

FRANCIS BACON PORTRAIT VI 1953
Accession number 58.35

LIFE OF THE ARTIST summary : a bittersweet existence, spendthrift, hedonist, gambler, alcoholic , atheist and survivor.

1909-1926 Francis Bacon was born in Dublin on the 28th October 1909. He was the second of five children born to English parents who had recently settled in Ireland but who had no Irish blood ties. His father, Anthony Edward 'Eddy' Mortimer Bacon was a retired Army captain now determined on a career as a breeder and trainer of horses.

During the First World War they uprooted to London, where Eddy Bacon served in the War office. After the war they returned to an Ireland fundamentally changed by the 1916 Rising. The subsequent War of Independence (1919-1921) and Civil War (1922-23) cast a shadow of violence over the countryside, particularly so for the Protestant gentry, with whom the Bacons associated and could be counted.

Bacon had little formal education (he claims to have none).

His home-life was chilly and fraught. His father, while not unintelligent, was a belligerent and argumentative man; his mother, a gregarious hostess inclined to self-absorption. At an early age Francis developed chronic asthma, a life-long affliction that hampered any efforts at country pursuits and diminished him in the eyes of his father. He was close, however, to his maternal grandmother, Granny Supple, who manifestly disliked her son-in-law. Her house near Abbeyleix contained bow-ended rooms that would echo in the backdrops of his paintings. Bacon's emerging homosexuality severely strained relations with his family and, by his own account, he was expelled from the household in 1926. Matters came to a head when Captain Bacon caught his son trying on his mother's underwear. Bacon's humiliation was heightened by a strong physical attraction towards his father, first realised through sexual encounters with stable hands.

1926 runs away to London where he subsists

1927 couple of years in Berlin exposed to vices and violence in the Weimar Republic. Then Paris 1928 Sees Picasso exhibit decides to become a painter.

1929-1932 Bacon became an interior decorator and furniture designer in Kensington. The pieces he devised were ingenious variations on the modernist language of chrome-plated steel and glass pioneered by designers such as Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier and Eileen Gray. The sources of Bacon's technical knowledge and, indeed, the identity of the manufacturer are still unknown; his rugs were made at the Royal Wilton Carpet factory and were presented as designs of the '1930 Look in British Decoration'.

The man who secured the majority of Bacon's commissions was an Australian Post-Cubist painter, Roy de Maistre. He also guided the fledgling artist in his first steps in oil painting and by November 1930, Bacon was ready to mount a modest exhibition of paintings and rugs in Queensberry Mews, together with works by de Maistre and an actress/portraitist, Jean Sheppard. Among Bacon's earliest patrons was Eric Hall, a well-off married man and pillar of the community, who continued an intimate affair with the artist for over 15 years. Despite such rapid progress, Bacon found it difficult to make a living from either his furniture or his paintings.

1933-1938 At the age of 23 Bacon painted his first truly original work, entitled *Crucifixion*, 1933. It was a small spectral painting clearly indebted to the biomorphs of Picasso. Scarcely any work survives from this period. Most of it was destroyed by the artist, a pattern of ruthless self-editing that he pursued for most of his life, but particularly so during his early years..

1939 -45 – During the war he worked in clearing houses bombed during Air Raids. Part of his job was removing bodies.

1945-1946 *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944 was hung in a group exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery, New Bond Street in April 1945, mere weeks before the end of the war in Europe. Although his next surviving work, *Figure in a Landscape*, 1945 was also included, it was the *Three Studies* that riveted the attention of public and critics. This triptych, with its hot orange background and stone-coloured monsters of vaguely human descent left a lasting and disquieting impression. Despite its title, the figures were inspired by the Furies, mythical agents of revenge who pursued Orestes in Aeschylus's tragedy. The painting was bought by Eric Hall, who later presented it to the Tate Gallery.

1946-49 *Gambling in Monte Carlo* His subsequent works departed in one vital respect; they were painted on the unprimed or 'wrong' side of the canvas rather than on hardboard. Bacon began working in this way while still in Monte Carlo. He had used up all his primed canvases and decided, perhaps out of desperation, to take one off its stretcher and try working on the other side. He found the raw canvas held the paint with more bite, enhanced its texture and allowed thinner applications to soak into the canvas. The indelibility of each mark raised the stakes, the medium's intractability posed a rewarding challenge, and Bacon found a technique precisely attuned to his temperament. He continued painting on the unprimed side, though the reverse was always primed, till the end of his life.

1949-1954 One painting stood apart from its monochrome companions in a 1949

exhibition. This was **Head VI, 1949**, with its sensuous purple cape. It was Bacon's earliest variation on Velázquez's **Portrait of Pope Innocent X, 1650**, a theme he mined with obsessive intensity throughout the following decade and intermittently in the 1960s and 70s. His experience of the Velázquez was entirely by way of reproductions, a dependency that, far from limiting the artist, encouraged him to take extravagant licence. Another of his primary sources was a still of the Screaming Nurse from Eisenstein's film, **Battleship Potemkin (1925)**. Bacon fused the scream and Pope to memorable effect in this and later works, but especially in an imposing canvas from the following year, **Study after Velázquez, 1950**. This was long presumed destroyed, but was recovered by the Estate of Francis Bacon nearly 50 years after it was painted.

In 1953 he rivaled this achievement with **Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X, 1953** and devised a suite of eight Papal variations, **Study for Portrait I-VIII**, remarkable for its macabre invention and economy of means. **Study for Portrait I** grew out of a portrait of the critic **David Sylvester** who championed his work and became a valued friend of the artist. Bacon tackled other subjects during this period.

1968-1973 In 1968 the artist went to New York for the first time, to an exhibition of his recent paintings at the Marlborough Gallery. While American critical opinion remained divided over the artist, the twenty works sold within a week. The show included some of his latest portraits of his lover **George Dyer**, replete with a host of visual puns and games but the relationship itself was running out of fun. The strains had been there for some time. Dyer's lack of purpose and worsening alcoholism, his sporadic suicide bids, the frequency and savagery of the rows and Bacon's thwarted attempts to persuade him to live outside London (Dyer always returned) all told. In 1970, matters descended into farce when Dyer tried to frame his lover for possession of cannabis by hiding 2.1 grams of it in his studio. Bacon was acquitted at trial.

The artist now set his sights on a retrospective exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, an honour exceptional for a living painter. Two nights before the opening of the show, and in cruel symmetry to Bacon's experience at the opening of the Tate retrospective in 1962, Dyer was found dead from a drink and barbiturate overdose in a bathroom at the Hôtel des Saints-Pères. Bacon seemed to take the news with a strange detachment. A series of paintings made over the next few years record the true strength of his grief. These include the so-called black triptychs **In Memory of George Dyer, 1971** and **Triptych August 1972**. The bleakest and perhaps the greatest of these testaments is **Triptych May-June 1973**, a work of monumental and grave simplicity in which the circumstances of Dyer's death are gravely re-inacted.

1992 Bacon died in Madrid of a heart attack

His studio

The studio, where Bacon had worked for over thirty years of his life, was donated by John Edwards to the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin in 1998. It was reconstructed in the Gallery and opened to the public in May 2001.

DESCRIPTION OF PAINTING

- Thinly painted on reverse of canvas with no primer, somber blacks and blues, touches of white, pink and yellow
- Fluid energetic strokes,
- Pope alone – surrounded by golden railings of chair (remember he was furniture designer)
- Inspired by Velasquez portrait of Pope Innocent X now in Palazzo Doria in Rome – never seen by Bacon – and by still of Injured Nanny in Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin 1925 – the scream.
- Also inspired by book on diseases of the mouth that fascinated Bacon, obsesses by sensuousness of the hand coloured plates and nakedness of mouth
- ½ length and near life size.
- Pose and attire of a baroque prototype but no grandeur or composure
- Desperate raving man – mouth open – as if worked up in 20 th Century after having been dead 300 years – disintegrating before our very eyes – what we see is the shriek of the Pope's recognition
- Feeling of a claustrophobic universe held by Lines.
- Terrifying intimacy of seeing creature (ie man) exposed.
- Stark background pushes body forward, pinning it in impenetrable darkness.
- We are witness of a moment of Horror, crisis and Panic
- Bacon very aware of existentialist crisis after WWII - painting represents "Man stripped of his few remaining pretensions"

Notes on his paintings and interpretations

- Overwhelming sense of anguish of impending catastrophe that haunts his paintings.

- earlier popes were dignified, reserved and heroic, as the Series progressed became more tense, agitated and hysterical

Other famous work

Three Studies for a Crucifixion, 1962 (198.2 × 144.8 cm). He readily admitted

that it was painted during an unusually booze-fueled fortnight, a working method that rarely delivered results, but in this case liberated him. Throughout the next three decades Bacon used large-scale triptychs to address some of his grandest and most ambitious subjects.

Quotes

“When I made the Pope screaming I didn’t want to do it the way that I did it , I wanted to make the mouth with the beauty of its colour, and everything look like the sunsets of MONET “

“I don’t believe you can be taught technique, it comes from your own nervous system”

“To trap a moment of life in full violence – its full beauty , that would be the ultimate painting”

“Three things that exhilarate me :

- a painting that comes out right
- to meet someone I get on well with
- a marvelous win (ie gambling)”

Factoids

In late 1943 Bacon moved into the ground floor of 7 Cromwell Place, South Kensington, a house once owned by the Pre-Raphaelite painter, John Everett Millais. Its cavernous moth-eaten grandeur provided an appropriate backdrop for an illicit casino run by Bacon and Lightfoot (his nanny) It was in this space that Bacon completed a painting that finally launched his name.

Bacon's Soho life was portrayed by [John Maybury](#), with [Derek Jacobi](#) as Bacon and [Daniel Craig](#) as George Dyer (and with [Tilda Swinton](#) as Muriel Belcher), in the film *Love Is the Devil* (1998), based on [Daniel Farson's](#) 1993 biography *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon*.

On 14 May 2008, the *Triptych, 1976*, “a landmark of the 20th-century canon,” sold at Sotheby's contemporary art sale for €55.465 million (\$86.28 million), a record for the artist and the highest price ever paid for a post-war work of art at auction.

Critics /followers

Margaret Thatcher called him the man who painted the ugliest paintings

Inspired recent work of Damien Hirst – crucified cows, also blue paintings with skulls

Bibliography /sources

Excellent and very comprehensive website - <http://www.francis-bacon.com>

Good file in MIA Library – including some articles from Arts Magazine

Claude Marks, World Artists 1950 -80