L'ARBOIS
SAINTE-MAXIME

DAVID HOCKNEY

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY CHRIS SMITH

L'Arbois, St-Maxime **is one of David Hockney's most celebrated early works. It came up for sale in the autumn of 2024 and triggered an intriguing memory of an important piece of photo-journalism more than half a century ago.**

In early March 1968 I was given an assignment that took me far from my regular photographic 'beat' of sports photography into the art world. While photography and art have their parallels, I was about to meet someone who masterfully bridged both realms: welcome to the world of David Hockney.

Stepping into his Kensington studio, I was immediately struck by the space's energy – a high-ceilinged Victorian room drenched in natural light. He stood working on *L'Arbois, St-Maxime*, amidst the organised chaos of artistic creation. A telling detail caught my eye: a Newsweek magazine featuring Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson on its cover – a quiet nod to current events beyond these creative walls.

Hockney, fully absorbed in his work, described the south of France landscapes, inspiring this piece, as 'an artist's paradise'. I now understand this painting marked a crucial turning point in his career. He had begun experiments integrating photographs into his process, pinning them to the canvas as visual references. Though his iconic photo collages – known as joiners – would emerge years later, these 1968 moments reveal early seeds of that innovation.

Our conversation began in shared northern accents, his from Bradford and mine from a little further north. He generously gave me free rein of his studio. My lens sought not just to record, but to reveal Hockney as creator-in-his-element. He worked quickly, layering thin acrylic washes to mimic the Mediterranean light, a technique that would define his pool paintings of the 1970s.

Decades later, in October 2024, a chance conversation at my local framer's shop re-ignited this memory. Upon hearing that *L'Arbois, St-Maxime* would headline a Sotheby's auction, I felt compelled to investigate whether my archived photos still existed. The digital trail began with a Pinterest image tracing back to the Guardian's archives, formerly the Observer picture library. Aided by my son and two archivists, we unearthed original transparencies.

Reviewing these images, I recognised early evidence of Hockney's signature style – bold shadows, vibrant, crisp colours and a pioneering fusion of photography and painting. Surrounded by paint pots, brushes worn into splayed shapes from relentless acrylic work, and reference photos adhered to the canvas, the images demonstrated his technical choices: quick-drying acrylic paints applied with broad brushes for sweeping colour fields. I recall framing shots of Hockney deep in thought beside his paint trolley, or posing before the nearly completed masterpiece.

For me, these rediscovered images are more than moments frozen in time. They are an invitation into Hockney's world, demonstrating the extraordinary talent we all now recognise and celebrate. My photographs now bridge two legacies: Hockney's indelible mark on art history, and a photographer's quiet testament to the electric moment before greatness is recognised. What began as a framing-shop anecdote has become a journey, reclaiming my own history while illuminating a pivotal chapter in the career of one of Britain's most celebrated artists.

Chris Smith

