



By **Zehra Naqvi**

Fearless strokes of vibrant colors and shapes dominate the canvas existing right on the border of beauty and ugliness; Maqbool Fida Husain was a master at expressing and embracing duality. With his free flowing white hair and bare feet he was an expression of simplicity despite being one of the highest earning painters in India.

A respected but controversial figure in the Indian art scene, he received some of the highest honors and awards that the country had to offer but continued to live abroad in self exile.

Much has been written on the objectionable subject matter of his paintings, and whether his depiction of Hindu goddesses in the nude was grossly insensitive or a brave gesture of his right to express. In recent times events like Aei Wei Wei's detention, the anti-cut protests in London, the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad have highlighted the artist's effect and role in politics and society. Art is not a political tool, but one that challenges preconceived ideas, suggesting

new ways of looking, hearing, thinking and living. However, at times this very intervention within a dominant discourse sparks controversy if a sensitive subject like religion is critiqued. Husain remained unapologetic of his work in staunch support for his right to express himself and was both largely criticized as well as greatly respected worldwide, considered the greatest Indian artist to date.

The media coverage and discussions on Husain have been reduced to debates on religion and freedom of speech when in reality the works of this artist represent so much more having lived through a period of great change in India from the British Raj till the present times, his practice encompassed this transformation through striking hues and cubist imagery. Thus I would like to pay homage solely to his work, his use of color and composition, his prints, photographs and films, the art that he was so passionate about.

Husain dabbled in all kinds of media and techniques, with a playful approach towards art he toyed with multiple and unconventional ways of expression. His first film 'Through the Eyes of the Painter' is a seventeen minute documentary depicting the artist's experience of Rajasthan with no dialogue and music composed by Vijaya Raghav Rao it won the Golden Bear at the International Film Festival in Germany and paints a poignant image composed of seemingly random shots of riverbanks, school children, abandoned pieces of jewelry, the patterns of the desert all coming together in a cohesive celebration of the land. His other films 'Gaja Gamini, Meenaxi: A Tale of 3 Cities' and 'Pehla Sitara' are flawlessly executed refusing to merely entertain the audience, instead making them think through an artistic and experimental use of the filmic medium.

Painting since he was a child, he craved freedom refusing to go to university instead choosing to learn subjects that he was interested in by himself, he delved into philosophy, the study of languages and art. Painting to him was not a profession but a way of being, worth a lifetime of dedication and he lived by that rule. His paintings were a lot like himself and depicted a world

structured by his own rules, as an artist he didn't have a studio but chose to paint wherever he went be it a hotel room or a friend's drawing room, choosing to afterwards pay for the damages that came hand in hand with his creations. One of my favorite series is the Mahabharata, which he exhibited alongside works by Picasso at the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1971. The paintings use symbols and characters from the Mahabharata with a contemporary twist, a visual storytelling of jealousy, conflict, philosophical ideologies and dramatic events, using them to comment on his present understanding of the world. The colors depicting a landscape of religion, death and struggle are more subtle and earthy than his later works. The composition and the use of brushstroke fills the paintings with movement perhaps commenting on our own shifting perception altered through time and age.

In an interview Husain revealed that he did not wish to be remembered as a painter but 'a Man of Renaissance.' He recalled a near death incident that he had experienced when instead of fearing his mortality, he rejoiced. "I thought I was going to die that day and I was so happy," he said, elaborating that he would have happily died that day knowing that he had lived a full life and accomplished so much more than what he had set out for.