

Frances Hodgkins' Cataracts

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As Vickie Hearnshaw and Mark Stocker have explained, the late work of Frances Hodgkins was affected by her cataracts,¹ which are very common at 70 years of age.² As her cataracts progressed, her use of colour shifted to muted tones and earthy hues; her compositions were simplified, with broader brushwork and fewer details apparent.

In these paintings, we appreciate her use of eyeglasses, which can compensate for the refractive changes that the cataract induces at some point. Even in the 1940s, the last decade of Hodgkins's life, cataract surgery was significantly different from modern techniques. At that time, the surgery was extracapsular, removing the entire cloudy lens (cataract) and leaving the patient aphakic (without a natural lens), requiring the use of thick glasses to recover some degree of visual focus. The visual outcomes were limited, with a high risk of complications. Less than 10 years after Hodgkins sought help from a Barcelona eye specialist, in the same city Dr Jose Ignacio Barraquer Moner is credited with introducing intraocular lenses of plastic during cataract surgery.³ However, it was in the 1950s, through the influence of Sir Harold Ridley in the United Kingdom, that acrylic lenses were used regularly. Newer techniques took decades before being popular and implemented worldwide. In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, cataract surgery improved with the phacoemulsification technique, minimally invasive, foldable lenses and better materials. The history of cataract surgery exemplifies the remarkable progress in ophthalmology, optimising results and benefiting millions of individuals each year.⁴ It is a pity that Frances Hodgkins was too early to benefit from this, yet it is fair to say that it was precisely her condition that is, as Hearnshaw and Stocker have demonstrated, an underlying and, till recently, largely overlooked factor in her art.

Eye disorders in artists are not directly associated with their work but can be influenced by age, genetics, drugs and overall health. Good vision is critical for capturing details, colour, depth and perception of the world. Hopefully, ophthalmology will deliver even better visual results to maximise people's careers and fulfilling lives.

References

¹ Vicki Hearnshaw and Mark Stocker, "“Eyes are eyes & can't be neglected”: A New Insight into Frances Hodgkins?" *Journal of New Zealand Studies* No. NS36 (2023).

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² Y C Liu, M Wilkins, T Kim, B Malyugin and J S Mehta, "Cataracts," *Lancet* (2017), 390 (10094): 600-612. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(17)30544-5.

³ A K Greene, "Ignacio Barraquer (1884-1965) and the Barraquer family of ophthalmologists," *Canadian Journal of Ophthalmology*, 36. 1 (2001): 5-6. doi: 10.1016/s0008-4182(01)80059-4. PMID: 11227390.

⁴ See Liu *et al*, Greene, and C T Leffler, A Klebanov, W A Samara and A Grzybowski, "The history of cataract surgery: from couching to phacoemulsification," *Annals of Translational Medicine*, 8. 22 (2020): 1551. doi: 10.21037/atm-2019-rcs-04. PMID: 33313296; PMCID: PMC7729313.