

GAGOSIAN

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‘India gave the painter a new joie de vivre’
Howard Hodgkin’s reflections on the sub-continent dazzle in a new exhibition

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Howard Hodgkin's Mrs Acton in Delhi, 1967-71
HOWARD HODGKIN, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN

For many years Howard Hodgkin would make journeys to India only in his imagination. He and a friend, Robert Skelton, the deputy keeper of Indian paintings at the V&A, would sit at the fireside after dinner and set off together on detailed imaginary adventures to admire the beauties of the sub-continent. “Finally we made a pact,” Hodgkin said. “Whoever got to India first would make sure the other one did too.”

In 1964 the pair eventually visited Rajasthan. It was an experience that — despite passing his first night on a railway platform — was to transform Hodgkin’s life. It planted the seeds from which an artistic love affair flourished. Hodgkin started returning there year after year. “I like to keep coming back here,” he told an interviewer. “I just feel at home.”

Hodgkin, who died in March, captured his feelings about India in hundreds of paintings, and it is a small, but for the most part high-quality selection of these that now goes on display at the Hepworth Wakefield. Howard Hodgkin: Painting India is the first exhibition in Britain to focus specifically on this painter’s much-celebrated relationship with the sub-continent.

It begins with a brief introduction that includes two or three pieces from Hodgkin’s holdings of Indian art — a vast collection that, begun by a teenager who had managed to scrape a few pounds together, became a passion so gripping that its creator once claimed to have parted with five dozen of his own paintings just so he could buy one Indian piece. (He loved the heightened colour, apparently, and the “totally non-European approach to pictorial space”.) It shows a film

of the artist at his first solo show in Mumbai and, for the first time, displays a couple of the diaries in which Hodgkin, for a while, would note his impressions.

A typical entry includes, among details of breakfasts and lunches and parties and dinners, this: “Out of the airport, wonderful air, bright sunshine and completely flat land to the horizon. Straight out of the edges of the plain came silhouettes of hills. Then the upward ascent of 13 numbered hairpin bends, through valleys filled with betel trees, blue gum and, as we went higher still, tea.” It serves the same purpose as the annotations of the traditional 18th-century topographer, who would scribble down quick notes about colour or light on a rapidly limned sketch so that later, in the calm of his studio, he could accurately work up his finished piece.

In Hodgkin’s paintings his faintly boring aides-memoire burst into exuberant visual life. The visitor is plunged into a world of all but rhapsodic colour — of rich oranges and glowing yellows, macaw scarlets and rainforest greens, of fat fleshy pinks and translucent aquamarines, of explosions of crimson and swashes of acidic lime.

India gave Hodgkin a new joie de vivre. A chronological hang broadly charts his excited sense of discovery. The earlier works, done in the late 1960s and early 1970s, are still underpinned by the figurative. You can make out the form of Mrs Acton on her Delhi veranda, for instance, or pick out the pool and the palm tree in a hotel’s lush garden. Thick black outlines control compositions and lend them a pronounced graphic quality. You can detect traces of lines left by unpeeled masking tape.

By the mid-1970s, as Hodgkin found himself feeling more and more at home amid the heat and the chaos and the riot of the colours of the sub-continent, his paintings grew freer and freer. He was not an abstract painter, he would always insist. Increasingly, however, recognisable forms are distilled into a variety of gestural marks — sweeps, blobs and swashes, wavy doodles and dabs. Strokes become broader and looser, more impetuous, more liquid. Layers of pigment, in the past laboriously built up over a period of many years, seem thinner.

Sometimes, towards the end, broad expanses of the pieces of wood on which he most liked to paint (he might use anything from a breadboard to a cupboard door) are left uncovered. Colour and the sensations that it captures merge. Memories are evoked through their atmospheres and moods. To look at his 2003 *Heat*, for example, is to feel the rich glow of the sun beating up from the pavements and the sides of stone buildings, burning flushed cheeks. *Summer Rain* captures the sudden cool freshness that floods in with a tropical cloud-burst.

There are paintings that capture the dusty blur of the heat haze, the glow of the sun as it sets a dark burning red, the cool blue of the ocean, the veiled descent of the night, the steady green flow of the turbid Ganges, the colour of the vegetables on a market seller’s cart. Hodgkin seeks to create a pictorial equivalent of the feelings that rise amid such fleeting experiences. He tries somehow to embody a disembodied essence. And in so doing he embodies the sheer physical and emotional pleasure of being alive.

These works, at their best, are possessed of what feels like a life force. The visitor is asked not just to look, but to participate. This is a show to take you on those journeys that Hodgkin himself once took by his London fireside. They take you to India in your imagination. They immerse you physically and mentally in their bright world.