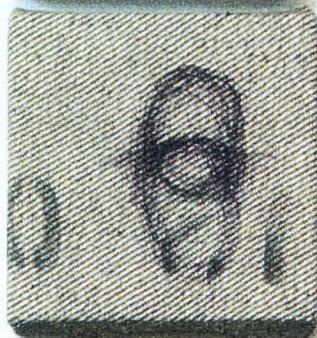
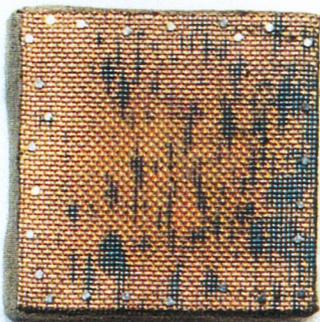


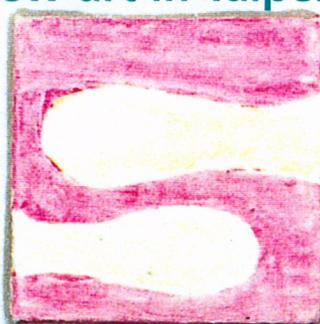
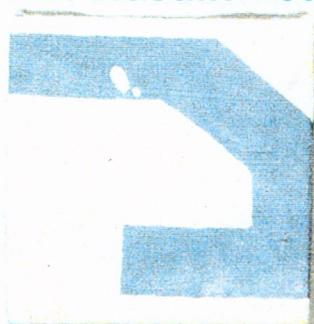
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83



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19

THE STORY OF



JSAIN, Radhe Kishan, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 72.5 x 127.5 cm. Courtesy A.R.K.S Gallery, London.

A JAGGED LINE

THE ART OF M.F. HUSAIN

Sundaram Tagore

Maqbool Fida Husain is regarded as the modern celebrity artist of twentieth-century India. It is a distinction he shares with no other artist from the Indian subcontinent. Husain transforms the visible world around him by combining forms from Indian mythology and the pure hues of miniature paintings and folk-art forms with modern western Pop art and the narrative format of cinema paintings. By making his art conform to an international artistic language – and yet endowing it with an ‘Indianness’ – he creates works that are unmistakably contemporary.



Husain has systematically directed his energy in two directions: first, towards aesthetic exploration; second, to his marketing strategy; finally coalescing the two. To look at his art on purely formal aesthetic grounds, while setting aside his persona as a filmmaker, designer and headline-making celebrity figure who is constantly crisscrossing the globe, would be to misread his works entirely. Today, if Husain is taken for granted, it is because his art has permeated India to such a degree that it is no longer thought of as belonging to him alone. To discover who Husain is, and what his art is about, is to peer into post-independent Indian history and to look at the cultural forces that thrust him into the present.

Husain began his artistic career with both trepidation and a singularity of vision from which he has never wavered. When he left behind the dusty back-roads of Indore in 1937 for the big, cosmopolitan city of Bombay, few people would have imagined that he would become the towering figure in the Indian art world that he is today. He has carved out a place for himself in modern Indian history, redefining and re-inventing the notion of a modern artist in India – a traditional society that does not comfortably embrace avant-garde culture.

Husain arrived in Bombay at the age of twenty-three, entering an arena where modern European art was disseminated through the Jamshedji Jeebhoy School of Art, a bastion of academic naturalism.¹ For Husain, it was immensely exciting; modernism is, after all, an urban phenomenon and metropolitan cities such as Bombay possessed institutions including museums, galleries and academies that both set a standard and posed a challenge for modern artists. Coming from a close-knit, feudal enclave like Indore – unconditioned by the Raj – such an environment was a revelation for Husain.

Born into the Islamic-Bohra tradition, Husain was reared by his maternal grandfather in Sidhpur, Gujerat, where he was given religious tutelage. His creative bent was demonstrated early enough and his love for *mushairas*, or Urdu poetry, as well as films and a serious attachment to painting – he won a gold medal at an Indore art show at the age of seventeen – convinced his father to give in to Husain's ambition of becoming an artist.

Husain arrived in Bombay during the explosive period of the late 1930s and early 1940s, when the long catalogue of uprisings against the British made it difficult for any artist to create a coherent artistic vision. Economic vicissitudes compelled him to seek employment as a painter of cinema hoardings. Balancing on bamboo scaffolding, he produced these billboards without using grids to create the superhuman forms of P. C. Barua's *Zindagi*, and the likenesses of film stars such as Jamuna, Saigal and Sohrab Modi. Like James Rosenquist, who made his first foray into the art world as a painter of billboards, Husain's early metier in the cinema gave him an understanding of the images of mass culture, consequently inclining him towards Pop art. Aside from working as a poster painter, Husain was exploring the city, trying to find an entree into India's elite colonial art world. Like many of his contemporaries who had also come from the hinterlands bereft of Indian or British patrons, he faced almost insurmountable economic and social challenges.

The path of such artists was made easier to navigate, however, by a

group of European exiles, including Rudy von Leyden, Emmanuel Schlesinger and Walter Langhammer, who had settled in India during the Second World War after being displaced from Vienna by the Nazi incursion. These émigrés became the mentors of the nascent Bombay art movement. Some of them, like Langhammer, held weekly salons where lectures were given on comparative art. Modernism was very much the mainstay of the discourse.

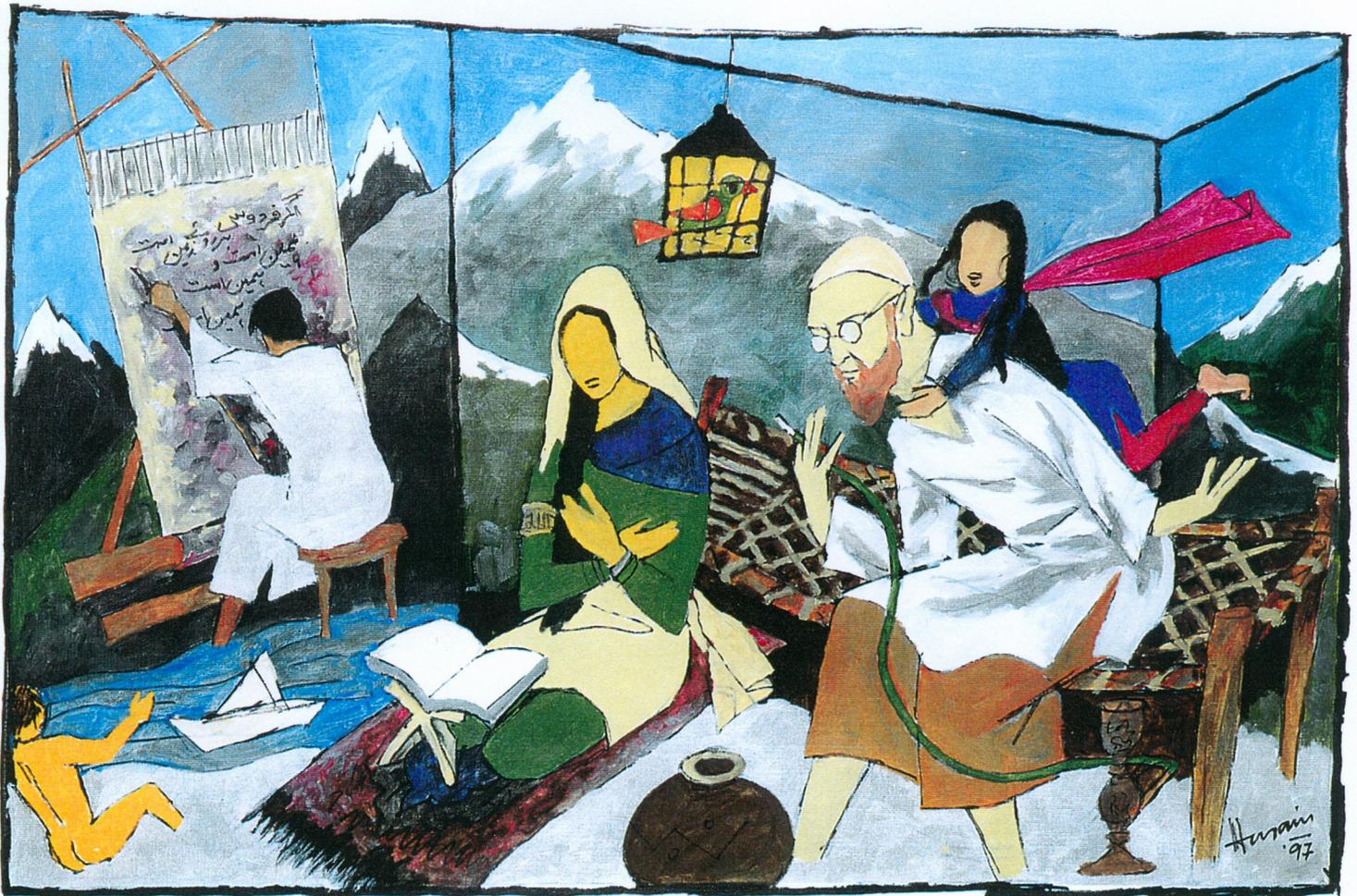
In 1947, ten years after his arrival in Bombay, Husain finally gained attention when he won an award at the prestigious annual exhibition of the Bombay Art Society. He soon found himself in the orbit of more established artists such as Francis Newton Souza, Syed Haider Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta, Hari Ambadas Gade and others of the Bombay avant-garde circle. The Bombay Art Society functioned as a salon, holding an annual exhibition that provided artists with an opportunity to introduce themselves to the public. In many ways the award was a sign of acceptance by the art establishment. Soon after Husain's award, Souza, a rather caustic but brilliant young artist, spotted him as a talent. He began to introduce Husain to the inner world of Bombay's artistic life, and to the European émigrés.

In the same year the Progressive Artists Group was formed, comprising Francis Newton Souza, Hari Ambadas Gade, Sadanand Bakre, Syed Haider Raza, Krishnaji Howlaji Ara and Husain. They were all hell-bent on deflating academic naturalism, the artistic legacy of the Raj, and the nationalist art of the Bengal School, both of which were pervasive throughout the Indian subcontinent and still had a strong grip on society. Souza, the leader of the group, proclaimed, 'Our art has evolved over the years of its own volition; out of our own balls and brains'.²

Modernism was inherently dissident, and the Progressives pitted themselves against the social order, seeking artistic autonomy in their iconoclastic postures. At the time the Progressive Artists Group was formed, Husain was experiencing intense emotional problems. After his stint as a billboard painter, he began to work as a designer of children's furniture. Although he was earning enough to support himself, he still had his large family and siblings to care for. On top of his personal struggle the Quit India movement had virtually paralysed daily life in the few years preceding independence. With it, the Hindu-Muslim chasm widened. In the aesthetic arena much of the discourse was affected by the struggle between Jinnah and Gandhi. The issue of partition was raging unabated throughout the country, so much so that, as the historian Stanley Wolpert has stated, 'Intellectually, India became a land divided by advocates of the one-nation and two-nation theories long before the Subcontinent's partition in 1947'.³

Husain rejected the idea of leaving his 'beloved India', however, partition was morally devastating and artistically crippling. The government, in an effort to resurrect the nation following the physical and psychological devastation of partition and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, used art as a symbolic balm both to anneal the fragmented society and commemorate India's freedom. In 1948 Nehru (Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister of the republic of India) presented an exhibition of ancient Indian art at the Presidential Palace to convey the message that

Husain's initial interaction with the language of the modernists was not simplistic: it was deliberate. He studied what would conform to indigenous requirements and, just as the European modernists had appropriated Oceanic, African and eastern art, he interacted with western art while presenting those qualities of Indian art that befitted the modern sensibility.



M.F. HUSAIN, Kashmiri Household, 1997, watercolour on paper, 40 x 50 cm. Courtesy A R.K.S Gallery, London.



above: M.F. HUSAIN, *Kauravas (Mahabharata)*, 1971, oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm, courtesy the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; below: *Between the Spider and the Lamp*, 1973, watercolour, 101.5 x 165 cm. Courtesy Pundole Art Gallery and *Art India* magazine, Mumbai.



the program for a successful future following India's independence resided in the time-tested receptacles of India's past, epitomised by artistic forms. Both Husain and Souza left for Delhi to see the exhibition. Husain said: 'It was extremely important for me to see all those pieces from the Gupta and Mathura period, and I studied them closely to develop a form in the context of my work'. Dhaneshwar Nadkarni states: 'The typical high-breasted taut female figures of Mathura sculptures represented in Husain's eyes a principle of energy and dynamism lacking in the more elegant figures of Ajanta paintings'.⁴

By 1949 the Progressive Group had fragmented as members departed for Europe and particularly Paris. With its bohemian life and international artistic ambience, Paris became an obsession for them. But there was another, deeper reason for them to leave, and it had to do with colonialism. The Raj, during its last gasps, engendered a reactionary cultural environment that precluded artists from gaining exposure to artistic developments outside of Britain. Their artistic exposure to original European art had been limited to minor works by British and academic painters. Increasingly though, these Indian artists were being fed a diet of impressionist and cubist works in books and prints and were clamouring to see the originals. In their desire to be part of an international movement, the Progressives immersed themselves in the aesthetics of the School of Paris. Their desire to create avant-garde forms while maintaining an indigenous expression did not lead to any outright breakthroughs and they struggled to create a cohesive aesthetic vision.

Husain, on the other hand, remained in India gaining the support of not only the European émigrés but the intelligentsia, who were promoting Indian art with an international outlook. Husain attempted selectively to respond to western modernism, and with an intuitive grasp translated the German expressionistic vocabulary to that of Indian miniature colours and the narrative format of the cinema poster. His perspicacious mind was quick to formulate Indian physical postures. Over the next few years he began to spend time in Delhi; contact with the capital was imperative if one hoped to forge ahead, since all monies and foreign travel grants were awarded from the capital.

In 1950 Husain held his first solo exhibition in the Bombay Art Society Hall. He committed himself to creating modern artistic forms that explored the problems facing man, a subject that became the title of the painting *Man*, 1947, and served as a metaphor for the fragmentation of values, culture and society, and the resultant violence that had engulfed India. The source of *Man* can be traced to Husain's encounter with ancient Indian art at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi. The sheer scale of the painting, and its reference to ancient and modern Indian history, proved to be formidable for Indian

M.F. HUSAIN, *Gaja Gamini in Transition*, 1995, watercolour drawings for his film



body of one figure, purplish-blue in another, and grey bands on the top and bottom of the painting. These elements are taken from different phases of Rajput painting and from direct observation of village life. The broad areas of flat colour are akin both to Indian miniatures and modern European art. The application of paint and the brushing-in of colour with thick, bold strokes is reminiscent of the expressionist tradition. The calligraphy in the top panel is a direct reference to the folk paintings found on village walls.

When Husain was establishing his career during the late 1940s and early 1950s – the golden years of Indian independence – Nehru was carrying out the essential tasks of modernisation at home, while also emerging as the leading international spokesman for the newly independent Third World. By 1956, however, with the Russian invasion of Hungary, India's isolation and wavering had begun. Similarly, from the late 1950s onwards Husain entered a restless phase, travelling first within India and then around the world, seldom staying more than a few weeks in any one place. In the 1960s his heightened travel and international exposure engendered increasing confidence and restlessness. It was in the late 1960s that a collective of artists banded together to form Group 1890, supported by Octavio Paz, the Mexican ambassador to India and later Nobel laureate, and Nehru. Husain, as a senior member, encouraged the extremely talented artist J. Swaminathan to take up a position to counter the pro-avant-garde ideology of the Progressives.⁷ Within the Indian art world a shift was being manifested in the works of K.C.S. Panniker and his neo-Tantra art which reflected a more indigenous point of view.

By the 1970s Husain was not only firmly placed as a national figure but was tackling much more controversial and charged subject matter in his art. It was also during this period that he created his famous satirical 'Durga' series – a metaphor for Indira Gandhi during the period of the 'Emergency' when the common slogan became 'India is Indira'. In this series the Goddess Durga is depicted on her lion vanquishing her enemy Asura – in this case the opposition Janata Party. This direct political statement made headlines nationally – people could speak about the 'Emergency' under the guise of Husain's art. Thereafter, he produced *Mother Theresa IV*, 1976, the two Indian epics, the *Kauravas (Mahabharata)*, 1971, and *Ramayana*, 1981, and images of great Indian personalities such as Satyajit Ray, always indiginising the Pop methodology epitomised by Andy Warhol.

At this time even politicians began to reckon with the power of artists and to confront the fact that history was not their prerogative alone. Hence they invited Husain to join the upper house of parliament. During the 1980s Husain began to reflect for many the craven consumerism of art as commodity and, in this regard, he actively courted



M.F. Husain on location for his documentary film *Gaja Gamini*, 1995.

the media, collectors and the paparazzi. In 1992 Husain undertook a performance work at the Tata Center in Calcutta by creating paintings of Durga, Parvati, Kali, Saraswati and the Virgin Mary. He rapidly created each of the forms in a day and on the last day, to the shock of his audience, obliterated them with white paint. It was a daring and innovative performance in the Indian context. It was contemporary yet rooted in the Indian tradition of *biswarjan*, or immersion, which takes place after the festival of Durga. In Calcutta craft artists have a long tradition of creating meticulous images of goddesses that, after a few days of celebration, are immersed in the Ganges River. Despite what would seem to be an obvious reinterpretation of tradition, Husain's performance was met with bewilderment. Once again, he was in the news. His critics reacted negatively, accusing him of creating a ploy to grab headlines from the artist Bikash Bhattacharjee who, just a few days earlier, had broken all sales records in a charity auction. In fact, Husain's performance piece, like all of his endeavours, had a long gestation period which accounted for its cogency.

Husain then returned to the Bombay film world and his early love of the cinema. He began by inducting into his work the Indian film superstar Madhuri Dixit. Reporters were soon writing about Husain not only in art and culture magazines but also in regional newspapers, bringing his work to the attention of the literati as well as the 'illiterati'. Husain not only appropriated the ultimate Pop art theme, but by co-opting its methodology in the Indian context, broke down the barrier between high and low art, which ultimately is the aim of Pop. In this case, Husain used Madhuri Dixit very much as Warhol had portrayed Marilyn Monroe.

Although Husain has been inventing and re-inventing his marketing strategy – an artform in itself – he was recently caught off-guard when a right-wing Hindu party decided to take issue with a twenty-year-old pen-and-ink sketch of an Indian goddess with her breasts exposed. The party

sent several hoodlums to Husain's museum in Ahmedabad – one of several he has built throughout the country – to burn his canvases and other *objets d'art*. From their point of view, Husain was the perfect target – a religious minority with celebrity status who would attract swift attention from the media. Though the event created the desired effect by fuelling communal passions, it also sparked international condemnation which cast Husain in a sympathetic light. As such, it became another Pop political event.

Through collision and collusion, Husain has relentlessly produced enduring art with great acumen, slowly helping to build an Indian audience that is accepting of the idea of modernism. By reinterpreting modern forms in an Indian context, Husain has broken new ground and qualitatively expanded the modernist language. He was the first artist to gain fame in independent India and he has gradually and profoundly altered the very idea of art as a vocation.

- 1 See Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism In Colonial India: 1850–1922*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.
- 2 Geeta Kapur, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikash Publishing, New Delhi, 1978, p. 10.
- 3 Stanly Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, New York, p. 331.
- 4 Dhyneshwar Nadkarni, *Husain Riding the Lightning*, Ram Das Bhatkal for popular Prakashan Pty Ltd, Bombay, 1996, p. 54.
- 5 Gieve Patel, *Contemporary Indian Art from the Chester & Davida Herwitz Collection*, New York University Press, New York, 1986, p. 15.
- 6 M.F. Husain, quoted in Chester Herwitz, 'Introduction', *Passage Into Human Space*, private printing, p. iv.
- 7 Interview with M.F. Husain in New York, 13 October 1996.

Sundaram Tagore is an independent curator focusing on the East–West dialogue. He is a lecturer at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York, and has written for many publications.