

## Francis Bacon: A Biography

*Sylvie Felber*

Francis Bacon is born in Dublin on October 28, 1909, as the second of five children. His father, Anthony Edward (“Eddy”) Mortimer Bacon, is a former major in the British Army, now engaged in breeding and training racehorses. The artist’s mother, Christina Winifred Loxley Firth, comes from a family of wealthy industrialists. Bacon’s relationship with his parents, especially with his autocratic and violent father, is fraught with conflict. His childhood is also marked by frequent relocations within Ireland and, during World War I, by a period of residence in England. Throughout his life, Bacon suffers from chronic asthma, which largely excludes him from formal schooling. During adolescence, Bacon becomes aware of his homosexuality, which widens the rift with his sternly disapproving father. In 1926, Eddy Bacon catches his sixteen-year-old son trying on his mother’s underwear and throws him out of the household.

From 1926 to 1928, Bacon lives the life of a drifter, at first in London and then in Berlin and Paris. The latter two sojourns have a profound impact on the future artist: in Berlin he enthusiastically embraces the city’s nightlife, and it is there, according to some accounts, that he sees, for the first time, Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).<sup>1</sup> His fascination with this cinematic masterpiece results, many years later, in the painting *Study for the Nurse in the Film Battleship Potemkin* (1957). After his stay in Berlin, Bacon spends three months in Chantilly and Paris, learning French and visiting museums and galleries. Nicolas Poussin’s *Le Massacre des innocents* (ca. 1627–28) at the Château de Chantilly (now the Musée Condé) makes a strong impression on the young Bacon, who later refers to Poussin as the creator of “probably the best human cry in painting.”<sup>2</sup>

An exhibition of drawings by Pablo Picasso, seen at the Galerie Paul Rosenberg in Paris in the summer of 1927, leads Bacon to begin painting, as an autodidact. Following his return to London, he works as a furniture designer and interior decorator, but continues to paint, under the influence of Cubism and Surrealism, to the point of being able to show a number of works in a small group exhibition in November 1930. Despite this quick progress, Bacon is unable to establish himself fully as a designer or as an artist. A phase of restlessness ensues, with continual changes of residence. In 1933 he enters into an unconventional living arrangement with his childhood nanny, Jessie Lightfoot, in Chelsea.

In the same year, Bacon paints his first original works, including *Crucifixion*, and a number of his pictures are included in a group exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, in London. The critical reaction is mixed, but *Crucifixion* is reproduced in Herbert Read’s influential book *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (1933). A solo exhibition in 1934 at the temporary Transition Gallery, set up by Bacon in a cellar, is unsuccessful, however, and his output as a painter thereupon decreases. Moreover, in 1936 his work is rejected by the International Surrealist Exhibition, in London, and an ensuing phase of low productivity lasts into the 1940s. Few of his pictures from this period survive the fits of dissatisfaction that lead the artist to destroy much of his work. His father dies in 1940. Because of his asthma, Bacon is declared unfit for active service in World War II, and he spends the war years in London, where he is active in civil defense.

In 1944 Bacon completes *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, the first of his pictures to arouse public and critical excitement. The work is bought by his patron and lover Eric Hall. Two years later, he completes *Painting 1946*, which is bought by the dealer Erica Brausen, the owner of the Hanover Gallery. The work is subsequently exhibited at the Musée d’Art moderne, in Paris, before its acquisition in 1948 by the New York Museum of Modern Art. Bacon repeatedly uses the earnings from the sales of his

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, rev. ed. (London, 2008), p. 37. According to the catalogue to the 1996 exhibition of his work at the Haus der Kunst, in Munich, Bacon saw the film for the first time in 1935. Francis Bacon, exh. cat. Haus der Kunst, Munich (Ostfildern, 1996), p. 288. The catalogue also contains a detailed biography, see pp. 282–313.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Bacon, “Interview 2,” filmed interview by David Sylvester [May 1966], BBC 1, September 18, 1966, in David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 3rd enlarged ed. (London, 2016), pp. 36–77, here p. 40.

works to finance trips to Monte Carlo, where he patronizes the casinos and, from 1946 on, occasionally takes up residence for some years.

Bacon's works from the late 1940s, such as *Head I* (1948) or *Head III* (1949), show a restricted, monochrome palette, and are increasingly focused on facial expressions and details. *Head VI* (1949) is the first of Bacon's many variations on *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (ca. 1650) by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez. In the mid-1940s Bacon also acquires the habit of painting on the reverse, unprimed side of the canvas, after finding that the raw fabric absorbs the color better and allows for a thinner application of paint.

In the fall of 1950 Bacon teaches for a few weeks at the Royal College of Art, in London, substituting for a friend. In January 1951 he pays the first of two visits to his mother in South Africa, where she has settled after his father's death. The wildlife and the dry colors of the unfamiliar landscape fascinate him, and their influence can be seen in works such as *Man Kneeling in Grass* (1952) and *Chimpanzee* (1955). The death of Jessie Lightfoot in 1951 has a traumatic effect on Bacon, who once again becomes a nomad, wandering from one lodging and studio to another. In 1952 he meets and begins a new love affair with Peter Lacy, with whom he travels to Rome and Tangiers.

At this point, Bacon's career takes a sharp upward turn. In 1953 he has his first solo exhibition, at the Durlacher Brothers gallery in New York. The year 1954 sees the creation of *Man in Blue I–VII*, a series of pictures showing a man in a dark suit against a somber, minimally defined background. In works such as *Study of a Nude* (1952–53), Bacon begins a deeper investigation of the nude. With Lucian Freud and Ben Nicholson, he exhibits in the British pavilion at the 1954 Venice Biennale. His first one-man show in Paris takes place in 1957 at the Galerie Rive Droite; a year later, a traveling exhibition of his work is shown in several Italian cities. Bacon's first exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art in London, in 1960, is a resounding success, confirming his status as an established artist.

A first retrospective takes place at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1955, followed in 1961 by a similar major exhibition at Nottingham University. In May of 1961, Bacon signs the lease on the studio at 7 Reece Mews, where he takes up residence in November and continues to work until his death. In contrast to the artist's growing fame, the studio premises are small and modest.

The 1960s and 1970s are a time of major successes. A first triumph of this period is the retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1962, although the event is overshadowed by the death of Peter Lacy. Lacy and Bacon have been separated for some years, but the demise of his former lover hits Bacon hard. Nevertheless, the following year, a new man enters Bacon's life: George Dyer, who becomes a recurrent figure in Bacon's art in the 1960s, with works such as *Portrait of George Dyer Riding a Bicycle* (1966). As Bacon soars to new artistic heights, the thematic focus of his work begins to shift: instead of painting "Furies, ... dictators and ... screaming Popes,"<sup>3</sup> he turns his attention to portraiture. In the London district of Soho, Bacon spends long evenings dining and drinking with friends such as Lucian Freud, Henrietta Moraes, and Isabel Rawsthorne, who also find a place in his oeuvre. Often working from photographs, he uses these images as the basis for portraits and depictions of nude figures. *Lying Figure* (1969), for example, is based on a nude photograph of Henrietta Moraes.

The artist Isabel Rawsthorne is one of Bacon's closest friends. As a member of the Paris avant-garde, she provides a link between Paris and London, as well as between Bacon and Alberto Giacometti, for whom she has modelled (she also models for Bacon, in *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho*, 1967).

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<sup>3</sup> Peppiatt 2008 (see note 1), p. 254.

The two artists themselves make each other's acquaintance at the latest in the early 1960s, when Bacon introduces himself to Giacometti in a Paris café.<sup>4</sup> In 1962 and 1965 they meet more frequently, while Giacometti is in London to prepare for his retrospective at the Tate Gallery and to attend the opening.

In 1968 Bacon travels for the first time to New York, for a solo exhibition of his work at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery. In April 1971 his mother dies, in South Africa. In October of that year, a further Bacon retrospective opens, at the Grand Palais, in Paris. Two days before the exhibition opens, George Dyer takes his own life in his Paris hotel room. Bacon addresses the subject of Dyer's suicide in works such as *In Memory of George Dyer* (1971) and *Triptych August 1972* (1972). He also turns increasingly to painting self-portraits.

In the years prior to 1980, Bacon spends long periods in Paris, where he rents a studio through the offices of his friend Michael Peppiatt. He deepens his friendships with his Paris circle of acquaintances, which includes Michel Leiris, for example, whom Bacon also portrays (*Portrait of Michel Leiris*, 1976). In the mid-1970s Bacon meets John Edwards, a new companion, forty years his junior, whom he names as his sole heir.

In works such as *Sand Dune* (1983), Bacon returns, for the first time in many years, to the depiction of landscape. His painting technique becomes finer and more nuanced, while reducing the means of expression to a minimum. International exhibitions and retrospectives in cities such as Tokyo (1983); Washington, DC (1989); and New York (1990) put the seal on Bacon's status as an artist of world renown. In 1985 the Tate Gallery also stages its second retrospective of his work. At the end of the 1980s, Bacon increasingly faces health problems. During a trip to Madrid his health deteriorates drastically; after being taken to the hospital, he suffers a heart attack and dies on April 28, 1992.

Additional Sources:

- "Biography," Francis Bacon, <http://francis-bacon.com/biography> (accessed January 21, 2018).
- Martin Harrison, "Chronology," in *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné* (London, 2016), vol. 1, pp. 74–101.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.