

David Hockney's iPad art

David Hockney explains why the iPhone and iPad inspire him.



A landscape painted on David Hockney's iPad

By Martin Gayford

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One day last summer I got a text message from David Hockney. It read: “I’ll send you today’s dawn this afternoon, an absurd sentence I know, but you know what I mean.” Later on it duly arrived: pale pink, mauve and apricot clouds drifting over the Yorkshire coast in the first light of a summer’s day. It was as delicate as a Turner, luminous as stained glass and as hi-tech as any art being made in the world today. Hockney had drawn it on his iPhone.



Landscape painted on David Hockney's iPad

He first started using that Apple gadget in late 2008. Since then he has produced hundreds of drawings on his iPhone and – beginning last spring – on his iPad, too. Some of these will go on show next week in an exhibition David Hockney: Fleurs Fraîches at the Fondation Pierre Bergé - Yves Saint Laurent, Paris (Oct 21 to Jan 30).

The title comes from one of Hockney’s favourite sayings from the first half of last year. “I draw flowers every day on my iPhone,” he told me then, “and send them to my friends, so they get fresh flowers every morning. And my flowers last. Not only can I draw them as if in a little sketchbook, I can also then send them to 15 or 20 people who then get them that morning when they wake up.”

The novelty of what he has been doing is two-fold. Firstly, this is a new medium with fresh possibilities, requiring unorthodox techniques. Hockney executed the drawings mainly with the edge of his thumb; you can’t use the thumbnail, he says, because the device is sensitive to heat, not just touch. The second innovation is in the method of distribution. He sends these techno-sketches out to friends, who may then pass them on, collect them or do whatever they want.

Each image as it appears on another iPhone or laptop is virtually identical to the original, although Hockney points out that even with a manufactured item such as this, there will probably be minute differences. Even so, the drawing on my phone not only looks like the one on his, digitally and in almost every respect it is the same. This is profoundly subversive of the art market as we know it, with its focus on the signed original work.

[Hockney's iPad art \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturepicturegalleries/8066826/David-Hockney-iPad-art-in-pictures.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturepicturegalleries/8066826/David-Hockney-iPad-art-in-pictures.html)

[Hockney's art goes under hammer \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8458938/Hockneys-art-goes-under-the-hammer.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8458938/Hockneys-art-goes-under-the-hammer.html)

Hockney first discovered the iPhone during the winter of 2008. “I was fascinated by it, because I think it’s a stunning visual tool,” he says. “It took a while to master how to get thicker and thinner lines, transparency and soft edges. But then I realised that it had marvellous advantages.” He uses an app called Brushes. “People keep sending me new drawings apps to try out, but once you get used to one it’s sufficient.”

Flowers were a frequent subject, especially of Hockney's iPhone drawings from 2009. His partner, John Fitzherbert, would buy a different bouquet every day – roses, lilies, lilacs – and often Hockney would sketch them. The real subject, however, was light. The other persistent motif was the sun – breaking through the shutters, sparkling on the glass of a vase, rising over the beach.

“The fact that the screen is illuminated makes you choose luminous subjects, or at least I did,” he says. “Dawn is about luminosity and so is the iPhone. People send me iPhone drawings which look OK, but you realise that they are not picking particularly luminous subjects – which this medium is rather good at [in ways that] another medium isn't.”

A lot of these little works were done in the early hours of the morning, as Hockney explained. “I've got this lovely bedroom window, and the flowers are there and the light's changing.” The location is the north-east coast of Britain. For much of the past seven years, Hockney has been living in the seaside town of Bridlington, after having spent the previous quarter of a century based in Los Angeles.

The big difference between the two places, as Hockney sees it, is climatic. In southern California, there is only a small degree of seasonal variation; in Northern Europe it's massive. During the dark winter the day is short, in high summer it begins to get light in the early hours of the morning.

“If you're in my kind of business you'd be a fool to sleep through that, especially if you live right on the east coast, where there are no mountains or buildings to block the sun. Artists can't work office hours, can they?”

In high summer Hockney wakes sometimes at 3.30 or 4 in the morning. “I go to bed when the sun goes down and wake when it starts getting light, because I leave the curtains open,” he told me in June last year. “The little drawings of the dawn are done while I'm still in bed. That's the window I see and the shutters. If there are some clouds about, you get drama – the red clouds, the light underneath.

This is not the first time that Hockney has turned new technology to the age-old purposes of art. “Anyone who likes drawing and mark-making,” he thinks, “will like to explore new media.”

In the mid-1980s he bought one of the first colour photocopying machines and used it to create a series of works entitled Hand-Made Prints. A few years later, he did the same with the fax. He sent whole exhibitions down the line to be printed out and assembled on arrival. The fax, he joked at the time, was a telephone for the deaf (he is himself increasingly handicapped by deafness).

In both these cases, and now with iPhone and iPad, Hockney worked with the strengths and limitations of the device. Approaching the fax, he recalls: “People said it was just a bad printing machine. But I think there is no such thing as a bad printing machine. It either prints or it doesn't. Most people were asking it to reproduce things it has difficulty with.”

In the case of the iPhone, he thinks: “There are gains and losses with everything. You miss the resistance of paper a little, but you can get a marvellous flow. So much variety is possible. You can't overwork this, because it's not a real surface. In watercolour, for instance, about three layers are the maximum. Beyond that it starts to get muddy. Here you can put anything on anything. You can put a bright, bright blue on top of an intense yellow.”

A little after Easter this year, another text arrived. Hockney had got his first iPad and was immediately converted to using that instead. "I thought the iPhone was great, but this takes it to a new level – simply because it's eight times the size of the iPhone, as big as a reasonably sized sketchbook." On this, Hockney draws with all his fingers, rather than just his thumb. Hockney began carrying his iPad around in the internal pocket he always has inserted by his tailor in all his suits. Previously it would contain a book of drawing paper.

One discovery that came with the iPad was that the process of drawing could be re-run at the tap of a finger. The screen goes blank again, then lines and washes reappear one after another, apparently of their own accord. The result is, in effect, a performing drawing (some of these will be on show in Paris).

Hockney is tickled by the experience of watching himself at work. "Until I saw my drawings replayed on the iPad, I'd never seen myself draw. Someone watching me would be concentrating on the exact moment, but I'd always be thinking a little bit ahead. That's especially so in a drawing where you are limiting yourself, a line drawing for example. When you are doing them you are very tense, because you have to reduce everything to such simple terms."

Like many people, Hockney thinks that this technology will change the world of news media and television quickly and irreversibly. But drawings, like songs, Hockney believes will always be with us: it is only the means of making and delivering them that will change. This autumn, Hockney remains in love with his iPad, and almost every day new drawings he's done on it arrive in my inbox. "Picasso would have gone mad with this," he says. "So would Van Gogh. I don't know an artist who wouldn't, actually."

David Hockney: Fleurs Fraîches is at the Fondation Pierre Bergé - Yves Saint Laurent, Paris (+33 (0) 1 44 31 64 31) from Thurs until Jan 30 2011
