

ROOM GUIDE

BACON GIACOMETTI

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GIACOMETTI

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BACON

GIACOMETTI

April 29 – September 2, 2018

 1-21

Where this symbol appears on the exhibit labels, you will find the work discussed in detail under the corresponding number in the guide.

Cover: Alberto Giacometti and Francis Bacon, Tate Gallery, London, 1965

Photo by Graham Keen

Gelatin silver print

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INTRODUCTION

Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) and Francis Bacon (1909–1992) exerted a decisive influence on the art of the twentieth century. This exhibition, organized in cooperation with the Fondation Giacometti in Paris, juxtaposes these two outstanding representatives of classic Modernism. As different as their oeuvre may initially appear, many surprising similarities emerge.

Bacon and Giacometti shared an unwavering belief in the importance of the human figure. Both occupied themselves with the fragmented and deformed body, and each devoted countless portraits to the depiction of human individuality. Bacon and Giacometti alike characterized themselves as “realists,” while exploring—each in his own way—new extremes of abstraction in the treatment of the human figure. In an almost obsessive fashion, both artists repeated and varied the forms and poses of their subjects, radiating a powerful sense of physical tension and dynamism.

Giacometti and Bacon worked in extremely cramped and chaotic studios. The life-sized multimedia projections created specially for this exhibition provide a virtual experience of the artists’ working environments.

The exhibition brings together 100 paintings and sculptures from leading museums and private collections across Europe and the USA. The works by Giacometti come almost entirely from the artist's estate, which is administered by the Fondation Giacometti in Paris.

The curators of the exhibition are Catherine Grenier, Michael Peppiatt, and Ulf Küster.

ROOM 1

1

Alberto Giacometti

Le Nez, 1947–1949

The Nose

For the depiction of space, Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti both made frequent use of a two- or three-dimensional grid structure. In *The Nose*, the space is organized by a “cage” of metal bars, in which a head dangles on a cord tied to a cross-brace. This suspension fixture makes it possible to set the figure in motion. Thus, the figure can move outside the predefined space in the same way as the pointed nose, pushing it even further beyond the limits of the grid. The head, with its hollow eye sockets, is reminiscent of a skull or a plague mask, while the long nose brings to mind the children’s book character Pinocchio. Seen in profile, the skull, the nose and the neck also recall the barrel and grip of a revolver.

ROOM 1

2

Francis Bacon

Head VI, 1949

The motif of the screaming Pope—used by Bacon in many variations as a metaphor for the agony of human existence under inexorable constraints—derives from the artist's obsession with Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650). Although he visited Rome several times, Bacon avoided seeing the original painting, fearing that it might lose the aura conveyed by the reproductions from which he worked.

A further oft-cited source for the depiction of screaming mouths, which fascinated Bacon, was the image of the children's nursemaid hit in the eye by a bullet from Sergei Eisenstein's legendary film *Battleship Potemkin*.

ROOM 2

3

Francis Bacon

Three Studies for Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne, 1965

Bacon met the painter Isabel Rawsthorne (b. 1912) in London in the late 1940s. On account of her formidable, charismatic personality and striking facial features, Bacon portrayed her many times.

For this depiction of Isabel, Bacon chose the triptych format. The pictorial structure, made up of three panels that form a strictly unified whole, has its origins in medieval religious painting. Bacon's triptych comprises a full-face portrait in the center, flanked by two side-view images.

Despite the distortions and exaggerations in the subject's expression, which make her face appear deformed, Bacon's work is an intimate portrait that clearly conveys the proud, strong-willed nature of his friend. Bacon himself observed: "The sitter is someone of flesh and blood and what has to be caught is their emanation."

ROOM 2

4

Alberto Giacometti

Femme au chariot, ca. 1945

Woman with Chariot

Giacometti, who had been living in Paris since 1922, travelled to Switzerland in 1941 and could not reenter France as he was denied the necessary visa. Thus, he spent the remaining years of the Second World War in Geneva and at his parents' home in the Val Bregaglia. During this period, Giacometti's sculptures became smaller and smaller, to the point of near-invisibility. The only exception is *Woman with Chariot*, which was made in Maloja. In the studio, the plaster figure was originally mounted on a low wooden cart, which is reconstructed here. According to Giacometti, the work is based on a remembered image of his friend Isabel Rawsthorne, seen from afar on the Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris several years before. The almost life-sized female figure, with arms held close to the body, stands on a plinth, looking into the distance. The sculpture marks a major turning point in Giacometti's work, heralding the shift towards the tall, slender figures of his post-war period.

ROOM 2

5

Francis Bacon

**Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street
in Soho, 1967**

The source for this painting was a shot by John Deakin, who was commissioned by Bacon to photograph a number of his models. The original image shows Isabel Rawsthorne standing in front of a shop in the London district of Soho. In the painting, however, the only remaining reference to the street scene is the automobile in the background. Instead, the space is organized by a cage-like structure, typical of Bacon's work, and a kind of arena. The latter anticipates the bullfight paintings, such as *Study for Bullfight No. 2* (Room 7), to which Bacon turned his attention two years later. Here, too, a bull appears, in the background on the right, painted with dynamic, vigorous brushstrokes. The painting technique—using streaks of white on a black ground—is echoed in the depiction of Isabel Rawsthorne's dress.

ROOM 4

6

Alberto Giacometti

Boule suspendue, 1930

Suspended Ball

When Giacometti first exhibited *Suspended Ball* at the gallery of Pierre Loeb in Paris in April 1930, the enigmatic object was received with particular enthusiasm by the Surrealists. They saw the sculpture as a convincing realization of their demand for the creation of art and literature directly from the unconscious.

In a cage-like enclosure, a plaster half-moon rests beneath a sphere with a grooved underside, suspended by a thin cord. The mobility of the two elements, and the potential mechanical friction between them, gave rise to a variety of interpretations: some commentators, for example, saw the work as an expression of sexual fantasies.

Giacometti's brief association with the Surrealists ended in 1935, when he returned to the representation of the human figure.

ROOM 4

7

Francis Bacon

Figure in Movement, 1976

The rounded, flowing lines of the limbs in this rendering of a moving figure make it difficult to see the body as a unified whole. Shown in profile, the face of the person in the center of the picture is accentuated with a black disc and an arrow. It is disfigured and even partly obliterated with color, in an undeniably violent manner. A second black disc contains a detail that could be an image of two legs, a pair of buttocks or a male phallus. Bacon constructs the surrounding space as a circular area of bright orange: an arena in which the isolated figure moves. The stage-like character of the scene is further emphasized by the fine white lines that define a rectangular space. A blood-spattered figure, one of the vengeful Furies of Greek mythology, enters the arena from the right. Bacon frequently used motifs from the world of classical antiquity: a further example can be found in *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus* (Room 8).

ROOM 5

8

Alberto Giacometti

Annette assise dans l'atelier, ca. 1960

Annette Sitting in the Studio

Giacometti met Annette Arm in Geneva in 1943. She followed him to Paris shortly after the end of World War II, and the couple married in 1949. Here, as in many of Giacometti's portraits, Annette is rendered as an apparition, with her faced reworked so heavily that she is almost unrecognizable. Giacometti's aim was not to capture Annette's individual personality; he sought, rather, to create a generic image of a woman. The portrait was probably executed over an extended period, and the assumption is that Giacometti integrated elements from memory and outward features from other models. With his characteristic line, he accentuated the eyes, in particular, and endowed the subject with the piercing gaze typically found in the works from his late period.

ROOM 5

9

Francis Bacon

Study after Velázquez, 1950

This study after Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* is also devoted to the motif of the screaming Pope. Here, the pontiff is partly concealed behind a veil or the bars of a cage. A white rail isolates the seated figure within the picture space and separates it from the viewer. Ragged folds of black material, attached to a rod with rings, direct the gaze toward the figure and at the same time divert it away.

Velázquez's portrait has a representative function as a display of authority, wealth and dignity, designed to impress the viewer. In contrast to his predecessor, Bacon strips the pope of all the insignia of his position and depicts him as a forlorn figure, screaming in despair.

ROOM 6

10

Francis Bacon

Portrait of Michel Leiris, 1976

The French ethnographer and writer Michel Leiris was a friend of both Giacometti and Bacon. In this picture, Leiris's face is transformed into a whirl of lustrous colors; only the disproportionately large left eye remains intact. For his portraits, Bacon generally chose sitters from his inner circle, whom he preferred to paint from photographs. In the act of painting, the subject's actual appearance tends to merge with Bacon's memory of him or her. In a letter from 1981 to Leiris, Bacon describes realism as "an attempt to capture the appearance with the cluster of sensations that the appearance arouses in me." His aim, therefore, was not to imitate nature by creating a direct likeness of the model; on the contrary, he explained, "The more the artificiality of the painting is apparent, the better, and the more chance the painting has of working or of showing something."

ROOM 6

11

Alberto Giacometti

Petit buste de Silvio sur double socle, ca. 1943–1944

Small bust of Silvio on a Pedestal

During World War II, Giacometti spent most of the time in Geneva, where his nephew Silvio also lived and sat for him as a model. In this phase of his artistic career, Giacometti sought to make figures that the eye could embrace in their entirety, without resting on individual details. This notion is based on the observation that we recognize people we know at a distance, before specific features become perceptible. The intention of rendering an impression of distance between the artist and his model led Giacometti to make ever smaller figures mounted on pedestals—a double pedestal in this case—that grew ever larger.

Giacometti stated that when he returned to Paris from Switzerland in 1945, he carried with him all of his sculptures from the previous four years, contained in six matchboxes.

ROOM 6

12

Francis Bacon

Self-Portrait, 1987

Bacon was fond of quoting a statement by Jean Cocteau: "Each day in the mirror I watch death at work." He painted this picture at the age of 79, five years before his death. It is one of his last self-portraits, depicting the artist in a pensive mood. Unusually, for Bacon, the face is more or less undistorted; the features show little deformation and have an almost youthful smoothness. The subject's expression, however, is tired, with eyes that are half-closed and seem to avoid the gaze of the viewer. The sprayings of red and white amid the darker colors cover the face like a veil and confer an air of deep calm on the picture.

ROOM 7

13

Alberto Giacometti

Femme de Venise I, 1956

Woman of Venice I

For the French pavilion at the 1956 Venice Biennale, Giacometti modeled a group of seven standing female figures in clay, which were then further elaborated in plaster; finally, several of them were then cast in bronze. The figures are variations on a single motif. Each of the works in the group, which was never really intended as a coherent series, marks a step toward the “right” form. Looking at several of the “Women of Venice” together, the variations in the modeling, the roughened surfaces, and the taut poses of the standing figures, generate a sense of dynamic energy that typifies the art of Giacometti and Bacon alike. In many of their works, the two artists sought to depict the essence, as it were, of movement and physical tension. This is impressively demonstrated by the works displayed in this room.

ROOM 7

14

Alberto Giacometti

Grande femme III, 1960

Tall Woman III

In 1958, Giacometti was invited to devise a sculpture for the square in front of the new Chase Manhattan Bank skyscraper in New York. This was an opportunity for Giacometti to fulfill a long-held wish to create a work of public art. After careful consideration, the artist submitted a proposal for a group of three monumental sculptures: a standing female figure, a walking man, and a head mounted on a large plinth—these would become the three main motifs that occupied Giacometti in his later work.

Although the project in New York fell through, Giacometti continued to work on the group of sculptures, which included *Tall Woman III*. The figure's narrow silhouette creates an impression of distance, as if the viewer were seeing it from afar. At the same time, it appears as a unified whole with a fascinating presence.

15

Alberto Giacometti

Homme qui marche II, 1960

Walking Man II

Walking Man II belongs to the group of figures originally planned for the Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York. Giacometti conceived the work as an alternative to the conventional depiction of a man walking across a square: with its disproportionately long legs, the figure marches forward in a single purposeful stride, with arms held close to the body and both feet firmly anchored in the rectangular plinth.

The dynamic appearance of the striding man contrasts with the static frontality of the *Tall Woman III*: the male symbolizes the tireless quest that Giacometti saw embodied in his own striving for formal refinement. Walking, thereby, is not mere physical movement, but rather a process of inner development. As with *Tall Woman III*, the effects of proximity and distance are astonishing. The contours of the face and the body do not become clearer as the viewer approaches the work; on the contrary, the perception of physical detail is enhanced by distance.

ROOM 7

16

Francis Bacon

Lying Figure, 1961

In a circular space, a man lies on a couch, naked except for a pair of white underpants. The model for this picture was Bacon's lover Peter Lacy, whom the artist had visited in Tangiers shortly before the work was painted. As in *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho* (Room 2), Bacon uses the motif of the arena to define the space. Here however, the scene is interior instead of exterior: the black blinds in the background are drawn, excluding all daylight. Nevertheless, the space is brightly lit, and the figure rests, exposed and isolated, in the center of the picture. The marked stylization and abstraction of the room are interrupted only by the delicately painted cord to the left of the figure.

ROOM 7

17

Francis Bacon

Triptych, 1967

Giacometti and Bacon were also united by a common love of literature. Bacon had a particular reverence for the poet T.S. Eliot, whose verse drama *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926/27) is often mentioned in connection with this triptych.

The value of literary interpretation is limited, however, as Bacon repeatedly emphasized that he had little idea of how his pictures originated. He spoke of them as if they emerged through a partly unconscious process from a vast “compost heap” of impressions and fragments of memory. Nevertheless, one statement by Eliot’s protagonist Sweeney seems to correspond closely to the vision of Bacon as a painter: “Birth, and copulation, and death. That’s all the facts when you come to brass tacks.”

ROOM 7

18

Francis Bacon

In Memory of George Dyer, 1971

Bacon met George Dyer at a Soho pub in 1964. In the years that followed, Dyer became the artist's lover and a model for numerous paintings. Dyer was a complex personality with a criminal past and depressive tendencies that he tried to drown with alcohol. His troubled relationship with Bacon and the artist's circle of intellectual friends ended in disaster: in 1971, two days before the opening of Bacon's retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris, Dyer committed suicide in his hotel room.

In Memory of George Dyer, a posthumous tribute to Bacon's lover, is the first of several triptychs painted after Dyer's death. The subject appears in a different pose in each of the three compositions, which together movingly convey the simultaneous presence and absence of Bacon's departed companion.

19

Francis Bacon

Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus, 1981

Many works by Giacometti and Bacon show a disturbing ambivalence. On the one hand, there is artistic brilliance, passion, intensity, and a perfect mastery of the means of expression, and on the other, there is a kind of will to destruction. Giacometti, and above all Bacon, manifestly sought to depict human existence in all its facets, including its abysmal side. Bacon's *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus*, with its mood of abject horror, is not an illustration of the Greek tragedy—the only direct reference to the murderous events on stage is found in the trail of blood seeping under the open door on the left. Instead, Bacon seeks to devise pictorial formulas that can give visual shape to the raging hatred born of betrayal and disappointed love.

ROOM 8

20

Alberto Giacometti

Buste d'Annette IV, 1962

Bust of Annette IV

Unlike Bacon, Giacometti preferred to work from models. With a perseverance bordering on obsession, he strove to render the presence of life itself in his art. His characteristic working process was marked by a sense of continual failure. The models who sat for him had to hold the same pose for hours at a time. Among his most frequent sitters was his wife, Annette, whom he tried incessantly to see and portray with fresh eyes.

This sculpture from the final phase of Giacometti's oeuvre has a particular expressive quality. The slender neck rises up from a torso that shows obvious traces of the artist's hand in shaping the wet plaster. The figure's gaze responds directly to that of the viewer. For Giacometti, the gaze conveyed utmost vividness: "If I can hold the look in the eyes, everything else follows," he explained.

ROOM 8

21

Alberto Giacometti

Buste d'homme (dit New York I), 1965

Bust of a Man (called New York I)

In contrast to many other sculptures by Giacometti, this work does not portray a specific individual. Although the facial features are recognizably those of his brother, Diego, the artist's aim was to depict a male archetype instead of a concrete person. As in the case of *Bust of Annette IV*, shown here in the same room, Giacometti developed the shoulders, neck and head of the figure from a bulky, plinth-like base. The shoulders stand out like wings from the torso, and the face is shaped with rough, but highly distinctive lines.

The sculptures were modeled in clay or plaster (as in this example) before being cast in bronze. The glossy orange-brown surface of *Bust of a Man* is a remnant of this process, resulting from the protective layer of shellac applied to the plaster to prevent it from sticking to the surrounding cast.

INFORMATION

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CATALOGUE



The exhibition *Bacon – Giacometti* is accompanied by a catalogue, published by Hatje Cantz Verlag. 204 pages, 162 illustrations, CHF 62.50
Further publications on Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti are available from the Art Shop at <http://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch>

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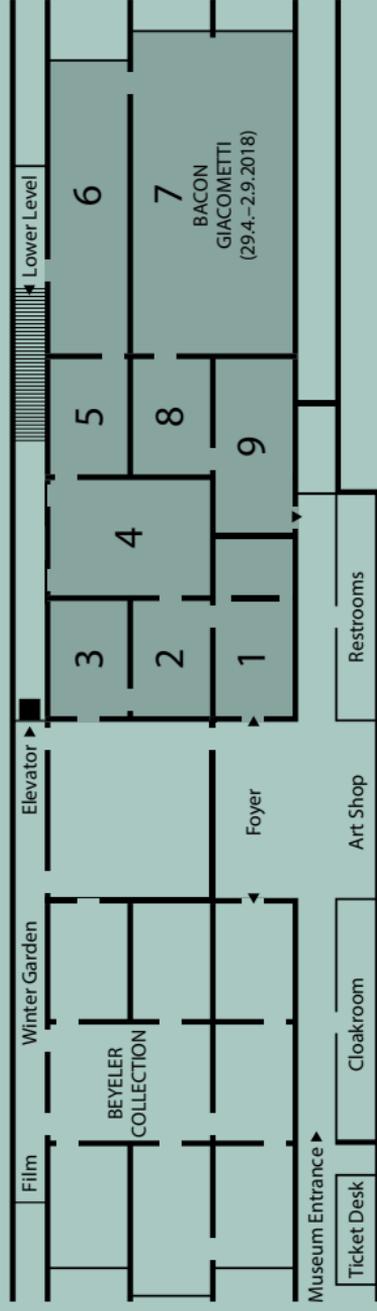
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BACON GIACOMETTI



Caution: please do not touch the works of art!