

ART REVIEW

It's Springtime in Paris for David Hockney

A huge new exhibition at the Louis Vuitton Foundation is a late-career retrospective with a sense of new beginnings.



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By Emily LaBarge

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Inside and outside the soaring spaces of the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris, everything is in bloom. “Do remember they can’t cancel the spring,” reads a pink neon sign above the museum’s entrance — a hopeful phrase that the English artist David Hockney sent to his friends, along with a drawing of daffodils, during the coronavirus pandemic.

The foundation’s exhibition, “David Hockney 25” is the painter’s largest to date. While its title indicates a focus on his most recent 25 years of work, it feels like an overview of his whole career. It’s a joyful vision, and a record, of a life in art lived with passionate curiosity, attention to the human condition and reverence for the natural world.

Born in 1937 in Bradford, an industrial town in northern England, Hockney started painting at a young age and impressed locals with a 1955 portrait of his father. The small canvas, tightly composed and painted in muted tones, is a far cry from the huge, raucously colored works that have come to define Hockney’s oeuvre. But it brims with a painstaking humanity, captured in his father’s alert expression, his tightly clasped hands and his energetic posture.

This work opens the exhibition, whose first two rooms lead viewers through Hockney's quick, and frankly astonishing, evolution as a painter. Works he made in London during the late 1950s and early '60s mix styles and aesthetics with abandon. Pop mingles with postwar European "art informel"; graffiti and collage stray into surrealist critiques of domesticity.



A room of portraits hung salon style teems with faces and forms painted in wildly different styles, a testament to Hockney's range as well as his sensitivity. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Even as homosexuality was illegal in the Britain (it was decriminalized for men over 21 in 1967), Hockney painted relationships between men. "Berlin: A Souvenir" (1962) shows a hedonistic abstraction of male figures — nude, in silhouette, about to embrace — merging and indistinct as forms. "Two Men in a Shower" (1963) and

“Boy About to Take a Shower” (1964) show their subjects in intimate moments, naked bodies rendered in impressionistic flesh tones, as if colored by emotion or desire.

When he lived in Los Angeles, from 1964 to 1998, Hockney produced some of his best-known portraits: romantic pairs, erotic interiors and outdoor scenes painted with clarity, bathed in soft California light. A 1968 painting, “Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy,” shows the writer Isherwood and his partner in matching armchairs. Bachardy’s head is turned toward Isherwood, in a scene of stunning tranquillity that mixes loosely painted figures with detailed surroundings.

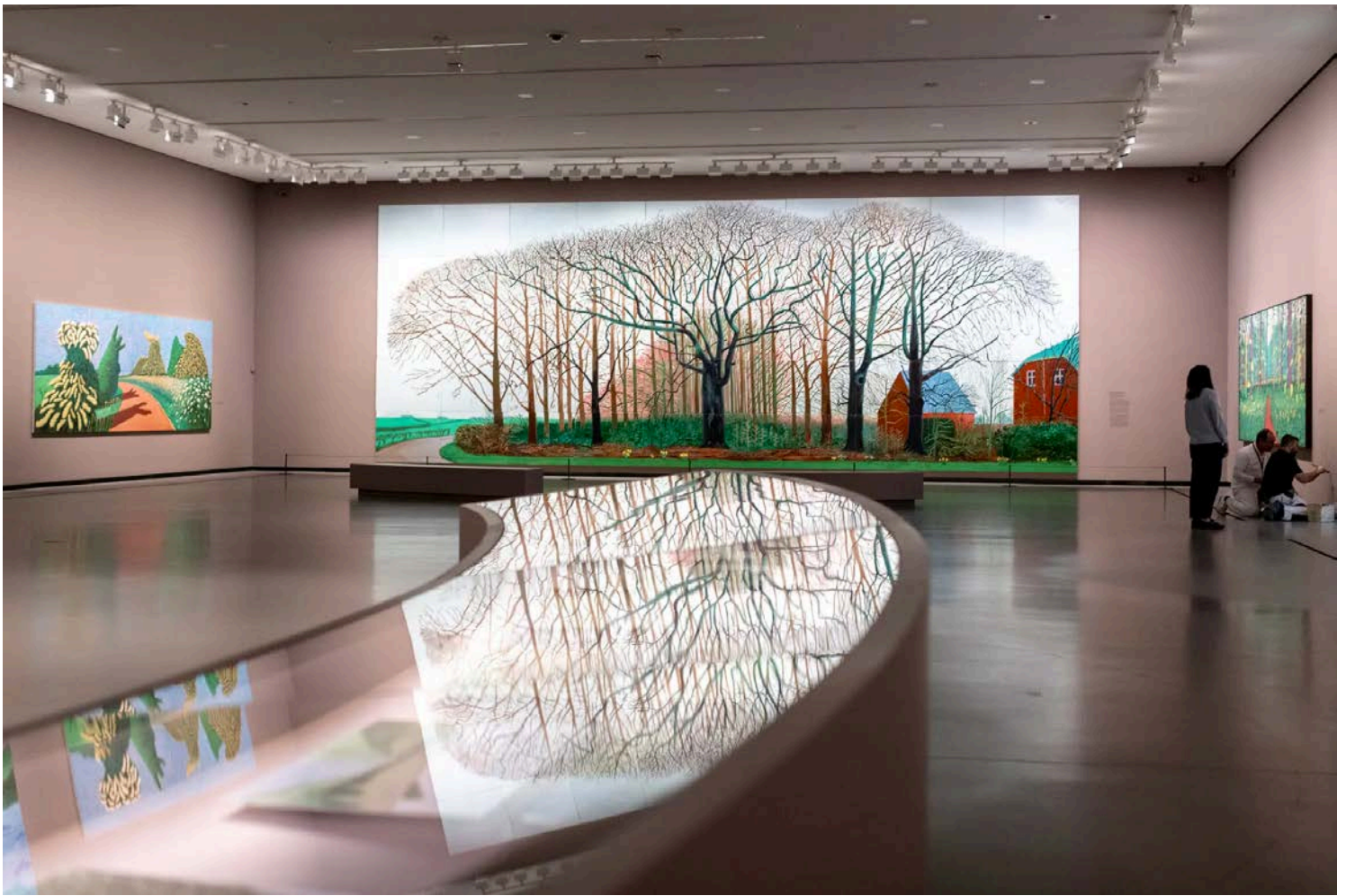


The exhibit features some of Hockney’s most famous paintings, including “A Bigger Splash,” center.
Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

“A Bigger Splash” (1967) has the same beguiling flatness and Los Angeles palette, but here the figure has disappeared, and we see only its wake. A giant spray of water rises from the otherwise placid surface of a blue pool. We never see who plunged in just seconds before.

The essence of Hockney’s work is the attempt to capture the animating force of life — in the faces of friends and loved ones, or in a blossoming tree, changing season or night sky. Just before the turn of the century, Hockney moved back to Yorkshire County, where he grew up. He stayed for a little more than a decade, turning his eye to the familiar, inexhaustible landscape of his childhood. In these paintings, hills roll, roads twist and turn, trees shed and sprout foliage, fields are golden and russet patchworks, light illuminates dense forests in otherworldly crimson and fuchsia.

A series of paintings of hawthorn trees in blossom show the flowers surging in dense, roiling masses, pouring along the roadside. A wall text for “Hawthorn Blossom Near Rudston” (2008) describes Hockney’s obsession with the hawthorn’s annual blooming, which arrives unpredictably at a moment he calls “action week.” At its appearance each year, no matter where he was at the time, the artist would drop everything to return to Yorkshire and paint the bountiful white flower, frothing, Hockney has said, like “champagne poured over everything.”



Technicians putting the finishing touches on the exhibition on Monday, before the show opened on Wednesday. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Despite their British settings, the otherworldly hues and writhing lines of works like “Felled Trees,” “Bigger Trees Near Warter” (both 2008) and “Untitled No. 2 (The Arrival of Spring)” (2011), recall the Post-Impressionism of Vincent Van Gogh, or the symbolism of Maurice Denis. Both artists, like Hockney, believed that nature possessed infinite inspiration, and that any single view holds within it the entirety of the world: One must simply look.

A room of portraits hung salon style presents the human figure as equally compelling. The walls teem with faces and forms painted in wildly different styles, a testament to Hockney’s range as well as his sensitivity. In “Charlie Scheips” (2005), the subject, an American curator, leans casually against a wall, the lines of his body painted energetically with a realist, Alice Neel quality. “Margaret Hockney, 14 February 2013,” shows Hockney’s sister, carefully sketched in charcoal.

The artist himself peers out at us from “Self Portrait, 20th June 2022,” customarily bespectacled and dressed in flashy attire, a wry smile on his face as if to say, “I’m still here.”

Hockney’s lavish attention to surface and detail make the exhibit’s transition to his many “iPad paintings,” his computer drawings printed on paper, and his oddly conceived 3-D drawings somewhat jarring.

A collection of 220 iPad works called “Four Years in Normandy” (2019-23) are the most persuasive: A room of prints big and small, as well as screens with shifting images, harness the restlessness of the pandemic lockdown years, and show Hockney working at great speed en plein-air. A grid of 15 self-portraits from 2012 is likewise affecting — a reminder that the self, too, is relentlessly fluid.



Over a 70-year career, Hockney has produced portraits, landscapes and still lifes in paint, charcoal, Polaroids, video and using an iPad — all of which are included in the Louis Vuitton Foundation show.

Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

In other parts of the show, Hockney's use of technology seems random at best, or lazy at worst, if only because most of his work is so considered and exquisite.

A trio of ungainly "photographic drawings" from 2018 are effectively experiments in Photoshop. Each shows a large room filled with people sitting or standing, sometimes in conversation, sometimes lost in contemplation. The technological process used to model each figure, a wall text says, forces us to observe them more closely, "unlike traditional photography." Another text, for a video of roadside foliage made with multiple cameras, compares the work to Dürer's botanical studies. Maybe. Or maybe not.

But alongside these forays, Hockney is still, fortunately painting. The exhibit ends with a series of new works inspired by Edvard Munch and William Blake, both of whom painted transcendent visions of the world. "Play Within a Play Within a Play and Me With a Cigarette" (2025) shows Hockney in his London garden. He is hard at work on a version of the very image we see before us. Though the trees are still bare, the daffodils, to his left are in bloom. It must be spring.

David Hockney 25

Through Aug. 31 at the Louis Vuitton Foundation, in Paris; fondationlouisvuitton.fr.