue background touched with a hint of springlike yellowish green, dark and barren branches are reaching upwards. (The correct date of the former is therefore spring 1939). Behind them there is however a flash of yellow light (figs.12-13). If we took trees as self-portraits in European symbolism (for example, Van Gogh and the *Solitary Cedar* painted in Asia Minor by Tivadar Csontváry Kosztká, a legendary Hungarian painter figure by the 1930s²⁹) (fig.14), and if we remembered Amrita’s words: “the shadow of a white man is bluish purple; that of the Hindus is golden green, mine is yellow. Van Gogh said that yellow is the gods’ favourite colour, so it is all right”³⁰, yellow “shadow” (actually light) would reinforce that the painting was a depiction of loneliness, and it could be interpreted in connection with the artist’s fate. (An analogy is the yellow body of the “white” girl behind the black one on the *Two Girls*.)

The *Trees* with French and Hungarian art historical implications, the appearance of barren trees in Amrita’s paintings of 1938 already created in India allow for the assumption that she did not merely depict but also interpreted the sceneries in her genres and landscapes, referring the sight to herself.

A few earlier paintings created in Hungary may serve as clues to the correlation and identification between the sight and the artist.

²⁹ It is presumable that Amrita saw the Csontváry exhibition including *Solitary Cedar* at the Ernst Museum in Budapest in October 1930.

³⁰ Her letter to Viktor, Simla, 1935. Dalmia: *op.cit.*, p.53

Her plein-air studies begun in Paris in the Vincennes Park³¹ and continued with the summer experiments in Zebegény also include landscapes of Zebegény and the Danube. Apart from the mass of *The Zebegény Church* presented with large loose brushstrokes, the composition of the *(Blue) Danube* suggests that Amrita was driven to develop both an airy, flowing painterliness and a tight picture structure (fig.15). This must have been an innate drive, since her studio nudes and portraits were characterized from the beginning by a popular solution in painting around the turn of the century: filling the picture surface with the main motif. (The narrow extract of her figural pictures painted in Zebegény finds its explanation here, too.) Spacious scenery is difficult to compose coherently. Her solution was, on the one hand, an accented motif placed in the centre: emphasizing the light and dark contrast of a ship at the meeting of water and sky. On the other hand, she changed the vantage point, which means deliberate thinking (or the understanding of the practice of impressionists and post-impressionists). The new vantage point is the overhead view or bird's-eye-view, which did not result in objectivity as is the usual case, but also in subjectivity. Her still-lives are good examples (*Still-life 1-2*): one with apples hid between the folds of drapery assuming peculiar spatial forms, and the other with a strange light and soft colour harmony of skin and flesh hues. Both call Cézanne to mind but their subjective, personal quality is obvious when they are compared to the rigid still-lives of József Nemes in Cézanne's style that presumably inspired her pictures (figs. 16-17).

The students might have been asked to paint in top-down perspective at the academy, too, at that time. In early summer Amrita painted pictures from the top of Notre Dame.³² These overviews continued with the Danubian landscape of *Boat*, summarizing as it were the novelties in her painting (fig.18). The extract is tight, the vegetation on the sandy shore is painted loosely, the diagonal line of the bank and the pointed almond shape of the boat slightly off centre are sharp. The glowing red colour of the boat on the dark water locked between the banks creates a strong bodily and physical presence only slightly relaxed by its shape reflected in the water. A similar compositional solution was chosen by Amrita for *In the Garden*: the dazzling white table in the centre shown from above and surrounded by dark and hurried brushstrokes, and the apples and jug on it might suggest female symbols.³³ (fig.19) In a top-down view the relation with the object or body may be more personal or subjective than in a general view

³¹ Therefore, *Open Air Painters* was probably created in 1932 and not 1933 (cf. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, p.802).

³² Her letter to her mother, June 1932. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, pp.79-81.

³³ According to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

because the motif is more exposed to the viewer's mercy. At the same time, as it is uncovered more fully, it is also more objective. A woman's (painterly) glance is not only objectifying but animating and subjective, identifying with the subject, and hence Amrita's motifs appear to be bodies of personal, subjective implications. Owing to the colours, this metamorphosis is intense in both cases. In short, a specific problem of women's art appeared in these pictures (perhaps also because she already had some friends among her Paris colleagues, exactly among fellow female students and female critics of women artists).

4. Baktay probably had nothing to contribute to this change, although he was intrigued by the female gender roles: by the difference between the introverted eastern and extroverted western female ways of life and the expectations of the male society that determined these roles. These expectations towards women, particularly those in the western culture which were unrealizable owing to their contradictory character, perplexed him. However, his conclusion was conventional: a woman has a "duty" wherever she is: to hold up and cherish life.³⁴ That women had specific skills to achieve this and they used these skills consciously in society and art was not yet conceptualized at that time.

Amrita's last "Zebegény" summer was spent in Verőce in 1934 in tempestuous high spirits, as her letters reveal, when painting was apparently forgotten.³⁵ One of the islands in the Danube was owned by the Egan family on which Baktay organized the so-called "Red Indian" tribe with outfits adorned with feathers brought (by Raoul Gottesmann) from America. They sang authentic American Indian songs, had a bar and wigwams, with lots of visiting artists and dancing.³⁶ Baktay was the chief. Everyone had a job in fitting out the camp including Amrita, for Baktay wanted to reproduce the Indian way of life authentically down to every detail, as Viktor Egan later recalled. Amrita was there in September, too putting off her leave for Paris, although it was she who was insisting upon returning to India in the autumn.³⁷

National and international

³⁴ Baktay E: Női ideál – Keleten és Nyugaton. [Female ideals in the East and the West] *Új Idők* 1937. 4. pp. 119-120.

³⁵ Amrita's letter to her mother, summer 1934. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, pp.135-137.

³⁶ After Viktor Egan's recollections. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, p.136. Géza Bethlenfalvy opines that the idea of camping was inspired by seeing the archeological camp of Aurél Stein. Lázár Imre Dr (ed.): *Hungarian Explorers and Travellers in India*. HICC et al, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 31-32.

³⁷ Her letter to her mother September 1934, letter to her parents Sept. 1934. Sundaram: *op.cit.*, pp.161, 173-5.

Amrita was in search of her mission, which she found in India, in painting her pictures of Indian life, in laying the foundations of a modern but specifically Indian art. It would not be too far-fetched to presume the influence of the Hungarian art philosophy on her endeavours, but the theory of Lajos Fülep on the correlation of national and universal art cannot be traced in her writings.³⁸ Fülep proposed his theory on national art in the 1910s. It was published in 1924. It claims that when the artistic formulation of a particular phenomenon coincides with the basic problems of art, then the given work of art has particular/national and universal validity at the same time. One of his examples was the problem of dancing figure in sculpture. Hungarian male dancers with their twisted bodies and draperies evoke the question of modelling: how to stand up the figures. This specific question of a late 19th century Hungarian artist corresponds to one of the basic questions of sculpture.

Regarding the importance of three 'regions' (Western Europe, Hungary and India) in the life and work of Amrita, the problem of genre picture raises a more complex question. In the time of Amrita, in the 1930s of Europe, the paintings of urban life were full of movements thanks to the techniques of montage and collage. Hungarian painters who wanted to find special (Hungarian) characteristics of life and painting followed the way of an earlier generation and represented rural Hungary where peasants' life was more traditional and quiet, or it seemed to be more silent on the contemporary paintings. Their compositional type partly came from the painterly tradition by presenting enlarged figures (men, women, animals) in narrow spaces. (István Szőnyi) On the other hand painters followed the way of their naive, authentic (non academic) contemporaries putting small figures/colours on the large foreground of the pictures. In this case colourful small motives filled the picture presenting the vitality of painting and of rural life (feasts and festive dresses) at the same time. (Vilmos Aba-Novák) This was a new idea of Hungarian painting corresponding to the question of colourism and moving (and not of the forms) of the age. If Lajos Fülep had extended his theory to the painting of the 30ies he could have dealt with this one as an international question of painting based on local/regional traditions.

Amrita's preoccupation was, however, more complex: she was concerned with a so-far unknown theme in Indian art (the life of the poor) shared by her Western European contemporaries. This problem manifested itself quite differently in India, where life went on with its traditional, quiet everyday customs untouched

³⁸ Fülep Lajos: *Magyar művészet*. [Hungarian art] Budapest, 1924.

by industrial civilization. This situation resembled that of the Hungarian countryside and had an appeal to (western) artists already at the turn of the century, which gave rise to a new style (the first wave of primitivism) in painting. That was the foundation of Amrita's quiet, motionless genre scenes buttressed by Baktay's earlier admonitions to pay close attention to the environment.

She started working full of zest in Simla and soon she was the talk of the town in the art life. Her pictures which drew their nutriment from the (forgotten) part of Indian art and to which she added the intensity of colour were the major sensations of the exhibitions. Her uncle received the important articles³⁹, presumably from Marie Antoinette whose handwriting can be read on one of them. In 1937 he decided it was high time to inform Hungary of Amrita's painting, her endeavours and success. In this article,⁴⁰ he gave a summary of art in India: the local people of western origin were amateurs, the local traditions were forgotten⁴¹ or the artists who quoted them (he meant the Bengal school) were one-sided, resigning from modelled forms and construction, that is, from vitality to the benefit of repeating familiar forms. That was first formulated in bold and straightforward words by Amrita in her first writing published in India.⁴² (In her view, the fundamental criteria of a work of art were: essential simplification, the aesthetic quality coming from artistic creativity (from abstract beauty and the vitality of the artistic tools) (instead of the complacent depiction of reality), the ecstatic nature of the aesthetic impulse, and the creation of the forms of the future out of the inspiration of the present (instead of copying the forms of the past).)

(This is important to consider because earlier, before travelling to India, Baktay had a different view of Indian art: he was writing of the Hindu renaissance at the onset of the century, stressing the role of the poet's cousin Abinandranath Tagore in the art schools of Calcutta and Santiniketan and their effort to enrich the traditional, unified "eastern" world view and mentality with elements (techniques, materials) and rationality of western art. At that time, however, he only knew illustrations by the artist.⁴³ Around the time of his travels in India, the painting of Abinandranath changed, the mystic traditions strengthening in it.)

³⁹ Folder of the Press coverage on Amrita Sher-Gil 1936-2001 (HFKÁM).

⁴⁰ India legkiválóbb modern festőnője – budapesti magyar leány [India's greatest modern painter – is a young Hungarian woman from Budapest]. *Új Idők* 1937 (vol.43) no.24. pp. 887-888.

⁴¹ He enlarges on this topic in more detail in the chapter Effects of the Western influence on Indian art. Baktay E: *India művészete* [The art of India]II. Third edition, Képzőművészeti Alap, Budapest, 1981. pp. 244-253

⁴² Amrita Sher-Gil: Modern Indian Art – Imitating the Forms of the Past. *The Hindu*, 1 November 1936.

⁴³ He mentions his illustrations for R. Tagore's poems The Crescent Moon, and to Omar Khajjam's poems: Baktay E: Modern festészet Indiában [Modern painting in India]. *Új Genius* 1925. 1. pp. 51-52.

After seeing Amrita's Indian paintings and learning her viewpoint, Baktay defined Amrita's art in contradistinction to Abinandranath's style saying that not only did "*the soul*" of the peoples of India expose itself to her, but it also appeared in her pictures through the forms, lines and colours, that is, through the artistic tools. He also added her power of construction, female intuition, instincts and the energy bursting her pictures. He concluded that Amrita "has found the inner, radical relationship between herself and the Indian world" and her lucid and simplified view was paired with "a universal expression". Lajos Fülep's theory could influence this interpretation.

However, he and also Fülep omitted an important fact of modern art which was the most important also for Amrita: the method of interpretation of the artist in which the picture was not the object of cognition but the field of its interpretation. The artist's conception decided the components of artwork including the technique. Baktay overlooked Amrita's extraordinary deliberation as an artist which constituted the basis of her modernity, although the Indian reviews mentioned it and even cited her words.⁴⁴ It was precisely the primacy of this self-consciousness as a painter that this "radical relationship" between Amrita and India grew in an area where the Indian painting tradition offered the possibility for reinterpretation: in the genre scenes.

The Hungarian article clearly reveals the change of the relationship between Baktay and Amrita as master and pupil. (Baktay received (black/white) photos on the back of almost each Amrita explained – in English – which issues of painting were the most important for her.⁴⁵ Baktay chose two: *Hill Women* (published with the title *Hill People*, 1935) and *Hill Men (Villagers)*, 1935).⁴⁶ On the back of the photo of *Composition* painted from a slightly elevated viewpoint – which the Indian reviews unanimously praised and which Amrita also regarded as one of her "best things" (1936) – she wrote, in addition to giving a detailed list of the strong pure colours as "colour is my stronger side," that "the background merges with the foreground without separation. The figures are almost silhouettes." The flat well-nigh disembodied figures are far removed from the physicality of her former figures. (The figures in *Hill Women* appear "in the deep, rich tones" of the colours "against a luminous white background".) The painter's interpretation of the tight community of people without activity and will clearly manifests itself in the flat patches of colour. But Baktay did not

⁴⁴ J.P.Foulds: Amrita Sher-Gil and Indian Art. *The Civil and Military Gazette* 7 November 1936.

⁴⁵ On *Portrait* in the set of six photos at present Marie Antoinette mistakenly noted that it won a prize in Paris, because the prize-winning picture was another portrait of the sitter Boris Taslitzky. (HFKÁM)

⁴⁶ This latter is missing from the estate.

choose this one. I think Baktay's later views expressed in his works on Indian art (the section on Ajanta in his 2 volumes book *The Art of India*,⁴⁷ the study on the Mughal and Rajput miniatures⁴⁸) were influenced by Amrita (and the critical writings on her art).

In 1956 Baktay had the opportunity to see the outstanding works of his niece Amrita Sher-Gil in the great room of the Delhi National Gallery. During that journey he also held a lecture on her and her pioneering role in Indian art at Vishvabharati University in Santiniketan in February 1957 and he spoke about "the Hungarian impacts manifest in the art" of Amrita at the Association of Young Artists in Benares. It is regrettable that the text of his lectures is unknown.⁴⁹ He also ends his book on *The Art of India* first published in 1958 with her: "an extraordinary talent who died young, *Amrita Sher-Gil* of Hungarian origin on her mother's side appeared as a pioneer in the thirties: her high-quality art has its roots in the most valuable Indian traditions and is at the same time international and modern in the best sense of word."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Baktay E: *India művészete* op.cit. I. pp. 206-207, 212-213; The Statesman 1936. No. 12, Karl Khandalavala's article on 6 Dec. 1936, Foulds, J.P.'s cited article.

⁴⁸ Khandalavala, K: *The Art of Amrita Sher-Gil*. Allahabad, 1943, *Amrita Sher-Gil*. Bombay, 1944 - Baktay E: Mogul és rádzspnt festmények a keletázsiai művészeti múzeumban [Moghul and Rajput paintings in the Museum of East Asian Art]. *Az Iparművészeti Múzeum Évkönyvei I. 1954*. Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 1954. pp. 42-53. Evidently in the article references were made to art historical sources.

⁴⁹ Ervin Baktay's report from Delhi to the Hungarian Ministry of Public Education, 9 Apr. 1957 and Report on my foreign study tour of 1956-57. Budapest, 19 Jan. 1958. HFKÁM Baktay estate. I am thanking Béla Kelényi for his kind help.

⁵⁰ Baktay E: *India művészete* op.cit. II. p. 253.

Illustrations

(BH indicates the Baktay estate in the Hopp Ferenc Museum of East-Asian Art, Budapest)

1. BH folder of Amrita and her family 1913-1934: Ervin Baktay: Amrita is drawing. Photo, Simla 1927
2. József Nemes
3. Umrao Singh Sher-Gil: The Sher-Gil family with friends at their Rue de Bassano apartment in Paris. Photo, c. 1930. Standing left at the back is József Nemes (from the book of Vivan Sundaram “Amrita Sher-Gil” vol. I, p.58)
4. József Nemes: Reading Man
5. BH folder of Amrita and her family 1913-1934: Ervin Baktay: The Family. Photo, the 1930s. Seated left to right, front row: Victor Egan jr., Amrita and others; middle row: Armand Martonfalvy, Baktay and others
6. Amrita Sher-Gil: Girls in Conversation. 1932. Private coll. (from the book of Vivan Sundaram vol.II, p.800)
7. Amrita Sher-Gil: Girls (Young Girls), NGMA
8. Amrita, Indira with their cousin Klára and a friend. Photo dated to the early ‘30s (from the book of Sundaram, p.84.)
9. Amrita Sher-Gil: Two Girls, 1938-39, private collection
10. Photo of Amrita Sher-Gil’s large studio painting
11. Amrita Sher-Gil: Self-portrait as a Tahitian, 1934. private collection
12. Amrita Sher-Gil: From the Studio. 1934. private collection
13. Amrita Sher-Gil: Trees, 1939, private collection
14. Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka: Solitary Cedar, 1907, Hungarian National Bank
15. Amrita Sher-Gil: (Blue) Danube, c. 1932. Whereabouts unknown
16. József Nemes: Still-life, private collection
17. Amrita Sher-Gil: Still-life II, c. 1932. NGMA
18. Amrita Sher-Gil: Boat. 1932, NGMA
19. Amrita Sher-Gil: In the Garden. Private property