

TRIBUTE

GODSPEED,
GENIUS!

At the news of the demise of India's greatest contemporary artist of recent times, a pensive Jenny Bhatt reflects on her very first meeting with the legendary M.F.Husain. She paints a vivid imagery of her association with him and the influence he had on her as an artist. Filled with mixed emotions, Bhatt continues to be inspired by this force and pays tribute to the man who splashed India all over the global canvas.

By Jenny BHATT.

I first encountered M.F.Husain quite by chance. It was through a common friend and collector (of his work and later mine) that I met him. I was in New York at a friend's place and was getting ready to go visit my brother in Washington. Since my bags were too heavy to lug all the way, my friend suggested I leave them behind, carrying a smaller one with me. While I was gone, Husain visited her, as he often did. She pulled out some of my drawings and a catalogue from the bag and showed it to him. The catalogue contained some pictures of my work along with poems I'd written. When I happened to call her a few days later, she excitedly told me that he had lauded my work. He was at the peak of his success at this time and I was young and naive about how the Indian art world worked those days. She said he'd called me 'dousur Husain' and that I had the heart of a real artist. Although I was rather pleased, I did not immediately understand how huge this was. It took me all of the next six years to digest those compliments. I later met him in person, when he wrote me a letter appreciating my work and expressing faith in it. I must confess that before I met him or got to know more about him from our common friend, like the majority of Indians...I did not understand him. But I liked his art, was intrigued by the person he was and was curious to know more about his artistic process.

For my next show, my friend asked him if he would attend my opening, to which he agreed. I was told to call and remind him, which I did. I was nervous and excited at the same time. The media showed up and they kept asking where he was. I called him again and he said he'd try and come, but eventually didn't. My friend was more upset than I was. He later told her he didn't come because I'd called too many times!

It was shortly after this that I began to study his work closely, following his exhibitions and media reports about him. I also read a book he had written and saw films he'd made. Meanwhile, I went to his shows in Mumbai, met him a few times and heard more stories about him from our common friend. It was then that I began to understand what he and his art were all about. He was extremely well read and knew a lot about world religions—themes and characters from religious texts often appeared in his work. He also liked and wrote poetry. He was very spontaneous and extremely prolific and I admired his mastery over line and color. I liked the fact that he experimented with form and medium and was one of the first artists to do installation art in India.

I remember going to meet him one time at Pundole Art Gallery. I was asked to come about two in the afternoon. When I got there, I saw a very long painting in the gallery. The colour was still wet. I was told it was 17 feet long and he had started painting it about three hours before! Needless to say, not many artists even half his age would have been able to do that.



I was reading philosophy and Indian aesthetics at the time and soon realised that he lived out some of the Hindu and Buddhist concepts from religious texts. I also realised that he was spiritually advanced. This is where the problem was. He knew more about Hinduism than the Hindus who objected to his work.

And more about Indian culture than most vociferous, self-styled custodians of it. He also knew how to promote himself, market his art and single-handedly put Indian contemporary art on the world map. As any artist knows, the most challenging part about being an artist, especially in India, is surviving and sustaining practice. He was, however, criticised for this and often called 'commercial' and a 'marketeer'. And ironically, this was often by the very same people who bought his art, bragged about its value and possession.

Of course he had his ups and downs and no artist in history has continually had an output of exceptional aesthetic merit and he should just have been allowed that. He was, sadly, misunderstood and misinterpreted even by the artists and critics, and repeatedly targeted. He believed that one should submit 100 per cent to one's beliefs and lived that way, unfazed by the accusations and venom that came his way due to the choices that he made. It seemed to me, that he was a man without fear.