



A final celebration on canvas

His last works, eight magnificent triptychs by MF Husain pay tribute to India's many civilisations

In 2008, two years after he was forced to leave India for good following the decade-long vicious hate campaign against him, MF Husain was commissioned to paint a grand series on 'Indian Civilisation' by long-term patron Usha Mittal. Elated at the chance to paint the history of a country he loved and missed, and quickly realising that he would not be able to capture what he wanted to in any less, Husain announced his intention to paint 96 panels, in triptychs. By the time of his death in 2011 Husain had made much progress, painting a series of eight magnificent triptychs, now on display at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A).

Like his other admirers, I enjoy many things about Husain's works — the vibrant colours he used, his unique style — drawing on both Western and folk techniques, and the grand-

ness of his themes and the works themselves, which hark back to his time as a painter of cinema hoardings. All these aspects are evident in the works on display at the V&A, but to me the emotion that went into these paintings was particularly striking.

With many familiar figures and objects in his works — Mother Teresa, the Ashoka Pillar, Ganesha — Husain conveys a very warm picture of a stridently secular India. Husain made carefully handwritten notes to accompany each panel, bringing home this point further. Divia Patel, the exhibition's curator, opens it with his portrait of Indian dynasties — a dramatic scene of Ashoka fighting bloody battles as his lions ascend the pillar of victory, and his eventual conversion to Buddhism stands side by side a portrait of the tolerance and culture promoted under the reign of Akbar, and a depiction of the Raj and Queen Victoria as Gandhi and the independence movement march upon it.

Most of his panels take on equally grand themes — a detailed triptych on the cities of India vividly captures the rich history of Delhi, Varanasi and Kolkata through some of their most famous figures and buildings, while another canvas on transport conveys the energy of towns and cities — again there are gentle references to multicultural India, such as a Sikh family on a Bajaj scooter, a pilgrimage to Pandharpur and an old Muslim man on a horse cart. He adds a particularly personal touch to the panel on Indian households, with a picture of himself as a child under the charpoy "doodling horses on the floor" as his grandfather sits by the side.

The paintings coincided with a very ener-

getic period for Husain, who, despite living in exile outside of India, went about his work with the energy, enjoyment and clarity that he had always had.

"He always had a whole image in mind when he started... he was always very sure of what he was doing," recalled his son Mustafa by telephone from Dubai. Husain, ever the multitasker, was working on two other major projects before he passed away — the History of Arab Civilisation for the Qatari royal family and 100 years of Indian Cinema. With typical Husain aplomb and energy he split his time between Qatar, Dubai and his Mayfair studio in London — the decision of when and where to go was often an impulsive thing, with Husain carrying around a number of tickets with different destinations and making up his mind at the last moment, recalls Mustafa. Far from being the solitary worker, he continued to enjoy having people around him as he worked. "He was a real people's man," he said.

Mittal, who saw him on the day of his death, recalled that even at the hospital he talked about the panels he still planned to do. "He was full of excitement to complete the series," she said at the launch.

If there was any sadness about a country he couldn't return to, it certainly isn't evident in the works on display. "I look and I look but I don't see any," said Patel, the curator. "I only see a vibrancy and the optimism that you see. A celebration of a country that he loved."

(MF Husain: Indian Civilisation runs at London's Victoria and Albert Museum till July 27.)

VIDYA RAM



A country captured
(clockwise from right)
A triptych on 'Indian households'; 'Indian dance forms'; and 'Three dynasties' viba.
COURTESY OF USHA MITTAL