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2007 ISSUE 05 WWW.MILLIONAIREMAGAZINES.COM

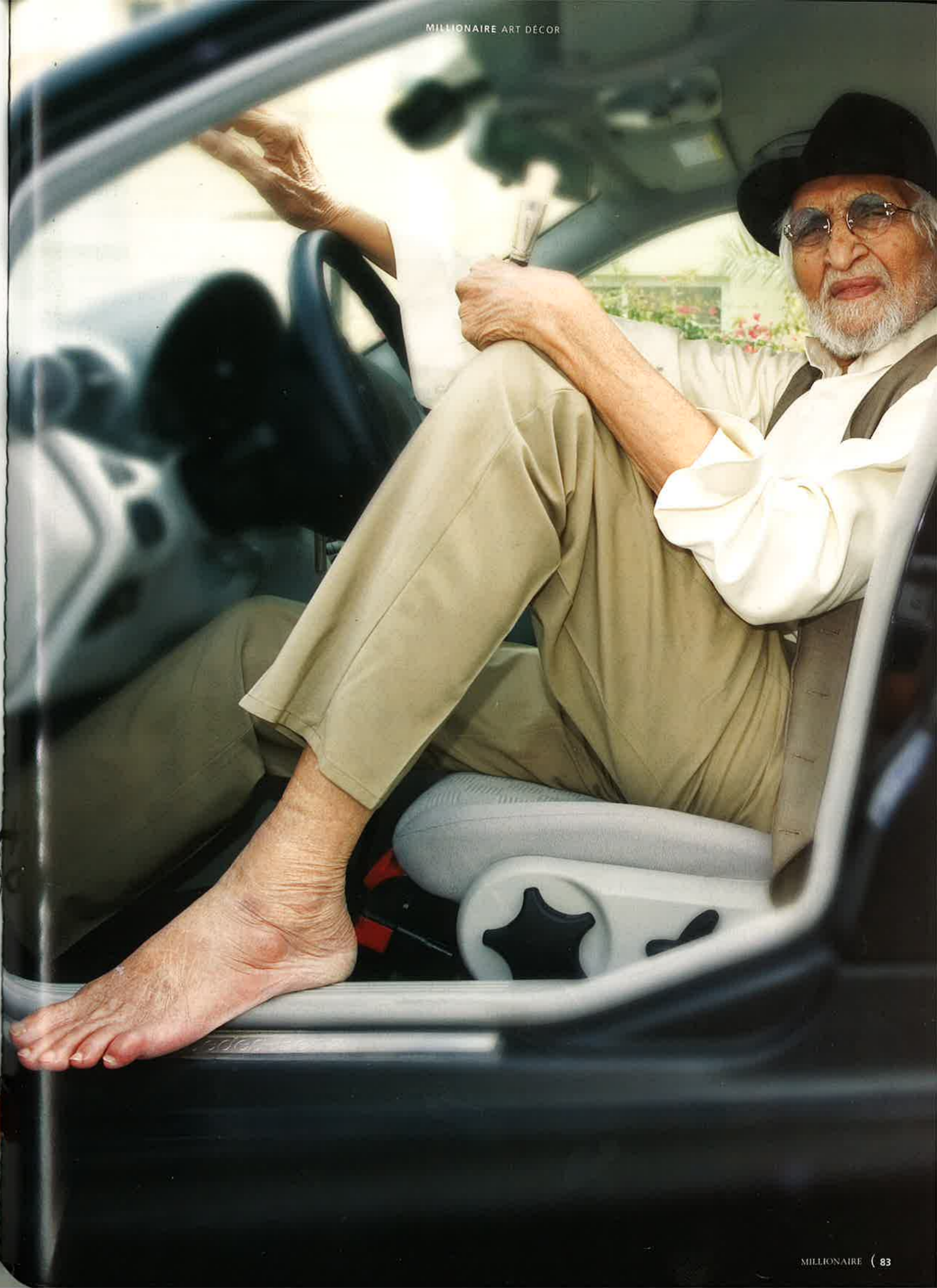
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Maqbool Fida Husain's art  
– business or passion?

# Barefoot in a Bentley

"I have to think twice if I want to own my own painting," says M F Husain, the artist whose self-portrait, at AED477,000, was the most expensive painting sold at Dubai's recent Gulf Art Fair. Demolishing the myth of artists in penury, the barefoot painter has made it fashionable for them to be builders of their own brand

text Vaethika Jain  
photographs Mark Brown



If the best endorsement of art comes from the price it commands, a single canvas by M F Husain has been known to fetch up to \$2 million at a Christie's auction. If controversy is the key to artistic temperament, Husain has been in the thick of one every year. If individualism defines an artist, the 90-year-old still insists on going unshod, his only concession to age being the socks that he now wears.

It was in 1947, then a father of two, that he quit working and concentrated on his career as an artist. He is one of the founders of the Progressive Arts Group, inspired by Western expressionism and formed on the eve of India's Independence from British rule with the aim of creating a new national aesthetic for India. Today,

and passion that I feel for it. No amount of marketing can let you last if you don't have any substance. The fact that I have been around for 56 years proves that my work has substance," Husain says.

Marketing, on the other hand, is an art. "I was accused of making art commercial, but I didn't care. I used auction houses to my advantage. I used media to make noise. But I achieved what I had set out to do.

Marketing is as important as the painting itself. It can take you to a different level. My inspiration is Stanley Kubrick, who plans his every [movie] release with marketing in mind. It's important to market yourself," he says.

"I CONSCIOUSLY WANTED TO MAKE INDIAN ART AT PAR WITH THE WESTERN WORLD. I THOUGHT THAT THE DEALERS DID NOT HAVE THE COURAGE TO ASK FOR A BETTER PRICE. BUT I BROUGHT IT AT PAR WITHIN EIGHT YEARS"

he has been called the Picasso of India by Forbes magazine.

"I had no money when I started out, I used to paint cinema hoardings in Bombay," says Husain, who was in Dubai to make another deal balancing accessibility with exclusivity. A local gallery, 1x1 Art Space, is selling 31 limited-edition prints of his work. His work is known to be a combination of mythology, folk art, interlaced with Pop Art or a cinematic narrative format.

Recipient of the Indian Padma Shree and Padma Bhushan awards, Husain is easily the highest-paid artist in India. He is certainly the best known. A few years ago, he struck a deal of INR1 billion for 125 paintings with a Mumbai-based industrialist. "From 1980 to 1986, Indian art was fetching prices lower than Indonesian and Burmese painters. I consciously wanted to make Indian art at par with the Western world. I thought that the dealers did not have the courage to ask for a better price. But I brought it at par within eight years," he says.

Even so, art is not about money. "You'll be surprised to know that I have no insurance on any of my work. If it's gone, it's gone. My bank balance is always zero. I have been fortunate to lead such an enriching life but I am not greedy.

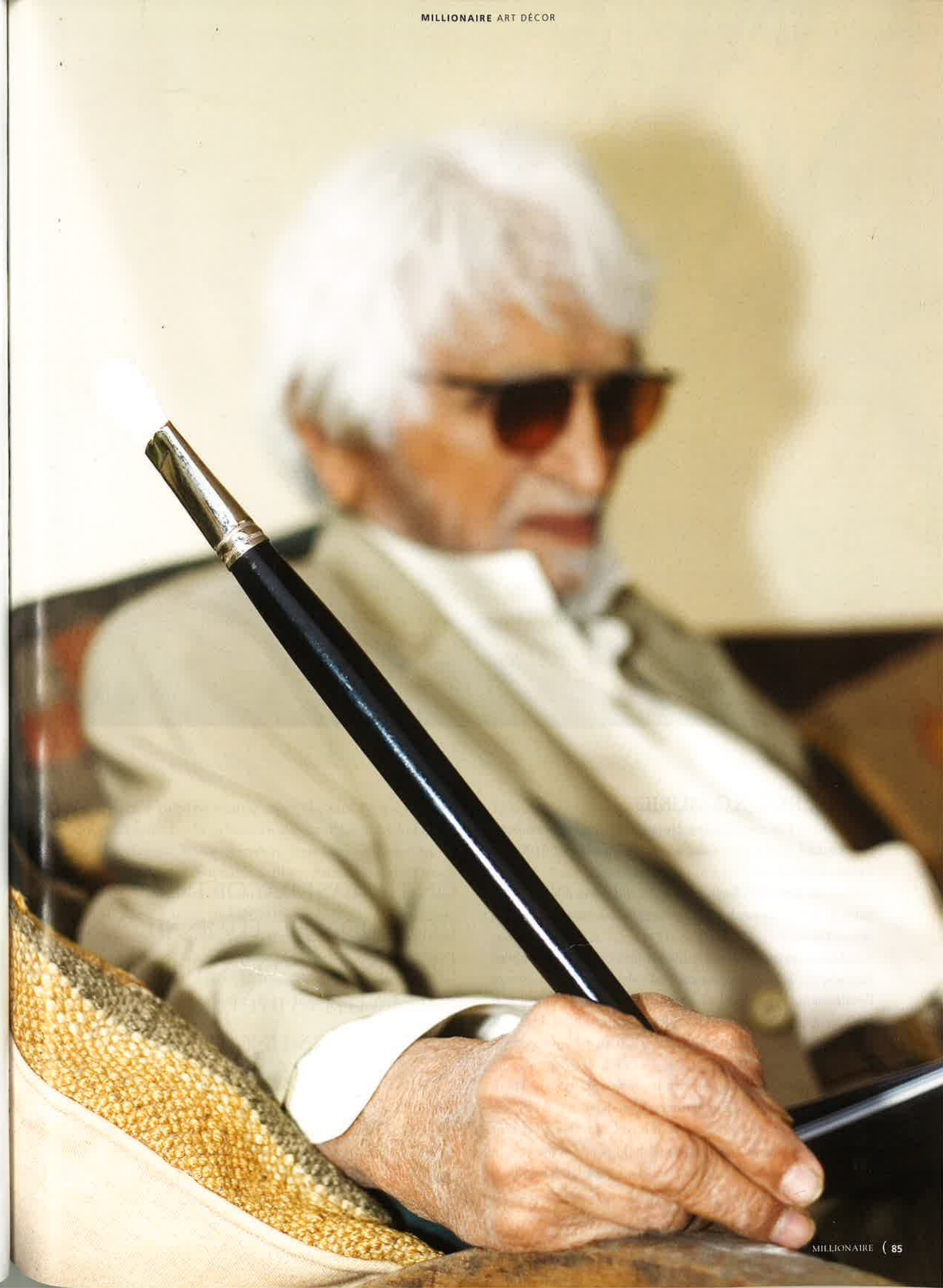
"I don't treat my art as a business, and I am not here to make a quick buck, without any substance. I have been doing this for decades now not because of the demand but for the love

On the other hand, it needs to be accessible. "The price of art around the world has gone up. Today, the common man can't even buy a student's work," says the artist.

## MUSEUM PIECES

Like a painter whose best work is a self-portrait, it ought not to be a cause for censure that for Husain, all art and its education is about Husain's art and education. "I am probably the only artist in the world to have opened museums. These museums are not for selling art. My paintings are kept there for art lovers to go and see and for art students to go and study," he says. There are two museums in Dubai (near the Clock Tower, in Emaar Tower, and in Emirates Hills) and four in India – all with works of Husain.

Some of the works exhibited in these museums date back to 1956, from an exhibition in Prague that the artist chanced upon. "I had gone to the Czech Republic in 1956 with an exhibition of 80 paintings. An interpreter was avidly interested in my work. Seeing her keen interest, I presented the whole show to her. For the next six years or so, I was in touch with her, after which we lost contact for the next 40 years," he says. Husain met the lady, who is now married to a professor, last year. "She had kept all the 80 paintings and gifted them back to me," he says. >





BE IT WALKING OR DRIVING, HUSAIN HAS BEEN BAREFOOT ALMOST ALL HIS LIFE. THE CALCUTTA CLUB WAS PILLORIED WHEN IT REFUSED ADMISSION TO A BAREFOOT HUSAIN ON THE GROUNDS THAT HE VIOLATED THEIR DRESS CODE

paintings on the history of Arab culture. These should be ready by October-November of 2007. And then I'll be starting work on my autobiographical film," he says. Much of the inspiration for his work comes from the world around him.

At a public performance at the Tata Centre in Kolkata, crowds watched as he painted pictures of six goddesses. On the last day of the exhibition, he "eliminated" his paintings by covering them with white paint, calling painting a performing art.

"I have painted the Beatles. I love the ecstasy of film-making. Writing the script, designing sets, choosing the fabrics, each and every part of it makes me happy," he says.

While India and its traditions are the best inspiration, it is time to move to London, where he spends summers. "I love the intellectual life there. I attend concerts and watch plays," he says. He'll be back in Dubai in the winter. ■

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