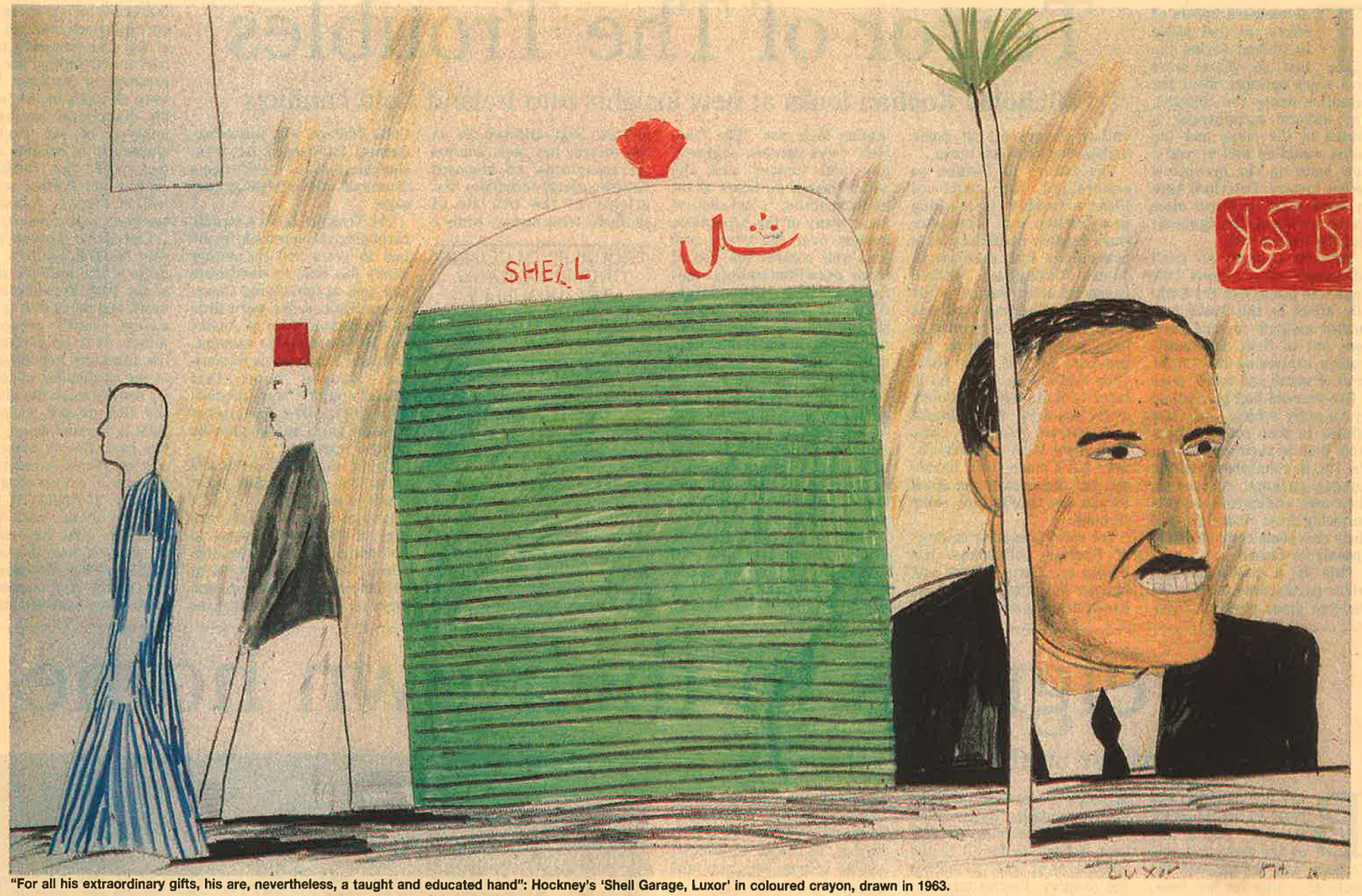
Hockney shows why he's still a big draw

William Packer takes a retrospective look at the artist as draughtsman



"For all his extraordinary gifts, his are, nevertheless, a taught and educated hand": Hockney's 'Shell Garage, Luxor' in coloured crayon, drawn in 1963.

A fascinating and revealing study of David Hockney as a draughtsman opens with two drawings made at Bradford School of Art, where he was a student between 1953 and 1957, and one made when he first came up to the Royal College of Art in 1959, after his National Service. They are of the nude model in the life-studio of a Bradford street – as preliminary, presumably, to a painting – and of the human skeleton. They are the key to all that follows.

The somewhat breathless catalogue is, however, just a shade disingenuous on their relation to the training the young Hockney received, suggesting it was in some sense unusual and restrictive in its academic emphasis upon the life-model and objective drawing. In fact the first two years to Intermediate, with its examinations in perspective and anatomy as well as life-drawing, followed by the further two years to the National Diploma – in painting in his case – would have been common to art schools throughout the country, and remained so until the mid-1960s.

His was clearly a precocious talent, and just as clearly it matured and flourished under that regime. The life-drawing in particular, dating from 1954, when he was only 17, and carried out in Indian ink prefigures so much of what is to come. The eye for detail, the light and varied touch, the naturalism – which are all to be found, for example, in the recent drawings of his dog, Stanley, or in those of his mother he has made throughout the years – all are there.

To suggest then that the exquisite drawings of the skeleton, that he made in his early days at the Royal College, marked a rejection of that first academic grounding, makes no sense. Rather they mark the artist returning to himself and finding his way again after that enforced interval of National Service. And they mark, too, an unconscious celebration of those instilled disciplines of draughtsmanship and observation, by now second nature, that made them possible.

If from this moment, the young Hockney should then move on for a while, to find his imagery in fantasy, invention and photographic reference, rather than in observed reality, so be it. The fact remains that, from now on, the line to be made by the chalk or pencil or magic-marker at his fingers' end, was his to command in its subtlest inflection, whatever the nature of the image. For all his extraordinary gifts, his are, nevertheless, a taught and educated hand and eye.

The uses and virtues of drawing are much debated, and Hockney himself is vigorous in their support. Mind you, he has been rebel enough in his time. He it was, we remember, who in defiance of the rules presented as his *Life Painting for a Diploma* an image worked up from a muscle magazine, with the direct result that the Royal College then abandoned that useful requirement. But the point with him is that even in his apostasy, he makes the argument in defence and praise of the disciplines of drawing, founded in technical command and constant close observation of the real and visible world, in every mark he makes.

Indeed, it is as a draughtsman that he has always been most true to himself as an artist, for it has never been in the stuff of paint itself, or in its modelling and handling, that he has expressed himself as a painter, so much as in the graphic disposition of line and pattern and flat, bright colour. He is a natural illustrator and has proved himself a masterly designer for the theatre. But with the sketch-book open on his knee, or the paper on the board before him, he seems to forget his public face and reputation, losing himself in the reality that currently intrigues him, whether it is a bunch of leeks in a bowl, or the friend who poses for him just like the model in the art school all those years ago.

How cunning he is in all of it, how deliciously clever. One quirky descending line describes the crumpled front of his mother's dress. The crossed feet of his father appear refracted through the glass tabletop. The bright intensity of an Arab's blue burnous, the fuzziness of Ossie Clark's Fair-Isle sweater, the sheen on a green pepper, are noticed, understood and, by some quiet miracle, described. He more than anyone is the true master of the coloured pencil.

It is an uneven show, maddening at times in the complacency and slackness of some of the later inventions, when compared with the taut energy of the earlier work. And some of the portrait studies suddenly seem over-sweet and sentimental. But the underlying wit and intelligence are never far from the surface, playing games with art history and pictorial convention. And always there is the essential reality of the figure to which he must constantly return, and to a shared humanity with the individual before him.

That is his great and consistent strength, hidden though it has so often been beneath layers of self-conscious trickery, fun and games. It is a strength which brings together that student life-drawing of 40 years ago and the very latest loving studies of his mother in her extreme old age. David Hockney is an old-fashioned humanist after all.

David Hockney - a Drawing Retrospective: The Royal Academy of Arts, Piccadilly W1, until January 28: sponsored by BMW (GB) Ltd in association with Harpers & Queen.