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In the last few years, there has been a spate of popular books inspired by the “Old Master.” Drawing upon my experience in Paris and as an artist, I offer the following comments on two of the books viability and accuracy.

“Secret Knowledge: rediscovering the lost techniques of the old masters” by David Hockney

“Secret Knowledge...” is David Hockney’s thesis on his theory that the leap in artistic realism which started in the 15th Century was due to the invention and use of the lens. He claims that artists could not have drawn or painted so perfectly without the use of those well-known early devices that “projected” the image onto a flat surface and was then “traced” or filled in by the artist.

Hockney is doing an enormous disservice to many of the artists of the past, to living artists who draw without computers, projecting or tracing, and to future artists who will believe learning to draw is unnecessary since mechanical means will be good enough.

Though his time spent in research is impressive (as are the art reproductions in his book), he was so fixated on his theory that his proof is often forced without understanding.

He has mixed and matched artists from various geographical settings and centuries; he has compared their differences in a meaningless fashion with only a passing nod to materials; and he has ignored their varied training and environments.

Unfortunately, space constraints limit me to only a few quick refutations to some of his “proofs.”

1. Hockney’s premise - Left handed subjects:

Hockney writes, “...Is it a coincidence that at the end of the sixteenth century, when I believe lenses were first used by painters, there are suddenly a lot of left-handed drinkers? This phenomenon appears with Caravaggio and lasts for about forty years, when good quality flat mirrors reversed the image back.”

Hockney is referring to the fact that the image projected by a simple camera obscura will reflect the image upside down and reversed, creating (he says) a lot of left handed people in paintings.

Hockney’s evidence:

Caravaggio’s “Bacchus” (1595-6), Carracci’s “Boy Drinking” (1582-3) and Hals (1627) “A Boy Drinking.”

My rebuttal: This seemingly credible observation by Hockney should validate his whole thesis, but since the statement is flagrantly incorrect, he actually negates his thesis.

To begin with, the Hals and Carracci paintings show that both hands of the boys are occupied. The right hands of the boys hold a stein or a carafe from which they poured the beverage they are drinking into the glasses held in their left hands.

The rest of the paintings I found by the same three artists show people strumming instruments and handling pens, knives, utensils, sticks, swords, glasses with their right hands. The only exceptions are in Frans Hals' group portraits in which one person, out of many, had a glass in the left hand...usually for compositional considerations.

Spot-checking paintings by other major artists in this same time frame (1580's to 1620's) yielded almost all right handed individuals or subjects with both hands occupied.

Caravaggio's one Bacchus holding a glass in his left hand does not constitute a proliferation of left-handed drinkers.

2. Hockney's premise: Vanishing points on different eye levels: Synopsis: He states that though detail on the paintings would be far more accurate with these devices rather than drawing freehand, in short range they only focus on eye level (or relatively straight on). Therefore, the artist would have to move the device in order to focus on each area of the item being traced. That would change the perspective and where there should only be one vanishing point for all the parallel lines, there may be two or more depending on the number of times the device is moved. He theorizes that many of the "errors" in Old Masters paintings are caused by this shift in the optical device.

Simple lesson on perspective: In order to follow Hockney's conclusion and my rebuttal, I've noted here my most simple and basic rules in linear perspective:

All lines that are parallel to each other, but are angled away from you, will meet at the same vanishing point (like railroad tracks). The vanishing points for items parallel to the ground are located on the eye level line (the height of your eyes).

However, most artists with a solid knowledge of perspective will not draw every detail using linear perspective, but will "eyeball" spatially and draw freehand, keeping the rules in mind. This would be especially true on items such as cloth patterns so that the material would not look too stiff (or architectural).

Hockney's Evidence: a) Lorenzo Lotto: "Husband and Wife" 1543: Hockney says the outside lines of the pattern on the side of the carpet covering the table have two different vanishing points, "proving" that the artist had used optics.

My rebuttal: If you look closely at the four lines Hockney has drawn as proof, you will see that he has forced his premise because he has not followed the pattern exactly. His lines go from the inside of the edges of the pattern to the outside, and vice versa, crisscrossing the lines when they do not. In essence, Lotto painted fairly accurately the lines Hockney says are incorrect.

But, looking very closely at the details of the whole carpet pattern, you can see clearly that Lotto neither used optics nor bothered with linear perspective because little of it is exact (except the lines Hockney said were incorrect). Like all great artists, Lotto painted a look of perfection, without being perfect.

b) Hans Holbein: "Georg Gisze" 1532: Hockney says: "*The pattern in the left hand corner seems 'true', but as you move back towards the letter, the table begins to loom up; and at the bottom right, it unexpectedly drops away, as if a corner has been chopped off. Also, we seem to be looking down on the box of coins left teetering on the edge from a different angle than the table itself. Again, these distortions suggest the use of a lens not geometry...*"

My rebuttal: In this case, Hockney has chosen only two specific lines to force his premise. He should have drawn a line from all the parallel elements and he would have realized that the pattern was eyeballed because of the inconsistency throughout. In fact, looking closely at the area Hockney says the pattern seems true, it is obviously not true at all. If Hockney had pointed this out, it would have

disproved his theory since the lines in that small area would have been more exact through the use of optics. Holbein painted spatially and with knowledge. It certainly was good enough, since he fooled Hockney.

As to the bottom right corner, the coin container and a feather on the edge have cast shadows where the furniture really does angle back. If the table were flat, as Hockney thought it should be by blaming the supposed “distortion” on the use of lenses, there would be no cast shadows beneath the two items. Does he really think that Holbein was such an inept artist so as to shift the pattern downward that drastically by accident? Hockney has just illustrated again that he is so caught up in his theory that he was blind to the obvious.

c) Hans Memling “Marian Flowerpiece”1485: “...a change in perspective can be seen on its pattern: the half of the carpet in front of the jug has a different vanishing point (A) from the half behind (B).” He then illustrates by drawing four lines following the pattern from both the front and the back.

My rebuttal: As in the first example, Hockney has not followed exactly all of the four lines but he has forced the angles in to prove his points (the pun is intended). Taking the two areas separately I drew 18 lines from the front section and 16 lines from the back . As Hockney wrote, if drawn with optics, there should be two vanishing points. There were roughly 70 vanishing points in the front section and 72 more in the back section and I did not bother to figure out the number of eye level lines, but there is a 5 1/2 “ vertical range for the points. Without a doubt, Memling drew the pattern freehand.

3. Hockney’s premise: Impossible to paint certain items without optics. He asserts many times that this or that item could not be painted so perfectly without using optics. Absurd!

Hockney’s Evidence: Juan Sanchez Cotan’s “Cabbage, Quince, Melon and Cucumber” 1608: “How long would the cut melon...stay like that without decaying? Not very long...certainly not long enough for Cotan to have eyeballed it so precisely.”

My rebuttal: The simple composition would take less than a minute to sketch, and a more exact drawing about 10 minutes. If the fruit deteriorates before the artist is finished painting, he can always replace it with another piece of fruit. What does it matter if it differs slightly from the first model since it is not a portrait of “George” the melon? It is unthinkable that a decent still life artist would need to trace a projection of an apple, cabbage or melon. Maybe Hockney should study at the Schuler School of Fine Art in Baltimore. In my short time there, I saw students paint magnificent, detailed, realistic still lifes from life - no optics, no photos, no difficulty.

Generally, the training in those times would start no later than age twelve or thirteen when the promising artists would be apprenticed to a master for six years (or more). During that period, they would work long hours drawing from casts (hands, feet, faces, etc.), sketching cloth stiffened with starch or plaster, mixing paints, preparing canvases or boards, cleaning, etc. Not only were they doing all the grunt work, but they were also learning every thing the master could teach them. There was no question that the master would hold back any of his knowledge, because these “boys” would eventually take over the basic work on some pieces. Those boys and eventual assistants were necessary in the workshop of a master for their help in completing commissions. The most talented of the apprentices moved forward, surpassing their teacher and becoming masters in their own right. “*It is a poor artist that does not outstrip his master,*” said Leonardo. The cycle continued.

In the major Dutch cities during the 17th Century, no artist could sign and sell a piece as his own unless he had completed his apprenticeship and was voted into the Guild. Compare it today to a law or med student passing the bar or his medical exams and then going through internship. Except, in that time, it took more training to be an artist than a lawyer or doctor.

4. Hockney's own drawings as proof. In his book, he shows a series of drawings that he has made over nine months using the camera lucida. He explains how difficult the use of the device was and the amount of practice it took to master it.

My rebuttal: The quality of his work does not show a leap or even great improvement. Considering that he is a professional artist, this is particularly condemning to his thesis since little was gained in using the device. A common difficulty with artists who draw using mechanical means is that they concentrate on tracing the line rather than seeing or understanding the subject.

Overview:

It is not an issue of whether it was (or is) cheating. Artists, like all professionals, have always used the "tools of the trade." The point is that for a talented, well-trained fine artist, copying mechanically is a hindrance, not an enabler. In addition to the added time factor of tracing, photographs are rife with flaws that are not noticed by the shortsighted copier.

Eugene Delacroix said *"If you are not able to sketch a man who throws himself out of the window in the time it takes him to fall from the fourth floor to the ground, you'll never be able to produce great paintings."*

Of course, today, anyone who picks up a pencil or a brush can call one's self an artist. Forget the basics of drawing. Hockney's message, whether he meant it or not, is that if you want to draw "realistically," tracing is good enough.

But why draw at all? With an artist's statement, anything is art: an unmade bed with stained sheets, used condoms, empty vodka bottles, etc. ("My Bed" by Tracy Emin, sold to Charles Saatchi for £150,000), an empty room with lights turning on and off ("The Lights Going On and Off" by Martin Creed, the £20,000 Turner Prize winner in 2001), or a sealed container of an artist's personal "waste production" (a popular museum purchase).

Sorry, but only clichés will do here: "art is in the eye of the beholder", and "to each his own", whether you are the artist or the viewer. Just do not ask me to bow down and worship work I do not respect, or does not excite me. And do not expect me to stop doing all my work freehand. It would take far longer to draw with the hassle of tracing and the results would be far poorer. Besides, what satisfaction would I receive from tracing anything, when drawing gives me such joy and the rewards are self-evident.