



## Hockney, David (b. 1937)

by John McFarland

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A portrait of David Hockney by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

David Hockney established himself as one of the liveliest and most versatile visual artists of his generation in the 1960s. Through the years since, he has expanded that reputation with prodigious productivity.

His widely seen portraits of friends and lovers have handsomely played their part in breaking down entrenched resistance to the erotic gaze directed at the male body, and his brilliantly colored paintings of sun-drenched swimming pools have captured the essence of Southern California sensuality.

These depictions, along with his portraits of gay male couples in domestic--rather than sensational or sexual--images, may be his greatest contributions to glbtq culture.

Born in Bradford, England on July 9, 1937, Hockney was the fourth of five children in a family headed by a pair of quiet non-conformists. Employed as an accountant's clerk, his father was a pacifist and an amateur painter; his mother was a vegetarian who neither smoked nor drank alcohol.

Although Hockney became aware of his attraction to other males at age thirteen or fourteen, the repressive climate of the time induced him to remain silent about his preference while he attended the Bradford City Grammar School and began his formal art training at the Bradford School of Art in 1953.

A conscientious objector, Hockney discharged his compulsory military service obligation by working in hospitals for two years. He then began postgraduate work at London's Royal College of Art in September 1959.

There, he made up for years of teenage reticence about his attraction to men by tackling gay issues and subjects with energy and style in paintings such as *Erection* (1959-1960) and *We Two Boys Together Clinging* (1961), the latter of which was inspired by Whitman's poem of the same name.

*Doll Boy* (1960), a campy yet artful meditation-as-crush on pop singer Cliff Richard, is a perfect, early illustration of Hockney's abiding artistic philosophy that "you can't have art without play . . . . People tend to forget that play is serious, but I know that of course it is."

In 1961 on his first trip to New York, Hockney was fascinated by the contrast of the American city to hide-bound England. He was inspired to dye his hair blond and began to develop the image that would later define him as a part of 1960s "Swinging London": oversized, black-rimmed glasses similar to those worn by the architect Le Corbusier; gold lamé jacket; and mismatched colorful socks.

Hockney threw down the gauntlet to gray, staid England and demanded sartorially that attention be paid to him as a paragon of color and personal, eccentric style. It worked like a press agent's dream and brought him a great deal of attention.

Fresh from a series of triumphs in 1963 that climaxed with his first solo exhibit's selling out in London,

Hockney traveled to New York again. In January 1964, he flew on to Los Angeles, unprepared for the visual and emotional impact that city would have on him.

Upon seeing a freeway ramp, he told himself, "My God, this place needs its Piranesi; . . . so here I am!" He quickly rented a studio and embarked on a love affair with Southern California that has continued to this day.

When he was an art student at the Royal College, Hockney had objected to the requirement of submitting life drawings of models hired by the school in order to receive a degree. Arguing that Renoir and Michelangelo drew subjects who attracted them and that passionate connection was responsible for the greatness of their work, he had protested that the school's models were unattractive and said he could not draw or paint individuals to whom he did not respond.

He declared that he would be more than happy to draw from life if the school hired models more to his liking. When the school refused to capitulate, Hockney, the "bad boy," still did it his way. To earn his degree, he submitted work based on American physique magazines.

In California, Hockney found many compelling specimens of his ideal model and soon became renowned for his life drawings. Their freshness, intimacy, and visual snap, in fact, for a time made them ultimate representations of late twentieth-century Los Angeles, defining the city's sensuality in images of sun-drenched swimming pools, palm trees, and languid, muscular, young men. Representative life drawings from this period include *Domestic Scene, Los Angeles* (1963) and *Boy about to Take a Shower* (1964).

In 1966, when he was teaching at UCLA, Hockney was drawn to a nineteen-year-old student by the name of Peter Schlesinger. The relationship with Schlesinger expanded Hockney's emotional horizons and provided him with a new subject: gay men enjoying the sensual delights of Southern California.

Schlesinger figured prominently in Hockney's images of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Jack Hazan's film of 1972, *A Bigger Splash*, focused on the end of the lovers' relationship.

At the same time that he was involved in his first serious relationship, Hockney began to paint a series of double portraits of couples. That series would include paintings of writer Christopher Isherwood and painter Don Bachardy in their Santa Monica home (1968) and of art curator Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott in their New York City apartment (1969).

Both of these double portraits assumed iconic status in the 1970s for portraying gay male couples in an everyday domestic routine, as if reaching such a stage were as simple for homosexuals as for heterosexuals.

In 1967, Hockney illustrated a limited edition of fourteen homoerotic poems by C. P. Cavafy. These etchings beautifully capture the longing and passion of the Greek poet and demonstrate Hockney's accomplishment as a graphic artist.

Hockney's first portraits of archetypal slim, tanned, and sexy California boys may have created open-mouthed dismay for their unapologetic homoeroticism when he first exhibited them, but with time such paintings have assumed honored places in late twentieth-century art history.

The painting of the naked and alluring Peter Schlesinger entitled *The Room, Tarzana* (1967) is a particularly important example. Nude portraits of subsequent partners Gregory Evans (sprawling against pillows, clad only in gym socks [1976]) and Ian Falconer (swimming underwater in a 1982 Polaroid collage) have also been greeted as works of art rather than as scandals.

An important characteristic of Hockney is his susceptibility to stimulus by new media and fresh subjects. The abandon and astonishing invention with which he hurls himself into explorations of all available means

to depict the world around him are key features of his continuing growth as an artist.

Over the years he has moved easily from oil paints to acrylics, from pen and ink drawing to etching, from the formed dyed paper technique of his 1978 *Paper Pools* series to photographic collages, from Cubist-inspired paintings to designing innovative sets for operas as different as *Tristan und Isolde* and *The Magic Flute*.

He has, however, always remained a storyteller celebrating what brings him pleasure. "My sources are classic, or even epic, themes, landscapes of foreign lands, beautiful people, love, propaganda and major incidents [of my own life]," he says.

In his self-assured quest to grow as an artist in his own way, Hockney has succeeded in convincing large numbers of people to share his view that "Cézanne's apples are lovely and very special, but what finally can compare to the image of another human being?"

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### **About the Author**

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