

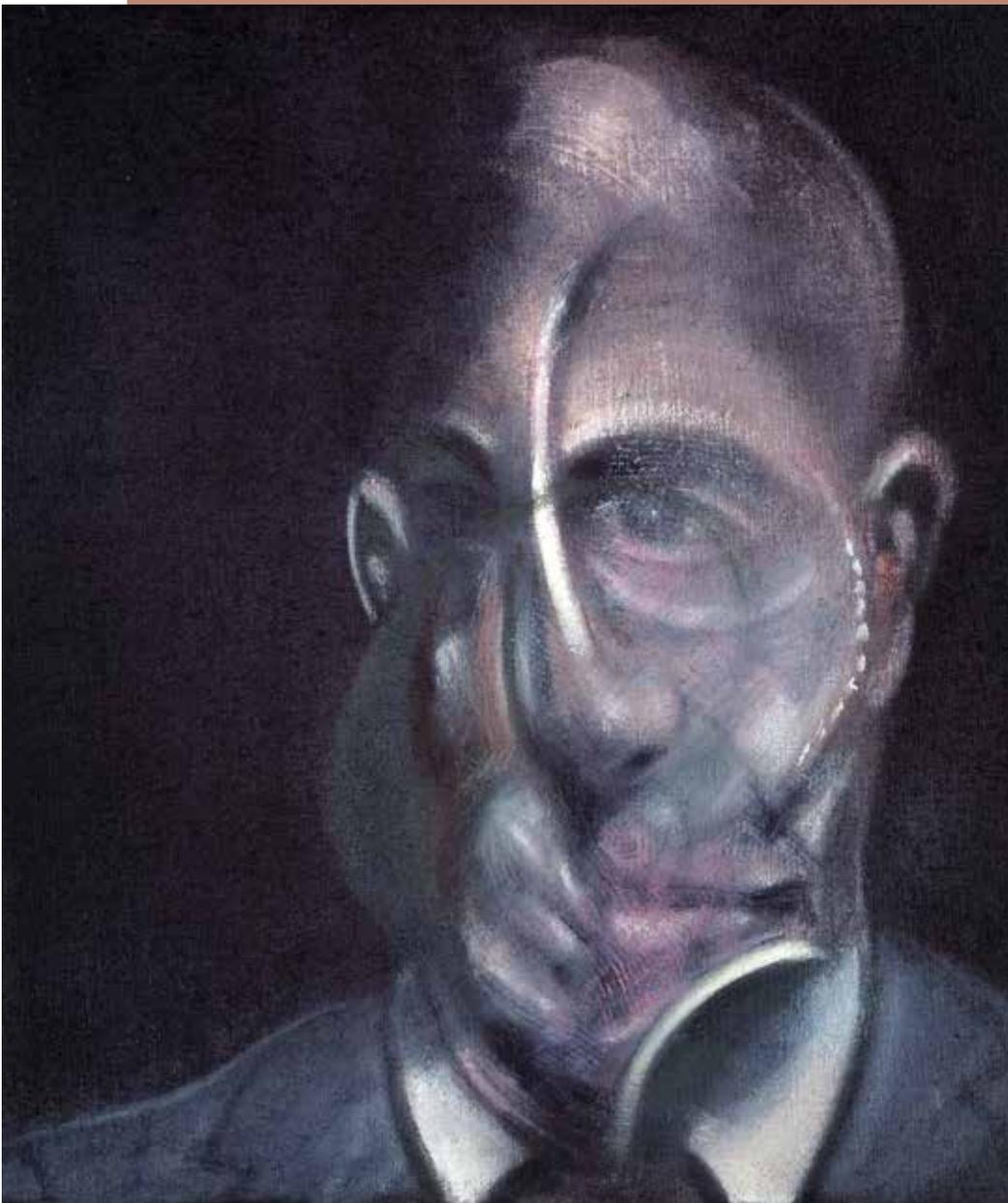
# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release

## FRANCIS BACON

FROM PICASSO TO VELÁZQUEZ

9·30·2016 / 1·8·2017



I am pleased to present to you the retrospective that the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is devoting to Francis Bacon, one of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Francis Bacon: From Picasso to Velázquez* surveys more than six decades of the artist's painting, displaying an impressive selection of his paintings alongside those of some of the Spanish and French masters who influenced him the most. This show reveals the importance that Bacon attached to tradition and allows visitors to grasp one of the keys to his creative impetus. Even though Bacon's work embodies modernity and expresses the angst common to men of his time, he also boldly and ambitiously revisits and carries on the legacy of the great masters while providing referents to the culture of his day and age.

The human figure is at the core of most of his compositions, which reflect a stark existentialist view of the individual. Bacon painted extraordinarily expressive portraits with a large dose of authenticity, which means being alive in all senses and with all its consequences. He sought to capture the mystery of life and reduce reality to its essence, synthesizing it in the guise of paint.

Iberdrola's support of this show on the British artist with Irish roots is part of our close partnership with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, as well as our commitment to disseminating art and culture wherever we operate.

I would like to congratulate everyone who has worked to put together this wonderfully broad and representative selection of paintings from Francis Bacon's career. It is very gratifying for Iberdrola, in its role as a patron of the arts, to have contributed to materializing a project which allows us to further explore the oeuvre of an exceptional artist.

**IGNACIO S. GALÁN**  
**Chairman and CEO of Iberdrola**

## *Francis Bacon: From Picasso to Velázquez*

- Dates: September 30, 2016, to January 8, 2017
  - Exhibition organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in collaboration with Grimaldi Forum Monaco
  - Curator: Martin Harrison
  - Sponsored by Iberdrola
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- **Portraits, nudes, landscapes, bullfighting... the exhibition offers a new perspective on Bacon's oeuvre by highlighting the influence that French and Spanish cultures exerted on his art.**
  - **Bacon created a new universe of images conceived via literature, film, art, and his own life using a totally unique language, reflecting human vulnerability with utter rawness.**
  - **Bacon's nudes tend to feature isolated figures in everyday poses which the painter transformed by twisting their bodies into almost animal-like shapes, thus reinventing the portrait.**
  - **Transgressive in both his life and his art, Bacon broke down many barriers that were deeply entrenched at the time, placing human beings in front of a mirror in which we could see ourselves in a raw, violent way.**

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Francis Bacon: From Picasso to Velázquez*, an exhibition of almost 80 works including some of the most important and yet least exhibited paintings by this British artist born in Ireland, alongside the works of the classic masters from French and Spanish culture who played a huge role in his career. Transgressive in both his life and his art, Bacon broke down many barriers that were deeply entrenched at the time, placing human beings in front of a mirror in which we could see ourselves in a raw, violent way.

Francis Bacon was a fervent Francophile. He was an avid consumer of French literature by authors like Racine, Balzac, Baudelaire and Proust and passionate about the art of Picasso and Van Gogh, both of whom lived in France, and the painters who preceded them like Degas, Manet, Gauguin, Seurat and Matisse. Bacon lived in and frequently visited France and the Principality of Monaco. As an adolescent, he discovered Nicolas Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1628–1629) near Chantilly, and in 1927 he had a revelatory encounter with Picasso's work when he visited the exhibition *Cent dessins par Picasso* in the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in Paris, which, in fact, spurred him to decide to embark on his career as a painter. In 1946, he left London for Monaco, where he lived for three crucial years in his career, and where he would

regularly return until 1990. Bacon always regarded his retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1971 as the peak of his career, even though it came at one of the most tragic times of his life, just after the death of his partner, and despite the fact that he had held major retrospectives in London and elsewhere. Throughout his career, Francis Bacon continued to develop ever closer ties with Paris, as attested to by the portraits of his Parisian friends and that fact that he kept a studio in Le Marais until 1985.

After his initial contact with Picasso's oeuvre in the 1920's and 1930's, Bacon's influence from Spanish culture is the most obvious in his obsession with the portrait of *Pope Innocent X* that Velázquez painted in 1650, which would serve as Bacon's inspiration for more than 50 works. Curiously, Francis Bacon never saw this Velázquez painting, which hangs at the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome, in person; when he had the chance to lay eyes on it during his visit to the Italian capital in 1954, he preferred instead to retain the reproductions in his memory instead of seeing the original painting. In addition to Velázquez, he was also fascinated by other classic Spanish painters such as Zurbarán, El Greco and Goya, whose paintings he fervently admired at Madrid's Museo del Prado, a museum he asked to visit alone just a few years before his death after seeing the Velázquez retrospective held there in 1990. Francis Bacon died on a brief visit to Madrid in 1992, and even though he never had a permanent home in Spain, he was known to have made extended sojourns in Málaga and visits to Seville, Utrera and Madrid.

## Exhibition Tour

### **Gallery 205. Picasso: The Gateway to Art**

"Picasso opened the door to all these systems. I have tried to stick my foot in the door so that it does not close. Picasso was one of that genius caste which includes Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, and above all Velázquez". Francis Bacon

Born into a wealthy British family living in rural Ireland, a place of upheaval in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Francis Bacon was confronted with Pablo Picasso's work in Paris's Paul Rosenberg Gallery at the tender age of 17. Bacon himself revealed that this signaled his shift towards a career in art; this is attested to in some of his earliest works, such as *Composition (Figure)* (1933), which clearly references Picasso's works from the 1920's, especially *Las casetas*, the series depicting deformed bathers holding a key, an object that fascinated Picasso and seduced Bacon as well.

Starting with absolutely no technical training, Bacon gradually entered the world of art and quickly assimilated what other creators near him, such as Roy de Maistre, were able to teach him. The mere handful of paintings that have survived from this time—Bacon was dissatisfied with most of them and destroyed them—attest to his early influence from Analytical and Synthetic Cubism, and from Picasso's biomorphic Cubism, which would lead Bacon to develop a language of his own. This vocabulary garnered recognition for the first time in 1933, when the critic Herbert Read reproduced Bacon's *Crucifixion* (1933) in a privileged spot, opposite Picasso's

*Bather* (1929) in his publication *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture*. Even though Bacon received this recognition at the start of his career and at a relatively young age, he did not enjoy the same good fortune in the subsequent years.

### Gallery 206. Human Cages

"I cut down the scale of the canvas by drawing in these rectangles which concentrate the image down. Just to see it better." Francis Bacon

After World War II, in which Francis Bacon worked in a civil capacity because of his chronic asthma, the artist's work was once again recognized by critics and the public. He also drew the attention of gallery owner Erica Brausen, who soon exhibited his paintings in different European countries. In 1948, the Museum of Modern Art of New York purchased its first Bacon work from Brausen.

During this period, the artist created a new universe of images conceived via literature, film, art, and his own life. Bacon approached this iconography using a unique language, reflecting human vulnerability with utter rawness. Somewhere between human and animal—as in some of Eadweard Muybridge's photographs—the figures begin to appear enclosed and entrapped in cages or cubes. Bacon used this device to focus the viewer's attention on the figures, which were smudged or disfigured, reduced to strokes of grayish and bluish colors reminiscent of El Greco and the drawings of Alberto Giacometti, which Bacon preferred over his sculptures. Later in this period, Bacon also paid homage to Vincent van Gogh, whom he evoked through his loose brushwork and bright palette, which contrast with the dark figures in other paintings. Bacon was fascinated by the way Van Gogh veered away from the rules and literal reality in favor of expressiveness.

### Gallery 207. Isolated Figures

"I think it is one of the greatest portraits that have been made, and I became obsessed by it. I buy book after book with this illustration in it of the Velázquez Pope, because it just haunts me, and it opens up all sorts of feelings and areas of [...] imagination." Francis Bacon

In the mid-1940's, Francis Bacon discovered the image of *Pope Innocent X* through reproductions. Diego Velázquez painted this work in 1650, and it came to obsess not only Bacon but also other English painters and writers. For more than two decades, Bacon's predilection for this painting was reflected in dozens of works in which the image of the pontiff is transformed in different ways. In some of them, it mingles with the suffering expressed by the decomposed face of the injured woman who appears screaming in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*, which Bacon had discovered in Berlin at the age of sixteen. In others, the figure is surrounded by butchered animal parts in clear allusion to French painter of Belarusian origin Chaïm Soutine. And in yet others, the image of Innocent X overlaps that of Pius XII, the Pope during World War II whose diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany still spark controversy today.

Velázquez painted his Pope alone, with no context to help identify his high station, just like Christ sacrificed on the cross. The crucifixion is another theme that Bacon revisited time and

time again since the beginning of his career, although without religious connotations and always with the intention of revealing the darkest side of the human conditions. Just like his Popes, his Crucifixions undergo transformations, mutations in color, format, or composition, and they are interspersed with other references that captivated the artist, such as Picasso's works and Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.

### Gallery 209. Exposed Bodies

"I think art is an obsession with life and after all, as we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves." Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon's first surviving nude painting dates from 1949. The painting shows a man with his back to the viewer, behind whom we can see a smooth surface, which might be curtains. His backbone stands out from his body, similar to an animal's ribcage, reminiscent of the back of the figure depicted in *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself* (ca. 1890--95), a Degas work that Bacon deeply admired.

Four years later, the artist painted two nude men together for the first time, an image which could not be shown in public in England, where homosexuality was still a crime. In Bacon's nudes, especially those rendered after *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962), which were a turning point in his career, isolated figures in everyday poses predominated, and the painter transforms them until they are virtually unrecognizable, twisting their bodies in an almost animal-like, implausible way, reinventing the portrait. In some cases, the sex of the nudes is ambiguous; in others, it is very clear.

Bacon admired the work of Rodin; he had pictures of his sculptures and made annotations on his figures. The preparatory bronze shown here was made by Rodin as a memorial to James Abbott McNeill Whistler. The works by Whistler and John Singer Sargent in this gallery reflect the influence of Spanish art on British painting, a legacy that sometimes reached Bacon through the filter of the great masters of Edwardian England.

These Bacon paintings are based on the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, and some of them on the snapshots that the painter commissioned from John Deakin, in which he portrayed Bacon's close friends. In these nudes, which are characterized by their extraordinary intensity, Bacon tends to depict the main figure in isolation. He rarely worked in the presence of the sitter but instead drew from the photographs he had commissioned from Deakin, whom he gave very precise instructions on the poses which echoed some of the poses in historical works or in Muybridge's images.

### Gallery 203. Together, but Isolated

"I think that the moment a number of figures become involved, you immediately come onto the story-telling aspect of the relationships between figures. And that immediately sets up a kind of narrative. I always hope to be able to make a great number of figures without a narrative."

Francis Bacon

In this gallery we can see Velázquez's portrait of Sebastián de Morra, presented isolated from his surroundings, whose rich clothing alludes to his position within the Hapsburgs. This type of figures, like Pope Innocent X, fascinated Bacon not only thanks to Velázquez's masterful portrayal but also due to the mysterious air that surrounded these paintings. Bacon revisited these works through his own vision thereby altering our perception of the Spanish master's oeuvre.

Here we can also see *La Bomba*, a painting by John Phillip, a Scottish artist who moved to the south of Spain in the mid-19th century for health reasons. This move had major repercussions on the painter, who came to be known as "Spanish Phillip" due to the influence of masters like Velázquez and Murillo on his oeuvre. *La Bomba*—whose title alludes to the place where this scene is set, perhaps in Granada—was presented by Phillip in London, where it was extremely successful and inspired numerous British artists of his period. The characters in this painting interact with each other in a friendly way, unlike Bacon's figures, who seem fated to either fight each other or engage in sexual relations, as exemplified by the large triptych which occupies the center of this gallery, *Three Studies of Figures on Beds* (1972).

The three panels of the triptych have the same background and depict the same scene, although with slight variations in each panel. This three-part format, which Bacon is said to have used 33 times over the course of three decades, allowed the artist to show intentionally fragmented images placed in separate frames. In addition to using this device of the triptych, Bacon also introduced this idea of three-scene compositions into works on canvas, such as *Studies from the Human Body* (1975).

### **Gallery 202. The Force of a Portrait**

"Of course, one does put in such things as ears and eyes. But then one would like to put them in as irrationally as possible. And the only reason for this irrationality is that, if it does come about, it brings the force of the image over very much more strongly than if one just sat down and illustrated the appearance..." Francis Bacon

In 1951, Bacon painted his first portrait of a famous person, British painter Lucian Freud, whom he depicted standing and leaning against a doorway. For years he painted friends and people he admired, such as Freud, Michel Leiris, Henrietta Moraes, Jacques Dupin, George Dyer, John Edwards, Reinhard Hassert and Eddy Batache, among many others. Few of these portraits were commissions because Bacon almost always chose the subjects of his paintings, whom he painted primarily based on the photographs that they sent him.

These paintings often had blue backgrounds, which might have been the color of his studio, where some of the photos were taken. Other times, the background is black and evokes the art of the great Spanish masters, while yet other works show other tones, including cadmium orange, which he used in his larger paintings. Bacon not only tried to capture the physical appearance of

his subjects; he also tried to convey his relationship with them and how these bonds affected him. They are not only psychological portraits but representations of human relations.

In his paintings, Bacon deforms people with the goal of making them more real than if he depicted them more realistically. Of his two portraits of Leiris, Bacon considers the less literal one more realistic. In the 1970's, claiming a lack of models for his works, he began to paint more self-portraits; between 1971 and 1979, he painted a total of 29, fifteen of them small individual self-portraits. Bacon achieved a great deal of international renown during this period. In 1971, he became the first living artist after Picasso to be the subject of a retrospective in the Grand Palais in Paris, and in 1988 he was the first Western artist to be the subject of an exhibition in the now-defunct Soviet Union.

### **Gallery 204. Bullfighting**

"It's based on that famous poem of Lorca's, you know, where the line 'A las cinco de la tarde' keeps coming back. It's a very long and beautiful poem about his friend the bullfighter being killed. I haven't seen a bullfight for a long time – I must have only seen three or four of them in my lifetime – but when you have seen one, it remains in your mind forever." Francis Bacon.

In numerous interviews, Bacon expressed his interest in bullfighting and his admiration of Francisco de Goya. In fact, Bacon actually chose the Spanish master's work *Don Andrés del Peral* for an exhibition he curated using works from the National Gallery of London collection in 1985. Goya made 50 red chalk preparatory drawings for his *Tauromaquia*, in which he used etching, aquatint, dry point, and burin engraving. Even though the main theme in this series is the evolution of bullfights, Goya's position on this issue has recently sparked a fascinating debate among art historians.

### **Gallery 208. Life Essence**

"This is the artist's privilege—to be ageless. Passion keeps you young, and passion and liberty are so seductive. When I paint I am ageless, I just have the pleasure or the difficulty of painting". Francis Bacon.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's Francis Bacon, now a septuagenarian, reintroduced into his paintings motifs such as the bull, and genres such as the landscape, which had always been secondary in his works. He had painted few landscapes prior to 1978, most of them in the 1940's and 1950's, and many of them still showed traces of humans or animals. In this last stage of his career, his works were pared down; the landscape elements are isolated from their surroundings and confined to the boundaries that the artist defines. In this way, Bacon tackled landscape painting similar to the way he dealt with the human figure. Thus, he "encased" the wave that appears in *Painting March* (1985) and the road in *Street Scene (with Car in Distance)* (1984).

The portraits from this late period are increasingly stripped down. The painter actually eliminated elements he had painted in order to diminish the visual references in the composition and focus attention on the main figure. Some of these works were made with aerosol paint, which

allowed Bacon to create textures never before seen in his output. These paintings are divided into those rendered with bright colors and those which primarily use dull, grayish tones. Bulls once again appear in these later years. His iconography harks back to artists like Goya and Picasso, as well as to poet Federico García Lorca and writer Michel Leiris, and it specifically references bullfights.

Francis Bacon died in Madrid in 1992, just a short distance from the Museo del Prado, the place where he had encountered many of the great masters he had admired, which he had visited for the last time in 1991 to see Velázquez's works.

### **Didaktika**

As part of the Didaktika project, sponsored by BBK, the Museum designs didactic spaces and special activities to complement each exhibition, and it provides tools and resources to help viewers appreciate and understand the works on display.

This time, the didactic space devoted to Francis Bacon is located in the corridor and Gallery 201. It presents a series of contents related to the artist which have been called *Overflowing Energy*. They include a seen 3-D experience specifically produced for the exhibition which allows guests to virtually visit the artist's studio in Reece Mews in London.

Likewise, the didactic activities include the following:

- Conversation: Francis Bacon  
Martin Harrison, Curator of the exhibition, and Lucía Agirre, Curator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, will discuss the oeuvre of Francis Bacon following the theme of the exhibition and the recent publication of the artist's catalogue raisonné.  
Wednesday, September 28, 6:30 p.m.
- Lecture: Bacon and his Studio at 7 Reece Mews  
Barbara Dawson, director of the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, where Francis Bacon's studio has been painstakingly re-created, will reveal the secrets of the artist's workspace.  
Wednesday, October 5, 6:30 p.m.

### **Shared Reflections**

The Museum is offering two unique tours led by its professionals to help visitors discover the exhibition on Francis Bacon through the ins and outs of its assembly and other curiosities, sponsored by the Vizcaína Aguirre Foundation.

- Curatorial tour: led by Lucía Agirre, Curator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.  
Wednesday, October 19.
- Key concepts: led by Marta Arzak, Associate Director of Education and Interpretation at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Wednesday, October 26.

**Film series on Bacon. *From his Life to his Work***

The Museum auditorium will show a selection of fiction films and documentaries related to the artist's work, either because they reflect his life and life in London during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or because they contain direct references to some of his works.

November 4 to 6.

**Catalogue**

The catalogue examines all the works on view, allowing the reader to observe the images of Francis Bacon's works along with those by ancient and modern masters—especially Spanish and French—that influenced the British artist throughout his career. The publication brings to light unknown facets of Bacon's production through insightful essays by Martin Harrison, Manuela B. Mena, and Sarah Whitfield. It also includes a biography.

**Curator**

Martin Harrison is the editor of the artist's recently-published catalogue raisonné. The author of publications on art from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly photography, he has curated exhibitions at renowned institutions in the United Kingdom such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and Ashmolean Museum, and in Italy, the United States, and Mexico. In 2006, he co-curated the exhibition spotlighting Francis Bacon at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Dusseldorf, and in 2013 he curated *Francis Bacon / Henry Moore: Flesh and Bone* at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, along with Richard Calvocoressi. His first essay on Francis Bacon was published in 1999, and he is the author of *In Camera: Francis Bacon - Photography, film and the practice of painting* (Thames & Hudson, 2005), and along with Rebecca Daniels, *Francis Bacon: Incunabula* (Thames & Hudson, 2008). In 2009, he edited *Francis Bacon - New Studies: Centenary Essays*, a collection of nine original essays to celebrate the centenary of the artist's birth, and throughout his extensive career he has written for prestigious publications like *The Art Newspaper* and *The Burlington Magazine*, and for the catalogues of prestigious auction houses like Christie's, Sotheby's, and Phillips de Pury in their headquarters in London, Paris, and New York.

**Cover picture**

Francis Bacon

*Portrait of Michel Leiris*, 1976

Oil on canvas

34 x 29 cm

Centre Pompidou, Paris – Musée national d'art moderne. Centre de création industrielle,

Donation Louise et Michel Leiris, 1984

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All the information on the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at [www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es) (press room).

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST

### 1910s

Francis Bacon was born in Dublin on the 28th October 1909. He was the second of five children born to English parents settled in Ireland, but who had no Irish blood ties.

The War of Independence (1919–1921) and Civil War (1922–23) cast a shadow of violence over the countryside, particularly for the Protestant gentry.

### 1920s

Berlin was Bacon's first overwhelming cultural experience. It may have been in Berlin that Bacon first saw *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein. Its full impact on the young man would not surface for several decades.

He later moved to France, where he saw Nicholas Poussin's painting *The Massacre of the Innocents*, ca.1628-29, at the Château de Chantilly (Musée Condé). Its portrayal of a screaming mother trying to protect her infant, left him one indelible memory. In Bacon's mind it was 'probably the best human cry ever painted,' a precocious sign of his obsession with a single image by another artist.

Bacon seems to have considered becoming an artist only after attending an exhibition of drawings by Picasso at the Galerie Paul Rosenberg, Paris, in the summer of 1927.

Bacon began making drawings and watercolors himself, apparently without formal guidance. Having moved to a hotel in Montparnasse, he had ample opportunity to visit exhibitions by Picabia, de Chirico and Soutine and to view the latest releases at the cinema.

### 1930s

Back in London an Australian Post-Cubist painter, Roy de Maistre, guided the fledgling artist in his first steps in oil painting. Among Bacon's earliest patrons was Eric Hall, a well-off married man who continued an intimate affair with the artist for over 15 years.

Bacon painted his first truly original work, *Crucifixion*, 1933, a small spectral painting—clearly indebted to the biomorphs of Picasso—that was reproduced in Herbert Read's book *Art Now* and purchased by the collector Sir Michael Sadler.

In the summer of 1936 his work was rejected by the International Surrealist Exhibition in London on the grounds that it was 'insufficiently surreal'.

Scarcely any work survives from this period. Most of it was destroyed by the artist, a pattern of self-editing that he pursued for most of his life, but particularly so during his early years.

### 1940s

Bacon was intrigued by the poems of T S Eliot, whose play *The Family Reunion* led him to a far richer source of ideas and sensations—*The Oresteia* by the ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus. It was no more than a year or two before its inspiration began to seep into his paintings.

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. It was in this space that Bacon completed a painting that finally launched his name, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944, which hung in a group exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery, New Bond Street in April 1945, and riveted the attention of public and critics. The following year Bacon realised a work of unparalleled ambition, *Painting*, 1946. Erica Brausen, the art dealer, bought the work, and it was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1948. Bacon would remain with Erica Brausen's Hanover Gallery for the next 12 years.

*Head I*, 1948, with its restricted palette of greys and blacks established an ideal precedent for an artist now in a hurry. His subsequent works departed from it; they were painted on the unprimed or 'wrong' side of the canvas. He found the raw canvas held the paint with more bite, enhanced its texture and allowed thinner applications to soak into the canvas. Bacon found a technique precisely attuned to his temperament. He continued painting on the unprimed side till the end of his life.

One painting stood apart from its monochrome companions in the 1949 exhibition at the Hanover Gallery. This was *Head VI*, 1949, with its sensuous purple cape. It was a 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. His experience of the Velázquez was entirely by way of reproductions. Another of his primary sources was a still of the screaming woman from Eisenstein's film, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925.

### 1950s

In 1951 and again in 1952 Bacon sailed out to South Africa where his mother had moved after his father's death. The artist was struck by the sight of wild animals moving through the long grass, a sensation he conjured up in several canvases of 1952. On his voyage back to England in 1951, he stopped off for a couple of days in Cairo. Bacon held ancient Egyptian art in enormous admiration and later asserted that its achievement had been unsurpassed. From 1953 to 1954, he painted four works based on the great Sphinx. In those same two years Bacon depicted men in suits within dark, suggested surroundings.

Bacon had also had begun to tackle the nude in a more forthright manner. In his paintings of *Two Figures*, the poses were based on Eadweard Muybridge's *The Human Figure in Motion*, 1901, images that Bacon manipulated to more personal and sexual ends.

In 1954 he exhibited with Ben Nicholson and Lucian Freud in the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. When in Rome he deliberately avoided seeing Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X* in the

flesh. He had his first one-man show in New York at Durlacher Brothers in 1953 and his first in Paris, at the Galerie Rive Droite in 1957.

For much of the decade, Bacon was involved with former RAF pilot Peter Lacy and remained in thrall to his neurotic sadism. When Lacy moved to Tangier in the mid-1950s, Bacon followed him, and on the way to Morocco he visited for the first time the Museo del Prado in 1956.

By 1957 Bacon's painting was undergoing a transformation in handling and color. In his paintings inspired by Van Gogh's, the Dutch painter was one stimulus, the Céret works of Chaim Soutine and the fierce light of Morocco were two others. It was a decisive break with the ghostly forms and somber backgrounds of the first half of the 1950s, and a permanent one.

He signed a contract in October 1958 with Marlborough Fine Art.

### 1960s

In 1961, he took over 7 Reece Mews, a converted coach house in South Kensington—just around the corner from his old studio at Cromwell place—that was to be the most important room in his life. He produced there his first large-scale triptych, *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, 1962.

Throughout the next three decades Bacon used large-scale triptychs to address some of his grandest and most ambitious subjects. *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* was included in a major retrospective at the Tate Gallery in May that year. On the opening day a telegram informed him of the death of Peter Lacy in Tangier. In 1963 he painted the dark and ambiguous *Landscape near Malabata, Tangier* in memory of Lacy's final resting place.

Towards the end of 1963 a new man entered Bacon's life, George Dyer, who became a recurrent subject of Bacon's paintings in the 1960s. Photography became an indispensable means to Bacon's expressive ends, mainly through John Deakin's photographs of Dyer and other close friends, which allowed the artist to capture the vitality of his subjects while keeping a critical distance.

One living artist for whom he had great respect was Alberto Giacometti; Bacon's approval was largely confined to his drawings. The two met several times during preparations for Giacometti's retrospective in the Tate in 1965 but Giacometti's death, the following year, left little time for their friendship to develop.

### 1970s

Two nights before the opening of the retrospective exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, in 1971, an honor exceptional for a living painter, Dyer was found dead from a drink and barbiturate overdose. A series of paintings record the true strength of his grief.

Bacon spent considerable periods of time in Paris during the 1970s, and took a studio there in 1975. Bacon's 1976 portrait of Surrealist author and critic Michel Leiris, a diminutive work of subtlety and insight, is among the finest he ever painted.

In the mid-1970s he met John Edwards, a good looking Eastender—Bacon's relationship with him was essentially a paternal one.

In 1978 he presented his work by the first time in Spain at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid and at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona.

### **1980s**

Solo exhibitions and retrospectives of Bacon's work were held around the world: Tokyo, Kyoto and Nagoya in 1983 and Washington DC in 1989. In 1985 the Tate Gallery, London again held a major retrospective, with the director's statement that the artist was the 'greatest living painter'.

Three years later a Bacon's retrospective was the first show by a major Western artist to be mounted in the Soviet Union.

He met the challenge of landscape, which he had largely avoided since his Van Gogh works of 1957. During the 1980s, Bacon simplified his pictorial language, paring it down to its essentials.

### **1990s**

In his last years and in declining health, he enjoyed a passionate relationship with a cultivated young Spaniard, whom he had met in 1987. In 1990 he visited Velázquez's retrospective at the Prado Museum and two years later against his doctor's advice Bacon made a trip to Madrid in April. Within days of arrival he fell critically ill and was taken to a medical clinic. On the 28th of April, he suffered a heart attack and died.

Images for press usage  
***Francis Bacon: From Picasso to Velázquez***  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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**Francis Bacon**

*Composition (Figure)*, 1933  
Pastel, pen, and ink on paper, mounted on card  
53.5 x 40 cm  
Colección Abelló, Madrid  
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DACs/VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016



**Francis Bacon**

'Fury', ca. 1944  
Oil and pastel on fiberboard  
94 x 74 cm  
Private collection  
© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved  
DACs/VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016  
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.



**Francis Bacon**

'Study after Velázquez', 1950  
Oil on canvas  
198 x 137 cm  
Private collection  
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Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.



**Francis Bacon**

*Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, 1962

Oil on canvas, three panels

198.1 x 144.8 cm, each panel

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 64.1700

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**Francis Bacon**

*Three Studies of Figures on Beds*, 1972

Oil and pastel on canvas

Three panels, 198 x 147.5 cm each

Esther Grether Family Collection

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Photo: Bildpunkt AG, Münchenstein



**Francis Bacon**

*Study for Self-Portrait*, 1976

Oil and pastel on canvas

198 x 147.5 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Purchased 1978

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Photo: © Jenni Carter, Viscopy



**Francis Bacon**

*Portrait of Michel Leiris*, 1976

Oil on canvas

34 x 29 cm

Centre Pompidou, Paris – Musée national d'art moderne.

Centre de création industrielle, Donation Louise et Michel Leiris, 1984

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Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN Grand Palais / Bertrand Prévost



**Francis Bacon**

*Study for Self-Portrait*, 1981

Oil, pastel and dry transfer lettering on canvas

198 x 147.5 cm

Private collection

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DACS/VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.



**Francis Bacon**

*Study of a Bull*, 1991

Oil, aerosol paint and dust on canvas

198 x 147.5 cm

Private collection, London

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Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.



**El Greco**

*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, ca. 1585

Oil on canvas

105.5 x 86.5 cm

Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao



**Diego Velázquez**

*The Buffoon el Primo*, 1644

Oil on canvas

106.5 x 82.5 cm

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



**Pablo Picasso**

*Composition (Female Figure at the Beach)* [*Composition (Figure féminine sur une plage)*], 1927

Oil on canvas

18.8 x 17.6 cm

Private collection

© Sucesión Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2016



**Alberto Giacometti**

*Buste of a Man in a frame* (*Buste d'homme dans un cadre*), ca. 1946

Oil on canvas

28.1 x 22.4 cm

Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, Paris

