

# David Hockney: “The Old Master of the Modern World”

## *Background Notes*

Douglas Skeggs — 2 April 2025



David Hockney, *The Arrival of Spring, Normandy 2020. No. 323.*  
iPad painting.

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## From School to Art School. 1937-62

Hockney was born in Bradford on June 9th, 1937. His father, Kenneth, was an accountant's clerk and pacifist. His mother, Laura, was a vegetarian and Methodist. Hockney recalled that his introduction to art was watching his father painting old bicycles to look as though they were new when they were put up for sale.

In 1948 he was sent to Bradford Grammar school. He discovered that there were only art lessons in the Lower Class so he spent his time underachieving so he wouldn't be promoted up from it.

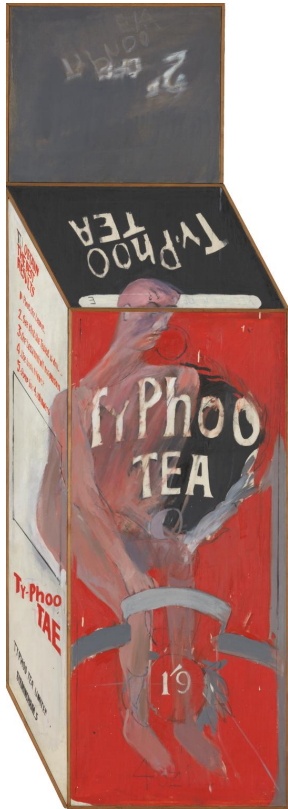
Leaving school he went on to the Bradford School of Art which had been his ambition since he was eleven. His teacher was Frank Lisle who encouraged his students to master the tonal values and subdued colours of Sickert and the Euston Rd school.

In 1958 he undertook his National Service but being a conscientious objector, as his father had been, he spent the time working in a hospital.

The following year he won a scholarship to the Royal College and moved down to London, living in Earl's Court. Amongst his fellow students were Derek Boshier, Allen Jones and Ron Kitaj. He also got to know Peter Blake who had studied there.

The students at the college were divided between those who followed the old, academic techniques and those who were experimenting in more innovative ideas. Hockney explored the potential of Abstract Expressionism in his 'Love Paintings', adding graffiti to give them a human context.

He also worked on some pictures in a style that acknowledged Pop Art, notably the *Tea painting in an Illusionistic Style (1)*. In this he made a canvas that followed the 3 dimensional outline of the tea packet, making the flat surface 'draw' the solid shape. He was so absorbed in the lettering that he misspelt the word tea.



**Figure 1.** David Hockney, *Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style*, 1961. Tate, London

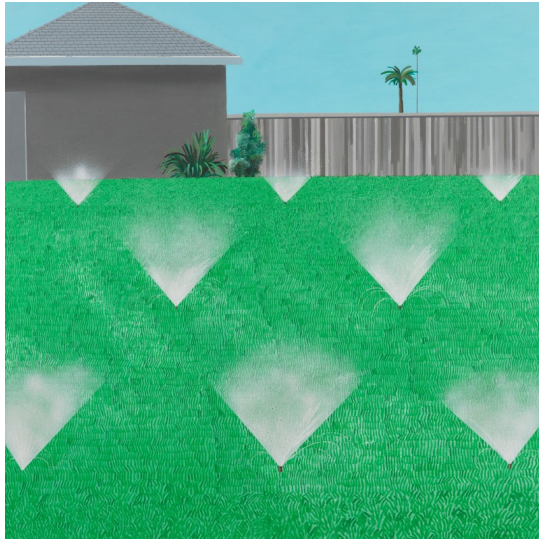
Travels to Florence, Rome and Berlin increased his interest in the Old Masters and resulted in a series of paintings, notably the *Flight into Italy - a Swiss landscape*.

To graduate from the college he was required to paint a female figure from life. He refused to do so and instead painted a male figure from a physical fitness magazine, calling it *A Life-painting for a Diploma*.

Later that year John Kasmin put on an exhibition of paintings by Hockney and his fellow graduates and with this became both his agent and dealer for many years.

## Swimming Pools and Portraits 1963-1971

During the early sixties Hockney increasingly travelled over to the US. He said that being claustrophobic he was less interested in New York, which was all vertical forms, and more in Los Angeles, which was all horizontals. This love affair with California would result in a series of images of lawn sprinklers (2) and swimming pools, leading up to the *A Bigger Splash*, which rapidly became an iconic image of the sixties.



**Figure 2.** David Hockney, *A Lawn Being Sprinkled*, 1967.  
Private collection.

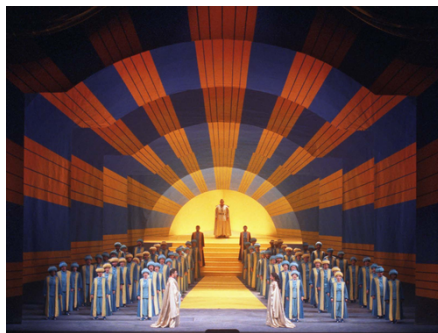
It was at this time he also began to work on a series of portraits, often making reference to both Old Master paintings as well as current styles. The outstanding work in this idiom is the portrait of *Mr & Mrs Clark with Percy* which echoes the ideas and techniques of Van Eyck.

## Picasso, Paris and Paper Pools 1971-80

On hearing of the death of Picasso, Hockney started work on a number of prints and paintings both celebrating and examining the artist's achievements. At the same time he moved to Paris. In 1974 Jack Hazan's *A Bigger Splash* was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. It was billed as a "film portrait of an artist" but Hockney was uneasy with its length and intimacy and felt it was an intrusion into his private life.

In the following year he started work on a portrait of his parents. This progressed through a series of false starts and re-workings that caused a temporary rift with his father. But the final version fortunately resolved the problems - both pictorial and personal.

Towards the end of the decade he became absorbed in the theatre, designing sets for Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* at the Glyndebourne Festival Opera. This was followed by *The Magic Flute*, in which he used highly imaginative designs and lighting effects to evoke the Masonic imagery of the opera, as well as lending it a fairytale atmosphere (3).



**Figure 3.** David Hockney, Stage design for *The Magic Flute*, Glyndebourne Festival Opera. 1977

At much the same time he created the *Paper Pools*. By tinting the paper pulp before it was pressed he produced images of swimming pools of great intensity, the colour being within the paper rather than on its surface.

### **Photography to iPhones 1980-2000**

Hockney had always used photos as a source for paintings but saw them only as a tool. He said that photography was all right if you don't mind looking at the world from "the point of view of a paralysed Cyclops - for a split second". To bring a work of art closer to the experience of seeing the real world he tried assembling Polaroid photos together into collages that examined the subject from both different angles and over a period of time.

Increasingly during this period he turned to alternative ways of making images, using fax machines and computers, and then later, iPhones and iPads. He particularly liked the pictures he made on the iPhone because they could be sent to another person, privately and invisibly, almost like a love letter.



**Figure 4.** Hockney with a Camera  
Lucida, 1999

Towards the end of the century he became interested in the use of the Camera Lucida, an optical device that can project an image onto the surface of a picture (4). This led him to explore the techniques of many Old Master painters who used similar methods. His discoveries resulted in a TV documentary and book in 2000 called *Secret Knowledge*. The drawings he made on this project were later exhibited at the National Gallery. In 1990 he was offered a knighthood but turned it down, saying that he felt it was inappropriate since he largely lived in the US.

### **The Hand, the Eyes and the Heart. 2000 -**

At this time he rediscovered watercolours as he said he wanted the image to “flow from his hand”. The Chinese taught him that you needed three things to make a painting: the hand, the eyes and the heart. Any two of those wasn’t enough. Watercolours were also easier to take on travels and he used them particularly in his trips around Norway and Iceland.

Increasing deafness made it hard for him to socialise and so he found himself turning to the company of his two dachshunds, who in turn became the subject of his paintings.

In 2007 he created the largest painting of his life, the *Bigger Trees near Water*. He’d made composite pictures from photos but here he made one from a composite of 50 painted canvases. Working on only four at a time, enabled him to work outside, directly from the subject. It’s probably the largest *plein-air* painting in history. This was shown at the RA’s Summer Exhibition and later given to them.

The Covid Lockdown isolated him in his Normandy home where he carried on with the large, highly coloured, landscapes produced in both oils and on the iPad (**Cover image**). The love of patterning, which had always been part of his work, became increasingly evident in the small, staccato touches of the brushes both real and digital.

In 2023, his immersive experience “Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)” opened at Lightroom, King’s Cross. For him it was

not just another exhibition but a personal journey through sixty years of his own unique work, ideas and techniques.

## Further Reading

***Hockney by Hockney.*** Thames & Hudson, 1976. A series of interviews with Hockney. Still the best account of his early paintings.

***That's the Way I See It.*** Thames & Hudson, 1993.

***A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney and Martin Gayford.*** Thames and Hudson, 2011. "Hockney reveals the fruits of his lifelong meditations on the problems and paradoxes of representing a three-dimensional world on a flat surface."  
(Paperback due out April 3rd)

***Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the lost techniques of the Old Masters.*** Thames and Hudson, 2007.

***Dog days.*** Thames and Hudson, 2017. Hockney 'offers no excuse' for making these drawings of what he calls 'his friends'.

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