

VIEWPOINT

# DECORATIVE ARTS

A meditation on the most intimate and brutal accessory: the earring. By DURGA CHEW-BOSE

I am interested in a particular type of earring—the kind that functions not merely as a decorative accent but as a handsome object, worthy of the sort of dignity we impart to cufflinks and neckties. Like this one: a tassel shaped like a feather duster, like a cheerleader's pom-pom in repose. Photographed in black and white and worn by the Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil—commonly referred to, albeit lazily, as “India's Frida Kahlo”—the

piece of jewellery alters the portrait's mood. It contradicts the strict line of Sher-Gil's middle part; her straight, dark brows. The enigmatic Sher-Gil, who died in 1941 at age 28, is currently experiencing a quiet but well-deserved revival. This March saw the UK reissue of *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait In Letters & Writings*, with a foreword by Salman Rushdie. This summer, the *New York Times* issued a reparational obituary. Now, new eyes are finding pleasure in her measured dissonance, in mint green juxtaposed with crimson and coppery orange in *Three Girls*, her best-known painting. Or in a woman's dejected stare, so different from the sheeny grace of her silk sari in *Sumair*, a portrait of Sher-Gil's cousin. Or in this photograph of the artist: with her earring, she has made art of herself.

In the only photograph I've ever seen of Katharine Hepburn wearing earrings, she looks stately. Her wonderful, fast-talking impatience is captured in the sting of her tapered fea-

tures. Her severe cheekbones. Her morose pout, painted blood red. The way her earlobe appears cinched to her jawline, as if secured in place by that tufted-button pearl cluster. An exacting earring. Tenacious. Only Hepburn could make a pearl cluster look tenacious. She was commanding, thoroughly modern, and headstrong. She looked comfortable and persuasive in a gown, on a skateboard, in a three-

piece suit, or in sandals and khakis, rearranging the furniture on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Earrings weren't really her thing. So of course I imagine Hepburn screwing in this pearl cluster while she busies herself with something more important. Winning an argument. Running out the door to get on with her day. (A particular intima-

cy is attached to watching a woman fiddle-close her earrings while sliding on her shoes or speaking on the phone. That vague but practised, and nearly unconscious, focus. The way our fingers take charge with some secret intelligence. The swiftness of it all.)

Many years ago, after a trip to India, I returned with gifts for my friends. I had bought cinnamon sticks from Kerala and Egyptian cotton T-shirts for hot summer days. I had chosen a pair of simple silver earrings for Sarah. We were new friends, and the thought hadn't crossed my mind that I'd never seen her wear earrings before. When she opened the box, Sarah smiled but



Katharine Hepburn, 1940s



Amrita Sher-Gil



18K gold earrings. Anissa Kermiche

Lily topaz set in gold earrings. Ana Khouri

Gemfields emeralds set in gold earrings. House of Meraki

sighed, pretend-hooking them into holes that were long closed over. I experienced a funny feeling of disappointment—the gift was useless. Sarah seemed to sense this, and while I can't remember if what happened next was actually the next day or the next week, Sarah took the earring and quite violently forced it through. I'd only ever seen impromptu piercings in the movies, in those summer-camp scenes. This felt not dissimilar—with a certain, secret thrill." ■

HISTORIC COLLECTION/ALAMY/ROKUS/ONION PORTFOLIO/GETTY IMAGES

# VOGUE

JAN

LOVE STORIES  
**PRIYANKA  
CHOPRA**

ON BREAKING  
BARRIERS AND  
LANDING  
THE MAN OF  
HER DREAMS

**PLUS** MORE  
COUPLES  
WE ADORE

THE  
PERFECT  
PLATE?  
WHEN CLEAN  
EATING GOES  
TOO FAR

LOSING MY  
RELIGION  
A CATHOLIC  
RECKONING

BIG, BOLD  
FASHION  
FOR 2019

IT'S A  
NEW  
DAY!

