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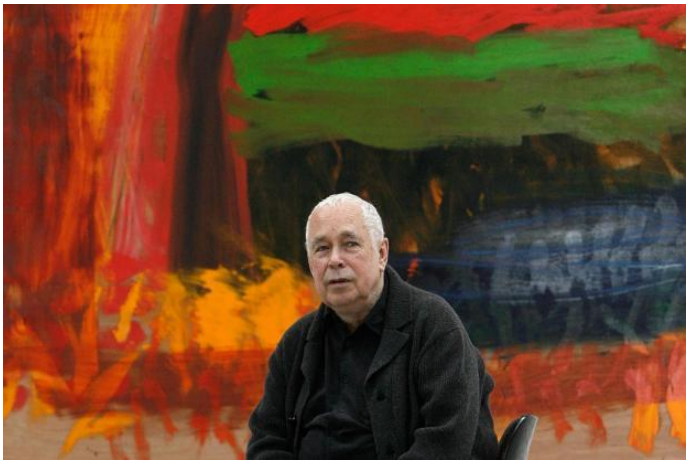
Sir Nicholas Serota on Howard Hodgkin: An artist with great insight and a love for life

Tate director Sir Nicholas Serota pays tribute to one of the 20th-century's greatest colourists, Howard Hodgkin, who died yesterday aged 84

Nicholas Serotas



Joie de vivre: Howard Hodgkin was a great role model for younger painters Getty Images

It was the early 1970s when I first became aware of Howard Hodgkin, who died yesterday aged 84. I saw some of his paintings in mixed exhibitions and was intrigued by what he was doing.

I found it strange that even though he was so respected by other artists, he was far less famous than his near contemporaries David Hockney and Bridget Riley. He didn't have their international profile.

I made contact and in 1973 I went to visit him at his studio, then in a coverted mill in Wiltshire, and so our friendship began. I remember we talked that day about his love of Matisse, Bonnard and particularly about his love of India. These were the stars that guided him throughout his life and career. He first went to the India in the mid-Sixties and the people and the landscape captivated him. He also became a great collector of Indian miniatures and had one the best collections in Europe or America.

I am fortunate to have curated three shows of Howard's work. The first was at Modern Art Oxford in 1976, the second in 1985 at Whitechapel Art Gallery, and the third in 2006 at Tate Britain, a large exhibition covering the entirety of career to date.

The Tate show illustrated the development of his language. The early works were painted very slowly with many layers. As his confidence grew his paintings became bigger, and he painted with so much more confidence, almost with abandon. They show his joie de vivre, his enormous love for life.

In his early days, he clearly believed in himself, which isn't the same as having confidence. For quite a long time, his work was deeply unfashionable. The art world was looking to New York—and here he was, painting in oil on small wooden panels.

The turning point came in the mid-1970s when he started to paint on a larger scale after spending more time in India. I think coming out as gay helped his work enormously. He relaxed and his work became more expressive and open. His sexuality became visibly part of his paintings and his relationships, including his friendship with his partner of 30 years, the opera dramaturge Antony Peattie, were reflected in much bolder and more sensuous works.

He never stopped working at his studio — a converted dairy near the British Museum — and new paintings completed recently in Mumbai have just returned to London.

He leaves a legacy as one of the 20th-century's great colourists. People always say painting is dying but he was a role model for younger painters in his conviction and determination to express a very personal view of the world. His gift was the way that he married the traditions of 19th-century Impressionism and Post-Impression with the colour of his beloved India.

He was given many awards, including the Turner Prize in 1985, but his Companion of Honour in 2003 probably meant most to him, as it was a recognition of his life and work.

His close friendships with other artists and writers such as Julian Barnes, Alan Hollinghurst and Colm Tóibín mattered greatly to him, and in conversation he was always utterly focused on you. His emotions were close to the surface, and it didn't take much to make him burst into tears — but not in a bad way. People were what mattered most to him. He loved good conversation and the company of friends, and I shall remember his capacity for laughter and great insights into art.