



M. F. HUSAIN

(1913–2011)

A Life in Masterpieces

ART DUBAI
18-20.4.2025

DAG
Estd. 1993

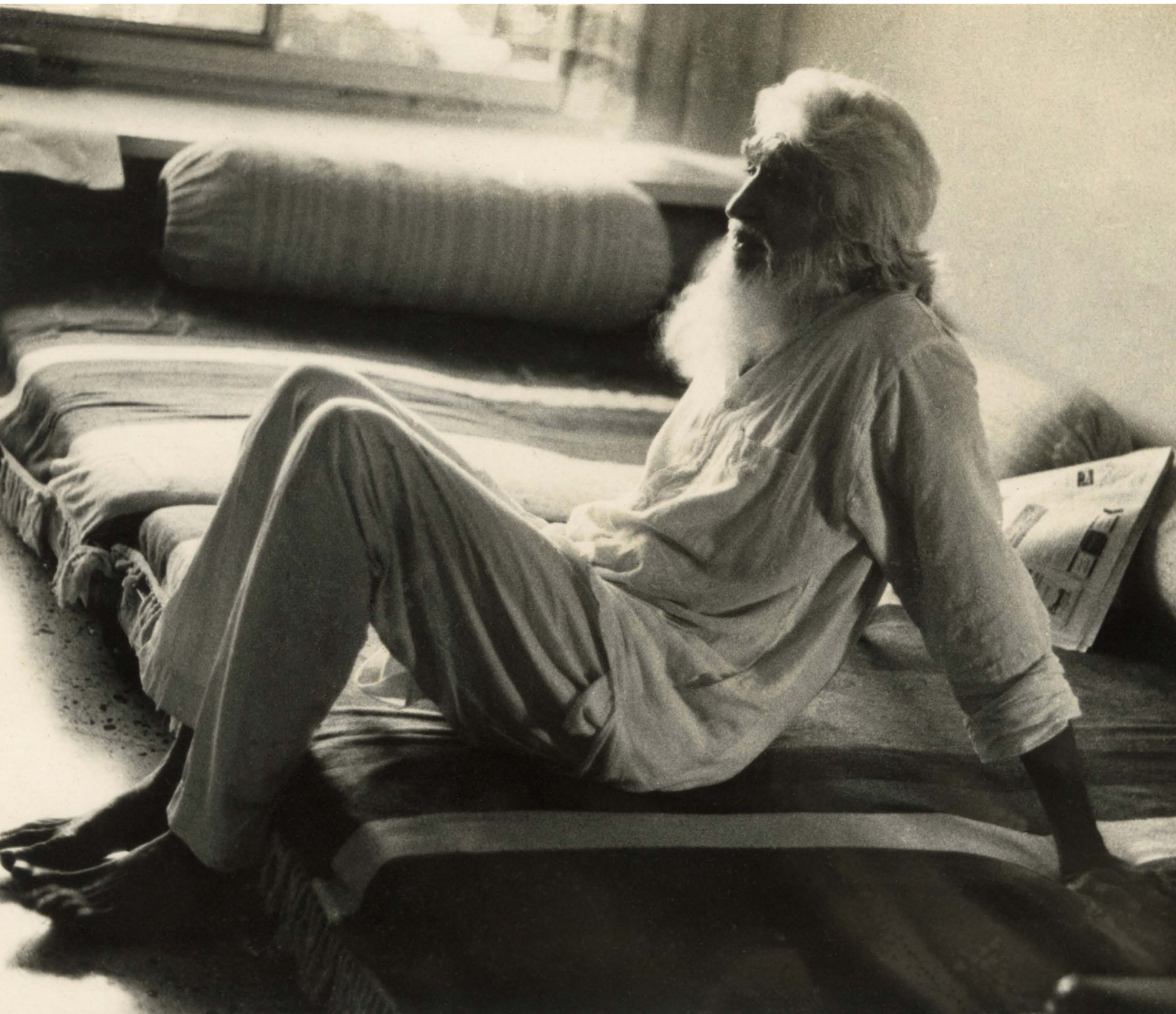
A Life in Masterpieces
M. F. HUSAIN
AT ART DUBAI

In 2006, when M. F. Husain left India, self-exiling himself from the country of his birth, he headed to the only other place he had called home—Dubai. Over the years, it had become a familiar destination, and Husain, who liked the finer things in life as much as the streetside glass of *chai*, had grown inordinately fond of the city. Its friendly nature and people appealed to him. And in the babble of expatriate voices, perhaps the most spoken language was Hindi. That his son Owais had a home there, helped.

Husain had been peripatetic all his life, travelling as much on whim as for work. While Dubai beckoned, he also enjoyed his frequent forays into London, where he passed away in 2011, after accepting Qatari citizenship. In Dubai, he turned his studio into a gallery, met visitors, painted and forged a bond with its people that has survived to this day.

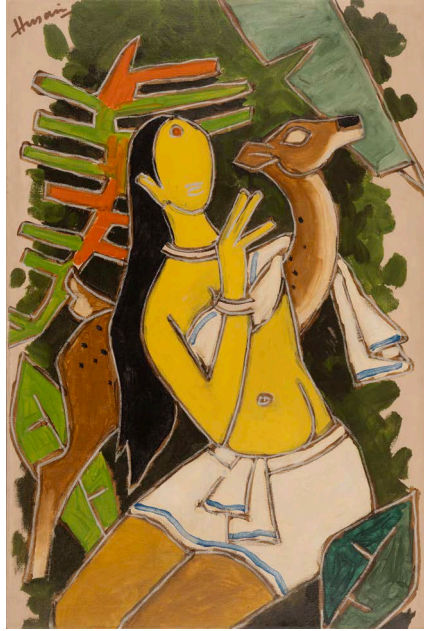
Having only recently celebrated Husain's legacy with a large retrospective exhibition at its galleries in New Delhi and Mumbai, it seemed appropriate that DAG curate a small, if eclectic, selection of his works for showing at Art Dubai. Those familiar with his style will recognise Husain's characteristic expressive brushstrokes, even though the works chosen for viewing are unusual and exemplify his genius at storytelling through colours. There is no doubt that Husain was prolific throughout his long career and this handpicked selection is an acknowledgement of the quality of his paintings and represent the finest modern art produced during the second half of the twentieth century. In mounting an exhibition as a homage to this great artist in the city he called his second home, we couldn't have chosen better.

**'PAINTING IS PRAYER FOR ME. WHEN I AM
PAINTING, I SWITCH OFF FROM THE REST OF THE
WORLD—THAT IS WHAT PRAYER IS MEANT TO DO.'
M. F. HUSAIN**



Husain





Untitled

Acrylic on canvas laid on Masonite board

35.7 x 24.0 in. / 90.7 x 61.0 cm.

Signed in English (upper left) 'Husain'

Husain was a storyteller *par excellence* who often turned to the myths for inspiration, drawing parallels from past scenarios, which he used to draw attention to current issues. His paintings appeared simple, part of his expressionistic vernacular, but often contained deeper meanings that he left to viewers' imaginations to explore.

This delightful painting is a superb example of Husain's mastery over his subject. Here, he paints a figure from popular lore—Shakuntala, the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and the celestial nymph Menaka. Abandoned at birth, she is raised in an *ashram* by Sage Kanva, amidst a forested landscape where she is surrounded by animals who love her. Later, she marries King Dushyanta and their son, Bharata, not only becomes a loved ruler, he also lends his name to the country over which he rules: Bharat, or Bharatvarsha, the ancient name for India.

Here, Shakuntala is depicted like a wood nymph with all the characteristics of a beautiful Indian woman—comely, with long tresses, a *bindi* over her forehead, wearing jewellery. She is featured alongside a doe with the variegated vegetation particular to forest groves where sages had retreats, a natural co-existence that was central to the Indian way of life as recorded by the poet Kalidasa in the 4th–5th century Sanskrit play *Abhijana Shakuntalam*.





Untitled

Acrylic on canvas, c. 1993

36.2 x 59.7 in. / 91.9 x 151.6 cm.

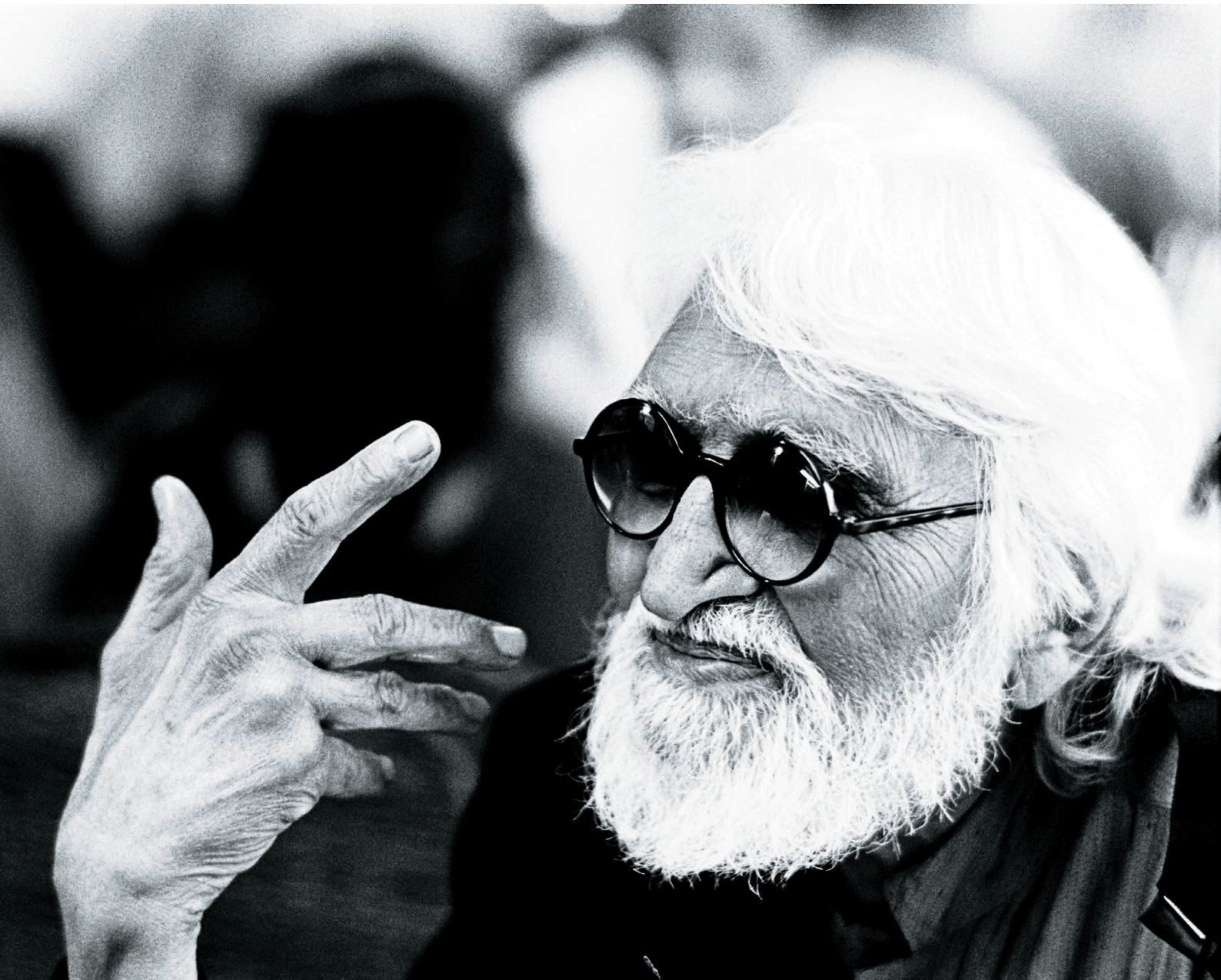
Signed in English (upper right) 'Husain'

This masterpiece by Husain is typical of the way the artist imagined his masterpieces, revealing them layer by layer to provide the viewer a glimpse of the mysteries contained within them. His use of symbols is also in evidence.

This sophisticated painting with its subdued palette has an interesting mix of components that hints at a forested settlement that is staged like a theatre. Pillars holding up a roof and tree trunks divide up the painting into cinematic glimpses. To the left, a sage-like figure lies sprawled diagonally, suggesting wisdom. To the right, a tiger is painted menacingly, a symbol of strength and virility. And in the middle, there is a rugged male torso representing youth. In the foreground, a bowl lies empty—the vessel of a mendicant.

Taken together, they represent the passing of the baton of knowledge from one generation to another, or, even perhaps, the learnings of the Buddha being spread by the valiant Ashoka across and beyond India.

**'I ONLY GIVE EXPRESSION TO
THE INSTINCTS FROM MY SOUL.'
M. F. HUSAIN**







That Obscure Object of Desire Nine
Acrylic on canvas, early 1980s
38.3 x 72.5 in. / 97.3 x 184.2 cm.
Titled in English (lower right)

LITERATURE

K. Bikram Singh, *Maqbool Fida Husain* (New Delhi: Rahul & Art, 2008), ill. p. 309.

Husain was so captivated by Luis Buñuel's film *That Obscure Object of Desire* that he did a series of paintings based on an old man's obsession with a young woman and her cruel manipulation of his feelings. He found echoes from life that he painted during this time, casting the woman as a temptress and the man as a frustrated lover tortured by his own sexual fantasies and desire.

In this canvas, the sprawling nude captured in Husain's deft brushstrokes hints at a female body bruised by the affections of a younger paramour. While the tiger represents male longing, the cactus is a symbol of desire that splits the painting—and the woman—representing the two sides of passion as forces both positive and negative.

A powerful painting of man–woman relationships, *That Obscure Object of Desire* examines Husain's perceptive take on a subject as old as mankind itself.



The Obscure Object of Desire II



That Obscure Object of Desire VI
Acrylic on canvas
50.5 x 104.0 in. / 128.3 x 264.2 cm.
Titled in English (lower left)

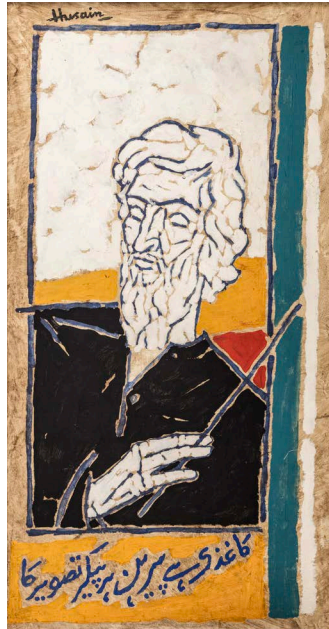
In this rendering of the same subject, Husain brings a cinematic feel to the painting with the theatrical drape that binds the painting together in spite of the splits imposed on it by the two vertical lines and a door that separates it from a public that, on second glance, turns out to be a protest. The supine figure lends a sense of mystery to the proceedings.

A powerful series of paintings on the man–woman relationships, *That Obscure Object of Desire* examines Husain’s perceptive take on a subject as old as mankind itself.

Husain



کاغذی پیرن پیکر تصویر کا



Self-Portrait

Acrylic on canvas, c. 1992

50.0 x 26.0 in. / 127.0 x 66.0 cm.

Signed in English (upper left) 'Husain' and inscribed in Urdu (lower centre)
'Kaagazi hain parihaan har paikaar-e-tasveer ka'

Verso: Label with artist's name, inscription and title in English on stretcher and
inscription in English on stretcher

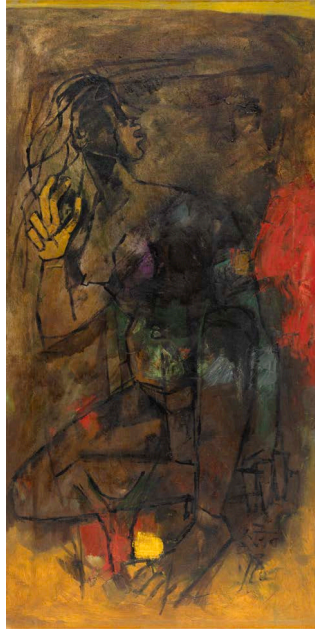
LITERATURE

Arun Vadehra, *Husain: Tapestry* (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1994).

Husain was known to insert autobiographic elements into his painting, sometimes as an oil lantern or an umbrella to symbolise his grandfather; occasionally a small figure representing his younger self in the company of an older, bearded patriarch. His own mature figure, though, by way of self-portraits, was part of his mature phase, intended to capture how he envisioned himself as an artist situated within the broader context of popular culture and society.

Here, Husain casts himself within a framed grid, placed diagonally and looking outside the frame, in a poised manner; his fingers holding a paintbrush. The expressionistic treatment, the painted lines on the right to add a sense of volume, and the Urdu text below turn this into a personal and inward-looking portrait of an artist who represented the popular pulse of a people through much of his career. Truly, as the Urdu inscriptions implies, a picture is but a piece of paper.





Nude

Oil on canvas

48.0 x 24.0 in. / 121.9 x 61.0 cm.

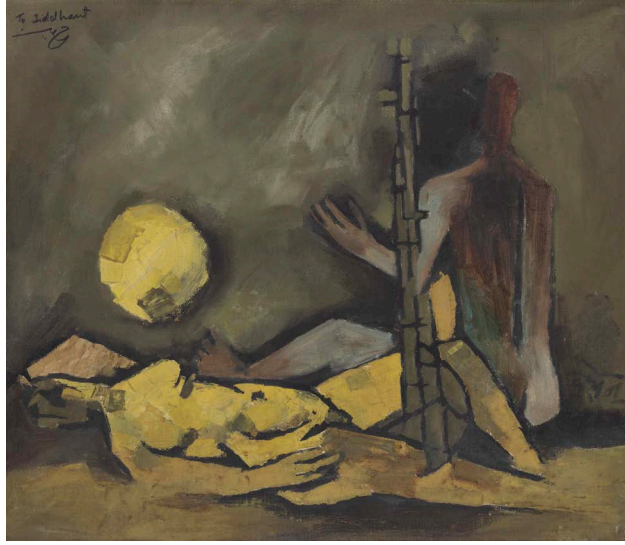
Signed in Hindi and Urdu (lower right) 'Husain'

Women were the focus of many of Husain's paintings, depicted by him sometimes as lovers and at other times as matriarchal figures replete with wisdom that they held in custodianship for future generations. Based as much on mythology as on his observations of society, they inspired the artist to explore facets of their personality beyond the traditional cliché.

The outlined figure here sits cross-legged, the expression of her turned face and palm suggesting a conversation with someone beyond the canvas. She seems not to wear the sheen of youth and is possibly a middle-aged woman addressing not a lover but a recalcitrant child—a symbol not of desire as much as one of authority.

To Sidolhart
1982





Yaksha Prashna

Oil on canvas, c. 1960

24.0 x 28.0 in. / 61.0 x 71.1 cm.

Inscribed in English and signed in Urdu (upper left)

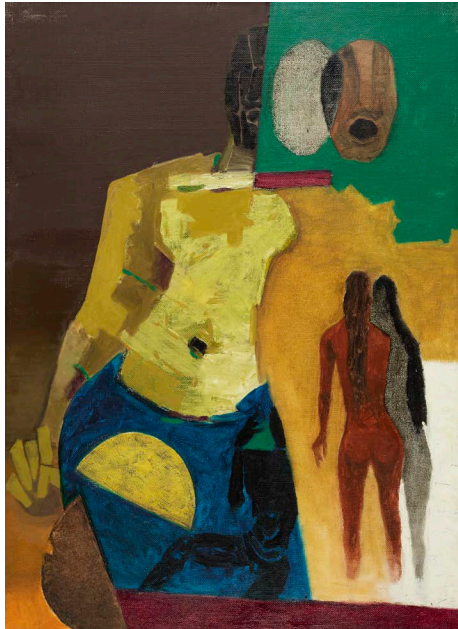
‘To Siddhant / Husain’ and signed in Hindi (lower right) ‘Husain’

The Mahabharata has been a source of stories and lessons for writers, poets and artists, and Husain, here, turns to a somewhat lesser-known parable from the epic—of a meeting between Yudhishtira, the Pandava prince, and a *yaksha* or nature spirit disguised as Yama, the god of Death. The questions Yama poses to Yudhishtira must be answered rightly for the latter to avoid death. Set during the Pandavas’ exile, this encounter emphasises fundamental lessons about living virtuously and justly.

Husain paints the episode with Yudhishtira shown lying down, his body luminous with a celestial glow, symbolising his wisdom and innate sense of justice, while Yama sits beside him as a nocturnal figure of darkness.

In representing the supine figure androgynously, Husain also brings into play the powerful matrix of male–female relationships that was central to his thinking and formed the subject of his paintings. This might well be a test of relationships.





Arrival

Acrylic and oil on canvas
35.5 x 25.5 in. / 90.2 x 64.8 cm.
Verso: Title in English

LITERATURE

Giles Tillotson, *Primitivism and Modern Indian Art* (New Delhi: DAG, 2019),
ill. p. 211; Edition II (2021), ill. p. 150.

The young woman represented frontally in this painting is the subject of its title, a newcomer come to usher out the old, depicted as the figures walking away, following a shadow of what appears to be a recurrence in the history of mankind. The burnished gold of the woman's youth attests to her appeal. The obscured face is dark, beside which one can see the haunted visages of the overthrown figures reminding us presciently of history repeating itself.

This is a powerful painting and one which, beyond its lessons of mortality and loss, is also a reminder of all that is glorious about the present in the world. Husain was not sentimental about loss and the passage of time, and his painting is a potent symbol of the presence of the young in our midst who have the ability to take over the baton of life and its challenges in ways that are beautiful—if not everlasting.

**'I AM AN INDIAN PAINTER.
I WILL REMAIN SO TILL MY LAST BREATH.'
M. F. HUSAIN**







Bharat Bhagya Vidhata
Acrylic on canvas, 1990s
78.0 x 69.0 in. / 198.1 x 175.3 cm.
Signed in English (upper left) 'Husain'

LITERATURE

Kishore Singh, ed., *Iconic Masterpieces of Indian Modern Art*, Edition 3
(DAG: New Delhi, 2023), ill. pp. 351-59.

Husain's sacred and secular credentials were never in doubt, and his love of India's syncretic culture drove his career as an artist. He borrowed heavily from myth and history, imagining the rivers as goddesses, the nation as a motherland.

Here, a woman's figure graceful as a dancer's bends to form the contours of the country, her flowing hair representing the Himalayas, while all around her are the symbols of nationhood—Gandhiji's salt march leading the country to freedom, the Ashoka pillar linking it to history and sacredness, the wheel of *dharma* depicting a nation on the move and its progress. The iconicisation of the peasant on a pillar, the dove representing peace; the elephant, wisdom; the boats, the country's trade ties since time immemorial; and the spacecraft over a rising dawn, scientific prowess.

Husain's ability to capture the zeitgeist of the moment is represented by the drapes on the top left of the painting, ushering in the winds of change into a nation no longer enslaved but a master of its own destiny.





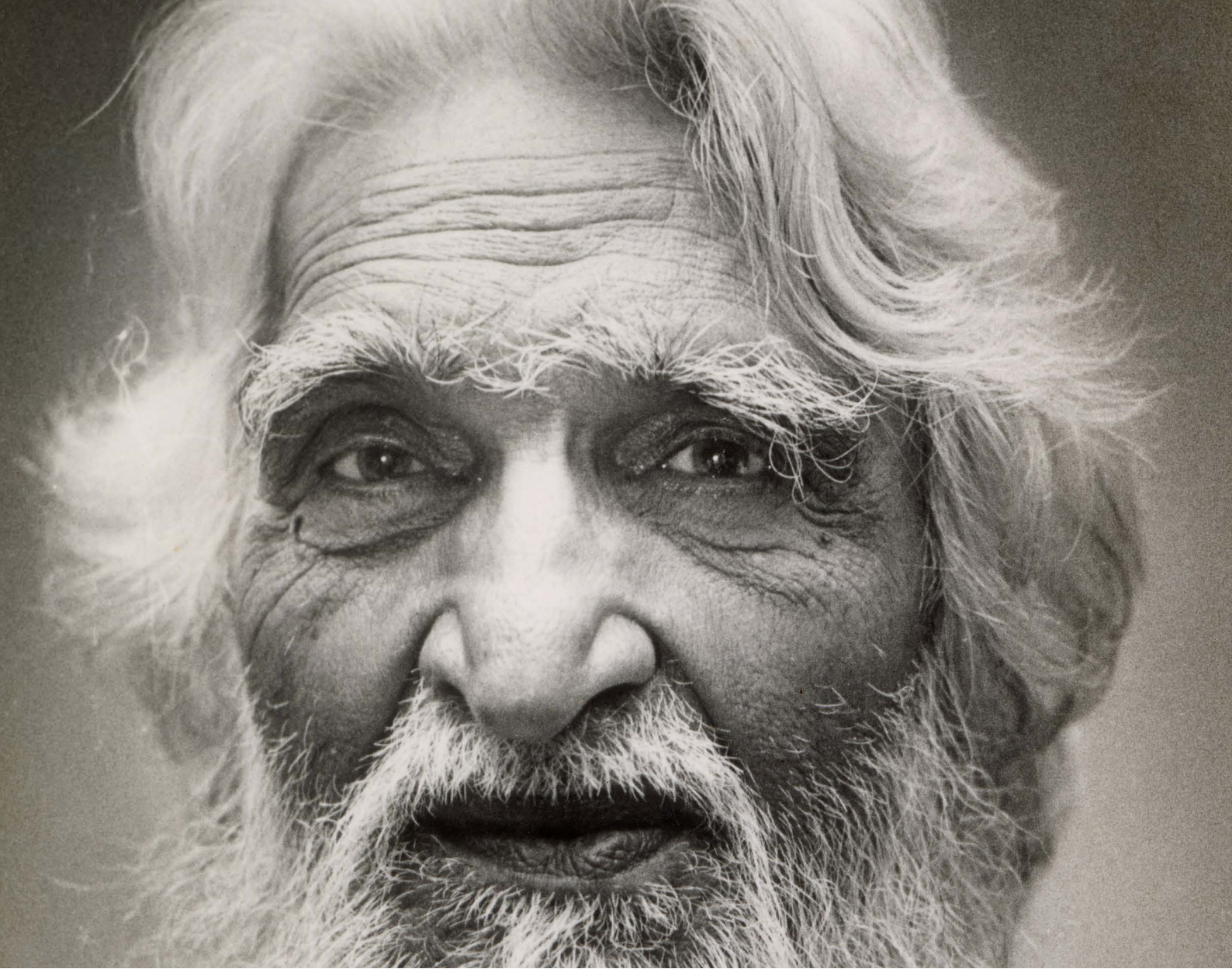
Tabalchi (Toy Series)
Acrylic on wood, late 1950s
29.5 x 21.2 in. / 74.9 x 53.8 cm.
Verso: Signed twice 'Husain'

LITERATURE

- Rashda Siddiqui, *Husain in Conversation with Husain Paintings*
(New Delhi: Books Today, 2001), ill. p. 266.
Geeta Kapur, Mulk Raj Anand, eds., *Husain* (Mumbai: Vakil and Sons, 1968), ill. p. 12.
Ram Chatterjee, *Husain's Toys* (Bombay: 1960).

Husain's early career required him to play breadwinner to a young family whose needs could not be met through painting. Having started out as a painter of cinema hoardings and posters, he picked up a job at a furniture company to design children's nurseries. It was here that he designed these 'toys' as embellishments for their furniture. These wood-crafted figures closely resemble the subjects of his paintings during this period—potters, farmers, dancers and, as here, musicians.

This *tabalchi* or *tabla* player sits with his instruments before him as he plays a beat with both hands. Rendered dynamically, captured in motion, it appeals not just to children's sensibilities but also to those of adult art-lovers, for whom this series is a delightful interlude in the career of India's most-loved and admired modernist.



IN THE GALAXY OF MODERN MASTERS, ONE NAME that is synonymous with twentieth-century Indian art is M. F. Husain. Born in Pandharpur, Maharashtra, on 17 September 1913, Husain came to Bombay in 1937 to become a painter, where he slept on footpaths and painted under streetlights. A self-taught artist, he began his career painting cinema posters and hoardings, and, in 1941, took up a job at a furniture store, also designing toys.

He experimented with text and images, and painted alongside musicians to translate music's elusiveness into the accuracy of brushstroke. His first film, a short titled *Through the Eyes of a Painter*, won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1967.

Husain earned renown for his paintings of horses, though he became equally well-known for his series on Mother Teresa, or the British Raj, among others. His work referenced India's syncretic culture using motifs and figures imbued with mythological meaning while reimagining them through a contemporary lens aligned with modern artistic approaches.

Husain was awarded the Padma Shri in 1966, the Padma Bhushan in 1973 and the Padma Vibhushan in 1991 by the Indian government. Well into his nineties, he continued to paint despite living in exile in London and Dubai, having left India in 2006 following death threats and obscenity cases filed against him. He accepted Qatari citizenship in 2010 and passed away in London on 9 June 2011.



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