Country strong

David Hockney's English landscape paintings have heroically revived this deeply unfashionable genre

Once, the English landscape was a prime subject for British art. From the time of the pioneering watercolour artist Paul Sandby in the mid-18th century right into the early 20th century, British painters responded keenly to particular features of the nation's countryside, beginning with fields and hills, and soon enough, as travel writer and painter John Brown put it in 1753, to "the beauty, horror and immensity" of the Lake District, Scotland and Wales.

The kingdom then was recently united and charting its topography in paint was a sign of a new, visual excitement about the union. Travellers to Britain's closest neighbours, France and the Netherlands, could also marvel at the strides the landscape painters of those thoroughly confident cultures had made the century before. The greatest 17th-century "English" painter, Anthony van Dyck—principally a portraitist of course—deeply influenced the English style, bringing with him from Antwerp to the court of Charles I innovations in depicting the world, meaning trees and hills along with courtly ruffs and curly cavalier locks.

For two centuries, to go out into the countryside and capture the land on canvas was an indisputably legitimate form of British art. Now, however, the painting of landscape is effectively taboo. It is regarded as too cosy, too much a part of an old, stolid tradition: it is what Sunday painters do, surely, hoping to flog their garish wares on park railings. So why has David Hockney, the most celebrated British painter of the last 40 years, most of them spent in his adoptive California, concentrated recently on painting his native Yorkshire? His focus on the British landscape, as a new Royal Academy exhibition dedicated to his pastoral paintings demonstrates, is bold and eye-grabbing—and at the same time traditional. Hockney the magician-colourist is also, we see, a master of perspective and mood, of trees and fields in their natural place. On his own Hockney seems to have reinvented a genre that practically died after the second world war.

Well into the 1930s many artists continued to paint the landscape. Despite the upheavals of European modernism, a deep-seated belief in Britain that art should be a response to the natural world—going back to perhaps the best-loved master of them all, John Constable, or even further, to the mid 18th-century Alexander Cozens—had established itself as something close to aesthetic law. From Paul Nash's views of prehistoric megaliths and the coast of Dorset to the work of the group of rural artists based around Great Bardfield in Essex, including Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden, English painting monitored the landscape's layers of history. The work of Nash et al might now be less fashionable than their more modernist contemporaries, such as Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, but even they were deeply influenced by the stiffly bleak landscapes round Zennor in north Cornwall.

In the 1950s, this element vanished from the mainstream. What began to count, and to sell, was introspective and urban. Wrestling with abstract ideas, artists lost interest in observation and faithfully mapping the world in two dimensions. True, traditional artists like Carel Weight and Leonard McComb, still went on painting expeditions in Dorset in the 1960s. Plenty of others, such as Patrick George, painted Euston Road-style, realist landscapes, with barely a nod to what was happening in the mainstream; but for all that it began to feel like a tradition that had withered away. When David Hockney and his generation graduated from the Royal College of Art in the early 1960s, they lapped up popular culture, rejoicing in the urban world's flotsam and jetsam—and, in Hockney's case, the swimming pools of southern California—but never, ever the English landscape.

When landscape returned to prominence in the 1970s, it was not through painting but conceptual art. A new generation of artists, including Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, challengingly evoked landscape through site-specific work: Long with his eerie, stone-notched walks through fields, Goldsworthy with his sculptures of melting natural materials. But this work was largely non-representational. The landscapes this generation explored were more often international than British.

Then, in a brief period in the mid-1970s, a group of artists known as the Brotherhood of Ruralists emerged, which included the pop maestro Peter Blake. They aimed for a "continuation of a certain kind of English painting." "We admire," they proclaimed, "Samuel Palmer, Stanley Spencer, Thomas Hardy, Elgar, cricket, the English landscape and the Pre-Raphaelites." Today, their efforts appear a little sentimental and nostalgic. Though refreshingly anti-conceptual at the time, their work tended to be idiosyncratic and personal, built on a desire for elitist retreat, and lacking finally the mystery and strangeness woven by the truly visionary and unselfconsciously English Palmer and Spencer. All said, very few major artists in the postwar period have*wanted* to paint the British landscape.

David Hockney is the significant exception. Yet he came to paint Yorkshire by accident. In the mid-1990s, when his close friend, Jonathan Silver, was dying of cancer, Hockney would drive over the Yorkshire Wolds from Bridlington, where he had bought a house for his mother. Silver had often encouraged him to paint Yorkshire. Recalling two summers when, as a teenager, he had worked on a farm between Wetwang and Huggate, Hockney began to paint large landscapes based on these experiences. *The Road to York through Sledmere*(1997) showed a compressed view of the village and the main road running through it, and another, *Garrowby Hill*(1998), the descent down into the Vale of York. Painted from memory, these canvases were not so much about the observation of the landscape as views from the road: English versions of his drives through the Hollywood hills.
In the following years, in Los Angeles, he was preoccupied by work which went into a 2001 book, *Secret Knowledge*, about the lost techniques of the old masters, but by 2005, the city had lost some of its allure. Hockney discovered that he preferred being in his mother's house. His sister moved out, his entourage moved in, and he began to paint the Yorkshire Wolds with a new intensity. Each day, he and his studio assistant, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, drove out into the countryside, often to a deliberately nondescript place by the side of a road. There, Hockney set up his easel and painted what he saw.
Having lived in rowdy, self-regarding LA since the mid-1960s, he became fascinated by exactly those qualities of the English countryside which have attracted artists in the past: slow, organic changes in the seasons; the patterns of trees against the sky; trees symbolising the passing of years; the play of light over fields; the sense of landscape undesecrated by modernity. If Hockney sounds highly traditional in these preoccupations, he is: passionate about art as a form of accurate visual transcription—truthful not in what it says about the emotion of the painter, nor as a detailed photographic record of landscape, but in how it looks and feels, its changes through a year. There is a constant tension in this work between landscape's tempting abstractness and the painter's desire for observational record.

Hockney has also remained conscious of the extent to which Constable invented a way of viewing the landscape round Dedham and the River Stour in Suffolk. Constable's endless, probing exploration of the same scenes of clouds, mills and water, as well as the activity of farmwork itself, has been a lightning rod for the Yorkshireman's own fascination with natural detail. In so far as artists have painted Yorkshire, they have tended, like JMW Turner, to be drawn to the dramatic Dales. By contrast the Wolds are unspoilt and agricultural, unvisited by tourists and hard to get to. Hockney has been able to shut himself away and dedicate himself to painting.

This body of Hockney's work demonstrates his vibrant involvement with new technology. Originally, he embarked on landscape painting in order to get away from the camera—with which he has performed some dazzling collage experiments—and to root out the virtues of pure painting. Hockney cannot entirely escape the camera, however—not least because everything that he does is subject to documentary record by his assistant, who has taken thousands of photographs recording Hockney's process of painting. Yet a constant preoccupation with the manner in which painting and drawing provide a truer record of the landscape gives these pictures some of their brilliant intellectual energy. The results of teaching himself to sketch directly onto an iPad, while simultaneously incorporating small-scale photographic images of trees taken with a high-definition digital camera, have ushered in a new medium of work, subtly different in visual character from Hockney's paintings and watercolours.

Above all, he has kept magnificently intact an ability to connect with the public. Looking at his painting and drawing is like experiencing someone, however knowing, seeing the world for the first time.

Hockney's enthusiasm for new ways of thinking about the processes of observation of the natural world are evident in his work. He insists we rediscover the idea of looking carefully, a process he believes has been contaminated by a generation gulping in the world only through television and photography.

Will the critics want something more portentous? Art has for a very long time recognised the validity of landscape painting, as it has portraiture. It might be deeply unfashionable, but it is surely legitimate for art to give us hills and trees and fields and clouds, and to exult in a mastery of drawing.

In the 1970s, it was Hockney himself who re-energised public interest in drawing: he got artists thinking once again about the idea of portraiture as a central art form. Thirty years on and late in his career, Hockney discovered the distinctly old-fashioned pleasures of sitting at a roadside, attempting to paint how the seasons change the hidden fields and woods of east Yorkshire. He has thrown himself into the task with characteristic gusto, encouraging an audience who might have wondered where and why the genre had gone to re-connect with it. This most modern and engaged of painters has done exactly what pioneering landscape artists did 250 years ago, and in the Romantic era John Constable ("painting is but another word for feeling" he once said): he has gone out into the open and captured British nature, 21st-century nature in this case, for posterity.

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