

# American collectors, david hockney essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Laura Cummings in her 2006 article 'Facing the Truth About Portraiture' claims that 'The desire to look at portraits is absolutely fundamental: to be face to face, eye to eye with our fellow beings.' How much does this apply to such stylized works as this? Introduction This unusual acrylic on canvas double portrait of Fred and Marcia Weisman by English born artist David Hockney is now in the possession of the Art Institute of Chicago, the gift of Mr and Mrs Frederic G. Pick. Hockney was and is a very versatile artist producing landscapes, still lives, theatre sets, etchings, drawings and even work for tapestries.

He has also used many different materials, pen and ink, oils, watercolor, crayon and even photocopies to create his works, though it is perhaps his portraits which are best known, if in reproduction. Right from his early days as a student he had used photographs as the source materials for his pictures, initially using available images, but later taking his own. This picture was only Hockney's second attempt at such a double portrait, although these would be the first of many. Hockney has a number of works on display in this same museum.

The curators are therefore able to show what a variety he is capable of producing, from a collage of chromogenic color prints - Sunday Morning, Mayflower Hotel, New York, 1983; an etching of a blue guitar ( 1976-77); a series on the topic of The Rake's Progress; a homage to his inspiration, Picasso ( 1976-77 ) ; illustrations for poems and ( 1964) an early water lithograph to the large acrylic ' American Collectors ( Fred and Marci Weisman) which is 83 inches by 120 inches. Description

The positioning of the two figures is unusual and so it hardly serves the criteria of looking face to face. Both faces are to some extent in shadow and the picture has a somewhat flat appearance with strong areas of bright light and shadow. Although the proportions are normal the figures to a certain extent seem more like caricatures rather than standard portraits, perhaps because of the rather oversized mouth on Mrs. Weisman. There seems to be very little connection between the two figures although the title points to the fact that they are husband and wife and have a shared interest in art.

The two figures are as stiff and solid as the objects with which they have surrounded themselves, the husband's stance echoed by the native American totem pole to the right and his wife's by the statue by Henry Moore that is to her rear. Even the potted tree doesn't look as if it has any life left in it. The couple seems stifled by their self created situation. It is the strongly angled light and the shadows it produces which Hockney has used to unite the work, rather than the figures displayed. They are perceived as oblivious to each other and to their art works, at least at the moment portrayed.

In November 2006 there was a retrospective exhibition of Hockney's works at the National Portrait Gallery, London. At that time Guardian correspondent Cumming asked ' Why are we fascinated by paintings of people even when some contemporary portraits are so inept? She quotes famous portraitist of the early 20th century John Singer Sargent who said that a portrait was ' a likeness in which there is something wrong about the mouth. ' Cummings describes the couple portrayed as plutocrats from Los Angeles, the city where Hockney has made his home since the mid sixties.

They are portrayed standing, some how remote both from each other and from any viewer, in their sculpture garden. Fred Weisman has his right fist tightly clenched, but it seems to be leaking paint - representing perhaps money leaking away in art. His wife is wearing a then fashionable an all enveloping hostess gown. Her mouth has a rather disturbing smile/grimace that apes the mouth of the totem pole in the background. The painting and the techniques and materials used are obviously modern, yet the proportions are those of Italian 14th century with the perfect proportions of old masters such as Piero della Francesca.

It can in some sense be compared to works such as Botticelli's Renaissance 'Annunciation of 1485 if one is looking at proportions, and even some of the shades used as well as the long straight lines and the separation of the two figures. ( see figure 2) At that time of course the majority of art was religious,. Perhaps this picture suggests the Californian, late 20th century religion, of ostentatious wealth. Hockney Hockney is often considered, and described as, a pop artist and this is true to a certain extent in that he was interested in mass imagery and was working as an artist in London during the 1960's when pop art was all the rage.

Often though pop art was not always representational, despite the definition given in The American Heritage Dictionary :- A form of art that depicts objects or scenes from everyday life and employs techniques of commercial art and popular illustration. Hockney denies that he belongs to the Pop Art movement , yet this continues to be how he is perceived and he is included in that group by the Artcyclopedia.

He certainly is not a totally traditional artist as he admits, as quoted on the Artchive :- Immediately after I started at the Royal College I realized that there were two groups of students there: a traditional group, who carried on as they had done in art school, doing still life, life painting and figure compositions; and then what I thought of as the more adventurous, lively students, the brightest ones, who were involved in the art of their time. They were doing big Abstract Expressionist paintings on hardboard. He did try his hand at Abstract Expressionism, but soon realized that for him it was too barren a genre, and according to Harold Osborne in ' The Oxford Companion to Art ' Pop Art was initially seen as a reaction to the Abstract Expressionism movement.

It is very much involved with urban culture. Roy Lichtenstein is quoted by Osborne (The Oxford Companion to art, page 894,) as describing it as ' An involvement with what I think to be the most brazen characteristics of our culture. ' Hockney claimed, according to Robert Hughes, in his 1988 article ' Giving Success a Good Name' that his hero was the Spanish artistic genius Pablo Picasso who, according to Hockney showed how ' style is something you can use, and you can be like a magpie, just taking what you want'.

Having produced several posters while still at school Hockney entered art college in Bradford in 1953. The training he received was traditional. Then, after National Service, he began to study at the Royal College of Art in London. While there he visited a major Picasso exhibition at London's Tate Gallery. His first solo exhibition in 1963 was a sell out. Soon after this he traveled to New York where he met both Andy Warhol and Henry Geldzahler, then the curator of 20th century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The following year he went to California where he began to use Polaroid photographs when planning his works as described on his own web site. His first American exhibition in New York was sold out. From 1966 onwards Hockney became involved in producing sets for ballet and opera performances and this could almost be one such. Despite being in familiar surroundings these people are neither relaxed nor at home - this is a performance. Only 4 years before Hockney had arrived in California and painted his first swimming pool pictures.

Although there is no image of water in this picture, it is reminiscent of those earlier works, especially with regard to the use of colors, the same pinks and blues, the palms. Hockney had sold his first portrait (of his father) in 1955 while still a student. In the same year as his picture of the collectors, 1968, Hockney attempted his first double portrait, this time in the Modernist style as is described in the book *David Hockney*, page 77 and 78. Again some of the same shades are used. The picture was of Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, a well known, if controversial, Californian couple of the time.

Hockney was concerned perhaps most of all with the relationship between the two men. Is he doing the same in the Collectors portrait? He made several studies of their home and faces, but it was character and relationship he was after. On page 69 of the same book there is a list of those he considered to be his main influences - Edward Hopper, Balthasar Klossowski de Rola known as Balthus, Walter Sickert and Stanley Spencer. Hopper is usually described as a Realist painter, Balthus was known for his somewhat voyeuristic studies of young women and girls, Sickert specialized in urban scenes.

As for Spencer, the Artcyclopedia which normally classifies artists according to school simply lists him as a British painter, though he could be considered as specializing in the sacred. So it seems that the commonest link between these people was their modernity rather than a particular subject matter or style. Earlier he had painted (1966) 'Beverly Hills Housewife', ( Figure 4 ) a portrait of another art collector that looks very , very similar, even to the full length costume, the lines, both vertical and horizontal and the shining glass.

This sold in May 2009 for \$7. 9 million as reported in the Los Angeles Times.

Andrew Causey, describing all the Californian works,( page 103, ' David Hockney') relates how Hockney would photograph his subjects in one situation and then eventually portray them somewhere totally different.

According to Causey the pictures can all be considered as still lives, whether or not people are included. He uses the French term ' nature morte' to describe how the subjects loose control of their own images as they come under the mastery of the artist.

According to Nannete Aldred , in the book by Hockney and Melia, ' David Hockney' a subject under discussion in the art world while Hockney was still studying at the Royal College of Art was the relationship between ' abstractionism and a commitment to modern figure painting' ( page 69).

Although the portrait is representational, the placement of the various components has a somewhat abstract feel. Another influence , according to Aldred ( page 69) was a fellow student, Kitaj, who gave him encouragement toward continuing to use figures rather than turning more towards the abstract.