

Transcript  
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 67  
Amrita Sher-Gil

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Hey guess what? [LAUGHTER] It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive.

And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond...then, we bring you a special selection of these stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm joined once again by DLS co-founder Katy Derbyshire. Hello Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hello Susan!

SUSAN STONE: This episode is one of those beyonds. The featured Dead Lady presentation comes via our friends at Dead Ladies Show NYC, which is organized and hosted by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper with Sheila Enright.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: The lady in question was a queer, feminist, Hungarian-Indian artist, writer, and art critic who left a profound impact on art despite her untimely death. Amrita Sher-Gil was an incredibly charismatic non-conformist whose work reframed discussions on art and feminism, orientalism, and colonialism, while merging European technique and classical Indian aesthetics into something new. If you'd like to see some of her works while you listen to the episode, you can find them over on our website at [deadladiesshow.com/podcast](http://deadladiesshow.com/podcast).

SUSAN STONE: And they are gorgeous, so go take a look. Today's presenter is Nafisa Ferdous, a feminist program manager and illustrator from the fittingly-named borough of Queens. Here she is, recorded live at New York's KGB Bar Red Room:

NAFISA FERDOUS RECORDED IN NEW YORK: Alright!! So, I am presenting a dead lady ... that I have a huge crush on. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND WHISTLES] She is an official "national treasure" in India, part of the avant-garde at the time, she's a modernist painter ... this is Amrita Sher-Gil.

Born in 1913 in Budapest, Hungary Amrita Sher-Gil, was an Indian-Hungarian, queer, proto-feminist painter, also an obsessive letter writer. Which is lucky for us because we have a lot of her diary entries and correspondences in her own words. Although *unlucky* for us, her mother decided to burn the ones detailing her many romantic affairs with men and women after her death. .... Boo. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND BOOS] Yeah, it's a little devastating but not unexpected as was the fate of many a queer histories.

The female body, colonization, desire and vulnerability, melancholic women with sad eyes – [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] these were some of the themes and tropes in Amrita's paintings. Her body of work also includes an extensive collection of self-portraits, where we can see her evolution over time. Amrita is known for blending European and Indian aesthetics as well as changing the game, and shifting the paradigm, by introducing female subjectivity in Indian art at a time when it was not common. This feminist inclination towards auto-theory and memoir, where you make sense of history and power and interpret it through the self – all of it feels very contemporary. So I think she was cool then, remains cool now. [SHOWS SLIDE]

So here's a photo of her topless on a beach. [AUDIENCE REACTS APPRECIATIVELY]

I discovered Amrita in college because like many of us, especially diasporic people of color, I was hungry for historical examples of queerness and sexual liberation in an *Asian* context. I am happy to report that the subcontinent does not disappoint. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] There are many rebellious, transgressive, loving dead ladies and gender diverse folks, despite official projects to sanitize or erase queer history - which yes, has always existed, right?! So who was Amrita and how did she exist?

Amrita, or Ammmri her pet name, was born right before the outbreak of WW1. And she's named after Amritsar, India, the holy city of the Sikh religion, her father, Sardar Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, was a Sikh aristocrat, and quite dashing himself. Wait for it...

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[AUDIENCE REACTS APPRECIATIVELY]

Yup! He was a Sanskrit and Persian scholar and a brilliant photographer in his own right while her mother, (and this is her real name) Marie Antoinette [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Gottesmann Erdobaktay, equally fabulous, was a Jewish, French-Hungarian-German opera singer.

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Umrao and Marie Antoinette met when Marie Antoinette was serving as the traveling companion of Princess Bamba, another fascinating Dead Lady who was part of Punjabi Royalty. So Amrita grew up with very artistic, liberal parents surrounded by diplomats, poets, writers, intellectuals and artists. So, bourgeois from both sides of the family. And they had the means to cultivate her talent. Her privilege also allowed her a level of exceptionalism and protection from the moral policing you might expect of other young women her age. Anyway, not to undermine her at all, it's just that Amrita really ran with it, and led a wildly fulfilling artistic and personal life, as you'll see.

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Young Amrita spent her time between Europe and India. It wasn't until 1921, when she was 8, that the British Raj allowed her family back to India. This was because Amrita's father had been identified as having ties to the Ghaddar Party, a transnational armed-revolutionary group calling for the abolishment of British imperialism. [AUDIENCE CHEERS] One of my favorite groups in history, I swear! As a consequence, the Sher-Gil's lands were seized and banned from reentry until 1921 after a series of appeals. The family finally moved back to settle in Shimla, a posh hill station in northern India known as an British summer capital.

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So back in India, little Amrita – you can see her here drawing a portrait of someone – was a precocious and rebellious little punk. [AUDIENCE REACTS] At nine, she declared herself an atheist and got kicked out of her convent school. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Like, what nine-year-old does that? Amrita started drawing on everything, walls and scraps of paper, even toilet paper, so eventually her parents got her an art teacher for formal lessons.

In her own words she said: "I have drawn and painted from childhood ... it will be of psychological interest to note that I detested the process of 'colouring in' the drawings of picture books. I always drew and painted everything myself and resented correction or interference."

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So yeah, she needed to be free and not color inside the lines, and I think this was a sentiment she practiced throughout her life.

In 1923, her mother met an Italian sculptor living in Shimla and probably a combination of factors including her mothers affair with him, one of a recorded few, because it seemed like Umrao and Marie Antoinette had somewhat of a liberal open marriage, but also recognizing Amrita's artistic talents, Marie Antoinette took her daughter to Italy to enroll at Santa Annunziata art school. There she was exposed from a really early age to Italian classical work, though Amrita, being Amrita, very quickly got expelled again, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] this time for drawing nudes. [LAUGHTER] They again returned to Shimla that same year where Amrita continued her learning.

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A few years later in 1929, now 16 and a bit of a prodigy, her family moved to Paris where Amrita began studying at Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, and later at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Can you imagine it, teenage Amrita in Paris, she really blossomed in this period.

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Amrita explored technique but also started developing her unique style of painting centering women's subjectivity, nudes, and self-portraiture. She was influenced by modernists and feminist artists like Suzanne Valadon who also centered women's experiences.

She won first prize in l'Ecole des Beaux Art's annual competition for portraiture...get this...three years in a row. Then, in 1933 when Amrita was just 20 years old, she had her breakthrough moment with the painting "Young Girls" which won a Gold Medal at le Grande Salon – which is the annual gallery at l'Ecole des Beaux Arts– where it named "the picture of the year," making her both the **youngest** and first **Asian** person to receive this recognition.

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"Young Girls", which I have behind me, is a painting with her sister Indra sitting quite self-possessively with short cropped hair, legs crossed, staring at Denise Proutaux, a French friend and art critic - who in comparison looks a little disheveled and shy, with long blond hair sitting topless, breasts exposed. Amrita went on to do about four portraits of Denise among many other lovers and friends in Paris. These paintings often mirrored Amrita's own experience, with art historian Nishad Avari calling her works more like 'psychological portraits'. They're very intersectional and often expressing what her biographer Dalmia says was an interiority connected to her experience of gender, class, race.

So, while in Europe, and probably all her life, people projected orientalist tropes onto Amrita as a mystical exotic "Hindu princess" - Denise's words, not mine. Remember, Amrita is an atheist from a Jewish-Sikh background so of course she defies this categorization and asserts agency in almost everything she does, and you can really see this in her self-portraiture.

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Another notable piece during her Paris years was this painting entitled "Self Portrait as a Tahitian" and oh my god, I think it's really punk, because it is a direct response to Paul Gauguin, the celebrated post-Impressionist painter whose paintings of women in Tahiti and French Polynesia sit most major art museums today. In Amrita's painting, Amrita is nude from the waist up, and in somewhat of her signature style, she's darkly staring off to the side, resolutely, and to me it feels defiantly. Her hair is long and pulled back into a ponytail, nothing about her stance is overtly sexual. And there is actually a shadow of a man behind her – if you can see this painting – which can easily be an allegory for the artistic mainstream dominated by the white male European gaze. Gauguin's paintings of Tahitian women in comparison are highly sexualized, where dark skinned women are fetishized, what he called primitive. But here you see Amrita, her brown skin in a bare room, biracial, bisexual, staging herself as a Tahitian woman and by doing so, kind of trashing Gauguin's orientalist gaze, the racialized woman here is not an "other", but is the subject, with personhood.

Just a little more about the life of teenage Amrita in Paris: she's fully immersed in the bohemian arts scene, partying, hobnobbing, and dating. She was briefly engaged to Yusuf Ali Khan, who is in this picture behind me, who was a wealthy Indian royal - except she was also dating other people at the time, and the whole thing ended really badly. He gave her a venereal disease, [AUDIENCE REACTS] and she ended up having an abortion. Yeah. It's okay, we are all about bodily-autonomy here.

Her mother had really wanted this engagement to work out because it would have meant financial security. Additionally, the abortion and STI treatment was taken care of by her cousin, Victor Egan, a Hungarian doctor on her mom's side. So, all in the family. Victor and Amrita grew up together and actually dated on and off. He'll be important later in the story .[AUDIENCE REACTS]

After five years in Paris she expressed an "intense longing", her words, to return to India. Amrita had strong and quite critical opinions about Indian artists and felt that it was in India, that she could really grow and take up space. Of returning to India, she said, (this is a quote) 'Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse, Braque and many others. India belongs only to me,' [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] The confidence, right?!

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So she does. In 1934, now age 21, she returns to Shimla and here, her art dramatically shifts. India is undergoing major changes as the anti-colonial movement is well underway. 1931 was when Gandhi did the Salt March, for example. Amrita undergoes a real expansion period, both in style and subjects. She brings bold colors more indigenous to Indian art, and painting scenes of everyday life. She is recognized in artistic circles, winning awards in Delhi and Bombay and finding new patrons. She also has a series of romances and is still chilling with prolific artists and intellectuals. So things are pretty good.

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In 1935, Amrita takes an extended tour of South India compelled by a need to dig into her roots. She is influenced by older Mughal and Pahari art, which are these brightly colored miniature paintings with fine lines often depicting myth and nature.

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She visited the Ajanta and Ellora Caves - some of the world's most significant examples of Buddhist art and sculpture carved directly into rock faces from the 2nd century BCE. Amrita wrote "a fresco from Ajanta... is worth more than the whole Renaissance!"

During this time she was influenced by Gandhian thinking and was herself an anti-colonial sympathizer, of course. Her paintings focused more on portraying Indian peasants and the poor. At the same time, let's be real, she's still incredibly privileged and that class outsider-ness never

developed into a sophisticated solidarity with the peasants per se, but even still the working men and women were her primary subjects now.

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In 1938 when she was 25, she pissed off her mother by marrying Victor Egan, remember him? [AUDIENCE REACTS] Her Hungarian first cousin and doctor, who helped her perform two abortions now, and cleared up that STI in Paris. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] There were no secrets between them and Victor didn't expect her to transform into an "ideal wife" but understood that he wanted to center her life around art. Unlike other suitors though, he was broke and struggled to set up a medical practice in India. They were forced to move to a rural sugar plantation owned by Amrita's uncle, where he served as the factory doctor. Bored, and surrounded by rural life, Amrita painted some of her most well recognized work during this time.

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It was also during this time in the 1940s that Nehru, the leader of the independence movement and future Prime Minister of India, began a flirtation with Amrita. [AUDIENCE REACTS] Yeah, this is wild! Based on existing letters, they seemed really taken with each other, it's incredibly poetic the ones that survive... but it's okay we don't need to know all their business. Nor will we because of course, Marie-Antoinette burned those letters specifically. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND BOOS]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Eventually, the rural life and isolation on the plantation made our girl depressed, to the point where she stopped painting for a while. Victor and Amrita decided to move to Lahore, one of pre-partition India's intellectual centers at the time. There she quickly became friends with all the influential folks in town and began painting again. In Lahore she started preparing for a major solo art show however, about 6 months into city life, she suddenly fell ill. In 1941, at the tender young age of 28, Amrita Sher-Gil died.

I know - surprise! She was very young. Furthermore, it was speculated that she died after Victor administered a third abortion that caused complications and death.

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When you step back and actually see what this woman did, and how she lived her life, you see a portrait of a liberated queer woman of color who exercised a freedom and fearlessness seldom seen, I think then, and even now.

In 1976 the Indian government made her a national treasure, which means it's illegal to take her artwork out of India without permission. Today, the National Museum of Modern Art in Delhi has over a 100 of her pieces. And while her art is something that's embraced, her life which included

multiple abortions, promiscuity, bisexuality and most likely polyamory - which are all feminist as fuck - these are not part of the official narratives or treasured. I wanted to present Amrita Sher-Gil precisely because constructing these mythical heroes while flattening and erasing parts of their fundamental identity because of moral panic is not true. Homosexuality was only decriminalized in India in 2018 and right now, as we're doing this lecture in 2023, the Indian supreme court is reviewing the legalization of same-sex marriage. Abortion stigma and affirmative care especially for unmarried, queer, or young women is rampant.

I think we all deserve the social and political conditions to live as freely and on our own terms as Amrita did, and that's why I see her relatively short life not as tragedy, but as a glorious example of feminist autonomy. I'll end with a very simple quote by an otherwise complex woman, on autonomy. This was originally addressed to Victor in the context of their marriage. Amrita says:

"You should always do what you want to do. I hope I will always have the power to do what I want to do which will suit my own wishes."

Thank you very much.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN: Nafisa Ferdous on Amrita Sher-Gil. Nafisa is also a wonderful artist, and you can see some of her work on her website, [nafisaferdous.com](http://nafisaferdous.com) and on Instagram via @\_\_petni. Well, we'll drop a link to that in the show notes. She's done fantastic illustrations of Dead Ladies including Ursula K. LeGuin, Wangari Maathai, and of course Amrita Sher-Gil.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We'll put some of those up along with images of Amrita herself and her art at our website, [deadladiesshow.com/podcast](http://deadladiesshow.com/podcast) and on social media, @deadladiesshow

SUSAN STONE: Psst – want to see a live Dead Ladies Show? Well, if you're in Berlin, come join us in October at Podfest Berlin, where we will be telling some new stories of amazing women from history for a live recording there. The festival runs from the 13-15th, and there will be all kinds of live tapings, workshops, and other opportunities for podcast makers and podcast fans (of all interests and languages) to meet up. We'll be doing our thing on Saturday October 14th at 8:15pm.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes! We look forward to seeing some of you live, where I will speak German, and the rest of you virtually, whether it's on social media or via email. Find us @deadladiesshow for all updates and information, or email us to [info@deadladiesshow.com](mailto:info@deadladiesshow.com). We'll be back again next month with another episode on another fabulous Dead Lady!

SUSAN STONE: We will! And let me say vielen Dank to everyone at Dead Ladies NYC including the lively audience at the Red Room, which is overseen by the one-and-only Lori Schwarz, and thanks also to Christopher Neil, who records the show in New York. You can see

what they're up to and find out when their next show will be over on Instagram @deadladiesnyc. Their next show in New York is Wednesday, September 27th.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme tune is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. Bye for now!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)