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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 515-544

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659356>

Accessed: 07/05/2011 20:06

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# A Retake of Sher-Gil's *Self-Portrait as Tahitian*

Saloni Mathur

The nude figure in the painting *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* (1934) is striking in her composure; she is resolutely female, self-possessed, and full of repose (fig. 1). The artist—Amrita Sher-Gil, the part-Indian, part-Hungarian painter who stands at the cosmopolitan helm of modern Indian art—was apparently responding to Paul Gauguin's stylization of the female nude, one of modernism's master tropes for the colonial other, by inhabiting, with her own corporeality, this overburdened representational form. In her painting, "Tahitianness" takes the form of her own brown body, but it is also projected through her straight, black hair, which is tied in an unfussy ponytail, marking simplicity or indigenuity as the absence of couture. I recall experiencing a sense of vertigo on first encountering this painting and the dizzying sets of questions it raised. What were the conditions that made possible such an account of Gauguin by a woman and a colonial subject in 1934? What precisely was meant by Sher-Gil's self-conscious self-placement into the body of a Tahitian nude? How could art history have missed this painting, so deliberate a citation of art-historical precedent? And how could such far-reaching coordinates—Paul Gauguin in the 1890s, Amrita Sher-Gil in the 1930s, Paris, Tahiti, India, Hungary—be plotted onto our existing map of modernism's unfolding in the twentieth century?

Upon arriving in the subcontinent soon after completing this painting, Sher-Gil announced that "Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse, Braque, and many others. India belongs only to me."<sup>1</sup> As the first Indian to receive art

1. Amrita Sher-Gil, letter to Karl Khandalavala, Apr. 1938, in *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait in Letters and Writings*, ed. Vivan Sundaram, 2 vols. (New Delhi, 2010), 2:491.

training in Paris, where she attended the École des Beaux-Arts from 1929 to 1932, the biracial, bicultural, and bisexual Sher-Gil, described recently by *Time* as “shockingly modern,”<sup>2</sup> both physically embodied the predicament of “belonging” to the West and painstakingly mined its artistic training, formal vocabularies, and painterly paradigms to facilitate her legendary return to India. Even so, she was aware as she boasted, according to her friend the writer Mulk Raj Anand, “that she was not on firm ground in India.”<sup>3</sup> *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* has scarcely been mentioned in the growing literature that confirms Sher-Gil’s canonical status in modern Indian art, but the painting speaks in powerful ways to a number of contemporary intellectual concerns: the profound and intractable global entanglements of modernism, the cross-cultural currents of the early twentieth century, the place of primitivism and Orientalism within the discourses of the modern, the avant-garde’s treatment of the female nude, and the bravado of the young woman who offered the statement while studying in Paris at the age of twenty-one. It is rare indeed to find within the history of art so probing an engagement with the construction of the exotic from such depths within its historical field of production.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I argue for the relevance of *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* for understanding Sher-Gil’s entire pictorial practice and emphasize the pivotal place of this painting in her short but focused artistic trajectory. As others have acknowledged, Sher-Gil’s self-portraits during her time in Paris—nineteen in all—are rather unlike the rest of her work, standing apart from the studies of European subjects and models she also painted in Paris or the pioneering portraits of what she saw as India’s “dark-bodied, sad-faced” communities that made her artistic career in the sub-

2. Aravind Adiga, “Shockingly Modern,” *Time*, 26 June 2006, bit.ly/5JmZyB.

3. Mulk Raj Anand, *Amrita Sher-Gil* (New Delhi, 1989), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated ASG.

4. A notable predecessor to Sher-Gil was the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. In her 1906 nude self-portrait, which depicted her own pregnancy, Modersohn-Becker had similarly responded to Gauguinesque conventions in radical ways. Modersohn-Becker’s premature death following childbirth in the same year, and Adolf Hitler’s inclusion of her work in his Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937, has generated much interest in her story from the critical vantage points of feminism and German modernism. See *Woman’s Art Journal* 30 (Autumn–Winter 2009), the special issue entirely dedicated to her work.

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FIGURE 1. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* (1934)

continent.<sup>5</sup> In these self-images, mostly painted between 1929 and 1932 while she was still a student at the École des Beaux Arts, Sher-Gil appears to be trying on different skins, in part—as Geeta Kapur has suggested—to “break the yolk-bag of her narcissism.”<sup>6</sup> However, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian*, which stands precisely at the moment of transition between her Western and Indian bodies of work, suggests an aspiration of a different sort. A number of elements in the painting point to Sher-Gil’s preparation for India, while exposing her awareness and sense of trepidation about the representational dilemmas that lay ahead. *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* is an exemplary negotiation by a female protagonist of the masculine paradigm of the modern artist and a theatrical intervention into the question of the female nude, staged through an ambitious but uncertain colonial subjectivity. As I will show, it is the kind of cultural text that makes possible dynamic ways of thinking about the dense historical entanglements within modernism and stimulates out of necessity comparative approaches to discrepant social fields that begin to uproot the authority of existing national frames.

In what follows, I explore how Sher-Gil’s self-portrait served to articulate and legitimate her own “avant-garde gambit” in the heightened political climate of India in the 1930s,<sup>7</sup> a decade of intense nationalist consciousness on the part of the subject nation whose independence was attained in 1947. I conclude, however, by pursuing what I view as the most consequential omission in the little attention the painting has received thus far, namely, the Japanese motifs that make up the curious backdrop for Sher-Gil’s performance of indigeneity as a Tahitian woman. By approaching the Japanese subtext of her painting through the lens of recent understandings of *Japonisme* within modernism, I argue that *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* conceals a deep engagement with the strategies of self-portraiture and acts of masquerade undertaken by both Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh in the late 1880s, in preparation for their famous collaboration in Arles. In the end, I propose—contrary to convention—that Sher-Gil’s self-portrait is neither merely a sign of the artist’s stylistic debt to the primitivist styles and colors of Gauguin in Polynesia, typically formulated by Sher-Gil’s biographers as her “Gauguinesque lust

5. Sher-Gil, “Modern Indian Art—Imitating the Forms of the Past,” *The Hindu*, 1 Nov. 1936, n.p.; rpt. *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 1:251.

6. Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi, 2000), p. 26; hereafter abbreviated *W*.

7. See Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London, 1992).

for sensuousness and colour,”<sup>8</sup> nor as the symptom of an unexamined gesture of “neo-primitivism.” In fact, the painting also expresses a crucial connection to the radical paradigm of identity presented by van Gogh, which offered Sher-Gil an alternative model for her gesture of outreach toward the “poor and downtrodden” people of India. As Sher-Gil herself once stated, cryptically, about her much-noted indebtedness to Gauguin: “I also love Van Gogh!”<sup>9</sup> What is significant about Sher-Gil’s embrace of van Gogh, I will argue, is that it exposes the precariousness of the moment of maneuver enacted by *Self-Portrait as Tahitian*, the forms of disalignment and difference at stake in this act of interpolation and reinvention, and the drive on the part of the young female artist to adopt and adapt Europe’s modernist imagination to the outer reaches of art history’s world stage.

We may recall that, for an earlier generation of art critics in the subcontinent, the relationship between India and European modernism was fundamentally anachronistic. This midcentury framework of “modernism as anachronism” bore the residual effects (and moral burden) of an earlier nineteenth-century evolutionary paradigm that saw Europe as the pinnacle of high-art achievement and India as aesthetically “fallen” or halted, and it determined in a number of powerful ways the aesthetic meanings and symbolic values assigned to twentieth-century Indian art. It also led to a preoccupation among critics with the question of the “Indianness” of modern Indian art. For example, in his 1959 treatise *India and Modern Art*, W. G. Archer assessed the Bengali painter Gaganendranath Tagore, who experimented with cubism in the 1920s, as “*un cubist manqué*”—as lacking, derivative, imitative, behind.<sup>10</sup> Not only was the output of this Bengali cubist painter judged as later and weaker than that of Picasso and Braque, it was much worse; according to Archer: it was “un-Indian” and therefore untrue, inauthentic, trivial, and irrelevant. The problem, as Kapur has poignantly observed, is that “the modern never properly belongs to us as Indians, or we to it” (*W*, p. 146). What Archer failed to see, of course, was what made this artist’s experiments with analytical cubism distinctly Indian: the revolutionary currents of Indian nationalism, the radical forms of cultural resistance operating in Bengal in the 1920s, and the tensions that came with the internationalist turn toward Europe and America at the same time—all of which left their marks on his canvases.

8. Yashodhara Dalmia, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life* (New Delhi, 2006), p. 149.

9. Sher-Gil, letter to Khandalavala, 16 May 1937, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 1:375; hereafter abbreviated “LK.”

10. See Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922–1947* (London, 2007).





FIGURE 2. Vivan Sundaram, *Bourgeois Family: Mirror Frieze* (2001)

The Delhi-based artist Vivan Sundaram's 2001 project, *Re-take of Amrita*, which provides a poignant image of the young Sher-Gil through the corpus of photographs taken by her father, Umrao Singh, contrasts sharply with these earlier views, in part by asserting the simultaneity of the historical clock, and offers the most penetrating set of insights thus far into Sher-Gil's sophisticated acts of modern self-fashioning. In these digitally produced photomontages, which "multiply points of entry and exit," the myths and legends enveloping Sher-Gil as a foundational figure of modernism are subjected to unique forms of subterfuge made available to the artist (Sher-Gil's nephew) through computer technologies (fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> Sundaram's far-reaching archival excavation presents the intricate entanglements of the Sher-Gil family, the "drama of their self-appointed egos,"<sup>12</sup> their individual journeys and cosmopolitan life stories through the privileged social milieus of Budapest, Simla, Paris, and Lahore.<sup>13</sup> For Sundaram,

11. Sundaram, "Recycling Photographs," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (London, 2007), p. 338; hereafter abbreviated "RP." See also Deepak Ananth, "An Unfinished Project," in *Amrita Sher-Gil: An Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century* (Munich, 2007), pp. 13–31.

12. Sundaram, *Re-take of Amrita* (New Delhi, 2001), p. 5.

13. Sher-Gil's unusual biography is worth noting here. She was born in Budapest in 1913 to a Hungarian mother and Sikh father and spent the first eight years of her life in Hungary with her sister, Indira. The family moved to India in 1921 and spent much of the next eight years in Simla before relocating to Paris for her art education. She returned to India in 1934 (at age twenty-one) and lived eventually with her Hungarian husband, Victor Egan, on the family's sugar plantation in the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh. She moved to Lahore in 1941, where she died suddenly later that year. For further biography of Sher-Gil and the Sher-Gil family, see *Amrita Sher-Gil: An Indian Artist Family of the Twentieth Century*; Dalmia, *Amrita*

the digital era enables a great deal: "You can shift to the playful, the provocative; you can lie to tell a truth. . . . There is a constant double-take or, in cinema terms, 'a retake' of the shot" ("RP," p. 338). The notion of retake, understood as the hermeneutic exercise initiated by Sundaram whereby "the copy of the copy of the copy makes it possible to shift register, to allow a dialectical reexamination, to propose new meanings," has thus emerged as an important motif for contemporary praxis and offers a point of critical reentry into the particular historical maneuver—simultaneously paradoxical, incongruous, divergent, and rebellious—that Sher-Gil's powerful self-portrait serves to enact and record ("RP," p. 334).<sup>14</sup>

### Polynesia, Primitivism, and the Female Nude

The woman in *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* is, in fact, only partially nude. Sher-Gil has covered herself, from the waist down, with a pale jade Polynesian wrap, but there is no floral pattern, no vibrant color, no flower in her hand or hair—all of which were among Gauguin's signature tropes in offering up for his European viewers the islands of the South Seas as a lush sexual paradise.<sup>15</sup> In general, Sher-Gil's sexuality is not depicted through the terms of the French male painter's preoccupation with the ripe fertility of Tahitian women, which he symbolized, for example, through the freshness of a flower—its readiness, if you like, to be plucked. Sher-Gil's body is not offered for consumption in the manner of the fearful, reclining nude of *Nevermore* (1897) or the rearview portrait of *Mana'o tupa-pa'u* (*The Spirit of the Dead Watching*) (1892), paintings that reveal, in Hal Foster's terms, the crisis of white heterosexual masculinity that stands at the core of Gauguin's primitivist encounter.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Sher-Gil presents herself in a three-quarter profile view, with full red lips (could that be lipstick she is wearing?), hands crossed in an X shape below her bare, robust breasts. The entire stance, and the impertinence of the painted lips, departs unequivocally from the disempowering portrayal of Gauguin's female subjects, whose erotic beauty was inevitably defined by their proximity to nature and their animalistic sexual states. And, yet, the self-sufficiency of Sher-Gil in her Tahitian guise is set against the shadowy presence of a male figure, recalling the ominous doppelgangers that Gauguin himself included in

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Sher-Gil; Amrita Sher-Gil; and Umrao Singh Sher-Gil: *His Misery and His Manuscript* (New Delhi, 2008).

14. See also the notion of retake or double take in W, pp. xiii, 7.

15. See Peter Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3 (Spring 1990): 51–90, and Stephen Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (New York, 1997).

16. See Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).



several pictures to signal his own presence in the scene. In Sher-Gil's painting, by contrast, the shadow does not appear as threatening as Gauguin's forbidding harbingers of death. It evokes, instead, the daunting predicament of the young female artist as she strives to make an artistic maneuver notable for its lack of historical precedent—namely, the reworking of modern Western painting for India—through the aesthetic terms made available to her by a previous generation of modern artists in Europe.

In her assessment of Sher-Gil's legacy in India, Kapur has set up a powerful equation between the young painter and Frida Kahlo of Mexico, arguing that the two artists, who never met but were contemporaries positioned at the birth of modernism in their separate Third World contexts, both exercised the same "vexed prerogative," that is, "to represent women in and through their experience of otherness" (*W*, p. 5). *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* may thus be seen as part of the young female protagonist's broader attempt to subvert the modernist conventions of the female nude, which began with the charcoal sketches she produced diligently from models during art school and continued after her return to India. Her 1933 painting *Professional Model*, for example, depicted not the iconic beauty of the female body but a saggy, middle-aged nude woman, slouched and slightly haggard in appearance. The model, we know, was suffering from tuberculosis; the mood is that of sadness and alienation.<sup>17</sup> In another striking picture, *Two Girls* (1939), Sher-Gil portrayed a brown and a white woman together in their nudity ambiguously, as possible lovers, or, in an alternative reading, as a form of self-portraiture that projected her own racially divided self.<sup>18</sup> As Vivan Sundaram has observed, "there is nothing simplistic in this painting. Nothing dogmatic or mechanical in Amrita's perception. . . . She has touched upon something which no other modern Indian painter has seriously tried to understand in its entirety. Perhaps she was in a better position to see it than anyone else."<sup>19</sup> In one of her final paintings, *Woman on Charpoy* (1940), Sher-Gil brought the theme of the reclining nude, ambitiously, by way of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and the South Indian painter Ravi Varma's existing engagement with the trope, to the social environment of rural women in South Asia. Here, Sher-Gil used the color red to convey a distinctive "semiotics of desire," one that expressed both woman's sexual yearning and the repression of female sexuality in the subcontinent.<sup>20</sup> However, Kapur has also cautioned against the nationalist valorization of the "native woman of genius in her excessively embodied, inevitably idealized

17. See Sundaram, "Amrita Sher-Gil: Life and Work," *Marg* (1972): 10.

18. See Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, p. 59.

19. Sundaram, "Amrita Sher-Gil," p. 20.

20. Geeti Sen, *Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography, and Cinema* (Ahmedabad, 2002), pp. 61–100.

form" (W, p. 5). In Kapur's terms, part of Sher-Gil's fate within the context of Indian nationalism has been "to conduct a cultural catharsis through her own image" (W, p. 13).

It is perhaps unsurprising that a recurring theme within the nationalist celebration of Amrita Sher-Gil has been the issue of her relationship to Gauguin, a debt that has been seen for decades as a series of stylistic clichés. For earlier critics, like Archer and Karl Khandalavala, Sher-Gil's "passionate adhesion" to Gauguin seemed "almost to have haunted her."<sup>21</sup> They argued that Sher-Gil was "missing India" during her time in Paris and identified with Gauguin's "sun hotted, joyous exuberant colour which to her symbolized her half-forgotten homeland" and that "filled a void" within her while in Europe.<sup>22</sup> For these writers, Gauguin's approach to color played a "supreme role" in her art, but by the end of the journey she achieved a technical transcendence, and "the result was totally new" (I, pp. 87, 96). The narrative they constructed thus emphasized the primacy of Sher-Gil's attraction to Gauguin but also her masterful overcoming of his style, which was heralded as part of an indigenous victory for modern painting in the subcontinent. At times, however, the critics' preoccupation with the relationship also produced some paradoxical results; as Archer stated obtusely, for Sher-Gil "Gauguin was India, and when at last she returned, India itself became Gauguin" (I, p. 92).

In more recent scholarship, the question of Sher-Gil's relationship to Gauguin has been entangled with the conundrum of the inheritance of primitivism, described by one feminist critic as a "white, Western and preponderantly male quest for an elusive object whose very condition of desirability resides in some form of distance and difference, whether temporal or geographical."<sup>23</sup> It is by now well known that the story of Gauguin's flight from civilization, his voyage outward from the metropole to the colony, projected as an earthly paradise, earned him the dubious distinction of being the father of modern primitivism. It is also well known that the Hungarian-born and partly European-bred Sher-Gil, who occasionally used her servants as models, was not part of the world of the Indian peasantry that she depicted in her paintings, who were essentially distant and foreign to the artist, at times gazed at from above or viewed from outside as an undifferentiated mass. Sher-Gil's portraits of Indians, which represented "the people" in the singular, as archetypes of humanity, would appear to reproduce, then, Gauguin's primitivist gesture while also

21. W. G. Archer, *India and Modern Art* (London, 1959), p. 86; hereafter abbreviated *I*.

22. Khandalavala, *Amrita Sher-Gil* (Bombay, 1944), p. 17.

23. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder, Colo., 1992), p. 314.

complicating the idea that primitivism as a structure of desire within modernism belonged exclusively to the white, Western male imaginary. Indeed, the deep unresolvable contradictions and psychological ambivalence that Foster has identified in such modernist pioneers as Picasso and Gauguin might well be applied to Sher-Gil; in his terms, “the primitivist seeks both to be *opened up to difference*—to be taken out of the self sexually, socially, racially—and to be *fixed in opposition to the other*—to be established once again, secured as a sovereign self.”<sup>24</sup> But the similarities undoubtedly come to an end with the crisis of phallic authority that ensues for the male modernist, conceived by Foster through a psychoanalytic framework of castration and masculine anxiety, a “traumatic knot” that cannot be said to be shared by Sher-Gil in any historical sense.<sup>25</sup> *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* can thus also be seen as an account, in part, of the phenomenon of historical particularity within the universalizing discursive arena of modernism. The painting makes visible both the European provenance of primitivism and the radical interruptions of its formations—its gendered subversions, its circuitous migrations, and its gestures of reproduction and difference—in and out of the colonial sphere.

By the year of Sher-Gil’s self-portrait, 1934, primitivism as a set of representational conventions was both well established and becoming unhinged by negritude, anticolonial nationalism, and other assertions of agency in Paris and elsewhere. If anything, primitivism in the period between the wars had emerged as a spectacle, both at the level of high culture (for example, in the 1923 ballet *The Creation of the World*, which featured tribal costumes and sets by Fernand Léger) and at the other end of the cultural spectrum, with the eruption of jazz in the bars and clubs of Montparnasse and the nightclub performances of Josephine Baker.<sup>26</sup> It is a sign of the complexity of Sher-Gil’s relationship to this environment that she lived a bohemian and cosmopolitan life but was nevertheless described by one reviewer in Paris as “an exquisite and mysterious little Hindu princess,” who “speaks French like a Parisian” and who “conjures up the mysterious shores of the Ganges.”<sup>27</sup> In presenting herself as a Tahitian nude, Sher-Gil was perhaps leveraging some of the exoticism surrounding her

24. Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, p. 20.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

26. See Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Summer 1998): 903–34; *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Foster et al. (New York, 2004), p. 245; and Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” *Theatre Journal* 55 (Oct. 2003): 433–50.

27. Denise Proutaux, quoted in N. Iqbal Singh, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Biography* (Delhi, 1984), p. 25; hereafter abbreviated A.

reception in Paris, but she was also undoubtedly conscious of its racism and of the limits of her own fiction of entry into Gauguin's sexual imaginary. Indeed, as a mixed-race subject, the young female painter was more like the deracinated *indigènes* that Gauguin complained of in the Tahitian capital of Papeete, dominated by missionaries and French colonial officials. Later, in the Marquesas, Gauguin routinely denounced the practice of intermarriage between the races, in spite of acquiring his own Tahitian "bride," the thirteen-year-old native girl Tehamana, who served as a model in many of his pictures. One can imagine how Gauguin's contempt for racial mixing and his well-known predilection for teenage girls might have resonated personally for the racially and sexually emancipated Sher-Gil, who was nevertheless still a teenager herself during much of her time in Paris.

It is from this uncomfortable space of enunciation that Sher-Gil managed to radically scrutinize, through her own self-image, the stylistic options offered by Gauguin to "devise the *indigenous body* from oil paint" (W, p. 9)—a pursuit that occurred in the subcontinent, as Kapur has pointed out, largely through the figure of the female—while rejecting much of the fetishism and male mastery that underwrote the French painter's escape from the excesses of European civilization. What is extraordinary is that Sher-Gil, like the best self-portraitists, does not allow this act of self-reflection to devolve into epistemological anxiety. Instead she remains poised and businesslike, retaining just enough distance to present the viewer with a glimpse of herself refracted through the authoritative gaze of the Western, male avant-garde, while maintaining command over the entire situation. As T. J. Clark has noted in another context, this is the kind of mastery we most admire in self-portraiture, namely, the painter's control over "the dialectical vertigo" created by the peculiar conditions of the look in the genre. In Sher-Gil's case, the look was compounded by the "double bind of otherness," which required a negotiation with both the gaze of the viewer and the ubiquitous look of the European male.<sup>28</sup> Although Sher-Gil's paintings were not always equally successful, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* belongs to the handful of her masterpieces—*Three Girls* (1935), *Bramacharis* (1937), *The Ancient Storyteller* (1940), or *Haldi Grinders* (1940)—where she arrived, in the poignant words of the artist Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, "beyond the frontiers of influence, alone, pointing a finger towards the meaning of modernity revealed to her by historic circumstances" (figs. 3–4).<sup>29</sup>

28. See T. J. Clark, "The Look of Self-Portraiture," in *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall (exhibition catalog, National Portrait Gallery, London, 20 Oct. 2005–29 Jan. 2006), pp. 57–65.

29. Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, "Amrita Sher-Gil: Dialectics of Academicism and Pictorial Situation of Traditional Indian Art," *Marg* (1972): 60.



FIGURE 3. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Three Girls* (1935)

### ***Japonisme and the Act of Masquerade***

Sheikh's reference to "the frontiers of influence" raises yet another question: how should we understand the Japanese motifs and figures—the seated Japanese male, the female geishas in kimonos, the pagoda-like structure, and the austere lines of a Japanese courtyard (is it an exterior or interior?)—that comprise the distinctly un-Tahitian backdrop of Amrita's



FIGURE 4. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Bramacharis* (1937)

provocative response to Gauguin? Sher-Gil was commenting here upon the turn toward Japanese techniques and aesthetics, and the Nihon-ga painting tradition in particular, undertaken by the Bengal school in India from the first decade of the twentieth century on. Sher-Gil was notoriously outspoken against the work of the Bengal school, which she viewed as “cramping and crippling” of creativity and responsible “for the stagnation that characterizes Indian painting today.”<sup>30</sup> However, her contempt for the “insipid futilities of the Bengal School,” Nandalal Bose’s “uninspired cleverness,” and Rabindranath Tagore’s “piddling little poetry;”<sup>31</sup> tended to be expressed vocally and publicly rather than articulated through the subtleties of her painting, except insofar as she viewed her entire practice as a bid against the orthodoxy they represented in Indian art by the 1930s. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the Japanese subtext in Sher-Gil’s portrait references the pan-Asian proclivities of the Bengal school because Sher-Gil’s opposition to their perceived hold over Indian art took shape largely after her return to India and the completion of the painting in 1934. It is more plausible that the background represents a continuation of the painterly issues at work in the foreground, namely, Sher-Gil’s immersion in the lessons and legacies of postimpressionist painting shaped by her art education in Paris. What is being referenced in the background of *Self-Portrait*

30. Sher-Gil, “Indian Art Today,” *The Indian Listener*, 19 Aug. 1941; rpt. in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 2:733.

31. Sher-Gil, letter to Khandalavala, Sept. 1937, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 1:405.



as *Tahitian* is, I suggest, the context of *Japonisme* in Europe, understood as a constellation of projections and longings around Japan that was simultaneously artistic and commercial and that took hold of artistic circles in London and Paris in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

As numerous scholars have shown, many of the pioneering figures of modern art in Europe (including Paul Cézanne, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, James McNeill Whistler, Auguste Rodin, van Gogh, and Gauguin) were all involved at some point or another in studying, collecting, and stylistically appropriating the techniques and subject matter of Japanese art during their influential artistic careers.<sup>32</sup> In 1888, Louis Gonse, the French art historian who specialized in Japan, described the degree of Japanese influence on French art as an act of cultural miscegenation: "A drop of their blood has mixed with our blood and no power on earth can eliminate it."<sup>33</sup> However intimate, the phenomenon manifested itself in a peculiar construction of Japan by Europeans that was variable, inconsistent, at times incoherent, and very far removed from the historical and geographical reality of Japan, a country itself in the process of rapid modernization and industrialization during the same period. In her self-portrait, Sher-Gil may have been seizing upon a common pictorial practice among nineteenth-century European painters of placing Japanese prints, objects, fabrics and motifs in the background of their portraits not merely for decorative effect but to enhance aspects of the sitter's biography in some way. Two well-known examples include Manet's *Portrait of Zola* (1868), which presented the novelist seated at his desk below a Japanese screen and a Japanese woodcut print, along with other meaningful items, and van Gogh's 1887–88 *Portrait of Tanguy*, with its kaleidoscopic background of Japanese images and prints.<sup>34</sup> Van Gogh made three such paintings of Père Tanguy, the old tradesman who supplied the impressionists

32. See Elizabeth Childs, "Seeking the Studio of the South: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Avant-garde Identity," in *Vincent van Gogh and the Painters of the Petit Boulevard*, ed. Cornelia Homburg (New York, 2001), pp. 113–52; *Japonisme in Art: An International Symposium*, ed. Society for the Study of Japonisme (Tokyo, 1980); Tsukasa Ködera, "Japan as Primitivistic Utopia: Van Gogh's *Japonisme* Portraits," *Simiolus* 14, nos. 3–4 (1984): 189–208; Lionel Lambourne, *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (London, 2005); Susan J. Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York, 2007); Hidemichi Tanaka, "Cézanne and Japonisme," *Artibus et Historiae*, no. 44 (2001): 201–20; Theodore Reff, "Manet's Portrait of Zola," *Burlington Magazine* 117 (Jan. 1975): 35–44; Janet Walker, "Van Gogh, Collector of 'Japan,'" *The Comparatist* 32 (May 2008): 82–114; Frank Whitford, *Japanese Prints and Western Painters* (New York, 1977); and Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1981).

33. Louis Gonse, quoted in Wichmann, *Japonisme*, frontispiece.

34. See Childs, "Seeking the Studio of the South," and Reff, "Manet's Portrait of Zola."

with paints from his Montmartre shop when they could not afford to pay for them. I will return shortly to develop in further detail the relevance of van Gogh's aesthetic relationship to Japan and its unique importance for Sher-Gil. For now it is important to also note the element of cross-cultural masquerade that characterized portraiture and self-portraiture in the *Japoniste* style, beginning perhaps with Monet's eccentric portrait of his wife in 1876, *La Japonaise*, and culminating in the exchange of self-portraits between van Gogh and Gauguin that inaugurated their legendary collaboration in Arles.<sup>35</sup> As I will suggest, it is the cross-cultural theatrics of *Japoniste* portraiture and self-portraiture in Europe that becomes part of the self-conscious arsenal for Sher-Gil's own act of masquerade "as Tahitian." In other words, her offering of a racialized body double against the backdrop of the Japanese motifs reveals a kind of tactical connection to the aesthetic precedents of different formations within modernism in Europe. Such an understanding begins to expose the radicality of her own self-fashioning project within the terms available to her in the Western tradition and offers a further clue about the role of the references to Japan in the background of a painting ostensibly about Gauguin.

### Sher-Gil and the Studio of the South

In the final analysis, Sher-Gil's self-portrait betrays a preoccupation with the idea of a *ménage à trois*—largely platonic and intellectually driven—with Gauguin and van Gogh, whose work she regarded with the highest esteem. The painting bears the influence, in particular, of the two self-portraits that Gauguin and van Gogh exchanged in the fall of 1888 in preparation for their artistic collaboration in Arles, which they conceived and referred to as the Studio of the South. In these self-portraits, representing what Debora Silverman has called "the bandit and the *bonze*," van Gogh and Gauguin stepped into vastly different roles and self-definitions, with a psychic intensity that departs significantly from Monet's earlier costume play, in order to drive their aesthetic projects into previously uncharted waters.<sup>36</sup> The picture Gauguin presented to van Gogh, titled *Self-Portrait: Les Misérables* (1888), portrayed the artist as a social outcast or bandit, a victim, and a tormented soul (fig. 5). In a letter to van Gogh, Gauguin described the self-portrait as both a "personal likeness" and a "symbol of the contemporary Impressionist painter" inspired by Victor Hugo's pro-

35. See Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, p. 22.

36. Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York, 2000), p. 27; hereafter abbreviated VG. See also Silverman, "Biography, Brush, and Tools: Historicizing Subjectivity: The Case of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin," in *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography*, ed. Charles Salas (Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 76–96.

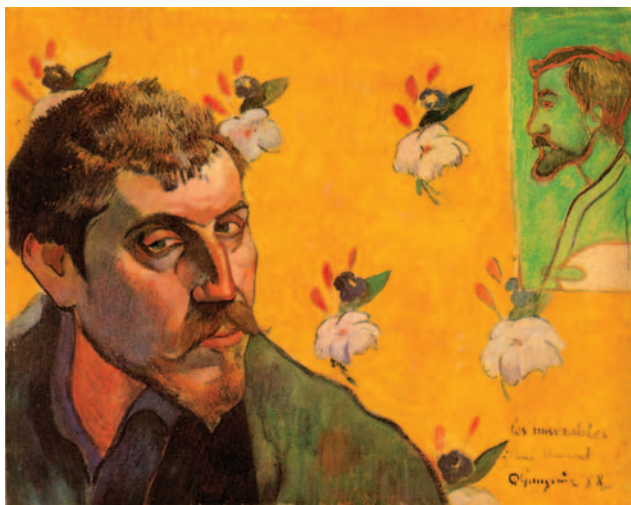


FIGURE 5. Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Bernard (Les Misérables)* (1888)

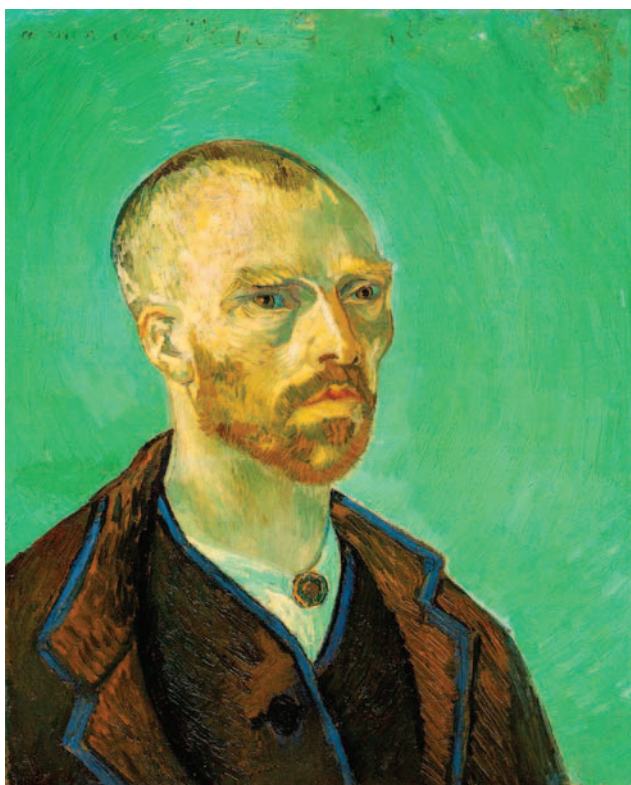


FIGURE 6. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin (Bonze)* (1888)

tagonist and outlaw in *Les Misérables*. "In endowing him (Hugo's protagonist) with my own features," Gauguin stated, "I offer . . . a portrait of myself as well as our portrait."<sup>37</sup> Van Gogh was overwhelmed by the gesture and wrote back that he had been "moved to the depths of my soul."<sup>38</sup> As it turned out, his response applied only to Gauguin's description of the work, not the actual portrait itself, which van Gogh found desperate, pessimistic, and deeply disturbing when the canvas arrived in the mail a short time later.

Van Gogh had nonetheless prepared in return a picture he titled *Self-Portrait as Bonze* (1888), in which the Dutch artist presented a bust of himself as Japanese, adapting the physical features—a round head, slanted eyes, and a flattened nose—to appear physiognomically like a bonze or Japanese monk (fig. 6). He too defined it as both a self-image and a portrait of the modern artist "conceived," van Gogh explained, "as the portrait of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the Eternal Buddha" (quoted in VG, p. 31). Van Gogh, who had no first-hand experience of Japan but was an avid collector of Japanese woodcut prints and read the *Japonisme* literature of the period enthusiastically, could have only encountered such a figure in fiction, most likely in Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), which he had studied carefully earlier that year. Van Gogh's projection of himself in "a study in which I look like a Japanese"<sup>39</sup> was actually the culmination of his utopian ideals more broadly and the peculiar place of Japan within this utopic vision. He believed the Japanese to be a primordial people liberated from the excesses of modern society as a result of their proximity to nature and maintained that to study Japanese art was to be happier because "we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention."<sup>40</sup> As van Gogh stated in a letter from Arles, "my whole work is founded on the Japanese, so to speak."<sup>41</sup> And the intensity of his imaginative operation, however fraught, was expressed in several of his portraits and self-portraits, as well as the sixteen paintings of blossoming trees he also completed in Arles that year.<sup>42</sup> *Self-Portrait as Bonze* was the highest expression of van Gogh's idealized landscape of

37. Quoted in Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South* (New York, 2001), p. 150.

38. Quoted in *ibid.*

39. Quoted in Kōdera, "Japan as Primitivistic Utopia," p. 203.

40. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 198.

41. Quoted in Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, p. 42.

42. See Walker, "Van Gogh, Collector of 'Japan.'" See also Childs, "Seeking the Studio of the South," and Kōdera, "Japan as Primitivistic Utopia," who have argued that van Gogh's affectionate *Portrait of Tanguy* similarly depicted Père Tanguy as a Japanese monk or bonze.

Japan but also his vision of hope for the artist, and he dedicated the picture to Gauguin with the inscription “à mon ami, Paul Gauguin.”

Art historians have long been fascinated by these very different self-portraits, subjecting them to extensive scrutiny and attributing their dissonant registers to divergent temperaments, discordant views of subject and society, and the twin responses, at different ends of the spectrum, of utopian optimism and social pessimism to the experience of modernity itself. The portraits also set the stage for the larger story, one of the most legendary episodes in the history of modern art: van Gogh and Gauguin’s pivotal nine-week collaboration in Arles, which produced a large body of paintings in intense dialogue with one another, but which was fraught with both friendship and rivalry. The personal incompatibility revealed in the self-portraits, according to one version of the story, made the relationship more and more volatile as the weeks progressed and culminated in the famous violent incident—the ear cutting—that brought a catastrophic end to their time together (Gauguin, who feared his friend’s signs of madness, left Arles immediately and never saw van Gogh again). The event is notorious and has long been at the heart of the myth of van Gogh as a mad artist-genius, a myth that persists in spite of ongoing efforts by art historians to deconstruct it through a range of theoretical lenses, including postcolonialism, in view of new insights into van Gogh’s identification with Japan.<sup>43</sup> Recent interpretation, for our purposes, has tended to stress the two very different aesthetic strategies embodied in their separate approaches to these self-portraits: if Gauguin’s portrait dramatized a problem—the social isolation of the artist—then van Gogh’s proposed a kind of solution involving monastic solitude within a community of painters, a vision that he equated, however mistakenly, with Japan.<sup>44</sup>

In the days following his release from the hospital, van Gogh produced another iconic self-portrait, in which he appeared in a coat and fur hat in the winter, with a large bandage covering his mutilated ear. It is one of two in which van Gogh depicted his injury, and both pictures have been traditionally understood as representing the artist’s precarious struggle for self-composure at a time when he was battling madness and thoughts of suicide. In the background of this painting, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889) there is an easel with a blank canvas, and on the wall hangs a Japanese woodcut print, an image by Saeto Torakiyo, part of van Gogh’s per-

43. See Childs, “Seeking the Studio of the South”; Kōdera, “Japan as Primitivistic Utopia”; Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888–1893*; and Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven, Conn., 1989).

44. See *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, p. 151.





FIGURE 7. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889)

sonal collection (fig. 7).<sup>45</sup> The message of this haunting representation now seems increasingly clear: van Gogh's utopian investment in Japan had suffered a blow; his aesthetic and social ideals had imploded; his Orientalist reality had been injured beyond repair. In the words of Elizabeth Childs, the juxtaposition of the blank canvas, the bandage cradling his mutilated ear, and the serene world of the Japanese print all point to a painful confrontation, namely, the "exhaustion of the Japanese paradigm and van Gogh's decision to leave it behind."<sup>46</sup> The postscript to this picture remains well known: van Gogh, who suffered from increasing psychological imbalance, was admitted to an asylum in Saint Rémy and ended his life two years later; Gauguin, meanwhile, lived for another thirteen years and turned his

45. See Childs, "Seeking the Studio of the South," and *Catalogue of the Van Gogh Museum's Collection of Japanese Prints*, ed. Charlotte van Rappard-Boon et al. (Amsterdam, 1991), p. 18.

46. Childs, "Seeking the Studio of the South," p. 136.



attention to the South Pacific, arriving in Papeete, the colonial capital of Tahiti, in 1891 to begin the next episode of his artistic career.

### **Sher-Gil's Artistic Self-Fashioning: Strategies, Choices, Preferences**

By the time Sher-Gil arrived in Paris to study painting in 1929, the tale of van Gogh and Gauguin's shipwrecked Studio of the South was firmly established as a creation story within modernism's master narrative, and the meaning of their self-portrait exchange had already been subjected to over forty years of mythmaking. The question is not if she knew of their collaboration but what she took away from it, how she positioned herself in relation to it, and in what ways the story of these founding fathers facilitated her own initiation into avant-garde identity a full generation after their deaths. Sher-Gil was clearly compelled by their strategies of self-portraiture, their acts of masquerade in particular, and, as I have suggested, she self-consciously imported their role-playing paradigm for her own act of masquerade as a Polynesian woman. But the pictorial tactic she selected—to approach Gauguin and van Gogh through the juxtaposition of Tahiti and Japan—was a radical one, exposing Sher-Gil's unique sense of the way in which these imaginative geographies fed the European male artist's creative experiments in paint. Moreover, the prominence of the male shadow behind her (is it Gauguin or van Gogh?) seems to indicate the looming presence of precedent and, above all, the artist's own search for a place for herself within the creation of modernism's master discourse. Sher-Gil, like van Gogh and Gauguin before her, was striving to cultivate an image of herself as an artist, while negotiating her relationship to a space beyond Europe through the personal experience of social displacement and difference. Significantly, for all three painters, the self-portrait became the particular site where the aesthetic negotiation and individual quest converged in the most dramatic of ways.

In an article on modern art published in the Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, Sher-Gil explained that, by the end of 1933, she had become “haunted by an intense longing to return to India, feeling in some strange inexplicable way that there lay my destiny as a painter.”<sup>47</sup> As the final painting before her return, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* preserves this sense of longing or desire; her eyes are focused determinedly on something in the distance, and her body is angled as if in midturn. But the picture also initiated and revealed a gradual process of aesthetic understanding that empowered the young artist and shaped her commitment to return. As

47. Sher-Gil, “Modern Indian Art,” 1:249.

Sher-Gil would later assert: "The decision was made after careful thinking. It was not an emotional impulse" (quoted in A, p. 36). The determination involved, in part, the studious attention given by Sher-Gil to the different strategies of painting and self-portraiture represented by Gauguin and van Gogh. If, by physically inhabiting the Tahitian subject, Sher-Gil was weighing the stylistic options offered by Gauguin to represent the brown, non-Western body in paint, then the earnest quality of this inhabitation, and the optimism of this cross-cultural reach, was the option presented to her by van Gogh. As Silverman has argued, van Gogh's *Self-Portrait as Bonze* (1888) presented "not a victim but a worshipper; it offered a self-portrait as social dialogue, with the self constituted in and through association, in deference and reference to the larger totalities" (VG, p. 45). It portrayed, in other words, a "relational ego" (VG, p. 45). And this paradigm of artistic identity—malleable, contingent, relational, dialogical—had enormous intellectual and emotional appeal for the part European, part Indian Sher-Gil seeking to define her connection to the subcontinent. It was also the source of her increasing identification with van Gogh over Gauguin, which she noted, at least implicitly, in a letter to her friend, the art critic Karl Khandalavala, in 1937:

In spite of the fact that till now my special favourite has been Gauguin, I sometimes feel that Van Gogh was the greatest of the two—the *Elemental* versus Sophistication (no matter how sublime) is apt to make the latter look a bit flat by comparison. I too have got an excellent book on him with some lovely reproductions. How beautiful his letters to Theo are! How inevitably the character reveals itself in one's work. Van Gogh's perhaps even more than usual. ["LK" 1:375]

Significantly, after her return to India, Sher-Gil made several comments of this sort, announcing her so-called emancipation from Gauguin and her view of van Gogh as "the greatest of the two." Her father, Umrao Singh, observed that Amrita scarcely attended to the Old Masters during a visit to the National Gallery but "stood for half an hour in front of the small painting of a kitchen chair by van Gogh" when they were returning to India by way of London (A, p. 37). The painting, *Van Gogh's Chair* (1888), and its partner, *Gauguin's Chair* (1888), have come to symbolize, more than anything else produced by van Gogh in Arles, the vast psychic differences between him and Gauguin and the range of unconscious desires (from Oedipal aggression to homosexual attraction) that presumably drove the extremes of their relationship. Shortly thereafter, in an address to students at Punjab University, Sher-Gil spoke of van Gogh as a model of excellence

for her own artistic goals, namely, “to paint good pictures.”<sup>48</sup> And she became preoccupied with one of van Gogh’s last paintings: “Do you know that picture of his, the cornfield with black crows? It always puts me into a state of violent emotion and divine restlessness” (“LK,” 1:375). In fact, Sher-Gil’s interest in the Dutch artist’s work had evolved slowly: she had studied him diligently over the years; she found van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo “beautiful”; but she strongly disliked *Lust for Life*, Irving Stone’s fictional biography of van Gogh. The latter, published in 1934, the year *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* was painted, was undoubtedly an important source of information for Sher-Gil. However, she rejected its romantic formula, suggesting that Stone had “made a mess of it” (quoted in A, p. 98) in part because her identification with van Gogh was not reducible to the mad artist-genius clichés made popular by *Lust for Life* (and further perpetuated by the Hollywood film version in 1956, which featured Kirk Douglas as van Gogh).

Why was Sher-Gil so drawn to van Gogh during and after her return to India, and what was the nature of the ethical model she appeared to be seeking in his paintings and letters? The content of van Gogh’s ethical vision has tended to elude modern thinkers and philosophers, as the infamous discussion among Martin Heidegger, Meyer Schapiro, and Jacques Derrida over a painting of an old pair of shoes by van Gogh attests.<sup>49</sup> It is significant that this discourse began in the same era as Sher-Gil, in the early 1930s, when Heidegger first saw the painting at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and used it as the basis for his 1935 essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” In fact, van Gogh’s reputation as a tortured seeker of truth, which earned him a certain moral currency as an artist, was largely established with his arrival on the world stage in the 1930s, in part due to the popularity of Stone’s *Lust for Life*. The first major van Gogh exhibition in America at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1935, for example, transformed the artist into a “depression-era icon” and left a powerful impact on the photographic projects of Walker Evans and James Agee in the American South.<sup>50</sup> This was because van Gogh’s penetrating portraits of anonymous people (peasants, young people, a postman, a mother) had revealed, in Schapiro’s terms, an “insight into the wear and tear of life” and

48. Sher-Gil, letter to Umrao Singh and Marie Antoinette Sher-Gil, Jan. 1934, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 1:113.

49. See Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987), and Meyer Schapiro, “The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh” and Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Preziosi (Oxford, 1998), pp. 296–300, 284–95.

50. Steve Spence, “Van Gogh in Alabama, 1936,” *Representations*, no. 75 (Summer 2001): 37.



FIGURE 8. Vincent van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Crows* (1890)

were the “first democratic portraits” with few forerunners in the history of French painting.<sup>51</sup> Yet ultimately, for Schapiro, van Gogh’s moral authority did not reside in the deep empathy he brought to portraiture or in the receptiveness he displayed toward human beings in general. The core of van Gogh’s ethical vision was most visible in his landscapes and still lifes, in particular, his painting of 1890, made in the final weeks of his life, *Crows over the Wheatfield*, a picture that left Sher-Gil in a state of “violent emotion and divine restlessness” (fig. 8).

In Schapiro’s 1954 account of van Gogh’s fateful painting, he observed that in this great panorama of earth and “troubled sky” a huge field spreads out before the viewer through three divergent paths, all of which end abruptly in the field or lead out of the frame, blocking their arrival onto the horizon. He thus noted the picture’s disquieting effects: “The perspective network of the open field, which he had painted many times before, is now inverted; the lines, like rushing streams, converge” towards the spectator “as if space had suddenly lost its focus and all things turned aggressively upon the beholder.”<sup>52</sup> For Schapiro, the “uncertainty of Van Gogh is projected here”; the artist’s world is disoriented, in disarray: “It is as if he felt completely blocked, but also saw an ominous fate approaching” in the presence of the crows, a “sinister flock” (“O,” pp. 87, 89). However, the most poignant aspect of the scene for Schapiro was the artist’s efforts to counteract these effects; the picture is van Gogh’s “defense against disintegration” through the unparalleled breadth and simplicity of the vision

51. Schapiro, *Vincent van Gogh* (New York, 1950), p. 18.

52. Schapiro, “On a Painting of van Gogh” (1946), *Modern Art* (New York, 1978), p. 87; hereafter abbreviated “O.”

and the powerful saturation of color at play. “Just as a man in neurotic distress counts and enumerates to hold on to things securely . . . Van Gogh in his extremity of anguish discovers an arithmetical order of colors and shapes to resist decomposition” (“O,” p. 90). Thus, for Schapiro, the painting epitomized a recurrent pattern of response by van Gogh, driven by his faith in the restorative functions of painting and his “fidelity to the world of objects and human beings,” as a constructive attachment with deep emotional roots (“O,” p. 97). And van Gogh confirmed this in his letters to Theo from the asylum: “You will see it soon, I hope,” he offered. “These canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words, what I find healthful and strengthening in the country.”

With Sher-Gil’s project of modern painting for India, we are admittedly far removed from these contexts of personal crises for van Gogh, not to mention the radiant wheat fields of southern France and the powerful backdrop of the Provençal sky. And, yet, aspects of van Gogh’s social vision—his tenacity in the face of fragility and disintegration, his “relational modality” and the syncretic model of selfhood it presented, his precariousness and ultimate defeat—had discernible implications for Sher-Gil’s life and work. The vision of identity presented by van Gogh, as compassionately constituted in and through association, offered a paradigm of artistic subjectivity that resonated strongly with the young Sher-Gil as she sought a point of entry into the cultural landscape of India from the difficult position of standing partially outside it. Van Gogh’s idealized image of Japan, and the hope that saturated his vision of alterity, presented a framework of empathy in the cross-cultural gesture and a more tentative negotiation with representation itself than the more triumphant, tropical escapism of Gauguin. Indeed, the differences and tensions between these two options, presented through the symbols of Tahiti and Japan, provided the terms for Sher-Gil’s own self-depiction and her act of masquerade of 1934. If her performance reworked Gauguin’s authority in relation to the female nude, it also called upon the utopic content of van Gogh’s self-portrait as a bonze and his painful admission of the fragility of this investment in his haunting later work *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*. The vulnerability Sher-Gil detected in van Gogh seemed to speak to her in the most philosophical of ways, as well as—in her words—“how inevitably the character reveals itself in one’s work. Van Gogh’s perhaps even more than usual.” This was especially true after her arrival in India, where she delved into the traditions of the subcontinent—the ancient Buddhist murals of Ajanta and the medieval Mughal and Pahari miniatures—to which she did and did not fully belong with precisely the kind of tenacity and tenuousness she had seen and admired in Vincent van Gogh.

In the end, it was not merely the brilliant raiding of historical energies for her own artistic repertoire that constituted Sher-Gil's specifically modern consciousness. It was also the artist's unique way of dealing with belonging and unbelonging: her enactment of identity as a dialogue across difference; her construction of a self "in deference and reference to larger totalities"; her liminality and its offshoot, a dialectical mode of being. These qualities of her life were rather unrepresentative of the era of Indian art in which she is located. Sher-Gil's early detractors in the subcontinent complained that her Indian portraiture "'smells of the west.'" <sup>53</sup> Clearly, the artist's crossing of borders and boundaries, and her unsettled relationship to the idea of home, threatened her contemporaries in the national collective seeking to define their autonomy through an authentic cultural space. Equally telling was the confidence of the young woman's response: "How dismal to be so completely misunderstood," she lamented, "when at long last I am learning restraint and discrimination and achieving the subtlety my work has till recently so glaringly lacked. These people have to have things yelled at them from housetops! They fail to recognize all except the most obvious." <sup>54</sup> The inability of the world to accept her vision was an ongoing source of aggravation for Sher-Gil, and her letters often sounded the discordant tone of an individual at odds with society—in her words, a "host of uncomprehending idiots." <sup>55</sup> As Khandalavala stated kindly, Sher-Gil was a "remarkably tolerant person" with "no charm, personal or otherwise, when it came to a discussion on art." <sup>56</sup>

Indeed, many of the most ground-breaking qualities of Sher-Gil's life—her restless opposition to orthodoxy, her stubbornness, her lack of serenity, her impatience with the culture of conformism around her—appear to be symptomatic of the dissonant relationship to society that Edward Said has so eloquently connected to migration and exile, as definitive forms of the experience of the modern. <sup>57</sup> Sher-Gil was of course not literally in exile; her patterns of migration, however unconventional, did not amount to a forced departure from a place. For Said, however, the notion of exile is also a metaphorical condition "engendered by estrangement, distance, dispersion," <sup>58</sup> and a powerful motif in the art of modernity, one that has histor-

53. Sher-Gil, letter to Khandalavala, 13 Feb. 1937, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 1:333.

54. Khandalavala, *Amrita Sher-Gil* (Bombay, 1944), p. 25.

55. Sher-Gil, letter to Khandalavala, 4 May 1940, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 2:641.

56. Khandalavala, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, p. 19.

57. See Edward Said, *"Reflections on Exile" and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

58. Said, "Introduction: Criticism and Exile," *"Reflections on Exile" and Other Essays*, p.



ically made possible “originality of vision.”<sup>59</sup> “Most people,” Said has explained, “are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” and the potential to mediate between discrepant experiences (“R,” p. 186). In Said’s terms, exile is thus the basis for a critical intellectual practice at odds with the prerogatives of the settled collective and the “thumping language of national pride” (“R,” p. 177). Yet the revolutionary daring and audacity of an exilic consciousness is not without its downside; as Said has stated, this is the essential and insurmountable sadness, the “crippling sorrow of estrangement” that comes from the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (“R,” p. 173).

The deep sense of melancholy that permeates Sher-Gil’s portraiture has long been viewed as emerging from the problem of India’s poverty or, more precisely, as a reflection of the artist’s reaction to what she saw as “those silent images of infinite submission and patience . . . their angular brown bodies strangely beautiful in their ugliness” (fig. 9).<sup>60</sup> Sher-Gil responded with such compassion and intensity that, according to Anand, one could almost “feel misery from the pores of paint” (ASG, p. 19). For other critics, however, her lyrical renderings of India’s subaltern populations amounted to an easy aestheticization of the issues; her aristocratic class background and the social distance created by her European education and upbringing were both her personal “failing and that of her art.”<sup>61</sup> Only recently have we come to recognize how Sher-Gil’s own sense of fragmentation and cultural isolation might also stand at the heart of her pictorial project. As Sher-Gil herself once reflected: “It may be that the sadness, the queer ugliness of the types I choose as my models. . . . corresponds to something in me, some inner trait in my nature which responds to things that are sad, rather than to manifestations of life which are exuberantly happy, or placidly contented.”<sup>62</sup> Clearly, the malaise she expressed in her letters about life as “infinitely grey and melancholy, something unbelievably empty” and her puzzlement and growing anxiety about “that sensation of utterable lassitude and vague chimeric fear” that she woke up to each day were also at the painful core of what she sought to communi-

59. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. 186; hereafter abbreviated “R.”

60. Sher-Gil, “Amrita Sher-Gil—The Talented Artist,” *The Indian Ladies’ Magazine* 10 (Jan.–Feb. 1937); rpt. *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 1:325.

61. Altaf Mohmadi, *Marg* (1972): 77.

62. Sher-Gil, “Modern Indian Art,” 1:257.



FIGURE 9. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Hill Women* (1935)

cate in paint.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Sher-Gil's art can no longer be heralded as a triumph over her own displacement, or a final act of reconciliation with her homeland, or as an affirmation of the power of origins and the stabilizing force of its essential "Indian-ness." Instead, the great strength of her affecting portraiture, its modernism and its historical innovation, is that it bears the pressure of cultural dislocation and "existential unsettlement on its surface"<sup>64</sup> and attempts to articulate the new topos of human experience that Said and others have linked to a critical consciousness most relevant to our time, namely, the aching and seemingly interminable search for the "solidity and satisfaction of earth" ("R," p. 179).

### Conclusion: "I Also Love van Gogh"

Sher-Gil once proudly described a painting of hers, *Professional Model* (1933), as her first successful "essay at art."<sup>65</sup> *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* may also be read as an essay of sorts—a graduating thesis, as it were, submitted by Sher-Gil on the interrelated topics of painting, self-portraiture, and, ultimately, her own artistic subjectivity, as fashioned dialectically in and through the processes of identification and cultural difference. Deepak Ananth has recognized this aspect of the picture, suggesting that her Tahitian guise in this transitional self-portrait is a "prelude to the interrogation of the alterity" that was yet to come for her in India.<sup>66</sup> Ananth's observation about the influence of Gauguin is equally astute: that the languorous poses at the heart of his "iconography of idyll become transposed as a rather more ambivalent stasis" in Sher-Gil's early paintings, while the *tableau vivant* she borrows from Gauguin becomes her most important compositional procedure in India.<sup>67</sup> *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* may appear to confirm, on the surface at least, the spirit of this exploration of Gauguin. However, as I have sought to demonstrate in this essay, against the long-standing narrative of Sher-Gil's intractable debt to Gauguin, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* also subverts and rejects several of Gauguin's gestures of objectification in relation to the female nude and makes visible, albeit in a more oblique fashion, Amrita's preoccupation with the art of van Gogh and the elusive experimentation with alterity and self-portraiture that characterized the latter's engagement with Japan. In the end, I have proposed that it was van Gogh's dialogical and fragile ethical vision, as an

63. Sher-Gil, letter to Indira, 6 Dec. 1940, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 2:691.

64. Said, "Introduction," p. xxii.

65. Amrita Sher-Gil, letter to Umrao Singh and Marie Antoinette Sher-Gil, 8 Oct. 1938, in *Amrita Sher-Gil*, 2:523.

66. Ananth, "An Unfinished Project," p. 19.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

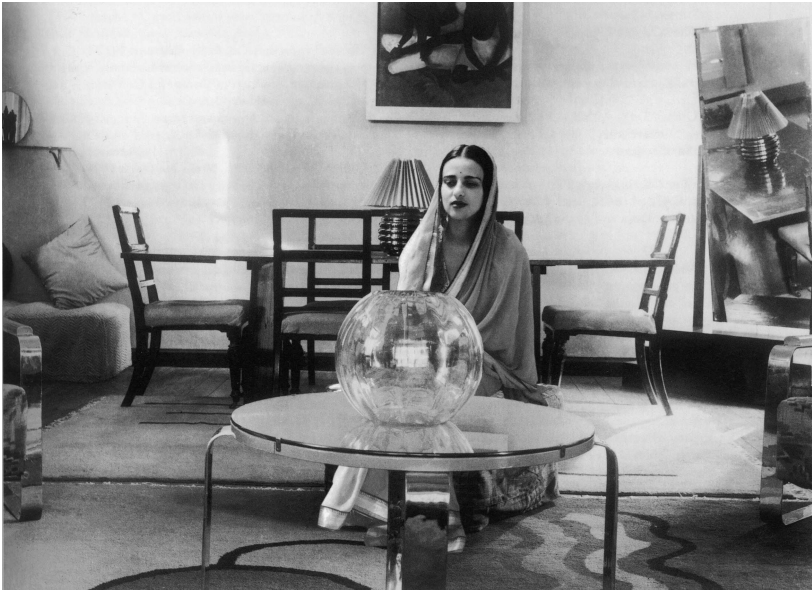


FIGURE 10. Vivan Sundaram, *Studio: Thirties Deco* (2001)

alternative to the story of triumph, and not her “intimate adherence” to Gauguin (*I*, p. 92), that drove the painting’s radical performativity, namely, its act of masquerade as a Tahitian woman, and that prepared Sher-Gil, both personally and aesthetically, for her ambitious critical mission to “interpret the life of the Indians, particularly the poor Indians, pictorially” (quoted in *ASG*, p. 2). For, as Kapur has observed, these “subaltern personifications on behalf of the community” would be “the last act, as it were” in the complex structure of her masquerade (*W*, p. 22).

A childhood friend of Sher-Gil’s once recalled that, in 1938, Amrita announced that she was “emancipating herself from Gauguin. ‘Do you mean,’ I asked her, ‘that the Gauguin in you is dying or that you are dissatisfied?’ ‘Possibly both,’ she said.”<sup>68</sup> Like almost everything that concerns Amrita Sher-Gil, we are left hanging from this hopelessly ambiguous branch. The lack of conclusion is central to her story; her sudden death at the age of barely twenty-nine meant that her career was, tragically, but also compellingly, an “unfinished project.”<sup>69</sup> It is no longer possible to regard Sher-Gil as an anomalous exception, as a “highly Europeanised artist” or

68. Baldoon Dhinra, “Amrita Sher-Gil,” in *Sher-Gil*, ed. Jaya Appasamy (New Delhi, 1965), p. vii.

69. See Ananth, “An Unfinished Project.”

“a complication to the social formation” of modern Indian art.<sup>70</sup> Instead, she has increasingly emerged, in the digital retakes of Sundaram and the work of other critical thinkers, as a paradigmatic figure of the twentieth century, one that embodied the most painful paradoxes of a colonial modernity and bore the melancholic imprint of its greatest dilemmas (fig. 10). Feeling alien, standing outside of one’s traditions, receiving a Western education, seeking authenticity and belonging—these aspects of Sher-Gil’s life have resonated for artists, both male and female, throughout the subcontinent and indeed across the world, in her wake. Sher-Gil’s *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* is a remarkable engagement with the multiple aesthetic and ideological foundations of a global modernism, a self-conscious revisiting of the existing tropes held up like a mirror of modernist possibilities and a powerful act of imagination within the uncertain coordinates of a decolonizing world. It is a record of the restless drive of the young female artist involved in the process of being, becoming, and belonging. It is an extraordinary vision of the modern self shaped through the migratory historical conditions of our time. It is a retake of the most exciting sort.

70. Daniel Herwitz, “Reclaiming the Past and Early Modern Indian Art,” *Third Text* 18, no. 3 (2004): 226.