



Untitled (After "Gandhi")

M. F. Husain

c. 1983

Acrylic on Canvas

90 x 32 in x 6 Nos:

(Panel 2 published in Yashodhara Dalmia. "The Making of Modern Indian Art : The Progressives", 106–7. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.)

In 1982 Sir Richard Attenborough's magnum opus, the biopic "Gandhi", took the cinematic world by storm, winning a record number of Oscars, and enthralled Maqbool Fida Husain. Husain was a cinema buff all his life, perhaps due to his earliest experiences as a cinema billboard painter. Gandhi, like Mother Teresa, was also a long-term muse of Husain. When the two threads of cinema and Gandhi came together in Attenborough's movie, Husain was inspired to pay homage, in the form of the monumental painting *Untitled (After "Gandhi")* also known as *The Attenborough Panels*. It is possible that he made this work with Sir Richard Attenborough, to see or collect, in mind.

Although the term "trending" did not exist in his time, Husain was astute at embracing social trends. When the newly independent India chose to celebrate Gautama Buddha's 1500th anniversary in the mid-sixties, Husain painted multiple works featuring many aspects of the life of the Buddha. Likewise, when Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she became the subject of many of Husain's paintings. When the celebration of the Oscars for Gandhi the movie, and by extension of Gandhi the man, swept the world and the nation, Husain returned to Gandhi as a muse, with renewed enthusiasm, and with a cinematic lens. Attenborough's treatment of the material, in vignettes rather than in a chronological biography, inspired Husain.

The Mahatma is clearly the subject of *Untitled (After "Gandhi")*., but he is elusive too. The first panel is reminiscent of Gandhi's ashrams, whether Tolstoy Farm or Sabarmati Ashram, with goats.

In the post-independence period, this meant opting to stay in India despite being a Muslim :

When I look back, I realize that the nationalist movement also meant Hindu-Muslim unity. We were brought up on those ideals. That is why, when our country was partitioned into India and Pakistan, our family never thought of emigration. We felt we belonged to the place where we had lived for generations.⁵



Fig. 66
M.F. Husain, Gandhi, Acrylic on canvas, Collection - Artist

To be a staunch nationalist was to join the march towards modernity and many of Husain's paintings are directed towards this (figs 66 and 67). The best-known of these is *Zameen* (1955). A panoramic painting that reads rather like a scroll, it places together a pack mule, a woman with a sieve, an inscribed letter, a snake, a man with a pair of bulls, a hand with a lion, a pregnant woman, a multi-armed man, a woman churning milk, a man beating a drum, a bunch of faces, a wheel, a kite, and a cock. While these images, placed in squares and rectangles, seem somewhat randomly put together, they connote an India that is real, mythical, and symbolic all at once. It is all the more ironic that in 1955, after the painting won the national award, it was purchased by the Lalit Kala Akademi only after a great deal of resistance from the selection panel. It was only after Rudi von Leyden, who was part of the jury, did some heated campaigning on behalf of the painting, that it was finally bought.

Another painting of the same genre *A Farmer's Family* (1960), is a wonderfully evocative work in ochre, brown, and yellow (pl. 54). A gaunt farmer stands with one arm raised upwards while the other, with long, tapering, sensitive fingers, gestures towards his wife. Painted in a darker hue, the woman is sitting and stroking a rooster with one hand and holding an emaciated child with the other. There is heavy foreshortening of her legs, which weld into that of the child in a symbiotic gesture. The smooth linear depiction of their bodies once again resonates the ideal form of the Gupta period. The bodily form here is emblematic of the universal farmer, the backbone of the nation, destitute and yet with a sense of inner dignity. The earthy colours and the classical poise sheds them of all sentimentality and imbues them with a quiet gravity. A comparison can be made with Amrita Sher-Gil's *Village Men and Women*, also graceful and grave but somewhat romanticized. In Geeta Kapur's words :

The second painting portrays Gandhi setting out on the road – possibly recalling the Salt Satyagraha, also known as the Dandi March. This panel is featured in the book “The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives”, by Yashodhara Dalmia. About this panel, Dalmia wrote: “*To be a staunch nationalist was to join the march towards modernity and many of Husain's paintings are directed towards this.*”

A third panel depicts Gandhi in an unusual seated posture. Most depictions of Gandhi being seated are on a mattress on the ground, but this panel shows the figure seated on a chair, or possibly on the edge of a cot.

The fourth panel shows Gandhi, lying back on a cot, the viewer cannot discern a head. It likely recalls the exact moment of India's independence, when Gandhi was in Noakhali in (then) newly formed East Pakistan, fasting to quell a brutal communal riot.

The penultimate panel possibly depicts the moment of the Mahatma's assassination, the figure in the painting seems to be losing his balance, falling back, arms flailing in the air.

In the last panel Gandhi is no longer discernable as the familiar figure. There are just some folds of his dhoti / loin cloth to suggest that this may be Gandhi. Instead the figure seems to have morphed into a many armed goddess or a figure in a Jesus like crucifix, ascending to the heavens.

In all the panels, the figure of Gandhi is alone. Other than two farm animals, there are no other living beings in the entire painting. This solitude, along with artistic license on musculature and proportions, makes Gandhi a heroic figure, a tragic hero. With his feet never resting on the ground, he seems to be in this world, but is not of this world - a divine figure. A painterly representation of the famous Albert Einstein quote about Gandhi, "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." A quote with which Attenborough opens the movie, seems to have inspired this work of M. F. Husain.