

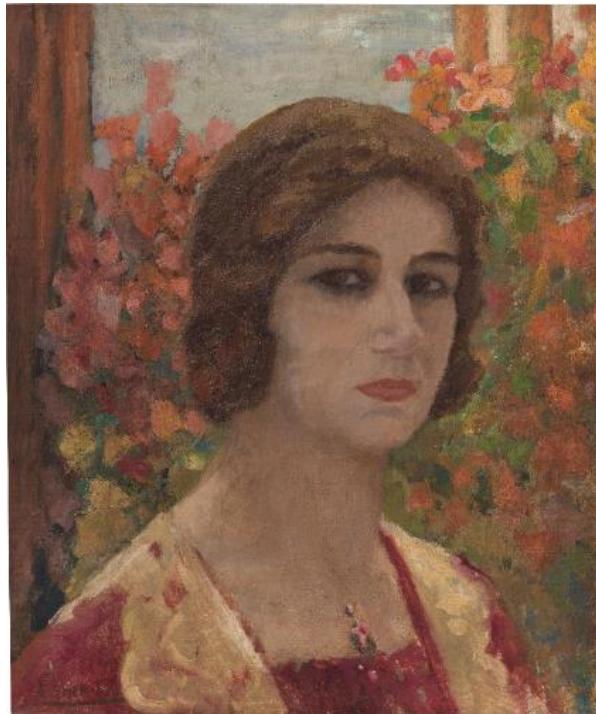
CHRISTIE'S

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CHRISTIE'S ANNOUNCES

REDISCOVERED PAINTING BY AMRITA SHER-GIL *PORTRAIT OF DENYSE*

HEADLINING THE SOUTH ASIAN MODERN + CONTEMPORARY ART AUCTION



Property from a Distinguished Private Collection
Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), *Portrait of Denyse*. Painted *circa* 1932.
\$1,800,000-2,800,000

Did I tell you about my Hindu friend? Imagine that her sister has been at the Beaux-Arts for two years and is very talented and very knowledgeable. So when she saw me, she went crazy about my hair and absolutely wanted to do my portrait with my hair loose. As it was for a competition and she had very little time, I posed almost non-stop for three days, and that's why I couldn't write to you as I had promised you. I've never known such an amazing girl, you know Phil? She has an intelligence and a personality like I had never met in a woman before, and also a very great talent, very powerful and robust, all her works seem to be made by a man. And she's only eighteen with it all!

- Denyse Proutaux, Letter to Philippe Dyvorne, 17 November 1931

NEW YORK – Christie's announces the top lot of the South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art auction (17 March 2021), an important rediscovered portrait by celebrated Indian artist **Amrita Sher-Gil** of her close friend and French art critic Denyse Proutaux (\$1.8 – 2.8 million).

Painted *circa* 1932, the painting is one of four known portraits of Denyse Proutaux, and the only documented example in private hands. The portrait is not only an exceptional painting by Sher-Gil, completed when the artist was barely nineteen years old, it is also a testament of the beautiful friendship between the Sher-Gil sisters and Denyse that was built on mutual admiration and love for each other and lasted well beyond the time they lived in the same country.

Nishad Avari, Specialist and Head of Sale for South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art, comments: "It is an honor to present this rediscovered work by Amrita Sher-Gil in our March auction. With very few paintings by Sher-Gil

still in private collections, it is truly a privilege to discover a painting by this talented artist that was previously unknown to her collectors and admirers, and to bring it to its full glory and offer it the world stage it deserves."

Previously unknown, this exceptional portrait has remained in France since the time it was painted. Undocumented works like the present lot are particularly rare and offer new insight on intimate aspects of the artist's life and work. Working closely with the descendants of the original owner and historical archives, Christie's conducted extensive research to bring this masterpiece to auction. Piecing together the history of this painting through the letters Denyse exchanged with her partner, Philippe Dvorine, and the Sher-Gil sisters, it has been possible to date this work to *circa* 1932. In these letters, Denyse refers to several sittings she did for Sher-Gil. This painting is most likely the one she refers to as the painting in 'Russian Style' in a letter to Philippe dated 22 February 1932.

Celebrating the many achievements and contributions to modern Indian art Amrita Sher-Gil made in her short life, the Indian Government recognized her as a National Treasure artist in 1976. Today, the majority of her 172 documented works reside in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi.

PORTRAIT OF DENYSE PROUTAUX

During their time in Paris from 1929 to 1934, the Sher-Gil sisters, Indira and Amrita, became close friends with Denyse Proutaux, an art writer and critic, who met and befriended Indira at a drawing class they both attended. Together, the three young women explored the Parisian art scene and regularly holidayed at the seafront in Royan.

Denyse was a particular inspiration for Sher-Gil during the artist's time in France, sitting for her in her most acclaimed paintings. Sher-Gil painted four portraits of Denyse that are known to us. These include the most famous painting, *Young Girls* from 1932, which depicts Denyse partially undressed alongside the artist's dressed sister, Indira, and won a Gold Medal at the Grand Salon that year. The same year, Sher-Gil painted another portrait of Denyse in profile wearing a black beret. Both these paintings are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. Sher-Gil began a third large composition in 1933, that included Denyse, Indira, herself and a model. She later cut Denyse's seated figure from this canvas, the largest work she ever attempted, and gifted it to Denyse. Unfortunately, this life size work was lost during the Second World War.

Set against what appears to be a window with colorful sprays of flowers on either side, the present composition is a beautiful portrayal of a Parisian lady of style and attitude. The portrait Sher-Gil painted of her friend, presents Denyse as a self-assured, young Parisian who she respected and admired. Denyse's gaze is confident, confronting the viewer, while the flowers around her add lightness and charm to her seemingly unflappable expression. The warm, red tones resonate across the foliage, curtain, tightly set hair and rouged skin, imbuing the sitter with a sense of controlled dynamism and silent resolve. Her gaze imbues the painting with an ancient solemnity, while her red velvet dress with its lace collar and the delicate floral pendant around her neck ease the tension of the gaze between subject and viewer. In this work and several others from the period, Sher-Gil masters the psychological portrait, able to capture a plethora of conflicting emotions and identities with ease and sophistication.

THE LEGACY OF AMRITA SHER-GIL

Born in Budapest in 1913 to a Hungarian mother and Indian father, Amrita Sher-Gil spent her brief, yet colorful life completely dedicated to her artistic practice. Living between Hungary, France and India, Sher-Gil painted the life of the people and places with which she was familiar with an intensity that remains unparalleled in modern Indian art. Sher-Gil's early paintings like the present lot, a portrait dating to *circa* 1932, constitute a vital part of her body of work.

The bohemian lifestyle in Paris coupled with the idyllic landscapes of rural Hungary, invigorated Sher-Gil's desire to paint, which she did with conviction and maturity rarely seen in a teenager. Her ferocity of mind and passionate love of beauty transcended through her brush strokes into her hauntingly beautiful portraits from that period. These confident and powerful paintings won her much acclaim, including prizes at the École and her election as an associate of the Grand Salon in Paris in 1933, a rare honor for a young, foreign artist.

The techniques she explored and mastered as a student, and the ways in which her artistic vocabulary expanded and developed over these years, set the course for the rest of her career, which unexpectedly came to an end when she died in 1941 at the age of 28 in Lahore. The artist, however, continues to live on through her impressive legacy, and her body of work continues to have a seminal influence on modern and contemporary in India and around the world.

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