Famed British artist David Hockney has embraced new technologies throughout his career—everything from Polaroid cameras to fax machines—shifting between media as his own style evolves.

From Oct. 2013 to Jan. 2014, the de Young Museum in San Francisco exhibited an expansive collection of Hockney’s work, “David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition,” with a focus on his recent video art and drawings composed on iPads.

Several massive NEC Display video walls featuring the technology-enabled work serve as a dramatic centerpiece amid conventional paintings and drawings.

“All told, this array forms an in-depth portrait of the artist as a tradition-fluent progressive working nonstop at the height of his powers, deftly juggling digital and analog modes of representation and energetically pursuing newness on several fronts,” according to the New York Times review of the show.

Because the video walls were part of an art installation, color accuracy and image sharpness were critical. The scale of the images required multiple panels, so it was important that the bezels were thin enough to produce a uniform image.
The screens needed to display images vibrantly no matter the lighting conditions because the exhibit extended through several galleries, some of which also showcased paintings. One gallery had a skylight, while another was dark and enclosed on two sides, more along the lines of a miniature theater. The displays also needed to be durable enough to run all day, every day while museum guests wandered through the show.

The Solution

After weighing all the options, Hockney and his team decided NEC was still the best choice.

The museum purchased two 6x3 arrays, four sets of 3x3 configurations and eight single screens, all featuring 55-inch ultra-narrow X551UN displays.

With NEC’s true-to-life color capabilities, the vivid hues Hockney uses in his paintings leave a stunning impression. “So many displays are bright and nice enough, but they just don’t look real,” Rice said. “Hockney’s colors look amazing on the NEC panels. They’re true colors, bright and good looking.”

The ultra-narrow 3.5 mm bezels virtually disappear so the panels appear to present a single, unified image (though Hockney likes to play with the images a bit and purposely misalign them). The video doesn’t hesitate at all, either, so it flows as a smooth, continuous image. And because the displays are designed to be on all the time, the museum’s long hours aren’t a problem—visitors don’t leave disappointed that a malfunctioning screen prevented them from seeing the art.

In this case the museum had a different source for each screen, but controlling the panels is simple, Rice said, with the option to insert the input from a computer into one screen and then daisy-chain it to the rest so they all run in sync. The configuration can just as easily display the same image or video on each screen, or tile the image so each screen shows a different portion of the whole.

The result has been one of the most popular exhibits ever to run at the de Young, Rice said.

“The show was very well-received, and word got around,” Rice said. “Even people who typically do not go to art museums were awestruck by the large digital images. That doesn’t always happen. It was a fantastic, grand show.”

Now that the show is over, the largest of the Hockney installations will remain at the de Young through October 2014 and may become a permanent exhibit. The museum has repurposed the rest of the displays for other uses, including signage for visitors and a 4x4 grid in the exhibition offices that curators use to look at floor plans for upcoming projects.

But even though “A Bigger Exhibition” has been mostly dismantled, it’s left a lasting impact.

“People were mesmerized by it,” Rice said. “It was a huge success.”