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## ***An almost Mystical Apparition Francis Bacon in Italy, 1954-1965***

**Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco**

### **A Forgotten Tale**

A scan through the most authoritative works on Francis Bacon reveals the surprising fact that his dealings with the Italian culture have hardly been recorded. This article is therefore intended to shed light on the exhibitions and critical fortunes of the painter, document his Italian experiences and assess his influence on painters and other figures (by calling on the accounts of those who met him). Our tale begins at the Venice Biennale. In 1954, Bacon was nearly 45 years old and the twelve paintings presented by David Sylvester at the exhibition came as a shock to the artistic world. In winter 1957, one of his masterpieces appeared in the "Rome New York Art Foundation" exhibition, which transformed the Isola Tiberina into a vessel bearing delights from far-off Anglo-Saxon lands. The period between winter and spring 1958 ushered in a series of three exhibitions (Turin, Milan and Rome), while Bacon aroused the interest of three dealers (Mario Tazzoli, Beatrice Monti and Gaspero del Corso) and one critic (Luigi Carluccio). Bacon's paintings found a permanent place in Italian collections: the painter had not yet reached fifty years of age. Let us try to imagine what Italians see in his paintings, beyond the shrouding mists of London and the distance of Dublin: his tormented humanity, first of all, but also his cynical photographic or even cinematic eye. The Italians rediscover the artist's ancestors and models, but not in the field of painting: instead they rediscover the impenetrability of Samuel Beckett and the tragic dandyism of Oscar Wilde. A cursed form of hell which preserves only one feature in the modern world: painting. "I want to paint the cry before horror" declared Bacon. Each painting marks the lightening point of an action, the unrepeatable flash. Bacon's work comes with no preamble or moral: he leaps in feet first. All his painting is essentially theatrical and concerned to depict the main action. We know that Velazquez's Innocent X predated his shouting pope, but in the end the reference is purely chance. The pope stands for power, the shout could be produced by any of us, and Bacon in particular. Horror is drawn out, but a shout is as instantaneous as a photograph taken with a flash.

"Whenever I go to the butcher, I think it is extraordinary that I am not in the place of the animals", Bacon wrote. This was the crux of his painful existentialism. Although concerned with the burning questions of the post-war period, his style was not generally abstract expressionist, but linked to his interior being (blood, spittle, sperm). Again he wrote: "To us is left solely the task of aiming our essence at many different levels, going deep down where a camera cannot reach, giving a sense of reality beyond the image." Hence his use of second-hand imagery: frames from Eisenstein or Buñuel, a recording of Muybridge's movement or a painting by Velazquez. Fear of the surrounding world forced him to take refuge in other places, or made him return to his own Deep (and we can assume that his fear was not small).

The painter's Italian odyssey progressed through further stages. In 1962, a one-man show in Turin Museum exhibited about eighty paintings. Other voices were added to those of Luigi Carluccio, including those of Marco Valsecchi, Dino Buzzati, Lorenza Trucchi (who summed up Bacon's

Italian experience in a monograph in 1975). The painter stayed briefly in Rome (or rather Ostia) in 1958. This experience is described in a page by Irene Brin, which tells us more about his existential pain than a thousand analysis by critics. A one-man exhibition was held in Rome in 1965. Painters have always been his best critics: when some were asked to write about Bacon, they all said the Irishman helped confirm their chosen direction or stimulated them toward new departures. To conclude, I would like to remind you of two more brushes with Italian culture: Michelangelo Antonioni bought a painting by Bacon, and Bernardo Bertolucci used Baconian imagery in his fade-out to the credits of *Last Tango in Paris*.

It is hard to tell whether this simply provides evidence (or reconfirms) the ubiquitous presence of the Italian culture, or whether it reveals something new. It could be that Italy has, in a certain sense, reinvented the role of Francis Bacon. This is another reason why it is surprising that Francis Bacon's dealings with the Italian culture have hardly been examined in works about the artist.

*Postscript.* Our tale ends with the 1965 exhibition, but Bacon's dealings with Italy do not stop here. We know of a stay in Rome in 1978 and a meeting with Balthus, another leading light in the figurative art movement. We know less about a stay in the countryside near Bologna in 1980 (documented in an interview in the newspaper "Repubblica" of 9 November 1980): the artist (sixty-five pounds overweight) was a guest of his London doctor who owns a villa in the Calderino area. He spoke of sex for sale, and then of the hills of Bologna as remembered by Stendhal ("I hate the English countryside, so flat and bald, a shitty spectre. How long does it take to get to the first hill from my house? Sixty miles, sixty shitty miles"). Which of the local painters did he like? Giuseppe Maria Crespi: "He knows how to fuck the picture!"; and then "he was violent all the great painters have been violent. Secretly, even Raphael".

### ***Exhibitions, Critical Reviews, The Italian Sojourn***

#### ***1954***

*May-October.* Venice - *XXVII Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*. The Italian pavilions featured a one-man show on Alberto Savinio and two big rooms devoted to Lucio Fontana and Giuseppe Capogrossi. The international pavilions featured a retrospective on Gustave Courbet, Ben Shahn and Willem de Kooning for the United States, a retrospective on Paul Klee on the German pavilion, while the French pavilion displayed the work of the Fauves, a room devoted to fantastic art and another to abstract art.

In the pavilion devoted to British art, the British Council put on an exhibition featuring three important names on the British artistic map. Forty works by Ben Nicholson (presented by Herbert Read), twenty-two works by Lucian Freud (presented by John Rothenstein) and a room with twelve works by Francis Bacon, presented by David Sylvester. This was the first time he had been seen in Italy, Bacon was nearly forty-five years old. His portrait could be seen at the exhibition, in a painting by Lucian Freud (now at the Tate Gallery).

«Beings extend towards us out of claustrophobic scenes closed by drapes. Those spectral, ambiguous and unexpected presences dominate any background against which they feature, making them look like the shadows of real beings. They are as frightening as they are fascinating, because these are creatures face to face with their tragic fate.

We are shown variations on Velázquez's portrait of a pope, as if the image could be made to achieve tragic stature simply by adding majestic robes. Bacon has created a tragic protagonist completely of our times, based on newspaper illustrations depicting politicians and industrial magnates. Many of these figures open their mouths to scream, with the demented shriek of a mad dictator, or the

terrible cry of Oedipus, Don Giovanni or the nurse in the Potemkin. The other figures sit immobile, meditating on their own imminent ruin.

If these images shock us, it is because we are forced into awareness of their reality. The shock caused by contact is due to the fact that they implicitly act out a drama and evoke events in the history of mankind. Our chaotic present and tormented past are truly often mixed, as is the case with *The Waste Land* - in the long term it is the oppressive weight of objective reality which follows us. Because these are not simply the ghosts of a literary image. Bacon is not simply the last in a longline of English romantic artists with a taste for the macabre: painters by name but illustrators by deed. He is a painter who descends in a direct line from Rembrandt, Goya and Soutine. What he has to communicate, he communicates through the painting itself. The last image in a set of three heads, whose order could represent the rise to power of a politician and his fall, shows us a man in disarray. We are left in some doubt as to whether the features of the face have been ruined by a horrible wound or simply obscured by a hand raised in a gesture of pain: but this is not important. The disintegration of form acts directly on our nerves and is sufficient to evoke the tragedy without need for explanations. Whether the ambiguity exists or not, this avoidance of description persists throughout all his recent paintings, of which it constitutes a persistent feature, albeit less spectacular in other cases. He takes inspiration from the uncertain photographs of newspapers, where visual events are translated directly into a pictorial language without the interference of voiced ideas. Bacon has resolved the problem, which is an essential problem in painting, of how to capture a reality without naming it explicitly.»

**Works exhibited:** 54-56. *Studies for a more vast Composition*, 1945, oil and pastel on board. London, Tate Gallery; 57. *Landscape with Figure*, 1946, London, Tate Gallery; 58. *Painting*, 1946, oil and tempera. New York, Museum of Modern Art (exhibited until November) [reproduced, number 96]; 58a. *Painting*, 1954. Exhibited after August; 59. *Study for Portrait*, 1949. Uckfield, Mr and Mrs Grigg coll.; 60. *Study of Figure*, 1949. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.; *Variation on Velázquez*, 1951. Aldbourne, J. Bomford Esq. coll.; 62. *Variations on Velázquez*, 1951. London, Contemporary Art Society; 63. *Study for Portrait*, 1953; 64. *Study of human Head*, 1953. Sphinx, 1954.

The Historical Contemporary Art Archives of the Venice Biennale contain a group of eleven photographs of works by Francis Bacon from London (copyright Tate Gallery), which largely correspond to the work exhibited. This was the occasion when Luigi Carluccio wrote his first article about Bacon.

«Bacon's painting may be viewed in terms of the true home territory of surrealism: anarchy. An anarchy spiced with many jarring notes. The morality, or rather the "the moralities", of Bacon's paintings are so many acts of distinction, of opposition. Bacon is against the army, dogma and plutocracy. He rubbishes war, gold and hierarchy. He is against rhetoric, even though his images sometimes achieve dimensions worthy of oratory, or even symbol. [...]

Bacon succeeds in harmonizing the two different terms of an allegory, and in this way surpasses current surrealism, which usually works by a cinematic form of cutting and editing. We may compare his work with the sequence from *Strike* by Eisenstein where scenes from a butcher's shop are juxtaposed with scenes depicting a bloodbath among the workers (this memory crops up as a reference, because the terms adopted in *Painting*, 1946 are the same: bloodbath and butchery).

Bacon adopts a contrasting, extremely open procedure to produce a series of snapshot-like

images, which give his painting the feel of something occurring in time.

Two of his four *Variations on Velázquez* (from the *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*) are exhibited in Venice. These paintings are typical expressions of Bacon's plastic imagination, which in this case documents figures as almost mystical apparitions. His figures contain all the potential for such mysticism within themselves, waiting to be discovered. The paintings also typify his manner of examining a temporal as well as a spatial perspective. [...]

The works show a figure who has not yet grasped his majesty (or who seeks to play it down?). The creature opens its mouth, smiles, yawns, scratches the tip of its nose and, suddenly hostile, extends its arms in a gesture of intolerance. It may be throwing something at us, or the gesture itself could be crying to us: "stop looking at me, stop boring me".

All Bacon's characters scream, moan or simply yawn. The painter encloses them in a "cage" formed out of four cursory marks on the canvas. Then he forces us to look at them as though they were in a trap, to monitor their contortions. [...] The painting chronicles the continual psychological contraction in detail, it becomes emotional and alternates moments of tenderness with moments of violence. It fits itself like a glove to the delicate sensitivity of the artist, who expresses himself now in veiled undertones, now with glorious disdain for form and tones. His works are always depicted in the stark light of a perverse lucidity - half way between comedy and tragedy - because Bacon's characters seem to be held in the lightening glare of a flash lamp. A great painter, then, of the type who loves to use rapid slashing brush-strokes. He meters the pressure of his hand with exact movements whether he wishes to brush the surface of the canvas like a feather or rend it deeply. [...]

**Reviews:** H. Read, in "La Biennale", Venice, April-June. J. Russel, in "The Sunday Times", London, 20 June, London, 21 June. G. S. B., in "Il Giornale d'Italia", Rome, 27 June. L. Carluccio, in "Gazzetta del Popolo", Turin, 19 September. A. Podestà, "Emporium", September.

### **1957 - 1958**

*Winter*. Rome, Piazza S. Bartolomeo all'Isola Tiberina, Rome - New York Art Foundation. *New Trends in British Art*. Presentation by Herbert Read and Lawrence Alloway.

The exhibition was organised by the "Rome - New York Art Foundation". The works were selected by Lawrence Alloway. Bacon was represented by *Study from the Human Figure*, 1954, oil on canvas, 115 x 150 cm. (Coll. Antony Denney, Esq.) [reproduced]. From Alloway's introduction:

«The aim of this exhibition is to sample the fresh, emergent elements in British art in the 1950s: they are, as I read the current situation, 1, a new definition of the human image, and, 2, a worthwhile contribution to the style of painterly abstraction. [...] in Bacon the imperfect visibility of a dark old master painting is combined with the low legibility of newspaper reproduction to give to a cast of male figure a provocative status somewhere between mystery and immediacy.»

### **1958**

*23 January -10 February*. Turin, Galleria Galatea, *Francis Bacon*.

Francis Bacon was exhibited for the second time in Italy. Eight paintings from the previous five years were exhibited in conjunction with the Hanover Gallery of London (later on, these moved to the Galleria dell'Ariete in Milan and the Galleria dell'Obelisco in Rome). Luigi Carluccio wrote the introduction to the Turin exhibition:

«Little is known of the life and work of Francis Bacon. An aura of silence surrounds him, which is difficult to penetrate. We know that he was born in Dublin, that he lives near

London and that his first one-man show was put on in London less than ten years ago in 1949, and that he is a teacher. He may owe his highly idiosyncratic position within the field of contemporary painting to the fact that he was brought up in the provinces of Ireland rather than England and the fact that he is self-taught, a solitary figure. It could also be that the sort of imagination capable of producing images of such rare eccentricity somehow realises how impossible it would be to ally itself with another person or movement. Perhaps these factors have conditioned that independence, that solitude - and have provided grounds for the germination of one of the most interesting phenomena art has seen grow up in recent years outside the natural training ground of a school or accepted art programme.

The painting of Francis Bacon certainly takes us by surprise because of its violent refusal to be viewed according to the normal canons of taste - and also because of its huge imaginative power and the authority which comes from the fact that the painter cannot be easily associated with other movements. [...]

The background in Bacon's paintings is like an empty blackboard, but we may hazard a guess that the artist's imagination has been aroused not simply by the ordinary repertoire of British culture and environmental memory but also by the stormy brush-strokes of Turner, certain less conformist aspects of Whistler, [...], the mystic lunar fairy tales of Samuel Palmer and, closer in time to Bacon himself, Richard Sickert's later works (produced after 1930).

Bacon's work displays a sense of degradation which seems to reflect on a cruel twist of fate. But perhaps this represents only one way of looking at the world and defining it as it is. In this Bacon shares something with other contemporary English artists [...].

The pressure exercised by events on the conscience of artists may be assessed in only one way. It must be concluded that the war fell on the generation of young English artists like a dark cloud, like a vortex of black terrors - hammering and obsessive. Within that darkness, an unknown force sprang out of concealment. Men must have continued to feel the repercussions of that loosened psychological mechanism within their guts, and that release continued to reproduce itself automatically, almost in a will to find release from anguish through the use of allusive forms converted into the cabalistic shape of totems, idols, gestures, objects and names. One long alarm cry of human experience too long abandoned, of joy and compassion.

Bacon belonged to that generation. His works belong to that experience. But he occupied a separate place, because he was one of those extraordinarily lonely and solitary artists who materialise from time to time within the world of art. [...]

Bacon always applies his brush marks with exactly metered strokes and pressure. Sometimes he applies the merest hint of porous veiling or a cursory slash of colour which sometimes seems inadequate in terms of quantity and variety. Bacon makes few brush marks over large brilliantly inked, clear areas, sometimes on natural canvas or canvas barely tinged with a watery wash. Sometimes his brush strokes are spread out meticulously or grouped together in a convulsive, overlapping agglomeration. The latter method does not prevail over the former, but conveys a temporal dimension on the subject while the image acquires enhancement and relief. The slow yet rapid motion appears uncertain, as if summoned up by the labile nature of ectoplasm. [...] We are let in no doubt that all Bacon's figures are almost unbearably alive, mobile and represent an aggressive presence which ponders ironically from afar [...]. A figure painted by Bacon is always a presence that repels and attracts us. We are drawn into its web despite the menace, sometimes horrendous in its effect, because the vitality released from the plastic portrayal forces us into awareness of its reality.

Bacon's painting is not designed to release the imagination. Instead it captures the imagination within a space which mechanically channels it to the required focus through a series of references [...] governed by a network of cleverly arranged magnetic forces. In figurative terms also, the space within which our imagination may move coincides with the space where Bacon's figures move or would like to move. This dual and ambiguous sensation gives rise to an initial state of anxiety. It is a closed, claustrophobic space, oppressed by drapes. It is a concrete measure, a standard volume whose vanishing point rarely lies outside our vision. This volume is very often identified and delimited within a dimension smaller than the one the canvas may objectively contain, almost as if to render the physical shortcoming more intense and accentuate this mental discomfort. [...]

At this point we could return to the theme of cruelty, or we could even return to the theme of anguish and solitude, and the problem of mental and metaphysical origins. Yet the harmony between the yellows and the violets, the sandy colour of the canvas and the clear blue background portray is painted with so many delicate harmonies, the tragic stature of the character is portrayed in plastic terms with much authority and immediacy.»

**Works exhibited:** 1. *Study for portrait of Pope no. 1*, 1953, 152x118 cm. [reproduced]; 2. *Man in Blue reclining*, 1953-54, 154x118 cm. [reproduced]; 3. *Study for Man*, 1954, 152x 118 cm.; 4. *Man in blue, profile*, 1953-54, 152x118 cm.; 5. *Study for Portrait no. 10*, 1953-54, 198x138 cm.; 6. *Study for Figure no. 5*, 1956, 152x118 cm.; 7. *Study for Portrait of P.L. no. 1*, 1957, 198x138 cm.; 8. *Study for Figure no. 2*, 1953, 198x138 cm.

**Reviews:** L. Carluccio, in "Gazzetta del Popolo", Turin, 6 February. O.A., Francis Bacon and Nicola Galante, in "Emporium", April.

*17 February - 5 March.* Milan, Galleria dell'Ariete, *Bacon*. Presentation by Toni del Renzio. The works exhibited were the same as in Turin. The work entitled *Study for Portrait of Pope no. 1*, 1953, was reproduced in the catalogue.

«Bacon resembles a great jazz virtuoso, who can take a well known melody and transform the theme without losing the harmonic bases. It is all the same to him whether he bases his work on a painting by another artist or not. He invents one brush-stroke after another in a stupendous flight of bravura. He suddenly reveals an almost mobile and imaginative image in a crescendo of passion and commitment.»

Two perceptive criticisms are worthy of note: one pro-Bacon (Valsecchi) and the other against (Dorffles).

«If you open the door and go into the gallery, the Ariete to be precise, you will find yourself among a crowd of characters who appear to dose in on the spectator through their very imminence. They stand out against black backgrounds like blackboards. These unlit subterranean chambers extend to the extreme limit of the painting. The figures' nerves appear so tightly stretched you almost want them to break out into a cry so that they may find relief because their pain is so apparent [...].

[...] Perhaps it is only natural that these paintings should arouse immediate controversy through their very nature. Very little is known about Bacon due to the indulgence displayed by British society towards concealment and solitude. He came up through artistic channels

the wrong way, jarring against the accepted canons of European art. His work is reminiscent of the Paris school of art, with its neither abstract nor expressionistic iconography, and wholly agrees with this movement. This is not due to a voluntary intellectual stance, however, but rather due to the immediacy of his solutions. He rejects all other cultural demands to respond to other motifs which are suggested, as I said, by an emotional source of a completely different kind. This source could be termed romantic, if we really must proffer definitions. His work is therefore aware of these secret voices from within, and his images are painted without interference from formal rules. These general Romantic terms suggest a spontaneous and effusive tendency towards a nordic and typically British imagination, yet with its edges blurred by the unreal, the obsessive and the visionary. [...] We could think of certain disturbing figures by Blake as a cultural reference: yet Blake's paintings depict idealised battles of the giants, mythical beings struck by metaphysical rage. These figures of Bacon are men of the present. One could even say that his humanity has experienced war. British society is seen as a happy, benevolent, proud society - somewhat abstract in its rules of decorum - suddenly struck by terror and dark obsessions. All the misery of a fight to the death launched against that benevolent society of tinkling china. With this contrast, then, little wonder that the war is more cruelly wounding and the painful edge of life such a shocking experience.»

(M. Valsecchi)

«The current fascination with this over-praised English artist who is claimed to represent a new expressionist (rather than abstract) painting movement appears more ill-founded than ever. Bacon's main artistic interest lies in an evident sadomasochistic satisfaction in portraying morbidly fantastical individuals - rapists, drug addicts, cocaine addicts or perverts (in all probability, at any rate to judge from their disquieting and pathological expressions). His work calls to mind that love of the macabre, the truculent and the abnormal which surrealism has already embraced using different techniques. Yet even though this British artist displays technical skill and an undeniable psychological charge, his gifts are insufficient to translate the Freudian seeds of its shrewd yet dangerous author into an effective flowering.»

(G. Dorfles)

**Reviews:** M. Lepore, in "Corriere d'informazione", Milan, 20 February. A. Dragone, in "Il popolo nuovo", 21 February. M. Valsecchi, in "Il Giorno", Milan, 1 March. M. Lepore, in "Visto", Milan, 8 March. M. Valsecchi, in "Il Tempo", Milan, 13 March. G. Dorfles, in "Letteratura," no. 31-32.

*10 March.* Rome, Galleria dell'Obelisco, *Francis Bacon*. Presentation by Toni del Renzio. The works exhibited were the same as those shown in Turin. Two works are reproduced in the catalogue: *Man in blue reclining*, 1953-54 and *Study for Portrait of Pope no. 1*, 1953.

An important comment was made by another painter, Gianfranco Ferroni (in the catalogue *6 Pittori a Milano 1955-1960*, Galleria Eunomia, Milan 1970).

«One important event for me that year was my spotting a small reproduction of a painting by Bacon in a magazine. What happened in 1958 was enough to make you despair: even my companions from via Brera were striking out in different directions and allowing themselves to be tempted by abstract expressionism. I felt alone and a complete failure. My work had produced only mixed results to that date (actually, I have recently destroyed most of the

paintings I produced during that period). Well, that painting by Bacon was enough to give me new hope. It proved to me that other artists I had never even heard of believed in the idea of portraying man in a new, real world. It was a step in the direction that we had been following for years, albeit not very systematically...»

Lorenza Trucchi's first comments on Bacon are also worth reading:

«In recent years, realism has passed through very discouraging periods. Yet here we are faced with an artist who manages to remain faithful to tradition while still incorporating the most important aspects of our reality. He does not lose himself in technical problems but pinpoints certain features of content, often revealing their flaws. In this sense, Bacon almost always appears to live more in the present than Buffet, for example, whose return to the forms of medieval times is somewhat of an intellectual contrivance, even though executed with great style. Despite Ben Shahn's essential differences in style and quality, he nevertheless seems the painter who comes closest to Bacon. This is due to the perceptive way Shahn succeeds in drawing us into an anti-modern and existential account which is both socially and humanly dramatic. Kafka's work could be the literary equivalent of this form of painting, which is made up of shadowy characters and so full of romantic, even surreal touches. Bacon's pictorial technique, on the other hand, takes its inspiration from the great masters of Spanish art, from Greco to Velázquez, and the swift brush-strokes of Degas and Toulouse Lautrec. The backdrop for this unusual and obsessive portrait gallery, however, comes from a completely different source. It is taken from newspapers and photographic archives, from the mysterious and desolate anonymous images which surround us every day and are a familiar part of the hectic and sometimes cruel life typical of the modern world we inhabit.»

Irene Brin, owner (together with her husband Gaspero del Corso, of the Galleria dell'Obelisco), wrote an important note on Bacon ("La fiera letteraria", 24 January 1965). In this, she remembers the painter's stay in Rome (or rather Ostia) and the opening of his show in Rome.

«The years passed by. I think he arrived one February, and I think that the Countess Pecci-Blunt invited him to stay in her palace in Ara Coeli. She immediately asked us to make sure the house was ready. It had recently been left by another painter and the corners were still full of rags stained with paint and turpentine, dust and old newspapers. It rained on the garden in front of the house, it rained through the roof, it rained through the broken refrigerator and into the kitchen, water rained onto the bathtub through a leaking tap. I was ashamed and explained that everything would be put to rights immediately [...]. He pressed his face against the glass and looked at the exotic palms of Rome bending under the strength of the wind: "You are awfully nice, but you see..."

I had the feeling that this studio would never be repaired to his liking and this was apparently true, but not for the reasons I believed: "If the sun came back tomorrow, those palms, those ferns... would be terribly cheerful. Don't you think that they would be terribly cheerful? I have been told that near the sea there are villages which are really suburban, really peripheral. Perhaps I would be happier there?" Next day we set out for Ostia with a fistful of introductions and his friend, who had arrived in one piece. He could have been almost a twin to Bacon and the others. He was gaunt too, with a slightly heavy-looking face, like someone who only eats occasionally and then too much. He and Bacon both wore an



acid green scarf, big knitted gloves and a hooded jacket, thus increasing a resemblance which was lost in anonymity.

It kept raining, and it was impossible to imagine anything more miserably suburban. [...] Every time a doorkeeper or landlady opened the entrance, Bacon would run towards the window and begin to lift dusty curtains or move creaking blinds. Usually he saw the cracked and rusty wall of another house, other blinds and other lace curtains. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders under his jacket. This was not it.

At last we found two rooms with a shower and use of a kitchen. The landlady allowed use of the hotplates and the shower room did not include any other conveniences. From balcony, most miserably of all, one could see only mud-covered ruins which had obviously been there for years. The place smelled of ruin. The sound was that of ruins. I believe the monthly rent was ten thousand lira. At any rate, it was very low and I paid in advance because Bacon wished to move in straight away, without going back to Rome. I took his friend back to the city to collect the luggage and begged him (unsuccessfully) to get a kettle, a stove, some provisions.

In any case, it would have been useless. The next day the two Englishmen came to my house to tell me that they were going back to England. Ostia was definitely too cheerful, too mediterranean. Francis would never be able to pick up his brush. Perhaps they would return for Bacon's exhibition.

Yet they never returned. The exhibition opened in 1958 and was an incredibly deserted vernissage. Apart from the postman, no one came all afternoon except Renato Guttuso. Literally no one else, not even the usual friends or the people who turn up to every Roman exhibition out of curiosity. I mean no one, even the beggars. Bacon's bishops were for our eyes only in the absolute emptiness - and no one bought them.

I use this memory to console myself when few people turn up to an opening.»

**Reviews:** G. Pensabene, in "Il Secolo", Rome, 1 March. "L'Unità", Rome, 21 March. L. Trucchi, in "La fiera letteraria", Rome, 23 March.

### **1959**

8 - 31 March. Milan, Galleria dell'Ariete, *Premio dell'Ariete. Selezione biennale di pittura internazionale, 20 Quadri 1959.*

The jury was made up of Ennio Morlotti, Sir Herbert Read, Franco Russoli, Michel Tapié and Antoni Tàpies. Francis Bacon was invited (together with Burri) by another painter, Ennio Morlotti. Works by Karel Appel, Alberto Burri, Sam Francis, Franz Kline, Graham Sutherland and others were exhibited.

**Works exhibited:** *Seated Man, orange Background*, 1959, oil, 140x154 cm. [reproduced].

### **1961**

June. Turin, Italia 61, Da Boldini a Pollock - Pittura e scultura del XX secolo. Mostra della Moda Stile Costume. By Franco Russoli, Luigi Carluccio, Gabriella Russoli, Marco Valsecchi, Michel Tapié de Celeyran, Tullio d'Albisola.

Franco Russoli presented Francis Bacon in the section on *Realism, Neue Sachlichkeit, Socialist Realism, Psychological Realism.*

**Works exhibited:** *Nude in the Grass*, oil on canvas, Milan, Dr. V. Olcese coll. [reproduced on page

120].

27 June. Rome, Galleria La Medusa, *Paragone: Inghilterra - Stati Uniti*.

A Portrait by Francis Bacon, oil on canvas, 55x65 cm [reproduced] was exhibited together with works by English and American artists (Moore, Sutherland, Pollock, Tobey).

**Reviews:** M. Volpi, in "Avanti!", Rome, 22 July. F. Scropo, in "L'Unità", Milan, 29 November.

November 21-22. He holds his first public sale at Finarte Auction House held by Casimiro Porro in Milan. In his first catalogue the following Francis Bacon's work is reproduced:

102. *Portrait*, 51x61 cm. Previously Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago.

## 1962

11 September to 14 October. Turin, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, *Bacon*.

This one-man show was organised under the patronage of the British Embassy in Rome. Vittorio Viale presented the eighty-three paintings displayed at the Tate Gallery in London (24 May to 1 July) "with slight variations". The introduction was written by Luigi Carluccio: Bacon, the Power and the Glory.

« This Francis Bacon exhibition, this breathtaking stream of paintings, will come as a hard blow for the Italian public, a blow directed straight at its deep-rooted complacency when it comes to rose-tinted manifestations of the spirit. The most daring forays into the avant-garde are welcome here provided they can be seen to possess a certain mellifluousness of inspiration. In half a century of figurative art, the Italians have only come up with a handful of "unpleasant" figures. The popular vulgarity of the artist is apparent only in certain "nudes", certain "portraits", and still more in certain "self portraits" by Rosai. The works of Savinio do frequently portray scenes of horror, admittedly: but with tongue always firmly in cheek, and a sense of highly controlled and stylish irony. [...]

The Italian audience will experience an even greater shock because this exhibition puts before them, suddenly and all at once, a new world of contemporary figurative art. Even the slightest fragment of this is shocking enough to upset the common sensibility. Probably few Italians will remember the paintings by Bacon exhibited in the English pavilion at the 1954 Biennale and Italy's idiosyncratic artistic map makes it extremely improbable that Bacon's work has made much impression outside a small circle of open-minded art lovers and art critics who are ready to accept that reality can be used to trigger a sense of the fantastic - despite the fact that Bacon's works should have reached a wider audience after a small one-man show at the Galleria Galatea in Turin. Yet Bacon's reality is a visibly threatened, humiliating and uncomfortable reality due to the all-pervading sense of disquiet in his works. This disquiet is closely linked to a knowledge of individual frailty and a piercing contrast between the instinctive, animal-like desire for life, energy and power - and the defeat of a perennial, endlessly renewed fall. [...]

Bacon's world does not stop at a simple show of perversion but enters into our awareness with all its artifice. At a certain point we become aware that the pitiful chaos portrayed by the painter is a reality which seethes beneath many ordinary, every-day appearances. We realise that the situation of horror which Bacon analyses without pity or qualms has a well-identified historical reference: war, with all its disasters nightmares and seeds of disturbance sewn but not consumed in souls. It is also true to say that war never ceases to exist. The

absence of judgement, in the ordinary sense of the word, which demands a distinction between judge and judged, appears to show that Bacon also possesses this awareness.»

**Works exhibited:** [all works are reproduced] 1. *Portrait*, c. 1930; 2. *Crucifixion*, 1932; 3. *Crucifixion*, 1933; 4. *Figures in Garden*, c. 1936; 5. *Three Studies for Figures for the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944; 6. *Study for human Figure at the Foot of a Cross II*, 1945-46; 7. *Mary Magdalene*, 1945-46; 8. *Head II*, 1949; 9. *Head IV*, 1949; 10. *Fragments of a Crucifixion*, 1950; 11. *Study of Nude*, 1951; 12. *Pope*, 1951; 13. *Pope*, 1951; 14. *Pope with Canopy*, 1951; 15. *Study of Dog*, 1952; 16. *Landscape*, 1952; 17. *Landscape*, 1952; 18. *Dog*, 1952; 19. *Man kneeling on Grass*, 1952; 20. *Study of Nude*, 1952-53; 21. *Two Figures at a Window*, 1953; 22. *Man eating a Chicken Leg*, 1953; 23. *Study for Portrait*, 1953; 24. *Study of Baboon*, 1953; 25. *Two Wrestlers*, 1953; 26. *Three Studies of a human Head*, 1953; 27. *Study for Figure II*, 1953-54; 28. *Study for Portrait III*, 1953; 29. *Study for Portrait IV*, 1953; 30. *Man in Blue IV*, 1954; 31. *Sphinx*, 1954; 32. *Study from the Human Figure*, 1954; 33. *Pope*, 1954; 34. *Mandrinking*, 1954; 35. *Pope*, 1954; 36. *Head of Man with Arm raised*, 1955; 37. *Head*, 1955; 38. *Study for Portrait I*, 1955; 39. *Study for Portrait II*, 1955; 40. *Portrait of R.J. Sainsbuiy*, 1955; 41. *Sketch for Portrait of Lisa*, 1955; 42. *Chimpanzee*, 1955; 43. *Portrait of Lisa*, 1956; 44. *Self Portrait*, 1956; 45. *Owls*, 1956; 46. *Figures in a Landscape*, 1956; 47. *Arab with Child*, 1956; 48. *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh I*, 1956; 49. *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh II*, 1957; 50. *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh III*, 1957; 51. *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh IV*, 1957; 52. *Van Gogh about to paint*, 1957; 53. *Portrait of Lisa*, 1957; 54. *Study for Portrait of P. L.N.*, 1957; 55. *Self Portrait*, 1958; 56. *Pope*, 1958; 57. *Nude*, 1958; 58. *Man seated, orange Background*, 1959; 59. *Reclining Figure no. 1*, 1959; 60. *Reclining Figure no. 3*, 1959; 61. *Reclining Figure no. 4*, 1959; 62. *Two Figures in a Room*, 1959; 63. *Head of Man no. 1*, 1958; 64. *Head of Man no. 3*, 1959; 65. *Head of Man*, 1959; 66. *Pope, from Velázquez (Daria)*, 1959; 67. *Child falling*, 1960; 68. *Figure in Movement*, 1960; 69. *Head of Woman*, 1960; 70. *Head of Woman no. 3*, 1960; 71. *Head of Man*, 1960; 72. *Man with Arm raised*, 1960; 73. *Homage to Van Gogh*, 1960; 74. *Small Head on Black Ground no. 3*, 1961; 75. *Paralysed Child walking on all fours (from Muybridge)*, 1961; 76. *Red Figure on a step*, 1962; 77 a-f. *Six Studies for a Pope I-VI*, 1961; 78. *Crouching Nude*, 1961; 79. *Nude*, 1961; 80. *Woman on red Divano*, 1961; 81. *Two Figures*, 1961; 82. *Man on grey Couch*, 1962; 83. *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, 1962.

A painter (Filippo Scropo) and a visionary writer (Dino Buzzati) have also written about Bacon.

«Bacon has found a way to satisfy his desire to remain aloof from the plethora of would-be or true avant-garde movements. He violates all the expected rules of composition, tone and space. He even rejects the normal practice of painting on the white side of the canvas to use the natural-coloured cloth on the other side. Against a light background wash, his tragic characters are depicted bleeding or unpleasantly contorted and grimacing within isolating cages, which are suggested by sketching pale lines on the darkness. These images of the pope, these numerous portraits with no features that bear any resemblance to beings that lived or have ever lived are the obsessive emblems of a definitive deformation or process of bestialisation. [...]

Bacon's work is an extreme romantic attempt to appeal to us through the typical eccentricity of surreal imagery, which avoids the trap of dipping into the world of the fantastic or Freudian symbology. [...]

This courageous exhibition should nevertheless be seen and enjoyed despite the apparent repulsion of Bacon's iconography and the striking monotony of some studies for portraits

of ordinary beings or popes. The clear images taken from photographs or film stills are often converted into paintings of great poetry.»

(F. Scropo)

«*Why he is important* - Bacon is important for the following reasons:

Because he shows us that today's painters may be extremely modern or even avant-garde without being abstract.

Because he has created a fantastic world which is as proverbial as the worlds of de Chirico, Picasso or Chagall.

Because he expresses, perhaps like no one else, the angst of the modern world, in other words the complex of tragic sensations and feelings that technical progress and mass civilisation have taken to their extreme.

*A regret* - The Italians should have been more aware of Francis Bacon: he even had a one-man show at the Venice Biennale in 1954 after all (he made such a strong impression on me then that I decided I wanted to buy one of his paintings and even asked the prices. I could have bought one for a few hundred thousand lira but I was so mean and undecided that I let the opportunity go. Now I would have a small fortune).

*What Bacon paints* - Think of the great and powerful of the earth, great industrialists, men of state, dictators, generals and so on. Their faces are victorious and self-assured. But what lies behind their faces? What are they really? We open the Pandora's box of their hidden secrets and look below. We see a terrible pit of desolation, squalor, misery and bodily suffering together with dark, sinister, unsatisfied desires. Bacon paints this very desolate view of man. His works are mainly portraits, whose faces stand out in the middle of gloomy, sinister and completely empty rooms. They are popes, industrialists, big businessmen or heads of state. At least that is their appearance. Bacon has chosen this subject because it offers a stronger, more bitter contrast between the apparent and the real. It is obvious, however, that he is speaking of the misery of man in general terms.

*From photos and films* - Many paintings are a poetic development of motifs taken from photographs and film sequences. The works of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who specialised in moving animals and human figures, gave him several inspirations. This provides us with a key for explaining how he managed to depict the breakdown of features and the disintegration of material with so much cruel imagination. Entirely calm, innocent photographic subjects are transformed into macabre and fantastic instances of supplication. In Bacon's eyes, for example, two wrestlers give rise to a horrendous and sadistic crime scene. Another curiosity, the shouting mouths (one of his Leitmotifs) are taken from a close-up of the governess in the famous massacre on the stairs scene in *Cruiser Potemkin* by Eisenstein. The most terrifying work, of those exhibited, is very recent: *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*. This work takes the form of great panels on a red background. Bacon has used scenes of butchery to denote the mortification of flesh. A horrible heap of mangled human flesh lies on a sort of bed in the centre. Something which must have been a head can be seen: and a mouth with teeth bared and contorted in a grimace of the death rictus. Bacon is certainly not a happy painter. Yet I walked out of the exhibition feeling as though I had listened to beautiful, moving music.

(D. Buzzati)

«This form of painting is far from the idea of a realistic portrayal or any intention to formulate a message by depicting an event of particular importance. Instead it is based on themes of isolation and existential inaction. We may therefore ask ourselves to what point it may be assumed as a point of reference, or even as a model, for experiences based on realistic events - or which set out to meet the needs of reporting and recounting. [...] These works are therefore concerned with a screening of individual experiences. Although only sketched in essential terms, they show effectively that reference to Bacon's work may be considered justified where it proposes, in current terminology, a theme expressly motivated by a problematic awareness of existence (which may be, though I doubt it really is today, a way of placing oneself beyond instead of beside abstract expressionism). In situations where this form of art is adopted as part of a dialectic approach to the problem of existence, or worse as a tool of unclouded yet faint-hearted rhetoric (and this is the salient feature of "Baconism") it is clear that this derives from a total, even insulting critical misunderstanding of Bacon's work.»

**Reviews:** S. M., in "La Biennale", Venice, Rome, March. "L'Unità", Milan, 7 September. L. Carluccio, in "Gazzetta del Popolo", Turin, 11 September. M. Bernardi, in "La Stampa", Turin 11 September. F. Scropo, in "L'Unità", Milan, 11 September. A. Dragone, in "Stampa Sera", Turin, 11 September. M. Valsecchi, in "Il Giorno", Milan, 15 September. M. De Micheli, in "L'Unità", Milan, 22 September. D. Buzzati, in "Corriere d'Informazione", 13/14 October. D. Morosini, in "Il Paese", 16 October. R. T. "Emporium", October.

*10 October - 6 November.* Milan, Galleria Galatea, *Francis Bacon*. Presentation by Luigi Carluccio. One-man exhibition of ten paintings between 1945 and 1960. The beginning and end of Luigi Carluccio's text is given below:

«This group of paintings by Francis Bacon has not been included in the big retrospective exhibition put on at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin because they were collected with the aim of exhibiting them at the Galatea Gallery in Milan. These works will give the people of Milan a better understanding of the work of one of the most representative and new personalities within contemporary art. [...] As we can see, Bacon's work displays a great freedom of expression and a deep sense of continuity. Freedom has its roots in his original approach and partly in his disregard for any convention, in his drive for sincerity. Continuity is based on the force of feeling profoundly etched in his conscience. The track left by human existence, from beginning to end, from the first to the last painting, is blazed as a trail of brutality, tribulation, desolation and squalor. The man depicted by Bacon is a man seen at a stage in his degradation, which is unstoppable because it arises due to his frailty; because he is in the centre of a humiliating, discomfiting and threatening world. This is a man who has exhausted all his physical and spiritual resources in a struggle, even though he already knows the outcome: defeat.»

**Works exhibited:** 1. *Landscape with Automobile*, 1945-46, oil, 145x128 cm; 2. *Gorilla at Microphones*, 1945-46, oil, 145x128 cm; 3. *Reclining Nude*, 1953, oil, 175x130 cm; 4. *Man in Blue*, 1953, oil, 153x117 cm; 5. *Study for Portrait. Head of Cardinal*, 1953, oil, 61x50 cm; 6. *Man in Blue*, 1954, oil, 198x137 cm; 7. *Skull of Gorilla*, 1956-57, oil, 152x119 cm; 8. *Portrait*, 1958, oil, 60x50 cm; 9. *Head*, 1959, oil, 74x67 cm; 10. *Figure seated on Couch*, 1960, oil, 198x141 cm.

**Reviews:** M. Valsecchi, in "Il Giorno", 25 October. L. Borgese, in "Corriere della Sera", Milan, 28 October. "La Notte", Milan, 6 November.

### **1963**

*16 February - 3 March.* Bologna, Galleria La Loggia, *Francis Bacon. Graham Sutherland.* Presentation by Giorgio Ruggieri: "Not an easy painter and not one who puts us into a happy frame of mind; but certainly one of the highest and most prominent poetic voices of the contemporary world".

**Works exhibited:** *Reclining Nude*, 1953; *Study for a Portrait, Man in Blue*, 1954; *Study for a Portrait, Head of Cardinal*, 1953; *Landscape with Automobile*, 1945-46; *Skull of Gorilla*, 1956-57; *Head*, 1959; *Nude*, 1960; *Man with Head wound*, 1955 [reproduced with complete titles: oil on canvas 99x114 cm].

**Reviews:** "Nazione sera", Florence 16 and 23 February. C. Corazza, in "L'Avvenire d'Italia", Bologna, 3 March. L. Lambertini, in "Gazzetta di Parma", Parma, 7 March.

*16 March - 5 April.* Naples, Galleria in Centro, *Francis Bacon. Graham Sutherland.* The introduction was by Luigi Carluccio. The works were the same as those exhibited in Bologna.

**Reviews:** Barbieri, in "Industria meridionale", Naples, 21 March. P. Ricci, in "L'Unità", Milan, 30 March. L. Vergine, in "Il Pungolo (Nuovo)", Naples, 4 April. L. Vergine, in "La fiera letteraria", Rome, 7 April.

*12 March - 6 April.* Milan, Galleria d'Arte Galatea, *Artisti italiani e stranieri.* A work by Francis Bacon exhibited together with works by Sironi, De Pisis, Casorati, Modigliani, Morandi, Campigli, Manzù, Brancusi, Giacometti, Schlemmer.

### **1964**

*May - October.* Venice, *XXXII Biennale International Art Exhibition.* Each country exhibited masterpieces from their respective contemporary art museums at the Biennale in a pavilion entitled *Arte d'oggi nei musei*, presented by Giulio Carlo Argan.

Accompanied by a text by Sir John Rothenstein, the Tate Gallery presented *Study for Portrait on folding Bed*, 1963, by Francis Bacon in room XII. The painting was reproduced in the catalogue.

### **1965**

*19 May - 13 June.* Arezzo, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Contemporanea, *Mitologie del Nostro Tempo.* By Luigi Carluccio.

In a Pindaric spirit, five of Bacon's paintings were compared with the works of young Italian painters (Cremonini, Ferroni, Fieschi, Romagnoni, Saroni, Vespignani) and foreign painters (Segui, Rosofsky, Petlin, McGarrel, Bertholo, Giacometti, Sutherland), and also to historical masters (de Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Matta, Savinio, Licini, Scipione, Gorky).

Giuliano Briganti discusses relationships with the Italian "Nuova Figurazione" movement:

«Bacon is another thing altogether. He is different because everyone knows exactly how much influence this British artist has had on young Italian artists: in the sense of his

"aesthetic of anguish", I mean, which illustrates one of his most rhetoric and decadent sides. But the fundamental question is something different. In our quest for this, we cannot ignore what he achieves, or at least sets out to achieve. In other words his indiscriminate hunger for figurative portrayal, his anxiety to represent, to construct a picture, to express something by painting.»

**Works exhibited:** *Three Studies for the human Head*, 1951, oil on canvas, 183x61 cm. Private collection, Turin; *House in Barbados*, 1952, oil on canvas, 55x66 cm, Galleria Galatea, Turin; *Man with Headwound*, 1955, oil on canvas, 99x114 cm, Galleria Galatea, Turin; *Man in Blue*, 1954, oil on canvas, 137x198 cm, Galleria Galatea, Turin; *Study for a Portrait*, 1953, oil on canvas, 51x61 cm, Galleria Galatea, Turin [all the works are reproduced].

**Reviews:** G. Briganti, in "L'Espresso", Rome, May.

*September*. Rome, Galleria Marlborough, Collective exhibition: *Giacometti, Ben Nicholson, Jacques Villon, Gorky, Bacon*.

**Works exhibited** [from reviews]: *Study for Portrait*, 1963. *Man lying down*, *Study for a Portrait*.

*27 October - 16 November*. Rome, Galleria Fante di Spade, *Francis Bacon*. This gallery was formed by a group of critics and painters who were figurative in style and left-wing in their politics: Micacchi, del Guercio, Morosini, Attardi, Calabria, Guerreschi, Guccione, Giaquinto, Vespignani. The presentation was again by Luigi Carluccio.

**Works exhibited:** 1. *Head*, 1951, 56x66 cm.; 2. *Man eating a Leg of Chicken*, 1952 51x61 cm. [reproduced]; 3. *Lying Figure*, Loredana Baldoni collection, 1953, 129x1 75 cm. [reproduced as: *Lying Nude (Pellizzari collection)*]; 4. *Study for a Figure*, 1953 - 1954, 137x198 cm.; 5. *Study for Pope*, 1954, 94x152 cm. [reproduced as: *Le Cardinal*, olio su tela, 94x151 cm. 37.5/61 inch]; 6. *Man on a Chaise-Longue*, 1954, 138x200) [reproduced]; 7. *Study for a Figure*, 1954, 98x106 cm.; 8. *Man in Blue*, 1954, 137x198 cm. [reproduced as: *Study for a Portrait, Man in Blue*]; 9. *Small Study for Portrait*, 1955, 51x61 cm.; 10. *Man with Headwound*, 1955, 99x114 cm. [reproduced]; 11. *Study for Portrait*, 1957, 142x198 cm.; 12. *Head*, 1958, 51x61 cm.; 13. *Seated Figure on Couch*, 1959, 141.5x1 98 cm.; 14. *Portrait*, Michelangelo Antonioni collection, 1962, 141.5x1 98 cm.; 15. *Figure on a Couch*, Ponti-Loren collection, 1962, 145x198 cm.

**Reviews:** V. del Gaiso, in "La fiera letteraria", Rome 7 November. G. Giuffré, in "L'Avvenire d'Italia", Bologna 24 November. V. Guzzi, in "Il Tempo", Rome 17 November.

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