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| Husain, M. F. (1915-2011) |
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| M. F. Husain has often been called India’s Pablo Picasso on the account of his stature as the most representative artist of modern India. After the gain of political sovereignty, Husain projected himself as the most vociferous spokesman of the national modern. He envisaged his role as a modernist by turning to ancient Hindu mythologies as his abiding subject matter and translating them into a modernist visual language. His pictorial vocabulary drew from Picasso, Matisse, Chagall and many other modernists and appropriated their style to forge a new personal idiom that may be termed as a signature style. It was only in the 1990s when Hindu nationalism began to dictate politics that Husain’s freedom to interpret Hindu religious mythologies and depict gods and particularly goddesses in the nude that his art became a target of attack and public litigation. What was seen by him as his right as a secular Indian artist to claim the past from a modern perspective was challenged when the opponents from the Hindu Right refused to let his Muslim identity be subsumed under an overarching Indian one. Today, he is remembered more for the debates around art and censorship that he gave rise to than his extraordinary creativity that manifested in a variety of medium ranging from installation art, mural painting and film making. |
| M. F. Husain has often been called India’s Pablo Picasso on the account of his stature as the most representative artist of modern India. After the gain of political sovereignty, Husain projected himself as the most vociferous spokesman of the national modern. He envisaged his role as a modernist by turning to ancient Hindu mythologies as his abiding subject matter and translating them into a modernist visual language. His pictorial vocabulary drew from Picasso, Matisse, Chagall and many other modernists and appropriated their style to forge a new personal idiom that may be termed as a signature style. It was only in the 1990s when Hindu nationalism began to dictate politics that Husain’s freedom to interpret Hindu religious mythologies and depict gods and particularly goddesses in the nude that his art became a target of attack and public litigation. What was seen by him as his right as a secular Indian artist to claim the past from a modern perspective was challenged when the opponents from the Hindu Right refused to let his Muslim identity be subsumed under an overarching Indian one. Today, he is remembered more for the debates around art and censorship that he gave rise to than his extraordinary creativity that manifested in a variety of medium ranging from installation art, mural painting and film making.  Maqbool Fida Husain was born in 1915 in a very orthodox Muslim family in central India and was brought up in the literary atmosphere of Urdu in Indore, Madhya Pradesh during the early half of twentieth century and lived for nearly a century. He died in London in 2011. As a young boy, he was deeply influenced by religion as much as he was influenced by Urdu poetry and he also learnt Islamic calligraphy. He became a student of fine arts at Indore art college, where N.S. Bendre, one of the most important mid-century modern Indian artists was an art teacher.  At the age of 22, Husain migrated to Bombay to make a living there as an artist and did big cinema hoardings which was to influence the master-craftsman in him, when it comes to working with large surfaces and the solidity of figures. Husain also briefly worked in a toy-making studio, which would have informed the symbolic universe of his later painterly oeuvre.  Husain had his first solo show at the age of 35, but by the age of 40 he was a prominent artist in India and was shown in the Venice Biennale in 1956. The nation recognized Husain by awarding him with the *Padma Vibhushan*/Lotus Medal in 1973, a prestigious civilian medal awarded to art and culture personalities.  Husain became an endearing artist figure to the nation state as well as to the nationalist bourgeoise by painting folk themes in expressionist painting methods in the immediate context of Indian independence in 1947. Husain and rest of Progressive Artists’ Group visited a landmark exhibition of 1948 where ancient Indian sculptures were shown in the *Rashtrapati Bhawan*/ Presidential Palace and those ancient Indian sculptures had a lasting impression on Husain’s career as an artist. The dance like posture of Indian sculptures with the *tribhanga/* contrapposto pose informed his figurations. He also utilized the *mudra*/ the hand gesture language of sculpture as symbols.  Husain became synonymous with some recurring leitmotifs in his painterly career, such as the Hindu mythological themes and horses. There are speculations that Husain’s horses are symbolic of al-Buraq, the mythological horse in Islam that carried the prophet. There is an indirectness in the ways in which Husain uses Islamic mythology unlike the candid ways with which he approached Hindu mythological themes, but the very freedom with which he took liberties with another religion, in the spirit of secularism landed him in trouble later.  Husain had to leave India when the Hindu right wing filed cases against him for offending religious sentiments with the nude representation of Hindu goddesses and Husain had to lead rest of his life in exile. He took Qatari citizenship. Although the Hindu right wing was against Husain, it can be seen that the judiciary in India supported Husain by suspending the cases against him and proclaiming Husain’s paintings as artworks. A large section of urban intelligentsia also rallied behind Husain, offering him emotional and intellectual support.  File: Yatra.jpg  Figure *Yatra* by M. F. Husain; Oil on canvas (1955)  Source: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art; http://www.knma.in/highlight-from-the-collection?page=24 |
| Further reading:  (Adams)  (Dalmia)  (Husain and Mohamed)  (Kapur)  (M.F. Husain (Indian Artist))  (Ramaswamy)  (Sengupta)  (Zitzewitz) |