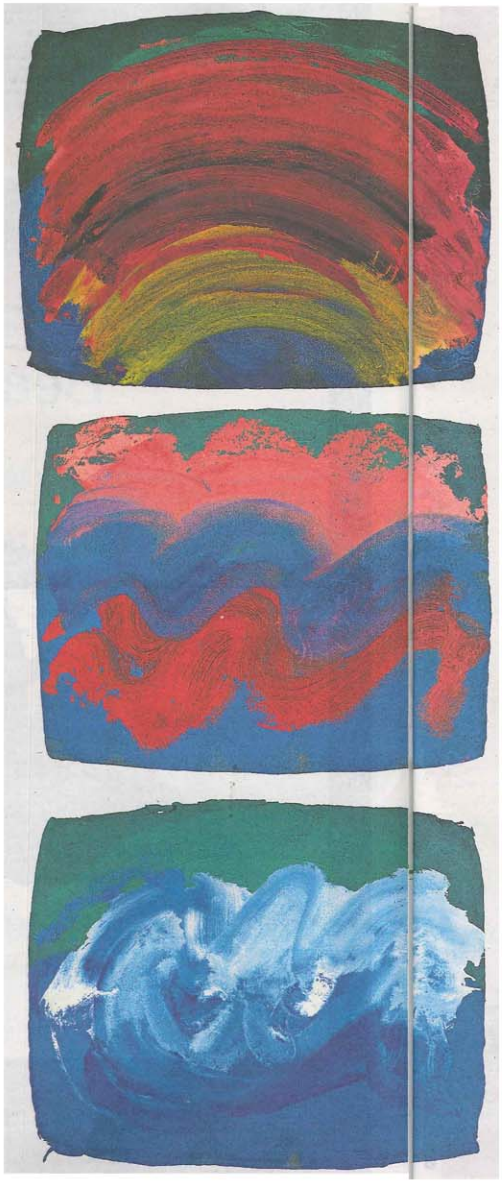
The Daily Telegraph
November 29, 2014

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Daily Telegraph

# Making waves in India

*A new exhibition of Howard Hodgkin's work highlights the debt he owes to the subcontinent, says* **Mark Hudson**



Two years ago, Howard Hodgkin became fascinated by a painting in Mumbai's famously grand Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, a work that eventually formed the basis for one of his own paintings. While there's nothing odd in that – artists co-opt each other's ideas all the time – what was unusual in this instance was that Hodgkin hadn't the slightest interest in the painting's content. What intrigued him were the proportions of the painting and its relation to the physical space around it – "in a sort of posh reception area" as he recalls.

Hodgkin's assistants photographed the painting, measured it, and made up a board in exactly the same dimensions on which he painted *Arrival*, one of the key works in his first Paris exhibition held earlier this year. "I was just very impressed with the shape of the rectangle," he says with a shrug.

I'm sitting in Hodgkin's London studio surrounded by the kind of paintings that have made him one of Britain's most popular artists: all big, exuberant brushstrokes and zinging colours that hum with the sheer physical pleasure of being alive. In all of them you're made intensely aware of the way the framing rectangle creates a kind of window on to the work, and of the tension between the edge of the painting and the centre.

Hodgkin himself is sitting just a few feet away, in front of a large painting titled *Indian Summer*, in which a tingling coral red is smeared over acidic lemon yellow with the wood of the original frame showing through. For all its appearance of spontaneity, the painting occupied Hodgkin on and off for four years.

While such works may appear abstract, they document events in Hodgkin's own life: encounters, memories, moments of particular intensity which he is reluctant to discuss. When I ask how the painting relates to India or to summer, if at all, he says, "I would never tell you," with a sense of flat finality, as though the matter were entirely beyond his control.

Sitting in this large, airy, serene space, just a stone's throw from the heaving pavements of Tottenham Court Road, Hodgkin projects a large physical presence, despite not being particularly burly. Now 82, he has difficulty walking, but retains the air of a rumpled and slightly mischievous schoolboy. He has a way of creasing up his face at moments of emotion, so you're not sure if he's about to laugh or cry. He always has been, he says, a "very lachrymose person".

He is also a somewhat reluctant interviewee, keen to discuss neither his ideas nor working methods. His responses can vary according to mood. On our first encounter he told me he'd been overlooked early in his career because of his privileged background (he went to Eton), only to flatly contradict this at our second meeting: "I probably just said it to see what it would sound like."

But if he can appear lugubrious, convinced that no one's interested in him or his work, despite every evidence to the contrary from a knighthood to a Turner Prize, today he's on expansive form describing the genesis of the works that make up his new exhibition, *Indian Waves*, which opens in London this week.

"Did you ever make mud pies as a child?" he asks. "Carborundum printing is a bit like that." The works in question, which combine painting with elements of printmaking, involved Hodgkin slooshing liquidised carbon filings onto thick Indian paper with his hands,

***'I was fascinated by India before I ever went there, and I still am'***

creating abstracted wave formations. "You have this surface which is controllable up to a point. You colour it, put it through a press and it sets rock hard."

Soon after they were completed in 1990, Hodgkin put the *Indian Waves* in a drawer where they were "completely forgotten" by the artist until their rediscovery earlier this year. Hodgkin links the creation of the pictures with that of another "lost" series, the *Indian Leaves*, in a spiralling shaggy dog story that says a great deal about his working methods, his personality and, not least, his love of India.

"India is totally exotic, everyone speaks English and everything is so transparent. Emotion is so close to the surface and on view," he says. "I was fascinated by India before I ever went there, and I still am."

Hodgkin has collected Indian miniature paintings since boyhood, impressed by their heightened colour and "totally non-European approach to pictorial space", and in 1963 at the age of 31 finally visited the country with Robert Skelton, keeper of Indian paintings at the V&A, and Skelton's American girlfriend, who irritated Hodgkin by buying up all the paintings he couldn't afford to buy himself.

They embarked on a journey through Rajasthan, which he still counts as one of the great experiences of his life, in the company of Asha Sheth, the formidable wife of a wealthy ship owner, who sang ragas and travelled with a small suitcase, from which she produced an endless array of spectacularly coloured saris. "She would say to me, 'You're only looking at me to get ideas for paintings,' which was, of course, absolutely true," says Hodgkin.

Which brings us to his *Indian Leaves*, a series of works on paper commenced in 1978, when he stayed in a famous Corbusier-designed modernist villa in Ahmedabad, on the understanding that the owners, a wealthy Indian family, would receive half of everything he produced there. It's a scenario that feels quintessentially Hodgkinesque, incorporating exoticism, modernity, lightly worn grandeur and a large measure of eccentricity.

Hodgkin decided to create two versions of everything he made, working on handmade khadi paper, produced, as he describes it, by "patient old ladies, probably using most of their relatives' clothing, which they turned into a sort of textile mud". Hodgkin worked into the paper while it was still wet, "with steam rising like from fresh chapatis", using textile dyes to create rippling wave and abstracted plant forms.

He found working at the house exasperating but kept his part of the bargain, retaining both versions of his favourite images, and heading for the airport with the paintings tied in a bundle to the roof of the car. On the way there the packaged disappeared.

Hodgkin was devastated. "It was like a great chunk of my life had been broken off," he says. In time, he decided to create new versions of all the motifs. Realising he couldn't hope to "re-create the original surfaces", he overlaid the sheets of dry khadi paper with carborundum, leading to the *Indian Waves* series. When the lost original works, now known as the *Indian Leaves*, were eventually found and returned to Hodgkin by the Indian police, he wasn't at all pleased to see them.

"Once I'd got used to them having disappeared, and remembering the difficulty of how

they'd been created, I didn't want to see them again."

The *Indian Leaves* pictures were eventually exhibited at the Tate in 1982. The *Waves*, meanwhile, wreathed for Hodgkin in a sense of disappointment and frustration, were wrapped in brown paper and forgotten for a quarter of a century, only to be rediscovered for the current exhibition.

Hodgkin has become such a substantial presence on the British art scene it can be difficult to remember that he achieved success only relatively late in his career and with considerable difficulty. He was born in 1932 into an eminent English family. One ancestor, a medic, gave his name to Hodgkin's lymphoma, while another wrote a ground-breaking study of clouds that prompted Constable's paintings in this field; the Bloomsbury Group critic Roger Fry, who coined the term Post-Impressionism, was a cousin.

Hodgkin's father, an ICI executive, sent him to Eton, where the art master, Wilfrid Blunt, brother of the art historian and spy Anthony Blunt, introduced him to Indian miniatures, of which he now has one of the world's most important collections. "He told me where I could buy them for about 12/6d each, which turned out to be completely untrue," says Hodgkin. "But he was a remarkable person, and an artist in his own right." Was he any good? "No, terrible."

After running away from Eton, he was sent to the more liberal Bryanston school in Dorset; again, he ran away.

Despite the opposition of his parents, who considered art an unreliable profession, he enrolled at Camberwell School of Art, where the dour realism of the so-called Euston Road School prevailed, and later at the Bath Academy, which was dominated by study of the Old Masters, neither of which Hodgkin "believed in". He began evolving his "own language" as an artist, confirmed by seeing the landmark Pollock and Rothko shows at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1958 and 1961 respectively, which, in the scale and power of the works, taught him that "more is more".

While his works of the Sixties had much in common with Pop Art, they weren't Pop enough to get the attention of the critics, nor were they abstract enough to fall in with the vogues for Colour Field and Hard-edge painting. While close friends such as Lucian Freud, Robyn Denny and Richard Smith achieved varying degrees of success, Hodgkin found himself overlooked.

He has gone on record as saying that he was "fortunate" in not achieving success until middle age. "Did I say that? Well, it was a thumping lie. I think all artists need success very badly. Things were very difficult. I had a wife and children to support, and the only way of making a living was through teaching, and part-time teaching at that. I think in those days… the English art world was really nasty."

More so than now? I wonder.

"Oh well, now it's become genuinely revolting."

Having acknowledged his homosexuality in 1975, Hodgkin's breakthrough came the following year with a small retrospective at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art, curated by Nicholas Serota, now director of the Tate, which transferred to the Serpentine Gallery. Within days of its opening, it seemed as if half the art students in London were doing big, semi-abstract paintings with Hodgkinesque stripes and splodges. Since then, he's received every accolade going.

Yet there has been frequent sniping at Hodgkin's establishment credentials and the suggestion that because his work is easy to like it cannot be quite serious. It's an extension of a prejudice which goes back to the Renaissance, that art that is strongly rooted in colour, that appeals directly to the senses, must be somehow frivolous – a view from which even Hodgkin's inspiration Matisse suffered to a degree.

"I think anyone who knows me even a little will think my paintings are entirely frivolous," says Hodgkin. "I don't think I've ever been taken very seriously as a painter."

If that bothers him, he's not letting on. "I've always known exactly what I want to do with a painting. It may take years, but I never tell anybody how I did it. I know what I want a painting to do, which probably means I know what it will look like. But I'd never tell you. No, no, no…"

Does he feel that talking about his work will somehow diminish it?

"No. Because if I told you you'd probably add a great deal to it. But I don't believe in that. I don't believe in programme notes for pictures. A painting's got to be itself."

Despite age and a degree of infirmity, Hodgkin feels his work is only now getting into its stride.

"I had so much difficulty becoming a painter in the first place. But age sets one free of inhibitions. I don't think my current work must inevitably be better than what I've done before – though I think it is. But the feeling of liberation that comes with age, of divesting one's self of all kinds of unnecessary skills, has certainly set me free."