

A New Look at a Very Old Image Technology



Portrait of
David Hockney

David Hockney is an artist, a printmaker, and a stage designer. He is one of England's most successful artists. He is also a photographer, which may explain a very controversial idea that he announced 10 years ago.

Hockney has a remarkably precise eye he can see colors and proportions and detail that most of us miss. He spent hours looking at paintings by artists whose names you may have heard: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Caravaggio. He admired the precise detail in the painting. The paintings were more realistic than earlier canvases had been. They were more precise than paintings in any other part of the world.



Pearblossom Highway,
11-18th April 1986 #2



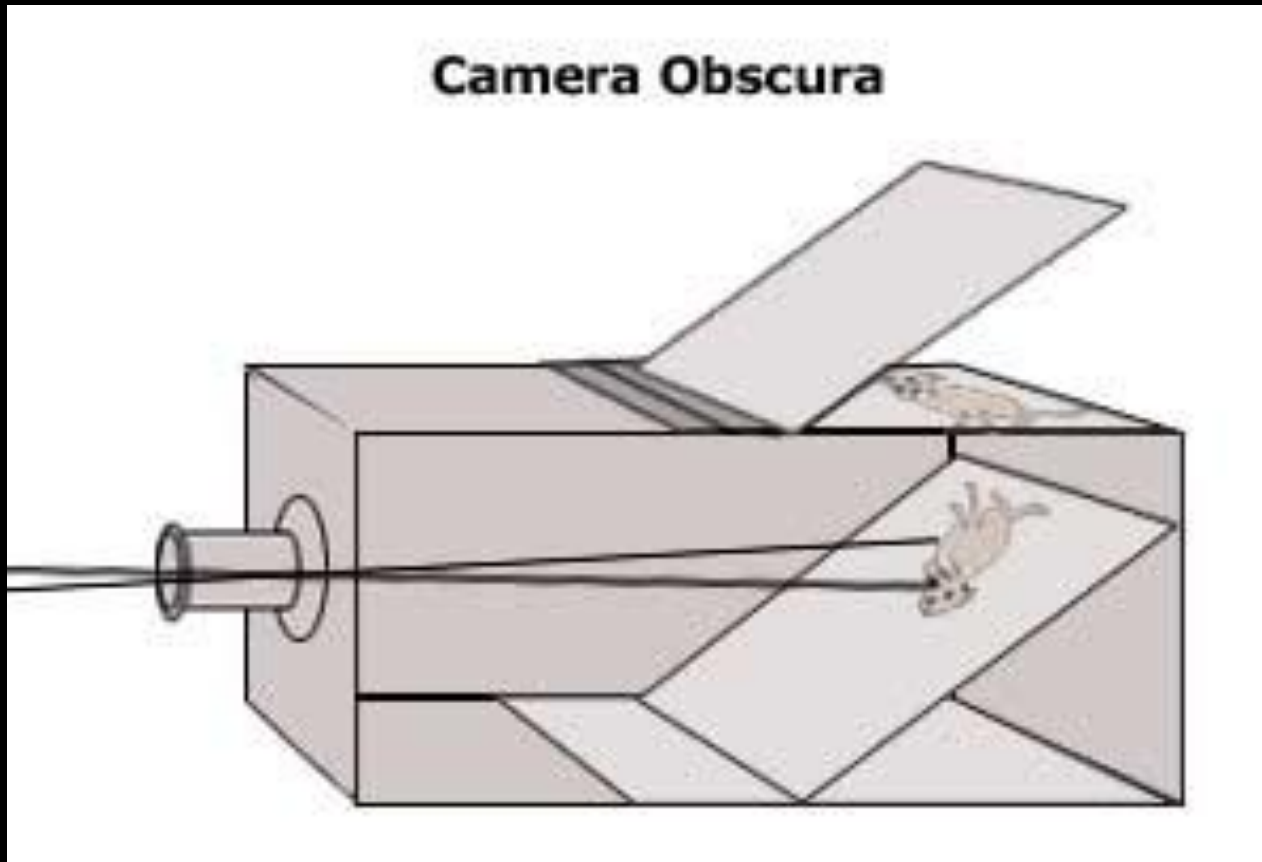
Portrait of Madame Louis-François Godinot (1829), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

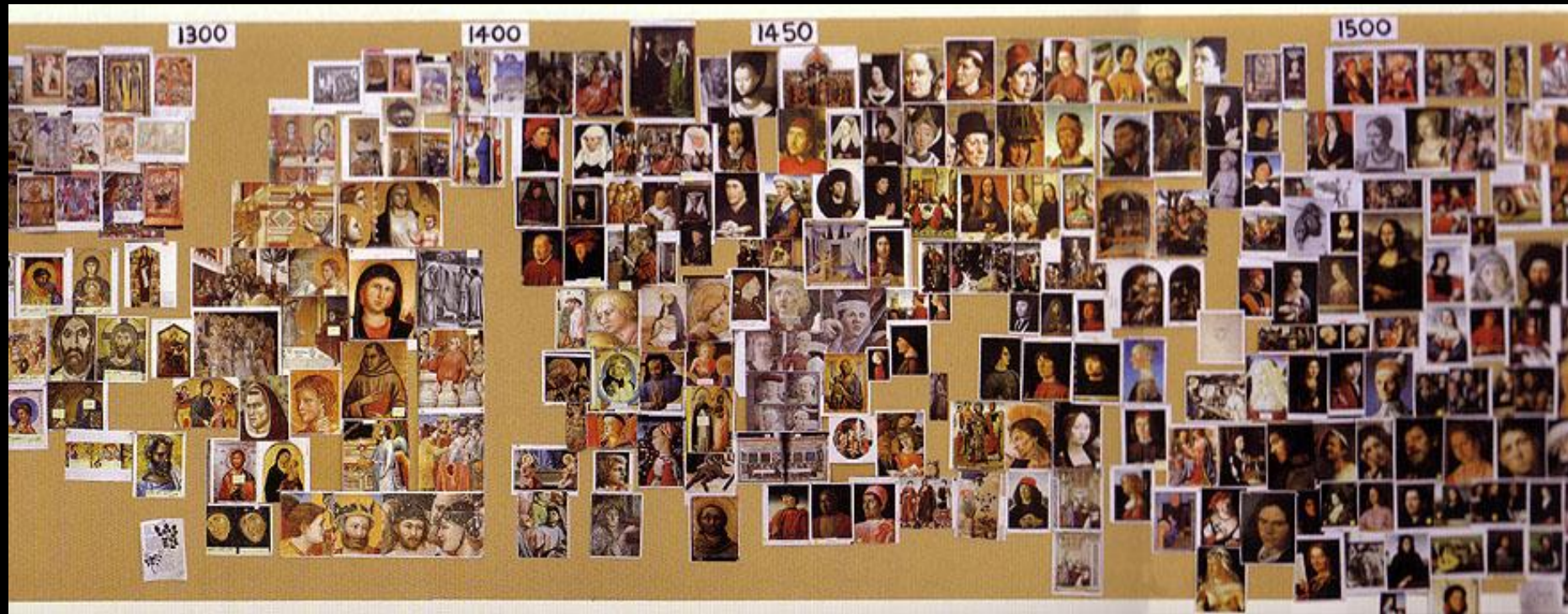


*Still Life, DETAIL (1975)
Andy Warhol*

Hockney saw the Ingres drawing in a museum and saw the same strong, sure lines that Andy Warhol created when he traced his images. Hockney began to wonder if the technology of lenses that the glassmakers of central Europe had just perfected was a tool that assisted these artists.

The *Camera Lucida* was widely known in Europe. Its lens and prism let an artist look at his subject and his hand drawing on a canvas at the same time. You have just constructed a *Camera Obscura*. Yours is small. Imagine a darkened room with a full sized canvas onto which an artist could trace the proportions and composition of his subjects. Hockney's question: *why would artists not take advantage of these tools?*





Hockney experimented with *Camera Obscuras*. As a photographer he knew that lenses distort (or bend) images in recognizable ways. Take another look at a scene on your *Camera Obscura*. Is there a difference between the center part of the image and the image toward the edge?

He made an entire wall of examples from different masters along his wall. Hockney began to see these differences in the paintings of the Old Masters.



Here is Hockney trying out his own camera obscura, to create a portrait.



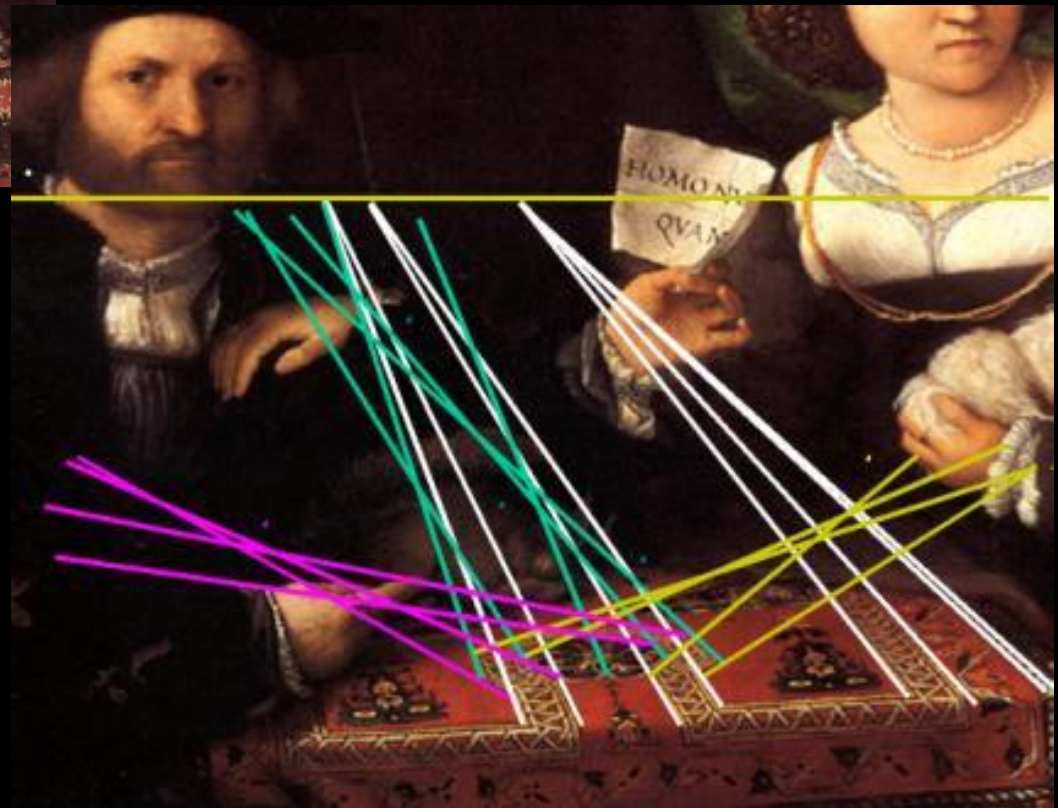
Officer and a Laughing Girl,
Vermeer, 1657

Hockney enlisted the help of Charles Falco, an American physicist and expert on optics. Together they identified features in the paintings that might be explained by the use of lenses. Hockney knew that his suggestion that great artists were using lenses would sound to many art lovers insulting. *Was he suggesting that the artists were cheating?* He responded that he certainly not calling lenses cheating, just a tool. And he added lenses don't paint paintings, skilled hands do. The painting on the left is an example of an artist using perspective which was unusual at the time - perhaps from using a lens?



These lines show the variety of different vanishing points used in this painting, perhaps because of the use of a lens.

Husband and Wife
Lorenzo Lotto



Hockney's evidence is impressive. The uproar was impressive.

Chuck Close who makes very realistic paintings from photographs said: *what's the difference?*

But others said: *just because you can't paint that well, what make you think they couldn't?*

Others said: *so why haven't any of these lenses survived?*

You might ask: *why does Hockney's proposal upset his critics so much? Is it really about the camera obscura? Or is about all the new technology of our time that makes it impossible to see how much is the talent of an artist and how much is a trick of a computer?*

Other Resources

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/vermeer_camera_01.shtml

<http://www.believmag.com/hockney/lookingglass/>

<http://www.diatrope.com/hockney.html>

<http://www.koopfilms.com/hockney/articles.html>