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Revisiting the book: "Secret Knowledge: rediscovering the lost techniques of the Old Masters" by David Hockney."

Original book review was published in Massey Fine Arts "News" Spring 2004 (Vol. 10, No.1). For a printed copy, please contact me, or it can be viewed on my website or at www.artrenewal.org/articles/2004/Massey/hockney1.asp

"Secret Knowledge" is David Hockney's thesis on his theory that the leap in artistic realism starting in the 15th Century was due to the invention and use of the lens and thus the camera obscura and the camera lucida. He argued 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. Following the publication of the book, there was extensive media coverage, including a video by the BBC and a segment on 60 Minutes. The theories sound plausible to the layman, the reproductions in the book are sumptuous and the documentary production spectacular.

Hockney has his supporters, especially physicist Charlie Falco and Philip Steadman (author of "Vermeer's Camera"), plus naturally, many artists who, for whatever reason, project or trace. Conversely, numerous fine artists (especially those who draw freehand), art historians, curators and other scientists (particularly Dr. David Stork) spoke out and published papers, effectively rebutting Hockney's presumptions. (Short list below)

Apparently, Hockney has retreated slightly from his pedantic stand. There is still heavy contention on which Old Masters "might" have used optics regularly. However, he now indicates that while some undoubtedly used optics, maybe more that he allowed had only been influenced by seeing projected images. Seeing and being influenced by flat images is a moot point as we have always known the devices existed and that many artists were familiar with them. If it was just a matter of becoming familiar with seeing three dimensions on a two dimensional surface, the advent of good quality mirrors illustrated that more clearly. Besides the impractical aspect of using devices to project, trained artists had no need for them, just as many artists today do not. There is no "secret" knowledge as posited by Hockney.

Why bring it up again? As James Elkins (Professor in the Department of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) said eloquently in his concerns with Hockney's theorems, "...I think it's true that no matter how many doubts art historians raise, and how well we argue, *we will all lose*, because the publicity on the other side is just too great...I will even make a prediction: in twenty years, by 2020, Hockney's claims will be part of first-year art history textbooks regardless of the critical consensus."

Though Hockney has now conceded that it is possible to draw brilliantly without resorting to projecting and tracing, the majority of the public have only seen the original media coverage, the video and the first edition of the book (the second edition backs off only slightly). Art magazine articles regularly have an artist justifying his or her use of mechanical means, writing "we now know the Old Masters projected." There are comments all over the Internet (including a YouTube video this February) accepting, lamenting or relishing that the Old Masters "traced."

Recently, I had a brief conversation with a well known author of books on Italian painters, who happens to be a friend of Hockney's and who even now stoutly defends Hockney's theories. He mentioned that what convinced him is the sharpness, then a slight blurriness, then sharpness in a basket of fruit by Caravaggio. (Hockney explains this is due to a mirror lens device's short depth of field and focus area. As a result, the artist must deliberately blur the transition areas when the edges don't meet because of differing eye level lines from repositioning the device.) It is a bit disheartening that a respected author of a book on Caravaggio evidently believes this extraordinary artist could not draw a still life without tracing a projection – something a first year art student in an atelier can render freehand convincingly.

Does it really matter? Yes! Hockney did an enormous disservice to many 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.

A plea to all art historians, fine artists, critics, and those who love fine art: Please don't let Dr. Elkins dark prediction become reality!

Some web pages querying or refuting Hockney's claims:

www.artrenewal.org/Article/Title/gregg-kreutz-answers-david-hockney
<https://www.artrenewal.org/Article/Title/new-book-on-old-masters-methods-is-a-leap-of-logic>
<https://www.artrenewal.org/Article/Title/why-david-hockney-should-not-be-taken-seriously>
<https://www.nicholascwilliams.co.uk/tag/secret-knowledge-david-hockney/>
www.webexhibits.org/hockneyoptics
<https://jameselkins.com/david-hockneys-theories/>
<https://christophertyler.org/CWTyler/Art%20Investigations/ART%20PDFs/HockneyBookAnalysis.pdf>
<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn6868-hockney-was-wrong-over-art-copying-claims/>
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/aaa.42.1.2.1557850>

Note in 2022: The original list have many sites or links that are now inactive. A few may have been removed due to complaints by David Hockney. I have researched and replaced those links with one directly to the authors.

Short list of those who spoke out against or wrote papers refuting Hockney's claims: Michael John Angel (Angel Art Academy), Dr. Filippo Camerota (Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza), Keith Christiansen (Curator of Italian Paintings, Metropolitan Museum of Art), Dr. Antonio Criminisi (Research Scientist, Microsoft Research); Mr. Marco Duarte (Dept. of Elect. & Computer Eng, Rice University), Dr. Sven Dupré (Ghent University), James Elkins (Dept. of Art History, Theory & Criticism at the School of the Art Inst. of Chicago), Virgil Elliot (Ind. Artist), Gary Faigin (Gage Art Academy), Dr. M. Kimo Johnson (Computer Scientist, MIT), Dr. Thomas Ketelsen (Kupferstich Kabinett), Walter Liedtke (Metropolitan Museum of Art), Dr. Christoph Lüthy (Radboud University Nijmegen), Dr. Antoni Malet (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Juan Carlos Martinez (Ind. Artist), Ann James Massey (Ind. Artist), Dr. Silke Merchel (Research Physicist, Bundesanstalt für Materialforschung und prüfung), Dr. Ina Reiche (Research Physicist, Centre de Recherche et Restauration des Musées de France), Kirk Richards (Ind. Artist), Dr. M. Dirk Robinson (Research Scientist, Ricoh Innovations), Fred Ross (Art Renewal Center Founder), Dr. Sara J. Schechner (Harvard University), Mr. Olaf Simon (Kupferstich Kabinett), Dr. A. Mark Smith (University of Missouri), Ron Spronk (Queen's University), Dr. David G. Stork (Chief Scientist, Ricoh Innovations), Timothy Stotz (Studio Escalier), Dr. Christopher W. Tyler (Assc. Dir., Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Inst.), Timothy Tyler (Ind. Artist), Nicolas Williams (Ind. Artist), Dr. Yvonne Yiu (Universität Basel), Brian Yoder (Good Art Founder)