Your Excellency, Honourable State Secretary, Distinguished guests, Director Umesh Kumar, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an extraordinary honour for me to participate in the festivities on India's Independence Day. Although I am an outsider, this day cannot leave anybody untouched, as we also cherish it as personal experience, particularly after having read Salman Rushdie's moving book *Midnight's Children*.

This day is especially notable, as the Indian Cultural Centre in Budapest is to receive today the name of a prominent person, one who belongs both to India and Hungary: Amrita Sher-Gil. Last year, exhibitions and conferences commemorated the centenary of her birth in Budapest where she was born, in India where her artistic oeuvre unfurled and in Paris where she studied. In 1932, she made her first important work, *Young Girls*, which led to her election as an Associate of the Grand Salon in Paris in 1933, making her the youngest ever (she was 20) and the only Asian to have received this recognition. From that time she exhibited her works both in Paris and India till 1941 when she died before the opening of her Lahore exhibition.

Allow me to conjure up her person and art briefly, laying the emphasis on the feminine, social and universal character of the latter. I am convinced that the most important discovery of 20th century art and art history with repercussions on society on a global scale was the discovery of women's art. Besides, the tragically short life of Amrita Sher-Gil and her rich oeuvre connect Europe and Asia, being among the first to prove the reality of the other fundamental concept of the century, *World Art*, the universal nature of art and artistic communication. I would like to underline the importance of a third characteristic of the last century, too namely the social sensitivity also in the artistic view.

Regarding the atmosphere between the two world wars, alienation and the desire to delve into the essence of reality characterized those decades. In art (as in life) this could be identified partly in an attitude that objectified everything, and partly in its opposite, a heightened interest in physicality, biological existence; an objectivity that sought to grasp existence. Characteristic feature in Amrita's art, as early as her student years, was: to present (and not to re-present) the model or object. In Amrita's type of picture the presentation hinges on the model, who "declares" herself to be a subject (and not an object) and is enabled to do so by the sensual gaze of the painter who regards her subject/model as an autonomous being.

"Woman must write her self" - wrote Hélène Cixous in her feminist manifesto, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (Le Rire de la Méduse, 1975; English translation: 1976), at a time when women's creative

work was being “discovered.” I quote her: “Now women return from afar, [...] from beyond ‘culture’; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget”. The “female voice,” the oeuvre of Amrita Sher-Gil makes sense to talk about an *écriture féminine* in the visual arts.

Her painting oeuvre is dominated all along by female figures: 108 of her 173 known paintings feature women. Her viewpoint was quite new, that is of woman, Indian and European at the same time. Amrita painted common scenes from the life of Indian or Hungarian/European women in her most important works, which had their tradition in the great masters of Western modernity (Van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso), the Indian [Moghul] painting, and the naïve and harmonious painterly world of her Hungarian contemporaries. The pictures also incorporates the 19th century Western tradition of the free, provocative and emancipated woman (Manet: *Olympia, Nana*), changing the postures into those of work, tiredness, devotion and defencelessness, and an elevated viewpoint, to highlight the essential dissimilarities between the male and female gazes of the 19th and 20th centuries. Amrita’s radical female objectivity/subjectivity revealed a deeper reality of her models, that of the existence of the body, without any elements of idealization or irony and created a suggestive artistic language of the unfriendly, unfamiliar (unheimlich in the Freudian sense), astonishing image of women.

Her uncle, Ervin Baktay informed Hungary about Amrita’s painting, her endeavours and success in 1937. His article[1] offers a general characterization of the state of the visual arts in India, marked by amateur local westerners, the forgetting of local traditions, and a biased preference in those who still reference it but for the prioritization of the spirit over form and construction. It is with the latter that he contrasts Amrita, for whom “the *soul* [of India’s peoples] manifested itself [...] in forms, lines and colours.” Her first Indian works, the tonally rich “grey” pictures of the poor, and then those dense compositions that relied on the extreme clarity of Indian colours, have been appreciated by European criticism. In Paris they were likened to the works of contemporary Mexican muralists, with such shared values as social commitment, and the representation of local peculiarities even in the imaging.[2]

[1] Ervin Baktay: “India legkiválóbb modern festőnője – budapesti magyar leány” (India’s best modern woman painter – A Hungarian girl from Budapest). *Új Idők*, 1913, 43:27, pp. 887–888.

[2] Of the Mexicans, Amrita could see the works of Orozco in Budapest, in February 1933, at Ernst Museum.

Of course, basically her main subject was art in a universal sense. She extended the world of art making known Indian artistic heritage by incorporating its sensuality and topics in her own art. She herself aimed at the correlation of local and universal in art as recommended in Hungary, with an essentially genre-focused strategy, by connecting the Indian mural tradition (born from the union of the genre piece and mythology), the genres of the miniatures, and Indian life. Her works convey a peculiarly Indian affinity between the everyday and the divine. With almost identical figures and a unified, warm palette, Amrita represented the continuous, simultaneous presence and interaction of the sensory and the supersensory.

"Painting is the primary factor and the subject only the secondary factor in a picture," she wrote in her essay, "Appreciation of Art."[3] In 1941 she said: "One of the functions of art is to liberate the imagination."[4] In his book on Amrita, Mulk Raj Anand calls painting "an enlightened illuminated perception of the human condition."[5] These statements have relation to each other and seem valid of Amrita's second Indian period, in which her painting became poetic and ambiguous at a time (1937) when a young poet from Hungary, Sándor Weöres was travelling in India, and defined the genre of his doctoral dissertation on the psychology of creation as a meditation and confession. He created a fusion of two different genres, one Indian, the other European,[6] as did Amrita Sher-Gil in her art. This unity of reality and imagination seems to be a way towards the universal reality of art.

An artist dedicated to her country, she became a believer of art, and the poetic characteristics of her works made them part of the universal art of painting.

Hoping that our new age does not forget the main topics of Amrita and the 20th century, I wish – together with her Hungarian relatives, the Gottesmann, Hegymegi and Székely families – a successful future to the Amrita Sher-Gil Cultural Centre in Budapest.

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KeserüK.

[3] Amrita Sher-Gil: "Appreciation of Art." *USHA* op. cit., pp. 109–110.

[4] Interview, 19 August, 1941. Republished as "Indian Art To-Day" in *USHA*, special issue, pp. 102–105.

[5] Mulk Raj Anand: *Amrita Sher-Gil.* New Delhi, National Gallery of Modern Art, 1989, p. 49.

[6] Sándor Weöres: *A vers születése*. Pécs, Dunántúl Pécsi Egyetemi Könyvkiadó és Nyomda, 1939.