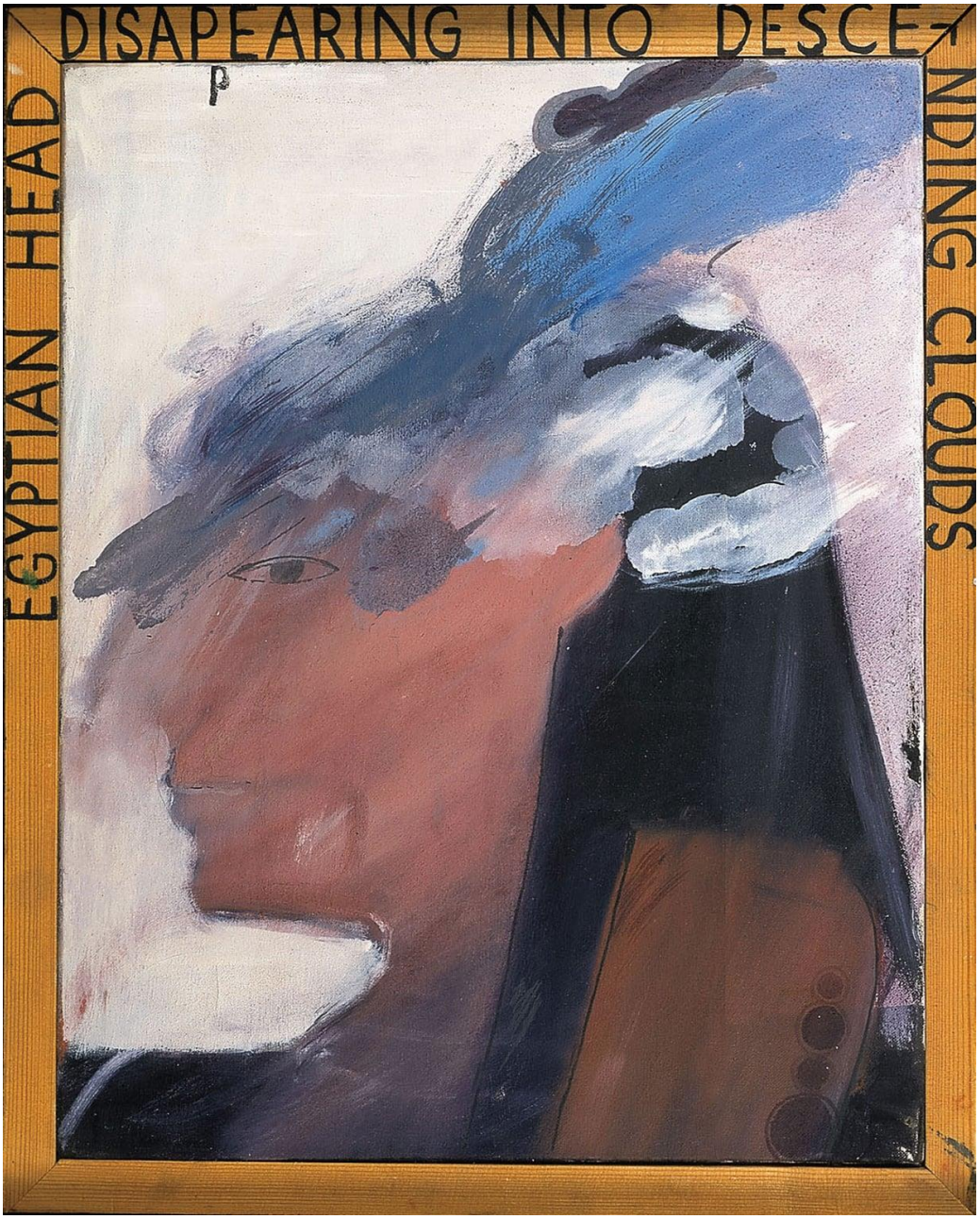
Artwork of the Month July 2020
David Hockney - Egyptian Head Disappearing into Descending Clouds (1961)

Peter Miller, President of the Friends of York Art Gallery, writes about an early work by the popular Yorkshire-born painter, acquired by the Gallery in 1999



David Hockney, "Egyptian Head Disappearing into Descending Clouds", 1961. © David Hockney.

Oil on canvas with title printed on wooden frame, 20 1/2 x 16".

Photo Credit: York Museums Trust, Collection: York Art Gallery, U.K.

David Hockney is one of the world's most famous artists, and has been so for the past fifty years. He exploded onto the scene in the early sixties, and his work was sought after when he was still a student at the Royal College of Art. He epitomised the Swinging Sixties, and was more akin to a pop star than a painter. His instinctive understanding of the media has always stood him in good stead.

However, his great and continued popularity has also worked against his reputation. The artist, since the advent of Modernism, has only been taken seriously if he or she is not immediately understood. My own view of his work is that, while it does not plumb the depths of the human condition, it consistently addresses the serious business of making pictures with a deceptive lightness of touch and a brilliance of invention that has renewed itself time and again over a long career. He has always sought to amuse and entertain himself and his viewers, and, like Picasso, is happy to steal good ideas from other artists and image-makers.

In order to place the York Art Gallery picture in some sort of context, I will look back on his early career – and it is his early career, because he was only 24 when he painted our picture.

Hockney was born in Bradford in 1937 into a modest family background to which he remained devoted all his life. He went to the Bradford Regional Art School (now Bradford College) from 1953 to 1957, where he received a traditional training. His painting at the time was heavily influenced by the Euston Road School of drab urban landscapes, but even then his self-portrait aged 16 in 1953 shines out with originality and technical expertise. During his time there he acquired a discipline for drawing which underpins all his work.

Conscription was still in force in the 1950s, and from 1957 to 1959 Hockney, refusing to serve in the armed forces, was a hospital orderly in Wakefield. He did little painting, became vegetarian, went on Aldermaston marches, and designed posters for CND. He was fortunate to have been sent to Wakefield as the Art Gallery there was then under the inspired direction of the artist Helen Kapp and he was greatly influenced by an exhibition in 1958 of the Scottish painter Alan Davie, who had recently been a Gregory Fellow at Leeds University. This introduced him to Modernism and to work influenced by Abstract Expressionism – not then known much outside London. All this encouraged him to think of the painting itself as shaping the experience of the viewer who was not just a passive receiver of information. Roger Hilton, a pioneer of abstract art who studied at the Slade and in Paris, was another artist whose work he saw at this time and who influenced his linear sense.

After finishing his stint as a hospital orderly in Wakefield he took up a place at the Royal College of Art in London in 1959, where he was to make his reputation and stay until 1962. His spectacular success prompted his Professor of Painting, Carol Weight, later to say: 'If you haven't made it by the time you're 25 you've had it!'

The first thing he did on arrival was a painstaking drawing of a skeleton. It was a summary of all that he had learnt from the thousands of hours of drawing at Bradford – as though as he was steadying the ship and checking the sails before setting out from harbour into heavy seas. His early work at the College explored mark-making in an abstract way, but after a while he abandoned this, saying later: 'It was too barren for me'.

His contemporaries at the Royal College included Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, Alan Jones, Ron Kitaj, and Peter Phillips. All demonstrated

a renewed confidence in realism, and found in the modern and burgeoning world of consumerism attractive subject matter. The bright colours, the youth culture, and the music were all a welcome release from the drab days of the fifties. They were also a world away from the social concern of the Kitchen Sink School or the existential angst of the Abstract Expressionists. Hockney fitted into this new hedonism perfectly. All this became 'Pop Art', with Hockney its 'Pop Star', and when he received the Gold Medal for Painting at the Royal College in 1962 he dyed his hair blond and wore a gold lame jacket à la Elvis. He had consciously reinvented himself.

While at the College he was profoundly influenced by a major exhibition of Picasso's work at the Tate in 1960. It showed him that he did not need to stick to one style. Of this experience he wrote:

> Style is something you can use, and you can be like a magpie, just taking what you want. The idea of a rigid style seemed to me then something you needn't concern yourself with, it would trap you.

Hockney was, by 1960, also exploring his own sexuality through his paintings. With titles like *Queer* and *Doll Boy* they seem pretty transparent now, but they were not so then, and they should be viewed in the context of homosexuality being a criminal offence until 1967. They are shot through with humour but also a new vulnerability, and a picture like *We Two Boys Together Clinging* has a pathos and a tenderness that is still moving. He also introduces figures and lettering as part of the interpretation of the image, where the style will change in a single picture from regular font to graffiti. It was all part of the greatly increased visual vocabulary that he acquired while he was at the College.

In the Autumn Term of 1961 Hockney embarked on *A Grand Procession of Dignitaries in the Semi Egyptian Style*, of which our picture is a study for the second head of the three figures.

This was his largest canvas up to that date (12 by 7 feet) and was inspired by the poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' by C. F. Cavafy. Cavafy was an Egyptian-Greek poet, and his poems were translated into English by 1961, with an introduction by W. H. Auden. The homosexual content may be one reason why Hockney learned about them so quickly. The title of the picture may have been adapted from a poem in the collection entitled 'A Grand Procession of Priests and Laymen'. The ironic tone of the poem appealed to Hockney as a wry comment on human nature and the way that we inflate our self-image by contrasting ourselves with those we deem inferior. The clergyman, soldier, and industrialist in the painting all hide within their public personae but are in fact quite small. The theatricality of parading on the stage of life is emphasised by the curtain rail, which is a motif that became a recurring feature of his work.

He exhibited *A Grand Procession* as one of the *Four Demonstrations of Versatility* at the Young Contemporaries Student Show in February 1962, and the collective scale of their ambition consolidated his reputation. The other three paintings were *Tea Painting with Figures in the Illusionistic Style*, *Figure in a Flat Style*, and *Swiss Landscape in a Flat Style*. The four pictures are a brilliant exploration of the business of painting. As Hockney explained to the American, Larry Rivers, in 1965:

> I deliberately set out to prove that I could do four entirely different sorts of pictures, like Picasso. They all had a subtitle and each was in a different style, Egyptian, Illusionistic, Flat - but looking at them

> later I realised the attitude is basically the same and you come to see yourself there a bit.

Turning to our picture, I would suggest that a crucial influence was the work of E. H. Gombrich, who in his *Story of Art* (1950) talks about the 'Egyptian Style' (p. 41). This is a book that Hockney would no doubt have read. In it Gombrich writes: 'The Egyptian Style comprised a set of very strict laws which every artist had to learn from his earliest youth'. Hockney was absorbed by finding a style, and this idea, I believe, he has taken from Gombrich.

In his seminal and influential book *Art and Illusion*, which came out in 1961, the same year that Hockney painted his picture, Gombrich starts the work with a cartoon by 'Alain' (the pen name of the artist and illustrator Daniel Brustlein) from *The New Yorker* magazine. It shows an Egyptian life-drawing class with the posing model depicted in two dimensions, as with figures in Egyptian paintings and relief sculptures. Gombrich states: 'the illustration in front of the reader should explain much more quickly than I could in words what is meant by "the riddle of style"'. Even if Hockney, like Tony Hancock, never got beyond the first page, it would tie in with his concerns about style and 'semi-Egyptian Style' at that time. Some years later, Hockney himself explained the completed picture in '*Hockney's Pictures'* (2004, p. 22) as follows:

> The first figure is meant to be ecclesiastical-looking. The second is a soldier like person; he has got medals on him. The third person is full of little workers in his body…. He is an industrialist or something. I called the style 'semi-Egyptian' because there is a true Egyptian Style with rules. All styles in a sense have some rules, and if you break them it's a semi-style, I thought; the Egyptian style of painting, of course, is flat and, since I was

breaking the rules of flatness, it was the semi-Egyptian Style. The curtain at the top is the first time I used the curtain motif; I wanted it to look theatrical.

If we look now at our picture, it is a preparatory sketch for the second figure, the soldier. It is very thinly painted in oil on canvas. The cloud doubles as a head-dress. I am not sure what the circles are on his upper arm, and they do not appear in the final painting. Perhaps they allude to his being a soldier and are formalised ‘pips’. The eye is an allusion to the ‘Egyptian Style’ as in Gombrich, and this has been drawn in pencil as a key motif.

The colour range is narrow but knowing. Hockney has painted on a ground of Indian red, which has allowed him to pick up the flesh tones, and also let it break through the white in the nose of the profile and above the shoulder. He seems to have used Payne’s grey for the cloud, moving into indigo – both very useful for establishing tone. The blue is predominantly cerulean with just a hint of deeper cobalt. Notice how artfully he has let the cloud intrude onto the back of the head. This allows him to break up the head-dress and make another shape, and also, importantly, to bring the highlight white against the black for maximum contrast. This was a trick much used by the Old Masters that Hockney was happy to borrow. The descending cloud allows him to scumble in pure paint and, as it were, to undo the academic lessons of his youth. The cheap boxwood frame is Hockney’s, and the fancier white and gold frame is the dressing of Bond Street. He is on his way to world-wide fame!

To end, I would like to say that David Hockney has always accentuated the positive. To him, each day is an engagement with life. His pictures of the Wolds come over as reminted with a colour scheme all his own, as

though they have been transformed into Hockney-land. His California is a mix of sex and sunshine. His pools are an invitation to cool pleasure. Having communicated the delight in being alive for over fifty years, unsurprisingly he remains an exceptionally popular artist; his retrospective in 1997 at Tate Britain was seen by nearly half a million visitors, to become the Gallery's best attended show.

The painting in York Art Gallery (oil on canvas, 50.2 by 40cms) was acquired in 1999 for £50,000 plus VAT with £22,000 from the V&A, £23,000 from the National Art Collection Fund, a contribution from the Friends of £4,500, and £500 from the Gallery. Richard Green, Curator of York Art Gallery from 1977 to 2003, comments on the decision to buy it as follows:

As the Millennium approached it became embarrassingly clear that the great burst of artistic talent from Yorkshire roots seen in the twentieth century was scarcely represented at York Art Gallery. This phenomenon was epitomised by the work of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and David Hockney, all with international reputations and consequently commanding high prices. Hitherto unrepresented in the collection, their names now assumed prominence on the Gallery's list of desiderata. Of course, it would be necessary to wait, keeping an eye on the art market, for suitable acquisition opportunities to present themselves — thus gradually fulfilling the wish-list. A perfect opportunity arose in the case of *Egyptian Head Disappearing into Descending Clouds* because, as a work of Hockney's student years, this was modestly priced, while it yet exemplified the artist's mischievous wit and lightness of touch — features not so readily apparent in much of his later work. In the same year, 1999, the Gallery acquired one the finest of Barbara Hepworth's hospital drawings (like the Hockney, purchased with Friends' support). A sculpture by Hepworth and something in two or three dimensions by Henry Moore would have to await their turn.

Peter Miller

July 2020