Editor’s note: San Francisco audiences were introduced to David Hockney’s stage work with Stravinsky’s The Rake’s Progress, first seen here in 1982. His striking designs for Mozart’s The Magic Flute, created for the 1978 Glyndebourne Festival, were seen on an American stage for the first time at San Francisco Opera in 1987. The British-born artist’s creations for Turandot debuted in San Francisco in 1993, and restaged in 1998, 2002, and 2011. The Company also produced his staging of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde in 2006.

It is said that Hockney’s stage designs were a way for the artist to experiment further with perspective. He researched Chinese scroll paintings which exploded conventional Western theories—the lines converging toward the viewer rather than away. Sometimes described as “reverse perspective,” this innovation permitted Hockney to represent space in fresh and creative ways, as seen with Turandot.

This short essay is excerpted from Hockney’s 1993 book That’s the Way I See It (Chronicle Books). It is still timely and provides a fascinating glimpse into the artist’s creative process.

San Francisco Opera had taken both of my productions that had originated in Glyndebourne and then gone to La Scala, Milan: The Rake’s Progress and The Magic Flute. They had bought those sets and produced those operas in San Francisco and I had helped. So I felt a sense of loyalty. They then said they would love to have an original work made for them and suggested Turandot. Then it turned out it would be a joint production with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, opening in Chicago.

Turandot was the only Puccini opera I would do because it is not verismo, there is some fantasy in it, it takes place in mythical China. I had seen many productions, most of them kitsch beyond belief, overdone chinoiserie and too many dragons.... When San Francisco Opera asked me, I thought, I’ve never done an Italian opera—I’d done eight other operas by then—but I would not do it alone because it is an enormous job. Ian Falconer, Richard Schmidt, and I got to work, with Richard setting up the model and doing all the technical work with the lights, while aesthetic decisions were made by Ian and myself. Ian and I designed it together because, for one thing, there are 200 costumes in Turandot and I wanted him to do them. Straight away I chose the colors, which are predominantly red—the color of the walls of the Forbidden City in Peking. I was inspired by the Chinese red I had seen on my travels in China in 1981.

I also specifically said that we wanted to do away with the excessive 19th-century Chinese look, the Victorian look, and use the drama and the music and make forms. It was clear to me—in the first scene in Peking—that Turandot was about cruel China, about harsh, sharp edges, axes, not about soft things, certainly
not the China of *Le Rossignol*. That was my main theme at the beginning as well as the red walls. So we began to make harsh edges, strong diagonals, using mad perspectives. We made little models first, just as notes, and then carefully made the big models. For the first scene, the city of Peking, I suggested that we take the dragons away and put them into the roofs, in forms that felt like dragons, without specifically looking like them, thus evoking the grotesqueness of the city. We used lighting right from the start, keeping in mind how the costumes should look, since Chinese costumes are elaborate.

*Turandot* is an opera with a large chorus on the stage for a lot of the time and you have to take into account how they come on, get off, and how other characters play against them. We worked it out slowly: when we got the red walls, I suggested that the chorus, the people of Peking, the popolo, should be dressed in black against them. Ian did a superb job and of course we found marvelous reference books covering 2,000 years of Chinese costume—a very rich area to explore. Even though the costumes were not in the end elaborate—they were bold abstractions of Chinese costumes—they were marvelous.

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Happy Birthday, David Hockney!

On July 9, Britain’s most famous living artist turned 80 years old. To honor the occasion, art institutions around the world have been exhibiting his prolific, eclectic work.

Chief among these displays is the massive retrospective that opened last February at the Tate Britain in London. Even more extensive than the de Young’s Hockney show from four years ago, the new retrospective surveys over 160 of the artist’s paintings, drawings, prints, photography, and digital images from his school days in Bradford, England up to this year, created at his Santa Monica home. Along with Hockney’s well-known “Swimming Pool” and “Grand Canyon” series and Yorkshire landscapes, the comprehensive display includes never-before-seen pieces. On view now at Paris’ Pompidou Centre through the end of October, the retrospective travels in November to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art where it will remain through the end of February.

Closer to the Bay Area is an exhibition of Hockney self-portraits at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Dating from the 1950s through 2012, the works reveal the artist’s versatility and playfulness: a lithograph of a teenage Hockney sporting a bowl cut and unflinching smirk to an iPad drawing completed at age 75 with cigarette in mouth and piercing blue eyes. The exhibition—which includes a companion display of Hockney’s photo composites from the 1980s—is on view through November 26.

Hockney fans can also delight in a new sumo monograph. True to its name, *A Bigger Book* (Taschen) totals 77 pounds and 500 pages and includes reproductions of more than 450 of Hockney’s works, including his stage designs. “Love life” is one of the artist’s favorite mottos, and it comes across in every one of the book’s pages.