



M.F. Husain



M.F. Husain

Pradeep Chandra

A Pictorial Tribute



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Pg. 1: In his inimitable style, Husain paints the ceiling of his Mumbai home in Cuffe Parade, Mumbai

Pg. 2-3: A collage of portraits and paintings of the artist and some his works

To
Hufrish, Stuti and Srishti,
the budding painters in my family





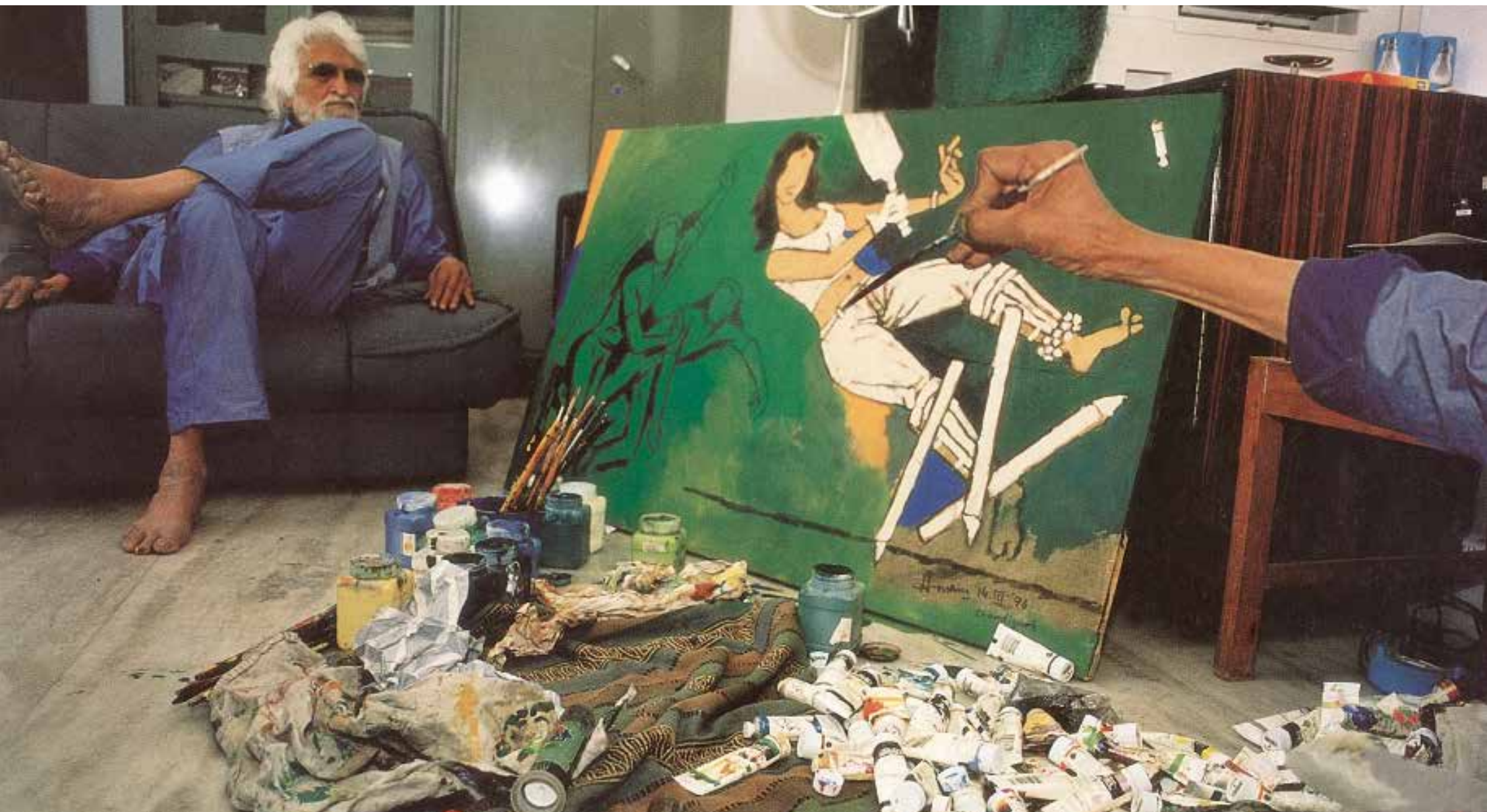
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*Kabhi kisi ko mukammal jahaan nahin miltaa
Kahin zameen toh kahin aasmaan nahin miltaa...*
— Nida Fazli

No one ever inherits a perfect world;
either the earth or the sky is denied to him.



Husain in a self-made collage of himself resting and painting at the Hyderabad Cinema Ghar

Pg. 8: A bird's eye view of Husain's show being set up at the National Gallery of Modern Art (Mumbai). It would be his last solo show in India before he left the country in 2006

Publisher's Note

In Memoriam

Bikash D. Niyogi

Amidst the hustle and bustle of a warm June morning, I received the news that M.F. Husain had passed away. My first reaction was of disbelief. Somehow, one felt the legendary artist would live well past his 100th birthday. I know I am not alone when I say that at the very least, Husain Saab should have been able to visit his beloved homeland one last time.

Without a doubt, Husain Saab is one of the finest modern Indian artists India has produced. His works are iconic; his vivid, bold strokes unmistakable. Despite being dogged by controversy in the latter part of his life, Husain remained true to himself and to his art. He was unapologetic about his fascination for Hindi cinema and his glamorous muses, despite the criticism he faced for his more “commercial” work. He may have been in the news for the wrong reasons, but he was still in the news!

The beauty of Husain Saab's work is the kind of reach it had—he strived to have his art touch the common man. His humble beginnings in Pandharpur and his struggles as a young billboard painter are well known. Eventually, he became a founder member of the Progressive Artists'

Group, along with two other giants of the art world, F.N. Souza and S.H. Raza. But Husain Saab was the only one of the three who chose to stay on in India. His fascination with the country is evident in his representation of its people, its culture, its epics and its traditions. Sadly, the country that he so lovingly depicted in his work turned its back on him in the end.

Husain Saab was a man filled with *joie de vivre*; he enjoyed the simple things of life such as cooking a delicious meal, or celebrating his birthday with loved ones. Then again, his love for expensive cars is also legendary! His grace and humour kept him in good spirits till the end—it speaks legions of the man that despite being sad that he was so far from home, he was never bitter.

This book was near completion when I got the news of his demise. It is particularly sad, because Husain Saab had been looking forward to its release after giving his blessings for the project. We decided to leave the text in its original, present-tense form—M.F. Husain lives on, in our hearts and in our imagination. I hope it is a fitting tribute to and celebration of the life of a great man and a brilliant artist.





The artist contemplates his work at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai before making his next move

Foreword

The Barefoot Painter

Anil Dharker

M

.F. Husain was on the cover of my very first issue as Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. I thought of him as a logical choice: he was well-known, so well known in fact, that even people who had only seen the outside walls of art galleries would recognise the familiar locks and the flowing beard. Besides this, he was colourful and provocative and aroused passionate reactions. In short, ideal cover material.

Having made that decision, the next question was what visual to put on the cover? The man himself (he is terribly photogenic) or one of his paintings? If the latter, which one work from his huge output? Then it struck me: it would be neither of the above. The cover would feature, instead, one of the aspects of the painter everyone knew about: his bare feet.

Then the chase began. “A photo session with Mr Husain?” his people asked helpfully. “Certainly, but he left for Calcutta just two days ago.” The Calcutta number responded with, “Oh, but he’s already left Calcutta!” Where was he headed? Possibly Bangalore, but they weren’t sure. We tried Bangalore. As far as they knew, he was in Chennai...

And so it went, a wild Husain chase, the painter dashing in and out of towns as his fancy took him, sometimes telling people where he was going, at other times, just getting into a cab, heading to the airport and vanishing into, say Hyderabad, from where someone would ring to say, “Husain saab is here.”



The essentials: palette, paints and the iconic, extra-long paintbrushes unique to Husain



Husain puts the finishing touches on his art work while Dadiba assists him at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

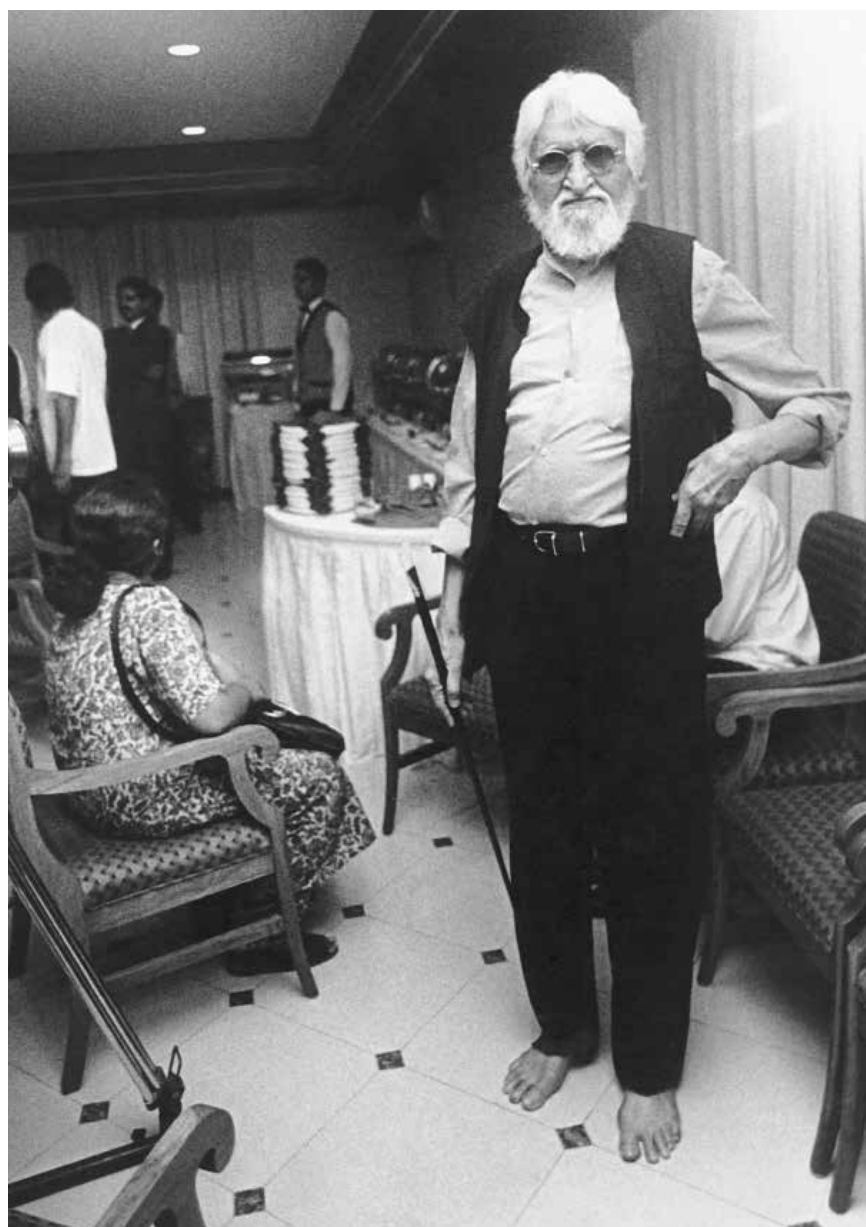


Husain painting at Tao Art Gallery as gallery owner Kalpana Shah looks on

Facing pg.: Husain painting at Pundole Art Gallery







The barefoot artist with his long paintbrush which often doubles as a cane at The Club, Mumbai

Facing pg.: (left) A dapper Husain standing outside the Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai; (right) Husain dressed traditionally in preparation for his annual Eid lunch at Badar Baug

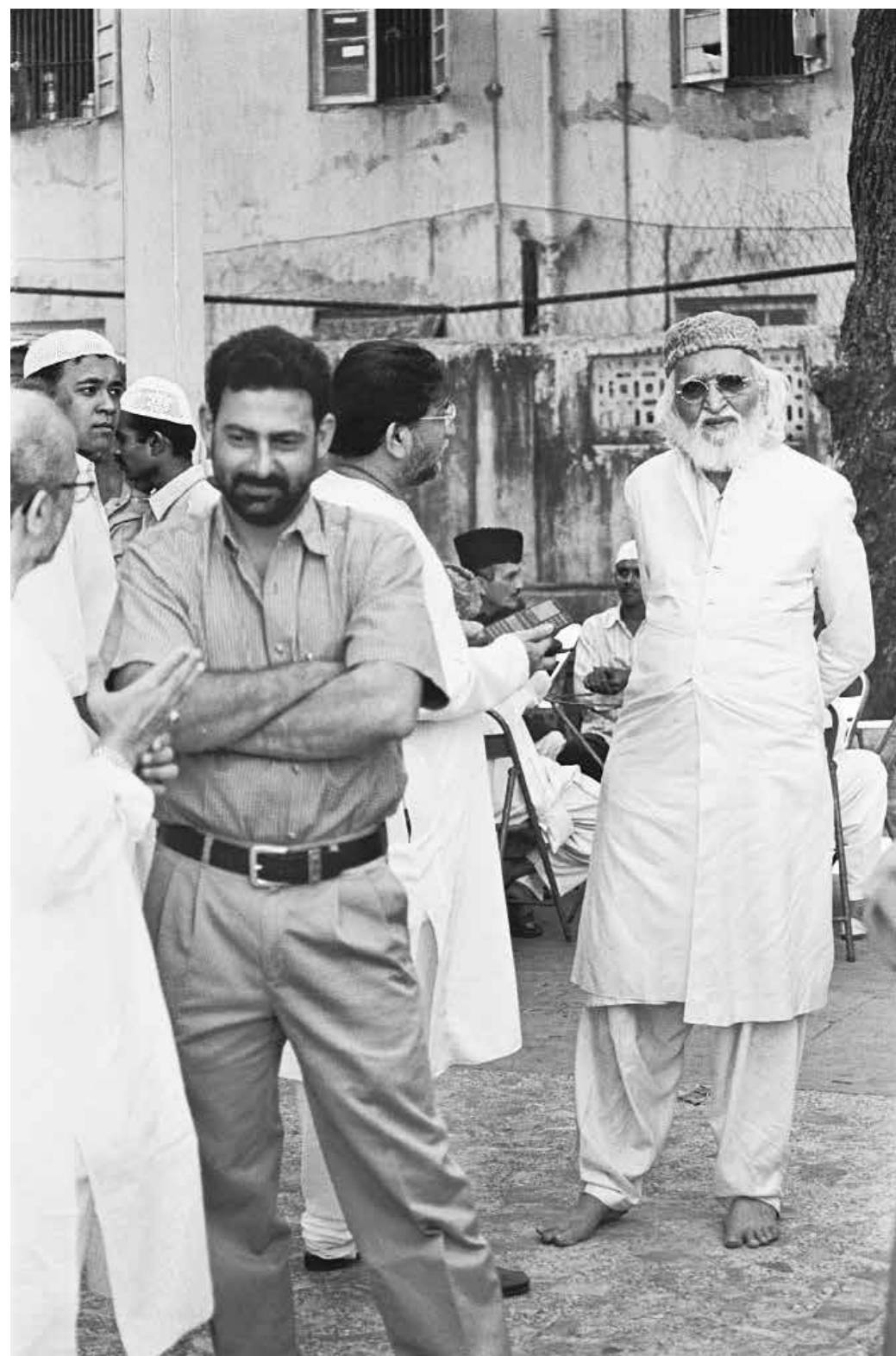
By now my deadline was history. Would my very first issue be late just because of the cover photograph? Desperate times call for desperate measures, so I took Pradeep Chandra, the *Illustrated Weekly's* illustrious photographer, to the lawns of the Bombay Gymkhana, removed my shoes and said "Shoot!" "Your feet, boss?" Pradeep asked. "Yes, my feet. And you are to tell no one about this!"

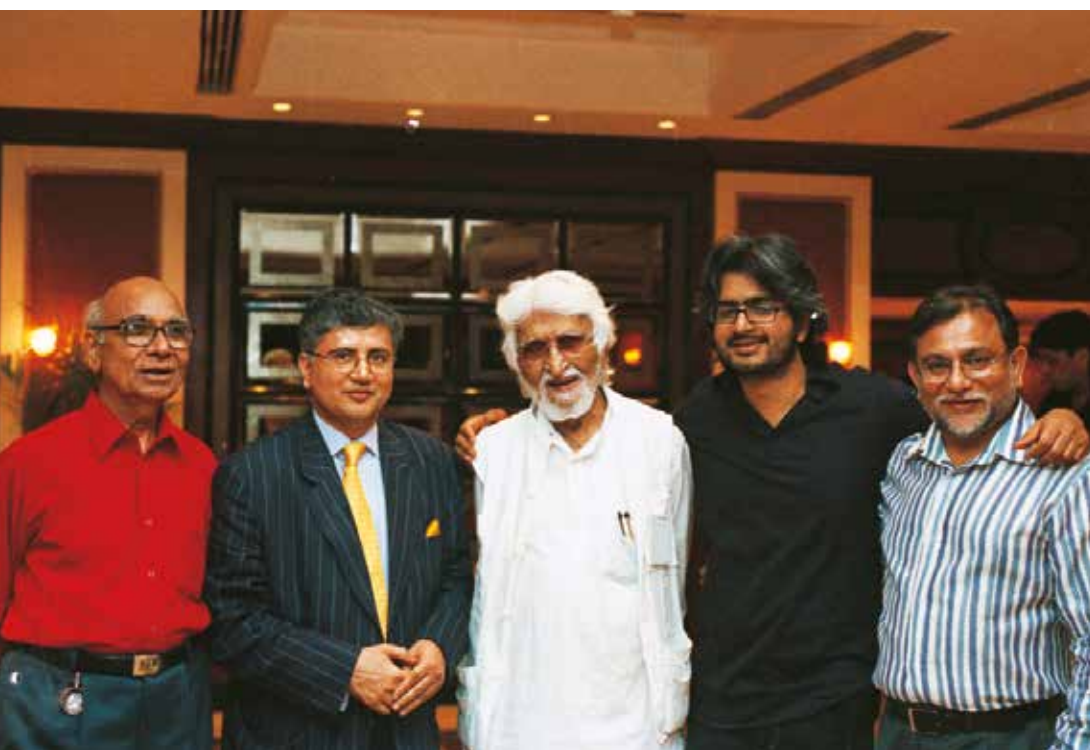
So it came to pass that the *Weekly* cover carried my bare feet impersonating Husain's more famous ones.

The story doesn't end there. The day the magazine appeared on the stands I got a call from Harsh Goenka, industrialist and prolific art collector. "Wonderful issue," Harsh said. "I particularly liked the Husain story. But, Anil, did you notice something? How young Husain's feet are!"

The bare feet, the flowing locks and the long brush used as a cane came much later. Before that was Maqbool Fida Husain, the artist. The man who started off as a painter of cinema hoardings, dangling precariously from high scaffoldings over Bombay streets has become the most recognisable face of Indian art. His paintings featured heroic figures, whether they were his dancing (and phallic) horses, flying gods and goddesses, Indira Gandhi as Durga, Mother Teresa as the saviour...they were all recognisably Husain's figures through the strong lines and the dynamic movement he imbued in them. They are always on a grand scale (which is why his small canvases look strange), and they always suggested that taken together, Husain's work was like an epic in the making, a kind of pictorial *Mahabharata* for post-Independence times.

To go with these larger-than-life canvases and motifs, Husain created a matching persona, a painter who looks like a painter, an artist who behaves just like an artist is supposed to behave—eccentric, unpredictable, whimsical. This mythic figure of the artist so assiduously created by Husain himself, can be many things to many people, including as a case study for brand making or a psychological study centering around how to influence people. Unsurprisingly, this persona is also a photographer's delight and consequently, a hundred flashes going off simultaneously invariably greet the painter's entry into any room. But these innumerable and anonymous photographers remain peripheral to the painter and to his work.





With Pradeep Chandra, though, it is different: he is not paparazzi but photographer. He has been taking pictures of Husain for years and years, long enough for the artist to acknowledge a kind of special relationship which is so very evident in the photographs in the book.

Chandra and Husain have one thing in common: a sense of restlessness. In the painter's case the story with which I began this foreword illustrates this restlessness; in the case of the photographer, it is the number of publications he has worked for. *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *The Independent*, both of which I was Editor, and so many others: *The Free Press Journal*, *The Indian Express*, *The Indian Post*, *The Week*, *The Metropolis*

Husain (centre) among friends. From left to right, Bal Chhabbra, Farhad Jamal, Owais Husain and Munna Javeri

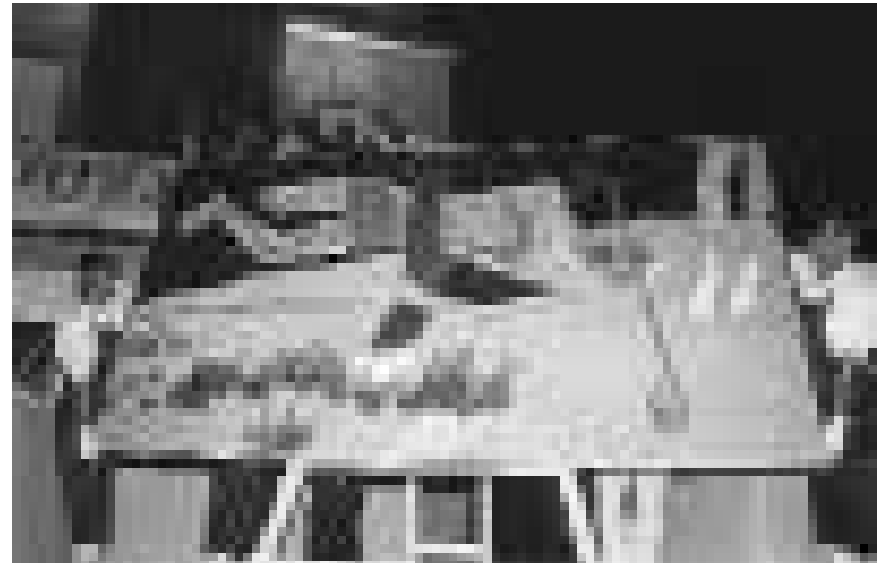
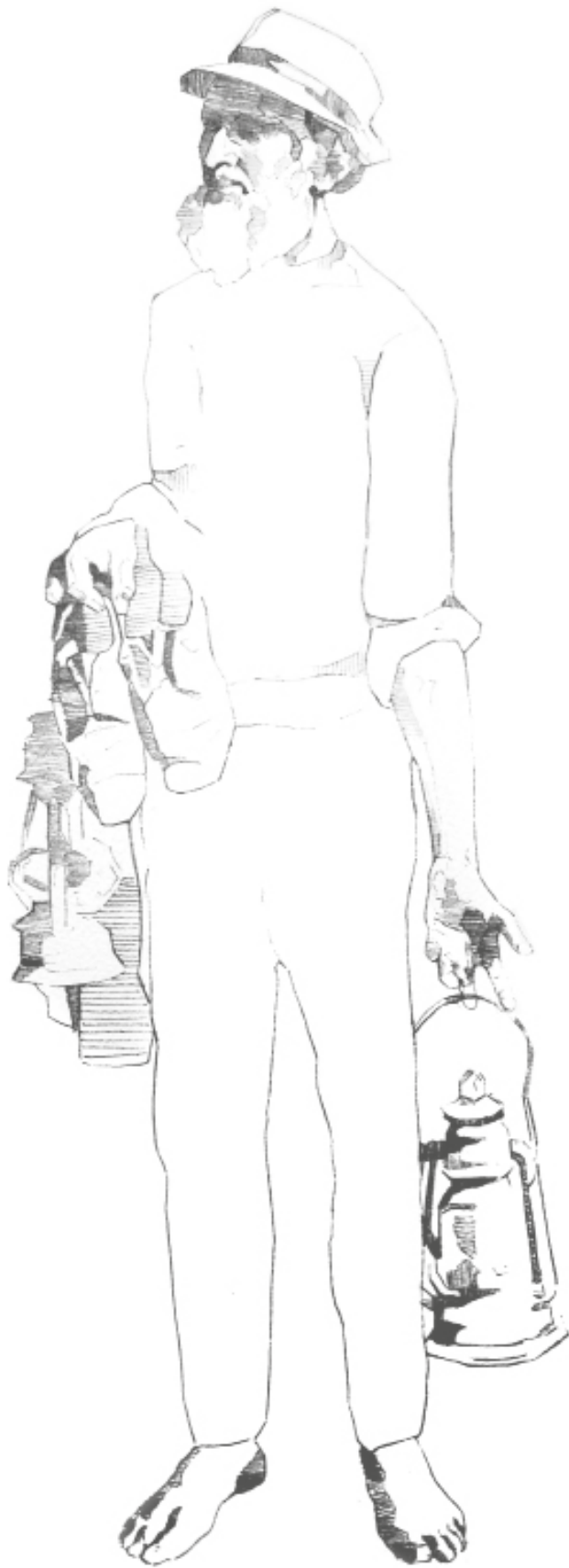
on *Saturday*, *Sunday Observer*, *Bombay Times*, *DNA*. Before this, Pradeep Chandra began by taking still photographs of films in production. Rajesh Khanna, the story goes, was so taken by his work that he recommended Chandra to Raj Khosla to do the stills of movie *Do Raaste* at the princely salary of Rs 200 per month!

Pradeep Chandra and M.F. Husain go together in other ways too. The painter as a filmmaker was notoriously averse to the presence of photographers yet Chandra was the exception on the set of *Gaja Gamini*. And seeing his collection of photographs, it was Husain himself who suggested that Pradeep should do a book of photographs of the painter.

As comprehensive as this book is, I would like it to have a different final chapter. And that would not be about Maqbool Fida Husain in Qatar but about his triumphal return to India. Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but miracles do happen.

By now we all know that India's iconic painter has been hounded by right-wing organisations for the last 15 years by means of legal cases filed against him in various parts of India so that it has been impossible for him to work in the country of his birth. The core of the problem is his alleged depiction of Hindu goddesses "in the nude". As it happens, there is, objectively speaking, no case against for the simple reason that Husain's 'nudes' are strictly not nudes. As art critic Ranjit Hoskote points out in an essay on the painter, "He is not so much a painter as he is a single-minded celebrant of the line Colour has served him chiefly as an infill between his bold linear patterns, a connective glue smeared over his graphic strut work." Husain's line, that strong, confident slash of the brush which is the essence of his work is what you see in his painting of Saraswati. In this there isn't even any infilling of colour; the flesh tones and voluptuous curves that would be the essence of a nude are entirely absent. This Saraswati isn't a nude at all; it's only an outline of a female form with no sensuous body parts, not hinting even remotely at eroticism.

As it happens, even if Husain had drawn a real nude, he would have only continued the tradition of artistic representation of our

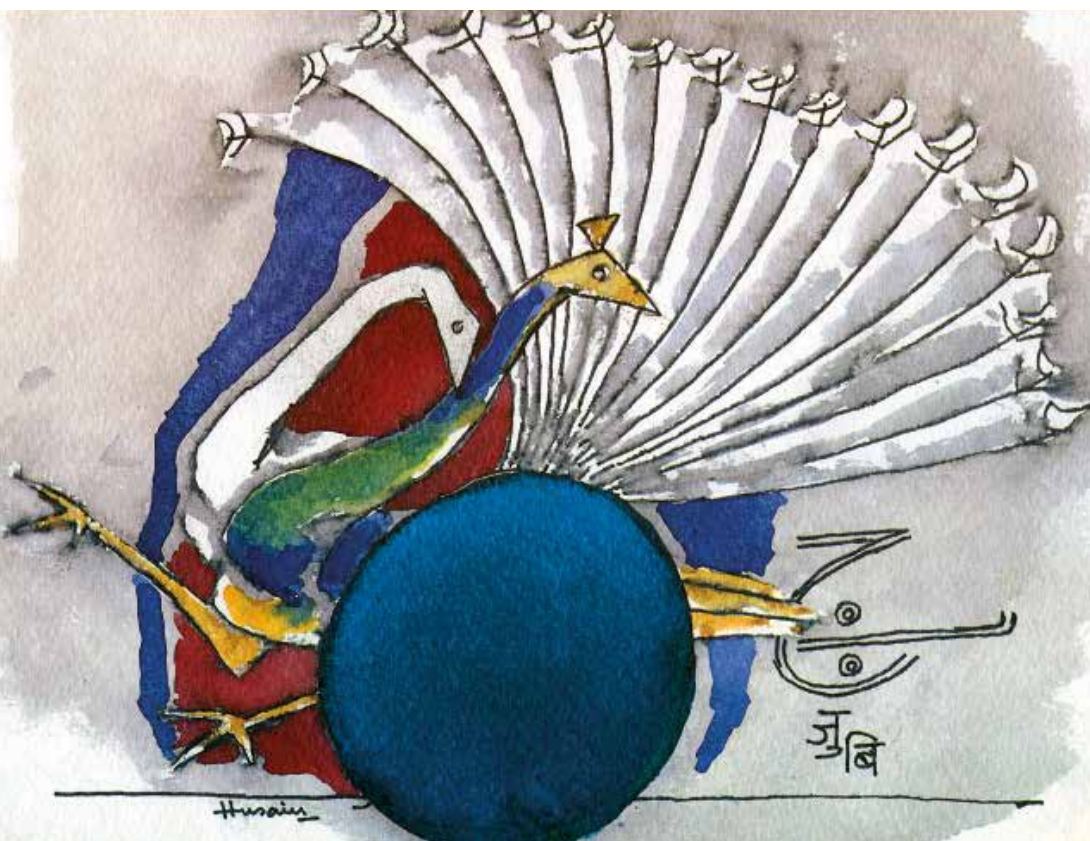


goddesses set centuries ago. For example, there is the naked depiction of Saraswati in Mathura which dates to around 2nd century AD. Or the depiction of the goddess Lajja Gauri's supine form in a birthing position. In a little known museum in Kerala, I was quite startled to see wall paintings showing Shiva with Parvati, his hand playfully on her bare breast. There were other paintings showing the birth of Rama and Lakshman, the mothers in squatting position, the body parts and the process of birth painted in graphic detail. Startling, yes. Vulgar or erotic, decidedly not.

None of this is surprising. As art historian Rashmi Poddar points out, the origin of these is the Yakshi figure, the Nature Spirits who were the forerunners of our goddesses. In a predominantly agrarian

Husain's painting of Safdar Hashmi on display at The Times of India Auction on the INS Jawahar. It was the first painting of his which sold for Rs 10 lakh

(left) An illustration of a barefoot Husain carrying a lantern. The lantern often featured in his art works



society, fertility and fecundity were worshipped and the mother figure with large breasts and broad hips represented fecundity in a near literal form. You see these Yakshi figures outside stupas that survive today, nude except for the ornamentation on their voluptuous bodies. In recalling this you could say that the right wing defenders of “purity” have forgotten our heritage; you could say it but you can’t, simply because they didn’t know it in the first place. Their idea of what our goddesses should look like comes from calendar art and the oleographs of Raja Ravi Verma which

An exquisite watercolour peacock painted on a card for Juhi Babbar’s wedding by Husain

are not even a hundred years old. *That* is our heritage? Not only that, their inspiration doesn’t even come from our roots. As Hoskote points out, Raja Ravi Verma “modelled his Sitas and Draupadis on the over blown Graeco-Roman women beloved of Victorian history painters like Alma-Tadema”.

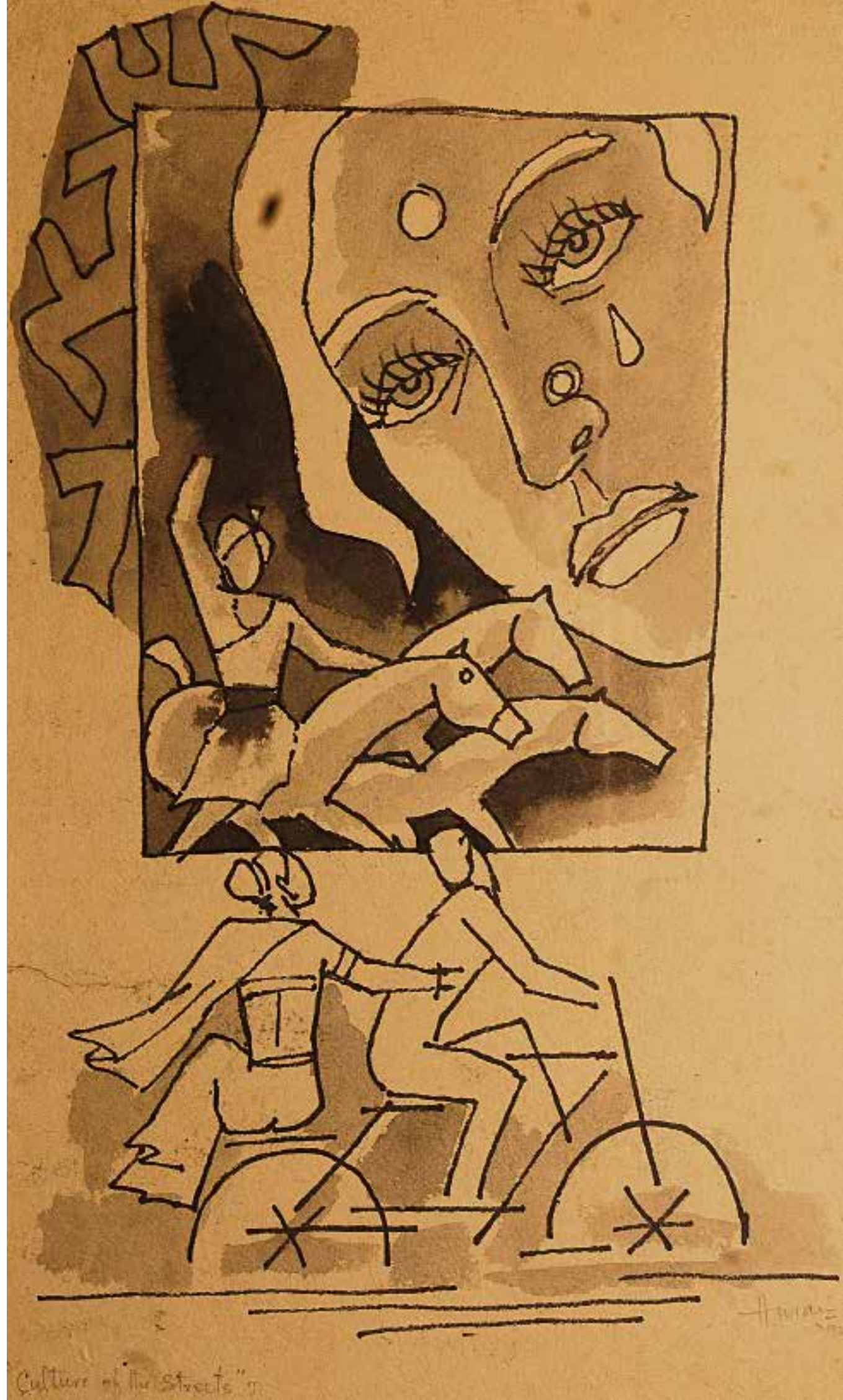
As to the often asked question why Husain didn’t paint figures from Islam, the answer is simple: Islam is an ascetic religion with severe strictures on the depiction of Allah or even of a perfect human form (because by depicting a perfect human form, you would outdo the Creator, which is blasphemy). On the other hand, Hinduism is a joyful religion with its profusion of gods and goddesses for all occasions and its huge treasure trove of myths and stories. Which Indian artist would want to miss out on that as a source of inspiration? This would apply especially to someone like Husain who is a barefoot painter in more ways than one: his work has always been instinctive rather than thoughtful, an extroverted and exuberant celebration of life rather than an introspective, ruminative meditation on existence. His source material has come from everything Indian, as it should be, not from a narrow part of it defined by the religion of his birth.

This wasn’t the man to be punished; this was the artist to be treasured. His talent for the dramatic gesture, his ability to reach out across the boundaries of art to all and sundry took contemporary Indian art to a new level of general awareness. Which is why, apart from any other reason, for Maqbool Fida Husain to be cut off from his country towards the end of his life is tragic; for India, to allow it to happen is nothing less than shameful.

But now as we hold this book, this isn’t the time to think of these things. Fifteen years may be a long time, but it’s less than a sixth of the long and productive life of India’s best known painter. His journey to the pinnacle of the art world would have been remarkable even if M.F. Husain had had an ordinary, conventional upbringing. But the hardships of his early life, and the unconventional nature of his schooling make his achievements even more remarkable.

Pradeep Chandra’s book is a wonderful celebration of that life.

Culture of the Streets, one of the rare paintings of Husain's where he painted eyes







Husain posing for a photo shoot at a desk at the Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai

Preface

Maqbool Fida Husain: the name conjures a plethora of ideas and stories in the minds of people who are aware of his legendary status. A master painter, a colourful persona, a filmmaker with a difference, a lover of the most expensive cars on earth, a painter who prefers to walk barefoot—Husain is an enigma even to the ones who know him best. That Husain is one of the greatest painters in the world is beyond doubt. Many scholarly books have been written in an effort to understand and explain the great painter's art. This book has a different focus. It seeks to document the many facets of Husain, the man behind the painter.

M.F. Husain's is an inspiring story of rags-to-riches. Through it all, he has remained a true artist whether painting hoardings, designing furniture, making films or indulging in cooking. Maqbool's expression of creativity is found not only in his paintings but also in his love for places and people that shaped his legendary status. There are so many incidents in his life that shed light on his painting, his interests, his personal life and his pains. I have tried to capture the nuances of this multifaceted painter through these vignettes from his life.

Husain saab, as he is often respectfully addressed, is a great raconteur. I have had the privilege of knowing him and interacting with him over many years. Husain has also spoken at length on various issues in the course of innumerable interviews he has given to journalists and the many cover stories that have featured him. I have tried to paint a picture of the



man behind the painter from these sources. The attempt is to understand the legendary painter through his work, installations, cinema, museums, women, friends and his undying love of art.

Through his ninety-five years, Husain has maintained a child-like curiosity and enthusiasm for living. On the occasion of his 90th birthday, he asked all his friends to gift him a lollipop! Similarly on his 94th birthday, in the US, he got ninety-four *jalebis*, a sweet and syrupy Indian dessert to celebrate the occasion. Like a child, a Pandora's Box opens for him at the start of every new day, full of wonder, surprise and colours. The book seeks to capture this boundless energy that keeps Husain saab going.

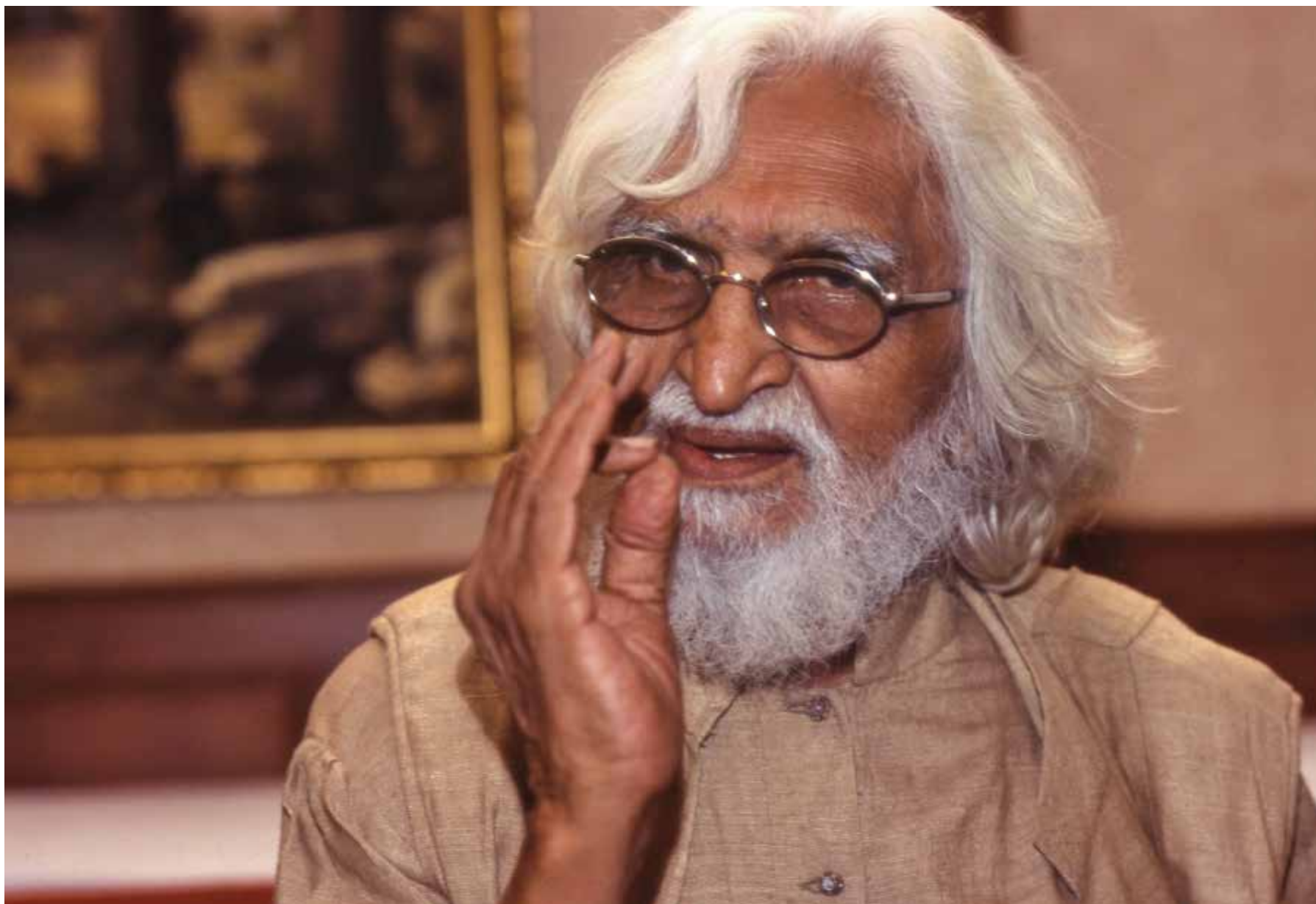
The book is intended to be a pictorial tribute to Maqbool Fida Husain. As a professional photojournalist, I have captured the various moods of Husain saab on camera for over three decades. Each photograph in the

M.F. Husain on the set he created for the actress Tabu for a live portrait at Mehboob Studios, Mumbai

Facing pg.: Husain being interviewed in the Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai



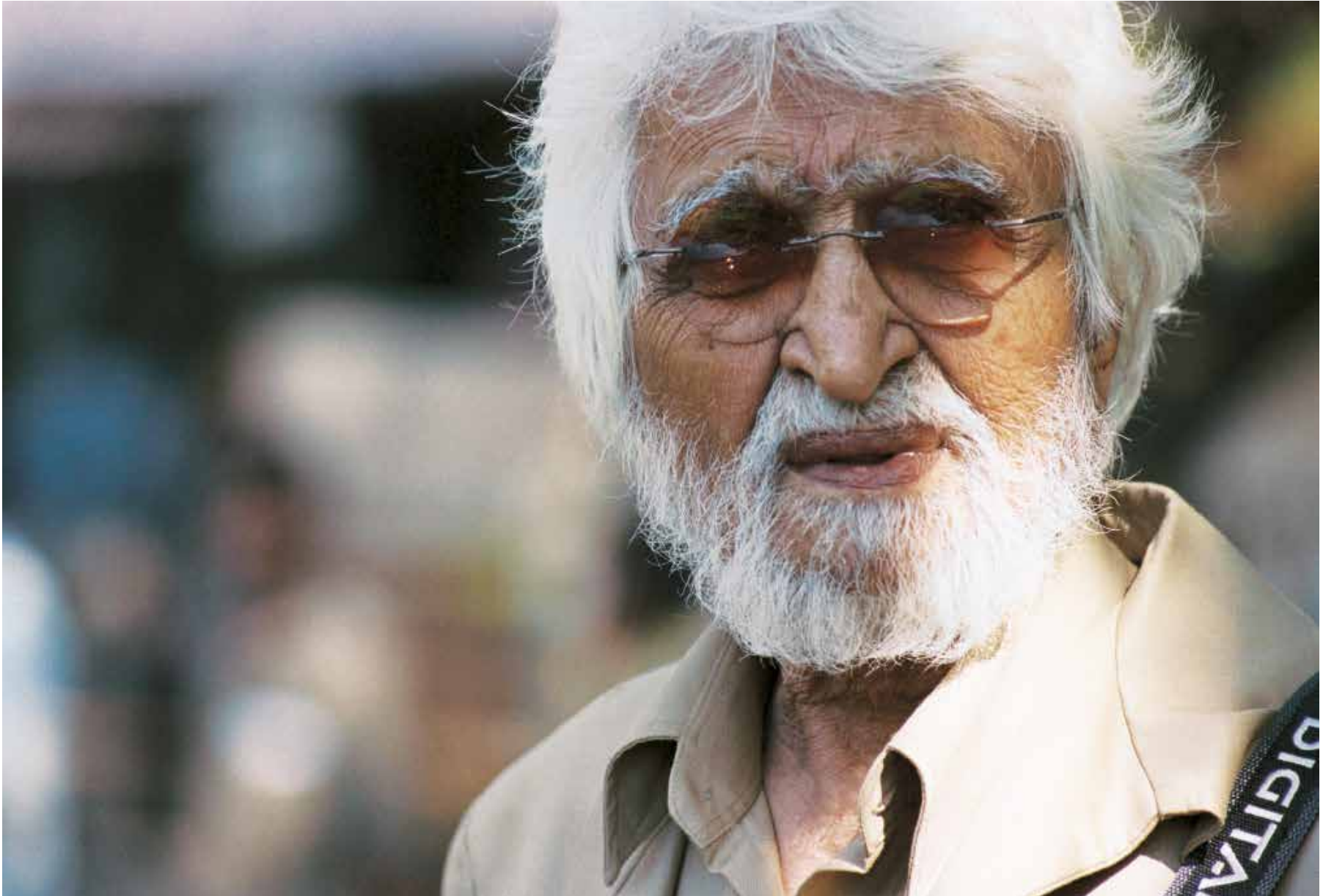




Husain making a point

Pg. 30: (left) Self portrait of Husain; (right) Husain as a younger man

Pg. 30-31: Husain drawing a sketch specially for *Sunday Observer* at Pritish Nandy's office in Mumbai



Portrait of the artist



book has an interesting story behind it. I have tried to narrate some of these stories in a separate chapter but the narration does not do justice to the excitement that I experienced while clicking these photographs. Inevitably, any book on M.F. Husain will feature a discussion on his paintings. But the focus remains on the painter and his many moods, captured through photographs and quaint stories of the man. Every chapter starts with a quote by Husain to give readers just a taste of his wisdom and wit.

I have photographed many celebrities in my career. Photographing Husain saab in his many moods has been the most enjoyable. I present my photographs as a tribute to one of the most fascinating men India has produced. He may be a genius, but he is also the most energetic, fun loving and vibrant person I have come across.

The world is still mapping the legend. Join me on this journey to understand the prodigy behind the myriad strokes. The soft spoken painter continues to make bold moves in the art world, in the process splashing vibrant tones of colour-coordinated creations. Presenting the artist's many facets has been an enriching experience. Hopefully the readers will enjoy seeing the maverick painter as much as his celebrated paintings through this effort.

Pradeep Chandra
Mumbai, 2011





Mumbai was his Muse^{*}

Ayaz Memon

At *Bombay Times*, where Pradeep Chandra was chief photographer when I was editing the lifestyle supplement in the early years of this century, Maqbool Fida Husain would often be the subject of discussion: not just for his brilliance as a painter, but also his life and loves which made him perennially newsworthy.

Pradeep was besotted by Husain. He had three or four muses where his work was concerned—Amitabh Bachchan and Shobhaa De are two other names that come readily to mind—and he enjoyed their company and trust as much as he did their appeal as subjects to his SLR's lenses. It would not be incorrect to say that he would 'create' an opportunity to shoot Husain because that would give him one more chance to meet the painter.

Pradeep frequently likened Husain to a wandering minstrel. He was probably right. Though Husain was not a singer, he had a strong sense of rhythm, notes and tunes—and occasion. He could come up with a relevant couplet or song from the classical poets or mainstream Hindi films to drive home a point.

His obsession for cinema is only too well-known, but was also unrestricted. His genre of filmmaking was more art-house than mainstream commercial, but his interest took everything bar none in its sweep. All his muses in films—Madhuri Dixit, Tabu, Urmila Matondkar, Vidya Balan, Amrita Rao—were essentially from the commercial stream, and he wooed them without compunction.

I first met Husain in the early 1990s when I was editing the city evening *Mid-Day*. It was standard practice every year for the paper to elect Mumbai's 'most influential', and no list was complete without Husain, though with each passing year younger people were staking a hard claim to be on this list.

Mumbai was not just his home; Husain lived and breathed the city. At the aforementioned 'first meeting', I remember asking Husain about what inspired him the most. "Life, love", he said instantly, "and Bombay" he added after a pause. Like many of his vintage, he could never get Mumbai to roll off his tongue.

Over the past two decades we met mainly for professional reasons, usually to get his impression on a current event or some anniversary special for the newspaper. Our conversations would be brief, beginning with perfunctory inquiries about his latest pursuit—painting or film—and invariably veer around to food.

Since my expertise on art is as evolved as Munaf Patel's about batting technique, this was just as well. But it is astonishing how a common interest can lend continuity to a relationship that would otherwise be unsustainable. There were times when discussion on a particular kind of dish would be revived after even a couple of years, the pieces quickly put together to create a meaningful canvas, however small.

Husain was a frugal eater, but from what I recall of our chats, driven by passionate (though not expensive) choice in this too. He was not the banquet and lavish buffet sort. Since he spoke very little and in a gurgling

manner some words would be swallowed and hard to decipher, but some came through clearly and consistently.

Street food seemed to be his favourite. *Khichda, kababs, chana-batata, daal-chaawal, chai, firni, falooda*, and *jalebi* were a few of these: all derived from various parts of the country but now thoroughly absorbed in the melting pot culture of this metropolis. Anybody who has lived here reasonably long will find these familiar in satiating hunger or propping up conversation tastefully.

Despite the fact that his physical appearance remained the same for so long as to become his identity, Husain bespoke Mumbai's cultural vicissitudes in its myriad dimensions, not merely food. Through his passions, pursuits, achievements and friendships he was the embodiment of the ebullience, contradictions, confluences, aspirations and disparities that define this city.

He may have been born in Pandharpur, grown up in Indore, trotted the globe for half a century, taken exile in the Middle East, died and is buried in London—an 'international gypsy' to fit his own description—but Mumbai, especially the island city, I would like to reiterate, was Husain's domain, his abiding love.

Of course he benefited greatly too from this relationship. His early career was as a painter of film hoardings at Bhendi Bazar probably inspired his deep interest in cinema apart from giving him bare wherewithal. At Badar Baug near Grant Road he lived for several years, traversing the areas around Byculla, J J Hospital, Crawford Market, often on foot, leading to great physical stress but garnering rich experience of life nonetheless.

Gradually Husain rose from hardship and obscurity into riches and fame, and moved to the tony Cuffe Parade area where he lived till his banishment. But the sights, sounds, smells and preferences of his early existence never left him.

In the late 1940s and early 50s, painters affiliated to the Progressive Artists Group which Husain had joined would meet at the Bombay Arts Society office in the Jehangir Art Gallery, or at Marine Drive, watching the waves from the Arabian Sea lap the shores of the city, discussing presumably the fate of Indian art, indeed India, post-Partition.

In the mid-1960s, Husain struck up a lasting friendship with Kali Pundole, and got associated with the Pundole Art Gallery in Fort which was to promote modern and contemporary Indian art and went a long way in making him the superstar he became. The gallery has Husain's famous horses painted on the wall outside.

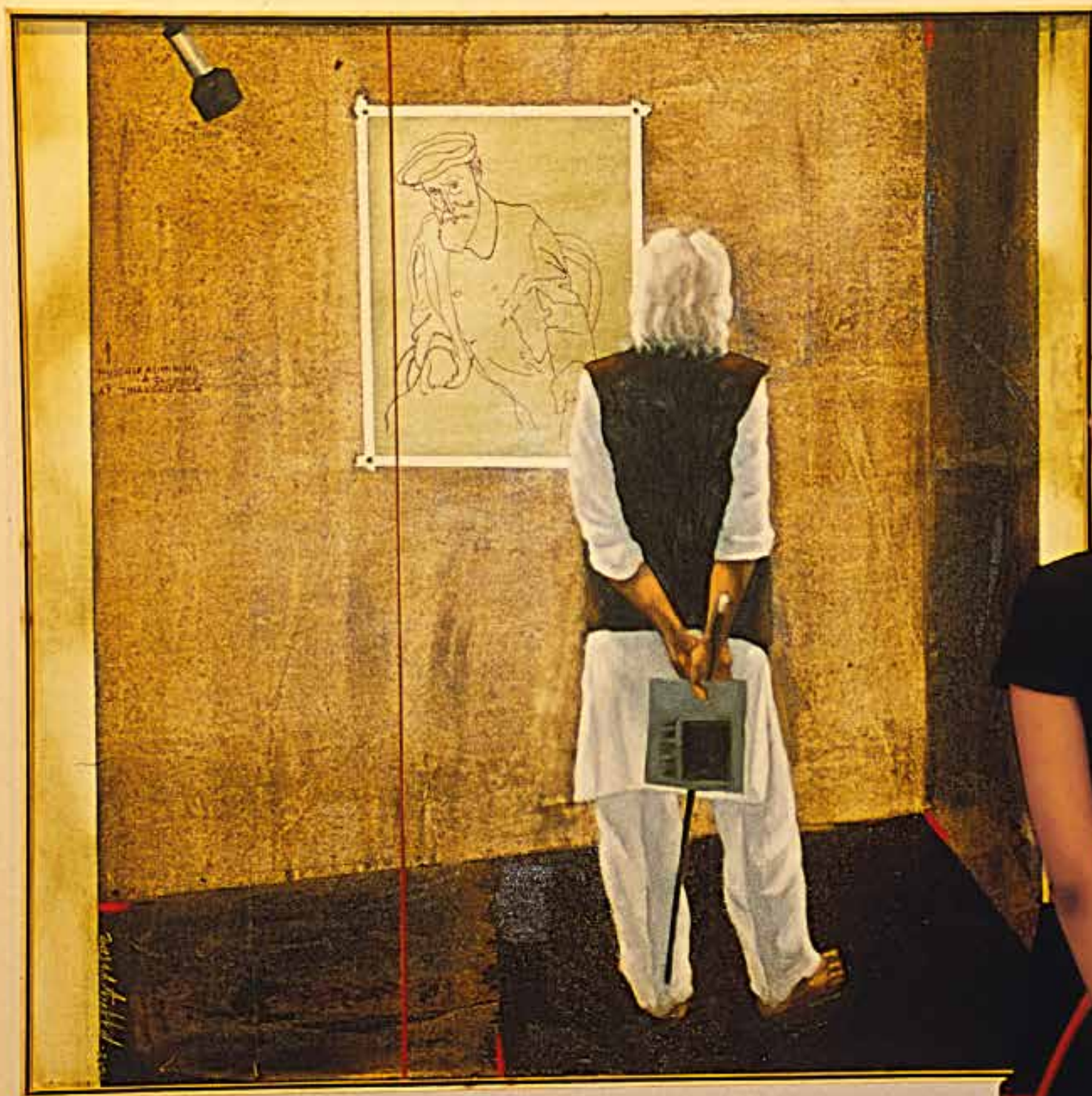
As he became more renowned, Husain was also in huge demand, and not merely from art buyers and dealers, but also from high society. He may have had the demeanour and some manifest virtues of a sufi, but he had not renounced the world. To the contrary, he enjoyed money, fame and the company of the rich and famous without getting trapped into a chimera. Every now and then he would be accused of hobnobbing with the snob set, but he had a strong streak of inverse snobbery in him which could find startling expression. For instance, he refused to comply with the requirements of the snooty Willingdon Club to wear shoes, and made walking barefoot a cause celebre.

Interestingly, one of his closest friends was Munna Javeri, owner of Joy Shoes which retails from the Taj Mahal hotel. The last 'contact' I had with Husain, if it can be called that, was when Munna hosted a party at the Taj (on his birthday, if I recollect correctly) a few years ago. Husain was then living in Dubai in exile and it seemed intriguing and newsworthy that he would brave the cases and protests against him to come to India.

As it happened, the 'Husain' who was present at the party was the actor Tom Alter in disguise. But behind the fun and the satire lay the supreme irony of a stellar artist who had been uprooted from his city and country on rather flimsy pretext.

This was to find high-decibel rebuke and lament from almost every quarter of society when he died—alas, all too late.

*Parts of this piece appeared in *Hindustan Times* on June 12th, 2011.



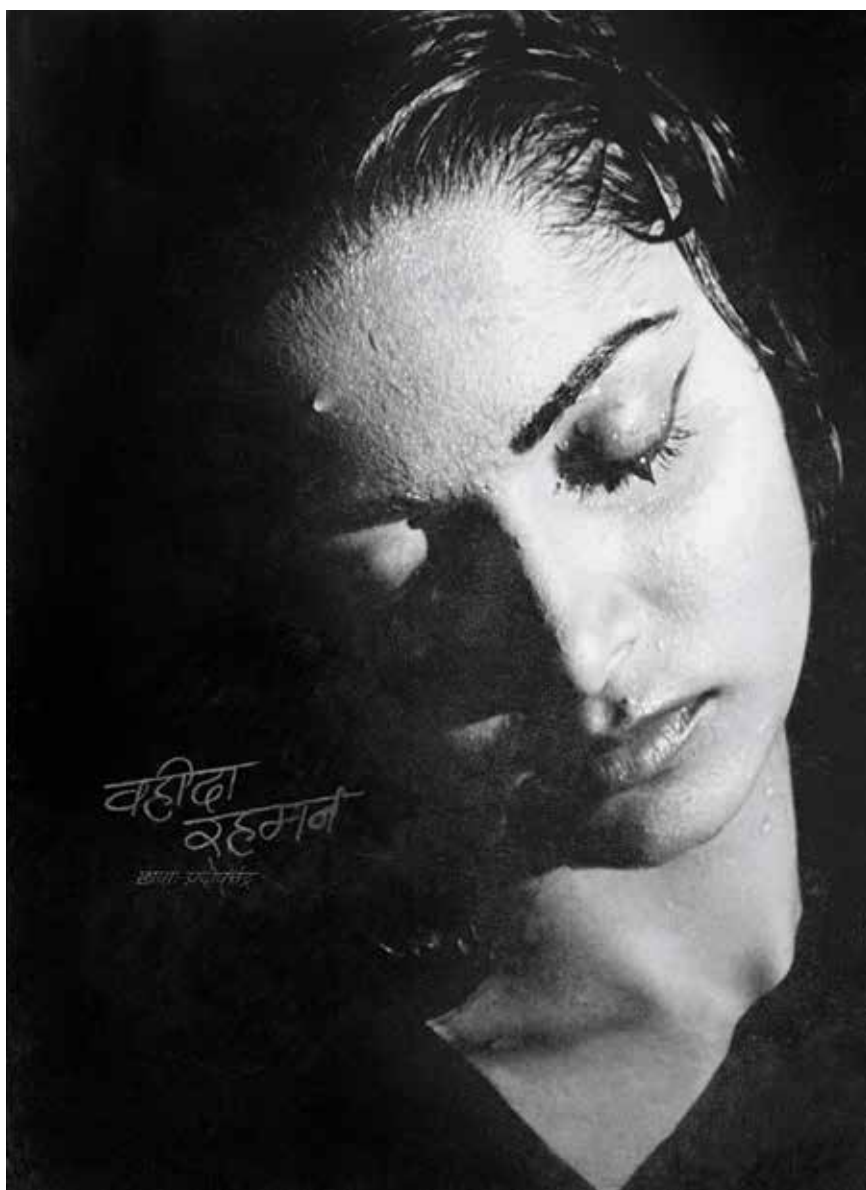
Introduction

The Author Reminisces

I was introduced to the world of art at a very young age. My father, Jnan Chandra, was a Hindi journalist by profession but his heart was set on painting. As a child, I remember seeing him paint in his spare time and having animated discussions with painters whom he used to invite home on a regular basis. The walls of our home in Allahabad were adorned with paintings gifted to my father by his artist friends. There were numerous portraits of my father painted in different styles and forms. Two huge paintings of dogs hung in the hall, so real and beautiful that I wanted to keep a dog as a pet. My father dashed this fanciful notion by pointing out that I was so fearful of dogs that I wouldn't come anywhere near touching distance of anything resembling a canine! But the painting that I really loved was of a man sailing in a boat; I overheard my father telling a fellow art lover that it was painted with a brush made from the hair of a squirrel. As an adult, knowing Husain saab and being introduced to his paintings was a dream come true. Working on this book is the fulfillment of a childhood dream.

On moving from Allahabad to Mumbai in 1955, my family set up home at Malad. Ram Kumar Sharma, an art director with Filmistan Studios became friendly with my father. An old friend of my father's wanted him to help his young son, Chandramohan, who had just come down to Mumbai from Allahabad. On my father's recommendation, Chandramohan got a job with Ram Kumar. But the young man could not keep up with the art director's fiery temperament and quit.

A woman looks at a painting of Husain by artist Yusuf Arakkal at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai



Waheeda Rehman on the sets of the film *Baat Ek Raat Ki*. This photo launched Pradeep Chandra's career as a professional photographer

Chandramohan started staying with us and along with my late elder brother Shiva Chandra, he set up NAINA, a small studio which used to design publicity material like show card posters for films. Some of the films for which they designed publicity material were *Teesri Gali* with Shyama, *Black Cat* with Balraj Sahni, *Kaarigar*, *Aparadhi Kaun*, *Picnic* and *Mr. X*, among others. Chandramohan went on to become one of the most famous publicity designers in the Hindi film industry, signing off his posters as C. Mohan. Chandramohan was originally a painter and he tried his level best to make a painter out of me. Today, the fact that I dabble in painting is due to him.

My brother moved into film direction and I started visiting film sets regularly. I would often go directly from school to Filmistan and Bombay Talkies. I was entrusted with my brother's camera, a Nikon with a heavy 135 telephoto lens, and shot with it when he was not looking. I shot a photograph of Waheeda Rehman, on the sets of the film *Baat Ek Raat Ki* with Dev Anand, while I was still in school. It was published in *Filmfare*. I have been a photographer since then, the last four decades of which I have spent as a professional.

I noticed Husain saab's work for the first time on the cover of *Illustrated Weekly of India*—it was a portrait of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru that appeared in the special issue titled *Homage to Nehru* in 1964. The issue had some excellent photographs by T.S. Satyen, Jitendra Arya and others to stoke my interest. Even then, Husain's work stood apart. He had painted three portraits of Nehru in the issue—the cover portrait in blue brown and black, a double page spread in deep blue and grey and one in red, blue and brown. Even for a person with a passing acquaintance with art, it was very bold and striking. In the same month that Husain's portrait of Nehru appeared in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Navneet's Hindi Digest* published a blue cover painting of the Himalayas by Roerich. The colours that were used in the painting were also very striking. I remember my father telling me that Roerich mostly paints mountains and the Himalayas were a special favourite of his. But unlike painters like Roerich who specialise in one subject, Husain's body of work covers multifarious areas of interest. The bold combination of colours that Husain employs in his paintings

has continued to fascinate me and I believe this is Husain's speciality; very few painters can match Husain's use of colours.

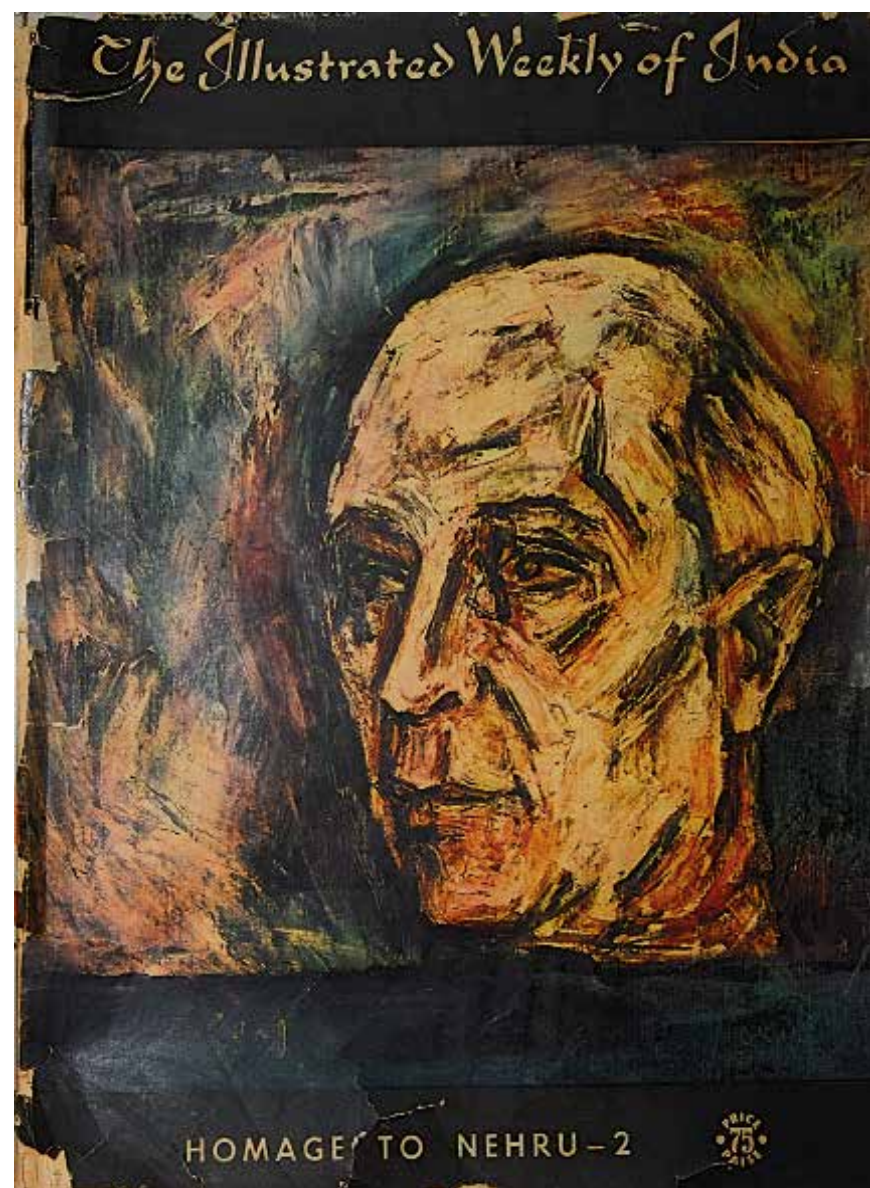
I had to move to Delhi but I kept track of Husain's work that appeared in magazines and also on a couple of book covers, though I cannot recall the names of those books. I regularly roamed the streets of Delhi to take photographs. On one occasion, I happened to be near Dhoomimal Art Gallery at Connaught Place. On a whim, I entered the gallery where an abstract painting of Husain's had been exhibited. It was the first time that I had seen an original Husain painting and I was transfixed. Seeing me so engrossed Dhoomimal, who was very helpful to young artists, assumed that I was a painter and wanted to see my work. When he heard I was a photographer, he seemed disappointed.

In Delhi I stayed at Bengali Market, close to Triveni Kala Sangam. It was in the art gallery there that I saw Husain's exhibition for the first time. Though I could rattle off names of painters like Roerich, Tagore and Nandalal Bose who were discussed in my home, I was not very aware of Husain's range of work then. But Husain's paintings at the exhibition with their use of bold colours and a gargantuan scale of imagination left me speechless.

I also saw Husain saab for the first time at Triveni Kala Sangam. He was surrounded by people and looked every inch a star. He was barefoot and was wearing a kurta-pyjama with a red muffler slung around his neck. Over the years, I have admired Husain saab's sense of style and the absolute confidence with which he carries himself. He is totally at ease wearing a three-piece suit with a bowtie and being barefoot at the same time.

Husain saab used to come to a coffee shop (which no longer exists) at Connaught Place at times in his car which he himself had painted, and which was instantly recognised by onlookers. I remember sometimes waiting near his car in Connaught Place and also at Nizamuddin. I photographed him a few times but hardly interacted with him.

In 1980, I came back to Mumbai after taking a job as photo editor of a film magazine *Super* which was then published by Namita Gokhale



The painting of Nehru by Husain on the cover of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1964 caught the author's eye. It was the first artwork of Husain's that he was exposed to



Husain often slept in the galleries where he was working. He would just unroll his *dhurrie* (cloth mat) and lie down for a quick nap whenever he felt the need



Paintings by Husain featuring horses became iconic

who is now a well known novelist. As part of my job, I started meeting Husain saab off and on for photo shoots. I often saw Husain walking on the streets of Mumbai near Taj Mahal Hotel and Jehangir Art Gallery. I remember an exhibition of his at the Jehangir Art Gallery, inaugurated by Sonia Gandhi. I shot a couple of black and white rolls but unfortunately those rolls got lost. But I still have one print which I treasure.

Then I shifted to a newspaper and started photographing the painter at many openings, galleries, and other gatherings. I remember meeting him at the gatherings of Murli Deora which were held at the Taj Mahal Hotel, Cricket Club of India and other places. During this period, I interacted with him on a few occasions but I got to know Husain saab closely once I joined the *Illustrated Weekly of India*.

Pritish Nandy was the editorial director of the *Times of India* group and the editor of *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Filmfare* and the *Evening News of India*. Nandy was promoting art in a big way at the time. Artists from all over the country were getting prime space in his magazines. The *Illustrated Weekly* did cover stories not only on art with M.F. Husain but also on the photographer Raghu Rai.

Husain used to drop in to meet Pritish Nandy often unannounced. On not finding him, he would leave a drawing for Mr. Nandy. I would not hesitate to barge into the boss' cabin to meet Husain saab. I shifted to another newspaper, *The Observer* but I kept meeting the painter who would come at times and draw something special for the Sunday paper. By now, he had started liking my photographs and would often borrow a few for himself.

Pundole Art Gallery at Flora Fountain in Mumbai became my favourite haunt where I could catch him painting. Once at the gallery, I asked the gallery owner Dadiba Pundole if Husain was there. He pointed towards a small room where the world famous painter was sleeping peacefully on a *chatai* (mat) on the ground, without a care in the world. On another occasion, I was standing near my office when Husain offered to drop me to where I was going to cover a political rally.

By this time, digital photography had arrived and it was easier to take a whole lot of pictures and get prints made of selected ones.





Husain with long time friend Munna Javeri outside the Emirate Towers in Dubai

Facing pg.: Husain's mischievous side often revealed itself in the little notes he left for people when he couldn't find them at home, or in the case of Prithvi Nandy, at the office



Clockwise from top left:

Husain signing autographs at H. Yusuf Alibhai, his favourite stationary shop in Indore

H. Yusuf Alibhai from outside

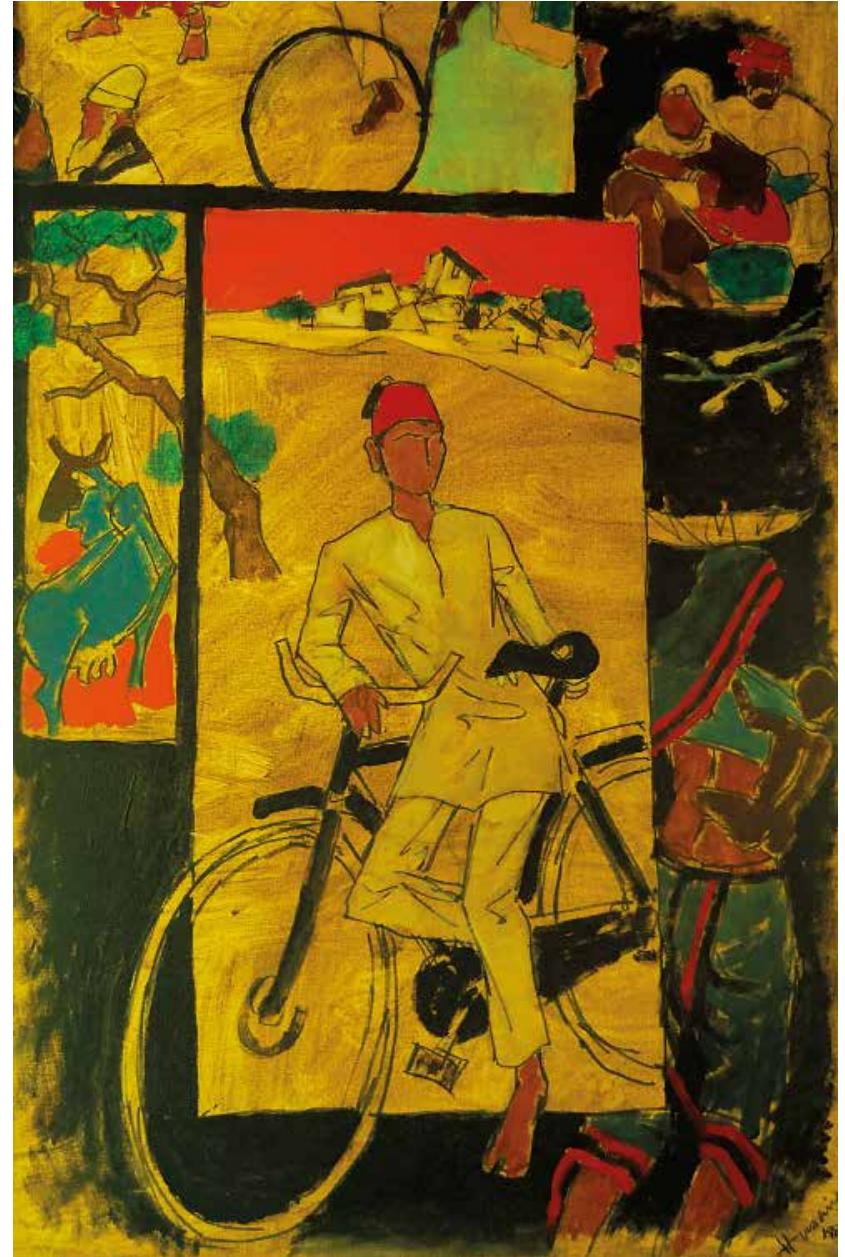
Husain surrounded by his family during his last Eid at Badar Baug, Mumbai. Front row, left to right: Raisa, Owais, Rahil, Zaara, Najma and Anisa. Standing, left to right: Rabiba, Aneeqa, Rakshanda, Reimafaiza, Mahera, Husain, Aqueela, Mehvash, Shafaat and Mustafa

A self-portrait depicting Husain’s years growing up in Indore

Husain with his grandchildren

Agra Hotel, one of Husain’s favourite food joints in Indore





Pg. 44: (left) A sketch Husain made for Prithvi Nandy and his wife Rina

(right) The sketch Husain made on the ceiling of Dr Mukesh Batra's clinic in Mumbai



Husain saab would personally select a few that he liked and ask for prints. He would say at times, “*Kitne paise doon? Print tum khud to nahin banaate.*” (How much should I pay you? After all, you don’t make the prints yourself). But for me, the fact that he had liked my pictures and selected some for himself was reward enough.

Once I remember someone telling me that Husain saab had got his long beard trimmed. I immediately rushed to his home at Cuff Parade at the other end of Mumbai. Looking at me he said, “*Tumhe khabar lag gayee?*”, (So you got the news?). My paper was about to go to press and I rushed back with an excellent picture which appeared next day on the city page.

On one of his birthdays, Husain’s close friend Munna Javeri called me and asked me to come for the party in the evening. The moment



I entered I was given a red fez to wear which I saw every invitee wearing. Many members of Mumbai’s swish set—artists Bal Chhabra and Tyeb Mehta, journalist and editor Farzana Contractor, architect and industrialist Niranjan Hiranandani, actor Mumtaz—had turned up in the red cap. Anurag Bhatnagar, General Manager at Mumbai’s Le Meridien, was engaged to organise the event and he delivered a crackling party! Food and drinks were as befitting the occasion and there were belly dancers to add colour to the party. Husain saab danced as well, and the party continued into the wee hours of the morning with the birthday boy still in high spirits.

Another year, another birthday; a weekly magazine wanted to do a cover story on him and asked me if I could do the interview with Husain. I called him several times and when he didn’t respond



I landed up at his daughter Raisa's home at Worli. He was sleeping but I requested Raisa to call me back when he woke up. At six in the evening, Raisa called and I went to wish him. I thought that he wouldn't spare much time but we ended up having a lengthy chat. He even called his grandchildren for pictures and I got one of the best stories of my career.

While doing a shoot at Film City in Mumbai one day in 1997, I came to know that Husain saab was near by, shooting for a film. I managed to catch up with him the next day. His son, Owais accompanied by his wife Reema and sister Raisa were also present. Husain was painting a huge white canvas. When I asked about it, he said, "*Ye meri autobiography par film ban rahee hai—Pandharpur ka ek ladka*" (It is a film on my life titled A Boy



from Pandharpur). It was an exclusive story in the *Bombay Times* next day.

When he was in the midst of *Gaja Gamini*, I went to the Mehboob studios for a shoot. He told me that media was not allowed but took me in and showed me the set. The moment I took out my camera, he reminded me again that the media was not allowed to shoot. I insisted, saying, "I am your friend and you can't say no to me." The next day, the *Bombay Times* had the first picture of the

(left) Husain painting in his home in Doha

(right) Husain relaxing at his home in Cuffe Parade, Mumbai





One of Husain's most characteristic paintings, *Between the Spider and the Lamp*. This artwork was commemorated as a postage stamp in 1982

Left: Husain looks on at a poster of his muse, actress Madhuri Dixit as Chandramukhi in the 2002 film *Devdas* during his exhibition at Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai



film. My visits to Mehboob Studio started becoming more regular. Once I photographed Madhuri in the film and left the picture with the editor. She expressed her unhappiness that I was being partial to Husain saab's film.

Husain never likes to discuss the commercial worth of his work. Once, I wanted to do a story on Husain the businessman, along with my journalist daughter Priyanka. He met us at the Taj in Mumbai, dressed in a white linen suit and looking quite stylish. We went to a friend's office in the Taj and he made himself comfortable in front of a computer. But he refused to talk about business saying, "How can art be business?" Much to my daughter's disappointment, the *Bombay Times* rejected the story, but the picture I took appeared on the cover page. Husain saab liked it very much.

Husain saab is very open and has his own way of making people who meet him comfortable. For his press conference on *Gaja Gamini* at The Club in Andheri, Mumbai, I went along with my daughter Priyanka. He met us at the entrance and welcomed us. I asked him how long he would take to start. He looked at Priyanka and said, "*Ab tum aa gayee ho to shuroo kar dete hain*". (Now that you have come, we will start at once.)

Husain has always been generous about gifting his drawings and paintings. Nadira Babbar, who has had close ties with Husain since she was a young woman told me that the painter had come to meet her mother Razia Sajjad Zaheer in Delhi in 1976. No one was at home so Husain painted the door, signed and left. Even at her home at Juhu in Mumbai, he had come once and painted a big mural on the wall and surprised the family. Although he was abroad when Husain was informed about Nadira's daughter Juhi's wedding, he immediately painted a huge peacock as a wedding card with J written on it and send it to Nadira. I came to know about

Husain shares a joke with actress Urmila Matondkar during the Eid lunch at Badar Baug, Mumbai

another such quaint story. Husain was sitting at a restaurant and having lunch when he liked the face of a person at an adjacent table. After finishing his lunch he took out his sketch pen and took a napkin lying on the table and drew a portrait of the unknown person sitting on the other table. Before leaving the restaurant, he asked the waiter to hand over the portrait to the person. The lucky person couldn't believe that he ended up with a signed portrait by Husain himself!

When Husain's exhibition on Madhuri titled *Chandramukhi* was being planned at the Tao Art Gallery in Mumbai in 2002, he kept redesigning the gallery till the last moment. On the evening of the opening, he appeared in a suit and shoes for a change. He was beaming with happiness and thrilled that Madhuri Dixit was going to inaugurate the show. By the time she came, it was so crowded that she couldn't see the exhibition completely. Husain saab was disappointed; in a role reversal of sorts, he was an awestruck fan of Madhuri's, almost blushing in her presence! Looking at him that evening, I realised that every time I shot the man, he revealed a new side of himself.

In a chance conversation, I told him that I had found the negative of his first meeting with Madhuri in which he was giving her an award at the Filmfare function. He asked me for a print, and I forgot to give him the print. As luck would have it, I was having dinner with my family at the Chinese restaurant of Hotel Regency in Mumbai, (now part of the Taj Group) and he entered with his family. He refused to speak with me as I had forgotten to give him the print. His anger could indeed be child like! All was forgiven when I finally gave him the photograph.

His criticism can be equally withering and to the point. He visited my exhibition on the *bavelis* of Shekhavati at the Tao Art Gallery in 2002 in which I had presented pictures on canvas. He spent a lot of time looking at my work but at the end when I asked for his opinion he said, "*Ab tum journalism chod kar commercial kyon ho rahe ho?*" (Why are you neglecting journalism and becoming a commercial artist?). I explained that I wanted photography also to be recognised as an art form.

Like any great artist, Husain also has an endearing sense of quirkiness. Dr. Mukesh Batra, the well-known face of homeopathy in India and a close friend, narrates an interesting incident. "Once after I had treated Husain, he wanted to gift me something. He had already gifted me a painting of a horse, but nevertheless I asked him to do a special painting just for me. He took out his brush and within 10 minutes he made the painting on the ceiling. Husain explained that the world's best paintings are on ceilings, like in the Sistine Chapel. Paintings are better appreciated in a supine position. He told me that when my patients lie down on the bed of my clinic, they would see the ceiling and feel the healing process!"

I realised the great esteem his peers have for him while walking with F.N. Souza under the Byculla Bridge in Mumbai when the conversation turned to Husain. Souza remarked that there is only one word to describe



M.F.Husain and Anil Relia, founder of Archer Art Gallery in Ahmedabad, looking at a work of Pradeep Chandra's at Tao Art Gallery Mumbai



Above: Husain looking at Pradeep Chandra's photos from his exhibition on Shekhawati at Tao Art Galery, Mumbai

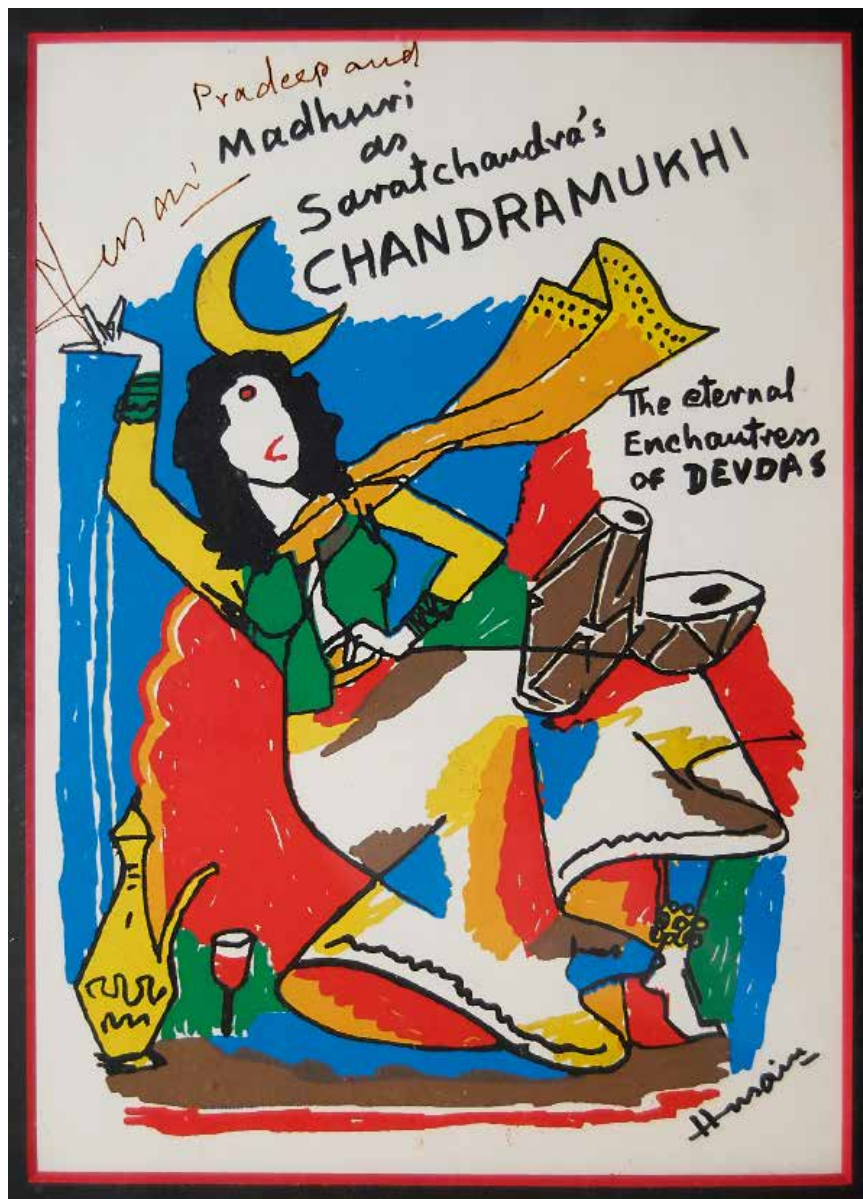


Right: Husain with Pradeep Chandra at Tao Art Gallery



Above: Husain with Tao Art Gallery owner Kalpana Shah at Pradeep Chandra's exhibition

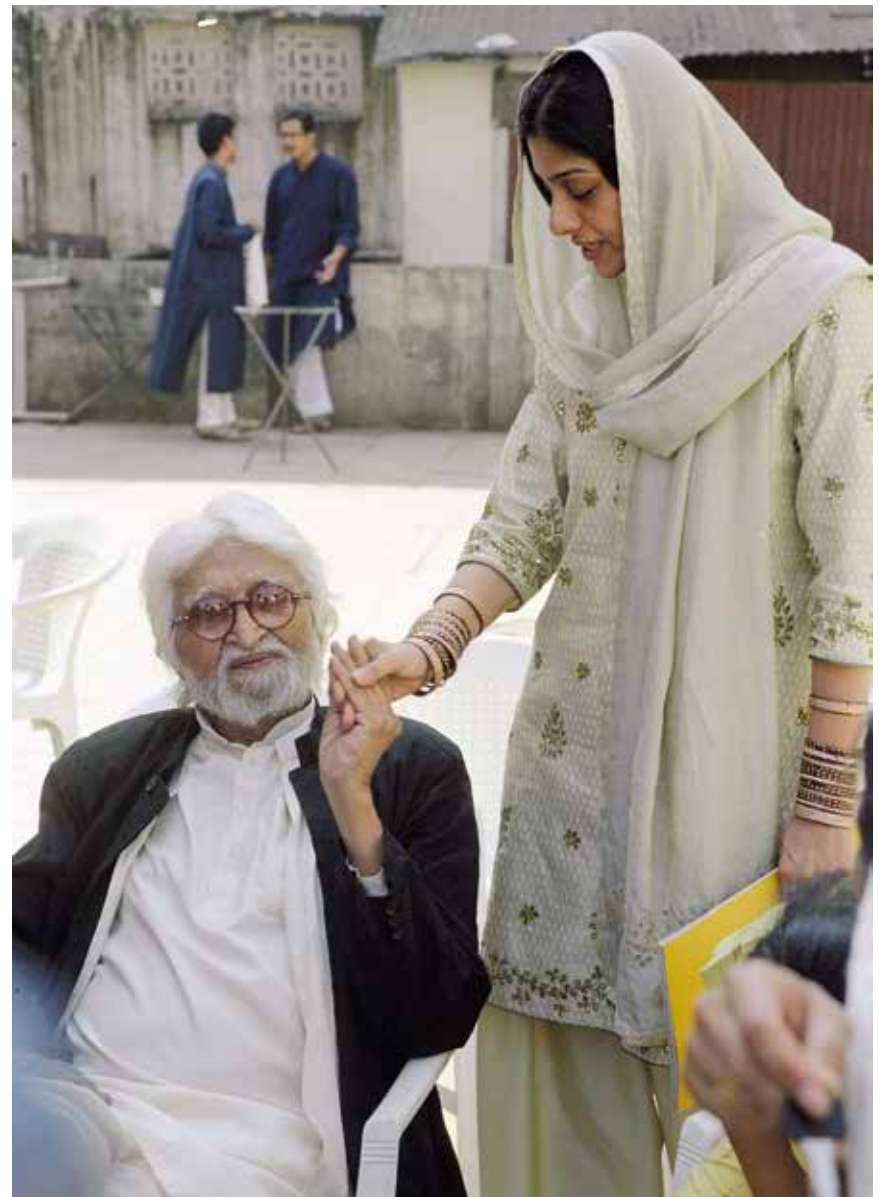
Left: Husain looks at photos from Pradeep Chandra's exhibition



Husain: amazing. But with a twinkle in his eye, he said that the world should give him some credit for discovering Husain. He was the one who noticed versatility in Husain's work and invited him to join the Progressive Art Group, a move which gave such a fillip to Husain's nascent career.

Left: A card painted by Husain and addressed to Pradeep Chandra, inviting him to a special screening of *Devdas*

Right: The actress Tabu and Husain at Husain's last Eid in Badar Baug



Once, Husain and I were discussing books and I broached the idea of compiling my pictures of him. He liked the idea. I started searching all my old pictures and gave him the prints. He would select some but keep all. He advised me to do a small sized book so that he could write a line under each picture. The book kept getting delayed. He called me and took me to painter J.P. Singhal's studio where he had got some work done earlier. He asked Singhal to get the pictures scanned and start designing. Unfortunately before we could start, he moved to Dubai.

Ever since, we have been in touch sporadically. I have done a few telephonic interviews with him since he left India and written a few articles



Husain painting at Pundole Art Gallery



on him. I did not give up the idea of doing a book of photographs on him. I created a dummy of this book and asked our common friend, Munna Javeri to present it to him in New York on his 94th birthday.

Above and facing pg.: The artist enjoying Eid lunch with friends at Badar Baug

Fortunately, Husain saab liked the dummy and asked me to go ahead with the book.

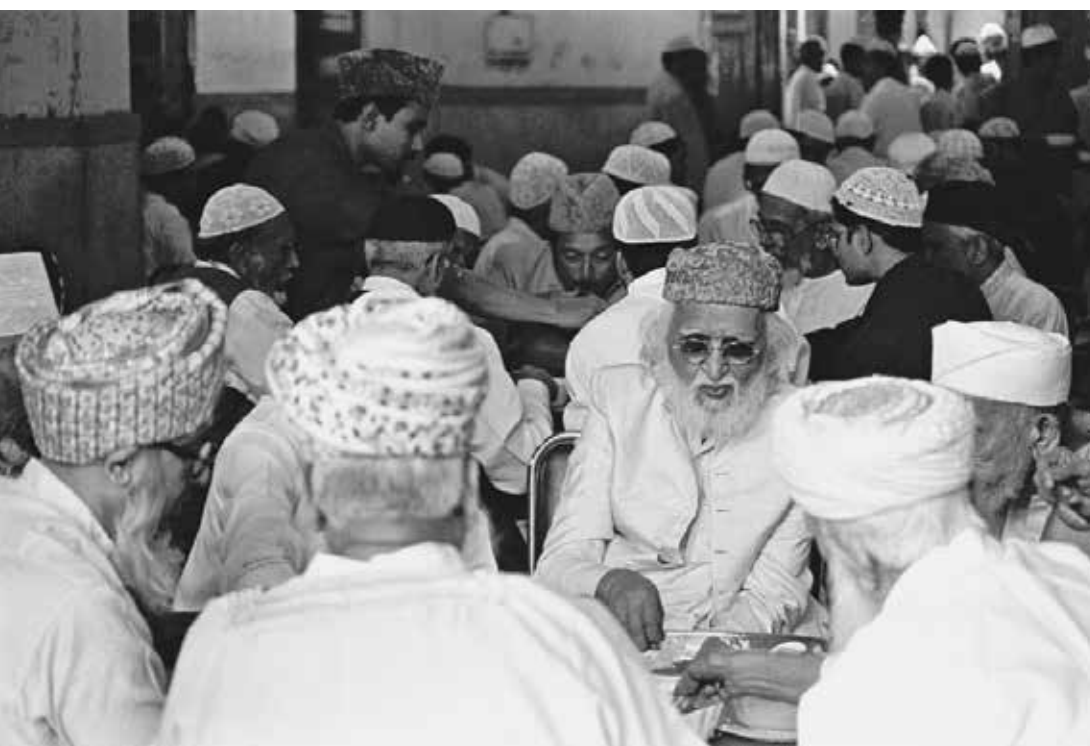
After leaving India, he has mentioned to me a few times that he would be soon be returning to India. In October 2010, Kalpana Shah of Tao Art Gallery mentioned at the opening of Owais' (Husain's son) exhibition that she plans to have an exhibition of Husain's work in 2012 and is confident that she will be able to convince the painter to come

and inaugurate the show. But I have my doubts—during the Art Summit held at Delhi in January 2011, the exhibition of Husain’s work met with a lot of protests and the works could be exhibited only under police protection. We may never see Husain in India again.

I have many memories of Husain, but the ones I treasure the most are those of his Eid celebrations. In these celebrations, he usually never called the media. He would begin the celebrations by praying along with his old friends. He would also call many people over for lunch. There would be a long wooden table in the centre and he would sit along with his age group of friends. His elder son Shafat would bring a bowl of water for everyone to wash their hands in. Food would be served in a huge *thali* (plate) and the group would share the meal. At the start of the meal, Husain would offer salt in a spoon and the group would dip their fingers in the spoon and taste. This was a ritual strictly followed. Food was generally served to everyone present with the utmost respect, under the

supervision of Husain’s youngest son, Owais. Once he finished his meal, Husain saab would generally go to other tables and enquire if everyone was comfortable and had eaten well. He would particularly urge everyone to have the sweet dish. When I first went to the Eid celebration years ago, I wanted to document everything. Husain saab stopped me, “*Ab bas, pabele kuch kha lo!*” (Enough! Please eat something first).

On the last Eid he celebrated in Mumbai, there was a huge gathering with many faces that I had not seen earlier. Actors Urmila Matondkar and Tabu, journalist Khalid Mohammed and his close friend Rashda Siddiqui were all present. Husain saab looked very happy. I asked him if I could have some pictures with Urmila. He took me around the compound and sat on the stairs, laughing and posing. As we returned, I shot a picture of Husain saab from behind, walking towards the other end of the compound. I did not realize then that he would never return to Badarbaug. But one can always hope....







Cutouts inside Husain Doshi ni Gufa, Husain's museum, now known as Ahmedabad ni Gufa in Ahmedabad. As the word *gufa* suggests, the interiors are rather cave-like

Chapter 1

From Pandharpur to the World

“...My journey is still on. What is important to me is continuity...”

Lord Ram was banished into exile for 14 years. But then he was God incarnate himself. As Vishnu, he returned to earth time and again. He came also in the form of Lord Vithoba in Pandharpur on the banks of the Bhima River. Since then, the ancient town became a holy pilgrimage site for the faithful. Ram's exile is just one of the legendary tales that a small Sulemani boy called Maqbool heard when he went with a friend to see *Ramlila* in his village. It's a different story that Ram's loyal devotee Hanuman fascinated him more. So awestruck was he that the budding artist painted the Monkey God acknowledging his attraction and fascination for the *Ramayana* and its myriad stories. Maqbool was fond of listening to the exploits of Lord Ram, little knowing that Ram's exile would have some meaning for him in the future. When Maqbool was growing up, the self-taught artist drew his own inspired version of Hindu gods and goddesses on paper. It is this propensity to paint Hindu deities in his own style that would come back to haunt him later in his life and lead to his exile from India.

A series of small paintings Husain did for *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Titled *Growing Up in Indore*, it tells the story of his childhood through images

Even a genius like painter and inventor Leonardo da Vinci went into voluntary exile from Italy to France in the last years of his life, largely due to religious conservatives asking for his creative head. Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet, the celebrated French figurative and landscape painter also spent

his last years as an exile in Switzerland. Husain, too, faces similar problems in India. Society has always found it difficult to indulge the free style of painters who normally live life with their blinkers off. Husain seems to be a victim of his free spirit. In the autumn of his life, Husain has chosen to live in a country where he feels more comfortable expressing himself. The artist has moved on while those baying for his blood continue to oppose artistic licence. Husain's life as an artist continues to intrigue us all. Even today, in his ninety-fifth year, the maverick artist has hardly lost his passion for painting. Husain is painting as furiously as he did when he was a motherless child of six years.

Destiny's Child born in Pandharpur

It is in childhood that most initial impressions are formed. For those who are sensitive to their environment, these impressions end up impacting all aspects of life. Little Maqbool who spent his age of innocence in a rural backdrop carries his childhood images even at this advanced age. He was barely one and a half years old when his mother died. He constantly recreates mental images of his lost mother, his benevolent grandfather, his mentor, and his childhood friends as he pours his dreams on canvas.

The legendary artist, poet and filmmaker has walked barefoot to understand Mother India. We trace his footprints to the places he has been touched by. While mapping Maqbool's life, we have to start from Pandharpur. The small pilgrim town in Sholapur, Maharashtra and the seat of Lord Vithoba was well known for its religious bent of mind in the early 19th century when Maqbool was born. It has always been known for its popular pilgrimage sites, and is now also famous as the birth place of India's most revered and controversial painter.

In September 1915, (Husain has never been completely sure in which year he was born. He had deduced it from his mentor Narayan Shridhar Bendre's age who was five years his senior) a son was born to Zunaib and Fida Husain. They named him Maqbool. Maqbool in Urdu means popular, Fida means 'to sacrifice in order to save something', while the origin of the word Husain can be



Husain's closest childhood friend was Mankeshwar, the son of a pandit. They often went to see the *Ramilila* pageant together



An illustration of Husain as a child made from a studio photograph, which was the first formal photograph taken of the artist



traced back to the Arabic *hasuna*, meaning ‘to be good,’ or ‘to be beautiful.’ Hardly did they know then that the boy would live up to his name so characteristically! Maqbool’s mother died when he was a baby, a little later his father remarried and the family moved to Indore. He did not spend many years in Pandharpur but Husain still speaks warmly of the place of his birth.

Years later, on his seventy-fifth birthday Husain was invited to Pandharpur by the temple trustees. Husain went back to his birthplace and the temple of Lord Vithoba. He was adorned with a *tilak* and gifted a Maharashtrian *pagdi* by the temple authorities. Husain was so moved that he picked up his paintbrush and painted on a cow standing nearby at the marketplace, in front of hundreds of people. His visit is still remembered by many of the townspeople.

Humble beginnings

Husain has never been apologetic about his humble beginnings, self taught art or his small town image. Born in a middle class Muslim family, Maqbool had a very humble childhood—a solitary life nurtured by his grandfather. Maqbool’s father was busy with his job as a timekeeper at the Indore-Malwa textile mill while his grandfather, Abdul, took care of him. His grandfather became a beam of light towards his waif-like grandson who had lost his mother. He is so grateful to his paternal grandfather that many of his paintings have the umbrella and the

The exterior and interior of the house where Husain lived in Indore



lantern as *leitmotif*—Abdul used to repair lanterns in the hamlet where electricity was unknown at the time and his umbrella was his prized possession. On his ninety-fourth birthday, he painted a huge canvas in New York where images of his grandfather, his umbrella and his lantern featured prominently.

Maqbool’s father did not fully understand him, but it never struck him that his father hardly had any passion for art. His father opined that art was not a profession that one could raise a family with. In those days a job in a mill or being a shopkeeper were more stable to raise a family with. Maqbool’s father had little tolerance for his growing son’s lack of interest in studies. His father complained that all the boy did was sketch all the time. Maqbool was hungry for his father’s approbation. However, in later years, Husain’s father did acknowledge his son’s gift. While at art school in Indore, Maqbool won a gold medal that prompted his happy father to present him with a set of expensive paints. He remembers the incident with great emotion. “My father had gifted me some expensive colours manufactured by British giants Winsor and Newton. They were so expensive that for many days I did not open them.” He has never forgotten this gesture of encouragement.

Unfortunately, his father did not live to see his son gain fame as a painter. As he was gaining recognition in Bombay, his father’s health was failing. He lay ill in bed when Husain exhibited his paintings as part of a group show at the Bombay Art Society exhibition in 1947. Fida died two months later, even as his son was winning appreciation for the first time.

The stroke of genius rediscovered in Indore

Maqbool was uprooted from the gentle town of Pandharpur to Indore at a tender age. While Pandharpur evokes memories of the age of innocence

The Duldul horse, which Husain saw on *tazias* during the Muharram processions as a child inspired his iconic horse series

for the maverick painter, time spent in Indore was an age of revelations and growing maturity. It was in Indore that he forged his passion as an artist. Whenever he got a chance, he would strap his painting gear to his bicycle and ride out to the surrounding countryside of Indore to paint the landscape. In one such trip, he was fortunate to acquire an admirer very early in his stay at Indore. The admirer was none other than N.S. Bendre, the renowned painter, who recognised the stroke of genius in Maqbool. Finally, the young boy had found someone who understood his fascination for art.

When Bendre advised Maqbool's father to send him to Lalitkala Sansthan, an art school in Indore, it was a turning point for the growing artist. Bendre had attended the same school. Husain joined the art school and discovered that his paintbrushes could sing on the blank canvas. He found that he could do what the final year students were doing. He refused to continue at the art school as he thought that it would be a waste of five years; Maqbool was unorthodox in his thinking even as a young boy. Besides, he never wanted a degree and was prepared to whitewash walls if he didn't get a job. But he was clear about one thing: without the paintbrush he had no identity.

Tracing the life of the gifted artist in Indore has been a memorable journey in itself. The house that Maqbool lived in, in the Parsi *mohalla* in the part of the city called Chhavni, still exists and has assumed historical significance. The present owners have often remarked that the media continues to show its curiosity by often visiting the place.

Husain did his schooling at Sanyogitaganj Balak Vidyalaya in Chhavni. The school still exists but there is no one on the staff old enough to remember the little boy called Maqbool. Mushtaq Ali, India's dashing cricketer of yore, and actor Johnny Walker were also students there.

The *Ramayana* fascinated Husain, and he painted a series of paintings based on the great epic





In between his stay in Indore, his father sent him to Vadodara (Baroda) where he could learn to be a better Muslim. His stepmother, Shireen came from a Bohra Muslim family hailing from Siddhpur near Baroda. Maqbool's father wanted him to be a Maulavi and when he was eight- or nine-years-old, he joined a religious school in Baroda. The patron was Abbas Tyabji who was a great follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He encouraged his wards to wear

khadi. At the time, Maqbool would make huge sketches of Gandhiji and would feel that he was participating in the national movement for freedom that Gandhi was leading. During his stay in Baroda and Siddhpur, he learnt the art of calligraphy and practised the Kulfic *khat* with its geometric forms. He also learnt to write poetry while staying with an uncle at a madrasa in Baroda, something he continues to do during his free time.

Watching *Ramlila* as a child

Life was hard for young Maqbool. He has talked about this in a recent interview with Dr. Ramesh Nirmal. "I lost my mother. I was sent from home to home, and by the age of fourteen or fifteen, I used to suffer

The interior of a classroom where Husain did his schooling in Indore

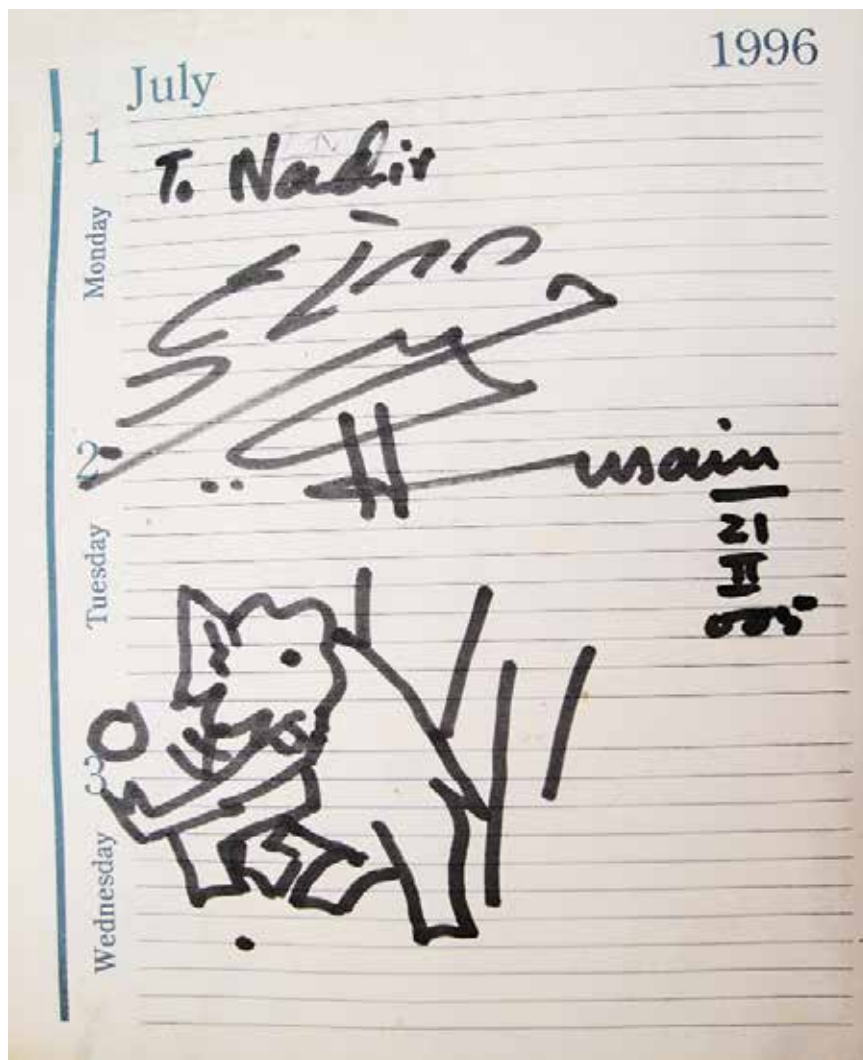
Facing pg.: The art college, Shaskiya Lalit Kala Sansthan Husain attended in Indore

from bad dreams.” He was also aware that his father was unhappy with him because of his lack of interest in studies. Maqbool adds, “When I turned nineteen, all this (nightmares) stopped.” Recourse to spirituality would help him overcome his childhood insecurities. Reluctance to formal studies notwithstanding, Maqbool had a deep sense of spirituality at an early age, reinforced by the sights and sounds he observed in his formative years as a child. He explains, “At the age of nineteen, I started studying books on spirituality. I did so as I had suffered so much in life that the memories would send shivers through me. Those memories are still painful. I had a teacher, Mohammed Ishak, from whom I learned the Koran for two years. I used to discuss the *Gita*, *Upanishads* and the *Puranas* with my friend Mankeshwar. These were spiritual discussions with my philosopher friend. Later he became a saint. After he left for

the Himalayas, I studied the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and other spiritual texts for years. By doing so, I became a peaceful and calm person. I never again had bad dreams.”

Though born in a Muslim Suleiman Bohra family, Maqbool was inclined to the spiritual tales of Hindu gods and goddesses from a very tender age. From the beginning he was fascinated by Hindu scriptures. He recalls with fondness the childhood memories of listening to the *Ramayana* with rapt attention. So enamoured was he by the strong and colourful tales of Ram that he started participating in the *Ramlilas* that were commonly staged in the villages at that time. His friend Mankeshwar joined him in his stints in these *Ramlilas*. He says, “As a child in Pandharpur, and later, Indore, I was enchanted by the *Ramlila*. My friend, Mankeshwar and I were always acting it out and discussing the rich and varied tales of Ram





and Sita with fondness and awe. The *Ramayana* is such a rich, powerful story, as Dr Rajagopalachari says, its myth has become a reality.”

Many years later, he got a chance to express himself on his favourite epic. The year was 1968. Husain met Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia in Hyderabad who suggested that he paint the *Ramayana*. He says, “I painted 150 canvases in eight years. I studied the Valmiki and Tulsi *Ramayana* (two of the most popular versions of the *Ramayana*). In

my view, Valmiki’s version is more emotional. To discuss my doubts, I called on the pundits of Benares (Varanasi). Ujjain’s world famous astrologer Pandit Suryanarayan Vyas and litterateur Dr. Shivmangal Singh Suman were some with whom I debated for hours. When I was doing this, some hard line Muslims asked me why I don’t paint Islamic themes. I asked them whether Islam has as much tolerance; if I make a small mistake in calligraphy, they would tear my canvas.”

As a child he used to see the Muharram procession every year and these have left a deep imprint. In these processions, the Shias lament the death of Hazrat Imam Husain, grandson of prophet Mohamed. The procession consists of bright *tazias* that represent the tomb of the martyr and also includes horses made out of paper and bamboo. These symbolise Duldul, the horse of Hazrat Husain. Maqbool witnessed these processions in his

Left: The sketch Husain made for his friend Abdul Waheed’s grandson, Nadir, who he also named

Right: One of the only photographs hand-painted by Husain. The photograph was of Bismillah Bi, Husain’s friend Abdul Waheed’s mother

childhood and was especially fascinated by the horse Duldul. Whenever he went back to Indore, he would visit Kagdipura where the paper and bamboo representations of the Duldul used in the Muharram processions were stored. The emphasis on self-sacrifice during these processions was especially fascinating for an impressionable child.

Maqbool's exposure to religious texts from a very early stage of his life resulted in his interpretations of those religious texts through paintings. Years later, he would create an acclaimed series of paintings on the major religions of the world. These paintings reflect the excellent understanding he has of all the major religions.

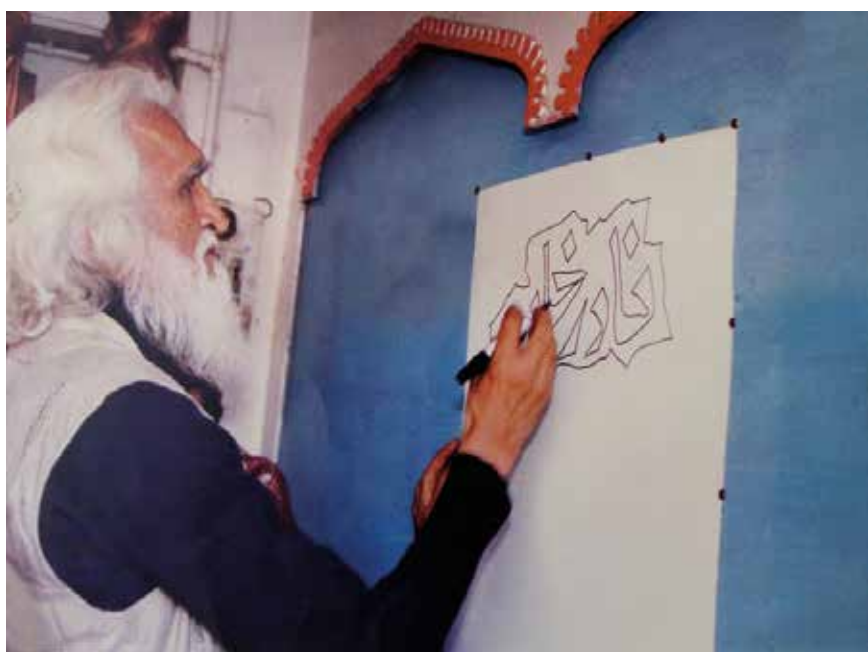
Recharging his memories

Husain's house in Indore is a mute testimony to the presence of a legend in the making. The ownership of the house has changed hands. For the last 30 years, Tanvir Khan has been living in the house. Husain has come back "home" often to reconnect and recharge his memories. In fact, he once landed up there at 2:30 a.m. with a friend! Obviously, the owner was surprised to see a celebrated guest at that odd hour. Tanvir recollects that

Husain sat at the entrance in perfect tranquility. On his visits, he would generally sit on the stairs and make sketches.

Husain's destiny took him back to Indore after a long gap. It was his seventy-fifth birthday and a group called Fankaar invited him to the city. A loving invitation was extended to the painter who had now made Mumbai his home. For Husain this was an excuse to reconnect to his old memories once again and he accepted the invitation. Fankaar had planned an exhibition of the works of a few upcoming and talented artists of Madhya Pradesh at Lal Baug in Indore and had invited Husain to be the chief guest. But Husain never made it to the opening, despite the fact that media publicity and press releases were sent to local dailies. The event was attended by Husain's son Shafat, who said that his father had skipped the event as he was hurt by the communal tension then prevailing in the city. The organisers were disappointed and requested Husain to change his mind. Husain came the next day and officially did the opening.

Husain also did an exhibition of his serigraphs at Devlalikar Art Gallery where he displayed twenty works. He requested the presence of twenty young art students and made each one stand under one of his serigraphs.



Left: Husain making a sketch for Fankaar Art Group, Indore

Right: *Zindagi*, an early film hoarding painted by Husain outside Minerva Theatre, Mumbai





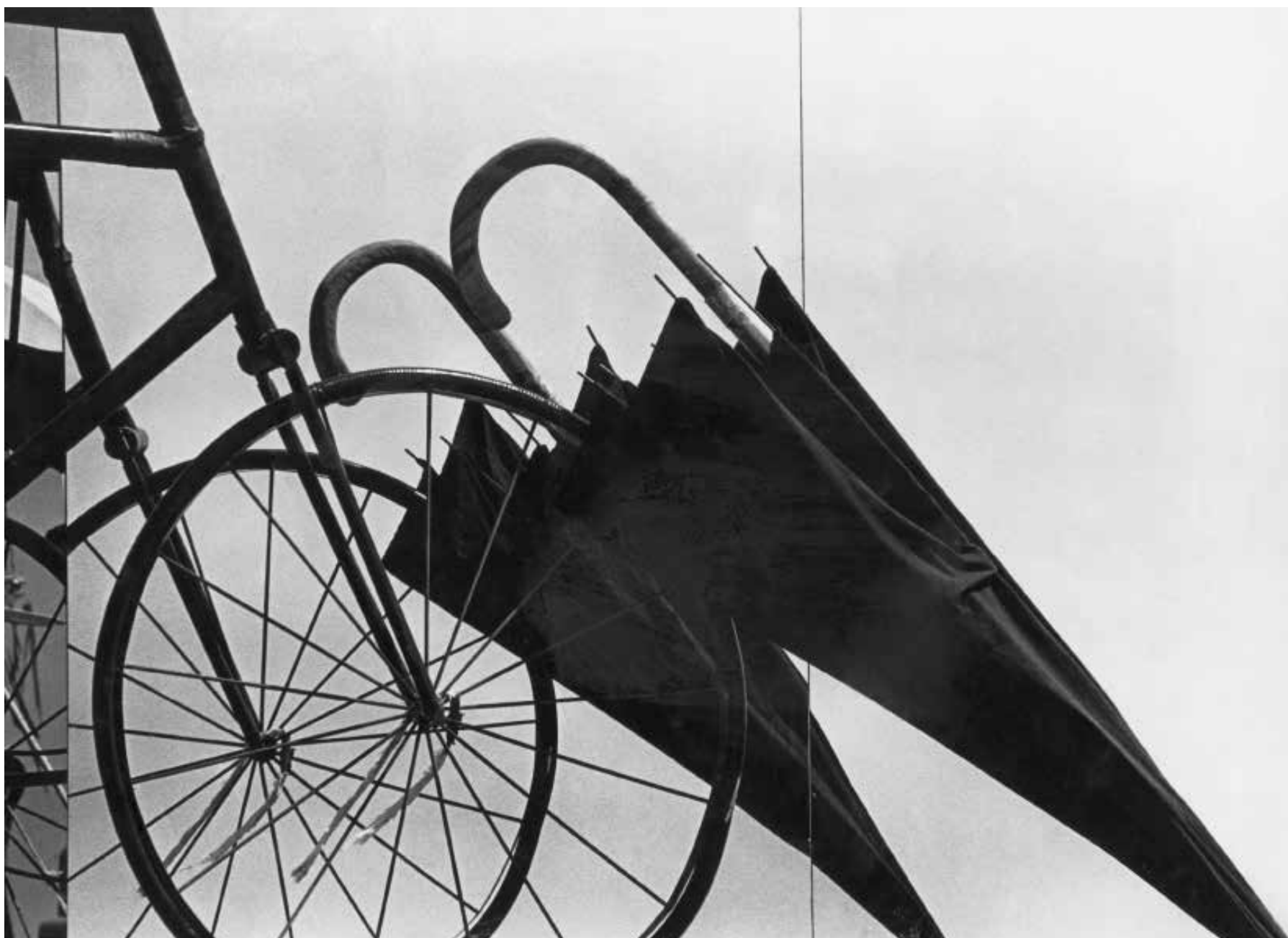
When the exhibition opened, Husain magnanimously announced that each student would be gifted the artwork they were standing under! To the delight of the art lovers present, he also painted live a portrait of Lord Ganpati on a 4 ft x 6 ft canvas within forty minutes. That painting was gifted to the organisers and still remains in their collection. It is in these ways that Husain has delighted and surprised his admirers.

While he was in Indore, Surendra Sanghvi, the owner of the Hindi daily *Chautha Sansar* decided to have a get-together at his residence in honour of Husain. Prabhakar Machewy, editor of the publication and a well known Hindi litterateur and a friend of Husain's was assigned the job of inviting him. Husain accepted the invitation and many prominent citizens of the city were called to meet the legend. But the painter never

turned up for the party that had been hosted in his honour! It was later discovered that Husain had run into an elderly man called Mitthulal Garg at his exhibition. He reminded Husain that the two of them had studied together in school. The old man had told his children and grandchildren about his friendship with Husain as a child. He told Husain, "Today our story is like that of Lord Krishna and Sudama. You are Lord Krishna and

Husain at Tao Art Gallery with gallery owner Kalpana Shah, Raisa Husain and Shafaat Husain and friends

Facing pg.: Anisa Husain, Fazila Husain, Aneeqa and Rabiba (Shafaat Husain's daughters), M.F. Husain, Owais and Mustafa



Umbrellas, another favourite imagery of Husain's



Husain on the set of *Pandharpur ka Ek Ladka* (A Boy from Pandharpur) at Film City, Mumbai

I am poor Sudama. Will you come to my humble dwelling?” (The story is part of the Mahabharata and celebrates the childhood friendship of Lord Krishna who went onto become a king and Sudama who remained a poor peasant.) How could the emotional and sensitive Husain refuse the offer? He skipped the grand party to make his old friend happy. The quaint painter had no qualms leaving the high and mighty cooling their heels at a party to please an old acquaintance and have dinner with him.

Among his friends in Indore, Abdul Waheed was the closest. The two were neighbours when they were little boys. Abdul Waheed remained in Indore and opened a photo studio called Taj Studio. Many years ago, Husain had done a live portrait of Abdul and coloured the black and white photograph of Abdul’s mother Bismillah Bi using water colours. That was the only time the maestro coloured a black and white photograph. Even after Abdul’s death, his son Qadir remains close to Husain. It was Husain who gave the name Nadir to Qadir’s son and maintained the old ties of kinship with the family.

Husain recalls the places he used to visit in Indore with great fondness. He used to buy his art supplies from a shop named H. Yusuf Ali Alibhai, right from his college days. This was the shop from where he bought oil paints for the first time. Husain gifted a painting of a landscape to this shop a long time ago. The story of what finally happened to this landscape painting is interesting. During one of his sojourns in the city, Husain asked Qadir to bring this particular landscape to the Taj Studio. In exchange, he painted a horse motif—for which he is more famous—and gave it to Yusuf Ali. As luck would have it, Husain lost the landscape and the horse motif was stolen from Alibhai’s shop. Only memories remain of this quaint exchange! Another favourite haunt of Husain’s in Indore is the Surya Hotel, a place where he often stayed on his visits there.

The exterior of Husain Doshi ni Gufa, Husain’s museum in Ahmedabad







The interiors of Husain Doshi ni Gufa, his museum in Ahmedabad



The ceiling of Husain Doshi ni Gufa, his museum in Ahmedabad, painted in the artist's characteristic style



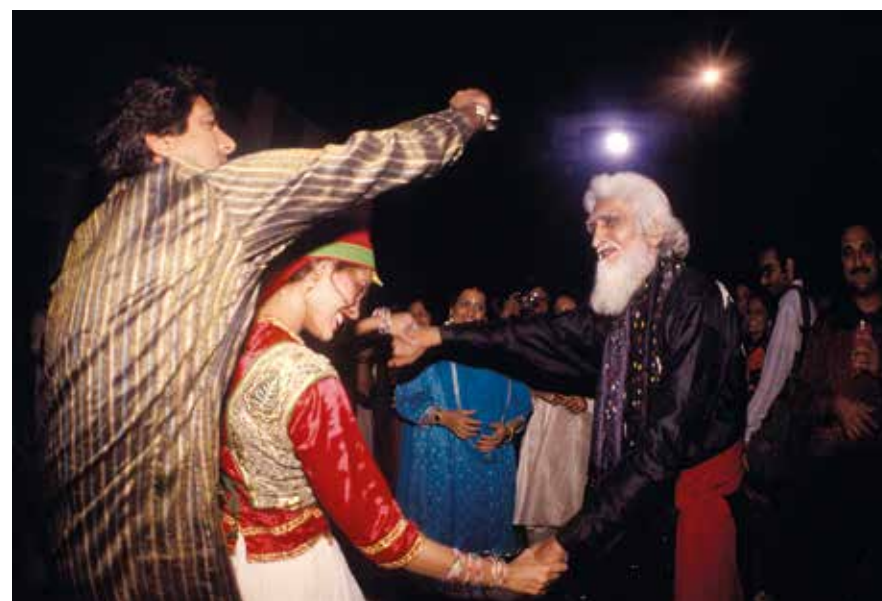
Mumbai migration

Husain first came to Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1934. It is said that in the initial part of his stay in Mumbai, his father asked him to manage his shop in the city. His father had a ghee shop called SF Bros. (the F stood for Fida). He did so for two months but then his father called him back to Indore. Fida Husain had lost his job at the mills. He wrote to his son that he needed him to pitch in his earnings for the household. Husain took a train back home to fulfill his father's wish.

Deeply in love with his art, a young Maqbool was yearning for more colour on his canvas. He returned to Mumbai, the melting pot for many cultures, in 1936. The city of dreams would help him develop his skills as a painter.

When he returned to Mumbai, he had no relatives or friends. Husain turned for help to a person by the name of Shabab who lived on Faras Road and made cinema hoardings. Husain thought that Shabab would help him since they were both from Indore. Shabab had heard his name but was reluctant to engage him to paint cinema hoardings. He was uncertain of Husain's skills as he thought that Husain's work was modern art in which the faces of the big stars wouldn't be as well defined and of a different style than that of hoardings. But he engaged Husain to paint the background of the hoardings at six annas (1 anna = 25 paise) a day. With nowhere to call his own, he would sleep in front of a shop in Faras Road. He would stay in the shabby rooms of the lanes that were inhabited by pimps and prostitutes. This carried on for a few months, during which time he mastered the art of painting cinema hoardings.

Husain then started approaching film distributors directly for work. In his meetings with distributors he would show them the layout of a hoarding that he had made, to showcase his skills. The layout had a small portrait of actor Naseem Bano, mother of the 60s Bollywood star Saira, who was considered a great beauty in those days. Naseem Bano's portrait was from the movie *Punkar*, made by Sohrab Modi. A distributor for New Theatres started giving him assignments. But he earned barely four annas per square foot for a 6 ft x 10 ft canvas. The poor pay from the hoardings was far from adequate in order to make even a humble



living in Mumbai. That was the reality of his life. But, he was also an artist and he had to prove his point. He did the hoardings in free style and on an enormous scale. Since Husain made a meagre income as a cinema hoarding painter, he had to supplement his income to support his family. He ran a company called Maqbool Pandharpurkar and became a wedding decorator. He had another company called Maqbool Cine Painting Works which specialised in posters, banners, litho designs, motor and theatre decoration and floats.

Husain used to paint cinema hoardings in the Grant Road area of Mumbai. While on the job, he became friendly with a family living in the same area. This is how he met with Fazila who later became his wife. Husain and Fazila got married on 11th March, 1941. Husain remembers that he was painting till an hour before his wedding, trying to complete

A dancing Husain is joined by the actor Raj Babbar

Facing pg.: Husain dancing with a folk dancer on the occasion of his 75th birthday while Nadira Babbar looks on at Famous Studios, Mumbai



the hoarding of a film which was to be released the next day! The name of the film was *Lagan* (which ironically means marriage). To reach the wedding venue on time, Husain took a taxi for the first time in his life. On his way he bought a packet of *agarbattis* (incense). Husain married Fazila in a simple *nikaah* ceremony for a *mebr* (bride money) of Rs. 40. He brought his bride home in a *tonga* humming the song from the film *Khazanchi*, “*Saawan ke nazaare hain la, la, la, lulla.*” [Behold the sight and sound of the rains.] He has even captured this episode in a memorable painting which was reproduced in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in December 1990. Husain started his married life in a small room in a Yemeni building in the same area. The room was generously provided by his postman friend, Mohammed Nasir, who lived alone in a two-room house and thought that a room could be spared. Nasir also gave him the Holy Koran as his wedding

Husain enjoys the festivities on his 75th birthday. Also seen are actor Raj Babbar, Parmeshwar Godrej and others

Facing pg.: Husain and his son Mustafa, daughters Aqueela and Raisa, his wife Fazila and friend Mira Javeri at the artist's 75th birthday party

gift. From such humble beginnings, Husain and Fazila fashioned their life together. Theirs was a rags-to-riches story. They had six children—Shafat, Shamshad, Mustafa, Owais, Raisa and Aqueela.

Later, Badar Baugh in the Grant Road area of Mumbai became Husain's residence. The family at that time lived in a single room for which Husain had to pay a rent of Rs 11 per month. There was such a space crunch that the children had to sleep outside! They also remember that every day after the day's work, their father used to paint by the light of the lamp post.

After marriage, there was immense pressure on Husain to increase his income. He had to try his hand at other jobs. He gave up his job as a painter of hoardings and joined a furniture shop called 'Fantasy' at Rs 25 a month. There he designed nursery furniture and wooden toys for children. As part of designing the furniture, he was expected to inscribe English nursery rhymes like *Jack and Jill* on the sides of the furniture. Husain was not comfortable with this and wanted to paint Indian folk songs instead. He created bedroom and drawing room sets based on these folk songs. The Maharaja of Dhangdra liked them so much that he bought the entire range. Husain later found out that the Maharaja had sold the set to an American who took them to Washington.

Husain remembers that he was working in the furniture shop on August 15, 1947 when India gained independence from the British. To commemorate the day, he organised a tableau of freedom with the workers.

Having worked in the furniture shop for six years, Husain started to worry that his dreams of becoming a painter would remain unfulfilled. He was the father of two children but he took the risky step of giving up his secure job to pursue his dreams. He exhibited for the first time at Bombay Art Society in 1947 and won an award. It was around this time that he joined the Progressive Art Group along with five other artists—S.H. Raza, F.N. Souza, V.S. Gaitonde, K.H. Ara and Tyeb Mehta. The six artists had a group show in 1948. Maqbool was now being referred as Husain and was being recognised for his paintings as well as his signature beard.

Steadily, Husain made a name for himself in the world of art. He had a studio next to another artist called Prafulla Dhanukar. The two







Left: Husain enjoys the moves of a belly dancer at his birthday party while Farzana Contractor, editor of *Upper Crust* magazine looks on

Above: The artist Tyeb Mehta and Husain in red fez hats which all the guests were given to wear at Husain's birthday party

Below: Husain with Farhad Jamal, Munna Javeri and another friend

studios shared a wall. She used to sing while painting and the sound of her voice would percolate to Husain's studio walls. Whenever she stopped singing, Husain would immediately ask, "*Prafulla, gaana kyun bandh kar deeya?*" (Prafulla, why have you stopped singing?) When she had an exhibition in Dubai recently, as one of her oldest friends, Husain was the chief guest.

It was in the city of Mumbai that Husain found his niche as an artist. He rose to become one of the greatest painters in the world whose work is now worth crores of rupees. Husain's choices of places to work from are important. Whether it was Indore, Mumbai, Ahmedabad or his exhibitions overseas, he imbibed it all in his creative mind.

Husain is quite quirky in the way he deals with people and places. He is known to form deep attachments with the places he has stayed, but at the same time, he has no qualms about moving on to a new place that his heart fancies. One of the places he loves and speaks of often is Ahmedabad.

Ahmedabad association

Husain's connection with Ahmedabad goes deep. Husain's forefathers are said to hail from the Kabra area of Saraspur, a locality of Ahmedabad. Whenever Husain comes to Gujarat, he always goes for early morning *namaaz* at this place. There is another Ahmedabad connection to Husain; his stepmother was from Siddhpur, about 100 km north of the city.

Speaking of his memories about the place, the painter becomes nostalgic even today. "Ahmedabad and its surrounding areas have been part of my formative childhood memories. When I come back to India, I would naturally be drawn to Ahmedabad, and one of the first things I would do is have a cup of hot tea at the Lucky Tea Stall at Lal Darwaza. This is a tradition I have rarely broken in the four decades that I have been visiting Ahmedabad. There have been times when I have landed in the city and taken an auto rickshaw straight to Lucky. From there, I have called up friends to come and pick me up." He further recalls, "I

remember the days when the stall was just a hand-cart and one had to sip tea sitting on the graves. I have seen three generations of the Lucky family. Given the history, I could not refuse the present owner when he asked me to do something for his walls. Some years ago, I painted a special canvas for him. I finished it late at night and immediately took it to Lucky. We had a cup of tea and I handed over the painting, showing the owner where to hang it."

The city has been a source of inspiration for the painter. "There is so much to Ahmedabad's beautiful architecture which has inspired me to make many drawings. And it is the home of Mahatma Gandhi which has given the city a very special identity. To pay tribute to this very special city, I agreed to the idea of 'Amdavad Ni Gufa', which is a museum of my work. It was first called 'Husain-Doshi Gufa' as it is collaboration between architect B.V. Doshi and myself, but then I felt it should be dedicated to the city. I took a brush in hand and repainted the board myself."

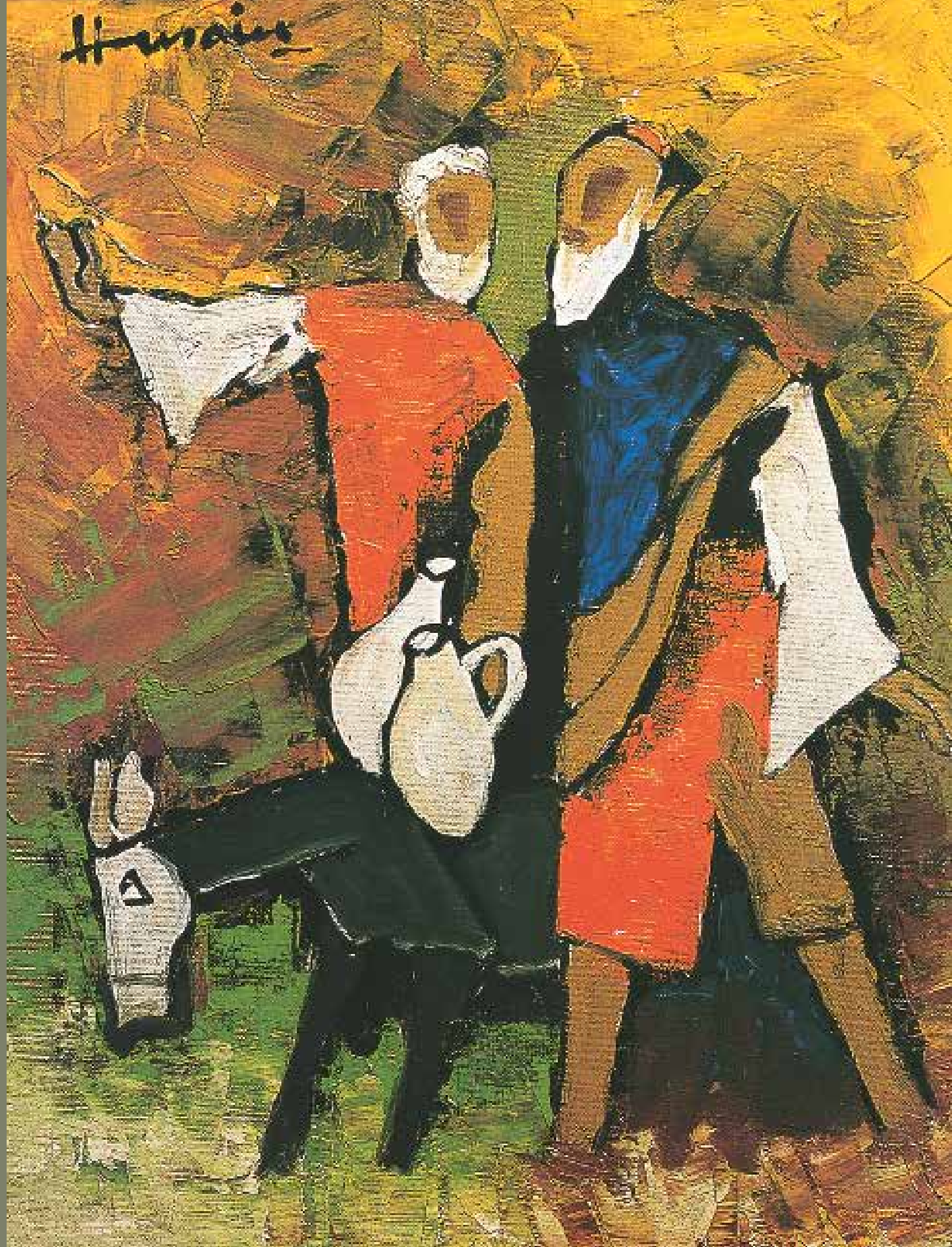
A nomad grounded in Indian culture

His silver mane and beard have stood the test of time, but Husain's journey continues towards uncharted territories. His love for places now stretches far and wide all across the world. His first taste of freedom was in the city of Zurich where he had his first solo exhibition as an artist in 1952. He was a young progressive artist wanting to showcase his creativity. His love for seeking new boundaries was destined to make him a global citizen.

Today he is a global dweller living and working in whichever city he fancies. The journey of a small town boy from Pandharpur to Doha has taken more than eighty decades. Husain has crossed geographical boundaries as an artist.

But he still has a craving to go back to his roots, perhaps to Pandharpur where he was born, or to his Gufa in Ahmedabad or maybe the labyrinths of Mumbai which he walked barefoot. He is ever ready with his tools to bring life to his creative imagination.

From the very beginning, Husain's approach was to form a new vocabulary in Indian art. Today most connoisseurs of art



A painting from Husain's
88 Series



admit that he has successfully created a new style in painting, which he has accomplished through a deft synthesis of tradition and modernity. His canvases have always been colourful and awe inspiring. He has skillfully incorporated themes from Indian

Husain celebrating his 94th birthday in New York with Munna Javeri and his daughter Raisa. Husain removed the 9 in front of the 4 before blowing out the candle

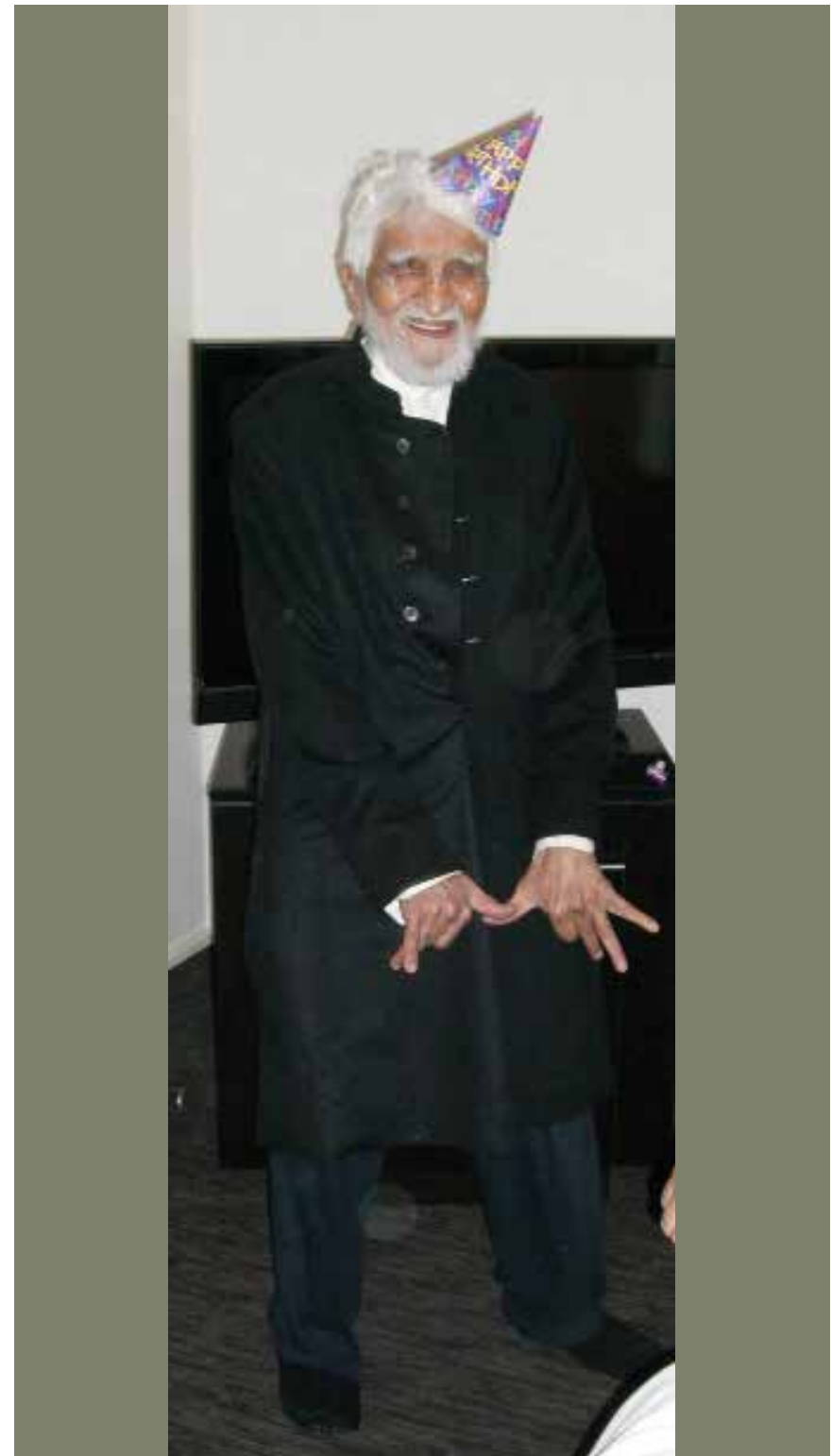


religion, history and culture, while giving them a modern look and an extra edge.

His interpretation of Indian culture can be quite breathtaking. Talking about his daughter Raisa's marriage, he recalls, "When my daughter Raisa wanted to marry, she did not want any ceremonies. That is why I drew her wedding card and sent it to all my relatives across the world. In the card, I showed Parvati sitting on the thighs of Shiva with Shiva's hand on Parvati's breast. This was the universe's first marriage. In Hindu culture nudity is a symbol of purity. Why would I insult something to which I feel

so close? I belong to a Shia sect of Suleimanis which has lot of similarities with Hindus. One of the similarities is the belief in rebirth. Culturally, Jews and Christians are more distant to us. But I cannot discuss such things with people who oppose me. If you talk to them about Khajuraho, they will say that these sculptures were made to encourage an increase in population and therefore have outlived their utility. Rural folk understand the emotions, way of life and progressive nature of Hindu gods and goddesses.” Husain has great faith in the understanding of Indian culture that the simplest and illiterate Indian villager has. He elaborates, “I had done paintings from the *Ramayana*, about 80 paintings over eight years. We took them to villages near Hyderabad on a bullock cart. The paintings were spread out, and the people saw them, and there was not one question. In the city, people would have asked: Where is the eye? How can you say this is Ram? And so on. In the villages, colour and form have seeped into the blood. You put an orange spot on a stone and people will say it is Hanuman. This is living art.”

At heart, Husain is still a rural person, simple in his understanding. His themes, from time to time, have depicted his love for simple life in idyllic rural settings. No wonder he tries to reconnect to the vicissitudes of life in a small town through what he does best, i.e. painting. By depicting the simple folk life of villages, which he understood very well, Husain has made art more heartfelt to the masses.



Husain showing off his dance moves at his 94th birthday party

A Letter to M. F.

by Anahite Contractor

What can i say?

Unable to write, inadequate to express and yet, most certainly confounded to critique, i resort to words. That too, for capturing the essence of your mesmerising, capricious lines and colours, Husain.

The greatest test of silence is Word and the most vicarious, long-suffering language is that of Silence. Who can possibly experience this as profoundly as you have?

Who else can ever churn the million existing and imagined colours of the universe to a climax of White with such élan and finesse?

Meanings, symbols, signs and signification are slippery creatures but you have conquered them all without so much as loosening your grip over your tendentious position as the supreme master of the arts.

All art and indeed all relationships and life itself is never quite complete. Your world of men and women, gods and goddesses, animals and objects is a whirligig, spinning on its own drunken axis, never once wavering from its hermetic vision.

If i were a mere admirer i would have eulogised.

If i were a critic, it would have been mandatory to analyse.

If i were (God forbid) a fellow artist, i would have aspired for your genius and failing that, may have scowled at my own ineptitude.

All i am capable of is forsaking the Cliché and blurring the otherwise impenetrable boundaries of ‘painting’ and ‘metaphor’, of rhetoric

and

proximity.

In a way, yours is not premeditated art. You control your domain of line, colour, history and style as a mother would, as a friend or a lover would through various trajectories.

You see your paintings much, much before it manifests.

The interpretive operations, the deluge of passions, the diabolic lines sizzling within their individual structures and self-contained universes of discourse, are all characteristic of your whimsy.

An umbrella, a horse, an *apsara*, a child and occasionally even your own fleeting presence in your paintings transmigrate to other planes.

An object or a figure ends up being the container of a parable.

Meaning invariably turns transactory; it vies with plenary images and

plunges headlong into reorganising reality. Your lines are the paradigm of continual exploration and reflection. As they say, “a poem

says one thing and means another.” Your paintings say millions of things and mean gazillions.

i once told you that in order to understand poetry, one must come to

terms with all the idiosyncrasies of the world. In order to write poetry however, one must give birth to new idiosyncracies. And you had smiled.

i often wonder how, what you see.
i wonder how you absorb White.
i marvel at your dazzling rhythm.
i am enchanted with your unparalleled Line.

As i confessed at the very beginning, i am no eulogist.
And therefore,
this cannot be a letter!

What can i say?

What can i possibly say?

Many salaams,

Anahite Contractor

Husain painting on the set he created for the actress Tabu in
Mehboob Studios, Mumbai







Husain with a mural that he painted in the lobby of the Taj Hotel, Mumbai in 2000

Chapter 2

Varied Strokes by Husain

“...I want to give my audience a visual experience. I raise questions through my paintings. It is a visual science...”

Husain has been painting since he was a child. Some of the earlier paintings of young Maqbool show his inherent talent. Unlike other children who had assorted things in their pocket, Maqbool had paintbrushes. He used to escape to the picturesque landscape of Chaatrigaon in Indore to sketch. No one goaded him to draw. Husain learnt the art of colour, forms and creation as he painted Mother Nature during these trips. He brushed and honed his skills during these trips, painting landscapes, temples and trees. He never studied art for lengthy periods nor did he sit for any examination.

His life is a rich and varied tale of a maverick artist. From four to six annas to millions of dollars, from painting cinema hoardings to Mother Teresa, Maqbool Fida Husain's career spans a breathtaking range. Unlike his great contemporaries—Souza, Raza, Gaitonde, Ara and Tyeb Mehta—Husain has experimented with different styles and diverse subjects.



Husain signing his mural in the lobby of the Taj Hotel, Mumbai



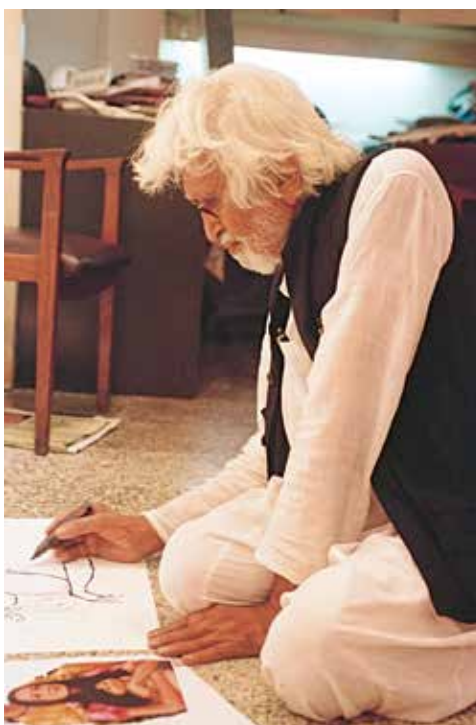
Husain with his mural in the lobby of the Taj Hotel, Mumbai

He has wandered the world for inspiration. Once he gets the inspiration, the rapid strokes possess him till he has completed not one painting but a series! When he was young, he used to make five paintings a day as a practice. It was almost a pledge. At the art school in Indore, it is said that while other boys took days to make one painting, young Maqbool finished one painting after another.

Early influences

As a young man, Husain joined Lalitkala Sansthan in Indore where he was doing a diploma in Arts but never completed the course. However, his time at Lalitkala provided him with his signature bold strokes and lines that so characterize his paintings. The painter attributes his style to D.D. Devlalikar whom he has called his guru. Husain said his guru had once said that he disliked minute details but preferred to go bold on his canvas. That's what the young painter absorbed as a guiding tip, much before his brush with fame and eternity.

Husain has spoken about his earliest motivations to wield the paintbrush. His fascination with Hindu deities has remained his inspiration, be it the character of Hanuman whom he often painted in diverse colours and shapes, the godliness of Lord Shiva or the myriad representations of Ganesha. He adds, "I have painted thousands of Ganeshas in my life. Ganesha's form is truly uplifting. Even today before starting any work I paint a Ganesha. I also like the godliness of Shiva. Natraj is one of the most complex forms in the world. It has taken thousands of years to evolve and is almost like Einstein's equation."



Husain sketching a poster for Khalid Mohammad's film *Tehzeeb*

By the time Husain was eleven, he had started painting portraits. Soon horses became his pet subject. As the legend goes, he was inspired to paint horses by the gigantic Duldul, a symbol of the horse of great martyr Hazrat Imam Husain in the Muharram procession. His early experience of copying the Koran by hand in fluid calligraphy cast a major influence on his paintings. He made his first oil painting based on V. Shantaram's film *Sinhgad* (1933), in Indore. His subsequent job of painting cinema hoardings in Mumbai also significantly influenced his style.

Unlike others who sketch before the actual painting, Husain straightaway paints. The strokes are rapid and never retouched. Alka Pande, a well known writer on art, comments "If you see Husain at work, he just takes the canvas and draws on it straight away. He doesn't even make a sketch beforehand. And because his schooling in art comes from painting large posters, he is a fantastic draughtsman. Everything is larger than life; his work is not reduced in that academic realism of size, scale, form and composition."

Husain's paintings are also conspicuous by the absence of eyes which he explains by saying, "I don't want to use eyes because to give someone eyes is to define and identify the person. I prefer to make the body expressive." In order to do this, Husain studied Rodin's sculptures to observe and understand hand expression and that enabled him to sketch classical *mudras* (ritual hand movements in Indian dance) in his paintings. But in a long career, there will be a few contradictions. There are a few paintings in which he has painted the eyes too.

Pioneering a unique style

Husain is considered to be a pioneer among modern Indian painters. To understand this, let me present a quick sweep of the history of modern Indian painting before Husain. During the Raj, the creativity of Indian art



Ganesha painting



had changed direction. Under British influence, Indian artists had started painting landscapes in water and oil colour. Then, in the later half of the 19th century and the early 20th century Raja Ravi Varma combined the oil on canvas technique with Indian themes, especially from the epics. He was the first to introduce modern techniques to Indian themes. Through oleographs from his printing press, he popularised his paintings and is today recognised as an iconic painter. But Husain is not a great admirer of

Husain's oil paints

his style. Ironically, the state government of Kerala selected him for the Raja Ravi Varma award for contribution to art in 2007. With the political upsurge in India in the early part of the 20th century emerged the famous revivalist school in Bengal. Ace painters like Abanindranath Tagore, A.K. Coomaraswamy and Nandalal Bose pioneered this school of art. Prior to Husain, Nandalal Bose was known for his expertise in painting themes based on epics and exploring Asian Art. These painters evolved a nationalist style—as compared to the feudal style of Raja Ravi Varma—that combined their European training with Indian miniature traditions. Their paintings are known for the depth of emotive expression. In this period, there were mavericks like Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and

Husain carefully inspects the paints at his home in Doha before making his selection







Amrita Sher Gill who developed their individual styles. Gaganendranath adopted various global influences, including Japanese art and German expressionism, in his paintings. Jamini Roy concentrated on folk and tribal art. Amrita Sher Gill challenged the Bengal revivalist school through her bold colours and the use of live models. In Delhi emerged a group of artists displaced from Lahore after the partition of India in 1947. These artists used local craft traditions to present an Indian style that was notable in capturing their anguish of displacement. Kanwal Krishna

Above: A painting Husain made especially for the actor Shahrukh Khan's son, Aryan

Left: Husain's painting alongside that of F.N. Souza's at the Institute of Contemporary Indian Art (ICIA) Gallery in Mumbai



and B.C. Sanyal were famous names associated with this group. In the 1940s emerged the 'Calcutta Group' of artists like Nirode Mazumdar and Paritosh Sen. These painters aimed to create art that was international and kept away from Indian themes like the epics and god and goddesses. They were also very influenced by European painters of the time like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Then there were the 'artists of transition' like N.S. Bendre and K.K. Hebbar who captured simple everyday life on canvas. The contribution of all these painters in reshaping Indian art can hardly be overemphasized. But it was Husain who created a new language of art for a newly independent nation. As a pioneer of the avant-garde Progressive Artists' Group in Mumbai in 1946, Husain—like many young artists of that euphoric period of India's Independence—was anxious to forge a new vocabulary in Indian art.

Husain was an integral part of the Progressive Art Group which was initiated by Francis Newton Souza. The others were S.H. Raza, Gaitonde, K.H. Ara and Tyeb Mehta. This group of artists aimed at defining Indian modernism that was different from the then prevalent styles which were either British oriented or based on the Bengal revivalist school. To quote Souza, "The group gang(ed) up as a collective ego

Above: Husain and his paintbrush

Right: Husain's painting displayed on the walls of industrialist K.K. Modi's residence in Delhi











against the established order.” The contemporary art establishment was harsh in its criticism of the Progressive Art Group. Husain recalls that teachers at the J.J. School of Art advised students to stay away from the ‘dirty half dozen’. But there were a handful of European émigrés, escaping war and Nazism, who provided support. Walter Langhammer who joined the *Times of India* as art director in 1938 became their mentor; Emmanuel Schlesinger was the main collector, while Rudy von Leyden, who was an art critic with the *Times of India*, relentlessly championed their cause. Their contribution in shaping Husain’s career is immense. During the late 40s and early 50s, this group would succeed in redefining modern Indian art. Most major artists of the period like Krishen Khanna, Akbar Padamsee and Ram Kumar, among others, were influenced by it in some way.

All the other members of the Progressive Art Group were well educated and their work reflected finer tastes; Husain was self taught and he expressed his creativity differently. Alka Pande remarks, “When I see Husain’s contemporaries like Tyeb Mehta or Raza or Souza, all of them had a more refined academic base. They were well educated, they had travelled abroad, and that reflected in the type of work they produced. With Husain, it was a very different language of expression, a different education—he studied in the school of life.” The group of progressive artists faded when many of them chose to go abroad. But Husain chose to remain in India. While the others went abroad to seek their fortune, Husain was to make a name in the domestic circuit. During the Partition, Husain decided against leaving India for Pakistan. Years later, he displayed his paintings in Pakistan in 2005 and was feted by the art community there.

Pgs. 100-101: Husain’s highly criticised Shvetambri exhibition was held at Jehangir Gallery, Mumbai. He earned very little admiration for this exhibition which consisted of shredded newspapers and bales of white cloth draped across the gallery

Facing pg. & right: Husain was a great admirer of Mother Teresa and created of entire series inspired by her work with the poor and neglected of India

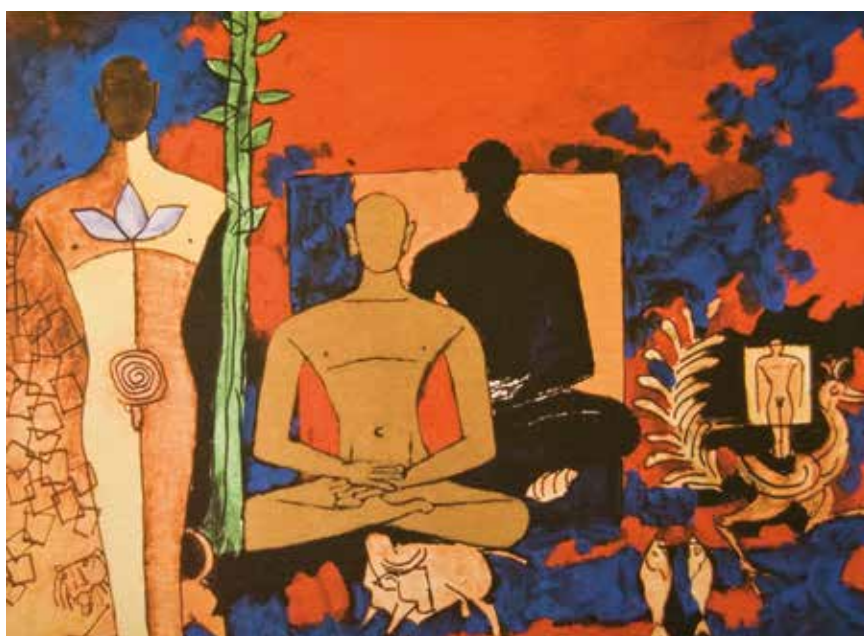




Husain overseeing the installation of his painting at a gallery in Dubai



A painting from Husain's Mother Teresa series being documented at
Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai



Husain was secular in his outlook. He admired all religions, as depicted in his Buddhism and Jainism series

Facing pg.: Husain posing at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

The prestigious *Forbes* magazine has bestowed the title “Picasso of India” on him to recognise his genius and contribution towards shaping emerging trends of Indian art. But ironically, he did not quite like Picasso’s works when he first started out. He could not relate to the purely western ideas of Picasso’s art. His outlook to life is also different from the great European painter, “Picasso was a giant of the last century, but he chose to sit in one place. I am quite the opposite of that. My vision is different. I am not satisfied with just one area or one part.”

The first artist outside India who shaped Husain’s imagination was Rembrandt. His paintings of human faces haunted the Indian painter so much that he collected pictures of human faces from newspapers to draw them later. Husain was fascinated by *Night watch*, particularly the painting’s dark background. He was so moved that he observed, “Rembrandt is the world’s greatest painter.” Through the Progressive Artists’ Group he came to know about the works of the great European expressionist painters of the 20th century, Emil Nolde and Oskar Kokoschka. Their influence on his paintings is unmistakable.

Husain was instrumental in heralding Modernism in the history of Indian art through his ingenious ideas and motifs. His constant zeal to do something different and creative urged him to experiment with new ideas and media. He once summarised his art in a very succinct way, “I must find a bridge between western technique and the eastern concept. That is my goal. And, of course, to show the eternal values of humanity.”

His synthesis of the style of European painters like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque with Indian themes created outstanding modern art. The deft fusion of tradition with modernity that has become the hallmark of Husain’s paintings started with the use of motifs from sources like Indian temple sculpture and miniatures. From India’s sensuous ancient sculptures to the pied hues of Rajasthani miniatures, Husain’s paintings are rooted in the Indian visual culture as well as social and religious traditions. He has drawn artistic representations of Gupta era bronze statues and used engravings from the Tribhang School of Art. He has used the emotional and exciting colours of





Husain putting the finishing touches to his mural at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai



Husain and Owais at Pundole Art Gallery
posing with the painting *Between the Spider
and the Lamp*

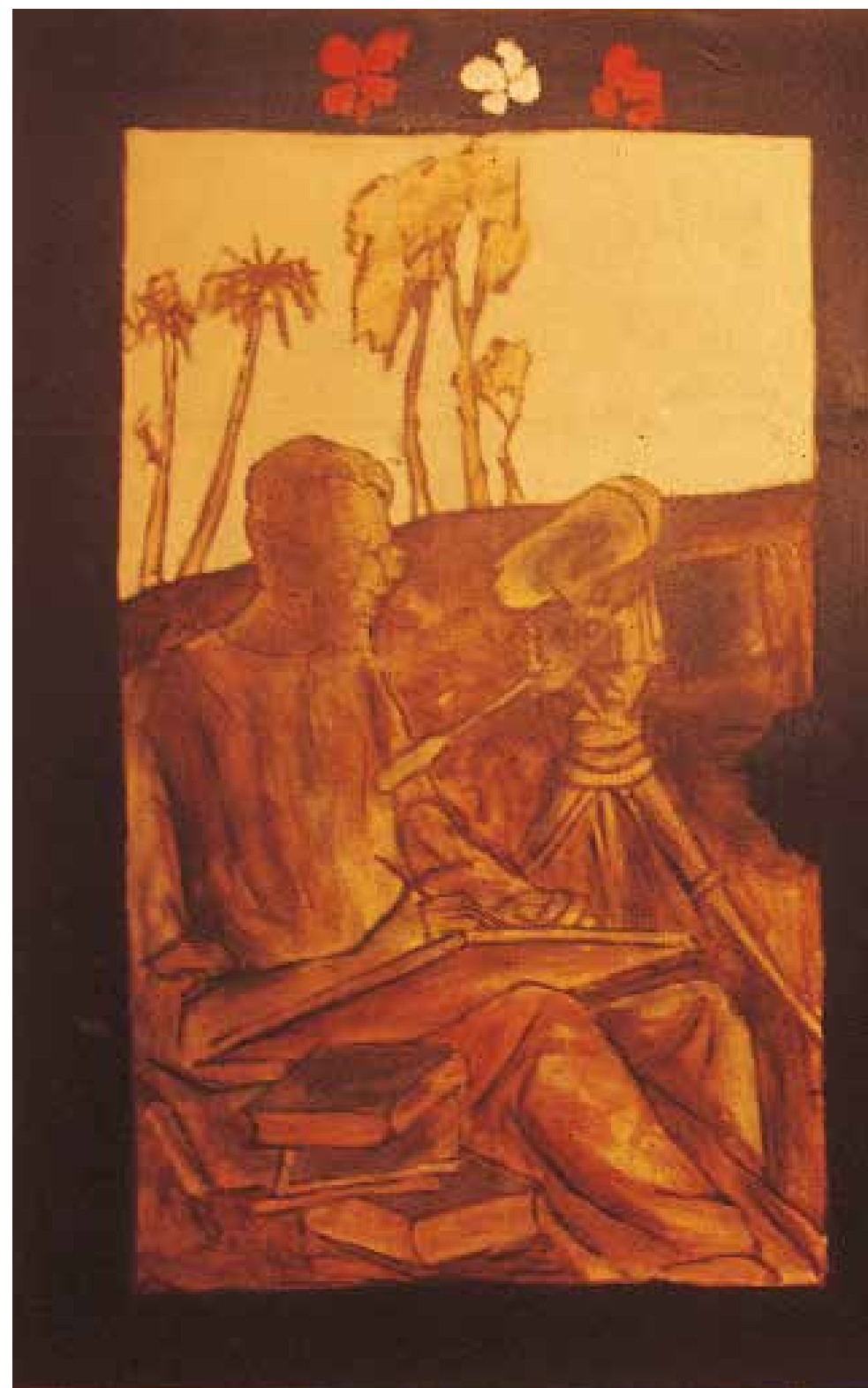


Pahari paintings. This in itself would have set him apart as a great painter. But he chose to combine his Indian heritage with the modernist lines and forms to create his unique style.

His paintings are known for bold use of colour and innovative ideas. He has always wanted his paintings to portray a story and his art to speak with people. He is on record as having said, “How can I go abstract with 500 million people around me?” Art knows no boundaries and cannot be circumscribed by thumb rules. According to art critic Michel Steinberg, “Husain’s paintings are unique for their profundity and their playfulness, for their ability to explore themes of cultural history and legacy in a context of explosive colour and beauty.”

The Surya Hotel, one of Husain’s favourite places to visit in Indore

Right: A painting in tribute of the renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray





2/1/2



The freshness of Husain's paintings has redefined Indian art and his quest to experiment with bold and original new forms has lent a new vibrancy to it. Husain is conscious and proud of his legacy and has commented, "I have worked with artists like Pablo Picasso. The human element of Rembrandt's art has influenced me deeply. As a worshipper of art, I have adopted the greatness of my predecessors and developed my own style. After the artist leaves the world, it is this style that survives. Just think of Picasso. In his time there were 5000 artists but no one else is remembered today."

Six decades of excellence

The first Husain painting that made the art circles of Mumbai sit up and take notice was titled *Sunebera Sansar*. It was his family that was presented in the painting. The canvas shows a small room with a cloth cradle in the middle of the room. The sleeping child in the cradle is his second son, Shamshad. His elder son Shafat is on the floor besides the baby. The lady is his wife Fazila, also sitting on the floor. This painting was part of a group show at the Bombay Art Society exhibition in 1947. He earned Rs.150 for it. Husain's first ever patron in Mumbai was Rudy von Leyden.

As his career progressed, Husain began to cross swords with the art critics and galleries. He stopped exhibiting his paintings at the Bombay Art Society after 1950 due to a difference of opinion with the organisers regarding one of his paintings, *Man*. Husain remarked many years later, "Those art critics and dealers who now swear by modern paintings, never bought any of my paintings then." The caustic remark is very much characteristic of Husain. He never forgets!

In the meantime, he painted other themes like *Children in a Basket*, *The Doll's Wedding*, *Parrot and Young Girl*, *Red Nude in Oil*, *Marathi Women*, *Balram Street* and *Holi*. By 1951, his unique style was apparent to the patrons. But he faced criticism when he did exhibitions in New Delhi and Calcutta

An exhibition and installation of Husain's at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai

(now Kolkata). After an exhibition in Calcutta he recollected, “Only one great artist, Kanwal Krishna, bought my painting. After an art critic wrote negative things, no one bought any of the paintings. With the painting that Kanwal Krishna bought, I was able to buy a ticket and return home.” One has to praise the artist’s honesty.

His continued exposure to the greater world of art and paintings nourished and groomed the ingenious painter in him. A series of exhibitions all over India brought him great recognition. During the 50s he also held acclaimed one man shows in Zurich, Prague and Tokyo. That was the beginning of what proved to be a long and successful career.

His paintings of this period focused on some of his favourite subjects: women, horses and mythological as well as religious personages. It was in 1954 that he created a horse painting for the first time. It was titled *Passage of Time*. Horse paintings would become his signature in later years. Three paintings of a religious nature, *Muharram*, *Maulvi* and *Duldul* reflected Husain’s upbringing as a Sulemani Bohra. His other paintings like *Amusement in the Street* and *The Puppet Dancers* reflected forms of life on street.

One of his landmark paintings, *Between the Spider and the Lamp* was created in 1956. He considers this his most important painting, just like Picasso’s *Guernica*. There is an element of enigma to the painting that makes it interesting. He says, “I like group sculpture of this kind. What are those five women speaking about? It is a secret. Even they do not know the stories. There is something special about the way those women are holding a spider on a delicate thread.” An interesting story is associated with this painting. Husain inscribed a few letters and symbols on top of the painting. There was speculation that these represented some coded message. But years later, Husain clarified that the letters were the first alphabets of the names of three women he was friendly with during the time the painting was made.

During the 60s and the 70s, Husain travelled extensively to China, Switzerland, the UK and the United States. Husain made his acclaimed series on the *Ramayana* in this period. In 1971, he was specially invited to



the Sao Paulo Biennial to paint along with Pablo Picasso. There he created 29 paintings on Draupadi, one of the key characters of *Mahabharata*, as part of the *Mahabharata* series. The Sufi series of paintings, among his best known works, were first exhibited at the Pundole Gallery in Mumbai in 1978.

This series of paintings was followed by another acclaimed series on Mother Teresa in the 80s. This decade also saw Husain create his memorable series of paintings on Indira Gandhi, former prime minister of India. The Raj series of paintings and the paintings on the Urdu poets—Ghalib, Iqbal and Faiz—are other notable Husain creations of this period.

In the 90s, he turned to giant murals. His big mural, almost forty feet in height and titled *The Portrait of the 20th Century* constitutes all the major personalities of art, science, dance literature, politics and so on. His series of paintings on the Bollywood beauty Madhuri Dixit created many ripples during this time as well. His gigantic murals grace institutions

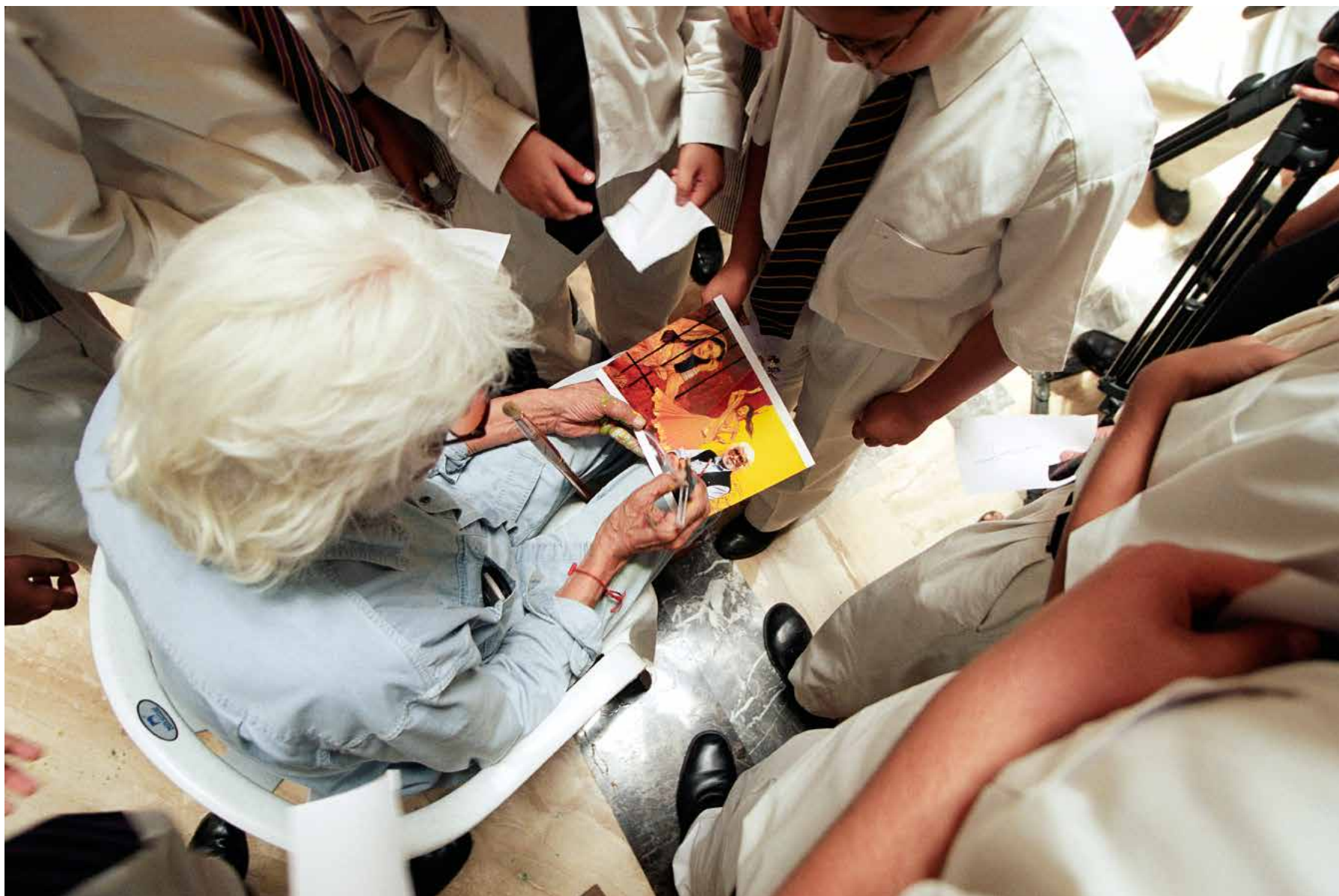
Children at Husain’s show at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai





Maharashtra, a mural Husain specially did for The Club, Andheri, Mumbai

Left: Children admiring Husain's art at Tao Art Gallery



the world over. One example is the huge panel that he painted in the reception area of the iconic Hotel Taj Mahal in Mumbai. Fortunately, these paintings survived the terrorist attack on the world famous hotel on 26th November, 2008.

Husain signing autographs at Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai

Facing pg. above: *Terracota Horses*

Facing pg. below: Small wooden wall-piece painted by Husain

Although all these paintings are major milestones in his career, it is Husain's horses that are now recognised globally as his signature art. Husain has been painting horses since his childhood. His obsession with horses started with the childhood fascination with the paper horses used during Muharram processions. This fascination was reinforced when he found horses all around him as a child. In the book published on his paintings by Tata Steel, Husain says, "In Indore I spent my childhood playing with clay horses at village fairs, on merry go rounds, or wooden horses. The young men in my neighbourhood went riding on decorated horses to fetch a coy bride with a brass band blaring"

Husain's horses are unique. He explains, "My horses, like lightning, cut across many horizons. Seldom are their hooves shown. They hop around the spaces. From the battlefield of Karbala to Bankura terracotta (horses), from the Chinese Tse pei Hung horse to the St. Marco horse, from the ornate armoured 'Duldul' to the challenging white of Ashwamedh...the cavalcade of my horses is multi-dimensional." Husain's horse denotes a combination of the male and the female. It's like Ardh Nariswar (half man-woman); the front part of the horse stands for the male part and is very aggressive while the back portion stands for woman and is full of grace. In Husain's own words, his horses are "charging like a dragon in the front and graceful and elegant from the back." Just a few mere lines drawn by the master painter to define the contours of a horse are capable of bringing to life the sheer power and the grace of a horse. A casual stroke of the ingenious artist's brush while drawing the eye makes the raw energy of the horse stand out. The horse continues to be a source of inspiration to Husain even today. As part of his current project in Qatar, he is all set to make sculptures of horses made from Murano glass.

Channeling the art market

Like Picasso, Husain understands the power of the art market. He invented new strategies to market his own art. He once commented, "You cannot escape the logic of the market. The worth of a painting is in the eye of the buyer." Husain's enigmatic painting style and vibrant use of colours took him to the peak of success and his fame and popularity shaded that of all other painters in India. He is now recognised as one of the greatest painters in the world and his equity in the art market is unparalleled. The painting that he exhibited at the Bombay Art Society in 1947 sold for Rs 150. In 1972, he sold three



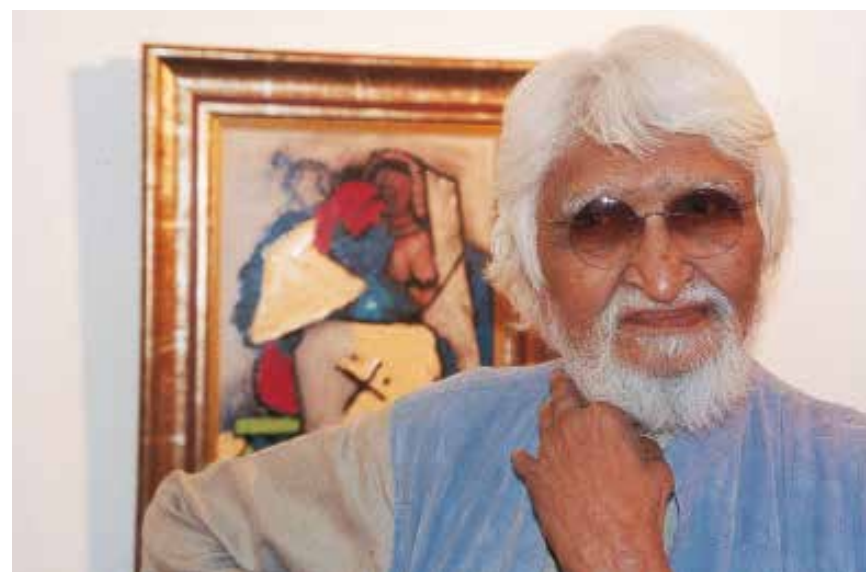
paintings to Aroon Purie, the owner of *India Today*, and his wife Rekha for the then princely sum of Rs 5000. A painting on late the Safdar Hashmi, the iconic theatre personality, was sold for Rs 10 lakhs. This was at an auction held on the ship INS Jawahar as part of the sesquicentennial celebrations of the *Times of India*.

Today, each of his paintings fetches crores of rupees. His rise to stardom has been meteoric. Not bad for a painter who's first painting sold for Rs10 in 1934! The painting was titled *Water colour landscape of Jooni, Indore*. This painting was also reproduced in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in December 1990.

On account of his immense contribution to Indian art, the Government of India honoured him with the Padma Shri Award in 1966, the Padma Bhushan Award in 1973 and the Padma Vibhushan Award in 1989. Besides, he was nominated







Husain and his son Owais at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

Left: *Persepolis*



to the Rajya Sabha of the Indian parliament in 1987. During his six-year term he produced the *Sansad Upanishad*, sketches on the proceedings in Parliament.

Controversies

As the 90s dawned, Husain became controversial; from a master he became an enigma. During the *Shvetambri* exhibition at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai, there were bales of white cloth with whorls and torn newspapers placed around in the gallery. No one understood what he had done. Husain had called a press conference to explain but did not attend it. He went instead to Akbar Padamsee's home in Juhu. The exhibition was savagely criticised but he remained unfazed by the critics. His close friends like Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee liked this experiment in art. Pritish Nandy was another admirer who enjoyed this show and was the only critic to praise this in his Editors Choice column in *Sunday Observer*. In a private conversation,



Husain later explained that he had thrown newspapers on the floor to express his displeasure with the media at that time. He wanted people trample all over the newspapers. Only Husain could have done such an exhibition—and get away with it!

His work also became a target of attack by certain Hindu organisations. His nude paintings of Hindu gods and goddesses created much brouhaha in India and many legal cases were launched against him. Tired by the harassment of responding to the court cases and fearing for his physical safety, Husain went into a self-imposed exile in Dubai.

Among the paintings that created trouble for Husain, the nude *Saraswati* and *Bharat Mata* were the most criticised. Many right wing Hindu organizations opposed these paintings on the grounds that they were disrespectful to Hindu sentiments. The painting of a nude Saraswati is actually a line drawing which uses the scientific principle of refraction. The images of fish, peacocks and lotuses are intriguingly used as objects of adornment for the artwork. Unfortunately, the goddess was depicted in the nude and all other aspects of the painting were lost in the subsequent debate. Protests were also made over Husain's depiction of a nude Bharat Mata. Eminent artist Paras Dasot has defended Husain with this statement: "When an artist delves deep in his creation then everything else except his 'art' and 'soul' tend to lose their meaning....the confluence of which leads to creation of a beautiful artwork." Husain himself has suggested that nudity is a metaphor for purity in Hinduism and should be viewed differently.

The world of art often views things in a manner that is different from what is generally accepted by society at large and this leads to misunderstandings about artists' ideas and thoughts. One of the primary issues that creates confusion is 'nudity'. Quoting Paras Dasot again, "nudity, in the context of art, is like having a glimpse of a mother giving birth to a child." Most people fail to understand the subtle difference that is there between nudity in general



and nudity in art. It is extremely important to understand and appreciate this difference before criticising a work of art, otherwise society runs the risk of losing the value and virtue associated with art. According to the acclaimed Bengali painter Jagannath Paul, "...we are surrounded by art, but sadly don't know how to interpret it. Everything is taken at face value. When I look at Husain saab's painting, I don't look at whether it is a goddess or a layman, whether it is fully-clothed figure or a stark-nude

Diamond merchant Bharat Shah and M.F. Husain at his Chandramukhi exhibition at Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai

Facing pg. above: Husain seated amidst and signing out serigraphs at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

Facing pg. below: Small wooden wall-piece painted by Husain

depiction; I look at the confidence of his brush strokes and that makes me realise that this man has God speaking through him. Why will he insult that same God?" Art is a gift of god and this beautiful form of expression has been made even more beautiful by the master strokes of Husain. He has been quoted in a recent issue of the Mumbai based magazine *Hello!* stating, "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."

Maqbool Fida Husain has created a place for himself in the history of art and nothing can undo that. His name is now a metaphor of contemporary Indian art, rooted to traditional culture but with an open and innovative mindset. Enigmatic in character, nonconformist in ways of life, Husain's masterful appreciation of life's colourful facets can be traced in his paintings. As he himself says, "I am essentially concerned with the human form and the mysteries of life. My paintings are a celebration of life."



Industrialist Parvez Damania sitting beneath a Husain painting in his home

Facing pg.: The meeting of two legends: veteran actor Dilip Kumar and M.F. Husain in conversation at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Mumbai







Husain relaxing with a friend outside the Air India Building, Mumbai

Chapter 3

Understanding the Essence of Womanhood

“...I will sign off my search for Indian womanhood and Shakti with a painting...and I will call it Yeh kaun sa moh hai? (What is this emotional attachment?)”

T

he physical beauty and the enigma of a woman's character have fascinated the creative minds since time immemorial.

Some of the world's most famous paintings have women as their subject. These immortal paintings continue to fascinate us so much so that the women in the paintings have become as famous and adored as their creators. Who can forget the amazingly natural *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi* by Agnolo di Cosimo Bronzino, the eternal mystery of *Mona Lisa* by da Vinci, the dream-like pose of *Flaming June* by Lord Fredric Leighton or the sexual suggestiveness of *Madame X* by John Singer Sargent? Painters have also adoringly portrayed the women they have loved on canvas. Dante loved Beatrice all his life even though she died young; she was the inspiration for his greatest work, *Divine Comedy*. Vincent van Gogh courted Madame Ginoux after her husband's death;



Gala divorced her first husband to marry Salvador Dali, Gustav Klimt had a long romantic relationship with Adele Bloch-Bauer, while Pablo Picasso was smitten and inspired by Dora Maar in equal measure. In fact, Pablo Picasso was said to fall in love with each woman he painted. Husain, too, is known for his fascination for the women who have inspired him to paint.

Maqbool or Mcbull?

It's not very hard for a muse to be swept off her feet when the legendary artist Husain declares that she fascinates him and he wants

to make a series of paintings on her! An exception to this rule was a lovely lady Maria, his overseas muse. It was Maqbool who fell for her like a ton of bricks. Many say that it is Maqbool who is swept off his feet by the women he paints. He has never been affected by these stories; like the amusing stories of his bare footedness, these colourful tales of Maqbool's admiration of women are a part of his legend. It is no wonder that Maqbool has called himself Mcbull at times to indicate his fondness for his muses.

That Maqbool has been fascinated by women and womanhood since he was very young is unmistakable. Among his paintings depicting his growing up years in Indore, there is one in which the young Maqbool is peeping through a tiny hole in his house and looking at a woman drench herself with water flowing out of a pitcher. There is another in which he has painted a woman sitting atop a car which bears the insignia of the Holkar State. Years later,

Left to right: Husain making a sketch of actress Urmila Matondkar; Husain's painting of Maria, his one-time muse; A detail from Husain's Growing Up in Indore series which he made for *The Illustrated Weekly of India* depicted his early fascination with women

Husain explained in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* that she was Tiki, the daughter of a nobleman of Holkar, and he was fascinated with her. But the fascination was unrequited, “How far could my poor bicycle keep pace with her car?”

As a small boy he was fascinated when he saw his stepmother Shireen’s fair ankle and her beauty remains etched in his memory. He was only a young boy then who had not even reached adolescence. He vividly recollects another memory. When he was eleven years old, his father had resigned to the fate that his son was an avid painter. He told the boy that he might as well learn a skill like tailoring if he wanted to pursue his passion as a painter. It was the logic of a concerned father not convinced that his son could make a living out of painting. Husain recollects, “I remember being an apprentice to a tailor. The young tailor was in love with a sweeper girl who used to come every morning.” As an adolescent, Husain saw this love story unfold before his eyes. He was amused and touched and the story served to increase his fascination for women.

The women who shaped Husain

Who are the women who have had a deep and abiding impact on Husain’s life? These would include the women in his family, his wife Fazila and daughters Raisa and Aqueela. When he shifted to Mumbai, a woman’s concern for him would change his life forever. Mehmooda Bibi, a widow who lived on the second floor of the Sulemani Building in Badar Baug, would stand on her terrace and see him paint hoardings. Husain used to paint huge hoardings standing on scaffoldings. She often wondered whether he had time to eat. One day she invited him to have lunch. He accepted the invitation not knowing what destiny had in store for him. Mehmooda’s motherly concern about his meals ensured that he would become a frequent visitor to their house. In fact, Mehmooda Bibi was a keen admirer of Husain’s art and often encouraged him, telling him that his art would one day be known all over the world. Husain was completely enamoured by the mother figure who was the only person in Mumbai



A painting depicting Mahatma Gandhi’s profile and Indira Gandhi’s silhouette. Both were leaders Husain admired





who still called him Maqbool. At last, Husain had found a place that seemed like a home to him.

On one of his frequent visits to Mehmooda Bibi's house, he caught her daughter Fazila staring at him while he made the hoardings. This continued for a while; Husain would paint and Fazila would stand on her terrace and steal a few glances at him. How could he not fall in love with her? One day, he gathered courage and made his way to the terrace where Fazila stood. He found her peering over the parapet trying to locate him. Husain said to her, "Tomorrow is Thursday, your mother will go to the maulvi's house for a religious discourse. As soon as she leaves, put a red soap case on the balcony and I will come to meet you. I have to tell you something important." He had found his life partner.

Husain has said that his wife Fazila was the inspiration behind all his successful paintings. It is said that Fazila herself was a fairly decent painter. Husain had seen her paint in her mother's house. That was what fascinated him in the first place. Not much is known about his wife's paintings. However, it is rumoured that a painting signed as Fazila Husain still exists. Fazila died in the nineties. Husain has said that after his wife's death, he has not had a bedroom in his house—he only has drawing rooms.

Husain calls Fazila the embodiment of *Shakti*, the power that runs the universe. His mother Zunaib also symbolises *Shakti* for him. His mother has been a constant presence in his life even though she died when the painter was a small child. His trademark painting style of leaving the eyes of a portrait undone has roots in this episode. He does not remember his mother's face. In his paintings he searches for it.

The women who inspired Husain

The embodiment of woman as Shakti has illuminated many a painting of Husain's. Among such works are the innumerable paintings on Mother



Teresa. Husain met Mother for the first time on her return to India after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1979. He was immediately struck by the sense of compassion that emanated from her. In order to paint Mother Teresa, he studied the churches of Florence and noticed that the clothes seemed more important than the facial expression. Therefore, Husain painted the mother in the minimalist form. The paintings show her with

the upper end of the sari wrapped around her face like a scarf. Although the paintings don't show her face, it is not difficult for anyone to know that it is the revered nun. It was the painter's own creative way of paying homage to the woman.

His paintings of the Mother are outstanding pieces of art that reflect her compassion and depict her as an embodiment of the highest ideals of humanity. In the book on his paintings compiled by Tata Steel, he bares his soul on Mother Teresa. "Against stunned black, the curling, quivering white folds float in slow motion. Like the Madonna, glowing marble melting over the knees of *Pieta*. Yet such a tender and soft flow of lines burst through space in thunder and turmoil. Its Himalayan snow peaks touching the high Indra-

Indira Gandhi was a woman who represented *Shakti* (essential feminine strength) for Husain

Facing pg. Sonia Gandhi at Husain's exhibition inaugural at Jehangir Art Gallery in 1986

dhanusha, still the same white sari unfolds love on the limping lanes of Calcutta, where at dead of night an unwanted child crawls out of the womb. The burnt browns and charcoal grey skies, with a blob of fading yellow spilled over, keep knocking our senses. They are alive, still loved. In each fold of her sari breathes a revived soul.”

He held an exhibition of the paintings of Mother Teresa at the Afghan Church in South Mumbai in 2005. The exhibition intended “to pay tribute to a woman like Mother Teresa, a symbol of *Shakti*”. It comprised a set of eighteen original paintings inspired by the legendary life and legacy of the extraordinary woman. The series of semi abstract works measured at least 6 foot in height.

Losing his mother at an early age had left Husain in search for a mother figure which he ultimately found in Mother Teresa. He says, “My association with Mother was special. When she saw the paintings I had made of her, she was amazed. And just as she believed that all she did was the will of God, I told her it isn’t me but something bigger that helps me paint like that.”

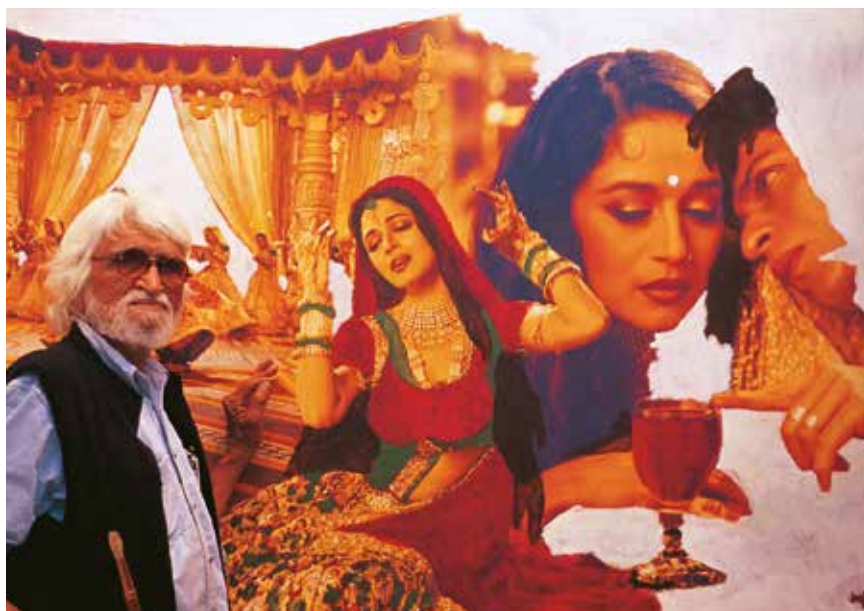
Another woman who represented ‘Shakti’ for Husain was the former Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. It was in November 1967 that Husain got the chance to sketch a portrait of Mrs. Gandhi in her office. It took him five minutes to draw the sketch but Mrs. Gandhi is said to have objected to the lower portion of her face being too similar to that of her father’s. It was only in his second attempt that Husain got it right. Husain had an abiding respect for the former prime minister. He felt that she was among the few politicians who had a proper understanding of art. He is on record suggesting that he would not have had to leave the country if Indira Gandhi was the prime minister. Rajiv Gandhi, Indira’s son, was also very respectful of Husain. During the centenary session of the Congress party in 1985, he went out of his way to meet the artist when he turned up without an appointment. In 1986, Rajiv’s wife, Sonia, who rarely appears for such functions, inaugurated Husain’s exhibition at the Jahangir Art Gallery in Mumbai.

Husain made a series of paintings on Mrs. Gandhi, many of which are in the collection of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Among the most

notable are *Indira as a Young Woman*, *Kamala Nehru holding Indira*, *Indira as Ranee of Jhansi*, *Indira Gandhi 1917-1984*, *Three Faces of Indira Gandhi* and *Ekla Chalo*. These capture the many moods of the multifaceted woman who was among the greatest leaders of India. Some of Husain’s paintings of Mrs. Gandhi evoked criticism. During the Emergency in 1975 he painted Indira Gandhi as Durga, symbolic of the Goddess’s destructive power. Husain also made paintings of the lifeless body of Indira Gandhi when it was laid before cremation. He painted her in a white shroud and marked it to point out the wounds that resulted from the sixteen bullet shots. He called it *16 Petals*.

Husain has had other women friends who have been a source of strength, or inspired him in different ways. Rashda Siddiqui has been a confidante and a close friend for over three decades and has written one of the most authoritative books on his paintings. She has been a source of constant support to Husain during his exile and has been spotted with





him many a time in Dubai, Doha and London. Then there was Marie Jaroslav Zurkova, who he met during an exhibition in Prague, in 1956. She was the interpreter but it was Husain who was lost in translation! He ended up gifting his entire exhibition to her. He even shaved off his beard and cut his hair to impress her! Marie was attracted to Hindu philosophy and Husain took interest in western music because of her. He wanted to marry her and even managed to persuade Fazila to agree to it. But Marie did not like the idea of living in India. Besides, she was not interested in being a second wife. Over a period of time, he realised that they had cultural differences and their marriage would not work. They remained friends even after Husain returned to India, and kept in touch on the

Above left & right: Husain posing in front of a pastiche of Chandramukhi played by Madhuri Dixit from the film *Devdas*; An Amul advertisement depicting Husain's fascination with Madhuri Dixit

Facing pg.: Husain with a poster of Madhuri Dixit



telephone. Marie married Jans Dottier in 1964 and subsequently shifted to Australia. Husain even attended her wedding. But he has always cherished the memories of his friendship with her. Marie inspired the lead character in his movie, *Meenaxi—A Tale of Three Cities*. Years later, Husain visited Marie and her husband in Australia on the occasion of his 90th birthday in 2005. In 2006 while shifting back to Prague, Marie returned all the paintings Husain gifted her, insisting they be preserved for posterity. Now they are all at Husain's private museum in Dubai.

Husain's muses

Among his muses, the one who inspired him most was the Bollywood superstar Madhuri Dixit, who re-established his passion of filmmaking. He made a film with her called *Gaja Gamini* (2000). Husain wanted to “give a message to the world about the dignity and mystery of woman”. However, not many people understood the concept of the film. The film also allowed him to return to murals and paintings in a larger-than-life way and underlined his reputation as an iconic painter. The actor herself completely bowled the painter over. “That movement of the hips is out





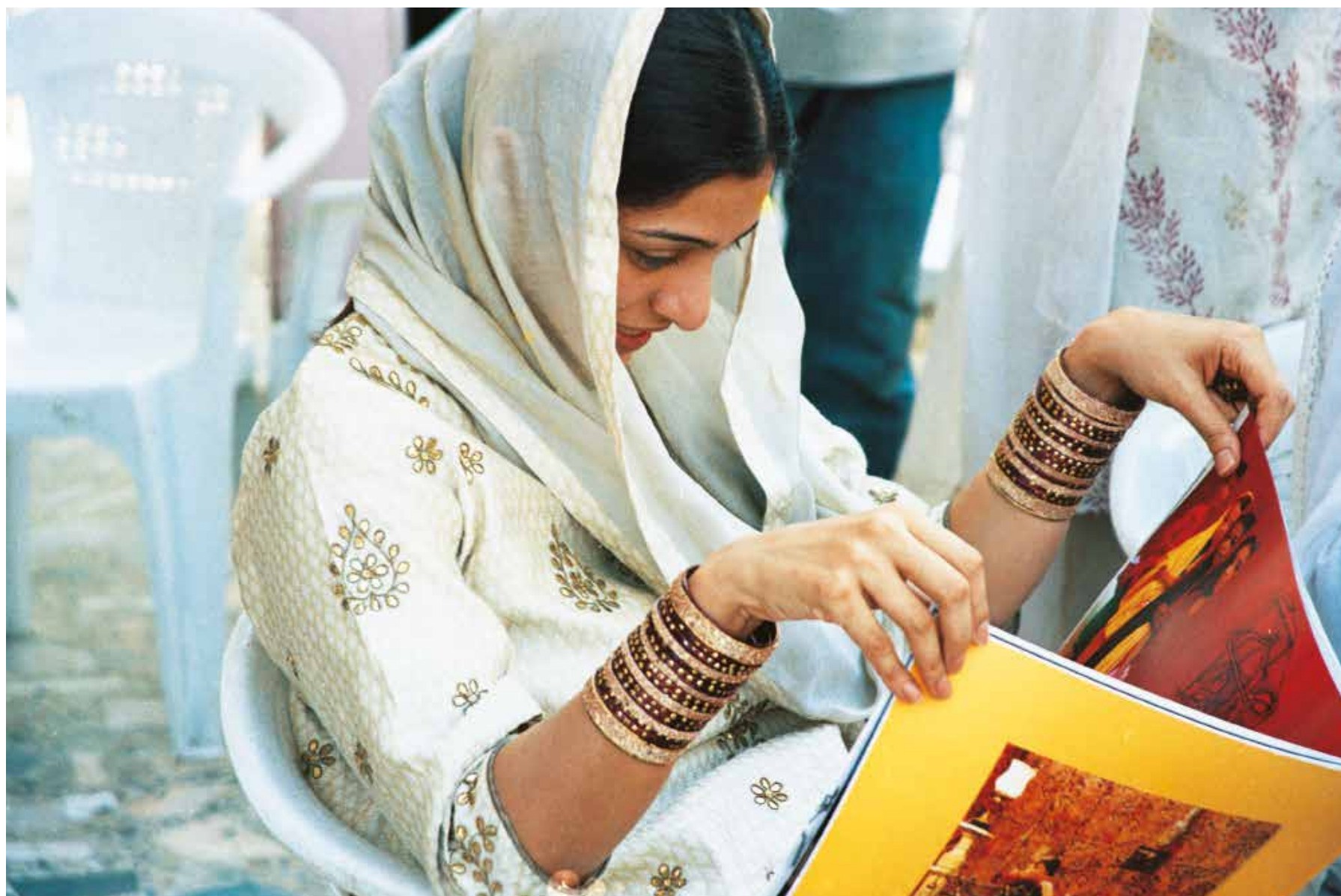
of this world. I have never seen such a dancer, and I have seen the best. Her words are transformed into body language.” However Husain’s fascination with the Bollywood diva created many ripples in the media. Numerous stories were published regarding his obsession with Madhuri. It is rumoured that he had seen her film *Hum Apke Hain Kaun...*! (1994) 67 times, *Devdas* (2002) 10 times and he booked the entire Lamcy Cinema in Dubai for her comeback film *Aaja Nachle* (2007) from Yash Raj films! He was so enthused that he sent an autographed movie ticket to his guests as an invitation. But the latest film disappointed him; after all, the

Husain is pleased after his haircut at a Colaba salon which he got specially before meeting actress and beauty queen Sushmita Sen

Right: Husain at Tao Art Gallery with Anil Relia







comeback movie of his muse needed to be perfect! He did not like the script, thinking it was weak. He also thought that the direction could have been better and Yash Chopra himself should have directed the film. Only a great director like Yash Chopra could have done justice to Madhuri's

Tabu engrossed in a brochure of *Meenaxi*... at Badar Baug

Facing pg.: Husain with Madhuri Dixit at the *Gaja Gamini* press conference at The Club, Mumbai

comeback. So enamoured was Husain by Madhuri that he produced many paintings of her. A series of her paintings based on her cinematic hits were exhibited at the foyer of the Lamcy Cinema during the show of *Aaja Nachle*. The muse reciprocated the painter's admiration, "It's nice to know that someone admires you so much. I only thought that he was a great painter. He's won the Golden Bear Award for his earlier film, *Through the Eyes of a Painter*. During the making of *Gaja Gamini*, I understood the way he made films. He is quite remarkable."

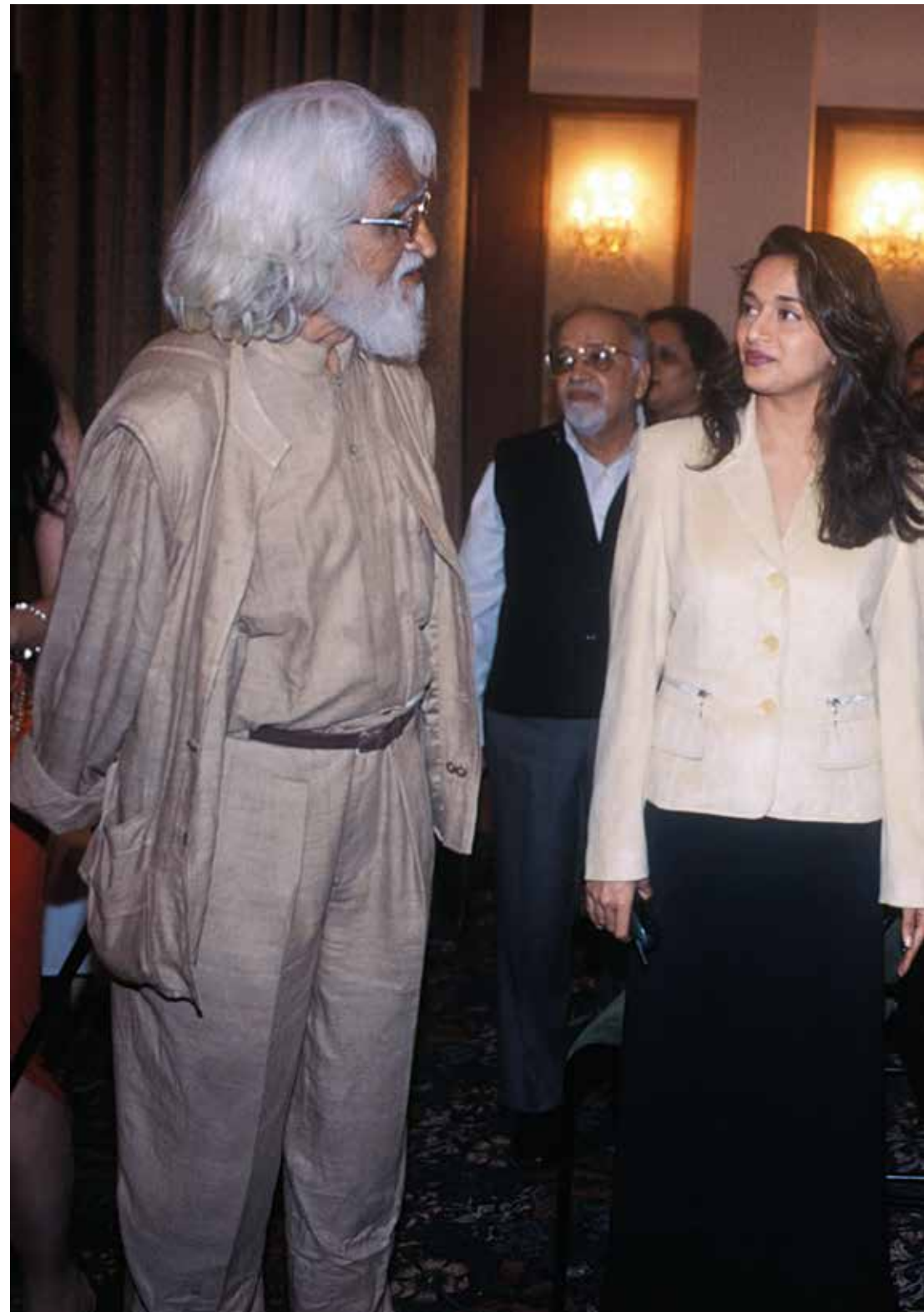
Husain's obsessions with other Bollywood divas are also quite popular. Before Husain was bowled over by Madhuri, Sridevi had captured his

imagination. Sridevi was the reigning Bollywood queen before Madhuri. She captured his creative mind when he first saw her in the film *Chandni* (1989). He was mesmerised by her solo *tandav* dance in this Yash Chopra film. He made a deal with the theatre manager that he would come only to see her dance sequence. He would sneak into the theatre when the dance sequence was about to begin and slip out as soon as it got over.

Husain's second feature film, directed by his son Owais featured Tabu, another famous Bollywood actor, in the lead role. The film was *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities* (2004). He did a live portrait of her before launching the film at Mehboob Studios. He had made a small set and invited the media. He even penned two songs for the movie. The film was shot in Prague, Rajasthan and Mumbai.

When he first saw the film *Vivah* (2006) starring the young Bollywood actor Amrita Rao, he was so inspired that he ended up watching the film nine times. He felt that Amrita represented a purely Indian face among the bevy of Westernised women who have invaded Bollywood. To celebrate the movie, he booked Dubai Plaza Cinema for a big bash where he invited 150 people that included his friends, relatives and media persons. The party was billed as a farewell party. According to the bohemian artist it was, "actually my farewell to the film. It will be its last show at the Plaza. After the late night screening I invited everyone for a grand dinner. After all, a delicious movie has to be followed by a delicious feast!" Amrita Rao got a taste of Husain's maverick reputation when she first went to meet him in Dubai. He had ordered loads of sand to be brought to his home in Dubai to create an artificial desert, all to greet Amrita. What's more, he had arranged for camels to be present to complete the setting of a desert. She was swept off her feet. So impressed was the artist with Amrita that he said, "she has entered my canvas. I will create an entire exhibition on her". But lately, he seems to have lost his fascination for her as he believes that her later work did not measure up to her first movie.

At one point his admiration for Kajol, another Bollywood superstar, was the talk of the town. It was said that Husain was planning to make a comedy film with Kajol, but the film never saw the light of day. He also planned to make a comedy film with the actor Urmila Matondkar, famous







Bollywood superstar Deepika Padukone with Husain after presenting her with an award in London

Facing pg. left & right: Husain looking dapper at an award ceremony in London; Husain with Rashda Siddiqui, his long time friend at an award ceremony in London



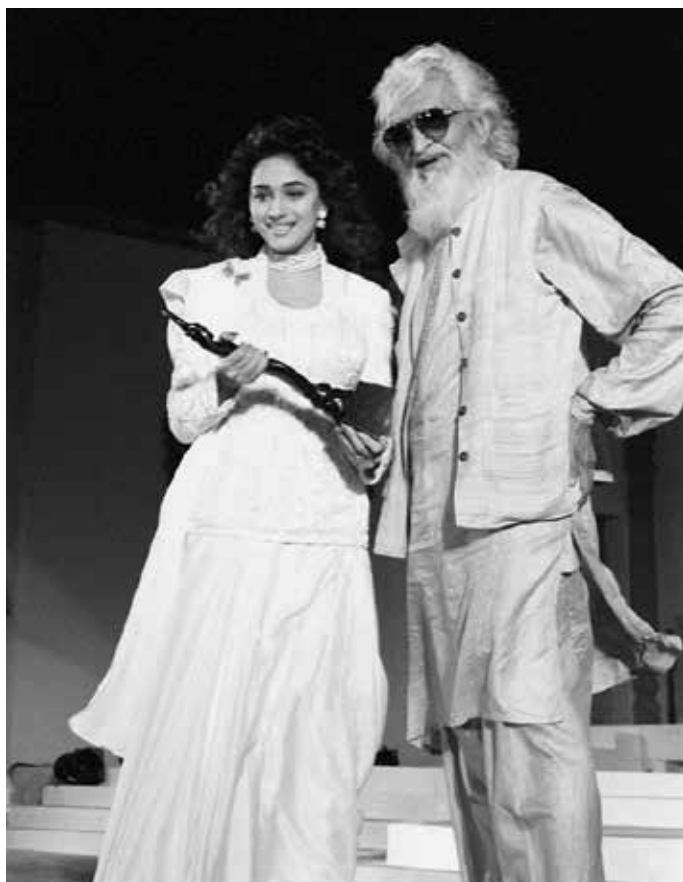


for her sensuous dance sequence in the film *Rangeela* (1995). Urmila was fortunate enough to be part of his last Eid celebration in Mumbai at Badar Baug.

Among the current Bollywood divas, it is Vidya Balan who has managed to impress the nonagenarian artist. He admired her work in the films *Paa* (2009) and *Ishqiya* (2010) and wants to cast her in his next movie. In an interview with Khalid Mohammed in the newspaper *Mid Day*, he said, “I’m absolutely bowled over by Vidya Balan. She conveys pure Indianness; she is feminine, sensual, without making an effort. I was captivated by her in *Ishqiya* which I saw a dozen times just for her.” On her part, Vidya has said in an interview to the newspaper *HT Cafe*, “I was overwhelmed when I heard this. I remember reading about him painting Madhuri years ago. And a painting by Husain saab would immortalise me.” She adds, “I’d love to work with him and I’m hoping we can get started on the movie by next year.” The most recent Bollywood beauty to impress Husain is Anoushka Sharma whose latest film *Band Bajaa Baraat* (2010) the artist has reportedly seen eight times. Husain claims that after he saw the movie his vision has improved and he no longer needs to use his glasses! Amongst Bollywood actors of an earlier era, he loved Nutan. He said, “There is a certain haunting quality about her face.”

Husain has an endearing way of charming his muses. When he met another diva, Miss Universe Sushmita Sen, he chose to reinvent himself. He wanted to make a good impression; he got his white mane cut into short and trendy waves at a famous Mumbai salon. He had said that he wanted to look like an apostle from Greece! Then aged 85 years he added, “A new film merits a new look, and I’m looking forward to working with Sushmita.” At the time, he was famous for his obsession with Madhuri Dixit and he was promptly asked if he would now forget Madhuri as a has-been muse. He joked, “Don’t make Madhuri jealous”.

Left: Madhuri Dixit flashes her trademark smile at the *Gaja Gamini* press conference at The Club, Mumbai



Despite the constant media buzz around Husain's muses, very little is known about Fazila's response to these bursts of inspiration. Husain on his part has been at pains to clarify his fascination for his muses. He had this to say about his fixation with Madhuri, "It has been said that I am in love with Madhuri Dixit. This is childish nonsense. Though I want to look at her image on the screen over and over again, it is because her movements and expressions fascinate me. She is the route towards a higher feeling of creativity. She stirs my impulses, she discloses the wonders of the feminine form which I have painted all my life."

Husain's first encounter with Madhuri Dixit at the Filmfare Awards when he presented her with an award

Right: Tabu posing in the set Husain created in Mehboob Studios, Mumbai in order to do a live portrait of her





Bare Feet

By Salil Tripathi

Bare feet
that have walked miles—
across the frontiers, beyond the black waters.

Bare feet
that have trodden
the slushy roads of Manhattan
when the eyes visualised a celestial Mahabharata
in the skies which became the canvas.

Bare feet
that have marched
on the scorching tar of the roads of Madras
while the right finger
pressed the shutter
and captured
the leper
dwarfed by the big breasts of the nautch girl.

Bare feet
that have sunk deep
into the soft sand of Rajasthan
while Airavata descended from the skies
and a gallant Rajput galloped away with a Moghul beauty
in the mind's eye.

Bare feet
that landed
on the seashore of Kerala
as the sun played naughty games
with the glistening bronze bosoms
and under the erect coconut trees
women endlessly combed their long tresses.

The frenzied hand moved faster,
the beard grew longer,

the hair silver,
the dress white.
The mane unruly,
the glasses quainter,
and on the gleaming canvas
bodies lost shape amidst rough, stark lines.

Bare feet
that refused to walk
into the muddy cesspool
where wind didn't remain wind,
but came unannounced with a senseless fury
to wipe out towns, erase names, snuff out villages, raze crops
and the hands couldn't paint—
the canvas was bare,
speaking more angrily through that silence.

Bare feet
that climbed never-ending steps
to the beat of conch shells
and the ghant-naad of Varanasi.
the brush-strokes caught
the reflection of twilight,
of women washing down their sins,
of floating diyas looking like fireflies
Of the flight of crows.

Bare feet
that twitched at the thought of a mother never seen
because like a Reverend Mother she had refused to get herself
photographed.

Bare feet
that relaxed
and felt at home
as tears rolled down that face, sculpted by wind,





Chapter 4

Baring his Soul on Being Barefoot

*‘How my mother longed for a
day to see me a grown-up man by
putting me in my father’s shoes!
As I grew up I became barefoot.’*

Every painter has his quirks. Salvador Dali got away with what he did because he often said that he never understood his own art! Da Vinci would write his notes using mirror writing. Van Gogh missed some characters while he wrote letters. Rembrandt, famous for his nudes, was often misunderstood by his rivals because he chose erotic themes. Throughout history well known artists have been misunderstood because they had a few quirks in their personality. Husain is no less.

In the 60s, Husain would drive around in his Fiat car which he had painted all over. A leaping horse was painted on the bonnet of the car. On the sides, Husain had painted *gopis* (milk maids) with Lord Krishna in the middle. But he would drive his car with bare feet.

The story of his bare feet is something that Husain himself finds hard to explain. Much speculation has been generated following Husain’s

Husain’s bare feet mystified
and fascinated his admirers



decision to stay barefoot. Even today people who meet him often look down, eager to see his bare feet. Some find in it a fashion statement while according to some it's just a gimmick. Some even find a philosophical tinge in it by believing that it symbolises the artist's toughness and willingness to confront hardship.

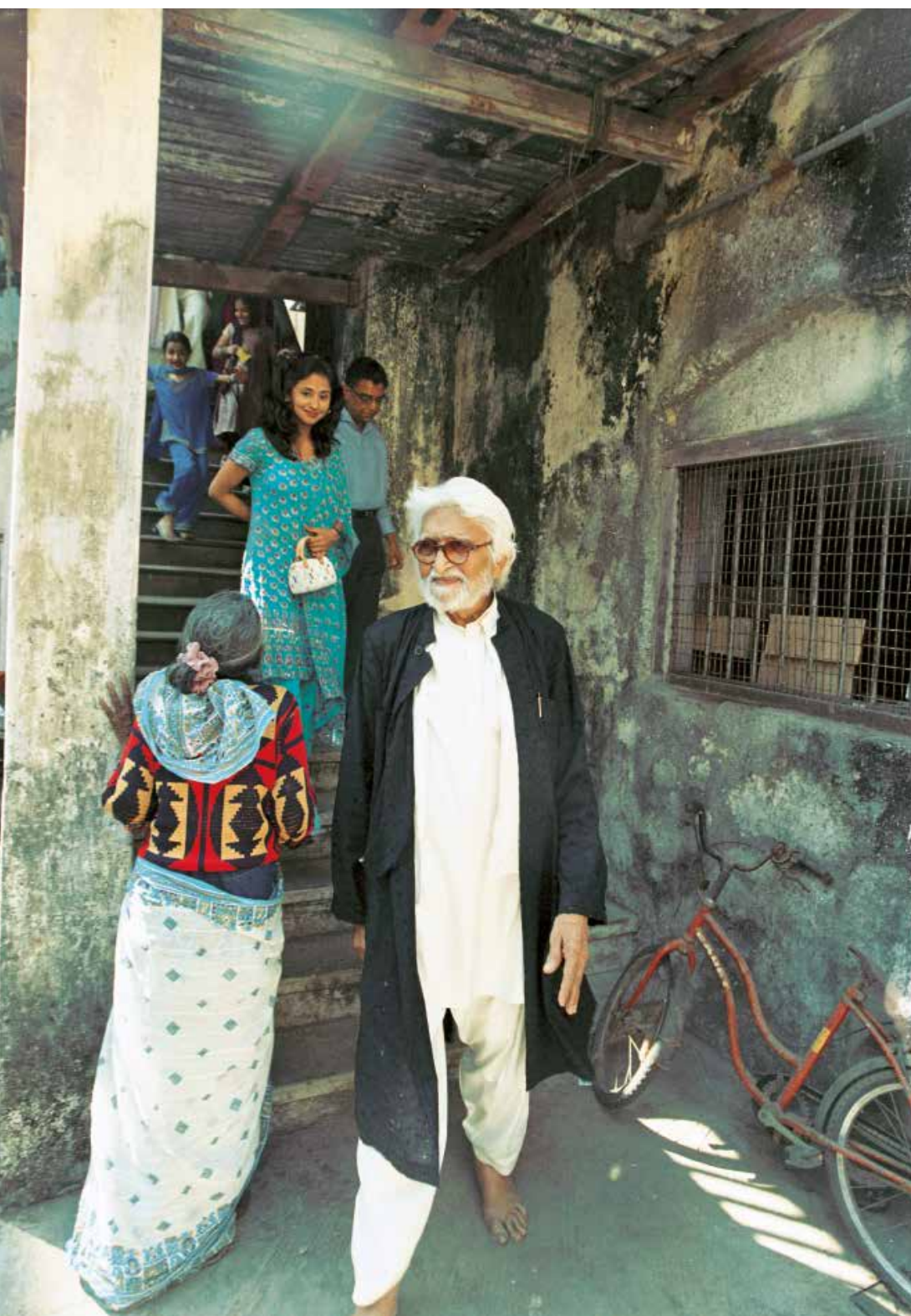
It wasn't in Mumbai that Husain first walked barefoot, it was in New Delhi. He never did it to seek attention. His image as a barefoot painter is purely accidental. The real story goes back to the 60s. While he has mentioned that he went barefoot to feel mother earth and be sensitive to nature, the beginnings of the story lie in one of his friendships. He revealed in a freewheeling interview, "During '60's, there

Husain at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

Right: Husain giving an interview at The Club, Mumbai



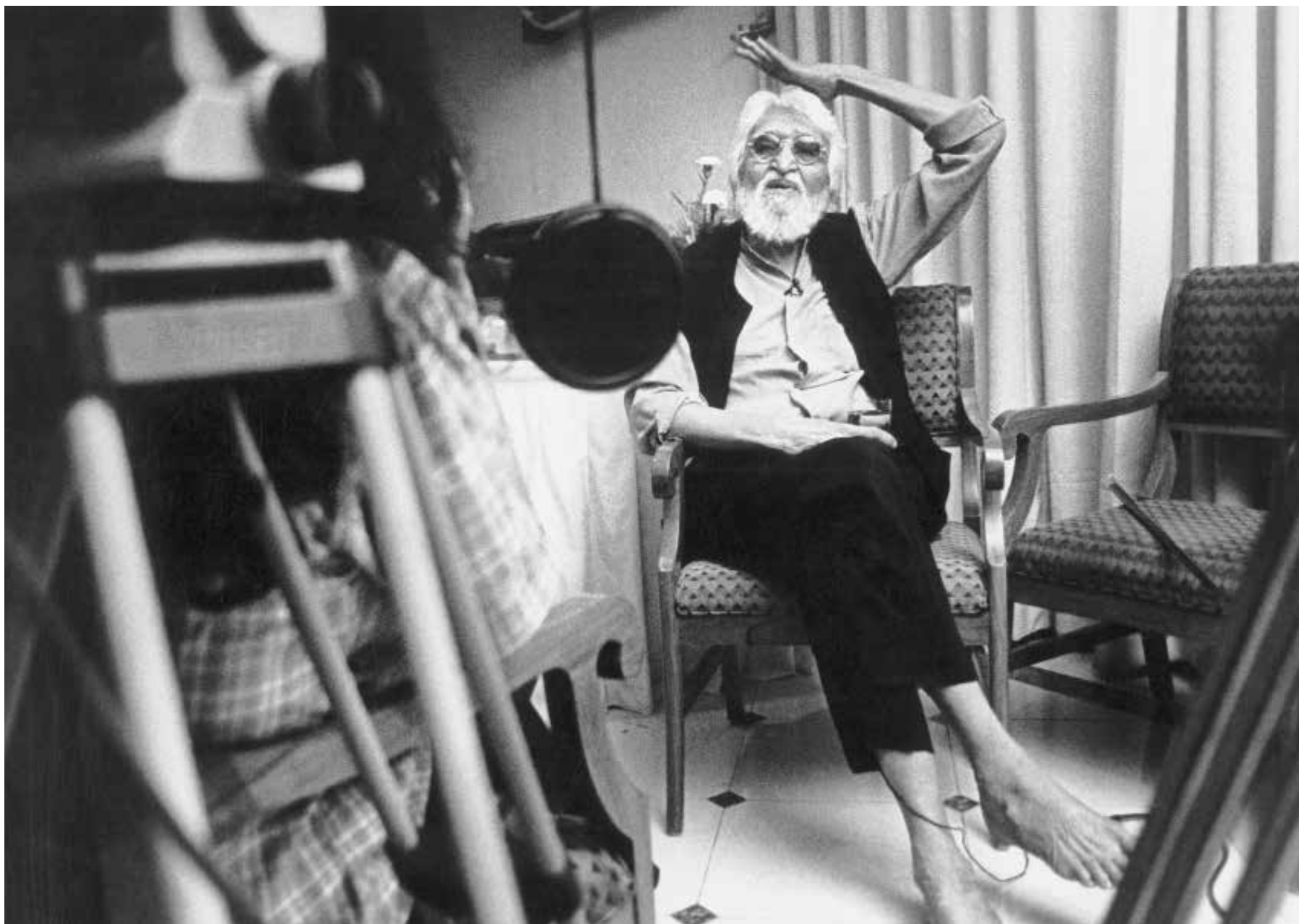




was a prominent Hindi poet Muktibodh. I am an ardent admirer and lover of his work. He was one of the most powerful Hindi poets of the 20th century. His poetry is very strong and sensuous, unlike sugary, sentimental stuff that is considered poetry these days. Muktibodh was considered to be one of the pioneers of modern poetry in India. He could be called the forerunner as well as the culmination of the whole progressive movement in Hindi poetry. In 1957, I had an exhibition of paintings based on his poetry—so influenced was I with his work. I thought his poetry corresponded with my imagery of modern Indian art. Unfortunately, he kept unwell during his last days and had gone into a coma when I went to meet him at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi with my friend Ram Kumar. He remained in a coma for nearly two years.” Explaining further he said, “During May-June ’64, Muktibodh died and I attended his funeral. At that time I was shocked to see that such a great poet had died without managing to get his works published as a book during his lifetime. After the funeral, on my way back, I was walking on Thar Road in Delhi and the sweltering heat was killing me. But just to feel the sorrow of his demise, I removed my shoes and walked barefoot. The road was so hot that it was burning my feet but from then on I stopped wearing shoes. This is my way of paying tribute to him. Walking barefoot by no way was an attempt to forge an ‘image’.”

Husain’s symbolic use of the Rajasthani shoes in his film *Through the Eyes of a Painter* (1967) has resulted in some more speculation about his not wearing shoes. Critics have deduced that the use of shoes as a motif in the film sprang from his consciousness of not wearing shoes himself. But then the shoe that’s used in the film is a *mojri* (typical Rajasthani shoe with the front curled upwards) and Husain never wore these kinds of shoes. Besides, symbols like the umbrella and lantern are also used in the movie, and Husain uses neither.

In 1982, Husain was traveling to Bhopal for the inauguration of Bharat Bhavan. He was wearing his shoes. At the airport in Mumbai, a reporter asked him why he was not barefoot. Husain was ruffled. The normally calm and gentle soul erupted, “Am I supposed to remain



barefooted in order to provide you with news? If I feel like it, am I not free to wear shoes?”

There was a time when many of his friends complained that he was being ridiculed for walking barefoot on dirty roads. The maverick painter decided to make a change. He started landing up at the homes of his friends wearing a black shoe on one foot and a white shoe on the other. To his utter surprise, no one noticed his quirky pair of shoes. After some time, he told his friends to stop complaining about

his bare feet since they had failed to notice his multi-coloured pair of shoes! Husain's attire has always been a source of great interest. He is comfortable sitting in the lobby of one of the world's finest hotels,

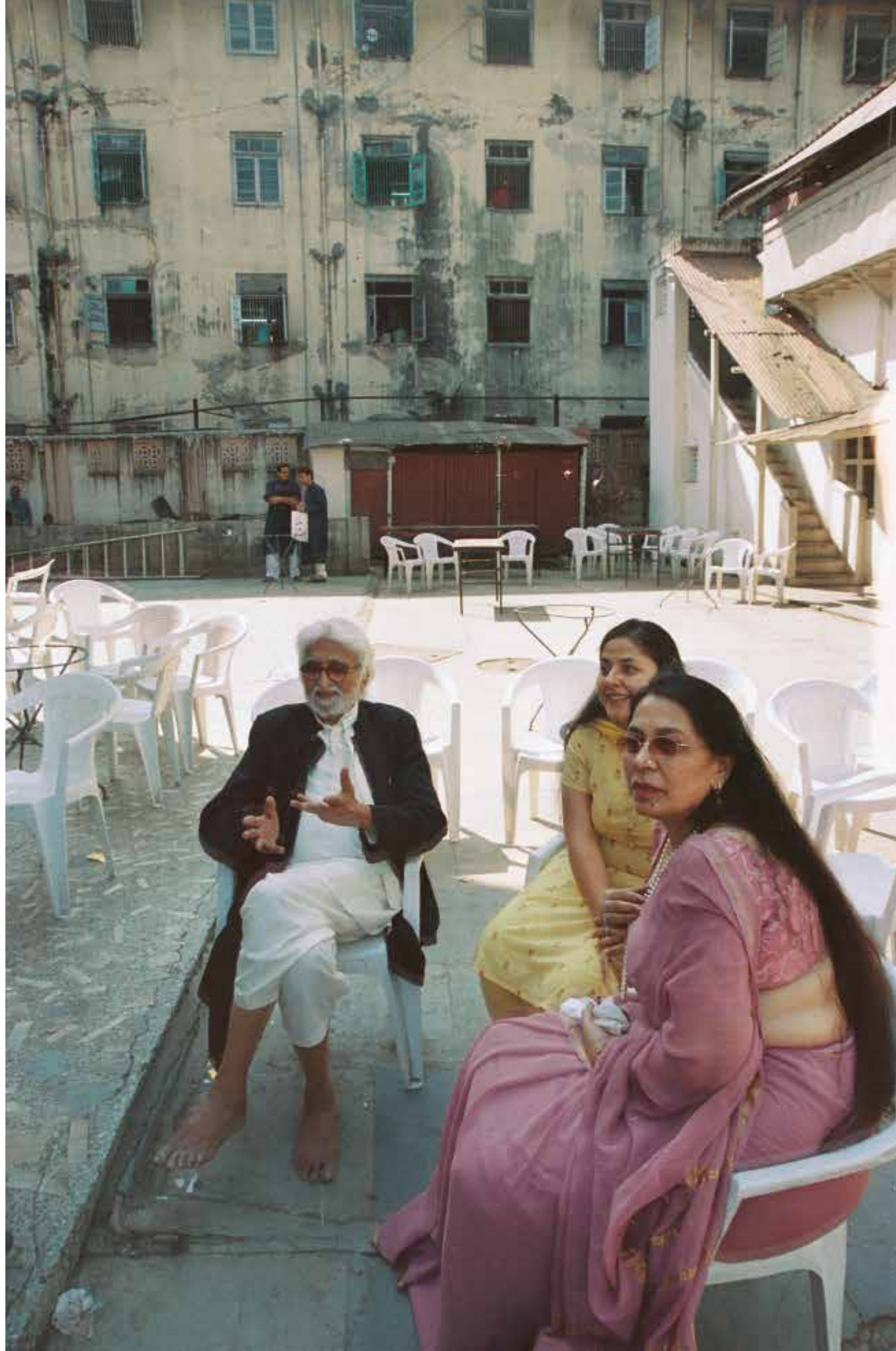
Husain giving an interview with his signature bare feet

Facing pg.: Husain walks barefoot in Badar Baug with Urmila Matondkar



Husain remains barefoot throughout the shoot of his autobiographical film, *Pandharpur ka Ek Ladka* (A Boy from Pandharpur) at Film City, Mumbai

Husain with Rashda Siddiqui and
Anjum Siddiqui at Badar Baug





Jumeriah Emirates Towers in Dubai, wearing a monochromatic blue *lungi* and blue *kurta* (and if you are careful to notice even blue socks!) From a humble beginning to being one of the most celebrated persons in this world, his personality has remained unchanged.

Often, Husain walked without shoes and got into trouble. Elite clubs known for their strict dress codes refused entry when Husain tried to enter the premises of these clubs barefoot. Newspapers and magazines published these stories with great relish. In 1988, he was not allowed entry into the Willingdon Club in Mumbai. A similar incident occurred in Kolkata—he went to the office of a well known art collector and was refused entry by the security personnel. But Husain remained nonchalant. He even entered the Indian Parliament barefoot when he became a member of the Rajya Sabha. It is a different matter that his most significant contribution to legislative affairs remains his sketches of proceedings at India's seat of democracy. Even in hallowed surroundings, Husain could not resist the temptation of wielding his pen and brush.

It is a popular belief that Husain walks barefoot mainly when he is in India. Husain has been seen wearing socks but no shoes while at a restaurant in Dubai. This is considered to be a way of commiserating himself with the majority of Indians, the unprivileged, who cannot afford to cover their feet. It is also seen as a gesture to remain in touch with the soil of India. Besides, he thinks that walking barefoot is a way of showing respect, as in India we keep ourselves barefoot whether at home or at places of worship. Of late, the painter has often said that his decision of going barefoot was based on health grounds. He says that he walks barefoot in order to get the benefits of acupressure.

The barefoot painter has created designer shoes for his close friend, Aziz Zaveri aka Munna who runs a shoe shop at the Taj Hotel in Mumbai. Like with everything else about Husain, there is a sense of irony in a barefoot painter designing shoes!

Whatever might be the reason of his walking barefoot, it undoubtedly depicts his quality and richness of mind. Not many have the mettle in



them to take an odd decision and stick to it. It takes great strength of mind to go to places like the Parliament without shoes. Husain remains unruffled in spite of the media's over publicising his bare feet by taking snaps of his unshod feet at press meets, exhibitions and art workshops. What is odd and precarious for others has become a norm for this great artist. Whatever the reasons, Husain's bare feet are a conscious decision and reflect the fact that he has a mind of his own and nothing in this world can change it.

Husain's characteristic bare feet

Facing pg.: Husain with friends on the steps of Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai





Husain in a thoughtful mood at Flora Fountain, Mumbai. This photo was taken en route to buying another car to add to Husain's already ample stable

Chapter 5

The Restless Soul

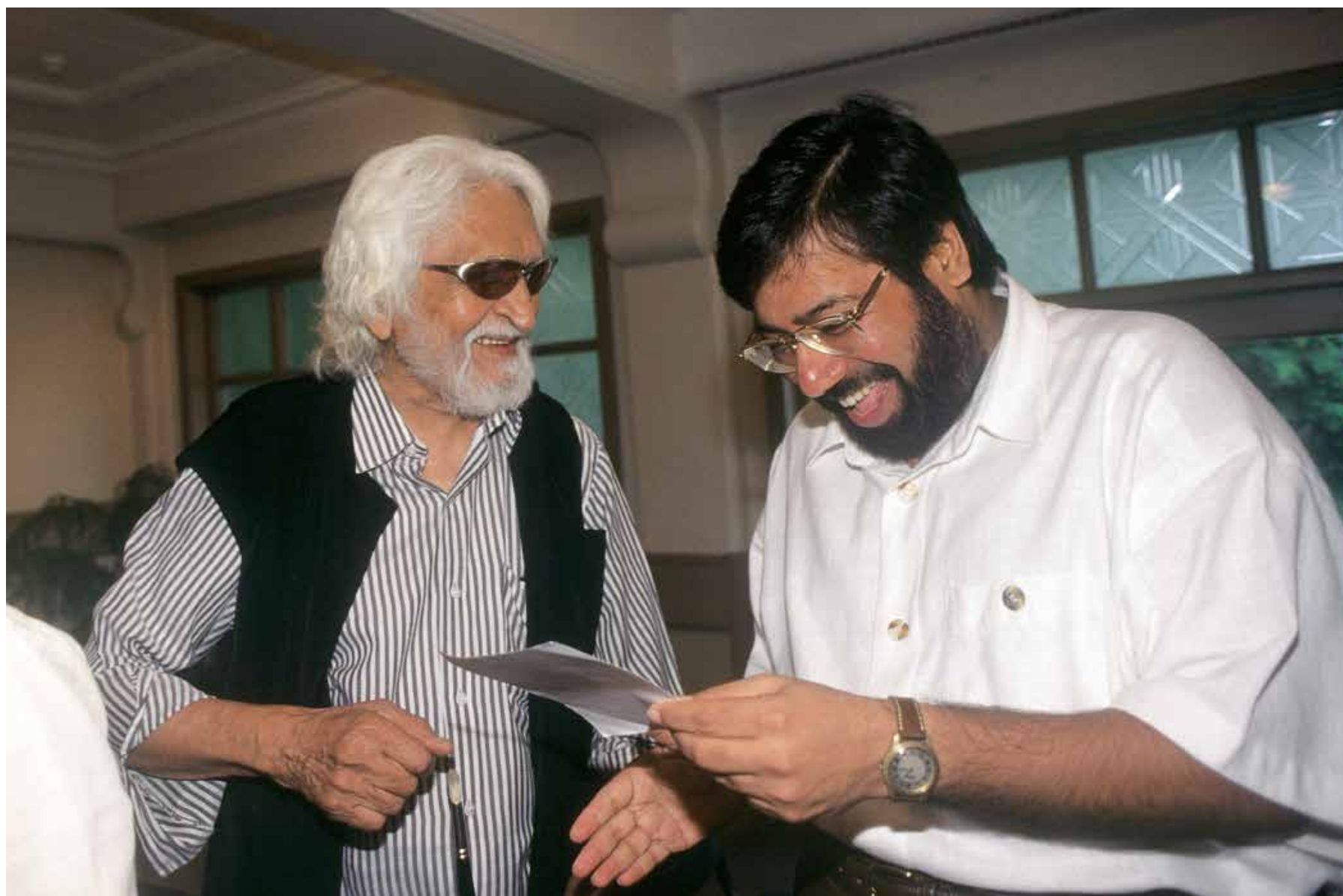
“...I live ten minutes at a time...”

W

hile applying for a passport in 1950, Husain chose his own date of birth (17 September, 1915) keeping in mind that he is a Leo. He is his own master and creates his own rules. Husain is a restless soul. One of his close friends, artist Ram Kumar revealed, “Years ago, I accompanied Husain to a Hindi movie. Barely ten minutes after it began, Husain was ready to leave the cinema hall. Why? He saw what he needed to and there was no point in wasting more time on it!”

In spite of being attached to the places he has lived in, Husain has always moved on to new places for artistic inspiration. He has never been a prisoner of geography; Husain is a nomad Dr. Mukesh Batra adds an anecdote to buttress this point. “Once, after he had come to visit me, his family called up to ask about his whereabouts. I later came to know that instead of going home, he had gone off to Dubai. He always carried a bunch of air tickets in his pocket. Once, I had to actually help him take out the right ticket from his sheaf of tickets!”

There are more such stories, like his old habit of sometimes sleeping in his car. During winters, he loves to sleep in the car just to be able to feel the sun on him, says his long time close friend Rashda Siddiqui. At times,



Husain with RPG Chairman, Harsh Goenka



Children at the shoot of *Gaja Gamini*



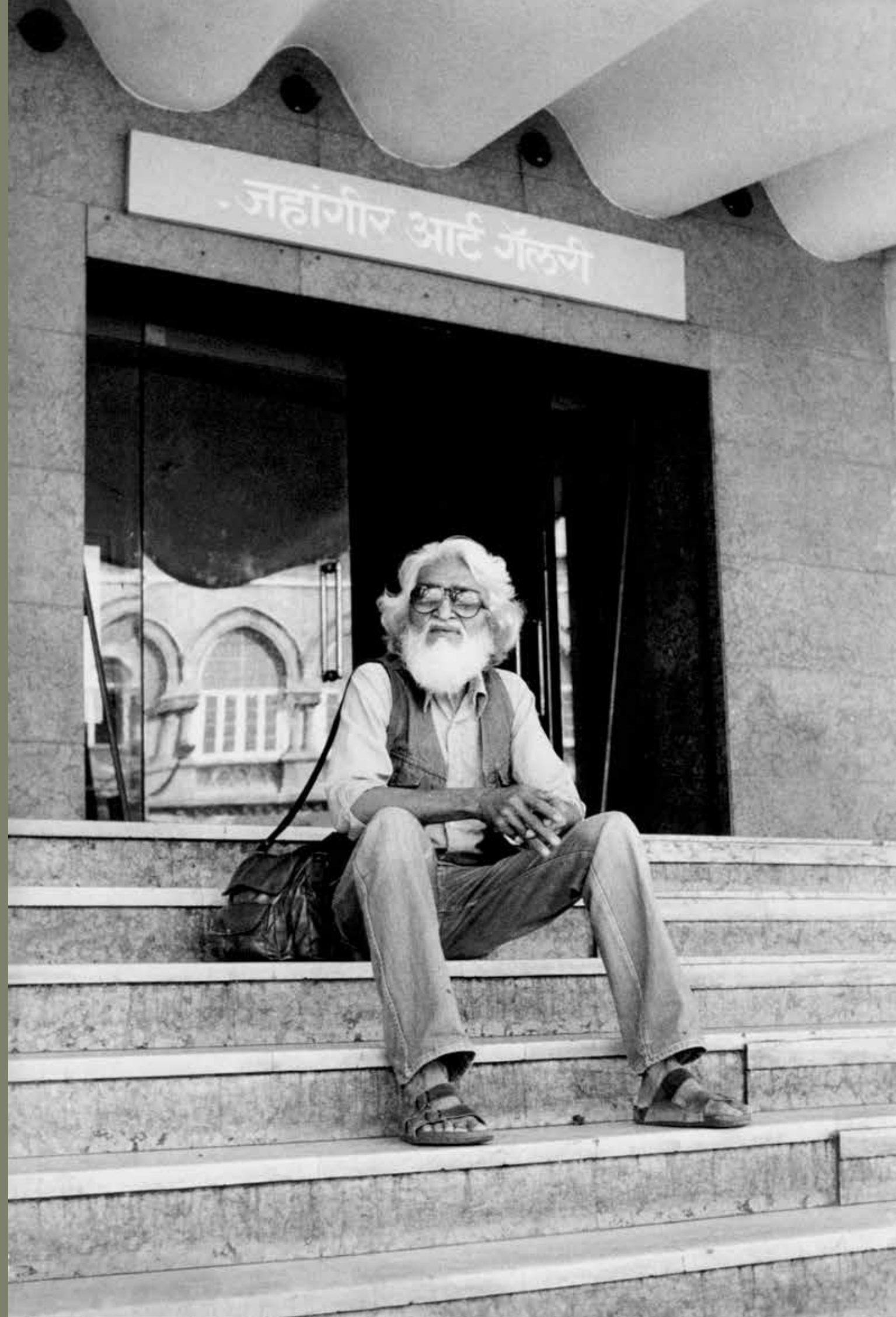
if he feels sleepy, he just dozes off on a *chatai* (mat) even at art galleries whilst painting.

The legendary artist's mischievous nature has attracted attention since he was a little boy. There are so many vignettes from his life that throw light on his persona and his penchant for playing pranks. Recollecting one such episode, the great painter Tyeb Mehta says, "Husain was painting on the pedestrian crossing across VT station (now CST station in Mumbai). Seeing him paint, a crowd gathered around. Unfazed he continued to paint. He was hardly distracted by the crowd. Suddenly he turned around and painted the cheek of an onlooker." Childlike and mischievous, these are endearing qualities that define the living legend.

In spite of being a reserved person, Husain is very spontaneous. His one-liners are famous. Once when asked from where he got the money to make films, he quipped, "*Log kaam karne ke baad ghode bech kar sote hain, Main ghode bech kar film banata hoon.*" (This is a humorous take on a famous Indian proverb that states that one can sleep well only after selling off valuable possessions like a horse, Husain is famous for his horse paintings which are a rage in the art market and Husain is able to finance his films with their sale). He is kind to the press, doesn't get perturbed by the questions shot at him by journalists looking for a juicy story. But he can give the most convincing answers without batting an eyelid. When he was asked if he fell in love with Madhuri he asked why the same was not asked when he was painting Mother Teresa and Indira Gandhi.

Husain is not apologetic about being rich. Shamshad visited his father at Dubai in 2008 and found the old man buying his thirteenth car! So much water has flown under the bridge since 1960 when he had to borrow a friend's car to experience the joys of driving. The friend was politician Natwar Singh who went on to become the foreign minister of India. In one of their meetings Natwar Singh proudly said that he

Husain delighted with the treats, including the *jalebis*, in front of him at his 94th birthday in New York



Husain sitting at the steps of
Jehangir Art Gallery



Husain with Sarayu Doshi, Former Director, NGMA at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai



A collage of the exterior and interior of the Hyderabad Cinema Ghar in Hyderabad



Husain with old friends during the annual Eid lunch at Badar Baug

had just purchased a Fiat car for Rs. 11000. Husain is said to have asked Natwar Singh if he could borrow his car for a few hours. He took the keys and disappeared. The latter waited and waited for Husain to turn up. But there was no sign of him. He waited restlessly and wondered what had happened to his car and his friend. Husain returned the next day, late in the evening! When asked for an explanation he said, “I met my friend on the way. She was on her way to Kanpur, so I dropped her and came back”. Well it was quite chivalrous of the painter to give a free ride to one friend and frustrate the other one by not turning up on time! He drove a car without a license and never cared to call up and say that he would be late.

Shamshad also remembers seeing his father paint in their small one room house at Grant Road in Mumbai. Husain has never forgotten his humble beginnings. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget my yesterdays. I know how it is to work so hard on a cinema hoarding that is put up for only a couple of weeks and then destroyed.”

Through this all, he has remained a man of simple habits. In his early days, he is said to have used the same soap, the brand 501, to wash his clothes, bathe with and shampoo his hair. The soap did not seem to harm his hair much and in later life his magnificent white mane has come to symbolise him as much as his bare feet. Even today, he does not have a secretary and prefers to pick up his calls and fix his appointments himself. He gets up early in the morning, irrespective of the time he has slept. Husain is very religious minded and regular with his morning prayers. At the same time, he is deeply committed to the composite, multi-religious and secular values of Indian civilisation. Husain breathes the spirit of modernity, progress and tolerance.

Husain is fully conversant with and knowledgeable about the chaos, the pathos and the gadgetry of today’s world. Even at the age of 95, he is in tune with the modern world. He has always been very contemporary and adapted to modern technology and techniques. He has used the video camera as a brush and has synchronised his paintings with classical music. In a concert held in the 80s, the maestro of Indian classical music, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, sang classical tunes while the master painted those tunes



on canvas. When asked how he could paint in front of so many people, he quipped, “Don’t musicians give concerts in front of a live audience? Then why can’t a painter paint, as long as he can concentrate on what he is doing?”

Husain is a man of strong likes and dislikes. He is said to form opinions about people in the very first meeting. He may not sell his painting to a person he does not like but he wouldn’t bother with the price if he feels the buyer truly appreciates his art. But he has always cared for the people who were instrumental in his rags to riches and goes out of his way to help them. Husain is known to promote other artists too. He helped Tyeb Mehta to return to India when he was unable to rustle up the money to do so.

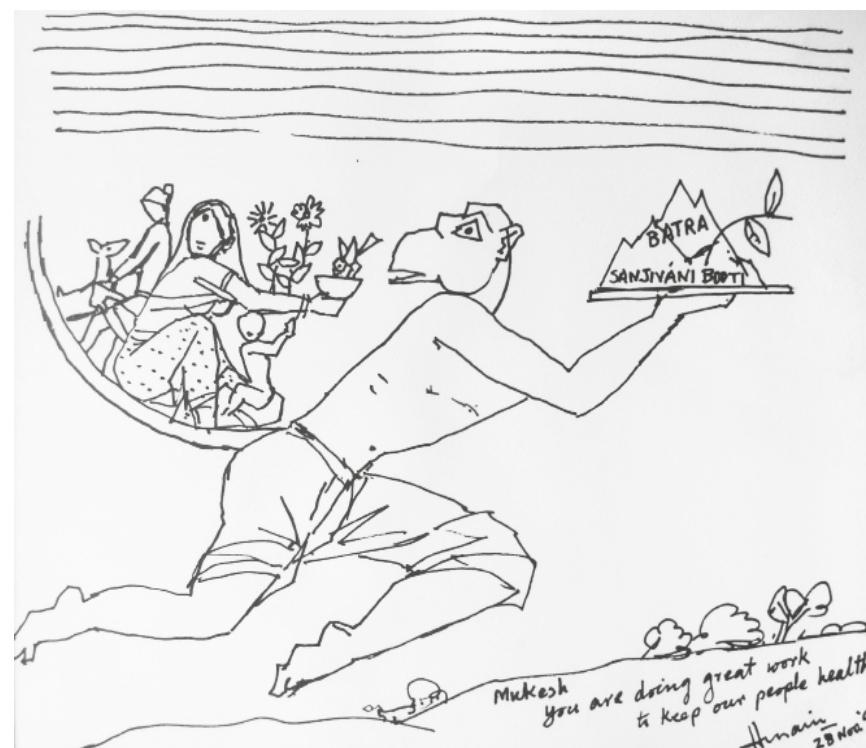
From the highest potentate to the humblest man on the street, Husain has charmed everyone. From Rajiv Gandhi to Manmohan Singh, many eminent Indian political figures have been his friends. Whenever any get

Husain with Sonia Gandhi and others at his exhibition in Jehangir Art Gallery in 1986



Husain painting on the set of *Pandharpur ka Ek Ladka* (A Boy from Pandharpur) at Film City, Mumbai





together was held in Mumbai in honour of a senior leader, Husain would be one of the invitees. But at the same time, he charms the cab-driver who recognises him in Manhattan, bows courteously to the awestruck hotel manager and sketches generously for the receptionist who merely requests an autograph.

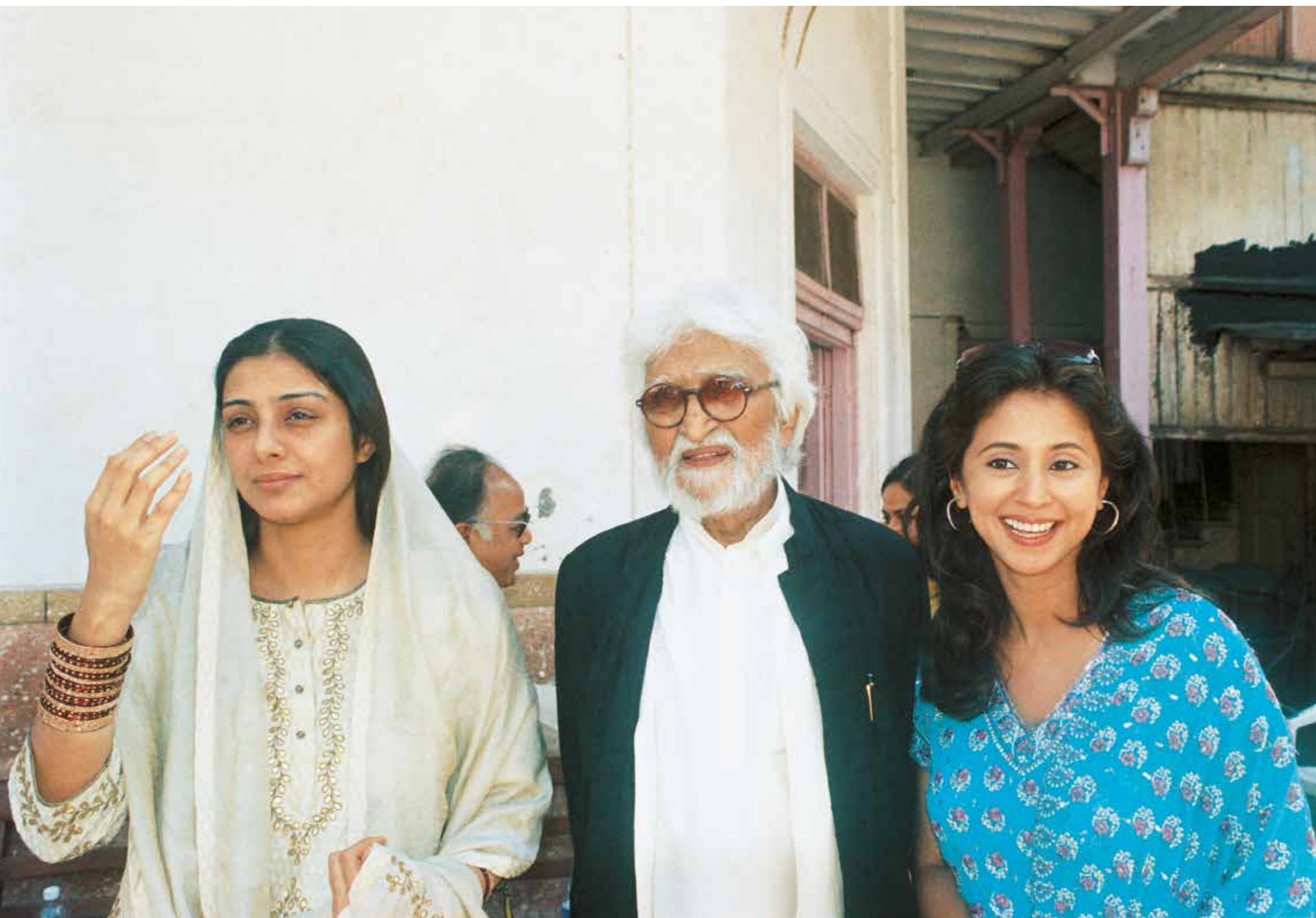
His infectious nature affects all. Only recently popular VJ and singer Rageshwari Loomba was in Abu Dhabi for an assignment and she met Husain. She gave him her card to autograph. Secretly she wished he would sketch his famous horse. To her delight, he obliged.

Above left & right: An illustration of Husain taking photographs;
A sketch Husain made for Dr Mukesh Batra

Facing pg.: The artist flanked by Tabu and Urmila Matondkar at Badar Baug, Mumbai

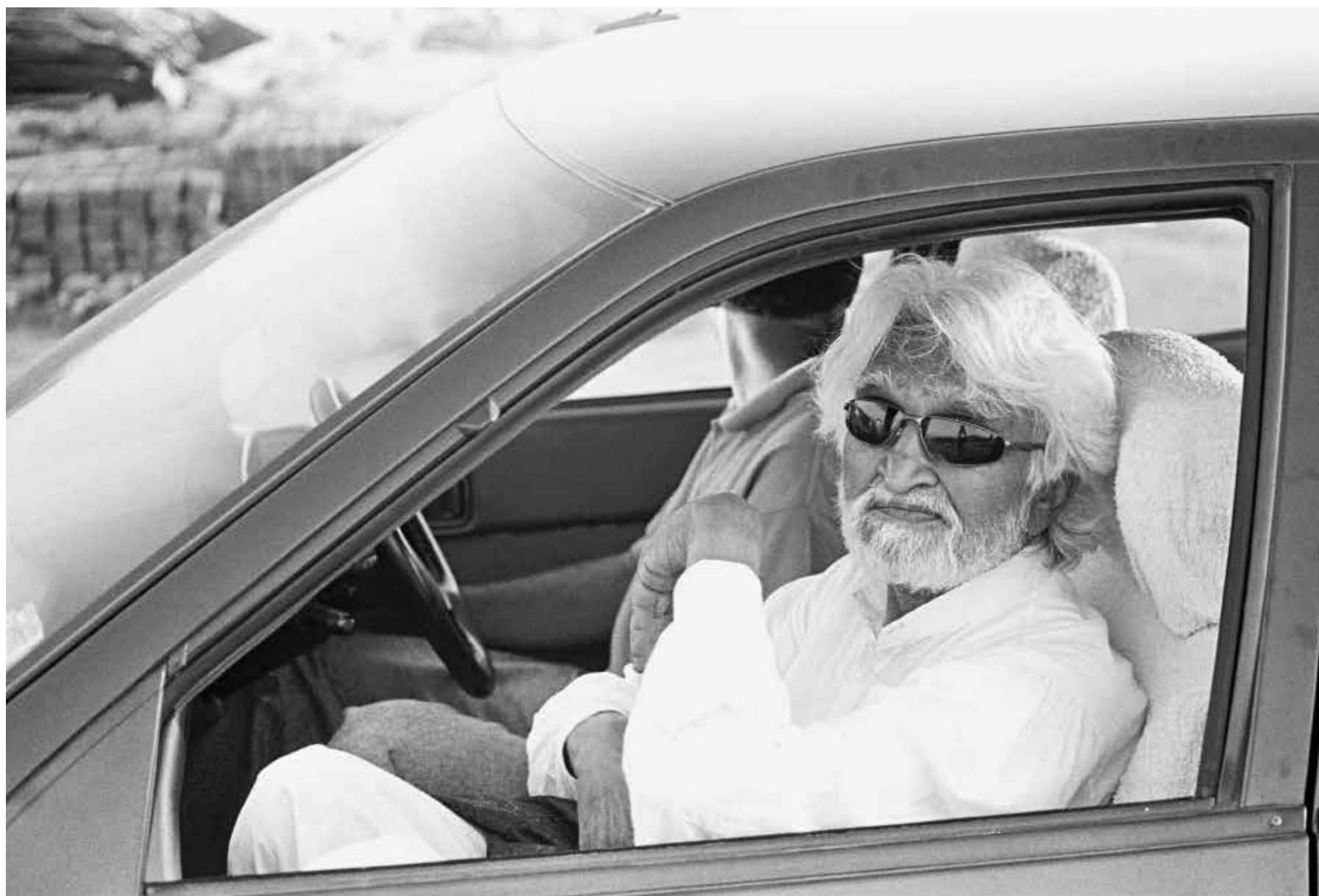
It is hard for anyone not to come away admiring this man. His hearty laughter, his fun loving personality and devil-may-care attitude have always made him the cynosure of all eyes. Husain knows how to attract people. He does not even have to make an effort. When he walks on the road, barefoot, with a tall paintbrush that passes off as a walking stick, people stop in their tracks to see him walk by their lives.

In spite of being such a well known and loved celebrity, he is a private person and loves to be with his family and friends. As a family man he dotes on his children and made sure each had a memorable wedding. Husain shines as a patriarch. While he has lived in Dubai he has constantly been in touch with his family in India, according to his first-born Shamshad who is now based in New Delhi. His sons keep visiting him every three months. A few years ago when his birthday was being celebrated at the Taj, the whole family of twenty-two members had gathered from all





Husain and Devika Bhojwani at Samovar Café at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai



Husain outside the Times of India Building, Mumbai

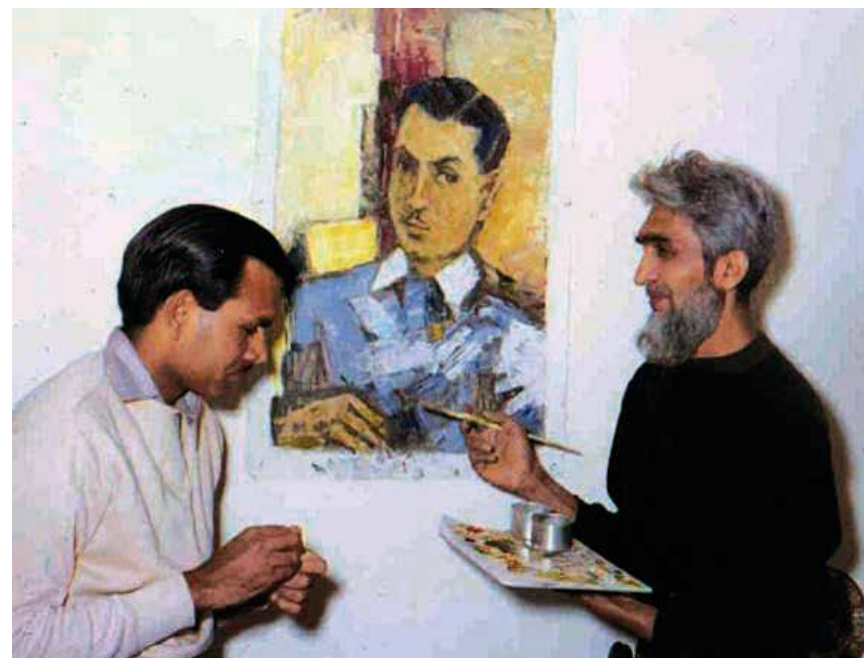


across the world. His daughter Raisa says that they made so much noise that night that they forgot that they were all in a public restaurant. At the stroke of midnight, Husain blew the single candle on the cake and the family had a rare dinner together.

As a rule, Husain rarely likes to celebrate his birthday with outsiders. When he was in India, he would put a ban on parties, formal dinners and meetings of any kind on the day. He would celebrate with his family and a few close friends. He made it a point to meet his friends, relatives and neighbours, old and young, ask them about their well being, feed them sweet *sewaiyan* (an Indian sweet dish made from milk and vermicelli), share their pains and extend a helping hand without being asked. Dr. Mukesh Batra recalls, “I remember during a birthday celebration at his residence in Badar Baugh, he made us sit on wooden chairs at tables with pristine white canvasses surrounding us. He said this also is an expression of art.”

Today, Husain is not in India and he clearly misses Badar Baugh. On his last birthday, he said in a telephonic interview, “It was a family occasion. I spent time with my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Left: Husain at Breach Candy hospital in Mumbai

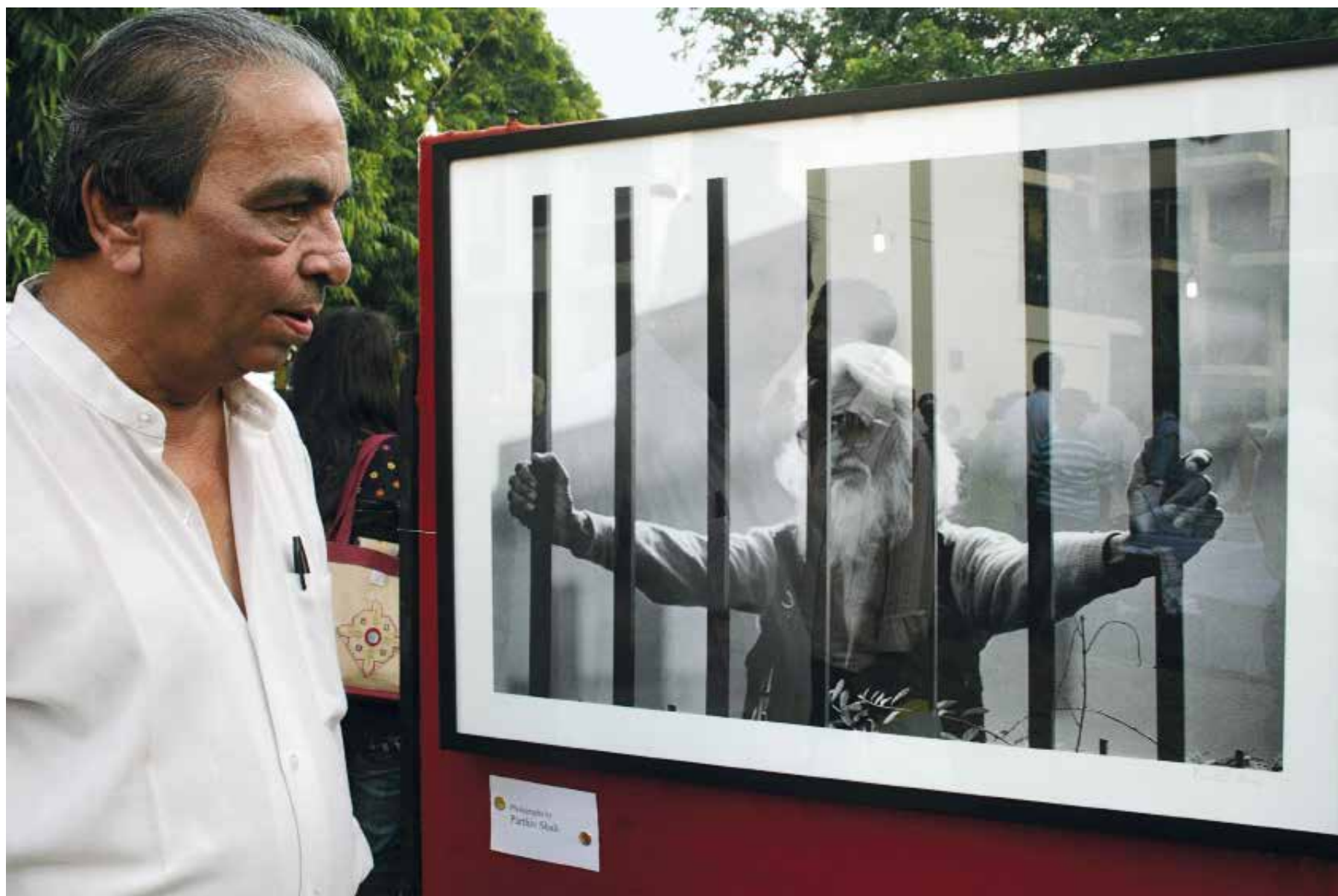


Right: Husain with Natwar Singh and the portrait of Singh's that he painted

But it was the not the same as it used to be at Badar Baugh, where 30-40 people from nearby houses would surround me.”

Till the time Husain was in India, he preferred to celebrate Eid in Mumbai, that too at Badar Baugh. His Eid celebrations are legendary. He would reach Mumbai from wherever he was in order to celebrate the festival with his near and dear ones. His day would start with *namaṣ* at his old mosque in Badar Baugh. The high point of the day was the traditional meal organised for all his old friends and acquaintances along with their families. Dressed in traditional clothes, *shervani* (traditional Indian long coat) and *topi* (cap), along with his family, he would personally welcome each and every guest. The meal would be served in the old fashioned way with groups of guests having food from large brass *thalis* (traditional Indian plate which is very big) laid out on the table. He would interact with each of his chosen guests with utmost care and love and would treat them with a glass full of sweet *sheer korma* (sweet made from milk traditionally served during Eid). These celebrations are amongst his sweetest memories.

Husain constantly strives to discover something new and this has led to his experimenting with “other fields of creative life like architecture, photography, poetry, autobiographical sketches and even furniture making”. But when Richard Holkar, descendent of the Holkar family of Indore, told him that he should take to jewellery designing, he refused. He has his own whims about what he would like to do.



This restlessness of spirit has been instrumental in helping him reach the zenith of success. As well known painter Ram Kumar has written, “His zest for life is almost contagious”. Life for Husain has been a celebration and he has always tried to accept every facet of life as it came. He has a great ability to adapt to his environment. It’s like a breath of fresh air, he says; he believes that in order to remain alert and enjoy life, one needs to be alive every moment. He has been inspired in his life by even the most mundane of things. A most trivial thing like a small piece of stone kept in the corner of a room can draw his attention. Even at the age of 95, the child in him is still very

energetic and vibrant and that keeps his soul restless. He says, “I look at the world through the innocent eyes of a child. It’s like opening a magical box every morning—full of surprises, full of colours, full of hope. That is perhaps why I am still active and fascinated with things even at this age.”

Shamshad Husain looking at a photograph of his father taken by Parthiv Shah at a SAHMAT event (The Hindu Archives)





Husain under a boat at
Cuffe Parade, Mumbai

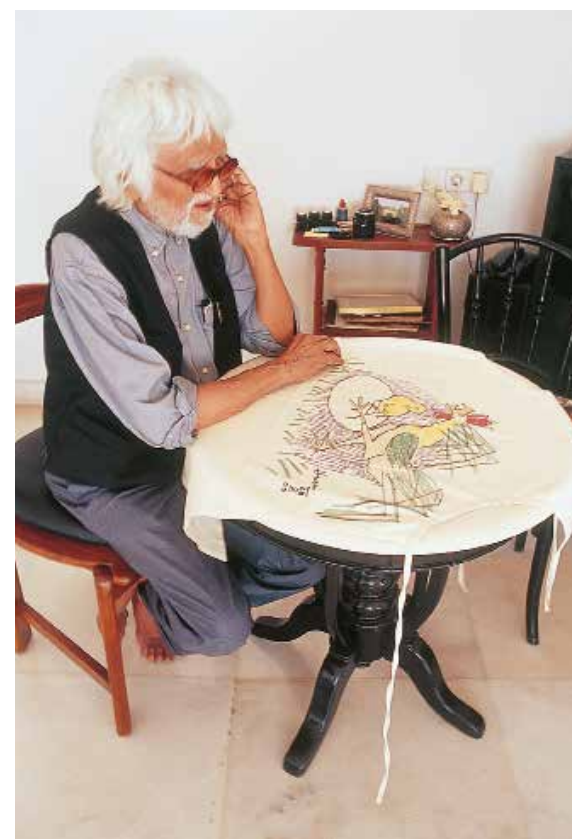
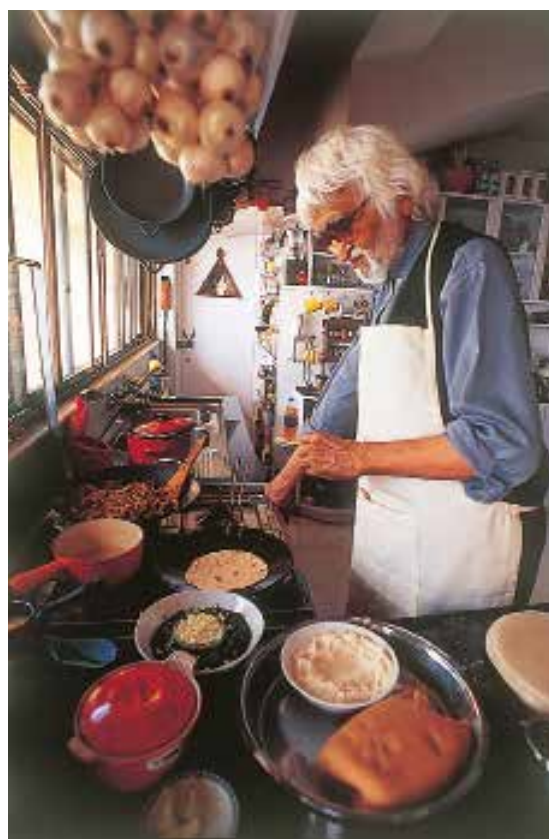
Chapter 6

Hobbies and Hobby Horses

*“India is a giant circus and I am
its rangeela (colourful) joker!”*

Husain is as comfortable pouring vegetable oil or ghee for cooking exclusive dishes as he is adept in mixing oil paints for a canvas! One of his favourite pastimes is rustling up delectable recipes and serving them aesthetically. Amongst his many friends in the media, Farzana Contractor, the editor of *Upper Crust*, a Mumbai based magazine devoted to gourmet and special cuisines, narrated a delightful anecdote.

One Sunday morning Farzana was busy doing household chores and the doorbell rang. She was taken aback to see the barefoot maestro, at the age of 86, standing with a bag of groceries outside her door. He walked right into the kitchen, having come to her house, according to him, “straight from the market”. And from which market had he come from? The vegetable market in New Delhi, where he had chanced upon some beautiful fresh *lassan* (garlic). Husain reminded Farzana that two years ago he had made a promise that he would cook *kheema-lassan* (mince lamb and garlic) at her place. Now that he had got the right *lassan*, he had decided not to waste a moment.



He came straight to her home from Mumbai airport. On the way, he picked up his daughter Raisa. Husain had also taken pains to buy all the other ingredients he needed from the grocery store. Farzana could see the spices and the grocery but where was the lamb mince? Husain had already ordered it and was going to mince it himself rather than using the grinder. Husain's father Fida used to cook meals in their old home in Pandharpur, and a young Maqbool had learnt some of his cooking skills from him. Both father and son were known

Husain, an accomplished cook, cooking with his daughter Raisa at Farzana Contractor's residence. He even found a way to liven up a drab, white-coloured apron!

to have cooked meals for families visiting their home. Years later, Husain still liked to cook the old-fashioned way using recipes from the reservoirs of his memory. He made *parwali roti* (flatbread stuffed with a green vegetable) along with the *kheema-lassan*. Even while he was cooking, he could not resist drawing. Husain noticed that Farzana's apron was plain. He took a pen, sketched away furiously and hung the apron back on the peg!

A connoisseur of food, Husain is very particular about what he eats. He loves Indian food, especially home made Hyderabadi and Awadhi food. Husain loves Iranian kebabs and *roti*. He also loves Italian cuisine, presumably because of his many visits to the country during his career as a painter. Sweets have always been his favourite. He often carries *motichur ke laddu* and *kaju barfi* (popular Indian sweets) in his bag while traveling.

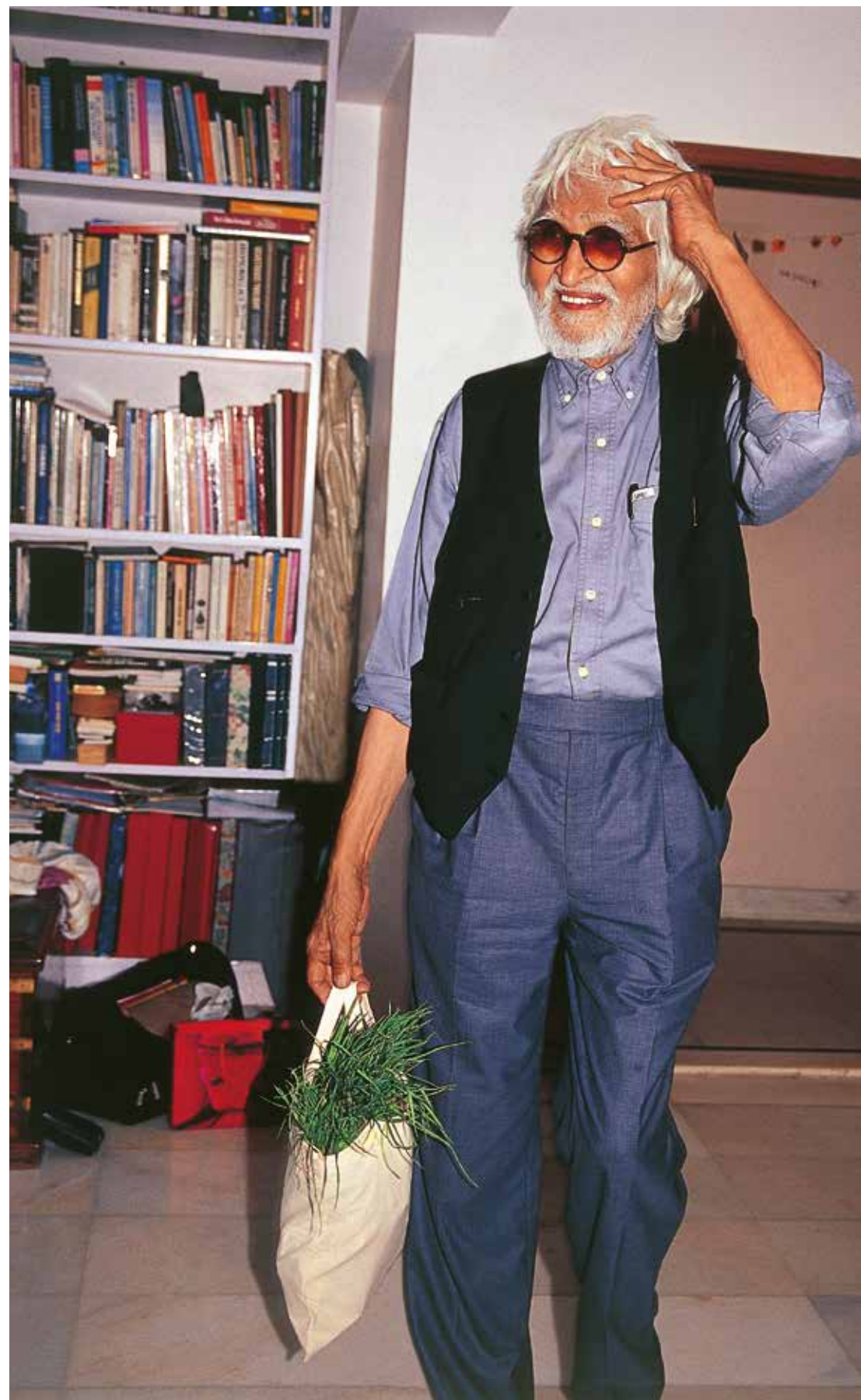
His subtly artistic sense of food habit is particularly depicted in his cup of tea. It's always half filled and is perfectly brewed. Cups overflowing with tea put off his aesthetic sense. Husain begins his day with a half a cup of light and milky chai and has endless such half cups through the day as he goes about painting his canvases. Reveals Syed Alawi Elanthical, his right hand man in Doha and who has been with him for the last thirty years, "Sahib is very particular about the milk in his tea." Syed, who originally hails from Kerala, reveals the secret of the nonagenarian's health: food with minimum spice and nothing fried. If it is vegetables, he likes it bland, with a hint of spices cooked in minimum oil. In Doha, where he lives now, Husain has South Indian food for breakfast at a restaurant 25 kms away from his home.

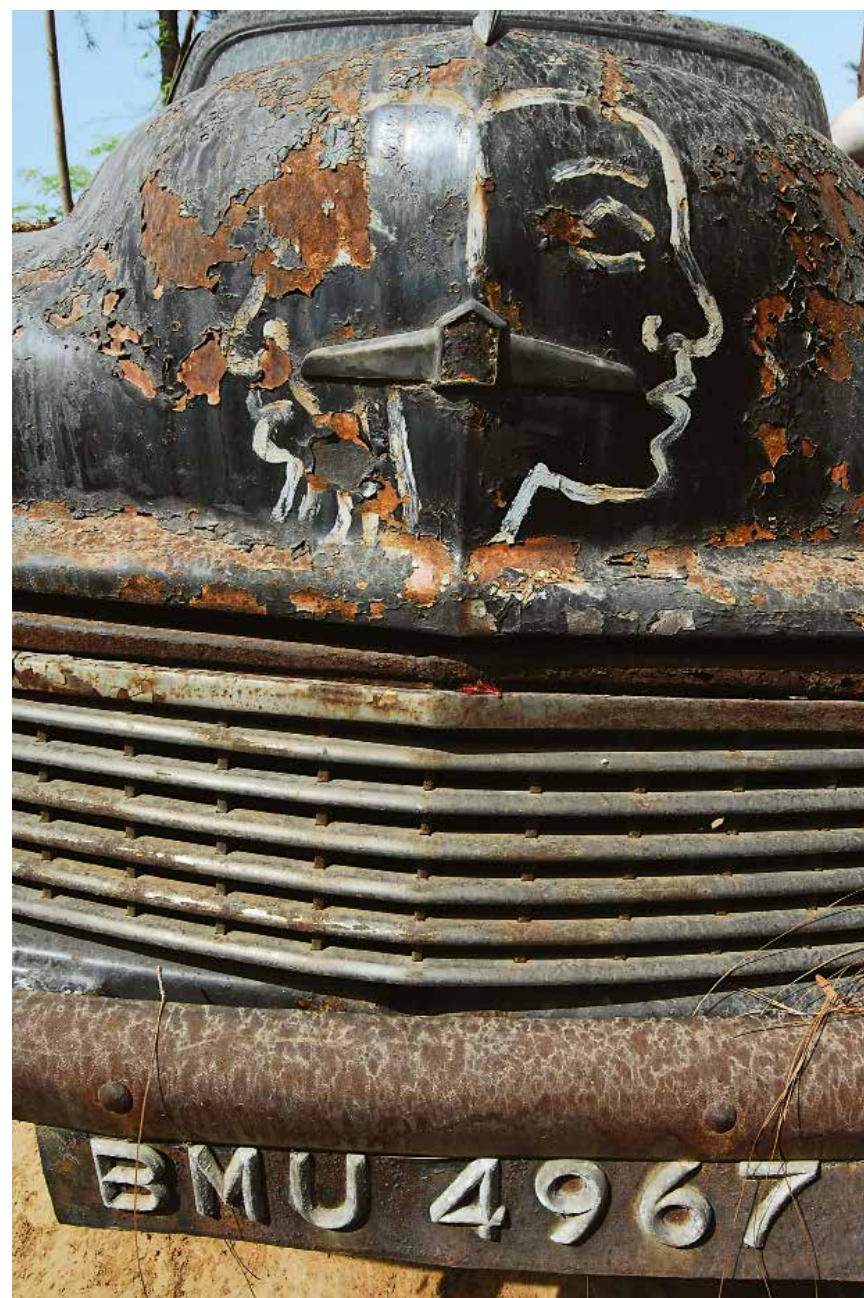
About his culinary delights and love for food the painter says, "Give me good food, give me good music and then watch how I function on canvas! My brush will move according to the beat of the music and to the lingering tastes of that exquisite meal."

Cooking isn't his only hobby. Husain is fond of cars too, classics like the Ferrari, Bentley and Buggati. He considers them art installations in his garage. Now, of course, he has enough money to buy one by simply calling up a showroom and ordering the desired model, in whichever city he is staying. There was a time when he cycled to locations in Indore to paint landscapes. But he used to dream big. His son Shamsad recalls that his father's first car was a second hand Hillman bought in the 60s from Sham Lal, the then editor of the *Times of India*. Today he has a Mercedes G500 in Qatar and fifteen cars in Dubai, including a Bugatti Veyran, a Ferrari, a Bentley and a Jaguar.

Husain's passion for these cars is unbridled. He needed a vintage open top Rolls Royce for a sequence in the film he made, *Gaja Gamini*. He called his friend Munna Zaveri and asked him if he could help. Munna named Pranalal Bhogilal who was Mumbai's vintage car collector. He left

Husain arrives with fresh vegetables from the market to cook for Farzana Contractor





Husain's first car, a Fiat which he had painted on, is now rusted and part of an eccentric installation at the Husain ki Sarai in Faridabad







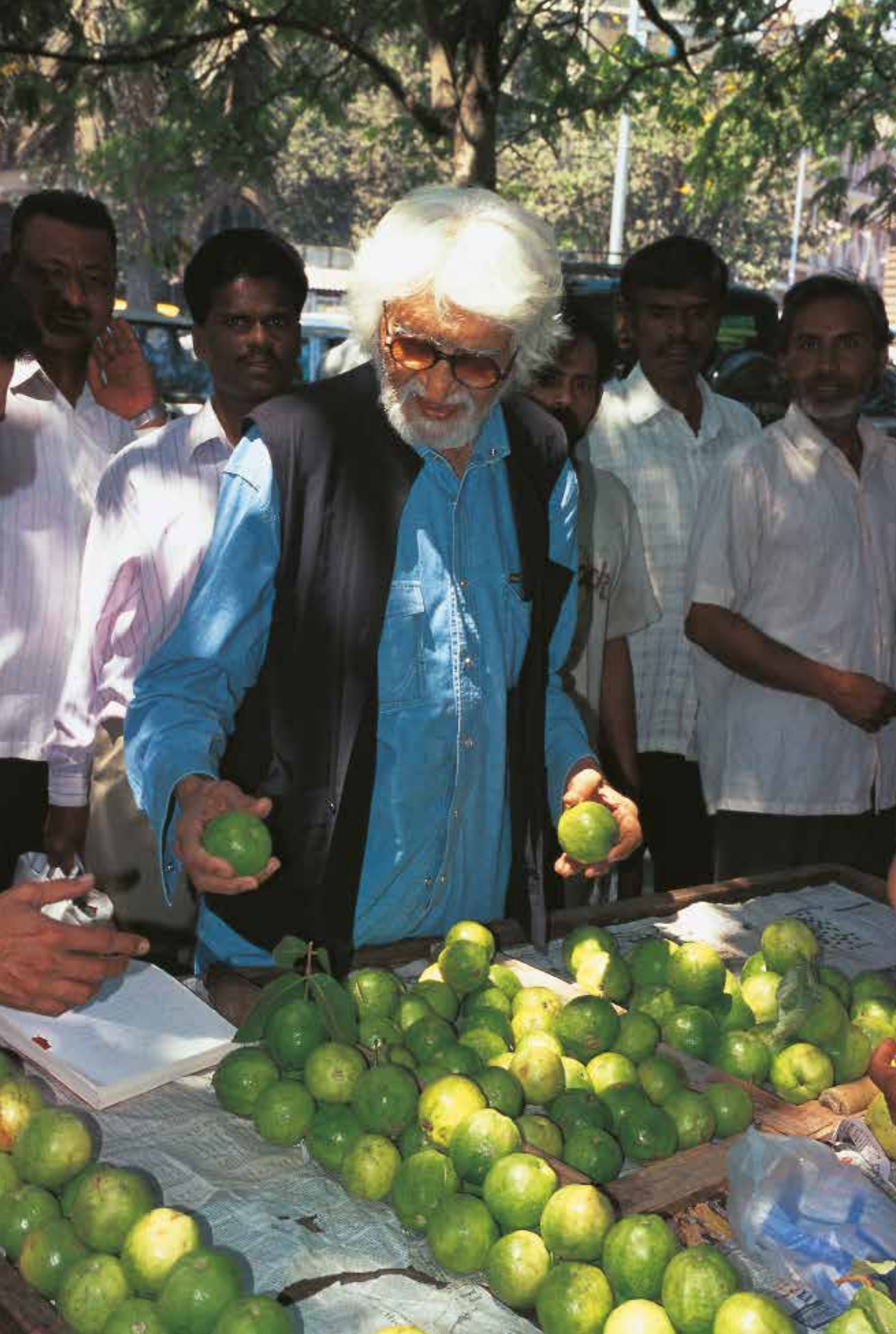
the shoot and drove the open top car from Pranal's house to the studio himself. Considering it was summer, onlookers and other car drivers must have been curious to know why anyone would drive across the city in an open car! Just like the vintage car, it was vintage Husain who worked his magic once again.

Husain has created art museums in different cities across India and abroad. He has a Husain-Doshi ni Gufa (Cave of Husain and Doshi) in Ahmedabad, a Cinema Ghar in Hyderabad, Husain ki Sarai (Husain's Inn) in Delhi and museums in Bangalore and Dubai. He is building an art museum in Qatar. His old Fiat car, with a horse painted on the bonnet and Krishna with *gopis* painted on the sides is hung up from a tree at Husain ki Sarai in

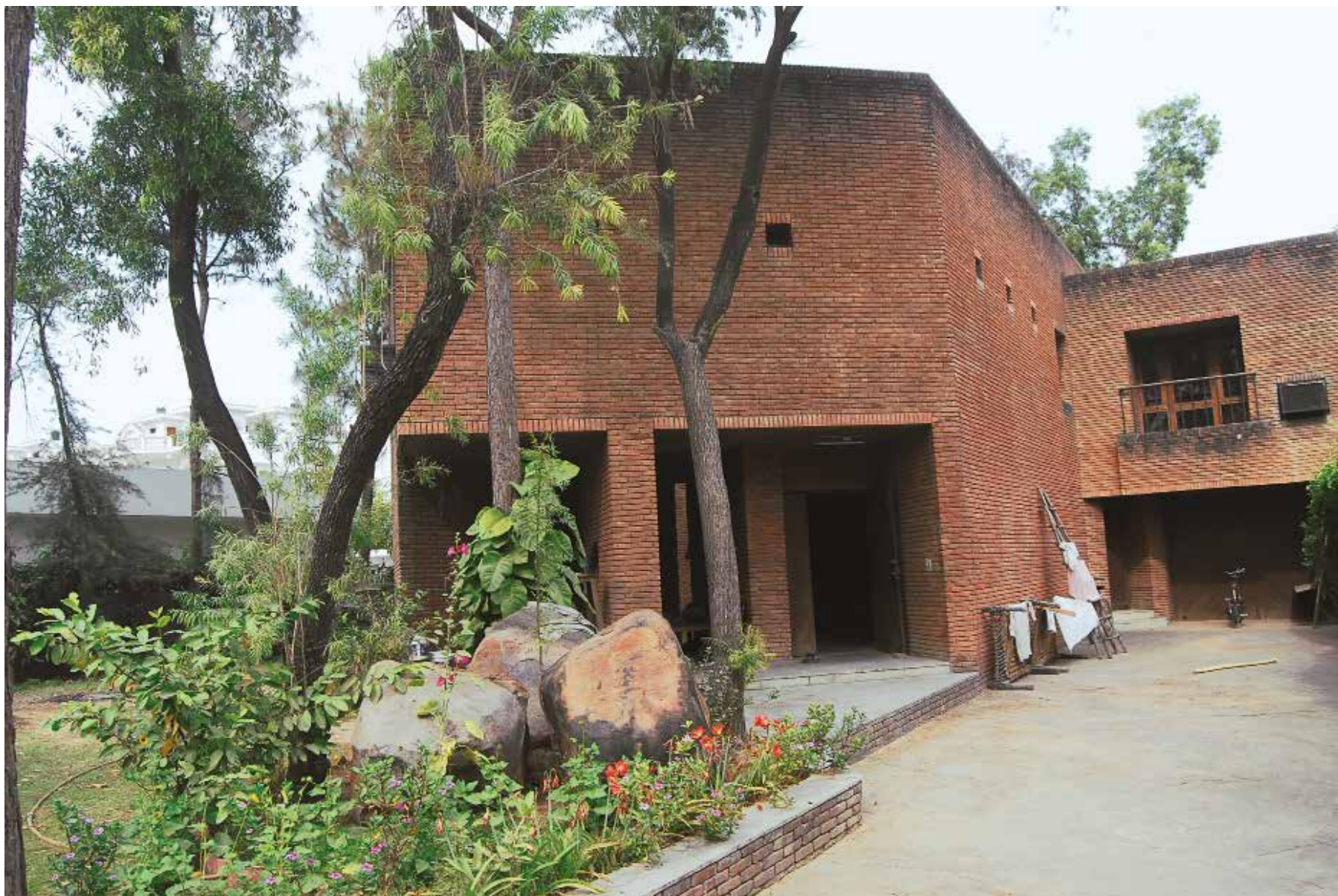
Delhi. During the making of the Husain-Doshi ni Gufa in Ahmedabad, Husain's involvement was total. He was involved right from the time the plot of land was finalised to its conceptualisation and eventual working. Husain's signature is very much evident in the end product. The structure is like a cave; it is partly above the ground and partly underground. Husain

Husain at Film City, Mumbai

Facing pg.: The Relia family with the family portrait that Husain painted of them which he started in Ahmedabad and completed in London



Husain, a big fan of road-side shopping, selects guavas from a fruit vendor



has painted all the walls of the cave. Alongside the Gufa, there is an art gallery and an open air cafeteria. The Gufa and the surrounding gallery and cafeteria are run by art collector Anil Relia who is also a close friend and calls Husain “baba” or compassionate father.

Husain loves poetry. He likes writing in English and Urdu. Natwar Singh reminisces, “I enjoyed his recitation of Mirza Ghalib’s poetry and his endless store of risqué jokes and stories.” Once he was hospitalised in Chennai, he wrote a *qawwali* which appeared in the movie *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*. Although he had formal education only till the 9th class, he picked up English in Indore. Often times, even the wittiest are

left groping for words. When the artist Kali Pundole died a few years ago, a tribute meeting was held in the Pundole Art Gallery. All the other artists and other guests said great things about the departed. When it was Husain’s turn, he simply said in a dramatic manner, ‘Kali I miss you, I miss you, I miss you.’” Once again his bold strokes were at play. Even without saying much, he succeeded in creating an impact.

Exterior of Husain ki Sarai in Faridabad



Above & facing pg.: Interiors of Husain ki Sarai in Faridabad





Husain is an avid traveller. But there was a time when he did not like travelling. He once had to go to Europe. On arriving at the airport, he did not like the crowd and decided against going. Today, however, he is a global citizen. In fact, he is said to move around with a sheaf of air tickets with him and take impulsive decisions on which city to travel to, depending on his frame of mind. In India, Varanasi, Rajasthan and Kerala are his favourite destinations. He likes Varanasi for its tradition, Rajasthan for its colour and Kerala for its starkness. He takes his camera along with him to whichever place he goes.

Often he is seen with a paintbrush the size of a riding crop in his hand. It is generally mistaken as his walking stick. He chided a journalist who made the same mistake, “This is a paintbrush, made in France where painters and creative people are revered and I carry it because it makes me feel good. If a general can carry his stick everywhere, why can’t I carry my paintbrush?”

In whatever field Husain tried his hand, he has emerged successful and has gained acclamation. Success, he says, should not be sought after or it will never come. According to him one should defy success and should keep breaking one’s image the moment he/she becomes popular.

An eccentric installation at Husain ki Sarai, Faridabad



Small wooden toys painted by Husain





Husain strolling barefoot
on the sets of his
autobiographical film
Pandharpur ka Ek Ladka
(A Boy from Pandharpur)

Chapter 7

Lights, Camera, Action!

*“I love the idea of being
a bioscope walla.”*

At one point, Hyderabad was Husain’s adopted city. His wife and many of her relatives belong to this beautiful city. Although Husain’s first brush with cinema was while making hoardings for Hindi film producers in Mumbai, he chose to make Cinema Ghar in Hyderabad. As the story goes, he had purchased this plot of land years ago. The idea for an art and cinema museum evolved over a period of time. Now it is a distinctive postal address which has Husain’s signature sketches on the outside. It is Husain’s personal tribute to Indian cinema, from the silent to the talkies era. Cinema Ghar was also conceived to celebrate world cinema and will store classics from the world over. Unlike other museums where memorabilia is stored, the magic of movies and movie moghuls is very much alive throughout the complex. It is like a village festival of live paintings on the walls and moving images of song and dance on celluloid.

First brush with the movies

The magic of cinema can be felt across all classes even in small quaint towns in the interiors of India. “There’s a unique pleasure



The artist on the sets of *Gaja Gamini*



Madhuri Dixit in a still from the film *Gaja Gamini*



to watching a film from the *seetivalla* (front row/whistle blowing) class”, says Husain. So, why would Husain not be attracted to the magic of celluloid like millions of other Indians?

While he was fascinated with *Ramlila* as a child, he also was in awe of films. After seeing V. Shantaram’s *Sinhgad* (1933) as a young boy in Indore, he sold his school books to buy paints to make a painting of the great Maratha king’s fort. He also loved *Devdas* (made by P.C. Barua in 1935) and *Ayodhya Raja* (1932). He had wanted to make films since he was fifteen years old. He nurtured a great desire to be a part of the history of Indian cinema.

His first opportunity came when he got an offer to paint a film poster. At that time, it was his chance to start earning a livelihood.

He grabbed the offer as he thought it was better than whitewashing the walls! He used to paint with great dexterity perched on the scaffolding, sometimes in the middle of traffic. Painting, of any kind, inspired him.

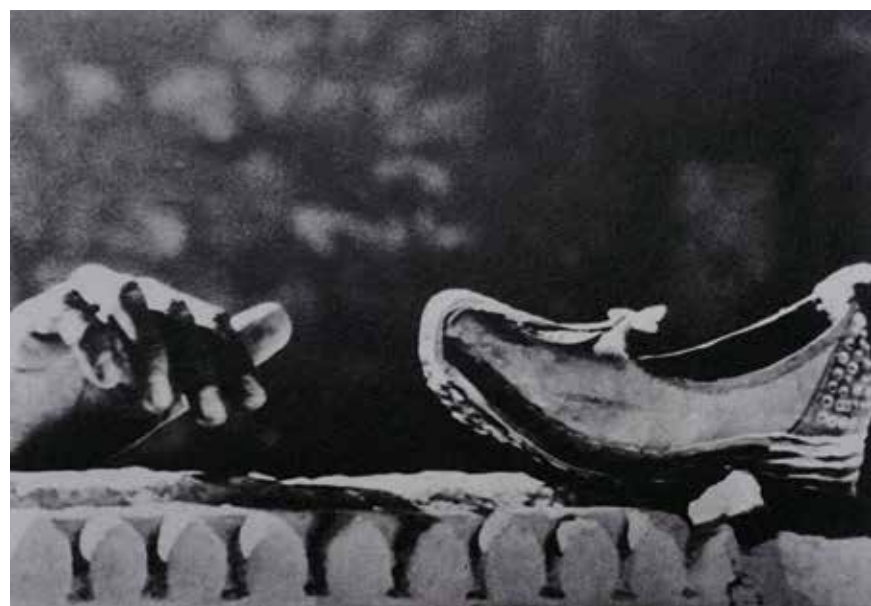
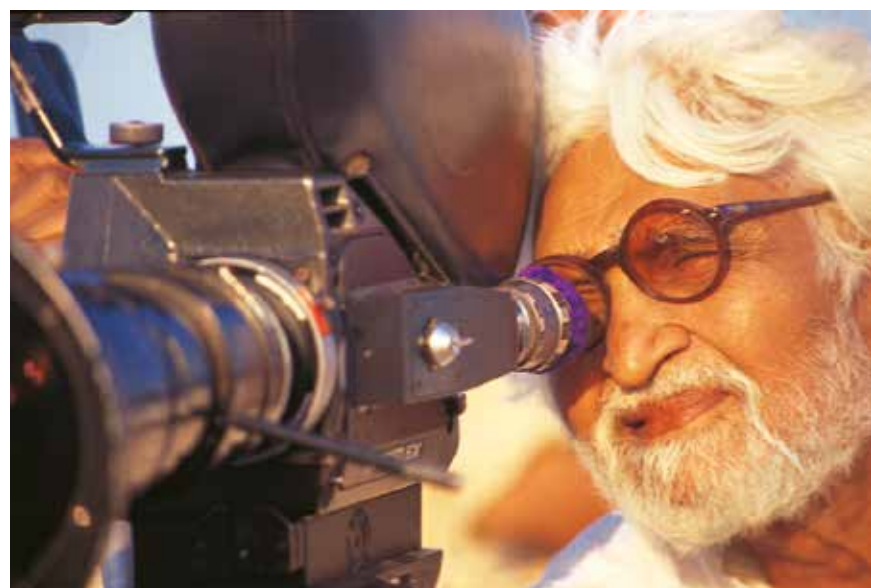
While painting cinema hoardings he had come into contact with people from the film industry. The experience aroused a latent desire in him to become an art director for films. He was able to get some work in the film *Anarkali* (1953) starring Pradeep Kumar and Bina Rai. But such was his luck; he ended up not being paid for his services. His work, though, was distinctive enough to be recognised. Another film producer, K. Asif was making his magnum opus *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). The film remained fifteen years in the making. K. Asif asked Husain to construct a set for him for a song sequence. He also asked him to design the costumes for the war sequences in the film. Not only was he paid for his services, his work was remembered many years later by K. Asif’s son, Akbar Asif. A resident of London, Akbar and his wife Kavita invited

Husain on the occasion of his daughter Haya's 18th birthday. Husain did a live portrait of the girl to the beats of the *qawwali* song from *Mughal-e-Azam*. This was another memorable moment in the painter's life. The film continues to inspire him and he exhibited a series of paintings on *Mughal-e-Azam* in 2007.

Husain recalls his initial days in Mumbai with fondness: "We were paid barely four or six annas per square foot of hoarding. That is, for a 6 x 10 feet canvas, we earned a few rupees. And apart from the New Theatre distributor, the others did not pay us at all. As soon as I earned a little bit I used to take off for Surat, Baroda and Ahmedabad to paint landscapes." Most of the cinema hoardings he painted are no longer available. But there are a few photographs as mute testimony to the genius of India's most celebrated painter of cinema hoardings. One photograph captures the hoarding of the film *Zindagi* (1939), which was displayed at the foyer of Minerva Cinema in Central Mumbai. Another depicts a 40 foot mural of legendary actor Durga Khote. It was displayed on the foyer of Majestic cinema in Mumbai. Husain had to supplement his income of being a cinema hoarding painter to support his family. He ran a company called Maqbool Pandharpurkar and became a wedding decorator. He had another company called Maqbool Cine Painting Works, which specialised in posters, banners, lithographic designs, motor and theatre decoration and floats. But he wanted to become a filmmaker. Legend has it that when he watched films back in Indore, he used to make notes in order to discuss aspects of film making with the celebrated directors of the 30s like P.C. Barua and V. Shantaram.

Husain's movies

Being associated with the Mumbai film world from an early stage of his career created a fascination and fondness for films, which was instrumental in Husain's filmmaking career. But what made him take up the director's baton? The former head of Films Division, Jehangir Bhowmager, put it into his head that an artiste should be able to create in any medium. If he (Husain) was a good painter, he could be a good director too. It was only a matter of translating the vision from canvas to the screen. Jehangir was



Above: Husain behind the camera during the shooting of his film, *A Boy from Pandharpur*

Below: A still from Husain's first film, *Through the Eyes of a Painter*, a whimsical short film filled with abstract imagery



Madhuri Dixit and Husain inside Mehboob Studios, Mumbai



An elephant on the sets of *Gaja Gamini*, which was there to inaugurate the film's first day of shooting. Husain sketched on the flanks of the animal before the first shot



an influential producer and director of his time. Even while his hoardings perched on scaffoldings high up in the air, Husain dreamt of his own success as a filmmaker. His chance came in 1967.

In 1966, the Films Division decided to get a short film made by a non-film maker and gave the chance to Husain. His first film, *Through the Eyes of a Painter*, is a black and white documentary of a painter who goes to Rajasthan and the visual impulses he encounters. Initially, everyone at the Films Division was baffled by the film. Veteran filmmaker Mrinal Sen, who was then part of the Films Division, was skeptical. But when he saw the movie he was bowled over, “After watching this film I liked Rajasthan a lot more than I ever did. I wouldn’t say it was a perfect film but it was certainly a work of art. Every frame of the film was like an artist’s canvas.”

The film was shown at the Berlin Festival and won a Golden Bear. The film is a romantic rhapsody of 15 minutes with not a single dialogue in it. In the film the camera moves, as if in a dream, from one spectacular image to another. The images are varied. A goat roams in front of a representation of a tiger, looking up at the infinite skies. A hawk flies across blue water. School children disperse after listening to the school bell. The images keep changing, from women bathing at the river bank to an anklet lying among the lines of a desert, from a window with a beautiful sculpture to a dirty canal in front of a house. The imagery is synchronised with music—composed by Elchuri Vijaya Raghava Rao—contributing to the aesthetic quality of the film.

Husain made over ten short films, including *Folk dances, of God and Men, Calcutta Unlimited, Cowumbrella* etc. It took him quite a while to make his first feature film *Gaja Gamini*, which released 2000. About this time gap he says, “It took me sixty years to realise a dream of which thirty years were spent in allowing Madhuri to arrive.”

Iqbal, a 2005 film directed by Nagesh Kukunoor, inspired Husain to make a series of paintings based on the film

He made the film in his own unique way. Unlike other directors who normally write a scene or do a shot division by scribbling notes, Husain used to paint the scene! The script of the film ended up being 100 feet long; perhaps the first and last in the world of Hindi films at least. *Gaja Gamini* literally means a woman with the gait of an elephant; it seemed only fitting that the film's *mahurat* (first shot of a film) was done by an elephant crushing a coconut under its right leg.

The film is a tribute to womanhood and Husain himself has dedicated it “to the woman who gave birth to me, the woman who lived with me and the woman who lives in my works.” In the movie Husain handles the journey of a woman through history in an artistic and aesthetic way. The film is philosophical, literary as well as spiritual. It has no plot, no hero or heroine, yet manages it to be a great work of art. The film provides the artist a huge canvas to depict various stages of womanhood with his usual creativity.

The film has Madhuri Dixit as the central character portraying the various aspects womanhood—the mother, the beauty, the tease, the coquette, the oppressed, the intellectual, the powerful, the strong and the muse. There is no specific time frame in the film—it is about timelessness and eternity. It depicts the interplay of various facets of a woman's life. The film impresses the viewers with the frame by frame synchronisation of thoughts, ideas and imageries used. The movement of the film from one frame to another is marked with a trickle of paint which makes the film acquire a new dimension. The film holds forth the idea that beyond the physical differences of time, era, society and status, the thread of womanhood remains the same. The effect is impeccable with the artist's muse Madhuri Dixit portraying the different facets of womanhood placed in different historical eras and social strata. Husain's ineffable command over the Hindu mythologies is articulated in the film. The dialogues of the film, though very few, are very rich and speak of the assiduity with which they were crafted. And this was endorsed when the master craftsman was quoted saying, “To write the dialogue was very difficult. I used to get up at 4 am and write them, but would change them on the sets. Like my paintings I kept on evolving on the spur of the moment.” Indeed



like his paintings, the film happens to be visually enchanting and open to subjective interpretations.

Mysterious in essence, multi-faceted in dimension and majestic in manifestation, *Gaja Gamini* highlights some archetypal aspects of womanhood, like her carrying a *gathree* or burden and passing it over generation after generation. The portrayal of a woman wearing an anklet again creates the imagery of fusion of the daily rigmarole and extraordinary art, thus pointing to the fact that women irrespective of social strata are endowed with inherent sensitivity and richness of mind. The bizarre presence of historical characters like Kalidas and Leonardo da Vinci in the same scene with contemporary characters like the actor

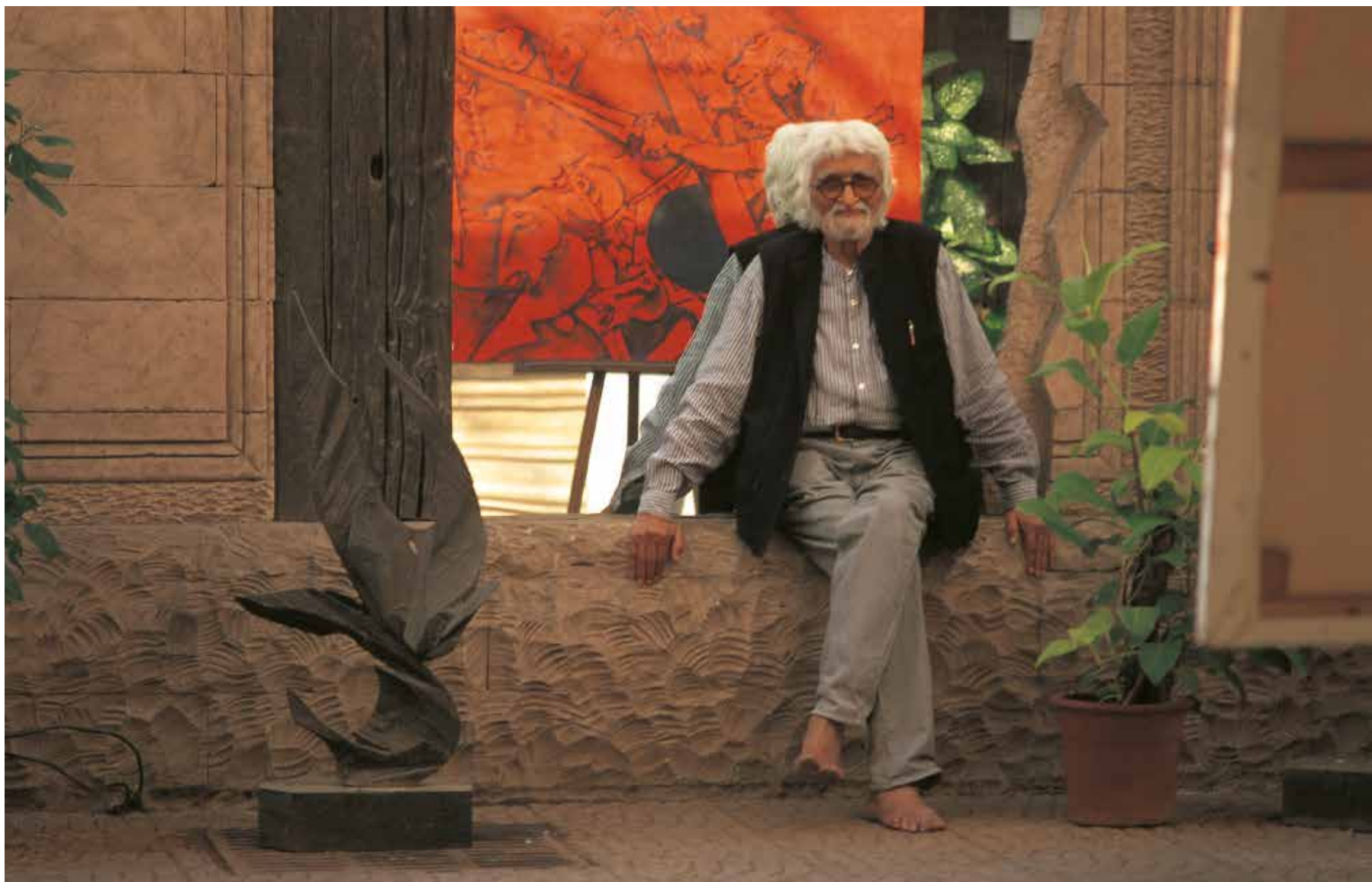
A painting from a series inspired by the 2005 film *Iqbal*



Shah Rukh Khan (playing himself) and the modern day character played by Madhuri in a single scene is Husain's artistic attempt to do away with time. The use of surreal imagery, sparse dialogue and shifting time frames make the film different from what viewers are used to. But Husain maintains that he has made 'celluloid on canvas' and his 'labour of love' is for the masses. Madhuri was so moved by the experience that she commented, "It is neither a commercial film, nor an art film. It is a film on its own terms. It is defined by its form, not its content. What truly attracted me to *Gaja Gamini* was its *form*. It deals with the different images of a woman as seen through the eyes of a painter. Each individual frame of the film is like a painting. It was inspiring and humbling. Thank you *Gaja Gamini* for introducing me to true art." Concur Mrinal Sen, "... Husain has been able to celebrate beauty from the core of his heart—he hasn't withheld emotion, has been able to change the language of cinema." Husain published a book on *Gaja Gamini* titled 'M² + V = GG' (Madhuri McBull + Vision = Gaja Gamini). Individual frames from the film were presented in the book and it seems that 100 feet painting that was produced in the book format. The book is now being endorsed in museums, used by documenters and art collectors worldwide.

After *Gaja Gamini*, there was a four year hiatus and then 2004 saw Husain's come back as a filmmaker with the release of *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*. With the film emerged a more zealous and passionate Husain. The story of the film revolved around the story of a chance meeting that Nawab, a popular Hyderabad novelist has with the enigmatic and individualistic Meenaxi. The film starts with Nawab, played by Raghubir Yadav, facing a classic case of writer's block when Meenaxi, played by Tabu, asks him to write a novel about her. From Hyderabad the story moves on to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan and then to Prague. While *Gaja Gamini* captures the image of a woman through history, *Meenaxi* deals with a modern woman. So involved was the artist with this venture that he even penned two songs for the films. Both the songs were filmed on Tabu.

In *Meenaxi*... too Husain deliberately keeps some loose ends that leave scope for interpretations and analysis. The film proves that



ambiguity, when dealt with sensitively and in an artistic fashion, can not only be pleasing but can even impress the audience. The painter plays with the camera as deftly as he plays with the brush. The film is a celebration of colours that becomes a feast for the eyes. *Meenaxi...* proves that Husain's movies will be remembered for their portrayal of female sensuality. The picturesque and artistic presentation of womanhood marks Husain apart from other filmmakers.

There is a strong buzz about Husain's future movie ventures. However, it is being said that a film on the life of Husain is being planned by his son Owais. The film, a documentary, promises to shed light on many unknown facets of his father. It will focus on the last three years of his

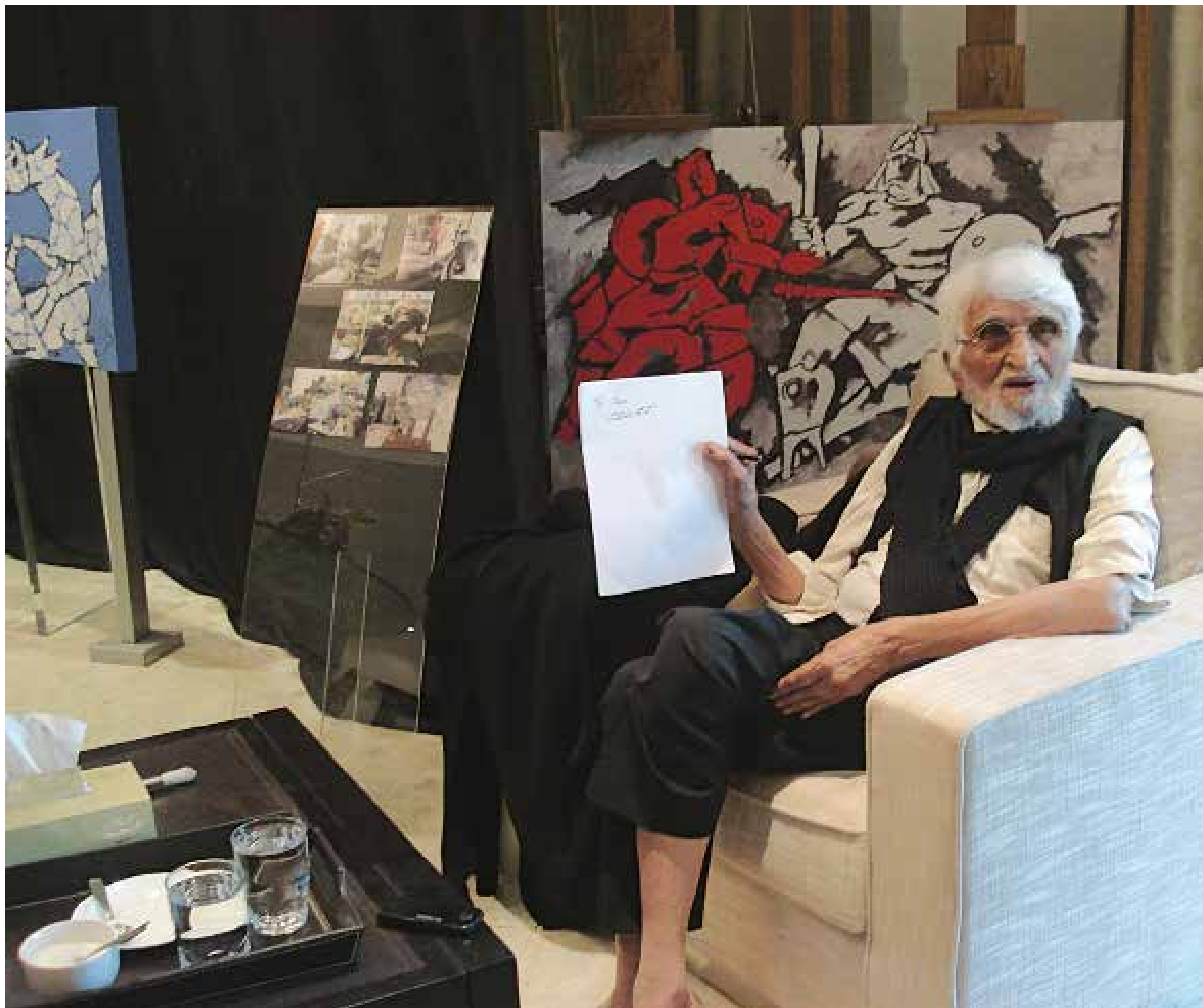
life and how Husain felt about his exile. When father and son last worked together on *Meenaxi...* they had creative differences which led to a huge row on the sets of the film in Jaisalmer. Husain is reported to have said, "We are generations apart and that showed the most when we worked on *Meenaxi*. My metaphor would be the green parrot in a cage while his is the crow on the garbage dump." They had similar creative differences

Husain at the entrance of Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai

Facing pg.: Husain at the Chandramukhi exhibition at Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai



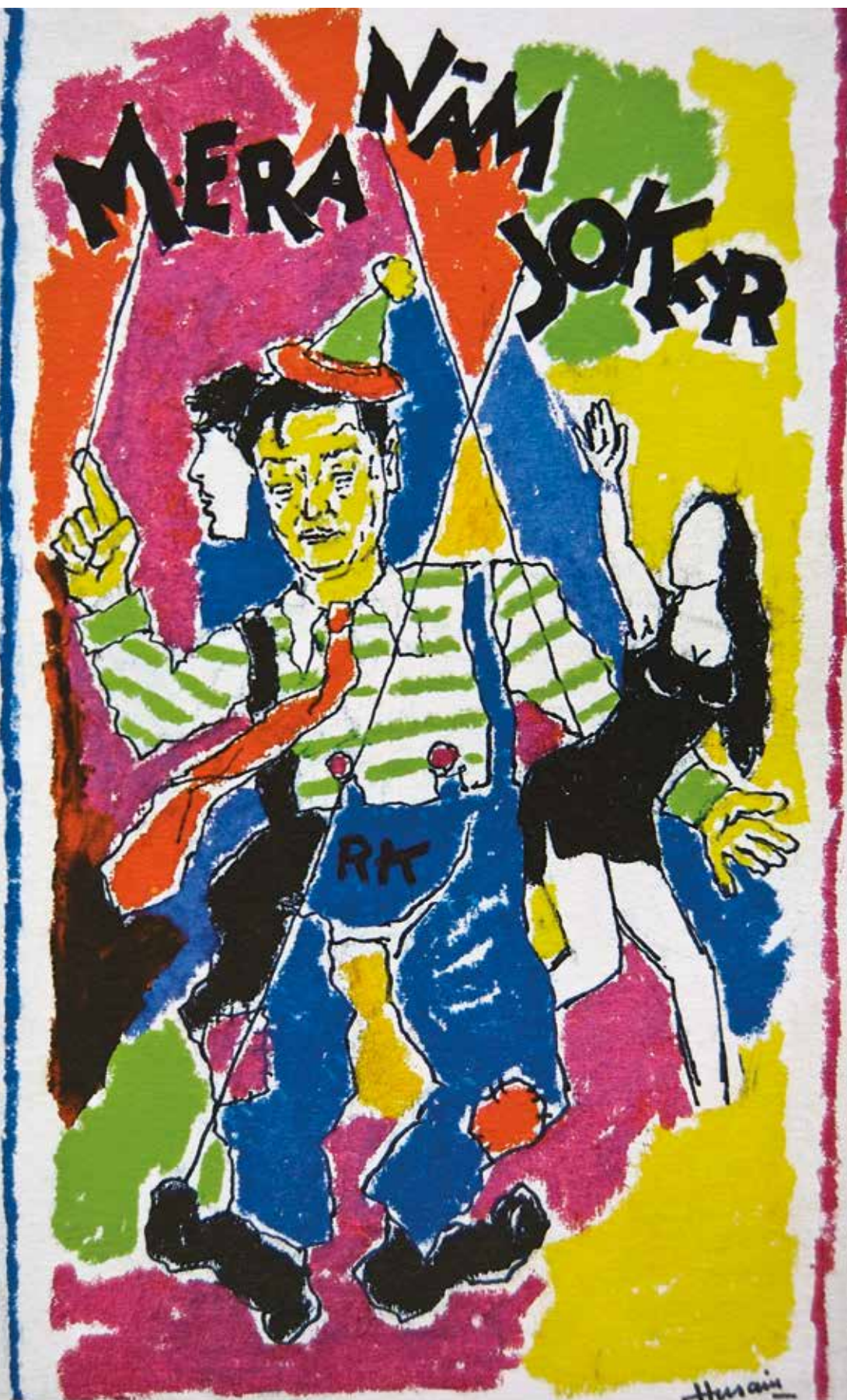
Husain with camera man Ashok Mehta, at the *Gaja Gamini* press conference at The Club, Mumbai



Husain at his residence in Doha

Pg. 202: A painting of Husain's inspired by *Mera Naam Joker* by the filmmaker Raj Kapoor

Pg. 203: On the sets of *A Boy from Pandharpur* along with Owais Husain, Raisa Husain, Reema Owais and the cameraman



on an earlier project that the father-son duo had conceived together. The film titled *Pandharpur ka Ek Ladka* (A Boy from Pandharpur), a film documenting the painter's life, was shot for three days at Filmcity in Mumbai and was discontinued subsequently. But the latest project purports to be different. Husain is reported to have given his consent to Owais on the new project.

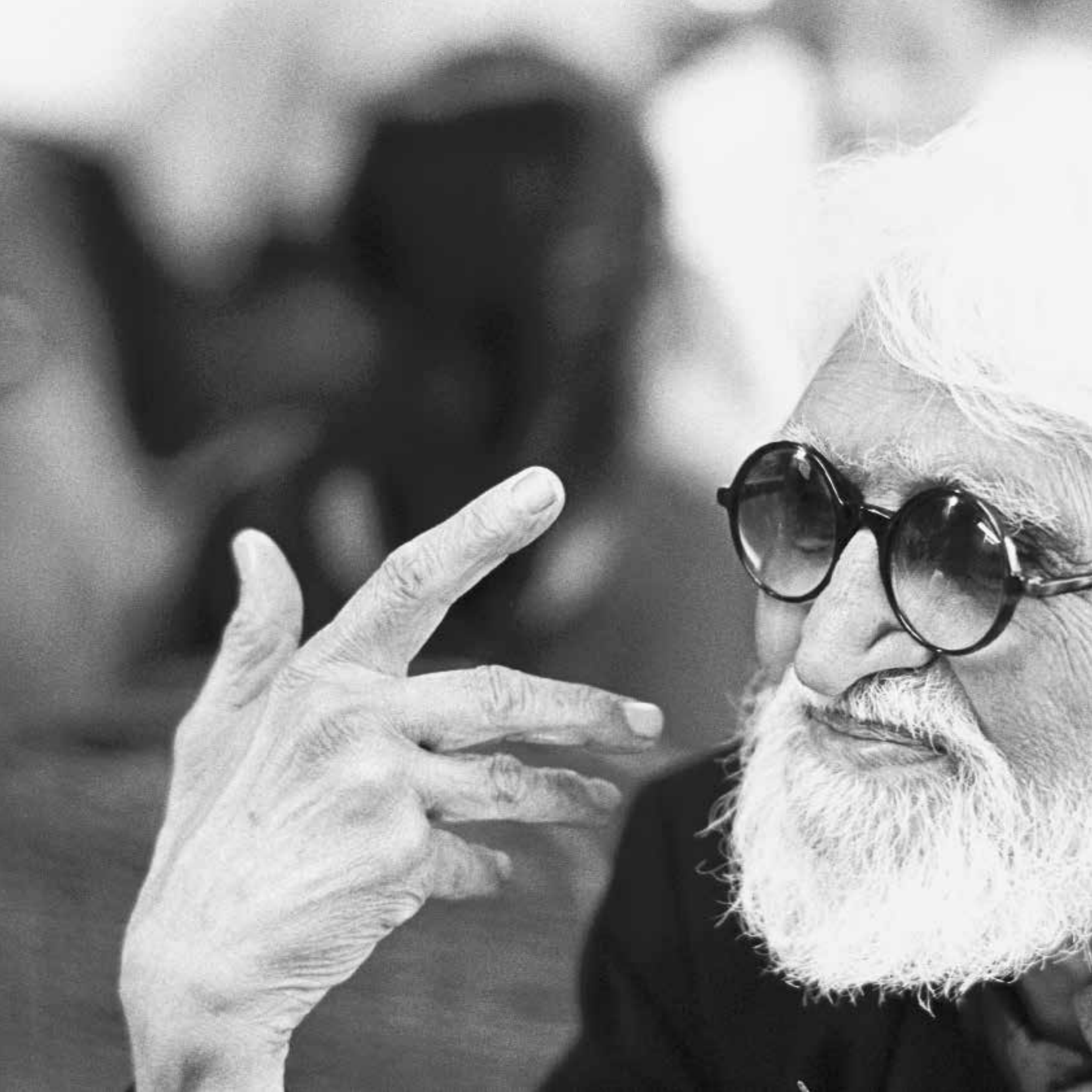
Movies—a continuing love affair

Movies have also inspired Husain to paint. During the making of *Gaja Gamini*, he did not stop painting. In fact he was so inspired by Madhuri that he made fifteen paintings of her titled the 'Madhuri-McBull' series. *Iqbaal* (2005) made by Nagesh Kukunoor, one of India's acclaimed new generation directors, also induced Husain to watch it several times and sketch fourteen paintings for an exhibition. These serigraphs were exhibited in Mumbai, New Delhi, New York, Chicago and London. Earlier in his life, he had also painted a series inspired by films made by Satyajit Ray, India's most celebrated film director. Bollywood's greatest showman, Raj Kapoor's film *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) inspired him to make a painting. Perhaps his cutest piece of work on cinema happens to be a painting of Charlie Chaplin whom he admired very much, inspired by the great director's film *The Kid* (1921).

Unknown to many, Husain has also appeared in front of the camera. M.F. Husain modeled in an advertisement for Philips Master Radio which was published in the *Times of India* on 24th September 1969. He was also to appear as a hero in a film opposite the late actress Smita Patil. He had agreed to do the film for producer Sachdev. The story was a love triangle in which Smita had to marry an elderly man. Husain was to play that part. But the film was shelved because of Smita's untimely death.

To say that films are one of Husain's abiding passions is an understatement. He has called cinema the highest form of art, "Cinema has everything—form, movement, space and time." Husain has etched a name for himself in the long list of achievers of Hindi cinema. He may be a passionate painter but he said once about his interest in films, "I love the idea of being a bioscope *walla*."







Husain, always an expressive speaker, gestures with his hand to make a point

Epilogue

The Pilgrim's Progress

“I am an original Indian painter and will remain so till my last breath.”

Husain has this to say about India: “India is an incredible country. It is generous. It is diverse. There is no country in the world like this”. It is indeed ironic that he had to leave the country after being accused of insulting the sentiments of the majority community in India. Since 2006, he has lived in self imposed exile first in Dubai and later in Qatar.

A restless soul, an eternal nomad, Husain has been a painter whose art belongs to the world. But like the pilgrim who always returns to his fount of inspiration after his peregrinations, Husain periodically turns to India's artistic heritage of five thousand years for inspiration. For years he has preserved the various aspects of Indian life, history and tradition through his works. He has to his credit more than 10,000 paintings celebrating India's treasures, ideology and philosophy. Husain is not an Indian merely because he was born here but because it was India's cultural heritage that honed the artist in him.



Husain with his daughter Raisa at his home in Worli, Mumbai

The nonagenarian artist is now a Qatari citizen. While shuttling between Dubai and London for the last few years Husain got the offer of Qatari citizenship and accepted it. The citizenship was offered to the painter voluntarily by the Royal family of Qatar. He has now formally given up his Indian citizenship and has surrendered his passport to the Indian embassy in Doha.

Feeling the pain

Husain giving up Indian citizenship has ruffled quite a few feathers in India. Some find it strange that he is no longer Indian by citizenship. “You can’t drive India out of Husain”, says Antara Dev Sen, journalist and founder of *The Little Magazine*. Another well known artist Jitish Kallat said recently, “After showering him with state honours like the Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan in the past three decades, the fact that Husain, the father of art in this country has to live in exile is a matter of national shame”. His compatriots in the art community though feel that this move will put an end to his miseries. Says S.H. Raza, a contemporary great, “If he’s happy with the decision, so am I.”

Being uprooted must have been difficult for the lion in the autumn of his life. Husain, though, consoles himself by saying that after his death he would require only a tiny piece of land. “It doesn’t matter to me where I am buried”, says the eternal nomad.

The moment of his surrendering the Indian passport was a poignant one for him. According to his son Mustafa, “It felt like one very important era of his long life had ended abruptly and he experienced acute pain. Something was over with him.” He sat in the embassy and awaited his turn. Just when his name was to be announced, he took out a small pocket book version of the Koran and read a few verses.

It seems though that being rooted to a place lost its relevance for Husain, years ago. He says, “I have no attachment to places. It is a mother’s love that creates a sense of home, ties one down. Since I lost my mother when I was one-and-a-half, I have never known such attachment. I lost my first child, Shabir, when he was three.





I lifted his body out of a gutter. What is loss after that?” Very few people will have this stoicism and sagacity while having to relocate and reconstruct their lives at such point of life.

Husain has always tried to hide his displeasure and his pain at being forced out of a country that he has loved and which has loved

him in return and made him her most celebrated artist. Even his paintings do not express any negativity or depression owing to his nomadic life out of force. He believes that the majority of the Indian people still love him and only a tiny fraction including a few politicians are against him. In an interview on NDTV he said, “*Tu kahe to main unwan badal dun, lekin ek umr darkaar hai afsaana badalne ke liye* (Only titles of paintings are told, the real story takes a lifetime). Whether my paintings are done in New York or Qatar, only the title has changed, nothing else. In my small way, I have told

Husain with his favourite glass of black tea

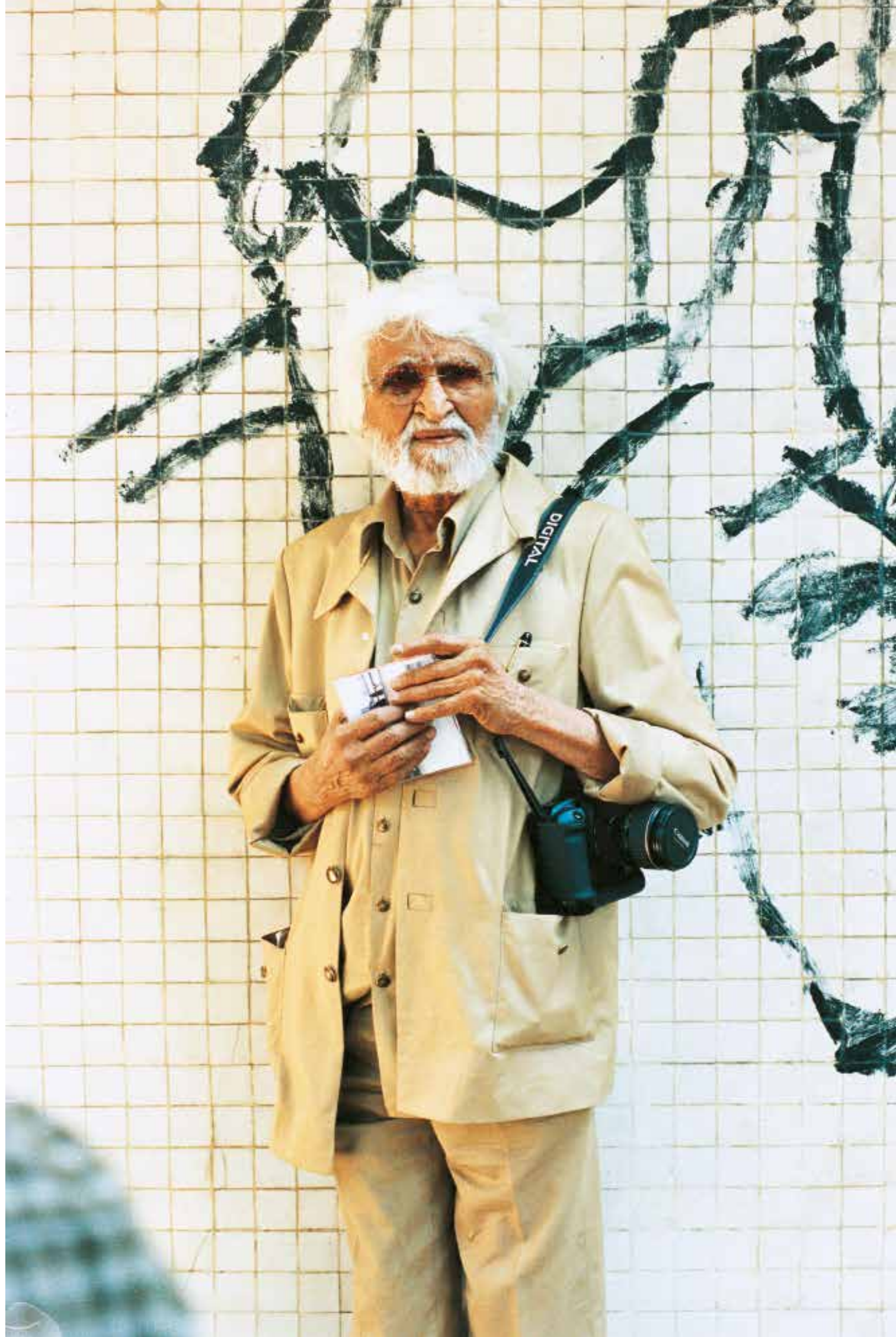
A distinguished profile of
the artist





Husain with a *maulvi* at Badar Baug

Husain standing in front of a painting he did a long time ago at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai





my own story, which I hope will remain in the hearts of millions of my countrymen.”

That Husain feels rejected and deeply hurt is apparent. “India is my motherland. I can’t hate my motherland. But India rejected me. Then why should I stay there? When the Sangh Parivar outfits targeted me, everyone kept silent. No one, including political leadership, artists or intellectuals came forward for me, but I enjoy complete freedom in Qatar. Now Qatar is my place. Here no one controls my freedom of expression. I am very happy here.” Dileep Padgaonkar, former editor of *Times of India* and a leading intellectual, puts the predicament of the

Above left: A pile of Husain’s serigraphs at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

Above right: Husain’s painting in his home in Doha



great artist in perspective, when he explains “...(Husain) suffers from what Edward Said called the ‘crippling sorrow of estrangement’”.

Questions galore

But the questions keep coming. Whom does he hold responsible for his exile? Why did he not fight his detractors harder? Why does he make controversial paintings only about Hindu deities? Is he running away from paying taxes in India? How can he choose a Middle Eastern monarchy not known for its liberal ways over a tempestuous, albeit imperfect, democracy?

When the courts issued a non-bailable warrant against him in 2006 for hurting the sentiments of a religious community, Husain refused to appear in court. He has been in exile since. Some of his creations, including the Gufa at Ahmedabad, were attacked by miscreants. Husain started fearing for his security. He also felt that the rigmarole of pursuing cases would



slow down his work. He also felt that he was not being supported enough by his well wishers. Concur the writer and lyricist Javed Akhtar, “The opinion makers and the urban middle class didn’t do much to prevent his exit. All of us are responsible for it. We were kind of indifferent to his discomfort.” In spite of that he never asked for any favour from anyone, not even from his friend, the Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, when they met in London. But he does believe that the Indian government has failed to provide him adequate security especially when he felt that the opposition to him was a move against art and against an artist’s self expression.

Many people have commented that Husain should have fought harder to protect his freedom of expression and not depend on others to do it for him. He defends himself by saying that he is not a political or social activist. He is an artist and wants peace of mind to express himself. Intriguingly, he adds that he may have fought the cases more vigorously



if he had been younger. At this age he would rather concentrate on his work given that he feels that he has so much unfinished work to complete. He still has dreams to fulfil, “I have expressed only ten percent of my creativity, ninety percent is still within me. I fear that I may not be able to express my creativity fully. I fear that a major part of my creativity will be buried with me unexpressed.”

The charge that hurts and baffles him the most is that he has deliberately denigrated Hindu deities, thereby hurting Hindu sentiments. He has never felt guilty about any of his paintings or been apologetic of his art. Instead he offers an explanation: “I have said that I have

Above left: Husain embracing his daughter Raisa at the Eid lunch at Badar Baug

Above right: Mustafa Husain with Husain’s grandchild



Husain sketching at his home in Doha, surrounded by his Murano glass horse collection



Husain in the lobby of the Emirates Towers Hotel in Dubai



done all my paintings, including those on gods and goddesses, with pure love and belief. I have celebrated my love through the paintings.” He believes that no other modern Indian painter has studied and used Hindu traditions as extensively as he has. For a painter who has internalised and studied Hindu traditions so deeply, starting with the *Ramlila* in his childhood, he finds it inconceivable that he is accused of hurting the very same traditions.

He has repeated time and again that he never had and never will have the intention of hurting anyone’s sentiments. He regrets if his paintings have caused hurt. He calls for greater understanding of an artist’s creative process, “I think if any act is charged...if you see a burning sun, a beautiful sunset, it is erotic. Whenever I take the colour red and put it on canvas, I feel it’s a sexual act!” Nudity and erotica have very different meaning for an artist.

What amuses him most is when people ask him if he has left India to save tax. In his defence, he points out that he had paid taxes in India for paintings that sold in Singapore for Rs. 25 crores. It is true that Qatar’s friendly tax regime, its excellent infrastructural support for the arts and the love and affection showered on him by the royal family makes it easier for him to work on his future ‘dream projects’. As to the question whether Qatar truly offers freedom of expression, Husain shrugs it off, “It’s a gamble, but a creative gamble.”

Promises to keep

In the meantime, away from the entire hullabaloo, the artist remains immersed in his work. He is working on three major projects. He is painting the history of Indian civilisation from ‘Mohenjodaro to Manmohan Singh’. Similarly, he is capturing the history of Arab civilisation till date on his canvas. The third project, on which he has spoken off and on for the last few years, is the history of cinema which completes a 100 years

A photograph of Husain the first time he trimmed his beard

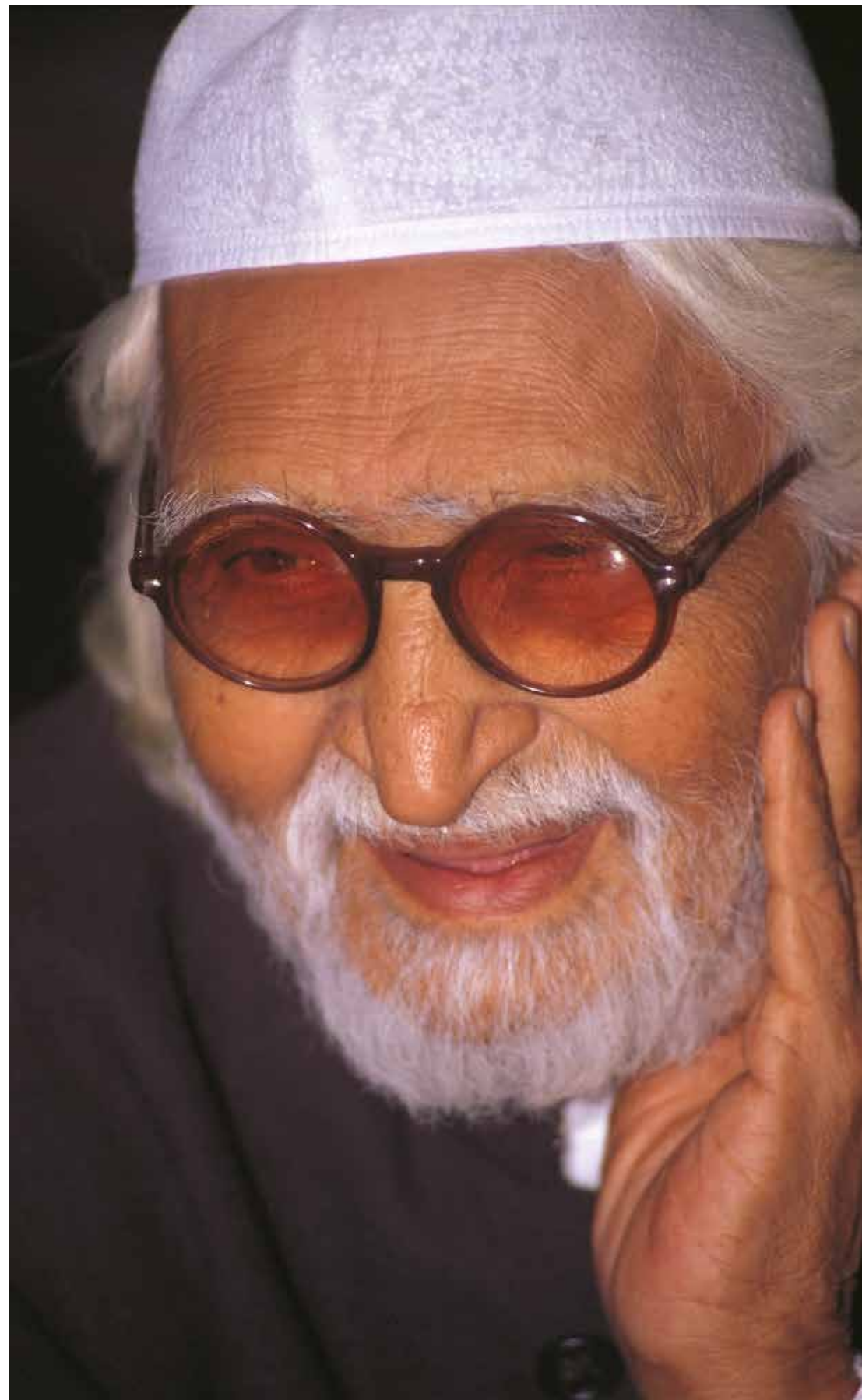
since Dadasaheb Phalke made the first ever Indian movie in 1911. All these projects have been conceived on a grand scale and Husain wants to make museums for each of the three. Projects of this scale and scope need sponsors. The royal family of Qatar and Lakshmi Mittal are among those who have agreed to support and sponsor his projects.

He is in a race against time to complete these projects. Probably in the corner of his mind, Husain realises that his art may be immortal but he is not. Thus, his single minded dedication towards completing these projects while rejecting everything that could hold him back. Maybe, he thought that his Indian citizenship was coming in the way of completing his projects.

The fact that Qatar is fast developing a reputation of patronising art must have also influenced his decision. The first lady of Qatar, Sheikha Mozah bin Nasser al-Missned, invited Husain to live in Doha, the capital of Qatar. Husain was impressed. “Doha is very clean and has its own style. It is going to be a major centre of art.” When the emir of Qatar commissioned the museum of Islamic Art, he chose the 91-year-old I.M. Pei as the architect. He is now planning a Museum of Modern Art and the 94-year-old Husain is the chosen one to accomplish the task. He is slated to complete ninety-nine paintings in the next two years for the museum. These paintings will focus on the history of the Arab tradition. In accordance; sand dunes, camels and *hijab* clad women have now started to appear in his paintings.

Apart from these paintings, Husain is also making life size sculptures of his miniature horses made from Murano glass, for the museum. The painter recently exhibited twenty of his creations at the Classical Museum of Islamic Art. He was happy with the reception the exhibition got among local artists and patrons. Husain has this to say about his sojourn in Doha so far, “At this age to come here and get all the facilities to work, I think I am fortunate.”

A portrait of Husain wearing the traditional skull cap during Eid



Life in exile

Exile, however, could not shadow the *joie de vivre* of the spirited artist—for him, life is still a celebration. Travelling between Dubai, Qatar and London, Husain is always on the move, ever enthusiastic. How does he remain positive amidst so much chaos? What moves him mentally and physically? His constant and unusual motion is infectious and keeps others feisty and active. He laughs and the world laughs with him. Shakespeare once said, “Laughing faces do not mean that there is absence of sorrow! But it means that they have the ability to deal with it”. These words ring true for Husain.

In Dubai he has a plush apartment fashioned like a Hollywood set. Another apartment has been converted to a museum and Husain has named it Red Light Museum, a name deliberately designed “to make people sit up.” The exquisite décor of this museum made of red carpets and fabrics prompted a visitor to call it a “painting in cloth.” This gallery contains the paintings sent back to him by his one time lady love, Maria. There is also the series of his paintings titled *Husain Decoded* as well as a series on *Mughal-e-Azam*.

West Bay Lagoon in Doha is where ‘the nomad has finally pitched his tent’. The complex is listed among Qatar’s ambitious housing projects and is deemed an architectural marvel for its canals that are linked to the Persian Gulf. Security, in today’s age of growing insecurity, is around the clock and no one can enter any villa unless the guest is personally escorted by the host or his representative. His new home is a gift from the ruler of Qatar, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Jan Verghese of the magazine *The Week* had the privilege of being Husain’s guest at Doha. She describes the villa as a ‘nest of bright hues’. As you enter, there is a “riot of blues, greens, browns, oranges...all standing out in defiance against the beige interiors. Easels tacked with canvases line the hallway, some taller than 5 feet, some completed, others half done as if the imaginative vein had petered out. Four glass horses—blue, red, clear and yellow—stand on a glass and steel table. Paint brushes as tall as walking sticks and carelessly placed bottles of paint complete the drawing room.”

But what he misses in exile is his association with his friends especially Gaitonde, about whom he says, “We would spend hours in total silence and complete understanding.” The painter yearns to talk to someone who understands him and his work. He has always been ambivalent about the modern art collectors who always surround him but with whom he rarely can have a meaningful conversation.

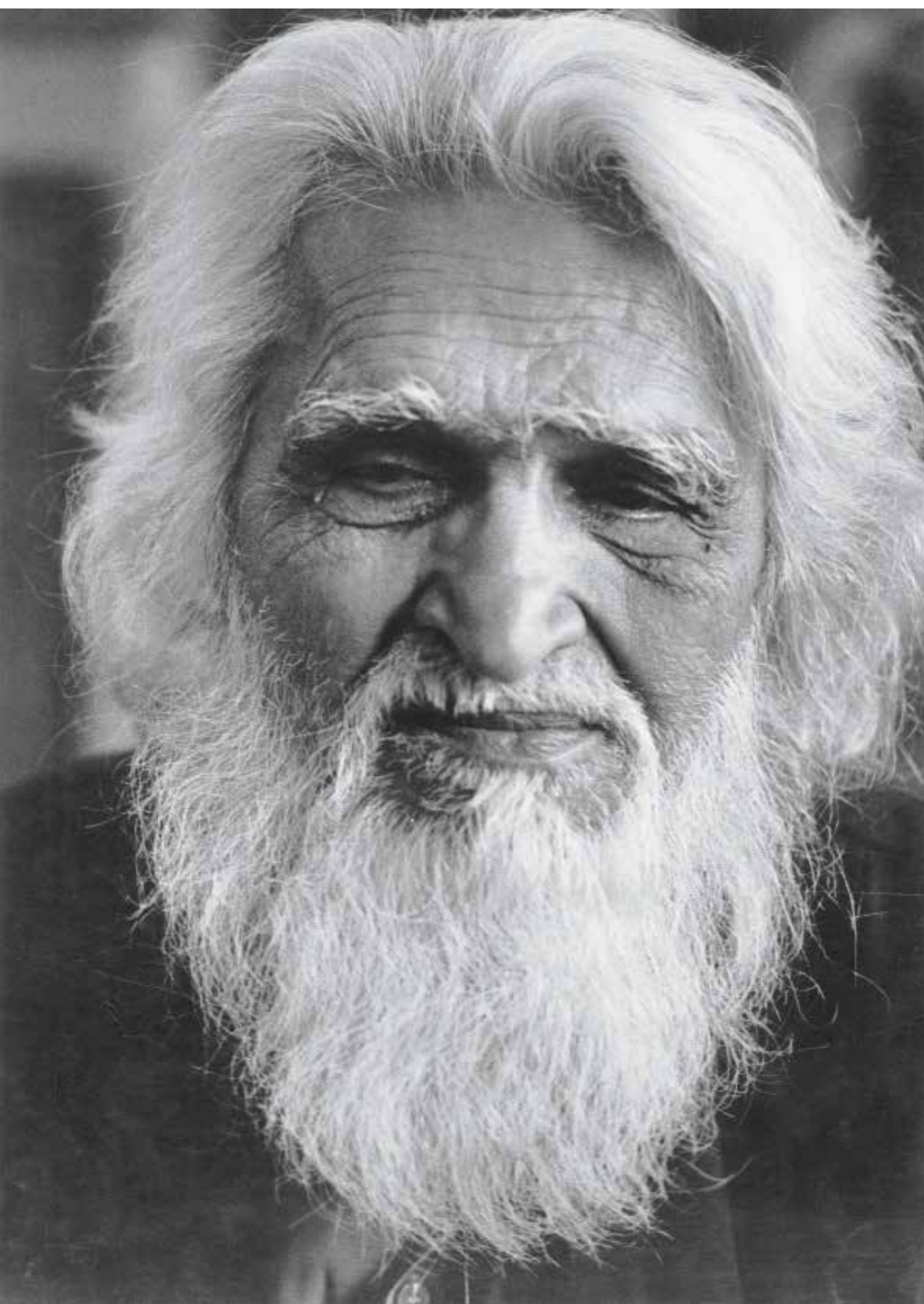
His family has been a pillar of support for Husain in the last few years. When he was struggling in his youth, his wife Fazila was the rock around whom he built his life. His wife is no more but his family continues to play this role. Thanks to modern technology, he stays in constant touch with his large family.

The *Karmayogi* carries on

However, in spite of his exile, Husain continues to remain an auctioneer’s delight, a style statement for the elite and a genuine inspiration for art lovers. The country’s rich and famous still compete amongst themselves to buy his work; a number of international magazines have eulogised him as the single most influential artist from India. Arun Vadehra of Delhi’s Vadehra Art Gallery explains, “Husain’s presence gave a fair amount of impetus to the art market. He was a walking, talking billboard of Indian art. The exile will add to the romance of Husain for some people.” His 94th birthday was a big occasion at the Tamarind Art Council in Manhattan. The cake was decorated with his well known horses; his daughter Raesa, now married, was fed a piece of cake from her father. He spent the day working on a 45 foot canvas at the Tamarind Art Council. On the canvas he wrote, “When I begin to paint, hold the sky in your hands as the stretch of my canvas is unknown to me.”

Husain, the *karmayogi*, carries on. He is still in the process of discovering himself. He has said, “I started out late in the voyage of desires, so I have conserved my energies.” On a day when he is not painting on a huge canvas or mural, he is attending concerts and movies, and planning for the future.

Dev Anand, the evergreen star of Hindi cinema, is another artist who has had the same urge to constantly push himself all through

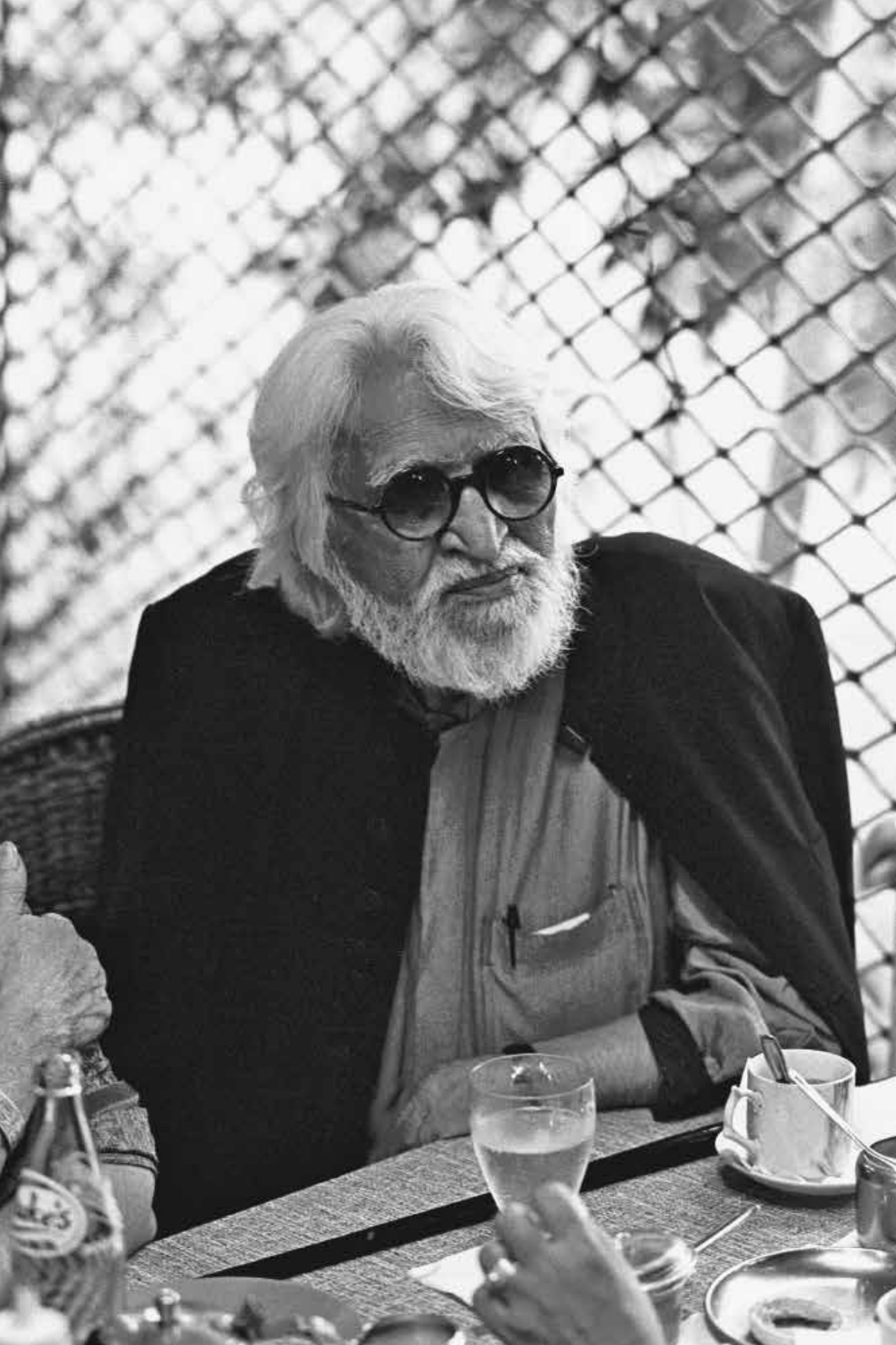


his life. They are kindred souls. In his autobiography *Romancing With Life*, Dev Anand narrates an incident which demonstrates their mutual empathy. Dev Anand had just returned home from a tour across the country to attend felicitation ceremonies marking his completion of half a century of work in the film industry. He was relaxing at his house under the gaze of his favourite Van Gogh painting when in walked ‘a tall, slim, silver-haired, long-bearded, bespectacled man, a stick in his hand, a bag hanging from his shoulder, his feet bare under crumpled slacks, radiating a warm smile’. No one has described Husain more completely. The painter had come unannounced to offer his congratulations for a glorious career. Dev asked Husain how he was feeling. He replied, “Same as always—calm as well as volatile.” He added, “I see a part of you in me, Dev saab. Your carefree creative restlessness—all very colourful.”

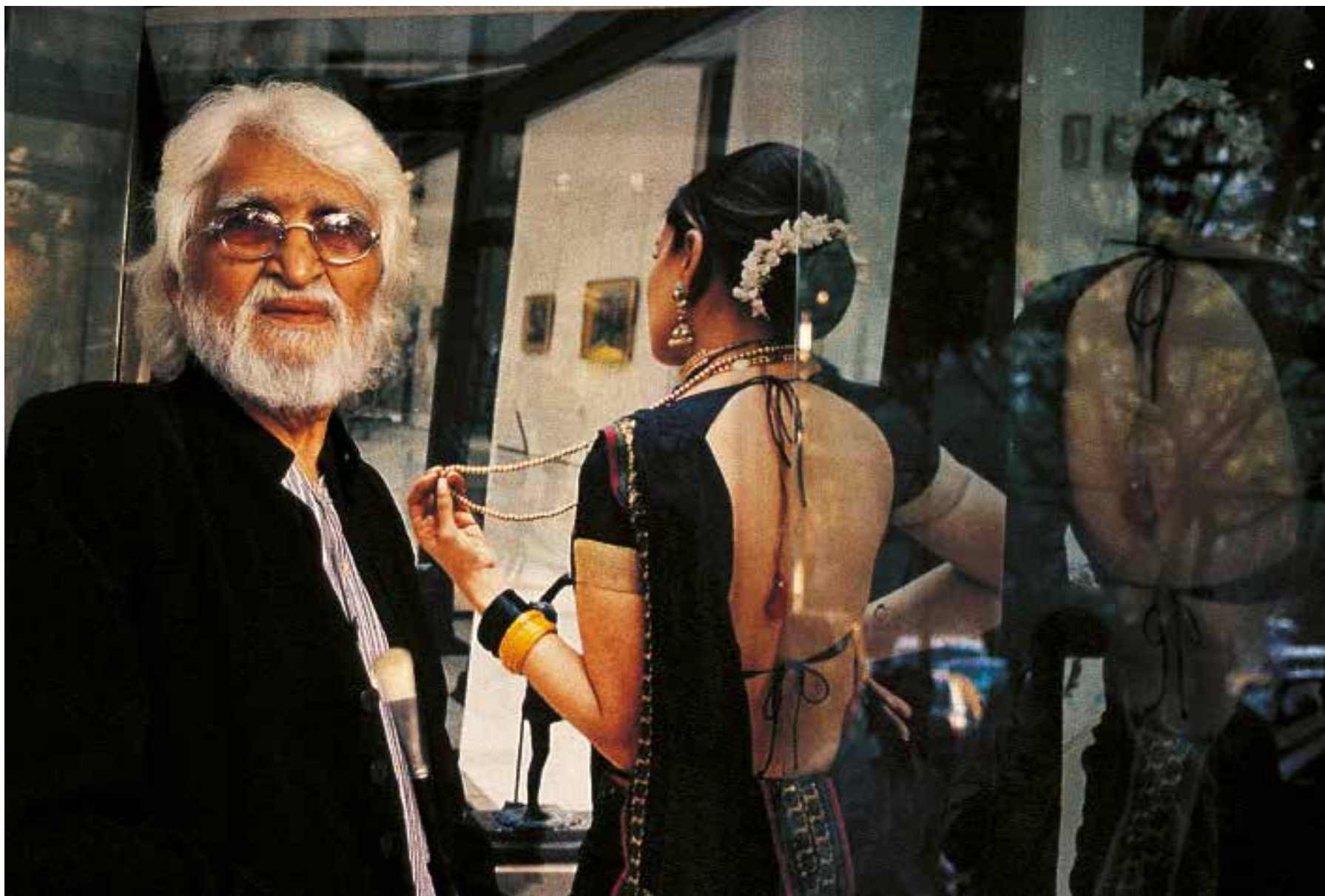
It is this ‘colourful, carefree, creative restlessness’ that is the hallmark of Maqbool Fida Husain. The great painter and artist keeps the process of creation going, “My journey is still going on. What is important to me is continuity. As long as you live, you paint. There is no end to it. Creativity is a circle. You start at some point and take it further, and then someone else comes and takes it up. That’s how the world progresses. Just like the Great Creator, you have to create.”

At times, one wishes that the Great Creator gave this restless soul a little patience...

A portrait of Husain which the artist claimed made him look “too old”

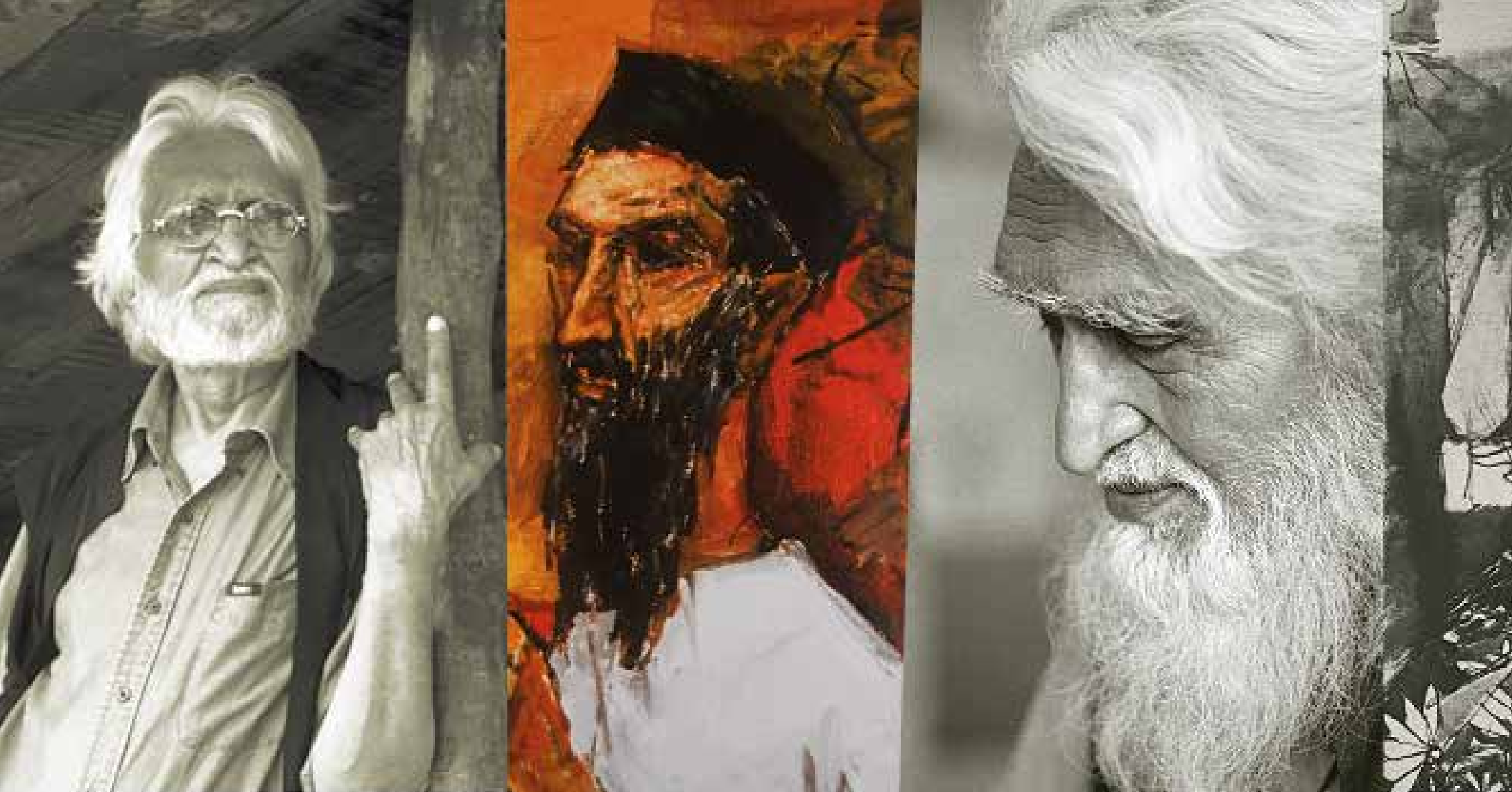


Husain enjoying a cup of tea at Samovar
Café, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai



Husain poses with a photograph of his most famous muse, Madhuri Dixit at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

Pgs. 222-223: A collage of photographs and paintings by Husain



A Final Note

Gulzar

India did not banish Husain; actually, it is he who left her.

This has always happened here. A revolutionary thinker like Osho breathed and lived in our life time. We merely watched and treated him the same way we have treated Husain.

We are fearful of the changes happening around us. We resist the new because we have no place for it inside ourselves. We shoot the one and only Gandhi dead.

When these people have exited this realm, we search for them high and low. We cherish the past, everything gone by. Eventually, we start collecting their mementoes, gaze upon them, completely baffled, and bow down to them in utter reverence.

This is what will transpire with Husain also. See for yourself.



हिन्दुस्तान ने हुसैन साहब को जिला वतन नहीं किया, बल्कि हुसैन साहब ने हिन्दुस्तान को तलाक दे दिया।

हमारे यहाँ हमेशा से ऐसा ही कुछ होता रहा है। 'ओशो' जैसा दानिशवर हमारे दौर से गुजरा। हम देखते रह गये। उसके साथ भी हमने यही किया।

हम डर जाते हैं हमारे आस पास कुछ हिल न जाये। कुछ नया है तो बाहर रखो, अन्दर जगह नहीं है। गाँधी को गोली मार दो।

और जब लोग वक्त के दायरे से निकल जाते हैं तो फिर हम उनकी तलाश शुरू

करते हैं। पुराना संभालना हमें अच्छा लगता है। धीरे धीरे उनके नक्शे जमा करते हैं। हैरत से देखते हैं, और परेशानी से छूते हैं।

हुसैन साहब के साथ भी ऐसा ही कुछ होगा। देख लेना!!

—गुलज़ार



Farewell, Husain

On the morning of 9th June, when I received two calls from two different countries about the demise of Husain saab, I couldn't believe it. I never thought that this would be the end of the marathon man. I always believed he was a man with a no expiry date, much like his self-given nickname, McBull—he often signed his name in this fashion.

The last time I met Husain saab, I had discussed the idea of a pictorial book about him. He was very excited about the idea and had lots of input

of his own. I created a dummy for him to look at, which was presented to him on his 94th birthday in New York. It is this dummy that he is looking at in the photos. He was happy with the idea, and gave the green light for this project. We were planning to present him with a copy of the book on his 96th birthday this September. It was not meant to be.

Goodbye, Husain saab. You will not be forgotten.

| | *hamsafar chhoot gaye raahguzar aaj bhi hai* | |
| | *apne paaon ke muqaddar mein safar aaj bhi hai* | |

— Is'haaq Asar

Fellow travellers are long gone, the path continues endlessly,
The destiny of my feet is to keep walking.

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Husain walking barefoot near Badar Baug during his last Eid in Mumbai