

# FRANCIS BACON

BRITAIN

TATE

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TEACHER AND STUDENT NOTES BY LINDA BOLTON

# FRANCIS BACON

## INTRODUCTION

Francis Bacon (1909–92) was one of the most important painters of the twentieth century and one of the very few British artists with a strong international reputation. He was a maverick who rejected the dominant practice of the time, abstraction, in favour of a distinctive and disturbing realism. This major exhibition displays Bacon's work from his first masterpiece to works made shortly before his death.

He was born in 1909 in Dublin to Anglo-Irish parents; his father was a racehorse trainer and his mother a steel and coal heiress. Bacon was a sickly child, he suffered from asthma and was allergic to the dogs and horses kept by his father. His lively and gregarious mother showed little interest in her son's early sketches. Bacon's closest childhood confidante was the family nursemaid, Jessie Lightfoot. They developed an intense bond and she lived with him at intervals long into Bacon's adulthood, remaining one of his closest companions throughout his life. It was a peripatetic childhood as his family moved frequently between England and Ireland. The frequent upheavals he experienced as a result of this were to induce in Bacon a sense of displacement which is often referenced in his work.

Bacon loved dressing up. As a shy child, his effeminate manner upset his father, who apparently had Bacon horsewhipped by their Irish groom, and banished him from the family home after finding his son dressed in his mother's underwear, admiring himself in front of a mirror.

Bacon had only a few months of formal education and did not become an artist through art school or apprenticeship; he ran away from school to drift through the late 1920s and early 1930s in London, Berlin and Paris, living off his allowance and occasional jobs, and dodging the rent. He worked as an interior decorator, coming to painting as a self-taught artist by the early 1930s.

When in London, he lived in the epicentre of the bohemian scene; he was a regular at Muriel Belcher's Colony Club in Soho and his hedonistic life was the subject of the 1998 film *Love is the Devil*. From the mid 1940s his work met with critical success, and his paintings sold for large sums and continue to do so today. The triptych, *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* 1976, was bought for \$86.3 million in 2008, by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich.

Teacher and student notes. Downloadable full colour A4 images with introductory information, discussion points, links and activities for use in the gallery or classroom. Suitable for teachers of key stage 3–5 and older students.

By Linda Bolton

Cover Image: Francis Bacon *Head VI* 1949 Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London  
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## VISITING THE EXHIBITION

Exhibition tickets for school groups of more than ten students are available in advance only at a cost of £4 per student and teacher (we ask for payment to be received two weeks before the visit). As tickets are limited it is essential to book well in advance.

To make a booking, please call the Education Bookings line on 020 7887 8888.

To avoid overcrowding in the exhibition, all groups with more than thirty students will be split and entry to the exhibition will be staggered at one-hour intervals.

You are welcome to use the Schools Area to have lunch or to use locker spaces; please book these at the same time as your exhibition tickets (there are a limited number of locker spaces and lunch slots available).

As all exhibitions at Tate Britain can get busy you cannot lecture in the exhibition rooms, but you can discuss works in a conversational manner in groups of no more than six students at a time. If possible, please brief your group before they enter the exhibition, and if you have a large group we recommend that you divide them into smaller groups and perhaps follow the suggestions in this pack.

## ABOUT THE TEACHER AND STUDENT NOTES

This short pack is intended as an introduction to the exhibition and some of its themes and covers four works in depth, taking in the range of the show. It offers ideas and starting points for visiting teachers to use with all age groups, as well as for A-level and GCSE students to use on their own. Some of the activities or discussion points can be used as preparation for the visit, some are for use in the exhibition itself, and others are more suited to class work after your visit.

The works discussed are reproduced here so that you can print them out and use them as a resource in the classroom. The notes aim to give a few jumping-off points to explore not only the featured works but the exhibition as a whole.

## OTHER RESOURCES

In the exhibition there is an information leaflet and an audioguide which gives further information about the works on display. The exhibition catalogue is available in the Tate shop, which also has a range of books, journals, postcards and other related materials.

## WEBSITES

Tate Online [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

Bacon Exhibition [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/francisbacon](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/francisbacon)

Bacon in the Tate Collection [www.tate.org.uk/collection](http://www.tate.org.uk/collection) and search by 'Artist Name'

Bacon Resources [www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools](http://www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools) and search 'By Artist'

Tate Schools and Teachers [www.tate.org.uk/schoolsandteachers](http://www.tate.org.uk/schoolsandteachers)

Tate Shop [www.tate.org.uk/shop](http://www.tate.org.uk/shop)

You can also view full length television and radio programmes about the artist via the BBC website [www.bbc.co.uk/archive/bacon](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/bacon)



Francis Bacon *Head VI* 1949 Oil on canvas, 93.2 x 76.5 cm  
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2008

## HEAD VI, 1949

Oil on canvas. 93.2 cm x 76.5 cm. Arts Council

This powerful painting was inspired by a famous portrait by the renowned seventeenth-century Spanish artist, Diego Velázquez. Velázquez's painting shows Pope Innocent X sitting in state on the papal throne. In the Bacon image here, the Pope's mouth is open in what looks like a scream. The painting is dominated by vertical brushstrokes that make it appear as if the Pope's head is being sucked upwards into a vacuum beyond the painting or even as if he is on fire.

It is a frightening image which has been interpreted in a number of different ways. Some think that Bacon is showing the Pope experiencing a moment of paralysing torment as he loses his faith in God. Others have interpreted this work as an "existentialist cry" – they think that the painting portrays a moment of realisation that life has no meaning.

Bacon has made two major changes to the original Velázquez painting – one is to place the Pope within what looks like a large glass box. This makes it seem as if he is imprisoned or on display like an object in a museum. Bacon used the image of the glass cage or frame in a number of his paintings. He said that his use of this image was 'an attempt to lift the image outside of its natural environment'.

The other change is to show the figure with his mouth open as if in a cry of pain. Again, this is something Bacon does in a number of his paintings. Bacon discussed his interest in the image of a mouth open as though crying in a 1966 interview with David Sylvester. "Another thing that made me think about the human cry was a book I bought when I was very young from a bookshop in Paris, a second-hand book with beautiful, hand-coloured plates of the diseases of the mouth, beautiful plates of the mouth open and of the examination of the inside of the mouth; and they fascinated me, and I was obsessed by them. And then I saw – or perhaps I even knew by then – the Potemkin film and I attempted to use the Potemkin still as a basis on which I could also use these marvellous illustrations of the human mouth. It never worked out though."

The Potemkin film Bacon mentions was Eisenstein's iconic *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The image from that film of a nanny's mouth open in a scream as she watches a baby's pram roll down the Odessa steps was to become a recurrent image in Bacon's subsequent work.

While Bacon often talked about the influence of particular films, book plates or photographs which find their way into his art, he resisted explaining his work. To explain it would demystify it.

## FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do you think people see Bacon as registering the twentieth century's lack of faith, and existential angst in this (and other) works?
- Which artists, writers and musicians would you say are picking up on the 'zeitgeist' or mood of today?
- What does the use of the 'glass frame' in this and several of Bacon's other paintings suggest to you?

## ACTIVITIES

- Bacon liked to transcribe the work of other artists, such as Velázquez and van Gogh, to reinvent the tradition. Take a recognised image by an Old Master and make your own transcription, so that the original image is recognizable but its mood is altered.
- Bacon found himself out of cash and unable to buy canvases so he turned around those he had and painted on the 'wrong' side. Finding he enjoyed the effect of working on the unprimed canvas, from then on he continued to work like this. Peter Doig did something similar when he was short of money for canvas, and used mail sacks. Monet used the wrong end of a brush to create the effect of branches by 'scratching' into the wet paint and Gary Hume used enamel paint on large metal hospital doors which were readily available. Experiment with unorthodox media as the basis for a piece of work and see what effect this has on the form and meaning.



Francis Bacon *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne* 1966  
Tate Collection © Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2007

# PORTRAIT OF ISABEL RAWSTHORNE, 1966

Oil on canvas, 81 x 69 cm. Tate

Isabel Rawsthorne (1912–1992) was a strikingly beautiful model and muse to several great twentieth-century artists including, Giacometti, Derain, Epstein and Picasso. She had a profound and lasting effect on the sculptor Giacometti with whom she lived briefly in Paris and was described by Giacometti's biographer, James Lord, as "tall, lithe, superbly proportioned" and "moved with the agility of a feline predator. Something exotic, suggesting obscure origins, was visible in her full mouth, high cheek-bones, and heavy-lidded, slanting eyes, from which shone forth a gaze of exceptional, though remote, intensity." She made an extraordinary impression on people. The artist Edouardo Paolozzi remembers her entering a restaurant in the 1940s and transfixing the diners with her beauty. Hers was one of the faces Bacon was to paint repeatedly.

Bacon was reported in the magazine *Paris Match* as saying of her "You know, I also made love to Isabel Rawsthorne, a very beautiful woman who was Derain's model and Georges Bataille's girlfriend." While we can't be certain of the truth of this she was certainly his friend. Born in London but brought up in Liverpool where she trained as an artist, she was married three times; to a journalist, and to the composer Constant Lambert and later, to another composer, Lambert's drinking companion, Alan Rawsthorne.

Isabel Rawsthorne lived in Paris and London and was a great bohemian character. A fine painter and set designer, she also swore like a trooper and could apparently match her hard-drinking husbands glass for glass.

Bacon painted landscapes, figure studies and portraits, distorting the readability of the image by a technique of smearing the wet paint. In the case of the portrait, this smearing creates the effect of facial damage. Bacon had seen a book of faces chronically damaged by war wounds, and many of his faces look as though they have been similarly mutilated. Bacon described himself as a painter of flesh, saying he had been powerfully affected by Poussin's painting *Massacre of the Innocents*.

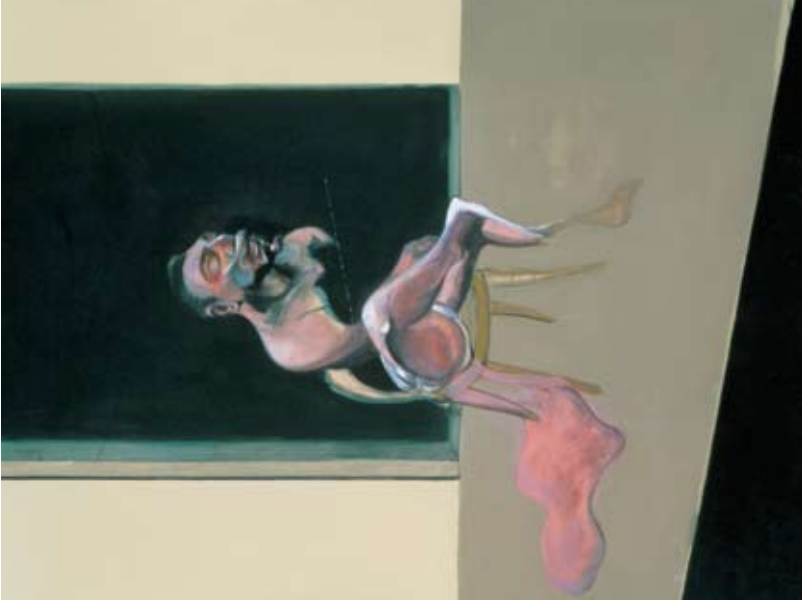
During the 1960s Bacon focused increasingly on portraits, especially those of his close friends. The portraits are deliberately not a 'true' likeness. Some have seen these portraits as a way to rework a traditional genre, to reinvent the portrait in a post-photographic age and to use the human face to say something about the human condition.

## FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you feel Bacon has painted Isabel Rawsthorne as the beautiful woman everyone describes? If art is not about being beautiful, what is it about?
- Although this is a portrait of a real person, a friend, it is more than that. Discuss what aspects of the human face or condition are brought to mind looking at this.
- Bacon often worked from photographs. In a so-called 'post-photographic age', why would a painter want to paint a face? What is different about this painted face and a photograph?

## ACTIVITIES

- Research portraits of the same iconic contemporary or historical figures, made by different artists and photographers (e.g. Princess Diana by Mario Testino and by Stella Vine). Examine the similarities and differences achieved in works.
- Find other examples where artists have deliberately distorted an image, and consider the various reasons for and effects of this. Use digital imaging software to try out distortion techniques in portraiture.
- Choose someone you know well and experiment with a range of media and techniques to build up an expressive portrait rather than an exact likeness.





## TRIPTYCH – AUGUST 1972, 1972

Oil on canvas. 198 cm x 147.5 cm each. Tate

Bacon formed a series of homosexual relationships from his teens onwards and frequently painted his friends and lovers. The eight room of this exhibition is dedicated to George Dyer, with whom Bacon had a relationship for nearly a decade. Bacon claimed that they first met when Dyer tried to burgle his flat in 1963. Dyer, who had spent stretches in borstal and prison, became Bacon's lover, constant companion and his most frequent model. Dyer, who was from London's East End, was never at ease in Bacon's bohemian set of friends. Their stormy relationship was to end tragically in 1971 when, on the eve of Bacon's major retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris, Dyer committed suicide by overdosing on barbiturates in the hotel room they were sharing.

From this time onwards Bacon used the large-scale triptych (three-part painting) for his major works. The format is traditionally associated with religious subjects, but here Bacon reworks it to give gravitas to the images of Dyer.

As well as his own memory, and invention, he often also used photographs. In particular he admired the work of the nineteenth-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge whose works follow a figure through a sequence of movements, such as running or walking down a staircase, taken on a series of consecutive camera frames. Bacon also admired the *Vogue* photographer John Deakin whom he commissioned to photograph his circle of friends. Bacon used photographs of Dyer, taken by John Deakin for this work. The discovery of lists of subjects and preparatory drawings challenge the assertion that Bacon's art was spontaneous. This revelation resonates with Edgar Degas' admission that 'no art is less spontaneous than mine'; he took inordinate pains to make his paintings appear easily achieved – reworking and rubbing out to make them look the work of a moment.

This image is both naturalistic, but also deliberately artificial. The images are melting, and we are uncertain of what we see. The figure is humanoid but disfigured or distorted. For some it has the aspect of a medieval torture scene, of the condemned man whose body is being ripped open or cut up. The interior resembles a sitting room but is also a series of almost abstract planes where the smoothness of the unbroken colour contrasts with the messiness which looks both like paint itself and blood. It is both a staged domestic scene and an abstract construction.

Once we know something of the biographical detail our response to the painting causes us to see this as being about Dyer's death. Is the tortured figure a depiction of Dyer's inner suffering, Bacon's torment, or everyman's angst?

## DISCUSSION

- Why would Bacon want his paintings to seem spontaneous?
- Why do you think Bacon reached an international audience while other artists did not? What was it about his work that caused buyers – galleries, dealers, friends and interested individuals to buy it?
- Ask a friend how s/he sees this painting, then reveal the biographical information. How does this change their response of the image?

## ACTIVITY

- The triptych lends itself to a series of moments in time or different versions of an event. Make a triptych of a friend or figure in the public eye showing three important events in their life. You might think of a politician – rise, rule & fall; or a love affair - falling in and out of love and finally separation.
- Damien Hirst has said in a recent interview about Bacon "He looks into the mirror and he sees meat." Take a series of photographs of your circle of friends and/or family, and use these images to paint as naturalistic an image as possible. Experiment with smearing or brushing this figurative image and examine the result. Is it distressing? Does it make the face look damaged? Can we read it as a metaphor of what happens to all flesh?
- Bacon must have experienced several different emotions, perhaps conflicting ones, in making this painting. Can you create a three-dimensional piece that expresses similar conflicts of emotion?



Francis Bacon *Second Version of Triptych* 1944 1988  
Tate Collection, © Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2008

## SECOND VERSION OF TRIPTYCH 1944, 1988

Oil on canvas. 198 cm x 147.5 cm. Tate

Bacon's work is not about beauty as most people would understand the concept. It is raw, disturbing, and often very difficult to look at, particularly in his portrayal of people and the human condition. Asked about the explicit violence of his work he replied "Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses".

This painting is a later version of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* a work, painted within two weeks in 1944, and which Bacon considered to be his masterwork, with the hallmarks of his later paintings: the distortion, the screaming mouth, the hot red-orange colour. It has been said that the 1944 work was a response to the horrific images and experiences of World War II.

The title of the work is religious: the Crucifixion, which has been a constant subject in western visual art for centuries. It is in three parts like a medieval triptych. But Bacon was not religious and here there is no Christ and no cross, just the figures at its base. The imagery is not naturalistic: the figures are part human, part animal. In Paris in 1927 Bacon saw paintings of biomorphic images by Picasso. He said that these works led him to become a painter.

The influence of classical Greek tragedy is often cited in connection with this work. Bacon later related the figures in this work to the Eumenides, the vengeful Furies in Aeschylus' *Orestia*.

The penultimate section of this exhibition looks at Bacon's response to drama and literature. Bacon admired the poetry of T.S. Eliot, especially 'The Waste Land'. Eliot stated that great works of art had to be reinvented for each age. We can see Bacon doing just that in this work – reinventing Greek tragedy and the Christian tradition.

Bacon has made an unusual interpretation of a subject that has resonated powerfully in Western Europe over the past 2,000 years. Here we cannot tell if these figure studies are distorted with grief, wailing at the foot of the cross, or if they are mocking tormentors.

The Christian tradition is used by contemporary artists such as Damien Hirst, whose vitrines in *Romance in the Age of Uncertainty* are named after the disciples and the evangelists, and by black hip hop artists like Coolio who responds to the beauty of the language of the psalms reinvented in Gangsta's Paradise: "As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... I take a look at my life and realize there's nothing left..."

## DISCUSSION

- If you did not know the title of the first version of this work would you see it differently? What would you call it?
- Which other artists or musicians use religious text or imagery in a non-religious contexts? Find examples and discuss them.
- Can you think of powerful images you have seen in films which you might use as a still image on which to base a body of work? For instance, the artist Peter Doig used a still from the low-budget horror movie *Friday 13th* as a starting point for a number of his paintings. The resulting works are peaceful despite their source image.

## ACTIVITIES

- How would you choose to make a work of art that registered anger or grief – like a response to war, invasion, or destruction?
- Consider this piece in relation to other depictions of the crucifixion (for example *The Crucifixion* 1515 by Matthias Grunewald and *The Descent from the Cross* 1612–14 by Rubens). How do all these artists use poses, movement and facial expressions to show a range of emotions? Use role-play to explore the possible interpretations of Bacon's figures. How do these make you feel? Develop these initial exercises into a longer performance or dance piece.
- Working in collaboration with another student, build non-natural figures by creating and collating different animal parts, and making a hybrid that somehow represents both of you. What do you feel towards this hybrid? Pity, love, curiosity, affection? What happens when a whole group of these creatures are placed together? Suggest that others give an adjective to describe the individual pieces and the collective work.

A key work card exploring *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* c1944 is available within the Tate Britain Teachers' Kit through the Tate Shop.