

*This letter was published in the Citizen's Weekly on April 28, 2002, under the heading "It Was Progress, Not Mirrors."*

Re: "THEY DO IT WITH MIRRORS," *Citizen's Weekly*, April 14. David Hockney, whose own paintings are admirable, believes that his great predecessors couldn't possibly have drawn and painted as accurately as they did, so they must all have been secretly tracing, using prisms and mirrors. The *Citizen's* two page spread on his book *Secret Knowledge* seems to present this charming conspiracy theory as fact. It is not, and the arguments quoted don't hold water.

For example, he says Ingres drew Madame Godinot's head eight per cent too large, which he is "too good a draughtsman" to do naturally, so he must have used one of these secret tools. But why would he make such a mistake because of the tool? If the model stood too close after taking a break, why wouldn't Ingres back up? Does the tool make him stupid?

Hockney argues that too many glasses in too many left hands make too many southpaws, so mirrors must have been used. But the two examples illustrated don't demonstrate this. One shows a young man with a glass in his left hand—but holding the pitcher in his right. The other shows Bacchus holding his glass in the hand that's correct for the composition, like an actor using his upstage hand. When Hockney flips the picture to put the glass in the other hand, the painting becomes less satisfying, because it reads better from left to right.

If artists like Michelangelo could not have painted so accurately without these secret tracing tools, then now on Earth could he have hammered and chiseled a block of marble into the David? (By the way, isn't David's head about eight per cent too large?)

Hockney thinks only the invention of these tools can explain the sudden great advance in painting that occurred between 1400 and 1440. But 40 years is a long time, and once a bar is raised it doesn't come down again. Look how figure skating has changed since Barbara Ann Scott.

The fact is that people are amazing. With training, talent, and motivation, some individuals can do things that the rest of us find impossible. In a different age, Hockney would have learned observation and craftsmanship through years of boyhood apprenticeship. Or perhaps not. Perhaps one of the other apprentices would have become the famous one.