"As I begin to paint, hold the sky in your hands as the stretch of my canvas is unknown to me."
(Maqbool Fida Husain)
In the book, *The Modern Artist and Tradition*, E. Alkazi writes that “one of the most revealing aspects of an artist’s work is his sense of the past: his capacity to assimilate in his mind and being the consciousness of his race, and his ability to direct the totality of that awareness through the filter of his creative imagination into an engagement with the contemporary situation.” It is in this perspective that we can talk of Maqbool Fida Husain (*henceforth referred as Husain, as called by many*) as an artist possessing a unique ability of giving birth to a pictorial language which is “indisputably” of a contemporary Indian situation, charged with his energy and art heritage. For Husain, art is not mere aesthetic creation that is different from him, it is himself. Every stroke, composition, color adds to his growth. To say the least, his works are not “mirror” of his thought, experience, or nature, but they are thought, experience, and nature themselves.

I think, to understand Husain’s work it is essential to understand the Indian dynamics prevailing before, with, and after him. I believe one can then make much more sense of his work and style, and more importantly the content and perspective in his paintings. Husain occupies a unique position in the Indian art scene, almost unbeatable. In 1947, he joined the Progressive Artists Group in Mumbai (then called Bombay), a group of young artists determined to break with tradition and promote a modern, internationally engaged art movement in India. He was at the forefront of contemporary Indian art.

Born in 1915, Husain spent his childhood in a central Indian town of Indore. He had spent a considerable time of his youth in penury and had minimal art education. He was the student and teacher of his own work, growing with it. When you refer to Husain, it is difficult to ignore the reference to a ‘bare-footed, six-inch tall man’ who carries his supplies where ever he goes. Many contemplate his “bare-footedness” as a style statement, which I wish to argue. There is a past associated with it. Husain lost his mother at a very young age. He had few memories of her, one of them being his mother trying to fit his small legs in his father’s shoe, obviously in a playful manner. With loss of his mother, he also lost the inclination to put on shoes any further. This deep emotional side is reflected in his early painting, *To wear or not to wear (Autobiography XVIII)*.

Such a metamorphosis of memories and emotions into colors, forms, and compositions seen in his many works can have two perspectives for the viewer. They can be taken as Husain’s strength or as his weakness. If one belongs to the former class, his paintings overpowers with spontaneity, vitality, and blend of color, form, and rhythm, ready to tell you a narrative and yet leave you with enough edge to come back to it again. For the later class, his work can seem to be a casual slipshod, haphazard, suffering from the vagaries of “unpredictable moods or passing whims.”

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1 In Conversation with Husain Paintings, Rashda Siddique, pp 21.
For him, it never mattered. He believed in the “act of painting” than the final piece, if anything of that sort exists. It may be because of this thought that many times a particular concept was explored on more than one canvas. On the other hand, this can also be contemplated as one of the reason of Husain’s dis-satisfaction with a particular medium and his foray into large murals, films, and set designing. For me, this dis-satisfaction is what gives his work purity and freshness. Husain’s paintings can be distinguished by, as E. Alkazi puts it, “a richness of experience, feeling, and sensitivity,” which is not subjugated by academic concepts. They reveal the vacillations, pressures, and challenges of the present age.

His earlier works blaze with honesty, no false exaggeration, only fact. For example, in the Man (1951, oil on canvas, 122 x 144 inches), through the organization of its forms, Husain presents a social condition, which raises questions in the minds of the viewer and changes the very perspective with which things are approached. Man is viewed as Husain’s germinal work, just like that of Picasso’s Les Demoiselles D’Avignon, not in mere the technique but also in its content and perspective that reflects the emotions of a post-partitioned India that is confused in its own state. The influence of Cubism, along with reflections of the Indian Miniature painting style is apparent in the painting when the forms are broken up in a way to place them juxtaposing each other, raising an “organized chaos”, which is so well reflective of the modern times. The violent distortions of forms and clashing colors brings out the intensity of the situation in way you cannot escape when you look at the painting. Yet, it leaves you with enough room to come back and study it further, deriving a new meaning each time you look at it. Such is the ability of Husain, raising the “why”, “how”, “when” in the viewer.

On seeing Husain’s later works, like Pamosh (1953), Passage of Time (1954), Second Act (1958), Empty River Bend (1961), and Quivering Brown Bodies (1966), he reflects the “universal” condition, which extends beyond the limits of individual experience. The corporeal appearances in these paintings are fictional in nature, portraying human relations, loneliness, and changes of fate, which Husain is aware of. In another series of 20 paintings, Husain portrays the journey of a woman from innocence to experience along with which he reflects the evolution of an idea through the process of painting. In the first few, the form is recognizable, almost closer to realism. Sharp contours and deep shading gives a sculptural solidity to the form, which can be seen diminishing in the later paintings, taking away its sculptural quality. Husain through the use of colors conveys the contradictory state of mind and the emotions of womanhood. One can feel that each painting is one step ahead in the drama that Husain unfolds through his brush thinking through it. Each character is advancing in complexity, almost like the growth of a human fetus. And with this growth, one can see the process of an artist also maturing. “It is in this sense
that art becomes an autobiography of the artist and more importantly of his thoughts.\textsuperscript{2}

One of the very characteristics of Husain’s work is his habit of forcing, through his brush, an encounter between the Indian culture and the postmodern elements. This is evident in Husain’s one of the most ambitious and controversial works, consisting of a series of paintings from 1971 to 1990. The series is inspired by the greatest Indian epic, \textit{Mahabharata} (almost ten time longer than Iliad and Odyssey, put together) that projects human conditions and frailty which have lasted through centuries and still holds true, not only in India, but in the world. And it is not surprising that Husain selected to work on the epic as it occupies a special place in the Indian national consciousness given the fact that he likes to work with emotions and contexts that effects human emotions.

On seeing some of Husain’s Mahabharata collection, I think of one question: What question/message from this great Indian epic could have possibly led Husain to take the characters and situations soaked in “epic resonance” and give them a new place on his canvas facing the contemporary world. It is an answer which is “subjective”, I realized. Mahabharata offers enough to draw “any” conclusion one wishes to, as it projects humanity, which is always in a sense open to debate and interpretation. The paintings should not be restrained under particular religious sentiments, as some critiques have done. The epic and the paintings both should be seen, as put by Shashi Tharoor\textsuperscript{3}, “not as religion but as the whole complex of values and standard-some derives from myth and tradition, some from our history-by which India and Indians must live.” The issues/questions raised in the paintings puts one’s interpretation of the epic in a challenging position (like Draupadi is looked more as human in Husain’s painting than incarnation of any god), which I believe is the intent.

Husain’s quest for imagery, which is beyond the normal physical human experience, compelling visions, universal significance, I believe drew him closer to Mahabharata. The gestation period was long. He drew several sketches, outlines, and did immense research on this project. Husain once said, “the main thing about it was the form...images. All this philosophy, religion was secondary. This is pure structure. It is purely imagery which only such an epic can imagine. You just look, [and say] what does this mean? The moment you say this, (it is ) then you are leaving the painting [and] you are reading the painting.” A strong influence can be seen of Picasso’s \textit{Guernica}, which was a vision of horror and tragedy of war. Blending this with the epic’s cinematic energy gives an elemental power to the entire series.


\textsuperscript{3} Shashi Tharoor is an active Indian Politician. He is also a prolific author, columnist, journalist and a human rights advocate.
In all the paintings there are strong heavily painted brush strokes and strong contour lines that defines the characters. The palette ranges from bright and warm to solemn shades of red, yellow, brown, sienna and black or blue and green but is often dominated by white in thick patches and passages, like seen in *Draupadi on Dice* (1982, oil on Canvas), or to completely monochromatic tone as reflected in the *Arjuna and Duryodhana Split* (Mahabharata 9, 1971). In most instances these colors charge the images with a feel of weight and solidity, making them forceful pictorial statements. Husain has used colors in full awareness of their symbolic value (like red being the reflection of Indian Emotions of love, passion, and energy). His colors share a close relationship with the composition that allows the figures to be identified.\(^4\) With its severity and simplicity of forms, he responds to life both in its framework of eternal narrative and in the format of a historical event, past or present.

In this series, Husain probes into a deeper level of human complexity, of rage and envy, of neighing horses and elephants, of scribe and author, “setting down the transcendent wisdom of the epic that speaks across the ages of Indians of Husain’s time.” Susan S. Bean, curator of South Asian and Korean art said about Mahabharata, “Husain moves from compositions that turn on the violent rupture of wholes to images approaching contemplative dualities.”

I believe that it is only in the realms of art that such an audacious probing of human relations, culture, and psychological conditions is permitted. Especially, in a country like India, which portrays complex psychological conditions, often imposed by force of social or ethical standards. And it is right under these conditions that Husain’s art finds its own expression. His achievement it two-fold, first in the honesty of his expression, and second the ability to find an appropriate pictorial form for the psychological states conveyed through his paintings. The thing with Husain is his speed of imagination. For him, as we talked earlier in this essay, “the process of gestation is longer (the process of painting), but the period of actual execution is brief (the final piece).”

Based on my understanding and few readings of the vast work of Husain, there is an unsurmountable energy one feels upon viewing his work. And E. Alkazi channelizes this energy perfectly here, “there are three main sources of Husain’s creative energy so far. First is the Indian landscape as such, second is the art of the past, in particular, the Indian miniature paints and the third is his intimate contact with the masses. Husain dips his hands into the humanity, invests the agony of mankind with a quality of visual poetry and by miraculous transformations such as these restores to art its quiescent dignity and its healing touch.”

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\(^4\) Shiv.S. Kapur- Husain
References:

Books


3. In Conversation with Husain's Paintings, Rashda Siddiqui, New Delhi, Books Today, [2001].

4. Images of Raj: water colors, acrylic on canvas, drawings, Sista's Art Gallery, Bangalore, India [1987].

5. Beyond the Canvas, an unfinished portrait of M.F. Husain, Ila Pal, New Delhi, Indus, [1994].

Journals and Articles


9. Various Museum catalogs and online links.

Paintings discussed in the above paper
Pamosh (Padmini Mohini Shankhini)

Oil on canvas (32 7/8 x 39 7/8 in. (83.5 x 101.5 cm.))
In sequence from top to bottom:

*Man, 1951; Indian Village 1955, oil on canvas (102 x 335); The Voice 1959, oil on canvas (122 x 456)*
Few paintings from the series from Innocence to Womanhood (left to right): 
*Blue Night, 1959; Fatima, 1960; Black Moon, 1960; Nartaki, 1964; Devdasi, 1965*

*To Wear or Not to Wear*
Draupadi on Dice, 1971