

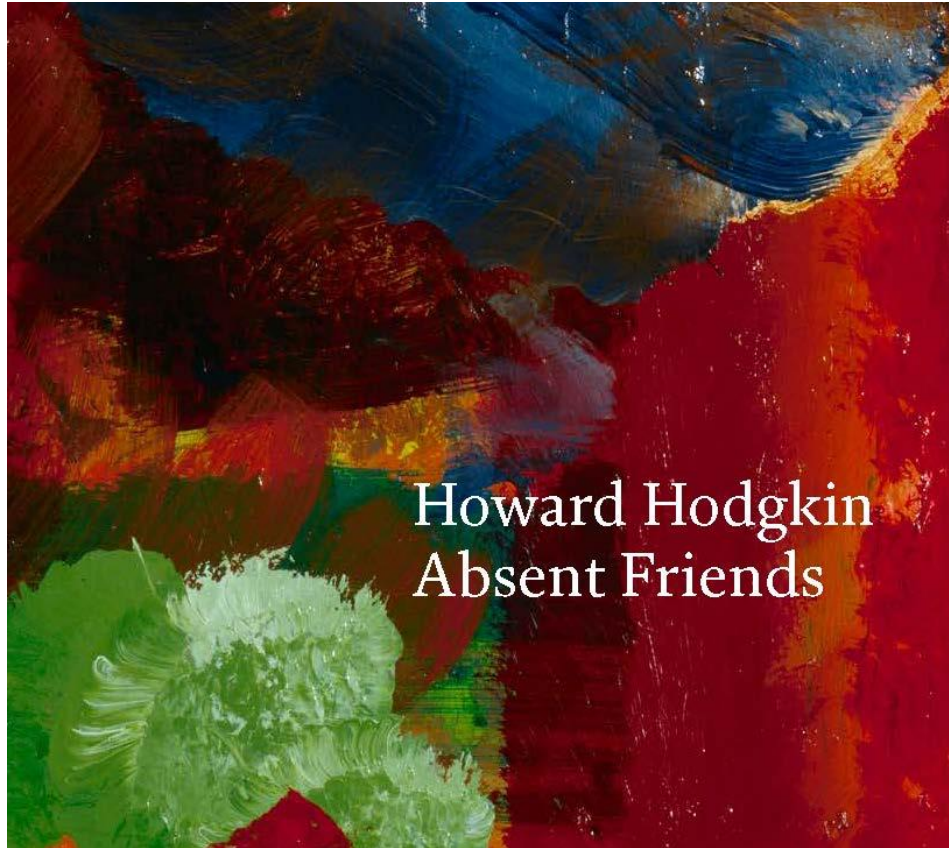
National
Portrait
Gallery

Howard Hodgkin Absent Friends

Paul Moorhouse

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248 x 280mm | Illustrations approx 100
216 pages | Hardback

Accompanies a major exhibition at the National
Portrait Gallery, London (March–June 2017) –
the first to focus on Hodgkin's portraits





Detail from *Small Durand Gardens*, 1974

A convivial evening spent with friends at their south London home is recalled by this vibrant painting. Expressive shapes and patterns are combined with a passage of description evoking a figure (at left).

ABSENT FRIENDS

Hodgkin would observe, 'I'm fascinated by people's surroundings and how they reflect their character.'²⁵ Most impressive is the way that, from these accumulated details, the young painter has created a psychologically charged, private situation in which we, as onlookers, are cast as voyeurs. In these respects, *Memoirs* looks back in time, and also anticipates much that is to follow.

That Hodgkin did not immediately develop the insights yielded by this early work reflects the period of uncertainty that followed. During his year-long attendance at Camberwell Art School in 1949–50, he encountered the 'kind of limbo'²⁶ that he came to associate with all English art schools, a situation he felt was 'isolated from the world outside'.²⁷ The teaching he received there bore the stamp of the Euston Road School's emphasis on realistic representation based on careful observation and measurement – hardly the direction in which *Memoirs* signalled he had been heading. Subsequently, he enrolled at Bath Academy of Art, Corsham, where he remained until 1954. There, however, at least he had the benefit of contact with figures such as the principal, Clifford Ellis, with whom he felt a greater affinity. A number of drawings date from that time, all of them portraits. These include *Blondie* (1952, page 57), *Mrs Ash Asleep* (1952, page 17) and *Miss Spackman* (1953, page 61). Each of these studies depicts an individual known to the artist, and does so with impressive precision. For example, Mrs Ash, his mother's cook, is caught while dozing in a chair; Miss Spackman, the artist's landlady, is shown apparently speaking while sitting at a table

strewn with objects. Hodgkin's drawing has a vital immediacy. It provides a detailed record of facial expression, clothing, the position of objects and their arrangement. It is therefore surprising that these precisely rendered images were not made from life but from memory.²⁸ They provide compelling early evidence of his claim that 'almost the only skill I have ... is a strong visual memory, and I can remember what things looked like from very long ago'.²⁹ This ability would be the foundation of an oeuvre rooted entirely in images recovered from the past.

FROM DESCRIPTION TO ABSTRACTION

From the early to mid-1950s Hodgkin's output was relatively sparse. In part, this was the outcome of circumstances that frustrated the kind of single-minded focus that would characterise his mature practice. In common with other artists at the beginning of their career, he needed to earn a living, and for that reason now turned to the very situation about which he had such mixed feelings, namely teaching. After leaving Corsham, he was appointed assistant art master at Charterhouse School, Surrey. His time there was, however, short-lived, and he resigned soon after taking up the position. In 1955 he married Julia, a fellow ex-student from Bath Academy of Art, who would figure in numerous portraits that Hodgkin painted subsequently. In the same year, he returned to Corsham in a teaching capacity, and would remain there for the next decade. That he apparently made fewer paintings during the early 1950s may also be attributable to other factors that are more closely connected with the way his work was developing. During this period, his thinking certainly advanced, and it is possible that evidence of the steps taken in the interim simply has not been preserved. Those paintings that take up the story after an apparent seven-year break represent both an extension of his previous thinking and, at the same time, a sea change.

HOWARD HODGKIN

Having in this way effectively and quite naturally incorporated metaphor within the iconography of portraiture, Hodgkin's work was ready to enter a new phase.

TRANSFORMATION AND EQUIVALENCE

An essential continuity underpins the progress of Hodgkin's art, and in certain respects his concerns have remained constant since the outset. Hodgkin himself has acknowledged this ongoing connectedness: 'I don't think the way I paint has fundamentally changed very much; it's just that I've managed to join the bits together a bit more.'⁵² This may be something of a characteristic understatement, for during the 1970s Hodgkin's art underwent remarkable changes. While his preoccupations stayed the same, from around 1975 his visual language began to acquire an unexpected new cohesion in which the various elements he had previously assembled and deployed now came together in a more seamless and mutually reinforcing way. These developments were discussed in his 1984 interview with David Sylvester, and Hodgkin's comments about them are illuminating:

I was beginning to join everything up together. Because my earlier pictures, I think, physically were very inorganic. It's not a word I like, but I can't think of another one. Like all artists who are alive now probably, I'm affected by assemblage and collage and the mixing of things, or rather the assembling of things, and the different elements in the language I was talking about before didn't join. They remained too autonomous; I mean, their autonomy defeated the autonomy of the whole picture, or at least the physical autonomy of the whole picture.⁵³

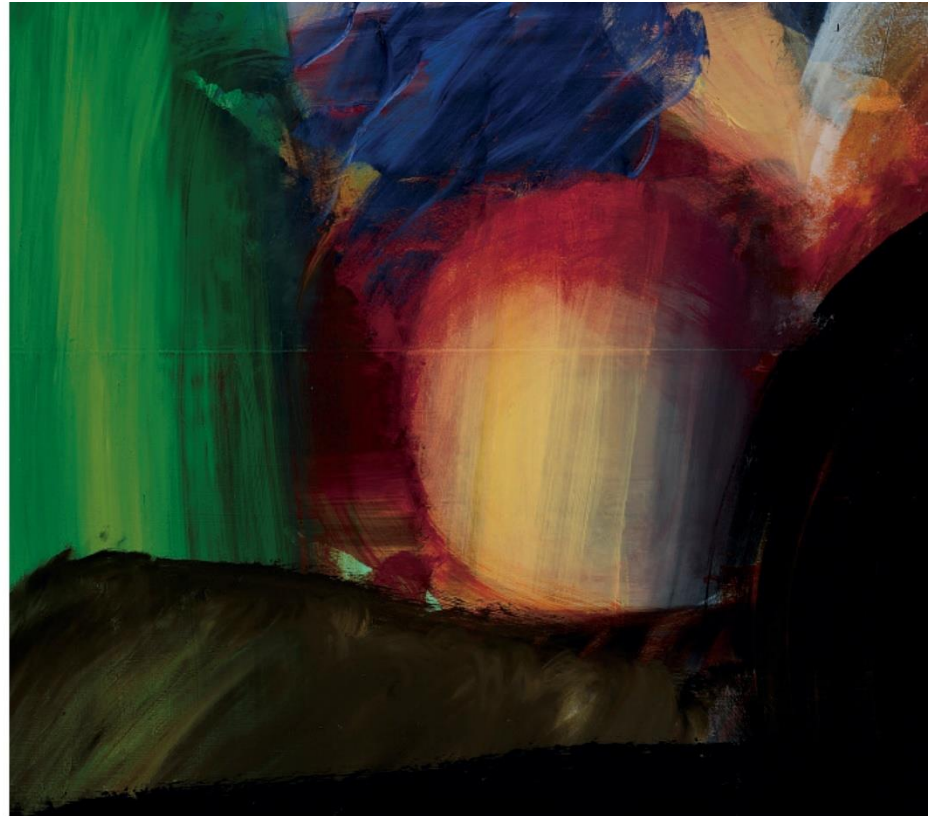
The 'different elements' were manifold. As seen, the vehicles for recollection, emotion and imagination comprised colour, abstract shape, line, pattern, brush mark, geometry, illusory space, flatness and, in a recent addition, the inclusion of a painted frame.

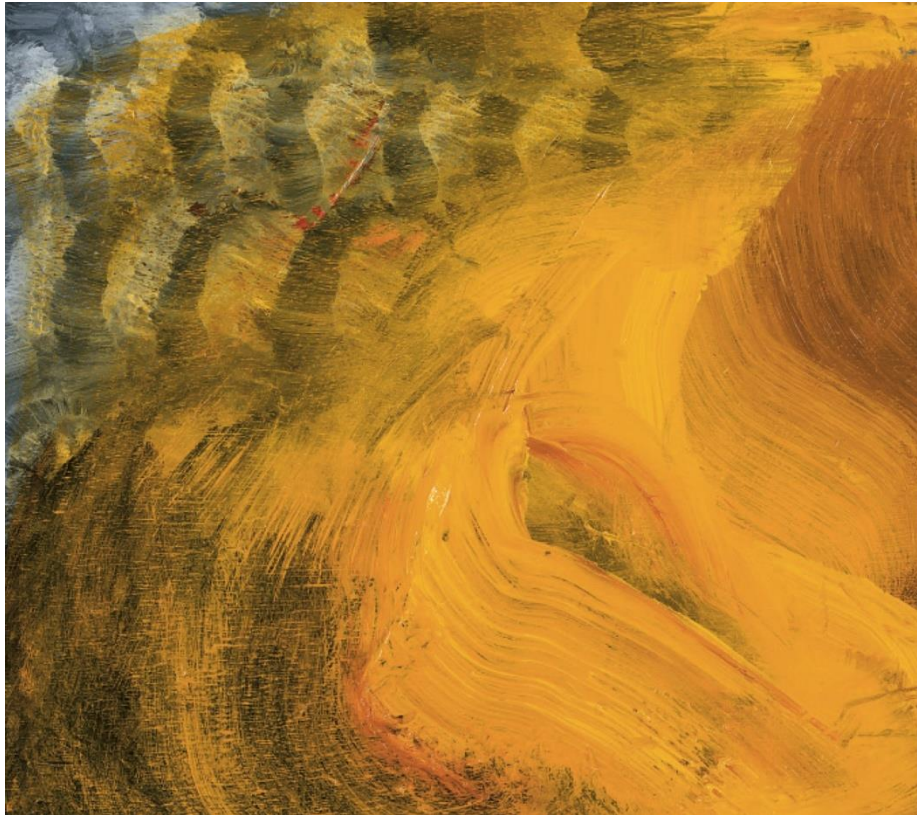
Hodgkin intimated that these components were combined, but evidently sensed that a full fusion had not been fully achieved. His paintings remained an assemblage of parts. This assessment of his own achievement is possibly too stark, but his imperative to forge a greater synthesis is clear. His large painting *Grantchester Road* (1975, page 117) has frequently been cited as the moment when things began to move in a new direction. In that complex image, all these components are brought together and, rather than simply interacting, they form a compelling imaginative architecture: almost a stage-set of the mind. The title refers to the address of the architect and art collector Colin St John Wilson, whose home is evoked as the site of the emotional situation described by the painting. This forms an expanded context for a portrait of the artist, whose figure can be picked out, partially obscured by a black vertical line at the right of centre. As would increasingly be the case, Hodgkin is not only an observer but inhabits the painting as a protagonist.

Nor is this an isolated development. Other portraits completed around the same time reveal Hodgkin's language working in similar ways. *Robyn Denny and Katherine Reid* (1975, page 119) and *Mr and Mrs Stephen Buckley* (page 111) also convey their subjects with a tighter, more economical focus. This is not to say that there is less in these images; if anything, the opposite is the case. But his compositional means are leaner, with the paintings' parts each fully absorbed, and nothing superfluous. Central to all these paintings is a defining feature of Hodgkin's

Detail from *Snapsheet*, 1984–93

This is one of Hodgkin's largest paintings. Despite its expansive size, it conveys the impression of a private, shared moment: a glimpse of figures within a confined space and in extreme proximity.





I paint a picture I don't know why I choose the colours'.⁶² There is a sense that to probe an essentially mysterious process would be to put in words something that is unsayable. With or without a rationale beyond itself, his recent work has fully accommodated the principle of metaphor within its own private language. In so doing, it has achieved a concentrated clarity of expression. At its heart is a complete commitment to the expressive mark. During the 1990s, certain portraits moved beyond his ethos of resemblance 'in a limited visual sense' to its attendant and more extreme condition of 'not at all'. *Kathy at La Heuzé (Flame Against Flint)* (1997–8, page 169), a portrait of Katherine Sachs, a collector of Hodgkin's work, evokes her visit to a house in northern France. Without mimesis, the work's coiled, smeared and pressed marks are connected with a precise event in memory: paint transmuting the ineffable into the physical by poetic association.

Such is Hodgkin's adherence to the equivalence of marks and recollected feelings that, as far as possible, he avoids making brushstrokes that have an autographic character. Any such connotation with his mood or identity would mitigate their role as bearers of other meanings within his visual argument. In that way his personality is irrelevant. Instead, as ever, the painting must be attuned to the requirements of the subject, which is located in the past and summoned by the painting process into the present. Serving that negotiation, his methods have adapted. Speaking in 2010, he observed: 'I felt it unnecessary to have a passionate backstory – a horrible expression – for the pictures I painted. I also

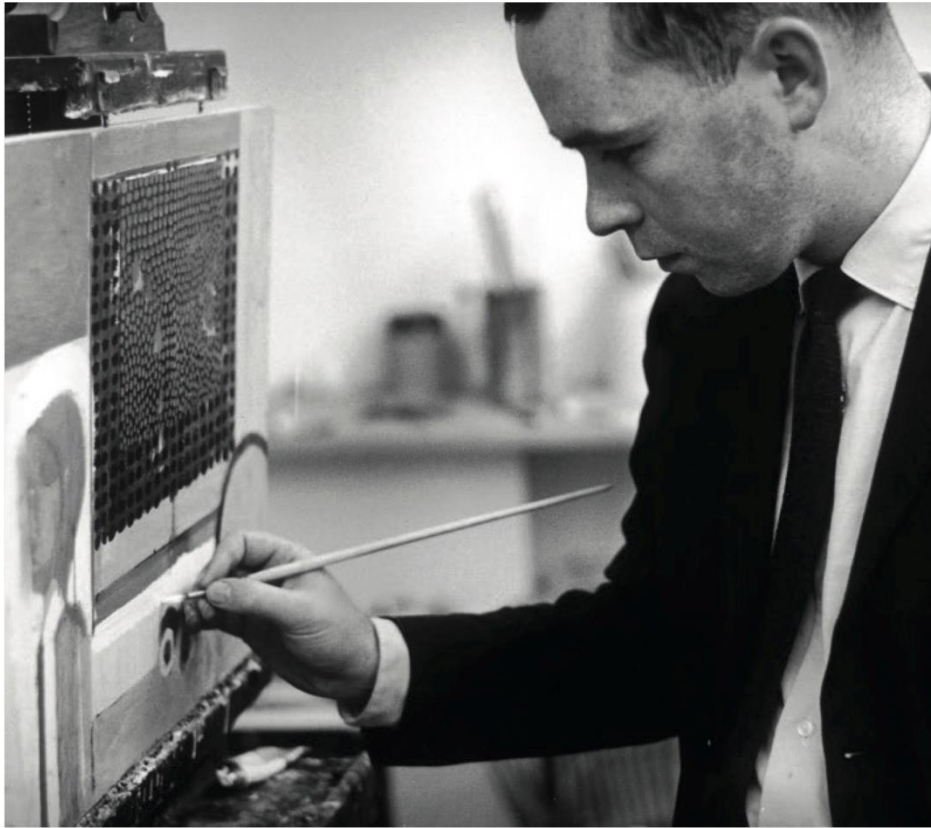
Detail from *Kathy at La Heuzé*
(*Flame against Flint*), 1997–8

In this striking passage, Hodgkin's use of brilliant yellow over grey has an almost synaesthetic quality. The colour combination suggests heat and texture, as well as a particular visual impression experienced during a friend's visit.

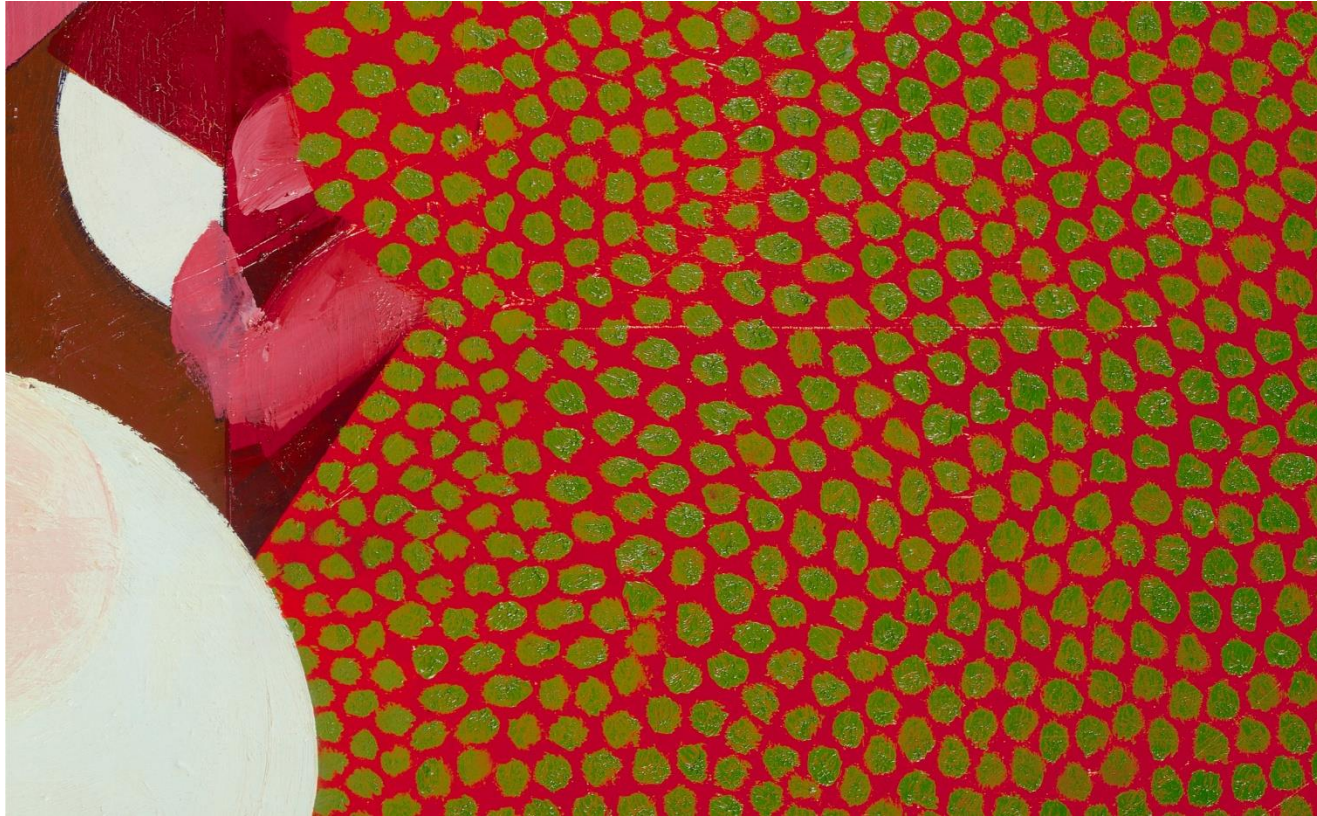
ABSENT FRIENDS

at the same time decided that it was better not to keep painting and repainting my pictures until they were just so – I should do all the painting and repainting in my head, which is what I have done'.⁶³ As this statement suggests, while a precise recollection remains his starting point, he has dispensed with a preliminary under-drawing and an encompassing context. Instead, the subject is committed immediately, as gestures in paint. Allied with that more immediate way of working, extensive revision has been replaced by protracted contemplation. As a result of that premeditation, the marks are fewer in number – but, in their final application, urgent.

In recent years, Hodgkin's portraiture has given up some ground to other subjects. Moments of reflection, and the act of remembering in itself, have become source material for paintings. That said, people remain a profoundly cherished preoccupation. *Double Portrait* (2000–3, page 175), *Visitors* (2002–5, page 177), and *Ekow* (2008, page 183) are, as he has sometimes described them, 'memorials' to individuals: physical equivalents for the emotional traces left by personal contact. *Blue Portrait* (2011, page 185) is one of his most extraordinary evocations, its subject rendered in a few simple, contrasted blue marks, with memory and feeling finding an unprecedented concentration. Among these recent portraits, *Absent Friends* (2000–1, page 49) has an ambiguous presence. Unusually, it was not painted in response to a particular incident or specific individuals.⁶⁴ Yet, as its title suggests, it has a poignant, human subject: the idea of friendship. The connectedness between people, and the void that separates them, are implied. Through other people, and our relationships with them, we come to a fuller awareness of ourselves and our position in the world. People come and go, we harbour recollections, and in joy and sadness come to a deeper understanding: we are not alone. In that respect, *Absent Friends* embodies the enduring premise of Hodgkin's portraits.



This is the first book and exhibition devoted to portraits by Howard Hodgkin, one of Britain's leading artists. Over the course of sixty-five years, a principal concern of his work has been to evoke a human presence. The role of memory, the expression of emotion, and the exploration of relationships between people and places are all preoccupations. The following catalogue of works explores Hodgkin's development of a personal visual language of portraiture that challenges traditional forms of representation.



Abstraction 1960–7

During the 1960s, Hodgkin was part of an explosion of artistic activity in London, with Pop Art and abstract painting and sculpture all vying for attention. Although acquainted with many of the artists associated with these different trends, Hodgkin felt like an outsider, belonging to no particular faction. Even so, he began to make portraits of individuals and couples connected with London's art scene. These included the abstract painter Robyn Denny and his wife Anna; the Constructivist artists Anthony Hill and Gillian Wise; Rhoda Cohen, wife of the painter Bernard Cohen; the art dealer Peter Cochrane; and the Pop artist Joe Tilson and his wife.

Speaking about his paintings, Hodgkin once remarked, 'some are quite representational in a limited visual sense; others hardly at all, or not at all'. That ambiguity is a conspicuous feature of these early portraits, which combine physical description with expressive colour and mark-making. That he should veer away from creating a literal resemblance is perhaps surprising. However, while he always began with an exact visual memory of the people portrayed, he developed his earlier approach, progressively adding other pictorial elements so that the original feeling he associated with the subject was 'built up again'.



Howard Hodgkin Chronology

1932

Gordon Howard Elliot Hodgkin is born on 6 August in Hammersmith, London, the second child of Eliot Hodgkin, a manager for Imperial Chemical Industries (and a keen gardener), and Katherine. He has an older sister Ann (1930–2006). On his father's side, Hodgkin is descended from Quakers, and his paternal ancestors include the physician Thomas Hodgkin (1798–1866), who gave his name to Hodgkin's lymphoma, and the pharmacist and meteorologist Luke Howard, FRS (1772–1864), who devised a nomenclature for cloud types in 1803. Hodgkin is named after his maternal grandfather Gordon Hewart, who served as Lord Chief Justice (1922–43). Other relatives include the painter and critic Roger Fry (1866–1934), who was closely connected with the Bloomsbury Group, Fry's sister Margery (1874–1958), who was a prison reformer, and Hodgkin's cousins, the painter Eliot Hodgkin (1905–87) and the conductor Sir John Eliot Gardiner (b.1943).

1932–40

Hodgkin's background is, in his words, 'fairly but not very wealthy middle-class'. Among his earliest memories, he recalls seeing a painting hanging 'over the mantelpiece in my parents' house ... a doubtful watercolour by David Cox'. The impression made by this work encourages a conviction about the nature of pictures, and is a contributing factor in his decision, aged five, to become a painter.

1940–3

Following the outbreak of war, he is evacuated with his mother and sister to the USA. They live on Long Island, and board with 'Aunt Bette', a family friend who features in Hodgkin's earliest portrait, *Memoirs* (1949). For three years he attends Greenvale School.

His ambition to paint is strengthened by visits to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where he sees pictures by Stuart Davis, Matisse, Léger, Picasso and Vuillard. He also visits the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Following the death of his maternal grandfather, he returns to London with his mother and sister.

1943–6

The beginning of an unhappy period, when he attends several boarding schools, including St Andrew's, Pangbourne, and Eton College. He runs away from all of them. In late 1945 he visits the Picasso–Matisse exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum and is again profoundly impressed by Matisse's work, having previously seen it during visits to MoMA. At Eton, the art master Wilfrid Blunt introduces his pupils to Indian painting, and shows them work by the seventeenth-century Mughal painter Ustad Mansur (1590–1624). Hodgkin begins to collect Indian miniatures.

1947

He transfers to Bryanston School in Dorset, where he is influenced by the ideas and opinions of his art teacher Charles Handley-Read, author of the first monograph on Wyndham Lewis. However, Hodgkin again runs away. He is sent to a psychiatrist, who recommends that he return to the USA. He spends the summer back on Long Island, staying with the same family that he had boarded with during the war.

1948–50

After returning from the USA, in 1949 he takes up a place at Camberwell School of Art, where his teachers include William Coldstream, Graham Bell, Victor Pasmore and Claude Rogers. He finds himself out of step with these exponents of the Euston Road School's ethos of objective observation. Working from memory, he paints *Memoirs* (1949), its graphic, abstracted style demonstrating his distance from Camberwell's prevailing approach. This painting is an early statement of Hodgkin's later preoccupation

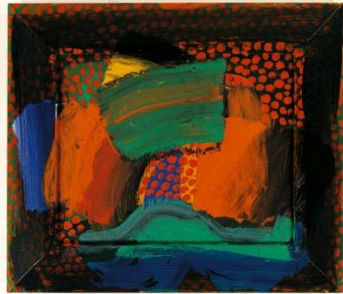


Opposite: Photographs of Hodgkin aged around 7 years old. Photographer unknown, c.1939

Top left: A portrait of Hodgkin's mother, *Mrs. Mrs. E. Hodgkin*, by Eliot Hodgkin, 1929. Pencil and watercolour, 482 × 342mm

Top right: Hodgkin aged about 16 during a return visit to stay with Betty Babcock on Long Island, New York. Photograph by Rosalind Oppenheim, c.1948

Above: Betty Babcock, a close friend of Hodgkin's mother who hosted them at her home on Long Island, New York, during part of their wartime stay in the United States. Photographer unknown



SALES POINTS

- Accompanies a major exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London (March–June 2017) – the first to focus on Hodgkin’s portraits
- Features around 100 beautifully reproduced portraits including the 55 exhibition works from collections around the world
- Includes an illustrated essay on the development and nature of Hodgkin’s portraiture, discussing his distinctive contribution to our understanding of what constitutes a portrait and examining key themes within the artist’s work: colour, memory, process and sources
- Hodgkin’s life and achievements are charted in an illustrated chronology, featuring archive photographs

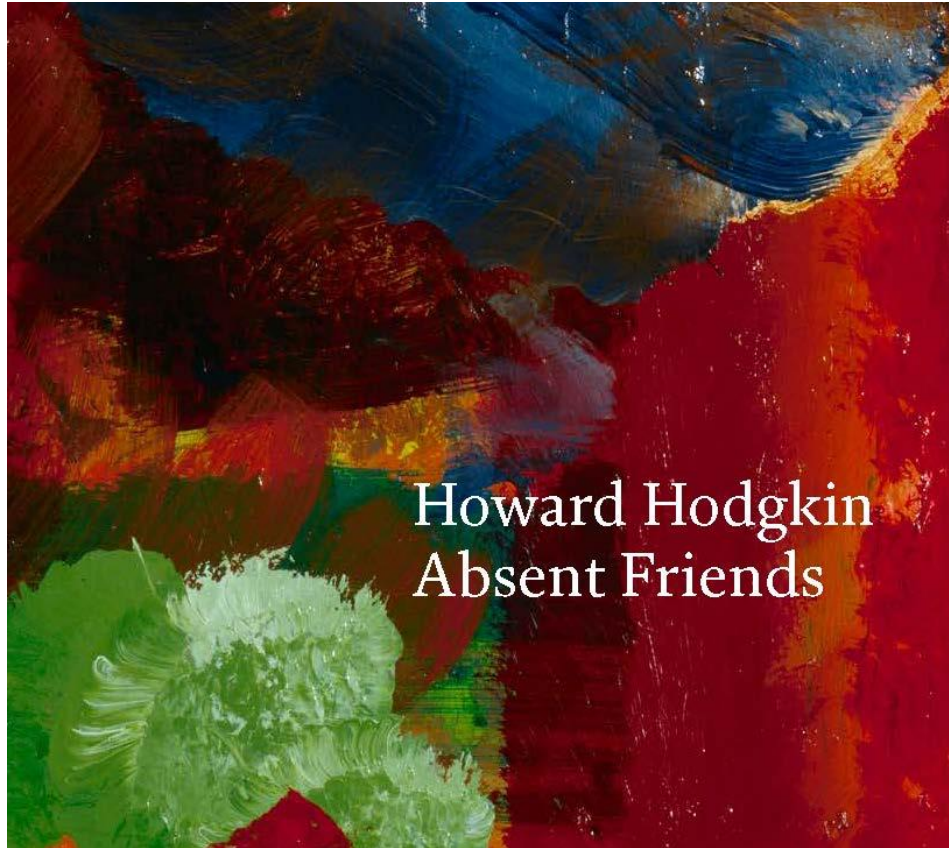
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