

COURTESY VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

SPOTLIGHT

Finishing line

The unfinished works of MF Husain express a longing for the India of his imagination

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Maqbool Fida Husain's final, unfinished commission is now on display at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London, UK. Husain was still working on the *Indian Civilization Series* when he died. The unfinished commission is not so much a work of art as it is a final, frenzied expression of longing for the India of the artist's imagination.

There is something at the heart of Husain's unfinished series of triptychs that is often seen as inimical to good art: a purpose. Yet it is this purpose, or collection of purposes, that makes the series such important work, and a thought-provoking parting note to Husain's remarkable career.

In 2008, when steel baron Lakshmi Mittal's wife Usha Mittal first commissioned the work, she wanted an epic series of paintings that would "express all the colours and diversity of Indian history on canvas". Mittal, who responded to a set of emailed questions, said she commissioned Husain after he showed her his *Mughal-E-Azam* series.

That commission, of 51 paintings, was completed by Husain in London in 2007 for Akbar East, son of V. Asaf, who directed the 1960 classic film that the series was inspired by, and named after.

When Husain showed Mittal that series, she says, "I knew that if he was to paint the history of India, it will be a great expression of Indian history." Mittal's objective was to capture the breadth of Indian history on canvas. And Husain, she says, was the only contemporary painter who could do this.

Three years later, by the time Husain died in June 2011, the controversial artist had completed eight panels of three canvases each. The triptychs, each with a theme, are dense with ideas, stories and detail. Yet, Divia Patel, a curator at the South and South-East Asian section of the V&A's Asian department, tells me these are just a small



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Imaginary homeland: (clockwise from above) A triptych from the Indian Civilization Series displayed at the museum; Three Dynasties (2008-2011), oil on canvas; Husain, who died in 2011; and Indian Households (2008-2011), oil on canvas.

little claustrophobic.

It could also be unfinished. Husain appears to have started work not chronologically but with the more "modern" themes. But he did move back and forth from canvas to canvas. That is one of the details Patel is keen to point out. "We can't be completely sure that this is how he envisioned the final series to look like."

There are horses here, of course, and dancing girls and other signature Husain themes. It is unmistakably Husain. But by this point Husain was almost 100 years old, and Patel says that shows. Not in his enthusiasm or the energy of his canvases—there is no shortage of either—but in his attention to detail and the way he applies paint to canvas.

Also he's doing these much larger-scale paintings that the earlier ones weren't. They weren't quite as large, or quite as large in his thinking, either, so there is a difference there. When you look at these you also see the repetition of motifs. You see similar things, themes that he's familiar with come back here. He plays with them, he experiments with them. I love some of the compositions. They are really very clever."

Patel says the V&A will present the exhibition in the way Husain would have wanted viewers to engage with the paintings. The triptychs will be placed in a long, narrow gallery so that viewers "go on a journey", Patel says, absorbing Husain's telling of Indian history as they go along.

Mittal says the series has great appeal both for people who know Indian history and those who are curious about it. "The artist's objective was to represent India's enduring civilization and he does this with a deep understanding of both, history and humanity."

Looking at her commission now, Mittal says she is filled with pride and emotion. "They evoke so much that is central to Indian life and identity." By recreating a vision of his India in the eyes of his audience, the artist seeks to reclaim what he had lost.

M.F. Husain: Master Of Modern Indian Painting is on till 27 July at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.

part of what would have been a substantially larger project. "He said that he was going to do 96 canvases. That's 96 of these to be made into 33 triptychs. It's a series that was infinite. A series that would have been huge."

I ask Patel how the series compares with the rest of his work thematically, and from the perspective of idea and execution. Is this an adequate swansong for Husain?

Patel says her approach to these canvases—both as a curator and as an enthusiast—is different. "He died before they were finished. They're of interest because they have such celebration of his passion for India. I think they really conveyed that. These canvases are important for that reason."

They are even more useful, Patel says, from a curatorial perspective. Yes, they have never been displayed in public before. But there is more attraction here. "They're important because

they expose this audience to something they've never seen before. One artist they can cope with, maybe multiple artists in contemporary Indian art they'll find difficult to cope with."

With a big India season planned at the V&A through the next several months, Patel says the triptychs are an accessible, enjoyable way to get audiences to engage with contemporary India and contemporary Indian art.

The eight themes captured in the canvases Husain completed before his death are: *Hindu Triad*, *Indian Dance Forms*, *Indian Households*, *Language Of Stone*, *Modes Of Transport*, *Tale Of Three Cities*, *Three Dynasties* and *Traditional Indian Festivals*. The exhibition starts with a 25th, single canvas, a *Ganesha*.

This *Ganesha*, Patel says, was Husain's first painting in the series. And his purpose for the series is very clear within this work. "This is the painting that started the series. He's got a ter-

racotta modern goddess figure in there. It's almost immediately telling you, 'I'm going to talk about India'."

The names of the triptychs sound like the chapters of a sweeping DVD box-set on Indian history. In fact this "documentary" quality manifests itself not just in the titles of the works, but also through the works themselves, and in Husain's handwritten notes behind each canvas.

Take, for instance, the triptych or *tribhang* titled *Three Dynasties*. Behind the right panel, Husain scrawls: "Queen Victoria of England appointed herself the Empress of India. It took about two centuries for Mahatma Gandhi to lead the multitude of Indian people to fight for the freedom non-violently. By 1947 the columns of British power crumbled."

Thankfully Husain is an infinitely better artist than he is a caption-writer. The three panels of this triptych are all wonderful

to look at. There is, as Patel puts it, "so much going on in one painting". The most pleasing element of all, perhaps, is Husain's dramatic take on India's national symbol. In the central panel, as emperor Ashoka wages fierce war, three lions scramble up a pillar of victory to find a place on top. Up in the sky a monochrome Buddha slowly begins to come into view, symbolizing Ashoka's imminent enlightenment.

There are many such rewarding details in all the canvases. Clever little interpretations of elements of the India story. Yet on the left panel of the same triptych, you see some of the compromises the "documentary" purpose of the series forces Husain to make. Emperor Akbar is crammed into the panel along with dancing girls, an elephant, a peacock and princess Indira in a litter. There is a screen draped over the princess in the unmistakable shape of the Indian map. The panel feels stiff and a