

DAVID HOCKNEY: Drawing From Life
DESIGN SAMPLE STAGE

Hockney and the Masters

by Sarah Howgate

In late 1977, shortly after moving to New York, Cindy Sherman commenced a series of black and white photographs that would come to define her emergence as a mature artist. In what eventually comprised seventy individual images she can be seen playing a succession of invented roles and inhabiting set-piece situations, her appearance transformed by make-up, wigs and costumes. Preserved photographically, the performative aspect of her work characterises her entire output to date. As the title of this celebrated early series suggests, the *Untitled Film Stills* 1977–80 evoke publicity shots for films. The protagonist is a solitary woman seen sometimes in close-up and at the centre of the action, at other times glimpsed from afar. Fictitious tableaux staged for the camera, such scenes seem familiar but are also tantalisingly ambiguous, inviting and at the same time defying explanation. These enigmatic works announced the arrival of a compelling artistic personality and yet, by presenting herself as an actress, Sherman simultaneously retreated behind the personae she created. The instinct to fabricate and occupy a world of appearances dominates the *Untitled Film Stills*, and during the succeeding four decades it has remained a central, motivating force.

It is telling that almost forty years later Sherman began a new series of colour photographs in which, like the *Untitled Film Stills*, she appears in the guise of different imaginary actresses. The earlier series refers to European cinema of the 1940s–60s, notably Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave, as well as films by Alfred Hitchcock. By contrast, in revisiting this theme she immersed herself in the look of a more distant era, namely 1920s Hollywood. The women depicted have an easy sophistication and languorous eroticism that recalls Theda Bara, Greta Garbo, Clara Bow and other female icons of silent film (see fig.2). Such allusions are, however, far from specific and Sherman's intention is not to impersonate particular people. Instead, her invented characters occupy a private world: one whose cultural sources are readily recognisable, but which is nevertheless self-contained. A poignant ambiguity resides in the way the images evoke women who are past their youthful prime; close scrutiny reveals an allure rooted in cosmetic artifice. With their bobbed and elaborately coiffured hairstyles these mature women may

well be stars of a bygone cinematic age, posing perhaps for publicity shots that they hope will return them to acclaim. But they are also actresses in a deeper sense, one that carries wider human significance as well as relating to Sherman's own artistic practice, for each of the individuals portrayed projects a persona.

Sherman's preoccupation with acting is long-standing and persistent, and as her work has progressed that involvement has taken various forms. In the *Untitled Film Stills* her fascination with inhabiting a role is apparent in the cinematic style of the imagery; the recent series of 1920s characters – described by Sherman as 'flappers' – also implies the presence of actresses but does so less explicitly. Somewhat earlier, in the so-called Hollywood/Hampton Types (2000–02) this theme was again at the forefront. In that series she played various out-of-work actresses who are each posing for photographs in an endeavour to be hired. In these affecting portraits the duplicity inherent in the characters' efforts is obvious. Deliberately exposing the women's forlorn attempts to convey an illusion of confident charisma and youth, Sherman makes the deception obvious through her use of exaggerated make-up, which borders at times on the absurd. The *Clowns* series (2003–04) took this a step further by pushing the theatrical element to centre-stage. In all these series, the idea of performance – whether overt or implied – is ever-present. It is also complex, for in their different ways such photographs advance a double layer of ambiguity.

This arises from Sherman's own performance for the camera, her features hidden by an elaborate visual charade; at the same time, the element of play-acting is emphasised by the imaginary characters that she inhabits, who are themselves actresses (or actors in the case of some of the *Clowns*) engaged in an elaborate pretence. Even when the characters she invents are not overt performers – as, for example, in the *History Portraits* (1988–90), which replicate the look of Old Master paintings – there is no less an abiding sense of artifice. Indeed, as Sherman's work has progressed, the impression of façade has been deepened by her use of prosthetics, masks and other visual devices, which define each photographic image as something that stands at a remove from the real world. Thus veneered,

Sherman's art invites the irresistible perception that what is being presented is pure appearance. While theories regarding Sherman's motives abound, this enduring characteristic cuts across different readings of her work and is unmistakable. What, however, is the significance of her total involvement with the look of people and things?

Part of the answer may lie in its sources. As a child growing up in Huntingdon Beach in the suburbs of Long Island, Sherman formed an early fascination with cinema. In common with many others belonging to the generation when television came of age, she was a self-confessed 'child TV addict'. i In her illuminating 2003 essay about making the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman explained:

I was always glued to the television when I was a kid, and I loved movies. There was one show, The Million Dollar Movie, that played the same film over and over every night for a week, so you could really know it by heart. ii

That exposure provided an intensive visual education, and significantly this was mediated by the camera and presented on a screen. From the outset, the world was filtered through these photographic modes of representation, a way of looking that defines the twentieth century onwards. Among the numerous films that she absorbed at an early age, one in particular stands out: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) (see fig.3).

In terms of Sherman's own later artistic concerns, the film's plot presents some intriguing points of connection. Confined to a wheelchair by a broken leg, the character played by James Stewart is a photographer who passes the time by observing his neighbours in their homes. Viewing these strangers from afar, he attempts to fathom their lives and situations purely by looking. In that way, the film expertly frames a difficulty that confronts everyone on a daily basis: how to make sense of a constantly changing world inhabited by people whose identities and private lives are closed to us. We seek clues in appearances but, as the film makes clear, attaching reliable meanings to the way people and things appear is fraught with ambiguity. Yet, in the absence of verifiable truths about the way things are, deciphering appearances is the only resort. That conundrum stands at the centre of the film and Sherman was evidently captivated by its implications: 'I loved all those vignettes Jimmy Stewart watches in the windows around him – you don't know much about any of those characters so you try to fill in the pieces of their lives.' iii Here, in embryo, is Sherman's later fascination with the inscrutable nature of appearances and the invitation that her work presents to the viewer to fill in the pieces.

Sherman's interest in the mysterious connection between the way things seem and what they mean may have roots in such early experiences, but alongside watching television there was another formative, and perhaps more fundamental, childhood passion. In common with most pre-teens, dressing-up was a

Untisquas del magnat libeat qui torporporem nullest, quae aborrov itisit autet et quam nobit, quasimi ligenis sitatibus rem alitia por se porporrum, sim earchitatur.

Overleaf:

Celia, Paris
1969
Pen and Ink on paper

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Untisquas del
magnat libeat qui
torporporem nullest,
quae aborrov itisit
autet et quam nobit,
quasimi ligenis
sitatibus rem alitia
por se porporrum,
sim earchitatur.

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Celia

Celia Birtwell (b.1941) is a British textile designer and fashion designer, known for her distinctive bold, romantic designs that epitomised the 1960s and 70s.

Hockney and Birtwell are well acquainted with Birtwell having sat for the artist over 80 times since they first crossed paths in the early 60s.

'Just like perfume can transport you to another place, looking at them takes me right back to that moment when we were still so young.'



Gregory

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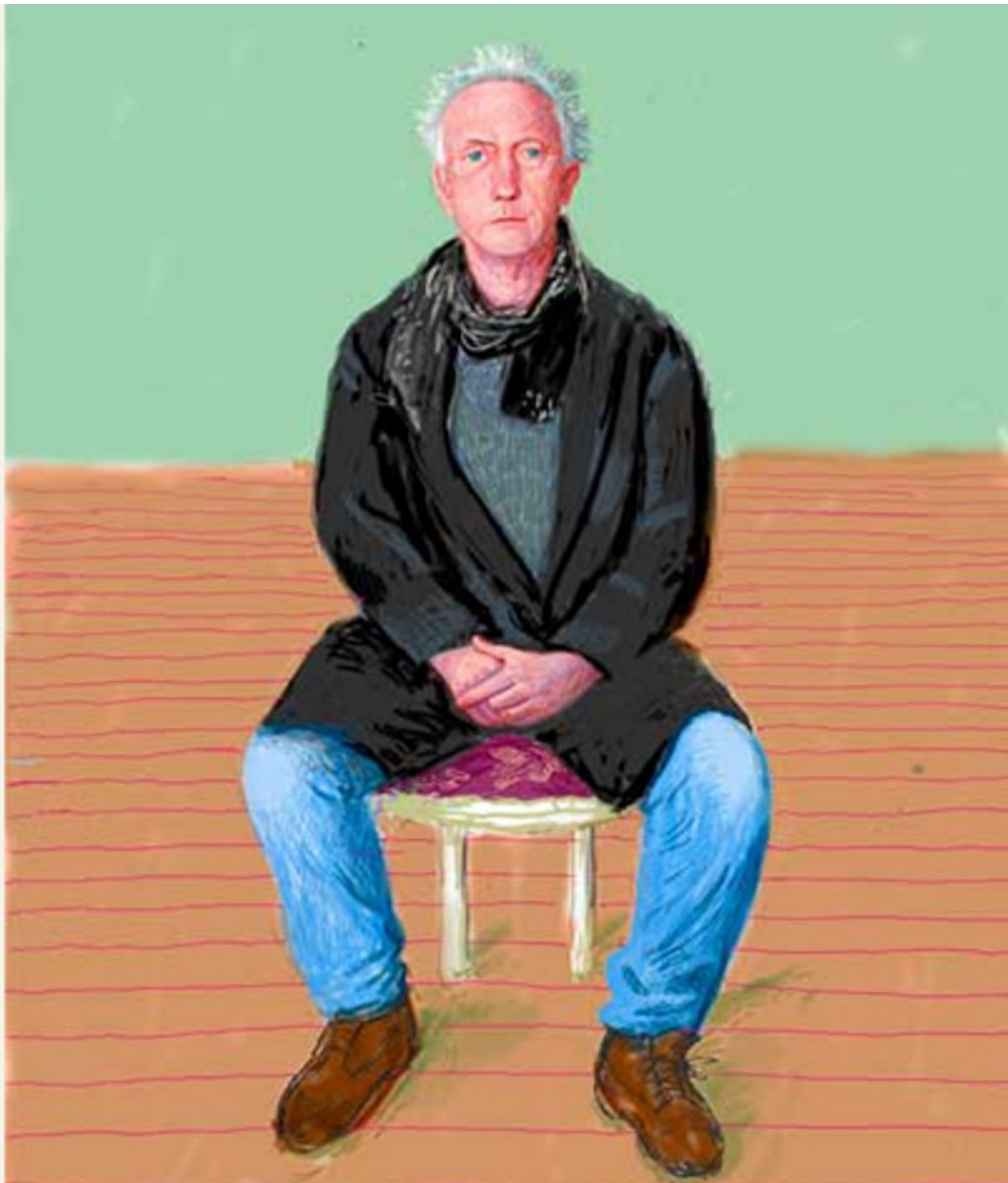
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Laura

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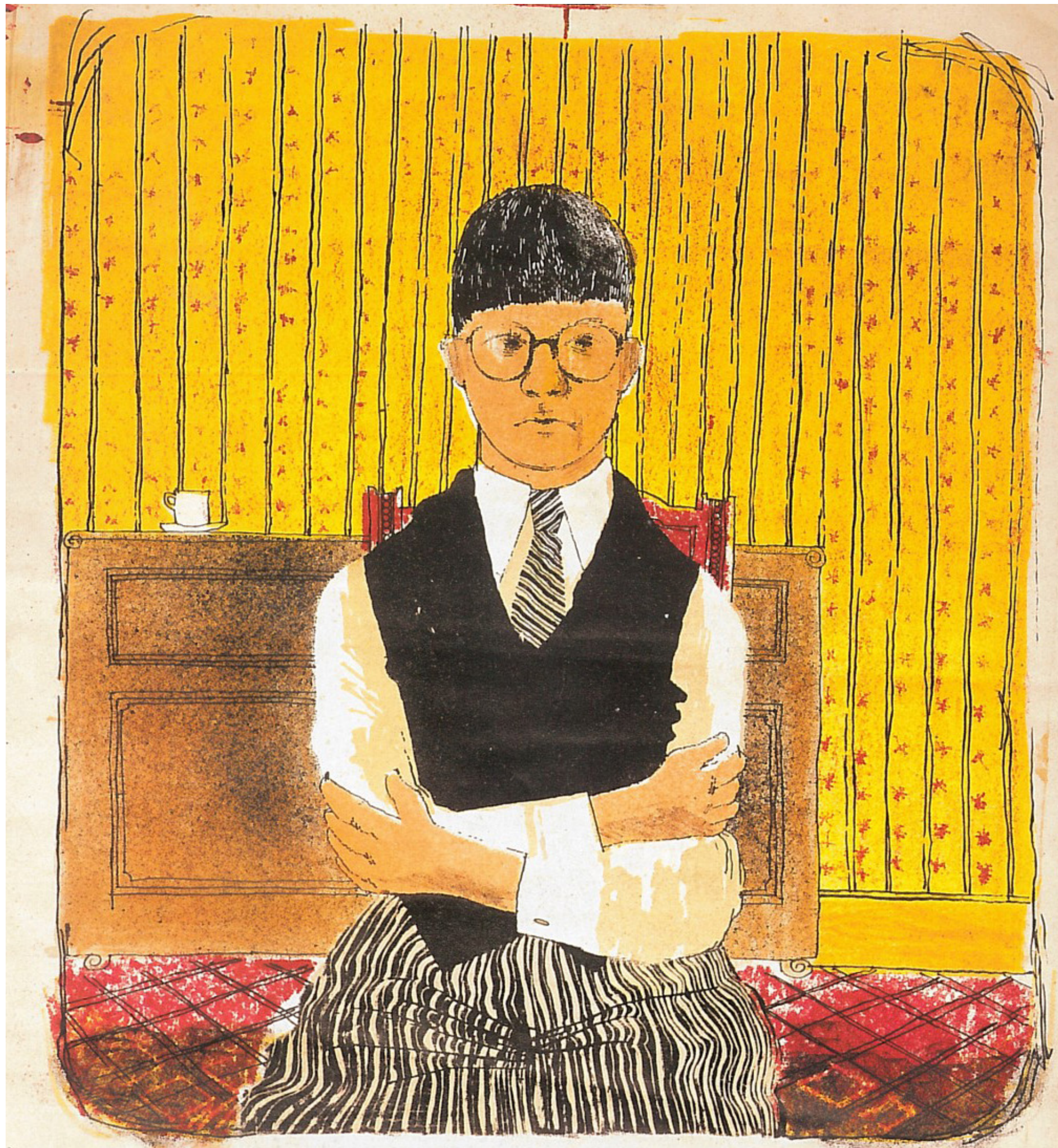
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