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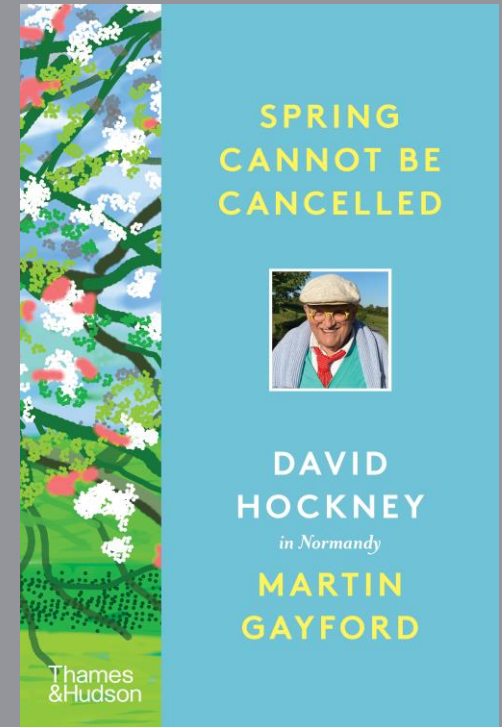


# Spring Cannot Be Cancelled

David Hockney in conversation with Martin Gayford

Martin Gayford

David Hockney reflects upon life and art as he journeys through lockdown in rural Normandy.



130 illustrations

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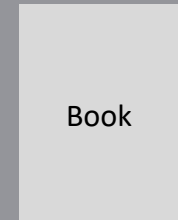
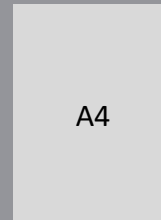
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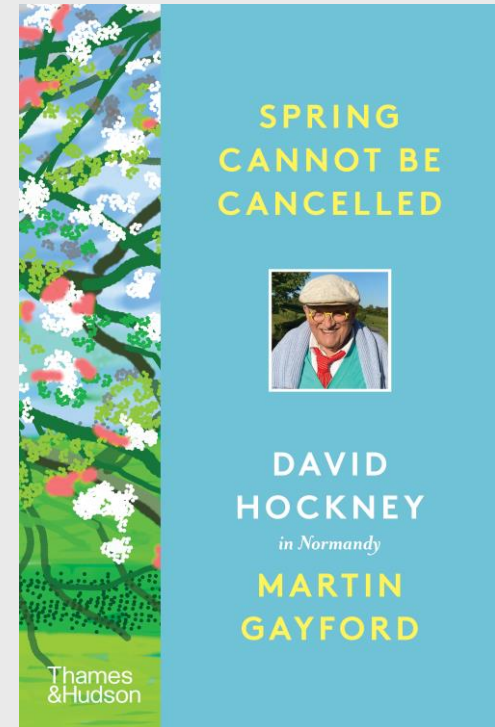
March 2021



# Key Sales Points



- Based on a wealth of all-new conversations and correspondence between two long-time friends and collaborators, this uplifting new volume celebrates art's capacity to distract and inspire.
- Hockney remains Britain's best-loved artist: when he released his freshly made landscapes and still-life pictures on 1 April 2020, they became not just a much needed respite from the news, but a major news story in themselves.
- Featuring a selection of Hockney's new Normandy iPad drawings alongside comparative works from Van Gogh, Monet, Bruegel and others.
- The Royal Academy of Arts, London, will host an exhibition of Hockney's iPad drawings from 27 March to 22 August 2021, a year after the UK's first Covid lockdown; further exhibitions will follow in Cambridge, UK, in the summer of 2022.



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*An unexpected move*

22 October 2018

Dear Martin

We are now back from France, where we had a wonderful time. We left London at 9.30am and drove to the Tunnel. With our Flexiplus tickets, we could just drive straight onto a train without stopping. We were in Honfleur by 3pm or 4pm local time. We then watched a magnificent sunset over the Seine estuary.

Next we saw the Bayeux Tapestry – a marvellous work without a vanishing point or shadows (when did they begin, is my question to the art historians?). We then went to Angers and saw the Apocalypse Tapestry (also no shadows), and then in Paris we saw the unicorn tapestries. So within a week we had seen three of Europe's greatest tapestries.

In Paris, we also saw Picasso's Blue and Rose periods at the Musée d'Orsay, and then went to the Pompidou and saw about eighty paintings in the Cubist show – so his work from the age of twenty to thirty. A magnificent achievement.

The food was fabulous – all that delicious butter and cream and cheeses. We also found France a lot more smoker-friendly than mean-spirited England. In fact, I've decided to do the arrival of spring in Normandy in 2019. There are more blossoms there: you get apple, pear, and cherry blossom, plus the blackthorn and the hawthorn, so I am really looking forward to it.

Love  
David H

I have known David Hockney for a quarter of a century now, but we live in different places – and always have done – which gives our friendship a certain rhythm. For long periods, it is conducted at a distance, by email, phone calls, an occasional parcel – and a steady stream of pictures that arrive almost daily in my inbox. Sometimes, when he is in an intense phase of activity, there may be three or four images together, showing a work at various stages of completion. Occasionally there is a joke or a story from the news that has caught his attention. Then, when we meet again after months or even years, our conversation resumes as if there had been no interruption. Except there is a constant, almost imperceptible, shift in perspective.

Over the many years that we have been talking with one another, innumerable things have happened around us, while we have also become older, naturally, accumulating new experiences as we do. The result is that even if we are contemplating something that we had discussed long ago or more than once, a particular picture for instance, the place from which we are doing so is novel, because it has never existed before. That place is *now*. Perspective, in this sense, affects not just pictures and how they are made – a perennial topic for David and me – but all human affairs. We see every event, person, and idea from a certain vantage point. As we move through time and space, that position alters, and consequently so does our angle of vision.

Before October 2018, when I received the email opposite, he and I had last spent hours in uninterrupted conversation two years earlier, when we had published a jointly written book

No sooner had they arrived than a stream of pictures began appearing in my inbox, often marked 'No subject', but sometimes with a brief explanatory caption. For the next few months, David told his story, as the Bayeux Tapestry does, mostly in pictures. Like a child on holiday, he had woken up early to begin exploring this exciting new place in which he found himself.

He was evidently so happy, and so productive, that I and many of his friends were loath to disturb his peace. Months passed by. In July 2019, Josephine and I went to Brittany on a completely different mission, prompted by another book, about sculpture, to see the prehistoric monuments around Carnac. We had a delightful time exploring standing stones and the Breton coast. Before we set out, glancing at the map, it had struck me that Hockney's new house was not far away. On impulse, I sent a message asking if I could drop in.



'My drawings of little Ruby', 1 June 2019



'Here I am drawing the house with little Ruby', 29 April 2019

## *Studio work*

DH J-P came here on 15 December, and moved in on 7 January, when they gave him the keys. On 15 January, the workmen started on converting this studio. He wanted it done as quickly as possible, and he nattered at them and nattered at them and nattered at them ['natter' is a favourite word with DH, meaning to talk to someone about something incessantly until they give in and do it]. He told them, 'This is a studio for David Hockney, who wants to do the arrival of spring here in 2019, not 2020!' Now they all look me up on Google, so they can see the work.

To get the studio finished, J-P used a notary who arranged things more quickly. It was all completed in three months. He needed help from the authorities, otherwise it might have taken four or five months; but J-P just got on with it, then the notary OK'd it. At one point, he had fourteen vans here, with fourteen different contractors, and he dealt with everything. He's done a great job – he's made this place fantastic!

The stairs weren't in when I arrived at the beginning of March, and the floor only went down at the end of the week before. There were still lots of workmen around. But I drew the first of several concertina drawings and twenty-one other drawings in three weeks because I wasn't interrupted once by anybody. At night, I'd go to bed planning what I was going to do next. So I always had it in my head. I'm not sure I'd have been able to do those drawings so rapidly if I'd had more visitors.



*In the Studio, 2019*



*In The Studio, December 2017, 2017*

studio really. That's all I want to do.' A series of pictures he has done in the last few years are meditations on that room, on the ideas that grow in it, and the way that it is as much a mental space as a physical one: the place where pictures are made, but also the one in which they are conceived, and the next develops from the one that came before. Such a depiction of the studio is a representation of the artist's world, but also of their interior landscape. In some of these works, which Hockney calls photographic drawings, the studio on Montcalm Avenue has been enlarged to enormous proportions and contains numerous pictures that had been made within it, some of which were representations of the studio itself, sometimes crowded with various friends, assistants, and spectators.

In one such picture, an expanded, panoramic one, Hockney stands in the centre surrounded by an entire cycle of paintings that he produced in a tsunami of activity in the summer of 2017 in the lead-up to his eightieth birthday. This was the series in which he reworked some of his own previous pictures and a few by predecessors such as Meindert Hobbema and the fifteenth-century Florentine Fra Angelico. In every case, he opened up the earlier image by slicing off the bottom corners so as to get rid of the right angles of the conventional canvas. Each separate painting on the walls and easels contained many perspectives, taking the viewer closer to the subjects, into and around the spaces within the pictures. And every single object in the studio itself has its own distinct perspective.

## *A house for an artist and a painter's garden*



*Painting 316, 2020*

DH In the Bible and other ancient texts, every important place is a garden. Where would you rather live? Where would you want to be? Even in Los Angeles, I am always drawing my garden. Actually, LA is a very green city. People think it's all freeways and concrete, but that's not quite right. Wild animals live around my house near Mulholland Drive. It's not an ugly place. But the air here is absolutely fresh. They don't talk so much about air these days. They used to. Ilkley in Yorkshire was advertised for its bracing air. Bradford didn't have that; it was all smoky. People would go to Ilkley, only fourteen miles to the north, for their holidays during the war. Even though I was used to the smoke, I could still taste the fumes on Kensington High Street; and New York was abominable. But I can *feel* the air here. I sleep with the window wide open. I always do, summer and winter, because I smoke in the bedroom and it might fill up with smoke. From every window in the house you just look out at trees – that's all there is. We're surrounded by *greenery*. It's fantastic, for me.

We're already planning for spring 2021. We're going to plant some more trees, and take others down to create vistas, so that you'll get a distant view and then something else closer. J-P says he's making the garden different from others because he knows it's all about *drawing*.

J-P must have heard that last remark, because at this point his face appeared on my screen and explained what he'd been doing.



J-P Country people are not sentimental. They'll chop anything down. We have a little wood, not very big but large enough to give the *feeling* of a wood. When we started converting the studio, the first thing they said was, 'We can cut it all down and put the earth we've dug out there.' That was because they were not interested in *looking* at trees. Landscapists come and say, 'This should come out and that should come out; it's got no value.' They want to replace the trees with better, nobler ones. But I know that for David, visually it's the shapes and forms that count. He can make a bit of gravel with some weeds growing on it interesting. They don't see that.

DH J-P's been working on the garden for a while, and from time to time he asks me what he should do next. Vincent, who brings us the milk and eggs, comes and spends two afternoons working in the garden every week. He cuts the lawn. He's a nice chap, but he complains and says that it looks as if there's no one caring for this garden. But there is. I don't mind that, because I *draw* the weeds.

MG It's different if you are designing a garden as the subject for an artist, in the same way that arranging fruit and vegetables for a still life would be different from cooking.

DH Some garden design experts have even said that Monet's garden was not that special! But for Monet it was. He arranged colours from flowers. He was an authority on horticulture; he had books on it in his house. And he organized the whole thing in terms of colour. J-P says that his garden was like a palette. What's wonderful when you go to Giverny is to think about

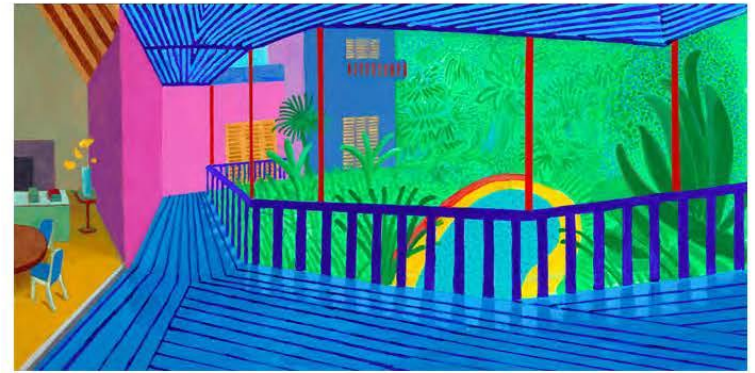


Claude Monet, *The Garden in Giverny*, 1900

brusquely enquired why, since it was a grey London day and the model was equally colourless, he had depicted her in bright red and green. Fauvism was the subject that Hockney chose for the thesis he wrote (under protest, since he thought it was a pointless diversion from making art) for his diploma. Over the next decade and more, however, though his colour was beautiful, clear, and strong, it was more reminiscent of the Quattrocento masters Piero della Francesca and Fra Angelico, whose work he loved, than it was of the Fauves. The direct influence of Fauvism on his work came later, after his stay in Paris from 1973 to 1975, at the same time that he was so struck by free-flowing 'French marks' while he was designing the first of two triple bills for the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In the sets and costumes, he recalled, 'I used the colours of Matisse – red, blue, and green.' In other words, he turned up the colour knob.



Henri Matisse, *The Conversation*, 1908–12



*Interior with Blue Terrace and Garden*, 2017

He then decorated his Los Angeles house in 'Matisse colours'. 'I painted the terrace of my house blue in 1982, after I'd been in New York doing the sets for *Parade*, a ballet, and two operas. When I bought this house, I used the same colours. The painters thought I was quite mad. But when they finished, they saw how good it was.' Matisse is not an artist that Hockney mentions as often as he does Cézanne, Picasso, or van Gogh. But there is a connection. When the *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith reviewed his eightieth-birthday retrospective exhibition, she highlighted the connection. 'He's followed through on the dense blue, green, black, and red of the French modernist's implacable 1909 masterpiece *The Conversation*, like no one else, Matisse included.' That's quite a tribute, but she's right. It isn't just landscape and portraiture that Hockney has carried on, regardless of the claims of critics such as Clement Greenberg that they had been superseded by the onward march of art history. He's also continued the whole tradition of



Photographs from the frontispiece to Arthur Mason Worthington's *The Splash of a Drop*, 1895

So the paintings of splashes were a sort of game with time in which he treated this moment of liquid turmoil with the care of a botanist describing specimens; in other words, he approached it almost like a scientist ... but not quite.

A photograph of the event, at least a high-speed one, reveals something different from the splash that we normally see and that Hockney depicted. In the late nineteenth century, a physicist named Arthur Mason Worthington pioneered the use of such photographs to study the subject. He analysed the successive cycles of a splash made by a drop of milk falling into a cup of tea, or by a large raindrop into a pool of water. First a crater appeared with jets spouting out from its rim, and then there was a rebound causing a 'column' to emerge. But, he noted, 'there is frequently a curious illusion': 'We often seem to see the crater with the column standing erect in the middle of it. We know now that in reality the crater has vanished before the column appears. But the image of the crater has not time to fade before that of the column is superposed on it.'

This optical illusion – column, jets, and crater all existing simultaneously – is more or less what Hockney painted in his swimming-pool pictures. However, the experience of seeing, even when we pay the closest attention possible, is often like that. What we see is relative to *us*, to our senses, the particular



*A Bigger Splash*, 1967

one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art and at one hundred and ten, every dot and stroke will be as though alive.'

There was an element of self-parody in this, and also in the sequence of pseudonyms Hokusai adopted. In 1801, when he was a mere forty-one, he began signing himself 'Gakyojin' or 'Man crazy about drawing', which he then altered to 'Gakyo rojin' or 'Picture-mad old man'. By 1834, his favourite signature was 'Brush of Manji, old man crazy to paint'. Most of the works for which Hokusai is best known were created after he had turned seventy, and many were signed in that way.

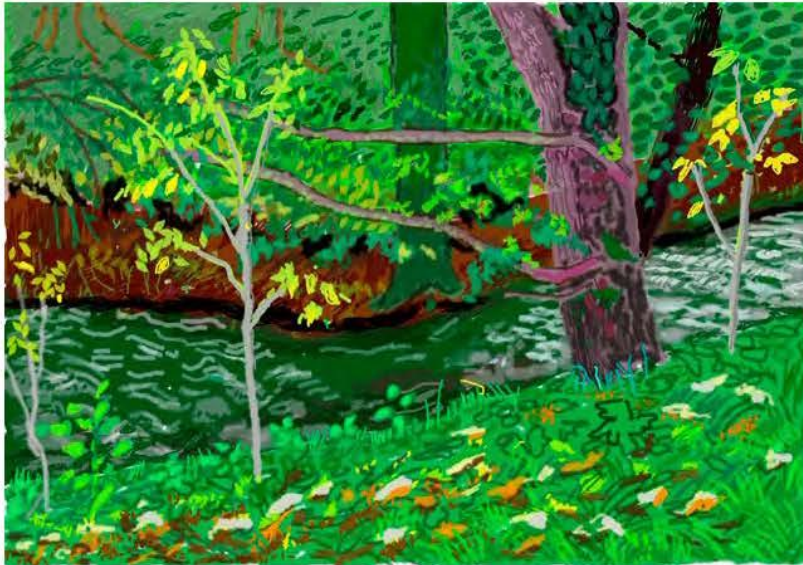
Like Hockney, Hokusai was fascinated by water, and he was renowned for representing it. One of his most famous works is a depiction of a wave, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. But quite as memorable as Hokusai's pictures of the sea is his series *A Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces*. These were done around 1832, when the artist was in his early seventies. In them, the moving water often seems almost living – like tree roots, blood vessels, or nerves. They are remarkable depictions of a subject that changes by the instant, and yet always remains the same thing: a famous waterfall, such as the Kirifuri in the mountains near Nikkō.

DH *Everything* is in flow. That is one reason why a drawing is so interesting, as opposed to a photograph. I like that remark of Cézanne's, 'You have got to keep painting because it is constantly altering.' Well, it is actually, because *we* are. It's permanent flux.

Hockney is not echoing Csikszentmihalyi there, but instead the ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus of Ephesus, who flourished around 500 BC. One of his insights was summed up in the phrase



Katsushika Hokusai, *Kirifuri Waterfall at Kurokami Mountain in Shimotsuke*, c. 1832

*Rippling lines and musical spaces**Painting 580, 2020*

DH I've done only two drawings of the river so far. But I like the moving water, how it just goes like that [he gestures with his hand]. The little ripples and eddies are so good.

MG It's a Leonardo da Vinci subject.

DH Well, it's a subject of *mine* now. I'm going to do a few more. We have some chairs and a table down there, in a couple of places. When we were sitting beside the river the other day, J-P asked me if I could hear the water, but I couldn't. Then we moved along to another place where there's a little weir, and I could hear it – and I drew it.

For Hockney, music and other sounds are intimately connected with the visual world around us. He has long pointed out that his own loss of hearing was related to a growing spatial sensitivity: 'As I got deafer, I could see space more clearly.' This led him to speculate that with other artists there might also have been a similar interrelation of the senses. In the case of his hero Picasso, however, he has mused on whether the link was the inverse.

DH The one art that Picasso had no interest in was music. I've wondered whether he was tone deaf. Maybe he didn't hear any tones, but he could certainly *see* them because he had a better grasp of chiaroscuro – light and shadow – than anybody else, it seems to me.

## *Being somewhere*

DH It was lucky that we were here when lockdown began. I've just worked away. We don't see anybody. It's fantastic for me. I think we've been a lot more creative. If people had been coming and going, we wouldn't have done all these drawings and the animations, but we're not disturbed.

I always planned to be here and doing just what I am doing. But probably lots of people in other places are observing their surroundings at the moment – and drawing them too. I get drawings sent to me on Twitter from people who are looking at my work and trying to do something similar. There are kids doing it too. And some are very good. David Juda [an art-dealer friend] told me that he was going for a walk on Tooting Common today, because it was a lovely day and the blossom was out. But he wouldn't normally have thought of going there. Celia's just staying at her cottage, but she says it's the first spring that she's really observed. People are *looking* at things.

Once while I was talking to the American abstract painter Ellsworth Kelly in an unremarkable office off Madison Avenue, he started pointing out the sort of sights that gave him ideas for pictures. Gazing at the utilitarian blinds and shelving, he exclaimed, 'Look at that shadow in the corner! There's something going on there!' As soon as he had said that, I could see in other tiny, apparently insignificant details the germ, perhaps, of a painting by Kelly. Similarly, one day Hockney must have noticed a tree with low branches, on which a few stray blossoms



*Painting 164, 2020*