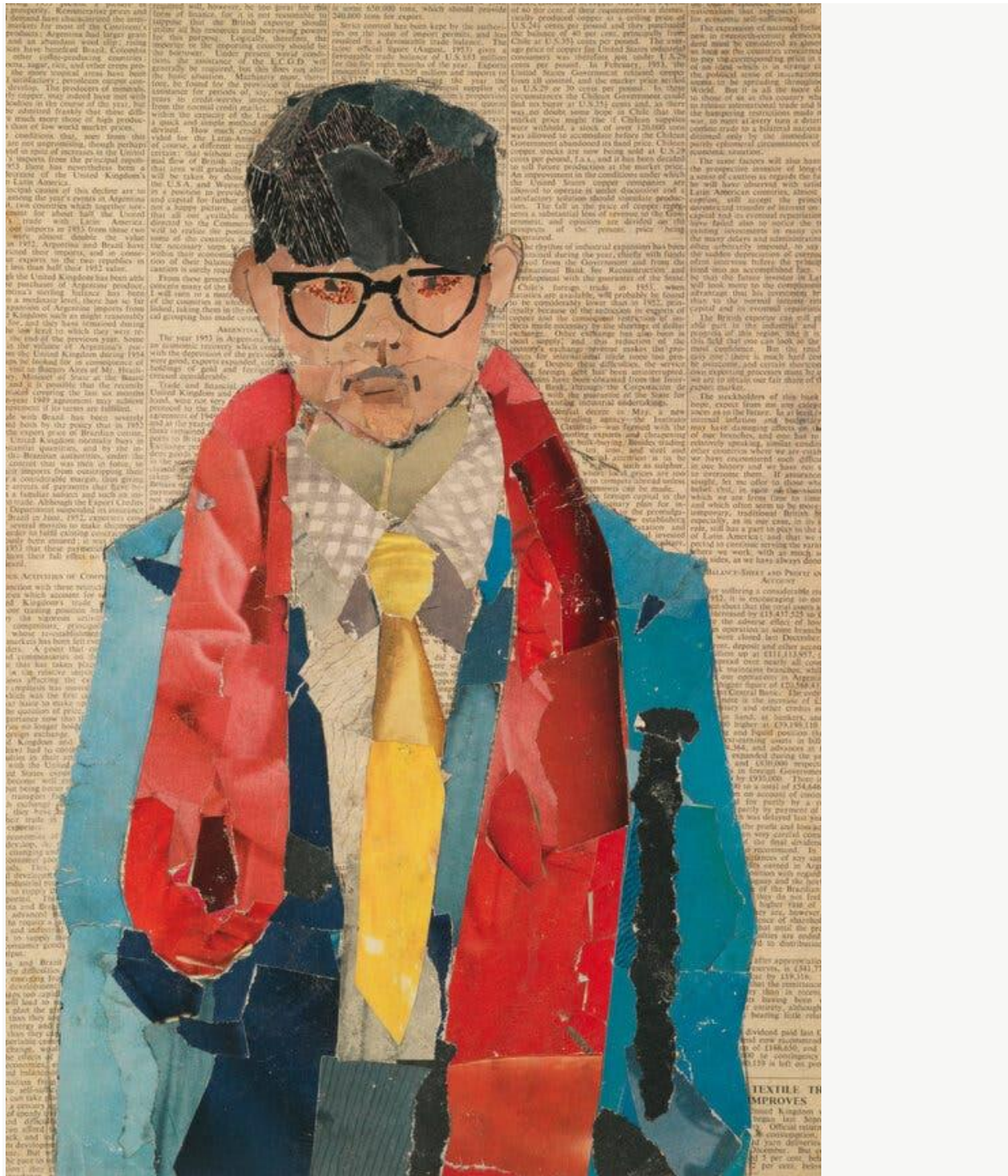


# David Hockney: A Life in Drawing

The British artist's new show at the Morgan Library & Museum derives its poignant power from its focus on loved ones and the complex nature of relationships.



“Drawing From Life,” an exhibition devoted to David Hockney’s portraits and self-portraits on paper, includes this 1954 self-portrait collage made mostly from small colorful scraps of glossy magazine images. Credit...David Hockney, Bradford Museums & Galleries, Bradford, U.K

## By Roberta Smith

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Whether we're related by blood or not, our loved ones have been very much with us these last several months. Some have been physically with us, at our elbows, sheltering at home, strengthening and sometimes straining the ties that bind. Or they are with us in absentia, in yearning, across great distances, sometimes oceans. Others are no longer among the living; their absences may have been caused by the current pandemic, leaving a fresh painful void and the suspicion that they died in vain.

["David Hockney: Drawing From Life,"](#) a poignant, viewer-friendly exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum, is about loved ones and the complex, constantly morphing nature of relationships and the people who forge them. Organized by Sarah Howgate at the National Portrait Gallery in London and overseen at the Morgan by Isabelle Dervaux, the show is devoted to portraits and self-portraits — some 125, all on paper. It shows the artist working, as usual, full steam ahead, in different scales and in about a dozen forms of drawing (pencil, ink, charcoal and so on) and printmaking (lithography, etchings and etchings with aquatint) as well as with composite Polaroids and an iPad. It is beyond ample as a showcase for Mr. Hockney's towering drawing gifts, openness to new technologies and his incessant work ethic.



“Gregory. Los Angeles. March 31st 1982,” composite Polaroid. Credit...David Hockney

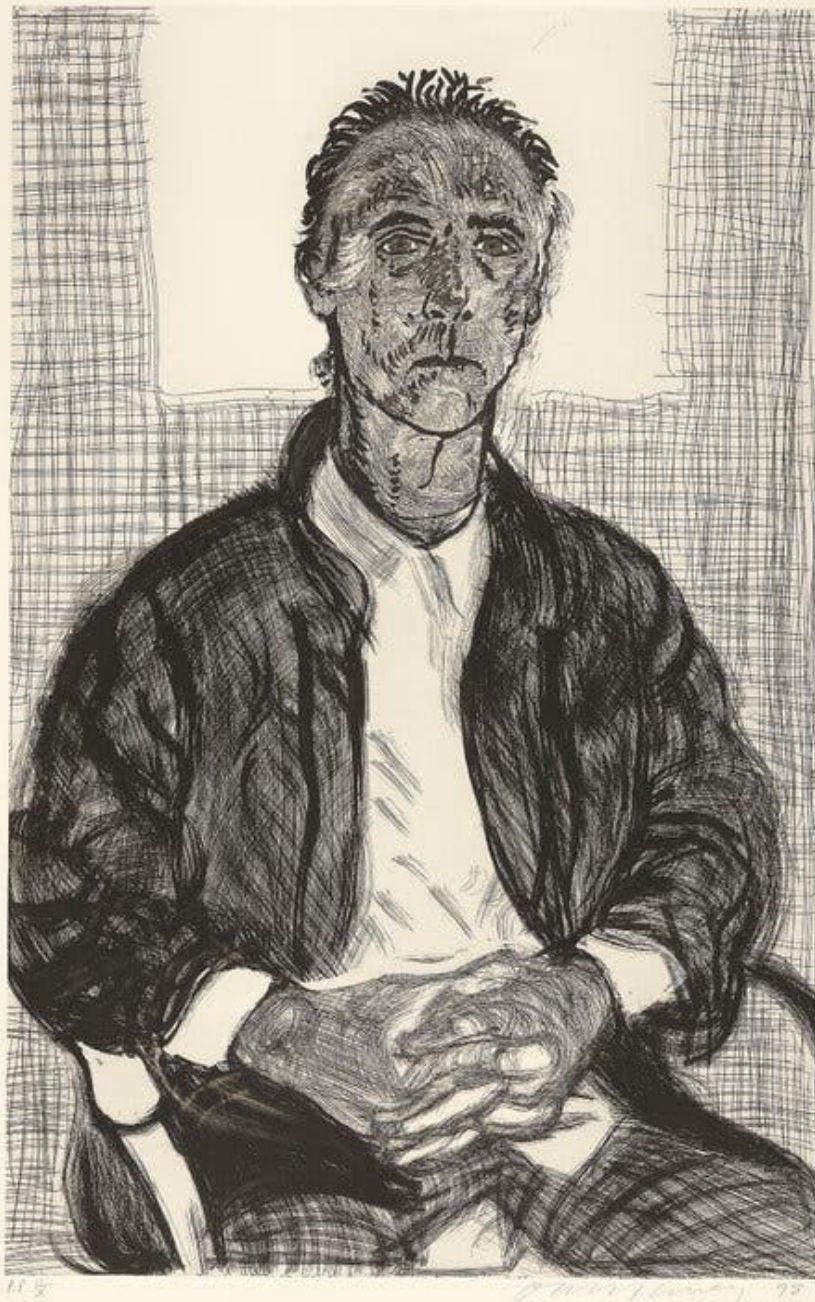
The exhibition's subtitle, "Drawing From Life," reflects the artist's tendency to always carry a sketchbook and to work only from life, recording what he sees in front of him. It also intimates the autobiographical nature of his project. He is drawing on his own life, portraying people he knows and cares about and the landscapes and houses he inhabits. While lavishly inclusive in terms of materials, the show is otherwise tightly focused, a cozy family affair. Only five people are depicted here: Mr. Hockney, his mother and three intimates whom he has known, traveled with, drawn and also painted for around five decades: Gregory Evans, his one-time lover, former curator and longtime friend; the textile designer Celia Birtwell; and Maurice Payne, a master printer with whom Mr. Hockney has collaborated since early in his career.



"Gregory" (1979), ink on paper. Credit...David Hockney

If friendship is one of the show's themes, and the glory of drawing in various materials and styles is another, then time itself is the third. The exhibition is divided into five chapters — wordless capsule biographies — in which we see Mr. Hockney's friends in various moods and settings as they progress through life. As with ourselves, we can see time pass on their faces.

Mr. Hockney is essentially documenting his life as it has entwined with others. Sometimes this is literal, as in the sprightly colored pencil drawing “Study for My Parents and Myself,” made in a hotel room in Paris in 1974. The artist's face, reflected in a dressing-table mirror, appears between those of his parents, seated to either side before deep yellow drapes. His father looks tidy and subtly dapper. His mother's dress is loosely scribbled — expansive and improvised, which seems appropriate to her warmer personality and more active encouragement of her son. One of his most touching portraits of her dates from Feb. 19, 1978, the day of her husband's funeral. Drawn in sepia ink (favored by Rembrandt), she wears a coat and hat, and looks a little blank but calm, as if appraising the next phase of her life.



“Maurice 1998,” etching. Credit...The David Hockney Foundation

The show's first wall offers a taste of Mr. Hockney's early talent and commitment to art with works from the 1950s that I don't think have often been exhibited in this country. Especially impressive is a self-portrait collage from 1954, the year Mr. Hockney turned 17. Granted he was already studying at the Bradford School of Art in Bradford in Yorkshire, England, where he was born in 1937, but it still makes one curious about how he got to it. Fashioned mostly from small colorful scraps of glossy magazine images glued to newsprint, it shows the young artist intently studying himself and us. Already in place are his self-possession, big glasses and mop head bangs — albeit very dark. The dull color startles, confirming how right Mr. Hockney was to enhance his innate charisma by peroxidizing his hair Andy Warhol white in 1961, on his first ecstatic trip to New York.



“Celia Carennac, August 1971,” colored pencil on paper. Credit...The David Hockney Foundation

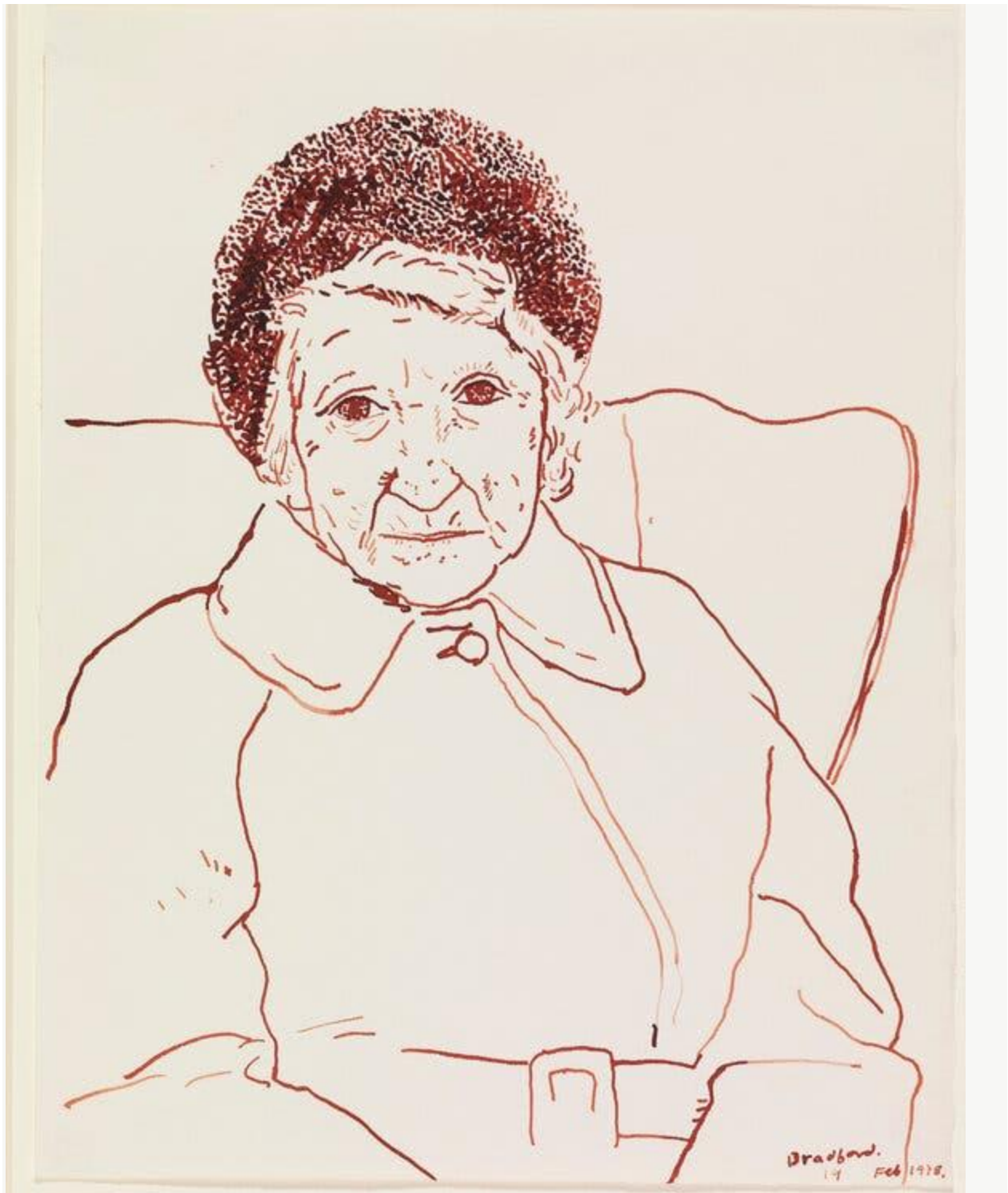




“Celia, 21 Nov 2019,” ink and acrylic on paper. Credit...David Hockney

The jumbled fragments of color that define the artist's blue coat, navy jacket, red scarf and yellow necktie presage the multifaceted Cubist vibe of his composite Polaroids from the 1980s. Visual wit is already apparent: The red of the scarf includes bits of an image of a red scarf, stylishly rumpled, as if from an advertisement. In a shift of mediums, the checked pattern of his shirt collar is casually indicated with gray wash brushed on white cutout paper.

The sections devoted to Mr. Hockney's friends form the core of the exhibition. Gregory Evans is represented by an almost novelistic profusion of images in terms of style, medium and his own changing appearance. He begins as a tall boyish beauty with cascading curls (depicted with fine, Matissean sparseness), and is almost unrecognizable as an imposing older figure, heavier and scowling through eyeglasses in a large ink drawing at the show's end.



“Mother, Bradford. 19 Feb 1978,” sepia ink on paper. Credit...The David Hockney Foundation

The elegant Celia Birtwell who is considered Mr. Hockney's muse, brightens the show with her serenity, kohl-rimmed eyes and fashion sense. Her spirit darkens only once in a large morose lithograph from 1973 that masquerades as an ink drawing and is one of the best images in the show.

Maurice Payne, a master printer who has collaborated with Mr. Hockney on many of his prints, must be one of the artist's steadiest subjects. Lean and laconic, with a certain resemblance to Marcel Duchamp, he changes little in pose or thoughtful expression, which makes Mr. Hockney's command all the clearer. A large, densely worked etching of him from 1998 gives a wonderful account of the medium's special way of infusing black with textured light.

At the end, this ebullient show circles back to the artist's self-portraits, which often catch him in the act of drawing, looking hard, sharply, at what is in front of him. A final wall displays eight monumental drawings in ink and sometimes acrylic of his three old friends. Each has embraced aging a different way — Ms. Birtwell most buoyantly, her open face reflecting the artist's own unfailing curiosity. Approaching paintings in terms of impact, these latest portrayals attest to Mr. Hockney's undiminished ambition for the medium so central to his achievement. They also attest to the endurance of love in our lives and the role of art in making us see it.

### **David Hockney: Drawing From Life**

Oct. 2 through May 30 at the Morgan Library & Museum, 225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan; 212-685-0008, [themorgan.org](http://themorgan.org).