

← Back to Original Article

L.A. Is Hooked on Hockney : Retrospective Draws Record Museum Crowds

April 22, 1988 | ZAN DUBIN

David Hockney, one of the international art world's most respected living artists, is proving his popularity with Southern California museum-goers.

Running through Sunday, the 25-year Hockney retrospective at the County Museum of Art "has been the best attended exhibition of a contemporary artist we've ever had," drawing 182,000 visitors as of last Sunday, says museum director Earl A. (Rusty) Powell.

(The museum's 1978 blockbuster, "Treasures of Tutankhamen," with 1.2 million visitors, still tops all attendance lists.)

"David Hockney: A Retrospective," which opened Feb. 4, has outdone Edward Ruscha's 1983 retrospective (150,000) and the "Avant-Garde in the '80s" (133,000), a major exhibition in 1987 staged shortly after the 1986 opening of the museum's Anderson Building.

The Hockney show also ranks as the 23-year-old museum's sixth most visited exhibition, trailing by 17,000 the fifth-place "Shogun Age," a 1983 exhibit--which Powell says "Hockney" could pass by Sunday.

The crowds are also boosting the museum's 80,000-strong membership, Powell said in a telephone interview Wednesday. He said that 895 visitors became members in March (about midway through the exhibit) while 407 joined in December.

To what does Powell attribute the show's success? "David engages people on many different levels," he said.

There's the locally appealing subject matter, Powell pointed out. The artist, who lives off Mulholland Drive in the Hollywood Hills, depicts that winding road, as well as the city's shimmering swimming pools, artists and art collectors.

There's also Hockney's references to art history, ranging from Renaissance perspective to Cubism, Powell said, plus the show's wide variety of media represented by more than 150 works. The versatile and prolific artist progressed from painted portraits, drawings and traditional graphics to theater design to photographic collages and copying machine prints.

And with a realistic sensibility, Hockney offers "a broader spectrum than abstract art does," Powell said.

Recent visitors to the exhibition, which goes next to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and then to London's Tate Gallery, seemed to support his observations.

"He's got a bunch of different styles here--that impresses me," said Shane Miller, a Redlands University art student on his second trip to the Anderson Building exhibit.

"His work is really inventive, I especially like the photo collages," said Robin Richesson, an illustrator from Long Beach. He was gazing at an image of a Japanese garden that Hockney composed of myriad individual photographs overlaid like shingles on a roof.

Said John Hosume, a USC medical student, pondering "The Snake," a 1962 painting of a coiled yellow serpent with black stripes: "It's playful, it's less serious art than you might see somewhere else."

"It really does look like L.A. to me. It's so colorful. Yeah, it's the colors," said Ron Jackson, a law firm researcher from Los Angeles.

Among those interviewed Wednesday, only one gallery-goer delivered a negative review.

"It's a little startling," said Fred Stevens, a Los Angeles resident who came with his wife Avis. "I saw some of (the exhibit) on TV and so we decided to come see it. I wouldn't come back to see it again."

But Phoebe Palmer, a painter from San Luis Obispo, said: "Hockney is great at conveying the sensuousness of everyday objects. . . . His freshness of eye in seeing these things is what I like about his work."

Devorah Knaff, a Calendar intern and graduate student at UC Irvine, contributed to this article.