

Transcript

Speaker 1

David Hockney is probably Britain's greatest living artist. With his unmistakable round specs, dry wit and soft Yorkshire vowels, he's the grammar school boy from Bradford who became one of the most influential artists of our time.

Speaker 2

Why are you popular? Well, I'm not that sure. My art is not as good as some people think. It's not as bad as some people think as well.

Speaker 1

Never afraid to experiment, innovate and embrace new technologies, he finds the magnificence in the mundane.

Speaker 2

Not everybody does look. It's just a question of how hard they're willing to look, isn't it?

Speaker 1

After decades intoxicated by the bright colors and freedoms of L.A., and latterly, the Normandy countryside, he's now 87 and living back in the U.K.

Speaker 3

For all those ***** boots in England.

Speaker 1

I traveled to Paris, where Hockney is opening his biggest ever exhibition, a journey through his landscapes and portraits. We talked about growing old, a recent visit from the King, and his two big loves, smoking, And painting. It's your biggest show ever. Do you think it's your best ever?

Speaker 3

I think it is. I think it's terrific myself. I am nearly 88 years old, so it should be. I mean, they came to me about two years ago. and we started planning it, but I just thought, I probably wouldn't be here. I was 86 and I'm still a smoker, a happy smoker, fed up of bossy people telling you what to do.

Speaker 1

You thought you might not make it to here two years on.

Speaker 3

Yeah.

Speaker 1

Because of your health.

Speaker 3

I thought so, I didn't know, I didn't know. But I did, I work every day. And I mean, I can get four to six hours a day painting.

Speaker 1

And what does it feel like to have made it here? How exciting is it? You've got through the health problems, you've made it to Paris. How do you feel?

Speaker 3

Well, I'm just laughing. I mean, we made it, yes, we did. It's fantastic.

Speaker 1

More than 450 Hockney works fill the space here. The arresting and most famous early works, the pools, the people, the vast LA vistas, But the focus is the last 25 years. There's a celebration of Yorkshire. He'd jet in from his Los Angeles home when he heard the hawthorn was about to bloom. Another room is dedicated to the iPad paintings, this chronicler of spring created during the pandemic. Walls bursting with blossom and optimism, done at a time when the world wasn't feeling very hopeful. Across the huge show, there's an exuberance of beautiful, bright colours, reflecting Hockney's desire always to make art that was joyful. A lot of people will come to this show.

Speaker 3

I don't care how many come. I mean, it's what I think that counts. And I'm very, very pleased with it, of course.

Speaker 1

Are you proud?

Speaker 3

I am.

Speaker 1

You should be.

Speaker 3

This is about 70 years work in here and 70 years of smoking as well.

Speaker 1

And a lot of the pictures have got you smoking in them and lots of the self-portraits.

Speaker 3

Yeah.

Speaker 1

The final self-portrait for this show, the last piece, you've got a cigarette there.

Speaker 3

Yeah.

Speaker 1

Is that a sticking it up to the anti-smokers?

Speaker 3

Yeah, that's called play within a play within a play with David and a cigarette in his garden. So up yours, up yours, up yours. I thought I'd be cheeky.

Speaker 2

It's gone too far. Stop it. It's time to stop it. Or speak up. Someone has to speak up. It isn't about pro-smoking, it isn't about... it's about tolerance, because there's a growing intolerance that's coming from all kinds of things.

Speaker 1

Of course there were early paintings, but why did you want to do the last 25 years?

Speaker 3

It's 2025 and... People think he's miserable and everything. And I pointed out, well, in 1925, they'd had the First World War. Oh, we haven't. I mean, why are the feelings so miserable? It's the newspapers that make them feel so miserable. They go on about health. Health. Health. What is health? What is health, really? I mean, if I can just paint every day, I think I'm pretty healthy. I don't care about anything else.

Speaker 1

A room full of David Hockneys, it lifts your heart. What is the secret to a happy life, to having your attitude? Are you born with it? Or can you make it?

Speaker 3

Well, I've always had it. I've always thought it was an absurd world. I have. I was the only one of my siblings who went to school after the age of 16. So I told my mother I was going to work very hard. And I used to go to the art school from nine in the morning to nine at night. And that's where I learnt to draw. All they'd do is sit down a model and then you'd sit there at a donkey and draw. and after a half hour they'd start coming round. And he wouldn't say much, but I could see straight away they'd seen more in the model than I have. And so I drew more carefully and things.

Speaker 1

Because that was what you told me last time we met, that you look more closely than other people.

Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 1

So you learnt that.

Speaker 3

Oh, yeah, yeah. And then when I went to the Royal College of Art, I didn't know what to do at first. So I drew a skeleton for about two weeks. and people would mock my accent. Trouble at Mill, Mr Ormondroy. Well, I'd look at their drawings and I'd think, well, if I drew like that, I'd keep my mouth shut.

Speaker 1

Born in Bradford, Hockney was one of five children growing up in a small terrace. He describes his upbringing as working class and politically radical.

Speaker 4

My father was always very political, taking part in peace parades. He loved painting Ban the Bomb banners. And at Christmas, he'd put tinsel on them. He used to buy and sell old bicycles or prams and paint them up new to look like new. And I used to think you couldn't tell. He could paint the line on a crossbar bicycle with using a special long brush. To watch it done without a ruler was very filling. I thought incredible that you can make a straight line like that just with your eye. I mean, it's like watching Michelangelo draw a circle.

Speaker 1

He's 11 when he decides he wants to be an artist, and his drawings soon begin to appear in his Bradford Grammar School magazine. But that wasn't enough to please

every teacher. One school report said he should realise that enthusiasm for art alone is not enough to make a career.

Speaker 4

If you wanted to do art, you really had to be in the lower forms. You see, they just didn't think art was something worth anybody's time. And so I had a problem. I immediately thought, well, I'm going to do art here. I'm damned if I'm going to, you know, do what they say and wait for a few years and study something else. I just made sure I was always in the forms that, lower forms that studied art by not doing much work. It was quite easy.

Speaker 1

With encouragement from his parents, Hockney goes on to attend art school. His 1955 painting, *Portrait of My Father*, now on show here in Paris, is the first work he ever sells.

Speaker 3

That was the first painting I sold at a Yorkshire artists exhibition. I hadn't even put a price on it. I thought, well, how much should it be? I didn't know. So somebody asked me. I said, well, ten pounds. And I thought that was quite a lot of money. And they gave me the ten pounds. And then, of course, when I went back to the outshore, I had to buy beer for all the students. But I got a lot of change from ten pound after doing that then, Pierre was about two shillings or something.

Speaker 1

Looking back, what would that child growing up in Bradford, would he ever have imagined the life that you had and to get to here? What would he have thought?

Speaker 3

He thought he was pretty daft. Well, I just go on. Because I've always really ignored the money. I want to work every day, and I do. But there's not perhaps that many people who would do that.

Speaker 1

What are you doing with all your money? You must have a lot of money.

Speaker 3

Yeah, well, I mean, I always thought I was rich.

Speaker 1

You've done pretty well.

Speaker 3

I have made my living as an artist.

Speaker 1

Seeking an escape from the dreary grey of post-war Britain for the technicolour of Los Angeles, Hockney found his paradise.

Speaker 2

It's like a sunny, naked version of the Portobello Road with more healthy people.

Speaker 4

Within a week of arriving there, I'd got a driving licence. I'd bought a car, I'd found a studio, and found an apartment living all within a week. And I didn't know it was one person in the city. And I thought, no, things move here.

Speaker 1

A place to explore his sexuality as well as his art.

Speaker 2

I get bored in England. You always feel you can never do anything, or you can't change anything. That's the way I feel. In America, I always feel freer. Also, I always feel in California, I start using brighter colours and I paint broader. And instead of painting like that, I paint like that more, which seems to be better for me, I think.

Speaker 1

The swaying palm trees, the neat green lawns, and of course, the swimming pools.

Speaker 2

The idea of drawing water is always appealing. If it's clear water, anyway, transparent water, you can look on it, through it, into it, see it as volume. I mean, there's a lot of different things which, of course, you can't do that with a floor or a wall. And the idea of representing it has always fascinated me.

Speaker 1

A bigger splash is perhaps his best-known work, the explosive movement of the water contrasting with the haunting stillness of the rest. But it was this later painting, portrait of an artist, pooled with two figures, that broke all records when it sold at auction for 70 million pounds in 2018.

Speaker 2

On my right, at \$18 million, ladies and gentlemen, selling here at Christie's, the Hockney is sold.

Speaker 4

That's one of the quickest paintings I've ever done. It was painted in just over 2 weeks. So we worked 18 hours a day on it.

Speaker 1

There's this incredible sense of liberation. Did you know at the time how radical, did you feel that was radical, the art you were doing then? Did it feel like you were at the vanguard of something new?

Speaker 3

No. No, I just moved to LA because I was getting... Well, I'd always wanted to go there. I'd seen in Laurel and Hardy films, even when they're selling Christmas trees, you could see their shadows on the ground. And I thought Hollywood must be a sunny place. I'd been to New York twice, but then when I was asked to do other things in England, I thought, well, it's time to go. I'll go somewhere I'm not known. And I did. And no one knew me in LA, and that was fine with me. I mean, I've always said, I want my work to be seen, but I don't have to be seen.

Speaker 1

Well, we're seeing you now. Who's next? You've painted Harry Styles. The King came round to see you. I know you've said no to painting him before. Would you paint the King? What did you talk about?

Speaker 3

Well, the problem there is the majesty, isn't it, really? I mean, And I would find that a bit difficult, I think.

Speaker 1

To paint.

Speaker 3

My age now, I don't know. But yeah, a very nice man. I mean, thoughtful, I thought. He does watercolours himself. He does paints himself.

Speaker 1

You turned down a knighthood a long time ago. I was wondering if he came round to persuade you, perhaps Sir David Hockney at this point might be good. No, The wry smiles, the hints of vulnerability. Hockney captures the essence of his subjects like no other. 60 of his portraits are on show here in Paris.

Speaker 2

If you're making a portrait of somebody, it should be a likeness in some way. I mean, not necessarily just of the surface. I mean, obviously you want to look into somebody and find things about the aspects of personality and character.

Speaker 1

Forever fascinated by people and faces, especially those he loves.

Speaker 2

You know, if you draw somebody you don't know, You tend to struggle for a likeness. You think maybe it should look like them, and you don't quite know what the people look like, really. And whereas friends, you learn slowly, you know, they have many faces in a way. And when I draw people I know well, in a way I don't bother about a likeness. It always is there somehow.

Speaker 1

There is one face who's become almost as synonymous with Hockney as those swimming pools, his close friend and muse, Celia Birtwell.

Speaker 2

He always says he doesn't paint a flatter, so he paints it for himself. David, can we mention my green nose?

Speaker 1

The most recent works were painted this year of the nurses who have been giving him round-the-clock care in recent months. Also on the walls are two portraits of his great-nephew Richard, who's sat for Hockney since he was four years old.

Speaker 5

It's a very personal experience. David has got a piercing look. You don't really know where he's looking. It's kind of like he's looking through you. For me, it's a little bit more normal because it's all I've ever known, but You can never be shy of the fact that David is who he is and you know he's always going to create a masterpiece. And I think the thing with David is he always gets your personality out and that's why he chooses to paint people that he loves, his family, his friends. And David sees you in the way you are really, not the way you look in the mirror. But I reckon he sees the truer representation of yourself than you do.

Speaker 1

What's it been like for you all to arrive en masse? All the family.

Speaker 5

Incredible. I mean, the night before we were just... up there we played five different variations of April in Paris. As you can see he's still full of life, he's still got the light in his eyes and I think the painting keeps him alive to be honest. So as long as he paints he's fine.

Speaker 1

It's full of portraits of your friends, family members. What have you learnt from painting them and from painting yourself? What do you learn about humanity?

Speaker 3

Well... You learn that not all of it is bad. Some of it is.

Speaker 1

David, you've said you can't judge a painter until his last work is done. What's the future? What else are you looking forward to painting? And how do you judge your own paintings?

Speaker 3

Well, now I judge it. I can see what I was always trying to do, really. I mean, it becomes clearer to me whether it does to others, but it seems to bring a lot of joy to others. And I will say this, I think anybody who has just a little visual sensibility will really enjoy this show.

Speaker 1

Now that now that you've made it to Paris and you're well again.

Speaker 3

Yeah, because where are you headed? I've only a quite small studio, not that big, and I have to take paintings out of it sometimes when they fill up. but the walls are now pretty empty. There's one painting on the easel waiting to be finished of my great-nephew Richard and I'll finish it when I get back and I'll paint somebody else and I'll just come out of here.

Speaker 4

David Hockney goes back to the beginning in a face-to-face interview with Jeremy Isaacs later, after his return to painting double portraits next on BBC Four.