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SMART ART

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The politics of iconography

How do leaders like being memorialised? As Narendra Modi moves into prime ministerial mode, bureaucrats in charge of such details are probably worrying about the “official” portrait that will need to be placed in ministries and government offices. Will Modi pick a close-up of his face, or a longer shot that portrays him arms across his chest and looking into the distance like a visionary (any likeness to Vivekananda being purely coincidental)?

India’s political leadership has given short shrift to portraits, but one must wonder why so few artists have deliberately stayed away from the genre. The decimated political dynasty at the helm of the Congress has fared better than most — Jawaharlal Nehru fancied himself enough to like being frequently photographed and painted and his images form part of the nation’s image archive. But few artists took liberties with his visage — though there is one particularly arresting caricature by P T Reddy that shows him goggle-eyed. And though several modernists — K K Hebbar and K S Kulkarni included — painted Indira Gandhi, they preferred to feed her vanity rather than exonerate their skills. Did they fear a backlash by attributing anything less than perfectionism to the subject? Why did no one portray her psychologically rather than reflecting on mere physical likeness?

Actually, M F Husain did. He was drawn to powerful figures — as also compassionate ones — and his portraits of Indira Gandhi at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation are fascinating because they resist the temptation to paint her as she looked but as she appeared to him. But the ones that became controversial were those that Husain

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Portraits in the Central Hall of Parliament

painted in the wake of her infamous Emergency, when he depicted her — like Durga — riding a tiger. However flawed the comparison may have been, here was an artist painting the head of the country in a manner that at least served the constituency of modern art.

No prime minister or president since can claim to have had portraits of any distinctive merit. There are the officially commissioned likenesses that line the walls of Parliament House and Rashtrapati Bhawan, and probably of a few ministries, that are uniformly stiff and boring. Artists — and some of the better known ones have signed their names to these works — have been singularly unimaginative in the legacy these paintings represent.

If there is a political leader who has been painted — and lampooned — time and again, it has to be Mahatma Gandhi. Artists have not shied away from taking liberties in the ways they have chosen to represent him — from Nandalal Bose's iconic, simple image to Surendran Nair's and Atul Dodiya's more recent, thought-provoking ones. As the Bharatiya Janata Party's Narendra Modi moves to occupy South Block, it remains to be seen how he would like himself represented. Official portraits aside, will artists be free to depict him as they see him — whether hero or villain? Would they offer a psychological study of a journey from genteel poverty to the highest office in the land? Someone traumatised by events under his charge? Or merely a continuation of the rose-lipped, cherubic figure that his inner circle might want to see him represented as? Already, a sculptor in Gujarat has created adulatory statue of Modi, and kitschy images testifying to his popularity are the stuff of masks.

Amidst some fears that a BJP government might trot out the moral police, squashing creative expression, Modi may need to deliberate on the freedom he must guarantee artists under his regime. Even if he stays away from interfering with the fine arts, he would have scored a brownie point that moves beyond George Bush's portraits of world statesmen — Manmohan Singh included — that was nothing more than an exercise in the trivial.

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These views are personal and do not reflect those of the organisation with which he is associated