

M.F. HUSAIN

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M.F. HUSAIN Early Masterpieces, 1950s–70s



Amusement in the Street, 1957

Oil on canvas, 14 ¼ x 20 ½

M.F. Husain: Early Masterpieces is mounted in conjunction with the Year of India at Brown University. Presented as an exploration of India and its dramatic rise on the world stage, the Year of India includes lectures, readings, conferences, and performances that advance the understanding of India's people, culture, economy, and politics.

The exhibition is drawn from the collection of Amrita Jhaveri '91 and funded by Jindal Steel Works.

It is presented by the Year of India, the Cogut Center for the Humanities and the David Winton Bell Gallery at Pembroke Hall, Brown University, February 5 – March 26, 2010

Mallica Kumbera Landrus and Jo-Ann Conklin, co-curators

It is entirely suitable that the work of M.F. Husain be chosen for this celebration. One of the most recognized figures in Indian art, Husain's career spans the rise of modernism in India and the introduction of contemporary Indian art onto the international art stage. While Husain exhibited in international venues, specifically the Bienal de São Paulo, as early as 1971, it is only over the past decade that contemporary Indian art has been widely embraced in the West. Galleries specializing in contemporary Indian art have sprung up in Mumbai and New Delhi as well as in London and New York. And major international art venues, such as the Tate Modern, Documenta, and the Venice Biennale, to name just a few, have focused viewers attention on living Indian artists.

The current exhibition brings this conversation to Providence. We are most grateful to Brown alumna Amrita Jhaveri, who has generously shared her collection with us. Focusing on Husain's early works, the collection provides a view into the artist's first manifestations of favorite subjects: life on the streets, women and horses (together and apart), and mythological and religious personages.

Jo-Ann Conklin
Director, David Winton Bell Gallery

Early Masterpieces, 1950s–70s

As I begin to paint hold the sky in your hands

*as the stretch of my canvas is unknown to me.*¹

M.F. Husain



Untitled (from the **Pagan Series**), 1954
Oil on canvas, 37 ½ x 22 ¾

In the field of Indian contemporary art, Maqbool Fida Husain has acquired an unparalleled notoriety. As the most recognizable Indian artist, Husain has indeed contributed immensely to popularizing Indian contemporary art. His paintings and prints are associated with his cultural roots—steeped in Indian visual culture, as well as social and religious traditions—and demonstrate his diverse influences, from India’s sensuous ancient sculpture, to the colors of Rajasthani miniature painting, and the lines and forms of Pablo Picasso and George Braque. Although Husain was influenced by many art forms and artists from both the East and the West, he merges these sources seamlessly on canvas and paper. His subjects, however, are always Indian. Carefully chosen, these Indian subjects render that which is of popular significance to an Indian audience, be it in the form of a mythological story or character, an Indian actor or actress, a politician or a Mother known for her immense charitable work in India. Husain has many admirers among Indian art collectors in India and especially in the West. There are also those critics who wish to censor his works—particularly paintings that depict Hindu goddesses in the nude. As a prominent artist of Muslim birth, he has been the unfortunate target of the latter group since the 1990s.

Although born to a Muslim family in 1915, Husain was immersed in Hinduism and its many traditions. Pandharpur, the city of his birth and early childhood, is a temple city. Dedicated to Vitthoba, the main temple is an important pilgrimage site for Hindus in the state of Maharashtra. Husain’s grandfather sold lanterns and lamps on a street that lead to the temple, and it was in this little shop that Husain spent his earliest years. These early years in the store on the temple street began after the death of his mother Zainab, when Husain was just two years old. A Freudian might view this early loss as the main reason for Husain’s attention to the female form. This may or may not be the case. Nevertheless, it is clear from his paintings that Husain is fascinated by women—mythic, historic and contemporary. His father, Fida—an early supporter of Husain’s passion for painting—married again and moved the family to



Musicians, 1961
Oil on canvas, 72 x 25 ¼

Indore. Here, as the oldest of seven children, Husain is known to have spent many a moment with just his brush and colors for company. He painted what he saw, and thus began the career of this self-taught artist who would travel the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, settling in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) by 1937.

To earn a living, Husain designed and painted Hindi film sets and billboards in Bombay, and in the early 1940s designed furniture and toys. While his wife Fazila, their two sons, and he subsisted on his meager income, their room in a *Chawl* (a tenement that consists of single-room housing for the low-income working class) was not far from the infamous red light area on Grant Road. On his way home Husain acquainted himself with

the faces of strangers, which revealed the marks of their struggle for survival. His early works focus on such contemporary lives and faces, even when shown as characters from Hindu mythology. His depiction of subjects and characters associated with the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Hindu mother goddesses, Buddha, Mother Theresa, Krishna, Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Madhuri Dixit, and others capture the essence and simulacrum of contemporary Indian culture, thus basing his interests in secular as well as popular beliefs.

In the 1940s several groups in India identified themselves as “progressive,” including the Progressive Writers Association (1936), Progressive Painters Association, Madras (1944), and the Progressive Artists’ Group, Bombay (1947). In the year of India’s independence, Husain was one of six young men who formed the Progressive Artists’ Group. Open and willing to learn from European modernism, this group broke away from naturalism and revivalism, choosing instead to represent Indian classical art via myths, rural landscapes, people, social, religious, and cultural traditions. Whereas three men (including Husain) were from minority backgrounds, a fourth belonged to the *dalit* (low caste or untouchable) community. According to the art historian Chaitanya Sambrani,

*Their social and economic backgrounds lend a special gravity to their bid for this universalized modernism in the context of the newly-independent, secular socialist republic with emancipation, egalitarianism and modernization on its policy agenda.*²

In 1953, Husain traveled to Europe and saw the works of contemporary Western artists, most notably Picasso. These works greatly influenced Husain’s own expressions. Indeed, Husain blends mythological Indian themes with cubist forms and mixes colors liberally taken from the many hues of Indian miniature paintings. Examples of these works feature strongly in the present exhibition, which focuses on paintings produced between the years 1954 and 1971.

Completed just after his return from Europe, his untitled oil on canvas (from the *Pagan Series*)



Durga, 1964
Oil on canvas, 26 x 26



Draupadi, 1971
Acrylic on canvas, 79 ¾ x 48

shows, at first glance, a semi androgynous figure. On further examination, the low horizon draws attention to the genitalia, revealing the form to be that of a woman. In this early work, Husain explores the surface of the figure as a construct in its own right. The surface is a thoughtful and interesting study of form (not flesh) and what appear to be palette-knife strokes. Defined by a dark outline, the body contrasts with the background. The colors and outline draw attention to the face, neck, torso, hands, and legs. An association between the head and left leg is drawn by the use of similar color and emphasized by the two hands placed on the figure’s left leg. The title and figure reveal nothing further about the subject.

In the years to follow, his confident use of color defined forms such as the scene in the painting *Amusement in the Street* (1957). The high slim horizon clearly shows Husain’s interests in the Rajasthani miniature painting tradition especially from Basohli. Instead of the bright and distinct colors of the Rajasthani miniatures, however, the dark hues in this painting are perhaps a commentary on contemporary times and city life.

His 1961 painting entitled *Musicians* shows three nude figures, standing intimately close to each other. In Indian paintings Krishna, the dark blue god, is often depicted in amorous circumstances with one or more *gopis* (cowherd girls), while he plays the flute or the girls dance and/or play some instruments. Here figures on either side of the central blue figure are female; the one on the right holds a *sitar*. Of particular interest is the uncoiled snake that rises from the base on the right of the painting. The snake perhaps stresses the awakened instinctive libidinal force called the *kundalini*, which is present, according to certain Hindu philosophies, in our unconsciousness. (*Kundalini* is usually associated with a coiled sleeping snake.) This force or power is also associated with *Shakti*, the form of the powerful female goddess Durga.

As the embodiment of the creative feminine force, Durga is normally depicted in painting and sculpture as a fierce, beautiful, and compassionate goddess who rides a lion or tiger while brandishing weapons to destroy evil. In Husain’s *Durga* (1964),



Chariot of the Sun God, ca. 1953
Oil and Chinese lacquer on canvas, 42 ½ x 114 ¼

the bright red-orange background focuses the gaze on the tiger rather than the rider. The goddess appears as a dark blue-green distinctly female shape, obscured by the brilliant color and form of the tiger, her vehicle. Husain’s emphasis on strong color and form, rather than realism, shows an influence of Fauvism.

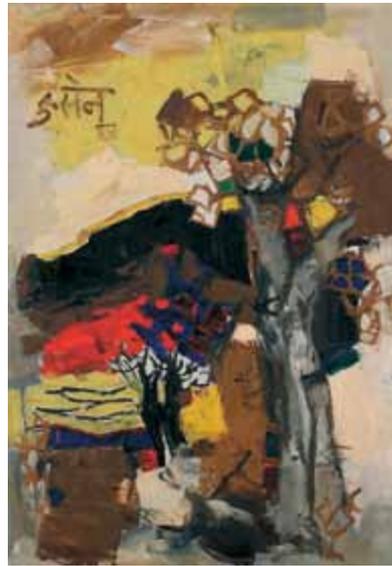
Another strong female mythological character represented in the exhibition is *Draupadi*, the heroine of the epic Mahabharata. The subject is the large central female nude that also makes up the background supporting five diminutive male figures. Painted in 1971, this work was probably part of a large series that Husain created to depict the many characters and episodes from the epic. A powerful story that continues to inspire people in the twenty-first century, the Mahabharata is the tale of two sets of cousins: the five Pandava brothers and the hundred Kauravas. Draupadi was married to all five brothers, who fought their cousins over the possession of the kingdom. While Husain painted both epics—the Mahabharata and the Ramayana—the former series of some twenty-nine works was created for the Bienal de São Paulo in 1971. Husain and Picasso were the only artists to be specially invited to the Bienal. At fifty-six years of age, Husain felt immensely honored to be seen as a peer of Picasso, whom he revered as the founder of modernism.

In addition to social, religious, mythological, and human characters, Husain has painted many works that depict animals. Two paintings in the exhibition show the tiger in all its ferocious and majestic form. However, of all the animals Husain has composed, the horse remains his most favored and often represented mammal, second only to the human form. After a trip to China, where he had the opportunity to meet artists and visit museum collections, Husain returned to India especially impressed with the images of horses from the Sung Dynasty. In *Chariot of the Sun God*, which portrays the seven horses that draw the Sun God’s chariot across the sky, the God himself is conspicuously missing. This work was probably done soon after Husain returned from China, where he learned and then experimented with the use of Chinese lacquer. With an economy of linear expression, the contours and volumes of each horse majestically and confidently emerge, racing from the background.

Husain’s forms and colors come together to energize and depict his individual and recognizable style. Far from realistic, the faces in almost all of Husain’s works, including those portraying Durga and Draupadi discussed above, remain anonymous, although expressive. Instead of using the naturalistic sensual expressions that are so familiar in Indian art, Husain emphasizes the visceral impact of the broad strokes and strong colors of his medium.



Red Landscape, 1964
Oil on canvas, 36 ½ x 36 ½



Black Hill, 1964
Oil on canvas, 57 ¼ x 39 ¼

These Indian subjects are in a form and style one can clearly associate with mainstream modernism. Although the landscapes (*Red Landscape* and *Black Hill*) are Indian, Husain's style creates with them an abstract universality. This merger of the Indian and universal modernism continues in Husain's later works. If not for certain symbols in his paintings, including the name of a character written on the surface, most subjects remain anonymous, as expressive color and form. However the word "anonymous" certainly does not apply to the artist M.F. Husain, whose name is the most recognized in contemporary Indian art.

Mallica Kumbera Landrus
Visiting Professor, History of Art and Architecture

- 1 Rashda Siddiqui, *In Conversation with Husain Paintings*, Books Today (New Delhi 2001) p. 10.
- 2 Chaitanya Sambrani, "The Progressive Artists' Group," in *Indian Art: An Overview*, ed. Gayatri Sinha, Rupa & Co (New Delhi 2003).

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Works in the Exhibition

Untitled (from the **Pagan Series**), 1954
Oil on canvas, 37 ½ x 22 ¾

Amusement in the Street, 1957
Oil on canvas, 14 ¼ x 20 ½

The Puppet Dancers
Oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 51 ¼

Musicians, 1961
Oil on canvas, 72 x 25 ¼

Rajasthan Drawing with Tiger, 1965
Oil on canvas, 34 ½ x 70 ¼

Chariot of the Sun God, ca. 1953
Oil and Chinese lacquer on canvas, 42 ½ x 114 ¼

Horse and Nude in Blue
Oil on canvas, 41 ¾ x 24

Horse and Nude in Red and White, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 30 ¾ x 49 ½

Red Landscape, 1964
Oil on canvas, 36 ½ x 36 ½

Black Hill, 1964
Oil on canvas, 57 ¼ x 39 ¼

Durga, 1964
Oil on canvas, 26 x 26

Draupadi, 1971
Acrylic on canvas, 79 ¾ x 48