

David Hockney and the Memory of Michelangelo

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David Hockney
In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci,
1962

[\[+ info\]](#)

Introduction

fig. 1

David Hockney***In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci, 1962*****Oil on canvas, 213.3 × 91.4 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,****Madrid, Inv. no. 584, 1978.12**[\[+ info\]](#)**1**

For her exceptional help, bibliographic references, productive insights about David Hockney, and generous observations about the painting while we studied both sides of it together, I extend my profound thanks to Marta Ruiz del Árbol.

2

Nevile Wallis, "General Notes: School of Irony Painting," *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts* 110, no. 5075, 1962, pp. 854–55.

3

On this particular group of painters, see most recently Martin Gayford, *Modernists and Mavericks: Bacon, Freud, Hockney and the London Painters*. London, Thames and Hudson, 2018, pp. 194–205.

4

The exhibition was on view from August 15 to September 8, 1962.

Shortly after David Hockney (b. 1937) graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1962, he and several classmates became the subject of an article both disdainful and prescient.¹ The author was the art critic of *The Observer*, Nevile Wallis, who had seen their work in several local exhibitions. Dubbing them the "School of Ironic Painting," Wallis claimed the group's wry visual commentary had yet to acquire real bite.² But their success obliged him to close with the admission that "London galleries will see much more of them." Artists cited in the article such as R. B. Kitaj (1932–2007) and Derek Boshier (b. 1937) would indeed grace galleries in and beyond the British capital, although none more so than Hockney.³

Had Wallis been capable of predicting Hockney's full success, he may have devoted more ink to the young Yorkshireman. Instead he briefly described two paintings by Hockney that he had seen at the *Image in Progress* exhibition at London's Grabowski Gallery.⁴ The first was *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* [fig. 1], about which Wallis wrote: "He [Hockney] may

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Wallis, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 854.

6

On this monument, designed by Michelangelo and located in the Roman Basilica of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, see within the substantial bibliography: Ernst Steinmann, "Studien zur Renaissanceskulptur in Rom. II. Das Grabmal des Cecchino Bracci in Aracoeli," *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* 1, 1908, pp. 963–74; Claudia Echinger-Maurach, „Michelangelos späte Grabmalskonzeptionen und ihre Nachfolge," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 50, 2006, pp. 49–92; Christoph Luitpold Frommel, „Michelangelo und das Grabmal des Cecchino Bracci in S. Maria in Araceli," in *Docta Manus. Studien zur italienischen Skulptur für Joachim Poeschke*, ed. Johannes Myssok and Jürgen Wiener. Münster, Rhema, 2007, pp. 263–77; Pina Ragionieri, „Tomba di Cecchino Bracci," in *Michelangelo architetto a Roma*, ed. Mauro Mussolin. Milano, Silvana, 2009, pp. 124–27; William Wallace, "Michelangelo, Luigi del Riccio, and the Tomb of Cecchino Bracci," *Artibus et Historiae* 35, 2014, pp. 97–106. On Michelangelo's poems about Bracci, see especially: A.J. Smith, "For the Death of Cecchino Bracci," *The Modern Language Review* 58, 1963, pp. 355–63; Ann Haddock, "Michelangelo's Revelatory Epitaphs," *Neophilologus* 67, 1983, pp. 525–39; Michel-Ange Buonarroti, *Épitaphes pour la mort de François des Bras*, trans. and ed. S. Matarasso-Gervais. Aix-en-Provence, Alinea, 1983; Franz Voelker, "I cinquanta componimenti funebri di Michelangelo per Luigi del Riccio," *Italique* 3, 2000, pp. 23–44.

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Homosexual acts were banned in the United Kingdom until 1967 based on the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. On the cultural climate in Britain at the time of the law's reassessment surrounding the so-called Wolfenden Report of 1957, see Brian Lewis, *Wolfenden's Witnesses: Homosexuality in Postwar Britain*. Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

depart from a rectangular canvas, adroitly shaping like a coffin-lid his memorial to Cecchino Bracci, a scarecrow figure in bowler hat with a wreath encircling his name."⁵ Wallis was observant. *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci*, which entered the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in 1978, is made from two separately-stretched canvases that Hockney joined before painting.

Despite his attention to Hockney's approach to constructing canvases, Wallis clearly knew nothing of the painting's subject: the deceased young Florentine Francesco ("Cecchino") di Zanobi Bracci (1528–1544). After Bracci's premature death, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) became responsible for designing his tomb in Rome, and he wrote fifty poems about Bracci, one of which Hockney transcribed on the painting.⁶ Wallis could be forgiven for his ignorance, as Hockney's painting and title make no explicit mention of Michelangelo, and the related poems remain little-known to this day.

The most apparent feature of Hockney's painting (its construction) and its least known (its literary source in Michelangelo's poetry) were closely yoked. At this stage in his career, Hockney sought innovative means of building canvases and choosing textual sources for subjects concerning same-sex desire. In so doing, he aimed to challenge assumptions about a painting's status as a work on canvas and the representability of same-sex love, as homosexual acts were illegal in Britain at that time.⁷ Neither of these artistic problems was wholly new, as Hockney knew. *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* shows how Hockney found innovative solutions by elaborating construction techniques from his prior work and by mining Renaissance history, given his access to new translations of Michelangelo's poems and his recent travel to Italy.

“Drawing” with Canvas

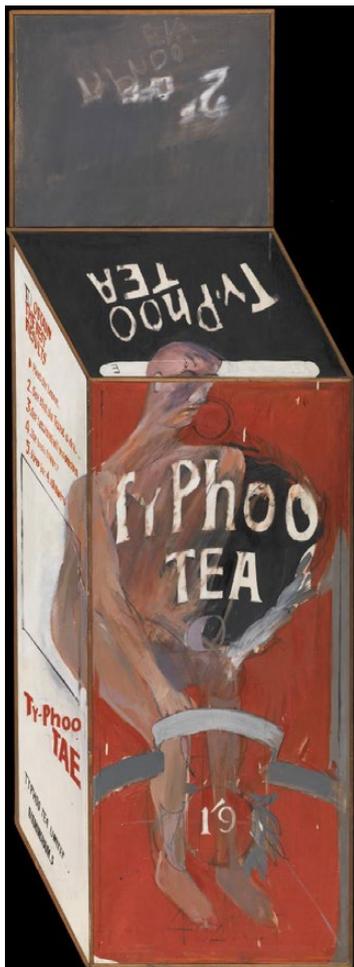


fig. 2

David Hockney
Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style, 1961
Oil on canvas, 232.5 × 83 cm
Tate, London, Purchased with Assistance
from the Art Fund 1996, T07075

In 1961 Hockney first began making paintings with multiple canvases that he built and combined himself. These included *Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style* [fig. 2] and *Figure in a Flat Style*, which were exhibited together in the *Young Contemporaries* show the following year. Of the former painting's assembly, Hockney later reflected:

“I can remember a precise moment when I realized that the shape of the picture gave it a great deal more power. To make a painting of a packet of tea more illusionistic, I hit on the idea of ‘drawing’ it with the shape of the canvas. The stretcher is made up from sections and I made the stretchers myself. It was quite difficult stretching them all up – the back is almost as complicated as the front; it took me five days.”⁸

The painting's scale substantiates the days of work behind it. Together the four canvases of *Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style* measure over two meters in height. Faint white painted lines give depth to the resultant illusionistic box, which encloses a seated, life-size figure. This figure is encased by signs of Hockney's labor, which was not only needed to build the bespoke box but also fueled by drinking the represented brand of tea, Typhoo.

In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci similarly combines multiple hand-made canvases to create an illusionistic space enclosing a life-size figural subject. The canvases' composite outline echoes the black coffin shape painted around the title figure. The painting thrives on the ambiguity created by this doubling: do the two forms create an illusionistic coffin in which the figure lies buried, or do they show the grave into which the corpse is being interred? Achieving this took planning. A view of the back of the painting shows that the

⁸ David Hockney, *David Hockney*, ed. Nikos Stangos. London, Thames and Hudson, 1976, p. 64.



fig. 3

Figure 1, seen from the reverse
Photo provided by Department
of Conservation, Museo Thyssen-
Bornemisza.

small trapezoidal canvas is fastened to the large rectangular canvas with two metal angle brackets at the corners and three thin wooden planks between them [fig. 3]. To give stability to the vertical stretcher bars of the large canvas, Hockney added a horizontal wooden cross brace. These deliberate steps in construction contrast with Hockney's eschewal of the typical first step of preparing a canvas: applying a priming layer. Because Hockney spread his paint onto raw, unprimed canvas (as he often did in this period), it seeped into the fibers.⁹ To offset the resultant dulling of the colors, Hockney applied varnish to part of the surface, creating a selective shine that is key to the painting's subject. Whereas *Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style* overlaid the figure with the logo of the tea box to create a sense of enclosure, *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* achieves this effect with diagonal streaks of paint that, together with the varnish, evoke a gleaming lid.

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I am grateful to Marta Ruiz del Árbol for showing me images taken by conservators of the canvas reverse seen through bright light, which helps to illuminate how certain paint layers have seeped into the canvas fibers.

Well-delimited spaces intensify the desire Hockney weighed upon his figural subjects and reflect his avowed debt to Francis Bacon (1909–1992). Many of Bacon's paintings show a figure in the middle of an interior space defined by stark lines, as in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza's *Portrait of George Dyer*

fig. 4

Francis Bacon
Portrait of George Dyer in a Mirror,
 1968
 Oil on canvas, 198 × 147 cm
 Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
 Madrid, Inv. no. 458, 1971.3

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 5

Francis Bacon
*Three Studies for Figures at the Base
 of a Crucifixion*, ca. 1944
 Oil on three boards, each 94 × 73.7 cm
 Tate, London, Presented
 by Eric Hall 1953, N01671



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In addition to visiting the Leeds Art Gallery in his youth, Hockney also sold his first painting in 1954 at the Yorkshire Artists Exhibition (Hockney, *op. cit.* note 8, pp. 34–39).

11

On Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, see Dawn Ades, "Web of Images," in *Francis Bacon*, ed. Dawn Ades and Andrew Forge. London, Thames and Hudson, 1985, pp. 8–23 (18–20).

in a Mirror [fig. 4]. Hockney had studied Bacon's work in person for many years, and the Leeds Art Gallery that Hockney visited in his youth acquired one of Bacon's paintings in 1951.¹⁰ Bacon's grouping of individual paintings to form a single artwork, as in his triptych of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* [fig. 5] that the Tate acquired in 1953, was a key precedent for Hockney.¹¹ But while Bacon divided discrete subjects across three boards in his triptych, Hockney physically attached his different quadrilateral canvases to extend a single figure across them. Bacon's eroticized figures each rend themselves apart through violent disassembly; Hockney's desired figures become whole through static assembly.



fig. 6

David Hockney
We Two Boys Together Clinging, 1961
 Oil on board, 121.9 × 152.4 cm
 Arts Council Collection, Southbank
 Centre, London, ACC5/1961

Hockney's act of joining canvases was a counterpoint to his contemporaneous exploration of the physical interlocking of same-sex bodies. His paintings such as *Adhesiveness* (1960) and *We Two Boys Together Clinging* [fig. 6] foreground how desiring male bodies latch together. While the former painting's title might relate to phrenology, as has been noted, Hockney was surely playing as well with its obvious significance as stickiness.¹² These two paintings pulse with energy as figures bridge the linear contours that separate them. By contrast, Hockney's paintings made with multiple canvases manifest a process of unification at odds with their subjects' isolation. *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* shows a figure sequestered from possible admirers, and connecting canvas edges was a determinate process suited to Bracci's terminal state.

12

Robert Martin, "Fetishizing America: David Hockney and Thom Gunn," in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*, ed. Robert Martin. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1992, pp. 114–126 (118).



fig. 7

David Hockney
Peter.C, 1985
 Oil on canvas, 111.7 × 40.6 cm
 Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester,
 1985.22

Hockney had previously used conjoined canvases of different sizes to represent an inaccessible subject in his full-length portrait of his friend and classmate Peter Crutch (d. 2002), made in 1961. The painting, *Peter.C* [fig. 7], captures the gentle swoop of Crutch's sandy hair and the faint smile drawing back his red lips. Hockney made a different painting of Crutch after observing him dance with his girlfriend, and *Peter.C* functions as Hockney's memorial for an unattainable, beautiful male beloved that he names in large capital letters.¹³ *Peter.C* and *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* thereby foreground the artist's relation to a human model through text and image. Both paintings allude to their subjects by incorporating the large, hand-painted capital letter "C," evocative of Hockney's use of codes in this period to mark same-sex desire.¹⁴ In explaining why he chose male models while at the Royal College of Art, Hockney later said that he believed Michelangelo was similarly attracted to the male subjects in his work.¹⁵ *Peter.C* and *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* thereby reflect the overlap of personal and historic categories in Hockney's early work.

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The painting of Crutch dancing, *The Cha Cha that was Danced in the Early Hours of 24th March 1961*, is in a private collection.

14

Hockney described his interest in alpha-numerical codes as stemming from his reading of the poet Walt Whitman (Hockney, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 62).

15

Hockney, *David Hockney*, p. 88.

16

Tusiani groups the 50 poems about Bracci together as the seventy-third entry in his volume under the heading: "In Memoriam Cecchino Bracci." See Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, trans. Joseph Tusiani. New York, The Noonday Press, 1960, p. 58.

17

English translations of a selection of Michelangelo's poetry prior to Tusiani's edition included Michelangelo Buonarroti and Tommaso Campanella, *The Sonnets of Michelangelo Buonarroti and Tommaso Campanella*, trans. John Addington Symonds. London, Smith, Elder, and Co., 1878; Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sonnets and Madrigals of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, trans. William Wells Newell. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1900; Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sonnets of Michelangelo*, trans. S. Elizabeth Hall. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1905; Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Poems*, trans. Cecil Clifford Palmer. Zurich, Johannespresse, 1941.

18

For a pioneering examination of Michelangelo's relationship with Cavalieri in English, see John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti: Based on Studies in the Archives of the Buonarroti Family in Florence*. London, John C. Nimmo, 1893, II: pp. 125–50.

19

Emily Porter-Salmon, "Textual Cues, Visual Fictions: Representations of Homosexuality in the Work of David Hockney," PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2011, pp. 93–94.

20

Invented in England in 1959, Letraset has a complex history that has been charted in Adrian Shaughnessy, *Letraset: The DIY Typography Revolution*, ed. Tony Brook and Adrian Shaughnessy. London, Unit Editions, 2017.

Michelangelo between Auden and Whitman

The title of Hockney's *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* and the reproduced poem on the canvas are taken from Joseph Tusiani's translation of Michelangelo's poetry, published in 1960.¹⁶ Among Michelangelo's more than 300 poems and fragments of varied forms, only a selection had been previously translated into English by that year.¹⁷ Tusiani's volume thereby made Michelangelo's lesser-known poems, including epigrams written for the death of the beloved Bracci, available all together to Anglophone readers for the first time. Previous publications had included other poems by Michelangelo that convey related amorous themes, and past scholarship on Michelangelo had addressed this aspect of his work, particularly the famous drawings and poems he made for the Roman nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri (1513/14–1587).¹⁸

By focusing on the poems about Bracci, Hockney opted to explore relatively uncharted terrain in Michelangelo's literary output. His painting is the earliest modern response to these particular poems and most sensitive visual interpretation. Michelangelo thereby joined other poets whose writings Hockney mined to convey same-sex desire in his artworks, particularly W. H. Auden (1907–1973), C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933), and Walt Whitman (1819–1892). Like these other authors, Michelangelo's canonical status could have lent potential legitimacy to an exploration of same-sex desire in this painting, as Emily Porter-Salmon has argued in her extensive study of homosexuality in Hockney's art.¹⁹ It is nonetheless worth stressing the obscurity of these particular verses by Michelangelo, which were far outside any literary canon in this period.

In the lower right corner of the painting, Hockney included the first of Michelangelo's fifty poems about Bracci, a four-line epigram, the opening verse of which he also reproduced in the center of the painting under Bracci's nickname, Cecchino [figs. 8–9]. He set these words in a neat typeface using the newly-invented Letraset transfer medium.²⁰ Hockney had chosen to write poetry in small lettering in other paintings, particularly *The Third Love Painting* [fig. 10], which incorporates the final verses of Whitman's *When I Heard at the Close of the Day*, a poem written a century earlier. Later reflecting on this painting, Hockney said: "I assume people

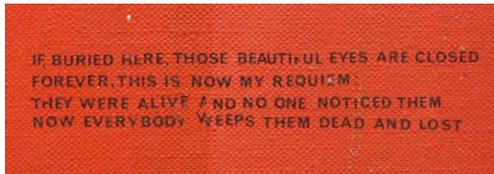


fig. 8
Detail of the reproduction of
Michelangelo's poem in Letraset in
the lower right corner of the painting
In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci

fig. 9
Detail of the center of the painting
In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci

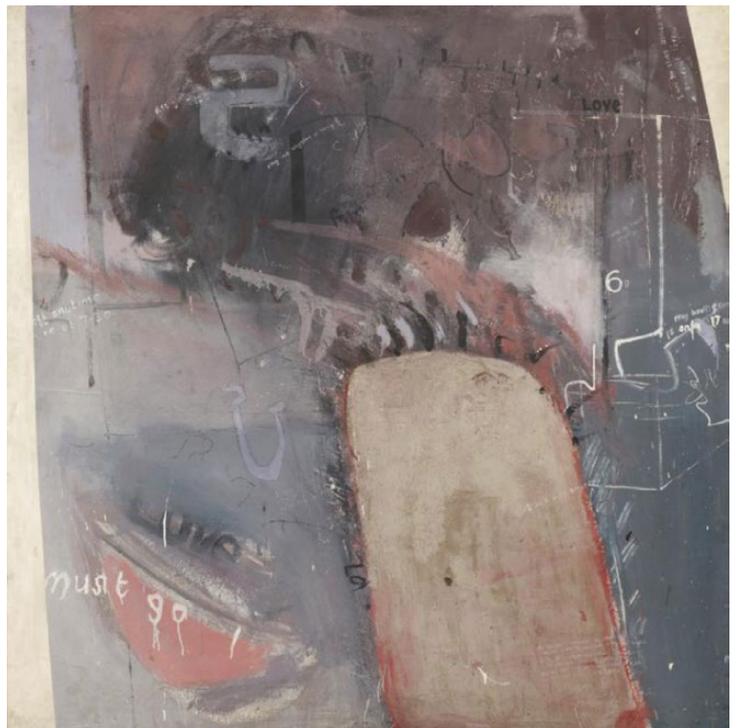


fig. 10
David Hockney
The Third Love Painting, 1960
Oil on board, 118.7 × 118.7 cm
Tate, London, Purchased
with assistance from the Art Fund,
the Friends of the Tate Gallery,
the American Fund for the Tate
Gallery and a group of donors 1991,
T06468

are always inquisitive and nosy, and if you see a little poem written in the corner of a painting it will force you to go up and look at it. And so then the painting becomes something a little different: it's not just, as Whistler would say, an arrangement in browns, pinks and blacks."²¹

The insouciance of Hockney's phrase, "something a little different," belies the complex interplay between text and image that he intended. A viewer must get close to *The Third Love Painting* to see Whitman's hand-written verses, which are among his most explicit poetic lines to reference same-sex desire. The citation begins: "for the one I love most lay sleeping/ by me under the same cover in the cool night." Alongside these words are scrawls of phrases Hockney later recalled having seen in the men's bathroom at the Earl's Court underground station.²² The rudimentary script on *The Third Love Painting's* paint-surface-made-lavatory-wall contrasts to the formal typeface on *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci's* paint-surface-made-coffin. Whitman's poem marks "the close of the day" to link daily activities of male bodies that live and love together. Michelangelo's poem marks the close of a life to isolate a male body that is desired but expired.

21

Hockney, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 44.

22

Ibid.

Hockney in Italy

Such textual citations of Whitman, a titan among American poets who made the country's landscape his subject, were linked to Hockney's broader interest in the United States, which he first visited in 1961. The choice of Michelangelo as a poetic source similarly reflects Hockney's interest in Italy, which he visited for the first time in December of that same year.²³ One of the two other paintings that Hockney exhibited at the *Image in Progress* show alongside *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* was *Flight into Italy – Swiss Landscape*, which recorded his tumultuous overland journey for that trip. In his accompanying statement published in the exhibition catalogue, Hockney wrote: "it did occur to me that my own sources of inspiration were wide, – but acceptable. In fact, I am sure my own sources are classic, or even epic themes. Landscapes of foreign lands, beautiful people, love, propaganda, and major incidents (of my own life)."²⁴ These varied sources coalesce in *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci*. During a second trip to Italy with his American friend Jeff Goodman in the summer of 1962, Hockney visited Florence, Rome, and Viareggio and apparently made preparatory drawings for the painting with young men in Florence serving as models.²⁵ An example of Hockney's graphic development of this subject is a print sold at auction in 2006 that uses the techniques of etching and aquatint.²⁶ The print shows Bracci set within a shape resembling a coffin, his eyes closed and hands within a black shroud. It also includes the phrase "in memoriam Cecchino Bracci" in hand-written letters, as well as the same poem by Michelangelo in a clear typeface.

Graphic practice was a key means for Hockney to explore poetry, as he also made two prints in 1961 based on translations of poems written in Greek by C. P. Cavafy.²⁷ One of them includes pairs of verses from Cavafy's poems, including the closing lines of *The Mirror in the Front Hall* about a tailor's assistant who examined himself in a mirror [fig. 11]. This print shows the figure before the mirror with the label "Peter," substituting Cavafy's subject with Hockney's classmate-crush Peter Crutch. The print also incorporates darkened shapes around the figure and his mirrored reflection, showing Hockney's approach to framing figures that would reemerge in his Bracci designs. Hockney's engagement with the writings of Cavafy and Whitman may have led him to select Michelangelo's epigram about Bracci, given that these authors

23

Hockney embarked on his trip to Italy by van with his friend Michael Kullman (Hockney, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 87).

24

The catalogue notably makes small errors in its listing of the painting, misspelling Hockney's title ("IN MEMORIAM: CHECCINO [sic] BRACCI") and citing an incorrect width ("84 × 84 in" [213,3 × 213,3 cm]), as the painting's width measures 36 rather than 84 inches. *Image in Progress*, with an essay by Jasia Reichardt. London, Gryf Printers (H. C.) Ltd., 1962, [unpaginated].

25

Peter Webb, *Portrait of David Hockney*. London, Chatto and Windus, 1988, p. 51.

26

The print was sold as lot 326 at Christie's in London at the "Prints and Multiples" auction (sale 5049) on October 25, 2006. The print is signed, dated, and numbered "1/1" in pencil.

27

Early English translations of Cavafy's poetry that Hockney could have accessed include C.P. Cavafy, *Poems of C.P. Cavafy*, trans. and notes by John Mavrogordato. London, Hogarth Press, 1951; C.P. Cavafy, *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven, intro. W.H. Auden. New York, Brace and World, 1961.

fig. 11

David Hockney
***Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*, 1961**
 Etching and aquatint on paper,
 40.5 × 49.7 cm
 Tate, London, Presented by Jonathan
 Cheshire and Gareth Marshallsea in
 memory of Peter Coni 1994, P11377

fig. 12

Anonymous
***Tomb of Cecchino Bracci*,**
***S. Maria in Aracoeli, Rome*,**
 sixteenth century
 Black chalk, pen, and brown ink
 on paper, 39.5 × 55.8 cm
 Metropolitan Museum of Art,
 New York, The Elisha Whittelsey
 Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey
 Fund, 1949, 49.19.20



all wrote poems about the tombs of men who died young. One salient example is Cavafy's *Tomb of Iasis*, which begins: "I, Iasis, lie here – the young man/ famous for his good looks in this great city."²⁸

Cavafy's poems are rooted in the city of Alexandria, while those about Bracci are directly related to the place of his death, Rome. Upon visiting the Eternal City in the summer of 1962, Hockney certainly could have seen Bracci's extant tomb in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Aracoeli [fig. 12]. Michelangelo had agreed to design the tomb at the behest of Bracci's uncle, Luigi del Riccio (d. 1546), who is named in the tomb's Latin inscriptions. The wall tomb incorporates a marble portrait bust of Bracci set into a niche, and below the bust is a sarcophagus that traverses the tomb's three bays. Hockney's painting does not show explicit details that connect it to the original tomb's design. At most, the wreath at its center may refer to the laurel crown bestowed upon Michelangelo's poetic model, Petrarch, on the Capitoline hill where the basilica is located, and this motif also functioned as an emblem for Michelangelo. Three interlocking laurel wreaths feature on his own tomb at the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence. More direct sources for Hockney, however, include the practice

28

C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis, 2nd Edition. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 76.

of wreath-laying at funerals common in England as elsewhere in the twentieth century, as well as the logo of a wreath of leaves on the Typhoo tea box that he had incorporated into his *Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style* the previous year.

Hockney's *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* shows careful engagement with the text of Michelangelo's poem. Hockney's fondness for poetry is evident in a short interview of 1970 together with R.B. Kitaj, in which he remarked on poetry's affinities with painting, saying: "I've always known or detected strong connections and thought a poet must be a bit like me, rather than a novelist. It's the way an idea starts with something you look at, or hear, and your imagination begins to work."²⁹ When making *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci*, Hockney allowed his own imagination to build off the poem he cited, reproduced below in his transcription of Tusiani's translation, as well as the original Italian:

*If, buried here, those beautiful eyes are closed
Forever, this is now my requiem:
They were alive and no one noticed them;
Now everybody weeps them, dead and lost.*³⁰

[*Se qui son chiusi i begli occhi e sepolti
anzi tempo, sol questo ne conforta:
che pietà di lor vivi era qua morta;
or che son morti, di lor vive in molti.*³¹]

Hockney likely selected this poem because of its opening position in the group of Michelangelo's poems about Bracci, and Hockney's repetition of the incipit in the center of the painting coincides with the poems' emphasis on the beginning of a life cut short. Hockney clearly paid attention to the original positioning of the verses he cited, as his quotations from Whitman and Cavafy's poems mentioned above are both taken from the poems' final verses.

The subject of Michelangelo's poem is Bracci's eyes (a synecdoche for his entire body), and the first verse's emphasis on their closure coincides with Hockney's placement of the join between the two canvases where Bracci's shut eyes should be. Hockney similarly located the join between two

29

David Hockney, "David Hockney in Conversation with R.B. Kitaj," *The New Review* 3, 1970, January-February, pp. 75-77 (76).

30

Buonarroti, *The Complete Poems*, p. 58.

31

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime e lettere*, ed. Antonio Corsaro and Giorgio Masi. Milan, Bompiani, 2016, p. 321.

canvases along the eye sockets of the figure in *Tea Painting in an Illusionistic Style*. Art historians such as David Freedberg and Megan Holmes have studied how eyes can enliven a figural image while their cancellation can remove its efficacy, and the black strikethrough created by the join of Hockney's canvases voids his subject's potential for life.³² No further act of painting could undo this fatal gap. But even though the closing verse of Michelangelo's poem emphasizes that Bracci's eyes are "dead and lost," these are by no means his last words on the subject. Many of Michelangelo's other 49 poems about Bracci deal with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, which he places in tension with the exceptional beauty of Bracci's body. While Hockney does not reproduce these other poems, his painting's subject and material support imply Bracci's potential resurrection through allusion to Christian devotional paintings.

32

David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 415–18; Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*. New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 183–190.

Christ and Cecchino

fig. 13
Giotto di Bondone
Crucifix, ca. 1290-95
 578 × 406 cm, egg tempera
 and gold leaf on panel
 Santa Maria Novella, Florence



Hockney's construction of *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* from multiple canvases was informed by his time in Italy and his experience of seeing large, devotional panel paintings there. In his autobiography, Hockney remarked on his youthful belief in the quadrilateral essentiality of paintings: "The idea that paintings should be rectangular or square was so fixed in every student's mind that even Italian paintings of the Crucifixion, constructed in the shape of the cross, still appeared in my memory as rectangular."³³ While at college in London Hockney could have observed panel paintings in the National Gallery to dispel this idea, and he recalled being particularly struck by the construction of many-sided polygonal paintings upon visiting Florence in 1961 [fig. 13]. "Seeing in the Uffizi that big Duccio, the Crucifixion, did confirm my belief in the power you can give to a canvas by shaping it to suit its subject," he remarked.³⁴ *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci's* two-part construction echoes especially the practice in the Renaissance of attaching pinnacles above larger panels in certain altarpieces.

³³
 Hockney, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 64.

³⁴
Ibid., p. 87

Hockney's decision to make paintings from multiple canvases also imported the affective capacities of such Renaissance paintings, and *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* alludes to widespread devotional imagery of Christ. The verticality of Bracci's life-size body invokes the Crucifixion, but the wrapping of his limbs against his body with a shroud more closely relate to the later stage in the Passion narrative of Christ's entombment. Michelangelo himself explored the complex relation of these narrative episodes and combined elements of them in a manner commensurate with reformist Christian theology, as Alexander Nagel has brilliantly shown, but it is unlikely Hockney thought explicitly about this facet of Michelangelo's art.³⁵ Rather, an entombed body offered a visual challenge appropriate to an artist who also dared himself to find lesser-known textual sources to explore same-sex desire.

Christ's entombment and subsequent resurrection are fundamental to the doctrine of Christian salvation, and Hockney himself has commented on the representational complexities of the resurrection. During a set of extended interviews, Hockney and Martin Gayford discussed the different modes of representing Christian narrative scenes in Western art. After Gayford compared strategies of different Renaissance artists, Hockney responded: "In any case, you could argue that the whole point of Christianity is the Resurrection, not the Crucifixion. It's more difficult to paint, certainly more difficult to photograph."³⁶ To the extent that *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* explores the possibility of Christian resurrection, it is part of a longstanding preoccupation with this theme in Hockney's early work. The first artworks he made at the Royal College of Art were drawings of skeletons, which not only show studied knowledge of anatomy, but could also carry valences of the skeleton as a marker of salvation and Christ's death on the cross.³⁷ In addition to the skeletal figures emerging from tombs in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, Hockney was presumably aware of the skeleton in Masaccio's famous *Trinity* of about 1427 in Florence's Basilica of Santa Maria Novella [fig. 14]. Masaccio's skeleton can be understood in relation to Christ's crucifixion above the burial place of Adam, the promise of resurrection made possible by Christ's sacrifice, and the fresco's role within a funerary context.³⁸

35

Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

36

David Hockney and Martin Gayford, *A History of Pictures: From the Cave to the Computer Screen*. New York, Abrams, 2016, p. 138.

37

On the relation of anatomical study to Christianity in English art, see Meredith Gamer, "Criminal and Martyr: The Case of James Legg's 'Anatomical Crucifixion,'" in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey. New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 495–513.

38

Rona Goffen, "Masaccio's *Trinity* and the Letter to Hebrews," in *Masaccio's Trinity*, ed. Rona Goffen. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 43–64; Charles Dempsey, "Masaccio's *Trinity*: Altarpiece or Tomb?" *The Art Bulletin* 54, 1972, pp. 279–81.

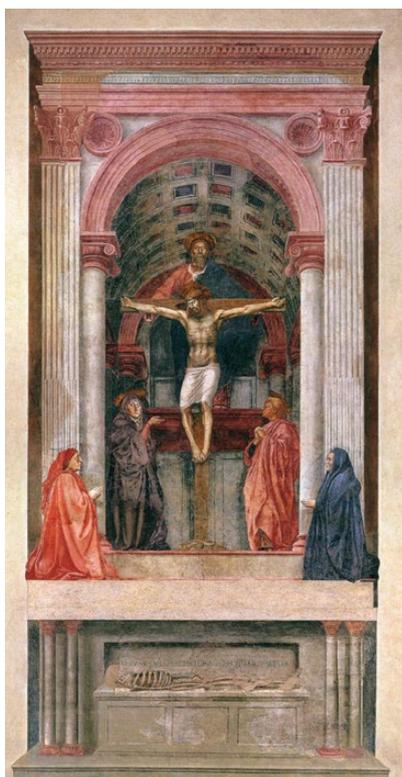


fig. 14
Masaccio
Trinity, ca. 1427
 Fresco, 667 × 317 cm
 Santa Maria Novella,
 Florence

39

Kent L. Brintnall, *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-in-Pain as Redemptive Figure*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 135–170.

40

Within the extensive scholarship on the torsion of Michelangelo's figures, see especially David Summers, "Maniera and Movement: The *Figura Serpentinata*," *Art Quarterly* 35, 1972, pp. 269–301; Michael Cole, *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Art of the Figure*. New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2014.

Given Hockney's declared interest in the work of Francis Bacon, his generational predecessor offered a model for reconciling Christian subjects in Italian Renaissance paintings with modern approaches to depicting the human form. Bacon's paintings with the crucifixion as their subject use extreme affective violence to destabilize both figural representation and fixed theological meaning, as Kent Brintnall has adroitly shown.³⁹ Bacon's contortions of the human body stage him as a modern successor to Michelangelo, who was famous for pushing the capacity of bodily torsion to new extremes.⁴⁰ Whereas Bacon radically warped figures, in this case Hockney historicized them, pivoting away from Michelangelo's representations of the nude. *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* shows a moment of clear biographical significance in the life of Michelangelo, which parallels Hockney's own lived experience given the painting's similarity to his portrait of Peter Crutch.

Conclusion

fig. 15

David Hockney
***The Second Marriage*, 1963**
 Oil, gouache and collage from torn
 wallpaper on canvas, 197.8 × 228.7 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria,
 Melbourne, Presented by
 the Contemporary Art Society
 of London, 1965, 1525-5



Hockney's deployment of poetic citations from Michelangelo, as from Whitman and Cavafy before, reflects his personal identification with historic experiences of same-sex desire, as well as his search for textual sources to confront the dilemma of representing such desire. Poetry would remain crucial to Hockney, who revisited Cavafy's poems in a suite of etchings from 1966, but his subsequent paintings show him seeking different means to visualize same-sex desire. In the catalogue for the recent retrospective of Hockney's art, Andrew Wilson pointed to the thematic difference between Hockney's treatment of same-sex desire in paintings at the beginning of the 1960s and his paintings of the immediately following years, such as *The First Marriage* (1962) and *The Second Marriage* [fig. 15]. Wilson wrote: "If many of Hockney's paintings of a few years earlier bravely trumpeted homosexual desire – specifically his own desire and fantasy – these are all paintings that by their very domesticity normalise that desire into images of companionship and commitment."⁴¹ *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* deserves to be seen as a crucial fulcrum of these two stages in Hockney's artistic development.

41

Andrew Wilson, "Pictures with People In," in *David Hockney*, ed. Chris Stephens and Andrew Wilson. London, Tate Publishing, 2017, pp. 49–55 (53).

The stillness and inaccessibility of its subject inform the same features of Hockney's dissonant pairs in his later *Marriage* paintings, and *The Second Marriage* similarly incorporates multiple conjoined canvases with a horizontal join along the male figure's eyes.

That Hockney did not produce other paintings explicitly related to Michelangelo's poetry is unsurprising given this shift in his work. Hockney returned briefly to Michelangelo in his 2001 study of optical techniques in artistic practice, citing Michelangelo as an exemplar for the avoidance of using lenses and visual tools.⁴² Indeed, the Italian Renaissance would serve Hockney well when attending to representational problems of perspective and illusionistic space, but salient figures in that context were Piero della Francesca (1416/17–1492) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). *In Memoriam of Cecchino Bracci* achieved a different afterlife in Hockney's subsequent work thanks to its multi-part construction and desirable subject. These features became crucial to his photographic collages of the later twentieth century, not to mention his large-scale paintings made from dozens of canvases extending into the following century. By 1962 Bracci's eyes were permanently shuttered, but Hockney's camera lens had yet to open and close. ●

42

David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. New York, Viking Studio, 2001, p. 184.