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Between a Rock and a Blue Chair: David Hockney's *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians* (1965)

Martin Hammer

Abstract:

Travel and cultural exchange between the United Kingdom and the United States of America became a key feature of the 1960s, shaping the world-view of many a British artist, curator, architect, writer, film-maker and academic. Against that wider backdrop, I offer here a focussed reading of David Hockney's 1965 painting *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*. With its faux-naive idiom and overt but quirkily un-modern American theme, the work conveys the artist's singular take on what it felt like to be a Brit at large in the US, an environment at once wondrously exotic and at times strikingly banal. Close analysis discloses Hockney's rich repertoire of artistic and literary allusions in *Rocky Mountains*, and the meanings and associations these may have encapsulated.

During the 1960s, the young David Hockney travelled across the pond as assiduously as any of his contemporaries. Following initial trips to New York and the East Coast, Hockney visited Los Angeles for the first time early in 1964. After several months in California he proceeded to drive through Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas, and up to Chicago, where he stayed for five days and 'looked at the big museums', before doubling back in order to spend the summer teaching, and being thoroughly bored, he

recalled, in provincial Iowa City.¹ The uncharacteristically severe *Iowa* captured Hockney's sense that: 'The only exciting thing that ever happened there was the clouds coming up over the landscape'.² He subsequently met up with his fashion designer friend Ossie Clark back in Chicago and together they first drove to California; then, with Derek Boshier in tow, to Arizona, Nevada and New Orleans. The 'epic road trip' culminated in attending the opening of Hockney's first show in America at the Alan Gallery in New York.³ After spending the subsequent winter in London, Hockney returned to the US in 1965. He and his painter friend Patrick Proctor arrived in New York, and then both went off to teach, Proctor filling Hockney's shoes in Iowa, and Hockney heading for the University of Colorado in Boulder, to do another summer stint. It was there and then that he produced the work on which I shall focus, *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*, subsequently included that autumn in Hockney's one-man show *Pictures with Frames and Still-Life Pictures* at his London dealer, Kasmin. The painting was sold to the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation for the not insubstantial sum of £750, before ending up in the collection of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh.

Such extended adventures in the States became a veritable rite of passage for numerous British graduates on either side of 1960.⁴ Aside from the

¹ Christopher Sykes, *David Hockney* (London: Century, 2011), 153.

² Sykes, *David Hockney*, 155; *David Hockney: Paintings, prints and drawings 1960-1970* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery), 46.

³ Sykes, *David Hockney*, 154.

⁴ See John Walker, *Cultural Offensive: America's Impact on British Art since 1945* (London: Verso, 1998); Martin Hammer, 'My Generation: British Art in and Around 1965', in *My Generation: A Festival of British Art in the 1960s* (Canterbury: University of Kent), 6-35.

availability of funding, the prevailing climate of ‘Americanization’ was eloquently evoked by novelist Malcolm Bradbury, who was a few years’ Hockney’s senior but provides a revealing literary counterpart to the artist. Bradbury’s recollections capture the euphoric enthusiasm for all things American in dreary post-war England, albeit tinged with ambivalence and a consciously British sense of inhibition and adherence to tradition:

Britain was losing an Empire and gaining a washing machine, and America was where, it seemed, everything that was best came from – the best jazz, the best novels, the best ice-cream, the best cars, the best films. In fact America... haunted the imaginations of the Fifties young... I became a typical example of a constant figure of the time, Midatlantic Man... His underwear came from Marks and Spencers, but his buttondown shirts from Brooks Brothers or the Yale Coop. In Britain he talked all the time of the States; in America he would become notably more British, a flagship in his Harris tweeds... And America proved pretty much what was expected. After austerity Britain, it was wildly exciting. After the British class system, it was wonderfully democratic. There was everything you ever heard of: Marilyn Monroe and Dave Brubeck, Elvis and the Kelvinator, eggs any side up you wanted them... once in America, we all fanned out ... by delivering a new car from coast to coast, you could see all of America... if you drove all night without sleeping, you could also pull in the Grand Canyon, grab the Painted Desert, see bear in Yosemite and a geyser in Yellowstone, and still turn up in San Francisco on time...⁵

Bradbury’s account serves to indicate that Hockney’s experiences and general outlook were in many ways typical of his generation. The work that

⁵ http://www.malcolmbradbury.com/fiction_stepping_westward.html

resulted from his encounters with America was also not without its cultural affinities, as we shall see, but was undoubtedly remote from the Pop Art aesthetic with which the artist tended to be associated.

Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians was one of Hockney's most distinctive and acclaimed 1960s paintings, which came accompanied by one of his most engaging titles, providing a droll commentary on his depiction of two American Indians, flanked by a traditional statue and modern chair, and set against an asymmetrical landscape backdrop. From a pictorial perspective, this relatively large work, around eight and a half feet across by five and a half feet high, bears the visual imprint of its execution in acrylic on canvas. Hockney had started using water-based paint the previous year in Los Angeles, valuing its swiftness to dry, and its retention of intense colour when diluted. In the original, even when viewed from a relative distance, *Rocky Mountains* looks a good deal more casual and improvised than it does in reproduction. The overall effect is the opposite of laborious or congested. Indeed, there is no attempt to neaten up the random drips of paint arising from the process of making. Yet, in its pictorial organisation, *Rocky Mountains* also appears carefully composed, in terms of the overall rhythm and balance of its component parts. Reviewing the exhibition in which the picture was launched, the youthful critic Robert Hughes generally commended the artist's 'sense of placement': 'Hockney manoeuvres his knife-edged shapes around until they fall into position with a nearly audible click... the paintings are a good deal more sophisticated than they look'.⁶

When one starts to register detail, *Rocky Mountains* reads not so much as a coherent stylistic artefact, in the conventional manner, but rather as a pictorial montage of discrete and disparate elements, notably varied for

⁶ Robert Hughes, 'Blake and Hockney', *London Magazine*, Vol.5 (January 1966): 72.

example in their degrees of naturalism and three-dimensionality. The landscape of the title evokes not so much the literal, dramatic Rockies ('a wild pushing mass of jagged peaks' according to a 1965 Bradbury novel set in the same part of America) as the dry, rocky, eroded, vegetation-less terrain typical of the American Southwest. This ambience is depicted by means of striated, multi-coloured bands, carefully distributed in the left half of the painting.⁷ The bands read as emphatically flat, in one sense, especially in the topmost passage, but they also diminish in size and strength of colour to evoke a layered recession into deep space, as perceived, we might suppose, through the astonishingly clear light that is such a memorable feature of the region. The sense of luminosity is enhanced by the bright blue of the sky but also by the pervasive presence of the off-white ground, which in another way asserts the literal materiality of the canvas. The three, repeated mound-like forms in particular serve to plot the progression from foreground to far distance, even though we might struggle to gauge exactly how far away the nearest of them might be relative to the immediate foreground plane.

Within that open but indeterminate spatial expanse, the extended splash of red paint is clearly not the spontaneous, poured gesture that it might appear at first sight. On closer inspection, it turns out not to be one single mark at all, but rather to comprise three passages, carefully executed on either side of the nearest striated rock formation, and also of the foreground eagle. The end of the fictive splash even employs a slightly different red from the other two sections. There is no suggestion that the bird and rocky mound were executed on top of a big underlying brushmark. But, given the implied landscape context, what we do begin to discern is the passage not so

⁷ Malcolm Bradbury, *Stepping Westward* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1965), 9.

much of an abstract splatter of paint as that of a river, perhaps muddy given its colour, which we take to be traversing the landscape in the middle distance and getting closer to us towards the left of the composition. The right-hand side of the composition evokes a rather different kind of landscape imagery. The more textural, rounded hill to the top right of the composition is presumably wooded terrain of some sort; while the painterly modelling of the form immediately behind the figures produces a more emphatically three-dimensional solid mass, a jokey reference, we might surmise, to the city of Boulder where Hockney was executing the work. On one level, therefore, *Rocky Mountains* provides a demonstration of how space, three-dimensional form and diverse types of physical substance can all be encoded pictorially by means of artifice and convention, given a cooperative viewer.

The lower edge of the composition intersects at ankle height the pair of standing, stationary figures, of whom the closest is female and overtly American Indian, her literal redskin facial mask eclipsing any signs of individuality. She is positioned in front of the rather dowdy man, with his economically-described cowboy hat, whom we take to be her partner on the most obvious reading. In more formal terms, her rear silhouette picks up the curves of the distant hills to the right, while the vertical stripes of her dress connect visually with the striated rock features to the left. The central red stripe of her garment provides a more precise counterpart to the not-so-spontaneous, horizontal splash of red. Beyond the group of cactus leaves that further establish the nearest plane, we encounter a grisaille eagle, looking stage-left, just like the figures. This element is clearly adapted from a Thunderbird totem, a well-known feature of American Indian visual culture. Though inanimate, Hockney's creature seems more vividly characterised in psychological terms than the humans, reading as rather cross, say, or perhaps sad if the visible trickles of paint are read as tears.

The top of its head minimally overlaps the parallel bands describing the distant mountains, the effect counteracting to a degree the sensation of space, as in more overt fashion does the visible bare canvas, the flat application of the paint in many areas, and the prominent internal border, or frame, whose width seems coordinated with the more irregular bands within the composition. Conversely, the eagle is balanced across the composition by a very modern-looking blue chair, a Saarinen Executive to be precise, which is of equivalent solidity to the bird and echoes the sky colour. This element could be interpreted as a potential respite for one of the figures, just in case thinking about the vista, and perhaps the arduous of old-fashioned tribal existence, became too much for them to contemplate. If we are so inclined, then, we might begin to discern some expressive or thematic point to Hockney's placement of his figures between the emblems of a mythic past, associated with the natural landscape, and a thoroughly Americanised present. Finally, the topmost section of the picture comprises a zone of sky, unmodulated and strikingly bright blue, as is frequently the case in the region, and broken only by a few cartoon clouds. Like the rocky striations, the clouds too equivocate between flat and three-dimensional, and the largest cloud across to the right turns out, when we peer closely, to be executed with flatly-applied silver paint. The clouds also look a little like thought bubbles, as if we are invited to imagine what might be passing through the figures' minds, even though their features are inscrutable.

Rocky Mountains could well strike the attentive spectator as a virtuoso combination of the faux naïve and the sophisticated, the fragmented and the carefully constructed, and the abstract and the figurative, or, to put it another way, of modernist engagement with the autonomy and flatness of the picture surface integrated with, and balanced against, more traditional evocation of a fictive scenario in depth, mobilising our imaginative responses to depicted subject-matter. Overall, making sense of the painting takes time.

Equally, the diverse components seem to cohere thematically around the concept of time, with the contemporary (the chair) and the fleeting (river and clouds) juxtaposed against the primordially remote (the rock formations), with such extreme opposition mediated by the shorter-term unfolding of human history (the Indians, of ancient lineage but now in their Americanised guise). In terms of affective charge, several early critics insisted on the persistent ambivalence in Hockney's early work, which employed 'wit as a cover for its serious inclinations'.⁸ Robert Hughes perceived an unexpected affinity with Truman Capote, and the 'peculiar combination of nostalgia for innocence with a thin, needling presence of evil'.⁹ In 1968 Charles Harrison remarked, less melodramatically, that *Rocky Mountains* came across as 'unmistakeably Hockney, a strange mixture of whimsy in its construction and disturbing reality in its effect'.¹⁰

Looking back now, over the span of five decades, we need to interrogate how and why Hockney arrived at the distinctive conception of *Rocky Mountains*, and how the picture-making decisions he made were shaped by wider cultural and historical contexts. But the artist's own perspective on such matters should not act as a constraint. Indeed, there is good reason to take our methodological bearings from a remark Hockney made in the preface to his 1976 autobiography: 'It is good advice to believe only what an artist does, rather than what he says about his work... People interested in painting might be fascinated by an artist's statements about their work, but I don't think one can rely on that alone to learn about an artist's work,

⁸ *The New Generation: 1964* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1964), 36 (text by David Thompson).

⁹ Hughes, 'Blake and Hockney', 72.

¹⁰ Charles Harrison, 'London Commentary', *Studio International*, January 1968, 36.

which is all trial and error'.¹¹ The sense that this particular composition was made up to a degree as Hockney went along is apparent from the minimal evidence of under-drawing, and from the visible pentimenti such as the perspectival lines to the bottom right, buried underneath the description of the rock, a feature whose upper-left contour also extends beneath the back of the female figure. Judging by other works from this time, Hockney probably began with a general idea of the picture, previously set down in a drawing and then transferred onto the canvas, which was then elaborated and modified until he felt that the painting 'worked', which perhaps entailed balancing those contradictory qualities that were outlined above within a suitably striking and suggestive image.¹²

Inevitably, there is a gulf between the highly visual thought processes that feed into decisions that a work is finished and worthy to be released into the world, and the commentary which he or she subsequently elaborates when talking to friends, gallery representatives, journalists, collectors and so forth. Introspection is quite likely to shade into rationalisation, hindsight and self-promotion. The supremely articulate Hockney has always enjoyed success, whether intentionally or otherwise, in dictating the terms in which his art is understood and appreciated. Critics have frequently ignored that cautionary remark about paintings coming about as much from improvisation as from some preconceived programme of ideas and intentions, and have insisted upon reading his art through the filter of the engaging commentaries which Hockney then proceeded to supply in the

¹¹ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), 27.

¹² For an example, see Alan Woods, 'Pictures Emphasising Stillness', in ed. Paul Melia, *David Hockney* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 32-3.

main body of his autobiography. That subservience to the proverbial horse's mouth is nowhere more evident than in the literature on *Rocky Mountains*. The relevant account by Hockney runs as follows:

I went back to America to teach at the University of Colorado, in Boulder, which is an attractive campus on the edge of the Rocky Mountains. I was given a studio that had no window to look out of, no windows to view the Rocky Mountains. Not being able to see them reminded me of *Flight into Italy – Swiss Landscape*. Here I am, surrounded by these beautiful Rocky Mountains; I go into the studio – no window! ... So I painted *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*. The whole picture is an invention from geological magazines and romantic ideas (the nearest Indians are at least three hundred miles from Boulder). The chair was just put in for compositional reasons. And to explain its being there I called the Indians 'tired'. In the bird there's a bit of illusion: it's a wooden bird.¹³

That whimsical anecdote about not having a studio window is the passage that has been endlessly recycled, as though in itself it explained anything revealing about the genesis and affect of the painting.

As a starting point, it may be helpful to view *Rocky Mountains* as 'an invention', serving to distil into a single image Hockney's varied memories of the American southwest. The obvious precursor to *Rocky Mountains* in his work is *Arizona* (1964), a more immediate and perhaps more illustrative product of the road trip he had enjoyed the previous summer. This likewise features the weathered forms of bare rock, as well as storm clouds, and a boulder and American Indian in the foreground, balanced around the road snaking back through the landscape.¹⁴ Here, as in *Rocky Mountains*, the

¹³ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, 101.

¹⁴ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, 111 (plate 111).

acknowledged allusion in the landscape to graphic conventions familiar from, say, *National Geographic* or other educational magazines was rooted, we might surmise, in Hockney's perception that the unusually regular, coloured strata characteristic of this particular region were in themselves visually akin to geological diagrams. Nature had evidently seen fit to supply its own didactic exposition of long-term patterns of evolution in the earth's physical surface that dwarfed the story of human occupancy.¹⁵

The 1965 picture appears more child-like than *Arizona*, as though assembled with little thought from an array of disparate images and pictorial languages. The apparent lack of artistic refinement might be taken to signify the triteness of the current construction of the southwest in the popular American imagination, those 'romantic ideas' to which Hockney also alluded. The elements add up to a compendium of the clichés about the region purveyed by the local tourist board – intense blue skies, interrupted occasionally by fierce rain storms; the rolling formations of an arid desert, and the geological layers of 'painted desert'; verdant pasture and woodland in other parts; weird cactus plants; the accoutrements of American Indian culture, and its current representatives. The general fragmentation and simplification of *Rocky Mountains* implies that we nowadays experience such places through the filter of postcards or illustrations in magazines and brochures, and in more literal terms through the window of a car passing swiftly through. The frame and white border make unmistakable reference to popular visual culture, reinforced by the exaggerated, artificial-looking colours.¹⁶ According to Andrew Causey: 'The line frame surrounding the picture is a graphic designer's device, used in postcards and reproductions

¹⁵ Andrew Causey, 'Mapping and Representation', in Melia, *David Hockney*, 89-110.

¹⁶ Causey, 'Mapping and Representation', 94.

as pictorial inverted commas to define the sense that something is worth recording, and to make it available as a souvenir or memento'.¹⁷ Such an allusion brings Hockney within the loose orbit of Pop Art. Indeed, one of Hockney's closest Pop affinities is that between the fake gestural mark describing the muddy river in *Rocky Mountains* and those in Roy Lichtenstein's carefully-wrought, equally ironic Brushstrokes series that likewise dates from 1965. But, generally, there is a more emphatic distance in Hockney's work from his vernacular source material. Moreover, compared with mainstream Pop's derivations from mass urban culture, Hockney's subject-matter here is notably idiosyncratic, as if to assert that it took an outsider from overseas to take an interest in the vast, largely empty centre of America which affluent sophisticates on the east and west coasts tended to ignore. For reasons beyond their control, contemporary American Indians perhaps symbolised for the artist the wider state of estrangement from nature that he saw, with a certain wry amusement, as characterising modern life in America, a corollary of the growing engagement with superficial sight-seeing amongst the well-heeled middle classes.

The Indians' presence certainly lends the painting an undertone of pathos that serves to undermine the usual connotations of noble savagery that characterized representations of the indigenous culture at this time. In Arizona or New Mexico, if we follow Hockney's reference to Indians 300 miles away, the artist had doubtless confronted the spectacle of real-life native Americans mingling uneasily with the wider community, hawking souvenirs in towns and on their allocated reservations, and all too often locked into significant social and economic problems. Wider awareness of their plight would lead to the passing of the Indian Civil Rights Act in 1968, to deal with specific problems not addressed in the recent, more general Civil Rights

¹⁷ Causey, 'Mapping and Representation', 94.

legislation. In his 1965 novel *Stepping Westward*, already cited, Malcolm Bradbury noted with a comparable sense of irony the coexistence of Wigwam Motel (which consisted ‘entirely of wigwams – each with their own box-spring beds and television’) in his fictional version of a Southwestern University city, while on the road beyond its boundary one could encounter ‘Indian dwellings of corrugated iron and tar-paper formed small mounds in the desert sand’ and ‘an old truck, the back laden with junk and Indians. A sign beside a shanty said NAVAJO RUGS’.¹⁸

It must, in truth, have been hard not to be aware of the gap between reality and image, especially for British visitors brought up on a diet of ‘cowboys and indians’ movies and TV shows. Equally, postcards and the like, then as previously, tended to show Indians against a backdrop of their ancestral landscape, a formula echoed in *Rocky Mountains*. Headdresses, wigwams and so forth were the staple of popular representations, rendering the culture suitably picturesque. Hockney’s figures, by contrast, look to have gone native – or rather gone un-native, so to speak, adopting the dress and, by implication, the banal lifestyle and mindset of modern white Americans. The couple look down at heel, a mere shadow of the mythic braves who had inhabited the distant mountains, living in proverbial harmony with natural spirits. In that sense, *Rocky Mountains* marks a pointed departure from *Arizona*, or from the treatment of Indian imagery in *Ethnic Minority* (1964) by his travelling companion Patrick Proctor, which offers an uncritically primitivist perspective on figures cast as timeless and spiritually-charged.¹⁹

In *Rocky Mountains*, Hockney’s eagle may be an identifying attribute, but it reads too as a poignant symbol of a living indigenous culture now reduced to

¹⁸ Bradbury, *Stepping Westward*, 10 and 403-4.

¹⁹ Reproduced (but without accompanying commentary) in Ian Massey, *Patrick Proctor: Art and Life* (Norwich: Unicorn, 2010), 76.

heritage and aesthetic spectacle. Perhaps the expression on its face is really one of disappointment. The image looks to derive from a black and white photograph, but in its visual isolation it also recalls the cover of Cottie Burland's *North American Indian Mythology*, which appeared in 1965 and would have been easy for Hockney to spot in local bookstores.²⁰ Such a publication could more generally have reinforced his sense, as a foreigner and as an inevitably naïve observer, that the traditional Indian way of life of popular cliché was becoming increasingly remote from everyday experience. The year of the painting also saw the publication of Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilisation: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*, a landmark study of the pervasive role of cultural stereotypes and clichés in white responses to the indigenous peoples over the centuries.²¹ It is hard to gauge whether Hockney was politically engaged and motivated, but *Rocky Mountains* can be located in some sense within the emergent shift in attitudes towards the American Indian community that underpinned the more robust positions dominant in recent decades.

Hockney's reading does at any rate seem relevant to the title of our picture. The artist's own explanation seems a little pat - that he simply called the Indians 'tired' to go with the chair. *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians* is a mellifluous phrase, and, as noted, a suitably literal, deadpan gloss on the imagery.²² However, consider Bradbury's account of a college town sounding

²⁰ Cottie Burland, *North American Indian Mythology* (New York: Tudor/London: Hamlyn, 1965).

²¹ Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilisation: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1965). The book had first appeared in 1953 under a slightly different title.

²² On Hockney's titling, see Woods, 'Pictures Emphasising Stillness', 39-40.

not unlike Boulder:

The small town of Party lies in the American heartland somewhere near the point where the various wests collide – where the middle west meets the far west and the south-west the north-west ... a town reclaimed from nothing, captured from one of the least desirable sections of the frontier. It has the air of being settled by those settlers who were too tired to go on, who said, on seeing ahead of them the magnificent range of the Rockies, that they could take no more. The Indians who preceded them in the section were tired and debilitated, horse-less cowardly braves with holes in their moccasins, without an art, without hogans, lax even in their production of arrowheads, a bore to anthropologists.²³

Hockney's title for his new painting was surely triggered at some level by this specific passage of text. The conjunction of the Rockies and the tired, not to say tedious Indians can hardly be coincidental, especially given that those sentences come, once again, from the prologue to that new Bradbury novel *Stepping Westward*. Hockney could have read the book while the picture was under way, or even after it was finished, and been sufficiently struck by the affinity of theme and mood that he allowed its verbal invention to inform his title. More interesting is the idea that reading the passage came before the picture-making process got under way, and that it stimulated Hockney to distil his own experiences of the various American Wests, developing in paint an ironic, anti-picturesque version of the American Indian trope in popular culture. One can well imagine Hockney identifying with Bradbury's comic mode, given the often tongue-in-cheek bent of his own work to date. *Stepping Westward* proceeds to recount the picaresque adventures of one James Walker, a creative writing fellow at the

²³ Bradbury, *Stepping Westward*, 9.

fictive mid-western University of Party, whose pursuit of personal and sexual liberation, and search for new beginnings, often have unintended and amusing outcomes. According to Bradbury, commenting on his novel with hindsight: '*Stepping Westward* can be seen as Henry James in reverse; it is British innocence that now goes toward American experience, in the age when Americans did indeed seem to have the future of the planet in their hands'.²⁴ Hockney's idiom is arguably another articulation of a self-conscious British innocence and distance, a mental equivalent to the Harris tweeds that Brits donned on their Grand Tour to America, in the face of the unfamiliar and often disconcerting spectacle that was modern America.

The playful dimension of *Rocky Mountains* might also remind us that Hockney was an enthusiastic admirer of the poetry of W.H. Auden, whose iconic status as a gay man was no doubt part of his appeal. Hockney has always been partial to the couplet from Auden's poem 'Letter to Lord Byron', as an antidote to the pervasive influence of abstraction and formalist aesthetics: 'To me, art's subject is the human clay/And landscape but a background to a torso'.²⁵ The sentiment applies to *Rocky Mountains*, though Hockney's figurative imagery seems remote from Auden's torso, with its heroic or alternatively erotic connotations. One can also imagine him responding to the bittersweet idiom of much of Auden's later poetry, as in the anti-pastoral 'Bucolics' sequence from the early 1950s. The opening lines of 'Mountains' provide a striking parallel to the imagery and deflating tone of Hockney's depiction of the Rockies:

I know a retired dentist who only paints mountains.
But the Masters seldom care

²⁴ http://www.malcolmbradbury.com/fiction_stepping_westward.html

²⁵ Quoted, for example, in Hockney's statement for *English Art Today, 1960-76* (Milano: Electa, 1976), 98.

That much, who sketch them in beyond a holy face
Or a highly dangerous chair.²⁶

It is not known what artists Auden had in mind, but Hockney's chair looks dangerous indeed, having only two legs (the effect of which is also to diminish the chair's perspectival disruption of the picture surface). The item of furniture likewise serves to keep the natural environment at bay, best experienced as ornamental backdrop or vista, even, it transpires, by today's native Americans. In other words, the chair was surely inserted, as suggested above, for thematic as well as the compositional reasons that Hockney acknowledged.

Rocky Mountains is a striking instance too of the artist's visual eclecticism. Within the trial and error involved in the making of pictures, recollections of experiences in the wider world clearly interacted in a very productive way, for Hockney, with memories of works seen in galleries or in books and magazines. Indeed, the montage character of *Rocky Mountains* is also symptomatic of its being a tissue of quotations, to recycle a phrase. In the first place, the conception is firmly rooted in aspects of his own practice. *Rocky Mountains* seems not just a distillation of recent travel experiences, but also the summation of a strand in Hockney's work to date, preceding the emphatic shift in 1966 towards the more naturalistic idiom that dominated his work during the second half of the decade (announced in a work like *Peter in Nick's Pool* from that year). As he explained, the new work was a specific reprise of *Flight into Italy* from 1962, not just because the windowless space in Rockies country brought to mind the experience of being in the back of a moving van and not really being able to see the Alps, as he and his friends drove through them. *Flight into Italy* equally offered a

²⁶ Edward Mendelson, ed., *W.H. Auden: Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 206.

precedent for the admixture in of diverse ways of applying paint, the extensive use of bare canvas, and the diagrammatic mountains in the background. More broadly, *Rocky Mountains* can be seen as a variation on a type of flat, frontal composition, with figures presented in profile and oriented from right to left, that Hockney had established in *A Grand Procession of Dignitaries in the Semi-Egyptian Style* (from 1961). This was one of the four so-called ‘Demonstrations of Versatility’ that he included in the ‘Young Contemporaries’ student exhibition in London the following February.²⁷ The formal figure style of Egyptian art is subsequently echoed in paintings like *The First Marriage (A Marriage of Styles)* and *The Second Marriage*, both of 1962, and in other pictures thereafter, including *Rocky Mountains*, where the pair of figures are direct descendants of the couple in *The First Marriage*.

The marital theme is pervasive in the funerary imagery encountered in ancient Egyptian sculpture and painting, which Hockney studied in reproduction and first hand in the British Museum, Berlin and, in 1963, the Cairo Museum.²⁸ His invitation to visit Egypt in 1963, at the behest of the *Sunday Times* magazine, was sparked no doubt by his overt engagement with its ancient artistic traditions. *Rocky Mountains* compels us to consider the force of that allusion in the context of a work depicting American Indians. Hockney may, for instance, have been struck by the ubiquitous

²⁷ Hockney’s inspiration for that work is said to have come from ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’, by the Egyptian poet C.V. Cavafy: see Marco Livingstone, *David Hockney* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 39.

²⁸ See the drawing *Rehotpe and his Wife Nofret sat in a Glass Case at the Cairo Museum* (1963), reproduced in Ulrich Luckhardt and Paul Melia, *David Hockney: A Drawing Retrospective* (London: Royal Academy of Arts/Thames and Hudson, 1995), catalogue no. 27.

animal and bird imagery in both Egyptian and tribal American art, and also the shared aesthetic impulse towards stylisation. But the common ground could equally have been the gulf in each culture between mythic aura and present-day reality. Perhaps Hockney perceived the southwest US as analogous in some ways to modern Egypt. Both places were hot and dry, with striking natural or man-made formations, and both presented the spectacle of incongruous residues of a glorious civilisation lingering on amidst an impoverished and down at heel modernity (as in Hockney's *Great Pyramid at Giza with Broken Head from Thebes* of 1963, a compositional and thematic precursor to *Arizona*). The couple in one of his Cairo street scenes, in traditional costume but placed against the emphatically contemporary trappings of a political poster and Shell garage, offer a striking precedent for the imagery and expressive tenor of *Rocky Mountains*.²⁹ The conjunction reinforces the idea of Hockney as a painter of the bathos of modern life, rather than any Baudelairean heroism.

When extending his latter-day Egyptian idiom in 1965, Hockney incorporated reference to further visual models, both past and present. This extended to contemporary abstraction. In 1976 Hockney acknowledged that there was 'lots of abstract painting I have loved', but claimed this had not been an influence on his work, surely an oversimplification made with hindsight, when his sceptical attitude towards abstraction had hardened.³⁰ Elsewhere in the autobiography, he recalled that in 1964 he still 'wanted to be involved, if only peripherally, with modernism'.³¹ In *Rocky Mountains* the combination of diverse diagrammatic elements, surrounded by bare canvas

²⁹ *Shell Garage, Luxor* (1963), reproduced in Luckhardt and Paul Melia, *David Hockney*, catalogue no. 26.

³⁰ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, 123.

³¹ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, 100.

and moving in and out of spatial illusion, brings vividly to mind the large-scale abstract paintings of Bernard and especially Harold Cohen, two artists associated with the 'Situation' group of young British abstract artists, with its strong transatlantic allegiance. Hockney's awareness of Harold Cohen, a rising star, would have been heightened by the retrospective staged at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in May to June 1965, just before Hockney for the USA. This featured relevant works from 1963 such as *Conclave* and *Before the Event*, and gave rise to a catalogue that quite solemnly discussed the layout of the paintings as metaphors for the mind and the processes of memory.³²

Likewise, the fictive red river in *Rocky Mountains* looks like a careful, representational elaboration of the spontaneous-looking poured marks, played off against the bare canvas that they stain, which had featured in Kenneth Noland's abstracts from around 1960, recently shown at Kasmin's London gallery.³³ Indeed Hockney commented that the main body of his work from 1965 was 'influenced by American abstractionists, particularly Kenneth Noland, whom I'd got to know through Kasmin who was showing him. I was trying to take note of those paintings...'.³⁴ If the annual Hockney shows were a mark of friendship and admiration on the dealer's part, as well as a reliable source of income, the Kasmin Gallery was otherwise operating

³² Collections Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh and Tate, respectively; *Harold Cohen* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1964).

³³ For examples, see Diane Waldman, *Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1977), 50-56 and 121-123. Shows at the time included *Kenneth Noland: Paintings 1959-62* (London: Kasmin Limited, April 1963); *Kenneth Noland: New Paintings* (London: Kasmin Limited, April 1965).

³⁴ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, 88 and 100-101.

as the main British outpost for the kind of American ‘Post-painterly abstraction’, that crystallised early in the new decade as an antidote to the ubiquitous Abstract Expressionism of the late 1950s and the upstart Pop Art movement. The new abstract aesthetic had been promoted since around 1960 by Clement Greenberg, as the onward march of modernism, and was anointed by a major group exhibition he curated, opening at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in spring 1964 before touring elsewhere in North America.³⁵

Noland and the late Morris Louis represented the more purist wing of Post-painterly abstraction. But in the work of artists like Helen Frankenthaler or Fridel Dzupas, both also shown during the mid-1960s at Kasmin, a type of colourful, stained, cropped, improvised abstraction was frequently associated with sensations of space, light and colour redolent of the natural landscape, a visual equivalence made explicit in the referential titles given by the artists (or their dealers) to many pictures. Frankenthaler’s show in 1964, for example, included works such as *Sands* (1964), or *Sun Dial* (1963), the latter illustrated on the exhibition poster.³⁶ Hockney was probably in Los Angeles at the time, but had other opportunities to view the artist’s work. In *Rocky Mountains* there is, to my eye, a willed awkwardness to the irregular, organic shapes, and to the oppositions of bright and muted, flat and

³⁵ The dates of the show in Los Angeles were April 23-June 7, 1964. Hockney was in Los Angeles at the time and presumably visited the exhibition. On Kasmin’s Greenbergian sympathies, see Lisa Tickner, ‘The Kasmin Gallery, 1963-1972’, *Oxford Art Journal* 30 (June 2007), 263 (note 87).

³⁶ See *Helen Frankenthaler* (London: Kasmin Limited, 1964); the works noted are in the collections of the Ulster Museum, Belfast and Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal.

textured, within adjacent patches of colour, that resonates with such recent work by Frankenthaler. Hockney can be seen as debunking the doctrinaire critical claims surrounding Post-painterly abstraction, while resourcefully reconciling its devices and methods with a more traditional and legible kind of landscape-based figuration. Then again, the treatment of sky and clouds echoes the clarity and boldness of the late work of Fernand Léger, where abstract simplification is used to confer an ideal order onto subjects from everyday life, although the effect can be unintentionally comical.

In addition, *Rocky Mountains* brings traditional exemplars to mind. It seems to allude with equivalent irony to the idea and formal conventions of Sublime Landscape, a prominent strand in 19th century British and American art. The mode is exemplified by Benjamin Leader's *Autumn in Switzerland* from 1878, a work that Hockney could have been familiar with from the art gallery in Huddersfield, near to Bradford where he grew up. The arrangement of mountains, river and boulder are loosely recapitulated in the Hockney, although again the citation sharpens his wry comment on how the elevated imaginings of Romanticism had come to be debased in the mass tourism that had replaced the aristocratic Grand Tour. Equally, the composition recalls the British portrait genre of a couple in the foreground against a landscape backdrop, epitomised by Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, a work acquired for the National Gallery in 1960. The sense of proud territorial ownership in the Gainsborough only serves to highlight the sense of loss experienced by the American Indians in the Hockney. In addition to its landscape imagery, the inclusion of the border relates *Rocky Mountains* to a cluster of Hockneys that referred, in his own words, to the 'vastly admired' Villa Aldobrandini cycle by Domenichino (from 1616-18), depicting mythological scenes set in an arcadian setting, a series which once

again had only recently been acquired for the National Gallery.³⁷ He was riveted by the overt artifice of these fictive representations of tapestries, executed in fresco for a villa in Frascati, but now transferred onto canvas and displayed as free-standing paintings.

Finally, the two figures in the Hockney make evident reference (though this seems never to have been noted) to the couple who preside over Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* (1884-6), as evident from their orientation, side-on placement, relative positioning and scale, and from details such as the man's hat and the contour of the woman's back, merging into the abstracted folds of her dress. The painting might also be said to recapitulate Seurat's ambition to project a monumental but also slightly mocking take on contemporary life, reflecting in the nineteenth-century artist's case on the airs and graces of the emergent Parisian bourgeoisie. We might go on to identify further allusions to the Seurat, a work which had itself prompted comparisons with the stiffness of Egyptian art when it was first exhibited in Paris.³⁸ The Hockney approaches the large format of *La Grande Jatte*, which also, of course, contains an internal border. The serious-looking, pipe-smoking, reclining man to the left finds an echo in both the placement and mood of Hockney's sombre, grisaille eagle. *La Grande Jatte* was a familiar enough work in the art-historical canon, but the reference would surely have had a particular point for Hockney, given that his drive through the southwest had ended up in the great northern city of Chicago, where he had visited the 'big

³⁷ Henry Geldzahler, 'Introduction', in *David Hockney by David Hockney*, 21.

³⁸ Andrew Causey noted a general affinity with Seurat in Hockney's treatment of the human figure in his Californian pictures, noting that the formality of *La Grande Jatte* had been described by Seurat's contemporaries as 'Egyptian' and 'primitive' ('Mapping and Representation', 101 and 103).

museums'. They do not come any bigger than the Art Institute of Chicago, which has long had the good fortune to house *La Grande Jatte*. The allusion was integral, then, to Hockney's sense of *Rocky Mountains* as an 'invention', fusing memories and associations bound up with touring mid-America during the previous summer.

We have seen that multiple scenic, literary and artistic memories converged in the major new painting that Hockney created in Boulder. Certain of the details in my analysis may be wrong, but some such synthesis of otherwise diverse points of departure was surely involved. The point is that the windowless studio, and indeed being in America generally, did not in the least compel the artist to rethink his methods. On the contrary, those circumstances merely encouraged him to carry on being exactly the kind of artist he had become in the early 1960s, to such successful effect, which involved working out of a repertoire of artistic ideas and devices, and incorporating knowing, creative borrowings from all manner of visual and literary sources. Seeking to transpose his immediate sensations of the external world had never been the artist's interest or method. As Guy Brett noted in 1963: 'Almost always Hockney's ideas come from museums, magazines, films, books rather than the more conventional inspirers of paintings – faces, still-lives, people, landscapes'.³⁹ The constantly reiterated idea that not having that studio window in Boulder was the springboard for *Rocky Mountains* appears seems symptomatic not just of the dominance of the artist's voice in interpretation of his work, but also of the pervasive sense of Hockney as an actual rather than a faux-naïve artist. This article has sought to evoke a more learned and complex figure, whose innocent-looking work was in fact richly informed by reading, looking and reflection.

³⁹ Guy Brett, 'David Hockney: A Note in Progress', *London Magazine* 3 (April 1963), 74.

A final point may reinforce that argument, although it is admittedly more than a little speculative. To my mind, Hockney's painting triggers a loose visual association with another image in which a figure in Native American Indian garb and another in contemporary dress, wearing a cowboy hat to shield his face from the fierce sun, are set against the backdrop of an arid southwestern landscape. That image shows the legendary German scholar Aby Warburg encountering and investigating Pueblo Indians, or more exactly a Hopi dancer in Oraibi, Arizona, during the course of his own visit to the region in 1896.⁴⁰ There are of course notable differences: the prominent Indian accompanying Warburg is male and semi-naked; the main figures are facing the camera rather than side-on; they stand in front of an array of artefacts and other figures; the landscape is more subordinate. Nonetheless, it is not implausible to suppose that Hockney had the photograph somewhere at the back of his mind as he conceived and developed *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*. He would certainly have been familiar with the image. His great friend and artistic inspiration R.B. Kitaj was obsessively interested in Warburg and in the scholarly journal which had emanated from the Warburg Institute since its move to London, having fallen under the spell of Edgar Wind while a student at the Ruskin in Oxford. Kitaj's own early paintings were steeped in Warburgian allusions, he and Paolozzi had collaborated on the work *Warburg's Visit to New Mexico* (1960-2). The photograph of 'Warburg and a Pueblo Indian' was reproduced full-page in the catalogue of his first one-man show held at London's

⁴⁰ See Edward Chaney, 'R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007): Warburgian Artist', accessible at <https://emajartjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/chaney-rb-kitaj-warburgian-artist.pdf>; David Freedberg, 'Pathos at Oraibi: What Warburg did not see', accessible at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Freedberg/Pathos-at-Oraibi.pdf>

Marlborough Gallery in February 1963.⁴¹ It seems very likely that Hockney and Kitaj would have talked about Warburg in connection with the artist's visits to precisely the region of America which had so powerfully stimulated the German scholar's reflections on Indian religious myth and ritual, and the affinities he perceived with classical Greece. The subliminal visual allusion may again resonate with Hockney's sense of the discrepancy between the idea of American Indian culture which underpinned Warburg's romanticised account of symbols and ritual dances, and the mundane actuality of the impoverished and seemingly assimilated population that Hockney himself had encountered, a 'bore' maybe to the earnest anthropologists of his own day, but not to a young British artist attuned to cultural ironies and clichés. It was the 'primitivist' fantasy of a heroic and idealised native culture that was now looking tired, rocky even.

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⁴¹ R.B. Kitaj. *Pictures with Commentary. Pictures without Commentary* (exh. cat. London: Marlborough Fine Art, February 1963), 15. Hockney's own title for the show in which *Rocky Mountains* was shown, *Pictures with Frames and Still-Life Pictures*, seems to make knowing reference to Kitaj's formulation two years previously.

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