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National College of Art and Design

**“DEVELOPING A LANGUAGE IN PAINTING -  
HOWARD HODGKIN”**

**by**

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FINE ART - PAINTING**

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# INTRODUCTION

Howard Hodgkin is widely regarded as one of the greatest living painters and most original colourists working at the latter half of the twentieth century. His brightly coloured paintings explore the boundaries between abstraction and representation. He succeeds quite brilliantly in blurring the distinction between representation and abstraction, surface and support. In a time when one must almost apologise for painting, Hodgkin has followed his own path and has continued to develop one of the most personal and inventive languages of painting.

In order to monitor his progression the work is broken into periods within the discussion: the 60's and 70's, 80's and 90's. Writing about the work of Howard Hodgkin is always going to be problematic and ambitious due to the fact that the artist refuses to discuss in any detail his work or any theories he might have. Since an interview with the artist was not possible, the sources used are books, magazine articles, interviews and a personal interpretation. I also travelled to London to view the Howard Hodgkin Show which was recently at the Hayward Gallery. Driven by a personal passionate interest in Hodgkin's work and in how a particular language has developed, I have looked at his progression from his awkward first steps of the 50's and 60's to his confident handling of paint and colour in the 90's.

The aim is to analyse how a personal language is developed, what affects it, and in a sense to examine the great expressive qualities of paint.





**CHAPTER ONE**

**THE 60's - MID-70's**

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“Picasso may have defined the predicament of the modern artist more succinctly than anyone. ‘Beginning with Van Gogh,’ he told François Gilot, however great we may be, we are all, in a measure, autodidacts - you might almost say primitive painters. Painters no longer live within a tradition and so each one of us must re-create an entire language. Every painter of our times is fully authorised to re-create that language from A to Z. No criterion can be applied to him a priori, since we don’t believe in rigid standards any longer. In a certain sense, that’s a liberation but at the same time it’s an enormous limitation .....”. (Graham Dixon, 1994, p. 173).

Picasso sums up the problems of the artist working in modern times and what he says, Hodgkin would seem to have firmly believed, when he started out on the road of inventing his own language. The idea of a painting being produced out of pure love for it has been treated with a great deal of scorn in critical discourse. It seems that one of the greatest problems in the area of critical practice is the notion of a signature style or personal language. Many commentators seem to be able to instantly recognise who a piece of work is produced by or whose work it is like, and this seems to put a stop to discourse going any further. When we consider the work of Howard Hodgkin there is no mistaking that it was painted by him. A Hodgkin work could be recognised anywhere.

His reputation is linked with notions of connoisseurship and taste. His English nationality would seem to be of vital importance with regard to this. In one sense Hodgkin seems to be an outsider, a late starter. He is also a teacher, a traveller, museum trustee, a collector, a dealer, a Turner prize recipient in 1985, a mural designer and a Knight of the English Realm. This gives an insight into the kind of artist we are dealing with.

Howard Hodgkin was born in 1932 to an upper middle-class family. An 18th century ancestor was the father of meteorology and another relative was later to identify Hodgkin’s Disease. In 1948, a visit for the second time to America, was to be very important to the young seventeen



year old. It was in America that he produced Memoirs and he also encountered the work of the American Abstract Expressionists for the first time. Memoirs is Hodgkin's earliest known piece of work. Although it is very graphic in its appearance, it would later be of great significance in the development of his mature style. At this time he also discovered the high-precision, recent American art such as that of Stuart Davis and Peter Blume. But above all, at this time his discovery of Matisse seems to be of a great significance. Matisse's Piano Lesson of 1916 was to have a lasting effect on Hodgkin. It wasn't just Matisse's composition, or balance and harmony that caught his attention, but also his application of colour. The harmony and balance, and the dependance of one mark on another was also to become very important to him. He obviously took it to heart when Picasso said that each part of a Matisse painting was so vital to the other, it was as if you could imagine that by taking one mark out the whole piece would cease to work, every mark was vital.

Memoirs, (PL.1), led the way for much of what was to become extremely important to the artist; the enclosure of the room, the figure, a view through a window and memories.

"I have to remember first of all what it looked like, but it would also perhaps contain a great deal of feeling and sentiment. All of that has got to be somehow transmuted, transformed or made into a physical object, and when that happens, when the last physical marks have been put on and the subject comes back - which, after all, is usually the moment when the painting is at long last a coherent physical object .....". (Sylvester, 1984, p. 97)

His choice of subject matter shows a strong sense of a British tradition from the 19th century. It seems that nationality and the tradition of place is of vital importance to the development of an individual language.







1. MEMOIRS, 1949, 8<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches





The 1950's which was a key decade for gestural painting saw Hodgkin in isolation. His paintings were still very stiff and would become freer in the most geometric work of the 60's. Many regarded 20th century British art as always being a little behind, jumping on the wagon driven by American contemporaries. And there also seems to be room for the notion that British art only received independence with its version of "Pop Art" in the 60's.

Immediately after World War One, the art produced in Britain could be classed as conservative. As a result of the war ending in 1918, purchasing power had diminished greatly, and this had a great psychological effect on the British people. Similar problems were being encountered in France but modernism was already so firmly established there that Picasso and Derain were already experimenting without a complete abandonment of modernist ideas. In Germany, the social structure had collapsed and it had to rebuild completely. This resulted in many artistic experiments which turned Germany into the centre for innovative art in Europe. It was in the early 1930's that modernism really began to surface again in Britain. Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore both spearheaded this new drive in British modernism. Nicholson can be easily linked to European tendencies, and ideas. He went to France and had contact with artists such as Picasso, Braque, Brancusi and Arp. His white reliefs were a major contribution to the "Abstract Crétion" group which the above artists were part of. Moore's main stylistic influences came from ancient cultures. His interest in art of the past and landscape are as a result of the romantic tradition of the 19th century.

Near the end of the 1930's, there was an effort to revive the surrealist group in Britain with a large international exhibition in 1936. In the 1930's, many small groups formed including the "Euston Road Group", which was working around 1937. But it was a group which came after





the social realism of the 1930's, the St. Ives Artists, which might provide a more interesting link with Hodgkin. The St. Ives group tried to reconcile the British romantic notion of landscape with the brushwork of the American Abstract Expressionists. The group had such noted painters as Peter Lanyon, Patrick Heron and the Irish artist, Tony O'Malley. Lanyon has more in common with Abstract Expressionism whereas Heron and O'Malley, as well as using the gestured brushmark, are very fine colourists.

The "British Pop" movement seems to have a greater claim to originality than the painterly work of the time. British Pop was born out of a new understanding of contemporary life. It was in the early 50's that artists began to realise how much their culture depended on the mass media. New technology and social changes were leading to what became known as the Americanization of Europe. Artists such as Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland were not affected by this new cultural transformation. They remained loyal to the British tradition of expressive figuration. With the arrival of Pop art, tradition was pushed aside because only Pop art was daring enough to step outside tradition.

"Painting had not of course ceased in the 1960's and early 1970's but had unconvincingly tried to extend a formalist modernist aesthetic". (Taylor, 1995, p.43).

Much of the new painting included the human figure. Conceptualism led the way to the idea that painting was a redundant practice. Hodgkin was emerging at a time when some viewed British art as second rate. It was also a time when the validity of painting was being raised as an issue of great concern. It now emerges that Hodgkin was well aware of the difficulties he was facing, when in 1981 at Slade School of Fine Art, he said;



“..... to be an artist in England is perhaps even certainly, special, more difficult, more traumatic and probably more fraught with the absolute certainty of failure than in any other country”. (Auping, 1995, p.9).

When in the 20th century the art world in general had been pushing forward and experimenting, the British preferred to sit back and ponder their past achievements. It seems that Hodgkin was well aware and prepared for a long-hall to become noticed as a British painter.

It is also very important when considering Hodgkin's development to note that he was a late bloomer. He was forty-five when he had his first one person show in New York and fifty-two when his work received major international exposure at the 1984 “Venice Biennale”. This time seems to have given Hodgkin the freedom to engage with the art around him and see how he might contribute to it. He also seems to have spent this time slowly carving and developing a language that to the viewer seems very fluent and natural. His early exposure to Abstract Expressionism, the Matisse show in London, and the collecting of Indian miniatures would not at first have an identifiable influence, but later would be of prime importance. It is also interesting to note that these artists who provided early influences, all had a strong sense of certainty of mark and colour and this is normally the first thing that confronts the viewer in a Hodgkin work.

Hodgkin's early work of the 50's, 60's and early 70's is very figurative in its appearance. It has a sense of the Euston Road philosophy; a denial of painterly abstraction, promoting a form of realism based on everyday life. By the 60's when Hodgkin's work was starting to be noticed, its appearance was largely unacceptable to received taste. British painting had largely been about informal abstraction and figurative work as developed in Bacon's work. Many younger artists





were reacting against the romantic notion of the English landscape in favour of a more intellectual approach. Hodgkin was also starting to invest his faith in the qualities of colour in his more geometric work.

“..... but in England, strong colour in painting since the Pre-Raphaelites has been almost disallowed. I think probably since Whistler no artist is truly taken seriously if he uses strong colour. There is an inbuilt puritanism about the English attitude to colour which is really quite bizarre. I was wondering in the National Gallery today how a Veronese in good condition and a Rubens in very good condition would be rated, in terms of moral seriousness and as great works of art against paintings by Rembrandt for example. I think that the Rembrandts would get an overwhelming majority on the side of seriousness”. (Sylvester 1984, p. 122).

Much of the public associated Hodgkin's work with the new reaction; Pop Art. The very absence of Pop imagery in his work would surely indicate that his relationship with this movement was not a straightforward one. But Hodgkin's paintings of the 60's did have a quality of caricature to them which together with the use of bright colours and bold shapes, led to comparisons with Pop. Hodgkin's treatment of colour in his early work was a lot more serious than that of the Pop artists. But the associations would more so indicate a link with American Pop, as shown by his use of colour and decorative patterns applied in a very bold manner. This is further enforced by Hodgkin saying that he wanted his paintings to look like an industrial object.

114 Sinclair Road and Interior of a Museum are the first paintings which were worked on over a number of years. 114 Sinclair Road is an interior with figures. By the manner in which it was painted the artist is inviting the viewer to reconstruct the situation. Interior of a Museum has a sense of watchfulness. Figures are viewed through a glass case, ceramic pots are in the case, but they are difficult to differentiate from the figures. Dancing 1959, (PL. 2), shows his interest in the representation of the figure and abstraction. It is in Dancing that he draws the viewer into







2. DANCING, 1959, 50 x 36 inches



his own world. The parallel bands of colour bind the painting together. Dancing starts the continuous battle between abstraction and representation without yielding to either. From these early portraits of the late 50's and early 60's, we can see that he does not get involved with illustration or descriptive representation but instead he uses memory and metaphor.

“Figurative painting is about a specific experience involving the figure. The most complete expression of subject would not necessarily involve description”.  
(Auping, 1995, p.13).

We can also see that colour is becoming an important factor in this early work. The striking red of 114 Sinclair Road creates a sense of tension or unease. The bands of colour in Dancing become vital to the overall effect and creation of form.

His paintings of the 60's are humorous as well as being serious. His double portrait of Robyn Denny and his wife is a commentary on Denny's painting and the pop scene in which he was involved. Portrait of Mrs. Wall is a rather straightforward representation of a female figure, which hardly seems to fit in with the other work of the time. His painting continued to be a reconciliation of subject and the demands of the picture. Many of the paintings of the mid-60's onwards were almost totally blocked in with vast areas of single colours, leaving an area that the viewer would be forced to look at. In paintings such as Small Staff Room, the viewer is presented with a tiny keyhole view positioned in a great field of red. The colour gives a sense of danger or naughtiness in looking through a keyhole, and in general sets up a rather intense feeling; the colour forces one into viewing the tiny form.

It was also in the 60's that he began to look at the intimacy of private moments and places; bedrooms, girl in bed, undressing, etc. His paintings of the 60's were very childlike, playful and







colourful. He had been influenced by the "Pop Art" movements, not only in its use of colour and form, but in its bravery, its abandonment of traditional ideas and will to experiment. "Pop Art" had put a new emphasis on subject matter and in a sense had broken away from pure abstraction. Although Hodgkin's early figure paintings are more personal than those of Pop, his caricature-like execution seems to owe a debt to this initiative. However, Hodgkin's work had a much greater link with the 19th century romantic notion in British painting. Pop was more about the surface appearance of things, whereas Hodgkin digs deep for feelings. While much of the painting throughout the 60's grew in scale, Hodgkin's work remained at a size that increased the idea of intimacy, and privacy. During the 60's, he made his first trip to India. Memories of such trips would become subjects for later work.

"But how did Hodgkin break away from sober-hued English gentility? The major catalyst for this increasing use of wild colour in the 60's seems paradoxically enough to have been architecturally genteel, English-gentlemanly pursuit of Indian miniatures". (Adams 1996, p.94).

This trip resulted in two paintings, Indian - Subject (Blue) 1969 and Indian Subject Blue and White 1968-69. These paintings don't seem to be a representation of anyone particular subject but of many. There is a feeling of architecture, organic growths, people, objects and more so they refer to looking. In the 60's, he identified many important techniques to help him deal with his subjects: his use of patterning to create a particular sense of place and colour to convey a particular mood or atmosphere.

The early work of the 70's sees Hodgkin working with a more geometric format than the caricature type of work in the 60's. The 70's also sees what has now become his trademark; the use of the frame or window device. The framing device becomes so obvious that it seems as



though the paintings might not have been working so he contained them by painting on a frame. The device also increased the play of spatial illusion. Colour also has become of vital importance in his work of this time. Like Matisse, Hodgkin is relying on colour to carry emotions. He has always been linked to the French intimist, Vuillard, whose depictions of domestic scenes and everyday events, together with his use of patterns, and illusionistic space seem to be rather easily linked with Hodgkin. However Hodgkin himself claims to be more interested in a Vuillard of the 1890's when he managed to blur the boundaries between abstraction and representation. It is as if Hodgkin has magnified Vuillard's marks; blown them up many times, to make them his own. Vuillard had the great gift of being able to suggest a subject without actually depicting it. What becomes apparent in Hodgkin's work of the 70's is his ability to address scale, but to work it in small format which was unlike what many of his contemporaries were involved in. Paintings such as The Terrace Delhi, View, Bedroom in Carennac, Coming up from the Beach, etc., all deal with scale in a rather small format. Coming up from the Beach, 1970-72 captures a moment of looking back as we move from one world to another, it is a picture about breaking through, about change.

Interior 9AG 1972 has a Barnett Newman echo to it. It also uses the framing device. The red, yellow and black bands in the centre almost divide the painting in two, as if looking into two rooms at once but it also ties them together. The colour in Bombay Sunset 1972-73, (PL. 4), seems very natural and increases the romantic notion of the painting. At times, Hodgkin's colour is so strong and expressive that it is much more than Fauvism, it is in a zone of its own, somewhere between the real and the imaginary. Granchester Road, 1975, (PL. 3), has a sense of doll's house architecture. The framing device and multiple use of windows, create a rather strange sense of illusion. This painting is almost cubist with its multiple views. Throughout the



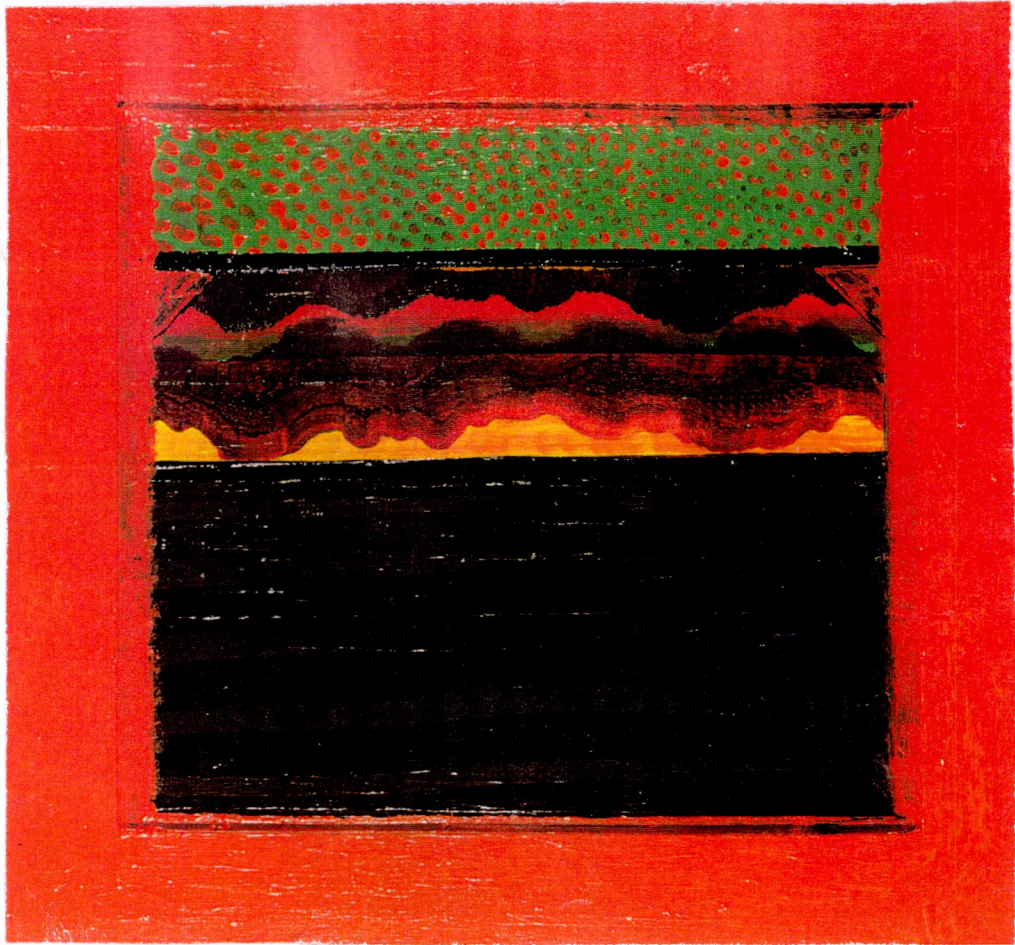






3. GRANCHESTER ROAD, 1975, 49 x 57 inches





4. BOMBAY SUNSET, 1972-73, 33½ x 36¼ inches







70's, Hodgkin made use of a number of different marks; spots, stripes and blocks. The use of line as contour has almost gone completely.

“The most convincing parallel however is with Juan Gris, who was so instrumental in bringing the lyric quality of light and colour into Cubism. Indeed, in their jewel-like luminosity and intimacy, Hodgkin's paintings play a similar role in late 20th century abstraction”. (Auping, 1995, p.21).

Hodgkin's work up to the mid-70's identifies a great many strands in relation to the development of his language. But one crucial ingredient in his development is his firm belief in the power of colour effecting not only the viewer but the very forms within the painting.

He is constantly in dialogue with the art of the past. He is aware of what has gone before him and what is going on now. Hodgkin was born in 1932 and he has lived through various movements and styles; Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Colour Field Painting, Minimalism, Pop and Conceptualism. Definite links between Hodgkin and any other artist are hard to make. Rather, there are links with intentions, ideas or feelings. The 80's would signal many important changes and events for Hodgkin and for contemporary British painting in general.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE LATE '70's - MID-80's**

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The late 70's and 80's were a time when painting, its role and its importance, was being readdressed.

“Painting has not always existed; we can determine when it began, and if its development and its moments of greatness can be drummed into our heads, can we not then also imagine its periods of decline and even its end, like any other idea”. (Louis Aragon/Crimp, 1981, p. 69).

Douglas Crimp's "The End of Painting, October 1981", was fore-fronting the arguments behind the so-called end of painting. It was a time when the mass media, T.V., Computers, etc., were becoming more and more accessible to the people. And in a sense many were saying that if the function of art was to communicate a message, it could only communicate that message successfully through a device that people could relate to. In other words, painting was not viewed as being easily accessible.

“One must really be engaged in order to be a painter. Once obsessed by it, one eventually gets to the point where one thinks that humanity could be changed by painting. But when that passion deserts you, there is nothing else left to do. Then it is better to stop altogether. Because basically, painting is pure idiocy”. (Gerhard Richter/Crimp, 1981, p.73).

There was much heated debate and discussion about the role of painting in the media age. On one hand, we had Douglas Crimp and the "October" writers challenging figurative expressive painting, and other voices were attempting to place painting within a photographic world. A young painter and critic, Thomas Lawson, said in 1981 that the work of such painters as Schnabel was in a sense contrary, presenting images that simply don't match up. However in Germany, young artists such as Büttner, Kippenberger, Marcus and Albert Oehlen, confronted a dilemma that was central to any avant-garde: how to go on with an art that had been said was dead many times. Oehlen was addressing the issues around the social function of painting.



Thomas Lawson said that:

“It all boils down to a question of faith, young artists involved in picture making are faced with a bewildering choice. They can continue to work within the idea of the traditional institute and in a sense remain blind and content with the way things are, or they can exploit modernism or try and rediscover or reinvent abstract painting” (Lawson, 1981, p.40).

While many painters seemed to be commenting on the very practice of painting through their work, Hodgkin continued to forge his own path. In a sense, his total belief and conviction about the validity of painting was almost like a stand or a reaction to what was going on.

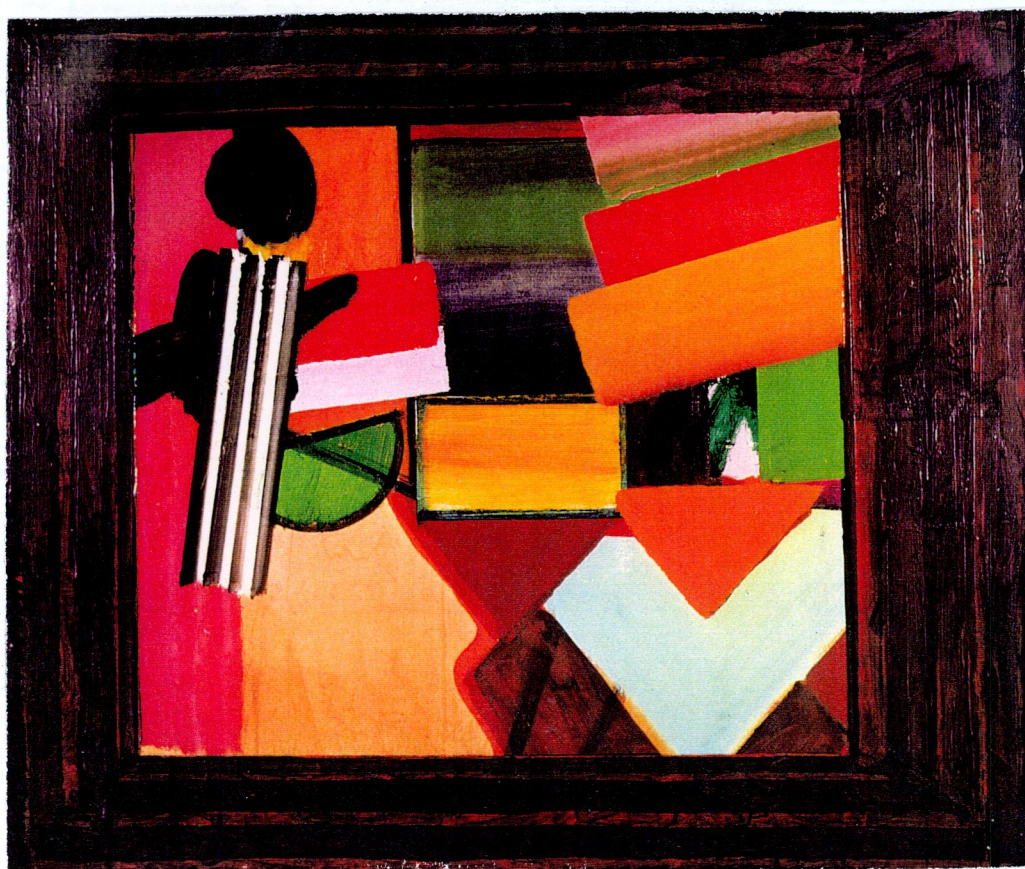
“The only way an artist can communicate with the world at large is on the level of feeling. I think the function of the artist is to practice his art to such a level that like the soul leaving the body, it comes out into the world and affects other people” [(Timothy Hyman, 1985) Dixon 1994, p.179].

It was also around this time in the 80's that there was a new interest in European art in America, particularly in British art through the Venice Bienniales which showed Howard Hodgkin and Frank Auerbach. Although much criticism of painting was in circulation, many shows sought to bring it to attention as a major force. “Documenta 5” in Kassel was very conceptually based whereas in 1977, Documenta 6 saw painting being brought back. Similarly “A New Spirit in Painting”, London 1981, showcased painters such as Polke, Richter, Schnabel, Marden, Stella, Bacon, Hockney and Hodgkin.

It was at this time in the late 70's, early 80's that Hodgkin seemed to give colour a more emphatic part in his work. It was as if he was aware of the arguments for painting not being very accessible, and through the sheer exuberance and seductiveness of his colour, he was luring the viewer back into the language of paint without them even questioning it.







5. TALKING ABOUT ART, 1975, 41¾ x 50 inches



Hodgkin's painting of 1975, Talking about Art, (PL. 5), may be taken literally. It could be making reference to the debates around painting but on the other hand, it could be about the new sense of passion in British art. It is certainly a painting which echoes a history of art. Its well ordered geometric forms are surrounded by a purplish frame. The shapes are rendered in marks that form a dictionary of painting, each shape is given a different stroke. It is also a commentary on the use of colour in art and its great ability to evoke emotions and feelings.

Foy Nissen's Bombay 1975-77 is based on a visit to the flat of an Indian, Foy Nissen in Bombay. The view, which is from the window, is largely of vegetation. This painting echoes Bomberg. It is also influenced by the radiating colours and flat patterns of Indian miniatures. It is about feelings rather than specifics. The idea of an enclosure is a continual obsession with Hodgkin. His landscapes and gardens also become enclosures; private spaces with a very private view or memory.

Hodgkin's work of the 70's involved the fragmentation of the picture surface. A Henry Moore at the Bottom of the Garden, uses the dots of Seurat and the patterning of Vuillard. A Henry Moore sculpture is viewed from a window. The painting has a sense of order like a garden carefully planted and designed. He played with green and red, rebounding one off the other, and allowed slight bits of colour peer through by over painting, thus enhancing the strength of the complementaries at work.

As the 70's progressed, his work became more emotionally charged and again his use of colour would be the prime contributor to this shift. The colour starts to play a much more important role as the fragmentation of the earlier work becomes less of a concern in work such as Tea - 1977-









6. D. H. IN HOLLYWOOD, 1980-84, 42½ x 51½ inches



80. Tea is a painting which is about feelings related to an embarrassing situation. Hodgkin was apparently at a tea party and casually during conversation one of the male guests said that he worked as a prostitute. It is a work which has a very misty atmosphere. Nothing is definite. The red emphasises the sense of tension, embarrassment. Almost like someone blushing, the red fulfils a similar role in an awkward situation. Reading the Letter, 1977-80 is a painting which deals with his feelings and emotions when hearing a letter read aloud. The surface is a mixture of large brush strokes and dots or blobs of various sizes to give a very dramatic and moody appearance. Jealousy of 1977, is a painting of an intense emotional situation. It is reduced to its bare elements of painterly daubs. A double brown border surrounds a yellow patch covered with green dots and a red blob. This is an important painting because here more than ever before, Hodgkin is signally his belief in the sheer expressive qualities of colour.

Much of Hodgkin's work has been concerned with memories that involved people. If a portrait is to render what is deeper than flesh, if it is to capture everything about the person then Hodgkin succeeds. His working method would seem particularly suited to painting people. Like a person builds his own character over a period of time, so too does Hodgkin through constant revisions and additions, make an object that is closer to a reality than any likeness.

D.H. in Hollywood 1980-84, (PL. 6), is a piece of work about his friend, David Hockney. This portrait includes everything about Hockney; reference to his Californian period, swimming pools and palm trees, compared to his earlier portraits of the 60's and 70's which were little more than sophisticated caricatures.









7. THE SPECTATOR, 1984-87, 45 x 49½ inches



The Spectator 1984-87, (PL. 7), further announces his reductionist approach to painterly marks, dots, swirls and slashes. But it is also a direct reference to himself, the mark marker, caught up in his own world of paint. In a sense, it could be described as a very accurate self-portrait.

The 70's certainly saw Hodgkin depart from his more geometric type of work and embark on a more gestural type of mark making. This change is not as simple as a natural progression but the demands of his subject matter begged a new approach. His paintings also became more about specific feelings rather than individuals. Throughout the 70's, paintings such as Bombay Sunset, 1972-73, Window 1972, and Granchester Road 1975, all suggest the artist as an observer. But as the 70's progressed into the 80's, there is more of a sense of personal participation or involvement. Goodbye to the Bay of Naples 1980-82, In a Hot Country 1979-82 or None But The Brave Deserves The Fair 1981-84, all have more of a sense of a participator than an observer. This personal involvement is at its strongest in work with sexual connotations. None But The Brave Deserves The Fair 1981-84 is one of the most obvious works about a sexual moment. The feathery border of blue leads the eye into a celebration of orange.

“A naked figure leaning on its back in the lower left corner of the picture, with a fairly obvious erection, gazes towards a flesh coloured presence wrapped in a towel or robe made of two green strokes of paint that is emerging from the rear of the painting”, (Auping 1995, p.26).

Hodgkin is very clever never to give too much away. His paintings of the late 70's and early 80's have developed a greater sense of intimacy. He is a painter of emotional situations, so it is no great surprise that sexual emotions are depicted. Waking up in Naples, In Bed in Venice and Clean Sheets, all give the notion of a remembered sexual experience. Such works are vitally important because they are like self portraits at a particular time in a particular situation.









8. IN A CROWDED ROOM, 1981-86, 45<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 47<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches



“But I can’t say another word about the pictorial uses of colour except to paraphrase a letter I wrote to a friend long ago talking about a visit to Naples, two or three smudges of blue and green paint rubbed into this wooden panel and I begin to feel I am there”. (Hodgkin in conversation with Elderfield, 1995, p.73).

The importance of his colour and the effect it has on the intimacy of his work was becoming more apparent as his subjects became much more personal and emotionally charged.

The notion of intimacy draws upon artists such as Vuillard and Matisse. If we go back to Granchester Road 1975, which is largely agreed to be the turning point for Hodgkin, many would claim that this was because his admiration for Matisse was being overpowered by that for early Vuillard. The marks he began to make and the way by which he varied them became similar to the marks of Vuillard. Hodgkin has almost become like a scientist, he has examined Vuillard’s marks and blown them up to large scale. He says himself that he has always been a fanatical admirer of Vuillard but with regard to the influence of Matisse, he claims that he was more interested in his ideas than the actual work. The influence of Vuillard starts to become more evident in work of the 80's and 90's. In a Crowded Room, 1981-86, (PL. 8), is clearly a work based on figures in a crowded room and it has much in common with Large Interior with Six Figures 1897-98 by Vuillard. He has moved in close to Vuillard’s painting and the flat, unbroken, unbreakable surface of Vuillard’s work has been deflowered. Whereas the space in a Vuillard tends to be more flat, Hodgkin has opened this up with his own illusionistic devices.

With regard to Hodgkin’s In a Crowded Room, Susan Gill said:

“It is composed of painterly shapes whose colours and textures are expertly played off against each other, a feathery blue rectilinear form at the left is jostled by a smaller squarish patch made of smears of pink and green that is in turn nudged out of the way of a blob of red”, (Gill, 1986, p. 119).





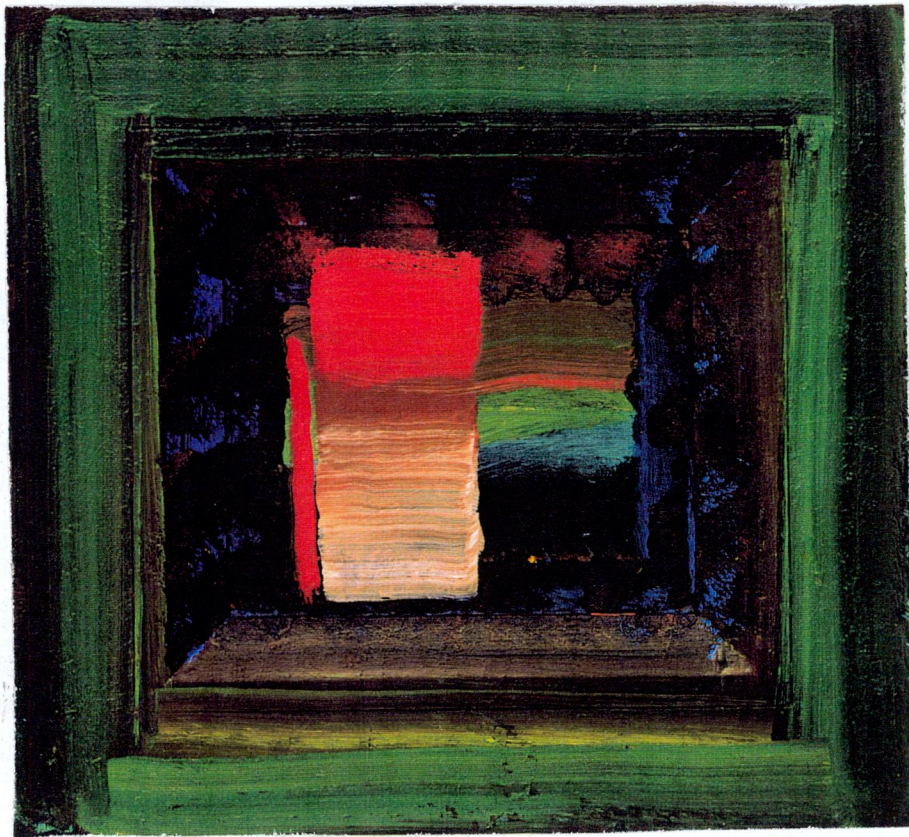
The large interior of Vuillards is also very important, as it has been noted as a transition painting, where the decorative qualities associated with his earlier work was less evident. Clearly within the Vuillard painting, the viewer becomes the voyeur of an interior with figures interacting. There is a sense of drama, a stage setting, about this work. The desk is lit by an unseen light. Like many of Hodgkin's paintings, this picture in a sense makes the viewer dangle, it gives away the title but very little else.

"It was Wyndham Lewis who once pointed out that Vuillard, you will find, is diabolically sensitive, as patternmaking an animal as any Indian, as a draughtsman, a peer of one of his two cherished models namely Degas: whereas his colour is of astonishing subtlety, beauty and range", (McEwen, p.11).

Hodgkin's relationship with Vuillard would seem to get stronger as it is investigated because of their mutual fascination with Degas and his obsession with collecting Indian art.

Travel seems to be very important to Hodgkin. Going to new countries, different climates and colour, all provide the artist with new challenges and subjects. He has frequently travelled to India and has a collection of Indian miniature paintings. But the relationship between his art and India has led to misconceptions. The link between Hodgkin and India is not as straightforward as we are sometimes led to believe. One of the most obvious links would be the idea of the miniature, Hodgkin's own work being relatively small. Also, through Indian art, he finds unsaturated colours and a visual language of eloquent force. But in his own Indian collection, many of these qualities are absent. They are not all very miniature and are low in tone. Influence does not necessarily have to be evident in the form of style, or mimicry. The Indian collection also features depictions of social occasions and highly charged emotional occasions, which seems very appropriate to Hodgkin. A very strong and precise link between his art and that of India is hard to pin down. One thing is certain that Hodgkin's own work and that of





9. HOUSE NEAR VENICE, 1984-88, 20 x 22 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches







Indian art have a shared faith in the ability of painting to create its own world. Robert Hughes says that:

“Hodgkin does to Indian miniature what Matisse did to Islamic decoration; the source is not simply quoted but transformed”. (Hughes, p. 284).

The influence of foreign countries on Hodgkin may have more to do with the strange feeling of being there, which he seems to thrive on, rather than any stylistic influence.

More so than India, Venice seems to have had an incredible, direct effect on his work. His Venice paintings are extremely confident, combining colour, and a sense of texture to create a strong description of passion. Rain in Venice 1983-85, Small View of Venice, 1984-86, House Near Venice, 1984-88, (PL. 9), Venice Grey Water, 1988-89, Venice Sunset 1989, (PL. 11), Venice/Shadows 1984-88, (PL. 10), and Fire in Venice 1986-89, all are simple but extraordinary depictions of the titles. Hodgkin's Venice paintings are of vital importance. Fluency, confidence and looseness of approach are vitally important in relation to his work after this period. Venice Evening 1984-85, has a rich, red/brown frame surrounding a rather flat blackish green space, rather like a canal or sky. There are echoes of Turner's representations of Venice; the dreamlike qualities.

There is also a sad sense of loss. He is trying to invent a language that has a dual purpose, to try and paint memories and show the difficulty of doing so. House Near Venice, 1984-88 is a painting of a building which becomes a reflection in water. It is a picture emerging from a blur; a state of mind. It has a dreamlike quality, sharp detail is present while the surroundings become somewhat obscure. Like the process of his paintings, building coats of paint upon each other, marks appear and disappear, his Venice has the feeling of shadows, fleeting moments becoming

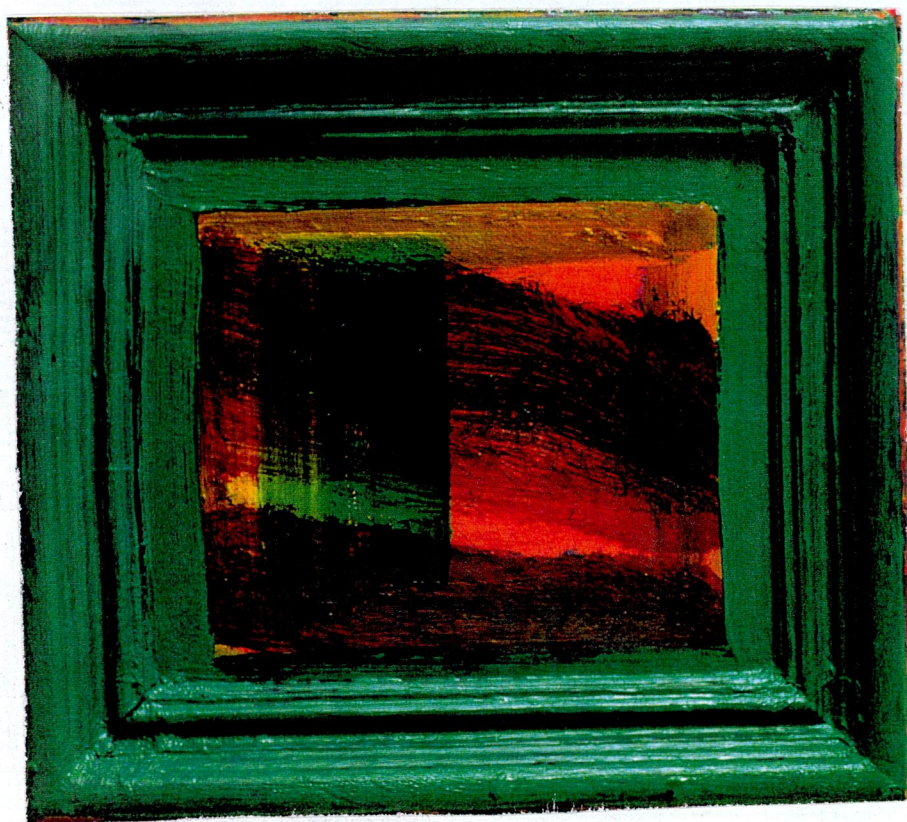


clear and then more obscure. Venice Shadows 1984-88 is a painting with a great sense of mystery; a red haze has a transparent green block floating on a surface.

Hodgkin obviously feels very passionate about Venice, as his work seems to take on a great sense of confidence. Unlike the more geometric paintings of the 60's or the fragmentation of the 70's, the Venice paintings show a move; not only in the handling of paint but it is as if he is more certain about what he wants to say and he is able to say it within as few words as possible.

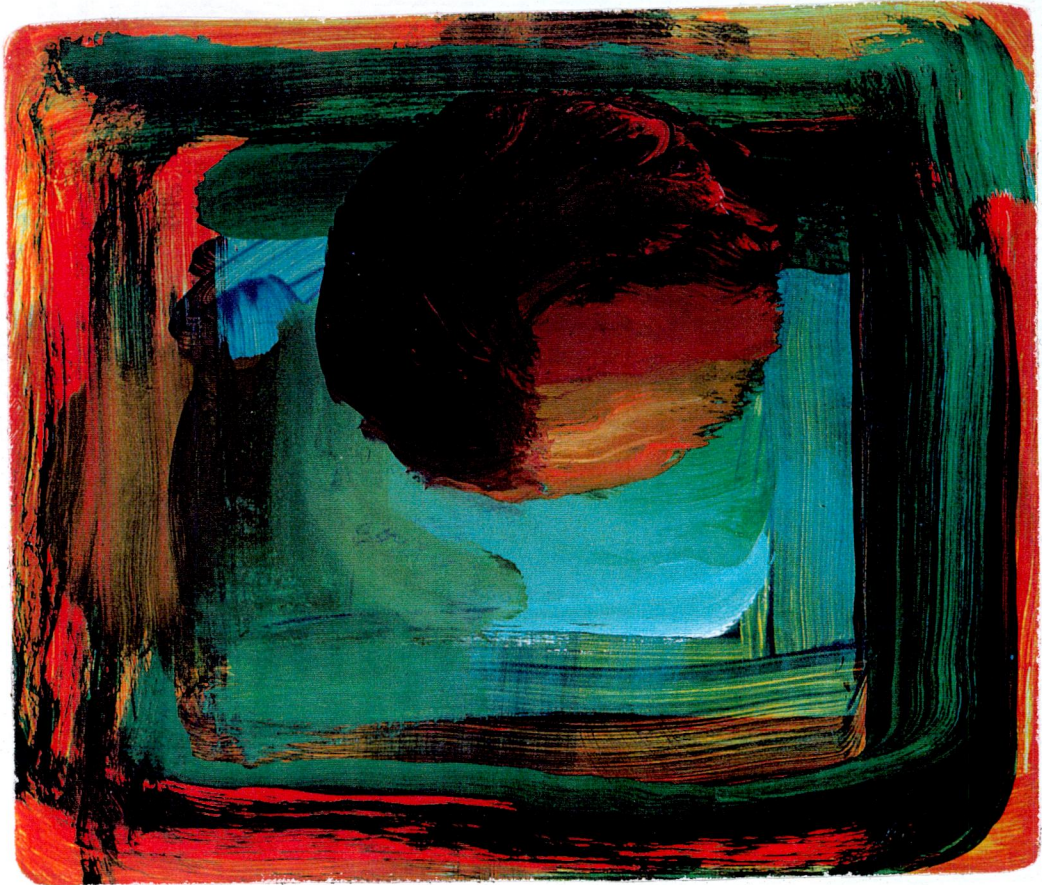






10. VENICE SHADOWS, 1984-88, 16¼ x 18¼ inches





11. VENICE SUNSET, 1989, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches





**CHAPTER THREE**

**THE LATE 80's - 90's**

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The simplification and certainty of form and colour of the 80's was to continue and become more assured and confident in the work to follow. British viewers tend to favour the suggestion that his paintings are clever little colourful abstractions. Whereas the Americans see them as representational and serious. In a recent Southbank Show interview, Hodgkin made it very clear that in general the British didn't fully appreciate or understand his work. This seems a little strange as he represented Great Britain at the 1984 Venice Biennale, and won the Turner Prize in 1985, he has also had three documentaries produced on his life and work and several other prestigious awards. Despite Hodgkin's feelings towards the British attitude to his work, his identity as a British artist would seem quite strong if we look at his choice of subject matter. But on the other hand, he is not very British when one looks at his use of colour. His colour sense would seem to have strong links with Matisse and Van Gogh.

“..... Hodgkin's works of the 1980's project a greater metaphorical and emotional richness; a more focused and self referential direction of the psychological intimacies alluded to in the works of the 1970's. Throughout the decade and into the 90's, Hodgkin has forged an unlikely coupling of intimism and expressionism”. (Auping, 1995, p.27).

Because of Hodgkin's emergence into the international art world in the 80's, Michael Auping suggests that there might be an inclination to link him with neo-expressionism. Neo-expressionism erupted in the 80's in England, Germany, Italy and the U.S.A. Schnabel, Salle, Clemente, Baselitz and Kiefer were all at the fore. The brushwork of Hodgkin seems to be a rather distant link with this movement. His work doesn't deal with historicism or culture at large. While the “Neo-Expressionists” have tended towards the monumental, Hodgkin has faithfully stuck to the rather small and intimate format.





Abstract Expressionism seems to have left an everlasting mark on much of contemporary painting. Hodgkin viewed the "New American Painting" at the Tate in 1959.

"As Lawrence Altway put it, even for conservative Brits the aftermath of seeing that exhibition at the Tate was enormous. No one who made art or wrote about it (in London) did it quite the same after seeing that show". (Auping, 1995, p.28-29).

Hodgkin admired the work of Barnett Newman; his large planes of saturated colour. This in fact may have been a contributing factor to the incredible ability colour had to carry emotions. After all it is colour which instantly hits you when confronted with a work by Hodgkin. Because of the fact that Hodgkin tends to favour a cubist type of figuration, De Kooning would seem to be well worth considering as a possible influence. De Kooning's work has the erotic, fine brush strokes, and a sense of proportion all of which could be said of Hodgkin's work also. Hodgkin's work of the late 90's such as Evening, (PL. 16), or Scotland, (PL. 17), are very reminiscent of the De Kooning landscapes of the late 50's - 60's. While Abstract Expressionism offered an almost violent approach, Hodgkin prefers the order and eloquent touch of Vuillard. His work of the late 80's, early 90's has involved a summing up of his feelings about a particular subject. It is almost like a final conclusion after a long period of investigation.

Keith and Kathy Sachs 1988-91, (PL. 12), is undoubtedly his most abstract portrait to-date. The Sachs commissioned the painting in 1988 to mark their 25th Wedding Anniversary in 1989 but it wasn't completed until 1991. They never actually sat for the painting but had the occasional lunch and chat. The result was a fusion of colour and form. The octagonal frame is dappled with yellow and orange, with two large ribbons of colour being the central part of the work. To the right is a blue curve and on the left is a green brush stroke. In his work of the late 80's, early 90's, the paint begins to take over, with layer upon layer being applied, the end result is a collage





12. KEITH AND KATHY SACHS, 1988-91, 45<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 45<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches







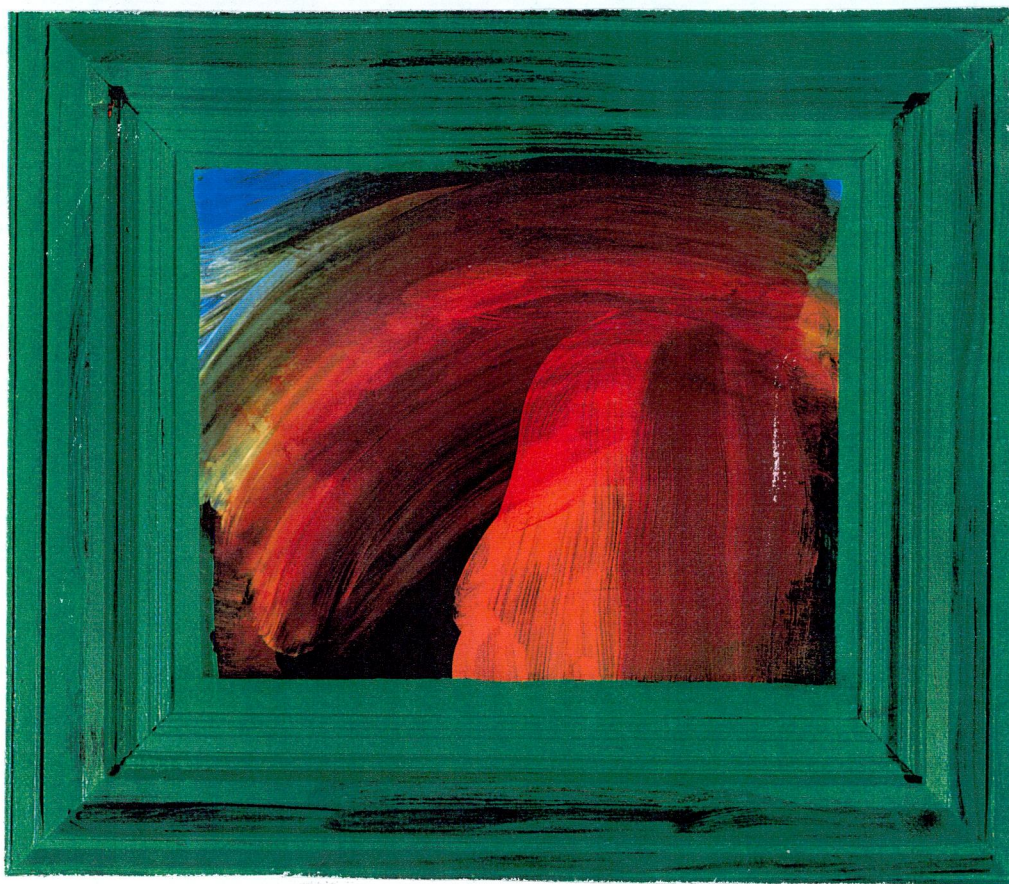
of colour, which creates a sense of place, presence, feeling, emotion or person. As Hodgkin's colour has intensified, so too have his forms become less fussy.

After Degas 1993, (PL. 13), is a prime example of his simplification of form and colour. A rich orange/red painterly blob is surrounded by a vibrant green border. In his later work, when the form becomes more simplified, colour seems to be vital to the success of the work. Hodgkin's colour seems so right, so natural, that it makes one wonder if he had ever studied colour science and theory. On the one hand, his colour is so perfect that it wouldn't at all be surprising if he had studied it. But on the other side of the scales, if we think about what he says about not having any idea of what the finished piece is going to turn out like, any planning at all, especially of colour, wouldn't be possible. To suggest that he hasn't studied colour science would be a little too hasty. In many instances, his work becomes so seductive and overwhelming that how he comes to the conclusion of how to use particular colours is seldom, if ever, questioned. He certainly seems to succeed when he says:

"I would like to paint pictures where people didn't care what anything was, because they were so enveloped by them". (Dixon, 1994, p.178)

If Hodgkin plans nobody knows because his skill as a painter is such that many viewers fail to consider past the initial sense of awe. If he did study colour theory, he may have read "Chevreul", The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours: And Their Applications to the Arts, a masterwork by the renowned 19th century scientist and authority on colour. Chevreul's book has dominated and influenced artists from impressionism right through to contemporary art. However, it is often easy to fit a work of art into a particular theory or influence, as seems to be the preoccupation of so many theorists and writers. While such an area is worth investigating, it could be a pitfall with regards to the work of Hodgkin.





13. AFTER DEGAS, 1993, 26 x 30 inches







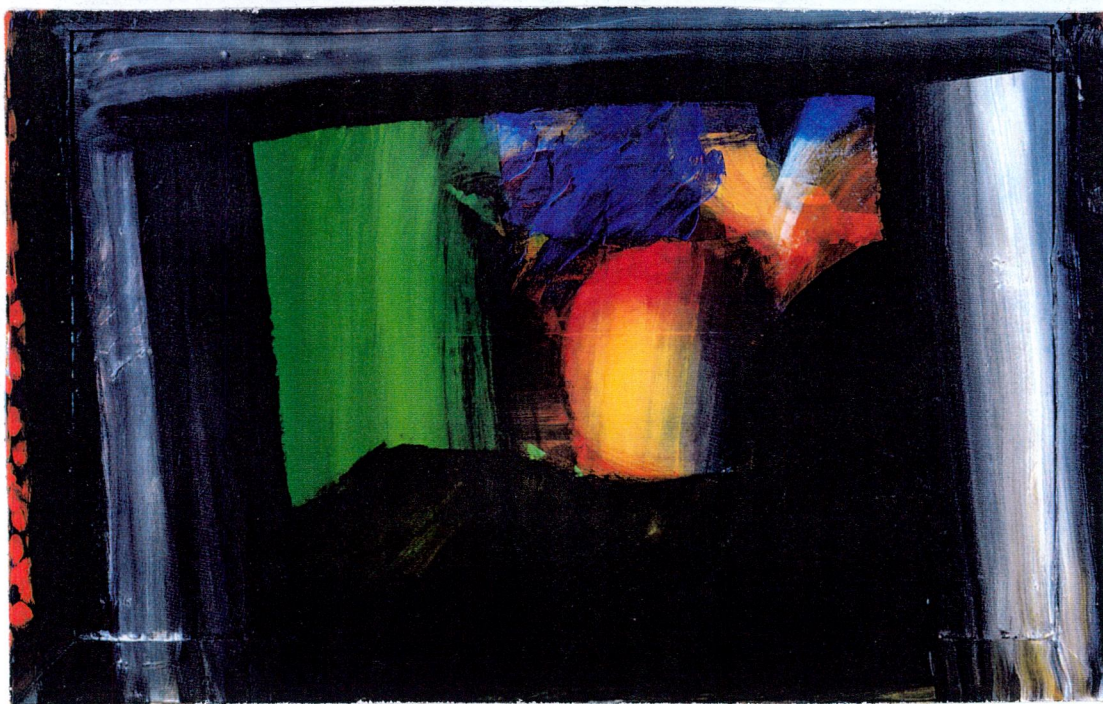
Chevreul emphasised and explained the effects of the contrasts of colour. His dealing with the optical mixing of colours influenced pointillism. Amongst the painters he influenced are Pissaro, Monet, Seurat, Delaunay and Delacroix. Delacroix said that when he looked out at the landscape through a window, he didn't view it in relation to line but purely with an eye for colour.

“The elements of colour theory have been neither analysed nor taught in our schools or art, because in France it is considered superfluous to study the laws of colour, according to the saying ‘Draftsmen may be made but colourists are born’. Secrets of colour theory? Why call these principles, secrets which all artists must know and all should have been taught”. (Birren, 1987, p. 14).

Delacroix was certainly showing the great influence of Chevreul when he said that if he was given mud and allowed surround it as he pleased, he would make the skin of Venus out of it. If we go back to After Degas 1993, it is basically a picture dominated by green and orange masses of colour. When Chevreul talks about harmonies of contrast with black in them as would apply to the colours in After Degas, he uses the pairing of orange and bright green. 1. Orange Green, 2. Black, Orange, Green, 3. Black, Orange, Black, Green, Black; Black combines extremely well with orange and green as it does with orange and yellow. Chevreul recommends to artists the alliance of black with the binary assortments orange and yellow, orange and green.

The 90's have not only seen a greater sense of freedom and exuberance of colour, but an ambitious increase in scale. Snapshot 1984-93, (PL. 14), is one such painting in which he embarks on a substantially larger scale. The size and boldness of the brushstroke which is evident in the work of the late 80's, early 90's, he has managed to transfer to the larger scale with a sense of ease. Red, black, green, blue, orange and yellow marks cover the support. If we analyse each of these colours as Chevreul might have we could conclude; black red, white green, grey blue, white yellow and black orange are the particular characteristics of the colours. If we





14. SNAPSHOT, 1984-93, 59 x 88<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches





look at the central orange/yellow circle which is surrounded by a blackish red daub, Chevreul says that orange and red normally injure each other and that it is better to separate them with black. If we look at the blue and green which are white green and grey blue, if both were grey or white based, they would not be very effective according to Chevreul. Besides being about colour, Snapshot is about scale, of taking something small (a snapshot) and making it large, on the grand scale of the Old Masters. In one sense it is large but it maintains its intimacy, as much by the pictorial devices as by its title. By simply taking the above examples, Hodgkin's colour does fit into Chevreul's theory. Of course, it could be possible that there is a combination of both learned and intuitive colour in his work. Linking Hodgkin with any solid theory would seem to contradict his work, but this shouldn't stop an avenue of investigation. It would be more acceptable to assume that if his colour has come from anywhere other than within, it has come from studying other art and not any science or theory related to it.

Hodgkin's colour is not as simple as putting one beside the other, but by letting colours which are over painted peer through, he is creating a sense of flickering lights in the distance, which enhance everything around them. Hodgkin has always used complementary colours in his work, even in small amounts, thus helping to create an overall sense of intensity and harmony. Of course the form and the way in which the colour affects them are of vital importance.

Sunset 1990-93, (PL. 15), is a painting charged with great emotion and immense feeling. Andrew Graham-Dixon suggests that it is a painting about death. the dimness of the sun is treated almost purely as an image of colour; orange, blue, red, crimson, are all being threatened by two blackish/blue/grey swishes. I doubt that Andrew Graham-Dixon's interpretation is the only one.





15. SUNSET, 1990-93, 22½ x 25¾ inches







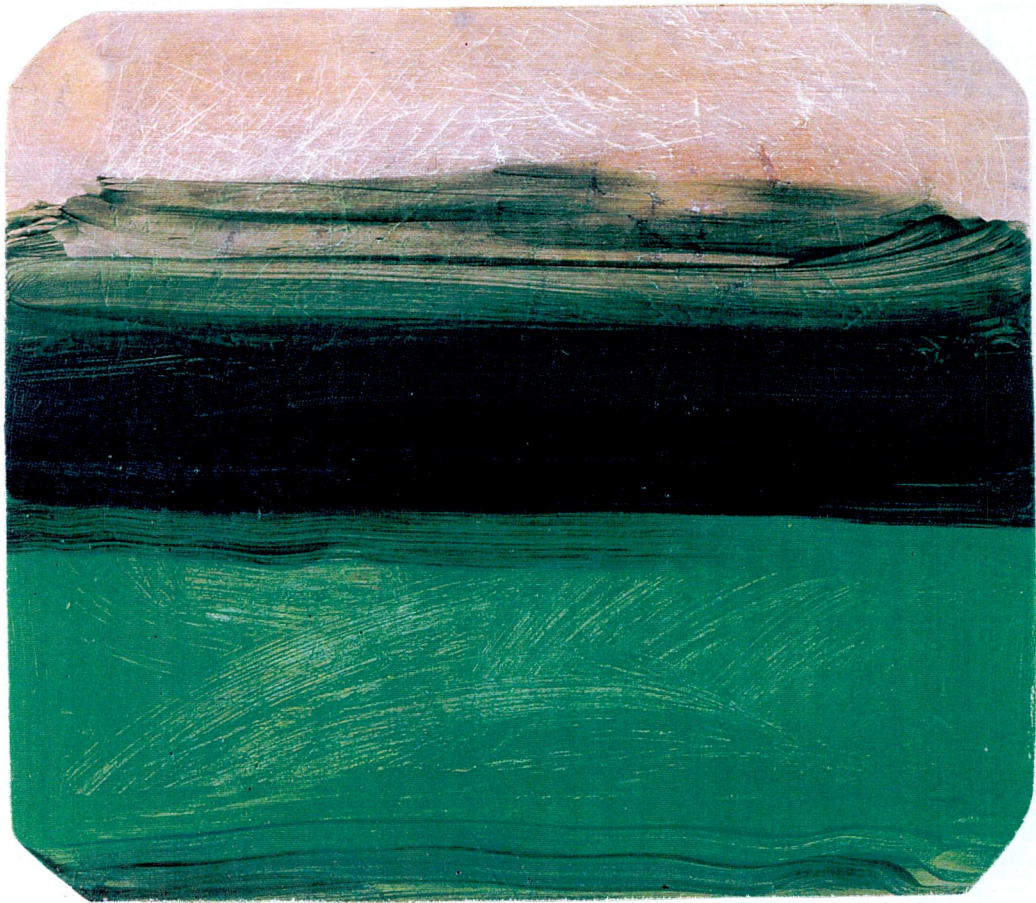
“I have a feeling that it is only in the Anglo-Saxon world that sunsets are to be described as ‘vulgar’, and I think the reason why is because of the connotations of the colour of sunset. Sunsets after all are very red, very orange, which at the red end of the spectrum are the colours of tumescence”. (Hodgkin interview/Sylvester Vogue, 1988, Dixon, 1994, p.179).

This would suggest that Hodgkin is aware of Chevreul’s colour theory and ideas, particularly when he talks about reds and oranges. It also could be about the ignorance that exists about colour in British art. Sunset with its colour fighting to break through is in a sense holding off the night, the darkness, thus keeping the colour alive. It is a painting which is in dialogue with its own limitations and conventions. Sunset is certainly a painting with more than one purpose.

Italian Landscape 1990-91 is very simple in its execution of form and colour. A hill of green with a triangle of blue to one side and red to the other is surrounded by an orangish brown border. Again, here we see Hodgkin playing with complementaries in equal amounts of each other. This is also a piece of work from the early 90's which doesn't just show a change in his approach with colour but the time he spends making the work changes drastically. Bedroom Window 1992-94 echoes the busy and more decorative qualities of the works from the 70's and early 80's. It is also very representational in its execution; a window looks out onto a sea of blue, the dotted complementaries around it may indicate the wallpaper or decoration of the interior. It is a piece of work which doesn't really fit in with the work of the early 90's which tend to be much freer and depend on colour and the gestural mark.

As the 90's progress, his simplification of form and colour becomes more surprising from one work to the next. It is as if now he can sum up his emotions, feelings or memories in victorious swipes of colour, showing the great confidence, and belief, he has in colour and form and more importantly showing his ever increasing faith in the expressive qualities of paint to communicate



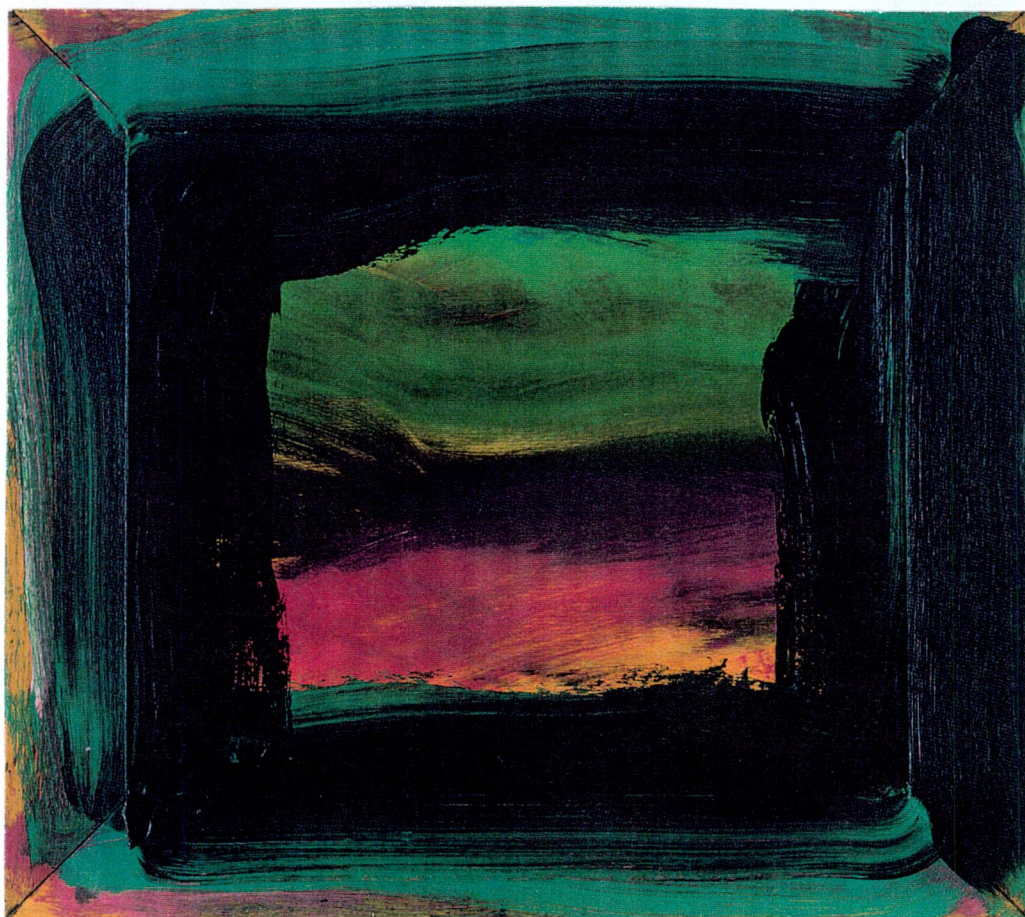


16. EVENING, 1994-95, 15½ x 18 inches









17. SCOTLAND, 1994-95, 20<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches





feelings. His work from 1994 to the present almost totally relies on the expressive brushmark and precise colour. Evening 1994-95 is a small green painting topped by a pinkish-white swipe. It is undoubtedly Hodgkin's most minimalist piece of work to-date. It draws up comparisons of the Abstract Expressionists such as Kline or De Kooning or the colourfield painter, Rothko. More so than ever before colour seems so vital, so important that one can imagine that a painting couldn't work in any other way. While paintings such as Evening may call up links with Abstract Expressionism, he still manages to keep them intimate. Evening is also a painting which totally abandons the framing device. It has a sense of openness, vastness, a never-ending sky and at the same time it looks rather unfinished compared to most of his other work.

Scotland 1994-95 again relies totally on the flow of the brush. Here we can see Hodgkin showing a great sense of exuberance, passion, energy and certainty, about what he says and how he wants to say it. With Scotland he is like someone who has held something in for years and then all of a sudden explodes with an incredible sense of certainty. The colour is clear and precise. Scotland is a prime example of over painting, of one colour peering through another like voices in a choir in perfect harmony with each other. The ochre green topping, and the magenta which are radiating over an orange ground are all surrounded by a rich blackish/prussian/emerald border. Gossip 1994-95 seems to be totally resolved in colour. It largely consists of very big blue and orange marks.

One of the pitfalls when focussing on the colour in an artist's work, particularly high colour is the fact that it is often not taken seriously. There are two sides to this; some people dislike highly coloured paintings because they think that they aren't taken seriously. On the other hand, many like them because they think that they can be trusted not to be taken seriously. In his





letters to John Elderfield, Hodgkin suggests that the inbuilt English puritanism with regard to high colour is not just an English problem but an Anglo-Saxon one. Of course there is also the other factor that high colour is always associated with decoration.

“In this regard, I found myself looking up these three sentences on Delacroix by meier-graepe, finally in all appreciations of Delacroix’s colour, now the central point of interest, we must be careful not to value him only for his palette. We can make carpets of colours but not pictures”. (Elderfield, 1995, p.71).

Many people forget the importance of colour, it affects form and space and either adds or takes away from them.

“Perhaps part of the reason is that the use of colour in painting performs so many different functions at different periods that Maurice Denis’ famous statement gets forgotten, (i.e. ‘it is well to remember that a picture - before being a battle horse or a nude woman or some anecdote - is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order’).” (Hodgkin in conversation with Elderfield 1995, p.72).

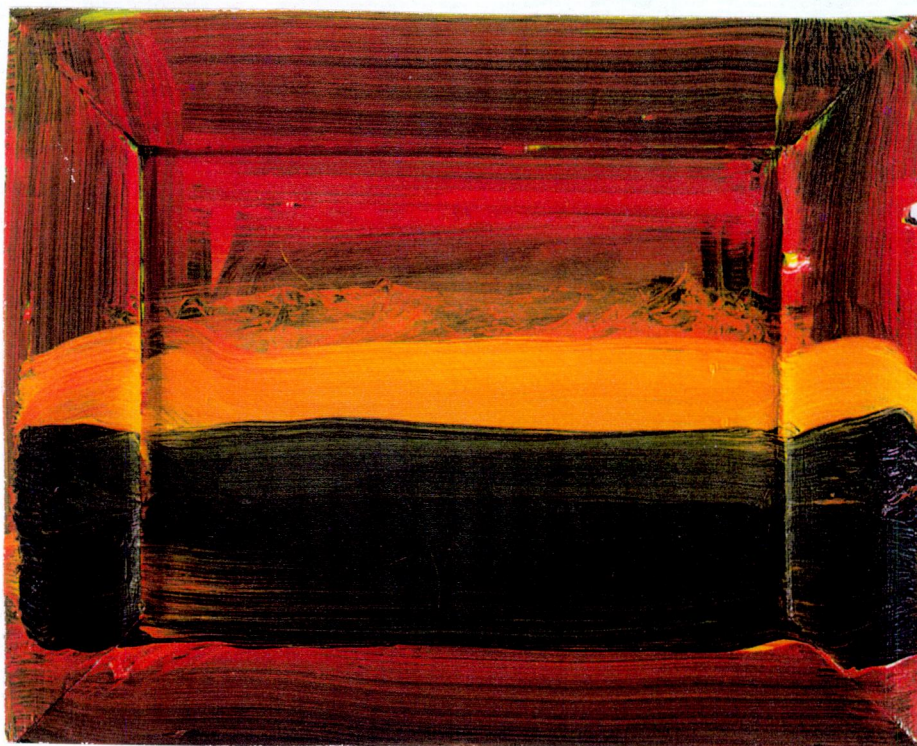
If Hodgkin did not indeed study a particular colour theory is a difficult question to answer.

However, the following quotation might at least address it further.

“Most colour theories are by their very nature somehow ridiculous. It seems almost impossible to talk about colour rationally or sympathetically, but nothing (for a painter) can compare with its infinite possibilities, its infinite seductions, the multiplicity of its possible meanings, from the most profound to the exceedingly trivial”. (Howard Hodgkin in conversation with Elderfield, 1995, p.73).

Hodgkin really shows the infinite possibilities of colour and his great belief in it in one of his most recent paintings. Work 1996, an ochrish green daub which comes down from the tip is lit by a reddish orange swish emerging from a black framing device which appears and disappears as the marks intrude and hide. It is a work which makes use of a few simple colours and shapes, it is small in format but calls out to the viewer for attention. The colour totally takes over and

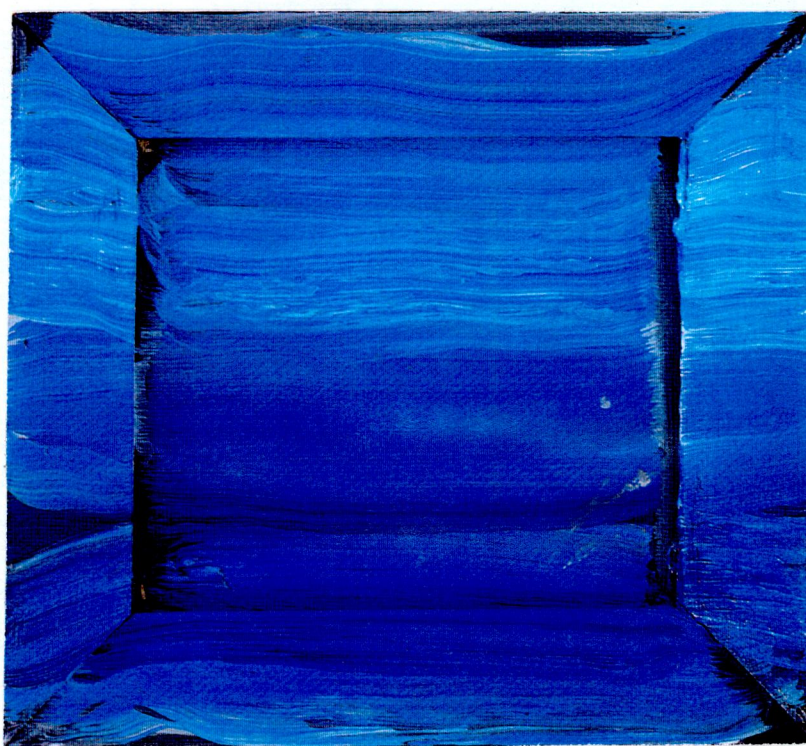




18. THE HEAT OF THE DAY, 1995-96, 13 x 17 inches

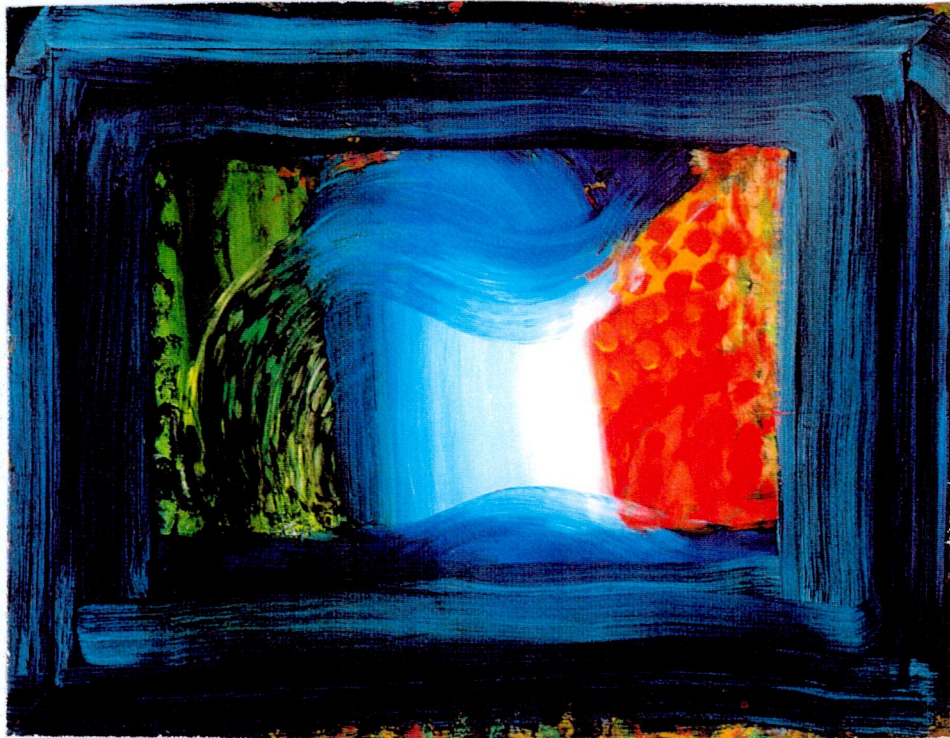






19. SEASCAPE, 1996, 10 x 11 inches





20. MEMORIES OF MAX, 1995, 67½ x 88 inches





is responsible for the success of the forms. Memories of Max, 1995, (PL. 20) combines both a brilliance of colour with a great variation and manipulation of marks. This is a tribute to an old friend deceased in 1990, the architect Max Gordon. The Heat of the Day, 1995-96, (PL. 18), is painted over one year. It totally relies on colour and a couple of brushmarks to convey a sense of heat. Seascape 1996, (PL. 19), is one of Hodgkin's most recent and most revealing little paintings. A small wooden support is covered in a field of blue with very subtle brushmarks, a grey ground peers through the luscious colour. There is little doubt that this painting totally relies on colour, all the dots, and variation of marks and break up of surface have disappeared. He totally gives in to his passionate sensitivities for colour, he reduces the painting down to its essential element; colour.

Many critics have questioned how much further Hodgkin can take his painting. The work to-date of the 90's has surely gone some way to answering the doubters, he seems to firmly believe that there are endless possibilities and his works have taken on a new sense of freedom, grounded in a passionate and daring use of colour.



## CONCLUSION

Despite all the questions and debates surrounding painting, Howard Hodgkin has continued in a somewhat difficult climate to develop a very personal language of expression. Although he has time and time again expressed his lack of understanding as to why there has to be words between the work and the spectator, the artist himself attaches words to all this work. His work is about those moments of confrontation, situations or emotions related to people and places. His ability and interest in the use of colour are rare in English painting. His subjects are presented in painterly swaths of colour. The work constantly reminds the spectator of the glamour of paint normally associated with earlier times. The size of his work and the intimate nature of his subject matter calls to mind Vuillard and the Indian miniatures which he collects and admires so much. His use of colour is bold and inventively reminiscent of Matisse. His work has an appearance of that which is carefully considered; the balanced brush strokes, the decorative use of dots and swishes and his varied use of colour are all vital characteristics in the success of his paintings.

He paints entirely from memory. He does not work from sketches, photographs or any kind of objects. In a sense he attempts to define what memory might be. If one looks at his work from his earliest paintings of the 50's and 60's right through to the 90's, there is a stylistic progression from a more figurative form of representation to a more abstracted one. As Hodgkin has become more confident and sure of his subject matter, his handling of paint has been treated with a great sense of freedom and fluency. It seems rather strange that a painter working at the latter half of the twentieth century is interested in the notion of illusion. His blobs of paint form planes which





disappear and move in and out creating a sense of illusion. But there is little doubt that it is the effect of colour which first strikes the viewer when confronted with a Hodgkin work. When presented with one of his paintings the viewer gets a title and the work it belongs to. It is important that they are not called "Untitled", because the title is not merely a starting point for the viewer, but it is an assurance for the artist in his total belief in his subject matter.

Hodgkin has formed the most inventive and sensitive use of colour of any other artist working today. Each picture is a maximum seduction. It seems that his subject matter is achieved as a result of an inner-necessity, which after time and a build up of emotions, it becomes necessary to paint. What makes his paintings so successful and what sets him apart from other living artists is not just his brilliant handling of paint, or his sensitivity towards colour, but it is the fact that he is true to his own feelings, to human emotions. So perhaps when the viewer is seduced by a Hodgkin he or she is really seeing a bit of themselves. If indeed art is about communication, Hodgkin has succeeded.



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