

David Hockney Wants His Biggest Ever Show to Bring You Joy

The artist is 87 now and under constant medical care. But he was determined to make it to Paris for the exhibition of his life.



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Reporting from Paris and London

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Two years ago, when the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris approached David Hockney about staging a blockbuster retrospective of his work, he assumed he would not be around to see it open.

“Even last year, I thought I wouldn’t be here,” Hockney, now 87 and wheelchair-bound, said in a recent video interview. “But I still am,” he added, with satisfaction.

A few weeks before the opening of the show — called “David Hockney 25,” and set to be one of the most talked-about European art shows of the spring — Hockney was in his London studio, wearing a mint green cardigan and canary yellow glasses that perfectly matched his tie.

When he lit a cigarette, a nurse in blue scrubs appeared over his shoulder, peering at Hockney with apparent concern. But by staying silent, the nurse respected the buttons that both he and Hockney wore, reading “End Bossiness Soon.” The artist made those after the British government banned smoking in public spaces in 2007.

These days, Hockney has 24-hour medical care, and ensuring that he will be well enough to go to Paris for the exhibition opening has been a priority for his team. He planned to travel by car, with his dachshund, Tess; his doctor would travel separately, he said.

“I am looking forward to it, because it is the largest exhibition I’ve ever had. Which it should be,” Hockney said with a wry smile. “Shouldn’t it, really?”

Hockney is still working as often as his health allows, and over a 70-year career, he has produced portraits, landscapes and still lifes in paint, charcoal, Polaroids, video and using an iPad, as well as created multimedia installations.

“David Hockney 25,” which opens April 9 and runs through Aug. 31, features more than 400 works, on loan from over 40 private and institutional collections. It fills all the rooms of the Louis Vuitton Foundation — though, as Norman Rosenthal, the show’s curator, said: “We could double it in size, and still use all different works.”



Hockney's "A Bigger Splash" (1967), acrylic on canvas. David Hockney via Louis Vuitton Foundation

Rosenthal first met Hockney in 1971, when the artist — with his bleached-blond hair, trendy friends and luminous portraits — was already a darling of the London art world. But it was only in curating this show, Rosenthal said, that he “really discovered” Hockney as an artist. His work is “bottomless,” Rosenthal said, adding, “He’s the artist I would most compare to Picasso.”

Like Picasso, Hockney has become one of the most recognizable artists of his time by always playing by his own rules, Rosenthal said. Picasso's late-period works were often dismissed, during his lifetime and afterward; in recent years, some of Hockney's iPad work has also had a mixed reception.

"There are people in the art world who think he's not very good," and are suspicious of his popularity, "same as Picasso," Rosenthal said. "But time will tell."

Hockney said he wanted visitors to take away just one thing from the retrospective: "Joy, some real joy!" To encourage this, on the exterior of the Frank Gehry-designed Louis Vuitton Foundation, visitors will be greeted by illuminated neon pink handwriting — Hockney's own — snaking up from the entrance. "Do remember," it says, "they can't cancel the spring."

Suzanne Pagé, the Louis Vuitton Foundation's artistic director, said Hockney's outlook could be paradoxical. He is a "great thinker" who has expounded new theories on art history, she said, and yet, "when he looks at spring, it is like a child discovering it for the first time."

The show celebrates both aspects of the artist. Unlike some of his previous retrospectives, including the 2017 show that started at Tate Britain in London, then headed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Pompidou Center in Paris, Hockney was closely involved in each stage of planning "David Hockney 25."



"Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)" (1972), acrylic on canvas. David Hockney via Louis Vuitton Foundation; Photo By Jenni Carter/Art Gallery Of New South Wales

The artist was meticulous about selecting the vibrant blue, red and yellow paint for the gallery walls, Pagé said, as well as closely editing a newspaper that accompanies the exhibition. (Thames and Hudson has also published a book.) To plan the show with Rosenthal, Hockney used dozens of 3-D models of the museum spaces.

The first two rooms host Hockney's greatest hits of the 20th century, including "Portrait of My Father" (1955), the first painting he ever sold; "Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy" (1970-71), his double portrait of the designers Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell; the quintessentially Californian swimming pool paintings "A Bigger Splash" (1967) and "Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)" (1972); and his nearly 25-foot-wide celebration of American landscape, "A Bigger Grand Canyon" (1998).

“From the beginning, he was brave and provocative,” Pagé said. These early rooms also include paintings that explicitly reference homosexuality, like “We Two Boys Together Clinging,” which Hockney made at art school in the early 1960s, when homosexual acts between men were still illegal in England. In the exhibition, “A Bigger Splash” hangs next to “The Room, Tarzana” (1967), which shows Hockney’s then-partner Peter Schlesinger lying face down on a bed, naked from the waist down.



“Portrait of My Father” (1955), oil on canvas. David Hockney via Louis Vuitton Foundation; Photo by Richard Schmidt

This will be the first time all these early pictures have been in the same space, according to Jonathan Wilkinson, the artist’s longtime assistant.

Most of those works were created in London and Los Angeles. Yet, as the show's title suggests, the bulk of the show is made up of works from the last 25 years, many of them from when Hockney escaped urban living for less populated settings in Yorkshire, England, and Normandy, France.

Hockney grew up in Bradford, in the county of Yorkshire, northern England. After art school in London, he traveled widely, and spent more than three decades living in Los Angeles. In the '90s, he started spending a lot of time back in Yorkshire, and in the mid-2000s, he moved into a house there, in the seaside town of Bridlington.

But Hockney didn't paint the sea. Instead, he headed inland, drawn to painting the Yorkshire Wolds, the rolling hills of the county that are "one of the last great, unspoiled areas of England," according to Christopher Simon Sykes, the author of a two-volume biography of Hockney, who also grew up in Yorkshire.



Hockney in his London studio in 2023. JP Gonçalves de Lima

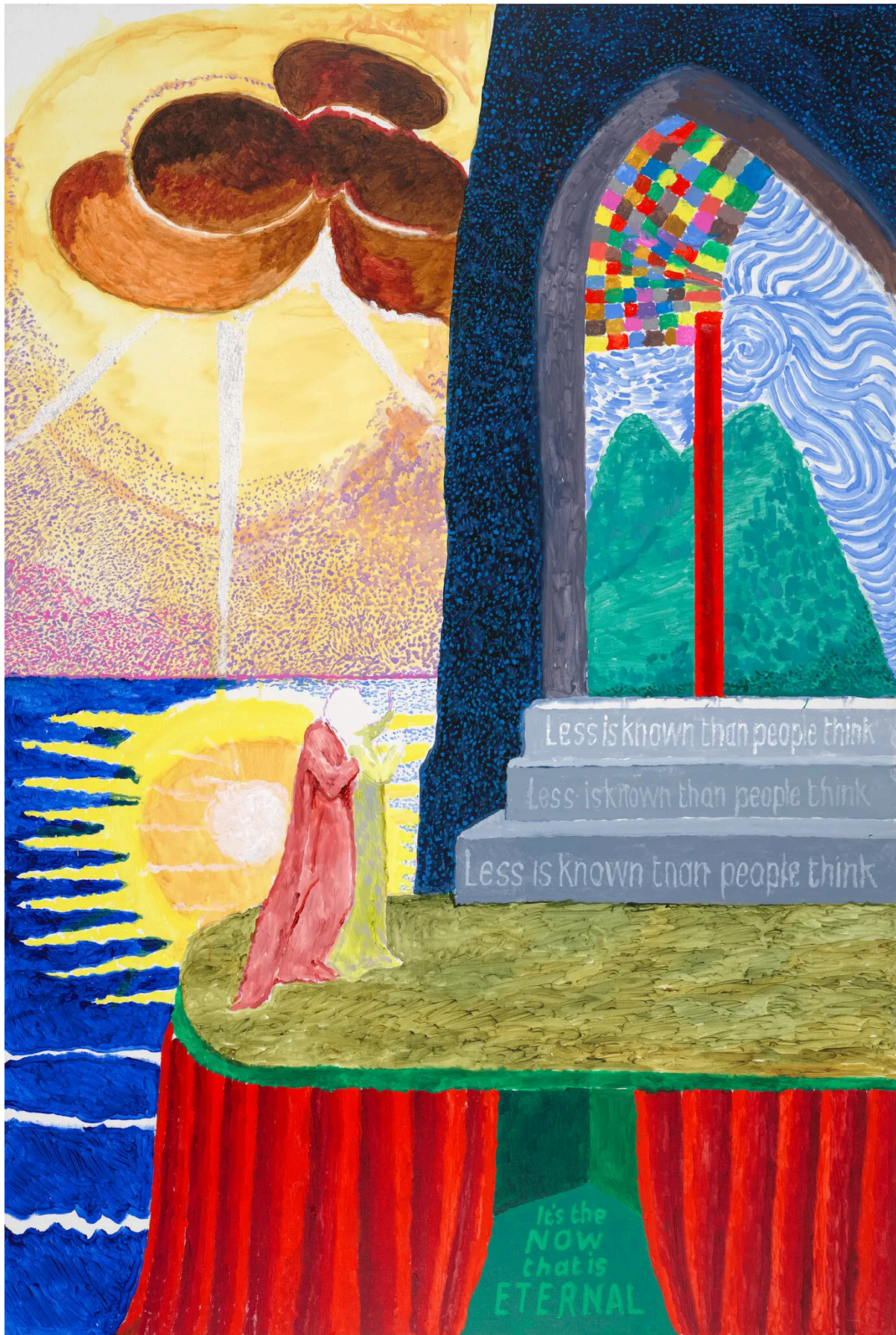
The great landscape artists of the 19th century returned again and again to certain English landscapes: Suffolk for John Constable; the banks of the river Thames for J.M.W. Turner. But no famous artists had felt that drawn to the Wolds, where fields crisscross the chalk hills under enormous skies.

For a decade, Hockney painted the area en plein air, translating the landscape into playful, richly hued pictures with twisting perspectives. “He became a well-known figure in the area,” Simon Sykes said. “People got used to seeing this figure, sitting in the middle of nowhere with an easel, with several canvases perched on other easels, painting away.”

Extending earlier experiments with Polaroid cameras, fax machines and photocopiers in the '80s, in 2010 Hockney started drawing pastoral Yorkshire scenes on his iPad — which allowed him to work much more quickly than paint — and in videos taken by multiple cameras mounted on his car.

At the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Hockney's love of innovative technology bleeds into his other passions. In a cavernous room that Pagé called a “cathedral to music,” some of Hockney's set and costume designs for opera will be transformed into an immersive, child-friendly installation. In another gallery, 18 screens flanked by mirrors show dancers performing in Hockney's studio, choreographed by Wayne Sleep. Visitors are encouraged to join in.

On a visit to the museum three weeks before the opening, installation had started in a room with freshly painted royal blue walls that will be devoted to Hockney's recent portraits. He has always painted what he sees around him — “Looking has been my greatest joy all my life,” he said — and that has included capturing the people close to him again and again.



“After Blake: Less is Known than People Think” (2024), acrylic on canvas. David Hockney via Louis Vuitton Foundation; Photo By Jonathan Wilkinson

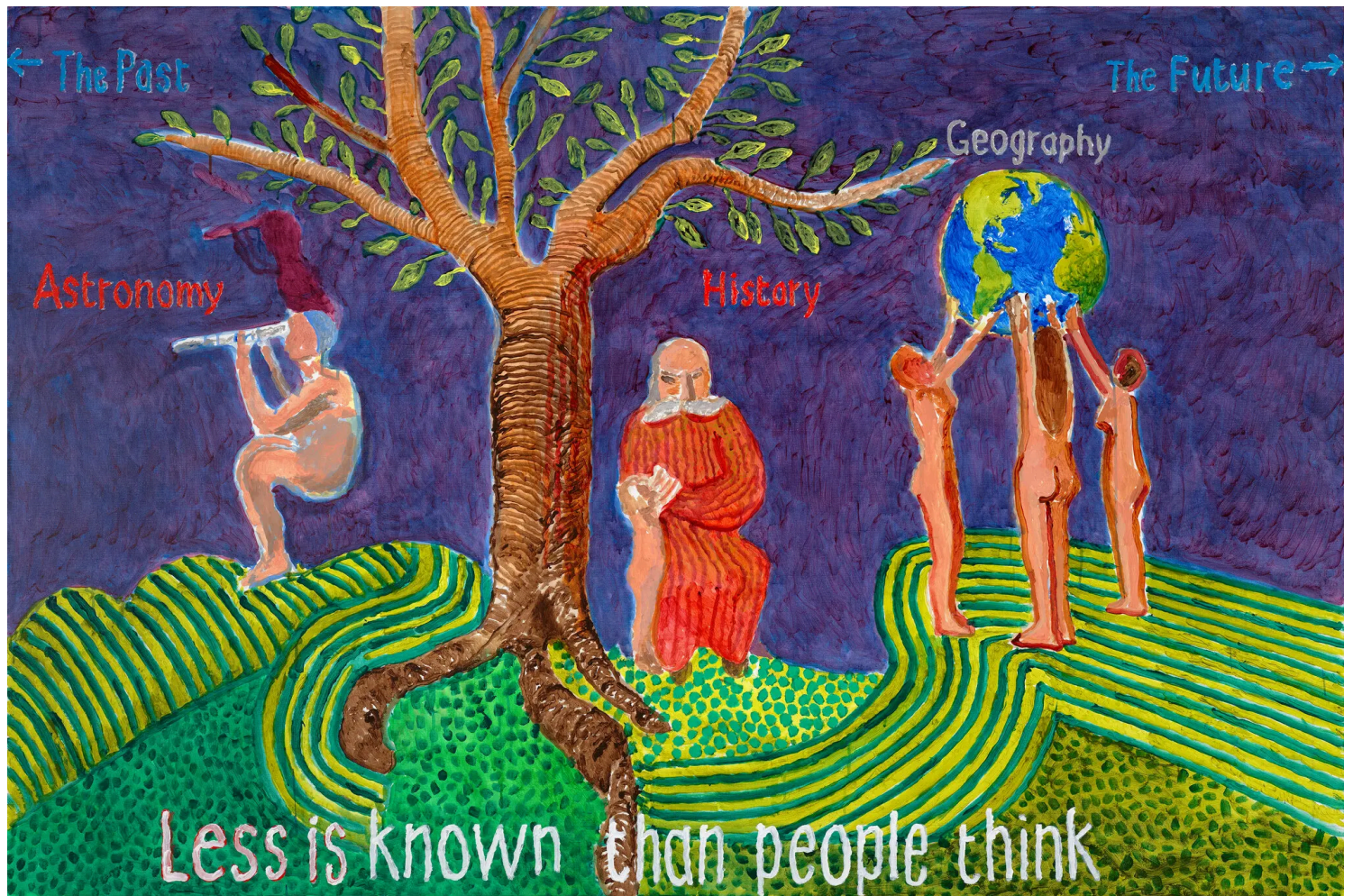
“His work is his diary,” said Birtwell, the textile designer depicted in “Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy,” who has been Hockney’s friend for six decades. A more recent portrait of her, from 2023, hung on a blue wall, near depictions of Hockney’s husband, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima; Frank Gehry; Harry Styles; and two of the artist’s nurses.

Sitting for a Hockney portrait was “rather intense,” said Birtwell, who has been painted by the artist dozens of times. Without music or other distractions for the sitter, it’s “just him and his facial expressions,” she added. But in capturing her over the decades, Hockney had “really seen the point of me in a very different way to anybody else,” Birtwell said.

If there has been a tension in Hockney’s practice over the decades, it was between “his sociability, and his wanting to be in the studio all the time,” said Martin Gayford, a critic who has coauthored several books with the artist. More recently, though, Hockney’s hearing has declined, making it hard for him to be in noisy spaces, and he doesn’t go out much. (He does, though, sometimes go and see London exhibitions in the evening, once they have closed to the public.)

So when, in 2019, he decamped to rural Normandy, the seclusion appealed to Hockney — as did the prospect of painting spring’s arrival. When the pandemic also arrived, he and his team lived and worked in more isolation than expected, but got “a hell of a lot of work done,” said Wilkinson, the assistant.

Hockney “works all the time,” Wilkinson added, and so to be on his team, “you’ve got to be really committed.” Hockney’s staff doesn’t necessarily take weekends or holidays off, and discussions of the work often stretches into the evenings.



“After Munch: Less is Known that People Think” (2023), acrylic on canvas. David Hockney via Louis Vuitton Foundation; Photo By Jonathan Wilkinson

Hockney needed help from his assistants in the studio as he created three new works that close out the show: a 2024 self-portrait of the artist in his London garden; and “After Blake” (2024) and “After Munch” (2023), two ambiguous scenes inspired by part of a headline he once saw in The New York Times: “Less Is Known Than People Think.”

“These last paintings are very much about being at the end of life,” said Rosenthal, the curator.

In the interview, Hockney said that he hoped his work would “survive for a little bit after me.” He had assembled a small, close-knit team of collaborators — including his husband and Wilkinson — whom he trusted to oversee exhibitions after he died, he said.

For now, though, there is always painting.

Hockney said he had heard recently that some artists can't work for months after they have a retrospective. "Well, I've had about six or something, and I don't care. I just go on with my work," he said. "When I come back from Paris, I'm going to carry on painting." Opposite his desk in his studio were two new portraits, standing on easels and waiting to be finished.

David Hockney 25

April 9 through Aug. 31 at the Louis Vuitton Foundation, in Paris; fondationlouisvuitton.fr.

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