

FIRST NIGHT | VISUAL ART

David Hockney: Drawing from Life review — portraits to break your heart

A rough and ready depiction of Harry Styles is the least interesting thing in a collection that captures the 86-year-old artist's astonishing draughtsmanship



David Hockney's Self Portrait, 22nd November 2021; Celia Carennac, August 1971
JONATHAN WILKINSON; RICHARD SCHMIDT COLLECTION; THE DAVID HOCKNEY FOUNDATION

★★★★☆

The first David Hockney you meet in this exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery is a scowling schoolboy. He is 16 or 17. Thick specs. Mop of hair down to his eyebrows. Oversized scarf (red), thickly knotted tie (yellow). It's a self-portrait in collage: glossy magazine tearings for the face and clothes, the dullest of brown financial newsprint for the background. A snippet beside Hockney's ear reads: "The rhythm of industrial expansion has been maintained during the year, chiefly with funds received from the Government and from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development with the guarantee of the State." If the paper stands for everything dull, numerical and old (bowler) hat, the colourful boy wonder, with his torn edges and rough-cut features, is youth, art and anarchy.



Harry Styles, May 31st
JONATHAN WILKINSON

That cross, cut-out student is now David Hockney, 86, Royal Academician, Companion of Honour and bona fide national treasure. He's the artist who had crowds queueing round the courtyard of the Royal Academy in 2012, who sold out Tate Britain in 2017 and who is packing them in at all-day screenings at [the Lightroom in King's Cross](#). This show will be a hit — it's Hockney! With Harry Styles! — but does it deserve to be?

Drawing from Life opened in the spring of 2020 for 20 days before the pandemic forced lockdown. The National Portrait closed for its makeover and, three years later, here we are again: Hockney, the comeback kid. It's a catch-all title and all sorts get swept up in the net. Principally, it's an examination of Hockney's portraits of five sitters: his mother, Laura Hockney; his friend the fashion designer Celia Birtwell; his former partner and curator Gregory Evans; his master printer Maurice Payne; and the artist himself. But there's also *A Rake's Progress* — great stuff but hardly faithful to life — and such charming oddities as a collection of Carmen hair rollers exploding out of their box, drawn in felt-tip circa 1980. A film shows Hockney leafing through a 2019 Los Angeles and Normandy sketchbook. On the checked tablecloth in the background is a packet of cigarettes, the “smoking kills” label clear for all to see. These pages are just jottings, but what jottings. What facility, what a gift for getting to the heart of things, whether it's an electric toothbrush charging in the corner of a room or a Normandy garden gleaming like the Emerald City in the sunshine after a downpour.



Celia Carennac, August 1971

RICHARD SCHMIDT COLLECTION/ THE DAVID HOCKNEY FOUNDATION

Hockney, turning up in yellow Crocs to meet the King or wearing red, blue and green to a premiere, might lead you to believe he's a colourist. But it's the draughtsmanship that astonishes. The grace of line in his ink sketch of Birtwell in Paris in 1969, the elegant yet agitated penmanship of a drawing of Evans in Rome in 1974, the scrupulous economy of a portrait of his mother in her chair at home in Bradford in 1972. Most moving are the Laura portraits. A caption tells us that Laura Hockney would always from his earliest schooldays not only sit for her son but sit *still*. The sepia ink sketch of Laura, wearing her hat and coat indoors (top button done up), on the day of her husband Kenneth Hockney's funeral, is haunting. It was February and

the lines around her face capture the cold. A pinched, skin-shrinking day. Hockney is brilliant (brutal) at ageing skin. Jaws don't just sag, they subside.



Gregory, 1978

RICHARD SCHMIDT; THE DAVID HOCKNEY FOUNDATION

In the final room are 33 new portraits painted in Hockney's Normandy studio after lockdown lifted, among them Hockney's gardener, his gallerist and Harry Styles (squeee!). Styles isn't Hockney's finest hour — none of the 33 are. They are billed as “painted drawings” and that's all they are: the visual equivalent of keepie-uppies, high-intensity drawing training. They're done in acrylic and the flesh tones are almost uniformly the pink of a boiled lobster sunburn. Harry will pull in the crowds, but it's Laura who'll break your heart.

The exhibition runs from November 2 to January 21, [npg.org.uk](https://www.npg.org.uk)

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/david-hockney-drawing-from-life-review-portraits-to-break-your-heart-z87wrqz8j>

