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David Hockney gets personal: National Portrait exhibition stars friends, family and Harry Styles

Hockney's Drawing from Life exhibition puts visitors up close and personal with some of the beloved artist's most important sitters

Roisin O'Connor | 1 day ago

David Hockney's lover Gregory Evans looks on sullenly, his arms folded. "Get on with it," he seems to be saying. "I haven't got all day."

In the next room, we find him sleeping peacefully, his body curled around a pillow. He leans against a wall, nude, serene.

This is Hockney's Drawing from Life exhibition, putting visitors up close and personal with some of the British artist's most important sitters, who have posed for him as his style evolved over six decades.

One of the most prominent features of the exhibition are a series of portraits of five important treasured subjects: Evans, his former partner and curator, his friend Celia Birtwell, his mother Laura Hockney, his master printer Maurice Payne, and Hockney himself.

Over the years, some of Hockney's regular sitters appear to grow prickly when posing for him, others – such as the delicate ink-on-paper portrait of Evans sleeping – are tender and romantic.



'Gregory' (1978)
(David Hockney/National Portrait Gallery)

His 1975 nude of Evans in coloured pencil shows what the exhibitors describe as “the quintessential Renaissance ideal of beauty, often seen in 16th-century

drawings of boys, such as Raphael's drawing from Michaelangelo's sculpture of David".

Early sketches show Hockney as a schoolboy training at the Bradford School of Art, then as a student at the Royal College of Art in 1959. His switch to etching was prompted by his unchecked spending on paint materials – his first attempt, *Myself and My Heroes*, shows him alongside Mahatma Gandhi and American poet Walt Whitman.

Later, Hockney's love of Pablo Picasso transpires in *Artist and Model (1974)*, in which he imagines himself being drawn nude by the Spanish master. Hockney looks almost shadow-like thanks to his fine pencil lines and use of shading, sitting across from Picasso – brawny in one of his signature Breton shirts – painted in bold, splashy brush strokes.

“As with all drawing from life, the success of Hockney's portraits is very much down to his state of mind on the day,” [*The Independent's* critic Mark Hudson writes in his review.](#)

“The room devoted to images of his mother begins with some unremarkable works in his coloured pencil mode, before we're suddenly looking into her anxious eyes in a large crayon drawing from 1994, with the simply drawn but perfectly observed pursing of her lips speaking volumes about the anguish of old age.



Hockney painting pop star and actor Harry Styles in 2022
(JP Goncalves de Lima/National Portrait Gallery)

“Throughout the show, works that are merely so-so contrast with works that are so acutely seen they fairly ping off the wall. While you might imagine that greater quality control could be the answer, that’s not the point: it’s the sense of the whole process, the realisation that no artist gets it right every time, not even Hockney – particularly, perhaps, not Hockney – that gives the show its piquant flavour.”

In the final room of the exhibition, visitors will find Hockney’s most recent portraits of visitors – familiar and unfamiliar – to his Normandy studio. These include his study of a besuited Clive Davis, legendary record executive, and one of pop star Harry Styles in a gaudy yellow knit (the fashion-forward Hockney must have approved). Another shows Hockney’s gardener, Vincent Bocage, sitting astride his tractor.

These quick, colourful studies in acrylic on canvas, with no underdrawing, offer the opportunity for contrast with Hockney’s intent and frequently vulnerable

closeups of Evans and Birtwell. While the latter are placed in awkward positions at times, or else shown nude or in lingerie, the recent Normandy portraits are rapid studies, with the sitters appearing more formal and often in similar poses to one another.

Aged 86, Hockney remains one of the UK's most prolific artists. At the beginning of the year, he unveiled his most ambitious show to date – Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away) at Lightroom in London. The 4D immersive experience saw his paintings, photographs, drawings and collages projected onto four 11-metre-high walls.

'Self Portrait' from 2021
(David Hockney/National Portrait Gallery)

[In an interview with The Independent](#), Hockney said he has “never been busier”, with his move to Normandy serving as a creative catalyst that gave him “a new lease of life”.

“Do I have a hunger always to do new things? Yes, I do,” he said.

“Closing this five-star exhibition after just 20 days in 2020 was incredibly disappointing for the gallery and its many visitors, making this restaging of David Hockney: Drawing from Life all the more significant,” says Sarah Howgate, senior curate of contemporary collections at the National Portrait Gallery.

“Now revitalised with over 30 new energetic and insightful painted portraits of friends and visitors to the artist's Normandy studio, it is a real privilege to have the opportunity to collaborate with David Hockney again.”

David Hockney: Drawing From Life is at the National Portrait Gallery from 2 November 2023 to 21 January 2024

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/david-hockney-national-portrait-gallery-exhibition-b2439701.html>