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ART

When Harry Styles Met David Hockney: An Exclusive First Look At A Special New Portrait

A legendary painter and a pop lodestar? Sparks were inevitable. David Hockney and Harry Styles share a very special sitting with Liam Hess

BY LIAM HESS

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What's the secret to a great portrait? At 86 years old, David Hockney has a few ideas. A lifetime of looking has taught him to always start with the face. "I begin with the head first," he says, matter-of-factly, from his home in France. "From there, I place everything else."

That was his approach when, late last May, Harry Styles travelled to his light-filled studio in Normandy and stationed himself on a cane chair, ready to become the esteemed artist's latest subject. Over two days, Hockney worked to capture the exact hues of red and yellow in Styles's striped cardigan, the indigo of his jeans, the string of pearls at his neck – not to mention the unmistakable tousled fringe of one of the world's biggest pop stars. For the

artist, though, the goal was merely to capture the essence of the person in front of him. “I wasn’t really aware of his celebrity then,” Hockney says, with a shrug. “He was just another person who came to the studio.”



The pair struck up an instant rapport that was likely helped by Styles being a full-on fanboy. For his US *Vogue* cover shoot in 2020, Styles wore a pair of hand-painted Bode cords that featured a talismanic illustration of Hockney by artist Aayushia Khowala. It's also hard to imagine the wide-eyed wonder of a flamboyant Brit discovering the sunny thrills and spills of California – a theme, and sound, that has permeated the former One Direction singer's solo albums – without Hockney as a precedent. “David Hockney has been reinventing the way we look at the world for decades,” says Styles. “It was a complete privilege to be painted by him.”

The unveiling of the portrait kicks off the second iteration of the National Portrait Gallery's Hockney exhibition *Drawing From Life*, which first opened in February 2020, only to close weeks later due to the pandemic. With the addition of a new room of pictures charting Hockney's creative impulses throughout lockdown, the show returns on 2 November – a few months after a refurbishment of the entire museum – with Styles's portrait as its crown jewel. “The whole world shut down, and the exhibition was still sitting there, in the dark,” recalls Sarah Howgate, the gallery's senior curator of contemporary collections, who oversaw the exhibition in both phases. “So it's nice to know it will have another life.”



Hockney paints Harry Styles at the artist's studio in Normandy, where his portrait of Clive Davis can also be seen in the background. JP Gonçalves de Lima

The Styles painting may bring star wattage, but the unassuming genius of Hockney's portraiture is still the main exhibition draw. What makes his images tick, you quickly learn, is their honesty: whether in the tension bubbling beneath the surface of his famed double portrait of Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell, painted between 1970 and '71, or the seated figures that populated his 2016 Royal Academy of Arts exhibition, which included the likes of his own sister, Margaret, and the late comedian Barry Humphries. Hockney's eye for the human figure may be playful, often kaleidoscopic, sometimes fantastical – but it's always, most importantly, frank.

Styles's portrait will hang alongside those of writer Gregory Evans, Hockney's printer Maurice Payne, the mayor of his local town Dozulé, his gardener and even his chiropodist, or in Hockney's words, "the dandy who cuts my toenails" .

One of his more recent subjects was the eminent music producer Clive Davis, who first suggested inviting Styles to swing by. “Clive told me about Harry’s new album, and JP [Hockney’s studio assistant] sent Harry a note and asked him if he’d like to come to my studio and sit for his portrait,” Hockney remembers. “He replied straight away and said, yes, he’d love to.” From there, Hockney’s process of painting Styles was instinctive. “Everybody just came to sit,” he says, breezily, before admitting: “Now I know Harry’s a celebrity, though: I’ve seen all his music videos.”

“He’s not a traditional portrait painter,” says Howgate. Hockney’s interest is not in what people do, but rather in who they are. “He’s not interested in fame. He’s interested in depicting people and their relationships.” It’s why his eye is primarily trained on his inner circle these days – but it also pays testament to his enduring curiosity that he’s still willing to open that up to a newcomer every so often. Styles seems to know how lucky he is, adding, with a tinge of disbelief: “I’m in awe of the man with enough one-liners for a lifetime.” As to what those one-liners might be? Styles and Hockney’s mutual silence on that question suggests that what happens in the studio, stays in the studio.

David Hockney: Drawing From Life will be at the National Portrait Gallery from 2 November to 21 January 2024

https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/david-hockney-harry-styles-portrait?utm_campaign=dashhudson&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=instagram&utm_content=www.instagram.com/p/CvcW9quL8Ij/