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 INDEPENDENT PREMIUM

# Sprawling and spontaneous, this could be the most monumental David Hockney show any of us will see



'David Hockney 25' is imbued with the same sense of freedom and play that defines the British artist's earliest works

Mark Hudson • Wednesday 09 April 2025 17:10 BST •  1 Comment





David Hockney: 'Play Within a Play Within a Play and Me with a Cigarette' (2024-2025). Acrylic and collage on canvas  
(Jonathan Wilkinson)

**David Hockney**'s biggest ever exhibition has opened in **Paris**, with a typically optimistic quote from the man himself emblazoned over the entrance: "Do remember they can't cancel the spring." Filling four floors of the spectacular Frank Gehry-conceived Fondation Louis Vuitton in the Bois de Boulogne, and featuring immersive installations on his opera designs and longstanding preoccupations with movement and perspective, this could be the most momentous Hockney show any of us will see – including, conceivably, Britain's most popular artist himself.

Yet the fact that it focuses, at his request, on his work of the past 25 years means that the glitziest recent addition to Europe's roster of great galleries is now substantially filled with landscapes of rural **East Yorkshire**. We Brits have learnt to love Hockney's endless, sometimes quirky, sometimes conventional views of rolling cornfields and wooded lanes around the hinterland of Bridlington and Flamborough Head. But what's in it for the French person in the street? They likely won't get the faintly comic nuances the British discern in names like Bridlington – and they've got plenty of flattish, overcast countryside of their own.

Well, the huge advance interest in this exhibition (it was featured on the cover of yesterday's *Figaro*) suggests there's plenty of enthusiasm here for the work of this most quintessentially English of artists. That the French don't get every single one of his Bradford-accented pronouncements means they likely appreciate Hockney first and foremost as an artist rather than as a personality. Indeed, they may end up liking his more recent work, created in Yorkshire, and latterly closer to home – for them – in **Normandy** quite a bit more than we do.

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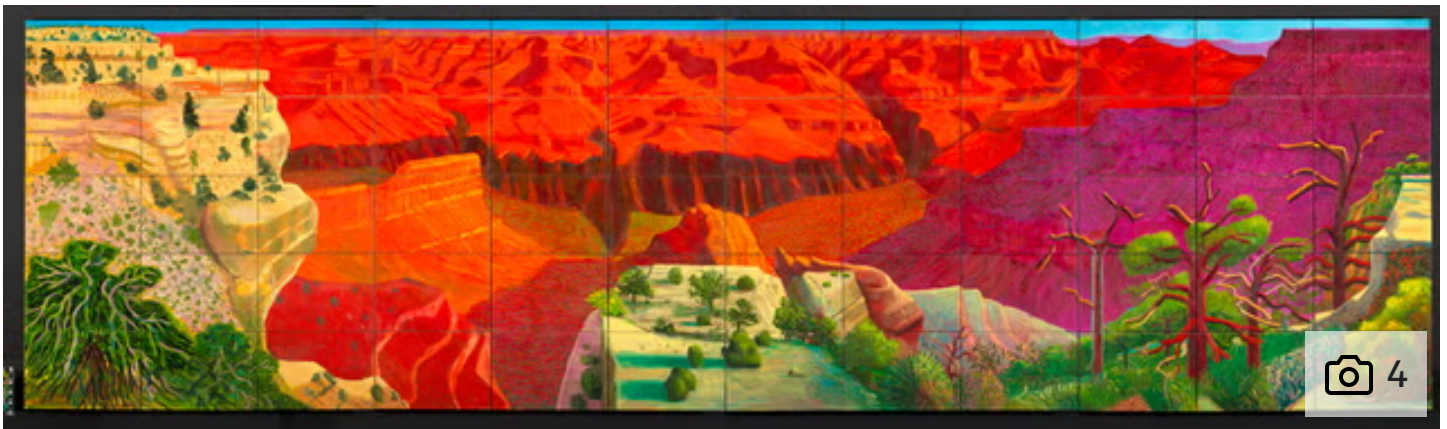
## RECOMMENDED

- **Post-its and gigantic babies, Ed Atkins's daring Tate exhibition proves he's the most interesting artist in Britain today**
  - **David Hockney on his continued passion for work ahead of his biggest show in 25 years: 'I will never stop painting'**
  - **Grayson Perry's *Delusions of Grandeur* asks not if it's great or even good art, but if it makes you laugh – and it does**
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With works from all periods to give context to Hockney's recent output, the show opens with a cracking selection of his early pieces, from a dour 1955 portrait of his father to *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* (1972), currently the world's most expensive painting by a living artist sold at auction. These are the iconic Pop Art classics, which for most British fans *are* Hockney: *A Bigger Splash* (1967), *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* (1970), *We Two Boys Together Clinging* (1961). It's rather sobering to reflect that they were painted in a relatively fleeting period of barely a decade, less than half the amount of time since Hockney moved back to Yorkshire.

Beside the feisty, playful energy of these early works, with their hyper-knowing juxtaposition of styles – from ancient Egypt to Hogarth to the Renaissance to the present – the equally iconic double portraits (including 1968's *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy*) feel more static.





David Hockney: 'A Bigger Grand Canyon' (1998) (David Hockney, Courtesy National Gallery of Australia)

But the sudden jump to the panoramic sweep of 1998's *A Bigger Grand Canyon*, with its brilliant orange rock and strip of turquoise sky surging across 60 canvases, shows there was absolutely no dip in ambition – certainly in terms of scale – over the intervening three decades, or indeed up to now.

Yet 12 Yorkshire landscapes arranged together in a large rectangle are so surprisingly conventional, I doubt most viewers would give them a second glance if they weren't by Hockney. *Winter Timber* (2009), however, shows Hockney back on his customary territory, playing with our expectations of colour and space. Turquoise tree trunks clash with a brilliant mauve pathway across the huge 15-canvas painting, with brilliant yellow logs cutting through the middle like a trail of discarded chips.

Even better is *The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire* (2011), an 8ft-high assemblage of four iPad drawings, which I hadn't seen before. The rain falling through the foreground is rendered in a stylised graphic form derived from Japanese prints, while the recession of the pathway beyond through areas of light and dark is classically European – and all flawlessly executed. Just when you think Hockney has gone a bit safe, he pulls something startlingly brilliant out of the bag. It's a pattern that runs throughout the show, just as it has done throughout his career.



On previous showings, I've struggled to get excited by Hockney's recent portraits, which seem to fall between the experimental and the conventional, with neither aspect being pushed to the limit. The diptych *Sid and Joni* (2005) links back to his 1970s double portraits, with Joni's arm disappearing humorously into the joint between the two canvases, while Sid appears to be photographing us. But it has none of the haunting suggestiveness of those earlier works. Later efforts, such as *Harry Styles* (2023), with the singer in a red-striped cardigan, fall into lazy semi-caricature that only Hockney could get away with – not because they're good, but because they're by Hockney.

Fifteen iPad self-portraits give a much-needed lift to the spirits: each in a different style, from cartoon to meticulous, with Hockney grimacing and gurning, sending up his everyday exasperations to hilarious effect. The wall texts note his capacity for "self-derision", while pointing out that he is "always kind" in his portrayals of others. Perhaps if he'd been a little bit less kind, some of those other paintings would've been more interesting.

A roomful of landscapes produced under lockdown around his farmhouse in Normandy, where he moved in 2015, are so flat and lacking in texture they could be iPad drawings. Oh sorry, they *are* iPad drawings. That said, they are intriguing for the way Hockney uses the backlit glow of the screen to evoke the effects of real daylight. The use of artificial patterning to teasingly replicate natural textures is typically Hockney, whether it's wiggling horizontal lines to stand in for grass or blotchy cherry blossoms that look as though they've been applied with a mechanical stamp; both are, of course, completely digital. Even the apparently chocolate-boxy *27th April 2020, No. 1*, with its pink and orange sunset, proves to be an essay in deconstructed mark-making when you get up close. The spectres of Van Gogh and Edvard Munch, two long-standing Hockney heroes, wander into these images in the muscular outline of orange, cherry and magenta tree trunks.





David Hockney: '27th April 2020, No. 1' (2020) (David Hockney)

There are much more ambitious homages to other artists on the fourth and last floor of the show, including a gigantic take on Claude Lorrain's relatively subdued *Sermon on the Mount*, from New York's Frick collection. Hockney's Christ preaches from the top of an enormous acid-orange outcrop to an audience of applauding shepherds. It's hard not to laugh at the sheer bonkers hubris. But then humour has played a central role in Hockney's art from the beginning, in the form of puns and games with visual language, quipping nods to other artists and the marrying of incongruous styles. That was what made his early Pop Art experiments so arresting. And he's still doing it now, not least in his most recent work in the show, *Play Within a Play Within a Play and Me with a Cigarette* (2024-2025), in which the 87-year-old portrays himself as a rather goofy figure in yellow framed glasses and a tartan suit, drawing the picture we're looking at, which, of course, contains the same image.

It's wonderful to lie on cushions in the opera section with Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* blasting as Hockney's blue-tinged stage designs flood the walls, and it's certainly intriguing to see his large-scale film and photographic explorations of

pictorial space. Yet, Hockney always feels most himself at his most intimate: when it's just him – and us – with his sketchbook, paints or iPad.

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## RECOMMENDED

- [Paris Metro bans David Hockney exhibition poster because artist is holding cigarette](#)
  - [David Hockney on why he will never stop painting ahead of his biggest show in years](#)
  - [Ed Atkins is the most interesting artist working in Britain today – review](#)
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Looking at this show's apparently endless, rapidly executed views of Yorkshire and Normandy, one might be tempted to wonder if Hockney would have been better served spending more time on fewer works. But then he'd have lost the sense of spontaneity, freedom and play that allow him to stream out throwaway visual gags: gravel drives like Seurat, writhing walls like Van Gogh, muddy rain like Hokusai. Hockney has made many of us laugh with his pronouncements to camera and radio, but even if you're not British or you don't speak English, his best jokes are in his paintings, where no words are needed.

*'David Hockney 25' is at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, from 9 April until 31 August; the accompanying book, 'David Hockney' edited by Norman Rosenthal, is published by Thames & Hudson in association with Fondation Louis Vuitton on 10 April*

