Artistic License

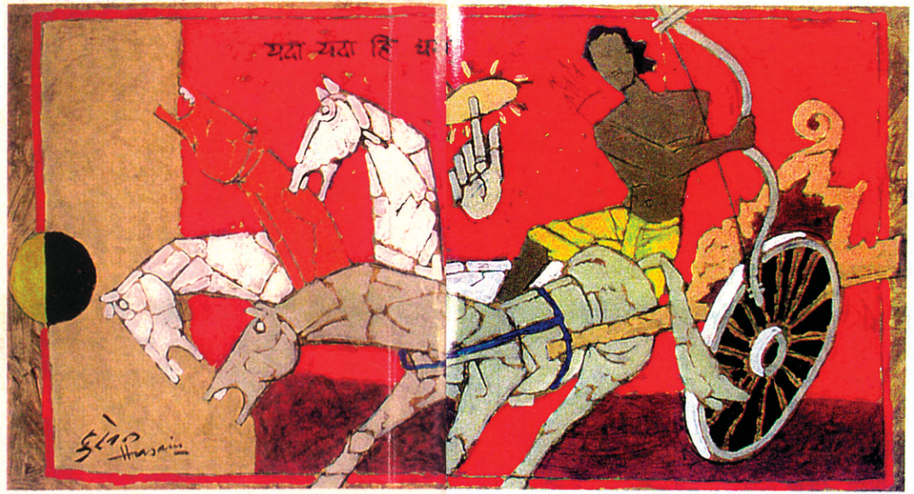
Now 90, M. F. Husain still puts on a good show.

BY VIBHUTI PATEL

HE WENT TO BOMBAY in 1935, dreaming of becoming a painter. Young and penniless, he slept on the pavement and painted billboards and baby furniture until 1947, when he was invited to exhibit with the Progressive Artists, who were creating a new style of Indian art by rejecting foreign influences. Now 90, the iconic painter Maqbool Fida Husain—dubbed "India's Andy Warhol"—commands $1 million a painting. This month, his work forms the core of a show on the pioneers of Indian modernism at New York's Gallery ArtsIndia.

It's clearly an M. F. Husain moment. He has also been commissioned to create a site-specific mural for a private museum dedicated to his work in Manhattan. Ever PR savvy, Husain recently invited the media to view him at work. Seated on a swivel chair or standing atop a high platform, he slashed bold black lines on a 13-by-3-meter canvas—entitled "My Life 90"—listening to Beethoven's "Eroica" as he first outlined Ganesh, the Hindu god of good beginnings, then a swift portrait of his Muslim grandfather.

Such gimmicks have been at the heart of Husain's prolific career. He walks barefoot on city streets and carries a long brush. Though he has used beautiful dancers and movie stars as his models, Mother Teresa has also inspired many paintings—all faceless. "I'm always looking for a woman who is not there—my mother died when I was a year old," he says. "She refused to be photographed, so I don't know what she looked like." As a Muslim using Hindu icons, Husain has often been at the center of political controversy: an old, rediscovered bare-breasted drawing of the goddess Saraswati as well as a half-nude "Ramayana" watercolor led to violent attacks by right-wing groups on his home, his work and one of his four personal museums.



LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY OF ALEXIS CULVER FOR GALLERY ARTSINDIA, COURTESY OF GALLERY ARTSINDIA (2)

'INDIA'S WARHOL': Husain favors mythic images rendered in bold colors and shapes

But his gifts as an artist are undeniable. Husain blends folk, tribal and mythic images and glories in bright colors. He broke new formal ground by creating sharp, angular images on a vast scale. Paintings like "Man With Kites," reminiscent of Picasso in its bold juxtaposition of cubes, colors and strong lines, are still essentially Indian in imagery. Indeed, he takes enormous pride in India's eclectic heritage. The only artist invited to exhibit alongside Picasso at the 1971 Biennale in São Paulo, he created monumental works based on the ancient Hindu epic Mahabharata. Nowadays his subjects are often modern—the nuclear age, for instance, or India's war with Pakistan.

His talents extend beyond painting. Poet, architect, graphic designer, filmmaker, Husain says his inspiration "came from Fellini and Buñuel. My art is cinematic." His first film, "Through a Painter's Eyes," won the Golden Bear at the 1967 Berlin Film Festival. The second, "Gajagamini," inspired by the Kama Sutra, is a gorgeous, painterly paean to color and to Madhuri Dixit, a film star who long obsessed Husain. But his greatest talent may be for self-promotion. "I'm my own trumpet blower," he says. "By using marketing techniques, I've raised the value of contemporary Indian art, long underpriced in the market. Some Indian painters' work is better than mine, but they don't know how to sell themselves. Marketing is an art form, too!" And one that Husain has clearly mastered. ■