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ONLINE MARKETS | HONG KONG'S HIGHS | M.F. HUSAIN

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# 100 POWER

The formidable private dealership established this year by Thomas Seydoux, Sandrine Pissarro, Stéphane Conneroy and Lionel Pissarro joins the elite ranks of the art market's movers and shakers.



# M.F. Husain

BY REENA JANA

OVER THE COURSE OF MAQBOOL FIDA HUSAIN'S more than five-decade career, the prolific artist gained international renown for his skill at blending a bold modernism with historical subject matter and Indian iconography. At the time of his death at age 95 in June 2011, he was celebrated not only as an artist who continued to work at the peak of his powers into his 80s, but also as a glamorous man who lived his long life to the fullest. Most often, he was pictured with his signature snowy white beard and hair, dressed in elegant yet laid-back clothes, tinted glasses perched on his aquiline nose, and a deeply satisfied grin on his face.

His output was so prodigious that even now, experts have trouble coming up with an estimate of the number of works he created. "I would not be able to put a number to his canvases," says Projjal Dutta, a partner at Aicon Gallery, which has long represented Husain in both New York and London. "But I'd see him do two paintings in the course of a day," he adds.

Although he embraced varied styles and themes, Husain's striking, often oversize canvases that blend jewel-like colors with Cubistic figurative forms drawn from classical Indian art and religion have consistently attracted the most attention in the market. *Battle of Ganga and Jamuna: Mahabharata 12*, 1971–72, captured the auction record in March 2008, when it

earned \$1.6 million at Christie's South Asian modern and contemporary art sale in New York, doubling the previous record of \$804,535 set in 2006 at auctioneer Saffronart for *Civilisation*, 1991. *Battle of Ganga and Jamuna*, a six-foot-wide, oil-on-canvas diptych, features abstracted figures that recall those of classical Hindu sculptures, rendered in blocks of color.

"As collectors continue to look for important works by Husain from specific periods, that come with airtight provenance, the demand for these has seen an increase over the last few years," says Dinesh Vazirani, the co-founder of Saffronart, an online auction house that specializes in Indian art.

Though his record came at the peak of the modern and contemporary Indian art market, prices remain strong. "Since his passing, Husain's market has broadened and demand has increased," says Arun Vadehra, director of Vadehra Art Gallery, in New Delhi, which has represented the artist for nearly two decades.

Husain's productivity, lengthy career, and solid sales track record provides a well-defined, transparent market, experts say, with Dutta confirming that private, or gallery, sale prices mirror ranges in the auction realm. "Our prices fall in line with auction prices, as most of our clients refer to auction estimates and sales to guide their purchases, thus regulating the

*Battle of Ganga and Jamuna: Mahabharata 12*, 1971–72, an oil on canvas diptych, sold for \$1.6 million at Christie's New York in 2008, setting a new auction record for M.F. Husain and doubling the previous artist record of \$804,535, achieved in 2006.





trajectory of artwork valuations. There truly is very little difference between the auction value and our pricing,” Dutta says.

A number of galleries played a critical role in his life, including the Pundole and Chemould Galleries, in Mumbai, and the Kumar Gallery, in New Delhi. Vadehra Art Gallery in India and Aicon in New York became more important to Husain during the later years of his career and they continue to dominate his market today.

The artist’s varied works display an intellectual’s attempt to synthesize themes and a dexterity with diverse iconographies synonymous with India and its multifaceted culture, both ancient and contemporary. Beyond images of Hindu deities, Husain is also known for his ongoing bodies of work featuring horses (a reference to a theme in Shia Muslim imagery as well as the Hindu god Surya, who drove a horse-drawn chariot) and a trio of iconic, yet very disparate, women: Buddha’s mother, Mahamaya; Mother Teresa; and Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit.

Husain’s horse paintings, with their “tremendous lines and the majestic way that the horses hold their heads high,” as New York-based Priyanka Mathew, a Sotheby’s specialist in South Asian modern and contemporary art, describes them, are among his most expensive works and are highly sought-after by collectors.

Husain first extensively explored the theme of horses in the 1970s; the earlier and bigger these works are, experts say, the more they command on the market. “Works by Husain incorporating horses as subject matter can range from \$50,000 to \$1,000,000, depending on size and date,” Dutta says, with “a smaller work measuring roughly 14 by 36 inches at the lower price points.”

For example the \$1,142,500 price, the second highest for Husain at auction, was achieved at Christie’s New York in September 2011 for *Sprinkling Horses*, from the 1970s, which mea-

much of it is already in collections, so it’s harder to get,” she says. Auction data show that these paintings from the 1950s, in which the artist’s style was heavily influenced by tribal art, generally sell for prices in the low six figures, but can reach up to the high six and low seven figures. In a March 2010 auction at Sotheby’s New York, an untitled Husain canvas originally shown in the 1956 Venice Biennale sold for \$1.06 million, far higher than the estimate of \$150,000 to \$200,000.

“The more formative stages of modernism in India were taking place when Husain was painting his earliest work, in the late ’40s and early ’50s,” says Deepanjana Klein, specialist and head of sale for South Asian modern and contemporary art at Christie’s New York. “Husain not only thought about Western modernism but was also very Indian.”

“His older works are more adventurous,” Dutta says. “I, too, like the early pieces as a collector. He had fewer resources then, and there is an economy of line in these works.”

Husain’s frequent depictions of female figures, including Mother Teresa and the actress Madhuri Dixit, also have a solid, if less high-flown market, and their prices have risen steadily over the last decade. In 1996, for instance, a 29-inch acrylic diptych, *Mother Teresa*, sold for a hammer price of \$23,000 at a Contemporary Indian paintings sale at Sotheby’s New York. Eight years later, in 2004, a larger, 66-by-92-inch oil diptych, also featuring the iconic figure, sold for \$65,000 at Sotheby’s New York, and in 2007 a medium-size acrylic diptych sold for \$128,872 at Sotheby’s London.

Similarly, auction records show that Dixit-themed works typically bring prices in the mid five-figure range. However values have risen to the point where works on paper now reach the same prices as larger canvases that were on the market when Husain was making them in the 1990s. For instance, in 1995, a 42-by-70-inch, acrylic-on-canvas painting, *Madhuri as Menaka*, sold for \$32,256 at Christie’s London. This past June, a 15½-by-19½-inch work on paper featuring Madhuri imagery, »

sures 42 by 93 inches. Meanwhile, a smaller *Untitled (Seven Horses)*, dated in the late ’70s or early ’80s, measuring 13 by 47 inches, sold for less than a tenth that price, \$86,500, also at Christie’s New York this past March. And a much later oil of a horse made in 2011 sold for just \$75,583 at Christie’s South Kensington in June of that year, weeks after the artist’s death. Dutta notes that he painted “often on popular demand, styles from a past period. So you have horses from the ’60s as well as from the ’90s. The former would usually command higher prices.”

Also popular in recent years are Husain’s works from the 1950s and ’60s that reflect his synthetic approach, says Mathew. “The earlier work garners the most interest, and



Above: *Mother Teresa*, from the early 1990s, features a recurring theme in which the revered figure is identifiable by her iconic white-and-blue sari. Right: An early untitled work, 1949, showing the influence of tribal art, sold at Sotheby’s in March 2012 for \$52,500.



*Madhuri-Mother-Madonna*, dated 1997, sold for \$45,927 in Saffronart's summer online auction of Modern & Contemporary Indian Art.

For collectors seeking new areas of Husain's oeuvre to acquire, there are enticing and affordable opportunities in his works on paper. "He created fantastic lithographs, drawings, and watercolors, mainly from the 1950s and '60s, which have many of the same lines and qualities of his canvases," Mathew says. They tend to be priced in the low five figures and also beat estimates at auction. On September 19, an untitled watercolor and pen-and-ink composition of a horse sold for \$28,247 at Saffronart's Mumbai Autumn Online Auction, far above its estimate of \$9,450 to \$13,230.

In many ways, Husain's own career can be seen as a parallel to the growth of modern India itself. He was born into a working-class family in 1915 in Pandharpur, Maharashtra. His mother died when he was a toddler; his father was an accountant. As a young man in 1937, he left his hometown for Bombay (now Mumbai) to pursue a career in India's popular film industry. A self-taught artist, he found work painting large-scale advertisements for Hindi movies.

It wasn't until he was in his 30s that Husain's art career began to gain momentum. In 1948 F.N. Souza invited Husain to become a member of the Progressive Artists' Group, a circle of ambi-



Chester and Davida Herwitz, owners of a department store in Worcester, Massachusetts, befriended Husain during their trips to India to source leather goods; the couple amassed more than 3,000 of the artist's works. In 2002 Dutta and his brother and partner, Prajit, acquired the bulk of the paintings in a negotiated private sale from the Herwitz heirs.

"Any sales from this collection are staggered, as its cultural and historical value is significant," he adds. Acquiring the Herwitz collection has enabled Aicon Gallery to curate in-depth solo exhibitions and to loan works to Tate Britain, the San Francisco Art Museum, and the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts. Husain's family now runs the estate. The Dutta brothers say they have no direct access to the balance of the collection nor do they know exactly what remains in it, though they do maintain a working relationship with the estate representatives.

In the 1970s, Husain began to develop several bodies of work that would gain ongoing attention, both good and bad, for the next 40 years. These include his horse paintings, as well as canvases picturing nude Hindu goddesses. The latter sparked such heated controversy among Hindu conservatives that Husain lived the last five years of his life in self-exile, moving to Dubai after receiving constant death threats. However, experts say this has had no discernible effect on his market, in India or elsewhere. Of course auction prices may be the best indication; one work featuring the nude deity Sita, entitled *Sita Hanuman*, 1979, sold for \$842,500 (est. \$600–800,000) at Christie's New York in March 2010. ▣



tious young painters who wanted to create an Indian version of modernist art.

Along with the recognition he received as a member of that group, he also caught the eye of numerous American buyers who visited or lived in India between the 1950s and 1970s, some of whom became his biggest collectors. Many of the pieces that appear at auction are from those U.S. collections, specialists say. One of the collectors was Tom Keehn, an American businessman who relocated his family to India in the 1950s. Keehn was "very important in the making of modern Indian art," says Christie's specialist Klein; the *Seven Horses* painting sold in March was from Keehn's collection.

Top right: An untitled acrylic painting from the late 2000s. Husain's signature horses are among his most sought-after works. Above: *Civilisation*, 1991, a later work that fetched \$804,535 in 2006 at an online auction held by Saffronart (est. \$465–698,000).

#### From the Files

- + Husain was also a filmmaker. In 1967 his short film *Through the Eyes of a Painter* won a Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival.
- + In 1986 Prime Minister **Rajiv Gandhi** appointed Husain to the Indian Parliament, where the artist served for six years. While sitting quietly in parliamentary sessions, he made satirical sketches of fellow members and eventually published the drawings in a book.
- + Husain's paintings of **Mother Teresa** were in part a response to the death of his mother while he was still very young. In a poem, the artist wrote: "I paint and unfold several layers of her sari / In search of my lost mother."
- + To date, three of Husain's works have surpassed \$1 million at auction, including the \$1.6 million record set in 2008.