

## Foreword

Every artist has his/her zenith where energy is boundless and creativity is at its peak. The painting, *Lightning*, was born under such auspices in the year 1975. It was a critical time in Indian politics—activists and artists alike expressed their feelings in various forms through different media. It was at this time that Husain created *Lightning* for a political gathering in Bombay that was led by Indira Gandhi. The significance of the painting is heightened not only by its sheer size or the brilliant rendering of its subject by the artist but also the time it was executed and the ideologies it stands for.

This book was conceived in honor of Husain, who has always been extremely gracious, hospitable and who paved the way to my deeper understanding of contemporary Indian art. It is through Husain that I learned the importance of various leading trends and schools of Indian art, how to appreciate a work of art and what to collect. He introduced me to all the other senior artists who were his contemporaries, as well as younger talents. Husain was the catalyst in expanding my horizon to the contemporary Indian art scene, and to date continues to help me in my endeavors in collecting and promoting Indian art in the United States.

Selected authors were invited to write on *Lightning* and each essay is beautifully composed and addresses the painting as well as its creator from various angles. Susan S. Bean, in her essay, seeks out the sources of inspiration for Husain and his fascination for horses from the East. Flamboyant

with his language, Daniel Herwitz, on the other hand, addresses *Lightning* as his main subject and situates it in its socio-political context. However, his approach is also more semiotic in nature and therefore presents a personal interpretation of the various colors and forms used by the artist in this painting. Prasannan Parthasarathi's essay focuses on Husain as an artist and on his contribution to modern Indian art. Gayatri Sinha's piece is quite academic in nature. She situates the painting in its historical context and further explains the symbols used by the artist and their significance in relation to the current situation under which they were painted. Similar to Sinha's essay, Boon Hui Tan's essay is very academic in nature, where he talks about the painting *Lightning* and its historic significance in the year that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency across India, and further talks about the multitude of visual references to India in the 1970s and many of the challenges and controversies facing India at the time. He also expands to compare Indian art in the Emergency period to the Cultural Revolution in China and the art within a changing political context.

Various anecdotal stories and interviews on *Lightning* form a part of this book. It is an attempt to create a whole story around this masterpiece; every brush stroke and every inch of the canvas has a story, secretly tucked away in the midst of the powerfully rendered horses, that is left for the beholder to decipher.



MARGUERITE CHARUGUNDLA

## Acknowledgements

When we decided to republish this book, it felt right. When was a better time to publish the second edition than on the occasion of the exhibition *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India* and *M.F. Husain: Art and the Nation*, organized and showcased by the Asia Society Museum of New York. It was the first comprehensive exhibition dedicated to the artworks of the Progressive Artists' Group. Thanks to the curator and museum director, Boon Hui Tan and guest curator, Dr. Zehra Jumabhoy for such a major undertaking and making this exhibition possible and a great success.

The publishers would like to express their appreciation to all those who have generously given their time, made their resources available, and given valuable feedback to make this book a success.

Our utmost gratitude goes to the contributors, Susan S. Bean, Daniel Herwitz, Prasannan Parthasarathi, Gayatri Sinha and Boon Hui Tan, for their brilliant essays, as well as Tom Keehn, for his personal commentary.

Many thanks are in order for the Peabody Essex Museum for allowing us to use images from their collection for Susan Bean's essay.

*Lightning* was the subject of a publication for the first time in the book titled *Where Art Thou: M.F.*

*Husain—an Autobiography* with Khalid Mohamed. We also would like to extend our appreciation to the late M.F. Husain for allowing us to reprint the spread on *Lightning* from his publication.

Thank you to Asia Society for allowing us to publish this book in conjunction with the exhibition of *M.F. Husain: Art and the Nation*, March 20 through August 4, 2019 at Asia Society Museum of New York and part of the *Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for New India* and the Triennial. Also many thanks to Boon Hui Tan and Asia Society for allowing us to include Boon Hui Tan's essay about the Progressive Artists' Group and the mural *Lightning*.

We would like to extend our special thanks to the General Manager and staff of the Maurya Sheraton Hotel (New Delhi) for accommodating M.F. Husain's request to close down the lobby in order to show the *Lightning* mural in its full glory.

There are number of others who were instrumental in making this process easier and productive, without whom this book would not have been possible, which includes the lighting and music engineers, the photographers, the organizers, the editors, the graphic designers, illustrators, event coordinators and art handlers.

## **Lightning**

*Horses as metaphor for tremendous energy, and exquisite grace and beauty. There are ten horses cutting across the horizon like lightning, and in between appears a baby horse wearing the nuclear crown, an indication that the world has entered the most dynamic nuclear era of its billions of years of existence. Here, there on the canvas, a few images of industry, agriculture, progress and family planning are inserted. The bold, black brush-strokes are like calligraphic form. In a way these black strokes become a "writing on the wall." The world should take a note of it!*

M.F. Husain, 2003

MARGUERITE CHARUGUNDLA

# Journey of the *Lightning*, its Creator and the Progressive Movement

*Lightning* was created in 1975, during a very controversial period in India's history, to be the backdrop of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Emergency speech. Given the short time frame that Husain had to complete the work, it was titled *Lightning*, because it came about in a flash. The masterpiece was made up of twelve massive panels with ten wild, white horses charging through an open space. The depth in the painting is captured by coloristic blues and greens that go from dark to light following the progression of horses. Husain's striking black lines that outline the horses stand out juxtaposed against the whites of their bodies. They resemble his billboard style, so that anyone viewing the work either up-close or from afar could see it in its full glory. Husain painted a nuclear crown above the head of a foal in a red semicircle, a red tank at war, and a bushel of wheat rising behind the last horse in the flock as a sign of the nuclear era, the Partition, and agriculture in India. The painting included depictions of family planning, farmers and their families, and a builder with an axe in hand. The work portrayed the political climate of the time in India post-separation.

Maqbool Fida Husain, commonly referred to as the "Picasso of India," was born on September 17, 1915 in Pandharpur in Maharashtra, India. M.F. Husain was a self-taught artist living on the meagre funds he received from painting Bollywood movie posters. In 1935, he began to receive formal training at the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. He applied the modernist concepts of Matisse and Cezanne to create masterpieces that portrayed Indian life in society. He began to garner national and international recognition in the 1940s. In 1947, he co-founded the Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) with five others.

The six founding artists of the PAG were F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara, H.A. Gade, S.K. Bakre and M.F. Husain, whose operations were based in Bombay (Mumbai). Each artist brought a unique style influenced by European modernists, which allowed different perspectives and influences in their art as they became globally renowned.

K.H. Ara was mostly involved in female nudes, which raised concerns and criticism in India. He was later guided by the group and started creating astonishing art that shaped India.

S.K. Bakre was the only sculptor in PAG. His

works presented the face of India after colonialism and paintings that depicted modern art, which was ahead of its time.<sup>1</sup>

F.N.Souza (fig.2) brought a level of expressionism to his works of nudes, human figures, sexuality and religious conflict between Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. He expressed his feelings concerning the struggle during British colonialism in India. He was an internationally recognized artist.

M.F. Husain focused on cubism with scenes involving Indian history and methodology (fig. 3).

S.H. Raza represented the nature of India and the relationship between man and nature.<sup>2</sup> He also created paintings with geometric abstraction (fig.4) that usually left off at a *bindu*, or a point, that he talked about with several of his works of art.<sup>3</sup> As Raza was the co-founder of PAG, he was very supportive of the Progressive Artists' Group movement and he initiated Gade into the group.<sup>4</sup>

Each PAG artist had his own signature style, which allowed the artists to contribute ideas to one another.



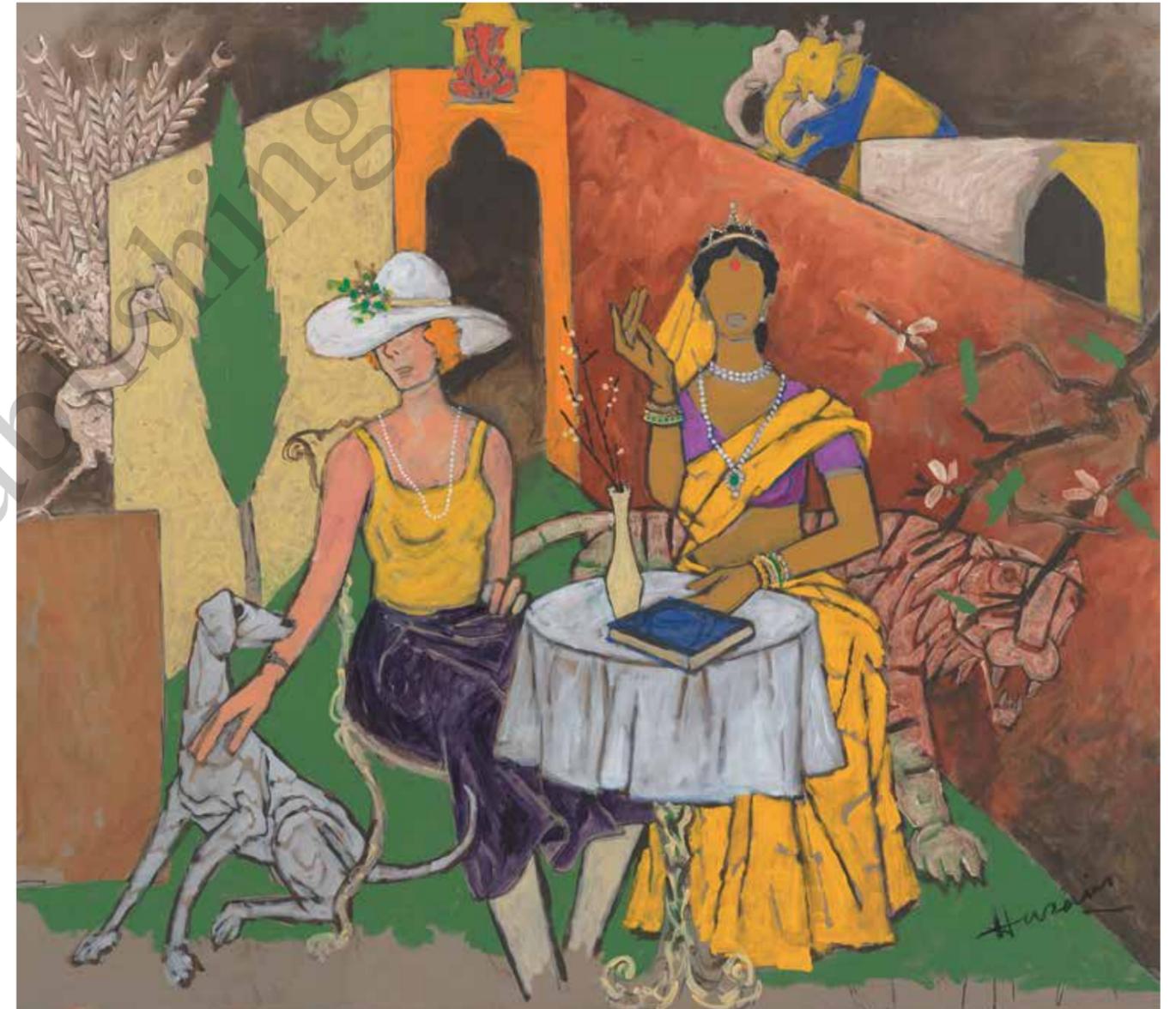
(figure 2) F.N. Souza, *Still Life*

<sup>1</sup> *Boundless: India* (2011). Available from: [www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/boundless-india-in1801/lot.28.html](http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/boundless-india-in1801/lot.28.html)

<sup>2</sup> Progressive Artists Group (PAG): The artists who revolutionized Modern Indian Art (Oct 15, 2016). Available from: <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/exhibitions/progressive-revolution-modern-art-new-india>

<sup>3</sup> Progressive Artists' Movement. <https://www.artsy.net/gene/progressive-artists-movement>

<sup>4</sup> The Progressive Artists' Group and Its Impact on Indian Modern Art (April 24, 2017). Available from: <https://www.artisera.com/blogs/expressions/the-progressive-artists-group-and-its-impact-on-indian-modern-art>



(figure 3)

M.F. Husain,

*High Tea*, 1985, from the Raj Series

Published in the book by Sumathi Ramaswamy titled, *Husain's Raj: Visions of Empire and Nation* (pages 98, 99)