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David Hockney – a Lifetime in Portraits

New London Exhibition

Ten years ago in Paris I saw an exhibition of Picasso's portraits. I didn't know too much about his work then and thought all his figures were twisted and distorted. I was bowled over by the evidence of his obvious ability to draw, and was fascinated by the autobiographical information the collection of pictures revealed. It was with a feeling of almost "deja vu", that I went to see the exhibition "David Hockney Portraits" at the National Portrait Gallery in London. The exhibition is a celebration of a lifetime of making portraits.

They are probably not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of David Hockney's art. He is perhaps better known for his swimming pools, his landscapes, and even his operatic stage sets. (He has recently had an exhibition of landscapes of his native Yorkshire), and yet making portraits is clearly something that is very important to Hockney. The artist Lucien Freud has remarked: "Everything is autobiographical and everything is a portrait." This statement could be said to apply to David Hockney's work.

The first impression, viewing this exhibition in

London on a grey Saturday afternoon in November, is one of light and colour, not unlike the vibrancy of Californian sunlight that Hockney opted for by moving to the West Coast of the United States in the early 1960's.

The inspired hanging of the exhibition helps this. Almost the entire ground floor of the portrait gallery has been cleared for the purpose.

The first picture you see when you come into the Portrait Gallery is the big, bold, colourful picture of "Elsa, David and Dayanna, 2005." It gives you an indication of what to expect inside the exhibition: There are no apologies. This is a family picture. Elsa has looked after Hockney's house in California for many years and he has watched her daughter grow up.

Room One is dedicated to Hockney's family. There is a painting in oil of his father in this room, painted when Hockney was seventeen years old. His father was an eccentric character who painted the cupboard doors of their house with sunsets, wore two watches and a bow tie that he stuck paper spots on for added effect. He encouraged his son's emerging talents, bought the paint and canvas for

his portrait and took a keen interest in its progress. At ten pounds it was the first picture that Hockney ever sold.



His father was an eccentric character

His mother lived to be ninety-nine years old, and Hockney has probably done more portraits of her than of anybody else. Studies range from the pencil and coloured crayon drawings of 1972, through to oil paintings of vivid colours in old age. The centrepiece of room one is the double portrait of them both, "My Parents, 1977." which, conveys his obvious affection for them and is also a simple statement of the kind of people they were.

In Room Two are several self-portraits which demonstrate Hockney's early competence at drawing, and his enthusiasm for using different media. There is an impressive lithograph

in five colours and a collage on newsprint. In this room also, is his famous series of lithographs: "The Rake's Progress" made between 1961 and 1963, when he was still at the Royal College of Art. It was the sale of these lithographs that first enabled Hockney to go to live in America for an extended period.



Early Self Portrait on Newsprint

The major part of the exhibition is taken up with portraits of Hockney's friends, which reflect his personal relationships over the years. He has drawn the fabric designer Celia Birtwell many times. She and her then husband, Ossie Clark, appear in the famous portrait: "Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy, 1970-1." which can be seen in Room Three.

There is only one swimming pool in the exhibition, and in "Peter Getting out of Nick's Pool, 1966." you can't help feeling that it is not the pool that he is concentrating on. His most detailed and

sensitive drawings are of people who have been important to him over the years. "Peter, Albergo, La Flora, Rome, 1967", Ink on paper, "Gregory, Palatine, Roma, Dec. 1974", Ink on paper, and "Joe McDonald, 1975", coloured pencil on paper, are a few noticeable examples. There are drawings of fellow artists such as R. J. Kitaj, whom he met at the Royal College of Art, and Man Ray and Andy Warhol, whom he drew in Paris in the 1970s. In 1971 Hockney did an etching and aquatint of the artist and teacher, Richard Hamilton. Hockney and the artist Lucien Freud have also made portraits of each other.



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Henry Geldzahler, former curator of 20th Century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is a larger than life character, whose friendship with Hockney was based on their shared passion for art. Another large-scale double portrait, "Henry Geldzahler and

Christopher Scott, 1969." is also in the exhibition. The famous double portrait of "American collectors, Fred and Marcia Weisman, 1968." is also included.

Hockney has had a wide and varied social life and it seems to be more or less essential to him to make a portrait of everybody he meets. At one time he recorded everybody who came to his studio in the course of a year. When he was on holiday he would take a sketchpad with him and do drawings of the people he was with. Hockney has remarked that when there was a breakdown in a relationship in his life, the figure disappeared from his paintings for a while, but with the beginning of a new relationship, the figure came back.

A charming part of the exhibition is the room in which the paintings of David Hockney's two dachshunds, Stanley and Boodgie are displayed. The portraits of the dogs are very tender and personal and colourful, for example; "Dog Painting 30, 1995."



Dog portraits are tender

Self-portraits are evidently important in Hockney's work, beginning when he was a student at art school. There were several in 1983, when he suddenly became more aware of ageing. They can be seen throughout the exhibition, often as the subject of another experiment with media. Examples of these are his self-portrait on five separate canvases, of 1984-2005, and his self-portrait, July 1986, when he put his actual shirt through a Xerox machine.



He put his actual shirt through a Xerox machine.

According to the curator Barbara Stern Shapiro, Hockney is devoted to traditional methods of working, but determined also to master new ideas and techniques.

One of Hockney's great loves is Opera, and in 1975 he took on a new challenge by designing a production of Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress" for Glyndebourne Festival Opera. This has been followed by other commissions to design productions both in England and in America. Designing stage sets coincided with a looser approach to drawing and painting. "I was trying to break out of something, break out of what I called obsessive naturalism. It took me a long time." He was influenced by, among others, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso. Picasso has for a long time, been one of Hockney's heroes (see the lithograph of 1973-4 "Artist and his Model.")



Picasso was one of his heroes

In 1980 Hockney saw two exhibitions of Picasso's work in America, and his influence can be seen in "David, Celia, Stephen and Ian London, 1982" and in portraits of "Pierre Saint-Jean 1984," and "Christopher without his

Glasses On 1984,"



Detail of 'cubist' Celia

In these pictures Hockney seems to be experimenting with cubist composition. Picasso's influence can also be seen in the cubist portrait of Celia that was on the front cover of the Christmas Edition of French Vogue, 1985, in which Hockney was invited to do a forty page spread.

Matisse's influence can be seen in Hockney's portrait of "Divine, 1979" with its bright colours and the texture of the wallpaper and fabrics. It is also evident in the series of portraits Hockney painted in 1997 in strong fauvist colours on an emerald green background, a series that included family members and some of his closest friends.

You can see the results of Hockney's experimentation with photography in Room Seven. It was in 1982

that he first made Polaroid compositions such as "Gregory, Los Angeles. March 31st. 1982." And "Kasmin, Los Angeles, 28th March, 1982". Because of the border around the photographs Hockney called these assemblages a "joiner". From these he progressed to more complex compositions of photographs taken with another type of camera. These photographs had no borders and their overlapping layers produced almost cubist compositions, such as "My Mother, Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire, Nov. 1982" and "The Scrabble Game, Jan 1st. 1983". Further experiments in photography came in 1990, at the time when Hockney recorded with his camera, everyone who came into his studio over a period of a year. Each portrait is a composite of five or six segments. The result is "112 LA Visitors. 1990-91".

In 1999 he began using a camera lucida - a quick shorthand for mapping out the face by using a tiny prism suspended at the end of a metal rod. Hockney made 280 drawings in this way in pencil, and sometimes-white chalk, on fine grey paper of friends, relatives and visitors. There are several examples of drawing by this means in the exhibition, including

"12 Portraits after Ingres in the Uniform Style, 1999-2000." when he drew the guards at the National Gallery.

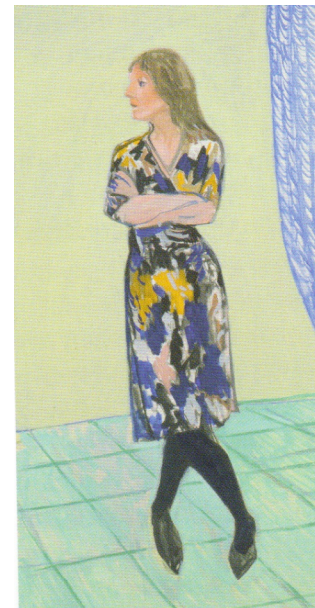
Following his experimentation in drawing with the camera lucida, Hockney returned to painting with a new freedom. He did a series of looser, freer portraits and double portraits in 2002. Hockney found the rigours of a naturalistic approach increasingly restrictive. These watercolours have an immediacy and freshness. In preparation for this exhibition of portraits Hockney painted a series of full-length portraits in oils in his studio in California. They are painted directly from life and reflect his continued interest in space, light and colour.

One of these is of the curator and art critic Sarah Howgate. Comparing a photograph of her posing for him she says: "There is no comparison. In the photograph my features are frozen; I am static and slightly leaden. Yet in the painting, there is a dynamism and strength about the pose..."

"In the end you find it." Says Hockney, "A camera finds it straight away, but with a painting it is there to be unlocked" Of his later style of painting he says (In conversation with Sarah Howgate)

"Painting is an old man's art... I couldn't have done these paintings when I was younger."

David Hockney's portraits document his autobiography. They are his personal record of the people he has encountered during his life. Many of them are still in his personal possession. His philosophy can be



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summed up in his own words:

"I do believe that painting can change the world. If you see the world as beautiful and thrilling and mysterious, as I think I do, then you feel quite alive; I like that... I see that part of my job as an artist is to show that art can alleviate despair."