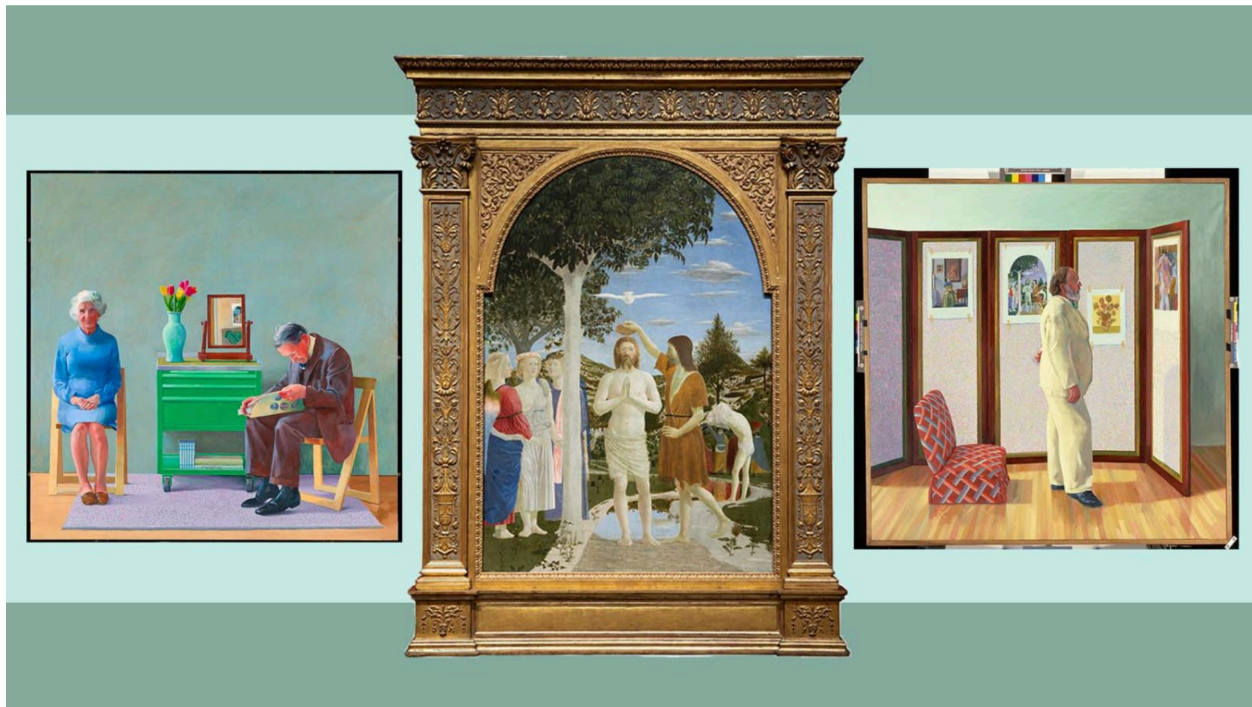


REVIEW

# Hockney and Piero: A Longer Look review — an absorbing, puzzle-box show

This one-room exhibition at the National Gallery contains two paintings by Hockney and one by Piero in a time-travelling triptych



David Hockney's *My Parents*; Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*; Hockney's *Looking at Pictures on a Screen*

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Laura Freeman | Monday August 05 2024, 6.50pm BST, The Times

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**I**n February 1980 David Hockney wrote in burgundy ink to the director of the National Gallery with “a strange request”. Could he come in and copy a Van Gogh painting? And could he do it in the basement? It would only take two or three days and “copying is a marvellous way to learn”. The trouble was that Hockney was quite recognisable by this point in his career and if he sat in the galleries “people would natter me”.

Copying, looking, borrowing, riffing are the themes of *Hockney and Piero: A Longer Look* a one-room exhibition at the National Gallery. Two paintings by David Hockney, 87, and one by the Italian Renaissance master Piero della Francesca (d. 1492) form a time-travelling triptych.

In the centre hangs Piero’s *Baptism of Christ* from the National Gallery’s collection; to the left, Hockney’s portrait of the American critic and curator Henry Geldzahler known as *Looking at Pictures on a Screen*; to the right, Hockney’s *My Parents*, a double portrait of his mother, Laura, and father, Kenneth.

Geldzahler stands in front of a screen on which are taped reproductions of four National Gallery paintings: Piero’s *Baptism*, Vermeer’s *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*, Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* and Degas’ *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*. In *My Parents*, a postcard of Piero’s *Baptism* is reflected in a mirror pinned above a trompe l’oeil curtain. A movie nerd might call these internal echoes, clues and call-backs “Easter eggs”.

Hockney was taken with the *Baptism* from the moment he first saw it in a little book on Piero worth three shillings and sixpence he won as a prize from the Bradford School of Art. Later, he saw the real egg tempera deal on a visit to London. In the 1970s he gave his mother a reproduction of the *Baptism*. It hung in her bedroom until

the day she died. Nothing beats “eyeballing” a painting proper, explains Hockney in one wall text, but reproductions nevertheless give off “powerful vibrations”.

The more you look at these three paintings, the more you see. Hockney has pointed out in the past the tension between stillness and movement in the Piero: the holy dove seems to hover motionless, while the water really seems to pour.

In Hockney’s *My Parents*, all seems held and posed until you notice Laura rubbing the edge of one soft shoe against the other and Kenneth, lifting his heels, impatient to be up and on the move. She faces forward (as Christ does), Kenneth sits in profile (like John the Baptist).

The tulips in the vase in *My Parents* are too tidy and upright to directly nod to Van Gogh’s lawless *Sunflowers*, but having copied the *Sunflowers* for the Geldzahler portrait, Hockney must have had sunflowers at least a bit on the brain. The Vermeer in the background of the Geldzahler painting has paintings in its own background.

In this absorbing, puzzle-box show, it’s less a case of spot-the-difference, more spot-the-artist’s-mind-at-work. What is deliberate, what is unconscious — and what is the slightly fanciful imagining of a spectator carried away with the game?

★★★★☆

**August 8 to October 27, [nationalgallery.org](https://www.nationalgallery.org)**

<https://www.thetimes.com/culture/art/article/hockney-and-piero-a-longer-look-review-nc80qqr3>