

The wild life of India's Picasso

MF Husain | A new museum in Doha is dedicated to an exuberant artist feted by royalty but also vilified in his own country. By *Cleo Roberts-Komireddi*

Mayfair's Shepherd Market was Maqbool Fida Husain's favourite London haunt. India's most fabled — and most expensive — artist often walked there from his studio on nearby Curzon Street. By the early 2000s, Husain, then in his eighties, had achieved international renown as a poet, filmmaker and painter of modernist canvases thrumming with energy and colour. The man who had once slept rough on the streets of Mumbai had reached the point where he was his own best dealer, sought after by industrialists — the Mittal and Hinduja families — politicians and royalty, who lavished him with mega commissions.

Dressed in sharp Boglioli suits, with flowing white hair and beard, Husain seemed to find the process of dealmaking almost as enjoyable as painting itself. "After one conversation, these VIPs would think they were his greatest friends," recalls the artist Krishen Khanna, one of his closest friends.

The extent to which Husain's patrons were enthralled by him will be evident in Doha from next week with the opening of Lawh Wa Qalam: MF Husain Museum — the largest in the world dedicated to his work. It was initiated by Sheikhha Moza bint al-Nasser, one of Husain's key patrons, who extended Qatari citizenship to him in 2010 following his self-imposed exile from India. Overseen by the Qatar Foundation, the project fulfils some of Husain's greatest ambitions that went unrealised before his death in 2011, aged 95.

The building brings to life the preliminary design sketches Husain created for the project in 2008. Inside, it holds only a fraction of the roughly 40,000 paintings he is thought to have produced,



displayed with no obvious thematic thread beyond the artist himself. Outside stands Husain's sole installation, "Seeroo fi al ardh", realised posthumously. The piece, unabashedly extravagant like the man who conceived it, features a ring of five vintage cars that rise from subterranean depths and rotate around five large Murano glass horses. Overhead flies a bronze sculpture of Andalusian polymath Abbas ibn Firnas, while to the side stand a curved mosaic of Husain's trademark horses and a sculptural replica of Leonardo da Vinci's Flying Machine.

Sheikha Moza's affection for the artist — and the sheer volume of his artworks and archives in her care — is one reason this impressive museum is situated in the Gulf. Another reason is India's complicated postcolonial identity.

Husain was born in Pandharpur in 1913, according to his Sulaymani Bohra community, although he cited 1915 as his year of birth. India's struggle for freedom was gaining momentum at that time. On the night of August 15 1947, when the country achieved independence and was partitioned, Husain had his own moment of liberation. "I went



Clockwise from above: Maqbool Fida Husain working on a canvas; Lawh Wa Qalam: MF Husain Museum in Doha; 'Dolls Wedding' (c1950) — Dinodia Press/Alamy; Dany Eid, Qatar Foundation



around the whole night dancing and singing," he told a television interviewer. "That night I decided to quit [working], without a bank balance. I was free now." Husain's artistic career would be forged in Nehruvian India.

He ended his jobbing years — which had included stints as a cinema-hoarding painter, illustrator and designer of elaborate nursery furniture and toys for India's elite — and, in his early thirties, began to exhibit his work. His painting "Sunehra Sansar", shown at the Bombay Art Society towards the end of 1947, won an award and brought him to

the attention of the Progressive Artists' Group. This renegade collective — also known as the "dirty half-dozen", among them FN Souza and SH Raza — was experimenting with a bold new visual language for the young nation-state.

Husain's exposure to this milieu refined his practice, his resolve and his commitment to India. In the spirit of secularism, fundamental to Nehru's government, Husain, a practising Muslim, developed a syncretic vision. Hindu gods, Christian iconography, Islamic calligraphy, the Buddha and Jain Tirthankaras all appeared at various points

on his exuberant, carnivalesque canvases. But the profane absorbed him as much as the sacred. Honest, playful scenes, rendered with confident lines, charted India's daily life, its little and large traditions and travails.

His female figures, whom he saw as embodying the spirit of India, were conjured again and again, partly to fill the absence of his mother, who died when he was one and a half. As the art critic Geeta Kapur has written, he was "national in content, international in form".

Husain possessed a vim that fed the showmanship of his later years. He understood how public spectacle could reinforce his mythology and expand his market. He often walked barefoot, offering various explanations: once that he was mourning the death of the Hindi poet Muktibodh; at another time, he put it down to health reasons; and later, he explained away his choice as an anti-status statement. With brush in hand, he would erupt into bursts of spontaneous creation, his quick line skipping from page to page. He was known to have sketched a horse on a restaurant tablecloth using sauce.

By the late 1960s, Husain was a media darling, trailed by paparazzi and pursued for autographs. He travelled the world with only a shoulder bag of belongings, collecting a Golden Bear award in Berlin for his first film, *Through the Eyes of a Painter* (1967), exhibiting alongside Picasso at the São Paulo Biennale in 1971, and taking part in the Royal Academy's Festival of India in 1982. Yet as much as India revered and rewarded him — financially and with high honours, including membership of the upper house of parliament — it also became the site of his vilification. As Nehruvian secularism gave way to Hindu nationalism, Husain's position grew precarious.

In 1996, he became the target of right-wing fury, provoked in part by an article in the periodical Vichar Mimansa asking: "Is he an artist or a butcher?" His use of Hindu imagery was suddenly deemed to be offensive. The repercussions were immediate and enduring. Authorities who might once have rushed to his defence abandoned him. Mumbai police filed criminal charges for his depiction of the goddess Saras-

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wati as a nude woman; in Ahmedabad, Amdavad ni Gufa, the extraordinary cave-like gallery he had designed with architect BV Doshi, was vandalised. One of his homes was ransacked, and a bounty of a kilo of gold was offered to anyone who could gouge out his eyes and cut off his thumbs.

A decade later, as lawsuits piled up — by his own count, up to 900 in Goa alone — Husain left India, dividing his time between Dubai, London and Qatar. Despite all the vitriol directed at him, he never spoke ill of his homeland. (One of the most poignant pieces on display at the museum is Husain's passport, which he relinquished.) Nor did he lose his creative urgency. "There was no pause, especially in the last decades of his life," says Dadiba Pundole, one of his former dealers. "He was always fighting time."

In his final year — living happily, even prodigally — Husain was strikingly productive, sketching plans for films, memoirs and new series of paintings. Restless to the end, he carried in his wallet a wad of unused return flight tickets. He never went home.

From November 28, lawhwaqalam.org.qa