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*Howard Hodgkin in 2008 with his painting Home, Home on the Range
CATE GILLON/GETTY IMAGES*

No artist likes to be pinned down, and Howard Hodgkin was no exception. He rather liked that he was regarded as an abstract painter in England, with its love of figuration, and as a figurative painter in America, where they respect abstraction.

Two exhibitions last year at the National Portrait Gallery and in Wakefield, *Absent Friends* and *Painting India*, the first of which opened days after his death, and now a show of his final works opening tomorrow at Gagosian Gallery in London, remind us that he was so much more than the general characterisation of his work — the painter of small paintings on panel that are records of a social encounter in an “intimiste” domestic interior.

Of course, many of his paintings do capture the character, and even the appearance, of friends. But the principal subjects of these paintings are emotion and mood; attraction and allure; seduction and love; conversation and argument; words left hanging in the air. In Wakefield we saw him responding to the dry or the humid heat, the open plains, the glimpses of dark interiors and lush vegetation of India.



Portrait of the Artist Listening to Music, 2011-16, by Howard Hodgkin
HOWARD HODGKIN ESTATE/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

As time passed, Howard became the most consummate painter of weather since Constable and Turner, and of water and mists since Monet and Whistler. It was no coincidence that he took his name from an ancestor, Luke Howard, the amateur meteorologist whose studies of clouds were so important to Constable. Howard captured the rain, the storms, the heat of a sunset, the cool early morning mists of autumn.

It was the suite of 12 silkscreens, *Indian Views*, published by Leslie Waddington in 1971, that first alerted me to Howard's work. I had seen single paintings, but these views from the window of a train in India probably struck a chord with the journeys that I had made across the sub-continent a few years earlier.

I asked to visit, with the idea that I might make an exhibition at what is now Modern Art Oxford. A few weeks later I found myself sitting beneath three or four young catalpa trees in a meadow beside the converted Wiltshire mill where Howard and his wife, Julia, were living at the time. These catalpas seemed extraordinarily exotic in the English countryside, and I realised that I was meeting a man of unusual sensibility and style.

Later that afternoon I entered the studio, with its white walls and floor, illuminated by light passing through a translucent screen of fibreglass over the windows. It took me to another world. The light and the whiteness of every surface served to intensify the colours. I was struck by the absolute concentration, and by the thought that Howard was spending many hours every day working on a very, very small number of paintings, each in progress for several years.

Later, in the top-lit courtyard of that converted dairy on Coptic Street, London, the same concentration was achieved by revealing only a single painting at a time — a nerve-racking experience for any visitor — as Howard waited for your reaction. And, of course, he was mischievous, he was sharp. Not for nothing did he name one of his prints *For BJ* — the art dealer Bernard Jacobson — in the recognition that the only person who would make any money out of the project was Bernie.

As others have noted, Howard was a collector of the best kind. His feeling for ornament and decoration — words that most critics of painting would regard as pejorative — grew out of his affection and admiration for Matisse.

You see it in some of his great paintings and, indeed, in the extraordinary work he made for Charles Correa's building for the British Council in Delhi. That eye for ornament and decoration allowed him to put together disparate objects in his own house: paintings, furniture, frames, sculpture, carpets, tapestry, miniatures, an assembly that brought out unexpected qualities and obliged you to question your own preconceptions and judgment.



Hodgkin's Over To You, 2015-17
HOWARD HODGKIN ESTATE/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

His feeling for colour, in painting and in architecture, was what one might call “hue perfect”. That particular shade of *eau de nil*, the liking for unpainted plaster, the dappled brush surface that absorbs light the way a rolled surface can never achieve, all gave his apartment and his exhibitions a unique character. But at times he would risk all, choosing a colour that was entirely unexpected, as we saw at the National Portrait Gallery.

I learnt so much from him, about how to select, how to hang, how to give as much space to a small painting as to a large one. In every exhibition I made with him he was determined to reduce the number of paintings in the show. And it was significant that in Oxford and later at the Whitechapel Gallery in London he wanted to include the number of the paintings in the titles of the shows. He was always reducing, refining and distilling. This was the process over 50 years. Looking, reflecting and then painting, rather than painting and then looking.

Howard opened my eyes to late Degas. *Hélène Rouart in Her Father's Study*, the great late painting by Degas that came from the Gimpel family, would not now be in the National Gallery

but for Howard's advocacy. Arguing against every other trustee, he won the day. Howard gave me an understanding of the significance of colour, feeling and mood in painting, and I'm sure that his vision will endure.

This is an updated version of a tribute by Nicholas Serota at a memorial evening for Howard Hodgkin at Tate Britain on July 1, 2017. *Howard Hodgkin: Last Paintings* is at Gagosian, London W1, June 1-July 28