



### David Hockney: *A Rake's Progress* (1961-63)

In 1961, a young David Hockney—just 24 years old and still a student at the Royal College of Art—made his first trip to New York City. What he found there changed everything. This wasn't the grey, post-war England he knew. This was a place where you could bleach your hair, be openly gay, and reinvent yourself completely. When he returned to London, he began work on what would become his first major print series and one of his most significant early works: ***A Rake's Progress***.

The title deliberately echoes William Hogarth's famous 1735 moral tale of the same name—eight copper-plate engravings that traced the tragic downfall of Tom Rakewell, a young man who inherits money, squanders it on vice and excess, and ends up insane in Bedlam asylum. But Hockney wasn't interested in moralizing. His rake isn't destroyed by American excess; he's liberated by it, at least initially. This is a very personal, semi-autobiographical journey told with wit, irony, and a touch of anxiety about what it means to lose yourself in the pursuit of the new.

The series comprises sixteen etchings and aquatints, numbered in pairs from plate 1 and 1a through plate 8 and 8a, to honor Hogarth's eight-scene structure. Hockney originally planned to make eight prints following Hogarth's original titles, but was encouraged to expand the series. At one point he contemplated twenty-five etchings, but eventually settled on sixteen, working on them over two years. Published by Editions Alecto in 1963, these two-tone prints follow a linear figure in profile—distinctively bespectacled, unmistakably Hockney himself—through a series of New York adventures.

The journey begins with "**The Arrival**," our rake stepping off at what looks like the Statue of Liberty, ready to embrace America. Then comes "**Receiving the Inheritance**," followed by "**Meeting the Good People**" in Washington, where he's welcomed into polite society. We see him at a gospel singing event in Madison Square Garden, then experiencing "**The Start of the Spending Spree and the Door Opening for a Blonde**." There's "**The Seven Stone Weakling**," a drinking scene, and delightfully, an image of him bleaching his hair—a genuinely transgressive act for a young man from Yorkshire in the early 1960s.

But as in Hogarth's original, fortune turns. "**The Wallet Begins to Empty.**" The good people who welcomed him now cast him aside. Unlike Hogarth's rake, however, Hockney's protagonist doesn't descend into traditional madness. His fate is somehow more modern and more chilling: he disappears into conformity, into what Hockney calls "the other people"—the mindless masses. In the final plate, "**Bedlam,**" he's become just another robotic figure in the crowd, distinguishable only by a small arrow above his head. Personal identity has completely dissolved.

The style of these etchings is deliberately varied—Hockney weaves together different levels of reality. There's personal experience, like his actual arrival in New York. There are direct references to Hogarth, including allusions to prison scenes. And there are pure nightmares, like the terrifying image where the hero is swallowed by a monster's jaws. The linear quality of the figures, rendered in simple profile, gives the whole series an almost hieroglyphic quality: pictographic storytelling that feels both ancient and utterly contemporary.

What makes *A Rake's Progress* so remarkable is how it captures Hockney at a pivotal moment, standing between two worlds. He's still in England, still at art school, but he's already glimpsed the freedom and possibility of America. The series is both celebration and warning: yes, you can reinvent yourself, yes, you can escape the constraints of British class and sexual repression, but there's also the risk of losing yourself entirely, of becoming just another anonymous figure in the American crowd.

This was Hockney's first major print series, and it established him as more than just a painter—it showed his narrative ambition, his wit, his technical mastery of etching and aquatint, and his ability to take art historical references and make them completely his own. Within a few years, he would move permanently to Los Angeles, becoming the chronicler of swimming pools and California light. But *A Rake's Progress* captures that earlier moment of discovery, when America was still thrilling and strange, full of promise and danger in equal measure. The series remains one of Hockney's most beloved works—a young artist's wide-eyed, self-aware journey into modernity, told with the craftsmanship of an old master and the irreverence of youth.

