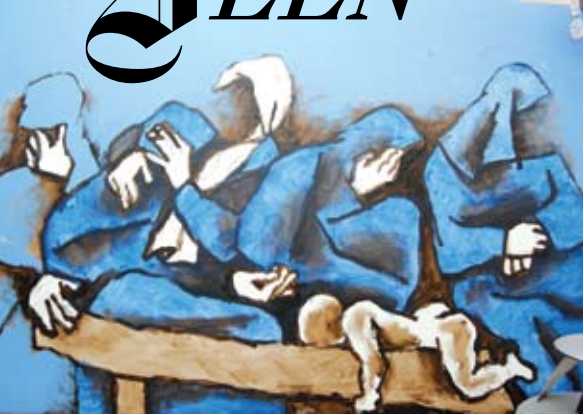




Palestine Blue – One of the series of 99 paintings on Arab Civilization.



A peek into his studio.



A model of a work in progress, being designed by Hussain on man's aspirations in mobility and flight. A flying Abbas Ibn Firnas (810-887 AD), the first Arab to attempt flying. A model of Leonardo Da Vinci's flying machine, and the trademark horses. The actual piece of art will span over 110 feet, and will be displayed in Qatar.



Maqbool Fida Husain

“ART IS AHEAD OF ITS TIME”

BY VANI SARASWATHI

He

dismisses his detractors as those without an understanding of art. At 95, the inimitable M F Husain has an enviable cachet of ideas and plans. The home of the often barefoot, iPhone-toting, Bugatti-riding painter is without the trappings of the rich and famous. There is no security to frisk you. The doors are wide open. Syed, the driver is out on an errand. Irfan, his man friday lays out a warm welcome. From Baroda in northern India, the hometown of *baba*, Irfan seems unaffected by the palatial lodgings complete with luxury motors in the patio and a private swimming pool in the backyard. A detachment from the surroundings, probably influenced by his master. Despite the overwhelming power of the paintings strewn around the place, almost carelessly, it's difficult to ignore the innocence of Irfan. Since *baba* was still napping when I entered, Irfan keeps company. He is a painter too, he reveals with great pride. In fact, his entire family is. “My grandfather, my father, I – we all are house painters.” As an afterthought, he adds “Of course, what baba does is more difficult, because he has to

sketch.” Right.

With all the doors wide open, the space is welcoming. One could get a feel of the place without snooping around – moving only between the foyer and the studio, the rest of the ‘used’ house is clearly visible. The bedroom is sparse, with a large television in one end, and a prayer mat in another, facing Mecca.

There are paintings he has carried all the way from India – of Mother Theresa, on Buddha, from Indian history and Hindu mythology.

Disappointingly non-controversial in their presentation.

Nude Goddesses and other provocative pieces from the past are not on display here. Those paintings resulted in protests from Hindu right-wingers in India, court cases and Hussain's shift of residence to UAE, in the hope of quieter life.

Apparently, a quiet life is not something that comes easy to him. Giving up the passport of the world's largest democracy, has given fresh fodder for old controversies.

He lives now in the West Bay Lagoon, as a Qatari citizen, working on a series of 99 paintings, tracing the history of the Arab civilization. A project commissioned by HH Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned.

Do you need a certain kind of space or place to work?

No. I do not have a permanent studio. I can't work in one place, can't be in a place for more than two weeks. I love to travel.

Easy enough when cities are the just a flight away, but earlier?



“Vivah” When the two become one, be they houses or lovers. When twenty digits become ten, and boundaries of body disappear. You know it is an Indian marriage. Is there a better open cage?



“Invading Cobalt” Aggression for its own sake is foreign to man, as it is, genetically, in the animal world. A lion will not kill for the sheer pleasure of killing. But man is forever killing other men for fun, as it also does to animals, making them extinct. If our species is to survive on our planet Earth, we must learn to control the fury of our own genre. And learn lessons from history and the animal world.



“Finishing Line” If wishes were horses, I would race them. On the one that win, I will bet my sum. To have it come true, I will do all I can. To wage with oneself can be serious fun!

I lost my mother when I was just a year and a half. What else could I do but keep moving? Even when I did not have the means, I travelled all around India. I need to see and be in touch with reality to work. But in my painting, I transform and restructure. When I visited Mother Teresa in 1979, I did not paint what I saw there, I painted my interpretation of that reality.

Do you take photographs to assist you in your paintings?

All those realities, over decades of travel, are registered in my God-given memory. Now people take a photograph, enlarge it, then turn it into a painting. I am not against it. I am not going to say only the conventional is best, simply because I have revolted all my life. But using photography is not my style. The reality is in my mind; I sketch it and use that to develop my art.

Did you ever expect this kind of fame and success?

Excellence in any kind of art is not to be had overnight or over a short period of time. A musician starts learning at five or six, but continues the discipline of riyaz or practice even at 80. That is art. Moreover, it takes time to realize what your form is. It takes even 20-30 years. It is not enough if you know the techniques and have the degrees, you need a fire within you.

Take Natraj (the dancing form of Lord Shiva, embodying the balance between form and void) for instance. That is the ultimate human form, evolved over thousands of years.

You can't merely keep reproducing. That is craft. As an artist, you cannot say I've achieved this much and that's enough. There is no limit to creation or creativity.

I wish I had another 100 years. There is so much more I want to do.

LIMITED EDITION IMPRINTS

“FOR THOSE with more taste than money” M F Hussain will be debuting a limited edition imprints in the UAE in April. The limited edition imprints collection comprises of 80 different pieces of which there are just 10 copies for sale, each of which is numbered and signed.

“The motto for Imprints of India Limited Edition is ‘For people with more taste than money’,” he smiles, obviously pleased with both the motto and the intent.

“Original paintings are so expensive. What about those who enjoy art, but can't afford it? My paintings itself are

so expensive, I can't afford it myself.”

Hussain has been preparing for this over the last decade.

The imprints, including the three above, will be on sale during the exhibition and at viewings after that.

Print making is one of the oldest forms of pictorial communication and an artistic expression that dates back to the 14th century.

Private appointments are through Ayesha Chopra on +97150 2055975. Ayesha and her husband Aman Chopra are the driving force behind the unique exhibition.

THE POWER OF WHAT YOU CREATE, IF IT'S GREAT, IT WILL STAND THE TEST OF TIME. IF IT'S WEAK, IT WILL FAIL IN ITS OWN LIFETIME. FAME OR SUCCESS CAN'T BE A GOAL IN ITSELF.

But when there is so much controversy surrounding your work, how do you continue to create?

You need to be strong. When you do something different or unconventional, there will be opposition. That's always been the case. You have to keep fighting... but you have to use your work as a weapon. I cannot use the means the politicians do. I can only build a body of work that will fight for me, bury the opposition.

No bitterness?

No, not all. India has 5000 years of culture and heritage. For hundreds of years so many forces have come in – the Christians, the Mughals, the British. They were all absorbed not thrown out, like in Iran, say. For thousands of years they've lived together. India is a composite culture, which has evolved over the years. Nowhere else in the world will you find this. These people (protestors) do not understand the modern language of art. If I had done something to hurt someone, then why didn't the Hindu Dharam Gurus or the Shankaracharya speak against me? Why are politicians objecting? Art is ahead of its time, in another 10-20 years perhaps they will understand. The active force of creativity continued. No one can stop that. The power of what you create, if it's great, it will stand the test of time. If it's weak, it will fail in its own lifetime. Fame or success can't be a goal in itself.

Yet, you discouraged your children from pursuing it?

I get asked this often. If there is too much comfort or help, the artist will not have enough power. If despite my discouragement they pursued, then it's true power. When I was a member of the upper house of parliament in India, artists approached me to help them. And my question was: ‘Why do you need help? Is it a business?’ Creativity is 80 percent hard work. Today I was up at 4 am and I worked for four hours non-stop. I don't have to, it's not a necessity. I can easily lay back and relax in all this luxury.

AFP IMAGE

Syed, the driver brings in a communication from the UK.

The British Parliament is honoring me with a Lifetime Achievement Award. I am travelling to London to receive it.

An irony perhaps? Given that some of your earliest works in pre-Independent India were distinctly anti-British.

(Chuckles) I had a series on the Raj. Satire and humor, mocking the British, their stooges and maharajas. I held a show in Calcutta some 30 years ago, and it was inaugurated by the British High Commissioner. It's been a tremendous journey; God has given me health and a good memory. I remember everything... there is not a second that I get bored. When the young tell me they are bored, I tell them they are lazy.

What about your current project, on the Arab Civilization?

The Arab Civilization is a very old one. It dates back to Babylon, and is not about Muslims alone. That's just in the last 1500 years. A lot of research has gone into this project to trace the history of Arabs – the contribution of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims.

He answers a call on one of his two iPhones.

An iPhone?

I like the iPhone because of the touchscreen. I love gadgets and cars. Because of my cataract I can no longer drive. I am crazy about driving, and I've driven all around the world. I am getting my Bugatti from Dubai...

Earlier in the day (March 17, 2010) you received your Overseas Citizen of India document. Are you planning a visit?

Of course. I can travel any time, any where I want in India with this. I can't vote though. But then, I've never voted. I don't side with any political party, I only believe in the power of the individual. So I haven't lost anything...

CINEMA CALLING: COMEDY-DOT-COM



Indian actor Vidya Balan. Hussain's latest muse?

M F HUSSAIN'S fascination with cinema is no secret. His obsession with a certain Bollywood heroine – Madhuri Dixit – resulted in Gajagamani, his first commercial film venture. “When done well and creatively, a film is a complete

medium. It combines music, literature, art, architecture. Commercial cinema is an abuse of that creativity.” With unfettered enthusiasm he talks of the film he hopes to launch by yearend. “It's a comedy. A silent film. Like what Buster Keaton did. I've been working on the script for six-seven years now.”

Since it's a silent movie, no spoken word that is, he says it can be made anywhere. And the star of *comedy-dot-com* (that's the registered title of the movie)?

“I would like Vidya Balan, but let's see if she would like to...”

Though he was vocal at one point about his Madhuri-fixation, he does not mention a name when asked who to his eyes is the most beautiful woman now. With his trademark chuckle, he says “Beauty also travels. Beauty is there till a certain age and then it fades. It's the beauty of character that leaves a mark forever.”