

David Hockney: Words and Pictures

Four Print Portfolios 1961–77

In his school report for December 1950, when he was thirteen, David Hockney's English teacher wrote: 'He still does not really believe that an artist needs occasionally to write.'¹ Although an implied criticism, the teacher was clearly aware of where the young Hockney's interests lay, and the comment can also be read as an early acknowledgement of his artistic talent and aspirations. As it has turned out, perhaps more than any other visual artist of his generation, Hockney has used words, and in a style very much his own – lucid, insightful, down-to-earth and tinged with dry humour – he has both talked and written extensively about his life, work and thoughts on art.

He read from an early age and reading has clearly been an important activity throughout his life. During the first two decades of his career, it was literature that provided him with the source material for some of his most outstanding graphic work, and this exhibition focuses on four major suites of prints made between 1961 and 1977: *A Rake's Progress*; *Illustrations for Fourteen Poems by C.P. Cavafy*; *Illustrations for Six Fairytales from the Brothers Grimm*; and *The Blue Guitar*.

Between studying at Bradford College of Art (1953–57) and the Royal College of Art, London (1959–62), Hockney worked out his term of national service as a hospital orderly. It was during this time he read Proust: 'I made myself read it because at first it was much too difficult. I'd never been abroad, but I'd been told it was one of the great works of art of the 20th century.'² When he returned to Proust some years later, he realised he could not really have understood

¹ Nikos Stangos (ed.), *David Hockney by David Hockney*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1976, p.32

² *Ibid.*, p.40

much of it the first time, but his initial experience was an indication of his desire to read and discover serious literature.

Upon entering the Royal College in 1959, he began experimenting with abstract painting, hugely influential at the time following recent exhibitions of new American painting at both the Tate Gallery and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. Hockney describes his own paintings as ‘based on a kind of mixture of Alan Davie cum Jackson Pollock cum Roger Hilton.’³ He was uncertain about the direction in which this work was leading, but continued to draw all the time.

One of the first students he befriended was the American-born R.B. Kitaj who had entered the Royal College the year before him. Almost five years older than Hockney, they shared an interest in literature and it was Kitaj who encouraged him to paint subjects which were meaningful to him. From early 1960 he began to turn to literary sources for subject matter for his painting. At first he was still unsettled about going against the grain of the time by making figurative paintings: ‘The idea of figure pictures was considered anti-modern, so my solution was to begin using words. I started writing on the pictures. And when you put a word on a painting, it has a similar effect in a way to a figure; it’s a bit of human thing that you immediately read; its not just paint.’⁴

Hockney began introducing lines from poetry, newspaper articles and graffiti found on the walls of public toilets. The title for one of his best-known paintings from this period, *We Two Boys Together Clinging* of 1961, is a line from a poem by the 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman (1819–92):

We two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
[...]

³ *Ibid.*, p.41

⁴ *Ibid.*

Arm'd and fearless, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.

At the same time, he had pinned up in his studio space a newspaper clipping with the headline: 'Two Boys Cling to Cliff All Night', in addition to pictures of the pop idol Cliff Richard. Hockney liked the idea that the boys were zealous fans clinging to the singer rather than the fact the headline referred to a climbing accident. The use of such references interwoven into the narrative of the painting was in part Hockney's own propaganda campaign for homosexuality, still illegal in Britain at that time and very much a taboo subject.

Hockney's first print at the Royal College, an etching entitled *Myself and My Heroes*, also dates from 1961. He has, famously, been quoted as saying that he started to make prints simply because he had run out of money and paint, and had heard that materials were free in the graphics department. He had made prints before – a self-portrait in 1954 and a number of other accomplished lithographs in a social-realist style made at Bradford College of Art – but at the Royal College he concentrated on etching. The heroes in *Myself and My Heroes* were Whitman and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), and the print was worked in etching and aquatint and printed in black. It was inscribed with the title and other lines of text around the three figures:

Walt – When I thy ports run out – for the dear love of comrades – love –
Mohandas – vegetarian as well – down with the Taj Mahal – David – I
am 23 years old and wear glasses – DH – MKG – WW

Hockney took to the medium, it suited the sensitivity of his line drawing and *Myself and My Heroes* was quickly followed by a further seven etchings in 1961. These included *The Fires of Furious Desires*, another self-portrait with reference to his homosexuality, the source for which was William Blake's *Oh! Flames of Furious Desires* (date unknown); and *Kaisarion with All His Beauty*, an etching and aquatint in two colours based on lines in the poem 'Alexandrian

Kings' by Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933).⁵ Hockney had recently discovered the work of the Alexandrian-born Greek poet Cavafy (Konstantinos Pétron Kaváfis) and a number of paintings and prints of this period were inspired by Cavafy's poetry.

He was already planning to make a trip to the United States when he won a prize of £100 for another of his etchings, *Three Kings and a Queen* (1961), which was included in an exhibition at the St George's Gallery in London's West End. The gallery proprietor was Robert Erskine, a print dealer and publisher who during the 1950s and 1960s was an influential figure in the promotion of British printmaking. With the prize money, Hockney set off for New York where he was to stay for three months in the summer of 1961. Erskine had advised him to take some of his etchings to William Lieberman, the head of the department of prints and drawings at the Museum of Modern Art. This he eventually did and Lieberman was to purchase a number of his etchings for the print collection as well as introducing Hockney to the Pratt Graphic Workshop where he made a new etching, *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*.

After his return to London, Hockney made a large painting, *A Grand Procession of Dignitaries in the Semi-Egyptian Style* (1961), which was in part inspired by lines from the Cavafy poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians'. He also embarked on his first suite of prints, *A Rake's Progress* (1961–63), telling the story of his experiences in New York. He based his idea on William Hogarth's suite of the same title, a moral tale of a squandered life told in eight copper-plate engravings published in 1735. Hockney's intention was to make eight etchings for his own series following Hogarth's original titles, but Robin Darwin, then Rector of the Royal College of Art, suggested that he should extend the number of prints and publish it as a book. He therefore set out to make twenty-four etchings, finally reduced to sixteen, which he worked on over

⁵ *The Complete Poems of C. P. Cavafy* was published in 1961, with an introduction by W.H. Auden.

the next two years. The book did not materialise, but after Hockney had finished and proofed the plates, *A Rake's Progress* was eventually published as a limited edition portfolio by Editions Alecto in 1963. Each plate in the series is inscribed with a title and the sixteen plates are numbered from plate 1 and plate 1a through to plate 8 and plate 8a, rather than from 1–16, to remain more faithful to Hogarth's story told in eight plates.

Now transposed to New York, Hockney's semi-autobiographical 'rake' is seen discovering the good life found in a more liberated society. At first all goes well for the young man, he sells prints, is accepted by the 'good people', bleaches his hair for the first time, frequents bars and marries. Misfortune is to befall him as he runs out of money and is shunned by the 'good people'. His ultimate fate depicted in the final two plates is not decent into madness as in Hogarth's tale, but into joining the mindless masses, the 'other people'. In his *Bedlam*, depicted in plate 8a, the only way of distinguishing the 'rake' from the other robotic figures is by a small arrow above his head: he has finally been subsumed into the uniform crowd where personal identity has disappeared.

Shortly after completing *A Rake's Progress*, Hockney was sent to Egypt by *The Sunday Times* to produce a series of drawings for the newspaper's new colour magazine supplement. He spent four weeks there in September and October of 1963 and visited Cairo, Luxor and Cavafy's home city of Alexandria on this occasion and made some forty drawings. But it was to be almost another three years before he began work on the series of illustrations to accompany the Cavafy poetry he had so long admired. He had been planning a book for some time and he finally visited Beirut in January 1966 to soak up the atmosphere of the city he felt would be more like the cosmopolitan Alexandria of Cavafy's day, which had all but disappeared by the mid-1960s: 'I wanted to do it also, perhaps, to counteract all that formalism in my recent pictures. I probably decided Now we'll stop painting for a bit and do some prints.'⁶

⁶ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p.102

The pictures Hockney was referring to had been made during an intensive period of activity following his first visit to California in 1964. The subjects included swimming pools and men in showers, in addition to more stylised landscapes, interiors and proto-cubist still life pictures. During this time he had also made a suite of six lithographs, *A Hollywood Collection*, printed at Gemini Ltd., Los Angeles in 1965.

Working from a new translation by Nikos Stangos and Stephen Spender, Hockney began *Illustrations for Fourteen Poems by C.P. Cavafy* in early 1966. He concentrated more on pure line than in his earlier etchings and drew some twenty line illustrations directly on to copper plates. Thirteen were finally published by Editions Alecto in 1967 as both a limited edition book and six loose-leaf portfolio editions. Plate 13, *Portrait of Cavafy II*, based on a drawing made in Beirut, was only available with certain editions. Only four of the illustrations are actually set against a Middle Eastern backdrop, for in order to capture the mood and inherent sensuality of the poetry, Hockney had decided to use his own experiences and, for the most part, the illustrations are based on intimate drawings of his friends in London. The most literal interpretation of Cavafy's lines is found in plate 3, *He Enquired After the Quality*:

He enquired after the quality of the handkerchiefs
and what they cost, in a low voice
almost stifled by desire.
And the answers that came followed suit
abstracted, in a choking voice
implying willingness.

They kept on, murmuring things about the goods – but
their sole intent: to touch each other's hands
across the handkerchiefs; to bring their faces
and their lips close together, as if by chance:
a momentary contact with their limbs.

Quickly and stealthily so that the owner of the shop sitting at the far end should not notice.

In addition to the Cavafy etchings, he had designed the sets and costumes for a production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* at the Royal Court Theatre, London, his first designs for the stage. After this extended break from painting he returned to California to pick up where he had left off. Still very much concerned with capturing the effect of light on water, swimming pools continued to be a favoured subject and *A Bigger Splash* from 1967 is perhaps the best known of the pool paintings from this period. He was drawing and painting more and more from real life, the life around him in Los Angeles, pools, portraits, homes, interiors, all painted in a more naturalistic style which would lead up to the large double portrait paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* (1970–71). He actually began preparing for this painting in early 1969, but it had to be put on hold as most of that year was to be taken up with one of his most ambitious printmaking projects, *Illustrations for Six Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm* (1969–70).

Working on illustrations of the world-famous tales collected by the German scholars and folklorists, Jakob Ludwig Karl (1778–1865) and Wilhelm Karl (1787–1859) Grimm, enabled Hockney to give full rein to his imagination. He had read all of the stories, some 350 in total, and was attracted by the simple, direct style of the writing. He had already made etchings based on the *Rumpelstiltskin* story in 1961 and again in 1962, and for the new series he planned to illustrate twelve of the tales, but finally settled on just six titles: *The Little Sea Hare*, *Fundevogel*, *Rapunzel*, *The Boy Who Left Home to Learn Fear*, *Old Rinkrank* and *Rumpelstiltskin*. In all he made over eighty etchings from which thirty-nine were published by Petersburg Press in both book and loose-leaf portfolio editions in 1970.

As with the Cavafy etchings, he largely worked directly on to the copper plates so the drawing had a spontaneous feel. He only occasionally made preliminary

drawings in order to try out ideas or for technical reasons, as for the figures in both *The Boy Hidden in an Egg* and *The Boy Hidden in a Fish*, two illustrations for the tale of *The Little Sea Hare*.

The etchings were more complex than his earlier prints and most notable was his use of the traditional engraving technique of crosshatching which, in addition to aquatint, he used for both areas of tone and in creating dense blacks. Though it was the first time he had employed the technique for his own prints, he had of course been aware of it having studied the Hogarth engravings for his *Rake's Progress* almost ten years earlier. He was to return to the Hogarth engravings again in 1974 when he brought them spectacularly to life by using the crosshatching effect on a grand scale for both the sets and costumes in his designs for a new Glyndebourne production of Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*.

Between 1973 and 1975, Hockney spent most of his time in Paris, where he began making etchings at Atelier Crommelynck, founded by the brothers Aldo and Piero Crommelynck, with whom Picasso had made prints during the last twenty years of his life. In the first three months of working at the studio, Hockney learned many etching techniques he had not known or been able to master before, including a successful way of using the 'sugar-lift' process. A variation on the traditional aquatint method, sugar-lift enables the artist to work directly on the plate with a brush using a mixture of sugar and a water-soluble medium. It is a very spontaneous way of working, much favoured by Picasso, and once processed, etched and printed, the plate can hold the tonal range of the original brush marks. Hockney made two etchings in memory of Picasso, who had died in April 1973, both prints combining different etching techniques including sugar-lift: *The Student: Homage to Picasso* (1973) and *Artist and Model* (1973–74). Aldo Crommelynck also taught Hockney his own method for making coloured etchings using just one plate rather than having to register separate plates for each colour. It was to prove something of a revelation and he made a number of multi-coloured etchings in 1974 including

Simplified Faces, an etching in five colours, which in both imagery and technique looked forward to the major suite of coloured etchings of 1976–77, *The Blue Guitar*.

The etchings were inspired by the poem, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, by American poet Wallace Stevens (1879–1955). Written in 1936, the poem had in turn been inspired by Picasso’s Blue Period painting of 1903, *The Old Guitarist*, and it is concerned with the complex relationship between art and life, imagination and the interpretation of reality. Hockney first read the poem in the summer of 1976 and immediately made a series of drawings which were to lead on to the etchings: ‘The etchings themselves were not conceived as literal illustrations of the poem but as an interpretation of its themes in visual terms.’⁷

For some time he had felt trapped by the conventions of naturalism in his painting, and the etchings provided him with the opportunity to break free of any notions of stylistic rigidity. They are filled with references to Picasso, and in both the vast array of imagery and styles, coupled with the technical virtuosity employed by Hockney, the prints pay homage to the Spanish master. He made a total of twenty etchings, each printed in a selection of five colours using the Crommelynck technique, which were published in limited portfolio editions by Petersburg Press in October 1977.

Ideas and solutions for paintings and prints often fed into each other. In addition to the number of paintings he made during the same period, which were directly related to *The Blue Guitar* etchings, references to earlier work were to be found in the prints. The curtain motif that he used for four of the prints (plate 12, *A Picture of Ourselves*; plate 14, *Etching Is the Subject*; plate 15, *Tick It, Tock It, Turn It True*; and plate 20, *What Is this Picasso?*) had been a constant device in his paintings of 1963–65; the border decoration used in the

⁷ *The Blue Guitar*, exh. cat. Petersburg Press, 1977: artist’s statement printed on the dust jacket.

title print (plate 1) refers back to California paintings of 1965 such as *Blue Interior and Two Still Lives*; and the sparsity of composition in *It Picks its Way* (plate 4) seems to have something of the same abstracted quality of a painting, two drawings and a lithograph from 1964–65, which were based on water pouring into pools.

The Blue Guitar etchings were the most recent works included in a major print retrospective which toured to ten venues in England, Scotland and Wales between January 1979 and March 1980. The exhibition covered the period 1954–77 and comprised all his prints from that time – a total of 218. Apart from three early prints made in 1954, the works were from the sixteen-year period 1961–77, and included etchings, lithographs and the one screenprint he had made for the ICA Portfolio in 1964. Although he has said, ‘I’m not a printmaker, I’m a painter who makes a few prints’,⁸ the prints from this period alone mark Hockney out as one of only a handful of major artists who have made a truly significant contribution to printmaking in the second half of the 20th century.

Hockney’s versatility and enthusiasm for working in different media continues unabated. During the 1980s, photography became an ever more important medium for him and, as the decade progressed, he began experimenting with alternative ways of picture-making, using computers, office copiers and fax machines – equipment and processes more commonly associated with information technology and the printed word. Always prepared to push his work in new directions, for his participation in the 20th São Paulo Biennial in 1989, Hockney chose to only exhibit large-scale pictures, which were simply faxed to Brazil. He later talked about the reaction to the exhibition and the ongoing nature of his work: ‘The fax show in Brazil caused quite a stir. But many people saw the philosophical side, the interesting side, the use of printing to make original works. I assume that even though people think my work is very popular, it often takes them time to see what I am really doing, to see what I

⁸ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p.294

am exploring, that it is not just a wild thing, but something that grows out of something else, and will grow into something else again.’⁹

Richard Riley

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⁹ *David Hockney That's the way I see it*, text of an edited version of taped conversations between the artist and Nikos Stangos, published by Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1993, p.204