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M.F. HUSAIN

Husain's Century

A landmark show of the artist's view of the modern world

By MADHU JAIN

IT started with an apple. Like all things good and evil, as M.F. Husain puts it with a devilish half-chuckle. From the fall of Adam to the falling of that apple on Newton's head.

Husain was sitting in his hotel room in London two years ago and there was this "big, beautiful apple sitting alone on a white plate". Temptation enough for the first painting of the current series: *Da Vinci's Flying Machine*, in the corner of which sits a jack-booted soldier, attacking a bright red apple in an otherwise sepia-toned canvas.

Husain has "preserved" the apple. That first bite triggered a whole splurge of work on civilisation and violence forming the bulk of this major Husain exhibition which opened last fortnight at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in New Delhi.

Considering that Husain shows so often, many of the capital's cognoscenti went to the exhibition with less than great expectations. But this time, he has really pulled a rabbit out of the hat. This was not a "happening" but "the most important event in contemporary art after a long time. Civilisations are brought into play and Husain's thematic concerns and the images he's been carrying for so long have been put together," in the words of the normally reticent painter, Tyeb Mehta. It was also the first time in over 20 years that a living Indian artist was being exhibited at the NGMA—sculptors Aman Nath Sehgal and Sankho Choudhuri had been honoured so earlier.

Certainly, it was the first time that a private gallery—Vadehra Art Gallery—has sponsored a show at the NGMA. The invitations to the opening were sent in the names of Husain and Arun Vadehra which has set off murmurs of discontent in the artist circle.

It took Vadehra a year to persuade the Department of Culture to allow the show. Husain was otherwise going to show these works at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Canvases of this size and import deserved the NGMA, according to Vadehra. "It makes sense with all that talk about privatisation. After all, David Hockney showed at the

Metropolitan in New York and Picasso at the Louvre."

A Husain now veering towards his eighth decade appears even more intent on breaking the speeding rules on the highway of art. "Take Lord Ganesh's example. The way he moves so fast. If you move fast, you don't fall, you become steady, stable, even in thought." Like a centrifugal force? "Yes," nods the painter who can't satisfy his "visual greed" no matter how fast he goes.

"The world was created with a bang not a blue-print, and in a bang lots of things can happen." The images come so fast that he wishes he were a "machine"—he often paints over anything in sight, even old canvases. He actually painted over Krishen Khanna's portrait of Salman Rushdie's father.

But this very hurry also trips him. That great billboard dash of his is both a strength and a weakness. In this show there are some very ordinary, come-too-easy works like *Nehru's Vision of Modern India* or the Satyajit Ray series done publicly in Calcutta. These "pictograms", says critic Isana Murty, make this show uneven.

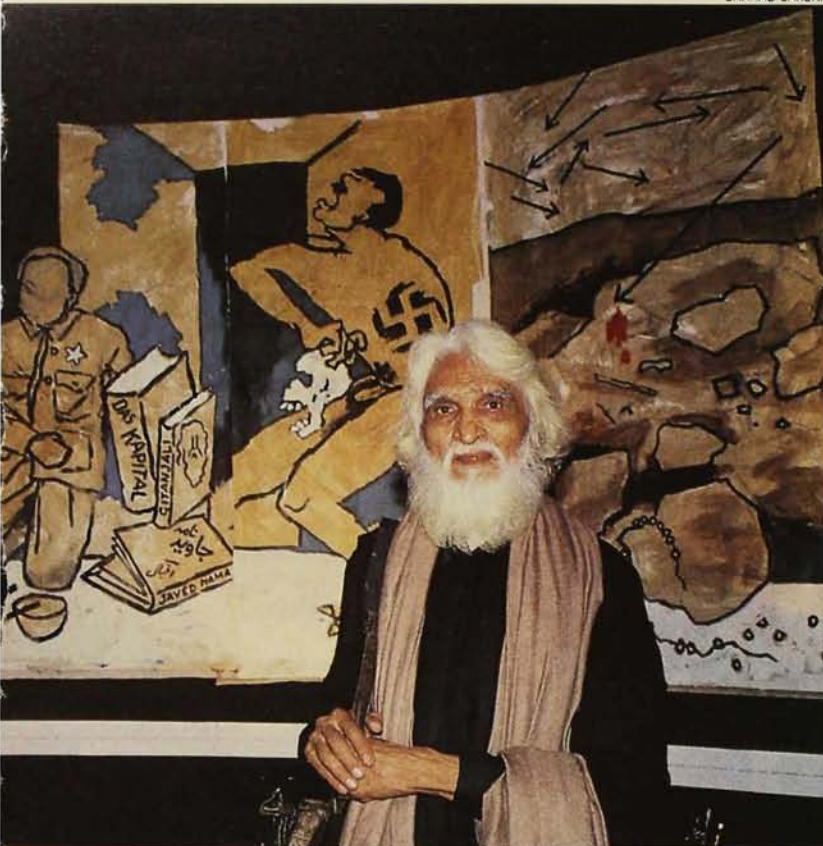
There are two leitmotifs in the exhibition. The apple, even a "Saturned apple" with rings around it. And, more sombrely, a broken chair. The apple is



with the more playful Husain work in which he has jumbled together figures from various centuries.

But it is with the chair that the mood changes. Especially the 'installation'—dismembered slabs of a painting on violence, in grey, black, white, and red.





displayed in a specially constructed black-lined tent in the Gallery garden. In front of each painting is a real black chair, each one broken differently.

Once in this enclosed, dark womb-like world, you are suddenly jerked out of complacency—a bit like stumbling

into the horror chambers in Madame Tussaud's wax museum.

This is the Ayodhya-land of our times. In all that abstraction and images of stones, guns, fallen figures and blood—red rivers of paint cut some of the canvases—you can almost hear the heartbeats of fear, the shrieks of the stricken, the blurbings of hatred.

This work was finished on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday—over two months before the Black Sunday—and the exhibition ends, aptly, on the day the Mahatma was shot dead.

Husain is dealing with the violence of our century. This passage to darkness culminates in his magnum opus of the exhibition: *Portrait of the 20th Century* which covers the walls of the tented rotunda in a huge semi-circle. He has thrown in all the personalities—even

HUSAIN ON HUSAIN: The dining table floats in space. Black Adam at one end and the blue Eve (crucified) on the other end of the table. The saturned apple in orbit. Steel-plated soldiers exhausted after the great kill. A robot feeds the programme into the presiding body. TV beams monstrous laughter.



Husain with his *Portrait of the 20th Century* (left); part of the 'installation'

inventions or books—of this momentous epoch which have acquired an icon status for him.

It starts with "Corporate Wheels", a Ford car, followed by Marilyn Monroe—"a symbol of beauty and passion".

THE eye moves easily over the panorama—a bewildered-looking Einstein. Mother Teresa's sari "softly caressing a black boy, representing the emergence of Africa". Mao burdened with the four key books of our age (*Das Kapital*, *Gitanjali*, *Sigmund Freud* and *Javed Nama*)—and then comes to an abrupt halt at Hitler. Naked, with a skull held over his groin, a swastika on his arm and his nails pointed like a beast's.

Almost in the centre is what Husain describes as "Hitler's backyard"—those strewn boulders, jagged lines, blobs. "It could be Berlin, it could be what happened recently," says Husain enigmatically. The hall-of-fame tour continues with the rape scene from Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, the Beatles, Churchill, De Gaulle, Gorbachev's expressive trench-coated back as he "excuses himself to join later for coffee", Jean-Paul Sartre's head in a coffee cup, Bertrand Russell's in a saucer. And the





The powerful *Mahabharata* in black and white has an entire room to itself

end is, of course, No Exit. As for Husain's hero in this varied cast of characters, it is Swami Vivekananda. "Not Christianity, not Islam. He is the only one who has done something in this century."

The *Mahabharata* is yet another major work in the show. The powerful black and white canvas has an entire room to itself: the ornate pillars, fireplace and walls of the room have been covered with white sheets to prevent them detracting from the starkness of the painting. Real paintings are black and white for Husain. "Colour dilutes.... Picasso did *Guernica* in black and white."

It's the *Mahabharata* according to C. Rajagopalachari, but Husain's strokes are visible. Husain wanted both Ganga and Jamuna in the painting, but two goddesses would have crowded the canvas. Jamuna was a fisherman's daughter—so, Husain put a fish in her place.

More often than not, it is his pursuit of structure which accounts for what he puts on canvas, and not thematic musings as many would like to believe. Similarly, in his *Last Supper in Red* and *Last Supper in Blue*—influenced by Japanese woodcuts—he has cut torsos in half to balance other figures. The bishop in a splendid red robe appeared too heavy, so he broke it with a vertical slash. "People will say that line is meaningful, but for me it was a question of pure structure." Also the reason he plonked Buster Keaton with his briefcase and umbrella at one end of the table? "To change the perspective says Husain."

Figures also metamorphose on his canvas and one can almost imagine the artist chortling over his own jokes. The central figure in the *Last Supper in Blue* started out as Henry the VIII, but then became a transvestite. Then, there is the devil peering out of a tv tube. Onida, or the media? Husain's not telling.

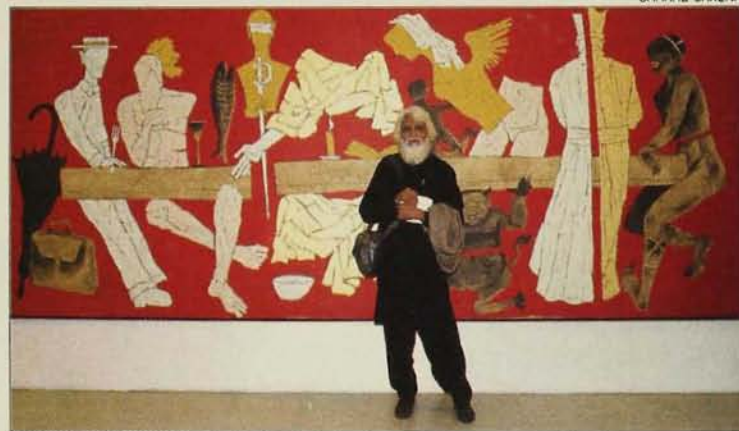
Obviously, Husain is enjoying mixing his metaphors so that Humphrey Bogart on a street corner shares the canvas with Moses. Or leans on a lamp-post with figures from the Sistine Chapel floating above.

As for Husain himself, he leaves his calling-card on his paintings. The umbrella on Van Gogh's chair in *Uffizi Gallery of Five Characters* (Picasso, Dali and company) is his. He says. ■



A 2,000-year-old man and 20-year-old woman share an Etruscan jar, containing the elixir of life. A drunken man who lies naked in front at a street corner. Humphrey Bogart waiting for a brief encounter with the identity of time. And sharing the canvas with Moses.

SHARAD SAXENA



Guest-list includes nine people. Buster Keaton with his briefcase and umbrella on one end and Bartholomew on the other end of the table (lifted by the devil). Damocles sword has broken the table top in two. Bishop is divided. Flutter of a fallen angel. Presiding sacred robe stretches its hand towards the standing fish and glass of wine.