

The Interplay of Vision and Observation in the Art of M.F. Husain

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Two very opposite sensibilities inform the work of M. F. Husain. One side is embodied by his admiration for the work of the art historian and theorist, Ananda Coomaraswamy, who focuses on the interior vision of the traditional Indian artist. This perspective is informed by classical Hindu mythology and philosophy as well as Arabic calligraphy, notions of mystical Islam, Buddhist lore, and all of the other rich narratives and visual traditions that inform Husain's art. The other, equally important side for Husain is an observational and humane engagement with his life in the everyday world, and by extension, an artistic engagement with the rich traditions of folk art in India as well as with the art of modernity. Focusing on the process of creating art, I wish to understand how these two co-equal sides of Husain's life experience most likely play out in the process of generating his art. Using the interplay of imaginative inner vision on the one hand, and observation on the other, as orienting principles, I will discuss the question of how this dynamic plays out in his creative process; how his approach can be simultaneously both traditional and modern, culturally specific and meta-cultural or global; how he can be understood in relation to our notions of Islamic art; and how his work can be understood ethically in the modern context. In the course of my argument I'll pose a few questions directly to the artist in the hope of stimulating discussion.

The great 20th Century philosopher and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy sums up the artistic process of the traditional Buddhist painter as "when the visualization has been realized, set to work."¹ In other words, the artist is to develop his image in the mind's eye through contemplation based on canonical prescriptions rather

than through direct observation. The work is then in bringing out that inner vision and making it a physical artistic reality in the material world. It seems clear that some of M.F. Husain's work, while not following canonical prescriptions, nevertheless comes from this imaginative inner focus on the image. (slide 1--images from Buddhist and Hindu mythology)

Coomaraswamy, however, is speaking of sequestered Buddhist monks, the painters of Ajanta and the sculptors of Sanchi, and of course, Husain is not a monk. His life is in the world, as an actor as well as an observer, and therefore his work is equally about the careful observation of life around him, about rubbing elbows with people from all walks of life, Indian and European, men and women, young and old, and engaging artistically with all of the many rich visual aspects of his life in the world. As an actor in his own life, Husain's visual responses are varied—sometimes he is humorous, satirical or playful, sometimes he responds compassionately, or with outrage, or parody, or in any of the ways that anyone actively comments on the world around him. (slide 2 & 3--observational examples--potters, bullock cart, etc.)

Clearly, Husain balances both aspects, the inner, imaginatively contemplative and the outer, observational, in creating his art. But how does this balance work out in the process of creating a canvas? As an artist, I'm always interested in finding out how others work imaginatively, so please indulge my curiosity with my first question to the artist: In creating your art, how much comes from the mind's eye; how much comes from direct observation; and how much is playfully and spontaneously suggested by the materials and the process of painting itself? I understand that you don't often create preliminary sketches. Do you generally have a very clear image in mind before you

start, and if so, is much of this coming from direct observation? Do you develop your ideas as you go along? How much, if any, of your work is created in the moment through the interplay of the medium, the process of painting, and the active subconscious suggesting particular directions?

Stylistically, it's easy for anyone who has seen any traditional Indian art, whether Ajanta, later miniature painting, or folk art, to trace the influences of those many models on the painting of Husain. From the voluptuous female forms of Khajuraho, popular images of Ganesha and Hanuman, portraits of Mughal rulers, or images of Krishna cavorting with the gopis, one can find in his work echoes of these traditional antecedents. Perhaps it is because the traditional in India, unlike in most of Europe and America, is still so much part of the present. As Shyamal Bagchee notes, "Virtually all 'times' seem to coexist in India, from the pre-industrial to the post-industrial."² It certainly seems to be true that those times coexist in the imagination of M.F. Husain.

But Husain has also been aware of and influenced by the developments of modern styles of painting throughout the 20th century and now into the 21st. Just as important, as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan observer of life and the world, Husain is no doubt more aware than most western art historians of the vastness of modern 20th-century art. Unlike most European or American artists or experts, Husain would be familiar not only with the major figures in the west, but also with the development of modern art in India and Pakistan, in Bangla Desh, in the Middle East and in East Asia. Nevertheless, from the Eurocentric perspective of many art followers and critics, Husain's work is understood as necessarily derivative of European modernist precursors, and so, for example, Husain is referred to as the "Picasso of India".

Let's examine what this moniker might mean. What did Picasso actually do? With the failure of the purely visual to fully convey the multi-faceted reality of modern experience, Picasso and others appropriated styles of "primitive art", especially African, using them to deconstruct what the eye sees and to construct a modern visual language not dependent on "sensations bombarding the retina".³ While they understood the power of forms not directly tied to visual literality to "represent the figure emblematically rather than naturalistically,"⁴ it didn't necessarily follow that they understood that their so-called "primitive" models might in fact be expressive of substantial content, of a sophisticated conceptual approach to visual expression. They appropriated the form without necessarily understanding the relationship between the form and its content.

While it is probably fair to say that Husain has adopted some of this visual language associated with Picasso and other early abstract European painters, he uses it very differently and with a very different end in mind. Being engaged with the rich traditions of Indian culture, Husain knows the essentially abstract nature of many forms of traditional Indian art—Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic. He knows in a way that the early European abstract painters did not, that traditional Indian art forms were highly conceptual and philosophical in nature. So he can use what is popularly thought of as a modern visual idiom to draw upon traditional narratives, using, I would suspect, a mind's eye vision similar to that described by Coomaraswamy, focusing deeply on the subject and bringing it into the world as art. Yet Husain always lends a fresh and original sensibility to this traditional process, which paradoxically is characteristic of a modernist approach. He links the inner and contemplative with day-to-day life.⁵

In much of his work Husain not only uses a modern visual language, but he also uses folk art motifs, and focuses on close observation of people, animals, and other aspects of the kaleidoscopic modern world of India and beyond, which also tips him toward a modernist perspective. As he says, “I never wanted to be clever, esoteric, abstract. I wanted to make simple statements. I wanted my canvases to have a story. I wanted my art to talk to people. . . I wanted my format to be classical, yet retain the innocence of the folk.”⁶ Husain bridges both the inner and outer, the contemplative and the observational, the traditional and the modern.

Husain’s subjects extend from traditional Indian narratives, religion, literature, music, art, and history, to subjects associated with modern India—Indian cinema, the British colonial presence in India, politics, and so many other ideas and images specifically related to modern India. The writer Shyamal Bagchee perhaps has captured this multiplicity of subject best by referring to Husain’s “Nomadic Eye”, saying, “. . .one learns to look at once at many things and at one thing, to look through one thing at many things and, most importantly, to look at one object (or image) and know its unity to be as real as its possible/inherent multiplicity, its fractured wholeness, even its inscrutable absence within its undeniable presence. Clearly, the nomadic eye, needed for such an enterprise, is also the ludic eye, or the playful eye. . .that constantly playful gaze.”⁷

This focus on Indian subjects makes much of his art seem culturally specific. But this is like saying that work coming out of the U.S. is necessarily only of interest to residents of the U.S., which of course, isn’t true. Why would work expressing an Indian specificity somehow not be part of a global dialogue? But in fact, Husain’s subjects do

extend beyond the cultural borders of India, expressing a range of subjects of global interest. (slides 4 & 5--NY Gang, Two Women, Tin Drum) As explained above, he also uses a visual language that resonates with a cosmopolitan understanding of art, extending the scope of his work to the meta-cultural or global.

Husain's breadth of artistic expression, an art that is both traditional and modern, both culturally specific and global, brings me to my next question for the artist: Putting aside the issue of who came first, Picasso or Husain; in light of this more "holistic" approach to modern abstraction that you have taken, shouldn't Picasso be called "the Husain of Europe" rather than Husain being "the Picasso of India"? On the other hand, if we don't presuppose an implied derivative status, then perhaps calling Husain "the Picasso of India" assumes that in the Indian context, of course a modern painter would also have access to that cultural depth that is still so available in modern India. And conversely, to call Picasso "the Husain of Europe" would require of Picasso a depth of cultural, historical, and spiritual awareness that he did not seem to command.

How does Husain's identity as a practicing Muslim play into how we understand his work? I have written elsewhere about the reductionist tendencies of various constituencies to define all art by, for, in the style of, used by, for the amusement of, or in the vicinity of Muslims as Islamic Art.⁸ This is problematic, as it assumes that the motivations of all Muslims, unlike other people, are only those of religion or religious identity. It thereby reduces Muslims to caricatures and plays into the current stereotypes pushed by neoconservatives and others who have a political agenda. There certainly is, however, a valid definition of Islamic art, and some of Husain's work can rightfully be called Islamic. (Slides 6 & 7 Sufi Series). Here he has directly engaged themes from

Islamic sources. But there is also the possibility of secular art by Muslim artists, and I think it is correct to put much of Husain's work in this category. As Kenneth George has succinctly put it, "Let me emphasize that we should not mistake 'Islamic art' as the only art venture of interest to Muslims. No one expects artistic expression or visual culture to always be so spiritual, reverential, or religious in conception, execution, or display."⁹

However, there is another angle through which to approach this issue. In Sura 5:48 the Koran says, "For everyone we have established a law, and a way. If God had wished, he would have made you a single community, but this was so he might test you regarding what he sent you. So try to be first in doing what is best" (5:48).¹⁰ This is often understood as an admonishment to all of humanity to engage in a "competition of virtue". As we have seen, much of Husain's work engagingly pictures themes, characters, and narratives from Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, as well as Islamic sources. (Slides 10-18, Religion) This leads me to the next question for the artist: Could it be that you are visually recording this "competition of virtues" referred to in the Koran, and if so, could this body of work be considered Islamic in the broadest sense, and also global or universal in its implications?

To conclude, I would like to think expansively about what it means to live an ethical life, and how we might understand Husain's life and work in this context. If I were to sketch out the two most important aspects that create the basis upon which an ethical life can be constructed, one would be to understand deeply from where we have come. What are the lessons learned from our past, our human heritage passed down through the narratives, art, poetry, myths, artworks, philosophies, and histories left as the collective teachings of our ancestors? The other basic aspect of constructing an ethical

life in its broadest sense would be to mingle compassionately with one's fellow travelers in this life, to participate fully in one's life with the knowledge that you do so in the company of all others who walk along side you on this terrestrial path. On one hand, we must know from where we have come, and on the other, we must compassionately participate in our present. M. F. Husain has built in his life both of these pillars, one of which is contemplative, focusing on inner vision; the other active, engaged both observationally and existentially with the everyday world. Not only has he cultivated these two sources of inspiration, but he has also left us an extensive, dramatic, engaging, magnificent visual record to ponder. We will be pondering his work for many generations to come. For this, I salute you, M. F. Husain, on the occasion of your 95th birthday. May you celebrate many more.

¹ “The Sukranitisara defines the initial procedure of the Indian imager: he is to be expert in contemplative vision, for which the canonical prescriptions provide the basis, and only in this way, and not by direct observation, are the required results to be attained. The whole procedure may be summed up in the words ‘when the visualization has been realized, set to work’, or ‘when the model has been conceived, set down on the wall what was visualized’ ”. Interestingly, Coomaraswamy refers to these two stages in the process as being the same as the *actus primus* and *actus secundus*, the “free” and “servile” parts of the artist’s operation, in terms of Scholastic theory. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Intellectual Operation in Indian Art,” in *Selected Papers*, vol. 1, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 131.

² Shyamal Bagchee, “Augmented Nationalism: The Nomadic Eye of Painter M.F. Husain,” Asianart.com/Articles, published June 19, 1998 (Accessed 09 September, 2010), <<http://www.asianart.com/articles/husain/index.html>>; pg. 4; originally published in *The Toronto Review*, Summer, 1997.

³ Maurice Raynal, quoted in John Musgrove, “Cubism, I: Painting, Sculpture, and Collage, 3: Technical and stylistic innovations,” Grove Art Online (Accessed 06 March 2008), <<http://www.groveart.com/shared/views/article.html?section=art.020539.1.3>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Frontline*, *India’s National Magazine*, Vol. 14 :: No. 16 :: Aug. 9-22, 1997; as told to Thomas Abraham, London. (Accessed 05 September, 2010) <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1416/14160820.htm>>

⁶ “In Hindu culture, nudity is a metaphor for purity.” Interview of Husain by Shoma Chaudhury, in *For Husain at 94 SAHMAT*; (Accessed 05 September, 2010) <<http://issuu.com/sahmat-india/docs/husain-at-94>>

⁷ Bagchee, pg. 2

⁸ Judith Ernst, “The Problem of Islamic Art”, *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip Hop*, ed. miriam cooke and Bruce Lawrence, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁹ Kenneth M. George, “Spirituality-Islam-Art and a multi cultural audience”, Interview of George by journalist Vandana Shukla, Islamic Art-Nigaah Report, *Nigaah: Arts & Culture from South Asia*, Vol 1 EIGHT 2010, ISSN No 2041-4595. (Accessed 07 September, 2010) <<http://www.nigaahart.com/islamic-art.asp>>

¹⁰ Koran, Sura 5:48, translation Carl W. Ernst.