

CASTLEGATE HOUSE GALLERY

Portrait of Sir Roy Strong by David Hockney (RA) - 1969

This graphite on paper portrait is a snapshot of a most exciting time in British art. Made during the Whitsun weekend of 1969, this David Hockney drawing depicts Sir Roy Strong at the home of acclaimed photographer Sir Cecil Beaton. It is the only known portrait of Sir Roy Strong by David Hockney.

Hockney, Beaton and Strong were friends. Hockney's progression to totally figurative paintings which depict a world bathed in light had made him a star beyond merely the circle of the creative elite Hockney moved in when he was in London. The late 1960s was a well documented period of cross pollination. Beaton's tremendous back catalogue can function as a 'who's who' of celebrity, photographing everyone from Princess Margaret to Mick Jagger.

One such figure who walked the line between the establishment and the creative individual, was the 'improbable' civil servant, Roy Strong. After he graduated, Strong became assistant keeper of the National Portrait Gallery. "My main recollection [of the National Portrait Gallery]," Strong describes, "is of empty, dimly lit galleries with the pictures glazed, all of them grubby [...] nothing ever seemed to move or change". Strong was unhappy with the dull and domestic character of the gallery and went on to revolutionise it. Museum goers are still reaping the benefits of his work today. Keenly aware of the years of opportunity the National Portrait Gallery had lost, and canny enough to note that they were to his advantage, Strong became the director of the gallery in 1967. He changed the type of exhibitions that were shown at the National Portrait Gallery and he doubled attendance by regularly introducing new exhibitions. One such show was *600 Cecil Beaton Portraits 1928-1968*. Reflecting on his time as director of the National Portrait Gallery, Strong pinpointed this exhibition as a turning point in the gallery's history.

Simply skimming his diaries or reading an interview with Strong reveals him to be an observant, caring and opinionated wit. It is unsurprising that during this decade of cross pollination across the arts in Britain, Strong and Hockney became acquainted. London was changing. While Beaton was hardly from modest means - educated alongside and bullied by Evelyn Waugh - Hockney and Strong (and a host of other famous artists) can be typified with a quote Strong made about himself; both were young men "from nowhere that went somewhere". There was a rush of people who "came up from below who had talent," Strong describes in an interview in 2015, people who found "new ways of doing things, new ways of looking".

The importance of looking is not to be understated when considering this Hockney work or Strong's curatorial work. After the heyday of abstraction in the 1940s and 1950s, figurative work rose as a riposte to the perceived inaccessibility of abstract expressionism. This was a return to looking - studying subjects, but with lashings of colour. Hockney has made clear the importance of looking harder, and longer, when he is drawing. His prolific production of portraits over many decades is a testament to this.

Both the brightly coloured, large scale portraits Hockney completed after his time in California and his small, deft drawings offer a stillness that is not often associated with the groovy counterculture of Swinging London. Therefore it is perhaps unexpected at first glance that this drawing, which depicts the man who made the London museum fashionable, by one of the most important (both retrospectively and contemporaneously) British artists, at the home of a principal tastemaker of the period, is so muted.

Hockney, who was a pop artist for all of 5 minutes, prefers a more adroit, subtle tact to communicate the essence of his subjects. Truth not effect is favoured, and the sitter's relationship to the artist is paramount. The likeness comes by accident. The lines forming Strong are precise, observant and effectual. Many Hockney works seem to share this quietness - either evoking the quiet of an expansive plain, or of a seemingly secret, shielded place. Hockney gropes for the ephemerality which he feels the camera cannot accurately capture.

This is evidenced by the presented drawing. As his diaries and writing more than prove, Strong has a quick tongue. And yet, this drawing depicts a rather reticent figure, arm folded across his lap plainly. Rendered only in pencil, his characteristically flamboyant clothes are of little import. Only Roy Strong the man is shown. The tension of his mouth seems to suggest contemplation.

Rather than rising above fickle trends like much of the establishment who prefer the timeless, Strong is seen to be modelling a mod haircut complete with impressive side burns.

This is a side of the 1960s that is less seen, or less promulgated. But without it, the more gregarious Swinging London would have been different. Hockney described himself in his autobiography as "associated with all that" by accident. He had little excitement for mini-skirts, Carnaby Street or bars that closed at eleven, and preferred the more egalitarian scene of California, where he lived for much of the decade.

There is a tension between the 1960s that Strong and Hockney recall. Strong described the exhilaration of frequenting London parties where he would see movers and shakers alongside old establishment figures, while Hockney lamented the expense and exclusion that remained in London society, disparagingly comparing London to California as he had once deprecated Bradford.

The resulting sketch is an understated image that contrasts the roar of the 1960s art scene. The National Portrait Gallery Collection has seventeen portraits of Strong but it does not have a portrait of Strong by Hockney. If Beaton's 1968 *Vogue* image of Hockney, Maudie James & Peter Schlesinger in front of Hockney's double portrait *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy* of the same year summarises the whole era in a singular photograph, this sketch offers a visual meeting point of three of the most inimitable cultural figures in Britain in 1969.

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